



NEW YORK TIMES DESTSELLER

Smashwords Edition

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Five Days Until You

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Published in the United States of America

First electronic publication: April 2015 by Monica Murphy.

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My girl is restless.

I can't quite put my finger on what's bothering her, but I know it's also bothering me. I hate it when she's unhappy. She graduated college over a week ago. We have the summer off from school, and we can do whatever we want.

But she's hesitant to make any plans. Worse, she's hesitant to just take off and go somewhere. We can do it. I can ask for less hours or trade shifts with someone at the restaurant where I work at, and so can Chelsea. A week off on vacation somewhere sounds fucking awesome. I think we both need the break. Just me and my girl on the sand, at the beach, seeing her in a skimpy bikini, all those curves on display....

Yeah. I'm game. But she's not game for much of anything lately. And it sucks.

I watch her as she sits on the couch and scrolls through her phone, her teeth sinking into her lower lip in that bad habit she has. At least she doesn't chew it so much it bleeds like she used to. She'd been so stressed out, worrying about money and her fucked up family. When we had that huge fight and I thought we were done for....

My brain shuts down automatically, refusing to go there. I hate thinking about it. How much we both suffered at the hand of our parents, our fucked up mothers. I nearly let mine destroy what I have with Chelsea. Where would I be without her?

Most likely in the freaking gutter, high as fuck, and a college dropout. Fable would've killed me if I didn't kill myself first.

Chelsea lives with me and Wade now and it's perfect. I love having her here. She's become friends with Wade, which is weird especially when they gang up on me but whatever. Someday Wade will be sprung on some chick and I will make his life a living hell. I guarantee it. That's what friends are for.

"What's going on?" I ask when I can't stand the silence any longer, causing her to look up with a gasp. Her eyes are wide and she sets her phone down in her lap, blinking at me.

"Nothing," she says and it sounds false. One word and yeah, she sounds like she's lying. Crazy. "I'm just..."

"What? Is your mom bugging you again? Don't tell me she called." The woman had pretty much cut her off, not even bothering to come to her graduation. I thought that was complete bullshit but considering Chelsea had me, Fable and Drew cheering her on at the ceremony. That was good enough. Right?

Though I sometimes wonder...am I good enough? For Chelsea? Or does she deserve someone better, someone more? She's so damn smart. She could do anything she sets her mind to. Hell, I can imagine her conquering the world, running for president, something crazy like that and she'd probably succeed, you know?

So would being with a guy like me—recovering pot head, former juvenile delinquent, son of epic loser, may she rest in peace, and a no name father—ruin her reputation?

I have no idea. It's something I don't like to think about either.

"It's not my mom," she says, offering me a faint smile. "It's—could you come over here please and sit with me? You're too far away."

Okay, I like it when she talks to me like that. Reminds me that maybe she does need me more than I realize.

Rising from the chair I walk over to the couch and settle down beside her, my arm going around her shoulders so I can hug her close. She leans her head on my shoulder and I kiss her temple, breathing deep the sweet smell of her shampoo. It's hot today and she's wearing a blue tank top and these little white shorts that are mind blowing. As in, I want to slowly peel them off of her and blow her mind with my varied skills.

My mind has been hanging out in the gutter lately. I can't help it.

"What's going on, baby?" I ask, giving her a slight shake. "Tell me."

She bends her head down, her hair falling forward and shielding her face. I wonder if she's doing it on purpose. "I received an email yesterday. From Santa Augustina State."

"Why'd they send you an email?" I ask reluctantly.

"Well." She tapped her fingers against her knee in a restless beat. "That's where I was supposed to complete my graduate program."

How could I forget the graduate program at a university in a small coastal town about four hours south from us? The program she withdrew from because of me. Or at least, that's what I'd always assumed. And asked her about. She denied it every single time. Said she was taking some time off for herself but that sounded like a bunch of crap to me. I still have another year of college before I graduate. I don't think she wanted to leave me.

And in a very small, extremely selfish way, I didn't want her to leave either. I got what I wanted. Chels—by my side, in my house and in my bed every single night—what more could I ask for?

Did she resent me for postponing her graduate program? Christ, I hope not.

"They still want you?" I ask, my voice soft, my heart racing. I'm trying to prepare myself for her answer and it's freaking me out. Her silence, the way she's not looking at me, is totally freaking me the fuck out.

"Well, yeah." She lifts her head and rolls her eyes, the little smirk curling her lips adorable. I want to kiss it off of her but I restrain myself. Focus on the relief rolling through me instead. "They want me to take on another project. One that's shorter, only eight weeks."

"Where?"

"There. In Santa Augustina." I start to talk, I want to ask her a bunch of questions, but she presses her fingers to my lips, silencing me. "Hear me out. It's a research project. Right up my alley. And they'd pay me. A lot of money."

I like the feel of her fingers on my lips but I don't like the words coming from her mouth. Selfish bastard. "How much?" I ask skeptically when she drops her hand from my mouth.

"A pittance in your eyes I'm sure, rich boy." She grabs her phone and starts scrolling through it, clearly...hurt?

What the hell did I just do?

"Hey." I touch her, drifting the back of my fingers across her shoulder and she shivers before turning to look up at me. "Once upon a time, not too long ago, I was poor as fuck. And you were the rich one. Don't forget that."

"I know. Sorry." She lifts her shoulder, as if to shrug off my touch and I let my hand drop. Damn, my girl is really upset. "It's only for eight weeks, Owen. Two months. I think this could be fun for me. And enlightening. I could learn a lot. I don't want them to forget me, you know? If I participate in this research program just for the summer, and take the rest of the school year off, I could go back there once you..."

Her voice drifts and I know what she's going to say.

Once you graduate.

Dread consumes me and I can't shake it off. Hell, I don't want to shake it off. She is definitely holding herself back because of me. I hate it. I wouldn't expect her to do that for me and I know she wouldn't expect me to either. I refuse to squash her dreams. Her parents forced her to do whatever they wanted since she could talk. She wasn't allowed to choose. I'm not going to be like them. My girl deserves to do whatever the hell she wants. And I know just by her body language alone, that she wants this. Bad. "You should go," I say firmly.

Her mouth drops open as she blinks up at me. "I should?"

"Yes. Definitely." I nod, telling myself it's for the best despite the racing of my heart and the sudden sweating of my palms. I don't want to lose her. I don't want her to leave me, not even for six weeks but I can't be the asshole here.

If that's what she wants, I have to let her go.

I'm shocked. Did Owen really just say I should definitely go? I figured he'd protest. Talk me out of it. Seriously, I don't really want to leave...do I? The thought of being without him scares me. I'm not used to doing things by myself. I mean, I came here by myself to go to school at a really young age and thought I could handle it, but clearly I kept myself completely sheltered. I didn't get out much in all my years in college, only after I met Owen did I allow myself to come out of my shell.

Well, more like he forced me out. I liked it. I realized that maybe I could do this thing like live a normal life versus being the sheltered, extra intelligent nerd no one wanted to talk to.

So when the big scary world came knocking on my door I clung to Owen. I like clinging to Owen. He makes me feel safe. Loved. Strong. Confident. He makes me laugh. He makes me feel sexy and wanted and needed.

"I refuse to hold you back," he continues when I say nothing. All I can do is stare at him in wonder, drink in his handsome features. His dark blond hair, that he's let grow out for some reason and I don't protest because I like grabbing hold of it when he kisses me and...other things. The way his green eyes pierce mine, dead serious and unwavering...I can tell just by the way he's looking at me, he's really going to make me do this.

"I never accused you of holding me back," I say weakly and he shakes his head, his mouth firming into a thin line.

"I never said you did. I'm just saying...if you want this, you should go for it."

"Really?" My voice squeaks and he smiles. He knows what it means when I'm squeaky like Minnie Mouse. I'm nervous. Unsure. And he's willing to be my backbone and support.

"Two months isn't so bad." He's the one shrugging now and my gaze drops to his shoulders. They're so broad, and so is his chest. He's built like a machine and watching him out on the football field gives me both a thrilling and terrifying buzz every single time. He's just so...fearless. And smart. And good at what he does, though somehow he doesn't see it. It's like he's blind to his own accomplishments and I hate that.

But he's all mine. I'm there to remind him of just how great he is. It still blows my mind sometimes, that he is mine. That I can rightfully claim him as my boyfriend, that he's the man I love.

"You don't think so?"

"Nah. We can do it. I'll come see you. Stay for a while and visit." He slips his arm around my shoulders and draws me into him, pressing his mouth to my forehead. That one sweet kiss causes tingles to sweep along my skin and I close my eyes, savoring it. "When do they want you?"

"Um, see, that's the thing." I pull away from him, wincing. "The beginning of June."

"As in..."

"June 1st. It's a Monday," I fill in for him, wincing some more when I see his face. He looks sad. And surprised. There's only a little over a week left in May. I'd hardly had any time to process any of this, let alone plan for it. June 1st is right around the corner. "They're still waiting for my reply."

"You haven't told them yes yet?" Now he looks incredulous.

I shake my head, my gaze never leaving his. "I haven't told them anything yet. I wanted to talk to you about it first." We're together. I live with him. It wouldn't be right for me to not consult with him about such a life changing moment, no matter how temporary it might be.

"I think you should do it," he says again, his deep voice firm. "Answer them right now, Chels. Let them know you'll be there June 1st. Are they putting you up somewhere while you're there?"

"Yeah, in student housing." I make a face. Dorm life, something I'd done the first two years I was in college and don't look forward going back to, but it's only two months so I should quit my mental griping. "At least I'll have my own room, right?"

"I guess." He scrunches up his nose, looking completely adorable. "I never had to do the dorm thing."

"Lucky. I hated it."

"You won't hate it now. It's temporary. You'll have fun. It'll be an adventure." He kisses my forehead again, his soft lips drifting down to my cheek, finally settling on my mouth. The kiss is sweet, simple, delicious. I want more but then he's pulling away, that no-nonsense expression on his face that he gets when he's determined to get something handled. "Let's Google Santa Augustina. Figure out the lay of the land and all that shit."

I burst out laughing. "The lay of the land?" He's never said anything like that before.

"This is going to be your home for the next two months. I want to make sure the town is safe." He kisses me again like he can't resist, murmuring against my lips, "I want to make sure you're going to be safe, Chels, since I won't be around to protect you."

Shivers move down my spine and I kiss him again. Harder. Sliding my arms around his neck, I scoot closer, as close as I can get and he grabs hold of my backside, hauling me into his lap. I'm lost in his touch, in his kiss, in the way his tongue tangles with mine, and how his hands slide up over my butt to my waist, his fingers slipping beneath my top.

Owen may not say he loves me very often, but he definitely shows me exactly how much he does love me as often as he can.

And that's all that matters to me.



Excitement fills me as we drive along the highway, the glimmering blue of the Pacific Ocean to my right, the sun suddenly so bright I grab my purse and reach for my sunglasses, shoving them on my face.

We left the campus only fifteen minutes ago and it had been shrouded with fog. In June. Owen warned me it would be this way after he'd done his 'lay of the land' research on his laptop and he'd been right.

But for some reason as we draw closer to the ocean the fog breaks up completely, revealing nothing but bright blue skies. It's not that warm outside. There's a breeze and I know the water is freezing but I don't care. I'm eager to get out on that sand, throw down a towel and catch some sun.

This is our vacation getaway before I have to get serious and start working. Come Monday, I'll be assisting Professor Jameson Michaels with a huge English writing project he's hoping to launch next year that'll be sponsored by the university. He's so busy he doesn't have time to work on it during the regular school year. Hence putting together his project during the summer along with a group of interns and...me.

I'm the one who's in charge of the interns. Me. I'm freaking nineteen and second in charge. I can hardly wrap my mind around it.

"You ever going to let me see what you got on under there?"

Owen's deep voice breaks through my thoughts and I glance in his direction to find him looking at me with those deep green eyes of his, his lush mouth curved into a sexy smirk. I wouldn't let him see my bikini earlier, changing in the connecting bathroom of my new private dorm suite before we left. The room isn't bad, what with the added bathroom and the fact that I didn't have to share anything, but it was still small. And filled with the potential to be lonely, despite having Owen there with me.

Going to be even lonelier once he leaves me.

"You'll see it soon enough," I tease.

He grins, flicking his hair out of his eyes as he hits the blinker and turns off the

freeway. The exit reads "Sand Dune Point," and I'm figuring that's the beach we'll be hanging out at this afternoon. We grab sandwiches at Subway and pack a small cooler of soda and waters to take along with us. I also bring a blanket, a couple of towels, and some sunscreen.

"You're gonna have to strip sometime," he says with a leer and I shove at him, making him laugh.

"You just want me to strip," I mutter, crossing my arms in front of my chest. We had sex last night and again this morning, before we were both fully awake and he was snug behind me on my new double bed. There's not much room on a double and we're used to his giant king bed, though we always somehow gravitate toward each other in the night. Like we have our own magnetic field between us and we can't help it.

I remember how he kissed my neck and a shiver moves through me. I'd been shameless, rubbing my butt against his erection and then the next thing I knew, he was inside me. Whispering dirty words in my ear and making me come so fast I was breathless for long minutes afterward. Just lying there staring up at the ceiling, trying to calm my racing heart and my accelerated breathing.

I feel like we're trying to cram it all in at once, during these last few days we have together before he leaves. All the sex, all the fun, all the love. I'm so nervous about being alone here I'm afraid I'll beg him to take me with him when he goes.

But I can't. I need to do this. Find independence and all that jazz. I talked with Fable on the phone a few days ago and she told me our being apart would be a good thing for us. Help Owen and me appreciate each other a little more.

I really hope she's right.

We find a place to park and unload everything from the car so we can take it with us out to the beach. Owen carries most of it and we trudge through the warm sand, my flip flops getting stuck and making him laugh. We finally agree on a spot and I spread out the blanket while he grabs the towels and sets the Subway bag on top of the cooler. I turn away from him, kicking off my flip flops and fixing a spot where the wind blew the blanket askew, only to turn around to see Owen tugging his T-shirt off over his head, revealing his hard chest and washboard abs.

Okay. I've been with him for a while. You'd think I'd get over this sort of thing. But he can still render me speechless with his amazing body.

He catches me staring and snaps his T-shirt at me, smacking me on the butt. "Stop your drooling. You're only allowed to do that in private."

"Arrogant much?" I raise a brow and rest my hands on my hips.

"You know you were drooling." He stalks toward me, walking along the edge of the blanket, his expression full of serious intent. I stand up a little straighter, my breathing coming a little faster as he slips an arm around me and pulls me to him. I have no choice but to rest my hands on his very firm, very warm chest. "It's all good. I get why you were doing it," he murmurs, his mouth hovering just above mine. But I dodge away from it, wanting to tease.

"Why? Because you're just so good looking I can't resist your charms?" I streak my fingers down his front, enjoying the way his skin prickles with goose bumps. A thrill runs through me because I'm the one who does that to him. I'm the one who has that effect on him like no other girl does.

That's heady stuff.

"No, though that's a valid reason. Ow." He rubs at the spot on his chest where I just slapped him. "I know that's how I react every time I see you. That's what I was trying to say."

"Oh." Now I feel like a jerk. I drop my head so I don't have to face him and he slips his fingers beneath my chin, forcing me to meet his gaze.

"Come on, don't make me beg. Take off your clothes so I can see your swimsuit, Chels. You're killing me with anticipation here."

"Turn around." Pulling myself from his arms, I make sure his back is to me before I pull off my T-shirt and then wiggle out of my denim shorts, tossing them both into my bag. I straighten out the bikini bottom, tugging on it so it's covering my butt and making sure everything's in place. "Okay. You can turn back around now."

The anticipation game is fun. We've done this sort of thing before. Lots of times really. Slowly he turns, his gaze becoming heated the moment it lands on me. He

whistles low as he rubs his hand along his jaw, his gaze running over me from the top of my head to the tips of my pink painted toes.

He says nothing for so long I'm starting to get a complex before he finally utters, "I think you need to put your clothes back on."

"But—why?" I let my arms hang loose at my sides, surprised by his words. I've actually filled out some this last year. I've gained a little weight but nothing too outrageous and besides, it seems to have gone in pretty good places. At least places Owen approves of. My boobs are bigger so I fill out the bikini top better than I had when I first met him. My hips are a little wider too but he just says that's more for him to grab on to.

Still, it's hard not to compare my wide hips to his lean ones and that stomach of his is so ridiculously tight and ridged with muscle. Trust me, I know because I've explored every firm inch of skin there with my tongue.

"I don't want anyone seeing you like this." He pulls me into him, his hands landing on my hips, fingers playing with the little ties there. "One tug and I could have these bottoms falling right off of you."

"Then don't untie them." I stepped out of his embrace with a smile, wondering if he'd chase me. I'm starving for my sandwich but I'm more starved with the need to play around with him. Shooting him a daring look, I turn and start running toward the water, yelling out, "Catch me if you can!"

I glance over my shoulder to see him standing there with his hands on his hips, a smile curling his lips as he watches me. He's letting me get ahead of him because he could so totally catch me and humiliatingly fast. He does this sort of thing for months on end out on the football field.

Catching me would be no big deal. But I know he will. He's caught me time and again, saving me from trouble, saving me from my own stubborn pride. And I've done the same for him too.

No heavy thoughts today though. Today is about fun in the sun on the beach and in the water. I want to enjoy these last hours with Owen before he leaves.

I let Chelsea get a good distance ahead of me before I take off jogging after her, keeping my pace steady. I could be on that girl in about thirty seconds flat but I'm in no hurry. She's having fun running through the foamy water that's leaving rounded patterns on the wet sand, squealing so loud I swear the seagulls above us are squawking louder just to be heard.

A group of little kids aren't too far off, digging into the sand and they laugh at Chelsea as she keeps yelling, which causes her to laugh too. "It's cold!" she tells them and they start giving her grief.

I come to a stop and watch as she walks over to them, plopping down into the sand on her knees. She's examining the sand castle they're making and when one of the boys offers her a red plastic bucket, she takes it with a smile and scoops it into the sand.

My heart catches and I rest my hand against my chest. Seeing her like this reminds me that she never had much of a childhood. She's told me bits and pieces since I've been with her, brief descriptions of what sounds like a lonely, extra smart kid who had to deal with a pair of selfish parents who didn't give a fuck about her.

I know what that's like, to have a parent who doesn't care. But at least when Mom wasn't around, I had my sister. Fable made sure I had food in my belly and clean clothes to wear. She's the one who stayed on top of me about my homework and that I went to school. Not Mom. She was too focused on finding her next drink and landing the next fool who was dumb enough to be taken in by her brittle charm and fading looks.

Scowling, I scrub a hand over the back of my head. It's wrong to think so ill of the dead but she wasn't a nice person. And that's putting it mildly.

Enough with the bullshit memories trying to wreck my afternoon, I need to refocus. I head over to where Chelsea is playing with the little kids, standing right behind her so my shadow falls over them, causing three little heads to all look up at me, squinting against the sun.

"You're ruining our view, mister!" one of them yells, sounding indignant.

No one's ever called me mister before. I step to the side, my shadow disappearing. "Looks like you're making a castle," I say casually.

Chelsea glances over her shoulder at me, flashing a smile in my direction. "Took you long enough to get over here."

"I didn't want to ruin your fun." I crouch down beside her, dragging my finger in the sand. I gather a bunch of it and turn my finger over, letting it land with a plop on top of her knee. "You need some help?" I ask the two boys and one girl who are digging diligently in the sand with their wimpy plastic shovels.

"Yeah. Here." The little girl hands me a bright yellow bucket, hardly looking at me as she refocuses her attention on what she's doing. And what that is, I really don't know but these are some inexpert castle builders I'm dealing with so I decide to get down to business.

I see the parents sitting not too far away and when I turn to them, giving them a look that asks if it's all right, the four adults all give me and Chelsea a thumbs up, the looks on their faces saying they think we're crazy.

We probably are. But it's no big deal because we can walk away whenever we want. They're the suckers with the kids they gotta take care of at the end of the day.

We work on the castle forming process for a while, with me instructing the kids how to pack their bucket with wet sand before they turn it upside down and dump it out. Their castles are crumbling but I set them straight. Chelsea watches me working with the kids with a mixture of amusement and that soft look she gets when I do something she particularly likes. Which only makes me want to keep doing it because I know she approves.

And I really love it when I earn my girl's approval.

When I send the kids off with empty buckets so they can go in search of rocks and little sticks to decorate their castles, they take off running, their little feet flicking up wet sand and getting it all over us.

"I'm scared to take a shower tonight. There's sand in some weird places on my body, let me tell you," Chelsea says as she scoops her hand into the sand and lets it fall from her fingers.

"I'll help you find all that sand," I tell her with a leer and she makes a face, grabbing another handful of sand so she can plop it onto my shoulder. I brush it off and lunge for her, causing her to fall backward onto the ground and start laughing almost hysterically when I start tickling her. "Is it here?" I ask, poking at her ribs.

"No." She shakes her head, her arm darting out to grab more sand and she presses her hand against my chest, letting the sand cover it. "It's right there."

It all falls on her so that was a bad move. Deciding to make it worse, I grab another handful and let it drop on her flat stomach, everything inside of me tightening when I see the way she shivers. "Cold," she murmurs, her laughter dying when I start to brush it away from her stomach, letting my fingers trace little patterns on her skin.

"You're dirty, Chels," I tell her, my fingers drifting lower. I can feel her tremble and when my fingers get closer to the top of her bikini bottoms, she sucks in a harsh breath, my name falling in a warning-filled whisper from her lips.

Just then the kids reappear, hopping up and down in excitement, the buckets making a total racket from all the rocks and sticks inside. "We found a lot of stuff," one of them yells.

I withdraw my hand from Chelsea's stomach and she sits up, sending me a sly look before she encourages the kids to dump out their buckets and we can get started.

"You're in big trouble, starting something you can't finish," she murmurs as she lines up a row of rocks in front of the castle she built, creating a pathway.

"Ha, I plan on finishing it later tonight, baby. That is a guarantee." I place a bunch of sticks in the top of my castle, sitting back to admire it.

"A guarantee, huh? That sounds promising." She keeps busy with her pile of rocks, her dark hair falling all around her face in damp waves, her lower lip caught between her teeth.

"Oh yeah." I reach for her and press a firm kiss to her mouth, making the kids groan over how gross that was. Guess they aren't fans of kissing yet. "A definite guarantee. A promise. Whatever you want to call it. So be prepared."

"Be prepared for what?" She glances at me, a wicked spark in her gaze.

"For the best night of your life."



I promised Chelsea the best night of her life and I tried my damnedest to live up to my own hype. After we finished with the sand castle building—posing for photos with the kids as the parents snapped away with their phones—we ate our sandwiches and hung out on our blanket, enjoying the sun. I fell asleep, it was so warm and the breeze felt so good on my skin. What made it even better was having Chelsea snuggled up close to me and I think she dozed for a while herself.

It was fucking perfect.

We went back to her new dorm suite and took a shower. Together. I examined every inch of her—looking for sand of course—and she laughed until she moaned because I got my girl off with my fingers buried inside her, my mouth attached to hers. Then she treated me to a full body examination, washing me everywhere, ending up on her knees, where she gave me a blow job that about made my eyes cross when I exploded in her mouth in mere minutes like some sort of inexperienced kid.

It's still so good between us and it should be, you know? We're young and I'm definitely not sick of her. I don't think she's sick of me either. We're in love and we're experimental and I'm always pushing her limits because it's so easy to do. She lets me get away with all sorts of stuff, always to her benefit.

No matter what, her needs are what is most important to me.

We went to dinner at a small restaurant not far from the pier, with a great view of the ocean. She looks pretty in a simple pale blue strapless dress, her skin glowing from all the sun she got today, her still damp hair up in a high ponytail, showing off her neck and shoulders. I realize halfway through our meal I'll be leaving tomorrow afternoon, headed back to home while I leave her here and I got this weird twinge in my chest.

I don't want to leave her. But this is what she wants. What she needs. I refuse to hold her back. Besides, it's temporary. I need to man up and act like this is no big deal.

The truth though? It's killing me that I have to go home without her. I don't care that it's only for two months. I'd hate to leave her for two fucking days, I'm that

attached to her. She's become such a big part of my life I know it won't feel right, not having her around.

What if she meets some dickwad while she's here? Some brainy guy who she has a lot more in common with? She could leave me in the dust. Shit, my heart just gave a major spasm at the mere thought and I rub absently at my chest, trying to ease the ache.

"You all right?" she asks, my always aware, ever-observant Chels.

"I'm fine." I wince, letting my hand drop from my chest. "Just full I guess." I blame the food but there's still half of it sitting on my plate and I always clear my plate. My appetite has disappeared thanks to my head being filled with images of Chelsea finding someone else. Someone better for her.

She loves you. She would never do that to you.

Yeah, she wouldn't. Not on purpose. People change though. We're young. Shit happens. All those clichés apply to my situation right about now. I could lose her. She's so beautiful, so smart and so freaking nice. Thoughtful and kind and funny and sexy as fuck...any guy would be lucky to have her.

Especially me.

"You don't look so good," she says, reaching out to touch my hand with delicate fingers. "Are you sure you're feeling okay?"

"Um." I tug at the collar of my shirt, in desperate need of some air. "I'm good. I just...I'll be right back."

