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KISSED
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MY ONCE AND FUTURE LOVE REVISITED #1

CARLA KRAE

KISSED

One kiss ignites chemistry and passion they can't ignore, but is this only a summer fling?

Neighbors. Best friends. It was only a crush Beth harbored for Jacob until she was eighteen. Until London.

Neighbors. Best friends. That was all Jacob thought of her until London. Until she kissed him and stole his heart.

It's funny what Geometry class and a shared backyard wall can bring about.

With a two-year age difference, Beth and Jacob were firmly in the Friend Zone during high school, but a pre-college trip to London will change their lives forever.

Kissed is the first of five books in the *My Once and Future Love Revisited* series exploring Beth and Jacob's relationship with all its joys, flaws, and heartache. New Adult Contemporary Romance saga.

By Carla Krae

Published by Willowick

Publishing

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About This Edition

The new editing and revision is part of a change to the whole *My Once and Future Love* series, now *My Once and Future Love Revisited*. Willowick Publishing will be releasing this newly-edited series as four novellas and one final novel. New content has also been added to the series. These releases will debut in paperback form first, starting with *Kissed*.

My Once and Future Love

Revisited series:

Paperback release dates:

[Kissed – Nov. 3, 2013](#)

[Betrayed – Dec. 1, 2013](#)

[Forgiven – Feb. 2, 2014](#)

Loved – April 6, 2014

Book #5 – coming 2014

E-book release dates:

[Kissed – Dec. 1, 2013](#)

[Betrayed – Jan. 5, 2014](#)

Forgiven – Feb. 2, 2014

Loved – April 6, 2014

Book #5 – coming 2014

Stand-alone stories:

[Dylan and Jen – Dec. 24, 2013](#)

Prologue

Christmas Day 2011

There were voices in the hall.

Beth ignored them. It was only her sister-in-law Darcy, and Dad. Darcy got up with the baby, and Daddy never slept past 6:00AM unless he was deathly ill. She wished they'd move further away from her room, though. She wasn't a deep sleeper.

Managing to drift off again, she didn't notice when someone opened the door a couple hours later. They crept in,

leaving the door ajar, and sat down by the side of the bed near her face, waiting for her to sense their presence.

Patience must've been short.

“Buh! Buh, Buh!”

Beth yawned. “Hey, munchkin... how'd you get in here?” Baby Sarah smiled a toothless grin and gurgled happily. “Hey, somebody? Escapee baby in here!”

She didn't have her glasses on and rolled over when a male figure came in to get Sarah. The door closed a second later. “Too early for Christmas,” she

mumbled in the darkness.

“It’s nearing nine, lazy bones,” a voice softly said.

Can’t be... “I’m dreaming...”

“In *Rudolph* pajamas?” the voice countered.

Her eyes shot open. “It’s possible.”

“Is it possible to dream with you, love?”

“Ohmigod.”

Beth rolled over and came face-to-face with the source. Only one person in the world called her “love”

like that! “Are you here?” she whispered, afraid she really was dreaming.

“You tell me,” he said, then kissed her. A kiss of two months’ pent-up passion.

She felt tears running down her face, but she wasn’t going to let him go for a second to wipe them away. He seemed to read her thought, his hands coming up to her face, his thumbs brushing the tracks away under her eyes. She slid off the bed into his lap, wrapping her body around his. “How?”

she gasped into his mouth.

Jacob only pulled back far enough to break the kiss. “I had to come. We’re on traveling days, and I finally said *screw it*—we’re going to see our families one damn bloody day out of the year. You have me for twenty-four hours.”

“I’ll take it! God, I’ve missed you!”

He kissed her again. “Missed you, too...so much. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

“*Bethie...*” He said her name

with enough reverence to break her heart. “Again?”

“I love you, Jacob.” *Huh, not so scary the second time.* “I have for so long. I just didn’t have the words.”

“Think your dad would kill me if I shagged you right now?”

She giggled. “Save it for later, big boy. I don’t want an audience.”

He sighed, then she felt him smile as wide as his face would go. “Happy Christmas, sweetheart.”

“Mmm. Best Christmas ever.”

They would’ve stayed wrapped

around each other on the guest bedroom floor indefinitely, but it was only a few minutes later when someone coughed very loudly outside the door. Point taken, they reluctantly parted.

Beth opened the door to find her whole family eavesdropping in the hall. “Something I can help you with?”

“Nope, just passing by,” Darcy said, then winked.

Dad looked very relieved to find them both still fully clothed. Beth stifled a laugh as they went back to the living room. Jacob glanced at her and

snickered, just as amused.

“Get dressed, woman. I have presents.”

She pouted. “But yours is at home.”

“Correction, I already got mine.”

She blushed. “Oh. Yeah. Gee, if I’d known you were *that* easy to please...”

“Hush, vixen, or I withhold your gifts until *next* Christmas.”

Miming zipping her lips shut, she batted her eyelashes, trying to look innocent. He rolled his eyes and

wagged his finger at her. She stepped back in the bedroom and closed the door before he could tickle her into submission.

Keeping their hands off each other in front of her family proved difficult. And *frustrating*. The normal holiday rituals of Christmas breakfast and Christmas dinner and everything else in between seemed to take *forever*. And to top it off, Andrew and Darcy apparently shared a tradition with their neighbors of having the whole town stop by to say hello!

Well, it *felt* like the whole town.

Jacob settled into the routine fairly quickly, though. Ironically, it was Beth that sat there jittery and looking for the quickest opportunity to pull him into a closet. Couldn't she get five minutes alone to grope her man? It amused him greatly to see her so frustrated.

That lasted until they were left in the living room alone for a few minutes. He motioned her over to the window seat, out of direct line of sight, and kissed her breathless.

“What was that for?” she asked

happily.

“Opportunity. Listen...” He fidgeted with a small box he’d produced from somewhere. “I wanted to give you this. We can exchange the rest at home, but I couldn’t wait.” He handed over the box.

It was light blue, and her eyes widened. “Jacob, this is—” Tiffany Co.

“Just open it.”

She slid the white ribbon off and removed the lid. Inside was a silver fob with one key on the ring. “A key?”

“My key. Don’t wig out—I’m not asking for anything, I... I want you to know you’re welcome in my home just as much as before, only—”

She stopped his rambling with her fingers on his lips, and smiled. “I understand. Thank you.”

He let out a relieved breath and drew her into a hug. “Merry Christmas, Beth.”

“Merry Christmas, Jacob. I’m so glad you came.”

She laced fingers with his and led him into the kitchen where her family

was sneaking cookies.

Out of bedrooms, Darcy put Jacob on the couch for the night. Once the others were asleep, Beth snuck out to the living room and snuggled up to him under the blanket.

“Mmm, my Bethie...”

“Didn’t mean to wake you,” she whispered.

He yawned. “Didn’t. I’m still on Russian time.”

She caressed his face. “Sleep if you want to. I just wanted to be close while you’re here.”

“I love you.” He raised his head up to kiss her.

“Love you, too.”

She laid her head on his chest and slept better than she had in weeks. He would have to leave in the morning, but it was only for a week, and then...well, so started her life with a rock star.

Chapter One

1998

Mum's latest idea of punishment was public school. The private academy asked him not to come back when the tenth grade term ended and she wasn't going to pay for him to "act like a hooligan" at another school.

Didn't make him miss England less. Why she moved them back to California and away from all his friends and the familiar, he still didn't know. They left Los Angeles when he was ten

and after four years in London, he finally felt at home, then yank—right back across the Atlantic and a whole ‘nother country again. Felt like a bleedin’ yoyo. So he acted up a bit at school—what did she expect?

London gave him his identity. At twelve, he discovered punk and metal and devoured every disc he could get his hands on, much to the Head Boy’s chagrin. What better appealed to a teenager than loud music and authority-shunning lyrics? These California prep school brats didn’t understand. They

thought punk was *Green Day*. Needed a bath just from thinkin' of it.

So, anyway, here he was at a new school *again* with no friends or allies and prob'ly stickin' out like a sore thumb.

Jacob snuck in the house, trying to get to his room without being noticed.

“Jacob...how was your first day?”

He sighed and walked into his mother's bedroom. “Every teacher but one had me introduce myself.”

She looked up from her needlepoint. “Did you make any

friends? You're welcome to have guests provided your homework is done first.”

“I had friends. You keep pulling me away from them.”

“Don't be melodramatic, Jacob. Your choices put you in your current situation.”

He stood his ground. “It wasn't *my* choice to leave England.”

She sighed. “I know, dear. Some day you will understand. Do you have homework tonight?”

“Little bit.”

“Then I won't take up more of

your time.”

“Yes, Mum.” He turned on his heel and went to his room, shutting the door and cranking up the stereo.

Beth’s mother gave her a journal today. “Now that you’re going to high school, there are going to be things you don’t want to tell me or Daddy, or you’re going to want to think them out first.”

She wasn’t going to use it. Really, she wasn’t...but there was Jake Lindsey and...

Most kids in Geometry were sophomores, with a sprinkling of juniors. Dreading the walk into a class of older kids, she got there early and chose a desk in the back on the door side of the room, hoping she could be invisible in the corner. She was a freshman, and not *just* a freshman, but five feet tall, undeveloped, and stuck in glasses.

With her first day over, she could say Geometry wasn't her worst class of the day, and part of the reason was the boy with the last name called after hers

—Lindsey comma Jake. The teacher had Jake introduce himself since he was new to their SoCal district, and that voice had been stuck in Beth's head all day.

Jake Lindsey had an English accent.

Jake Lindsey wore a sleeveless shirt displaying arm definition she'd never seen on a teenage boy before.

Jake Lindsey was a junior, sixteen or seventeen, and *way* out of her league.

Still...that buttery voice made Beth and every other girl in the room take notice.

She'd been dwelling on this memory to avoid thinking about English class and the boy assigned to the seat next to her—didn't even know her and he already called her names.

Two weeks later, Beth put her pencil down and sighed. Concentrating on homework was impossible with that racket outside. The noise of wailing guitars and raucous drums came from the house behind theirs. Rolling her eyes, she ground her teeth, and stomped off around the corner to give some idiot a piece of her mind. Just because it was

September, it didn't mean she could slack on school work.

She pounded on the neighbor's front door, hoping to be heard. After the second time banging her fist on it—ow—the door finally opened. The hottest boy she'd ever seen stood in the doorway, looking at her like she was the biggest inconvenience he'd ever experienced. His brown hair was spiked straight up and was that eyeliner around his baby blues?

“What?”

“Can you turn the music down?”

“What for?” he yelled back.

“I’m *trying* to do my math homework!”

Pretty Boy in the Billy Idol t-shirt had the look of a light bulb moment.

“Hey! You’re in my class, aren’t you?”

He walked away for a moment and the volume of the music decreased by half.

Class, class...oh God... she knew that voice...and they were having a conversation? She wished she hadn’t come over in overalls cut off at the knees and winced as her eyes fell onto her outfit. It was geeky-farmer chic.

“Um, maybe? Are you in Geometry?”

He could have transferred from her class. She wasn't known for her powers of observation and was there to learn.

“Yeah, it's bloody boring and I think the teacher's a boozer. You know your stuff, always raisin' your hand. Those proofs don' make a bit o' sense to me.”

“I-I could help...i-if you want. Just takes memorizing the theorems.”

He grinned at her and leaned against the door frame. *Oh my god, Jacob Lindsey smiled at me!* Her

cheeks turned crimson.

“Cool. What do they call you?”

“Beth.”

“Well, Beth, your place or mine?”

Oh, God, don't faint, don't

faint... “M-my book is still...” She gestured around the corner.

He shrugged, grabbed some books off the coffee table, and came outside.

“Lead the way.”

Beth turned for home, palms sweating. *Oh God, oh God...* What would Mom think when she walked in the house with a *boy*? With an *accent*?

She let him in and told him to wait in the living room while she retrieved her text.

Neighbor Boy—downgraded for touching things without asking—was rummaging in the fridge when she came back. “*What* are you doing?”

“I’m thirsty.” He grabbed one of *her* Snapple Iced Teas.

“You could ask first. Sit.”

He winked at her and sprawled in a chair, his tight jeans looking...well, it wasn’t appropriate to think of it.

She sighed and opened the book to today’s assignment. “What are you

having trouble with?”

“How about I copy yours and get out of here?”

“Look...whatever-your-name-is, I don't cheat. I tutor. If you want to learn, great, but that's all you're getting from me.”

He clapped her on the shoulder and laughed. “I like you, kid. Fair enough. If you can make this nonsense make sense, I'll owe ya one.”

She smiled. “Deal...”

“Jake. Mum calls me Jacob, but it's so stuffy.”

“Open that book, *Jacob*.”

Beth helped him all the way to dinner time.

Mom came out of her darkroom to the kitchen and stopped with the weirdest look on her face when she saw them. Then, she smiled. “Elizabeth, who’s your friend?”

“S-someone from Geometry class, Mom. Jacob needed help.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Jacob. You’re welcome to stay for dinner if it’s alright with your parents.”

Mom! What was she *doing*? “I-

I'm sure Jacob has to go, Mom."

He stuffed notebook paper in his book and stood from the table. "I do. Got a date now my work's done." He mussed Beth's hair. "Thanks, squirt."

"No problem," she said through clenched teeth. *Jerk.*

He walked out of the house and she fled to her bedroom. *Squirt.*

Squirt! Might as well call me a ten-year-old. Why couldn't I be cool?

Wasn't so bad bein' tutored by the kid. Got his mother off his back, too.

The mums had met and seemed to approve of each other, so he was free to go to Bethie's or have her in his living room. No closed doors, of course, blah, blah...like he'd be interested in a freshman. Sure, she had a certain cuteness, but a kid was a kid.

Two years in California and he still wasn't used to the lack of seasons. He missed the chill in the air and leaves changin' color. Wasn't lonely, though... always been a popular chap and this school was no exception. Girls flirted and the guys wanted to be his friend.

Soon as Mum stopped watchin' his every move, he could have fun, too.

That day finally came for Halloween week and his first party with the new crowd. He was over at Bethie's to rush through homework so he could leave.

"It's the same time it was thirty seconds ago," she said after he glanced at the clock. "Jacob, focus."

"We've been through the concept three times. I've got it." He stole a Tootsie Roll from her pile.

"Hey!" She slapped his hand.

“Mine.”

“You have more than me.”

“You’ve eaten more. I counted out an equal amount, Jacob. I’m always fair.”

“Let me leave and I’ll stop eatin’ all your candy.” He gave her the grin that usually worked on every female.

“Fine...*if* you come back tomorrow and prove you retained what I said.”

He smiled and gathered his books. “Deal. You’re the best, Bethie.”

Jacob hurried around the corner to

drop his books, change, and grab his guitar. He wished he could drive to the house, but Mum wouldn't let him take the test, yet. Luckily she was out at some thing tonight and couldn't check his work. He checked the mirror, a truly handsome bloke smiling back.

“Hell, yeah. This is gonna rock.”

The bad-ass look and guitar were guaranteed chick magnets and he'd have to totally put his foot in it to not get a good snog tonight. Maybe reach second base.

Nearing Thanksgiving break, Beth finally had a handle on high school. Jacob showed up at her house whenever they had a test the next day. Honestly, he was smart enough to do the work. He just got bored, and then he got antsy. If she could keep him focused, he usually had the lesson mastered in under an hour.

Despite liking her teacher, she dreaded going to English even more now than the second day of school. Chad Cromlin had been the bane of her existence for two months.

Mom taught her to ignore bullies and they'd stop. Not this jerk. Today's stunt? Poking her with an extending pen wand. She was trying to do the in-class reading and he kept tapping her ribs with the stupid thing—always when the teacher's back was turned, of course. She didn't want to be a tattle-tale, what with her already minimal popularity, but how long would this go on? He *had* to get bored soon, right?

She stopped at her locker before her last class (Biology) to drop off the books she didn't need tonight.

“Hey, Bethie, see you at Thanksgiving.”

She turned to Jacob. “Huh?” He never talked to her at school.

“Your mum invited my mum and me to the feast. Found out this morning.”

“Oh. Uh, see you Thursday, then.” A holiday with strangers at their table? Well, not strangers, but definitely not family. Mom had never invited outside people before.

The warning bell rang. “Later!” he said.

She watched him jog off, then

walked the twenty feet to class.

On Thanksgiving, they weren't the usual Beth and Jake.

Mom put her in a dress, and Jacob arrived in a white collared shirt and tie. He'd even left his ear stud at home. Beth's brother made an excuse not to come again, so it was her parents, Mrs. Lindsey, and them. Daddy ate too much then fell asleep in front of the football game on TV. Their moms, though... you'd think they were BFFs.

“Weird, isn't it?” Jacob said.

“Huh? Oh...yeah, definitely. You

know they'll start trading stories about us soon.”

He shivered. They watched them wash and dry the dishes in the kitchen. Mom handed Mrs. Lindsey another dish to dry, their heads close together while they gabbed. Then they laughed about something.

“Scary. Gonna eat the last piece of pie?”

Beth pushed the tin to him. “Nah, take it.”

Christmas break meant two whole weeks without homework or freshman

jerks. She felt like dancing, except she tended to trip over her feet just by walking.

She watched through her window as Jacob hopped over the back fence into her yard. Always gave her a thrill when he did that, dropping to the ground with the grace of a cat. He smiled, seeing she was in her room, and she waved, then opened the window.

“Hey.”

“Hey. Wanted to wish you Happy Christmas. I’m off to England.” He looked happy to go.

“Family?”

“Yep.” He pulled a candy cane out of his back pocket and presented it.

“Thanks for tutorin’ me. Know I’m not the easiest student.”

She took the candy and smiled.

Her first gift! “You’re welcome. Not like I have a busy schedule or anything. Well, it’s cold out, so...”

“Right. Can’t stay, but I wanted to —”

“Sure. Thanks.”

He nodded and left the way he came, back over the fence. Boy had the

cutest butt ever in a pair of jeans.

The two weeks without a friend revealed her crush on Jacob to her. She'd gotten so used to seeing his face every day, it hurt to be without him. Her calendar got an "x" through every day of vacation. She heard Dad ask Mom why she was moping. Had she been? She was lonely, but... Really, did they expect her to go out or something? She was fourteen in Los Angeles, *duh*.

When the break was over, she looked for Jacob the second she got on campus, knowing his schedule by heart,

and finally caught him at his locker between second and third periods. Almost hugged him right in front of *everybody*.

“Hey, kid.”

The urge to roll her eyes came upon her again. It was *only* a two-year age difference. “Have a good Christmas?”

He shrugged. “It was alright. Got a new amp for my guitar. Sounds wicked.”

“Cool.” *Oh God...* her nemesis was coming down the hallway. “Hide

me!” She ducked in between Jacob and the lockers.

He blinked down at her. “What?”

“Chad Cromlin three o’ clock.

Please.”

He shielded her from view to her right. She faced his open locker and tried to be invisible.

“Bethie, what was that?” He placed his hand on her shoulder.

She turned around. “Is he gone?”

“The hall’s nearly bloody empty. We’re going to be late.”

“Thanks.” She ran to World

History.

Chad was talking to his cohorts-in-crime when she got to English later, so she managed to sneak into her chair without the usual torment before the bell.

Jacob started out using Beth's willingness to impart knowledge, but months later it was a friendship he valued. He could tell her things and she wouldn't gab...not that she had many mates he knew of, but still. She didn't have much to gain by ratting out his less popular aspects.

When he wrote new lyrics, he let Bethie critique them.

When he wanted to watch Monty Python or Doctor Who, she'd keep him company.

If he wanted to rant about a teacher or his mother, she would listen, then always have good advice. He'd never say it out loud, but the wisdom a fourteen-year-old could have amazed him. She was way more mature than he was when it came to the brainy stuff.

She was sweet, innocent, not afraid to bust his balls, and the only part

of this new school he wouldn't trade.
His best friend, and he'd protect what
they had with his dying breath.

For two weeks, all Chad did was
greet Beth with a stupid name and she
thought she'd finally won. Too boring to
tease all year. What *really* happened
was the jerk lulled her into a false sense
of security.

Semester finals week in late
January, she walked into English and
found a folded piece of paper on her
desk. It was an obscene drawing with

her name on it. Chad laughed when she looked at it. She crumpled it into a ball, stuck it in her jacket pocket, and opened her lit book. Always kept layers on in that class even if she was warm. It was finally time to talk to her teacher now she had evidence. Then, he started poking her with the pen wand again under her right arm in the side of her nearly-non-existent boob. Ms. Blake was lecturing, so she turned her back on him and tried not to cry.

“Heh, knew you were frigid,”

Chad said under his breath.

Frigid? She'd have to look that up later, but it was obvious he meant it as a major insult.

The second the bell rang, she ran out, debating whether to call Mom to get her or try to be a big girl about it. Not looking where she was going, she ran into a male chest.

“Bethie?” Jacob’s hands steadied her. “What’s wrong?” He guided her into the library. “Did you get a B instead of an A?”

Oh, thank God it was him. She shook her head, lower lip trembling—

couldn't *cry* at school, at least not out in the open. He kept walking and they were soon behind the stacks. She liked the back of the library—it was quiet and left alone.

“Hey, what’s up, Beth?” he asked again.

Beth. Not *Bethie*. The serious use of her name did it and a tear leaked from each eye down her cheeks.

“Aw, Bethie, it can’t be that bad...” He tugged her into an awkward hug, patting her back.

“I thought he was done teasing

me..." she blubbered into his shirt.

God, I was such a baby.

"Who?"

"Boy. English class." She pulled the drawing out of her pocket, handed it to him, and turned away to dry her face.

"Name," he said. He sounded scary. Glancing at him, he *looked* scary. That expression would be a bad thing to meet in a dark alley. The look in his eyes was hard and his jaw was clenched tight.

"It's my—"

"His *name*, Beth."

She sighed. “Chad Cromlin.

Blond hair, long in the back. Sits next to me in English. He’s been picking on me since the first day of school.”

“He drew this?” He balled the drawing in his fist, his knuckles turning white.

She nodded. “And pokes me with a stick and calls me names. What does ‘frigid’ mean, besides cold?” His eyes widened for a second to the size of silver dollars. *Wow, it must be bad.* “On second thought, don’t tell me.”

He squirmed, shifting his weight

from foot-to-foot. “It means, uh, that a girl can’t, um...”

“What?”

“She doesn’t respond to sex.”

“Oh. *Oh*. First, *eww*, and second, he doesn’t know that! *I* don’t even know that, but I’m pretty sure I—”

“Bethie, please stop there.”

Her cheeks turned red. “Sorry.” He still looked pissed. “Please don’t get in trouble for me, okay? I was going to show that to Ms. Blake once I got a grip, so please don’t do something stupid.”

“Beth, this sketch is sexual harassment.” He used the English pronunciation of “harassment”, with the emphasis on the first syllable. The different way to say things always made her pause and take note.

“Which is why I’m talking to my teacher! I finally have proof.”

“‘Finally’? What else did he do?”

Okay, never want that angry face directed at me. “Jacob, just leave it alone.” Their voices were starting to carry.

“He drew himself raping you!” he

whispered.

“You don’t know that. That’s not necessarily what it is.”

“Pffft, *please*.” He started to charge out of the library.

She grabbed his arm. “Promise me you won’t get in trouble?”

He met her eyes. “I won’t get in trouble.”

Beth took the drawing back and went to lunch, what was left of it. When she told Ms. Blake what was going on, she promised Chad wouldn’t be sitting near any girls again. He didn’t show up

for the final day of finals and it soon traveled the grapevine he'd been suspended.

They had Friday off between semesters. Beth went over to Jacob's and listened to him play a song he wrote while it rained all day. It was the first time he played for her and she was mesmerized by the movement of his hands, her fingers itching for her camera. His singing voice was even prettier than his speaking one.

On Monday, she didn't know what to expect when she walked into English.

True to her teacher's word, her tormentor was now on the opposite side of the room. For the first time, he didn't stare at her, daring her to hide her eyes. He avoided eye contact with most of the room, actually. Weird.

The bell rang to end the period and freshmen poured out into the hall.

"Did you hear what happened over the weekend?" one boy said.

"There's a rumor Cromlin got jumped."

"No way!" That came from a girl from History class.

“Who did it? Who did it?”

“About time,” another girl
muttered.

What were they all talking about?
Beth didn't see any bruises on the jerk in
class, but three-day weekends gave kids
time to make stuff up.

Jacob met her at her locker when
she grabbed her Geometry book and
walked her to their class. He was
smiling and had an extra spring in his
step. “Jacob...what did you do over the
weekend?”

“Hung out with you, silly.”

“That was only on Friday. What about the other two days?”

He didn't look at her when he said, “Not much. It rained, remember?”

“Yeah...” She didn't press further. The skin on his knuckles was roughed up. It made her feel safe he protected her honor, and ratcheted her crush up another notch.

Their teacher decided to alphabetize them this semester, so Jacob ended up behind her.

“Perfect. Now I can see over your shoulder,” he teased.

“I’ll tell your mom if I catch you cheating, Jacob Lindsey.”

He placed a hand over his heart.

“You wound me, kid.”

She rolled her eyes and faced forward. “Yeah, yeah...” It was nice having him close by, though.

Second semester was definitely better than the first. Monday through Thursday afternoons, it was good odds Jacob was over at her house to study, though they went to his sometimes, too. Mom and Mrs. Lindsey were frequently out gardening on weekends and chatted

over the back fence until one or the other offered a glass of lemonade or iced tea. Beth kept expecting Dad to wonder what this boy was doing at the house so much, but Jacob was usually gone before he got home for dinner and she guessed Mom hadn't said anything he felt the need to worry about.

Spring Break came along, but not with fun time for her—Jacob and his mom were out of town. Dad didn't have the time off, so Mom dragged her around to her daytime activities when she couldn't escape to the park to practice

with her camera. She got her first SLR for her thirteenth birthday, but she'd been shooting since she could hold a camera without dropping it and she had plans to make a career of photography.

With May racing by and the weather heating up, her fifteenth birthday was approaching. Birthdays were a family thing, since she hadn't had enough friends for a party since she was seven, and brought mixed emotions of loneliness and anticipation.

“Don't forget we're going out to dinner tonight,” Mom said, setting two

sodas on the table.

“Special occasion?” Jacob asked.

“Her birthday,” she said with a smile.

“Your birthday’s today, Bethie? Mine’s in a week. Small world.”

“No wonder you get along,” Mom said. “The symbol for Gemini is The Twins. Two sides of the same coin.”

“Mom...” She knew Beth didn’t believe in any of that stuff.

“Fine, I’ll let you study.” She walked down the hall and they heard a door close.

He bumped Beth's shoulder with his. "Should've said somethin'. I'd at least get Mum to bake."

"It's no big deal." She wrote out an equation from today's assignment. "Just another day."

"Next year, have a party. My sixteenth was awesome."

"Honestly, who'd come?"

His knee nudged hers under the table. "I would."

"Thanks."

Two weeks later, finals arrived. The end of the school year filled her

with dread.

What if Jacob went away all summer? What if he didn't need her help next year with Algebra? What if he met a *girl*? Duh, she knew he dated. Anybody with ears at their school knew if Jacob Lindsey had plans Friday night. The junior girls he asked out couldn't keep their mouths shut about it. Summer, though...summer meant pools and beaches and parties she wasn't invited to. Every date was the potential end to their friendship. He was two years older than her, so what else could she

expect?

But the last of June was okay and she started to relax. He passed his driver's license test and they celebrated with hamburgers and ice cream. She ordered a chocolate fudge sundae.

When the waitress brought him the check, she said, "You know, I think it's so sweet you took your little sister for lunch."

Beth's face flamed as the server walked away and she excused herself to the ladies' room. Staring at her reflection, she couldn't blame the

woman for the assumption. She wore no make-up, her hair was in pigtail braids, she still had frames from eighth grade, and she'd yet to graduate from the double-A training bra Mom bought her a year ago. Might as well have been *twelve*.

She sulked during the ride home and mumbled an excuse about eating too much and not feeling well. He shrugged and said he'd see her tomorrow.

Completely oblivious to my pain.

“Home so soon, honey?” Mom asked.

“My stomach’s kinda yucky. I’m going to lie down.”

“Okay.” She came into Beth’s room a few minutes later. “Do you need a Midol, Beth?”

“What? No! Eww, Mom.”

“Sorry, sorry...just wanted to check.”

God, could this day get more embarrassing?

Chapter Two

Dad took Beth and her mother on a camping trip for a week in July.

She came back to a note from Jacob that his mom decided to travel, after all. He didn't know how long. So much for *her* fun. In spite of being Queen of the Friend Zone, her teen heart was fiercely loyal—and stubborn, crushing on him hard all summer.

September came all too soon and school started in a week. She was ready to kick scholastic butt. Sophomore,

baby! No more lowest-woman-on-totem-pole. Even had a new backpack and folders. And pens. And a graphing calculator. Okay, still a nerd. But most importantly, Jacob would be back!

She heard a car next door and checked her appearance in the bathroom mirror. New, much smaller, glasses rest on her nose and she'd chopped her hair from waist-level to across her shoulder blades. Last week, she started experimenting with mascara and pink lip gloss. Finally grew an inch, so new jeans were added to her wardrobe, too.

Having stalled long enough, she skipped next door to welcome her best friend home. Her jaw dropped when he opened the door. “Oh my god, what did you do to your *head*?”

“Like it?” He ran his hand over the bleached spikes.

