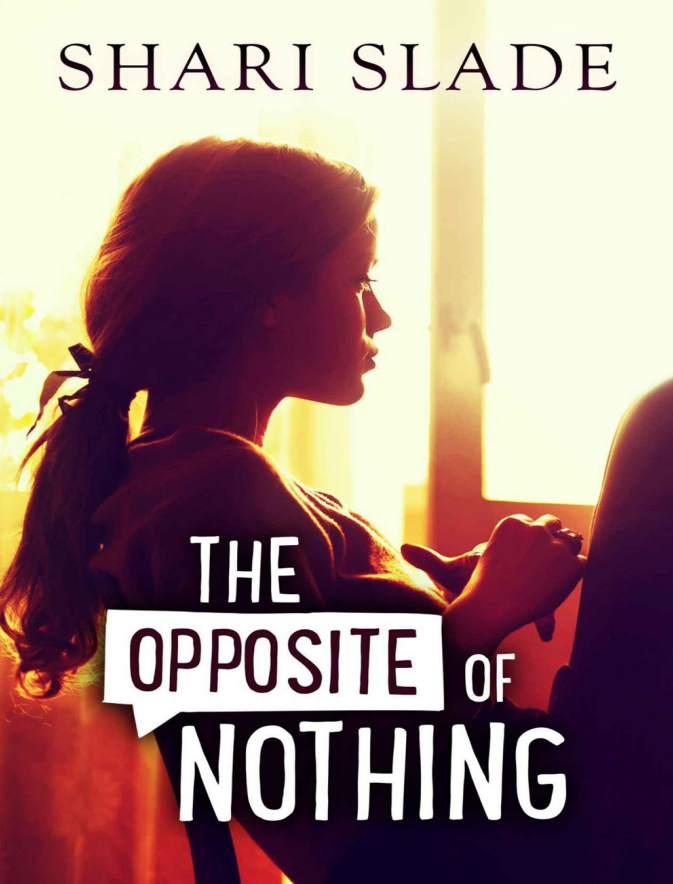


A young woman with long brown hair tied in a ponytail with a small bow is shown in profile, looking out a window. The scene is bathed in warm, golden sunlight, creating a soft, contemplative mood. The woman's face is partially in shadow, and her hands are clasped together near the window frame.

SHARI SLADE

THE
OPPOSITE OF
NOTHING

**The Opposite of
Nothing**
SHARI SLADE

This is a work of fiction. Similarities to
real people, places, or events are
entirely coincidental.

THE OPPOSITE OF NOTHING

**First edition. March 31,
2014.**

Copyright © 2014 Shari Slade.

Written by Shari Slade.

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

For Ethel, who loved beyond all
reason.

Chapter One

If Callie sat still for one more second, she'd explode in a confetti blast of frustrated lust. She peeled her feet off the sticky floor and shoved her soda cup into the empty popcorn bag. Tayber sat motionless, his eyes closed and his broad body eclipsing the small seat, like a mountain of worn denim and freshly laundered cotton. She resisted the aberrant urge to cuddle against him and inhale the sharp citrus scent she knew clung to his skin.

Was he asleep? How? The movie had been so steamy her blood had turned into magma beneath her skin, thick and hot, perilously close to eruption. She

scanned the empty theater and tugged her hair free of its ponytail, hoping to hide some of the blush creeping up her neck and over her cheeks. She couldn't possibly act on her attraction and risk losing the tenuous friendship they'd developed. Making friends was nearly impossible for her. And she couldn't risk being ridiculed. She'd come to Copeland to escape ridicule.

We are friends. We are only friends.

She didn't trust herself to touch him, not after the ninety minutes of exquisite torture she'd just endured with his forearm pressed against hers on the armrest. She might spontaneously combust. Thank God the weather remained cool, mid-Atlantic spring

barely budding, and they had layers of clothing between them. She nudged his boot with the toe of her sneaker.

His hazel eyes flew open, bright with unshed tears. Not asleep, overcome. Her lips curled into a secret smile. The movie had moved him in a different way. It might have been sad, but she'd had a hard time focusing on anything but the skin, both on the screen and beside her.

He pressed the heels of his palms against his eyes and groaned. "If you tell anyone that I cry at chick flicks I'll never speak to you again."

"Like that was a chick flick." And like she'd ever share anything about him. She hoarded his secrets, collected bits

of information, meted out or stolen, and tucked them into the magpie nest of her desire. “Dude, that was more like soft-core porn.”

Callie knew this heat was one sided, that it was all in her head, but she couldn't stop stoking it. He turned to face her, his grin crooked. The dim lighting cast shadows over his angular face, making him appear predatory. His voice was a low thrum, practically dragging over her neck. “What do you know about porn?”

She shivered, despite the fresh burst of heat to her cheeks, and scrambled to stand. She couldn't look at him anymore. Her mouth always seemed to get ahead of her brain whenever she focused on

him for too long. “We had cable. And, you know, the internet.”

Her throat was tight, voice more squeak than she could stand. She needed to coil up this web of wanting, stuff it down. *Must. Remain. Cool.* She slipped down the row, putting as much space between them as possible without actually leaving him behind. Gripping the top of a seat back, she raked her fingernails against the rough fabric. Focused on the last of the credits, she ignored the weight of his eyes boring into her as he waited for further elaboration. A silence stretched between them that snapped with the creak of his seat. His brief touch, light against the small of her back, jolted her into the

aisle.

“Right. You want to grab a pizza before we head back to campus?” he asked.

Why did he keep wanting to do more things? Wasn't he bored yet? Didn't he have plans? She couldn't survive another hour in his orbit. She shook her head.

“I'm too full of popcorn and Twizzlers.”

They crossed the desolate lobby and headed for the exit. A lone employee eyed them with contempt as he Windexed a candy display case. Wednesdays must not be big business. If they hadn't come in tonight the theater might have closed early. A pang of guilt

pierced her gut. She'd hated last minute customers when she'd worked at the diner back home. She quickened her steps, shuffling over the thin maroon carpet, popcorn hulls and static sparks trailing in her wake.

A rush of frigid air and rain blasted her when Tayber held the door open.

“Something wicked this way comes.” He mused, watching dark clouds race across the night sky.

“We better make a run for it. It doesn't look like it'll be letting up anytime soon.”

“No, wait here. I'll pull the car up.”

She watched him lope across the strip mall parking lot. This was like a movie shot for her private enjoyment.

Now she lamented the heavy clothing. Nothing sexier than a rain-soaked t-shirt. Except maybe a rain-soaked Tayber. She hugged herself against the chill and tried to remember why this line of thinking was wrong, wrong, wrong.

He screeched to the curb and popped the locks on his beat-to-shit Taurus. *My chariot awaits.*

They didn't talk for most of the ride back to campus. Instead, they listened to a mix CD Callie had burned last year after he admitted he'd never heard of most of the bands she played on her radio show. She'd scrawled 'Educating Tayber' across the front with a green Sharpie. Now she cringed and hid it under the seat whenever she saw it lying

around. It always resurfaced, like a bad penny. These days every song felt like an exposure of her soul.

Tayber sang along to the end, his voice hoarse and endearingly off key, as he pulled into the lot adjacent to her apartment building. Long fingers tapped in time against the steering wheel, knee brushing the dash. She watched him and imagined he was singing just for her. How many times had he listened to this song?

He killed the engine and she watched him take a long sip of his soda, watched his lips wrapped around the straw. He waggled the cup in her direction, ice sloshing against the sides. "Want some?"

The radio played on. The wiper

blades screeched across the windshield, not fast enough to keep up with the downpour or her racing pulse.

“Are you ever going to kiss me?” She said it fast, without thinking. And instantly regretted it.

“What?” He coughed, choking on soda, slamming his giant cup into the holder. His shirt rode up when he turned to face her, revealing a sliver of taut skin. She resisted the urge to punch him in his distractingly muscular stomach. The question wasn’t completely absurd. He’d kissed dozens of girls, that she knew of, over the last year and a half. More than kissed, if she were honest with herself. Not that she was counting.

“Nothing. I was kidding. The

evening was so...so date-like I felt compelled to ask about my goodnight kiss.” She was kidding herself. Tayber Michael King did not kiss girls with more brains than boobs. He talked to them. Which, if she had to choose, was better than nothing. Or not. She was twisted, bent like a flower trying to find a ray of sunshine around a corner. And she hated herself for it.

“Jesus, for a minute I thought you’d meant it.”

He pinched his bottom lip, the same way he’d done last year in Calculus. Pinched his lip and stared a burning hole into the textbook before leaning over to mouth ‘help me later.’ She wanted to pull his hand away and soothe that

bottom lip with her thumb. She clenched the door handle so tight her fingernails cut into her palm.

I'm so fucked.

Pulling her hood around her face, she braced for the deluge. “See you tomorrow.”

“Wait, it’s pouring.” He held his hand out like he might try to stop her, but if he reached across the console to grab her arm, if he touched her, she’d die. She’d expire on the spot. Never mind that he’d touched her a thousand times before now. Each tap, poke, and hug carefully cataloged. Friendly and meaningless, yet branded on her skin.

If he touches me, nothing will be okay again, ever.

She didn't wait. And he didn't follow her into her apartment. It wasn't like she was his girlfriend—just his friend who happened to be a girl.

* * *

Tayber caught a flash of orange from the reflector strip on her coat and tried to follow it as she vanished into the rain. All he could see was the look on her face right before she opened the door. Pale, wide-eyed panic. She'd looked at him like he was the monster under the bed. *Maybe I am.*

He yanked the car into reverse and retreated. Picking that movie had been a mistake. Callie was the only person he'd dare see a chick flick with, but all that

skin had surprised him. It wasn't even close to porn, but she'd obviously been mortified. God, what was wrong with him? Talking about porn with Callie.

She'd really be mortified if she knew he'd spent chunks of his toddler years eating Cheerios in the dressing room of a strip club. If anything good happened in his life, it didn't last. He'd screw it up or his family would. It was like a law of the universe. *If Tayber wants it he cannot have it.* So he was careful to never want anything too much.

The rain sheeted against his windshield. The headlights barely cut a three second path through the storm. He backed off the gas for a second, then gunned it. *My life is one big road*

*hazard sign: slippery when wet,
bridges ice before highways, falling
rocks.*

His cell phone vibrated, but he wasn't suicidal enough to answer. It could be anyone. He had a constant nagging buzz of texts and calls from guys he fist bumped and girls he fucked. Not friends, though. Not like Callie, who gave him a place to be himself. To just be.

He hydroplaned a few times on his way to the other side of campus, narrowly missing a bicycle freak when he fish-tailed into the parking lot.

The light from his phone's screen was blinding. One missed call. He recognized the area code. Home. His

finger hovered over delete. *Mom hasn't called in months.* He tapped play.

A cough, gruff and strangely familiar, followed by four seconds of silence. "Tayber? It's Aaron. I'm back. Call me."

Motherfucker. His phone hit the frame behind the passenger side window and ricocheted into pieces. He hadn't heard his brother's voice in years. Not since Aaron had tossed a duffle bag into the back of his girlfriend's car, shouting promises up to Tayber on the stoop. "We'll come back for you. I'll call you when we get settled."

Too fucking late. His violent response surprised him. He'd been scared right after Aaron left him alone to

fend for himself while Mom bounced from one club to the next, using and being used. He'd been angry when he realized his brother had lied to him about returning. Angry and sad, imagining Aaron had tracked down his father and was living a fairytale life that didn't have room for half-brothers. The last few years, though? He hadn't felt anything.

He gathered up the broken shards and shoved them into his pockets. *Dumb-ass*. He wouldn't have cash for a new phone any time soon. His mother's sporadic deposits into his bank account had stopped a few weeks after her phone calls. If he didn't see her posting cat pictures online he might think something

was wrong. His throat tightened thinking about their last conversation, if you could call it a conversation.

“Tay-bee.”

He’d stiffened. Usually she barked his name, if she used it at all. But sometimes she dipped it in honey, when she wanted his help or his approval. When she wanted him to swallow some patented bullshit.

“I can’t float you anymore. You’re on your own, kiddo. You’ll land on your feet. You always do.”

Happy freaking birthday. He hadn’t bothered to argue. His mother barely had a maternal bone in her body. It was a wonder she’d helped for as long as she had.

The anemic stipend from his campus work-study assignment wasn't cutting it anymore. Now his brother was back from the ether and wanted something—a little cash to hold him over, maybe a place to stay—and Tayber had been scraping change from under the car seat for weeks trying to get the money together for his summer housing deposit. *Nobody fucks you over like family.* Maybe it was time to join the merchant marines.

He took his foot off the brake and the car rolled onto the curb with a sickening scrape. He'd forgotten to put it in park. *What's one more scratch?* It's not like he could sell the piece of shit for anything but scrap metal anyway.

Still soaked from his parking lot sprint earlier, and fuming, he barely felt the rain as he pounded up the walkway. If the merchant marines didn't work out, maybe he could sell some bodily fluids. Googling fast cash opportunities seemed like a very bad idea, but it was the only idea he had. He nodded to a couple huddled under the overhang sharing a smoke near the entrance and thanked God he'd never picked up that habit. Aaron had, sneaking Kools out of their mother's pack while she crashed after a long night shift. A little mental math, and he was pissed all over again. She couldn't keep funding college, but she could spend thousands a year on certain death. Screw it, she could do whatever

she wanted. She always had.

Between the storm and the dorm's all-or-nothing heating system, the humid air in his room clung to his skin like a sticky film. He stripped down to boxers, switched on the oscillating fan he used year-round, and grabbed his laptop. Sprawled on the bed, debating "no experience jobs" and "legal fast cash" as search terms, he looked for a tiny green light next to a tantalizing name. *Sasha*. His money troubles weren't going anywhere, but his elusive "friend" could blink out of existence at any moment. He pushed his worries to the back of his mind. The fan blasted his overheated skin, raising goosebumps as he opened a chat window. His pulse

sped up while he waited for a response.

* * *

Callie's apartment was a pit. The tiny sink in her galley kitchen overflowed with cups and plates, completely obscuring the small collection of carnival glass she'd set up on the windowsill. She'd been so proud when she moved into her own place. She'd felt grown up and relieved to not have to deal with the drama of group living, the mystical puzzle of interacting with familiar strangers. She'd never fully adjusted to dorm living. She was too wary of people's motivations, mistrusting overtures of friendship to the point of isolating herself.

Ignoring the mess, she grabbed a quart of orange juice from the fridge and drank directly from the carton. As soon as the soured liquid hit her tongue she sputtered. Capping the carton, she shoved it back into the fridge to deal with later, hip-checked the door closed, and went in search of cookies. Anything to get that taste out of her mouth. With an Oreo clamped between her teeth, she breezed through what she called her living nook, jostling a pile of papers in her wake. A futon and two upside-down milk crates didn't exactly qualify as a room. It was more like a wide hallway leading to her bedroom. Her destination.

She dumped her soaked hoodie into the hamper and collapsed onto her bed.

The cookie was stale but edible. *Even bad cookies are still pretty good.* If she were back in the dorms with a roommate, this would be the portion of the evening where they braided each other's hair and compared notes on campus hotties. Too bad she sucked at braiding and hated almost every conceited frat boy she'd ever met.

This was all her former roommate's fault anyway. She was the one who'd brought Tayber back to their room last year. Callie had woken up to the unmistakable, lip-smacking, heavy-breathing symphony of a serious hook-up.

"Trying to sleep over here," she'd said.

Jessa had thrown a pillow across the room and not-so-politely suggested Callie get the hell out. She'd been such a dork. It was a wonder Jessa still spoke to her.

If Callie had just pulled the covers over her head and pretended they weren't there, Tayber never would have recognized her in Calculus. Never would have apologized with an offer of conciliatory pizza and beer. Never would have wormed his way into her heart.

She changed into a tank top and threadbare shorts before slipping into her desk chair. *I'll just check my school email, ten minutes tops.* She was lying to herself, bargaining with the devil. *I*

will not open his profile. I will not send him a message. Making that fake profile for herself last month had seemed like such a good idea at two o'clock in the morning, after a few beers with Jessa and a few agonizing hours of watching Tayber hook up with some random girl at The Brick. She just wanted to know what she was missing. In graphic detail. *Sasha* let her find out. Except it had only made her wanting worse, and it was such a wrong thing to do. So she'd stopped. At least a dozen times.

But nothing stopped him from messaging her. There it was, blinking away. She should ignore it. Delete, delete, delete. It wasn't even for her. Not really. It was for Sasha. And she'd

sworn she'd never be Sasha again.

Tay: Hey

How could three tiny letters be so suggestive? She could hear him in her head. He'd say it kind of soft, but forceful, like the whole universe of his carnal experience could be contained in one word. She pictured him hunched over his laptop, shaggy hair eclipsing his face, shirtless, bare feet hanging off the end of his extra-long bed.

She had to answer. She wanted him any way she could have him.

Sasha: Hey yourself.

Tay: Why am I always happy to see you?

Sasha: Because I'm awesome like that?

Tay: You are. I'm looking at your picture right now. So beautiful.

Not me. She'd sent him a picture of her cousin, on spring break in Cabo three years ago, filling out her bikini and pulling a duck face for the camera.

Sasha: Not really

Tay: Inside and out

Sasha: Laying it on thick tonight?

Tay: I can't stop thinking about you.

It was torture. The ninth level of Hell. Everything she'd ever wanted him to say was there on the screen, except it wasn't really for her.

Tay: I wish I could touch you.

And she was burning, flaming. If he were saying these things in person, she'd disintegrate. She tugged on her tank top,

pulling the thin cotton away from her itchy skin.

Tay: Is that okay?

She was practically molting, slipping right out of her skin on the spot. This disastrous attraction might kill her. She squeezed her thighs together and shifted in her seat.

Sasha: I want to touch you too.

Tay: Skype?

Sasha: Can't, still no webcam.

Shit. This was going to be the end of it, again. Who didn't have a webcam? She held her breath, waiting for the little indicator to flash that he was answering. A full minute. He was probably frustrated, pulling that mop of hair out of his face now, tugging it into a tiny

ponytail. A minute and a half. He'd lost interest. Any second now his light would go out.

Tay: Too bad

She exhaled, a rush of relief that left her giddy.

Sasha: Sorry

Tay: Don't you want to see me?

Sasha: More than anything

Tay: I want to see my hands on you.

Was he touching himself now? She traced a figure eight over the soft skin below her navel, chasing the flutter building there. She'd never be able to tell him the truth, and this was never going to be enough.

Sasha: You're touching me now

Tay: Where?

Sasha: My belly

Tay: Lower. I'm touching you lower. I've got my fingers between your legs and you're so wet for me.

Tay: I'm pinning you to the bed and kissing you.

Tay: I've got my tongue in your mouth. You taste sweet.

Like red licorice. If anyone else sent her messages like this she'd block them in a second. Without thinking, she slid her hand lower, beneath the waistband of her shorts and between her legs, mirroring his description. She'd need to answer him soon. Tell him something, everything she wanted to do to him. But first, she'd take the edge off a little. The edge that had been building all evening

beside him, watching love scenes filled with artsy shots of peaked nipples and glycerin-smeared abs and punishing kisses.

Why had they gone to that movie?

She was crushed under the weight of her unfortunate attraction and the game of pretend he didn't even realize they were playing. Desperate for a friction she couldn't find, couldn't manufacture on her own.

Sasha: Keep going.

Tay: What are you doing to me?

That question could mean so many things. And she could ask it herself.

What are you doing to me, Tayber?

How am I this person right now? She knew he wanted her to type something

sexy. Something to make his dick hard or harder. Something he could play over in his mind while he jerked off alone. Both of them alone, together, touching nothing but static.

Sasha: I can feel you pressed against me.

Tay: I am so hard.

This was hard, because it was easy. So fucking easy to pretend to be someone she wasn't while he laid himself bare. She had to tell him. Not now. She wasn't that cruel or that selfless. But soon, before she slipped and typed something only Callie would know. Or, worse, repeated something in person only Sasha knew. She moved to the bed. Curled around the laptop, she

pushed things further than she ever had before. It had to be the last time. If he could lay himself bare, she'd do it too, in her own way. Her name might be fake, but these dirty fantasies were real. And just for him.

Sasha: my hand is all slippery

And it was. Her left hand, sticky slick, buried between her legs while she pecked at the keyboard with her right hand.

Tay: Lick it. Suck your fingers.

She almost did, but she didn't want to stop touching yet. It felt so wrong and so good. Seeing his name, his words, blink up on the screen while she skimmed over the hard bud of her clit again and again and again. She pictured

the flash of stomach she'd seen earlier, and her mouth went dry with desperate longing to drag her tongue over that patch of skin. And lower.

Sasha: rather suck you

Tay: plz

God, it wasn't even a word. Just a collection of letters and intent. He was touching himself now, she knew it.