I flee the table before she can say another word and I can feel her eyes on me, watching as I go. I bet she's worried and I seriously don't want her to chase after me.

Thankfully she doesn't and I go into the bathroom, glad it's a one-stall kind of thing so I can lock myself inside. Not that I need to take a leak. More like I need some advice—someone to talk me down off the ledge.

Hitting a button, I bring my phone to my ear and listen to it ring.

"Aren't you supposed to be spending the weekend with Chelsea?"

"Hey Fabes," I say weakly after she answers. My niece Autumn is crying in the background and I can hear the TV running some obnoxious cartoon stuff. I even hear Drew talking to Autumn and she stops crying. She's a total daddy's girl and hearing all that in just a few seconds' time makes me ache for my family. I miss them. All of them.

I'm a weenie asshole, having to call my big sister for relationship advice but shit. I was about to have what I think might be a panic attack out there and nothing like that has ever happened to me before. Ever.

"You okay Owen?" Her voice softens and I can tell I must sound a mess for her to switch gears so quick. "Is everything all right?"

"Uh, yeah. I'm with Chelsea and we're supposed to be having a nice dinner but..."

"But what?" she asks when I stop talking.

"I'm in full on panic mode." My voice lowers and I turn my back to the bathroom door, as if that can keep my conversation more private. "I just realized I don't want her to leave."

Fable sighs, but she doesn't sound put out. More like she feels sorry for me. "You only just now realized this? Come on, it's just for two months."

"I know. And I was good with it until a few minutes ago. She looks so pretty tonight and she's about to go on this new adventure that I'm not a part of. I didn't plan for that. I thought this summer would be for us, you know?" I let out a loud exhale, irritated with myself. "I'm being selfish."

"No, you're not. You've just been caught by surprise with this change. Your being upset is completely normal," she explains. "You can't let her know you're upset though. You have to be the strong one."

What if I don't want to be the strong one?

"She's probably feeling unsure right now. You're the one who's going back home while she's left there alone, not knowing anyone and about to start a new job that's important to her. You need to make her feel good about her decision, not feel sorry for yourself that she's leaving you," Fable continues.

Shit. I know my sister is right. It just sucks, being faced with that reality. "She could meet someone else."

"Is that your fear?" When I don't answer, she makes a little tsking noise. "She's madly in love with you. She'd be a fool to find someone else or...cheat on you."

God, if she cheated on me I don't know what I'd do. Not that I think she ever would. "I'm not saying that. I'm saying...she could meet a guy who's more like her. Who she has lots of stuff in common with. A smart guy. Not a dumb ass jock like me," I explain.

"You are seriously Mr. Insecure tonight, aren't you? God, Owen do you know how smart you are? And how much you have going for you? Give me a break. If you just believed in yourself for once, you'd realize all you've done with your life and you'd be proud of it." Her voice lowers and I press the phone closer to my ear so I can hear her. "Don't let all that bullshit Mom fed us through the years get to you. She was wrong. You're not worthless. You're smart and you're talented on the football field. You could go pro, you know."

"Could not," I mutter. Here we go again. She was always telling me this crap. I'm no Drew Callahan and I never would be.

"Could too," she stresses, cutting me off before I can protest more. Like she always does. "Now get off the phone and go back out there. Spend the night with the girl you love. Treat her right. Tell her how much you love her and that you're going to miss her. But also tell her how proud you are of her and how much you believe in her. She needs to hear all of that, okay?"

"Okay. I will," I reassure her and I swear I hear her smile over the phone.

"Good. Now grow a pair and get back out there. Love you."

Fable's gone before I can tell her I love her too.

Owen comes back to the table ten minutes later, still looking a little stressed out, which worries me. What's wrong? Is he not feeling well? I really wanted our last night together to be perfect and so far it's been pretty great. Until approximately fifteen minutes ago when he fled from the table in a full on run, looking like he wanted to throw up.

At least he doesn't look pale and queasy any longer.

"Sorry about that." He settles back in his chair, offering me a wan smile. "I don't know what happened."

He's lying. I can tell. After being with him for so long, I think I've got him pretty much figured out. And right now, he's not being honest with me. I don't know why either.

"Did you want to finish your food? Or are you ready to go?" I ask, my gaze locking with his. I stare into his eyes, practically willing him with my mind to tell me what's really wrong with him. But he just keeps that fake smile firmly in place as he pushes his plate away from him.

"I'm ready to go if you are," he says. "I just need to pay the bill."

"I already did." The waiter dropped it off when Owen was gone and I took care of it, not wanting to just sit there and wait for who knew how long. I toss my napkin onto the top of my plate and grab my purse, pushing myself out of the chair. "Ready?"

I hardly wait for Owen as I leave the restaurant but I feel him fall into step behind me, and for once, his presence isn't so reassuring. No, more like I'm pissed at him. Pissed that he ran away from the table like a weirdo. Angry that he came back and looks like shit and this is our last night together before he leaves. He's the lucky one who gets to go back home like no big deal while I'm left here all alone, worried I somehow won't measure up.

Who knows how long it'll be until I see him again? I'm freaking out. Panicking. I can feel it. I'm thinking irrationally and acting like a selfish brat.

But I can't help it. I'm scared. Nervous. I don't know if I can do this alone. And

the only way I can find out is if I stand on my own two feet and act like a damn grownup instead of a silly baby.

The moment we hit the sidewalk in front of the restaurant, I turn to Owen, stopping us both from walking any further. "Tell me what's wrong."

The shocked look on his handsome face doesn't surprise me. I bet he didn't expect me to call him out on his crap in public. I usually save that for when we're alone. "Nothing's wrong, I swear—"

"Don't lie to me." I take a step closer to him as another couple tries to pass us by and he slips his arm around my waist automatically, holding me close. Reminding me that no matter what, he is my rock. My support. My love.

My Owen.

He sighs and hangs his head, his hair falling over his forehead. I reach out and push it away, causing him to glance up, his tortured gaze meeting mine and my heart cracks at the sight of his expression. "It hit me in the middle of dinner, how much I'm going to miss you," he confesses, his voice low and kind of scratchy.

And here I am getting mad at him. All my anger evaporates at hearing his words. "I'm going to miss you, too," I whisper. "So much, I'm afraid I could start crying right now in front of this stupid restaurant just thinking about it."

He kisses my forehead, then steers me toward the parking lot. "Let's get out of here, Chels. I don't want to have this conversation out here. Swear to God I might start crying and we know I can't fucking have that."

I can't help it but his words make me giggle. He takes my hand, flashing me a grin as he leads me down the sidewalk. "I'm serious."

"I know you are." I squeeze his fingers and he tightens them around my own. "This is not a night for tears."

"Tell me about it. I want it to be a night for nakedness." He drops that statement just as an older couple holding hands walks by us, headed in the opposite direction.

"Owen," I chastise, my cheeks warming because I know they heard what he said.

Although, I actually heard them both laugh.

"What? It's true. And you know it." He stops and whispers close to my ear, "I plan on giving you as many orgasms as possible tonight, Chels. So you won't forget just how good we are together."

"I could never forget." I reach for him, slipping my hand around his nape so I can tug him down for a brief kiss. "Ever."

"I feel the same way." He squeezes my hand harder, like he never wants to let it go. "Exactly the same."



The minute we enter my dorm suite, Owen's wrenching the lock into place and pushing me against the door, his hands at my waist pinning me, his mouth fused with mine. His kisses are slow and purposeful, his tongue circling mine in the most erotic rhythm. I'm quivering deep inside, between my legs, and when he pushes his leg between mine, his knee rubbing against me I'm whimpering, practically begging for more. We had sex not even two hours ago and I want him all over again, the urgency taking hold of me and making my blood pound with need.

We've been voracious ever since I agreed to take on this job, like we're trying to fit in as much sex as possible before we're separated. I cherish the sexual connection we share. How he makes me feel. How patient he's always been with me, and everything he's taught me too. I knew nothing. I was the most ignorant virgin on the planet when I first met Owen. I mean, I knew how it worked, I wasn't that stupid, but I had zero experience with boys beyond a few really bad kisses.

From that first moment he kissed me on top of his car—and what a kiss it was—it was like Owen made it his personal mission to show me everything he knew about sex. And he knew a ton of things. He still surprises me, too. Like how only a few months ago I realized that I like it when he dirty talks me.

A lot.

Now, he's always been a talker. He can't help himself and I love it. But he's been extra crude lately and I…love it. Me. The girl who never curses, who somehow ended up with the guy who drops F-bombs on a regular basis, gets off on my boyfriend's extra filthy mouth.

Go figure.

"This dress is driving me insane." He's cupping my breasts, his eyes widening in surprise when he makes his discovery. "You're not wearing a bra."

I slowly shake my head, my eyes falling closed when he rubs his thumbs across my nipples. The cotton fabric of my dress is thin and there's only a band of elastic holding the top in place. One tug and he'd completely expose me. "I forgot to bring a strapless bra with me," I murmur, sighing when he draws the

backs of his fingers across my exposed collarbone, just before his hands drop back down to my breasts.

"Lucky for me then." He kisses me, stealing my breath, his busy fingers squeezing and kneading my breasts. He curls his hands around the straight neckline and pulls the dress down, exposing my chest completely. "I like this. Easy access."

A shuddery breath escapes me as I watch him bend his head to take a nipple into his mouth. He sucks and licks it with his wicked tongue, teasing my skin and making me moan. I close my eyes and toss my head back, gasping when he grabs hold of my butt and lifts me. I have no choice but to wrap my legs around his hips, anchoring my body to his.

He pins me to the wall with his hips, reaching for the bunched fabric of my skirt between us and shoving it out of the way. "I want it off. Lift your arms," he demands and I raise my arms above my head, shocked when he yanks the dress off of me and tosses it onto the floor.

I'm only wearing a lacy pair of panties, hot pink and totally see through and he dives a hand between my thighs to cup me, pressing the fabric tight against my skin, creating a delicious friction that makes me tremble and gasp. God, I already feel close to coming, just by how he's touching me, using my underwear like some sort of sex toy.

"Fuck, you're soaked," he growls, his words and the way he says them making me even wetter. "I need to be inside you, baby. I can't wait."

I'm so weak with wanting him all I can do is watch helplessly as he tears at his belt buckle and undoes it, the metal clanking together loud in the otherwise quiet of the room. His ragged breaths and my gasping ones mingle in the air as he shoves his jeans open and pulls his rigid cock out, pushing aside my panties and thrusting inside me before I can even prepare for it.

A cry escapes me and I close my eyes, my arms resting across his shoulders as I cling to him and he brutally takes me. I let him have his way, let him do whatever it is he wants because he seems a little wild, lost in me, lost to the pleasure as he thrusts and thrusts. So hard, my head knocks against the door. The inside of my knees and thighs feel raw when they rub against his jeans again and again.

We've had plenty of wild sex before but this moment seems particularly raw. He grabs hold of my chin and I open my eyes, staring at him as he continues to fuck me—truly there are no other words for what he's doing to me and I can't hardly believe the word just flittered through my brain. But that's the only way I can describe it. He's just...taking. Fucking and taking and not caring whether I'm enjoying it or not but I am. Oh God, I so am and just when I think it can't get any better than this...

I'm coming, his hand still curled around my chin, his cock buried so deep inside my body I feel like he can touch my very soul. I'm shaking, everything within me is trembling and hot and falling completely apart. A helpless, strangled moan falls from my lips and then he's kissing me, his mouth so soft and gentle compared to the still brutal pumping of his hips within my body. "I love you," he whispers and I grab onto those words tight, holding them within my chest, within my heart. "I love you so much, Chels."

He rarely says it so when it happens, it's like this rare and magical moment I never want to forget. Like I want to etch it across my memory so it'll always be there. I know I'll never forget the night in my new dorm room when my boyfriend took me against the door and whispered how much he loved me.

Never.

I'm a pig who lacks control but Chelsea's not protesting so I guess she doesn't mind. I can't believe I couldn't keep it together long enough to get her to the bed but I felt...desperate somehow. Like this might be the last time between us for a while.

Which is probably the case though I don't want to admit it. Not now. I can face that ugly fact later. When I'm back home, all alone in my bed while she's still here.

I had a plan in place for tonight, damn it. A seduction. It would've started with me undressing her slowly. Kissing her everywhere, every little bit of skin I exposed, I planned on covering with my mouth. Coaxing that orgasm out of her body with my lips and tongue and fingers. I would've worked her into such a frenzy, she would've been a trembling, agonized mess, begging me to let her come already.

Instead, within minutes if not seconds of locking the damn door, I'd torn off her dress and fucked her hard, not even bothering with much foreplay beyond groping her breasts before I became too desperate to have her. I couldn't focus on anything else.

Just her. Just being inside Chelsea. Feeling her squeeze around me, hearing those low moans of hers, the little whimpers. All the shit that drives me absolutely crazy and causes me to lose control—that was all I wanted. All I needed.

That desperate feeling I still haven't shaken, though I'm trying to slow down and enjoy this. Enjoy Chelsea. She already came and she's clinging to me, her mouth on mine as she whispers how much she loves me. Right after I told her exactly how much I loved her.

I don't say it often. It's hard. Mom rarely uttered the words. Most of the time she could only complain about us, what a pain in the ass we were and how we dragged her down. Such a great mother.

Fable told me she loved me and I believed it. It's one of those situations where she had to love me though, you know? She's my big sister. I was her responsibility. She could've taken off and left me with Mom but she didn't because that's not Fable's style. When she loves, she loves fiercely and with her

whole heart. Drew Callahan didn't stand a fucking chance when she started to fall for him. She'd figured it out fast that he belonged to her and she had zero plans on letting him go.

I belonged to Fable too, but it's different. I'm her brother. She didn't have a choice but to love me. It's ingrained in her. She chose Drew. She brought him into her life despite all the bullshit and loved him anyway.

Just like I chose Chelsea and she chose me. I always thought I got the better end of the deal.

Anyway.

Deep philosophical thoughts about love and choices while still buried deep inside Chelsea's velvety hot body is kind of out of the ordinary for me. More like totally not normal. I need to focus on the fact that my dick is throbbing and I'm gonna blow at any minute. That I can feel her squeezing her inner walls around my dick every few seconds and I close my eyes, clench my teeth, hiss out a harsh breath in the hopes that I can gain some semblance of control.

But it's no use. I can feel Chelsea's warm breath against my neck just before she presses her mouth there, kissing and nibbling my skin and making me groan. Damn, I love it when she does that, her mouth on my skin, the sensation of her tongue licking me...fuck. Her arms tighten around me and she sort of hitches herself up, her thighs tight around my hips. The movement sends me deeper inside her and we both moan as I sink even further.

"I'm not gonna last," I tell her, my voice gruff, my thoughts hazy. My orgasm is barreling down on me, my insides tensing up, the familiar tingling at the base of my spine is the definite warning that it's about to happen...

"Let go," she whispers against my jaw. "I want to feel you come inside me."

She talks like that, says a few simple, slightly dirty words—for her—and I'm a goner. My muscles seize up, my heart feels like it just rolled over on itself and I start to come. I grip her waist hard and slam into her one last time, filling her up as I press my forehead to hers. She curls her fingers around my nape, tangling them in my hair and it all drains out of me as the orgasm takes me over completely. The worry and the heartbreak and the stress until all that's left is my girl with her body wrapped all around me. Completely naked while I'm still

pretty much dressed.

"Owen." She whispers my name close to my ear and I shudder, a shaky breath leaving me. My heart is pumping triple time and my head is spinning. "My God, Owen..."

"What's wrong?" I open my eyes and lift my head away from hers, staring into her hazy gaze. "Did I hurt you?"

She shakes her head, a closed-mouth smile curling her lips. "No. I was going to say that was...amazing."

I start to laugh, the sound rusty. My lungs fucking hurt. What I just experienced was like the most intense orgasm of my life. "That was me moving too fast and screwing you against a door."

Her smile grows. "I love it when you screw me against a door."

"Perv." I drop a kiss to the tip of her nose and slowly withdraw from her, feeling my semen drip out of her as I do so. Wincing, I set her down on her feet before I stuff my dick back in my jeans. "Sorry, baby. You better go clean yourself up."

There's nothing better than having sex with my girl without a rubber but sometimes, it's messy.

"I'll be right back." She dashes off to the bathroom and shuts the door. When she's gone I go to her bed and sit on the edge of the mattress, running both my hands over my hair until I'm clutching the back of my head. I glance around her room, taking it all in. The pale blue walls remind me of jail. Not that I've been in jail thank God, but I imagine it looks just like this. Her bed is small. There's a rickety looking desk sitting just below the window along with a matching dresser along the opposite wall. Her suitcase sits on the floor wide open, the only bursts of color in the room coming from her clothes that are nestled within.

That's what she's like. In a sterile, cold world my baby is sweetness and lights. Smiles and laughter. Love and comfort.

All things I used to laugh at and mock. All things I never believed I needed, let alone deserved. I thought I could make it through this world never really needing anyone by my side.

I was wrong. And now that the girl I've always wanted by my side is about to stand on her own two feet and do something that belongs only to her, I wonder where exactly I fit into her new world.

And if she would still need me when it was all said and done.



"Coach wants to talk to you," Wade says the moment I walk through the front door. He's sprawled on the couch in a pair of basketball shorts and nothing else, the TV on though the sound is on mute. His cell phone sits beside him and I can see it's blowing up with an endless list of texts.

"What does he want?" I ask as I shut the door behind me, letting my duffel bag drop to the floor. I'm tired. I stayed with Chelsea for as long as I could despite her wanting me to leave at a decent hour so I wouldn't be driving too late at night. She didn't want to worry about me.

Considering it's past one in the morning, that plan didn't work. I texted her the minute I pulled up in front of the house, praying like hell she wouldn't answer because if anyone needed a good night's sleep it was her. But she responded with a kissing Emoji and a bunch of x's and o's.

Cute.

I figured Wade would be sleeping. Or hooking up with some chick like he usually does. The guy never gets tired of it. He has access to more pussy than any other guy I know, including myself back in the day when I was just like him.

Not that I'd ever admit it.

"He didn't say. Mentioned he tried to call you but you didn't pick up so he called me instead." He grabs his phone and makes a face, then taps out a quick text before dropping the phone again. "Told me to tell you that you need to call him first thing in the morning."

I withhold the groan that wants to escape and flop onto the opposite end of the couch. "Great. Maybe he wants to rip me a new asshole." Why, I don't know. I haven't seen Coach in a while. But I feel like every time he wants to talk to me I'm in trouble.

I feel like whenever anyone wants to talk me, I'm in for it. Throwback from when I was a troublemaking kid I guess.

"He didn't sound mad. And you haven't given him reason to rip you a new one, right?"

"Nope." I run a hand through my hair and lean my head back against the couch, closing my eyes for a brief moment before I turn to look at him. "Why are you still awake?"

"Some girl I chatted up on Tinder for a while was supposed to meet me here tonight but she never showed. I gave her my cell number and everything. Now she's sending me texts full of apologies and saying she fell asleep." Wade rolls his eyes. "Like I believe that shit."

He loves to think the worst. "Maybe it's true. Maybe you should give her the benefit of the doubt."

"The girls I deal with? They don't deserve the benefit of the doubt. They're all liars," he mutters, shaking his head. "She was probably fucking some other dude and lost track of time. Wouldn't doubt for a second that she's just some Tinder whore."

"Like you are?" I glare at him and he gives me a look, one that asks why I'm giving him a bunch of shit. "It's true. You're the one who's the Tinder whore and you know it. So don't go bashing some chick just because she didn't come running when you asked her to. She probably knows all she'd get out of it is a blow job and a half hearted fuck."

"Nothing wrong with a good blow job," Wade says with a shitty grin.

I toss a pillow at him, nailing him on the side of his head. "Of course you'd say that. You're not the one on your knees with a mouthful of dick and a tired jaw."

"Whatever," he practically spits out. Sometimes I take it too far. Sometimes he does too. But how much longer was he going to keep up this pace? Felt like he banged a different chick every day of the week. "Since when do you give me such a hard time? You used to be just like me."

"I was never as bad as you and you know it." I'm about to say more but he keeps on talking.

"We were partners in crime. Before you met Chelsea, we were fucking around with girls left and right. It was fun, man." He shakes his head, his expression sad. "Sometimes I miss those days."

I don't miss them at all. I like what I have with Chelsea. The last thing I want to do is go back to that kind of meaningless life. Not that Wade is meaningless. But all the sex he's having with different women is a whole lot of nothing and he knows it.

"I know Chelsea's cool and all. She's the perfect girl for you," Wade continues. "But sometimes...I miss when it was just us."

"Well, it's gonna be just us all summer," I mutter. "So your wish just came true."

"It won't be the same," Wade points out. "You won't go out, and even if you do it's not like you'll be any fun. You'll probably sit around here and mope the whole time she's gone."

Most likely, though I don't plan to since that sounds seriously fucked up.

"You want to go out? I'll go out," I tell him, irritation simmering in my blood. I'm tired and that makes me quick to anger. I hate how he's talking, like I'm just a little bitch sitting around waiting for my girlfriend to call me while she's off living her life.

"Really?" He sounds like he doesn't believe me. "How about later this week? Let's do Thirsty Thursday like the old days."

Thirsty Thursday is the most popular day of the week when college is in session. Since it's summer, most of the students have gone back home so the downtown area will be quiet. Yet Thirsty Thursday carries on with or without them. And there are always a few people lingering around, the ones that don't go home anymore. The locals, like me and Wade.

"I'm in," I say firmly, watching as he grabs his phone and sends another text.

"I got another chick wanting to come over," he says, his gaze never leaving his cell screen.

"You lined up someone else already?" I can't freaking believe it. Though I should. I mean come on, he's become Wade the chick magnet. All the girls want him. To the point that I think it's gone completely to his head.

"Hell yeah. She'll never know she was second choice. I made out with her

before, last week. Never took it any farther than that though." He smiles, looking pleased with himself.

I shake my head, blown away by the casual assessment of his love life. Scratch that, make that his sex life. Big difference. "Don't you ever want to find a good girl? Someone you can actually date and spend time with and maybe even...I don't know, call your girlfriend?" Or fall in love with? Not like I'd ever say that out loud. He'll give me enough grief in exactly 4...3...2...

"You're getting sappy in your old age." Wade grins, not letting me down whatsoever. He'll also never let me forget that I'm a couple of months older than him. Ever. "I don't want a girlfriend. All they do is tie you down and nag you all the time."

"Not Chelsea," I point out.

"Yeah, but there's no one else like Chelsea," he says, lifting his head so he can look at me. His expression is dead serious. "She's perfect, man. I'd be freaking lucky if I could find a girl half as good as yours."

I try my best to ignore the pang in my chest but it's no use. Hearing my best friend praise my girlfriend only makes me miss her more.

"Good ol' Jameson is kind of a hard ass, huh?"

Startled, I glance up from my phone to find one of the interns—her name's Talby—standing beside the picnic table where I'm sitting, a small shopping bag from Victoria's Secret dangling from her fingers.

"Um, yeah. Sort of." My new boss came at us like a blustering general ready to go into full on battle first thing this morning but I figured he was putting on a show. Letting us know that he meant business. I could appreciate the act. I had a feeling he was a big old softy though. His warm brown eyes were too kind. And he spoke of his wife multiple times and we'd only just met.

Talby's smiling at me, her head angled to the side and I wonder if she wants me to invite her to join me for our lunch hour. "Can I sit here?" she asks, answering my own question and I nod, dashing off a quick text to Owen before I set my phone on the table beside my pitiful lunch.

PB&J, a mini bag of Goldfish—so sue me, I love them—and a slightly warm Sprite. Oh, and an apple. All stuff I went shopping for last night at the supermarket up the road from the university.

Shopping alone is no fun. Shopping for one is really no fun. Missing your boyfriend almost more than you can stand is the ultimate in no fun.

I'm pitiful.

"I love peanut butter," Talby says as she starts pulling out various items from her Victoria's Secret bag. A banana, a snack baggie of baby carrots, another baggie of celery and a bottle of coconut water.

"But you're not eating it," I point out, taking a bite of my sandwich.

"Too fattening," she answers nonchalantly. She unzips the bag of carrots and pulls one out to start munching on it. "Want one?" She holds the bag out toward me.

"No thanks," I say weakly, setting my sandwich down. Maybe she's right. I shouldn't eat peanut butter. It'll only make me fat. And then Owen will leave

me. Not like I'm around to remind him he has a girlfriend anyway. What if he meets someone else? What if he starts flirting with some dumb girl at a bar—because I know Wade's going to want him to go out since I'm not there—and he ends up liking her? What if he's attracted to her? And she's attracted to him because who wouldn't be? I mean, my God, he's Owen Maguire. Girls glare at me every time they see us walking together. I can see why. He's so gorgeous it almost hurts to look at him.

My phone buzzes and I grab it eagerly to read Owen's text.

Yeah I'm still in bed. Wish you were with me though.

Naked.

I smile, my cheeks warming. It's past noon and he's still in bed? I know he got home late last night. Well, really early this morning. And he was probably tired after our extra busy weekend. I know I'm still tired, though I'd give anything to be with him right now in our bed. Naked.

God, I miss him so much already. How am I ever going to get through this?

"You have a really dreamy look on your face right about now," Talby says, knocking me from my thoughts. "The text must be from a guy."