“It’s *white*!” She took in the rest of him—torn jeans, a wallet on a chain, and a black tank top. He wore studded cuffs on each wrist and silver rings on most of his fingers. It was *hot*. “And are you taller?”

He grinned. “Six-foot-one as of

two weeks ago. You're still Little Bethie."

She scowled at him. "I grew, too."

"Oh, how much?"

"An inch!"

"Ooo, sproutin' like a weed."

And oh my god, he'd added a tongue stud. "Shut up." Turning on her heel, she pretended to leave.

"Oh, come in, already," he said, grabbing her hand and pulling her through the door. "Brought you some Cadbury chocolate."

“We have Cadbury here.”

They reached his room. Their decorating tastes couldn't be more different. He liked dark rich colors and nearly everything on the walls was music-related.

“Not the same.” He dug around in an overnight bag on his bed. “Here.”

“Thanks. So...why the bleach?”

“It's my senior year, love. It's all different now.” He pushed the bag over to make room for her to sit. “What did you do this summer?”

She sat on his bed, and he joined

her. The white hair made his eyes look bluer, something she didn't think possible. "N-not much. We were camping when you left, as you know. Um, Dad's been traveling for work a lot, so it's me and Mom and our cameras. I learned how to develop my own prints. I could show you later."

"That's great, Bethie." He tugged a strand of her hair. "Where's the rest of it?"

"Trash can of Supercuts. It got in the way that long." He noticed she cut her hair? *Dad* didn't. *Swoon*.

Jacob dropped the strand.

“Shame. I like the Princess Leia look.”

“Geek.” His love for *Star Wars* was a secret, especially if they were at school.

“Nerd.”

“Punk poser.” The walls were currently black, matching his wardrobe.

“Bookworm.”

They grinned at each other. “It’s good to be home,” he said.

“Yeah?” Her heart swelled that she was part of that.

“Yeah.”

They hung out every day until school started.

Last year of high school and less than a year 'til he was eighteen and finally out of here. He was counting down the days, chomping at the bit for a time when he could really devote his all to music.

Not all bad in L.A., of course. He had a car and Mum, and Bethie. Loved shocking her with his new look.

There were plans for this year that were all his, though, and he needed to do them alone.

His senior classes weren't near Beth's and neither was the Senior Quad, so she didn't see him much on campus. They didn't get the same period for Algebra 2, either, then she found out he joined the soccer team after the fact. Other than giving her a ride to school in the morning, she barely saw him until October and he needed her help again.

"I see how it is. Too busy for ol' Bethie unless you want something," she said when he rapped on her window.

"You know it's not like that."

She arched one eyebrow. "Oh, do

I?”

“Please, Bethie? Name your price.”

Anything? He must be desperate.

“I want to go to Homecoming.”

He squirmed. “Uh, I already have a date.”

She slammed the window shut.

“Then no deal.”

“Fine! Plenty more tutors to choose from!”

“Fine!”

Not fine. Dammit. Ooops. Good thing I didn't say that word out loud.

She took the bus for a month just for spite. Of course, she was dealing with a teenage *boy*. A gorgeous teenage boy that could sell ice to an Eskimo. He had no problem getting help from the senior girls and even less of a problem remaining eligible for all his activities despite rarely being home to study. She knew. She peeked through the fence to see if his light was on almost every night.

It was a month before she saw him other than by a brief glance at school. Their moms planned Thanksgiving

again. This time, they sat them right next to each other. He kept bouncing his left knee and bumping her leg.

So she bumped his leg back.

He knocked her knee again.

She did it back and bumped bone-to-bone.

“Ow.”

“Then keep your legs to yourself,” she hissed.

“You need less room.”

“You need *manners*.”

“Pie?” Beth’s mother asked, giving both of them The Look.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said. Suck-up.

Beth escaped to her room when the adults moved to the den, hoping he would stay out there. He didn’t.

“What is your problem, Beth?”

He shut the door.

“I *thought* we were friends.”

His brows furrowed in the middle. “We are friends.”

“I never see you anymore, and you have *new* ‘friends’.” He was in the top five of most popular seniors, maybe *the* most of the whole school.

“*You’re* the one who refused to let

me take you to school.”

“Because you only want my brain power.”

He sighed. “I’m sorry I’ve been busy, but that’s how this is. You’ll understand when you get there.”

She crossed her arms over her newly-A-cup chest. “Oh, so it’s all okay because you’re a senior?”

“Now you’re twistin’ my words. Bethie, you still matter, okay? We’re just livin’ two diff’rent lives right now.”

“You’ll be gone in six months, so how is that going to change?”

He sat on her bed. “More like seven and a half. *If* I get accepted to university.”

“Where have you applied?”

“Some here. Some in London.”

“Oh.” *Away from me. I’m going to lose him to another continent.*

He bumped her shoulder. “We’ll keep in touch. Swear on my guitar.” A pretty serious declaration.

“Which one?”

“Does it matter? I’d give up my car before I’d part with either of ‘em. Hell, I’d give up my *soul* before music.”

She smiled. “I know. *The big dream.*”

He nodded. “Too bloody right. And you get the first copy of the album, after me.”

“And you’ll sign it for me?”

He grinned. “Love and kisses, baby.”

She socked his shoulder. “You’re so corny.”

“Forgive me?” he asked hopefully.

“If you’re staying for Christmas.”

“Brat.”

She stuck her tongue out at him. “I

want best friend time. Deal with it.”

He smiled. “Yes, Your Highness.”

At least soccer was done, so he didn't have to stay after school for practices anymore. Beth allowed him to be her transportation again...which worked most of the time. Friday and Saturday nights were rarely hers, and she *hated* it when he ditched her to feel up some girl.

Well, she assumed that's what they were doing. It's not like they *talked* about it.

Mrs. Lindsey stayed in L.A. this Christmas, then left him home alone for the days surrounding New Year's, Beth's mother informed to randomly check up on him.

“Any New Year's Eve plans?” Beth asked while he played a video game. She lay on his bed with one of his pillows under her chin.

He sat on the floor with the controller. “Officially—no.”

“Unofficially?”

“Somethin' might come up.”

With his hair right in front of her,

she was tempted to play. The bleach had grown out a bit and waves were starting to form. He had the most perfect hair that did whatever he asked it to. So not fair. “I’m not going to be your alibi.”

He glanced up. “I only did that once.”

“If you go out that night, you’ll have to tell my mom.”

“Don’t even know if there’s somethin’ to go out *to*. It’s just a rumor.”

“How come you won’t take me to one of these parties?” She wasn’t great

in groups, but staying home every night was getting to her.

“You’re a sophomore.” Like that explained it all.

“*So?*”

“So...you’d be the youngest by a lot. And you hate crowds.”

She rolled onto her back and stared at the stars on his ceiling. “Just say the truth: I’m not cool enough.”

“Bethie...”

“You’re rarely seen in public with me if there’s a chance someone from school will see us, Jacob. I’m not an

idiot.”

He paused the game. “I don’t care about that.” He rose up on his knees so he could see her face. “If anything, I’m protecting you.”

“Me? From what?”

“From the jerks who think I’m bein’ nice because you’re young and impressionable.”

“What does my age have to do with anything?”

He smiled at her, an expression that said he had wisdom she didn’t. “An easy lay with a little manipulation.”

“Why would they think—? How *dare* they—? It’s not like that!” Of all the stupid— “You’re my *neighbor*. My dad would *kill* you.” Yeah, part of her wanted him to be her first, but not at fifteen. And it was downright *insulting* anyone thought she was *gullible*.

“Believe me, I know. It’s just high school, Bethie. Most of it’s bleedin’ stupid.”

“Have you ever, um...?”

He turned back to the game.

“Nope.”

Her heart did the Snoopy dance

over him still being a virgin. It shouldn't matter, except it did. "But you date a lot."

"*So.*"

"So, why not? Isn't that what a seventeen-year-old boy does?"

"Haven't met the right girl, yet."

"What makes her 'the right girl'?"

"I don't know... She just will be."

"But I heard—"

"Beth, I'm gonna die if you don't quit yammerin'." He meant the game, of course.

"Sorry."

He was two years ahead of her and his own person, but it was bad enough he'd be going off to college without her, you know? She didn't want to be left in the dust for *every* milestone.

And... She loved him. She still hoped he'd see her before the year was over.

Feel free to mock my delusion.

Bethie was giving him guilt trips whether she meant to or not. She looked so sad every time he told her he was busy, like she didn't expect him to come home one day. She tried to hide it, but

he wasn't as oblivious as people thought.

Mum wasn't much better. He'd spot her dabbing at her eyes sometimes, like when a university letter came in or he passed another high school milestone for the last time. She took so many pictures the night of Winter Formal he was blind leaving the house.

So, he tried to balance them all—his mother, friends, dates, studies—and hoped no one would be too mad with him in the end for being human.

That winter was pretty rainy, so

Jacob wasn't away from home as much. When the semester ended, Beth hoped to hang out for another three-day weekend, but Mrs. Lindsey took him to visit some university. Unfortunately, only one of the schools on his list was in L.A.

Dad went away for Spring Break on business and Mom left to visit Beth's brother. Dad and Andrew butted heads if they were in the same room and both of them were too stubborn to get over it. Since Andrew wouldn't come home, Mom went to him when she could.

It was the first time they'd left her

home alone for a weekend.

She climbed in through Jacob's window that night. He offered half of his bed. After making him promise to be a gentleman, she got under the covers, back to him, and sighed in relief.

She woke up in the morning feeling a weight across the middle of her. His arm was draped over her ribs, his fingers laced with hers, and he was breathing on her neck.

One part of her wanted to stay being held. The other fifteen-year-old part was freaking out and thought flight

was in order. She carefully slid out from under his arm, stood, and snatched her pillow. He mumbled in his sleep and stretched his arm out where she'd been.

He looked so cute dead asleep, his face like an angel's. Sighing, she turned for the window, carefully slid it open, and went home.

Why did she have to fall for the unattainable boy?

Beth's parents were away for the weekend for some such thing and she

snuck into his room in the middle of the night, carrying her pillow.

“Hey. Can I take your floor?” She climbed in through the window.

Jacob paused the Nintendo game. “Beth? What are you doing here at this hour?” She was never outside past curfew and even preferred getting to bed by ten.

“The house makes weird noises. Do you mind?”

He shrugged. “Whatever.”

Bethie was the only girl allowed in his room because she respected

boundaries. She stretched out on the hardwood floor and placed her pillow under her head. “Don’t tell anybody on Monday.”

He rolled his eyes. “I wouldn’t do that. Just go to sleep.” He waited for her to complain about the game noise.

Three. Two. One.

“Can you mute that?”

Sighing, he shut it off, then stretched out on the bed, propping his bleached head up with his hand.

“There’s enough room, you know.” No motive behind the offer—it

was just the hospitable thing to say.

Her eyes bugged out of their sockets. “Share a BED? I-I...”

“Bethie, it’s not a big deal, pet. I’ll even sleep on top o’ the covers, if you like.”

She thought about it, squirming all the while because his floor was hard as a brick. “Fine...” She stood and waited for him to scoot over. “No monkey business.”

He made a crossing motion on his bare chest. “Cross my heart and hope to die.”

She got under the covers, her back to him, and sighed. The mattress was a double, so there was plenty of room.

“Better?”

“Thank you.”

He played the game a while longer, being a natural night owl.

When the sun shone through his window in the morning, he awakened before she did. He was still on top of the covers with his arm wrapped around her, their heads sharing her pillow. Their fingers were laced together. He inhaled the sweet smell of her soft hair

and went back to sleep.

The next time he woke, she was gone.

It was the first time he wondered what it would be like to wake up next to a girl every day.

In May, Beth helped him get ready for Prom. Black suit, white shirt, straight black tie...and a single rose for his date.

The bitch.

Aw, that wasn't fair. It was a girl he spoke well of from drama class, with

good grades and a clean rep. He didn't go last year, calling it "cheesy and too American", but his mother was on the *experience every part of your last year* kick, so...Prom.

"It's too tight." He tugged on his collar.

She centered the tie again. "It's fine."

"Hate these things. Can't breathe."

"You look great." She turned him toward the mirror.

He smirked at his reflection. "I do, don't I?"

She rolled her eyes. “Don’t let it go to your head.”

The bathroom smelled like Obsession. She needed air before she did something insane like kiss him.

“Jacob, the limo’s here, darling,” Mrs. Lindsey called.

“Time to go, kid.” He left ahead of her. His mother snapped a picture when they reached the foyer. “Mum, a little warning?”

“Smile, kids.”

He draped his arm around Beth’s shoulders and mugged for the camera.

Her eyes were on the floor, cheeks blushing whenever a flash was pointed her way. He took the rose from her hand, kissed his mother on the cheek, and walked out the door.

Jenny what's-her-name was a lucky girl.

“Didn’t feel like dancing, dear?”

“Not my scene, Mrs. Lindsey. I work at Sadie Hawkins, but that’s it. You know...the music’s too loud and all sounds the same, the food is terrible and the punch is watered down...”

She nodded. “Of course.

Goodnight, Elizabeth.”

“Night.”

Mom had “sympathy face” when Beth walked back in the house. She finally confronted her about her crush a few months ago and knew how hard it was for her to see him go off with other girls. “Chocolate Fudge Brownie?” she offered, extending the pint.

Beth took it and stuck a big spoonful in her mouth. “You’re a lifesaver, Mom.”

Ice cream in hand, she went back to her room to put more photos in her

album and try not to cry.

Bethie turned sixteen on the twenty-fifth. Shopping for girls had never been his forte, so he looked for clues, watching for some sign of something she wanted that wouldn't be weird for him to buy. Books were a good bet, but he didn't want to get one she already had. Knew she liked classical music, and chocolate ice cream, and flowers...but flowers were for mothers and girlfriends and the sick and those categories didn't fit. Could've played her party, but she refused to have

one.

So, he treated her to a meal at their favorite burger joint.

“You picked up the check last time,” she complained.

“Bethie, it’s your birthday. Enjoy my generosity.”

She sighed and sat back on her side of the booth. “It’s just another day.”

“Why do you dislike your birthday so much?”

She shrugged. “I don’t...I just don’t think it’s special.”

“Well, accept that other people do and milk it.”

“That what you’re doing?”

“Haven’t had to lift a finger.

Wouldn’t believe all the dosh comin’ in for my birthday or graduation. I’ve never been so happy to see the mailman as this week.”

She rolled her eyes. “Of course everyone loves *you*. You’re charmed.”

“Seriously. Just wait for it. I’ve gotten congratulations from folk I don’t even know, just ‘cause Mum does.

People like your parents, so it’ll happen

to you, too.”

She didn't look convinced.

“S'pose it'll help you move to London.”

He'd accepted the enrollment offer and would be leaving this summer to find a job before school started. “What happens to your car?”

“Dunno. Probably sell it. Mum doesn't need two. Gonna get your license now?”

“Eventually.” She stirred her milkshake. “Thanks for taking me to the parking lot before I got in with Dad. I needed the practice.”

“Still drivin’ your mum around?”

“Yep. Think she likes having a chauffeur. But Dad’s the one to declare me ready.” She slurped up the last drops in her glass. “I’m done, so we can go. You probably need to be somewhere.”

He stood. “Yep.” He draped an arm across her shoulders once she slid out of the booth and joined him. “With you. It’s your birthday, dummy. I’m takin’ you to the mall.”

“Eww, why?”

“So you can pick out what you

want. And I thought you were the brainy one.”

Beth socked him in the ribs. “Shut up.” She hit hard for such a petite little thing.

Going into a Barnes and Noble with her was a lesson in patience. Normally, she didn't like shopping and went straight for what she wanted and left—*if* you got her in the mall in the first place. But take her to a bookstore and you might as well kiss your afternoon goodbye, especially if she was allowed to buy. She flitted from this possibility

to that, taking forever to decide which book was the one. Made him happy to see her smile, though, so he followed along and didn't complain.

If Bethie's birthday was quiet, Jacob's birthday a week later was in stark contrast. His house was filled with friends, food, and loud music, and that was *after* coming back from the rented movie theatre. The actual date of his birth was a Thursday, so the party was two days later and he hoped it lasted all night. Never felt so alive, being the center of adoration for so many people.

It inspired him to grab his electric and accompany the stereo.

Too bad his best friend had bailed earlier, but he couldn't make her stay in a crowd.

With prom behind them, only one event remained—Graduation Day.

Saddest day of Beth's life up to that moment. Their moms sat in the bleachers holding roses. She had a wrapped gift she felt he'd appreciate more.

“Congratulations Class of 2000!”

After the ceremony, she found him

first over by the booth to turn in his cap and gown. They hugged, the pat-the-back type between friends. “You made it, amazingly,” she teased.

“Quiet, you. Pressie for me?” He reached for it and she held it behind her back.

“Yup. But pick up your diploma first. The moms are about to reach us.”

They gushed over him and he made them feel like the bouquets were the best thing ever. Sometimes Beth’s mother forgot she’d only passed two kids out of her womb, not three.

He got his fancy diploma, then they started trying to get to the parking lot amid a thousand other people. Mrs. Lindsey had made a reservation at a really nice restaurant. He and Beth climbed in the back of the car. She placed his present on his lap so she could fasten her seatbelt.

“Can I open it now?”

“If you want to.”

He shredded the paper. “A notebook?”

“Look inside.”

“Ah, notation paper! You’re the

best, Bethie.” He draped his arm across her shoulders and squeezed her arm.

She blushed again. “You’ll need it for all those hit songs.”

“Damn right.”

“*Jacob*,” Mrs. Lindsey scolded him.

“Sorry, Mum. *Darn* right.”

Beth saw her roll her eyes in the rearview mirror, and stifled a giggle.

“What’s next for you, Jacob?” her mother asked. She just *had* to bring that up.

“Moving to London in two weeks

to get used to it,” he said. He’d decided to pursue his music degree at one of the universities there.

“And find a job,” his mother added.

“Yes, Mum, *and find a job*. She’s not funding my summers, only my education.”

“Poor baby,” Beth teased to keep from crying.

Four years with an eight-hour time difference. She’d been counting down the days since he told her his plans. Probably be counting the hours, too. She

fantasized about one of those airport romance movie scenes where the boy and girl kiss at the last minute instead of parting forever. But in this scenario, she'd have to do the kissing and she was too chicken. Ruining their friendship wasn't worth satisfying her crush.

So, she toasted his graduation, helped him pack up what he could fly with, and said goodbye to him at the terminal with a smile. 'Cause that's what best friends did.

Chapter Three

Keeping in touch with Jacob

across the world was hard. Well, not on Beth's end—she still didn't have enough of a life to make her too busy to write.

At first, he called.

Then he sent notes.

Then she got the occasional postcard.

Once classes started for him, she had more luck getting info from his mother. It hurt, but life went on.

She was sixteen, a junior, and

ready to take her driving test soon.

Dad's car would be hers to drive when he was out of town. Driving a car filled a hole in her she didn't know was missing. It was control. It was freedom. It was *fun*. Without Jacob here as an excuse, she had to make more friends. Turned out, geeks found each other pretty easily in AP classes. She didn't get close to anyone else, though.

Christmas and Spring breaks were lonely.

First-year music was easy. Since

he'd been playing piano and guitar since he was a small lad, he passed the proficiencies, no sweat. The private voice lessons were tougher. Though he'd been in choirs forever, there was apparently much technique he still didn't know, and the professor insisted he master classical pieces before modern ones. Some days frustrated him to near tears. But the classes for his major weren't a problem.

It was the rest, the general education crap. Though he tried to pick the easiest choices in the catalog, he was

still surprised by the amount of work presented. Many dead trees were sacrificed in the name of higher education. Faced with having fun or spending the weekend stooped over a desk, he probably chose fun a few times too many, but what else would an eighteen-year-old bloke do out on his own? A bar band, a beer, and a pretty girl on his arm made for good distraction.

Still, a voice in the back of his head that sounded an awful lot like Beth kept nudging him back to study, to press

on. She'd never let him hear the end of it if he flunked out first year. As always, she was his conscience, the good little angel on his shoulder.

When Jacob had finals week, Beth asked him how he thought he did.

Blueydevil: Alright, I think. Performance exams were a piece of cake. You?

Bookworm01: Passed the AP tests in April, so those classes are auto A's. So glad I don't have to take PE again. Are you coming home for summer?

Blueydevil: Don't think so,

Bethie.

Bookworm01: Why not? School's out.

Blueyedevil: It's expensive, and the band is pushing for gigs now we have time. 'Sides, you know Mum—I have to work.

Bookworm01: You could work here.

Bookworm01: I miss my best friend.

Blueyedevil: Miss you, too, love. Gotta go. Celebratory freedom date.

Bookworm01: Oh. Girlfriend?

Blueyedevil: Could be. Later,
Bethie!

He signed off the messenger
program.

Well, that sucked. No best friend
for the summer plus he was out with
other girls and she was...

Beth grew to five-foot-five over
the year and finally felt she was starting
to look her age of seventeen. She still
didn't have much of a figure, yet, but at
least she didn't look *twelve*.

It was summer and she was
looking at college applications, so she

toured the UCLA campus and got lost in the beautiful library. She'd already decided not to leave L.A. as long as her parents were here. Call her a scared-y-cat, but she wasn't ready to leave home, yet. London was the only other city that enticed her, but friendship wasn't enough to make her move to another continent.

She and Mom went to visit Andrew for a week in August. He had a serious girlfriend he wanted the family to meet. It was an awesome trip and she could already tell she wouldn't mind

Darcy as a sister-in-law.

Her high came crashing down when they got home.

Jacob made a surprise visit for a few days and she wasn't there. He left souvenirs and a letter on her bed, but there was so much she would have said and wanted to know.

Of all the rotten, stupid timing...

"Hey..." she greeted him when the phone picked up.

"Hey, Bethie! What's up, love?" He sounded distracted, some place noisy.

“I don’t have a lot of minutes, but I wanted to say I’m sorry I missed you. Why didn’t you tell someone you were coming?”

“Eh, spur of the moment, pet, really. You should see us play. The band is really takin’ off, Bethie. I had to tell Mum before things get crazy, ya know? I have a feelin’ about this like you wouldn’t believe.” Even over an international phone line, his accent was thicker after a year in London.

“That’s great. When you make the radio I’ll tell people I knew you when.”

Jacob getting famous scared her.

Distance made it hard to keep in touch—becoming a rock star would make it impossible. The worst of it? She knew it would happen some day.

“Aww, there’ll always be room for my number one fan, Bethie. Think you’ll like what I brought you. Well, gotta go, pet. Rehearsal space ain’t cheap.”

“O-okay. Keep me up to date, okay?” He wasn’t reliable about it, but she could still ask. These phone calls never lasted long enough.

“Sure, sure. Bye!”

“B—”

Click.

“Bye...” She set the phone in the cradle, and sniffed, something bothering her eye, and looked through her presents. There was a t-shirt wrapped in plastic. She tore that open and held up the shirt—a band logo. *Jacob’s* band logo! “Awesome!”

There was some other London stuff—tourist trinkets, mostly. She set the letter aside to read after dinner when she wouldn’t be interrupted.

When she went to bed, she slept in the shirt.

Senior year was a blur and too slow all at once. Didn't make sense, but the mind sensed the passage of time in weird ways.

Her eighteenth birthday carried little fanfare, but she did finally have a party, a small one. Dad barbequed and they were out in the backyard until it got too warm. A few class friends came over, other nerds that were cool to hang out with.

Andrew and Darcy sent a gift and

she got an e-mail from Jacob, and her friends brought gift cards. Beth's mother gave her an old camera and the coordinating lenses. You might think a hand-me-down present was cheap, but not this...she could spend days playing with her new capabilities on film.

She graduated second in her class and five foot seven. Jacob sent a charm of a book for her congratulations gift. It was gold, or gold-tone, and on a fine gold chain. At least, she thought it was from him. Mrs. Lindsey passed it on to her. She chose to believe his mother

wasn't covering for his forgetfulness since she didn't hear from him often these days.

Beth wanted to fly out to London to see him this summer, but her parents wouldn't pay for it and she didn't have enough. "Can't you cover the rest? You know what it would mean to me, and I'll pay you back."

Mom shook her head. "I'm sorry, honey. Your father said absolutely no way. He doesn't want you going that far alone."

"But I wouldn't be alone there!"

Jacob would take her in even if she didn't call him first.

“Elizabeth, he made up his mind before he left. Maybe when he gets back there will be time to—”

“Forget it.” She stomped into her room and slammed the door shut. Then she thought of talking to Mrs. Lindsey about it. She was eighteen, could go where she wanted—just didn't have the cash. Luck was with her when she went around the corner and found Mrs. Lindsey's car in the driveway. Opening the front door, she called out, “Hello?”

“Elizabeth?” Vivian Lindsey walked out of her kitchen.

“It’s me.” She closed the door since the AC was on. “Um, I wanted to ask you something.”

She led Beth into her living room to the sofa. “What is it, dear?”

“Are you visiting Jacob this summer?”

“Probably...why?”

“I...I’d like to go with you. I haven’t seen him for two years, and once I start college, there might not be time again.”

“Well, Elizabeth, of course I enjoy your company, but have you discussed this with your parents?”

She had an answer prepared for that question. “Mom’s fine with me going and Dad’s away on business again. I’m eighteen, though, and I’ll be moving into the dorms in August, so, adult now. I’ll even pay part of my way. Please?”

She smiled. “Just as stubborn as my son. Do you even have a passport?”

“Yup! A trip like this would be educational, too, with the history and the

sights...get some nice photos for my portfolio...?”

Chuckling, she shook her head. “I pity the person that stands in the way of your goals, Elizabeth. Very well—”

Beth squealed and hugged her, cutting off the rest of her sentence. Might have squeezed a bit too hard, now she was several inches taller than Vivian. “Thank you, thank you! Say when and my bag is packed.”

Two weeks later, she sat at an airport gate waiting for them to call their row, foot tapping impatiently. Daddy

wasn't too thrilled she found a way to circumvent his decision, but she didn't care. In a matter of hours, she'd see Jacob again! He knew his mother was coming, but she hadn't told Beth if he knew about her tagging along, as well. She hoped to surprise him.

Mrs. Lindsey put her house up for sale before they left, but that didn't matter now, either. England was her home, and he would be there indefinitely. It made sense she'd want to go back, though Beth would miss climbing over the fence and chatting

over cookies.

“Elizabeth, that’s us.”

“Okay!”

Vivian grinned. “You know you can’t bounce on the plane, yes?”

She blushed. “Sorry. This is just a big deal for me.”

She hugged me with her free arm. “I know, dear. Strange as it may sound, I remember being eighteen.”

Chapter Four

2002

Mrs. Lindsey hugged Beth with her free arm. “I know, dear. Strange as it may sound, I remember being eighteen. I met my husband at university here.”

“In L.A., here?” She knew his dad had been American, but she assumed they came from England when he started at her school.

She nodded. “I wanted to get out on my own, away from what I was used to, you know, and met this brash young

man in my Philosophy class. I turned him down twice before we went on a date, and then I discovered he was sweet, too. A lot like Jacob.”

They handed the attendant our boarding passes. “Wow. So you were sweethearts?”

“Goodness, yes. Probably quite sickening.”

They made it into the tunnel and onto the plane. The seats were spaced farther apart than Beth was used to. She actually had room to stretch her legs. “Do you mind if I take the window

seat?” She stowed their carry-ons above while Vivian stepped aside to let people continue down the aisle.

“Not at all.”

Beth had never left the US before—flown cross-country, but never across an *ocean*. She wasn't sure how she'd bear waiting five hours just to get to that part. Her book would be killed in four. Then, what? “I should've brought a second book.”

“What's that?”

“I was just thinking about the length of the flight. My book isn't long

enough to keep me occupied for eleven hours.”

She smiled, understanding. “Well, they will show a movie, though keep in mind it’s likely you’ll doze off at some point.

Beth shook her head. “I’m too excited to sleep.”

“Mm-hmm...”

They chatted for a while, Beth picking her brain about famous stuff close to her house. Vivian insisted there was enough room to put her up and assured her she wouldn’t be a burden.

Still, she hoped it wasn't far from his apartment.

Reading until they served a meal, she then finished off the book before the in-flight movie started. It was some think-y drama about adults with issues and she nodded off from boredom. A light sleeper, though, she woke when they got dinner.

“Hey, it's dark on this side of the world.” They left Los Angeles at 10:30AM, which made it around eight in the evening now, but with the time difference... “What time is it in

London?”

“It’ll be close to six in the morning when we exit the plane.”

“Oh, wow. No way Jacob will be up to meet us at the airport.” It was a bummer she had to wait longer to see him.

His mother laughed. “Indeed! He didn’t like waking early as a *baby*.”

A clear summer night, Beth could see the moon reflecting off the water below out her window. *Far* below, but hey...scenery.

They landed around 6:00AM. Ten

at night at home, so she would be thinking about bed in another hour. Instead, she was looking at breakfast. A car with personal driver picked them up and she started to wonder about the family Mrs. Lindsey came from. When the car eventually stopped in front of a *manor*, she knew Vivian had been holding out on her.

“Friend’s place?”

Vivian’s cheeks colored slightly.

“No. It belonged to my parents, and my grandparents before them.”

“No wonder you don’t have a job

in L.A.”

“I have been fortunate, yes, but one does not need to be blatant with one’s wealth. And I was quite happy to be a young bride in California, once upon a time.” By appearances, she was younger than Beth’s parents.

