

a novel

# CONNECTED

CONNECTED

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assisted by  
JENNIE WURTZ



*What if a  
'Once in a Lifetime'  
could happen twice?*

# *Connected*

Written by Kim Karr

Assisted by Jennie Wurtz

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# Table of Contents

[Authors Note](#)

[Connected Playlist](#)

[Preface](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

**Chapter Five**

**Chapter Six**

**Chapter Seven**

**Chapter Eight**

**Chapter Nine**

**Chapter Ten**

**Chapter Eleven**

**Chapter Twelve**



**Chapter Thirteen**

**Chapter Fourteen**

**Chapter Fifteen**

**Chapter Sixteen**

**Chapter Seventeen**

**Chapter Eighteen**

**Chapter Nineteen**

**Chapter Twenty**

**Chapter Twenty-One**

**Chapter Twenty-Two**

**Chapter Twenty-Three**

**Chapter Twenty-Four**

**Chapter Twenty-Five**

**Chapter Twenty-Six**

**Chapter Twenty-Seven**

**Epilogue**

**Authors Note Two**

**Authors Note Three**

**Acknowledgments**

**About the Author**

## Author's note 1...

I want my readers to understand that music means a great deal to me. In this book, I have used many songs to convey character feelings and emotions in each and every chapter. So much so, that each chapter title is a song. I spent many hours searching for songs that signify the narrative of each chapter and I hope that listening to the songs before you read each chapter will only help to enhance your reading experience. Go to my website [www.authorkimkarr.com](http://www.authorkimkarr.com) for song links to Spotify. And unfortunately, without permission from the artists I

cannot include the actual lyrics in the narrative. What you see is a revised version to better fit the feelings and emotions of the chapter, not the actual lyrics. The exception to this is the use of a Maroon 5 song lyric for which I was granted permission to use.

# *Connected playlist...*

## Prologue

♪ Gnarlz Barkley—*Crazy*, Prince  
—*Purple Rain*, Nirvana—*Rape Me*, U2  
—*Beautiful Day*

## Chapter 1

♪ Theory of a Deadman—*Out of My  
Head*, Michael Jackson—*Thriller*

## Chapter 2

♪ Erykah Badu —*Next Lifetime*,  
Stevie Wonder—*Superstition*

## Chapter 3

♪ 3 Doors Down—*It's Not My Time*,  
Gavin DeGraw—*I'm In Love With A Girl*

## Chapter 4

♪ Breaking Benjamin—*The Diary of Jane*

## Chapter 5

♪ Gary Allen—*Every Storm Runs Out Of Rain*

## Chapter 6

♪ Taylor Swift—*Begin Again*, The Kinks—*Lola*

## Chapter 7

♪ Thriving Ivory—*Where We Belong*

## Chapter 8

♪ Secondhand Serenade—*Something More*, Tom Petty—*Free Fallin*, U2—*Beautiful Day*

## Chapter 9

♪ Tenth Avenue North—*Hold My Heart*

## Chapter 10

♪ Mazzy Star—*Fade Into You*

## Chapter 11

♪ Nine Inch Nails —*Closer*, Robin Thicke—*Sex Therapy*

## Chapter 12

♪ John Mayer —*Say*, Fuel—*I*



*Should Have Told You, Coldplay*  
*—Yellow*

## Chapter 13

♪ Teddy Geiger—*Living For The First Time*, Portishead—*Glory Box*,

♪ Every Avenue—*Tell Me I'm A Wreck*, Maroon 5—*She Will Be Loved*,

♪ AC/DC—*Back In Black*, Coldplay Avenue—*Green Eyes*

## Chapter 14

♪ Adelitas Way—*Alive*, Rihanna—*S&M*, Enrique Iglesias—*Dirty Dancer*,

♪ Havana Brown—*You'll Be Mine*, Enrique Iglesias—*Tonight I'm F\*\*king You*,

♪ Saving Abel—*Addicted*

## Chapter 15

♪ Hedley—*Kiss You Inside Out*, U2  
—*Beautiful Day*,

♪ Cheap Trick—*I Want You To Want Me*

## Chapter 16

♪ The Veronicas—*Speechless*, Phil  
Collins—*In The Air Tonight*,

♪ Poison—*Talk Dirty To Me*,  
Adelitas Way—*Dirty Little Thing*

## Chapter 17

♪ Phillip Phillips—*Home*

## Chapter 18

♪ The Who—*Pinball Wizard*

♪ Justin Timberlake—*Sexy Back*

## Chapter 19

♪ Dashboard Confessional—*The Secret's In The Telling*

## Chapter 20

♪ One Direction—*Little Things*

## Chapter 21

♪ Lifehouse (featuring Natasha Bedingfield)—*Between The Raindrops*

## Chapter 22

♪ Within Temptation—*Memories*,  
Smashing Pumpkins—*Perfect*

## Chapter 23

♪ Yellowcard—*Miles Apart*

## Chapter 24

♪ Ivan & Alyosha—*I Was Born To Love Her*

## Chapter 25

♪ Rihanna—*Diamonds*

## Chapter 26

♪ Avenged Sevenfold—*Victim, Citizens—Amazing Grace*

## Chapter 27

♪ Sara Paxton—*Connected*

## Epilogue

♪ The Script—*Breakeven*, Go Radio  
—*Go To Hell*

# *Preface*

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I have visited this place many times, but today it's different. I'm alone. There are no comforting arms around me. My body trembles. Not from the cold, but from the realization of fate. A single tear slowly drips down my face as I look into the night and scream, "Why couldn't we just stay together?!"

As the wind moans in the distance, thunder crashes and lightning strikes. I

stand here just hoping the impending storm will carry me away and erase the shadow that looms over me. A slow soothing rain falls from the blackened sky, but it provides no relief to my ravaged soul. A mist slowly rises into the night, puddles form in various spots, and the cold air sends shivers down my spine. The dark, the storm—they are both upon me.

I'm a lone figure and I huddle to the ground feeling completely lost. As my tears merge with the rain into one slow dance, they only fall further into the darkness. No one is here to see me. No one knows where to find me. Only the vultures notice me as they fly swiftly overhead, seeking shelter against the

cold rain. I'm not looking for refuge in this place I now despise, but I have nowhere else to go. I have no hope. I have no future. This is where I belong—in the darkness.



# Prologue

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CRAZY

*Every time we were there we had  
fun*

*There was something special about  
the place*

*Sights and sounds echoed  
throughout the space*

*And when we're there we never had  
a care*

*We were having the time of our*

*lives.*



### *August 1999...*

Every sight and every sound told me this was the best place on earth. The arena was a buzz of activity: music roared through the speakers, electricity filled the air, and nameless people were rushing to find their seats. My father and I stopped quickly to purchase our

concert t-shirts. Clutching our tickets tightly, we made our way through the crowd.

The excitement around us was immeasurable, almost indescribable. We sat down, mesmerized by what was before us. Looking at the stage, it was impossible to take everything in. Being so close was intoxicating. I was frozen with shock, and my eyes flickered through the rays of the spotlights as they made their way up the stairs.

Bono encouraged thousands of waving hands and nodding heads. Eventually, I gathered my senses and began to absorb my surroundings just as U2 began to play Beautiful Day. Slipping into an almost hypnotic state, I closed

my eyes and swayed to the pulse of the beat as the vibrations penetrated my whole body. I stayed this way throughout most of the concert, just as I had so many times before.

Going to Greek Theatre, or The Greek as otherwise known, was an experience like no other. It was the largest indoor arena, and people of all kinds walked around to experience the ambiance. Famous people, unknown bands, known singers, groupies, and concertgoers came from miles around. They all loved it there, and so did I. I used to notice how all of the visitors' shirts meshed together like a finely woven blanket with different colors of yarn. Everyone came from different

places, but they all were there for the same reason: to listen to the best music ever played.

My father was the general manager of The Greek. He loved music, mostly rock, eighties, and nineties. My dad had been going to concerts since he was thirteen and always bought a t-shirt. So to say he had a few concert t-shirts was putting it mildly. He started working at The Greek at a young age and never left simply because he loved his job. He accumulated so many stories and told me of numerous freak events. Having witnessed them first hand, he always knew the inside scoop and would share it with me. I was even lucky enough to have one of the Wear Purple ticket stubs

from Prince's sold-out Purple Rain concert in my possession.

There is one concert that will forever hold a place in my heart. It was the Nirvana benefit concert performed to raise money for Bosnian rape victims. They opened with the very emotional song Rape Me, and while the cause moved me, it was the emotion in the song that made me fall even more in love with music than I already was. After I left the concert that night, The Greek was not only my father's favorite place to be, but mine too.

My mom was not into music like my dad was; she preferred clothes to concerts. She taught me to sew, and together we made a quilt with the

concert t-shirts I outgrew. Between my father and I, we collected over two hundred pieces of chronicled music history.

Trying to figure out what I wanted to be when I grew up was always puzzling. I was torn between my father's love for music, my mother's love for fashion, and my love for capturing images of all things beautiful. I thought maybe I'd have a music career or go to the New York School of Fashion and Design like my mother had. Whichever career path I chose needed to lead me toward being able to take pictures. Maybe someday I'd create my own dream job that blended all three!

# Chapter One

---

## OUT OF MY HEAD

*You're always in my head  
Maybe it's the way you smile at me  
Maybe it's the way you laugh with  
me  
Maybe it's that we've known each  
other so long  
Thoughts of you are always in my  
head.*





## *October 2006...*

Walking through the greek-lettered doors of Kappa Sigma, I felt like I'd just stepped onto a movie set. It was Halloween, everyone was wearing costumes, holding red Solo cups, and dancing . . . well, not everyone. I looked twice to be certain, but sure as shit, there was a large, dark-blue ice luge in the center of the living room. The guy at the

bottom of the channel was my boyfriend, Ben, and the person in line behind him was my best friend, Aerie.

I didn't go to a lot of fraternity parties, and looking at the two of them under the almost kid-sized slide, I now knew why.

Frowning at the sight of the two drunken idiots who had been on the receiving end of the ice luge a few too many times, I headed toward the kitchen to grab a beer. As I crossed back into the living room, I could see Ben sucking on a lime and squinting his eyes with his nose scrunched as he vigorously moved his head from side to side. He was making a vain attempt to relieve the potent impact of the countless shots he

had just let flow freely down his throat. While shaking my head in amusement at him, I passed by a couple playing beer pong and giggled. If the state of the girl's condition was any indication of her skill level, the guy was obviously a much better player.

Noticing me, Ben shot me a wicked smirk and crooked his index finger, gesturing me toward him. He strode a few steps closer; his gaze holding mine as the crowd cleared the way.

Standing face to face, I could see that his forget-me-not blue eyes were slightly hooded, allowing me only a glimpse of his dilated pupils. His sly grin was still present, which alerted me to his somewhat coherent state of mind.

Raising an eyebrow, I pointed to the dark-blue ice sculpture. “Hey, how many times did you hit that?”

Feigning confusion, he raised his hands palms up. “Not sure,” he said as he cocked his head to one side while shrugging his shoulders.

Ben took the cup out of my hand and set it on the table beside us. He snaked his arms around my waist and pulled me to him. “Hey, Dahl. What took so long?” he asked as he rested his strong hands on my ass.

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I rested my forehead on his chin and let out a slow sigh. “Photo shoot took longer than expected. Drake had a meltdown when the models’ outfits

weren't the shade of purple he'd asked for."

Ben groaned and dipped his head to kiss me. "Drake's a fuckin' pansy-ass. He better hope you find a new internship for next semester because he's really starting to piss me off."

Flinching a little at his words, I leaned back to place my hands on his hard chest before looking into his slightly glazed eyes. "Ben, promise me you'll stay away from him."

"Will do. Promise, Dahl," he chuckled, the smell of alcohol strong on his breath.

I sighed and ran my hands up to his hair, combing my fingers through it.

Looking at me with concern, he

whispered, “You okay?”

“Of course. The wrong color purple isn’t really the end of the world.”

He studied me and hesitated before responding. “Dahl, you know that’s not what I mean.”

I stiffened. I knew what he meant, but I didn’t want to talk about the anniversary of my parents’ death.

“Ben, I’m cool. Let’s have a good time,” I muttered. I broke our embrace, grabbed my beer, and looked around the room for Aerie.

Ben nodded in acknowledgment, his sly grin returning while he watched me chug the entire contents of the Solo cup before chewing on the ice cubes that were left behind. Beckoning me to the

center of the room, he swooshed his arm and pointed to the luge. "This way, gorgeous."

Having refilled our drinks, we stood at the liquor-filled ice dispenser. The party was in full swing, and I watched Ben hit the luge yet again. I excused myself to use the restroom; I glanced around at the mass of people and pushed through the chaos. There were wall-to-wall people in every room. I stumbled into a tall guy with red hair, and I knew he was beyond drunk when he tried to kiss me. I shoved him and giggled when he tripped over his own feet and fell on his ass. I continued making my way to the stairs. They were covered with a throng of people that were drinking,

making out, or doing way more than I ever needed to see.

The room smelled like alcohol mixed with sweat, and I suddenly felt like I couldn't get out of there soon enough. I had to carefully weave around the crowd on the stairs and was thankful when I finally made it to the bathroom.

After I left the bathroom, I went to Ben's room for a much needed mental break. This particular day was the hardest one of the year for me, but participating in the party festivities always seemed to help me through it. As I headed toward his bed, I noticed the tickets he gave me this morning. I knew he meant well buying us tickets to see one of my favorite bands, Maroon 5,



perform at The Greek. I felt horrible about my knee-jerk reaction. When he gave them to me it was because he thought he would brighten an otherwise dark day for me, but I couldn't go back there. I experienced such joy there with my dad, and I couldn't bear it. It would only remind me how much I miss him.

Sighing, I threw myself on the bed. Yes, he meant well and he really wanted to be the one to take me there, but he knew I would never go back. I've told him this. When he bought those tickets, he probably thought he could bring back the happiness I once shared there with my father. Sadly, I haven't been back to The Greek since I was fourteen years old and went to the U2 concert. It was

the last concert I went to with my family before my mother, my aunt, and my father died in a small plane crash coming home from Mexico. So, going back to The Greek can never bring me happiness, only sadness at the loss of my family and my longing to have them back. I'm not sure how long I stayed in his room thinking about my parents until I finally decided to rejoin the party.

I stopped in the kitchen to grab a third beer, and then I headed back into the living room. All the lights had been turned off and orange candles glowed everywhere as the sound of haunting music filled the room.

I felt a strong arm wrap around my waist and Ben nibbled on my ear.

“Where you been, Dahl?”

“Just grabbing a beer,” I answered, holding my Solo cup up in the air and twisting around in his arms.

Loud screams diverted my attention back to the ice luge where Aerie was jumping up and down, grabbing her throat, and squealing as if in pain. Motioning my head toward her, I set my cup down on the banister. “What’s she drinking?”

Clutching his arms tighter around my hips, he pulled me closer to him. As he slipped his long fingers inside the waistband of my black leggings, he fingered the lace of my panties and whispered in my ear, “Don’t know.” Then he placed one of his legs between

mine and asked, “Want some?”

I shook my head no and was nearly panting as I responded. “I promised Aerie I’d go with her to the bar and listen to some new band. One of us should stay somewhat lucid—at least until we get there.”

He trailed his hands across the top of my panties; the fingertips of his one hand grazed from my backside across to my hipbone. Before I knew what was happening, his fingers started drifting down into the front of my pants.

“I didn’t mean the luge,” he said coyly before plunging his tongue into my ear and grinding his hips into mine.

I pulled back from him and effectively removed his hands from

inside my leggings. I needed to stop this very public display of affection before I couldn't. I brushed his blond hair away from his seductive blue eyes and asked, "You coming?"

Grinning fiendishly, he answered, "I hope to be soon, gorgeous!"

I laughed and shook my head. "Ben Covington, you're impossible."

Loud music played overhead in the dimly lit room that was largely occupied by trick-or-treaters who paid no attention to us. I reached around his neck and tugged his head down to mine, melding my mouth to his. He really was something else.

Ben pulled his soft lips from mine and groaned in my ear. "My room now. I

need to fuck you.”

I leaned back and stared at his incredibly irresistible grin. Summoning all of my willpower, I tried to decide what to do.

Before I could respond, Aerie tugged my ponytail. She had a light sway to her stance and with her slightly slurred words she said, “There you are, girlfriend! You ready?”

Disentangling myself from him, I shrugged my shoulders and mouthed, “Sorry. Rain check?”

He exhaled and muttered under his breath to Aerie, “Nice fucking timing.”

Aerie, being Aerie, thumped him in the forehead. “Watch the language, asshole,” she quipped haughtily as she

reached for my arm.

Leaning back toward Ben, I gave him a swift kiss. With Aerie forcefully tugging me toward the door, I managed to say, “Meet you back here later.” Walking backwards and giggling, I blew Ben a kiss and waved goodbye.

Rocking back on his heels, he stood with both hands in his pockets while biting his lip and shaking his head at me.



The cool night helped to settle the heat Ben had just sparked in my body.

Sounds of Halloween echoed from every direction as we walked down fraternity row. I put my hands over my ears to block the shrill of the annoying sounds filtering from house windows. I glanced at Aerie, or more specifically, at her devil costume. She must have been plastered when she got ready because it wasn't something I could have ever imagined her wearing. It really was the most ridiculous outfit; a very short red sequin dress, high heels, and all the accessories to match. It could barely pass as an acceptable red-light district ensemble—let alone a Halloween costume.

As we walked toward the bar, I grabbed a stumbling Aerie by the arm



before she landed on her ass. “Have a nice trip?” I laughed, knowing full well she didn’t like to be made fun of but not really caring right now.

Aerie shrugged, pulling her wavy beautiful blonde hair back and fastening it with the clip she had been fishing out of her purse when she missed her step. “Be nice,” she quipped, stopping me so she could readjust her shoe. “At least you can’t call me a non-conformist!” She stopped pouting, having resolved her anger toward my sarcastic remark by assaulting me with her drunken words.

I had never told Aerie that Halloween was the anniversary of my parents’ death. Ben was the only one who knew. He understood why I disliked

Halloween and why I never dressed up. For me, it was already a dark day, and I never felt the need to cover my sadness by camouflaging my feelings with a costume.

I sighed at her intoxicated state and recognized my own, not exactly sober, frame of mind; I wrapped my arm around her shoulder and put on my very best Vincent Price voice from *Thriller*. “Ahhhahahahaaaaa, you know I never conform. It’s against my religion.”

We continued walking—Aerie in red high-heel vixen pumps, me in black Converse sneakers—and she tripped again, leaving her shoe behind her this time. “Aerie, really, I think your outfit could have done without those shoes.

They're too big, you dumbass." I turned around and picked up her shoe. "What size are these?" I asked, squinting to see inside the shoe.

"Don't worry about it; it's not like you'd ever wear them anyway, Miss I-Always-Have-to-Wear-Comfortable-Shoes. It was the only pair of red shoes left, and one size too big is hardly an issue when they match your outfit perfectly," she announced, yanking the shoe out of my hand. "You know it's all about the look. I'd sacrifice comfort for style any day. Ahem..." she cleared her throat while looking down at my shoes.

Shaking my head at her, I couldn't help but roll my eyes. "Whatever."

I walked a little slower so she could

keep her shoes on. Aerie said in a much sweeter voice, “Thanks for taking me out. Now, come on. Let’s get moving and have some fun. It’s girls’ night out after all, and I have a broken heart to mend.”

I gave her a little smile as I squeezed her arm. “Sweetheart, I think you started the mending process hours ago!”

Aerie shuffled down the sidewalk to hold her shoes in place, and I just knew this was going to be an interesting night. Aerie, my best friend since freshman year, broke up with her boyfriends like I changed the flavor of my coffee creamer—often.

Aerie was a Type-A personality, but you would never have known this in her drunken state. Her major flaw was her

drive for perfection, not just with herself, but also with her boyfriends. When a guy fell short of the perfection she expected, she simply moved on. As was the case with her last boyfriend and she broke up with him yesterday. Tonight she was looking forward to new horizons, and I was looking forward to listening to a new band.

# Chapter Two

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## NEXT LIFETIME

*What am I going to do  
I want you in my life  
But I can't have you for myself  
Because I belong to someone else  
So I'll see you in our next lifetime.*



We walked through the open door to the USC Campus Bar and Aerie pulled her tail up. “At least they aren’t playing that Halloween crap in here,” she yelled a little too loudly. As my ears adjusted to a more peaceful sound, I heard a velvety soft voice singing an unfamiliar, yet captivating song.

Aerie stopped to put her devil horns on, and I glanced through the large room at all of the familiar faces while trying to

get a glimpse of the band on stage. I shouted directly into her ear, “They sound really good. Have you heard them before?”

She was on her toes trying to see over the crowd of people. I laughed at her short stature until her pointy devil horn hit me in the eye. “No, but love their sound,” she responded, still trying to see the stage and almost falling over.

I had been coming here for the last three years to listen to music, experience new bands, and dance. I couldn't ever remember seeing this bar so crowded. There were so many people around I could barely see the long wooden bar to my right, and with the mass of bodies bumping and grinding on the dance floor,



I couldn't even catch a glimpse of the stage behind it.

Looking at Aerie, I asked, "Do you know their name?"

"I think they're called The Wilde Ones," she hiccupped and laughed. She winked at me as she started to dance her way toward some friends she had just spotted on the dance floor and yelled over her shoulder, "By the way, I love them! Great name and an even greater sound."

Aerie was like two people in one. Sober Aerie was a perfectly performing machine, with impatience and order ingrained in her life. Drunken Aerie was a sober Aerie with fun and downright craziness mixed in. I'm not sure which

one I preferred.

“I’ll get drinks and meet you out there in a bit,” I said to no one since she was already gone. Throngs of people surrounded me as I made my way to the bar. When the bartender acknowledged me, I ordered two beers, one with ice and one without, and tacked on two shots to continue in my quest to help Aerie drown out her misery.

The live music stopped and the typical mix of Halloween songs played throughout the room. I turned my back to the bar and scanned the crowd for Aerie. You would think she would be easy to spot in her red sequin devil costume. She said she was out for vengeance and if her outfit of choice was any

indication, she was going to be vindicated.

Looking through the crowd, I didn't see her anywhere but what I did see was one attractive silhouette, and I was drawn to it. The silhouette was that of a guy. He was still too far away for me to zero in on any specific physical feature. But something . . . no everything about him drew my attention.

I studied the silhouette's movement and noticed the beauty of his walk; he was captivating and he oozed confidence. He seemed to be relaxed and not in a hurry, like he knew exactly where he was going. This attractive guy was strutting in my direction and as he got closer I was completely mesmerized.

Biting my bottom lip, I was unable to focus on anything else but him. My head was still a little foggy from the three beers I had consumed earlier. I was clearly not thinking straight when I made eye contact with him and slowly studied his body from head to toe purposefully.

As the distance between us narrowed, I could see that his physical appearance was just as captivating as his walk. He was alarmingly attractive: long, lean, and muscular but not bulky. He wore a black beanie hat with his light brown hair sticking out here and there. When I looked into his eyes, they simply undid me. Although I couldn't see their color, the intensity of them was extremely powerful. It was almost as

though if I looked into them for too long I might never get out. His eyes aside, the words handsome and gorgeous weren't strong enough adjectives to describe him.

My mind wandered to where it shouldn't. Knowing better than to compare this captivating guy to my boyfriend, I did it anyway. I felt incredibly guilty, but I couldn't help myself. My boyfriend was all surfer. He was attractive, hot, and sexy with an ego to match. This breathtaking guy was equally as attractive, hot, and sexy, but there was something else—something more. I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

Easing his way through the crowd, he removed his beanie, and ran his hands

through his hair. I swear I could see a hint of copper peeking through his light brown locks. When our eyes connected it felt like minutes, in reality it was mere seconds. At that moment, something happened inside of me. The connection was like nothing I'd ever felt before. It was an electric pull that willed me in and forced me to keep looking at him.

Everything I saw and everything I felt translated into three little words—he is dangerous. I knew I should look away, walk away, but I didn't. I couldn't. He was just too alluring. I wanted to know everything about him and I hadn't even met him yet. With those three words swirling around in my mind, other thoughts screamed over them. Thoughts I

couldn't ignore, and I knew I needed to see this through.

He was finally close enough that I could see that his gleaming eyes were green. Their soft, reflective sheen reminded me of two crystal balls. I was instantly drawn to his smile like a magnet. It wasn't a full smile, more like a half grin emphasizing his dimples. His skin was smooth with no facial hair and that made me weak in the knees. He had full lips that made me want to kiss him, and I don't know why. I'd never looked at another guy like this before, not even Ben. So why was I eyeing him this way, and why was I unable to avert my gaze?

Aside from his overall physical sex appeal, his simple clothing choice made

him even more irresistible. He wore faded jeans, a black Foreigner concert t-shirt, and black work boots. I had to laugh a little when I saw the concert t-shirt because I was wearing one too. Mine was my dad's with U2 emblazoned across the front. I had it knotted on the side, which allowed the neck to hang off my shoulder.

Having managed his way through the crowd much better than I had, he was standing right in front of me. His face was breathtaking; he had an adorable chin, a small straight nose, perfectly shaped eyebrows, and long eyelashes. He was an utter vision of perfection and I couldn't help but smile.

The bar was crowded and there was



no room on either side of me. Putting both hands in his pockets, he stood where he was and smiled back at me. Then, running his tongue over his bottom lip, he asked in a low, sexy voice, “Were you staring at me?”

I pouted my lips and rolled my eyes. I was a little shocked by his candor. I took a deep breath as I straightened my shoulders and placed my hands on my hips, “No, I was just looking for my friend while I waited on my drinks. You just happened to be in my line of vision.”

He chuckled a little then said, “That look was hot.”

I huffed out a breath and tried not to laugh. *Did he really just say that?*

When the bartender brought my order and set it in front of me, my phone started ringing in my pocket, but I ignored it as I continued to stare at him. “Why would you think I was looking at you, anyway?”

As the person beside me settled her tab and walked away, he moved to fill the empty space and tossed his beanie next to my drink. His close proximity caused my pulse to race and my heart to pound faster. Leaning sideways, he rested his hip against the bar. With his eyes still locked on mine he answered, “Because I was staring at you, and I was hoping you were staring back.”

When I turned to speak, I instantly lost my train of thought. I looked directly

into those powerful green eyes, so full of intensity, and I was lost. With the electric pull only growing stronger between us, I feared I wasn't going to be able to get out unscathed.

He dragged his teeth across his bottom lip and his eyes moved to scan my body. The expression on his face told me he wanted to do more than just talk to me. My stomach felt a little strange because I wanted to do more as well. As his eyes continued to study me, goosebumps ran up my arms. I couldn't remember ever getting those simply from the way someone looked at me.

A moment of comfortable silence passed before he cocked his head to the side in the most adorable way and

grinned. "With all this talk about who was staring at whom I think we forgot the basics, I'm River," he said as he extended his hand with the most devilish grin on his face.

Feeling almost bewitched by him, I put my hand out to shake his but quickly pulled it away. Unfortunately, in doing so I bumped into the person standing next to me and accidentally spilled his beer.

He gave me a dirty look while swearing under his breath. River's grin quickly turned into a frown, and he gently moved me away. In a clipped tone he apologized, "Sorry man, just an accident, but let me buy you another."

The now drink-less man with a

somewhat wet shirt looked at him and nodded but never smiled. River pulled out his wallet. Nodding his head at the man, he handed him a ten. “Buy two.” The man took the money and walked away, muttering something under his breath. River immediately brought his attention back to me, and I bit the corner of my lower lip and smiled at him.

There we were, standing face to face, with only a few drinks separating us. Sliding one of the beers toward him, I took a sip of my own even though the ice had melted. “Thank you, that guy sure as shit wasn’t happy with me. In fact he kind of acted like an asshole.”

Taking a sip of his drink, he started to laugh, almost spitting it out. Skimming

his finger over my bare shoulder, his eyes locked on mine. “You’re more than welcome.”

Quivering from his simple touch and intense gaze, I took a step back, fearful of where this might lead.

Moving forward, he traced my last step. He was not going to let the distance widen between us. He stared intently into my eyes and asked, “Now, where were we? Do we need to start over?” He waited for my response as he watched me swallow my drink.

I pulled my lower lip to the side with my teeth and smiled playfully. “We were introducing ourselves.”

“Okay, so let’s try again. I’m River and you are . . .?”

My eyes scrutinized his face in search of a non-verbal clue. I found it instantly in his grin. Poking my finger into his chest, I slowly eyed him before taunting, “I’m not sure you need to know that information right now. I’m kind of thinking you might be a stalker.”

His eyes widened as he laughed at me. “You’re not serious are you beautiful girl?”

Unable to control my own laughter, I simply said, “Maybe I am,” but my laughter subsided when I realized the sweet name he’d given me.

Leaning toward me, he was close enough that I could inhale his fresh scent. It was soapy, just out of the shower, a simply amazing smell.

“What? If you’re not going to tell me your name then I get to call you whatever I want.”

Averting my eyes from his gaze, I looked down.

After taking another sip of his beer, he set the mug down. He hooked my chin with his finger and tilted my head up toward him. His lingering touch seared my skin and left it tingling. He stared at me with his intense green eyes and chuckled a little. “Can we talk about you thinking I’m a Jack the Ripper type? I just want you to know, I’m definitely not. In fact, I think it’s safe to say you were staring at me first, but in no way do I think you’re a stalker.”

His touch made me quiver and my



mouth dropped open. I was unsure of what to say. I knew he was right. I had stared first. I was surprised that he would call me out on it.

Cocking his head to the side he said, “So we can get past this; let’s just say I was staring first. Not that it really matters.”

We were looking into each other’s eyes as the bartender presented me with my bill. When I turned to pay for my drinks, the connection was broken. Handing my money to the bartender, I thanked him and told him to keep the change. This diversion gave me some time to think about how to handle this potentially dangerous situation. I also had to consider my love for Ben.

I watched River as he ordered two more beers, and I realized that I had to figure out these strange new feelings I was experiencing. I wanted to explore them further because our initial connection from a distance had intensified; not only from his nearness, but also from his total honesty and raw charm. I pushed aside any feelings of guilt about my flirtatious behavior. I handed him one of the shots and said, "Cheers."

People were bumping into him, into me, but neither of us seemed to care. He looked down at my shirt and back up again before lifting his shot glass to clink mine.

"It's a beautiful day," he toasted

before drinking his shot.

I tried not to show how turned on I was that he had just quoted the lyrics from one of my favorite songs. All of his irresistible gestures throughout this encounter were competing for first place in my head, but all of them deserved it.

Setting his shot glass down, he put his hand in his pocket. “So, does this mean you forgive me?”

The sound of his voice was strong, but soft, and made him even more tempting. I found myself thinking that he was not only adorable, but he was something else entirely. I knew I shouldn’t be doing this. I had a boyfriend that I loved waiting for me.

I raised an eyebrow and questioned,

“Forgive you? Forgive you for what?” I was having a hard time concentrating on the conversation and honestly had no idea what the apology was for.

He shifted on his feet. “You know what? Never mind,” he muttered in my ear. His warm breath reached my neck and I wanted to feel it everywhere.

Looking me up and down, he changed the subject and asked, “What, no costume?”

Continuing with this dangerous flirtation, I glanced down my own body, motioning with my hands from head to toe. “How do you know this isn’t my costume?”

While tugging on my t-shirt and pulling me a little closer, he seductively

whispered, “If that's your costume you're definitely taking first place in the contest because it's the sexiest one I've ever seen.”

We were silent for a minute; not even our heavy breathing could be heard. The noise from the bar and the crowd of the people around us had extinguished, but his words, his touch; they inflamed me, excited me, and sent fire through my veins.

“Where'd you get this anyway?” he asked, tugging at the knot on my shirt pulling me even closer.

It felt like the room was spinning and I wasn't sure if it was him, the alcohol, or the fact that he just asked me a question I didn't want to answer. “My

dad managed The Greek and was a collector of concert t-shirts,” I said, trying to push back the emotion welling inside me.

He seemed to understand my hesitation, maybe from my use of the word ‘was’ or maybe from my body language. He nodded, cleared his throat, and once again totally changed the subject.

“So, have you ever seen Foreigner play?” he asked, now pointing to his own shirt and grinning.

As I looked at the bold white letters across his shirt, I pushed aside all of my sadness and focused on our conversation. We were just two people who had a lot in common, talking, or at

least that was what I wanted to think. When our drinks were gone, he ordered another round. As I finished the shot, I accidentally slammed the glass on the bar, causing a loud crack and the bartender glowered at me. I mouthed, "Sorry."

River reached out and grabbed a strand of my hair that had come loose from my ponytail. He very slowly tucked it behind my ear, sending shivers down my spine. Circling his index finger around my ear, he lightly tugged on my lobe. He sparked a heat within my body that I didn't know existed. He did this in one swift movement, causing my scalp to tingle while my ear lobe was on fire.

Gulping the drink I didn't need to be

drinking, I hoped to extinguish that fire. I also hoped no one saw him touch me that way. Ben would be fucking furious. He was ridiculously jealous and we had many arguments about other men, all unjustified. At least until now.

As the strobe lights started to flicker and I leaned my hip against the bar for support, he put his hand on my waist and turned me so my back was against the bar. Had he noticed I almost lost my balance because of the flashing lights and my own dizziness? Moving to stand directly in front of me, he put his hands on either side of me and pressed his palms into the bar. He was effectively enveloping me, but I didn't feel trapped at all. I honestly didn't know what I felt,



but I knew my heart was pounding out of my chest; my stomach was doing flips, and I got light-headed as the goosebumps returned.

He braced his arms on both sides of me and I thought he was going to kiss me as he stared intently into my eyes. I closed my eyes preparing for the kiss but I felt him abruptly pull away. Immediately, I heard a high-pitched voice squeal, "River, don't forget we're leaving right after the show," and before I could catch a glimpse of the girl, she bounced away.

Smirking at me he said, "My little sister has the worst timing."

I was going to respond when I heard a strange drum roll echo through the bar.

Glancing around, I tried to figure out what it was for. With an amused look on his face, he rolled his eyes before shifting them to the stage and back to mine. “That would be for me,” he laughed, leaning in so we were face to face. “They want me back on stage. I’ve gotta go unless you’d rather I stay and we finish what we started? Because that certainly would be way more fun.”

I really hadn’t heard anything he said, but everything seemed to finally make sense. He was the enamoring voice I heard when I came into the bar, and right now he was so close to me I could feel his warm breath and smell his soapy scent. He was so charming, so captivating, and so aware of me. I was

pretty sure I was drunk because I was feeling things I should not have been feeling. As I stared into his powerful green eyes, I knew I should've been trying to swim out of them.

Before I could say anything in response, he moved his head slightly back, lifted my hand, and slowly kissed it. Then he leaned into me and whispered right in my ear with his wet lips, "Guess not. Not yet anyway." My hand was on fire, my ear scorching; I should have dressed up as the Wicked Witch of the West because not only was I pure evil, I was melting.

That same strange drum roll rumbled through the sound system again and he quickly dunked his head back to look at

me. "I gotta jet."

He was still holding my hand, as he looked straight into my eyes. "You'll wait for me until after the show."

It wasn't a question, more like a statement. And then motioning between him and me, he added, "Because this isn't finished."

At that moment I realized that what had started as harmless flirting had turned into a situation that had gotten way too dangerous for me; it was bordering on trouble.

He placed his hands on the bar, surrounding me in his arms again, but not touching me, and waited for a response. Since he hadn't really asked a question that I wanted to answer, I just smiled and

said, "If you're in the band you'd better go, you shouldn't leave your fans waiting."

He took that as a response, or maybe he didn't, since he wasn't really looking for one. Maybe he was just in a hurry. But either way, he gave me one last heart-stopping grin and then leaned in and kissed me. My body reacted strangely to his kiss. A rush of something I couldn't identify surged through me. At first he only lightly touched my lips with his then for a few short seconds he pressed a little harder before pulling away. I didn't kiss him back, but I was completely lost in the moment.

"I hope you've become a fan," he said, winking at me before grabbing his

hat. Then he turned and walked away.

I brought my fingers to the place he had just kissed and watched as his silhouette walked away; taking in the sway that had captivated me from the moment I laid eyes on him. I became vaguely aware of the music being piped through the sound system. The song *Superstition* was being played overhead, but I wasn't really listening to it because my mind was on him.

I shook my head, trying to rid the thoughts that should not be in there. I knew I had to leave, or I would end up doing something that I would regret. I had to leave for two reasons. First, I loved Ben, and second, Ben would fucking kill River just for looking at me

the way he did. And then there was the kiss; yes, Ben would do more than kill him.

Knowing these things, I wondered why I hadn't walked away in the first place. For a moment there, I felt as though I believed in love at first sight, which I didn't. And how could love at first sight even exist when you were already in love with someone else? I didn't want to analyze the events of tonight because I was confused as hell, and the answers would not be what I wanted to hear.

I smiled about my exchange with this enamoring stranger. He definitely was not a stalker. He was a guy that was adorably charming and utterly

charismatic, a guy who had a simple ease about him that I really liked, and a guy I didn't ever need to see again. This I knew for certain because our complete awareness of each other scared the shit out of me, and his touch did something to me. It made me afraid that the danger would win out, and I wasn't going to let that happen. I had a boyfriend that I loved, and he was waiting for me at his house.

With thoughts of River swirling around in my head, I made my way through the crowd to the dance floor where I found Aerie with some kind of pink drink in her hand. "We have to leave. Now!" I shouted at her while pulling her off the dance floor.



“What? Why? Are you sick?” she asked, struggling for words.

Then she turned and pointed to the stage. “Because if you’re not, I want to see that hot guy sing first.”

I turned to see where she was pointing and sure enough it was at him, River, the guy who captivated me with his charm and attitude. It was then that I realized I’d never even told him my name.

Pulling Aerie through the crowd under protest, I heard the audience chanting River Wilde, River Wilde. I glanced up to the stage just in time to see him grab the microphone. Before the live music started we exited through the door, and Aerie started yelling obscenities at

me. As we walked away I found myself thinking I had just met the most enchanting guy and knowing that I might never be the same.

# Chapter Three

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## IT'S NOT MY TIME

*Looking into the future I see the  
plans we have  
And the dreams that we both share  
Happiness is what we believe  
But we are in a world that tries to  
take it away  
I wish it wasn't my time.*



### *March 2010...*

I looked in the mirror, trying to decide whether or not the pearl necklace would take the edge away from my deep V-necked black cocktail dress. The bathroom counter was covered in different necklaces, our dirty clothes were in a heap on the hamper, and dirty towels were thrown all over the floor. I smiled when I glanced up and saw Ben's

reflection in the mirror. He was leaning with his shoulder on the bathroom doorframe, a wicked grin on his face, and a wild glimmer in his piercing blue eyes.

“Pearls or no pearls?” I asked as I watched him stride toward me in the mirror. I had known him since I was five years old, but for some reason the way he looked at me then left me breathless.

Ben wrapped his tan arms around my waist and started to kiss my neck. I could feel the soft, warm skin of his freshly shaven face. “Dahl, I’d prefer nothing at all to be perfectly honest,” he muttered while he began to unzip my dress.

“Hey, we’re going to be late,” I

quipped. "LA is at least an hour drive." I tried, unsuccessfully, to wiggle out of the one arm he still had around my waist as he continued to unzip my dress with the other.

Still watching Ben in the mirror, I saw him bite his lip as he let out a little groan. "Well, it's my party, and I can be late if I want to," he whispered in my ear then resumed kissing my neck. Ben looked incredibly hot in his black tuxedo with slicked back hair and a clean-shaven face. I felt a slight stirring throughout my body from his close proximity, which made me decide against wriggling out of his arm. Instead, I turned around to look at him.

I was so proud of how successful

Ben had become in such a short time. He landed a job at the LA Times right out of college and proved his extreme confidence and ability in only a few short years with his focus and dedication to his job. Even though the commute from Laguna was tedious at most, he didn't mind doing it, especially since he wasn't required to go into the office every day. My fiancé was going to be receiving California's Journalist of the Year award at a prestigious dinner in LA for his brilliant work in underground crime investigation. I knew I wasn't the only one full of excitement, even if I was the only one who showed it.

Ben's lack of enthusiasm toward the honor he was receiving wasn't like him.

In fact, he hadn't been acting like himself all week. He wasn't acting different in a good way or a bad way—just different, and I had been trying to figure out what was driving his mood. I wasn't sure if I should be concerned or touched by his actions. They were definitely a little strange to tell the truth. He had been sweeter than he usually was; he sent me flowers, he bought me candy, he spent every night at home with me. He had even shown up at my office every day to take me to lunch.

Ben was never the type of boyfriend to dote; he wasn't a flowers and chocolates romantic kind of guy, and I wasn't the kind of girl who needed that. I liked my independence and so did he.



He had always taken care of me and loved me in his own way, but never in all our years together had he done the types of things he'd done that week.

Once before, he came close to acting like a doting boyfriend, but technically he wasn't my boyfriend at the time. I'd broken up with him and because of his borderline doting then, I was always wary of this behavior from him at any time.

The event leading up to our breakup and its cause will forever be ingrained in my mind. I remember clearly the day I popped into Ben's room at his frat house. It was the end of the first semester of our senior year at USC. I stopped by to tell him I'd finally gotten

the internship I really wanted at Sound Music. I was so happy that I wasn't going to have to intern for Drake anymore, and I knew Ben would be thrilled. He wasn't in his room when I got there, so I sat down at his desk to send his sister, Serena, a quick email to share my news with her. I knew she'd be excited for me.

I pressed the space bar on his computer and his email account was already opened, so I figured I'd just type my quick note from there. Instead of hitting compose I accidentally clicked on the trash folder. I noticed the date October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2006 right away. As my eyes scanned the screen, the words *Reply to: S'belle, later tonight, green*

*eyes, touch, copper, and your apartment* were all that registered before he came over and quickly right clicked, hitting the delete button. His presence startled me as I hadn't heard him walk into the room. I gaped at him in astonishment that he just deleted that email so quickly in front of my eyes. I hadn't had a chance to read the whole thing, but I knew he must have been hiding something. *Was he really making plans with another girl? Plans that were not in the least bit platonic?*

He admitted to emailing this girl and socializing with her but assured me nothing sexual had actually happened. In the end, he confessed that their relationship was inappropriate. He

swore he would end it, and I'm sure he did; but I couldn't trust him, so I broke up with him.

Everyday from that day forward he called me. Over the next three months, little 'remember me' items turned up almost daily. He was trying so hard to convince me to forgive him. He left notes on my car, flowers at my door, voice messages with profuse apologies, text messages confessing his love, he showed up anywhere he knew I would be, and he even bought me a silver-plated coffee cup with a note saying 'To brighten up your mornings'.

It was a long, hard three-month separation. I never realized just how much I would actually miss him, but I

did—a lot. So I decided to trust him and move past the dishonesty. I really did love him, and I knew he loved me. Perhaps I also felt a little guilty about my own encounter with a certain singer of a band that wasn't exactly innocent.

So yes, the doting alarmed me, not that I didn't appreciate his kind gestures, but it just made me think something was wrong. Was there something not right in our relationship, a relationship that already had its share of ups and downs? Maybe this behavior was just one of the ups, or maybe Ben's sudden emergence into romance had something to do with wanting to get married since we had never talked about setting a wedding date.

The one thing I was sure about was our love and commitment to each other. We grew up together. We had been boyfriend and girlfriend since we were sixteen, and we had been engaged for two years. We may have disagreed on many things and argued more than I preferred, but we always fell back on our longevity; especially since the root of most of our disagreements stemmed from something I could not fix. Our arguments were usually the result of Ben's jealousy or self-concern. Ben would be jealous if another man so much as looked at me, which was ironic because Ben himself was always very flirtatious. He was also self-centered. This trait was more a function of who he

was; a man with drive and determined to get ahead, although sometimes I wondered at what cost.

Shaking my head, I had no idea what was going on with Ben. However, I made an effort to push aside the disconcerting thoughts and just embrace the moment.

“Today is your big day,” I said while looking into his eyes. I gave him a large happy smile full of pride for his accomplishments. I diverted my eyes from his when I said, “And your party or not, it would be rude for the main speaker to be late.” I kissed him on the lips to help soften my words. “Now zip my dress back up, and tell me what you think.”

Ben gave me his dangerous smile but didn't move. "You can be very bitch . . . y, oh I mean boss . . . y. I think you look fucking gorgeous," he snickered, finally turning me back around to zip my dress.

I looked at him in the mirror again as he was still grinning at me. "No, the pearls silly! Should I wear them or not?" I asked while holding them up to my neck again.