"My boyfriend," I admit, feeling stupid.

"Ah," she says, her tone all-knowing. "He's pretty special?"

"I'm in love with him." Completely and totally.

"And he doesn't live here I take it." When I send her a peculiar look she shrugs. "I heard a few details about you before you came in this morning. Jameson mentioned you were from up north. That you're here only for the summer."

They were talking about me? Weird. "Yeah, it's true." Only for the summer. It sounds like no big deal but when I think of all of those weeks stretched out in front of me, it makes my heart hurt. I need to focus on my new job, not worry about the next time I'm going to see my boyfriend. Independence is good. Fable said those exact words to me the last time I talked to her. She's my go to when it comes to advice and I'm so thankful that I have her in my life.

But even though she says independence is good, it doesn't feel so great at this particular moment.

"So you miss him." When I say nothing, she continues. "Your boyfriend."

"Uh huh." I stare at my stupid sandwich, the one that's going to make me fat and grab my apple instead, sinking my teeth into the crisp fruit.

"Well, let me see him then. Do you have a photo?" Talby's munching on carrots and I grab my phone, scrolling through my photos until I come upon a particularly good one of my Owen.

I took it on Saturday when we were at the beach. His dark blond hair is wet so it looks even darker than usual and he'd whipped his head around when I called his name, his pretty green eyes sparkling and there's a big smile on his face. He's not wearing a shirt and all I see is acres of golden, firm skin. He looks amazing.

So I hand over my phone and wait for Talby to gush over my freaking gorgeous boyfriend.

"Holy hell girl," she breathes, staring at the phone. "He's hot."

I say nothing. Just let her look her fill at Owen until she finally hands over the phone. "This is perfect," Talby says.

"What is?" I ask with a frown.

"You, being so incredibly taken by about the hottest man on the planet and me completely single and ready to freaking mingle." She grins. "I broke up with my dickhead boyfriend two months ago."

"I'm sorry..." I start to say but she cuts me off with a wave.

"Don't be. He was a cheating asshole. Best decision I ever made." Talby's grin grows. How that's possible I'm not quite sure. "I went through the month long depressive state where I ate my feelings and soaked them in beer. Then I became mad. Like, super angry I-wanted-to-tear-everything-apart-and-key-my-ex's-stupid-ugly-truck mad. That lasted for a few weeks."

I hope like crazy she still isn't in that state. Sounds violent. "How are you feeling

now?"

"Over him. And it feels fucking fantastic." Talby breaks into the celery bag and starts munching. I really hate celery. It tastes weird and I always get strings in my teeth. "You should go out with me sometime."

Oh, I don't know about that. I'm not here to party. I'm in Santa Augustina to learn and to work and make a little money. Not go out drinking and partying every night. Crap, I'm not even twenty-one yet. And I definitely don't have a fake ID.

I'm too much of a good girl to even consider getting one.

"Don't make that little face," Talby says, catching me. Dang, she's perceptive. "I'm fun, I swear. I know everyone. Where all the good parties are, even in the summer when no one's really around. In fact, there's a big one happening over at Shep Prescott's house Wednesday night."

"Uh," I start to protest but she shakes her head, that grin back in place. Her teeth are perfectly white and perfectly straight. Her hair is a pretty golden brown that falls in gentle waves down her back. From looking at her, I find it hard to believe she ate her feelings and soaked them in beer. She's got a great body.

While I'm packing extra pounds that make my boyfriend say he's got more to grab onto so supposedly that makes him happy.

Yeah, right.

"You're going." She points her celery at me. "Everyone wants to go to Shep's parties. They're legendary. I heard his parents are in the Turks and Caicos for the next few months and so he can't go back home, considering they let the staff have the entire summer off and heaven forbid he has to wash his own clothes and pick up after himself or oh my God, like actually cook a meal. So he's staying here."

Well, that sounds surreal. I knew kids like that, growing up. I was sort of like that myself at one point. Dad had all the money in the world, or so it seemed. He bought me everything I could want. Took us on extravagant trips. Focused all of his attention on Mom, when he deigned to spend time with us, but when he was gone, it was like the earth opened up and swallowed him whole. He flat out

disappeared for days, weeks, sometimes months, devastating Mom every single time.

Yet she took him back. Always. He brought her an expensive gift, bought back her love and sweet-talked her. Just like that, she was swayed.

My memories aren't always pleasant, especially when all the big crap hit the fan. Growing up, I thought that was how people lived. How parents raised their kids. I believed their behavior was normal.

But what is normal anyway? No one I know is from a normal family. We've all got our quirks.

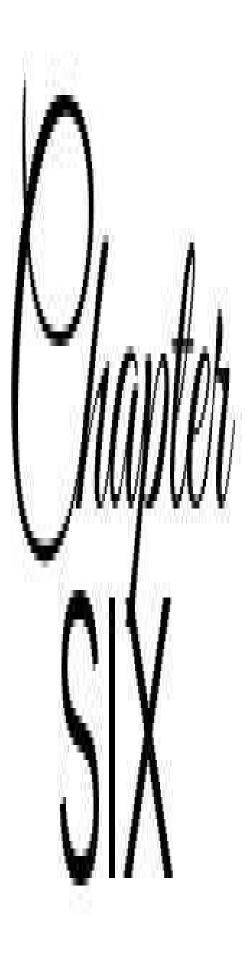
"Please say yes," Talby says, snapping me out of my thoughts. I realize she's been talking to me this entire time and I feel bad. I should go out with her. If Owen were here right now he'd encourage me to do it. He'd want me to say yes and make new friends, even go to a party.

"Okay," I agree and she smiles, shoving the last bit of celery into her mouth before she starts clapping her hands.

"Yay! I can't wait. Everyone will be intrigued with the new girl," she says, looking pleased with herself. "And then I can sink my claws into them."

Is she using me as some sort of bait to hook up with guys? Sounds perfectly harmless but then again...

Who knows?



"Hey Chels."

The sound of Owen's voice in my ear makes my insides go liquid. I clutch my cell tighter and settle back on the uncomfortable double bed, glancing around my dreary dorm room. It had been fine when he was with me, filling up the space with his vibrant personality.

Now the room fills small and hollow. Sort of like my heart.

"Hi." I want to roll my eyes at myself. That's all I can muster up? What's wrong with me? I'd been dying to talk to him all day.

"How was your first day at work? Do you like your new boss? Meet anyone nice?"

I proceed to tell him everything. How Professor Michaels came on strong but I could tell he's really kind and quiet. How all the interns were nice and seemed excited to be there. That the writing program we're putting together is unlike any other I've seen before and I know it's going to be a great accomplishment when it's all said and done.

"Made any friends?" he asks when I'm finished.

"Sort of." I sink my head deeper into the too-soft pillow. "Her name is Talby."

"What kind of name is that?"

"I don't know, but she seems really nice. Fun. She invited me to go to a party with her on Wednesday," I tell him.

"You should go," he urges. "You could meet new people."

"I know. I guess it's at some rich kid's house."

"I'm sure that means it's going to be a nice house with top notch booze."

I laugh. "Only you would care about that." Though I know he's not a big drinker, not so much anymore. After everything that happened with his mom, he's

become cautious and I love that about him. It means he's aware of his own weaknesses and does his best to avoid them.

"Gotta look for the positives where you can," he says.

"So how about you? How was your day? Or did you spend most of it in bed?" I tease, though the second I say the word bed I imagine the two of us in our bed and the thought makes me squeeze my thighs together.

I never realized just how needy I am for sexual contact until I'm away from Owen. It's sort of wild. Funny, how I lived without it when all the teenagers around me were getting it on with anyone and everyone. I thought they were crazy.

Now I feel insatiable. And I'm all alone which sucks.

"I finally crawled out of bed around one." He punctuates his sentence with a yawn. "I guess Coach wants to talk to me."

"What about?"

"I dunno. We keep missing each other. Wade told me he called when I got home. I tried to call him and left a message. Then I somehow missed his call on my cell when I was out earlier," he explains.

"Where'd you go?"

"The gym." I can tell he's making a face. I can practically hear it in his tone. "I figure if you're not here giving me a rigorous sexual workout I should keep up at the gym during the off season."

I almost want to melt away with embarrassment from what he just said but I push forward like no big deal. That he can still fluster me is sort of amazing. "Tell me you're coming here on Friday."

"I am," he says without hesitation. "You know what I promised you on Sunday before I left."

Five days, he'd told me. All we needed to do was focus on the next five days and that's when we'd see each other again. I can handle five days, he told me. And

so could he. If we broke it up into little chunks versus thinking of the entire summer stretching out before us, it's easier to deal with.

"I know," I murmur. "It's only Monday and I miss you so much."

"You saw me twenty four hours ago," he points out.

"That feels like a long time," I admit.

"Focus on the good stuff, baby. We'll be together soon. Now it's only four days until I see you."

"Four very long days," I say with a sigh. I pluck at a thread sticking up from the new comforter we bought at Target for my room. It's turquoise with these cute ruffles and gathers and it's so soft. I love it. I could never get away with this sort of thing on the bed I share with Owen.

"It'll go by fast and you know it. Focus on work. Check out the town more. Go to that party with your new friend with the weird name," Owen says.

"Talby," I add for him.

"Yeah, Talby. Next thing you know, it'll be Friday afternoon and I'll be there to pick you up from work."

Longing fills me. "You will?" I ask, my voice a breathy whisper. I sound pitiful but I can't help it.

"Promise."

"It's such a long drive though..."

"You're worth it," he says firmly, making me smile. Making me miss him.

"You'll have to tell me what your coach wants to talk to you about." I wonder if it's about his future. Owen swears he's not interested in the NFL. More like, he doesn't believe he has what it takes. Why I have no idea. I wonder sometimes if it has to do with his fear of being compared to his brother-in-law, even though they play different positions.

"Probably just wants to give me grief about the upcoming season. How I need to keep my grades up and all that shit," he mutters, sounding irritated. He likes his coach but feels like the entire coaching staff of his team hammers on him all the time. It's like he doesn't realize they only want the best for him.

"I doubt that. Maybe he wants to talk about your future potential with the NFL." The moment I say it, he's dead silent on the other end. I close my eyes, waiting for him to deny it or worse, to yell. Not that he yells at me but he's super sensitive about the pro football talk.

"There's no future there," he says with a finality I've never heard before. "So don't get your hopes up."

More like he doesn't want to get his hopes up? "How do you know?" I ask gently.

"Because I know. And so do you. Anyway, my plan is to become a coach. High school kids, so I can mold all that potential and send them off to the best college possible," he says.

That would be wonderful. What about now though, or right after he graduates? I think the possibility for a pro career is there. He should at least give it a shot. But once Owen has something in his head, it's hard to change his mind. He's just about the most stubborn person I've ever met.

Well, besides Mom but she's crazy.

"You can be a coach's wife. Hope you don't mind being in charge of the booster club," he continues, dropping the word wife so nonchalantly. Like it's no big deal. We've never talked about marriage before. Our future is together, there's no doubt in my mind, but an engagement has never come up. Marriage. That's too serious. We're too young.

So hearing him say wife in reference to me for the first time, does something weird to my heart. Like make it feel so light I'm almost afraid it'll bust free of my chest and fly away on gossamer wings.

"Isn't it against the rules for the coach's wife to be in charge of the team's booster club?" I ask, deciding to keep it light.

"Probably. But when have we ever really followed the rules?" He's silent for a moment and so am I. "I miss you, baby."

"I miss you too."

"I'll call you tomorrow."

"Text me whenever you want."

"I don't want to interrupt whatever you're working on."

"You're never an interruption. Ever." I pause. "I love you."

"Bye, Chels." He hangs up before I can say another word.

Coach finally got a hold of me first thing this morning and I'm headed to his office now, curious to see what he wants to talk to me about. He had that serious, gruff thing going on that he likes to do when he's being evasive. Which is pretty much all of the time because the guy rarely just comes right out with it, you know? His big speeches or announcements always have lead-time. He enjoys the build up.

More like I think he likes watching all of us dudes squirm.

I grab a coffee and a blueberry muffin along the way since I'm starving, practically shoving the slightly dry muffin down my throat while I chase it with coffee as I drive. When I pull into the parking lot, I swear I see Fable's SUV parked there but I can't be sure. You see one huge, gleaming black SUV, you've seen them all. Besides, why would she be here? And she hates driving the SUV long distances. It's huge and she's so little I swear she needs a booster seat to see over the steering wheel. I suggested Fable should use Autumn's car seat once and she gave me the finger in reply.

Sisterly love at its finest.

When I walk into Coach Halsey's office, I stop in surprise. Drew is sitting in one of the chairs in front of the desk, chatting it up with coach like they're old friends. And they are of course, since he used to play for the team too, before my time. The moment they see me standing in the doorway with my mouth hanging open, they stop talking, giving each other a look. One I can't decipher. Drew stands to his feet and walks over to me, pulling me into a hug.

"What are you doing here?" I mutter as he pats me on the back before he releases me.

Drew smiles, shoving his hands into his jeans pockets. Women all over the world would love to see that smile aimed right at them. He's got star quality written all over him and I'm a chump. Most of his success comes from his skills on the football field. His personality and good looks make up the rest. He's so freaking popular it's mind blowing. His face stares down at us from billboards, in magazines, on TV. It's fucking unreal, that this dude who's my brother-in-law, is so famous.

Looking at him right now, at his open, friendly expression, I suddenly remember the time I was so pissed at him for breaking Fable's heart I socked him in the jaw and sent him sprawling to the ground.

I'm still secretly proud of that moment, not that I'd ever admit it out loud.

"We wanted to talk to you," Drew says, settling back down in his chair.

Coach waves a hand at the other empty chair across from Drew's. "Have a seat," he says gruffly.

I sit down, warily looking at the both of them. I feel tag teamed here. Like they're both going to come at me with something and I hate that I have zero clues as to what. "What's up?" I ask, keeping my voice even though inside, I'm twisted up in turmoil. It couldn't be bad news, could it? I've done everything right. Kept up my grades, no more drugs and alcohol clogging up my system. It's off season and I could drink if I want but I don't.

One drink leads to another until I'm tempted to smoke out and I just...can't risk it.

"We wanted to talk to you about your upcoming season," Halsey starts out, his face like a mask. I couldn't read his mood if I tried. He's real good at that stoic thing.

"It's your senior year," Drew says, like I need the reminder. "There are going to be a lot of people watching you."

"Scouts," Halsey adds.

My gaze meets Coach Halsey's and I swallow hard, unable to find my voice. There's been talk before about NFL interest in me but I figured it was because of Drew. The whole reason I went into football in the first place is because of him. I went through a major idolizing Drew Callahan phase. I wanted to be him when I grew up. I wanted to be rich as fuck, good looking, a great football player and a good guy that all the chicks wanted.

"I'm already getting calls," Halsey continues. "Hell, I've been fielding calls about you for over a year."

He's already told me this and I've blown him off. I can't even explain why.

Okay, fine I can explain why. I don't want to get my hopes up. Mom fucked me up so bad my self confidence is in the toilet most of the time. Having to deal with Drew's fame doesn't help. It's not his fault. I have my own hang ups and most of them were instilled by Mom. It doesn't matter how many times Fable's told me I'm good. Or Drew. Or Chelsea. Or Coach Halsey, Wade, any of the guys on my team.

When I start thinking of the possibilities, that I could make something of myself, the naggy little voice inside my head starts in on me, telling me I'm not good enough, I'll never be good enough and that I'm just like her. A liar, a manipulator, a drug addict. Useless. No good. A waste of space.

And the voice always sounds just like my dead mother. Those words, aimed right at me, were her weapons. They worked too. Did some major damage.

"We want you to participate in the Draft Combine," Drew says, knocking me from my thoughts.

"Wait a minute...what?" I shake my head, like I can clear it but the nagging voice is still there, accompanied by the tiniest ray of hope.

"I'm fairly positive you will be one of the three hundred who are invited," Coach Halsey says. "But just because I say that doesn't mean you're going to actually get an invite."

"Then why say it?" The NFL Scouting Combine is an annual event where the best college players are invited to participate in a national invitational camp. The players are run through endless drills, all while being watched by various NFL coaching staff, along with player and medical personnel departments. Four days of brutal, nonstop playing, drills and questions. It's a huge step in getting into the NFL draft.

"You need to train," Drew says, his expression serious. "And when I say train, I mean hard. The combine is tough, mentally and physically. You're going to need to prepare for it."

"I don't think I can handle it," I say, my words rushing out of me. "There's no point." I drop my head, not wanting to face them. My heart's racing and my

fucking palms are sweaty.

"What do you mean, there's no point? And I know you can handle it. You're the one who thinks you can't," Coach Halsey says but I don't look at him. I can't. How many times have I had to suffer through a speech from him? Too many to count. "You know what your problem is, Maguire? You don't take any of this seriously. None of it."

He's right, but why bother? Nothing is going to come of it. "This conversation is pointless," I mutter.

"When the hell are you ever going to believe in yourself? Huh? Aren't you tired of sitting around boo-hooing like a little baby? Don't you get sick of this whiny shit? Because I know I sure do."

I glance up to find Drew glaring at me, his eyes blazing with anger and disappointment, his hands gripping the arms of his chair. He looks ready to spring out of that chair and come at me, but I can't look away from him. I feel frozen, in shock. "I-I'm not acting like a baby."

"The fuck you aren't." Drew leaps to his feet and with me still sitting, he's like a giant. Looming over me, his jaw tight, his mouth a thin line. This is the most pissed I've ever seen him. And I've witnessed him get pretty pissed. "Either you want it or you don't."

"Drew—" Halsey starts but Drew silences him with a look before returning that vicious gaze back on me.

"Well? Do you want it? Or don't you? It's a simple question, Owen. Answer me."

I don't want it. To want means...it'll hurt that much more when I don't get it. That would devastate me. It's better to keep on with my plan. Finish out college, try my best during the season, graduate, eventually get my fucking teacher's credential and become a coach.

Teacher's credential, me teaching a bunch of high schoolers, guiding them, teaching them what exactly? I'm just a dumbass kid myself.

Give me a fucking break.

"Owen." Drew's voice is low, downright deadly and I know I need to answer. I'm fucking sweating, I can feel my T-shirt growing damp and it's like my life is on the damn line, all with this one decision. I wish Chelsea were here. So I could look at her and ask what I should do. She'd know the answer.

She knows all of my answers.

"I want it," I choke out, shocking myself that I actually said it out loud. "I shouldn't but I...fuck, I do."

"That's what I thought," Drew says almost smugly, the bastard. He rests his hands on his hips and turns to where Halsey's sitting behind his desk, sending him a look that says, 'told you so'.

"Jesus, Callahan," Halsey mutters and I glance over at him to see that he appears semi-traumatized. "I thought you were going to force his hand and he'd walk. He's stubborn like that."

"He wouldn't walk," Drew says confidently, his gaze meeting mine once more. "Deep down inside, he wants it too bad."

Drew's right. Damn it, there's this tiny part of me that still wants it. Wants what he has. So fucking bad, it almost hurts. It had been a kid's dream that I never truly believed I could make a reality.

"You'll need to start training right away. Extra stuff. Outside of the team," Halsey says, rubbing his hands together, like he can't wait to get started. The relief radiating from him is palpable. I guess he really did think I would walk. "You're the only prospect, Maguire. The rest of the seniors, they're a talented bunch. Great players, but you've got that focused drive. And you've got the charisma, the star quality, like Callahan here. If you signed with the NFL just like your brother-in-law, the media would have a field day."

"The media is going to have a field day with this, with my name attached to it. And Fable's," Drew adds. My sister is almost as famous as he is. They're like America's couple or something. It's wild. "You ready for it?"

"Ready for what?" I ask weakly, rubbing at my chest. I feel like I've just run a marathon, my heart is still hammering and my limbs are weak. Being cornered by Drew is fucking tough.

"The attention. The training. It's going to get intense fast. A specialist is coming this weekend. Someone we've used before with the Niners. He wants to test you out and see what you're capable of," Drew explains.

"Wait, this weekend? I'm supposed to go see Chelsea." Damn, my girl is going to be so disappointed I can't even begin to imagine it. She'll pretend she understands but I know she'll be sad. Because I'm already sad. I miss her something fierce.

"Cancel your plans," Halsey says, his voice gruff and surly again. "If you want to get in with the NFL, then this is what you need to do. This guy Drew found for us is going to draw up a training program for you like you won't believe. You're good, there's no doubt about that, but he's going to make you even better."

"He's going to make you fucking shine," Drew adds.

"Yeah, no, I understand. I'll give her a call. She'll be fine. She wants this for me," I say, wishing I could leave. Wishing I could wrap my head around all of this. I feel like it got sprung on me out of nowhere, and though I'm excited at the possibilities, I can't deny that, but I know it's going to take a lot of hard work.

I also don't want to get my hopes up.

Because all they'll do is come crashing down if I fail. And my track record leans more toward the fail side if I'm being honest with myself.



The moment she answers my call my skin prickles with awareness at the first sound of her sweet voice. I tell myself she'll be all right, she'll understand why I can't go see her this weekend but damn. I really don't want to disappoint my girlfriend. Not right now. Not if she's still feeling vulnerable.

"How are you?" I ask, bracing myself. Yesterday I wanted to hear how much she missed me. Tonight, not so much. Only because I need her gaining confidence and having a good time in Santa Augustina, not falling into a pit of despair because I'm not around.

Not that she'd fall into a pit of despair being without me, I don't think that highly of myself. But hell, we were both sort of a mess when I left her Sunday night. The past few days have been a lot of upheaval for her and I'm about to add to it.

Big time.

"I'm great! I had a good day." She launches into an explanation of exactly everything she did and she sounds bright. Happy. Relief grips me, shakes me up and I withhold the big sigh that wants to escape. Instead I make a few of those noncommittal 'yeahs' I'm so good at, asking her all the right questions at the right spots. I let her ramble, let her get it all out and she has plenty to say.

Like how excited the interns were to push right into the launch stages of this new program they're creating. How they put together a decent plan after they brainstormed their various ideas. How nice Professor Michaels was and that she went to lunch with the chick with the weird name and some other girl, and she likes them both. Chelsea was so closed off when she was younger, advancing through school like she did at such a young age, it was difficult for her to make friends. She's still pretty shy. Doesn't really open up to new people so I'm glad she's making friends.

"How about you?" she finally asks, laughing a little. "You just let me take over the entire conversation for the last fifteen minutes and now I feel bad."

She rarely talks this much, especially nonstop like she just did. My girl is quiet —unless I'm making her come and most of the time, I can turn her into a screamer. Something I'm quite proud of, pervert that I am. "I finally talked to

Coach Halsey this morning."

"Oh, yeah? And you're only just telling me now?"

"I was giving you your turn first," I point out, making her laugh.

"True. But I know you were worried about what he wanted. What did he say?"

Gear up, dude. Brace yourself for her eventual disappointment when you have to break the bad news.

"Drew was there. Uh, they wanted to talk to me about getting me into the scouting combine," I say.

"What's that?" She sounds...perplexed, which is typical for Chelsea. If she doesn't know how something works or doesn't understand it, that makes her crazy. She's a knowledge freak. She wants to learn everything. Back when we first started dating she hated that she didn't understand much about football. I'd catch her on her phone looking up football stats or reading websites about plays and stuff. She favorited the ESPN site for the love of God. All because of me.

Girl knows about football now—college football that is. Oh, and she's a Niner fan like the rest of the family because of Drew.

So I explained to her what the combine was, how it worked, how long it lasted, and that only three hundred of the top college football players in the country were invited to attend.

"It's a great way to prove you're ready for the draft," I tell her.

She's quiet for a moment, processing what I told her, no doubt. "So you're going to try for the NFL."

"I—I think so." I wait for her to tell me I'm stupid, that I don't have even a glimmer of a chance to get in. I'm not talented enough and I'm wasting my time.

Of course, she doesn't say any of that because she's not Mom. She's the love of my life and she believes in me, sometimes more than I believe in myself.

"I think this is fantastic," she breathes. I can hear the excitement in her voice and

it gets me excited too. "About time you realized your full potential."

I burst out laughing. "You think so?"

"I know so," she says. "I never wanted you to give up your dream. I always felt like...no, never mind."

"You always felt like what?"

She sighs. "That when you would say that kind of stuff, how you had no intention of trying to play football professionally, that you didn't think you were good enough, I was secretly scared you were giving it all up for...me."

Funny how we both think we're holding the other back from our dreams and plans. "I give up nothing for you. You made my life better, Chels. I give you my everything."

"Owen..." Her voice trails off and now I can tell she's sort of overcome. Not the most ideal time to tell her I'm not coming to see her this weekend. So I try and hold off a little more.

"The training I'm going to have to go through, it's going to be intense," I start and she interrupts.

"I'm sure. But you can handle it, right? Don't worry about the training. I know you've got it in you. And you don't have to work at the restaurant anymore if you don't want to. I'm sure Drew and Fable would supplement your income while you're working so hard to get into the draft. I'll try and help out as much as I can too."

"This, ah, this has nothing to do with money, baby. I've got that covered." It used to drive me nuts when Drew insisted on paying for everything. Not only is his family wealthy, but the guy makes more money than God what with his pay plus bonuses and all the endorsements. I realized too that he likes doing things for me. It's one of the many ways he shows that he cares. I don't bother protesting too much anymore. It doesn't feel like a handout.