People opened doors for them and more people took their luggage to other rooms. Beth spun in a circle in the foyer, taking in the grand staircase, chandelier, and gold-framed paintings. Her sneakers squeaked on the marble tiles.

“Elizabeth, it’s not polite to gawk,” Vivian whispered in her ear.

She dropped her chin and her eyes and followed upstairs. Mrs. Lindsey took a right and stopped at a door.

“This is your bedroom. I’m only down the hall. There is an intercom system throughout the house, so if you need a servant for any reason, buzz.”

“Servant?” she asked, her voice taking on an airy quality as she took in her bedroom.

“It’s a long way to the kitchen if you crave a midnight snack.”

The room had a four-poster bed and a window seat. Fresh flowers graced every table and the duvet looked to be a silk blend from the subtle sheen of the fibers. More exploring revealed a huge closet, and a luxurious bathroom with a claw-foot tub. She ran her hand over the fluffy towels.

“The room is satisfactory, I hope,” Vivian said from the door.

“It’s amazing and you know it. Are they all like this?”

“Identical? Gracious, no. But each individually beautiful, yes.”

“Jacob never mentioned this place.”

She didn't look surprised. “He spent most of his time at school while we lived in London, coming home for holidays. California was where he was born and where we came back to. I imagine he'll end up there again, too.”

“I won't mind.”

Vivian smirked. “Undoubtedly. Try to take a nap. Then we'll have brunch and try to rouse my son.”

Beth folded back the covers of the bed once she left and opened her luggage

to get pajamas. A few hours later, a ringing telephone awakened her.

“Hello?”

“Did I wake you?” Mrs. Lindsey asked. Her tone said she knew she did.

“A little. Did I miss breakfast?”

“No, dear. We’re setting the table now.”

“I’ll be down in a few minutes.”

She hung up and rolled out of bed, then washed her face, ran a brush through her hair, brushed her teeth, and dressed in a blouse and shorts. Hearing voices when she walked down the stairs,

she followed the sound. The object of her affection stood at the kitchen island munching on strawberries.

He talked to his mother with his back to Beth. At twenty now, his body had matured since she last saw him two years ago. His shoulders were broader and he was no longer adolescently skinny. The bleach had grown out to only being on the tips of his hair.

“Ah, there you are,” his mother said.

He turned around. “Bethie!” The biggest smile she’d ever seen spread

across his face. With two strides, he wrapped his arms around her and twirled her around. “What are you doing here, love?”

“Surprising you.”

He set her down and backed up to arms-length to look at her. “Bloody hell, you changed in two years.”

Her cheeks turned crimson. “A little bit.”

“Little! You barely fit under my chin now. How was graduation?”

“Salutatorian. Got beaten out for first in class by a tenth of a grade point.”

“Aww,” he teased. “Want me to beat ‘im up?”

“It was a her, and no, but thanks for the offer. Should I ask about *your* grades?”

He coughed. “Maybe later.”
Same ol’ Jacob.

God, he looked good. His face had matured a bit, too, bringing out his cheekbones. His skin was paler than in California, but no less attractive. Today was Saturday, and he wore a tee and low-slung jeans with a studded belt through the loops. Only man she knew

who refused to wear shorts unless at the beach.

“Come eat, kids.”

He took her hand and led her into the dining room. What Vivian called “brunch” was no simple spread. The polished table probably sat twelve and was set with china and sterling silver flatware.

“Is this what they mean by an English breakfast?” Several serving dishes were spread before us.

“That you can stuff yourself silly on a good fry-up? Pretty much,” he said.

“A little variety never hurt anyone,” his mother said. She sat at the head of the table, her plate already filled.

He handed Beth a plate and asked, “How long do I get to keep you?”

Forever, her heart answered, but her rational side said, “Uh, I’m not sure? I have to be at UCLA in September, but your mom made the travel arrangements.”

“Well, any mother that brings me a Bethie present earns my everlasting devotion.”

She shook her head, but said, “You’re welcome, dear, though this is just as much for Elizabeth, if not more so. Traveling abroad diversifies a young woman’s education.”

He sat down with his pile of food. “On that note, you have to come see us play tonight.”

Beth smiled. “I’d love to. I brought the t-shirt.” She sat to his right since he’d chosen the corner seat next to his mother.

Her internal clock thought it was three in the morning. Mrs. Lindsey, on

the other hand, was still bushy-tailed. Beth didn't know how she did it. With eggs, fruit, pastries, and sausage in my belly, she felt like another nap. A yawn escaped her mouth while they caught up. Embarrassed, her hand flew up to her lips to hide it.

He poked her side. "I heard that."

"I'm sorry. My body thinks it's the middle of the night."

"Aww, past Bethie's bed time?"

he teased.

"Shut up. You've had jet lag before."

“Not *my* fault you didn’t plan your flight around your natural schedule.”

“In the same room thirty minutes and you’re picking on me.” She propped her chin on her hand. “Hmm, why did I miss you again?”

He leaned closer, blue eyes sparkling. “Cause I’m irresistible. A magnet for females young and old.”

“Watch it,” his mother and Beth said in unison.

He laughed, and stretched in his chair. “So easy.”

Beth hit him with her napkin and

stood to take her empty plate into the kitchen.

“Elizabeth. Someone will take care of that for you,” Vivian said.

“Pffft, nonsense. No offense, but I carry my own weight.”

She brought the dirty dishes into the kitchen and set them by the sink, then looked for the dishwasher. All she saw were drawers. Well, fine, guess she'd do it by hand. Yeah, she had a bit of guilt over the cost of bringing her here. Even though it was obvious now Mrs. Lindsey could afford it and then some,

she still didn't feel right letting her staff wait on her hand and foot. She didn't incur debts.

“Love, what are you doing?”

Jacob asked behind her, amused.

“Washing my dishes, duh.”

“Looks like you're puttin' someone out of work.”

“Huh?”

He took the glass from her hand.

“They're paid to do a job, Bethie. They're not *slaves*.”

“I know that.”

“Then remember you're on

vacation and *relax*.”

Hard to do when he smelled so good. “You haven’t called in a long time.”

“Keep me busy, school and the band. Lose track of the days.”

She glanced down at his wrist. “It’d help if you wore a watch.”

He nodded once, conceding her point. “Probably. Wanna see my world, or do you need that nap?”

“I can make do with caffeine.”
After two years away, he wasn’t getting out of her sight.

He grinned. “Brilliant. See you out front.” He walked out.

She found a Coke in the refrigerator, took it up to her room, and freshened up, slammed the soft drink, belched (oops), and grabbed her purse/camera bag. Mrs. Lindsey wished her a good time on the way out.

Beth stopped short when she saw his mode of transportation. “Nuh-uh.”

“It’s perfectly safe,” he said from the bike.

“It’s a *motorcycle*. And I remember how you drive.”

He held up a second helmet.

“Don’t you trust me, Bethie?”

Oh, not the pout...damn him. She took the helmet and stuck it on her head.

“If you kill me, I’m haunting you forever.”

He rolled his eyes. “Hold on tight and you’ll be fine.”

Hold on tight, eh? To *what*? He climbed on the bike and looked back at her expectantly. She straddled the bike behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist.

“Put your feet on those little pegs,”

he said. She did. He pulled her arms further around his middle. “Tighter. You’ll fly backward when I accelerate with a grip that loose.”

“Okay.”

He started the motorcycle. She had a death grip. *Oh-god-oh-god...*

When he made it roll forward, she hid her face between his shoulder blades. Air started moving very fast past her body.

Sorry, Mom and Dad...

Chapter Five

When they hadn't crashed for several minutes, Beth dared to look at her surroundings. Traffic was slowing as they got into the city proper. The whole left side of the road thing was very strange.

“You okay back there?” Jacob asked.

“Maybe.”

She felt him laugh. The slower pace wasn't so bad. The buildings weren't a blur, and the wind wasn't

deafening. She started to notice how firm the body in front of her was. Felt the definition of his abs through his tee. She inhaled the scent of his shirt and relaxed. He still smelled the same, a mixture of fabric softener, cologne, and natural Jacob.

They stopped at a signal. He patted her hand. “Not much further.”

“Okay,” she yelled over the noise of London.

He finally parked by an apartment building. She handed him the helmet. He offered his hand to help her off the

bike. There'd been a lot of hand touching today, something he'd never done before. Didn't know what to think of it.

This wasn't a new building, but it looked maintained. She followed him inside. He held the door for her. "The lift is out of order, so we'll have to take the stairs."

"How many floors?"

"Two."

"Yippee." She walked a lot back home, but not up hills or stairs. Nerds didn't do exercise.

“Wuss.”

“Bite me.”

He tugged on a strand of her hair.

“Don’t tempt me.”

Following him upstairs meant she had a nice view of his butt the whole way. “Doing this every day must be a good workout.”

“Keeps me from gettin’ fat,” he quipped.

“Oh, yeah, I’m sure you’re in real danger of that.”

He sighed, laying the drama on thick. “No one understands...”

She eye-rolled. “You are so full of it!”

He stopped in front of 3B and fished his keys out of his pocket. “Home sweet home.”

The interior was a true bachelor pad. One futon, one secondhand chair, and two game systems on the coffee table in front of a large TV. “Live here by yourself?”

“Sometimes.” He dropped the helmets on the floor.

“Sometimes?”

“Yeah. Sometimes a mate needs to

crash. Sometimes I'm short on rent."

"Ah. What about now?"

"Alone." He shrugged.

"Technically."

"Meaning you get visitors a lot?"

He grinned. "I'm a popular bloke, love. So, bed's through there, loo's over there, and everything else you can see."

"It's...nice." Translation: dusty, cluttered, and slightly smelly.

He'd walked into the tiny kitchen to grab a beverage. "You're welcome to crash after the gig."

"You're not gonna take me back?"

He laughed. “It’ll be late, Beth.”

“Oh.” If she knew, she’d at least grabbed a toothbrush. “You need to warn a girl *ahead of time*.”

“Spontaneity really isn’t in you, is it?”

“If you’re going to make fun of me, I can take a cab back to your mother’s.”

“I was *teasing*. Since when are you so defensive around me?”

Oh, since my hormones reminded me my crush never went away and he was even more gorgeous than I remembered. “Since when are you so

nosy?”

He held up his hands, backing off.

“Maybe some rest would be a good idea, after all.”

Feeling guilty, she turned away from him and walked to the window.

“Sorry I snapped at you.”

“Already forgotten. Take my bed, hmm? We can catch up over dinner.”

She shook her head and sat on his futon. “I’m fine.”

He sat down next to her, legs sprawled. “Wanna play somethin’, then?”

She set her bag on the floor. “A video game?”

“Or cards. Whatever.”

“Tell me about your life here.”

She folded her legs under her.

“Well, the music degree is harder than I thought it would be. I can play and sing, but they want a lot more than that. A bloody lot. The memorization fries my brain, then I kill my voice at another gig.” He shrugged a shoulder. “But that’s why I don’t care if it takes me five years to graduate.”

“If you hit the big time before then,

will you still finish your degree?”

He tilted his head to one side, thinking. “I don’t know. It’d depend on how things are in that moment, I think. How much I had left, and how good the offer was.” He tapped her knee. “What about you? What are your big plans?”

“Well, I’ve declared as an art major, but my focus is photography, of course. I might have jumped the gun at accepting, though... I’m going to have to take some online courses at the same time in order to learn what I should.”

“Why’d you take UCLA if it’s not

all you're looking for?"

She sighed. "Because it's close to home...and maybe because Dad was so proud I got in. He's a big fan of the basketball team."

"Bethie..."

"I know, I should've cut the apron strings. He doesn't get that I don't need to be protected anymore." She ran a hand through her hair. "To him, I'm still a little girl. You know how I'm really here? He refused to let me go alone even though I offered to pay part of it, so I went to your mom and convinced her to

bring me along. By the time he got back from his trip, tickets were bought and Mom had approved me going, so all he could do was grumble. He'll probably be a bear when I get home."

"Hell bent on seein' me, huh?"

"You're only an excuse. I'm really here for the fish 'n' chips," she deadpanned.

"Why you—"

He attacked her with tickling fingers. His fingertips dug into her ribs and she almost jerked off the couch. She tried to scramble backward from his

hands, but the metal armrest cut off her escape. He went for the soft flesh of her middle. She shrieked and tried to roll off the futon.

He wrapped his arm around her waist and hauled me back. “Not gettin’ away that easy. Now, admit you missed me and couldn’t live without my presence.”

“Puh-lease.”

He pressed his fingers into the most vulnerable spot of her abs. “Say it,” he sang. And tickled her.

“Gah! No more.”

“Say ‘Jacob Lindsey’s the best reason to come to London’.”

“I’m not— Aaaaah! Okay, okay.”

She glanced back at him. “Please stop.”

He grinned in triumph. “Give me what I want.”

Anything, her hormones said.

This close to him, her back against his chest and the room hot from their war, she remembered how much she’d wanted him to kiss her for four years. Her face was close enough to his to do it, but she froze, knowing she couldn’t take it back if she made the move. They

sat staring at each other for who knew how long.

He swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing, and finally looked away.

“What time is it?”

She looked at her watch. “Almost one.”

He let go. “Hungry?”

“Thirsty.”

“Okay.” He stood and walked into the kitchen. “I’ve got soda, energy drinks, beer, and water.”

“Gee, how health conscious of you,” she teased. Her pulse still raced.

“S’posed to eat crap in college. I miss that place...the burger joint by the high school?”

“Tommy’s.”

“*Right.*” He rubbed his belly.

“Heart attack wrapped in paper.”

“I’m *so* gonna out-live you.”

He tossed her a bottle of water.

“Maybe. Maybe not.”

“Huh?”

“Most accidents happen in the home, Miss Homebody.” Back to the banter.

“Whatever.”

He grabbed a bag of “crisps” and turned on the TV with the remote left on the counter.

She’d never seen British television before. “What are you doing?”

“Checking the football score.”

“Summer’s not football season, Jacob.”

“Not *American football!*” He shuddered. So melodramatic.

“Oh, soccer.”

He muttered something that sounded like “bloody Yanks”.

She got up to use his bathroom.

Gross! Did he ever clean in here? She rinsed her hands—there wasn't any soap visible—and shook them dry. Seriously, would it kill him to use some Comet or bleach in here once in a while? The shower had a ring of soap scum at the bottom, the toilet was no longer porcelain white, and the sink had shaving cream residue in the basin. The only remotely clean spot was the mirror.

“You are a pig,” she said when she walked out.

“*Pig?*”

“That bathroom is totally gross!

They don’t clean themselves, you know.”

He shrugged. “I’ll get to it.”

Beth folded her arms over her chest and gave him The Look. “In the next millennium? You’re about to have old stuff growing new stuff.”

He turned back to the sports channel. “It’s not *that* bad.”

“*Men.*” She felt better, getting a second wind now that breakfast had digested some. “Come on. Play tour

guide.”

“Thought you were tired?”

“Was. Now I’m not. Take me somewhere!”

“I have a gig tonight.”

“So? That’s hours from now. Please?” She rocked on her heels, wanting to get *outside*.

He didn’t move from the futon.

“Need my energy for tonight, Beth. Not going to run you all over town.”

She stood in front of the TV, blocking his view. “Doesn’t have to be ‘all over town’. Just one place. Come

on... I came all this way. Can't you indulge me a little bit?" She could pout, too.

When he sighed and started shaking his head, she knew she'd won. He turned off the television, rose to his feet, and grabbed his keys.

"Forgetting the helmets?"

"We're not takin' the bike."

"Oh." Okay. An afternoon stroll was alright, she guessed.

People didn't often think of it, but each city had its own smell. Downtown L.A. at night, for instance, smelled like

urine. In London, she immediately felt she was someplace really old. The history was tangible, like the memories long-past were still floating down the streets. And oh-my-goodness English people talked fast! Someone passed her talking on their cell phone and the blur of sound made her brain say “what?”

Jacob had this odd smile on his face.

“What?” she asked. “Am I gawking?”

“Little bit.”

They kept bumping shoulders—

just a brush that said *hi, I'm still here.*

“Sorry. I don’t mean to scream ‘tourist’.

You have an interesting neighborhood.

Good-interesting, not interesting-is-code-for-I’m-afraid-for-my-purse.”

He smiled. “I get it, love.”

“Okay.”

They walked a while, in no rush.

She smelled fried food and felt her mouth water. He grabbed her hand to pull her into a shop.

“Fish ‘n’ chips?”

“The best on this side of London,” he said.

“Thank you.”

He glanced down at her. “For what?”

“Not being too busy to spend time with me.” Her hand was still in his. Her palm started to sweat.

He lifted her chin with his finger. “Hey, there’s always room for my Bethie.”

His Bethie. God, I loved the sound of that. She got caught in his eyes and the room fell away.

“Next!”

He stepped up to the counter to

order, dropping her hand. He'd touched her more today than she could remember before. What did she do with that? Was this how he was with women in general now, or did it mean something? She wished she had more experience in the boy-girl thing to figure it out—wouldn't know a guy like-liked her unless he came out and said it or kissed her. Anything more subtle was over her nerdy head.

“Beth.”

“Hmm?”

“Food, love.”

Caught spacing out, she blushed.

“Oh.”

“Where do you want to eat?”

She shrugged. “It’s your town.”

He thought for a second, then led her to a small park. They picked a bench. Pigeons waddled over for fries.

“Huh. Not only in the movies.”

“What isn’t?” he asked around a mouthful.

“Pigeons everywhere.” *Mmm, fried fish.* Something about traveling always increased her appetite.

“Ah. Yeah, like winged rats.

Breed like bunnies.”

“Pretty feathers, though.”

“I s’pose.”

A nice park on a not-too-hot summer day, good company, yummy food...she could get used to this leaving the house thing. Temporary, though. Just a vacation. He’d be on his side, she’d be on her side, and another year would pass before they could possibly do it again.

Pessimist? Beth? *Nah.*

They went back to his apartment after lunch.

Fortunately, she did have a change of clothes in her bag, a tank top and knee-length skirt that didn't wrinkle. Normally didn't wear skirts often, but coming to a different country, she didn't know when she might come upon a dressier occasion. The tank she had in case the temp spiked, but it also worked better for a club than her preppy shirt.

She braided the sides of her hair off her face and added another coat of mascara and gloss.

“Beth! I need my bathroom!” he yelled through the door.

“Okay!” She grabbed her stuff and opened the door. “I was only in here ten minutes, *geesh*.”

He looked her up and down.

“Nice.”

Chewing her lip, she asked, “Really? Not gonna stand out like a sore thumb?”

“Beth, you can never go wrong with black.” He kissed her cheek as they passed in the doorway. “Now get out.”

“Yeah, yeah...”

The door shut and she heard the

shower turn on.

Naked, sudsy Jacob...

Whoa, thought train.

“Let’s see what’s on TV,” she muttered.

A short time later, he walked out in only his jeans to finish dressing in his bedroom, hair still wet and drops of water clinging to his torso. Even hotter than she remembered. This vacation was not going to go well if she couldn’t get her hormones under control.

They took a cab to his venue since he had to carry his guitar.

“Pick a table where you want,” he said, and hopped on stage to start the sound check.

Beth hadn't watched him perform since the talent show his senior year. Tingles raced down her spine and they wouldn't start the concert for close to an hour.

The club wasn't well-lit, and painted in dark tones. Tables sat along the sides, leaving a dance floor in the middle. The bar was in the back. The floor was sticky. They'd come down a short stairwell from the street, so she

guessed you could consider this the basement. Looking around, the place would maybe fit two-hundred people standing.

Jacob was on lead guitar and vocals. He had a bassist, a drummer, and a guy that bounced between rhythm guitar and the keyboard. She winced at the volume when they started to play for real. Would it be that loud for the concert?

The sound check wasn't the same as a rehearsal—they started and stopped a lot of songs, playing, then calling out to

the sound guy some musically-technical instruction she didn't understand. She'd get into the groove of a melody, then poof—no more song. Like watching her father flip channels on a Sunday.

She ordered a soda and adjusted the light settings on her camera.

Chapter Six

Beth must've been a good luck charm, 'cause they *kicked ass*.

The lights went down on the stage so they could carry their equipment off before the next band. Jacob zipped his guitar into its soft case and went in search of her. She was still at the table, sipping from a glass. She smiled when she saw him.

“You were great!” She stood to hug him and swayed on her feet. “Whoa, head rush.”

“Love, what are you drinking?”

She held the glass up. “Coke.”

“May I?” he asked, holding his hand out.

She placed it in his palm. “Sure.”

He took a swallow. Rum and Coke. “How many of these have you had?”

“I don’t know. The waitress said they were on the band’s tab.”

Shit, he’d forgotten anyone linked with an act got free booze. Place filled up most nights just because they didn’t card. “Someone gave you the wrong

drink, Beth. Let's get you home."

She shrugged. "Okay. It's hot in here."

They hit the outside air; she shivered. He moved to the curb to hail a cab. She pressed into his side. "Cold?"

"No." She sniffed his neck. "You smell good."

"Thanks."

She nuzzled the skin above his collar. "Yummy."

He grinned down at her, trying not to laugh. Girl was an adorable drunk. A cab pulled to a stop in front of them. "In

you go, love.” He climbed in after Beth and gave the cabbie his address. She slid closer to lean her head on his shoulder. “Tired?”

“No...”

A warm hand snuck under his shirt, then she nuzzled his neck again.

“Uh, Beth, what are you doing?”

She straddled his leg and nibbled his throat. “What does it feel like?”

Two hands explored his abs.

He felt his body responding to her attentions and grabbed her shoulders to push her back. “Sweetheart, you’re

drunk.”

She smiled. “Feel fine.” Her fingers tickled his sides. “Feel good, actually.”

“Beth—”

She kissed him, then put her finger on his lips. “You talk too much.”

Trapped between her and the guitar, he couldn't really move, and she was persistent in being naughty. She trailed hot, wet kisses up to his ear, then flicked the lobe with her tongue and sucked it into her mouth, her teeth applying light pressure. His hips arched

off the seat as a jolt of electricity and blood went straight to his groin.

“Playin’ with fire, love.”

He felt her grin.

“Good.” One of those sneaky hands slipped under his shirt again.

“Can’t tell me you don’t like it.”

True enough, but it wasn’t right.

He put his hands on her hips to push her away, then clenched his fingers when she bit his ear again.

“Beth—”

She cut off his complaint with another kiss, plunging her tongue in his

mouth.

The cab stopped and the cabbie announced the fare owed.

Beth pulled away, grinning while Jacob fumbled for his wallet. He shoved a few bills at the man and opened the car door, grateful for the cooler summer air to calm his hormones. She wrapped her arms around his waist as he slung his guitar case on his shoulder.

One of her hands slid in his back pocket. He jumped. She smirked up at him, mischief in her eyes. “Quit that. I

need to unlock the door.” The door to the street was locked after dark except to residents.

“Hurry up, then.”

He turned his key in the lock and opened the door for her. It locked automatically again once they were inside. He slammed her against the wall and kissed her hard enough to bruise, hoping to scare her into backing off.

“That what you want?” he spat.

She stared at him, then grabbed his head and kissed him back, wrapping her long arms around his neck and curling

her leg around his hip. Part of him thought *you're resisting this, why?* She kissed like he was her favorite treat and she was going to gorge herself on him.

Sod it—he picked her up, her legs wrapping around his waist, and carried her into the stairwell to press her against the wall. He let the guitar case slide carefully to the floor. Snogging his best friend was the last thing he expected to do tonight, but he couldn't deny it was a bloody good time. The cock-stand in his jeans was hard enough to hurt. Couldn't remember the last time he'd been this

turned on.

Or wanted this much.

She clung to him like to a life preserver, one hand grasping the back of his shirt, the other tugging on the hair at the base of his skull each time he did something she liked. He pressed his hips into her center, seeking pressure for some relief. She squeaked and pressed back.

Oh god...

His southern brain took over, dry-humping moans out of his girl that echoed up the stairwell. He slid his

hands under her ass to support her weight and give him greater leverage. She sucked his tongue numb, but he didn't care.

“Jacob...” Shiny eyes and lips swollen from kisses. Gorgeous.

“Upstairs?” he asked.

She nodded. He let her down, picked up the guitar, and grabbed her hand. They ran up to his flat. Keys in the lock, knob twisted, and they were inside. He pressed her against the door, unable to resist her lips.

She walked him backward to the

futon and pushed him down, straddling his lap. His hands slid under the back of her top. God, her skin was soft. They parted for air and he hiked the tank over her head and dropped it on the floor, then kissed and nibbled her neck, making a path over her collarbone and—

A charm on a delicate chain.

Beth's graduation gift.

His best friend, barely out of high school and barely eighteen.

God, what am I doing?

Any other girl, and they'd be racing to his bedroom to get naked right

now, but this was *Bethie*. Sure, they'd have a night of fun, but then would come the sober harsh light of day and things would never be the same.

Jacob needed to regain control.

He gently moved her off his lap and handed her top to her. "I'm sorry, love." He went to the kitchen for water, and distance.

"For what?"

"I shouldn't've kissed you back. You're drunk."

"That occurs to you *now*?"

He turned to her, surprised she

was pissed off. “Hey, tryin’ to be a gentleman, here.”

She started to argue, then grabbed her belly. “I’m going to throw up.” She walked quickly to his bathroom.

He heard the seat lifted up, then the sound of her emptying her stomach. Poor thing. He dampened a cloth and walked into the bathroom. “Here.” He pulled her hair back and placed the cool cloth on her neck.

“Thank you.” She had her head over the basin.

“Empty?”

“Maybe.” She straightened and flushed the toilet, then plopped down with her back against the tub. “Ugh.”

He smiled. “Been there.”

She frowned. “You’re under twenty-one.”

“Drinkin’ age here is less, love.”

“Oh. All I ordered was a soda...”

She leaned over the bowl and wretched again.

He held her hair back again. “I know. You can’t trust the bartender there.”

Once she stopped, he got up for a

bottle of water. He brought it back with aspirin, set the pills on the sink and handed her the water.

“Here. Rinse your mouth.”

She did so, spat, and flushed the toilet again. “Yeah, that was sexy.”

“Done?”

“Think so.” She dropped her head back on the rim of the tub and closed her eyes. He touched the cloth to her flushed cheeks. She sighed. “Don’t have to take care of me.”

“Rubbish.”

She opened one eye. “Mean it.

Not a kid anymore.”

“Got the message on that, yeah.”

He still felt her kiss.

“You can go away now.”

“It’s my bathroom, love.”

She groaned. “Don’t call me that.

Please.”

He tilted her chin up. “What?”

“Don’t.” She jerked her head

away.

“What do you mean by that?”

“By what?”

“Not calling you ‘love’. Never

seemed to mind before. I don’t

understand.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Bethie...”

“You don’t mean it.” She dropped her face on her folded knees. “Forget it.”

“Can’t. It’s going to bug me now.”

She lifted her head. “Life is full of disappointments. Deal.”

“Hey, don’t take your hangover out on me.”

“*Forget it.*” She wobbled to her feet. “I just wanna lie down.” She started for the futon.

“Take my bed. It’s more comfortable.”

She shook her head, one hand on the wall. “Not throwing you out of your bed.”

He walked around her to face her. “I’m offering. You only have to take it.”

“Jacob...”

Tired of bickering, he picked her up and carried her to his room. She didn’t protest when he set her on the mattress and started removing her shoes. He pulled the covers over her, turned off the light, and began to leave.

“Don’t go,” she whispered. “I just...I feel like crap and I don’t sleep well in strange places.”

He sighed. “Yeah, alright. Let me shut off the lights.” Once done, he grabbed the water and aspirin and set them on the bedside table.

She’d already rolled to her side, facing the wall. He took off his boots and belt and lay down next to her on his back.

What a night...

Her breathing slowed. He rolled over to check she was asleep and gently

removed her glasses, setting them on the table next to her.

You don't mean it echoed through his mind. *Don't mean what?*

He couldn't sleep in his clothes and quietly rolled off the bed. The post-gig shower and pig-out awaited. An exceptional set always amped him up. Normally, he'd party with the boys, but with Beth along, he'd declined.

And why *was* that? He said no before he found her sipping on a doctored drink. His mates had no problem meeting a new friend, so that

couldn't have been it. His mother already knew he'd bring her back tomorrow, so that wasn't it, either.

Because she's Bethie, his mind whispered, and you didn't want any of them to hit on her.

Well, yeah...but I wouldn't recommend them to any female friend.

Tell us another one.

Hey, brain. You're s'posed to be on my side.

I am, idiot, if you'd open your eyes.

He turned the faucet knob and cut

off the shower, toweled dry, then slipped into a pair of sweats and padded to the kitchen for munchies. Carrying a piled-high sandwich and a beer to the futon, he turned on his Playstation, keeping the volume low.

He'd been playing an hour when she walked out of the bedroom. "Hey, pet."

"You left."

"Wasn't sleepy. Feeling better?"

She sat on the sofa, several inches between them. "Some. My head hurts."

"Left aspirin—"

“I know. I took some.”

“Oh.” He reached the end of the level and paused the game. “Okay.”

She nodded, twisting a ring on her hand. “Sorry for...”

“Being a horny drunk?” he teased.

Her hair fell to hide the side of her face. “For snapping at you. I’m not a friendly patient.”

“No harm done.”

She nodded again, still not facing him. “Well, you can have your bed back.”

“Beth—”

“I’d go back to your mom’s, but it’s the middle of the night.”

“Bethie—”

She looked at him, then. “Please, Jacob.”

