



MY SWEETEST ESCAPE

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *MY FAVORITE MISTAKE*

CHELSEA M. CAMERON

The past will always find you

Jos Archer was the girl with the perfect life—until the night it all came crashing down around her. Now, nine months later, she still hasn't begun to pick up the pieces. Even transferring to a new college and living under the watchful eye of her older sister, Renee, isn't enough to help her feel normal again.

And then she meets Dusty Sharp. For reasons Jos can't begin to fathom, the newly reformed campus bad boy seems determined to draw her out of her shell. And if she's not careful, his knowing green eyes and wicked smile will make

her feel things she's no longer sure she deserves.

But even as Dusty coaxes Jos to open up about the past, he's hiding secrets of his own. Secrets about the night her old life fell apart. When the truth is finally revealed, will it bring them closer together—or tear them apart for good?

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My Favorite Mistake

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*Chelsea M.
Cameron*



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Excerpt

Chapter 1

“I can’t believe your parents are forcing you to leave. It should be, like, illegal. You’re over eighteen. Why don’t you just bail?” Kelly sat on top of one of the boxes of my almost-packed dorm room and snapped her gum. When we’d first met, the little habit had irritated me to no end, but I’d gotten used to it.

“I wish I could, but they’re footing the bill for school, so right now I’m screwed,” I said. Not to mention the fact that no one said no to my mother. No one.

“Why don’t you drop out?” Oh, I’d

considered that more than once.

Actually, more than a thousand times. It was impossible to explain the complicated dynamic of my family to someone like Kelly, who had moved out of her parents' house and gotten her own place when she was still in high school.

"I don't know," I said, shrugging and taping up another box. Kelly flipped her dirty blond dreadlocked ponytail and cracked her gum again. She'd asked me if I needed help packing, but so far all she'd done was bother me.

"You'll come back and visit, right?" she asked.

"Yeah, sure," I told her with a little smile. We both knew it was unlikely that I'd ever get back here. I folded my

University of New Hampshire blanket and shoved it into another box. My mom had bought it for me two summers ago as a going-away-to-college present.

I was one of only two of my siblings or steps who'd actually managed to graduate high school, let alone get accepted somewhere. Neither Mom nor Dad nor any of my stepparents had finished high school, so it was a big deal for any of us to make it that far. The only other one who had was Renee, and that was the reason they were shipping me back to Maine to live with her after...everything.

Kelly's phone buzzed and she typed a quick response to the text message and

grinned at me.

“Mac wants to meet up for coffee.” I always wished she’d put *coffee* in air quotes, because we both knew that it meant getting stoned and hooking up in the backseat of his rusty Pontiac. Kelly and her boyfriend were notorious; they’d even been caught by campus security in the middle of the day. It was a miracle they were still students at all. I think they were holding on by the thinnest of academic threads.

“Have fun.” I knew she’d bail on me for Mac. She always did. Kelly wasn’t much of a friend, but she was the only one I had. The others had ditched me months ago.

“Call me before you leave. I wanna

say goodbye.” She got up and gave me a loose hug. It was more of a lean involving arms that was over as quickly as it had begun.

“See you later,” she said, slamming the door. Kelly could never leave a room quietly.

I stared at my deconstructed dorm room. My roommate was avoiding me, had been avoiding me since the beginning of this year. We’d had all of two conversations—one of those happened on the day we moved in, and the other happened when she found me passed out in front of the door one night after a crazy time with Kelly and Mac and a bunch of people I hadn’t seen

again. As if I'd remember them anyway.

I took Kelly's place on one of the boxes, pulling my knees up and resting my chin on them.

The fight I'd had with my mother when she'd told me that I was being forced to move back kept running through my mind. Actually, the entire Christmas break had been one long fight that didn't seem to end.

What is wrong with you, Joscelyn? You'd better straighten up and fly right. You are coming back to Maine, or else I am coming there and dragging your ass back, understand?

Straighten up and fly right. Yeah, I'd get right on that, Mom. She was one to talk. My parents had a half-dozen

marriages between them and kids and stepkids all over the place. It was a full-time job just keeping track of them.

I'd screamed myself hoarse, but hadn't gotten anywhere. She'd even put a moratorium on hating Dad long enough to call him, fill him in and then get him to yell at me, too.

I was powerless against the two of them.

And then there was Renee.

If Mom didn't drag my ass back, Renee would be on that. She was worse than Mom in some ways.

Speaking of my sister...

My phone rang, and when I saw who was calling, I debated about picking it

up.

“Hey,” I said, wincing in anticipation of the barrage I knew was coming.

“You better be getting your stuff together and be out the door,” she said by way of a greeting.

“Nice to talk to you, too, dear sister.”

“Don’t give me that shit, Jos. I am so done with this. You’d better get your butt on the road in the next hour or—”

“I know, I know. You’ll surgically remove my fingers and sew them to my ass. I *know*.” Having a sister who knew surgical procedure and who was also mad at you really sucked sometimes.

“Hey, I don’t need the attitude. You’re lucky that you’re coming to be here with me instead of Mom.” She did have a

point. Back at Mom's I'd just be drowning in a sea of my step and half siblings, among them a set of four-year-old twins who made the devil look like Mother Teresa.

"I know," I said. That seemed to be my phrase of choice lately.

"Just know that I'm going to be on your ass like white on rice, and if I'm not around someone else will do it for me. You're walking into a house full of people that are going to watch your every move and call you out on it. Understand?"

Jesus Christ.

"Yup."

"Okay. I'll be waiting for you. Call

me the second you leave.”

“I will. ’Bye.”

I hung up before she could say anything else. I put my hands over my face and screamed into them. This was a nightmare I never seemed to wake up from.

Asleep or awake, it never left me.

But I was awake now, and I had to move, so I got off the box and picked it up.

Chapter 2

After nearly twelve trips and a lot of sweating and swearing, I got all my stuff into my car. Despite it being freezing outside, I peeled off my winter coat and just wore my ratty sweatshirt, my breath visible in the January air. People walked by and gave me looks, and I knew what they were thinking. Just another student who couldn't hack it and was being forced to leave and not come back after Christmas break.

They didn't have any idea.

I went back up to the half-bare room and looked at it one more time.

Goodbye, freedom.

I didn't bother to leave my roommate a note and just shut the door behind me. It wasn't like she'd care anyway.

I texted Kelly that I was leaving, but she didn't respond. Big surprise. Other than Kelly, there wasn't really anyone else at UNH that I had left to say goodbye to. I hadn't heard from Matt since before the summer, when he'd broken up with me. The others, my little circle of friends, had long since lost touch with the crazy, reckless emo girl. I'd heard them talking about my transformation behind my back more than once.

Snow was just starting to float down

from the sky when I got back downstairs to my car. I could barely see out the rearview mirror, but I was mostly driving on the highway anyway.

I plugged my iPod into my car speakers and hit Shuffle. It was going to be a long trip and I only had music for company. The sleeve on my sweatshirt rode up, exposing the bracelet I never took off. It was simple, just a chain with a little elephant charm on it. I kept it as a reminder. A constant reminder.

Shaking my head, I pulled away from the dorm and headed for the highway and the next chapter in my life. A fresh start was irrelevant when the dark things in your past were always following you.

It took me longer than I anticipated to get from New Hampshire to my sister's house in Bangor, Maine. Actually, it wasn't even her house. She'd moved in with this guy Hunter, who was buying the house because he was apparently loaded. Leave it to Renee to find a rich friend. She was also on again with her boyfriend, Paul, which was a good thing, in my opinion, because she was a pain in the ass when she wasn't with him. Even more so than she was when she was with him.

I hadn't seen the house before, so it was a bit of a shock when I parked in front of the house Renee had given me

directions for.

“Damn,” I said. It was huge. Way huger than Renee had let on. I’d pictured something a little run-down, and small, but this was bigger than any house I’d ever lived in, with Mom or Dad.

I grabbed my backpack and headed up the porch steps, glancing at the cars in the driveway as I passed them. It was easy to spot Renee’s, so I knew I must have the right place.

There was even a freaking doorbell. My finger was an inch away from ringing it when the door flew open.

“There you are! I was worried you were lying in a ditch somewhere,” Renee said, flinging herself at me. Startled by the hug, I sort of stood there

and kind of hugged her back.

“I’m here.”

Somehow, I’d gotten a recessive redhead gene in our family and ended up with carrot-red hair, freckles and green eyes. Renee had gotten the good genes, with her blue eyes and blond hair that didn’t need much highlighting. Our features were similar, but our coloring was so different that people never thought we were sisters.

She finally stopped hugging me, but kept her hand clamped on my shoulder and steered me into the house, as if I was going to make a run for it. Where, I didn’t know. Renee had mentioned something about Stephen King living

down the street, but I wasn't sure if I'd be any safer at his house anyway.

"How was the driving?" Renee closed the door behind us and it clicked shut with finality.

"Fine," I said, glancing around the house. Damn. Again. I didn't know who had decorated, but they'd obviously used those crazy home-improvement magazines as inspiration.

One thing was for sure—it didn't look like a typical college crash pad. It was clean, first of all, and second, there seemed to be an actual scheme where things matched and went together. There were also a lot of peacock feathers, and similar peacock colors around. Renee had mentioned something about her

roommate Taylor being obsessed with peacock stuff. I couldn't remember why. I sort of tuned out when Renee gushed about her amazing and awesome life, while mine had gone into a downward spiral that never seemed to hit bottom.

“Hey, Jos. How are you doing?” Paul came around the corner. He was cute in one of those white-bread nerd ways. Not my type. Not that I had a type...anymore.

“Good.” It was a step up from fine. No one questioned you when you said you were good. Everyone thought there was something wrong with you if you said, “fine.”

He gave me an awkward hug. I'd seen him at Christmas when he'd kept Mom

and Renee from throttling each other with varying success. I'd tried to tell him it was no use, but he'd done it anyway.

"Where's everyone else?" I was actually looking forward to seeing Darah and meeting her new boyfriend. Darah was one of the sweetest people on the planet, and I knew if there was anyone who wouldn't judge me, it would be her.

"They wanted to give us some space. They'll be here later." Something about the way she said it made me suspicious.

"They're not going to make a big deal about it, are they?"

"No," Renee said, not looking at me, but glancing at Paul. Something was afoot.

“So, how about we get your stuff inside, shall we? Come on, Paul.” Renee grabbed Paul’s hand and yanked him out the door.

“Uh, okay.” I was left standing in the foyer alone. I walked into the living room, which was gorgeously decorated, except for a mangy-looking recliner and the video games the guys had probably left scattered around. I saw the “Skyrim” box and smiled. Renee couldn’t get enough of that game. It had consumed quite a bit of her time over Christmas break.

I flopped down onto the couch and stared up at the ceiling. Even that was clean.

A thud sounded a second later as Renee and Paul brought in some of my stuff.

“Since we only have three bedrooms, you, my dear sister, get to stay in the newly refurbished basement. You’re lucky we decided to put in a guest room,” Renee said, panting.

“Great,” I said, although I wouldn’t have minded staying on the plush leather couch. It was the largest couch I’d ever seen and took up most of the living room.

“Why don’t you show her around and I’ll get the rest of the stuff,” Paul said. I got up from the couch and Renee led me down the stairs into the basement.

“Welcome to the man cave,” Renee said, waving her arm. A man cave indeed. A bar, a pool table, yet another gigantic couch and a television large enough for a movie theater. There were also several sports team posters, including the Red Sox, the Patriots and the Celtics. Go teams.

Renee led me toward the back of the space where there was a small guest room with a bathroom right beside it. Thank God. I wouldn't have to share a bathroom. I'd done that in the dorms enough to last a lifetime.

“So this is it.” The room was decorated in tan and black, which was boring, but nice.

I sat down on the large bed and looked around at my new home.

“Okay, we have some ground rules,” Renee said, leaning against the dresser. Don’t even bother to beat around the bush, sis. Go ahead and get right to the point.

“Number one,” she said, holding up one finger. “You will inform me where you are and who you are with at all times. You will keep in touch via cell phone. You will also answer said phone when I call you, no matter what.”

I clamped my mouth shut. I didn’t want to provoke her in the middle of her speech that she’d clearly rehearsed, probably on Paul.

“Second—” she held up another finger “—there will be no partying. No drinking. No drugs. No substances of any kind other than aspirin. There will also be no passing out. Third, there will be a curfew which you will follow or suffer the consequences. Fourth, I may not be your mother, but you will treat me with respect, and that goes for the other people in this house. And fifth...” She didn’t seem to be able to come up with number five.

“Fifth?” I said after a few seconds of silence.

“I had a fifth one, but I can’t remember it right now,” she snapped. “But that doesn’t negate the other four.

Do you agree to them?”

“Yeah,” I said. What did it matter?

“You said yes way too easily. I don’t believe you.”

Jesus. I was being criticized for being too agreeable.

“Whatever, Renee. Can I just be alone now?” I turned over on the bed, touching the sheets that were no doubt Egyptian cotton and had a crazy high thread count. Of course.

“Listen,” she said, sitting down next to me. Ugh, she always started her lectures like this. Just like Mom. Although, Renee’s lectures always had more cursing in them than Mom’s.

“You’re going through something right now. A phase, if you will. I’ve been

there. Even Paul was there.” Yeah, I found that extremely hard to believe. And she had no idea what I was going through. She thought she did, but she didn’t. No one did, and I couldn’t explain it. I twisted the elephant charm on my bracelet.

And then she smacked me on the shoulder. Hard.

“But it’s time for you to get your head out of your ass and straighten up. Understand?”

“Why with the violence?” I flipped over, jumped up and shoved her back. “Look, it’s not my fault that Mom decided to dump me on you. I don’t want to be here any more than you want me to

be.”

She glared at me, her face turning red.

“Look, I don’t like the fact that my once-perfect sister, the one sister I knew would never screw up, has fallen off the wagon of epic proportions. You’re the one I never worried about. You got better grades than I ever dreamed of getting. You were the good one. And then...”

She didn’t need to finish. And then everything happened, and that girl, the one who obsessed over straight A’s and wanted to be the president of every club and who had her sights set on being valedictorian and someday running a huge company or working for the government or doing something

important with her life, disappeared.

Nine months ago, everything changed, and everything I thought I wanted seemed stupid and pointless. Or maybe I'd just finally realized it was stupid and pointless. That had less to do with what had happened and more to do with *him*. Even thinking his name was like taking a bullet in the chest.

“Yeah, then I decided to screw it all up. I know. I've heard the story. I was there. You don't need to reiterate it to me.”

She shrugged. “Well, nothing else has worked, so I thought I'd give it a shot. I've also considered beating you senseless, but that's usually frowned

upon.”

“Go for it,” I said, sitting back down. Wasn’t going to work.

“Oh, believe me, I’d love to. But then you’d be unconscious and I wouldn’t be able to get information out of you, sooooo...”

“And what information is that?”

“What the hell happened to you to make you like this?”

That was something she could try to beat out of me, but it wasn’t going to happen. I shoved her aside and went back out into the main area of the basement.

“I guess I just decided all that stuff was bullshit. Getting good grades, being the good daughter. Where did it get me?

Nowhere. And I was miserable. I never got to have any fun because I was always working or trying to get those good grades or planning some sort of event for one of the million clubs I was in. I got tired of it, okay?" I understood them being upset about me partying and that sort of thing, but just because I wasn't getting straight A's anymore, that was a reason to have a coronary?

Renee grabbed my shoulder to stop me from running up the steps. I tried to shake her off, but she yanked me around to face her.

"No, that's not it. You've spent your entire life following the rules. You don't do that and then just flip a switch and

change. People don't change like that unless something makes them." I'd had this conversation with her, with my parents, with my now ex-boyfriend and ex-friends. I told them all the same thing.

"Just leave me alone." Everyone had, eventually.

Renee glared at me, her eyes turning a steely blue like they did when she was determined about something. Getting her to back off was going to be a challenge. She took stubborn to a whole new level.

"Fine. Go get the rest of your stuff." She let go of my arm and jerked her chin up the stairs.

"Fine," I said, stomping up the stairs.

Chapter 3

“Hey, Jos,” Darah said, coming in while I was putting my clothes away in the dresser. Her voice scared the crap out of me and I dropped the Fall Out Boy T-shirt I’d been refolding.

“Hey,” I said, picking up the shirt and turning around. I could never figure out how Darah and Renee had become friends, because they were like night and day. But out of all of Renee’s friends, I liked Darah the best. I hadn’t met Taylor yet, I supposed, so I couldn’t judge her.

“Are you settling in okay?” It was then that I noticed she had a plate of

cookies. Oh, Jesus. What next? “Cookie? Taylor and I made them last night. They’re snickerdoodles. I know those are your favorite.” Yes, they were, but that wasn’t the point.

“Thanks, but I’m fine.” I refolded the T-shirt and put it in with the others. Darah sighed and sat down on my bed, setting the plate of cookies next to her.

“Look,” she started. *Here we go again.* “I know that everyone is going to be up in your face and scrutinizing you, but I just wanted you to know that I’m here for you. If you want to talk, if you don’t want to talk. Whatever. Even if you want to...I don’t know, eat ice cream and cry in the middle of the night. I’m here, okay?”

She got up and rubbed my shoulder. What was it with people invading my personal space? It was really starting to piss me off. If Darah hadn't been one of the sweetest people on the planet, I would have shrugged her hand off and told her to leave me alone. But she was the sweetest person ever, and she'd brought cookies, so I let her touch me as I gritted my teeth.

“Okay, well, let us know if you need anything. Um, Hunter and Taylor are doing dinner tonight, and it's going to be vegetarian, if you're cool with that.” I nodded. Back in the day I'd been an on-and-off vegetarian. Back in the day when I'd been in the Climate Action Club and

a card-carrying member of PETA. I might still have the thing in my wallet. God, I'd been wound so fucking tight back then. I'd also done a lot less cursing.

“Come on up when you're ready.” She patted me once more and shut the door behind her, leaving the plate of cookies. Did they expect me to polish those off and then have dinner? I shrugged, snagging one of the cookies. She must have put them in the microwave, because they were warm and crumbly. Oh, wow. I chewed slowly, savoring the spicy sweetness of the cookie.

Footsteps and voices sounded upstairs. I heard laughter and chaos. The house above me was full of life and joy

and people. And then there was me, hanging out in the basement. Lurking like a creeper. I shook my head and shoved the rest of the cookie into my mouth and went back to folding.

* * *

When the smell of whatever they were cooking upstairs became too much for me to withstand anymore, I ventured up the stairs.

“There you are,” Renee said, nearly crashing into me as I opened the door. She’d obviously been coming down to drag me upstairs from my cave.

“Here I am.” I gave her a tight smile as we walked into the kitchen/dining

room. Everyone went absolutely silent as Renee and I walked in.

“Awesome. I was totally going for that reaction. Well played, everyone,” I said as they all tried to resume their normal activities. It was weird seeing some of them in person, because I’d only seen them in pictures. They really *were* three-dimensional.

Hunter was the first to come over and offer me his hand. I got to give him the once-over and I understood what Renee had said about not allowing him near anything flammable because he would set it on fire with his hotness. Yeah, he had the whole tatted-up, muscled thing going on. Plus his smile was genuine when he said he’d been looking forward

to meeting me. Taylor was next, but she didn't touch me. Thank God. She was also just as freaking adorable as the pictures I'd seen her in. It was easy to see why Renee and Darah had asked her to move in with them.

"I hope this is okay. I wasn't sure what you'd like. We were planning on doing something bigger, but Renee... Never mind," Taylor said, after getting the evil eye from Renee. I didn't need to be able to see her giving it to know that was what she was doing. I'd been on the receiving end of that look more times than I could count. Paul stood next to Renee and gave me a comforting smile.

Last was a guy who looked like he

missed his calling as a professional football player. Or wrestler. Or attractive bouncer. I guess sexy ran in the family of Hunter and Mase.

“Little Ne,” he said, giving me a handshake that nearly crushed all of my fingers. “It’s cool if we call you that, right? We’ll probably come up with a better nickname at some point. Unless you hate nicknames as much as your sister seems to.” He looked a little sheepish, which was kind of funny, given how strong he looked.

“Whatever,” I said, flexing my hand to get the feeling back into it. “I’m neutral in nicknames.” I couldn’t count how many I’d had in my life. Most of them I’d ignored, including when my sister Cari

spent an entire summer calling me “Stinky Butt.” To be fair, she was three, and “Joscelyn” was a mouthful to say.

“Thanks for the cookies,” I said to Darah, who was absentmindedly stroking Mase’s arm. “They were really good.”

“Oh, good. I was hoping you’d like them,” Taylor said, stirring something in one of the steaming pots on the stove.

“This is about ready, so why don’t you go sit down?”

“Is there, um, anything I can do to help?” Granted, I had been forced here, but they didn’t have to take me in. They could have said no.

“Don’t worry, sis. You’ll be on the

chore chart soon enough,” Renee said, steering me toward the dining room table. Someone had already set out the plates, and there was a place set for me, with a card sitting on the plate, and yes, it was handmade.

“Taylor and Darah made that, so you have to gush about it even if you hate it,” Renee hissed as I opened it. How could I hate it? Someone had made some really cool designs with paint on the front that looked like fireworks, and there were letters cut from magazines spelling out the words *WELCOME TO YELLOWFIELD HOUSE*.

“Yellowfield House?” I said.

Renee rolled her eyes and sat down next to me, Paul on her other side. I

caught him taking her hand under the table and giving it a squeeze.

“It was Taylor’s idea. She wanted it to be like in one of those British novels, where the house has a name. It was, like, the only way she’d agree to let us all live here. It was her one stipulation,” Renee said with a shrug.

“She wanted to make a sign and everything, but the rest of us vetoed it,” Paul said. “It was really cute, actually. She was so excited. And then we shot her down.”

“Um, weird,” I said.

“Shh,” Renee said as everyone else carried dishes and pans and other dinner paraphernalia. The second everyone sat

down it was a chaos of passing plates and bumping elbows and trying to get everyone what they needed. Taylor had made spaghetti with an olive oil sauce with tons of vegetables and garlic bread and a salad. It was crazy delicious, and even though I'd consumed several of the cookies, I put away more than my share of dinner. It beat the hell out of the cafeteria food, or eating ramen for the millionth time.

Everyone laughed and talked about their day, and for the first time, I wasn't the center of attention. It was really...nice. They were all just so damn happy and smiley and in love. It was enough to make me sick, but instead it somehow had the opposite effect. I'd

really wanted to hate it here. It would have been more appropriate for me to hate it.

“Um, I still have some...stuff to unpack,” I said, getting up as soon as I could. I needed to get back to the loneliness of the basement. All the happy was screwing with my head. Renee shot me a look, but nodded.

“Are you sure you don’t want to hang out up here? You haven’t even seen the rest of the house yet,” Darah said, giving me a hopeful smile. I couldn’t really get out of that.

“Yeah, sure.” She led me upstairs, showing me her room, which was immaculate, as if they were selling the

house and had a decorator come in to make it look good for prospective buyers. Renee refused to let us see her room, and Taylor only gave me a quick glance at her and Hunter's suite on the top floor.

"Just ignore the clothes on the floor. I know I do." Hunter and Taylor had tagged along for our little tour. It was technically his house, after all.

"Thanks. For...for letting me come here." *For letting my parents force me on you. I'm sure you had lots of choice in the matter.*

"You're welcome. Any member of Renee's family is part of ours," he said, putting an arm around Taylor. Did they have to do that all the time? "I hope

everything...works out. I know what it's like to go through a rough time." Yeah, yeah, yeah. I'd heard all about Hunter's and Taylor's tragic pasts and subsequent "getting their shit together" moments. They were probably planning my intervention right now. Luring me into a false sense of security before springing it on me.

"Yeah, thanks," I said as he closed their door and we went back downstairs.

"Are you sure you don't want to join us for some music?" Darah said as she and Mase canoodled on the couch. What was this, the Partridge family? Seriously, these people were a Cleaver short of a heartwarming fifties family

show. "Hunter's a really good guitar player."

"I'm good. I still have...stuff to do."

"And things?" Renee said, giving me a look. Yeah, stuff and things, Renee.

"Am I not allowed to do stuff and things now? Was that the fifth rule on your list?" I snapped, realizing only after I'd said it that everyone could hear me.

"Whatever," I said, heading for the basement. "I'm going to bed." It was only eight, but I couldn't take being around them anymore. They were just so damn happy. It was killing me. I needed to go back to the basement of doom and comfort myself with more cookies and heart-wrenching music.

"Good night," they all chimed almost

in unison. Sick, this was sick. Maybe there was something in the walls that seeped into their pores when they were sleeping. Or maybe it was the water?

I shook my head and walked back down to what I was quickly deciding was my cave. My basement of solitude.

My room reeked of the delicious cookies, and even though I was stuffed from dinner, I ate two more before heading to the shower. The water pressure was significantly better than the dorm, and I took my time, savoring the sensation on the back of my neck. All the showers in the world couldn't wash away the darkness in my life, but that didn't stop me from enjoying it.

The charm bracelet caught in my hair as I was brushing it and I spent a good five minutes and several curse words getting it undone.

We're friends, right? And friends give each other gifts. I know how much you love elephants, so...here, he'd said when he'd presented me with the box. I remembered opening it and falling in love with it. Such a simple, sweet gesture. He'd helped me put it on, and I'd worn it every day since. Especially after...

I shook my head and turned on some music. Something nice and harsh and loud to drown out the Sing-Along hour going on upstairs. After scrolling through

my recent purchases, I found the newest Skillet album. Perfect.

I could feel the joy seeping through the floor and invading my cave, so I turned the music up so loud that it was hurting my eardrums. I should have just put on my cost-an-arm-and-a-leg-and-a-kidney headphones, but I didn't. I unpacked the rest of my stuff and deleted the voice mails from my mother and father, demanding that I call them when I'd gotten to Renee's. I was sure she'd already called them and shared the news of my safe arrival.

My room was outfitted with a small television and DVD player, but I didn't turn it on. Instead I got out my laptop and scrolled through my pictures from a year

ago. I was torturing myself, I knew.

I remembered that girl. The one who always had her hair perfect with cute clips and had lots of cardigans and pumps. The girl who had a boyfriend who was headed for the White House, and had friends who never let her down. It wasn't picture-perfect, but it had been as close as it could get. And it had been a complete and utter waste of time and energy.

I slammed my laptop shut and yanked the covers back on the bed and got in. My music was still blaring, but it seemed to be quiet upstairs. Finally. They all probably had class or whatever tomorrow. I was surprised Renee hadn't

been up my butt about registering for classes yet. I had all my paperwork to become a UMaine Black Bear, just like her.

I turned over on my side and closed my eyes. Sleep was far away, and elusive, but that's how it always was now. I'd gotten used to passing hours by staring at the insides of my eyelids.

* * *

Several hours later, I decided I'd had enough. I needed to go somewhere else. Anywhere else, even if it was just to see the stars. I pulled some sweatpants on over my shorts and grabbed my winter coat and tiptoed up the stairs. I listened

for a second to the almost-silent house before I pushed the door to the basement open and started creeping toward the front door. The floors were all hardwood, so creaking was going to be an issue.

And then a voice made me nearly jump out of my skin.

“Where do you think you’re going?”
Mase’s head popped up from where he’d been lying on the couch in the living room. Holy...shit.

“Out for a walk,” I said, somehow finding something to say.

“Is that what the kids are calling it these days?”

“What?” He got up from the couch and came to stand in front of me, blocking

access to the front door. Yeah, there was NO WAY I was getting past him. Not even if I had a weapon.

“Have a seat.” He clamped his hand on my shoulder and steered me toward the couch. I tried to fight him, but he was even stronger than he looked.

“Who are you? My dad?” Actually, my dad never really cared this much what I did. He was always too busy with his current wife and one of my numerous siblings to notice if I skipped out.

He sighed and sat down next to me. “Look, I know you’re going through a tough time. I’m familiar with those. Hunter was in really bad shape for a long time, so while I can’t say I know

what you're going through, I know that whatever you were going to do by leaving this house in the middle of the night isn't going to help."

"But—" I tried to get up, and he stopped me again. "I wasn't going to do anything. I just...needed some space."

He smiled and shook his head.

"You're not leaving this house right now, *capiche*?" He pulled me up from the couch and shoved me toward the basement. "Even if I have to sit outside your bedroom door."

"Why do you care?" I said as I stumbled down the stairs back to my room.

He laughed. "Because Renee said she would drug me, remove my dick and

sew it to my face if I let anything happen to you, and I kind of like where my dick is in its present location.”

I almost laughed, too.

“Sounds like Renee.” I paused outside the bedroom door, and he sat down on the stairs.

“I’m also betting that her stubbornness is genetic, so please don’t make me come down here again. I have class in —” he glanced at the clock on the DVD player “—a few hours, so I’d like to get some sleep.” He yawned and started to go back up the stairs.

“Good night, Little Ne.”

“Night,” I said, watching him walk back up the stairs. I waited until I heard

a door close before I let out a frustrated sigh. Seriously, Renee? SERIOUSLY?

Chapter 4

Despite my late bedtime, I woke up at seven the next morning, probably because the smell of bacon had penetrated the cracks under the door and seeped into my room.

I got dressed and threw on a ratty thermal shirt with thumbholes I'd made myself, a pair of holey jeans and decided to venture upstairs. I half expected to see Mase sitting next to the door to the basement.

"You're up," Renee said, yawning and coming down from upstairs. "I didn't expect you to be awake this

early.” Her hair was all over the place. Either she’d been having some sweet sex with Paul, or she’d been tossing and turning.

“Especially after I tried to sneak out last night, right?” I said, saying the thing I knew she was thinking. She crossed her arms and her eyes narrowed.

“We will discuss that later. Right now you’re going to have breakfast because it’s the most important meal of the day.”

Where was she getting this stuff?

“You’re not my mother,” I said, walking away from her and heading for the kitchen. She wouldn’t make a scene in front of everyone. At least, I hoped not.

“Hey, Little Ne,” Mase said brightly,

looking up from a giant mug of what I assumed was coffee. Darah was manning several frying pans and Taylor was slumped over at the dining room table.

“Why did I sign up for an eight-thirty class again?” she moaned as Renee went to the coffeepot and poured herself a cup before going back upstairs.

“Because it was the only time offered and you need the class to graduate?” Darah said, dumping a huge mess of bacon onto a plate covered in paper towels.

“You want some?” Darah said. I shook my head. As nice as the bacon smelled, I didn’t think I could stomach it. “We have some toast and eggs, if you

want. And there's always cereal, and I think we still have some pumpkin doughnuts somewhere." God, it was like living in a bed-and-breakfast.

"Um, do you have any tea?" I sat down at the table near Taylor, who was trying to pull herself upright so she could drink her coffee.

"Yeah, sure." Darah opened a bunch of cabinets before unearthing a dusty box of Lemon Zinger tea. It was going to take a little more than zing to fix my problems, but it was a start.

Hunter came down a few minutes later, freshly showered and with a grin on his face.

"Morning, Missy girl," he said, giving Taylor a kiss. "You awake yet?"

“No,” she moaned, putting her head against his chest. He laughed and pulled her onto his lap, and I remembered my reasons for wanting to get out of the house last night.

“Make it go away,” she said.

“I would if I could, baby.”

Renee and Paul came in a few minutes later. Her hair was fixed and they were both dressed for the day.

“Okay, here’s the deal. Since I don’t trust you on your own, you get to come with me today,” Renee said, with a sweet smile that I could tell was hurting her teeth. Everyone looked at me.

“And since I have class in less than an hour, you’d better get your ass dressed

and ready to go.”

“What am I supposed to do all day?” I sipped my tea and stared into the cup so I wouldn’t have to see everyone staring.

“I don’t know. You’ll think of something. As long as it doesn’t involve you getting into trouble, or getting me into trouble, we’ll be good. So, that’s how it’s going to go.” It was another well-rehearsed speech.

“Whatever,” I said, shrugging.

“I said she could come with me,” Darah said, finally breaking the enormous silence that had suffocated the room.

“No, it’s fine. She’s my responsibility,” Renee said, going for the coffee.

“Um, sitting right here,” I said. “And I don’t need a babysitter.”

“That’s not what I hear,” Renee snapped at me. Mase coughed and shoved a piece of bacon into his mouth. He chewed and mouthed “sorry” at me. Of course he’d told her. I would have been shocked if he hadn’t.

I sipped my tea and bit back a snarky response.

* * *

Two hours later I was yawning, sitting outside one of Renee’s labs. I couldn’t remember which one. It sounded complicated and disgusting at the same time. I’d been smart enough to bring my

computer, so I'd been catching up on some of my favorite vlogs and music blogs.

Then I played my favorite game of trying to find new music by clicking on random videos online. This summer I'd started a music blog, but I'd been slacking on posting this week. Since I was so new at it, I was still trying to find my niche when it came to what the blog was about. I barely got any views, but I discovered that the only thing I loved more than music was writing about it. Before...everything, I never would have considered music blogging. I still hadn't told anyone I was doing it. They wouldn't understand—that was for sure.

Renee had promised me a tour of the

campus after we had lunch. From what I'd seen so far, it was a lot like UNH. College campuses were pretty similar, especially if they were state schools. I'd considered coming here, but the idea of being away from my crazy family was more enticing than saving a few bucks by going to an in-state school. I'd gotten into Bowdoin and Bates, two prestigious Maine schools, but they had been far too expensive and my financial aid hadn't been enough to cover it. Too bad, so sad.

When she finally emerged from her lab, Renee reeked of formaldehyde, but she had a crazy gleam in her eye. She must have gotten to dissect something.

“Have fun?” I said, as I got to my feet. My back was crazy stiff from all the sitting I’d done.

“We got to cut into a fetal pig. It was awesome,” she said, as if she was talking about seeing the latest girlie movie to hit theaters with a hunky vampire in it.

“Sometimes I wonder if we’re related,” I said as the rest of her class poured out. They didn’t seem nearly as enthusiastic as Renee was.

“I’ve been asking myself that very question for years,” she said as we headed toward the Student Union for lunch. Unlike some people who wouldn’t be able to eat after a fetal pig

dissection, Renee got herself a bacon cheeseburger and inhaled it like she hadn't seen food for weeks. I went with a strawberry walnut salad and picked at it.

“So I have to do a three-hour shift at the hospital tonight,” she said after she disposed of the burger and was attacking the fries. How she stayed so thin was beyond me. I usually had to watch what I ate to keep myself thin, or at least thin-ish.

“And?”

“And you're coming with me, so I hope you have something to do with yourself. Like maybe getting that transfer paperwork together.”

I'd rather have my teeth drilled, but

the look on Renee's face told me I didn't have a choice.

“So you're my jailer now, is that it?”

“Well, I wouldn't have to be if you'd just follow the damn rules, Joscelyn.” God, she sounded like Mom. Way too much like mom. She even had the same “I'm disappointed in you” face.

“Fine. Am I allowed to go to the bathroom, or do you need to come with me to hold the cup while I pee?”

“Cute,” she said as I got up and headed for the bathroom.

* * *

I spent the rest of the day watching movies on my computer. I threw in

movie reviews every now and then on my blog just to spice things up. They usually got quite a few hits, especially if they were classics from the eighties.

There's something so comforting about watching a movie you've seen a ton of times. I started out with *Sixteen Candles*, and then because I was in a John Hughes kind of mood, I moved on to *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, and then *Pretty in Pink*, which took me almost to the end of Renee's shift at the hospital.

I was camped out in one of the lounges, and for a hospital it was pretty quiet except for the occasional squeak of a nurse's shoes on the linoleum, or a restless kid fussing, or a monitor going off. I'd had dinner at the cafeteria, but

that had been a few hours ago, and I was in need of munchies. Renee had showed me a vending machine down the hall, so I fished in my bag for some quarters and paused the movie.

“Yes,” I said as I saw that they had both M&M’s and Skittles. I couldn’t eat one without the other. It was something I’d started doing as a kid, and it was one of those things I’d always done that had never changed.

My M&M’s came out fine, but the stupid Skittles bag got stuck. Great. The universe was out to screw me. I banged on the machine, trying to shake the candy loose. Luckily, there was no one around. I didn’t want to get busted for

destruction of hospital property. That would most definitely be against Renee's rules.

I turned my shoulder and shoved the side of the machine, trying desperately to get the bag of candy to fall from the clutches of the machine.

“Come on, you son of a *bitch*,” I said, ramming my shoulder into the machine.

“You have to put your hips into it,” a voice said, making me look up from my assault of the vending machine.

“What?” A guy wearing a baggy hoodie and equally baggy jeans over torn-up high-tops was looking at me like I was something he'd never seen before. He had darkish skin, cropped black hair, but the most astonishing green eyes.

Unlike mine, which shaded toward blue, they were almost goldish. They popped in his face, especially since they were fixed on me. He jerked his chin at the machine.

“You have to put your hips into it. Here,” he said, glancing over his shoulder to make sure no one was watching before motioning to me to move aside. “The key is to thrust your whole body into it. Not just your shoulders.”

Was it just me, or did he make that sound sexual on purpose? I gaped at him and he laughed. Nope, wasn't just me. It was one of those laughs that made you want to laugh, too, like a reflex. I was

barely able to hide the smile that threatened to spread on my face.

“On three,” he said, putting his hands on the machine next to mine. Up close, his eyes were even brighter. They almost glowed.

“One. Two. Three,” he said, and we both shoved at the machine, which moved a hell of a lot more than when I’d been the only one pushing it. I heard a satisfying clunk of the Skittles falling. The guy went around the front of the machine and pulled the bag out.

“Mission accomplished.” He winked as he held it out to me.

“Thanks,” I said, taking the bag and making sure to avoid touching his hand. I was about to turn around and leave when

he made a sound, like he was going to say something. I stood there, waiting.

“I should get back,” I finally blurted out to break the uncomfortable silence that stood between us.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Of course, of course,” he said, shaking his head as if he’d forgotten something and just remembered it. He smiled and stuck his hands into his pockets.

“Okay. Well, ’bye.” I gave him a little wave and turned around. What a weirdo.

“Don’t forget. Put your whole body into it next time, Red,” he said, making me turn back around. He was grinning again. Red? Like I hadn’t heard that one before. At least he hadn’t called me

Carrots.

“I’ll keep that in mind. Thanks.”

For the last time, I spun around and walked back to the lounge, his laughter echoing behind me.

The lounge was still empty when I got back, and all my stuff was still there, so I settled back in to finish another movie.

Next thing I knew, someone was shaking my shoulder.

“Hey, Jos. Time to go,” Renee said, her voice softer than I’d heard it in a long time. It was the voice she probably used with patients. I’d fallen asleep on the couch. I couldn’t even remember it. My computer was dark; it, too, had gone to sleep.

Renee sat down next to me, pulling my

feet into her lap and letting out a heavy sigh.

“So what did you do?”

“Nothing,” I said, tilting my neck back and forth to work out some kinks. “What time is it?”

“Ten. You ready to go home?” Home. Was that what her place was now?

“Yeah.” I swung my feet over and sat up.

“I see you raided the vending machine,” she said, picking up the empty candy bags. “You freak and your candy combinations.” She crumpled them up and found a trash can as I packed up all my stuff.

“Did you get to do anything

interesting?” she said as we walked back down to her car.

Other than the interaction with the Vending Machine Hero? I was about to tell her about that and changed my mind.

“Nope,” I said around a yawn. Maybe I’d sleep tonight. Usually I got to a point where I was so exhausted that my body just shut itself down. This felt like one of those times.

“You know, you should call Mom.” I didn’t want to. I knew it would just end up in another yelling match, and I was too tired to deal with that right now.

“I will.” Renee was about to say something, but changed her mind.

“Okay.”

Chapter 5

Everyone was deep in study mode when we got back to the house. Paul had taken up almost the entire dining room table with something that, at a glance, looked far too complicated to even begin to understand.

Taylor and Hunter had the living room, and both had their heads buried deep in textbooks. Darah was at a little desk that was tucked next to the stairs, and I suspected Mase was also around somewhere. Nine months ago, I would have been right there with them. Now I thought they just looked like a bunch of

people wasting their time.

“Little Ne,” Mase said, coming down the stairs, a textbook in hand, big surprise. “How’s life?”

“Peachy,” I said, putting my bag down on the bench by the front door. The sound of the door closing seemed to rouse everyone else, and they descended on us. There were just so many of them. It was overwhelming. Plus the happy. That was equally overwhelming. Paul came over and gave Renee a kiss, and she went to sit with him at the dining table to catch up.

“I’m going down to my...room,” I said, catching myself before I could say *cave*. It wasn’t really a cave. Or, if it was, it was the nicest cave ever. With

Wi-Fi and everything.

“Are you sure? This house is yours now. You don’t have to stay down there,” Hunter said. “We’re not that scary, are we?” He turned to Taylor, whose eyes were pretty glazed over.

“What? I’m still thinking about suffragettes.” He gave her a look and shook his head.

“Seriously, Jos, this is your home.” It wasn’t really, but it was nice of him to say that.

“I’m just really tired. I’m going to bed.” I said good-night to everyone, including Renee.

“Not planning any nocturnal activities?” she said.

“Nope,” I said, popping my lips on the *p*.

“Well, just in case, I’m watching you,” she said, making a gesture with two fingers to her eyes and then pointing them at me. “Whenever you think I’m not there, that’ll be when I show up.”

“Jesus, enough with the third degree. I got it. Message received. Mission accomplished.” I stomped down the stairs and banged the door shut.

Ahh, peace and quiet.

* * *

The rest of the week went pretty much like that first full day, with the exception of Renee letting me go to the admissions

office by myself to sign up for all my classes and get everything transferred over from UNH. Since my first year grades were so high, even with the shitty grades I'd gotten last semester, they were still willing to let me in.

When it came to classes, I just picked whatever. I'd decided to stick with my major, political science with a prelaw minor, since it seemed easier than picking a new one. I'd thought transferring would be a pain in the ass, but it was relatively easy, and before the end of the week I was officially a UMaine Black Bear, with an official decal for my car and a copy of the school song, the "Stein Song." I was sure I wasn't the first person who found

it ironic that a college had a drinking song as their official school song. What kind of message did that send?

I'd only really missed the first week of classes, so I was going to be able to catch up no problem, according to all the professors who had emailed me on my new UMaine account to send me the syllabi from their classes.

Renee wasn't around to take me to get my textbooks, because of a meeting of her nursing club, so the task fell to Hunter and Taylor, who drove me to campus on Saturday.

They fought about what music to play the whole way there.

"I think that Jos should pick," Taylor

finally said when we were practically driving onto campus.

“I don’t care.”

“The rule is that the driver gets to pick,” Hunter said, skipping a song that Taylor had picked out.

“Uh, no, the rule is that I get to pick.”

“Since when?”

“Since you put this swell ring on my finger,” she said, holding up the amazing ring that Hunter had gotten her when they’d first started dating. It was fucking huge, and nearly blinding when you looked at it. Yet another show of his wealth. It was just wrong that some people had so much money and others had less than nothing. Not that Renee and I were poor, but we definitely got our

fair share of financial aid, what with our parents having so many kids between them.

“That ring does not give you totalitarian radio powers,” Hunter said, taking her hand and kissing it.

“Thank God,” I said under my breath as he found a parking spot by the performing arts center, which wasn’t too far from the bookstore. They continued to argue as we walked into the Union and then went downstairs to the bookstore. I was about to tell them that I could just find my books myself when Hunter grabbed my list from my hand and started grabbing books.

“Hold up, dude,” Taylor said, poking

him in the stomach and snatching the list. “Not all of us can just pick out whatever books we want.” She gave me a sympathetic smile. Hunter had pulled all new books off the shelves, ones that were still wrapped in plastic. There was no way I could afford those. I’d have to get used ones, and even then it was going to be tight.

Taylor started pulling books off the shelves, all with that bright yellow USED sticker on them. She flipped through to make sure they didn’t have strange stains, or missing pages.

“This one okay?” She held one up and I flipped through it. Only a few of the pages were bent, and the spine was fine. I nodded and she put it into the basket

Hunter was holding. Who knew getting textbooks would turn into an exercise of humiliation?

“Why don’t you go see if you can find these?” She tore the list in half and shoved him toward the next shelf. Once he was gone she gave me a smile.

“You didn’t have to do that,” I said, staring at the books as if I was looking for one when really, I didn’t even know what the titles said.

“No, it’s fine. I know how it feels, believe me. Been there, done that. How’s this one?” She handed me another used book and I found a mysterious brown stain on one of the back pages.

“I don’t even want to speculate what that is,” she said, holding the book in the tips of her fingers and putting it back. We got the rest of my list and filled the basket.

“Now this is one of those times when it really does pay to have a strong guy around.” We’d both tried to lift the basket, but it wasn’t happening. As if she’d said his name, Hunter came around the corner with another equally full basket that he carried with no problem.

“Did my ears deceive me? Did you order a strong man?” he said with a cocky grin. Yep, Renee hadn’t been exaggerating. He was a stunner.

“Shut up and carry this for me.” She

kicked the basket toward him. Hunter looked over his shoulder.

“Hey, Dusty, you wanna give me a hand, man?”

“Sure,” a guy said, coming around the corner. “Hey, Tay,” he said, smiling at Taylor. “And...Red, we meet again,” he said with an even wider smile for me. Seriously?

“You two know each other?” Taylor said, giving me a look. I knew what that look meant, and I knew what it implied, and I had to shut that down before it went any further.

“No,” I said at the same time the guy, who was apparently named Dusty, said, “yes.”

“We’re acquainted,” Dusty said with

another wink. Jesus, he thought he was God's gift, didn't he?

"We met. Once," I tried to clarify.

"Where?" Taylor said. Hunter hadn't said anything, but he was looking at Dusty and then looking at me, and I could feel my ears getting hot. One of the major downsides of being a redhead is that when you get uncomfortable or embarrassed, you broadcast it to the world. Which was what I was currently doing. Dusty seemed to get a kick out of it. D-bag.

"It was at the hospital the other night. So, um, I think that's everything. We should probably go," I said, leaning down to pick up the basket. I was

determined to get it myself. A set of arms beat me to it.

“Let me get that, little lady,” Dusty said as I looked up to find our faces only inches apart. He laughed a little under his breath and I stood up so fast the blood rushed to my head.

“I don’t need your help.”

He looked like he was going to make a snappy comeback, but he just ducked his head.

“Well, you’ve got it anyway.”

“Okay, then. Ready to go?” Taylor said, taking my arm and steering me toward the checkout counter. I heard Hunter and Dusty talking behind me and I distinctly heard Hunter tell Dusty my name. Like it was any of his business.

After I checked out and gave the UMaine bookstore a good chunk of my bank account, we carried the books back to Hunter's car. Of course, being the always-helpful guy he was, Dusty had to come, too.

"So Hunter tells me you're enrolling here," he said as we put the books in the trunk. Taylor and Hunter were deep in discussion, probably about me.

I just nodded.

He leaned against the car. "Look, I appreciate you've got this whole 'don't touch me, don't look at me, don't even fucking think about me' thing going on, but I'm just trying to be nice. You could, you know, thank me for it."

“Thank you,” I said, giving him a completely fake smile. Yes, I knew I was being a complete asshole to this guy, but there was something about him that just made me grit my teeth. There was also something familiar that had gotten under my skin and was itching like crazy.

He shook his head.

“Okay, fine.” He started to walk away.

“Hey,” I said, and he stopped. “I’m sorry I’m such an asshole. It’s kind of my thing.” I laughed at the truth of it.

“No, I don’t think it is,” he said, looking at me intently with those green eyes that seemed to see everything. “See

you tomorrow, Hunter?”

“Right,” Hunter said, as if he’d just remembered something. “Tomorrow.”

“Bye, Red,” Dusty said, walking backward with his hands in his pockets.

“Bye,” I said, closing the trunk of the car.

“What in the hell was that?” Taylor said, crossing her arms and giving me a look that was almost exactly like Renee’s. Damn, those two had rubbed off on each other.

“Nothing,” I said, trying to get into the car.

“You guys hungry?” Hunter said, in a blatantly obvious way of trying to divert attention.

“I don’t know what you’re making

such a big deal of,” I said, getting into the backseat. “We met at the hospital for, like, five seconds. End of story. Am I not allowed to talk to people now? Is that part of the unwritten rules my sister didn’t tell me about?”

Hunter gave Taylor a look, and she shook her head.

“Never mind. I overreacted. I have a tendency to do that, just so you know,” she said.

“No, really?” Hunter said, and she smacked him and turned on the music, leading to another argument about song choice.

What were the chances that I’d encounter Dusty all that much, anyway? I

mean, he and Hunter were friends, obviously, but UMaine was a huge campus. Besides, if he ever came to the house, I could just hide in the basement if I had to. Or escape somewhere, if Renee would let me. She had to loosen the reins at some point. And who really cared if I saw him again? It wasn't like he affected me or anything. He was just a guy.

Just a guy.

Chapter 6

Sunday was chore day at Yellowfield House. Lovable control freak as always, Darah had added the list of chores and everyone got their fair share, including a rotational schedule so no one had to do the same thing over and over. The funny thing was that they all followed it without question. Like she was their mom and giving out gold stars and higher allowances for each one they completed.

“I figured you’d need another week to settle in, but next week you’re on the list,” Darah said, as if she was offering me a plate of those amazing

snickerdoodles.

“Great,” I said with a smile that was totally forced. Not that I wanted to be a mooch, but they seemed to have everything in hand. I kept my room and bathroom clean and helped with the dishes. They kept trying to integrate me into the machine of the house, and I didn’t want to be a part of it. I wasn’t a part of it, not really.

They were all helping pay for the house. I was just an inconvenience that had been pushed on them. The annoying kid sister.

By late morning all the chores were done, and the already-spotless house was even more spotless. I did my first load of laundry, and everyone settled

into their own activities. Renee was having a “Call of Duty” tournament with a few of Hunter and Mase’s friends, Dev and Sean, and Darah was catching up on homework and Taylor was reading some vampire book on her e-reader while Hunter played his guitar.

Renee had told me he was some kind of musical genius who could play practically any song. At the moment he was playing anything that Taylor yelled out, including Taylor Swift, Bruno Mars, Seal and Matchbox Twenty.

I changed my laundry over to the dryer and was about to sit back down and watch the “Call of Duty” battle when we all heard the doorbell ring.

“Got it,” Hunter said, getting up and rushing to the door as if he was trying to beat everyone else. No one else had even gotten up. Weird.

“Hey, man, you know you don’t have to ring the bell. It’s always open.” He stepped aside to let the person in, and I glanced at the doorway.

“I know, but I have this thing for doorbells,” a familiar voice said before a familiar person walked through the door. Dusty.

I was surprised to see him, but he didn’t seem surprised at all.

“Red,” he said, giving me a little bow. “Nice to see you again.” I looked at Hunter, who was trying not to look at

me. Something clicked in my brain. Dusty had said he'd see Hunter tomorrow. Well, that day was today. Hmm, Hunter hadn't said anything about Dusty coming over. Wonder why that was?

“Hey, Sharp!” Mase yelled as something exploded and Dev groaned and threw his controller.

“Hey,” Dusty said, coming in and sitting down on the couch as if he'd done it a million times before. He was also sitting in my spot. “‘Call of Duty’ again? How bad are you losing?”

Mase grumbled as I looked at Hunter. He stepped around me and went to sit back on the recliner. I had no choice but to go and lean against the arm of the

couch.

“Oh, Dusty, this is my sister Jos,” Renee said, barely glancing up from the game. She had a one-track mind when she was playing.

“We’ve met,” he said, glancing over his shoulder at me and then back to the game.

“When?” Renee said, moving her whole body as she moved the controller, as if that would make some difference. I’d always threatened to video her while she was doing it for future blackmail use.

“I can’t quite recall. Where was it that we met?” I couldn’t glare at him with everyone watching, so I had to settle for

clenching my teeth. He knew very well where we had met. He was totally screwing with me in front of everyone. Oh, two could play that game. I wasn't a redhead for nothing.

“That's right. It was at the hospital, and you needed to know the way to the pharmacy. Has the itching on your junk finally gone away?” I stage-whispered the last part and motioned in the general area.

Dusty's eyes went wide for just a second before they narrowed and a grin spread across his face. Everyone else started laughing nervously, wondering if I was being serious or not. They didn't know me well enough yet. Of course Renee just rolled her eyes.

“TMI, dude,” Mase said, shaking his head, and Dev tried to slide away from Dusty on the couch.

“Well played, Red. Well played.” He started a slow clap while he laughed.

“Yes, my junk is now itch-free.” He shifted on the couch, adjusting his pants. Seriously, how did his pants stay up? It was one of those mysteries science had yet to solve. Like where your missing socks went when you put them in the dryer. He cleared his throat when he caught me staring at his pants. Jesus, he probably thought I was trying to check out his junk. Not that I could even see it...

“On that note,” Hunter said, clearing

his throat and giving me a look before grabbing his guitar again. “Okay, requests are now open from anyone but Taylor.”

“Hey!” she protested, glancing up from her book.

“Sorry, Miss, it’s time for someone else to abuse my musical genius.”

“Fine,” she said, going back to her e-reader, but she gave him a little wink before she did it. Everyone else seemed too wrapped up in what they were doing, or was busy trying to think of a song.

““Sunday Morning,”” I blurted out. It was the first thing that came to mind.

Hunter looked up from the guitar.
“Maroon 5?”

“Yeah.” He smiled and looked over at

Dusty. "Can you give me a beat on that?" Dusty nodded and sat up. After thinking for a second, he started making sounds with his mouth. Not just sounds. Beat boxing. Hunter listened for a second and then started strumming as Dusty layered on more sounds until it was like he was creating an entire percussion section for the song with only his mouth.