"The time then. I'm sure you're going to be put on a rigorous training schedule. When do they want to start you?"

- "Right now." I pause. "Like, first thing tomorrow morning. And into...this weekend." I wince, waiting for her reaction. But it's not much of one.
- "Oh." She's quiet for a moment. A too long moment that makes me antsy. "So are you saying that...you can't come see me this weekend?"
- "I can't. And I'm so sorry, baby. I know how much this means to you and it means a lot to me too. I miss you so damn bad and I know you're all alone over there, but Drew arranged for a trainer to come this weekend to help me and Coach implement a new training regimen and there's no way I could get out of it," I explain, closing my eyes. I hate telling her no. The worst thing in the world is denying Chelsea anything.
- "No, I get it, I understand. I'm just...disappointed." She sounds it, too. My heart is cracking right now.
- "I'm disappointed too. You don't know how much. But I'll come see you next weekend," I tell her.
- "You promise?"
- "Promise," I say firmly, and with my whole heart.

"Oh, my gosh, he lives in a mansion," I say as we pull up in front of the house. I give a quick glance at Talby as she throws her car into park and turns off the ignition before I return my attention to the house with its grand, sweeping front lawn. A lawn that is already littered with discarded Solo red cups and the occasional beer can. The street is crowded with cars lining the sidewalks on either side and I can hear the sounds of the party coming from within the house, even though we're still in Talby's car. "He lives here alone?"

"Well, he shares the house with his cousin Tristan, who's just as hot as he is." Talby flashes me a smile when I turn to face her once more. "Talby and Tristan sounds good together, don't you think?"

"Sure." I shrug, then open the passenger door and climb out of the car, my gaze stuck on the huge house looming before us. Talby is a little obsessive over finding a boyfriend to replace the one she dumped two months ago. It's all she can talk about. She's sweet and fun and I enjoy hanging out with her but the man talk is sort of over the top.

"This is going to be epic," she says as she hurries over to the sidewalk where I'm standing and loops her arm in mine. "All the guys are gonna go crazy with the appearance of fresh meat," she continues as we start to head up the walkway toward the front door.

I stop in my tracks. "Are you referring to me as fresh meat?"

Talby laughs and pulls on my arm so we start walking once more. "Don't take offense. You really are fresh meat. Trust me, the guys are going to come swarming."

"Maybe I don't want them to swarm." I definitely don't want them to. I'm still feeling low from my conversation with Owen last night. I'm so incredibly happy for him. It's almost overwhelming, to think of my boyfriend as a future member of the NFL and I know he's got what it takes. I'm just sad he can't make it this weekend. I miss him terribly. Despite keeping myself busy and okay, it's only been three days, and maybe I'm the one who's being over the top, not Talby. But it's hard not having him around. I'm not used to it yet.

"Give me a break. Every girl loves attention from a bunch of hot guys. I don't

care if you're taken or not," she says as we walk up the steps of the covered porch. Loud music throbs from within the house and a bunch of people are congregated on the porch, most of them checking us out as we approach the door. "And with your guy not coming to see you this weekend, I figured a little extra attention from someone else might do you some good."

I should have never told her about my boyfriend. Some things are better left unsaid. "If you're talking about extra attention like making out with some random guy, I'm not interested," I say, barely able to hide the disgust in my voice. I would never do that to Owen.

"Please. Don't be such a prude." Talby opens the front door and takes my hand, leading me into the middle of a very crowded living room. "I have arrived, bitches!" she yells, making a bunch of the guys laugh and a small group of girls start to squeal. They're headed right in our direction, all of them trying to hug Talby and ask her where she's been.

She lets go of my hand and I step aside, glad to be away from the chaos. Her friends carry her away in a group, leaving me alone and I'm tempted to run straight out of this too large house filled with too many people and get the heck out of here.

I feel like I'm in way over my head.

"Music's too loud, huh?"

The deep voice spoken a little too close to my ear makes me whirl around with a soft gasp, finding a wide, covered in a black T-shirt chest facing me. I tilt my head back to see the owner of the broad chest is smiling down at me, his dark brown eyes friendly.

"It's uh, great." I force a smile, knowing what I just said sounds totally inadequate.

He raises a brow. "You really think so?"

"Sure." I shrug.

"Maybe you're right, considering it's so damn loud I have to stand close so I can hear you, and I shouldn't complain about that." His dark eyes sparkle as he watches me. "Want a drink?"

"Um, I'm fine," I say. "Thanks though," I add lamely. Is he flirting with me? Certainly feels like it.

He slowly shakes his head, the smile fading though he doesn't look mad. No, he appears rather amused at my expense. "A pretty girl like you shouldn't be standing here all alone without a drink in your hand."

"I, um, I just got here." I don't know how I could sound any dorkier. This is pure torture, trying to make small talk with a guy I don't know. How did I do it with Owen? How did he tolerate me? I'm a bumbling idiot I swear.

"Well, why didn't you say so? As the host, it's my duty to make sure you have something to drink." The smile returns and it's glorious. I can't help but find it... appealing. He is seriously handsome, almost as handsome as my Owen. "What's your name?"

"Chelsea." I can assume he's Shep Prescott, the owner of the house. The guy that Talby's been talking about nonstop, and I've known her only since Monday. And if she wasn't talking about Shep, she was talking about Tristan, Shep's roommate and cousin.

Though maybe this guy is Tristan. And if he is, then I'm in trouble because she's pretty hot for him...

"I'm Shep." He tilts his head toward me, a lock of golden brown hair falling over his forehead. He's definitely good looking, and he knows it. How could he not? Owen is the same way. He knows he's gorgeous but he doesn't act like an egotistical jerk. Most of the time.

Ha ha.

"Nice to meet you," I say, sucking in a sharp breath when he reaches out and takes my hand in his. "What are you doing?"

"Leading you toward the drink area," he says with a wink. Yes, he winked at me. But it wasn't cheesy. I find myself following after him, my hand in his warm one, my gaze darting everywhere as people shout his name as he pushes his way through the crowd.

I'm having a total flashback, remembering that moment when Owen defended me out in front of the restaurant and then we walked back to his place, only to find his roommates were having a party. Scratch that, his roommate Wade and drug dealer Des were having a party. Owen had been so angry, but so sweet to me. Taking my hand and leading me through the crowd, taking me back to his bedroom.

I really hope Shep doesn't think he can lead me back to his bedroom.

There are so many people in this gorgeous, I'm-pretty-sure-it's-brand-new house. They all look about my age, carefree and having the time of their lives, cups in hand and smiles on their faces. Considering the university isn't even in session, I can't imagine how big the party could get when all the students were back in town.

"What's your poison?" Shep asks after I slip my hand out of his. We're in the kitchen, which is state of the art with its shiny granite countertops, stainless steel appliances and recessed lighting. An array of liquor bottles cover the center island, most of them I'm not familiar with and Shep waves a hand toward them. "Or there's a keg in the backyard. You want beer? Though I gotta warn you, it's mostly foamy and probably warm."

That sounds gross. "Um, would I sound like a complete nerd if I asked for water?"

"How about a Coke?" He grabs a two-liter off the island and holds it aloft. "Would that work?"

"Yeah," I say with a nod, watching as he grabs a red cup off a stack and scoops up some ice in a bowl before he cracks open the two liter and pours in the Coke. He hands it to me with a smile. "Thanks."

"You're welcome. So tell me." He leans against the edge of the counter, crossing his arms in front of his chest. He has nice arms. Great biceps. They strain against the sleeve of his T-shirt and I think of Owen. When do I not think of Owen? "How do you know Talby?"

Oh. Not the question I expected. This I can handle. "We work together." I take a sip of my drink while Shep starts laughing.

"Talby works? Go figure. Do you know her very well?"

"Not really," I say with a shrug. "I just met her Monday. We're participating in putting together a summer writing program for Professor Michaels. She's an intern and I'm a supervisor. We've been hanging out and she mentioned the party suggesting I should go, since I'm not from around here."

"Clearly," he scoffs and I almost giggle. I can tell he's not being insulting. "Talby is...how shall I put this...a party girl."

"Okay," I say slowly, taking another sip of my drink. That sounds harmless.

"As in, she likes to party," he continues, his dark brown gaze locked on me. I study him from over the rim of my cup, wondering at his intentions. Is he trying to warn me? "A lot. Too much. And when I say too much, I mean we might find her on the lawn tomorrow morning with her skirt hiked up around her waist with no underwear on. This is a common experience when it comes to Talby."

"Oh." I don't know what else to say. I feel bad that he feels the need to warn me. And I feel bad that Talby acts like that at parties. She should have more respect for herself.

"It's only since that asshole Chad cheated on her. She's kind of spiraled out of control but I guess it's to be expected, right? Anyway." He leans in closer, his voice lowering like we're about to share a secret. "You don't look like the type who'd end up half naked on my lawn at three in the morning."

"Much to your disappointment, am I right?" Another guy appeared, this one just about as good looking as Shep. He holds out his hand, his eyes twinkling with mischief. "Tristan."

"Chelsea," I offer, shaking his hand weakly. Great, I'm alone in the kitchen with the two guys Talby gushed over. What are the odds?

"You would scam on the new girl first," Tristan mutters, giving Shep a shove.

Shep doesn't even budge, just glares at his Tristan with minor disgust. "I'm not scamming on her, as you so crudely put it."

"Making a move, chatting her up, scamming on her, whatever you want to call it,

- you're doing it," Tristan returns, his gaze sliding to mine. "I'm the nicer Prescott. Just thought I'd let you know."
- "From the way Talby talks about you two, I don't think either of you are very nice," I retort, making them both laugh.
- "You're not too far off the mark," Shep says, grabbing an open vodka bottle and chugging straight from it. "I like you," he says, pointing the bottle in my direction.
- "Don't bother," I tell him with a tiny smile. This is sort of fun, harmless flirting with guys. I had no idea I could actually do this. "I'm very, very taken."
- "Ha," Tristan says with a smug grin, pointing his finger at Shep like a gun and pressing his thumb down. "And you're done."
- "We can still be friends though, right Chelsea?" Shep asks with a disarming grin.
- "Probably not," I admit, making them laugh even harder.
- "I'm out dude," Tristan says, clapping Shep on the shoulder as he walked past. "Great meeting you Chelsea. Try your charm on someone else, Shepard." And with that, he was gone.
- "So I'm wasting my charm on you?" Shep asks once we're alone.
- "Absolutely," I say with a nod. "I'm madly in love with my boyfriend."
- "Then he's a lucky dude," Shep says with a sigh, grabbing the vodka and tucking it under his arm. "See ya around," he says with a salute as he shuffles off.
- "See ya." I wave, staring at his retreating back. I'm ready to go too. There's no point in staying. I have no idea where Talby is. The house is full of people and more keep spilling through the front door. I do have Talby's number though. I can text her in a few.

After I call Owen. He'll definitely want to hear this story.



One month later...

My girl isn't answering my calls. And it's kind of pissing me off.

Granted, I know she's busy. I'm busy too. Busy busting my balls out on the football field or in the gym, enduring the most intense training of my life. Drew stayed with me for the entire first week of my new training regimen, encouraging me, giving me endless speeches and trying to pump me up. Making me watch past games so he could point out my weaknesses and strengths. Hell, he even put me on a diet, something I've never done before in my life. He said I ate too much junk food.

He's probably right.

I suffered through it all, thankful he was there and encouraging me, because without him by my side pushing me, I probably would've given up before that first week was even through.

Working out so hard for hours at a time meant I collapsed into bed super early. This also meant my schedule wasn't really corresponding with Chelsea's. She usually wants to talk at night, and all I want to do lately at night is sleep. She even got mad at me one night when—and this is shitty, but it couldn't be helped—I fell asleep while she was talking to me.

"Oh my God, Owen are you sleeping?" she'd screeched into my ear, startling me back into wakefulness. "I could hear you snoring!"

Yeah. She didn't call or text me for a solid twenty four hours after that incident. Not that I could blame her. And I didn't call her back either. Not only was I letting her cool down, I was too damn busy with Drew being my shadow. Having him watch me so closely, I knew I couldn't let him down. I had to do this for him.

And for myself.

At the end of that first week with Drew, Fable and Autumn came up to visit and we all hung out together for a few days. So I didn't go see Chelsea that weekend either. She understood—I was with my family. But I missed her like crazy because she's a part of my family too.

I still haven't seen her. It's been one month since she left. We're at the halfway point before she returns home. And I haven't gone back to Santa Augustina to visit her yet. I feel like an asshole. Part of it is her fault too and she'll admit it. She's just as busy as I am. Her project is consuming her and she even works Saturday and Sunday—the main reason I didn't come see her last weekend.

Three weeks into training all alone and I'm doing great. I've burned off fat but gained muscle and I'm ten pounds heavier because of it. Wade's been training with me too, encouraging and forcing me to the gym when I tell him I can't do it. I didn't realize how much I needed a partner in this. How much it freaking helps to have Wade jogging by my side, throwing me those passes, spotting me with the weights.

We've become closer. We went out for Thirsty Thursday that first week Chelsea was gone but after that, no partying. No bars. And for Wade, no girls, which is like a miracle. He's too damn tired at night to hook up so he collapses into bed like I do. All the exercise and training is exhausting.

This upcoming weekend though, I plan on seeing Chelsea. Nothing is going to stop me. I deserve the weekend off. I want to see my girl. But does she want to see me? The distance between us makes me nervous sometimes. It feels like we're growing apart.

Seeing her, holding her close, will make me feel closer to her. And I fucking need that more than anything else right now.

I'm just parking my car in front of my house when my phone buzzes and I check it. A text from Chelsea.

Sorry I didn't answer sooner. Been busy. What's up? ⊚

I smile and hit a few buttons, deciding I should call her so I can hear her voice.

"Owen." She sounds breathless. My heart squeezes. I miss her so damn much. "We keep missing each other."

"That's why I called." I clear my throat, weirded out by the emotion that seems to be clogging it. "I've missed you, Chels."

"I've missed you too," she admits, her voice low. "Where are you?"

"Just got home from the gym. Still in my car."

I swear I can hear her smile. "Are you with Wade?"

"Nah, we met there and then he took off to his mom's. She needed his help with something." He invited me over for dinner and I'm gonna head over later in the afternoon. Wade's mom took care of me a lot when I was younger. I feel like they're both a part of my family.

"Oh. So you were at the gym again. I feel like you live there. Have you completely transformed yourself or what?"

"I'm no 'roid head, but I've put on more muscle." I lift my arm and flex my bicep, impressed with the size of it. Damn, guess all those weights I've been lifting do make a difference. "I don't think you're going to complain when you see me." Hell, I hope not.

She sighs wistfully. "You're all ripped and I'm getting fatter by the minute."

"I doubt that." She's the farthest thing from fat. Chelsea's no beanpole but she's curvy where it counts. And I love all of those soft curves of hers. "What have you been up to?"

"Work. I've put in so much overtime, my next check is going to be huge. I'm making way more money than I thought I would."

"That's great baby." I leave the engine running so the air conditioning is blasting on me. It's hot as hell outside. It's right at the end of June and the temperature has been hitting close to one hundred degrees by the midafternoon these last few days. "You've put in a ton of hours toward this project."

"And it's coming together perfectly. We've been working so hard, a bunch of us went out last night to celebrate." She grows quiet and I wonder exactly who she went out with.

She's told me a few stories about going to parties and talking with other guys. Harmless stuff though I think I know what's up. She swears to me she tells them immediately that she's got a boyfriend and I know that's half the damn appeal. She's taken. Off limits.

Forbidden fruit.

I trust my girl though. Despite my secret worry that she could find someone who she has more in common with, I know she loves me. She'd never cheat on me. We might not be talking as much and there's this vast physical distance between us, but we're in this together. Even though we're apart.

"Who'd you go out with?" I ask.

"All of the interns, you know, like Talby."

The girl with the weird name who's always going out and trying her best to convince Chelsea to come with her. I want my girl to have fun. She deserves it. I feel like with the life she's had, she grew up too fast. She never got to have any fun and just...be a kid. And then what does she do?

She gets together with me and we fall in love. Almost twenty years old and she's in a serious relationship with a twenty-one-year-old kid. I worry she'll resent me later for never getting the chance to just be her own person.

That's why I don't complain. Why I don't let her know I'm jealous and worried and scared she'll realize she's having more fun without me.

"Have a good time?"

"Yeah we went to a party." Her voice grows smaller. Like maybe she doesn't want to admit where she went, what she did. Like she doesn't want to fess up that she had fun without me.

"Where at?"

"Those two guys I told you about? The ones who are cousins I met the first week I was here? The party was at their house. They have a pool and we all went swimming."

Jealousy shows up and waves a vivid green flag right in front of my face. I try my best to fight it down. I don't want to act like a dick. But if she wore that little black bikini that made me want to hide her away so no man could see her in it... shit. "Sounds great," I say tightly.

"It was no big deal, Owen. I hung out with the girls the entire night." She sighs. "I hope you don't think I'm off flirting with a bunch of guys and throwing myself at them since you're not around. I would never do that."

She sensed my jealousy and is reacting to it. This could be the beginning of an argument I know I have zero chance of winning. "I know you wouldn't baby. I want you to have fun. I just wish I was with you when you were having all that fun." And strutting your stuff in a bikini, looking sexy as fuck. Making all the guys drool as you pass by them.

Yeah. I need to not focus on that.

"I wish you were with me too." She doesn't sound defensive anymore and I'm relieved. I don't want to fight with her. That's the last thing we need. It's been tense enough, the last few phone conversations we've had. "It's the Fourth of July this weekend. They have a big fireworks show here on the beach. I hear it's awesome."

"Oh yeah?" I keep it nonchalant. "Don't tell me you have to work this weekend. It's a national holiday, you know."

She laughs. "I have a three day weekend. I'm off Friday, Saturday and Sunday."

Perfect. "That sounds ideal, considering I planned on coming to see you this weekend."

Dead silence on her end for a few seconds, before the words burst forth and blast my ear. "Are you serious? You're coming this weekend?"

"If you want me to," I say softly, starting to smile when she squeals.

"Do I want you to? Of course, I want you to! Oh my God, Owen. This is perfect. I can't wait to see you."

"You really think I'd let you spend the Fourth without me? No way. We'll go watch the fireworks together on the beach." Having my girl snuggled up close to me while we watch the brilliant bursts of color light up the night sky sounds fucking perfect.

"I was invited to a barbecue too. You can come with me. What day are you

coming? If you left in the early afternoon on Thursday you could be here by the time I get off work," she suggests.

"I can do that." That would give me the full Friday, Saturday and Sunday with her. Then I could leave early Monday morning. Forget that leaving her all alone on a Sunday night thing again. That sucked balls. I want to sleep with my girl as many nights as possible before I have to head back home.

"Instead of five days until I see you, it'll only be four." She squeals again and I hold the phone away from my ear because hell, she's loud when she's excited. "I can't wait, Owen."

"I can't wait either, baby. I have all sorts of plans for this weekend."

"Like what?"

"Well." My skin warms just thinking about those plans. "Let's just say it involves you and me, no clothes and your bed. Or any available surface, as long as I have you naked and sprawled across it."

She's quiet for a moment. "Like the door?"

I get the feeling Chelsea really liked it when I fucked her against her dorm room door. I liked it too. A lot. "Exactly."

"I'd be game for a repeat performance."

"I'm sure you would. So would I." I breathe deep and close my eyes. I'm sitting here in my car in the middle of the morning fantasizing about getting my hands on a naked Chelsea. "I miss you so damn much."

"I miss you too. But I'm going to see you this weekend. Nothing's going to stop us."

"Nope. Nothing," I agree.

"You promise?" she asks.

"I swear."

"You act like you're going to bounce out of your seat," Talby says with a shake of her head.

"Maybe that's because I feel like I'm about to bounce out of my seat." I'm so anxious, so keyed up that the anticipation is killing me. It's Thursday afternoon and I know Owen's close. He texted me thirty minutes ago letting me know he'd pick me up from work. Considering we're approximately twenty minutes from the clock striking five—and we're leaving right on time today, no one wants to linger or work overtime before a three-day weekend—I know he's in the near vicinity.

It's like I can practically feel his energy drawing closer. My skin tingles. My face feels flushed and my heart is beating a little faster than normal. My stomach is fluttery and full of a thousand hypothetical butterflies that are all trying to escape.

It's the most awesome feeling in the world. I can hardly sit still, I'm so excited to see him.

"You two haven't seen each other since you got here, huh?" Talby asks.

"An entire month." We threw that only five days until we see each other plan out the window. I know why he needed to stay home those first two weekends. He was in intense training and then his sister came to see him. She's an important part of his life, I would never resent him or Fable for wanting to spend time together.

The third weekend we weren't together was my fault. I've been working like crazy and my paychecks show it. Earning all of this money that I'm able to put away and save for later is giving me such a sense of accomplishment, I can't describe it. I went from being the rich girl, to the poor little not-so-rich girl in the blink of an eye. I had to support myself and worked hard to do so practically the entire time I was in college.

The scholarship I received was only for tuition and books. I needed money to live, for the day-to-day expenses. Mom couldn't help me. And then when she offered up money my father stole, I refused to take it. No way would I allow myself to be dependent on them ever again.

Once Owen and I got together and I eventually moved in with him and Wade, I was filled with a sense of security. No more living paycheck to paycheck. We could share the burden together, though really I had no burden. Owen took care of everything.

But that meant I was dependent on his money. He was taking care of me. And while I love him and appreciate that he would do something so selflessly, it made me feel weak. I didn't like that. Working and living on my own this past month has helped me reclaim my independence and I love it. It's liberating.

Doesn't mean I miss my boyfriend any less though.

"You think he's found someone else?" Talby asks pointedly, knocking me from my thoughts.

"No! I can't believe you'd say that." Actually, I can but I'm trying to be nice. Talby is fun. I enjoy working with her. Hanging out with her. Do I trust her one hundred percent? Not quite. She's bitter towards guys. I can't blame her because a lot of them have done her wrong, at least according to Talby. I sometimes wonder though, if that's because she puts herself in these hopeless situations. She seems to allow them to take advantage of her.

But that's not for me to judge so I keep my mouth shut.

"Hey, I've seen pictures. He's gorgeous." Talby shrugs. "And seemingly unattached this summer. You don't think girls aren't checking him out, especially since you're not around? Because they so are."

"He's had no time to pay attention to other girls. He's either training out on the field or working out at the gym." My voice drifts at the you-gotta-be-kidding look Talby gives me. Sometimes, she makes me feel stupid.

I don't like it.

"Girls work out, dummy. Half the reason they go to the gym is so they can show off in their tight workout clothes and check out guys. And I bet they're drooling over sexy Owen Maguire and all of his manly muscles. Pumping iron and working up a sweat with his shirt off or something ridiculously awesome like that..." Talby mock shivers. "I know I'd hang out at the gym all the time to check him out if I lived there."

Her words are putting unwanted images in my head. Of pretty girls with perfect bodies wearing sports bras, showing off their flat stomachs, eyes wide as they drink in the perfect male specimen that is my boyfriend. Ugh. "You're just trying to mess with my head," I mutter, leaning down to throw open the desk drawer so I can pull out my purse. I'm done. I'll clock out a few minutes early and wait outside. I know Professor Michaels won't mind.

"I'm just trying to be realistic. I don't want to see you get hurt, Chelsea. College relationships rarely work out, you know. And you're young. You're not even twenty! You can date whoever you want and trust me, there are so many cute guys out there. Plenty of them are interested in you, I know that for a fact. You don't have to tie yourself down to one guy yet," Talby says.

"Who's supposedly interested in me?" I stand and she does too, her expression full of grim determination. Like she knows I want to run away from this conversation and she's fully prepared to force me to stay. Or follow after me.

"Tristan. Shep. Oh, they act like they just want to be your friend but really, they're trying to figure out exactly how they can get in your panties," Talby says, her eyes narrowing. She's standing directly in front of me, her arms crossed. "Funny, how they're the guys I tell you I like and they're also the ones who are sooo interested in you. I wonder why?" She tilts her head, the seemingly innocent expression on her face telling me she thinks I lead them on.

"I don't like them. Not like that," I say, the words rushing out of me when I see her lips part, like she's ready to protest. I lower my voice, trying for stern. I am, after all, in charge of her. "And we really shouldn't be having this conversation here at work."

I walk around her and start to leave the room, not giving her a chance to explain or defend or hmm, I don't know, say something else accusatory, like I'm trying to steal Tristan and Shep, lure them into my web of lies or whatever. So frustrating that she would even imply I'm flirting with them when I have a boyfriend.

"Have a great weekend," Professor Michaels calls from where he's sitting behind his desk. We're all crammed into this temporary office we've been given for the summer. Four desks are shoved together so we can all face each other, and a couple of dented steel gray file cabinets line the back wall. The windows are hard to open with their old crank handles that stick and the air conditioning unit is old, which means most of the time it's horribly stuffy in this office.

With Talby trailing after me, shooting me accusatory looks, it's become downright stifling.

I wave at everyone who remains in the office and bolt out of there, Talby hot on my heels. The moment we're outside in front of the building, I turn to face her.

"What exactly is your problem?" I ask. I'm trembling, mad that my earlier rush of excitement has been replaced by agitation. Irritation.

Anger.