He sighed, nodded, and stood to leave. “I’ll get you a pillow.”

“Thank you.”

She sat in the same place when he came back, looking small and lost. He crouched down in front of her and brushed her hair behind her ear.

“Hey, look at me. Don’t be so hard on yourself, alright? You’re still my

Bethie.”

She glanced away. “Whatever that is.” Wincing, she closed her eyes.

“Sorry.”

Couldn't say later what possessed him to kiss her, but it seemed like the right thing to do at the time. He gently touched his lips to hers, cupping her cheek in his hand. She gasped in surprise, but tentatively kissed him back. It was slow, sweet, and... innocent.

He ended the embrace as gently as he started it, kissed her forehead, and

said goodnight.

Chapter Seven

When Jacob kissed me, I almost cried.

What the *hell* did he mean by doing *that*? Make the stupid kid feel better for acting like a fool? She couldn't sleep after that, and couldn't move to chase him for an explanation.

Dammit...

For one brief moment, she thought he wanted her. *Her*. Instead, he got her shirt off and changed his mind.

Wonderful confidence booster, that

was. Never drinking alcohol, deliberately or by accident, again.

As soon as light shone through the windows, she snuck out and left. It took a while for a cab to come by, but she finally flagged one down and told him Mrs. Lindsey's address. The day was starting out cloudy and even a little hazy with fog in spots. Summer was weird in this place.

She had a loaned key for the manor, so she quietly let herself in and went straight to her room. First thing she did was brush the dead cat out of her

teeth. Thought about a shower, but she was too exhausted and fell into bed with a sleep-shirt on, instead.

Her dreams were full of kissing and losing him.

On repeat.

When Beth came downstairs for breakfast at noon, Mrs. Lindsey hugged her.

“I’m so glad you’re here, Elizabeth. Jacob called saying you’d left his apartment and he didn’t know where you’d gone or when.”

“Sorry to worry you. I came back

this morning and crashed.”

She gave her the Mom Look.

“Well, you should have left a note even though you are an adult.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She smiled and kept her arm around Beth when they turned for the kitchen. “I have an appointment in a bit, but it shouldn’t take very long. We could go into town if you like.”

“That’d be nice. My stomach’s a little rumble-y, but I might be up to that by the time you get back.”

“Excellent.” Mrs. Lindsey kissed

her cheek and started walking away.

“Oh, and call my son to let him know you’re safe?” She left, expecting Beth to follow her suggestion.

Beth was stirring a pot of oatmeal on the stove when she heard Jacob’s bike pull up out front. *Just what I needed.*

“Mother?”

Waiting for him to look in here, she hoped he wouldn’t. If she could spend the rest of her vacation with Vivian and run home with the remaining shreds of her dignity, she’d be happy.

“*You.*”

“Oh, good morning, Beth. Did you sleep well?” she replied, still stirring breakfast to completion. The oats were cooked, only needed seasonings and the sprinkle of fruit on top.

He grabbed her shoulders and turned her around. “Nice of you to say *goodbye.*”

She rolled her eyes, not planning to rise to his bait. “One, where else would I go, and two, it was early and I didn’t want to wake you.”

“Didn’t *plan* on waking me, you

mean.”

“Potato, po-tah-to. Can I eat my breakfast, or do you need to impersonate my father some more?”

He let go of her robe. “You can be such a brat.”

“Snappy comeback.” She carried the bowl to the small breakfast table and sat down to eat.

He sat across from her, glaring with his arms crossed over his chest. His hair looked like he rode the bike without his helmet.

After five minutes of him staring at

her, she put her spoon down. “Were you really that worried? Hello, raised by an Army man. I know how to get myself out of trouble, which I *wasn't in*.”

“You weren't there, didn't leave a note, and Mum hadn't seen you. Didn't know what to think.”

“I took a cab here and went to bed. Sorry, I was *exhausted*.”

“Not an excuse to be irresponsible.”

“There you go again, talking down to me like I'm a kid. It's a *two year age difference*.” She picked up the bowl to

take to her room.

“Adults don’t walk out in the middle of a conversation.”

Scowling, she turned to him.

“They do when it’s *stupid*.”

“Oh, *excuse me*, Miss Straight A’s. Was I boring you?”

“I didn’t call *you* stupid. I said *this* was stupid.”

He took another step closer so he looked down his nose at her. “By all means, go back to America where I’m not wasting your time.”

“Maybe I *will*,” she said, poking

his chest on the last syllable.

They stared at each other, angry, fired up, and neither willing to be the first to back down.

Jacob grabbing her shoulders and kissing her wasn't part of the plan. It wasn't a *nice* kiss at all. Their teeth clashed. He scratched her lip. The stubble on his face chafed her skin. She dropped the bowl. It shattered on the tile. He picked her up and set her butt on the table, his lips still on hers. She had one hand on the back of his neck, her nails leaving soft dents in his skin. He

set her body on fire, the robe she was wearing suddenly too hot.

“Don’t go,” he said between kisses.

“Wasn’t gonna.”

“Good.” He moved to kissing her throat, nipping her skin with his teeth.

She squeaked when he bit a particularly sensitive spot. “Why?”

He pulled back to look at me.

“Why what?”

“What is this? You didn’t want me last night.”

He ran a hand through his hair and

let out an audible breath. “Oh, I wanted you. The way you kiss, Bethie...” He shivered.

“Oh.”

That was all—physical lust. She slid her feet to the floor, stepped around him, and started cleaning up the mess of oatmeal and china.

“What ‘oh’?”

“I hope the bowl wasn’t expensive. I’m so clumsy sometimes.”

Keep him off-guard and he’ll stop arguing.

He crouched down in her way.

“Beth, stop avoiding the question.”

“I get it, that’s all.” She shrugged and picked up more bits of china.

“Maybe you can enlighten me, then, ‘cause I’m lost.”

“You like what I can do, so you’re attracted to me.”

“Well, yeah...but—”

“Jacob, it’s okay. Can you find some paper towels or something?”

“Uh, yeah...”

He rose and went to the broom closet and found the towels and a dustpan. She dumped what was in her

hand in the dustpan and stood to wet a paper towel at the sink. At least the bowl was almost empty when she dropped it, so there hadn't been much splatter. Once the floor was spotless again, she washed her hands.

Turning to where he'd been, she came face-to-face. He wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her close.

“Now, where were we?” He closed in on her lips again. Like a dog with a bone!

She moved her head back.

“Someone might see us.”

He grinned and said, “So we find a more private room. House is huge, in case you didn’t notice.”

She broke his hold. “I’m not like those groupies.” The girls he was used to might like private corners or dark hallways, but that wasn’t her.

His eyebrows rose. “What *groupies*?”

“The girls ready to have your babies at the concert. Don’t tell me you’re oblivious to the attention!”

“We have fans, but what does that

have to do with—”

“*Ugh. Men.*” She stormed out of the kitchen. With any luck, she’d reach the stairs before he recovered.

“*Will you stop running away from me, woman?*” He grabbed her hand and pulled her to a stop. “What the hell is your problem?”

“You and your Y chromosome are my problem! Let me go.”

“No. You’ll just run off.”

“My prerogative. Asshole.”

He brushed her hair off her face with his left hand. The touch of his

fingers on her scalp gave her tingles.

“Afraid to be alone with me?”

Yes. She stuck her chin out, fronting. “Why should I be?”

His thumb caressed her cheekbone, his fingers resting on her neck. “You tell me.” His gaze flicked from her eyes to her lips and back again.

“You have a reputation.”

“Do I?” he said, amused at the notion.

“Well, your mother has suspicions.”

He chuckled at that. “My mother has an over-active imagination about what I don’t share.”

“Can you blame her? Your career goal is Rock Star.”

He frowned. “What’s wrong with that?”

“Potentially nothing. And potentially everything. Say you get famous—what will you do with all the attention? Where will we fit? Who will you know to trust when everyone wants a piece of you? How will you find privacy?”

“Been reading tabloids?”

She sighed, not wanting another argument. “No. There are people who want you to succeed and worry about it at the same time. I know you’re having fun right now...”

They stood apart.

“You think this is a ‘bit of fun’?”

“Well, *yeah*. Isn’t it?”

“Beth, you’re not a fling.”

“Yeah, not yet. And I never would’ve kissed you last night if I was sober. I can’t just fool around with you and go home. I won’t.”

“So, what, we pretend it didn’t happen?” He stepped to her and cupped her cheeks in his hands. “I can’t do that.”

“Why *not*?”

He opened his mouth to reply, and paused, searching for the right answer.

She pulled away.

“Yeah...*exactly*. You come up with a good answer, *then* we can talk.”

Before he could see her cry, she fled to her room.

The bike started up outside after a few minutes. She went to the window

and watched him ride away.

*You just had to come to England.
Had to see Jacob. How's that goin' for
ya?*

Bite me.

*Pretty hard to accomplish that,
considering I'm your mind.*

Figure of speech. Go away.

*You're really going to throw
away that much gorgeous just because
he's not in love with you?*

I have standards.

*Oh, come on! Do you really want
your first time to be with some college*

nerd instead of your hot best friend?

Take advantage of an opportunity here!

*Since when is my subconscious
such a slut?*

*Since she got a taste of what
you've been dreaming about for four
years. Ain't my fault you couldn't
crush on more than one guy at a time.*

Oh, shut up.

Debating with her Id wasn't going to do any good. Since she didn't know when Mrs. Lindsey would be back, she set the alarm for a half-hour nap.

Someone knocked on her door

while she was dressing after her shower.

“Come in.”

The door opened. “Nice legs.”

Male voice.

She froze, sunscreen half-rubbed into her skin. “Thought you were your mother.”

He shut the door. “Sorry to disappoint.”

“She’ll be back any minute.” Beth closed the cap on the bottle, legs now sufficiently protected. Her skin got sunburns from beach scenes on TV.

He came closer. “Got plans?”

“Yes.”

“To do what?”

“I don’t know. Stuff. Why are you here?” She backed into the dresser.

Dammit. Felt like the antelope about to be pounced on by the lion.

“Because you’re my favorite girl next to Mum, of course.” He placed both hands on the dresser behind her, pinning her in.

“That’s, um, nice, but—”

His lips cut off her sentence.

Another different kiss, this one coaxing her to play his game of seduction, slowly

making her blood boil. One of us moaned. “Need you, Bethie.”

Again with the lust. “I’m not—”

“Need you in my life. I’ve never wanted to share.”

She ducked under his arm, needing air. “You don’t like sharing *anything*. Whine and moan if I steal one fry.”

He stalked her again. “That’s not what I meant. Remember how you complained about me not bringing you along with my friends? I wasn’t excluding you. I wanted our time all to myself. You’re the only girl I ever

trusted in my room.”

Her eyes widened at that news.

“You never brought your dates back to the house?”

“Sure, to the den or the kitchen.

Not in my room.”

“Do...do you share your room now?”

He grinned. “Nope.”

Whoa. “You haven’t...in...”

He shook his head. “Not at my place.”

“But...you’ve...?” *Had sex.*

“Yeah. If it matters.”

“Ah.” Well, she’d expected that already, so...well. “I didn’t like being excluded. Back then.”

“I know. I remember.”

She folded her arms over her chest. “You kept saying you were protecting my little-girl-self from the assumptions of you old people.”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “Not exactly how I worded it...”

“Point is, you thought of me as a baby sister until I showed up yesterday.” God, it was only *yesterday*.

“I did not.”

“Did too.”

“Did *not*.

“Did *too*.”

“Spring Break my senior year.

You slept over when your parents were away. I woke up holding you.”

“Nuh-unh. I left when you were asleep.”

“I woke up *before* you did, love, and I liked it. Liked having you there with your cute little snore sounds.”

“I do *not* snore!”

He grinned. “Kinda do, yeah.”

Her hands went to her hips and she

glared at him. “Take that back.”

“It’s adorable, really. A soft breath followed by a tiny whistle.”

She smacked his arm. “You’re so lying!”

He caught her hand and laughed. “Cross my heart and hope to die, Beth.”

“Damn.”

He shook his head, still laughing at her. “I tell you I liked holding you *two years ago* and all you take from the story is that you snore? No wonder they say women are crazy.”

Her cheeks flushed. “Shut up.”

“Do you believe you’re special to me now?”

She let him pull her into his arms.

“Warming up to it.”

“*Finally.*”

She smacked his arm again. “Shut up.”

“So abusive,” he teased.

“You drive me nuts. It’s not my fault.”

“Look at that pout...” He kissed her, gently sucking her lower lip into his mouth.

Unh. One of his hands slid under

the back of her tee to stroke her spine. She leaned into him and he fell back to sit on her bed.

We were that close to the bed?

She crawled on his lap so their faces would be even height again.

Anything that maximized the kissing.

He laid back, her body following, and she felt the hard-on he was sporting. One of his hands was tangled in her hair, the other still caressing her back. They were getting pretty hot. He'd just unfastened her bra when someone knocked on her door.

Beth sat up so fast; she nearly fell backward off the bed. His hands tightened on her waist to save her.

“Elizabeth?” *Oh god...his mother!*

“Yes?” Praying her voice sounded normal.

“Do you still want to go out this afternoon?”

“Um...” Her eyes widened and she glanced down at him. He nodded. “Sure!”

“Wonderful. Bring a sweater in case it gets chilly this evening.”

“Yep. Be down in a minute!”

They heard her walk away. He started to giggle. She put her hand over his mouth. “Shhh! She might hear you and come back!” she whispered. He stopped and kissed her palm. “Oh my God...” That was mortifying. She dropped her hands to her sides.

“Bethie, we’re adults and she likes you. It’s okay.”

She got off his lap. “She’s like a second mom to me, Jacob. It’s a big deal. You need to sneak out to another part of the house. I’m sure she saw your

bike.”

Was it obvious she'd been making out? She went into the bathroom. Her lips were bright pink, cheeks flushed, and her hair needed brushing. Oh, yeah, and her *bra* was undone.

God, that was close.

“See you tonight?” he asked, watching her cool her face.

“I don't know.”

“Why not?”

“Cause I'll be with your *mother*.”

He shrugged. “So I'll hang out here for the day.

“*Here?*”

“In the *house.*”

“Oh.” That was a relief.

He turned her face to him and kissed her again. It was short. “See you later, love.”

“Uh-huh.” He kept turning her into Dreamy-Beth. *Oh, I’m in so much trouble...*

He left. She heard a door open and shut down the hall. When she finally felt presentable, she walked downstairs and found him chatting with Mrs. Lindsey.

“Did Mother wake you, Beth?”

Stinker.

“Uh, no. I was just in the middle of something. Sorry to keep you waiting, Mrs. Lindsey.”

“It’s alright, dear. There was no rush. Shall we?”

“Yep.”

Vivian placed her hand on his arm, a gesture of affection. “Goodbye, dear. Do you have plans today?”

“Nope. Maybe some writing.”

“Then perhaps we can reunite for dinner. Come along, Elizabeth. I’ll show

you my favorite spots as a girl.”

Mrs. Lindsey took her purse from a servant on the way to the door. Beth followed, glancing back at him just before she walked outside. He winked at her.

Chapter Eight

Jacob was in the conservatory testing a melody on the piano when he heard their voices. The front door shut as he walked into the foyer. “There are my two favorite ladies.” They turned and smiled at him, both carrying shopping bags. “Have fun?”

Beth nodded. “Vivian took me to this really old bookstore that only carries vintage texts!”

“Ahhh. There goes any hope of seeing you surface the rest of your

vacation,” he teased.

“That is an exaggeration, sir.”

“We also went to the art museum,”

his mother said.

“Is *that* what they’re calling clothing stores these days?”

“Hush.” Mother thrust her bags into his hands. “Be a good boy and carry these to my room.”

“*Yes, Mum.*”

They giggled as he walked away. His girl and his mother bonding—no good could come from this.

He put his mother’s loot by her

closet and left her room. Coming down the hall, he saw Beth enter her bedroom and slipped in behind her.

“Jacob!”

“What?” He took the bag out of her hand and wrapped his arm around her waist. “I missed you.”

“It was only a few hours.” Her breathing quickened when he nibbled on her neck. “Stop that.”

“But you like it,” he said, grinning against her throat.

“I don’t want a mark.”

“I can find a place that doesn’t

show.”

She pushed him away. “We need to get downstairs.”

He sighed. “As you wish.” He’d only get her alone later.

Mum was speaking to her cook about the night’s menu. “There you are. Does Chinese work for both you?”

“Sure.”

“She just means takeout, love.”

Beth’s lips formed a soundless “o”.

His mother shook her head. “Au contraire, darling. I’ve been collecting

recipes since my last visit and Rose has kindly agreed to indulge them. Another fifteen minutes, yes?”

The cook nodded and went back to the kitchen. He preferred the one they employed when he was a child. This lady, while good at her job, rarely said a word or laughed. Staff should be like family if they were living in your house twenty-four-seven.

“Jacob, you should show Elizabeth your old room while we wait,” his mother said.

“Aw, Mum, it’s not very

interesting—”

Beth interrupted him. “I’d love to see it, if you come with us, Vivian.”

“*’Vivian’?*”

Two pairs of eyes settled on him.

“Yes, dear. Calling me by a title is entirely too formal.” She smiled at Beth. “Elizabeth is like family.”

“We’ve become good friends the past two years,” Beth added. “If I’m not being too bold.”

“Of course not.”

He waved in their field of vision.

“Ladies? Still here?”

They glanced at each other with amused grins. Oh, definitely not a good sign.

Vivian coming along to give Beth a tour of the house put her at ease. He had one thing on his mind right now, and until she had a chance to tell him to slow down, she didn't want to be left alone with him.

A large estate, the house had formal and informal rooms. The family rooms had obviously been used more often, the chairs and sofas broken in and personal items left here and there.

Upstairs, Vivian led her to his boyhood room located next to the master suite. The room reflected a boy that hadn't yet reached puberty, with stuffed toys and action figures still on the shelves. A child-size acoustic guitar sat in the corner. The twin bed was decorated with navy blue bedding. A moment frozen in time.

“Do you still sleep in here?” Beth asked him.

“Not if I can help it. Bed's too short.”

She walked over to the

bookshelves. “Definitely different than your room at home.” The walls and furniture were white, with accents in primary colors. “Especially the black phase.”

“You’re never going to let me forget that, are you?”

“The Black Hole? Not likely. Has he always done crazy things when he’s bored?”

“Creative ones, yes,” Vivian said. “I once found him—”

He muffled her statement with his hand. “That’s enough stories for one

day, Mum.”

She pushed his hand away.

“Darling, it’s only Elizabeth. I’m not blabbing your secrets to the press.”

Beth admired that woman so much for keeping up with him, and especially when she won. If they hadn’t started out as tutor and student, he would’ve steamrolled right over her freshman confidence. Bossing him into buckling down with his homework was the only way she could keep on even ground. Now, she could verbally spar with him, but he still intimidated her. Watching

him interact with his mother made her homesick. She resolved to call hers after dinner.

A chime sounded over the intercom, signaling dinner was ready.

Vivian had the head of the table, with Beth and Jacob at each hand so they sat across from each other. Mother and son talked more about what they'd missed in each other's lives.

Beth listened.

After dinner, she got time alone. Mom gave her a phone card for the long-distance minutes, so she used it when

she called from her room.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Mom.” She flopped on the bed.

“Beth! Are you having fun, honey? What time is it there?”

“Around seven-thirty. We just finished dinner. I saw Jacob play last night, and went out with Mrs. Lindsey today.” *No way was I telling her about the kissing.*

“Oh, what did you see?”

She twirled the phone cord around her fingers. “Part of a museum, this

really cool vintage bookstore, and some clothes shopping. Mrs. Lindsey has some fundraiser thing to attend, so we picked out a nice dress.”

“I assume you didn’t leave the bookstore empty-handed.” She could hear the smile in her mother’s voice.

“You know me well, Mom. Is Dad still grumbling?”

“He’ll be glad you called, I’ll say that. He means well.”

She sighed. “I know. And I’m fine. The house is nicer than any hotel I’ve ever been in and we’re getting

along great.” By “we”, she meant Mrs. Lindsey.

“Good to hear. Call whenever you want, okay? We miss you.”

“Love you, too, Mom. Bye.”

Feeling better about being across the world from her family, she hung up.

Two knocks on her door, then it opened. “Hey.” Jacob.

“Hey. What’s up?”

He closed the door. “You were quiet at dinner.” He sat on the other side of the bed.

“Just listening.”

“Ah. I was wondering if I should head home, yet.”

She looked up. “Doesn’t your mom want you to hang around?”

He plucked at the duvet. “Didn’t want to get in the way of girl time.”

Beth realized he wasn’t completely secure about this—them—either. “Oh. I just got off the phone with Mom.”

“Everything alright?”

She nodded. “Yeah. Only checking in. My dad is still pouting that I’m here and not at home.”

“Rough.”

“Would be, if he knew about last night.” She shuddered.

He chuckled. “*Yeah...that stays between us.*”

“Yep.”

He reached for her hand. “This scares me, too, you know. We go down in flames, I lose you for good.”

She watched his thumb stroke the back of her hand. “Is it worth the risk?”

One side of his mouth flicked up in a smile. “Hope so. Don’t know, yet.”

“Ditto.” They lapsed into a few

minutes of silence. Was the potential for love worth risking a friendship? How did anyone know? How could they tell? If they waited another ten years, they might not have it figured out. “So, the options are stay friends...or try dating?”

He nodded. “Long-distance dating.”

“No pressure...”

He sighed. “Yeah...”

She turned her body to face him and folded her legs up to sit Indian-style. “Would you call or write more often than you do now?”

He mirrored her position. “I’d try. You know I’m not good at keepin’ track of time, so I hope there’d be allowance for that.”

“Some. Depends on the reason. Studying for midterms—excusable. Partying with your friends—not so much.”

“In case—not sayin’ it will happen—but in case either of us meets someone at home...then what?”

“You want a contingency plan for a *hook-up*?”

“No! I’m *saying*...there’s always

the possibility one or both of us would fall for someone we see every day. The long-distance thing falls apart ‘cause people can’t stay close. I’ve seen it at school.”

She frowned. “Then how does *anyone* make it work?”

He ran his hand through his hair. “I don’t know. Might have to ask for advice.”

“Maybe...maybe we shouldn’t start, then. Wait until graduation on the proviso we’re both single at that time.”

“Yours or mine?”

Good question. “Would you move back to L.A. when you’re done here?”

He shrugged. “If I don’t have a contract, then I’ll prob’ly *have* to, anyway. L.A. or New York.” Music centers.

“Right.”

He took her hands in his. “There is a lot to think about, but we don’t have to decide right now, Beth. It’s too important to make a snap decision, yeah?”

“Really?”

He looked at her like it was the most stupid question in the world.

“Well, *yeah*. Do you see me with another best friend?”

“I-I don’t know... I don’t know what you have here.”

He locked eyes with her. “I only have one Bethie.”

Color spread across her cheeks. “Oh.” *When he put it like that...*

Honestly, she was a bit overwhelmed by the last twenty-four hours. When she first decided to come to London this summer, it was to *see* him

again. Never dreamed they'd kiss, let alone talk about a future *together*. So, yeah, she was spun.

Rocked to the bloody core.

Whether from jet lag or the emotional weight, she yawned. "Sorry."

He smiled. "S okay. Long day."

She snorted out a laugh. "Yeah."

"Do you want me to let you sleep?"

"At..." She glanced at the clock.

"Eight? No. What kind of self-respecting eighteen-year-old would I be if I did that in perfect health?"

He laughed. “Then what would you like to do, love?”

“Um...got any movies?”

He tugged her hand for her to follow him off the bed. “That I do.”

They went downstairs and outside.

“You store your DVDs in the garden?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

They walked through a maze of hedgerows and came out to open grass on the other side. In the back corner of the property was an old gardener’s cottage. “No one had used this for

years, so when I moved back two years ago, I claimed it as a place no one would find me.” He took an old key out of his pocket.

“Secret hideout, eh?”

He grinned in the dark and nudged the door open. “Exactly. Let me find the lights...”

She heard the flick of a lighter, then light spread from a lantern. The cottage was one open room, save for a door that might lead to a bathroom. A stone fireplace sat center in the back wall. He had set up an inflatable

mattress, an older TV, and a writing desk by the window.

“No electricity wired back here, so I use a portable battery. Lanterns or candles are enough to see by. Don’t have much to trip over.”

“Yeah. This is...unexpected, but pretty cool. I thought you liked your creature comforts.”

He got the TV and DVD player running. “I do...but every so often, it’s nice to have the quiet. Sit. I’ve got snacks and a box of movies.”

“Why do I feel like there should

be a ‘Boys Only’ sign on the door?” she teased.

He plopped down on the mattress next to her. “Because you’re a dork. Pick something.”

Looking at the titles, she gasped. “Someone has a thing for ‘80s flicks...”

“What of it?”

“Oh my God, *The Breakfast Club*...my mom loves this movie. Aww, *Superman* one-through-four... I haven’t watched any of those since my brother left.”

“Then pick one.”

“It’s your secret hideout.”

“And I’m bein’ a good host. Pick a bloody movie, Beth.”

“I don’t know. Recommend something.”

He rolled his eyes and lay back on the bed. “Wake me when you decide.”

“Okay, okay... Well...out of the movies I recognize...here.” She handed him the case.

“*Goonies*? Somehow that does not surprise me.”

She play-shoved him. “It’s hilarious.”

“No question, but it’s also almost two hours long.”

“Most movies are two hours long. If you’re worried I’ll fall asleep, I’ll just go back inside. We can watch something another time.” She started to get to her feet.

He tugged her back down. “Don’t think I said you could leave, love.” He held her wrist.

“Gonna hold me prisoner? Very mature.”

He slowly shook his head.

“Temper, temper...” And kissed her.

Thoughts of running away fled her mind. His lips were soft against hers, yet they demanded she join in, coaxing her to yield to his dominance.

Jacob was always naturally confident in the time she'd known him, but Adult-Jacob had a mastery of his life. He was one of those lucky people things just worked out for, but more than that, he'd figured out how to get what he wanted and *knew* he'd have it. He kissed in the same way, overwhelming her senses with his touch and his scent. She needed more...*something*.

Not close enough...

He'd tugged her to sit sideways on his lap, but twisting to kiss him was uncomfortable. She straddled his hips—much better.

“Want you,” he said, his voice rough with passion.

She shook her head. “Not yet.”

He nodded, and the next kiss was slower. The rhythm he intended to cool things down with backfired on her, though. Her heart pounded in her chest and heat suffused her body, focusing deep in her belly.

He broke away. “Beth, you keep rubbin’ on me like that and I’m not going to be responsible for the consequences.”

“Huh?” This must be what they meant by “lust-addled brain”. He placed one of her hands on his fly.

Whoa. That was, um...

“I’m hard enough to hammer nails, love, to borrow a phrase.”

There’s no way that’s fitting in— “Oh, um...sorry. I should go, um...” She gestured toward the house.

“Maybe. Yeah.”

It’d work better if you got off the

boy's lap, Beth. They stared at each other, breathing in unison. "I'm gonna leave. Any second now."

"Uh-huh." He leaned closer, his reply touching her lips as well as her ears.

"Yep." Speaking with their mouths touching might've been the most erotic thing she'd experienced this weekend.

Sighing, she made full contact again, a junkie for his kisses. He moaned and pressed her closer with a hand on her low back. If she could

crawl inside him, maybe she could satisfy this ache...

She sucked in a breath. He dipped his head to bite her neck where it met her shoulder. "I need..."

"Tell me, baby."

Baby...I liked that. "Unh... I can't think with you this close."

He rolled her onto her back.

"Thinking's overrated."

Okay...wait, I was going to do something...I needed to... "Go. I mean, I should go."

He lifted his head to stare at her.

“Now?”

She nodded. This was about to go where she couldn't come back from.

Rolling onto the mattress, he said, “Better run, then.”

Scrambling to her feet, she glanced at him. His blue eyes were dilated black and naked longing was written on his gorgeous face. Part of her wanted to throw sense to the wind and learn what he could teach her.

She ran out, not slowing down until she reached the other side of the maze.

When she woke up the next morning, his motorcycle was gone. She and Vivian had a light breakfast, then set out for more sightseeing. They took the tour of the Tower, Beth shot photos of the Bridge, then they explored the British Museum.

“Tomorrow, we can drive over to Stratford-upon-Avon, and perhaps Jacob can take you on one of those ghost tours this week.”

“I’m all for the Shakespeare. Not so much with the scary stuff.”

Vivian shrugged. “Merely a

thought. Really, there's more to do around London than you'll have time for, so I'm sure we can keep you entertained.”

“That's why I packed a guidebook.”

She put a hand on Beth's arm.

“Would you rather go off alone? I don't want to...crimp your style?”

“You're not,” she assured his mother. “I might take a day before I leave, but I love spending time with you. My mother would be wandering the parks taking pictures of strangers, Dad

would drag me to every war museum, and Jacob would be bored to tears looking at old books. You like what I like.”

She smiled. “Lucky for us, then, isn’t it.”

“Absolutely.”

As the day went on and she was so nice, Beth felt guilty about kissing her son behind her back. “Can I ask you a hypothetical question?” she asked at lunch.

Vivian set her fork on her plate.

“Of course.”

“Say you had feelings, and even kissed someone, but you’re not sure if it can work. How do you know?”

“Hmm, does the hypothetical object of that affection share those feelings?”

