

A man and a woman are shown from the chest up, partially submerged in the ocean. The man, on the right, has dark hair and is wearing a white t-shirt. He is looking down at the woman with a gentle expression. The woman, on the left, has dark hair and is wearing a white lace-trimmed top. She is looking directly at the camera with a serious, somewhat somber expression. Her hand, with bright pink nail polish and a ring, rests on the man's shoulder. The background shows the gentle waves of the ocean under a warm, golden light, suggesting sunset or sunrise.

TOXIC *Secrets*

a novel by
JILL PATTEN

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resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental. With the exception of the original material written by the author, all songs, song titles, and lyrics contained in this book are the property of the respective songwriters and copyright holders.

For my sister, Lara, who planted the seed in my head, making me believe I could actually do this.

For my friend, Tiffanny, who nagged me relentlessly for the next chapter as she needed another fix.

For my smut sisters – Terri Thomas, Amy Jennings, Adriane Leigh, Summer Marston, Beth Ashworth, Joan Pleasant, Teri Maxwell, K.M. Golland

and Sibylla Matilde. Without you ladies, this book would be a wreck. I owe it all to you for helping me perfect my story. Lifelong friendships never die. Love you!



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Toxic Secrets Playlist of Inspiration

Courtney's California Playlist

Acknowledgements

Prologue

After eating the traditional Thanksgiving dinner, my stomach was bordering along the lines of regurgitation. To make matters worse, driving around on the back roads of North Carolina was frustrating the hell out of me. All the twisted roads—or, as they were called around here, “kiss your ass curves” —were making it difficult to know which direction I was heading. Traveling in this part of the state was nothing like the easy navigation you find in Southern California. I figured they didn’t believe in road signs in this part of the state. It was because of this that I

had to rely on my GPS to get me back into town.

My lungs fully expanded with a refreshing dose of crisp clean air, which was a far cry from the So Cal smog I was used to. With my hand laying relaxed out the window, I rubbed my fingers and thumb together, missing the feel of a cigarette between them.

According to the locals, the weather was unseasonably warm for this time of year. It sort of reminded me of the weather I had left back home in Cali. As bright as the sun shone today, I regretted not wearing my Ray Bans. Instead, I opted for the intelligent style, and wore my prescription glasses—it

sort of diverted people's opinion of me. Not that it stopped Reed from playing matchmaker today. *Hell, he knew me well enough anyway for it to not matter.*

If my cousin Reed wasn't so damn persistent on setting me up with his girlfriend's best friend, I might have waited to follow him back into town. I wasn't out here for that shit. This trip was strictly business, not pleasure. *What the hell was he thinking anyway?* I had no business throwing myself in the mix of high school girls... *immature girls... jailbait... trouble...* Besides, they would only put on a fake façade around me then brag to their friends about having an older boyfriend. *I didn't have*

time for that shit.

High school—those days seemed so long ago... some of the best days of my life, and some of the worst. What I wouldn't have given to turn back time and correct my mistakes instead of living a life full of regrets.

When the hotel sign came into sight, I blew out a breath of relief that I made it back to the hotel without getting lost. I'd seen *Deliverance*, and, if I were to hear the sound of banjos playing, I would have been hopping my ass back on a plane to California. My phone buzzed as I pulled into the parking lot, Reed's name appearing across the screen. Parking the rental, I grabbed my

phone to see what he wanted. My heart paused for a second as the picture of a familiar face took me by surprise. *What the fuck!* Was this some sort of sick joke?

My Princess.

My fingers clasped around the phone tightly.

Dark, natural curly hair that flowed past the shoulders, big green eyes, deep as a rain forest... plump, pink lips that felt all too familiar to me... I closed my eyes; her face was still fresh in my mind. I hadn't forgotten one single detail of her.

My Princess.

Was he playing fucking mind games with me? He couldn't be because he didn't know.

I texted back.

Me: Why are you sending me this?

R: It's Courtney, Kendra's friend. Please say yes, Jaxon?

I couldn't peel my eyes away from it. She was just as beautiful as I had remembered.

Before I could respond, Reed buzzed with another text.

R: She works at the local cinema,

and she's working tonight. Go see a movie and check her out yourself.

Me: Maybe.

R: Dude! Just do it or Kendra will kick my ass! I promised her already that you would.

I contemplated the idea, already knowing I had to see the girl face to face. After all, it was Thanksgiving and everything was closed except the local theater and, of course, the Chinese restaurant.

I grabbed my phone and sent

Reed another text.

Me: Ok, but no promises.

Could I face this look-alike? Can I be around her without confusing myself?

Reed texted me back with the name of the theater and address so I could program it into my GPS. Making a big circle in the parking lot, I headed back onto the main road.

The parking lot was crowded, so I assumed that three-fourths of the town's population had crammed themselves into this small building. I walked inside and stood in the long line

to purchase my ticket while vigilantly scanning the employee's faces and name tags. *Courtney, was that her name?* There was no sign of her anywhere. The movie I had chosen was starting in a few minutes, so I got into another line to show my ticket. As I got closer to the girl taking tickets, I realized it was her. *Holy shit!*

My heart leaped up into my throat, and I could feel my pulse pounding in my neck. The moisture in my palms was making my ticket damp. Not wanting to creep her out, I swiped my palms across my jeans before approaching her.

Waiting my turn, I looked down

at her petite frame, sizing up her chest that was the perfect size for my hands and hips with just the right amount of curves.

Blinking her eyes like the wings of a hummingbird, she nervously took my ticket. “Your movie is showing in theater six. Enjoy.” Her voice was soft. But her smile was off, it wasn’t the same. Her accent was off, too, but her shyness was the same as I remembered. I could only assume she wanted to stare, but, instead, she tried to hide it. I’d seen that gesture too many times. The resemblance was bizarre. People say everyone had a twin, but she looked more like a clone.

My interest in watching the movie vanished. Instead, I wanted to pick her up and hold her in my arms. I wanted to wrap my hands around her tiny waist then slide them down under her plump ass. If only I could kiss her and taste the sweetness I missed. I wanted to lose myself in her, but I couldn't. It wasn't her. I didn't want to freak the girl out. With my eyes closed tight, I inhaled a deep breath. *Don't lose it, Jaxon.*

Before I opened the door to my theater, I glanced back at her to get one last look. Everything I had worked so hard to forget started to leak back to the surface. The taste of her... the scent of her... the feel of her... those memories

never disappeared. She was oblivious of me, she had no idea I was about to change her world.

Once I found a seat, I sent Reed a simple text.

Me: I'll go.

Then I turned my phone off.

Had fate removed the ones I loved the most from my life just to lead me to this girl?

Chapter 1 ~ Decisions and Confrontations

Before I could even shut the door to her convertible VW bug, Kendra bombarded me with the same question she'd been asking all weekend.

“So, have you given it any more thought?”

Here we go again, I thought to myself.

Rolling my eyes and reaching over to turn the volume up on the radio, I blew through my pursed lips and turned my back to her. My thoughts were running rampant as I stared out the

window and considered my options. I ignored Kendra and her repetitive question for the duration of the ride to school.

The mush-ball that I am, guilt started to settle in halfway to school. It always did when I gave Kendra the cold shoulder after having a tiff. She was, after all, my best friend, my one and only true friend that had stuck by me since the first grade.

We were both new to the school this year after transferring due to a re-zoning, and, as no surprise, she had no problems making new friends. I on the other hand wasn't as fortunate. In the beginning, I had optimistically looked

forward to attending the same school as Phillip, and to also have Kendra with me, but it rapidly became disastrous. Phillip had ruined my reputation before the school year even started. He had made up lies about me and told people I cheated on him, and that I stalked him when he broke things off with me. He was such a scheming asshole. After I ended our nearly four year relationship, the rumors got worse.

“Okay, since you are obviously giving me the silent treatment, I think we should settle things by making a deal. I promise I won’t ask you again as long as you promise to give me your final answer by Wednesday,” Kendra said as she turned the car off. It was Monday, so

that gave me three full days.

Kendra was so relentless that she worried the piss out of me until I finally peeked over the ledge, waving my little white flag. She had a touch of only-child syndrome. I was an only-child too, but I wasn't a rich, spoiled only-child. I glanced over at her, and she looked at me with sad puppy dog eyes, begging and pleading with her hands folded in a praying gesture.

“Kendra, you know I'm not ready for that right now. I just want to make new friends and have the whole high school experience before I graduate. I know I'm a little late for that party, but I still have half the school year left.”

“I get that, but, damn, Courtney, it’s just one night,” she scolded. “I’m not fighting with you over something so petty.”

“Then don’t.” I jerked my stuff up and drudged out of the car, huffing my way through the parking lot, when I was nearly knocked off balance.

Kendra linked her arm around mine. “You know I never give up,” she whispered in my ear, followed with a quick kiss to my cheek.

Without giving me a chance to protest, she took off, skipping between the cars and laughing out loud to herself before I could get a word out of my mouth.

The corners of my lips tugged into a small smile. My frustration with her never lasted more than a few minutes, and I knew at that moment I had been defeated.



I was standing at my locker, fiddling with the combination on my lock when I heard that familiar, silky voice behind me. “Enjoy your Thanksgiving? It wasn’t the same this year with you not being there.”

His close proximity sent an unwanted shiver through my body, but I didn’t bother turning around as I

removed books from my locker. “Leave the past where it is. What do you want, Phillip?” I snapped through gritted teeth.

“I was just asking about your Thanksgiving. Why do you assume I want something?” he said, trapping me in with both hands planted on each side of my locker. “And I can’t leave you in the past when you’re currently always in my present.” His smile was sickening and flirty. He knew my weak points and he was using them against me. He knew how I bent to his sexual manner.

Wanting him to know he didn’t intimidate me anymore, and that I wasn’t his to control, I turned around to face him. *Don’t show weakness.*

“Oh I don’t know, maybe because you’ve not spoken to me since I taped pictures of you with your whores all over your car,” I pointed out with confidence.

A corner of his lip turned up into a slight smile, but anger pierced from his dark brown eyes.

Oh crap! That might not have been the wisest thing to say. I had no one around as my witness if Phillip decided to retaliate to my comment. I flexed the muscles in my arms as I anticipated the pinch he liked to give when he tried to hurt me discreetly.

He leaned down so close to me that our noses nearly touched, then he

softly said, “Did I ever tell you how hot you look when you put on the gangster act?”

Holy hell balls!

I couldn't speak. My tongue suddenly felt as if it had absorbed every drop of moisture in my mouth. I tried swallowing, but it was bone dry.

Laughing nervously, I replied. “Phillip, I don't know what games you're playing with me, but I don't have time for them, and you're going to make me late for class.” I swiftly ducked down and slipped under his arm escaping his entrapment.

Suddenly, I stopped mid-step

when I felt my hoodie being tugged from behind. My heart started pounding in my chest when I glanced over my shoulder at Phillip. “Just so you know, I’m not playing games, Jeanette,” he said firmly.

Heat rose from my neck up into my cheeks. I lowered my eyes and glared at him. He knew how much I hated that nickname. *Remain calm, Court, he’s just trying to piss you off*, I told myself.

He let out a boisterous laugh. “See ya later in class,” he called out cheerfully as he walked the opposite direction down the hall. *Pompous ass*.

Just like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Phillip could always flip his

personality on a whim.

I was barely able to slip through the door before Mr. Whitmore closed in on me.

As I rushed past him, I mumbled, “Sorry, emergency,” before making a mad dash to my desk. I loathed the idea of being the last person in class because everybody always stared at the person walking in late. Some people loved drawing attention to themselves, but I was not one of them. I preferred sitting in a corner or in the back where no one could see me.

I was positive my face still looked flushed. Kendra gave me her *what-the-hell* look as I sat down in front

of her. I exchanged a crazy look back to her with my eyes bugging out of my head.

As I slid into my chair, trying to catch my breath, I felt my phone buzz.

K: **What**
happened? r u ok?

Hiding my phone under my desk, I quickly put it on silent.

Me: **Got caught up**
by Phillip. I'll tell
u later.

K: **OMG!!! I can't**
wait till later.

Kendra was so impatient. If I didn't end this now, we'd be texting

back and forth throughout class, and I didn't need any more attention drawn to myself by getting busted by Mr. Whitmore.

Discreetly, I held my phone up for Kendra to see me turn it off. Problem fixed.

Kendra huffed and puffed and tapped her pencil incessantly throughout class, just loud enough for my ears. I could tell she was chomping at the bit to find out what just took place with Phillip. I glanced back at her a few times to mouth *Stop!* But she ignored me every time.

Phillip and I had been dating since the middle of our freshmen year.

At that time, we attended separate schools and the night we met our teams were playing against each other. Prior to that night, I had no clue as to who Phillip was, before the night ended, I knew him on a kissing level. He charmed me with his smooth, manipulating ways and I fell head over heels for him.

After ending our long term relationship and only being single for a month, I had no desire to go on any dates any time soon. I was more concerned with building friendships than dating. Phillip had a way of manipulating people and he ruined my reputation with everyone in school. I was on a mission though, to persuade everyone that I had been the victim in our relationship, not

him.

Mr. Whitmore's words sounded like a low hum in my ears throughout class. My mind was busy replaying the strange encounter I had earlier, and, by the time first period ended, I was geared up for the entire day to be over. I wasn't ready to face Phillip in my next class.

As soon as the bell rang, I twisted around in my chair to give Kendra the run-down of the little episode that unfolded this morning by my locker.

"That prick just wants a piece of your ass for Christmas, Courtney," she said knowingly. "You have always been that easy piece for him, and he thinks, if

he throws a little charm bone your way, you will come back begging like a sick puppy. Stay away from him, and I mean it!” she demanded, giving me a firm glare, but I could see the concern in her eyes, too.

Sometimes I thought Kendra knew me better than I knew myself.

Phillip could charm the pants right off of a nun if they wore them, and I was no better to keep mine on around him.

She was right, though. I had to stay away from him, but avoiding him in class every day until Christmas break was going to be pretty impossible.

After our break-up, I spoke with the guidance counselor and had my schedule for second semester switched around so I wouldn't have any classes with Phillip for the remainder of the year, but I still had to get through this semester first.

My chest began constricting as thoughts of my next class started creeping in. I had finally got myself to the point of not dreading that class anymore, but, with the psychotic animal having reemerged inside Phillip, those nerves were now back on high alert.

How was I going to make it through the next three weeks? By us avoiding each other and giving the silent

treatment this past month was a godsend, but now, I had a tingly feeling that was all about to change within the next hour.

After I gave Kendra the scoop on my run-in with Phillip, I was almost late for class once again. Stepping into the classroom, I came to an abrupt halt. Phillip was sitting in the desk behind mine with a smug grin plastered on his face.

Gah! Could this morning get any worse?

After our break-up, he convinced one of the girls in class to switch seats with him, but, from the looks of it now, he'd convinced her to switch back. I flashed my eyes at her, but all she gave

me was a shrug of the shoulders mouthing *Sorry!* I was sure Phillip had thrown his smooth charm on her, prompting her to give up her seat without him even having to ask. I hated how people at this school thought he was some sort of God. If only they knew he was a spawn of the devil.

Rushing to my desk, I made sure I didn't make any eye contact with him. I could feel him staring right through me, right along with everyone else in class, but I resolutely ignored his presence.

As soon as I got situated in my seat, his warm breath blew across my ear. "You coming to my game tomorrow night?"

I kept my head straight watching Mrs. York as she turned on the smart board. *Don't speak, keep eyes square.*

His fingers lightly brushed my skin as he swept my hair away from my neck. "You can't ignore me forever, Courtney." His touch sent chill bumps up my arm.

"I see you still feel something for me... I see the goose bumps on your soft skin. Are your boobs aching for me to touch them?" Everyone sitting around us started smirking and giggling. The heat rapidly rose in my face, and I'm sure it flushed bright red.

Quickly, I whipped around in my seat to face him and slammed my hand

down on his desk, invading his personal space. I was a little closer to the asshole than I intended, but I wanted him to hear me clearly. “Go. To. Hell. Phillip!”

He looked at me blank-faced. “I take that as a no,” he chuckled, stretching his arms back, folding them behind his head. He reclined back in his seat and stretched his long legs out, resting them past both sides of my desk. It felt like he was trying to trap me in.

Ignoring the heavy laughter from my peers, I whipped my head back around and raised my hand to get Mrs. York’s attention.

“Courtney,” Mrs. York said questioningly.

“Is it possible that I could be moved to another seat, like across the room? I’m having a hard time concentrating on my assignments,” I glanced behind me making eye contact with Phillip.

“Well, I don’t think it should be a problem. I think a new seating arrangement would be a good change for everybody.” Mrs. York smiled and gave me a quick wink. The rest of the class gave a disgruntled moan. *Kill me now*. It wasn’t exactly the response I was looking for. I knew Mrs. York was aware of the situation with Phillip and me and that she thought moving everyone would appease me, but, in all reality, she just gave Phillip’s posse one more

reason to despise me. I didn't think I'd ever fit in with the kids here at this school. At least not as long as Phillip was here to influence them.

“Tomorrow when you come to my class, I want everyone to sit alphabetically according to last name,” she announced, walking in between desks. She held up her finger to stop the next set of groans. “I know it seems childish to hand out assigned seats to juniors and seniors, but I find some of the behavior in here very immature. Don't think that, just because I don't say anything, it means I don't notice what goes on in my classroom.”

Without missing a beat Mrs.

York walked back to the smart board and continued explaining today's assignment.

After feeling the loathing stares from my classmates for the duration of the class, I gave a silent prayer of thanks when the bell rang.

With my book bag in hand, I prepared to make a mad dash out the door, but stopped when Phillip grabbed my arm. I looked at him with an amiable smile. He kept a tight hold on my arm, his fingers digging into the tender skin by my armpit. "Getting yourself moved isn't going to deter me, Courtney. You know how I love a challenge, so you better just wipe that smug grin off your face," he

warned me in a low voice, staring at me intensely.

My grin faltered as I realized I just turned this into a game for him, and Phillip wasn't one to lose so gracefully.

Phillip side-stepped me, and gave me his signature wink. "Let the games begin!" I heard him bellow in his sing-song baritone voice as he walked into the hallway.

Chapter 2 ~ Compromise

It was ridiculous of me to try and cram everything imaginable into my book bag just to avoid visiting my locker for the remainder of the day. Knowing Phillip, though, he would be hovering around like a vulture, waiting to swoop in on me after our little incident. I jetted to my locker, emptying it of everything I could get my hands on, and sent Kendra a text telling her I would meet her at her car just as the last bell of the day rang.

Lugging my big ass book bag around was killing me. My shoulders and back were in dire need of my mother's magic fingers. I always told her

she missed her calling as a masseuse.

Impatiently waiting for Kendra in the parking lot after school, I squatted down by her car. My eyes viciously scanned the parking lot in preparation to hide the moment I saw Phillip. I felt like a coward and a complete idiot looking all crouching-tiger-hidden-dragon, and my stance was only putting more strain on my back.

“Hurry up, hurry up, hurry up,” I kept repeating under my breath.

“What are you doing?” Kendra giggled, peeking around the side of her car.

“Ahh!” I screamed. “Holy crow,

Kendra! You scared me to death,” I said in exasperation.

“Sorry,” she replied, shrugging her shoulders.

Kendra unlocked her car doors, and I jumped in and slammed the door shut.

“Easy there, tiger. My car has done nothing to you, so please handle with care.”

“Sorry...”

“So, what were you doing hiding behind my car?” she asked, eyeing me curiously.

“I was hiding from Phillip, and

don't start in on me. We had another altercation in class."

On the way home, I rehashed everything that took place in Mrs. York's class. Kendra listened attentively, waiting until I finished before she handed out free advice. Kendra was a go-getter, don't-take-crap-off-of-people kind of girl. She was very bold and never sugar-coated things, no matter how upset you may have been. That was what I loved the most about her. She had given me an endless list of advice on my relationship with Phillip over the years, and I rarely ever took any of it into consideration. I was determined to listen this time though. Obviously my decisions were belly

flops.

“Okay are you ready to hear what I have to say about this whole ordeal?” Her eyes flickered back and forth to me and the road.

“Sure, lay it on me.” I had already decided I’d do whatever she suggested.

“I think you should go on that blind/double date with Reed, Jaxon, and me.”

Whoa! Not exactly the advice I was expecting. Scratch that decision I prematurely made.

She cut her eyes at me, and I

could see a hint of a smirk trying to appear on her lips. *Heifer*.

I rolled my eyes. “My freakin’ morning starts off with this question, and now it’s going to end the same damn way. I thought we were past this?” I was being a little harsh with her, but I was so wound up from Phillip, and I could feel a headache coming on. I didn’t need any more stress.

“Courtney, I told you this morning I don’t give up, and I’m not going to. Look, if you go out with Jaxon, you know Phillip will hear about it. Then he will know that you have officially moved on. You’ve never showed any interest in any other guy

before. He still thinks he has control over which guys at school can and cannot date you, but Jaxon is not from around here. I think Phillip will feel intimidated enough to leave you alone.”

“What if I do this and, once he gets wind of it, he goes into one of his crazy jealousy antics?”

Kendra was the one and only person I had told, or would ever tell, about Phillip leaving bruises on me. He had never actually hit me, but he'd grabbed me with iron fingers from time to time, sometimes leaving noticeable marks. Once he got so mad at me for joking around with Reed, he accused me of flirting and jabbed his car key into my

thigh as if it were a knife. Of course, all this stuff always happened when no one was around. He couldn't bear to have any witnesses to ruin his good-guy reputation. After that, Reed was very careful of how he interacted with me when Phillip was around.

“Then we will make sure Jaxon and Reed give him the ass-kicking that's long overdue.”

My face faltered, giving her a serious look. “Kendra,” I sighed, “The guy doesn't even know me. Why would he defend me? And I doubt he wants to get involved with some little high school kid's drama.”

Kendra rolled her eyes at me

while staring at the road. “I seriously don’t think you have anything to worry about. You and Phillip are not together anymore, so the opportunity won’t be there for him to lash out at you. You only have to deal with him for one class at school, and, by Christmas break, that won’t even be an issue anymore.”

“But it is an issue,” I said in desperation. “Did you not hear what I just told you about him making a game out of this? He’s going to harass me until I give him the attention he’s seeking, and he won’t make light of me making a fool out of him by going on some date.”

“Court—”

I held my finger up interrupting

her. “Let me finish. We have no idea what he’s told people, but, from an outside view, it probably looks like he’s trying to be my friend or rekindle what we had. You know how sneaky he is, I’m sure they are clueless about the mind games he’s playing with me. I just have to figure out a way to beat him at his own game.”

I really didn’t want to tell Kendra that, even after everything Phillip had put me through, I still loved him. I knew it was wrong to love him, but it wasn’t easy to just turn those feelings off for your first love. Plus, I was afraid of going on this date because, once Phillip found out, he would get revenge and flaunt his newest piece of

ass in my face. Even though I was the one that ended our relationship and decided to move on, it still hurt to see him with another girl. If he wasn't hurting me physically, he was hurting me mentally and emotionally... and to be honest, my heart was almost irreparable.

“Well, I think you should just go at Phillip open and honest and let him know that you are willing to be his friend and nothing more. Let him know that there is the possibility you may go on dates occasionally, and you don't want any repercussions if you choose to do so.”

I let out a brief sigh.

“By taking this route, you will

eliminate the chase, Courtney. If you continue to ignore him, he will continue the game of cat and mouse. If you play nice with him, you will silently beat him at his own game.”

She made a good point. I was just worried if it were even possible to be his friend without all those emotions resurfacing. My heart had skipped a beat when he'd spoken to me today, and then, when he'd lightly touched me, that was enough to make my skin tingle. I knew I had to do this, though. It was the only way I would ever be able to move on and have a peaceful senior year.

“Okay. As always, you get your way. I will talk to Phillip tomorrow, and

I will go on this stupid date... but this Jaxon character needs to know ahead of time I'm not looking for a boyfriend. Got it?"

Kendra was grinning so big I thought the corners of her lips might crack. "Yes, I got it, and, like I told you before, he's not staying here for long, so I seriously doubt he's looking for any kind of boyfriend/girlfriend connection."

"Well, just in case he is, you better let him know this is a friends-only date... or better yet, let him know how you had to practically twist my arm behind my back before I would agree to go."

"You are so mean sometimes!

I'm not telling him that or he won't want to go at all. But I will tell him you have recently ended a long, troublesome relationship, and you're only interested in the single lifestyle right now."

As we pulled into my driveway, her phone buzzed with Reed's name showing.

Kendra started getting all giddy again, "I can't wait to tell Reed the great news."

"I'm sure you can't," I mumbled to myself.

"I heard that sourpuss."

I gave her my best Cheshire cat

grin.

As Kendra picked up her phone and started to text Reed back, I grabbed her hand to stop her. “Hey, I have one question.”

“Yes?”

“Before you tell Reed I’m on board, I want to know what this Jaxon guy looks like. I don’t want to regret my decision if the guy turns out to be fugly.”

Kendra got a devious look on her face. “I’m not telling you because then it wouldn’t be considered a blind date, but I will tell you that he is the exact opposite of Phillip. I promise you won’t be disappointed.”

Grinning, I tried a different approach. “Does he look like Reed? You know, since they’re cousins and all?”

Kendra’s lips puckered as she tried holding back a smile. “I’m *not* telling you a thing, so stop asking!”

Just like that, my curiosity was on high alert. Reed was a super-hot guy with short, dark brown hair and brown eyes to match, a chiseled jaw, and a tall, athletic body. As cute as he was, I had always saw him more as a brother than someone I could ever be attracted to.

Getting out of the car, it hit me. “Kendra, one more detail I forgot to mention – do not plaster this all over

Facebook, or I will not go, and I will post pictures of you as a kid when you were going through your ugly stage.”

I closed the car door before she could shoot back a snide remark.

Not that it mattered; she rolled her window down anyway.

“You post pictures of me and see what happens. Phillip will be the least of your worries,” she yelled out at me.

Cringing, I lifted my overloaded book bag onto my shoulder. I was totally bummed to see my mom wasn't home yet. She must have had to pull a double shift at the nursing home again.

Chapter 3 ~ Checkmate

I had to admit to myself, I was getting a little bit excited, and a whole lot nervous, about Friday night. No way would I give Kendra any indication I felt this way though. She would make a bigger deal out of it than what it already was.

She had already decided she would do our hair, since her mom was a hairdresser, and I would be responsible for our make-up, since I was simply good at it. She also asked if she could pick out my attire for the night. I agreed, knowing she would most likely be raiding her closet to make sure I looked

stunning for this Jaxon guy.

There was nothing I loved more than rummaging through her closet. It was like my own private little department store. Half of everything in it still had price tags. Every now and then, she would send one of those new items home with me, deciding she really didn't like it after all and would never wear it. I never had a problem accepting anything, either. Of course, I was always thankful, but I saw no reason for her to drop things off at any of the consignment stores when I was a perfectly willing participant to put them to good use.

After my mother got home from her double shift, she massaged my back.

She was so good to me and always went above and beyond to try and satisfy me. Since she was the only parent I had, she tried her best to be a mother and a father to me all at the same time.

As I was lying in bed pondering the day and feeling refreshed, my phone buzzed with a text. Grabbing it off my nightstand, my heart did a little flip-flop when I saw Phillip's name. I loathed that he could still have that effect on me.

P: Hey did u
decide if u r
coming to my
game

Me: Sorry, I can't.
I have to work.

I wish I had remembered this in class today instead of ignoring him. It might have prevented the whole boob comment.

Before he could reply, I sent another quick text.

**Me: I need to talk
to you tomorrow.
When is a good
time?**

I was glad he couldn't see me right now. I was very nervous and my hands were shaking so bad that I could hardly get my fingers steady long enough to text. I was going to need a nerve pill to get my emotions in check, or I would be doomed. Phillip knew me like the

back of his hand, and he knew how nervous I could get. Not only did my hands tremble, but my voice would shake like I was in a yodeling contest. Very embarrassing.

My phone buzzed again.

**P: K sure I'm
down wit dat. what
about?**

Guys had to be the worst when it came to using proper grammar in a text.

**Me: Just tell me
when and I'll talk
about it then.**

I should have added a smiley face, so he wouldn't think anything suspicious. Who was I kidding? He'd be

suspicious no matter what I said or did.

P: R u bossin me?

Good gosh. I hated having to walk on eggshells around him.

**Me: No. Sorry.
Didn't mean to
come off that way.
Please?**

**P: Ok n the
parking lot b4
skool**

Me: Thanks!

Maybe I was overdoing it, but I had to play nice or it wasn't going to work.

I placed my phone back on my

nightstand and checked to make sure my alarm clock was turned on. I doubted I would even need it. My nerves were wound up too tight to doze off to dreamland.

My phone startled me when it buzzed. I knew I should have turned it off.

**P: Goodnight
court hope u have
sweet dreams
about me**

Oh my gosh! I decided to not respond, instead turning my phone off and turning on the TV.



It was my turn to drive the next day. I drove Tuesdays and Thursdays, and Kendra drove the remaining days, including any weekend activities. She begged me numerous times to let her drive all week and swore she just wanted to help me save money on gas. More likely, she was afraid we would get stranded on the side of the road with some hillbilly redneck kidnapping us for torture at his farmhouse. I really should have stopped making her watch horror movies with me.

The one time we did end up on the side of the road was the result of me not paying attention to the mileage. The fuel gauge on my nineties model Maxima had stopped working a couple of years ago, so now I had to reset the miles every time I filled my car with gas. Kendra was near hysterics, and I had to remind her that we were only a couple of blocks from a gas station... and that we carried around cell phones solely for this type of situation—not to text or tweet or Facebook or Instagram all day. I also threatened to leave her if she posted my idiocy on Facebook.

Reed ended up being our hero for the day and stayed true to his word to never tell a soul, including Phillip.

When Kendra got in the car, I told her about the texts from Phillip the night before and how we were going to have our special talk this morning. My stomach twisted in knots all morning, and it only got worse the closer we got to school.

As I pulled into the parking lot, I saw Phillip leaning against his 4Runner already waiting on me. I quickly closed my eyes and inhaled a deep breath. Seeing him standing there set my nerves into the red zone. The bile had made its way up to my esophagus at that point.

“Kendra, please don’t leave me,” the panic in my voice was too obvious.

Kendra looked at me with dismay. “Oh Court... I would never leave you alone with him. I was planning on making myself comfortable right here anyway.” Reaching over, she rubbed my arm as comfort. “I even have Reed on standby in case Phillip acts out.”

The air wheezed in and out of my lungs as I was on the verge of a full blown panic attack. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly and calmly. The sad part was, I didn't know if my nerves were because of my fear of Phillip's response or if I was just excited to be close to him again.

“You got this, sweetie. No worries,” Kendra said with empathy.

Taking a few deep breaths, I gave myself a quick pep talk, and stepped out of the car.

There he stood with his arms crossed over his chest. All six feet, three inches of pure lean muscle hiding under the letterman jacket I used to wear. The memory of walking around with that coat on like I was the queen and Phillip as my king was still fresh in my mind. Our love was never a fairytale. I just used to think it was.

His full lips pulled to the side in a sexy smirk, and those deep brown eyes were raking me over from head to toe. *How can someone look like a god, but act like the devil?*

I could feel my heart beating in my throat the closer I got. I silently prayed to God that I wouldn't pass out.

Phillip pushed off from his 4Runner and took a couple of steps to meet me. "Can I give you a hug?"

Not wanting to start off on the wrong foot, I nodded. His arms engulfed me, and he gently rested his chin on top of my head, his tall frame towering over me. I used to think I was protected in his arms, but I learned long ago that I wasn't. Feeling conflicted on whether to hug him back or not, I lightly laid my hands on his sides instead. He gently swayed back and forth, holding me to him tight. "I miss you," he whispered.

Why does he have to say things like that to me?

I missed this—being in his arms... smelling him... feeling him... I wanted to taste him.

Then it clicked. This was a mistake. I realized what he was doing and pulled away before he could screw with my head any longer. I tried to gather myself together. Then, clearing my throat, I tried to swallow the lump of nerves that had formed.

Surprisingly, he let me go.

“I need to talk to you about something, so just hear me out before you interrupt me. And we don’t have

much time before the bell rings, so...”

Phillip gave me a questioning look, rolling his hand signaling for me to continue.

Taking a deep breath, I blurted everything out about wanting us to remain friends and me dating other guys without any repercussions from him. And how I wanted us both to be able to move on and still remain civil to one another.

He was steadfast poker-faced.

Not. A. Word. No emotion shown. Just silence.

Oh Lord, please say something.

“Phillip?”

He was still staring at me, but not really looking at me, like he was thinking, possibly weighing his options.

“Okay, it looks like you’re not quite ready to continue this conversation, so we’ll catch up later,” I explained nervously. “I’m heading to class.” I had a bad feeling about this. I took a step back toward my car, preparing myself to run if I needed to.

“Courtney, don’t—”

I turned back to face him. “Don’t what?” Those two words could mean so many different things.

“Don’t leave yet,” he coughed a couple of times before pausing. “I’m fine with us being friends, and, although I’m not thrilled about the dating, I know there is nothing I can do about it.”

I couldn’t figure out if he was being sincere with me or if he had some kind of trick up his sleeve.

“So you promise to not go loco if you see me with a guy?” I said, wincing.

He leaned back comfortably against his 4Runner again. “Yes, as long as you do me one favor,” he agreed with deceit in his eyes.

Bingo! There it is.

“What,” I said nonchalantly. I wasn’t very good at trying to play it cool.

“I ask that you not date anyone from school. Ever.”

I twisted my lips to the side like I actually had to consider it. “And if I do?”

He pushed himself off his 4Runner again, stepping closer to me. He stopped inches from bumping up against me, his voice dropping to a low and sexy tone. “I can’t promise you Phillip with a halo,” he smirked, making a circular motion above his head. His eyes never leaving mine.

My insides were unstable. He was seducing me, controlling me, and giving me what I wanted all at the same time.

There wasn't anyone at school I was interested in, and the one date I was going on was with someone that didn't even live here. This was turning out to be easier than I thought.

“Deal. I'll keep my end of the bargain as long as you keep yours,” I said without letting his close proximity affect me. I reached out and laid my hand on Phillip's arm. “It makes me happy to be able to talk to you as a friend and not an enemy. Let's not screw this up,” I suggested.

“I won’t if you won’t.”

Rolling my eyes without him seeing me. I knew somewhere, somehow, this niceness wouldn’t last.

“Well, we better hurry. The bell has already rung, and the tardy bell will be next,” I chimed.

I took off jogging back to my car to get my book bag and to let Kendra know I survived... and that she was right.

Chapter 4 ~ Dressed to Impress

Friday had finally arrived, and I was truthfully looking forward to having a good time tonight on our blind/double date with Kendra, Reed, and Jaxon. The rest of the school week ended “without a hitch” as they say in the South, and I was hoping my night ended with the same results.

Phillip was behaving himself better than I had ever imagined, and, as much as I wanted to believe things had changed, I couldn't. It would only be a matter of time before the right incident ignited his fuse and he blew up. When I thought things were too good to be true,

they usually were.

I knew I shouldn't have such a negative outlook, but I knew him all too well and he wasn't one to change overnight—he was the master of disguise.

Phillip had a basketball game that evening at another county school, so I knew he wouldn't be making an appearance at the party. Actually a lot of the students from my school wouldn't be attending tonight since the party was being thrown by a classmate from my old school, which also happened to be our biggest rival.

With our make-up already applied, Kendra added the final touches

to my natural curly hair while I sat in front of the vanity in her enormous bathroom. She had flat-ironed my hair before curling it, giving me big ringlets falling loosely in the back. She kept my back to the mirror, not letting me look until she was finished. Kendra kept her golden hair straight, only running the flat-iron over it to give it a smoother look, then added a French braid to the side with it ending right behind her ear.

The black skinny jeans Kendra picked out for me snugged my ghetto booty just right, and the silver sequined tank with silver peep toe platform pumps matched perfectly. Kendra paired up a royal blue sequined party dress that displayed a lot of cleavage with gold

platform pumps.

Passing me the hand mirror, Kendra displayed a self-appreciated smirk, obviously admiring her handiwork. “Okay, you can look now.”

Examining the back of my hair, I then turned around to look in the full length mirror. It was perfect. She had gathered most of my hair on the sides, pulling it together in the back and leaving a few tendrils hanging by my face.

“I tried to pull most of it off your neck so you won’t get too hot while dancing.”

“Well I must say you did a

fabulous job as always. Thanks, doll,” I said, blowing her a kiss.

“And I give many thanks to the marvelous make-up artist,” she said in her best British accent.

We both stood in front of the floor length mirror primping before grabbing our iPhones to take a few selfies.

Still using her British accent, Kendra added, “We should just call ourselves Mary Poppins because we’re practically perfect in every way... or at least pretty damn close.”

We were both laughing when Kendra screamed and jumped as her

phone buzzed in her hand. It was Reed texting to see if we were coming because they were already there waiting on us.

I had made Kendra agree to drive separate from the guys because I didn't want the whole awkward car ride to the party with Jaxon while she and Reed were enjoying the comfort of one another. She had tried to convince me that she would ride in the back with me, but I knew her tactics, and she would sabotage me and stick me in the back seat with Jaxon. She often forgot I wasn't the social butterfly she was. I was socially challenged.

“Shit, I didn't realize what time

it was. We are late,” Kendra huffed.

She quickly texted Reed back letting him know we were on our way.

We scrambled around, throwing a few necessities into our clutch purses, then made a mad dash down the stairs.

Kendra had my wrist in a tight grip, pulling me down the steps behind her. I felt like I was seconds away from falling. “If you don’t let go of me, we will soon be on our way to the hospital instead of a party. I’m about to break my ankle in these heels.”

I envied Kendra with her graceful way of waltzing around as if she were wearing slippers and not five

inch stilettos. She used to practice walking the runway when she decided she wanted to be a model. That little hobby ended up lasting for about six months.

Kendra's mom waltzed into the foyer with a smile of pride on her face. "Oh my goodness, you girls look beautiful," she exclaimed. She was pulling her phone out, I'm assuming to take pictures of us.

"Mom, we don't have time for pictures," Kendra whined. "We took some already, I will send them to you later."

"Now, where did you say you girls were going again?"

“The Russells are throwing a Christmas party.”

We actually were going to a party thrown by Jake and Jessica Russell, but not a party their parents were aware of. The Russells were well-known in our town and owned a couple of car dealerships. Every year they hosted a Christmas party at their home, but this year their twins, Jake and Jessica, had decided to host their own party at their lake house.

“Yeah, yeah. That’s right. I remember now. I loathed declining the invite, but I just don’t enjoy going when you’re dad isn’t accompanying me. Speaking of, your dad called earlier and

said he's stuck in Chicago for another day. They are having record snowfall up there. He is so miserable being stranded at the airport."

I loved Diana like my own mother, but, boy, could that lady talk. I always figured one of the qualifications of becoming a hairdresser was exceptional communication skills. Well... that and gossiping. If you ever needed to know any good juice on anyone, Diana was the lady to see.

Kendra held her hand up to stop her mom from rambling any further. "Mom, we are very late, and Reed is waiting on us. Bye! I love you."

"You girls have fun and be

careful,” Diana said, giving us each a kiss on the cheek.

We hurried out the door before her mom could delay us any longer.

“Love you, and be home before midnight,” she yelled as we got in Kendra’s car.

“We will, and we love you too, Diana,” I shouted back.



It took us at least twenty minutes to find our way to the secluded lake

house. The gravel driveway was about a mile long, and, since Kendra's car sat so low to the ground, she had to drive at a snail's pace. The drive was spooky as hell, so I decided to have a little fun scaring Kendra. I started by telling her about Crystal Lake and how all these kids had been partying in a cabin when a guy wearing a hockey mask went on a killing spree.

“I'm going to literally kill you if you don't shut the hell up about this Jason guy,” she said through gritted teeth.

She loathed horror movies as much as I loved them.

“I'm sorry, I'm just trying to

have a little fun at your expense to ease my nerves,” I laughed.

A sick feeling overcame me as soon as we left Kendra’s house. The anticipation of meeting this guy Jaxon was placing me on the verge of an anxiety attack. It didn’t matter if we were just doing the friends thing or not, it was just that I hadn’t interacted with a guy other than Phillip or Reed in several years. And Reed didn’t even count.

“Courtney, everything will be fine. Jaxon is a pretty cool, laid back guy.”

“Yeah, and exactly how many times have you actually talked to him?”

“It doesn’t matter,” she answered flippantly. “Anyway, we’re here now, so swallow those nerves, relax, and let’s have a good time,” she added with a cheerful smile.

Pulling up to the lake house, there were cars parked everywhere, causing us to have a hard time finding an empty spot that didn’t put us out in the woods.

I think it would be fair to say, considering our location, that we were pretty safe from the cops being called for any noise ordinance.

Stepping out of the car, I could hear the sounds of Usher playing from a stereo inside the house. There was

nothing like a little booty-shaking on the dance floor to remedy my worries. Dancing was my favorite stress reliever.

I loved to dance, and, not to sound arrogant, I was good at it. Several years ago, mom paid for me to attend hip-hop dance lessons for a couple of years, but I had to quit due to a money shortage. It was long enough, though, to heighten my natural ability.

“You’re dancing with me tonight, right?” I asked Kendra as we approached the front door.

“Of course, but Jaxon may want to dance with you as well,” she replied with a suggestive smile.

“What if he doesn’t dance?”

Her smile broadened. “Then we will find someone that will.”

The music intensified times ten once we opened the door.

The house was beautiful inside; it was more of a log cabin than a house. Everything within was either made of wood or wrought iron, giving the place a rustic atmosphere. The living room had a high vaulted cathedral ceiling with a balcony above that extended to a patio leading outside.

There were people everywhere, and, almost instantly, I noticed a larger crowd gathered in what appeared to be

the family room or entertainment room where everyone was dancing. It looked like they were watching a dance off.

I nearly jumped when I felt a cold hand grab my arm. I turned my head to see it was only Kendra. “I’m going to look around for Reed, he’s not answering my text,” she yelled over the loud music.

“Okay, I’ll be over here,” I said pointing to the crowd of people dancing.

Pushing myself through the crowd of gyrating bodies, I prayed no one spilled their beer on me. Even if we were just having a friendly date, spending the evening smelling like a keg wasn’t my idea of a stunning first

impression.

After sliding through a few sweaty bodies, I found myself standing in front of the inner circle. There wasn't a dance off taking place. Instead, three guys were performing a little dance routine. Two of them were a couple of my old classmates, but the other one I didn't recognize. Whoever he was, he was hot as hell and seemed to be the one drawing all the attention.

He was good. Actually, he was better than good. He was a better dancer than any contestant I had ever seen perform on *So You Think You Can Dance*. Wearing a black, tight-fitting shirt, distressed jeans that hung low on

his hips, and black Vans, he screamed sexy. His hair was raven black, spiked up to a peak on top. He had large diamond stud earrings in his petite ears and was sporting a little stubble on his face. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to make out the rest of his facial features in the dim lights.

Mesmerized by his dancing skills—well, that and his muscular physique—I wished that I had never agreed to go on the stupid double date. I wanted to focus my time on this hot guy.

“Hey, I found Reed,” I heard Kendra say behind me.

“Yeah? Well I found sex on a stick. Come here and watch him dance,”

I said pulling her to stand beside me. Kendra started giggling.

“Who is he? He sort of looks familiar.” I questioned.

“That is Jaxon, your date tonight,” Reed said with a shit-eating grin on his face.

Holy shit, I was in trouble.

Chapter 5 ~ You Make Me Wanna

Kendra shoved me forcefully away from her car. “Get your big ass back inside now,” she grunted.

“My big ass is going to kick your little ass if you don’t get off of me,” I snorted, keeping my feet planted firmly.

My nerves had gotten the best of me. I had taken off running out of the house when I found out the guy I was drooling over was my date for the night. Kendra immediately came running after me, trying to convince me to go back inside. We’d been battling for the past fifteen minutes over why I thought she

should take me home and why she thought I should stay.

“Hahaha,” she said sarcastically. “Yeah, well, if we’re going to fight, let’s at least find some mud so we can make it worth watching.”

I busted out laughing and nearly fell, losing my balance from Kendra pushing on me. Using quick reflexes, Kendra grasped my shoulders, steadying me so I didn’t land with my face in the dirt.

“Thanks for catching me, but you should’ve let me fall. Then I would have a perfect excuse to go home.”

All the humor left Kendra’s face.

“Courtney, I’m being serious now. You’re really starting to fucking piss me off. You’re acting irrational, and I don’t understand why.” She turned to take a couple of steps toward the house when she turned around and walked back to me. “I’m not babying your ass anymore. You know what? Just sit out here and be miserable in the cold. I’m going inside to have a good time. If you change your mind, you know where to find me.”

She stomped back to the house, stopping in front of the steps to the porch. She again spun around to face me.

“I hope that fucking Jason guy in a mask comes looking for you!” she

shrieked. She walked up the steps, turned around again before opening the door. “And I hope you freeze your fat ass off too!” she yelled even louder.

My ass must have been the target that night. That was twice in a five-minute-span she referred to my butt being large. I happened to be proud of my plump derriere.

Scanning the perimeter, I wanted to make sure there were no witnesses to our quarrel, and I secretly checked for any Jason-like characters roaming the edge of the woods. I blew out a breath of relief to find myself alone. Although I didn't want to go back inside, I had to. For one, my jacket was in there and I

was out here freezing. Two, Kendra was mad at me, and I would feel guilty if I ruined this double date she had worked so hard to achieve. Third, and most important, I needed to face my fears. Without a doubt, I was going to meet guys at some point in time, so I figured I might as well start with one that I was positive would not become a permanent fixture in my life.

Oh, how I wished I could pump confidence into my veins. I needed an IV hook-up. Being socially awkward painfully sucked.

Taking several deep breaths, I shook my hands by my sides, as if to shake the jitters off of them, and kept

repeating the mantra in my head. *Balls to the Walls.*



Nothing could deflect me as I found myself in the zone. I fell into the beat of ‘Birthday Cake’ by Rihanna, closing my eyes and letting my body feel the music.

When I walked back into the house, I hadn’t seen Kendra, Reed, or Jaxon anywhere. I didn’t exactly go looking for them either. I knew dancing was the best way for me to loosen up,

so, after glancing over the bopping heads and seeing no sign of their presence, I joined the cluster of bodies. The DJ switched the music from one song to the next, giving no hesitation in between. I danced as he pumped Calvin Harris, Kanye, Ke\$ha, and Nicki Minaj through the speakers for a good half hour or so; however, I was really ready for a beverage break.

As I navigated through the house to the patio outside, I was greeted with a few “hey’s” and hugs from my old classmates. After getting harassed a bit over switching schools, I received several congratulations for “dumping the jerk,” as they had put it. It felt good to be with the familiar faces that I shared

twelve years of my life with. The weather had been unseasonably warm lately, but the night temperature continued to drop down into the high thirties. As I stepped out onto the patio, I felt the sweat on my body chill like ice crystals on my skin. It felt great.

Kendra, Reed, and Jaxon were still MIA, and I felt a brief surge of panic shoot through my heart, fearing they had left me there alone. I reasoned with myself, though, knowing Kendra would never abandon me at a place like this.

All the kegs and coolers were stationed on the patio. I guess they figured it was wiser to leave them out in

the cold night air. I rummaged through the standing cooler, looking similar to a dumpster diver, trying to find something non-alcoholic, preferably water, but there only seemed to be bottles of beer and wine coolers. I'd only had beer once, and I'd decided it was something I couldn't acquire a taste for. I was too thirsty to guzzle any wine, and, if I did, the night would end quickly with my low alcohol tolerance level.

My arm started to ache down to the bone from digging in the cold ice, forcing me to stop a moment and let the blood flow warm up my hand.

“Geez! Is it that hard to find water around here?” I mumbled to

myself, getting more and more flustered by the minute.

“You can have mine,” I heard a voice say as a bottle of water appeared in front of my face, the bottle attached to a thickly veined hand and muscled forearm.

My eyes slowly trailed up to see what else was attached to that muscular arm. The first thing to catch my eye was the well-defined abdomen with ridges that made the black fitted shirt seem almost transparent. I then noticed something faintly protruding through his shirt where his nipples were located. Were his nipples pierced? *Whoa!* The strong angular jaw with a five o'clock

shadow came into view next. Lazily, my eyes reached the deepest set of dimples, brought out by a playful, sexy smile. He had kissable lips revealing the utmost beautiful set of straight, white teeth. My focus then locked onto the most iridescent ice-blue eyes, a color that could only be obtained by wearing colored contacts. *No freakin' way!* Not only was this the guy I was gawking at on the dance floor, he was also the same guy I had drooled over Thanksgiving night at the theater.

My heart rapidly picked up the pace. I could feel my pulse throbbing in my head; the onslaught of dizziness. *Please, Lord... do not let me pass out.*

“I promise, I don’t have... cooties,” he chuckled lightly.

My eyes were glued to his, and, if I spoke out loud, I’m sure it would come out sounding something like “Nom, nom, nom.” *Yes, he was that delicious.*

“Courtney... your name is Courtney right?” He eyed me suspiciously.

I zoned out, in such a trance staring at his godliness, I hadn’t taken notice of his deep, raspy voice with a slight accent that told me he wasn’t from around here.

Say something, Court, so he didn’t think you were a freak.

“Er, uh... yes, yes it is,” I eyed him curiously. “How do you know my name?”

“Reed and Kendra pointed you out to me earlier.”

I could feel confidence oozing out of his pores. I still couldn't pull my eyes away from his, they were simply breathtaking. In the middle of our staring contest, I searched his eyes for a thin line around the iris. Nope, not a trace of contacts. They must be real.

“I've been looking for them,” I mumbled. *Not really.* “Do you know where they went?” I hoped he couldn't hear the nervous tension wiggling in my voice box.

“Last I saw, they were on the dance floor.”

Striking up conversations with a complete stranger, a painstakingly attractive stranger, was not my forte. I was lost for words.

“So... about the water...” He gestured his water to me again.

Flexing my fingers behind my back, I tried to get a bit of feeling to return before I reached for the water. I couldn't allow him to see my hands tremble.

“Oh, uh, sure,” I took the water, making sure our hands didn't touch.

As if he knew I purposely avoided contact, he stuck his hand out to me. “By the way, I’m Jaxon, your blind date for the night.”

His gaze held my eyes with dominance. His lingering smile made me wonder if he could sense how uncomfortable he was making me.

Reaching out to shake his hand, I welcomed the warmth that pulsed into mine. He held onto my hand a little longer than deemed necessary before he let go.

“Well, now that we’ve got the introductions out of the way, would you like to dance?”

“Sure,” I squeaked.

“Do you want to finish your water first?”

I had forgotten the water in my hand. I wasn't even thirsty anymore, but, after remembering where it came from, I suddenly had a dire need to put my lips where his had previously been.

Tipping the bottle up, I turned my back to him so he couldn't watch me. The water was cool and refreshing to my parched throat.

“Here, I'll take that for you,” Jaxon said.

He took the empty bottle, tossing

it into a growing pile of trash. Walking back over to where I was standing, he stopped before reaching me and motioned with his hand to the doorway, prompting me to lead the way back inside.

As I walked past him, I felt his fingers lightly touch the small of my back. Chill bumps rose on my skin, and I don't think it was from the cold air. He was following behind me close enough that I felt his chest brush occasionally against my shoulder. I was enjoying this too much, and I needed to get control of myself. I didn't want a boyfriend, I didn't need a boyfriend, and I didn't come here for any hook-ups either. I didn't know what he was told or what he

may have been thinking, but I needed to let him know very soon this date was going to be strictly platonic.

We reached the make-shift dance floor, waiting for the next song to start before we joined. My heart was hammering in my chest with the words I needed to say. Placing my hand on his shoulder, I stood on my tiptoes to get closer to his ear. “I don’t know what Reed or Kendra told you, but I recently ended a long, torturous relationship, so I don’t want you to think I’m looking for a boyfriend because I’m not. I’m perfectly content on us being friends,” I said loudly.

“No worries, Sweet Cheeks. I

don't do the boyfriend/girlfriend thing anyway. I'm a one-night stand kind of guy," he said, giving me a wink. "But, if you want to be friends, we can be friends. I'm open to the whole friends-with-benefits thing, too, though," he grinned with deepened dimples.

Sweet Cheeks? Friends with benefits? What the fudge have I gotten myself in to?



The first few beats of ‘Wobble’ started to circulate the room. Kendra and

I titled this our gay-humping song. We liked to throw in our own bit of mix in the line dance and do a little grinding against each other. The first time Phillip witnessed our exhibition, he nearly dragged me off the dance floor by my hair. The whistles and cat calls didn't help matters either. His reaction had blind-sided me. Most guys I knew we're ready to engage in a little girl-on-girl action. That was the first encounter of abuse I received from Phillip and one of the worst fights we ever had. A year into our dating, I learned the extremes of how jealous of a guy he could be... er, still was. That should have been my first sign to cut ties and run, but I waved it off instead, feeling ashamed when he

accused me of acting like a slut.

Jerked from my thoughts, I felt Kendra tugging on my hand pulling me onto the dance floor.

“C’mon, we haven’t got to perform our dance in public in a long time.” She was hopping around like a giddy little five-year-old.

I was happy to see her ill feelings toward me had subsided.

I tossed a glance over my shoulder to the vacant spot where I was pulled from and saw Jaxon and Reed standing with legs apart and arms folded across their chest. The sly grins spreading across their faces screamed

the carnal thoughts reverberating in their minds. I was not one to tease, but I wanted to give them a performance that would have them shifting uncomfortably in their pants. I just hoped Jaxon's sexual innuendo earlier didn't backfire on me and bite me in the tail later.

As we got into the third line of the song, I leaned over to Kendra and told her to play it up. She gave me a quizzical look, so I came up behind her and grabbed her hips grinding against her very provocatively. I was being more touchy-feely than usual, and Kendra seemed to catch the drift on where I was heading.

Following my lead, she swung

around and came up behind me repeating the same movements. I snuck a quick peek over at Jaxon, trying to gauge his reaction when his eyes locked with mine. He was no longer in his bodyguard stance. His expression looked antsy and hungry with lust. I slacked off from Kendra, fearing the feral animal watching me might attack any moment.

“What’s wrong?” Kendra asked.

“Don’t look now, but Jaxon is watching me as if he could devour me with his tongue.” He was unconsciously licking his lips. *He was the lion, I was the gazelle.*

Kendra nonchalantly looked over their way and blew a kiss to Reed.

“You’re right. He is watching you as if no one else is in this room exists. Damn, girl, that’s hot!”

I rolled my eyes at her. “I told him earlier I wasn’t looking to hook-up.”

“Why did you do that?” Kendra huffed.

“Duh! Because I’m not. Do you ever listen to anything I say?” I breathed out.

“Oh, good gosh, Courtney, hooking up doesn’t mean you have to have sex with him. A little kissing never hurt anybody,” she sneered.

“Kissing never hurt me,” Reed

said, grabbing Kendra around the waist then gnawing on her neck.

Oh God! How long had he been standing there and how much had he heard?

I gave Kendra the ‘oh shit’ look. I was so wrapped up in our conversation, I didn’t notice when the song ended. Looking at Kendra’s surprised expression, neither had she.

Cripes! Please don’t let Jaxon be standing behind me.

I was afraid to turn around.

“You girls going to dance with us, or stand here and talk all night?” I

heard Jaxon say over my shoulder. “After that show you two just performed...” he blew out a whistle, “I’ll be honest, I’m in no mood for talking,” he said, shaking his head.

I didn’t know what mortified me more—him possibly hearing my last piece of conversation with Kendra or the fact I just aroused a famished beast with an appetite for sex. Before I was given the chance to answer, Jaxon moved up behind me, wrapped his arm around my waist and placed his hand across my stomach grinding to ‘Pop, Lock and Drop It.’ I stiffened instantly before letting the music and swaying of Jaxon’s hips lull me. We started grinding together, matching each other’s moves. I

rested my hand on top of his hand splayed across my abdomen, feeling intense electricity surge through me. Beads of sweat formed between my shoulders from the heat permeating off his body. Instantaneously, the music bled right into 'Down on Me' by 50 Cent. He apparently liked the way my booty was grinding against him as he grabbed my hips, pulling me into him firmly. I could feel his hot, heavy breathing down my neck, and the smell of mint on his breath was intoxicating. I closed my eyes, relishing in the moment. *This felt good.*

The sound of Kendra's laughter sprang my eyes open, releasing me down from the clouds. I welcomed her interruption, feeling shameful for my

actions. This behavior was so much out of character that I didn't even know who I was at that moment. Jaxon was forming a haze in my brain, and all moral thoughts were swiftly getting tossed out the window.

“I need a break,” I said breathlessly, twisting myself from his embrace.

“Is something wrong? We only danced to two songs.”

“No!” I blurted a little too loudly. “I mean no... everything's fine. I just need a pee break,” I replied, giving him my best fake smile.

“Okay, I'll be here when you get

back.” From the expression on his face, I figured he knew I was feeding him a line of bullshit.

Waltzing over to Kendra, I grabbed her arm and dragged her behind me.

“What the hell!” she exclaimed.

“Shut up and just come with me.”

“This better be good. I was having a good time back there,” she said, glancing back at Reed dancing.

“Yeah, well, rolling tongues around in each other’s mouths is something you can do anytime. You don’t need the dance floor for that.”