"I thought you were my friend," Talby says, her voice soft but edged with accusation. Hurt fills her eyes and for the briefest moment, I'm thrown. She's good at this playing victim thing. Annoyingly good. "Instead, I find out you're talking to the guys I like. The only two guys I'm interested in."

"First of all, they're my friends," I tell her. "I have zero interest in them and they know it. I'm not available. They know that too. It isn't my fault they're not interested in you."

She visibly recoils and some small, bitter little part of me thinks: Good. I struck a nerve.

But I don't like that part of me. I don't enjoy hurting people's feelings. I'm always so careful of how I treat someone. Heaven forbid I offend. I'm a good girl. I'm always the good girl.

I'm starting to learn that a good girl needs to stand up for herself on occasion. Like now.

"I don't know what you're trying to say," I continue, though I'm pretty sure I know exactly what she's trying to imply. I'm just giving her the benefit of the doubt. "But maybe it would be best if we don't hang out anymore outside of work."

Talby says nothing. Just stares at me with that wounded look in her eyes, her mouth drawn into a thin line. She looks upset, which doesn't bother me because

I am upset.

Like, mega upset. Want-to-punch-a-wall upset. I haven't felt this worked up since I got into that big fight with Mom.

Without another word I walk away from Talby, leaving her standing there steaming on the steps of the building. I head down the sidewalk toward the parking lot, my sandals slapping against the hot concrete sounding loud in the odd stillness of the warm summer afternoon. A breeze washes over my heated skin, bringing with it the tangy scent of the ocean and I lift my head up, my eyes sliding closed as I try to will away all the tumultuous anger swirling around inside of me.

"What the hell are you doing, Chels? Communing as one with nature or what?"

The sound of Owen's voice drifts on the breeze and for a quick moment I wonder if I'm imagining it. My eyes pop open and I turn around so quick, I almost make myself dizzy. Or maybe I'm dizzy because it really is my boyfriend standing in front of me, a giant smile on his face, a bouquet of summer flowers clutched in his right hand.

Without warning I launch myself at him and he drops the flowers to the ground with a grunt, his arms coming around me as I wrap my arms around his neck, my legs sliding around his hips. He grips my butt with his big hands, holding me close, his mouth at my neck as he kisses me there, whispering sweet words of greeting.

"Damn baby, you about knocked me over. You look so good." His arms tighten around me and I squeeze him hard, fighting at the tears that threaten to spring into my eyes.

I'm overwhelmed at having him here with me. It's like now that I've got a hold of him, I never want to let him go again.

That's sort of a scary thought.



"Are you sure you want to go to this party?"

I ignore the reluctance in Owen's voice and grab his hand, tugging on it. He's slagging behind, his shoulders slumped, the look on his face almost making me want to giggle. I can only imagine him doing exactly this at around eleven years old, dragging his feet and whining.

But he's not eleven, he's twenty-one. And he doesn't want to go to the barbecue at Shep's house because I told him all about my argument with Talby yesterday and he's not real thrilled about it. He's not too excited over the idea of other guys wanting to get into my panties either.

Yeah, I mentioned that line specifically and I swear I thought Owen was going to bust a blood vessel he looked so angry. This was right after we had sex though, so he was fairly relaxed and got over quick.

After I made my way down the length of his finely muscled body with my lips.

A blush steals over me and I tell myself to get over it. But I can't get over it. Owen has transformed his body in a month. He was already lean and well muscled but now...he could pose in a fitness magazine. Or in those underwear ads I saw Drew doing.

Yes. Drew Callahan was recently in an underwear advertising campaign. Go figure. I can't believe Fable let it happen but when I asked her about it, she gave me a smirk and said, "I'm the one who gets to sample the goods whenever I want so I'm not complaining."

I'd blushed furiously over that remark. I don't like thinking about Owen's sister sampling Drew's goods. Sheesh.

But anyway. Owen looks good enough to eat. He had a six pack stomach before and now it's an eight pack. His thighs are bulked up with muscle. His arms... good lord, his arms. I could write poems about the beauty that is Owen's arms. When they hold me close against his extremely hard chest, I just want to melt.

I turn to face him, yanking on his hand to pull him closer to me and he comes willingly, his mouth formed in that sexy half smile of his that I love. His hair is

still long, the ends curling against his neck and I wrap my arms around him, my fingers tugging on the strands at his nape so he tilts his head toward mine and captures my lips in a kiss.

"We don't have to stay," I murmur against his mouth, a shuddery breath leaving me when he slides his hand over my backside. I'm wearing a white cover up dress and my black bikini beneath it. We're parked down the street from Shep's house, since there are so many cars already there. A ton of people are at this party and they won't miss us. "We could go back to my room if you want. Head down to the beach later this afternoon to find a spot to watch the fireworks."

His smile grows. "Now you're talking," he says just before he kisses me again.

"Get a room!" someone yells, causing me to spring apart from Owen, a guilty look surely on my face. I see that it's Tristan Prescott who said it. He's watching the both of us with a giant grin on his face. "Caught ya," he teases me and I roll my eyes.

Owen looms at my side, his body tensing up. I turn to him, my hand on his chest, my gaze meeting his. "That's Tristan. He's cool. I promise."

My boyfriend looks decidedly jealous. Not what I want to deal with on the Fourth of July. "If you say so. Though maybe I should tell him to quit checking your ass out."

"He's not checking me..." I turn to find Tristan staring at me, his gaze in the vicinity of where my butt had just been. He jerks his head up guiltily, his smile weakening. I can practically feel the glower on Owen's face and I know he's sending Tristan a touch-her-and-I-will-kill-you stare.

Great. I'm honest with Owen from the very beginning and I tell him everything that happened with Talby and her accusations, yet he's still acting like Tristan wants to steal me away from him. Even if Tristan did want to do that, it wouldn't matter.

I'm with Owen.

"Hey." Tristan approaches, extending his hand out in front of him. "I'm Tristan. You must be Owen."

"Yeah." Owen steps away from me and takes Tristan's hand, giving it a firm shake. Like, extra firm, considering Tristan just winced. "Nice to meet you."

"Great meeting you too." He disentangles his hand from Owen's, shaking it out like the circulation got cut off. Freaking Owen, he's so over the top. "Your girlfriend here talks about you a lot."

"Oh yeah?" Owen slips his arm around my shoulders, pulling me against his side. "Glad to hear it."

"Yeah, well." Tristan shoves his hands into the pockets of his black swim trunks. "I guess I'll see you guys back at the house."

"What are you doing?" I ask him and he shrugs, glancing around like he doesn't want anyone to hear what he has to say. Weird.

"Looking for someone. A girl." He lowers his voice, his gaze turning almost pleading. "Don't tell Talby, okay? She might flip out on me."

Well, crap. He's avoiding her too. "Is she here?"

"No, I thought she was coming with you," Tristan says.

"We sort of had an argument yesterday," I tell him.

Tristan frowns. "That sucks. She's sort of been on a rampage lately."

"Go figure," Owen mutters. I poke him in the ribs to shut him up.

We say our goodbyes and I take Owen's hand once more, leading him toward the house. The party is in full swing. There are clusters of people on the front porch and a volleyball net has been set up on the front lawn, a team of guys on one side and girls on the other. Everyone is in their swimsuits so there's plenty of skin on display and I suddenly feel self conscious.

I don't really want to take my cover up off. I know I've gained weight since I've been here in Santa Augustina. I'm not eating as good and I sit most of the day at work. When I'm home with Owen he forces me outside so I'll actually get some exercise.

Oh, and then there's all the sex. That adds up to plenty of exercise and calorie burning. But with me being on my own here, I end up eating more fast food than I should.

Like, way more fast food than I should. My stomach is a little rounder than it used to be only a month ago. I'm not too thrilled with the idea of walking around in my bikini when so many other girls at the party look so incredibly amazing.

"You're tense." Owen curls his fingers around the back of my neck. "What's wrong?"

I shrug one shoulder, my gaze on the beautiful people playing volleyball on the grass. "I'm being stupid right now."

"That's impossible."

"Not really." I shake my head, irritated with himself. "Trust me."

"How then?" He looks seriously perplexed.

"In my head. Having stupid thoughts." I turn to face him. "I feel...fat. I've gained weight this summer. I spend most of my day inside sitting at a desk eating hamburgers or whatever and I swear my butt is spreading wider every day. It sucks."

He reaches around me and sneaks his hand beneath my cover up to palm my backside. "I think your ass is sexy," he murmurs as his fingers slip beneath the material of my bikini bottom.

"I think everything about you is sexy." I shove at him and it's like trying to move a boulder. The man is solid muscle. "And everything about me is slowly going soft."

"I like all those soft parts of yours." His grin is wicked and I know he's thinking dirty thoughts. Which of course, makes me want to blush and stammer and basically act the fool. But then his expression grows somber and I know what he's about to say will melt my heart in a different way. "I love every part of you, Chels. So stop giving yourself a complex and let's go have fun at this stupid party."

I step into him and rest my hands on his chest, lifting up on tiptoe so I can plant a kiss on his lips. "We don't have to stay long if you don't want to," I murmur.

"Good." He slips his hand from beneath my cover up and wraps his arm around my waist. "We'll make an appearance and maybe go hang out on the beach? I'd rather be alone with you."

"Agreed." I kiss him again, because I can't resist his delicious lips. "Let's go inside."

We ended up staying at the party all afternoon, into the evening. I was fully prepared to hate everyone, especially the two assholes that live at this house, the ones who are supposedly interested in Chelsea. She didn't believe they were interested in her since she'd told them upfront she had a boyfriend but I had my doubts.

First of all, look at her. All that talk about her ass spreading or whatever, give me a break. She's chatting with a group of girls at this very moment, standing there clutching a bottle of water in her hand, wearing that sexy black bikini that drives me out of my mind. Those little strings at her hips tempt me to do bad things. Like untie them. With my teeth.

Second, the whole forbidden-fruit-she's-taken theory still hung in my head. But that was before I started talking to Tristan and Shep—ridiculous name, but he can't help it that his parents gave it to him—and I realized pretty quickly that they are both really cool dudes. Rich as fuck, don't have a care in the world guys but that's what makes them so fun. They seriously didn't care about...anything.

At least, that's how they acted.

The house they live in is huge and swarming with people, most of them around our age. College students who stay in town for the summer, is what Chelsea told me. A surprisingly large amount of them stick around, working summer jobs, hanging at the beach. I wouldn't want to leave this place either. Santa Augustina is beautiful.

The party never slowed down from the moment we arrived. Shep and Tristan's back covered patio was full of tables laden with food and the guys took turns barbecuing hamburgers and hot dogs. There was enough booze to get everyone seriously liquored up and there was even a couple of cakes with white frosting and topped with strawberries and blueberries in an American flag design.

How domestic.

I ended up chatting with a bunch of people, played a couple of games of volleyball, ate until I was stuffed and felt up my girl in the pool when no one was looking.

All in all, it's been a perfect fucking party.

"Fireworks are starting soon!" someone called and a roar of approval followed the announcement. I watch as Chelsea says something to the girls she's talking to, gives them a little wave and then heads toward me, her smile shy as she approaches.

"Did you want to go to the beach still?" She glances around and I do the same, noticing that no one seems too inclined to leave any time soon.

I sort of feel the same way.

"Do you want to go?" I ask.

"I don't know." She steps closer and I can smell her, a mixture of chlorine and sunscreen and just beneath, the sweet, unmistakable scent of Chelsea. "Shep mentioned earlier that everyone throws their blankets or towels or chairs out on the back lawn and they watch the fireworks here. The house isn't too far from the ocean."

The neighborhood is fancy as hell. A far cry from my neighborhood at home, this area is more on Drew and Fable's level. "You want to stay then?"

"What do you think? It's already late and I'm sure the beach is crowded. We probably wouldn't be able to find a spot." She scrunches up her sunburned nose and I tap it with my index finger. Damn, she's cute. "I don't mind staying if you don't."

"If you want to stay, let's stay." I pull her into me. Yeah, I would've liked to keep her all to myself but I've had fun this afternoon. And I know she has too. Why leave if we don't want to? "I've had a good time today. I like your friends."

"I'm so glad." She smiles and leans her forehead against my jaw. "I like them too. It's nice that Talby isn't here, causing a bunch of drama. It's probably mean of me to say that."

"Not mean if it's the truth." I push her away from me so I can look into her eyes. "We'll watch the fireworks and then head back to your place so we can create our own fireworks. What do you think?"

She giggles. I think she's had a few drinks and she's feeling pretty relaxed. Her cheeks are pink from the sun and so are her shoulders. She looks beautiful. It hits me again—I can't believe how lucky I am that she's mine. That our time together here so far has been pretty much fucking perfect. "I think that sounds like a great idea," she whispers as she loops her arms around my neck, her mouth seeking mine.

I kiss her right there in the backyard as we stand near the pool, my hands resting on her waist as she plasters her body against mine. I can feel every inch of her and my body is reacting because fuck, she feels good. Too good. Her tongue slides into my mouth and I take the kiss deeper for a brief moment, coming up for air before we get out of control.

"Do you two ever quit?" Tristan yells again from the pool and I burst out laughing. Chelsea buries her face against my chest but I can hear her muffled giggles.

"Soon as the fireworks here are done, we'll head home for our own," I tell him with a grin, earning another slap on my chest from Chelsea.

Oh well. It was worth it.



Two weeks later...

"I haven't seen you since the Fourth of July Owen. I can't believe you're not coming to see me this weekend either."

I contain the aggravated sigh that wants to escape. Chelsea's pissed at me. Again. After having the best weekend with her ever two weeks ago, I haven't been able to come see her since and she's mad as hell about it. Doesn't matter if she only has another two weeks there before she comes home. She's lonely. I miss her too but fuck, my life is consumed with football right now and I can't lose focus.

Plus, ever since her friendship ended with Talby—and I say good riddance, that chick was bad news—she's been even lonelier. And I feel bad for her, I really do, but my training has picked up big time. The team is back and Coach Halsey has us out on that field in the early morning, before the temperature gets too hot, making us run plays over and over again like the task master that he is.

And if we're not training in the early morning, we're training at night, right as the sun's going down. It's still hot but at least the sun isn't beating down on our heads. We just keep going and going Monday through Friday and I'm worn the fuck out. I've never worked out so much in my damn life.

In other words, I'm fucking exhausted. I take the weekends to catch up on sleep because I never stop during the week. More than once I'd contemplated giving up but I know what I'm doing now has the potential to further my career. More like has the potential to gain me a career in the NFL.

And I want that. Bad.

When I'm feeling low or ready to quit, I talk to Wade. Or Drew. Or even Fable. But lately, it's like I can't talk to Chelsea. She's too defensive. Last week she even accused me of being selfish.

Something's not right with her. Again. I can't quite put my finger on it and she's not really talking.

"Listen, I know you don't want to hear it, but I'm exhausted, babe. I'd be worthless if I came to see you. All I'd want to do is sleep the entire weekend. Plus I couldn't leave until Friday night and then I'd have to head back home

Sunday afternoon so I won't get home too late, since I practice so early on Monday." I try and stifle my yawn but I can't. And it's a jaw popping loud one too.

I can practically feel the irritation rolling off Chelsea, even though we're hundreds of miles apart from each other.

"You promised when I first came here that we could always count down five days until we see each other again. That theory went right out the window within the first week," she says irritably.

"And that couldn't be helped," I remind her. "I'm doing this for my future here, Chels. For our future. For us."

"For us? Or for you?"

I'm quiet for a moment, her words feeling particularly sharp. Like little daggers, stabbing me in the heart. She knows I don't make any decisions without thinking about how it affects her. I'm fucking hurt that she'd say such a thing. "This is temporary, Chels. You'll be home in two weeks. Everything will go back to normal then."

"What if I don't come back in two weeks? What if I want to...stay here?"

I swallow hard, trying to contain my emotions. "What the hell are you talking about?" I croak.

"Professor Michaels said he wants me to stay. He says he can still get me into the graduate program for the fall semester if I'm interested." She pauses for a moment. "I'm still interested."

"So you want to stay there."

"I-I don't know." Another pause. "Maybe. You'll be too busy for me anyway."

"I'm never too busy for you," I say as I stretch out across our bed. Damn, the pillow feels extra soft. I could pass out right now, even with the distressing news Chelsea's throwing at me.

"Then come see me this weekend," she tosses out.

I close my eyes and breathe deep. "You know I can't. It's just...too hard right now."

"Meaning that you're too busy for me." She sounds almost triumphant that she just proved me wrong. "I think I need to do this, Owen. I need to do the graduate program after all."

"You're serious." Fuck me, what is she saying? She doesn't want to come home?

"You're going to be so wrapped up in football, when are you ever going to have time for me?"

"Why are you acting like this, Chels? You knew when we got together that I played football."

"I just didn't think you'd want to do it as a career," she says, her voice small.

"You're the one who kept encouraging me for the last year that I should consider playing professionally. You agreed with Drew and Fable every time they brought it up. You told me I shouldn't give up on my dream," I point out.

"And you told me I shouldn't give up on my dream either. Maybe, just maybe, this is my dream after all, you know? I decided to put off going into graduate school for a year but I'm starting to think that was a mistake. I really like it here."

"More than you like it here." With me.

"I never said that. It's just...it's different. We're changing Owen." She's whispering now. She sounds scared and I hate it. I wish she were here with me, lying on the bed by my side, her arm slung across my stomach, her head nestled against my shoulder. "Maybe we're changing too much."

"Baby, we were together only two weeks ago and we had a great time. I've never felt closer to you." It's true. The connection we shared that weekend had been perfect. No arguing, no tension. Lots of laughter, lots of kissing, lots of fucking great sex—it had been so good I was reluctant to leave. She'd practically had to shove me out the door and I thought about her the entire drive back home. Reliving all the best moments in my mind.

Now look at us. We're arguing. She's threatening to stay there. She just said maybe we're changing too much.

What the fuck just happened?

"I need some time to think. Can you give me that?" she asks. She sounds stressed out. I wonder again if there's something else bugging her.

"I'll give you all the time you need. Just...don't forget I love you, baby. I don't want you to stay there, but if that's what you really want, then I'm not going to stop you." I don't know if I'm speaking the truth. I think I would try and stop her if she made that choice. I'd drive my ass to Santa Augustina and beg her to come back with me.

"You wouldn't stop me?"

"I refuse to make you give up what you want for me," I tell her vehemently. "I'd hate myself if I stopped you from pursuing something you wanted."

"I wouldn't ask you to give up anything either, Owen. I know what's important to you." She sighs. "I'm just...afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"Afraid you'll never be around. My father was always gone. Always. But he was up to no good. I didn't realize that when I was a kid. I was too naïve and in my head and heaven forbid Mom tell me the truth. She hid everything from me." Another sigh, this one longer. "I talked to her today."

"Your mom." I sit up so I'm leaning my back against the wall. All thoughts of falling asleep are long gone now. "She called you?"

"She's been texting me for the last couple of weeks and yeah, she finally called me today. She uh, she wants to see me. They both do."

She hasn't seen her dad since he's been in prison. He got out before she graduated college and she still hasn't seen him. "Your dad too?"

"Yeah." She says nothing else and I know she's miserable. Every time they reach out to her she kind of withdraws into herself. Chelsea doesn't give me too many

details but I know her relationship with her parents is crap. So I don't push. If anyone has experience with a shitty parent, it's me. My mom could win an award for the world's worst mother.

I'm thinking Chelsea's mom could be right up there in the top ten. Same with her dad.

"What are you going to do?" I ask when she remains silent.

"I don't know. Look, I'm sorry for being so awful. I'm just—they're putting me under a lot of pressure. And so is Professor Michaels. He's sweet talking me all the time, trying to get me to stay there. And Mom is trying to convince me to do the same since you know, she thinks I'm so brilliant and why would I want to waste my time staying in that small stupid little college town when I've already graduated? That's a direct quote," Chelsea says.

My blood boils with anger. Her mom isn't referring to the town. I think she's referring to me. I'm sure she thinks her precious, smart daughter is wasting her time with a no good asshole like me.

"They upset you. I understand. You know I understand," I tell her and she starts to laugh. The sound is like music to my ears, to my soul.

"You're so right. I don't know why I always forget we have bad parents in common."

"Maybe because we don't like talking about them."

"So true." She exhales softly and I close my eyes, savoring the sound. I like all of her sounds. Even when she's angry, because I can hear the passion in her voice and I appreciate that she never holds anything back. My shy, sweet Chelsea is a firecracker when she's mad. "All the pressure is getting to me and I took it out on you."

"That's what I'm here for baby." Relief sweeps through me so hard I swear I feel weak. "Take it all out on me."

"But that's not fair to you Owen, and you know it. Just—give me a little bit of time. A few days to sort this all out."

"So you're really considering staying there?" The relief leaves as fast as it came in and my stomach is twisting up in double knots.

"I don't know what I want to do but I'm going to think about it. I have to. I need to do what's best for me."

Her words leave me cold.

That's the first time she didn't refer to us in the same breath.

I'm sitting in a busy diner on a Saturday morning, my hands curled together and resting on the table, on top of the cracked plastic menu. The smell of breakfast is heavy in the air—burnt coffee, sizzling bacon and the almost sickeningly sweet scent of maple syrup.

My stomach lurches and I inhale deep, trying to calm my nerves. A waitress approaches, her coffeepot poised in the air and I shake my head. "A glass of water please?" I ask weakly.

She offers me a sympathetic smile. "Sure thing, hon. I'll be right back."

I glance around, trying my best not to look at my phone and check the time. They're already ten minutes late. I know how they operate. Mostly families fill the restaurant this early on a Saturday morning, the majority of them young with little kids who behave like they can't be contained. They're crawling over the booths, hanging onto their moms or dads, yelling and screaming and carrying on.

I have no memories of ever coming to a restaurant like this for breakfast with my parents. And I definitely don't remember trying to escape a booth or crawl all over my mom's shoulders. She probably would've had a coronary if I even attempted such a thing.

We were a calm, orderly family. I sat quietly and did as I was told. I had good manners and I never spoke unless I was spoken to.

Meaning, I didn't get a chance to talk very much.

"Chelsea."

I turn to see Mom and Dad standing there, their faces expressing similar grimaces of annoyance as they hover next to the table. I chose the loudest tourist trap diner in town for this breakfast meeting. If we're going to see each other again, we're doing it on my terms.

Not theirs.

"Sit down." I wave a hand at the empty seat across from me and with the grimaces still firmly in place they scoot in together, the perfect married couple

joining me and making us the perfect little family.

What a bunch of lies.

"There has to be a much nicer restaurant to have breakfast at, hmm?" Mom asks as she settles her Gucci bag on the seat beside her. It looks brand new, soft black leather with the iconic G's in a subtle pattern all over it. Where'd they get the money to buy that?

Oh, let me guess—Dad stole it. Probably came from that secret bank account he has.

"I like it here," I tell them, though I've never been to this restaurant before. Like they'd know that. Funny, how petrified I used to be of lying to them. I swore I would always be honest. I was too scared I'd be punished if either of them caught me in a lie.

The thing is, once I discovered they were the liars? All bets were off.

"It's nice. I'm sure they have great food. The dumps always do, right?" Dad laughs, like he's so hilarious but I just glare at him. He acts as if the last few years have never happened, like he just saw me yesterday.

It's been years since we last laid eyes on each other. I'm a different person. I'm not his little girl anymore. More like I'm the distrusting daughter who'd rather be anywhere but here.

"It's not a dump," I tell him through clenched teeth. "Since when do you have a right to be so judgmental?"

"Chelsea!" Mom's eyes are practically bugging out of her head. "How dare you talk to your father like that?"

I'm about to reply when the waitress reappears, setting the tall glass of ice water in front of me. "Care for some coffee?" she asks and both Mom and Dad nod in answer. The waitress turns the cups over and starts pouring while I sip from my water, grateful it's so cold. I feel like it's waking me up, keeping me alert. I can't slip into old habits. I need to be aware and ready to defend. More like ready to walk out if they push me too hard.

They both really like pushing me too hard, especially Mom.

"So you're considering doing the graduate program after all," Mom says the moment the waitress takes off. I should've known she'd get right to the point.

"I'm considering it," I say, repeating the word. "Leaning more towards saying no. At least right now."

Her lips thin. "Don't give up on your goals all for a boy."

"Like you did?" I take another sip from my water, enjoying the way she's squirming in her seat. She can't deny what I said because it's true. So for her to pick on me because of Owen is hypocritical. Not that it'll stop her.

"Your mother wants you to learn from her mistakes," Dad says, smooth as can be. "She may have made sacrifices in her life to be with me and some of those things she regrets. I regret them too. Our lives could be different if we'd made different choices."

"Do you have regrets for everything you've done, Dad?" I ask him, my gaze fully meeting his for the first time.

He looks away, almost like he can't face me. "Of course," he mumbles.

I don't know if I believe him.

We make small talk until the waitress returns to take our order. Mom gets an egg white omelet, Dad orders the traditional bacon and eggs with hash browns and toast and I get French toast with four pieces of bacon because screw it. Owen doesn't seem to mind my spreading butt so I'm going to eat the sweetest, most calorie laden meal on the menu.

Besides, it'll drive Mom nuts.

We make more small talk about the weather, the town I'm living in, the vacations they're taking. I marvel at the way they so casually admit they're spending scads of money while I'm busting my butt to earn as much as possible so I can stash it into my savings account. But I turned down their earlier offer of dirty money so I guess I deserve it.