Ben's smile faded a little as he took the pearls from my hands. "No pearls. They remind me of your grandma. Not that I didn't love your Grammy, but I love you in a totally different way. I don't want Grammy images popping up in my head while I'm fucking you." He turned me back around and kissed me



right on the chest where the pearl necklace would have sat, while he ran his hand up under my dress. I shivered from his contact, and his bright smile returned.

I laughed lightly and said, “Stop it Ben Covington! You can’t do that after talking about Grammy, it just seems wrong.” I moved aside and started to leave the bathroom to go put on my shoes. I tripped over a towel on my way out and said, “Maybe you could try cleaning up after yourself a little,” but he knew I was kidding since I was much messier than he was.

“I love you, you know,” Ben said while he followed me out of the bathroom.

As I sat on the bed, still unmade from our afternoon romp, I slipped on one of my shoes before pulling my leg up onto the bed. “I know, and I love you too.” Once again, I wondered: why the onslaught of affection?

Ben stood over me to help me fasten the ankle strap of my left shoe. I noticed his facial expression change again, taking on a more serious tone. “No Dahlia, I really, really love you. Never forget it, no matter what.”

“Dahlia? You never call me that,” I said as I wriggled my foot and ran it up his stomach trying to lighten the mood.

Ben smirked at my gesture, set my foot down, and walked over to his dresser. I was at a loss for words as he

reached into one of the drawers and pulled out a Cartier box. Walking back to the bed, he handed me the box and said, “I bought this for you because it says what I never seem to be able to say to you.”

Surprised at the lavish name on the box, I looked at it for a few seconds before opening it. Inside was a stunning white gold and diamond bracelet. It had four hearts engraved around the edge. I knew it well because I had written a paper about that piece of jewelry in college for one of my style classes. The bracelet was created by Cartier in the 1970s and is meant to be a symbol of genuine loving attachment; a discreet token of passionate love. It is to be

locked firmly onto the loved one's wrist by the giver with the aid of an included golden screwdriver of which the giver remains the guardian. Looking up at him, my eyes started to fill with tears, and without words I put my hand out for him to fasten the bracelet around my wrist.

Staring at the beautiful piece of jewelry, overcome by emotion, I tried not to cry. "I love it," I said while swallowing hard. He leaned down and kissed me softly on the lips. I gazed at him and noticed his eyes were slightly weepy, and his forehead was creased.

I kept watching him as he turned around and walked toward what used to be my mother's hope chest. It was old, and the creamy-white paint was almost

completely peeled off. Ben's strides were slow and deliberate. His display of emotion was unusual. I had never seen him that overcome, not even when he asked me to marry him. He just wasn't very emotional; it wasn't his nature.

Turning the key that I always left in the keyhole, he opened the lid to the chest and said, "I don't see why you'd ever have to take off the bracelet, but just in case I'll put this," he held the screwdriver up in the air, "In here so you know where to find it, okay?" He winked at me while pointing to the chest. I knew he never liked how unorganized I could be, but he knew I could always find anything of importance in that chest that had belonged to my mother.

I watched as Ben looked for a place to put the screwdriver. His search seemed to be done with care and concern. He decided on a small square located in the red-velvet covered tray that was hinged to the lid. From the bed I could see all of the material items I held true to my heart stored in that chest. I smiled when I saw all my dolls, along with yearbooks, diplomas, and various pictures. I finished putting on my other shoe, stood up, and walked behind him. I wrapped my arms around his waist and squeezed. He grabbed my arms and squeezed back for a few seconds before placing his hands on the lid. As he closed the lid to the hope chest, I saw Malibu Ken lying on top of all the other

items, and my mind wandered back to the first time we had sex.

We were out surfing at our favorite spot, miles away from people and cars. The swells were small so the surf was unburdened. It started to lightly rain, but we remained with our arms stretched in the air riding the most perfect waves. When the rain fell harder we swam to shore, boards attached to our legs. It was almost pouring as we made a run for the car. Ben carried both of our boards while I carried all the other gear. The crackle of the thunder was loud and the jolt made him fall with the two boards toppling down. I stopped to help him, throwing all the gear I was carrying to the ground. He just looked at me and

laughed, “Fuck it.” Then he put both boards together in the sand to make a teepee of sorts.

We were sitting under the teepee watching the rain hit the waves like sheets of glass shattering on the ground when Ben leaned in and kissed me. We had kissed so many times before, but never like that. I pulled away at first, not sure where we were headed. I’d gone on the pill a couple months before in anticipation that Ben and I would finally have sex for the first time. And as the tide washed up onto the shore I knew the time was upon us—I knew the time was right.

Ben brought my lips back to his and thrust his tongue to meet mine. I closed



my eyes, craving his touch. I could smell the salt from the ocean on his warm skin and taste it on his tongue. He pulled me as close as he could and when we stopped kissing, I opened my eyes.

We were both breathing heavily, almost panting as the drumming of the rain continued. He gazed at me with his lips slightly parted, and I pressed my fingers against his lips and he kissed them. Then in a gesture of returning his kiss, I kissed my own fingers before running them down his bare chest and across his well-defined abdominal muscles. I heard a slight intake of breath and with hooded eyes he kissed my lips again, this time a little harder. As his tongue entwined with mine, he slipped

his hand inside my bikini top rubbing circles around my nipple with his thumb.

The wind picked up, blowing my hair across our connected faces. Moaning in his mouth and straddling his lap, I felt his erection as I ground my hips into his. I ran my hands through his wet hair and down his bare back, hard enough that I could feel the grit of the sand rubbing against his skin.

Kissing his way down my throat, Ben whispered, "I love you, Dahl," before moving his hand behind my neck and tugging the string that held my bikini top in place.

My head fell back as he lightly kissed each of my now fully exposed nipples in turn. I arched my back as his

kisses turned into sucks and licks, sending a jolt of pleasure through my core and a shiver down my spine. I could feel his smile against my skin as I whimpered, "I love you too."

Flashes of lightning lit the sky off in the distance, but the real spark was right here on the beach. As I reached down pressing my hands against the outside of Ben's board shorts, he moved his hands to the inside of my knees and spread my legs open wider as I continued to straddle his lap.

After outlining his erection with my fingers, I hooked my hands in the elastic of his shorts wanting to do the same without the wet barrier between us. As my hands descended, Ben pulled away.

“I want you, now.”

“I want you too,” I responded as I leaned back from him so I could see his face, leaving my hands where they were.

As the ominous storm assaulted the beach we continued to explore each other's bodies. When we were both panting uncontrollably, he stood up and reached for my hand, pulling me up, out of our shelter, and into the pouring rain.

“Come on let's go, I'll come back and get our shit later,” he managed to say while pulling me close enough so that I could feel the rain drops from his body mix with mine. We stood there touching and kissing as he pulled me into his hardness, running his fingers inside the back of my bikini bottom.

Pulling away I looked around the deserted beach. "Let's stay here."

Ben didn't need any more convincing as he pulled me back under our surfboard teepee and we had sex for the first time.

I remembered looking at him that day so long ago, with his blond hair and perpetual tan. When we stood there in the rain, about to take the next step in our relationship, I thought he looked more and more like my Malibu Ken Doll, and I wanted to be his dream Barbie. Ever since that day I called him Malibu Ken or just Ken for short. I even remembered him saying in response to my nickname for him, "Shit, Dahl, people are going to think I play with Barbies." Then, with a

wicked grin, he said, “But that’s okay as long as you’re my Barbie.” He knew I was. That night I pulled out my Malibu Ken and set him on my dresser. When he saw it, with an amused look on his face he asked, “Barbie belonged to Ken right?” I nodded. He declared, “It’s cool then.”

I thought about how he tolerated my nickname for him over the years, even though he never really liked it. He just knew my Barbie dolls were my lifeline to my lost childhood, and I think that was why he never really protested the nickname. My dolls photographed well, they let me style them, they always looked great for the camera, and they reminded me of happier times.

Ben suddenly shut the lid completely, and the memory was gone. Blinking my eyes, I came back to the present as he turned and hugged me tightly. I don't remember the last time we hugged like that, and again I felt a bit alarmed until he looked me in the eyes and said with the slightest whisper, "Please Dahl, I want to fuck you, make love to you, before we go."

With all the emotion and love I felt for him, I really didn't care how late we were, so I whispered back, "How can I turn you down when you asked so nicely, and you did shave after all?" Then in a half-joking, half-serious voice I added, "But make it quick!" I grabbed the back of his head and pulled him to me for a

kiss.

Ben kissed me differently than he had ever kissed me before, and then he made love to me in a completely different way as well. He was full of passion and love, like usual, but I also felt a need in him I'd never sensed before. He loved sex, and we had it often. He was usually quick and to the point, but now he took his time, his eyes never left me, and he never said a word. The look in his eyes and the way he touched me told me everything I needed to know.

Afterwards, we held each other for a little while before he got up and went into the bathroom to get dressed again. I heard noises in the bathroom that sounded like sobbing. Ben had never



cried—ever—and knowing we were going to be late, I pushed the eerie feelings away and vowed we would talk about his strange behavior when we came home that night.



The ominous glow of the headlights ahead filtered through the rain as it continued to fall. I sat in his BMW and glanced over at him. Ben hated listening to top 40 music, but he turned the radio station to 102.7 for me anyway, which made me smile. We were listening to Gavin DeGraw's I'm in Love with a Girl. I was singing along to the lyrics

and was surprised when I saw Ben singing the words as well. Sensing me watching him, he turned, quickly looked at me, and stopped singing. "If I ever wrote a song, this is the one I'd have written about you," he said. Then he turned the radio up louder, and the lump that I had in my throat earlier returned.

We had been together so long that sometimes I lost sight of what I loved about him. At this moment I knew it was just everything; the way he carried his six-foot frame, his short dirty blond hair, his dimples, and the way he commanded attention from everyone with his confidence. Sometimes it seemed to border on arrogance, but it only made people notice him more.

Growing up he was all surfer, and even as an adult he still was. I smiled thinking that as a kid he had such a bad mouth, was hotheaded, and most teachers said he had a poor attitude, but I never thought so. That was just his way. As I looked over at him driving on the freeway I realized it still was his way, and God I loved him.

He looked at me as he pulled off the freeway, continuing to drive through the streets of LA. “What?” he said while turning the radio down, just as the song ended.

Grinning at him, I reached over the console to place my hand on his thigh and ran it up his leg. “We’re going to be late to your first award party, and it’s all

your fault.”

With a shit eating grin on his face he said, “So fucking worth it,” as he changed the radio station.

We stopped at a traffic light, and I took my hand off his leg to turn the radio station back. I heard tires squealing, and when I looked up, I saw a big black SUV with heavily tinted windows jackknifed in front of us. Its passenger door opened, and a man in a ski mask jumped out holding a gun.

I screamed at Ben, “Oh my God, he has a gun!”

Panic set in instantly, and I struggled to breathe as he approached Ben’s side of the car. “Get the fuck out of the car!”

I was frozen in place as my body

riveted with fear. *What's going on?* In my panicked state, I hit the lock button on the door, but the car was already locked. My sweaty palms were shaking, and I grabbed for Ben. He looked at me, and I knew he was trying to contain his own emotions. "Just keep calm, Dahl."

My eyes were locked on the gunman as his eyes shifted to mine. Terror shot through me as he tapped his gun against the window a couple of times and then pointed it at me.

Frantically, I started beating the dash and was screaming, "Drive, Ben drive!"

He pounded the steering wheel with his fists. "We're fucking blocked in."

He grabbed my hand tightly, while his other moved to open the car door.

“Call 911!”

I was petrified. “What are you doing?”

“Whatever happens, don’t get the out of this car.” His voice was deep and quivering. “Do you hear me?”

I heard the click of the door and screamed, “Ben, don’t!”

He stepped onto the pavement and I yelled, “You don’t have to be the hero! Come back!”

Not taking my eyes off Ben, with trembling hands, I managed to dial 911 before the phone slipped through my fingers.

I heard a shot. Ben fell to the ground. “No! No! Noooo!”

My vision started to blur as I

swallowed back the bile in my throat. My screams faded into squealing police sirens. The sirens grew louder as I grew numb, and It's Not My Time by 3 Doors Down played on the radio while everything I knew ceased to exist.

# Chapter Four

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## THE DIARY OF DAHL

*Life is full of sadness  
Life is full of heartache  
I like the silence of it all  
But as I fall further into the  
darkness  
I should try to keep my place in this  
world.*





Black is everywhere. It's the ground where he fell, it's the bag his beautiful body was taken away in, it's the color of the dress I wore to his funeral, it's how I feel, and it's the color of the journal I have kept since I was ten. The journal he talked me into keeping because he had been keeping one of his own. Even then, he loved the thrill of putting words on paper. I never got a thrill out of it, and now it just plummets me further into the

black.

*3 days after...*

*March 6<sup>th</sup>, 2010*

The funeral. His sister Serena took care of everything. His best friend Caleb was back in town. I didn't even know he was back from his tour in Afghanistan. He helped Serena. His mother Grace, his sister, his nephew Trent, and I sat together. That's really all I remember.

*3 months after...*

*June 9<sup>th</sup>, 2010*

Each day is a test of will. Will I get

out of bed, will I take a shower, will I leave the house, will I eat dinner, will I sleep on the couch, the floor, or in the spare room because there is no fucking way I'm going back into that bedroom. When I go in there—I see him everywhere—and when I sleep in there I can't stop dreaming about him. The thing is, they are not dreams; they are nightmares because when I dream, I dream he's here with me, and when I wake up—I'm alone.

I had my first dream about a week after he was killed. I woke up in the middle of the night, and he was lying next to me. I laid my head on his chest to hear him breathe. I ran my hand up his stomach to feel his hard muscles. God,

he felt so good and I missed him so much, and here he was. So I laid my head on his chest, happy to have him back, and fell back asleep. Of course, when I woke up in the morning, I was alone.

I had my second dream after Grace insisted on taking me to the doctor because she knew I wasn't sleeping well. The doctor prescribed Ambien, and that night I decided to sleep in *our* room. Grace stayed with me, as she often did, and I fell asleep easily. I woke up in darkness. He was leaning over me, kissing me, running his hand up my thigh and under my shorts. He moved my panties to the side and plunged his finger inside me before completely removing

my panties. Then he removed his boxers and slid inside me easily, moving slow at first, then faster, his thrusts increasing until he found his release. That is when I woke up and realized he wasn't there, I was alone again and my dream was just a sweet memory of what we had done so many times before he was killed.

The nightmares of his death come no matter where I sleep. They are of that night, the road we took, the stop light, the gun, the loud echoing sound of the bullet that fired out of it's chamber, him calling me by my full name, and him falling to the ground—blood everywhere. In my nightmares we take different roads and stop at different lights, but the outcome is always the

same. He calls me by my full name and then he dies. Dahlia. Death. Those two words have echoed in my head almost every night.

The police called Grace last week to let her know they had arrested the man who killed him. They found the gun he used. His fingerprints were all over it, which lead the police directly to him. He later confessed to the shooting. Serena came by to let me know because Grace couldn't talk about it. She was just too upset. Caleb stopped by later to check on me and ended up sleeping on the couch. He's worried about me so he ends up crashing here a lot lately.

*6 months after....*

*September 15<sup>th</sup>, 2010*

I haven't been coping well with his death, with life without him. I know this. I still can't say his name. He was my friend, my love—my everything. When my parents died, I was only fourteen years old and even though my uncle moved in with me, I would have felt really alone if it wasn't for his tender affection.

My uncle was a shell of a man who had lost his wife and only brother in the plane crash that took them all from us. The crash that changed not only my life, but also my dreams of performing; performing on the stage at the place where my father loved to be. I never

thought I would recover from losing my parents, and even at fourteen, he was not only my best friend, but also my sole source of comfort. We spent every day together in the year following my parents' death and we formed a bond that was unbreakable.

When tragedy struck again, there he was, my rock; the mountain I depended on to give me strength. I don't really remember my parents' funeral. I think I blocked out the memory of that devastating time. I do remember him sitting next to me, staying with me, taking care of me just as he did when my uncle died. But he couldn't do that when he died, since he too was dead.

I remember my uncle's funeral well.



I was kneeling in the pew of the empty church, crying as he came to sit beside me, pulling me onto the bench. Smoothing out the wrinkles in my black skirt, he asked, "I've looked everywhere for you, Dahl. What are you doing here so early?"

Looking around, I noticed there was no one else in the church and thought how appropriate that was. I looked into his blue eyes and cried, "I'm all alone now."

I shifted my gaze quickly to look somewhere else, anywhere else but at him. I didn't want him to see me crying. I was stronger than that. I was a girl who knew death well. As I looked back to the front of the church I caught sight of Jesus

on the cross. The colors from the stained glass windows reflected on the statue, and Jesus suddenly looked amazingly beautiful and tranquil. I wished I could feel that much at peace.

Cupping my chin, he turned me to face him as he looked at me with his crystal-blue eyes, clear as the sky on a cloudless day. “You will never be alone; you will always have me, you know that, right Dahl?”

But I don’t have him. He’s gone, just like the rest of my family, and I’m alone.

*9 months after....*

*December 18<sup>th</sup>, 2010*

Recently, I’ve started leaving the

house, but I feel like I have no hope, nothing to look forward to and wonder what the point is. To say life has been hard for me since he died would be an understatement. I haven't gone back to work. I don't really have to work, for the money anyway. Not that money matters to me in the least. Between what my parents left me and what he left me, along with the mortgage insurance that paid off the house; financially, I'm secure. Emotionally . . . that's a different story. I can't seem to care about anything. So going back to work isn't an option.

Grace and Aerie stop by almost every day. Serena comes as often as she can. Caleb brings dinner at least once a

week and stays to watch TV until I fall asleep. These are the only people I have left in the world now. I've had many friends in my lifetime, but these are the people I've stayed close with. They're very concerned about me, I know. They try to get me to go out with them: lunch, movies, errands even, but I can't seem to go anywhere without breaking down.

My last breakdown was mid-October. Serena brought me to the farmers market to get apples because she wanted to make an apple pie. I didn't want to go but she insisted. When we got to the market the outside was decorated with pumpkins and bales of hay. Off to the side of the entrance was a huge display of ghosts and goblins. I didn't

open the car door. I couldn't. I told Serena to go in without me. She was used to my mood swings and didn't argue with me anymore, so she went on in without me.

As I stared at the festive display with tears streaming down my face, I remembered our first Halloween Party together as freshman in college. His fraternity house was having a party and at the last minute he told me we had to dress up. I was so pissed because he knew I didn't dress up for Halloween, and even if I did, we didn't have costumes to wear. I remember the argument so clearly.

We were standing in his bedroom, and I'd just finished drying my hair when

he decided to tell me about the Halloween Party.

I was so mad at him, I was seeing red in the mirror instead of my ashy light blonde hair. My mouth started spewing before I could stop myself. “Why do you always have to do things last minute? Can’t you get your shit together just once and think ahead?”

Not answering, not arguing back, not even looking at me, he strode over to the bed and grabbed the two sheets off it. He still hadn’t said a word even as my spewing continued.

As I watched him, my fury only grew. “What the fuck are you doing now?”

Taking the sheets into his bathroom,

he came out holding a pair of nail scissors.

He walked over to me with the sheets in his hands; he started cutting holes in it. When he was done he grinned at me. "Here, you be a ghost," he announced, while tossing the cut up sheet over my head, "And I'll be a goblin," he said while cutting the other sheet into strips and wrapping his body with it.

"I'm not wearing that. I'm not wearing any costume. I hate Halloween," I hissed at him as I pulled it off my head. But he knew why I hated Halloween and I knew he knew why. Of course he knew why; it was the day my parents' plane crashed some many years ago. "Fine then, be your own fucking

gorgeous self,” he remarked, grinning at me as he pulled me to him and kissed me hard. “Now let’s go to the fucking party and have some fun.” And just like that, we went to the party.

He didn’t take my shit; he just took care of the situation, of me, always. So as I sat in Serena’s car missing him and remembering that day, I thought *God he definitely had his flaws, but he always had a way of calming me down*. That was how it was with us. If I was mad at him, he was always the calmer one, taking control, and making things work out.

I wish I could have done the same for him, but it never worked out that way. When he was mad at me, his anger



would linger no matter what I tried to do or say. It could last one hour or one day. I had learned to just stay away and let him come to me when he was ready. He didn't express his love in words very often, but his gestures more than made up for it because at the end of the day he always made sure I knew how much he loved me. That's just one of the many things I miss every day.

*12 months after...*

*March 4, 2011*

Grace insisted I stay with her last week and she took me to see my therapist every day. She received an update on *his* killer. The police told her

the shooter would be standing trial within the next twelve months. When she told me, she made me go to her house; she knew how upset I was.

I didn't mind staying with her really because the loneliness and heartbreak were eating away at me, but I finally came home today. Home. That's a funny way of putting it. More like I came back to the house that he and I shared as our home before he died.

Yesterday was the anniversary of his death, and after visiting the cemetery Grace sat me down and told me it was time to take my ring off. She handed me a long white gold chain she had bought and told me to wear the ring around my neck until I felt I could take it off and put

it away forever. She reminded me that the ring, and he, would always be a fond memory I would have forever, but it was time to start living my life. She cried more that day than I'd seen her cry in the past year and I realized the depth of her grief as well.

After arriving home, I went to sit outside on the stone patio I love so much. It was quiet and peaceful, like a private oasis with a pebble stone path that leads to the pool. I noticed the purple flowers from the Salvia had bloomed. In fact, most of the wildflowers are starting to bloom. They are beautiful, and I started to cry thinking spring is here already. Another season alone.

Walking down the pathway, I saw that butterflies were everywhere. I sat in one of the Adirondack chairs on the back of the patio and looked at the dazzling ring on my hand. The 2.5 carat Tiffany bezel princess-cut ring is really stunning. He picked it out himself and told me it just reminded him of me. The contours of the princess-cut diamond accentuate its shape in a streamlined platinum bezel setting. It is elegant, modern, and simply radiant.

As I twisted the ring around my finger, I remembered the day he proposed. I'd just graduated from Grad school, and he was already working full-time as a journalist at the paper. We had both been really busy the last couple of

months, so I insisted he take off work the Monday after my graduation, and he surprisingly agreed, saying we needed to spend some time together. Having just moved into our house in Laguna Beach, we decided to get some things done on Sunday and make Monday our fun day.

We woke up early Monday morning. I stepped into the backyard to watch the sunrise and I recall the way my skin pricked from the chill in the air. I remember the light breeze that swept through my hair. The cooler temperature prompted warmer clothing choices than normal. As he walked in front of me I could see the waistband of his board shorts slightly peeking out from his jeans. I threw on my favorite J Crew

black and white striped sweater over my bikini.

We packed up the BMW M5 Touring with all our gear and headed to Rockpile Beach. I didn't really care for the surfing there, but he loved it. "The coast has a sick reef break right now. Depending on the conditions, we could catch a right at the north corner, and if it comes together it will be cranking. Come on Dahl, it only happens maybe three times a year and right now is one of them." He was so excited I couldn't possibly say no.

When we arrived at the beach with our boards on top of the car, I looked out to the waves and gasped a little. The paddling channel was to the South of the beach where the rip allowed easy access

to some very big, thick, and grinding waves. He took his aviator sunglasses off and watched the waves. They looked to be medium sized, eight feet or more. The small cove had a lot of water rushing in. We didn't even get out of the car. He knew there was no way I was going to be able to surf those waves without getting crushed.

"Go ahead, go. I'll watch you," I said, staring at the waves crashing against the rocks.

"Nah, I don't have a death wish today, another time Dahl. Let's head down south," he said with his hand cupped over his blue eyes, squinting out into the vast Pacific. He put his sunglasses back on and pulled onto US

1. It was a beautiful day. We had the windows open, and I could feel the heat of the sun soaking into my skin, The Cure was blaring through the speakers. “You hungry? I’m starving. Taco Bell first?” he asked with a huge smile on his face. For some reason he only liked that particular Taco Bell.

Rolling my eyes at his choice of restaurant, I just smiled and nodded my head. “Sure, why not, but I get to pick the dinner spot.”

“Saweeet,” he said, laughing back at me.

After lunch he surprised me when he asked, “Dahl, what do you say we grab some towels and head down the beach where it’s a little quieter? We might



even catch some Zs?”

“You don’t want to surf?” I asked as I looked out into the blue of the Pacific, the waves ripping radiantly out to the horizon, and the many bodies already on boards.

“Nah, not feeling it,” he said, grabbing my hand and leading me to the car to grab the towels. We then walked down to the never-ending beach of glistening sand.

We headed out a couple of miles until we were far away from the hub of the facilities. When we were alone, he threw a towel on the sand and picked me up, making like he was going to throw me on it. I screamed in protest as he gently laid me on the towel, bracing

himself on top of me to kiss me. It was so quiet I could hear the birds squawking as they dove into the water to catch their prey.

“I’ve missed this,” he whispered while dipping his head down to kiss my neck, tickling me with his unshaven face, “And I’ve missed you not being around.” He continued running his hands down the length of my body.

“I’ve missed you too, you know. At least I’m finally done with school forever!” I began running my fingers through his blond hair. “Now I’ll be out in the real world; no homework, no internships, no thesis. Just plain everyday work and I’m so looking forward to it,” I said as I pulled him

back down to my lips and ran my hands down his back.

He braced himself on his forearms, and stared at me for a long while.

“What?”

“You,” he replied, “You’re just so fucking gorgeous.”

I shook my head and smiled at him like I always did when he used his own oxymora language.

“Really, you are. I could look at you, be with you, for the rest of my life,” he stated while standing up to reach into the inside pocket of his board shorts. He pulled out something silver and shiny but I couldn’t quite see what it was with the sun so bright and my sunglasses off. He was holding the item, and it seemed to

glint in the sunlight. Maybe it was a coin or his watch even, I couldn't tell.

Then he sat on both knees back on the towel and pulled me up off my back and onto my knees. "Dahl London, I have loved you my whole life and don't ever want to know what it is like to live without you. Marry me!"

The wind blowing though my backyard brought me back into the present. I stopped twisting my ring as I stood up and reached into my own jeans pocket to retrieve the necklace Grace gave me. With tears in my eyes, I walked over to the flowers and sat on the grass to smell them. After I inhaled their beautiful scent, I picked one and a silent tear rolled down my face and I decided

—yes—it was time.

*15 months after....*

*May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2011*

I woke up in the spare room, the room that Grace has now made my room. But today when I woke up I felt different. This morning I felt a little better than I did yesterday and much better than I did last month or the month before that. I looked out the window and the sun was shining. I decided I needed to get up and as I did, I looked at the bare walls and my clothes thrown all over the floor. I thought maybe today will be the day that I will go in our room, no, that room. I hated this room I

was in, but couldn't help feeling that its drab, lifeless personality is a direct reflection of me and how I feel.

After we moved in, I never got around to decorating it. The walls and carpet are still a gloomy shade of off-white, the windows are uncovered, and there is very little furniture. The room has no personality; it is the exact same way I have been feeling.

I pulled myself out of bed and traipsed down the hall to the bathroom, thinking about how much I hated it as well. Maybe I should go back to that room today. My room, I mentally corrected myself. I may even sleep in that bed again and use that bathroom. My therapist wants me to call things in the

house *my* instead of *our*, but I can't do that yet, so I just call things *that*.

I walked through the living room trying not to trip over the boxes sprawled across the floor that Grace dropped off three months ago. She wanted me to pack up some of his stuff, but I hadn't gotten around to it. Pushing the boxes aside, I walked to the closed bedroom door at the end of the hall and when my hand touched the doorknob I considered whether or not I should actually open it. I remembered the dreams I had when I slept in there and how real they seemed and I knew he was in there—everywhere.

I mentally pushed myself and opened the door to look in the room. It was

unchanged; I hadn't let anyone go in there, not even Grace. The bed wasn't made. My dress was thrown over a chair in the corner. My many strands of white pearls and a single strand of black pearls were strung over the mirror attached to my dresser. They were my aunt's most cherished pearls, handed down from her mother, left to me when she died. I saw my running shoes under the chair and walked across the room, touching various items on my way to the bathroom. I actually laughed a little looking at the necklaces still on top of the counter remembering his *pearls remind me of Grammy* comment. He was always so witty.

I started to feel like maybe time had



stood still, but I knew that wasn't true, only in here it was. I looked around at all of our things intertwined and knew it was time. It will be strange not having his things here to remind me of him, but I will always remember him, he was a part of me, he *is* a part of me, a part of my heart, a part of my soul, a part of my everything. Always.

As I stood at the dresser, I looked at all of his things. I grinned as I spotted his bottle of cologne, the cologne his sister bought him so long ago, the cologne he hardly ever used. He used to say, "Cologne is just a masculine name for male perfume, either way it's made for chicks."

I laughed a little at his love for

redefining words using his own personal brain dictionary as I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror; gaunt cheekbones, light splattering of freckles more obvious, unkempt hair, and tired hazel eyes shadowed by fatigue. I remembered he would always tell me, “*You’re so fucking gorgeous.*” I wonder what he’d say if he saw me now. Probably something like, “Dahl, get your shit together already.” Even at that I laughed because his use of obscenities wasn’t really vulgar, it was just a part of his every day vocabulary, and over the years had become a part of mine.

I looked in the mirror and I saw my engagement ring hanging around my neck and the bracelet encircling my wrist. I

closed my eyes to avoid looking at myself. I was aching inside at the thought that this ring wouldn't hang around my neck forever, but I knew I would always wear my LOVE bracelet. I will wear this bracelet, not just because he gave it to me the day he died, but because of the irony of the gift. It's ironic that he gave it to me and said, *"This says what I never seem to be able to say."* I never doubted his love, but the gesture itself more than proved it. Just thinking about it almost brought me to my knees. So as I looked at the bracelet, I promised myself that it would be a constant reminder that life is full of ironies; that I will always say what needs to be said—no regrets.

Opening my eyes, the mirror seemed

to only reflect the messy room I was standing in. It is not our room, it is not that room, and it is not my room. I smiled because it was just a messy room. Grace wanted to clean it up a million times, but I wouldn't let her. I wasn't ready for the memories of that beautiful day, our last day together before getting in his car to be erased, but I knew the memories could never be erased because they were engrained in my mind forever.

Moving away from the dresser and looking around the room again, I asked myself, "What have I become?" But I already knew the answer. I'd become empty, almost completely void of emotion and I didn't want to be like that

anymore. I needed to let time back in this room. I knew I had to put that day away. I needed to become me again. With that thought, I reached down and grabbed my running shoes. I headed towards the door and smiled, but not before snatching my iPod. I would start my day with a run and listen to some music. I would run and clear my head. Then maybe when I came back I'd start what I knew I should have already started.

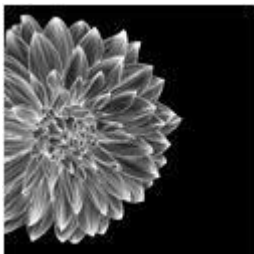
# Chapter Five

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## EVERY STORM RUNS OUT OF RAIN

*Every storm has a last raindrop  
Just like the darkness turns to dawn  
The pain of losing someone fades  
away*

*Every storm has a last raindrop  
But the pain of lost love never  
really goes away.*



## *November 2011 - Present Day*

Fall is in the air. There is a cool breeze all around me blowing orange, yellow, and red leaves in circles. As I exit the park to head back to my house, I pass by a bunch of kids raking leaves into piles and then watch as they jump in, carefree, with no worries about what lies beneath. I wonder what I would feel if I were to jump into those leaves.

I have been running almost every

day. Running makes me feel human again; it sets my mind free and allows me to forget everything. I ran five miles this morning and felt like I could have pushed myself another five, but I promised Aerie I would meet her for lunch. I have been meeting her for lunch at least twice a week and for dinner almost every Friday night.

Walking through the front door I notice the boxes, some labeled, some still empty, piled in the corners and know I should finish packing up his things. Maybe later. I've started sleeping in my room again. On the nights that I wake up thinking he is still here, I end up sleeping on the couch, but that is happening less and less these days and



so are the nightmares of his fatal shooting.

After taking a shower in my bathroom, I go out to the garage. His car is parked next to mine, our surfboards are in the corner, and our water gear is piled on the shelves. He's just everywhere but nowhere at all.

As I drive to the restaurant I notice familiar surroundings that remind me of him as I do every time I leave the neighborhood. He's at the corner bus stop where he would drop off Mr. Langston, our elderly neighbor, every Wednesday morning. He's at the drug store, where he would go whenever he ran out of something, always in a hurry. Reminders of him are everywhere.

As memories flood my mind and thoughts of what used to be cloud my vision, I finally understand what I have to do to get myself out of the pouring rain that I have been standing in for over a year. It is today, as I drive down my street, what used to be our street that I finally realize it is time for my own personal storm to end. No umbrella can stop me from getting wet while living in that house, what used to be our house. It's like the thunder has finally stopped crackling in my head, and as the clouds begin to move away, tiny rays of sunshine start to filter in. I know I have to move out of the home we once shared.

Walking into the restaurant, I smile as I spot Aerie right away in her jet-

black suit and hot-pink blouse, all buttoned up and put together. I glance down at myself in jeans, Converse sneakers, a Bon Jovi 1987 concert Tour t-shirt, and my leather jacket. I am already anticipating the concerned look she's going to give me.

I sit at the white linen-clothed round table in the middle of the restaurant; she's on her cell phone, no doubt shouting orders at someone. She hits the end button and places her phone on the table as she stands to greet me. As expected, she looks me up and down before hugging me like I'm made of glass and might break if she squeezes too tight.

"Still not eating," are the first words

out of her mouth before lifting a piece of my hair and wrinkling her nose. “Dahlia Girl, I’m taking you to see my hairdresser tomorrow, and I don’t want any lip from you. Your hair isn’t even blonde anymore.”

Glancing around the restaurant at all the people eating lunch, involved in their own conversations, I give her a mock smile. “So nice to see you too. How are you?”

I continue in a very high-pitched voice with, “Glad you could meet me for lunch.”

I resume my normal voice, rolling my eyes and admonishing, “Seriously, maybe you could start out with something like that Aerie before laying

into me.” I try to keep a straight face but I can’t hold back the giggle that escapes my mouth, which sounds more like a snort.

I know she’s worried about me, but we have gone through this little exchange every time I meet her somewhere and really enough is enough. Last week she took me to get my nails done after having grabbed my hands and wincing at the dirt still stuck under my nails from gardening. In my defense, she called me last minute when I was weeding the flowerbed and I only had time for a quick shower. It’s not like I’m walking around dirty and unshowered for Christ sakes.

I decide to move on and tell her my

decision.

“I had a revelation on the way over here.”

“Really? And what would that be?”

Attempting to restrain my voice as much as I could manage, while fighting back the tears, I say, “I’m going to sell the house.”

I see the concern written on her face as she responds, “Are you sure? I mean, are you sure you’re ready? This is kind of sudden. The last time Grace talked to you about the idea, you shut her down flat.”

I shift a little in my chair and take a sip of water. “Yeah, I’m sure. Everything about the house reminds me of Ben, and it’s not just the house, it’s the whole

damn neighborhood. I need to do this. I know I do.” As I tell Aerie how I feel, as I finally start to open up to her for the first time in such a long time, I realize that I just said his name. I actually used his name. I said Ben. I said the name I must have said over a million times until almost two years ago, and I know my emptiness is starting to fill back up. I know I will always have him in my heart, but Ben will forever be in memories not in life. My whole body tenses and locks up at the realization, and my eyes rim with tears. I battle with my internal emotions to relax and will these drops not to spill over.

Aerie reaches across the table and gently wipes one of my cheeks where a

few of the persistent tears flowed against my will. She takes a deep breath, and I see her eyes start to fill with tears as well, having realized that I said his name. “I think it’s a good idea Dahlia. I think you need to remove yourself from the things that prevent you from moving forward.”

I take my napkin and wipe my mouth for no reason. “I know I need to, I just don’t know if I can.”

The waiter approaches and takes our order. Once he leaves, Aerie looks directly at me with concern still etched on her face. “Yes you can, you are stronger than you think, and you have me, you have Grace, and Serena too. We will all help.”



Putting her napkin on her lap, she gives me a slight smile. “I think moving is the best decision you’ve made in a while.”

Her voice cracking a little as she adds, “And this is none of my business, but you know that has never stopped me before, so I’m just going to throw this out there for you.”

She pauses looking anywhere except at me and then continues. “I was thinking, why don’t you give his car to Trent?”

Her words come out fast and I can see the tears begin to well in her eyes. After all this time, Aerie still hasn’t been able to say his name to me, probably for fear I will break down.

The atmosphere in the open restaurant is causal, but I suddenly feel stifled as tears fill my own eyes now, and I'm sure I'm going to surprise the shit out of her with my next quick response.

"You know what, that's a great idea. In fact I'll call Serena and see if it's okay. I have actually been thinking about that for awhile, since Trent turns sixteen next week."

I take a piece of bread and rip off the crust. I dunk it in the olive oil in hopes that my eyes will stop stinging by the distraction.

"I think Ben would have wanted his nephew to have his car, he loved that car and he loved Trent. I know Trent misses

Ben too, surfing with him, and driving to the beach with him. Trent always told Ben his car had so much power and gumption and loved to go anywhere with him.”

Shaking my head and laughing a little, I think about how happy this will make Trent. I’m also trying not to cry at the thought of Ben’s car not being parked next to mine, as I chew on the piece of bread that I feel I might choke on.

Aerie laughs a little too, but tears are rolling down her cheeks. “Power and gumption, those are two great words to describe him, not just his car.”

She picks up her napkin and dabs the tears off her cheeks. “God he did love that damn car.”

Her laughter fades as she reaches her hand across the table and sets it next to my plate, silently asking for mine.

“Dahlia, you know how much he loved you.”

She pauses a minute like she’s trying to decide if she should say something or not as she starts to pat my hand.

“And because of how much he loved you, you know he would want you to move on and live your life. I think he would be happy with your decision.”

Removing her hand from mine, she clears her throat. Smiling, and just barely laughing now, she adds, “I also know if he were here, he would have kicked your ass for not making that decision sooner.”

Aerie pauses again, raising her water glass and waits for me to do the same. Then she clinks her glass to mine. “To bright days ahead, Dahlia girl, I know they’re coming.”

And before either of us can cry, our food arrives.

We spend the rest of lunch just chatting about nothing, and I really enjoy the food and the company. As we finish, Aerie’s look becomes more serious and determined. “I need a favor,” she says, tilting her head to the side and smiling at me. “Tom quit yesterday, and I need you back at work, I’m really short staffed in the photo department at the magazine. Dahlia girl, please I need you.”

I sigh knowing I’m not ready to

commit to anything full-time, and without thinking, I quickly answer, “I’d be happy to help you out until you get someone else.”

Aerie’s face contorts slightly as she says, “No, I mean come back to work full-time. Take Tom’s job. I need you.”

Crossing my arms and leaning back in my chair, I look at her. She’s a vision of beauty with her slightly wavy bright blonde hair, her perky little nose, and petite toned body. Underneath that beauty I know lurks a beast. I have a feeling I’m about to see that beastly side as I bring this conversation to an end.

“Aerie, come on, don’t ask me to make such a big decision. Don’t say you need a favor and then not like my

answer, it's not fucking fair.”

She knows I can never resist a request when someone asks with such need. I'm just a sucker like that—always have been. “I only just decided to sell the house. Let me get through that first and then we can talk about work, okay?” I look her straight in the eyes and add, “But I will help you on my terms. So, is working only on an as-needed basis okay for now?”

Surprisingly, Aerie's irritation seems to smooth quickly. Sighing, she takes a sip of her water and just looks at me. As she pushes her plate aside, she smirks and says, “That's called freelancing, and in my defense, I didn't know you were going to come here and tell me you

decided to sell your house. So I'm sorry. Okay?" She sticks her tongue out at me for good measure.

I take my napkin off my lap and smile as I roll my eyes at her. "Whatever. Do you want my help or not?" She just laughs and so do I.

Aerie started working at Sound Music right out of college while I went to grad school. She worked her way up the ladder quickly and now manages the main features department. Once I graduated I went to work for her as a photo stylist. My love is photography but my passion is music, so with my degree in place I was able to meld my love and passion together into what became a dream job. I hadn't gone back to work



since the day Ben died, but maybe now it's time.



A week later, it's Thursday night. My routine consists of putting on my pajamas, brushing my teeth, and lying down on the couch to watch Vampire Diaries. Every Thursday Ben and I used to watch Vampire Diaries together. He told me he hated the show, but he always watched it with me. I used to think he secretly had a crush on Elena. We would pop popcorn, get my quilt and pillows out of the closet, and lay feet to feet on

our giant sofa. I've continued the tradition, only without the popcorn since Ben was always the one who ate the whole bowl anyway.

Just as I settle on the sofa, with the quilt my mom and I made together, and turn on the TV, my cell phone rings. Aerie's name flashes across the screen and I roll my eyes. "What!" I answer.

"I know, I know. Vampire Diaries! But listen, and do not say anything, and do not say no. I have you on the eleven o'clock flight tomorrow morning to McCarran International to conduct the initial photo style interview with River Wilde."

"What? Are you crazy? No! No fucking way!" I tell her, shaking my head

for emphasis even though I know she can't see me.

Aerie ignores my outburst and tells me she has already arranged for me to meet the lead singer of The Wilde Ones at Sound Music's corporate headquarters in Las Vegas tomorrow afternoon. She stresses, "The lead singer, you know, River Wilde," in case I'm for some reason unclear as to who he is. Aerie tells me River is in Las Vegas for some kind of promotion and had a last minute change in his schedule. She has no one else to do it and his schedule change is only allowing a small window of time for the magazine to meet with him on Friday. Then she stresses, "And Dahlia girl, this is a huge opportunity for me

and the magazine, please.”

Turning down the volume on the TV and looking around at everything I have to pack, I say, “I can’t go on such short notice, you know that. I just put the house on the market.”

“No, I know no such thing. Having your house up for sale isn’t the issue. Being gone one night won’t make a difference. I’m not dumb. I know you. I know what’s going on in that pretty head of yours, and this has nothing to do with your crush, I promise.”

She stops a minute, pauses, and then continues. “You’re afraid to see him, your secret rock star crush, but come on Dahlia. He probably won’t even remember you.” She says it so matter of

factly I actually feel a little hurt.

I think to myself while mentally correcting her words in my mind, that actually, River Wilde was my crush before he was a rock star, and no matter what she says, she's obviously setting me up so I can't say no. Aerie knows I secretly swooned over him after we met at the USC Campus Bar many years ago. She knows he's the singer whose songs were always on repeat, not only on my iPod, but also in my head. And she knows he was the one singer I never talked to Ben about, and now she wants me to meet him, again.

"You are going to owe me so big, you know that right? I'll do it, I'm sure he won't remember me anyway and even

so it's not like anything embarrassing happened, you know?" I finally manage to croak out.

"Thank you so much, I really do love you Dahlia girl," Aerie croons and then spends the next hour telling me the highlights of River's career.

After we hang up, my mind wanders back to how I felt that night I met River. How that was still the only time someone's touch sent goosebumps up my arms. I remember the feelings I felt then, feelings I have long since buried. I hope to God they don't resurrect tomorrow. How could they? Those were feelings of a young college girl who was in love with someone else anyway.

Every now and then I have thought

about our intense connection that night in the bar and wondered if it might have been more in my mind than it actually was. More like it was okay to want to believe in something you knew couldn't possibly be.

Besides, even if the connection was real, River is somewhat famous now and I'm sure he has a lot of women after him or possibly a girlfriend even. What does any of that matter anyway? I'm still a broken girl struggling through the stages of my grief, trying to reenter the real world without the man who is still a part of me.

I haven't paid much attention to River's career since Ben's death. Curiosity takes over and I Google his

name. I read a few articles about him and download his latest songs. I slip into my bed around eleven not even realizing I never watched Vampire Diaries.



# Chapter Six

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## BEGIN AGAIN

*I've been spending the last years  
Thinking love will always leave you  
I wondered if it would all begin  
again  
Memories of years ago flood my  
mind  
And I can't help but think of you.*



Shimmering through the desert haze of Nevada is the most dynamic city on earth. My plane is just about to touch down on the ground that's often referred to as a latter-day El Dorado. My stomach is in knots. It's a mix of nervous excitement and downright fear. I'm nervous because this is my first day back to work in almost two years. I'm excited because I finally feel like I'm doing something productive after so long. And I'm fearful because of who I will be

interviewing to prep for his upcoming photo-shoot. Well, I'm not really fearful as much as uncertain or maybe even apprehensive, or dare I say, eager to meet with him.