We stumbled through the labyrinth of bodies looking for a bathroom. I caught sight of a long line of girls waiting their turn and spun us around in the opposite direction, heading toward the front door. Squeezing through the crowd became more of a struggle as we encountered our share of intoxicated people. I swear I felt a couple of hands squeezing my butt. I just wished I had some way of knowing which one of these drunks was trying to cop a feel. We finally made our way outside, and the cool, fresh air was inviting.

“Will you now tell me why you so rudely interrupted my lip-lock with Reed by nearly jerking my arm out of socket?” Kendra asked rubbing her

shoulder.

“I lost myself in there,” I blurted as Kendra gave me a puzzled look. “It’s like I was having an out of body experience, and I didn’t know who I was. That’s not me. I’m not that type of girl.”

“Court, you’ve lost me. What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about my behavior with Jaxon. It’s not me. I don’t rub all up on guys I’ve just met, guys that inform me that they are only interested in sex. That’s not me!” I exclaimed. I walked over to the porch swing and sat down. “I just don’t want him to get the wrong idea, and right now I’m pretty sure he’s

probably thinking third base is a possibility tonight.”

“Courtney, you are not doing anything wrong. You are just paranoid because you’ve never had a guy other than Phillip show any interest in you or find you attractive. Well, you actually have, you just never noticed.” She took a few steps closer to me then leaned against the railing on the porch. I started to protest, but she stopped me. “It’s true, Court. Everybody knew you were off-limits, so no one ever bothered giving any attempt to pursue you. What you are doing in there tonight is normal,” she said pointing to the house. “Look around and watch, you will see what I’m talking about. You are on your way to

experiencing life the way it should be, not under that damn rock where Phillip kept you hidden. Phillip scrutinizing your every move for the last four years has really screwed you up.” She sat down beside me on the swing. “Nobody is judging you but yourself. Stop questioning your morals, and let’s have some fun tonight,” she smiled, wrapping her arm around my shoulders for a quick hug.

“You know you’re the big sister I never had. I know I’ve told you that a million times, but I just want to remind you again. You always know how to get me back in check. I don’t know what I would do without you. Thank you for being my best friend and sticking with

me these past few years. I know Phillip didn't make our friendship easy," I whispered, laying my head on her shoulder.

"Whoa, easy on the shoulder, I seriously think you dislocated it," she winced, rubbing her shoulder again.

"Well, we're not going to dwell on the past right now. What's done is done, and I love you regardless. Now we have two hot guys waiting for us inside. C'mon, let's head back in before they start thinking we had to take a shit." Kendra stood up stretching her hand out to me. I took it, letting her pull me up off the swing.

"Oh, yeah, I forgot I told Jaxon I

needed a potty break,” I snorted.

Kendra stopped before opening the door and smiled at me. “I have an idea. We should have a toast to your first real night as a single lady. I know you’ve been single for a month, but this is your first date with another guy to do whatever the hell you want.”

Her excitement made me laugh. I think she was happier about me being single than I was. We walked back into the house, entering a whole different atmosphere compared to the serenity we left outside. It felt as if a hundred more people had shown up, draining every keg available. Kendra hooked a finger into my belt loop, trying to keep up with me

as I guided us through the massive swarm of drunks. I threw my arm in the air, giving a little fist pump to the beat as we got closer to everyone dancing. I felt more relaxed and was ready to throw my insecurities out for the night.

“Hey,” Reed said, drawing the word out like a true southerner. “Look who finally decided to join us. Did everything come out all right?” He let out a bellowing laugh.

Kendra smacked him in the arm, and called him an asshole. She reached up, grabbing his head and putting her mouth to his ear. I assumed she was giving him an edited version of our previous conversation. Reed started

shaking his head, eyes roaming from me to Jaxon, and then started to nod his head in agreement to something Kendra was saying.

I shot a quick glance at Jaxon and quickly looked away when I saw he was staring at me. I considered glaring back at him, but he seemed comfortable enough in his skin to not let my stares intimidate him. Someone like him would probably see it as a challenge.

Feeling slightly uncomfortable, I walked over to Kendra and Reed, nudging them. “Hey, you two lovebirds. Are we going to dance or stand here and talk all night,” I said, repeating Jaxon’s words earlier.

“Oh, we’re dancing, then celebrating later,” she said giving me a wink. More than likely, she was planning on getting a little tipsy tonight.

Saddling up close to me, she spoke lightly in my ear. “As for your earlier qualms about Jaxon, he’s not that type of guy. He’s not looking to score tonight. Maybe a kiss, but nothing more than that,” she laughed at my blank face and sauntered back over to Reed.

Chapter 6 ~ A Toast to New Beginnings

We danced a while longer before Kendra decided she needed a drink. Reed, Jaxon, and I headed out to the patio for a breath of fresh, cool air while Kendra made a detour into the kitchen. Moments later, she breezed through the door with a bottle of tequila tucked under her arm and four shot glasses threaded between her fingers. She wasn't fooling around when she said we were celebrating and making a toast to me. I'd never taken a sip of liquor before, so, with my beginner level of throwing back shots, I knew things were

going to turn interesting pretty fast. Taking charge of my festivities, she grabbed a salt shaker and placed several slices of lime on a party plate decorated with Christmas trees.

Filling up each shot glass, she placed one in front of each of us.

“Okay, I want everyone to lick their hand so I can sprinkle the salt on.”

Snickering, Reed cut his eyes over at her dubiously. “I think we know how to do this, Kendra.”

“Well, Courtney doesn’t, so kiss my ass,” she huffed, then blew him a kiss.

We all licked our hands, and, as much as I wanted to look at Jaxon, I kept my eyes on Kendra as she sprinkled the salt.

Kendra held up her finger. “Now, before we throw back our shots, I want each of us to give Courtney a toast to her new single life, and everybody has to say something. I’ll go first,” she ordered. “To my best friend, Courtney. May she live her life for herself, do all the things she was never allowed to do, and *never, ever* date another piece of shit again. Oh, and one more thing. May she find a real life book boyfriend like she’s always reading about in her romance novels,” Kendra said, giving me a wink.

My face began to feel hot as Kendra announced my love for fictional characters. *Traitor!* I narrowed my eyes at her for her duplicity, but she didn't seem to notice.

Reed started clearing his throat before speaking, Jaxon following his cue. I thought Jaxon was going to give his toast next, but Reed began to speak first. "To the girl who has made my girlfriend the happiest I've seen her in this past month, and who has eaten more shit than a fly on a cow patty. May you one day get the happily ever after you deserve, and may I get my chance to beat the hell out of that fuckhead, Phillip."

"Awe! Thank you, Reed." I

leaned over and gave him a peck on the cheek. I felt a quick state of panic before reminding myself I was not in Phillip's presence. Old habits die hard.

“I'm serious, Courtney. Once that motherfucker turns eighteen, it's open season on his ass. I just hope the stupid fucker realizes his age won't protect him from me anymore.” I knew he was serious. When he accidentally found out Phillip put bruises on me, he'd went ballistic. It took Kendra and me at least an hour to convince him to not hunt Phillip down. If we hadn't, Reed would've only ended up in jail for assaulting a minor, and I would've been the one to suffer the repercussions. From that point on, I kept my bruises hidden

from everyone, including Kendra.

“I know you will, Reed,” I said with honesty, “but the past is the past, and there is no need to dig up old dirt. If I can learn to move on, you should too. Besides...” I said with a sly smirk, “... I’m a true believer in karma, and you know what they say...” I didn’t feel the need to finish because everybody knew karma was a bitch. “No more talking about Phillip tonight. We are celebrating my future, remember?”

Giving Reed a quick hug, I whispered in his ear. “Thank you for always looking out for me, big bro.”

Reed gave me a small nod of understanding. “Anytime, little sis.”

Jaxon cleared his throat again. After hearing him clear it earlier, I became more consciously aware of some odd noises he continuously made in his throat when he occasionally cleared it. I had to admit, it was quite annoying, and I couldn't believe this beautiful man may perhaps have a flaw.

“Jaxon, your turn,” Kendra chimed.

His lip pulled up on the side, giving a slight smile. “Hmm, where do I begin?” he paused. “I just met you, so I don't really know much about you. But I do know you're a beautiful girl who can dance almost as well as me,” he chuckled. “I would also like to get to

know you better, as friends of course.” He grinned, giving me his deep, dimpled smile. “Here’s to us,” he nodded at me, “to being your first guy friend, may we become the best of friends,” he smirked with an eyebrow raised in question.

“Hey, I thought I was your first guy friend, Courtney?” Reed said jokingly.

Before I could tell Reed he was more like my brother than a friend, Jaxon was already speaking on my behalf. “Okay, maybe not your first guy friend, but your best guy friend instead. You see, a girl always has a best girl friend and a best guy friend, and who better to fill that position?” He stood there

pointing to himself with eyebrows arched high and a million-dollar smile, clearly stating he was ‘that guy.’

I snorted, trying to hold back a laugh that I was unable to contain. Kendra and Reed laughed along with me.

“Is something funny?” he was staring straight at me when he spoke.

“No, not at all, I’m just trying to figure out if you expect me to seriously believe you want to be my BFF after you clearly stated earlier that you were down with the whole ‘friends with benefits’ thing,” I sneered, using my two fingers in a quotes gesture.

He let out a bellowing laugh. “You took me serious? Ah man, I was just kidding with you, Sweet Cheeks,” he admitted playfully. I felt a tinge of disappointment flow through me. “I don’t fuck my friends, but, then again, most of my friends are guys. Girls usually don’t want to be my friend. They just want a good fuck... and a few other things,” he said, mumbling the last part, making it nearly inaudible.

Hearing his man-whore confession was both gross and a turn-on all at the same time. Thinking of the diseases he possibly contracted was appalling, but the way he moved on the dance floor, combined with an air of sexual experience, had the heat rising in

my private regions. My body was already betraying me, and I hadn't even consumed the first drop of alcohol.

“Um... wow! Um... I don't even know how to respond to that.” I was lost for words, my emotions in a tormented battle with each other. He had given me every indication of being sexually attracted to me, and then he declared he was only interested in my friendship? I felt so confused.

Not knowing what else to say, I told everyone bottoms up. Without looking at them, I swiftly licked my salt, chasing it with the potent liquor then the lime. I choked the repulsive liquid down as gracefully as possible without

drawing any unwanted attention. The need to cough and sputter was there, but I kept swallowing, trying to force it down as saliva formed in my mouth. I could feel the liquor slowly burn into my stomach and welcomed the feeling, hoping it would wash away the mixed emotions I was having. Not wanting to attach myself to anyone, I was eccentrically drawn to Jaxon like a moth to a flame. I didn't really want him to show any interest in me, but I would be a liar if I said I wasn't slightly hurt when he announced he only wanted to be my buddy. The conflict of interest within reinforced the need to screw my head back on right, and I made the rational decision to reciprocate the feelings.

After all, he was going back to California in a few weeks, so a relationship wasn't in the stars for us anyway.

I forced a smile as everyone followed and took their shot. Kendra opened the bottle to pour another round, but Jaxon placed his hand over the top of his glass. "No more for me. I don't drink hard liquor. I only took the shot for the toast and now will just grab myself a beer."

I threw back the shot Kendra had just poured for me, keeping my eyes on Jaxon as he walked away to fetch his beer. Not sure how I didn't notice before, but he had the most impeccably

round butt that filled his jeans to perfection, the kind of ass your hand was itching to squeeze.

“See something you like?” I jerked my eyes away as Kendra startled me out of my reverie.

“No, I was having the stupid stares. I wasn’t looking at anything in particular,” I lied.

“Whatever! You know you can’t fool me.”

“Kendra, it’s not like that. You heard him. He is only interested in being my friend.”

“Yeah, but that’s not saying how

you feel about him.”

Our conversation abruptly ended as Jaxon came walking back to us with a bottle of water in hand. I was silently thanking him for the interruption.

“I thought you were getting a beer,” Kendra queried.

Jaxon shrugged his shoulders. “I changed my mind.”

Holding my glass up to Kendra, I motioned for her to fill my glass up again. “Hey, lightweight, you better slow down before you make yourself sick,” Reed chuckled.

“One more after this, I promise.

I've never been drunk, and I don't plan on tonight being my first time." I thought I heard Jaxon murmur 'that's a shame,' but feeling the onslaught of a buzz, I couldn't be sure.

After two shots, Reed cut himself off, saying somebody had to be the responsible one to drive us home tonight.

Kendra poured us two more shots, the last one barely going down because we were laughing so hard. Neither of us were sure of what we were even laughing about, but we both seemed to find it impossible to stop. I chanced a glance over at Jaxon, and he was once again staring at me, this time shaking his

head with a playful smile on his face.

Reed stepped between us, taking the bottle from Kendra's hand. "No more for you two ladies. I'm not being held responsible when your mothers find you staggering into their houses."

"Party pooper," Kendra pouted.

"Yeah, you're going to think party pooper when you are puking your guts out later. You'll be thanking me for this come morning, and, don't worry, I'll let you know how you can repay me," Reed said, wiggling his eyebrows up and down. Kendra reached over to grab Reed's head with both hands, pulling him to her as she whispered something on his lips before giving him a deep

kiss.

Jaxon cleared his throat again. Thanking him for another interruption from awkward silence I asked, “Are you getting sick?”

“No, why?”

“I noticed you keep clearing your throat. I just thought maybe you had a sore throat or something.”

“No, just a little tic I have. Is it bothering you?”

“Oh, no, not at all,” I lied. Actually, it was annoying the hell out of me. “What do you mean a tick? Like the kind that gives you Lyme disease?” I

asked, cocking my head to the side. My brain was feeling a little foggy, and I hoped my words weren't coming out in a slur.

“No, it's the kind that causes you to make sudden movements or sounds that you are unaware of and are unable to control,” he said laughing.

“Oh.” Now I felt kind of stupid and guilty for being annoyed by something he couldn't control.

“It's a form of Tourette. Have you ever heard of that?”

“No.”

“Google it sometime.” His face

turned blank as he seemed to ponder something. The atmosphere suddenly changed.

“You want to go back inside and dance? I don’t think these two lovebirds are ready to detach yet,” he smiled, his thumb pointing to Reed and Kendra locked in a strong embrace.

“Sounds good to me.” As soon as I stood up, the trees starting spinning and I came close to losing my balance.

“Whoa, Sweet Cheeks, you think you can stay vertical long enough to dance?” Jaxon asked as he grabbed my waist to steady me.

“As long as I’ve got you to hold

me up,” I giggled.

Looking up with blurred vision, I clearly became aware of the vivid, blue eyes staring back at me. Our proximity was mere inches, and the smell of his cologne mixed with the mint on his breath left me woozy. I could feel his ragged breath on my face, and I urgently wanted to kiss him. The lines were getting blurred, but I didn't care. I reached up to lightly brush my fingertips through his short buzz-cut hair along the nape of his neck, all the while gazing in his blue eyes.

“You don't want to do this,” he whispered, as he reached up to remove my hand from his head. Not letting go of

my hand, he intertwined my fingers through his as he released my waist and pulled me back inside to follow him. In my inebriated state, I knew he wanted me. I could see the wanton battle in his eyes. He just struggled to restrain the lust more than I could.

Chapter 7 ~ A Kiss of Rejection

For the first time in my life, I was shit-faced drunk, and Jaxon was my first-class babysitter. He was very attentive to my needs—frequently asking if I needed anything, asking if I felt okay, and making sure I didn't fall flat on my face by keeping his hands on me at all times. I felt a smidge of guilt for not being the perfect date, but, moreover, I thoroughly enjoyed the attention I was receiving from him. Phillip hadn't cared about my well-being since the early months of us dating, so I milked it for all it was worth, and, by the smile Jaxon kept plastered on his face, I think he

enjoyed it as much as I did.

My attempt to kiss Jaxon had miserably failed, but I wasn't ready to surrender. Friend or not, I was determined to get a kiss before the night ended. I wasn't going to be satisfied until I got a taste of him. I began to understand the reason people chose to drink, it gave you the courage to be someone else. I felt confident, carefree, bold, and seductive—all of the things that didn't normally make up my list of characteristics. Despite my flirtatious advances being repeatedly brushed away, I remained persistent for Jaxon to reciprocate any signs I passed his way.

Relishing in the inebriated

person that had taken over my body, I didn't want any of it wearing off before my night ended. I tried being persuasive, but I was unable to convince Jaxon to let me have a couple more shots of tequila. The sex God wouldn't even let me out of his sight, saying he didn't trust me, thinking I might sneak off for a little more liquor.

After trying to dance to a few more songs by artists I couldn't even remember, Jaxon decided it was time for me to go home. My motor skills were declining rapidly, and he literally had to hold me upright.

We had left Reed and Kendra in their intimate moment on the patio, and

they had been MIA ever since. Jaxon texted Reed, letting him know he was taking me home.

“Oh my gosh, Courtney,” Kendra cried, clearing me from my drunken fog. “How many more shots have you had?”

“Zero,” I said, trying to form a zero with my thumb and forefinger.

“Zero my ass—”

“Really, she’s not had any more. I haven’t let her out of my sight, much less my grip, for her to drink anything else. Her body just can’t handle it. She needs to go home.”

“She can’t go to my house like

that. My mom will call her mom, and we will both be grounded until we graduate,” Kendra proclaimed.

“Take her to my apartment,” Reed suggested. “If your mom asks why she’s not with you, just tell her she got sick or something.”

“That won’t work either. My mom’s not stupid, Reed.”

“Hell, I don’t know then! Tell her anything. You’re good at making shit up,” Reed said with an exasperated sigh, throwing his arms up in the air.

“Just take her to Reed’s, and I’ll figure out something to tell my mom before I go home.”

I loved how they talked about me as if I wasn't there.

I groggily lifted up my head. "Where have you and Reed been?" I asked Kendra, hoping my words came out comprehensible.

"What? I didn't understand a fuckin' word you just said," Kendra laughed.

"You," I said pointing to her. "Reed," I said pointing to him. "Disappeared," I slurred, giving a questioning look.

"Oh, we had things to take care of," she giggled. I rolled my eyes, knowing they slipped off somewhere to

get a little booty. Rolling my eyes wasn't a wise thing to do. My equilibrium was off, and I stumbled while standing in place.

“Come here, Sweet Cheeks. Party's over. Time to leave.” Jaxon wrapped his arm around my waist and draped my arm over his shoulder. “See you guys later,” he said, nodding to Reed and Kendra.

“Bye, girlie! I'll talk to you tomorrow.” Kendra hugged me, and whispered in my ear, “If he tries to kiss you, you better let him.”

Shaking my head, I gave her a big eye roll. *Damn*. Everything started to spin again.

“If you have any trouble with the GPS, give me a call. My phone has good service out here,” Reed hollered to Jaxon as we walked away.

“I mean it!” Kendra shouted.

“She means what?”

“Nothing,” I mumbled.

Jaxon had me pulled tight against him as he towed me outside. The wind was blowing in strong gusts, making the temperature feel colder than the mid-thirties. The blast of cold air hitting my face and bare arms gave me a slight feeling of sobriety. I then remembered that I had left my jacket inside. “I forgot my jacket,” I told Jaxon.

“Shit. Well, let me get you in the truck, and then I’ll run back inside and get it.”

“We’re taking Reed’s truck?” I asked, as Jaxon pushed the key button to unlock the doors.

“Yeah, it works out better if I drive Reed’s and he drives Kendra’s.” Jaxon, being very gentlemen-like, helped me in the truck.

“I’m freezing,” I forced through chattering teeth.

“Sorry, I could give you my coat if you want it, but it’s just as cold from sitting out here in the truck,” Jaxon grimaced. “I’ll start the truck so it can

warm up while I run back to get your jacket. Do not unlock the doors for anybody but me, okay?” Jaxon peered at me under his long, thick, black lashes with concern in his eyes. It was too cold to talk, so I nodded, letting him know I understood. Jaxon lightly closed the door, locking me in as he ran back to the cabin. The warmth from the heater, mixed with alcohol, relaxed me enough to send me into a drunken slumber.

I jumped awake when I heard the truck door shut.

“Damn, that wind is brutal! How do you people live in this shit?” Jaxon rubbed his hands together and held them in front of the vents to warm them up.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you. Were you sleeping?”

I felt dizzy again as I rolled my head to the side to face Jaxon.

“No, I was just resting my eyes,” I murmured with my eyes closed.

My whole body felt lethargic as I reached up to grab my seat belt. I became frustrated with my hand coordination, so I let the seat belt go, not caring if it was on or not. Suddenly I felt a hard, muscled body leaning against my chest with the sweet smell of cologne and mint swirling around me. I opened my eyes to find Jaxon’s face in front of mine. I gasped, unable to move as my heart rate accelerated. He reached up to

pull my seatbelt across me and paused when he noticed me staring at him. We stayed frozen in place, lost in each other's eyes for what seemed like a lifetime. I wanted to grab the back of his head and pull him to my lips, but my body wouldn't listen to what my mind was telling it. I silently begged him to kiss me. He rapidly blinked, looking away from me as he clicked my seatbelt in place. No words passed between us as we left, and I sluggishly fell asleep.

Feeling overly groggy, my muscles felt limp as I felt my body floating in the air. My nose tingled as I inhaled a delicious aroma that my senses were getting accustomed to—Jaxon. The strange grunting sounds he made echoed

in the cool, dark air. Slowly, I opened my eyes finding myself cradled in his arms as he carried me into Reed's apartment. Wanting to draw in closer to him, I wrapped my arm that dangled behind him tightly around his back and nuzzled my face into his chest, breathing him in. My face pressed up against something hard in his coat with a strong minty odor. Before I could ask what it was, he explained with one word.

“Altoids, I used to smoke,” he confessed. “I kicked my nicotine habit only to replace it with a sugar habit. If I don't die of lung cancer, I'll definitely die with a mouth full of cavities,” he chuckled. Well, that explained the minty aroma always surrounding him.

Jaxon gently bent down on his knees to lay me on the couch, telling me I should try to go back to sleep. As he released his hold on me, I gripped the front of his jacket, pulling him back down for our lips to slightly brush. I hesitated for a fraction of a second to see if he would pull away. When he didn't, I pulled him closer. As our lips touched, my heart rate hastened and intense heat shot through my body. I lightly ran my tongue along his top lip. I wanted to taste the delicious mint I had intricately smelled all night. Jaxon took a deep breath through his nose as he pulled away. I opened my eyes, afraid the moment had ended too soon, only to find his beautiful blue eyes staring at me

with desire.

Without deflecting his stare from mine, he grabbed my head with both hands, thumbs gingerly brushing over my cheeks, and leaned in to kiss me. His lips were warm and wet from our preceding kiss as they pressed softly against mine. I opened my mouth, inviting him in as I felt his tongue brush along my bottom lip. Voraciously accepting my invitation, our tongues intertwined intensely, becoming more sensual as the kiss grew into heated passion. My hand bravely found the lean muscle of his waist under his shirt. I easily glided my hand over his smooth skin, gripping him tightly, and I heard him faintly moan in my mouth. I felt

myself losing all control as the kiss deepened further, then abruptly he broke the kiss. Jaxon pressed his forehead to mine, breathing heavily with his eyes clenched shut.

As if he were struggling with emotions, he whispered, “I can’t... you can’t... we can’t.”

I could only stare at him as he battled his inner thoughts. He inhaled a deep breath through his nose, then slowly exhaled a shaky breath as he released my face, rocking back on his heels.

“I’m sorry, Courtney. I didn’t mean to take advantage of you. You’re in a vulnerable state right now, and if

things move forward...” he paused shaking his head, “well, let’s just say we both would be weighed down with regret in the morning.”

A rush of humiliation seeped into me as his words registered into my inebriated brain— rejection. He didn’t even look at me as he dismissed my actions. I was so overwhelmed with embarrassment that I wanted to cry, but I was too overcome with anger. I couldn’t talk. My words of fury caught in my throat with the tears I held back.

He finally looked at me, and I prayed he couldn’t see the tears of hurt and anger stinging the back of my eyes. “I still want us to be friends while I’m

here. I don't want things to be awkward between us," he said with sincerity. "Are we good?"

I kept silent, not wanting to make a fool of myself any more than I already had, not wanting him to hear me choke on my words. I gave him a small nod.

"Can I hug you," he asked with eyes seeking forgiveness. *What the hell? More like, could you torture me some more?* I wanted to ask, but instead I nodded again.

He bent down to me, sliding his thick arms around my back in a tight embrace. He squeezed me briefly with a couple of friendly pats on the back before letting me go. I returned the

friendly hug, knowing our minute of passion was over. He stood up from the couch, hesitating before walking away.

“I’m going to make some coffee. Do you want some?” I heard him call from the kitchen.

I didn’t answer him. I couldn’t answer him. When he walked away, I had turned my body to face the back of the couch. I hid my face as the tears of shame fell. *How could a beautiful night full of promises end feeling empty?*

That damn tequila was turning me into a blubbering mess. I was tougher than this. I had just met him, hadn’t even know him for twenty-four hours, so why did his rejection tear up my

insides. Pretending to be asleep, I prayed the sandman would find me soon, and fortunately he did.

Chapter 8 ~ Sweet Cheeks with a Touch of Honesty

Bright lights blazing behind my eyelids woke me up. *Did I fall asleep in the tanning bed again?* Peeking through a small slit in my eyes, I found the sun shining directly in my face. *Ugh! Why can't my mother ever leave my blinds alone?* I had cotton mouth from hell. Now I knew why they always told people to drink plenty of water with alcohol.

Turning over in the tangled sheets, I flopped onto my belly, and stuffed my face in my pillow only to discover it smelled like men's cologne.

Actually, it smelled just like the cologne Reed wore. I shot up, resting on the palm of my hands looking down and around at the bed I was in. *Holy crow! I was in Reed's bed. Kendra was going to kick my ass.* Sitting up on my knees, I looked down at myself in relief to see that I still wore the same clothes I had on the night before. The remnants of which suddenly came crashing into my mind—*Jaxon... dancing... Jaxon... tequila shots... Jaxon... kissing... Jaxon rejecting me.* That last thought sent a shot of sorrow right through my veins, landing directly in my heart. *Gah! I made such a fool of myself.*

Now that I thought about it with a slightly groggy, but clear and sober,

head, I had no one to blame but myself. I had plainly stated in the beginning what my boundaries were. Jaxon had plainly stated in the beginning he was a one night stand kind of guy and still respectably remained a gentleman, even after I initiated a panty-wetting kiss—a heated kiss that I willingly would've allowed to transpire into more. Maybe Phillip was right all along. Maybe I was a closet slut.

Thinking that I could hear talking in the living room, I eased off the bed as quietly as the box springs would allow. Reed seriously needed to invest in a whole new bedroom set. Looking at his mismatched furniture, I would guess it all was purchased randomly at a yard

sale. I just hoped the mattress I slept on all night wasn't thrown in as a bonus. *Yikes!* Suddenly, I had that creepy feeling, as if I had bugs crawling all over me. I guess that's what I got for watching Dateline and 60 Minutes.

Tip-toeing over to the door to listen, I realized it was just the TV. Somebody was out there, and I prayed to God it was Reed and not Jaxon. I couldn't face Jaxon after what happened last night. It would be too weird unless I pretended to act like I didn't have any recollection of our steamy encounter. Then I heard it, the repetitive throat clearing, and I had my confirmation who sat on the other side of that door. *As annoying as it was, I think I could*

possibly overlook his quirky habit.

Quietly, I padded over to the mirror to tame my wild bed-head and to wipe away the smudge of make-up under my eyes. If I played the dementia card and only recalled the events that happened at the party, then I wouldn't have to tell anyone about our kiss.

Reed had recently moved out from his parents and now lived in a one-bedroom apartment. The place consisted of a small living room, an even smaller kitchen, and a rinky-dink bathroom. All the rooms were connected with no escape, so, as soon as you walked out of his bedroom, you walked directly into the living room. As I opened the door, I knew I would be face-to-face with

Jaxon. My hand methodically turned the doorknob as my heart accelerated in anticipation.

I slowly peered out from behind the door and gazed straight into the eyes of a Greek god, aka Jaxon. No lie... I swear I heard a church choir sing in the background with a ray of sun casting down over his impeccable, powerfully built body. He was stretched out on Reed's black, leather couch wearing nothing but loose basketball style Under Armor shorts. The couch, recliner, and flat screen TV were the only items Reed splurged a little money on, sporting a typical bachelor pad. Jaxon's arm was folded up behind his head with his forearm being used as a pillow,

showcasing his bulging biceps. I took note of the absentee hair in his armpit; clear sign of manscaping. I was curious to see if his chest and abdomen were bare as well, and I noticed a tattoo of a symbol on the inside of his bicep. *Bingo!*

I was right about the nipple piercings, and, oh God, I had a desperate urge to kiss them. He had a thick, silver hoop in each nipple. As my eyes continued to travel down the muscled grooves, I got lost in the clearly defined V that disappeared in the elastic waistband of his shorts. I would be lying if I didn't admit I searched for any bumps, hills, or mountains where his unit was located. My eyes made their way to

his well-built and, I must say, very sexy legs. His skin was a deep, brown tan one could only muster by spending days on the beach. My mouth salivated as I remembered the kiss from last night and what could've been. *Closet slut.*

“Yoo-hoo, Sweet Cheeks,” Jaxon called out to me, waving his arms back and forth trying to get my attention. My eyes snapped up to meet his. He gave me a half sly grin, causing his dimples to deepen. He was fully aware of the affect he had on me. “So, are you going to answer me?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t hear what you asked.” *Your godliness was too distracting.*

“I said ‘Good morning, Sweet Cheeks’ and I just wanted to know how you were feeling this morning.”

It just occurred to me that I didn’t have the dreadful hangover everyone always fusses about after a night of alcohol binging. Just a moisture-free mouth that tasted like ass.

“Actually, I feel fine, no different than any other morning,” I said cheerfully. After picking up the blanket that was draped across the recliner, I plopped myself down, making myself comfy. I had an inkling Reed slept on it last night while I snoozed comfortably in his bed. *Poor guy!* I hoped he didn’t have a crick in his neck this morning.

“Wow, I’m surprised,” he said shaking his head. “You seemed pretty blitzed last night. I thought for sure you would have either puked your guts out or woke up to a splitting migraine.” He stretched with a yawn before sitting up on the couch.

I couldn’t help to sneak a peek of the muscles straining against his sun-kissed skin as he stretched past the length of the couch. “Yeah, I’m pretty surprised myself. I guess I was given the ‘get out of hangover free’ card. I just wish I could remember what happened last night.” I found my chance to throw the memory loss in before I was questioned about the kiss.

Jaxon's elbows were resting on the top of his knees with his body hunched over, rubbing his face with the palms of his hands then through his hair. He stopped all movements and turned his head to look at me incredulously when I revealed I had no recollection of last night. "Seriously? You don't remember anything from last night?"

"Well, I think I remember everything up until about the time we left. I remember freezing my butt off outside, then falling asleep in Reed's truck." Shaking my head, I acted completely oblivious of any events afterward. "Nope, nothing else." I hesitated. "Oh God! Please don't tell me I did something crazy, you have a look

on your face that screams I did something I'm going to regret," I exclaimed, trying to express a look of horror on my face. *That should make me sound believable enough.*

"No, no, not at all. You umm... you were a sweetheart last night and I enjoyed our date," he said grinning then looking away in thought. A teeny swarm of butterflies erupted in my stomach as I hoped that he was smiling from thinking about our kiss. "Actually, we all should get together again and do something fun before I go back to California."

Literally, I reached up to touch my chin to make sure my jaw was not hanging open in shock of his statement.

My mood slowly started to match the weather outside.

“Hold up... back up,” I frowned, holding my hand up to stop him from saying anything else. “Seriously?” I asked, repeating his one worded question. “How could you enjoy my company when you were my full-time babysitter? What’s the fun in that?”

Jaxon stood up from the couch and handed me the remote control before making his way to the kitchen. “Sweet Cheeks, you are the best entertainment I’ve had since I’ve been in this God-forsaken little town. You want some coffee?” he asked, interrupting himself. “You have to remember where I’m from,

and, to be honest, since I've been here, I've been contemplating suicide because this little town is boring as hell."

Still stuck on the nickname he labeled me with, I had to know where it originated from. "Why do you keep calling me Sweet Cheeks? Are you making fun of my chipmunk cheeks?" My back faced him in the kitchen, and I was unable to see his expression to my confrontation, so I leaned around the recliner and looked back to gather a response.

"Does it bother you?"

"Please don't ask me a question without answering mine first." I scolded.

“Look, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to offend you, and I won’t call you that again if it bothers you that much,” he said with genuine apology in his eyes.

I tucked a few strands of hair behind my ear that fell obstructing my view of Jaxon. “I didn’t say yay or nay if it offended me. I just want to know why you keep calling me Sweet Cheeks.”

Without hesitation, Jaxon confessed, “You have the two sweetest sets of cheeks I’ve seen on a girl.” He gave me a quick wink. “I think your chipmunk cheeks, as you call them, accentuate your beautiful face, and, I’ll just be honest—damn woman, you have one fine ass. I’m not apologizing for that

comment, so don't ask me to." Jaxon continued making coffee as if what he just said wasn't anything out of the ordinary. I was dumbstruck.

Quickly, I turned back around in the recliner hiding the red heat I felt rising from my neck to the top of my head. I expected hot lava to burst out of my ears like a volcano. He made it obvious he was attracted to me, said he wanted to hang out more, abruptly stopped a kiss before it went any further, clearly stated he was a man-whore, and declared he wants to be my best 'guy' friend. At that point, I was righteously confused. In all probable cause, my best defense was to just go with the flow and let the chips fall where they may. If he

wanted us to be friends, then we'd keep things platonic, but, if his interest spiked to another level, well I may just go against my better judgment and reconsider staying single.

“Thank you, I guess?” I said, still hiding behind the recliner.

Jaxon rummaged through Reed's cabinets, most likely looking for clean coffee mugs. Reed only kept a limited supply of necessities to accommodate a bachelor. “Sweet Cheeks, don't feel embarrassed. That was certainly a compliment. You should feel smug given that I hand those out very sparingly.” I jumped when I heard the cabinet door slam shut. “Damn, does Reed only own

two coffee mugs?”

I wasn't sure if he had asked me or a phantom because I was still hung up on his rare accolade. Jaxon started washing dishes, apparently giving up on finding any more coffee cups. “Do you drink your coffee black or do you like cream and sugar?”

Peering around the recliner, I soaked in the pleasant backside of Jaxon as he washed a few dishes. I wasn't sure if I was tuning it out, but his throat sounds didn't seem to be as annoying as last night. Aside from staring at his protruding, tight butt and clearly defined back muscles, I noticed two small angel wings wrapped around a heart on his

right shoulder blade with writing etched inside the heart. They were pretty, and I wondered what they represented.

“I like cream and sugar, but don’t worry about it. I’ll fix it myself. I like my coffee sweeter than most people,” I said, getting out of the recliner to join him in the kitchen. I needed to guzzle a gallon of water before I enjoy any coffee. “By the way, where is Reed?” I asked, surprising myself with how I felt a little more comfortable in his presence. Reaching into the fridge, I grabbed a bottle of water. I quickly gulped it down before Jaxon could watch me.

Jaxon turned to hand me a cup

he'd just finished drying. I dumped a little creamer and an overabundant amount of sugar into my cup. "He left right before you woke up to grab a few items from the grocery store. He said he wasn't prepared for company and didn't want to be branded as a bad host," he chuckled as he filled my cup. "I told him it didn't matter, that I was the one imposing—"

"You're not the only one," I interrupted.

"Well, I didn't want to speak on your behalf. That wouldn't be fair to you. Besides, you had a reason to stay. I didn't."

"So why did you?" I blurted, not

meaning for it to come out loudly.

“I don’t know. I guess I wanted to follow through with my babysitting job until big bad dad got home,” he said laughing. “No, I’m kidding with you. Really I don’t know, I guess maybe I find that I just enjoy your company.” He smiled, showcasing his perfectly, white teeth and those dreamy dimples I was such a sucker for. “So... what’s on the agenda today?”

His question was a great way to avert another revelation of his.

“Work,” I deadpanned.

“All day?”

“No, not all day. Five until closing.”

He stayed quiet for a moment, except for a little throat clearing. Feeling his eyes on me, I looked up from staring a hole into my coffee to find them studying me. Quickly, I looked away, not wanting to make eye contact. He took a sip from his coffee, then started, “Well, how about we go out for lunch before you go to work, my treat?”

My first thought was what Phillip’s reaction would be if he saw me out with Jaxon. “I don’t know, Jaxon. Aren’t you sick of looking at me by now? I know I’m looking pretty close to death warmed over at this point.” I ran

my fingers through my hair again, trying to untangle all the hair products Kendra swore was a necessity the night before.

“To be honest, I think you look pretty damn sexy with the fucked-up hair.” He reached out to thread a few strands through his fingers. “I don’t think it’s possible for you to look ugly. Few people are born with natural beauty. It’s a rarity, but you are one of those few truly blessed,” he said in a low raspy voice, holding my eyes with his intense stare. He must’ve seen my face quickly flush because he released my eyes giving a crooked grin. “Don’t feel uncomfortable with my observations. I call it like I see it,” he said matter-of-factly. “I believe in pure honesty. Sugar-

coating the truth only results in heartache later. So, as a fair warning, if you don't want the God-to-honest truth about something, don't ask me." He raised his eyebrows, walking out of the kitchen into the living room with a take it or leave it attitude. I made a mental note to never lie to him. It was obvious the truth was something of importance to him. Already, I started off on the wrong foot with him when I told my first fib this morning.

Jaxon claimed his spot back on the couch hugging his coffee with both hands. "So we're going to lunch, right?"

Doing what I did best, I gave in without a fight. "Sure, but I need to call

Kendra. I'm sure she's been blowing up my phone, and I need to go home to shower and change."

Chapter 9 ~ The Caretaker and the Dictator

After a morning of true confessions with Jaxon, answering Kendra's missed texts and phone calls, and Reed's failed attempt at making us breakfast, I finally made it home. Jaxon had the bright idea for us to have lunch, but, having a better idea myself, I mentioned our plans to Reed and Kendra, inviting them to join us. Spending more time alone with Jaxon and his outlandish comments was not something I could endure twice in one day.

As soon as I walked through the

door I jumped in the shower. The bathroom door creaked as my mother poked her head in. “Kendra wants to know if you can meet them at one o’clock instead of twelve?”

“Tell her that will be fine.” I could hear my mother repeating my words as she closed the door. Knowing her, she would keep Kendra on the phone, trying to find out who all “them” included.

I loved my mother more than anything in this world, and we had that mother/daughter relationship most girls dream about, well... we used to. We had always been very close, if you excluded the past three and a half years. When

Phillip and I started dating and became more serious, I pushed her out of my life to put him first. Our constant fighting and bickering was usually due to Phillip. She thought he was the devil, and I thought he was God. They always say moms know best, and it turned out everything she ever said about him was right. He was poison to my mind and soul, and I nearly drowned in his toxic love.

Over the past month and a half, we had slowly built our relationship back up to where it used to be. I tried to spend time with her, talking and just hanging out when she was not working. My mom was a CNA at a nursing home and put in either twelve-hour shifts or eight-hour days six to seven days a

week. She always claimed there was a shortage of caring and qualified nurses, plus the extra hours earned the extra income she deemed necessary. Therefore, we didn't get to have quality time very often, so we would try to make the most of every minute we could. Going against her rules of not working until I graduated, I took a part-time job at the local theater as soon as I turned sixteen. I loathed the extra hours she worked to pay the bills, and I only felt it was fair to earn my own money to spend on gas, clothes, eating out, and other unnecessary luxuries.

Feeling as if I just washed a pound of make-up and hair products from my body, I added the pound back

on by lathering myself in cotton candy-scented body cream. It was a favorite of mine that my mother kept in stock for me after Bath and Body released their new flavors for spring and summer. I lightly raked a wide-tooth comb through my wet locks, letting them dry naturally to prevent frizzing, and decided to spend a little quality time with my mom since I had an extra hour to spare. I could never get back the years we'd lost, but I was determined to make up for that crucially misplaced time.

Since I would be leaving straight from the restaurant to start my shift at the theater, I threw on a little make-up and my work uniform. Mom snuggled in a blanket on the couch watching one of her

infamous love stories on Lifetime. Sitting on the couch with her, I cuddled up to her side under the fleece blanket and laid my head on her shoulder. Breathing in the smell of baby powder always made me think of comfort, soft skin, wisdom and love—the best way to describe my mom. We sat snuggled next to each other in silence watching her movie... and then the interrogation started.

“So, who is Jaxon?”

My assumption was right. She wasted no time finding out who I was having lunch with today.

“Oh, Mom, I know you have already asked Kendra for details, so

why are you asking me something you already know?"

"I just wanted to hear your side, that's all. Nothing more." I could hear a smile in her voice.

"He's Reed's cousin from California. What he's doing here in North Carolina is beyond me, but I know he won't be here for very long. I think he's just visiting family for the holidays, but I'm not sure." I started to pick at the fringes on the blanket. "We never really got the opportunity to sit down and chit chat last night. Loud music and dancing isn't the best atmosphere for getting to know someone." The tequila flowing through my veins had me knowing Jaxon

on a completely different level, one I know my mom wouldn't approve of. Turning my head, I gave her a sideways glance and a slight shrug. "That's pretty much it." Being honest with her, made me realize that I didn't know much about Jaxon at all. I was ready to set up a little Q & A session at lunch today. I found Jaxon intriguing, and I wanted to know more about him.

"Aside from what little you know, did you like him? Did you have fun with him?" Mom asked.

Yes! Trying not to answer too quickly, I paused a moment. "Yeah, we had a pretty good time. He's one heck of a dancer. You should see him move,

Mom. He puts most hip-hop dancers to shame.”

Mom gave me an arched eyebrow response. “Does Phillip know you went out on a date?”

Doing a complete one-eighty, I turned to face her, wondering where this question stemmed from. “Nooo, not exactly,” I said, drawing my words out giving her a quizzical look. “Why do you ask?”

Mom hit the mute button on the remote control. *Uh-oh!* I knew this couldn’t be good. When she wanted to have a serious talk with me, she always liked things quiet. Whether it was the TV or the radio in the car, the volume either

got turned down or turned off.

“He called this morning asking for you. I told him you spent the night with Kendra. I thought it was kind of odd, since he has not called here since y’all broke up and then, the first time you go out on a date, he’s calling the next day?” She shook her head. “Sounds a little fishy to me. Did he call or text you?”

“No, did he say what he wanted?”

“No, but he did ask me how I’ve been doing and said he missed me.” She chuckled, rolling her eyes. Mom was very good at reading people, mostly douchebags. Phillip pulled the wool

over his parents' eyes, and everyone else he came in contact with, but he couldn't fool Alma Peterson.

My mother was very aware of guys like him. She was once married to a cheating control freak—my father, Neil Peterson. My dad was a naval officer who should have retired to enjoy life at fifty-five, but instead continued to serve his country only because of his love for the domineering role. Since he no longer had a wife to overbear, he could only find the dictatorial position by remaining in the Navy. Sometimes I was thankful for him not involving himself in my life. I don't think I could stomach a drill sergeant for eighteen years.

My dad cheated on my mom for several years, just like Phillip cheated on me. She finally grew a backbone and left him. I should've learned from my mother's mistakes.

When I was two, Mom took me and left everything she owned in Norfolk, Virginia. Her best friend confessed that she thought she was pregnant with my father's child. That was the final nail in the coffin. My mom's heart was broken. Her hopes of him changing and becoming the faithful husband and dedicated father fell flat, so she moved back to North Carolina and never looked back. It all blew up in my dad's face, though, when my mom's best friends suffered from a miscarriage and

left my father shortly after.

“I thought maybe you could tell me what he was wanting. Are you two talking again?” The tone she used told me she wasn’t happy with any communication we might be sharing.

“He approached me at school after we got back from Thanksgiving break. We made a truce and agreed to be friends.” Mom shot me one of her you’ve got to be kidding looks. “Mom, I figured it’s the only way we could remain civil to one another.”

“And what happens when he finds out you’re dating somebody or sees you out with another guy?” My mother knew Phillip was jealous, but she had no

idea the extremities of it. She forever tried to protect me from making the same mistakes she'd made with my father, but I had thought Phillip was different. At least that's what I used to tell myself.

“We discussed that, and I told him I would be dating. I made it very clear to him that we were over and the only thing I could offer him was my friendship. He promised me he was okay with me dating other guys, as long as I didn't date anyone from our school.”

“Why not anyone from your school? What difference does that make?” Mom's agitation was getting stronger in her tone. “Once again, the little shit has control of you. Yeah, sure,

Courtney, date whoever you want to, but I'm still in control because I'm going to tell you who you can and cannot date," she sneered, imitating a guy's voice... Phillip's voice.

Gah! Why did it never occur to me that he put a freakin' restriction on whom I could date? Letting the realization of my mom's words sink in gave me the itching desire to fall back on my word. You know, they always say, you marry a man just like your father. At one time, I was well on my way to bringing truth to that statement, but not anymore. Phillip, the forever tyrant, was about to get schooled—by me.

"I don't know why he doesn't

want me dating anyone from school. I didn't ask, I was more concerned of his reaction to me dating at all than to worry about what school they attended," I paused, "or didn't." Glancing at the clock, I noted my mommy-and-me time was almost up. "It's going to be a fairly interesting day when Monday rolls around. I'm sure someone will have told him about me attending the Russells' Christmas party." I could only imagine what his thoughts would be when he heard about me and tequila making an acquaintance. For some odd reason, drunken slut came to mind.

"Well, guessing from his phone call this morning, I'd say he's already caught wind of your date last night. You

should probably call him back now and settle whatever issue he has. You know how he is... he'll let it brew up over the weekend then annihilate you Monday morning." She said these words as if they were spoken on a daily basis. I never gave my mother enough credit for her silent observations.

Untwisting myself from the fleece blanket, I popped up off the couch, leaving my living, breathing security blanket. I felt cold where her warmth just seconds ago embraced me. "And that's just what I'm going to do." Leaning down, I gave her a kiss on the cheek. "Wish me luck," I said, giving her a look of question and dread.

“Honey, you don’t need my luck. You’ve been doing this for three and a half years. I’d say you’re a pro by now,” she chuckled with sympathy in her eyes.

Walking into my bedroom, I snatched a ponytail holder off my cluttered dresser, and twisted my hair up into a loose ponytail. I swiped a light shade of lipstick on and popped my small silver hoops in my ears. I was not trying to impress Jaxon, but I didn't want him to see me looking as drabby as I had this morning. Digging through my purse, I located my cell phone and quickly sent Phillip a text.

Me: What’s up?

Grabbing my keys and purse, I

took a deep breath, preparing myself for the next adventure that awaited me—lunch with Jaxon and a text or phone call from Phillip.

Chapter 10 ~ Suspicious Eyes

I sat in my car outside of Rome's Pizza and Pasta, waiting for everyone else to arrive. Kendra and Reed were going to freak because they were usually the ones that had to wait for me. Smiling to myself, I made a mental note to mark this on my calendar as a red-letter day.

Pizza wasn't my first choice for lunch, but Rome's had the most comfortable atmosphere of any of the other restaurants in town, and a calming ambience was what I sought. It was a popular eatery with the young and old, and, from what I had heard, they had the best pizza in the entire northeastern part

of North Carolina. I couldn't stake truth to that claim, though, considering I had never eaten it. I was one of those rare few that did not like pizza. I preferred their pasta dishes.

The longer I waited, the more my thoughts got carried away. Every scenario kept playing out in my mind of what I would say to Phillip when he asked me about the party. I knew I shouldn't be worrying myself with something that had not yet even happened, but, where Phillip was concerned, I liked to be readily prepared. As a result of my heightened nerves, my stomach decided to have its own private gymnastic performance, tumbling and twirling inside.

I was trying to psyche myself up when Reed's truck pulled into the parking spot beside me. So much for getting the Olympic Fab Five to cease in my stomach because, as soon as I caught sight of Jaxon, the gold performance was in full swing. My intense stare locked in on his clear, blue eyes as he stepped out of the truck. Then, unexpectedly, he opened my car door.

“Nice to see you again, Sweet Cheeks,” he grinned, pulling his dimples in deep and reaching for my hand in order to help me out of the car.

Distracting my attention from Jaxon, Kendra began to freak out, just like I thought she would. “Oh. My. Gosh!

Slap a straightjacket on me and call me Charles Manson! I do not believe what my eyes are seeing.” Kendra had her arms stretched out as if showcasing me for a presentation. “Are you seeing this, Reed?”

He shook his head making a clicking sound with his tongue. They both were on the verge of spouting what I could only assume to be a mouthful of garb about me trying to impress Jaxon. *Think fast, Court!*

“Stop yelling, Kendra. It’s not that big of a deal. My car has been running a little weird lately, so I wanted to give myself extra time in case I ended up with car trouble.” It was the best lie I

could configure up.

“What’s wrong with it?” Jaxon and Reed asked simultaneously.

“Oh... uh... I’m really not sure. It’s been making this weird noise when I’m stopped at a stoplight. It sounds kind of like it wants to go dead when it’s idling.” I was the worst liar in history, but, by God’s good grace, I prayed that they bought it.

“Well, I’m pretty good under the hood, so, if you don’t mind, I can take a look at it while you’re at work,” Jaxon offered. “Reed, you want to join me?”

“Sorry, man, I got to get my homework done while I’ve got some

free time. I've already spent too much of it entertaining your ass. You're going to have to ride solo, bro," Reed said, smacking Jaxon on the back.

"Ah, shit, you know you've loved every second you've gotten to spend with me," Jaxon smiled, giving Reed back a hefty pat on his shoulder.

Jaxon leaned up against my car and crossed his arms across his chest. "Well, I tell you what, after lunch, I'll drop you off where you work and then take a look at it," he smiled at me mischievously. His idea freaked me out a little, and I think he did it purposely so he could have a little alone time with me. "But first, let's go eat, I need to feed

this beastly body,” he chuckled as he stepped away from my car to walk into Rome’s.

Engrossed by whispering to Kendra about Phillip calling my house that morning, I didn’t see Phillip’s parents sitting diagonally across from us. It wasn’t until I sat cozily next to Jaxon in a booth, that I noticed them both. The two of them were staring a hole through me when I made eye contact. Phillip’s mom, Maryann, looked away immediately, having been caught staring, but his dad, Sean, gave me a friendly smile. Returning the gesture, I mouthed the word “hey” and waved to both of them. Jaxon looked up to see who I greeted as our waitress introduced

herself as Kim and blocked our view of the Wilkins to take down our drink orders.

It had been over two months since I had seen Phillip's parents. I'd missed his dad, but his mother was another story. Maryann had never accepted me and thought I wasn't good enough for her son. She never came right out and said it, but, after the twenty questions she'd thrown at me the first time we'd met, it was obvious I'd failed her test. And then there was the time when I overheard her, in the next room yelling at Phillip, telling him was too young to focus on one girl and that he should be dating other girls. Phillip's mother came from money, and, even

though she was the preacher's wife, she still looked down on people that were less than fortunate.

Phillip's dad seemed like a man that somehow had been placed with the wrong family. He was everything his wife and son were not. Sean was the pastor of the largest Baptist church in our town and was the most down to earth man I'd ever met. He accepted all people, no matter what they possessed or where they came from. He was always doing some type of charitable work and was highly admired by his congregation. Other than Phillip, I'd never heard anyone speak an unkind word about him or show him anything other than the utmost respect.

Seeing the Wilkins brought back the anxiety I'd felt earlier when thinking about Phillip. Wanting to push him from my mind for a few hours, I decided it was time to dig for some information from Jaxon.

“So Jaxon, what college do you attend,” I asked, turning my attention toward him.

“I don't.”

“Do you work then?” I gave him a quizzical look.

“No, I'm a vagabond,” Jaxon smirked, trying to suppress a laugh.

I could see Reed from the corner

of my eye trying to stifle his laugh as well. Giving him an eye roll, I let him know that I knew he was feeding me a line of bullshit.

“Can I get a real answer?”

Jaxon turned his body to face me, pinched his t-shirt with his thumbs and forefingers, and pulled it away from his body. “This is what I do.” His shirt had a picture of a boisterous looking bar surrounded by palm trees with the ocean displayed behind it. In big, white letters, the name ‘Zack and Joey’s Bar & Grill’ was featured above it.

“So you work at a bar?”

“No, I own it.”

My eyes widened, I was flabbergasted. “How can you own a bar if you’re just twenty years old?”

Jaxon cocked his head to the side, looking puzzled. “Twenty years old? Who said I was twenty?”

I pointed to the not-so-innocent looking Kendra sitting across the table from me and gave her my best stink-eye.

“Sorry,” she blinked innocently. “I thought you were, but I guess I misunderstood Reed.” She had her palms up in the air giving a shoulder shrug.

Kim, our waitress, popped up with our drinks, interrupting another

Jaxon revelation. She asked if we were ready to order, but Reed waved her away telling her to give us ten more minutes.

Giving me a cocky grin, Jaxon offered up his actual age. “I’m twenty-two.”

It was the worst time for me to take a drink of my soda, because I nearly choked to death when I heard him say he was five years older than me. Jaxon started patting my back, asking if I was okay. I nodded as I thought about what my mom would say if she knew I was willing to have sex with a twenty-two-year-old bar-owning guy.

In between coughing, I glared

back and forth to Kendra and Reed, letting them know how perturbed I was. I knew they had no idea what transpired between Jaxon and I the night before, but, if that night had ended like I had wanted it to and my mom had caught wind of it, Jaxon would find himself in jail.

“Are you sure you’re going to be okay?” Jaxon asked as he laid his hand on my shoulder, looking at me with deep concern.

I sputtered through coughing, “Yeah, I think I’ll survive.” Glancing over at Phillip’s parents, I caught Maryann watching me again. Her eyes darted to the couple sitting across from

them, who at some point must have joined them.

“So, how did you get into the bar owning busin—”

“Why the hell does that man keep staring at me?” Jaxon blurted loudly, causing me to jump and Kendra to squeal at his sudden outburst.

“Who?” I choked, triggering up another series of coughs.

Jaxon pointed at Phillip’s dad, “That guy right there.”

I smacked his hand down. “Shh, don’t be so loud,” I whispered. “That is my ex-boyfriend’s father.”

“Well, I don’t care who the hell he is, he needs to stop staring at me,” he exclaimed, his voice growing louder with each word. “From the moment we sat down, the fucker’s been looking at me.” Jaxon glared at Phillip’s dad. “People are so fuckin’ judgmental,” he muttered under his breath then looked away.

Getting agitated with his sudden behavior, I was slightly taken back by his anger, the harsh tone rubbed me the wrong way.

“I’m sure he’s not staring at only you, and, even if he is, he’s probably just wondering who you are since it does look like we are on some sort of date.” I

waved my hand indicating all four of us sitting together. “And maybe he thinks your staring at him. After all, you've been noticing him watching you that long.”

Reed reached across the table with his palms out. “Calm down you two, geez. Jaxon...” he gave him a ‘get real’ look, “you should be used to the stares by now, and, after all, you are in a small town where everybody knows everybody. When we see an unfamiliar face... we stare,” he explained with widened eyes. “Stop assuming that everyone around here is so judgmental.” Reed turned his attention to me. “Courtney—”

“Reed, don’t even say it.” I interrupted him, leaning across the table and keeping my voice low so that no one from the surrounding tables could hear me. “You know how much Mr. Wilkins means to me, so keep your wise words to yourself.”

Sitting back against the booth, I turned to Jaxon, “Will you please excuse me? I need to visit the ladies room... and somebody needs to find a new attitude,” I muttered while scooting off the long bench. Jaxon stood up and let me out, keeping his eyes on Phillip’s dad the entire time.

Kendra was on my heels as I shoved the bathroom door open. I

whipped my head around to face her when I heard the door close.

“What the hell just happened? I felt like I had Phillip sitting beside me, going off on one of his tirades.” I flapped my arms around in exasperation. “I don’t need to surround myself with another hot-head, so you guys can leave me out of anymore escapades you plan from now until Jaxon leaves. I have no —”

Kendra harshly laid her hand over my mouth, muffling everything else I tried to say. “You are as out of control as Jaxon is, now shut up and listen.” *Was she seriously giving me attitude?* “Jaxon has had a hard life and had to

grow up way too soon, and, when I say soon, he grew up with no parents and only his grandmother to raise him.” My eyes grew wide. “Yeah, so cut him some slack. Anyway, he’s going to be here for a lot longer than I thought.” Slowly, Kendra’s lips spread into a smile. “I was just informed this morning that Jaxon is planning on opening a bar and grill here in his grandmother’s hometown, and he’s asked Reed to manage the place for him. Isn’t that great news?” *So that was why he was out here.*

I pulled Kendra’s hand off my mouth. “So, what does that have to do with the meltdown we just witnessed?”

“Well, according to Reed, he gets a little overly defensive when he thinks someone is judging him. With his upbringing, he got ridiculed a lot,” she explained. The tips of her lips pulled down slightly. “Does it really matter? Look, I just want us all to get along and have a good time together.” She dropped the cheerful charade. “If I thought he was leaving after Christmas and never coming back, I wouldn’t care if you told him to fuck off, but, since he’s practically asking Reed to be his business partner, I want us to all play nice and get along... for once. You know what I mean?” I did know what she meant, and I could tell she wasn’t trying to throw the past in my face. I owed her,

it was the least I could do.

Sighing, I said, “Look, I’ll play nice in the sandbox, but you know Jaxon’s going to have to meet my mom ASAP if you expect us four to pal around together.” I took a step toward her pointing my finger to her chest. “And you are going to explain the whole miscommunication mishap to her too,” I sneered.