Sasha: squeeze first, tight, until you beg me to put my mouth on you, until you push me down on your cock

Tay: yes suck my cock

She wanted that more than anything. For him to want her as much as she wanted him. More, even. For him to make her, to tangle his fingers in her hair and drag her down. She was so far gone

with lust she could barely see.

Sasha: sucking hard

Tay: gonna cum in yr mouth

Sasha: yes

Tay: on yr chest

Sasha: make me a mess

Such a mess. Twitching and achingly empty. So close. The more she got, the more she wanted. With her eyes squeezed shut, the space between *enough* and *good enough* shimmered behind her eyelids, flickered at the tips of her fingers—an invisible barrier. She needed something real, something solid. Instead, she clung to what she could have. The life she'd fashioned out of Popsicle sticks and poor substitutes. The pillow she'd shoved between her thighs.

All the *close enoughts* she could manage. The pleasure built and built until the only way out was through. Her orgasm was a burst of light in the darkness, a secret wish given voice.

She closed the laptop without signing off.

* * *

He left her picture open on his desktop long after she stopped responding. How had he gotten to this place? He could stumble out of his dorm room and find a warm body in no time. He could message someone he actually knew and have a knock on his door in fifteen minutes. But he didn't want just any lips on his cock, not anymore. Instead, he

was trying to memorize the curve of her breast, the sliver of pale skin exposed where her bikini top skewed. He held that image in his mind while he stroked himself back to hardness. Slow, lazy, still spent from the last round. The image slipped, blurred, morphed into dark hair and a sad smile. She turned away from him, lifted her hair up as though waiting for something, the gesture an echo of one he'd seen earlier that day. *Not a stranger.*

Someone who never asked him for anything. Someone he should not be thinking about with his hand in his pants.

Fisting his cock, he jerked hard and fast. Flashes of breast, of navel, of wide blue eyes pierced his consciousness

until he finished hot and sticky in his palm.

Did it even matter who he was talking to? If his fantasy matched a reality that probably didn't exist? He kept seeing those eyes, bright and searching. *I know those eyes*. Not Sasha's. Hers were hidden behind giant neon sunglasses. His brain was filling in blanks. And there were so many blanks to fill. Callie was just the last person he'd seen. He grabbed a towel off the floor and cleaned himself up before closing the laptop for the night. He slept with his shame tucked around him like a blanket. It had been keeping him warm for years.

Chapter Two

She'd made it to class on autopilot, but the professor's droning lulled her deeper into a zombified state. She planted her elbow on the sloping desktop and rested her cheek against her palm. She was listening, she just needed to prop her head up a little.

“Callie, wake up. It's time to leave.”

The shaking startled her, but she squeezed her eyes shut against the sound of Tayber's voice. His fingers rested on her bicep, and she didn't dissolve into a puddle of insensate mush. Good sign.

“I'm awake.” No use tempting fate, so she shrugged out of his grip. Ducking her cheek into her shoulder, she prayed

he hadn't seen her drooling.

"I'm usually the one falling asleep in class. What gives?"

"Late night." Her voice cracked. Four hours to function might work for some people—for *him*, obviously—but she needed at least seven.

He raised an eyebrow and broke into a grin. He swung his leg over the seat in front of her and sat backwards. "You got a boyfriend?"

The incredulity stung. He was joking, but it was so close to the truth her stomach clenched. *I was studying. I was sick. I was abducted by aliens. I was up all night pretending to be Sasha, and you told me things I'm still blushing over.*

She swam in an ocean of lies. She could fish out any explanation. He'd believe her.

“Yeah, so?”

She clapped a hand over her backstabbing mouth, too late. His face went blank. His decadent mouth vanished into a thin, hard line.

“Why didn't you tell me?”

Deflect. Deflect. “It's not like you tell me everything.”

He'd never mentioned Sasha, for one thing, but she couldn't call him on that.

“Right. Sure. I better grab some lunch before Lit.” Tayber shook his head and squeezed her shoulder.

“You wouldn't want to face your mob of adoring fans on an empty

stomach.” Back on the common ground of banter, his hand off her shoulder, she settled.

“I can’t help it if girls go crazy over my dramatic recitations.” He pulled himself up to his full height and put his hand over his heart. For all his flailing over math, he had a gift for language. With his free hand he grabbed her fingers and drew them toward his mouth. *Don’t kiss me. Oh, please God, don’t kiss my hand here.* Instead, he gave a stiff bow and laughed. “Accompany me, Milady.”

“Rein it in, Romeo.” If he were quick, if he’d paid attention, he might have heard her gasp when his mouth was mere inches from her skin. But he

wasn't, and he didn't.

As if on cue, one of his groupies appeared. Meg, all sleek black bob and doe eyes. Callie and Tayber only had one class together. Lucky Meg had at least two since they shared a major. Callie tried to picture Meg as an English teacher. She could see Tayber breaking hearts at the head of a class, but not so much Meg. Meg looked like she belonged at the helm of an edgy fashion magazine. Callie couldn't see herself in charge of anything.

Apparently oblivious to the fact that Tayber was currently holding Callie's hand, she bumped her hip against him. "Hey, you. Are you headed to the library? I need a study buddy for today's

quiz.”

Hello. I'm right here. Do you not see that we are in the middle of a personal conversation?

Please don't ditch me to go make out with her in the stacks. Please don't. Please don't.

“Sorry, I've got plans.”

Yes, he does. Thank you very much. With me.

“Alrighty then. Catch ya later.”

Callie braced herself for a snarky comment or a dirty look, but Meg only nodded, flashing a grin that could be interpreted as a challenge or begrudging admiration. Before she could decide which it was, Tayber tugged her back to reality.

“Let’s eat.” He propelled her out of the room.

Nothing felt natural anymore. She was too self-conscious, too aware of his touch. Too aware of everybody looking at her. She might never be able to look at him directly again.

The dining hall was a treacherous place, filled with people she kind of knew, but not really, and she was never certain where to sit unless directly invited. Usually she tried not to come during peak times, instead choosing to eat when she could be sure of an empty table. Lately she hadn’t been coming much at all. She had a kitchen now. She could make her own less-than-stellar food.

But today, Tayber was her cruise director. He'd engraved her invitation with a cocky flourish, and she followed him into the depths of social hell. She wasn't even hungry, barely noticing the food she picked up as they wove through the lines.

Tayber set his tray on an empty table and grabbed half a sandwich off hers. Chewing, he sprawled in a chair. He never just sat. Spreading his legs, rocking back, dropping an arm across the chair beside him, he took up as much space as possible. *Stupid boy.*

"So when were you going to tell me?" A few crumbs drifted into his lap as he spoke.

"Tell you what?" Her heart stuttered

as a curl of ice twisted in her belly.

“About your boyfriend, space cadet.” He waved the stolen sandwich in the air for emphasis and rocked even further back in his chair.

“Oh, that. I don’t know.” She slumped, dropped her head into her arms and watched him from the corner of her eye. *Never, because I’m a big liar.*

“He isn’t going to be a douche about you and me hanging out, is he?” He wiped his mouth with his shirt sleeve and let his chair slam back to its upright position.

“No, he isn’t like that.” Her situation wasn’t just hopeless, it was ridiculous. *I have to come clean.* She swallowed hard around the lump in her throat and

started to tell him that she didn't really have a boyfriend, but when she opened her mouth all she could manage was a pathetic little "uh."

"Good. Who else is going to save my ass in Statistics?" She'd be pissed if that's all she was to him. The smart girl he took pity on because she helped with his math homework. But he licked his lips and smiled his sunny, dimple-busting smile. "I'm happy for you, Callie."

She was gutted. Be jealous, you big jerk. Be pissed. Be anything but happy.

"I have to go. Meet him. Before my next class." The lies, they just wouldn't stop. Next she'd be planning an imaginary wedding. If she were looking

for more ways to destroy their friendship, she couldn't have done better.

“Later.” And he was grabbing his stuff, ready to swoop in on a gaggle of girls she knew he'd spotted as soon as they entered the dining hall. He was like a compass drawn to the magnetic north of hotness, and she was the pitiful South Pole. Except last night, when she could have melted ice caps. She shivered at the thought and clutched her books tight against her chest.

“Yeah, um, later.” She wasn't sure where she was going. Certainly not to meet her fake boyfriend. She needed to go. Away. Immediately. She fled. She was always fleeing him lately.

“Callie!”

She turned around and he was right there. He grabbed her shoulders and looked her dead in the eye. “If he isn’t decent to you, you tell me. Okay?”

She could only nod. His palms were so warm and he was so close. His cologne, the scent that was so him it haunted her dreams, fogged her brain.

Meltdown in three, two—

“He better appreciate what a good girl he’s got.”

One.

I don’t feel like a good girl. Soft lips, warm and dry, touched her forehead. The spark of heat radiated over her scalp, down her neck, and across her chest. For a split second her

mind went blissfully blank. She forgot everything except the feel of his mouth on her skin. Stunned, reeling in the middle of the dining hall, the truth of their situation returned. The truth of her lies.

She ran, hoping he wouldn't realize that she'd never told him her fake boyfriend's name.

* * *

Lunch cut short, Tayber made a pit stop in the career center. The lady at the front desk introduced herself as a 'job coach' and handed him a survey.

"I'm looking for anything that doesn't require a lot of experience. I can start immediately. I'll work any shift that

doesn't conflict with my existing class schedule. I'm desperate."

She nodded sympathetically. Tapping her chipped nails against the desk, she encouraged him to take advantage of the self-help materials and local job postings.

He'd rather shove a dull pencil in his eye than tutor the person who'd posted the 'you're English skills are needed' flier, but he grabbed it anyway. Who used red ink on blue paper? That and one for a house-sitting gig. 'No weirdos. No pets.' He wasn't sure if those were requirements or job perks. At this point in the semester, the job center was more suited to finding internships and capital C careers. He needed fast

cash, like human-guinea-pig fast. Where were the medical test subject fliers?

He scanned a small business card seeking nude models for an art class. '\$50 a session Suite 314, Arden Hall.' That wasn't bad money, but stripping for cash turned his stomach. Even if it was for educational purposes. Even if he'd get paid with crisp twenties in a clean envelope, not sweaty singles shoved into a g-string. He'd seen behind that curtain. Maybe back in Denham that was all he could've been good for, but he'd come to Copeland to escape that spiral. To try, at least. If he started peeling off his clothes now, what was the point?

He waved the house sitting flier at the job coach. "You know anything about

this one?"

"Oh, that's been filled. I was supposed to take those down yesterday."

Blowing off Lit, he hauled ass back to his dorm, crushing the pale blue paper in his sweaty fist. He'd leave a message about the tutoring job. Maybe he'd swing by Suite 314 just to see. Modeling wasn't really the same as stripping. For starters, the art department probably didn't offer the models a line of coke at the beginning of their shifts. Of course the least distasteful job was taken. Dignity didn't mean much when you were facing eviction. Hadn't he heard his mother say those exact words more than once?

“CJ Evans here at WCCC, The Cube, with Random Nonsense. Regular listeners, all five of you, I’ve got the blues. The actual, gritty, blow-your-mind, blues. So I’m going to shut my mouth and let Bessie Smith tell you all about it.”

She tapped a cracked jewel case against her laptop after she cued up the track. Usually she worked from her MP3 collection, or the music library at the station, but when she’d found this coverless CD in a Goodwill bargain bin, she’d slipped it into her purse without thinking. Impulsive and reckless and stupid.

As she’d darted across the parking lot, head down against the wind, it had

practically vibrated against her hip. She'd glanced back to see if an angry manager was on her heels, leaned against a dusty delivery van parked at the far corner of the lot, and fished it out. It was like the Sexy Lips gloss incident all over again. Only her mother wouldn't find this buried at the bottom of her underwear drawer, drop it into her lap at the dinner table, and drag her back to the drugstore by her ear.

Fingers trembling, she'd been poised to return and, if not confess her crime, at least sneak her contraband back to its proper place. The Essential Bessie Smith. Sunlight had hit the CD at the perfect angle to cast a prism of blinding light in her face. She'd raced home to

listen.

With the first illicit burst of horn, she'd been lost in a kind of time travel. She wasn't wearing headphones, she had one ear pressed against the wall of a 1920s gin joint. She'd rocked, eyes closed, body thrumming with the callused-finger caress of each scratch and hiss in the recordings. A phantom curl of cigarette smoke tickled her nose. And the voice, the voice that reached across the divide to grab her by her shirtfront, was a belt of whiskey against the back of her throat. The smooth burn of shameless passion, and the ragged edge of need. She drifted right back to that place every time she played it.

As the track ended, she cross-faded

from Bessie into an indie rock anthem that bordered on power ballad. She liked to think of her juxtaposition of old and new music as a quirky trademark. Really, she played what she wanted to hear and hoped no one ever analyzed her song choices for deeper meaning.

Jessa, her partner on the air and former roommate, smoothed a hand over her auburn dreads. She snatched the cheat sheet off the desk and rolled her eyes as she read. “Can you play something that doesn’t make me want to slit my wrists?”

Callie stuck her tongue out. “You know, I only hear the sad songs lately. I may even start spinning some country.”

Jessa widened her heavily lined eyes

and leaned over to grab a CD off a teetering stack. “Perish the thought. You need some ska in your life, stat. Maybe some thrash metal. Something you can dance to by yourself.”

“I don’t dance.”

“Everybody dances. You’re just too wrapped up in who you’re dancing with. Or who you aren’t dancing with, more likely.”

Was she that transparent?

“You don’t know what you’re talking —”

“Don’t try to play me. Random Nonsense has been nothing but a thinly veiled love note for the last few weeks. I don’t know who. I don’t care who. But you need to do something about it.”

“I don’t know what to do.”

She waved the CD at Callie. “Get out of your own head for a while. And if you keep sticking your tongue out at me, I’m going to pierce it.” She clicked her own silver stud against her front teeth as punctuation.

Wasn’t that part of the problem—Callie spending too much time in someone else’s head? She cued up more Bessie. *Need a Little Sugar In My Bowl*.

A tiny icon in the corner of her screen let her know she had a new message. No, scratch that, Sasha had one. She didn’t dare read it with the way-too-perceptive Jessa around as a witness. She closed the email program

so no more alerts popped up and returned her attention to Random Nonsense. It was Jessa's turn to pick a few tracks.

She phoned in the rest of the show, unable to focus on anything but the email waiting for her. The one with Tayber's dorm number in the subject line. The one that she absolutely should not read, and certainly could not read until Jessa left.

"I'll pack up here. I'm free for the rest of the evening," Callie offered.

Jessa smirked, and Callie realized she'd just made a terrible tactical error.

"Free, huh? In that case, meet me at The Brick later."

"Maybe."

"We'll dance. We'll drink. We'll get

you out of your crazy hamster wheel head. I see you thinking, don't think I don't."

"I said maybe."

"Your maybes always mean no. Come. You need it." Jessa shrugged her messenger bag over her shoulder and blew Callie a kiss as she darted out of the sound room. "I know about these things. Trust me, Callista."

Jessa was the only person who didn't use her nickname. She'd gotten it off the roommate notification sheet and clung. It was too exotic for anyone else to use.

Back in her apartment, finally alone, Callie opened the illicit email.

Did you fall asleep while we were

talking last night? I was up for another hour, and you never came back. I wish you would let me call you. It's hard to type all the things I want to say.

I've got all this family shit going on and talking to you takes my mind off the drama. My brother keeps leaving me these messages. I can't even listen to them. Hearing his voice after all these years... it's too much. I'm glad he's alive, but I'm not interested in reconnecting. Cold, but he deserves it. He bailed on us when we needed him. Now, I don't need anything. Except a job. And to hear from you.

If by some chance you decide that you'd finally like to call me, don't bother using the number I gave you

before. I broke my phone and I don't know when I'll have the cash to replace it. I'll probably get a new number, since Aaron keeps abusing my old one. But then I'd have to update everyone. Seems like too much work. He'll stop calling, eventually. Call my dorm.

I know you won't call. And that's okay. But sometimes I dream about it, what your voice would sound like if you read your messages out loud. How would you say cock? I want to hear you say it. Would you whisper it? Would you growl it? Either way it's hot. Or you could just listen, if you wanted. I'd do all the talking. Tell you where to touch and when to stop. I'd tell you to taste yourself because I can't do it

*myself and listen for the slip of your
finger between your lips. Let me make
you gasp.*

*Do you think about what I sound
like? Are you imagining it now?*

-T

God damn him. She was.

Chapter Three

Sasha: I want your mouth.

No greeting. She didn't have the patience for that after reading his email.

Tay: Tell me.

Sasha: Your face between my legs

Tay: mmm you taste so good

She could almost feel the hum of that *mmm*, right where she needed it. She wriggled against the seam of her jeans and popped the top button.

Sasha: your tongue inside me

Tay: I'm fucking you with my tongue

She couldn't help but imagine him with a stud, a steel ball stroking her with every thrust. She knew it wasn't pierced, but—God, she could imagine.

Tay: spreading you open with my fingers

Sasha: yes

Tay: sliding up to get at your clit, flick and suck, flick and suck

She'd barely worked her way beneath her underwear, and she was coming. A few swipes of her thumb over the top of her mound, and it was over. Fast and hard. All that remained was the ache. She couldn't keep doing this.

Tay: my fingers pumping

Sasha: gtg

She left him hanging.

That thrilled her too. She had to get out of this apartment and far away from her laptop. If she stayed, she'd talk to him again. At least the walk to the bar

would give her a chance to cool off.

* * *

Thumping bass poured out of The Brick as a crowd of people milled near the entrance.

“Hey, Callista. You took my advice!”

Jessa flapped her arms like a deranged seagull, and Callie tried to imagine how she and Tayber had ever hooked up last year. She wasn't being fair. Jessa was gorgeous and fun—unique. Her exuberance was part of her charm. She'd dragged Callie to the radio station last year and signed them up for their own radio show. Made that silly *CJ/JC* logo poster for their dorm room

door. Callie's first reaction had been fear that it was a set up for some cruel joke. The adopt-a-loser program, or bring-a-dork to rush week, or something else public and awful. But Jessa didn't seem to play those games. Her game was more like catch-and-release, the campus stud version.

“Good band tonight?”

“Nah. Decent crowd though. Wanna do some shots?”

Jessa's eyes were a little glassy, and her lipstick was smudged. Callie started to say no, but fuck it. If she went home, she'd only make a fool of herself again.

“Why not?”

“Brilliant. Shots first, and then dancing.” Jessa grabbed her by the belt

loop and dragged her into the bar.

“We need Cuervo, baby.” Jessa shouted to her boyfriend. Trip, Ted, Tim? Tim, of course. Tone-deaf Tim. He didn’t seem to mind the moniker. It was usually accompanied by shouts and fist pumps. And Jessa absolutely enjoyed the attention.

Tim appeared with shots, limes, and salt. “Body shots, ladies.”

He wagged two shot glasses in their direction and pumped his hips a little to punctuate. He suggested it loud enough for people nearby to hear.

“Hell, no. Maybe when you speak Latin.” Callie tried to put enough scorn in her voice to shut him down for the night.

Their spectators booed. Jessa took the shots and passed one to Callie. She grabbed the front of Tim's shirt, pulled him close and bit his nose. Obviously not hard—or maybe just hard enough—because Tim only grinned while Jessa admonished him. “Enough of that, you animal. We're not here to entertain you.”

Lick, shoot, suck. They both shivered. Tim set them up again and they repeated the ritual. Suck, shoot, lick? Lick, suck, shoot? At some point she lost count and the order became irrelevant. Eventually, maybe inevitably, she licked salt from Jessa's neck and sucked lime from her mouth. Tim chanted beside them. “*Veni, vidi, vici.*”

Probably the only Latin he knew.

She didn't have the grace to pass out. Instead, she wobbled onto the dance floor like she was auditioning for spring-breakers gone crazy. She raised her arms, swiveled her hips, and barely registered the body pressing up behind her. When a large hand gripped her hip, she gasped. But she didn't move away. Jessa was in front of her, smiling. Her lips moved, but Callie couldn't hear her over the pulse pounding in her ears. She only felt the heavy arm around her waist. In her head, it was Tayber pulling her close, grinding his pelvis into her ass.

She leaned her head back against his shoulder and let the music move her. The cloud of Tim's body spray undid the spell. Leathery and harsh, nothing like

the clean citrus burned into her sense memory. She jerked away, but her reflexes were too slow. He pinned her against him, pressed his sweaty face against her hair, and whispered in her ear.

“You two are so fucking hot together.”

Jessa was still smiling and dancing, oblivious to the smarmy routine her boyfriend was working. She had her fingers in Callie’s belt loops again.

“Are you guys making fun of me?” Callie shook her head and tried to pull away. Their attention had to be a cruel joke in the making. Her pulse was frantic. No longer fueled by lust, she prepared to elbow him in the ribs. She

needed to focus.

Before she could shove back, Tim vanished. Already off balance, she fell—limbs flailing, Jessa’s smile blinking out of view—and landed on her ass.