We've been circling the airport waiting to land for almost forty-five minutes. I'm sitting in the plush leather seat of the plane listening to the music I recently downloaded. Looking out the window and past the clouds, I can see the crowded and famous Las Vegas strip. I'm trying to comprehend how I allowed myself to be talked into this job. How is it that in just a few short minutes I'm going to be seeing River again?

Earlier this morning Aerie texted me a list of hygiene items I might want to

attend to before hitting my first 'freelance' job. These items included shaving my legs and blow-drying my hair, both of which she knows I've done very infrequently since Ben's death. She also rudely advised me to put some thought in my wardrobe selection.

Last night I carefully picked out what I was going to wear today. I had decided on a white blouse, a black pencil skirt, and the standard high-heeled black pumps. However, after listening to The Wilde Ones' album this morning, their music actually inspired me to want to go to work today.

I happily showered and used my favorite grapefruit-scented shampoo. I not only took extra time to lather it in

and repeat the process, but I decided to ditch my chosen business attire in favor of something more fun. My showers are usually the five-minute quick in and out kind, but today it lasted much longer. I can't say why, but I just felt different, maybe even excited in a way I can't really describe. I actually danced around my bedroom before getting dressed. I hadn't done that in a while.

Feeling concerned about my appearance for the first time in a long time, I decided casual was better than trendy, and then decided sophisticated was better than casual, and in the end went with a mix of all three. I opted to wear black skinny jeans and my most loved white swing top with the words

The Kinks scripted diagonally across it and the word Lola underneath in black faded scroll. I threw on my gray moto leather jacket with the hoodie snapped off, and a pair of black open toed wedge booties. I haven't been shopping in so long, I don't even know if the shoes are still in style, but they are comfortable. I added some eyeliner, mascara, and lip-gloss and I was ready to go.

As the plane finally lands, I take a deep breath, and walk down the jetway. I laugh as I read the sign at the end of the walkway that says, "What Happens in Vegas, Stays in Vegas." As I make my way through the airport, I smile again as I hear the sounds of the slot machine handles being pulled and bells ringing

for the lucky winners gambling in the Las Vegas Airport. After collecting my luggage in baggage claim, I set foot on Sin City's pavement and wait for a taxi to take me to my destination.

It's early November and the weather is crisp and mild. I'm sitting in the back seat of a taxicab, feeling the bright sunshine through the window permeate my skin. I embrace the warmth and take a few deep breaths, trying to curb my sudden onset of jitters. I have so many emotions going through my head as I think of the two extreme outcomes of meeting River again today. How will I feel if he doesn't remember me? How will I feel if he does? The answer to both questions . . . I have no idea.

Knowing I'm in a hurry, the driver tells me he will take the fastest route he can. As he's explaining that it is the longer way, mileage wise around the strip, but much shorter, time wise, I zone out. God, what if he doesn't remember me when I've never been able to forget him or what if he does and we still have that instant connection? Is he still adorably charming and utterly charismatic? Why am I even thinking this way and why do I care? I'm here to do a job and that is all I need to be thinking about. River is just a person I have to interview to prepare a photo-shoot for. I've done this job a thousand times. "Just do your job, that's all you have to do," I say to myself over and over again.



I watch the multitude of people walking down the sidewalk, men and women, couples and families, winners and losers, I think about how they're all here to forget about their everyday lives. I decide today is the perfect day for me to do the same. I'm going to get lost in this city too. Today I'm Dahlia London, the photographer. I can be that girl. I was that girl. I am that girl. Today I will not be Dahlia London, poor girl whose fiancé was killed in front of her.

The sunlight streaming through the cab window is reflecting off the diamonds of my bracelet. As I look out onto the street I see a man dressed in a suit, walking while checking his phone and I can't help but think of Ben. Ben

was always multitasking, able to accomplish more in a single day than I ever could in a week. Today these thoughts aren't sad thoughts. Instead I smile at the memory they provoke of the man that was so driven and so successful at such a young age. Taking deep cleansing breaths, I look at my bracelet again and remember the reason I will never take it off. The promise I made to myself to have no regrets. Those thoughts are what I will take with me as I interview the one man I had an almost dalliance with once, a long time ago.

The taxi is approaching the office building located on East Harmon Avenue, just a few blocks east of the Hard Rock Hotel where I will be

staying. Since I'm running short on time, I decide against dropping my bags off at the hotel first.

I hop out of the cab and I hear my phone's familiar ringtone. I answer it while grabbing my suitcase and messenger bag to make my way into the building. With my shoulder holding the phone to my ear, I open the large double doors to the building that houses Sound Music's office. The lobby is quiet; it's Friday afternoon so I suspect many employees are gone for the weekend. Aerie is on the other end of the phone frantically screaming that I'm late and telling me to get up to the seventh floor immediately because River is already there. After reassuring Aerie that I've

arrived and am on my way up, I exit the elevator and hit the end button on my phone.

Practically running to get to the conference room, I trail my suitcase with my messenger bag on top of it behind me. I turn the corner and start down the hallway where I can see through the conference room's glass wall. There he sits, River Wilde, looking down at his phone. My heart is pounding at the mere sight of him, and the feelings of the young girl crush I had on him five years ago come flooding back.

I slow down my pace, take a few deep breaths, and pause to straighten my jacket. The shift of my body weight causes my messenger bag to fall off the

top of my suitcase, making a loud noise on the marble floor. Looking around the empty hall, I pick up my bag and continue walking, but as I lift my eyes and River Wilde comes into view, he's no longer looking at his phone. He's watching me instead. He's still just as captivating as he was so long ago, but this time the word 'dangerous' no longer applies.

My legs are shaking and my stomach is doing flip-flops as I make my way to the conference room. I'm not a nervous person by nature, but the fact that I asked myself, 'Could love at first sight be real?' when I met him that night makes me nervous as hell. The silence in the office adds to my anxiety; the only sound

that can be heard is that of my shoes clicking across the tile floor.

As I approach the door, I can see him running his hand through his hair. He's walking around the conference table towards the door, and we reach it at the same time. With a nervous grip, I grab the door handle, dropping my eyes from his as my Cartier bracelet hits against the glass, causing a sharp pain to radiate through my wrist.

I wince as I stumble into him. Once our bodies meet, my nervousness evaporates and it is replaced by a bevy of heightened senses. I'm so close to him. I can smell his soapy, just-showered scent that I remember so well. I can feel his hard body, and as I look

up, I can see the smoothness of the skin on his face, which makes my knees buckle beneath me.

Goosebumps run up my arms and down my legs. Our collision has awakened something in me. It's something as simple and pure as desire. Something I haven't felt in a very long time.

Gaining all of my composure I look up into his gleaming green eyes, the intensity is still so powerful anyone looking into them might never get out. I already know I don't want to get out. I'm sure I'm staring as I continue to gaze into his eyes searching for that same look he gave me long ago, but before I can find it our contact is broken.

He takes a step back and I notice his gleaming eyes studying the length of my body. Remembering I am supposed to be Dahlia London, the interviewer, I try to push the wanton girl aside and replace her with the professional one. However, trying to manage multiple personalities has never been easy for me. I drop my eyes to escape his power and begin to speak a mash of garbled words that make very little sense even to me. “Excuse me, I’m so sorry, thank you, and oh shit.”

Shifting my gaze into the room, embarrassed by my lack of professionalism, I somehow manage to look at him again. I take in his faded jeans, black Doc Marten boots, and gray



t-shirt with the word Fender scripted across in black. He's still so overwhelmingly attractive. He looks just how I remember him; no, he looks even better. The guy I had talked to one night at a bar five years ago is now a man.

Still grinning, he chuckles and crosses his arms. "No apology necessary, that's the kind of crash I wouldn't mind having every day."

Giving him a polite nod, I continue to stand there, and I'm wondering if he really doesn't remember me.

"Let me get your bags for you," he says as he takes hold of the items in my hand. Crossing into the room, he sets my black messenger bag on the table in front of us and then, picking up my suitcase,

he casually walks to the corner of the room and sets it next to his guitar case, which is leaning against the wall. I can't help but notice his walk is still a sway and still full of confidence.

Turning around, he strides back to the conference table, showing no sign of recognition and I begin to feel a little deflated. He stops at the table where I first saw him and we stand across from each other, the table as our divide.

Glancing at my suitcase and pointing to the glass wall he asks, "Are you sleeping here? Because there isn't much privacy."

I let out a soft laugh and he chuckles to himself.

Trying to decide if I should mention

we have met before, I decide against it. I'm not sure he remembers me; actually I'm pretty sure he doesn't, so why further embarrass myself?

Garnering all of my composure and remembering I'm here to do a job, I remove my jacket and stand up straight, extending my hand. "Hello, I am Dahlia London from Sound Music. I'm so sorry I'm late."

River extends his hand to meet mine, and I think I see a little glimmer in his eyes but I'm not sure. "Dahlia, hmmm . . . a flower. Well it's nice to finally meet you," he remarks as his lopsided grin returns.

"Aerie has been texting me your location for the past hour," he says

glancing at his phone.

“You already know who I am, so we can skip that part of the introductions. Agreed?” he asks smirking, as he sits down and motions for me to do the same.

“Sounds great,” I say, sitting down and taking in this man in his entirety. Reflecting back to that night so long ago, which now seems like yesterday, I try to see through his words. His words make me start to question my first impression that he doesn’t remember me. So does he or doesn’t he? Is he playing with me? Well this time around, I’m not playing a game. This is a business meeting, so let’s get down to business. With that thought, I unzip my bag, take out my tablet, pen, and paper, and avoid looking

into his eyes at all costs.

Glancing around the room, I notice the stark surroundings. The room houses simply a conference table, chairs, and a credenza. There is no white board, no easel, nothing to make notes on. Pulling a larger tablet and colored pencils from my bag, I place them in the center of the table. River looks inquisitively at the items. “For our final layout,” I say with a grin.

Leaning back in his chair and placing his hands behind his neck, River responds mischievously, “Whatever you say. As long as I’m not the one drawing, anything goes.”

“I won’t grade you on your inability to draw a simple diagram,” I retort,

giving him a half-grin of my own.

I start the interview by asking River for a brief history of his band. I continue with questions that include the band members themselves, their likes and dislikes for clothing and locations, and their favorite memories from their first tour. This takes about thirty minutes and our conversation is flowing in a very businesslike manner.

Moving past the band's history, I move on to ask him questions about the new album. Before answering, River gets up from his chair and strides across the room to the credenza, pouring us each a glass of ice water from a pitcher. The room is silent as I watch him walk, relaxed and confident. It is the sexiest

thing I have ever seen, aside from him. As I'm staring at his backside, I notice his ass is somewhat flat as his jeans hang a little and think his ass is also the sexiest thing I have ever seen.

River circles the table and sits next to me. This little move surprises me and makes me lose my train of thought. My mind trails off the business track course it has been steering on so well. He turns his chair to face me, points to my shirt, and says, "Lola ranks in my top ten all-time favorite songs. It's actually on my phone." He takes his phone out of his pocket touches the screen a few times and shows me, in case I doubted him.

"That's cool, we obviously have similar taste in music," I say in response

while trying to catch a glimpse at what else is in his music library.

“Where did you get that t-shirt anyway? It looks like the actual shirt sold when the album *One for the Road* was released in 1980,” River asks as he stands up and pulls me up with him.

The goosebumps quickly return on both my arms and legs as he tugs the hem of my shirt and demands, “Turn around, let me see something.” He twirls his finger in a 180-degree arc in case I didn’t understand his words.

Looking directly into his powerful eyes, I give him a questioning look before turning around. Without even thinking I jump into his game headfirst. His scent, his closeness, the way my



body reacts to his touch have paralyzed me and I welcome the chance to turn around and try to swim out of his green, crystal ball-like eyes. God he's just so mesmerizing, and I need to pull myself together and get back on track.

His phone chimes from the table, but he ignores it. With my back to River he pulls the collar back on my shirt and reads the tag. "Holy shit, this is an original! Do you have any idea how long I have been searching for one of these?" Then he makes me laugh when he apologizes. "Sorry, my mother taught me better than to swear in front of women."

Stifling full out laughter I say, "Don't worry about it, I say *shit* just about every other sentence." With that, he

chuckles along with me.

The ease of conversation we so easily picked up that night in the bar so long ago comes back immediately. Well, for me anyway as I realize this is just River's way with women. He's flirtatious and charming and must have the same rapport with all the women he meets. Embracing this knowledge, I continue to converse with the savvy, almost famous rock star.

I relax and sit back in my chair and start telling River all about my father and his obsession with music and concert t-shirts. I make sure not to repeat what I'd told him that night so long ago, I'm not sure why. Talking now, I realize that our conversation that night so long

ago was just one of many intimate conversations he has probably had in his lifetime. It's his nature; it is who River Wilde is.

I continue to talk and converse with him because honestly, I haven't felt this comfortable in a man's company in a long time. I try to keep in mind that it doesn't matter if he doesn't remember me; I'm having fun now. And besides, I was the one who ran away from him that night after a short conversation and a single kiss. Seriously, how memorable could one conversation and one kiss be with one girl in a crowded bar anyway?

Glancing at the clock on the wall I notice it's almost five o'clock and I have only just started the interview needed to

prepare for The Wilde Ones' upcoming photo shoot. River must have seen the concern in my face because he looks at the same clock and casually asks, "I don't have any pressing plans for tonight. We could finish the interview over dinner?"

I have spent the last hour discussing everything music with this attractively charming man. I told him about all the concerts I have been to, he told me all the bands he has seen, and we listed our top songs, top artists, top singles, and top albums. Throughout our conversation, he continued to stare at me with those twinkling green eyes, grinning occasionally, even when what we were talking about wasn't funny. He played air

guitar when I mentioned a song with a great strings solo and mocked playing drums when an artist we were talking about was known for his drumming ability. He was actually very playful and I was enjoying myself immensely, actually I was having a blast. I even grabbed a pen and pretended to sing my favorite Britney song, which really made him laugh. So dinner . . . sure why not?

Just as I start to answer, my cell phone rings. It's stashed in my purse, and I reach to grab it, in case it is Aerie. Picking the purse up off the table, I accidentally dump all of its contents.

"Shit!" I yell, holding up my index finger. "Sorry, give me a sec, that could be my boss," I say rolling my chair back

and kneeling on the floor under the table to find my phone and gather my things. I find my phone first, right in between River's feet.

As I reach for it I hear River clear his throat. "Ahem, I can get that for you," he says before peering his head under the table. "But on second thought I think I like this better," he continues, pointing at my head between his legs.

Noticing that my face is almost in his knees, I move back a little to look at him and end up staring right at his crotch. I move quickly, trying to remove myself from the very awkward position I'm in and as I do, I smack my head on the table.

Standing back up again, I hold my

phone up and laugh a little before patting my head and saying, “Sorry about that, but I got it.”

He chuckles again. “Do you want me to get the rest of your stuff or do you want to do it? I’m good either way.”

Biting my lip, I say, “If you don’t mind, I’ll let you get it.”

Staring at me with intensity in his eyes, he runs his tongue over his bottom lip. “You sure, I was enjoying myself.” Then not waiting for an answer, he scoots out of the chair, and starts to gather everything as I watch him still patting my head and having missed the call.

His mannerisms, his tone, his facial expressions, and his body language . . .

all so charming—almost disarming. He's the same as I remember. And right now, as he stands in front of me putting my things back in my bag, all I can think about is him. How much I want him.

Once everything is safely put back in my bag, he asks, "And dinner?"

I bite back a smile. "Sounds great, but we really need to get going, the offices close at five on Fridays."

"That's no problem," he says. Then pointing to the large tablet in the center of the table he says, "I was really looking forward to Pictionary, later maybe?"

Shaking my head back and forth I put the rest of my things away and say, "Let's go."



He puts his hand out in a lead-the-way gesture; he scans my body from head to toe again. “Do you want to drop your stuff off at your hotel before dinner?” he asks while grabbing his guitar and my suitcase from the corner.

Nodding my head I say, “Yeah, I’ll just grab a cab and head to my hotel, I can meet you for dinner later.”

He runs a hand through his hair and looks at me. No, he’s actually glaring at me. “Is that a nicer way of brushing me off?” he asks.

I cringe, remembering the night I left when he asked me to stay, but since he doesn’t even remember me I’m not sure why he has such an aggravated tone.

“What? No,” is my only response.

Shaking his head he says, “It’s settled then, I have my car here. We’ll just swing by your hotel first.”

His annoyance seems to be gone and he no longer waits for me to take the lead. Instead, he grabs my hand, leading me to the elevator and out of the building.

# Chapter Seven

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## WHERE WE BELONG

*We're just beginning to talk  
We're just getting to know each  
other  
We seem so close in such a short  
time  
We hold hands and smile  
And it feels like this is where we  
belong.*



Is holding hands more of an art or a science? This is the thought running through my mind as River and I walk out of the office building together. I ask myself this question because when he takes my hand, I don't mean he holds it palm in palm; I mean he laces all his fingers in between mine and holds them tightly in his grip. It feels intimate and conveys the idea that we know each other very well, when in reality, we

don't. Not yet anyway.

Ben is the only guy I've ever held hands with. So in trying to figure out the whole art or science question, I attempt to picture other couples I know. I try to remember how their hands intertwine; however I can't delve into that level of detail in my memory. I only have my hand holding with Ben as a gauge to help with my decision.

Ben and I usually held hands when we were in public. I don't really know if this was a gesture of closeness or a way for Ben to let others know he was my boyfriend. Either way, when we held hands, we were palm in palm. Our hold was loose enough that if we needed to let go to allow someone by or to stop

and look at something the hold was easily dropped. I'd say our handholding was more of a science.

So why does the way that River holds my hand seem so different? His hold is tight, our fingers are laced, and he's occasionally rubbing circles on the top of my hand with his thumb. These small gestures definitely make handholding seem more like an art. So my conclusion would be that handholding is unique to the two who are doing it.

Wholly absorbed in my thoughts as we walk through the parking garage, I barely notice it's just as empty as the building. With his guitar slung over his shoulder, he runs his other hand through

his hair. He takes the lead as he heads toward what I assume is his car. It's a vintage Black Porsche. He turns as we walk and I see him crack a genuine smile. He has the cutest dimples. It's the first full-blown smile I've seen from him, and it is adorable.

Arriving at his car, he gently lets go of my hand as he reaches in his front pocket for his keys. He unlocks my door and opens it for me to get in. He clutches my hand to assist me into the very low seat. Once I'm seated, he lifts my hand and kisses it. Instantly, I feel a sense of déjà vu, as if I'm back in the bar that first night I met him so long ago.

He closes my door and walks around to put my things in the trunk. He opens

his door and tosses his guitar in the small area behind us before he gets in. Grinning crookedly, he raises an eyebrow and splays both hands out. “So do you like it?”

I bite my lip and raise my eyes as if thinking. “Isn’t this James Dean’s car?” I ask.

He shakes his head and laughs. “Well this one isn’t his actual ride, obviously, but it’s modeled after his 1955 Little Bastard.”

I giggle at hearing a car referred to by such a nickname, I remember my dad and his love for James Dean. My dad won me over with his constant movie watching and references. We were both avid James Dean fans so much so that



we must have watched Rebel Without A Cause over a hundred times. I think I knew all the lines by heart. I probably still do.

He looks over at me curiously and says, “Can I ask what you’re thinking about?”

Sighing at the memory, I lock the thoughts of my dad away. “Dream as if you will live forever, live as if you will die today.”

He places both hands on the steering wheel and glances over at me. The intensity of his powerful green eyes captures my full attention. “I love that movie, and that's definitely one of my favorite lines.”

I put my seat belt on before twisting

sideways to face him. “James Dean was my dad’s favorite actor, and he always loved his car. So how fitting that I get to ride in a Spyder in my lifetime.”

“Hmmm...” he responds as he puts on his seatbelt.

Giving him a thumbs up, I say, “Hey, I really do like your car. It’s actually pretty cool.”

His huge grin returns and his dimples blare in high definition. Then, just as I remember him doing in a gallant attempt to avoid any awkwardness in conversation, he changes the subject.

He starts the car and pulls out of the garage, heading down the street toward the Las Vegas Strip. “Where to?”

I tell him where I’m staying, and

after what feels like only a few minutes, we pull up to the Hard Rock Hotel. He puts the car in park and glances over at me. “Stay there. I’ll get your door.”

Walking around to my side of the car, he points and nods to the valet indicating he himself will get my door. After opening it, he braces his hands on each side of the doorframe and leans in. He surrounds me with his intoxicating scent and overwhelming sexiness before he reaches for my hand.

I shake my head and roll my eyes at his over the top chivalrous gesture but thoroughly enjoy the whole dynamic of it. Stepping out of the very low car, I clutch his hand and laugh a little. “Thank you, kind sir.”

He guides me forward to close my door. Then, half-grinning he looks away, almost shyly. “You’re welcome.”

He’s so adorable.

Standing very close, he gingerly pushes me back against the car, again bracing his hands on each side of me. He’s close, but still not close enough. His eyes shift back to mine; they are piercing me with their intensity, sending shivers down my spine. As he leans in toward me, he whispers in my ear. “Sir. I think I like the sound of that.”

He shrugs his shoulders and stares at me with his mesmerizing green eyes. He chuckles and says, “What, a guy can’t be a gentleman?”

I smile, actually impressed, and

laugh a little myself. "I never said that."

He hands his car keys and some cash to the valet. "Just the bags in the trunk go to this beautiful girl's room. We won't be long."

Hand in hand again, he leads me to the front desk. He stands close to me and I feel his hand occasionally, maybe accidentally, brush against my outer thigh. Giving my name to the cute female clerk, he checks me in. She sends him a flirty smile and asks if a credit card should be left on file for incidentals. He smirks and hands over his card. When I protest he just shrugs and winks at me. "Doesn't matter, I don't think you will be charging anything."

I have always been an independent

person; even with Ben, I would exude my independence, often getting really upset if I thought he was infringing on it. Strange, how for some reason, I'm not the least bit upset that this adorably charming man took control of getting me checked into my room. Actually, I find his actions somewhat of a turn on.

Before handing me my room key, he looks at it while sliding his tongue over his lower lip and dragging his teeth across it. "I'll wait in the bar, unless you need some help getting to your room."

I stare at his lower lip and try to control my heavy breathing. I choose to focus on his flirty comment and not his overwhelming sexy charm. With that, I just shake my head at him. Flirting back I

bite my bottom lip and scan the length of his long, lean body in a very obvious manner. Then cocking my head I say, "I'm good, thanks."

He responds with a slight groaning noise, and his eyes flicker over me. I quickly turn, laughing to myself as I walk to the elevators without even glancing back. When I reach my room, I call the concierge and arrange to have my bags delivered. While waiting, I lie on the bed trying to figure out what is going on with my feelings and emotions. I feel a connection to River. We have the same ease we did the first night I met him. He's adorably charming, beyond charismatic, and more than attractive. All of the same qualities that made me

want to stay with him that night at the bar and that make me want to spend more time with him now. It's like he's reenacting parts of that night even though he doesn't seem to remember our encounter.

I look around my hotel room at the pictures of guitars on the walls, and thoughts of wanting someone to touch me, kiss me, someone to be intimate with me, flood my mind. Glancing out the window, I begin to question myself, and what I'm doing with River. Am I betraying Ben? How much time is enough time? Am I ready to be with someone else? I have only ever had sex with Ben, what if I suck at intimacy with somebody else? Is this dinner actually a



date, or is this just a business dinner? Am I prepared for a one-night stand with the man who has captured my attention faster than anyone I have ever known, twice? With everything racing through my mind, I'm only certain of the answer to the last question. Maybe I am. So for now I put away all my doubts and questions and tuck the guilt away as well.

A knock on the door takes me out of my thoughts and I jolt off the bed. Oh yeah, my luggage. Opening the door, I ask the bellman to wait a sec while I get some money out of my purse. Answering quickly, he tells me it has already been taken care of by a man wearing a Fender t-shirt and black leather jacket. All I can

do is smile.

As I close the door, the hotel room phone rings and I slide across the bed to answer it. River's seductive voice penetrates the line, "Just wanted you to know I made dinner reservations at N9 Steakhouse, in case you want to change, or not. They couldn't fit us in until eight, is that okay?"

Lying on the bed, clicking my heels together I answer, "Sounds great actually. I'll change and come down."

I can hear him chuckling on the other end of the phone as he asks, "Do you need help?"

Giggling, I roll over and stand up so I can hang up the phone. "I'm good. Thanks though. I'll be down in a few

minutes.”

I hide my face in my hands. I can't help but laugh out loud at the exchanges that have taken place between us over the last few hours. In no way would I ever classify our conversations as professional. He's flirting with me and I'm flirting back! It's fun and exciting and I feel almost reborn.

Thanking God that I packed extra clothes, I'm happy that I had trouble deciding what to wear this morning. I packed a few different outfits in case I decided to change before the meeting, along with clothes for a quick morning run.

Opening my suitcase, I take out a dress. It has a crisscrossed silk top with

an asymmetrical black leather mini skirt bottom and a drawstring waist. It's edgy and short, perfect for dinner with an almost famous, adorably charming rock star. I pair it with my black and nude ankle strap pumps and silver clutch.

Since I never change my jewelry, my wardrobe for tonight is set. I have worn the same jewelry every day for as many years as I can remember. My jewelry ensemble consists of a pair of two carat diamond studs, given to me by my parents for my thirteenth birthday; my grandmother's vintage watch with a black satin band and diamond surround; my aunt's white pearl and black pearl bracelets; my most recently added Cartier bangle; and my engagement ring

from Ben that I still wear on a chain around my neck.

Looking in the mirror as I quickly strip down to jump in the shower, I wince at what I see. Knowing actual clothing choice is irrelevant to men but looking sexy certainly isn't, I shake my head at myself. That's definitely not sexy looking back at me. My tall thin frame is now soft. I've lost most of my muscle tone along with the definition I spent years creating at the gym and in Pilates' classes. What is left is merely skin and bones. My legs have very little shape and any semblance of the small chest I once had is now gone, even the bra I just removed is too big. Suddenly I have doubts that the hot, attractive, and

charming man waiting for me downstairs will even want what I'm willing to give.

Deciding to just let fate take its course, I take a shower, brush my teeth, fix my face, spritz on some body spray, and put on my too big black bra and panties, before slipping on my dress and shoes. I look in the mirror again and flip my hair over to brush it so that my now ashen blonde hair falls in a cascading mess down my back, and then I give myself a self-assuring smile.

As I look away from the bathroom mirror, I turn back and decide I probably shouldn't wear my engagement ring when I go out with another man. It just doesn't feel right. I decide that just for tonight, I should remove my necklace.

As I do, visions of Ben slipping it on my finger come to mind, and I try to suppress them, but that was a happy time for me, and I actually smile at the memory.

It's only once I have actually removed the necklace and kiss my engagement ring that sadness instantly fills my heart. I swallow hard to hold back my emotion. I almost feel like I should be begging his forgiveness for my thoughts, my wants, and my needs. As I continue to look at the ring, a constant reminder of Ben, I know I will never forget him, but I have to put him away just for now. So I kiss my ring one more time and turn to lock it in the safe, saying a soft *I will always love you.*

While gathering my things, I hear a faint knock on the door. I open it without even looking to see who it is. He's standing there, leaning against the doorframe with his head down and a beautiful grin on his face. I can't help myself and I scan his long lean body just for a quick look. He's tall, lean, slightly muscular like a swimmer, and has crazy light-brown hair with copper here and there. He's insanely attractive. When my eyes meet his, he simply undoes me, completely mesmerizing me.

For the first time today, I feel the same electric pull that I felt between us that night. I also finally realize what the *something else* was that I couldn't figure out back then; what was driving me to



him so long ago. It is awareness; not only am I completely aware of him, but he's also completely aware of me.

Still standing in the doorway, I catch him studying the length of my body, and then he leans in toward me. Unable to control myself, my body unconsciously sways closer to his, and a small noise escapes my throat. I hear him inhale in response. We are so close, I think he's going to kiss me, but instead he rests his forehead on mine and I can feel his breath on my jaw. Our foreheads remain connected for a few short seconds before he glides his nose over my cheek. Exhaling a heavy breath as his mouth lightly grazes my ear, he whispers, "You look beautiful, perfect really."

His sexy moves and his closeness catch me off guard. My stomach is a mix of butterflies and flips. I didn't expect his contact nor did I expect his kind words; words that I just doubted about myself. Biting my bottom lip and swallowing hard, I resist the urge to pull him over to my bed and just be done with the semantics. Instead I decide to take a step back and wrap my arms around myself to stop my uncontrollable quivering.

With his gleaming green eyes gazing at me so intensely, I manage to find my voice and say in an octave or two off, "Thank you kind sir, did I take too long?"

Before he can comment, his phone

chimes, but he ignores it. The distraction is fine with me because it keeps him from noticing my reaction to his touch. He continues to look at me with that mesmerizing look of total awareness. I almost feel like he's deciding if he wants to eat me for dinner, which would suit me just fine.

Stepping back, he braces his arms on both sides of the doorframe and shakes his head. "No, I just wanted to make sure your bags were delivered."

I smile warmly at this thoughtfulness and inhale his intoxicating scent. "Yes they were, thank you very much."

Stepping under his arms and into the hallway, I turn to glance at him as the door closes. "I'm ready."

I grin when I hear that *Hmmm...* sound from him again. I have figured out that he makes that sound either when I do something that is unexpected or when he finds something I said or did funny.

He catches up with me, and once again, takes my hand and leads me to the elevator. Exiting the building, we walk to his car that is still waiting for us out front.

Driving out of the parking lot, he pulls his car over to the side of the road and cocks his head toward me. “Did I tell you how amazing you look?” His voice is soft with a rough whispering, raspy tone.

Losing myself in his green eyes, I answer in complete honesty. “Yes

actually, you did, but I don't mind hearing it from you again."

With his eyes locked on mine, he nods his head. "Just wanted to make sure you knew." Grinning delightfully, he turns back to his driver position and pulls out of the hotel parking lot. "Mind if I change before we head out?"

He pauses a second to look at me, and when he sees me shake my head, he continues, not waiting for a verbal response. "You can grab a drink while I take a quick shower."

Then thumbing to the back seat where his guitar is, he says, "I have to drop my guitar off anyway, I had a photo shoot before our meeting and they wanted pictures of me with her."

I giggle, despite myself. *Her? He calls his guitar her?*

“What?” he asks in mock offense.

Still giggling, I ask, “Does your girl have a name?”

Chuckling back at me, he answers, “Stella, her name is Stella, and don’t make fun. She’s the only girl I have ever really counted on.”

Having stopped my giggling and replaced it with appreciation, I say, “I’m not making fun, I actually get it. I feel the same way about my camera.” And for good measure, I laugh a little and say, “Maybe I should name him.”

The humor having entered back into our conversation, he chuckles along. “Him?”

“Him, her, I don’t know. I’ve never given it that much thought, but having a girl sleep in my room with me every night isn’t my thing.” I say this knowing it will elicit a reaction.

He’s full out chuckling now. “Hmmm . . . you should see the picture I have in my head right now, no pun intended.”

Pouting my lips, I raise my eyes in an upward glance, not quite rolling them. “I’d rather not.”

“That look was hot,” he says after making a slight groaning noise.

We stop at a red light and my giggle fest is over. As I glance over at him and he’s looking at me, I wonder if he can see into the future because the look he’s giving me tells me he sees what I see.

His phone chimes again from his pocket, and he continues to ignore it. He slowly reaches over, grabs a strand of my hair, and very slowly tucks it behind my ear, sending shivers down my spine. Circling his index finger around my ear, he lightly tugs on my lobe, sparking a heat within my body that I have only felt once before. My body starts to quiver again. I look up to meet his now hooded eyes and decide to just come out and ask him if he remembers me because his movements and gestures are the same as they were that night so long ago. Before the words can come out, horns start honking and blowing. The light has turned green and I close my mouth.

As we enter the Palms Place Hotel



and Spa driveway, he continues to tell me about his new album, but I'm having a really hard time concentrating on anything other than his physical being.

He stops the car and peers over at me. "Dahlia, did you hear me?"

Blinking at him, I shake my head. "Sorry, should I be taking notes?" I have no idea what he just said, and the funny thing is I really am interested in his new album and not only for work purposes.

Frowning at me, he nods his head. "Yeah, this is really important stuff." Then grinning mischievously, he counters with, "I asked if you have ever stayed here before?"

My door opens and the valet is standing there. River meets me on the

sidewalk and continues his teasing. “So did you get that down?”

I pout my lips and roll my eyes. “No I have never stayed here.” I give him a smirk and add, “Smartass,” just for fun. With a little more boldness than I intend, I say, “And don’t say it.”

Cocking his head to one side he asks questioningly, “Say what?”

“That my look was hot.”

“First of all, what makes you think I was going to say that? And secondly, it was!”

A greeting from the doorman helps distract him. I’m grateful as he nods his head and says, “Hi,” especially since I knew what he was going to say because he said the very same thing to me not

only today but also the night that we met.

With our hands connected, we walk through the lobby of the hotel. The lobby is soothing and quiet in contrast to most Las Vegas hotel lobbies with their bright lights and dingy slot machines. The peaceful sound of water surrounds us, and the gleam of the floor is almost blinding. Everything about this place is tranquil.

As we wait for the elevator, I realize he's still holding my hand, and we're no longer in transit. We are standing still, holding hands as he looks at me with his powerful green eyes and rubs circles on the top of my hand with his thumb.

He's explaining that he likes staying here because it is close to everything,

but quiet, not all of the hustle and bustle of casino hotels. I can see what he means. This place is like nowhere I have ever been. I feel like I'm in another time and another place. The more I stare into his eyes the more I feel I am.

Dropping my hand as we approach the elevator, he reaches for his wallet and takes out his room key. Upon entering the elevator, he puts his room key in the key slot and pushes the button for Penthouse A. I'm relieved that he doesn't have a single room like mine, because what am I supposed to do while he showers, sit on his bed and drink?

As we ascend, he leans against the elevator door with his foot on the wall, his hands in his pockets, facing me. He

smiles slightly, and I can see traces of his dimples. Then out of nowhere he breaks out in song, singing an ode to the t-shirt I wore earlier today. Watching him as he sings Lola, he seems lost in the song. He's so attractive, and watching him sing makes my breath quicken and my insides tighten.

When he reaches the lyric that mentions Cherry Cola, he grins crookedly. His tone is amazing, and I just close my eyes and listen, trying to control my breathing. He stops singing before he gets to the next line about sipping champagne.

I'm hyperaware of his closeness without even opening my eyes. He strides to stand directly in front of me,

and his breath is noticeably quicker. He takes my hand and kisses it before leaning into my ear and whispering, “Do you like Cherry Cola?” The elevator doors open, and the connection is lost.

# Chapter Eight

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## SOMETHING MORE

*I know there is something more  
We don't even know what we're  
fighting for  
I have to ask why then  
Because I don't understand  
I know there is something more.*



I can't stop thinking about everything that has already happened today as we exit the elevator. River grabs my hand and leads me down a magnificently decorated hallway. The floor is checkered in different white toned tiles, the walls are a spa-blue with creamy-white colored picture moldings equally spaced apart, each housing different photographs of the desert, secured by glass panels.



Walking down the hallway, I begin to wonder about the *something more* as my mind fades back to the question I asked myself so long ago. Does love at first sight really exist? It's an interesting question. If you had asked me that question five years ago, I'd have said absolutely not. The love Ben and I had for each other evolved over our many years as friends. I can't even remember when our love went from the love between two friends to falling in love.

Then one drunken girls night out, I met the man who is now leading me to his hotel room and wondered to myself; *Could I suddenly believe in love at first sight? How could love at first sight even exist when you were already in*

*love with someone else?*

And now, after River's serenade in the elevator, I'm asking myself that very same question again. Only this time, the man I was already in love with is gone. Ben is just a beautiful memory of my past, and with that, the 'danger' of the man next to me is gone as well.

Shaking my head to rid any thoughts of love, I choose to focus on lust instead. My body begins to tremble slightly and I have an ache that seems to radiate from everywhere. I want this man to touch me. I need him to touch me. Honestly, I want more—a lot more. I'm fairly certain he wants that too. All I have to do is finish my interview first so we can move on to what I've wanted to do since I first saw

him.

River pauses at the door while he takes the key that's already in his hand and slides it into the key slot, pushing the door open. He drops his hand and puts it on the small of my back as he guides me into the suite. Walking in, I mentally take back my thoughts that he's almost famous. This suite is definitely for famous people. It has floor-to-ceiling windows along the entire back wall. The living room is decorated similar to the hallway with soft color tones and contains a fireplace. The dining room houses a light beech wood table for twelve, and the kitchen is equipped with white marble countertops, built in coffee maker, and even a gas stove. The

hardwood and marble flooring is like nothing I've seen in a hotel suite before. There is even a small swimming pool with a hot tub on the balcony overlooking the strip. The suite feels bigger than my house.

Setting his guitar down in the corner, he leaves his hand on my back while guiding me toward the window. He stands still for a moment, and I wonder what he is thinking. He slides his tongue over his bottom lip in an insanely hot manner. We're so close that I can feel his warm breath on the nape of my neck. I admire his gorgeous face and smooth skin. I can almost touch his fully defined abdominal muscles through his t-shirt. He is so unbelievably good looking. I

feel my heart quicken and if he gets any closer, I might just free-fall out the window, but I continue to look at him. His facial features are so alluring: he has a strong jaw, a sculpted nose, an extremely toned body, and his personality is extremely captivating.

“There isn’t another view in Las Vegas like the one from this window at night,” he says while unlocking the sliding glass doors and opening them. “I hope you plan to stick around to see the city light up.” Not waiting for an answer, he brushes by me to walk toward the kitchen, but not before dragging his fingers across the span of my back. His slight touch sends tingles all the way up to my neck.

On his way into the kitchen, he texts something on his phone, but I don't ask what.

Watching River walk that walk to the kitchen, I can only smile. "Is that an invitation? Because I didn't think I needed one," I tease, now laughing out loud and grinning widely.

"You don't," he says as he turns back to catch me staring at his backside. He winks at me, and then grins so wide his dimples are almost pulsing.

River plugs his phone into an iPod dock on the counter and U2's Beautiful Day surrounds us as he glances at me from under his brows, a small grin curving from his lips, and he hums along to the song. *What is he doing?*

Opening the refrigerator, River pulls out two bottles of beer. He lifts one up and asks, “Is this okay? I’m not really a good bartender, but I can try to whip up something if you want.”

I nod my head, my ever-present smile still in place. “It’s perfect. Can I get a glass of ice please?”

“Hmmm . . .” I hear River say, still grinning at me and shaking his head.

He starts opening and closing a few cupboards until he finds the glasses. He pulls down two and places them on the counter. After filling one with ice from the dispenser on the refrigerator door and pouring the beer into the glasses, he walks toward the large L shaped sofa and motions for me to come over and

have a seat.

As I walk toward him, I can't help but notice how hot he looks. He's like a magnet, and I'm a piece of metal being pulled to him without control. When I'm close enough to see into his eyes, the ones I have looked into one too many times, this time I'm thinking I hope they don't let me out.

Raising an eyebrow, he says, "What are you smiling about?"

"Nothing. Everything. I don't know," I say, shrugging my shoulders and trying to resist the pull.

"Hmmm . . ." I hear again as he walks even closer to me. He motions with one hand for me to sit. I do as he suggests, and he hands me my drink and



says, “That’s not very definitive.”

“It wasn’t meant to be.”

I’m a little distracted by his messy but perfect hair and overall good looks. I want to ask him if he has any idea how attractive he is. *What’s wrong with me?* I’m giddy like a teenager for Christ sakes!

Taking a large sip of my drink to cool down my overheated body, I immediately feel it; a brain-freeze. I squint my eyes trying to stop it, to will it away.

“Much colder with ic . . .” I hear him start to say, but the end of his sentence trails off.

I look up as he sets his glass on the table. He must have noticed my brain-

freeze face because he says, “Close your eyes.”

I look at him quizzically while squinting.

His close proximity makes me feel even more off as he says, “Brain-freeze, right?”

I nod my head yes and close my eyes.

Placing his fingers on each side of my temples, River firmly presses while massaging circles at the same time. The goosebumps rear their heads and my temples are on fire, forget the freeze.

I once again feel his nose in the crook of my neck, but this time on his way up to my ear he allows his lips to skim the most sensitive flesh of my neck. When he reaches my ear he whispers,

“Better?”

Nodding my head slowly, I open my eyes, very aware of how close we are. My breathing starts to increase again. Does he realize what that little move does to me? I really just want to grab him, but I restrain myself, remembering dinner and the interview. Yes . . . dinner and interview.

Pulling back to a safe distance, River once again masters changing gears as his conversation leads us back to normalcy. He questions me about where I grew up, what I was like in high school, where I went to college, and my life in general.

My mind drifts back to Ben time and time again. I'm finding it difficult to not mention him, but his spirit occupies my

every memory. I'm talking to River, but Ben is in my head. I start to wonder what the hell I'm doing.

A knock at his door distracts me from my thoughts of Ben, for now.

"That must be the food," River says as he walks over to answer the door. A waiter wheels in a table full of plates covered with silver domes. After River hands him a tip, I shoot him a questioning look.

"Yeessss," he says as he removes the domes to reveal an array of nibble-sized bites.

"When did you order food?" I say, squinting my eyes and pouting my lips.

"Texted down to the kitchen," he says, making a slight groaning noise, and

with his eyelids half closing he adds, “That look is hot.” *I knew he’d say that.*

All I can do is shake my head at him because what I really want to do is lie him down on the couch. *What’s his game?* He’s driving me to the edge and there is no way he isn’t there too. He was almost panting after his last move.

Pushing aside my need for a man’s human touch—his touch—we talk for almost another hour while we continue to drink and eat.

When we have both finished our second beer, mine with ice, his without, River stands up. “Feel free to make yourself at home while I take a quick shower.”

I’m watching River leave the room,

admiring that walk that I can't get enough of and the way his hair somewhat sticks out in the back, when he turns around and winks at me. Having caught me staring he mumbles something I can't really hear, but sounds strangely like, *you could join me if you want.*

Disappearing into what I can only assume is the bedroom, I consider joining him. I really want to, but I'm here for work. Damn, I really need to get my shit together and get that interview done.

I make my way over to the window and I step outside. Horns are blowing, lights are flashing, and people are everywhere. As I stand up here looking down at all the chaos, I feel the disarray

is a welcome relief to the life I have been living. I want so badly to just feel alive again. But everything still reminds me of Ben. Even here, now, with this incredibly hot, yet adorably charming man, my mind still wanders back to Ben and our trip to Las Vegas right after I finished graduate school.

Remembering when a group of our friends planned a couples weekend, I smirk even now at the word ‘couples’. It was more like a guy’s weekend and a girl’s weekend combined only for the sake of each couple sharing a hotel room. As soon as we arrived, the group of guys hit the casino and I never saw Ben again until he came stumbling into our room around four in the morning,

drunk and not ready for sleep. The next day, we spent the morning together in our room and then he met the guys in the afternoon, this time I didn't see him again until he stumbled into our room just in time to catch a cab back to the airport. That was the way we were, and honestly, I had a great time with my girlfriends that weekend. We played blackjack, did some shopping, ate fabulous food, and went clubbing at night. I had a blast.

Suddenly arms surround me as River braces his hands on the railing on both sides of me, suspending my memories of Ben. River has his front to my back, and I want to lean into him, just feel him, the entire length of his hard body against



mine, but I don't. I inhale his now familiar scent and close my eyes. Every nerve in my body is electrified with need. Two years of neglect has my body screaming for this man to touch me.

"Should we catch the sunset before we head out?" River says, standing so close, yet way too far away.

"I would love that. The sky is so clear, the sunset is going to be gorgeous," I say, not turning around, and not moving a muscle because the pull of my body to his is so strong right now, I can barely restrain myself.

"Yeah it is."

I can tell by the way his warm breath is hitting my ear that he's not looking at the sun, and that thrills me. Being

surrounded by River and watching the sunset feels so right that I try to rid my mind of any thoughts of Ben so that I can focus solely on River. However, focusing on anything right now is hard to do. His close proximity to me has brought me back to the edge, and free falling with him once again occupies my mind.

After we watch the sunset, River moves back, leaving one hand on the rail next to me. “Ready?”

“Yes,” I say, glancing up and noticing how his strong arm leads the way to his gorgeous face.

When I turn completely around, I see him for the first time since emerging from the bedroom. I notice he’s wearing

black denim frayed jeans with a gray button-down shirt that shows hints of his very defined muscles, a belt, and his black work boots. I notice that he is about the same build as Ben, maybe just slightly taller.

River grins as he detects my stare. “Do you see something you like?”

Before I can respond, I stumble slightly, having started to walk toward the living room and River’s nose is at my neck, but this time only because that is where I landed.