Kendra closed the distance between us and rested her hands on my shoulders. “Don’t worry, I will, and I’m really sorry I told you Jaxon was twenty years old. When Reed told me stories about him and Jaxon as kids, I just assumed they were the same age,” she

said, releasing my shoulders with a shrug.

Leaning against the sink with my arms folded, I begged the question. “Was Jaxon as misinformed about me as I was him?” Some guys like younger girls, but Jaxon didn’t seem to fit that type.

“I honestly can’t answer that, Courtney. That is a question for Reed. I really have no idea what Reed told him about you. You’ve been around Jaxon more than I have.”

I was having trouble reading her face. *Was she feeding me a line of bull or telling the truth?* I decided to skip asking Reed, and, when the timing was

right, I'd ask Jaxon instead.

“We better get our asses back out there before they think we are having bathroom issues for real this time,” Kendra laughed, reminding me of my bathroom escape last night.

We both took a quick glance in the mirror, making sure everything was in place before joining the guys.

As we walked out of the bathroom, I stopped Kendra right outside of the door. “I didn’t say it earlier, but I’m uber excited for you and Reed. Even though you haven’t said much about it, I know how stressed you’ve been lately.” Reed wanted to pursue a Bachelor’s degree in business management after

graduating with an Associate's this spring, and he was contemplating whether or not to move close to the college or make the long commute every day. This business proposition Jaxon offered him was a godsend. "We should celebrate."

Kendra flat-palmed my chest, stopping me from taking another step. "No, we shouldn't. I'm not supposed to know about any of it. Reed made me swear to secrecy because they've not told anyone yet, so keep your mouth shut."

"Fine, my lips are sealed," I huffed.

As we walked back toward our

booth, I took notice that the Wilkins were still at their table.

Reed winked at me as Jaxon stepped out from the booth to let me in. I avoided all eye contact as I stepped by him to slide into my seat.

“I’m very sorry for my behavior, but people staring at me is a big pet peeve of mine. I know that’s not a good excuse, but do you think you could find it in your sweet southern heart to forgive me?” He whispered into my ear, sending chills across my body. I slowly nodded as his lips lingered. “And, just so you know, you are an exception to that pet peeve.” Instantly heat rolled through me, flushing away the chills. Jaxon moved

away quickly as I heard a familiar voice. Looking up, I saw Phillip's parents standing at our table. Sure, they had gotten their eyes full of Jaxon's lips on my ear. I prayed at that moment that my face was not flashing in red.

“Hey, Mr. and Mrs. Wilkins,” I said too cheerfully. I kicked Jaxon in the leg under the table to let him know to keep his mouth shut.

“Courtney, Kendra, Reed,” Sean nodded as he greeted each one of us. “And, you are?” He asked, nodding to Jaxon.

“I'm Jaxon Vaughn,” he replied extending his hand. We sat there in an awkward hiatus as Jaxon and Sean

shook hands staring at one another. "You look very familiar young man. Are you from around here?"

"No, Sir."

"Do you visit here often?"

"No, Sir."

"Well, it's nice to meet you, Jaxon."

Sean kept his eyes on Jaxon, studying him. Not judging him like Maryann, but observing like he was trying to figure out something about him.

"Jaxon, this is Pastor Wilkins and his lovely wife, Maryann," I explained, trying not to choke on the last

few words that spout out of my mouth. I was proud I had the ability to withhold my distaste for her from rolling off my tongue... *Bitch!*

Jaxon gave her a nod as she gave him a weak smile. I could tell she judged him by appearance alone, and her eyes definitely saw something different than what I saw.

“Well, kids, it was nice seeing y’all. Hope you enjoy your lunch, and, you,” Sean said, pointing at me, “don’t be a stranger.” I understood his double meaning. Not only had I stopped going to their house, but I had also stopped going to their church after breaking things off with Phillip.

I mumbled a ‘goodbye’ to them as they left our table.

As the waitress came back to take our order, I discreetly slipped my phone out to see if I had a text or missed call from Phillip. The only unread text on my phone was from Kendra, asking if I had left the house yet. Seeing Phillip’s parents made me sure that I would be hearing from him sooner rather than later.

Chapter 11 ~ Showtime at Seven O'clock

The remainder of lunch ended with a monotonous conversation. The company, though, was far from dull. Jaxon had this indescribable vibrancy about him. He was just one of those types of people that you wanted to hang out with. Besides the occasional sexual innuendo he tossed my way, I felt more at ease in his presence the longer I was around him.

I was eager to leave the pizzeria a little early in case Phillip called. Talking with Phillip was not a conversation I was willing to have in

front of everyone. I pulled my phone out again to see if I might have missed a call or text from him, but, still, there was nothing. I was bumfuzzled; it was very unlike him to not have called or texted back already. A shot of nerves hit my stomach as I thought of what kind of shenanigans he could have had up his sleeve.

Earlier, Jaxon volunteered to drive me to work, and, at first, I dreaded the thoughts of being alone again with him. But now, after thinking it over, I wanted to take advantage of the moment. I wanted to know who he really was. I wanted to dig into his personal life.

Reaching for the knob on my

radio, I switched through the stations until I found something worth listening to.

"Let me guess, you love country music?"

I laughed, "Don't you know it's not nice to stereotype people?"

His smile widened, showing his beautiful teeth and setting his dimples on display. "Hell, that's not stereotyping. Everybody in California loves it, so I figured a real country girl would, too."

"Well, you're wrong," I told him as I turned the radio off. I opted for silence so there were no distractions while I interrogated him. "I like pretty

much everything *but* country music." Dropping back in my seat, I angled myself to get a better view of him instead of the road. "So, how did you get into owning a bar at such a young age, and how long have you been running it?"

He rubbed the stubble on his face, taking his time answering me. Patiently enough, I waited for him to answer. "Hmm, well, let's see... since I got into a lot of trouble my senior year, I screwed up my chance to play football at UCLA." He chewed on his top lip, and I couldn't stop watching him. My eyes were glued to his mouth, remembering the way those lips felt. "I was messed up after graduation and had no plans for the future other than living life day by day,"

he smiled, but the smile didn't reach his eyes. "I wasn't a good person then," he mumbled more to himself than to me.

"So, how did you ruin your chance at playing college football?"

"Hmph, I was young and dumb," he answered flatly.

"So, if you got into a bunch of trouble then, how did you end up owning your own business? It almost sounds like things turned out good for you after all."

He let out a loud sigh. "Good God, you ask a lot of questions."

I could see him roll his eyes behind his sunglasses. I thought of

calling him out on it, but I didn't want him to stop talking.

"After my grandma passed away, she left me some money. So, my best friend, Troy talked me into partnering up with him and opening up the bar. It's not just a bar, though. It's a restaurant, too. We have live entertainment on the weekends, and every Wednesday is karaoke night."

I squealed, "Oh my gosh! Don't you dare tell Kendra. She is like *the* karaoke queen." I was about to tell him that I hoped he wasn't planning on having a karaoke night here because Kendra would take it over, but I remembered I wasn't supposed to know

about him opening up another bar.

We were hanging out in the parking lot outside of the theater and killing time until my shift started. My original plan was to use the extra time to talk to Phillip, but, since he wasn't returning my text, I took advantage of my time with Jaxon. "Can I ask you another question?" I knew I was pressing my luck, but I wanted to know more.

Jaxon inhaled a deep breath, then exhaled loudly through pursed lips. "Give it a go," he replied, outwardly tired of my curiosity.

"Who are Zack and Joey?"

"Nobody."

Slowly, I rolled my eyes over to look at him. “Really? You named your bar after a couple of nobodies? Whatever.” With an exaggerated eye roll, I shook my head, then turned to look out the passenger side window.

We sat in silence for a minute or more before I whipped my head around to face him. He obviously wasn't going to answer me. I guess I had probed too much. There was no point in sitting around any longer if we weren't going to talk, so I gathered my purse. “You know I think I'm going to start my shift early. I can see you are clearly finished with this conversation.” I grabbed my purse, then reached for the door handle. “Oh, and thanks for lunch, and, if I forget to tell

you later, thank you for taking a look at my car,” I sneered.

As I pushed the car door open, Jaxon grabbed my arm holding me in place. “If you must know, Jack and Zoey are my grandparents... I just switched the first initials.” He peered up at me over the top of his sunglasses.

Letting go of my arm, he then straightened up in his seat to inspect his teeth in the rearview mirror. “So you see, Zack and Joey really are nobody,” he said sarcastically, as he readjusted the mirror back in place then sat back comfortably in his seat giving me an adorable crooked grin. *Smartass*. “Now, if you don’t mind, I would appreciate it

if you would stop meddling in my personal business,” he added in a serious tone.

“No problem... jerk,” I mocked, coughing out the derogatory name. It came out a little more harshly than what I’d meant. He wasn’t being mean to me, but I didn’t like how he’d been blowing me off. Even if I was being Nosey Rosey.

Jaxon popped up straight in his seat and glowered at me. “I’m a jerk because I don’t want to give you the run-down of my life history? I don’t know who you think you are, but, if I want to withhold a detail about my personal life, then that’s my prerogative,” he scolded,

pointing to himself while jabbing his finger in his chest. “I don’t appreciate people, especially a young, gorgeous girl that I know is off-limits, invading my personal space.” His clear, blue eyes were seething with annoyance... and lust?

I snapped back at him. “Well, excuse me for trying to find out more about a complete stranger that I’ve spent twenty out of the last twenty-four hours with,” I paused, “and, might I add, took me to my friend’s house while I was totally passed out drunk. Hell, you could’ve even taken advantage of me for all I know!” I shrieked. It was a false accusation, and I regretted saying it as soon as it left my mouth. “I’m sorry, I

didn't mean that," I whispered.

He didn't seem to hear my apology as he removed his sunglasses to show his annoyance with me. His eyes were lowered with a deep wrinkle between his eyebrows. "I took advantage of you?" I couldn't tell if he was looking at me with wounded eyes or if he was shooting daggers at me. "Are you fucking kidding me? You fuckin' mauled me on Reed's couch, and, if I had not stopped kissing you, I'm pretty damn sure you would've let me fuck you right then and there," he barked.

Oh hell... and there it was. He just laid it all out on the table. I wondered if I should come clean or keep

pretending to not remember.

He pressed his fingers to his temples, massaging them intensely. Then, speaking with a lower-leveled tone, he asked me, “Do you fuckin’ realize the kind of trouble I could get in to if that shit were to happen?”

I nodded, feeling numb.

I had to fix this downward spiral fast. I promised Kendra I would play nice, and, honestly, I wanted to. I didn’t like the idea of him being upset with me. I provoked the argument. He'd been nothing but nice to me. I would've never talked to Phillip in a derogatory tone, so why was I acting this way toward Jaxon?

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” I pleaded getting louder with each apology. “I didn’t mean it, and I don’t know why I said it.” I grabbed his arm tightly as I begged. “Please forgive me?” He stopped rubbing his temples when I touched him.

Quickly letting go, I started nervously playing with the zipper on my jacket. Focusing my attention on my fingers, I continued speaking, not waiting for him to answer. “I didn’t mean to pry. I mean, I did, but I didn’t. Mama has always told me the best way to ever learn about anyone or anything is to ask. I know I should filter some of my questions, but I find you intriguing and...” I stopped myself from rambling

any further or saying something I would regret later.

Jaxon kept his eyes focused straight ahead, watching people walk through the parking lot. “Courtney, please understand, I’m a very private person. What I told you within the last twenty minutes is more than I’ve told anyone in a very long time. I don’t even tell Reed shit about me.” He turned his head facing my direction. “I’m flattered that you are interested in who I am, but I’d rather we keep it on a need to know basis for now. The less people know, the easier life is for me.”

Feeling his eyes on me, I looked up to meet his stare. “I understand. So do

you forgive me?” I winced.

“For what? What you accused me of, or for you attacking me last night?”

Staring at his lips, I thought about our kiss again. I wanted to tell him I remembered, but I couldn't. *Coward*. “Hey, eyes up here Sweet Cheeks,” he chuckled, lifting my chin with his finger. *Busted!*

He released my chin, and I could tell the playful spirit of his that I liked so much was making a comeback. “Yes, I forgive you, but if you're apologizing for your sexual hunger for me last night, then don't. I enjoyed the hell out of it, but, please, do me a favor—don't try it again

because next time I doubt I will be able to muster enough self-control,” he said with a cocky smile still perched on his face.

He was so dang charming, and I loved how we could argue then flirt within seconds. Even though my physical attraction to him made me uncomfortable, he still set off an aura that allowed me to feel like I could be myself with him.



The first couple of hours into my

shift were boring, but I wasn't going to complain, considering it wasn't my night for concession duty. I had the privilege of patrolling each theater for people propping their feet on the back of a seat, people using their cell phones, or people sneaking in snacks or fast food. I usually didn't enforce the rules, but the one thing I couldn't stomach was teenagers hiding in the back row, doing things with their mouths and other body parts that should be done in private. Phillip tried to pull that stunt with me once, and I told him he had lost his mind. Some people have no shame.

I could tell it was around the seven o'clock hour because each theater started to get crowded with mostly pre-

teens. The adults and kids around my age group usually waited for the ten o'clock shows. I was walking down the aisle when I was suddenly grabbed around the waist and pulled down onto someone's lap. "Surprise, surprise." I heard whispered in my ear followed by a light, familiar chuckle.

When I looked around, I saw he was sitting by himself. "Phillip, what are you doing? When did you sneak in here?" I whispered back. I tried to get up, but he had a death grip around my waist.

"I've been sitting here since the movie started. I watched you walk in. You were looking in the other direction,

though, when you walked up the aisle.”

Turning my head, I tried to face him, but I could only get it turned enough so that my cheek was facing him. “I texted you earlier, why haven’t you texted or called me back?”

“Because I wanted to come here and surprise you,” he whispered so low I could barely hear him. I could feel his lips lightly touch my earlobe, so I turned my head back quickly to face the movie. He apparently took that as an invitation to taste my exposed neck because he slowly licked the sensitive area closest to my ear. Instantaneously, the goose bumps betrayed me.

I jerked hard trying to twist

myself out of his tight grasp. He wouldn't relent. "Phillip, stop! We are not doing this remember?" I was trying to sound forceful, but fear was creeping in... and maybe a little longing.

"Damn, Courtney! You can't wiggle like that on me and not expect Dr. Philgood to rise for the occasion. He misses you." He wasn't lying either. My butt could clearly feel how much he missed me.

"Phillip, I swear if you don't release me I'm going to scream to the top of my lungs. Now... Let. Me. Go!" I gritted through my teeth. He released my waist but quickly grabbed my wrist before I could walk out of his reach.

I stood glaring down at him. “You agreed to us moving on. Pulling me down onto your lap with a hard-on is not moving on.”

He released my wrist, sliding his hand across my palm to interlace with my fingers. “Okay, okay, you’re right. We did, but you can’t blame me for trying.” He gave me a look indicating he was asking for forgiveness. The derailed train was finding its way back on course. My tensed muscles slowly began to relax. “No, I can’t. I think I know better than anyone what kind of needs you require.” He could interpret that however he deemed fit.

I scanned the seats around me to

see if anyone was paying us any attention and felt even more relieved to see all eyes were on the big screen. I squatted beside him so I was at eye level. “I can’t hang out in here but for a few more minutes, so let’s talk. What did you want this morning?”

“Don’t get mad, but I have to take baby steps with this.” He reached up to tuck a few strands of hair behind my ear. It was difficult fighting my intuition to not lean into his touch. “I know you went out on a date last night,” he paused, “although it’s your right to do what you want. I just wish you would’ve told me beforehand. I felt like a fool when people came up to me asking me about it, and you know better than

anyone how I don't like being caught off-guard," he mocked in a low voice. *Was he silently threatening me?*

"Phillip, I—"

He put his hand up to stop me.

"I know you're probably thinking I'm mad, but I'm not. I'll be honest though. When I first found out, I was pissed, but I'm over it now. Aren't you proud of me?" He was sporting the biggest smile, visibly proud of himself. *Was he honestly asking me that?* Of course he was because, for him, to not lash out at me spoke volumes.

"I told you, as long as it wasn't someone from school, I was going to

behave, and I intend to prove to you that I can.” I was in complete and utter shock. *Was Phillip turning over a new leaf?*

"Pick your jaw up off the floor, Court, unless you want me to put something in it," he chuckled.

"Gah, you're such a perv," I said, then walked away before he could stop me again.

I carried on with my nightly duties of cleaning up spilled drinks to having to kick a couple of girls out for starting a popcorn fight. That incident got me fuming when I thought about having to clean up the mess after closing hours. My mind wandered throughout the

night thinking about Phillip. I thought about everything Phillip and I had been through over the past few years and what all I had endured from him. I should treat him like the piece of trash he treated me, but, in my heart, I still loved him. And, more so, I was not a malicious person. My thoughts then flipped to what my plans would be after graduation when I had free reign. Time was running out, and I needed to pick a career path. Phillip wanted me to attend the local community college while he was making good use of his basketball scholarship at Wake Forest. His plan was for me to be a stay-at-home wife and pop babies on command. I couldn't believe I was so stupid to agree to sit around and wait

four years for him while he indulged in the fraternity life, partying and having a different girl every night of the week.

I felt overwhelmed with all the possibilities that awaited me and my future when I was jolted from my thoughts with a gentle squeeze on my butt cheek. Spinning around to see who was copping a feel, I came face to chest with a brick wall made of lean muscle—*Phillip*. God, I missed the smell of him. I inhaled deeply then took a step back to look at his mischievous brown eyes.

“Hey, sorry about that, my hand has a mind of its own.” His friends, Corbin and Keith, held their fists up to

their mouth trying to stifle a laugh. My face flushed with heat from embarrassment, and I furrowed my brows, cutting my eyes at his immature friends. “Yeah right, I’m sure you did. You do realize we are standing in a crowded lobby, or do you not care?”

Before Phillip could respond, Jaxon came out of nowhere to join us. “Hi, Sweet Cheeks. You mind if I join this little ass-grabbing fan club you got going on over here?” He was twirling my car keys around his forefinger. *Holy shit!* I knew they would meet at some point in time, but I never imagined it would be this soon, much less this type of situation. My heart started pumping blood through my veins at a rapid pace.

“Uhhh...” I stammered, feeling a full-blown panic attack mere seconds from taking place.

My eyes cut over at Phillip to assess his response, and his eyes were blazing with fury as he stared at my keys spinning on Jaxon’s finger.

“Jeanette, who’s your friend?” Phillip asked, scrutinizing Jaxon. His voice was calm, but the use of my nickname told me he was angry. I knew he was mulling over why Jaxon had my car keys in his possession.

Jaxon stepped up with his hand stretched out. “I’m Jaxon, and you are?”

Phillip shook his hand for a brief

second then released. “I’m Phillip, a very close friend of Courtney’s.” Jaxon’s friendly behavior suddenly shifted as the recognition of who Phillip was registered.

“So, how do you know Courtney?” he asked Jaxon, taking a step closer to me.

Here was the question and answer I dreaded the most. I was petrified. The voices surrounding me started to sound muffled, and all other sounds were drowned out by my heartbeat thumping in my ears. My face and neck felt like they were on fire, and everything in the room starting spinning. Unable to breathe anymore, I collapsed.

Chapter 12 ~ King of Crazies

This had to be the worst panic attack I had ever encountered. Phillip grabbed me instantly, scooping me up and cradling me in his arms as he quickly headed to my manager's office. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't swallow. My lungs felt more and more restrained, as if a boa constrictor was wrapping itself around my neck going for the kill. Hyperventilation hit me with full force, pulling my chest tight and filling me with more anxiety than my heart could contain. I was one hundred percent sure I was a beat away from a heart attack. My pulse was pounding in my

ears. My vision felt blurred through the haze.

I felt Phillip gently situate me on his lap as he sat down in one of the old office chairs. I closed my eyes, hoping it would help ease the nauseated feeling growing deep in my stomach.

“Take deep breaths, Courtney. Clear your mind, everything is okay. You’re going to be okay,” he repeatedly whispered in my ear as he encouraged me to bend over, placing my head between my knees.

“Here, breathe into this.” Opening my eyes, I saw Jaxon squatting down in front of me handing me a popcorn bag. I faintly noticed a look of

empathy in his eyes. Reaching for the bag with a trembling hand, I gasped for air, making it hard for me to properly grab it. Jaxon seemingly aware of my struggle, scrunched the top of the bag and quickly, but gently, placed it up to my mouth. Phillip's muscles tensed up underneath me. I couldn't handle a repeat performance at this moment. I wanted them both to leave and let me handle this on my own, but I couldn't even find an ounce of oxygen to inhale, much less speak. It was their fault I was in this situation in the first place.

I tried ignoring them the best I could. I even tried blocking out all thoughts, everything that had happened between Jaxon, Phillip, and I over the

last week. But it was simply impossible, I could feel the tension radiating throughout the room. In one corner sat my ex who didn't really want me, but didn't want anyone else to have me either. Then, in the other corner, sat Jaxon, the 'best guy friend' whom I had a strong attraction to, but knew was off limits. I didn't need this unnecessary stress in my life.

Remembering the techniques the doctor taught me, I zoned out, taking myself out of the equation, even if just temporarily. I closed my eyes, mentally removing myself from all my surroundings, and only focusing on happy times in my childhood. I remembered the summers I spent with

Kendra and her parents at their beach house without a care in the world. I could smell the salt water and feel the ocean breeze blowing through my hair, sauntering with the warm sand between my toes and the sun kissing my skin.

Before boys, life was so much simpler. As I went through the early transition of becoming a teenager, I couldn't wait for that first boyfriend whom I could go on dates with, experience that first kiss, and share intimate moments. Now, I longed for a genie in a bottle to grant me just one wish—remove all boyfriend material out of my life. Phillip was my one and only 'real' boyfriend, and it didn't turn out at all like the romance novels I'd read.

Sure, I'd had my crushes before Phillip, but I was always too shy to tell anyone, even Kendra, for in fear that my secrets would be revealed and I would be rejected. I dreamed of the day when I'd meet that perfect guy who would give his heart and soul to me completely. *Gah! I was such a hopeless romantic.* I had to stop reading those stupid romance novels all the time and fanaticizing over fictional characters. They were fictional for a reason. This was real life I was living in, with real dirt bags. There was that saying—a girl marries a man just like her father. Lord help me if I were to make that same mistake.

Through my meditation, I could feel my heart rate slow, my airway

expanding with every lungful of oxygen I inhaled. I could feel someone lightly raking their fingers through the hair closest to my face. My senses started to awaken with the hint of peppermint circling through the air. As I became more aware of my surroundings, I noticed a tender hand circling around my back, soothing me. I was still sitting slumped over with my head down by my knees when I heard that all-familiar throat clearing. I opened my eyes sluggishly to find those beautiful, iridescent blue eyes staring out into space with a look of concern... anguish... fear? Jaxon sat directly in front of me on the floor, his knees pulled close to his chest. His arms draped over

his knees with one hand extended out toward me, playing with my hair. He was close enough to me for Phillip to not be aware of him piddling with my brown locks. Blinking his eyes rapidly, he let his hand fall as he caught me staring at him. I was confused by the strange expression in his eyes.

As I started to sit up, I realized then that the hand rubbing my back belonged to Phillip. I could feel the anger starting to build up in my muscles, now making me tense. Phillip had never been one to console me, especially when I had panic attacks. He usually ridiculed me and told me it was all in my head and that I was a hypochondriac looking for attention. The only reason he was being

so caring now was solely due to the man sitting on the floor in front of me.

Phillip stopped rubbing my back as I straightened up. His hand slid down my back, stopping at my waist to place a firm hand around it. His other arm draped over my legs giving me a slight squeeze on the outside of my thigh. It was a familiar gesture of his. Like he was claiming me as his property, demanding that I not move. My panic attack had made me so tired and drained, but Phillip's chauvinistic behavior was causing me to internally implode with rage. I was about to make a bad situation worse when my manager came busting through the door.

“Oh, Courtney! Thank God you’re okay.” She had her hand on her chest giving a sigh of relief. “I thought I was going to have to call 911, but Phillip said you have these attacks all the time, that it was normal.”

“He should know,” I mumbled. He was usually the cause of all my panic attacks.

“I heard that,” he whispered in my ear. I ignored him, pretending to not hear him.

Jaxon stood up, leaning against my manager’s desk with his arms crossed over his chest. Maggie walked over to Jaxon giving his bicep a squeeze. “And this sweet gentleman here seemed

to know just what to do.” She loved flirting with the young guys. Even if she was old enough to be their mother, she never let it faze her. “He was very knowledgeable on panic attacks.”

Jaxon gave her a friendly smile. “It’s no big deal. I’m just glad Courtney is okay,” he said, locking eyes with mine. Phillip squeezed my thigh tighter, clearly not liking the friendly exchange.

Jaxon’s eyes left mine, landing straight on the placement of Phillip’s hand gripping me. His face twisted into anger. *Was he jealous? Did something crazy happen in the duration I tuned out the world?* Whatever was the cause of his contorted face, I wasn’t in the

mood to deal with it. I needed both of these guys out of my life at the present moment, and possibly for a portion of the future.

Maggie continued chatting non-stop. I wasn't sure who she was talking to or what she was talking about because nobody, including myself, appeared to be listening. It was obvious she wasn't feeling the high levels of testosterone permeating throughout the room.

"I need to get up," I murmured as I tried to pry Phillip's fingers from his vice-like grip on me. Surprisingly he let go and helped me up as he stood up himself. He still kept hold of my elbow, though. I turned to look at him, clearly

letting him know I didn't want him touching me anymore. "I'm going to the bathroom, then I'm going home," I said to no one in particular with disgust dripping from my voice as I hastily pulled away from Phillip's hold.

I walked out of the office without making eye contact with Phillip, Jaxon, or Maggie.

"Courtney!" I heard Maggie say as she approached from behind me, trailing my heels as I walked into the bathroom. "Don't worry about punching out. I'll fix your time for you later. You just go on home and get yourself some rest. Don't you worry about those silly boys out there either, especially that ex-

beau of yours. He's not worth a shit. Heck, he's as useless as tits on a boar."

"Thanks, Maggie. I'm so lucky to have you as my manager."

She gave me a one-arm hug then told me goodbye.

I stood in the stall, not having to use the bathroom at all. I just needed to escape, to gather my thoughts on how I wanted to handle the circumstances I knew I needed to address. I'd have to tell Jaxon and Phillip to keep their distance from me. It would be no problem for Jaxon because we hadn't made that deep connection. There was no history between us. Phillip, on the other hand, was a whole different story.

I had tried this once before when I broke things off with him, but that only lasted a month. I was worried that he wouldn't leave me alone, especially now that Jaxon was a temporary fixture in my life.

Taking a few deep breaths, I checked myself in the mirror to make sure I didn't look like some lunatic after that crazy, insane panic attack. I pulled my hair back into a ponytail. Someone apparently had taken it down while I was zoned out because I didn't recall doing it.

I walked into the lobby and looked around for Jaxon and Phillip with no sight of either of them anywhere.

“Are you going to be okay?” It

was Jaxon's voice asking, but it was Phillip who came from behind to embrace me.

I turned around, bypassing Phillip's eyes to see Jaxon leaning up against the wall right outside the bathroom doors. "Yeah, I'm fine, but I need to talk to both of you." My heart rate rapidly picked up the pace.

"Phillip, please take a step back. I don't need you up in my face at the moment."

He gave me a look that screamed 'bitch,' but I was numb to that derogatory name, had been for a couple of years now.

Drawing in a long, deep breath, it felt as if I was sucking all the oxygen out of the air. I wiggled my fingers, trying to hide the nervous shakes I seemed to have no control over. *Why wasn't Kendra here with me?* She had always been my rock in situations like this.

My voice started off doing that embarrassing shaky thing it tended to do when I got nervous. "I don't really know how to go about handling this," I circled my hand around indicating the three of us, "but I need a break from both of you. Jaxon, I know we just met and we are clearly just friends, but being around you right now is making life difficult for me. I'm really sorry, and I feel bad that

you are unknowingly getting caught up in this foolishness Phillip and I have going on. I hope we can meet up again in the near future.”

Jaxon took a few steps toward me stopping before he got too close. “I completely understand, Courtney. No need to apologize. Don’t get so stressed out. I respect your request. I’ve dealt with a lot of pricks in the past.” It was a calming feeling to recognize the sympathy he was clearly showing me.

“Fuck you, motherfucker!” Phillip blurted to Jaxon.

Jaxon ignored him as he made his way toward the exit doors. I watched him leave as he turned around and

shouted, “Courtney, if you need me for anything, you know how to get in touch.” He walked out into the dark, cold night.

“I’m gonna kick his fuckin’ ass! Who the hell is he to act like he knows anything about me, or have you been telling lies about me again?”

I only spoke the truth about Phillip. He was the one living a life of denial. He was openly battling with his inner demon, but I knew he wouldn’t do anything to me out in public, so I swallowed my little bravery pill and decided to tell him how I felt about him.

“Stop it, Phillip! Just shut the hell up!” I spoke loud, but not so much that everyone in the lobby could hear

me. “I can’t continue to be your pal right now. I know we discussed us,” I said, pointing back and forth at chest level, “but ‘us’ isn’t taking the path that I had hoped for. We made that agreement, and you’ve broken that contract already. I had a freakin’ panic attack because I was afraid of your reaction when you found out who Jaxon was.” I noticed that people started looking at us and realized I was hitting a few octaves higher than my normal tone. “It’s nonsense, and I can’t inflict that type of abuse on myself anymore.”

“So, now this is my entire fault? Bullshit, Courtney. You bring this shit on yourself. Don’t you dare try to turn your sensitive nerve problems on

me. You inherited that shit from your mother.” He had his finger pointed so close to my face that he was a hair shy from touching my nose, seething by that point. His bright red cheeks gave him away every time. Whenever he got mad at me, he would always throw my mom into the mix. He liked blaming her for everything because, first, he knew she was all I had and, second, he knew she didn’t like him. So he verbally bashed her every chance that he got.

Taking a step back, I wanted to remove myself from the self-destruction that was about to take place. “Calm down, Phillip, I’m not blaming you. I’m just saying I need another break from you, this time longer.”

All the hurt he inflicted on me over the years started to resurface. I wanted to cry, but I was not going to let myself cry in front of him. All it ever did was piss him off even more. Taking a deep breath, I swallowed the bundle of tears that had formed in my throat. “You disintegrate my heart... my soul... my mind... my body... and I’m tired of feeling like I’m a piece of shit. I need to surround myself with positive people that support me and love me, regardless of any flaws I may bear.” My voice fell into a whisper as all my fighting strength crumbled down around me. “I’m not saying everything ends here. I’m just saying we need time to ourselves, or at least I need time to myself. I guess I

can't really speak for you."

Phillip stood there, still as a statue, not speaking a word. I knew at that moment he was trying to compose himself before he lashed out in front of everyone.

"Please don't make this harder on me than what it already is."

"Harder on you? There you go again throwing all blame back at me. Damn, Courtney! When are you ever going to take any responsibility in our relationship?"

Me take responsibility? He somehow always managed to flip things around to make me feel like I was the

one that had screwed up. Every time he had cheated, he turned the story around, saying I was the cause of him having to stray. Worst of all, he manipulated me until I actually believed it was my fault. I was determined to not get brain-washed this time.

“Fuck!” Phillip suddenly turned around and punched a hole into the plastic casing holding the movie posters. “Fuck,” he gritted between clenched teeth.

I peeked around my shoulder to assess the damage he caused. I had ducked when I saw his fist fly through the air, thinking he had finally snapped and was going to take that first swing at

me. Unintentionally, I had lit his fuse.

“You stupid, fuckin’ bitch! Look what you’ve done now. You trying to fuck up my basketball career?” His glare was cold as ice. The cuts he sustained were quickly producing a lot of blood. “I don’t have time for your dramatics anymore. I’ve got to get my hand looked at.” He was cursing under his breath, twisting his hand around to examine how severe the injury was. I knew at this point there was nothing I could say that would extinguish his rage of fire. “Save your damn drama for your mama because she’s the only one that gives a fuck about you anyway,” he spat out at me.

He left me standing there feeling

numb all over as he escaped into the bathroom. I mused over how my day had started off, exciting and with endless possibilities. When I woke up this morning, I felt happy, a little panicked, but still content. Now I stood feeling my heart slowly thump in the darkest pit of my chest. I jolted from my pity party when Phillip came barreling out of the bathroom.

“I’m not paying for that shit, so you better come up with a good story on how that happened,” he seethed, pointing to the busted-up case. He jogged to the doors, bursting through them so hard I thought they were going to come off the hinges. At that moment, it dawned on me that I had no way to get home. Phillip

just left, not that there was any way I would've asked him for a ride, and Jaxon had already left, taking my car keys with him.

Having no reason to hold in my sorrow anymore, I felt the sting of tears in the back of my eyes as I stood there alone. Running back to the bathroom, I locked myself in a stall and stifled my tears as I sobbed. I couldn't hold it in anymore. My heart was breaking... again.

I was tired, so tired. My eyes were puffy and red, and I had the snubs and no way of getting home. I wanted to text Jaxon about my keys, but I didn't want him to see me like this. Pulling my

phone from my back pocket, I texted the only person that wouldn't pass judgment—Kendra.

**Me: Jaxon left w/
my keys & I don't
want 2 bother him
w/ bringing them
back. Can u come
get me plz?**

I hit send... waiting.

Thankfully, no one entered the bathroom during my meltdown. I swiped the smudge of mascara out from underneath my eyes, trying to make myself somewhat presentable, and headed back out to the lobby. As I came around the corner, Jaxon stood there giving me his smirky, dimpled smile. He

looked gorgeous.

His smile quickly turned down and his eyes grew tender as he drew in my not-so-stellar appearance.

“I... uh... I thought you left already?” I stammered.

“I hope you don’t mind, and I know I’m going against your request already, but I couldn’t leave you alone with that jackass. I’ve been sitting out in the parking lot waiting until I knew you were safe.” He started spinning my car keys around on his finger again. “Plus, I figured you were going to need a ride home.”

“Oh.” I could see his relation to

Reed. The sweet mannerism must run through their blood.

“Thanks for the offer, but I already texted Kendra asking her to pick me up,” I winced.

“Yeah, I know, she texted me asking if I would since I had your keys. Is that okay?” he asked curiously, making me feel obligated to accept in order to prevent any hurt feelings.

“Um... sure, that will be fine. Just let me grab my purse.” I snuck into Maggie’s office to grab my purse and coat, hoping to avoid her and any other coworkers. I wasn’t in any mood to explain my horrible evening, especially to those gossip vultures I worked with.

Jaxon was waiting for me by the exit doors, holding them open for me as we walked into the cold night. As we walked to my car, he stepped in close beside me and wrapped his arm around my shoulder, squeezing me just enough to give the comfort I needed. When we reached my old Maxima, he walked directly to the passenger side opening the door. I made my way over to the driver's side, assuming I would drive seeing it was my car, but he stopped me. "Sorry, Sweet Cheeks, but I can't let you drive after the night you've had."

"Thanks," I mumbled, as he walked me over to the passenger side of the car helping to ease me in. I molded myself in the seat feeling drained. The

smell of peppermint swirled around in my car, and I had to admit it kind of soothed my shattered heart. I didn't know how to react to the kindness Jaxon was showing me. I had never experienced it before with Phillip, not even early in our relationship.

As soon as Jaxon started the car, warm air came pouring out of the vents, relaxing me, making me sleepy. "I hope you don't mind, but I'm going to drop you off at Kendra's. She requested I bring you there and said not to worry, that she already spoke with your mom who said it was okay."

"Thanks." It was all I had the energy to say. I just wanted to go to bed

and forget all my problems. I didn't want to deal with them anymore tonight.

“Are you going to be okay? Do you want to talk about it? I know you don't know me well enough to discuss such personal information, but I've learned that talking about your problems out loud is the best therapy, no matter who the person is.” He had just totally contradicted himself after what he said to me earlier in the day. I was about to call him out on it, but I decided to let it go.

I opened my eyes, wondering if he was speaking from experience, so I asked him.

“Yes,” he deadpanned.

I waited for him to offer more, but he kept tight-lipped on the subject, so I decided that was my best option, too.

“Thank you for being there for me tonight and being concerned for my safety, but I don’t really want to talk about any of it anymore. I just want to forget this night ever happened.”

“I understand.” And that was all that was said between us until we got to Kendra’s.

Kendra and Reed were waiting outside when we pulled into her driveway. Jaxon rushed out of the car so he could open my door and help me out. He was so full of chivalry tonight. I didn't need to be taken care of, but I let

him because it felt good.

Jaxon wrapped his strong arms around me in a comforting embrace. "Take care, Sweet Cheeks, and if you ever need me, I'm here," he whispered.

He was complicating things for me again, making me reconsider what I told him earlier. I liked his company. I liked being around him.

He released me and his eyes saddened, so I looked away.

Walking up to the house with Kendra's arm draped over my shoulder, I stopped before going inside. Not able to help myself, I turned around to watch Jaxon and Reed back out of her

driveway and leave.

Chapter 13 ~ Apologies

Two weeks had passed since distancing myself from Phillip and Jaxon. Those two weeks went by a lot smoother than I had anticipated.

After Jaxon dropped me off at Kendra's that night, he texted me later, saying that if I ever needed him for anything, I could call or text him any day, any hour. He did sort of contact me once by relating a message via Kendra saying that my car checked out fine and that he didn't find anything wrong with it. I felt guilty wasting his time, knowing darn well that my car was in decent running condition. It really saddened me

to cut ties with Jaxon. I think he would have been a lot of fun to hang out with. The platonic male friend scene would have definitely been a new adventure for me. Hopefully, after high school and when Phillip left for Wake Forest, I could start to do all the things I'd missed out on.

I feared returning to school that following Monday. Dreading the one class I had with Phillip the most, but it turned out he ignored me just as much as I did him. We were right back to where we were after the break-up.

Life was getting easier already. Other students in class occasionally struck up conversations with me. Even

one of the popular football players, Trent Moore, asked me to go to Friday night's basketball game with him. I think my face turned twenty shades of red when he stopped me in the hall to ask. He was one of the guys at school that everybody loved, and not just because he was tongue-panting gorgeous, but because he had the best personality to go with his ripped physique and pretty face. Reluctantly, I turned him down. Not because I was scared to go, but because I didn't want to attend the game where Phillip would be. No need to rub it in his face.

It felt good to live freely again, especially after being kept prisoner for three plus years. I didn't normally like

being put in the spotlight, usually preferring to hide in the shadows, but I enjoyed the small increments of attention.

By the beginning of week three, I started catching Phillip staring at me: in the parking lot, during class, during lunch... it didn't matter where I saw him, his eyes always held the same look in them—guilt. I didn't have it in me to meet his gaze. Kendra told me I was a coward. She wanted me to stare him down, laugh in his face, and tell him to go fuck himself. Of course, she hated him with every fiber of her body, but I didn't share those feelings with her. I avoided eye contact because I was worried I would feel sorry for him. He'd

never shown any type of remorse in his life when it came to me, so to see it now filled me with pity.

It was Tuesday morning, exactly a week before Christmas and three more days until Christmas break. We still used the term Christmas vacation, Christmas tree, Christmas card, and so forth in our little town. The country folks—especially the elders—were not very keen on using the phrase ‘holiday’ in the place of Christmas. You couldn’t exactly throw those politically correct terms into the Bible-belt country. Many southerners frowned upon it.

The atmosphere at school was becoming more cheerful with the idea of

a two-week vacation around the corner. Yes, we still had to get past exams in the coming week, and luckily I was exempt from all of mine except World History. I honestly thought Coach Harrison hated my guts. Coach Harrison was not only my World History teacher, he was also the varsity basketball coach and Phillip was his 'baby,' so to speak. If anything happened to Phillip and our team didn't make it to state, I was sure he'd be eyeballing me as the cause. No matter how much I worked my butt off, I was sure he'd still find a way to sabotage my grades. If only I could prove it. Today I was on my own since Kendra, Miss I-get-straight-A's-without-studying, was exempt from all her exams. If she wasn't

my best friend, I would hate her.

Despite having to come to school for one hour, I didn't have to attend either English class or lunch, leaving me Phillip-free all week. I didn't think I could handle one more week of those puppy dog eyes pleading with me. My stupid self was likely to cave in.

Feeling positive with my answers, I turned in my exam and headed out the door to my locker. Musing over my plans for the day had me feeling elated. I caught myself humming 'Carol of the Bells' while thinking about the Christmas shopping Kendra and I had planned for this afternoon. Christmas had always been my favorite holiday,

followed by my birthday. What could I say? I loved receiving presents. I was not a high maintenance type of girl, so it didn't matter how extravagant or how inexpensive the gift. I was easy to please regardless. Not to be mistaken as a miser, though. I thought giving gifts was just as much fun as receiving them.

I found myself entertaining thoughts of breaking out of my three-year traditional Christmas/New Year's routine. Number one item on my agenda—discussing holiday plans with Kendra. This year, I wanted to go clubbing somewhere to ring in the New Year or maybe snow-tubing the day after Christmas.

Stopping by my locker, I dropped off my book bag, not wanting anything school related coming home with me. As I opened up the metal door, a small envelope fell out landing by my feet. Hastily, I swiped it off the floor. My curiosity was running wild since there was nothing written on it. I eagerly opened it up, pulling out a small card with the sweetest little Cocker Spaniel puppy with droopy, sad eyes. I flipped the card open to see the words ‘I’m sorry’ written in the all-too-familiar, most beautiful handwriting I had ever seen from a guy—Phillip. I was stunned. The entire time I’d known Phillip, I’d never known those words to come out of his mouth. He had never apologized for

anything in his life, at least not that I was aware of and definitely not to me.

A small smirk of a smile formed on my face. *Dammit!* My body always betrayed me. Glancing around, I looked up and down both ends of the hall, with a funny feeling Phillip was hiding somewhere, watching me.

Not really knowing what to make of his apology, I shoved the card in my purse and headed out the door to my car. I pondered over his act of contrition on my way to meet Kendra. Sure, he took the first step in admitting he was wrong, but, in order for me to know how sincere he meant it, I needed to hear it. I needed to see the expression on his face while

saying it.

Kendra's little pink bug stood out amongst the rest of the cars as I pulled into the theater parking lot. As usual, she insisted in doing all the driving. I took the card out of my purse and tossed it into my console before getting out of the car, not wanting to take any chances of Kendra finding it in my purse or having it accidentally fall out. She didn't need to know about it just yet. Sure, she was my best friend, and I normally tell her everything, but this was one of those instances where I didn't feel it was necessary. I knew I would only be given negative backlash, and I wasn't in the mood to have my Christmas spirit dampened.

I rushed out of my car, fighting the bitter cold, and jumped into Kendra's. The heater was cranked up full blast, warming my frozen fingers and toes. Since my car was so old, it took a good five to ten minutes—the duration from school to work—for the heater to pump out anything remotely close to warm air.

“So, how do you think you fared?” Kendra asked, batting her big, Barbie blue eyes at me.

“Who knows, ask Coach Harrison,” I grumbled. She kept staring at me, batting her eyes and wiggling her eyebrows up and down. “Is something in your eye? And why do you keep giving

me googly eyes?”

Kendra stopped her eye performance, giving me the stare down. “You’re a bitch.”

Unable to hold it in any longer, I busted out laughing at her. “You’re such a baby. I see your fake lashes. Happy now?” Kendra was the reckless one in our duo. She would do or try anything at least once. She once shaved all body hair, except for her eyelashes and the hair on her head, just to see what it would feel like. I had learned long ago to never lay a dare on her because she just wouldn’t back down.

“It’s about damn time you noticed. I was about to get a headache

from all that blinking,” she exclaimed, rubbing her forehead intently.

“So, what’s up with the lashes? We’re just going shopping. Those spider legs look more like something you would wear clubbing.”

Kendra pulled her sun visor down admiring her lashes in the little mirror. Smiling, she turned to look at me. “I just wanted to try them,” she shrugged. “I figured if those fake bitches in magazines could pull them off, surely I could too.”

I laughed again. “Well, they’re cute, and they make your already beautiful eyes look voluptuous.”

“Sultry and sexy,” Kendra said nonchalantly, throwing me off track with her random remark.

“Huh?”

“Gah! Keep up, Court! Sultry and sexy is the look I’m shooting for, not cute. Voluptuous is a perfect description, but who wants to be cute?” She rolled her eyes, shaking her head at me.

“Careful there. You’ve exercised those eyes enough in the last few minutes. I’d hate for you to get a migraine,” I giggled and smiled at her, giving her my best smartass grin.

“You’re still a bitch,” she huffed with attitude and stuck her tongue out at

me. All I could do was shake my head at her and smile.

Our first stop was the mall. Kendra had the ever-growing list of people to buy for. Her mother left her with specific instructions of who to buy for and what to buy. Even the store to buy it in. Kendra was a chronic shopper, so it never bothered her in the least to do her mother's bidding.

Thankfully, my list was smaller than usual, as this year I was short on cash. My gift buying consisted of my mom, Kendra, her parents, and Reed. Christmases past saw most of my hard earned cash going directly to Phillip, and I was guiltily excited to disperse

those dollars elsewhere, although I was still considering buying something small for his dad.

The mall was overly crowded. Christmas music blasted through the speakers in every store, and women of all ages were wearing some sort of Christmas décor. Small children were running around, either playing or whining while waiting to have their ‘moment’ with Santa, and I absorbed every little piece of it into my merry little heart.

Kendra and I snaked through the crowd at the food court, looking for an empty table to rest our legs and feed our growling bellies. Finding one, we took

turns guarding it while the other ordered food. I had my usual gyro from Great Wraps while she ordered from the same place everyone else in the mall flocked to—Sbarro. *Pizza, yuck!*

I popped a fresh fry into my mouth, nearly burning it. “So, what are the plans for Christmas and New Year’s?” I garbled, quickly taking a sip of soda to relieve my scorched tongue. I took another gulp, holding the cold liquid in my mouth to bring some relief before swallowing. “I really want to do something different, something fun. What do you think? Any ideas?”

Kendra’s lips broke out into a mischievous grin as she shoved her slice

of pizza in her mouth.

“Hurry and chew,” I muttered. “I know you’ve got something up your sleeve with that sneaky grin you’re sporting over there.”

“Hmm, it’s funny you bring this up because Reed and I were just talking about the same thing this morning,” she said, wiping pizza sauce off her chin.

“Well, to be honest, I was kind of thinking about me and you doing something by ourselves, but I’m up for whatever.” What I really wanted was for us to spend some time alone like we used to.

Kendra took in a deep breath,

giving me a nervous feeling as to what she was going to say next.

“Hear me out before you say anything or make any decisions, okay?” *Yikes!* This was serious news she was about to deliver. I started to feel a little uneasy.

“Okay,” I said warily.

“We were talking about going skiing up in West Virginia for New Year’s—”

I interrupted her. “Count me in! Why would you think I need to consider going skiing when you know I’ve been dying to go for years?”

Kendra went every year, and Phillip never wanted me to go. I always gave into his obsessive controlling need to have me close to him. Even though Kendra invited him every year, he always declined. He always used the excuse that it was too dangerous, that he didn't want to risk breaking a leg or arm, and he didn't need anything jeopardizing his basketball career.

“Because Jaxon is going.” Kendra almost cringed, as she threw in the monkey wrench.

“Oh.” It was all I could say. Her mentioning Jaxon was the last thing I expected. The guilt settled in the pit of my stomach. Our separation wasn't fair

to him. I knew it from the moment I had made the decision. He treated me with nothing but kindness, and I swept him to the side the same way I did Phillip.

Kendra leaned up from her chair, propping her elbows up on the table. “Okay, here’s the deal... Reed and I really want to go skiing New Year’s Eve, and Reed invited Jaxon to go with us. Reed asked me if it was okay if Jaxon went, too, so I told him sure. Problem is, Jaxon doesn’t want to go because he said he will feel like a third wheel, and he doesn’t want to intrude. Reed really wants Jaxon to go, so he wanted me to ask you if you would come, too.”

“Whoa, slow down and take a breather Kendra. You’re going to pass out from lack of oxygen. I promise you I wasn’t going to interrupt, if that’s what you thought,” I chuckled, shaking my head.

“Courtney?” she said, her voice all whiney. She batted her stupid, fake lashes at me at the same time as popping her bottom lip out.

“Really? We’re resorting to pouting?” I asked, cocking my head to the side.

I stayed mum for a little while longer, tapping my finger against my temple. Not wanting to answer yet, sitting silent, pretending to contemplate

my answer. Kendra was used to instant gratification, so I liked making her squirm. I really, really wanted to go, so, if I said yes, was it going to be worth it to me in the end? I guessed I'd never know if I didn't take that chance. Imagine, little ol' me, Miss Chicken Little, expanding my horizon. It may not be considered living on the edge to most people, but it was to me.

“Pleeezzzz? Wait, no, you don't have to give me an answer now, but will you please consider it and let me know something by the end of the day?”

And the never-ending begging began. I knew if I didn't answer, she'd talk the subject to death.

“I’ll go, but you have to promise you won’t announce this on Facebook. My life has been flowing smooth as still water in the past couple of weeks, so there’s no need to lob a rock into it.”

“I promise. You know I’m always good on my word. My goal in life is to make yours better, not worse,” she smiled. Moments like this were why I loved her so much. My secrets were her secrets; taken to the grave.

Kendra threw our trash away while I gathered all of our shopping bags. “Do you think we can find the remaining gifts in enough time to get you back by four o’clock?” she asked, crossing off items on her list.

I smiled at her. “With your shopping expertise, I’m sure.”

On the way home, I debated talking to Kendra about Phillip’s apology. The longer I thought it through, the more I decided to leave it alone. I wasn’t in the mood for fighting, and, when I defended Phillip—which I thought I would—we inevitably ended up in a yelling match. My day had turned out to be nearly perfect, so my lips were staying sealed until further notice.

My thoughts flipped from Phillip back to our earlier conversation about Jaxon. I wondered how Jaxon felt about me going, or if he even knew. “Is Jaxon aware that there is a possibility I’m

going skiing?” I sneaked a sideways glance at Kendra to read her facial expression.

She was not giving anything away. “Yes.”

“So... how does he feel about that?” I asked, propping my back against the door so I could assess her better.

Her lips curled up to the side. “He’s pretty damn excited, if you want to know the truth.”

Wow! Blunt much?

She had my curiosity running wild. “Did he say this?”

Kendra suddenly slammed on her

brakes then raised her hand, sprouting her tallest finger and shouting profanities at the car in front of us. I sat there taking steady breaths to lower my pulse and decided to sit back in my seat and watch the road so I wouldn't be taken by surprise again.

Moments later, she carried on our conversation, as if nearly rear-ending the car in front of us had never happened. "Court, he didn't have to. You could see it on his face... the way he talks, the way he acts when your name gets brought up. He asks about you every day, you know," she said as she pulled into the theater parking lot. "If you ask me, I think he likes you, but, if you ask him, he says he thinks of you as the little

sister he never had,” she frowned. “I think he just doesn’t want to admit he has a crush on you, you know because of the age difference and all.”

“Huh,” I said to myself. In the minimal time I spent with Jaxon, I received so many mixed signals from him that I felt like I was a traffic light on the blitz. I’d admit, I was profusely attracted to him, I would have loved to been his ‘friend’ or even his girlfriend, but I saw too many complications stemming from either.

Kendra parked beside my car, popping the trunk so I could gather my shopping bags. She rolled down the window. “Thank you again for agreeing

to go skiing. We are going to have so much fun. You won't regret it, I promise," she yelled cheerfully before driving away.

As I unlocked the door to my car, I noticed another envelope lying under my windshield wiper. Pulling it out, I found another card with a single red rose on the cover. I open it up and saw that beautiful penmanship again, the card reading 'Please forgive me. Phillip.' *How did he know my car was here? Was he stalking me?*

Chapter 14 ~ Holiday Surprise

The temperature was hovering around the freezing mark, and a fine dusting of frost blanketed the ground. Christmas Eve in Mayberry was both beautiful, yet chillingly frigid. Every now and then, North Carolina got a hefty dumping of snow, but it looked as if today was going to be more of the customary ice. *Ugh!* I had a very busy day planned ahead, and hazardous weather was not a part of it.

My radio was firmly set on a station that played all-day-long Christmas music. Dancing around the house, full of cheerful Christmas spirit, I

finally finished wrapping the last of my gifts. I was belting along with Johnny Mathis' 'Sleigh Ride' when I faintly heard the doorbell ring. Running down the hall to turn the volume down, I nearly busted my butt on the freshly polished floor. Hastily, I opened the door, sucking in an absurd amount of cold air as I gauged my much unexpected visitor. My heart fluttered momentarily. From fear? From delight? From the abundance of love I still carried for the psycho male species standing before me? So many mixed emotions were tingling through every nerve ending of my body. This boy had me questioning my own sanity.

Phillip's looks were so deceiving. His GQ physique masked his

malevolent persona. My body involuntarily responded before my brain as I drank him in. His lustrous, brown eyes raked over me as I stood stunned, staring at him. His dirty blond hair was shaved close to his head, and he now had a small goatee that made him look a few years older. He stood motionless in my doorway with his hands shoved in the front pockets of his faded jeans.

“May I come in?” he whispered, his head hanging low. His chocolate browns peered up at me behind his dark eyelashes. The demeanor radiating off of him was a mixture of seduction and passiveness. I was unsure of which emotion he was aiming for, and the latter wasn’t his style.

Pulling myself down from the clouds, I quickly got my brain on the straight and narrow path. “Can I trust you, Phillip? Are you going to turn all psychotic on me again?” I huffed, pushing my hair behind my ears. I needed to do something with my hands to hide the nervous shakes he triggered. “I can’t keep doing this with you. I can’t keep letting you take control of my heart,” I pleaded, my hands grasping at my chest. “You break me. You’ve shattered my spirit so many times. The pieces are incapable of being put back together.” Phillip took a step toward me, and I shook my head. “No. Don’t come any closer. Just tell me, what do you want from me?”

Phillip took yet another step forward, reaching a hand up and cupping my face. “I just want your forgiveness, nothing else,” he said softly, shaking his head. “These past few weeks have killed me. I can’t handle not being near you, not talking to you. I know I’ve fucked up, and I understand your anger with me, but, please, I’m begging you, forgive me.” I could see things in his eyes that I had never seen before—regret, shame, sorrow.

Seething, I asked the most obvious question. “Why now, Phillip? Why after all the times you’ve treated me like a piece of shit, why now do you want my forgiveness?”

He stood immobile, a pained expression wrinkling his forehead.

“Answer me, dammit!” I screamed, my fist clenched tight by my sides.

“Because I can’t handle not having you in my life. I’ve tried moving on without you, but I’m not capable, Courtney. Yes, I know I dated other girls, I know I screwed around on you, but none of it replaces you.” He reached forward, and his thumb started caressing my cheek. “I’m not asking for us to get back together. I fucked up. I get that. I’m just asking for your friendship, for your forgiveness.”

My heart was racing a hundred

miles an hour as I listened to his words of endearment continue on.

“Did you know Trent came up to me and asked me if he could ask you out? I told him you were free to do whatever you wanted, and that I was not in control of you. Doesn’t that say something, Courtney?” he whispered, his other hand reaching up to cup the other side of my face.

I grabbed both of Phillip’s wrists, lightly pulling his hands from my face. The contact was too intimate, and I didn’t trust myself in his personal space. “Yes, Phillip, it does. I can forgive you, I always do, but I can’t trust you. Believe me, I’ve tried,” I said harshly.

Phillip took one final step closer. “Just give me one more chance, please? I’m begging you, and you know I never beg.” He was starting to freak me out, displaying a new personality I’d never met before. I’d thought my introductions had been made with all of them by now.

“And if you go on one of your crazy rampages, then what? I’m supposed to forgive you again? I can’t keep going through this vicious cycle, Phillip.” I suddenly noticed he had slyly made his way into my house. Standing firmly by the door, I wasn’t about to let him in any further.

“Then don’t make a decision now. Let me show you I can be the

person you always desired me to be. I can prove it to you. Just give me a chance,” he pleaded

Those days of making him promises were over. “I’ll think about it,” I confirmed. That was all I could give him, nothing more.

“I’ll take that. It’s better than no,” he said, pulling a small wrapped gift from his coat pocket, holding it out to me.

His gesture confused me. I thought our gift exchanging days were over. “I can’t take that. I didn’t buy anything for you.”

His full lips pulled up to the

side, flashing his adorable sideways grin. “It’s not really a Christmas gift... it’s more of an ‘I’m sorry for being such an ass’ gift... a truce,” he chuckled.

I didn’t know what to say. He had never given me a gift unless it was a holiday that required it. I stood motionless, staring at the wrapping paper, taking notice that it wasn’t wrapped in Christmas paper.

“Open it.”

Slowly, I pulled the ribbon, feeling like I was about to reveal some kind of sick joke. Phillip took the wrapping paper from my hands so that I could open the box. My hand shook as I pulled off the lid. Phillip reached down

and pulled out a beautiful, silver bangle bracelet with some kind of plant in the middle. I could never wear this in front of anyone unless I wanted to give an explanation, which I did not.

“Here, let me put it on you,” he said, lightly grabbing my right wrist, clasping the bracelet in place. “The vine on top is an olive branch; it means to offer peace or reconciliation, and that’s what I’m doing here with you today. I’m giving you this token to show you how serious I am. I want you to wear this until I break your trust.” He lifted my hand and gently pressed his lips to the sensitive underside of my wrist. “Thank you,” he murmured, his lips still lingering on my skin.