Stirring the straw in her soda, she watched the ice float in circles. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Well, you would only know if you tried, but the effort would have to be equal from both sides. If you want different things, that’s something that has to be settled.”

Figured as much.

“*Hypothetically*, is it okay to put off a relationship for a while, then? Can a person be asked to wait?”

“Elizabeth, is there something you want to tell me?” Her right eyebrow arched just like Jacob’s did when he had a hunch.

She shook her head, maybe a little too hard. “No, no. Only thinking...”

Vivian smirked. “*Hypothetically.*”

“Yeah.” She felt the blood rushing to her cheeks and tried to relax before she blushed like a beet.

“Well...” Vivian picked up her fork to resume eating her salad. “It’s merely my opinion, but I think Jacob should court you properly, or not at all.”

“J-Jacob? What—I mean, there’s...there’s no Jacob,” she sputtered.

“Mm-hm.”

“I didn’t say anything about—”

“Elizabeth. I’m not blind. Only the incredibly oblivious would miss the flirtation between you two since we arrived.”

This time, she did blush. “Oh.”

What all had she seen? “What do you think?”

Vivian reached across the table and took Beth’s hand. “I’m quite fond of you, I hope you know that. I’d be happy to welcome you as a daughter...when you’re ready. However, I promised your parents a wholesome and educational trip, and I’m pretty sure a summer fling doesn’t fall under those guidelines.”

“I don’t want a *fling*.” She pulled her hand away.

“Forgive the way that sounded. That was not my intent. You’re a good

girl, dear. I worry more about my son's intentions more than yours."

Hey. "Jacob is a good man."

She nodded. "He is. He has a good heart. He's also young, and usually gets his way, and I don't think he's mature enough to be what you hope, Elizabeth."

"What does that mean?"

She smiled kindly. "That I don't think it's the right time for you, dear. Maybe in a few years. Maybe ten—who knows? But, I'd hate to see you hurt unnecessarily when the distance wasn't

realistic in the first place.”

Logic sucked. “Maybe I won’t like UCLA.”

She sighed, but the smile was still in place. “Maybe you won’t.”

Chapter Nine

Jacob stayed away Monday.

When he called the house on Tuesday, he discovered they were already gone and would be out the whole day. Now, it was Wednesday, and Beth hadn't called, either. He knew—he made sure his voicemail worked.

Maybe he'd scared her into avoiding him. Be easier, perhaps, if they could put the weekend behind them and be best friends again. Easier...but lacking, maybe. He didn't know what it

was that made the two of them a combustible entity when in the same room alone, but he'd never felt something so powerful. So amazingly sexy.

If they could just...

Well, there he went, thinking with his dick again. Beth, because she was *Bethie*, deserved better.

She deserved a guy in a time zone less than eight hours ahead, frankly. Someone who could take her to movies and dinner and that sci-fi convention she secretly wanted to attend. A guy who

would carry her books to class and rub her neck when she got stiff from studying for finals. Someone that remembered the chocolate sprinkles on her hot chocolate. A bloke who was friggin' *there*.

And that wouldn't be him for years, if ever.

Could he tell her that? Could he be selfless enough to let her go?

Question of the bloody year, mate.

Thursday morning, and Beth hadn't

seen or heard from Jacob since Sunday night. Guess that was it, then...no sex, no interest. Of course, he could be busy with the band or whatever, but still... couldn't a girl get one phone call?

Ooo, maybe his mother got to him! That could be it. It was a nicer thought than him only wanting her for her body, so yeah...sticking with that one for now. She'd blame Vivian!

Then again, that might be unfair to her good friend and he really was an asshole when it came to women. *See how my brain works? Help me!* She

groaned and dropped her head on the table.

“Miss Elizabeth?” One of the servants.

“I’m fine. Sorry for the noise.”

She smiled. She was young, maybe only a couple years older. “I find a nice walk or bicycle ride helps when my mind is overburdened.”

“Probably a good idea. Thank you.”

She nodded and left Beth to finish breakfast.

She’d slept in today, so Mrs.

Lindsey was already out of the house. After leaving a note on the refrigerator saying she'd be back by dark, she set out alone. A dusty bike from the garage was her getaway. Didn't know how far she'd go, but the scenery of manicured gardens and stately mansions was worth wandering. The scent of roses carried on the warm breeze.

She rode for a half hour or so when a familiar motorcycle passed going the opposite direction. Hoping he hadn't spotted her, she kept going. Got about five minutes further, and the red

bike pulled up next to her.

“Whatcha doin’, love?” Jacob asked.

“What does it look like?”

“Okay...serves me right for askin’ an obvious question. Where are you going?”

“Nowhere. Anywhere. What’s it to you?” *Couldn’t I get one afternoon of peace to myself?*

He accelerated the bike to cut off her path. “Why are you biting my head off?” He removed his helmet.

“I’m not.”

“Uh, beg to differ, love.”

She rolled her eyes and sighed.

“Fine, think what you like. Can I continue now?”

“Can I get a clue why you’re mad at me?”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “Haven’t heard from you in four days. It’s a bit rude.”

“You didn’t call me, either.”

“Been busy. Try leaving a message.”

“I called on Tuesday.”

He did? “I didn’t hear about it.”

“Not my fault.”

“*Fine.*”

He shut the bike off. “I missed you.”

“Huh.” *Don't give in, don't give in...*

He dismounted and walked the few steps to her. “I see you, and I don't want to let you go.”

Gulp. “You didn't feel for me at all before Saturday.”

“So you say.” He placed his hand on hers. “You know how I am—once I decide to do something, I jump head

first.”

“That doesn’t change the fact that I’m going back to L.A. and you aren’t.”

“Don’t *have* to be back until September.”

She pulled her hand away. “I can’t stay that long. My parents would never allow it.”

“You’re an adult, Beth. What can they do?”

Grasping for straws, she said, “My Dad could threaten to pull the plug on my tuition.”

He shook his head. “He wouldn’t

do that.”

“You don’t know. My dad can hold a grudge a long time. My brother left when I was eight, Jacob. He hasn’t been back because Dad didn’t approve of what he wanted to do with his life. Mom couldn’t bear losing both of her kids. I won’t do that to her, not even for you.”

“Does that mean you’d never leave L.A.?”

“I...” She glanced away. “I don’t know. I don’t know what’s beyond college.”

He touched her cheek. “With your grades, you could go anywhere, you know.”

“What are you asking?”

“I’m not...I’m only saying you shouldn’t be afraid to explore your options. You’d survive your father’s disapproval, Beth.”

“Maybe.” A headache blossomed in the center of her forehead. “God, you really can complicate things, Jacob.”

His kissed her head and hugged her, rubbing her back. “I don’t mean to.”

She chuckled, because it was

better than crying. “I know.”

Thankfully, this wasn't a busy street in the middle of a work day. They would have been an odd sight hugging on a bicycle.

His shirt was damp under the jacket, the July weather too hot for leather if he wasn't at speed. She sat there resting her chin on his shoulder until her butt started to go to sleep on the seat. He released her when she loosened her arms.

“Where would you like to go?” he asked, tucking her hair behind her left

ear.

She shrugged. “I could use a laugh.”

He nodded his head to the motorcycle. “Hop on. We’ll find a theater.”

“What about this?” she asked, patting the handlebar.

“Stow it behind a bush. It’ll be fine.”

“That’s not right. I’m not ditching someone else’s property.”

“Love, do you really want to ride all the way back to the house first?”

“It’s your *mom’s* bike.”

He held his hands up in surrender.

“Okay, okay... I’ll go get the car so I can pick you up.”

She nodded. “That’s fair.”

People and things were treated like Beth wanted to be treated, which tended to be better than how most people she met acted in return. Had a cousin she wouldn’t let touch her Barbies after she saw what she did to hers. The memory *still* made her shudder, seeing all those poor dolls with missing heads or their hair in tangles. Mom thought she

had a problem with sharing, but that wasn't it—she had a problem with *chaos*, which any bit of childish destruction was to her. She was the only kid she knew that didn't need to be told to clean her room, because it was never messy.

He was a clutter slob—never filthy, but stuff was just tossed anywhere. Hence the suggestion for the bicycle.

Beth pedaled faster this time, but he was still there and back to her in around ten minutes. Boy had a lead

foot. They put the bicycle in the trunk, dropped it off at the house, and parked the Jag.

“Do we have to take the bike?” she asked.

“What’s wrong with it?”

“The car has air-conditioning and leather seats that don’t hurt my butt.”

“Easier to find a parkin’ space with the bike.”

She pouted. “So?”

“Fine,” he sighed. He rolled the motorcycle into the garage. “But if we have to pay for a spot, it’s out of your

pocket.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

She knew he secretly didn't mind much. He only rode the bike here for the cheap mileage and ability to get through traffic.

“Whatever happened to your car when you moved, anyway?”

“Sold it. Mum only let me live at the house until I had stable work that summer.”

“Lucky for you it was only two years old.”

He pulled out of the driveway.

“Yeah. What do you drive?”

“Dad’s car when he’s away.”

“You’re going to university without a car?”

“Yup. Living in the dorms was cheaper than buying one. We aren’t made of money like some people.”

“Mum has the dosh, not me. Don’t even get my trust fund ‘til I graduate.”

“You have a *trust fund*?” She shifted on the seat to face him. “What else don’t I know?”

He threw her a look. “It’s not a big deal, alright? Just somethin’ my

grandparents set up.”

“Wow. What were they like?”

“Very traditional and very kind.

They’ve been gone a while.”

She laid her hand on his knee.

“I’m sorry.”

“It was ten years ago, love. Didn’t know them very well. As people.”

Understandable. She only knew certain things about her grandparents from stories. “What about your dad’s side?”

His smile faded. “Never met anybody.”

“Oh.” How sad. They’d missed out, wherever they were. “So, when’s your next gig?”

“Saturday. And another on Sunday.”

“Same place?”

“Nope.”

“Oh. Break a leg.”

He grinned, keeping his eyes on the road. “Thanks.”

She faced forward again and watched the scenery go by. It was so weird to be on the left side of the car and not driving. They soon got into the

metro part of London, heading in the same direction as his apartment.

“Do you always drive toward home?” she teased.

“I know the neighborhood.”

“I’m sure there’s a theater closer to your mother’s place.”

He smiled. “Probably is.”

She shook her head. “And you called *me* a creature of habit.”

“Bethie, someone could set a clock by you in high school.”

“Hello, it’s a regimented schedule *everybody* was on.”

“But you stuck to it with supreme efficiency.” He parked the car. “Bet you couldn’t go *one day* without checking the time.”

“Just point me to my movie.”

They bickered over who would pay for the tickets, then the snacks, then what *row* to sit in. Beth liked the middle of the theater. He wanted the front or the very back.

“*You* can sit there. I’m not gonna.”

“Maybe I *will*,” Jacob said, and sauntered down to the second row. That lasted until the end of the previews when

he got lonely.

She grinned in triumph and gave him her “told you so” look. He stuck his tongue out at her and stole the popcorn.

“Hey, give that back! You said you didn’t want any.”

He popped a kernel in his mouth.

“Changed my mind.”

She grabbed the box. “Then get your own!”

“But the movie’s starting.” He stole a handful this time.

She moved it to the empty seat next to her. “Not my problem.”

“Brat.”

“Mooch.”

“*SHHHH!*” someone said behind them.

She turned around and mouthed “sorry.” Jacob sat there smiling about getting her in trouble. She smacked his knee and whispered “behave” at him. The second after she spoke the word, she remembered it usually acted like the red flag waved in front of the proverbial bull. From anyone except his mother, he took the order as a dare. She hoped he’d be more interested in the movie this

time. He let her enjoy the film, the only small reminder things were different presenting in his arm being stretched across the back of her chair. It was a fun cartoon. She started to relax, and laugh, and felt on familiar territory for the first time since flying over.

When it was time to leave, he took her hand in the hallway. The gesture carried a lot of weight for her—one, he'd never casually done it before in public; two, he'd only taken her hand, not done something else more overt or possessive; and three, holding hands

was so *normal*. He opened her door for her when they reached the car, kissed the hand he held, and walked around to his side. She swooned at the sheer sweetness of it.

“Just in time for supper at Mum’s,” he said, pulling the car into traffic.

“You’re hungry after all that candy?”

“Well, *yeah*. Growin’ boy, love.”
He winked.

“Pig.”

“Oink, oink.”

Vivian didn't look surprised at all to see them walk through the door together. "I didn't realize you two had plans today," she said.

"We didn't. Jacob caught up with me when I was out by myself."

"And gave you a ride home? How sweet of you, dear."

"We saw a movie, Mum." He started for the kitchen. "What's for dinner?"

She turned to Beth. "I took the liberty of picking something up for you today, Elizabeth. It's on your bed."

A present? “Wow, okay. What is it?”

“Go take a look. There’s time.”

“Um, thank you.” The kitchen door was closed, so he couldn’t hear her. “Did you talk to Jacob about...?”

She shook her head. “Why? Did he say something?”

“No. He was just...nice today. Less intense.”

She smiled. “I haven’t said a word.”

Huh. “Oh. Okay, then.”

Beth excused herself to her room.

A large, flat box sat on the bed. The note on top said *for tomorrow night*. That was odd—she didn't have plans for tomorrow. She lifted the top off to reveal folded-over tissue paper.

Wrapped in the tissue paper was a dress. Lifting it out of the box, the length of the dress fell to the floor. It was semi-formal, a simple sheath design in navy blue. She held it up to her body in front of the full-length mirror. The hem skimmed her ankles. Not bad. Right in between drawing attention to her body and embarrassing her. She might have

chosen it in a store if she could afford it.

“Try it on,” Vivian said behind her.

“Was I taking too long?”

She waved off the question. “No, I wanted to see how you like it. Try it on tonight in case any alterations need to be done.”

“It’s lovely, but...why?”

She shrugged. “Why not? Besides, what would a visit to London be without attending a society party? I’d love to have your company. It’s a good cause, but you have *no* idea how much of a

bore some of those people are.”

“Not seeing the incentive here,”

Beth teased.

“Did I not mention the five course meal? Silly me.”

Thinking about it, she asked,

“What’s for dessert?”

“Something with far too many calories, of course.”

“If it’s chocolate, you’ve got yourself a deal.”

Vivian laughed, green eyes twinkling. “I’ll try to find out.” She shoed Beth toward the bathroom. “Try

on the dress!”

“Okay, okay.”

She shed clothes, unzipped the back of the dress, and carefully stepped into it. It was sleeveless, so she got the straps situated on her shoulders and reached her right arm behind her to pull the zipper up. The fabric started to magically hug her meager curves. A small slit in back made it easier to walk. Glancing in the bathroom mirror, she almost didn't recognize her body.

“Whoa.”

“Does it fit? Come out and let me

see.”

She smoothed the dress into place and walked out to the bedroom.

“Oh, Elizabeth...” Vivian started to walk around her. “I had a hunch this would be perfect.” She guided her to the full-length mirror, then gathered her hair in her hands and twisted it up off her neck. “Look at you. So grown-up.”

“I...I don't know what to say.” The girl in the mirror looked like a different person. She had *possibilities*.

“You like it, yes?”

“It's amazing...” Beth tried to be

an adult, though she didn't feel like one, yet, but Mirror-Beth *was* one.

Vivian smiled at her in the mirror. “Then ‘thank you’ is all I need. Change for dinner, now.”

“Okay.” Beth walked back into the bathroom and heard his mother leave.

She wanted to call Mom. “Crap, it’s Thursday.” She checked her watch. “She’s at ceramics class.” Oh, well. She’d tell her all about the party tomorrow.

After dinner, Vivian convinced

Jacob to play something on the piano. To Beth's surprise, he took a random book out of the bench seat, opened it to a page, and started playing like he'd done it a hundred times. She watched his long fingers dance over the keys and wondered what instrument he was really better at—guitar or piano. They clapped when he finished the song.

“It's been too long since I heard you play,” his mother said fondly.

“That's what you get for stayin' in California,” he teased.

“Perhaps it is time for a change,”

she said

“I didn’t know you’d taken lessons.”

“Started before the guitar, actually,” he said. “And I’ve had to pick it up again at school.”

“You play very well.”

Professional quality, to her inexperienced ears.

He shrugged. “A little rusty, but it wasn’t too bad.”

“Play Elizabeth some of the Gershwin.”

“Mother, I haven’t touched that

piece in almost four years.”

“Well, whose fault is that?” She added to Beth, “He stole the recital with it, don’t believe any different.”

“I barely remember any of it. Request somethin’ from this *decade*.”

She sighed. “And on that note, I’m going to bed. Be good, kids, and turn out the lights tonight.”

“Yes, Mum.”

“Goodnight, Vivian.”

Left alone, Beth moved closer to the piano bench. He swung one leg over to straddle it and face her. “How much

longer are you staying?” He wrapped his arms around her waist, resting them on her hips.

She sighed. “I don’t know... maybe make it an even two weeks.”

“Any way I can convince you to stay longer?”

“Oh, *that*’d go over well. ‘Hi, Dad, I’m not coming home yet ‘cause Jacob and I wanna hang out.’”

He rolled his eyes. “I’m serious. What would justify it, then?”

Lowering her voice to mimic her father, she said, “Summers are for

school or a job, same as the rest of the year. Preferably both.”

“Hmm... What if you could shadow a working photographer?”

Might work... “Like an apprenticeship?”

“Yeah... I have a friend, see. She shoots gigs for a paper or magazine or some such.”

“*She?*”

He grinned. “Never dated her, love. Too old for me. Anyway, I could give her a ring; see if she’s up to it?”

“Couldn’t hurt.”

He pulled her closer. “That’s my girl.”

She kissed him, keeping the contact light and innocent. “You should go home.”

“Not tired.”

“Not why I said it.”

He smiled, and let her go. “Okay, I’ll be good.”

She walked him to the front door and they kissed goodnight. Feeling the heat build in her belly again, she gently pushed him away.

“Goodnight, Jacob.”

“Night, love. Sweet dreams.” He stepped outside and walked to the bike.

She shut and locked the door before she ran to him for another kiss.

Chapter Ten

Jacob called the next morning to tell Beth his friend was free to meet up around lunchtime on Saturday. It was too late in California to call Mom, so she sent her an e-mail about the benefit party tonight and added a line about meeting a photographer tomorrow to pick her brain.

Vivian wanted her to start getting ready no later than five o'clock, so she stayed close to the house other than picking up the prints she had developed.

She never did much with make-up and only knew how to braid her hair, but, whatever put Vivian at ease.

She came into Beth's room when she was almost done blow-drying her hair. "Come with me, Elizabeth."

"What for?" She set her brush on the bathroom counter. "I'm almost done. Promise"

She smiled. "Just come to my room, please."

"Okay..." Still in her robe, she followed his mother down the hall.

Vivian's room looked like a

decorator showcase in a magazine, everything perfectly in its place. She walked to a dressing table and indicated Beth should sit on the stool in front of it. She sat. Then Vivian gathered Beth's hair in her hands and made a twist while she watched in the mirror.

“You don't have to do that,” Beth said.

“Indulge me. I never had a daughter's hair to play with.” Vivian tucked the ends of Beth's hair into the twist and slid a comb in to hold it in place. Then, she reached for a few

bobby pins on the table. “There. You can dance all night and that won’t fall out of place.”

Dancing...heh. There were no plans of making a fool of myself in front of a hundred strangers.

She pulled a make-up palette and a few brushes out of a drawer. Beth started to move out of the way to let her sit down and finish her routine. She placed a hand on her shoulder.

“I’m not done with you, yet, dear.”

“Huh?” Beth glanced at the make-up. “Oh, I don’t wear that stuff.”

“Trust me, Elizabeth. I promise you’ll only be a lovelier version of yourself.”

She chewed on her lip. Vivian didn’t look like she was budging on this. Sighing, she closed her eyes. Vivian didn’t take long at whatever she did to her face. She felt brushes touch her eyelids, cheeks, and lips for all of five minutes.

“Done.”

“Really?”

“You can open your eyes, dear.”

She turned to the mirror, put on her

glasses, and stared at her reflection.

Mirror-Beth was her, but better. Vivian had used the barest hint of color, but her eyes were defined and she now had cheekbones. The only noticeable touch, really, was the rose on her lips. She'd never worn lipstick before and the texture felt kinda weird.

“Thank you,” she said finally.

Rude of her to stay silent so long.

Vivian smiled at her in the mirror.

“You're very welcome. Go get dressed, now.”

“Okay.” She started to leave, then

turned around and hugged his mother.

“Oh! One more thing.” Vivian went to her dresser and brought back a small box. “A woman is naked without jewelry. And don’t say no.”

Beth nodded and went back to her room.

Carefully stepping into her dress, she zipped up the back, smoothed the fabric down her body, and checked her reflection in the standing mirror.

Satisfied her bra straps weren’t showing, she stepped into the kitten heels that were also in the box and

stuffed a few things into the new clutch purse. The last touch was the sapphire earrings and necklace set.

“Elizabeth...”

“Coming!” Three steps down the staircase, she saw Vivian wasn’t alone at the bottom. “Jacob.”

“Bloody hell...” He stared up at her, eyes running over her head-to-toe and back again.

“What are you doing here?”

“I, uh, I always go to this thing. The foundation is in the name of my best friend from boarding school,” he said.

“Oh. Hold on.” She ran back to her room to grab her bag.

Vivian frowned when she saw it. “Elizabeth, isn’t that a bit casual for the evening?”

“Oh, I’m not bringing it in. I want to show Jacob the pictures from his concert later.” She hurried down the stairs.

“You have photos?” he asked, smiling.

“Look at them in the car,” his mother said. She nudged them toward the door like a hen. “We’re going to be

late.”

“Yes, Mum.”

The chauffeur had the door open when they left the house. Beth couldn't stop glancing at Jacob in a suit. Merely your basic black suit with a white shirt and black tie, but wow...he was yummy. They ended up sitting across from his mother, Beth's camera bag between them.

“You mentioned an old friend?” she asked him.

“Uh, yeah. He had cancer. It was the '80s and that kind of thing was

harder to treat than now. So, his folks set up the charity to fund research.”

“Is he okay now?”

He shook his head. “He passed due to an infection.”

“I’m sorry.”

He smiled and squeezed her hand.

“It was a long time ago, love. I normally hate these sorts of parties, but it’s a good cause.”

“And I get to see him look respectable once a year,” his mother teased. They laughed and the mood stayed light.

He didn't let go of Beth's hand.

They drove out a ways west to an estate with several acres. Behind the ornate black gate stood a house no older than twenty years, by the materials used. Beth's mother would take her on Sunday drives through the rich parts of L.A., and this place would have fit right in.

Beautiful, classy, and big, though the landscaping definitely had the English touch she'd gotten to know here. You had no idea how refreshing it was to see no palm trees.

The car pulled up in front. She

whispered a question about leaving her bag there in Jacob's ear.

“No problem, love.”

Vivian had already gotten out, so it was Beth's turn. Not used to wearing a long dress or heels, she was extra careful about not tripping and landing flat on her face. She glanced up—or knocking her head on the roof. Successfully upright, she stepped aside to let him out. He took her hand again, lacing his fingers with hers.

“Nervous?” he asked quietly.

“Why?”

“Your hand is cold.”

She blushed. “Oh. A little, I guess.”

They moved up the steps. “Don’t be nervous. You look beautiful, and I guarantee you’re smarter than at least half the room.”

“Stop...”

“Only speak the truth, love.” He caught up to his mother.

She gave the butler her invitation. They followed inside.

“Whoa. If possible, it’s bigger on the inside,” Beth whispered. Jacob

chuckled.

Past the foyer, they heard voices. He led her into a ballroom set up for the banquet with round tables. A live band at one end played old standards. Vivian had already found their table. She set her purse next to her place setting and started to mingle.

“So how does this thing go?” Beth asked Jacob.

“People arrive, then someone says an introduction, usually a spokesman for the foundation. They start serving food, and the guests put checks in the

envelopes on the table. Aside from the donations, it's mostly an excuse to socialize. Eventually, some get up to dance to the band, or walk in the garden, or leave once they think they've been polite. Like Mum said, it's bloody boring if you're under fifty."

"Why don't you mail the donation in, then?"

He shrugged, and unbuttoned his coat. "Don't rightly know, anymore. Remind me to do that next year."

"Deal." She leaned in to add, "Maybe you'll be in L.A. next summer."

He grinned and wrapped one arm around her waist. “Maybe.”

They walked around the room for a little while, his mother waving them over to say hello to this person or that. She was so natural at this, working a room. Impeccably dressed in a white dress and jacket, she had a smile and warm greeting for everyone Beth met. If she had to act with some of them, Beth couldn't tell.

Jacob's hand rested on her back, a reassuring presence. Crowds were not her thing, and even more so in a group

where she felt intimidated. If people closed in around her, she tended to panic and couldn't breathe. He had to rescue her at Disneyland once and remembered ever since.

She loved him for looking out for her.

“Don't know about you, love, but I'm parched,” he said after another exchange of pleasantries.

“Sounds good.” They headed to the open bar.

A chime rung through the room. Beth was about to ask what it meant

when everyone started moving to their seats. *Oh.*

There was a very nice speech about the necessity of funds to keep research alive and the current chances of a cure, then the waiters started bringing out the first course. She looked at all the silverware around her plate and gulped. Waiting to see what Jacob did, she took another sip of water. He picked up the outside fork first.

After three courses of food she could barely identify, she hoped the entrée was something normal. Thank

God for chicken.

He whispered to her, “Don’t worry, we’ll snag somethin’ good later.”

She giggled. Vivian arched a brow at her.

“This isn’t so bad,” Beth whispered back. “Just...”

“Small?”

“Yeah.” They shared a grin, and she almost kissed him in front of everybody. “But dessert can’t be bad. It’s...dessert.”

“Unless it’s coffee flavor.”

Her nose wrinkled up. “You

would have to say that.”

“Ain’t my fault your taste buds are defective.”

“Eat your chicken.”

He grinned again and squeezed her knee under the table.

Dessert had nuts sprinkled on top—which she didn’t like, either—but once removed, it was chocolate-y goodness. The shell of chocolate hid some kind of berry mousse. Didn’t know how they sealed it in there...

“Bored?” Jacob placed his hand on her shoulder.

“Huh?” She shook her head.

“No...I was wondering how they made the chocolate thing.”

He laughed. “You’re adorable.”

Her cheeks turned pink.

“Adorable is for puppies and stuffed bears.”

“Sweetheart, learn to take a compliment.” He stood and offered his hand. “Dance with me?”

“I don’t dance.” *Please don’t make me.*

“Beth, it’s merely swaying in time.”

Sighing, she put her napkin on the table, and stood. “No fancy maneuvers.”

He grinned and took her hand.

“Scouts honor.” Instead of joining the other couples, he headed for the door outside.

“Where are you going?”

They stepped onto the patio. He pulled her into his arms. “We can hear the music out here, too.”

She placed her hands on his shoulders. It *was* nice being a bit removed from all the chatter. The summer night air was perfumed with

roses and other flowers she couldn't identify in the garden. Standing between the house and the open air, with the band playing slow jazz, the atmosphere was a lot more romantic. Private.

“Better without all those eyes on you?” he asked.

“Mmm-hmm.” She let out a contented sigh and laid her head on his shoulder.

“I hope you and Kit hit it off tomorrow.”

“Kit?” she asked, lifting her head to look up at him.

“The photographer. Did you forget already?”

“*No*. You didn’t tell me her name.”

“Oh. Anyway, I hope you want to work with her.”

“So I stay,” she translated. So transparent.

He rolled his eyes and hugged her a little closer. “Yeah, I have an agenda. Sue me. I have an interest in keeping my girlfriend in town.”

“Girlfriend?” *I sounded way too hopeful-needy.*

He met her eyes. “Well, *yeah*. Thought you were the smart one in this relationship.”

Her heart started doing cartwheels. “You know what they say about assuming.”

His hands slid up to her neck, cupping her jaw-line. “Then let me be clear: as far as I’m concerned, love, you’re my girl. My squeeze, honey, girlfriend, etcetera. My Bethie.”

He dipped his head and she tilted hers to her right, rising on her toes to kiss him back. One of his hands stayed

on her cheek; the other dropped to her low back, pressing their bodies closer. That same fire from all week stirred again, driving her to try crawling inside him. Nothing was close enough. He could kiss her a thousand times and she'd still want more.

It scared her. "This, um..."

"Not really the place for a snog."

He let out a long breath. "Yeah."

"I'm going to visit the ladies' room."

"Alright. I'll see if Mum's ready to go."

Less than a week in each other's presence again, and he was biting back proclamations every time he kissed her.

He'd always cared for Beth—it was pretty easy to do, actually—but he'd never named it before. Honestly, though, he should've seen it'd come to this. She was the only girl he'd ever trusted into his life, his secrets. Didn't know when it happened, really, but it all made sense at the time. They needed quiet to study, so they went to his room. She was good at English, so he asked her opinion of his lyrics. Their mothers hit it off, so they

ate dinner together often.

Family.

Except you weren't supposed to want to shag your sister. Good thing she hadn't occupied that space in his mind for a long time. Spring break of senior year killed that notion.

Now, well...he understood how love had inspired millions of works since the dawn of time.

“Ah, Jacob, there you are.” An older lady approached him, her hair mostly white.

“Evening, Mrs. Haversham. Have

you seen my mother around?”

She was a longtime friend of the family. “That’s what I was going to tell you, dear. Your mother went home with a headache, but she said not to be concerned and to have fun as long as you like.”