I couldn't stop my eyebrows from rising, but no one else seemed surprised. Dusty turned his head, and I made my face neutral, but he still sort of grinned at me anyway. Cocky much? Hunter started singing, and I tried to find a comfortable way to lean on the arm of the couch while also pretending to be

interested in the explosions and chaos happening on the television. I would rather set my hair on fire than ask Dusty for his seat, or give him the satisfaction of going to the dining room to get a chair. Should have just stayed in my cave.

Okay, so Dusty was *really* good at beat boxing, not that I was an expert, by any means. He made sounds with his mouth that I didn't know a human could make. So what? There were a million people online who could do the same thing. It wasn't anything special. It wasn't anything to swoon over. He wasn't anything to swoon over.

They finished the song, and Dusty did a fancy noise that sounded like a cymbal

crash and reverberation.

“Good enough for you?” Dusty said, turning to face me.

“Meh,” I said, shrugging one shoulder and turning back to the television as Renee screamed and jumped up and down and all the guys groaned and threw their controllers down.

“Take that, bitches,” Renee said, pointing at them. “In your face.” She started doing a dance that was somewhere between slutty club dancing and a weird touchdown dance hybrid. The guys all booed and threw things at her. I just shook my head. That was my sister.

“I’m hoping those moves are genetic,”

said a voice so close that I slid off my perch on the arm of the couch. Luckily, I was able to catch myself before my butt hit the floor. Everyone else was too distracted by Renee's victory dance.

"You know it's rude to sneak up behind people," I said, turning to face Dusty, who had somehow managed to get off the couch and creep up behind me.

"You know it's rude to tell everyone that a fellow has a rash on his dick when he doesn't." He crossed his arms and leaned down, challenging me. "So what do you have to say to that, Red?"

Yeah, should have stayed in my cave.

"Nothing. I have nothing to say to you."

Fortunately, Mase interrupted us.

“Little Ne, you want to take a turn?”

The video-game-master gene seemed to have skipped me and just been concentrated in Renee. I turned away from Dusty. Hunter was watching us with fascination. Ugh, that was the last thing I needed.

“No, I’m good,” I said, stepping around Dusty and taking the seat he’d vacated on the couch and claiming it as mine. I shot him a smile, and he just pretended to clap again before going to the kitchen and dragging in one of the dining room chairs.

* * *

Renee was still kicking ass when my phone rang with a call from Mom. Just what I needed. I got up from the couch and headed for my cave. No way I was talking to her in front of everyone.

“Hey, Mom.” I heard screaming in the background, but that was par for the course. Mom always called me when she was doing a million other things.

“Hey, Jos.” Her voice was tense, but less tense than it had been earlier in the week. We’d somehow made our way onto less-shaky ground, but that didn’t mean she was any less pissed at me.

“You ready to start classes tomorrow?” A shriek meant that she was probably taking something away from one of the

twins.

“As I’ll ever be.” I didn’t have a choice. They wouldn’t even let me drop out when I’d suggested it as a potential solution to my academic implosion. I could get a place and a job and then they’d get off my back. I wouldn’t waste their money—or the government’s. Win-win situation. Or so I’d thought. Mom had acted like I’d just told her I’d brutally slaughtered a bunch of people, and Dad just hung up on me when I pitched it to him after striking out with her. And Renee had threatened to strangle me for even mentioning it.

“Well, I want a full report when you get back, you hear? I swear, if I get a call from your sister telling me that

you've skipped, there will be hell to pay."

"I know, I know."

"Okay, then. No, you cannot have cookies for dinner. How many times do I have to tell you that?" I waited for her to be done yelling at whichever of my siblings had the audacity to want cookies for dinner.

"Listen, I've got a tantrum brewing here, and Chuck is working late, so I'm on my own. Can I call you later?"

"Yeah, sure." She never would.

"Bye, Jos. Say goodbye to Jos, everybody!" She must have held the phone up, and I heard a chorus of my siblings saying goodbye.

“Bye, everybody,” I yelled back. Then the chaos resumed and then the call died. So much for that. I put my phone back in my pocket and went up the stairs.

Hunter and Dusty were going crazy with a rendition of “Everybody Talks” by Neon Trees. Dusty was also banging out the rhythm on his chair. The video game had been abandoned, and everyone else was humming along, including Renee. I stood back and hovered, not wanting to bust into the musical bubble. The song ended and Renee gave me a look. She probably wanted a play-by-play of the conversation with Mom. It wasn’t really anything earth-shattering, so I just sat back down on the couch as

they finished the song.

“Okay, my turn. ‘Scream,’ Usher. Go,” Dusty said before starting a set of vocal gymnastics that were even more impressive than what I’d heard already. Okay, okay, you’re talented. We get the message. As soon as Hunter started singing, Mase jumped up and started dancing. Dev hopped up and they somehow managed to dance in the small space without breaking anything. I would have thought Darah would have been tweaking out about the possibility of one of the carefully arranged pictures or vases or any of the other really nice things being smashed by her boyfriend’s sick dance moves, but she just smiled and watched with her chin in her hands.

Idiots. They were all idiots.

The singing went on for a while and then someone mentioned food and then that was all anyone could talk about, so the group reached a consensus that a night out was in order.

“Yeah, we never got to celebrate the new member of the Yellowfield House family,” Taylor said while everyone yelled out suggestions. That made everyone turn to me, including Dusty.

“So, you get to pick the place,” Taylor said. Even though she was not that much older than me, when she talked everyone seemed to listen. She was the shortest one, too.

“Um, I don’t even know what’s

around here.” I’d wanted to go out and see what was around Bangor, but Renee had been totally down on that. I might actually have fun, and that was definitely against the rules.

And then they all started talking at once, each pitching for their favorite place, telling me which had the best steaks or pizza or bread sticks. Jesus, they were loud.

“Whoa, hold up,” I said. “I can’t think straight when you’re all yelling at me. We need to, like, do this democratically.”

Darah piped up.

“How about everyone writes their choices on pieces of paper and then Jos will pick one?”

That made everyone but Dusty burst into raucous laughter.

“Yeah, because it worked out so well before,” Taylor said, poking Hunter in the chest. He just grabbed her hand and kissed it.

“Pretty swell, I’d say.”

I gave Dusty a look, because he was the only other person who wasn’t enjoying the inside joke.

“Okay, then,” Dusty said, ripping a piece of notebook paper out of one that someone had been doing homework in earlier. “My choice is Sea Dog. Who’s next?” He wrote down everyone’s choices and then tore the slips in equal pieces, folded them up and tossed them

in one of Mase's hats.

“Do the honors, Red,” Dusty said, bowing and holding the hat out as if he was bestowing a great gift.

They all waited with anticipation like I was choosing something that would affect the rest of their lives. I grasped a piece of paper, unfolded it and read it out.

“Sea Dog it is.” Dusty winked at me. Of course I'd picked his choice. Everyone else agreed that it was a nice place and started to get their stuff together.

“Need a ride, Red?” He'd sidled up behind me again as I'd gotten my coat.

“I swear, one of these times you're going to get a faceful of my fist if you

sneak up on me, Dustin.”

“You coming, Jos?” Renee said as Paul helped her on with her coat and everyone else piled into their cars. I decided to seize my opportunity to get out from under her radar, even if I’d have to spend a few minutes with Dusty.

“I’m going to ride with Dusty.” He looked surprised for a second but then smiled. Did he just...smile all the time? Was it a reflex?

Renee looked like she was going to protest and then Paul said something in her ear. They had a quick argument and Renee threw up her hands.

“Fine. See you there.” I didn’t know what she was making such a big deal

about. The restaurant was just down the road.

“Ladies first,” Dusty said, pointing toward a black VW Golf that had more than a few dings. “By the way, I wrote Sea Dog on all of them,” he whispered.

Of course he did.

“Wow, sneaky,” I said, pretending to sound impressed. He shut the door for me, and I resisted the urge to call him out on it. Matt, my ex, was big on door opening, and I’d always liked it. Yeah, I knew that it was against feminism or whatever, but it was still nice. Matt was big on things like that. Flowers on holidays and pulling chairs out and wearing ties.

His ambition was to be president, and

he always said if you wanted to be president the first step was looking like one. Granted, I'd also dressed very differently then. Yes, I'd had skirts and blazers and pumps and even brooches for my neck scarves. I'd boxed all of it up and left it at Mom's house when I'd moved into my dorm room this year. No need for any of that anymore. I'd quit all the clubs I'd been in, even Student Council, much to the dismay of nearly everyone there. Mostly because I kept the minutes and no one else wanted to do it.

“So what's your story, Joscelyn Archer?” Dusty said as he pulled out behind Taylor's Charger. “Have you

always had that chip on your shoulder, or is it new?"

Why the hell did he care?

"What's *your* story, Dustin Sharp? Renee's never mentioned you before." Instead of turning on the radio, he made his own music by tapping on the steering wheel and making snare drum sounds with his mouth. I was beginning to think he had ADHD. It would explain a lot.

"I bet yours is more interesting than mine," he said, turning to look at me. I stared out the window, pretending to be fascinated with the houses that passed by.

"Okay, fine. You win," he said when I didn't answer. "Let's just say I wasn't always this good-looking and talented. I,

uh, got myself into a lot of trouble when I was younger, if you can believe that.”
Could I? You bet.

“And I screwed up a lot and then something happened to me to...yeah, this part sounds lame, but something happened to put things in perspective, you know? And I stopped screwing around, and I started actually giving a shit about what I wanted to do with my life.”

“And how did you become buddies with Hunter?” That was what I was most curious about.

“I met Hunter in one of my classes, and, for lack of a better, more masculine term, we formed a bromance. We see

each other all the time now, since he changed his major. So, yeah. That's my rambling and completely weird story."

It wasn't what I'd expected, but before I could answer he was pulling into the parking lot.

"So, on the way back it's your turn, Red."

This time I opened the door myself before he could get around the car.

Chapter 7

Dinner was...interesting. Everyone—except me and Dusty—greased their wheels with the wide selection of beer on tap. Even though Taylor wasn't of age, Hunter just ordered two glasses at a time and handed her one when the waiter wasn't looking. I didn't even bother to try that, because Renee's eyes were on me the entire time. She kept herself to one beer, but I knew from experience that she could pound them back when she wanted.

The more alcohol the group consumed, the dirtier the stories got.

Renee kept trying to shush them, as if they were going to poison my precious ears. Like it wasn't anything I'd heard already. I'd been in college before. I also had the sneaking suspicion they'd been on their best behavior with me in the house.

“Oh, my God, do you remember that time I walked in on you in the shower?”
Mase said to Renee.

“No, I cannot recall,” she said, becoming really interested in the half-devoured onion blossom. “But even if I did, that doesn't mean it's the kind of story one would tell in front of one's impressionable younger sister.” Her words were sharp as knives and I think Mase and everyone else got the message.

Then there was one of those silent moments where everyone is super uncomfortable and doesn't know what to say. It stretched out until Dusty cleared his throat loudly and then made a whistling sound like an airplane diving and then crashing in a giant explosion. It was pretty accurate-sounding and made everyone laugh nervously. Our waiter chose that moment to come over and ask if anyone wanted more drinks. I got myself another Dr Pepper and Dusty got another Mountain Dew.

“You're going to be up all night if you keep drinking that stuff,” I said. Of course we'd been the last people to arrive at the restaurant, so we'd gotten

the last two chairs at the end of the table, so of course I was next to him.

“Maybe that’s my plan. Maybe I don’t sleep.”

All I could think of were supernatural creatures. “Vampire, werewolf or zombie?”

“All of the above,” he whispered and winked at me. Why was I talking to him again?

I stole a glance down the table at Renee, but Paul was telling her something and she was laughing. Thank you, Paul. I caught his eye and gave him a thumbs-up.

“Your sister is, um, protective,” Dusty said.

“It’s a recent development.”

He waved his hand for me to elaborate. “Due to...”

I rolled my eyes.

“None of your business.” I was *not* going into my life story with him even though he’d shared his. I didn’t ask him to. I didn’t care.

“I think we need to have a toast,” Darah said, raising her glass. I knew she wasn’t much of a beer drinker, but she seemed to have changed her mind. “To our new resident, Jos.”

“May her life decisions be much wiser than ours,” Mase finished for her. Glasses were raised and clinked and there was some minor beer sloshing as my ears turned red and I tried not to

make eye contact with anyone. Yeah, my life decisions weren't anyone's business but mine.

I hate it when people say “seize the day.” Seizing sounds so violent. How about “love the day” or just “live the day”?

Live the day.

A pair of fingers snapped in front of my face, making me jump.

“Come back to earth, Red. You were orbiting somewhere else. That’s dangerous, you know.” I turned toward him and a retort formed on my lips, but I let it die. He wasn’t worth it. He didn’t understand. So I just gave him a sweet smile and imagined dumping the glass of Mountain Dew on his head. It would

have been so satisfying, but I would have made a scene.

“Okay, okay, it’s time for some of us to go home because some of us have class tomorrow,” Renee said.

“She means me,” I said in a stage whisper to the entire table. They laughed, some more than others, but that was probably because of the beer and not because I was that funny.

“I can drive her,” Dusty said as everyone tried to figure out the bill and how much they should tip. Most of the guys did their guy thing and refused to let the poor delicate females even consider paying. After a few lectures about feminism and the increasing popularity

of going Dutch, the guys won the battle and the ladies left the tip. Paul ended up paying for me, mostly because I was broke as shit.

“But then you’d have to go to our house and drop her off and then drive back. It’s no big deal—I’m fine to drive,” Renee said.

“It’s not a big deal. I forgot my phone at your place anyway.” He was totally lying. I’d seen it in his pocket, but I kept my mouth shut.

“If you don’t mind...”

“It’s no big deal, Ne,” he said. So I guess everyone was calling her that these days. She’d always hated it when Paul called her “Nene,” but I guess she was over it. You can only fight a

nickname for so long before everyone just decides to use it with or without your permission.

What if I call you...Josie? Jo? Jojo? Lyn?

He'd finally agreed to call me Jossy, which was the only suggestion I could live with.

"You went away again, Red. You have a habit of doing that?" Dusty said, bringing me back again.

"None of your business."

He laughed as we walked, and some of us stumbled a bit, out of the restaurant.

"You sound like a robot when you say that. Means I've hit on something you'd

like to keep hidden. You're one of those onion girls."

"Onion girls?" I had a brief visual of a girl wearing an onion costume. "Are you saying I smell like an onion?"

We got to the car and I let him open the door, standing back and folding my arms. Damn, it was fun screwing with him. He was about to open it but pulled his arm back at the last second and walked around to his side of the car. I wrenched it open, got in and fastened my seat belt.

"No, I mean that you're one of those girls with layers. You know, you're more than just a pretty face. Plus, you don't have to scrape through a layer of makeup to get there." While it was true

that I didn't wear a lot of makeup, I used to, back when I wore skirts more often than pants and had to look good for any photo opportunity. I used to get up early every single day and straighten my hair and line my eyes just so. I had the cat eye thing down to a science. I honestly didn't know where my eyeliner was. I definitely hadn't seen it in months. Renee had probably stolen it.

“Is that a nice and slightly weird way of saying I look like crap?”

“Jesus, do you take everything negatively? Man, kick a guy for trying.” He shook his head and started making drum noises. “Your turn.”

“I'm not telling you my life story,

Dusty.”

“I’m not asking for your life story. Just...give me something.”

“Why? What do you want from me?”

He shook his head, a different kind of smile on his face. It was almost shy. If anything about him could ever be considered shy.

“Nothing, Red. Absolutely nothing.”

And by the time I could think of something to say, we were back.

“I know you didn’t forget your phone, you liar. Is something burning?” I pretended to sniff the air as we walked up the front steps. “I think your pants are on fire, dude.”

“Ha-ha, you’re so funny.” He reached out and rang the doorbell. I raised my

eyebrow. I would have just walked in. The bell dinged and then donged and Dusty made the exact same sound with his mouth. Somehow. The door opened, and Hunter gave both of us a look before holding the door open to let me in.

“Thanks for the ride,” I said to Dusty, but it sounded like a question. He tapped two fingers to his forehead and then flicked them upward in a little salute/wave. Yeah, okay.

“Bye.”

Hunter was still looking at Dusty. Hmm. I was distracted from watching the two of them by a retching sound coming from the upstairs bathroom and then Mase yelling that he needed a hand.

There was a sound like a herd of stampeding models as Renee and Taylor clacked their way up the stairs to take care of their fallen comrade.

“Jos, can you bring me up a glass of water?” Renee said over her shoulder as the puking sounds got louder. Lovely.

“Yeah, I’ll get right on it,” I said, giving her a thumbs-up and walking toward the kitchen. I set the glass in the sink, turning the water on, and tiptoed back to where I could hear Hunter and Dusty, but they couldn’t see me.

“So, I’ll see you at Steiner’s tomorrow?” Hunter said.

“Yeah. I might be late, but I let Kent know.” Dusty walked into the living room, and I could hear him rustling

about “looking for his phone.”

“Found it. See you tomorrow, man. Thanks for inviting me.”

“Thanks for coming.” I heard them slapping hands or fist bumping or performing some type of guy-bonding ritual and then the door closed and I realized the glass of water was overflowing. I went back to the sink and turned it off.

Bromance indeed.

* * *

My alarm shattered the calm of sleep the next morning so completely that I woke up cursing. Stupid fucking school. I rolled out of bed and stumbled to the

bathroom. I was just taking care of business when a fist slammed on the door and Renee's voice penetrated my morning fog.

"You'd better not be late your first day."

"Thanks, *Mom*, but it would be nice if I could pee without being interrupted."

"Just get your ass upstairs in ten minutes, or I'm coming back down and dragging your ass to class, no matter what you look like."

"Jesus H. Christ," I muttered under my breath. I couldn't even remember my mother being this wound up about taking me to kindergarten.

"Hurry up," she said, rattling the doorknob for good measure. I had half a

mind to walk upstairs stark naked and say I was ready, just to see the look on her face. But I didn't fancy being naked in front of all the guys, so that plan was out.

Eight minutes later I was shoving an egg and cheese sandwich that Taylor had made in my face and shoving notebooks in my new messenger bag. Back in my "before" life, I'd carried a designer handbag just like all the other girls. Of course I also had a small clutch purse that went with it for all my makeup and tampons and such. Now I had a black messenger bag with lots of pins and buttons on it that I'd collected. I'd thrown my red hair back in a braid, put

on my luckiest jeans and called it good enough.

Since everyone's schedules were different, I was finally allowed to take my own damn car. Renee had gotten me a parking pass and handed me back the keys she'd stolen when I moved in on the condition that I didn't get into any shenanigans. I'd been completely shenanigan-free ever since I'd gotten here, but that didn't seem to matter to anyone. They were all still watching me, waiting for me to screw up. Maybe I should, just to put them out of their misery.

I said goodbye to everyone, promising I'd come back in one piece later.

I blasted Ingrid Michaelson on my

drive to campus and sang at the top of my lungs. It took a few times of driving around the football field for me to find a free commuter parking spot. Apparently they were real asshats about parking in areas that weren't designated for you to park in.

Finally, I found one, even though I had to squish in between a minivan and a huge truck and slide sideways to get out. I had ten minutes to get to my first class, Intro to American Law. I'd thought about changing majors, but I knew I could pretty much sleep through most of my poli-sci classes, so I stuck with what I knew.

The class was full of clones of the

students I'd left behind. I even saw a few girls with the exact same bag I had shoved in a box back at my mom's house. Since it was a sophomore-level class, most of the nonserious people had been weeded out, but there were still a few people who looked like they wouldn't make it through four years of this. And, of course, since this was New England, there were the token Birkenstock-wearing, patchouli-smelling weirdos who were going to spend their time protesting whatever the trendy cause of the day was.

They were almost worse than the buttoned-up, straitlaced kids. They just had to be so self-righteous about every. Damn. Thing. They also loved to hear

the sound of their own voices. Fortunately, I'd brought my headphones, and since they liked to talk so much, they'd take up plenty of class time, leaving that time for the rest of us to do whatever. I booted up my laptop and listened as the professor, a guy in a nice button-up and tie—big surprise—droned on about Marbury vs. Madison. Been there, done that.

I kept one ear open and the other covered as I listened to some new music I'd found the other day on low volume. I'd also bought some new albums that I needed to review, so I switched to those. The first was a ska group that was way more punk than ska and didn't have a

whole lot going for them. It wasn't even bad in a craptastic way that made you want to listen to it anyway. They definitely weren't Streetlight Manifesto, or Reel Big Fish.

I made a few notes about some of the songs and moved on to the second album that had more of a folky/bluegrass feel. That one was much better, and I found myself transfixed by the complex melodies and haunting lyrics. I didn't think there was anything else like music for having the ability to transport you to another place, even when you were sitting in a class full of strangers.

Finally, the class was over and homework was assigned. I'd managed to get a seat in the back and had avoided

making eye contact or speaking with anyone, so I called the first class a total win.

I wasn't so lucky for my second, American State and Local Government. It sounded like a total yawner of a class, but when I got into the room everyone was talking and laughing like it was a social gathering instead of a class. I sat in the back, closest to the door and with at least two seats in between me and anyone else, and I thought I was set until a girl rushed in and sat with one seat between us.

“Am I late?” she said, not even looking at me and frantically searching through her bag. All I saw was a huge

quantity of very blond, very curly hair that she had tried to shove into an elastic band without much success.

I looked around, but there was no one else to respond to her, so it was up to me.

“Um, there’s still a few minutes.” She was up to her elbows in her bag, and she finally emerged, holding a bag of Skittles. I opened and closed my mouth a few times as she ripped the bag open with her teeth and then held the bag in my direction.

“Want some?” I finally looked at her face and then wished I hadn’t. One half was perfect white skin, and the other was mangled with what looked like a severe burn. “Do I have something on

my face?” she said, her eyes getting wide as her hand flew to her face. “Oh, yeah, I do. Duh.”

She dropped her hand and grinned at me. Somehow her eyes had remained unharmed, but the side of her mouth and the rest of her face going all the way to her ear were shiny and had a weird pattern on them. It extended down her neck, and though her arm was covered, I could see it on the back of her hand, as well.

“So I’m going to tell you my name and also tell you that you can stare if you want. I’m Hannah, and it’s okay to stare.” She flicked some of her hair back, and I tried my best to look into her

eyes, which were a deep brown, in contrast with her pale hair and skin.

“Jos. I’m Jos,” I said, because what else was I going to do?

“Nice to meet you. And if you choose to sit on the other side of the room next class, I won’t, like, hate you or anything. I’m a people repeller. It’s kind of my thing. For obvious reasons.” She giggled a little, and I turned to the front of the class, where an extremely tall woman in a charcoal skirt and jacket was writing things down on the numerous whiteboards. She looked like she just stepped out of a Senate meeting. When she was done writing what looked like half of a novel, she turned around and clapped her hands. Everyone shut up.

“Okay, I see you all made it here for another week of mind-broadening. Congratulations on being sober enough to drag yourselves here.” Everyone else laughed, and I sort of joined in. She picked up a clipboard and read our names off. Of course, since my last name began with the first letter of the alphabet, I was the second person called.

“Joscelyn Archer?”

“Here,” I said, listening to my voice echo in the large room.

She looked up from the clipboard and searched me out. “You’re new to us, yes? Transfer?”

“Uh, yeah.” I could feel the blood rushing to my face and ears.

“Do you go by Joscelyn, or is there a nickname you’d prefer?”

“Um, Jos is fine.”

She smiled, showing the most perfect set of probably real teeth I’d ever seen.

“Jos. Lovely. Nice to have you with us.”

She moved on to the next name, and I slumped down in my seat.

“I hope you’re not going to do that all the time. She’ll call on you more if she knows how much you hate it,” Hannah whispered as someone else said, “here!”

“Great. Just fantastic.”

Hannah was right. Since I was new, the teacher, who went by Pam, didn’t call on me, but everyone else was fair

game. She fired questions out like bullets, and if you answered too slowly, she'd move on to someone else. There was a lot of stuttering, a lot of red faces and a lot of people shooting their hands in the air to be called on so they could show everyone just how freaking smart they were.

And then there were some, including Hannah, who gave the answers when called and didn't elaborate unless Pam asked them to. Everyone sort of turned to look at Hannah when she talked, and I could see that more than a few people's gazes skittered away from the burned side of her face, but she didn't seem to notice or care.

I didn't get out my headphones the

entire class. It was just too interesting. How she could make something as potentially boring as Colonial government riveting was beyond me.

When the class was over, we all sort of walked out like we were in a trance.

“Is it always like that?” I couldn’t help myself from asking Hannah as she crumpled up the empty Skittles bag.

“Pretty much. Awesome, huh?”

“It probably will be less awesome when she starts calling on me.”

“Just do the reading. You seem like the kind of person who doesn’t have her head up her ass, so you should be fine. So, where did you transfer from?”

“UNH.”

“Boo, hiss. Don’t say that too close to anyone connected with hockey, or else you might get your ass handed to you.” So I’d heard. The hockey rivalry between the University of Maine and the University of New Hampshire had been going on for as long as they’d been playing hockey. I’d never gone to a game, but campus pretty much shut down so everyone could go to the games, and I bet UMaine wasn’t any different.

I had some time before my next class, and I was already starving, so I headed toward the Union.

“Do you have another class right now?” Hannah said as we got to the doors. “Because, although that bag of

Skittles was totally satisfying, I could go for something else. Why does this sound like I'm asking you out? I'm totally not." She shook her head.

"Um, no. I'm available. For eating. Not the dating."

Her dark eyes went wide. "Because I like boys. I swear."

"Yeah, me, too."

We shared one of those nervous giggles that turns into full-on laughter, and by the time we got to the Union, I was wiping tears away.

"I swear, I'm not normally this weird," she said as we joined the lunchtime throng and descended into the food court. Only a second later she said, "Okay, that's a complete lie. I am

normally this weird.”

“I won’t tell anyone,” I whispered as we scoped out what was available. The longest lines were for pizza and burgers and the pseudo “Taco Bell,” so we headed to get wraps since those were the quickest. I happened to be on Hannah’s “good” side, but I was more than aware of the stares she got. It was one of those things. You saw her, realized there was something different about her, did a look again to check and then couldn’t look away.

She just smiled and giggled and acted like a normal girl. She got a hummus wrap and I ordered the special, known as the “Winslow,” which was basically

a chicken caesar wrap with the addition of crushed croutons, which was such a brilliant idea that I couldn't believe someone hadn't thought of it sooner.

Finding a seat turned out to be a challenge, but we found a table for the two of us in a corner. I was about to say something, but Hannah beat me to it.

“So, in light of wanting to get things out in the open, yes, it's a burn. It happened when I was a kid and it's a long story and I'd rather not go into it because it's a bit of a downer and a bit of a conversation killer and usually after I tell it I never see whoever I told it to again. Which is my weird way of saying that I don't want to make you uncomfortable this early in our

relationship. Wow, why do I keep doing that? I am so sorry.”

“No big,” I said, unable to stop laughing. “How about you tell me something else? Where are you from?”

She chewed and swallowed before she spoke. “Up north. The boondocks. The sticks. The butthole of Maine. Whatever you want to call it. I couldn’t afford to go out of state and this was the biggest school in Maine. Great place to get lost in, you know?”

I did.

“What’s your major?” she said after taking another bite of her wrap.

“Poli-sci.”

“Me, too. Although, that’s only

because it sounded better than history and I'm a bit of a law junkie. I have no idea what I want to do, but I figured it was as good as anything else. Plus, in the upper level classes we get to debate and that's kind of one of my favorite things. You?"

"I used to want to be president, or a senator or something," I said. I hadn't decided quite what yet. I figured I'd start out in local government and work my way up.

"Used to?"

"Another one of those long stories that's a bit of a downer that I'd rather not tell."

Hannah nodded. Honestly, the burn wasn't that bad once you'd been looking

at it for a while. You got used to it, and the fact that Hannah didn't seem bothered about it helped.

"I hear you, girl." We finished our lunch and talked more about the class, and Hannah told me that as long as I did the reading and had a reasonable grasp of the current political climate, I'd be fine. I wasn't so sure, but I took her word for it.

"Are you on campus?" she asked as we dumped our trays and made our way upstairs to the Starbucks. Hannah said she needed her next caffeine fix.

"No. I live in a house in Bangor with my sister and a bunch of her friends." Hannah let out a dreamy sigh.

“That sounds awesome. I’m stuck on campus. Yay, scholarship.” She sounded so enthused. “I’ve only lived with my roommate for a few weeks, and she’s already stopped talking to me. Luckily, she has a boyfriend with an apartment, so she usually stays there.”

Once again, been there, done that.

“It’s awesome if you feel like having three sets of parents always watching your every move.” I hadn’t meant to share so much about myself, but I couldn’t help it. I hadn’t talked to anyone like this in a while, and there was something about Hannah. I’d known her less than a few hours, but it was like we’d met before, even though that was

impossible.

“That sucks,” she said as she got in line. I decided to get my second round of tea just for the heck of it. The line was crazy long with everyone jonesing for their next fix like a bunch of junkies standing in line for methadone. Actually, the methadone was probably cheaper.

By the time we got our drinks and found a table crushed in a corner and two seats, it was almost time for my next class. I downed my tea and told Hannah I'd see her on Wednesday. We hadn't talked about the rest of our class schedules, but the chances of me seeing her in another of my classes were actually pretty good, and I had the feeling I would.

I was searching for Neville Hall, which housed my English class, when someone tapped me on the shoulder.

“Fancy seeing you here, Red.” I pivoted and found the ever-grinning face of Dusty Sharp. He pulled a set of headphones nearly identical to the ones I had off his ears and let them rest around his neck. His wardrobe of baggy everything hadn’t deviated, and I found myself wondering, once again, how his pants stayed up.

I wanted to say something snarky, but instead a question came out of my mouth.

“Do you know where Neville Hall is?” Someone yelled hello, and his eyes briefly left my face to wave hello and

call out to someone.

“Sure. Follow me. I’m going there, as well. What class do you have?”

“English.”

“Me, too.”

Jesus, if he and I were in the same class, that would just suck beyond suckage.

He must have seen the horror on my face. I hadn’t really tried to hide it.

“Just messing with you, Red. I have calc. Would being in the same class with me be *that* bad?”

I didn’t answer as we crossed the road and I saw a building with the words *Neville Hall* on it. I could have found it if I’d looked, but then I probably would have been late.

He held the door for me and a few people coming in behind me.

“Thank you,” I said.

We paused in the lobby.

“I’m on the second floor,” he said, pointing toward the stairs.

“I’m on the third.”

We walked up two flights and he gave me that little two-fingered wave again.

“See you later, Red.”

“Bye.”

I joined a few other people and plodded my way up to the third floor.

I hadn’t fulfilled my English requirements yet, so I was stuck taking Creative Writing. When I walked in, there were only about ten other people

there. That did not bode well for being able to hide and listen to music. Great.

I found a seat in the back and close to the door and looked around. I felt pretty young; most of the people looked like they were quite a bit older than me.

I'd gotten a decent grade in my English comp class at UNH, but only because I'd been one of the few students who turned in assignments. I liked to read, but writing those insipid papers where you had to analyze what some dude who had died hundreds of years ago had meant by writing about rain or some such crap was pretty much the worst thing ever. Luckily, the more you seemed to bullshit, the better grade you got. Maybe I could do the same in this

class.

A few more people trickled in until there were fifteen of us. The professor was the last one there, and he was everything a teacher of English should be. He even had a tweed jacket with those weird elbow patches and horn-rimmed glasses.

He called attendance and when he got to my name he asked me what I wanted to be called. I went with Jos again as he introduced himself as Greg and explained how the class would go. I'd skimmed the syllabus, but hadn't really paid attention to it. As he explained what we'd be doing, my heart sank. We'd have to write something every week, and

during at least one class period a week. And we had to read what we'd written. Out loud. And, if that wasn't enough, he'd make copies of what we'd written and we'd all have a class discussion.

Welcome to your nightmare, Jos Archer.

Once again, since I was new, I didn't have to do much, but this was going to be another class in which I was required to participate, even if I didn't want to. At least half of the class looked like they'd rather be getting a lobotomy than be there, so at least I was in good company.

I suffered my way through and then I was finally done with classes for the day. I scurried away from Neville Hall

as fast as I could before I could bump into Dusty again, and checked my phone. There were several missed texts from Renee, asking how classes were going, and one from my mother and another from Darah that was just a smiley face.

I could have gone back to the house, but I wanted to savor this time I had without anyone watching my every move. It wasn't too cold, so I did a walk around campus, finding the rest of my classes for the next day and watching the other students go about their lives, wondering what it was like to be them.

When my legs started to get numb, despite the walking, I went back to my car. My instructions were to go right

home, but I didn't. I'd been dying to go to Bull Moose in Bangor, so I headed toward the mall. Bull Moose was pretty much the best music store in all of New England. I'd discovered them when I went to UNH and I was over the moon when I realized there was one close to UMaine.

It took some maneuvering and lane-switching to find the place, but I did.

The great thing about Bull Moose was that they had not only CDs, but records and old movies, and all the people who worked there knew what they were talking about. When I walked in, I let out a breath I hadn't known I'd been holding. Ah. I loved the comforting rows of cases, all ordered by genre and artist.

Yes, most music could be purchased online, but you couldn't duplicate the experience of going to a store and browsing yourself.

“Can I help you, little lady?” Jesus. H. *Christ*. I paused with my hand on a Radiohead CD that I didn't currently own and turned to make sure he wasn't a hallucination.

“No, thank you. I can pick out my own music.” That was a lie. I'd recently discovered The Black Keys, and I was hoping to find more bands like them, but I was never going to ask Dusty. Not in a million years. “Are you stalking me? Because, seriously, it's getting ridiculous.”

“Maybe you’re the one who’s stalking *me*. I was here first. You came into *my* store.” I finally noticed he had a lanyard around his neck like the other guys who worked here.

“Oh, so this is *your* store? Do you own it?”

“Nope, but I do work here. And I’ve been going to Yellowfield House longer than you, too. So I was here first.”

“I don’t give a shit,” I said, putting the CD back. Even my music sanctuary had been invaded.

“So you’re into music,” Dusty said, straightening some of the CDs, as if he was pretending to work. “What kind?”

“Taylor Swift,” I said, just to throw

him. Granted, I had listened to plenty of her stuff and some of it wasn't so bad. But he didn't know that.

“Well, we have a wide range of T Swift's music for your listening pleasure.” He gestured toward the pop section. “I'm partial to her earlier work, but her newest album is getting great reviews.” I waited to see if he was being sarcastic.

“Can you just let me browse without being harassed? I get it enough at Renee's, and I don't need it from everyone else.” Wow, I did not mean to be that honest. What was it with me today? I seemed to be vocalizing everything I was thinking whether I meant to or not.

“Wow, easy, Red.” He put his hands up as if I’d held a gun to his head. “Just trying to be a good employee and help a customer, but if you want to be left alone, you got it.” He turned around and left before I could say anything else. I saw him talking to a few of the other guys and pointing at me. What fresh hell was this?

He came back a few minutes later as I was searching through the alt-rock section.

“Okay, so I’ve told everyone not to approach you unless you approach them first, so the store is yours, Joscelyn.” He waved his arms to indicate everything.

“Thanks.” It sounded like a question.

“Anytime.” One last grin and he was gone, off to the back of the store and through a door marked Employees Only. And I was left alone for the rest of my time in the store.

I found a couple CDs, but didn't look as close as I wanted because I felt like all eyes were on me, even though every time I looked up, one or more of the employees were giving me looks like I was going to run over and stab them or something. God only knew what he had told them so they'd leave me alone. Then again, I probably didn't want to know.

* * *

When I got back from my little Bull

Moose trip, there were several cars parked in the driveway, so I had to settle for parking in the street.

“Hey, Miss I’m-not-going-to-text-my-sister-back.” Renee’s voice was the first thing I heard when I walked through the door and hung my coat up. Renee hopped up from the couch and came over to glare at me.

“I was busy.”

“Doing what?” She crossed her arms and leaned against the wall. I pushed past her and went downstairs to put my stuff away. Of course she followed me.

“Look, Renee, I know you find this hard to believe, but I didn’t do anything bad. I went to class, I had lunch, I went to Bull Moose and I came back here.

That's all. Besides, how can I do anything with you riding my ass at every turn?"

Instead of yelling at me she just tossed her hands in the air and then banged them on her thighs.

"Why are you being like this, Jos? What happened to my little sister who never, ever swore? I don't feel like I know you anymore."

"Maybe you didn't know me before. Maybe that girl was a lie." She had been a lie. That girl had a metal rod shoved so far up her butt she was choking on it. That girl was so afraid of stepping out of line or making any waves that she never did anything. Never broke curfew.

Never got drunk. Never did anything that could be construed as wild, or out of control, or free.

She was so fucking uptight that she barely ever laughed. Or smiled. Or had any fun of any kind. That girl never would have just sat in a dark room and listened to music without it having a purpose. Being that girl was exhausting, but no one knew.

“I just don’t know what to say to you anymore, Jos. You’re my sister and I feel like you’re a complete stranger. What am I supposed to do?” For the first time, I heard the hopelessness in her voice. Renee didn’t get hopeless. She didn’t get weak. She was always tough as nails; she had to be with our crazy

parents.

“You don’t have to do anything. Just...give me some space. I can’t breathe.” I sat down on my bed and she came and sat next to me.

“I never thought that I would be this worried about you. You’re the good one. You made the rest of us look like losers. It was hell when our report cards would come out and you’d always have A’s and the rest of us had to compete with that. It sucked, by the way.” She bumped my shoulder with hers.

“I’m sorry?”

“No, I just wish I had been the one who could have set the good example. You know, I’m supposed to be the oldest

and all that. I tried, but you were always better.”

Was. Past tense.

She touched my hair. “Are you ever going to tell me what happened last year?”

I shook my head. “I just decided that life was worth living, and I hadn’t been.”

“All of a sudden? Carpe diem?”

Sure.

“Something like that.”

Chapter 8

I ran into Hannah in my bio 202 class the next day. It was cruel, but the university required that we have at least six credits in science, and I only had three. Once again, I figured bio would be the way to go since it would be a huge class and I could probably show up or not show up and no one would know.

“Hey, stalker,” Hannah said as I sat next to her. The classroom was one of the larger on campus, with what looked like stadium seating. Too bad we’d all be falling asleep and learning about ribosomes instead of watching an

awesome movie, or a rock concert.

“Maybe you’re stalking me.” There were quite a few empty seats around her, and I hoped they stayed that way.

“Told you, I’m a people repeller,” Hannah said, leaning back in her seat. “Skittles?” She had another fresh bag and held it out to me.

“No, thanks. I can’t eat Skittles without M&M’s.”

“You serious?” She tossed a handful into her mouth and a few clattered to the floor.

“Yeah. It’s not crazy, if you think about it.” I’d explained this quite a few times. “Skittles are like fruit, right? And M&M’s are chocolate. So it’s like chocolate-covered fruit. You should try

it. Could change your life.”

Hannah gave me a dubious look and munched her Skittles.

“I’ll take your word for it.”

The class filled up and the seats nearest us were the last to be filled by stragglers. Hannah and I spent most of the class writing notes back and forth because, honestly, it was boring as hell. I somehow managed to stay awake, but that was mostly due to Hannah. My second class of the day, something called the Nature and Language of Math, was equally boring and sleep-inducing.

I went right back to the house after class and found it pretty quiet. Since there were so many people living in the

house and everyone had something going on, Darah had made a chart on a whiteboard so everyone could write where they were when. I erased the words *at class* and wrote *home* next to my name.

Taylor and Mase were the only ones home. I heard the washing machine going and some loud music coming from the man cave downstairs. Guess I couldn't go to my room. Instead, I threw myself on the leather sofa and sighed.

"That sounded like a heavy sigh." Taylor's voice pierced the quiet. I sat up to find her leaning against the stairs.

"It wasn't, really." She came and sat on the recliner, leaving me the entire couch.

“So what do you think of UMaine? Is it everything you expected?”

I shrugged.

“It’s college. Pretty much like any other.”

“Still. Everything going okay?”

She was fishing and not doing a very good job of it.

“Renee tell you to talk to me?” I grabbed the remote and turned on the massive television, flipping around until I found something decent. And by decent I meant a marathon of *Behind the Music* on VH1.

“If I say no, you’ll know that I’m lying, so yes. She’s just worried about you.”

“Well, she’s got lots of company in that department.”

“I know things are kind of crazy for you right now, but I swear, they will get better. And lashing out feels good when you do it, but living with the consequences kind of sucks. I should know. I punched Hunter when I first met him. He’s got a hell of a hard face.”
Renee hadn’t told me that story.

“You did?”

She smiled as if it was a fond memory and shook her head.

“Yeah. He kind of cornered me, and I have a bit of a claustrophobia issue. To be fair, he totally deserved it.” I could imagine him provoking her. It seemed to

be one of his favorite things to do.

“I bet he did. How did you go from that to...being disgustingly in love?”

She laughed.

“He’s persistent. And has a high tolerance for me being mean and shoving him away.”

“Huh.” Sounded familiar.

She kicked out the footrest on the recliner and squinted at me, as if she was deciding something.

“I was nearly raped, when I was younger. It was my sister’s older boyfriend, Travis, and he tried to rape her, too. She got over it and I never did. Hunter was the first guy that I let touch me. There was something about him that made me feel safe in a way I’d never felt

safe before. I trusted him, even when I told myself not to. I let him in before I even knew that's what I was doing.

Sometimes you meet people like that. By the time you realize you've let them into your life, it's too late, and usually by that point you can't see life without them."

I knew exactly what she was talking about, and I found myself twisting the elephant charm on my bracelet. Yeah, I knew what she was talking about. But sometimes, those people get taken from you, and there's nothing you can do to get them back.

Even if she and Hunter broke up—which I couldn't see happening—he was still alive. She could wake up every

morning and know that, even if she didn't see him, he existed in the world somewhere.

“So yeah, that's my story, the abridged version, and now things are...really good.” Yeah, I could see that. She stared down at her ring and twisted it on her finger.

“Has anyone even stopped to think that I wasn't okay before, and I am now? Just because I looked like I was keeping things together and was this perfect person doesn't mean I was doing okay. Maybe that was my master plan, to make everyone think that.” Taylor thought about that for a second.

“Like reverse psychology? Wow, you are smart. I wish I would have thought of

that instead of just being a bitch to everyone. That probably would have worked a lot better than violence.”

Footsteps sounded on the stairs, and Mase emerged from the basement, his face with a sheen of sweat on it and his arms busting from the thin tank top he was wearing.

“What are you doing down there? If I didn’t know that Darah was at work, I’d swear you guys were going at it,” Taylor said.

Mase smiled and went to grab a bottle of water from the fridge.

“Rome wasn’t built in a day, and neither were these arms.” He flexed and his arms bulged. They were, like, the

size of my neck. “Gotta do some maintenance to keep them nice for Dare.”

“One of those crazy workout videos again?” Taylor said, pretending to punch him. He collapsed, pretending she’d wounded him.

“You’re welcome to join anytime.”

“Yeah, I’d rather not. Kickboxing all the way.” He gulped down some water and wiped his face on her sleeve.

“Ugh! You are disgusting!” She screamed and he chased her around the living room as the door opened.

“Someone want to explain?” Hunter said, setting his bag down and watching as Mase growled at Taylor and she dived behind the recliner. “Dude, you

are my family, but if you're going after my girl, I will have to pound your ass," Hunter said, but he wasn't serious.

"Aren't you coming to rescue me? Isn't that your job?" Taylor squealed as Mase dragged her out and tried to put her head under his sweaty armpit.

"Oh, no, baby, you're on your own. It's all you, Miss. I'm just enjoying the view."

"Douche bag!" She managed to pinch Mase's side and wiggle out from under his arm and rush toward Hunter.

"See if I do anything *nice* for you anytime soon." It didn't take a genius to figure out she was talking about sexual favors. Disgusting.

“How was your day, Little Ne?”

Mase moved my feet and sat down next to me. I hoped he wasn't going to wipe his sweat on me. Not that it would be any different than being at home with my siblings who often used my jeans and shirts as tissues.

“Same as yesterday. It will probably be the same tomorrow.”

“Wow, don't sound so depressed. Most people your age would love to be living in this house. I mean, what more could you want?” He gestured to the beautifully furnished house.

Freedom to do what I wanted. Freedom from being watched and criticized. But Mase wouldn't

understand that.

“Nothing, I guess. You can ignore my bitching if you want,” I said.

“Please tell me you won’t sync your period with the rest of the ladies in the house. It’s bad enough, and now the guys are outnumbered,” Mase said.

“I’ll give it a shot, but no promises.” He held his fist out and I bumped it with mine and then we exploded at the same time and I couldn’t help but laugh. Hunter sat down on the recliner and Taylor sat in his lap.

“So, I’ve got a performance this weekend. You guys in?” he said.

Mase nodded. I was missing something.

“Performance?” I asked.

“Yeah, I’m in this a cappella group, the Steiners. God, that still sounds lame when I say it out loud. I was sort of *forced* to join after someone saw a poster for auditions,” Hunter said, staring at Taylor.

“I’m someone,” Taylor said, raising her hand. “And you should come. It’s actually really cool. Dusty’s in it, too. He’s their beat boxer.”

I wasn’t even surprised. Dusty Sharp was destined to show up in my life. I might as well accept it.

“We might even do a certain song that I think you’d like. I can put in a request,” Hunter said.

“Sure, why not? It’s not like I have

anything better to do.” I needed to get a job soon, but I hadn’t talked to Renee about it yet. The plan was to find something, get myself hired and then tell her about it later so she couldn’t say anything about it.

My first inclination, when I found out that there was a Bull Moose close to campus, was to try there, but now that I knew Dusty was there, that was out. I just wanted to do something that wouldn’t suck, but the chances of that happening were pretty slim. Still, I’d have to start looking. Maybe Hannah would have some ideas.

“Awesome. You’ll like it, I swear,” Taylor said, tracing Hunter’s number seven tattoo. Paul was the only guy in the

house without any ink. I'd considered getting some myself, especially now. I wanted something on my body that reminded me of him. Something that would make me think of him and what little time he'd been in my life that would influence me. That was what I missed the most, second to him. It was his influence.

But I knew Renee would have a litter of two-headed kittens if she found out I was even considering getting inked. I'd have to wait until she'd stopped watching me like a hawk. It was something to think about. Soonish.

Soon everyone was home and the dinner-making commenced. It was Renee

and Paul's turn and they opted for pasta again, since they could make a ton of it and different sauces and satisfy everyone. I lurked in the kitchen, feeling crappy about the conversation I'd had the night before with Renee. I was pretending to work on my homework for the next day, but I couldn't focus on it.

She was busy informing Paul the correct way to cook pasta, and he was taking it in stride. He was a saint, I swear. I couldn't understand why he put up with her, except that he must really love her this time.

"My God, Paul, it's not rocket science, which you happen to know."

"I'm not a rocket scientist," he said, leaning back and giving me a look.

“Clearly not,” she snapped.

“I’m going to go...be somewhere else,” he said, heading for the living room, where the rest of Yellowfield House was engaged in homework warfare. Renee put her hand on her head as if she had a headache when he left.

“I swear, he gets on my last nerve sometimes.” She turned off the pasta pot and leaned back against the counter. “It’s a lot, you know? Living together.”

“Do you regret it?”

“No, definitely not. It’s just...sometimes I wonder if we moved too fast. Getting back together and then the house and everything. But that’s none of your business. I’m fine. How was

school today?" My mother had never been the one to ask me that when I got home every day. It was always Renee who wanted to know about my assignments and so forth.

"It's fine. Pretty much the same."

"Are you still okay with your major?"

"Yeah. It's fine."

She shook her head as if she couldn't believe what I was saying.

"I never thought you would say that. I remember when we were kids and you snuck out of bed to watch the election results. I used to think you were a robot, or that there was at least something seriously wrong with you."

Yeah, I remembered that little girl. She'd grown up, and now she was gone.

“Pasta’s getting cold,” I said, using my pen to point at the large pot. Renee seemed to snap herself back into place and remember that she was in the middle of making dinner. She went back to the sink and drained the pasta as I took my unfinished homework downstairs. I’d deal with it later. I had at least done the reading and made notes for Pam’s class. No way I was looking like a moron in that class.

Dinner was pretty quiet. Darah was at work, so there was one less member, and it felt weird to not have her there, getting on everyone about putting their elbows on the table and using napkins and not damaging the finish on the table.

Renee and Paul seemed to be okay again. I caught him whispering in her ear and giving her a hug. He always knew the right things to say to her. Most often, the best thing to do with Renee was to make her think she'd gotten her way and give her some space to realize that she didn't know everything. She'd come around and apologize and promise never to do it again, even though she'd do it again in two hours.

* * *

“At the risk of sounding like I’m asking you out, do you want to come to this thing I’m going to this weekend?” I said to Hannah before class the next day.

“What kind of thing?”

“One of the guys I live with is in the Steiners and they’re doing a show at the Union and everyone in my house is going.”

“Wow, you know one of the Steiners? It’s crazy hard to get into. Plus, guys who can sing are super hot.”

“He is pretty hot, but he’s taken.”

She sighed and got out her bag of Skittles. She must have a case of them in her dorm room or something. “The good ones usually are.”

“Still, you could meet my pseudo family. If you wanted to.”

“Sure, why not? Beats sitting in my dorm room and watching a bunch of

episodes of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.”

“I’ve never seen that show,” I admitted. It never really appealed to me when it was originally on.

She shook her head sadly. “I’ll make you a deal. I’ll come to see the Steiners with you if you come and hang out and watch two episodes of Buffy with me on Sunday.”

Renee would be pissed if I said yes without asking permission.

“Deal,” I said, holding out my hand.

Pam called the class to order and I snapped my head forward. She called roll and seemed pleased that I was still here. And of course I was the first one she called on, but I was freaking ready. She fired questions around the room like

Ping-Pong balls and you had to think fast. Hannah got a few tough ones, but she volleyed with the best of them. Pam seemed satisfied with both of our answers, and I was glad I'd survived by the end of it.

“Bravo, girl. You did good.” We didn't talk about getting lunch—we just sort of walked toward the Union anyway. I heard a girl walk by and gasp when she saw Hannah's face.

“Take a picture. It lasts longer, bitch,” she said under her breath. “I know I seem all Zen about this.” She waved her hand to indicate her burn. “But sometimes, I just want to wear a fucking mask or scream at people or something. I

mean, at least in the olden days I could have joined a freak show and made some money or something.” Wow.

She yanked open the door and didn’t hold it for the person coming in behind us, who muttered under his breath.

“Suck it,” Hannah said in response, but not loud enough for him to hear.

We got our food and found a table.

“It’s just like, yes, I have a burn, but it’s not like I’m disabled or mentally challenged. Also, I’m not deaf. I can hear it when people are talking about me, and it pisses me off. But you know what would happen if I freaked out and yelled at people? Fucking nothing. So why waste the words?” She exhaled slowly. “Okay, I’m done. Pity party

over. I've shut it down." She made a slashing motion with her hand.

"Keep going if you need to. It doesn't bother me." At least she had something to actually be pissed about. Unlike some people who couldn't breathe without bitching about something that didn't need to be bitched about.

"Nah, I hate going to that place. It just gets me down sometimes, but I swear, I'm back." She smiled and picked up her burger. "So none of the guys you live with are single?"

"Nope. Not one. There are three couples...and me. It's a bit like living in a weird reality show."

"It sounds kind of awesome, not going

to lie.”

“Yeah, sure.”

Sensing my reluctance, Hannah switched subjects.

“So, you found any man candy?”

“Not if you count my other stalker,” I said, picking up a French fry I’d dropped on the floor.

“Um, details?” She snapped her fingers.

“It’s not even anything worth talking about. He’s just this guy who keeps popping up. He’s friends with one of my roommates. Actually, you’ll get to see him on Saturday. He’s a Steiner.”

“Oh, really?” She raised and lowered her eyebrows suggestively. Wow, she was reading way too much into this.

“It’s seriously not like that. It’s not anything. I shouldn’t have even brought him up.” Why had I brought him up?

“What about at UNH? Did you have a guy there?”

Oh, fun. The ex talk. “Yeah, I did. We broke up this spring.”

Hannah’s eyes lit up.

“Sounds like there is a story there.”

There was, but I wasn’t going to share it with her.

“Not really. He was in love with a girl I wasn’t. Took both of us a while to realize it, but eventually he did.”

“Did you love him?”

“Yeah, I did.” I couldn’t lie about that. I had loved Matt, but that love was

part of that other girl, and when I let go of her, I let go of that love. It was easier than it should have been. “And what about you? How about we talk about your love life?”

Hannah laughed.

“Yeah, that’s a really short story. It can be summed up like this...” She held up her hand, making a circle. She peered at me through the hole in the middle.

“That’s it. There aren’t a whole lot of guys lining up to fuck the freak.”

Jesus, she was blunt. I liked it.

“I usually have to get them good and drunk first, but by then they usually can’t perform, so I end up leaving them to sleep it off.”

Was she serious?

She burst out laughing.

“I am totally screwing with you, and the look on your face was totally worth it. I haven’t really done the boyfriend thing.”

“Ever?”

“I spent my high school prom at home with my cat, so that pretty much gives you an accurate picture of my dating history. I’m not bitter about it—don’t get me wrong. I guess I’m just old-fashioned, at least when it comes to that. I don’t want to waste my time on a guy that I’m not going to spend my life with, you know? I don’t see the point in dating a bunch of losers just for the chance of finding out one of them might be decent.

I trust my instincts when it comes to people. Haven't been wrong yet." She winked at me and stole a fry from my plate and popped it into her mouth.

I wished I had her confidence in my own instincts. Right now, I didn't trust them at all.

Chapter 9

“Brought you something.”

Dusty was standing in the lobby of Neville Hall when I opened the door to go to English that afternoon. He had his trademark smile in place and a bag of Skittles in one hand and a bag of M&M's in the other and was holding them out to me like he was very pleased with himself.