He turned around quickly and jogged back to his truck, I stood still at the door, unable to move and not feeling the cold air we let in as we exchanged what turned into... an agreement? *Did I just agree to go through this whole shenanigan with him again? Really?* I faintly heard my phone playing Pink Floyd's 'Brain Damage' letting me know it was Kendra. I was too muddled to carry on a coherent conversation, so I just let it go to voicemail.



After having Christmas lunch

with my coworkers, I was feeling a little apprehensive about spending the rest of the evening with Kendra and her parents. My gut told me that Reed might bring Jaxon with him, but, then again, he probably wouldn't since this was Kendra's family. I just wasn't ready to face him yet. I felt embarrassed for the way I treated him, especially after Kendra told me about his concern with my well-being on a daily basis. As I pulled into her driveway, I was relieved to see no unfamiliar cars parked outside.

Running from my car up the long walkway, I tried to dodge the freezing rain that started pouring down on my way over. As I tripped over the threshold, I nearly tossed my bag of

gifts. I face-planted right into none other than Jaxon, or at least his super-hefty, beefy, muscular chest. I attempted to nonchalantly pause, taking a deep breath through my nose, savoring the wonderful peppermint aroma that intoxicated me.

“Whoa, Sweet Cheeks,” he laughed. His arm firmly wrapped around my waist to keep me steady on my feet. The groan that escaped my lips was loud enough for the neighbors to hear. Not sure which one embarrassed me more, the groan or my clumsiness. I felt the heat run up from my neck to my face.

“I am so sorry, Jaxon. I was trying to escape the rain before it frizzed up my hair,” I gasped, a little breathless.

“Don’t be sorry. I’m just glad I was in the right place at the right time, or we might have been paying the ER a visit,” he smiled, pulling his dimples in deep. “I could see it now, you falling face first onto this hard, ceramic floor,” he chuckled.

I definitely preferred the hard, sexy chest. I felt his body tense up. *Oh hell, did I just say that out loud?* Judging by the sudden shift in the atmosphere, I knew I had.

Looking up at him was a big mistake on my part. His baby blues peered into my eyes, mesmerizing me and hitching my breath as we stood motionless. The smile he had moments

ago was replaced with a more desirable expression. Neither one of us moved. The fresh minty scent of his breath blew quickly across my face in short breaths as if he had just finished running a marathon. My body became paralyzed, and it dawned on me that I didn't want to move from his touch even if I was able to. How was I allowing him to have so much control over my feelings? My attraction to him at the party was merely alcohol-induced, or at least that's what I had told myself. Was it possible to develop this strong of an attraction to someone you barely knew? Someone you'd spent a scarce amount of time with? I wished I could tell what he was thinking as he stared at me intensely,

passion emanating from his eyes.

I was losing myself in his iridescent gaze when I woke from my reverie and spotted Kendra.

“There you ar—oh, sorry, I uh —” she stammered.

“I tripped... um, walking in the door,” I interrupted, realizing it sounded more like an excuse for our close embrace instead of a statement of events. Jaxon quickly jerked away, and I didn’t realize until that moment that I had a tight grip on his upper arms.

“Okaaaay,” Kendra said, drawing the word out longer than necessary. “Well, y’all are acting like a

couple of deer caught in headlights, and it's making me feel awkward. I'm going to mosey my ass back into the kitchen to help mom with dinner," she smiled, then turned and walked down the hall.

My eyes followed her until she disappeared around the corner, only to catch her poking her head back around to give me a wink. Turning around to see if Jaxon was watching as well, I found him bent down, sliding on his black Vans, as he cleared his throat.

My heart sank a tad. "Are you leaving?" I asked timidly, hoping my voice didn't come out sounding desperate.

"Kendra's mom needs eggs. She

dropped the entire carton, so I told her I would run to the store for her.” He grasped the door handle like he was ready to make a mad dash out the door.

“Do you know where the store is?”

“No, but I’m good,” he answered swiftly, then fled through the door just as quickly as I stumbled in.

Standing there alone, I wondered if I’d overstepped the friendship line. I hadn’t reacted any differently than he had, really. In fact, it slightly pissed me off the way he appeared all smitten with me, but then cut me short once Kendra walked in.

“What the hell was that all about?”

My body jerked from fright. Spinning around to face Kendra, I found her standing in the hallway with both hands on her hips, head cocked to the side. “I swear, if I hadn’t interrupted you two, y’all would’ve been kissing within five seconds. Is there something going on that you’re not telling me?” she eyed me curiously.

I’m telling you, if I didn’t meet my untimely death in the form of a heart attack by the age of twenty, I’d be shocked. Between having the shit scared out of me, Phillip playing with my heart, Jaxon teasing my heart, panic attacks...

it was bound to stop beating eventually.

I shook my head at her. “I knew you would jump to conclusions. When I walked in, I tripped over the stupid threshold, and Jaxon happened to be at the right place at the right time. He caught me before I busted my face on the floor,” I shrugged, acting like it was no big deal.

“You better not be blowing me off, Court. I swear, if there is something going on between you two and you don’t tell me about it, I will break up with you,” she warned, her lips pulled in tight and her eyebrow lowered, giving me the stink-eye.

I reached down to pick up my

bag full of gifts, checking them out to make sure the bows weren't smashed. I was a horrible liar, and to lie to someone's face, especially Kendra, without being consumed by guilt was a trick I'd not yet mastered. Pretending to meticulously examine the presents, I avoided making any eye contact with her. *What was going on with me and the lies spilling so easily from my mouth lately?*

“Seriously, Kendra? You know you are the one and only person I tell all my deep, dark secrets to,” I promised, wincing inside, while thinking back to ‘the kiss’ between Jaxon and I and to the treaty I’d made with Phillip earlier that morning. “So, for the record, I don’t feel

that way toward Jaxon.”

“Well, maybe you don’t, but I know you’re attracted to him. You proved that at the Russells’ Christmas party, remember?” Kendra was still standing with her hands firmly on her hips, her eyebrows lifted high, bringing wrinkles to her forehead.

I inhaled a deep breath. “Is he cute? Yes, he’s freakin’ gorgeous, but he’s not my type,” I argued.

If I didn’t end the conversation now, she would start using her usual tactics, and I would be revealing feelings that I was not ready to share. Sliding my flats off, I walked past her, clearly letting her know the discussion

was over.

We walked into the kitchen where Kendra's mom and dad, Diana and David, were congregated with Reed around the island, chopping onions and celery. I stepped over to Diana and David, greeting them both with hugs and kisses. They were my second parents, and, even though David traveled a lot with his job, he had always been there for me when I'd needed a father figure in my life. Not wasting any time, Diana immediately put me to work, peeling potatoes for the potato salad.

In the midst of a discussion with David and Diana about our ski trip, I caught sight of someone in my peripheral

vision. Jerking my head up, I spotted Jaxon leaning against the door frame. His expression made me wonder what he was thinking as he watched our playful banter with a contented smile on his face. His eyes flashed over to mine, and he gave me a quick wink. Instantaneously, butterflies exploded in my stomach. My eyes quickly shot back to the potatoes I was cutting. I chanced a glance at Kendra, curious to see if she'd noticed Jaxon was back. Breathing a small sigh of relief, I found that she hadn't. She was whispering in Reed's ear and not paying us any attention.

Dinner started off awkward. Kendra purposely sat Jaxon and I beside each other while she and Reed sat

across from us. Jaxon chose not to look at me throughout the entire dinner, barely acknowledging my existence. His avoidance didn't stop Kendra from boring a hole through the both of us during the dinner service. Finally fed up with it, I kicked her under the table to let her know. After that, she focused more on eating and joining the circulating conversations than on Jaxon and me.

After Jaxon's return from the store, he'd remained somewhat neutral toward me, kind of like he was deliberately being a little stand-offish. It made me question things, like whether or not he had winked at me, or if maybe he was blinking because he'd had something in his eye. I decided to brush

it off, though. It was senseless for me to even be worrying about it. In hindsight, I shouldn't care about whether he liked me or not.

After dinner, everyone gathered in the family room to play our traditional game of Rook. Reed decided that, since we had an even number of people, we should play in teams of two, partnering himself up with Jaxon. After a couple of rounds, we discovered the two sly snakes were cheating, so we broke out individually, making the game a little fairer. However, David—the strategic player—made a clean sweep in every hand and the game ended quickly. He then challenged us all to a game of chess, but we all declined since he was

a master chess player.

After having our butts whooped in Rook, Kendra and I helped Diana clean the kitchen before opening presents. Hearing Christmas tunes deriving from the piano in the family room, all three of us turned to look at each other curiously—Diana and Kendra being the only ones who knew how to play the piano. We marched ourselves down toward the family room to see who had the hidden talent, only to find Jaxon alone in the room, sitting at the piano and playing a beautiful medley of ‘Silent Night,’ ‘What Child is This,’ and ‘Mary, Did You Know.’ He was in his own little world, not noticing us standing there watching him graciously move his

hands and fingers over the keys. The sound he created was both beautiful and mesmerizing. We continued watching him, listening, for what seemed like hours before he spotted us and stopped. Looking a little embarrassed, he smiled shyly. "Sorry, didn't know anyone was in here. I hope you don't mind me trying out your piano," he said, looking at Diana.

"Oh, honey, not at all. You play beautifully. How long have you been playing?" she asked enthusiastically.

He turned on the piano bench to face her. "Umm, since I was about five years old. My grandma taught me."

"Well, she must be a very

talented lady,” Diana gushed.

“She was,” he replied softly, the obvious sadness in his eyes as he tried to force a smile on his gloomy face.

The room became very quiet. The three of us didn’t know exactly what to say. He seemed to hold so many secrets, never willingly revealing any personal insights, and it only perked my intrusive curiosity. The wheels started spinning in my head as I wondered how his parents died or if he even had any siblings. He’d never spoken about any immediate family, and the only family he did talk about was Reed. It never occurred to me to ask any of those questions, but you could bet your sweet

ass that my inner sleuth was itching to start snooping now.

Reed and David walked into the room, arms loaded up with presents, inevitably deflecting the unease floating around the room. “Jaxon, how about you get your butt over here and help us out instead of trying to woo these women with your mad piano skills?” Reed laughed.

Jaxon flashed a dimpled smirk at me before spinning back around on the bench, facing the piano. “I’ll pass. I’m not finished charming these ladies with my *other* talents yet,” he joked, laughing loudly.

When he grinned at me

specifically and no one else, he threw me off balance. Especially since he had been ignoring me for the majority of the night. Attempting to gain my mental stability once again, I wondered if anyone else had caught on to how he had just emphasized the word ‘other’... or was I the only one with my mind in the gutter?

Suddenly, the room filled with a rich, soulful voice as Jaxon started singing ‘The Christmas Song.’ Everyone froze, surprised, and stopped what they were doing. Even David and Reed paused to watch Jaxon as his fingers flowed effortlessly over the piano keys, singing in perfect harmony. By the time Jaxon crooned through the first chorus,

Kendra had made her way over to the piano, synchronizing their voices together. She carried a smooth tenor voice that matched with his perfectly.

I was utterly impressed by his musical talents. Music was food for the soul, and tonight Jaxon was spoon-feeding me his melodic capabilities.

Unfortunately, the night ended far too early. It was the best Christmas Eve dinner I'd ever had at Kendra's, and I couldn't help but wonder if Jaxon's presence had anything to do with it. I couldn't wait to get home and charge my iPad, an extravagant gift from David and Diana who went above and beyond on Christmas. Kendra had pouted over my

gift because she'd felt like the all-day spa voucher her and Reed gave me wasn't enough.

With all the gifts I received tonight, the unexpected one from Jaxon stood out to me the most—a sterling silver elephant ring. It was the cutest and most unique thing I'd ever seen. The face and trunk wrapped around the finger, meeting up with the tail. I was baffled when I opened the gift, knowing I'd never told him about my elephant obsession. I'd pulled Kendra aside and asked if she had told him about my love for elephants, but she'd said no. Who would've ever thought I would receive two meaningful pieces of jewelry from two guys in the same day? Not me, that

was for sure. I had to make sure I was careful when wearing them, too. I didn't want to cause another stir with anyone again.

Gathering our gifts to carry out to the car, Jaxon took my gift bags from my hands. "Here Sweet Cheeks, let me carry your stuff for you. We don't want you to complete that fall you started when you first got here," he laughed.

Trying to cover-up blushing from embarrassment, I playfully smacked him on the arm.

He swung his arm out like he was about to hug me, then abruptly stopped and dropped it down to his side. He quickly crammed the empty hand into

his front jean pocket. "Are you sure you're going to be okay driving in this cold, wet mess?"

"I'm fine. David checked the roads and said it's just rain and the temperatures are no longer below freezing." We stood there staring at each other in an awkward silence. "Thank you, again, for my ring. I wish I'd known so I could've bought you a gift."

"Courtney, really, it's okay." He cocked his head to the side looking at me sheepishly. "I'm a giver, not a taker. Besides, spending the day with you was enough for me."

I resisted the urge to hug him one last time. His sweetness melted my

heart. Regretfully, I simply sighed instead.

We said our goodbyes, and I was driving into my neighborhood when I swore I passed Maryann's Cadillac. It was hard to tell through the rain and fog. I couldn't figure out what she would be doing in my neighborhood at eleven o'clock at night in this treacherous weather. As I pulled in the driveway, though, realization dawned on me. I was ninety-nine percent sure Phillip was in that car, possibly stalking me... again.

Chapter 15 ~ Snow Princess

Christmas came and went too quick to enjoy, right along with the remaining days of the week. I'd spent every day and night until New Year's Eve laboring away at the theater. I had volunteered to work more hours to make that extra buck to replenish my savings. Between Christmas and the upcoming ski trip, my bank account was nearly bone dry.

Phillip surprisingly kept his word by sending me various text messages on a daily basis, telling me again how thankful he was that I was giving him one last chance. It freaked me

out seeing Phillip behave anything other than bipolar. I loved the rueful personality he had introduced. I just hoped it was here to stay. No matter how much I wanted to accept the new and improved him, my gut kept telling me to remain leery. I guessed time would tell.

Jaxon surprised me first thing Christmas morning by sending me a text saying ‘Merry Christmas’ and how thankful he was for allowing him to be part of our traditional Christmas Eve dinner. At first I thought his message went out as a group text, but, when I had asked Kendra about it, she’d said she never received any messages from him. He also stated how it was the best Christmas celebration he’d experienced

in several years. Was it coincidental that we both adored that night more than the past Christmases? Why couldn't I have met him a year from now? It would have definitely made life a little easier for me at the moment.

Knowing that I didn't have the extra cash on hand, Kendra let me borrow one of her chic ski suits. I was decked out in all white, trimmed in sapphire. The light blue lining sort of reminded me of Jaxon's eyes. From my bibs, coat, gloves, boots, and ski goggles, I was looking totally trendy. Even my head warmer was stylish. Standing in front of the mirror admiring myself, it didn't matter how many times I twisted and turned, I found nothing in the

outfit to flatter my curvy figure. Even though I was wearing the most fashionable ski attire to walk the runway, I felt more like the abominable snowman. I loathed having to wear bulky clothes. They always highlighted my chubby cheeks, making me look like I was storing nuts for the winter. Fretting over my appearance was solely because of Jaxon. Secretly, I wanted to look appealing to him.

After removing the bibs, I folded them up and placed them in my duffel bag. I left my hair in its natural state—curly and unmanageable. Not wanting it to hinder my ability to ski, I decided to pull it up tight in a ponytail. I applied a little mascara over my short eyelashes to

bring life to my sleepy eyes and painted on tinted gloss to hide my corpse-ridden lips. Death warmed over wasn't exactly the look I was going for. Getting up at five o'clock in the morning so we could leave by six was unheard of. My brain didn't function at that hour.

I left mom a note, letting her know I should be home around nine o'clock that evening. She despised technology, so sending her a text would've been a waste. Over the last two weeks, I had barely even seen her. Between the extra hours we both were putting in at work, it felt more like we lived alone. We were lucky to even have Christmas morning together.

The raucous sound of a horn reverberated through the house. I grabbed my duffel bag and phone before braving the freezing cold. My tummy started twisting in tight knots as a nervous surge shot through me. I would have been lying to myself if I said I wasn't excited to spend the whole day with Jaxon. Nobody but me needed to know that minor detail, though.

As I ran to the truck's back door, Reed still felt it necessary to pound on his horn. I was mortified. Regardless of whether my neighbors had to work or were off on vacation, I didn't think they'd appreciate the boisterous noise.

As soon as I opened the truck

door, Reed, Kendra, and Jaxon were laughing so hard they could barely breathe. “Would you stop it, Reed?” I exclaimed seething and speaking through a clenched jaw. “You’re going to wake up the whole freakin’ neighborhood. It’s six o’clock in the morning, you ass!”

Reed was trying to catch his breath, “You... are... so... easy.”

He started laughing even harder. I glared at him then whipped my head to the side, shooting Jaxon the same look. Once Jaxon had registered my expression, he turned to look out the window, stifling a full-fledge belly laugh.

“Screw you, Reed. Screw all of

you!” I huffed, reaching up to smack Reed in the back of the head. “Who’s next?”

He jerked his head out of my range. “Ow!” He exclaimed, rubbing the back of his head. “What the hell, Courtney? We were just having a little fun with you. Damn, you didn’t have to get all violent with me.”

Not able to hold it in any longer, I started giggling. “Dang, Reed, you don’t have to act like a little candy-ass. I was just having a little fun with you,” I said, mocking him. Kendra and Jaxon started laughing louder, making jokes at Reed about how he got schooled by me.

“You think you’re cute, do ya?”

Well, let's see how cute you think you are now," Reed chuckled, laying on the horn as we drove through the neighborhood.

Lunging my entire body toward the front of the truck, I used all my strength to pull Reed's arms off the steering wheel. He had them laid across it, using his elbows to press the horn. "Stop, you crazy lunatic!" I tried shouting in between laughing.

Just as I was able to slightly tug Reed's arms of steel, I felt my ribs under attack, sending me into a thrashing frenzy. My limbs were flying in every direction, waiting to make contact with something or someone. Kendra quickly

let go, taking cover. It was my best defense mechanism, and it worked every time.

I sank back in my seat, breathing heavily, drained like I had just competed in a Tough Mudder.

Everybody was still laughing, including me. “You almost made me piss my pants, Kendra,” I muttered, then slapped my hand over my mouth.

As soon as I said it, I was horrified. I’d been so caught up in our teasing, that I’d forgotten Jaxon was sitting right next to me. Kendra, Reed, and I were all contented enough in our own skin to be as crude as we wanted, and we usually were, but I wasn’t

comfortable enough with Jaxon yet to show my true colors.

Apparently, it didn't seem to faze Jaxon at all seeing that he handed me a napkin, telling me I could probably fold it up so it would fit in my panties. "I would give you a pad, but I don't use them. I prefer tampons," he said straight-faced. Of course, Kendra and Reed started with the cackling laughter again.

My face was burning from such intense heat that my hair should probably have burst into flames. As usual in Jaxon's presence, I was lost for words.

I was too embarrassed to look at him as I heard him chuckling lightly beside me. I snuck a peek, finding him

watching me, assessing my reaction. He gave me his deep, dimpled grin then curled his forefinger, giving me a come-here motion. Not trusting him, I gave him a skeptical look.

“Sweet Cheeks,” he whispered, curling his finger again for me to move closer. I decided to see what he wanted so I scooted close to him. I was about to jump back when his face leaned in close to mine. Reaching up, he cupped his hand around my ear. The smell of peppermint lingered as I felt his warm breath spread across my neck. His lips faintly brushed my earlobe as he whispered, “It was Kendra’s idea to harass you. She used the whole celibate threat if he didn’t follow her orders. Cut

him some slack. Please?” The word please lingered on my ear much longer than necessary, and it sent shivers up my spine.

Not sure if I was imagining things or if I was wishing for them, but I swear he smelled my hair before pulling away.

Trying not to draw any attention, I nodded without looking at him.

“What are you two being so quiet and sneaky about back there?” Kendra and Reed both asked simultaneously. Kendra turned completely around in her seat to get a better view of us.

Jaxon cleared his throat, shaking

his head, “Nothing, I was just letting Courtney know I was just teasing her.” He looked over at me giving me a wink. My eyes shot up to Kendra really quick to see if she had seen the wink, but thankfully she had already spun back around in her seat, ignoring us. Once Reed shouted ‘deer,’ she became too focused on catching a glimpse of one running across the highway.

My heart was pounding so hard that the beat was vibrating through my ears. I tried to control my breathing without making it noticeable. At this moment, I was very happy to be layered in winter clothing so that my chill bumps would be hidden.

Was it really necessary for him to tell me that little secret in such an intimate way? Should I have taken his gesture as flirting, or did he encompass a natural swag? Was he going to give me the cold shoulder now? Was I overthinking things? *God! He confused the hell out of me.*

The two hour drive to the ski resort passed all too quickly. After our goofing around and possible flirting, I fell asleep.

Stirring from my slumber, I faintly heard Jaxon's voice and felt him nudge my shoulder. "Wake up, Sleeping Beauty. We're here. Time to hit the slopes. Reed and Kendra are already on

their way to the front office.”

As I woke up, I found that I had been leaning on the palm of my hand against the window, and, because of this, my hand was asleep, giving me no warning of the drool puddled up in my palm. Once I felt wetness on my cheek, I knew I had to quickly recover before anyone saw. Facing my window, I discreetly reached down, wiping the wetness onto the seat of the truck. Reed would kill me if he knew I smeared saliva on his baby, but what he didn't know wouldn't hurt him.

I groggily stumbled out of the truck as a mixture of bitter cold and snowflakes danced across my face. “Did

the forecast call for snow today?" I asked Jaxon across the back of the truck as he was putting his gloves on.

"Reed said it was calling for a couple of inches up here, but nothing to interfere with our plans," he shrugged. He didn't seem too concerned so I chose not to worry about it either.

My teeth chattered as I quickly put my bibs and pulled my puffy coat back on. I looked around, assessing the resort. My eyes widened like saucers as I gauged the steep slopes. I felt a twinge of sickness punch me in the stomach. Jaxon grabbed me around the shoulders, pulling me against him. "Don't worry, we won't make you ski the Black

Diamonds on your first try,” he chuckled. “I’ll save those for last.”

“You do know this is my first time skiing?” I looked up at him, realizing just how close we were.

“Yes, of course. I’m just teasing you,” he grinned, flashing his adorable dimples. If only he had an inkling of how much his dimples drove me crazy. I wanted to grab his face and kiss them, even lick them. “You finding something you like?” he asked gazing at me intensely, all playfulness gone in his voice. *Shit! Once again, I got caught staring.*

I paused, contemplating whether I should tell the truth. “You’ve probably

been told this a lot, but your dimples are adorable,” I grinned, hoping to downplay my statement.

He stopped walking, gazing at the snow producing clouds. “Adorable,” he mumbled, musing to himself. He looked down at me, “Sexy, yes... but adorable?” He wrinkled up his nose, shaking his head. *I guessed that was not a word normally used to describe him.*

Hoping he would follow me, I started walking again. “So you don’t like being called adorable?” I opened the door taking us to the lobby.

He smirked. “Do you like being told you’re cute?” I shook my head no. “Exactly. And I don’t like being called

adorable.” We stopped once we reached the cluster of snowboarders and skiers waiting to buy their lift tickets.

“Well, let me rephrase myself then. You’re dimples are abso-freakin-lutely sexy.” I gave him a mischievous grin, looking for approval.

Jaxon cocked his head, giving me a dubious look. “Are you flirting with me, Sweet Cheeks?”

I started giggling. “Well, aren’t you the pot calling the kettle black?”

He stared at me with a confused look. “Huh?”

I shook my head laughing, “It’s

an idiom. In other words, I was going to ask you the same thing because I swear you've been flirting with me since we met." *Where was this boldness coming from? I couldn't believe I had just confronted him.*

He lifted his hands to chest level, palms facing me. "I'm not admitting to anything, I'm an innocent bystander. If my hearing is good, which, last I checked, it was damn near perfect, I recall you telling me I was fucking sexy." His playful sarcasm was sexy as hell.

I just shook my head. "You're a funny guy, Jaxon... uh, what is your last name?" *How did I oversee that minor*

detail? I should have been ashamed of myself. Girls at school developed bad reputations for sleeping with nameless guys. We never did the deed, and I did know his first name, but, still, I was almost one of those girls.

“Vaughn, you know—Jaxon Vaughn wakes up at dawn, lets out a yawn, before mowing the lawn because all his money has been overdrawn, so he works yearlong, before he’s undergone, a severe withdrawn...” he ended his little rap with a mixture of beat boxing. I was already applauding before he finished, laughing hysterically.

I was bent over, trying to catch my breath. “That was... cheesy, but the

beat boxing was awesome!”

He seemed amused by my reaction. “Next performance, I’m charging,” he joked.

After I pulled my composure together, I noticed several girls had formed around where we were standing. It seemed I wasn’t the only person affected by his charm. I looked around at the girls, giving them a stare down. Distractions were not welcomed today. Jaxon was focusing all of his attention on me, and I wanted to keep it that way.

I was so busy having fun with Jaxon I hadn’t realized Kendra and Reed were nowhere in sight. “Where are Kendra and Reed?” I asked standing up

on my tiptoes, peering over the massive groups of toboggans, head warmers, and ski helmets.

“They already hit the slopes. Since we have no ski equipment, we get stuck standing in the rentals line. Stay here. I’ll be back. I’m getting our lift tickets.” I was about to protest, but he disappeared into the snowmen-clad bodies before I could object.

Observing the endless line for tickets, I decided it was a perfect time for a potty break. I knew I would have plenty of time to peel off and reapply the layers of clothing before Jaxon got back.

When I finally walk out of the bathroom, I saw him frantically looking

around, his arms full of boots, skis, and poles.

Oh shit! “How long have you been waiting, and how did you get all of this so quick?” I asked, my hand showcasing all the items he was lugging.

Jaxon quickly spun around to face me as relief washed over his face. “Where the hell were you? I thought you got lost or someone had kidnapped you. I was about to send out a search and rescue.” He dropped all the ski equipment on the floor by my feet.

Crap! Was he upset? Was he mad at me? I had to stop thinking his reactions mirrored those of Phillip.

His demeanor quickly changed. “Nah, I’m just joking with you. I just got over here myself. I figured you would want to take a bathroom break before we head outside. I know how you women love your bathrooms,” he laughed.

I grabbed the front of my puffy coat, pulling it away from my body, “With all this garb I have on, I’m hoping to avoid the bathrooms at all cost. Speaking of cost, how much do I owe you?”

His lips curled to the side, “You owe me nothing other than spending the day with me, and, of course, allowing me to teach you how to ski.” He leaned down close to my ear. “These instructors

here have nothing on me,” he muttered low.

Chill bumps spilled all over my body. “You’re the little charmer, aren’t you?” I said, giving him a playful smile.

He threw his chin up in the air, arrogance radiating off his body. “I try my best,” he chuckled.

I rolled my eyes, shaking my head, “Are all Californians cocky?”

“Nope, just me,” he beamed. “I’m the only sexy, funny, charming and *adorable* Californian motherfucker you will ever meet. I have more great qualities. You just haven’t discovered them yet.” He ran his hand through his

hair with a smug grin on his face. I pretended to ignore his innuendo.

My layers of clothing were suddenly making me sweat, or was that Jaxon? I needed to get outside in the crisp, snowy air to drop my body temperature a few degrees.

“Yo! Mr. Swag, I think we need to jump on those bunny trails before you blow your head up with all those vain compliments,” I snickered, pulling him by his coat to the nearest bench. He laughed, following close behind me.

Jaxon turned out to be a great ski instructor. He was very patient and refrained from laughing at me all twelve times I fell on my butt. The moments I

got frustrated and wanted to give up, he encouraged me, pushing me to keep going. After skiing down the bunny slopes time after time without falling, Jaxon decided it was time for me to broaden my horizons and take the ski lift to the Green Trail... whatever that was. I figured he knew what was best, so I agreed.

Standing in line for the ski lift was a tougher challenge than I ever imagined, but getting on the lift was almost a nightmare. Jaxon prepped me before it was our turn to hop on the lift, but the operators still had to stop the entire contraption so I could gracelessly maneuver myself on the seat. I had never been so mortified in my life, but Jaxon

was so decorous. Not once had he laughed or poked fun at me.

The falling snowflakes were beautiful as they piled high on the surrounding pine trees. As far as I could see, the resort was covered under a fluffy, white blanket of snow. Jaxon and I rode the lift up in silence, enjoying the peaceful beauty around us. Together, we were on our way to embracing this magnificent winter wonderland.

The exit ramp was fast approaching when my nervous jitters decided to pay me a visit. I was petrified of the staff shutting the lift down again for me to depart. Jaxon, my knight in black ski attire, came to my

rescue, taking my poles as we were about to descend. He then wrapped his arm around my waist to steady me as we glided off the lift and down the small knoll.

Jaxon held onto me tight until we made our way to the top of the hill. “You ready for this?” he smiled, pulling his ski goggles down over his amazing eyes.

I laughed nervously, “No, but I guess you’re going to make me do this regardless.” Grabbing my goggles, I slid them down to protect my eyes from the falling snow. My motor skills were going to be a challenge. Therefore so, my vision was going to be a necessity. Taking down a small child was not

something I wanted to add to my list of ‘embarrassing moments for the day.’

He gave me a crooked grin, then replied using a bossy tone. “Yes, I am. As you can see, the only way back is for us to ski down this hill.”

Jaxon started slowly down the hill. He didn’t go far before he stopped to wait on me. I stood there frozen, unable to move. Fear was taking over. All I kept envisioning was me flying down the hill, out of control and unable to stop. “Sweet Cheeks, come on, let’s go!” he yelled up at me.

“I can’t,” I yelled back.

He pulled the goggles off his

eyes, placing them on top of his head. “What do you mean you can’t? Are you scared?”

I nodded. This was embarrassing. Just call me Courtney the Coward.

Jaxon was side stepping his way up the hill to reach me. “You will be fine. Stop worrying.”

“I know, but what if I fall? Or what if I can’t stop? Or what if I go off the side of the mountain? Those orange thingys are not going to stop me from meeting the grim reaper.” *Okay, maybe I was getting carried away, but still, the thought briefly crossed my mind.*

Trudging up the hill on skis looked to be a difficult task, but, as I watched Jaxon make his way up to where I was standing, he made it appear effortless. He wasn't even breathing hard when he stopped in front of me. "Meet and greet with the grim reaper?" he snickered. "C'mon, Court, your fear is giving you wicked illusions. I'm not going to let anything happen to you, I promise." His facial expression told me he really meant what he said. "I will stay right beside you until you feel comfortable, then I'll follow behind so I can keep an eye on you."

Gathering as much courage as I could, I closed my eyes, said a quick prayer, and then allowed myself to glide

down the hill. Jaxon stayed alongside me, keeping his word. “Remember, if you want to slow down or stop, make a ‘V’ with your skis.”

I nodded, not wanting to speak, afraid of breaking my concentration.

Halfway down the hill Jaxon fell back behind me, giving me space. As I started to feel comfortable, gaining confidence, I straightened my skis to gain a little speed. For the first time that day, I thoroughly enjoyed myself, finally understanding the enjoyment people found in the sport.

My thoughts were contemplating whether or not to attempt the blue trail before the day was over when I heard

Jaxon yell “fuckin’ asshole!” *Who was he talking to?* Right at that moment, some jerk cut right in front of me, causing me to cross my ski tips. I was on the ground tumbling before I could comprehend what was happening.

When I finally stopped rolling, Jaxon was already squatted down in front of me assessing the damage. “Fuck!” he hissed. “I am so sorry, are you okay? Does anything feel broken? Are you bleeding anywhere?” He was frantic as his hands and eyes were everywhere on me, feeling and looking for injuries.

“I’m okay, Jaxon. Just a little dizzy from all the somersaults,” I

laughed. Looks like I had another embarrassing moment to add to my list.

“Are you sure?” he asked, lifting my disarrayed goggles off my head. “I’m really sorry. That guy nearly hit me right before he cut in front of you, giving me zero time to warn you. I’m sorry I broke my promise.” His eyes were sad, genuinely apologetic.

The sincerity he was showing was doing funny things to my insides. “I promise, I’m perfectly fine. Pride is a little cracked, but that can easily be sealed,” I smiled at him. “Now as for what I look like... I’m afraid to see what this white, mangled mess looks like,” I snickered, feeling the snow everywhere

in my hair and sliding down my neck. “I bet I look like an albino yeti,” I snorted.

Jaxon stood, offering his glove covered hand to help me up. Grabbing it tight, I let him pull me to my feet. “I think you look like a snow princess,” he whispered, before softly kissing my lips.

I was startled, jerking away even though I wanted more. “I’m so sorry, Court, I didn’t mean to do that... I did, but I didn’t.” His eyes were laced with anxiety. Perhaps he was worried over my reaction. “Not yet anyway,” he mumbled, almost inaudible.

My brain was screaming in confusion as my tummy danced with butterflies. I blew his kiss off by

focusing on my new nickname. “Snow Princess?” I looked at him questionable. “Is this my new nickname? I was starting to like Sweet Cheeks,” I said, brushing the snow off my coat and head warmer, distracting myself. Making eye contact at this moment was not a wise choice.

He gave me a one-dimpled, crooked grin, aware I was avoiding the brief connection. “No, Sweet Cheeks is permanent, but out here, right now, you’re Snow Princess.” I grabbed onto his sturdy arm as he helped me snap my boot back into my ski. “Speaking of nicknames, I noticed that Phillip called you Jeanette. Is that your middle name or something else? If it’s none of my business just tell me.”

He handed me my poles so that we could descend the rest of the way down the hill. “It’s a nickname, one that I hate, and one he calls me when he’s mad or when he wants to piss me off,” I seethed. Just thinking about it got my blood boiling.

“Knock the snow off your skis, like this,” he said, showing me how to strike my pole against my skis. “So where does Jeanette come from? What’s the meaning behind it?”

I gave an exaggerated sigh, “You know the Chipettes from Alvin and the Chipmunks?” I asked. He nodded. “Well, he says I’m just like Jeanette—we’re shy, clumsy, and timid, and we

both share the same color of hair and eyes, and both wear glasses. He said the only quality I don't have that she does is the high IQ," I shrugged, knowing Phillip's words turned to shit as soon as they hit the air.

He cocked his head, looking at me studiously. "Glasses?"

I threaded my hands through the loop of my ski poles, "Yeah, I used to wear them, but I switched to wearing contacts after getting tired of his jokes." I shrugged. "I thought it would stop him, but, of course, it didn't."

I was ready to change the subject. I didn't want to think or talk about Phillip during my time with Jaxon.

“Wanna race?” I challenged, pushing off to get a head start.

I could hear him laughing behind me saying something along the lines of ‘you’ve got to be joking.’

This time, I flowed smoothly down the mountain. Jaxon passed me then slowed down to let me pass him. We kept up the playful game of cat and mouse until we reached the bottom. He stopped directly in front of me, picking me up in a big bear hug, celebrating my accident-free journey. Jaxon lowered his face to mine. *Was he going to kiss me again? Would I let him?* I closed my eyes, ready for his soft lips to connect with mine. I couldn’t restrain myself this

time. I wanted to feel his tender skin, taste his sweet, cool mouth, get lost in him again.

After waiting what felt like an eternity, his forehead connected to mine. His breathing was ragged, and I could smell the sweet, peppermint aroma tickling my senses. "I'm so proud of you. I knew you could do it," he whispered, restraint evident in his tone. I kept my eyes closed, afraid of losing control if I looked at him.

My breathing was heavy, not from exertion, but from the unwelcomed feelings I was developing for this wonderful, charismatic guy embracing me. Confusion was overcoming my

senses again. I was perceptibly attracted to Jaxon, but was I developing a crush? Yes, it was a possibility. He represented all the qualities in a guy I never knew I wanted. Unless I wanted my heart broken later, I couldn't allow those feelings to grow. He was much older than me, my mom wouldn't allow it, he lived on the opposite coast, and he would be leaving soon.

Jaxon released me, setting me back on the quickly accumulating snow.

We spent the entire day together, alone. He bought my lunch, ignoring me the entire time I argued, waving my money to the cashier. As the day progressed, the snow changed from

dime-size to quarter-size, adding at least six more inches to the amount already lying on the ground. Jaxon and I sent continuous texts to Kendra and Reed throughout the day, both of us deciding to give up when they never responded. At first I was worried, fearful of something horrible happening to them, but after a while my concern became overshadowed by anger. Knowing how sneaky Kendra could be, my intuition was telling me she had this planned all along.

The evening hour was quickly approaching, filling me with anxiety. The snow was coming down relentlessly, and I knew, even if we left right then, our drive home would be

treacherous. I was tired, cold, and ready to go home. My hair was in between stages of being wet and frozen, and my stomach couldn't make up its mind whether it was hungry or nervous.

Jaxon's phone buzzed, bringing me subtle hope, when suddenly my phone buzzed right after his, indicating I also had a text. My mood lightened a little as I saw Kendra's name flash on my screen.

**K: Hey we r n the
main lobby trying
2 find somewhere
2 stay 2nite.
Roads r bad!!**

The first thought to cross my mind was how much my mom was going

to freak and how I would be grounded until I turned eighteen.

I turned to Jaxon, curious to find out who his text was from. “That was Reed. He said to meet them in the main lobby. They’re trying to find a place to stay for the night.” he smiled warmly at me. “You look cold. Let’s get you inside and see what those two crack-heads have planned for us.”

After wasting an hour of arguing over Reed and Kendra’s irresponsibility, we managed to make amends, thaw our limbs and clothes, return our rentals, feed our bellies, and reassure our parents that we were okay. Due to the weather, someone had

canceled their reservation at the last minute, freeing up a one bedroom chalet at the bottom of the mountain. It wasn't exactly what we were hoping for, but it was better than our last option—sleeping in Reed's truck.

It was early in the night once we got into our chalet, and exhaustion was taking over. The place was small, but suitable for our one night stay. It provided all the amenities we would need, minus an extra bed. I whispered my concerns to Kendra of our sleeping arrangement, but she was dead set on sleeping with Reed. Reed voiced his reasoning of why he was not sleeping with another man when he had a sexy, hot woman to share his bed with. I could

have strangled Kendra for telling Reed I didn't want to sleep in a bed with Jaxon. Taking notice of my discomfort, they offered to sleep on the couch bed, taking all the blame for us being in this predicament to begin with.

Staking claim on the bathroom, I took the first shower. The hot water felt amazing, relaxing my tense muscles from a surprisingly stressful day. I vigorously scrubbed the washcloth over my teeth, trying to clean them the best I could without a toothbrush.

After showering, I put my thermals back on over my panties and bra. I ran my fingers through my hair to disentangle the wet curls, making myself

somewhat presentable before going to bed.

Jaxon kept quiet as I crept to the bed, sliding under the covers. There was so much tension building in the small bedroom, I was relieved when he took his turn in the bathroom. I tried to rush myself asleep as he took a shower, hoping the combination of my fatigue and the running water would lull me to sleep before he got out. His shower lasted a whole two minutes. I switched positions, lying on my side with my back facing where he would lie. The room was dark, only a sliver of light was peering from the crack around the bathroom door.

Before exiting the bathroom, he

turned the light off. My eyes had already adjusted to the dark, and I could clearly make out his half-naked silhouette as he approached the bed. I feigned sleep as he crawled under the covers beside me.

Lying still for what seemed like hours, Jaxon startled me as I felt him turn his body to face me. “Court, are you awake?” He was whispering, tapping my back. Stretching, I turned onto my back, pretending he woke me up. “I am now, is something wrong?” I whispered groggily.

“We need to talk.”

“About... ?” Oh boy, I was afraid of where this was headed.

“Us. There is something going on with us. I know you feel the chemistry, too. If you didn’t, you would discourage my flirting.” His voice was steady and serious. “I know you remember what happened after the party. I know I hurt your feelings, and I apologize for that. I had to stop before things went any further. I didn’t want to take advantage of you in your condition, that wouldn’t have been fair. Something... something like that should be consensual without alcohol fogging one’s intellect.” He was propped up on his elbow, looking down at me.

My heart fluttered, I was lost for words. He knew. He knew this entire time what I thought was my own

personal secret. I felt like a fool. “Why didn’t you say anything? Why did you ask me what I remembered if you already knew?” I was confused why he hadn’t told me this before now.

“I didn’t know how you felt about me. You kept reminding me how you didn’t want a boyfriend, that you were only interested in us being friends. And I can’t leave out the times that Kendra and Reed reminded me you were off-limits,” he sighed. “I occasionally tossed a few hints your way here and there to see what kind of reaction I would get from you,” he huffed. “But—”

I cut him off before he could say anything else I didn’t want to hear. I

don't know why I did it, but it was possibly the most impulsive thing I'd ever done in my life.

Reaching up, I cupped his stubbly face in both hands, and pulled him down until our lips met. He was hesitant at first. The kiss was feather-light, so I grazed my fingers over his ear, through his short, soft hair, encouraging the kiss. He inhaled deeply, his breath ragged, the smell of mint exploding all around me. His lips parted slightly, and the tip of his tongue ran across my bottom lip, asking for an invite.

Accepting the invitation, I opened my mouth, tasting his tongue and the sweetness that fulfilled him. He ran

his hand down my arm, sliding it across my abdomen before grabbing my hip, squeezing gently. At that point, the kiss deepened. I trickled my fingers across his jaw line, down his neck, stopping once I reached his nipple rings. I allowed them to explore his chest, fondling the piercings, which caused a moan to escape his lips. He quickly repositioned himself over the top of me, hovering, but not putting any weight on my sensually heated body. His mouth pulled away from my lips, making a trail down my neck, leaving light kisses along my collarbone.

The loud sound of something falling from the other room startled us both, stopping us in mid-action. Jaxon

swiftly flipped over onto his back as I sat ramrod straight in the bed. We both sat silently still, only our heavy breathing filling the blank room. We sat motionless a few more minutes, enough time for my mind to clear, to fall from the clouds I had just been floating in.

My heartstrings were pulling me in all different directions, I didn't want to say the words out loud, but I knew I had to. "Jaxon?" I paused. "What just happened, it can't happen again. I'm feeling things for you that I shouldn't. You are leaving in a day, and I can't allow myself to become attached to someone that lives three thousand miles away. I'm sorry," I whispered. I lay back down and turned so my back was

facing him, feeling a tear escape my eye, I was angry with myself for letting him in.

“I’m sorry too. Happy New Year, Sweet Cheeks,” he whispered back, his words full of melancholy.

Chapter 16 ~ Texting

Dreams... the stories we fantasize about, carnal thoughts coming to life in hopes that they never become exposed.

Waking up confused, I questioned if I ever fell asleep the night before. The warmth radiating off the heavy body wrapped around me was enough to trigger the dreams I sustained.

Jaxon's legs and arms were folded around me like weaving ivy. I turned the only thing I was able to move—my head. Trying desperately not to wake him, I rested my cheek against the

fluffy pillow as slowly as possible. He was facing me, breathing steady, his face completely relaxed and serene.

Staring at him, I observed every detail, scrutinizing his most delicate features—he was almost too beautiful to be a male specimen.

My eyes held their gaze on his lips, remembering the softness and tender way they caressed my skin. The taste, the coolness of his breath, and his tongue as it stroked mine into pure delight. The power it took for me to restrain myself from kissing him again was substantial as he laid there unintentionally tempting me.

Inhaling deeply, I cleared my

mind of all things Jaxon and prepared myself for the awkward day that lay ahead. If we managed to omit future conversations of everything that happened beyond taking showers last night, I would be a very happy girl.

A nudge against my thigh, jostled me from my thoughts. Jaxon's long, dark lashes flashed open, revealing fiery blue eyes. From the smoldering stare-down he was giving me, I was in some serious trouble. If my calculations were correct, the perpendicular outline of our bodies placed him... well, let's just say he was suffering from a serious case of morning wood.

The sheer closeness of his man

parts didn't feel restrained. *Was he a hang loose and roam free kind of guy?* My mind was spinning, wondering if he was saluting me or some chick from his dreams.

Jaxon continued to hold my eyes with a sensual glare, and I felt as if he had some kind of power over me, disabling me from pulling away. "Sorry, normally he lets me control his thoughts, but this morning he's not listening." His voice was deep and raspy, "Especially when waking up to a beautiful brunette with shimmering green eyes." His gaze turned more intense. *Geez! What was he doing to me?*

My heart felt a subtle squeeze,

almost like a hug. I was very aware of my appearance when I first woke up, and it was definitely not worthy of compliments. His words of endearment were like a foreign language to my ears—incomprehensible. His crude remark should've disgusted me, but it didn't. My insecurity held onto the beautiful and shimmering words, words that were always meant for other girls, not me. *Why? Why was this happening to me?*

“Jaxon, you can't say things like that to me,” I whispered. My eyelids lowered, breaking the trance.

His warm hand reached up to caress my cheek. “Courtney, I have to be

honest with you. I like you. I mean, I *really* like you. I know the circumstances are shitty for us but, you can't run and hide just because another guy finds you attractive or funny or just flat out enjoyable to be around."

I peeked a little through slit eyelids. "You enjoy hanging out with me?" I asked, scrunching my nose up and, finding it hard to believe. "Nobody enjoys hanging out with me except Kendra, and... well... Reed."

Jaxon's hand slid away from my cheek, resting on my shoulder. "They would if you let them," he smiled, sympathetically. I heard his double meaning loud and clear.

“I’m trying,” I whined. “You have to understand, Jaxon, this is uncharted territory for me. You alone are a huge step in a direction I’m unfamiliar with. Cut me some slack, please?”

He leaned up, propping himself on one elbow. The covers fell from his chest, gathering at his waist. I wanted to stare at all of his glorious beauty, but I wasn’t taking a chance at getting caught again.

“What do you mean uncharted territory? We can remain friends, no strings attached.”

I twirled a piece of loose thread from the sheets around my finger. “I’ve never had a guy friend.”

“Never?”

I shook my head, “Never. I know, how pathetic huh? I just can’t imagine telling a guy all my deep, dark secrets. I don’t think it’s possible to share a bond like what I have with Kendra without developing feelings for the guy, of course, unless he’s gay.” I chuckled.

He laughed, “You’re just young and inexperienced. You need to live a little, put yourself out there and take a chance every now and then.”

I laughed a little in return. “What do you think I’m doing now? This,” I waved my hand around to indicate us, “is taking chances. This is a huge leap for me.”

Sitting up in the bed, I folded my legs Indian-style. “Besides, how can we remain friends when we have enough chemistry flowing through us to score an ‘A’ in the class?”

He raised one eyebrow up at me, “Really? An ‘A’?” he said more to himself, nodding his head. My eyes rolled as I regretted my words.

“Look, I think it’s sweet that you want to be my BFF, but I just think it’s a bad idea. We’ve already crossed the line on two occasions...” I paused, thinking, “You know what? I’m the young and inexperienced one here, so why am I making the mature and more reasonable decisions?”

He scooted back in the bed, propping his back against the headboard. Hesitating before answering me, he caused my mind to temporarily wander. “I don’t know, I’m just trying to help you explore, experience all the things you’ve missed in the last few years.” His voice sounded agitated. *Was he thinking about Phillip?*

We sat in silence, neither of us looking at each other. After what seemed like minutes slowly ticking by, Jaxon’s voice startled me. “Courtney, your personality is pure. You’re full of life. Just being in your presence makes my soul content, and I like the way I feel when I’m around you. It’s not just the physical attraction that draws me to you.

It's your character too, the person you are on the inside." Feeling his eyes on me, I couldn't gain the courage to look at him.

Still not looking at him, I shook my head. "How can you say that? You barely know me. I appreciate your flattery, but there is nothing special about me. I'm just a plain, little ol' country girl, living in a small town with no goals for my future," I sighed. "I haven't even decided on a college to attend, or, better yet, what career path to take." Speaking those words aloud to him made me feel like a failure.

"I know more about you than you think," he murmured.

He reached over to place his fingers under my chin and lift my face up. "Look at me." I obeyed his command. "Fuck the last four years. Now is the time for you to become the person you're destined to be without someone dictating your future. You have plenty of time to figure out what you want to do. Who says you have to start college immediately after graduation. I didn't, and look at me." His tone was solemn. He honestly believed there was hope for me. "Now that Phillip is out of the picture, you have nothing holding you back." *Shit!* I should tell him that Phillip and I made a truce, but I decided it was best not to. It really was none of his business.

I blew the few strands of hair hanging in my face. “You know, I think the earth is shifting.” He lifted an eyebrow in question. “I think you just gave me brotherly advice, or would that be fatherly advice?” I snickered.

Jaxon swiftly sat up, giving me no warning as he pushed my shoulders, causing me to fall back onto the bed. “Shut up! You’re such a brat!” he laughed.

Lying on my back giggling, Jaxon attacked my ribs with wiggly fingers, which quickly turned into breathless laughter. He was tickling me on my belly, inner thighs, armpits, anywhere he could gain access to. “I’m going to tickle

you into submission. Now admit you're worthy," he huffed.

He had no idea what kind of war he had just declared on me. I loathed to be tickled. I mean, it literally made me angry. It was as if once my tickle zones were attacked, my legs would start rotating like pistons, kicking vigorously. I had absolutely no control over them.

Nine times out of ten, the "tickler" usually got hurt, and poor Jaxon fell into the ninety percent bracket. Not sure what my heel made contact with, but I heard a grunt fall from Jaxon's mouth followed by a few curse words.

Shooting up on my knees, I

looked Jaxon over to assess the damage. Immediately, I felt horrible. Jaxon's hand was cupping his mouth and nose.

"I'm so sorry, let me see," I cried, trying to pull his hand away from his face. I was horrified when I saw all the blood. "Oh my gosh, Jaxon! Get in the bathroom so we can clean you up."

"I'm fine, Sweet Cheeks. It's just a nosebleed. I get them all the time," he muffled through his hand while walking into the bathroom.

Practically on his heels, I followed right behind him.

"So I didn't do that then?"

He laughed, “Oh yeah, you most certainly kicked me in the face,” he paused, blowing his nose, “but it doesn’t take much to make my nose bleed.”

Grabbing a wet washcloth from the shower, I started wiping the blood from Jaxon’s chest. “What the hell, woman!” he exclaimed, jumping back from my reach. “That shit’s cold.” He reached across me to turn the hot water on. “Bloody my nose, freeze my nipples, give me blue balls, what else are you going to do to me today?” *Blue balls? Did I invade his dreams?*

I doubled over laughing. “All those things were done unintentionally... especially the last part. And correct me

if I'm wrong, but, if you hadn't tickled me, we wouldn't be in this situation to start with," I said, flashing him a smug grin.

"You could've warned me, ya know. How was I to know a sexy set of slender legs would kick my ass?" He was standing in front of the mirror, wiping the blood off his chin, neck, and chest. Standing behind him, I closely observed the winged tattoo I saw the morning after the party. I openly eyed the set of angel wings embracing a heart with a halo hovering above it on his left shoulder. The names Jacqueline and Zoey were elegantly etched in calligraphy inside the heart, and the word 'forever' below them.

Glancing up, I felt the playful banter escaping right out of the tiny room. Jaxon was watching me through the mirror. He stood motionless, giving me a blank stare. “Go ahead and ask. I know you want to know.” His tone told me he was perturbed. Laying the bloody washcloth down, he stretched out his arms to brace himself against the sink, his head hung low. Under any other circumstances, I would’ve gawked at the muscles stretched tightly across his back, but this was not the time to ogle.

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to,” I whispered.

Not meaning to, I lightly traced my fingers over the names. He inhaled a

deep breath, holding it in a few seconds before loudly releasing. The inner pain he was battling was visible. “Jacqueline was my mother. She died while giving birth to me, and you already know Zoey was my grandma. She died a couple of years ago from breast cancer. Now, if you don’t mind, can we talk about something else?” he asked, looking over his shoulder, his eyes cutting through me.

The sharpness of his voice caught me off guard, and instantly my defenses kicked in. “First of all, I didn’t ask. Second of all, you don’t have to be so rude. If you didn’t want to talk about it then you shouldn’t have brought it up,” I seethed. When he told me he didn’t like talking about his personal life, he wasn’t

joking.

He turned around and rested his butt against the sink, with his arms folded across his chest. “Well since you’ve admitted to being intrusive, I figured I better give you the info that you want.”

My face was tingling with heat as anger dissipated throughout my body. “By looking at the design of your tattoo, I believe I have enough common sense to recognize you’ve lost people close to you, so I wasn’t going to pry.”

At first I was overwhelmed with sympathy; losing someone you loved was profound to me. I couldn’t fathom the grief he must harvest. But now, his

insolence was steering me further from any compassion I held for him.

“Maybe not at the moment, but you would have eventually.” His behavior was very condescending.

My mind was boggled. How did we go from joking and goofing around to vile attitudes and nasty accusations in zero point six seconds?

I shook my head.

“You’re such an ass!” I yelled, slamming the bathroom door behind me.

Taking my frustration out on the overstuffed garments, I picked up my ski attire, and yanked them on over my

thermals. Tears started stinging the back of my eyes, forcing their way out. I blinked rapidly, fanning them, trying to dry them away. My feelings were hurt and I was angry, but it didn't erase the guilt I felt.

Thinking he was so much different than Phillip, the converse personalities didn't vary much at all. I didn't want Jaxon thinking he could manipulate me. I was not the bad guy here, and I wasn't apologizing.

Kendra came barreling through the bedroom door. "What the hell is going on in here?" Swiftly, I swiped at my eyes, erasing all traces of tears.

Throwing my happy face on, I

kept myself busy to avoid making eye contact with her. “Nothing. Jaxon and I were just joking around,” I said, using my bubbly voice.

“Oh. Well I heard a door slam and before that I thought I heard y’all arguing.” Reed walked up behind her, peering through the doorway.

Keeping my head down, I pulled the sheets up on the bed. “Arguing? What would we be arguing about? All you heard was me kicking his ass when he found my tickle spots,” I laughed a little fake.

“Ah, damn!” Reed snorted. “What kind of injuries did you sustain?” he yelled at Jaxon through the door. I

prayed Jaxon could hear our conversation and play along.

“Nothing bad, just a little nose bleed. I’ll be alright,” he yelled back. All traces of hostility toward me disappeared from his voice. “You guys should have told me her legs were like a machine,” he chortled.



Three hours later, we were back on the road heading home. Jaxon and I hadn’t spoken to each other since I slammed the bathroom door on him.

After the first hour, I think Reed and Kendra were onto us, knowing something quirky was going on. Neither one asked questions, nor included us in their conversations. I was thankful to Kendra for giving me a little space.

The drive home was taking longer than the two hours it took coming up. The snow had fallen throughout the night, giving the road crew less time to clear the highway. Reed had to keep the truck in four-wheel drive due to some unplowed areas, causing us to merge into one lane.

After we traveled through West Virginia, the road conditions improved. The further south we drove, the less

snow we encountered.

Now that I didn't have to stay alert anymore, I rested back against the head rest in hopes of relieving some tension. I felt a pesky headache coming on from my stressful morning.

My phone buzzed with a text, waking me from my doze. Jaxon's name appeared, puzzling me. I never programmed his number, in fact, I didn't have his number.

J: I apologize 4 my behavior.

I held my phone, staring at it, contemplating whether or not I wanted to respond. I preferred the words 'I'm

sorry.' I gave in, like I always did with everyone.

My phone quickly buzzed again.

J: I told u I don't do well revealing personal biz. Am I 4given?

Me: Doesn't sound like much of an apology.

J: Plz SC? If u knew me well enough, which I hope u will, u will know I don't do apologies.

SC? Was he meaning Sweet Cheeks?

He didn't hand out compliments, didn't give apologies, but, here in a matter of days, he was admitting to breaking his own rules. Was he lowering his standards or was he really that fascinated with me?

**Me: Why me?
Why are you so
intrigued by me?**

Sneaking a peek at him, I watched his thumb rapidly tap over the phone. As soon as his thumb stopped moving, I awaited his reply.

**J: I told u already.
No need 2 repeat.**

Before I could text him back, my phone buzzed again.

**J: Plz don't make
me go back to Cali
w/out our
friendship :(**

A sad face? That was classic. I stifled a giggle before Reed or Kendra could ask what I found so funny. Then, cutting my eyes over to Jaxon, I found him watching me and waiting for my reaction. His bottom lip was puckered out, pouting. A big grin started to spread across my face, I couldn't stop it. Once again, he was that one word he disliked being called—adorable.

We had one issue to discuss or we were a no-go.

**Me: If we're going
to continue talking**

to each other, we
have to open up to
one another. I
know this is
unstable ground
for you to tread
on, but it's one of
the most
important
elements required
in a friendship.
Deal?

Keeping my head down, I tried to
get a view of him from my peripheral
vision, unsure of what his reaction
would be. If he agreed, I could only
think that he truly valued the person he
thought I was. Waiting for him to decide,
I sat there holding my phone in my hand.

It buzzed once again.

J: I can agree 2 that, but I can't guarantee it 2 b an easy ride. U have 2 b patient w/ me. Let me take baby steps. Ok?

My heart swelled.

**J: BTW u busted my top lip. I think I deserve a kiss.
:***

J: U know, 2 make it feel better and all.

Now a kissy face? His charisma was killing me. I texted back what I wanted to do, but couldn't.