Not once does Mom ask about Owen and she knows I live with him. Not once does she ask me if I have any other plans or hopes or dreams. She just automatically assumes I'm staying on here in Santa Augustina and that I'm gearing up to start the graduate program in the fall.

I'm tempted to tell her I'm not doing it just to piss her off. She'd be furious if I tossed everything aside, everything I worked so hard for, all for a boy that I'm in love with. But what she doesn't realize is that all those years of working so hard toward this seemingly unattainable, vague goal wasn't about me, or what I wanted.

It was about them, and what they wanted from me.

The realization hits me crystal clear as I'm munching on bacon, of all things. I'm having a profound moment while sitting in this crowded diner on a busy Saturday morning, annoyed at the way Dad keeps slurping his coffee and Mom flicks the food around on her plate with her fork, refusing to eat it. I'm devouring the French toast and bacon, breathing freer as the invisible weight lifts off my shoulders and I know I've come to my own conclusion.

And I've never felt better.

We're walking out of the restaurant after Dad so kindly paid for our meals, when Mom draws me into a hug right there in the parking lot. I'm surprised since she's not a big believer of public displays of affection. "I've missed you so much," she murmurs against my cheek. "I'm so proud of you for making the right decision."

Dad doesn't even bother trying to hug me. I'm sure he can feel my hostile vibes a mile away. Instead, he pats me on the back, tells me I look good and offers a blasé, "Love ya, kiddo," before they start heading toward their car.

I watch them go, marveling at how they didn't even ask me if I needed a ride. Which I sort of did, and would've taken them up on if they'd offered. But they didn't, so I watch their BMW back out of the parking spot, the both of them waving frantically as they pulled out of the lot and drove away.

I keep my gaze trained on their car until I can no longer see it and then I heave a giant sigh, one that I've been holding in since I first saw them standing there next to the table inside the diner, looking decidedly uncomfortable. That sweet reunion had lasted approximately one hour. They drove all this way to spend an

hour with me, their only child. Not once asking what I really wanted, what I was really all about, never mentioning my boyfriend, none of the normal stuff thoughtful parents would've asked.

But my selfish parents are far from thoughtful.

More like they're thoughtless.

I make my way to the bus stop and settle in on the bench, figuring I'll be waiting a while. The sun is intense but being on the coast, the temperatures don't get as hot as they do at home. Owen's griped about the extreme temperatures more than once and I know he's been suffering, especially with all the practices he's having to endure.

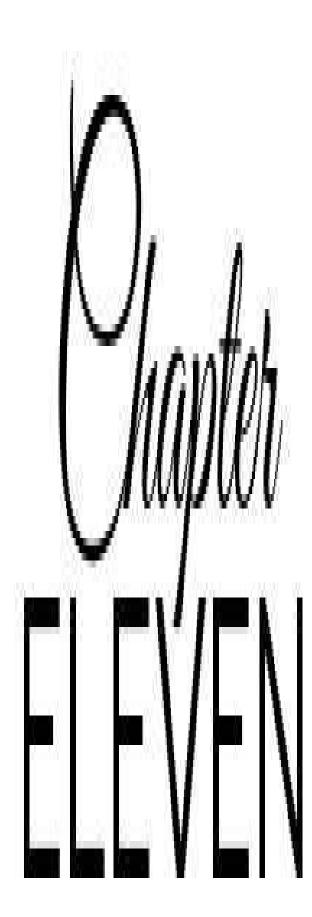
My heart pangs just thinking about him and I'm tempted to call him but I don't. I need to take a little more time to reflect first. Though I know what my decision is, I'm not ready to tell him yet. There are a few things I need to do. Like get my things in order. Let Professor Michaels know what I plan on doing next.

Sometimes you have to make sacrifices in order to get what you want. You need to give up one thing to gain another. And that's what I plan on doing. I'm willing to give up on my parents' dreams and goals for me for what I want. I've been working hard toward my parents' goals, not my own. I've always done what someone else has told me to do.

But for once, I matter. What I decide is what's best for me.

And right now, what I want more than anything else in this entire world is...

Owen.



I spot her before she sees me so I lean against the hood of my car and watch her. It's something I don't get to do often, study my girl while unobserved. She's fascinating really. She moves with this innate grace and her hips sway almost magically. I know I can't keep my eyes off of her when she walks and I don't doubt for a moment other guys get caught up in her aura as well.

Though I know I'm the first one who really saw her. Who dug a little deeper to find out who the real Chelsea is. She hid from others. Kept to herself, remained in the background, always quiet, always looking, always learning. Until she met me. I pushed her out into the crowd, forced her to speak up for herself and ask for what she wanted.

I'm proud of that. Proud of who she's become because of me. And I say this since I've become a better person because of her. I owe her a lot.

Really, I owe her almost everything.

She stops when someone calls her name and they start talking. I don't know who the other girl is, but they're both laughing and chatting animatedly with their hands, something Chelsea tends to do when she's excited. They hug each other and then Chelsea is heading my way, still oblivious to my presence.

She's wearing cutoff jean shorts that don't seem to cover much and a bright pink tank top that clings to her chest and makes her look stacked, with black flip flops on her feet. Not what I would call proper moving material but it'll work in a pinch. Besides, I'm the one who's doing the heavy lifting, not her.

I'm so fucking thankful we worked it out, Chelsea and I. She called me exactly two weeks ago, on a Saturday afternoon, her voice high pitched and sounding a little breathless, talking so fast I had trouble understanding her at first.

But then I started picking out the words. She met with her Mom and Dad and had a revelation in the middle of a crappy restaurant while eating bacon. That she was living her parents' dream for her, not her own dream. So she was done. No graduate program for her—at least, not right now. She wanted out.

She wanted to come back to me.

The relief I felt at hearing her say those words was enormous. I'd sweated over what her plans might be for days. She left me hanging and with too much time on my hands, I about drove myself out of my mind. When Chelsea finally made that call and ended it by asking me to help her move, I nearly collapsed on the floor with gratefulness.

There is nothing worse than thinking your girl is leaving you. That's what kept running through my head those last few days before I finally received her call. I firmly believed she would break up with me. And no matter how much I tried to psyche myself up for it, I knew if she said those words, if she admitted she didn't want to be with me anymore, I wouldn't have been able to accept it.

But luckily enough that didn't happen.

"Hey."

Her soft voice breaks through my thoughts and I blink, bringing her into focus. She's standing in front of me, her hair pulled up into a sloppy knot on top of her head, her eyes sparkling, the smile on her face making me automatically smile at her in return. "Hey," I tell her, keeping my hands in my pockets, though they literally itch to grab her.

"You spying on me, Maguire?" She rests her hands on her hips and tilts her head, looking sassy. "I thought you were going to put those giant muscles of yours to good use and help me move out of this hell hole once and for all."

Giving in to my urges, I reach out and grab hold of her waist, pulling her in close. She comes to me with ease, stepping in between my spread legs, her hands going to my chest as I rest mine on her ass. "Did you really just say hell hole, Chels? Is something wrong with you? I'm not used to hearing you say such naughty words."

"Stop." She slaps my chest, her fingers curling into the fabric of my T-shirt before she gives it a little tug. "Put those lips of yours to good use and kiss me instead," she murmurs, her gaze dropping to my mouth.

I do as she asks, sinking into her parted lips, swallowing the sweet sigh that escapes her. I cup the back of her head, thread my fingers into her hair, messing up that already messy top knot and I put my whole self into the kiss with plenty of tongue until we finally break apart, the both of us breathless.

"Did that meet your approval?" I ask her, my voice low, my thoughts dirty. Maybe we could put her dorm bed to proper use one last time before she leaves. A sort of goodbye, bon voyage, sayonara to Santa Augustina State.

"Most definitely. Now let's grab those boxes and get out of here," she says as she reaches up and touches my face, her fingers gentle on my cheek. "I want to go home," she admits in a whisper.

Perfect. There's no place I'd rather be.

It's late. I should be exhausted. But it feels too good to be back in the bed I share with Owen, his arms around me, my head resting on his bare chest. We're naked, our skin damp with cooling sweat, our hearts racing in matched time. I roll my cheek against his skin, press my lips to the center of his chest, his heartbeat thumping hard beneath my mouth.

He curls his fingers around the back of my neck, a sigh of pure male satisfaction escaping him. "Don't tell me you want to go another round."

I start to giggle. And I'm not a giggler. "Maybe," I tell him, lifting up so I can look at him. He's watching me, the moonlight filtering in from the cracked open blinds gilding his features in silver. His eyes are bright, his hair a complete mess about his head and there's stubble lining his jaw and cheeks.

He's never looked sexier. He's so freaking big. When did he get so big? How many more muscles can this man add to his already muscular body? He felt so good earlier, pressing against me, pressing me straight into the mattress as he slid inside my body. The first gasp that falls from my lips when he touches me in that one particular spot never fails to make him flash me that knowing, arrogant smile. He has such complete mastery of my body and he knows it.

Owen knows just what to do to make me wild.

He'd murmured something filthy in my ear all while he thrust inside me. How wet I was. How good I felt. How hard his cock was, just for me. Only for me. He kept up those words the entire time he made love to me, his hands everywhere, his calloused fingertips making my skin tingle. Until I was coming and he was coming and that happened only a few minutes ago—our third orgasm of the night.

Wade was smart enough to make himself scarce tonight and I appreciate that. So does Owen. We wanted no interruptions. Just the two of us back together in our house, in our bed.

Where I belong.

"I'm exhausted, woman," Owen says, breathing deep and making his chest rise. I drop another kiss, on his pec this time, and his fingers tighten around my neck,

hauling me up so that my mouth is on his. "Let's sleep first," he murmurs against my lips. "We have all the time in the world to do this, now that you're back."

He's right. I like hearing him say that. Now that you're back.

And I am most definitely back. He couldn't get rid of me if he tried.

"Okay," I whisper just as he kisses me. It's like he can't stop kissing me. Touching me. He asked me on the drive back home, if I felt like I was giving up everything just to be with him.

I told him no. I'm not giving up anything because I'm doing what I want. And right now, more than anything, I want to be here. With him. Standing by his side. Supporting him. I can make my own path while we're here. He has one more year of school and then we'll see where all of this takes him next. That's not giving up on my dreams.

That's recreating my dreams so they include him—they're our dreams, not just his or mine.

"I love you, Chels," he murmurs as he tucks me into his side, my head on his shoulder, his mouth at my forehead. "I never say it enough."

"You don't have to—" I start but he cuts me off.

"I do. I need to say it more. Just know..." His voice drifts and I wait, my heart in my throat, my entire body rigid with anticipation. "Just know it means a lot to me, that you're here. I'm so fucking thankful to have you in my life. No matter what happens, as long as I have you by my side, I know everything's going to be all right."

I lift my head, blinking back the tears. "I love you." My throat is raw with emotion and I can barely get the words out.

"I love you, too." He touches my face, his fingers sliding across my cheek, touching my lips. "Don't cry baby. This is a good thing."

I start to laugh, the tears falling down my cheeks freely. "I'm crying because I'm happy."

"Oh. Well, then cry all you want." He streaks his thumb across my skin, catching a few tears, the faintest smile curling his beautiful, perfect lips. "I'll be here to dry your tears."

I know without a doubt that he will.

Check out the following bonus feature – Christmas with Drew, Fable, Owen and Chelsea! (This short story first appeared on monicamurphyauthor.com December 2014)

"Your brother is making me crazy."

Fable turns to look at me, a frown on her pretty—and weary looking—face. "Oh, give him a break. He's nervous about his gift for Chelsea."

Yeah, I know all about it. He's talked about that ring endlessly any time we're alone together since they arrived this morning and I should be more understanding, right? I was the same exact way when I gave Fable her ring years ago. Owen gave me endless grief for being a "nervous asshole," is what I think he called me, and now here I am, dying to do the same thing to him.

But I hold my tongue. It's bad enough, watching him pace around the living room like an edgy cat ready to attack. I finally had to make my escape in search of Fable and found her in the baby's room, checking in on our son as he lay sleeping in his crib.

She's tired and running on little rest, but she's still just as beautiful as the day I met her, maybe even more so. But Autumn and Jacob keep her busy. My girl needs some down time.

I have just the solution.

"Why are you staring at him?" I ask as I approach her from behind, slipping my arms around her waist and resting my chin on her shoulder.

I can feel her smile as she keeps her gaze locked on our sleeping son. I watch him too. He may be a little angel now, but he'll wake up in a few hours in the middle of the night, howling for his mama to feed him. "Because he's beautiful. And I can't believe he's ours. He looks just like you, Drew."

There's no denying he's my boy, I will agree with that. The hair color is the same as are the eyes. His features are all mine...he'll most likely grow up looking exactly like me.

"Funny looking then?" I joke, earning a jab from Fable's sharp elbow right in my gut. "Ow."

"Shh. You'll wake him," she whispers as she reaches out and brushes her fingers

over his fine, dark brown hair. He's chubby, well fed and content, with a loud cry and a louder laugh. Autumn both adores and wants to maim her baby brother, all at once. The girl is a whirlwind of movement, always on the go, never stopping for longer than a minute, always wanting in on the action.

I can imagine Fable acting just like that as a child, before everything went to shit and she became responsible for her little brother. And eventually, her good for nothing mother.

But it's not right to speak—or think—ill of the dead, so I'll stop.

"Come on." I take Fable's hand and lead her out of the baby's room, straight into our bedroom, where I close and lock the door behind her just before I push her against the solid wood. "Where's Autumn?" I ask before I make my move. I need confirmation that there will be no interruptions.

"She went to bed a half hour ago," Fable says, her gaze narrowing. "Why?"

"Just making sure." I rest my hands on her shoulders and lean in for a kiss just as she tips her head up, our mouths meeting in perfect alignment.

The kiss deepens quickly and everything within me tightens. I want her. Always. I got home yesterday after a brutal game that sent us right out of the playoffs, and Christmas is in two days. I'm feeling like shit over the loss and need some comfort...comfort only Fable can offer me. Owen and Chelsea are here and I love having them with us for the holidays, but I need some private time with my wife.

"Are you trying to get in my pants, Drew Callahan?" she asks breathlessly when I break the kiss moments later to run my lips down the length of her neck.

"What gives you that idea?" I mutter against the spot where her pulse thumps mightily at the base of her throat. I lick and nibble her skin, feel the shiver move through her body and I know I'm going to get what I want. What I need.

Fable.

She rests her hands on my hips and pulls me closer. "Oh, I don't know. Maybe the fact that we've kissed for two seconds and you're already hard as a rock?" She runs her hand down the front of my jeans and I moan against her neck.

"I've missed you, baby," I whisper just before I lift my head and kiss her again, thrusting my tongue deep as I press her against the door. Her hands go for the button on my jeans, fingers fumbling as she undoes it and slides the zipper down. "It's been a shitty week," I mutter when I break away from her delicious lips again.

"I'm sorry," she murmurs as she delves a hand inside my boxer briefs and grasps me firmly. "I know how to make it better."

"That's what I'm counting on." I slide her yoga pants down past her hips, taking her panties with them, getting her naked below the waist in seconds. She kicks the pants away from her feet impatiently as she shoves at my jeans and underwear. I lift her, and her legs wrap around my waist.

"Is the door locked?" she asks the moment I slide inside her, her gaze locked on mine, her breath hitching when I go deep.

"Yeah." I kiss her, feel my jeans fall past my ass, my underwear tight around my thighs as I begin to move inside my wife. I'm fucking her against a wall like the impatient ass I am, but I don't care. I don't think she really cares either.

That it's still so good between us...so perfect, blows my mind. Since the minute I let her into my fucked up world and she accepted me anyway, I knew we were made for each other.

It's stolen moments like this one that only confirms it.

I gave up pacing the living room floor a while ago, after Fable and Drew disappeared. I don't even want to know what they're doing right now. I can figure it out and...no. I feel like a jerky little kid thinking this, but those two are so obsessed with each other, it's kind of disgusting.

And okay fine, it's nice that they still act this way. I'm glad Fable found someone who loves her so much, who treats her so well, who accepted me so readily. I'm a lucky bastard.

An even luckier bastard who has a pretty girl of his own and is about to either make it an epic Christmas by giving her a diamond ring or make it a shitty Christmas if she refuses it.

Hell, she better not refuse it.

Chelsea's curled up in an overstuffed chair that sits by the Christmas tree, her head bent over a book, her long dark hair obscuring her face. My fingers itch to tuck it behind her ear and stroke her cheek. Whisper for her to follow me back to my old bedroom so I can get her naked, but I don't do any of that.

Instead I sit on the couch and stare at her, glancing away when she looks up so she won't catch me, pretending to watch whatever's on TV. Which is some crap holiday movie about a fake girlfriend for Christmas. Something Fable was watching earlier, which blows my mind because she's not usually the sappy Hallmark Channel type.

"Uncle Owen?"

I glance toward the doorway of the living room to see Autumn standing there in bright pink footie pajamas decorated with candy canes. Her dark hair is a mess and she's clutching a ratty looking pale yellow blanket.

"Hey, baby." I hold out my arms and wiggle my fingers at her. "C'mere."

She comes running and climbs into my lap, leaning her head against my chest as she snuggles in. "I woke up," she says around the thumb she just stuck in her mouth.

"I see that." I run my hand over her hair, trying to smooth it down, but it's a tangled mess. I'll leave that up to Fable to take care of in the morning.

"Mommy and Daddy's door is locked." She pulls her thumb out of her mouth and stares up at me. "That never happens."

Ha, I bet. Drew knows he can get away with it because I'm here. "I'll take care of you."

"And Chelsea, too. Don't forget Chelsea."

My girl lifts her head at hearing her name, smiling at Autumn when she spots her curled up in my lap. "What are you doing up, princess?"

Autumn shrugs and settles her head back against my chest. She's solid and warm and feels good in my arms. Not that I'm ready for babies—hell no—but it's nice to have one to spoil and play with, and then hand back to their mom or dad when you're done.

That little Jacob is cute as hell but a total mama's boy. I don't know how Fable does it, but she's the best mom ever. Unlike our own.

Chelsea closes her book and rises from the chair, leaving the book on the ottoman as she makes her way over to the couch. "Got room for one more?" she asks me.

I stretch my arm across the back of the couch and invite her without a word to settle down beside me, which she does. She leans her head against my shoulder and reaches out to tickle Autumn beneath her chin, making her giggle. I drop a kiss on top of Chelsea's head, breathing deep the floral scent of her shampoo as I close my eyes.

My stomach is jumping, I'm so damn nervous to give her the ring on Christmas morning. I don't know if I can wait that long. I don't know if I want to do it in front of witnesses. Maybe I should do it tonight. Or tomorrow night, on Christmas Eve, after everyone goes to bed and we're all alone. I'm scared she'll tell me no and then what the hell will I do?

We've had some rough patches, specifically last summer. But we're all good now, though my focus has been almost exclusively on football. I never want to put her second but she knows this is my future. She's a part of that. I'm trying to not only take care of me, but also take care of us.

"You should go back to bed," Chelsea says to Autumn after a few minutes of silence. I can feel my niece's body grow heavier and heavier and her eyes are slowly closing. She's almost asleep.

"Will you tuck me in, Aunt Chelsea?" she asks in that little lisp that makes Fable nuts. Typical mom stuff, that she's worried her kid sucks her thumb and lisps.

I happen to think it's adorable.

"Yeah, let's go sweetie." Chelsea gets up and holds out her hand. Autumn climbs out of my lap and takes Chelsea's hand and they head for Autumn's room.

Chelsea glances over her shoulder, her gaze locking with mine. "We need to talk, I think."

Dread socks me right in the gut. "Uh, okay."

"Let me put her to bed first."

I watch her go, scared out of my mind. I can't fuck this up. She's...everything to me. But does she know it? I have a hard time expressing my feelings, I always have. Chels tells me she loves me all the time and I don't say it near enough. I need to tell her.

I need to show her. In a big way.

"I really should go unlock the door." I run my hand along Drew's stomach, over every ridge and muscle. The man has posed for sports magazines shirtless for the love of God. And he's all mine.

I feel like those greedy seagulls from that one Disney movie, the ones that say mine, mine, mine over and over again.

"Don't worry about it," he whispers against my forehead. His arm is wrapped around my shoulders and he squeezes me close.

"You know how Autumn usually gets up after a few hours and comes to me," I remind him. I never heard the door handle turn or a knock but considering my husband just had his face between my legs only a few minutes ago, I probably couldn't hear anything what with all the gasping and moaning going on.

He pretty much attacked me the moment he got me alone and I let him. I can tell he needed it. Needed me. And I needed him too. Life gets in the way sometimes and though we never really drift apart, we get busy. He's on the road a lot, traveling with his team, and this season was rough. Taking care of Jake and Autumn fill all my hours and I can hardly keep up with the days, but I wouldn't trade any of this for the world.

So...no complaints. No regrets.

"Owen and Chelsea are still up." He reaches out toward the beside table and grabs his cell, checking the time. "It's only a little past ten. If she gets up, they'll take care of her."

I know he's right but as usual, I have mother's guilt.

"Fable." He gives me a little shake and I glance up at him. "Don't worry about her. If she does wake up, she'll go to them and she'll be all right. You deserve some down time, baby."

I smile at him, parting my lips when he tilts his head down and presses a soft, lingering kiss to my lips. "Fine, you're right."

"I know." His voice is full of smug satisfaction. "I'll go unlock the door in a

minute."

I drape my leg across both of his, trapping him but not really. He's so strong he could break away easily. "Not yet. Let me enjoy you first."

"What do you have planned?" he asks, his arm tightening around my shoulders and pulling me closer.

"Why don't I just show you?" I move so I'm on top of him, my legs straddling his hips, my hands resting on his shoulders. I gaze down at him, admiring his gorgeous face, those piercing blue eyes full of so much love. Watching me. The same eyes that our son has, beautiful and blue and so perfect...

My heart aches, it's so full of love for my husband, my children, my brother and his girlfriend. Not only is my heart full, but so is my life.

"You okay?" Drew reaches up to cup my cheek, his big, warm hand a comfort, a balm for my chaotic soul. My emotions are all over the place lately and it hasn't helped that Drew's been gone the last few days.

"I'm just glad you're back," I admit, my voice raspy, my eyes stinging with tears. I still hate crying. Makes me feel weak.

"I am too." He frowns as his calloused fingers stroke my face. "I'm an asshole, though. I didn't get you a Christmas gift."

I shake my head, a watery laugh escaping me. "Don't bother. You're my Christmas gift."

He makes a face. "Please. Your brother is going to give Chelsea a diamond and I'm giving you nothing? I don't think so. I'll go shopping tomorrow."

"I'm telling you, it's not ne—"

Drew rests his fingers over my lips, silencing me. "Shut it, woman. I'm getting you a gift."

"Fine," I whisper once he removes his fingers from my mouth. "But let me give you a special gift first, okay?"

He doesn't protest, doesn't utter a word. Just offers me a nod as I move down his body and proceed to rock his world.

I never did talk to Owen last night. I ended up having to lie down in Autumn's tiny bed with her until she fell back asleep. Problem was, I ended up falling asleep too, waking up past midnight with a crick in my neck and lower back pain since I was crammed into that toddler bed alongside a little girl who sleeps like she's making angels in the snow.

As in, legs and arms wide, nearly pushing me off the bed.

I found Owen crashed out on the couch with a cheesy Hallmark channel movie playing in the background. I turned it off and the Christmas tree lights, then woke Owen and walked him back to the bed we're sharing in his old room. He didn't say a word, just tore off his shirt, yanked off his jeans and climbed beneath the thick comforter.

I followed after him, wondering at his strange mood all night. He's been antsy for days, really. Like something's bothering him, but every time I ask, he brushes me off or says he's fine, just tired and stressed from the finals he took last week. Plus, there's all the preparation for the draft. I know he's been extra busy but...

His excuses are lame. I pretend to accept them when deep down inside, I know something's bothering him. Something big.

So it bothers me too.

The moment I took off my sweat pants and bra and climbed into bed, Owen made a grab for me, pushed me against the mattress and kissed me so hard, he left me breathless. He never said anything—and Owen is a talker during sex, he always has been—just stripped me naked, kissed me everywhere, tore off his underwear and then slid deep inside me from behind, his arm banded across my stomach, his hand gripped my breast, fingers pinched my nipple as he took me hard and fast.

It surprised me. And...it was awesome.

Weirder still is how he never mentions it this morning. Not like we can talk about it over the breakfast table with his sister and brother-in-law sitting with us, his niece humming Christmas songs off key and Jake making a mess of himself while Fable attempts to feed him disgusting looking baby food.

Domestic bliss at its finest.

I want forever with Owen, I don't ever doubt that. But oh my gosh, babies? Not yet. I'm too young. I want to explore things and check out the world, not be tied down with a baby. I'll get my baby fix with Jake and Autumn, thank you very much.

"What are you guys up to today?" Fable asks, looking at me since she knows I'm the planner and Owen's more of the doer.

"I don't know." I shrug, looking at Owen, who I already find is watching me. So weird. "What do you want to do?"

"Whatever you want, Chels," he says, his voice easygoing but I see the anxiety in his gaze. The poor guy is amped up. And I don't understand why.