River doesn’t waiver as he uses the opportunity to glide his nose to my ear and whisper, “Hey gorgeous, you okay?” I feel his nose at my ear; I feel his breath, feel his lips slightly grazing my

neck. But unlike the last time, he doesn't pull back immediately and the electric pull takes over.

Responding in a very raspy tone, I start, "Absolutely, I'm . . ."

River doesn't let me finish my sentence as he gently pushes me back against the rail. His arms are extended on either side of me, he's surrounding me, caging me in, but once again, I don't feel trapped. He never moves his lips away from my neck as he repositions us. My breath is hitched and my heartbeat has doubled as I tilt my head back to allow him full access to my neck. He's softly running a trail of kisses from my neck up to my mouth, slowly, lightly licking, softly sucking, until his lips

finally meet mine.

Parting my lips, I think I hear a groan from the back of his throat, and I know I hear a small moan of my own as his mouth presses against mine. I'm frozen, unable to move, not even able to lace my arms around him because I'm wrapped up in a different emotion. It's happiness growing, overshadowing the sorrow. I feel all of my darkest days slipping away, right here, right now, with him—and I'm paralyzed.

My body starts to tremble, and I put my hands on his chest for support. He's gently kissing me, sucking my bottom lip before he suddenly presses his mouth harder to my lips, his tongue colliding against mine. As soon as I start sliding

my hands down his chest, he groans again, louder this time but then draws back. And just like that, our first *real* kiss is over.

But it wasn't just a kiss. It was so much more. When our tongues met, it felt like our souls connected with each other as they passed through each other's mouths. This soul mate feeling confuses me, but looking at him makes me smile. He grins back at me as he takes my hand, leading me through the living room and out the door without a word.

Standing in the silence of the elevator, our hands still connected, each lost in our own thoughts, we don't look at each other, and we still don't speak. Memories of Ben flood my mind, but

these memories are searching, fleeting thoughts. I can't remember my body reacting to Ben's touch like it just did to River's. He's so seductive and alluring, he makes me want more than the kiss we just shared. God, does he not want me, is the skinny, frail girl standing next to him just not that appealing? Shaking off my self-doubts because of all the things I am, I'm not a needy, insecure girl. Maybe it's time to cut my losses and run; finish this interview and take the next plane home.

As the doors open, my scattered thoughts are broken when River asks me if I'm hungry and I am transported into the now. I nod my head yes in response. We exit the elevator and walk through

the lobby toward the doors; I'm thinking *just finish your job and leave*.

I stop abruptly when I remember that I don't have any of the materials I need for the interview. I left my messenger bag in my hotel room when River knocked unexpectedly on my door. "Shit, I forgot my bag and I need it for the interview."

River chuckles at me and leans in quietly. He seductively whispers, "Could we do the interview thing tomorrow because you're looking far too sexy for me to concentrate on anything other than you?"

My emotions are a tangled mess as he gestures for a cab. "Are you playing some kind of game with me?"



“What do you mean?” he says, running his hands through his hair. He sounds genuinely confused as he opens the door to the cab.

Trying to keep my voice down I say, “What do I mean?” Then I point to the top floor of the building as we scoot into the cab. “What was that up on the balcony?”

River tells the cab driver, “N9 Steakhouse please.”

Then after turning to face me he says, “That was a kiss and I think . . . no, I know you know what that is.” His tone is much harsher than I have heard from him before.

My eyes open wide and my mouth drops open. I’m at a loss for words.

I don't have to speak because River does before I can. "We've met before you know?"

I look at him a little perplexed and a little hurt that he hasn't mentioned it. I nod my head indicating that, of course, I remember. Then with a low raspy voice I answer, "You remember meeting me and haven't said anything up until now. Why?"

With an equally low voice and the harshness seemingly gone in his tone, he says, "Why haven't you, Dahlia?" He's looking at me with his powerful green eyes and I know there's no seeing the future in them right now.

With honesty pouring out of me and thankful that he actually does remember

me, I answer, “I just didn’t think you remembered me, that’s the only reason.” And I wonder why he seems to think there is more to it than that.

“That’s rich,” he says almost with a laugh, his harsh tone returning. He clenches his fists as he leans his head back on the cab seat.

I stare past him looking out the window to avoid his gaze. We are sitting still in the traffic. How appropriate. I don’t want to look at him. I’m trying not to cry. I’m confused and not sure what to think. After all the flirting, the attraction, and now the bitterness; his emotions seem to ping-pong faster than I can keep track of and I know I have to get out of this game.

With sudden clarity, I turn my entire body to face him. Doing this with a dress on isn't easy. I brace my hand on the seat in front of me so the slick leather bottom of my skirt doesn't slide across the bench and I fully cross my legs. The cab starts moving again; horns are blowing and bright colored lights are flashing everywhere.

"River, I don't want to play games. I don't know what is going on here, but let's just go back to my hotel, let me get my stuff, finish the interview, and then we can say our goodbyes." I let him know this in as flat a tone as I can, knowing this is not what I want but what needs to happen.

Ignoring my request to change our

destination he turns his entire body toward me. With his elbow up on the ledge of the back window and his knee slightly bouncing he says, “Dahlia, I’m not playing any games here. I’m just trying to figure things out. So let’s start with the night we met, okay?”

I nod but think this isn’t going to go well at all.

Sitting up and in a monotone, but rather harsh voice he asks, “Why did you leave the bar that night with another guy?”

“What are you talking about?”

Staring at me he says, “Dahlia, come on, just tell me the truth.”

“I didn’t leave with any guy. I left with my girlfriend Aerie. So what are

you talking about?”

Running his fingers through his hair, he hisses his words between his teeth. “After my gig you were gone. Here I thought we had some intense connection. Then I had to go back on stage and you said you’d wait for me, but you didn’t. You just left. Later that night I had to stop by my brother’s frat house to look for my sister who left without us and I saw you there. You were standing with some guy near the stairs and he was sucking on your neck.”

He says the last part with disgust in his voice and I start to feel a little queasy. Never did I think my two worlds would collide like this. With my most apologetic tone and my eyes pleading

forgiveness for my omission I say, “River, that wasn’t just some guy that was my boyfriend and I was afraid of what might happen between you and me, that’s why I left when I did.”

“That’s fucking fantastic news to hear now. That wasn’t something you thought you should share then?”

My eyes start tearing up as I say, “It’s not like that, you don’t understand.”

He curls his lips into a sneer as the cab starts inching its way to nowhere. While gritting his teeth and looking at the floor he says, “Really, because I think I understand pretty well. You were out for fun and looking to have a good time.”

Raising his gaze to meet mine he continues with, “Do you have a

boyfriend now?”

I flush, swallowing back my tears. I'm a little pissed myself now at his bitter reaction, so in a slightly clipped tone I answer, “No, Ben was my boyfriend but he died almost two years ago, and actually he was my fiancé.”

His eyes flash to mine and I see compassion and maybe a little bit of pain in them. He studies my face like he's trying to bring back the last five years but doesn't know how. “Is he the same guy? The boyfriend from the party and your fiancé?”

Trying to wash away my somber mood, I say, “Yes, Ben was my boyfriend since we were like five. Well not really but it seemed like it. We



actually knew each other since we were five.”

“Hmmm . . .” is all River says at first. Then after a few beats he looks at me. His eyes are a little softer, and he seems more understanding. And just like that, the charming man that seems to captivate me is back. “That explains a lot. Why . . .?” He doesn’t get to finish his question as the cab driver announces our arrival at the restaurant.

I put my hand on his knee. I’m a little shaken by our exchange but for some reason drawn even closer to him. I don’t know if we can recover from this and honestly I’m afraid to go too much further in case we can’t. “River, let’s just end this here.”

Taking my hand from his knee he lifts it to his mouth and lightly kisses it in the same way he has done before. My goosebumps return and I have to swallow a few times to get the huge lump out of my throat. Still holding onto my fingers, our hands now resting on his leg, he lifts my chin with his other hand and rubs his thumb over my lips. "Dahlia, stay and have dinner with me? You owe me that much for standing me up that night. Then let's see what happens." He says this very softly, almost like a whisper as he continues to run his thumb back and forth over my bottom lip. The cab driver gets out of the cab and opens my door. It's a gesture I'm sure to move us along.

As resolutely as I can, I say, “Okay fine, dinner and then the interview.” But I know that’s not all I meant. It’s time to remove our masks to see if there is really something more between us, but in order to do this I have to get my emotions under control. This is easier said than done around River Wilde, especially because, as I get out of the cab, I can still feel the searing left behind on my lips from his touch.

# Chapter Nine

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## HOLD MY HEART

*How long until I see what you see  
Until I see through your facade  
Stop bringing me to my knees  
And tell me you're everything you  
say you are  
And how long until I let you hold  
my heart.*



There are some things I expected when I landed in Las Vegas this morning: casinos, alcohol, video gaming, slot machines, crap tables, neon lights, and even River Wilde. What I didn't expect was the bitter exchange that just took place in the cab.

Grabbing my hand, he leads me to the elevator inside the large glass building. As we stand in silence, I take the opportunity to collect my thoughts as

we rise the forty floors to the restaurant. First, he remembers me. Second, he is, was, I'm not sure, upset with me for leaving that night. Finally, he went to the Kappa Sigma party to look for his sister after leaving the USC Campus Bar and saw me with Ben.

The facts are easier to sort than the underlying feelings accompanying them. It's my feelings I can't seem to get a handle on. They are growing, almost intensifying with every word he says to me. And although I don't really know him, this doesn't dampen the unspoken truth that I feel more connected to him right now than any other living man.

These are the feelings driving me to stay here, to not walk away. But the

biggest reason keeping me here is I actually get him. He's mad right now, but what I see are his struggles between his emotions and his charm. I can see through his anger to his wounded pride at being jilted. I can also see a little hurt there too. The fact that I get him intrigues me, it captivates me, and makes me want him more.

Facts and unanswered questions are swirling in my head as I exit the elevator into the restaurant. We are hand in hand and I'm wondering how this can be real. Doubts start to cloud my reason. Is he on the up and up or is he trying to get me back for leaving that night? Is this all a game? If it's not, can we put the past behind us? Can I tell him about Ben?

What is his motivation in asking me to stay, while pushing me away at the same time? My doubts mix with my certainties, but what I'm most concerned about is why do I feel every time he looks at me he can see through to my soul?

I'm desperately trying to shut thoughts of Ben out of my mind, but for some reason the conversation keeps leading back to him. Not literally in terms of using his name, but figuratively in that all outcomes of this conversation lead to Ben.

As the hostess leads us to a secluded U-shaped booth, I notice the beautiful view of Las Vegas. Our booth faces the interior of the restaurant, and a wall of



glass is to our right. Sliding into the booth, I turn to look out at the view and long for the tranquility it offers.

I stay very close to the edge of the booth, not allowing River access from my end. He smirks at me when I don't move in but doesn't say anything. He just nods as he gets in from the other end and sits down.

The restaurant is dimly lit, but there is an ominous glow coming from the candle in the center of the table and I swear from River too. As we sit in silence, I know he's staring at me. I can feel it, but I don't look at him. Instead, I shift my eyes down to study my menu.

When the waiter approaches, he asks what I would like to drink, and I order

my trademark cocktail. “A filthy Grey Goose martini with extra olives, please.”

River orders a bottle of beer and starts chuckling.

Looking at him for the first time since we sat down, I ask, “What’s so funny?”

He’s staring at me, and my gaze shifts to meet his eyes as he says, “Filthy. That sounds really dirty and really hot.”

I smile coyly at him, but I don’t break our eye contact. I actually allow his stare; almost welcome it. I decide to join in the banter and ignore the sexual undertone of his statement. “I only drink three types of drinks.” Then holding one

finger up in the air, I say, “Beer with ice.” Holding a second finger up in the air, I say, “Martinis.” And finally, holding a third finger up, I finish with, “And champagne, but only with a strawberry.”

Then smirking, I decide to go for it and throw a detail from our first meeting at him. Without any perk or animation I say, “And oh yeah, an occasional shot, but then you already knew that.”

Running his hands through his hair, he raises an eyebrow. “Yes I do. I remember that very well actually.”

And there it is again. A *ménage* of shuffled signals where words and body language aren’t always in sync, but emotions and body language seem to be

oddly connected. With my mind and body having had enough of the chaos, I let it out. I just say it.

“River, what kind of game are you playing? Is this your way of luring me in, because if it is, I’m not interested? I’m not a groupie!” I finally manage to say what’s been on my mind, and I feel relieved.

He moves toward the center of the booth. He’s inching his way closer to me, but he’s still a good distance away. Putting his fingers on the table, he starts tapping it. He looks at me intently and says, “Dahlia, I’m not playing any game. I’m just interested in you, and I know you’re not a groupie.”

His fingers stop tapping the table,

and he reaches over to where my hand is clutching the hem of my skirt. He takes it and rests both of our hands on my leg, his over mine. I notice he hasn't laced our fingers together though. He clears his throat before saying, "I'm just trying to figure that night out. Believe me, the facts are pretty clear, but it's the whys I'm struggling with."

River looks at me for a beat, dragging his tongue over his lower lip before continuing. "This is how I remember it. I was singing a gig at the USC Campus Bar. During a break I went to grab a beer. I met the most incredible girl whom I don't think even knew that I sang in the band, but loved music. We seemed to hit it off. We did a couple of

shots, drank a few drinks, and talked without any pretense. I asked her to wait for me after the show. She didn't say anything about having a boyfriend or not sticking around and then when I finished she was gone." With his eyes still piercing through me, he pauses as if waiting for a response even though he hasn't asked a question.

The restaurant seems very quiet as I return his gaze and just nod my head in agreement. All the while knowing what he said is the truth and knowing what he hasn't asked for is the answer.

Before River can continue, the waiter returns with our drinks and asks us if we're ready to order. River asks him to give us a few minutes. Once the

waiter leaves he raises his glass and out of politeness I do the same. "To beautiful days," he says and clinks his glass to mine. I can't help but smile that he remembers my concert t-shirt that I wore that night and the toast he made then, but this also infuriates me.

"That's what I mean!"

"What?" he says, actually looking confused.

"That! You're back and forth with me, with your actions, with your emotions. You act like you don't remember me, then spring on me that you do. You flirt with me and then you stop on a dime. You kiss me and then you pull away as soon as I touch you. You're mad then you're not." I don't stop to take a

breath or let him speak before finally raising the hand he's holding and letting it go. "You're holding my hand, then . . ." I trail off, not sure of how to finish that thought. Tearing my gaze from his, I try to rein in my emotions, to wipe the flustered girl up off the floor.

Pulling myself together, I look over at him again and decide to continue. As I'm about to speak, I can't help but notice that he seems to be contemplating everything I just said. I can read it on his face. So I stop and give him a chance to respond.

"Hmmm . . ." is his only response, as he quickly slides next to me and suddenly his lips are on mine. He's kissing me very softly. He tugs at my



bottom lip before he leans away and moves back into the center of the booth. He rests into the bench and puts both hands behind his head as he looks past me out into the night. When his eyes shift back to mine he says, “Here’s the thing Dahlia, you confuse the shi . . . out of me. Boyfriend or not, I really thought we had some epic connection and then you bagged out without even giving us a chance.” When he finishes he just shakes his head and gazes out the window. His eyes are darker now, sad even.

The waiter returns and we order our food. I’m not the least bit hungry anymore. My stomach is in knots, and I feel uncertain as to why we are still discussing this, where we’re going with

this, and what the purpose of staying here is. I just want this conversation to be over. And if we leave together I have no misconceptions that this attraction isn't anything but a one-night stand, and I'm all right with that. I'll put aside my confusion and just be with him. I'm craving intimacy: a touch, his touch; a kiss, his kiss; and so much more. But this bittersweet conversation is blocking the way to satisfying my needs, and the driver behind the madness is confusion.

*His confusion. He's confused? My confusion. I'm confused!*

Oddly enough, the desire I feel for him is only being stroked by our emotional conversation. What I see in him is so real. I feel like I know more of

him, of his soul, than I knew of Ben's in a lifetime. And that draw is irrefutable, but confusing at the same time. *Why do I feel like this?*

If tonight happens, I know I will have to deal with tomorrow's emotions because I'm certain my flame won't be doused. But to get to tonight, we have to get past this bitterness. We have to speak the unspoken words about Ben, my relationship with Ben. I'm not sure I can.

Soft music is playing overhead, and the candle flame has burned out, but River's ominous glow is still ever present, and he's still sitting in the middle of the booth. As I glance over at him. I see sadness in his face, and the pull I feel to be closer to him is

overwhelming.

Knowing I'm the cause of his confusion, of his sadness, makes me want to close the distance between us. Physically and emotionally. So I move just a little closer to him. As I do, he shifts his gaze to mine and the corner of his mouth lifts slightly into an almost charming half-smile.

When I'm close enough, I grab his hand, lacing my fingers with his as I say, "I'm sorry. I don't expect you to understand why I didn't say anything or stop what was happening between us then because I didn't, I don't, understand it myself. All I know is, I was a young college girl who flirted with an insanely attractive guy at a bar and had to leave

because she felt like the cosmic universe had crashed down on her. And she couldn't have that, she had a boyfriend."

I pause a minute, scanning the room before continuing, but I don't see anything but his intense stare. "To be perfectly honest, she didn't even think that guy would remember her from that night. And that's why she didn't bring it up, that's why, *I*, River, didn't bring it up." When I finish my speech, I take a deep breath and exhale, clutching his hand a little harder to help contain all the emotion.

River pauses for a moment to watch me and then gives me his most charismatic grin. "Hmmm . . . you flirted?" Then rather seductively he

continues with, “I think I was the one flirting with you, and I couldn’t stop because you were perfect really, still are.”

Bringing my hand to his mouth, he softly kisses it. “Beautiful girl, of course I remember you. How could I not? You’re unforgettable.”

Our food arrives and I try to contain the tears welling in my eyes. Before he lets go of my hand he squeezes it and with the utmost of charming looks, he winks at me. With that one little look I can feel the tension washing away.

Then he does the most adorable thing I have ever seen a man do. He crosses his right hand to his heart and draws an X over it as he says, “Dahlia, I was

never mad. I could never be mad at you, I promise.”

Believing him completely, I decide to leave that conversation behind for now and like River does so well, I change the subject. As we eat, I ask him about his childhood, his family, and his career. We talk again with the ease of familiarity. He casually touches me whenever the opportunity presents itself and before I know it we’ve finished our meals and our second drink.

The waiter returns, asking if we want dessert. I pass, but River orders chocolate mousse. Once the dessert arrives he offers his spoon to me and I sample it in the most seductive way I can. Carefully and slowly eating the

mousse off his spoon. Taking the spoon from my lips, he leans into me, licks some chocolate off my upper lip with the tip of his tongue, and then leans back on the bench.

I'm not sure if it is the alcohol, his fresh scent, or just him, but the sexual tension is everywhere, and every fiber of my body is screaming for him to touch me. I can't take it any longer. So I flat out bring my hand to River's neck and pull him to my mouth, pressing hard, not caring that we're in public. I allow his tongue to meet mine just once before I pull back.

Sitting back and grinning, I can see he is looking at me that way again; that mesmerizing way he has with his eyes.



He leans into me again and whispers in my ear, “Are you ready to get out of here, because I am?”

I want to scream, ‘I was born ready’, but I restrain myself and simply move to stand up. Swallowing hard and slightly nodding my head, I say, “Excuse me while I use the ladies room.”

When I exit the ladies room, he is standing against the wall, foot propped up, and head down, grinning. He’s the epitome of sexy with his long lean toned body and killer smile. He looks up at me and grabs for my hand. He surprises me by gently backing me up to the wall. He kisses my forehead before moving his mouth down to my nose and kissing it too. He moves to my lips and tenderly

but aggressively bites down on my lower one and then looks at me. I close my eyes as he sucks on my lip, sending an overwhelming sensation through my body. Pressing his lips firmly to mine, he starts to kiss me in the most erotic way. First, he lightly kisses me, then opens our mouths together and exhales. I can only inhale his sweet breath. He runs the tip of his tongue over my lower lip before slipping it into my mouth and firmly pressing his lips to mine. I'm left breathless as the kiss ends and he takes my hand.

As we leave the restaurant, River takes me out to the terrace to watch the craziness below us. We talk about what we see and the beauty of the night. We

are both leaning over the stone wall gazing below when he steps back and turns me to face him. He puts one hand on the small of my back and the other behind my neck. "You are so beautiful," he says then he kisses me again, and just like before, it's in a way that I have never been kissed. There is emotion, compassion, and lust all wrapped together in his kiss. The kiss is slow, full of passion. Our mouths move in sync with our tongues, but unlike before, he doesn't press harder or move faster. He goes slower and the kisses turn into burning desire. As our lips part, he doesn't stop. He whispers something I can't hear. I think I might be purring. I know I am breathless. I am almost

panting as he starts kissing my neck, nipping and gently biting his way up to my ear where he whispers, “I want you so much.”

I pull him to me, crushing my lips to his. He responds instantly. He licks my top lip then sucks on it; he does the same to my bottom lip before locking his mouth on mine. He moves his hands down my backside and presses me closer to him so I can feel his hard body on mine. He slides his tongue over the roof of my mouth, and I know I’m moaning as I step back.

“Where did you learn to kiss like that?” I manage to say breathlessly.

He shakes his head, and his fully dimpled grin returns as he, just as

breathless, responds. “I wasn’t just kissing you. I was also whispering in your mouth,” he says lightly laughing. “Do you want lessons? Because I might be able to swing something for you.”

Laughing together now, both out of breath and both panting, he laces our hands together and looks at me. “I want to tell you something before we go,” he says, pulling me back into his body. “Do you know my band’s song Once in a Lifetime?”

I nod my head because I know that song very well. It’s one of the ones I used to listen repeatedly on my iPod.

“I wrote that song about you. About meeting you that night.”

Smiling, while trying to swallow the

emotion that was lumped in my throat, I manage to verbalize only a fraction of the feelings welling deep within me; the true appreciation of being someone's muse and just the absolute awesomeness and gratitude that he wrote a song about me. My words are short and clipped, and I don't care anything about a one-night stand or not. "You wrote a song about me? Really?" It's all I can say before throwing my arms around his neck and crushing my lips to his. I kiss him hard before whispering, in my most seductive voice, "Take me back to your hotel. Now!"

River sighs as he stares at me for a few seconds, blinking his eyes before saying, "You're just so beautiful." He

grabs my hand even tighter, if that is possible, and leads me quickly down the strip. In our haste, we abandon the idea of a cab because at this time of night, we can honestly walk to the hotel faster than a cab could get us there. As we walk, I notice he has lost that sway of a walk that I admire. Instead he's walking fast, with purpose, and I'm following his lead, finding it hard to keep up as we stride into the night.

Reaching the hotel lobby, he sits me in a chair and tells me to stay put as he walks over to the front desk and has a short conversation with the clerk. The lobby is quiet with just a few people coming and going. I don't even know what time it is. I watch him as I sit back

in the chair and think, *God he is so hot.*

I see him hand the clerk a bunch of cash and wonder what the money is for; does he pay his bills in cash instead of credit card? As he walks back over to me, he's smiling and I melt again. He reaches for my hand, pulling me out of the comfortable chair, and leads me through the lobby.

The closer we get to the elevator the more nervous I become. My breathing accelerates as memories of Ben flutter in and out of my head, and my stomach starts to flip-flop with thoughts of River.

My mind is shouting at me to proceed with caution, and I wonder if my thoughts are echoing off the walls. *What am I doing with this man?* I have



slept with one person my whole life. Am I betraying Ben by consciously deciding to have a one-night stand, because this cannot possibly be more? I know that. He's a player, I've read this, and I know this. God, how many women has he slept with? And even through all these warnings, the thought that is loudest in my head as I grip River's hand as tightly as if we were walking down the street of a dark alley is, *Am I ready to be with someone else, someone who isn't Ben?*

While my mind echoes, 'Don't take that path.' My body is screaming, 'Yes, take the road less traveled.' My body is telling me I want this man, his touch, his kiss, everything he wants to give and more. And the longer we walk into the

unknown, the more my mind starts to agree with what my body is screaming.

So, as he pushes the elevator button, my own light turns red. I can't do this. I can't sleep with him. I'm trying to absorb the tranquility in the room, my breath starts to shallow and I try to decide how to jump off this ride I so willingly boarded.

Sensing my nervousness or even my apprehension, he caresses my cheek, gliding his thumb over it and asks, "What's wrong?"

When the elevator doors open, I clear my throat and yank on the hand guiding me down the wrong path away from the open doors. Looking at nothing but the shiny marble floor, I drop his

hand and manage to say, “I am so sorry River, I’m not sure I can do this, that I can be with you.”

He gently repositions me so my back is against the wall, and he’s standing in front of me. Placing his thumb on my chin, he guides me to look at him, to gaze into his powerful green eyes. While intently staring at me he says, “You know the song I wrote about meeting you? Have you ever really listened to the lyrics?”

I shake my head. I know the song well, but right now I can’t recall any specific lyric. My mind shuffles between thoughts of both of them. *Ben, River, River, Ben.*

He pauses, removing his hand from

my face; he places both his hands against the wall on each side of my head. I know what I just said to him, but his nearness makes my heart accelerate to twice its normal rate.

He continues to talk, and I continue listen. He has my full attention when he very softly starts to sing.

*You were my once in a lifetime.  
This I knew from the moment your  
eyes met mine.*

*You were my once in a lifetime.  
This I knew the first time I  
whispered into your ear and my heart  
stopped.*

*You were my once in a lifetime.  
This I knew when your face touched*

*my spirit.*

*You were my once in a lifetime.  
This I knew when I kissed your lips  
and felt it in my soul.  
So where did you go, where did you  
go?*

He sings those beautiful lyrics into my ear, and tears start streaming down my face.

Moving a little closer, he places his leg in between mine. With a strained voice he whispers, “Those lyrics tell the story Dahlia, our story. I wrote that song five years ago and even now when I sing it, your face is the face I see. You’re unforgettable Dahlia. You’re perfect, really.”

My body quivers without control as he leans in and lightly kisses my forehead, sliding his lips down my temple to my ear. “I just wanted you to know because I felt connected to you that night in a way I’ve never felt connected to anyone. Then today, when I saw you again, that connection I felt years ago instantly returned.”

Feeling light-headed, I close my eyes. I’m unable to speak. His words are so moving, so raw, so emotional.

He kisses each of my eyelids and hovering his mouth over mine, he talks around my lips. “Ever since I met you, no one else has been worth thinking about.”

I open my eyes, and he presses his

forehead to mine as he continues, “I feel like fate has brought us together again. I also believe that one night, so long ago, just wasn’t the right time for us. But tonight is.”

I close my eyes again at his confession. Keeping them closed this time, I stand there motionless, still unable to speak. When I open my eyes, I drink him in, all of him, everything about him, especially his beautiful words.

Looking into his eyes, I find him gazing back at me as he says, “Dahlia you don’t have to apologize for anything.”

With a small grin, he motions his finger back and forth between us. “And even though I’m sure you can do this, it’s

ok if you don't want to right now. We can just hang out, talk, or watch a movie. Whatever you want. Just stay with me, don't interfere with fate now that we've reconnected."

And with that, I nod my head, turn to press the elevator call button, and realize I never spoke a word during that whole conversation. I didn't need to. Because somehow, he knew exactly how I felt.



# Chapter Ten

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## FADE INTO YOU

*You turn the light on slowly and I  
ask*

*Does your heart have a home*

*You put our hands together*

*And your smile covers mine*

*As I fade into you.*



Separating my job from my personal life has not gone as seamlessly as I had hoped. Dahlia the photographer and Dahlia the girl whose fiancé was killed in front of her have mixed together, and I'm standing next to the person blending the two.

We are on the balcony staring into the night. Looking up into the heavens, I notice the sky is the deepest shade of blue, and the stars are brighter than they

have been in a long time. He is next to me, leaning over the railing and gazing up at the stars. I smile to myself as I realize that I'm no longer in the fire pits of hell. I've been grieving for Ben for so long, I couldn't even see past him and even now with this beautiful man beside me, my thoughts can't shut him out completely.

River nudges me with his shoulder, and my thoughts return to him only. He captures my full attention with just a simple brush of his body against mine. With just our arms touching, I can feel the electric current traveling through my body, and my heart beats a little faster. I look over at him and smile. His head is cocked to the side, preventing me from

seeing all of him as his gorgeous face fades in and out from the shadows of the night. He gives me a smirk that is so sexy I want to lean over and kiss him. He has to be the most attractive man I have ever seen.

Sure enough, true to his word, the view from where we stand is the most spectacular view of Las Vegas. The wondrous mountains, the clear night sky, and the flashing neon lights from the strip below act as our backdrop as we discuss his band and his own impending emergence into the limelight. River is down to earth and not in the least bit pretentious. So of course, not having been witness to it, I'm curious about his interaction with his fans. "How do you

feel about being famous? Being asked for autographs? Do fans follow you?"

He looks confused for a second, then laughs, "I'm not exactly famous."

I softly clear my throat and then insist, "Yes you are! Your picture is all over the Internet. Your band has a huge fan base, and I wouldn't be here with you now, prepping for a photo shoot that will announce the launch of your second album if it were otherwise."

Grinning at me, he asks, "How do you know my picture is all over the Internet?"

"I had to do some research before coming. I'm a professional you know," I answer, slightly laughing as I tell him this.

“Did you find any good ones?”

Feeling like I might be blushing, I sidestep his question. “So have you had to sign anyone’s bra yet?”

Shaking his head, he snickers a little at my question. “I don’t sign and tell.” He sighs and adds, “When the band is together, sure we get asked for autographs, and sometimes when I’m walking around LA someone will recognize me. But really, I mean it when I say, it hardly ever happens. When we toured, we had fans following us around and people asking for autographs. To tell you the truth, I’m not really sure how I feel about it. Part of me just wants to stay unknown. The whole touring thing was hard. It was a constant infringement

on my personal life. That's why I've put off doing a second album for so long. There's just so much . . . you know what, never mind. And don't get me wrong; it's not that I'm ungrateful," he pauses and laughs, "If it weren't for the fans, I wouldn't be here—with you—trying to set up promotional shots."

His raw honesty captivates me. "Sure, I can see how all of that can wear on a person. It always sounds so glamorous, but I'm sure it can get old."

He seems to get lost in his own thoughts, so trying to lighten the mood I say, "Well no one seems to recognize you here."

He looks around at our surroundings before answering, "I think people who

come here aren't looking for anything but themselves. Everything around them is just irrelevant."

I nod in agreement as I repeat the adage I saw as I exited the airport this morning. "What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas."

With that, he just shakes his head and smirks. "You've been watching too many commercials."

Giggling, I playfully nudge him. "Yeah, yeah I have."

Still curious about his fame, I ask, "So when your home in LA, fans really don't recognize you on the street?"

Turning around, he leans his elbows on the railing and thinks for a minute before answering. "Sometimes they do."



It happens randomly though. I can be going for a run and someone will come up to me, tap me on the shoulder, and shove a pen in my face. But most of the time, unless I'm with the band, people are cool and just leave me alone."

He seems a little saddened by my question and somewhat distracted by his own answer. I want to ask him whether being recognized or not being recognized is the reason for his thoughtful behavior when there is a knock on the door.

"Hold that thought," he says as he turns to head back inside.

As he walks through the living room to answer the door, I can't help but watch him. It's his walk, his sexy sway

that gets me every time. Once again, he turns around and catches me staring; and just like before, he winks at me and grins. I shake my head and laugh to myself. It's been so long since I've smiled and laughed like this, I didn't realize how much I've missed this feeling.

He opens the door, and one of the hotel wait-staff wheels in a dining cart with two bottles of champagne and a huge bowl of strawberries. I gush a little that he remembers I like champagne and that I like it with strawberries.

I'm surprised to see the waiter pull my suitcase and messenger bag out from under the cart as River tips him. Really? How? When? That must have been what

he was doing at the front desk. This kind gesture melts away any remaining apprehension I have about being with him and replaces it with something else. It's something way better and much more appealing. This I know as the goosebumps run rampant over my body, and the butterflies swarm in my stomach.

My mouth drops open and I take a step inside. "How did you get my things?"

Cocking his head, he breaks into a breathtaking grin as he uncorks the champagne bottle. "I knew you wanted to start the interview, so I asked the front desk to do me a favor and have your hotel send your things over." He pauses, looking a little concerned. "I hope that's

okay?”

I bite my lip and nod my head as I walk over to him. “Of course.”

He’s pouring the champagne into the first glass as I approach him. He looks at me with an unyielding gaze. Getting as close as I can while he’s filling one of the glasses, I stroke his face with my thumb before softly kissing his cheek. “That was really sweet of you.”

His breath quickens, but as passion fills his eyes the champagne overflows and spills out the top of the glass. We both take a step back and laugh.

“I told you, bartending isn’t my thing,” he says as he sets the glass down and begins to fill the other. Once both glasses are full he drops a strawberry in

each, and they sink to the bottom. He wedges another strawberry on the rim of each glass, picks one up, and hands it to me. His grin widens and he shrugs as he says, "I'm not sure which way you like it, in or out?"

Giggling, I take the glass and place my hand over his for a few seconds. "Usually I only put the berry on the rim, but I kind of like it your way."

I look at the glass I'm holding and smile. "The way you did it is perfect, and now I have a new way to order champagne; not with one, but two strawberries."

Shaking his head, I have a feeling he wants to say something else, but instead he lifts his glass and clinks it to mine.

“To chance meetings.”

I smile at that and respond. “Yeah, to chance meetings and scheduled interviews.”

Taking a sip of his drink, he drags his tongue over his bottom lip in that sexy way he does. He leads us back to the balcony where we sit in separate chaise lounges. I rest my head back and drink my champagne, enjoying the air and his silent company. I think we must both be trying to regain our composure. After a few quiet minutes, he twists his body sideways and faces me. “Do you want to wrap up the interview?”

As I turn my head to answer, I see just a hint of skin at his waist where his shirt has come untucked. I can't help but

grin at how sexy every flex of his muscles and every movement of his abs are. The overall tautness of his body makes me lightheaded. It's only now, as I think about him, his body, that I notice my erratic breaths.

I think to myself, *there is no way I could do the interview now*. It takes me a second to compose myself. I then remove the strawberry wedged on the side of my glass, and while looking directly at him I say, "Absolutely not! I can't focus on work right now with the fabulous view. It's breathtaking out here. I'd much rather just sit and enjoy it, if that's okay with you?" I smile at him and slowly lick my strawberry before taking a bite.

Watching me intently as I chew, he turns to sit up. I notice his breath catch and he clears his throat. He places his feet on the concrete perpendicular to me and rests his elbows on his knees. In a low and husky voice he says, “Sounds good to me.”

His head is down, but he’s looking at me with his powerful eyes like I’ve never been looked at before. The way he pierces his eyes at me makes me anxious. He puts his palms together; lacing his fingers and inhales a deep breath. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure,” I say while continuing to lie on the chaise. I dig my feet into the mesh underneath me in an attempt to stop my jittery nerves.



Bringing his head up, he runs his hands through his hair. “Have you dated anyone since he died?”

“No,” I whisper and say nothing else as my body suddenly goes cold.

Clearing his throat, he blinks thoughtfully and resumes his gaze. “Have you ever slept with anyone else?” he asks, then moves to lean back in his seat. Putting his arms behind his head, he stretches his legs before adding, “Besides him I mean?”

“No,” I whisper again, this time turning to look at the clear sky ahead with its stars shining brightly. “Sounds pathetic, doesn’t it?”

With concern clearly etched in his voice and words spoken that I never

expected, he says, “Hey Dahlia, look at me.”

As I turn my head to look at him, his expression is one of compassion and maybe a little unease. Swallowing, he holds his steady gaze. “That’s not pathetic at all. It’s a beautiful thing, being with the same person, caring about someone enough to want to get through all the shi . . . crap life throws your way with them.”

He’s talking to me about Ben, and it’s a little overwhelming at first. Strangely, I find comfort in being able to openly discuss my true reason for not waiting for him after his gig the night we met. I also find his concern and honesty extremely touching. Oddly enough, the

mention of Ben's name right now does not send me spiraling back into my memories. My mind is moving forward toward River, and my body starts to quiver with need again at that thought.

"Yeah, he was there for me through all the shit life threw my way."

I pause; taking a moment to collect myself and think just for tonight I'm pushing Ben aside and letting River in.

"Ben might be the only man I have ever slept with, but he's not the only man I've ever wanted to have sex with."

He starts to say something, but I don't let him. Instead I put my finger to my lips and make a *shhh* sound. I stand up to take that one big step keeping us apart. Once I do, I walk over to him and

straddle myself on his lap. Watching him, I can't tell if the look on his face is shock or surprise, but when he sighs, his arms instantly loop around my waist and I don't really care anymore what his facial expression was. Enjoying our closeness, I lean in and whisper into his ear, "That's why I left the bar five years ago, because I wanted what I shouldn't. I didn't care about anything else. I wasn't thinking about consequences, so I had to leave."

When I lean back a little to look at him, he gasps. His breath is shallow and quick as I wrap my arms around his neck and look into his eyes. That's when I know it's time to jump in. Running my hands through his messy hair, I press a

soft kiss to the corner of his mouth. “I’ve never wanted anyone like I wanted you then, like I want you now.”

Grabbing my face, he tries to pull me to his lips, but I resist. I need a minute longer to finish saying what needs to be said. “I think you were right about timing and fate.” I stop for a second to lightly kiss his soft lips before I finish. “And I know you were right that I can do this, but River, what you don’t know is that I want to do this more than anything.”

I feel him shutter beneath me as a groan echoes from the back of this throat. I’m finished with words, so I move to kiss his neck inhaling his fresh scent and enjoying the smoothness of his stubble-free skin. Then I roll my tongue

down his throat, making my way to the top of his chest. His head drops back, but as soon as I nip his skin, he sits up a little straighter and grabs my hips, clutching them and pulling me into him. My leather skirt rides up to just below my ass and I know he has figured this out when the palms of his hands glide down my backside and I hear another groan, louder this time as he hisses out an erotic breath.

When I trail kisses back up his neck, I can feel his lips in my hair and I can hear him pull air through his nose as if capturing the clean, citrus scent of my hair. My lips head toward his mouth and when I reach his jawline, I again feel the amazing smoothness of his skin. I stop to

gaze at his perfect face and when he looks back at me with desire in his eyes, I know he wants me as much as I want him.

When I press a little harder into him, I smile because I can feel his arousal. This only ignites my body further and pushes the limits of my own desire; the desire that has been in hibernation for so long and is fondly welcoming aestivation.

Before I make it back up to his mouth, he dips his head and slams his lips over mine, flicking his tongue against mine. With both of us panting heavily, he stands up, taking me with him. He wraps his arms around my thighs, urging my legs around his waist. I

grab the hair behind his head and hold on.

Walking through the living room door, he pauses dragging his tongue up my neck before gliding his nose to my ear and whispering, “Are you sure?”

“I’ve never been more sure about anything.” I say right back, without a shred of hesitation. And it’s true. I want him. I need him. This is never truer than right now as he’s touching me, running his hands over each of my ribs, over the almost non-existent curves of my chest, and up and down my body, searing my skin in his every wake. Just as I know that I haven’t been touched in almost two years, I also know I’ve never been touched like this before. As he continues



to touch me, the searing turns into burning, and I know only he can cool it.

Instead of continuing toward the bedroom he takes a step toward one of the unopened glass doors. With my legs still framed around his waist, I'm surprised when I feel the slight chill of the glass against my back, and I gasp a little. My dress has ridden up to near waist level and my panties are completely exposed. Loving the feel of his hard body now pressed against mine, I deepen the kiss. My lips feverishly slide along his. My tongue moves in and out of his mouth with the same urgency as his.

We stay like that for I don't know how long. He's pressing his body to

mine, sliding his hands up and down my length. Both of us kissing, tasting each other, caressing our tongues together. My hands are still in his hair, tugging harder as our kisses become before frantic. I'm moaning when he pulls back and sets me down.

As he pushes aside a piece of my hair, tucking it behind my ear, he seductively whispers, "Dahlia, I want you. I want to kiss you, touch you, make you come over and over again. I've never wanted anyone as much as I want you."

Goosebumps cover my body and I'm so thankful for the hard glass that is supporting me. I'm shaking so badly right now I'm not sure I could support

myself. He starts to trail kisses down my neck, over my décolleté, and down to my chest. Then he slides his tongue over my nipple, still covered by my dress. Pushing the fabric to the side, he holds it in place and his teeth nip the lacey material of my bra. Pulling my bra down, he starts sucking my nipple, tasting me, circling his tongue around and around, occasionally blowing a cool breath of air on each. He does this over and over again until I begin to moan and a slight jolt of pleasure flickers through my body.

I can feel his smile as he kisses his way back up to my lips. He stops to nip and suck my sensitive skin along the way. With the hand that was holding my

top to the side, he skims my navel. He moves his hand back and forth as his fingertips lightly brush over the top edge of my panties.

He slides his leg in between mine pushing my thighs apart. His hand continues to move and his thumb lightly touches the sensitive skin of my inner thigh. My core is aching for his hand to move back up.

Sucking in a breath, I sweep my fingers up and then down his back. I slip my hands in the waistband of his jeans and skim them along the elastic of his boxers. Letting out a light moan, I slide them all the way around to the fly of his pants. Hissing in a quick breath, he swallows as I unbutton his jeans.

He presses light kisses across my jawline to my ear where he whispers, “You are so beautiful, perfect really.”

With heat and desire pooling in me, I can't take any more foreplay. I reach around to his lower back and untuck his shirt. I slide my hands up his chest to the top button and begin slowly unfastening each one.

He's practically panting as I undo the last button. His head falls back ever so slightly before it dips back down to mine. He sucks on my lower lip before kissing me then flicks his tongue against mine.

His hand moves back up my thigh. Pushing my panties aside, he starts drawing circles across my slick flesh.

My breath is coming in shorter gasps as he plunges one finger inside me, slowly moving it in and out. My head falls back, hitting the glass when his thumb strokes me, but the throbbing that is spreading throughout my whole body masks the pain.

He whispers in my ear as his lips explore my neck, “You’re so beautiful,” and that is my undoing.

My fingers claw into the front pockets of his jeans as my muscles clench into a tight ball, and my body explodes into a thousand pieces. I hear him talking, but his sound is masked by my own cries of pleasure.

He pushes my body back against the glass with the force of his own. He rests

his forehead on mine and places both of his palms against the glass on either side of me. His elbows are almost touching the glass, and his breath just as erratic as mine.

My body is screaming for more. I want him inside me. I need for him to relieve the bigger ache I have, the one that has been frozen for almost two years. With panting breaths, I bite my lip as I move to unzip his fly. As I finish, he lifts me up again and carries me into the bedroom.

Once inside the room, he kicks the door shut, sets me on my feet, and turns me around. He moves my hair aside and kisses my neck, seductively whispering, “God, I need you now,” while unzipping

the back of my dress. Pulling my dress down, he kisses my right shoulder. "You're so beautiful." Pulling down the other side he whispers, "You smell so good."

He turns me back around to untie the belt at my waist; he then kisses each of my eyelids. "I love your eyes, their color, the way they look at me." He moves to sit on the bed and pulls me to stand between his legs. Motioning for me to lift one foot, and then the other, he unbuckles my ankle straps and removes my shoes. "There's just something about you that I haven't been able to forget." While still sitting on the bed, he tugs my dress all the way down and it puddles to the floor. He kisses my stomach softly. "I



haven't been able to stop thinking about you for five years.”

As the moonlight streams through the windows, I struggle to find my breath as all the air leaves my lungs from his words, his charm, his everything. He just leaves me breathless. Standing up, he stares at me in just my bra and panties and then in one quick move he removes my bra and slides my panties off my hips where they too fall to the ground. He continues to stare for a few more seconds before raking his eyes down my body. “You’re perfect, really.”

I stand there completely naked, vulnerable, and unable to move. I’m shaking as he steps closer and touches me. His hands wander from my hips

around to my backside and he pulls me to him. “Do you want me?”

“So much.”

Pressing my body into his, it almost feels like we’re about to perform an erotic dance. I rip his shirt from his body, and it falls to the ground. Sliding my hands up his hard smooth chest, I push him down on the bed and fall on top of him, kissing his throat as he groans in my ear. Running my hands further down the deeply etched V in his abs, I slide one hand into his boxers. I finally grasp him, moving my hand up and down his length as he moans louder panting my name.

Gently rolling me on my side, he sits up and quickly removes his shoes and

socks. I prop myself up on my elbows as I watch him standing there taking off his jeans. He reaches down to the floor to pick up them up and pulls a condom out of his wallet, tossing it on the bed, before removing his boxers.