She’d thought sprawling on the floor of a dive bar was as bad as the night could get until she saw Tayber, face contorted with rage, looming above her. *Uh oh.* “When’d you get here?”

He didn’t answer, just hoisted her up and carried her out like so much garbage. The crowd sent them off with wolf-whistles. *My night is totally getting worse.*

He stuffed her into the passenger seat and slammed the door.

“You can’t drive.” She tried to

sound stern, but it mostly came out like *yeh can drib*. She could dribble though. She wiped her mouth.

“You’re drunk, not me. I show up to play some pool and find you getting mauled. Do you even know what was about to happen in there?”

The disgust in his voice penetrated her inebriation. She nodded. Her brain sloshed in her skull, a second behind the motion. *Yes, I was gonna maim Tone-deaf Tim*. Somewhere, under a layer of Cuervo, she knew it might have been a tiny bit worse than that. So what if it was?

“Did you want that?” His hazel eyes darkened to a stormy gray. If he was asking about committing bodily injury,

sure. But he probably meant the sexcapades they'd been starting on the dance floor. She watched his jaw rise and fall as he clenched. What had he seen? She didn't drink often, but she'd witnessed the aftermath of a night out enough times to know it wasn't pretty. Her ponytail had fallen out. Her eyeliner was probably on her forehead. Considering her rolling belly, her skin might be ever so slightly green.

“Does it matter what I want?” Of course, that came out clear. And loud. *Oops*. She pressed a finger to her lips and shushed herself.

He smacked his hands against the steering wheel, rocking the Taurus. She retched.

“Shit, don’t puke in the car.”

Then she was outside, with Tayber kneeling beside her, holding her hair, stroking her back as she vomited in Technicolor.

“Sorry. Sorry. Sorry.” She apologized, over and over, between heaves.

“I don’t get it, Callie. This afternoon you have a boyfriend. Tonight you’re flirting with those assholes. Nothing makes sense. What the hell happened?”

“I don’t—” *I don’t—have a boyfriend? Understand what happened either? Flirt?* She couldn’t finish before another wave of nausea forced her back into the gutter.

“Not now. When you’re sober.” He

stroked her back again, and she couldn't even enjoy his touch. *I'll never drink again.*

* * *

"I'm going to die." She cracked one eye open and a sliver of light ice-picked her brain. Was it possible to be lobotomized by sunshine?

Tayber tossed a bottle of water. It landed, cold and wet, beside her.

"I've never seen you so wasted. I barely recognized you."

She winced at his thundering voice and pulled a pillow over her head. If only it weighed as much as her shame. Then she could suffocate herself out of this situation. She took a deep, cleansing

breath to settle her stomach. Everything smelled like him. She snuggled into her dark cocoon and considered staying in bed forever. Only, it wasn't her bed. She slid the pillow down so she could peek over the top. "Why am I in your room?"

"You weren't exactly cooperative. I didn't know if I could get you into your apartment without waking up all your neighbors."

"I didn't, you know, try anything stupid, did I?" Her jeans were in a tangle on the floor, and he stood shirtless beside the bed. His track pants hung low on his hips, exposing a flat expanse of leanly muscled abdomen so distracting that, even hungover, she wanted to crawl across the room and just lick the faint

ridges. *Jesus*. She looked down at the very narrow bed and tried to remember anything that happened after they left the bar. She'd know if they'd done *that*, but there were about a hundred other things two people could do.

“I had to keep you from climbing out of the car window to serenade campus security, and there was the a capella karaoke in the downstairs lobby.”

She'd been thinking more like wanton bodily attacks or professions of undying love. In comparison, his suggestions were no big deal. She'd sing country gospel on a table in the dining hall rather than throw herself at him. Rather than have him look at her like something he'd found crumpled at the

bottom of his gym bag. Kind of how he was looking at her now. And she'd transfer schools before table dancing in the dining hall.

She snaked a hand down to grab her pants. Pinning the comforter in place with her chin, she huffed and yanked and lifted her hips off the bed. The springs squeaked as she landed hard, face burning with sudden consciousness of her lewd gyrations. There was no dignified way to wriggle into skinny jeans while horizontal. Tayber cocked an eyebrow in her direction. His lips turned up ever so slightly at the corners. The jerk was fighting back laughter. And losing.

“Who do you think took those off?

I'd never guess hot pink lace."

If lightning could strike inside a cinder block dorm room, she would have welcomed its destruction. "It was laundry day?"

Doubled over with laughter, he slapped his hand down on the edge of the bed. Her stomach rolled, reigniting the hangover from hell. *Not going to puke*. She repeated that mantra until the waves dissipated and carefully pulled herself into a sitting position. Spine stiff. Chin up.

"Please. Stop. Laughing."

"I'm sorry but my whole image of you is shattered. Last night I pull you out of an impending threesome on the dance floor, hold your hair while you barf in an

alley like a sorority pledge, then—” His laughter took on a harsh edge. He scrubbed a hand over his face and smoothed back a shock of sleep-snarled hair. “When I have to help you out of your jeans because you’re so drunk you nearly bust your head on my bookcase determined to do it yourself, I find you in pink lingerie.” He spat the word pink like a bitter seed. Like there was nothing more obscene than Callie Evans trying to be a little girly. God forbid. That sonofa...

“If this is you with a boyfriend, I don’t know if I like it.”

He wasn’t exactly wrong, but who the hell was he to judge? She grabbed a pillow, wished for a brick, and threw it

at his head.

“How many times have you hooked up with some random girl at the bar? Why is it okay for you but not me? I’m not some, some, asexual being whose sole reason for existence is to help you with statistics and eat lunch with you when you want to escape.”

Every word triggered a new throb behind her eyes. And it was all true. That part hurt, too.

He stood there, holding the pillow under one arm, his jaw slack, the humor bleeding out of his eyes until they were flat brown. Hurt.

“I’m sorry you feel that way.”

She’d killed him. The navigational system in her parents’ car delivered

instructions with more emotion. She never wanted to hear that android voice from him again, but she wouldn't take it back. "You aren't sorry, though, are you?"

"What do I have to be sorry for? For rescuing you from impending doom?"

"Untwist *your* panties, Tayber. There was no doom. I'm not a child and, despite what you may think, I'm not a virgin in need of protection. I appreciate the safe ride, but Jessa probably would've made sure I got home okay."

"Sorry I spoiled your fun. I'm going to get breakfast. Make sure the door locks behind you, okay?" He dropped the pillow, grabbed his keys off the dresser, and left her alone in his room.

What the hell was that? She needed to fix this. She wasn't mad at Tayber for what he'd done. She was mad at him for what he hadn't done. He hadn't seen her, but she hadn't really let him. She'd put all of the *her* she wanted him to see into Sasha. She flopped face down on the bed for several long moments. Then, she scooped up her sneakers and raced down the hall, finally catching up to him in the nearly empty dining room.

He had a bowl of rainbow loops and a stack of microwave pancakes floating in syrup.

“You need more sugar to balance out all that healthy.” She nudged his tray with her own, but he didn't even cut his eyes in her direction. She tried another

jab. “I didn’t know anyone over seven drank chocolate milk.”

His silence was a heavy weight on her chest. He swiped his ID at the checkout, but it buzzed instead of blipping.

The hair-netted cashier looked up from her paperback. “Insufficient funds. You got cash?”

Tayber dug into his pockets but came up empty. He raked his hair and flashed a forced smile. “Can you let me slide this morning,” he dropped his eyes to her name tag, “Carolyn?” But his heart obviously wasn’t in the charming shtick because she didn’t wave him through.

“Visit the bursar.”

“I’ve got it.” Callie whipped her ID

out so fast the edges should have melted.

“No thanks.”

“Too late.”

He glared at her as she pushed in front of him to swipe her card for both meals but followed her to an empty table by the large windows at the back of the room. She sat, letting her head rest against the cool glass and watching him in the reflection.

“I’ll pay you back.” He slid his tray onto the table and pulled out a chair.

“It’s no big deal. I’ve got guest credits I never use.”

“My credits are always gone before the end of the first quarter. How do you still have yours?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“No.”

She swallowed, hard, trying to find an answer that didn't highlight the scarlet L branded on her forehead since high school. He'd missed it so far. “I don't have a lot of friends. I didn't have many friends back home either.”

“Bullshit.”

His disbelief slapped her like a challenge. Pushed into that old ache she nursed, the one that held her hostage in her dorm room during half of freshman orientation, the one that kept her from making eye contact with friendly strangers on the quad, and it felt good and wrong. But mostly good. She wondered how far she could push back.

“Any. I didn't have any friends.”

“I don’t believe you.” He tapped his thumb against the edge of his tray and grinned. He was waiting for a punchline. *Fine.*

“I was a pariah. Untouchable. A black hole that sucked all the coolness out of anyone who came near me. Every school has one. You should save yourself and sit at another table now.” The sarcasm was so thick, so tart, she could’ve spread it on her toast.

“I may not have a dime on my meal plan, but I’ve got cool to spare.” He rocked back in his chair and smoothed a hand over his t-shirt. *Smug bastard.*

“I’m not kidding. If we’d met in high school...” She turned away, afraid she’d break before she could bite the words

out.

“What?”

“You’d have been dropping your trash on my table instead of sitting with me. It’s why I chose Copeland. I knew no one from home would be coming here.”

His chair smacked against the tile as he jerked back into an upright position.

“Someone actually did that to you?”

His voice was softer, the cocky edge melting as the realization that she wasn’t joking clouded his eyes with pity. Her heart thundered against her ribs, a caged animal desperate to break free. Escape. She touched her forehead to the window again and let her breath fog the glass as she spoke.

“Yeah. Trash on my table, on me sometimes. Always by accident, of course. Mostly it was being ignored, snubbed. I didn’t get invited to anything after middle school. Around the time people stopped inviting the whole class to their parties, you know? If I showed up somewhere, there would be whispering. There were a couple of girls who really hated me and it was like one day I just woke up in a parallel universe. I didn’t fit anymore.” She traced a circle into the condensation.

He pushed their trays to the end of the table and reached across the opened space. His hand was warm against hers. A solid weight pressing her palm flat against the glass. Reassuring. He curled

his fingers around hers and drew her hand away, drew her focus back to him.

“You think I would have been a part of something like that? Have you ever seen me be cruel?”

“Not overtly. But—” She couldn’t stop herself.

“Covertly?”

She pulled her hand out from under his and pushed back from the table. He was supposed to walk away now that he knew what she was. She knew it would hurt him if she said what she really thought, but she did it anyway. Her voice barely above a whisper, she could hardly stand to speak this truth.

“The whole ‘hit it and quit it’ thing is pretty cruel.”

“Jesus Christ, Callie. I’ve never said those words in my life.”

She studied an Italy-shaped pool of syrup coagulating on the table top and took a shaky breath. She’d started down this path. She’d have to finish it. Calm, matter-of-fact.

“You don’t have to say them. It’s what you do.”

His lip curled with disgust and he raked his fingers through his shaggy hair. “We’re back to that. Like I’m some kind of man-whore. I’m glad you think so highly of me.”

It was like she was watching this all unfold from outside her body. She just kept wounding him, every barb designed for maximum destruction. “You haven’t

dated anyone since I've known you."

"Nobody dates."

"You just hook up. And never with the same girl twice."

He flinched. *Direct hit*. Anger and pain twisted his mouth into a dark smile. "Are you notching my bed post for me now?" he said.

"The pattern is hard to miss." The sadness in her voice shocked her. Empty, hollowed out by her own cruelty. She'd poured all of her poison into him until he bubbled over in a rush of indignation.

"Who I hook up with, and how often, is my business. But answer me this, Miss Observation, do you see a bunch of girls crying over me? Because I've seen girls

crying over douche-bags, all ‘why doesn’t he call me’ and ‘he said we had something special.’ You’ve never heard anyone saying that shit about me. Have you?”

She hadn’t. Of all the girls she’d seen him with, she’d never even heard a whisper of a rumor that he’d broken anyone’s heart. Except her own. She could only shake her head and let him continue.

“I don’t lie. I don’t make promises. When I fuck someone it’s because we both want the same thing.”

Don’t ask. Do not ask. Her heart lurched into her throat, but not fast enough to block the question she did not want the answer to. “What’s that?”

“Nothing. When we both want nothing.”

And it plummeted to the pit of her stomach, like an elevator with its cable cut. Nothing? That was worse than anything she'd imagined. “You're lying to yourself then. Everybody wants something, and everybody lies. I'm not hungry anymore. Thanks for helping me out last night. Enjoy your breakfast.”

She left him sitting at the sticky table and forced herself not to look back.

* * *

Why was she always running away from him? Toe tapping incessantly under the table, he bristled with annoyance. He was the insulted party here, wasn't he?

He watched her stride away and was struck by the image of her on his bed, struggling into those tight jeans. Callie. On his bed. He stilled his foot. And he'd laughed at her. A jolt of adrenaline spiked his brain. *Fuck*. After what she'd just told him, he couldn't think of a worse response.

“Wait up.” He shoved away from the table and chased her through the double doors. He bumped his shoulder into hers, pacing her as she walked in the direction of the library. “I’m sorry I laughed.”

She froze.

“Earlier. I wasn’t laughing at you. I was laughing at the situation, but I wasn’t being fair. Who you hook up with

is your business. I don't have any right to judge."

She stood there with her lips parted like she was about to speak, only she didn't. He shoved his fists into the pockets of his hoodie and barreled into more apology. He wasn't sure what he was going to say. He only knew he needed to make this right.

"Your friendship means a lot to me. I don't want to fuck it up, but I can't seem to help it."

Searching her face for any sign that he'd succeeded, or dug his hole deeper, he held his breath.

She pursed her lips into a quirk of a smile, and her blue eyes fluttered shut. "Well, okay then."

He released his breath with a whoosh. “That is great, really great. C’mere.”

He gathered her under his arm, squeezing her into a half-way hug and led her over to a bench. She felt solid against him, and alive, thrumming. Was she shaking? He was shaky himself, the adrenaline spike dissipating in a rush.

She ducked out and darted behind the bench while he sprawled against the arm rest, his other arm draped across the back to make a space for her that she obviously wasn’t going to use. She leaned against the back of the bench on the opposite end, her ass resting on the wooden slat at the top, her knuckles white as she gripped for support. They

were so far apart again, but there was only a whisper of distance between their hands. He brushed a fingertip over the top of one knuckle, wanting to soothe whatever tension he could. She dipped her head, rolled her shoulders forward. He could only see her in profile, the tip of her nose jutting out from behind a curtain of hair. "I'm sorry, too."

"You called me on my shit and bought me breakfast. We're good."

"Tayber, why don't you have any money on your account?"

That was not a path he wanted to travel with her. He tapped the top of her knuckles once more, maybe to soothe himself, and bent forward, elbows resting on his knees. He rubbed the back

of his head and smoothed his hair into place again. He had to give her something.

“I’ve been prioritizing my spending. I can go without a few meals. Nothing I haven’t done before. But I can’t go without a housing deposit.”

“You’ve gone without—”

He shut her down before she veered into pity, so glad she couldn’t see him while he spoke. Not his face, anyway. He didn’t want to see her, either. A sympathetic smile, an all-fucking-knowing nod. They weren’t supposed to do that to each other. “Not a big deal.”

“I could—”

“Hey, you got some time to work your math magic on me soon? I won’t

need to worry about summer session if I flunk out this semester.” He held his breath, hoping she wouldn’t circle back to his self-deprivation. He couldn’t take it if she thought less of him than she already did.

“Always. Tomorrow night, seven sharp.”

* * *

Callie focused on the mountain of dishes she’d transferred to a towel on the peeling laminate counter beside her sink. Hot water, soap, the squish of the sponge between her fingers. Small things. Things she could control. She’d already dusted, sorted laundry, and stacked her papers into tidy piles. Anything to keep

her mind off the gaping hole in her heart. The one Tayber blasted into her with his “nothing.”

She would never want *nothing* from him.

With the last of the dishes clean, all that remained was sleep. She folded back her comforter, smoothed her pillow —

The laptop blipped.

Her nipples tightened in a Pavlovian response. She needed a twelve-step program. Her inability to stop pretending was a sickness. She’d tried going cold turkey, swore it wouldn’t happen again, and then ended up bleeding lies over the keyboard at one o’clock in the morning anyway. She rushed over to her desk.

Tay: You didn't let me finish last time. You got my email?

Sasha: Yeah

Tay: I should pretend I never sent it.

Sasha: That email, God. I don't know what to do with it, but I am glad I have it.

Tay: You could pick up the phone.

Sasha: I'll never live up to your expectations.

Tay: All I expect is a little heavy breathing. Or we could just talk.

Sasha: Do you need to talk?

Tay: Guys don't "talk"

Sasha: What are we doing now?

Tay: Why are girls crazy?

Oh, no. Please don't talk to me about me.

She pictured him pulling on his lip, trying to puzzle out her crazy, his own crazy, like a differential equation. She couldn't help him solve this calculus.

Sasha: Why are boys?

Tay: You sound like Callie.

And her duplicitous heart leapt. Her deepest, darkest fantasy gurgled to the surface. That he knew she was pretending to be Sasha and didn't know how to tell her. That he'd figured it out early on because he knew her so well. They'd laugh like idiots and start holding hands in public. *Stupid*. She should have made an excuse and shut it down immediately, but she didn't. Her hands shook as she typed. No going back now.

Sasha: Callie?

Tay: A friend.

Tay: I don't get her.

Just a friend ranked slightly higher than "this girl I know." She gnawed a strand of her hair and deleted three different responses before she decided on a question she actually wanted him to answer.

Sasha: Are you mad at her?

Tay: Why would you ask that?

Sasha: I dunno. You said she's crazy and you don't get her.

Tay: Not mad. Confused.

Sasha: Maybe she's going through stuff.

Tay: She'd tell me.

Sasha: Maybe you wouldn't

understand?

Tay: She's lying to me about something.

Sasha: Everybody lies.

Tay: Callie said that too. Are you lying to me?

Fuck. She mashed the power button on her laptop, severing their connection.

Chapter Four

Tayber sat on a shaggy area rug in Callie's apartment, his back propped against the side of her futon, and smoothed a crinkled sheet of notebook paper against his thigh. He growled at his own scratchy handwriting. The frame shook as she shifted behind him. He didn't need to turn around to know she was propped up on one elbow, eyes narrowed, lips pursed. This was her trademark look. The *when will you get it through your thick skull that I can teach you this shit* look.

“You will get this. You always do.” Her words were pointed daggers aimed at the back of his head, and she followed

them with a quick swat that barely ruffled his hair. He smoothed it down anyway, letting his hand linger over the spot she'd touched.

She was right. But 'getting it' always involved her explaining concepts eleven billion times. They were only around explanation number two hundred and forty-two and he wanted to drop a match on his Statistics folder. Miles to go before he could sleep.

"My brain is fried. How about a study break?" He eyed the shiny laptop whirring quietly on the crate across from him. *There be entertainment.* "A movie? Something scary?"

It was a calculated suggestion. There were three things Callie was physically

incapable of resisting. If there was a good song on the radio, she'd sit in the car until it was over. If there was an open bag of gummy candy, she'd finish it. And if there was a new horror movie out, she needed to watch it.

The frame shifted again. "That new found-footage flick is streaming now. It's not very long." When she started convincing herself, he knew he'd won. He reached for the laptop, but she pinned him in place with a strong grip on his shoulder, launching herself off the bed. "I'll get it."

He held his hands up in surrender. "Okay, I won't touch the precious."

She dragged a milk crate into the center of the room and used it as a

makeshift entertainment center. While the movie started, she hit the lights and hopped back onto the futon. She hooked her knees over the armrest and scooched forward so her head wasn't quite behind his. They both had a clear view of the screen.

“Why do you watch this crap?” He shifted, his ass going numb on the hard floor.

“Shhh.”

“No, really. Why?”

“The adrenaline rush. I like knowing something horrible is just about to happen, but not being sure of the when. I'm hanging there, waiting for I don't know what. A jump, a gasp. And then, at the end, the bad guys are almost always

defeated. It's comforting."

"Horror is comforting?" He laughed. It made a strange sort of sense. They were predictable.

"I'm twisted, aren't I?" She leaned closer, a zealot looking for converts. He could feel her breath warming the back of his neck. It wasn't unpleasant.

"You and millions of moviegoers."

They slipped back into silence. He watched the screen without really watching the movie. He floated, half-asleep, lulled by the rhythm of shifting light and Callie's hushed sounds behind him.

"I feel twisted sometimes."

Something in her voice, something quiet and thready, sent a cold burst down

his spine. He needed to see her face. The pale light from the screen cast her in shadows. She had her hands wrapped around her body in an awkward self-hug, like she was trying to keep from flying apart. She studied the cracks in the ceiling like they were a map to the Holy Grail.

“Callie? Tell me.”

“It’s nothing.”