Me: LOL

Our silent conversation in the back of Reed's truck was something I would remember for a long time.

J: Laughing? I'm suffering over here and ur laughing @ me? :/

J: Look @ me

I looked over, grinning until I saw his top lip protruding. There was a small slit across the left side of his lip with a little bit of dried blood outlining the cut. My smile faltered, replaced by a frown. I was shameful for inflicting two injuries.

Me: I'm sorry too, and yes, you're forgiven.

The corners of his mouth broke into a grin, reaching his incredible dimples. The cut in his lip broke open as he smiled, causing a few drops of blood to surface. My eyes were drawn in as I watched him leisurely lap up the blood from his lip. His tongue lingered over the cut far longer than necessary, leaving a trace of wet wonder behind. The movement was so sexy. I caught myself licking my lips, mirroring his image. Pulling my eyes away from his lips, my eyes connected with his. He winked before directing his attention back to his phone.

**J: Last I recall
friends don't stare
@ their friends
like they want to**

**sexually assault
them. Ur creeping
me out!! ;)**

My mouth gaped open as I read his text. When I looked over at Jaxon, I wasn't surprised to see he was waiting for my reaction. He winked at me, just like in his text.

Shaking my head, I glided my fingers over my phone.

**Me: You're
delusional, stop
trying to flatter
yourself.**

I could hardly wait for his next reply. Something arrogant, I'm sure.

J : I think u 4got.

**I've caught u
numerous times
gaping @ me. U
really should try
controlling ur
hormones a little
better.**

Maybe if I play along, it won't
be as much fun and he'll stop.

**Me: Ok. You're
right. Just so you
know I often
dream about u too.**

If only he knew how truthful that
was.

**J: Really? 0_0
Fucktastic!**

**J: U want 2 know
a secret? I**

**dreamed about u
last night.**

My face quickly flushed with heat. My thoughts went back to this morning and the little nudge I felt tapping against my thigh. I guess I now knew I was the girl receiving the salute.

Our crazy friendship was going to be a very interesting situation. It had already started off on a crazy route. I just hope that we didn't end up in an asylum in the end.

The amount of flirting that passed between us was not healthy, so it probably worked out best for Jaxon to live on the west coast. If we lived close to one another, I couldn't see how it

would be possible to not get intimately involved with each other. Juggling him and Phillip in the same small town would be an impossible task.

It was fun texting with Jaxon, but I knew I had to end it before we ended up sexting.

Looking out the window, I realized we were almost home, sadness washed over me with the thoughts of him leaving.

Me: We're almost home. Are you leaving as soon as we get there?

J: Wow! Ur a buzz kill. j/k

**J: Yes. R u going
2 give me a proper
goodbye?**

We pulled into the parking lot of Reed's apartment complex. Hastily, I put my phone away, never replying back to Jaxon's question.

Reed and Kendra were completely oblivious to our make-up session on the way home. They remained quiet, both tip-toeing around us, not saying much as we gathered the ski gear. Kendra really surprised me by controlling her inquisitive urges. I hoped she would contain them until tomorrow, as I was not sure how I would feel once Jaxon left.

After we all put the ski gear up and rid ourselves of some clothing, everyone sat around chatting about the new business. It relieved me to not have to keep it a secret anymore. Afterwards, Jaxon said his goodbyes to us all. Reed and Jaxon both seemed very pleased with the new opportunity of opening a restaurant/bar in our small town. We had the usual chain restaurants, but nothing with live entertainment. I was excited to see Reed follow his dreams and put his Business Management degree to use.

Jaxon saved my hug for last. He squeezed me in a brief embrace, whispering in my ear to follow him out to his car.

I turned to Reed and Kendra who were looking at me quizzically. “I’ll be right back,” I smiled, walking a little too fast.

Jaxon reached into his rental car, picking up a small gift bag. I gave him an enquiring look as he handed the gift bag to me. “What is this?”

“A going away gift.” Before I could protest, he stopped me. “Just open the damn thing,” he huffed.

As if there were a snake inside, I peeked in the bag before pulling out two blue and red toboggans. “Toboggans?”

“Um... no, those are beanies. A toboggan is something you sit on to go

snow sledding,” he laughed.

“Well, we call them toboggans here, and a sled is what you sit on to go snow sledding,” I said, knowing his version was most likely the proper term.

He pulled the hats from my hand, holding them up. One read “best” and the other read “friends.” I snorted at his peculiar thoughtfulness. “Where on earth did you find these?”

“I bought them at the ski resort, don’t you like?” He grabbed the one that said ‘Best’ and pulled it down over his head, almost covering his bright blues. “There, now I can advertise my nickname wherever I go,” he said, taking the hat out of my hand.

“I think you need one that says pompous ass,” I muttered.

“I heard that, Sweet Cheeks,” he muttered back, pulling the ‘Friends’ hat down over my head. He stood back smiling, observing me like a proud father looking at his child for the first time. “There, now everyone will know I’m the best in this duo,” he laughed, pulling me in for a one arm hug.

“Whatever.”

“This really isn’t fair. You get to walk around advertising you’re the best in who-knows-what while I get to walk around advertising reruns for Jennifer Aniston,” I whined.

He broke our embrace, running his hands up and down my arms before gripping both my shoulders lightly. His head was lowered, nearly making eye level with me. “Don’t worry, Sweet Cheeks, as long as I know you’re the best, it doesn’t matter what anyone else thinks. And so far... hmm, you haven’t disappointed me.”

Whoa. This was getting too intense. My heart accelerated, taking my breath. I swallowed. Hard.

Closing my eyes, I placed my mind in a different surrounding, soaring away from here. “Sweet Cheeks, open your eyes.” His breath was warm and sweet on my face. I shook my head no.

His hands cupped both sides of my face, both thumbs circling my cheeks. “Please?”

I had to face him at some point, so bravely, I opened my eyes. He was closer than before, his nose barely brushing mine. “Jaxon, no more flirting,” I whispered. “You’re making this too hard.”

“I won’t... I mean, I’m done flirting, but can I ask of one thing before I leave?”

“Yes.”

He hesitated, his eyes looking fearful. “Can I... kiss you?” he asked, wincing.

“Um, Jaxon... that is flir—” I was cut off as his lips pressed roughly against mine. My lips tingled with delight. I let my lips fall open. I wanted him to devour me. I knew I should pull away but I didn’t want to.

He pulled away instead, leaving my lips yearning for more.

His face broke out into a devilish grin. “That’s the kiss you owe me for busting my lip.” He turned away from me, holding his arms up to the sky yelling, “I’m healed!”

I think, in some sort of way, he was healing me too.

We said a quick goodbye, then I

watched Jaxon drive down the street until he was no longer visible. My emotions were all jumbled up with a mixture of sadness and anger. I was disheartened because I was going to miss being around him, his presence made me feel good about myself. I was also angry for him stepping into my shattered life and complicating things even more. He just better keep his promise and not forget about me.

Opening the door to Reed's apartment, I nearly hit Kendra in the process.

She was fuming. "You better start talking," she commanded. "You've got a hell of a lot of explaining to do."

She knew more than I gave her credit for, and she didn't appreciate being left in the dark.

I looked at Reed for shelter, but he just gave me a shrug. He knew there was nothing he could do to help. Kendra was on a mission, and, if she had to peel the skin off my body layer by layer to obtain some information, she would—with a sharp knife in hand.

Sitting down, I inhaled a deep breath, and exhaled *almost* everything that happened between me and Jaxon since the moment we met.

Chapter 17 ~ Mr. Jaxon S. Vaughn

Thank the gods in heaven for sunshine and warm weather.

As soon as I stepped outside the airport, I inhaled the largest amount of smog my lungs could hold. If I couldn't have a cigarette, this was the next best way to pollute the nodule producing organ. Popping an Altoid in my mouth, I once again resisted the nicotine urge. After two years of quitting, I still craved the shit. But, a promise was a promise, and Gramma Z would roll over in her grave if I went back on my word.

Beads of sweat formed on my

forehead as soon as I shut my truck door. The temperature was hanging around the mid-eighties, meaning the valley would be ten degrees hotter. Idling through the LAX parking lot with my windows down, my arm relaxed along the frame. I relished in the Santa Ana winds blowing through the city. Giving the accelerator a tap, I blew loud exhaust from the mufflers. A couple of pretentious teenage girls wrinkled their noses in disgust before taking witness of the rebellious driver. I gave them my flirtatious crooked grin, nearly sending them melting like tar into the hot asphalt.

During my absence, I missed California more than I thought possible. Often, I toyed with the idea of moving

away, starting over, leaving my pain in this bankrupted state of failure. Maybe one day I would. As I had grown older, I couldn't fathom the concept of people packing up their entire family to take a chance at success. Most people wanted to move here to start their dreams. But for me, after graduation, I wanted to leave, to end my nightmares. My dreams lie in Heaven... or... confoundedly, North Carolina?

That damn girl had complicated my fuckin' life, and it was my fault for allowing it.

Two years. It took two fucking years to take control of my life, to purify my body, to erase the demons that

haunted my mind and soul.

Five days. The last five fucking days was all it took for me to spend with her before she awakened my eradicated heart.

Gramma Z had always taught me that, when we died, our bodies returned to the earth and our souls rejoiced for eternity in Heaven. Courtney was either deceiving me into believing there was no Heaven or manipulating me into believing in reincarnation.

I was convinced Courtney was Heather.

Chapter 18 ~ Last Basketball Game

The day after Jaxon left, a large floral arrangement was delivered to my home. It was a beautiful bouquet filled with various flowers. I've never had flowers sent to me, much less given to me, so, when I saw my name on the card, I assumed there was a misprint. I opened the card anyway.

I picked these flowers specifically for their meaning. White camellia – because you're adorable, iris – because your friendship means so much to me, and sweet pea – to thank you for a lovely time. – Jax

Adorable? Nice! He thinks he's

being cute.

If I was going to be honest with myself, I really wasn't expecting to hear from him again. Seriously, what did a twenty-two-year-old guy want with a nearly eighteen-year-old in high school? My guess was a piece of ass. And since he didn't make his way around the bases, I thought all the 'let's be friends' talk was just to humor me.

After I told Kendra and Reed most of the events that went down between Jaxon and I, they both did everything they could to convince me his demeanor was genuine. I wanted to believe them but didn't want to put myself in a position to have my feelings

hurt.

My phone buzzed with a text as I was in the process of sending a thank you text to Jaxon.

J: Hi Sweet Cheeks! When is school out 4 spring break?

Me: Why you asking?

I wondered if he was making plans to come out and visit again.

J: Reed is coming out in the spring & I thought it would b great if u & Kendra could come too.

Wow! I was blown away. I had to read the text again to make sure my brain had correctly processed what my eyes were seeing. Butterflies came alive in my belly. My body now filled with excitement. Not wasting any time, I texted him the dates.

I wanted to go. I mean, I *really* wanted to do this. I just had to figure out a way to convince my mother. So, I called Kendra.



Going back to school after

Christmas vacation was an easier transition than when I came back after Thanksgiving vacation. Although Phillip and I were on better terms than before, my school days were still pleasant without him torturing me through class. If we saw each other at all, it was usually before or after school. He invited me to several of the home basketball games, but I declined every time. After feeling guilty for continuously turning him down, I finally decided to watch his last home game. He was, after all, keeping his temper under control, and I was only going as a friend to support him. *That's what friends do, right?*

Circling around the parking lot of North Mayberry High School repeatedly,

I convinced myself to just find a damn parking spot and not drive off with my tail tucked between my legs. This was the first basketball game I'd attended since we had broken up. Kendra was making me brave it alone, refusing to go with me. She was furious that I was on speaking terms with Phillip—again. She told me she loved me as her sister and would be there for me if ever I needed anything, but she could no longer support me anymore where Phillip was concerned. I would never tell her how much her neglect hurt me, but, then again, I didn't know if I would be able to stand by her if the shoe were on the other foot. She'd put up with a whole pasture full of bullshit over the last three-plus years

because of me.

In order to avoid unwanted stares and whispers, I made sure to arrive right before the boys' varsity game. The gossip mill was already working full time.

Creeping into the gym, I sat the bottom row right by the door so I could make my escape as soon as the game ended. My choice of seating was an unwise choice—every other person that walked through the door stopped to ask me if Phillip and I were back together. It got to the point where I was on the verge of grabbing the microphone from the announcer and screaming over the PA system that Phillip and I were *not* back

together.

Phillip caught sight of me as soon as he entered the gym for warm-ups. The quick smile on his face surprisingly delighted me. I think it was the feeling of reassurance, of him keeping his word and trying to be *normal* for once in his life.

The game was exciting, and every time Phillip was fouled he would look at me, giving me his signature wink before shooting his free throw. My cheers for him came out with too much enthusiasm each time he made a basket.

Those old feelings of pride and honor I used to get watching my basketball star began to resurface. I

missed this—sitting here and proudly watching my superstar make his dreams come true. When we first started dating, he'd told me he was going to play for a college. I had laughed at him, blowing off his arrogant confidence, not taking him seriously. He proved me wrong our junior year when scouts from various colleges started showing up to watch him play. From the time he signed on at Wake Forest, he was determined to make sure nothing got in his way of playing basketball... especially me.

The game ended with another win, leaving the team undefeated. Phillip led with the most points, and he even broke the school record for the most three-pointers in a single game. They

were almost on their way to another state championship. After witnessing his great accomplishment, I was pleased with my decision to come and watch.

My plans to leave immediately after the game were disrupted when Phillip's dad stopped me in the lobby. "Hey Courtney!" He embraced me with a heart-warming, fatherly hug. Aside from my issues with Phillip and his mother, Maryann, I loved this man with all my heart. "Phillip didn't tell us you were going to be here. It's so nice to see your pretty face again," he beamed. There was nothing phony about Sean. He was kind to everyone he met. I'd never heard him speak harshly about a person, and I swore he would give someone his

last dollar, even if it meant skipping a meal. He made departing with Phillip a tough feat.

I smiled back at him, "I've missed your handsome face, as well." My smile faltered as soon as Maryann nudged herself up to Sean with Sasha Davis in tow. Sasha was the captain of the girls' varsity basketball team and their best player. She earned herself a scholarship to a minor college, but still, for our small town, that was a major achievement.

Back during the summer, rumors of Sasha and Phillip having a little escapade floated around. I had never gotten the proof of this, but, during my

investigation, I discovered all the other rendezvous he'd had with various other girls. With the help of Kendra and Reed, we had hidden out, taking a shit-load of pictures of him with the said girls. I'd waited until his truck sat in the school parking lot for a week while he was away at basketball camp and taped the pictures all over it. I'd written *cheater*, *prick*, and *liar* in big, red letters on his windows. I wasn't there to witness his outrage, but the word on the street was that he went crazy mad as he ripped the pictures off his truck. He'd known it was me, calling me directly and threatening to burn my house down for humiliating him in front of everyone. Not once did I ever doubt his threat. He was capable of

doing the unthinkable. He never did apologize for being disloyal or took into consideration of how severely he humiliated me by straying. That was the final moment for me. I ended our long, twisted courtship.

“We were planning on grabbing a bite after the game to celebrate, would you like to join us?” Mr. Wilkins inquired innocently. The cold-hearted bitch, or, as I like to call her, Ice Queen, stiffened upon his request. Her eyes were challenging me, tempting me to crash her little party. In her opinion, I was never good enough for Phillip. Coming from a divorced family, the Peterson name held no level of importance, we didn’t attend church on a

regular basis, and wealth didn't flow through our veins. She imprinted the name hypocrite. She was a disgrace to all preachers' wives.

Declining, I explained. "I'm sorry, I'd love to join y'all, especially since Phillip asked me to come tonight," I had to let the Ice Queen know her son wanted me here, "but I have to work all weekend, and tonight is the only time I'll have to finish my English paper."

I totally lied. I finished my paper the day after it was assigned, but I had no desire to sit through a meal and have Maryann belittle me throughout dinner. She was a pro at making snide remarks that only I would catch on to. Sean was

such a sweet, humble man. He was either oblivious to the wicked witch he'd married, or his heart only allowed him to see the good in everyone.

Maryann interrupted Sean just as he was about to speak. "Oh, well that is a shame. I know Phillip would love for you to come celebrate with us." She turned to face Sasha, ignoring Sean.

"Wouldn't he, Sasha?" Maryann's voice leaked venom. Sasha's expression was contorted, almost pained looking. Judging from her face, she didn't want to get involved with any drama tonight.

"I... um... yeah, sure?" she stammered.

I almost felt sorry for her. It was obvious she had no idea who this lady really was. I didn't know much about Sasha, but I never heard anything negative about her, besides her rumored love affair with Phillip. It was in this moment, though, watching her uncomfortable manner that made me kind of like her... kind of.

Quickly saying my goodbyes, I rushed to my car before Phillip caught sight of me. I backed out of my parking spot and slammed it into drive right as Phillip stood at the hood of my car. My heart nearly leapt out of my chest. I was frightened stiff, frozen, unable to move. Taking several deep breaths, I gave my heart time to regain its regular pace.

Phillip pecked at my passenger window, motioning for me to unlock the door. Clicking the unlock button, my mind wasn't quite processing my movements yet. The door slammed shut, bringing my senses back alive. "Don't ever scare me like that again!" I yelled. "I just nearly died of a heart attack, you crazy fool!"

Phillip started laughing. "I wouldn't have had to jump out in front of you if you weren't trying to make a quick escape." He looked at me curiously, "Were you trying to avoid me?"

"No," I lied. "I thought you were going out to celebrate with your parents?" I asked, trying to divert his

train of thought.

Phillip made himself comfy in my car, fastening his seatbelt. “No, that was never the plan. And once I saw Sasha was with them, I told them I didn’t feel well. They knew I was blowing them off, but no way would my mother cause a scene in front of everyone. You know, she’s got to keep that image.” I didn’t want to comment, I found it quite comical that he verbally bashed his mother when he was her mini clone.

“So, where to?” I inquired.

“I don’t know,” he shrugged.
“Where were you going?”

“Home.”

He suppressed a smile. “Home’s good with me.”

Rolling my eyes, I gave him a look that said ‘you’ve got to be joking.’

“Or maybe not,” he muttered.

“Hurry and make a decision, or I’m gonna leave you here in the parking lot.” I wasn’t in the mood to play games with him. He was creating the exact thing I was trying to avoid—a semi-date.

“Whoa! Someone’s gotten a little ballsy,” he replied, challenging me. He eyed me as if daring me to smart off at him again. This was the first time since our agreement at Christmas that he showed an ounce of the old Phillip.

I thought coming here tonight was a wise choice, and I hadn't started to regret it... until now. "I'm not being ballsy, Phillip, I just want to get out of the parking lot before the traffic gets out of control. Sitting here waiting for you to make a decision is only going to make that left turn harder on me." The cops only showed up to direct traffic when we had rival games, and, although the crowd tonight was as large as one of our rival games, we didn't have the organizational traffic flow to keep everyone in order.

"Whatever! Just go to fuckin' McDonalds or something. I don't care."

I pressed down hard on the

accelerator, nearly rear-ending the car in front of me. I wasn't going anywhere with him. He didn't know it yet, but I was taking his psycho ass home.

Little by little, I crept closely behind the car in front of me.

“Get off their ass, Court,” he commanded. “Riding their ass isn't going to speed things up.”

Getting increasingly pissed off at him by the second, and becoming more pissed at myself for allowing this situation to occur in the first place, I had trouble keeping my cool. I couldn't understand what made him snap and revert back to his old asshole self.

Quietly, I continued riding close to the car in front of me just to defy him. He needed to be reminded that he couldn't boss me around anymore.

We were the next car to pull onto the main road when he startled me. "I said get the fuck off that car's ass!" he screamed in my ear. I was furious at that point.

Fear and rage flowed through my body, spiking my adrenaline. Reacting upon impulse, I pulled out onto the main road without getting a clear view. What I thought were my tires screeching on the asphalt turned out to be the massive, black dually pick-up truck trying to avoid impact.

I pressed the accelerator until it touched the floorboard. The loud roar of the truck's horn reverberated throughout the car. We were mere inches from turning my old car into a heap of metal to be hauled off to some scrap yard. I looked into my review mirror, watching the truck slowly fall back from my bumper. I blew loudly through pursed lips as I exhaled in relief.

His violent side exploded as he repeatedly punched the dashboard. "Are you trying to fucking kill me? God!" he shouted. "I should beat the fuck out of you, you crazy bitch!"

Cringing, I waited for impact. My body convulsed all over from fear,

fear of him hitting me and fear from the near-miss accident. “Stop freaking out, you’re only making things worse,” I stammered. My insides were a living, breathing, mangled up cord of nerves. Feelings of anger and fear detonated inside my being. Tears welled up in my eyes, blurring my vision. I wanted to swipe them away, but I didn’t want to draw attention to my inner breakdown.

Phillip never got the chance to respond.

As I drove through the intersection Phillip screamed “Holy fuck!” before his side was t-boned... then everything else fell quiet.

My vision may have been

hindered, but I knew without a doubt my light was green.

Chapter 19 ~ Jaxon

“Dude, either you need pussy or you’re turning into one. I’m not sure what crawled up your dick and sucked the testosterone out of your main vein, but you need to grow some balls and act like a fucking man.” Troy threw down the rag he had been using to wipe up the spilled ice from the bar. He extended his arms, palms face down, resting them on the shiny wooden surface. He was staring at me in disbelief.

“Seventeen years old? She’s fucking seventeen years old. What the hell is the matter with you?” Troy asked, shaking his head.

“Almost eighteen,” I corrected.

“It doesn’t matter, dude. She’s young enough to get you in trouble—something your stupid ass has worked too hard to stay out of for the last couple of years,” he said sternly, pointing his finger in my face. He just didn’t understand how this situation was so different than what he had construed in his mind.

“Are you sure you didn’t fuck her?” His light blue eyes bored into mine. He was most likely analyzing the story I told him a few days ago.

Telling Troy about Courtney was a mistake, but he wouldn’t get off my back. He was more like my brother than

my best friend. He knew every deep, dark secret I kept hidden under lock and key. My odd behavior after returning from North Carolina had apparently caught his attention immediately. I didn't know if it was so much of my odd behavior as it was my obsessive name dropping. Then again, I sometimes believed he knew me better than I knew myself. After all, we had spent over ninety percent of our life together. We became instant best friends in daycare, and, from that point on, we were inseparable. Most people thought we were brothers; saying that we shared a lot of the same features, but his blond shags sets him apart from my raven spikes. Personally, I didn't see much of

a similarity in us other than that we both sported the same colored eyes.

He was right, though, to be suspicious. I'd tried to not think of her every second of the day, but it had been impossible. Everything around me constantly reminded me of Heather... and Courtney reminded me of Heather, or vice versa.

I blew an exasperated breath. "No!" I gritted between clenched teeth. "How many fucking times do I have to tell you? We. Did. Not. Have. Sex," I clarified for him.

Troy walked around the bar stopping beside me. He grabbed my shoulder, squeezing tightly a couple of

times. “You’ve come so far bro. I can’t help to worry.” He released my shoulder and started to walk away, but stopped just as I turned to look at him. “I’m just having a hard time comprehending your infatuation with this young girl that lives three-thousand miles away. There’s something else you’re just not telling me. You can’t hide it forever, though. I always find out.” Troy turned his back to me, making his way to the office.

“You’re not my damn father, Troy. So stop trying to act like it,” I yelled at him, but he had already closed the door, ignoring me.

“You boys arguing again?” Startled, I spun around on the bar stool,

not hearing anyone enter the room. Valeria was the last person I wanted to deal with right now. I ignored her question laced in that sexy Spanish accent I used to adore. Laying my head down on the bar, I closed my eyes to capture a glimpse of Courtney's beautiful smile. She lived in my mind and I couldn't get her image out of my head. Every time I closed my eyes, I replayed all the moments we'd spent together.

Once again, I was startled from my reverie as I felt acrylic nails massaging my scalp. My head shot up from its resting spot to throw daggers into a set of almond-shaped, brown eyes. "Fuck off, Val." I plopped my head back

down on the bar, ready to continue my daydreaming.

“It’s easier to fuck off if you’re the one doing the fucking,” Valeria spoke lightly in my ear. I lifted my head a few inches off the bar, mainly to get her out of my ear. My eyes were greeted with a pair of voluptuous tits. Valeria had perched herself across the bar, planting her double D’s on the counter trying to entice me to take a taste. I knew her devious tricks just as well as I knew my own.

Flashbacks of how I used to face-plant myself in her silicone-valley brought bile up to my throat. Valeria was nothing but a whore that used me as

much as I used her.

Before I could tell her to get the fuck out of my life, my phone buzzed with Kendra's name lit up across the screen. I jerked it down under the bar to keep Val's wandering eyes from meddling in my business.

My heart lodged itself into the pit of my stomach as I read the first sentence.

K: FYI - Court's been in a car accident w/ Phillip, but she's ok.

Chapter 20 ~ Forgiveness

Guilt washed over me as I sat in the waiting room with Phillip's family. Little by little, his teammates and friends filled the shrinking room. The more people that filtered in, the more stigma pushed against me, penetrating into me, slowly slicing through my skin like an Obsidian knife.

Shame overwhelmed me. I couldn't even look at them, especially his dad. My worst injury consisted of a mild concussion and a busted lip from the air bag, but, other than that, I didn't have much else to show for the wreck. It should've been me in that operating

room having surgery. I'd possibly ruined his life, his career, his dream, his future. I didn't know whether to cry in agony or scream in anger.

No longer could I handle all the whispering floating around the room. I knew they were talking about me. I needed to leave, but I couldn't. How would I be portrayed then? As a coward... or narcissist... or heartless? I was none of those things, so I had to suck it up and persevere.

I was too shameful to look anyone in the eye, so when the officer touched my shoulder to get my attention, I nearly fell out of my chair. "Sorry, ma'am, I need to ask you a few questions

regarding the accident,” the officer asked. I wanted my mom with me, and I didn’t understand why she hadn’t arrived yet. The tears were stinging the back of my eyes like a thousand bees on attack, and I didn’t know how much longer I was going to be able to hold them back.

“Is your mother or father here with you?” I shook my head, afraid that if I spoke, the forceful cry would escape from my throat.

Warm hands touched my shoulders, pulling me to them in an embrace. Immediately, I recognized him—Phillip’s dad. “Hey, Officer Jamie. Her mother is on her way. Is it okay if I speak with her for a minute?” The

officer nodded and told Phillip's dad he would be back in a little bit.

The kindness this man showed me after I sent his son to the hospital for emergency surgery, almost costing his life, was too much. I let go of all the anguish I was holding in and wept hard. "Shh, it's going to be okay. Phillip is going to be okay. He's alive, and so are you. That's all that matters now." Shaking my head, I knew I didn't deserve the love this man was showing me.

He continued to comfort me, patting my back as I sobbed, appeasing me until my cries turned into snubs. He pulled away, looking at me with great

sympathy. “Do you want to walk outside and talk? I think a fresh breath of cool air will be good for you.”

Not yet trusting my voice from flouting back into uncontrollable sobs, I nodded.

Following him through the automatic doors, I nearly trampled over my terrified mother. “Oh dear Lord! Thank goodness you’re okay,” she cried in a state of panic. She had already grabbed me, hugging me tighter than I ever thought her small frame was capable of.

After holding me for what felt like hours, she pulled away, but still kept a death grip on my upper arms.

“What happened? All I’ve been told was you and Phillip were hit by someone running a red light. I didn’t know if you were dead or alive.” Fear poured out of her mouth like running water. I was all she had, and if something were to ever happen to me, I knew she would be lost in this world forever.

She frantically turned her head back and forth, eyes searching for something. “Where is Phillip? Is he okay?” A tear made its way out of my mother’s eye. It hurt me so much to see the pain I was inflicting on her. She had always been the rock in our home, staying strong, never showing weakness, even in the hardest of times. But to see her so fragile, to see that single tear roll

down her cheek, broke my heart. Another shot of guilt washed over my body like a tidal wave, suffocating me with sorrow.

In order to make things right, I had to suck it up. It was time for me to be resilient, I couldn't cry now. It was the only way I would be able to repay my mother for causing her so much agony. It was my turn to be the rock. "He's in surgery," I whispered. "His leg got crushed. We haven't heard the extent of his injuries yet."

My mother looked up at Phillip's dad with deep sympathy. "I'm so sorry, Preacher Wilkins."

He laid a heartening hand on her

shoulder. “No need to apologize, Alma. It wasn’t Courtney’s fault. They just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. God is in charge; he doesn’t allow these things to happen without a purpose. What that purpose is, well, we’ll just have to wait until He’s ready to show us.”

I couldn’t understand how he wasn’t blaming me. His forgiving soul brought me comfort, but it also brought me sadness. I didn’t deserve his forgiveness. Not this quickly, not without knowing the outcome of Phillip’s injuries.

“I’m going to head back inside and see if there have been any updates

from the doctor,” he said, giving us a nod. I could tell he wanted to give us privacy. He knew I needed my mother right now as much as she needed me.

“Maryann has no idea how lucky she is to have such a sweet, wonderful man as her husband,” my mother whispered as we both watched him walk down the hall until he disappeared. Mom grabbed my hand, lacing her fingers through mine. “So, tell me exactly what happened from beginning to the end.”

I went through the entire story starting from the time I arrived to the game until I lost consciousness from the impact. I left out the part about Phillip losing his cool. “Honey, you just don’t

know how happy and relieved I am that you are okay. I'm going to talk to a doctor about your concussion and—”

“Phillip is awake and is asking for you, Courtney,” Sean interrupted with heavy, short breaths. “I ran down here to get you as soon as I could.” His smile told me everything I needed to know. I inhaled the deepest breath of relief. Just knowing that Phillip was awake was enough for me to feel that ounce of hope I needed in order to deal with my guilt.

With my mother close behind, we followed Phillip's dad back inside. “I'll be here waiting for you in the lobby,” she called out to me as Sean and

I rushed into the elevators.

Every nerve in my body felt fidgety. My insides were bouncing around in different directions like a pin ball machine. Time was ticking in slow motion. The elevator felt like it was moving slower than a sloth climbing a tree.

Sean must have been able to sense my restlessness. “He’s okay, Courtney. The surgery went well. It’s not as bad as they feared,” he smiled.

He wouldn’t tell me this if it were untrue, so I knew he was right. Once again, his smile warmed my spirit and brought me hope.

Slowly, I opened the door, not expecting to be greeted with eyes of the devil. Maryann's malicious glare followed me in, giving me the coldest stare and causing chill bumps to appear all over my body. I swear I could feel the temperature in the room drop twenty degrees from the menace emanating from her evil soul. Her eyes were red and swollen from crying. I almost felt sorry for her. Almost.

Knowing I had already wavered somewhere along her scale of distaste, I was pretty sure I had now surpassed the hate meter.

Trying to stay discreet, I stood against the wall beside the door. Not

trusting her enough to know if she would turn psycho and beat my ass, I didn't want to press my luck with the bitch-witch. I wasn't taking any chances to find out either.

Sean walked over by Maryann leaning down to tell her something I couldn't clearly hear. I thought he told her to give us some time alone, but I wasn't sure. She stood from the chair to give Phillip a kiss on his forehead then left the room without acknowledging me on her way out. I'd thought of telling her that I was sorry, but decided against it. Silence was usually the best option to choose when it came to dealing with her.

Sean followed closely behind

her then stopped before stepping out of the room. “Take all the time you need, Courtney. I think he’s going to need all the love and support we can give him.”

Tiptoeing over to Phillip’s bedside, I absorbed the trauma lying in front of me. Monitors beeping, tubes twisted in all different directions, and Phillip lying there wrapped up like a mummy in bandages and blankets. All the agony hit me at once. My heart was broken. My eyes released tears of pain for this boy I loved, lying helpless in this hospital bed because of me.

Lacing my fingers through his, I lowered myself into the chair his mother had vacated. Immediately, I felt him

lightly squeeze my hand. Eagerly, I looked up at him happy to see those beautiful, milk chocolate, brown eyes staring back at me. He tried smiling, but instead winced from the deep cut in his lip. I didn't deserve his smile. He should be angry with me.

My phone buzzed in my back pocket indicating a text message. I ignored it without looking, only wanting to focus my attention on Phillip and his needs. "I'm so sorry, Phillip. It should've been me, not you. I should've been paying better attention. I lost my temper. I wasn't focused on my surroundings. I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry. Will you please forgive me?" I was on the brink of becoming hysterical.

Tightening my grip on his hand, I held on for dear life as I buried my face in the blankets, crying out in pain—the pain I was causing him. Of all the horrible things he'd done to me, I still couldn't find it within myself to watch him suffer.

Phillip very slowly ran his fingers through my hair, shushing me. “It was an accident, it wasn't your fault,” he paused. It appeared the anesthesia was still strong in his system. He was struggling to stay awake.

“It was the stupid asshole's fault that ran that red light,” he whispered. “I saw him right before he hit us, but it wasn't enough time for me to warn you.” He closed his eyes, fatigue clearly taking

over. Sitting there, I stared at his peaceful but battered face in disbelief. He wasn't blaming me. Instead, he was actually consoling me. The one time I didn't deserve his forgiveness and he was giving it, effortlessly.

“I'm sorry,” he choked out.

Those were two of the simplest words to say, except most people found them so hard to speak. I'd prayed many sleepless nights for him to tell me he was sorry. Those two words I longed to hear from this boy I still hopelessly loved, but had given up all hope of ever being told. If I hadn't read the words form on his full lips, I would have never believed my ears. Since the day we met,

that was the first time he ever told me he was sorry.

Now here he was lying in bed, unable to walk, while I sat beside him with nothing but a few bruises, and he was telling me he was sorry. Phillip was damaged far worse than I ever imagined.

My phone buzzed again with a text message. I ignored it—again. All the important people in my life knew where I was and what condition I was in.

Not sure if I should say something back or not, I just sat there motionless. I wanted to tell him he didn't need to apologize because the accident wasn't his fault, but I wasn't really sure what he was apologizing for. I wanted to

believe it was for all the hell he'd put me through, but now wasn't the time for nasty thoughts, as such, to be filtering through my head. Even if I asked him, I wasn't sure if he was even coherent enough to know I was still there.

All my attention focused on him for what felt like hours, but was actually only minutes passed. Patiently waiting for any type of movement, he finally blinked a couple of times, barely opening his eyes. His eyelids hung low, but I could tell he was looking at me through his lush eyelashes. "I love you, please don't leave me," he murmured then closed his eyes before squeezing my hand.

I sat there dumbfounded.

Was he delirious from the drugs administered to him? He was saying things I'm sure he didn't mean. Maybe it was one of those situations where a person felt threatened or uneasy by certain situations or circumstances, and they were able to muster enough nerve to tell how they really feel? I knew firsthand that's how an inebriated person functioned, so why would pain medication be any different?

My phone buzzed one more time in my back pocket. Pulling it out, annoyed by the disturbance, I turned it off.

I shook him lightly. I needed an

answer. I needed to know if he was talking to me or someone else. He could've easily been talking in his sleep or talking out of his head. *Hard drugs could screw up a person's ability to think clearly, right?* I shook him a little harder. "Phillip," I whispered. "Phillip, wake up. Talk to me, please?" I pleaded, raising my voice a little.

I stood from my chair to get closer to his ear when I heard the door open. I jumped back from the bed, feeling like I was doing something I wasn't supposed to be. Dread coursed through my body when the last person I wanted to see was standing in the doorway.

Maryann glared at me with a suspicious look upon her face.

“Umm, he just fell asleep,” I explained, stumbling over my words. *Why was I letting this woman intimidate me?* I had enough weight lying on my shoulders. I didn’t need the belittling comments and stares she loved throwing my way.

Her cold stare quickly cut over to Phillip, the ice melting in her eyes as she looked at her son with compassion and pity. She didn’t speak to me, nor look at me further. Instead, she walked over to Phillip’s bedside and adjusted his blankets and IV.

“You can leave now,” she forced

out with a harsh tone, deliberately refusing to acknowledge my presence in front of her.

I circled my thumb a few times over his cut up knuckles before leaning down to lightly press a kiss to them. My lips lingered on his rough skin as I whispered bye to him then walked out of the room without looking at Maryann.

As soon as the door shut behind me, I released a rush of air I'd been holding in.

Sean was standing outside of the door. He approached and draped his arm around my shoulders giving me the reassurance I desperately needed. "He's going to be fine you know." I could only

nod, once again fighting back tears. “Go home and get some rest. Your mother is worried about you,” he said, then kissed the top of my head. “Maryann is staying here tonight. If anything changes, we’ll let you know.”

I rolled my eyes, knowing full well that I would never hear any updates unless I called Sean myself or visited Phillip alone.

Chapter 21 ~ Jaxon

“Shit!” I gritted between clenched teeth. Before I even realized what I had done, pieces of my phone were lying on the shiny, wooden floor and scattered across the bar room. *Don't lose control, Jax. You've worked too hard for too long.*

Since I received that first text from Kendra, I told myself I wouldn't lose my cool. But, without any reassurance from Courtney, I was quickly slipping off my security vine. I was on the verge of losing my fucking mind. I couldn't stop the same damn questions from running through my head.

Why the hell was she not answering her phone? Kendra said she was okay, but what if she wasn't. What if she just told me that so I wouldn't worry? What the hell was she doing with Phillip anyway? Does she not want to talk to me anymore? Had she gone back to him? What had he done to cause the wreck?

If something bad happened to her, I would kill that fucking bastard. Nothing would give me pleasure more than to wrap my long, thick fingers around that giraffe neck of his and choke him out until his face turned the deepest shade of blue. "Fuck!" I screamed out in rage, my voice ricocheting through the empty bar.

Troy broke my murderous thoughts as he walked out of the office in his ‘I’m a badass’ cool stride. “Yo bro, I think you need to get that temper of yours under control before I have to pin you down and make you beg for mercy,” he grimaced, pulling out the bar stool beside me to straddle. “What’s got you all pissed off?”

My fists were still balled up tight. I guessed it was my body’s natural reaction to all the feelings I had for Phillip. I took several deep breaths, slowly releasing the tension and calming the blood flow. Flexing my fingers, I stretched the tight muscles in my hands. I needed to practice my breathing techniques before telling Troy what was

going on.

Was I going to do this? Did I want to do this? Did I want to reveal the irrational thoughts that streamed through my mind? I blew him off earlier, but it was only a matter of time before he figured things out, he always did. “You know that girl, Courtney, I told you about?” Troy nodded. “Well she’s been in a really bad car accident, and, even though her best friend told me she’s okay, I can’t get her to answer my calls or my texts.”

Troy carefully scrutinized me like I was a three-headed alien sitting in front of him. He shook his head with a smirky grin on his face. “Are you for

real, dude?”

“What do you mean am I for real? Hell yeah, I’m for real,” I scoffed, my voice growing louder. “You think it’s funny? Fuck you, Troy!”

The bar stool crashed into the side of the counter, and Troy was in my face faster than I could blink. “Listen here, you little whiney prick. You’re not gonna take your frustration out on me. Throwing a tantrum and breaking your cell phone all because some little girl won’t acknowledge you is childish.” Jumping to my feet, I was ready to throw a punch if necessary. Troy stood still. His demeanor was calm, but his eyes told me he was not affected by my

challenge. “Sit the fuck down, Jax. I’m not fighting you, and I’m not laughing at you, but you need to calm down,” he said coolly while he picked up his stool, inspecting it for damage before setting it upright.

We hadn’t fought since we were in grade school. We’d come close more times than I would like to admit, but we both knew it was best to never cross that line. Our friendship was worth more than stepping over the line and destroying a lifelong friend and loyal business partner.

I lowered myself back onto the bar stool. “You don’t understand,” I half whispered.

Troy leisurely sat back down on his stool beside me. “You’re right, I don’t understand because you won’t tell me what the hell is going on. Why are you so obsessed with this girl?” Deep furrows lined vertically between his eyebrows.

“She’s special. She’s...” I didn’t want to say it. I knew what his reaction would be.

Silence fell between us.

“Just tell me.”

“She’s Heather,” I whispered, barely audible. Troy didn’t say anything. He just stared at me, almost like he was seeing through my eyes, into the depths

of my brain, trying to process what was flowing through my mind.

“Are you chasing the dragon again?”

“Hell, no! You know I don’t do that shit anymore.” My heroin use was the last thing I expected to hear him throw in my face. He knew that was a life I’d left behind and never wanted to revisit again. “I can’t believe you actually think I would ever touch that smack again after everything I’ve been through to stay clean.” He was my biggest supporter besides Gramma Z, so to hear him doubt my resistance was a bit hurtful.

Troy raised his hands with his

palms facing me in a surrendering stance. “I’m sorry man. It’s just... do you hear yourself? Do you know how crazy that sounds? It sounds just like those bizarre hallucinations you used to have when you were on one of your drug binges. It just drags up old memories, that’s all,” he shrugged.

“I know it sounds crazy, and I’ve even questioned my sanity repeatedly, but, I swear man, she’s Heather, just in a different body. Everything about her is just like Heather. The way she smiles, the flirtatious looks she gives me, the way she acts timid, but deep down I know she has the instinct of a wild animal. She even bounces on the balls of her feet like Heather used to do when

she got excited. I knew it the moment I met her. Her reaction to me that first night, it was inevitable. The way she responded to me—my voice, my scent, my touch...”

Everything about that night came rushing back to me. I’d wanted her so bad that night. Refusing her was one of the smartest decisions I’d ever had to make, but one of the hardest too.

“Hell, she seduced me within a few hours of getting to know me. Don’t you get it? She’s my second chance to make things right. I won’t corrupt her like I did Heather.” I felt water forming in the corners of my eyes. “I won’t take her life away from her before she has a

chance to fully live it.” My voice trembled as I fought the guilt building in my stomach, clawing its way up my throat.

Troy started drumming his fingers on the cool surface of the bar; a nervous habit of his when he didn’t know how to handle a situation... or me, for that matter. “Jax, please stop with the throat grunts,” he smiled.

Good distraction, Troy.

Swallowing hard, I forced the old guilt back into its hidey-hole. “I will as soon as you stop banging your fingertips on the bar,” I joked, pretending to be in a playful mood.

My nervous habit annoyed him as much as his did me. Our very first fist fight was over him teasing me about my tics. After we had made up, we'd become instant best friends. We eventually got used to each other's annoying habits and only noticed them now, during moments like this, when we were all pissed off at each other.

Troy stopped his rhythm in mid-beat. "I can't let you do this. I know what you think, I understand that, but, dude... it's not her." He popped up off his stool to reach around the counter for his hidden stash of mixed nuts. "There is no such a thing as reincarnation. You're grandma taught you better than that." He popped a handful of nuts into his mouth.

“I know I’m the last guy to be preaching to you, but you’ve got to be realistic here. It just doesn’t happen.” He loudly crunched on the nuts he had just tossed into his mouth, not bothering to close his mouth as he chewed. “Please, just move on. Stay away from her. Nothing good can come from this. You’ve tortured yourself for so long anyway. There is no point in going backwards. You can’t undo the past.”

I scrubbed my fingers along my scalp in frustration. “I can prove it.”

Troy cocked his eyebrow with interest.

“She’s supposed to be coming out here during her spring break, and I

know without a doubt that, once you meet her, you will be convinced. I'll even bet you on it. I'll bet you the title on this bar *and* the one I'm building in North Carolina," I challenged him, holding my hand out ready to shake on it.

Troy shook his head in disbelief. "Damn, you're a confident motherfucker. With assurance as pure as that, I guess I have no choice," he grinned. We gripped hands tight, giving a couple of hard shakes before releasing.

Troy pushed his stool back against the counter then placed his mixed nuts back into his hiding spot before heading into the office. He stopped in the doorway, whistling to get my attention.

“Yo, Jax, you better hope this girl gets back to you soon or your bet will be lost forever.” He closed the office door behind him. *Asshole.*

I had to get in touch with Reed or Kendra to learn more of what was going on. I had to know where things stood with us. Courtney had thrown all the signs out to me that she was interested, even if she said she wasn't. She wouldn't be so enthusiastic to visit if she hadn't wanted to see me again, right?

Fuck! I was tired of guessing. What if Troy was right? Was I being irrational? Had I finally lost my fucking mind? *God!* Times like this, I missed Gramma the most. She would know what

to do.

The light bulb clicked in my head. The only choice I had was to let the stars align wherever they may. If she called or texted back, then I would know she carried the same feelings that I did. If I didn't hear back from her, then, well, I had no other choice but to cut all ties and leave her alone.

Could I really do that though?

Chapter 22 ~ Surrender

Who knew so many traumatic events could take place in a two week span.

Phillip was finally able to come home from the hospital after having to stay two extra days due to a minor infection in his leg. Kendra's father had to cut his business trip short after taking an unexpected visit to the ER, only to find out he had severe appendicitis and had to undergo emergency surgery. This resulted in Kendra being a little M.I.A. lately, tending to his needs.

But, with all the unfortunate

events that had occurred since the accident, I think the worst was my mom losing her job. After dedicating the last fifteen years of her life, she was wrongly accused of stealing a few valuable items from one of her patients. This left her so grief-stricken that she wouldn't leave the house from embarrassment. I tried to persuade her in every possible way that I could that nobody believed it, but she had it in her head that everyone thought she was a thief. I knew my mother would never steal from anyone. She had no reason to. We never possessed the finer things in life, but we never exactly needed them either, nor would we ever steal to have them.

Physically, I was worn down.

My body had been pulled in so many directions that I didn't think I could stretch another cell from my insignificant stature. Aside from school, I'd been spending most of my time at Phillip's. Since I was the one that put him in the situation he was in, I felt it was my duty to take care of him. Besides, he'd been so sweet and understanding that I wanted to take advantage of his new profound self before he flipped personalities on me.

Phillip's mom, aka the Ice Queen Bitch, surprised me the most. She was very encouraging of me spending so much time at their house. Normally, she sought any reason she could to keep me from stepping foot on their property.

Now, she was finding every excuse to leave me with Phillip while she ran her imaginary errands. She even went out of her way to send her apologies to my mother for, as she put it, “getting caught with your hand in the cookie jar,” whatever that meant. I couldn’t imagine her being sentimental enough to feel any sympathy for anyone other than herself or her family.

When I wasn’t with Phillip, I was either at home, surrounding my mother with all things positive, or with Kendra, giving her my support since she had always been there for me. Before now, Kendra had never experienced any life-threatening sickness in her family, so, when her dad had his surgery, it took

its toll on her.

Unfortunately, the least amount of my time was spent at my place of solace—my job. I'd always loved my job, and it had always been my time to lose myself in my thoughts and make those trivial life decisions I'd had to make during the last three and a half years. Sadly, my time at work, though, had almost become non-existent lately. After the accident, I asked to cut my hours back so I could spend more time nursing Phillip, but, after my mom lost her job, those extra hours became crucial for my family's survival. When I requested to gain those hours back, my manager refused after she heard the rumors about my mom. Maggie never came out and

said that was the reason, but, after walking up on hushed conversations about it and the way she has shunned me, I was no fool to believe any different.



My phone chimed in my pocket, breaking me from my trance.

**P: If u don't mind
can u bring me a
blanket plz?**

Quickly, I texted Phillip back to let him know that I would.

For just a moment, I thought for

sure I would see Jaxon's name appear on my screen.

Through all the craziness that had taken over my life during the past two weeks, it hadn't occurred to me until now that Jaxon hadn't bothered to text or call. I knew that he was aware of the car accident because Kendra sheepishly confessed about telling him. She thought that I would be upset with her, figuring that, by telling him, he would make a special trip to see me. Apparently, her plan spiraled downward into a black hole.

Sure, our communication had become strained since he'd left, mostly my fault. I wasn't the best to respond.

But, still, he always went out of his way to stay in touch—nearly every day—even if it was just to say hi. I guessed he decided after going back home that befriending a teenage girl like me was a waste of his time.

A bar-owning guy with his looks and personality was only going to draw in the most desirable women known to mankind. It was obvious that he could have any woman—or possibly man—anytime, anywhere that he wanted. I should've been realistic in the beginning.

I just wondered how long he'd kept up the charade until he finally decided to stop leading me on and move

on with his life.

My heart felt a jolt of searing pain, as if a needle had just pierced it. It was stupid of me to develop feelings for him. Hell, I didn't even know if my own feelings were real or just a crush. Maybe I was just looking for a rebound guy. I was so screwed up, I didn't even know what I felt or wanted anymore.

And to think he wanted me to come out and visit during spring break. Who was he kidding?

“Silly, silly girl,” I murmured to myself, shaking my head.

It was time for me to live in the present and focus my time on repairing

all the damage I'd caused Phillip, not to mention help my mom find another job and repair her reputation.

Opening the linen closet door, I reached in to grab Phillip a blanket as requested. What I wasn't expecting to find was every type of quilt, throw, or bedspread sporting some sort of Wake Forest logo. I didn't want to take any of them to him because I knew it would be a painful reminder of what had been taken away... of what I cheated him of. Again, I felt the guilt button being pushed in the pit of my stomach. *God, was it ever going to go away?*

When I picked up one of the blankets, I was taken by surprise when a

small, silver antique jewelry box tilted, and pieces of jewelry came spilling out. My mouth fell open in disbelief. The jewelry was exactly like what my mother had been accused of stealing. *That damn Ice Queen Bitch!* I was raging mad. She set my mother up. She'd had this all planned out. No wonder she'd been so kind to me. She's been stabbing me in the back all this time.

My heart accelerated, and I squeezed my fists then released them repeatedly, exercising the tense muscles in my arms. I took a few deep breaths in attempt to calm my nerves. I guessed this was her revenge for what I'd done to Phillip. I'd hurt the thing that was most precious to her, so she was going to hurt

the one person that was most precious to me. Fury brewed within me that she would stoop this low.

Pulling my phone from my pocket, I decided to take a picture. Carefully, I picked the earrings and necklace up with the blanket and put them back in their original place, trying not to tamper with them any more than what I had already.

Hurrying down the steps, I strode into the living room where Phillip was lying on the couch watching TV. I wondered if he knew. I had to believe that he didn't. I had to believe she wouldn't be dumb enough to involve him. Now I had to figure out what I was

going to do. *How could I confront her without it backfiring on me?* This was going to take some time for me to figure out, and I had to plan it out very carefully.

Awaiting his reaction, I cringed inwardly as I draped the blanket across Phillip.

“What’s wrong, Court?” He looked at me quizzically.

I tried my best to fake a bubbly persona. “Nothing, nothing at all, why you ask?” Carrying on nonchalantly, I tucked the ends around his legs. After I situated the blanket to my liking, I turned to take my seat in the recliner when he abruptly grabbed my forearm and pulled

me down onto him.

My chest landed flush with his as my legs dangled off the side of the couch. Not intending to, but my face landed right in the crook of his neck. I inhaled the fresh aroma of soap, shampoo, and cologne that swarmed around him. My heart began to stammer. *You stupid, stupid girl. What are you doing?*

Phillip held me close to him. "I've known you for far too long. Now tell me what's wrong," he spoke softly in a deep tone.

I lifted my head from his neck. I didn't need his scent muffling my thoughts. Keeping my eyes averted from

his, I stared solely at a family portrait of the Wilkins hanging on the wall above the gray-stoned fireplace, a picture that had been taken two years ago at church. I'd never forget that day as long as I lived. It was the day I lost my virginity.

It was nothing like I thought it would be. I was expecting some kind of firework explosion to take place during that magical moment like I had always heard and read about, but mine was painful, messy, and the most unpleasurable juncture I had ever experienced. I'd wanted to climb up to the next level in our relationship as much as Phillip had, but my reasoning was more out of curiosity than love. I wish it had been planned out better—fairytale

fashion instead of getting humped a total of five times in the bed of a pick-up truck on a deserted dirt road. *Classy.*

My mother would have been furious with me if she knew I'd been deflowered. She had preached to me since I was a little girl to save myself for marriage. The thing was, I always looked at it as though Phillip was my future husband, so what harm would there have been if we got a jump start on our sexual life.

Now, as I stared at that picture and thought of that day, I wished I could go back in time and change that moment. I didn't know if I would still choose Phillip to be my first and only partner,

but I did know I would make sure it was the most romantic point of my life. Making it a time that would bring a glorious smile upon my face and a sensation full of pure satisfaction.

“You thinking about that day? Is that what has you upset?”

Rapidly blinking my eyes, I brought myself back to the here and now. Phillip’s head was stretched over the arm of the couch, straining his neck to get a better view of the picture I got so lost in. “A little.” It wasn’t exactly a lie, but it wasn’t the truth either.

He lightly trailed his fingertips back and forth along the spine of my back. Since his accident, I had noticed

his affection toward me growing daily. It kind of reminded me how he used to be when we first started dating.

When I looked away from the picture, I saw Phillip had focused his attention elsewhere. He was staring at me. The expression in his eyes took me by surprise. It was a look of plea. *Was he still asking for my forgiveness? Did I ever tell him out loud that I forgave him the moment I nearly took his life?*

As I lay on top of the gorgeous boy I fell in love with nearly four years ago, giving everything I owned to him including my heart, I realized I'd never let him know he was forgiven.

Holding his warm, brown eyes, I

told him those three little words I never thought I would ever say to him again, “I forgive you,” I whispered.

The words ‘thank you’ barely left his mouth before his warm, plump lips caressed mine.

The kiss was unexpected.

He cradled my face in his hands, kissing me so tenderly. Even though I should, I didn’t discard him. His tongue swept along mine, but he never intensified our embrace. The smallest part of my brain that screamed at me to stop, that what I was doing was wrong and that I would regret it later, got shoved aside by the strong feelings of love and lust gushing throughout my

body. Unbeknownst to me, I had kept those feelings hidden, having thought I had turned those emotions off. But it seemed as if a genuine touch of affection was all it took to bring my love back to the surface.

Phillip kissed me with so much passion and urgency, never turning forceful. It felt like he was making up for the last six months of being apart. His breathing turned heavy, as did mine, as his left hand slipped away from my face, slowly rubbing its way down to my back. That hand stopped at the small of my back pulling me into him. Hard.

My body instantly stiffened when I felt his erection pushing into my upper

thighs. “What’s wrong?” Phillip purred against my lips. “Please, don’t. I miss you, Court. God, I’ve missed you so much.” My mouth was enveloped with his lips, his tongue, his intoxicating kiss, before I ever got the chance to protest. Relaxing into the kiss, he devoured me like I was his last meal.

The sound of a door closing awoke my senses, causing me to jump off of Phillip in a flash. In the process, I nearly tripped over his crippled leg. Deep breaths placated my body, overcoming my outlandish panting. I didn’t dare turn around to catch a glimpse of Phillip. I could only hope he was pulling his composure together better than I was.

His mother rounded the corner right as I adjusted my blouse. My brain cranked into overtime.

What was I doing? How far would things have gotten if his mom had not come home? Did I want this with him again? Did he really miss me? Was he screwing with my head again? Was he—

“Courtney!” Phillip yelled, interrupting my inner battle.

I jerked my head around to face him. His tone was not the sweet voice he used with me just a few moments ago.

Phillip looked at me curiously. “Are you okay?” His voice softened

with unease.

“Sure... why?” My mind felt fuzzy. Why did Phillip always have this effect on me? He loved playing mind games with me, and I was always the weakest pawn.

He continued staring at me with a look of confusion. “Mom was talking to you, and you never responded. You looked like you were lost in space.” He pulled himself up into a sitting position using all his upper body strength. “You haven’t acted right since you came downstairs to bring me a blanket. Are you sure nothing is wrong?” The muscles in his biceps and shoulders bulged against his skin. My body responded

deeply as I remembered how those strong arms felt wrapped around me.

I had to get away. If I stayed any longer, I knew I would only complicate things more... for me.

Rubbing my temples, I feigned discomfort. “Actually I’m not feeling that great, I think a migraine is trying to take over. If you don’t mind, I’m going home to lie down for a while.” I winced, hoping they would buy my little fib.

“No problem, I’m finished with my errands for the day, so I can take care of Phillip,” Phillip’s mom grinned.

Her smile seemed forced, and when she spoke to me in a pleasant

manner, her mouth moved in a way one would do to keep from biting their tongue. The more I was around her, the more I questioned her motives. After discovering the stolen jewels in the closet, I knew exactly what her motives were. I had to beat her at her own game though.

Instantly, I grabbed my keys from the end table.

“Can I get a goodbye hug?” Phillip asked.

I nodded, taking baby steps until I reached him. Leaning down, I gave him one of those friendly hugs with the little pats on the back, but Phillip wasn't accepting it. Instead, he pulled me tight

against him and whispered in my ear. “Don’t overthink us. Let it flow naturally.” He gently kissed my earlobe before releasing me.

Pulling away quickly, I scampered out of the house to my car before I chanced passing out. Once inside, I shut the door and let out the deepest breath, releasing the fog that was blurring my thinking process.

One more hiccup to add to my already complicated life.

Chapter 23 ~ Jaxon

My muscles screamed in agonizing pain, my lungs burned from the deprivation of oxygen, but it still wasn't enough to override the thoughts of Courtney residing in my brain. Swimming had always been my release, but, oddly, it wasn't working this time.

The first of April was two weeks away. Spring break for Courtney was two weeks away, and I still had not heard anything from her. It had been four weeks since our last conversation. My obsession was beginning to worry me. She was obviously done with me, so I needed to pull my head out of my ass and

focus my time living my life post-Courtney. Shit was always easier said than done.

My head thrust from the water with intense force as my lungs engulfed every ounce of air and smog it could obtain. Resting my head on the warm concrete, I clung to the side of the pool, panting heavily as the lower half of my body fell limp beneath the cool water.