He's standing in front of me, gloriously naked, and I can't help but smile a huge smile. He really is the sexiest man alive. His body is just amazing. He has chiseled arms, hard abs, and taut muscles. He grins back at me as he bends down and kisses my lips, my jaw, my ear. He lightly sucks on my lobe and then returns to my lips.

I pull him on top of me as his hands go from my hips, to my breasts, to my hair, and then clutching my face with

both his hands he loudly groans. “I want to touch you everywhere, all of you Dahlia. I want you.”

Trying to manage words, I hoarsely say, “I want you too.”

Shaking his head, he lets out a low husky laugh as he responds, “You’re just too sexy.”

Drawing away for a mere second, he lets go of my face and rolls us over. I cannot wait any longer; I reach across the bed, pick up the packet, and tear it open. His eyes glaze over as he watches me, his breath heavy. I move to the side as I attempt to put the condom on him. I can feel his body trembling under my touch, and my body quakes in response.

I’ve never put a condom on a man

before, and my hands are shaking so badly I can't possibly do it. Leaning into him, I laugh against his mouth. "I've never done this, you're going to have to help me."

And with that, he laughs along with me as he says, "Dahlia, you are . . . amazing." The moment isn't broken as he chuckles, "Yeah, I can do it."

But he doesn't, instead he reaches for another packet and tosses it on the bed as he throws the unused condom to the floor. Then gazing at me with his powerful green eyes, he says, "But there's something I have to do first, something I've been wanting to do for a long time."

Then gently, he rolls me over onto

my back, resting my head on the soft pillows. He moves his leg over my body. Hovering over me, he looks down with a wicked grin and says, “Dahlia, I need to taste you.”

# Chapter Eleven

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## CLOSER

*Help me tear down my walls  
I want to be near you  
I need to feel you  
I don't want to be with anybody else  
I only want to get closer to you.*



Photography is all about finding the moment, but it's nice to know when to put the camera down. Sometimes I'll ask myself, "Do I want to photograph this, or should I just experience it?" Right now in this moment I know I want to just experience it.

With his last words, our momentary lapse into laughter quickly fades and emerges as a different emotion entirely—pure desire. He's standing in front of



me while I'm sitting on the edge of the bed, nodding, speechless. Emotions are sailing through me as we embark on this course, seeking the beautiful horizon. I want him. No, I need him—badly. But, as quick as a sail goes up on a windy day, a surge of nervousness wraps itself around my desire like the chain of an anchor, dragging me down. He wants to taste me? Thank God Aerie took me to the salon! I haven't slept with a man in almost two years. Is it like riding a bike? Do I remember or even know how to do this? God, what am I doing naked in front of this delicious man whose middle name could be Seduction? Should I stop now before embarrassing myself, before drowning myself in the vast ocean?

He must sense my apprehension because as he leans into me, he whispers, “Don’t worry, we’ll take it slow.” His words do extraordinary things to me. They give me the courage to continue the course we have charted, to dive into this sea of desire so welcoming, so warm, so inviting.

Moving between my legs, he rests on his forearms as he begins to softly kiss my lips. Snaking my arms around his neck, I pull him closer to me, arching my back and pressing myself up into him. I want him inside me, now, but he seems content taking it slow. I’m aching for him, not only because I’ve been abstinent for so long, but also because I have wanted him for far longer.

As my hands slide along his taut muscles, feeling the smooth skin of his back, they make their way around his hips and feel their way to the point of no return. Before they meet their destination, he stops kissing me. Raising his head, breathing heavily, he lifts himself back up onto his arms and looks at me pointedly. "Not yet," he whispers, shaking his head and kissing my nose before gliding his lips down my throat.

As I try once again to slip my hands around his hips to feel his hardness, he slides his body further down mine. I can feel his grin as his mouth connects with my hard wanton nipple, circling it, sucking it before moving to the other. The feeling is overwhelming, and I'm

shocked that I feel like I can come again so quickly. Knotting my fingers in his hair, I begin tugging on it as if it's a life raft pulling me ashore.

My hold is lost as he descends further down my body, my breath increasing at an alarming rate. I can feel his tongue on my stomach, jetting in and out of my navel, as small moans escape me. River mutters, "You taste so good."

As his mouth lingers on my slick flesh, my core starts to pulse in anticipation, and a much louder, "Yes," escapes my lips.

Hearing his hitched, ragged breathing as he slowly sucks, lightly strokes, tastes, and licks my most sensitive skin I start to moan his name. As his tongue

plunges inside my core, going as deep as it possibly can, moving in and out in a constant rhythm, his eyes flick up at me. He notices I'm watching him. "Fuc . . . Dahlia, you're just so hot," he moans with a devilish grin.

When he starts circling his tongue around me, I lose all ability to function. He then presses his tongue harder while slipping one finger inside me. He pauses again to say, "God, you taste so sweet," and when he slides a second finger in, I can no longer even remember my own name.

I start to grind myself against his mouth, his fingers. "Oh God, River," I cry out as I come harder than I've ever come in my life, momentarily leaving

this planet behind.

As I float back down to Earth, he's slowly, seductively making his way up my body, still licking and tasting every inch of my skin. His mouth meets mine and I can taste myself. It is the most erotic feeling. He lightly licks my bottom lip from the outside around to the inside. I open my mouth further, and his tongue brushes against mine. He gently bites down then flutters his tongue against the tip of mine before finally kissing me.

As we continue to kiss, I trail my fingers down the deep line of his abdomen. His stomach clenches beneath my fingers as I pass over his sensitive flesh. I hear him let out a sharp breath as I wrap my hand around his girth, making

my way down to the base.

Shifting my body, I'm now hovering over him. Breathing, panting, almost gasping, I can feel each and every pulse radiating from his hardness. I can barely hear the music in the background, but I think I hear Sex Therapy playing from his phone. How appropriate. As my hand finds its own rhythm, I begin sucking on his lower lip, moving to his upper lip, before running my tongue over the roof of his mouth, making him groan even louder.

Stopping only to look into his powerful green eyes, which are darker, filled with deep desire, I pull back to an almost sitting position. I can hear his breathing; fast and unsteady, nearly

uncontrollable, much like my own right now.

“River,” I say while reaching for the condom packet, tearing it open and handing it to him. “Do you know how much I want you?” I feel like a spider caught in his web of seduction, or maybe it’s my web.

“God, Dahlia I want you so much,” he whispers to me as one corner of his mouth lifts, and he grabs the condom. Watching as he rolls the condom on, smiling and more than ready, I move to align my sex with his. His face is a picture of clear passion.

He smiles, grips my head, and pulls my mouth to his. As he deepens the kiss, I open my mouth further to welcome the



softness of his eager tongue. His fingertips press into my hips, searing me, as I lower myself onto him.

Watching him closely as he fills me completely, I think this is the most satisfying thing I have ever felt. I begin to move faster. He clutches my hips trying to slow my pace, but I don't let him.

Sucking in a deep breath, he bites his bottom lip before closing his eyes and cringing in ecstasy. "You don't know how long I've waited for this," he manages through gritted teeth.

Opening his eyes, he rolls us over still connected. I'm now under his beautifully hard body. While moving inside me with slow even thrusts, he's

kissing down my neck, touching my arms, cupping my breasts, thumbing my nipples. I like that he doesn't know what part of me he wants to touch.

Fire burns through my veins as a blaze of arousal flames through my body. Moans of passion flood the room as my fingertips claw his very well defined muscular back, urging him to move faster.

My head falls back as I suck in a breath. The lyrics from Robin Thicke's Sex Therapy echo from the other room and River sings me his own version of the song. "It's your body, we'll go slow if you want or as hard as you want to."

Moving slowly, precisely, intently, he momentarily stops kissing my neck.

“Dahlia, you feel so good.”

Gazing at me as his hips continue to slowly roll, he kisses one cheek then the other, kisses my nose, then my eyelids in turn. He moves toward my mouth, reaches under me, and pushes me upwards allowing himself to plunge deeper inside. It's much more intense.

“Oh God, don't stop,” I cry as I wrap my legs around his waist, our bodies fitting together like they were made for each other. Moaning himself, he starts to pick up the pace as he grabs my hand and pulls it to his heart.

The moonlight is luminescing through the windows as I moan louder now, feeling the buildup approaching from within me again. And when I look into

his face I know he's there too.

Opening his mouth, halting his breathing, I feel him start to explode. Groaning low and intensely, he stills for a beat as I scream out in pleasure from the mind-blowing orgasm that rivets through my body. Cupping his chin with my free hand, I pull him to me as every fiber of my being tingles from my head to my toes. As the intensity of our kiss calms, our lips rest together. Panting against each other, he gently trails his fingers up my cheek and wipes my hair from my face before resting his forehead to mine. "You take my breath away."

As our breathing becomes more controlled, he gently rolls off me and lies by my side. Removing the condom,

he ties it in a knot, and tosses it to the floor alongside the unused one. Then he pulls me into his arms. Caressing my cheek, he turns to look at me with his gleaming green eyes. “That was amazing, definitely worth the wait.”

I nod my head and words momentarily escape me. *Oh my God, why didn't we do that before?* But I remember why. Ben. I think about how glad I am that I didn't succumb to my desire for River that night at the bar because I unequivocally know I would never have recovered from it, from him, and even now I'm not so sure I ever will.

Needing to rid my mind of my inability to see this for what it probably

is, a one-night-stand, I stare back into his eyes and say, “If your definition of amazing is incredibly hot sex with an equally incredible partner, I definitely agree.”

He looks at me with a smirk on his face that says more than words possibly could.

With my arm draped over his chest, I lightly stroke his smooth skin as he rubs circles on my back. I glance up at him, wanting to clear the room of the throws of passion that are still knocking at my door and say, “Was that Robin Thicke I heard playing from your phone?”

Rolling onto his side, his eyes meet mine as he circles his finger around my ear lobe, tugging on it before leaning in

to kiss just the corner of my lips. Then raising an eyebrow, the biggest grin crosses his face. "I'm willing to explore your naughty side. Are you willing to let me unleash mine?" He follows his own adorable lyrics with a wink.

As I laugh at his half-hearted attempt to once again revise the words of a song, he grabs my hips and a new hunger surfaces between us. He rolls on top of me, and I think this time we aren't taking it slow.

# Chapter Twelve

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SAY

*Don't have any doubts  
Don't have any fears  
Because in the end  
It's better to say too much  
Then not to say anything at all.*





Having stayed awake most of the night, and seeing a glimmer of light through the window from the rising dawn, we lie quietly together, entangled in a mess of sheets. My head is on his chest with one of my legs wrapped around his, and I'm trailing my fingers down his smooth body as he nuzzles his nose in my hair, caressing my lower back.

Never having had a one-night stand, I

didn't know what to expect, but I didn't expect this. Plenty of my friends have experienced casual sex. They've always described it as a quick fuck, sometimes followed by a sleepover. Either way, they've usually said both people wanted out the door as soon as possible.

And yet, in this moment, I don't want our time to end. Last night was amazing. River and I were together in a way I've never experienced before, not just the sex and the multiple orgasms, but also his constant tender touches, the heat I felt everywhere surging throughout my body, his softly spoken words, and just our utter awareness. I find myself hoping that he asks me for my phone number and we see each other again.

Wondering if all new sexual encounters are this satisfying, I try to keep in mind that Ben and I were together for so long that our lovemaking became routine; dare I say somewhat expected. I also remind myself I haven't experienced a man's touch in a long while, so of course my sexual re-awakening thrills me.

Knowing I shouldn't be comparing Ben to River, I do it anyway. I thought my sex life with Ben was fulfilling, but after what I experienced last night, it seems like it may have been a little empty. I think about how wrong it is of me to compare this very much alive and breathing man to Ben, who is no longer here on earth living freely.

Am I always going to make comparisons to Ben? I already know the answer is yes. But usually anytime I compare anything to Ben, Ben is always better. If I make stir-fry, I think: Ben made it better. If I read an article in the paper, I think: Ben would have written it better. Now I'm comparing sex, and I know it's wrong. I have to stop this wave of thinking. I have to remember Ben was my life, but is no longer here, but River is. I also have to remember River is someone I allowed to seduce me for the sheer pleasure of having amazing casual sex.

I'm failing miserably at trying to channel the casual sex, one-night stand mentality because continually scrolling

through my head are all of River's endearing qualities. Qualities that include: his sexiness, his charm, his concern, his playfulness, and his awareness—our awareness of each other, he of me, and me of him. Seems odd to feel this connected to someone who I may never see again. Even now in the lull of our aftermath, I'm absorbing the sensation of his calm and relaxed breathing, and I know he's sensing my satisfaction.

Trying to make myself stay focused, I forcefully return my thoughts to the list of things I need to do this morning. Things that include: finishing the interview, saying goodbye to River, getting to the airport, and boarding the

plane destined to take me to the place so far away from this bliss.

His attention is interfering with my plans. It's challenging my ability to focus. Thinking about the way he reacts to me and interacts with me; the way he makes me feel like he really cares is clouding my judgment. But then I remember my Google search. River appearing just as attentive in picture after picture with different women on his arm and that brings me back to my original casual sex thought.

Sitting up, I attempt to slip out of bed but River pulls me down and crushes me to the mattress as he leans over me. "Where you going?" he asks, smirking, his voice sounding raspy, groggy from

lack of sleep.

With an equally raspy-sounding morning voice, I smile at him and gaze into his eyes, while indicating first the bathroom, then the window. “To the bathroom and then to watch the sunrise from this beautiful view.”

As he nods his head in response, I wonder how it’s possible that someone can look even sexier in the morning. Then he kisses me softly on the nose and releases me. “Coffee or tea?”

Pouting my lips and furrowing my brows, I wave my finger from head to toe, pointing to my very disheveled self. “Do I look like a girl who drinks tea in the morning?” And for added drama I say, “And please God, don’t tell me you

drink tea!”

Leaning back on the headboard, he puts his hands behind his head, his naked body shadowed by the faint glow of the bathroom light. He’s shaking his head and chuckling as he responds. “I’m not sure you need to know that information. Right now I’m still trying to figure out if you’re a stalker.”

I slip on his button-down shirt. I laugh at the words he just spoke that mimic my own from so long ago. Shaking my head, I turn and see him laughing just as hard. Oh yeah, *add makes me laugh often* to my list of endearing River qualities.

Entering the bathroom with none of my toiletries in hand, I sit for a while



and just think. Having decided to at least wash my face before going to get my bag, I look in the mirror and run my fingers through my hair. Then I see his toothbrush. *Why not?*

Coming out of the bathroom, I grab my phone and give Aerie a quick call.

“Why haven’t you called me back? I must have called you ten times,” Aerie answers the phone as her greeting, and I know a quick call is out the window. I was hoping she’d still be asleep and I’d just leave her a message.

In a low tone I answer, “I’m sorry. I’m calling you back now.”

“Dahlia, where are you? Why are you talking so low?”

“I’m in Las Vegas. You know that.”

“No. Where are you right now?”

Knowing it's easier to just tell her, I whisper, “In his suite.”

“River's?! You are? Really! And?”

“Umm . . . Well it's kind of a long story and I will tell you later but,” I say, trying to choose my words carefully. Then I just blurt out the rest. “We went out to dinner and then I spent the night with him.”

In a cautious tone, she says, “Are you telling me you had sex with River Wilde?”

“Yes Aerie, that is what I'm telling you.”

“You're shitting me,” she says, her voice full of skepticism.

“No I'm not. What? Is it that hard for

you to believe he'd be interested in me?"

"Of course not Dahlia. Men are always interested in you. It's you I'm surprised about. You're not exactly a Miss One-night Stand. Were you drunk?"

"No Aerie. Can we talk about this later please? Like I said it's a long story."

"Well at least tell me how it was? Was it good?"

"Aerie I'm hanging up now."

"No, Dahlia wait. Are you okay?"

"Aerie I had sex, not surgery. Of course I'm okay."

"That's not what I meant and you know it. We both know you had a crush on him. I just want to make sure you're

in the right frame of mind. Having sex with someone is one thing, but having sex with someone you already know gets around is another.”

“Aerie how do you know he gets around? And anyway it was one night. We’ll say goodbye, and I’ll never see him again I’m sure.” *I decide not to tell her I haven’t even done the interview yet.*

“Okay Dahlia girl I get it. And I don’t know he gets around, I’ve just heard he doesn’t keep a girlfriend for long.”

“Aerie I’m fine, and I’m hanging up now. I’ll call you later. Goodbye.”

“Bye Dahlia, and don’t forget to call me this time.”

I hang up the phone and ponder Aerie's comments a moment before glancing over to the open sliding glass door where the sun is starting to rise. Pink and purple waves of color paint the horizon over the mountains and I really want to see the beauty of this new day, so I decide to get my toiletry bag later.

My pulse quickens as I see him sitting in a chair, wearing only his jeans; his leg over one knee. Walking toward him, I see a pot of coffee and croissants sitting on the table beside him. He grins at me and pours two cups of coffee. "Cream and sugar?"

Standing at the door, watching him, and smiling larger than life I say, "Cream only, kind sir," and then with my

hand on my hip I continue, “And I’m so glad you’re a coffee-drinking kind of man, now that I know, I can stop stalking you.”

He winks at me while pouring cream into one of the cups and he quips, “Oddly enough, a sexy woman with stalking tendencies doesn’t seem to bother me.”

Crossing my arms and leaning a hip against the doorframe, I can’t help but laugh. “I just bet.”

He smirks and says, “And here I thought you’d be a cream and sugar kind of girl with all your sweetness in the morning.”

I move my hands to my hips and say, “What, I’m not sweet enough already?”

Then throwing caution to the wind, feeling so comfortable with him, experiencing not an ounce of unease or pretense, I stroll over to him as he motions me to sit on his lap.

The early dawn turns into a hazy morning, light streams from the beautiful yellow glow to my east. I sit on his lap with my knees bent and feet resting on his knee. We drink our coffee as he feeds me pieces of a croissant since one of my hands is glued to my morning coffee and the other is wrapped around his neck.

We continue to kiss and talk even after the sun has fully risen. Dazzling beams of sunlight reflect in his tousled hair and it takes on a multitude of shades from blonde to brown. I look at this

incredibly attractive man in awe. He catches my gaze and kisses me a little longer and a little deeper. His touches also become more intimate. I try to calm the overwhelming feeling of desire creeping throughout my body. As his fingers drift up my leg, I suddenly become fully aware that I'm pantiless. I grab his hand and say, "Come on, we have to do the interview," then pull him through the door heading toward the living room.

Stopping in the bedroom, he grins and nods toward the bed. "You can interview me while we lay in bed."

Looking at his gorgeous smiling face, his smooth chest, well-defined abdominal muscles, and gleaming green



eyes now ablaze, I know I should say no, resist the temptation, but I can't, so I shake my finger at him in warning. "Okay, but you better behave, I need to finish this interview."

Walking into the living room to get my small portable notebook, I hear him mutter, "I promise nothing."

I can't help but smile at his remark as I reach for my things. I'm in awe of how his charming smile makes me smile. Before going back to the bedroom, I walk over to the kitchen counter, press play on the docking station, and hit the room change button directing the music to the bedroom. Immediately, I hear the band Fuel singing I Should Have Told You. I love this song.

When I walk into the bedroom, I see River lying on his side, leaning on an elbow that is propped on the pillow. His head resting on his hand, his other arm is slung loosely over his hip. His legs are slightly bent with one propped up, and he's watching me intently. *He is so hot.* He starts to anxiously bite his thumbnail and I can't look at this complete vision of perfection any longer, so I avert my eyes. I know I won't be able to concentrate if I'm too close to him; I decide to sit at the foot of the bed.

Taking my portable notebook out of my bag, I turn it on and pull up the list of questions we started on yesterday. He takes the thumb he was just biting and starts rubbing circles up my legs. His

still moist touch sends shivers up my spine. I can't even think about focusing on my list of questions.

"Behave," I admonish as I glance at him from my computer screen. Putting my hand over his wandering one, and in a more playful tone, I say, "Sound Music paid me to come to Las Vegas and do an interview, not do you, not to have a one-night stand and get on the plane empty-handed." I say the last few words in a much more teasing tone to help lessen the blow of the truth in the reality.

Removing his hand from my hold, he quickly sits up and he grabs the notebook from my lap, placing it on the floor. Wrapping his fingers around my wrists he pulls me right up to him, face-to-face,

eye-to-eye. He slides his nose across my cheek to my ear, and with a low, quiet, but almost harsh tone says, “Dahlia this is, was, in no way a one-night stand on my part. Is it to you? Because if so, I totally misread this, you, us.” As he says this, he continues resting his cheek and his lips against the side of my head.

His words momentarily take my breath away as emotions surge everywhere, in my mind, throughout my body, and within my soul. I’m not sure what to say or what to do, but I feel strangely at peace. So tugging my arms from his grip, I grab his face and look into his eyes, knowing I can make this better, that I can take the sting out of my words. Words only thought, only spoken,

to protect myself, to guard myself from what I thought was only a night of casual sex.

With my heart beating faster than the music playing, I respond with only fragmented thoughts. "I'm sorry, I just thought... No not a one-night stand on my part. I wasn't sure..." Then sitting up straighter, gently sweeping the hair from his eyes, I point between him and me. "I just thought you did this kind of thing all the time."

A frown appears on his face. He shakes his head no as Coldplay's song Yellow starts to play throughout the room.

Hovering his lips over mine, he lightly brushes them across each corner

of my mouth. “No I don’t do this all the time,” he says while gliding his lips to my neck. “In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever spent the night in a hotel room with a girl and shared breakfast with her the next morning,” he continues as his lips start to make their descent. “And I’m glad we feel the same way,” he finally whispers before pausing his kisses and directing his gaze at me. Then with a huge grin, he finishes the conversation. “So now is it okay if I misbehave?”

Placing both my hands on his strong jaw, it’s my turn to rest my head on his, and in an effort to right my wrong, I say, “You know every time you move your nose to my ear like that, it drives me crazy.”

Pulling back, softly gripping my arms with his hands, he nods and a slight grin appears, a smirk really, and he says, “Yeah, I know that.”

# Chapter Thirteen

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## LIVING FOR THE FIRST TIME

*As our bodies move across the bed  
We look out the window into the  
brightness  
The doubts that clouded my head  
are gone  
They have all faded away  
And I'm living for the first time in a  
long time.*





The throbbing pulse that travels through my body every time he kisses me continues to increase as his kisses turn into more, and his lips meet my most sensitive spots. Every time he touches me, he makes my breath quicken, my heart beat faster, and my temperature rise. Never have I felt like this before.

We didn't finish the interview. My plane departure time came and went. We fell asleep sometime in the late morning.

After more amazing, can't-get-enough sex, River asked me to stay the weekend with him, and without any doubts, I agreed. *How could I not?* I feel alive again—living, breathing, and experiencing life like I never had before—because of him. He took me to places within my body and my soul I've never been, and I wanted to discover more.

Something happened within me when he asked if I considered our night just passing casual sex, because he clearly didn't. The sorrow, grief, and sheer loneliness I was carrying with me for almost two years passed much quicker than seasons change. I feel a sense of new beginnings, hope sprung alive. It's as if I'm heading into spring, and winter

is finally fading behind me. My mind begins to see the leaves turning green; no longer are they brown and lying lifeless on the barren ground. I can hear the chirping of the birds, they are no longer flying south, and as the harsh cold winds of the Santa Ana morph into gentle cool breezes, I can say I'm alive once again.

Hearing the music change from Glory Box to Tell Me I'm A Wreck as I wake, I glance to look at the clock; it's almost noon. Lifting my head from its very comfortable position, I look up and see River. He's awake and grinning at me. His hair is a mess, but still so sexy, and my stomach flip-flops from his sheer raw attractiveness. He nods his head toward the nightstand. "Your phone is

vibrating over there,” he says in an almost wicked way as his gleaming eyes divert back to mine and then down the bed.

Smiling, I lay my head back down and snuggle into his chest. I glance up at him, sighing and nodding my head, wondering how it is he can take an ordinary sentence and turn it into something sensual, almost erotic. I mumble, “Yeah, it’s probably Serena, I really should call her back and check on her son. He was sick before I left.”

Shaking his head, he sits up and pulls the sheet from our naked bodies as he leans over and softly kisses my stomach, gliding his hand all the way up my chest with his fingertips as he stands.

Reaching for my phone and handing it to me he say, “Text her fast, you can call her later.”

I sit up and sneak a quick peek at his bare ass as he walks toward the end of the bed. It is perfect, and I just smirk at him. I can't help myself. Sliding the unlock bar on my phone, I send Serena a quick text.

*Sorry I haven't called. Been busy. How's Trent? Let me know. Kiss him for me. :-\* <3 :)*

I finish, adding a virtual kiss, a heart, and a smiley face to the end of my text and press send.

Having pulled on his boxers, River

walks back over to me and takes the phone. He sets it back on the nightstand. Gesturing toward the bathroom, he says, "Come with me."

I snatch his shirt from the floor and shrug into it, leaving it unbuttoned.

Cocking his head he watches me, his eyes scanning my body. Goosebumps emerge everywhere. Taking his extended hand, he leads me into the large spacious bathroom. The floor is black marble with his and her sinks to the right and a large open glass shower to the left with a huge Jacuzzi tub in the center. I immediately head to use the restroom, which is in its own separate room next to the sinks.

While in there, I hear River softly

humming a song. I can't quite make it out over the sound of the water flowing from the sink. When I open the door, I stop and observe. He's singing and shaving like the two were always meant to be done together, like hugs and kisses or rock and roll. He doesn't notice me standing there as he abandons his singing and starts brushing his teeth. Gazing at him, I can't help but think again about how attractive he is, and I laugh out loud at the thought of using that same toothbrush this morning.

I walk over to him and lean against the counter. I cross my arms and bite my bottom lip as I stand next to him, grinning.

Turning his head, while bending over

the sink, he pulls the toothbrush from his mouth. “What’s so funny?” he manages through a mouth full of foaming toothpaste.

Giggling uncontrollably now, I manage to answer, “I sort of used your toothbrush this morning, hope you don’t mind.”

A devilish grin appears on his face, his eyes narrowing as he sets his toothbrush on the counter while the water continues to run. “Oh, yeah. Then you shouldn’t mind this.”

Before I can move away, his arms encircle my waist and reach down to my backside. He lifts me up as his lips crash into mine, and he sets me on the counter. His tongue jets back and forth over my



top teeth, then he does the same over my bottom teeth before his tongue finds the roof of my mouth. Desire flows through me as easily as the water streams from the faucet trickling into the sink.

Shifting his taut body slightly, he spreads my legs further apart and presses into my core. He moves his mouth to suck my bottom lip before he starts kissing me hard and wildly. True undaunted yearning cascades through my body as fast as the water ripples around the basin and down the drain. The toothpaste is now dripping from both our mouths as the water continues to fill the sink, but neither of us cares.

Finally, I nudge him in the shoulder and he steps back. “Hey. That’s not

playing fair. I didn't say I wanted you to brush my teeth. I . . .” but I don't get a chance to finish. As his eyes flicker to my lips and down my open shirt, his breathing labors as his lips part and he bows his head forward. The tip of his tongue finds the small swell of my breast where some toothpaste has dripped and as he starts slowly dragging his tongue up my chest, an unstoppable moan escapes my mouth.

As his lips slowly and seductively slide from my chest to my neck, I wipe the toothpaste from my mouth with the back of my hand and try to stop panting as my body heat rises from his touch. When he looks up at me, his eyes are full of passion. Licking the edge of his

bottom lip, he propels his hard body back into mine, but this time I wrap my legs around him instead of pushing him back, welcoming the feel of his soft skin against mine.

With a quick intake of breath and toothpaste still dripping down his chin, he says, “What were you saying?”

Moving toward him, I slide my tongue up his chin, licking all the toothpaste off before wielding a simple, “Nothing.”

With his taut body crushed to mine, he reaches and turns the water off. The only sound that can be heard in the room now is our increasingly heavy breathing.

“Actually,” I moan as my lips drift down his cleanly shaven chin. “I was

wondering.” I pause to inhale deeply as my hands slip into the waistband of his silky black boxer shorts, “Why haven’t you sang for me yet today?” I barely get my words out between trying to catch my breath and shoving my hands down his boxers to grab him.

With a sharp intake of breath, he pulls me forward, my behind barely resting on the counter. My hands fall from his hardness and he exhales deeply as he rocks his hips into mine, his hands travel down my spine, pushing me even closer. Crying out, I scratch my nails down his back before arching so I can grind my hips further into his.

As his hands travel around my waist and rest on my lower back, he takes a

step back. He stares at me with desire clear in his eyes, the same eyes I used to be afraid I would jump into and never get out of, but now so happy that I did take the leap.

“You want me to sing something for you?”

Nodding my head, I feel his hands travel right to my sex. He slides them between my legs and trails his fingers up and down my inner thighs, teasing me, almost torturing me. “Let me turn the music on,” he breathes out. But he doesn’t leave the room, he doesn’t leave me, instead he glides his hands around my hips and lifts me off the counter, carrying me to the shower, pushing me up against the wall. He turns the water

on before setting me down and I get the feeling the water is our music.

He grins and asks, “What do you want me to sing?”

“Anything by Maroon 5 of course.”

Showering with River is intimate, very sexy, —almost carnal. As he lathers the soap all over my body, he sings She Will Be Loved. And even though he frowned when I answered Maroon 5 to his question, he sings it anyway. I reward him generously when he sings, “It’s not always rainbows and butterflies it’s comprise that moves us along.” *My favorite line in the song.*

When he finishes, he whispers seductively into my ear paraphrasing the same words he spoke last night but also

divulging his sexual desires. He tells me how much he wants to taste me everywhere, describing what he wants to do to me with his body. Feeling unabashed and very comfortable, completely connected in this man's arms, I detail what I want to do to him, with him, freely, with no walls and no barriers between us.

My brain feels as if it's in overdrive, but my body is invigorated as he steers me down the road I so desperately want to be on. With every shift of gear, my body quickens over and over again. I feel like a car accelerating too fast, and my body is driving into oblivion. God this man is . . . is . . . I can't even think as he slowly moves his hands up and

down my sides, reaching behind me, lifting me and backing me up against the shower wall.

When we finally emerge from the shower, both sated and satisfied, he wraps a towel around me, and then his waist. I run my fingers through his wet, messy hair. I shake my head and grin at how attractive, charming, and just adorable he is before I turn and head into the bedroom. I can feel his stare as I leave the room, so I shake my ass a little, giving him a show, and I hear his chuckle.

Heading to the living room, I grab my suitcase and bring it back to the bedroom. I set it on the bed just as River comes out of the bathroom buttoning his



jeans with a towel around his shoulders. He looks overwhelmingly attractive.

He sweetly says, “Why didn’t you ask me to get that for you?” For some reason his gallant, chivalrous gestures do something to me. I’m falling for this guy, a guy I hardly know.

With an enchanted smile on my face, I conjure as strong of a southern accent as I can muster while pretending to fan myself and say, “Why kind sir, do you think I’m a helpless maiden?”

Laughing and smiling that huge dimpled smile again, he comes over and draws me into his arms; shaking his wet head of gorgeous light brown hair against the crook of my neck.

“No, I don’t think that,” he says,

biting my shoulder, “I just wanted to help.”

River’s phone chimes from the dresser, but he ignores it. He slowly reaches over, grabs a lock of my hair, and tucks it behind my ear. Sending shivers down my spine. He circles his index finger around my ear and lightly tugs on my lobe, which sparks a heat in my body.

Grabbing his towel, I pull it off his shoulders and use it to dry his hair while massaging my fingers on his scalp. The rumbling of my stomach stops the emotion sticking in my throat from his pure sweetness. He braces his hands on my arms and leans back, his smooth chest glistening brightly in the sunlight,

and asks, “Hungry?”

Pushing back comparisons to Ben or thoughts of how Ben may have lacked a good portion of the sweetness gene, I say in a trifling tone, “You know how to work up a girl’s appetite. I’m starving,” and I let his towel fall to the ground.

Pulling the fluffy-white towel off my body, River grins and swats my behind with it. “If you’d stop being so sexy and put some clothes on, we could get the hell out of here and get some food,” he says as he turns and heads back into the bathroom, leaving me gawking once again at his fine backside view. When he enters the bathroom he says, “I know you’re watching me,” and he also shakes his ass at me.

I laugh out loud, and I begin rummaging through my suitcase. I put my last clean pair of panties on. They are plain white ones with a little black bow on the back. Then I slip on the matching bra. This lingerie doesn't exactly scream sexy.

He emerges from the bathroom and stands in the door. "I like your bow."

Turning to look at him and meaning to answer sarcastically, I gasp. He's wearing a black AC/DC Back in Black Tour concert t-shirt. My dad loved AC/DC so of course I do too.

"Well I like AC/DC, now get out and let me get dressed."

Strutting, he crosses the room. He passes by me then stops and takes a step

back as I continue pulling the messy heap of clothing from my suitcase. He places a kiss on each of my shoulders, and then tugs on the black bow on the front of my bra. “Thank you, Dahlia,” he says as he saunters to the bed, sits down, and puts his socks and black boots on before falling back against a pillow and kicking his feet up.

“I’m not giving you a show, you know,” I say while slipping on a black lace camisole and pulling my gray long-sleeve Coldplay Viva la Vida concert t-shirt over my head before knotting it to the side. I quickly pull up my faded black jeans and while looking at him I start to think about the Coldplay song, Green Eyes. I think it must have been

written for him with words like green eyes and the spotlight shines upon you. I can hear the song playing in my head and it reverberates through my soul.

Drawing me from my thoughts, River chuckles as he asks, “Am I making you nervous?”

Swinging my hair over my head, I bend over and brush it. “No you’re not, why would you think that?”

I throw my head back and meet his gaze as he says, “I don’t know. It just seems like it. It’s good that I don’t because I shouldn’t, you’re much too sexy not to be adored.”

Grinning hugely, he puts his arms behind his head. “I really like your shirt. Did you go to . . .?”

As he speaks, I remember my ring. *Where is my ring?* I start to feel dizzy as I grab my neck, running my fingers back and forth, but I know it's not there. River sits up immediately as I frantically say, "Oh no, I have to go back to my hotel, my necklace is still in the room!" I'm trying not to panic; really I am, but my necklace, my ring from Ben, I have to have it.

River gets off the bed and heads over to me with concern etched on his face. He pulls the hair from my eyes and tucks it behind my ear before cupping my cheeks with his hands as his eyes examine mine for the depth of my worry. "Okay, we can head over there now."

I try to calm myself, but I can't, and

tears start streaming down my face. With his thumbs, he wipes the tears away. He doesn't ask why and he doesn't shrug off my concern. He just kisses my forehead and leads me toward a journey that can only end with some sort of uneasiness. At the very least, a pained conversation about the man I loved with the man I . . . I don't even dare think about the word I was going to use.

Feelings are swirling through my body like a tornado. But unlike Dorothy, when the tornado ceases and the damage is assessed, I'm not going to land in Kansas wearing ruby red slippers in a land full of happy people. No, my aftermath will include the Hard Rock Hotel where I must tell the man I'm



starting a new relationship with the reason I'm in a panic. I must tell River the reason he's taking me back to my hotel is so I can get back the most significant reminder I have left of Ben. The man I had, only recently, finally been able to mentally let go.

As we wait outside the hotel for his car, he turns to me and takes both my hands. He looks at me like he knows he can make everything better. "Baby don't cry, I promise I'll fix this for you. Everything will be all right," he says, drawing an X over his heart with his right hand. Baby? Did he just call me baby?

It is in this exact moment, standing at the valet stand with rows of cars behind

me waiting to be parked, that I know. I know I'm not just falling for this attractive, charming, and captivating man. I already fell.

We drive over to the hotel in silence. It really is beautiful in this sinful city, but the strip is so different during the day. It doesn't have the allure it does at night. The lights are on, but aren't shining brightly, not lighting the way. I hope they at least lead me back to the item I need to find.

I'm feeling a little lost sitting in River's car going to get my engagement ring from Ben. Fidgeting in my seat, I keep grabbing for the necklace that isn't there. He isn't holding my hand and he hasn't as much as glanced over at me

since we got in the car. I know he must be curious as to why possibly losing a necklace would make me this emotional. I just can't talk about it right now. I need to get the necklace back first and for the lump in my throat to go away. Only then can I allow the words to flow.

I wish it were that easy to shut my thoughts off. *Did I betray Ben by taking his ring off? What kind of betrayal took place by sleeping with River? Was it even a betrayal? How long should one grieve? How long should one wait before engaging with another? Are there even any right answers to these questions?*

When we finally arrive, the valet opens my door before River gets out of

the car. I wait for him, and he takes my hand, leading us straight to the front desk. I know housekeeping must have already been in the room and apparently so does River since we don't bother going up there. There is a rather long line at the front desk, but River doesn't acknowledge it. Stepping right up to the desk, he nods his head at the gentleman who just handed room keys to a couple and waits for them to leave. Moving to where the couple was standing, he clears his throat to get the attention of the clerk who is looking down at a computer screen under the counter. I'm sure the line of people behind us is not pleased by our blatant disregard for waiting-in-line etiquette.

When the man refuses to look up, River drops my hand and leans forward, placing both elbows on the counter, his forearms down, as he clasps his hands into a V to inch a little closer. “Hey man, I have a situation that needs to be taken care of immediately, and I was hoping you could help me out,” he says in his smooth easy voice. The front desk assistant, obviously impervious to River’s charming ways, doesn’t even look up as he says, “Sir, I’m going to have to ask you to wait in line like everybody else.”

River’s jaw tightens as he grips the counter closest to us, and in a flat, but stern voice he says, “I’m not sure you heard me, but we have a situation that. .

”  
.

The now, narrow-eyed man looks up at River and interrupting him, seethes, “I heard you, and once again I’m going to .

”  
..

This time River doesn’t let him finish, and he leans in as close as possible and very politely says, “I think it’s time you call for Mr. Hughes.” Then, looking at his nametag and smirking, he adds, “Joe.”

*Who’s Mr. Hughes?*

The now completely flustered man stutters before regaining his composure. He stands up very straight and manages to nicely say, “Why don’t we see if I can fix your situation before I call Mr. Hughes. You were saying?” Swallowing

back my laughter at the suddenly very funny situation, River cocks his head and winks at me. Then he takes my hand, squeezes it, and sets it on the counter in his so our elbows are almost connected.

Before I know it, the red-clad uniformed man is calling housekeeping himself, asking about items that may have been found in the safe in my room. By some grace of God he tells us the necklace had been found and was put in the main hotel safe.

River drops my hand to very politely shake hands with the clerk. Then before thanking him, he removes his wallet from his back pocket and hands the now jubilant Joe a hundred-dollar bill. Nodding his head he says discreetly,

“Joe please see to it that the necklace gets delivered to us in the bar.”

Joe, very happily accepting his more than generous tip, responds, “Yes sir, not a problem.”

We head to the same bar where River waited for me last night. It seems like way more time has passed than just one day. I feel so connected to this man, like I’ve known him for a very long time. As we’re seated, River pulls my chair out for me and I nod my head and grin, but before I sit, I stand on my tippy toes and kiss him on his cheek. “Thank you.”

“Dahlia, don’t thank me. It’s my fault you lost your necklace to begin with,” he says, caressing my cheek before motioning me to sit down. Sitting next to



me, he grabs my hand and strokes it with his thumb before leaning over and kissing me.

Our waitress arrives, and we order two beers and one glass of ice, of course River snickers. When he asks me what I want to eat, I motion to the casino and say, “Anything, right now I could eat the craps table over there,” and we both laugh, because really, couldn’t I have just said the blackjack table.

He orders a burger and fries and I order a grilled cheese sandwich, fries, and a chocolate milkshake. I ask the waitress to bring my shake with my food.

River looks at me a little puzzled.

“What? I like to dip my sandwich in

the shake.”

He shakes his head. “That sounds disgusting.”

“Try it. I guarantee you’ll love it.”

“Hmm . . .”

Once our drinks arrive, I gulp my beer down before deciding to say what I should have said in the car. Looking into River’s eyes filled with so much kindness, I say, “I’m sorry I sort of freaked, but the necklace isn’t replaceable.” Pausing, I swallow the lump in my throat before continuing.

Tilting his head, he continues to look at me and simply says, “I guessed that by your reaction.”

Nodding in agreement, I clear my throat and tuck my hair behind my ear.

“Here’s the thing, the necklace isn’t just a necklace,” I pause again, willing the stinging in my eyes to go away.

River, obviously having noticed my uneasiness leans forward in his chair, bending slightly into me, and grabs for my hand with both of his. “Go on. What?”

Before I can finish, Joe saunters in, smiling like he just hit the jackpot on the casino floor and hands River an envelope that says ‘From Room 716’ on it. River nods and says thank you again and Joe walks away to go back to his desk duties I assume.

Handing me the envelope, I let go of his hand and open it. I hesitate before pulling the ring out. As I do, I clasp it in

my hand and looking him sincerely in the eyes I say, “This is my engagement ring—from Ben.”

He quickly leans back in his chair and takes a large gulp of beer, obviously not expecting that. Crossing his leg over his knee he asks, “Can I see it?” His eyes now filled with something. It’s not kindness though; I think it’s more like sadness.

Biting my lip, I hand it to him with shaky fingers. My heart begins beating faster than the levers being pulling on the slot machines. He stares at it for a few seconds before gently placing it back in my hand and squeezing it shut, as if not seeing it makes it go away. “It’s beautiful, just like the woman who wore

it,” he says, looking intently in my eyes. I notice the use of the word—wore.

“Can I ask you something?” he says.

My hands are still shaky as I hold the ring and answer, “Of course.”

Pointing to my wrist, he asks, “Is that bracelet from him?”

Swallowing my emotion, I lift my arm and answer, “Yes, Ben gave it to me the day he died, and every time I look at it, it reminds me to live life to the fullest, to have no regrets.”

“Well, that too, is beautiful and a great way to live life, Dahlia.”

Then he surprises me. “Do you want to talk about it, about him?”

After tucking the ring safely inside my purse, I answer very softly.

“Honestly, no. No I don’t. I’m having an amazing time with you. I haven’t had this much fun in a long time, and I don’t want to drag our weekend down with sad conversations.” I say the last part while reaching my hand across the table and caressing his cheek.

He just shakes his head but doesn’t speak as he takes my hand and kisses it.

I smile a faint smile and say, “I hope you’re okay with that?”

River returns the slight smile and says, “Dahlia, for now I’m fine with it, but I’d like to talk about it sometime. I want to know you, all of you.”

Just then, our food arrives. I pull my hand away and silently nod to him. Then his phone chimes from his pocket as he

continues to ignore it, and I remember I left mine at the hotel, but I really don't need it anyway.

We talk and laugh throughout lunch, and before leaving, we decide what to do with the rest of our day; we will hit the casino, and then have a casual dinner before heading out for a night of fun at a famous Las Vegas club.

# Chapter Fourteen

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## ALIVE

*I feel alive when we're together  
I feel it deep within my soul  
You're the best reason I've had in a  
long time  
To celebrate this thing we call life  
I feel alive when we're together.*





I remember Grace telling me on the one-year anniversary of Ben's death when she brought me home from the cemetery, "Dahlia honey, there is something beautiful about each and every scar we bear no matter where it comes from." Pausing, she wiped the tears streaming down her face before finishing what to this day, has to be the single most important piece of advice ever given to me. "When my son's death,

our Ben's death, has healed in your heart, you will know it. A scar will appear and that means the extreme hurt and unbearable pain is over, your wound will be healed, but don't ever let your heart close. Leave it open, let someone else in." She couldn't speak anymore, but I knew she wasn't finished. She put a note on the counter when she left that night that read, "Let your heart heal and someday you will love again. Let someone else love you. You deserve it. Remember, I will always be here for you."

So tonight, as I embark on a first date with this very sexy, charming, and charismatic man, Grace's words come back to me. I know what I'm feeling

now. *Healed.*

Walking into Aqua, I know I'm in trouble. It's dark, and the music is blaring in an almost seductive beat. I'm already intoxicated by River's pure charm and breathtaking attractiveness, and this nightclub isn't going to help sober me up at all. Also, adding to my almost inebriated state of mind are the two drinks I had with dinner and the few I had before that.

Earlier in the day, we had taken his car back to the hotel and hit the casino floor. He taught me how to play craps, and we also played blackjack and poker. I played the slot machines as he watched. Rolling his eyes at me he told me, "Only sixty year old women waste

their time on a game of pure chance.” And in what I’ve come to know as true River fashion, he added, “Now, skilled games, those are something to spend your time on.” Of course, he whispered that in my ear while running his finger down the side of my body. We were having so much fun that we never even made it back to our room. After we left the casino, we walked through the sky tube and then ate a light dinner before coming up to the club.