He might be obtuse about mathematical theory, but he knew without a doubt that when a girl said ‘it’s nothing’ it was almost always something. Callie’s own words echoed in his mind. *Everybody wants something, and everybody lies.*

When he touched her arm to get her

attention, just a squeeze to let her know he was still waiting for an answer, she jolted.

“You need to tell me what the hell has you so wound up. Is it that guy?”

The sound she made in response to the question was sharp and pained.

“It is. Jesus. Do I need to kick some ass? I will.”

“No.” She turned to face him again. His hand slipped away with the movement, but she caught it in her own. Her fingers were cool against his palm. “I’m being weird. I am weird. Don’t pay any attention to me.”

She scrunched her face up into a grimace, clamping her eyes shut and crinkling her nose.

“You’re being a girl again.” He was teasing, but it worked like clipping the green wire when he’d meant to clip the blue. She gave a little shudder, dropped his hand, and then, more terrifying than any horror movie he’d ever seen, tears. Not ugly, gasping sobs, just a shiny trickle from the corner of her eye.

“Shit. I’m sorry.”

She shook her head and covered her face, forcing out a few ragged breaths. He didn’t know how to fix this mess. He wasn’t even sure how he’d made it. If he’d made it. He knelt beside the bed and drew her hand away from her face. “Tell me what to do. Cartwheels? Armpit farts? Hamlet’s monologue in Pig Latin? I’ll do it. Ootay ebay—”

“Stop. Don’t look at me. I’m all snotty.” But her mouth had already quirked into a wobbly smile and she was pushing herself upright. His stomach unclenched.

“You’re not.” He leaned in and smoothed over the tear trails with his thumbs, capturing her face in his hands. “You’re just a little damp around the edges.”

She tilted her face into his touch and he reacted on reflex. Like breathing. He closed what distance still remained. A feather-light brush of lips at first, then deeper. So soft. He darted his tongue against the seam, parting her lips, tasting salty sweetness. He slid his fingers into her hair, loosening her ponytail, and

pulled her even closer. Callie made a strangled sound in her throat, shocking him back to reality. He scrambled back.

“Oh, God. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to —”

“It’s okay.” It came out muffled. She had her hand over her mouth, probably to protect herself from further assault.

“No. It isn’t. You’re my friend. And you have a boyfriend, even if he is being an ass. And I’m—I don’t even know. I just wanted you to feel better, and I reacted. It was an accident.”

“It. Is. Okay. I swear. But if you don’t stop apologizing, I’m going to get a complex.”

She didn’t look completely okay. She looked pale and ruffled and

frightened with her fingers still splayed over her lips. And a little like someone had mauled her. Which was what he'd done.

“I'm sorry.”

She flinched at his reflexive apology. He just kept making things worse.

“I'm tired. I don't think we're going to get any more studying in tonight.”

“No, you're right. I'll go.”

He stuffed his notes into his backpack. The closing zipper was impossibly loud, despite the movie still screeching on the chair. He forced himself to look back, to make sure she wasn't rocking herself in a corner. She flashed a *say cheese* smile, all effort no

emotion, and waved him out the door.

He lingered in the hallway. What was Callie hiding? Not one fucking thing made sense anymore. The universe was pounding him into the ground. He grabbed for the door handle but pulled back like it might burn him. Thumping his fist against the wall, he pushed off into the night. It was like kicking off from the pool wall at the city rec center when he was a kid, eyes shut tight against the chlorine, rocketing forward in a straight line.

Aaron was the one who'd taken him to the rec, taught him to cup his hands on the stroke, turn his head to breathe. He would fling him into the deep end and follow behind. Their bare chests had

heaved with laughter as he'd tried to dunk his big brother. Eventually, Aaron had always let him, his body going limp as Tayber shoved down on the top of his head.

He pushed his fists against his eyes, against the burn behind his eyelids, like he'd spent the day underwater. Fucking chemicals.

* * *

She quavered in the center of the apartment, bereft and detached. She recognized her rug and her lamp and the silly stuffed chicken she'd won at first year carnival but didn't understand how any of it could still exist in a world where she was such a cataclysmic

failure. A giant black hole should have swallowed everything up. She tapped her fingers against her lips in a vain attempt to recreate the delicious shock of his tongue. She'd been so damn close to having exactly what she wanted that she could literally taste him. His mouth was warm and sweet, like Fireballs or Red Hots. And she'd blown it. So overcome by the incongruity of a wish fulfilled that she'd frozen. A terrible, choking laugh bubbled to the surface.

“I need a do-over.”

She grabbed her stuffed chicken and crushed it against her chest before curling into a ball on the futon. She slept, fitfully, for a few hours. One dream barreled after another. Her teeth fell out.

She stepped into an elevator and fell down the bottomless shaft. Every radio she touched only played static. She woke gasping and sweaty, mouth dry from an endless, silent scream.

She padded barefoot to the fridge and grabbed a soda. Caffeine and sugar were exactly what she needed. *No rest for the wicked, I guess.* A do-over wouldn't help anyway. He didn't want to kiss her—that had been pity. A song she'd heard recently tickled at the back of her brain. She'd tweak a playlist for her next show.

Blip.

Tayber.

Or a message from a professor.
Possibly Viagra spam.

Tay: I'm an asshole.

Only the most heart-crushing asshole on the planet. Wanting to know why he thought he was an asshole, what he felt about what had almost happened between them, she swallowed the hard knot of panic that always grew in her throat whenever she started down this path and let her fingers hover over the keys. She couldn't resist. Couldn't even pretend to resist.

Sasha: No you aren't. Well, maybe. What did you do?

Tay: Took advantage of someone I care about.

He didn't take enough advantage. Talking to him about herself was almost as painful as the long moments she'd

spent stretched out behind him while the movie played, watching the back of his head instead of the tiny screen. She'd restrained herself then.

Sasha: How?

Tay: Kissed someone I shouldn't have kissed.

Tay: Shit, I shouldn't talk to you about kissing other girls.

Tay: I AM an asshole.

His concern for her feelings, for Sasha's feelings, acid-etched guilt into her dirty soul.

Sasha: It's cool. You can talk to me about anything.

Tay: Good.

The wrongness welled up, a boil she refused to lance. She had to do this. Had

to know. And pretending was the only way. The pained expression on his face when he'd realized who he was kissing, like he'd made some horrible mistake, she couldn't see that again. And he'd wear it if *she* asked him. Sasha, on the other hand, could ask him anything.

Sasha: Why did you kiss her?

Tay: I don't know.

Liar.

Sasha: You just fell on her lips?

Tay: No

Sasha: She was convenient?

She gnawed the ragged cuticle at the corner of her thumb. Waiting, waiting, waiting for confirmation. She knew it. He'd felt an urge that had nothing to do with her. She was simply the collateral

damage of his indiscriminate libido.

Tay: No. She was hurting. I wanted to fix it, and it just happened.

A rush of breath escaped her lips, as if his words had jumped off the screen and pelted her in the chest.

Sasha: Doesn't sound like you took advantage of her to me.

Tay: She's my friend. It was wrong.

Sasha: You shouldn't be friends with the people you kiss?

Tay: Usually I'm not.

A mental slide show looped endlessly in her head, Tayber's greatest kissing hits. The blonde up against the jukebox at The Brick, one hand splayed on her waist, the other cupping the back of her head, his leg wedged between her

thighs. The redhead straddling his lap in the quad, his face buried in her neck.

Jesus.

Sasha: How was it? The kiss?

When she read his answer, it was like he'd rung a bell inside her body.

Tay: Right before I realized I shouldn't be doing it, it was amazing.

* * *

“This is CJ Evans with Random Nonsense on WCCC, The Cube, bringing you some gorgeous girl rock. And I don't just mean pretty girls. Or even rock, in the traditional sense. I'm talking about capital M music. Lush vocals, arrangements that will drown you, and lyrics that heal while they hurt. Right

now, I'm gonna let Ellie Goulding fill up the whole of our souls."

Jessa flashed an exaggerated eye-roll, exposing so much white it had to hurt, and pulled her headphones down around her neck. "*This Love Will Be Your Downfall?* Really?"

"It's a great track."

Jessa wrinkled her nose. Her dreads were knotted on top of her head, poking in every direction as she shook it. "It's pablum, and you know it."

"You'd rather I play some crunchy Ani D.?"

"Better. But you don't need to wallow in that either. An infusion of classic Riot Grrl might do you some good."

It was how they'd bridged the gap from wary strangers to sort of friends. Dancing on the tiny isthmus of their barely overlapping eclectic tastes, sparring over music choices, debating the merits of indie cred over slick, corporate packaging until Jessa had caved with a huff, "Fine. It doesn't have to be indie to be cool, but it sure helps."

Callie ignored the impatient click of Jessa's tongue stud and braced for the inevitable backlash as she queued up her next selection, a local band's punk cover of Fiona Apple's *Criminal*. She held her hand up in protest as soon as the intro hit the sweet spot where Jessa would realize exactly what song she'd chosen. "Don't."

“Oh hell no. I hope this streak of what-have-I-done music isn’t about last Friday night because you shouldn’t even worry—”

“No, that’s not it at all.”

“I’m sorry things got so intense. I thought we were having a good time, but Tim was being an ass. I told him I’d eat his balls for breakfast if he ever got that aggressive again. And what was with Tayber dragging you out caveman-style? You two hooking up?” Jessa’s voice was all curiosity and zero venom, but Callie’s palms still prickled, slick with sweat.

“God, no.”

“Don’t hold back on my account. We enjoyed a hot minute, but it was only a

diversion. I never even let him past second base.” She spun in her chair, a tornado of mischief, an un-bottled genie. After almost two years, she was finally wearing down Callie’s reserves. She hadn’t understood at first that Jessa always meant what she said. For all her counter-culture trappings, she completely lacked artifice. The idea that Jessa and Tayber had *diverted* each other made her belly flip in an altogether unpleasant way. It wasn’t wrong. It was just so empty.

Callie turned back to her laptop and cross-faded *Criminal* into an alt-country torch song that made her break out in gooseflesh every time she heard it. Random Nonsense was really living up

to its name today. She shivered with the opening notes, her throat tight with longing and maybe hope. “So it meant nothing?”

“I wouldn’t say nothing, exactly. But it wasn’t important. It was about feeling good, not about feelings.” Jessa’s mouth opened wide with surprise, like she’d solved a million-dollar puzzle. “You’ve got it bad, don’t you?”

“I do not.” Callie touched her cheek. Her face flamed hot with shame. She considered crawling under the soundboard. Her pulse sped up in terror of what would happen next. There would be mocking and ostracizing and—

“Oh. My. God. You so do. You’re blushing purple.”

Shit. Hurt and anger warred with fear. How could she be so stupid? Thinking she finally had a friend she could open up to, just a little. “Please don’t say anything.”

Jessa’s smile faltered and slipped back into place. She pressed her thumb to her forefinger and drew them across her lips. “Zipped.” She wheeled herself closer and squeezed Callie’s knee. “And you have to know by now I would never do that to you.”

The ache wrapping around her chest, crushing her lungs, slowly uncoiled. “I do. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. Be happy. This is exciting. Go get ’em, tigress.” She squeezed Callie’s knee again.

If only it were that easy for her.

“Have we met? I can’t go get him.

I’m, well, me. And he wouldn’t—”

“He is obviously into you. I’ve never seen him play savior for anyone else.”

“I may have gotten in my own way.”

“Then fix it. Boys are easy. Just tell him what you want.”

Chapter Five

The Student Union was a collection of ratty couches and a few metal cabinets filled with ancient board games, clustered in a glorified alcove. Callie scanned for Tayber. He always crashed here between classes on Mondays, too lazy to trudge across campus to his dorm.

She tripped on a wiffle ball and forced herself to stumble across the open space, drawn and repelled in equal measure. He was sprawled on a rust-colored sofa, his enormous, sneakered feet dangling over the worn arm. He had a notebook tented over his face, and his chest rose and fell with hypnotic

regularity. Napping. In public. On purpose. She couldn't even fathom such a risk. Actually, she could. Memories of a horrific eighth grade field trip to the Air and Space Museum threatened to pull her under.

She'd walked every inch of the museum, twice, doing the scavenger hunt designed for teams all by herself. She'd been so tired by the time they boarded the bus home, she could barely drag herself to the one empty seat near the middle. When Quinn O'Neil sat beside her and smiled, she'd nearly collapsed from shock. She'd thought maybe it was an overture of friendship, that she'd served her time in purgatory, proved she could take whatever punishment they

could dish out, and her sentence would be lifted. She'd thought wrong.

"I like your jeans," Quinn had said.

Maybe Mom was right. Maybe a new outfit, still creased from the precision folding of a mall employee who'd bobbed to techno at the front of the store while she shopped, and a new attitude, had been exactly what she'd needed.

"Thanks. I got them at—"

"Oh, I know where you got them."

Of course she knew. She was Quinn Freaking O'Neil. Stores like that checked with people like her to decide what to sell in the first place. Quinn could wear a Hefty bag as a dress and everyone would call it couture.

They'd sat in awkward silence after that, until exhaustion finally won. Callie had fallen asleep, dreaming of slumber parties and broken-heart necklaces and lunches that didn't involve her sneaking Cheetos from the front pocket of her backpack when the librarian's back was turned.

She'd woken up—alone again—to a nightmare. The top of her thigh felt damp. She'd looked down to find confusing multi-colored blobs. *What the...?*

While she slept, Quinn had decorated her jeans. Not with daises or hearts or even initials. She'd drawn the word LOSER in big bubble letters with magic marker. It was as if she'd been

tagged by a graffiti artist.

The worst part had been her own reaction. She hadn't asked "Why did Quinn do it?" *Because she could.* Or "Why me?" *Because of course.* Her first thought had been, *How could I be so dumb?*

Because hope had made her stupid. Hope always made her stupid.

Too embarrassed to tell anyone what happened, she'd blocked her lap with her notebook and shuffled off the bus. Her mother had taken one look at the ruined pants and winced. "Why would you let someone do this to you, Callie?"

Tayber's mother probably never had to ask him questions like that. He didn't let people hurt him. He was a Quinn.

She'd known it from the very beginning. Whatever he did was cool by simple virtue of the fact that *he'd* done it. And he liked her.

She arranged herself on the edge of the couch, careful to keep a safe distance between them, and cleared her throat. No response. She bounced a little, and he stirred.

"I'm not seeing him anymore."

"Huh?" Tayber grabbed the notebook and dropped it on the floor beside him. His face was soft with sleep, the sharp edge of his jaw blurred with stubble she ached to touch.

"I said I'm not seeing him anymore. The guy. We broke up."

"Oh, that's why you were upset."

“Not really.”

“Come again?” He rubbed the heels of his palms into his eyes and scooched himself into a sitting position, bringing his leg into contact with her backside. She shifted, putting space between them again. She couldn’t do this if any part of him was touching her.

“It wasn’t real. I thought it was, but it wasn’t. No big deal.”

Bury a lie in the truth to really sell it. Her stomach rose up and she folded her hands in her lap in an attempt to quell it.

“Hey.” The weight of his palm on her back startled her. He stroked soothing, disconcerting, circles between her shoulder blades. “I’m sorry, Callie. What can I do?”

“You don’t have anything to be sorry for.”

“I’m sorry you’re hurting.”

“I’m not.”

“Don’t lie to me.”

That stung. All she did was lie. “I can’t do this here, in the middle of everything.”

He stood. “I have a thing after class, but let’s catch up tonight. We’ll walk. Clear your head.”

A thing? Maybe more like nothing. The thought of him hooking up with someone before he dropped by her place was gutting. “It’s still too cold to walk anywhere at night.”

“I’ll keep you warm. I mean moving, so you stay warm. About seven o’clock?”

In front of your apartment?”

He jogged backwards as he spoke. Grinning, so his dimples showed on cheeks that were maybe, possibly, just a little bit pink. *Was Tayber blushing?*

* * *

Suite 314 was the last door at the end of a long hallway. Tayber hadn't taken any visual arts classes so the building was unfamiliar. Unnerving, too, but that probably had less to do with the location and more to do with what he was thinking about doing.

He'd swung by earlier to inquire about the modeling job, and a paint-spattered student assistant had told him to come back at quarter to six. The guy

had barely looked up from his canvas.

The room was filled with students setting up easels and it smelled like a fresh box of pencils. His nose itched. He hadn't expected a class to be in session.

A mousy redhead noticed him standing at the threshold and beamed. She clapped her neighbor on the shoulder—the painter kid from earlier—and bounced on her stool. “Guys, I think the model is here and he’s a hottie.”

He clenched his jaw. He couldn't just leave now that he'd been spotted.

“Dana, we do not objectify the models. They share their form with us, and we honor that with respect and dignity. We draw life.” It had to be the instructor, though he'd never guess by

looking. She wore a gray t-shirt and faded jeans. From behind, she looked like she could only be a few years older than the oldest students in the room, even if her voice was commanding. Dana blushed and ducked behind her large sketch pad.

The instructor turned to face him, and he was surprised by her very pregnant belly. “Sorry about that. You can change in the bathroom down the hall. There’s a robe hanging on the coat rack in the corner.”

Change? Robe? He hadn’t taken the job yet. This was a fact-finding mission.

“I’m not sure I’m right for—”

“Can you sit still for long stretches of time?”

“Yes.” Sit still. The opposite of dancing—entertaining—though still naked, still exotic.

“Then you’re right for this job. It’s a fifty dollar stipend, paid in cash, at the end of each class.”

“Cash?” He rubbed his damp palms on his shirt. Take clothes off, accept cash, repeat, problems solved.

“Is that a problem?” She tilted her head, looking up at him like he’d suddenly started speaking Greek. He could feel the eyes of every single student studying their exchange. He felt naked already. The light bulbs in here had to be tiny nuclear reactors. He squinted against them. Was it a problem? *Fuck, yes.*

“Actually, I don’t think I can sit still. Not for more than a few minutes. Sorry.” Maybe he could start flushing money directly down the drain. He exited the hot little room, full of scrutinizing gazes, with empty pockets. Dignity. Respect. *Shit*. He’d never had those. Why the hell did he care?

* * *

Callie paced the cracked sidewalk in front of her building, expecting to see the familiar, dented grill of Tayber’s car turning the corner at any second, terrified that the tiny flicker of hope she’d nursed since last night would be snuffed out the instant she opened her mouth. She sucked in a breath when he

appeared on foot, illuminated by the glow of her neighbor's porch light. So, they really were going for a walk. He bobbed his head in her direction and broke into a jog.

“H-hey.”

The slightly breathless huff reminded her of exertion. She imagined that almost-pant against her ear, how warm his breath would be, how strong his hands...*Shit*. She hugged herself against a chill she was now too warm to feel.

“Why didn't you drive? I didn't think we were really going to walk.”

“I can't be health conscious?” He fisted his hands and struck an exaggerated body builder pose. “You know this body doesn't happen by

itself.”

Laughter bubbled up inside her, despite, or maybe because of, all her tense yearning. “Says the guy who eats three bowls of rainbow loops for a snack.”

“They’re a part of a balanced breakfast. It says so on the box.”

“Do you believe everything you read?” Her mouth went dry. Did she really just say that? He believed too much of what he read. From her, anyway.

“Only on cereal boxes.”

They fell into pace beside each other, the sidewalk breaking up beneath their feet the further they got from the semi-disreputable outskirts of campus.

Dilapidated row houses spreading apart, patchy brown lawns turning into actual yards with narrow driveways. Working class houses, with rusted swing sets and front windows glowing TV blue.

Eventually, they were walking on the shoulder, the shadowy stretches between streetlights giving her time to shore up her armor.

“How did your uh, thing go?”

“The thing was a shitty job interview, and I blew it. So we walk, because I can’t afford aimless drives around town while you unburden yourself on my willing shoulder.”

“I don’t need to unburden anything. I’m fine. And I could chip in on gas. We don’t have to—”

“I don’t have gas money, period. Or phone money. Or housing money. I’m screwed.” He shoved his hands into his pockets, maybe to find some loose change he’d forgotten, or to hide their emptiness. Her own palms itched to hold those empty hands. To squeeze. To soothe.

“So take the summer session off. Go home, re-group. Not graduating early isn’t the end of the world.”

“I can’t go home. I don’t think I have a home anymore. And I don’t have enough financial aid left to cover tuition and my dorm.”

She almost asked how that could be, him not having a home. But she knew how that could work. She looked back in

the direction of her own small apartment. The apartment her mother paid a full year's lease on, just so she didn't have to deal with Callie coming home too often. "It makes sense, dear." Her mother had chided. "If we're going to pay all this money for an apartment, then we should save on transportation, shouldn't we?"

She didn't want to go home anyway. She kicked a can abandoned on the roadside. The tinny scrape of metal on pavement echoed in the stillness. "What about one of the frats? They have cheap summer rent."

"You have serious faith in me if you think I can carry the credits I need living in the land of beer bongs and keg stands.

Everyone chill is heading to Europe or the Shore. Maybe I can borrow a tent and *occupy* the quad.”