That all-too familiar voice tugged me from my deep thoughts. “I could watch you work those back muscles all day long.” I kept my head down, eyes closed. She loved using her thick Spanish accent when trying to seduce me. “Go the fuck home, Val.” I

mumbled against the porcelain surface of the poolside.

“Don’t be mean, Jax. You said I was welcomed to join you anytime I liked.” Her voice grew louder as she bent down closer to me. “Don’t you remember?” Her acrylic nails scraped along my scalp as she twirled my hair in between her fingers. *One of these days I’m gonna buzz-cut the shit.*

Right when I was about to tell her those days were long over, I made the mistake of lifting my head to look at her. Greeting me was red patent-leather stilettos snuggled comfortably around freshly manicured toes. Her slim, light brown legs, that I’d had wrapped around

me more times than I'd like to admit, were bent in a squatting position. She'd left her legs open just enough to let me know she was not wearing any panties. I looked away as soon as I saw her bald pussy. "Why bother wearing a skirt if you're gonna show that shit?" I slipped underwater, not in the mood to hear her excuses and swam over to the opposite side of the pool, hoping she would take my rudeness as a cue to leave.

Before I emerged out of the water, I could see her blurry form hovering by the edge, waiting for me to come up for air. I needed a distraction. I wanted a distraction, but Valeria was not the distraction I was looking for.

I allowed for only my head to bob out of the water, not giving her the satisfaction of ogling over my body. “What? What the hell do you want, Val?” My tone was harsh.

She dropped my towel she’d been holding onto the ground. “Why are you always so fucking mean to me? I treat you like a fucking king, and all you ever do is treat me like shit.” Her chin quivered slightly, holding back a cry.

Guilt washed over me. She was right though, I’d used her and abused her. And, no matter how severe or small the circumstance was, she always stood by my side. She’d always been there for me when I needed that comfort. Besides

Troy, she was the only other person I trusted. Well, almost. There were some things she didn't know or need to know—Courtney. She wasn't just my friend, though; she was also my fuck buddy, a fuck buddy that was in love with me. No matter how many times I told her that I didn't carry the same feelings, she still remained loyal to me.

I hoisted myself up out of the pool from the deep end. My arms felt a little like wet noodles after swimming for over an hour. Picking up the towel that Valeria had dropped, I soaked up the water droplets that clung to my chilled skin. “Look, Val, I’m not trying to be mean, but you can’t come over here dressed like that, purposely enticing me

with your tits and ass hanging out.” I couldn’t figure out if her top was a bra or a bikini top, whatever it was, it definitely was barely there.

“So, you still think I’m sweet and juicy like a peach?” she asked softly, giving me a child-like innocent look. So much for the guilt I’d just felt.

“For fuck sake stop it! Just fuckin’ stop it!” I yelled, throwing my towel down onto the chaise lounge. “It’s not happening, so just leave. Go home, go to work, go somewhere, just not here.” Walking toward the pool house, I ignored her presence, hoping she would give up and walk away.

“Who is she?” Valeria asked,

stopping me dead in my tracks. I kept my back to her. “Since you’ve been back from North Carolina you’ve been giving me the cold shoulder.” Her heels clicked loudly against the concrete as she walked closer to me.

I turned to face her. “As usual, it’s always about you,” I said shaking my head. “I have a lot on my plate right now, Val. I don’t have time to babysit your ass. Just because I’m not paying special attention to you doesn’t mean I’ve met someone.” Val reached up to swipe her eyes underneath her sunglasses. I knew then she was crying.

“Fuck!” I screamed.
Manipulative bitch.

She played me like a fiddle, and I let her every damn time. It was the same vicious cycle. I couldn't win for losing.

No longer was I able to watch her cry. Her pain hurt me as well. I knew her tears were real because I knew her true feelings for me. Reaching for her, I grabbed her shoulder to pull her to me in a tight embrace. "I'm sorry," I whispered, "But you can't keep torturing yourself. We will never be, Val. You're a great friend, and you've always been there for me, but you've got to move past the idea of us having a happily ever after." Pulling back from our embrace, my hands settled on her shoulders. I stared into her brown eyes with tears

still puddled around the bottom edge. “I love you, but I’m not in love with you,” I said with much sympathy. “I know it hurts you to hear that, but I can’t pretend to feel something I don’t. It’s not fair to either of us.”

Valeria nodded, indicating she understood. This wasn’t the first time we had had this conversation, though.



Needing to prepare myself for a busy night, I made my way to the bar. It was St. Patrick’s Day, and we had a

band performing that used to be locals around the area before moving away to Seattle, Washington. After giving Val some reassurance, I told her she could have the night off. I figured it was the least I could do after breaking her heart for the millionth time. The girl was glutton for punishment. No matter how cruel I was to her, she always came back for more. Our little escapades probably didn't help matters either. Unbeknownst to her, those would never happen again.

Troy was probably going to chew my ass out for short-staffing him, but I knew I could convince him that I'd pick up her slack. *Looks like I better put on my show-stopping smile, I had some ladies to charm tonight.*

As I pulled my old seventy-two pick-up truck into the parking lot of my bar, my phone chimed. *Reed, huh? Now that was someone I hadn't talked to in a while.* Maybe I could finally get a few answers. Before I took the call, I parked my truck in my personal spot.

“What up, cuz? It's about damn time you returned my calls. I was beginning to think you decided to decline my offer.”

“Never, man. I would be a fool to give up an opportunity like what you're giving me.”

“Where the hell have you been? Actually, where the hell have all of you been?”

“Sorry, dude. I’ve been so busy with school. I’m trying to cram everything in so I can finish up before graduation. I’ve also been working my ass off so I can get ahead on my bills before I fly out in April.”

“I told you the job is yours whether you have that degree or not. I also told you I would give you advancement if you needed it, and your trip out here is on me, so what excuse you got for me now?”

“I know, I know, I just don’t like depending on people. I like taking care of my own shit myself, ya know?”

In order to find out what had been going on with Courtney, I needed to

maneuver my way around the conversation

“I understand where you’re coming from. So, is Kendra still coming out with you?”

“I’m not sure. Things have been a little rocky between her and Courtney lately. She knew I would be busy with you and spending my time in training. Now that Courtney isn’t coming, she’s been indecisive about whether she wants to come or not.”

Damn. Not exactly the news I was hoping to hear.

“So Court’s not coming? What’s happened?”

“Dude, ever since that damn accident she was in with Phillip, she’s been up his ass catering to his every need. I’m not sure what’s going on there. Kendra’s pissed about it. She threatened Courtney of ending their friendship if Courtney continues to pursue Phillip. All I know is what Kendra tells me. I’ve been trying to stay out of it as much as possible. You know that damn girl drama.”

“Fuck!”

My frustration was meant to stay in my head and never fall out of my mouth for Reed to hear.

“I’m sorry, cuz. I know you two sort of had a little thing going on, but,

when it comes to that prick, he has a way of manipulating her every time. From what Kendra tells me, she's so eaten up with guilt that she blames herself for the accident and his broken leg. The little fucktard's basketball career is ruined. I personally think it's pretty damn funny. Serves him right."

All of a sudden I had a sick feeling in my gut that I had not felt in a long time. It was so disheartening to hear she had flown right back to him as soon as I left. *Was she really that type of girl?* I had never seen that side of her in the short time I spent with her. Or was it just because of the accident that she'd cut me out of her life? Things were so good between us when I was there, and,

even after I left, she still seemed into me. I could clearly see Heather coming out of her though, and taking all the blame even if it wasn't strictly her fault.

Reed interrupted my train of thought.

“Helllooo, Jaxon. Are you still there?”

“Yeah, yeah, I'm still here. Sorry, I was slightly distracted. Well, if Kendra or Courtney either one decides to make that trip with you, just let me know.”

“I will. I've been staying on Kendra's back about coming with me, but, I'm telling you, she's pretty adamant

about not going unless Courtney goes. Besides, aside from Courtney being stuck up Phillip's ass, I don't know if she would come anyway because her mom recently lost her job and they've been struggling to pay their bills"

"What the hell?"

"Dude, there's been so much crazy shit that's gone on since you've left, I can't wait to get out to Cali for some normalcy and hopefully a whole lot of relaxation."

Reed continued to fill me in on all the details he was aware of. I was happy to hear from him, but not so happy with the news he left me.

After we hung up, I decided to make one last ditch effort to contact Courtney.

Chapter 24 ~ Falling In, Falling Out

It was exactly seven weeks to the day since the accident. We had just finished one of many physical therapy sessions and were now on our way back to Phillip's house.

My phone rang, indicting a call from my mother.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you, sweet daughter of mine,” my mother exclaimed. “You have no idea how perfect you have made my day. I can't believe you were keeping this a secret from me. Why would you let me stress for so long without telling me? I haven't

slept a wink—”

She was acting like a crazy loon, so I cut her off from her hysterical rambling. “Whoa, whoa, whoa, hold up a minute. What the heck are you talking about, mom? What are you thanking me for?” I asked, confused. Phillip leaned over the console, stretching his neck so he could eavesdrop. *Nosey fool.*

Switching my phone over to my left ear, I scooted a little closer against the driver’s door so I could keep my phone conversation private.

“I drove over to the power company today to see if they would let me pay at least half of our bill before they decide to turn our power off. Well,

to my surprise, they told me my bill was already paid in full, and I have a five hundred dollar credit.” Her voice hiked up to a level I was pretty sure only a dog could hear. “How did you do it? Wait, please don’t tell me you had someone to help you take out a loan or you borrowed from Kendra’s parents, or, worse, fell for one of those advance cash gimmicks?”

Glancing over at Phillip, I saw he was giving me a hard glare. I knew he wasn’t happy that I wasn’t allowing him to listen in on my phone call, but those days were over.

“Mom,” I deadpanned.

She began to ramble again,

ignoring me and talking about how naïve I was, and that I would only throw us further into debt.

“Mom!” I yelled, cutting her off again. “Would you please stop for a moment and just listen to me? I haven’t done anything. I don’t even know what you’re talking about.” I didn’t want to prolong the conversation with her, knowing Phillip’s impatience was increasing by the second.

“So you really don’t know anything about this?” Her happiness drifted from her voice.

“Sorry, mom, I don’t.”

“Shit!” She huffed into the phone,

nearly rupturing my ear drum.

She almost made me giggle. Mom rarely cursed, but, when she did, I always found it funny. From the change in her manner, though, I didn't think she would appreciate my wit at this moment. "What if... surely it couldn't be..." she drifted off, not finishing her thoughts.

"What if what, mom? Who are you thinking it might be?"

"Have you contacted your father?" she queried, her tone sounding accusatory.

Where the hell did that come from? I hadn't spoken to that piece of

shit known as my father since he called me for my thirteenth birthday, and all I told him then was to stay out of my life.

“Heck, no!” I shouted. “You know I would never contact that a— butthole.” Luckily, I caught my tongue before my mom’s rage flew off the scale.

“Watch your tone, missy. Have you told anyone else about our financial problems, Court? I’m not going to be known around town as a thief *and* a charity case.” Her tone was firm, outlined with anger.

Mom had always been too proud to depend on anyone for assistance. Even during the toughest of times, she refused to ever rely on government

assistance or help from anyone else. I guess she had too much pride, and, for that, I envied her.

“I’ve only told Kendra.” I honestly replied. Gosh, I so didn’t want to talk about this any further in front of Phillip. Hearing a one-sided conversation was only going to raise questions later, especially after I just admitted that I’d told Kendra something that I hadn’t shared with him. There was no denying we had become very close since the accident, but I still had my limits on how much knowledge of my personal life he needed to know.

My eyes stayed focused on a few robins digging for worms in Phillip’s

front yard. Knowing he had to be furious with me at this point I was afraid to look at him. I had to figure out a quick way to end my conversation before things got heated to a burning degree.

As I watched the robins find food for survival, knowing their only fear in the world was their line-up in the food chain, it dawned on me that I was no longer owned by Phillip. I could do as I pleased. He had no control of me. I had control of my own life now. With confidence, I looked at him, ready to face any wrath he tossed my way. But to my surprise, he was gazing out of the passenger side window, watching his neighbors pick weeds from their flowerbeds.

“Courtney Danielle Peterson!” My mother exclaimed.

Startled, I dropped my phone in my lap. When my mother used my full name it was never a good sign. I scrambled around to answer her. “Yes?”

“Are you ignoring me?”

“No ma’am.” I frowned. “Sorry, I got distracted,” I said, watching Phillip lost in his own world.

She sighed. “Do you think it is possible Kendra told her parents?”

I huffed, “No mom, I really don’t. She wouldn’t do that.” Phillip finally turned to look at me, a genuine

smile plastered on his beautiful face. His eyebrows shot up and his hand motioned for me to hurry up. “Look, mom, I need to get off of here, can we talk about this when I get home?”

My mom grunted in the phone. “Yeah, and that’s not all I want to talk about with you when you get home. I think we need to discuss Phillip, too.” I could just picture her smirky grin on the opposite end of our phone call. *Great!*

I rolled my eyes. “Okay, mom.” I pulled the phone away from my ear to hit the end button when I heard her shout my name.

I didn’t expect the exciting nature in her voice when she gushed into the

phone. “Oh my gosh! Don’t hang up yet. I forgot to tell you the rest of my exciting news.” Geez, she was flip-flopping all over the place today. “Reed stopped by the house today. He told me about the new restaurant/bar opening up in a couple of months and asked if I would be interested in a job.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I told him of course. It looks like your senior year is going to end on a happy note after all, sweetie.”

My thoughts drifted to that one person that made me happy during the holidays—Jaxon. Remembering the laughs and smiles he’d placed on my face saddened me. How easily he’d

forgotten me after leaving. I knew that I wasn't any better in communicating with him, but I would have thought for sure he would've at least contacted me. If not for any other reason than to at least see how I was doing. How could I have been so stupid to believe that I was actually getting a chance to visit him in California, to finally travel out of North Carolina? *Oh well, I guess life goes on.*

“I'm so happy for you, mom.” I truly was. The misery she'd drudged through over the last five weeks was wearing her down. I hadn't seen her so unhappy since my grandparents passed away.

Mom began clicking her tongue.

What could it be now? She only did this when she was contemplating whether or not to say what was on her mind. “Just spit it out,” I droned.

“Well, Reed also mentioned to me that Jaxon is the owner of my new place of employment—”

“*Annnd?*” I questioned, cutting her off. I absolutely did not want to discuss him in front of Phillip. Talking in code was not my forte’.

Mom giggled in the phone. “Well I was just wondering if you two still talk. You know, he was a really nice guy...”

I masked a grin. “Okay mom, I’ll

talk to you later. I love you. Bye.” I tapped end before she could make our conversation any more awkward.

Hopping out of Phillip’s 4Runner, I moved at a snail’s pace, buying myself time getting over to his side to help him out of his truck. Racking my brain, I tried to think up a quick conversation piece before he had the chance to question my phone call.

Time was up. As I reached his door, my mind was still coming up empty. His eyebrows scrunched tightly together, watching me intently. *Oh shit, do something quick, Court.* I opened his door, and before he had the chance to say anything I grabbed the “oh shit”

handles, pulling myself up to meet him face to face. Then I kissed him lightly but fervently, leaving no hesitation for second guessing.

Phillip didn't seem to have any qualms about my candid attack, his arm snaked around my waist holding me close to him. His other hand palmed my cheek gracefully while his thumb floated over my skin, stopping for a moment to graze the outer edge of my lips. Then, moving lower, he rubbed it back and forth so tenderly along my jaw line.

Phillip deepened the kiss, our tongues exploring each other's mouth. I tasted the sweetness I remembered. The sweetness I used to love and crave...

and possibly still did. He released my face, his hand trickling down along my thigh. His fingers crawled their way up my jeans, making their way up under my shirt to lightly caress my waist. He then explored higher to palm my breast over my bra, his thumb rubbing back and forth, bringing things to a peak. A small moan escaped me.

I was surprised by how good it felt. It had been so long. My own betrayal sent a shot of nerves into the pit of my stomach. The questions started overflowing my mind—*Was this what I really wanted? Was I leading him on? Was this going to change everything?* Quickly, I pulled back, breaking the kiss I was drowning in. Both of us were

panting and filled with desire. I searched his eyes looking for some sort of clue that this was right. I needed to know.

He took a couple of deep breaths, trying to regain his composure. “Why did you do that?” he asked. His hand fell from my breast resting on my waist. The touch still felt electrifying.

At that moment, I noticed I had a death grip on the handles. I loosened my fingers bringing the blood flow back to surface. “Do what? Kiss you or stop kissing you?” I breathed.

“Both.”

I paused a moment before speaking. “To be honest, I don’t know. It

was just something spontaneous,” I shrugged. I couldn’t tell him the real reason why I started it, but could I tell him the reason why I stopped it? I hoped I didn’t regret the words that were about to fall out of my mouth. “Phillip, it’s killed me to see you in so much misery and I want you to know how much I still care about you. I have wished every day that it was me that was in that passenger seat and not you. You will never know how sorry I am for what I did to you, and, if there was some way for me to repay you, I would do it in a heartbeat, no hesitation.” He sat there staring at me with no expression. He always had the best poker-face.

His big browns held mine, not

allowing me to look away. “That doesn’t really explain why you stopped, but you said something else that caught my attention.” He reached up to tuck a stray piece of hair behind my ear. The gesture was so simple, but so endearing. “Before we discuss this any further will you help me out? My leg is killing me, and I want to lie down and rest for a while.” The wheels started spinning like a dragster in my brain trying to think of what I had said to pique his interest.

I tried talking Phillip into lounging around on the couch because it was torturous on me to help him up the stairs, but he was insistent on relaxing on his bed. He said he didn’t want to be bothered by anyone. I thought it was

strange because nobody was here but us, and his family was gone for the day visiting his aunt and uncle up in Boone.

Sitting in his office chair, I stared at him, but not really looking at him lying before me on the bed. The questions started burning back into my thoughts about the feelings that came to life during our kiss. It felt stronger this time than before.

“Courtney,” he said, patting the empty spot beside of him on the bed. “Come over here and talk to me. You look like you’re a million miles away,” he smiled crookedly.

Reluctantly, I sat down beside him with my legs crisscrossed, facing

him. The butterflies came to life in my belly. I wasn't sure if it was from nerves or from the old feelings I was battling with.

“I’m not going to pussy-foot around... I need to know...” He cleared his throat a couple of times. “Do you love me?” he asked quietly. His hooded eyes opened widely, his stare locked with mine to assess my reaction.

My heart rate accelerated, and the butterflies turned into a massive swarm. I smiled warmly at him, “Yes. But that doesn’t change anything, Phillip.”

He laughed a little. “But it does because I’ve learned through all of

this..." he said, pointing at his leg, "... that the times we've been apart these past few months, that I still love you too. When I told you back during Christmas that it killed me to be away from you, I meant it." He grabbed my hand, interlacing my fingers with his. "As bad as the wreck was, I honestly believe it happened for a reason, Courtney. God brought us back together because he knows we belong together." He gently pulled my hand to his lips, placing a soft kiss in my palm.

I was speechless. I was confused. I was overwhelmed.

"Stop overthinking. Let things happen naturally. I know you feel it too.

I know you feel that pull toward me, just as I feel it for you. Stop fighting it because you can't win. Believe me. I know. I've tried."

My body went numb. My body was going through the motions without any control over my actions. Phillip's fingers streamed through my hair, circling around the shell of my ear, teasing my lobe. His tongue moistened my lips before tasting my desire, our kiss more powerful this time than the previous two.

Our mouths separated, leaving my lips wanting more. He continued kissing a trail from my cheek up to my ear. "Don't think, just feel," he

whispered almost inaudibly, his lips brushing against my neck below my ear.

Unable to think, my head was buzzing from a high. My body tingled everywhere he touched me. Reveling in the intoxicating euphoria he brought over my body, I hadn't even notice he had unbuttoned my blouse or unclasped my bra. It wasn't until I felt his hot breath against my breast, followed by his cool tongue circling my small bud and deepening my arousal, that I became aware of his actions. It was all so surreal. I had never felt this way before with Phillip. He has never tended to my wants and needs in the past. But this time was different, this time he was showing me the true love I always sought from

him. Right now, at this moment, I knew his words of love were real. I could feel it.

Rising to my knees, I hastily jerked my blouse and bra the rest of the way off, tossing them onto the floor. Phillip had already removed his t-shirt, and lay on the bed wearing only his sweat pants. The string was untied and the band around his hips hung loosely. Closing my eyes, I inhaled a deep breath. There was no need for me to look at him. I could still remember exactly how he looked. I had memorized every curve, every groove, every freckle, every scar, the little birthmark that rested right along his rib, and the light trail of hair that led to his most

treasured piece.

Slowly, I opened my eyes, finding that he was unbuttoning my jeans. Remaining still on my knees, I allowed him to take over my body. He tugged my jeans and panties down as far as he could reach, and without any hesitation, I finished the process for him.

Sucking in a deep breath, he slowly exhaled and spoke with passion. “God, I’ve missed that perfect body of yours,” he moaned as his hands easily gripped my waist and placed me on top of him.

“Phillip, I don’t want to hurt you. What about your leg?” I warned.

He chuckled in response, “Court, my leg is the least of my worries right now. The way you make me feel is too good to hurt anything else.”

Now straddling his waist, he pulled me closer, placing his mouth on my breast, and flicking my firm nipple with his tongue. His other hand ran over my waist before cupping my breast, massaging tenderly. I wanted to touch him, I needed to touch him. Reaching around behind me, I found the firmness I was searching for, a shot of heat running through my core causing it to tingle with hunger.

Neither one of us could wait any longer. All foreplay had disappeared as

we became ravenous for one another. Phillip grabbed both sides of my bottom, pulling me to him to devour my mouth. His hands worked behind me to release himself from the only piece of clothing left between us. He maneuvered me around smoothly, positioning me in the perfect location to bring us both pleasure. My breath hitched, and Phillip let out a loud moan as he leisurely pulled me down onto him. The sensation was intense. It felt so different than any time before. Better. I hovered over Phillip, picking up a continuous rhythm. His hands skimmed up my waist until they reached the underside of my breast, squeezing gingerly each time I pushed him further into me.

Our eyes locked into place, the brown of his and the green of mine combining into one, creating an abundant color of nature as we acted like primal beasts. “Court... I’m not far... when I say off... you’ve got to move... fast,” he choked out breathlessly. Speeding up my movements, I began to feel a strange, but lavishing, sensation that I had never experienced before. “Off!” Phillip spat out. I didn’t want to get off, I wanted to continue. I wanted to experience this strange but wonderful madness growing within my core. “Dammit, get off!” Phillip yelled.



The next thing I knew, I was lying on the floor and the corner of my head was throbbing. I couldn't rationalize what just took place. Reaching up to rub my head, I felt something wet. I pulled my fingers away, seeing blood on the tips. Looking down at myself, I noticed I was completely naked. I scurried up, crawling around on the floor to gather my clothes. What had happened right before I was knocked unconscious started flooding back into my memory. I felt sick. Still dazed, I looked around me, trying to determine

what I hit my head on. I could only assume it was the night stand. I rummaged through my clothes putting them back on quickly. Surges of pain shot through my head with every sudden movement I made.

Once I completed the task of dressing myself. Slowly, I pulled myself up onto the bed. Phillip lay on the bed with his arms folded behind his head. I was puzzled. Why was he laying there so relaxed while I was injured, struggling to put the pieces back together?

He glared at me and laughed. “You stupid fuckin’ bitch,” he sneered, his head shaking at me like I’m an idiot. “You thought you won this little game

didn't you?" he pushed himself up into a sitting position, resting his back against the head board. "Well guess what, Jeanette? Checkmate. I fucked you over good this time. Literally." His laugh was frightening me. He sounded like a mad person.

Feeling like a fool, tears began welling in my eyes. I didn't want to appear weak, but I couldn't stop them from forming.

"Go figure, you're gonna start crying like the little bitch you are," he scorned, rolling his eyes. "Did you seriously think I meant all those things I told you?"

I stood still, not able to speak. If

I opened my mouth, I knew my terror and sorrow would take over. My heart was pounding, beating against my chest. As I felt the onslaught of a panic attack, I knew I had to do something quick to fight it back. I couldn't let myself become vulnerable once again.

“When you said you wished it were you that got the broken leg, well, guess what, I wished it was you too. I don't deserve to be lying here, unable to hang out with my friends, party with the girls, or play basketball,” he gritted the last bit at me. “You ruined my fucking life, and I will *hate* you forever for it!” he screamed, emphasizing the word hate at me, causing my body to shudder. “Stay away from me and my family. And you

especially better stay away from my dad. You two are so fucking creepy the way you make over each other. If I didn't know any better, I would think you're in love with him."

Poison fell out of his mouth with each word and slur he threw at me.

"Mark my words—you will never make me look like a fool in front of anyone in this town ever again. If you ever do, you'll suffer the consequences far greater than what you experienced today." His neck veins became engorged, his face turned a bright shade of red, and his nostrils flared with each noisy breath he took.

As he spat malicious words at

me, anger began to mold my heart, turning it cold. The fear and hurt that I felt before was rapidly boiling, turning into rage. Angry tears started spilling from my eyes. I didn't care anymore. I wasn't afraid at this moment. I had finally had enough—the bullying, the possessiveness, the anxiety, the manipulating. It wasn't going to control me anymore... he wasn't going to control me anymore. “Keep on with your threats you worthless piece of shit.” I pointed my finger at him, unable to control the shaking madness that infringed every nerve ending in my body. “Is that all you can do? Bully a girl? I'd like to see you grow some balls for once in your life and face a man. But you're

not a man are you, Phillip? No, you're still just a young, little boy, and you got the dick to prove it." I mocked.

"I don't recall you saying that when you were riding me like a stallion. If I remember correctly, you were squeezing your eyes shut tight, biting your lip because I was pumping you full," he said with one hundred percent pride.

"Don't threaten me, Phillip. I do have the upper hand at this moment. Remember, you are the one crippled here, not me." I didn't give him time to lash cruel words at me again. After walking out of his bedroom, I braced myself against the wall in the hallway. I

released a shattering breath. My anger was dissipating, and the pain in my heart resurfaced. I ran downstairs. I had to get away from him, from here. He started shouting profanities at me, telling me I was a whore, saying my mom was a thief and for me not to steal anything on my way out. I wanted to yell at him and tell him his mother was the thief, but I didn't want to waste another breath on him. I just wanted to escape from the hell I was in. As soon as I slammed the door behind me, I fell to the ground, releasing the sobs that invaded my chest.

It hurt. God, it hurt so much. It hurt the most because I had loved him. And he'd just proven to me that he didn't love me back... at all. I grabbed a

handful of newly grown grass, yanking it from the cool dirt in frustration. I questioned if he ever did. I felt so hollow inside. My chest ached. My heart bled with every beat it took. I was crying too. Digging my phone out of my purse, I hurried and sent Kendra a quick text to come get me ASAP.

The cut in my head started throbbing again, and the memories rushed back to me... I had been used. He'd manipulated me and turned it all into a sick joke. *I hate him... but I think I love him... No, I hate him.*

Chapter 25 ~ Jaxon

After hanging up with Reed, I didn't immediately call Courtney. I had to make sure I had all my shit together the way I wanted it before making the attempt. Fishing for more information, I texted Kendra a few times hoping she would be more helpful than Reed.

A week later, she became a lot more helpful.

The yawns wouldn't stop rolling on this particular morning. Tending to business this early wasn't something I was used to. Troy normally handled this part of the business, but was unable to

do so this day. The live estrogen I heard making obscene noises on the other side of our phone conversation probably had something to do with it. *Crazy bastard.* Knowing him, he had more than one girl in there at the time.

As I waited for the delivery guy to show up, I got bored. I strode over to the stage area to visit my favorite piece of instrument, my baby grand. I pulled the stool out, flipped the cover up, and skimmed my fingertips along the sleek, ivory keys. Settling down onto the stool, I began pondering over what tune I wanted to surprise the crowd with this evening. I jumped around from note to note playing with a few melodies I had been practicing. Getting lost in music

was my muse. Sometimes, it was my nightmare.

Not until my phone buzzed did I realize what song I was playing —‘Untitled’ by Simple Plan. It was always the same damn song that haunted me, that took over when I gave myself to my music, when I didn’t have control of my emotions. I always went back to that day... that time. My chest tightened and my throat closed in, clamping down around the lump of pain in my throat. Still, after four years, the open wound in my heart was still as fresh as it was the day I got the call from Heather’s mom telling me she was dead. *Would it ever subside? Would I ever be able to escape that song? Would that open*

wound ever scab over? I wondered if Courtney was my salvation, if she would be the one to save me from all the torment that stirred in my empty soul.

Glancing down at my phone, the lump in my throat began to dissolve when I noticed Kendra's name flash across the screen. I opened the text with hopes of some good news.

**K: Hey Jax! This
time difference
sucks!**

Her disposition made me smile. Reed liked to complain about the same thing, too.

K: I need ur help.

Me: Sure, what is

it?

**K: After a ton of
begging &
promises from
Reed, I finally
agreed 2 come
with him 2 visit u,
but I can't
convince Court 2
come with me.**

Another text popped up before
she gave me a chance to respond to the
last one.

**K: She's been
super depressed
lately & I can't
convince her 2
leave her house.
HELP!?**

I was not one to talk on the phone, but I needed to know more than a few words from a text message. So, having no choice, I called Kendra.

“What’s going on with Courtney?” I blurted out before she even had a chance to say ‘hi.’

Kendra breathed a heavy sigh into the phone. “Oh my gosh, Jaxon, it is sooo bad. She’s not eating, and she sleeps all the time. She goes through the motions of the day without knowing she’s in the world. I think a little getaway would cheer her up, but she won’t do it. I’ve begged her and begged her, but she won’t budge. I don’t know what else to do, that’s why I texted you.”

I chuckled. “So, you contact me?” My head shook at her ignorance. “Kendra, you do realize we’ve not talked since before her car accident, right?”

“Yes, I know, and that’s why she won’t go. She says you want nothing to do with her, and that you were just being nice while you had to.”

“I had to? What the hell? I texted her right after you told me about the wreck, then I texted her several more times after that, but I never got one damn reply back, so I don’t know what the hell she’s talking about.”

Pulling my phone away from my ear, I checked her number. I repeated it

to Kendra, just to make sure.

“Yes, that’s her number,” she responded. “How strange.”

“Yes, very strange. Either she’s lying to avoid me, or somebody’s screwing with her phone.” The name Phillip popped into my head, but I wasn’t about to make any accusations until I talked to Courtney myself. “I swear Kendra, I think too much of Courtney to play with her feelings like that. Despite whatever Reed might’ve told you about me, I’m not always a player.” It was a good thing, too, that Reed and I lost touch for some time because the less people knew about my mayhem years, the better off things

would be for me, and with Courtney.

“I know, Jaxon, I can tell she’s more than a convenient lay to you.” Silence settled over the phone for a moment. If Kendra only knew how true that statement was. “So... will you help me out? Please?”

I should’ve told her begging wasn’t necessary. I wanted Courtney out here just as much, if not more, than she did.

“Sure, but what about her mom, and what is Phillip going to say about it? I know those two are back together, so don’t pretend they’re not.” It sickened me to believe that she went back to that piece of shit.

“Her mom is no problem. I’ve already talked to her about this, and she’s willing to do about anything at this point just to get her back to normal again. As for Phillip... well, they’re no longer together. That’s kind of why she’s in this funk. They had a big fight, and he was very nasty, saying malicious things to her. I promise you, they are done like a turkey on Thanksgiving.”

I shook my head. It pissed me off a little that she blew me off just to appease that asshole again.

“I’ll call her. Just tell her to make sure she answers her phone this time.”

“She will, don’t worry. I’ll also

tell her you've been trying to get in touch with her, so she won't think I'm bull-shitting her. I gotta go, thanks again, Jaxon. Bye.” Kendra disconnected the call before giving me a chance to let her know I was planning on covering the costs for the plane tickets.

Not wanting to waste any more time, I called Courtney as soon as Kendra ended the phone call. My heart rate quickened with each ring. By the third ring, Courtney finally picked up. “If this is a charity call, don't bother.”

Her opening line made me chuckle. Her sweet, southern accent calmed my nervous jitters. I laughed inwardly at myself, trying to remember

the last time I actually got nervous over anything. *Damn, this girl.*

“Well, hi to you, too, Sweet Cheeks. It’s so nice of you to display that southern hospitality I miss so much. Not to mention you actually answered your phone.”

“Look, I know Kendra called you, so if you’re doing this as a favor to her, then do me a favor and hang up now.”

Wow, I wasn’t expecting the bitter tone she used to snap at me. Bitter or not though, just talking to her made me want her here with me more than I’d expected.

“And what do you mean answer my phone? I always answer my phone. Maybe you need to learn how to call and text people.” Feisty... I liked that. I was finding this new little side of Courtney hot.

“By the way, thanks for calling to check on me after getting t-boned by a big-ass dually. Good thing I wasn’t on my death bed, huh?”

I tried defending myself, but all I could get out was a grunt before she cut me off.

“You know, you had me fooled into thinking you were a different type of guy than the usual asshole I’m used to dealing with, but, in all reality, you’re

no different. You're just a player. How hard was it to pretend to be interested in me, Jaxon? Do you play charades with all the girls or just the underage ones?"

She was accusing me of things she had no clue about. I wondered if she was ever this nasty with Phillip.

"Whoa, hold up, Sweet Cheeks. It's not necessary to make ugly accusations. Your behavior is becoming immature, and you're jumping the gun without even knowing what you're talking about—"

"I don—"

"You had your chance to speak," I interrupted. "Now it's my turn. First of

all, I texted and called you several times, but you never responded back. I have the phone records to prove it, if you want to start passing the blame torch around. It was no different on my end, ya know? I sat here day in and day out thinking that you wanted nothing to do with me anymore. Then, after I hear about you and Phillip... hmph, well, I think you can make your assumptions on what thoughts filtered through my mind from that revelation.” I was trying my best to not lose my cool with her. She’d already compared me to Phillip, and that fucker was the last person I ever wanted to be linked to.

The entire conversation was turning out completely different than

what I had hoped for, but I knew it was up to me to fix it. She was in a dark place at the moment, and, from what Kendra told me, I was the only one that would be able to penetrate the blue bubble she was hiding inside. “Look, Court,” I pleaded, thinking that, by not using her pet name, she would see I wasn’t playing games with her, “I think we started this phone call off on the wrong foot. You thought one thing, I thought another, but actually it looks like we were both wrong. Now that we’ve learned neither one of us is at fault, I hope we can move past this and continue being friends again. No matter what you might think, Courtney, everything I’ve said to you before is the truth.” I

informed her with pure certainty.

She sighed heavily into the phone. “Jaxon, I apologize if I falsely accused you. But you better not be bull-shitting me. I had no idea you’ve been trying to contact me. I don’t even have an explanation for why I didn’t receive any messages. Phillip had my phone pretty often after his got destroyed in the accident, so that probably explains our miscommunication.”

“You should know me well enough by now that I’m not a bull-shitter.”

I knew that asshole was behind all this bullshit. I wanted to ask her about what happened between her and

Phillip, but I could sense that this wasn't the right time to be prying.

“So, can we put this whole misunderstanding behind us and go forward from this point?”

“Do you really want to waste your time on me? I'm nothing but a negative ball of energy right now, and you have too many wonderful goals coming up. You need to be focusing on that, not me.”

“Speaking of... Reed and Kendra are coming out in a few days, and, well, the trip just isn't going to be any fun if you don't come with them.” My heart started pumping with anticipation. “Before you start trying to

come up with excuses, your mom has already approved it, and the flight is paid for in full. All you need to do is bring your sweet southern self. So what do you say?" *Come on, Court, don't jerk me around now.*

The phone fell silent. I pulled it away from my ear to see if our call had somehow gotten disconnected, but it still showed the picture of her beautiful smile I stole in Reed's truck when she wasn't paying attention. "Court?"

She coughed a few times. "I'm still here. I'm just trying to think up the perfect excuse to not go. I'm sorry if that sounds rude, but I just don't know if I'm ready for this. And, when I say this, I

mean me and you, Jaxon. I know we're BFF's and all that, but I think it was pretty clear before you left that we could easily become so much more. Right?"

So, she felt it too.

Knowing she couldn't see me, I nodded. I didn't want to answer her honestly. I contemplated telling her it wasn't like that for me, but I didn't want to lie to her, nor myself. But mostly, I didn't want to hurt her any more than she'd already been hurt.

"Yes," I whispered. "But that won't be a problem this time, Court. I'll give you your space. I'll be the friend I declared to be. I just... I just think you need to get away from that little town.

You need a change of scenery and fresh, fun faces to whisk you away for a new adventure.”

The silence grew as I patiently waited for her to give me an answer. She started humming what sounded like *California Dreamin’* with an obsessive pen-clicking sound, echoing in the background. I took this as she was weighing her decision. It gave me hope. Contemplation was better than an instant “no.”

The humming ceased, and the silence returned. My hope fell to the floor just as quickly as it had risen up to the clouds.

“Fine. I’ll go.”

Wow! So much melancholy in her voice. It was up to me to bring her joy during this trip, to make her forget about life in North Carolina and everything Phillip-related.

Her gloom should have depressed me, but it didn't. Not when she had just given me the best damn news I'd received in a while. I couldn't fucking stop smiling. "Turn that frown upside down, Sweet Cheeks. I promise you, I'm going to make sure you have the freakin' time of your life."

"I'm holding you to it, too. Don't disappoint me, Jax." I heard a hint of a smile in her voice. *Baby steps, that's all I ask for.*

“No worries, Court, no worries. Just let me take care of everything. All you need to do is get your sweet ass on that plane and arrive safely. Plane tickets are already paid for and on their way.”

“On their way? But you didn’t even know if I would talk to you, much less come to see you.”

“I know, and it was a risk I was willing to take. I’m glad I did.”

She gave a slight chuckle. “You’re crazy, Jaxon Vaughn, you know that?”

“Yeah, I think I’ve been told that a time or two.” I smiled to myself. She

had no idea just how crazy I was for her.

“Thank you for calling me and straightening out our whole miscommunication issue. I’m looking forward to seeing you and having an epic time.”

“My pleasure, Sweet Cheeks.” And, with that, she ended our call.

My cheeks were on fire. The muscles burned from a smiling workout.

“Hot damn!” I shouted, throwing a few fist pumps into the air, feeling like a damn giddy little girl going to her first dance. I wanted to jump up and down and clap my hands in excitement, but my

testosterone had to draw the line on that one. I wasn't about to take a chance on Troy popping in unexpectedly. He'd been known for that before. My subconscious got the best of me. Whipping my head around back and forth, my eyes quickly scanned the empty dining area looking for signs of peeping Troy. After I assured myself he wasn't here to see this, I blew out a sigh of relief. He would ride my ass for days if he saw me now.

“I remember when I used to make you that happy, but those days have dwindled into the dust, haven't they, Jax?” Valeria said, walking up behind me.

Closing my eyes, I shook my head as the words ‘motherfucker’ slipped silently across my lips. Unfortunately, I was worried about the wrong person. I had other eyes watching me—silky brown and almond shaped.

She brushed up against me as she passed me, planting herself nose to nose in front of me. “So, who is she? And don’t fucking tell me no one because I heard your whole fucking conversation.” She was enraged.

“Val, I’m going to tell you like I’ve told you a million times before—Fuck. Off. It’s none of your fucking business what I do or who I do it with,” I said, seething. “And since you always

make it a point to be up in my shit, you better learn real fast to find yourself somewhere to go next week,” I added, hovering over her five-foot five frame. “Consider yourself on vacation next week because I just gave you the week off.” I quickly turned away. I had to distance myself from her. She wasn’t about to knock me down from my level of pure bliss. Feeling the need to get away, I headed for the exit doors to catch a breather.

“Have you told her about Heather?” She yelled from behind me. I spun around, hitting the hardwood floors as I made my way toward her at full speed. My muscles quivered and my breathing increased from the adrenaline

pumping through my veins. I stopped mere inches from her face. “Don’t you dare throw your nonchalant threats at me.” I gritted through my teeth. “I’m no fool, Val. I know you’re conniving little ways. If you dare think about showing your face around here next week, I’ll fire your ass once and for all, and I’ll cut you out of my life forever. Got it? Do I make myself clear?” I asked, my eyes narrowing harshly at her.

“As always, your wish is my command,” she said, pulling away from me.

There always has to be some sort of complication in my life. If she crossed paths with Courtney, I was doomed.

Troy would be easier to convince, but Valeria... that's a whole other story.

Chapter 26 ~ Californication

The day after I spoke to Jaxon on the phone a beautiful arrangement of forsythias arrived in an elegant crystal vase with a note attached saying ‘These represent anticipation.’ I sort of forgot how bold he could be. The unscented flowers cheered me up with their vibrant yellow petals. A day after that, his self-assurance reached a higher level when the FedEx guy dropped off a small package. I sent him two very neutral texts thanking him for both items. I didn’t want to lead him on into believing something magical was going to happen between us once I arrived.

When I pulled an iPod from the package he'd had delivered, I let out a discerning sigh. A whole list of songs was attached to it with the word 'California' somehow incorporated into each song title. How ironic. He included a note that read—"Just wanted to prep you for your trip to the golden state. Enjoy, Jax." I appreciated his effort, but I was still leery over the whole thing. After years of listening to girl's gossip in the bathrooms at school about making stupid decisions because they were on the rebound, I didn't want to be thrown into that category. With my past history, I was afraid it was highly likely, even if it was a one-time thing.

The days passed quickly, and,

before I knew it, it was the night before we were scheduled to leave. My suitcase was still lying in my closet empty, so, looking for some motivation, I spotted the iPod Jaxon had sent me lying on my dresser. I popped the ear buds in and scanned over the list of songs, looking for any I might be familiar with. There were only a few songs that I found remotely recognizable, so I started with the one I knew best—‘California Gurls’ by Katy Perry. After an hour of shaking my tush to Jaxon’s eclectic playlist, I had everything stuffed in my suitcase to cover any affair I’d happen to encounter.

The following morning, I was unable to eat and I kept having to run to the bathroom every few minutes from an

unsettled stomach. My nerves were so torn up that I couldn't sleep the night before. Kendra had reassured me that there was nothing to flying, but I couldn't get my nervous system to listen to my addled brain. Since this was to be my first flight, following my mother's instructions, I tried to relax with a dose of Dramamine. Later that morning, when the plane took off, I gripped Kendra's arm so tight that I left nail impressions in her skin.

Between the medicine and a lack of sleep the night before, I finally dozed off and slept the biggest part of the flight, only waking up minutes before landing. I was still a bit groggy and didn't take notice of the smooth landing. As the

plane taxied the runway, I pulled my make-up bag out to freshen up.

“He thinks you’re beautiful no matter what you look like, Court,” Kendra said quietly.

My mouth pulled up on one side giving her a sideways grin with now emotion behind it. “I’m not doing this for him... I’m doing it for me.” I should have felt guilty, but I didn’t. I was only interested in myself at this point. This trip was about me, and my window of opportunity opened at the most pristine moment for an experience of a new world... and, of course, Jaxon’s world. “This is my time, and I’m going to make the most of it.” This time my smile was

real, it was genuine.

“I know,” was all she whispered back.

She continued to watch me as I continued piddling with my face and hair, pretending not to notice her pity stare. After stalling as long as I could stand, I put all my items away in my bag then stuffed it back underneath the seat in front of me.

I could still feel Kendra's stare penetrating me. “Kendra, stop feeling sorry for me. You're supposed to be my rock, not a wet noodle,” I said, turning to look at her. “I promise you, I'm fine. I've decided to embrace this trip and all the things that come with it.”

She awkwardly wrapped her arms around my shoulders, squeezing the life out of me. “I know. And I also know we are going to have the best time ever because you deserve some happiness in your life,” she muffled, her head practically buried in my armpit. “I’m sorry you repeatedly get hurt, but I’m so happy Phillip screwed up again so I didn’t have to terminate our friendship.” She pulled away from me. “Of course, I know you knew I was bluffing. There is no way I could ever cut you out of my life, you know too much to blackmail me with,” she grinned, cutting her eyes at me.

“The hell with blackmail. When have you ever cared about being

reserved? It's more like your life would be boring without me in it. So take your insensitive self and shove it up Phillip's ass," I said, sticking my tongue out. I knew it was juvenile, but it was better than giving her the finger in front of everyone on the plane.

Kendra popped up out of her seat squealing, "Oh my God! Oh my God! Oh my God! Can I have everyone's attention please? This girl sitting here beside me has finally found her personality—"

I jerked her arm hard enough to throw her back into her seat. "Shut the hell up!" I scorned through closed teeth. "What the hell do you think you're doing, you crazy skank? Have you lost

your ever-loving mind?” My eyes were open so wide there was no way possible to see anything other than the tips of my painted eyelashes.

“What?” she feigned innocence.

My eyes rolled past Kendra, landing on Reed. He was sitting across from Kendra, stifling a laugh with his fist. “You suck! Both of you suck!” I whispered loudly, narrowing my eyes. I didn’t dare take a chance of looking around at everyone else on the plane. No thanks to Kendra, I was pretty sure they were all watching our childish exchange.

Although I would never admit it to Kendra or Reed, it felt good to joke around with them again. If I was

planning on surviving this week, I better suck up my self-pity, throw a happy-ass face on, and pull my big girl panties up high.

Everyone began lining up in the aisle to exit the plane, and, in that moment, it dawned on me—I was about to see Jaxon face-to-face. Literally, I was minutes away from being in a stupor by those mesmerizing blue eyes, that sexy, raspy voice, and that delicious, minty smell that always swirled around him. *Damn myself, I'm my own worst traitor.* The dormant caterpillars in my tummy came to life as soon as the memories of Jaxon came flowing back to me. As nonchalantly as possible, I began to take deep breaths to calm my nerves. I

didn't want Kendra or Reed to take notice of the mini panic attack I was currently battling.

Being nearly three-thousand miles away made all those feelings dissipate. But now, being near, everything I felt before was floating back to the surface.

Kendra reached behind her back grabbing my fingers. She squeezed them lightly before leaning back into me. "It's okay if you still have that crush on him. I'm sure he won't mind," she whispered into my ear. "I know he's still crushing on you." She straightened herself back up-right behind Reed. *Hussy*. Sometimes I hated how she could read me like a

book.

Lagging behind Kendra and Reed as we departed the plane, I went my own way to find our luggage. My nervous twitches grew stronger as we approached the luggage gate. Scanning through the crowd of people, I looked for any signs of Jaxon, and, so far, I wasn't able to place his handsome face.

And then I heard it, the all-too-familiar sound of someone persistently clearing their throat. Spinning around, I found him leaning against a pillar with one foot propped back against it. He was wearing his usual attire of black Van's, distressed jeans, and a black t-shirt advertising his business. Not meaning to,

I took him in, absorbing every inch of his perfect body starting from his shoes, then pausing where I knew those nipple rings were hiding behind his shirt. I made my way up to his scruffy, angular jaw, and then to that sexy, smirky smile he was tossing my way.

“I see you haven’t changed a bit, Sweet Cheeks. You’re still openly gaping at me like you used to do before,” he chuckled, pushing himself from the pillar to take a step closer to me. *Busted. Every time.* “Get your sweet ass over here and give me a hug, pretty girl.”

My feet took the reins, dancing their way right over to him. He pulled

me into a strong embrace, picking me up off the ground, my legs dangling, swaying back and forth. The delicious mint hit me like a tons of bricks. I'd forgotten how much I craved that smell and just how delectable the taste was. Fighting the outlandish urge to turn my head and taste his addictive lips, instead I squeaked out the only thing I felt safe saying—"Hey."

"Damn girl, I've missed the hell out of you," he breathed into my hair. I was lost for words. I didn't know what to say. I wasn't expecting to feel the way I was, thinking that, after our time apart, things may have changed for us. After the brutality I suffered from Phillip, I had wondered if I was past the point of

feeling anything noble for any guy, but Jaxon was making me feel all funny inside. He gave me a warm fuzzy sensation I never before experienced with Phillip. He made me feel wanted.

Our hug lasted longer than it should've, and I slipped from his arms as I panicked from the idea of Reed and Kendra witnessing our private moment. He wasn't willing to completely let go of me yet, sliding his hand down the inside of my arm. Once he reached my hand, his fingers laced through mine.

No sooner than I turned away from him, I found myself standing right in front of Kendra. Quickly, I unlinked myself from Jaxon.

“No need to stop on my account,” Kendra mumbled under her breath.

My face instantly flared up, and I could feel the red flashing from my face like a stoplight. I gave her a wicked stare mouthing the words ‘shut up’ for only her to see.

Reed came wobbling up, pulling several suitcases behind him and a couple of handbags flopping from his shoulders. I hurried over to help him, feeling even more embarrassed when I became aware that I had left him to handle my luggage while I was hugging it out with Jaxon.

“I’m so sorry, Reed. I found

Jaxon,” I smiled pathetically.

Jaxon released Kendra from a hug that had no comparison to the one he gave me, before walking over to help Reed with the rest of our bags. “What’s up, cuz?” Reed huffed, giving Jaxon one of those manly hugs where they only used one arm. *Men... heaven forbid them to ever show an ounce of the feminine side they all have.*

It was nice to be in our little group of four again, however, I remained quiet as Jaxon, Reed, and Kendra babbled on about our flight and plans for the week. Jaxon filled Reed in on what to expect at Zack and Joey’s Bar and Grill. My thoughts were caught up with

worrying about what kind of sleeping arrangement we would have at Jaxon's place. I had no idea if he lived in a house, an apartment, or on the streets. I couldn't ask Kendra these things in front of everyone, so I made a mental note to text her when we were on the road, to stress how much she better *not* leave me alone to shack up with Jaxon.

The California air was warm and dry on my skin. The sun shone bright without a cloud in the sky. It was enough to put anyone in a cheerful mood. As we walked through the parking lot, I was a little overwhelmed by the hustle and bustle of people and cars. I had never seen so many people swarming around a confined area in all my life. I thought

Charlotte airport was crazy with people, but LAX had it beat. This country girl sure had a lot to learn about the city life.

When Jaxon approached a jet black Jeep without the rag top, I wanted to squeal with excitement. I had always wanted to ride in a Jeep, but to ride in one in California, close to the beach, with a super-hot guy? It was a teenage girl's dream come true. I couldn't wait to take a few selfies and post them on Facebook and Instagram.

Kendra and Reed hopped into the back seat, leaving me up front with Jaxon. I would've scolded Kendra for her little trick, but, since we would have the wind blowing through our hair,

conversation would be difficult to carry riding down a noisy highway, or as they called it—freeway.

We pulled into the parking lot of a two-story stucco building placed right in the middle of a beautifully landscaped lot. Palm trees lined what appeared to be the property line, and it looked like a walkway was settled in the back that took you down to the beach. All types of exotic plants and colorful flowers bordered the sidewalk and the outer edge of the building. The entire set-up was gorgeous. The words Zack and Joey's Bar and Grill sat high right under the roof covered with red clay tiles. When Jaxon told me he owned a bar, I was expecting some rinky-dink hole-in-

the-wall type of place. A lavish, state-of-the-art restaurant that looked nothing like a bar at all wasn't exactly what I was expecting.

The parking lot was deserted other than a white Range Rover parked in a VIP spot by the front door. I didn't know a lot about bars but I was assuming the place was closed since it was ten thirty in the morning. In this instance, I was loving the three-hour time change.

As soon as Jaxon turned the engine off, he stretched his arms out in front of him, showcasing his restaurant. "Welcome to Zack and Joey's," he grinned proudly. "Let's head in. I want

you guys to meet my business partner and best friend, Troy.”

We all hopped out of the Jeep, and Reed made a beeline to catch up to Jaxon. “Dude, you didn’t tell me how awesome this place was,” he said with excitement. Reed threw his arm around Jaxon’s shoulder giving him a manly squeeze. “Cuz, please tell me the one I’m gonna be managing will be as pimped as this place?”

“Reed, you saw the blueprints, and you’ve seen the progress of it. Did you really think I was jerking you around?”

“Nah man, but damn, it doesn’t look like this one.”

Jaxon gave that smile that showcased his dimples. “And it’s not going to look like this one.” Jaxon was totally playing around with Reed.

“And why the hell not?” Reed’s eyebrows furrowed.

Jaxon stopped at the door, and we all waited for him to go inside before entering. “Because this one is on the beach, and yours is in the hills. It’s got to integrate with its location. You can’t put a place like this out in the country,” he laughed, twirling his keys around on his finger. “I promise you, Reed, it’s going to be nice. Stop sweating it.”

Jaxon stood at the door, holding

it open for us as we walked in. I avoided eye contact with him when I passed through, but I could feel the electric vibes radiating off of him as he hovered close behind me. I should have made sure I walked in first instead of last. I didn't like the tingling sensation he was causing, so I excused myself to the bathroom. Jaxon pointed me to the back corner where the restrooms were located.

Taking my time, I made my way to the bathroom. I was in such awe of the stylish decorations. The place was immaculate. Everything inside was made of what looked like driftwood? There were surf boards hanging from the ceiling, and it made me wonder if Jaxon

surfing. I made a mental note to ask him later. The bar was equipped with enough alcohol to intoxicate a small town. I wondered how much and how often Jaxon drank.

Once I reached the bathrooms, I let out a laugh when I saw the sign “clams” on the women’s door and “clam diggers” on the men’s. After just witnessing the trendy dining area, I shouldn’t have been surprised when I walked into the bathroom. It was laid out with marble countertops and a vanity in the corner equipped with an array of lotions and body spray. Completely freaked out was an understatement. I wanted to text Kendra and tell her to come in here to check the place out, but I

didn't. I would somehow usher her in here later though.

After spending way too much time in the bathroom, I joined everyone else sitting at a table close to the bar. Jaxon jumped out of his chair as soon as he saw me approach them. "Courtney, glad you could finally join us. Is everything okay?" he said, pulling the chair beside of him out for me to sit in.

My face heated at his insinuation.

"Sorry, I had a little too much fun playing with the vanity," I smirked.

Taking the attention off of me I asked, "Where's your friend Troy?" Before Jaxon had a chance to answer, a

tall, muscular guy with a similar build to Jaxon, but with shaggy, blond hair came walking out of what was probably an office.

Jaxon turned to face him when he heard the door close. “Well, speak of the devil,” he grunted followed by his excessive throat clearing. His funky noises were really beginning to grow on me.

Troy didn’t say anything as he joined us. He just smiled at Jaxon with a look that said “sorry.” Troy walked over to Reed and Kendra first. “So this is the studly cousin that will be handling things for us in North Carolina?” he asked, shaking hands with a warm welcome.

“I don’t know about the studly part, but yeah, that’s me,” Reed smiled, gripping his hand tight. “Man, this place is kick-ass! I’m eager to get this training started as soon as possible,” Reed exclaimed.

Jaxon stood in front of me, making it hard for me to have my turn at greeting Troy. Every time I would move to the side, he would shift his feet to block me. I wasn’t sure what kind of game he was playing, but I was about to call him out on it.

After Troy greeted Kendra with a kiss on her cheek, he focused his attention on Jaxon. I was still unable to get a good look at the guy. “So, Jax, am I

finally going to get to meet Courtney, or are you going to keep her hidden behind your back the entire trip?”

Jaxon was really acting weird, almost like he was nervous. The way he repeatedly cleared his throat was starting to get out of control. I know he said it was a tic or something like that, but it seemed to get worse when he was nervous or in an uncomfortable situation. My mind was spinning, wondering what he could be so worked up about.

“Don’t worry dude, I promise I won’t make any moves on her... yet,” Troy laughed, pushing Jaxon out of the way. The laughter quickly died in his throat when our eyes connected. I wasn’t

one hundred percent positive, but I was almost sure he mouthed the words ‘what the fuck?’ He stood there gaping at me, and it was starting to make me uncomfortable. Glancing over at Jaxon, I saw he had a look of pain on his face.

Confused as hell, I had no idea what their problem was. So, after a few uncomfortable minutes of no one speaking, I persevered through my discomfort and introduced myself to Troy. “Hey, I’m Courtney. It’s nice to finally meet you,” I said awkwardly with my hand out to shake his.

He eyed my shaky hand then blinked a few times, coming back to earth to join us. “Umm... I... I’m... uh...

Troy. It's... umm... nice to finally meet you too. I've... uh... heard a lot about you," he said, his eyebrows pulled together in question.

Jaxon told me a little about Troy, but he didn't tell me he had a stuttering impediment. He also didn't tell me just how much they looked alike, minus the hair. Troy looked like more of the surfer type than Jaxon. Maybe that's who decorated the place up with the surfboards.

"Umm, could you guys hold on a second? I need to discuss an important business situation real quick with Jaxon," Troy asked looking at me. *Was he asking me or everybody?* I wasn't

positive so I nodded, “Sure.”

Troy gave Jaxon a serious look of anger, or was it disappointment? I wasn't quite sure, but he didn't look pleased with Jaxon at all. Jaxon followed Troy toward the door that I now knew was an office. “You guys feel free to look around and check the place out, especially the outside patio. We won't be long,” Jaxon yelled out to us before closing the door.

I turned to face Kendra and Reed. “Awkward,” I sang.

Kendra gave me a quizzical nod. “Very.”

Reed and Kendra shrugged it off

and took Jaxon up on his offer to explore the place. Following along, I couldn't brush off the bizarre reception I received from Troy. All three of us stopped when we heard raised voices echoing from the office Troy and Jaxon just stepped into.