“Okay,” I said, looking at him and then back down at the candy. I really wanted it, but I didn't want him to know that I wanted it.

“I'm going to pretend you said thank

you. You're welcome, Red.” He shoved the candy at me, and I had to catch it so that it didn't fall on the floor. “Are you always this rough on people when they try to get to know you?”

“If it's so hard, then why are you doing it?” I needed to hurry my butt to class, but I wasn't letting him have the last word.

“Maybe I like a challenge,” he said, but he wasn't grinning. I saw something else on his face. Determination. Yes, Dusty Sharp was a guy who was used to getting what he wanted; anyone could see that. He even walked with a swagger that broadcast it to the world, but instead of leaning toward the cocky douche-bag side, he just seemed confident. Self-

assured. A lot of women found that sexy.

“I have to get to class. Thank you for the unnecessary candy. It was...sweet of you.”

“I’m a sweet guy.”

Uh-huh.

“Shall we?” he said.

We walked together up the stairs, and I left him on the second floor.

“Later, Red.” There was that wave again.

I copied him and he laughed. “Bye, Dusty.”

* * *

My first assignment in my creative writing class was to write a two-page

paper about something I had never done before. Greg gave us our assignment with the attitude of Santa presenting orphans with shiny presents.

How the hell was I supposed to write about something I'd never experienced? Seriously, how?

Everyone else seemed just as perplexed as I was, and a guy sitting near me was muttering under his breath and most of the words weren't complimentary. We had the entire class period to complete the assignment, so I got out my notebook and a pen and tried to figure something that I could write so I could just complete the damn thing.

Well, the first thing I could think of to write about was completely out of the

question. My still-intact virginity was a relic from my other life. I'd been way too focused on school and other things, and it didn't mesh well with my political aspirations.

There was also something romantic, I'd thought at the time, about saving that milestone in my life for marriage. My ex had been completely on board with it; in fact, he'd been more for it than I was. We'd done things here and there, but every time it got heated one of us stopped it, citing our vows of chastity. The funny thing was, it never really got all that heated.

The kissing was fine, but I never found myself wanting to just rip his

clothes off like in some horny teenage fantasy. There was probably something wrong with me. I had no problem getting myself off, so my sex drive wasn't broken, but I never fantasized about getting hot and heavy with Matt. He wasn't a hot-and-heavy kind of guy.

Honestly, I didn't care anymore. It was low on the list of things I was concerned about. Right above floods and right below zombie apocalypse.

I tried to think of something to write that would fill two pages with my small handwriting. Some of my classmates were already writing away, but others were just as stuck as I was.

Music. I wanted to write something about music.

The only thing I could think of was that I'd never performed onstage, at least not outside of a late-afternoon fantasy. I'd actually never really sung in public. I'd been in choirs in school, but had never tried out for anything where I had to sing a solo.

I wrote a sentence, and then another, and then another. I described the stage and the lights and the fluttery feeling of captivating everyone in the audience with just my voice and maybe a guitar.

Before I knew it, I had filled three pages, front and back.

“Okay, everyone. Just hand in what you've got and I'll go make copies. Don't worry about neatness or spelling.

That's not the point of this exercise. The point is just to write what comes to your mind, to stretch it and see what happens."

Greg left and people broke out talking, mostly complaining about the assignment and how lame it was and that they'd bullshitted their way through it. Yeah, like Greg wasn't going to see right through that. At least I'd been honest about mine. No one talked to me, for which I was grateful. Greg came back with a huge stack of papers and handed them to each of us.

"Okay, so your assignment for next time is to read everyone else's and make at least three comments on each paper. Got it? You're dismissed." He waved

his hand, and I wondered if he'd been British in a past life. He certainly talked like it, even though he didn't have an accent.

I was freaking about everyone else reading my paper because it was so personal. I hadn't meant it to be, but the words had sort of come out of nowhere. Nothing I could do about it now.

I pulled the Skittles and M&M's out of my bag and tore them open, pouring an equal amount into my hand before folding the bags back up and putting them back.

*You and your weird snacks.
Sometimes I wonder if there's
something wrong with your taste buds,*

Jossy.

I cracked an M&M's between my teeth and chased it with a Skittles.

* * *

That night I finally got around to updating my music blog. I'd gained ten followers that week, which made me want to dance for joy. It didn't sound like a lot, but for being relatively new, I was gaining followers pretty steadily. My happy was taken down a notch when I saw how many stupid spam comments I had to delete.

"Jos!" Renee yelled from upstairs. I had my headphones around my neck and my music on low, so I was able to hear

her over my new Lenka CD.

“Yeah?” I yelled back.

“What are you doing down there?”

“Nothing.” This was ridiculous. I went to the top of the stairs. “Why?”

“You’ve just been down there forever.”

“Well, I’m not setting my hair on fire or slitting my wrists, if that’s what you were worried about.” I leaned in the doorway. She was killing my blog-updating momentum.

“No, I just think it’s silly for you to be down there alone.” The living room was full of people, as usual, and also full of half-done homework, open books and too many highlighters. Darah had a thing for using different colors for each class.

“Maybe I like being alone.”

She didn't have an answer to that. Renee hated being alone. Being raised with so many siblings had had the opposite effect on me.

“Oh, come on, Little Ne. Why would you want to be alone when you can hang out with us?” Mase was twisting Darah's hair around his fingers, and she was trying to concentrate on a textbook open in her lap.

They weren't going to leave me alone, so I went downstairs, got my laptop and came back up. Mase moved over so I could squish next to him on the couch.

“See how much more fun this is?”

Hunter and Taylor were sharing her e-

reader and he kept yelling at her for skipping to the next page too fast. Once she was sure I was within her eyesight and not doing anything bad, Renee went back to her books and Paul did the same. Just another night at Yellowfield House.

I turned my music back on and put my headphones over my ears. With them on, I couldn't hear any conversation around me, even if I wanted to, so it was kind of like being alone, except for when Hunter stole the e-reader and Taylor chased him around. She eventually got a hold of his ear and twisted it until he gave it back.

“You play dirty, Miss. I might have to punish you for that.”

I was mentally gagging.

“Shh, that's the kind of thing we don't

talk about in front of everyone,” Taylor said, sitting back down on the couch. I had no doubt that they normally talked like that, but me being there put the kibosh on the sexy talk.

“You guys know that I am aware that you all have sex with each other. I mean, not at the same time, because that would be super creepy, but I’m not an idiot.” All eyes turned toward me. “I can hear you when I’m down there.”

Ha. They all looked sheepish. Even Mase.

“I’m not saying that I care. I’m just saying that I’m aware of it. I mean, Taylor and I are nearly the same age. You guys have to stop treating me like a

child.”

Mase cleared his throat.

“You’re right, Jos. I think it’s that we all sort of went into protective mode when you came here.”

“I wonder where you got that idea from,” I said, glaring at Renee.

“What am I supposed to do? You are my little sister. I’ll always think of you that way, even when we’re old and gray.” I was a bit uncomfortable talking like this with everyone watching, but it was bound to happen sooner or later.

“I know that.”

“You could loosen up a little, Ne,” Paul said. I was surprised. He never usually provoked Renee if he could help it. I’d have to thank him later.

“Okay, everyone gang up on me—that’s awesome.” She got up and stormed up the stairs. Yup, I could have called it.

“Sorry, Jos. I was trying to help,” Paul said, getting up and going after her.

“I know. Thanks, Paul.”

“I don’t get what she’s so bent out of shape about,” Mase said. “I mean, I know you’ve only been here for a short time, but you don’t really seem like juvenile-delinquent material. No offense.”

“None taken. It’s just...complicated.” I was shocked Renee hadn’t given them every gory detail.

“Most relationships are. Complicated,

I mean,” Mase said, looking at Darah.
“But the complications can be the best part. Right, Dare?”

Darah nodded and he kissed the side of her head.

Chapter 10

I texted Hannah and told her I could pick her up at her dorm and walk down to the Union with her, and she took me up on my offer. Taylor and Hunter had gone over earlier because he had to be with the group. She also mentioned meeting her friend Megan, who I had yet to become acquainted with.

Hunter had been acting really weird that morning, and everyone had noticed. He tried to play it off that he was nervous about the performance, but I was pretty sure Hunter had never been nervous about anything like that in his

life. He oozed confidence, so clearly he was either up to something, or he'd done something stupid. Or both.

"I'm going to meet a friend," I said to Renee as I downed my second cup of Lemon Zinger. I'd really gotten addicted to that stuff, and I even had my own corner of the cabinet now for my stash.

"Who?" I hadn't really mentioned Hannah in great detail to Renee since she had been so pissy the night before. I didn't know why. I guess I just didn't want to get into it with her. She'd want to know all about her, and I didn't want to share Hannah with other people. She was my friend.

"Don't worry. You'll get to meet her. She's coming to Hunter's thing. I'm just

picking her up on my way.”

She looked suspicious, but seriously, that was what I was doing.

“Okay. I’ll meet you there, then. Drive safe.” Wow, that was the first time she’d let me out of the house without a massive lecture. I met Paul’s eyes and mouthed, “thank you.” He nodded back.

I parked in front of Oxford Hall, Hannah’s dorm, and sent her a text to say I was ready. She came down a few minutes later, her hair loose and all over the place.

“Hey, girl. What’s up?”

“Not a whole lot. You?”

“Nope. Just normal roommate drama, but I’m over it. I would have invited you

up, but she's there, and I don't want to provoke her any more than I already do by existing in her space. Plus, she's a major bitch." She clicked her seat belt and gave me a rueful smile.

I found a spot in the commuter lot right across from the Union.

"Do you mind if I stop for a little pick-me-up?" Hannah said.

"Nope."

Hannah filled up on caffeine from the Starbucks and I marveled at how empty the Union was when classes weren't in session. It was a ghost town. It wasn't until we got out to the walkway that crossed over to the other side of the Union that we looked down and saw all the people waiting in front of the

bookstore on the lower level.

The Steiners were easy to spot because they all had black T-shirts that said Steiners and were standing in a tight group. I spotted Hunter mostly because his arm tattoo was so visible. Dusty was also easy to spot because of his sagging pants. I leaned over the railing and squinted. Huh. He had some ink, too, peeking out from the edge of his T-shirt sleeve.

His tattoo was impossible to read from my angle. Not that I was trying, or really cared that much about it.

“Who are we staring at?” Hannah said in my ear, making me jump. She sipped on a giant cup of iced something-or-

other and leaned next to me.

“No one in particular,” I said, standing back up.

“Uh-huh,” she said in a tone that said she didn’t believe me one little bit. Yeah, I didn’t believe me, either. I looked away from the guys and found Taylor’s blond ponytail and then I saw the rest of the household joining her.

“So,” I said, facing Hannah. “You wanna meet the crazies I live with?”

She took a long sip from her straw.

“Lead the way.”

The space in front of the bookstore grew increasingly crowded as more people arrived to see the show. Hannah and I threaded our way through, and I caught Renee’s eye as she searched for

me.

“There you are,” she said, holding Paul’s hand. “And you must be Hannah.” Renee barely even looked at Hannah’s scars. I’d expected that; nothing phased Renee, least of all something like a scar.

“I must be,” Hannah said, shrugging. “I’m going to take a wild guess and say you’re Renee.”

“Ding, ding, ding, we have a winner,” Renee said, laughing.

“This is Paul,” I said, motioning to him. He nodded and smiled at Hannah. I whistled and Mase turned his head. He’d been deep in conversation with Darah. You could set a tornado around those people and they wouldn’t even be aware

of it.

“Hey, nice to meet you. Any friend of Jos’s is a friend of ours.”

Then Taylor introduced her friend Megan, a fellow redhead, and her fiancé, Jake, and I liked her instantly and not just because we were hair comrades.

I went through the rest of the introductions and pointed out Hunter, who was busy chatting with some of the other guys as they got ready.

“He’s freaking out,” Taylor said, watching him.

“He doesn’t look like it.” He was smiling and laughing.

“He’s tapping.” I looked down and saw that he was tapping his hand against his leg. One, two, three, four, five times

in a row. “He always does that when he’s freaking out. I have no idea why—this isn’t his first show. I swear, the minute I think I understand him is the minute he decides to surprise me.” She nibbled on a hangnail and I noticed her ring was missing.

“Where’s the rock?”

“Hunter’s lawyer, Joe, wanted to get it appraised or something so they could take out insurance on it, or something? I feel crazy not having it. You’d be surprised that you can get used to wearing something like that.”

Megan coughed and Taylor gave her a look. Huh. Wonder what that was about.

“Um, spoiler alert, but that guy over

there is trying to eye fuck you,” Hannah said, her voice just a little too loud. I didn’t even need to look up to see who it was.

“Shh, keep your voice down. I’m fully aware of him.”

“Uh-huh,” she said, sucking the last few drops of her drink into her straw and then tossing it in the nearest trash can. “He’s pretty sexy.” She turned her head sideways and then to the other side.

“You should totally hit that. He looks like he’d be...good.” Like either of us would know.

I finally decided to look in Dusty’s direction. While he was talking with one of the other guys, his eyes were definitely turned my way. He caught me

staring and winked. My eyes traveled down his arm, trying to make out the tattoo, but it was mostly covered by his sleeve.

“Stop ogling,” Hannah hissed in my ear.

One of the guys cleared his throat and stepped forward as the rest of the Steiners formed a line.

“Hello, everyone, my name is Kent, and we are The UMaine Steiners. Guys, you wanna introduce yourselves?” One by one, the guys stepped forward and said their names. There were twelve of them in total, and at least half were very good-looking, which was a higher amount than I would have thought.

Kent snapped his fingers to make a beat and counted. Dusty came in first, laying down a drumbeat, and then the rest of the group started the song. “One More Night” by Maroon 5. I caught Hunter’s eye and he pointed at me. The guys traded off who would sing lead, and Hunter got a turn. Dusty got totally into his beat boxing, even dancing a little with it. The other guys also danced, a few even making a little joke of it as everyone laughed.

They finished the song, and Dusty made the cymbal crash sound again. Everyone cheered and clapped and the guys regrouped and started another song. This time it was an old one,

Hoobastank's "The Reason," followed by a mash-up of a bunch of Queen songs that got everyone humming along and had plenty of awesome dance moves, and then "P.Y.T." by Michael Jackson.

"They're really good," Hannah said in my ear. "And your beat boxer is beyond sexy. I'm just imagining all of the things he could do with that mouth."

I ignored her comments as the group took a quick break and had some water. Hunter stepped forward.

"Hello, everyone. I'm Hunter, and I'm going to have to beg for your attention for a second."

"What the hell is that boy doing?" Taylor said under her breath.

"You see, I love this girl over here."

He pointed to Taylor, and her face turned red. “Yeah, you, Taylor.” He held his hand out, and she stepped forward. “Music has always been a part of our lives. I sang to her on our first real date. I sang to her the first of many times I screwed things up, and so I thought it was only right that I sing to her for this. So, here goes.”

One of the other guys brought out a chair for Taylor, and Hunter forced her to sit in it. She looked like she wanted to sink into the floor and kept ducking her head so she couldn't see everyone staring at her.

I had a feeling I knew where this was going, and everyone else was

whispering the same thing around me.

“Oh, my God, he isn’t,” Renee said.

“I think he is,” Paul responded.

This time it was Hunter’s turn to start the song. Dusty set a slow beat that was soft and romantic. It took a few seconds, but I recognized the song, and I knew what was going to happen.

I watched Taylor’s face as he started singing “I Can’t Wait” by Runner Runner. The second he sang the word *wife*, she put her hands to her mouth and started to cry. The crowd sighed in unison as Taylor shook her head and wiped tears as Hunter held her hand and sang to her. I caught Dusty’s eye and he smiled at me and I smiled back. You couldn’t help it. Such an open and

beautiful expression of love had that effect.

Hunter was left singing the last note by himself, holding it and then letting it fade before he reached into his pocket as he got down on one knee. My eyes were more than a little moist, but I wasn't the only one. The surrounding crowd held their collective breaths.

“Taylor Elizabeth Caldwell, you are the only song I want to sing for the rest of my life and I love you more than the stars. Will you marry me?”

She only paused for a second before she whispered it, but somehow that whisper carried through the whole room.

“Yes.”

The crowd erupted as Hunter yanked her off the chair and swung her around, and she laughed and cried, oblivious now to everyone watching her. The rest of the Steiners broke out singing “Chapel of Love” by The Dixie Cups and a sing-along broke out as everyone clapped and sang with the group.

Kent stepped forward and asked for quiet after everyone finished.

“Yeah, yeah, enough of that.”

Everyone booed. “Just kidding. We have one last song for you.” Hunter put his arm around Taylor and pulled her back to stand with the group as Dusty started another beat and they launched into “Walking on Sunshine.” Taylor was so

giddy that she sang along and her voice melded with the rest of the group.

“Thank you, everyone! And let’s have another round of applause for the happy couple!” Everyone clapped and then started heading back to wherever they came from.

Renee and Darah and Megan let out shrieks that sounded like they belonged to long-extinct dinosaurs and launched themselves at Taylor, and lots more screaming and carrying-on ensued. Hunter and Mase gave each other back-banging hugs, and Mase gave one to Taylor that I was pretty sure crushed her ribs.

“Congratulations,” I said, giving both of them hugs. “Now you’re really, really

family. No escaping us now.”

“Nice proposal, dude. Well done,” Hannah said to Hunter, holding her fist out. He looked at her for a second, perplexed.

“Hunter, this is my friend Hannah.”

“Oh, of course, didn’t mean to leave you hanging there.” He bumped her hand. I could tell Taylor had a hard time not staring at Hannah’s face, but after Hannah gave her a huge smile and a hug everything was fine.

“I saw you crying.” I really needed to stop being surprised when Dusty sneaked up behind me. He’d done it enough times.

“And you are?” Hannah said,

swooping around and getting right in front of him. Dusty didn't look twice at her face before he smiled.

“Dusty Sharp, at your service.” He bowed. Hannah didn't look impressed. Five seconds ago, she'd been talking like she wanted to jump him. Jesus, this girl was going to give me whiplash.

“Hannah Gillespie. And you, dude, have been staring at my friend Jos, here.”

His smile faltered for just a second and then he raised his hands as if she'd pointed a gun at him.

“Guilty as charged. But can you blame me?”

“Maybe,” Hannah said, narrowing her eyes. I had to put a stop to this.

“Hey, Hannah, do you want to come shopping with me? Like, right now?” I grabbed her arm and tried to drag her away. I’d been planning on going on my job search, but he didn’t need to know that.

“Can I come?” Dusty said, following us. No, idiot, the point was to get away from you.

“Uh, no,” I said. “You wouldn’t want to come with us. We’ll be buying things like tampons and yeast infection cream and...other things for our lady parts and sparkly earrings and lots and lots of pink.”

“Sounds like fun.” Ugh, could anything I say turn this guy off?

“Why don’t we do something a little less...um, disgusting? Do you live on campus?” Hannah directed her question to Dusty.

“No, I have my own place in Old Town. I would invite you there, but I’m pretty sure the mold growing in my bathroom is becoming sentient and would murder you when I turned my back.”

“Ew,” Hannah and I said at the same time.

“Yeah, I keep trying to get my landlord to do something about it, but no dice. Can’t get anywhere when you’re poor as shit.”

“Amen. You speak my language,

dude.” Hannah nodded. Oh, now she was cool with him again. They’d bonded over their shared financial difficulties.

Somebody called out to Dusty to remind him of plans next week or something. “Actually, I have to get to work. Sorry, ladies. Rain check?”

“Sounds good,” Hannah said.

“But, Red, I will see you on Sunday. The guys have sort of planned a little surprise party for Hunter and Taylor, and all the members of Yellowfield House are invited, of course. And you, Hannah Gillespie, are also invited.”

“Sweet,” she said. “I have nothing else to do.”

“Sounds like fun.”

Renee called my name.

“We’re going out to celebrate. Are you coming?”

So much for job hunting. “Yeah, sure.”

“Am I invited?” Hannah yelled.

“Of course,” Renee, Mase and Hunter yelled back.

It was scary how well she was fitting in with us.

“Well, I guess this is goodbye, then. I’ll see you tomorrow. Red, Hannah Gillespie.” He nodded at both of us, grabbed his bag and waved goodbye to the other guys from the group and took the stairs two at a time.

“He is...something else,” Hannah said, staring after him.

“My thoughts exactly.”

* * *

The only topic of conversation when we went out to eat at Pat's Pizza was Hunter and Taylor's plans. Megan was in the midst of planning her own wedding and was busy giving tips and so forth, and Hunter didn't seem to be nearly as intimidated as I expected him to be.

“Did he ask your father?” Renee said, her pizza mostly untouched.

“Actually, I did,” Hunter said, earning a look of approval from Renee.

“You did?” Taylor said. “When?”

“Christmas. Planned it all out and everything.” Taylor had recently

reconnected with her father, and had even gone down to see him in Connecticut during the break and taken Hunter with her.

“Brilliant,” Mase said, giving him another fist bump. “I thought you were crazy, man, but best of luck. I’m happy I can officially call Taylor a member of the family. Oh, my God, have you told Harper yet? She’s going to be over the effing moon.”

“Let’s call her right now.” I knew a little bit about Mase’s sister Harper, who had cerebral palsy and was wheelchair bound. There were more than a few pictures of her in the house, and he’d said she was coming to visit with his parents at some point.

Hunter got out his phone and put it on speaker.

“Who are they calling?” Hannah whispered as the phone rang.

“Mase’s little sister. She and Hunter are really close,” I said.

“Hello?” A little girl’s voice answered. Seriously, the kid had her own phone? Typical rich people.

“Hey, Seven! What’s shaking?” Hunter said, a huge smile on his face. It was clear from the way he talked about her that he was completely in love with her. It was really sweet.

“Hunter! I got an A on my story. Wanna hear it?”

“Sure, Seven, but I called because I

want to tell you something. Taylor's here, too."

"Hi, Harper!" Taylor said.

"When are you coming to see me?"

"Soon, princess. I swear. But guess what?"

"What?" Harper said.

"Hunter and I are going to get married."

"You are?"

Taylor looked at Hunter and smiled.

"Yes, we are."

A little-girl scream exploded from the phone, and Hunter picked it up and took it off speakerphone.

"She has never made that sound before," Mase said, shaking his head. "I think she's more excited about that than

she was about the Taylor Swift tickets she got for Christmas.”

Hunter continued to talk to the excited Harper.

“So you guys going to get hitched right away?” Hannah asked Taylor as she stole the uneaten pizza crust off my plate and munched on it. I guess our friendship had progressed to the food-stealing stage.

Taylor snorted. “Yeah, I don’t think so. We both want to finish school first, and it seems...I don’t know, weird to get married while we’re still in college. I mean, I don’t want people to think I’m knocked up or anything.”

“Are you?” Hannah said. I almost

died.

“Not that I know of,” Taylor said. “I just really don’t want to deal with that now. We have too much to do. But someday.”

Hannah nodded, and Renee went back to grilling Taylor about her perfect wedding.

* * *

“You okay?” I was in the kitchen having a cup of tea that night. Everyone else had gone to bed, but I couldn’t sleep. Renee’s voice made me jump.

“Yeah, fine. What are you doing up?”

“I guess I was just excited about everything. I can’t believe he actually

did it.” She grabbed a glass from the dish drainer and filled it with water.

“When he first got her the ring I thought he’d proposed, but then the ring was on her right hand. It was only a matter of time, though. Those two are destined for each other.”

“You jealous?” She gave me a look like I’d said something completely outlandish.

She snorted some of the water and choked. “Of them getting married? Hell, no. I am *not* ready to get married.”

“But you’re living with Paul. I mean, it’s not exactly the same thing, but it’s close.”

She laughed.

“Oh, my dear sweet little sister. There

is a world of difference between living with someone and marrying them.”

“But you would marry Paul. Eventually, I mean.”

“Yeah, years down the road when we both are out of debt and have more than two nickels to rub together. I don’t want to spend a shit ton of money on a wedding if we can’t even afford to pay for our health insurance or a place to live. Besides, I want a huge-ass wedding, and I’m only going to do it once. Why not do it right?” She had valid points, rational points. I wondered how Paul felt about it. Not that it mattered. Renee wore the pants, the shirts and everything else in their

relationship. She had him by the balls, but he never seemed to mind.

“So what was with you and Dusty?”

“What do you mean?” Shit, I did not want her to get on my case about him.

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe I’m reading too much into it.”

“I’m not interested in him,” I said for the millionth time.

“I didn’t think you would be. I mean, he is *so* not your type at all.” Wasn’t. I didn’t have a type anymore.

“I can say this now that you’re not with him, but I never liked Matt. He was always so... I don’t know.” She waved her hand, trying to come up with the right word.

“Uptight?” I supplied. Yeah, so was I.

“No, it was something more than that. I always felt like he was judging me and found me wanting. But he treated you right, and I saw that he loved you, so I kept that to myself.” Not really. I could tell the whole time I’d dated Matt from high school to college that Renee hadn’t liked him. She was pretty bad at hiding when she didn’t like someone, but I would never tell her that.

She drained the glass of water. “Okay, well, I’m going back to bed. Night, little sister.” She held her arms out for a hug and I held mine out too and we hugged like we used to.

“Night, big sister.”

I took the rest of my tea and went back

down to my cave and turned my music on. Ingrid Michaelson's voice filled my ears, feeling weirdly appropriate for late-night listening.

“Here, listen to this one,” he said, handing me one of his earbuds. I fitted it to my ear as an unfamiliar voice sang about loving someone, but feeling like a freak in comparison. When I’d told him I didn’t really listen to music, he’d taken it as a challenge. Each day, he would bring me a new song. Pop, rock, country, rap, oldies, whatever. He’d listen to pretty much anything. “As long as it’s good,” he said.

“Music says what words can’t. Add words to music and you say two things at once.”

I missed him, but I still couldn't talk about him, out loud. Not to Renee, not to anyone. I couldn't explain it. He'd been the first real friend I'd ever had. He'd been the friend that made me realize that all the other people I thought were my friends really weren't.

I hadn't been in love with him, not that way, but I'd loved him all the same. I'd heard something somewhere that said guys and girls couldn't be friends without at least one falling in love with the other, but it wasn't true. There were just different kinds of love, that's all. He'd been like the brother I never had, and he'd treated me like a sister. A part of me was gone, taken with him when

he...

I turned off the music. It made me think of him, and I knew what he would have said if he knew I was moping about him.

Just smile, Jossy. The world isn't that bad. Besides, you have to have the bad parts so you recognize the good ones when they come along.

Chapter 11

“Wow, this show is ridiculous.” I was sitting with Hannah on the futon under her lofted bed, watching my second episode ever of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. “It’s so weird. Those computers are, like, gigantic,” I said.

“I know, right? Like, in the best way. Just wait until the third season.” Hannah had her trusty bag of Skittles and I’d brought some M&M’s from the vending machine in the basement of her dorm and I was mixing them in an empty Solo cup. “You know, a lot of the problems on this show could have been resolved by cell

phones. But then you wouldn't have such an entertaining show, so I guess it's fine the way it is."

I held my cup out and she poured some more Skittles into it.

"Heard from Dusty?" she said, eyes on the screen.

"Uh, no. He doesn't have my number, so that's a negative."

"Bummer."

"Do you want me to have heard from him? Because you were acting really weird yesterday."

"Oh, that? I was just being the protective friend. I wanted to see how he'd respond. A lot of guys get intimidated by a protective friend, and then there's always the ones you need to

watch out for, the guys that are threatened by a girl having friends.”

“Have you known a lot of guys like that?”

“A few. Here and there.” Yeah, there was much more to that story. An asterisk and a lot of footnotes in tiny print. I didn’t think we had passed the friendship milestone where I could interrogate her until she told me about it, so I let it go.

“And the verdict on Dusty?”

“He seems like a nice guy. Cocky, and he might have a dark past he’s trying to hide, or maybe he’s a closet fan of *Lord of the Rings*, or a hoarder, or obsessed with something weird, but I don’t think

he's a bad guy. Didn't get that bad-guy vibe. Bad-boy vibe, yes."

"What's the difference?"

She paused the show and sighed, brushing her hair away from her face.

"Okay, a bad boy is one that makes you all, like, tingly. He's dangerous in a good way. A way that makes your heart race and want to ride a motorcycle or go skinny-dipping. A bad guy is one who hurts you, or makes you feel worthless, or isolates you from your friends. He's just dangerous. Those are the guys to stay away from."

"Oh." She seemed to have it all figured out, and I could tell she'd spent a lot of time thinking about bad guys as opposed to bad boys.

“So Dusty is a bad boy.”

“Definitely. Unless you see any red flags. Then you run in the opposite direction.”

“I’m pretty sure if there were any red flags, my sister and the rest of the people I live with wouldn’t let him near me. Hunter wouldn’t be friends with a bad guy.”

“Still. You never know. People aren’t always what they seem. You spend years thinking they’re one way and then something happens and they reveal who they really are.”

“But you can’t go through life thinking that everyone is bad.”

“I don’t. I told you—I trust my

instincts.”

We weren’t going to agree, so I dropped it and we went back to watching the show, but I thought a lot about what she’d said about people being bad or good, and trying to tell the difference.

I didn’t think I’d ever met a really bad person. Even my ex and my ex-friends weren’t bad people.

I’d been just like them, and I didn’t think I was a bad person. That guy, Travis, the one who had hurt Taylor, he was a bad guy. I didn’t need to meet him or know anything else about him to know that. But did that mean he would always be bad? Could people change?

I’d changed.

I had so many thoughts running through my head I almost forgot about the engagement dinner and found the house in chaos when I got back from Hannah's.

Mase was on his hands and knees in the living room, along with Hunter and Darah.

“What do they look like again?” Hunter said, patting his hands on the floor.

“They’re little gold studs. Remember, Taylor gave them to me?” Darah said, closing one eye and putting the side of her face on the floor.

“Right,” Hunter said.

“Found it!” Mase held his hand out to Darah, and she gave him a kiss.

“Thanks, baby.” She stood up and brushed off the front of her black dress and put the earring in her ear.

Both Hunter and Mase had nice dress shirts on and nice pants with dress shoes.

“Where have you been?” Renee said, slipping her heel into her shoe and walking down the steps at the same time. Paul was just behind her, making sure she didn’t take a dive down the stairs. She had one of her best dresses on; green with swirls of black on the hem. Paul was also wearing a green shirt. Oh, no. They’d become one of “those” couples.

“You’re not wearing that,” she said,

pointing to my torn jeans and gray thermal shirt.

“I’m sorry. I completely forgot. I’ll go change.” Shit, what was I going to wear? Everything nice was packed away. “I don’t have anything,” I said, biting my lip.

“Are you serious? You used to wear dresses and skirts more than pants.” She put her hands on her hips.

I shrugged. “I don’t have any.”

“Okay, let me think.” She put her fingers to her temples. “I think I have something that you can wear. Come on.” She lunged out, grabbed my arm and dragged me upstairs.

I bumped into Taylor on her way down from the third floor. She had a

baby-blue dress that looked like it could have belonged to Audrey Hepburn and her hair was loose around her face.

“Hey, Jos!”

“Wardrobe crisis,” Renee said before yanking me into her room and throwing her closet doors open. Taylor followed, and Darah was right behind her.

A flurry of activity followed, where I wasn’t allowed to talk or say anything. Much like a mannequin.

They held things up to me and messed with my hair. Darah had the best hair skills, so she braided it, starting above my ear on one side of my head and going to the other, making a sort of crown. Back in my previous life, I’d been a big

fan of buns, and had slicked my hair back so people could see that I was put together and meant business. Darah let my hair wisp out around my face and pulled a few strands loose.

“There,” she said, putting a few bobby pins in place.

Renee and Taylor were tossing dresses on the floor and finally settled on a sparkly gold party dress with a flared skirt.

“I’m not wearing that,” I said as they started undressing me. “Jesus, can I have some privacy?” I ducked into the closet and pulled the door semishut. I didn’t care about Renee seeing me mostly nude, but it felt weird having the other girls there.

The dress had enough going on the top so it covered my bra, which was good. I adjusted it a little and tried to zip it up in the back, but my arms didn't move that way.

“Um, can somebody give me a hand?”

Renee hauled me out of the closet and zipped the dress up.

“Perfect!” she said, hooking the clasp at the top of the dress so the zipper wouldn't come down and cause a wardrobe malfunction. That would be just fantastic.

She spun me around and the other two shoved earrings in my ears and started applying stuff to my face.

“I am not a Barbie,” I said as Taylor

swiped something on my eyelids. I was too busy concentrating on not getting poked in the eye to see what color it was.

“You are right now, my dear,” Taylor said, smudging some of the color. Renee was busy looking through her makeup to find a color that would work on me and found some pink lip gloss.

“Yes. Here we go.” She put it on my lips as Taylor tried not to jab my eye out with mascara.

“Isn’t this unsanitary?” I said.
“Shouldn’t you be disinfecting that before you stick it near my eye?” Renee was a big proponent of hand sanitizer and disinfecting things and coughing in your elbow.

“Are you saying that you don’t want to share my germs? I mean, you are my sister. Are you saying you’re too good for my germs?” She pretend-glared at me.

“Fine, fine. Am I done yet?” I really wanted to see what they’d done to me. I hoped it wasn’t like when one of my little sisters decided to play dress up and used my face to practice their makeup skills on.

“Just about,” Taylor said, spritzing me with some of Renee’s perfume. Was that a subtle way of telling me that I smelled bad?

“Done,” Renee said, straightening one of the straps of the dress.

“Uh, shoes?” I was still barefoot. Through some miracle of genetics, Renee and I had identical-sized feet, so she shoved some black ballet flats on my feet. I was out of practice when it came to wearing heels. I’d probably fall on my face if I tried.

“Okay, now you’re done,” Renee said.

I turned and looked at myself in Renee’s full-length mirror. I looked like before me, only not. I never would have worn this dress, or done my hair this way, or put that much eye shadow on. Taylor had given me a sultry look that I was pretty sure I could never pull off, but it made me look older and

mysterious. That illusion would be shattered the second I opened my mouth.

“What are you doing up there?” Mase yelled up the stairs.

“Making my sister sexy,” Renee yelled back. I gave her a look. “Oh, come on. I couldn’t let you go to a party in your frumpy wear. We should definitely go shopping.” I hated shopping. I’d always pretended to like it back when it had been a social obligation. I was actually thrilled that I didn’t have to do it anymore.

“Yeah, maybe.” I probably wouldn’t have a choice. She’d force me to do it as some sort of sister bonding and attempt to get me back to the way I was. It would take a lot more than putting on my old

clothes. Or new clothes that would have worked on the old me.

“Can we go now?” I said, uncomfortable with attention already.

“Let’s go, bitches,” Renee said, whooping. “We have some shit to celebrate!”

* * *

Renee, Paul and I drove to campus to pick up Hannah. I was so glad she’d agreed to go, because I figured a lot of the people there would be upperclassmen that I didn’t know.

“Damn, you clean up good, girl,” Hannah said as she swept into the car, wearing a black shift dress. It was the

first time I'd seen her arms bare, and I saw that the burn traveled down her neck and over her arm, as well.

"It'll be too dark, and most people will be too drunk to notice," she said, turning her arm back and forth as if she was looking at it for the first time. "Plus, I love this dress and I'm not going to let anything stop me from wearing it."

She was awesome.

The party was at a house just outside of campus that several of the Steiners rented together. There were already quite a few cars there when Renee pulled up.

"Okay, here's how this is going to go. If I see a drink in your hand, it better be soda. If I see you talking with any weird

guys, someone will step in. You have a lot of eyes on you and this night is about Taylor and Hunter, okay? No shenanigans.”

“Yes, yes. I got it.” I was kind of offended that she’d think that I would try to ruin their special night.

“Don’t worry. I’ll keep her out of trouble,” Hannah said. “I’ve got my eye on you, young lady.” We were the same freaking age.

Renee looked at Hannah and then back at me. “Okay, then. Let’s go.”

The house was already full of people, none of whom I knew, which made me beyond grateful that I at least had Hannah.

Hunter and Taylor were being bombarded with hugs and congratulations and bits of semisober unsolicited advice. Renee and Paul went to join them in the living room along with Megan and Jake as a few of the Steiners serenaded the rest of the room with dirty versions of popular songs.

“Man, I wish I could drink without pissing your sister off. She scares the crap out of me, by the way,” Hannah said.

“Yeah, she has that effect on people.” I scanned the room, looking for anyone that I might know.

“You look nice.” As per usual, Dusty Sharp had sneaked up behind me. I spun

slowly, preparing myself for his snarky comments at the change in my attire. What I wasn't prepared for was to make him momentarily speechless. His eyes widened and scanned me up and down. Twice. He swallowed and made a kind of stuttering noise. Well, that was a first.

"Keep your eyeballs in your head, dude," Hannah said, stepping in front of me.

"And you look ravishing as well, Hannah Gillespie." He waved his arm to indicate her dress.

"Nice recovery," she said, patting his chest. Dusty didn't look too bad himself. His pants almost fit him and he had a button-up on that was definitely a little tight in the chest region. Not that I paid

any attention to it. Or the fact that the shirt clung to his arms, as well. They were...pleasant arms. Very nicely shaped and muscled. The kind of arms that you'd feel safe in, if you tripped. You knew they'd catch you....

“You okay there, Red?” Dusty peered at me as if I'd been staring at him. Shit. I probably had been. No, I definitely had been. “How about I get you ladies something to drink. Nonalcoholic, I promise.”

Dusty saw my hesitation. I didn't accept drinks from anyone unless I'd poured or opened them myself.

“Trust me, Red. I'll bring you unopened cans. Tamper proof. Be right

back.”

“Smart. I never trust anyone at a party. Not that anyone would want to drug me,” Hannah said. She sounded disappointed, which was a little crazy.

Dusty came back a few minutes later as Hannah and I were trying to figure out a good place to park ourselves.

“A can for you and a can for you and a can for me.” He handed out sweating cans of Coke. “They didn’t have Dr Pepper, sorry.” How did he know I liked Dr Pepper? “I saw you drink it at the house, and at the Sea Dog.” The question was, why did he remember that?

“Now how do I know that you didn’t shake this?” I said, pausing before I popped the top.

“Because I wouldn’t dare do anything to that stunning dress. And I know how you redheads are when you get angry.”

I wanted to shake the can and open it in his face.

“That is a common misconception,” I said through clenched teeth. If I’d heard one redhead joke, I’d heard them all, but everyone seemed to live under the delusion that I’d never heard them before.

“Oh, really? Because I can picture you getting all...fiery.” He stepped closer and I caught a whiff of his cologne. Thankfully, it wasn’t one of those that guys seemed to think it was okay to douse themselves in. It was nice.

He also smelled faintly of clean laundry.

Hannah popped her can and took a huge swig.

“You don’t seem like a soda kind of guy—what’s up with that?” she said, pointing at the soda in his hand. He opened it, being sure to point it away from me. How considerate.

“Been there, done that. It wasn’t pretty, that’s for sure.” He wouldn’t look at me when he said it. “More fun, though.” He gazed at the crowd, who was definitely having a good time. Some sort of drinking game was going on in the middle of the room. It was too cramped to play beer pong, but they had cooked up some alternative.

Hannah was studying Dusty with her

head to the side. I caught her eye and she shook her head. If she was trying to tell me something, I wasn't speaking her language. I finally opened the can of soda and took a sip.

* * *

The Steiners put together a little performance, and everyone watched and sang along. Hannah spotted a girl from one of her classes, but didn't seem to want to go over and talk to her, so we stayed in a corner, talking to Dusty. He left us to go and sing, but always came back, even though several of the guys tried to drag him away or ply him with drinks.

For some reason, he turned them down and talked with us instead. I couldn't help but laugh as he told us stupid stories about random things. Dusty was one of those infectious people that made you feel good when you were around them. It was easy to see that everyone adored him, and easy to see why he and Hunter had formed their "bromance." Hunter was like that, too.

"I think he's into you," Hannah said during one of the songs when Dusty had left us. "Like, really into you."

"Well, that doesn't matter because I'm not into him. At all."

"Funny, because you've been staring at him like you want to finish him like

the last piece of cake.” I stared at her and she wiggled her eyebrows. “Tasty, tasty man cake covered in sex frosting.”

“You are disgusting.”

“Or maybe I’m just right.” I had to shush her as Dusty rejoined us.

“So what do you think about those two crazy kids getting hitched?” He pointed toward Hunter and Taylor, who hadn’t let go of each other pretty much the entire time.

“Are you asking me about my feelings on marriage, Dusty?” I said.

“Whoa, Red. Easy there. Just making conversation.”

“I think it’s lovely. I mean, they’re obviously perfect for each other. Some people are like that. Made for each

other,” I said.

“Some people are,” Dusty said, but he was looking at me, and I could feel my stupid face and ears going red. I wished sometimes I could wear a hat that would cover my ears so people couldn’t see them broadcasting my emotions.

The marriage conversation was dropped as one of the Steiners started taking bets on if he could sing random songs that people shouted out without making any mistakes. If he made a mistake with a lyric, he had to drink. And everyone else got to drink if he... Well, the rules weren’t really clear. Everyone seemed pretty gone at that point, so it made sense to them, but not

to us sober folks.

Dusty sighed and stared into his soda can.

“I don’t think anyone’s going to arrest you if you have a beer,” I said.

He shook his head. “No, but I made someone a promise, and I have to stick to it.”

“You go to AA?” Hannah said, laughing as the guy singing got a lyric wrong and everyone called him on it. God, you could make anything into a drinking game.

“No, just took some advice someone gave me to heart. Made a change.”

“Is this supposed to be an improvement?” I said.

He held his hand on top of his chest,

over his heart. “Ouch.”

I was saved from replying by Renee stumbling into the wall and Paul barely catching her. Little hypocrite. I knew she drank, having gotten more than one drunk text and a few drunk voice mails from her. Paul caught my eye and nodded.

“Excuse me,” I said to Hannah and Dusty.

“I’m not drunk, I swear,” Renee said, although *swear* came out *schwear*. “I only had—” she counted on her fingers, but it wasn’t working very well “—three drinks?” It definitely sounded like a question.

“Good job, Paul. Way to keep her sober.” I patted him on the shoulder as

Renee slumped against him and hummed an off-key song.

“It’s not as easy as it looks,” he said, holding her up. “I’m going to take her home. I can come back and get you, if you want.”

“I can give Jos a ride. I haven’t been drinking at all.” If there were an award for lurking and sneaking, Dusty Sharp would have won it hands down.

“Thanks, man,” Paul said as he shoved Renee’s arms into her coat and she protested.

“Put her to bed and tell her she’s a terrible example. Not that she’ll remember it,” I said.

“Hey, little sister!” Renee leaned and smacked a kiss on my cheek. “Why are

you so sad?”

“I’m not sad, Ne. Go home.”

“But you are sad. Sooooo
saaaaddddd,” she sang as Paul dragged
her out the door.

“I love how she gets drunk after
giving me the third degree,” I said,
shaking my head. I was going to give *her*
the third degree the next morning when
she was good and hungover so it had the
biggest impact.

“Are you?” Dusty said, laughing a
little at Renee.

“Am I what?”

“Sad?” Someone yelled, and Dusty
pulled me to the side as a guy barreled
by us yelling about something or other.

In addition to lurking and sneaking, he had very good reflexes.

“No, I’m not sad,” I lied.

He tilted his head a little. “You seem sad.”

I looked away from his searing green eyes. “Um, thanks. I barely know you. I don’t really think you’re qualified to make judgments on my level of sad.”

“Okay, fine. Just let me know when you and Hannah are ready to go.” With that he turned around and dived into the fray, heading toward the kitchen and the makeshift bar.

“How are you doing?” Darah had unstuck herself from Mase’s side to come see me.

“Fine. Did you see Renee?”

Darah rolled her eyes.

“She always thinks her tolerance is way higher than it actually is. You’d think she would have learned by now.”

Mase came over and put his arm around her.

“What’s up, Jos? Having a good time?” He was clearly a little buzzed. He held out his fist as if he expected me to give him a bump. So I did and he cheered.

“Yeah, great party.” I gave him a thumbs-up. It would be so much better if I wasn’t sober.

Why do you need to drink to have fun? Drinking just dulls your senses. Why would you want to dull the

beautiful intensity of life?

An arm snaked around my shoulder and I jumped. “Hey, girlfriend, you abandoned me.”

I turned to find a grumpy Hannah leaning on me. Some of her hair floated into my mouth and I brushed it away.

“Do you wanna go?” I said.

She removed her arm and shrugged.

“I’m cool with whatever.” Her eyes kept skipping around the room, as if she was looking for someone.

“What’s up?”

“Nothing,” she said, smiling at me.

“So I’m guessing some guy is going to drive us home now? Some guy named Dusty?”

Another hand descended on my

shoulder, but it wasn't Hannah's this time. "You would be correct, Hannah Gillespie."

"You know, one of these times you're going to do that and I'm going to think you're trying to kill me and I might kick you in the junk."

"My junk would be honored," he said, removing his hand. I saw that he had my and Hannah's coats in the other.

"You guys are going home?" Darah said.

"Yeah, I think so. I still have some homework to do." That was a lie. I had some blogging to do. I'd decided that I was going to get ahead on posts and schedule them ahead of time so I

wouldn't always be behind. It was a great idea, in theory, but I wasn't sure how it would work in practice.

"See you at home, Little Ne!" Mase called as Darah waved to us. How she was going to handle that monster of a guy was beyond me, but she'd done well so far.

"I'll tell Taylor and Hunter you went home," Darah called after us.

"Ladies," Dusty said, handing us our coats. We put them on as he led us out of the house. His car was parked in an interesting spot, and he ended up maneuvering it out before we could get in.

"You can have shotgun," Hannah said in my ear.

Awesome.

Hannah and Dusty chatted about random things as he drove to her dorm.

“See you tomorrow, girl. Thanks for the ride, Dusty.”

“Anytime,” he said with that signature wave.

Once Hannah departed, she appeared to have taken all the air out of the car with her. What was wrong with me? I’d been alone with him in the car before. Why was this different?

“So what do you really think about Taylor and Hunter getting married?”

“Why do you care?” I reached out to play with the radio for something to focus on, other than Dusty.

“Here,” he said, reaching across, grazing my boob and opening the glove box and pulling out a battered iPod. He plugged it into the cigarette lighter and changed the radio station before handing me the iPod.

“Skip whatever you don’t like.”

An unfamiliar song came out of the speakers, so I skipped to the next one. Another unfamiliar song. I clicked to his library and scrolled through. Damn, the thing was jammed. He had all sorts of stuff in there. I settled on Beastie Boys, just to watch his face when “Fight for Your Right” came on. I was not disappointed.

“Interesting choice, Red. I approve.”

He nodded, and I could see his teeth flashing in the headlights of the oncoming cars.

“What, do I not look like a girl who would listen to the Beastie Boys?”

“No, it’s not that. I just didn’t think you’d choose that.”

We listened to the rest of the song and then I switched it to Death Cab for Cutie. He laughed.

“You are an interesting girl, Red. I’m never bored when I’m with you.”

Ditto.

“You know, if you ever want to talk about anything, I have pretty good listening skills.”

“Are they better than your lurking skills? Because you’re pretty good at

that,” I said.

“Lurking?”

“Yeah, you always seem to sneak up behind me, and I never hear you coming.”

“It’s a skill. Honed over years of having to get away quietly.”

“Get away from what?” Let’s see how he liked getting asked personal questions.

“Nice try, Red. Those doors are shut and they’re not going to open. Not even for a cute little thing like you.” He was trying to distract me, but it wasn’t going to work. I’d just let him think that. I had other means of prying into his life.

“Fine, fine.” I scrolled through some

more songs. Huh. He had Ingrid Michaelson. That was a surprise. I put on “The Way I Am” and waited for his reaction. He laughed softly, and I could almost hear him blushing.

“If you tell anyone I have Ingrid on here, I will... I don’t know.”

“What, would listening to her ruin your image?” I put air quotes around *image*.

“I am perfectly confident in my image, thank you very much.” He couldn’t even say it with a straight face, so I started laughing.

“You are so full of shit.”

“Yeah, Red. I am. You shouldn’t believe a word I say.”

“I don’t.”

“Good.”

“Good.”

He tried to stop smiling but he couldn't and I threw my head back and laughed like I hadn't in a long time. He pulled up in front of Yellowfield House and turned off the car.

“Here you are,” he said.

“Here I am.”

It was one of those moments that, if this were a movie, he would have leaned over and given me a good-night kiss. But because it wasn't a movie, we just sat there and I tried to think of something that I could say that would give me a graceful exit.

“Thanks for the ride.” Yeah, that

wasn't it.

“Anytime. Anytime you need anything, just...let me know.” That would be kind of hard to do, since I didn't have his number. But yeah, I wasn't going to ask him for it.

“I'll keep that in mind.” It was times like these when I wish I had a script.

“I'm not into you like that, Red. If that's what you're worried about.” Well, the script didn't matter if he went off book.

“I wasn't.”

“Okay. Because I know I joke around, but it's not serious.” He seemed to be trying really hard to be convincing.

“Right.”

“Okay, then. I guess I'll...see you

around.” There seemed to be nothing else to do but get out of the car, so I did and started walking toward the house. I heard the creak of the window crank and then his voice.

“Jos?” The sound of my actual name made me turn around by reflex.

“I...” I’d never seen him at a loss for words, but he seemed to be nothing but tongue-tied tonight. He whispered something that I didn’t hear.

“What?”

He looked through the windshield and not at me. “Sorry, nothing.”

“Well...I’m going to go in the house now.”

“You should do that. It’s too cold to

be standing outside.”

“Right. Here I go.” I started walking backward and he laughed.

“Don’t trip, Red.”

I kept going backward until I got to the porch and he watched me the whole time. It wasn’t until I had opened the door, waved and closed it again that I heard his car drive away.

What a freak that boy was.

Chapter 12

Renee was slumped over at the dining table the next morning when I came up for breakfast. I'd heard Paul talking softly to her in their room the night before when I went to check on her and figured he had it under control. The rest of the crew crashed in quite late. For people who were academically inclined, drinking on a Sunday night didn't seem to be the wisest choice.

“How you doing, big sister?” I said, going to grab a mug so I could make some tea. The residents of Yellowfield House were big on breakfast, but no one

had made any yet, so I grabbed some waffles from the freezer.

“Shut. Up.”

“Hey, you’re the one who’s supposed to set a good example. I didn’t force you to drink.”

“Please, just...later.” She couldn’t even form a complete sentence.

I waited for my waffles to cook as the other inhabitants of the house stumbled downstairs and went for the coffeepot. If I were a complete bitch, I could have gotten up early and made a crap ton of noise. The idea had been tempting, but I hadn’t acted on it.

“Alcohol bad,” Renee said as Paul came in the front door holding bags of greasy fast food.

“Hangover cure,” he said, holding them up.

“I would cheer, but I don’t want to,” Renee said as Darah leaned against Mase. Taylor raised her fist hesitantly.

“That’s the best I can do,” she said as Paul distributed the bags and everyone dug in, plates be damned.

“I got you an egg and cheese, if you want it,” Paul said, holding a bag out to me.

“I’m set with waffles, but thanks.” He shrugged and handed the sandwich over to Mase, who inhaled it in three bites. Breakfast was a quiet affair and over because everyone was late for whatever they were supposed to be doing. I’d

thought some of them would skip, but they all got their butts out the door eventually.

“So how hungover is everyone in your house right now?” Hannah said when I sat next to her for Pam’s class. We had an unspoken agreement that she would always have Skittles, but I would have to supply my own M&M’s, so I made sure to stop and grab some from the machine in the Union, enough to last me the week.

“It’s pretty epic. I was feeling bitter about it last night, but now I’m grateful I stayed sober.”

“Well, there is a solution to not being hungover,” she said, flipping her notebook open.

“Not drinking?”

She popped a Skittle into her mouth.

“Never being sober.”

“Valid point.”

Pam started the class and I had other things to think about for the next hour.

“You know, your sister keeps you on a tight leash,” Hannah said as we ate lunch. “What did you do?”

What hadn't I done? I'd been the poster child for destructive behavior last summer. You name it, I'd done it. Staying out late, partying, drinking, whatever. I'd done what I wanted, when I'd wanted to do it and hadn't cared what anyone said or tried to do about it. It was fun. For a while. Even though I'd

gotten most of it out of my system, I'd burned too many bridges and it was going to be hell to reconstruct them.

"Let's just say I went through my wild-child phase."

"You don't seem like that now."

"Yeah, well, I've gotten wiser in my old age."

She snorted in disbelief. "Dude, how old are you?"

"Eighteen. I started college when I was seventeen. My birthday's in a month and a half."

"Baby. I'm already nineteen, so I am both older and wiser."

"So what advice do you have for me, oh wise one?"

"Always drink less than you think you

can, trust your gut, and the next time you see Dusty Sharp, you'd better make a move." She gave me a big smile.

"That's not really what I meant." I hadn't told her about the little moment, if that's what you could call it, that Dusty and I had last night in the car. It was so minor I would have felt stupid bringing it up.

We'd talked. We'd both been awkward. The end.

"I am going to have to have an intervention with you two, I swear. He likes you...you like him. The equation is pretty simple, and I kind of suck at math. You plus Dusty equals..." She waved her hand in a circle, searching for the right

word.

I was pretty sure it was *disaster*.

She snapped her fingers.

“Sexplosion.”

“Really? You spent all that thinking and that’s what you came up with?”

“You’re just mad that you know I’m right and you don’t want to admit it.”

“I am not, and you’re not. Right, that is.”

“Oh, sure, sweetie. I believe you.”

She patted my arm. I chucked my straw wrapper at her, and she laughed. Her smile fell as she saw someone across the dining room.

“What?”