“Campus security would probably give you a hard time.”

He grabbed her arm, pulling them to a halt. “Hey, what about us?”

Her heart stopped. No, it crawled up into her throat and attempted escape. Us? She’d hoped. Jessa had said. But she hadn’t thought it would happen like this. So easily. Words. Now was the time for words. “Uh?” It was all she could force out.

“We get along pretty great, when we aren’t arguing about dumb shit. You’ve got a quiet apartment. And an unoccupied futon. Aw, fuck. Never

mind.”

He wasn't interested in her, he was interested in her apartment. Shame heated her face. “You want to move in with me?”

“I'll be a perfect gentleman. You won't even know I'm there.”

What fun would that be? Also, impossible. “My apartment is the size of a shoe box.”

He raked his fingers through his hair and huffed. “Like I said, never mind. It's too much to ask. I'll figure something out.”

But he wouldn't. Not this late in the semester. His time was up, and she had the power to help him. She swallowed the last bitter drops of shame and

disappointment.

“No. I meant we’ll be on top of each other. Not, on top on top. Just, I wouldn’t be able to miss you. I’m shutting up now. Of course you can stay with me.”

“You sure?” He tugged at the sleeve of her cardigan. The slight contact sent a shiver up the length of her arm. She nodded, afraid to say anything else.

His face broke into a dimple-busting smile, and he scooped her up into a bear hug. Her toes barely scraped the ground. “Great. After finals I’ll haul my shit over.”

Her whole universe shrank down into the space created by the circle of his arms. This. This was what she wanted.

The squeeze of his arms. The warmth of his chest pressed against hers. The two of them, occupying the same physical space. And so much more. “Maybe you should move in sooner. Instead of going hungry in the dorms. You can use my kitchen.”

He set her down and cocked an eyebrow. The corner of his mouth quirked as he tried to stifle a laugh. “Got any rainbow loops?”

“Stale Oreos.” She wasn’t going to lie about her homemaking skills. She couldn’t hide that if he was moving in right away. Shit, she wasn’t going to be able to hide anything. Her stomach churned.

“Close enough.”

Was it really? She'd find out one way or another.

* * *

Tayber fumbled his keys in a rush. He felt lightheaded, like he'd pounded a six pack instead of walked a few blocks. He tripped over a useless lacrosse stick and kicked it across the room. Too much junk. Shit he didn't even need. He was going to have to pare down to the essentials. Everything that couldn't fit in Callie's apartment, or his trunk, needed to go.

He opened an email from someone he didn't know, certain it was probably spam. It was worse than spam. Aaron. Stupid public directory.

I want to make things right. Give me a chance. I'll stop by your dorm...
Blah, blah, blah. He deleted the email without finishing it and noticed Sasha online.

Tay: My brother found my email address

Sasha: What did he say?

Tay: Doesn't matter. I deleted it.

Sasha: Really? You aren't even curious?

Tay: He wants to apologize.

Sasha: For what?

Tay: For being a selfish dick.

Sasha: ?

Tay: We'd been talking about leaving forever, but the same way we talked about playing pro ball or winning

the lottery. It wasn't real. Not for me. One day he had a bag full of clothes and a girlfriend with a car running in the parking lot. He promised he'd be back for me as soon as he could swing it. And I believed him.

Tay: I guess he thinks eight years counts as soon.

Sasha: Don't you want to know why he didn't come back?

Tay: Fuck why.

Sasha: Maybe he had a good reason. Like, he was locked up in prison.

Tay: Prison is good?

Sasha: Not good. But it would be a good excuse, right? Like, it wasn't his choice.

He tried to picture Aaron in prison

but couldn't do it. Some people from their neighborhood treated jail like a vacation from life. No big deal. But he and Aaron hadn't been like that. No stints in juvie, no brushes with crime. Could've gone a different way. If they'd run wild in the streets...

Tay: If he got locked up, that would be a choice too. A bad one.

Sasha: Is everything always so black and white?

Tay: Yes.

Sasha: I think you should talk to him.

An answer to the nagging question of why the fuck he left would be nice. If only he could get that answer and walk away.

Tay: Maybe. But not right now.

Everything is too messed up. I don't need more drama on top.

Sasha: What else is wrong?

Tay: I'm crashing on Callie's futon this summer. It might get weird.

Sasha: How?

He wanted the weird vibe that had been ping-ponging between him and Callie to do something. To stop or grow. Anything was better than what they had now. It was like an unreachable itch. No, it had to stop.

Tay: I'm worried that I'm taking advantage of her. That I might lose her as a friend.

Sasha: How?

Tay: We don't want the same things.

Sasha: What do you want?

He wanted one day where everything in his life wasn't threatening to crash down on his head.

Tay: A break.

* * *

Callie wished she'd dropped a can of tomatoes on her foot and saved herself the trouble of that conversation. She'd been clearing off shelf space in the pantry, making room for Tayber to store his things, bouncing to some synth-pop, when she'd heard the familiar ping of a new message. If only she'd ignored it, distracted herself with a more desirable disaster. A broken toe probably didn't hurt quite as much as a broken heart.

They didn't want the same things.

His message might as well have been a blinking billboard. Big surprise. She wanted something. He wanted nothing. No, he wanted a break. Did he want a break from her? She slammed the laptop shut and stormed out of her room, banging her shin on the unfolded futon in her living nook. “Shitfuckdamn!”

Hopping around on one foot, she rubbed the throbbing spot below her knee.

That’s going to be an awesome bruise. He hadn’t even carted over one box yet and she was already tripping over him.

It wasn’t all in her head anymore, the heat between them, she knew that much. So what the fuck kind of game was he playing?

She was a rubber band stretched to

its limit. No give left. Tears welled up, but she fought them back. She was absolutely not going to cry over this anymore. She had a crush, end of story. She'd nearly made a fool of herself over it, but she could start over. Time to lay Sasha to rest for good. She was done pretending, in public, in private. It was like an erosion of her soul.

They'd both be so busy that they'd hardly see each other anyway. She'd make sure of it, take up jogging in the morning, study in the library after class. She pulled an Oreo out of the open package on the top shelf of what would soon be Tayber's closet and split it apart. Every time she wanted a cookie, she'd have to look at his things. Smell

his cologne and laundry detergent.
Maybe she'd stop eating so much junk.
Yay, silver lining. She sighed and
slumped against the kitchen wall, licking
the cream from the middle before
shoving both halves into her mouth at
once.

Chapter Six

Tayber lugged the last box up the narrow stairs. The first two were already stacked in the corner of Callie's "living nook." She seemed to think her place was embarrassingly tiny, but it wasn't much smaller than the apartment he'd grown up in. Add one bedroom, and it would be damn near palatial. The box landed on top of the pile with a *thunk*.

"Is that it?" Callie asked from her perch on the futon. She had her legs tucked underneath her and a pencil shoved into the twist of hair on the top of her head. She'd offered to help, but he'd refused. He could carry his own crap.

"Yeah, I'll get it all squared away

soon. Don't worry. I won't spread out everywhere."

"It's fine. There's room for stuff in the pantry, too." She kept her head down, focused on the notebook open on her lap.

He reached into his jeans pocket and pulled out the envelope he'd stuffed there earlier. It wasn't anywhere near half the rent on a place like this—close to campus, clean—but it was something. He'd been scraping together a housing deposit. Now, he'd give that to Callie. He held it out to her, extended it like an olive branch. "Here."

"A present?"

"More like a down payment."

Her mouth dropped open in shock

and she shook her head, that ridiculous pencil bobbing with every movement.

“No, no, no. Save your money. I told you my mom paid for the whole year in full.”

“For you. Not for me.”

“Doesn’t matter. Paid is paid.”

“Take the damn money.” He dropped it on top of her notebook, and she knocked it off like it was a hot coal.

“No. Buy some groceries if you want. Stock the fridge with beer. Put some gas in your car. You need the money more than I do.”

He could hear the blood rushing in his ears, and his neck flushed. He ground his back teeth together. “I’m not a charity case.”

She looked up then. Finally. All pink

cheeks and wide blue eyes. At least she wasn't giving him the sad, I-feel-sorry-for-you face. "I don't think that. I just want to help."

"Not charging rent is more than help. You're already doing enough."

"I can do more." For a second he wondered exactly what *more* could be, blood rushing much lower than his neck, and then shook it off. He wasn't here for that. Callie wasn't *for* that. He picked up the envelope and shoved it back into his pocket. He'd find a way to give it to her later. Groceries weren't a bad place to start.

"I'll go shopping tomorrow. Any requests?"

She flashed a wobbly smile.

“Twizzlers. And I’m almost out of Oreos.”

Did she ever eat real food? *I guess I’ll find out.*

* * *

“Is something burning?”

Callie jumped at the rumble of Tayber’s voice. He could have whispered it, and she’d still have heard him through the paper-thin walls. She’d spent the last few nights trying very hard not to hear him breathing on the other side of that wall. Pounding her pillow into submission, her nipples tight against her sleep shirt. Every tug, every shift, abrasive and electric.

She finished yanking on the jeans

she'd finally decided were clean enough for one more wear and bolted toward the kitchen. "It's the garlic bread." She hadn't even been sure the oven would work. Apparently it worked too well because the box said the bread would take ten minutes and it hadn't even been five. As she rounded the corner, Tayber flung open the enamel door, and smoke flooded the tiny kitchen. She grabbed the hand towel she'd planned to use as a pot holder and fanned the cloud toward the open window over the sink.

"Are we having charcoal briquettes for dinner?"

"Very funny. I don't know what happened. I read the box. I set the timer. This should be idiot-proof."

“Here, let me.” He snatched the towel from her hands and removed the cremated bread, deftly dumping the smoking remains into the sink. He peered into the pot on the stove. “How long have these noodles been boiling?”

“A while?”

He used the fork resting on the stove top to fish out a single noodle and squeezed the pasta between his thumb and forefinger. “I think we passed al dente and are closing in on glue.”

“Ruined it, didn’t I? Shit. I promised to feed you.”

“No, you promised me a kitchen. The least I can do is cook. Seems you can barely feed yourself.”

“I do okay.”

“Give me a half hour. I’ll whip something up.” He stuck his head in the pantry and started pulling cans off the shelf.

“There isn’t much to work with.”

“Believe me, I’ve accomplished more with less.” He shooed her away.

She sat on the edge of the futon. Her futon. Her apartment. Why did she feel like a guest?

She couldn’t see around the corner into the kitchen, but she heard the can opener buzz and the bang of a pot being pulled from the cupboard. The water ran for a few minutes. And then he started singing to himself. Or to her—it was one of her favorite songs. She closed her eyes and leaned back, pulling her legs up

under her. Letting the glorious sandpaper scrape of song lull her into a sleepless dream.

When she woke, Tayber stood over her, grinning, a dish towel tucked into the waistband of his jeans and a steaming plate balanced on one hand. “Milady. Dinner is served.”

Her stomach growled in response, and she imagined cartoon scent-fingers curling up from the plate directly to her nose.

He laughed. “And just in time.”

The chipped plate was warm and heavy, loaded with elbow noodles and...were those chunks of hot dog? “What is this?”

“Macaroni Surprise. My signature

dish.” He handed her a fork and returned to the kitchen to get his own plate. Two glasses of iced tea sat sweating on the milk crate coffee table.

“You have a signature dish? I can barely make toast.”

He settled on the futon beside her, their knees almost touching. “I know. Your toast attempt is still smoking in the sink.”

Her cheeks burned. She’d wanted to do something nice for him. Something to make up for how strange she’d been lately. How strained. Things had been easy between them once.

He nudged her. “Just teasing, Callie. Sometimes disasters are how we learn. You can’t make an omelet without

cracking some eggs. Or something.”

“You can make omelets too? How did you learn?”

“Necessity. I told you my mom wasn’t around much. Cook or starve. Aaron, my brother, he taught me how to cook some before he left.” He leaned over his plate, and she couldn’t help but picture the boy he must have been. Gangly, wrestling with pots because the hunger in his belly was too great to fill with cereal. Had she ever been that hungry? Not for food.

She chewed her lip, her heart breaking for the hungry boy on her couch and unsure of what to do with her forbidden knowledge of Aaron. Her secrets were a cancer in her belly,

quelling her appetite. She could give him some of her own secrets.

“My mother never let me cook. She didn’t trust me in the kitchen, in her domain. She tried to show me a few things before I moved in here, but she didn’t really have the patience. For anything. When things got really bad with the mean girls at school, you know what she did? She took me shopping for new clothes and told me to try harder.”

“She should’ve taken you shopping for a new school.”

“That’s kind of what I did with Copeland. We’ve seen how well that worked out.”

“Stop it, Callie. There is nothing wrong with you. You just need to trust

people more, let them in. You've got friends. Me. Jessa. You could have more if you wanted to."

"That sounds a little too much like my mother's 'try harder' advice."

"Trying doesn't work with people who've already decided they don't want to be friends. And why would you want friends that don't want you? But here? We've got all these people around who haven't made their minds up about us at all. We can be anything we want. Our pasts don't matter."

He sounded like he was convincing himself as much as her. She wanted to reach out and tell him that his past didn't matter to her, but she wasn't supposed to know about his past.

“I just keep waiting to change, to wake up and be different.”

“Change doesn’t happen on its own. You have to make it happen. All that waiting?” He shook his head. “You didn’t get your patience from your mom. Eat. I can’t promise this is any good cold. I’ve never let it sit long enough to find out.”

It was good. Not exactly gourmet, but far more edible than anything she could’ve managed. “You found all this in my kitchen?”

“A box of mac and cheese, a pack of hot dogs, some canned tomatoes. Not much to it. Of course, I’ll never divulge my secret ingredient.”

“Okay, Chef Boyardee. Your secrets

are wasted on me anyway. I may have the culinary equivalent of a black thumb.”

“I’ll teach you a few tricks.”

Swallowing hard, she tried to clear the lump of food suddenly caught in her throat. She wanted him to teach her more than a few tricks, and none of them involved cooking.

Thinking like that was absolutely not the way to get back to normal with him. She shoveled another forkful into her mouth. If she kept her mouth busy, she couldn’t say anything she’d regret.

When they both finished, he cleared their plates. She heard running water and the clank of silverware.

“Please don’t do the dishes too. You

already rescued dinner. I'll wash up."

"Come dry."

Her very full belly somehow managed to flip at his command. She could do that.

The sight of Tayber leaning into the counter, up to his elbows in soapy water, intent on his task, was ridiculously sexy and painfully domestic. The sharpness of her desire surprised her. She'd be fantasizing about household chores for the rest of her life. He tilted his pelvis toward her, and it took her a moment to realize he was offering her the dish towel still tucked into his pants. She went hot all over. *Jesus*. And hesitated, before tugging the edge furthest from his crotch.

A bang on the door startled them both. The only person who would knock on her door without calling first was standing in front of her.

“Tayber, I know you’re in there.”

He tensed, then paled, dropping the pan he was scrubbing.

“You weren’t expecting company, were you? Who is it?” She twisted the towel into a knot.

“That is my fucking brother.” He shook his hands, spraying droplets of water all over the kitchen, and stormed the door. Leaving the security chain in place, he cracked it open.

“You gonna let me in?”

“Fuck no. I’ll meet you downstairs in a minute.” He slammed the door shut

before his brother could protest.

“I’m sorry about this, Callie. We’ve been—” He slumped against the wall and looked up like he was searching the ceiling for answers. “—estranged for a while.”

“What can I do? How can I help?” She knew too much to trust herself with anything more than platitudes. How had his brother found him here?

“You can’t. I’ll go talk to him. Can’t avoid him now.”

“I’ll go with you.”

“No. I know I said our pasts don’t matter, but mine does when he shows up on your doorstep.”

“Try and stop me.” She would be there for him, for this. She wouldn’t

leave him. She pressed her lips into a thin, hard line.

He scrubbed his face with a damp hand, fingers still pruney, and shrugged. Defeated.

She followed him out of the apartment and down the stairs.

* * *

Aaron paced the sidewalk, a heavier, craggier version of Tayber. He crushed a cigarette under his boot when Tayber slammed the exterior door.

He hopped off the stoop, skipping the steps, charging toward Aaron and leaving Callie behind. “How’d you find me?”

“Since you wouldn’t return my calls

or my emails, I went to your dorm. Your empty dorm.” Aaron closed the distance between them and poked Tayber in the shoulder. “Some guy in the hallway said he helped you move and told me I might find you here.”

“Don’t touch me. You’re not welcome here.” Tayber shoved him.

Aaron stumbled back. “Doesn’t being brothers count for anything?”

“It stopped counting when you didn’t pick up the phone for eight years.

Where’d you go? The fucking moon? You couldn’t even send a postcard?”

Tayber’s voice, strained from yelling, cracked on the last question. She wanted to go to him, break up the fight, make this hurting stop, but she couldn’t bring

herself to step off the porch. He shoved his brother again but Aaron didn't budge. He grabbed Tayber's arms and flung them away.

"So you're going to punish me now by doing the same thing? Still trying to be like big brother."

"I'm nothing like you," Tayber hissed.

"You aren't? Looks that way to me. Dropping out of school. Playing house with your girlfriend. Running away."

"Fuck you." Tayber spit on the sidewalk and threw a punch that cracked against Aaron's jaw. Suddenly, there was no more yelling. Just grunting and grappling and the two of them rolling around on the ground. Callie clutched

her phone, ready if not willing to call the police. She'd never had to call the police before.

Aaron twisted Tayber's arm behind his back and pinned him facedown on the ground. The sick thud of Tayber's forehead against the concrete made her cry out. She couldn't take it anymore.

"Stop it right now! You promised him you'd be back. Why didn't you go back for him?" She raced forward and pounded her fists into Aaron's back.

He ignored her completely, focused solely on Tayber. "Shit. I'm sorry, Tay. I didn't mean it."

"I didn't drop out. I moved."

"You really didn't drop out?" Aaron released his grip and lifted himself off of

Tayber, rocking back on his heels.

“Like you care.” Tayber pushed off the ground and cast his heavy-lidded eyes in her direction like she could absolve him for his weakness.

“I care, Tayber. I care. You know I had to go. You have to know that. I was a fuck-up. I’d have ruined you anyway.” Aaron backed off further, touching his thumb to his jaw like it might already be swelling. Tayber rolled his shoulder and shook his head. He looked small next to his brother.

Tayber wiped the cut on his forehead with the cuff of his shirt. “Get out of here, Aaron. I can’t deal with you.”

“I’ll leave you alone for now, but we aren’t done. We both need to cool off.

I'll be back in a few days. You can count on it."

Tayber snorted. "I'll hold my breath."

Aaron flinched but didn't say anything. He just kept walking.

Callie led Tayber back upstairs and directed him to sit on the end of her bed while she gathered supplies. He was wounded. She'd take the futon tonight.

She grabbed some napkins from the kitchen and then rummaged in the medicine cabinet for ointment. She'd seen some recently. Was it behind the mascara or under the cotton swabs? No, tucked into an empty box of Band-Aids.

"Callie, how did you know what Aaron promised me?" Tayber called out.

She dropped the box into the toilet. *Splloosh*. Her heart, already pounding, lurched into a frantic arrhythmia. “I just assumed. You said he taught you to cook before he left. And then you were angry. I don’t know.” If Tayber found out about her deception like this there would be no hope for them. Not as friends. Not as anything.

Chapter Seven

Her dark hair shaded her face as she leaned over him, but he could see her crinkled nose. He didn't have it in him to protest or ask questions. He felt wrung out.

“Aaron split your eyebrow.”

“He split a lot of things. He's good at splitting.”

Holding a wad of damp napkins with one hand, she reached for his jaw. She'd been so fierce. His protector and, now, his nurse. Bile rose in the back of his throat. *You're fucking weak, man.* She clenched her teeth and sucked in a breath, poised to strike with antiseptic. He flinched.

“Don’t be a baby.”

“I’m not, I just...I’ll do it myself.”

He snatched the napkins and pressed them against the tiny cut. The sting was nothing compared to the flash of pity in her eyes before she turned away.

“Do you think you’ll ever forgive him?”

Would he? Probably better to ask *could he*? He wanted his brother back, but he didn’t know how to stop being angry. “I don’t know.”

“You hit your head pretty hard. I’ll go get ice.”

“Wait.” He grabbed her arm and pulled back, but she wasn’t moving yet. She stumbled, landing across his lap with a gasp. The warm weight of her

was an unexpected balm, but her body was tense, her eyes were wide and searching.

“I don’t need ice. I need you.” And before he could stop himself, he gathered her in his arms and kissed her. Hard. Pain bloomed and receded as she softened against him. She tasted like home. *Why did we waste so much time not kissing? Not touching?* Slipping his fingers under the soft fabric of her t-shirt, he circled his thumb over the smooth plane of her belly. She squirmed in his lap, clutching a handful of his shirt.

“You’re hurt, and you’re pissed. You don’t want me like this.”