“Are they fighting?” I whispered. Reed and Kendra both shrugged their shoulders.

We stood there eavesdropping, but never able to catch onto a single word they were saying. Their voices would escalate, then quickly drop down to a hum.

We scrambled for the exit door to the patio like a bunch of sneaky kids when we heard the office door open.

Jaxon walked out by himself. His face was contorted, thick veins popping from his neck and forearms. His walk was stiff, and his hands were clenched tight into a fist. "Come on guys, we can look at all of this later. We'll have plenty of time," he said, his voice strained. "I'm sure you guys are tired from the long flight. I apologize for my rudeness... and Troy's," he mumbled.

Immediately, I felt uncomfortable. Something went down between him and Troy, and I had an odd feeling it had something to do with me. The first thing that came to mind was my age, but surely Jaxon told him that beforehand. Besides, I was only a month away from being eighteen, so my

underage issues shouldn't really be an issue at all.

Everyone remained super quiet in the Jeep. Even Reed and Kendra felt the tension. Instead of doing their usual PDA, they sat ramrod straight in the back, taking in the scenery around them.

My mouth fell open when we arrived to a gated community with houses worth well over a million dollars. I knew this because I watched *The Real Housewives of Orange County*, and we just entered the Coto de Caza community. Whoever's home we were pulling up to was absolutely breath-taking.

Jaxon parked his Jeep in front of

the grand entrance of the multi-million dollar home. He hopped out of the Jeep and started pulling our luggage out without speaking a word to anyone. Reed, Kendra, and I all looked at each other in disbelief. I couldn't contain the big grin spreading across my face. I was all giddy with excitement. I couldn't believe I was going to be spending the night at this posh pad.

Jaxon left Kendra and Reed's bags by his Jeep, but had my suitcase in one hand and my carry-on bag draped across his shoulder and chest. "Welcome to Vaughn Estates," Jaxon stated in a flat tone, squinting up at his mansion in the bright California sun.

“Are you fucking kidding me, man?” Reed exclaimed. “You make that kind of money running your bar to afford something like this? Hot damn!” Reed had dollar signs in his eyes.

Jaxon stopped in front of the door, his shoulders sagging. “Don’t get too excited, cuz. This kind of money doesn’t come from that bar. I inherited the money from Gramma Z,” he revealed with so much melancholy dripping from his voice. When he told me he opened his bar with the money his gramma left him, I wasn’t expecting it to be this much.

“Oh.” Was all Reed could say. It was all any of us could say. I was

beginning to learn Jaxon ran through emotions as quickly as a cheetah chasing an impala. He had started with flirty arrogance, switching to happy, then to nervy, followed with anger, and finally sad in approximately four hours. I wondered what emotion the spinning wheel would land on next.

Chapter 27 ~ Pieces from the Past

Thirteen bedrooms and seven bathrooms, and the majority of the house was decorated in black. Aside from the gothic color scheme, was I the only person to notice those numbers to be an odd combination? Another mental note I made to text Kendra about later.

What single person needed a house with that many rooms? *I'll tell you who—nobody.* Jaxon had surprised me on so many levels. He pulled off the whole normal, average Joe persona very well. Never would I have guessed him to be loaded. I had to admit, it made me crush on him even harder. Most guys

were quick to brag about being rich, but not Jaxon. I liked how he was so humble in that way.

Jaxon remained quiet as he navigated us through the house. When he did speak, his tone was monotonous, and it was only to give details on the room. He was causing us extreme discomfort, and none of us knew what to do or say. Jaxon had to sense the awkwardness he was putting us through. The tension was too obvious. Although he and Reed were cousins, they had never really had that close of a family bond. They were slowly working on it, but about ten years had passed without them seeing or speaking to one another. It was not because they didn't want to, but because

they had been too young to have the opportunity. Until recently, their relationship had been mostly about business, so Reed didn't feel comfortable enough to talk in depth with him yet.

Jaxon gave Reed and Kendra an overly-large room that looked more like a suite at a hotel. And here I always thought Kendra's house was over-the-top big, but that room had nothing on hers. I could easily live in that room itself. After dropping off Kendra and Reed at their room, I followed Jaxon down the never-ending hallway. Eventually, it had led to a couple more adjoining hallways. Then it reached an open sitting room with a balcony

overlooking another room that was decorated in a sophisticated, but manly, style. It looked more like a waste of space to me. Once we stopped outside the door, I was completely lost. Panic struck me when I thought about how I was supposed to find my way back to Kendra's room... or even my way outside in case of an earthquake or something.

He opened the door to another bedroom. "Here's your room. It has anything and everything in it. The bed, of course, and here are some drawers if you don't want to leave your clothes in your suitcase. Over here is the closet," he said, walking around pointing everything out. "Here's the bathroom,

and it's stocked with everything you should need." He picked up two remotes, handing them to me. "This one is for the TV, and this one is for the fireplace, in case you get chilly at night." He inhaled a deep breath then released with a loud blow. "If you need me, I'm right next door," he said, his lips pulled in between his teeth, making his dimples sink in deep. He shuffled his way out of my room with his head hung low. Before he walked out of my sight, he stopped at the doorway, barely lifting his head to look at me. Frustration was written all over his face. I couldn't handle seeing him in such misery any longer. I wanted to hug him, to comfort him, but mostly I wanted to talk to him, to get him to let

me inside so I could maybe help him. He needed to tell me what was going on.

“Jaxon, are you okay?” I asked, honestly concerned. “You can talk to me, you know. I promise I’m not asking because I’m curious either. I’m asking because I care.” I wanted to walk over to him and hug him, but I’d learned he could be an odd character at times, so I didn’t want to force any unwanted affection on him. The way he reacted in the bathroom at the chalet was still fresh in my mind.

He cocked his head up, looking at me with a forced smile. “I’m good, don’t worry about me. It’s nothing I haven’t dealt with before.” He shoved

his hands in his pockets looking like a man who'd been defeated. "I... umm... I'm gonna go... so... you can get settled. I'll be next door in my room... uh... yeah." He hastily disappeared around the corner. I heard his door close quickly after. Just like that. He cut me off short, just like he had before, never wanting to reveal any more than what he wanted to give.

Standing there in the middle of the room, I was running through the day's events in my mind. My first day here was already turning out to be a disappointing one. I didn't come this far to spend a week with Debbie Downer. Not meaning to sound insensitive, but I'd had enough sorrow of my own to deal

with. I didn't need any more negativity in my life at this point. This was supposed to be a vacation for me, a time to have fun, to live life to the fullest. I could be someone else here. I could do whatever I wanted without a watchful eye lurking about. I could tap into my inner goddess and invite her to come out and play for a little while, like for a week. I could...

My feet began moving forward before my brain made the decision of what I was about to do. I crept around the corner then stopped in front of Jaxon's bedroom door. Taking a deep breath, I allowed my knuckles to lightly tap against the wood surface a couple of times. Jaxon opened the door half naked,

wearing only swimming trunks. There was no way I was able describe them because my vision was engaged by the taut man standing before me. He stood holding the door, inviting me into his personal space. I couldn't move. My eyes raked over the tight, defined grooves of every muscle in his body, the smoothness of his skin, the silver metal protruding from his puckered nipples. I was taking a mental picture to take back with me to North Carolina. As lust began running through my veins, my thought process started to turn to mush. I couldn't think coherently, I forgot what my mission was, my purpose for coming over here.

“You’re doing it again,” he

observed.

Oh hell. I snorted a nervous laugh. “Sorry?”

“Sweet Cheeks, I’ve told you before, you don’t need to apologize, just don’t be so obvious with it.”

Did he smirk? Was that a slight smirk I caught?

Clearing his throat more than normal, he turned his back to me, walking into an adjacent room. I wasn’t sure what room it was—the bathroom, a closet, an entertainment room maybe? Hell, it might be a freaking fully equipped gym for all I knew. I quickly took advantage of the moment by myself

and inspected his room while he wasn't in it. It was decorated much like his house—sleek, but gothic. Everything was either black or had the color black incorporated into it. His bed was massive, big enough that all four of us could fit comfortably on it. The bedding was all black, the material soft as silk. Then again, it probably was silk... imported from China. Running my fingers along the sleek material, I thought about the things that could be done on that bed. *Stop it, Courtney!*

Turning away to focus my attention on something else besides his bed, I spotted several pictures sitting on top of the wide, white marbled mantle over the black, rocked-in fireplace. One

picture was of a beautiful young lady with jet black hair flowing freely down her back. She looked to be maybe in her twenties. By the style of clothes she was wearing, you could tell the picture had been taken twenty or more years ago. She was laughing in the picture. She looked happy, full of life. She also looked familiar. The hair, the eyes, the dimples—that smile. She looked just like Jaxon. She had to be his mother.

I switched my attention to the other picture sitting in a beautiful antique frame. This lady was older, the picture appearing to be taken by a professional photographer. I picked it up to get a better look. She had dark brown hair that curled right above her shoulders with

strands of gray threaded through. She had a petite structure with delicate features. Despite the wrinkles that lined her eyes and mouth, she was a beautiful woman. She looked nothing like Jaxon or the lady in the other picture, but I had a feeling she was the grandma he always talked about.

“What are you doing?” Jaxon asked, standing right behind me, his mouth level at my ear.

Letting out a shrilling scream, the picture went flying out of my hands. Thank goodness for Jaxon’s quick reflexes, because he caught it before it shattered into a million pieces against the rock fireplace. The way he grasped it

in midair put my heart into overdrive. I was already frightened by him sneaking up on me, but the closeness of our bodies only frightened me even more. I wasn't afraid of what he might do, I was more afraid of what I would do.

We both stood still, panting, and I could feel his breath against my cheek. The smell of mint tickled my senses, inducing my endorphins. Peering at him from the corner of my eye, I noticed that his eyes were closed. His throat grunts sounded strained. He was trying his best to hold back his tics. He was fighting it... us, the struggle was clear on his face. He was battling with the need as much as I was. The only thing was, I didn't want to fight it at this point in

time.

I had to know, I had to put myself out there and see if he would react the way I wanted him to. Turning my head toward him, I lightly brushed my lips against his. He inhaled sharply, his exhale releasing in a shaky pattern, as his lips gently pressed against mine. Turning my entire body to face him, I relaxed into him. Everything I'd felt for Jaxon before came back with a vengeance. It was so much stronger this time. Was I denying those feelings before because I was afraid? *What was I afraid of? Was I afraid of him treating me the same as Phillip had?* Their mood swings and colossal personalities were similar, but, no, Phillip never

treated me with the tenderness and care that Jaxon showed me.

My lips ached as he broke our kiss and tenderly traced my jawline, lingering on the shell of my ear. “What are you doing to me?” he whispered.

It wasn't a question to be answered, it was a statement. His lips engulfed my earlobe, suckling lightly and sending a tingling sensation across the skin of my neck. Just the feel of his warm wet tongue drove my body wild. Slowly and gingerly, he scraped his teeth over the now moist, sensitive flesh. A surge of heat struck my core, the warmth radiating all the way to my cheeks. I couldn't respond back. All I

could manage was a soft low moan of pleasure. Hearing my uncontrollable desire for him, he didn't hesitate. He reached down, placing his arms underneath my knees, and swiftly lifted me up, cradling me in his arms. I held his gaze for seconds, and the look of lust he directed at me didn't go unnoticed before his lips came crashing down onto mine. Effortlessly, he walked me to his bed, and then placed me down so gently onto the silky fabric. Our kiss remained intact, we were too hungry for one another to let go. He straddled his hands over me, firmly setting them on each side of my head. His feet remained on the floor. My fingertips grazed along his ribcage then around to his back. With my

fingers spread out, and my palms flat over his smooth skin, I wanted to explore all of him. I could feel every ounce of lean muscle flexing under my hands as he moved against me. The touch was so exhilarating. It made me want him more. The bed dipped down beside me as his upper body hovered over mine. Pulling down on his back, I wanted to feel the warmth of him against me. He wouldn't give. His arms remained straight, holding his weight off of me. "Hmm mm," he grunted into my mouth. "Don't rush this. I want to savor you," he breathed heavily.

Confident. That was how he made me feel right there in that moment. I felt like I could conquer anything I set

my mind to. I felt attractive, I felt desirable, and I felt truly wanted for the first time in my life. I craved Jaxon. I wanted him. Whether it was a thoughtless act or not, I didn't care. Reaching down, I shimmied out of my shorts.

Jaxon gasped, and I knew my brazen move lit a fire within him, tormenting him. I wasn't about to let go of him, though. Our kiss intensified, mint bursting into my mouth as his Altoid brushed against my tongue. I felt exuberant, but at the same time intoxicated. As I was getting drunk off of this incredible guy, he was utterly unaware of how dangerous he might possibly be for me.

My lips felt swollen and my chin irritated from the stubble on Jaxon's face, but I didn't care. The sweet kisses he placed across my raw skin and then trailed down my neck felt so good. Nothing could cause me discomfort at this moment. My breath hitched when he lifted up my coral colored blouse and placed tender kisses around my naval. His hand trickled up along my ribcage, stopping to rest underneath my breast. I grabbed his hair, tugging it hard. I wanted his mouth on mine again, but he had other plans. He palmed my breast over the thin fabric of my bra, rubbing it in circles until a peak formed while his mouth continued to work its way down. He pressed his lips lightly along my

panty line all the while rolling the tip of my boob between his fingers. The feeling was overwhelming, and I felt my body heat up to a life-threatening degree. My core was aching. I wanted him to continue his path, to journey his way down to the wetness between my thighs. He must have read my mind because without warning his teeth caught onto the top of my thong, and both hands gripped the barely there material on each side of my hips, pulling them down so slowly, so sensually. I was spent. I felt like I was going to implode.

His tongue ran up along the inside of my thigh and he paused a second to inhale before placing a delicate kiss in my most intimate spot.

His hands joined his mouth in sweet harmony. My most personal space was being explored. I froze with fear. *Was I ready for this? Had I started something I couldn't finish?* I didn't want to lead him on, but I couldn't find the strength to stop him.

I was feeling things I had never felt before, and, as perfect as it felt, it was also scaring the hell out of me.

Trying to relax, I inhaled a couple of deep breaths. Jaxon didn't acknowledge my stiffness as he continued exploring the warmth between my thighs. I gripped the soft sheets, fisting them tight when I felt Jaxon's hot tongue and warm breath invade my

sensitive spot. I began feeling the same odd sensations that took over me when Phillip and I last had sex. The sensation was exhilarating and explosive all rolled up into one big pleasurable ball. Jaxon continued a relentless rhythm, and I felt myself lose all self-control. Breathing erratically, my muscles began to spasm, and I was on the verge of combusting. As my body released the biggest display of fireworks, I let out an embarrassing moan

My body was numb. I couldn't move. I had never felt anything like that in my entire life, and I wondered how I had never experienced it before.

Jaxon released me, leaving

feather-light kisses across my skin as he worked his way back up to the middle of my abdomen. He then lay down beside me, cradling me in his arms. He pressed a loving kiss to my temple and held me tight.

We laid there content with each other for what seemed like hours when Jaxon broke the silence. “You’re not mad at me are you?” he asked, propping up on one elbow and looking down at me.

I smiled at him. “Of course not. Why would you ask that?” I queried, my eyebrows drawn down.

“Well, it’s just... you’ve been quiet for a pretty long time now, and I

don't want you upset with me for what just happened or regretting any of it..." he trailed off. "Because I don't," he whispered, staring me down.

He still wanted me. It was plastered all over his face. I swallowed stiffly then let out a nervous giggle. "Jaxon, to be honest, I'm speechless. I don't know what to say after all of that. I have never felt anything that wonderful in all my life," I admitted. Reaching up, I placed my hand on his face and rubbed my thumb along the stubble below his cheek bone. "I think the world could've blown up and I wouldn't have cared." The joker smile on my face was beginning to feel permanent. Even if I tried, I wouldn't be able to wipe it

away.

Jaxon displayed an expression as if he wanted to ask me something, but couldn't get it to come out. And the throat sounds intensified.

“Just say it,” I demanded.

He pulled his lips in tight between his teeth before blurting out his query. “Are you a virgin?” He squinted and ducked to avoid an imaginary slap.

My eyes bulged out in shock. “Wow! You just get right to the point don't you?”

“Well, it's just that you don't move like a virgin, but you threw me off

the way you froze up on me when I... well... you know..."

My face burst into flames, I felt like I was on fire. I wanted to bury my head in Jaxon's pillows. *Did he seriously just call me out on my sexual swag?* He must've found me the most inexperienced female he had ever played with.

"... and that's why I stopped. Courtney, I don't want to push you into something you're not ready for. I'll wait." His expression was serious, all playfulness gone. "That is, if you give me the opportunity." He didn't come straight out and ask, but I understood the hidden question. He wanted to know if

we'd continue whatever this was we were starting when I went back to North Carolina. I wanted to, I really did, but I didn't know what my future held, so I avoided his comment. I didn't want to commit to us until I positively knew it was a guarantee.

I pulled myself together, gaining control of my composure before taking the liberty of answering him. "If you must know, no, I'm not a virgin. But whatever that was you did with your mouth and the burst of hormones that took over my body was not something I've ever experienced before."

Jaxon broke out into a boisterous laugh. The entire bed shook. It annoyed

me that he was laughing at me, but his laugh was so cute and so rare that I found it contagious. Although I didn't succumb to laughing with him, I did give into the smile that was forcing its way on my face.

Jaxon flopped onto me with his head buried in my neck, chuckling to himself. "I'm sorry, Sweet Cheeks. I'm not laughing at you, I promise. I'm laughing because you just had your very first orgasm, and you didn't even know it." He pulled me closer to him, squeezing me hard, but not so hard that it hurt. *How humiliating.*

Groaning loudly in frustration, I felt like a first class idiot. All this time

with Phillip, and he was cheating me in more ways than one.

Jaxon placed a small kiss behind my ear. “Don’t worry about it, Sweet Cheeks. It’s got to happen at some point in time. I feel pretty honored that I got to be that guy,” he smiled against my skin. “Is Phillip your one and only?” he asked, pulling up to rest on his elbows after placing them on both sides of my head. His body hovered over mine, he was always careful not to put any weight on me. His hands stroked my hair back away from my face.

“Yes.” It was all I could squeak out. He stared at me with so much passion before lowering his lips to mine.

He knew just what to do with them. I didn't have but one other person to compare him to, but I knew I didn't need any other person. No one else could make me feel the way he did.

His hand slipped down to my hips, his thumb drew a circle around my hip bone when it dawned on me that I was still naked from the waist down. I had all my glory displayed for him to feast on. I jerked from the tickle and from the thoughts of still being fully exposed.

Jaxon leaned back, breaking our kiss. "What's wrong?"

"Umm, that sort of tickles... and, umm... I'm half-naked," I admitted

shyly. I couldn't tell him I wasn't ready yet. I thought I was, but, as I lay here with him, I knew I couldn't give myself over to him completely. I couldn't take the chance of us possibly losing touch again after I left.

Jaxon's lips curled up to the side of his face, giving me that crooked, one-dimpled grin I found so adorable. He stared down at me, waist down, embarrassing me even more. "I must say, I'm enjoying the scenery. That's the most tantalizing, excuse my language, pussy I've ever tasted in my life," he said, leisurely licking his lips. His eyes were hooded and glazed.

His words sent electricity

through every nerve ending in my body. I could see the lust in his eyes and knew that he was ready for more, but I wasn't ready yet to take that next step with him. He may have been telling me he could wait, but his body signals were screaming in protest. It was up to me to break him from his trance.

“Now you're doing it to me,” I accused.

He blinked his eyes rapidly, focusing his attention back on my face. *Mission accomplished.*

He pulled his eyebrows down, drawing a deep crease between his eyes. “What?”

“You’re staring,” I accused.

He kissed my forehead chastely then stood from the bed. “Well if you’re looking for an apology, you won’t get it from me. When I see beauty lying before me, I’m going to make a memory of it.” He picked up my thong and shorts from the foot of the bed and began putting them on for me. The gesture was sweet, but it was too awkward for me, so I quickly tugged them from his hands and did the job myself.

He stood against the edge of the bed, watching me keenly. Sighing, he said, “I can help you with that you know.”

I shook my head. I wasn’t taking

a chance of him seducing me. I didn't know if I could pass the test of self-restraint, especially after spotting a clear view of his erection pushing against his swimming trunks. *How did I not feel that when he was on the bed with me?*

“It makes me uncomfortable, you know,” he said, playfully.

I snapped my eyes to his and away from his bulging trunks. “What does?”

“You openly gaping at me all the time,” he laughed, teasing me.

Reaching above my head for a pillow, I slung it as hard as I could at Jaxon's chest. He caught it before it hit

him. He was just about to throw it back at me when my phone rang. I tugged it out of my back pocket to answer.

“Where the hell are y’all at?” Kendra screamed into the phone. I pulled it away from my ear before she damaged my hearing. She was always so dang dramatic.

Raising my eyebrows at Jaxon, I silently asked if it was okay to tell her where we were, knowing he could hear from where he was. He nodded once.

“We are in Jaxon’s room. I think we’re about to go... swimming?”

Jaxon nodded again.

“Okay, well meet us at our room because Reed and I have no clue how to get around this crazy maze Jaxon calls a house.”

“Okay, we will.”

She hung up before I finished talking.

Rolling off the ginormous bed, I walked over to give Jaxon a quick hug and a peck on his cheek. “I can fix that problem you have in your shorts you know?”

Jaxon pushed me away. “Get out of here before I become so crippled I can’t walk,” he laughed.

I felt relieved. “If you insist,” I smiled. “I’m going back to my room now so I can put on my swimsuit. See you in a bit,” I beamed, walking out into the hallway.

“Good, while you do that, I’ll be relieving some tension I’ve been building up,” he chuckled followed with a wink. I darted to my room from embarrassment.

“If your bathing suit isn’t a G-string bikini, I’m buying you a new one,” he yelled out to me as I walked into my room.

As soon as the door closed behind me, I locked it and took a flying leap onto my bed, giggling in excitement.

I couldn't believe this was happening to me. I couldn't believe how happy he made me feel. It was my very first day, and I already didn't want to go home.



The next morning I woke up to what felt like someone playing with my hair. At first I thought it was just my imagination, but, as my senses woke up, I realized the movement was real. I didn't want to move just in case it was some vicious cat or dog that I had not been introduced to yet. As I slowly opened my eyes, I was greeted with

Jaxon's, as blue as the sky on a clear day.

Jaxon beamed at me. "Good morning, Princess."

The edges of my mouth curled up. I could wake up this way every morning for the rest of my life, and never get tired of the beautiful sight before me.

I placed my hand over my mouth to block my morning breath. "Princess? What happened to Sweet Cheeks?"

The sweet smell of mint swirled out of his mouth. "Princess suits you better when you're sleeping. You look so serene, so graceful, and so pure. I could sit here and stare at you sleeping

for hours.” The backside of his knuckles lightly stroked my cheek. He was staring at me without really looking at me. “You know sometimes it’s almost like you’re not real. I can see you, but not touch you.” It appeared as though his words had escaped him, that he was lost in a world a million miles away.

“Jaxon, where are you?” I snapped my fingers in front of his face.

His eyes blinked rapidly as he arrived back into the here and now. He smiled from embarrassment. “Sorry.”

“Where did you go?” I cocked my head, curious as to where his mind had traveled to.

He leaned up to place a chaste kiss on my forehead before climbing off the bed. “Just to the kitchen. I brought you some milk, fresh fruit, bacon, and sourdough toast for breakfast. The bacon and toast are probably cold now, but I didn’t want to wake you when you were sleeping so soundly.” He picked up the tray of food from the dresser and strolled over to me, taking his sweet time.

It was plain to see that he was avoiding the question I was really asking. I decided to leave it alone for the time being, but sooner or later he was going to have to start opening up to me.

Scooting myself back in the bed,

I stuffed the pillows behind me so I could lean comfortably against the headboard. “Looks great. Thanks.”

His lips turned up to one side, giving me that one dimpled grin I adored so much.

Jaxon sat the tray in front of me then bent down for a kiss. My hand shot up in front of my face blocking his lips before they reached mine. I shook my head. “Uh ah, no kissing until I’ve brushed my teeth,” I garbled through my hand.

“There is no way someone as sweet as you could turn sour by a little morning breath,” he laughed, “but have it your way.” He kissed the back of my

hand instead. Quickly, I grabbed a piece of bacon and shoved it into my mouth to kill the rotten fumes before they could reach his nose. Jaxon shook his head, smiling hard at me and giving me both dimples.

Without hesitation, I gobbled up my breakfast under the scrutiny of Jaxon's eyes. He not only liked to watch me sleep, he seemed to enjoy watching me eat, too.

I pushed the tray away from me. "So, what are the plans for today?" I asked. He plucked my napkin from my tray and swiped it along my chin, wiping up something I must have missed. The gesture was innocent, nothing out of the

ordinary. Normally I would've been embarrassed for leaving traces of food on my face, but instead my heart skipped a beat from his nearness. The gentle way he touched me sent my chill bumps on guard. "Thanks," I let out in a huff of air.

"I'm sorry, but we have more training to do."

I groaned, frustrated.

Oblivious to the way he just affected me, Jaxon took my tray, placing it back onto the dresser, then sat down beside of me on the bed. "But tomorrow, I was thinking we could go to Disneyland, or spend the day down on the beach, or I could take you into Hollywood, or we could watch a

Dodgers game,” he rattled on, ticking each finger as he went. “Or we could be adventurous at somewhere like Knott’s Berry Farm or Raging Waters,” he added, shrugging his shoulders, seemingly content with any of the choices named.

All those places sounded wonderful to me. Of course, anywhere with Jaxon would be exactly where I wanted to be. “Umm... well since I know very little about the places you just named, how about you pick and let it be a surprise?” I suggested with my eyebrows arched.

“You got it,” he smirked, leaning his head in close to my face until his

nose was within an inch of mine. “But, first, I need to discuss something very serious with you,” he said with so much magnitude.

My breathing held still as his gaze hypnotized me. I nodded once to him, afraid to make any other movement. Although his voice was strong and stern, his eyes were feral, eating me alive with lust. “You make me fucking crazy. After what happened between us yesterday, and then to carry on throughout the rest of the day as if we are nothing more than friends...” He closed his eyes, squeezing them tight and latched onto my face with his warm hands. “It’s making me lose my mind.” He inhaled deep, a look of pain crept over his face. “I want

to touch you. I want to kiss you. I want to let every fucking person I come in contact with know that we are together, and not just as friends,” he confessed. His long, black eyelashes opened up, outlining his baby blues. “I was miserable yesterday, Courtney. Do you know how many times I wanted to put my arms around you? How close I came to kissing you?” His lips covered mine, not giving me the chance to tell him how much I wanted him to kiss me as well. To hug me, to shower me with affection.

His warm tongue skimmed along the seam of my lips. He wanted in, I wanted him in, but I couldn't let him invade my dirty mouth. I broke the kiss and turned my cheek against his lips.

Panting in his ear, I whispered, “Jaxon, I want all those things too, but I don’t know how you really feel about me. I feel like I barely know you.”

He pulled away from me to study my face. His forehead creased as his eyes flickered back and forth to each of my eyes. “Has anyone ever told you your eyes sparkle like emeralds? The shade of green is so unique... beautiful,” he whispered.

I nodded, “Yes, my mother tells me all the time. She says ‘babies born in May have eyes like the deepest green of an emerald, a hidden gem, born from all the April rain.’” We stared each other down in silence. Once again he was

averting my question. I wasn't going to let him this time. "Look, Jaxon, I like you. A lot. I'm physically attracted to you. You make me happy. You make me feel things I've never felt before—physically and mentally. You make me feel confident, attractive, and alive, but I'm confused. I'm confused because I feel like I don't know who you are. I feel like you show me the person you want me to see, but there is another Jaxon that I've not met yet."

Instantly, he began clearing his throat. He was uncomfortable. He stood up and walked over to the fireplace keeping his back facing me. His arms were stretched out, defining every pound of muscle as his hands rested against the

mantle, holding all his weight and whatever burdens he carried. I wanted to smack myself for turning a beautiful morning with him into an awkward confrontation. I didn't know what to do, I just knew I was thankful that he didn't run off this time and leave me again without discussing whatever issues we had looming over us.

“Jaxon—”

“What do you want to know, Courtney?” He snapped. “Do you want to know that I was raised by my grandmother because I killed my mother during childbirth, and my father hated me for it so he left me, never to return? Never to look for me? Never to meet his

first and maybe only son? Are those the things you want to know?" He demanded, his shoulders rose and fell with each heavy breath he took. "Yes, there are things you don't know about me, Courtney, but I'm trying to do you a favor. I don't want to burden you with my past. My problems are for me to deal with, not you," he said, his finger pointed at me.

My heart ached for him. It hurt to have a non-existent father, I knew that. But to have one that hated you was gut-wrenching. Hopping off the bed, I ran over to him, wrapping my arms tightly around his waist. "We don't have to talk about it anymore. It must've been painful for you to grow up without a father. I'm

sorry to have brought any of this up.”

He stood there motionless, his arms hung limp by his sides. The only movement he made was the heavy breaths he took. It hurt a little that he wouldn't hug me back, but I also understood his frustration with me. I'd dug up a memory of his that he chose to keep buried in the back of his mind, a painful memory that he stashed away for a reason. His reason was to avoid the pain. It was evident with the agony all over his face.

I held my grip on him and laid my head against his chest, listening to his steady heartbeat. “But I want to thank you, too. I want to thank you for staying

in here with me, for not dodging my questions.” I took a chance and looked up at him. His gaze was staring off into no man’s land, his eyebrows furrowed and the corner of his lips drawn down into a frown. He was suffering alone... inside, and it killed me that he wouldn’t let me help him. I reached up and placed my palm against the stubble on his face, my thumb lightly caressing along the outside of his bottom lip. “Jaxon,” I whispered, hoping to draw his attention. “I like you a lot. Probably more than I should in such a short amount of time. I know I’m young and inexperienced and a lot of times naïve, but I feel something different with you, and I think I would like to know what it is,” I hesitated.

“What I’m trying to say is that I think I would like to be more than your friend, too.”

He ducked his head down gazing at me. His eyes shined from the slight presence of moisture. His body hunched over me, and I felt his arms slowly move around my waist. His hold grew tighter and tighter until my feet no longer touched the floor. He buried his face into my neck and placed feather-light kisses behind my ear. “I will open up to you, Courtney. It just has to be on my time. You have to wait until I’m ready, okay?” He asked lightly in my ear.

I nodded. “Yes.”

“Don’t be afraid, Court. I’m

going to make you happy, I swear it. I will never do anything intentionally to hurt you.”

He slowly released me, letting me slide down the length of his hard body. As I descended, I could feel every ripple, every groove of his rigid muscles. Once my feet touched the floor again, he bent down and placed a tender kiss on my lips. “I think we’ll head into Hollywood tomorrow. We can go to Universal Studios or we can see the former Grauman’s Chinese Theatre or do a little shopping in Beverly Hills. Whatever you guys want to do, I’m game,” he said, all signs of his distress wiped clear from his face.

I hoped he followed through with his admission because, right now, the way his moods jumped around, I was worried I'd end up in the same situation I found myself in with Phillip. An unstable man was always a dangerous man.

“Sounds great to me!” I said cheerfully.

“You know, if you and Kendra get bored around here, I'll leave the keys to my Jeep, and you two can take it into the city. Do a little sightseeing or go shopping. There are a lot of great stores in Coto.”

Confused, I scrunched my eyebrows together. “But if we take the

Jeep, what are you going to drive?”

A pleasurable grin spread across his face, creating deep dimples. “I’ll drive Black Stallion.”

“Huh?”

He huffed, like I should know what he was talking about. “My restored, nineteen seventy-two Chevy truck. She’s my beauty. My baby. I would’ve introduced you already, but she gets jealous very easy,” he laughed. “Maybe one day you’ll get to meet her.”

I shook my head at his silliness. “Oh brother, guys and their stupid toys with motors.”

“I’ll go tell Reed and Kendra the plans and you go get your sweet ass ready,” he laughed, giving me a swat on my butt.

Chapter 28 ~ Love Material

Over the last four days, Jaxon and I seemed to have very little time to ourselves. I wasn't sure if he was purposely avoiding alone time with me, or if maybe I was just expecting too much of him. A lot of the time, when we did have a moment alone, he kept his distance, like he was purposely being stand-offish. I missed him, though. I was growing accustomed to the security I felt while around him, and these feelings I was growing for him so quickly were scaring me.

Kendra and I were left alone for most of the day while Reed and Jaxon

spent long hours training at the bar. Even though Reed was days away from graduating with a business degree, Jaxon still wanted him to have 'hands on' experience. He felt he needed to get familiar with the 'ins and outs' of running a restaurant equipped with a bar and live entertainment. Knowing it was the main reason for us coming out here, I couldn't help to feel selfish. I wanted time with Jaxon. Alone.

He gave us the key to his Jeep and free reign to do whatever else, but we opted to spend our days in the sun. We wanted to go home with a natural tan instead of the fake one everyone else had to get during this time of year.

Jaxon had his own little mini-water park. Aside from the pool, there was a swinging rope like the one we used to jump from by the river back home. There was also a spiraling tunnel slide and an open curvy slide, both emptying into the massive-sized pool. And then there was a lazy river that outlined the entire pool. That's were Kendra and I liked spending most of our time.

I felt like I'd been here for weeks, but, then again, it felt like time was moving at the speed of light.

Kendra and I floated around Jaxon's lazy river, soaking up those skin-wrinkling types of rays. According

to Jaxon, the weather was warmer than the norm. He'd tried to convince me into believing it was all because of me, but I knew he was feeding me a line of crap. Still, I loved how he said things to me just to see a smile on my face.

With a light breeze blowing and daydreaming about Jaxon, I was so relaxed lying on my stomach that I started to doze off.

“So are you ever going to tell me about what’s going on with you and Jaxon, or am I gonna have to squeeze it out of you?” Kendra said, waking me up.

I opened my eyes, squinting at her. She had a tight grip on the corner of my float, lying on her stomach facing me.

Her eyebrow was arched waiting for me to answer. It didn't take me but a second to refresh my sleepy eyes. Anytime I thought about physical contact with Jaxon, my heart began to flutter. "What do you want to know?"

She gave me an obvious eye roll. "You know damn well what I want to know. Spit it out. I want it all. I want details of details," she giggled.

The smile that appeared on my face was unstoppable. "Wellll... let's see," I thought looking into the cloudless sky. "We've decided we want to be more than friends. I'm not really sure what that means or where we are headed, but I like it too much to stop."

Propping up on my elbows, I gushed with excitement. “He is so sweet to me, Kendra. Gah! The way he touches the small of my back when I’m near him, the way he laces his fingers in mine like it was second nature. He even smells me! I mean he literally presses his nose into my neck and sniffs.” My tone fell flat when my insecurity tapped on my heart. “It kind of scares me though because I’ve never had that. I worry that it’s too good to be true.” I flopped around onto my back nearly toppling off into the water.

When a few droplets of water landed on my bare stomach, I was thankful the pool was heated. I challenged myself to be a little more

daring by wearing the bright, yellow G-string bikini Jaxon had bought me yesterday. He thought he was being sneaky by not telling me about it. Instead, I found it this morning under my pillow with a little note laying on top of it, written in his chicken-scratch handwriting, ‘Please don’t be offended, but that prehistoric bathing suit of yours was boring me.’ I had yet to inform him of my discovery. Kendra nearly had a coronary when I removed my cover up. Surprisingly, she didn’t question me about it. Something told me that she already knew about it, especially since it was my favorite color. And that was something I’d never told Jaxon.

“Hmm... interesting.”

I looked at her curiously, “What’s interesting? Do you know something I don’t?” I said, shielding the sun with my forearm.

“No! Not at all,” she smirked.

“You lying ho! You better spill it now, or I will flip you off that float and drown you.”

Kendra had the look of fear in her eyes. Not because she was afraid of me drowning her, but because she was afraid of getting her hair wet. In her mind her hair was untouchable. You touch one strand and she’ll slice your fingers off without you ever feeling it. At least that’s what she threatens anyway. “Don’t even think about it. I’ll cut a

bitch, and you know it,” she warned.

I snickered at her. “Promises, promises. How many times have I heard that ceaseless threat? Just shut up and tell me what information you’re not telling me.”

She peered up at me. “Courtney, I know you don’t have anything to worry about. His feelings for you are genuine. The way he watches you is so intense, it makes me jealous.” She wiggled her fingers around in the water chasing a bug away. “Reed and I were talking about it last night in bed. He notices it too.”

I made a mental note to catch Jaxon staring at me when he didn’t think I was looking.

Knowing Kendra as well as I did, I recognized the look on her face. It was a look of ‘I know something, but I don’t know if I should tell you.’ She was trying to decide whether or not she wanted to tell me. It didn’t make any sense why she had to ponder the matter, because she always ended up telling me. She opened her mouth then closed it, then opened it again. *Here it comes.*

“I’m going to tell you something, and you better not breathe a word.”

Blowing out an exasperated breath, I rolled my eyes. “I promise, scouts honor, blah, blah, blah. Just spit it out. You know I’m not going to say anything.”

Kendra narrowed her eyes at me. “You’re such a bitch sometimes.”

I grinned at her. “I know.”

“Reed talked to Jaxon a little bit about you while they were training. You know how Reed can get protective of you?” I nodded. “Well he flat out asked Jaxon what his intentions are with you. He told him you’ve been through enough, and you don’t need another jerk to come along and trample on your heart.” *I loved Reed. He had always been my brother from another mother.* “Anyway,” Kendra continued, “Jaxon told him the feelings he’s developed for you are real. He said even though the situation sucks, meaning the age

difference and distance, that, no matter how hard he's tried, he can't get you out of his head. He also said he was glad you were only staying here for a week because, if he spent any more time than that with you, he would be afraid of falling in love with you." Kendra's voice softened. "He says your love material."

My heart swelled. It excited me, but it scared me at the same time. I'd already given my heart to a boy... a jerk and he punched it, ripped it, broke it, and left it lying dead on the floor. *Could I possibly give it away again?* I didn't want to jump to conclusions; it was too early for that. All I could do was play it by ear and see what direction my path

took me.

Kendra and I got out of the pool so we could shower and change before Jaxon and Reed got home. Although Jaxon had seen me naked waist down, I still didn't feel comfortable enough to let him watch me prance around in the G-string. And I especially didn't want Reed to see it either.

The overly-large, tiled shower in my bathroom was amazing. I loved it, so much that I could bathe in it several times a day. My favorite part was the five-speed sprayers located in various spots to give you a full body massage. Standing limp in the shower, I let the hot water beat against my skin until it turned

red. As I turned to pick up my bottle of shampoo, my heart skipped a beat when I saw writing appear on the glass. The steam formed the words, ‘You make my dimples happy.’ I wondered when he’d snuck in my room to write that. Must have been the same time he hid two yellow pieces of material under my pillow. I wondered how I must’ve looked smiling the entire time I showered.

After being neglected the first few days of our visit, Jaxon made sure our itinerary for the rest of the week was packed full of fun. He reached his goal to give us all the complete California experience. We’d spent one day at Disneyland and another at Knott’s Berry

Farm. I loved how he enjoyed thrill rides as much as I did. Another day he took us into Hollywood and Beverly Hills, driving us around through some of the glitzy neighborhoods and making sure to highlight all the movie star paraphernalia. Honestly, I didn't find the famous neighborhoods any better than the one he lived in.

He even took us shopping on Rodeo Drive. Kendra was in retail heaven, but, I on the other hand, felt very out of place. That was one part of the trip I would've liked to have forgotten about. Jaxon was pretty adamant on taking us into some of the stores. I was perfectly content on staying outside and doing my usual window shopping. I

already felt drabby dressed in very short, peach shorts with a black sleeveless blouse, but I didn't want to admit my real reason for not going inside—I couldn't afford it. I knew Kendra would just whip out her parents' credit card and buy whatever she wanted. Then she would push me into letting her buy me something as well, but I didn't want to have that scene in front of Jaxon. I continued to blame my lameness on my outfit, but Jaxon was persistent. He wasn't about to give up.

“My god, Courtney, do you think they don't see the slums of Hollywood on an everyday basis? Stop worrying about what you look like, and get your cute ass in that store now,” he demanded

standing outside the Louis Vuitton store. Kendra had already made her grand entrance, dragging poor Reed with her, and was inside getting her fashion fix.

Jaxon raked his hands through his hair a few times then rubbed the scruff on his face. I could feel the irritation I was causing him. I didn't want to upset him, but I didn't want an embarrassing moment either. He turned away from me walking toward a small slab of stucco separating the windows in the store. He leaned against the small section of the building and pulled his Altoids from his jean pocket, popping a couple of them into his mouth. At that moment, I knew he was frustrated with me. His Altoids were his cigarettes, and people usually

smoked when their nerves have been played until frayed. I swallowed my stubborn pill, walked over to the door, jerking it hard, and walked into a store that was completely out of my comfort zone.

Immediately, the posh sales assistant wrinkled her nose up at me in disgust. I couldn't let her think she had the upper hand on me so I gave her an over-exaggerated eye roll. She won though, she came in behind me wiping and readjusting every item I touched as if I'd spread some sort of disease on it. I came into the store for Jaxon, but I wasn't going to let someone degrade me to my face. I'd finally had enough and spun around on my heels only to come

face to chest with pure muscle—Jaxon.

“So, Sweet Cheeks, is this the one you wanted,” he said holding up a purple clutch purse, “or did you want something bigger? You know we don’t have to buy anything in here, there are a variety of stores out there where you can purchase better quality with friendlier service,” he scolded, but gave me a cute little wink. He stared the sales assistant down with demon eyes until she muttered something about someone needing her help in the back.

“Thank you,” I whispered. He wrapped his strong arms around me in a big bear hug. “You’re welcome,” he said before kissing my temple.

We browsed through the store with our pinkies hooked together. Because there were no price tags, I knew those who could afford these were ones who didn't have to ask for a price. That person clearly wasn't me. I was more than ready to leave. "You ready to go?" Slowly, I was making my way to the doors.

"Sure, but hold on a minute, I'll let Reed and Courtney know we'll be waiting for them outside." He walked over to them, acting discreet while they exchanged briefly, then strode back over to where I was standing. Laying his hand on the small of my back, he gently guided me outside.

We both slid our sunglasses on to block the bright sun. The one thing I'd learned so far this week was the weather in California was always sunny. Jaxon gripped my hips and pulled me up against him. The way he stared at me was like he could see my heart, see the way it accelerates when in his presence. Neither of us said anything. He zoned in on me until the tip of his nose was touching mine. Lightly, he rubbed it against mine, giving me eskimo kisses. "I want this week to be frozen in time forever," he murmured.

I swallowed. Hard.

I watched his eyes close, and then I felt the scruff around his mouth

tickle me before his lips devoured mine.

“Ahem.” Kendra cleared her throat, interrupting our public display of affection. “I think it’s cute and all how you two have finally stopped fighting your sexual desires, but please don’t make the rest of us suffer by watching,” she smirked. “Here.” She stuck her arm out to me with a Louis Vuitton bag dangling from her thumb and forefinger.

I scrunched my eyebrows together in confusion. “What’s this?”

“Just open the damn thing.”

Taking the bag from Kendra as if it was going to bite me, I then peeked inside. “Hell to the no, I’m not keeping

this,” I scolded, slinging the bag back to her. “It’s a nice gesture, Kendra, but your mom and dad don’t need to support me, too.”

Kendra tossed the bag back to me, her eyes flashing over to Jaxon. “I didn’t buy it. Jaxon did, so you can thank him now,” she grinned.

Cutting my eyes at Jaxon, I swiftly turned on my heel and marched myself back inside. I approached the rude lady at the counter. “Yes, I’d like to return this.”

The bag slipped off the counter out of my reach. “No, she would not. Sorry for the confusion, but we are keeping this,” he said to the snobby lady.

Jaxon had the bag in tow walking toward the door.

“I’m not keeping it,” I said to him.

He stopped in his tracks, shook his head then turned around marching back to me. “You will keep it because I bought it for you—”

“Jaxon I’m not a charity case. I can’t prove it, but I’m pretty darn sure you are the one that paid our bills, too. I appreciate it, but I don’t need to be taken care of financially.”

He cocked his head to the side with a look of disbelief. “I never said you were a charity case and I’ve never

treated you like one either. I just thought you would like something nice, since you never get the opportunity to splurge. I wanted to make you happy. And, as for the other, I don't know what you're talking about."

"Liar," I muttered. "Well, just so you know, I don't need expensive things to make me happy, Jaxon. You alone makes me happy."

Kendra came barreling into the store to put her two cents worth in. It was a two against one battle.

After bickering in the store with Jaxon and Kendra for too long, I finally caved in and agreed to keep the Louis Vuitton wallet. I felt silly carrying it. It

was only going to look ridiculous paired up with my off-brand purse, but I wasn't about to tell them that. That would've just prolonged the argument, and I would probably then end up walking out with a purse to match.

We walked down the sidewalk with our fingers laced together. I refused to go into any more stores I couldn't afford. "I would've bought you all the accessories to match it if you would've let me," Jaxon said softly in my ear.

I'd learned so many new things about Jaxon throughout the week. I learned he had severe road rage, he had low tolerance for rude people, and he carried a very soft spot for children.

While we were at Disneyland a little boy around the age of five with big crocodile tears in his eyes approached Jaxon, asking if he had seen his mommy. Without any hesitation, Jaxon quickly flagged down a Disneyland employee and stood by that little boy's side until he was back in his mother's arms. The workers kept telling him the boy was in great care, and that he should leave and enjoy his day at the park, but Jaxon wouldn't budge. He persisted in staying. What surprised me the most was when he opened up a little to me without me prying.

We had been sitting around at the Baby Care Center, both lost in our own thoughts until he began telling me a little

story. “When I was seven years old, this same exact thing happened to me. Gramma Z took me for my birthday. It was supposed to be the perfect day for a kid that age, but instead it turned into a nightmare. I thought being seven gave me some sort of super powers, ya know? I was into the whole Power Rangers craze at that time. I ventured away from my gramma for a second to look at some stupid sword, and, by the time I turned around, I had lost her. I’d never been so terrified in my life.”

He spoke softly, staring down at the floor in deep concentration. He was reliving that moment. Seeing that poor little guy lost had brought that fear back to Jaxon, and he was feeling the same

terror that little boy was feeling. Sliding my arm around his waist, I gave him a light hug, then rested my head against his shoulder. There was no need to say anything. He was offering me a small piece of him, and I didn't want to take away anymore from it than that.



It was our last full day in California, and Jaxon was throwing a huge party for us at his bar. Well, actually it was out on the beach. He had cabanas for us to escape the sun, fire pits set up for the night when the cool ocean

breeze blew in, a stage set up outside the bar for karaoke—thanks to Kendra’s whining—and alcohol for everyone except the three of us.

Kendra was pissed at Jaxon when she found out he wasn’t going to serve us alcohol. So, Kendra did what she did best—she took matters into her own hands.

I was helping with some of the decorations when Kendra grabbed my arm causing me to drop the box of solar powered paper lanterns. “What the hell?”

“Shut up! Stop making a scene and just come with me to the bathroom.” Following her orders, I followed behind

her. As soon as the door closed she set her purse on the vanity and made a feet-check under the stalls. “Look what I got for us,” she said, pulling the top of a bottle from her new Louis Vuitton purse.

“Where did you get that?” I shrieked. I wasn’t sure I even wanted to know.

“I snatched it from Jaxon’s private stash I found in his office,” she snickered, showing me another bottle.

“Have you lost your mind? You’re crazy if you think I’m joining you in your little shenanigans,” I said, making my way back out the door.

“Oh, no you don’t!” she roared,

jerking me back into the bathroom. “This is our last night here, Court. Let’s have fun with it,” she pleaded. “I slipped a few twenties under his keyboard, so technically I’m not stealing.”

I blew a few strands of hair from my face. “Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

“No, but... but... please just do this with me. I promise we’ll have fun, and I’ll make sure you have the best night of your life. You won’t want to go home.”

I already didn’t want to go home. She stuck her bottom lip out and gave me her best puppy dog eyes. *Damn bitch always got her way.*

Standing in front of the mirror, I pulled my hair loose from my hair tie. “You know we won’t get away with this. The smell will be obvious on our breath,” I said, pulling my hair back into a tighter ponytail.

“Really, Court? You know I’m smarter than that. I got us vodka. We each have our own bottle. We just have to be careful of our intake. We don’t want to gulp it down within an hour then pass out before the fun starts.”

To be honest, I was ready to head back to Jaxon’s house to take a shower and see what hidden message he’d left for me on the shower glass. Every day it was something new. Once it

was a heart with our names inside, or a sweet message saying, ‘Hurry up! My eyes miss your beautiful face.’ My favorite was his quirky little message saying, ‘Don’t cover up, I like watching’ with a set of eyes drawn on the glass. That one freaked me out for a second. After I showered, I searched around the bathroom for a hidden camera.

Jerking the hair tie out in frustration, I turned to face Kendra. “Well, if anything goes down, I’m holding you responsible.”



I learned that night to never drink vodka again.

That morning I woke up to a severe migraine. My head was literally hurting from lying down. My pillow felt like the same ones they used on The Flintstones. My mouth was as dry as the Sahara desert. I tried swallowing, but my throat was too sore. I needed water. Severely. I didn't want to open my eyes, but I had to. I had to get up to take something for my head before it exploded. Jaxon wouldn't want brains plastered all over his walls. As I scooted my way over to the side of the bed, I bumped into a warm, firm body. At first I thought it was Kendra, but the body felt too big and solid to be her. It

also felt familiar. *Jaxon!* My eyelids shot open. Looking around me, I gasped when I took in my surroundings. I was sleeping in Jaxon's bed with Jaxon, and I was wearing nothing except my panties and bra. *Oh God, did I have sex with Jaxon last night and not even remember it?* All the pain from my migraine was forgotten as the memories from last night came flooding back into my head.

“How much do you have left in your bottle, Court?” Kendra asked, already slurring her words a little. “Half,” I answered. My motor skills were already becoming dysfunctional. “Good, don’t drink anymore for a while. I want us to sing some karaoke,

and we can't get up there in front of everyone singing like a couple of sloppy drunks," she giggled, pointing up to the stage where everyone was taking turns singing, or, for better words, screaming their favorite songs.

Oh God, the memory of our singing made me cringe. We both agreed on the song, but the rest was all Kendra's doings. I didn't know what her intentions were when we made the song choice.

"Whassup ladies and gentlemen! My name is Kendra, and this here is my best friend Courtney. We are from the awesome state of North Carolina, and we want to

dedicate this song to the two hottest guys up in this place tonight—my super sexy boyfriend, Reed Ashburn, and the California hottie, Jaxon Vaughn.” Jaxon’s head popped up as soon as he heard his name, I was mortified. I wanted to run off the stage and hide in the bathroom, but Kendra knew me all too well. She had her claws digging in the crook of my arm, not allowing me to go anywhere. The song started up, and I either had the choice of standing there looking like a fool or joining my ex-best friend in her private concert. I chose the latter.

The first line of Enrique Iglesias’ ‘Tonight I’m Fucking You’ popped up on the screen. Kendra’s

pitch-perfect voice started right on queue. Mine got stuck in my throat. I was frozen. I couldn't peel my eyes away from Jaxon. He made himself comfortable leaning against the bar with his arms folded across his chest. His sun-kissed skin glowed underneath his white button up shirt. His sleeves were rolled up close to his elbows, showing off the tight muscles in his forearm. At that moment, I realized that we were dressed alike. I chose a simple white sundress with gold strappy sandals for the day since we would be spending a lot of the time on the beach.

My eyes raked over his body, inspecting every inch of his physique from head to toe. When I reached his

mouth, I paused. The memory of the way his mouth felt on me made me blush. I tried to stop thinking about it, but the vodka was fighting against me. He seemed to be amused as he flashed his signature sexy, smirky smile, displaying those damn lickable dimples. I think I actually sighed into my microphone. My eyes continued their journey until they connected to his, and I was lost. His lips may have told everyone he found the song humorous, but his eyes held me tight telling me he wanted what the lyrics were saying.

Jaxon began stirring around, bringing me back from my reminiscing of last night's events. I lay still on the bed,

even holding my breath until my lungs started to burn. I didn't want to wake him yet. I wasn't prepared to talk to him. I wasn't prepared to face him.

More memories come crashing back down, and I couldn't blame Kendra for the rest of the night. I was solely responsible for my own ignorance.

Stumbling over to the DJ, I requested my next song. This one was mine. I shook my head at Kendra. She knew. She took a step back and let me have my moment on the stage. The music started up and I captured Jaxon with my eyes. If he wasn't familiar with the song, I was gonna familiarize him with it. I started off with "na na na" to

Kylie Minogue's 'Can't Get You Out of My Head.' Maybe I wasn't the best singer, but right at this moment, I didn't care, I wanted Jaxon to know how I felt. I wanted him to hear the words my sober lips couldn't tell him. I indulged in the valor alcohol gave me. I liked how it made me feel alive and free.

Jaxon watched me like there was no one else but him and I as my hips swayed to the beat. I noticed he didn't watch my body or my mouth, instead, his sky blue eyes connected to mine, like an invisible tether linking us together and not allowing either one of us to look away. The song ended, and it was like everyone around me

disappeared. Silence settled in. I zeroed in on Jaxon, blocking out all of my surroundings. I had tunnel vision, and all I could see was him; he was my light at the end of the tunnel. He watched me curiously, and I wondered how much he read into the lyrics of my song.

I jerked in response to Kendra bumping into me. All the sounds in the restaurant came crashing back to my eardrums. My invisible tether snapped, ending our private moment. A thrill of excitement traveled to every nerve ending, and I wanted to sing him another song. I choose 'Animal' by Neon Trees. I didn't bother asking Kendra what she wanted. I think she

saw what I was doing anyway and let me take the reins for a little while... or maybe not. I was intoxicated more than I thought, and, halfway through the song, I tried adding a few dance moves into the rhythm. My impaired judgment caused me to stumble and fall off the stage, and never got the chance to finish my song.

The throbbing pain of my migraine came back, knocking on my skull again. I then remembered Jaxon's reaction when he found out what Kendra and I had done. Silently groaning, I thought about how he had to pick me up and carry me outside to avoid all the spectators I had drawn.

“Fuck!” he yelled.

I cringed.

He rubbed the scruff on his face and paced back and forth in front of me on the sand. His throat grunts were out of control. He was mad. I didn't like this feeling at all. This was the first time he'd been openly upset with me, and it brought back haunting feelings. Phillip made me feel this way when he became furious with me.

“Please don't be mad at me,” I said in almost a whisper. I was sitting on the sand. The tide was starting to roll in, and it was inching closer to my bare feet.

The moon was bright, casting a glow on Jaxon. Watching him carefully, I assessed his body language. He stopped pacing and turned with his back facing me, staring out at the waves breaking against the calm water. He shook his head. "You just don't understand, Court."

"Then explain it to me, Jaxon," I scolded, instantly regretting my harsh tone. I didn't want him mad at me. I was mad enough at myself. I was feeling so exuberant before... before I got carried away and fell off the stage. Wanting to end my last day with a bang, I was having the time of my life. Then I had to screw it all up. Me, the amateur drinker, thought she could

hold her own like she was a damn professional.

Jaxon spun around, dropping to his knees in front of me, making us eye level. The crease between his eyebrows was deep, his eyes were narrowed, and his nose flared with each breath. His eyes told me he was battling with himself, not with me. He wasn't mad. "I can't!" he gritted between his teeth. I could see him working his jaw.

Clench. Unclench. Clench. Unclench.

He was searching for words. What was he about to tell me?

He closed his eyes and took in a

deep breath. "Dammit, Courtney. Don't do this," he begged. "Don't go and ruin the best fuckin' week of my life."

I absorbed his words. They weren't what I was expecting to hear.

"Then talk to me, Jaxon. Please." I cupped his face in my hands. "Tell me what's wrong. Tell me why you're so upset," I begged.

He blew out an exasperated breath. "You're fucking seventeen and I'm twenty two, that's what's wrong." He pushed back onto his heels then turned to lay down beside me on the sand.

I was stunned. Not exactly what

*I wanted to hear, but he didn't run.
Baby steps.*

*Several minutes of silence
passed between us. Would my age come
between us? Would it be our demise?*

*Jaxon spoke first. "I'm sorry,"
he whispered. He folded his arms
behind his head and stared out into the
starless sky.*

*I said nothing, yet I had
everything to say. I just couldn't say it
out loud to him. My feelings were hurt,
but I didn't want him to know that. I
didn't want him to think of me as the
weak little teenager that I really was.
Often, I forgot about my age, and most
of the time, it was when I was with him.*

But, this time, he made it loud and clear just how much our age difference really mattered. Not sure if it was from the alcohol or from the punch to the gut I had just received, I felt sick to my stomach.

I was ready to go home, but home wasn't here. That came tomorrow. It was time for me to find a ride back to Jaxon's. "I am sorry, too," I said then pushed myself up from the cool sand.

Not getting any further than into a squatting position, Jaxon grabbed my wrist and pulled me back down onto him. "You're not running off from me. That's what little girls do,

and I know you're more than that." My body landed straddled between his legs, and my face planted in his chest. The water lapped over my feet slowly, crawling up my legs. "I didn't say that to hurt your feelings or to make you feel immature." He crooked his forefinger, lifting my chin up, forcing me to look at him. "I have to be careful with you, Sweet Cheeks. You have no idea the amount of damage you can cause me." Leaning up, he stretched his arm out behind him to rest on, and placed a warm kiss on my chilled lips.