"He's going shopping with me," Drew says, his deep, authoritative voice allowing no arguments. "There are a few things I need to pick up."

"Ah, yeah. Right." Owen flashes me a smile, one that makes everything within me light up. He's so good looking. I don't ever get tired of staring at him.

Truth be told, I don't get tired of looking at Drew either. Between the two of them, it's testosterone overload. There is something about them when they're together...they have such presence. I feel a little dazzled when I end up spending too much time in their company.

"I'm going to try and make cookies." Fable grimaces. "I've never been much of a baker, but I want to create Christmas traditions with the kids and thought this year would be perfect to start."

Autumn bangs her hands against the edge of the table, making everything rattle. "I'll help."

"I'm sure you will," Fable says dryly, sending me a tired smile.

"I will too," I say. "My mom and I used to make cookies together every Christmas. Frosted sugar cookies."

"That's what I wanted to do today," Fable says, her voice lowering. "But I'm

going to cheat and make the dough straight out of those bags. Just add an egg and a stick of butter and boom, you're done."

I laugh. "Perfect. I remember my mom's frosting recipe she got from my grandma so I'll be in charge of that."

"I'll frost the cookies!" Autumn crows, making Drew and Owen wince.

"Sounds perfect," I say, my gaze meeting Owen's once more. I send him a reassuring smile, one that says, whatever's bothering you, it's all going to be okay.

I hope he understands it. I hope he realizes that's true. I'm not going anywhere. His family is my family now too. Owen's all mine.

And I'm all his.

"I couldn't wait." I hold out my hand towards Fable, the small box wrapped in shiny gold paper and topped with a vivid red bow sitting on my palm. "Merry Christmas."

She stares at the gift for a long, quiet moment, her expression incredulous. "That's not jewelry, is it?"

"Open it and find out." Now I feel as anxious as Owen. I tried to talk him down off the ledge while we went out shopping earlier, reassuring him that Chelsea loves him and won't say no to anything he has to offer, but he's still nervous. Poor guy.

"Shouldn't I wait until tomorrow?" She's still studying the gift, her teeth sinking into her plump lower lip, looking sexy as hell. She's fresh out of the shower after putting our kids down to bed, her hair hanging in a damp braid down her back, wearing a red T-shirt with a way too jolly looking Santa Claus on it and a pair of little black sleeping shorts.

All I want to do is strip her down and have my way with her but I restrain myself. For now.

"I want you to open it tonight. It's Christmas Eve." I shrug and shove my hand closer to her. "Take it."

She plucks the gift from my palm and contemplates it, running a finger over the bow. "Did you wrap it?"

I chuckle. "No. I'm not that talented."

Fable sends me a smirk. "You are pretty talented, Drew. Magic hands and all that."

"Football and making my wife feel good, those are my handy talents," I tell her with a wink, making her laugh. "Come on, Fable. You're driving me nuts. Open the damn gift."

"If you say so." She gently tugs the bow off the top and sets it on the dresser, then slides her finger beneath the wrapping paper and tape, opening it like she's

going to save the paper for later or something. I'm bouncing on the balls of my feet, impatient as I watch her carefully open it and I sort of want to rip it out of her hands and help her along.

But I don't.

With the paper gone, all that's left is a small, black velvety box. "Drew..." Her voice drifts and she shakes her head. "You spent too much money, didn't you?"

"Stop worrying about money." She's always so practical. Growing up poor does that to a person, but I've always had more money than I know what to do with. If I want to spoil her, then it's my damn right to do so. Stepping closer to her, I slip my arm around her waist. "Open the box, Fable."

She does so, slowly, as if she wants to savor the moment. When she pops the lid open, I hear her gasp. Nestled inside is a diamond band, the dim light from the nearby lamp catching on the stones, making them sparkle. Her eyes, when they lift to mine, are sparkling too, filled with unshed tears. And my Fable doesn't cry much. The sight tugs at my heart. "It's beautiful."

With my free hand, I take the ring from the box and hold it out to her. "Not as beautiful as you." She holds out her trembling right hand and I slip it on her ring finger. The ring is simple, the flawless round stones covering the entire band. "I saw it and knew I had to get it. The stones are bright and beautiful, like you." I pause, worry suddenly gnawing t me. "You like it?"

"I love it. Anything from you, I love." She turns her hand this way and that, the stones bright on her slender finger. "It fits perfectly."

"I have my ways." I kiss her cheek and she turns her head toward mine, capturing my lips in a tender kiss. "I love you, baby. Thanks for making my world brighter."

"I love you, too." She pouts, her lips brushing against mine. "Now the lame presents I got you are going to seem extra lame."

I laugh and grab hold of her waist, hear the box drop to the floor with a dull thud when I push her onto the mattress. "No way. Everything you give me is perfect."

Instead of reading a book all cozied up in the overstuffed chair by the Christmas tree like she was last night, now I'm sitting in the chair with Chelsea in my lap, her head on my shoulder, face pressed against my neck. I can feel her warm breath, her lips moving on my skin when she speaks and it's making me crazy.

"We should go to bed soon," she murmurs, her voice sleepy. She drapes her arm across my chest, her hand clutching my other shoulder and I poke her in the side, making her lift her head up. "What?"

"I have something for you." Shit, is my voice shaking? What the hell is wrong with me? I need to man up.

She frowns, her dark eyebrows drawing together. "You do?"

"Yeah. It's this." I hold out a small black box. I didn't bother wrapping it. What's the point?

Chelsea's lips part and she stares at the box as if it's a poisonous snake about to bite her. "What is it?"

"Open it."

She takes the box from me and pops the lid open, sucking in a harsh breath when she sees what's inside. Her gaze lifts to mine, shock written all over her face. "Owen. Is this a..."

"I want you to marry me," I say, interrupting her. When she gapes, I hurriedly add, "Someday. Not now. Not even a year from now, unless you want to. Because I'm ready whenever you are. Last summer when we were apart, it made me realize just how much I need you. How much I want to make you a permanent part of my life. But I know we're both young and we're trying to figure out what we're doing here. I do know this, though. I love you. I love you so much, Chels. I know I don't tell you that enough, and I'm sorry, but I lo—"

Chelsea cuts me off with a kiss, her lips firm against mine before she pulls away slightly. "Yes," she whispers. "Yes, I'll marry you. I love the ring. I love you. I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

"Are you sure?" I take the ring from the box and slip it on her finger. It looks perfect there, just like I knew it would. "I know I can be a stubborn ass sometimes. And a pain in your ass, too. I'm almost done with school, thank God. But there's the possibility I could...go pro and then I'd be busy and you'll be busy. We probably won't see each other much."

"I don't care about any of that." She shakes her head, her head dropping to stare at the ring before she lifts her gaze to mine once more. "All I care about is you. And us. Together."

I smile, my heart lighter at her words. I have to say it again. I need to keep saying it so she understands just how I feel. "I love you."

She smiles and leans in to kiss me again. "I love you, too."

"Thank you for saying yes," I whisper when we end the kiss minutes later. I can't help but thank her, I'm so damn relieved.

"Thank you for asking," she says, laughter tingeing her voice. "Now let's go to bed."

"Nice ring," I say to Chelsea, flashing a knowing smile in Owen's direction. "Guess he couldn't wait to give it to you, huh?"

Chelsea grins and holds out her hand. It's a simple round diamond, not too big, not too small, tiny diamonds lining the band. "I love it."

"You did good, Owen," I say. "With the ring and the girl."

He smiles in response as I pull Chelsea into a quick hug.

It's Christmas morning and we've come out to the living room, though I've been snuggling with Jake in bed for the last hour while feeding him. Drew finally woke up and watched us with a sleepy smile and a contented expression, his hair a wreck, sticking up all over his head. I've never seen him look better.

But I think that all the time since I'm so completely biased.

Finally Autumn came running into our room, yelling about Santa, so we climbed out of bed to find Owen and Chelsea already sitting by the tree, smoothing on each other. Then I noticed the ring on her finger.

All is right in our world.

"Ooh, look at your ring!" Chelsea snags my right hand in hers, admiring the present Drew gave me last night. "It's so pretty."

"I thought you were going to wait," Owen says accusingly to Drew.

He shrugs and goes to the tree, where he gets down on his knees and starts going through the presents. "I couldn't. I'm impatient like you. Autumn, you have one from Santa right here."

"Yay!" Autumn goes to her daddy and tackles him, wrapping her little arms around his neck. He grabs hold of her and tickles her belly, making her giggle before he hands her the present.

After that it's a flurry of paper flying everywhere, gifts being admired and stockings becoming unstuffed. About an hour later, I go to the kitchen after

every present is unwrapped and start the coffee before I grab the stuff I need to begin making breakfast.

"Hey."

I turn to find Drew standing in the doorway and I admire his outfit. He's wearing green and red plaid pajama pants—ones I bought him for Christmas last year that he never wears—and a white T-shirt. He looks good. When does he not look good? "I just started coffee," I tell him because I know he's probably eager for some.

"I don't care about the coffee." He walks toward me and wraps me in his arms. "Thanks again for the presents."

"They were nothing special." A shirt I found that reminded me of the color of his eyes, and a watch. A bag of his favorite candy stashed in his stocking and the newest Madden video game because, oh my God, do you think he gets enough football out on the field? That would be a no. I figure by early this afternoon he and Owen will be completely engrossed in the game, yelling and cursing at each other. I'll have to hide the children.

"They were awesome." He kisses me. "Just like you are."

I roll my eyes. "You're such a flatterer."

"I'm just speaking the truth." He holds me close, smiling down at me. "Merry Christmas, baby."

"Merry Christmas to you, too," I murmur, standing on my tiptoes so I can deliver a kiss to his perfect lips.

"I'm so tired. It was a great day." I snuggle up close to Owen in bed, sighing when he rolls over to face me, his arm going around me and hauling me to him.

"Are you too tired for this?" He makes a grab for my waist, his hand sneaking beneath my shirt to cup my breast.

"Never," I whisper as his head descends and he kisses me thoroughly.

"Did you have a good Christmas?" he asks minutes later, when we're both breathless from too much kissing.

"Oh, yeah." I nod, skimming my fingers down his bare chest, across his stomach. "I love my gift."

"I'm glad." I can hear the happiness in his voice. Now I get why he was so anxious. He was worried I was going to say no, which is the silliest thing ever.

"I think I want a big wedding," I say nonchalantly as he rolls over and pins me beneath him.

"Really?" He looks surprised.

"Mmm, hmmm." I slip my arm around him and rest my hand on his butt. "At least six bridesmaids."

Now he looks worried. "Six?"

"Yes. And we'll invite a ton of people. Fable told me of a few places where we could possibly hold the reception. Though she did mention they're pretty expensive."

I think he's starting to sweat. I bite my lip, trying my best to contain the laughter that wants to spill.

"You really want to go all out, huh? Because, uh, that might take me a while, to save up the money."

Finally I can't take it any longer and I start to laugh. "I'm kidding. I don't care

about a big wedding."

"You sure? Because I'd give it to you. I'll give you whatever you want," he says, utter sincerity in his voice, glowing in his eyes.

My heart threatens to burst. "I'm sure. All I want is you."

"I feel the same way, Chels." He kisses me. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

"Merry Christmas, babe."

Closing my eyes, I pinch his butt and he nibbles on my ear, the both of us laughing. "Merry Christmas."

Check out the first chapter of FAIR GAME (Book One of The Rules series), coming May 12th!

Chapter One

Jade

"I hate Shepard Prescott."

"Of course you do. Heaven forbid you're normal and think he's hot like the rest of the female population on campus." Kelli rolls her eyes, flicking her long, perfectly wavy brown hair over her shoulder. I dodge out of the way before all that glossy perfect hair smacks me in the face.

"Do you really think he's hot?"

The pointed look Kelli sends my way is answer enough.

It doesn't matter if I think or Kelli thinks he's good looking because he just is. There's no denying that fact. But his arrogant attitude and smug personality cancels out the sexiness.

"Seriously. He's an asshole." I stare at the back of the asshole's head. His hair is this streaked golden brown that almost looks like he paid for those highlights, which I really hope he didn't because oh my God, that would make him even more pretentious. Though I'm sure he received those naturally glorious blond streaks by sailing on his family's yacht or whatever. Or perhaps sunning himself on the beach during one of the many tropical vacations he no doubt takes.

To say we run in different crowds is putting it mildly. He's older than me by two years. He's in a frat and I'm not in a sorority. He's rich as hell and I am most assuredly not. There is absolutely no reason whatsoever for him to know I exist and I'm fine with that.

Really.

"Even his name makes him sounds like an asshole. And his nickname is stupid

too. Shep." I grimace. All rich dudes have stupid nicknames I swear. "Sounds like a dog's name. 'Here boy. Here Shep. Mommy's got a treat for you'," I sing song then roll my eyes. "Ridiculous."

"I just bet Mommy's got a treat for him," Kelli says, her droll voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Pfft. Please. He wishes." I wave my hand, sending a cautious glance in Shep's direction. I may be mocking his ass but the last thing I want is for him to actually hear me.

"You're on a roll tonight aren't you?" Kelli sounds bored. That's because we are bored. Holed up in a crappy little underground poker palace run by the supposedly legendary gambler Shepard Prescott and all of his rich, asshole friends. Our boyfriends brought us here so they could play against Shep and his gambling posse because they have a reputation. As in, they bet big so they tend to win big. But more often than not, they lose. Really big...

Our boyfriends are counting on the losing really big part.

"I can tolerate maybe two more rounds of this and then I'm walking," I mutter before I finish off the rest of the warm beer in my requisite red Solo cup. Grimacing, I set the cup on the table behind me and heave a big sigh, earning a quick glance from my boyfriend. Pretty sad he recognizes my irritated sighs but we really haven't been getting along lately so no surprise. He flashes me a tense smile before returning his gaze to the cards in his hand.

"He looks stressed." Kelli nudges my side with her pointy elbow, making me yelp. Does she sharpen those things or what? "Joel. Look at him."

I'm looking at him. And she's right. Joel does look stressed. What else is new? "He's been wearing that look a lot lately." Lack of funds will do that to a person. Instead of saving the money his parents gave him at the beginning of the semester to bail him out since he lost his part time job, he went and blew it on stupid stuff. Like that pair of designer sunglasses he promptly lost when he was at one of those lake parties, got drunk and went swimming with them on. In February.

My boyfriend doesn't always make the best choices.

"He doesn't have very many chips left either," Kelli mentions, leaning in close to me so she can see past Shep. But who can really see past that guy? He has shoulders as broad as a mountain. And all that wild does he pay for highlights or not hair that sort of springs up as if it has a mind of its own.

"Good. Maybe that means we can leave soon." I grab my cup from the table and bring it to my lips only to realize it's empty and I frown. Not that I want more warm beer but...

"Get her another." Shep raises his hand above his head and snaps his fingers, his finger pointed backward.

Right at me.

"How the hell did he do that?" I ask no one under my breath, glancing up at the barely dressed girl who's suddenly standing in front of me, fresh Solo cup in hand outstretched toward me. I take the drink from her with a mumbled thank you and she flashes me a toothy smile before she bounces away.

"Look." Another nudge from Kelli's pointy elbow—that should be a illegal weapon—before she's pointing at the wall across from us. There's a mirror mounted there.

And Shepard Prescott is looking right at us, a smug grin stretching his lips wide, revealing perfect white teeth.

"He's watching us?" I ask incredulously.

His gaze snags on mine in the mirror, those dark brown eyes never leaving me. I'm the one who has to look away first.

Asshole.

"What a creeper." A shiver moves down my spine but I ignore it. I sip my beer, thankful it's colder. They must've cracked open a new keg.

"Ha. If he's a creeper then I hope he abducts me in his tricked out van." Kelli bursts out laughing at her own crude joke.

"Ew." That we're joking about being abducted is one thousand times wrong.

That we're joking about Shep Prescott abducting us is a million times wrong. "And what do you mean, his tricked out van?"

"So many creepers have those equally creepy vans. You know which ones I'm talking about." Kelli mock shudders. "So gross."

Our conversation has taken a weird turn and I blame boredom. We need to get out of here. But Joel's not paying attention to me. He's too busy gnawing on his lower lip and sweating bullets. Kelli's boyfriend Dane is hunched over his cards, as if he's afraid someone might catch a peek at his hand. And Shep Prescott is sprawled in his chair, legs spread wide, one arm slung over the back of an empty chair, his other arm resting on the table, cards fanned wide so anyone can see them. He looks just as bored as we are.

It's a good look for him.

Damn it.

"I'm done." Dane throws his cards down in disgust and gets up from his chair, moving so he's sitting on the bench behind Joel. He claps a hand on Joel's shoulder in a good luck gesture and plucks the beer out of some random chick's hand, downing it before he grins at her.

I feel Kelli tense up and I can't blame her.

Sitting up straight, I peek over Shep's broad as a mountain shoulder to see exactly what he's holding. And oh my God, he's holding something amazing. When I was little, my grandpa taught me everything I know about poker and blackjack. My gambling knowledge always impressed Joel even when I tricked him with that irritating game of fifty-two pickup one time. He fell for it completely.

Thanks Grandpa.

Shep Prescott's hand is about as good as it gets. As in, he's holding a full house with tens and jacks. Talk about luck. I can only guess by the way Joel is still sweating and muttering unintelligible words under his breath that he's got nothing. Or he's the best bluffer ever.

I'm guessing the first option.

"You in?" Shep asks, his deep voice rumbling from his chest, low and intimidating. Joel looks up, his teeth still sunk in his lower lip and I notice all at once how incredibly young and foolish he appears. He's wearing a faux vintage Mountain Dew T-shirt he got at Target a few days ago with the gift card his mom sent him and his dark hair is buzzed short. Like he's ready to join the armed services or something. His face is clean-shaven and a little pale though there's a faint ruddiness to his cheeks. He looks like a baby compared to Mr. Suave Calm and Cool with the broad shoulders and sexy hair. I'm afraid he's about to get his ass kicked.

"Uhhh..." Joel draws out the sound, his gaze flickering to mine. I'm shaking my head no, slicing my finger across my neck, anything to get him to fold so he doesn't get suckered and loses everything. He's already close enough to losing it all as it is.

"What the hell are you doing?"

Everyone in the room goes silent. Kelli nudges my side with her damn pointy elbow again and I stop gesturing when I realize that Shep Prescott is talking...

To me.

I lift my head to find him glaring at me in that stupid mirror, his dark eyes almost black, his mouth thin. Oh, he looks pissed.

"Are you cheating? Is that why your boyfriend brought you here?" he asks when I don't say anything.

"Um." I have lost all coherent thought. I've also lost the ability to speak.

This isn't good.

"Forget this fucking hand." He throws his cards face down into the middle of the table, right on top of the pile of chips, various dollar bills and even a small mountain of quarters that were part of that round's pot. Everyone playing had already dropped out, one by one, even Dane, until it was just Joel and Shep left. Some had even abandoned their chairs, moving on to grab more beer or play at another table. Or to leave the party with their tails tucked between their legs and their wallets empty.

Not Joel. He's holding out to the very bitter end. And now I'm getting him into some major trouble.

"Come here." Shep turns to look at me, his hard stare pinning me in place. I can practically feel his anger coming at me in big, hot waves. All my snarky comments, all my earlier bravado evaporates. "Sit by me," he commands, pointing at the empty chair beside him.

I stand on shaky legs and approach the table, ignoring Joel, ignoring the snickers from other people watching the spectacle unfold. Without even looking at Shep I fall heavily into the chair beside him, keeping my spine stiff, desperate to put as much distance between us as possible.

But it's no use. I can smell him. And he smells...fucking incredible. There are no other words for it. A combination of pine and lemon and dirt...okay I know that doesn't sound very appealing but oh my God, I'm tempted to lean in close and sniff his neck.

I don't of course. Instead I grip the edge of the table and allow myself to look in Joel's direction. The expression on his boyish face is nothing short of misery. I'm starting to wonder if he had a good hand after all. Possibly better than Shep's? Did I ruin everything? Oh God, if I did, would Joel ever forgive me?

"Don't look at him," Shep murmurs, his voice so close to my ear I gasp and turn my head to find his face directly in mine. I can see everything. Every pore in his skin, every little hair in his thick brows, every inky lash that rims his too dark, all seeing eyes. "I want your eyes on me and me only."

Swallowing hard, I try my best to ignore the anger slowly building inside of me at his threat. But it's no use. "Are you kidding me?" Who does this guy think he is? So he's worth a fortune. So he's ridiculously good looking. So what?

He offers a lopsided smile as he gathers all the cards and starts shuffling like he's some sort of pro straight out of Vegas. "Nope. I catch you looking in his direction during this next hand and I'll kick his ass."

My jaw hangs open as I absorb his words. "You really are an asshole, aren't you?" I whisper.

The lopsided smile grows. "You're looking at a top of the line asshole, baby," he

says.

I roll my eyes at the baby mention. I hate it when guys call me baby. Though... huh. No guy has ever called me that before. Not even Joel. Considering Joel is only my second semi-serious boyfriend and we've been going out for about six months, I guess that's not saying much but still.

The baby bit should offend me. But it doesn't. Neither does that smile.

What the hell is wrong with me?

"We'll play another round of five card draw, just you and me." Shep jabs his index finger in Joel's direction. "The pot stays as is. But we'll still raise. Consider this game." He pauses and I hear the smug amusement enter his voice. "High stakes."

Someone groans. I think it might've been Joel. Not that I'm allowed to look at him or anything.

"Your girlfriend here." He touches me. Freaking Shep Prescott risks losing a limb by actually sliding his arm around my shoulders, his hand gripping my upper arm firmly. I can hardly move, what with the way he's holding me. "You two make eye contact for even a second and you automatically lose."

"Not a problem," Joel says, his voice shaking the slightest bit. I wish I could look at him. If I could I'd be telling him to grow some balls and man up.

"So we're ready?" Shep releases his hold on me, his fingers streaking across my back as he moves away and settles back in his seat. I send him my most evil glare but it doesn't even faze him. He simply resumes shuffling his cards, slouching in his chair as he does so, his legs going wide so his knee bumps against my thigh.

Ignoring the sizzle that shoots up my leg, I scoot away from him as best I can but he stops me in my tracks.

"You leave, he loses," Shep murmurs, so low I'm sure no one can hear him but me. "Don't forget that."

"Considering you won't let me, I don't think you need to worry," I say with a

little snort that I immediately regret. Way to impress him.

But you don't want to impress him. You think he's an asshole.

Yeah. I need to remember that.

Shep

The girl with the sarcastic mouth just made the night infinitely more interesting. I'd been bored out of my skull knowing I was going to win. The pot was small, maybe five hundred bucks. Big fucking deal. The last dude sitting at the table was a nervous little freshman who hadn't backed down which surprised me. I figured he either had a better hand than me—almost impossible—or he was an excellent bluffer.

Also fairly impossible.

Then the girlfriend had to go and gesture behind me. She saw my hand. The little fucker brought his hot girlfriend to cheat and I hadn't even noticed. And I always notice that crap. Instead of making sure she was on the up and up while I stared at her in the mirror I put up for the sole purpose of catching cheaters, I caught myself checking her out.

Nice tits. Good skin, if a little on the pale side. Long red hair pulled up into a ponytail and freckles scattered across her cheeks and nose. Not my normal type but what did me in—besides her tits because they look damn good in that black tank top she's wearing—was her mouth. Bee stung lips. I can only imagine those lips wrapped tight around my...

"Are you going to deal or spend the entire night staring at me?"

I blink her into focus. She's a feisty little thing too. What's she doing with this freshman loser sitting across from me, looking ready to pass out at any given moment? I like her voice, despite all the shitty things she's been saying about me.

And I've heard every single comment since she settled in behind me.

Ignoring her, I deal our hands and check my cards, careful to keep my expression neutral. A pair of queens and three junk cards. I won't discard until he does first. I'm the dealer so that's protocol and I don't want him to know that I only have a pair.

"What's your name?" I ask the girl.

She crosses her arms in front of her, plumping up her chest. I catch a glimpse of lime green lacy bra peeking above the neckline of her tank. Interesting. "Bitch Face," she answers serenely.

I laugh. This chick is something else. "Fitting. I'm Shep. Though you already know." I lower my voice. "Since Mommy has a treat for me and all that."

Her cheeks go crimson. Busted. But she doesn't say a word in her defense, which I find admirable.

I turn my focus on her boyfriend. "Hey. Asshole." He lifts his gaze, pale blue eyes staring into mine. He looks petrified. He should be. "What's your name?"

"J-Joel." He clears his throat, his gaze falling to his cards once again. He shifts them around, moving two from one side to the other. Then he plucks one from the five and tosses it out face down. "I need one more please."

Hell. What kind of hand does he have? I'm pretty sure I'm fucked. "You gonna raise the pot or what?"

He meets my gaze once more, trying to school his expression but I see the flash of triumph. He has a good hand. Fucker thinks he's gonna win. "Uh, I'll raise you fifty." He tosses in the last of his chips.

"Fifty?" I cock a brow and toss in a matching fifty then deal him a single card. "That's all you got?" I rapidly exchange out my cards, discarding the three junk ones and taking three new ones. I don't turn them over. Not yet. The anticipation is half the fun especially when I'm fairly sure I'll lose this round.

Damn it.

"Clearly." The kid waves a hand in front of him, where zero chips remain.