“I want you exactly like this.” He

bent to kiss her again, but hesitated, captivated by her sigh. It wasn't her usual eye-rolling, you're-being-an-idiot sigh. It was this tiny, involuntary exhalation. A gasping breath. Sharp and hot and so fucking sexy he wanted to dispense with preliminaries and pin her to the bed. He'd heard that sigh before on other lips, but he'd never heard it from Callie. He wanted to hear it again, he wanted to swallow it. He traced a finger over her hipbone and slipped his tongue along the curve of her bottom lip. "Tell me, how do I want you?"

"You're concussed." She released her grip, smoothing the crease she'd made with a tentative caress, but didn't pull away. He rested his forehead

against hers and took a ragged breath, inhaling the sugar-apple scent of her shampoo. Shifting, trying and failing to hide his erection, only made things worse. He didn't want to push her, but his body had other ideas. Her face flushed.

“Then keep me awake.”

She squirmed again. On purpose? He froze, terrified that if he moved, she'd bolt. If this was going to happen, she'd need to make the move. And if she was half as turned on as he was, he wouldn't have to wait long. Her brows knit together in a question, and all the doubt and agony he felt was there on her face. But worse, because he knew her too well, knew what she thought of him. She

wanted this kiss, but she didn't want to want it. She didn't want to want him.

“This will change everything.” She breathed the words against his skin.

“Everything has already changed.” She'd seen him empty handed. Fighting in the street like gutter trash. He'd told her about his hungry nights alone, and she hadn't looked at him like he was garbage. Callie quieted a place inside him he hadn't even known was noisy, muffled the anger he carried around with him every day. He could do this with her—be real. Finally, she let her hand land on his cheek, warm and dry, drawing him closer. She tangled her fingers in his hair and tugged, sending electric jolts over his scalp. He was lost.

With that first kiss, they'd breached a divide. But this kiss, this kiss was a cool glass of water in the desert. No, a sudden deluge. He drowned in the warm slide of her tongue, the rhythmic rocking of her ass against his cock. Her nipple hardened against his palm and he nearly came right then. Like he'd never touched a breast before. Well, he'd never touched hers.

"Callie." Her name was a rasp in his throat. A guttural moan. How many times had he said it like it meant nothing? Now it was a plea. "Is this okay?"

"Yes."

He rolled her onto her back, poised over her with his leg wedged between her thighs and one hand gripping the

waistband of her jeans. One tug and he'd have them open. Another tug and he could have them down over her ass. They'd crossed so many lines today, what difference did this one make? Why hesitate? He skimmed his thumb over her belly and savored her shiver. Soon he'd taste that spot. He tugged again, and she lifted her hips in answer, grinding herself against his knee. Fuck. This was really happening. He'd never seen anything hotter than Callie undone, biting her bottom lip and groaning beneath him. Wanting. He wanted too.

When she slipped her fingers under his shirt he hissed. Her hands were cold against his heated skin. Cold but soft, pushing his shirt away to explore the

expanse of his abdomen. Impatient to have her touch every possible inch, he grabbed the hem and yanked the shirt over his head, launching it across the room. She scrambled up to do the same, pressing the rough lace of her bra against his bare chest. Burying his face in the curve of her neck, he stifled a groan. He needed her naked. Soon, or this would be over before it got started. Fumbling the clasp, he cursed. She swatted his hands away and undid the damn thing herself.

He slipped the straps down her shoulders and pulled back to let the cups fall away. *Damn*. Her breasts were perfect. Small and high with dark nipples he couldn't wait to taste.

Cupping them both, he thumbed the stiff peaks until she arched into his touch. Head bent, he drew one into his mouth. One flick of his tongue, and her mewling moans were replaced by a sharp gasp. He did it again. And again. Anything to hear that sound.

“Tayber.”

His name on her lips was like a fist around his cock. And then her hands replaced the ghostly touch of voice. She gripped him, stroked him through the thin fabric of his shorts. No hesitation, only possession. Sure and right. They weren't friends. They weren't even people. They were just skin and mouths and lust. He popped the fly of her jeans and tugged hard as she shimmied against him,

helping to strip the ridiculously tight pants down her thighs. Finally, he could get his hands on her. Slip his fingers into the hot silk of her cunt. Find the hard bud of her clit and circle it with his thumb until she quaked against him.

The scratch of her nails against his waist made him jump. She clawed his shorts down, exposing his cock inch by inch, and grabbed his bare length.

“No, I’m too close.” He covered her hand with his own, guided it up and down once, before pulling it away.

He stood to finish stripping, buying himself some time to gain control. He grabbed the ankles of her jeans and tugged them the rest of the way free, exposing the curve of her thighs,

dimpled knees, smooth calves. His cock ached, insistent and pulsing. She crossed her legs, obscuring the dark thatch he'd touched moments before, turning her body ever so slightly, hiding from his view. He wanted to pin her arms above her head and *look*. Nothing hidden. Memorize every inch, exposed just for him. It was not helping his control issues. He groaned.

“Have you changed your mind?” she whispered.

How could she even think that?

“I was trying to cool off a little. I'm not gonna last long.”

“That's okay.”

Jesus, he'd never said anything like that before. He'd never really cared

before. He didn't just want to touch her. He wanted to touch her *right*. Kneeling on the bed, he traced the tender skin behind her knee and skimmed his hands up to her waist. "No. It isn't. Tell me what you like. Show me."

A seductive blush spread across her chest, up her neck and over her cheeks like a road map for his lips. He followed it, tasting dips and hollows, nipping her earlobe, before finding her mouth with his own. He pulled back and propped himself up with one arm. He watched her face as he worked a hand between them. Between her legs. And up the full curve of her inner thigh before stopping at the edge of her lips. He didn't part them, just traced his finger

along the outside, gathering her moisture.

“Do you like that?”

“More.” Barely a whisper. A breath of a word. He could give her more. One finger, then two, plunged into hot, wet velvet. Her body bowed beneath him, and his cock jerked in anticipation. He wanted to watch her come, watch her break with pleasure. This desire to see so much was a violent, unexpected need. He found her clit with his thumb again and pressed as he pumped his fingers deep inside her. She was so wet he could hear the slipping sounds, almost as sexy as the sounds Callie made as she thrashed against him. And then she stilled, muscles rigid, as she shuddered against him. Fuck, even her orgasms

were restrained.

He crushed himself against her chest, their hearts racing, breathing in tandem pants. “I want to be inside you. Are you ready?”

“Condom. Nightstand.” She gasped. Thank God one of them was thinking.

He fumbled in the drawer until he found a stash and pulled one free. Tearing it open with his teeth, he rolled onto his back. Sliding it over the head of his cock was almost painful. He’d never been this hard in his life. Not since the first time. Maybe not even then.

Poised at her entrance, he watched her face again, searching for any sign that she might not want this as much as him. Her eyes were shut tight, braced.

“Look at me. Look at us.” He looked down to where their bodies nearly joined and watched as he finally, finally, pushed inside.

He stilled. Pleasure coiled, threatened to burst.

“So. Damn. Good.” He ground the words out, face buried in the curve of her neck. The slick muscles of her cunt spasmed against his cock, and there was nothing he could do but move. There was no rhythm he could find, no artistry—he thrust inside her hard and fast. Her fingers slipped over his back and down to his ass. She gripped as if to draw him deeper, closer, and he was undone. One final thrust and then over the edge into rigid, blinding bliss.

When he could move again, he disposed of the condom and grabbed a bottle of water. He took a sip and passed it to Callie, who was mopping sweat from her neck with his t-shirt.

“That was—” He couldn’t finish, he hadn’t thought far enough ahead to decide on the exact right word to describe what that was. Amazing, awesome, wonderful. None of them sufficed. It might not have been the best sex she’d ever had. How could he know? But something magic had happened between them. And for the life of him, he couldn’t figure out why it hadn’t happened sooner.

“Really nice.” She finished looking away from him as she pressed the cool

bottle to her cheek.

Nice? Fucking nice? She couldn't mean it. Could she? "It was more than nice. Wasn't it?"

He curled himself around her, pressed kisses into the slope of her shoulder, and she shivered against him.

"It was so much more than I imagined. Intense." The words were spoken like a prayer, quiet reverence, but with a throaty edge that undid what little he had left of himself. She'd imagined this. Imagined. He'd imagined it too. Alone in the dark. His own hands on his body. Had she? He rolled that over and over in his mind as he drifted to sleep.

Her face mashed against the wall, and a long fuzzy leg tangled over her own. Naked and exposed, the top sheet tangled at their feet, she'd have frozen, but Tayber's body burned against her back. Trapped. Do. Not. Freak. Out. *This is what you wanted.* And she did want it. She resisted the all-consuming urge to roll over and kiss him awake, because what if he didn't want it too? What if last night was an accident, like that accidental kiss? If he woke up full of regret and apologies she'd have to go live under her bed. A dark and cozy nest. She would need to find some Oreos first.

She pushed his thigh back and held her breath, waiting for signs of life. Nothing. So she slithered down to the

knot of sheets and slipped off the end of the bed with a thump.

“What the hell?” He woke, sleep-creased and flailing.

Covering the important bits with a sweatshirt from the overflowing hamper, praying he wasn’t about to have another moral crisis, she coughed. “Relax, it’s only me.”

“Come back to bed. I’m cold.” Husky-voiced liar, he was a human furnace. He patted the empty space she’d left behind and dropped his head to the pillow with a soft grunt. She studied the golden curve of his shoulder, the dip of his waist, the broad expanse of his strong back, and sucked in a breath. With daylight shafting through the crooked

blinds, he still wanted her.

“Okay.” She shrugged into the sweatshirt and slipped back in between Tayber and the wall. Body rigid, chewing her lip, she focused on unclenching her muscles one by one. Toe. Calf. Thigh.

He draped an arm over her and pulled her into his chest. Like her very best dreams, the circle of his arm felt like home. Warm and safe. And no place she belonged. The heat of his breath against her neck raised goosebumps along her arms. He traced lazy circles over her belly, her ribs, up the curve of her breast, until he finally made contact with a very stiff nipple. His touch inflamed her. Last night had been so

frantic, she hadn't even had a chance to process what was happening. But now, today, fully present in the moment, she was overwhelmed by sensation. She mouthed his name, unable to force enough air from her lungs to make sound.

"You're wearing too many clothes again." He nipped the sensitive flesh below her ear, and she convulsed. Every hard inch of him pressed against her, and her only armor was a scrap of over-washed cotton.

"I was naked."

"I like you naked." He rocked his hips, nudging his erection against her bare ass. It seared her, as did the finger he slipped between her legs. Maybe this could work after all. They'd just have to

stay in bed forever.

Chapter Eight

She leaned over the sink, filling the coffeepot, and he brushed against her as he slipped past on his way to the fridge.

“No milk.” He grunted.

“Real men drink their coffee black.” Her nervous smile turned into a smirk. Okay. She could do this no-big-deal-morning-after thing if they fell back into the familiar territory of teasing banter.

“As long as there’s sugar.” He wrapped his arm around her waist from behind and pulled her against him. One large hand splayed over her belly, rucking up her camisole, his thumb teasing a sliver of exposed skin. The casual intimacy shocked her. Her hand

shook. The coffee pot was full to overflowing, and the water rushed over the top and down the drain. A wasteful burden she couldn't bring herself to stop or set down. All of her energy focused on staying upright, on not dribbling into a puddle of mush at his feet.

He reached around her, caged her against the sink, and shut off the tap. "I think we're about done here."

The plastic handle dug into her palm. She squeezed, knuckles white. She still didn't trust him, or herself. This was all happening too fast. "I don't know what to do with you."

"What's that supposed to mean?" He sounded insulted.

She twisted around to face him, his

pelvis against her stomach, reminding her how close they'd been only a few hours ago. She lost her nerve and stared at his chest instead. It was a nice chest. If she had to stare at not-his-face, at least she could enjoy the view. "Exactly. What did last night—this morning—mean? I'm such a mess. I hate that I'm that girl right now. You've made me that girl. I want to be cool, but I just can't. You make me a mess."

His eyes flashed—with recognition?—and his fingers brushed her cheek, her jaw. He tipped her chin up, coaxing her to meet his gaze. She pushed her ass into the counter, trying to put some space between them. "Hey, that girl is my friend."

“So we’re friends? Who fuck?”

“I don’t fuck my friends.”

“I feel like we’ve already had this conversation.” She pressed her palms against his chest, to push him away, not to feel his heat, not to feel his heart pounding. *Jesus*. It was thumping as hard as her own. What did he have to be scared of?

“We didn’t fuck, Callie. What we did was—”

“Please don’t.” She squeezed her eyes shut, flexed her fingers into his skin, bracing herself. *Please don’t say recreational, or a diversion, or nothing. Just don’t.*

“It was more.”

Now, pinned close, she looked at his

face. Jaw rough with stubble her fingers itched to touch, eyes full of some swirling soft emotion. Sadness? Hurt? “You don’t have to take pity on me.”

He rocked his hips and she could only gasp. The hard length of his cock, insistent, impatient. “Does that feel like pity?”

She could only shake her head as he closed her in the circle of his arms, squeezed her into a tight embrace. She stopped pushing, relaxed, let her cheek rest inches from his beautiful, thundering heart.

“I want you, Callie. I want more.”

“More what?” She spoke the question into his skin.

He skimmed up the curve of her

back, over the nape of her neck, until he cupped the back of her head. He sifted his fingers through her unruly hair.

“More everything.”

Everything. The opposite of nothing. She pushed herself up onto her tiptoes and kissed the full center of his bottom lip. She gripped his strong shoulders for an anchor, in case this incredible lightness spread, in case she floated away. “Okay, then. I think I can do everything.”

He grinned and she couldn't resist touching a dimple. He ducked his head, giving her a clear view of the wound she'd almost forgotten about. It reminded her of his brother and their awful fight and all the things she shouldn't know.

When she traced a fingertip over the angry gash through his eyebrow, he flinched. “You might need a stitch. Or one of those special band-aids.”

“Nah, I’ll just rub some dirt in it. It’ll be fine. All I need is coffee.” His tone was light, but he tensed and pulled back. His dimples disappeared.

“You should stop by the health center. Have it looked at by a professional.”

“It’s an overgrown scratch. I think I can count on my fingers the number of times I’ve needed a doctor. Sports physicals in the school nurse’s office. An STI screen. That’s about it. All clean, by the way.”

“You never got hurt? Broke a bone?”

“My bones are adamantium, but sure, I got hurt.” He peeled down the waistband of his boxer shorts, exposing a jagged white scar running along the edge of his hip and disappearing over the top of his ass. It was so thin she hadn’t noticed it in the dark. “That one probably needed stitches. And maybe a tetanus shot. But I survived.”

“What happened?”

“Me and Aaron were screwing around on the fire escape. I slipped. Some raggedy-ass wrought iron bit me. Man, Aaron was so pissed. He kept telling me not to cry while he dumped a whole bottle of peroxide down the back of my pants.” He ran his fingers through his hair and leaned against the bare wall

opposite the sink.

“That is so mean. How old were you?”

“I don’t know, maybe eight? But it wasn’t mean. He was mad at himself, and he was trying to keep us out of trouble. If I’d woken Mom up with my crying, we both would’ve needed a doctor.”

Again, she tried to imagine what his childhood must have been like and pictured two little boys, scared and alone, trying to take care of each other and eating Macaroni Surprise. Blinking back tears, she reached for his hand.

“No, don’t. I’m fine now. Mom worked nights. Not waking her up was the number one rule.”

“You should talk to him.” *Shit.*

She’d told him that as Sasha, too.

“Yeah, so I’ve been told. Probably not today.”

* * *

She’d given running a lot of thought, really. Tayber took up so much room, physically and emotionally, she needed some space. Every time he touched her she felt simultaneously wonderful and awful. Not because of anything he’d done or because she didn’t want him touching her. But because she felt so damn guilty. So she’d loaded an upbeat mix on her iPod, tightened the laces on her battered Chucks, grabbed a water bottle, and jogged down the stairs like

Rocky.

She didn't make it farther than the front porch. As soon as she stepped into sunlight, heard the sounds of a busy street, she froze. Panic unfurled in her chest like an algae bloom, slimy and tenacious and clouding everything.

Ridiculous. She shook her head but could only sit on the concrete step with her head between her knees. Pressing the cool bottle to the back of her neck, trying to slow her frantic pulse. She didn't need to run. She'd already raised her heart rate into the cardio zone. Did freaking out count as aerobic exercise? She should make a video. Panic and Pilates? No. She didn't do yoga either. Her temples throbbed. The elastic she'd

used to secure her ponytail was wound too tight. She yanked at it, letting her hair fall loose over her head and brush the filthy ground.

The door creaked behind her, and she knew it could only be Tayber.

“Hey.”

“Hey.” She echoed, ashamed of how small her voice sounded, how small she felt.

“I thought I’d see you bobbing down the street by now.”

“Probably not today.”

He sat behind her, spreading his legs and scooching forward so she was wedged between his knees. He was always crowding her. But, God, it felt good to be inside his space. To be

inside, period. She'd been outside for so long.

* * *

“Tell me. What’s wrong?” He shifted when she set her hands on his thighs and pushed herself upright. Like she needed leverage. Like this was a very hard task. Her hair was a wild mess. He smoothed it back. Raking his fingers through silky strands until they lay tamed, gathered in his palm. He tugged, not hard, a flirty pull that reminded him of elementary school and playgrounds and... “Tell me.”

“I still feel like a target sometimes.”

“You’re safe here, Callie. What happened back then? It can’t happen again.” Without thinking, he split the

bundle in his hand into three sections and started crossing them one over the other while she spoke.

“I know it’s stupid, but I can’t help it. And people are cruel, not just kids.”

“Do you want me to go with you?” She didn’t really need protection, but maybe he could make her feel safer.

“No, I...Are you braiding my hair?”

She stilled, the rhythm of her breathing interrupted as she held her breath.

“Sorry. I’ll stop.” He pulled his hands back. What the hell was he thinking? He wasn’t. That was the problem. He had a sudden flash of another dark-haired girl. One with a purple bow and a ratty sundress. He’d

forgotten all about playing with Jasmine when he was a kid. Poor Jazz.

“Please don’t stop. It feels lovely, but when did you pick up hair braiding?”

“There was this girl.”

“Of course.”

“Not like that.” He tugged again.

“We were ten.”

“Mhmmm,” she hummed, relaxing into his touch. He undid his sloppy work and started over.

“She lived in my apartment complex. We didn’t exactly play together, but we both spent a lot of time on the front stoop. Neither one of us talking about why we had to get out of our apartments. Anyway, she’d bug me to braid her hair. She could braid but couldn’t do it to

herself. It was easier to go with it than listen to Jazz whine.”

“You saint.” She pushed her elbow into his ribs. A teasing jab.

He tugged again and this time he could see the smile curving the corner of her mouth. “I was a kid. She taught me on a—she taught me.”

“On a what?”

“A Barbie.”

“I hear learning to braid on a Barbie is a rite of passage.” Her shoulders shook, and he could feel the giggles she held back threatening to burst through.

“Here I am, trying to do something nice, and you mock me. You’re a terrible friend, Callie Evans.”

She froze again. She had to know he

was teasing. Maybe he shouldn't tease her at all. God, how could he even stop? It was who they were together.

“It was sweet of you, playing with her. I think a lot of boys would've been mean.”

“I am many things, but I'm not mean.” *I am, however, very fucking confused.* He wouldn't tell her that. Not when she was finally relaxed into the space between his legs, letting her arms rest on his thighs, leaning the back of her head against his chest. No rib jabs or taunts.

Tayber broke the silence. “Hey, do you know the kid who does the hippie oldies show? The one on Wednesdays?”

“David something. Yeah, I've seen

him at station meetings and parties. He doesn't think any music recorded after 1979 is worth playing. And he isn't a hippie, he looks more like a Trekkie. Why?"

"I caught half a song the other day and I haven't been able to get it out of my head." He rubbed his knuckles down the back of her neck, working out knots of tension.

"He probably saves his playlists. Or you could tell me what you remember. I might know it."

"Something about a strange face. And spring?"

"That's *Cello Song*. I heard it, too."

"I don't remember anything about a cello."

She stifled another giggle. “No, that’s the name of the song. It’s Nick Drake.”

“It was almost depressing, but not. Earwormed the hell out of me.”

“More bittersweet than sad. I think I have it upstairs, if you want to hear it again.” She twisted to face him, all eager smile and braid slipping loose. So pretty.

“Play it for me.”

* * *

She cued up the song, and it felt strangely like the early days of their friendship. Last year, she’d found songs for him all the time, usually when she mentioned one that he’d never heard of

before. She'd hand him an earbud and then watch his face. If he didn't like a song, he'd scrunch his nose and tug on the cord stretched between them. But if he liked it, she could watch that revelation spread like dawn: his upper lip curling back into a wide smile, his hand reaching up to press the bud tight against his ear, to amplify the sound.