“Nothing.” Her demeanor had completely changed. I searched and saw

a table of guys looking over at us. They weren't even being stealthy about it. They could definitely take some lessons from Dusty. One of the guys said something to the others and they all laughed. Well, it didn't take a genius to put those two things together. Most of them didn't look familiar, but I'd definitely seen at least two of them at the party.

Hannah tipped her head forward and her hair fell in front of her face like a mane on a depressed lion.

“So I need your help,” I said, turning so I blocked Hannah from the view of the other table, and blocked her view at the same time.

“With what?” She kept her head down. I wished I could get the whole story from her, but I knew if I pushed she’d close up like a steel trap. I knew that because I’d do the same thing.

“I really want to get a job, but I don’t want something that’s going to suck, so I need help thinking of a job I could have that wouldn’t make me want to slit my wrists.”

“I think I’m up to that challenge,” she said, finally lifting her head. I had no idea if the guys were still looking and laughing, but Hannah raised her chin and flipped her hair back so her scar was completely visible. It was a totally “suck on that” moment. Yes, there was a

reason I was friends with her.

We spent the rest of our time brainstorming ideas. Some were ridiculous, like selling my organs online, or finding a potato chip that looked like the Virgin Mary, but some weren't. The campus radio station had paid positions, I knew, as did the student newspaper. The library was another option, and I already had connections because Taylor and Hunter worked there.

“They pay ten dollars an hour for nude modeling in the art department. It's not really that bad,” Hannah said, as if she was commenting on the weather.

“You've done it?” I nearly walked into the trash can as we left the Union. She nodded.

“Here and there. I’m not ashamed of my body.” Her words were sharp, as if she wanted to pull them out of her mouth and hurl them like knives at the group of guys who had been so obviously talking about her. I bet she could if she wanted to.

“Well, I don’t know if I’m that destitute, but I’ll put it in the maybe column.” It seemed like a weird note to leave on.

“You know, if you ever want to come over to hang out or study, or whatever, you’re welcome. I have, like, a whole man cave right outside my room.”

“Sounds good. I’ll text you, okay?”

“See you in bio.”

She walked away, her shoulders a little hunched, but that might have been because of the cold.

* * *

Dusty's Golf was parked outside when I got home that afternoon, along with Hunter's rust bucket. The other cars were absent.

"Hey, Jos!" Hunter said when I walked in to the sounds of his guitar and Dusty's beat boxing.

I wrote that I was home on the chart and set my bag down, noticing that the girls had written *out* on the chart. "Hey, Hunter. Where is everyone?"

"Um, I think Renee kidnapped Taylor

and Darah to go look at wedding stuff. Or something. I sort of tuned it out. Mase is at the gym and Paul had a lab.” Weird.

“Hey, Jos,” Dusty said, giving me a sort of half smile. It wasn’t his full-on grin, and I didn’t know what to make of it.

“Hey. What are you doing here?” I went to the kitchen and grabbed an apple.

“Just thought I would swing by and see how everyone was recovering.”

Hunter looked a hell of a lot better than he did in the morning.

“I’m shocked they went shopping even though they were all hungover,” I said, sitting down on the opposite end of the couch from Dusty.

“They bounce back pretty quick. They’re young,” Hunter said with a smile as he strummed his guitar.

“Requests?”

I shrugged.

Hunter put the instrument back on the little stand he had in the corner of the room. “Something wrong?”

“Not really. Just... I don’t know.” I risked a look at Dusty, and he had his hands in his pockets. “Did Hannah seem weird last night?”

“No, why?” Dusty said.

“I don’t know. She was acting weird, and then today I saw some of the guys from the party at the Union, and it was almost like they were laughing at her or

something. I may be just reading too much into it, but she got very...un-Hannah-like afterward.”

“Did somebody say something to her?” Hunter leaned forward, ready to get to his feet and go after whoever it was.

“I don’t know. She wouldn’t tell me. I probably should have kept it to myself. Please don’t say anything to her.” Dusty and Hunter nodded and shared a look. I could just picture the two of them, grabbing their swords and saddling up their white horses. They were cut from the same cloth.

“Who’s in charge of dinner?” I said to change the subject.

“Well, that’s also why I’m here,”

Dusty said, clearing his throat. “Hunter has informed me that it’s your turn for dinner and I just happen to have volunteered my culinary skills to assist you. If you will have them.”

I had no idea if he could cook at all, or if he was just screwing with me. I also had no idea what was really behind him being here, because he obviously had a reason.

“Don’t you have your own home?”

“Yeah, a shitty apartment. Why would I want to be there, when I could be here at the Ritz?”

Yellowfield House was pretty nice. Oh, who was I kidding? It was freaking sweet, as houses went. I mean, not only

was it nice, but it was so damn clean. Darah was like a fairy godmother who flitted around and made sure there were absolutely no cobwebs or dirt or anything that resembled dirt.

But still. Why was Dusty here all of a sudden? I mean, how stupid did they think I was? I mean, you wouldn't even be able to put this past a six-year-old.

“Fine. You can help me, but we’re making what I want, and if I tell you to get out of my way and let me do something, you do it. Understood?”

Dusty looked at Hunter, who looked like he was holding back a laugh.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said as we moved into the kitchen.

I’d planned on making lasagna, since I

had everything for it. I'd never gotten to cook when the house was so empty, so it would have been nice, but I had a tall and lurky shadow.

“What can I do, oh kitchen goddess?” He held out his hands as if he was waiting for me to put something in them.

“First of all, you can get out of my way.” He moved aside as I assembled the ingredients. I was going to make it with pepperoni, but figured I could skip it and then Taylor wouldn't have to worry about trying to find the pepperoni-free sections after I'd baked it.

“Here. Chop.” I handed him a knife and a bag of fresh spinach. I figured he could at least do that much.

“Cutting board?” I got it out and handed it to him as I mixed the rest of the cheeses together.

It was clear after a few seconds that Dusty had only rudimentary culinary skills. Jesus, he couldn't even hold a knife. Once again, if this were a movie, I'd come up behind him, put my hand over his and show him how to properly use it. During which he would turn slowly, the knife would clatter to the floor and he would sweep me up in a passionate embrace.

What really happened was that I started laughing at him as he mangled the spinach.

“I can hear you laughing at me,” he

said, not turning, but putting down the knife. “I’m sorry. I’m used to either ordering out or nuking something in the microwave. This is not in my wheelhouse. At all.” He stared at the spinach as if it was out to get him.

“Then why did you agree to help?”

He turned around and faced me.

“Because I wanted to spend time with you.”

“You did.” It wasn’t a question.

“Believe it or not, Red, I enjoy your company.” He gave me a smile as if to say, *what do you make of that?*

“Even when I’m constantly insulting you?”

Pushing himself away from the counter and toward me, he said, “I

especially like that.”

“I thought you said you weren’t into me.” When did swallowing become so hard to do?

That stopped him from his advance across the kitchen.

“I’m not. Can’t I just want to hang out with you? Are you one of those girls who think that guys and girls can’t be friends without one of them falling for the other?”

“No, actually, I’m not.” I’d already proved that not to be true.

He nodded. “Neither am I. So, with that said, would you please finish this so I can stop screwing it up?”

I rolled my eyes and went to take the

knife from where he'd set it on the counter.

“I can't believe you don't know how to chop. You're hopeless.”

“But now I have you to teach me, Red.”

I put the knife in my hand, showed him how I gripped it and chopped a few pieces.

“It's like a teeter-totter. Back and forth.” I held out the knife to him and supervised him from a few feet away until he had it. Sort of. Once he was done with that, I tossed the spinach in the bowl with the cheese mixture and made him use those arms to good advantage by opening the jars of sauce.

I let him layer the noodles and sauce

and then it was time to shove the thing in the oven.

“Do you seriously not cook?” I said as I set the timer.

“I seriously don’t.” He hopped up on the counter and started making a drumbeat noise. He was like Hunter with his tapping. Nervous, the pair of them.

“Well, if the zombie apocalypse happens, I guess you’re going to have to learn.”

“That’s only if my cooking skills are needed. It’s far more likely my zombie-slaying powers would be needed.”

Okay, he had a good point, and he knew it.

I just rolled my eyes again and went to

the fridge to get the garlic bread. It was premade, so I only had to stick it in the oven with the lasagna at the end so it would get warm. We needed a side dish, but we were out of lettuce, so I found a bag of broccoli in the freezer and put it in a bowl to steam in the microwave.

“Well, if you keep coming here more often, I’m sure Taylor or Darah would rope you into helping with the cooking or baking. They’re big on baking.” Taylor didn’t let a week go by without some form of delicious something getting put in the oven, and Darah was just as bad. They took domestic to a whole new level.

“Can I tell you a secret?” he whispered after dramatically looking

around the room. Yes, we were still alone.

“Yeah, sure.” I needed something to do, so I wiped down the already-spotless counters.

“You promise to never, ever reveal this information to anyone at any time for any reason?” He was making a big deal out of this.

“Cross my heart,” I said, making a crossing motion over my chest. It wasn’t my imagination that his eyes went to that area when I did it and lingered longer than they should have.

He hopped off the counter and crooked his finger at me to lean in. I crossed my arms over my chest and

turned my ear toward him.

“I’ve never baked anything in my life,” he said, and I almost jumped out of my skin because he was so close to me. His cologne messed with my senses and overwhelmed the smell of the baking lasagna.

My brain stuttered like a freezing car engine in January.

“I—I won’t tell anyone,” I said, stepping away from him and pretending I had something really important to do in the sink.

“So I think the first time I bake something, it should be special. With someone I trust. I don’t want to bake with just anyone.” Why did I have the feeling we weren’t talking about baking

anymore?

I knew when I turned around from rinsing the sponge in the sink I would find him there, and I was right.

Even though my hands were wet, he grabbed both of them and knelt in front of me. Jesus H. Christ.

“Will you, Joscelyn Archer, be my first?” I was so, so glad he couldn’t hear what my heart was doing, because it definitely wasn’t beating in a normal fashion.

“Baking, you mean?”

Rising to his feet, but not letting go of my hands, he started to smile.

“What did you think I was talking about, Red?”

Not baking, that was for sure.

Why wouldn't he let go of my hands? Also, why were his so big? They completely encompassed mine.

The door slammed and Dusty dropped my hands like they were on fire.

"What smells so good?" Renee said, her arms weighed down with bags from the mall. Darah and Taylor were right behind her, equally as burdened.

"Lasagna," Dusty said, since I seemed to have lost the ability to form words with my mouth. I swallowed a few times and coughed.

"Clearance sale?" I finally said.

"Yeah, sure," Renee said, her eyes not meeting mine. Um, what?

“Why are you being weird?” I said, moving away from Dusty. “Are you hiding something from me, big sister?”

“Absolutely not,” she said, hiding the bags behind her back. “Be right back.” She dashed up the stairs and the other two followed. Hmm. If I had only one guess, I’d say it had something to do with my upcoming birthday, but maybe I was just being too self-centered.

They came down a little while later, and Paul and Mase were home a few minutes after that. No one seemed surprised to find Dusty with me in the kitchen, which also led me to the conclusion that the reason he was here was some sort of weird way to distract

me while they all went out shopping. My birthday had never been a huge deal, being from a family with a lot of kids. It was bigger when I was younger, but of course I didn't remember a lot of those birthdays. They only existed now in pictures.

Maybe Renee felt shitty about being so strict with me so she was throwing me a birthday party to make up for it? It didn't make a whole lot of sense, but I couldn't think of any other reason she'd be hiding things like this from me, or why Dusty had suddenly decided to cook dinner with me, seeing as how he couldn't cook at all.

But of course, I pretended that I didn't notice anything out of the ordinary. I'd

play along.

Dusty stayed for dinner and I was also shocked to discover that he'd brought homework, as well. Call me crazy, but he just didn't seem like the kind of guy who would do homework. I mean, he'd have to because he'd managed to make it through one and a half years of college already, but I just couldn't picture it.

Everyone claimed a piece of real estate, and I ended up sitting on the floor of the living room with my laptop on the coffee table and my books on the floor.

"Is this area taken?" Dusty parked himself next to me and set a stack of books on the table.

"I guess it is now. It's kind of catch as

catch can around here for study space.”

“I see that,” he said as everyone else spread themselves out in various places and positions. I skimmed the titles of the books he’d set down and was a little surprised. Calculus, music theory and several that looked like they were for education.

“Music education, like Hunter,” he said to my unanswered question.

“Surprised?”

“I knew that already.” Not exactly, but I could put two and two together.

“Hey, Hunter, do you still have that Praxis study guide?” Hunter had taken the first set of the tests he needed to pass to become a teacher a couple of weeks before and was still waiting for his

results since he had to pass the first test to take the second part. It sounded like the SATs only way worse.

Hunter looked up from whatever he was immersed in, his eyes taking a second to focus.

“Yeah, sure. You want to borrow it?”

“Just the practice tests. I just want to make copies, if you don’t mind.”

“Sure, no problem.” Hunter went and got the book from upstairs and brought it down. “I didn’t fill in the answers, so you can’t cheat off me.”

“Well, I’d rather pass the test, so I think I’ll take my chances.” Hunter chucked the book at Dusty, and he caught it as I ducked.

“No throwing books,” Taylor said from the couch. “They can’t protect themselves. You should know better, Hunter Zaccadelli.”

“I hate to be that person, but I have a huge anatomy test and I have, like, a billion pages to read, so can you guys flirt later? Like, in your room? Quietly?” Renee said, glaring at us all like a pissed-off librarian.

“Sorry, Ne,” Taylor said, ducking her head and going back to her book.

“Yes, ma’am,” Hunter said, his accent creeping in.

Dusty gave me a look before he whispered, “You’re not going to yell at me, are you?”

“I’m still hearing talking,” Renee said, turning a page of her book.

I pretended to zip my lips and pointed at Renee and then made a slashing motion across my throat and then pointed to him. I hoped he got the message. He gave me a look and flipped the book Hunter had given him open, and I went back to working on my studying for Pam’s class. I always did it first so my brain was at its most fresh and able to absorb the information.

For a guy who made a lot of noises with his mouth, Dusty was really good at focusing. I kept looking up from my book and seeing if he was really studying or only pretending to, but he was always

absorbed in whatever he was doing. He never even looked up, even though I was looking at him and we were sitting so close. It was like he'd shut the door and was in his own room that none of us could get into.

I shook my head and went back to my work and read until I finished everything I absolutely had to finish and then started working on my blog. I was thinking about doing a new design, but since I knew next to nothing about HTML, I was kind of limited. I should just learn code. Maybe I could find a used book about it in the bookstore or something.

“What’s that?” I turned my head the tiniest bit and found Dusty’s face almost resting on my shoulder. I slammed my

laptop shut, startling everyone out of their study stupors.

“Oh, my God, I think I just died a little,” Taylor said, holding on to her chest.

“Sorry. Sorry.” I glared at Dusty, who still had his face way too close. As far as boys went, he definitely smelled a lot better than the ones I’d encountered. A lot of them covered up the fact that they didn’t shower too often with that nasty body spray that was probably toxic and slowly killing them with black lung disease. I tried not to close my eyes and lean into him and imagine him hanging up a fresh load of laundry, shirtless, of course, outside on a sunny day.

Dear Jesus, what was I doing?

He'd already said he wasn't interested, and I wasn't interested, so why did he keep doing things that made it seem like he was interested, and I kept thinking things like him hanging up laundry without a shirt on?

I scooted away from him and turned my laptop so he couldn't see the screen. He settled back in his position with the smallest of sighs and went back to taking notes. Or at least that's what I thought he was doing, but then a paper airplane landed in my lap. Seriously? How old was he? Although, I had to give him points. Note passing was a lost art in the world of texting and Facebook

messaging and tweeting your every vapid thought out to the world whether the world needed to know it or not.

I didn't look back at him as I unfolded the note.

What didn't you want me to see? Were you looking at porn? If yes, may I join you? If no, what were you doing?

I turned and gave him a disgusted look before setting the note on the coffee table and scribbling an answer.

You are a pig and it's
none of your business.

I refolded the airplane and chucked it over my shoulder, not bothering to aim as I went back to working on my blog. I couldn't really focus, though, because I thought that any moment he was going to stick his head over my shoulder again.

My blog was mine. I didn't post my real name, and there were no pictures of me so no one would ever know it was mine. My blog was...private. It was mine and no one knew about it. This was probably what Peter Parker and Bruce

Wayne felt. Only, you know, their secret identities were more awesome than my secret blogging identity. I could say anything I wanted, be anything I wanted on my blog. That girl that I was didn't matter. No one knew her. And besides, the blog wasn't about me. It was about the music.

A little while later, people started packing it in for the night. I expected Dusty to get up and leave, but he didn't. He also didn't pass the note back, either, and when I stole a glance at him, he was back to being focused. Weirdo.

I was about to turn and ask him if he was going to stay all night when I heard a book close behind me.

“Well, I should probably get back to

my shack.” He got to his feet and everyone who was still downstairs mumbled their good-nights. He looked down at me as if he was expecting something. Was I supposed to walk him out?

Hold up. Did he think this was a date? Was this a date? Why would this have been a date? Sure, dinner had been involved, but only because he’d been here when we were making and serving it.

“See you later,” I said, and it sounded just as lame as it sounded in my head, and I felt as lame as I had the night before in his car.

He opened his mouth, changed his

mind and then made one of his drum sounds to cover it up. “Bye, Red.”

I gave him one of those two-fingered waves, and he did one back with a smile on his face.

It wasn't until after he was gone that I realized he'd taken the paper airplane note with him.

Chapter 13

“So I know your sister is, like, super down on parties, but I got an invite to one, and I can’t go on my own. Also, if you don’t want to come with me, I will hurt you. So, you’re coming,” Hannah said after bio the next day.

“My sister is never going to go for it.”

“I figured, which is why I thought I could talk to her and convince her.”

I almost started laughing. That was never going to work, and it was cute that she thought it would.

“It isn’t going to happen, Hannah. You’ve seen my sister in action.”

Besides, I didn't know if I'd really want to go anyway.

“Oh, I have powers of persuasion.” Hannah didn't seem like the type who would be all over going to a party, so I really wanted to know why she was into it.

“Why do you want to go so much? Is it a guy?”

“No, it's not a guy. I just feel like I want to get the whole college experience, and that includes going to a frat party at least once. It's on the college bucket list. I checked.”

I wondered what else was on that list, because I'd probably taken care of most of it already. She was being weird about it, and I knew that it was another thing

she wasn't telling me about. In some ways I felt so close to Hannah, but in others I felt like she had all these secrets that she would rather die than share with me.

"I'm not taking no for an answer," she said, and I recognized determination on her face. For whatever reason, she had decided that this was a thing she was going to do, and I was going along with it. Hannah had never made any demands on me as a friend, and I was so used to it from my former friends that I felt like a bitch for saying no.

"I might have a lead on a job that wouldn't suck. If you agree to go, I'll tell you about it." It was like one of

those game shows where they put a mystery box in front of you. I could win, or I could lose big. But it might be nice to go out and let loose, for real this time.

“I will only say yes if you can convince Renee. Because I’ve already gotten myself into hot water enough, and she’s just starting to loosen up on me and let me do things.”

Hannah put her hand out.

“Deal. I have complete faith in my ability to convince her.” She was confident, that was for sure. “So I’ll be over this afternoon.”

“If you want to come for dinner, you can. We always make plenty, and you wouldn’t be the first person who’s invited themselves over.” Crap, I hadn’t

meant to mention Dusty coming over. I knew she'd want to overanalyze it and read more into it and say things that would totally mess with my head.

“I don't even need to ask who it was. I can figure it out based on the fact that you mentioned it and that you clearly don't want to talk about it.”

Well...maybe Hannah would turn out to be a sympathetic ear. I only paused for a second before launching into the story of Dusty helping me make dinner and then the airplane note. Of course, I left out the part about my own feelings. She was smart enough to figure them out anyway.

“So I'm just...confused and I don't

know. He's so...complicated." I remembered Mase saying something about the complications being the best part of life.

"Is that code for 'sexy'? Because he is so into you."

"Then why does he tell me that he isn't?" I made a frustrated sound that made a few people walking in front of us turn and give me a look like I was crazy. I was going to be late for math, but I didn't care. It was the kind of class that you didn't have to attend to get a good grade in. Hell, the tests were open book, and I'd heard the TA would point you to the right answers if you asked nice enough.

"Look, I have to go, but we will pick

this up later. What time should I come over?" she said.

"Around six?"

"See you later, girl," she said, taking off for her next class, which was clear across campus. She was going to have to book it to get there.

I went to math and spent the entire hour and fifteen minutes listening to Maroon 5. They were one of those groups I'd loved for so long, and their music was the equivalent of a hug, or a bowl of chicken soup. Warm and comforting.

I drove back to Yellowfield House in a daze and was less-than-surprised to see Dusty's car parked on the street.

“Honey, I’m home,” I called as I shucked my shoes off and set my bag down in the entryway.

“How was your day, dear?” Dusty called from the living room, where he was hanging out with Mase.

“Are you moving in now?” I said, grabbing a can of soda from the fridge. “Do you want one?” I would have felt like a jerk not asking.

“Nope, I’m good,” he said right behind me.

“I swear to God, the next time you do that...” I couldn’t think of what I was going to do. “You know what? I won’t tell you what I’m going to do. The anticipation will just kill you, waiting

for the moment. I would enjoy that.”

“Easy, Red.”

“Seriously, why are you here?

Because I know you have a little bromance, but one half of that isn’t here right now, so it can’t be Hunter. And it can’t be because you love to cook. And it can’t be that you really, really love the house. So what is it?”

I leaned on the fridge. I knew I was asking a question I wasn’t going to like the answer to, but I couldn’t take it anymore. I wanted to know the truth, whether I liked it or not.

“Maybe it is something else that keeps me coming to this house. Maybe...maybe I’ve been waiting for the right moment to say it out loud.” He wouldn’t look at me,

which meant that he might have been telling the truth. I was really tired of him always trying to change the subject, or making a joke out of things.

“I really come here because I’m crazy about...this coffeepot.” He moved around me and stood by the fancy coffeepot that Hunter had probably bought and that cost more than my entire textbook budget for a year.

“I mean, I really, really love it.” He leaned down and pretended to hug it and stroked it fondly.

“Are you shitting me?”

He stood up, his smile faltering for a second.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Just...nothing.” He’d done that on purpose to screw with me, and I wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of knowing that he totally had. I walked past him back into the living room. Mase was busy with a textbook and a highlighter.

“What’s up, Jos?”

“Nothing.” I turned on the television and flipped around. Dusty made sure he entered the room and sat down in the recliner loud enough so that I’d hear him. Jerk.

I purposely settled on an annoying girlie reality show that he would probably never watch in a million years. I turned up the volume. Mase didn’t

seem to mind. He was known for his deep focus when he was reading.

We sat in silence as the girls went out shopping and to clubs and fought and made up with their boyfriends. I waited for him to beg for me to change the channel, or get up and leave. Maybe this was the way to get rid of him. Drive him away. I should start playing Nickelback, or that really angry Russian girl-band music I'd randomly found on the internet. I should start talking about menstrual cramps and yeast infections and other girlie shit he wouldn't want to hear about.

But then I would probably repulse the rest of the males in the house, and I didn't really want to ruin their lives. Just

Dusty's.

What was it about him that made me so crazy?

He started softly making drum noises in the chair. Now he was messing with me. I turned the show up and he started making louder noises. I still wouldn't look at him.

“Can we take the volume down a notch? I'm going deaf over here, and I'm a big fan of standing near speakers at clubs,” Mase said, grabbing the remote and turning the volume down. “Are you okay, Little Ne? You're being kind of...not you.”

“I'm fine.”

I was saved from further explanation

by the arrival of Darah and a few minutes later Taylor and Hunter and then Renee.

“So, Hannah’s coming over for dinner. I hope no one minds.”

Everyone chimed in with how they didn’t, and they’d be more than happy to have her whenever she wanted to come over. Yellowfield House was like a sponge, soaking up random people, and I was one of them. Pretty soon they’d have to add a fourth level, or turn the basement into a dorm. I could just picture it with bunk beds lining the walls.

Taylor and Hunter were on for dinner, and they were doing pizza, since everyone could choose what they wanted

for toppings and we could make them individually. Hannah showed up just as we were flattening out our individual crusts. Of course Dusty was staying. I wanted to ask him if he was going to just move in, but I was kind of giving him the silent treatment for the thing about the coffeepot.

“Hey, girl. And everyone,” she said, walking through the front door without knocking.

Hannah got a warm welcome. I saw the same look in her eyes that I’d seen earlier when she’d told me about making me go to the party.

“Pull up a ball,” Hunter said after she’d washed her hands. He gave her a

ball of dough and a plate to roll it out on. “You just flatten it out as much as you can, and then put it on the pan here and we’ve got sauce and toppings. I recommend using the toppings to make your name, so you remember which one is yours and there’s no confusion. Okay?”

“Got it, chief,” she said, giving him a salute and banging down the dough with a little too much force.

Everyone made their pizzas, and we somehow fit them all in the oven at once. Darah and Mase shooed us all out of the kitchen as they cleaned up, so we had music sex in the living room, with Dusty doing backup drums for Hunter. I kept waiting for Hannah to make her move,

but she just sat back and kept yelling out ridiculous song suggestions that made everyone laugh.

It wasn't until we were all stuffing our faces and Darah and Renee were recounting memories from one of the parties they'd gone to when they were freshmen.

“Speaking of parties,” Hannah said. “There’s this really cool one happening at the Kappa Sigma house and I got an invite and I need a wing woman.”

Her pronouncement was met with silence at first.

“You want to go to a Kappa Sig party?” Hunter said, skeptical.

“Well, I feel like my college

experience won't be complete without going to a frat party. It's not that I want to go...it's that I feel obligated to go. And I really shouldn't go alone, so I need someone to escort me. Hey, Jos, what are you doing on Saturday night?" Was this her master plan? Because it wasn't very masterful.

"Absolutely not," Renee said, practically yelling.

"Well, how about this? How about you all come with us? Then we can all go and have a good time and you can supervise us and I can fulfill my dream. Win-win."

Dusty coughed.

"You okay there, bud?" Hannah happened to be sitting next to him, so she

banged him on the back.

“Fine,” he choked out, taking a gulp from his water glass.

“So,” Hannah said, turning back toward Renee. “Are you in?”

All eyes were on Renee.

She put her hands up. “Why do I have to be the deciding one? Someone else say yes or no. I don’t care either way.”

“Could be fun,” Taylor said.

“Right?” Hannah said, latching on to Taylor. Hunter shrugged.

“I guess.”

“What about you, Dare?” Mase said.

“I’ve already been to one, and it wasn’t that bad.”

Hannah smelled a victory.

“I’ll come, too. Keep you girls in line. And you could use some extra muscle on your side,” Hunter said.

“Agreed,” Mase said, nodding.

“I’m in if you’re in, Nene.” Props to Paul for using the nickname at a time like this.

“Well, I guess I have no choice,” Renee said, getting up and putting her plate in the sink. I knew this was going to happen. Now my sister was mad, and I was going to have to try to patch it up. Renee could stay mad for a while; I knew that from experience.

I gave Hannah a look, but she just smiled triumphantly. I shook my head and stood up, following Renee to the

sink.

“I told her I didn’t want to go. I have no idea why she wants to go, but she does. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, Jos. It’s fine. I’m just... I don’t like being the bad guy. I hate being in that situation. I want to be your older sister, not your mom, and sometimes I cross the line and feel like I have to be your parent.”

“I’m sorry.” Now I felt like absolute shit and I was kind of pissed at Hannah. If she hadn’t been so intent on going to this stupid party, which would probably turn out to be nothing and totally not worth it, Renee wouldn’t be mad at me.

“I’m not mad at you. I know it’s not your fault, Jos.” She turned on the sink

and everyone else started bringing their dishes over.

“It’s our turn,” Darah said as she picked up the soap and squirted it on one of the sponges.

“No, it’s fine. I’ve got it,” Renee said.

“Babe, come on,” Paul said, taking her hand. I knew my sister well enough to know that she was on the verge of tears. He took her hand and led her upstairs and I heard the door to their bedroom shut.

“Can I talk to you, Hannah?” I walked toward the downstairs and jerked my head so we could go down into the cave and have a chat.

“I am so sorry. I had no idea that

would happen,” she said as I shut the door and walked down the stairs.

“What did you think was going to happen? That you’d just suggest that her underage sister should go into a snake pit filled with alcohol and boys who want to touch me and things that I was all wrapped up in this summer and she’d just go along with it? Seriously, Hannah?”

We’d been friends such a short time that this was our first fight, and it felt like shit.

Her eyes were wide, her usually sassy demeanor deflated.

“I’m so sorry. I just... I’m so sorry.”

“Why did you want to go so bad?”

She walked the rest of the way down

the stairs and sat down on the second to last one. I sat a few steps above her.

“It’s so stupid. You’re going to think I’m a moron.”

“Tell me and we’ll find out,” I said. I just wanted people to stop lying to me, or changing the subject. I wanted the truth, for once.

The truth is the most beautiful thing there is, because it’s the most real.

I didn’t believe him when he’d said that, and I wasn’t sure if I believed it now. The truth sucked a lot of the time.

“Okay, so you remember at the party on Sunday that I was being weird? And then we saw those guys in the Union?” I knew it had something to do with that. I

just had no idea to what extent, or how.

“So, this guy came up to me and he pretended to flirt with me, invite me to the party and then he went and told all his friends that he’d flirted with a freak. It was some sort of stupid dare or something. I was pissed, of course, but whatever, you know? But then I saw them again and they just pissed me off. I’m not fucking Gandhi. I can’t deal sometimes. So I had this plan to go to the party and fuck them over somehow. I wasn’t exactly sure how I was going to do it. I was going to wait until we go there and, like, pull a Carrie, only, like, get the bad guys this time. You know?”

“Were you planning on bringing a bucket of pig’s blood with you?”

“Obviously not. That was more of a metaphor than an actual plan. I was kind of hoping you’d help me out with it.”

“You are one of the single weirdest people I have ever met.”

“That is not the meanest thing anyone’s ever said to me.”

I could imagine.

“Are you mad?”

“A little.” I slid down a step so I was one closer to her. “You could have just told me that’s why you wanted to go instead of orchestrating this crazy plan. Or I would have just told you that those douche bags weren’t worth it and averted this whole thing.”

“I know you’re right. I have this

tendency to only trust myself and think that everyone else is going to screw me over. Probably because lots of people have screwed me over. I'd tell you how many times it has happened, but you might not believe some of my stories."

"Oh, you'd be surprised." I had stories, too.

She put her head down on her knees.

"I've messed things up, haven't I?"

"It's okay. You're allowed. And it's not like you did it to be mean, or for some malicious reason. I mean, not a malicious reason against people who hadn't already been assholes to you." I wasn't much for an eye for an eye, but getting those guys back seemed like a valid plan. "But would messing with

those guys make you feel better?”

“At first.”

“Have you ever done this to someone who’s been like this in the past?”

She finally lifted her head up and I saw a glimmer of her smile.

“There was this girl who used to call me freak face and would move away from me if I was ever near her. She used to say a lot of other horrible things, and this one day, I’d just had enough and snapped.” She moved up and there was only one step between us.

“So every morning she used to get these giant frozen coffees from the Starbucks, right? I mean, they were huge. I’m pretty sure they were the only thing

she ever consumed. I can't remember seeing her eat. I'm pretty sure they were her bitch fuel. Anyway, so I started buying the exact drinks she got and putting them in her locker. So she'd open her locker and they'd just spill over all her shit. Wow, that sounds so much worse when I say it out loud. It was funny that week when every time after lunch she'd open her locker and one would come flying out at her. She never figured it out."

I had to admit it was pretty good.

"And you know what? I bet that girl is probably screwing some ridiculously hot guy at some awesome college in Florida or something. Bitch," she said.

"Or maybe she got knocked up the

summer after high school and her parents made her marry him and she had a super ugly baby and she waits tables at a horrible diner and her boss is always grabbing her ass, but she can't say anything because she can't afford to lose her job because her baby daddy is an alcoholic who just sits in his recliner and drinks all day."

She stared at me as if I'd grown an extra head and then burst out laughing.

"Girl, you have a hell of an imagination. You should be a writer." She wasn't the first person who'd said that to me. In English, Greg had written comments on my first few prompts that were all positive, and he'd singled me

out more than once for recognition. Of course I'd turned into a human fireball every time, and I wished he'd stop doing it.

And because Hannah had told me about one of her little secrets, I decided to share one of mine.

"Hold on a sec." My laptop was in my room, so I grabbed it and turned it on, clicking on to the internet browser and pulling up my blog. I handed the computer to Hannah without saying anything.

"Okay," she said, scrolling through my blog. "What is this?"

"It's mine. My blog. This is my secret identity. My name is Joscelyn Archer and I'm a music blogger."

Her eyes went wide and she stared at the blog more intently.

“No shit, this is yours? Oh, my God.” I watched her eyes race over my latest album review and then she clicked on some of the tabs and looked at some other things. I waited for the verdict.

“This is so freaking awesome! Why didn’t you tell me about this?”

I shrugged.

“I don’t know. I guess it was just such a personal thing that I was putting out there. I didn’t mind sharing it with strangers because they would never know me or meet me, but sharing it with people I know is something different. What if they thought it was weird? And

what if I was bad at it? I mean, I get sucky comments from strangers, but it would be awful if one of my friends or something said it. I don't know." I tried to take the laptop away as I felt my ears getting red.

Hannah wouldn't let me have it.

"No way. You shared this with me and I'm going to take it all in. I told you that you were a good writer, and you are. You're really, really good. Why are you not an English major?"

Shit. I didn't know showing her my blog would lead to a rehash of things I didn't want to talk about.

"Because I don't fancy working in food service for the rest of my life or ending up living in a refrigerator box on

the street.”

Hannah smacked me on the arm.

“You would never end up in a box on the street. Hello? Do you see where you are living right now? Your sister and all her friends would never let that happen. You have a whole fucking houseful of people that care about you and you can’t even see it.”

What was that about?

“I’m not ungrateful. Do I seem ungrateful?”

She sighed and gave my computer back.

“No, that’s not what I meant. That was just my little jealousy monster rearing his incredibly ugly head. Just forget it.”

“You have people who care about you. I care about you,” I said, putting my arm around her. “Once again, I totally sounded like I was into you. But you knew what I meant, right?”

“Totally. And I care about you, too.”

We shared a completely not awkward hug and then started laughing.

“So, a frat party, huh? Did you ever think that the best revenge is living well? I read that somewhere, and I think it would work in this situation. We’ll get you a killer dress and the ladies of Yellowfield House can make you up and then we can go and you can shove it in their faces. If they think they got to you, they win. If you show them you don’t

give a shit, then you win,” I said.

She shrugged one shoulder.

“It’s not as good as dumping buckets of pig’s blood on them.” Thinking about Carrie reminded me that Stephen King lived right down the street. I told Hannah and I thought her eyeballs were going to fall out of her head.

“I knew he lived in Bangor, but I didn’t know where.”

“Yeah, we can drive by or something sometime. We could even creepily walk by. But we’d probably get arrested. He’s got security cameras and stuff.”

We both walked back up the stairs and found everyone sitting in the living room, pretending they weren’t waiting for us—except Renee and Paul.

“We didn’t kill each other, and we didn’t devolve into a girl fight of hair-pulling and eye-gouging, if anyone was worried about that,” Hannah said, slinging her arm over my shoulder. “See? All good.”

Everyone seemed to sigh in relief.

“But I think I owe your sister an apology, so I’m going to go do that,” Hannah said, heading for the stairs as if she’d been in the house a hundred times.

I didn’t know if that was a good idea, but I wasn’t going to stop her.

I sat down on the couch next to Taylor, and she leaned her head on my shoulder.

“You know, I’ve never been to a frat

party, either. I was a bit curious about the experience, as well.”

Hunter made a grumbling noise.

“What, you don’t think I can defend myself against a few drunk frat guys? I defended myself pretty good against you,” she said.

His eyes narrowed and he pointed at her. “Touché, Missy. Touché.”

Dusty seemed to be watching me. Why hadn’t he gone home yet?

“I’m going to go check on them,” he said suddenly, popping to his feet. “I’m not sure who my money would be on in a fight between Hannah and Renee.” He jogged up the stairs, his pants sliding lower and lower. One of these days I was going to ask him how they stayed

up. But he'd make some weird comment and then I'd blush and that wouldn't be fun. I didn't need to give him any more fuel.

"I always wished I had red hair," Taylor said, running her fingers through mine. Hers was so pretty, though. It did that beachy-wave thing that I could never pull off. My hair just sort of...hung on my head.

"So you'd have an excuse to fly off the handle?" Hunter said, picking up his guitar again. It seemed to be his go-to in times of turmoil.

"Ha-ha, you wish," Taylor said.

We sat for a few more minutes as Mase turned on NESN and checked the

sports stats. Both Hannah and Dusty had been gone for longer than I was comfortable with, but it was nearly silent upstairs.

I got up and went for the stairs. I heard the rest of them talking behind me, but I didn't care.

Being careful to walk quietly and carefully, I approached Renee and Paul's room. The door was cracked just a bit. Dusty's voice was the one I heard first.

"She's going to have so many people watching her, she won't be able to sneeze without one of us saying 'bless you.' Trust me."

"Why should I trust you?" That was Renee.

I leaned closer and maybe a little too far, catching myself off balance and banging into the door, which slammed open and banged off the wall. Not the most graceful of entrances I'd ever made.

“Sorry, I just came up to see if everything was okay. I didn't hear anything downstairs, so I was hoping I wasn't going to come up and find a pile of bodies and one of you holding a knife or something,” I said, trying to save myself.

“Where would someone get a knife in my bedroom?” Renee said, recovering first from being burst in on.

“You do have that really pointy nail

file,” Paul said, chiming in. Dusty was composed but Hannah was a little red-faced.

I wanted, desperately, to know what Dusty’s answer to Renee’s question would have been, but I couldn’t admit that I’d been listening.

“Sorry I flew off the handle,” Renee said, sitting down on the edge of her bed.

“No, it’s okay. Mom would have done the same thing,” I said.

“But I’m not your mom. Even though you’ve made some bad decisions in the past, you’ve been doing really great lately, and I haven’t given you enough credit. I’m proud of you.” The praise was going right to my ears, and I could

feel them heating up. She couldn't have done this when we were alone? I mean, I didn't care if she did it with Paul around, because he was practically family, but with Dusty and Hannah there, it was embarrassing.

Dusty cleared his throat and moved toward the door, shoving his hands into his pockets.

"I think that's my cue to go home. I'll see you all...at some point. Okay, good night." He was out of there quicker than you could say "saggy pants."

"Sometimes I have an issue picking up on social cues, but this isn't one of those times. I will see you tomorrow, Jos. Thanks for understanding, Renee. 'Bye,

Paul.” Hannah scurried after Dusty, and I was left with Renee and Paul.

“I think I’m going to give you two a minute.” Paul left and closed the door quietly behind him. I sat down next to Renee on the bed.

“So what were you talking about when I made my awesome entrance?” I said.

“Nothing. Hannah was just explaining her reasons for wanting to go to the party. I swear, ninety percent of guys are complete and utter douche bags.” She closed her eyes and flopped backward.

“If that’s true, then how is it possible that we have three non-douche bags living in this house? I mean, those are, like, Powerball odds.” I joined her and

let myself fall backward and we stared at the ceiling.

“I don’t know. But I’m thinking we should start buying more scratch tickets,” she said.

The comforter was bunched up under my head, so I smoothed it out.

“You ever take that thing off?” She reached for my bracelet, fingering the elephant charm.

“No.” I let her play with it for a second longer and then turned on my side, propping my head on my hand. She did the same. It felt like when we were little and used to build forts out of pillows and sheets in the living room with all the chairs from the dining room.

That was before a lot of our siblings entered our lives. All I could remember was that it was pretty quiet back then.

“Sometimes I feel so old,” she said.

“How so?”

“Just between everything with Mom and Dad and with our family being so crazy. Do you remember that time when Mom forgot us at school and we had to hitchhike?”

I rolled my eyes.

“Which time?” It had happened often in our youth.

“It’s a wonder the two of us even managed to turn out relatively normal.” I tapped the side of her head.

“Relatively? Speak for yourself.”

“Hey, ‘relatively normal’ is a

compliment for you,” she said, grabbing a pillow and whacking me with it.

“What the hell?” I dived and got a hold of one and smacked her back. And then, because we were sisters, we had a pillow fight. Renee didn’t have down pillows, so there were no feathers, but it got pretty ridiculous anyway.

By the time both of us were out of breath, we had an audience. One of the guys must have heard us yelling and carrying on and thought we were killing each other, but they found us collapsed and laughing in exhaustion.

“So, you’re good, then?” Mase said. “Because you could, you know, keep doing that. I wouldn’t complain.” He

grinned, and Darah made a disgusted sound.

“I think the odds are going down,” I said to Renee and she laughed.

“What odds?” Hunter said.

“Never mind,” we both said at the same time.

Chapter 14

Hannah was more reluctant to go shopping than a virgin being led to the sacrificial altar.

“You agreed to this plan. It will be okay, I swear,” I said as I drove us toward the Bangor Mall. She kept changing the radio stations and it was driving me mad. I finally reached out and turned off the radio.

I drove around a few times and found a parking spot near the Dick’s Sporting Goods store. I got my purse and was about to get out of the car when Hannah’s hand reached out and stopped

me.

“Okay, so you know how we’ve been sharing stuff lately, and I have to tell you that I haven’t been shopping in, like, two years.” She bit her lip and shrugged.

I sat back in my seat in shock.

“For serious?” I said.

“I mean, not like food shopping, but clothes shopping.” This was astounding, because she always looked cute, in a punk/vintage kind of way. She’d wear something that looked like it belonged in a 1950s period piece with something that had spikes or grommets or leather.

“I buy everything online. I know which major retailers make their shirts small and don’t even get me started on shoes.”

“Why do you hate shopping so much?”

She gave me an icy look that told me she thought it was more than obvious and I should know without having to ask. “I mean, is that it?”

“Is that it? Do you have any idea what it’s like to go into a changing room and have the attendant look at you like a leper? It’s like they’re afraid I’m going to ruin the clothes. And then the other people stare and those horrible lights make you look awful. It’s just an experience that I decided I didn’t want to participate in anymore. Nude modeling is one thing, but shopping is completely different.”

“Then why did you say okay?”

“Because I had hoped that this time

would be different. In addition to being really good at sensing people, I'm also an eternal optimist. Deep down inside. But don't tell anyone. I don't want that to mess with my image."

"I won't tell anyone if you agree to not tell anyone about my blog." We got out of the car and she started whistling. "Hannah? Did you hear me?"

"Um, yes? The thing is, I kind of already did." She squinched up her face as if she was preparing for a blow.

"What!" She nearly hit me when she opened the door.

"Uh, yeah. Remember how I said I was going to help you with the job thing? Well, it just so happens that I have a contact, of sorts, at the campus

newspaper and I showed him your blog. He's been looking for someone to start writing a music column, and I gave him your name and your email, so he'll probably be contacting you." She said it all in a rush.

I stopped walking and grabbed her arm to make her face me.

"Why did you do that? I told you I wanted it to be a secret." I could feel the panic building in my chest. I honestly didn't know why it freaked me out so much, but I was definitely freaking.

"I know, but, like I said, you're really talented. I don't think you belong in poli-sci. You belong at a magazine or writing for a newspaper or, since those are all

dying out, working for music promotions. I don't know that much about it, but I know that you are wasting your talent.”

“And you know all that from reading a few blog posts I wrote?” The music industry was vicious, and there were thousands of other blogs out there. I didn't have thousands of followers, or even close to that. I was one drop in a vast ocean of other people doing the same thing, and a lot of them doing it better than me.

“I know it because I know you. Once again, creepy, but I feel like you don't even see yourself sometimes. I know you've got, like, baggage and shit and that someday you will share it with me,

but you don't have to now. But that baggage is standing in the way of you doing something awesome.”

She started walking toward a Deb shop, which was where we were most likely to find something for her to wear. They already had the prom dresses out, even though prom was months away. I couldn't explain because she wouldn't understand, so I just followed her into the store.

* * *

Almost an hour later, Hannah had rejected nearly all of my dress suggestions. I'd tried everything; short, long, in between. Red, green, blue,

black, gold, pink. She hated them all and found a reason for every rejection. It was no wonder she hadn't been shopping in two years. She was so freaking picky.

“What about this?” I'd gotten fed up with trying to help her, so I was picking out ridiculous things. I held up a tube dress that was in a shade of violent fluorescent yellow and looked like something a cheap streetwalker would wear.

“Do I have to list the things that are wrong with that dress?”

I sighed and put it back.

“Jesus, Hannah, you're harder to shop for than the Queen.”

“The Queen doesn't do her own

shopping. She has people,” she said, walking along a rack and running her hands over the dresses. “Oooh,” she said, pulling one out. It was the first time she’d showed interest in anything, so I was shocked.

It was a one-shouldered red dress with black embroidery along the hem that would probably hit right above her knees. It also had a black belt around the waist with a silver buckle.

“I’m trying this on,” she said, and without any more fuss, she marched toward the dressing room.

I followed in her wake, stunned.

The attendant was absent, so Hannah just walked into the first room that was

open.

“Hold my bag?”

“Sure,” I said as she handed her purse under the door. I waited as she shucked her shoes and clothes off and then heard the sound of the zipper on the dress. She turned back and forth.

“Well? Does it fit?” The door slowly opened halfway and she let me in.

“You tell me.” She shrugged and turned in a circle and the skirt flared out.

“You are a knockout, Hannah.” It was true. The belt made her look like the perfect hourglass, and the length made her legs look like they went on forever. The bare shoulder happened to be on the side with her scars, but really, I wasn’t looking at them.

“I think we have a winner,” I said, taking her hand and twirling her under my arm. She crashed into the wall because there really wasn’t enough room for twirling, and we both laughed.

“Okay, now it’s your turn. Go pick something and get back here, bitch.” I had just planned on borrowing the gold number again, but once again, Hannah wasn’t going to take no for an answer.

She shoved me out the door and I went back to the front of the store where the dresses were. I’d seen a few that I thought were cute, but I’d been so focused on Hannah I hadn’t even thought about it. I quickly looked through, trying to find something that wasn’t too short or

too long, or a bad color.

I rejected anything red or pink or orange. I also didn't want black because it tended to wash me out at the same time it made my freckles stand out way too much. I found a drapey gray number that shimmered a little when I held the fabric under the light. It also looked like it would be comfortable and cover everything I needed covered. It wasn't as conservative as what I would have worn in my old life, but it was a good middle ground kind of dress.

I brought it back and saw that Hannah was back in her other clothes and had the red dress draped over her arm.

“Very pretty. Now get naked and put it on.” I was shoved into the room and she

slammed the door behind me. There were only a few other people in the dressing room, and I bet they didn't know what to make of Hannah.

I stripped down and put the dress on. I got the zipper almost all the way up. Hannah's foot was tapping impatiently on the other side of the door.

"Can you zip me up?" I unlocked the door before she busted it down. I turned my back and she finished zipping me before she wrenched me back around. I didn't think she knew the meaning of the word *gentle*.

"It makes your boobs look great." Of course, this was an important consideration. "Gorgeous. If I had a

dick, I'd totally do you."

"That's the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me," I said, touching her shoulder.

"Okay, so now we both have dresses, can we get out of here?"

"Sure, just let me get changed."

Hannah couldn't get out of that store fast enough. I reminded her that we needed accessories for our dresses, so she dragged me into Claire's for earrings and such, and then we went and got shoes. By the time we had everything for our outfits, we were both starving, so we decided to be done for the day. I invited Hannah to dinner and she accepted.

"By the way, what were you and my

sister talking about for so long last night?” I said as we shoved our purchases into the backseat of my car.

“I was just apologizing profusely for my lack of tact. It took a while. I also had to go into the whole story about the guys and outline my reasons for wanting to go. After I told you, it seemed stupid that I was trying to keep it a secret in the first place.”

“That was it?”

“Yeah, why?” I looked at her, but her eyes were wide and innocent. I’d underestimated her lying skills, apparently, based on past experience.

“No reason. Just curious.” I dropped it. My next stop was Dusty to see what

his version of the story was.

* * *

I didn't have long to wait to interrogate Dusty because he was at the house when we got back, sitting on the couch with his headphones on as if he was the king of the castle. He pulled them off his ears and left them around his neck when he saw me and Hannah.

“Should we add your name to the list?” I said, pointing to the chart with everyone's name on it. “Or maybe you should just move in. You could sleep on the recliner.” It happened to be the ugliest chair in the history of chairs, but Taylor refused to get rid of it, and would

never say why. Some sort of weird sentimental value. I honestly didn't want to know.

"Pass. I'm just here because Hunter is helping me study for the Praxis. Or actually, he's showing me how *not* to study for the Praxis."

"Did you get your scores yet?" I asked Hunter.

"Not yet. But they should be in by tomorrow. If not, I'm going to let Taylor call and rip them a new one. She's much better at yelling and getting her way than I am." This was true. I'd seen it in action.

"I'm sure you did fine," I said, going to take my bags down to my room, Hannah following. Hunter was really

smart—in fact, the entire house was freaking smart, just in different ways. It was more intimidating than when I'd been competing with my classmates in high school and last year for the highest GPA.

I tossed my bags on the floor and went to check my email, my heart pounding a little bit. Yup, there it was. An email with the subject line: Writing for The Maine Campus, from someone named Brett Evans. I clicked it open and scanned it. He'd read my blog and loved it and was wondering if I'd like to have my own column in the Entertainment section where I'd review bands, CDs and so forth. He did mention that he'd

gotten my name from Hannah, so it didn't seem like he was contacting me out of the blue. He also mentioned that the paper paid per article, but if I liked it enough, he was looking for an assistant editor for his section, and he would love to talk to me, and it didn't matter if I wasn't a journalism major.

“Let me guess. Brett emailed you.” Hannah had been silent the entire time I'd been reading the email. Probably because she knew that's what I was doing.

“Yeah. He wants to give me a column, and he said he needed an assistant editor.”

“Holy crap, that's awesome! Good job, girl.”

I felt less-than-enthusiastic. “But, Hannah, I’ve read the paper, like, once, and I’m not a journalism major. I’m not even a writing major.”

She scoffed.

“Doesn’t matter. Brett’s a new-media major. There are lots of people who work there that aren’t in journalism. Besides, it’s not like it’s the *New York Times*. It’s just a school paper. Not a big deal.” Why did it feel like such a big deal? “So you’re going to do it, right?”

It was money, which I didn’t have, and it was something I loved to do.

Live the day, Jossy.

“Yeah, I’m going to do it.” The second the words were out of my mouth,

Hannah tackle-hugged me and we both fell back on the bed. “I swear, I think you’re more excited about it than I am.”

“Awesome. Fuck, I’m starving,” she said, putting her hand on her stomach and sitting up. She held out her hand and pulled me to my feet.

“How do you know this guy, anyway?” Hannah never really talked about other friends.

She sighed and rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. “It’s kind of a long story. We were sort of friends in high school, and I was madly in love with him. I never told him and eventually I got over it, but we’re still sort of friends. It’s one of those weird relationships where you never really know where you stand, you

know? But he's a good guy, I swear."

Okay, the story wasn't that long. My next question was automatic.

"Is he cute?"

She smiled a little. "Not in the conventional way. He's sort of band-geek chic. You'll see what I mean when you meet him."

* * *

Hannah kept my new job quiet at dinner, like I asked her to, and ended up staying with us for homework time.

"You know, I said we needed to build a library instead of a stupid man cave and look at us now," Taylor said as every available surface, including the

floor, was taken up with books and people and computers. “I told you I wanted one of those bookcases with the ladder that rolls across it.”

“Well, maybe some people were waiting for some other people’s birthday to do that,” Hunter said, not looking up from his book. He and Dusty had their heads together over the same book.

“Whatever,” she said, going grumpily back to her book. “I have a point and you know it.”

“Yes, baby. Whatever you say, baby.” Taylor balled up a piece of paper and chucked it at him.

I was busy typing out a response to Brett while Hannah read for Pam’s class. I was honest in saying that I had

no journalistic experience, but said I was eager to learn. I sent it off, and my email pinged only five minutes later with a response.

Brett was thrilled and wanted me to come in for an official interview at some point in the next few days. He told me to pick up a copy of the *AP Stylebook* at the library, as well. I had no idea what that was, but I'd figure it out. I typed back a quick response telling him when I was free and he wrote back a few seconds later saying he'd see me at four on Friday at the office in the Union. I'd walked by it enough times, so I knew where it was. Now all I had to do was panic about it until then.

My only other mission that night was to get Dusty alone so I could ask him about the night before, but doing that was going to be tricky with a houseful of people watching. If I asked to talk to him, that would look crazy suspicious, so I'd just have to wait for a good opportunity.

I seized one when he got up to grab a soda from the fridge. Pretending I needed more tea—which I actually did—I followed him into the kitchen.

“So, you proposed to the coffeepot yet?” I said, filling my mug up and putting it in the microwave. He came and stood right behind me. Clearly, he had never learned anything about personal

space.

“Shh, I’m planning to do it in an elaborate viral video. I’m still trying to find some backup singers and dancers, and I’m waiting on a hot air balloon, so don’t say anything.” He put his fingers to his lips and pointed at the coffeepot. “I want it to be a surprise.”

“Your secret is safe with me,” I said as I took my cup out of the microwave and put the tea bag in. “So, sorry about last night and you getting wrapped up in the drama.”

“It’s no big deal. I just wanted to make sure nobody broke out a chair or called the cops or anything.”

“Is that how it was in your house?”
He’d never really talked about growing

up, except for vague statements that, reading between the lines, led me to believe it hadn't been great.