The nightclub is located on the fifty-fifth floor of the Trees Place Casino. All of its exterior walls are glass, and there is a huge bar toward the back and an even bigger dance floor in the middle. There also looks to be outdoor bars to

both the right and left, just outside the glass walls. Each is a mirror image supported by a brick wall on the backside of each bar, creating a terrace-like appeal with trees and benches everywhere. The bar to the right is serving drinks; its mirror twin appears to be closed.

With Rihanna's song S&M playing loudly as we enter the large double doors of the VIP entrance, we hand our jackets to the coat check, and River turns to me and says, "Stay close, it's a wreck in here tonight."

Does he think I want to be anywhere but close to him? *Because I don't.* In fact, with all the sexual energy radiating between us, I'm more than willing to

forego the clubbing and head straight back to our hotel room. But, since that doesn't seem to be an option right now, I just nod my head and bite my lip. He looks so delicious and I'm hoping I get a taste of him real soon.

Clutching his hand with both of mine, I follow close behind and bump into him as often as I can, rubbing my front to his back. Making our way to the bar, he orders two lemon drop shots. I just smirk and shake my head.

Cocking his head, he hands me the shot. While grinning widely, he declares, "I know up until now you've only done shots to celebrate disasters, but here's to changing that."

As he clinks his glass to mine, I

recall my earlier thoughts about my feelings for him and know for sure I have most definitely already fallen. He remembers everything I tell him, even the most inconsequential things. As I tip my head back to drink the sweet alcohol that smells of lemons, I think of Ben. I think of how many times I had to tell him something before he remembered it. I had chalked it up to typical male behavior, and maybe it was. *Is River is the exception to the rule?*

We order another drink, and he leads me to a high-top table in the reserved section just on the edge of the dance floor. We continue to talk about everything, but nothing at all. It is liberating and invigorating to be here

with him laughing, drinking, and just having fun.

With the humidity reaching record highs, the ceiling above us opens just as the Enrique Iglesias song, Dirty Dancer, starts thumping out a seductive beat. We both look up in awe of the spectacular sight. As our heads return to eye level, our gazes meet. Bopping my neck and shaking my hips, I full out laugh when I hear something about a girl doing it one way and then another throughout the now open area.

River smiles his full mega-watt dimple smile before running his eyes up and down my body, giving me instant goosebumps. Glancing down at his feet and then at mine, he grins mischievously



as he points to the dance floor and breathes in my ear, “You sure you want to do this? I’m pretty good.”

Checking out the scene on the dance floor, I see a bunch of drunken college boys making obscene gestures with their hands, a group of girls dancing like they have no idea what song is playing, and many couples actually dirty dancing. Having assessed my surroundings, I run my hands down my sides and grinning ear to ear I mouth to him, “You’re on.” I hear a sharp intake of breath from him before he grabs my hand and leads me to the dance floor.

I feel our connection growing stronger minute by minute. What was once an electric pull is now an electric

force. I can't wait to unleash the magnitude and velocity behind its force on the dance floor, on his body. The law of relativity most certainly applies tonight.

We are in the middle of a swarm of people, but I feel like it's just the two of us out here. Having removed my t-shirt long ago, I'm standing on the dance floor in my black lace camisole. With the lights blinking on and off, I know everyone must be able to see my girly white bra. River doesn't seem to mind though as his eyes flicker to my lips, my chest, down to my jeans, and back up. He grins at me as I lift my hair off my neck to help cool my extremely overheated body.

Grabbing my hips, he pulls me closer. I snake my arms around his neck as Enrique continues to describe dirty dancing. As we start moving our bodies to the rhythm of the now seemingly very erotic song, I run my fingers through his beautiful shaggy hair. We move like we have known each other for years; like we're two pieces of a puzzle that fit together perfectly.

At first, our moves are innocent. A soft touch here, a light caress there, but the innocence passes just like the song. When Havana Brown's You'll Be Mine starts to play, it's game on. I no longer just lightly run my fingers through his hair, rather I tug on it. I no longer just run my hands down his back, instead I wet

my finger in my mouth and softly glide it down the back of his neck, and he shivers beneath my touch.

He's playing too. His hands are no longer resting on my hips, they have drifted down to my backside and he's cupping it. He's no longer just leaning into me; he's now whispering dirty things in my ear.

The song thumps on, and we get so completely lost in ourselves that we're oblivious to everyone else on the dance floor. As I turn around so that I'm no longer facing him, this is never so apparent than in this moment. With my back now to his front, the sexual energy radiating between us turns electrifying. My want and my need for him overcome

me as he places his right hand on my hip. My body quivers in response as he slowly slides his hand up my stomach. His nose is in my hair and his hand glides across the front of my camisole in a crossing motion. He's breathing heavily on my neck, and I know I'm not the only one affected by our electric current. As he continues to softly move up my body, I absorb every touch. When he stops and gently pokes his fingers through the holes of the lace in my shirt, touching my bare skin, I throw my head back into his neck. He's caressing my skin; searing it with his touch, and I love every minute of it.

As his hand continues to travel up my body, he carefully, almost strategically

takes his other hand and swipes my hair off my shoulder to expose the side of my neck. He trails soft kisses down it. As he reaches my shoulder, his kisses fade away. His mouth reappears at my neck, and he seductively drags his tongue back up to my ear. When he reaches my lobe, he jets his tongue in and out, sending shivers down my spine. My body is now a trembling mass of sensation. It's only heightening my awareness of him and quickly increasing my need to have him.

I smile as Havana Brown's song bleeds into another Enrique song. I no longer hear the lyrics in each verse, but I do hear the words as he sings about fucking someone tonight. The colored lights of the disco ball and strobe lights

continue to flicker, and we begin to do more than just dance. He's seducing me, or I'm seducing him; I have no idea which and I don't care. The only thing that matters, the only difference, is I have an urgent need that can't wait to be addressed.

I close my eyes as his hand passes over my ribs and settles on my breast, and his fingers rub circles around my erect nipple. His hand is now clenching and unclenching my hip as he continues his tongue's assault on my ear and my neck. Experiencing sensual overload with his body wrapped around mine, with his mouth on me, with his scent so intoxicatingly close, and his smooth jawline rubbing against my tender skin, a

sudden carnal need erupts. One that must be satisfied sooner rather than later.

When I grind myself into him, I can feel his hardness, and this makes me very aware that he feels the same way I do. I smile. I can hear his erratic breathing and he groans as he grabs both my hips, holding me tight to him. His breathing grows more irregular as his hands drift down the front of my jeans. When my hands make their way around to his core, I slide them into his back pockets and push him further into me. He quickly turns me back around. *Hah . . . I got him.*

Facing each other, our eyes flicker and our breaths are ragged, extremely intense. When he licks his lower lip in a



way that screams out how sexy he is, I bite mine. I skim my way down his body. I'm amazed my dancing abilities haven't rusted over the past few years, and I'm shocked that I'm dancing far more seductively than I ever have before, ever.

I shimmy my way up his leg and run my hands up the inside of his thighs. As I'm reaching his core, I brush my fingers over his flawless chest and well-defined abs, and they tense under his tight t-shirt. When I start to untuck his shirt, he grabs my hands and pulls them around his neck, hoarsely whispering in my ear, "Do you want a drink?"

My breathing is past controllable as the sweat beads on the back of my neck

drip down my shoulder blades. “No, I don’t want a drink. I want you,” I breathe out in erratic whispers, my desire more than apparent.

River pauses for a moment, as if assessing the situation. He then leans in and touches his nose to mine before gliding it to my ear and whispering, “You want to head back to the hotel?” I know he knows that’s not what I mean.

I shake my head and pout my lips. I’ve decided it’s my turn to drive him crazy; he’s not getting out of this that easy. I get up on my toes so that I’m eye level with him, and I kiss him; really kiss him, in a way that communicates non-verbally what I want. I only stop to suck on his bottom lip before running my

nose to his ear. "I can't wait that long. I want you now. I need you now." I know what I just said, and if the words that just purred out of my mouth didn't shock him, they sure as shit shocked me. In fact, I think the only time I've ever had sex in a public place was my first time with Ben, but I push that thought aside. I'm feeling parched, dehydrated, and River is the only drink that can quench my thirst. I need a sip right now, right here, but somewhere just a little more private.

Grabbing my chin, he roughly pulls me to his lips and growls, "You're just so beautiful. You know I can't say no." Letting go of my face, he trails his fingertips down my arms, only

stimulating my senses even more. Staring intently at me, his eyes are now the color of a perfectly glistening bottle of Cristal; he looks ready to let the liquid flow freely. As he scans my body he says, “You drive me wild, you know that?” Then he grabs my hand and leads me to the back of the club.

I drop his hand, opting instead to snake my arms around him and rub my body to his. The warmth is invigorating, and I need to feel any part of him right now. When we get to the back of the club, he opens the glass door and leads us to the closed outdoor bar.

The terrace is just as gorgeous as it looked from the front doors, but I don't care about the view. The heat, the

humidity, the loud music all fade as we hit the cool fresh-air of the night, and I'm finally alone with River. He stops and I walk right into him, giggling. As he turns around, I see the passionate look in his eyes, and I'm no longer giggling.

Cocking his head, his eyes search for reassurance. His lips slightly part as he snakes his arms around my waist. I hear a quick intake of breath and the electricity shooting through my body turns into high voltage. I press myself into his body, wrapping my arms around his neck, connecting my lips to his. With a thirst only his wet tongue, his soft lips, and his hard body can satisfy, I start to kiss him fiercely, wanting him to pour his exquisite champagne into my mouth.

Slowly moving us backward, careful not to break the connection that is our lips, we lose touch with reality. Fifty-five floors above the streetlights, cars, and people on the strip, we're in our own erotic world out on this terrace.

After a few steps he pauses, looks around, and then places one of his legs in between mine, sending shockwaves through my body. He jets his tongue into my mouth and quickly skims his hands up and down my length. He breathes heavily in my ear and growls, "I like the way you move."

He's driving me insane, always quoting my favorite lyrics, and singing them to me with his rough, but soft voice.

His fresh scent is overwhelming, his hot touch is searing, and his strong body so close to mine, I can't wait for him any longer. Needing to cure this insanity, I start unzipping his jeans and untucking his shirt at the same time. I move my head down to where his shirt ends. I pull it up and gently kiss his taut stomach. I don't even care that the club's glass wall is not that far away.

I moan loudly in disappointment as he pulls me up and away from him, just gazing at me with those emerald-like eyes, now so full of desire. "You're going to end this before we even start," he says before grabbing my hand. "Come with me."

"Gladly," is all I can muster, wanting

no more talking, no more dancing, just wanting to feel his touch, his hard, beautiful body everywhere, to feel him inside me.

Turning the corner, we're on the other side of the bar. We are finally secluded in the dark cool night. He suddenly pushes me up against the brick wall. My face is flushed, and my body is quivering as I glide my hands down his sculpted chest. Reaching his waist, I finish unzipping his pants freeing his hardness. I run one hand down his long shaft to his base while my other hand braces myself on his strong bicep and urges him forward. He groans loudly and pants, "Fuck, I can't control myself around you."



I smirk because this is the first time I've heard him swear without apologizing or not completing the word, and now I know for sure his thirst for me is just as unbearable as mine is for him.

His hands move down my body, and as I continue to stroke him, he moves without haste to unbutton my jeans. His groans and my moans grow louder with every passing second.

Breaking our connection, our kiss, he rests his forehead on mine. "You sure you're okay with this? We can take a cab back to the hotel right now if you want?"

I shake my head and pull him to me, kissing him hard for a brief second. "No, I want you now," I say as I break the kiss and reach my hand down to grab his

arousal.

He quickly pulls my pants down to my upper thighs and just as quickly, his fingers slide inside my panties. As his fingers glide over my sensitive flesh, my thirst becomes a little more manageable. Then he moves his hands around to my ass removing them from where I need them to be, causing my unquenchable thirst to return.

Grinding my hips into him, I'm pressing myself right where I want to be; he's unwavering though, not giving up control in the slightest. I even feel him smirk against my lips as he kisses me. A cool breeze flutters by, but I'm so hot, it doesn't even cool me in the least. "I thought you couldn't control yourself?" I

murmur, urging him to me, wanting his fingers on the other side of me, inside of me. Wanting him inside of me.

“You give me the willpower,” he grumbles in a devilish tone.

I find my thoughts echoing the words I said before we hit the dance floor and think, *Okay sexy, game on.*

I sense his wicked grin as I remove my hands from his shaft and run them up his chiseled chest, then under his defined arms, and roughly down his sculpted back. He groans and does the same thing to me, but I restrain myself. I’m starting to enjoy this game way too much to cave.

With alcohol flowing freely through my veins and because of the incredible ease I feel in his company, I have no

inhibitions what so ever. I slip my hands inside the back of his pants, run them down his backside, and around his hips to his front. I lower my hands and tightly clutch the inside of his muscular thighs. He throws his head back as my hands move up slightly and cup him. I grip the base of his incredible hardness with both hands before sliding them to his slightly moist tip.

I'm pretty sure I'm winning this game of willpower when he says, "Fuck, Dahlia what are you doing to me," and quickly pulls my white cotton panties down, ripping them in the process.

With both his hands heading to my core, I brace the wall. With one hand, he pulls my slick flesh apart using his

thumb and finger. As he plunges a finger inside me, I no longer notice the blinking casino lights in the distance, just the pure pleasure of his touch.

Kissing my neck, he moves one hand to tease my nipple and continues to plunge one finger and then another inside of me. I'm losing my mind. With a panting breath, I mutter, "I surrender, you win." But thankfully, he doesn't stop.

Closing my eyes, I inhale a deep breath. I drink him in completely as I claw the brick wall for support and scream into the night, "Yes, yes!" My body shudders and pulsates from its core as I come hard and fast. My thirst for River mildly satisfied, but nowhere near quenched.

Wanting him inside me more than I have ever wanted someone to penetrate me before, I say under spent breath, “River, fuck me now, make me come again.” Once again, I’m shocked at my own words, but he’s not so shocked as he quickly breathes back, “I plan to.”

He doesn’t wait as he slams inside me quick and hard. Abandoning my brace on the wall, I fuse my palms to his chest, as his thickness fills me. Each retreat is followed by another glorious lunge. As his pace quickens, he reaches behind me and pushes my ass into his full, penetrating hardness, causing it to rub my most sensitive spot with each and every thrust.

As he says, “Stay still,” he moves

even deeper into me and at an increasingly faster rate. When his groans become lower, almost primal, I don't move. I stay still. I want to experience him fully. As I continue to meld my hands to his chest, I realize this has to be the single most fulfilling sensation I have ever felt, bar none.

His fingers start digging into my flesh, his own pleasure building at the same pace as mine. Groaning into my shoulder, he's no longer kissing me, no longer able to, I'm sure. Especially if he's feeling anything close to the pure heaven I'm experiencing right now. As he continues to rock himself into me, I feel my body responding again. I grab his strong biceps for support and feel the

tremble in his body.

Lifting his head, his green eyes find mine, and they are glazed over with passion. He sucks in a quick breath, his eyes closing as he lowers his head to my shoulder.

I don't let him finish as I lift his head with both my hands. "Say it," I command.

His groans grow louder still as I continue to clutch his gorgeous face in my hands and experience the mesmerizing transformation that's taking place as he finds his release. He grunts, "I'm coming," as his thrusts slow, and a low cry escapes his mouth.

I know I was wrong before when I feel him fill me and hear him say those



words. My muscles clench tightly, and my toes curl. This, right now, is the most fulfilling moment I have ever felt.

As he lowers his head and thrusts into me one final time, I fall apart at the seams, coming for a second time as we both quench our insatiable thirst for each other; further building our connection. As we ride out our orgasms together, his sperm filling me, he suddenly looks up, his face full of concern, his eyes wide. "Shit, we didn't use a condom."

Lost in my own fantasy world of pleasure, I never realized it either, but I quickly reassure him, "It's okay I'm on the pill."

Surrounding me, with both palms pressed against the wall, he leans his

forehead to mine. While both us try to stabilize our breathing, he grabs my chin and says, "I've never been with anyone without a condom." He removes one hand from the brick wall and draws a cross over his heart. "I'm clean. I promise."

I nod my head and kiss him, not wanting to talk about other women he has been with. So I just say, "River, that was amazing."

With a sly grin he says, "You could say that again," as he pulls up my ripped panties and jeans and I button them as he zips his own.

Once we have both put ourselves together, he curls his arms around my waist and presses himself into me.

Bringing his forehead to mine, he starts dancing slowly with me. While we move together in the night, my environment suddenly comes alive, and I see the beauty all around me.

With the blinking lights below, and the stars above guiding our way, River twirls me around the terrace as he sings one of my favorite songs, Addicted, by Saving Abel.

When he gets to a verse I know really well, I smirk as he makes up his own lyrics. "I'm so addicted to you, everything you do, it doesn't matter if you're walking or dancing, when we're standing here, the sounds you make and the smile on your face, they're unlike anything I've ever seen."

I think how true those words are and how much they mimic the way I'm feeling right now. River is unlike anyone I have ever met. And right now I'm so happy to be with him—to be alive.

Finishing our dance by dipping me, he whispers in my ear, “Sorry about your panties.”

When he pulls me back up, I joke, “No you're not, but they were ugly anyway.”

He laughs and tenderly cups my chin as we experience our first soft kiss of the evening. “You ready to go now? We have a hot tub waiting for us back at the hotel.”

Nodding my head, I smile, “Absolutely!”

He slings his arm around me, and I tuck my hand in his back pocket as he leads me to the coat check, both of us grinning ear to ear.

# Chapter Fifteen

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## KISS YOU INSIDE OUT

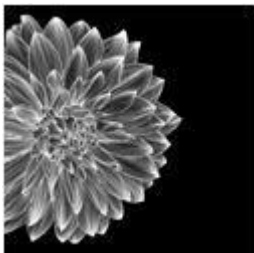
*Are you ready to go where I want to  
take you*

*I want to feel every inch of you*

*I'll be the one that saves you*

*You know I will rock your world*

*Let me kiss you inside out.*



It's Sunday morning, only two days since River and I reconnected. Two days, but it seems so much longer. After all, it only took a minute for me to crush on him that night in the bar five years ago, it took less than an hour for me to lust after him two days ago, and, dare I say, it only took me slightly more than a day to know I could more than like him.

With our connection so strong, it seems strange that Ben keeps popping into my mind. *Will it take a lifetime for*

*me to stop thinking of him? Do I want to stop thinking about him? We were together for so long, he was such a big part of my life, and yet talking to River about him seems like a betrayal. It shouldn't though, should it? Is it because I'm feeling guilty about not being able to recall ever having this kind of new budding feeling for Ben like I'm having for River?*

Ben and I never experienced the typical milestones of a new couple. Our relationship simply happened. We just loved each other. I don't recall unique markers like when I knew for sure I loved him or when I knew for sure he was the one I wanted to spend my life with. One day we were best friends, and



then one day we were lovers. There was no single moment where I knew I loved Ben, I just always did.

*So yesterday, why did I feel something happening within me that was strange and different? It felt like some alien feelings somehow crashed through the universe and knocked on my door. What were these unknown feelings I had deep within me?* I don't know the answer to these questions, but I do know that as I lie here next to him, I'm full of contentment.

I remember waking up next to Ben for the four years we lived together and countless other mornings before that, but I don't recall ever feeling like I do now. We never cuddled with each other when

we slept. Ben had his side of the bed, and I had mine. We would usually make love and fall asleep with our legs entwined or arms touching, but by morning we clearly each had our own side of the bed.

Yet, right now River is sleeping soundly, his body wrapped around mine. I'm nestled into the smooth skin that is his hard sculpted chest. He's sleeping on the opposite side of the bed than he did Friday night. *Funny, maybe he doesn't have a side, or maybe I don't?*

We had such a magical night, and yes my backside is a little scratched from the bricks, but what a pleasant reminder of the amazing time we had. Leaving the club around midnight, we decided to

walk back to the hotel and enjoy the sights. We walked arm in arm, slowly; we stopped to kiss, and we stopped to talk. We were in no hurry. Having both been sated by our passionate impromptu romp out on the terrace, we just wanted to enjoy each other's company.

River stopped as we walked past the fountain at the Bellagio. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out two quarters and handed one to me. Cocking his head, he explained, in that incredibly sexy way he has about him when he talks, that he wanted us both to turn around and throw the coins over our shoulders into the fountain while making a wish. He looked adorable as he belted "One, two, three," using his fingers like he was cueing up

his band to start a song. At the end of three he said, “Go,” and we both tossed our coins.

Pulling me into him, he rocked us back and forth. When I looked at his gorgeous face, all signs of his playfulness had diminished. Taking on a more serious look, he whispered in my ear, “Do you want to know what I wished for?”

Staring into his calm bottle-green eyes, I responded with a superstition-induced question. “If you tell, doesn’t that negate your wish?”

Grinning his so-sexy half smile, he shook his head and kissed me. He ran his nose to my ear and whispered, “I wished for you.”

Feeling slightly confused, since I was right there, I leaned back and asked, “What do you mean?”

Moving closer to see the dancing water perform its show, we stood and watched the spectacular beauty in front of us. Then he dunked his head and looked right into my eyes. “Come with me to LA tomorrow.” It wasn’t a question; it was more like a plea.

With the brilliant white lights twinkling in the flowing water and spray misting us from our close proximity to the fountain, I felt like I was back in our own private, enchanted world. As he stared at me with such intensity, I knew he was completely serious, that he really wanted me to go with him.

He paused a minute and caressed my cheek. When he licked his bottom lip, shivers ran up my spine before he continued with, “I just moved so I live alone, and I have some down time while I wait on contract negotiations for the new album.”

Pausing again, only for a moment, he pressed one palm into the small of my back, ran it up my spine, and pulled me flush against him. Goosebumps surfaced all over my body when he said, “I really want us to get to know each other, to spend some time together.” Then kissing my nose, he finished with, “I’m feeling something between us I’ve never felt before and want to give it a chance.”

Tapping the back of the fountain wall

with his heel, he leaned back slightly and rested his hands on my shoulders, waiting for me to answer.

It was a moment of pure vulnerability. My throat clenched at his words, and I fought back the tears of joy that stung my eyes. At the same time I had such a mix of emotions swirling throughout my mind. I didn't know what to say. Of course I wanted to go with him, but I didn't know if I should. I didn't really know him. *Did I?*

The night had been perfect; our whole time together had been actually. Sure, I had a semblance of a life back home, a job, and friends, but my life of the past two years was nothing like the happiness I had experienced in the last

two days. And I knew right then, in that moment, as I stared into his eyes that looked so much like two crystal balls, that I could see my answer. There was nothing I could deny this man.

I remembered the first time I looked into them that night in the bar so long ago, and I remember feeling the exact same way I felt right now; like he could see into my soul. I knew then that if I jumped in I would never get out, and to this day I never have. So I took the answer I saw in his eyes, and I decided to keep swimming, to be happy, to live in the moment. As I glanced at my LOVE bracelet, I bit my lip and playfully answered, "What time are we leaving tomorrow?"



Even before I could finish my words, he crooked his head in the most adorable way and smiled his full dimpled smile. He lifted me up, urging my legs around his waist as he twirled me around and around. Then in a surprising move, and before I knew what was happening, he jumped over the fountain wall holding me in his arms. There we stood in the streaming cold water, fully clothed, lights twinkling underneath us, mirroring the stars in the sky above. I just looked at him, shook my head, and continued to smile the same smile I had been wearing for the past two days.

Wiping drops of water off my face, he gazed into my eyes and winked at me as he said, "See, wishes really do come

true—even if you share them.” Then he kissed me.

Lying here now, smiling at the memory of the fountain, I look at our wet clothes that are strewn all over the hotel room. As the light becomes brighter and more radiant, I wish we had closed the blinds so I could stay asleep, dreaming of him.

I start thinking about how I really should text Aerie. I carefully reach over to the nightstand for my phone. *Damn, it's dead.* Aerie is probably so pissed at me. I forgot my phone yesterday in my haste to retrieve my ring, so I never called her. I'll have to borrow River's phone and call, but that can wait.

Since I know I won't be able to fall

back asleep unless I get up and close the blinds to darken the room, I decide it's time to wake my Dirty Dancer. Did I say *my*? Sliding my fingers down his chest as it rises and falls with his shallow breathing, I trace every defined crease of his abs, sketching the line leading the way to his deep V.

Waking, he makes a pleasant noise in the back of his throat as he leans down and kisses the tip of my nose. I glance up at him and when our eyes meet he mutters, "Good morning," while grinning his sexy crooked grin at me.

Raising myself up on one elbow, I continue to etch the deep lines of his muscles. With my fingertips heading back up toward his chest I whisper,

“You were sleeping so soundly. Were you dreaming of rainbows and butterflies?”

Chuckling, he quickly untangles our bodies from the sheet and rolls me over onto my back. With him hovering over me, I stare into his eyes, now shining with need as he pins my arms to each side of my head and retorts, “I’ll give you butterflies!” Then driving me crazy, he glides his nose to my ear and whispers, “Can you wait a bit for your coffee?” And he proceeds to do just what he said he would do—give me butterflies.



Hanging up the phone with Aerie, I can hear River singing Beautiful Day in the shower. Having already showered, I'm working on the interview as I listen to him while smiling ear-to-ear. Hitting the send button in the email program on my portable notebook, and finally submitting the interview to Sound Music, I think how my dad would have really gotten along well with River.

Actually, I think my dad would have liked him a lot. River has the same taste in music as he did. He likes a lot of the same bands my dad used to like, and of

course the same bands that I do, with the exception of Maroon 5. They have been one of my favorite bands for years. I wonder if it's some kind of a band rivalry that makes River indifferent at the mention of Adam's name, or just the fact that Maroon 5 is so mainstream. If the answer is the latter, River is very much like my father was. My dad always pushed for the underdog, supported all the Indie bands, and loved to watch them perform.

The only disagreement my dad and I ever had about music was concerning Top 40 songs. My dad disliked Top 40 music as did Ben, but I love it. Ben disliked it because he didn't ever vary his choice of music. He listened to the

same thing since high school. However, my dad disliked it because he didn't like the commercialization of songs or bands that occurred with popularity. I'm not sure how River feels about Top 40, but from the songs I've seen on his playlists, I'd say he's not a fan.

A thought makes me smile as I throw on my running clothes, having decided to make a quick trip down to the hotel boutique in search of some clean clothes to wear for the day. Grabbing my briefcase, I pull a sharpie marker out of it and pick my ripped white cotton panties up off the floor. Under the bow on the front of the panties I scribe the words, "You can push me up against a wall and do dirty things to me anytime."

Before laying *the note* at the foot of the bed, I pull out my girly pink lip-gloss, apply it heavily to my lips, and kiss the bottom of the note. Leaving a large pink pair of lips for my signature, and grabbing my now-charged phone, I finish the note by adding my cell number and head out the door.

Dashing into the boutique, I quickly purchase the outfit fitted on the mannequin, shoes and all as well as an extra pair of jeans and a plain white t-shirt. Having selected some revealing undergarments including a pair of slinky black lace boy-shorts, a slinky black lace push up bra, garter belts, and thigh high hose, I change in the dressing room. My cell begins to ring as I reach for an



elastic hairband in my purse. It is flashing *blocked caller*, so I decide against answering it and throw my hair into a messy bun. Applying a flick of powder and a touch of blush, I stop to look at myself. Wow, what a difference a few days can make. I stare at myself in the mirror, no longer wincing at what I see because what I see now, looking back at me, is sexy. Sure I'm still soft and boney with no breasts so to speak, but none of that seems to matter to the adorably charming and attractive man waiting for me upstairs. Feeling very happy with my purchase of a short flared black skirt, a gray fitted off the shoulder sweater, and low-heeled, black studded ankle boots, I set off to get us some

coffee and breakfast, feeling better about myself today than I have in a very long time.

Setting the coffees and scones down next to the door, I search for the room key I found in River's wet jeans pocket before I left. Pulling it from the small purse crossed over my body, I unlock the door. As I open it I can hear chords of a guitar being played. Bending to pick up the coffees as I open the door, my mouth drops open and I almost dump the plastic lidded cups down the front of my new outfit.

There he sits in faded worn blue jeans, shirtless, his guitar on his lap. The hot Nevada sun streams through the open glass doors, highlighting the

magnificently lean muscles of his perfect chest. He's the epitome of sexiness. He glances up at me, and motions with his head for me to come sit next to him, but I stand there mesmerized by the view and the sound of the music. As I watch him play, my eyes dart to his nimble fingers picking the fret board on the neck of the guitar. His fingers flow with such ease and the sound they make is so mesmerizing. My eyes travel upward to the muscles in his forearm, flexing sexily with each move. Continuing my visual journey up his spectacular arms, I eventually land my gaze on his taut biceps, and then finally his adorably beautiful face so engrossed in the music.

His whole body seems to be moving

to his own beat. His sculpted definition and full soft lips work together in one single beautiful rhythm. Obviously staring at him, I'm unashamed. I can't help myself, but as soon as the words, "I want you to want me," leave his lush mouth, I close my eyes and absorb his tone, his music, and join him in his own beat.

Opening my eyes when he stops singing the lyrics, I glance over at the couch. I see his Cheap Trick t-shirt lying on the back of it and smile. Now I know where he got the inspiration for the song he's singing, or at least I think I know. As he continues to sing the chorus while strumming his guitar, my body comes alive. My cheeks blaze and my pulse

quickens. Sauntering toward him, I bite my lip hard, and my heart skips a beat as I feel the need to kiss his songful lips, to touch his bare chest.

Raising his head, he scans my body. When his eyes reach my short flowing skirt, he immediately stops playing. We stare at each other, and he cocks his head to the side as he sets his guitar down. His eyes are simmering. The look on his face tells me everything he wants. He actually looks like he wants to devour me. His tongue slips slowly out of his mouth to lick his bottom lip and when he pulls it back in, ever so slowly, I nearly faint from the raw sex appeal of his simple non-verbal statement.

I'm a few steps away when he combs

his fingers through his disheveled hair, leaving strands sticking up here and there.

Setting the coffees down, removing my purse, and placing the items on the coffee table, I straddle his lap. “Hey sexy.”

He kisses the very corner of my mouth as he runs his hands from my boots to the bottom of my skirt. “Hi yourself.”

Tangling my fingers through his wet hair, I tug on his bottom lip with my mouth. “I really like that song.”

My thighs tingle as his hands glide under my skirt, I know the moment he feels my new undergarments because his body stiffens, and he lets out a short

gasp. “I really like your . . . skirt.”

Sucking in a deep breath through his teeth, he explores the soft skin between my garter and my exposed thigh. “Did you buy this just for me?” he murmurs against my lips as he runs his fingers up and down the straps of my garters.

Laughing against his mouth I answer, “Maybe . . .”

Caressing my tongue with his, tasting me completely, he pauses to mutter, “Then your leaving was worth it.”

Moving my hands to his chest and grinding into him a little I quip, “Glad you approve.”

Sliding his nose to my ear, he gently bites my earlobe before whispering, “I loved your note.”

I smirk at him as his lips crash to mine, and he runs his palms up my back.

As his fingers move to the knot in my hair, he pulls out my elastic tie. “I called you.”

Crushing my body against his, my hands wander down his bare skin, along the sides of his torso. “Oh, the blocked caller was you?”

Running his fingers down the slight curve of my breasts and along each of my ribs, he says, “Let me see your phone.”

Not wanting to break our closeness, I say, “It’s behind me.”

“Can I see it?”

Twisting around, I reach for my purse and pull out my phone, fully



exposing the top of one of my thighs.

“Fuck.” I hear him mutter as I turn back and say, “Here you go, sir,” with my southern belle accent. The one I find myself using every time he demands something or does something extremely charming. Odd. Not sure why I’m doing that.

Smirking at me, he takes my phone and taps on the screen before handing it back to me. “There you go, now you’ll know who I am when I call you,” he says with a wink.

“Do I get a picture?” I say, standing up to snap one before he answers.

Shaking his head at me with a ridiculously adorable grin on his face, he says, “My turn.” He gets up to

retrieve his phone from the kitchen counter.

*Holy shit! He has my lip-kissed underwear tucked in the back pocket of his jeans. Is he planning on keeping my panties as a souvenir?* And that's not all I notice. Walking his sway of a walk to the counter, I notice his jeans are a tad loose, exposing just a hint of the gift that lies beneath them. Of course he turns to see me gawking, but I just don't care, as I stand there open-mouthed, gaping.

He grabs his phone and walks back to the couch. "Yeeesss . . ." he exaggerates while pulling up my skirt and running his phone up my leg.

I look at him quizzically, unable to comprehend anything right now until it

clicks. “You are not taking a picture of my garter to store in your contact file,” I quip, pushing his hand away and lowering my skirt.

“What makes you think that’s what I was doing? But, thanks for the suggestion,” he chuckles while feigning innocence.

With a devilish look in his eyes, he raises an eyebrow and moves his phone to playfully finger the inside top of my hose and continues, “And besides, I thought you bought these for me?”

Nudging him in the shoulder, I retort, “Well, your mind seems to always move to the opposite end of the innocence spectrum.”

“Hmmm . . . really? I never noticed,”

he says with a wicked grin. Setting his phone down, he picks mine back up. He checks out the picture I took of him before tapping the screen a few more times.

I watch him and remember that it wasn't too long ago when I thought happiness was only for those who believed in fairytales, that my future held nothing but sadness and a stoic existence. Yet, in this moment, as he juggles our phones, I think my future is bright, and maybe it's my time. Maybe it's our time to begin a new chapter in our own fairytale.

So as River sets my phone back on the coffee table, he picks his up and turns to face me. "Smile, beautiful girl,"

he says, and just like that, I melt at his heartfelt words; and for the first time in a long while, I feel hopeful.

# Chapter Sixteen

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## SPEECHLESS

*It feels like I've always known you  
It's like we've been together forever  
I think the time apart was worth it  
I'm falling head over heels for you  
And you leave me speechless.*



With the windows open, the sun is shining and the wind is blowing through my hair. The radio is on, but it's not even loud enough for me to hear the song that's playing. Even now, I can't help but notice his extreme attractiveness. He is wearing his black leather jacket and Wayfarer sunglasses, and he looks incredibly hot. I shouldn't even be thinking about this with the conversation we just had, but I can't help myself. My mind is a jumble of thoughts that keep

leading back to the man sitting next to me, and how he makes me feel.

His hands are gripping the perforated leather bands wrapped around the steering wheel. His hair is whimsically dancing around his face, just barely reaching past his ears. His lightly stubbled jaw is tightly clenched. Everything I see, everything about his body language, is giving me the indication of his emotional state right now; he seems uncertain, unaware of how to proceed, maybe even unsure of what to say.

We have been driving for slightly more than two hours. River just exited onto the I-10W merge, and we're that much closer to LA. Looking at him now,



even driving, he oozes confidence, and this confidence is just one of the many things that has enamored me. The more than sexy man, driving this sexy car has completely turned my world around in a matter of days. I'm hoping our recent conversation hasn't put a kink in our connection.

Up until about twenty minutes ago we were talking non-stop since leaving Las Vegas. I found myself telling him things I've never shared with another living soul, not even Ben. He absorbed every word I spoke and actually wanted to hear more. I told him about my parents, what their hopes were for my future, about the dreams I once had for my own future, the ones that would have

made my parents smile down on me from Heaven. I told him about my life when I was younger, the one when I had parents I loved and who loved me. I even shared with him how my parents died, which I rarely ever did. Something about him just makes me want to open up. It's one of the many feelings I'm experiencing that I don't understand.

He talked about his family. He has a brother, eighteen months older, and a sister, fifteen months younger. His father died when he was sixteen, but his mother is very much a part of his life. She has since remarried. His mother's sister lives in Paris and has one child. He has never met his cousin. His maternal grandparents died before he was born,

and his paternal grandparents died a couple of years ago. His father was an only child. He talked openly about his grandparents' deaths, but he never mentioned how his father died and I didn't ask. He was elusive about it, and I felt I shouldn't ask. I respected his right to keep some things that are difficult to talk about private.

He told me about how he started his band back in high school with his two buddies; how their band's name was so unoriginally conceived on a drunken bet and why they kept the size of their band to only three. He told me about his career goals, which ones he has successfully achieved, and which ones he has not, and even why. He told me

about some of the disappointments life has thrown his way on his journey toward a music career. He discussed how it seems to be just an illusion that happiness and notoriety can work together in harmony. He further explained why it is just an illusion and why he feels happiness and fame don't seem to be able to co-mingle in the manic commercial music industry. He even divulged his wish to remain an unknown and just make music; how his brother, the band manager, disagreed with him and kept pushing the band further into the limelight.

However, that fond exchange has long passed and now we sit in silence, both still processing the last

conversation we had. I'm not sure what to say or do right now. My mind won't stop traveling from the past to the present; from Ben to River and back. *Why can't I stop this time travel?*

Thinking back to the start of this conversation, to when River asked, "Can I ask you something?" I question my immediate response of "Sure, anything." I wonder if I should have been a little more cautionary before answering. But I wasn't expecting the question he presented or the emotions deep within me that began to rise to the surface as I answered. Thinking about it now it makes sense, since thoughts of Ben never seem to be far away for long.

Over the last few months, I had

become very good at pushing the memories of Ben's murder back into the far depths of my mind. I had perfected how not to relive his death in my nightmares. However, the closer we got to LA, and the closer I got to the place Ben died, the quicker my memories started creeping to the forefront of my mind. Not just memories, but feelings as well. Grief over his death resurfaced momentarily, but guilt over returning with someone to where he died overtook me.

So, when River asked the very direct question, "How did he die?", it triggered the flood of every horrid memory and ill feeling that was already there, just waiting to break through. Once I opened

the dam, there was no closing it. I couldn't. I had to let it open. I told River about the whole tragic night as I remembered it. With tears streaming down my face, my body shaking with fear, my voice trembling with emotion, I told him what I had never told anyone before. I retold my fiancé's brutal attack as it happened, but from my point of view. This time I was not a witness, but I was me; the girl who loved a boy who was killed in front of her own eyes.

He listened, nodded his head, held my hand, wiped tears from my cheek, and told me how sorry he was. Ending my emotional and detailed explanation of Ben's attack and his death, I managed the following sentence, "And then I was

escorted to a police car as the coroner drove away.” With that I drew in a deep breath and sighed. I wasn’t going to tell him about my emotional state after Ben’s death right now. I couldn’t talk about Ben anymore today. I mentally pushed everything back far away and I simply asked, “Can I tell you the rest another day?”

He just nodded, seemingly unable to speak, maybe trying to process what I had just told him and hasn’t spoken since. So now as River turns off the I-10W onto the San Bernardino Freeway, I decide to break the silence and lighten the damp mood; guide him away from his somber mood, the same mood I want so desperately to free myself of as well.



Plugging my iPhone into the modern radio jack he had installed in his 1960's car, I take a deep breath and run my hands through my wind-blown hair before asking, "Wanna play a game?"

Shaking his head, he looks over at me quizzically before pulling off the freeway. "Can we talk first?" I nod my head, but don't say anything. I want to push my thoughts of Ben away for the day, but he isn't going to let me.

River parks the car in a gas station parking lot and takes off his sunglasses. Setting them on the dash he silently unbuckles his seatbelt, twists his body to face me, and reaches over to unbuckle mine. Placing his hands on my shoulders, he turns my body to face him.

He removes my sunglasses, and with the pads of his thumbs he caresses my cheeks. He looks at me intently before speaking and I swallow back emotion from the intensity of his stare; a stare so full of concern I feel like my tears may come back any minute. “What happened to him was wrong, but for it to happen in front of you . . . that is something you should never have had to see, to experience, to go through.” Placing his fingers under my chin, he tilts my head up. His eyes are gleaming and so full of power, but his voice is soft, almost broken as he continues, “I mean it, what you went through would break anyone, but here you are . . . so vibrant, so full of life, and still in one piece. Whenever

you're ready to talk I'm here, ready to listen."

He pauses a second to rub his thumbs across my cheeks again then down my neck. His serene expression remains as he says, "You're so absolutely beautiful." He stops speaking and places a soft kiss on my lips.

Looking at him as he watches me with such care and concern, I quietly respond, "River, my life the last two years has been . . . nothing really." I stop to cup his gorgeous face in my hand and then continue. "I'll tell you about it, about me during that time. Just, not now. You have to understand, it was such a sad time for me, and I don't want to relive it right now, but I want you to

know this—being with you these last few days has been the most fun I've experienced in such a long time." I stop my words and kiss him, but my kiss is not soft like his. It's intense and full of passion. He makes me want him every time he touches me and his touch pushes away any sorrowful thoughts that seem to always be lingering in my mind.

He immediately wraps his arms around me, holding me tight. It's an odd, yet familiar feeling. We're two people who just connected, or actually re-connected, and it feels like we've known each other for far longer than three days. So as we sit here together in his car, about to cross the path to the unknown, we're in no hurry, we have nowhere to

be, and it feels heavenly.

Before breaking our embrace, he slides his nose up my neck until his lips reach my ear. “Did I tell you how beautiful you look today?” he whispers. Goosebumps ravage my body, and he’s grinning as he draws his finger down my bare shoulder over the now eminent bumps. He knows that drives me wild. He’s doing it on purpose and I can’t help but smile at that thought.

His words are said with such emotion. They are so raw and honest; I know he can only be speaking the truth. My heart rate is slightly elevated. Need is pooling everywhere throughout my body, and I’m smiling so widely, not only on the outside but on the inside as

well. It's in this moment that I realize the sweet-nothings he whispers are a part of his gorgeous soul, the soul I feel so connected to in this very short amount of time we've spent together. I know I definitely made the right choice in coming with him to LA.

Grinning back at me, he pulls my seatbelt across my body. I see the corners of his lips lift when he runs his fingertips across my hipbone before buckling it and then down my leg, slinking his fingers slightly under my skirt before twisting and leaning back in his own seat. Fastening his own seatbelt, he glances at me. "You mentioned playing a game. What do you have in mind?"

Turning the volume up on the radio, I tap the library button on my iPhone and select one of my favorite songs. I allow the song to play for five seconds before hitting the pause button. “Name it?”

He looks over at me with a shit-eating grin on his face. “Really? Come on now. All you had to give me was the first three beats of that Roland drum machine used in the intro and I’d know the haunting beat of Phil Collins any day of the week.”

Starting to thump out the intro on the steering wheel, he adds rhythm to his own beat. Using the dash as his pedal bass and his own voice to synthesize the droning, he begins to sing the first few lyrics of *In the Air Tonight*.

Thinking to myself, *Wow he's good*; I shake my head mouthing, "Show off."

"I saw that," he instantly vocalizes. With his eyes darting at me, he adds, "Come on, what else you got baby?"

Studying my library for songs he may not recognize in three seconds or less, I decide to try Poison's Talk Dirty To Me. Before I even hit the pause button he yells out, "Look what the ... Then he stops and grins, not bothering to finish the lyrics." Reaching over and running his fingers down my leg, he nonchalantly mentions, "Talk Dirty To Me was named one of the forty greatest hard rock songs of all time," and as he drags his fingers under my skirt, sending shivers down my spine, he finishes with, "But, you must



know that, so why are you being easy on me?" Pulling his hand back, he reaches for his sunglasses and puts them back on. "Next."

After nine songs I say, "Okay musical genius, last one. All or nothing." Then flickering my eyes at him, I hike my skirt up just enough for him to catch a glimpse of what lies beneath and ask, "You in?" He has managed to guess every single song within three seconds, so why not distract him a little, knock him off his game.

I hear a sharp intake of breath as his head slightly turns in my direction. "I'm always in," he mutters with a huge smirk on his face.

Looking through the songs on my

playlist, and knowing there is not a single one he won't know, I decide to just have some fun. Turning up the volume, I let Adelitas Way blare through the car, knowing full well there is no intro or musical chorus. Dirty Little Thing starts to play, and I let the first two lines flow before looking at his grinning face. On the third line of the lyrics, I don't turn the music off, but rather start singing along. Reaching over to his leg, I run my hand up the inside of his thigh as I continue singing about how I like it when he looks at me and before I finish the first chorus, he joins in and we both sing about not being able to say no.

By the third chorus, the song is still thumping but we aren't playing Name

That Tune anymore. Reaching over, I take his sunglasses off so I can see his eyes. He immediately places his hand back on my leg. This time his fingers dart quickly to the bare spot between my hose and my garter belt. My body starts to ache with need from deep within my core. His touch does this to me every time.

Placing my hand on top of his, I give it a little squeeze and in a voice somewhere between playful and seductive, I quip, “You won, you know.”