The innocent kiss was so much more to me. It was electrifying. The hairs on my arms stood at attention. He broke the kiss, but I came back for

more. I acquired a taste for him long ago, and now I couldn't ever get enough of it. Our kiss deepened. No longer resting between his thighs, I climbed up onto his lap and straddled him. His long piano fingers wrapped around my waist and lifted me up to position me onto a more pleasurable spot. He took me with him as he fell back against the sand. Within a second, I was flipped over onto my back. The rough sand scraped against my skin as he hovered over me.

“No. Stop.” He shook his head. His eyes closed tight, inhaling a sharp breath. “I want you. God, I want you so fucking bad, but I can't have you. Not now anyway. I made a promise to

myself that I wouldn't touch you again intimately until you turned eighteen." He hopped up extending his hand to me. I reached for him, and he gently pulled me up. And just like that our moment was over.

I was sick and tired of my age becoming the root of my rejection.

We were both pretty wet at this point. My teeth began to chatter from the ocean breeze blowing against my wet dress. I hadn't noticed it before, but, now that Jaxon had blown out the flame to the fire he ignited in me, it was hard to avoid.

From the alcohol, to the cold wet clothes, to the rejection, my body was in

turmoil and my stomach began to churn. “I don’t feel good. Can we leave?”

Jaxon nodded and wrapped himself around me.

Again, I was broken from my spell when I felt the covers sliding off of me. Jaxon groaned as he stretched. “How are you feeling, Sweet Cheeks,” he asked, wrapping his arms and legs around my entire body. “Horrible,” I grumbled. “I have little elves working inside my cranium chipping away pieces of my skull little by little with a hatchet,” I frowned.

He chuckled slightly and his breath on my neck brought goose bumps. “That’s what happens when you steal

vodka from me and drink the entire bottle by yourself within a few hours.”

“It wasn’t stolen, and I didn’t drink the *entire* bottle,” I answered defensively. “Kendra paid you for it.”

He yawned. “Still, what the hell were you two thinking?”

“I obviously wasn’t. I was letting her make all the decisions for me.”

He mumbled, “I’ll say.”

His thumb formed circles on my bare shoulder. His thick, black eyelashes brushed against his cheek a couple of times before he looked up at me. “Court, do you remember last night?” I nodded.

“I mean do you remember everything?” he asked. Oh gosh, this was the moment where he was going to tell me we had sex, and I was gonna have to admit to not being present. “I think so.”

He propped up on one elbow, looking down at me as he cleared his throat. “I had a hard time going to sleep last night. I couldn’t stop thinking about me and you and what our future holds for us. I’m a difficult person, Courtney. I’m dark inside. My heart is black, and my soul is empty. I’m telling you this because I’m falling for you. Hard. When I got upset last night, it wasn’t because of you, it was because of me.” His eyes made a bee-line to the pictures of his grandmother and mother sitting above

his fireplace. "I've gotten myself into a lot of trouble in the past. I have a record." He looked away from the women he loved, and his baby blues found their way back to me. "Last night when you got up on that stage in a drunken stupor, I was fearful of what could happen to us. All it would take was one person with a grudge to turn me in for serving alcohol to a minor, and they would've thrown my ass in jail. If I couldn't see you or talk to you anymore..." he shook his head, as if he didn't want to think about the consequences, "I don't know what I would do. You're good for me, Court, I feel so alive with you."

I felt like a fool. I could've

easily ruined his life and, instead of him worrying about that, he was worrying about what could happen to us.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know.”

“I know you didn’t know, and I’m sorry for not telling you sooner. But, like I’ve said before, I have a lot of baggage, Courtney, which you don’t need to be burdened with. The troubles of my past only bring me down, so, when I can, I prefer to leave it all where it is.” He tucked my hair behind my ear, his eyes still boring into mine. “If you can’t handle this, I’ll understand. It wasn’t fair of me to bring you in without warning you first, and I’m sorry for that.” His eyes were begging me not to leave.

“Jaxon, in my eyes, your good outweighs your bad. Plus we started off as friend’s right? Well, friends stick by each other no matter what, so I’m not going anywhere. You’re kind of stuck with me for a while. I don’t leave so easily, just ask Kendra,” I smiled.

He lowered his head kissing me softly, murmuring the words on my lips. “Thank you.”

Quickly changing the subject, he laid his hand over my bare stomach. “How’s the tummy this morning? You really blew some chunks last night.” So that was why my throat hurt so much. I didn’t even remember it. After Jaxon carried me to his Jeep, I must’ve passed

out because I had no recollection of what happened after that, except... except I vaguely remembered him talking to a girl down on the beach. Actually I think they might have been arguing. It seemed like I remembered Jaxon's arms flailing in the air. Hell, I don't know, maybe I dreamt it.

“I don't know. My head hurts too badly for me to focus on anything else.”

He planted a chaste kiss on my forehead and rolled out of bed. “Just chill here for a little bit, and I'll get you something to remedy your hangover.” He walked into his entertainment room and came back out carrying two bottles of water.

“Water? That’s my cure?”

He unscrewed the cap and handed it to me. “Yes. You’re severely dehydrated, that’s why your head is pounding. I tried giving you water last night, but, every time you chugged some down, it came right back up.” He crawled back into bed and curled up against me. *Mmm, he felt good. Soothing.*

“Oh shit!” he exclaimed, jumping out of bed just as quickly as he crawled in. “It’s ten o’clock, and your flight leaves in two and a half hours.” I sprang out of the bed, instantly feeling queasy along with a hot knife stabbing me in my head. The pain was excruciating. I

needed Excedrin, and I needed it quick.



The four of us made it to LAX in record timing, according to Jaxon. On the way to the airport, I drank a little ginger ale and nibbled on toast. My headache eased up, but the sick feeling still lingered around. This time, though, it wasn't because of alcohol. My heart pounded erratically, and I couldn't catch my breath—I was grieving. I was grieving because, after spending a week with this beautiful man who thought he had a black soul, I had grown attached.

We were now linked together. I had wrapped around him like a weed on a vine, and now my roots were getting cut, setting me free. I didn't want to be free. Not without Jaxon.

Jaxon pulled his Jeep up to the curb and helped us with our luggage. He made his rounds of hugs and goodbyes, saving me for last. Reed and Kendra both looked at me with sad eyes, then walked inside to give us privacy. My eyes brimmed with tears as his thick arms wrapped around my waist hugging me tight. He lifted his hands, carving them around my face. "Shh, it's not goodbye, Princess," he said, with his lips brushing up against mine. "I'll be out to visit in a month. I'll talk to you

every day. We can Skype, so we can see each other. Whatever you want to do, I'll do it."

He brushed an escaping tear from my cheek. "I want you to come with me."

"Baby, I wish I could, but I have things here I need to catch up on."

Understanding, I nodded. I was asking for the moon and stars.

"I'm going to miss you like crazy." I stretched up to my tiptoes and slung my arms around his neck squeezing him hard and inhaling his sweet mint one last time.

“Are you sniffing me?” He asked me as if he never did it.

“Yes, I’m making a memory.”

Jaxon laughed at me before gently kissing my lips one more time.

Throughout this time I’d spent with Jaxon, I’d learned so much about who he was. I’d also learned there was so much more about him that he kept concealed. He could freely express himself physically, but he battled exposing his true identity. Aside from learning that his favorite food was sushi, his favorite animal was a dog, and his favorite thing to do to release tension, besides sex, or least that’s what he told me, was swimming laps in his pool, I

wanted to know who the real Jaxon Vaughn was. I wanted to climb into his body and pull out the person I felt he was hiding from me.

Since I wasn't in any mood to make small talk, I didn't speak to Reed or Kendra. They left me alone and gave me my space. I wasn't even nervous or excited about flying back home. All I could think about was Jaxon.

We boarded the plane, and I let Reed have my seat. I wanted to be alone. As I sat there pondering over the past week, it occurred to me how I never saw Troy again except from a distance at our going away party. Then, the girl I thought I saw Jaxon arguing with on the beach

slipped back into my mind. *What else was he hiding from me?*

Chapter 29 ~ Jaxon

My Jeep sat idling at the drop-off section in front of the airport. I had no consideration for other people's loved ones saying their goodbyes. I was too wrapped up in myself. A girl was trying to invade my heart. I ignored the horns blowing as I walked into the airport. Standing at the entrance, I watched Courtney like a stalker until she passed through security and disappeared out of my sight. I wanted a cigarette so bad. Grabbing my little Altoid tin from my pocket, I tossed a handful of the little mints into my mouth.

What the hell had I gotten

myself into? I was in too deep now to end things with her. She'd grown too attached. Or was I the one that had grown attached? She was tearing up at the airport. I mean, fucking literally on the verge of crying because she didn't want to leave me. *Damn.*

How could this little girl, whom I met less than six months ago, dance on my emotions with so much force? I was so twisted inside. Was it my brain or my heart that was deranged? I couldn't decipher whether or not the feelings I'd developed for her were new ones, sincere ones for her, or if they were the old one's resurfacing. *God, I was so fucked up.*

Walking out of the airport, I received several snide remarks and evil stares as I jumped back into my Jeep and drove off.

Before going to Zack and Joey's, I made a detour to the cemetery. I had to speak to Heather. I had to let her know I wasn't going to fail her this time. Stopping at the fresh market, I bought an arrangement of flowers for her headstone.

I despised cemeteries. The most important women to enter into my life resided in them.

It had been a year since I'd visited. Creeping up to the obscure slab of granite, I squatted down in front of her

headstone to adjust the flowers so that they wouldn't blow away in the breeze. I traced my fingers over her name—Heather Grace Morrison. Her name formed on my lips as I moved over each letter. “I miss you, Princess,” I whispered.

My thoughts flipped back and forth to Courtney and Heather. Heather was just like Courtney when we met—full of life, willing to tackle new adventures, pure, sweeter than icing on a cake, but more directly, she fell for me, fast and hard. She was everything I wanted. She was my future bride. She was my life... until I took it from her... until I stopped her heart from beating. She then nearly became my death.

“Why? Why did you have to leave me, Heather?” I yelled out to the heavens above.

I didn't notice the tear escaping my eye until the wind blew it across my cheek. *God, it hurt.* The pain still felt as fresh as the day my soul turned black. My heart constricted as each memory flashed back to me—the phone call, her limp hand dangling off the gurney, her pale, cold, but still beautiful face in the casket. I choked back the lump of guilt forming in my throat. No matter how hard I tried to move on, to wipe her from my mind, she still came back to haunt me... to remind me of the pain I caused her. Now she had found a way to seek revenge. Life was so cruel.

Courtney was my punishment. I'd take my punishment with a firm punch. I'd take a hundred punches—I'd take them to the heart. After all, I deserved it.

I'd prove her wrong this time. I wouldn't ruin her. I wouldn't poison her body. I was a different person now. I was a better person now. *Everybody deserved a second chance, right?*

I knew I needed to stay away, but I couldn't. This was my last opportunity to right a wrong. I'd rectified all the rest of my fuck-ups, this was my one shot to correct my biggest one.

“Princess, I know you hear me. I know you hear my inner thoughts. Please forgive me. I beg for your mercy. Give

me this last chance.” I brushed away the dead grass clippings then kissed the picture of her engraved into the smooth granite. “I love you, Princess. I’ll love you till the day I die.” I promised before walking down the path back to my Jeep.



Troy and I hadn’t spoken since that day he first met Courtney. I was too pissed off at him, plus I was afraid he would expose the most important thing I’d been hiding.

Walking into the bar, I headed

right to my office. I still wasn't ready to face Troy. I was afraid of punching him dead in the face.

“So, has the doppelganger gone home?” Troy asked, standing in the doorway to my office. I didn't even hear him open the door.

“Don't fuck with me, Troy I'm still fucking pissed at you. Do you know how damn difficult you made this week for me?” Troy didn't say a word he just stood there and watched me. “She knew! She fuckin' knew you had an issue with her. She asked me about it, and I had to lie to her.” Red crept into my vision.

Troy laughed, but it wasn't one filled with joy. “Now you just wait a

fucking minute,” he growled, pointing a finger at me. “I didn’t make you lie about anything. You’ve done a fine job of that since the day you met her. All I did was try to talk some fucking sense into your stubborn-ass,” he shot back at me.

He cocked his head and narrowed his eyes at me. “And what’s with that little stunt her and her friend pulled last night? Were you trying to get the place shut down? C’mon dude, get your dick out of your ear and listen to me. This girl is going to be nothing but trouble for you. She’s—”

I stopped him in his tracks. “I get it, Troy. Don’t worry. I will never jeopardize *my* business, if that’s what

you're worried about. This place means too much to me for me to let it go down —”

Troy trudged heavily over to the front of my desk, cutting me short. “We are partners here, remember? I may not have put the money into this place like you have, but we know damn sure I’ve added enough man labor to justify my half of the business.” He blew out a loud breath, an exasperated breath. “Look man, I’m not fighting with you over this. I’ll tell you again, like I told you the day she got here—nothing good is going to come out of this. She’s not Heather, nor will she ever be. They may look the same, they may act the same, but they are not the same. Is it coincidental? Yes, but

you are just setting yourself up for more heartache.” Troy dropped down into the black leather chair positioned in front of my desk. “Dude, you’re my brother, and I’ve been through a lot of shit with you over the years. I’m not going to watch you fall back into the drugs, alcohol, and prostitution again.”

“Who said I’m going back to dabbling in that shit?”

“Jaxon, when she finds out what your interest is with her, she will never speak to you. I can’t watch you self-destruct for a second time.”

Massaging my temples, I tried to release the tension I felt building up in my head. “I will be fine. She will be

fine. Stay off my back, Troy. I know what I'm doing.”

Troy popped up out of the chair. “Whatever, man, you do what you got to do, just don't drag me and everybody else down with you,” he scolded. He turned his back to me as he walked out of my office then turned back, facing me at the door. “As always, I'll be here to catch you when you fall dude, because it will happen, especially when Valeria finds out. That psycho bitch will destroy *y o u and Courtney*.” He walked out, shutting the door firmly behind him.

Dropping my face into my hands, I tried to rub the stress off my face. “Valeria,” I grumbled to myself. That

was another problem in my life. God, she almost saw Courtney last night. I couldn't take a risk like that again. There were only two ways to bribe Valeria. If I couldn't pay her off with sex, I could always resort to my next best offer—money. It satisfied her enough for me to run her off before Courtney had seen her with me.

After catching up on some neglected paperwork and phone calls, I drove back to the house for a little bit of down time. My neck and shoulders were so tight from stress. I needed a swim.

After my swim, I walked into my bathroom to shower, and the red lipstick was so loud it felt like it screamed at

me. On my mirror were the words ‘Love is like a soul. Without it, your body is just a dark, empty vessel.’ Underneath it Courtney wrote ‘Let me in Jaxon, let me color your soul.’

I wanted to let her in. I would let her in, but I just had to do it slowly. I felt ashamed for shunning her so often when we could have spent time alone. Controlling my sexual urges was a battle I nearly lost that first day. She was so damn perfect, so sensual to my touch, and so in tune with my body. The smell of cotton candy escaped the pores all over her body. I couldn’t resist the urge to inhale her scent every time I was close to her. I wanted to taste her every second, every minute that I was with her.

She was my favorite flavor.

Aside from my temptation to take her, I could no longer risk the evasive questions she asked. I knew her curiosity would win in the end, and I didn't want to lie to her further than I already had. She didn't deserve the repercussion of my temper. Every moment with her, I could see the questions forming on her lips, but she respected me enough to not ask... or maybe it was fear. I hoped it wasn't fear. I never wanted her to be afraid of me.

I turned the water on to start my shower. My smile was irreplaceable when I thought about her copying the hidden messages I'd left for her on the

shower glass door. She brought me so much happiness. Warmth replaced the cold that had surrounded my heart for the past four years. Fate brought her to me. Heather brought her to me. A tragedy will not break us. I would fight it with everything I had in me.

Chapter 30 ~ You Dropped the Bomb on Me, Baby

“I was going to surprise you, but I changed my mind. I’ll just go ahead and tell you,” Jaxon teased me over the phone.

I couldn’t believe it had been exactly two weeks since I left California, leaving a small piece of my heart with him. We both kept our promise to stay in touch. We didn’t want a relapse of falling apart like the last time.

I bounced on my bed with excitement. “Oh goody! I love

surprises.”

“On second thought, maybe I’ll keep it to myself.”

His playfulness was welcoming. We seemed to connect better, to open up more, when we were not in each other’s sight. We decided to communicate the old fashion way—talking on the phone. We tried to Skype, but neither of us could speak openly while the other was watching. It turned into a staring contest most of the time. I wasn’t sure what held him back, but, for me, every time I saw him, all I could think about was the intimacy we shared. Jaxon wasn’t very fond of the whole social networking lifestyle, so our choices narrowed down

to phone calls, texting, and the occasional Skyping.

“No, no, no. Please tell me,” I pouted, giggling when I realized my bottom lip was protruding as if he could see me. I quickly sucked it back in, sinking my teeth into the fatty flesh.

“Well since you’ve resorted to begging, I guess I’m not left with a choice.” His light laughter was contagious.

Since I got back home there had been nothing but happiness in my life. Who knew having a boyfriend could be this much fun. *Was that what he was—my boyfriend?* We’d never discussed it. *Should I ask him? Would I come off as*

being too pushy? Too demanding? I remembered Kendra telling me he thought of me as love material, but what exactly did he mean by that? My curiosity had to know. I'd go crazy not knowing.

“I’m coming out for your graduation.”

I exploded into a scream of glee. “Oh my gosh! Oh my gosh! Oh my gosh!” I gushed.

He was laughing loudly on the other side of the phone. “I take it you are okay with it?”

“Okay? I’m freakin’ ecstatic! Jaxon, you just made me happier than

what you already make me.” The feeling inside of me is absolutely indescribable. I’ve never felt this level of happiness in my life.

“Mission accomplished,” he said with poise. “Sweet Cheeks, making you happy is my number one goal. I don’t ever want you to feel sad or angry. I know you’ve had too many years of struggling through a miserable relationship. I want to be your light. I want to be that person that gives you a reason to wake up every morning with a smile on your face.” His words lost all play. He was serious. *Was this my chance to ask him about our relationship status?*

“Jaxon, you *are* all those things to me. I can’t believe I’m telling you this, and I probably sound like the typical teenage girl, but... I count down the minutes, even seconds, when I know you are about to call or text me. My hands literally start to shake with excitement when I pick up my phone.” My heart rate picked up its pace. Butterflies burst in my belly just from talking about it. That’s just how euphoric he made me.

He sighed into the phone. “And I don’t want that to ever stop. I want those feelings to intensify.” He groaned momentarily, “I don’t know if I’m going to be able to wait until your graduation. I may possibly have to make an

impromptu trip before then. Hmm... like a weekly trip.” He cackled an evil laugh. “Yeah... I think I’ll have to see what kind of tricks I can pull out of my ass,” he said, talking more to himself than to me.

I wanted to catch him at the perfect time. I wanted his mood to be cheerful. This was my opportunity to ask him where we stood. *Here it goes. I better do it while I have the courage.* “Jaxon, I’ve been thinking, or actually wondering... umm... what are we exactly?”

“What kind of question is that?” he laughed. “Last I checked you were a smokin’ hot, southern speakin,’ sweet-

as-cotton-candy chick that has turned my insides into a tangled up mess of zeal,” he said in his not so stellar southern accent. “Sweet Cheeks, I don’t need drugs when I have you. I’m flying high on the ecstasy of just thinking about you.” *Whoa*. His words instantly turned me into a hot mess. “I know what you’re asking, and, yes, I think of you as my girlfriend.”

And there it was. He laid it all out in front of me like a Thanksgiving feast. *Somebody, please resuscitate me. My heart just exploded with joy.*

“Is there anything else you want to know? Never mind, scratch that. I’m not ready to open that window yet.”

“Get your ass off the phone and help me,” Kendra blurted at me, slinging my bedroom door open. She looked disheveled with no make-up on, her hair matted up into a pony tail, and a Walgreen’s bag dangling from her hand. She tossed the bag onto my bed then plopped herself down on top of it.

I placed my hand over the mouthpiece on the phone. “What’s wrong?” I whispered to her, knowing something was terribly wrong. Kendra *never* went out in public looking the way she did right now.

There was no point in hiding our exchange, Jaxon heard her loud and clear when she barged into my room.

“Umm... sounds like you have a friend in crisis. I’ll let you tend to her. We can talk later.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, he’s sure. Now hang up the damn phone!” she cried, her voice muffled in my pillow.

Until she looked up at me, I hadn’t notice the tears in her eyes. “Yes, it’s fine. I promise. Now go,” Jaxon demanded.

“Bye,” I said, then quickly touched the end button.

Setting my phone down on my nightstand, I scooted down my bed

beside her. “What is wrong, Kendra? Talk to me.” I pleaded, rubbing her back. Her body shuddered beneath my hand as she sobbed.

After she released a hard cry, she wiped her eyes and tried to catch her breath. “I think I’m pregnant, Court.”

I wasn’t expecting to hear that. I was waiting for her to tell me anything but that. “Are you sure? How late are you?”

Reaching over, I pulled a tissue from my nightstand and handed it to her. “Five days,” she stuttered through her hiccups.

I waited for her to blow her nose

before pressing for more information. “But you’re on the pill. I don’t understand.”

She reached across me to grab another tissue. “When we were in California, I had a couple of days where I forgot. I got off schedule with the time change and stuff.”

I started calculating up the days in my head. It didn’t add up. If I was calculating right, that week in California was too close to her period for her to be pregnant. “Have you taken a test?” I asked.

“No, that’s why I bought these,” she said, unloading a bag full of pregnancy tests onto my bed.

“Kendra, was it necessary to buy...” I counted all of them under my breath. “Seven?” I questioned in confusion.

She shrugged me off. “I want to be sure. Don’t judge.”

I laughed gently, trying to lighten the situation. “You know I never judge. C’mon, let’s go take one,” I said pulling her off my bed by her arm.

Snatching up a box, I hauled her into the bathroom. “I’m not doing this by myself, you’re doing it with me,” Kendra proclaimed.

“Yeah, that’s what I’m doing. Duh!” I said, shaking my head.

“No, I mean I want you to take one with me too,” she said still fighting through the hiccups.

Stopping dead in my tracks, I turned to face her. “Are you serious? Why? I haven’t had sex, so there is no reason for me to take one.”

My body transformed into panic mode as I thought about the one incident with Phillip. I had worked hard to block that tainted memory from my mind. Kendra was throwing out the cast, reeling it back in. *What if? Oh God! What would I do if it came up positive?* I knew we didn’t use protection. We never did, but he always pulled out before it got too far. I didn’t know how

far we got this time. I couldn't remember. I had to believe he threw me off before he reached that point. My heartbeat began thumping hard in my chest. I had to pull myself together. I couldn't let Kendra be aware of the possibility.

“Because that's what friends do. I know yours will come up negative, but it will still make me feel better if you do this with me. Please?” She begged.

Blowing out a hard sigh, I walked back into my bedroom to get another test. I couldn't believe I was going to do this. My hands were shaking. My nerves were taking over. She was going to know. I pitched the box to her. It

was my only way to deter her eyes from my shaky hands.

I ripped the box open with too much force and pulled the small stick out. “You read the directions. And you’re going first,” I added.

Kendra read the directions aloud then squatted over the applicator while she peed on it. “Okay, now it’s your turn.” I noticed her hands trembling. My heart hurt for her. She never got upset or nervous over anything, but this seemed to really rattle her.

My nerves filled my bladder. I had no trouble wetting the test.

“Have you told Reed?” I asked.

She shook her head. “No. I’m scared to. Everything is finally coming together for him, Court. What if it comes up positive? I will ruin everything he has worked so hard for.” Her lip quivered, and tears began to spill from her eyes again.

Tossing my test into the sink, I rushed over to wrap my arms around her. “Shh, it’s going to be okay. No matter how this all turns out, Reed is still going to love you. You know you can’t get rid of him that easy.”

She only nodded in agreement.

I pulled off some toilet paper and handed it to Kendra. “Here, honey. Dry those pretty eyes up.”

Kendra worked on her eyes and nose until she no longer had the sniffles. “Okay, I think our time is passed from being up,” she said. “It only takes three minutes. You look at it. I’m scared to.”

I didn’t even have to pick her test up. I could clearly see there was no line. She was free.

“It’s negative!” I exclaimed. She jerked the applicator up to see for herself. “Oh my God, Courtney!” She jumped up and down screaming. With all the commotion, I was thankful my mom wasn’t home. This wasn’t exactly a scene I would want to explain to her.

“I have to go. I have to see Reed and beat the shit out of him for scaring

me to death.” She pulled me to her roughly giving me a quick squeeze. She grabbed her keys and walked out of my room. “Throw the rest of those tests away if you want,” she yelled to me as she walked out of my house.

And just like that all the craziness was gone. Evaporated.

I thought about calling Jaxon back and telling him what happened, but I changed my mind when I saw all the tests spread out over my bed. Quickly, I picked them up and hid them in my closet. I walked back into the bathroom to clean up the rest of our mess before my mom got home and saw them.

As I picked the empty boxes up

off the sink, I was caught off guard by what I saw. I blinked my eyes repeatedly to clear my vision. *It can't be. This can't be real.* I started my breathing technique before a panic attack caused me to lose all control. Two lines. Two clearly visible pink lines staring back at me. Grabbing the positive test from the sink, I quickly tossed it in the trash and ran to my closet ripping open another test. My hands were shaking so violently, I could hardly hold it still under the stream. Sitting still on the toilet, I waited for the longest three minutes of my life.

Holding the stick in my hand, I was unable to peel my eyes away from it, slowly watching the pink line form,

matching the one beside of it. I shook my head as tears streamed down my face.

I went through the torturous process until I'd used all six tests. All six of them displayed positive results. *My life is just starting, and now it's going to end. I'm not ready to be a mother. I don't want a baby with Phillip. Oh God, what have I done?*

Sinking to the floor, I crawled to the bathroom door and locked it. My chest tightened and my stomach caved in as I digested what could possibly happen to me. My body jerked from the sobs pouring out of me. I lay on the cold floor for what felt like hours, just wanting to crawl in a hole somewhere

and die.

My body emotionally rejected the evil spawn Phillip planted in me, and I retched all over the cold linoleum floor.

Chapter 31 ~ Vengeance is Mine

I always sucked at playing charades. Going through the motions of pretending to live a normal, happy life was draining me dry. Feeling like a zombie at school, I couldn't focus on my school work. I avoided Kendra, I avoided my mom, but I couldn't avoid Jaxon. It wouldn't be fair of me to punish him for my foolishness, though I did lie to him. *What would one more lie hurt?* I was becoming a pro. I'd told him I thought I was getting a cold and my throat hurt, so we stuck to texting for the time being. I was thankful because I feared he would hear the somber strain

in my voice. He also gave me space. The time we normally spent talking to each other was cut in half. He demanded I rest and let my body have a break. If only he knew just how much rest my body really needed.

I thought I could keep it to myself, or at least wait until after graduation before I made any final decisions. It wasn't possible though. I couldn't do it any longer. I couldn't hold this secret inside of me. It wasn't fair to be the only person to carry this burden. I knew many people would consider it a blessing, but for me it wasn't. Nothing good would come from it. I would lose Jaxon. Phillip would make my life a living hell, and I would end up becoming

that stay-at-home mom I used to think I was destined to be. I was in charge of my life now, and I was not suffering this pregnancy alone. Phillip was just as much at fault as I was. He was the father, and he deserved to know.

Oh God... his reaction. The wrath I would sustain when I told him would be aggressive. I had no doubt about it.

Opting out, I decided not to tell Kendra. I couldn't take that chance of her telling Reed and then Reed telling Jaxon. She'd always harbored my secrets, but this was one secret I couldn't take a chance at. I had to make sure I planned everything out perfectly.

She was going to be furious with me. Not because I hadn't told her, but because I had stooped low enough to fall into Phillip's trap and have sex with him. She was my best friend and had picked me up every time I had fallen. *Would she catch me again? Would she swear to secrecy to not tell Jaxon? Should I wait to tell her?* I was so confused and screwed up in the head. I couldn't stop second-guessing myself. I just wanted to turn my brain off, hibernate in a dark hole, and not come out until next year when all of it was over.

My thoughts switched over to Jaxon. The amazingly, noble guy that flew into my life like an angel with

wings, stripped all my sorrow away, and filled that emptiness with joy. How was I going to tell him? I couldn't tell him now. I was not ready to break his heart yet. He didn't deserve to get caught up in the crossfire of my screw-up.

I had to focus on Phillip right now. I wanted to crush him. I wanted to see him break. I wanted to hurt him like he hurt me. A scene from a movie I once saw popped into my head, giving me the perfect idea. I knew exactly what I wanted to do and I knew how to hurt him in the worst way.

Not wanting to run into anyone I knew, I drove to the next county to buy another pregnancy test. With the test in

my purse, I stopped off at a gas station to fill my car up and to use their restroom. Once I was in the bathroom I peed on the test, waiting for the positive result to show up. When it did, I placed my test in a Ziploc baggie. Taking my stationary paper out, I wrote a little love letter to the Ice Queen Bitch.

I know what you did. I know you set my mother up. I saw the stolen items in your linen closet. Well played, Maryann, well played. Too bad you've been beaten at your own game, though, just like your son has. Oh, that's right, you don't know. Well, I want to wish you congratulations. I'm so thrilled to inform you that you are going to be a grandmother. That's right. Your precious Phillip is going to be a father. Looks like you'll have to

deal with me for the rest of your life. Oh, and don't think you're going to seek vengeance on me because, whatever you do, will not only hurt me, but it will also hurt your son and unborn grandchild.

After addressing the envelope with her name only, I folded it up then slid it, and the bagged test, inside.

Driving back into town, I stopped off at Meadowland Baptist Church. Parking beside Maryann's Caddy, I hopped out, and shoved the envelope underneath her windshield wiper, then drove back home.

Phillip's mom found my letter sooner than I had expected. As soon as I walked through the door, I heard the

house phone ringing. “Hello,” I answered.

“You think you’re a sneaky little bitch, don’t you? Well, let me tell you something. If you think you’re going to blackmail me by keeping my grandbaby away from me, then you are stupidly mistaken. I can easily dismiss you out of my life for good. Who do you think a judge will listen to? Who do you think they’ll believe? Not you, you piece of redneck white trash!” She snarled at me.

“You don—”

She cut me off. “You don’t have a say in the matter. If you dare try to screw with me or my family, I will take you to court and have that baby taken

from you so fast that you won't even have a chance to see it after giving birth," she threatened. "One more thing—as of now, you better not tell anyone until I decide what you're going to do. You will not ruin our reputation. Got it? People in this town know what kind of person you and your mother are, and, if they don't, I'll be sure to inform them."

The phone suddenly went stale. She hung up before I ever had a chance to say anything, never giving me the opportunity to defend myself. She was right though, who would believe me over the Wilkins? Tears began stinging my eyes as different scenarios filtered through my mind. No matter what I did, they would win.

After I dried my eyes from a good, hard cry, and cleared my brain, I made the dreadful phone call to the OB/GYN and made myself an appointment.

Never had I ever imagined I would get myself into a situation like this. Teen pregnancies always happened to other girls, not me. I'd always taken myself to be somewhat mature for my age. Yes, I'd made some pretty foolish decisions in the last few years, but, in the last few months, I had felt like I had finally gained control of my life. I had finally started making decisions based on what was best for me, and not someone else. I was finally living for me. I was finally doing what I wanted to

do and not what someone else wanted to do. But, the one time I slipped up and converted to my old ways, doing what that one person wanted to do, because of my stupid feelings of guilt, it came back to bite me in the ass. *Was I one of those people that never learned my lessons?*

One time. How many times had I heard people say that one time was all it took? I guessed I was just as idiotic as all the rest of the teenagers out there that believed they were invincible. I'd thought, just because we got away without using protection before that it would work every time. I was an immature and stupid girl after all.

My head was throbbing from so

much stress. I didn't want to think about it anymore. I'd played the 'what if's' in my head a zillion times. Crawling onto my bed, I hoped a little nap would make me feel better. Maybe it would give my brain a rest. I lay still on my bed, with my hand flat over my lower abdomen, trying to imagine the beginnings of a life forming inside my womb. My thoughts fell flat as I drifted off to sleep.



Hearing a loud banging sound from the living room, I shot up into a sitting position. As my senses began to

wake I realized it was someone beating on the front door. Glancing over at my clock, the time read a quarter after four. I couldn't believe I had been sleeping for four hours. I called out for mom, but she never answered. She must've still been at Jaxon's restaurant. She'd been spending a lot of time over there recently, helping Reed pick out décor and making sure all orders were placed and invoices received. She wasn't exactly hired to take on those tasks, but she couldn't handle sitting around not doing anything.

Grabbing a pony tail holder, I flipped my hair up into a messy bun on top of my head. As soon as I opened the door, I tried closing it with as much

force as I could muster. I didn't get far when Phillip's arm stopped it from moving. The contorted look on his face was worse than I'd ever seen before. Of all the times I'd seen him mad, this was an expression beyond that rage. I was petrified.

He knew.

Panicking, I froze still. I couldn't gather a single thought together. I'd have to outsmart him. I couldn't let him in my house. He would have full advantage of me then. *Think fast, Courtney.* Forcing my feet past the threshold, I closed the door behind me. Phillip's chest rose and fell heavily with each uncontrolled breath he took. The veins in his neck

were clearly defined, and I couldn't stop watching the bulging vein at his temple, pulsating with the rapid beat of his heart. His full lips were now pulled back against his teeth in a thin line. I knew he was using everything in him to control himself from lashing out at me.

My nerves were wound up so tight I was on the verge of losing all self-control. I took a couple of deep breaths. A panic attack wasn't something I could withstand right now. "Wh... what's going on?" I stammered. My voice shook all over the place. It killed me to know Phillip had control right now. I was helpless.

He didn't answer me. Instead, he

shoved the baggie with my pregnancy test into my chest. It hurt. "What the hell is this?" he seethed through clenched teeth. "How dare you. How dare you try to manipulate me by using my mother as bait." His breath was hot against my mouth. I couldn't even look into his eyes. I was afraid the devil would reach out and hold me captive. "Any issues we have are between me and you. Not my *mother!*" he screamed in my face. Closing my eyes, I awaited the blow. He began to laugh like a maniacal lunatic. "You're not so tough now are you? I can smell the fear oozing from your pores. You never were much for sticking up for yourself, were you, you spineless bitch?" He wrapped both hands around

my upper arms, squeezing them tight like a vise. He had my body pulled close against him, and I had to turn my face away from his to avoid the spit escaping from his mouth as he foamed at me like a rabid dog. "I knew from the moment I met you that I would be your puppet master. All I had to do was give a little twitch to the strings dangling from my hands, and you would do whatever I commanded. Just as a reminder nothing has changed either. I will always have the upper hand you fuckin' whore!" This time he was in my ear. Making sure I heard him loud and clear.

The death grip he had on my arms felt all too familiar. I knew there would be bruises to see tomorrow.

“Phillip, you’re hurting me. Please let go,” I cried.

My plea only made things worse. “You think I fucking care if you’re hurt or not. After you nearly killed me? Ended my basketball career? Ruined my fuckin’ life? And now you try to blackmail me by sending my mother a pregnancy test accusing me of being the father?” He yelled. “After you spread your legs for that California guy, you think I’m gonna believe I’m the dad?” He shook his head answering himself.

I winced as he squeezed my arms tighter. “I didn’t have sex with him. I swear. You are the only person I’ve had sex with,” I pleaded. “Take a test if you

don't believe me."

His brown eyes narrowed in at me, turning black. "I swear to you, Jeanette, if you tell a single person that I'm the father, I will kill you and that baby. I promise you that." He let go of one arm and continued holding on to the other as he dragged me off the porch. "You think I'm hurting you now? You don't know what hurt is, you little slut. But I'm gonna teach you." His walking was impaired, giving me a glimpse of hope that I may have been able to maneuver myself from his reach.

I was wrong.

Using all my strength, I kicked him in the leg. The broken leg. He

released his grip on me, but I wasn't fast enough. He reached out in enough time to grab the loose bun on my head, jerking me back with enough force that I thought my neck snapped. Tears poured out of my eyes as I feared for my life. He was dragging me down the side walk by my hair, pulling me closer to his car.

“Help me somebody!” I screamed. I felt the blunt force across my face before I had time to comprehend what even happened. He finally did it. He finally hit me. Repeatedly, I had told myself he never would, but I was only fooling myself.

“Shut up, you stupid bitch! I will beat that baby to death if you scream one

more time,” he threatened. A metallic taste slowly coated my tongue. I hated him. I’d never hated anybody in my life. I never knew it was possible to hate a person, but I did him, all the way down to my bones.

“I. Hate. You!” I screamed at him.

Phillip reached down and grabbed my face with his fingers, digging his nails deep into my cheeks. “This is your last warning. If you scream one more time, I’ll fuck up that little mouth of yours to where you won’t be able to speak for a month.”

Suddenly Phillip no longer had me in his possessive hold. He was no

longer in my sight. All I heard was a familiar voice.

“You get off on hitting girls?” Then I heard a crunching sound. “Hit me. I’m an even match for you.” Next, I heard another solid thud, then a grunt that sounded like Phillip. “You fuckin’ cocksucker. I’ve been waiting to do that since the day I met you.” Another hit followed by a moan. I sat up. My head spun around, and my vision was blurred. I wiped the tears from my eyes. When I pulled my hands away, I saw blood soaked in with my tears. I gained focus long enough to see Jaxon hovering over Phillip, hitting him repeatedly. He screamed at him with each blow. He looked robotic, like a machine made to

kill. I was frightened. I was frightened for Phillip's life.

Stumbling to my feet, I ran over to them. "Jaxon, stop. Jaxon, please. Jaxon, you're going to kill him. Please. Stop," I sobbed. Grabbing Jaxon by his shoulders, I tried to pull him back with all the strength I had, but he wouldn't budge. He was in a trance, repeatedly punching Phillip in the face, in the chest, in the head, anywhere he could make contact. Phillip tried fighting him off, but he was pinned underneath him and his bummed leg worked against him.

I had to do something quick before the situation turned fatal. Doing the first thing that popped into my head, I

put myself in between Jaxon and Phillip. Jaxon immediately stopped in mid-swing. His eyes were feral. They weren't his beautiful baby blues. There was darkness in the depths of them. His breath was ragged, his nostrils flared with each heavy breath, and his face was blood red.

“Courtney, please move out of my way,” he sneered without ever looking at me. His eyes remained focused on Phillip. “I’m going to teach this motherfucker a lesson. I’m going to make sure he feels every ounce of pain that he has caused you over the years.”

Phillip spat out blood and began to laugh. “Fuck you! Fuck both of you!”

Jaxon reached past me and wrapped his long fingers around Phillip's neck, choking him out. Phillip's body went still. He no longer put up a fight.

“No!” I screamed. Grabbing his fingers, I pried them away from Phillip's throat. “Please, Jaxon. Just stop. Please! I'm begging you,” I sobbed. I released his fingers then turned around and faced him. I stared him in the eye. I wanted him to see me instead of seeing through me. I had to break the mad frenzy he was in. Wrapping my arms around him, I buried my tears into his neck. Slowly, I felt both of Jaxon's hands wrap around me; one hand on my waist and the other cradled my head against him.

“He’s not dead. He’s just unconscious,” he whispered in my hair. He picked me up and carried me over to the front porch settling me down onto his lap. He lowly rocked me, soothing my cries. “Shh... you’re okay now. I have you. I will never let him hurt you again,” he whispered to me.

We sat that way for minutes when he broke the silence. “How many times has he hit you?” He pulled me away from him so he could look into my eyes.

“That was the first time,” I admitted.

“Then how did you get that gash on the back of your head?”

How did he know? “What gash?”

I played dumb.

He blew out a loud breath. “Sweet Cheeks, I saw it while you were sleeping at my house one morning. Well actually I felt it first when I was playing with you hair. It was pretty deep, probably should’ve had stitches,” he said with a sympathetic smile. “I’m not a fool, Court. I know he hurt you, and I know that’s why you were so depressed before coming out to California.”

I didn’t know what to tell him. If I told him what happened, he was gonna find out the truth about the rest. I just stared at him dumbfounded.

He dropped his head. “I guess

you don't want to tell me." *I do want to tell you, but I can't.* "Why do you protect him?" he asked peering up at me through his thick, black lashes.

"Jaxon, I don't protect him. I'm not protecting him. I hate him. It's... it's just so complicated." Tears escaped my eyes. He was going to find out about the baby, and I was going to lose him. I couldn't stop the tears as they puddled in my eyes before racing down my cheeks. I'd never had this feeling of security before. He made me feel safe. He made me feel alive, and I was going to lose it all. My body shook as I could no longer control the grief I'd been stricken with.

Jaxon's hands cradled my face.

His thumbs brushed my tears away as they fell. His lips stole my cries as they fled from my mouth. The feelings I had for him in this moment while he tried to envelope my pain were indescribable. I thought I loved Phillip. I thought I knew what love was. But those feelings were nothing compared to what I felt for Jaxon. Maybe I didn't exactly know what love felt like anymore. Maybe what I was feeling now was love. Maybe I was falling in love with this gentle but cryptic guy that swooped in on me at a vulnerable time and stole my heart.

When Jaxon's lips left mine I felt weak, exposed. "Court, I don't know what he's done to you. I can only imagine. I've been around guys like him

before. I swear to you he will never do it again.” He brushed the hair that was stuck to my wet face from my eyes.

“Jaxon, you can’t promise me that. He’ll always be around. I’ll never be able to escape him.” *Not when I’m carrying his child.*

Phillip started coughing and sputtering. I looked over at him as he spat blood from his mouth. He sat up staring at us with so much hate. “You need to get the fuck out of here. This has nothing to do with you,” he said to Jaxon. His coughing continued, and he spat out more blood. His hand was draped over his stomach, holding his ribs as his face contorted with agonizing

pain. Suddenly, as if something clicked in his mind, a devious grin spread across his face, exposing blood covered teeth. “This is between Courtney and I. What we choose to do with *our* baby is *our* business.”

Jaxon’s head whipped over at me, his eyes engaging my expression. “What’s he talking about?”

My chest squeezed hard, blocking my flow of oxygen. Phillip’s going to win after all.

Phillip let out another one of his maniacal laughs. “Oh, you don’t know! She didn’t tell you? She’s pregnant! Tsk, tsk, Courtney, shame on you,” he mocked. “She wants to abort it, but there

is no way in hell I'm allowing that to happen," he accused.

He gently lifted me from his lap, his body moving robotically, sitting me down on the porch. My body became immobile—numb. My tongue felt paralyzed in my mouth. I couldn't speak.

He stared at me with pain coursing through his eyes before he looked away. He could probably no longer look at me, but I couldn't pull my eyes away from his. I watched him unfold before me as his jaw muscles tightened repeatedly. His chest rose and fell with each short breath he took. The torment he was battling inside was killing me. No longer able to watch his

agony, I squeezed my eyes shut. *Was he mad? Was he hurt?*

When I opened my eyes, Jaxon was standing in front of me. “Was that the part that was so complicated?”

I nodded.

“Is this why you protect him?”

I shook my head.

“Talk to me dammit. I deserve that much.”

My chin trembled and my bottom lip quivered. “I’m so sorry, Jaxon. I didn’t mean for any of this to happen. I didn’t want to hurt you, and I didn’t tell you because I’m terrified of losing you,”

I whimpered.

Tears began to form in my eyes again. I cradled his face, “Please don’t be mad at me. Please! Let’s just talk about it. Let me explain it to you,” I begged.

His tensed shoulders fell, his unfocused gaze connected with mine. “Are you really going to abort it?” He asked in disbelief.

“No.” I dropped my head looking at the ground. I wasn’t brave enough to face him. “I don’t know... I mean, I haven’t decided what I’m going to do, but I *never* told Phillip I was going to abort it.” I said, sending fiery eyes Phillip’s way.

Jaxon just stood there continuing to stare at me. His silence was killing me. "I'm so sorry," I whispered. "I don't know what to do," I cried, grabbing the front of his shirt, burying my face in his hard chest.

He stood there motionless as I cried into him hoping his heart would hear my pain. Terrified of him leaving me, I grasped his arms tight. Gently, his arms reached around my shaking frame and cradled me close against him. Repeatedly, he shushed me as he comforted my cries. I could hear Phillip laughing and saying something along the lines of 'things never change with you.'

Anger surged through me with

each taunt Phillip threw my way, and I spun around, releasing Jaxon, and ran up to Phillip. My hand was mere inches of slapping his face when he caught it, nearly causing me to stumble. Pulling me down to him, pretending to catch me, he whispered quickly into my ear before he released me. “Remember what my mother said. If you don’t want any trouble you better tell your boyfriend goodbye. Now.”

Him and his mom were really going to force me into this. They were really going to make me put an end to all my happiness. The pain in my chest sunk further with every breath I took. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath before I had to do the unthinkable.

I turned back to Phillip. “Leave. Now,” I gritted through my teeth. “I need to be alone with Jaxon.” Phillip glared at me with fury, but surprisingly did as I asked.

Jaxon walked over to where Phillip had been laying on the ground as I stood there watching Phillip struggle to pull himself up with the help of a big oak tree. After he got himself upright, he pulled his keys out of his pocket and hobbled over to his truck. His eyes narrowed at me as if telling me I better do as I was told before he climbed into his truck. He kept quiet the entire time. He knew Jaxon would kick his ass again if he acted like a fool.

As soon as Phillip was out of sight, I brought all my attention back to Jaxon. My heart hammered in my chest cavity as he strolled up to me.

He palmed my face, his thumb tracing my bottom lip.

“You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me, and I don’t want to lose you but—” I told him as tears started to spill from my eyes again.

He cradled my head against his chest. His chin rested on top of my head. “Sweet Cheeks, you have no idea how much you’ve opened me up. You’ve brought light into the core of my darkest shadows. You make me want to be the person I thought had died when...” He

swallowed hard, "... when she died. You've brought the old Jaxon back, and I forgot how much I like that guy," he chuckled. "Look at me." He placed both hands on my face and tilted my chin up to lock me in with his sky blue eyes. "I know this baby isn't mine, but I could help you. I would care for it like it's my own. I know what it was like to grow up without a father, and I don't want that to happen to your baby. Is Phillip really ready to love someone other than himself?" I shook my head the entire time he talked, not wanting to hear the things he was telling me.

"We can't do this, Jaxon. It would never work. I can't be with you and carry someone else's baby. Phillip

is a horrible person, I know this.” I took a deep breath, hating what I was about to say. “But I have to hope that he can change. I have to hope that this baby will change him. It happens,” I told him, trying to convince myself, too. “You mean everything to me, and I thank you for opening up my heart again.” Jaxon’s hopeful expression turned wretched as he began to comprehend the dreadful words flowing from my mouth.

“Courtney, please don’t do this. I’m begging you.” He kissed the tears streaming down my face. “God! You’re killing me.” I watched a single tear pool into the corner of his eye, and then slowly creep down his face until it was lost in his stubble. “I want to sweep you

up and bring you back to Cali with me. I want to save you from all of this madness.” He jerked away from me in a sudden movement and slammed his fist into my mother’s hanging flowerpot. “Fuck!” I hate this fuckin’ shit!” he roared.

He stomped back over to me, crushing me against his body. He hugged me like it was the last time he would ever hold me again.

Sadly, it probably was.

He pulled away but stayed close enough for our noses to touch. “I feel things for you that I shouldn’t. I get high in the clouds when I’m around you. You make me feel emotions that have been

dormant for years. Thank you for reminding me what it's like to fall in love again, but please, don't push me out of your life." His eyes were glassed over.

"I can't," I said without any sound.

His lips brushed against mine so delicately. It reminded me of that first kiss on Reed's couch. His intoxicating mint sent my appetite into overdrive. It started off slow and sweet then turned into a longing desire. I wanted to freeze this moment. I never wanted it to end.

"Don't turn this into a goodbye, Sweet Cheeks," he muttered against my lips. His breath was ragged and his eyes

were closed tight.

“I’m so sorry.” It was all I had the strength to say. I wanted to tell him to stay. I wanted to tell him he had me, and that I was his... but I couldn’t.

He held me tight. I wanted him to hold onto me forever, but I pushed him away. It was easier this way. “Go. Please. If you stay Jaxon, it will only make things harder for me. *Please* understand.”

He nodded a few times, but the pain on his face was unmistakable. He took a few steps towards me, but I shook my head at him. He knew what I was saying. Without a fight, he quickly walked to his car never turning around to

look at me.

Jaxon kept his back to me while he climbed into his rental car. My heart stammered when he turned around to face me at the last minute. His face expressed torment. I could see it all over him. His brow furrowed, and the corners of his lips were turned down. I closed my eyes and dropped my head. I couldn't even look at him. I couldn't accept the pain I was causing him. I was a coward.

He backed out of my driveway, and I watched until I lost sight of him.

My heart broke. Right there at that moment. It laid in my chest in two pieces. He just admitted that he had fallen in love again, and now I'd lost

him. I couldn't even feel my heart beat in my chest anymore. I felt dead inside. I wanted to be dead. It hurt so much. *How could I have ever thought my life would be over without Phillip?* The pain I felt now was worse than any I'd ever encountered.

A roaring sob that had been building up in my chest finally made its escape. "Why?" I screamed out into the sky. My head fell in defeat as my vision blurred with salty tears. "I fuckin' hate you Phillip Wilkins!" I screamed out.

My shoulders slumped forward, the rest of my body following suit as I fell to the ground. Through the wetness in my eyes, I spotted something white on

the ground lying next to all the dirt, broken flowers and the plastic pot. *My pregnancy test—a baby. My baby.*

No matter how much I wanted to give up, I couldn't. I had someone depending on me, someone pure and innocent. Jaxon thought I chose Phillip, but he was so wrong. I would never let him into my life again. Phillip was dead to me.

I could take care of my baby and myself. It would be a long, hard road, but I knew I could do it. It was just going to take me one day at a time.

Epilogue

She pushed me away and I let her. *Did I really have a choice in the matter?* No, I didn't think I did. She wanted me gone and I respected her enough to let her go.

Fuck my life.

I was on my way back to Greensboro. I couldn't fathom hopping back on a plane right now. I'd just stay at one of the hotels by the airport for the night and catch a flight in the morning. I wasn't prepared to go home the same day I arrived. So much for surprising Courtney—she ended up surprising me.

Pregnant... a baby... Courtney as a mother... she would be a wonderful mother. That, I truly believed. Offering to father her baby... *Could I really have done it?* Did I have my life under control enough to raise a baby, a baby that wasn't even my own blood? That was perhaps the most irrational decision I'd ever made. I'd never thought about fathering a child, but I thought I had what it took to be one. I wanted to give what I'd never had. I knew someday, if I ever had children, I would not follow in my father's footsteps. I would want to be in its life regardless of the outcome.

Fuck my life.

Confessing my love to Courtney

wasn't something I planned. Did I love Courtney? Yes, I did. Would most people think I fell in love too soon? Probably. Would I love her if she wasn't a replica of Heather? I wasn't sure. But no matter who my love was for, it was real. It was there.

Wanting to clear my mind of Courtney, I turned on the radio and 'Was It a Dream' by Thirty Seconds to Mars was blaring through the speakers. I pulled my phone out and glanced back and forth from the road to the picture I'd snuck of her while she slept. So peaceful. So pure. So beautiful. So much love I could give her.

Fuck my life.

Fate and I had a love/hate relationship. I was given the most wonderful people to love with all my heart and soul, and they reciprocated that love in return. But, as soon as I gave myself over to them, fate came along and whisked them away in the blink of an eye. Love wasn't meant for me. Love wasn't something I was meant to have. All the people I had loved in my life always found a way to leave me. I found myself at the point of believing I'd been given a second chance to right a wrong, and what happened? Fate cut my heartstrings and jerked that love right out from under my feet. Once again, I was left feeling hollow, lifeless, and black inside. My ray of sunshine had been

extinguished. My flame had been blown out.

Fuck my life.

Pulling into the nearest gas station, I bid fate a silent ‘fuck you,’ and bought myself a pack of cigarettes. My hands shook as I inhaled the first taste of fresh tobacco. My lungs exploded with gratitude as I gave them the craving they’d been longing for. As I climbed back into my rental car, a blinking sign caught my eye—Cherry Grove.

I drove across the street and pulled into the gravel parking lot of the small bar. Finishing my cigarette, I flicked it into the rocks before walking in. The building was larger on the inside

than it looked on the outside. Two girls wearing a few scraps of black leather, fish nets stockings, and black stilettos were dancing in separate corners. One, a blonde, the other a brunette. They're both pretty, but probably pumped full of drugs and STDs. A group of guys wearing Harley Davidson gear staked their claim on the pool tables.

Sauntering over to the bar, I ordered a shot of Jack. My nerves stood on end as the warm liquid burned all the way down into the pit of my stomach. Another feeling I welcomed. I ordered three more, and they each went down smoother than the shot before. Finally feeling warm and relaxed, I heard a sweet, southern accent hum in my ear.

“Can I buy you a drink?”

I didn't bother looking at the lot lizard hovering over my back. “Is that the best pick up line you got?” Turning my head back to the bartender, I nodded at him for another shot.

She sat down beside me and threw a five dollar bill down on the counter. “It wasn't a pick up line, asshole. I've never seen you before, so I figured you're just one of the strays passing through without a pot to piss in.” The bartender sat a shot down in front of the woman. “Fucking strangers... always mistake a kind gesture for flirting,” she mumbled under her breath. *Damn.*

The damn asshat in me always

tried to shine through. Instantly, I felt like shit. “Sorry. I apologize,” I said looking at her for the first time. “I’m Jaxon. Can I buy you a drink?” Her thin lips spread into a pleasant smile. She looked to be older than me, but still a beautiful woman. Her hair was long and blonde, and swept off to the side with a small white bow. Her brown eyes danced as she examined me from head to toe. “Sure, but don’t get the wrong idea,” she smirked.



I woke up the next morning to an

alarm I didn't remember setting. Reaching over to check my phone, I saw an empty condom wrapper lying on the night stand. My other hand slid along the sheets until it stopped against a soft, warm body beside of me. Dreadfully lifting up the covers, I found it was a soft, warm, and naked body. It was the girl from last night, and I never even got her name. Closing my eyes, I tried to recollect what all had happened last night. We'd sat and talked and shared a few more shots, and that was it. I'd drawn a blank after that. One little slip-up and old habits had apparently resurfaced.

Fuck my life.

If I couldn't beat fate, I might as well join the destructive life she had laid out before me.

The end... for now.

Watch for the continuation of Jaxon and Courtney's story coming out early in 2014.

Toxic Secrets Playlist of Inspiration

Scream – Usher

Let's Go – Calvin Harris

C'mon – Ke\$ha

Crazy Kids – Ke\$ha

Mercy – Kanye, 2
Chainz

I Get Crazy – Nicki
Minaj

Birthday Cake – Rihanna
Wobble – V.I.C.

Pop, Lock and Drop It –
Huey

Down on Me – 50 Cent

I've Got This Friend –

Civil Wars

As Your Friend –

Afrojack

Beautiful Lie – Thirty

Seconds to Mars

Chasing Pavements –

Adele

If You Were Here – Cary

Brothers

Untitled – Simple Plan

Crazier – Taylor Swift

Bliss – Muse

Tonight I'm F'ing You –

Enrique Iglesias

Can't Get You Out of My

Head – Kylie Minogue

Animal – Neon Trees

Demons – Imagine

Dragons

Madness – Muse

Never Let Me Go –

Florence and the

Machine

Was It a Dream? – Thirty

Seconds to Mars

Wrecking Ball – Miley

Cyrus

Cold Desert – Kings of

Leon

Courtney's California Playlist

It Never Rains in
Southern California –
Tony, Toni, Tone'

California Gurls – Katy
Perry

Going Back to Cali – LL
Cool J

Californication – Red
Hot Chili Peppers

California – Phantom
Planets

California Sun –
Ramones

California Waiting –

Kings of Leon

Heads Carolina, Tails

California – Jo Dee

Messina

Going to California –

Led Zepplin

Queen of California –

John Mayer

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First and foremost, I want to thank my husband and kids for putting up with my negligence as a wife and mother. Sorry to break it to you, but I'm going to be locked away for a wee bit longer. Love you!!!

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supported me all the way. Y'all are amazing!

About this Author

Jill Patten was born a Yankee, but raised a southerner. She lives in the small town of Mayberry, North Carolina which was made famous by a popular TV show back in the sixties. (Maybe there will one day be a statue of her at the end of Main Street. Ha! A girl can dream, right?)

Jill has always loved to read, even during reading labs in middle school for reading comprehension. Judy Blume was her first author she hero-worshipped, maturing to revere the works of Stephen

King. With all the fantastic authors today, she simply cannot choose a favorite. Her taste is very eclectic and she loves almost all genres. When she's not captivated by her fictional characters, she spends time with her sweet husband and two beautiful children.

Music is her muse. Jill also loves elephants, sarcasm, and anything made with sugar, especially sweet tea. She enjoys all things rude and crude and laughs at stuff she probably shouldn't. She has been accused of being bossy a time or two, but doesn't really see it herself.

All in all, Jill is just a small town girl in this great big world trying to enable your book addiction.

Oh, and if you read her book, please leave her a review - good or bad, she'll love you forever.

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