“Sometimes.” I nearly collapsed in shock at the honesty in his answer. “But that’s ancient history.” He cracked his soda open and looked at me as if he was waiting for something. I was completely distracted from my original plan to ask what he’d been about to say last night. This was much more interesting.

“My mom’s been married four times. My dad three. I have so many half and stepsiblings I can’t name them all when people ask,” I said, stirring my tea. I didn’t know how much Renee or anyone else had told him about our situation, but

he didn't look surprised.

"I've lost count how many houses I've lived in, and I've had to switch schools a bunch of times," I continued. He just stayed silent, so I kept talking, like he was somehow pulling the words out of me. Stupid mesmerizing eyes.

I expected him to share something about his own childhood, but he didn't.

"That must have been rough." He came and leaned his back on the counter next to me. There it was again, that smell of clean laundry with just a hint of cologne.

"It was. Remember when you said I had this 'don't fuck with me' vibe?"

He smiled. "How I could I forget? I remember everything you say." Hold up.

He, what?

I looked at him, questioning.

He raised his hand and dragged a piece of my hair through his fingers and sighed.

“You don’t make things easy, Red.”

“I don’t make what easy?” Sometimes I felt like he was talking in code and I needed a translator. It would be a hell of a lot easier if he would just talk in a way that I could understand.

“Why do you do that? I feel like you’re always talking about something I don’t know about.” He dropped his hand and looked down and let out a breath.

“Nothing. I didn’t mean anything.”

I shook my head.

“No, I want you to tell me what you meant, and I want to know how you would have responded last night when Renee asked you how you would protect me before I crashed into the door and interrupted.” Screw it, they probably all knew I was listening.

He stepped away from me, but I grabbed his shirt to make him stop. Jesus, he was cut under there.

Not the point, Jos.

“Jos, come on. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“Why are you lying to me?” It was hard to keep my voice down so everyone in the living room didn’t hear. I didn’t want to make a scene.

“I’m not lying to you, Jos.” He tried to pull away, but I grabbed his shirt with my other hand. Either I overestimated my strength, or he added some force and ended up slamming up against the counter and he crashed into me, trapping my arms between us. It didn’t hurt; I was shocked more than anything else.

“What the hell!” I said, finding his face only inches from mine. He exhaled and all I could think was that he was going to kiss me and how much my lips were begging him to. No, no way. I pushed against his chest and it was like something in him snapped and he leaped away from me like I was a leper.

He wiped his mouth as if he had

kissed me and his face was horrified.

“What just happened?” I said, using the counter to hold myself up. Dusty let out a sound that was a bit like an explosion and, somehow, very apropos.

“I’m going to take my soda and go back to homework. Yeah, that’s what I’m going to do.” Without looking back at me, he grabbed his Coke and practically ran back to the living room, where I heard him talking with Hunter.

I picked up my tea with a shaking hand and sipped it, because I didn’t think I could go back to the living room right now. I stayed in the kitchen and savored my tea. And by savored I mean I drank about three drops with every sip so it would last. It was only a matter of time

before someone disturbed me trying to get myself together and it turned out to be Hunter.

“What are you doing?”

“Just...thinking.” If anyone asked, I was going to say I was lost in thought about...something. I’d been too busy replaying the moment with Dusty to think of a more valid excuse.

“It looks painful. Whatever you’re thinking about.” He grabbed a bottle of Gatorade and a can of cranberry-lime seltzer water for Taylor. Oh, it had been anything but painful, unless you counted a cannon of butterflies being fired repeatedly inside my stomach and feeling like every nerve ending in my

body was on fire as painful.

“Just got a lot...on my mind.” He looked at me like I’d grown an extra head.

“Okay, then. You coming back to study?” Well, I had to, didn’t I? Or else they would know something was wrong and then they’d all vote on who would be the one to come and talk to me about it. I’d figured out their system.

“Be right there.” I downed the rest of my tea in one gulp. It didn’t feel as badass as I’d imagined it would. I set my cup in the sink and walked back into the living room and took my place on the floor next to Hannah. She gave me a questioning look, but I shook my head and picked up my phone.

Tell you later.

I typed out the message and hit Send, hoping that her text alert wasn't too loud. She usually had her phone off during the day when we were at class, so I couldn't remember if I'd ever heard it go off.

When I heard what sounded like a Chinese gong at an insanely loud volume, I nearly choked on my heart, because it had jumped into my mouth. Exclamations of surprise, some more colorful than others, came from everyone else.

“Sorry! Sorry! The volume on this phone is all wonky. I'll just turn it off.”

She read my message and typed out a quick response and then turned her phone off as everyone tried to focus back in on what they were doing.

Make it good.

I shook my head at her answer and she started wiggling her eyebrows again and I debated about telling her at all, but she was really the only one I had to talk to.

Chapter 15

Hannah made some vague excuse about accidentally leaving her earrings that she'd bought at the mall in one of my bags, so we had to go back down to my room and "search" for them. As soon as she shut the door to the upstairs, she turned on me.

"Oh, my God, I've been dying up there! I could barely concentrate. Did he kiss you? Was it good? Did he cop a feel? Did you do it in the kitchen?"

I had to put both hands on her shoulders to stop her from continuing. Where did she get these ideas?

“No, no, no and NO. Do you seriously think we would be able to have sex in the kitchen without someone either hearing or walking in? And do you really think I’m that kind of girl? Seriously?”

She thought about that for a second.

“Well, no, but I had hope.”

I let go of her shoulders and walked down the rest of the stairs and sat on the huge couch.

“Sometimes I wonder how your mind works and then I realize that I really don’t want to know.” She dragged her feet and sat down next to me.

“So what did happen?”

I pulled my legs up and folded them

under me.

“That’s what I’m still trying to figure out. We were talking and then he said something about his childhood being rough and then he touched my hair—”

“That means he loves you,” Hannah said, nodding as if it was a scientific fact.

“How do you know that?”

She waved her hand.

“It’s been proven, like, over and over again. So yeah, he touched your hair and...”

I got back on track. “He touched my hair and we were talking and then I said something and he tried to brush me aside, so I grabbed his shirt and he just...he dived at me and pushed me

against the counter and I thought he was going to kiss me and then he freaked out and went back into the living room. The end.” Hannah’s eyes were wide, and she’d hung on every word as if I was sharing some naughty secret tryst rather than...well, pretty much nothing. It sounded, like, so minor when I said it out loud. It had felt anything but minor at the time.

“How many times do I have to tell you that he wants you? Dude, it sucks that we were all here or else you two might be mopping the kitchen floor together right now.” I hadn’t yet told Hannah about my still-present virginity, but this didn’t seem like a good time to bring it up,

even though she'd all but admitted to me that she was, too. The way she talked led me to believe that she'd at least done more than I had, even if she hadn't done the deed.

"I'm not going to dignify that with a response. So have you 'found your earrings' yet?" I got up to get ready for bed. I was tired and I had a lot to think about in the hours it would take me to actually fall asleep.

Hannah pouted but got up.

"Fine. But you're no fun."

"Why don't you find your own guy? What about Brett?" I'd never met the kid, but he was the first guy she'd even mentioned, so that had to count for something. Hannah made a frustrated

sound.

“I told you—it’s ancient history.”

“History has a way of repeating itself.” I was big on being the devil’s advocate tonight.

“Whatever, girl. You’ve got much more going on than I do, since I’ve got nothing going on.”

I walked her up the stairs and said goodbye before I went back to pick up the rest of my books from the living room. Hunter was the only one still up and he was rubbing his eyes and blinking them over and over.

“Where’s Dusty?”

“Oh, he had to go. Said to tell you good-night.” Why did I feel like

something more had gone on while I was downstairs with Hannah? I stared at Hunter, but I knew that he was a good liar, at least about stuff like this.

“Did he say anything about me?” The words were out before I could grab them and shove them back in my mouth and pretend they hadn’t happened.

“Like what?” Play it cool.

“Oh, I don’t know. He was just being weird in the kitchen.” Hunter looked genuinely confused.

“Weird, how?” If he was lying, give this kid an Oscar.

“He didn’t say *anything* to you?” He shook his head and he looked a little concerned.

“Do you need to talk to me about

something?”

I shook my head quickly. “No, no. He just made a joke, and I took it the wrong way. It’s fine. No big deal, seriously. I swear. Cross my heart.” I smiled and held my books to my chest.

“Okay. If you’re sure.”

“Yeah, no big. Good night.”

“Night.”

I hoped Hunter bought my semiterrible explanation and didn’t ask Dusty, because clearly Dusty hadn’t said anything to Hunter about what had happened in the kitchen. Maybe it was because everyone was around. Jesus H. Christ, why was this so confusing?

Dusty wasn't around the next day, or the next, and I knew it had everything to do with me. I tried to ask where he was without acting like I cared too much about it, because I didn't want anyone to be suspicious. Hunter just said that he'd picked up some extra hours at Bull Moose. We were still all going to the party on Saturday, and I decided that I needed to talk to him and know what the hell was up, because I couldn't take the suspense. Also, Hannah had been driving me so crazy I kind of wanted to kill her, or talk to him just so I could shut her up.

Despite being so distracted about Dusty, I did manage to at least make a

good impression on Brett at the interview on Friday. The offices were on the first floor of the Union, and I'd walked by and peeked in a few times since the door was made of glass. I'd always been kind of fascinated by it, if I was being honest.

Brett had asked me to bring in some more writing samples, and he went over them with me, explaining how an article should be written in something called "inverted pyramid style." It was all a little confusing, but he gave me a handout on it and some articles to read online. By the end of the hour, he had given me a desk and filled out paperwork to put me on the payroll. I was still giddy when I got home, but I

didn't say anything to anyone, except Hannah, of course. My first day would be next Tuesday, since they had production nights on Wednesdays and Sundays. It was good I had the Dusty thing to worry about already, so the new-job thing was pushed aside.

Dusty and I still hadn't exchanged numbers, so I had to do some stealthy eavesdropping to find out when exactly he'd be at work so I could talk to him, and I found my perfect opportunity on Saturday.

I walked in hesitantly. I had the whole thing planned out. I was looking for Christina Perri, Muse and The Red Jumpsuit Apparatus. I had a script and

everything. It wasn't John Hughes material, but I thought it was pretty good.

I walked into the store and went right for the Christina Perri, since it was easiest to find in the Pop section. I'd been back a few times since the first time, and the employees had continued to leave me alone.

“Welcome to Bull Moose. How may I be of assistance?” It was much better to just sort of expect him to always be lurking behind me. Like a tall shadow. With great abs and a killer smile.

“Well, I was, like, looking for some cool music. Because all the music I thought was cool is cool now, and I like things before they're cool, so those things aren't cool anymore. I need

something that is precool.” I pretended to toss my hair.

He laughed as if he was surprised.

“What?” I said, dropping the annoying voice I’d been using and going back to my normal one.

“Nothing. I wasn’t expecting you to come here anymore.”

I played dumb. “Why not?”

“Well, after...” He cleared his throat. Huh. This must be Dusty when he was nervous. It was kind of adorable. I gave myself a mental slap. Get your head in the game, Jos.

“Nothing, nothing,” he said, shaking his head and chuckling. “Is there anything I can help you with, Red?”

I struggled to remember the script. I wished I had one of those people who stood in the wings of the theater and I could just yell “line!” and they’d feed it to me.

“Actually, I did come to talk to you about that. Should we maybe go somewhere else?” The other employees had definitely stopped what they were doing, and I could hear them all listening to us. I wondered what else Dusty had told them about me. Did I really want to know? Probably not.

“Sure. Come on.” He nodded to one of the guys at the register and pointed to the door that said Employees Only. The guy nodded back, and Dusty opened the

door for me.

It was what looked like a break room with a huge folding table, some mismatched lawn chairs, a fridge, microwave and coffeepot. Dusty cleared a bag of half-eaten chips out of the way and pulled a chair out for me. I wondered if he was conscious of stuff like that, or if he just did it without thinking. If he was trying to impress me or if it was just a reflex he had when a woman was in his presence. I kind of hoped it was the first.

“Okay, so you haven’t been back at the house and I just wanted to make sure it wasn’t because of me,” I said in a rush. In my script, I had said the lines perfectly. I guess I should have

rehearsed more.

He turned a chair backward and slouched on it. Too cool for school, that boy.

“Why would it be because of you?” He had a smile on his face, but I was beginning to learn the many smiles of Dusty Sharp, and this one said that he was putting on an act. The smile was just a little too wide, his eyes just a little too bright. Ha, caught in the act. It was time for my next line.

“Um, because maybe I called you out on the fact that you never give me a straight answer about anything and then...you almost...” Ugh, the words wouldn’t come out, even though I’d said

them over and over. Stupid words, being so hard to say.

“We almost what? Because from where I was standing, *you* were the one who grabbed *me*.”

Oh, that’s how he wanted to play it?

“As I remember it, I was trying to stop you from leaving and you, well, you...threw yourself against me.”

“I was caught off balance and I underestimated your strength.” Yeah, and I was the secret love child of Paul, George, Ringo and John.

“Really? That’s what you’re going with?” I said, giving him a look.

He looked down and his smile faltered.

“It sounded much better in my head.”

Story of my life.

“We should be able to talk about this. We’re both rational adults. This doesn’t have to be a big deal.” Yup, I was officially off book.

He looked up and shook his head as if he couldn’t believe what I’d just said.

“Oh, Red. It’s been a big deal for a long time.”

“H-how long?” I leaned forward in my chair without meaning to, and he leaned over the back of his so our faces were close and at the same level.

“Long, long. Since that first time I saw you messing with the vending machine. I almost didn’t want you to turn around, and then you did. I’d heard about you,

but I had no idea you were...you. Shit, I'm really screwing this up."

"It's okay. I'm not really good at the whole talking thing, either."

"I guess that makes two of us."

He leaned, and I leaned and we leaned and my head was spinning and I was afraid I was going to go off balance, but I was falling just as much into his eyes....

The door opened and a surprised voice invaded our space. "Whoa, sorry, man. Just came in to get a soda, but I'll get one later. Sorry." I didn't even turn to see the guy. My eyeballs were otherwise occupied.

Dusty and I were frozen, with those last few inches of air between us. How

was it that air, so insubstantial most of the time, could suddenly be so...substantial?

“I don’t know what I’m doing here, Red. You are a complication that took me completely by surprise.” His breath moved across the space between us.

“Ditto,” I said, and he closed his eyes, but that didn’t break the spell.

“We can’t do this,” he said, not opening his eyes, but not pulling back.

“Do what?” I didn’t even know what he was suggesting. We weren’t even friends. Did he mean kissing?

He made a frustrated sound and threw himself to his feet, as if it took every ounce of strength he had, which was

considerable, and went to the farthest corner of the room.

“A year ago, I would have kissed you in the kitchen. Hell, I would have kissed you the second you first looked at me. But I’m not that guy anymore. The guy who takes what he wants and doesn’t give a shit who it hurts. I would have taken you and broken you, and I can’t do that. I can’t do that to you. So I’m saying we can’t do this. The answer is no.”

I was confused by so much of what he said it took a moment for me to even formulate my first of many questions.

“What do you mean, a year ago? What happened?” I hoped his candor would be more than a onetime thing. I knew so little about him and I wanted to know

more. He was such an enigma.

“I lost someone that I loved, and it put things in perspective.”

“I lost someone, too,” I said. It was the first time I’d really said it out loud.

“That’s why I changed. Because the things that used to matter didn’t anymore. I spent my whole life worrying about the wrong things, like grades and getting ahead. So I stopped worrying about that and tried to focus on the things that mattered.”

“Like what?” Our eyes finally met again.

“Well, I screwed it up a lot at first. That’s why my parents sent me here. I was partying and skipping class. I

thought living for the day meant doing whatever I wanted and worrying about the consequences tomorrow. Or never.” I laughed a little. “And then I realized it wasn’t about that. It was about finding something you were passionate about.”

“What are you passionate about?”

I pointed to the store behind us.

“Music.”

“Yeah, that’s pretty obvious. I should have guessed.” We both sort of laughed to break up the intensity in the room.

“Why? What did you think it was?”

The mind reeled.

“I think I will keep that to myself.”

“Oh, come on. You’re Mr. Cryptic all the time. How about some transparency? I’ve been honest with you.”

“I didn’t ask you to.” He went from joking to almost hostile. “Shit, Jos. What are you doing to me?” He groaned and started pacing the room. “I really should get back to work. They’re probably taking bets on if we’ve hooked up yet.”

Uh, what?

“For real?” I looked toward the door. I did not want to go out there.

“I can set them straight, if you want.”

“If I want? I definitely *don’t* want your coworkers thinking we had a quickie in the break room. I am not, nor will I ever be, the kind of girl who would do that.”

“That wasn’t... I never thought you were...”

This thing had spiraled out of control, and I was starting to get a little pissed. Why in the hell did he have to be so freaking frustrating?

“Look, Jos. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry about...everything. You’ve done nothing wrong. It’s all on my side, and I wish I could just snap my fingers and take it all back.” With that, he strode by me, opened the door and shut it, leaving me to wonder what the hell I’d gotten myself into and how I was ever going to get out of it.

* * *

Of course in all the confusion I had completely forgotten about the party and

the fact that Dusty was coming to it. Instead of potentially causing a big deal, I snatched Hunter's phone and scrolled through his contacts and memorized Dusty's number before Hunter could notice. He was too busy making googly eyes at Taylor, so I was pretty much in the clear.

I wrote and deleted five messages before going with one.

R U still coming tonite?
This is Jos.

I felt like a moron, putting the identifier at the end, but I didn't want

him to think the message was from some random person. I stared at my phone and waited for a response. He was still at work, but I had the feeling the cell phone policy at Bull Moose was pretty lax.

Yes. I promised Renee I would. See you later.

The words were blank and emotionless. I couldn't see his face to know if he was smiling when he wrote them, but intuition told me that he was either mad at me, himself or both. If only he'd used a winky face, I would have

known he was joking. But then again, Dusty didn't seem like the kind of guy who would use a winky face via text.

I typed out two letters and sent them.

OK.

“Are you sure you still want to do this?” Renee said, coming up for air after studying all day for an exam on a subject I couldn't even pronounce, let alone begin to understand.

“I mean, I bought a dress, and Hannah is all for it. I talked her out of her Carrie plan by telling her that the best revenge was living well. So now her plan is to

look hot and dance and have a good time to shove it in their faces. We'll see if it works. They'll probably be far too drunk to notice, but I don't think that will matter," I said.

She sat down next to me at the dining room table, where I'd been reading the latest assignments for English from my classmates. Most of them made me want to gouge my eyes out. These people had no respect for *their*, *they're* and *there*. None at all.

"Has she ever told you what happened to her? I mean, I can see that she's had a lot of reconstructive surgery. That's why her skin has that weird pattern on it. Skin grafts from other parts of her body." I

knew that, but I didn't say anything.

“No, she just told me it was a long story. Hannah's the type of person who doesn't talk about something unless she wants to. Reading between the lines it sounds pretty horrific. Like one of those things you wish you didn't know. I'm sure she'll tell me at some point, but I'm not going to drag it out of her. People keep secrets for a reason.”

“Like you, maybe?” She flipped my hair over my shoulder, but I could see she wasn't mad. “I just wish you trusted me enough to tell me.”

“It's not that I don't want to, or that I don't trust you.”

“Then what is it, Jos? We've been through so much together.”

“I know, I know.” Trust had absolutely nothing to do with it. It was more like...if I told her, if I opened up that wound again, I didn’t think it would ever close, ever heal. It was better to put a bandage over it and hope that it would heal on its own with time. And besides, I should have this wound. It was mine to bear.

She got up and put her arms around me, resting her chin on my shoulder. “You know that I love you, right? You’re my favorite sister.” I put my arms up and hugged her back.

“I know. You’re my favorite, too. Now what do you want?”

She laughed.

“Nothing. I just felt like I needed to say it since we didn’t when we were growing up.” She was right. Mom and Dad and our various stepparents hadn’t been big on the affection. That was probably why Renee and I had such skewed views on love. It must be so easy for those kids with two normal parents that love each other to believe in the existence of love. Not that I believed it didn’t exist. Living in a house full of couples who were crazy about each other pretty much guaranteed its existence. But was it only possible for some people?

I mean, if love was so prevalent and real, then why did so many people get

divorced? My parents had stood up with several people each, claiming to love and honor and all that forever and ever, and then forever turned into yesterday. Were people just wrong about love? Or did they just pick the wrong people to love? How the hell did you choose the right one?

“It’s a good thing to say,” I said, letting her go as I went back to my homework. There were only a few people on this planet that I could really say that I loved, and one of them was gone, and I could never tell him again.

“Love you, big sister.”

I had to live the day, but I had to love it, too. Just like he’d said.

Chapter 16

This time I was allowed to do my own makeup, but I had to borrow Renee's and Taylor's again, since I still didn't have my own. Taylor had decided she was wearing pants, but Darah and Renee went with dresses so I didn't feel too left out. Hannah came over to get ready, and I watched as Taylor, Darah and Renee gave her the same treatment I'd gotten last time.

“Ouch!” she said as Taylor tried to finger-comb Hannah's hair.

“Sorry! I thought mine was bad, but this is crazy. What do you use for

conditioner?" Hannah winced again.

"Coconut oil. It's the only thing that works." Hannah and Taylor started swapping hair tips and tricks as I lined my eyes. I was doing a toned-down version of the smoky look they'd given me for the engagement party. For a moment, I was back in my old life, doing my makeup every day. I shook my head. I had to stop thinking about that.

Once again, the guys were left waiting downstairs, and I could hear them having a loud and violent video game battle.

"I swear, it's like they never grow up," Darah said as we came downstairs and the guys were so wrapped up in their game they didn't notice at first.

"Maybe we should just go naked,"

Taylor said loudly.

“But then we might get cold,” Renee said, just as loud.

Every single male head snapped around at the word *naked*. It was like they were trained or something.

“Hopeless,” Taylor said. “You’re all completely hopeless.”

“Hey, it’s not my fault,” Hunter said. “If you didn’t look so good naked, I wouldn’t be thinking about it. All the time.”

“What he said,” Mase said as Darah glared at him.

Dusty got up slowly, as if he didn’t want to join us. Or maybe he didn’t want to join me. I’d seen his head turn along

with the others, though.

“You all can just keep it in your pants, thanks,” Hannah said, putting her coat on. “I have some revenge to get to.”

We ended up taking three cars, just in case someone needed to bail and to make sure no one got stranded. I rode with Hannah and Dusty, and this time, I made her take the front seat. It meant that I saw Dusty’s eyes sparkling in the rearview mirror frequently, but at least I didn’t have to be within touching distance of him. He’d been mostly silent, and hadn’t even commented on the dress I was wearing.

Hannah chattered away to fill the silence, and I reminded myself to thank her later. I hadn’t given her complete

details on the Dusty situation, but she was smart enough to read between the lines. Plus, she was a bit distracted by her upcoming plan. Dusty was still vague on the details.

“It’s like in *Legally Blonde*, when these girls tell Elle the party they invite her to is a costume party, but it’s not and she shows up dressed like a Playboy bunny and then she just acts like she meant to do it,” she said. As if Dusty had ever seen that movie. I would die of shock if he had.

“Didn’t they do that in *Bridget Jones*, too?” I said.

“Yeah, they did. Huh.”

“So shouldn’t you be in a bunny

costume?” Dusty said.

“No, you are completely missing the point,” Hannah said, frustrated. “Oh, in *Pretty Woman*, when she gets treated like crap by those women in the clothing store, and then she goes back after she’s cleaned up and gotten new clothes and shoves it in their faces.”

“Isn’t that the one where she’s a hooker?” Dusty said.

Hannah threw her hands up in frustration. “Can you focus for two seconds? My God, I swear all you guys have a direct line from your brain to your dicks.”

“Who says we don’t?” I saw a shade of the Dusty I’d known, pre-kitchen incident.

Hannah just grumbled the rest of the way. Of course, there was literally no place to park that was within range of the house, so we ended up parking in the lot by the old steam plant that still churned out disgusting air that you always smelled when you were on campus and within wind range.

“You sure you can walk in those?” Dusty said as we got out. The heels I’d gotten weren’t that high, but I didn’t plan on having to trek from the parking lot to the house.

“I’m fine,” I said, stepping in front of him and taking Hannah’s arm. We walked in step away from the car, seeing the rest of our gang all hanging out by

their cars.

Renee pulled me and Hannah aside.

“If I catch either of you drinking, or doing anything that you wouldn’t do in front of your grandmother, I will make you regret it. I have scalpels, and I know how to use them. Understood?”

We both nodded.

“Okay, let’s get this over with,” Renee said, and Paul offered her his arm.

“Your sister is hella scary sometimes,” Hannah whispered to me as we fell in line behind the rest of the group. Dusty was last, behind us. He looked like he’d rather be eating glass while simultaneously getting a colonoscopy.

“Tell me about it. She’s gotten worse now that she knows all this medical stuff.”

I was shocked the party hadn’t gotten broken up already, because it was so loud you could feel the bass beat in your chest from a half mile away. It only got worse the closer we got.

By the time we were standing in front of the house, I was second-guessing my willingness to go along with this. I’d been to plenty of wild parties, and if my past experience was any indication, this was a rager. I hadn’t been around one of these in quite a few months. In fact, I barely remembered the last one. It was a wonder I hadn’t gotten raped, or had

anything else happen to me, but Kelly and Mac had always looked out for me, and if things got crazy, we usually went back to his place and just drank with his friends. I'd gotten a few texts from her, but I'd ignored them.

"You ready for this, Han?" Her arm had tightened on mine the closer we'd gotten, and I could almost hear her second thoughts.

"Right behind you, ladies. You say the word and we're out. No one is going to mess with you. Either of you." I looked over my shoulder and met Dusty's eyes. Even though it was dark, they burned with an intensity that told me he meant what he said. That he was telling the truth.

“Thanks,” I said as Hannah started dragging me toward the pounding house. It was a wonder frat houses managed to stay standing after all the generations of partying and damage their inhabitants did. There had probably been more than a few repairs over the years.

“Let’s rock this.” Hannah gave me a fist bump and we both took deep breaths and walked into the house.

* * *

An hour, many turned down drinks and dances, almost getting a beer spilled on my dress, one broken heel and one lost earring later, Hannah and I were dancing right in front of the giant speakers. The

other members of our group were standing just out of the way, talking and laughing. Except for Dusty, who was really taking sulking to a whole new level. Well, it wasn't really sulking. It was more like brooding. It didn't look good on him, the guy I was so used to seeing with a smile on his face.

We'd kept our eyes wide-open for the guys, but it was so packed and the crowd so fluid, it would have been nearly impossible to find them, even if they were here. I'd pretty much given up on looking when Hannah grabbed my arm and pulled my ear to her mouth so I could hear her.

"There they are!" she yelled. It was still hard to hear her, so I motioned and

we moved away from the speaker.

“Where?” I said, doing a visual sweep. Ah, there was one of them, standing over near one of the couches that had been pushed to the side. He hadn’t seen us yet.

“Right there.” Hannah jerked her chin in his direction, and I picked out some of the other guys I’d seen in the Union. They were all laughing and talking and drinking, clearly at ease. For all I knew, they were residents of the house.

“Come on.” Hannah didn’t give me a moment longer to think about it before she pulled me to the center of the improvised dance floor and started grinding her hips like she was born to do

it. She'd been dancing earlier, but this was a little more...something you'd do against a pole wearing a lot less than a dress. I had to give her credit; she was good at it. I took her lead and let myself go.

“Is that them?” Taylor said in my ear after touching me on the shoulder. I nodded and she looked over at Darah and Renee. They came over as well, and we formed a circle. Taylor gave Hannah a run for her money in the dancing department. That girl had moves. More than once I glanced over at Mase, Paul, Hunter and Dusty, but they just watched with bewildered smiles on their faces. Dusty still looked even more surly than he had earlier.

Hannah kept looking at the group of guys, but they weren't paying attention. More than a few of the other guys at the party were, though, and a few tried to come and dance with one or more of us, but we weren't interested.

After the third guy tried to grind on Taylor, though, Hunter had had enough and came to dance with her. Mase joined Darah and Paul grabbed Renee. The song switched to the latest dance hit that you heard fifty times every time you listened to the radio. Hannah's hips were still going strong, and the group of guys had finally noticed. I pulled her in, pretending to give her a hip bump.

"They see you." She pretended to toss

her hair and looked at them. Oh, they had noticed. The entire group was now fully aware of Hannah and her supersonic hips.

She threw her head back and laughed, executing a twirl that would have had me on my ass. I had no idea she was such a good dancer. The guys were pointing and talking, and it was definitely about Hannah. The guy who seemed like the ringleader started walking over. I gave Hannah a signal.

He looked like the typical college “dude.” Backward Red Sox cap, jeans, Hollister shirt. He was so generic it was a wonder I’d even recognized him. Wading through the crowd, he came closer to our group.

“What are you going to do?” I yelled in Hannah’s ear.

“Depends on what he does. Maybe he feels like a douche and he’s coming to apologize.” She shrugged and kept dancing. Yeah, I wasn’t going to hold my breath. Guys like that seldom thought anything they did was wrong, so they didn’t have to apologize. But maybe that was me being judgmental? He could surprise me.

Hannah spun around and stopped right in front of him. He looked startled for a second.

“Can I help you?” she yelled, loud enough for me to hear.

“Yeah, you can get your disgusting ass

out of this party. The girls with you are welcome to stay, but you gotta go.” He had one of those sort of half smiles on that dick guys used when they thought they were being charming, but really, they were just being dicks.

Hannah’s face froze for a moment and I waited for her reaction. I didn’t have to wait long.

She slapped the bottom of the cup of beer he had in his hand and her aim was true. It exploded and covered him.

“What the fuck? You psycho!”

Hannah smiled in a way that, if I were that guy, I’d be worried. But clearly, he wasn’t the sharpest knife in the drawer because he looked like he was going to slap her, or yell at her, but Hannah got

there first. She socked him in the jaw so hard that I heard it, even with the loud music.

They both screamed in pain as I dived for Hannah.

“You fucking bitch!” His friends rushed over, but Dusty, Mase, Hunter and Paul were there in a flash.

“Walk away, dude. You’re lucky a busted jaw is the only thing she gave you,” Dusty said, getting right in the guy’s face. Hannah cradled her hand to her chest.

“I had no idea it was going to hurt that much. Holy shit,” she said, her face twisting in pain.

“Are you okay?” I said.

The pained look went away and she beamed at me.

“I’m fucking awesome. I feel like I should get drunk or scream on a rooftop or something.” Renee leaned down and started examining Hannah’s hand.

Having a sister who was a nurse was always a plus because it always came in handy.

“You don’t look at her, you don’t think about her, you never even breathe near her, or else I will make you regret it. Got it?” Dusty was still tearing the guy a new one while his friends tried to puff themselves up, but were definitely intimidated by the presence of Hunter, Dusty and Mase, none of whom looked

like they would back down if it came to blows.

“We need to get some ice on this,” Renee said, putting her arm around Hannah. Taylor and Darah got our coats and we left the party. Some people clapped, but most were just disappointed that the fight was over and hadn’t gotten more interesting. The guys followed us once they knew that no one was coming after us.

“Was that everything you thought it would be?” Dusty said, hurrying to catch up with us.

“And more,” Hannah said, the gleam still in her eyes. I could see it even in the dark.

“How about you wait here and I’ll

bring the car over,” he said as we walked down the lawn.

“Good idea,” Renee said, her attention still on Hannah’s hand. We all sat on the sidewalk and waited for Dusty to get back with the car. The other guys had stayed with us as protection. They’d gone completely alpha. Any minute they were going to turn into werewolves or something.

Hannah’s hand had started to swell and turn colors. Renee used her cell phone as a flashlight to make sure that none of the bones of her hand were broken.

“I think you’re going to be okay, but we need to get you back to the house.

Where is that boy?”

Tires squealed and the Golf appeared right in front of us.

Renee and Hannah got in the backseat and I climbed in with them.

“See you at home,” Renee called out as the rest of the group walked toward the parking lot. They waved and told us to be safe.

Dusty drove a bit too fast away from the house, and when he hit the highway he floored it.

“You’ve got quite a hook there, Hannah Gillespie. I think he’s going to be feeling that for a few days,” Dusty said. “I know not to mess with you now.”

“Would you have messed with me

before? Because I have another hand and I'm totally cool with using it."

"Whoa, easy, Rocky. I was just saying." He laughed a little, and I saw his surly facade cracking. Must have been hard to keep it up.

We got home, and Renee went into nurse mode, getting ice and wrapping Hannah's hand up.

"Does it feel like *déjà vu*?" Taylor said when the rest of the household got back ten minutes after us.

"A little bit," Renee said. "I don't know why you do this to yourselves. A knee to the groin is just as effective and less damaging to you."

"I wasn't really thinking about it at the

time, but you make valid points. I shall take them under advisement for next time,” Hannah said.

“Next time?” I said. “Were you planning on punching out d-bags on a regular basis?”

“If I didn’t encounter d-bags on a regular basis, I wouldn’t have to,” she said.

“Fair point,” I said, sighing.

“Shit, I need a drink,” Renee said after she got Hannah all patched up. Paul went to the fridge and pulled out a few beers.

“Anyone else?” he said. Everyone nodded their heads.

“Can I get one of those? You know, for the pain-numbing effects?” Hannah

said. Renee cracked the top off her bottle and rolled her eyes.

“One. You can have one.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Hannah said as Paul passed her one.

“Dusty?” Paul said, holding one out for him.

“No, thanks. I’m set. I’ll take a Coke if you have it.” Paul tossed him a can and handed the bottle Dusty didn’t want to me. I stole a glance at Renee, but she seemed determined to look the other way. I opened the bottle and took a swig. Damn. It had been a long time.

We all adjourned to the living room and sat down on the couch.

“Is anyone else, like, exhausted?”

Taylor said, curling up in Hunter's lap as they passed a bottle back and forth. "I feel really old right now."

"You were working it pretty hard there, Missy girl."

"We all were," Darah said. "I feel like it's been years since we went to Blue, but it's only been a month. We need to go out more, I think."

"Amen," Mase said. "Especially if you shake it like that, Dare."

"Are you saying you enjoy my booty-shaking skills?" She raised an eyebrow and it disappeared under her bangs.

"Yeah, you could say that." He pulled her chin to his mouth and gave her a kiss. Hannah made a gagging noise.

"Jesus, are they always like this?"

She held her beer in her left hand, a bag of peas draped over her right.

“Pretty much,” I said, taking another swig. “It’s almost impossible to live with them.”

“Hey!” several voices said at once.

“What? You guys are, like, disgustingly cute and in love, and sometimes I just want to tear my hair out and scream at the perfection of it all.”

Wow, I did not mean to say that. I couldn’t even blame it on the alcohol because I’d only had two sips and it hadn’t even hit me yet.

The room went silent, and it was like I’d completely frozen the conversation.

Shit.

“Jesus, I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just hard sometimes, you know? Now I sound like an ungrateful bitch. I’m sorry.” I held the beer with two hands and looked at it so I wouldn’t have to see everyone watching me have a meltdown.

“Do, um, do you guys mind if I crash here tonight? I don’t really feel like going back to the dorm,” Hannah said, trying to come to my rescue. Oh, I was such a lost cause at this point.

Everyone chimed in that they would be more than happy to offer her shelter for the night.

“I’ll go and make up the couch in the man cave for you,” Taylor said, the first

to think of a way to extricate herself from the room.

“I’ll...help,” Hunter said, hurrying after her.

“I should clean up the kitchen,” Darah said. Mase just got up and followed her without a word.

“Well, I know how to clear a room,” I said, drinking again for something else to do with my mouth, other than putting my foot in it.

“Dude, I’m sorry I brought it up,” Hannah said.

“No, it’s not your fault,” I said.

Dusty still hadn’t said a word, but he’d been watching me. I knew he was watching me like I knew exactly how he was sitting without having to look at

him. Like how I knew when he was behind me, even though he was so quiet. He was always in my mind, even when he wasn't here. He was always with me, and that scared me like hell.

“You’re probably about my size,” Renee said to Hannah. “You can borrow some pj’s of mine.”

“Great, thanks,” Hannah said, setting her beer bottle down on a coaster and following Paul upstairs.

“Jos?” Renee got up and sat next to me.

“Yeah?” I looked up from the bottle to see that worried look on her face that I’d seen on so many faces, so many times before.

“Are you happy here?” Dusty shifted in my peripheral vision.

“Maybe I should go...be somewhere else,” he said quietly.

“No, it’s okay,” I found myself saying. I didn’t mind having him here.

“Are you sure, Jos?” He said my name so soft, like a caress, as if he was afraid to break it. I closed my eyes and tried to block out the image that had risen to the front of my mind of how close we’d been to kissing earlier.

“Yeah. You can stay.” I meant for now, but somehow it sounded like I was talking about a longer period of time.

I set the bottle down on a coaster.

“You just seem so...lost,” Renee said.

“You were so happy before.” I wasn’t. I was just really good at pretending.

I shook my head.

“That girl...that girl that I was, she wasn’t happy, Renee. She was just really good at pretending. I even believed myself sometimes. Just because I looked happy and together, it didn’t mean that I was.”

“I don’t understand,” she said, shaking her head. I wasn’t sure if I could ever really explain it.

“You never met that girl,” I said, turning to Dusty. “You would have hated her, I bet. She was stuck-up and uptight, and she dressed like Hillary Clinton.”

That comment earned me a little smile. “I could never hate you, Red. Not

even if you wore an ugly pantsuit.”

For some reason talking about pantsuits made me start to laugh, and then I started to cry.

“She would have avoided you like you were going to get mud on her pumps, buddy.” This only made me laugh and cry harder, and once I started, I couldn’t stop. Renee looked lost, like she had no idea what to make of me.

“I think I need to see evidence of these pumps. You wouldn’t by any chance have some still, would you?” Was he flirting with me? In front of my sister? He seemed to realize what he’d said a second later and coughed.

“No, they’re all boxed up with the rest

of my former life at my mom's house. That girl is gone, and she's not coming back. This is who I am now." I shrugged.

My laughter stopped, and I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand.

Dusty got up, dashed out of the room and was back in a flash, handing me a paper towel.

"Thanks," I said, wiping my face and my nose. The towel came away with smears of makeup. I realized too late that I was wearing it. I never would have forgotten before.

"What happened, Jos? Sometimes..." Renee ran her hands through her hair. "Sometimes I just want to pin you down and get you to tell me, like when we were kids and you used to try and keep

secrets from me.” She always got it out of me back then. Renee was always good at finding out about what she wanted to know.

“I’m not a kid anymore, Ne,” I said, balling up the paper towel and putting it next to my beer.

“I know. That’s what makes this so frustrating. I just want you to talk to me.”

I was about to answer when Hannah and Paul came down the stairs. Hannah had a tank top and shorts that I recognized as Renee’s. They must have been lurking up there, worrying about interrupting. Darah and Mase had also been pretty quiet in the kitchen. I also hadn’t heard a peep from downstairs.

“I feel like we should all get to bed. This has been a very exciting night,” I said. “Plus, I forgot how hard it is to breathe in a dress. So I’m going to go change.” I got up and went downstairs, finding Taylor and Hunter watching something on the giant television.

“What are you watching?” They both looked up as if they were shocked to see me. I no doubt looked like a mess anyway.

“Are you crying?” Taylor said, getting up.

“I’m fine.” Hannah opened the door and came down the stairs behind me.

“I’m just really ready to go to bed.”

Exhaustion hit me like a

sledgehammer, and I realized how long of a day it had been and how much I wanted it to be over.

“Yeah, sure,” Taylor said, taking Hunter’s hand and leading him up the stairs. “Night!”

“Have a good night, ladies. Take care of that hand, Killer,” Hunter said, giving Hannah a wink.

“I’m going to change and wash my face,” I said, going to my room. I stripped off the dress and let my skin breathe for a minute. I found some loose pajamas and put them on before I went and washed my face and avoided the mirror so I wouldn’t see how blotched my face was.

If I was one of the girls from the

movies, I would have been able to cry and look gorgeous doing it. But this was real life, where my eyes puffed up and my face blotched and my nose ran all over the place. I took my hair out and gave it a quick brush.

When I came out to the living room, I found Dusty talking to Hannah.

“Hey,” I said. “I thought you would have gone home.”

“I was just saying good-night.” He got up and walked toward me, his eyes sweeping from my just-brushed hair that fell loose on my shoulders to my baggy Coldplay T-shirt to the shorts that had definitely seen better days, and hung from my hips because the elastic was

worn out.

I hadn't planned on wearing this outfit in front of anyone but members of the house and Hannah. I didn't care about them seeing me dressed this way. But Dusty was another story entirely.... It didn't matter that he'd seen more of my skin earlier when I'd been wearing the dress. I felt completely and utterly exposed.

And yes, I wasn't wearing a bra, either.

And yes, his eyes were resting quite heavily on that particular area. I fought the urge to cross my arms and tell him to look at my damn eyes instead of my chest.

“So, um, good night. Red.” His eyes

finally worked their way up to my face, and his voice had that soft quality again. I was acutely aware that Hannah was there and pretending that she wasn't by being really quiet, but I could see her head peering over the top of the couch and watching us.

“Thanks for...thanks for coming.”

Lame, Jos. Super lame. Why couldn't I ever say goodbye to him in a cool way? Or at least a normal way?

“Thanks for...for not being mad at me for earlier.”

“Oh, I'm still a little mad.”

“Could you tell me what you're specifically mad about so I can figure out what I can do to make up for it? Like,

will bringing you Skittles and M&M's cut it, or will I have to make the jump to flowers or chocolates or elaborate picnics with string quartets and candles?"

I gaped at him for a second. Was he for serious?

Hannah made a squeaking noise that she couldn't suppress and jumped up from the couch.

"Before you go any further, dude, I think I'm going to excuse myself, because I feel very inappropriate being here. And also like a creeper. So, yeah. I'll be lurking in the living room." She skipped up the stairs and shut the door loudly.

"I...I'm lost, to be honest," I said,

going to the couch and sitting down, grabbing a blanket off the back so I could cover my boobs without making it obvious that's what I was doing.

“Well, I was just wondering what part, specifically, made you mad. Was it because of what I said? Or what I did? Or didn't do?”

I really wasn't mad, exactly. *Frustrated* was a much better term for it. And honestly, not all of it was his fault. I could blame myself for a lot of it.

“I don't know, Dusty.” He sat down with plenty of space between us. “I've never had to work this hard, at something like this.” Whatever *this* was.

“I'm not trying to make it hard on you,

Jos. Shit,” he said, leaning back. “I’ve never worked this hard. I usually don’t have to.”

That made me snort.

“Cocky much?”

“I don’t mean to be. I only went with girls who pursued me. Made it easier that way. Plus, I didn’t get hurt when it ended, because I’d never really wanted it in the first place.” He shrugged as if it didn’t really matter.

“That’s kind of a dick thing to say about other girls, Dusty.”

He nodded and half smiled. “I was kind of a dick.”

“Kind of?”

“I told you, Red. I was a different guy. Like you were a different girl. I don’t

judge you now based on that person you were that I didn't even know." He had a good point.

"Fine, but I still think you were a dick."

"You have every right to think that."

Neither of us seemed to know what to say next, so we just sat and stared at each other. Any minute now the soft music would start to play, and he would lean in and we would share our first sweet kiss. If my life had been written by John Hughes, that would have been what happened.

What actually happened was a little different.

"Fuck it," Dusty said and lunged

across the couch at me, and I was caught so off guard that it took me a second to realize he was pretty much on top of me. "I can't take it anymore," he said, holding my face between his hands. "I've wanted to taste you since that first night, and now I'm going to."

I opened my mouth to respond and he seized his moment and kissed me.

He made a sound that was halfway between a growl and a moan, and I let myself go. Stopped thinking about if it was right or wrong, if I should or shouldn't. This wasn't a movie, and I didn't know what my next lines would be. This was life. This was living.

I touched my tongue to his and he took the invitation, and we moved, our lips

dancing together for the first time. It was a little rough as we tried to figure things out. It wasn't perfect, but it was so, so, so good.

He tasted a little like beer, and his mouth was gentle, yet firm. His hands dived into my hair, using it to pull my mouth closer. At this point, he was completely on top of me, with only the blanket between us. That didn't stop me from feeling just how much he was enjoying the kiss.

This was only a completely different planet compared to all the other kisses I'd had before. Those had been...adequate. Serviceable. Good enough. Kissing Dusty was

like...quenching a thirst I'd been living with my entire life. And once I got one drop, one taste, I knew I wanted more. I kissed him like I was drinking him in, taking him and making him a part of me. This was a life-altering kiss.

I did things I could never imagine myself doing. Like trying to pull his shirt off. Or wrapping my legs around him. Or moaning when he sucked on my bottom lip. I now understood why people had sex. Got carried away. This was why.

"I want you so bad, Red," he said into my mouth.

"I want you, too," I said, shoving my hands under his shirt to finally get them on those abs. Yep, they were everything I thought they would be. And more.

He kissed my cheeks and under my ear and down my neck. Shit, this was happening. This was really happening.

“Oh, fuck, Joscelyn.”

“Dusty,” I said. Well, it was more of a moan. I didn’t seem to be able to say anything right now without a moan behind it. That might be a problem.

He stopped kissing me and looked down at my face. Why, why had he stopped? No stopping.

“Oh, Red. What have I done?” He kissed me on the forehead and climbed off me.

What. The. FUCK!

He stared down at me as if he’d made some terrible, irreversible mistake. His

face was one of horror as he backed away from me. If I wasn't pissed that he'd stopped kissing me, I might have laughed at the situation happening in his pants.

"I shouldn't have done that. I'm...I'm so sorry. I have to go." He looked at the stairs as if they were his escape route from a certain and imminent death.

I finally put some words together without the moaning.

"Like that?" I didn't have to point, but he looked down.

"Fuck."

Pretty much.

"Do you have a sweatshirt or something I could borrow?" His eyes were wide like he was a caged animal.

Damn, he was really freaking out, and I didn't see what the big deal was. Who cared if he kissed me? I was an adult, nearly nineteen. A few months ago, during my crazy phase, I wouldn't have thought twice about it.

“Why don't you just...take care of it? Bathroom's right there.” I pointed. I wouldn't seriously do that to him, but I was still pissed about the nonkissing.

“Shit, Jos, please. I can't...I can't with you here.” He put his hands over the area. I could probably take care of it for him. Not that I had much experience, but how hard could it be?

He looked at the ceiling and closed his eyes like he was concentrating on

something. I could be a total bitch and drag this out if I wanted. Instead I got up and went to my room, grabbing a sweatshirt that I'd bought in the boys' section of a store that might be big enough for him.

"Here," I said, coming back and handing it to him. He tied it around his waist with the main part covering his issue. "Need a hand with that?"

I'd hoped he would laugh, but he just looked hopelessly embarrassed. Well, that was nice. Now I got to be on the other side of it.

"You think this is funny?" Oh, now he was the mad one.

"It is pretty funny. You know, unless you're you." I smiled at him.

“I can’t have this, Jos. I can’t be like this around you. I never should have been alone with you like this. It won’t happen again.” He turned to go up the steps, but I grabbed the back of his shirt.

“Why? Why can’t it happen?” He faced me slowly.

“Because...you’re off-limits.”

“Off-limits? What, you think my sister would get pissed? You’re really going to let that stand in the way of this?

Whatever this is, or could be? She’ll get over it.”

He shook his head.

“No, it’s not that. It’s not just Renee.”

Now we were both frustrated.

“Will you do me a favor? Will you

just be straight with me, for five seconds?”

“I have to go, Jos. I’m sorry.” He jerked away from me and took the stairs two at a time before wrenching open the door and slamming it behind him. I heard voices above and then the front door close seconds later. He’d gotten out of there like he was on fire.

The door opened again to reveal Hannah’s slack-jawed face.

“What the hell just happened?”

It was going to be a long night.

* * *

I filled Hannah in on most of the details, mostly because the whole thing was so

unbelievable, I had to say it out loud to make sure it had actually happened.

“Girl, he has it for you so bad.”

Everyone else had gone to bed, so Hannah had sneaked into the kitchen and gotten snacks, including a bag of M&M’s and Skittles that I’d stashed in the back of the cupboard behind the flour.

“Well, yeah, I guess he kinda does.”

Understatement.

“And by ‘bad’ I mean, he wants to take you to pound town.”

I threw an M&M’s at her.

“You are disgusting.”

“He wants you on board his meat rocket. He wants to put his basilisk in your Chamber of Secrets.” I kept

chucking candy at her, but she didn't stop and we were both laughing so hard that the candy missiles were ineffective.

"I swear, you know way too many of those," I said when she finally ran out.

"Well, I've put all that time not going on dates to good use."

"Clearly."

I found an M&M's in the blankets and popped it into my mouth.

"Back to more important matters. How was it?" Her eyes gleamed.

"It was..." How could I describe it? "It was really good. He puts the 'issing' in 'kissing.'"

"He wants to put his issing in *you*."

It was much later that I finally went into my room and went to bed and Hannah went to sleep on the couch.

I was definitely too wired to sleep for a while, so I listened to some music. It was an Ingrid kind of evening, so I put “Can’t Help Falling in Love” on repeat.

The moments with Dusty replayed themselves in my mind, in slow motion, and then sped up. I relived the feel of his mouth capturing mine, his hands wrapping themselves in my hair. And I’d been...yeah, I’d never been like that. I hadn’t felt out of control. It was more the opposite. It was like I knew what I wanted and how to get it with complete and perfect clarity.

But it wasn't going to happen again, at least according to Dusty. What was his deal? I was kind of done with him jerking me around. I'd have to find a way to get him to tell me. Maybe I could kidnap him and tie him up. That could be enjoyable. There were lots of other things I could do if he was tied up. I'd never seen the appeal before now.

My phone interrupted my visions of Dusty tied to a chair. I'd put it on vibrate, just in case he decided to text or call and tell me he was sorry. Again.

We need to talk.

Well, don't be ominous at all, Dusty. If I didn't know exactly what it was about, I'd be freaked out of my mind.

Go for it. I'm all ears.

My phone rang a few seconds later.

“Are you awake?” he said, his voice almost a whisper, as if he was afraid of waking me.

“Dude, if I was sleeping, I wouldn't have answered the text.”

“I guess that's a good point.” I thought he would laugh, but he didn't. “Look,

Jos. What I did was completely inappropriate. I took advantage of you and it won't happen again."

"You took advantage of me? Um, what kiss were you experiencing, because the one I was sharing with you was pretty fucking amazing. Like, earth-shattering and fireworks and all that. If there were Kissing Awards, that would have won in a landslide."

He took a few seconds to answer. He sighed.

"It was pretty epic."

"Pretty epic?"

"What do you want me to say, Jos? That if I were in the same room with you that I'd kiss you like that again? And again? And again? I'd kiss you until we

both forgot our names. I'd want to take off that shirt and those shorts and count every freckle until I knew exactly how many you have. And then I would taste every inch of you until it was burned into my memory so I could never forget it. And then..." He stopped and I almost screamed in frustration. While he'd been talking, my hand had drifted down to my shorts so I could find some release from earlier. I burned with it.

"And then?!" I finally said.

"Jos, I'm not having phone sex with you right now. Why do you keep doing that to me?"

"Oh, do not blame this on me, buddy. I'm not the one who tackle-kissed you.

That was all you. It's not my fault you can't keep it in your pants. Or, you can, but it did not look comfortable. How are you doing now?" I may not have had a hard-on, but I was definitely suffering from some sexual frustration.

"Great. Just great." Ha-ha. I smelled another lie.

"So what are we going to do? If we can't be together, according to you, and you can't be around me without getting a bad case of hard dick, what are we going to do?"

This was all him.

"I don't know, Jos. I just...I can't see a good way out."

"You know you're the only one standing in the way of this, right? Unless

there's something I don't know about, which, if there is, I think you should fucking tell me because I've had it with people not telling me things like I'm a child and I can't handle it."

"I don't think you're a child."

"Then why do you treat me like one?"

He exhaled one long breath.

"I knew about you. Before you came here. When Hunter and I became friends he invited me over a lot and I met Renee and she was always talking about you. She was pretty much at her wit's end. Hunter offered to let you come here and she told your mom and you know that part of the story. You know, I don't think I can do this over the phone. Can I...can I

come over?”

“You sure you’re going to be able to control yourself?”

“Jos.”

I rolled my eyes, which he couldn’t see. “Okay, okay. Everyone’s sleeping, but I think I can get upstairs without waking everyone up. I’ll come out to your car, okay?”

“I’ll text you when I’m out front.”

We hung up and I turned my music off. I cracked my door open and looked at the couch. I knew it was going to be cold as hell outside, so I put some sweatpants on over my shorts and a sweatshirt on. Additionally, it would serve to cover my body to save him from temptation. You couldn’t get much unsexier than

sweatpants and a baggy UNH sweatshirt.

Ten minutes later my phone buzzed and I crept out of my room and went up the stairs. Hannah made a humming noise in her sleep, so I figured I was good.

The house was dark and still. No sounds even from upstairs. Good.

I was glad that Mase and/or any of the other residents of the house weren't watching me anymore.

Dusty pulled right outside the house, the headlights off. I crept down the porch and ran down the walkway.

"Anyone see you?" he said as I closed the door. He had the heat blasting, and I wrapped my arms around myself. Even after only seconds outside, I was cold.

“No, I think we’re good. It was quiet upstairs and Hannah was sleeping. So, continue.” I put my back against the door and turned toward him.

“Where was I?” Oh, it was not my imagination that he was still checking me out, even with the sweats. He must really have a thing for me. Or maybe he was trying to get out of telling the truth.

“My eyes are up here,” I said, using my fingers to point to my eyes. He cleared his throat and blinked, and when he opened his eyes, he was looking at my eyes and not my chest. Like he could even see it, all covered up as it was.

“You were right about when Hunter told Renee that I could stay with them.”