This time there was no cord between them. Only the lilting lull of Nick Drake's vocals, streaming from her small desk speakers, and the relentless cello plucking. She could feel it, like a phantom hand on her body.

Tayber, sitting on the edge of her bed, wasn't making either of the music faces she expected. He looked confused,

tugging on his lip. “I don’t know what it is about this song.”

He ran his hand over his forearm. Did he feel it too? That thrum.

She took a step toward him, then another, until she was back between his legs like she had been on the porch. Only this time she was standing, facing him, not panicking. She followed the path his hand had taken with her fingertips, trailing from his wrist to his elbow. He shivered.

How many times had she written that she wanted to kneel before him, that she wanted to use her mouth? What would it be like to just do the things she wanted to do?

“It makes you feel. That’s the magic.

The words are almost meaningless.” She didn’t want to think about words right now, anyway. She wanted to act. She knelt before him at the foot of her bed and used both of her hands to open his pants. It was like a perversion of nighttime prayers. Her fingers trembled.

He slid forward and sucked in a breath when her palm brushed against his erection. “Really?”

Didn’t he want her to? She shook off the doubt. Of course he did. He leaned back onto his elbows. Opening up for her.

She’d pictured this moment in her mind, let it carry her over the edge as her fingers pumped inside her. Now she could actually wrap her hand around his

girth, run her tongue from base to tip. Gripping his hips, she swirled her tongue over the head of his cock before taking him all the way into her mouth. She did exactly the things she'd talked about doing when she was Sasha. Her eyes watered as he hit the back of her throat, but she swallowed, relaxed, took a deep breath through her nose. Hollowing her cheeks, she sucked, rolling her tongue and gripping him tight at the base. All she could taste was clean skin and salt. Tayber's groan was followed by the tug of his fingers in her hair. Soon his hips were pumping, and she let him set the pace, let him fuck her mouth, ignoring her sore jaw and numb knees. This was about him. She couldn't

tell him, but she could show him. *I love you.*

* * *

He pulled free of her mouth at the last second and tried to catch his come in his hand. Too late. Some of it hit her neck, trailing down toward her collarbone. His softening cock throbbed when she reached up to touch her neck, to wipe the come away with her fingers.

The urge to push those fingers into her mouth overwhelmed him, and he nearly died of lust when, as if he'd spoken his desires aloud, she did it herself. Traced the curve of her bottom lip with her ring finger, darted her tongue to follow the same path, then

slipped that finger right into her mouth up to the first knuckle. He'd been in that mouth, so he knew what it felt like. Hot and wet. *Fuck*.

He grabbed her by the chin and pulled her up to his lips. Tasting himself, he couldn't resist the urge to taste her further.

“On the bed. Clothes off.” He hadn't meant to order her, but he had so little restraint left. She scrambled to her feet and wobbled a little as she crawled toward the pillows.

He watched her pull the t-shirt over her head, exposing a thin, white sports bra that did nothing to conceal the hard points of her nipples. He peeled her yoga pants down over her hips,

impatient to have her naked. To have access to everything. She lifted up to help him, covering her chest with her hands while he wriggled the pants the rest of the way down.

“Don’t hide from me.” He pulled her hands away and pushed the bra up, spilling her small breasts from under the band, framing them. With a flick of his tongue over each nipple, he meandered his way down her torso, alternating long laps with sharp nips. When he plunged his tongue into her navel she bucked up off the bed.

“Tell me what you want, Callie,” he pleaded, laying his head on her soft belly, gazing up the length of her body to her face. He didn’t know why it was so

important to hear her say it, but it was.

Eyes shut tight, she shook her head.
“Please. Just, please.”

With the heat of her core pressed against his chest, he could guess it was the same thing he wanted. When he finally reached the apex of her thighs, her panties were so wet they were almost translucent. He drew the cotton into his mouth, and she tried to cross her legs against him.

“No?” he asked, sure she was about to kick him out of the bed, deny herself—deny him—*this*. He wanted it so much that not having it was almost guaranteed.

And then, the muscles in her legs relaxed. “Yes.”

Thank you. He grabbed hold of the

top of her underwear and dragged them down her legs, leaving them tangled around her ankle. He hooked her knees over his shoulders and settled in before she could change her mind, taking one tentative swipe at her slit, before diving in to savor in full what he'd only sampled on her panties. He rolled his tongue in lazy, languid circles. She tasted of salt and shadow. Sharp and dark and fucking awesome. "God, I could live here."

She still didn't speak. She dug her fingers into his hair and held him against her as he plunged his tongue in and out of her hot opening. The tug and scratch of her nails against his scalp was electric. He was surrounded by her,

drowning in her. She lifted her hips, bucking against his face, sloppy and frantic.

He was so hard.

He pinned her down with a forearm over her belly and gripped his cock with his free hand, squeezed it once against the building throb, and released it.

She cried out a wordless moan when he slipped a finger inside her, and then another. Curving them, pumping them. He wrapped his lips around her clit and sucked.

“I can’t. I can’t,” she gasped, shaking beneath him, flooding his tongue until everything was so slick, so perfect, he knew she absolutely could. She had.

She stilled, and he smoothed his

palm over her sweat-damp waist, down her hip, and rested his head on her thigh. “You can talk to me. You can tell me anything, ask me anything. I wish you would.”

She jerked again, and he didn't think it was aftershocks. “I can't.”

The bed rocked beneath them as she pulled a pillow over her face and rolled away. Damn it, she still didn't trust him. Maybe she never would.

Chapter Nine

Tayber rested his elbows on the sticky bar top and laced his fingers behind his neck, his cheap beer going flat. *Piss water*. A dozen people were scattered nearby, on stools and in the peeling vinyl booths that lined one wall, but he didn't approach anyone. This wasn't social hour. He needed a few minutes to himself, to gather his thoughts, to breathe. He couldn't get that in the apartment, and he no longer had a key to his emptied dorm.

A man without a country, relegated to gummy pretzels and dollar drafts.

Yesterday he'd gone to the library to send Sasha an email and then waited for

freaking ever to see her response. It never came. It wasn't a digital booty call, it was more like a Dear John letter. Thanks so much for the fun times, can't do it anymore. They hadn't screwed around in a while, but he couldn't imagine trying to do that with Callie in the other room. God, Callie. He'd pushed her too far. He needed to slow it down.

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched a couple practically fucking in public. He couldn't help but remember doing the same thing, in the same spot. He tried to picture the girl, remember her name, but all he could imagine was Callie pushed up against the jukebox, his hand inching up her shirt while he

shielded her from view.

He shifted in his seat. She was replacing all of his memories, filling in all his empty spaces.

“Tayber King.” A smoky, satin voice called from behind him, followed by a few quick scratches to the center of his back.

He untangled his fingers, ran them over his scalp from nape to crown, plastered on his most congenial smile, and faced the interloper. Meg, from Lit. A few weeks ago he’d have welcomed her company. Her attention.

“That’s what they call me.” He shrugged, breaking their contact.

“You weren’t in class last week.”

“Had some shit to take care of.”

“You never miss class.”

“Apparently not never.” How the hell did she know his nevers? He’d missed so many days his junior year of high school the district had sent a registered letter threatening to fail him for the year. If he hadn’t pulled straight A’s, they probably would’ve done it.

“We started a pool. I put my money on mono.”

“Excuse me?”

“You know, the kissing disease.”

“I know what mono is, and I don’t have it.”

“Just teasing, Tay. You going to the Phi Ep thing next Friday? I was planning to make my move on you.” She did a little shimmy, running a manicured hand

over her own slim hip. He couldn't tell if she was serious or joking. Her wide smile was a mixture of *kiss me* and *kiss my ass*.

Callie couldn't even make it off the porch on Sunday. He wasn't going to drag her to a frat party. Certainly not one where Meg was planning a shimmy move. Even if Meg wasn't, someone probably was. Christ, people thought he was the poster boy for mono.

"Doubtful."

"What crawled up your butt?"

"Sorry. Look, Meg, I'm really not interested in hanging out tonight, or hooking up, or anything. I don't have it in me."

"It's cool. I was just worried about

you. Some other time.”

No. He hadn't meant to leave the door open to future hook ups. “I'm kinda seeing someone.”

“Well damn, lost that bet too.” She slapped his shoulder. “Just kidding.”

I'm seeing someone, he repeated to himself. It felt strange, saying it. Foreign. Off. *I'm seeing someone*. Not right. *I'm seeing Callie*. Yes. That's what he should have said.

“I'm seeing Callie Evans.”

“Whatever. I'll see you around.”

Meg smirked and sauntered off.

“I'm seeing Callie.” He repeated to the bartender refilling his snack bowl. It felt so good to say it, he needed to say it again. The wiry grad student who

seemed to live at The Brick cleaned his glasses with his shirt.

“You want a cookie or something?”

He dropped a ten next to his half-full beer and pushed his stool back. “Yeah, I do, and I know where to get one.”

* * *

“CJ Evans here on WCCC, The Cube, bringing you Random Nonsense, The Pop Edition. Regular listeners, I can hear your collective snarl. JC is snarling too. Bear with me. Sometimes you need a little infectious, hook-riddled, bounce in your seat, don’t think too hard, bubble gum. Now sing it with me, *Call It What You Want*.”

She spun in her chair. It felt good

nailing her lead with the song's catchy intro.

"I like this, Callista."

"I figured Foster the People was a safe bet."

"No, you. I like you bouncy with pop songs. No emo. No *wah wah* angst. It feels lighter, like my head." She grinned and ruffled the inch of hair cropped close against her scalp. Callie was so accustomed to Jessa's ever-changing looks she'd taken the drastic hair cut in stride, only pausing to tell her she looked pixie-cute before darting into the sound booth to get started.

"That's what I'm going for—lightness. It must be spring fever." She cued up a few more tracks, saving a

chart topper she knew Jessa would hate for last. Holding the words from Tayber's last email to Sasha close to her heart. *Things have changed. If we keep talking...I can't do that to Callie.* He wanted her, not Sasha. Her. An actual relationship. The kind where even an anonymous cyber fuck-buddy felt like cheating.

"I'm glad to hear you say that because I signed Random Nonsense up for an on-location spot at Spring Fest."

"The Phi Ep party?" She winced. The bubble of happiness building inside her turned to stone and dropped instantly to the pit of her stomach. She could handle chattering into the void, but out in the open, on location, with a crowd of

revelers on the quad?

“Spring Fest does not belong to the Greeks just because Phi Ep throws a big party at the same time. It’s a campus-wide event.”

“Okay. But why sign us up? You want to participate to prove that anyone can?”

“No. Maybe. It’ll be fun. And I don’t know about you, but I think I might like to make broadcasting my career. More experience is more experience. Besides, you can play all the mainstream top forty you want.”

Callie had no idea what she wanted to do. Get a degree. Start her *real* life. What was real? She thought she’d have figured it out by now. Everyone else

had. Tayber was racing through his degree program at warp speed so he could start teaching as soon as possible. Now Jessa wanted to make radio a career. She couldn't ride on Jessa's coattails forever. She felt lightheaded. The way she'd felt when she'd looked over the edge of the Grand Canyon. *Such a long way down.*

“If it's important to you, I'll find a way to muddle through.” Because that's what friends do, they muddle through the important things. They pick you up at the airport even when the parking lot there scares them to death. They learn your favorite songs even when they hate the band. They compromise. *They tell the truth.* A flicker of fear tickled at the

edges of her joy.

Jessa scrolled through her song queue and did a little toe-tapping jig in place. “Oh, I could kiss you. I know it’s not exactly pop, but I’m playing *Hallelujah* because Halle-fricken-lujah.”

“I think it’s been performed on enough reality TV talent shows to qualify as part of the pop lexicon.”

It felt good to jam like this, to bounce back and forth with songs, like call and response. And then the lyrics hit. Hard and fast, right in the solar plexus.

She could forget for a few moments at a time that she was a lying liar who lied, but not when she was listening to

Buckley's voice shred all her emotional armor. Every note raw and honest. She pressed her thumbs against her eyelids. What would it do to Tayber when she finally told him? What would it do to her?

“Hey, hey, hey. I didn't play that to undo all the happy. It's almost over.” Jessa cross-faded Buckley into some ska. The abrupt shift reminded her of how startling Jessa's haircut really was. How easily her friend seemed to handle change. How would Jessa react if she shared this terrible secret?

“Why did you cut your hair?”

“You hate it?” She covered most of it with her hands, little tufts peeking out between her fingers, and wrinkled her

nose.

“No, not at all. It’s just so drastic.”

“The dreads were really heavy, plus my aunt hated them. I did it for her, mostly. To support her.”

Callie’s heart raced as she considered why people shaved their heads to support other people. Cancer. “Oh, God.”

“She’s a fighter, I come by it honest. We’re all focused on being super positive. Only good thoughts. Thoughts have power.” She jutted her chin and smiled. It was a fierce smile, the kind of smile that would see a warrior through battle.

Callie’s thoughts were a dark, twisted mess. There was a reason she’d

called her secrets a cancer, but now she felt ashamed. They were not a cancer, they hadn't split inside her body against her will.

She'd created them, and she had the power to eradicate them. She needed to unburden her soul now, if not for Tayber, then for herself.

She reached across the soundboard and grabbed Jessa's hand, squeezing it in her own. Passing strength on as much as taking it. "Only good thoughts."

Chapter Ten

Callie paced, breathless and dizzy, outside her apartment, their apartment, tucking the damp curls at the nape of her neck back into her ponytail. Her palms tingled. She clenched and unclenched her hands a few times, trying to banish the prickles, and blew out a shaky breath. Her whole body felt clammy as the thin sheen of sweat covering her skin dried. She shouldn't have run across campus, but walking would have given her too much time to think. No good came from that kind of thinking.

Thoughts have power.

If they were going to have any chance at a relationship, she had to tell

him the truth. She no longer had any excuses. His break up email to Sasha played over and over in her head. *I can't do that to Callie.* Now or never. The sharp rap of her knuckles against the door echoed in the empty corridor. At least she didn't have an audience. Don't be home. Don't be home. Don't be—
“Come in.”

The door might have been lead. It took every ounce of her resolve to push the damn thing open. Head down, she stepped over the threshold and into her new life.

“Hey, I was looking for you. And some cookies. Why were you knocking?” He looked so at ease, slouched on the futon, so relaxed and

happy with his feet up and his dimples flashing.

She opened her mouth to speak.
Nothing.

“What’s wrong?” Voice edged with concern, he launched himself off the futon. The game controller resting on his lap clattered to the floor and spun between them.

“I, I—” Skipping like scratched vinyl, she couldn’t force the words out. He tugged at her sleeve, gently guiding her into the camp chair set up beside the milk crate coffee table. If he offered her tea and a blanket she’d scream. He didn’t get to be nice to her. Not now. She needed him to be an asshole.

Sitting on the futon, he reached over

to grip the arms of the nylon chair and pulled, dragging her closer. Their knees touched. The contact, and the weight of his regard, did nothing to ease the fear churning in her gut. He skated his thumb over the back of her hand. She flinched.

“You’re scaring me. Are you hurt? Just nod yes or no.”

“I’ve done something terrible. I mean, I stopped doing. But I did it. Did do it.” She was actually blithering.

“What did you do?”

“I’m Sasha, Tayber.” There. She’d said it, and the universe hadn’t imploded on the spot. Her galloping, stuttering heart, though? That was still a distinct possibility. She couldn’t even cry. The mix of fear and relief was a paralytic

swirling in her veins.

His brows knit together. She watched in horror as all the color drained from his face. “No, that’s not possible. You can’t be.”

Tayber blinked twice, stood, and said nothing. He just looked at her like he was seeing her for the very first time. And he did not like what he saw. She shuddered and fought against the tightness in her throat, the aching sorrow in her chest, until it heaved up inside her with a wrenching sob.

“I’m so sorry. So, so sorry.” She couldn’t stop saying it, pouring out all her regret in a torrent of meaningless syllables. She reached for him and he stumbled back like her touch might burn

him. Oh, God, if she never got to touch him again, to laugh with him...She couldn't think about that.

“Not good enough.”

She wiped her sweaty palms on her jeans and swallowed hard. “Let me explain.”

He shook his head and grabbed his keys off the hook by the pantry. “I don't even know you, do I?”

“I'm still me, Tayber. We're still us. I know I did something stupid...” She followed as he picked up his laptop and shoved it into the backpack still sitting on the floor by the futon.

“Stupid? You think? I'll be back for the rest of my shit later. Around ten. You probably shouldn't be here then.”

She hadn't thought, and that was the problem. Or she'd thought too much.
"Please, let me explain."

He threw his bag over his shoulder and turned around. She'd thought she'd seen him angry that night in the bar. She'd been wrong. He curled his lip in disgust and sneered. "Go ahead, Callie, explain."

She couldn't explain it or justify it. No matter what she'd thought of him, or herself, he hadn't deserved her lies, her manipulation. Her vision hazed out into tiny pinpricks of light at the edges. She dried her hands again and again, wringing the hem of her shirt in front of her. Would they ever get dry?

"I didn't trust—I didn't—I—I—"

She couldn't get anything out. It was too important. And indefensible.

“Explain to me how deceiving me for months is okay. How tricking me into sharing the most personal details of my life is no big deal. You violated me. For what? So we could fuck around? You only had to ask.”

“I didn't know how.” And she wanted more than that. But how could she tell him that? She felt small and very far away.

“Sasha did.”

His words were a bee sting, a shocking burn. Her face flamed as she remembered all the things she'd told him. All the things she couldn't tell him now.

When he left, he didn't even bother to slam the door. The jangle of keys, the barely audible click of the lock, the muffled thump of his footsteps trailing off, were all more devastating and final. She'd known this confession would be ugly and painful, that it would make him hate her. At least she didn't need to hate herself anymore.

She didn't deserve to cry, not for the person she had been, the one who couldn't be honest with anyone. Maybe for Tayber, who had deserved her truth much sooner. Or for Jessa and her aunt. For everything awful and unfair and unforgivable in the whole fucking world. But not for herself. Never that. She choked it all back, squeezing her fingers

into fists, nails cutting deep into the flesh of her palms. She'd cried enough in high school. Maybe she'd deserved that too.

Chapter Eleven

The force of his fury propelled him four blocks before he remembered he had a car. Tayber stopped in the middle of the broken sidewalk and bent over, hands on his knees, to get some blood back in his brain. That stitch in his chest was from exertion, not heartbreak, right?

He wanted Callie to take it back, to tell him she'd snooped on his laptop and was playing a practical joke. But as soon as she'd said it, he knew it was true. Her confession had been the last puzzle piece falling into place. And it fit. He didn't have to jam at the edges or pound it with his fist. It fit. Why had she done it? To make fun of him? To dig up

dirt? To use him for a thrill and then throw him away?

All he could do was breathe, and curse, and pick himself up to walk back to his car. He'd been living in Callie's bubble even more than he'd realized. She knew everything about him, and he knew nothing about her. Less than nothing, because what he did know could be all lies.

When he rounded the corner into the parking lot, his bastard brother was leaning against his car, arms crossed, sunglasses blocking eyes. Tayber knew looked exactly like his own. *Salt in a motherfucking paper cut.*

"Hear me out." Aaron held up his hands, palms out. Warding Tayber off

and beckoning at the same time.

He didn't know if he wanted to punch him again or hug him. He jogged ahead, fists balled, but Aaron didn't move. Tayber launched himself and Aaron caught him. The punch he'd been considering melted into a gut tap, his other arm wrapped around his brother's neck. He should still be angry—and he was—but it was muted now, like he only had enough room in his heart to be angry with one person he loved at a time. Squeezing, he buried his face in Aaron's shoulder.

He hadn't hugged his brother in eight years, maybe longer, but it was only awkward for a moment. It melted into warmth and safety. Comfort. "Fine, you

fucker, fine. You win.”

“Yeah, I do.” Aaron squeezed him again and stepped back, gripping Tayber’s shoulders.

“You alright? You blew outta that apartment like you were dodging the cops. I was about to tear after you once I realized no one was following behind.”

He almost wished he were in trouble with the cops, then maybe Aaron could help him. No, not even that. His brother hadn’t fought his battles for him in years. He shrugged out of his grip. “I don’t even know.”

“Fight with the girlfriend? I know I bolted from Kelsey like that a few times. Usually she was throwing my shit at me while I ran.”

Kelsey, of course. That was the girl Aaron had taken off with. He remembered her like a cloud of Baby Soft perfume mixed with smoke. Sweet and harsh. Callie wouldn't throw things. She'd probably box his stuff up neatly and set it in the corner. Damn. He didn't want to go back up there and deal with her. He jingled the keys in his pocket. "You hungry?"

"I could murder some burgers. There's this dive attached to my motel..."

He lobbed the keys. "You drive, old man. I'm not up for it."

He hopped into the passenger seat, Callie's seat, and cursed. He knew if he reached under the seat he'd find a brush

full of her hair, a CD with her handwriting scrawled across the front.