“Oh. Thanks, then. Goodnight, Mrs. Haversham.”

She smiled. “Nice to see you again, Jacob.” Message delivered, she wandered off.

Well, with his mother gone home, all they had to do was wait for the car to

return, if it hadn't already. He went to the nearest restroom to find Beth. A short line of ladies stood outside.

“Looking for me?”

He turned around. “There you are. Mum went home, so it's only you and me now.”

“Is she okay? How are we going to get back?”

He steered her toward the front door. “She's fine, love. Just a little headache. As for the car, he'd come right back.”

“Oh. How long ago did she

leave?”

“While we were outside. Might have to wait a bit.”

She sat on a chair in the foyer.

“Why didn’t she say goodbye?” Her shoulders slumped. “I’m a rotten guest. She asked me to come to keep her company.”

He crouched down in front of her and took her hands. “Hey, you are not. You didn’t ignore her through dinner, did you?”

“No...”

“I guarantee she wasn’t offended

by you dancing with me.”

A smile tugged at one corner of her mouth. “Okay.”

He pulled her up. “Let’s check on the car. It’s stuffy in here.”

Luck on their side, the chauffeur showed up just as they came down the entry steps. Jacob opened the door for Beth.

“Where to, sir?”

He glanced at Beth. “My flat.”

“Yes, sir.” The car pulled out of the driveway.

“Your place?” she asked.

“Unless you want to go home. Are you tired?”

“No. I can’t ride the bike in this dress, though. Wait, did you ride to the house?”

Blast. “Uh...” He tapped on the glass partition separating them from the driver. A panel slid open. “Second thought, take us to my mother’s house, please.”

“As you wish, sir.”

She tried hiding her smile in her hand.

“Quiet, you.”

“Hey, *I* didn’t forget where *I* left a vehicle.”

He slid her closer on the leather seat and poised his index finger to dig under her ribs. “Persons who are extremely ticklish should be nice.”

She looked up at him with wide eyes. “I am nice.” Her hand slid up to his neck, her thumb stroking the soft skin behind his ear. “I can be very nice.”

His eyelids drooped, her touch relaxing him into jelly. If he was a kitten, he’d purr. “No fair...”

“Stop threatening to tickle me,”

she said.

“How ‘bout I kiss you instead?”

He leaned in, the tips of their noses brushing before he made contact with her lips.

She exhaled into his mouth, wrapping her arm around his neck. This was fast becoming one of his favorite things to do in life. His girl was lovely to kiss, her lips having just the right fullness, her responses always equaling his. They *matched*.

He pulled away before they got too hot, not wanting to give the driver a

show. “I’m glad you came.”

“Me, too.” She laced her right hand with his left. “Tonight, or...”

“To England. Hopefully for more than a week.”

“I’m meeting your friend, aren’t I?”

“Yep!” The thought of having Beth here for a month put a wide grin on his face.

She rolled her eyes, then leaned her head on his shoulder. “I’ll admit, I’m not ready to go home, yet. Don’t think I should leave until I see

Stonehenge.”

“Ohhh, so a circle of rocks is really what’s keepin’ you here?”

“It’s a factor.”

“*Brat.*”

“Such an ego you have...”

He couldn’t see much of her face from this angle, but he knew the expression that went with her teasing by heart. She’d always been expressive, for a shy girl. Well, formerly shy. “You handled yourself pretty well tonight.”

She sat up to look at him. “You think so?”

He nodded. “Very nice first impression and those people are big on those.”

“I was taught a little social grace.”

“Hey, I wasn’t implying anything. I meant you didn’t look nervous, love.”

“Oh.” She pulled her bag onto her lap and took out a small bottle of water.

“Want a sip?”

“I’m fine.”

She unscrewed the cap and took a swallow.

“Can I ask you something and not get my head bitten off?”

She eyed him warily. “What?”

“Why do you get defensive with me?”

She sighed and put the bottle back in her purse. “Not just you.”

“Good to know. And?”

“You might have noticed I wasn’t one of the popular people? From the time I hit school, I wasn’t comfortable around a single person except my parents. My brother left when I was eight, so I barely knew him. To other kids, I was born with giant ‘kick me’ signs front and back. It wasn’t fun.”

“We’ve always gotten along.”

“And I didn’t expect that to last.”

Her gaze dropped to her shoes. “You keep surprising me.”

He reached for her hand again.

“I’d never hurt you on purpose, Beth. Hope you know that.”

She lifted her head and met his eyes. “Yeah. I do.”

“That’s somethin’”

The car stopped. They glanced out the window and saw the house. He slid to the door and opened it, then held his hand out to her. The house was

dark. He bid the driver goodnight and walked to the front door.

A small lamp had been left on in the foyer.

“Hungry? I know a few places open late,” Jacob asked.

“Sure. I should probably change first.”

“Need any help?” He added a wink, just in case she thought he was serious.

She swatted his arm. “No. Perv.” Despite the protest, there might have been some added sway to her hips as she

ascended the staircase.

Seriously fine ass...

He loosened his tie, took it off, and slipped it into his pocket. Hated anything snug on his neck.

“Jacob?” She appeared at the top of the stairs, still in her dress.

“Yeah?”

“I really do need help. The zipper’s stuck.”

He started up the stairs. “You’re kidding.”

“I think a bit of fabric got caught in the teeth, so it doesn’t want to slide.”

She walked back into her room where there was more light. Her back to him, she said, “Be careful.”

“I won’t rip it.” He tried sliding the zipper. “Bend forward a little.”

That was better—he could see detail in the light now. Yep, a bit of fabric was stuck between the teeth at the top.

“Uhh, I’m not sure how to get this unstuck.”

“*Great.*” She turned around. “It’s too snug to slide off.”

“What about lifting it over your

head?”

She shrugged. “I’ll give it a shot.” She walked into the bathroom.

He sat on the bed to wait, and heard a few muffled curses a minute later. “You okay?”

The door opened a crack. “Not so much.”

“Do you want help?”

She hesitated long enough, he thought she wasn’t going to reply. Then, “Yeah...”

No big deal, mate...just innocently help your girl out of a jam.

She walked out. “I can’t lift it all the way off without tweaking my shoulders.” She turned her back to him. “Don’t look.”

He took a breath, then bent to grab the hem and started lifting. Keeping his eyes on the floor didn’t stop him from seeing thigh-high stockings, so he directed them skyward, instead. She lifted her arms once he’d reached her shoulders. When the dress was past her head, she took it from him and tossed it on the bed.

“Thanks.”

He kept his eyes on her face.

“You’re welcome.”

“I-I’ll be right back.” She backed into the bathroom.

“Yeah.”

Just shut the damn door, Beth.

Once she was out of sight, he rubbed his face with both hands and let out a long breath. If she stood there a moment longer, he’d have looked, and after looking, he’d have touched.

He left her bedroom and jogged downstairs. Saw enough, though.

Black bra with matching satin

knickers, and those stockings...long, slender legs in sheer black...an image of those legs wrapped around his hips popped into his head and he headed for the kitchen and a drink. Couldn't hop in a cold shower, but he could down some ice water.

Get a grip, man.

Chapter Eleven

Beth leaned against the closed door, feeling flushed all over. Not even a week since she first kissed him and the man had seen her in her underwear. Logically, she didn't have many options. Cut herself out of the dress—ah, no. Wake Vivian to help—rude when she wasn't feeling well. That left him, and for a second, Beth almost succumbed to the tension between them and kissed him.

Could she keep resisting the entire

month he wanted her to stay?

She dressed in jeans and a tee, put away her finery, and sat down to send Mom an e-mail about the party.

Describing the house and dinner and the music helped calm her down, and she felt cool and normal by the time she carried the envelope of prints downstairs.

“Jacob?”

“In the kitchen, love.” He stood at the window to the backyard with a glass of something clear. Probably water.

“Here are the photos I was going

to show you.”

He took the envelope. “Thanks. I should be going. It’s late. I’ll come get you for the meeting tomorrow.”

He was leaving? “I thought we were going to grab a bite.” *Great, Beth, you scared him off.*

He sighed. “Food isn’t really on my mind right now.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re a bloody siren, Beth. More alone time isn’t the best idea at the moment.”

“It’s a *restaurant*, Jacob, not a

cozy cabin for two.”

He turned from the window and set the glass on the island. “And then?”

“And then, what?”

“Where do we go from there? My flat? Here?”

She threw her hands up. “Fine. Leave. Run away.” She stomped out of the kitchen and opened the front door.

He slowly followed, looking pained. He glanced at her face, set in a hard mask, shook his head, and walked out. She slammed the door, locked it, and ran upstairs to flop on her bed.

Dammit. Why couldn't we date without all this sexual tension?

She hoped no one heard the door. It was stupid to slam it at this hour, but that was a Lawson trait. Doors got slammed when they were pissed off. Her mom's version was slamming the cabinet doors in the kitchen while she cleaned. Always knew Dad was in trouble if she heard that.

If she went to bed now, she could wake up early enough to call Mom. She washed her face, brushed her teeth, pulled the pins out of her hair, and

turned off the lights.

She woke a little before seven. Since she'd washed her hair the afternoon before, she knotted it out of the way for a quick shower. No one else was up, yet, so she found the laundry machines and washed the clothes she'd worn so far.

Vivian came downstairs at eight-thirty. "You're up early for a Saturday."

"Got my eight hours. Tea? Kettle's gonna whistle any minute."

"Certainly. Thank you." Vivian opened a cupboard and took out a tin of

loose-leaf and a small teapot. “Did you have fun last night?”

Except at the end of it. “Yeah. Not my normal scene, but it was nice enough. I never went to a formal at school, so getting dressed up was neat.”

The kettle sang. She poured hot water into the little teapot. “I’m sorry I had to leave early, but I need to take medication right away if I feel that kind of headache coming on.”

“Migraine?”

“Something like that, yes. The pill knocks me out within an hour. Most

inconvenient.” While her tea brewed, she retrieved a mug. “So, do you have plans for today?”

“Well, I’m meeting a photographer friend of Jacob’s to pick her brain. Other than that, nope.” Beth poured the leftover water in the kettle into a bowl of oatmeal.

Vivian dropped one lump of sugar in the mug, then poured the tea. After stirring it three times, she sipped from the cup. “I thought Jacob had a concert tonight,” she said, green eyes looking over the rim.

“He mentioned it.”

“You’re not going?”

Beth shrugged. “He didn’t invite me.”

“Ah.” There was a lot of weight in that “ah”.

“There’s no *ah*...only two facts: I know about the concert and I’m not going.”

“Alright.”

A tricky woman, but Beth was *not* going to spill details. She shook her head and picked up her oatmeal to sit at the table.

Failing at getting any dirt, Vivian picked up her teacup and a saucer.

“Well, I think I’ll take my tea and get dressed.” She’d come down in her robe and pajamas. “Have fun today.”

“Yep. I’m sure I’ll see you later.”

Once she was gone, Beth checked the dryer to see if the first load was done. She folded the clean clothes and tossed the wet ones in the machine. Picking up the small stack, she carried it to her room and put it on the bed so no one would stumble upon her socks and undies. That made her think of home and

Daddy going “uh...” because he found women’s stuff in the laundry room again. Mom always offered to do his stuff with hers, but he insisted on doing it his way. Even used a different soap just to avoid it “smelling girly”.

Beth retrieved her breakfast and picked up the phone.

“Lawson residence.” They picked up on the first ring.

“Hey, Mom.”

“Beth! I just read your e-mail. Sweetie, do you know what time it is?”

Checking her watch, she did the

math. “Crap, it’s just after one, huh?”

She smacked her forehead. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking.”

“It’s okay. I was still up reading a novel, but you’re lucky I picked it up before your father heard it.”

Thank God Dad slept like the dead. “Yeah. Again, sorry.”

“Are you still having a good time, honey?” Dang sensitive Mom ears.

“Just a little homesick. I was doing a little laundry and remembered how he gets all weird if he finds a whites load.”

She laughed. “You should have seen him when we first got married. Sure, he had no problem stripping those things off in bed, but—”

“Mom! Eww, stop! TMI!”

That only made her laugh more.

“How else do you think you came to be, Beth?”

“Stork.”

“Ah, you kids... Well, unless there’s something you need, can we talk later, honey? I need to get to bed.”

“No, sure, later’s good. Sorry about the hour, again. Sweet dreams,

Mom.”

“Thank you, Beth. Have fun today. Be good. We love you.”

“Love you, too.” She heard her hang up the phone. Note to self: eight hours earlier, NOT later.

Still three hours left before Jacob arrived. She flopped back on the bed and sighed, hoping today would be normal. They *could* be, if this stupid attraction thing would stop getting in the way. Otherwise, a month of this was going to drive her insane.

Maybe a few more days were all

she *should* stay.

Her door was open. Jacob found her on the bed, reading a book. He rapped twice on the door.

“Hey.”

“Hi,” he said. “Ready to go?”

She put a bookmark in the book and set it on the nightstand. “Yeah.” She settled the strap of her bag across her torso and followed him out.

“Where’s the meeting?”

“Deli close to the gig.”

“She’s shooting you tonight?”

“Yeah, but we’re payin’ this time. We need a cover for the demo sleeve.”

“Explains the haircut,” she said behind him.

He reached the first floor.

“Yeah.” He ran a hand over his locks.

“Saw a barber this mornin’.” It was shorter on the sides with the top left long enough to slick back or spike. No more bleached tips.

She wore the same jeans from last night and a plain blue tee, her hair pulled back into a French braid. No make-up, no earrings, no perfume—just Beth.

Didn't make him want her less.

Pushing that thought aside, he opened the front door and walked to the bike, passing her the extra helmet. She climbed on behind him and wrapped her arms around his middle, gripping her arms instead of his waist.

“You can hold on to me, love.

That's how this works.”

“I'm fine.”

He sighed and started the bike. At least after a few times now, she no longer felt terrified behind him, though having her wrapped tightly around him

was nice. They needed to talk later. He hated when it got awkward between them.

Kit was already at the deli. She was around thirty, with tousled ice-blonde hair that grazed her cheekbones. Standing to greet them when they walked in, she was taller than Beth.

“Hey, Jake. Nice to see you’re only—” She checked her watch. “Five minutes late.”

“Traffic.” He nudged Beth forward. “This is Beth Lawson.”

“Hi.” She offered a handshake.

“Kit Vokac. You’re interested in pro photography?” She took her seat and gestured they should do the same.

“Yeah. I’m rarely without a camera these days, but I’ve been hooked since I was a kid,” Beth said.

Kit nodded. “Well, I’ll say first you won’t get rich by it, unless you’re very, very lucky, so if fame and glory’s what you’re after, I’m not workin’ with ya.”

“It’s not. My mother used to have local gallery showings, but she only made enough to buy new equipment here

and there. I'm in it for love and I want to learn.”

Kit shrugged. “Good enough, then. You can observe tonight and we’ll see how it goes.”

“Beth won’t disappoint you,” he said.

“Well, I gotta run, kids.” Kit stood. “See you later.”

Beth kicked his shin when they were alone.

“Ow. What was that for?”

“I can speak for myself. You didn’t need to interject.”

“Sorry.”

She sighed. “What time are you meeting at the club?”

“Round six.”

“Fine. I’ll see you later.” She stood and started for the door. He hopped up and caught her arm.

“Where are you going?”

“Exploring. I’m on vacation, remember?” Jerking out of his grip, she folded her arms under her breasts.

“You don’t know where anything is, Beth.”

“I have a map.”

Bloody stubborn woman. “Are you really mad enough over one interruption to run away from me?”

She rolled her eyes and turned for the door. “Get over yourself.”

He followed her out to the sidewalk. “Doesn’t take a genius to see you’re still mad about last night, love.”

“Fine, yes, the whole week has been a lesson in frustration. Happy? I want things to go back to how they were.”

“What *things*?”

“This.” She gestured around

them. “Us. I’m tired of fighting with you and being confused. It’s too much too fast, and I still have to go home.”

“You want me to forget, Beth? I can’t do that.” She was already in his blood, his soul.

“Be my friend, Jacob. Or I’m leaving tomorrow.”

“That’s not fair.”

She turned her gaze away to watch the cars passing by. “It’s what I’ve decided.”

If that was how she wanted it.

“Then I’ll miss you.”

She looked up in surprise, then nodded. “Okay. I’ll see you tonight.”

“Yeah.” He pivoted on his heel and walked to the bike before he did something embarrassing or stupid.

He got halfway home before he thought *what have I done?* One week... god, one soddin’ week, and she’d turned his world and his heart upside-down. If she’d just stop bein’ so damn *afraid*...

Beth wandered London for almost four hours before going back to the Lindsey house.

Congratulations, Beth...couldn't

even date a guy for one week. Good job.

“It’s *his* fault. He wants more than I can give.” She threw another large crumb of bread to the sparrows on the deck.

“Elizabeth! Phone call, dear.”

“Coming.” She left the half-eaten roll on the patio table and went inside. Maybe Jacob changed his mind?

Vivian handed her the cordless.

“It’s your father.”

“Oh.” *Daddy? What would he call me here for?* “Hello?” She carried

the phone to her room.

“Elizabeth. I wanted to say something while your mother’s out of the house.”

“Dad, I’m fine. Perfectly safe. Ten fingers and ten toes—”

“It’s not about your trip. Look, your mother doesn’t want you to know until you come back, but she’s going in for a biopsy Monday.”

“Biopsy? O-of what?” The color drained out of her skin.

“She found a lump, honey. I think you should be here, but it’s your choice.

As she keeps reminding me, you're an adult now." A door closed in the background.

He hung up without letting her reply. Of all the things to guilt her with...

No, it wasn't about guilt...he just communicated in his usual awkward fashion and let her deal with the consequences. Her legs gave out and her butt landed on the bed.

A lump. A lump in her mom.

The phone started making that noise of a disconnected call and she

turned it off.

Would they know when they looked at the...the thing? There would be tests, right, and waiting...that's what you always heard. People frustrated by the waiting.

Vivian knocked softly on the open door. "Elizabeth, you're white as a sheet. Is everything alright?"

She felt her head turn toward her though she hadn't told it to. "My, uh, my mom's having surgery Monday. He wanted me to know."

Vivian came and sat next to her,

taking the phone from her hand. “Is it serious?”

“I don’t know. He said it’s for a biopsy.”

“Well, I’m sure it’ll turn out alright. Do you want to schedule a flight right away?”

“I...I have something to do tonight, but...can you find out what’s available tomorrow?”

“Of course.” She pulled Beth into her arms. “I care a great deal for your family, dear. Whatever you need.”

Tears coursed down her cheeks

onto his mother's blouse. She stayed in the hug and closed her eyes, willing herself to be strong until she had information. Lawsons didn't panic. "Thanks," she said, pulling away.

Vivian handed her a tissue. "I'll make those calls."

Once she left, Beth closed the door and changed clothes for tonight. The band t-shirt on, she combed out the braid in her hair and brushed it up into a high ponytail. After wiggling mascara on her lashes, she took out the chubby eye pencil she'd bought on a whim and

colored her lids smoky blue.

Surprisingly, the dark color didn't look scary on her image in the mirror. Her glasses back in place and a swipe of gloss completed her routine.

She double-checked there was a fresh roll in the camera—digital was still too expensive—and went downstairs to wait for the cab she ordered. Her hands shook during the ride to the club. Whether from the shock about Mom, seeing Jacob, or nerves about working with Kit, she couldn't say.

From the outside, this was a nicer venue than last Saturday's. Inside, it was twice the size and, from her limited knowledge, pretty dang cool. Jacob's band was setting up their instruments onstage for the sound check. He walked out of the back with Kit, discussing something. She had a tripod set up in the middle of the room with a digital Canon on top. He hopped on the stage and picked up his guitar.

“Hey,” she greeted Beth.

“Nice camera.”

She grinned. “Yeah. What you

got?”

“My mom’s old Pentax. It’s not fancy, but she had a lot of lenses.”

“Hey, gotta start somewhere.”

She put her eye to her camera, then adjusted settings. “Wait until you get up to editing software. Lots of fun. Been in a dark room, yet?”

“Practically grew up in it. My brother’s former bedroom is Mom’s image factory.”

“Awesome.” She stepped away from the tripod. “Well, until they turn on the lights, I’m in limbo, so let’s have a

seat.”

“Okay.” Beth pulled out a chair at the nearest table.

He started singing *You Got It All*. He hadn't looked at her, yet, since she walked in the door. It hurt. Kit watched her watch him play.

“How long you and Jake been somethin'?”

“Huh? Oh, we met my freshman year of high school. How long have you been friends?”

“Wouldn't say 'friends'. I'm a fan, and they've been appreciative of my

work.”

“Oh.” Yet Jacob felt comfortable asking her for a favor?

“Don’t get me wrong. He’d be good for a tumble or two—look at him, but I like my men seasoned,” she said. “Boy put out his best sales pitch to get me to meet you, though. I don’t like people lookin’ over my shoulder, but it was hard to say no.”

Beth’s cheeks warmed. “He’s like that sometimes, but I don’t want to be in your way. If you’d rather e-mail me a few shots with some notes, that’s fine. I

didn't ask him to bug you.”

“Nah, it's cool, as long as you don't mind bein' a gopher.”

She shook her head. “I like to keep busy.” Anything to keep from running to a phone to talk to Mom.

The house lights dropped and the spots and colored accent lights shone on the stage. Kit got up and started snapping shots while the band played through *Figured It Out*. She gave them a thumb's up at the end and started dismantling the tripod.

“You're done?” she asked.

“With the paid gig, yeah. I’m stickin’ around to shoot the live show.”

“Oh.” Beth took the collapsed tripod she handed her.

“My bag’s over there,” she said, pointing to the wall at Beth’s left.

She had a duffle by the stage door. Beth put the tripod inside and crossed past the stage on her way back. He crouched in front of his amp, pulling the cord out. Their eyes met, but his expression was blank.

“Break a leg,” she said. He carried his guitar offstage, ignoring her.

Ouch again. “Jacob...” She went after him.

“What?” he asked in the hall.

“I have to leave tomorrow.

Something’s come up.”

He kept walking past the others.

“Have a safe flight.”

She caught up and touched his arm. “Can you stop being mad at me for a second? I’m serious. My dad called and I have to go. I don’t know if I’ll get to say goodbye.”

He finally turned around. “What happened?”

“My mom’s having a thing on Monday. He wanted me to know. She didn’t. I don’t want to talk about it right now, but...I didn’t want you to get the wrong idea.”

“Are you okay?” She shrugged, not sure how to answer, or if she could. He stepped forward to give her a one-armed hug and kissed her forehead. “I’m sorry, Bethie.”

Several things popped in her head to say, but all she did was inhale his scent. The lack of his presence at home would be a hole in her life when she

could need him most and she wanted to memorize everything.

Chapter Twelve

Kit instructed Beth on her camera through the opening act. They were working with the same terms, only the controls were different. Had to admit—seeing instant results was pretty cool. Once Jacob's band came on, she moved through the crowd, getting shots from all sides. Beth kept watch over her stuff at a table along the wall. She came back to Beth twice for drink refills, once to switch memory cards. “Honestly, he's too good for ‘em,” she shouted over the

music.

“Who?”

“That one and that one,” she said, pointing to the bassist and drummer.

“Neither one can keep time.”

And Beth thought the cacophony was intentional. Learn something new every day.

Some girl in the front of the mosh pit passed Jacob a slip of paper during the interlude. He winked at her and stuck it in his pocket.

Bastard. Back to friends for mere hours and he was already flirting

with new girls. Guess that proved what he felt for me, huh?

Only big, fat, lust.

Yay, me.

He could feel her eyes on him, but refused to look. He wasn't going to let her toy with his heart until she figured out what she wanted. This afternoon's pain proved there was a name for what he felt—love.

Terrifying, heart-consuming love. It snuck up on him, then whacked him in the head like a hammer. This week had been the catalyst for knowledge, but not

the emotion. She'd been making a home inside him since the day he walked into her kitchen.

Four years. But it wasn't the right time. He couldn't make her try.

They finished the set and he threw his guitar pick into the crowd and escaped backstage.

"Nice job, gentlemen. I'll have the proofs for ya in a couple days," Kit said. She handed him a beer.

"Thanks, love." He took a long swig, feeling parched. "Beth still here?"

"Somewhere." She finished

handing out drinks and left.

They were the last band for the night, so the club was playing piped-in music now. The mosh pit had dispersed, leaving couples slow-dancing on the floor. No immediate sign of his girl. He didn't want to walk out into the main room, since the birds at this club tended to swarm him, so with a curse, he exited the building out the back.

Beth stood by the curb talking to the bouncer.

“Hey,” Jacob said.

“Hi. Going home?”

He turned to his band-mates coming out the same way. “Don’t know.”

“Ah. Well, goodnight.” She smiled at the bouncer, who’d flagged her cab a few feet down the street.

“Wait.” Jacob slid in after her before she could close the door.

“What are you doing?”

“You tell me.”

“I really do have to leave tomorrow,” she whispered.

“That’s tomorrow.” He touched her cheek. “I know you, love. You

aren't going to sleep a wink when you're worried, so why suffer insomnia alone?"

She glanced away and sniffed.

"You're a good friend."

Friend... Right. He gave the cabbie his address and settled back in the seat, the soft case for his guitar between his legs. She stayed on her side, her face turned to the window.

He sighed. It was going to be a long night...

Jacob was too sweet, to offer to keep her company. She didn't deserve it. She hurt him this afternoon, yet here

he was, still supportive. “You should be celebrating with the band. It was a great gig.”

“It was alright.”

“The applause was deafening.”

He cracked a grin. “Yeah, it was. Though that crowd would cheer on a foghorn by ten o’clock, they’re so knackered.”

“Knackered?”

“Hammered. Drunk. Three sheets to the wind.”

“Got it. Still fun, though, right?”

Least she could do was try to cheer him

up.

“As long as we don’t get booed.”

She shifted a little to face him.

“Kit said you could use some better back-up.”

“Huh.”

“She had a lot to say about working in that kind of lighting, and I got to play with her camera a little. It was cool.”

“Glad you had a good time.” He smiled at her, first she’d seen all day.

It still did things to her tummy.

The car stopped in front of his building.

She paid the cabbie.

“Went to the market this mornin’,” Jacob said, unlocking the door to the lobby.

“How grown up,” she teased. It earned her an eye roll.

He pushed the button for the elevator. “They finally fixed the lift.”

“Cool.” She hoped it’d been fixed *well*.

It opened on the third floor without incident. Once more to 3B—had she been here since her drunken attempt to seduce him? Insane that was only a

week ago.

He let them in and set the guitar on its stand. “Thirsty?”

“Water’s fine. I’m going to use your bathroom. Promise not to make it smell like vomit.”

“Ha, ha.”

Whoa, he cleaned. Actually frickin’ cleaned. The room wasn’t going to look new due to its age, but it was clean and tidy.

“It looks nice,” she told him when she came out.

“Couldn’t sleep last night.” He

nodded to a glass of water. “Want a sandwich?”

“Maybe later.” She took the water and sat on his futon.

He went all out, toasting the bread, then using mayonnaise, mustard, and piling on cold cuts from three packages. Amazed her that man could keep a thirty-inch waist with how much he ate. He grabbed a bottled beer and brought his plate to the futon. The TV clicked on a second later. Sports channel.

Sitting quietly while he unwound from the gig, she watched him eat, the

chewing motion making his cheekbones stand out. He wore a white tank tonight with an unbuttoned black short-sleeve shirt over it. The shirt had been absent during the concert, the girls in the audience drooling over his defined arms. He only got more gorgeous with every year, and she wondered how long it'd be before he got mobbed by fangirls everywhere.

She wished she could doze off. It'd let both of them off the hook for making conversation. "I still have the pics in my bag." Her bag was on her

lap, so she pulled out the envelope.

“Oh?”

“You left them last night.”

“Oh.” He took it from her, setting his plate on the coffee table.

“I ordered four-by-six prints. Normally get the three-by-five, but they’re kind of small for portraits.”

Please stop me from babbling.

He started flipping through the photos, holding the stack by the edges. It surprised her he remembered to not leave fingerprints. It’d been two years since she showed him her work.

“A lot of me in here.”

She blushed. “You’re the only one I know.” Only one she wanted. “I know they’re not as good as Kit’s—”

“They’re fine, love.”

Fine. Fine... “Just fine?”

He let out a breath. “Actually, they’re pretty damn flattering.”

“Really?”

“I’m singin’ and there’s not a single shot where I look weird.”

“I had a good subject.”

He looked up then. “Beth, your timing and choices are excellent. You’re

going to knock the professors' socks off.”

“Don't know about that. I'm still not as good as Mom.” If she'd be around long enough to teach her.

“You'll learn.”

Reaching the end, he slid the prints back in the envelope and tried to give it back. She stopped his hand. “Those are your copies.”

“Thanks.”

Now what?

He rubbed the back of his neck, a nervous gesture. “Uh, did you see

anything interesting today?”

“Well, it’s all new to me, but aside from Kit’s blue and black streaks in her hair, not really. I just wandered. Listened.”

“Ah. What did the city say?”

She smiled. “That I cannot comprehend all its wonders in one trip and it’d be foolish to try. That includes you.”

He tilted his head, curious. “I’m a wonder?”

“Stop fishing,” she teased. “But, in that I feel humbled and inadequate,

yeah.”