“Right. Well, I’d seen pictures of you. Of how you used to be. Of course I thought you were, well, you know you’re stunning, Red. Even with your hair all pulled back and in those straitlaced clothes. But I didn’t think...” He stopped and took a breath. He was usually so confident with words. They seemed to come easily to him, but he was having a tough time finding the right ones.

“They asked me—specifically Hunter asked me—to watch out for you. To make sure you didn’t get into any trouble. He knew that I had recently gotten myself out of a lot of it, and he trusted me.”

I wished he wouldn’t have found

those words, because each one of them punched me in the stomach with their meaning.

It wasn't real. None of it was real. He'd been forced to be friends with me because Hunter asked him to. It had all been an act. He had been playing a part. Saying his lines. Only I didn't know we were in a play. Just a few minutes before he'd had me hotter than I'd been in my life and now I was ice-cold. Frozen.

"Fuck. You." They were the only two words I could come up with, and I hurled them at him as hard as I could before I fumbled for the door.

"Jos, wait! There's more." Yeah, I didn't want to hear it. I finally got the door open and started running back

toward the house.

“Will you just listen, for fuck’s sake!” He caught up to me and I struggled. I wasn’t going to yell because then I’d wake up the entire street and I didn’t need Stephen King coming out of his house and seeing me and Dusty fighting. I would probably die of embarrassment.

“Will you just stop for a second?” He held my shoulders so I couldn’t go.

“Let go of me!” He let me go immediately, as if he was appalled that he’d grabbed me. I turned my back on him, expecting him to try to physically stop me again, but he didn’t.

“Joscelyn. Please. Just give me five minutes. Then you can hate me for the

rest of your life. But just give me five minutes. And please, get in the car. It's cold out here and you don't have a proper coat on. Please."

Oh, if he hadn't said *please*. And if his voice hadn't had that begging tone in it. When I spun back around I found that he was desperate. His stunning eyes begged me.

"Five. Minutes."

We got back in his car, but I kept my hand on the door so I could make my escape if I had to.

"That's what it was. At first. It was me looking after you because Hunter asked me to. He thought you could use a friend who had been where you'd been, and I kind of owed him. He helped me

out a lot, and he was there for me when I needed someone. I saw it as a chance to pay it forward. That's all it was at first."

He took a deep breath, and I waited for him to say something that would make everything he'd said before okay. Because it definitely wasn't, right now.

"And then I met you and from that first second I knew that it could never just be that. Some sort of charity mission. You were...you. So beautiful and funny and smart and I just wanted to be around you all the time. You're...addicting, Jos. I can't seem to get enough of you. You can see how this complicates things. I'm pretty sure that wasn't in the plan when I told your sister I wouldn't let anything

happen to you. That ‘anything’ probably included kissing you and almost doing several other things that she would probably kill me for even thinking about.”

He did have a point there. Renee would skin him alive if she knew about what we’d done, and almost done, on the couch in the man cave. And then she would have given me a very long and potentially very graphic lecture about sexually transmitted diseases, complete with a condom demonstration. I’d already been through it several times, and I didn’t want to relive the experience. When it came to “the talk,” I’d gotten more than I ever wanted to know from Renee. That was probably

why I was so willing to hold on to my virginity.

“I swear, Jos, I never meant to fall for you. I tried to stop it, but I didn’t have a whole lot of choice. You’re impossible not to fall for.” I stifled a laugh.

“What’s so funny about that?”

“You, saying I’m impossible not to fall for. Have you met me? Do you not see what I’m wearing right now? I’m not exactly supermodel material. I’m also not very nice, either. I’ve been mean to you on more than one occasion. I’m not that girl. The girl all the boys fantasize about when they jack off. I might have been, before, but I’m definitely not now.”

“And that, my lovely Red, is exactly why you’re impossible not to fall for. Not caring is pretty damn sexy. You don’t care what people think of you.” Oh, how wrong he was. He had no idea how much I still cared. It was why I didn’t want anyone to know about the blog, or about my new job at the paper. In my other life, I’d spent my entire existence caring what people thought of me. You couldn’t turn that off so easily.

“I care, Dusty. I care way more than I should.” Why did I feel like I was going to cry again?

“Oh, Red.” He reached out to touch my face and I flinched back.

“No. Just because you say all those

nice things, doesn't make it right. Why didn't you tell me?"

Sighing, he dropped his hand into his lap. "Because, at first, I wasn't supposed to, and then, after meeting you, I didn't want to. I thought I could just go along and carry an unrequited hard-on for you forever. I had it all planned out."

"Sounds like it." I wasn't convinced.

"It drove me crazy, Jos. You drive me crazy. You're driving me crazy right now. All I can think about is that you're mad at me, and I should feel worse about lying to you, but all I can fucking think about is kissing you again and finding out what's under all that material you're wearing." He had his hands covering...
Oh.

“That bad, huh?” Not going to lie, I was having the same issues. I just didn’t show it as much as he did, but I was affected, too.

“You have no idea.”

“I think I have *some* idea.” My “ideas” were making themselves known. Loudly. I was going to have to finish what we’d started earlier. The question was, would we finish it together, or would I have to go it solo?

“I’ve told you, Jos, I don’t have the cleanest past.”

“I don’t care. I’m not all that pure anymore, either. Screw purity. I’m still mad at you, but can I just put that on hold and be mad at you tomorrow so you’ll

kiss me?”

He leaned just a fraction closer to me.
“If that’s what you want. Hell, I know it’s what I want, but we’ll only do it if you want.”

Oh, that was it.

“Dusty?”

“Yes?”

“Can you stop being a gentleman for, like, a little while?”

A sexy smile spread across his lips.

“I think I can manage.”

* * *

Kissing in the car wasn’t as nice as kissing on the couch. There were too many things in the way and pointy

objects, like the shifter, that seemed out to get us.

“Backseat,” I said as I tried to climb on top of him and failed for the third time. We both got out of the car and met on the passenger side as he shoved me up against the car, pressing against me and attacking my mouth with everything he had. Maybe we wouldn’t even make it to the backseat. I was aware that it was freezing out, but my body was on fire.

Dusty reached around me and opened the back door.

“Oh, shit. Give me a second.” His backseat was a mess, littered with textbooks and clothes and other guy crap. He swept it all on the floor and

tried to clean it up as much as he could while I waited.

“Good enough,” I said, pushing him aside and diving onto the seat, grabbing his sweatshirt and pulling him down with me.

“Shit! Did I hurt you?” Just a little, but I didn’t care. He straddled me and reached to close the door.

“I’m good. Come here.”

Sweatshirts were very good for yanking on, I’d discovered. His mouth returned to mine; his hands went back to roaming my body, dipping under my clothes and wiggling into new spaces they hadn’t been before. This...this was living. Pure, passionate living.

He paused and pulled back to look at my face in the dark. The streetlights cast everything in an orange glow. “You’re so beautiful. How are you so beautiful?”

“You’re not so bad yourself.” I didn’t want to make his head too big, but the more I looked at him, the more I realized how gorgeous he was. I’d been in some serious denial early on.

“Jos, I really, really want to continue this,” he said, pulling my sweatshirt aside so he could kiss where my neck met my chest, “but I don’t think the backseat of my car is the place for it. You’re not a backseat fling.”

“I should hope not,” I said as he kept kissing lower. Despite saying he wanted

to hit the pause button, he was doing anything but. He was right, though. I didn't want to have my first sexual experience in the backseat of a car with what felt like a pen, or something else sharp, poking into my ass the whole time.

“You're right, you're right.” I was panting a little, and he definitely had another hard-on.

“I don't think my dick is ever going to recover from being around you,” he said, holding himself up on his elbows.

“Well, you could always get one of those things they used in the Middle Ages. It was like a harness that had these sharp metal points, so every time you'd
—”

He kissed my mouth so I couldn't finish. "I'm begging you. Please stop talking about it, Red."

"I was only trying to help. If you want, I could help in other ways." I reached for his pants, and he tried to leap away from me and ended up banging his head on the roof of the car.

"Shit!" I should have been more worried about his skull, but I laughed.

"You just...keep your hands to yourself. I'll take care of it." He rubbed his head.

"Poor baby," I said, getting up on my elbows and feeling the top of his head gently. Yup, he was definitely going to have a bump. I kissed the tips of my

fingers and touched them to his head.

“It’s late. You should get to bed.” I wished I could ask him to come with me, and then he could sneak out of the house before dawn, but the chances of that were so freaking slim, with Hannah asleep in the next room. Besides, we couldn’t really do what I would want to do with someone in the next room without making a little bit of noise. Those walls were pretty damn thin. There was always the shower, though...

“Good night, Red.” I got one more chaste kiss on the lips before he got out and pulled me up after him.

“Good night, Dusty.” Well, that was pretty normal for a goodbye. Finally, I’d gotten the hang of it. I walked back

toward the house, as slow as I could.

“Jos?” I’d been waiting to hear my name.

“Yeah?” I turned and started walking backward.

“Would you like to come over tomorrow? To my place?”

“You mean your shit shack?”

“Yeah. I’ll make it as unshitty as possible for you. But I thought it was one of the only places we could be...without anyone watching us. I want to spend time with you without worrying that someone is going to walk in.” Oh. *Oh*.

He must have seen the realization dawn on my face.

“That is definitely not what I’m asking

you over for.”

“Uh-huh.”

He gave me a look. “Jos.”

“Okay, okay. Yes, I would love to come over. Do you mind if I tell Hannah? Then she can be my alibi. I’m guessing we should keep this on the down low?”

“She seems like the kind of girl who can keep a secret. Plus, I think she wants us to have some time alone almost as much as I do.” That was definitely true.

“So, tomorrow?” he said. “I’ll text you.”

“Tomorrow.”

I’d reached the steps, so I was going to have to turn away from him.

“I’m counting the minutes,” he said

quietly, his eyes never leaving my face.

“Me, too.”

Chapter 17

Sneaking back into the house turned out to be easy, and I got back in bed without anyone the wiser.

Despite only getting a few hours of restless sleep, I woke the next morning as excited as I used to get on the first day of school. Yes, I was that kid who couldn't wait for summer to be over so I could go back to school. In some ways, school was my safe haven from the chaos in my numerous homes. School made sense. It had order and structure at a time when I needed it.

I was up even before Hannah, but

when I came out of the bathroom from brushing my teeth she was moving.

“Does your hair always look this spectacular in the morning?” It looked like a stylist had spent hours teasing it to the max.

She tried to pat it down and failed.

“Pretty much. And if you tell anyone, or ever take a picture, I will kill you.” She yawned and stumbled to her feet.

“Can I use your shower?”

“Sure, go ahead. Towels are in the cabinet and you can use whatever you want. Need some clothes?”

“Yeah, that would be great.” Hannah was taller than me, but I found some pants that I had to roll up and a shirt that worked.

“I know we’re close, but I’m not sure I’m ready to swap undies just yet,” she said. “I’ll just keep mine on.”

“Sounds good. Listen, I have a favor to ask you about when you’re more awake.”

She gave me a thumbs-up and shuffled to the bathroom.

While Hannah took her shower I went upstairs to see who was actually awake. Mase was lying across the dining table, a cup of coffee steaming inches from his face. Darah closed the fridge and yawned, running her hand through her hair. I’d never seen it so messy before. Definitely sex hair. At least somebody got some last night. Well, with someone

else other than their hand, which was what I was reduced to after everything with Dusty. It was the most epic sex with myself I'd ever had.

“You want me to make some eggs?” Darah said to Mase. “Hey, Jos. You and Hannah sleep okay?”

“Yeah, great,” I lied through my teeth. Mase mumbled something incoherent.

“Hey, it's not my fault, babe,” Darah said.

Taylor and Hunter came down, followed by Renee and Paul as Darah got out the skillet and started making eggs. I decided to help by making massive amounts of toast and handing everyone a full cup of coffee when they walked into the kitchen.

Hannah emerged from downstairs looking significantly more chipper. I handed her a cup of coffee as she dried her hair with a towel.

“Sugar?” I got the sugar jar and started spooning it into her cup. “Say when.”

I put about four tablespoons in when she stopped me.

“That’s disgusting,” I said, sipping my Lemon Zinger. I was definitely addicted to the stuff now.

“Meh,” she said, taking one of the last available seats. It was Sunday, so that meant cleaning, but it looked like it was going to be a while.

My phone vibrated in my sweatshirt

pocket.

Okay, I can't wait anymore. Can you be over here...nowish?

This time I could almost feel the desperation in the little black letters. Or maybe that was just me.

I typed out an answer.

I have to drop Hannah off first. And get dressed in something

cute.

He responded a fraction of a second later.

You always look cute.

Ass kisser. But no. I need to shower.

An hour, then?

One hour.

I could barely contain my excitement.
Then my phone went off again.

Bring socks. Brand-new
ones.

What the crap? Maybe he meant to say
something else and got auto-corrected.

Socks?

That's right, Red.
Socks.

I could just picture him saying it with a smile on his face.

Are we making puppets? Because that's a little weird.

I couldn't think of anything sexy we could do with socks, but then again, I was a virgin. Maybe it was something I had yet to learn about. I did a quick internet search and didn't find anything illuminating.

You'll see. Come soon.
Bring socks.

I'd have to make a trip to Walmart to get some. That seemed like a mission Hannah would want to be in on.

She had already downed her coffee and was washing out the cup.

"I should get back. I have a shit ton of homework. And clothes. I'd really like to put on a fresh pair of panties," she said. Mase choked on his toast.

"You okay there, buddy?" Hannah gave him a look.

“Fine. Just fine. How’s the hand?”

Hannah held it up. You couldn’t really tell because it was all bandaged up, but she didn’t seem to be in much pain.

“Can I check it?” Renee said. Once she’d ascertained that Hannah’s hand was just bruised and swollen, she went back to her coffee and staring off into space.

“I’ll drive you. Do you just mind if I take a shower first?” I said, giving her a look, and I watched as she remembered I’d said earlier that I had a favor.

“No big. Hey, do you have a comb I could borrow?”

“Yeah, sure.” She put her cup in the dish drainer and followed me back

downstairs.

She rounded on me as soon as the door shut.

“I’m guessing you need a favor so you can sneak away and make out with a certain boy that has gorgeous green eyes. Am I correct?”

“Let’s just say that we sort of made up. Kind of. Anyway, we’d like some alone time, so would you be my alibi?”

She got down on one knee and held my hand.

“I would be honored to be your alibi anytime you want to get together with Dusty and bump your bits together.”

I took my hand back. “That does not sound sexy. At all.”

She shrugged and I went to my

drawers. She followed and shoved me aside as I pawed through, trying to find something remotely cute.

“Girl, you have a serious wardrobe crisis. We need to get you some new clothes ASAP. But for now, how about this?” She pulled out a green three-quarter-sleeve shirt that must have hitched a ride from my previous life.

“This is cute. And it brings out your eyes.” She also selected a pair of dark skinny jeans that I’d bought with the intention of wearing them, but it had never actually happened.

“He said I needed to bring socks. Brand-new ones.”

She laid the clothes out on my bed and

then went for my underwear drawer, picking out the only matching set of a black bra and panties that I owned and adding them to the pile. “Are you making puppets?”

“That’s exactly what I said.”

She raised her eyebrows.

“Okay, then. Socks.” She found a pair and set them on the bed, as well. I didn’t have much choice in footwear because it was winter and we lived in Maine and you had to wear shoes you could potentially slog through the snow in, so that meant boots nine times out of ten.

“I’m going to shower.”

“I’ll be here.”

I showered as quick as I could and got dressed, wondering what to do with my

hair. Dusty seemed to like it when it was down, but it was wet and it was winter and I didn't fancy pneumonia, so I twisted it back on the sides and formed a bun. Once I was at his place I could take it down and let it dry. Maybe it would actually have some curl in it from being twisted up. Yeah, probably not.

“Verdict?” I said, coming out and spinning around for Hannah to see.

“You need jewelry. Other than your bracelet. Which is why, when we were buying stuff last week, I got you these.” She pulled something out of her pocket and handed them to me. They were tiny silver studs shaped like trumpeting elephants.

“You didn’t have to do that.”

“But I did. Do you like them?”

“Yeah, I do. Thank you.” I gave her a hug and then put the earrings in. They were small and understated, which I liked.

“Perfect. Now we just have to get you some socks. Oh, by the way, are you on the pill, or anything else?”

“Yeah, the pill.” I’d gone on it last year when I’d thought things were serious with Matt. Yes, I hadn’t planned on having sex until we were married, but that didn’t mean I thought it couldn’t happen earlier. More than anything, it was probably wishful thinking. If I’d learned anything about living with

Renee, it was that you always had to protect yourself and never leave it up to the guy.

“You got condoms?”

This should have been a crazy uncomfortable conversation, but somehow it wasn't.

“My sister gave me a box when I got my period. No joke.” I'd been thirteen and so mortified I'd hidden them in the very back of my sock drawer. “And I find them periodically in my stuff, especially now. There was a box in the drawer when I got here.” I went and got it, putting a few in one of the zippered pockets on the inside of my purse.

“Good girl. I think you're ready.”

“We're not going to have sex,

Hannah.”

“Well, it won’t be long. I’ve seen the way you look at each other. The logs have been laid, the gasoline has been poured and all someone has to do is strike the match.”

She gave me a hug and we dashed upstairs.

“Renee? I’m going to study with Hannah today. We have this thing to work on for our class.” This was true. First step in crafting a good lie was to use something that was actually true and build upon it.

“Okay. Just be careful. There’s supposed to be a snowstorm coming in this afternoon. If you get stranded, Mase

can come get you.” He had an extra truck with a plow attached to it so we didn’t have to pay anyone to plow the driveway.

I’d been so wrapped up in everything I hadn’t even paid attention to the weather. I hoped it didn’t cut my time with Dusty short. That would seriously suck. But then, weather forecasters were notorious for predicting a huge storm that would never happen. They’d already been wrong at least twice this winter.

“Very smooth, Jos. I’m impressed,” Hannah said, giving me a high five as we drove toward the Bangor Mall.

“I’ve had a lot of practice.”

Hannah gave me a lot more advice, most of which sounded like she'd gotten it from the internet or movies or from urban legends. Sometimes it was hard to tell.

I dropped her off and had strict instructions to give her every single dirty detail when I called her that night.

Dusty's place was pretty easy to find from his directions. He was also right; it was a shit shack. How the crap was this building still standing?

It kind of looked like someone had taken parts of three other buildings, glued and stapled them together on top of each other and called it good. I sent him a message saying I was here as I tried to

figure out the least dangerous way to get to the front door. The porch was definitely suspect. He messaged me back that there was a set of stairs around the back, which weren't much better than the porch, I discovered.

If I die coming up the stairs, I'm suing you from the grave.

I made it all the way up the steps and knocked on the door.

“You made it,” he said, his face splitting into a smile that made my knees feel like I was still climbing the

dangerous steps.

“And I brought socks.” I didn’t know what kind to get, so I’d brought three bags. White, multicolored and a bag of knee-high argyle socks that were too cute not to buy.

“I see that. Come on in.” He moved aside and I walked in.

“This isn’t nearly as shitty as I was expecting. You made it sound a lot worse.” Granted, it was no Yellowfield House, but it wasn’t that bad. We stood in a tiny kitchen with room only enough for the appliances on one side and a small table and two chairs on the other. A narrow hallway led to what I assumed was the rest of the house.

“Want the tour?” he said.

“Sure.” I put the bags of socks down on the table and followed him down the hall.

“Bedroom, bathroom.” He pointed to the rooms on the right and left of me.

“And living room slash study slash library slash storage room.” The apartment was shaped a bit like an hourglass, but it was adorable. All the furniture was old and patched, but it wasn’t dirty.

“And this is Napoleon. He thinks he’s going to take over the world.” Dusty reached behind the couch and pulled out what looked like a black ball of fuzz. On further inspection, I realized it was a

kitten with huge blue eyes. Dusty cradled him like a baby in his arms and Napoleon meowed and I died, right there, in the middle of Dusty's living room.

I'd always heard about the appeal of guys with babies, and I'd never really gotten it. But Dusty holding a kitten and scratching its belly as it purred like a little tank? Pantie-meltingly sexy.

"Here, you want to hold him?" I'd never had a pet before. My parents had always said no when I'd asked for one every single birthday and Christmas. A lot of the time it was because we were renting in a place that didn't allow them. I'd always wanted a dog, but now I was seeing the cat appeal. Big-time.

Dusty passed him over to me and he mewed at me.

“He’s just saying hello. If you scratch him right here, he’ll be in love with you forever.” He put his fingers under Napoleon’s chin and scratched, which made Napoleon close his eyes and start purring again. Dusty moved his hand and mine took his place under the kitten’s chin.

“I didn’t know you had a cat,” I said as Napoleon snuggled closer to my hand.

Dusty sat down on the couch that took up much of the limited space.

“I didn’t plan on it, but then the woman downstairs found a litter of kittens and she asked me if I wanted one

and I couldn't say no. Could you say no to him?"

"Never." I sat down next to him, making sure I didn't jostle the sweet little kitty. "This really isn't that bad, Dusty." He had it organized at least. There was a bookshelf in one corner with quite a few worn paperbacks on it and an ancient television, one of those with the big wooden box around it, across from the couch with a DVD player that looked very out of place on top of it.

The walls were pretty bare, but here and there were a few pictures. It wasn't what I'd expected, from the few times I'd been in guys' apartments and dorm rooms. Usually there were more than a

few posters of half-naked girls, or at least a Playboy or two hanging around, and lots of beer cans and chip bags.

“It’s not much, but it’s mine. And Napoleon’s. It’s really his place and I just live here.”

Everything was quiet except for Napoleon, who was still purring away.

“So are you still mad at me?” he said.

I couldn’t lie. “I’m not happy about it, but it’s not completely your fault. I’m going to have it out with Renee and the rest of the residents of the house when I get back about it.”

“Do you have to? I mean, they don’t have to know that you know.”

“But they lied to me, Dusty. I can’t

just let that go.”

“You’re right.” He stroked Napoleon’s head and sighed. “So I have something for you. Something to say I’m sorry. Or at least start saying I’m sorry. Do you want it?”

“Does it have anything to do with the socks?”

“Nope.”

I had no idea what this could be. Dusty took the now-sleeping Napoleon from me and placed him gently in a little kitten bed on the floor beside the couch.

“Be right back. Oh, and close your eyes.” I gave him a look and did what he said. He left the room and went into his bedroom. I listened as he came back and placed something on the floor in front of

me.

“Okay, open.”

I looked down to find a clear plastic bucket with a huge bow on the lid. It was absolutely filled with...

“An equal ratio of Skittles and M&M’s. I actually counted them out. Did you know they don’t put the same amount in each bag? I learned that around five this morning when I couldn’t stop thinking about you.”

“Do you mean to tell me you sat and counted all of those?” There must be thousands of them in there.

He put his hands into his pockets.
“Yeah, it took a while.”

I looked down at the bucket again and

shook my head. “You are so weird, Dusty Sharp.”

“Is weird good?”

I stood up and stepped over the bucket and pulled him toward me.

“Yeah. Weird is awesome,” I said before I tilted my face up and kissed him. He took his hands out of his pockets and wrapped them around my waist, pulling me up so I was on my tiptoes. I pulled away from his mouth, which tasted like chocolate.

“Did you eat any of them?”

He grinned.

“They were uneven, so I had a few left over.”

“Oh.” I shrugged and went back to kissing him. It was a little bit slower

than last night. Softer. Like a tentative first kiss. Like we both knew we could take our time. I let the taste of him flood my senses as his hands slipped under my shirt and set off every nerve ending. He pushed me back, and we nearly tripped over the bucket on our way to the couch. He laid me down and got on his side so he wasn't on top of me.

He pulled some hair loose from my bun and twirled it around his fingers. "Want to try it slower this time? We have all day."

"What do you mean by slow? I think I need to see a demonstration before I commit to it," I said with a serious face.

"I was thinking something like this,"

he said, giving me a slow kiss before moving down my chin and to my neck. “And this,” he said, pulling aside one shoulder of my shirt and kissing down my clavicle, moving my bra strap aside.

“And this,” he said, coming back up to my mouth and sliding his hands upward, under my shirt.

“Slow...good,” I said. Once again, my moaning-while-talking issue had returned. He laughed, sending vibrations racing across my skin. Jesus. H. Christ.

We kept making out and he kept moving my clothing, but not removing it. Which was both awesome and totally frustrating at the same time. Also, because he was fully clothed, as well. I’d never seen him without a shirt on,

and I had about had it with waiting.

Finally I just started pulling it off him so he had no choice but to take it off.

“About time,” I said, taking in the toned muscles, which, up until now, I’d only felt with my hands. Seeing them with my eyes was something else entirely. He was cut, but not in a gross way. Just...perfectly perfect in every way. And I got to see the tattoo for the first time.

It was two identical Chinese characters. I had no idea what they meant, but I made a note to ask later. I didn’t have any tattoos myself, but I always liked hearing the stories behind them. They reminded me of a tattoo I’d

seen before. I couldn't begin to imagine what Dusty's meant. I just hoped it wasn't Gangsta 4 Life or something like that.

"Wow," I said before going to his mouth. My fingers raced along his blazing skin, and I kissed my way down his neck.

"Fuck, Joscelyn." I loved when he used my full name. Like he was having sex with it. Really, really good sex. "If we go much further, I don't think I can stop, and I don't think either of us is ready for that. Yet."

His words were right, but I didn't want them to be. My body was screaming so loud I didn't want to hear anything else.

“You know, you’re not really being fair. You can’t get me all worked up and then expect me to be able to...shut it off.”

“Do you have any idea how many times I’ve had to jack off since I met you? It’s like I’m twelve again and hiding in the bathroom and praying my parents don’t walk in.”

“Gross,” I said, putting my hand on his chest as if I was going to push him away.

“Oh, don’t tell me that you haven’t done it.” My ears betrayed me.

“Not today.” That was a lie. It had technically been today when he’d called me and we’d had our little session in the backseat of the car.

He climbed off me, looking down at his pants. He shook his head as he grabbed his shirt and put it back on.

“I always tell myself before I see you that I can control it, but it never turns out that way,” he said, as if he was speaking to the bulge and not me.

“Are you giving yourself a pep talk?”

He threw his hands up. “Why won’t you go away?” Yep, he definitely was. Talking to his dick.

“I’ll stop being so...seductive,” I said, adjusting my clothes so everything was covered.

“Oh, Red. You can’t stop. It’s just...you don’t have to do anything. You could sit there and do absolutely nothing

and it would get me hot.”

Yeah, well, he was the same way.

“Maybe I should start picking my nose, or hocking loogies. What about that?” I said.

“I’d find that charming and adorable.” Napoleon had woken up and was crying from his bed. Dusty went and picked him up. He brought Napoleon up to his face and gave him a kiss. Sweet Jesus H. Fucking Christ.

“Is Napoleon helping with your problem?” Since I didn’t own a penis, I didn’t know exactly how that whole thing worked. I did have brothers, but they were all younger and this wasn’t really dinner-table conversation.

“A little. I’ll get over it. I hope. I’ve

had worse.”

He kept looking at Napoleon and not at me and I kept looking at his pants. It should have been the most awkward thing ever, but Dusty was treating it like no big deal.

“Does it hurt?”

“I’m fine, Red. You don’t need to worry about my dick.” Maybe I wanted to worry about it. But he clearly wasn’t going to let me anywhere near it, so I took the top off the bucket of M&M’s and Skittles and pulled out a handful.

“It’s not that bad. Eating them together,” he said, making faces at Napoleon, who kept pawing Dusty’s nose. “It’s like chocolate-covered fruit.”

“Exactly,” I said, cracking an M&M’s between my teeth.

“Do you want anything else to eat? I should have offered.” He walked into the kitchen with Napoleon and looked in the fridge. “I don’t have much, because, as you know, I can’t cook.”

I followed him, enjoying the view from behind. He had a great ass. You could see it was great even though his pants sagged. That reminded me...

“How do your pants stay up?” He closed the fridge and turned around, holding a block of cheese.

“What?”

I pointed.

“How do your pants stay up? I’ve

wanted to ask you that for weeks.” I sat down at one of the only chairs as he went to the counter and got out a knife and started cutting up the cheese.

“Can you hold him? He doesn’t like being set down. Little monster.” He handed me Napoleon, who was upset that Dusty was abandoning him, but as soon as I started scratching him under his chin he relaxed.

“I wear a belt, as you can see,” he said, lifting his shirt and showing it to me. Yes, I’d seen it earlier and contemplated how to undo it in the sexiest way.

“But your pants are so saggy.” They were kind of not saggy right now, given the situation, but normally, they were.

“They just defy gravity.” Napoleon started batting at my finger, so I waved it around for him to attack. He dived for it, got off balance and nearly tumbled off my lap.

“Um, Jos?” I looked up to find Dusty regarding me with his eyebrows raised.

“Yeah?”

“Talking about my pants isn’t really helping with my current situation.” He gestured in the vicinity of his situation. How long was that going to be a problem for him? Should I offer to leave?

“Sure thing.” I went back to petting Napoleon while Dusty cut up cheese and then got some crackers out of the cabinet

and put them on a paper plate.

“Want some?” he held the plate out to me and I took a few pieces of cheese and some crackers. I wasn’t hungry, but I didn’t know what else to do.

Dusty got out two glasses and poured me a soda and sat down. It was probably more comfortable for him that way.

“So, socks. What’s with the socks?” I said, trying for a subject change.

He smiled and took one of the bags and opened it.

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but this entire apartment is linoleum. From the living room and down the hall and out here. As you know, linoleum can be very slippery, especially if you’re wearing new socks, and especially if it

is freshly cleaned. So, let's put Napoleon back in his bed and get some socks on your feet, Red."

* * *

"Sock sliding? We are seriously sock sliding?" I said when Napoleon had been shut safely in Dusty's bedroom so we didn't run into him.

"I have a lot of free time," he said, putting a pair of the new socks on his feet as I did the same. "And I used to drink that time away, or smoke it away, or do other bad things with it. After I decided not to do those things anymore, I had to find sober ways to occupy my time. You've only met sober me. Drunk

me was way more fun.”

“I don’t know about that. You’re pretty fun now. And I used to be no fun at all.” He took my hands and pulled me to my feet.

“You ready, Red?” He got in a position that made me think of runners preparing to sprint.

I copied him, getting down. “Ready.”

“And...GO!” We both took off running and then slammed on the brakes, trying not to crash into each other and also to keep our balance. I made it down the hallway, and Dusty got all the way into the kitchen.

“No fair,” I said as he moved backward to the door to prepare to go again.

“I’ve had a lot of practice,” he said, getting down. I joined him at the door and we went again, but this time I tried to push him but he dodged me and I ended up not going very far.

“Cheaters never prosper, Red.”

“Whatever.”

“Oh, don’t pout. It’s too cute. Here.”

He held out his hands and we faced each other. He started running backward and I planted my feet. I was afraid he was going to trip on something, but I was too busy squealing as he pulled me along the length of the apartment.

“Again!” I said the second we stopped.

“Let’s try this.” He went and got my

sweatshirt and tied it tight around his waist and then had me hold the end. It reminded me a bit of sled-dog racing. He took off and I slid along behind him. Dusty was right—the new socks worked great.

We went again and again until we were both panting and laughing too hard to keep going. We both fell on the couch and he put his arm around me and pulled me close.

“Is this allowed?” I said, turning my face and looking at him.

“I think I can control myself. For the moment. We might need to bring out Napoleon again.” As if he’d heard his name, Napoleon mewed from Dusty’s bedroom.

“Poor little guy. I’ll go get him.”

I opened the door to Dusty’s bedroom and I heard him rustling around in my candy bucket.

“You’d better not be sticking your paws in my candy bucket,” I yelled out, taking my chance to look around his tiny bedroom. There was about enough room for his bed and that was about it, except for a dresser, a basket of laundry and a few knickknacks. I picked up the crying Napoleon and cuddled him.

“It’s okay, buddy.” I gave him a kiss and he licked my face.

“Thanks, I needed that.” I wasn’t snooping, exactly, but I was curious about Dusty. I still knew so little about

him. He was cleaner than I thought he'd be. I saw one lone picture frame on his dresser and picked it up.

It was of Dusty, a few years ago, with his arm slung around another guy. A guy I knew.

The picture frame slipped out of my hand and crashed on the floor.

"Jos!" Dusty heard the crash of the glass and rushed in. "What happened?"

"N-nothing. I just... I dropped something."

"Be careful. Come over here. I don't want you to step on the glass." He moved me aside, since we were both still wearing just our socks.

"I'll get the broom," he said, leaving me standing there, still holding the kitten.

How was it possible? Why would they be in the same picture? Clearly, they were close if they were in the same picture.

“Who is that, in the picture?” I blurted out when he came back. I saved myself from saying his name.

“What?” He stopped, his arm holding the broom out.

“The other guy in that picture. How do you know him?”

And then he said the thing that pulled the world out from under me.

“He’s my brother.”

Chapter 18

I nearly dropped Napoleon. Nathan was Dusty's brother. How was that even *possible*?

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. Just one thought ran through my head. One line, over and over. *Get out, get out, get out.*

"I—I have to go. Right now." I set Napoleon on his bed and shoved past him.

"Jos, what's wrong?" Everything. Fucking everything. I grabbed my purse and my keys and threw myself down the stairs with abandon. If they collapsed

and took me with them, maybe that wouldn't be such a bad thing. Then I wouldn't have to ever explain to Dusty the reason I'd freaked out and fled his house after dropping a picture of his brother that I didn't know he had until he told me. A brother that was now dead.

Dusty pounded down the stairs after me, but I had a head start.

Shit, I didn't even have my shoes on. I got in my car and peeled away from his house, heading for the only place I could think to go. Tears streamed down my face as I drove, and I had to keep wiping them away with my hand so I could see and not crash into someone. The snow was just barely starting to float down from the sky, but it was too warm still

for it to actually stick to the ground.

It was a miracle of epic proportions that I made it to the parking lot near Hannah's dorm without killing and/or maiming myself or anyone else. I didn't even know which room she was in, so I just sent her a text saying I needed to talk and asking if she was in her room.

She responded immediately, and then a short time later she was at the front door, holding it open for me, since my University key card didn't work for her building. When she saw my tears she pulled me inside and I was crushed into a hug.

“Sweetie, where are your shoes?”

I was still wearing the brand-new

socks, which, by now, were filthy.

“I left them somewhere.” My voice sounded robotic.

“I have no idea why you’re crying, but you look like you could seriously use a hug. Let’s go upstairs. My roommate is gone.”

We took the stairs to the second floor and walked down the second of what I knew were four identical hallways that jutted out from the center of the building. I’d been here once before, and I’d needed Hannah’s help to navigate that time, too. On the campus map, Hannah’s building looked disturbingly like a swastika.

She unlocked her door with her key and pulled me inside.

“Sit. I’ll make you some tea and then we can talk.” I flopped down on her futon and grabbed one of the pillows. Her laptop was open on her desk and playing music that I recognized as The Black Keys “Howlin’ for You.” I would have complimented her on her choice in music, but I was a little preoccupied.

My phone went off again. Dusty had been blowing it up ever since I’d driven away from his apartment. I’d thought I’d seen him following me in his Golf, but I did a little maneuvering and lost him by pretending I was going to Yellowfield House and then doubling back to Hannah’s.

Hannah’s microwave dinged and she

handed me a mug of Lemon Zinger tea.

“I started drinking it because of you. We’re not allowed coffeepots, and sometimes I’m too lazy to walk down to the dining hall.” Even though the mug was screaming hot, I held on to it for dear life. Hannah sat down next to me and touched my shoulder.

“What is it, Jos? Did something happen with Dusty?”

My phone went off again.

“Is that him?” she said, and I nodded. “Do you want to talk to him?” I shook my head. Words weren’t my method of communication right now. They were just too much work.

Hannah picked up my phone, turned it off and tossed it on her desk.

“There. Now you can talk, or not talk. If you want to sit here and watch Buffy, we can do that. Whatever you need.” She stared at me and it was with so much love and care that I started to cry again. Dusty was right. I had all these people in my life that would do anything for me. I didn’t deserve it.

“I can’t tell you. I just... I can’t.” I’d carried it for too long, this thing inside me. I’d locked it away and shoved it aside, put it to the back of my mind, where it sat there, not letting me forget. It was a devious little thing, always making itself known when I least expected it, when I let my guard down a little. It was always looking for an

opening to jump into my mouth and scream itself out loud. I wouldn't let it. Not now, not ever.

"It's okay, Jos. I understand the secret thing. I seriously do. So what do you need? You know, within reason."

"I need..." What did I need? A fucking time machine. A do-over. A different life.

"You gotta give me something, girl, something I can do. I'm not good with this emotion stuff. Like, you know how some girls are, like, awesome at the consoling and knowing the right things to say? I am not one of those girls." This made me almost laugh, and given the circumstances, that was something.

"I'm so confused, Hannah." I stared at

the steam rising from the mug and took a sip of the tea. It tasted of comfort and home and waking up. If only it could solve all my problems.

“I sorta got that. Reading between the lines.” I had another sip of tea and started to feel weird that Hannah was staring at me, as if I was a bomb she was waiting to go off.

“I’m not going to explode, you know.” She shook her head back and forth.

“Yeah, I know. Like I said, I’m not good with this kind of thing. So, I’m going to do what I do when I am suffering from life suckage—watch Buffy. It works. Every time.” She got up and went to her DVD collection and

pulled down the first season of Buffy. I couldn't remember where we'd stopped, but Hannah seemed to, so she put in the disk and found the right episode and hit Play.

And for some weird and unfathomable reason, I stopped thinking about the ugly thing in the back of my mind. I acknowledged its presence, but I chose to focus on something else instead. Like a teenage girl fighting vampires. Too bad my ugly thing wasn't a vampire I could stake that would just turn to ash. That would make things a hell of a lot easier. Bam, staked. Done.

As Buffy navigated the tangled web of high school and vampire slaying with her trusty sidekicks Willow and Xander

and her watcher, Giles, I wondered, distantly, if Dusty had gone to the house, and if he had, what he would say to them. It wasn't like he could tell them the whole story without making himself look bad, so what would he say? In a weird way, I hadn't lied to Renee. Here I was, at Hannah's. Yes, we weren't working on a project, but I was where I said I would be. I'd just made a stop in between.

I could have gotten over Dusty lying to me. But this...I couldn't. He definitely wouldn't, if he knew. He'd never forgive me. He'd hate me. It was way better for him to just think I was a freak than to have him know that I was...

Yeah, it was much, much better to let him think I was a freak.

“Are you hungry?” Hannah said. “I have Skittles and crackers and we can raid my roommate’s fancy cookies. She’ll never know.” She went into her roommate’s closet and pulled out a bag of Milano cookies. I hadn’t had those in ages.

Hannah mentioning food reminded me that I’d left the entire bucket of candy Dusty had made for me. It was a loss, but there was no way I was going to try to get it back.

She handed me the bag and I took out one of the cookies and she took one for herself.

“What size shoe are you?” I knew her feet were several sizes bigger than mine.

“Six.”

“Perfect.” She got up and rooted around under her roommate’s bed and handed me a pair of cheap slip-on sneakers. “These should work.”

“Um, Hannah? I’m not stealing your roommate’s shoes. Besides, that’s kind of nasty.”

“Oh, please, she never wears them and just think of it like buying shoes at a yard sale. Except without the paying-for-them part. You need shoes on your feet. You can just bring them back tomorrow or something.”

She had a point. It was going to look

nuts if I walked back into the house without my shoes on. That would definitely raise suspicions with Renee and it was going to be hard enough to act like everything was normal without worrying about my feet.

I took the shoes and slipped them on. They weren't that different from a pair I owned, so hopefully Renee wouldn't notice. Hannah grabbed another Milano out of the bag and clicked onto the next episode of Buffy when we heard a loud banging.

“What in the hell?” We waited and then it sounded a few seconds later, only closer, like someone was pounding on every door in the hallway.

“Probably a stupid inspection. Crap,

crap, crap.” She jumped to her feet and rummaged in her closet, finally emerging with a towel. “This is an illegal microwave, but as long as they can’t actually ‘see’ it, I can’t get in trouble.” She flung the towel over the microwave, adjusting it so it was completely covered. It would be obvious to anyone and everyone what she was hiding, but I took her word for it.

The pounding continued, getting closer. Hannah was in the fourth room down the hallway. By the time the door pounder got close, we could hear voices, but couldn’t make out what they were saying.

Hannah did one last glance around the

room and looked out the peephole seconds before the knocking happened.

“Oh,” she said, as if she was surprised.

“What is it?”

“See for yourself.” She moved aside as the person pounded again.

I fitted my eye to the peephole and was met by none other than Dusty as he said, “Does Hannah Gillespie live here?”

“Shit,” I whispered, not loud enough for him to hear.

He swore and moved on to the next room, and I saw that he was carrying the bucket of candy and my shoes in the hand that wasn't doing the knocking. He pounded on the next door and asked the

same question, but it seemed like no one was home.

“Dude, you need to go talk to him before someone calls campus security. Like, seriously.” Hannah opened the door and shoved me out into the hallway, but she came with me.

Dusty turned when he heard the noise and I met his eyes. Oh, Jesus H. Christ, shit, shit, *shit*.

“Jos.” He walked toward me, but Hannah blocked his path and put her hand up to stop him.

“Listen, dude. I don’t know what happened between you two, but all I want to know is if you hurt her, because I swear to God and everything else that

if you did, I will make you eat your own dick.”

Dusty didn't take his eyes off me.

“I have no idea what happened. You just took off and I've been trying to find you. I knew you'd either go home or come here, so I went to the house and you weren't there, so I knew you would be here. Did I do something? Please, I can't...” He let go of the bucket and it banged on the floor, but the top stayed on. An anguished look passed over his face, and I thought he was going to cry, but he didn't.

“Please, Jos. I just... I can't bear to think that I've done something to hurt you. I couldn't live with myself.”

Hannah took her eyes off Dusty and

looked back at me.

“Do you want some privacy? I can find somewhere else to be if you two need to talk. But I think we should move this little shindig somewhere else.” I finally looked away from Dusty and realized nearly every door along the hallway was open and several sets of eyes were staring at us.

“I can’t.” They were the only two words that came to my lips. Dusty made a sound of frustration and walked toward me as if he didn’t care if Hannah followed through on her threat.

“Okay, okay, let’s take this down a notch,” she said, grabbing my and Dusty’s arms and shoving us both back

into her room. "I'll be outside. If you're in trouble, just yell 'Buffy' and I'll come running." She shut the door behind us, and I heard her yelling at the onlookers to mind their own business.

I backed up, trying to put as much space between the two of us, but he had longer legs and moved faster. I thought he was going to grab me, but he held back at the last moment.

"Joscelyn." There it was, the way he said my name that made it feel like he was making love to it with his mouth. "Please talk to me." His voice broke. "I can't lose you. Not like this."

I'd never seen him so emotional. So broken. He was always so assured, so confident.

“It’s not you, Dusty. It’s me.” And there they were. The lamest and most overused words in the history of breaking up. Only this time, they were true. It was me. It was all me.

“You’re just saying that. It’s got to be something I did.” His hands reached for me, and I put mine behind my back so I wouldn’t reach for him, too. I wanted to—more than anything I wanted to fall into his arms and hear him say my name over and over and over until I forgot about everything.

“I just want to shake it out of you, but I can’t. Please, please tell me.” His anguish was almost more than I could stand, so I closed my eyes. I had to come

up with something. Fast.

“I just... I realized that it wouldn’t work. It couldn’t work. You and me. It was nice while it lasted, but I can’t do it anymore. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” My resolve to not cry crumbled, and I lost it. So much that I couldn’t stand anymore, so I folded to the floor, but Dusty caught me before I hit it. I tried to push him away, but his arms were too strong as they folded around me and held me tight.

“Oh, Joscelyn. What you do to yourself.” He started rocking me as I sobbed, and I couldn’t fight him holding me. It felt too good, having someone hold me as I cried. I’d done too much of it alone with only myself for comfort.

My hands held on to his sweatshirt

and he put his hand on my head, laying it near his heart, which was beating a million miles a minute.

“Beautiful, beautiful girl.” He said other things, but I didn’t pay attention to them.

We were still on the floor, but somehow he picked me up and carried me to the futon and lay me down, lying next to me. I reached for him this time. He sighed into my hair and moved his hands up and down my back. Not in a sexy way. More like a friend comforting a friend.

He started humming, but I was too messed up to realize what the song was.

“Are you guys watching *Buffy the*

Vampire Slayer?” The words almost startled me. My crying had slowed from a flood to more of a light shower. I needed a tissue, bad, but I wasn’t in the position to get one.

“Um, yeah.” My voice was clogged with mucus and leftover emotion.

“You know, I’ve never seen this show. I heard it’s really good, though. I loved *Firefly*. Joss Whedon is kind of a badass.”

“I’d never seen it until Hannah showed it to me. It’s pretty good, but I’m only in the first season. It was made in the ’90s, so the computers are massive.” Were we really talking about Buffy right now? Yes, yes we were. And somehow, it made complete and total sense to be

talking about Buffy right now.

“Oh, are these Milanos?” Dusty pulled the bag from under me. They were slightly crushed now, but that didn’t stop him from reaching into the bag and pulling one out and holding it up for me.

“You want one?”

Was he really feeding me cookies and talking about Buffy right now?

“What are you doing? Five minutes ago I thought you were going to have a breakdown.”

“I know. I was close. But then you did, and that was more important. You’re always more important. I can’t break down when you need me.”

“Who says I need you?”

He didn't even look hurt. “Just eat the cookie, Red.”

So I took a bite of it and he popped the rest into his mouth and then picked out another one and we did the same thing and we watched Buffy and ate cookies. It didn't make any sense, and at the same time it made all the sense in the world.

Chapter 19

By the time the cookies were gone, my face was dry and a little crusty and I had a headache. Dusty was still holding me, and I remembered that Hannah was still waiting in the hallway.

“Oh, my God. We forgot about Hannah.” Dusty readjusted his arms around me.

“She’s fine. You don’t need to worry about her.” My nose was still stuffed up and I sniffed. “Here,” he said, searching around for something and finding a box of tissues on the floor under the futon. He’d had to let go of me to find them,

and as soon as his arms weren't around me, I realized I wanted them back.

“Here you go.” He handed me one and I blew my nose. Not the most sexy thing to do, but it wasn't like I hadn't already un-sexied myself as much as possible. I knew, without having to look in a reflective surface, that my face was blotched all over like I had some sort of disease and my eyes were definitely harder to open and close than they had been a while ago.

“Do you need some water? I can go get you some.”

I did, but I didn't want him to leave, so I just shook my head.

Dusty turned his head and yelled out, “Buffy!”

A second later, the door flew open.

“That’s her word, but I came, just in case,” Hannah said. “I see you’re doing better.”

“Can you get her some water?”

“Sure thing.” She grabbed a red cup from a stack in her closet and dashed away. She was back in a flash with a cup of cool water. “Holler if you need anything else.” She went to her bookshelf, grabbed something and left again, shutting the door behind her.

I chugged the water, spilling some of it.

“If you were that thirsty, you should have said something.”

“I didn’t want you to go anywhere,” I

said, finishing the water and handing him the cup. He wiped my face with another tissue.

“I’m not going anywhere. Not even if you try to make me. Not again.”

I loved hearing him say that at the same time I hated it.

“We can’t, Dusty. We just can’t.”
Now I was the one saying no.

He put his finger on my lips to stop me from talking.

“Not right now, Red. Later. For now, can I just enjoy being here, with my arms around you?”

I nodded. I was enjoying it, too.

“If you want to sleep, that’s fine. Close your eyes.” I did and he started humming again.

I listened and kept my eyes closed. I knew he could beat box like a boss, but I didn't know he could *sing*, sing. Dusty Sharp, man of many talents. I let myself sink into his voice and his arms, because soon, I would have to find some way of getting out of this. But for now, I was going to savor this last moment of perfection. It would have to last me for a long time.

* * *

“Oh, shit, look outside,” Dusty said when I woke up. I'd fallen into a deep and dreamless sleep and woke when the light in Hannah's room had turned dark. I glanced out the window, which was

partially covered with what looked like a shower curtain. The world was dark all right, but it was also covered in snow. From the looks of it, there were several inches and it was piling up fast. Double shit.

“Renee said it was supposed to snow, but I was hoping the weather people would all be wrong. I mean, it’s not like they can predict the future,” I said, rubbing my eyes.

“True. We should probably get you home.” He started to move, but I latched on to him to make him stop.

“It’s not really that bad.”

“Joscelyn,” Dusty said, giving me a look. “I’m not letting you drive in this. There’s just no way. So you can give up

now and let me drive you, or we can fight about it a little bit and then you can give up and let me drive you. The choice is yours.”

I rolled my eyes.

“I can call Mase if you’re going to get that upset about it. He’s got a plow truck. He’d probably be willing to give you a ride, too.”

“No, it’s fine. You’d be surprised how good my car is in the snow.”

“So you’re allowed to stop me from driving in the snow, but I’m not allowed to stop you from driving in the snow? Double standard much?”

“Fine, fine. But if I get a ticket, I’m holding you personally responsible,” he

said, kissing me. This was the first time he'd kissed me since I'd cried. And I let myself give in to it because it felt damn good, and if this was going to be our last kiss, I was going to make it fucking count.

“Your mouth is all salty and chocolaty,” he said, smiling as he kissed me.

“Is that bad?”

“No, it's good.”

And we didn't talk for a while after that. His hands and my hands moved up and under and between our clothing, searching for skin-on-skin contact. We were both a little hesitant, him because he probably didn't want to push me after I'd been crying and me because I was

afraid of letting myself go too far.

I was so, so close to saying fuck it and ripping his clothes off and mine off, even though this was Hannah's room and she was outside and her neighbors would probably hear us. I'd finally found something to drown out the bad parts of my mind. People had been using sex for centuries as an escape. Why did it take me so long to realize it could work for me, too?

"Dusty," I said, pulling away from his mouth.

"Oh, Red. We have to put the brakes on, even though I don't want to. This isn't right. Not right now, as much as you can probably tell I want it." Yep, I could

tell. Really, really tell.

“This is Hannah’s bed and this just isn’t the right time. I don’t want to go further like this. I want it to be because we both know it’s right.”

“Why are you such a gentleman?”

“You wouldn’t say that if you had met me a year ago.” And just like that, the mention of what he used to be like shut all the good feelings down. What was I doing? I pushed myself away from him.

“I’m going to call Mase.” I got up and climbed over him, getting my phone from Hannah’s desk. Dusty followed me, moving my shirt aside so he could kiss my neck. I tried to ignore it as I realized I had about a million missed calls from both him and Renee.

“Hey, what’s up?” I said, knowing very well that Renee was going to lay into me.

“Where the hell have you been? I’ve called and called you. The snow is getting pretty bad, so I think you should come home. If you didn’t contact me in another ten minutes, I was going to send Mase to get you anyway.”

“I’m sorry. My battery died, and I couldn’t find my charger so I had to use Hannah’s.”

She sighed and Dusty kept kissing me. Damn, that was distracting. I reached my hand back and smacked him a little, hitting his nose and also poking him in the eye.

“Ow,” he said, moving away from me.

“Sorry,” I mouthed.

“What was that?” Renee was instantly on alert.

“Nothing, just dropped something.” I hoped she bought it.

“Okay, well, Mase is leaving now.”

“Okay, ’bye.” I hung up and spun around.

“Not nice. Renee definitely heard you.” He looked up from my neck.

“So? I’ll just say that I came here to say hello. Taking my guarding duties seriously.” He was smiling, but I didn’t think it was very funny.

“Not the best thing to bring up right now, Dusty.” I moved away from him

and got the rest of my stuff together.

“Buffy!” I yelled and Hannah came rushing in.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I was just wondering if it would work for me, too. Mase is coming to get me with the truck. Will you please convince Dusty to let Mase give him a ride?”

She went to the window and looked out. The wind whipped the frothy white snow around, and the usually bustling walkway was bare of people.

“Damn. It’s looking pretty gnarly out there. I wouldn’t want to drive anywhere.”

“I live in Old Town. I could practically walk if I had to,” he said.

“You can give in now, or we can fight about it and then you can give in,” I said, throwing his words back at him. Take that.

He threw his hands up. “Fine, fine. I really suck at saying no to you, Red.”

“That’s as it should be,” Hannah said, nodding and patting Dusty on the shoulder. “Your woman is always right. Even if she isn’t.”

Mase texted me when he was in front of the building. Hannah had volunteered to keep my candy bucket safe for me, because there was no way I could explain that and not have everyone get suspicious.

“I swear, I won’t touch it. Those

Skittles are tainted.” She made a face and pushed it to the back of her closet.

“Good, because I would find a really creative and painful way to murder you if anything happened to them.”

“Point taken.”

The storm was in full rage mode when we got downstairs. I pulled my hood tight around my face and Dusty did the same.

“Don’t you own a winter coat?”

“I kind of rushed out of the house in a hurry, Red. Didn’t have time to consider the proper attire.”

Oh. Right.

We both ran for the truck, and Dusty boosted me in so I rode bitch in the middle.

“Hey, man, what are you doing here?”

Dusty grinned in a casual way. “Just came to check on Jos and got stranded by this crazy storm. You mind giving me a ride back to my place?”

“No problem.” Mase was giving me a look, and I wondered if maybe my face was still red from crying. Hannah and Dusty had both assured me it wasn’t, but you never knew.

Mase drove confidently through the snow-covered streets, and before I knew it, we were at Dusty’s.

“See you, man,” Mase said, turning his head as if he was watching something fascinating in the opposite direction. Smooth.

“Yeah, thanks for the ride.”

Dusty looked at me, and I saw in his eyes that he wanted to kiss me goodbye, but that wasn't possible in our current situation.

“Bye, Red. See you later.”