"Hmm." I lift my cards, cupping them in my hand so Bitch Face won't see them. She's as still as a stone sitting next to me but I can hear her breathing, can feel the tension radiating off her in heavy waves. She doesn't like this. She's nervous for her boyfriend especially because she can't look at him. Her body is angled toward mine and I chance a glance at her before I study what I have.

Holy hell. I dealt myself two more queens. Four of a kind.

Beat that fuck stick.

"Let's make this interesting," I say, staring at Joel once more. His expression lights up. Everyone who'd heard of, or who'd come to our little gambling venture in the past know that's the game changer statement. It's the cue that the round is about to take a wild turn.

More like it's one of us—my friend Gabe, my cousin Tristan—bored out of our minds and ready for an adventure. We like to win big. But by winning big, you need to lose big too. That fifty-fifty chance is what always gives me a thrill. I've lost more than I've won but that doesn't really bother me.

"What do you have in mind?" Joel asks, impressing me. He's played this game before. That's the pat question we want them to ask. I don't recognize him but I'm guessing he might've played a night I wasn't here, or at someone else's table.

It doesn't matter. He understands what's about to happen and that's all that matters.

"Let's see." I set my cards down and drum my fingers on the green felted table. We run a semi-professional operation here. Gabe owns the house. Well, his family owns the house. We converted it a little less than two years ago, turning the living and dining room into a mini casino a few miles off campus. Blackjack tables, poker tables, hell we even have a roulette table though I hate playing it. Roulette is a game of total chance. The odds are shit.

At least with poker and my preferred game of choice, blackjack, we use some sort of skill.

"Don't do it Joel." I lift my head at first sound of her voice. She's not looking at Joel though. She's staring straight at me, her mouth hard, her eyes flat. "Show your cards and end the game. Don't let this asshole get you in any deeper than you already are."

"Ouch. So mean with the name calling." I rub my chest, pretending she hurt me. I've been called worse. "You going to let her tell you what to do, Joel?" I say it because I know the question will piss her off. And it does. She's practically got steam coming out of her ears but she says nothing to me. I can't help but be faintly disappointed.

"Shut up, Jade," Joel mutters, shocking the both of us. "Let me do this."

I turn to her. "Joel just grew some balls, Jade. Or should I still call you Bitch Face?"

She grimaces. "I'd rather you call me nothing at all."

"Jade," Joel says, his voice firmer. I can tell he really wants her to shut up. I'm taking this as a sign that he also wants to carry forth on the bet. Meaning his hand is fucking stellar.

Well, guess what? So is mine.

"What kind of name is that anyway? Jade?" I make a face, trying to hold back the laughter that wants to escape because I know for a fact that I'm irritating the shit out of her.

"Like you have any room to talk. What the hell is a Shep?"

"I'll have you know it's an old family name." I try my best to remain dignified but I'm failing. This chick amuses me like no other. Her smart mouth is kind of hot. "My mother is a Shepard. I come from a long line of Shepards."

"Well goody for her. My mom happens to like the color green." She flashes me a smile and tosses her head, her ponytail swishing, tempting me to grab it, yank her close and wipe that shitty little smile off her face.

With my lips.

"You two done flirting so we can do this, or what?" Joel asks, sounding furious. And he looks furious too. Interesting. I'm enjoying this more and more.

"We were not flirting," Jade says as she starts to turn her head in Joel's direction.

"Ah, ah, ah. Better watch it," I warn and she returns her attention back to me, earning a fierce frown from her for my efforts. "I don't want to have to kick Joel's ass, you know."

"He could probably take you," she mutters halfheartedly.

"Ha. I'd demolish him and you know it."

"I'm sitting right here, you know," Joel pipes up.

"Okay." I look away from Bitch Face Jade and study Joel, who appears much more confident than he did a few minutes ago. This would normally make me nervous. And I normally don't mind feeling nervous during these situations because it amps up the adrenaline and makes everything that much more intense. Life is what you make it, right? I'm all for crazy bets and tense moments. At least I'm actually feeling something while it's unfolding. "Let's bet on Jade. If I lose, I'll pay you some ungodly amount of money."

"What sort of ungodly amount?" Joel asks, never missing a beat.

I ignore his question. "And if I win...I get your girl."

"Joel, if you agree to this asshole's stupid bet, I will kick you in the nuts so hard, you will never have children. And that's a promise," Jade threatens, her voice like ice.

Hell, even my nuts shriveled up a little at her words.

"It's a sure thing," he says, never once looking at her. "Don't worry about it. What sort of ungodly amount are you talking about, Shep?"

The kid wants money. No problem. I can more than deliver. "Fifty."

He rolls his eyes. "Big fucking deal."

"Thousand," I add, and those rolling eyes are now bugging out of his head.

Low murmurs erupt from the observers watching the game, startling me. I forgot they were there. Glancing up, I see Gabe standing near the doorway, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed in front of him and an amused expression on his face. He loves this shit as much as I do, maybe even more so. He gives me one of those shit-eating grins of his and I nod once before I resume my focus on Joel.

"What do you say?" I ask nonchalantly, clutching the cards in my hand. I could win this. Not much else can beat four queens, unless the schmuck has four kings or four aces. What are the odds though? Really?

They're in my favor. They have to be.

"I'm not up for barter, you assholes," Jade spits out, her voice laced with venom. "I don't know who the hell either of you think you are, but you just can't bet on me. I'm a freaking human being." She pauses. I'm guessing she's realizing her words are having little effect on either of us. "What would you do with me anyway if you won?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" I slide my gaze over her, imagining the many ways I could have her if she was mine. Though it would be brief. I don't keep girls, never have. Girlfriends want too much. Have high expectations that I can never, ever deliver. I don't even want to deliver, because women? They are demanding as fuck.

And this one I know would give me nothing but endless shit.

"I hate you," she whispers, shooting daggers at me with her...hmm. Hazel eyes? Yeah, they're a mix of colors, green and gray and a hint of brown, so I'm calling her eyes hazel. "Don't think I won't stomp on your balls if you go through with this, because I so will."

"Maybe I like that sort of kink," I say, sitting up straight. "So what'll it be, Joel? You in?"

"I'm fucking definitely in!" He shouts, then high fives the jackass who's sitting behind him.

"All right then. An extra fifty-k if you win, Jade Bitch Face if I win." I throw a hundred dollar chip into the center of the table, adding it to the pot as a goodwill gesture. "Call."

"Here you go." The smugness in Joel's voice is unmistakable. "Read 'em and weep." He spreads his cards out in front of him. Three aces and two kings.

A fucking nice hand for sure.

"A full house," I murmur, keeping my voice even while deep inside, I'm ready to offer up my own triumphant shout. Hot damn, I've got this fucker. "Aces and kings high."

"Fuck yeah, dude." Joel starts to reach for the pile of chips, coins and dollar bills, looking like a greedy kid who just busted the piñata and has no plans on sharing any of the candy that fell from it.

"Hold it." Joel pauses in his gathering. "I haven't showed my hand yet. There's a protocol to this procedure you know."

"Right, right, dude. Go for it." He releases his hold on the pile of winnings, though his greedy gaze never strays from it. He's not even looking at his girl, who just happens to be staring at me. She hates my guts. I can feel the waves of anger coming at me, heavier and heavier as each minute passes.

She's really going to hate me when I share my cards.

"Ready?" I cock a brow, drawing out the suspense. I'm relishing this moment because it's going to be a good one. There's a vibration beneath my skin, a buzzing that grows and grows until it's a dull roar in my ears and I blow out a long exhale, crinkle the cards between my fingers before I slowly drop them onto the table, one by one.

Six of hearts—the trash card.

Queen of spades.

Queen of hearts.

Queen of diamonds.

And—dramatic pause—the queen of clubs.

The entire room erupts into cheers, choruses of 'no way' and the occasional 'he fucking beat you man!'. Gabe rushes me, shaking my shoulders from behind and offering up his congratulations. Others follow suit and clap me on the back, some chick drapes herself over me and kisses my cheek. A defeated Joel pushes away from the table so fast his chair falls backward with a clatter. He leaves the room in a huff, never once saying a word to anyone, not even his freaking girlfriend.

What a jackass.

And speaking of his girlfriend...

"You don't really think you've won me or anything, right?" She rests her hand on my thigh—Jesus that feels good—and digs her fingernails in so hard, I can feel them even through the thick denim of my jeans.

That doesn't feel so good. At all.

"A bet is a bet," I remind her, wrapping my fingers around her wrist and disengaging her from my flesh. I drop her hand back into her lap, ignoring the tingle I feel in my fingertips from touching her.

"It was all for show," she says, sounding the slightest bit worried. While all hell breaks loose around us, we're having this conversation. Funny how I'm able to tune everyone else out and only focus on her. "You didn't lose your fifty thousand, so everything's good right? You get all that as your prize." She waves her hand toward the pile of chips that Joel so recently abandoned.

"I hate to break it to you, Jade. But you're my prize. And I plan on collecting." I lean in close to her, so close I can feel her warm breath waft across my face, see the way her eyes widen the slightest bit. Her lips part, her tongue appears, touching the very center of her upper lip and my skin tightens. "How about a victory kiss for starters?"

"Fuck you," she spits out.

Just before she slaps my face and storms off without another word.

Check out an excerpt from OWNING VIOLET, the first in Monica Murphy's The Fowler Sisters series...

Chapter One

Violet

Tonight, my life is going to change.

In preparation for it, I spent all day at the spa. Treated myself to a facial, massage, wax, mani, and pedi. My skin is smooth, my face is clear, my fingers and toes are painted a perfect demure pink. My muscles are relaxed and loose, but my brain . . .

My brain is jumpy. My stomach is a mess of nerves. My outward appearance is the exact opposite of my inside because so much is on the line. Everything I've strived toward these last few years is coming to the final pinnacle tonight.

Finally.

I found a dress to wear for this special moment a few days ago at Barneys, one I knew Zachary would approve of. A navy-blue sheath, it hits just above the knee and skims over my curves, subtly sexy because he doesn't like anything overt. Obvious.

Meaning he hates everything my older sister wears, does, says. He doesn't much approve of the way my blunt baby sister acts, either.

But that's fine. He's going to ask me to marry him tonight. Not Lily or Rose.

Me.

There's nothing obvious about me. I'm the epitome of understated. I would make the perfect politician's wife. Standing behind my man, offering my never-ending support all while wearing the pleasant smile I've mastered over the years. There have been a few slipups in the past. I struggled once. Fought for my life, really, and survived.

My father and grandmother like to pretend none of that ever happened. Zachary doesn't even know about it. It's a moment in time—before I met him—the family prefers to sweep under the rug.

It's so ugly, Violet, Father told me once. Wouldn't you rather forget?

So I try. For the family.

Zachary arrives at my apartment right on time because heaven forbid he's ever late. One of the many qualities I admire about him. He's punctual, thoughtful, efficient, handsome, and smart. So incredibly smart. Some call him conniving. Others call him cutthroat. Rumors swirl that there are other women. I'm not stupid. I have my suspicions. They might have even been confirmed once or twice. But when we're engaged, when we're married . . .

That will change. It has to.

Zachary and I have a perfect relationship. The sort of relationship I'd dreamed of since I was a little girl. One that Lily mocks constantly, but what does she know about love?

Sex and addiction and getting into trouble, she knows plenty. But love? I don't think she's had a real relationship in her life.

I have. Boyfriends throughout junior high and high school, then my one very serious boyfriend in college. The one I'd originally thought I might marry. The one I gave my virginity to midway through freshman year. I'd been a real holdout, one of the last remaining virgins among my friends.

He dumped me the beginning of our sophomore year. Right after everything . . . happened. The incident, I like to call it. The thing no one likes to talk about. So I don't talk about it either.

After the breakup, I remained single. Tried my best to rise above everything that happened by focusing on finishing school and then on my career, my legacy at Fleur Cosmetics.

I might have quietly fallen apart for a short period of time that not many know about. We kept it secret. Father didn't want any more public humiliations. We lost Mom so long ago and he always said I was the most like her. Delicate but

determined. Smart but not always practical.

I lived up to his expectations for a brief, not-so-shining moment. I needed therapy. I needed medication. More than anything, I needed to be numb. Craved being numb. Feeling emotions only hurt, and I was so tired of hurting.

But eventually I knew I needed to learn how to cope on my own.

Father let me return to work after my brief stint away. And when Zachary Lawrence started working for the company two years ago, getting to know him, I was soon interested. And so was he. I could tell. I didn't care if at first he talked to me only because I was the CEO's daughter. I flirted. I wanted his attention.

And I eventually got it. Got him.

I knew dating someone I worked with wasn't the smartest move, but I couldn't help it. Where else can I meet a man of such good quality? Someone I can trust? I have trust issues. No surprise, considering what I've been through.

While my father calls most of the shots, the company really is a family business. Both Rose and I work there. Even my grandmother still comes in and consults, though she's now eighty-five and mostly retired.

She loves Fleur Cosmetics and Fragrance. My grandma is Fleur Cosmetics and Fragrance. She started the brand. It was her face that appeared in the magazine advertisements and billboards for so many years. Dahlia Fowler is a legend in the cosmetics industry.

And despite my weaknesses and my father's once complete lack of faith in me, I desperately want to follow in her footsteps. With Zachary by my side, of course, considering he works in the brand marketing department and has higher aspirations. The two of us could take Fleur to the next level. I know it. He knows it.

Together, we're a force to be reckoned with. And once we're married . . .

"You're lost in thought."

Zachary's deep voice washes over me and I blink, realize that he's watching me. His brows are furrowed and his mouth is turned down. He looks concerned.

"I'm fine." I smile, hope lighting within me when I see the worry etched all over his handsome features slowly disappear. His blue eyes twinkle as he reaches across the table and takes my hand, grasping my fingers tightly.

"I have something I want to discuss with you," he says in that low, reassuring way of his.

My smile grows and I nod, squeezing his fingers. "Now?"

"Yes." He takes a deep breath and lets go of my hand. Odd. "I've known about this for a while and it's . . . taken everything within me to work up the courage to tell you."

Oh. How sweet. He's nervous about proposing. Zachary's always so confident about everything—I'm surprised. "Go ahead and just say it, Zachary. I'm fairly sure it will all work out in the end."

"I agree. Your father said the same thing."

My heart skips a beat. He spoke with Father. This is serious. This is exactly what I've been waiting for all this time. I can't believe it. My fingers are literally trembling in anticipation of the ring he's about to slip on my finger. I wonder how big it is. I don't like gaudy jewelry. Neither does Zachary. Understated, refined—that's more our style. Perhaps he spoke with Grandma and she gave him her engagement ring, though rightfully that should go to Lily since she's oldest . . .

"... so he's asked me to test out the new position in London and see if I'd be a good fit. And I said yes." $\,$

Wait. What? "P-position? In London? What are you talking about?" I clear my throat, proud that I keep my voice level. I didn't want to make a scene in the middle of one of the most elegant restaurants in all of Manhattan. I could hear my father's voice now.

Violet, that just wouldn't do.

"Your father is sending me to the London office, just on a temporary basis. They've created a new position there since growth in the UK and Europe has been so strong the last couple of years. I'll be trying out the new chief brand and marketing director position both in London and Paris. It's a tremendous opportunity, Violet. One I couldn't turn down. This promotion could change everything." The pointed look Zachary gives me says he's made his choice and there's no chance I can talk him out of it.

"But . . . Wait a minute." I shake my head, a huff of fake laughter falling from my lips. He can't be serious. That's what he wanted to tell me? About a possible promotion? To London? "What about . . ."

"Us?" he finishes for me with that rueful, charming smile. The one that says he knows he's a little bit in trouble but somehow he'll talk himself out of it. As usual. "I won't be gone for long, only a few months. Hey, I bet you could fly over for a weekend. Come to London or even better, Paris. We can explore the cities together."

No offer to take me with him to live there—not that I'd go, especially since it's temporary. But it could turn permanent and he might end up staying. We don't know.

Would I leave to be with Zachary? Only if he promised that we would be married—and he vowed his complete fidelity. I feel safe here. Everything I know, my family, my friends, my career, is here. In New York. Not London or Paris. And what about the ring? The proposal?

It sounds terrible in my own head, but I expected that. A beautiful diamond solitaire ring accompanied by an offer of marriage, along with Zachary's promise of undying love and faithfulness to me. A girl can tolerate only so much and I know it's stupid, but . . . I love him.

I do.

Disappointment threatens to wash over me, but I hold it at bay. I have to.

"I think I know what you were hoping for," he says softly. "But what sort of marriage could we start if we're on two different continents? It wouldn't be fair to either of us. We're still young, darling, especially you. We have plenty of time."

"We've already been together almost two years . . ." My voice drifts and I drop my head, blinking my eyes shut for an agonizingly long moment before I open

them again. I refuse to cry. I am twenty-three years old. I refuse to bawl like a little girl.

"And maybe we'll have another year, maybe two years, like this, but I promise, I will marry you." My heart leaps at his words. "I swear. I just—I need this. This promotion is important to me and I'm not the only one your father is considering. I'm a front-runner, but still, there are no guarantees. For you, it's different. This is your family. They'll give you whatever you want," Zachary says, irritation making his voice scratchy. Does he even register the change in tone? "But for me? I have to work at it. Constantly."

I stiffen my spine, offended by his words. They make it sound like I'm some sort of spoiled brat who gets whatever she wants whenever she wants. "I've worked very hard at Fleur since I was in my early teens," I say in protest. "You know this."

He waves a hand, whether dismissing his words or mine, I'm not exactly sure. "You know what I mean. Just . . . let me have this. I'm not a selfish man but I've worked damn hard for this career, Vi." I hate it when he calls me Vi and he knows it. "I'm almost thirty years old. The time for me to do this is now. Before I marry you and we have children and I won't be able to ever leave."

The way he said that makes me think he would feel like he's stuck with the wife and children. In other words, with me and our future children. Why am I letting this bother me? Am I being too sensitive? What he's saying makes sense. He needs to push forward with his career. I understand that. But I need to push forward with my career as well. And my life. My personal life, with marriage and children and . . .

My voice is hesitant as I say, "I could ask my father to step in and offer you a promotion here—"

"No. I refuse to take that sort of handout. I will earn this promotion," he says vehemently. "I want to do this. I would never hold you back, you know."

"That's not fair," I murmur, my gaze locking with his. A mix- ture of anger and sadness fills me, but he doesn't appear sad at all. No, he looks excited. Like this is exactly what he wants. What he needs.

Does this mean I'm not what he wants? What he needs? "It's the truth," he says

simply. "And you know it."

He never told me he was interviewing for the position. And this sort of thing goes on for weeks. Sometimes months. My fa- ther didn't tell me either, and that hurts because he knew what was happening yet never gave me a warning. More than any- thing, though, I hate that Zachary has kept this secret from me.

Makes me wonder if he's kept any other secrets.

Don't fool yourself. He's kept plenty of secrets from you. Why do you put up with him?

I swear my sister's voice is berating me in my head. I can just see Lily's smug expression, telling me she knew it all along. Zachary Lawrence doesn't deserve me. She's said that time and again. So has Rose.

I'm starting to wonder if they're right.

A woman's husky laugh draws my attention and I glance at a table a few feet away, recognition making my stomach sour. God, of course he's here. A million restaurants in all of Manhattan and he'd have to show up in this one. The mysterious, arrogant Ryder McKay, fellow corporate employee of Fleur Cosmetics.

Ryder's with . . . of course, Pilar Vasquez, his former boss, his supposed lover, girlfriend, whatever he might call her. Their relationship is strange, to say the least.

Strange because Pilar doesn't talk about it and Ryder definitely doesn't talk about it either. No one's sure exactly what happens between them, but everyone would love to know.

Not that I want to know. Or really care. His arrogance, the look on his handsome face, the way he strides around the build- ing as if he's the king of all he sees, drives me crazy.

If all goes as planned, that right will eventually go to Zachary someday. He is without a doubt the future CEO of Fleur.

Or me. I could be the CEO. Grandma has said that more than once. If I had half

of her confidence, I could conquer the world.

All I know is that Ryder McKay is definitely not on par with Zachary and all of his experience. He's worked at Fleur a bit longer than Zachary, a little over two years. He came to the company via Pilar, who got him a position since she worked with him at her previous employer. Somehow, he's gotten into the good graces of practically every executive who works at Fleur. His charm is dangerous, and I can reluctantly admit he's a valued employee.

Which makes him lethal. And I refuse to fall for him. Zachary hates his guts. Something about Ryder rubs me the wrong way.

Ignoring the disgust curling through my blood, I try my best to keep my attention on Zachary, trying to ignore that the life I'd planned is falling apart in front of my eyes. But Zachary's phone rings, and he takes the call without asking if I mind. Like I don't matter, and I hate that. I hate even more that he turns away so he can murmur into the phone without me hearing.

More secrets. It's probably a woman. That I sit here and tolerate his behavior makes me want to smack him.

Or smack myself.

I'm at a loss. I don't know what to do, how to act, and I can't help my gaze from drifting to where Ryder sits. He's disgustingly gorgeous in a charcoal-gray suit and a crisp white shirt, though he's sans tie and a few buttons are undone at the neck, revealing the sexy column of his throat. His dark brown hair is in slight disarray, as if he's run his fingers through it countless times, and the entire look gives him a rakish air. One that says he doesn't care what people think of him while he sits in a restaurant that caters to some of the richest people in all of Manhattan.

That is the exact sort of attitude Ryder McKay always seems to have and I find it infuriating. Not that I have to deal with him, not much. He was promoted to associate director of package development a few months ago, a position I now can't help but wonder why Zachary didn't apply for, though it would have been more of a lateral move, not necessarily a step up. It would have kept him in New York, though.

Unless Zachary had no desire to stay in New York . . .

I stare harder, wishing I could listen in on Ryder's conversation with Pilar, but I can't hear a thing. His face is shrouded in shadows, the candle flickering in the deep red votive that sits in the middle of the table casting it in golden light. He's very attractive, I can reluctantly admit. Flashing a wicked smile at Pilar, he lets forth a glorious, downright filthy-sounding laugh that sends a spark of heat zipping over my skin.

Only because it sounds so devastatingly wrong and shockingly dirty, not because I have any sort of interest in him. He's too quiet, too mysterious, too . . . dark and full of secrets. That wicked smile is still curving his lush lips as he reaches across the table and takes Pilar's hand, bringing it to his mouth to kiss.

I watch, transfixed, as Pilar laughs, her voice raspy as she seemingly admonishes him. He merely shakes his head in return and drops her hand, his gaze going to mine for the briefest second and then lingering.

I'm caught. Snared in his intense gaze and for a long, charge-filled bundle of seconds, I return his stare. Recognition flares in his eyes and I quickly look away, my cheeks heating, and I'm thankful the lighting is dim so he can't tell. He thinks nothing of me, I'm sure. I'm barely a blip on his radar, and that's just the way I like it. I don't want his attention.

His type of attention . . . scares me.

Glancing across the table, I wave my hand in front of Zachary's face but he doesn't see me. I his out his name, earning a hard glare from him before he turns away.

A sigh wants to escape and I stifle it, chancing a glance in Ryder's direction again to find him still watching me. And he doesn't look away, either. His smile softens and he leans back in his chair. He positively reeks of a man who knows just how to please a woman—a man who has no qualms about flirting with one woman while sitting at a table with another.

I remind myself that I can't stand him. I hate his cocky behavior. His confidence is galling and Zachary can't stand him. I should be disgusted that he's looking at me in such a blatant manner, but . . . I'm morbidly fascinated.

What's it like to think that way? To feel that way? Pilar seems absolutely thrilled to be with him, which only confirms that something is going on between those

two. And I wouldn't doubt he'd try and touch her in some inappropriate manner if he hasn't done so already. She probably wouldn't protest, either. She's an eager climber who has no problems stepping on people to get what she wants, both professionally and socially.

They look like they're enjoying their evening, though. Whereas I'm tense and upset at Zachary's seeming rejection they're laughing and carrying on as if they have zero worries. Funny, I can't help but think how lucky Pilar is. To be lost in the pleasure of Ryder's wicked company while I'm lost to my own turbulent emotions at the thought of Zachary leaving me.

Of being alone. Again.

Tearing my gaze away from Ryder McKay, I focus on Zachary, who's off his cell phone and watching me with an expectant expression on his face. "Now, where we?" he asks, looking genuinely confused. How could he forget that he'd just delivered such life-altering news?

"You were telling me about your possible new promotion." I hold in a breath, count to three, and then let it out in a soft exhale. "I'm happy for you," I finally say, forcing myself to smile. But it doesn't feel genuine. My lips tremble at the corners and I let the smile fall away. "Congratulations, Zachary."

"I knew you'd understand. You always understand. Every- thing." He reaches across the table and grasps my hand again, giving it a gentle squeeze. "If I get the position, I don't see myself staying in London beyond two years. We can make it work, can't we, darling?"

"Of course we can," I whisper. But I'm not sure. Two years with Zachary in another country, meeting numerous women? Most likely bedding numerous women?

For all I know, this could be the beginning of the end.

Read other books by Monica Murphy

Monica Murphy is the New York Times and USA Today bestselling author of the One Week Girlfriend series. She writes new adult and contemporary romance for Bantam and Avon. She also writes romance as USA Today bestselling author Karen Erickson. A native Californian, she lives in the foothills below Yosemite.

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