The scent of her shampoo clung to the headrest. She lingered. He ducked his head and focused on breathing through his mouth.

They pulled up in front of a faded motel that seemed to exist solely to house family members in town for tours, sporting events, and graduations. “I’m staying here for now. Until I figure out my next move.”

“You seen Mom yet?”

“Nope.”

“Do you plan to?”

“Are we going to sit here and stroll down Bad Memory Lane, or are we going to eat?”

The neon ‘open’ sign in the front window of the motel’s attached diner—Moonlight Fries—glowed blue and pink, a beacon guiding them toward greasy potatoes and sloppy burgers. They settled into a booth. A perky waitress in a mustard-yellow uniform took their orders and dropped off two glasses of ice water. He didn’t recognize her and for some reason that made him feel better.

“So I figure some pretty bad shit had to go down between you and your girl to get you sitting here with me right now.”

“I don’t want to talk about that. I’d rather know why you left and never looked back.”

“I looked back every damn day, but I

couldn't go back. You had a chance without me. You were so smart, but you followed me around like a puppy. Anything I did, you were right there doing it too."

"What's wrong with that? You're my brother. You took care of me."

"Oh, grow up. I shouldn't have been taking care of you, doing Mom's job. I thought maybe if she didn't have me to fall back on she'd actually do it. Did she?"

"You have to know that she didn't."

He ran his fingers through his hair, nape to crown, the same way Tayber did when he was overwhelmed. It was strange seeing so much of himself in his brother when they'd been separated for

so long.

“She got you here.”

Tayber knew he meant to Copeland, not to this crummy diner. The crummy diner was more her speed.

“All me. I had to forge her signature on my applications. A few months ago, she pinched off the last trickle of financial support. I hope you’re paying for dinner.”

Aaron grunted. “Yeah, I got this.”

“It’s like, she wanted me to go to college in theory, but she didn’t understand her role in the process. She was fine with picking out my sheets, but orientation weekend? I drove myself.”

“Did you tell her you wanted her to go with you?” Aaron stacked coffee

creamers into a pyramid.

“No. She should have known.”

“How? It’s not like she went to college. Besides, did you really want her there?”

He couldn’t picture his mother making small talk with professors or imagine the kinds of questions she might have asked. The only meaningful question she’d asked him was how much it was going to cost her. “I guess I was kind of relieved she didn’t come. I haven’t been back home more than a few times since.”

“Sucks, doesn’t it? Realizing that what you want and what you need don’t always line up.”

“I can feel the old neighborhood

pulling me. I'm still too close here. I know it's only forty-five minutes if I don't hit any red lights. I just want to finish this degree and get a job and start my fucking life. As far away from Dirty Denham as I can get."

"What do you think I wanted, Tayber?"

"So I was right all along. You did leave because of me." The words were like gravel in his throat, but he had to finally get them out.

"No. I left because of me. It was all I could do to take care of myself. I'm so sorry I hurt you, but you gotta understand. I was a kid too. I kept looking for somewhere better, somewhere easier, and next thing I know

it's eight years later and there still aren't any picket fences."

Fuck, I'm not much older than he was when he left. He did need to grow up. "How far did you get?"

Aaron looked down at his burger, and then pushed the plate toward him. "Far enough to know that 'far enough' isn't on any map."

Tayber slumped, the truth about the impossibility of escape dragging him down. "You got two beds in your hotel room?"

"Honeymoon over already?"

"It wasn't like that." Actually, it was exactly like that. He shifted, remembering how much *like that* it was. God damn her.

“She seemed pretty concerned about your wellbeing. That’s more than some guys get.” He reached around to rub his own shoulder, reminding Tayber of Callie’s small fists pounding into Aaron’s broad back.

“She wasn’t honest.”

“Who the fuck is honest? We’re all just doing what we can to get by. She cheat on you or something?”

She hadn’t cheated on him. There hadn’t been a chance for that. But she had cheated. She’d cheated them out of something, but he couldn’t put his finger on what exactly it was. He couldn’t tell Aaron what she’d done, his pride wouldn’t let him.

“It doesn’t matter. I can’t stay there

anymore.”

“You can sleep in the tub. I only have one bed and I’m not giving it up, even if you are heartbroken.”

“I am not heartbroken. I’m pissed.”

“Sometimes that feels pretty much the same.”

Tayber flicked a sugar packet at Aaron’s creamer tower. They all fell down.

* * *

Aaron’s hotel room was a lot like the dorms, frigid and spartan, only more depressing. Tayber tossed his bag on the desk chair. “Home sweet home.”

“Not for long. I’ll rent an apartment eventually.” His keys clattered on the

nightstand.

“Here?”

“It’s as good a place as any. And you’re here.”

“For now. I’ll graduate.”

“I’m not buying a house. Can’t we just try being a family again, for a little while? Give me a chance?”

“Let me have the bed and I’ll think about it.”

“Fuck that. I’m too old for sleeping in bathtubs. Besides, you’re already thinking about it. I can tell. You’ve got that look you used to get when you wanted half my sandwich.” Aaron stripped the comforter off the double bed and tossed it to him, followed by a pillow.

The bathroom was small, but at least it was clean. The scent of bleach tickled his nose and he fought back a sneeze. He'd slept worse places, a sketchy futon in a frat house game room, the backseat of his car. He considered bringing his boxes inside. He could put them in the tub and then he could sleep in the car. *Too much work.* At least they'd gotten his shit back without incident.

He made a nest in the tub and stripped down to his shorts, leaving his clothes in a pile on the counter. Curled up with his foot jammed under the faucet, the air conditioner humming, he couldn't settle.

“Tell me where you went, Air? Please.” And just like that, he was ten

again, begging to tag along with the big kids. A knot the size of a fist settled in his throat. Only the truth could dislodge it. He was certain.

“I enlisted. I married Kelsey. Neither lasted as long as I thought they would.”

At least now Tayber knew. It was what he'd wanted for so long. To know. Only now he didn't want to walk away.

At least now he knew about Callie, too. And Sasha.

“Air?”

“Tay.”

They were like the fucking Waltons calling to each other through the bathroom door. “She lied to me. A lot.”

“Why?”

“That’s what I’d like to know.”

“People lie for a lot of reasons.

Because they want things they aren’t supposed to have. Because they’re afraid of the consequences. Because they don’t want to hurt or be hurt. Any of that ring true?”

All of it. Huddled in the tub, with the faucet dripping on his big toe, he realized he hadn’t been exactly honest with Callie either. He’d hidden from his feelings because he’d thought he wasn’t supposed to have her, that he wasn’t good enough to have her. *Bullshit.* He’d never told her about the relationship he’d been having online. He hadn’t wanted her to judge him. More bullshit. Lies of omission.

And he'd lied right to her face, when he told her that all he wanted when he fucked someone was nothing. He'd lied to himself too.

He still had so many questions, big ones, like had she been lying to him as Sasha too? Was all of it fake? He didn't think so, but he needed to know. Deserved to know.

If he could push his anger aside and give Aaron a chance to explain, he could do that for Callie too. He loved her. He couldn't turn that off any more than he could cut off the stupid leaky faucet.

* * *

Two days felt like a month. Tayber's things had vanished, as promised, and

Callie's tiny apartment felt enormous. She rattled around aimlessly, leaving a trail of empty soda cans and cookie crumbs behind her. She'd done something stupid. Destroyed something special. Now she couldn't focus on anything at all.

She tried to work on a paper, but it was pointless. She set her laptop on the floor beside her bed and pressed her face into the pillow that still smelled faintly like him. Eventually that would fade too, along with this ache.

Blip. She ignored it. It couldn't be anyone she wanted to talk to, any email she wanted to read.

Blip. Blip. Blip.

Fine. She grabbed the infernal

device, determined to shut it up. And then her head swam. What the hell was he doing IMing Sasha?

Tay: Hey

Tay: Are you there?

Tay: I want to meet you.

Shitshitshit. She got up and paced a tiny circle at the foot of her bed. *I need a cookie.* Half an Oreo sat lonely and forgotten on her nightstand with all the cream licked out. *That'll do.* She popped the whole thing in her mouth and, fortified, sat down to respond. *Blip.*

Tay: I think I deserve an answer.

Sasha: I'm here, and you know where I live. You still have a key.

Tay: Not Callie. Sasha.

Sasha: She isn't real.

Tay: Isn't she? She seemed real enough the last time I talked to her.

Yes. She was real enough. And the fact that he seemed to think so swelled something inside her, something fragile and terrible and a lot like hope.

Sasha: I'll be at Spring Fest tomorrow doing a spot for Random Nonsense from one to two. You can meet ME after.

Which me did she mean? Could she *be* Sasha for him? Was Sasha what he really wanted?

* * *

“CJ Evans here, one half of Random Nonsense. You might have heard me and JC on the air, if any of you listen to the

campus radio station on Friday nights.”

The smattering of applause was reassuring. The more she talked, the less she worried that someone was going to pelt her with rotten produce.

“Now, here’s a little digital Vitamin C to go with all the Vitamin D you’re soaking up.”

Fifty sun-starved co-eds writhed on the quad, bouncing in time to pop songs that Jessa would’ve ground her teeth over if she’d tried to play them on their show. The WCCC booth at Spring Fest wasn’t really an on-location broadcast. They didn’t have the equipment for that. Today they were glorified party DJs, and tonight their regular spot would be nothing but dead air. Unless Callie

skipped the parties and did the show herself. Maybe she would do it herself. It wasn't like she *wanted* to party. Not now. She probably wouldn't want to do anything after she talked to Tayber. Her belly flipped.

“Why aren't you gloating?” Jessa leaned close and shouted.

“Gloating is mean?”

“You should be grinning like mad. These are your jams aren't they?”

“Not today.” She didn't want to tell Jessa what she'd done, what had happened with Tayber. And if she did, she certainly wouldn't tell her here, in the middle of all these people, shouting over the music.

Her head pounded in time to the

bass. She leaned under the table to dig in her purse for some Tylenol.

“We’re not taking requests.” She heard Jessa yell and popped up to see if she needed to diffuse the situation. Doe eyes. Black bob. Danger.

“I know you.” Meg shouted, smiling. “Callie? Tayber’s girlfriend?”

The song dropped off into silence at the most inopportune moment, and Jessa punched her in the arm while Meg’s words socked her in the gut. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I’m not Tayber’s girlfriend.” She wanted to be, but she’d screwed everything up. Her already flipping belly turned somersaults, churning into acrobatic twirls up her esophagus. They

could destroy her right now. Maybe not Jessa, but Meg? Meg could shred her in front of all these people. Sure, they'd clapped and bounced to her set list. But they didn't give a shit. And who didn't love a crucifixion? She could picture them all turning to watch as Meg pointed and laughed about how silly Callie was to think she could ever have a boyfriend. Have *Tayber* for a boyfriend. *Get a grip.*

She flexed her fingers, willing the blood flushing her face to dribble back down to her extremities. She wasn't that girl anymore. She hadn't been that girl for a long time, but old wounds cut deep.

"Well, he seemed to think you were when I talked to him the other night. But

he wasn't very convincing. Maybe he used you as an excuse not to hook up with me?"

Her worst fear. She didn't care if he used Sasha. Hell, Sasha had used him. The thought of Tayber using her, the real her, made her want to vomit. When she noticed Tayber standing behind Meg, she nearly did.

"I didn't use Callie." He ground the word *use* into dust. The bitter edge, a reminder of how used she'd made him feel. But, God. He didn't use her. He didn't. She knew that deep down in her toes, under all the doubt and fear and worry. He'd never used her. She felt awful. He hated her, and he was still defending her.

“Oh, hey, Tayber. Fancy seeing you here. I just meant it was all very kinda sorta wishy-washy. You were there, you know. You two need to firm things up.” She squeezed Tayber’s biceps and darted back into the crowd of dancers. If she’d left her fingers on his body any longer than that second, Callie might not have been able to resist the urge to peel them off, one by one.

“You’re early. I’m not done until two.”

“I didn’t want to miss the transformation.”

Like she was an ugly caterpillar ready to bust out of its cocoon? What did he think was going to happen? She’d flip a switch and suddenly be sex-bomb

Sasha? Why couldn't he see that she already was Sasha every minute of every day?

Jessa narrowed her eyes, glaring at the both of them. "I don't know what's going on here, and I don't think I want to know. I don't think the rest of this crowd wants to know, either. Okay, maybe they do. But they don't need to. I'm going to play the last few songs in our set and you're going to take this dramarama elsewhere."

Chapter Twelve

Callie and Tayber walked back to the apartment in silence. A gallows walk. She wanted this over with, but she wasn't in any hurry to listen to him spew venom at her again. She deserved it, but she didn't like it.

Tayber led, two steps ahead, and she studied his back most of the way. Watched the hitch of his shoulders, the stride of his legs. Determined.

She'd just lay it out for him. Explain to him that she had been afraid of what would happen if she'd acted on her feelings. Afraid of losing him as a friend. Afraid that he wouldn't—she swallowed hard. She could do this. She

could weather the storm of his anger and face her own betrayal.

As soon as she got the door locked behind them, he kissed her. Hard and breathless. All tongue and teeth and raking fingers. She thought she might die from the relief of his body against hers. The rasp of his fingers over her ribs. The pull of his mouth on her lips. She'd thought that was over for good. Relief and terror warred in her gut. Were those the punishing kisses she'd read about in romance novels? Was he just taking his rage out on her mouth, making her feel, only to withdraw? Withhold? Was he kissing her good-bye?

He pushed her up against the door, and she pushed back. Clawing at his

shirt, dragging it up so she could get her hands on his skin. If it was good-bye she was going to make the most of it. They knocked over one of the milk crates, sending empty coke cans rolling across the floor, and landed on the still-open futon in a tangle of limbs.

“I want to hear you say it.” Eyes passion-dark, breath hot, he bit at the corner of her mouth.

“I’m sorry.” An exhalation. An exultation. She felt like every ounce of her body weight was pushing down on the erection pulsing between them.

He shook his head and rolled her onto her back. “You know what I want to hear.”

All the relief slipped back like a

fast-receding current. A riptide of loss and anger. What did he want from her? She'd confessed, apologized, abased herself. And she couldn't think with all of him pressed against her like this, crowding her. Every dirty word she'd typed flashed before her eyes, like credits at the end of a movie. She couldn't even be embarrassed anymore. She liked what she liked. She wanted what she wanted. And he wanted it too. Wanted her. Of course she knew. *I want to hear you say it.* She'd read that email enough times she could recite it from memory. "Cock?"

"Like you mean it."

"What do you want me to say? I want to suck your cock, Tayber? Because I

don't. Not right now. Not when you're being like this. Not when you hate me. Not even when you kiss me like we're dying, and it's the only way to live."

"I don't hate you. I don't even know you. When we were together—when I was inside you—you hardly said anything. And I asked. I can't stop thinking about that and remembering all the things Sasha did say."

"Sasha didn't say anything. She wrote." *She. Me.* Callie didn't even know where the line existed anymore.

"Fine. She wrote them. She thought them. You thought them. Was it different in person? Did you not think them when you were actually with me? I didn't live up to the hype? Make me understand."

He didn't look angry anymore, he looked wounded.

"I didn't trust you." A shrill cry, welling up from every broken and sore place inside her.

"Do you trust me now?" Cupping her face, he wiped her tears with his thumbs. The sweetness unbearable, she turned into his palm.

"It's why I had to tell you the truth."

* * *

Tayber knew why she didn't trust him. The same reason Meg thought it was funny to call him Mr. Mono. He did hook up. A lot. And he'd never given Callie any reason to think he was interested in more than hooking up with anyone. He'd

given her every reason to think that was all he was interested in, ever. God, when he thought about their fight that day in the dining hall he wanted to travel back in time and punch himself in the face.

He had wanted more, long before Sasha sent him that first message. *Hey, you're cute.* Jesus, he was easy. He just didn't think he deserved more. Just like he didn't really think he deserved to be at Copeland. It was the same reason he was trying to race through his degree before anyone realized they'd made a mistake and kicked his useless ass to the curb.

“What did you want, Callie?”

“I wanted us. And I wanted more. I

didn't think I could have both. I thought you'd laugh at me if I made a move."

"I wouldn't have. I would've—"

"Suggested friends with benefits? I didn't want that either. I wanted to be with you."

"Why me?"

"Because you're funny and smart and sensitive and an asshole and you sing songs I like and you cared about me. I couldn't figure out why you wanted to spend time with me, why you wanted to be my friend."

She didn't even trust his friendship? It wasn't only about her doubting him, she had her own issues too.

"We're both idiots."

"You do know me. I never lied about

anything but my name. And that picture. Oh God, you can't ever meet my cousin." She covered her face with her hands.

He pulled them away and brushed his lips against hers. "The picture didn't do it for me. Not that I'm opposed to a few authentic bikini shots. Maybe a tasteful nude."

She grinned in response, and it felt right. The two of them, together, laughing in bed. Exposed and still wanting each other.

"It was the words. All those dirty, filthy words. Tell me you'll say them."

He could see her throat work as she swallowed. Every inch of her was blotchy pink with blush. She squeezed

her eyes shut, opened her mouth, and devastated him.

“Fuck me, Tayber. Fuck me hard. I want your cock inside me.”

Holy. Shit.

“All you ever have to do is ask.”

But he didn't fuck her, not hard, not at all. He cupped the curve of her cheek, holding her gaze while he followed the line of her body with his other hand, bringing his lips almost to hers. So close, but not touching, just sharing breath. Smoothing over the rise of her breast, the dip of waist, down the front of her jeans, under her panties, until he found that hot, wet center.

“Gah.” She bowed beneath him, pushing against his fingers.

“I love you, Callie. I love you when we’re fighting, when we’re talking about music, when we’re talking dirty. I don’t deserve you, but I love you.”

She fisted his hair in her hands and pulled him to her mouth. Eyes glazed with lust, she bit his lip, pulled it as she rocked her hips. He felt the tug zing straight to his cock.

“You deserve everything. You are not your past. You’re my future.” She held him tighter as she spoke, their eyes locked. And then she came, violent and moaning and unrestrained. It was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen. He didn’t feel worthy, but he’d try.

* * *

She was breathless. They'd spent the whole movie not touching. Sitting side by side, passing popcorn back and forth, darting glances and avoiding all physical contact.

A game.

A game he was winning.

Their game.

He grinned, wolfish, but kept his eyes trained on the dash and both hands on the steering wheel of the stationary car.

She wasn't going to last another minute, let alone last through dinner and then the ride back to her apartment. Her apartment. Not their apartment. Tayber was staying with his brother for the summer. Aaron had found a cheap two-

bedroom on the other side of town, but he couldn't swing the rent on his own yet. She missed Tayber, but, God, they were so intense together the space was a relief. Except for when the space was a physical pain. A dull ache between her legs, a throbbing pulse under her skin.

Every inch of her body silently screamed *touch me*. The jerk. She twisted in her seat and blew out a ragged breath. She wanted to win this time.

He popped in her CD and she cursed. "Don't you dare sing, that's cheating."

He hummed instead. It didn't matter, the damage was done. Music and Tayber and prolonged bouts of not touching were her personal kryptonite.

“Kiss me, you bastard.”

He leaned across the console, still grinning, and traced her bottom lip with his tongue. Drawing out her sigh. She wrapped her arms around him and pulled him closer, forcing him to end the torment and kiss her properly.

“I win.” He gloated, both of them smiling as they kissed and teased.

Their game. It had always been their game, she'd just been too wrapped up in her own old hurts to see it. They'd had something from the very beginning. Now they had everything. She ran her hand under his shirt, up the side of his waist and tweaked his nipple. “I let you.”

“Did not.” He ran his mouth down the column of her throat, nipping the

sweet spot where shoulder became neck.

She panted. “All I had to do was whisper a few dirty words into your ear during the movie and you’d have been all over me.”

If it wasn’t so warm out the windows would’ve fogged. He bit again. “It’s that easy?”

“Loving you is the hardest easy thing I’ve ever done.”

Afterword

I hope you enjoyed *The Opposite of Nothing*. Please consider leaving a review.

Be the first to know about upcoming releases by [signing up for my newsletter](#). I'll only send you news about new releases (with the occasional freebie, teaser, or excerpt). I won't share your information with anyone.

I love to hear from readers. You can find me on [facebook](#) and [twitter](#).

Acknowledgements

This little book would not exist without the love and support of some amazing people that I am blessed to call friends. Especially Amber, Dayna, Del, Emily, Mary Ann, and Shelley. My heart could burst. *Always say yes.*

About the Author

Shari Slade is a snarky optimist. A would-be academic with big dreams and very little means. When she isn't toiling away in the non-profit sector, she's writing gritty stories about identity and people who make terrible choices in the name of love (or lust). Somehow, it all works out in the end. If she had a patronus it would be a platypus.

Read more at [Shari Slade's site](#).