“See you,” I said. Once again, lame goodbye. I almost told him to say hello to Napoleon for me, but that would have been like admitting I'd been to his place and then there would be a lot of questions that I couldn't answer.

Just before he slid down off the seat, he grabbed my hand and squeezed it hard, once. I squeezed back and he let go and I let out a breath as he shut the door and a little bit of snow swirled into the

car. I watched him walk to the back of the building and go up the steps and the automatic light flash on when he got near the top. He waved once and then closed the door.

Mase coughed and turned the radio volume up louder.

“Be careful,” he said.

“Careful of what?” I was still watching Dusty’s apartment as we pulled away.

“I think you know,” Mase said, and I met his eyes in the dark cab of the truck.

“Please don’t say anything.” I didn’t need Renee finding out and flying off the handle like I knew she would. Besides, I was going to end things with Dusty before they even began, so there would

be nothing to freak about anyway. We were done. Finished. Sure, I'd still hang out with him when he was at the house. That was pretty much unavoidable, but I wouldn't go out of my way to be alone with him, and if he tried anything, I'd just keep telling him it couldn't be. Eventually, he would find someone else. Someone that was not emotionally damaged.

Someone who wasn't responsible for his brother being dead.

Chapter 20

I thought Renee was going to tackle me when I walked in the house.

“Don’t ever do that to me again,” she said, nearly squeezing the life out of me. Christ, it was like I’d gone off to war or something. I’d done way more dangerous things than this, things she knew about, but that didn’t stop her from giving me a nice and thorough tongue-lashing about keeping my phone charged and not doing things in snowstorms. We did live in Maine, so that pretty much meant I wasn’t allowed to do anything for at least half the year. I just listened and

hoped she didn't pop a blood vessel and waited for it to be over.

"So, how did you do with your project?" she said, switching gears so fast I got whiplash. Shit. I'd taken my backpack, along with the socks, into Dusty's apartment and forgotten to grab it when I ran out.

"Shoot, I forgot my backpack," I said.

"Well, I can take you to Hannah's tomorrow morning and you can grab it. Hey, maybe this will get so bad that they cancel classes." She sounded kind of bummed that they would cancel classes. I remembered feeling that way.

"No, that's okay. I'll just...get it from her when I can." I couldn't let Renee drive me to Hannah's because my

backpack definitely wasn't there. Oh, what a twisted web I'd gotten myself stuck in.

"You sure?"

"Yeah." I walked into the living room just so I wouldn't have to look at her and lie to her face anymore.

Everyone else was watching the weather.

"It's not looking good for tomorrow, kids," Taylor said. The weather guy was gesturing wildly and using words like *nor'easter* and *school closings* and *power outages* and *whiteout conditions*. The crawler on the bottom of the screen was already flashing with school closings and bingo games being

canceled and offices being closed.

“They’re not going to close.

Remember that time last year when we had nearly a foot and they had all those accidents because they refused to cancel?” Hunter said.

“I vote we take bets,” Taylor said.

“Who thinks they will close tomorrow?”

She raised her hand, and Darah, Paul and I also raised our hands. “So the rest of you think they won’t?” They all nodded.

“Okay, loser has to take the winner out for dinner and drinks and foot the bill. Deal?”

“Deal,” we all said.

“We got this,” Taylor said, holding her hand up for a high five. I gave her

one and sat down on the end of the couch to watch the weatherman ramble on and on and hope that class would get canceled. Then I would have more time to figure out what to do with the backpack situation.

It would also give me some time to hang out downstairs, away from everyone else, and think about what the hell I was going to do to Dusty to get him to stop pursuing me without actually telling him why he should stop pursuing me. This was beginning to feel more and more like the plot of a really bad teen movie, except mine wouldn't end with an epic slow-motion kiss and a killer song playing in the background.

For only the second time that winter, classes were canceled as Maine was hammered with one of the worst storms it had seen in years. It was even worse than they predicted, and the state pretty much ground to a halt as everyone hunkered down and stayed close to home. Mase was the only one who went out, offering to plow some of the driveways of the neighbors who hadn't had their plow guys show up yet.

The rest of the house slept in, except for me. I was up bright and early as a result of barely getting any sleep the night before. That nap with Dusty had also screwed with my sleep schedule.

He'd texted me a few times asking if I'd gotten home safe. I'd messaged back that I had, and he'd tried to start a conversation and even called me, but I'd ignored him. Why did he have to make this so hard on me? It would be a hell of a lot easier to let him go if he'd actually done something awful, like cheat on me.

If he wasn't so...*him*, things would be so much easier. When I'd decided to break up with Matt, things had been so clear, so simple. We had a rational conversation, few tears and only a little regret. Dusty was something else altogether.

The other thing I did was search back in my memory to pull forward any

mention Nathan had made of his brother. I knew he had a half brother who lived in Maine that he'd talked about more than once, but I'd never seen a picture of the guy, and Nathan had always called him Buzz. I felt almost stupid for not making the connection, but they didn't have the same last names, even though they had the same Dad. Dusty must have been named for his mother.

Nathan had always talked fondly of his little brother, wishing they lived closer so he could see him all the time. He also said his brother was wild, and thinking back, I remembered some of the stories he'd told me about him.

At the time, I hadn't known how important they were, so I didn't file them

away as that important. If I hadn't been such an idiot, maybe I would have seen it sooner and stopped this whole thing in its tracks. But no. I had to wait until after I'd decided that I liked Dusty and wanted to see him naked and "bump our bits together" as Hannah so inelegantly put it. Life had to screw me, but I deserved it.

That was the thing that made the most sense in all of this. That I deserved to have this thing that I wanted, so much, dangled in front of my face. This thing I could never have. It was karma at her best. What I should do is accept my punishment in stoic silence and move on. To what, I didn't know, but I couldn't

stay where I was. Something had to change, for me and for Dusty. He couldn't stay attached to a girl who he could never have, either. That wasn't fair to him.

I stuffed my face into my pillow and screamed a few times, but that did little to help, so I went upstairs to get another cup of tea. I was chugging the stuff like it was a drug and I was a junkie. I was on my way to the kitchen when someone called my name from the living room.

“Jos?” Of course he was here. Dusty Sharp was like the postal service. Neither rain nor snow nor me ignoring him would stop him from coming to this house.

Be cool, be cool, be cool.

“Oh, hey, Dusty. Crazy weather we’re having, isn’t it?”

That was the opposite of cool, Jos.

He gave me a weird look for a second and then got up from the couch and picked up my backpack where it had been sitting on the floor.

“I had a friend take me back to campus to get my car, and I stopped in to see Hannah and she gave me your bag. I thought you might need it, so I brought it over.” I was torn between thinking that was really nice to being livid that he’d been out driving in this weather just for my stupid backpack.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” I said, very aware that everyone was

watching me and I had to keep it on the down low.

“I know, but I was already out, so I figured why not? The roads really aren’t that bad now.” The snow was still coming down, but not nearly as heavy as before, and the plow and sand trucks were probably out in force, so it was less dangerous than it was last night, but still. I was torn between wanting to pull him aside so I could yell at him, and not wanting him to know how much I cared. Because if he did, there would be no getting rid of him.

Why couldn’t I just punch him and run away like we were five and on the playground? Would make things so much easier.

I walked over and took the backpack from him.

“Thank you, Dusty. You really, really didn’t have to do that.”

“I know,” he said softly, and his eyes were even softer. Damn those eyes. Hypnotic. “But I did it for you.” He said it so quiet that no one could hear.

“Don’t,” I said, even more quiet as I shook my head just a fraction.

“Well, I think afternoon calls for a snowball fight, snowman building and then hot cocoa. Who’s in?” Taylor said, springing to her feet.

“I’m in,” Hunter said, getting up, too. Two seconds later everyone else was on their feet and running to put on their

boots and mittens and hats and everything else.

“You game?” Dusty said, his face lighting up, probably seeing an opportunity to flirt with me and so forth.

Well, I couldn’t really say no. Everyone else was all for it as if we’d all reverted to childhood status. Mase popped a hat on Darah’s head and pulled it down so she couldn’t see, and she fought with him to try to pull it back up before he kissed her and she gave up.

I sighed and joined everyone by the door to get my winter things.

Dusty leaned down and held my boots for me to put my feet in them. He already had his on. The rest of the house was too busy to notice, so I seized my chance to

talk to him.

“I don’t need your help.”

“Don’t be mad at me. I knew that you’d need your backpack, and you obviously couldn’t come get it, so I brought it to you. I wish we could talk. Do you think, maybe, that I can come by late tonight?” He spoke low and fast, as if we were plotting how to rob a bank or something.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. Let’s just have fun now and we can deal with it later, okay?” I put on a smile and chased everyone else out the door. Hunter and Taylor were already making snow angels, and everyone else was choosing sides for a snowball fight.

“Boys against girls,” Mase said.

“Uh, I don’t think so, buddy,” Renee said. “You have, like, twice the arm power as me and Taylor. Unfair advantage.”

“Isn’t that...unfeminist?” Mase said.

“I am perfectly fine with the fact that you, my friend, have muscles that are larger than mine, and can thus lift heavier objects,” Taylor said. “So if we do boys against girls, we get Mase to even it out.”

There was mutual agreement to this plan, and Dusty gave me a wink.

“No mercy, Red. Bring it on.”

Of course, in order to have this fight properly, we had to dig trenches and

make walls, and it was a huge production that Mase took charge of and Renee *tried* to take charge of.

I didn't want to be out here playing in the snow. I wanted to be in the basement where I belonged, hating myself.

Wow, that sounded really emo. It was a good thing no one could read my mind, or else they'd be really worried.

“Okay! Ready, set, GO!” Mase screamed like he was a Viking charging into battle and the girls and I followed behind him as we charged the rest of the boys. White balls of doom flew and smashed as people screamed and tried to duck and recover from being hit and make new ammo all at the same time. I stayed toward the back, but Dusty

wouldn't stand for that.

“Come on, Red. Let's see what you got.” He started lobbing balls with alarming accuracy that shattered on my legs and then my stomach. I threw one ball for three of his, and he kept coming closer and closer and egging me on.

“Show me what you got!” Oh, that was it. My hair was red, and yes, I did have a temper, and yes, he was pushing my buttons. I scooped up some snow and packed it in a ball and chucked it with as much force and accuracy as I could gather.

Yes. Direct hit. Right over his heart. He looked down, surprised, and nodded.

“All right, okay. Now we're talking.”

Mase was busy trying to take Hunter down as Darah and Taylor ganged up on Paul. It was a bit of an unfair fight because Taylor was taking him out at the knees and then Darah was going nuts on his torso. We'd made the "no face" rule, but she was getting pretty close to violating that.

I hucked another ball at Dusty, and he dodged it. He tossed one at me, and I did the same thing. We danced around each other, trying to fake the other one out and put them off balance.

"Where you gonna go? Where you gonna go, Red?" He was trying to get in my head, but it was my experience that silence was more unnerving than throwing useless words around.

The two of us circled each other and I could almost hear the Wild West music in the background. Dusty kept lunging at me and I kept shadowing him. The battle had devolved around us into people trying to shove other people into the snow, and tickling without mercy.

“I’m gonna get you, Red. You are going down.”

I finally decided to speak.

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah,” he said, and I made my move, lunging forward and taking out his knees. He fell backward, and if there wouldn’t have been at least a foot of snow on the ground, he might have hurt something, but he had a cushion as I landed on top

of him, pinning his shoulders.

“I win,” I said, grinning down at him. I’d stuffed my hair under my hat, but it had started making its escape and hung down between us. I realized, far too late, that I was straddling Dusty, and if we were naked, we were in quite a compromising position. Good thing we both had quite a few layers on. Of course, those layers didn’t stop me from feeling him getting hard underneath me, so I rolled off him, onto my back.

We both panted a little as everyone else gave up and sat or lay in the snow.

“We win,” Mase said, punching his fist into the air.

“Whatever,” Hunter said, shoving snow in his face. Boys.

Dusty turned onto his side.

“Did you enjoy that as much as I did?”

“I don’t think so.” I shifted away from him.

“I know what you’re doing, and it’s not going to work.”

“What am I doing?”

He inched closer and I inched backward. If we continued, we’d wiggle our way across the yard.

“Pushing me away. It’s pretty obvious. I knew you had some baggage when I met you, but I’m not going to let it come between us. You are not your baggage, Joscelyn.” Why? Why did he have to say my name that way? You know, if he didn’t have such a luscious

voice, I would probably have a much easier time saying no to him.

Oh, Dusty. You have no idea about my baggage. In a weird way, my baggage was his. I understood now why he'd been so closed off. He'd lost his brother, and that had probably hit him really hard. That was easy baggage. Simple. One suitcase that you could fit in any overhead compartment. Mine was a trunk. A huge, heavy trunk with about forty different locks on it. With chains wrapped around it. Like pirate's treasure.

He interrupted my baggage-picturing.

“So let me help you. Let me help you carry it. We can do this together, Jos. I want to be with you.”

I looked into his green eyes that were so bright next to the whiteness of the snow, and said the words that cut me like a knife.

“I don’t want to be with you. I’m sorry. I don’t see you that way.” I’d told him once that I thought his pants were smoking, but this time mine were definitely on fire.

I waited for his reaction. For him to be shocked and to get mad and storm off.

He didn’t. Instead, he made one swift move and threw himself forward and kissed me. I realized a second too late what was happening, and by then it was much, much too late.

My lips betrayed me.

They knew Dusty's lips, and they were happy they were meeting again. It was a glorious reunion, at least for my lips. They were rejoicing and attacking Dusty's lips with a desperation that I didn't know I was capable of. My brain fought for supremacy over my lips, but really, the lips had the upper...hand?

I stopped thinking as Dusty held my face and I tasted the melted snow on his mouth, and even though snow was creeping down my neck and under my jacket, I didn't give a shit.

A sound made us jump apart as if someone had fired a gun into the air.

"What the hell!" Renee's voice was right above us. Dusty and I both looked

up, our faces still close enough to kiss. Or continue to kiss. Or make out, which is what we were really doing.

“Are you fucking serious, right now?” Dusty recovered first, getting to his feet, and I scrambled up behind him.

“It’s not what you think—” Dusty said at the same time I said, “It’s not his fault.”

“Get inside, Joscelyn. I will talk with you later.” She jabbed her finger to the house like I was a kid who had ruined the flower bed. Yeah, I wasn’t, and I’d had enough of her lecturing me and telling me what to do and treating me like I wasn’t in control of my own life anymore.

“No. I will not get inside. I am not

five, and you are not my mother. I am nearly nineteen years old and I am in control of my own life. If I want to make out with Dusty on the front lawn, I can. I'm not getting drunk or high or cutting class or breaking curfew. Yes, I did those things, but I'm not doing them anymore. I respect you and I respect your house and your rules. So stop judging me on my past mistakes.”

I wasn't really talking about Dusty. In fact, Renee being pissed at catching me kissing him gave me the perfect reason to push him away, but I would be damned if she was going to talk to me like that in front of everyone.

“Joscelyn, just get in the house and we

can discuss this.” She wasn’t backing down. We were going to have this out, but I’d take doing it with just her rather than in front of everyone. So I stomped as much as you can while wading through the snow, up the porch steps and into the house. I heard Dusty trying to say something to me and then to Renee, but I didn’t hear what her answer was. I didn’t really need to. I could imagine.

I pulled off my boots and my jacket and left them to dry near the door so I wouldn’t track water all over the house. I was rushing to get back down to my cave when the door opened and I was met with Renee’s seriously pissed face. This was one threat level above her normal pissed face. In fact, it was close

to the face she'd given me when I accidentally told Paul she thought she was pregnant that one time. She wasn't, but I never forgot the look she gave me when she found out I'd told him.

“You are not running away from me, Joscelyn Meridith Archer. We are going to sit and talk, and I'm not letting you do anything until we have this out and get everything out in the open. Sit. NOW.”

She pointed at the couch and I had no option but to park my butt on it. Renee wasn't messing around.

“Okay, how about we start with the obvious. What are you doing kissing Dusty?”

“Is there some rule against me kissing

him? Because I never agreed to that when I moved in.”

“Don’t you dare get sassy with me. I’m so not in the mood for it.”

She sat down in the recliner and waited.

“Fine. I was kissing him because he kissed me. Have you ever tried to avoid a kiss once it’s started? Not that easy.”

“Did you want to kiss him?”

The answer was both yes and no. More yes than no, but I really needed Renee to believe in the no. If she thought he’d forced me, in any way, he would be gone for good. But could I really do that to him? Let her think that he’d somehow taken advantage of me? The outcome would be better in the long run, but for

who? Dusty would never be allowed in a ten-mile radius of the house. If he and Hunter wanted to hang out, they'd have to hide it better than an illicit affair. And if Renee found out?

No, I could definitely not do that. I didn't hate Dusty. I didn't want him to suffer, which was why I needed to get him out of my life.

"Yes," I said quietly.

"How long has this been going on?" The real answer? Since he helped me with that damn vending machine. If I could go back in time, I would have stayed down the hallway and not given in to my candy craving. But that might cause a nuclear war or something,

according to the butterfly effect, so maybe that wouldn't be such a good idea. My life had been altered by a damn vending machine.

What I told her was “not that long.”

“What were you thinking, Jos?” My intention had been to play ignorant about the whole Dusty-babysitting-me thing, but my resolve crumbled pretty damn quick.

“What did you expect to happen when you told him to ‘watch over’ me like some creepy stalker slash protector? What were *you* thinking?” My words had the desired effect of making Renee blanch.

“How did you know?”

I threw my hands up in frustration.

“Because he told me. If anyone has the right to be pissed and yell and scream here, it’s me. Why in the hell would you do that, Renee?” I didn’t mean to, but I stood up and the volume of my voice rose until I was yelling. I was just so mad at her.

Renee got to her feet, as well.

“Because I didn’t know what else to do! You didn’t give me a whole lot of choices. It was either come here or send you to live with Mom, and I knew that wouldn’t be good for anyone, so I said you could come here, and Dusty had started coming over and he’d told me all about his shady past and how he’d gotten his shit together. I thought that maybe he

could help you, that you would see that you could go back, you could be my sister again—”

I cut her off.

“So you’re saying I’m not your sister anymore? Are you fucking serious? So I can’t be your sister because I’ve changed? That’s not how family works, Renee. You love each other no matter what. No matter how much you change. So are you saying that you don’t love me anymore?” I was right in front of her and I watched the effect my words had. Her face was so shocked I might as well have slapped her.

“I will always love you, but I don’t know you anymore. I don’t know how to talk to you. I don’t know what to say or

do...” Her chin wobbled and tears started streaming down her face. “I will always, always love you. That was never even a question. How could you think that I don’t love you, Jos?”

She threw herself on me and I was forced to catch her and hug her as she started sobbing. This was new territory for me. Renee never got emotional like this. She was much more likely to yell and scream to display her emotions. I could only remember a few times when she’d cried. One was when she broke up with Paul. She was a bit of a wreck after that, but she’d tried to hide it by crying only in the shower. But I was her sister, so I knew what was going on.

“I’m just so lost, Jos. I don’t know what to do. I don’t know how to help you anymore, and I feel like I’m just screwing it up.” She rested her head on my shoulder and I held her.

“You’re not screwing it up. What happened has nothing to do with you. It’s not your fault.” I rubbed her back as she shook in my arms.

“But I’m your older sister. I’m supposed to know what to do. I’m supposed to have words of wisdom and bake cookies and...other shit like that.” I laughed a little and she did, too.

“You do have words of wisdom. It’s not your fault that I choose to ignore them. It’s not your job to save me,

Renee.”

She pulled back, and I used my sleeve to wipe her eyes.

“I’m not broken beyond repair, Nene. Just a little worse for wear, but who isn’t?” She nodded and I gave her another hug.

“You’re not supposed to be the one with the good advice,” she said.

“It won’t happen again—I guarantee it.”

Somehow I’d deflected her attention from the kiss with Dusty. I hadn’t been intending to do that, but I was going to take advantage of it while it lasted. It would probably be over as soon as he walked into the house.

We sat back down on the couch, my

head on Renee's shoulder this time as she played with my hair. When we were kids she'd been jealous of it. None of our other brothers or sisters had gotten the freaky redhead gene. Except me. The terms *redheaded stepchild* and *ginger kid* were used often in my house, and those were some of the nicer names I'd been called. I couldn't count how many times I'd heard guys musing, out loud, if "the carpet matched the drapes."

"Don't be mad at him, Ne," I said, trying to head her off from ripping him a new one. He didn't deserve that. "It was just one of those things, but I'm going to end it."

"I will be mad at him. He was

supposed to watch you and keep you out of trouble, not get you into it.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry, because I’m not going to let it happen.”

“That’s probably wise. Can I ask why, though?”

Now it was time for a performance. I was going to have to work to sell this.

“I just don’t see him that way. He’s more of a friend, you know? I don’t think I should be with anybody right now. I want to focus on school and try and figure things out.” I deserved an Oscar for this. Even I thought I sounded sincere.

“Now that sounds like the sister I knew.”

“Do you miss her?”

“I don’t know. I miss her...consistency. You were always so uptight I knew what to expect. Now you’re a little wilder. A little more unpredictable.”

“Well, I do have red hair.”

“Yes, you do. Bitch.”

We both laughed, and I snuggled closer to her.

“Love you, big sister.”

“Love you more, little sister.”

Our sister love sharing was interrupted by the doorbell ringing.

“Oh, my God, I forgot they were all still outside,” Renee said, getting up and rushing to get the door.

“So did I,” I said, following her.

Instead of finding a bunch of shivering people on the porch, we just found one, and he wasn't shivering.

“Dusty,” Renee said. “Where’s everyone else?”

“They took the truck to go get Dunkin’,” he said, his eyes riveted on my face. “Can we talk?” I wasn’t sure who he was addressing, but Renee decided it was her and crossed her arms.

“Okay. Talk,” she said.

“We should at least let him inside,” I said. He might not look cold, but I wasn’t cruel enough to make him stand outside while Renee said whatever she was going to say to him.

“Maybe the cold would do him some good. Chill him and his penis out a

little.”

“That’s enough,” I said, reaching around her, grabbing Dusty and dragging him inside. He didn’t deserve a frozen penis. He shut the door behind him.

“Renee, I swear to you. I never meant for this to happen, and I’m sorry, but I can’t really do anything about it now. You have to know how special she is. It was kind of...inevitable. I was sort of halfway in before I knew that’s what was happening.”

I swallowed and realized saying no to Dusty had just gotten so much harder. Why did he have to say things like that? If he would just shut his mouth and stop kissing me, I might have a shot.

“Very nice,” Renee said. “But I’ve talked with Jos, and I don’t think she feels the same way. So, I am going to go and fold some laundry and try not to eavesdrop while you two talk. But, if it comes to blows, I’m on her side. You lose.” With that, she pivoted on her heel and went to the laundry room in the back and shut the door.

“You might want to take off your boots. Darah will skin you alive if she finds out that you tracked water all over her clean floors.” This wasn’t actually true. I couldn’t imagine Darah even threatening to do such a thing, but Dusty shucked his boots off and put them next to mine. Seeing him in his socks

reminded me of sliding around in his apartment and how much fun we'd had. No, bad thoughts, Jos. Gotta shut those suckers down.

We went back into the living room and sat on the couch. This talk was going to be very different from the one I'd had with Renee, that was for sure.

"So let me get this straight," he said, holding his hands up, as if he was asking me to slow down. "You told your sister that you don't feel the same as me."

Time for Oscar-worthy acting performance number two.

"I did because it's true." My lines sounded like something out of a bad play. A really bad one. Like, not even community-theater caliber. More like a

crappy high school production that the kids had been forced to participate in for an English grade.

“Joscelyn.” I shivered as he said it.

“What? It’s true. I am putting you firmly in the friend zone, where you belong. I got carried away, and when I sat down and thought about it, I decided that it wasn’t something I wanted. With you. I have a lot going on right now, and I don’t think this is the wisest choice. You know, even if I wanted it.” I could see the reviews now. *Joscelyn Archer is the worst thing to happen to theater since Cats!...I got up and walked out and demanded a refund...This girl has no talent and will never act in this town*

again.

I peered at Dusty out of the corner of my eye. I couldn't make eye contact with him directly, because I would have blinked too much, or given some other sign that I was lying.

He was silent for a second, watching me.

“You have got to be shitting me. Do you honestly think I would believe that? If so, then you must think I'm pretty fucking stupid.”

No, I didn't think he was stupid. He was too smart for his own good.

The smile on his face this time was one of confused bewilderment. It was too adorable.

I went with the truth.

“I don’t think you’re stupid.”

“So why are you doing this to me?

You kissed me not that long ago, and that kiss is sort of the opposite of what you’re telling me right now, and I’m thinking if I kissed you again right now I’d get the same reaction as before. Your voice is saying one thing and your lips and your body are saying another. Do I have that right?”

Well, yeah. He did.

“Dusty.”

“No, Red. I wanna hear this. Tell me why we can’t be together.” He sat back as if he was waiting for me to put on an encore performance. I was kind of at the end of my rope.

“Why do you have to make this so hard on me? If you were just...a jerk or you smelled bad or you didn’t say nice things it would be so much easier.” I got up from the couch and went to the recliner so I could have some distance from him. Also to get away from his smell.

“Maybe it’s hard because you’re attracted to me. And you don’t put people you’re attracted to in the friend zone.”

“Some people do.” I was certain that, at some point in history, someone, somewhere, had put someone they were attracted to in the friend zone for one reason or another. There had to be a

precedent.

“Okay, I’m going to talk now, and you can listen to what I’m going to say and tell me if I’m on the right track or not. Okay?” he said.

“Do I have a choice?”

“No.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Proceed,” I said, waving my hand.

“We were going along just fine a few days ago. If you remember, you were the one who wanted to take this to the next level, correct?”

I nodded.

“I kissed you, you kissed me back, things got a little intense. We both wanted it. Correct?”

I nodded again.

“And then, for reasons unknown to me, you freaked out and left my house, and now you are trying to come up with anything you can possibly come up with to get me to go away, even though you still want to be with me, based on the kiss. Correct?”

“That’s not exactly—” He cut me off.

“Yes or no?”

I glared at him.

“Yes.”

“So what I need to do is find out what occurred to make you change your mind. If my memory serves, you went into my bedroom to get Napoleon and decided to snoop around—”

I tried again to interrupt him, but he

held his hand up.

“Just let me finish and then you can comment. So, you were in my room and picked up a picture of me and my brother and dropped it. I came in to find you looking like you were scared for your life, and then you shoved my cat at me and ran out the door without your shoes on. Correct?”

I had to swallow a few times before my voice would work.

“C-correct.”

“So it seems, from my view of the events, that the moment when you decided was when you saw and then dropped the picture. So. What was it about that picture that caused you to drop it in the first place? What could a picture

of me and my brother do to freak you out that much? Let's look at this in depth, shall we? You have seen me. You have kissed me. You know what I look like.” At this point, I felt like I was on the witness stand in one of those cop dramas, and he was the hard-ass lawyer cross-examining me about what happened the night of June 14. He would make a great lawyer.

“So it couldn't have been me that led you to freak out, and the only other one in the picture is my brother.”

I was beyond stupid to think that he wouldn't figure this out after my freak-out from seeing the picture. I shouldn't have left. I should have pretended that

I'd gotten an emergency phone call. Hell, I should have told him I was a virgin. That might have done it. In fact...

"I'm a virgin," I blurted out. It was better him knowing that than finding out the truth. Embarrassment would trump the hatred he would have for me if he really knew. Why hadn't I thought of this before? It was perfect!

"I'm a virgin and I was in your room, and looking at your bed made me think of sex, and I realized that I wasn't ready and I was scared and that's why I left. It had nothing to do with the picture." For the love of GOD, please buy it, Dusty.

He looked at me really hard, and I, for the first time ever, was glad that my face and ears were turning red. It was more

from fear that he wouldn't buy it than from embarrassment about revealing I still had my V card. But he didn't have to know that.

“Seriously? That’s what you were freaking about?” Sweet Jesus H. Christ, he bought it. I heaved an internal sigh of relief.

“Well, yeah. I know I was, like, all over you, but I got thinking about it and I guess I lost it. I’m so sorry I didn’t tell you, but you can see why I wouldn’t.”

Now he looked confused again.

“Why?”

“Because I know, for a fact, that you’ve been with plenty of girls before, so you’re probably used to...girls with

more experience. And I barely have any.” Okay, I was actually embarrassed now. That wasn’t part of the plan.

“Oh, my God. I cannot believe I just told you that.” I put my head in my hands.

“Hey, hey,” he said, coming over and pulling them away. “You have absolutely nothing to be ashamed of. I kind of guessed, but I was waiting for you to say something. If you’re worried about me, don’t be. It doesn’t matter that you haven’t been with anyone else. It wouldn’t matter to me if you’d been with a hundred guys. Just the fact that you wanted to share that moment with me means...everything. You mean everything to me, Jos, and I don’t want to lose you.

Even when you try to lose me.”

He gripped my hands tight and moved his face close to mine. I knew he was going to kiss me, and this time, I was going to stop it.

“Dusty, I can’t. I’m sorry. There are just...things that are standing in the way. Too many things. I don’t want to ruin what I’ve got here, and I’m afraid to screw things up and you’re too important to me. So if I can avoid fucking up what we have already, which is great, then I’d like to do that. Because what if we do this, and it doesn’t work out? Then what? You wouldn’t be able to come here anymore. Hunter would be put in a horrible position and I just... I don’t

want to not see your face anymore. I couldn't handle that." Wow, I didn't even know I felt that way until I said it out loud. Why hadn't I just said that in the first place?

He opened his mouth to argue, but shut it quick and made that frustrated sound that was a bit like an explosion.

"I get it. I get that, and I understand it. Doesn't mean I have to like it, but if that's what you want, that's what I'll do. However and whenever I get to be in your life...I'll take what I can get. I want you, any way I can get you. I guess you're my new addiction." He smiled, but it wasn't a happy smile.

"I'm sorry you're hooked on me. I'd suggest a support group, but I don't think

they have Joscelyn Addicts Anonymous.”

“That’s more than okay. You’re the one addiction I can live with.” I felt like I should reach out and touch his face, but that would probably lead to more kissing and that would undo all of the things I’d just said.

He let go of my hands and went and sat on the other end of the couch.

“So what do you think? Can we put Renee out of her misery and tell her that she can come in now?”

I heard rustling in the back room and I knew she was pretending not to listen, but we all knew that’s exactly what she was doing, if only to make sure I was

okay. I nodded and turned my head.

“Renee! You can come out now.”

She dashed out as soon as she heard her name.

“You okay?” Her eyes went from me to Dusty and back.

“I’m fine. We’ve talked and everything is okay. No need for threats or pitchforks or mobs of angry villagers,” I said.

Renee gave me a look and Dusty shrugged.

“I don’t know where she gets it from,” Renee said.

“I don’t really care where it comes from. I just want to be with it wherever it’s going,” Dusty said. I shot him a look. He wasn’t supposed to say things like

that anymore. He wasn't supposed to say heart-melty things in front of my sister when I'd placed him very firmly into the friend zone. Was he screwing with me?

"Sorry," he mouthed, but he didn't look the least bit sorry. The doorbell rang again and Renee went to answer it.

"Honestly," she said as she let the rest of the household back in.

I got up and smacked him in the chest.

"You're not supposed to say stuff like that, you idiot," I said as everyone piled in carrying bags and trays of foam coffee cups and several boxes of Munchkins.

"We got you a chai, Little Ne," Mase said, handing me one of the cups.

"Thanks, Mase." I sipped the chai and

it was sweet and warm. Dusty grabbed a cup of black coffee and searched for all the jelly-filled Munchkins before someone else stole them. Two seconds ago he'd been flirting with me, but now he was acting like I didn't exist. What the crap.

"You okay?" Taylor said, sidling up to me. "That was pretty...heated earlier."

"I'm fine. Dusty and I had a chat and decided we're better as friends."

She laughed a little and grabbed a croissant from one of the bags. "You mean, *you* decided. I find it impossible to believe that he would go for that."

"He said it was my decision," I said. Still laughing a little and shaking her head, she went to the cupboard and got

down a jar of Nutella. If there was one thing we always had at Yellowfield House, it was Nutella. We might be out of toilet paper, or laundry detergent, but we would never, ever be out of Nutella.

Tearing the croissant up, she unscrewed the jar of Nutella and dipped a knife in and slathered the chocolate goodness on the croissant pieces.

“Trust me. Hunter didn’t back down when I pushed him away, and Dusty is the same way.” I looked around, but no one was listening or watching us.

“What are you talking about, baby?” Hunter said, coming up behind Taylor and putting his head on her shoulder.

“Yeast infections,” she said with a

wink at me.

“Yum. You gonna share some of that?” he said, pointing to her Nutella-covered croissant bits.

She sighed and held one up for him and he ate it from her fingers and she laughed as he licked the chocolate off. Taylor gave me a look, and at first I didn't understand it, but then she reached out and pulled me close so she could whisper in my ear.

“Let him in. You'll regret it if you don't. Trust me.”

She let me go and went back to feeding Hunter parts of her croissant. I went back into the living room and found Dusty messing around with Hunter's guitar. I didn't know he could play.

Everyone else was still in the kitchen and I had the feeling that they were trying to give us some privacy.

“Have any requests, Red?” he said, strumming the instrument as if he was born with one in his hand.

“You can play?”

“Yeah, Hunter’s been teaching me. I feel like you kind of have to play if you’re a music teacher. You know, for sing-alongs and stuff.” Well, those must have been some damn good lessons, because it was obvious that he was a natural.

“What was that song you sang to me last night at Hannah’s?” I said quietly so no one would overhear.

“Oh, ‘Live and Die’ by the Avett Brothers. I’m surprised you didn’t know that one.” I’d gotten a few of their CDs, but not all of them. He started the upbeat song, which had a sweet melody that somehow worked with the lyrics, which might have been taken from a much-less-jauenty-sounding song.

Dusty’s singing voice was deeper than I would have thought, and I could tell he’d had to take the song down a few keys to make it work for him, but he’d done it flawlessly.

I couldn’t help but tap my feet to the addicting chorus, and I felt the eyes and ears of everyone in the kitchen on me and Dusty. He kept his eyes on me the

whole time, barely even blinking. A smile of pure joy was stuck on his face, and I couldn't help but smile, too. He strummed the last note of the song and I laughed.

“What next, Red?”

“You don't have to do this.”

“I want to. I like playing. It's one of the only things that makes me truly and completely happy.” He leaned over the guitar and lowered his voice. “Besides you, of course.”

I shot a look behind me, but everyone scrambled to pretend they hadn't been eavesdropping. “Dusty.”

“What? I can't say that you make me happy? Damn, Red. Harsh.”

“Play whatever you want. It doesn't

matter to me,” I said, crossing my arms.

“Okay. I will.”

And then he started a song that made me want to beg him to stop and pick another song. After seeing that picture of Nathan, my memories of him were fresh and raw and this song was just going to make it worse.

Dusty somehow did justice to the Ingrid Michaelson version of “Creep,” although I had no idea how. Their voices were galaxies apart, but Dusty took her soft version and added a little bit of the edge back in, making it a little harder, a little more heart-wrenching, and I couldn’t take it.

I got up from the couch and Dusty

stopped, slamming his hand on the guitar to stop the strings from vibrating.

“I can’t.” And then I dramatically dashed from the room, ran downstairs and slammed my door before he, and everyone else, could see me crying.

* * *

Of course, given the fact that I lived with a crap ton of people, someone was bound to come after me. A soft knock at my door made me look up from my pillow. I’d thrown myself on my bed, hoping to get myself together so I could explain it to whoever came to ask me what the hell was going on.

“Joscelyn.” Of course it was Dusty.

They couldn't have sent Taylor, or
Mase, or even Renee. I wondered how
hard he had to fight to be the one to come
and check on me.

“Go away, Dusty. Seriously. Just
leave me the fuck alone. Go back to your
apartment. I'm sure Napoleon is missing
you.”

“I'm not going away. I thought I made
that pretty damn clear.” I heard him slide
to the floor outside the door. “So you
can stay in there all you want, but
eventually you will need food, or the
bathroom, or to get some more Skittles
and M&M's, and I'm going to be here.”

“Why can't you find someone else?” I
said, throwing my pillow at the door. It
was a pointless thing to do and didn't

make me feel any better.

“I don’t want anyone else, Red. I want you.”

“Well, I don’t want you.”

He laughed, and I wished I could reach through the door and strangle him.

“I think I can smell your pants burning from here.”

“You think you’re so fucking funny, don’t you?” I got up and spoke through the door so he could hear me loud and clear.

“Sometimes.”

“Dusty. Please. Just leave. Me. Alone.”

He was silent for a moment. I thought he was going to finally go away, but I

didn't hear him get up.

Then I heard him singing softly.
“This” by Ed Sheeran. I adored that song, under normal circumstances.

“You’re not going to get me to come out by singing, so just stop it.” He didn’t. The song continued, and Dusty’s voice got louder and stronger.

“Shut the fuck up!” I screamed, pounding on the door. It was just too much. I tried to drown him out, but I couldn’t. I kicked the door repeatedly, trying whatever I could, short of opening the door and punching his lights out, to get him to stop and go away.

“SHUT UP!” His voice was calm and smooth as he sang. I kicked the door one more time and screamed in frustration.

He ignored me.

I panted from my freak-out and sat on the floor. My nose was running, so I wiped it on my sleeve.

“Why won’t you stop?” I said, not loud enough for him to hear. “I’m the reason your brother is dead. Why can’t you understand that and leave me alone?” The song cut off.

“What did you say?” There was no way he could have heard me.

“Nothing.” I moved closer to the door. “Dusty?”

“Yes, Jos.”

“Do you think you could ever hate me?”

He shifted on the other side of the

door, and his voice got closer, as if he was talking through the crack between the door and the frame.

“Listen to me, Joscelyn. I want you to really hear what I’m saying. If you don’t believe any other thing I say, believe this. There is nothing, *nothing*, you could, or would ever do, that would make me hate you. You’re not capable of doing something to cause anyone to hate you. I know that. And I also know that...that I love you.”

I started to cry again, putting my head against the door. It was solid and reassuring, and that was what I needed.

“You wouldn’t if you knew, Dusty. You wouldn’t.” I put my hand on the door, and somehow I knew he was doing

the same on the other side.

“Oh, Jos. I just... I want to touch you and hold you so bad right now. Can you please let me in? Please.” I reached my hand up and unlocked the door.

“It’s open,” I said, scooting back from the door as he turned the knob and opened the door slowly.

I looked up and there he was.

“Oh, sweet girl.” He crouched down next to me and picked me up and set me down on my bed, stretching out beside me and brushing the tears from my face. He kissed the tip of my nose and I couldn’t stop him.

“Dusty, don’t.”

“Stop telling me what to do, Jos. For

this once, I'm not going to be a gentleman and listen to you." He pulled me tight against him, and I struggled a little to get free, but his arms were like steel cables and I didn't really try that hard.

"Let me. Just let me for a little while." He locked his arms around me and I turned my head so it was against his chest. His heart pounded like the rough beat of a drum, and I listened to it, trying to let everything else go.

Once he was sure I wasn't going to try to get away from him, his hands loosened on my back and started moving up and down in soothing waves.

The tears continued, but they weren't as bad as before.

He didn't sing. He didn't speak. He just held me and breathed with me and let me cry my tears into his shirt until I was wrung out and didn't have any left. At least for now.

My arm was falling asleep, so I shifted and he tensed up.

"Sorry. I just need to move." He loosened his grip, and I turned so I was in a better position. One of his hands went under my chin, tipping my face up so he could look at it.

"I'm a mess. I know," I said as he brushed some of my hair out of my eyes.

"A beautiful mess I don't know how I got myself roped into."

"I didn't rope you."

“Yes, you did. It just isn’t your fault.”

That wasn’t, maybe.

“Joscelyn?”

“Mmm?”

“You’re not this upset about the virginity thing, are you?”

I couldn’t lie anymore. “No.”

“It’s something else. Something bigger.”

I nodded with his hand still under my chin.

“Then I have to tell you that you’re not the only one who has something so big and so bad that they can’t tell anyone. You’re not the only one. Do you understand?”

“What?” I’d known there were lots of

secrets about Dusty's past that he would rather leave buried, but I just assumed he had a bad home life, or he'd been abused, or something like that. What was it with people and secrets? I seemed to attract them. First Hannah and now Dusty.

"But you know what? Compared with the thought of losing you, my secret doesn't seem so big anymore. You're the first person I've told about this."

I tried to put my hand on his mouth, but he moved it.

"No, I'm going to tell you, not because I want to, but I need you to hear it." I held on to his shirt. "You saw that picture of me and my brother, right?" Oh, no. Oh, nonononono. I stiffened in

his arms, but he didn't stop talking.

“Well, he died. Nine months ago. And it's my fault.”

At the exact moment my brain took the things he said and translated them, I was sure my heart stopped.

Chapter 21

I sat up, wrenching myself out of his arms.

“I can’t listen to this. I can’t, I can’t, I can’t.” I dived for the door, but Dusty stopped me, trying to pull me back.

“Let me go, let me go, let me go!” I screamed. My door burst open and Dusty froze.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?!” Dusty let go of me and Renee pulled me away from him. “I think you need to get the fuck out of this house and I hope the door hits you on the way out.”

“I’m so sorry.... I just...” Renee held

me and turned her body so she was between me and Dusty.

“Get. The. Fuck. OUT.” He gave me one last desperate look and pushed past us and went up the stairs.

“Did he do anything to you?” Renee said, holding my face as if she was looking for bruises.

“No, nothing like that. He didn’t hurt me.”

“That’s not what it looked like from my perspective. Shit, I never should have trusted him, but Hunter was all for it. I swear, I’ll never let him near you again.” She hugged me, and I tried to tell her that it wasn’t Dusty’s fault. That I was to blame. For this, for everything.

But the words were too big and too

heavy for my tongue to form, so I just started crying again. It seemed to be my default form of expression lately.

“It’s okay, Jos. It’ll be okay.”

It was less okay than it had ever been.

We both heard yelling upstairs and then the front door slammed so hard it shook the whole house.

“It’s okay, baby girl. I’m not going to let anything hurt you.”

* * *

Renee insisted on putting me to bed and then bringing me soup. No one else came downstairs, but I could hear them upstairs, and even if I didn’t know what they were saying, I knew they were

talking about me. I wondered who had taken what side. When Renee left to go make the soup, after tucking me in bed, I checked my phone. Nothing.

I'd expected at least a phone call or something from Dusty, but I finally seemed to have driven him away for good.

So why did I feel like someone had frozen my heart and then smashed it into a million pieces with a hammer? I curled up in the fetal position and tried to stop myself from crying. Seriously, how many gallons of tears could I produce? I was apparently going for the world record.

Renee came back with the soup, and I had some of it, just to appease her. She also handed me some Tylenol PM, and I

swallowed it down without thinking. I wouldn't sleep otherwise. I'd done this routine nine months ago, only that time I didn't have Renee.

“You just rest. Don't worry about school or homework or anything else. I'll take care of everything. Okay?” She kissed my forehead and turned off the light as she left the room, and I lay there in the dark silence.

“Come on! I've never been to a concert before. Please? I can't do this without you,” I said, clasping my hands together. “Please be with me when my concert cherry gets popped.” That made him laugh.

“Fine, fine. But you're paying for

gas.”

“Deal!” I said and threw my arms around him. “You also need to tell me what to wear. I don’t really have concert attire in my closet.”

“I know. What is up with your wardrobe? You look like you just stepped off C-SPAN all the time.”

“I’m going to have to dress like this all the time someday, so I might as well get used to it.”

I tried to shut out the memories, but they wouldn’t go back in the place I normally kept them. They were too big, too close, and I couldn’t shove them away, no matter what I did.

“So, what do you think?” he yelled in my ear as the first act finished their

set and the crowd went berserk.

“Amazing!” I yelled and then screamed with everyone else at the top of my lungs.

“This is life, Jossy. This is living the day,” he yelled as people chanted for an encore.

We watched the second act, which wasn't as good as the first, but it didn't matter. Nathan got a text that made him frown, and I asked what was wrong.

“Nothing. Nothing that I need to deal with. You want to see if we can get closer?” We'd pushed and worked our way to the front by the time the third act took the stage. I was drunk on the music and the atmosphere, and I'd

never felt like that in my life. It was too much and not enough at the same time.

“I never want to leave!” I yelled.

“You’ll have to sleep sometime. And they will kick us out eventually.”

He seemed distracted.

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah, fine. My head’s somewhere else.”

“Do you want to go?”

He shook his head and smiled.

“No way. I’m not cutting your first experience short. We’re staying until the end.”

“We don’t have to.”

“Are you sure?”

I looked at the stage.

“One more song?” I said.

“Deal!” He put his arm around me and kissed my forehead.

We stayed for that one song, that song that changed our lives.

When it ended, we moved through the crowd and went back to the parking lot. Nathan had volunteered to drive me back to Maine to surprise my stepsister Jessica on her birthday. He’d said he had a few friends he wanted to visit anyway, so it was no big deal. I felt bad for making him drive me all the way to Maine, but he said he didn’t mind and I could pay him back by giving him a ride another time. He was such a good friend. Would have given me the shirt off his back.

“Friends don’t owe friends. You do a favor, they do one back and eventually you forget and you just end up doing nice things for each other. That’s how it should work anyway.” When it came to advice, Nathan always had some, and it was always good, even if I didn’t understand it at the time, or thought he was crazy. In the end, he was always right.

We spent the trip back home searching every station on the radio for new music. Up and down the dial, AM and FM. It was amazing what you could find when you went outside your comfort zone, something I’d always been afraid of. Nathan had held my

hand and pulled me into a world I didn't know existed. A world of passion and music and love. He was just so happy that being with him made me happy, too.

“Call me if you need anything, Jossy, and I'll be here,” he said when he dropped me off. I'd told him about my family issues, and he'd told me he had some of his own. “So I'll see you on Sunday?”

“Unless I go crazy before then,” I said, rolling my eyes. From the driveway I could already hear my stepdad yelling at one or another of my siblings and then there was a crash.

“Just call me if you need to.” He gave me a hug and I didn't want to get

out of the car.

Barely a half hour later, I'd already had a fight with my mother and had escaped the house. Luckily, one of my stepbrothers had gotten a letter from the school principal about cutting class, so I'd seized my chance. I felt bad for doing it, but I figured Nathan wasn't that far away and could come get me.

"Hey, Jossy, what's up?"

"Hey, Nathan. Can you come get me? I hate to ask, but I can't stay here."

"Of course. I just have to take care of something and then I'll be right there, okay?"

I wiped my eyes and looked back at the house. I didn't know if I could handle that. Things had been bad lately, and I was pretty sure Mom was on the verge of another divorce.

"Hurry."

"I'm on my way, Jossy." He hung up and that was the last thing he said to me.

* * *

I got up a few hours later and put on some music, but I had to turn it off because it seemed like every song was trying to either remind me of Dusty or remind me of Nathan, so I shut it off and put a movie on my computer. Something

with a lot of explosions and crappy dialogue that wouldn't make me cry or think or anything like that. But even those movies have some sappy moments, and I found myself crying for a stupid robot.

“Knock, knock.”

“It's open,” I said, wiping my eyes and shutting my computer. I would not let anyone know that I cried watching a movie about robots from space.

Taylor poked her head in with a tentative smile on her face.

“I thought you might want something to eat. Or drink. Or company.” I didn't want any of the above, but it was sweet of her to ask, so I sat up and patted the end of my bed.

“I've been where you are, Jos.” No,

she hadn't, but I kept my mouth shut. The reason Taylor had been messed up was because of something that happened to her. Not something that she had any control over. I was messed up because I deserved it. I deserved the torment the universe was visiting on me. I deserved to drown in it.

She said sweet things, and I listened and tried to look like I was listening and absorbing and that she was being helpful.

“So you can't let the bad things that happen to you stop you from seeing the good things.” It was cute and all well and good for her. I was happy that she was happy and had a good life. I'd never

get that.

This was the most depressing pity party ever, which was probably the point of a pity party.

“Renee is convinced he tried to hurt you, but she’s suspicious of everyone and everything. I also know that if I’ve learned anything about you, it’s that if a guy tried to hurt you, he would never survive, and you wouldn’t defend him. So, what I think is that he was trying to tell you something that you didn’t want to hear. Am I getting warm?”

Yes.

“No.”

“Uh-huh. So the question is, what was he trying to tell you and why didn’t you want to hear it?”

Okay, I was really sick of people having theories about me. If I was better at lying, I'd come up with a completely reasonable explanation that everyone would believe. Or I should have just done what I'd considered a few times and run away without looking back. But of course, that plan had a flaw in the form of my sister Renee. If there was anyone who would search the ends of the earth for me and then drag me back from the edge of it, it would be Renee.

“I’m not going to force it out of you. It will happen when you’re ready. Hell, I spent years keeping my secret just as fiercely as you’re keeping yours. So I get it.” She got up and patted my shoulder.

“Things have a way of working themselves out, whether you make the effort or not.” With that she shut the door quietly and left me alone again.

Chapter 22

“You look like shit,” Hannah said when I showed up to Pam’s class on Wednesday. Renee had insisted that I take off Tuesday as well, but I thought it was so she could keep an eye on me.

I sure as hell wasn’t suicidal, but that didn’t seem to matter, no matter how many times I told her. My razor and all the knives in the kitchen and even the aspirin vanished mysteriously, and I suspected her and at least one other member of the house, but I pretended not to notice.

I’d emailed Brett that I couldn’t come

for my first day of work because I was sick, and Hannah helped me out by laying it on thick with him as well, so he just said he'd see me next Tuesday.

“Thanks. You're the first person who's told me that.”

She pulled a Ziploc bag out of her backpack and held it out to me. “I figured all that candy shouldn't go to waste.”

“No, thanks,” I said, swallowing a roll of nausea. Candy had never made me sick before, and it was a damn shame, but I couldn't look at that bag without thinking about Dusty. He had ruined my enjoyment of candy. Honestly, that kind of pissed me off, which made me grab the bag from her and shove a

handful into my mouth. No one, not even Dusty, was going to take that away from me.

“That’s my girl,” she said, giving me a huge smile. “And you don’t look that bad.”

“I appreciate that.”

Wednesday was hard to get through. Mostly because I was so distracted with thinking about the past and Dusty and things I’d struggled for so long to repress and put away. People had to repeat themselves and I was totally off in Pam’s class and the look that she gave me wasn’t pretty. It was worse on Thursday and by lunch on Friday I was so ready for the weekend so I could just

hole up in my room and not have to fake it anymore.

“Dude, if you want to come over, my roommate is gone for the weekend.”

Hannah had been the missing half of my brain, which was exactly what I needed.

“We could do a Buffy marathon and just camp out in my room and order food whenever we needed it. Or we could just live on that bucket of candy. I mean, we are college students. It’s kind of expected.”

“That sounds awesome, but I don’t think Renee is letting me out of her sight. But you could bring all of those things to Yellowfield, and we could camp out in the man cave. I’m sure we can rope some of the girls into keeping the guys

away. Actually, the guys have been kind of avoiding me, now that I think of it.” Maybe they thought that I hated all men now, and them by association.

“Good. Then we can do just girl time. Who needs ’em?”

“You’re preaching to the choir.” Not that I’d ever been really boy crazy, but I definitely could do without seeing one of them for the foreseeable future.

My birthday was also fast approaching. I hadn’t forgotten about it, really, but it wasn’t at the top of my priority list. Besides, nineteen wasn’t that great of an age anyway. Not like eighteen or twenty-one. No one had mentioned it much at the house, either,

apart from that one time when the girls went out shopping. I still hadn't found where they'd stashed the results of that trip. Probably in the attic, which I wouldn't go near if someone paid me. I'd found a mutant spider the size of my hand once when I was a kid and had been hiding in one, and as a consequence I avoided them.

Still no word from Dusty. I hadn't seen him on campus, either, even though I'd had several close calls where I thought I saw him and had to duck behind a bush, but it never turned out to be him anyway.

Hannah and I spent most of the weekend holed up in the man cave watching endless episodes of Buffy and

ignoring the calorie count for everything we ate. I'd gone nearly ten minutes without thinking about Dusty when Hannah brought him up.

"I know I'm supposed to be all friendly and not ask you about what went on with you and Dusty, but it's been killing me for days. Will you tell me what happened?"

"You're one to talk about sharing secrets, Hannah," I said, shoving another handful of salt-and-vinegar chips into my mouth. I really needed to shower, and I'd been wearing the same sweats since Friday night.

"Okay, if that's the way you want to play it, I'll show you mine if you show

me yours.”

“Did you—” I said, moving away from her on the couch.

“No, I did not mean to make it sound like that. Despite the fact that I haven’t gotten any action in I-don’t-care-to-remember how long, I don’t swing that way. Do you want to hear this or not?”

“You’d be willing to do that?”

“Sure, it’ll bond us for life or some such shit like that. I’ll go first, if you want.”

Was I ready for this? I hadn’t told a single person.

“Sure.”

She sat up and turned the television volume down.

“So you know I’ve got these awesome

burns? Well, the truth is that my brother tried to set me on fire when we were kids. I was four at the time and he was eight, and we were out in the backyard. He'd always had a thing for fire, and had nearly burned the house down several times, but no matter how many times Mom hid the matches, he always seemed to find them. Aaron is smart. Like, really smart. Like, hack-into-a-government-database-with-one-hand-tied-behind-his-back smart. Anyway, so he told me to stand real still. I had no idea what the hell was going on, except he told me that he was going to give me candy if I stood real still. I just remember the snap as he struck the match on the box and the look

on his face as he threw it at me.”

I couldn’t even breathe.