He frowned. “Beth, I’ve never thought of you as *lacking*. I’m just as flawed as the next bloke.” Sighing, he added, “I don’t get you sometimes. You simultaneously put me on a pedestal and point out my cock-ups, and it’s not fair. If you want to be with me, you’re gonna have to stop wrapping yourself in thorns.”

“Nice word image there.”

“I’m serious.”

She put her hand on his knee to stop him getting up. “I know. I’m sorry.

The deflection is one of those thorns.”

He took that hand in his. “What are you so afraid of, Beth?”

Loaded question. “The shorter list is what I’m *not*.”

He persisted, tilting her chin up to meet his baby blues. “Enlighten me.”

“Oh, only everything that could possibly go wrong between us...and I mean every scenario. I’ve weighed them all for years. And that’s just with *you*. There’s the whole rest of my life analyzed up here, too,” she said, tapping her temple.

“You’re nuts.” At least he said it with affection.

“Um, *duh*.”

He caressed her cheek. “You know I’d never deliberately hurt you, right?”

She leaned into his hand. “Yes. Though I don’t rule out me doing something to make you want to.”

He shook his head. “Revenge isn’t my style, love. Might put my foot in my mouth, but—
”

“I know. I can only think of one

time you set out to hurt someone.”

“Don’t know what you mean.”

“Jacob, I know you gave Chad Cromlin a black eye.”

“He was lucky he never touched you,” he said, an edge to his voice. It was almost a growl.

The protective fire in his eyes stirred her blood. “Only one man I want to touch me.”

His hand slid to the back of her neck. He gave her time to stop him from kissing her. She didn’t want to. Their lips touched, and a cross between a

whimper and a moan escaped her throat. Facing separation for who knew how long, she was sick of excuses, rationalizations, and deflections.

He let go of her hand and wrapped his arm around her. Twisting sideways on the couch was awkward, so she crawled into his lap. His fingers tightened their grip every time she sucked on his tongue. She slid her hands under his open shirt, caressing his shoulders.

“Missed this,” he said, before trailing kisses from her ear to her

shoulder. One hand held her ponytail out of his way, the light tension pulling her head to the side.

Normally, she'd protest being led by her hair, but Jacob doing it was hot. "Mmm...I'm going to miss you every day."

"I'll come to L.A."

She gasped when he bit her neck.

"Soon?"

"I promise."

She pulled back to look him in the eye. "Gonna hold you to that."

He grinned and kissed her again.

When his hands trailed down to caress her legs, she slipped his shirt off his shoulders. Her turn to kiss his neck and shoulders, the tank he wore displaying plenty of warm skin. She felt him relax into her attentions, until she sucked his earlobe between her teeth.

“Beth...”

“I’m not teasing,” she said in his ear.

He gently pushed her back.

“What?”

“Take me to bed, Jacob.”

His eyes widened. “Are you

sure?”

She nodded.

He practically growled in response, kissing her fiercely, his arms tightening around her. His hands slid under her shirt up her back as she ground against him. She had the brief thought of *what am I doing?* before surrendering to his attentions and twining her tongue with his. She *wanted* this, even if it was the only time she ever got.

He picked her up and carried her to his room.

The pace slowed once he set her

on the bed. Maybe it was something in her face or body language...she didn't know, but once he set her down, his touch became more deliberate, reverent. He bent down on one knee to take her shoes and socks off. She stared down at his bowed head.

“Jacob...” she whispered.

He looked up and silenced her with his expression. “Do you know how much I've wanted you?” She shook her head no. He tilted his head, speculating. “Well, I could tell you, but I'd rather show you.” Grinning, he rose

up to kiss her and gently pressed her down on the bed.

She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and arched her back when she felt him tugging her tee out of her jeans. He pushed her shirt up to the band of her bra and slid down to kiss her belly button. She squirmed. The kisses across her tummy tickled, but when he started upward, she held her breath, body tingling with anticipation. He nosed the shirt higher and kissed the underside of her left breast through her bra, his hands caressing her sides.

“If you change your mind, tell me,” he said.

“I won’t.”

Her whole body felt intensely sensitive and he’d barely touched her, yet. He slipped her tee higher with both hands. She raised her arms so he could slide it over her head. He tossed it on the floor, his eyes zeroing in on her cotton-clad breasts. They weren’t special, or anything, barely a B-cup, and she closed her eyes. It was easier to feel what he did than see it.

“Bethie...” His breath touched

her lips before his mouth did.

Mmm... Kissing was good... kissing she knew how to handle.

He could render her mind silent, distracting her into not noticing his sneaky hands until they reached places, like under her bra. She gasped into his mouth at the feeling of his calloused fingertips circling her nipple. Her bra sprung loose, his other hand having found the clasp in back.

He cupped her breasts with both hands, timing his movements with his kiss. Playing her as deftly as his guitar.

Heat concentrated between her legs and she pressed her chest into his palms. The world could fall down as long as he didn't stop touching her.

And while her mind went wandering again, he rendered her topless... "Um...oh..." Whatever she'd been about to say flitted away when he suckled her breast. His teeth grazed her nipple, which she liked a *lot*. "Oh, God..."

He chuckled with satisfaction when he made her arch off the bed.

Sitting up to pull his tank off, he

undid his belt, then slid the belt out of his jean-loops, tossed it on the floor, and came back down to her.

Oh, wow... Skin-on-skin felt awesome, especially with how soft his was. The metal button of his jeans was cold on her tummy, and it clicked to her his belt buckle would have scratched her skin. So thoughtful.

“My pretty pet... Feel good?”

“Don’t stop,” she said, and arched into his hands again.

She finally opened her tightly-screwed-shut eyes and looked down, her

breath catching when she saw the sexy gleam in his gaze. There was no mistaking he wanted *her*. He was the predator ready to devour her all up, and...where was he going?

“You’re definitely not naked enough, love,” he announced, and undid the fly of her jeans.

Oh, God. Thankfully, she shaved today. He slid her jeans down her legs and dropped them on the floor. Ran his gaze down her body. She wished she could dive under the covers without looking like a complete fool, and

covered her breasts with her arms.

“Hey...you’re beautiful. Come here, kitten.”

He wanted me to stand? She scooted to the end of the bed, blushing down to her armpits. He took her hands and pulled her to him, twining her arms around his neck.

“Been dreamin’ about this since you first kissed me.” He looked her over and shivered. “But are you sure? It’s only been a week and...I don’t want to lose you because you regret this tomorrow.”

His vulnerability touched her. For the first time, she knew she had power over him, too.

“I want this. You. It’s always been you.”

He revealed a dazzling smile and dipped his head to kiss her. She met him in the middle, standing on her toes. He hugged her tight as their tongues dueled for dominance, his hands splayed on her back. Her desire simmering long enough, she snuck her hands between them and popped the button on his jeans. Humming his approval, he picked her up

and laid her on the bed, her head on one of his pillows.

“Hold that thought,” he said, and walked out of the room.

“Hey...” She moved the covers from under her butt and kicked them toward the foot of the bed.

He returned a minute later and shut the door, leaving them in darkness except for the faint glow of the city through his small window. She watched his jeans drop to the floor, then he crawled up the bed to hover over her thighs and started sliding her panties off.

Oh, God...

Okay, so I'd never done this before, and now Jacob was—

“OH!” she shrieked.

That was good. That was *really* good. Note to self: singers have dexterous tongues. It felt too good to get self-conscious over his face being down there. His fingers joined his tongue, gently sliding inside her, stretching her.

“You okay?”

“Uh-huh!” Her stomach tightened as her body got ready to soar off that cliff to bliss...and then— “You’re

stopping?”

The bastard chuckled. “Only for a second, love.”

He crawled up her body and kissed her. She melted into the kiss, just like the others, her hands wandering with a mind of their own. He was built so beautifully, so strong, and hard... well, something pressing against her hip was hard.

Her lover was *smooth*, too. She didn't even notice he'd moved until he was nudging at her entrance.

“Let me in, baby,” he whispered

hotly in her ear.

This was the moment, the point of no return. Any further, and I would never forget this. Did I want to know how well he could love me? How it felt to be as close as two humans could possibly get? My eyes opened again to see him gazing down at me, his expression naked, completely open. I didn't want to cry, so I just smiled and moved my legs further apart.

He kept eye contact with her the whole time until he was fully seated in her body. Kissing her, he started slowly

rocking, like he didn't want to pull away. "God, you feel good."

"You, too," she said.

"Wrap your legs around me, love."

She complied, her eyes rolling back when the new position changed how he stroked her inside. It was like they were made to fit perfectly with each other, the tension from her previous near-climax building again until her ears were buzzing and her skin prickled hot. Then he slowed down again, taking longer strokes and driving her mad.

All with a look of adoration. *It was beautiful, he was beautiful, and I thought I could die. If this was my last moment, it couldn't be any better.* “I wish I could stay,” she whispered.

“We’re here now, you have me. Always my girl...aren’t you?”

“Yes...” Always had been, really, so why stop now?

He sped up. She felt her inner muscles tightening, her delayed orgasm near again. “Close?” He must have felt it, too.

She nodded, clinging to his

shoulders. He slipped one hand between them and rubbed her clit.

“*Oh... Don't stop.*”

“Not gonna.”

It was too much, but she needed more...then her body arched off the bed and endorphins flooded her blood. She panted hard enough her throat was instantly dry.

He thrust a few times and collapsed on top of her, breathing heavily. “Damn...”

She giggled. Felt drunk. His face was next to hers, so she turned her head

and kissed his nose. It was the closest part handy.

“Gimme a minute and we’ll go again,” he said.

Again? She tried to reply, but all that came out was more giggling. He broke her brain.

He grinned. “Can you try a coherent sentence, sweetheart?” She shook her head. Her smile probably looked really goofy. He softly kissed her lips. “I’ll be right back.” He carefully moved away.

She watched him drop the condom

in the trashcan next to his desk. *Oh.* Good thing he'd thought of one, as it never crossed her mind. He got back in bed, pulling the covers over them, and wrapped his arms around her. Her body was like a rag-doll's, limbs flopping where he pulled her.

“Take a nap, Beth. There's time.”

She snuggled into him. “Thank you.”

He felt Beth go lax in his arms after a few minutes, and sighed happily. Brushing wisps of hair off her face, he whispered, “I love you.”

Chapter Thirteen

Beth stretched, rubbing her body against him, and opened her eyes. “How long was I out?”

“Less than two hours.”

She tilted her face up to kiss him.

“Mmm. I’m going to use your bathroom.”

“Hurry back.”

Slipping out from under the sheet, she located her shirt and bent to pick it up, giving him a nice view of her cute little bum. She pulled the tee on and left the bedroom, the shirt just skimming her

thighs.

He tucked his hands behind his head and waited, his erection returning—though, it'd been at half mast from the moment she snuggled up to him nude. Normally not the cuddling type, holding her filled him with sweet warmth. She was still the only girl he'd ever watched sleep. The only girl he wanted to.

The bathroom door opened and she came back. Her hair was down from the ponytail and her face scrubbed clean. There was no hesitation in crawling into bed. She straddled his lap

and kissed him again, sucking his bottom lip into her mouth.

She trailed hot kisses along his jaw, brushing his ear with her nose, and down his neck, pausing to nibble on his pulse point.

“I love this cologne on you,” she said.

“Yeah?”

She nodded. “Oh, yeah. Drove me nuts in high school. The night of Prom?” She shuddered.

“You helped with my tie.” He had a vague memory of his date, a nice

friend he hadn't clicked with.

“Uh-huh. You complained it was too tight.” She bit above his nipple, making him hiss in pleasure-pain.

He wrapped his hand around her hair and gave it a light tug to get her to look up at him. “*Want you.*”

She grinned and slid downward under the sheet. He felt her hand grip his prick and moaned, then felt a condom rolled down his shaft. Didn't know she had one in hand—sneaky.

She sat up, pulled her shirt over her head, tossed it to the floor, and

crawled up his body to fuse her mouth with his. He knew this time would be even better than the first, with no anxiety in the mix. She wiggled until he felt the head slide along her slick opening. Just the tease of what was to come had them both moaning into the kiss. She slowly took him inside, inch by inch, and paused, breathing fast.

“Feel so good, baby,” he said.

“You okay?”

“Just needed a minute. You stretch me.” She started rocking her hips. Her eyes fluttered shut, the expression on her

face one of pure pleasure.

He'd have to get her back to the house by sunrise, and it wasn't fair. They were just beginning to touch something special. He'd imagined making love until they were too tired to move, sleeping in each other's arms, then having a late breakfast in bed. Saying goodbye in mere hours wasn't part of the original equation.

He didn't want to let her go—out of his arms or his city.

It would take amnesia or senility for me to forget this night. I thought I

understood how it was supposed to go, you know? Your mom told you it should be special and to wait for someone you love. The romance books described the act in minute passionate detail. The horror stories of classmates made you fear everything that could go wrong.

None of that prepared me for the actual experience of spending hours in Jacob's arms cocooned in the darkness. I didn't know our breathing would sync. Couldn't have imagined the connection of looking into his eyes

while he came. The pleasant ache in muscles I'd never used in this manner before—not that I wanted to be sore, but from the knowledge of how I got that way. Our shared grins when our limbs were too noodle-y to go another round again.

They showered together, unwilling to part until they absolutely had to. He wanted to help Beth wash parts, though, which led to naughty soapy touching and her having to tell him she was too sensitive for a quickie against the shower wall. *Guaranteed way of*

making your man pout, let me tell ya.

The sun was just starting to illuminate the city when he took her home on the bike. He parked at the entrance of the property, not wanting to chance waking someone in the house with the engine noise.

“Call me when you know the time of your flight,” he said.

“Wait a few minutes. Your mom probably left the info on my bed.”

He wrapped his arms around her waist. “Mmm...bed...”

“I know...I could sleep ‘til noon.”

“Wore you out, did I?” he asked, wearing a proud smirk.

“Hey, I’m not the one who had to slam a Red Bull to be able to drive.”

He laughed. “Fair enough. Come on.” He took her hand and led her through the gate.

Luckily, the front door and its lock were well-oiled. They entered with only the slightest sound.

“Wait here,” she whispered.

“Don’t trust me in your boudoir?” he teased.

“Hell no.” Not with them both

wanting to strip down and curl up in bed until tomorrow.

She took the stairs with gingerly steps, both to be quiet and because of her protesting thighs. Just as she thought, Vivian had scribbled the flight number, time, and gate on a notepad in neat cursive. She copied the info and went back down to him.

“Flight leaves at noon if it’s on time.”

“Too soon.”

A lump developed in her throat.

“Don’t make this harder. I have to go.”

He sighed, and hugged her. “I know, love. Sorry for bein’ a selfish git. Your mum is a special lady and you should be with her to support her.”

“Thank you. Well...see you in a few hours?”

He pulled back enough to meet her eyes. “Count on it. I’m escorting you as far as they’ll let me.” She nodded, knowing if she tried to speak she’d cry. He cupped her face, caressing her cheeks with his thumbs, and softly kissed her. “Until later, sweetheart.”

“Later.” She appreciated that he

didn't say "goodbye".

He slipped out the front door. She watched him walk down the drive to the street, then went up to her room, the tears she'd been holding back no longer cooperating. Exhausted, she set the alarm, then changed into pajamas and brushed her teeth. She'd pack when she got up.

Once she stretched out in bed, though, the saying *too tired to sleep* came to mind. Her fears started taking over—fear Mom wouldn't be alright, worries about his feelings fading away

once she was gone—and she couldn't shut off her brain.

When the alarm buzzed, she felt like she'd just fallen asleep. It took a few minutes to get her body to follow the command to get up and shut it off.

Twelve hour flight. She could sleep on the plane.

Jacob came back shortly after she went down for food. He looked about the same as she felt—walking zombie.

“Coffee, dear?” his mother asked him.

“Please.” He walked over and

kissed Beth on the cheek. “Hey.”

She looked up. “Hey. You have a show tonight, too, right?”

“Yep.” He dumped a generous helping of sugar in his mug. “Rumor has it a critic is gonna show up.”

“Pro review? Sweet. It was a good show last night.” Though she preferred the performance at his apartment.

He grinned, winking at her when his mother’s back was turned. “Thank you.” He looked at her plate—two slices of melon and a piece of buttered

toast—and added a scoop of scrambled eggs.

She glared at him and mouthed *I'm not hungry*. He shot her a look of disapproval and put two pieces of bacon on the plate, too. “Stop that.”

“You need to eat,” he argued.

“I don't like starting with a heavy stomach.”

“Ah, the bickering. No wonder I thought L.A. was so quiet,” Vivian said.

“Sorry,” they said in unison.

She shook her head, smiling.

“Elizabeth, are you packed?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She nodded. “Very well. Jacob, help with her things and get her to the airport on time?”

“You’re not coming?”

“As much as I’d like to see you off, dear, I feel I would only be in the way.” She patted Beth’s hand. “Don’t worry, I’ll see you soon. The sale of the house still has to be overseen.”

“Oh.” On the one hand, she was glad to get one more moment alone with him. On the other, it didn’t feel right leaving Vivian here.

“Jacob, could you give us a moment?” she asked.

“Sure.” He got up from the table and went outside.

She took Beth’s hand. “The truth is, I’m not good at goodbyes. You’ll need to be brave, Elizabeth, and my blubbering won’t help...because this isn’t goodbye.”

“Just ‘see you later’.”

She smiled. “Exactly. If you need to talk when you get home—”

“I’ll pick up the phone. I, um... I can’t thank you enough for your

hospitality. This trip was a big deal for me.”

She glanced at Jacob pacing outside. “Important for both of you, it seems. Well, give me a hug, and we’ll part with smiles.”

Gladly. Beth lingered in the embrace as long as she let her. Logic was usually her course, but intuition told her this trip had changed her life, that the path before her would be different, and not for the cliché reason of losing her virginity. If there was another Beth out there facing her mother’s illness without

these memories, experiences, she'd be much more alone.

Mrs. Lindsey left the kitchen and Beth tried to finish her breakfast. Jacob came in off the patio, sat down, and watched her eat. "You didn't finish your toast," he said.

"It's cold."

"Microwave is over there."

She stood with her plate and set it next to the sink. "Back off, okay? I'm too anxious to eat much and pushing food at me doesn't help."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to upset

you.” A chair slid on the tile. He wrapped his arms around her waist, resting his chin on her shoulder.

She leaned back against his chest.

“Know you’re only looking out for me.”

“You’re my Bethie.” For him, that said it all.

Still wanted to know what being his really meant, but she wasn’t going to ask. Not after one week. Not when she was going thousands of miles away.

They didn’t say much during the ride to the airport. He put a CD in of bouncy punk trying to lift their spirits

and give them something else to focus on. They parked. He carried her suitcase. She wished he could see her all the way to the gate.

“Everything I could say feels like statin’ the obvious,” he said when he could go no further. “Of course I’ll miss you.”

“Of course you want me to have a safe flight.”

“Of course I wish you could stay longer.” They leaned into each other, touching foreheads.

“Me, too.” She sighed. “Well,

there's Christmas..."

"Yeah..." His arms tightened around her. "I'll send you a copy of the demo soon as we pick a cover shot."

"Looking forward to it." She tilted her face up and kissed him, hoping he would feel what she couldn't say.

Hoping it would help him not forget me.

He moaned and pressed her closer. The crowd, the airport, the take-off noise—it all fell away. They made out until someone tapped her on the shoulder. The security guard stood there

with a raised brow until they parted contact. She blushed. Jacob was unapologetic, staring right back.

“Move along,” the guard said, and continued on his rounds.

“I need—”

“To go. Yeah. Call me when you get home.”

“It’ll be late.”

“Beth, do you think I care?”

Her cheeks reddened further.

“No...”

He hugged her, then let go. “Go. Before I drag you home.”

She nodded and turned to the security line. As long as she didn't look back, she could do this.

Chapter Fourteen

Beth slept on the plane, but not as much as she hoped. Dad *and* Mom picked her up at Baggage Claim. She smiled for them. Didn't know what else to do.

Mom hugged her while Daddy looked for her suitcase. "I'm sorry you cut your trip short, honey. This is all going to be very routine."

"I hope so, Mom." She looked the same as when Beth left, still beautiful. That comforted her, and she realized

she'd feared her mother would be weak and sickly already. "It's okay. I still saw a lot."

"I want to hear *all* about it."

"Geeze, Elizabeth, what'd you bring back? Lead?" It sounded like a complaint, but he was teasing.

"Just some books, Dad. It's not *that* heavy."

He grunted, his usual reply, and started for the car. They followed, sharing a look of *what can you do*. The familiar was comforting.

At home, Beth took her stuff into

her room to unpack. Dad was grilling dinner tonight and Mom knew she liked to reestablish normal when she came home from a trip, so she was left alone.

A week ago, this room had been her sanctuary. Now, as she put dirty clothes in the hamper and set aside souvenirs on her bed, it seemed smaller, inadequate. One week, and the room felt like a young girl's, not a college student's. She hadn't redecorated since sophomore year when she wanted to go back to school as a young woman and put away all the stuffed toys except for

one bear sitting on her dresser.

Everything that didn't say "teenager" went into a box in the garage.

Jacob said he didn't recognize the place. She took that as a compliment.

It was the bed, she thought, that really made her notice. White-painted metal, twin-size, and girly. Her father put it together when she was ten. He thought girls should be all about pink and sweetness and frilly dresses. It took bringing home a dissected frog from seventh grade Biology to convince him that wasn't her.

Checking her watch first, she reached for the phone and called Jacob.

“Hey, baby,” he said. Made her feel good he picked up on the second ring.

“Hope you don’t always answer the phone like that.”

“I was waiting for your call. What are you up to?” The warmth in his voice loosened the knot in her stomach a bit.

“Unpacking, as far as my parents are concerned. I finished already.” She stretched out on the bed.

“Where are you?”

“On my bed. This thing is really too small for me now.”

He laughed. “My mother spoiled you.”

“*You* spoiled me.”

He sucked in a breath. “Kitten...”
Hadn’t meant to go to the sexy place. “I’m not a baby feline.”

“No, but you *are* adorable and possess sharp claws and teeth.”

She smiled. “Metaphorical, maybe.”

“Sweetheart, I’ve got a bite mark.”

Oh, god...where did I do that?

“Um...”

“Still there, love?”

“I’m here.” She cleared her throat. “How was the gig?”

“Rowdy. But we got paid. Had a pint with the boys, then came home to wait for you.”

Awww... “Your friends are going to start to hate me.”

“Bah...work is work, and what I do on my time is my soddin’ business.”

“Touchy subject?”

“Not yet. So...how is it being home again?”

She switched the phone to her other ear and sighed. “Like there’s an elephant in the room. Mom barraged me with a ton of questions about what I saw, and Dad pretty much didn’t talk at all. Not that he’s wordy to begin with, but...”

“I’m sure your mum will be fine, love. Could’ve just been a dirty scanner.”

“I hope so.” Thinking of the C-word was too huge, too scary. The what-ifs had been hard to ignore since Dad told her the biopsy news.

“Beth?”

“Sorry... I’m here.”

“You okay?”

She swallowed the lump of worry in her throat. “I don’t know.”

“Oh, baby... I wish I could hold you right now. Try not to think ahead of what you know, alright? She’s still healthy and active, right?”

“Yeah.” *Presumably.*

“Then that’s the truth until you know otherwise.”

It was good advice. “You’re occasionally smart, Jacob Lindsey,” she

teased.

“Oh, you’ll pay for that one next time I see you.”

“Ooo, I’m scared. You barely outweigh me.” Probably not true, but guaranteed to rile him up. Her boyfriend’s vanity was a sure thing.

“Hey, there’s muscle on this frame!”

“Uh-huh.”

“I miss you,” he said, his voice soft and affectionate. The sudden turn surprised her.

“Miss you, too.” After last night,

she wouldn't have left for anything but the most important circumstances. She ached for him now. "I'll call you tomorrow as soon as I...know."

"I can—" He yawned. "I can stay on with you."

So sweet. "I've heard the tired in your voice the whole time, Jacob. And I know you didn't get to sleep much."

"Mmm, best reason to stay up, though. Gonna dream about you, love. Sure you don't wanna chat? I don't have to be anywhere in the mornin'." He yawned again, and apologized.

“Go to bed.”

“It’s lacking a soft-skinned
brunette.”

She turned red at the seductive purr in his voice. At least he couldn’t see it this time. “Nothing I can do about that,” she said. “But I’m sure you’ll pass right out.”

“Yeah, yeah. Tomorrow, love.”

“Count on it. Bye...” She pressed “end” on the keypad.

Beth loved that he wanted her there still, but emphasizing it only made it more difficult to bear. Her heart

wanted to be in two places at once.

A knock on the door, then,

“Elizabeth...”

“Yes, Mom?”

She opened the door and stuck her head around it. “Dinner, honey.”

“Okay.” She put the phone on the stand and followed her out.

Beth grabbed her glass off the table and went to the refrigerator. Dad walked in from outside with a plate of chicken. She heard the “thunk” of the plate hitting the table, then his chair sliding on the floor when he sat. The

grilled veggies were already on the table. Her glass full of Snapple Iced Tea, she took her place.

It was the most quiet, awkward dinner she could remember them having. Dad complimented Mom on the marinade, she complimented him on the chicken, and Beth kept her mouth full to keep from asking questions she wasn't sure she wanted answers to. Mom tried asking more about her trip, but with Daddy sitting there like a lump, she didn't want to talk about it. He cleared his plate, then excused himself to his

study for “work”.

“Well, that was fun,” she muttered.

“Elizabeth.”

“Sorry, Mom.” She took her plate into the kitchen and got a bowl for ice cream.

She sighed. “No, you’re right... I considered not telling your father until I knew something conclusive, knowing how he’d be, how he’d worry.”

“Are you worried?”

She handed Beth the chocolate ice cream. “Nervous. But, it isn’t the first time in my life there has been a lump in

my breast, so I'm expecting it to be another cyst."

"A cyst would be good?" Beth scooped three scoops into her bowl, then offered her mother the carton.

She shook her head, put the lid back on the ice cream, and put it in the freezer. "They're usually benign, and they drained the last one and it was done. Or, it might just be a calcium deposit. I really wish your father hadn't interrupted your vacation, honey."

Me, too, under different circumstances. "It's okay. I want to be

here. So, how does this go tomorrow?”

“The procedure won’t take long. My doctor is going to take a look with an ultrasound, then get a sample of the lump.”

“Cut you open?”

“Probably not. Don’t worry, Elizabeth, I’m not going to come home looking like Swiss cheese.”

She stuffed ice cream in her mouth and muttered, “Glad you can joke about it.” Mom didn’t look up from washing the dishes, so she either didn’t hear her or chose not to comment.

Beth wished she could be as non-ruffled as her mother was right now, but she guessed she was more like Dad—too many thoughts to be glib. Back in her room, she set the bowl on her desk and looked in the drawers for a notepad, needing to write down the questions she had.

A biopsy was taking a small sample piece for testing, but what if they look at the thing and want to get rid of all of it? Mom hadn't told her how big it was. That mattered, right, for how long it'd been in the body...how bad it could

be? And were there good kinds of breast cancer vs. bad ones, like the grades of skin cancer?

As they rode to the doctor's office the next morning, she wondered if her brother knew. If Mom was sick, Beth knew he'd come, but could he and Dad put aside their differences for her sake? The stress wouldn't be good for her and Beth would be stuck as referee.

They were ten minutes early and they took Mom right in after she filled out the paperwork. She explained on the way that the doctor would be sticking a

needle into the lump and pulling out a bit of tissue—no cutting today. Dad read a golf magazine, or pretended to. Beth watched the clock.

“When will we know?” she asked when Mom and the doc came back to the waiting room.

“Twenty-four to forty-eight hours,” the doctor said. “It depends on how busy the lab is. I’ll be in touch, Sarah,” she told Mom.

“Thanks,” Mom said. She looked the same, except for not carrying her purse on her shoulder.

“Did it hurt?” Beth asked her.

“She gave me a local,” she said.

“It just felt a little odd. Now, who wants brunch?”

Dad opened the door for her, took her hand to walk back to the car, and that was it. They were ignoring the elephant.

Beth didn't flippin' care about *brunch*. “Mom, is that all you're going to say?”

“Elizabeth, I don't know anything more *to* say. We have to wait.”

“How can you be so calm?”

“Elizabeth, that’s enough,” Dad said. He glared at her. She glared back.

He dropped her at home with a line about “fixing her attitude”. It was his clumsy way of protecting Mom. Alone in the house, she went for the phone and called Jacob.

“’Ello.”

“I’m glad you’re home,” she said.

“Beth? It’s good to hear your voice, love. How’d it go?”

“We have to wait another day or two for results. My parents are trying to pretend everything’s normal and I hate

it.”

“I’m sorry, baby. Wish I could say somethin’ to make it better.”

“Listening helps. They don’t want to talk about it. I don’t even know if they’ve told my brother.” She sighed.

“What did you do today?”

“Slept late, thought about you in the shower—”

“Oh my god...”

“You asked,” he said, and chuckled.

“You are so dirty.”

“And you like it.” His voice

dropped to that tone that made her knees weak.

Hello, wet panties. “When it’s... appropriate,” she said.

He laughed again. “Got you to smile, didn’t I?”

“Yeah... Did you do anything out of the house today?”

“Nope, except for picking up takeout. Been writing.”

She liked the sound of that. “A new song?”

“Parts. Spent more time on course work—”

“You’re not in classes right now.”

“—so I won’t get buried this term.”

“You...were studying *ahead*?” It didn’t compute in her brain.