With a full-blown blinding smile that makes my heart skip a beat and my lips tingle, he cocks his head and glances over at me. “I know,” he snickers.

As he picks up my hand and brings it

to his mouth, he kisses each of my knuckles while asking, "What do I win?"

Smiling widely, I remove my hand from his mouth, place it back on his thigh, and lean over the center console to suck on the sweet spot behind his ear before answering him. "Anything you want."

I stay close to him, inhaling his fresh scent, rubbing my nose along his unshaven jaw. Funny, I never liked it when Ben didn't shave, but I love the feel of River's slight stubble against my soft skin.

As I lean back, I notice him dragging his tongue over his lower lip. I let out a deep moan and sigh.

Cocking his head, his lips form a

slow sexy smile as he raises his eyebrows. “Anything?”

“Anything,” I promise.

Laughing huskily, he glances down at my hand on his lap and raises his eyebrows.

I raise one eyebrow in return. “Really?” I ask, but not really questioning what I know he wants as his prize.

“You wouldn’t,” he says looking down at my hand again as I begin to slide my palm up his leg to the button on his jeans, slipping my fingertips inside his waistband.

His breathing picks up and he groans when he feels my touch. “Dahlia, I’m only kidding.”

I glance at him from under my lashes. Leaning forward, I whisper in his ear, “You might want to pull off the road as soon as you can.”

His gaze falls to his lap again as I successfully unbutton his jeans and begin pulling down his zipper. “Dahlia, really I wasn’t serious.”

“River you don’t know me well enough yet. I never back away from a challenge or from paying up.”

Leaning his head back, he seems to be thinking about something. “We’ll be home in less than thirty minutes,” he manages under heavy breaths.

Continuing to unzip his jeans, I am now kissing his neck, his jawline, and the outer edge of his ear. “Your choice.”

Questioningly, almost unable to speak, he mutters, “My choice what?”

“You won. You told me what you want. I’m not backing down. So pull over.”

Noticing his tight grip on the wheel and the look in his eyes, I know he wants this, but doesn’t want to admit it.

“Dahlia?” he questions.

I finish unzipping his pants and tug at the opening of his boxers, freeing his erection before I teasingly say, “Pull over. I’m not asking you to get off the road because I need to use the bathroom.”

I begin to sketch the outline of his ear with my tongue before biting on his earlobe. Then I come out with, “On the

road, or off the road? That is your choice! But the when is now.” I am physically and verbally making my intentions known, making him unmistakably aware that this is going to take place sooner, not later. I am not waiting until we get to his house.

“Fuc . . . he starts to say, obviously opting for my suggestion as he quickly moves from the innermost left lane to outermost right lane, exiting the highway at the first available opportunity.

Before beginning my descent, I glance up at him. His eyes are slightly hooded, his back is pushed against the seat, and his eyes are overflowing with desire. Surprising myself again with what I am about to do, what I never liked



to do before, I can only grin. However, deciding that his state of mind right now might hinder his driving, I opt to wait for him to safely park the car before finding my way down to his lap.

I don't waiver my seduction in the slightest though. I reach back and unbuckle my seat belt as River pulls into an underground garage to an office building, obviously closed on Sundays. As he pulls into a parking space in the center of the lot, he unbuckles his seat belt, pushes his seat back, and grabs for my face.

"Shit, what are you doing to me?" he pants.

Before letting him kiss me, I taunt, "Nothing yet," but I know he's not really

referring to what I am doing to him at this moment. I know this because I often want to ask the same thing of him. He has undone me so completely, and I think he feels the same way about me.

Capturing my mouth, he passionately kisses me until I am breathless, but I am not waivered. Moving away from his soft lips, I start to trail open-mouthed kisses down his neck, over the outside of his t-shirt down his hard, taut chest. Stopping to lift his t-shirt, I find his soft skin and continue with my kisses over his finely chiseled abdominal muscles, down his deep V, finally reaching my destination.

His legs tremble slightly as my tongue darts to his very tip, circling it

before running it down one side to his base and back up. He has his hands lightly gripping my head, and I can hear his erratic breathing. I clench his base with one hand, and he groans loudly as I slide my mouth over his length, moving slowly, up and down. Letting go of my head, he grabs my other hand and starts to suck hard on my thumb.

Passion is bubbling over inside me as I take him in my mouth as far as I can. When his tip hits the very back of my throat, I keep it there moving just slightly back and forth, but this time with my teeth, not my lips. My tongue continues to lick circles wherever it lands and when it rounds his base, I feel him shudder.

His body's reaction, his groans, his heavy breathing, they're all stoking the fire already blazing in my body. I want to make him feel good, the same way he has made me feel the past few days, so I suck harder and faster. He releases my hand and I bring it to my other one, completely wrapping it around his base.

He runs a hand down my back in a vain attempt to try to reach the hem of my skirt. However, the angle of my body and the position of my legs are not in the least bit accommodating to his wandering ways. It does not allow him free access to my sex and since this is for him, about him, I don't move my body.

Giving up, his hands move to grip my

hair as he begins to move my head to the writhing of his body beneath me. I follow, taking him all the way in and pulling him out as I bare my teeth gently against his long, hard length. His body stiffens at first before relaxing and I am sure he's going to lose control.

Groaning loudly, he takes his right hand and slides it back and forth across my back, muttering my name. He exposes the skin between my sweater and skirt and runs his fingernails across it while his left hand continues to tangle in my hair, still guiding me to the motion he prefers.

His breath quickens as I rock my head up and down to his own beat. His right hand now slips under the waistband

of my skirt and his fingers splay, and grab my ass, causing an ache to build between my legs. I can feel myself getting wetter; this extremely sensual act is not only turning him on, but me as well.

Hearing him suck in a few quick breaths through his teeth, he groans and I know he's close to coming. I can already read his signs. When I flick my tongue across his tip, circling it, sucking it, he hisses, "Fuck," and I moan loudly. He lets go of my head and grabs the door, his other hand still rubbing back and forth across the soft skin of my backside.

He's nearly panting when I hear him mutter, "Yes." Then as his body stills, his stomach muscles clench and his

warm fluid pulses out of him. I can taste the salty sweetness of it flowing down the back of my throat as I swallow.

Raising my head, I can't help but grin at him. His eyes are still closed, but his face is full of contentment. As he opens his eyes, his breathing slowly returns to normal. I lick my lips, still able to taste him, and his eyes widen. He starts to say something, but I don't let him speak as I crush my mouth to his.

When he has thoroughly kissed me, he pulls his lips away and presses his forehead to mine. His warm breath brushes my cheeks as he speaks. "I have to say, I really enjoy playing games with you . . ."

Sliding his lips across the side of my

face, he presses his mouth against my ear. As shivers ravage my body he continues, “. . . more than any other games I remember playing with anyone. Ever.”

Pulling back, he kisses me on the nose and chuckles; “I’m going to have to come up with a really great grand prize for you when you actually win one of these days.”

I lean my head back against the headrest as I raise an eyebrow. When I look into his beautiful green eyes, I beam, “Maybe I’ve just been letting you win. I have mad game playing skills you haven’t even seen yet.”

Leaning back and stretching his legs out forward to zip his pants back up, he



shakes his head and grins devilishly while reaching over to brush his finger over my lips. “I can’t wait for you to unleash your mad skills.”

I give him a quick wink before I buckle my seatbelt. “In due time. Now let’s go check out this new house of yours.”

# Chapter Seventeen

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## HOME

*Hold on to me as we go  
As we go down this new path  
We have each other  
And when we get there  
It will be clear that we are home.*



As we pull up to a very affluent neighborhood in the Hollywood Hills, I am a little surprised at the grandeur of the scene. There is a large iron gate and multiple guards carrying guns that are quite noticeable at their waists. I don't see any lane designated for the residents to just pull through using either gate openers or bar codes on their windows.

We stop in front of the glass booth and a young, skinny blonde-haired

woman in a uniform approaches the car. River nods his head and greets her. Giving her very little information, he flashes his sexy dimples and pearly whites. We are immediately waved through. Obviously, this guard already knows who he is.

Scrutinizing the area, I notice a bunch of young women all dressed the same. They are camped outside the gate. I hadn't noticed them when we drove in, but I do now because they are yelling and holding up various signs. One has the words 'autograph for a kiss?' on it. Another sign is scribed 'I trade fair'. *Interesting.* Pointing over at the flirtatious girls shaking their signs in the air along with other body parts, I

remark, “Are they your groupies or just groupies in general?”

He glances over to where I’m looking and says, “In general I assume. I’m really not sure. I’ve never paid attention.”

Pulling away from the guardhouse, he points to the doppelganger group of girls and wryly says, “But they’re basically the reason I moved into a gated place.”

“Oh right. You don’t like fans.”

“I didn’t say that really. I do but in the right place at the right time. Sometimes they forget artists have personal lives too.” He stops as if contemplating what to say next. “Don’t get me wrong, I love the whole signing

autographs thing and meeting new people after we perform. It's the chaos I don't really like."

The screaming begins to fade as he looks in the rearview mirror. "Xander says it comes with the job, and they're harmless." Shaking his head he continues, "I'm sure they are, but they can be aggressive."

Pondering that comment, his melancholy tone makes me think about his choice of residence. For some reason, I hadn't pictured River living in one of the most famous Hollywood Hills neighborhoods. But driving through the quiet winds and turns of the paved roads, I get why he does. It not only provides privacy and security, but it's

also very quiet and secluded, just like the hotel he stayed at in Las Vegas. Like me, he must prefer the quiet and tranquil side of living. Funny, Ben loved the beach, but not the quiet of it like I did.

As River drives deeper into the community, I laugh to myself thinking buses probably stop out front as part of the 'Homes of the Rich and Famous' Tour. This is a neighborhood Ben would have referred to as *the homes of the irresponsibly rich and ass-famous*. Ever since he investigated Mark Hines, the famous football player who lived somewhere up in the Hills, he was irrationally biased toward any famous person from this part of LA. Ben had been the journalist on the team that

investigated the money-laundering scheme derived from illegal betting. Mark was such a douche, as Ben put it, that he never confessed to his part in the ill deed but rather pushed the blame to his agent. Because of this, he was allowed to continue to play football. Ben felt Mark used his money and fame to hide his part in the scheme. He also felt it was because of his celebrity status that it worked.

Ben's attitude may have stemmed from a mix of his love for football, the injustice itself, or maybe a little jealousy over the power Mark held; I was never certain. Either way, whenever I mentioned any well known person who lived in the Hills, his comment was



always a derivative of that fucktard this or that fucktard that. He was never jealous of the amount of money a person had, this I knew because both of our families were financially secure. I think he was jealous of a celebrity's status, being recognized just by name. Even though Ben never actually told me this, I know he had hoped to be a household name one day, like Anderson Cooper.

Ben and I didn't live extravagant lifestyles like most Hollywood Hills residents appeared to live. We grew up on the beach where there were no facades. There was never pressure to 'keep up with the Joneses' so to say. We lived our lives easy and carefree for the most part; it was the way of life on the

beach. As I look around, I have to remember—*that* is not my life anymore.

I should have an open mind about being in the city where River grew up, the place where he's actually known as a musician. Maybe not known or recognized by undaunting fans yet, but I have no doubt he will be soon. I hadn't thought of him like that, until now, but being here brings it all home and Ben's words reverberate through my mind.

Noticing my distraction, River asks, "What? You don't like it?"

His voice snaps me out of my thoughts, and I can't help but laugh. "Of course I do, silly!" Then I say, "You just didn't tell me you were one of the rich and famous."

He chuckles and replies, “I told you, I got a great deal on this house.”

Grabbing my fingers, he continues. “The previous owners got divorced and just wanted to get rid of it. Xander is friends with the ex-husband, and he hooked me up.” He kisses my hand and sets it on his lap. “The view from my backyard is amazing, and that’s what sold me on the house the minute I saw it.”

Smiling hugely at him, I couldn’t help but think how much we really did have in common. “Funny, the first thing I do whenever I go anywhere is check out the view.” Then I couldn’t help but joke, “In fact, I think I checked out your view the first time I saw you.”

Laughing at me, he retorts, “Oh? You’re finally going to admit you were staring at me?”

“No, I didn’t say that. Don’t get carried away,” I quip as I pinch his leg.

Passing by acres of houses, all isolated on their own plains in the Hills, I briefly look out the window, but I can’t even see most of the front doors because the houses are so well hidden. I’m not really even that interested because my view inside the car is way more appealing right now.

“You don’t even want to start that kind of game,” River says, lifting up my hand and gesturing to where I just pinched him. Then he releases my hand and reaches over to tickle me.

I shift in my seat and start squealing. I'm very ticklish but don't want him to know this, so I try to quickly subdue myself. Grabbing his hand, I attempt to move it away, but he's relentless and continues his tickling assault. "You're driving! Put both hands on the wheel. Please!" I yell out with tears of laughter streaming down my face.

Braking at the stop sign, he takes his hand back to grab the wheel and hits the turn signal with his other hand. He cocks his head to look at me, and a devilish grin appears on his face. "You didn't seem that worried about my driving ability an hour ago."

"Actually, I was. That's why I waited for you to park the car first," I respond

with a sly grin of my own.

“Well, I’ll stop for now but only because you asked so nicely,” he tells me in his most adorable voice.

He starts to slow down as he approaches a cul-de-sac. He indicates with his chin a house I can just barely see at the end of the street. “Here we are. Home sweet home,” he says as he pulls into a long upward sloping driveway.

The house has a smooth white stucco finish and looks to be a 1940’s style ranch. It’s suspended high above the city with a large modern circular stucco staircase leading to a beautiful pair of art deco style double doors. The landscaping is modest but neatly kept;

eclectic rocks surround the palm trees. River hits a button in his car, and the large wooden door opens.

The garage is located under the house. As he pulls in, I can see a wide staircase in the back right corner, which must lead into the house. Once he puts the car in park, he switches the ignition off and shifts to face me. “Remember, I already warned you what to expect. I just moved in.”

He seems slightly nervous, so I bestow a little reassurance. “It can’t be much worse than my house, and I’ve been in transition for way longer,” I say, not explaining why but letting him know I’m cool with unsettled space.

As he opens his door, he turns back

to look at me. He's wearing a huge smile and his eyes sparkle. "Not sure if I mentioned this, but since I lived with a bunch of dudes I didn't bring much. The previous owners left a few things, but really it'll be like camping until we hit some stores."

Shaking my head and rolling my eyes at him as I reach for the door handle, I ask, "Are you trying to tell me we'll be sleeping on the floor?"

Chuckling as he exits his door, he responds, "Pretty much."

I get out of the car and glance over at him. "Well then Mr. Rock Star turned Boy Scout, show me the way." I can't help but laugh; thinking about how similar our carefree domestic attitudes



are.

He points his finger at me and says, “Don’t laugh. I told you I just moved in.”

I approach him as he waits at the front of the car for me, and he takes my hand, leading me up the stairs. Once we reach another small bank of steps that lead to the landing, he ushers me forward. When we get to the top, he reaches above the door and removes a key from the ledge.

Turning around, I notice the key in his hand and quickly jest, “Hey River, first rule of a new house never let anyone know where you hide your spare key!” As I look at him, my breath catches from his close proximity and my pulse starts to race when I notice his muscles

showing through his t-shirt as they flex and roll with his every movement. Unashamed, I continue to watch him as he reaches around me to unlock the door and reaches again to put the key back.

Before I can add any further words of wisdom to my already expressed thoughts, I notice his eyes drift down to my skirt. His fingertips lightly brush the hem before his hands brace the doorframe on both sides of me. The sunlight is peaking through a small round window behind him, only highlighting his extreme attractiveness.

He dips his head so we are eye-level. "Since we've already established you're not a stalker, you knowing where I hide the key just makes it easier." He

laughs and thinks for a moment before slowly slipping his tongue out of his mouth and dragging it across his lower lip. Leaning in, he places his knee in between mine and kisses me hungrily. He kisses up and down my jawline and neck, almost as if trying to find my pulse. It should be easy, since it's racing. He returns his lips to mine and we continue our kiss. This kiss isn't just any kiss; it's a kiss very much full of need. Not just his, but mine. It's a kiss that leaves me breathless and wanting more.

I wonder how is it that one-minute we can be having a normal conversation and the next minute I want to strip down in his garage and fuck him right here? This need is completely new to me. My

inability to control my libido around him is making me a little nervous, and I decide to escape this situation. Lowering my head, I turn around and duck under his arm, reaching for the doorknob.

“Easier how?” I finally manage. Without glancing back, I open the door and pass by his overwhelming sex appeal.

Putting his hand over my eyes as I start to walk into the house, he whispers in my ear, “I’ll explain later.” He kisses the side of my neck, and I can feel his smooth skin as he says, “After we finish what you started in the car.”

Fumbling around my words, I say, “Oh, did I start something in the car?”

Since he vocalized his intentions,

exploring his house right now doesn't seem like a priority. Especially since he's standing so close behind me, and I can breathe him in. I can smell his invigorating scent—clean and fresh.

Softly chuckling, he says, “Don't play innocent. You know you did. Not that I minded in the least.” He says this as he slides one hand down my body and reaches under my skirt. Running his fingers down my garter belt he growls in my ear, “And I can't wait to see these just as soon as I show you around.”

I roll my eyes. I really don't need a house tour right now. I just need to tour him. “Okay, if that's what you want to do first.”

With one hand still over my eyes, he

guides me to where he wants me to stand. Then removing his hand, he says, “You’re cool to look now.”

Opening my eyes, I change my mind; I definitely need a house tour. I’m standing in what must be the most mod looking kitchen I have ever seen. There is a twelve light ultra modern fixture hanging from the ceiling that is at least eight feet long. I assume a table belongs underneath it. Stainless steel appliances grace the entire kitchen and there are thick glass shelves above the appliances where you would normally see cupboards. The floor is a mix of black and white paint swirled together, it is almost industrial looking, very chic. The counters are jet-black granite with white

pearl splashed throughout. There is a high bar with curvy, black stools along it, and on the other side is the living room. It is unlike any kitchen I have ever seen.

“River, this is stunning,” I remark as I take it all in before moving toward the living room.

He follows and I can feel his eyes on me as I move. “Yeah, stunning.”

The living room is painted white and rich black walnut wood panels the wall in front of me. A large black and white picture of River and his band is on display. Underneath the picture is a long gray tufted sofa that is flanked with a few vintage guitars resting in their stands. To the left is a huge flat-screen

TV that is sitting on a small stand. Surprisingly, no video gaming system is attached.

Strutting over to the couch, walking that walk I love so much, he sits down and pats the couch. “Xander outdid himself,” he says, patting the couch. “He picked this out for me and had it delivered.” He glances up at the picture and points to the TV and guitars. “He said these are house-warming presents.”

“That’s really nice of your brother,” I comment while walking over to get a closer look at the picture.

While stretching his arms out on the back of the couch, River says, “He can be, sometimes. You can be the judge when you meet him.”



“Well if he’s anything like you, I’m sure I’ll like him.” I almost said love but quickly caught myself. My emotions are running away from me; I have to rein them in.

“When was this taken?” I ask, still looking at the large photograph on the wall. “A while ago, maybe four years. It was our first official released band photo,” he says while laughing quietly. “It was a big deal for Xander. It was his first accomplished task as band manager.”

“Having your brother looking out for you must relieve a lot of stress. I don’t have any siblings, but always wanted a brother and a sister.”

“I love my brother and my sister, but

they can both be a pain in the ass.”

“Well, since I am an only child, I would have loved to have had even one pain in the ass growing up with me,” I teasingly respond.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” he says, trying to reach for me, but I am already walking over to the large glass doors that seem to go on for miles. Gushing when I reach them, I am in awe. The view is out of this world. In the distance I can see each letter of the Hollywood sign. It’s truly amazing. I wish I brought my camera up from the car because this is an incredible photo opportunity. Opening one of the doors, I step outside to an equally amazing outdoor living area that spans the entire length of the

house. The upper deck has a wooden table with twelve chairs around it, along with a built-in barbeque grill. To the right and left are modern spiral staircases. Each circles down to the lower deck containing a large rectangular pool and hot tub. Several cloth-covered benches line the half-wall made of plexiglass.

I turn to River, who hasn't said anything, and he's watching me intently. "This is your view?" I sputter out. "You can see the Hollywood sign," I whisper, spelling out the word instead of just saying Hollywood.

In the time we've spent together, River certainly hasn't given me any indication that he's as wealthy as his

surroundings suggest. Sure, he stayed in a nice hotel and spent plenty of money over the weekend, but he's just so laid back and down to earth.

After seeing this house, with this view, I start to wonder what I've gotten myself into with him.

Snapping me out of my reverie, he comes up behind me and wraps his arms around me. "Hey, you okay?"

"Yeah, I just had no idea."

"No idea of what?"

"That you're one of the rich and famous."

Chuckling, he says, "Hardly. Just in the right place at the right time."

River presses his body into mine and adds, "And I had no idea either."

“No idea of what?” I parrot back.

His body moves as he laughs, and I feel his hardness behind me. “That you’re one of the enamored that has to spell Hollywood instead of saying it.”

Pouting my lips, I turn around and give him a slight shove. “You’re an ass. I’m just surprised. It seems like something you would have mentioned. That’s all,” I say motioning to the sign, the view, and his house.

“You mean like, *hey I just moved into a really sweet new place, and by the way, you can see the Hollywood sign from my backyard?*” he mocks, turning me around and pulling me back in for a tight embrace.

“Well, when you put it that way, I

guess not,” is all I can say because he’s leaning into my neck, caressing it with his tongue so hard I know I’m going to have a mark. My body shudders from his touch, from his warm breath, and I giggle. “What are you doing?”

“I think you know,” he chuckles against my skin.

I sigh and breathe deeply.

“I’ve had enough show-and-tell for now, and I have one more room to show you,” he says as he leads us back into the house. “Let’s finish what we started in the car, in here,” he continues as we cross the living room and walk down a hall to an open door at the end.

“Your bedroom,” I manage as I look into the very large empty room. There

are multiple closed doors inside it. One most likely opens into a bathroom and the others are probably closets. The room also has the same large glass doors as the living room, and I can see the sign and the city from here as well. Everything is just so beautiful.

I laugh when I look into the actual room. In the middle is an air mattress with pillows and blankets thrown on it. Turning to face River, I smirk at him and he smirks right back. He really does light up my insides. So much so, I know my darkest days are behind me.

“What are you smiling about?” I whisper while running my hands firmly up his chest.

“I don’t know. What are you smiling

about?" he responds while moving some of my hair aside.

"I can't believe you were telling me the truth. We really are camping."

"I never lie," he says, suddenly very serious.

Grabbing his hand, I lead him to the center of the room and turn to face him. "I never meant it that way," I whisper into his ear before sucking on his upper lip.

He mumbles something I can't comprehend, but for some reason, I don't ask him to repeat it. He lightly shakes his head and runs his finger over my lips.

The sun is shining so brightly into this room, there is no hiding myself. I cannot cover up what I once didn't want



him to see.

Never taking my eyes off his, I break our embrace and peel my shirt over my head before pulling down my skirt, letting it fall to the floor at my feet. I'm now standing in front of him in the lingerie I bought for his eyes only, and I smile at him as I run my own hands down my body and he gasps loudly.

His fingers trace the skin above my push-up bra and moves down to my ribs before tracing circles on my almost non-existent stomach muscles. "You're so beautifully sexy, perfect really," he whispers as he leans to kiss the same trail he just etched with his finger.

I stand there, unable to move, his touch is searing, my heart is racing, and I

really don't know what is happening to me. Every time he touches me, the feeling becomes more of a need and less of a want.

As he stands back up, his powerful green eyes scan the length of me—slowly. Grinning, he runs his hands down to my garter belts as he says, “I’ve been wanting to see what these look like since this morning.” Then unsnapping, first one, and then the other, he continues, “It was certainly worth the wait.”

He leans back a little, catches my hand, and turns it over. Bringing it to his mouth, he gently kisses each fingertip, stopping to suck on them for just an instance before kissing my palm.

“I’m glad you like the outfit,” I pant out. My eyelids are fluttering as he breathes on the sensitive spot of my wrist and I continue, “I bought it just for you.”

I brush my fingers along his cheekbones and rub my thumbs underneath his eyes. As I jump into those eyes, I kiss him deeply before nipping at his lower lip then tracing my tongue along the inside of his mouth.

Groaning, he threads his fingers through my hair then runs them down my back, unhooking my bra but not removing it. I pull his shirt over his head and he rips his jeans off before I push him down on the mattress. As I stare into his eyes, so full of desire, I straddle him as he

grunts, “I’ve wanted to do this since your little ‘name that tune’ game.”

I hover over him, wearing nothing but my lingerie, and I let his eyes devour me; I can feel our connection growing even stronger. And today, in the early hours of the evening, on the absolutely brightest and most beautiful day of the year, we slowly do what we haven’t done before. We begin to make love.

# Chapter Eighteen

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## PINBALL WIZARD

*How does she do it  
I wonder how she is so good  
She doesn't even watch  
As the ball whizzes by  
She's always happy to win the  
game.*



Despite having slept on an air mattress, I wake surprisingly rested. Rising, I make my way to the bathroom. I look back over my shoulder and grin at the sight of River sleeping so peacefully. I notice again we don't seem to have sides of the bed. I quietly pad over to his closet and find a white button down shirt on top of a bunch of boxes. While slipping it on, something grabs my attention. The top box has River's

boxers in it and Pac-Man catches my eye immediately. *Pac-Man? Really?* I love Pac-Man! When I was younger, my father used to take me to an old-fashioned arcade down the street from The Greek at least once a week. Still grinning, I slip on the boxers and make my way through the empty house to the kitchen in search of coffee.

Walking down the hallway that leads to the living room, I think about how we spent the remainder of yesterday's daylight hours in his room getting to know each other in a more intimate manner. I'm surprised by how comfortable I feel with him; the ease and playfulness we experience together is simply intoxicating. It keeps me wanting

more, and I'm pretty sure it keeps River wanting more as well.

When the darkness fell upon us last night, the Hollywood sign glowed in the distance. After stepping outside to take it all in, we made our way back inside to the living room where we ordered pizza and bottles of water. We ate and talked, then we laughed outrageously watching Letterman discuss his version of Fifty Shades of Grey while we lie together on his new couch. Finally, we made our way back to his bedroom and continued our most intimate discovery of each other.

Entering the kitchen, I don't see a coffee pot anywhere, so whether or not he has coffee is irrelevant. He actually



has nothing in his kitchen. No food, no small appliances, not even silverware.

I stand in the doorway to the bedroom and look around at the blank canvas. It gives away nothing about the person River is. But I am not looking for it to do so; I already feel like I know him so well. Yesterday, I may have been a little taken aback by my surroundings and the whole LA feel, however, as I think about it now, I know that where River lives is not an indication of who he is. And besides, I actually love this house, especially the incredible view. In fact, I'm pretty sure that I actually . . . I dare not think it, not yet anyway.

As I watch him sleep so soundly, I can't help but think about how the sound

of River's voice melts my insides, how his gaze makes me quiver, and how his touch drives me wild. Everything about him, about us, feels so right. These feelings I have are unknown to me. I've never felt them before, not even with Ben. Suddenly, guilt washes over me with the reality of this situation. The culpability is beaming through my mind like the bright sunlight streaming through the windows. *What is the difference? Why are my feelings for River so much more explosive than they were for Ben?*

Squinting my eyes while looking out the sheer covered glass doors, I try to squash the remorse I am feeling. I stare at the scenic view and try to think about River, the man I am enamored with now

and not Ben, the man I loved for so long. But the guilt won't stay at bay, and I'm racking my brain trying to remember if Ben ever made me feel the way River makes me feel. I can't recall having the same feelings for Ben.

Breaking me free of those stray, unwanted thoughts and questions is the voice that liquefies my insides. "Good morning sexy girl," he says, and I glance his way. Stretching and yawning, he looks ever so sexy himself. "Whatcha doing way over there?" he asks, holding his arms out for me to join him.

"Good morning yourself," I respond, smiling while I walk toward him and almost jump into his arms. "I was looking for coffee."

“Sorry, a pot is the first thing on my list.”

Grinning at me, he lightly kisses my nose, almost as if he’s kissing each freckle. He raises himself on one elbow. “Do you wake up early every morning?”

Laughing a little, I speak the honest truth, “I can’t sleep when the light shines in from outside.” I shift to face him. “My parents installed blackout blinds in my room when I was younger so I would stop waking them up at the crack of dawn.”

“Hmmm . . .” he sounds before adding, “So you’re saying if I want to wake up before you and watch you sleep we’ll have to get some heavy duty blinds?”

Chuckling at him and pointing out the window I abash, “River, no, that would ruin waking up to that stunning view.”

“Wouldn't ruin the stunning view I see when I wake up," he says while looking right at me and tucking a loose piece of hair behind my ear.

God that's what I'm talking about. Everything about him drives me wild. So grabbing him from behind the neck, I pull him toward me, kissing him hard. I rub my thumbs over his cheeks, continuing to clutch him to me. When I release him, he scans my body, now right next to his. A devilish grin appears on his face and I ask, “What's that face?”

He runs his fingers down the buttons of the white shirt I am wearing, then

follows with his mouth, tugging on the first button with his teeth. “Do you mean the ‘you’re wearing my underwear’ face?” he asks, moving to the second button and swishing his head back and forth as he does.

Laughing as his hair tickles my chest, I say, “Oh, I didn’t know people had a face for that.”

He lifts his head and narrows his glare at me. “People? Do people have faces for when their girl is wearing their underwear?”

“Well I love Pac-Man,” I say before realizing what he just said.

He winks at me adorably and says, “Really? You know how to play?”

“Of course I know how to play!”

“I think I’ll need to check that out,” he says as he checks *me* out, then says, “You look really hot in Pac-Man.”

Our laughter quiets down as his hand starts to trace the outline of the little yellow men located on my hip. He moves his head back up on the pillow next to mine. I immediately attach my mouth to his and suck on his top lip before slowly trailing kisses down his neck. “By the way . . . did you just call me your girl?”

“Yeah, I did.”

He’s staring at me with only truth in his eyes as he laughs again, tugging on the elastic band of his Pac-Man boxer shorts that I am wearing.

Kissing him again, all jesting is

pushed aside. My kiss is full of want and need, and I make that quite apparent. He instantly groans, then rolls us so he's now hovering over me.

Grinning mischievously at me, he says, "Dahlia, I don't know what you're doing to me, but if we don't get off this thing very soon, we may be here all day." He pushes his hand down on the air mattress. "And I'm not sure it will hold up."

Swallowing, I laugh a little. "The air mattress or you, River?"

"Watch yourself girly, you don't want to mess with me."

"Well actually, I do, but first I need coffee so you're in luck, we can't stay in this room all day."



Raising an eyebrow, he jokes, “That’s not the kind of luck I want.” He presses his warm body against mine and continues, “First, I’ll get you coffee, then we need to hit the stores, and then I’ll let you mess with me.”

“You want to go shopping?” I ask, surprised at his plan for the day.

He laughs softly and twists to sit on the side of the mattress. “No . . . not shopping, nothing even remotely like shopping, I promise,” he says, crossing his finger over his heart.

Leaning back toward me, he chuckles against my mouth and pinches my ass. “Just quickly stopping in a few retail establishments to pick up some necessities.”

“Yeah,” I respond, gently slapping his twisted arm before grabbing it.

Sitting up, I lean against his back, keeping his body close to mine a little longer. “I’m pretty sure that is the definition of shopping.”

As I lean over his shoulder, his head turns toward me and I kiss him. I caress his tongue with mine and taste him thoroughly before pulling away. Sliding over to the other side of the mattress, I stand up and stretch.

Still sitting, twisted with his feet on the floor, his eyes roam my body and my skin begins to tingle. I bite down on my lip at the sight of him and try to focus on what has always been my morning priority, coffee. But even the thought of

my beloved morning coffee can't suppress my insatiable desire for him.

He stands up and lets his unyielding gaze weigh on me for a moment longer. "We should probably take a shower." He has a look on his face like he's trying to convince himself that he should leave the room.

As he stands there, grinning at me, he's completely naked and absolutely sexy as hell. Without saying another word, I grab my bag and saunter off to the bathroom, pushing my shirt off my shoulders and letting it fall off my body, knowing he's watching me. Shortly after I reach the bathroom, I hear his feet padding across the wooden floor, and I know he's headed in my direction. Game

on, I win.



Having opted to wear the jeans and t-shirt I bought yesterday since they were my only clean clothes, I pull the jeans over River's Pac-Man boxers and slip the t-shirt over my white bra with the black bow. Sliding my arms into my black leather jacket and tying my Converse sneakers, the ones I luckily threw in my overnight bag before I left home, I'm ready to visit a few retail establishments.

I haven't been shopping in so long

that I am actually a little excited. My excitement only grows as I walk out of the bathroom and see River texting on his phone. He's wearing worn jeans, a black Ramones t-shirt, a black leather jacket, and black work boots. When he smiles at me while slipping on his black beanie, I am transported into the past, to the first time I laid eyes on him, and he's just as sexy now as he was then.

While we're driving, I check my many emails and listen to my voicemails. Both Grace and Aerie have left messages. I send Aerie a quick text and call Grace. I hang up just as my phone battery dies and I mention to River that I should be getting back to Laguna Beach by Wednesday. His eyes

flicker to mine, and he very quietly says, “How about we take it day by day?”

I want to argue that I really need to get home, but don't because I couldn't care less about getting home. I just really like being with him. So instead, I smile over at him and respond, “I can't stay with you forever, you know.” Poking him in the ribs underneath his jacket, I add, “You'll get sick of me and all my games soon enough anyway.”

We walk into what appears to be almost a town unto itself. I have been to The Grove a handful of times. It really does have the best shopping. It hosts all of my most favorite stores including Nike Goddess, Pottery Barn, J. Crew, and H&M.

Coincidentally, the first place we hit is Pottery Barn. I'm quickly learning that shopping with River is rather comical. As we enter the store, he approaches the more-than-willing-to-help young brunette, who instantly bats her eyelashes at him. She blinks at first, as if trying to place him, but blows it off as soon he mentions the wares he's looking for. I laugh as he jumps on one of the mattresses and tries to take me with him. In a matter of no more than thirty minutes, we have selected neutral bedding, soft towels, and fluffy pillows. We also select a mattress, box spring, and a black leather tufted headboard. The flirty salesgirl didn't have to bat her eyelashes to convince him to add the

coordinating nightstands; he would have done it anyway. He quickly pays and arranges delivery for later today.

As we walk among the stores, his arm slung over my shoulder and my hand in his back pocket, he tells me that he wants to take me to a place called Smitten's tonight. It's a local neighborhood bar that The Wilde Ones have been practicing at every Tuesday night for over five years. He informs me I'll get to meet his brother, sister, and bandmates. That makes me a little nervous, but I'm more excited to finally see him perform with his band.

Our next stop is Williams Sonoma where we select the newest Starbucks coffee pot and purchase coffee pods,



cookware, modern white plates, and silverware. Once again, as he pays, he arranges for it all to be delivered later today.

As we walk through the very festive outdoor mall, we pass by an H&M. “Mind if I duck in and grab a few things?”

Nodding, he motions with his head to the side and says, “I’ll be over there. I have a few calls to return,” then he kisses me, slides his nose to my ear and whispers, “So take your time.” He knows what that does to me. I smile at him and run my fingers up his stomach. “It won’t take that long.”

I quickly select a few things to hold me over until I figure out if River has a

washer and dryer or until I go home. Approaching the cash register, I hear the urgent pulsing, almost soaring track of an unmistakable musical opus. The distorted vocals, heavy electronic chords, and pounding bass beat all mixed together are undeniably the masterpiece of Justin Timberlake's Sexy Back.

Looking around to figure out where the music is coming from, I finally determine it is my purse singing. As the word sexy blares out and the lyrics of the first verse come to an end, I can't help but smile and step out of line. Reaching into my bag, I grab my phone. The name River Wilde is flashing across my screen.

“Heeelllloo,” I beam, glancing toward the front of the store. There he is, leaning against the wall between two glass window cases. His foot is propped against the pink flowery wallpaper of the store’s decor. He has one of his hands in his pocket and the other is holding his phone to his ear. He smiles his full dimple smile and I smile back. Holding his phone out for me to see, he then puts it back to his ear. “Do you like the ringtone I picked?”

I watch as he pushes the phone to his shoulder as a couple of fan girls approach him, pens in their hands. He gives them an obligatory grin and signs the back of one’s shirt and the shoulder of the other’s. Shaking my head and

rolling my eyes that he claimed no one really notices him; I bring myself back to the ringtone issue. I guess he must have assigned himself that ringtone when he added us to each other's contacts. "Yeah, I do actually, Mr. I'm Not Really That Famous," I answer while giving him a thumbs up and raising my shoulder indicating that I want an autograph too while miming a pen in my hand. Then I add while giggling, "But I didn't know sexy ever left."

Shaking his own head, he hangs up the phone. I almost stop breathing from his perfection as he charmingly waves goodbye to his two groupies and starts walking toward me. I step out of line to greet him. "Hey sexy didn't you . . ." I

start to ask when he's close enough, but he ducks his head and kisses me, quickly preventing me from finishing my question.

"Hey sexy yourself", he says when he pulls away, and I've forgotten what I was going to ask and figure it didn't really matter anyway. Before taking my hand, he pretends to sign his name on my shoulder, and his touch sends shivers up my spine. "Thank you Mr. Rockstar," I say and then he leads me back to the line.

Leaving the store, he takes the bags. "I have something I want to show you."

"What? The line of groupies outside waiting for you to sign their bare skin?"

I joke.

“No smart ass, that was random and seriously hardly ever happens.”

“If you say so, but you can give me an autograph any day of the week,” I concede and smile over at him, dropping the subject.

We hop on the Green Trolley that travels between The Grove and the Farmers Market and get off at The Entertainment Center. The complex has dozens of buildings of all shapes and sizes. It is located on a landscaped park with picnic areas in the center. It even has a dancing fountain. There is a lively crowd of people walking around. Some of the entertainment seekers have shopping bags in their hands, while

others walk casually drinking coffee or eating pretzels. The street-grid layout of the sidewalk and older looking buildings makes the area feel like an old-fashioned downtown.

Exiting the trolley first, I grin as River steps off and moves behind me. Pressing his front to my back, he wraps his arms around my waist and guides me into an open red brick, double arched building. When my eyes adjust from the sunlight to the much darker room, I see lights and hear sounds everywhere. We've just walked into an arcade. It's very much like the one I frequented with my dad so many years ago. Shaken with emotion, overcome by happiness, and full of joy, I turn around, throwing my

arms around him and kiss him. He runs his tongue across the roof of my mouth before closing his lips around mine.

With labored breaths, I pull away. I clutch his shoulders while he wraps one arm around my waist, the other still holding my bags. “An arcade? Here at The Grove?”

“Yeah, I thought you’d like it.”

“Like it? I love it.”

Looking around, I see so many black stalls, all of which house video games from the eighties. There’s Mousetrap, Asteroids, Centipede, Frogger, Pac-Man, Space Invaders, and Venture. Along with Skee Ball, driving games, and even a Chicken Clucker.

The sounds, smells, and excitement



of years gone by are right here, right now, and I can't believe it. They remind me of a non-looping ambient audio track—beep, blip, ding, buzz, and a click. Closing my eyes and just listening, I can clearly recall myself hanging out at the local arcade with my dad while feeding quarter after quarter into Ms. Pac-Man, Donkey Kong, and of course, the pinball machines. My dad was a pinball wizard, and he taught me well.

His favorite pinball machine was Flash Gordon. It was the first multi-ball table I ever played. It was equivalent to Black Knight, but better and faster. The table was amazing, and just the thought of getting that 'fifteen seconds' still gives me an adrenalin rush. I remember

the first extra ball was easy to land, but getting the second was always a big challenge.

My favorite, of course, was Baby Pac-Man. It wasn't the game for everyone, and my dad didn't really like it because the flippers aimed at the center of the game instead of the sides. I thought this offered greater challenges; he thought it was a flawed table design. It really did make getting to the mazes difficult, which I thrived on.

"Look over there," River says, pointing to Pac-Man. "How about it?" he asks with a twinkle in his green eyes.

"Game on, hot stuff," I answer as I head toward the machine.

We stay here, playing different games

for hours. Challenging each other, I sometimes win, but he mostly wins. I have no idea how. I decide to try my luck, solo, at the Drive My Course game while River goes to get more quarters. When I finish, I look around the room and spot him walking his sway of a walk my way. I melt.

“Close your eyes,” he says as he comes to stand in front of me.

“Why?”

“Just close them.”

Closing my eyes, I feel him take my hand and attach something around my wrist. It's the same wrist where my Cartier LOVE bangle sits.

“Okay, you can open now.”

Staring down at my wrist, I can't

believe what I'm looking at. This adorably sweet and sexy man has just placed a very colorful linked bracelet of the cutest Pac-Man on my wrist. It has a yellow Pac-Man with the blue, red, pink, and orange monsters on it.

"I love it!" I manage as I swallow back my tears of joy. I throw myself around him and say, "Thank you."

He lifts me up and twirls me just once before setting me down. "Happy?"

Smiling up at him, I respond, "More than happy."

# Chapter Nineteen

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## THE SECRET IS IN THE TELLING

*There is something you don't know  
I don't want to tell you  
But tonight somebody else will  
So please understand why  
Just remember the secret is in the  
telling.*



Every town and every city has something that makes it a little unique. For Brentwood, it must be the beautiful white Dogwood trees that line its streets and the serendipity of the quaint shops, all very different but co-mingling so well. Downtown Brentwood is a small but trendy area. Its old fashioned streetlights display banners, its stores are covered with different colored awnings, and its Main Street sidewalks

are even paved in bricks.

Having left the car in a small parking garage on a side street, we're walking through the town where River grew up. We walk, with his one arm slung around my shoulder and my hand in his back pocket; he's carrying '*Stella*' on his other shoulder. We are on our way to what River described as his local neighborhood bar. It's dusk, but light enough that I can see the town. It doesn't look like an area where the word *local* seems to be the best description, but I'll go with it. It's actually very upscale. There's a movie theater, a florist, retail shops, galleries, and many restaurants and bars. People are walking like they don't have a care in the world, just

browsing, talking, and laughing; just like us.

One place in particular catches my eye; it's a bookstore named Fiction Vixen. My love for literature draws my attention toward the two piles of books in the large windows located on both sides of its front door. The books are displayed in a Christmas tree-like fashion with lights wrapping them. Pointing the store out to River, he laughs softly and tells me his mother's friend, Vicki Mixen, owns it. He goes on to say that she has always been crazy about books and that when he was fourteen she decided to open a bookstore. He spent that whole summer helping her get it ready to open for business. It was his



first job. He tells me that he hauled and stacked so many books that he never wanted to look at another book again. Then he jokes that it's why he opted not to go to college. Again we both laugh and continue toward the bar.

I take in all the splendors that surround us. The visual makes me think of the Entertainment Complex at the Grove. I can't help but smile at the memory of the wonderful day we had there, along with everything else we did. After the arcade we stopped at Whole Foods to purchase a few items, my priority being coffee and creamer. Picking up a late lunch from the deli, we made it back to the house in time for the prearranged delivery of all the items

River purchased earlier today.

Throughout our day, we talked about our lives and I discovered so much more about him that I didn't know. When he asked me questions about USC and I asked him how he knew the campus so well, he told me he visited his brother and sister there many times. He also told me his brother was in the Kappa Sigma Fraternity, but lived off campus. I mentioned that Ben was in the same fraternity, but skirted the topic. He told me he went to a few parties at the frat house and then crashed at either his brother or sister's place. I got the impression that who he stayed with depended on which sibling took someone else home with them. Funny,

we only saw each other that one night, but good I guess.

I found out River's mother moved out of Brentwood a couple of years ago when she got remarried; she and her husband actually live in River's neighborhood. His sister lives with them, and his brother lives in what used to be their grandparents' condo in downtown Beverly Hills. His grandparents both died within six months of each other last year and left a sizable inheritance to River and his brother and sister. Xander inherited their condo. I learned his grandfather was a silent partner in one of the first and most successful retail stores on Rodeo Drive and was extremely wealthy. I also found

out there is another wing to River's house. It's located behind the garage and that is where the laundry room is. I laughed that he had no idea if there actually was a washer and dryer at the house, but we discovered, once we returned, that there is. I also laughed, because just like him, laundry is not something I actually think about or even do for myself. Since we hadn't bought laundry detergent we couldn't wash the new sheets. Instead we put the sheet from the air mattress on the new bed and proceeded to christen it.