“From there things get a little fuzzy, but I think I somehow remembered something from one of those kids’ specials about stopping, dropping and rolling, so that’s what I did, and it saved my life. My mom ran out when she heard me screaming and stopped Aaron from completely lighting me up. A trip and a long stay in the hospital and tons of skin grafts and surgeries later and here I am.” She gave me a smile, but it was dark. Haunted.

My mouth was so dry I had to take a drink of water before I could say anything.

“What happened to him?”

Hannah grabbed her can of soda and I saw her hand shaking.

“They put him in a mental health facility, doped him up. He’s still there. It was either that or jail, and my parents chose that. He’s of age now, but he’s still too much of a danger to be let out. So, that’s my story. Now show me yours.”

She flipped so quickly that I couldn’t follow. I couldn’t process what she’d told me. Once again, it was something that had been done to her. Something she’d had absolutely no control over. Hannah was a victim; I’d created one.

“I...I don’t know if I can, Hannah. I haven’t told anyone.”

She got up and sat on her knees right in front of me.

“Look, we all have terrible shit in our lives. Every single person on this planet at some time or another has had a secret they would rather die than share. It’s part of being human, of being alive. Stuff happens and we can’t deal with it. But what I’ve learned is that we are stronger than what happens to us. You can’t let it define you. The fucked-up parts of you are just that. Parts. But I understand if you’re not ready. It took me a long time and a lot of therapy to be able to even remember what happened. I blocked it out for a long time.”

My eyes skimmed over the scars on

her face and neck and arm and I couldn't even imagine the horror she'd been through.

"I killed someone," I blurted out. To her credit, Hannah didn't gasp like I expected her to. Her eyes went wide for a second and she shook her head.

"Okay, then. I think I'm going to need some details before I process this." She got up and sat back down on the couch beside me. "Because that can mean a lot of things."

I took the deepest breath of my life and started from the beginning. How I'd met Nathan randomly at a party that I'd gone to in order to satisfy my stupid friends, and how we'd formed an odd friendship and how he'd started making

me open my eyes to the world and music and having fun and then how I'd begged him to go to the concert, and then drive me home, and how I'd called him and begged him to come get me.

“He was just hanging up with me when it happened. They figured he must have been looking down at the phone, or have dropped it, or something. He never saw the tractor-trailer truck, and that was it. Nathan is dead because of me.”

Saying the words had been as hard as slicing into my soul and bleeding them out, word by word, drop by drop. Whoever said the truth was freeing had never held a secret like this. Somewhere around the middle of my story, I'd

started crying again, but I was kind of used to it by now. It was a bit like being a leaky faucet.

I tried to turn my tears off and waited for Hannah to process.

“So you think you’re the reason Nathan hit that truck.”

“I *am* the reason, Hannah. He never would have been on that road at that time, and he wouldn’t have been distracted. I’m responsible for all of it.”

“You. Are. Mother. Fucking. Crazy,” she said before she dived at me, putting her arms around me and pulling me close in a rib-crushing hug. “How in the hell have you convinced yourself that it’s your fault?”

See? That was my exact fear. That

whoever I told would try to convince me that it wasn't. That it was just an accident and no one's fault, etc. No. I wouldn't go for that. People had used that excuse for thousands of years to get themselves off the hook for the horrible things they'd done. Not me.

Hannah wouldn't let go of me, and I was having trouble breathing.

"You need to let go," I sort of gasped.

"Oh, sorry." She pulled back, but kept her hands on my shoulders. I couldn't look at her.

"So there, I told you. Now you can get off my back about it."

I tried to get up, but she wouldn't let me.

“No way. You are not going anywhere. You’ve carried this alone for too long, and I’m not going to let you carry it a second longer. What happened was an act of God or a shitty day or a whole host of things. You’re one of those people, Jos, who can’t stand not having an explanation for something, a reason. There was no reason for this. There wasn’t a reason for my fucking brother to set me on fire.” She couldn’t compare the circumstances. They just weren’t the same. I wrenched myself free from her grip.

“I knew this would happen if I told someone. I knew they would try to talk me out of feeling bad, but I don’t want to

stop feeling bad. He was a wonderful person and he didn't deserve to die. The world is a worse-off place without him, and I'm the one that caused that. I won't let you take the pain that I should be feeling away from me. If I don't have pain that he's gone, then who will?"

"I don't know where you got such fucked-up logic from, but I'm going to stop you right there, because this is crazy. Bat-shit crazy." She tried to grab my shoulders, probably to shake me, but I backed away.

"Great, now you think I'm crazy. Thanks so much, Hannah. I feel so much better that I finally told you." I went for the stairs, because it was the only escape down here.

She blocked my exit. Damn, her reflexes were good.

“I told you that it took a lot of therapy for me to get where I am, and part of that very expensive therapy was letting go of my anger toward my brother. I had to let it go or I would never be free of him and what had happened. I’m not saying I’m the poster child for letting go, or that I’m even okay, but the one thing I do know is that you have to let go of this guilt, Jos. It’s going to kill you, and I don’t think Nathan would have wanted that.”

I exploded.

“How the fuck do you know what he would have wanted? You didn’t know him. No one will ever get to know him

again.” My yelling brought the pounding of footsteps, and the door at the top of the stairs opened.

“What’s wrong?” Renee came rushing down, with everyone else just behind her.

“Why can’t you all leave me the fuck alone?! I just want you all to stop trying to save me, because I don’t want to be fucking saved, okay?! JUST LEAVE ME ALONE!” I had nowhere else to go, so I went for my bedroom, managing to get the door shut and locked before they could catch me. I waited for someone to bang the door down, but it didn’t happen. I waited and heard quiet talking and people going back up the stairs.

Then...silence. The door shut and I

waited for someone to come and try to talk to me through the door. Nothing. I moved to the crack between the door and the frame and listened, just to make sure. Nope, it was quiet.

Wow. That was the first time someone had listened to me. I wiped my eyes and blew my nose and tried not to fall further apart. I'd cried so much already, been in so much pain, but this, this was the worst.

This was what was below rock bottom, whatever they called that. They probably didn't have a name for it.

* * *

The next few hours involved me crying

more tears than I knew were possible and going through an entire box of tissues as I sat on the floor of my bedroom and wondered what the fuck I was going to do. I went through several options, but none of them seemed viable.

What I wanted, what I really wanted, was to go to a new place. Just cut my losses and pick up and leave. Everything, including my family. Invent a new person to be, a new person that people wouldn't ask questions about. It's what a girl in a movie would do. I'd have to cut and/or dye my hair, though, and get completely different clothes for it to work.

I was delusional. I couldn't start over, because they wouldn't let me. Hannah

had said she was jealous of how many people cared about me, but I'd willingly hand them over to her. She needed it more than I did. How horrible it was, what had happened to her.

When I was finally able to get myself to move, I went to my computer and put Coldplay's "The Scientist" on repeat. My below-rock-bottom moment needed a sound track. I really had to pee, which was insane, given how much water I'd already let out of my body through my tears, but I wanted to make sure there wasn't someone camped outside my door. After listening for a little while for the smallest sound, I unlocked the door and poked my head out.

Empty. I breathed a tiny sigh of relief and scurried to the bathroom in case they were listening and waiting for me to emerge from my room to attack me. I wasn't going to take any chances. I thought I was home free when I opened the door of the bathroom, but someone got up from the couch. He'd been so freaking quiet I had no idea how long he'd been there.

"Dusty." I breathed his name and it was both a blessing and a curse at the same time.

"Hey, Red. We need to talk. I know you don't want to hear what I have to say, but I think I can change your mind."

"Did Renee send you down here to

drag me out so they can do whatever they're plotting to do with me?" The mind reeled with possibilities. I bet she wouldn't be above forcing me to go to a facility. I'd been threatened with that more times than I could count, but this time they might actually be able to do it, even though I was of age.

"No, I came on my own. She wasn't going to let me in the house, but Hunter convinced her that I was the only one who could get through to you. Would you just listen? You don't have to do anything else. Just listen."

"Dusty—"

He put up his hands, like I was holding him at gunpoint.

"Just wait here. I have to get

something. I swear, I'll be right back. Yes, you could just go in your room and lock the door and I will respect that, this time, but I beg you. Please, Joscelyn.” He was brave to come near the house, what with Renee on the warpath and a target on his back.

“Okay.” Moving slowly from behind the couch, he kept facing me, probably so I didn't make any sudden movements. He even walked up the stairs backward and had to grope for the door handle. If I wasn't so far from laughing, I might have found it funny.

For a split second, I considered going into my room and locking the door, just to get this over with, but something told

me he'd be back and he wouldn't give up.

I heard voices, and I wondered for a moment if he'd set me up, and they were going to come storming down the stairs, all dressed in riot gear. My suspicions turned out to be nothing more than that when Dusty slowly opened the door and came back down the stairs, cradling something to his chest with one hand. A tiny sound told me that it was Napoleon.

“So you think you're going to use your adorable kitten to get me to listen to you, huh?” Napoleon poked his sleepy head out from the folds of Dusty's sleeve. Why did he have to be so freaking sweet?

“I play dirty. Here.” He held

Napoleon out to me, and Napoleon protested at being moved. “It was a job to get him away from the ladies upstairs, I’ll tell you that much. I’m pretty sure this house is going to be full of kittens next week.” I had no choice but to take hold of Napoleon. I put him up to my face and he snuggled under my chin and started purring. This was the key to world peace, I swear. Kittens. Start dropping those in the Middle East and problems solved.

“Would you like to sit?” Dusty gestured to the couch as if he was an old-time gentleman inviting me into his parlor for tea. I nodded and went to sit on the couch, still holding the sweet

Napoleon, who was playing with my hair.

“Don’t eat that,” I said, taking some of it out of his mouth.

Dusty made sure he had quite a bit of distance between us, but I remembered how that had gone last time we’d been on this couch. This time, though, there would be no kissing, even if I wanted to.

“Joscelyn?”

I looked up from the adorable kitten to meet Dusty’s hypnotic eyes. Two very different things, but equally captivating.

“Hannah shared with me what you told her earlier. About...about Nate.” His voice broke a little on Nathan’s name. “And it’s just not true, Jos. It’s not.”

“I can’t believe she told you,” I said, looking back at the kitten because it didn’t hurt as much as looking at Dusty.

“Don’t be mad at her.”

“I’m not mad at her.” I wasn’t really mad anymore. I’d gotten to that place where you just don’t feel anything. It was kind of nice. Emotional purgatory.

“So go ahead—talk.”

“It’s not your fault that Nate died. It’s mine.”

“Yeah, you said that.” I looked up from the kitten and wished I hadn’t. Dusty was crying, and in the second it took for me to realize he was crying, I snapped out of my emotional purgatory from a moment earlier.

“Yes, I did. He was coming to get me from my parents’, and I was on the phone with him just before it happened. If he wouldn’t have brought me to Maine from the concert, he wouldn’t have been on that highway.”

With that, I went back to petting the kitten as tears rolled down Dusty’s face and splashed on his shirt. He didn’t bother to wipe them, which made it worse, somehow.

“Joscelyn. He was coming to get me. I’d gotten arrested, again, for drinking underage. The charges were later dropped, but that doesn’t matter. What matters is that I asked him to come and bail me out, and that’s why he was on

that highway. To save my stupid ass, again. I can't count how many times he drove home for me, and..." The tears finally became too much and he sobbed, leaning toward me.

"How could you blame yourself, you beautiful girl? How could you ever think you were responsible?"

"How could you?" I said, turning it around on him. "I'm carrying this blame. Not you. It's mine, and mine alone."

He moved closer to me and seized my hands.

"No. You will not carry this alone. It's not yours to carry." He let go of my hands and held my face, and I couldn't breathe. Napoleon protested at being squished, so I moved him.

“It’s not yours,” I countered.

“Look, we can play this game all night, or you could let me kiss you and we can put the blame aside for a little while. I need to show you how much I missed you.” He didn’t wait for an invitation and his lips descended on mine. He tasted salty from the tears, but behind that was the familiar Dusty taste that I had missed, more than I would ever admit to him.

“Kitten,” I said as I broke away from him for just a second. Dusty picked Napoleon up and set him on the floor, where he cried. “Take him upstairs?” Dusty nodded against my mouth.

“Be right back.” He scooped up the

now-grumpy kitten and took the stairs two at a time. I lay back on the couch and ran my hand through my hair.

What was I doing? I shouldn't be kissing Dusty, no matter how good it felt and how much I wanted to. It was wrong. We were wrong together. It would never work. There would always be something between us, and it might not be a problem now, but down the road it would separate us. It would.

Dusty came back and straddled me.

“Where were we?”

I put my hand on his chest.

“I can't.”

He made a frustrated sound and shook his head.

“Yes, you can, and you want to.”

Yes on both counts.

“We shouldn’t. We shouldn’t start, because then this will turn into something and I can’t let it. I can’t let this be something, because I don’t want to lose it. It’s better not to start at all than to get into it and then have it gone. I couldn’t deal with you being gone, Dusty.”

“You’re not going to lose me.”

“I never thought I was going to lose Nathan. Did he ever tell you about me?”

“Yes. I didn’t know it was you, though. He always called you Jossy but I didn’t make the connection. And he never really told me much about you. Just that you’d become friends and that

you had terrible taste in music that he was bound and determined to change.”

I almost smiled, remembering. “He did say that. A lot.”

“Did you love him? Is that why?”

I put my other hand on his chest.

“No, I didn’t love him in the way you’re asking. I loved him like the older brother I always wanted, but never had. I have a lot of siblings, but I’m not very close with any of them. They tend to come and go when my parents get married and divorced. I’ve had so many people walk in and out of my life, and he was one of the only people I was sure would stay, would always be there, and now he’s gone and it’s my fault and I can’t stand it if I lose you, too. I can’t,

Dusty, because I love you. I love you so much and I can't lose you, too. I can't." This time I was the one who reached for the kiss, and he met me halfway.

"I don't want to lose you, either, but neither of us is going anywhere, right now, at this moment, so we should enjoy it."

"Live the day," I said, touching the sides of his face. He felt so good.

"Yeah, Nate used to say that."

"I know."

"So let's live, Joscelyn. Right now."

So I brought his mouth back to mine, and our lips had another joyous reunion. Now it was time for our bodies to be introduced. The kiss got more intense,

and he pressed himself against me, and I knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that I wanted to give myself to him, completely.

“Take me to the bedroom?” I said. No second-guessing.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Live a little with me.”

“Okay, Red.” He picked me up and carried me to my bedroom. I didn’t think about if it was a bad decision or not, or second-guess the intelligence of doing this now, when I was so emotionally fucked. It was exhausting doing all that thinking. Just like when I gave myself up to the melody of an amazing song, I wanted to give my body up to this amazing guy. No, not give it to him,

share it with him.

“The Scientist” was still playing, so I shut my computer and the music stopped and only the sound of our breathing filled the room. Dusty kissed my lips and then down my neck. It was a little more frantic this time, as he couldn’t get enough of me. Well, the feeling was mutual. I nearly tore his shirt off in my haste to get him undressed.

“Easy, Red,” he said as it got caught on his head and he had to help me pull it the rest of the way off. I traced the tattoo on his arm.

“‘Little brother.’ Nate had one that said ‘older brother.’ But you probably knew that.”

“I do now,” I said, kissing the tattoo before going back to his lips, which became more and more demanding as his tongue plunged into my mouth, as if he was trying to taste my soul. I let myself go, and he removed my shirt and then my bra with expert hands.

“One, two, three, four,” he said kissing from my cheek down my neck and in between my breasts. “Five, six, seven...”

“What are you doing?” It came out as a semimoan as his tongue licked one of my nipples.

“Counting your freckles. It might take a while. Eight, nine, ten—” I grasped his head as he took one of my nipples into

his mouth and sucked on it. He stopped counting as he ravaged me with his mouth, and I wrapped my legs around him and made incoherent sounds, begging him for more.

He moved to the other breast, making sure it got just as much attention, which was very considerate. I nearly lost my mind when, at the same time, he slipped his hand under the waistband of my sweatpants and stroked me there, as well. He had done this before, and had learned well, but I wasn't going to ask. Who really cared?

"Fuck," I moaned in the grip of building pleasure. He kissed down my stomach, his hand still working, and he dipped his tongue into my belly button. I

had no idea how sensitive that area of my body was until now.

All I could do was hold on as he scooted my sweatpants lower until I was completely exposed. He still had his pants on, which was hardly fair, but I couldn't do anything about it as his mouth joined his hand and lights exploded in my head and I thought I was going to die with the beauty and intensity of it.

And then he started humming, his mouth and lips vibrating against me in a way that made me cry out. I thought I recognized the tune, but shortly later my brain gave itself over and I lost myself to him and his mouth and the sweet

ecstasy. He hummed and kissed his way to my inner thighs, which trembled as I felt another one coming, only seconds after the first. This really wasn't fair at all.

I let go of his head and reached down, but his pants were well out of my reach. I made a little sound of protest and the humming cut off.

“What’s wrong?” His head came up and his hand stilled. I was granted a momentary reprieve.

“It’s not fair. I want to touch you, too.” I tried to drag him up my body, but he wouldn’t let me.

“I’m sorry you feel that way,” he said, as he slipped a finger inside me and dipped his head back down. “But I’m

busy right now.” With every word he moved his finger in and out and moved his tongue, as well. He added another finger and I was completely helpless again as I burst into a million shards of glittering pleasure.

Dusty took me to the edge again, merciless in his attack with both mouth and fingers until I was quivering and unable to move.

“Now you may touch me,” he said, sliding up my still-heaving body. My hands were a little shaky at first as I tried to undo his belt and then went for his zipper. Now it was his turn to moan as I slid his pants and boxers down, finally getting to touch him everywhere.

I'd always been scared of this part, of the actual sex part. What if it hurt too much? What if I did something wrong? What if I was really bad at it? When I'd been with Matt, those things had always run through my head, but in this moment with Dusty, as I stroked him and heard him growl and say my name, I didn't think of any of those things.

I kissed my way down his chest and saw that he was having trouble keeping himself above me. I smiled to myself as I took him into my mouth, and he was the one making incoherent sounds. I had no idea what I was doing, but he seemed to like it, so I started humming and he nearly collapsed on me.

“Jesus, Red. You can’t do that when I’m above you,” he said, putting a hand in my hair and pulling my head away. “Sometime I’ll let you do that again, but right now, I just want to get inside you. Do you have something?”

“I live with the queen of safe sex,” I said, pointing to my nightstand. “Second drawer in the back.” He reached over me, and I started stroking him again, up and down, twisting my hand a little.

“I can’t even remember my own name right now,” he said, fumbling for the box and moving so he was beside me.

“Are those okay? I don’t really know what you’d like.” Now was not the time to start babbling, Jos.

He kissed me, and I took that as a “shut up, Jos” as he pulled one out and tore the package open.

“I can do it,” I said, taking it from him. “Renee taught me how. That’s not as weird as it sounds,” I said as I rolled it on and he closed his eyes and breathed through his nose. I got it on in one try. Renee would be proud. Or maybe not. I should probably stop thinking about her.

“Are you ready?” He moved so he was above me. “Or if you wanted to do it another way, we could—” I stopped his question by grabbing him and moving my hips up. He slid inside me and I prepared for massive amounts of pain.

“Did I hurt you?” he said, once he

was fully inside me.

“No,” I lied. It was more of a dull ripping feeling, as opposed to a stabbing pain. I tried to let my body get used to having him inside me. “Just give me a second.” He held himself so, so still, and I let myself fall into his eyes and get trapped there.

“I love you,” I said, tilting my face up for a kiss. His head came down and our lips met.

“I love you, Red.” I wrapped my legs around him and shifted my hips back, and he started moving. It hurt a little less the second time, and a little less, and then I could feel myself building again, the two sensations of pleasure and pain mixing together and overtaking me. I

rocked my hips up to meet him as he increased his speed, hell-bent on destroying both of us. It got rougher and I welcomed it, my fingernails digging into his shoulders and my voice asking him for more.

Finally, he shuddered above me and fell against me, being careful not to crush me. Both of our chests heaved and we were slick with sweat. He kissed my lips and tried to pull out, but I grabbed his butt to stop him.

“Stay with me.”

He kissed my nose and moved my hair out of my face and then pulled me close. We were as connected as two people could possibly be, and in that moment of

clarity, I realized that it didn't matter. Whose fault it was about Nathan. Dusty and I were both alive, and he wasn't.

We were getting to do all the things he wouldn't. But that was okay. He always told me I needed to find a guy who appreciated me, who knew how lucky he was to have me. Little did he know it would be his brother. Or maybe he did know.

I wasn't a big believer in anything, but this would be just the kind of thing Nathan would have dreamed up. Bringing us together, but making us work for it first. The thought of telling him that I had finally found someone, and the look on his face made me start laughing. Dusty finally pulled out because he had

to, but he didn't move away from me just yet.

“What are you laughing about, Red?”

“I'm just thinking that Nathan is somewhere laughing at the two of us for being idiots.”

That made his face split into a smile so wide I thought it was going to break his face.

“You're right. This is exactly the kind of thing he would pull. I know he definitely wouldn't have set you up with me in my before state.”

“Ditto,” I said, shifting a little and wincing.

“Are you sure you're okay?” Dusty said, stroking my arm.

I gave him a kiss. “I’ll live.”

“And live, and live, and live.” He tapped his finger on my shoulder and I realized two things at once.

One, that everyone in the house had probably heard us, and two, that I was bleeding. Either one of those things was enough to turn me into a human stoplight, but both made me want to die.

“Oh, my God.”

“What? What is it?” Dusty was on the alert.

“I need to go and take care of something,” I said, trying to get up so he wouldn’t see the results of what we’d just done, but he stopped me and then looked down.

“Oh, Red. It’s okay. Why don’t you go wash up and I’ll take care of this?”

“It’s not just that, Dusty. This room isn’t soundproof.” I pointed to the ceiling and he looked up.

“I completely and totally forgot we weren’t the only two people in the world. Well, it was nice knowing you. Renee is probably going to kill me now and chop my body into little equal pieces and scatter them everywhere so no one will ever find me.”

I gingerly climbed over Dusty and grabbed the first thing I found to cover myself with, which turned out to be his shirt.

“Oh, this is bad, bad, bad.” I went to

open the door, but Dusty stopped me with a hand on my waist.

“Joscelyn, the only bad thing here is that I can’t take you back to bed right now because I want to. I wish there were some way that we could just stay in bed together forever and never leave this room. I wish we could make these little moments, right here, right now, last forever.”

I turned in his arms.

“Well, I can make this last a little longer. Come shower with me?” His hands dipped under the shirt, eager to get me naked again.

“I would love to. Almost as much as I love you.” He pressed me against the door.

“I can’t believe no one has come down to drag your ass upstairs for a good old-fashioned beat down.”

“Oh, I’m sure that’s coming. So, if these are my last moments, I want to spend them naked with you.” He growled and swept me into his arms and I squealed as he carried me toward the shower.

* * *

“So. You have deflowered my sister,” Renee said, pacing in front of us. Dusty and I were on the couch, hand in hand.

“Renee!” I said, my face going scarlet.

She held her hand up for silence.

After the lovely shower with Dusty, we'd gone back to my room and gotten dressed to face the judge, jury and executioner.

When we'd emerged from the cave, the house had been quiet, but I could hear people talking on the second floor.

"Maybe they gave us some privacy?" I'd said, shocked.

"Or maybe they're lying in wait," Dusty had said behind me. "Let me go first."

He'd sneaked up the stairs, with me right behind him, and we'd found everyone in Darah's room, except for Mase and Hunter, playing with Napoleon.

The moment Renee looked up and saw me and Dusty, she'd grabbed both of our arms and dragged us downstairs, and here we were. Getting reamed out by the best.

To his credit, Dusty hadn't run away, which was a plus. It was nice to have someone to hold on to while Renee was on the warpath, even if I was more scared for him than I was for myself.

"So," she said, pivoting on her heel.
"*So.*"

I waited for her to say something else.

"Did you use protection?" Of course that was her first question.

"Yes," I said, beating Dusty to the answer. "Condoms and the pill."

Renee narrowed her eyes and glared at Dusty.

“It’s true,” he said, his hand holding mine a little tight. I almost laughed. The confident Dusty Sharp was scared of my sister. Scared shitless.

“How long have you been planning this?”

I started to answer, but Renee turned the glare on me.

“I want to hear it from him.”

I shut my mouth and looked at Dusty.

“Honestly? I’ve been trying to be with your sister since the first time I saw her. Right about the same time I realized that I loved her.”

Renee nodded and started pacing

again.

“You fell in love with me at first sight? Really?” I’d heard of it happening, but always just chalked it up to lust instead of love.

He brought our joined hands to his mouth and kissed them.

“Of course. I told you, it was like I met you and I knew. Took myself a long time to realize it, though. But I told you. It was impossible not to fall for you.” He was so sure of himself, spoke as if it was such an easy thing to say.

Renee started pacing again.

“And how am I supposed to believe that? I mean, it sounds like a really good line to feed a vulnerable girl to get in her pants.”

“If all I wanted was to get in her pants, I would have given up a long time ago. Your sister is...” I waited.

“Stubborn,” he supplied with a grin as he flicked some of my hair off my shoulder. “Comes with the hair, I think. Or maybe it’s genetic.” He turned and smiled at Renee, and she faltered for a second. Ha.

She cleared her throat and tried to collect herself for the next line of attack.

“Be that as it may, I am still not very happy about this.” I started to say something about how I was of age and could make my own damn decisions and after everything Dusty and I had been through to find each other, I wasn’t going

to let her stop us, but she kept going and ignored me.

“I trusted you to keep an eye on her. Just an eye, not your entire body. And I’m still not sure if I trust you, and I want to know what happened between you, but...” Dusty and I waited with bated breath. Whatever that means. I’d never understood the phrase before, but this certainly felt like it.

“I can’t stop you from seeing each other. You’re Hunter’s friend, and this is Hunter’s house and you’re going to be here anyway. I also know that if I try to keep you apart you’ll come together quicker than you can say ‘star-crossed lovers.’” I started celebrating in my head, but I knew it was probably too

good to be true.

“BUT,” Renee said, as if she sensed my precelebration. She stood in front of Dusty and leaned down until their faces were level.

“There will be rules, and I will get everyone else in this house to enforce them. You will have her home at a reasonable hour. You will not take her anywhere I would not want her to be. You will never, ever, EVER hurt her, because I will come after you and I will make your death slow and painful. Got it?” By the time she was done, their faces were so close I wanted to tell Renee to back it up.

“I am sufficiently terrified,” Dusty

said. "So yes, I've got it." He looked away from Renee and at me.

"You okay with those terms, Red?"

"I will agree to them on one condition," I said, holding one finger up. Renee finally stopped trying to stare Dusty into submission.

"*You* will be nice to my boyfriend and not threaten him anymore. Got it?"

Renee thought about that for a second, and I could see her fuming.

"Deal."

"Deal," I said, sticking out my hand, and we shook on it.

"Boyfriend, huh?" Dusty said. "That's the nicest thing you've ever said to me." He leaned over and gave me a kiss, which was either a very brave or very

stupid thing to do, seeing as how Renee was within slapping distance.

I grinned and kissed him back, and I heard her making protesting noises.

“You said you’d be nice.” I pulled away from Dusty long enough to say that, and then went back to his lips.

“I can be nice,” Renee muttered under her breath.

“Can we come down now? The suspense is killing us,” Taylor called from upstairs, and Dusty broke the kiss.

“Come down and meet my boyfriend,” I called, and I heard a little exclamation of glee that was probably from Taylor.

She and Darah came down the stairs with Napoleon, who was meowing

because of all the excitement. Paul came after them and went right for Renee, putting his hands on her shoulders and rubbing them.

“Yay, everyone is alive,” Taylor said. “Dare and I were getting worried.” She held Napoleon up like Simba in *The Lion King* and he didn’t seem too happy about it.

“Oh, buddy, it’s okay.” Dusty reached for him and Taylor passed the kitten over. The second Dusty had him, Napoleon started purring.

“Nice job with the kitten,” Renee said. “Well played.”

“Thank you,” Dusty said, giving Napoleon a kiss on his tiny head. Dead, I was dead. “He’s irresistible. Just like

you, Red.”

Renee groaned, and Darah and Taylor said, “aww,” simultaneously. Well, you couldn’t win them all.

“Straighten up and fly right, Ne,” I said as I kissed my boyfriend.

Chapter 23

Having sex with Dusty put our relationship in some sort of relationship time machine. Where I was with Matt after years of being with him, I got beyond after only a few days with Dusty. Mostly because we spent every moment of time we could, together.

I was a little reluctant to fool around at Yellowfield House after the first time, so I started staying over at his place. It wasn't as nice, of course, but it didn't matter, as long as we were together. Plus, Napoleon slept with us, and the first time I woke up and found Dusty

curled around the sleeping kitten, I swore my heart was going to explode from the sweetness of it.

I got my bucket of candy back from Hannah when I went to see her to give her the good news about Dusty and also to apologize for throwing her out and for general craziness.

“Dude, it’s okay. I’ve been there. In fact, your crazy wasn’t as good as mine. I’ll tell you about it sometime.”

I also had to give her nearly every detail of my sexual exploits, and it was like she was reading *Cosmopolitan* and taking notes for later use.

“Humming,” I said.

“Humming?” She looked puzzled.

“Humming,” I said with a wink. “Just

trust me on this one.”

Tuesday I attended my first meeting at the paper, and Brett gave me my first assignment, a battle of the bands on campus featuring groups like Zoom Zoom Bang, Lader Vader and Sterling Silver Lining. I got to know some of the other writers, and they all seemed both cool and unintimidating, which was good.

“So what are you doing on Saturday night?” I said to Dusty that night as we lay in bed at Yellowfield House after a hushed naked session. I’d hinted to Hunter that it might be a good idea for everyone if they soundproofed the basement, but it hadn’t happened yet.

“Um, hopefully doing more of this with you.” He stroked my thigh and then kissed where his hand had been. “I still haven’t counted all these freckles.”

“Not for lack of trying,” I said, tracing his tattoo with my finger. “But I have to cover the battle of the bands, and I wanted to know if you’d come with me. It’ll probably be awful, but it will suck less if you’re there.”

“Sure, Red.” He kissed his way up my leg, and I had the feeling I was going to be incoherent again very soon.

I’d been so scared of him finding out about my role in Nathan’s death, and just like that, it didn’t matter. I’d spent nearly a year hating myself and hating the world

and just hating everything, and it had been the ultimate waste of time.

This was what Nathan had meant when he said, “Live the day.” He didn’t mean getting drunk, or completely abandoning who I was, or isolating myself. I knew that this, these moments with Dusty, and the moments with Renee and Hannah and the rest of the people who loved me, those were what life was about. And music, of course. Life wasn’t worth living without it.

“What do you want for your birthday?” Dusty said a little while later after we’d gotten tangled up again.

“You’ll think of something,” I said, still panting a little. He knew how to wear a girl out.

“How about a truckload of candy?”
He set his chin on my stomach and I stroked his head.

“I’m still working through the bucket you got me before.” It was in the corner of my room, and barely a third was gone. There was a shit ton of candy in there.

“Or oral-sex coupons?”

“I need coupons to get that now?”

He smiled.

“No, just kidding. You’re right—I’ll think of something.”

“I love you,” I said. If there was one thing I loved more than actually loving Dusty, it was getting to say it out loud.

“Love you, too, Red.”

“Do you think he’s in heaven?”

Nathan?" I said. Dusty and I hadn't talked much about him, since it was still such a fresh wound for both of us, but we needed to. We couldn't move on together until we had dealt with our shared past.

"I never used to believe in something like an afterlife, but I feel like...now, that I kind of have to. That I have to believe he went somewhere beautiful and happy and safe, because if anyone deserved to go there, it would be Nate."

I nodded, knowing exactly what he meant.

"He'd tried to get me clean so many times, and it was him dying that finally did it. That night when you met me at the hospital, I was at my support group

meeting for addicts.”

“Isn’t that supposed to be anonymous?” Dusty crawled up my body until we were face-to-face again.

“You won’t tell anyone, right?”

“Cross my heart,” I said, crossing my hand over my chest, which drew Dusty’s attention to that area.

“Do that again.” I did. “I love watching you touch yourself. Do you know how much of a turn-on that is?”

Men. They had a one-track mind.

“Eyes up here, buddy,” I said, putting my hand under his chin and raising it so I could meet those glorious green eyes.

“Right. Support group.” He tried to get himself focused again.

“When did you start going?” I moved my hand to the top of his head and started moving it in circles, and he closed his eyes.

“Right after Nate’s funeral. I was high for it, because I thought that was the only way I could get through it. That was the only way I got through life back then. I don’t know how much he told you about our dad, but he’s nothing to brag about. He bailed on Nate’s mom and mine as soon as he could and skipped town to find his next woman. I have these dreams sometimes that I have all these other half siblings out there that I don’t know about and someday I’ll run into one of them.

“I was sitting there, at the funeral, and

all I could think was how it was my fault and how ashamed Nate must have been to have me as a brother. And it clicked that I didn't have to let him down anymore. I could try and live my life in a better way. So I went home and got rid of all the drugs and the booze and went to my first group meeting the next day. It was hard, at first. I had a lot of people in my life that had fed my habit, but I got rid of them all, and then I met Hunter and he was my first sober friend in a long time. He made it look so easy.”

He opened his eyes and sighed.

“It took a lot of work, but I did it because it's what Nate would have wanted.”

“He called you Buzz, when he talked

about you. I always thought it was because you had a buzz cut or you were, like, Buzz Lightyear or something.”

Dusty laughed a little.

“No, it’s because when I was little, I was obsessed with making noises and I used to make a buzzing noise that drove my mother crazy. She and Nate’s mom used to get us together sometimes so we could bond, and I was always doing that, so Mom and Nate and everyone else called me Buzz. I miss him so much it physically hurts.” Dusty rolled onto his back, pulling me so I was resting against his shoulder. I wrapped our legs together, and he danced his fingers up and down my back.

“I know. I miss him, too. When we first met, I thought he was trying to pick me up. I’d gone to this stupid frat party with my friends, and they were all wasted and going home with other guys, so I didn’t have a ride, and he just came up to me and said he’d take me anywhere I wanted to go.”

Dusty kissed the top of my head.

“He used to do that. Go to parties and rescue girls. He told me about it, and I accused him of trying to pick them up, or take advantage, because that’s what I would have done. I told you, I was kind of a dick back then.”

“Well, he did rescue me, and in a way, him offering me a ride at that party

led me to you. So he kind of picked me up for you, in a twisted way.” I looked up at him.

“He always did have good taste.”

We both smiled and shared a soft kiss that might have led to more, again, but I stopped it.

“It feels wrong, still, to be this happy with you.”

“I know, Red, but it’s going to take time. I have these moments in the middle of the night when I have this horrible fear that everything with you was a dream and I wake up and then you’re right there beside me. I never thought something as good as you could happen to someone like me. I don’t deserve this, but I’m going to take it,” he said with a

kiss on my nose, “and savor it—” he moved down to the corner of my lips “—and savor it, and savor it...” The kisses went lower and lower until I was the one doing the, um, savoring.

Chapter 24

“Brett asked about you,” I said to Hannah on Friday as we had lunch after our class. Pam was ramping up the intensity in preparation for our first test, and everyone was on edge. If any class had driven me to drink, it was that one.

Hannah choked a little on her frozen caramel Starbucks thing, and I banged her on the back.

“You okay there?”

“What do you mean, he asked about me?”

Wednesday night had been my first production night, and I’d finally had to

fess up to everyone at Yellowfield and tell them what I was doing. The reaction had been stunned at first, but then ecstatic when someone—named Dusty—had given them my blog address. Renee was mad at me for the second time that week for not telling her. Apparently, she'd thought I was doing something nefarious and had been trying to figure it out for a while.

It had been fun to hang out with the other people who made the paper happen, and Brett had casually asked, while we were struggling to get the layout right for our section, if I knew if Hannah was seeing anyone. Well, it was more like he asked if Hannah and I hung out with a lot of guys, and I sort of got

the gist reading between the lines.

“And?” Hannah said, grabbing my hand and gripping it so hard it cut off my circulation.

“Ouch, let go, crazy girl. I told him that you weren’t seeing anyone, but that we hung out with a lot of guys.”

“Great, now I sound like a slut.”

I shook my head.

“No, it makes it sound like you have a lot of interest. I played it that you were hanging out with, but not dating, these guys. Which is true. You hang out with Hunter and Mase and Paul and Dusty all the time.”

“Yeah, except every single one of them is taken.”

I grinned.

“Brett doesn’t know that.”

“Yeah, well, just...” she sputtered.

“Easy there. He’s really cute, by the way.” Brett was even more adorable than Hannah had let on. I mean, he had a bow tie on and glasses and everything. Plus, he’d made a *Star Wars* joke, a *Breakfast Club* reference, and he loved Muse. So he was good in my book. He’d also been so nice to me and had gone out of his way to help me figure out what the hell I was doing when it came to the paper.

“I think he’s coming to battle of the bands, just to watch. Dusty’s coming with me, but if you wanted to happen to

show up, that would probably be a good idea.” I wasn’t going to tell Hannah that Brett had asked if she was going. That would just make her nervous and not want to go.

“I guess I can go. I’ll have to check my schedule.” She pretended to open an imaginary date book and flip through some pages while muttering to herself.

“Uh-huh, if I move that to Sunday and that to next Tuesday, but then I’d have to —”

I smacked my hand down on the table.

“Hannah.”

“I’m looking!” She closed the pretend book. “Okay, I can do it.”

“Good, because I was about ready to smack you.”



Saturday night turned out to be fabulous. The bands were much better than I'd anticipated, and with my shiny press pass around my neck, I got to chat with them before and after and rushed home to write my article in the wee hours of the morning while Dusty tried to distract me with his tongue.

It was also a good night for Hannah, who rocked the red dress from the frat party, and Brett definitely noticed. Poor guy. He got so nervous around her that he dropped the can of soda he'd been holding, narrowly missing the dress. I thought she was going to blow up, but

she just laughed it off. No, more like she giggled it off. It was a giggle I hadn't heard her emit before, and I knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that she liked him, too.

“Congrats on your matchmaking success. Maybe you should write a column about that,” Dusty said while we were making breakfast at Yellowfield on Sunday morning so everyone else could sleep in.

“Yeah, since I've had so much relationship experience to draw from,” I said, dumping a panful of bacon onto a plate covered in paper towels.

“You can do anything you set your mind to, Red.” I looked at him suspiciously.

“You’re not buttering me up for more oral sex, are you?”

“I should hope we aren’t at the point in our relationship where I have to give you empty compliments to get something out of you.”

“Do you smell that?” I said, sniffing. “That is your pants burning, you liar.” I smacked him with the spatula and he dived at me and we slid to the floor and rolled until he was on top of me.

Someone cleared their throat and we both looked up to find Renee’s grumpy face staring down at us.

“No sex in the kitchen. I’m adding that to the rules.”

Dusty climbed off me and helped me

up.

“Bacon?” He held the plate out to her like a peace offering. She snatched a few pieces and started munching them.

“I’m watching you,” she said, going to the coffeepot.

“So,” I said, grabbing a piece of bacon for myself, splitting it in half and giving one piece to Dusty, “I hear they have this thing now, where on the day you were born people have celebrations and they give you presents and stuff. I’ve also heard rumors of cake, but those are still unconfirmed as of this time.”

My birthday was the following Friday and I was getting antsy, because I knew they were planning things behind my back.

Renee looked at me with an almost-believable innocent face.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” I definitely didn’t miss the look she shared with Dusty, so I went for him next.

“What?” he said, his face a similar mask of innocence. “I, too, have no idea what you’re talking about.”

I glared at both of them and grabbed the plate of bacon and ran away with it, and they both chased me until Dusty caught me and got it away from me.

“No fair,” I said as Renee held the plate out to Darah and Mase as they came down the stairs.

“No bacon hoarding. That’s another

rule,” Renee said.

“We should really write these down,” Darah said. “Yellowfield House Rules.”

We spent the next hour writing down the rules, some of which were good, like putting down the toilet seat, and some of which were ridiculous, like no bacon hoarding.

I looked around at all of them and I realized that, like it or not, this was my family now. I couldn’t even imagine living alone anymore. When I’d been with my parents, I’d been surrounded by siblings and noise and chaos, but I’d always felt completely alone.

But here, in this house, I’d found people who had taken me in, no questions asked. They liked me and

wanted me around, and I wanted the same thing. And it was in those moments that I heard Nathan's voice the loudest.

Chapter 25

Friday night I was kidnapped from Yellowfield House by Dusty. Big surprise. He'd tied a blindfold around my head and had made me use his iPod blind, which is harder than it sounds. He drove and drove, and I was wondering where the hell we were going, but he wasn't giving me anything.

“Come on, Dusty.”

“I swear, if you take that thing off, you will receive zero birthday sex.” I sighed and left the damn thing on, and he laughed.

“Yeah, well, I'm going to remember

this when it comes time for your birthday, so just keep that in mind.”

“And we’re here,” he said, slowing the car down and then parking it.

“Can I take this thing off yet?”

“Nope. Stay there.” He got out and opened the door for me, and I took his hand as he led me to whatever he was leading me to.

Someone opened a door for us, and we stepped inside some type of building. The smell was familiar, and the second Dusty’s hand was on the back of my head removing the blindfold, I knew where we were.

“Surprise!” Everyone yelled as the blindfold dropped, revealing that we were indeed at Bull Moose.

Even though I knew where we were, I was still shocked at the amount of people.

The Yellowfield contingent was here, as well as Megan, Jake, Hannah, Brett, a few of my new buddies from the paper and someone I hadn't seen in months.

"Matt?" I said, and he smiled at me, and our entire relationship came flooding back.

"Hello, Jos," he said, coming and giving me a hug.

"Oh, my God, I haven't seen you in so long. You came all this way?"

"I'd never miss your birthday," he said, giving me a better hug than he had when we'd been dating. "I miss you,

too.”

“I miss you.” I couldn’t help but miss that part of my life, because even though I didn’t love him, I had, and you couldn’t let go of something like that, even months later.

“You look good. Different, but good. Thank you for inviting me.” He said the last part to Dusty, and I turned around.

“You invited him?”

“I thought you should have something of the old you. You know, something old, something new.”

“That’s for weddings, Dusty.”

“I know, but it couldn’t hurt, could it?” He wrapped his arms around my waist.

“Not at all.” I gave him a kiss and

everyone else came over to say hello.

“Isn’t this against company policy?” I said as I stared at the table covered in presents and realized there were balloons tied everywhere, too.

“Um, I pulled some strings,” Dusty said. “The store is yours. That’s the other part of your present. You can go through and pick anything you want. I mean, you can’t have the whole store, but go crazy.”

I put my arms around his neck.

“I can have anything I want?”

“Anything,” he said, leaning down and putting his forehead against mine.

“Then I pick you.”

“You’ve got me, Red. I’m yours. What

else do you want?”

I pretended to think and then kissed him.

“This.”

“That’s good. What else?”

I kissed him again.

“Anything else?”

“Maybe the new Avett Brothers? And A Fine Frenzy? And Ed Sheeran, and Sparks the Rescue, and Pete Kilpatrick, and Sia, and The Airborne Toxic Event, and—”

He cut me off with a kiss.

* * * * *

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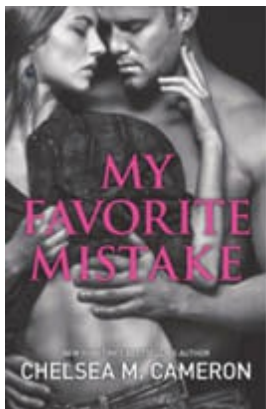


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CHAPTER 1

The first time I met Hunter Zaccadelli, I punched him in the face. Granted, he completely and totally deserved it. He also asked for it, in so many ways.

When our fourth roommate bailed on us three days before school, Darah, Renee and I assumed housing would take care of it and shove some poor unfortunate in with us. Probably some poor girl who had decided to switch colleges at the last minute to follow a boyfriend, or someone who had their apartment plans fall through. We weren't sure what to expect, but come move-in

day, I did not expect who was waiting outside when I opened the door. I knew the upper-class housing was coed, but never in my wildest and craziest dreams did I think it would actually happen to us.

Instead of a desperate and frazzled girl, he showed up with a footlocker, a backpack and a guitar. It was so beyond cliché that I didn't say anything for the full three seconds it took for me to assess him. Dark hair buzzed so short his head was almost shaved, purposeful five o'clock shadow, piercing blue eyes and at least a foot on my five feet. And a cocky smile to top it all off. He might as well have had *Trouble* tattooed on his forehead. Speaking of ink, I could just

make out some on his arm, but I couldn't see what it said. His thin T-shirt hugged his chest in a way that didn't leave much to the imagination. Maybe he'd borrowed it from his little brother.

“Are you Darah, Renee or Taylor? You look like a Taylor to me,” he said, looking me up and down.

I wasn't at my best, considering I was dressed for moving heavy objects in a blue UMaine T-shirt and black soccer shorts, and I had my light brown hair in a haphazard bun against the back of my neck. His eyes raked up and down twice, and for some reason the way he assessed me made me blush and want to kick him in the balls at the same time.

“There must be a mistake,” I said.

He adjusted his bag on his shoulder.

“That’s a creative name. What do you shorten it to? Missy?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

His grin somehow got wider. Either his dad was a dentist, or he was really into flossing because those teeth were pretty perfect. I noticed things like that, having gone through my own dental saga between three years of braces and night headgear. I still had to wear a retainer every night.

“Is that her?” Darah called from her room, where she was arranging her photo frames so they were exactly level. She was neurotic like that.

“I’m Hunter, by the way. Hunter Zaccadelli.”

Of course his name was Hunter. The only Hunter I’d ever known had been a complete douche. Looked like this guy was going to carry on the tradition.

He pointed to his footlocker. “So, should I bring my stuff in or...?”

My brain wouldn’t stop misfiring.

“Who’s that?” Darah finally emerged. Our other roommate, Renee, was still unloading stuff from her car.

“New roommate, hey,” he said.

“You’re the new roommate?” Her eyebrows migrated so they were nearly hidden under her dark bangs. She gave him the same up and down as I did, but

he didn't do the same to her. He was still looking at me.

“Yeah, my housing plans fell through at the last minute. My cousin was going to let me live at his place, but that didn't work out, so here I am. Do you mind if I come in now?”

“You can't live here,” I said, crossing my arms.

“Why? This is a coed living facility, last time I checked.” He flashed his grin again and shouldered his way into the room, completely ignoring me as his chest brushed mine, and I got a whiff of cologne. It wasn't that cheap crap that punches you in the nose. It was spicier, almost like cinnamon. I stood my ground, but he had height and weight on me. But I

had surprise on my side.

“Well, it’s better than sleeping on my cousin’s couch,” he said, plunking his bag on the floor and surveying the room. The suites were small, with a kitchen and tiny nook for a dining table on one side and a tiny living room for an apartment-size couch and a recliner on the other. The bedrooms were the worst, with two lofted beds crammed perpendicular to each other along the wall, the desks crammed underneath, and room for only two small closets.

“Can I see some identification?” Darah said, propping her hands on her hips. “How do we know you’re not some random creep?”

“Do I look like some random creep?” He spread his arms out, and I finally saw what the tattoo on his left biceps was. A number seven in curling intricate script. My eyes moved up to his face.

“How are we supposed to know?” Darah moved closer to him, using her stature. They were almost the same height.

“Look, all I know is that I submitted an application and they sent me an email with a room number and your names. Here, I printed it out. Do you treat all your guests like criminals?” He drew out a many-times-folded sheet of paper and handed it to Darah. She glanced at it, sighed and handed it to me.

“Why wouldn’t they have notified us?” I said once I’d read it. There it was in black-and-white.

“Who knows?” Darah said, still eyeing him warily.

“Oh my God, I swear I’m never moving again,” Renee said from the top of the stairs, her arms full of boxes and two bags dangling from her arms. “Who left their crap in the hallway?” She stepped over the footlocker and guitar case, giving them a look of disgust. “Has our new roommate showed up—oh, hello.” Her voice changed from irritated and dry to sweet and sugary the second she saw Hunter. “I’m guessing that’s your guitar in the hallway.” She dropped

her stuff and proceeded to pop her hip out and lean to one side. Oh, please.

“*This*,” I said, pointing to Hunter, “is our new roommate, according to housing.”

“No way.” Renee’s eyes got wide in her tiny face. Renee looked like a blond-haired, blue-eyed china doll you plucked off a shelf and put in a Victoria’s Secret tank top. “Are you shitting me?”

“What a reception,” Hunter said.

“Shut up,” I said. He just smiled again. God, I wanted to smack that smile right off his face.

“I should probably get my junk out of the hall,” he said, going and picking up the footlocker as if it weighed nothing more than a shoebox. Show-off.

Hunter had to navigate boxes and random pillows and crap that littered the rooms, which he did with grace. He found a spot and set the footlocker down, looking at us.

“So, who am I sleeping with?” he said, leaning against the door to my bedroom.

The agreement had been that since Darah and Renee had already been roommates last year, and I was joining their little group, that the new girl would live with me. But that was so not happening now that the new girl wasn't a girl.

“Did you seriously just say that?” I said.

At the same time Darah said, “The only free bed is in Taylor’s room.”

“There is no way he’s staying with me,” I snapped, readjusting my arms so they covered my boobs better. He’d been staring at my chest since he’d made the sleeping-with comment. Not that I had much of one to speak of, but that didn’t stop his eyes from traveling there.

“No, we’re calling housing right now and straightening this out,” I said, pulling out my cell phone.

“Tay, they’re not open on Monday,” Renee said.

“I don’t care. There must be someone there. It’s move-in day.”

I grabbed the campus phone book that

had been on the doormat when we'd gotten there that morning and thumbed through it until I found the number for housing.

“Aw, c'mon, Missy, you don't want to live with me?” Who did this guy think he was? I'd known him all of ten minutes and he'd already given me a nickname and propositioned me.

“Call me that one more time...” I didn't finish as I furiously typed in the number. Darah and Renee whispered to Hunter, but not quiet enough so I couldn't hear them.

“It's best to let her go when she gets like this,” Renee hissed.

“I wouldn't mess with her,” he said as I listened to another ring.

Finally, a message picked up, telling me what the hours were and giving me some extensions I could try. I punched in the first one. No answer, but a message machine picked up. I left a short message, explaining the situation in the most urgent of terms, and then called back the original number. I didn't stop until I'd left messages for all five of the contacts on the housing voice mail list. I slammed my phone down on the counter.

“Feel better?” Hunter said.

“No.” I chucked the phone book on the couch. Darah and Renee were looking at me like they were worried I was going to explode. I was on the verge. “If you were a gentleman, you'd offer to sleep

on the couch,” I snapped.

“Well, Missy, you’ll come to find out that I’m not a gentleman. I plan to take full advantage of this situation.” My mouth dropped open in shock. No guy had ever talked to me that way.

“Is it hot in here? I think I’ll open the window,” Renee said, scurrying over to our one window, located at one end of the couch.

Darah looked at me and then Hunter and back. “Well, there’s nothing we can do right now. Let’s get his stuff in, and then maybe we can go down and see if anyone is at housing,” she said. Darah was always the peacemaker.

“Sounds good to me,” Hunter said, walking right into my bedroom as if he

owned the place.

“I can’t believe this is happening,” I said, closing my eyes. I heard “Back in Black” by AC/DC coming from my room. Hunter’s ringtone.

“Hey, man. No, I just got here. Room 203. Yeah, that would be great...” He nudged the door shut, and I glanced at Renee and Darah.

“I didn’t think we were going to have to do this so early, but I think we need a roommate meeting,” I said. We’d agreed that we would have weekly roommate meetings to air our grievances. I was all for getting that shit out in the open so we didn’t end up hating each other. I’d had a horrible roommate last year, and I didn’t

want to deal with that again.

I listened, but it sounded like Hunter was still on the phone. I could hear him rummaging and prayed he wouldn't break anything. Then I would kill him.

"I don't see what the big deal is," Renee said. "I mean, it would be the same if one of us had a boyfriend staying over. Paul stayed over all the time when Darah and I lived here last year."

"But that was because you were sleeping with him," I said.

"Maybe I'll sleep with Hunter," she shot back. Renee had broken up with Paul extremely recently and was on the prowl for a rebound. We all knew she and Paul were meant to be and that they would eventually realize that, but Renee

was still in the anger stage.

“Are you uncomfortable with staying with him, Taylor? It’s okay if you are,” Darah said.

“I can’t imagine why I would be uncomfortable about sharing an extremely small room with a guy I’ve known all of a half hour who keeps making creepy comments. Can’t *imagine* why I’d have a problem with that.”

“If you want, Renee and I can switch. I’ll stay with him, and Renee can stay with you,” Darah said.

“Why can’t he stay with me?” Renee whined.

“Because you’ll rape him in his sleep,” I said.

“You can’t rape the willing, Tay,” she said, winking.

“You’re disgusting.”

“How about we draw straws?” Darah said.

“Do we even have straws?” Renee said. “How about we do numbers or something? Here,” she said, grabbing a UMaine notepad that someone had left on the kitchen counter, along with a pen. “I’ll write our names down and we’ll put it in...” She grabbed the baseball cap I’d discarded earlier. “And Hunter will pick. There you go. Problem solved.”

My door opened and Hunter emerged, another grin on his face.

“You weren’t talking about me, were you?”

Like he didn’t know. I rolled my eyes as Renee wrote each of our names on little bits of paper and tossed them in my hat. She put her hand over the top and shook it up.

“Pick one,” she said, shoving the hat in his face.

“Okay,” he said, sticking his hand in and pulling out a folded slip of paper. Renee slowly unfolded it. We all waited as she paused dramatically.

“Taylor,” she said, turning it around so we could all read my name in black-and-white.

“Shit,” I said.

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MY SWEETEST ESCAPE

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