“*Yeah*. If I’m gonna have time to talk to you, I can’t slack off like usual, can I?”

“No...well, I...I’m impressed.”
And touched.

“Advantage of makin’ friends ahead of me—I know what profs always assign the same crap every year.

Between jobs right now, so I got the

time.”

“It’s a good plan.”

“Thank you.” He dropped the defensive edge to his tone. “What are your plans until moving day?”

Summer plans? She hadn’t thought about it since coming home. “I don’t know...depends on Mom’s diagnosis, I guess. If she needs...if there are needs, I want to help.” *Had* to. “Well, I shouldn’t run up the phone bill...”

“Alright, love. Call me whenever you want to, though, okay? I miss you.”

“Miss you, too, Jacob. Bye.” She

hung up, though it hurt to do so.

It sucked more than ever to be on opposite sides of an ocean. She craved him physically, and not just his kisses or his touch. There was a place he filled in her soul she hadn't known was empty.

When the house phone rang at eight the next morning, she *knew* it was the doctor. Sure, it could've been a telemarketer or something, but she just knew—this was it. She stared at the phone next to her bed and waited for someone to pick it up. It stopped after two rings.

A door opened and shut down the hall. Dad left for work at seven, so it had to be Mom unless he called in sick. Beth waited with the sheet kicked off her legs, staring at the ceiling.

Ten minutes later, a soft knock on her door. “I’m awake,” she said. Mom came in, still holding the phone. “It was bad news, wasn’t it?” Beth asked without looking at her face.

“Yes, honey. My doctor has some time this afternoon, so I’ll be going by the office and hearing my options.” She sat on the bed. “Beth, just because it’s

cancer, that doesn't mean we're looking at dire circumstances, okay?"

She nodded. "Yeah, Mom. I know," she said for her sake. Mom patted her leg and left the room.

But she *didn't* know. There were too many variables and she didn't like it one bit.

Mom went into her dark room. Beth got up to get ready for the day and cried in the shower so she wouldn't hear her. After dressing, she called Jacob. His voice mail picked up, so she left a short message and dialed Vivian's.

When she was unavailable, too, Beth left a note on the refrigerator saying she had an errand to run, and walked to the park.

It was a small park, with only a swing set and a jungle gym to climb on surrounded by a bit of grass. She and Jacob used to come here when he needed to burn off energy to focus. She'd drill him on test questions while he pumped on the swing high enough to be parallel with the ground. Always feared he'd screw up and crack his head open going so high.

She sat on a swing—her usual

middle-right position—and swayed for a while. It wasn't the same without him.

Dad wasn't home, yet, when Mom needed to leave for her appointment, so Beth went along. The doctor didn't mind her being there, so she took notes.

Writing everything down gave her something to focus on other than the word *cancer* echoing in her head. They were going to do further testing, she said, to find out exactly what type Mom had, and schedule surgery to remove the tumor.

“Depending on the size and

aggressiveness of the tumor, we'll discuss whether a lumpectomy or more significant removal of tissue is appropriate." She slid some pamphlets across the desk to Beth's mother.

"These can answer some basic questions, and there's some info in there about local support groups."

"Alright. Thank you, doctor," Mom said.

She was quiet through most of the meeting, listening to the doctor explain technical terms and procedures. If Beth hadn't been there, she wasn't sure Mom

would have asked any questions at all.

“You okay, Mom?” she asked as they were leaving.

She smiled. “Just a lot to take in, honey. Would you mind driving home? Think they took enough blood for a donation.”

She took the keys. “What was all that for, anyway?”

“She said she likes to give the patient a physical before starting treatment.”

“Hm. Better than going in blind, I guess.” Beth pressed the button for

remote unlocking the car.

“Yep.”

When they got home, she made Mom eat something. Dad came back from work at his usual time—didn't she call him with the diagnosis?—and they disappeared in their room for a while. Dinner was another awkward event.

Unless you went through cancer before or knew someone that did, you didn't know about the waiting. Beth wanted that damn lump out of her mother yesterday, but apparently operating rooms didn't sit around empty and

waiting, and tests results didn't magically reveal themselves.

Friday night, she lay awake staring at the ceiling again, trying to fall asleep. It was well past midnight when she finally dozed off.

Tap, tap, tap-tap tap...

Two bits.

Wait...

She rolled toward the sound and opened her eyes. A dark shape was outside her window. She sat up and bolted out of bed, ready to call for her father.

“Beth, open the window,” the man said in a hushed voice. He stepped back a foot and the moon illuminated his outline.

Oh my god... She pushed up the window, careful not to make a sound. “Jacob, what are you doing here?” They reached for each other and kissed over the windowsill. *Oh my god...*

He climbed inside without breaking contact. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she tilted her head to deepen the kiss, her tongue dancing with his. His scent enveloped her, an essence

of home just as much as her bedspread or her father's old recliner in the den.

“How?”

“Mum sent me to pack up the house, though I think she was just sick of me mopin' all week,” he said around kissing her neck. His hands slid under her tank top.

“You were moping?” *God, he was the sweetest boyfriend...*

He thumbed her nipples. “Needed to be here.”

Their lips met again and her skin flushed with heated anticipation. When

he started to lift her top, though, she broke away. “Not here. My parents,” she whispered.

“Come home with me.”

She nodded. He climbed out her window while she put on a tee and shorts over her PJs and slipped her feet into a pair of Keds. She placed a pencil under the window once she was outside so she could open it later and followed him over the fence. He caught her when she dropped down off the cement wall.

They barely made it inside before starting to shed clothes. Her tee and tank

hit the floor together.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” she said, lifting his shirt over his head.

He cupped her breasts and bent his knees to kiss the tips, then yanked her bottoms down. Her shoes slid off with her shorts, leaving her naked in his kitchen. She needed him too much to feel shy, and took his face in her hands and kissed him again. He picked her up.

When she landed on a bed, it was in his room. He unfastened his jeans and dropped them to the floor. Aside from in the shower the morning she left

England, it was the first time they were naked with a light on. He crawled onto the bed into her open arms.

It didn't occur to her something was missing until she felt him start to slide in. "Condom!" she blurted out.

That *oh shit* look crossed his face and he pulled away. "Right!" He rummaged in the main compartment of his suitcase on the floor and came back to bed properly gloved.

"Now, where were we?" he asked, sliding home.

"Unh... Missed you." She

wrapped her legs around his hips.

“Missed you more.”

“Did not.”

“Did *too*.”

“Enough talking,” she said, and shut him up with her mouth. The pace of their coupling picked up while they made up for five days apart.

He didn't last long, at least for them, and collapsed on top of her, panting on her neck. She whimpered and wiggled her hips, close to release but not close enough.

“Need something, baby?” he

asked, though his hand was already snaking between them to rub her clit.

Her body tensed, then released wave after wave of pleasure. She bit his shoulder to keep from crying out in his ear. Warmth flooded through her and she felt the week's tension fade away. If he let her, she could finally fall asleep.

Jacob had other plans.

Thank you for reading. Please drop Carla a review or message with your thoughts—they're like virtual cookies. This series continues with *Betrayed*.

Absence makes the heart grow fonder...or forgetful. Jacob is attending university in London while Beth stays in Los Angeles. The tender long-distance relationship falls apart when she believes he betrayed her on the same day she learns her mother's cancer has

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Contemporary Romance saga.

DEDICATION

Thank you to Mrs. Johns for teaching me I could create, Celeste for being so supportive of this story, and “Tech Guy” for providing years of twenty-four hour tech support and love. Thanks also to Sotia for being a fan of this tale and encouraging me to keep going when words fail me, for being a sympathetic ear, and so much more.

A special shout-out to Pitizens, Purgatorians, and Divas. You know

who you are.

And last but not least, thank you to all the fans of Beth and Jacob since April 2011. This wouldn't be possible without you.

About the Author

Carla Krae lives in California with two crazy cats and a tech guy. Debuting in 2011, Carla is the author of the popular *My Once and Future Love* series. When she isn't writing love stories, she likes to dabble in [fantasy](#). Carla also writes as [K.C. Taylor](#).

Subscribe to the [mailing list](#) to learn about new releases. Find her on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), or her [blog](#). A multi-faceted Q&A interview is

available [here](#).

BETRAYED

Chapter One

Bright light hit Jacob's face. He squeezed his eyes shut tighter and rolled over to hide from the sun. Long hair tickled his nose. *What the...?*

Beth. As the haze of sleep cleared from his mind, he remembered the night before, and falling asleep sated and holding her. She'd rolled onto her side away from him, the sheet tucked under her chin. He reached up and pulled the

drapes closed above his bed, shutting out the offending light, and cuddled up to her back.

“Mmm...what time is it?” she mumbled.

“Don’t know. Sun’s up.”

She squirmed her hips forward an inch. “Quit poking me.”

“Morning wood. Can’t help it.”

“Geesh.”

He grinned and snuggled closer again. Holding her was really comfortable. He could get used to this. “Will you be missed?”

“Nah. It’s Saturday.” She rolled partially onto her back. “We do our own thing in the morning.”

He kissed her nose. “Good. Rather sleep in.”

She smiled. “We were up late.”

“Mmm.” He put his head down on his pillow. “Starting to like this weekend trend, Miss Lawson.”

She rolled to face him. “Me, too.”

He’d keep her in bed until their stomachs made too much noise to ignore if she let him. They’d christened his bed in a hell of a fashion, only stopping

when she couldn't keep her eyes open any longer. He pulled the sheet over their bodies, wrapped his arms around her with her head on his shoulder, and that was the last thing he remembered. Fell right to sleep for the first time in days.

Her eyes were closed again.

“You asleep, love?”

“No,” she said, and yawned.

“Sorry. Probably have morning breath.”

“Nah.”

She opened her eyes. “How long are you here?”

“Long as it takes to box everything up.”

“Are you going to miss the house?”

A fair question. He'd lived here more years than he hadn't. “Some. I'll miss climbin' over your wall more.”

She smiled. “A lot of memories in two years. I'll miss your mom being next door, too. You'll both be so far away.”

He kissed her pout. “I'll miss comin' back to the ol' place, no question. When I left for uni, I thought I missed England...and I did, but L.A.

might tip the scale of home a bit more.”
He laced their fingers together. “And now there’s you.”

“Jacob...”

He kissed her before she started crying, before he laid his heart out too soon, and wrapped his arm around her waist, pulling her closer. She moaned into his mouth, her hand clutching his shoulder. He loved her soft skin, especially when there was so much of it available to his fingers, and stroked her back, over her ass, and down her thigh. She curled her leg over his hip.

She broke away from the kiss.

“Do you have any more...?” Her brows rose, and he caught her meaning.

“Don’t know.” He grinned. “Last night was intense.”

She smiled back, but her cheeks turned pink. “Uh-huh.”

“You okay?”

“Yeah. Sleepy. And hungry.”

He brushed her hair behind her ear. “Could see what’s around for breakfast.”

Her nose wrinkled up. “*You* can move.”

“I spend eleven hours on a plane and you want to be waited on?” he teased.

“Yup.” She popped the “p” at the end.

Now he was thinking about food, his stomach started gurgling. “Fine...but don’t think this’ll be a habit, missy.” He got out of bed and grabbed his jeans.

She watched him pull them on, her hands propping her head up on the pillow. Though he knew he was a good-looking bloke, it thrilled him to see her admire him so blatantly. Put a bit more

cock into his walk. He left the jeans unbuttoned.

The refrigerator was mostly bare, his mother making sure she didn't come back to a rotting kitchen. Too bad there was no milk for cereal...

Beth never thought she'd be naked in *this bed* listening to Jacob hum in the kitchen. Even through all the years of wanting him to kiss her, she never thought further than *I'd trust him to be my first*. Now, she was thoroughly twitterpated, and had sex over *two* nights with her best friend, the change in their

relationship just hours shy of two weeks old.

Frea-ky.

But awesome. This week would've been a lot harder without him answering her calls.

Her bladder said it was time to get up, so she found her underwear and his t-shirt and used his bathroom. The girl in the mirror made her do a double-take. Her hair was a rat's nest and she had a dark purple hickey on the side of her neck above her collarbone. There was *no* way of hiding that mark without

wearing a turtleneck.

She walked into the kitchen and slugged his arm. “Are you trying to get me in trouble?”

“Hey! What are you on about?”

“*This*. I told you not to leave obvious marks.”

He touched it. “That’s a good one.” He grabbed the waffle that popped up out of the toaster. “Ooo, hot.”

“Dumb-ass. My dad is going to *freak* when he sees my neck!”

“Wear a scarf,” he said with his

mouth full. “It’d be cute.”

She rolled her eyes and grabbed the apple he left on the counter. “I don’t *have* a scarf, or a short-sleeve turtleneck, or make-up thick enough to hide this thing. You realize you have to flee now before he kicks your ass.”

“Is he really going to notice with all that’s going on, Beth? A love bite’s a bit insignificant right now. Just hide it with your hair or something.”

“*Mom* will notice and she’ll tell him, and she’s smart enough to put two and two together if they know you’re in

town.”

“What, you never made out in high school?”

“*No.*”

“Not ever?” He asked like he couldn’t imagine people existing with such a history.

She looked away. “Kissing you was the first time I kissed anybody.”

“Wow.” He took her face in his hands. “I’m honored.”

She blushed. “Shut up. No fair being sweet when I’m annoyed with you.”

He gathered her into his arms. “If it’ll make you feel better, I’ll take you shopping.” He looked down. “Are you naked under my shirt?”

“God, you have a one-track mind.”

“Didn’t answer my question.” His hands slid under the hem of the tee.

She batted his hands away before he could distract her with their talents.

“Quit that. I’m mad at you.”

He grinned. “No, you’re not.”

Okay, she wasn’t *mad*, but definitely inconvenienced. The hickey was not a good thing to come home with

and she wished she could hide out until it faded, which, with her fair skin, couldn't come soon enough.

“Don't wanna play, Jacob.” She sat on one of the dining chairs and bit into the apple.

Seeing her genuinely put out, his demeanor changed and became more contrite. “I'm sorry, love. I'll remember next time.”

Guess it bothered her so much because it reminded her she was still a kid in some ways, and stuff like this was only the beginning of things that would

chafe until she struck out in the world on her own. The dorm still awaited, but with Mom's diagnosis... Well, she hadn't decided if she could leave home, yet. On the one hand, she'd have freedom. On the other, she'd worry.

He touched her shoulder. "Hey, what's going through that head, kitten?"

"Lots." She rubbed her forehead. "Too much, lately."

He moved a chair close to hers, sat, and put his arm around her shoulders. She leaned into him. "I'm here, okay?"

“I know. Until you have to leave.”

He didn't reply to that and she didn't ask him to. They sat cuddling until the mood settled and they could turn their attention back to food.

After breakfast, she wanted to get dressed, but needed a shower somethin' awful. They went through a round of *you go—no, you go* and ended up with him using his mother's bathroom and her using his. She braided her hair over the side with the bruise, which sort of concealed it.

“What would you like to do

today?” he asked, leaning casually on the doorframe.

“Aren’t you supposed to box up the house?”

“Technically, but I think I’m allowed to spend a day with my girl.”

She’d never get tired of hearing that—*my girl*. “I don’t know...” She looked in the direction of her house.

“Mom might need something.”

“We could go to the beach, take your camera, escape the heat a bit...”

That smile wouldn’t sway her this time. “Let me check in first.”

He sighed. “Alright.”

He plopped on the couch in front of the TV and reached for the remote. Rolling her eyes, she left through the back to climb over the wall again. No one was in her yard or showing through a window, so she dropped to the ground and hurried to her room. The pencil was where she left it, allowing her to get back inside. She dressed properly, then reached for make-up.

Caking on concealer hid the hickey a bit more, but not entirely, so she'd still need to be careful to keep her hair over

it if she ran into her parents. She loaded a roll of film into her camera and left it on the desk next to her purse.

Her room was at the start of the hallway to the bedrooms. There was a bathroom between it and her brother's old room, then Mom and Dad's was at the end. She walked out to the front to check the driveway first. No cars, but one could be in the garage.

A note was stuck to the fridge:

Elizabeth,

We went to see the nutritionist for your mother's new diet. Then we'll

stop at the store.

Dad

Okay, guess she wasn't needed. New diet? Fighting cancer required specific food? Well, whatever worked. If eating powdered duck bills upside-down would kill the cancer, she'd feed it to Mom herself.

Beth left her own note about spending a few hours with a friend, grabbed her stuff, and left the house, using the sidewalk to get to Jacob's this time. His door was unlocked.

“So?” he asked.

“They weren’t there.”

“Lucky me.” He turned off the TV.

She followed him to the garage where his mother’s car was stored.

“Aren’t you going to lock the front door?”

“I’ll do it after I move the car.

Have to put the lock on the garage, anyway.” He pushed the garage door up. There was no automatic opener. He opened the passenger door for her.

“Hold that,” he said, and dropped a padlock on her lap.

He backed the car to the end of the

driveway, locked both doors, and pulled onto the street once it was clear, then tuned the radio to his favorite local rock station.

It was a half-hour drive to the beach he'd chosen, one of the little places you took stairs down to with some tide pools and a bit of sand. The only other person there was a diver going into the water just as they took to the stairs. The air was at least ten degrees cooler than inland and smelled fresher than at the sunbathing beaches. Though Beth wasn't really a swimmer,

the peace of the waves always called to her.

Jacob sat on the last step to take his boots and socks off. She sat two steps above him and pulled her camera out of her bag. He continued stripping down to a pair of black swim trunks.

“Join me?”

She shook her head. “I don’t do the ocean.”

He shrugged and stood on the sand. “Your loss, love.” He took off at a run and dove into the waves, coming up again where the water was armpit

high.

He was gorgeous wet in general, and here the sun was making his eyes crystal blue and glowing like beacons. She raised the camera to her eye and zoomed the lens on his face, now in profile. He dove into the waves again. The water was gentle today, not even making peaks. She wondered if he could see the diver under there.

She kept an eye to where her boyfriend was, but turned her camera to other subjects—a hermit crab, a couple anemones in a tiny pool, the carving of

the cliff wall to the beach. Capturing nature in interesting ways fascinated her and she liked when a photo of something natural looked like it could be something else. Focused on the view through her lens, she didn't notice he came up behind her until he shook his wet hair like a dog.

“Hey! Watch it!” She jumped away from him and shielded the camera.

“Should keep your ears open, love,” he said, grinning. “Give us a cuddle.”

She evaded his arms. “No, you're

wet!”

“Didn’t seem to mind a week ago.”

“That was in the shower.” She dodged another grab. “Stop it. Expensive equipment in my hands.”

“So put it down.” He stalked her like a cat.

She could make a break for it, but he was a faster runner and had a bit of a stride advantage. Didn’t want to run with the camera, though—it was Mom’s. “I don’t feel like playing right now, Jacob.”

He sighed. “Fine. What do you want to do?”

“I was doing it before you interrupted me. Sorry we have different interests.” She so didn’t need his craving for attention right now.

“Just horsin’ around. Don’t have to be a bitch about it.”

“I’m not being a *bitch*. I was protecting my camera.” Now she wished she drove. The camera strap went around her neck and she turned for the stairs, grabbing her bag on the way up.

There was a fruit stand across the road where she could sit in the shade. He could swim until he grew gills for all she cared...no one got away with calling her names.

For once, he didn't chase after her.

What, I'm not worth chasing?

Whoa, there, with the crazy talk.

Well, he never lets me have the last word. What am I supposed to think?

And even as she thought it, she saw him wait for a car to pass, then jog across the road. He was dressed again.

She stopped peeking and pretended to find a cantaloupe very interesting.

“Let’s go, Beth.”

“Huh? Oh, hi. Hungry?” She walked to the register and requested, “One basket of the strawberries, please.” The girl handed over the berries in a paper bag in exchange for her money.

“Done?”

“Yes.” No cars were coming, so she crossed at a walking pace. “Where are we going?”

“Home.”

She had to open her door this time. “That’s mature.”

“Don’t want to waste your time.”

“God, you’re such a drama queen.”

He drove onto the street. “You’re more interested in being with your parents right now. I heard it in your voice when you came back to the house. The camera’s just your way to avoid thinking about it.”

“They teach you that in Psych 101?”

“Beth, you didn’t talk the whole

way down here.”

“You had the radio on loud!”

“So turn the bleedin’ thing down. Known you long enough to know when you’d rather be elsewhere, love.”

“Sorry if my mother having *cancer* is inconvenient for you.” Of all the... If they weren’t so many miles from home, she’d get out of the car right here. “This morning was nice. *I’m* not the one that ruined it.”

He shook his head and exhaled, his grip tightening on the steering wheel. Seriously, there was nothing he had to

have a tantrum about. She wasn't the one picking fights.

Back in LA, he dropped her off in front of her house. She slammed the car door and stomped inside, not caring if he left or not. Her parents were in the kitchen putting away groceries.

“Hi, honey,” Mom said.

“Have fun, Elizabeth?” Dad asked, his head in the pantry.

“Took some shots. I'll be in the dark room unless you guys need anything?”

“Nope.”

She nodded to Mom and took her camera into her brother's former bedroom. The roll she happened to have was only twenty-four exposures, so she'd gone through it fast.

Working in the darkroom was therapeutic. Everything was timed and measured. Structured. She and Mom worked with an amber safelight to see what they were doing. As long as the light was at least four feet from the paper, there were no problems.

First, Beth had to load the film on a reel in the dark. To process the

negatives, she needed to put it through pre-soak, developer, stop bath, fixer, wash, wetting agent, and drying for at least four hours for them to harden completely. They hung the sheet with a weight at the bottom to straighten it. The strip could then be cut into individual images.

It was around one o'clock when she started, which meant she could check the strip around dinner time to see about making prints. The AC vent was sealed off in this room to help the drying process, so the duration was usually

shorter in summer.

An enlarger was used to project the image of a negative onto a base for printmaking. A sheet of photographic paper was exposed with the enlarged image from the negative. The exposed paper was processed, first by immersion in a photographic developer, then halting development with a stop bath, and fixing it in a photographic fixer. The print was then washed to remove the processing chemicals, and dried. They spaced the prints out on a clothesline.

She left the room and came upon

her smiling mother. “What did you use this time?” she asked.

“Color. It was what I had handy.”

“I look forward to seeing them.”

“Where’s Dad?”

“Playing nine holes. He needed some man time after the visit to the alternative health center.”

“I thought you were seeing a nutritionist?”

“We did, but that’s where she’s at and we talked about stuff other than pills and injections. Research says you have better chances with a positive outlook,

so we discussed spiritual wellbeing, too. That kind of thing makes your dad uncomfortable.”

Beth followed her into the kitchen. “I can imagine. So, what’s this fancy diet?”

“Completely organic, with the nutrient ratios specific to my body type to keep my strength up once I start chemo.”

“But we don’t know that you’ll need that, yet. The doctor said—”

“I’m only preparing. I’d rather expect the worst and be surprised by the

best. Besides, the food is still good for me either way, so it won't hurt."

"Yes, Mom."

How she could think about the badness, Beth didn't know. It terrified her.

Mom showed her the recipes in her new cookbook and talked about the yoga instructor she met. Beth guessed once Mom had a path, it was full steam ahead.

They made dinner when Dad came home, then Beth went back in the darkroom.

She worked on print after print,
slowly seeing her subjects revealed.
The photo of Jacob standing in the water
took her breath away and she wondered
again why he wanted her as a partner.
He could rule the world with his
charisma and ambition.

She was just a scared young girl.

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About the Author

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Trained vocalist. Cat mom.

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Interviews: [here](#) and [here](#).

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Quickest way to get news. Then hang

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“Morning wood. Can’t help it.”

“Geesh.”

He grinned and snuggled closer again. Holding her was really comfortable. He could get used to this.

“Will you be missed?”

“Nah. It’s Saturday.” She rolled partially onto her back. “We do our own thing in the morning.”

He kissed her nose. “Good. Rather sleep in.”

She smiled. “We were up late.”

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“No,” she said, and yawned. “Sorry. Probably have morning breath.”

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“Long as it takes to box everything up.”

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She rolled her eyes and grabbed the

apple he left on the counter. “I don’t *have* a scarf, or a short-sleeve turtleneck, or make-up thick enough to hide this thing. You realize you have to flee now before he kicks your ass.”

“Is he really going to notice with all that’s going on, Beth? A love bite’s a bit insignificant right now. Just hide it with your hair or something.”

“*Mom* will notice and she’ll tell him, and she’s smart enough to put two and two together if they know you’re in town.”

“What, you never made out in high

school?”

“*No.*”

“Not ever?” He asked like he couldn’t imagine people existing with such a history.

She looked away. “Kissing you was the first time I kissed anybody.”

“Wow.” He took her face in his hands. “I’m honored.”

She blushed. “Shut up. No fair being sweet when I’m annoyed with you.”

He gathered her into his arms. “If it’ll make you feel better, I’ll take you shopping.” He looked down. “Are you

naked under my shirt?”

“God, you have a one-track mind.”

“Didn’t answer my question.” His hands slid under the hem of the tee.

She batted his hands away before he could distract her with their talents.

“Quit that. I’m mad at you.”

He grinned. “No, you’re not.”

Okay, she wasn’t *mad*, but definitely inconvenienced. The hickey was not a good thing to come home with and she wished she could hide out until it faded, which, with her fair skin, couldn’t come soon enough.

“Don’t wanna play, Jacob.” She sat on one of the dining chairs and bit into the apple.

Seeing her genuinely put out, his demeanor changed and became more contrite. “I’m sorry, love. I’ll remember next time.”

Guess it bothered her so much because it reminded her she was still a kid in some ways, and stuff like this was only the beginning of things that would chafe until she struck out in the world on her own. The dorm still awaited, but with Mom’s diagnosis... Well, she

hadn't decided if she could leave home, yet. On the one hand, she'd have freedom. On the other, she'd worry.

He touched her shoulder. "Hey, what's going through that head, kitten?"

"Lots." She rubbed her forehead. "Too much, lately."

He moved a chair close to hers, sat, and put his arm around her shoulders. She leaned into him. "I'm here, okay?"

"I know. Until you have to leave."

He didn't reply to that and she didn't ask him to. They sat cuddling until the mood settled and they could turn their

attention back to food.

After breakfast, she wanted to get dressed, but needed a shower somethin' awful. They went through a round of *you go—no, you go* and ended up with him using his mother's bathroom and her using his. She braided her hair over the side with the bruise, which sort of concealed it.

“What would you like to do today?” he asked, leaning casually on the doorframe.

“Aren't you supposed to box up the house?”

“Technically, but I think I’m allowed to spend a day with my girl.”

She’d never get tired of hearing that —*my girl*. “I don’t know...” She looked in the direction of her house.

“Mom might need something.”

“We could go to the beach, take your camera, escape the heat a bit...”

That smile wouldn’t sway her this time. “Let me check in first.”

He sighed. “Alright.”

He plopped on the couch in front of the TV and reached for the remote.

Rolling her eyes, she left through the

back to climb over the wall again. No one was in her yard or showing through a window, so she dropped to the ground and hurried to her room. The pencil was where she left it, allowing her to get back inside. She dressed properly, then reached for make-up.

Caking on concealer hid the hickey a bit more, but not entirely, so she'd still need to be careful to keep her hair over it if she ran into her parents. She loaded a roll of film into her camera and left it on the desk next to her purse.

Her room was at the start of the

hallway to the bedrooms. There was a bathroom between it and her brother's old room, then Mom and Dad's was at the end. She walked out to the front to check the driveway first. No cars, but one could be in the garage.

A note was stuck to the fridge:

Elizabeth,

We went to see the nutritionist for your mother's new diet. Then we'll stop at the store.

Dad

Okay, guess she wasn't needed. New diet? Fighting cancer required specific

food? Well, whatever worked. If eating powdered duck bills upside-down would kill the cancer, she'd feed it to Mom herself.

Beth left her own note about spending a few hours with a friend, grabbed her stuff, and left the house, using the sidewalk to get to Jacob's this time. His door was unlocked.

“So?” he asked.

“They weren't there.”

“Lucky me.” He turned off the TV.

She followed him to the garage where his mother's car was stored. “Aren't

you going to lock the front door?”

“I’ll do it after I move the car. Have to put the lock on the garage, anyway.”

He pushed the garage door up. There was no automatic opener. He opened the passenger door for her. “Hold that,” he said, and dropped a padlock on her lap.

He backed the car to the end of the driveway, locked both doors, and pulled onto the street once it was clear, then tuned the radio to his favorite local rock station.

It was a half-hour drive to the beach

he'd chosen, one of the little places you took stairs down to with some tide pools and a bit of sand. The only other person there was a diver going into the water just as they took to the stairs. The air was at least ten degrees cooler than inland and smelled fresher than at the sunbathing beaches. Though Beth wasn't really a swimmer, the peace of the waves always called to her.

Jacob sat on the last step to take his boots and socks off. She sat two steps above him and pulled her camera out of her bag. He continued stripping down to

a pair of black swim trunks. “Join me?”

She shook her head. “I don’t do the ocean.”

He shrugged and stood on the sand.

“Your loss, love.” He took off at a run and dove into the waves, coming up again where the water was armpit high.

He was gorgeous wet in general, and here the sun was making his eyes crystal blue and glowing like beacons. She raised the camera to her eye and zoomed the lens on his face, now in profile. He dove into the waves again. The water was gentle today, not even making

peaks. She wondered if he could see the diver under there.

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December 1st, 2013.

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