Right now, thinking of laundry makes me think about Ben, something I haven't been doing much of lately. But since he always took care of the laundry, I can't

help but remember him. When I say Ben took care of the laundry, I mean he dropped it off at Fluff and Fold. He was so funny about dirty clothes, he hated when they'd pile up. There were only a few things he was OCD about and the care of our clothing was one of those things. Although, I remember one time when the large pile of dirty clothes didn't seem to bother him.

We had piled our laundry on the floor in the laundry room. Neither one of us had gotten around to bagging it in the special bright yellow bags provided by Fold and Fluff. Ben had been busy on a story, and I was trying to write my thesis. It was a Sunday morning in the early spring, and Ben was headed out to

a flag football game, but he couldn't find all of his gear.

"Dahl, have you seen my jersey?" he yelled from the laundry room.

"Nope," I said without even giving him a sideways glance from my desk in the kitchen.

"Could you help me look? I'm late!"

"Sure," I said as I pranced his way.

When I walked into the laundry room, there he was, bending down over the pile in only his track pants. Freshly showered, his back glistened with droplets of water. I had been cooped up at my computer for far too long over the past week, and the sight of him brought a yearning I didn't expect.

Walking over to the pile, I stood

there in my Ugg boots looking at him as he rummaged through the huge pile. “Find it yet?”

When he looked up at me, he noticed I was wearing nothing but one of his long sports t-shirts and my boots. I hadn’t showered yet because I wanted to finish another section of my thesis first, so while he was in the shower I threw on something comfortable and warm and made my way to the kitchen for coffee and writing.

He shot me a wicked grin, and I rolled my eyes. “What?”

“I found my jersey,” he said as he stood up and sauntered one step closer to me.

“You did? Where?” I whispered,

barely able to pull my eyes away from his smoldering blue ones.

He cocked a brow at me and pointed. “You’re wearing it.”

Then lifting the jersey over my head he said, “Fuck flag football today.”

As I’m reminiscing about Ben, River bumps my shoulder. “Nervous?”

Suddenly transported back to the here and now, I shake my head and say, “No. Should I be?”

“No of course not,” he says grinning at me. “You just seem . . . somewhere else.”

“I’m right here silly,” I say while tugging on his back pocket, my Pac-Man bracelet dancing with my slight wrist movement.



Turning to walk backwards, swinging his guitar to his back, he grabs both my hands and pulls me towards a building with the sign Smitten's. "Did I tell you how beautiful you look?" he asks with an adorable grin and a twinkle in his green eyes.

Tonight I'm wearing one of my new outfits. I'm also a little more made up than I usually am because I'm meeting River's friends and family. Changing my clothes after our shopping spree, I chose a black lace swing camisole, cream-colored jeans, black high-heeled boots, and my leather jacket. Changing my underwear into something a little sexier, I had to go without a bra because of the thin spaghetti straps, but it really isn't

even noticeable. My hair is down, but a little fuller than I usually wear it, and I'm wearing makeup complete with blush, shadow, liner, mascara, and lip-gloss. The electric force I feel when I'm with him is back from the sight of his slight smile, and goosebumps run up and down my body.

"Actually, you didn't," I say, moving my head so my hair sways side to side.

He stops and I almost walk right into him. "Even with all that makeup you still look perfect," he says, still clasping both of my hands together, dunking his head, and touching his nose to mine.

"What? You don't like makeup?" I ask, but I'm not in least bit offended because neither do I.

Standing together on the sidewalk, he slides his nose to my ear. “I didn’t say that. I just think you look amazing with or without it.”

He brushes his lips against mine ever so lightly and then turns to catch the door for me. The building has a set of double glass doors and one oversized window with the name Smitten’s blazoned across it. I walk in first. Red brick walls border the large square room. There is a stage to the left, the bar is all the way in the back, and the wall on the right is lined with chairs and sofas. A large mirrored sign behind the bar is framed in wood and says ‘Smitten’s’. High-top tables are scattered throughout the room, and a small dance floor is in front of the stage.

An archway to the back right has a sign mounted above it that reads 'Restroom', and an archway to the back left has a sign hanging above it that reads 'Poolroom'. The place actually does look like a local neighborhood bar.

With his hand on the small of my back, he starts to guide me toward a grouping of different shaped chairs and a big black sofa with a wooden coffee table separating them. Pointing in that direction, he starts to say, "Everyone's over . . ." but before he can finish his sentence, a very cute, young copper-haired woman comes running up to him, throws her arms around him, and gives him a big kiss on the cheek.

River drops my hand to steady her

and hugs her back, practically lifting her off the ground. I know immediately this petite beautiful thing must be his sister, Bell. The resemblance is uncanny. They could pass for twins except her eyes are a much more vibrant green color and she has red streaks in her light copper-brown shoulder length hair. She's also quite a bit shorter than her brother. River returns his sister's affections with ease, and I see how much they adore each other.

Setting her down, he moves back slightly to rest his guitar against one of the four columns bracing the center of the room. He blindly locates my hand and laces his fingers with mine. She breaks their embrace and thumps him on

the chest. “Where have you . . . ?” She doesn’t finish as her eyes flicker to our fingers. Her smile turns even bigger, and she eyes us curiously. She may even have a bit of confusion mixed in her very bright green eyes. She actually looks at our hands like she has never seen her Irish twin brother holding hands with a girl.

Looking at River, she coyly remarks, “When you texted me you had someone you wanted me to meet, I just assumed it was a guy.”

Then she throws her arms around me like we’re long lost friends. “Hi! I’m Bell, River’s sister.”

“Dahlia. Nice to meet you, Bell,” I say as she continues to clutch her arms

around my back before finally allowing me room to breathe. She studies me for a few beats. “You look familiar.”

“I went to USC. River said you were a junior when I was a senior.”

Shrugging her shoulders she says, “Maybe that’s it.” Gently tugging on some of my hair, she says, “I think I’d remember you. You’re so pretty and the shade of your golden blonde hair is unforgettable.”

She looks at River and gives him a look that he obviously recognizes because he grins at her. Then twisting sideways, she winks at the bartender and points to me. Why? I have no idea. Then she diverts her attention back to us. I can tell she has all kinds of questions for her

brother, but she holds back.

“So where did you two meet?” she asks me as the River’s name is being chanted from across the room. Looking over, I see a dark-haired, dark-eyed man catcalling River. He continues to cup his hands over his mouth, calling River’s name. River smiles at me and raises his chin in the air toward his friend as he tugs on my hand. “Come on,” then asks his sister, “You coming?”

Shrugging her shoulders, Bell replies, “I’ll meet you over there,” then winks at me and says, “We’ll talk later,” as she flutters off toward the bar.

Approaching the seating area, the very attractive dark-haired guy is sipping his beer with an arm draped



around the girl standing next to him. As he tilts his bottle back, he eyes me up and down then finishes his drink before setting it on the table. He drops his arm from the girl and grabs two beers out of an ice bucket on the coffee table. Twisting the tops off the Heinekens, he sidesteps the knockout redhead and walks up to us just as we approach him.

He's about my height with a very athletic build. I could clearly see the cut-line of his arm muscles as he twisted the caps, and his tight shirt shows signs of well-defined abdominal muscles. He obviously works out. His hair is short, but long enough that it is wispily styled to the side, his eyes are like rich chocolate, and his skin is almost almond

in color, making him appear slightly tanned.

He hands one bottle to River and the other to me. “River, man where the fuck you been? You’ve been MIA!” he says. Then with a big smile, displaying the whitest teeth I have ever seen, he adds, “And who is this beautiful thing you brought with you?”

As I look at this guy, who can no doubt woo any girl, I can tell he must be part Native American. Glancing at the arm that just handed me a drink, I notice he has a very detailed tribal tattoo circling his bicep with an intricate feather design draped down his arm. It is peeking out from under the short sleeve of his tight black t-shirt.

“Phoenix, this is my girl, Dahlia London,” River says, dropping my hand to place his arm around my shoulder before he continues with, “Dahlia, this jackass is Nix Stone.”

“Dahlia, like the flower?” he asks, raising his hand to shake mine. “Nice to meet you.” Raising one eyebrow in question, he asks, “What’s a sweet thing like you doing hanging out with this douchebag?”

River pipes in with, “Language dude. Really?” And he squeezes me a little tighter.

Nix must be short for Phoenix I figure as I take a sip of my beer just to break his gaze. I hate the taste of beer without ice, so while blinking at his

brash forwardness and the taste of the beer, I decide to ignore his rude question. Instead I shake his hand in response. “Nice to meet you! You’re the guitarist?”

He nods his head yes and shakes my hand a little longer than necessary but stops as River eyes him.

Shoving River in the shoulder but looking at me, he says, “Sorry Dahlia. I’m not used to seeing this guy bring a girl to rehearsal. He never stays with one girl long enough to introduce us to her.” I glance over at River rather quickly, but he isn’t looking at me. My gaze is broken when someone calls Phoenix’s name.

“Nix, what crap are you stirring up

now?" Bell chimes in, taking the beer out of my hand and handing me some red drink with a lime in it.

"Just ignore him! He's always an ass," she says.

"Bell, you're lucky I love you," Nix responds, winking at her.

Then looking at River, he says, "Meet you on stage, I'm going to warm up." As he walks away he turns, "And Dahlia, it was really a pleasure meeting you."

Rolling my eyes at his obvious intent to piss River off, I raise my glass and ask Bell, "What's this?"

"A Cranberry Crown. Try it."

As I give it a sip so as not to be rude, River bends slightly and whispers in my

ear, “Watch out for her drinks.”

“I heard that,” Bell says as she sticks her tongue out at her brother and walks away.

“River, you made it,” another voice says. Glancing to my right, I see the cutest blond boy reaching to give River a firm handshake and a manly hug.

“When do I ever miss, man?” River answers, grabbing for my left hand before introducing us. “Garrett Flynn, this is the girl I told you about.”

River obviously has a great relationship with this gray-eyed boyish looking man. With his hair slightly longer than Nix or River’s, it almost covers his eyes. His hairstyle and boyish face make him look like he’s fifteen. His

lip ring only adds to his perceived youth, and his overall tall, skinny stature certainly doesn't help. But honestly, he's so cute and innocent looking, I know he must make even the hardest of women melt.

"How can I forget the amazing girl you've met twice?"

Then smiling so genuinely at me, I know what he's saying is with the upmost sincerity. "Dahlia right? I'm Garrett." Extending his hand he adds, "Nice to finally meet you. I've heard a lot about you."

I shake his hand and smile. "Hi Garrett. I've heard a lot about you too." Watching his easy smile, I know I like him already.

A moment later, I feel someone approach us from behind. Looking over my shoulder, I see another duplicate of River. “This isn’t a reunion. Time to rehearse girls,” the almost carbon copy of River says. He’s circling around us and I can see some differences immediately in their looks but there is no doubt that this is Xander.

Raising his hands in an *all’s good* gesture, Garrett smiles at me. “Catch ya after rehearsal,” he says and then walks toward the stage to join Nix, who is strumming different chords on his guitar.

Xander is definitely good looking, but not in the same charming, adorable way as River. His hair color is the same, but he wears it shorter. He has the same



green eyes, but they don't sparkle like Rivers. His demeanor, I can immediately sense, is cooler, more controlled. Upon first glance, he seems to be all about image. The kind of guy who traded in his college cool-boy uniform of old sports jerseys, worn-out jeans, and broken-in baseball hats for the city cool-boy uniform of button down shirts, neatly pressed jeans, and a lot of hair gel. Without even meeting him yet, he kind of reminds me of Ben.

Extending his hand to me, he keeps his eyes on his brother. "Xander. I assume you are Dahlia," he says with a slight chill in his tone.

I extend my hand and he shakes it once before pointing to the stage.

“They’re waiting for you,” he says to River.

“Yeah, give me a minute.”

“One is all you get bro,” he says, walking over toward the bar.

Bell lets out a yelp, claps her hands over her head, and beckons Xander to come her way. “Xander! C’mere!” she yells as she slugs back a second shot of what I think is tequila.

Looking quizzically at River he wraps his arms around me and kisses me. “I’ll explain my family later.” Pulling away, he crosses his heart. “Promise.”

Giving him a slight smile, I lean in to kiss him again.

Drums echo through the room and the

words, “Testing, testing. One, two, three,” blare through the bar. Looking over to the stage I see Nix at the microphone then hear him say, “Loverboy, your presence is needed up on stage.”

River shakes his head. “Come on and sit over here,” he says, guiding me toward the high-top table at the end of the dance floor that centers the stage. “Do you want something different to drink?” he asks as he pulls the bar stool out for me to sit.

“I’m good Loverboy,” I joke as I take my jacket off because it’s really hot in here. He takes it from me and drapes it around the back of the chair. I hang my purse on top of my jacket and sit down

as I smile and push him toward the stage. “Thank you kind sir. Now go and sing something, will you! I’m impatient you know. I’ve never gotten to see you with the band, and I’m looking forward to it.”

“Forward to it, huh?” he winks as he kisses me one last time and turns to leave. I watch him walk to the stage. He’s wearing his trademark worn jeans and a plain white t-shirt. I glance at his ass as he turns to pick up his guitar, and he catches me. He shakes his head and his mouth turns up into a wicked grin as he winks at me. I just wink back and giggle. I’m used to getting caught gawking, so I might as well embrace it.

I continue to watch him walk all the way up to the stage. He takes his jacket off

and tosses it to the side before strutting over to the microphone stand. He blows into it a few times and our eyes lock as we both grin at each other. Damn, I wish I had my camera with me. He's so incredibly photogenic and I'd really love to get some shots of him up on the stage, here where he's in his element, so relaxed and comfortable. He starts to sing a few notes, and I can tell this is pretty casual and definitely more like a rehearsal and less like a show because there are no introductions. Some people stop and watch while others, probably use to the band's rehearsals, continue with their conversations. Once the song starts, I can't peel my eyes away from him. It's an old one from their album, but

actually seeing him sing sends shivers down my spine. He's so serious and more than half way through it, he seems to lose himself in the song. I'm not sure how to describe how I feel, but the back of my head starts to swirl and goosebumps cover me from head to toe. It's a really nice feeling and it sort of makes me go numb. I can't even lift my drink because I think I've lost feeling in my fingers. This is a feeling I have never experienced. It's strange but incredibly soothing and calming. I don't want the song or this moment to end, but as it does, I slowly recover my composure and shoot him a thumbs up. He winks at me again and turns to talk to Garrett.

I'm finally able to sip the drink that

Bell handed me earlier when she walks over and sits next to me. Handing me a blue iced drink, she says, “Bottoms up.” Then clinks her glass to mine. It’s an interesting mix of blueberry and cranberry; I kind of like it. “And this would be?” I ask after drinking a healthy sized gulp.

“No idea. I just told Tate I love cranberries and blueberries, and this is what he made for us.”

“Tate?”

“The bartender, and my very good friend,” she winks, glancing over to the hulk-sized man behind the bar who is staring back at us.

Not sure how to respond to her, I point to my drink and give Tate a thumbs

up. He smiles at me then turns to Bell mouthing, “You like?”

“Excuse me,” she says as she gets up from the table. “I just want to thank him properly. I’ll be back in a few for some girl talk.”

I glance up at the stage and see River watching over me. Since I’m in a thumbs up giving mood, I shoot him one as well as he adjusts the microphone stand and puts his guitar over his shoulder.

Shaking his head at me, he just grins before he turns for what looks like a pow-wow with the band and Xander.

Glancing toward the bar, I see Bell leaning over it, flirting with Tate. I wonder if he’s her boyfriend or just her bar boyfriend, but I can’t tell. Then I see



her pluck her drink down on the bar and stamp her foot before traipsing into the room marked “Poolroom,” Tate following quickly behind. After witnessing their little exchange, I’m guessing boyfriend.

Looking back to the stage, River starts to sing a song I know well. It is the song he told me he wrote about me. His eyes find mine as he sings the lyrics to Once in a Lifetime, and when he hits the chorus he closes them.

Having finished my blueberry concoction, I go back to the Cranberry Crown. I am listening intently to River’s singing. I love the sound of his rough but smooth voice. Closing my own eyes, I take in his whole sound. The clanking of

a bottle being set on the table makes me open them, and I feel slightly dizzy for a second. I know I need to slow down, I am a lightweight to begin with, and having eaten an early dinner, I don't have much food in my stomach now to absorb the potency of Tate's drinks.

The song ends, and River lifts his shirt to wipe some sweat off his face. Lifting his shirt exposes a healthy amount of his firm stomach, and I'm not the only one who notices them. Girls throughout the bar are yelling and screaming, and I'm torn between doing the same or just running up there and pulling him down off the stage. I choose the former. He looks over at me as he lets his shirt fall and winks. I stop

yelling when Xander takes a seat next to me. He sets a bottle of Black Label Patron on the table and adds two shot glasses with chasers.

Observing him more closely I notice his eyes are a lighter shade of green than River's, but he has the same strong jawline and full lips. His hair is shorter and much neater, compliments of hair product I'm sure. He's just a little bit shorter and a little broader than River.

He smiles at me, but his smile doesn't touch his cold green eyes. "I've heard a lot about you."

I'm not sure why he doesn't seem to like me but I smile cordially anyway. "I've heard a lot about you too."

Pouring two shots, he slides one

over, but not all the way. He looks at the stage, at his brother, and at the other band members. I get the feeling he's avoiding looking at me, but manages to say, "You're the reason River didn't answer his phone all weekend."

The music stops and the three bandmates step to the side to discuss something. River is pointing to the chords of his acoustic guitar, and Nix is pointing to the strings on his electric guitar. Garrett is both nodding and shaking his head.

"They'll be awhile," Xander says, leaning back in his chair.

He pushes the shot directly in front of me, and I look over at him about to say no thank you when a wicked grin

appears on his face. “Drink with me, Muse?”

I look up at River, but he’s still talking to Nix. Without saying another word, Xander licks his index finger and rubs it in the salt. He motions for me to do the same. So, deciding a drink can only help calm the uneasiness I feel in his presence, I dip my finger in the Patron, wet my wrist, and coat it in salt. Licking the salt, I quickly down the tequila and grab a lime wedge. He does the same.

When we’re done he pours 2 more shots, this time putting the glass in front of me at its first touch to the table. “Another?”

“What are we drinking too?”

“Life!”

“Okay, life, I’ll drink to that.” Then, as I setup another shot and he does the same I ask, “What’s with the name Muse?”

He doesn’t answer as he tips his head back and drinks his Black Label without even a *here’s to*.

I do the same, but when I set my glass down I ask another question. “Have I done something to offend you in *life*?” I ask, stressing the word life.

Guitar chords are being played, but the band has their backs to us, seemingly still in a dispute. After pouring yet a third round, he leans even further back on his barstool. “Where should I start,” he says, twirling his glass on the table,

some of the liquid spilling out.

“Let’s see . . . First, I’m a little pissed at my brother right now. He had a radio interview on Sunday morning here in LA that he blew off.”

Xander looks directly at me for the first time since sitting down. He actually seems more peeved at me than at his brother as he continues, “I called him all fucking weekend and he never answered his goddamn phone until today.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know,” I say, having no idea why I’m apologizing. I look up at River who has started to play again, but still turned to Nix. He’s singing a song I’ve never heard.

“You know what?” he asks, but I don’t answer because it seems like a

loaded question. He continues anyway. "That's not even what really pisses me off." He drinks another shot, this time straight and refills the glass again.

Drinking my shot straight now as well, I force back the bile coming up my throat and know I have to stop. "So, what is it that pisses you off Xander," I say, equally as coolly now. I have had enough of his shit.

"You," he says, not taking his eyes from mine.

"Me! What have I done to you?"

"You don't know do you? He didn't tell you? No, of course he didn't," he wryly says, pushing a fourth shot my way.

River has turned around and is



staring at me with concern. I give him a little smile and return my eyes back to Xander. He's playing his guitar now, but I have no idea what he's singing because I am not listening to the words. The alcohol is flowing through my veins and my judgment is more than a little off.

I give Xander a measured glance and push the glass back toward him as if to say enough and I don't just mean the alcohol. His games need to stop as well. "Know what?"

I can see by his glazed over eyes he's more than drunk. Leaning forward he turns to face me, but I lean away. "You should be flattered that I call you Muse. In fact I've referred to you that way for a long time."

Sighing heavily, he looks up at River for a moment then continues, “That song he wrote about you is why the band is successful today, so you were his muse.”

“He did tell me that,” I say, feeling the need to defend River and myself. I honestly have no idea where his anger is coming from.

Shooting me an irritated look, he says, “No. Not about the song.”

He says it like I’m an idiot.

“Then what?” I ask, even though I need to excuse myself to use the bathroom. I stand up, and the room starts to spin.

He snorts as he answers, “River had brought Bell to the bar the first night you met him. Rather than bring her home

himself, he asked me to do it so he could stay and talk to you. She was in a hurry to meet some guy at her apartment, and I wasn't ready to leave so my sister left without me." His sad tone draws me back into the conversation.

Glancing at me, as if he is annoyed that I stood up, I quickly sit back down and he continues. "I was easily distracted back then and had stopped to talk to somebody, and before I knew it she had left with a friend. When River saw me still at the bar with no sign of Bell he tried to call her. She didn't answer and he was concerned so he went to her apartment. She wasn't home so he called me and asked where to look for her. I told him to try my frat house,

and I think he did. Before I heard back from him, I got a call from my mother.”

As this scene plays out, I know what is coming. It's not going to be good. Our eyes lock and neither of us blinks until he finally breaks. “Turns out the friend she caught a ride with was drunk and ran a red light. Their small car was hit by an SUV. Bell's friend died instantly and Bell spent six months in the hospital recovering. The trauma of the accident affected her so much she didn't care about school anymore. She just lost her drive and never went back.”

My mouth drops open and I shake my head, telling myself that this is fiction, it's made up; it's not real. My unfocused eyes narrow in on Xander's sullen

expression, and all I see is the truth. Bile rises up my throat and I know I am going to lose it. He blames me! Does River blame me? Does their family blame me? “I’m sorry,” I say again for the second time tonight. I’m paralyzed by his words, glued to my seat.

He ignores my apology and continues, “As far back as I can remember, Bell always wanted to be a doctor. Especially when our father died. She wanted nothing more than to save people. But, because of the accident, she didn’t take that path in life. So instead of being a doctor, she works for me as my assistant. She gets drunk most nights and never talks about the life she should have had.” Then throwing back one more

shot, he clears his throat. “So Dahlia, do you see my problem with you now?” Then he points to River and says in a louder tone, “You were the only chick he ever wanted to look for or even bothered to look for, ever, and you didn’t even stick around that night. Why? Tell me why.”

Turning to the stage, I catch sight of River’s furrowed brow. His eyes are narrowed on his brother. Seeing his expression makes my body tremble, and tears fills my eyes as I look away. I don’t even know Bell, but my heart aches for her and for me. How can I start a relationship with someone under circumstances like this? I stand up again, slightly wobbly, and stumble as I grip

the table for balance. I need to remove myself from this situation, but Xander isn't finished. Almost laughingly, he adds, "And now, I see my brother tonight, happier than I have seen him in a long time. So again, I want to know why you left that night. There is obviously something between the two of you. I could hear it in his voice when he talked to me today." His questions end and then he throws the dagger. "If only you would have stayed . . . "

I grab the tequila shot that he poured for himself from the middle of the table and down it. Hoping the quick gulp of this mind numbing liquid will give me the ability to free myself from this hell. Then, finally able to stand without fear

of stumbling, I give River one last glance before leaving this uncomfortable situation. I am feeling sick and need to get out of here. He stops singing and quickly removes his guitar strap from his shoulder. I know Xander must be pretty near rip-roaring drunk, but I'm surprised when he suddenly grips my bare arm, preventing me from walking away. With his eyes burning into me, he says, "Have you had enough? Because there's more to tell."

"Excuse me. I need to use the restroom," I manage, not able to listen to another word. I take off for the bathroom without even glancing at River again. Barely making it to the bathroom in time, I kneel on the floor, lift the seat, and try



not to lean my head against it. The room is spinning as I heave into the toilet. When I think my stomach is finally empty, I sit back on my heels for a minute to steady myself. Once the spinning has stopped I stand up and make my way to the sink for the cool water I so desperately need.

Leaning against the counter with my head down in the sink, my senses start to return. I wonder why River didn't tell me everything himself and how he could possibly think this information wouldn't impact us. His brother harbors resentment towards me and I'm sure his family must as well. Hearing the door open, I already know who it is. As I look in the mirror and see his reflection all I

can do is cry uncontrollably.

Coming over to me, he turns me around and grabs my face with both hands. He looks into my eyes, unaware of the information I already know. “Dahlia, are you okay? Are you sick? Did something happen with Xander?” he asks these questions without pausing for me to answer. Concern is clear in his voice.

I shake my head no but mean yes. I’m not crying because I’m sick. I’m crying because I might very well be the cause of somebody’s life being drastically changed. “Why didn’t you tell me?” I hoarsely whisper while trying to urge myself to stop crying.

“Tell you what? What are you talking

about?" he asks, not knowing that his brother has basically told me I am responsible for their sister's messed up life.

"About your sister!" I say surprised by the hardness in my own voice.

"Christ! What the hel . . ." he starts to say. With his face so close to mine, I'm sure he can smell the alcohol mixed with vomit on my breath.

Before he says anything else, the bathroom door opens and Xander is standing there. River turns around, but Xander doesn't move towards us. He stays in the doorway, slightly swaying, bracing it to help balance him in his inebriated state.

Surprising me with his ability to

articulate his words in his drunken state, he looks directly at me. "I'm sorry I was the one that told you, but you had to know."

River's eyes narrow at Xander. "What the hell did you tell her?"

I'm not usually one that invites conflict, so I feel startled by the hostility River is channeling toward this brother.

"It wasn't an unspoken vow of secrecy, and she needed to know," he answers in a much more humble tone than he has had all night.

My drunken state is quickly evaporating as I look at Xander blankly, perhaps a little confused. He was so angry with me before and now he's apologizing?

River's face is pale as he looks at me with understanding of what Xander has told me. Then running his fingers through his hair, he steps closer to Xander as he continues with his explanation. "What I told you about Bell, those are my demons. I just wanted someone else to blame for once and there you were after all these years."

River is much closer to Xander now and with anger in his voice says, "Just shut up Xander. Shut the fuck up."

"Sorry man, but she had to know."

River slams his fist into the stall door nearest to Xander. "It wasn't your place to tell her!"

He doesn't even flinch from River's close punch.

Stepping the one step between them, Xander says, “You’re right, and River I know you aren’t going to believe this, but I want you to be happy. I know you think you just met this girl but to me you’ve known her way longer. I know how you are. I don’t want you to fuck this up because of your need to always protect women because of . . .”

It seems that Xander has struck a nerve with River because he cuts him off before he can finish his thought. “You don’t think I know that you harbor guilt about Bell. I do! But that’s your guilt not mine. I let that go a long time ago. Bell is happy with her life. It’s you that’s not happy with her life and as for how you see my needs, you’re wrong.”

I am watching these two brothers tear each other apart over their sister. It is both heart-breaking and heart-warming that they love her so much to care so deeply.

Stammering with more to say, Xander shakes his head, pointing his finger at River. “You think I don’t know that you hide your guilt on the inside. You can pretend you are happy with how Bell’s life turned out but I know different.”

Then he smiles sadly as he says, “You aren’t even the one who should feel guilty. A long time ago you asked me to, no not even, I told you that I would take Bell home so you could find this girl,” he says, pointing to me and then

continuing, “You didn’t then, but you have now, so don’t let me or Bell or anyone else screw it up for you, but most of all, don’t let yourself screw it up.”

Pain flashes through me at Xander’s words. Am I really to blame for their sister’s accident? Should I have told River the truth when I first met him? Couldn’t I have just stuck around and told him the truth about Ben then? Would it have mattered? My head is spinning and I may be sick again.

Xander smiles sadly, his eyes glassy as he looks from his brother to me. “Dahlia, once again I’m sorry. It has been a shitty day and I took it out on you.”

Then looking back to River he puts



his hand on his shoulder, but River flinches back. “Bro, I’ll call you tomorrow.” And with that, he turns and leaves us in the bathroom.

River walks back to me as tears fill my eyes again. Swiping my fingers under my eyes, I scrunch my forehead and purse my lips. “You should’ve been the one to tell me, not him,” I yell, pointing to the door, not in anger, but more because I am upset.

He stops in front of me and swallows. Exhaling a shaky breath, he looks into my eyes and gently cups my cheeks before whispering, “Dahlia that’s not how I wanted our relationship to start,” but I pull away before he can even finish. I don’t want his touch or his

charm to cloud my judgment about where we stand with each other in light of the information I have just learned.

I stare back into his eyes as he flinches at my sudden movement. They are now hazy, no longer gleaming. “River,” I say a little softer, feeling the need to make sure he knows that an omission is still a lie. “I didn’t want our relationship to start like this either, but hiding things from me . . . I can’t, I won’t be in a relationship like that, but what’s more . . . what does this mean for us?” I manage to say this, feeling bad about the meaning behind my words before they even come out. But a lie is a lie, regardless of why it was told or how it was hidden. This I know well. I

experienced it with Ben just that one time and it almost ended our relationship. But this time, with River, I seem to be more concerned about what this hidden secret will do to our relationship, than the actual secret itself.

He stands there, shaking his head. “I was going to tell you, but the right time just hadn’t happened yet.”

Averting my eyes from his, with a shaky breath I manage, “I need some air.”

I walk past him, through the dimly lit bar, and out the doors into the chill of the night. There is a cool breeze in the air, sending a shiver down my spine. As I walk to nowhere I know this time the shiver isn’t from his touch. Instead, it’s

from the secret he kept from me. It's from the cold of the night.

There are still so many people walking the quaint streets we languidly stepped down when we arrived, but the happiness I felt then is gone. The people seem to be more hurried as well. They are huddling together, almost rushing in and out of the many bars and restaurants that line the street.

November in California isn't usually this cold, but the dampness seems to warn of impending rain. Glancing upward in hopes of seeing some light, finding some answers, all I see are thick clouds covering any stars that I might have seen. They only allow a glimpse of the moon's slight crescent-shaped glow

and provide no guidance. Looking ahead instead of up because I know I will find no comfort from the sky tonight, I continue to walk, clutching my own body to keep warm and wondering why life has to be so complicated.

“Here, put this on,” he says, taking his jacket off and wrapping it around my bare shoulders. He walks close to me, but doesn’t touch me. “If you want to go home, the car is the other way.” *Maybe I’m not as sober as I thought.*

Stopping, I turn to look at him. We are toe to toe. With tears in my eyes, I say words I don’t really want to say but know I have to. “River, I think it’s time for me to go back home.”

Slumping, he closes his eyes and

whispers, “Not like this. Not until we talk about everything.”

My heart breaks as I look at him but I know I have to go. “I need some time to think River. I can’t do that here.”

His eyes snap to mine, and his voice cracks in anger. “What happened to my sister has nothing to do with us. You going home and thinking isn’t going to change that or even make you understand.”

Looking at him, I hear him but choose to ignore his words. I need time to think and not in my drunken state. “I can call Aerie or Serena to come pick me up if you don’t want to take me home.” Then, remembering I didn’t bring my phone, I ask, “Can I use your

phone?”

River breaks, ignoring my request; his voice grows louder than he has ever spoken to me before. “Dahlia, are you listening to me? That shit that just happened in there, that’s Xander’s life.” Motioning his finger from me to him, he continues, “I am not going to let someone’s misconceived course of events change this.”

Grabbing my shoulders with his hands, he says, “You can’t just say you are leaving. You can’t leave me again.”

I shrug out of his grip, and sway slightly as I take a step. “That’s the point River, I’m not leaving you again. I never left you five years ago because I wasn’t with you.” Tears are uncontrollably

sliding down my face, my teeth are chattering, and I am freezing but I continue with what must be said. “I met a guy at a bar that I was attracted to and before things got out of hand I left. Now I find out that some unmentionable horror happened to your family because of my actions and you think we’re going to be okay?”

He flinches at my tone but tenderly places his arms on my shoulders. Dunking down so we’re at eye level he says, “That’s what I’m trying to tell you. It’s not like that.”

With complete honesty I say, “I just don’t know if I can do this. This thing we have is way more complicated than two people who are incredibly attracted



to each other. Your brother is going crazy having me here. Does your sister even know any of this? And what about your mother! What will she say?"

"Dahlia! Listen to me!" he says, but I don't. I can't. I don't want my heart to break again so instead I turn around and start walking in the other direction toward his car as he keeps pace. I navigate the sidewalk surprisingly well considering how foggy my brain feels. The air and life that was being sucked out of me becomes emptiness. Neither of us says another word. As we reach the parking garage, I just want to feel the bliss one more time, but I don't think I will.

With my whole body shaking, I get

into the car and wait for him to sit. Grabbing his cold cheeks, I look at him and I see he's shaking as well. With tears in my eyes and sadness in my voice, I say what I know I've felt since Xander told me about his sister. "Here's the thing River, I've already lost someone I loved, and it almost killed me. What I feel for you is so much more than I ever expected, and I know that if I stay here with you and begin to live again that I won't survive losing you. And losing you is inevitable. We can't be together if your family blames me for your sister's accident. In the end, it will be our undoing."

Shaking his head, he grabs my cheeks and forces me to look at him. "That's

just it Dahlia. No one blames anyone. Bell is happy. Our family is happy. It is Xander who can't accept what happened. And to answer your question, yes my family knows about then and about now and they are happy for me, for us." His eyes are glassy as he holds my gaze then leans in and kisses me. With that kiss I feel the air return to my lungs and life returns.

I pull away from his soft lips, confused in my current state of mind. I don't know what to do, but I feel like this night has been a reality check. "I believe you, but it's still time for me to stop playing house with you. I have to go home tomorrow."

# Chapter Twenty

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## LITTLE THINGS

*Your hand fits in mine  
Like it's made just for me  
It just makes sense that we were  
meant to be  
I see the faint freckles on your nose  
These are the little things I love  
about you.*



“Dalhia,” he says, his tone is as dark and sad as the place I have lived for the past two years before meeting him. “One day, if you change your mind . . . just know you’ll always be my once in a lifetime.”

He presses kisses to my forehead and nose, then turns, leaving me at the front door to the house I shared with Ben for so many years. The house that is now empty is the house where, once again, I

will be alone.

Fear starts to wrench through my body, not from being alone, but from being without him. Was I wrong in my decision? Did he not tell me for us? Can we get past this? My questions don't really matter because it's too late. I have already said things I shouldn't have. I made the decision to end us.

"Don't leave me," I yell as he walks down the path leading to another life.

Turning and glancing at me over his shoulder, his eyes are no longer gleaming their perfect shade of green; they're cloudy, hazy even. "I'm not," he says as he keeps walking. "You left me, beautiful girl."

Tears stream down my face as I let

him go, and he fades into the horizon.

Waking, my body thrashes in the sheets, and my fists clutch the pillows.

“Fuck,” I mutter to myself as relief washes through me when I realize it was just a dream. No it wasn’t a dream; it was a nightmare. Reaching over, there is no one there to hold me. It hurts to not have him here with me. Waking up with him next to me the last few days has been amazing and I feel empty and alone in his room without him.

Licking my dry lips, I lift my aching head. “What time is it?” I ask to nobody but myself.

My heart is still pounding in my chest as I reach over to the nightstand and pick up my phone, plugged into its

charger. The time on the screen reads 11:48am. How did I sleep in this late? I never sleep past sunrise. As I set my phone back down, I see a bottle of water and two aspirin off to the side on the nightstand.

Hearing the roaring of thunder and the howling of the wind from outside, I gladly pick up the water and aspirin. The aspirin are sitting on top of a yellow Post-it note River must have found them on the counter where I quickly dumped my messenger bag yesterday looking for a pen to sign for the deliveries.

Sitting up, I pop the aspirin in my mouth and swig the water in hopes of calming the storm riveting in my head. As I set the bottle and paper down, I



notice something written on the Post-it.

*Beautiful girl . . . In case you're not feeling so great.*

Stretching and grinning at his note, I glance around the room. Sheets are tacked over the glass doors. He must have done that so I could sleep. How sweet. How could he be so nice to me after I was such a bitch last night? *Shit, last night.* I remember every minute of the horrible evening, every minute of our painful conversation, but I don't remember getting into bed.

Glancing down, I notice I'm only wearing one of River's t-shirts and my panties. I must have passed out in the car. Did he bring me inside, up all those stairs, and change my clothes? The last

thing I remember saying after leaving the parking garage was that I still wanted him to take me home, to my home, not his, but I'd wait until morning.

Deciding I need to find River and talk about last night, I stand on shaky legs and see my clothes lying on the floor beside the bed. Making my way to the bathroom, I look in the mirror. That was not a good decision. Makeup smears my face and my hair is a tangle of knots from all the hairspray. I really need a shower but settle for washing my face, brushing my teeth, and throwing my hair into a ponytail before going to search for him.

I don't have to look far. As I walk down the hallway I hear soft music being

played on a guitar. I stop at the entranceway to the living room to take him in. He's sitting on the couch in jeans and a plain white t-shirt, barefoot, and his hair is a little more disheveled than usual. His fingers are holding a guitar pick and he's strumming a beautiful melody while quietly singing an unfamiliar song that I can't really hear the words to. He has a notebook and pen beside him and he's deep in thought. I stand there awhile just listening, looking, thinking how unbelievably gorgeous he is both inside and out and how sad I am that I'm leaving. I decide to quietly go get my camera out of my bag in the bedroom. I want to capture his perfect image at this moment. As I tiptoe back

and stand just inside the living room, watching him through my lens, I snap a few photos while he's playing. He's so involved in his work that he doesn't even notice me or hear the click of the camera. When he finishes the song, he adjusts his guitar on his leg and leans over to his notebook.

Standing there leaning against the wall I say, "That was beautiful."

He glances at me, but the happy grin I usually receive from him when entering a room is absent. "What song was that? I didn't recognize it."

Leaning his guitar against the couch, he nonchalantly says, "It's just something I'm working on."

Taken aback by his cavalier attitude

and obvious disinterest in discussing the song, I ask, “You got your guitar back?”

Standing up, he shoves his hands in his front pockets and shrugs his shoulders. “Yeah, Xander brought it by this morning.” Then he asks, “How about coffee?”

I enter the room and head for the kitchen while I say, “Yes, I can get it though.”

“I’ve already made it, I’ll grab you a cup.”

“Thanks,” I say, putting my camera down and sitting on the couch, hoping my queasy stomach can hold down the coffee.

“How do you feel?”

“Fine. I took your remedy. I think it’s

working.”

I watch him walk into the kitchen, but he doesn't turn around to catch me like he usually does. Once he's in the kitchen, he pulls out the paper cups we bought at Whole Foods yesterday and pours two cups. He adds cream to mine and I smile. He walks back into the room and hands me the cup. “Do you want me to go get you something to eat?” he asks as I take the cup, staring at him. For the first time since I met him, I can't read him at all.

“Shit no,” I answer grasping my stomach. “I hope I can keep the coffee down.”

He chuckles and I can tell the River I've come to know is in there

somewhere.

He walks back over to where he was playing his guitar and sits down.

Sipping my coffee, I look over at him. "Was Xander feeling okay?"

He quickly glances my way and answers, "Yeah. He looked wrecked but nothing some sleep won't cure." He takes a sip of his coffee, then continues, "I asked Garrett to take him home last night. I guess he stayed at Garrett's, and on their way back to Beverly Hills this morning they stopped by to check on you and drop off my guitar." Pointing to the bar, he adds, "And your jacket and purse."

"That was really nice." Then I laugh a little. "Shit, I don't even remember

leaving my stuff there. I guess since you gave me your jacket, I never thought of mine. At least my purse was still there. That would have sucked to have to cancel everything.”

I notice he doesn't laugh at my swearing like he usually does. Instead, he nods at me then says in a very flat tone, “Well your mind was elsewhere. I would have grabbed your stuff when I stopped to talk to Garrett, but I forgot it was even there. At least I grabbed my jacket or you would have been frozen.”

For some reason the whole conversation seems strained, awkward even, and I sense it's because of my behavior last night. I'm sure he's uncertain about my feelings and upset



about what I said.

Needing to rectify the situation and make amends for my bitchiness to this man who now, in my sober state, I believe with my heart never meant any foul behavior, I stand up and walk over to the bar. Setting my coffee down, I turn and move toward him.

His eyes rake my body as I approach him. I feel like this one little move on my part, a sign of my forgiveness, has put his mind at ease and by the look in his eyes, I know he's back. Tears sting my eyes as I sit on his lap. His arms instantly surround me and a soft sigh meets my ear.

"I'm sorry," I cry as I throw my arms around him.

He sighs again and pulls me as tightly to him as he can. My head is in the crook of his neck and he inhales before sighing again. Shifting me so that I fit perfectly into his lap, he whispers into my ear, “You have nothing to be sorry for. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I know I should have.”

Pulling back, I sniffle a little and wipe my nose with the back of my hand. He gives me that grin I adore then shifts me again to lift his shirt, using it to wipe my tears and my nose.

Resting my forehead on his I ask, “Is your family really okay with me, with everything that happened?”

Cupping my cheeks, he nods. His face is now the epitome of seriousness

and sadness combined. “The accident had absolutely nothing to do with you, Dahlia. Call it coincidence. Call it bad judgment. But, Bell getting in that car could've happened even if I was the one who said I would bring her home. She was determined to meet some guy at her place and she wasn't waiting.”

His eyes flash to mine, filled with concern, as I continue to listen. “I left that night and went straight to her place. When I got there, no one was waiting for her.”

“No one,” I say, saddened that his sister left in hopes of meeting someone that obviously never showed up.

Shaking his head, he moves his hand to my head and pulls my elastic band

out. "If your head hurts you don't need this pulling on it," he says tossing the band to the ground before continuing. "Who knows what happened to the frat boy, but he wasn't there waiting for her. He never bothered to visit her and he never knew. After the accident she never mentioned him again."

Tightening his jaw, he spits out, "And I'm glad she never did. I'd have killed him." Hanging his head, he relaxes his jaw. "A guy planning to meet a chick at her place so late after going out with his buddies is just not cool. We didn't even know everything until after."

Unraveling myself from him I start to say something. "What do you mean by every . . ."

He puts his finger over my lips to shush me. “Never mind, it’s really none of my business anyway.”

Grabbing my chin he says, “All of that has nothing to do with us, but I’m still sorry I didn’t tell you. I don’t want this to impact us though. Got it?”

Nodding my head, feeling exhausted and emotional I say, “River, I understand and it’s okay, but I still have to go home. I can’t stay indefinitely.”

His gorgeous face looks so sad as he exhales deeply and says, “Whatever you want, but you look tired. Can we at least go tomorrow?”

Nodding my head because I’m exhausted, I hold him tight, inhaling his scent and loving his warm embrace.

“Only if we can take a nap now.” Snuggling into his neck I add, “I love sleeping while it’s raining.”

He pulls back and kisses my nose. “Me too,” he says, and then he leads me back to his bedroom.



His room is somewhat dark when I open my eyes. The rain is still pounding outside, but snuggled into River’s chest, I’m calm and at peace. The sheet and a single blanket are tangled around us and he’s lightly rubbing his thumbs over the

sliver of bare skin between my neck and shoulder. He's awake before me for the second time today.

Lifting my head, I smile at the sight of his adorable face. He's lying on the right side of me and I meld into his arms. The faint light filtering through an opening in the sheets that are still hanging on the glass doors is reflecting off his gleaming eyes, making them twinkle.

Grinning at me, he asks, "Feel better?"

I nod my head and lay it directly on his chest and answer, "Much."

"Good," he says, kissing the top of my head and wrapping his arms around me.

Having to use the bathroom, I slide my body down his shirt and jeans and get off the bed.

“Where you going?”

“Bathroom. Want water while I’m up?”

“Nope, I’m good, I just want you back here with me sleepy girl.”

Giggling as I leave the room, headed for the bathroom, I turn and ask, “What was that song you were playing earlier?”

“What song?” he says, watching me like I always watch him.

Turning completely around, stopping at the edge of the bathroom, I bite my lip and answer, “You know, the one you quickly stopped singing when I came in the room. The one I asked you about that



you said you were working on.”

Sitting up and stretching, his glorious body now in full view he says, “It’s not that I stopped working on it when you came in the room.” Then standing up, he adds, “I just want to finish it before you hear it.”

“What if I want to hear it now?” I challenge as I quickly turn back around shutting the bathroom door.

“Well that would depend,” he says loudly enough that I can hear him through the walls. Then he adds, “I’ll get your water.”

When I open the bathroom door he’s standing there, water in one hand, guitar in the other. Lifting both items he hands me the water bottle.

I swish it back as he continues to block the door with his guitar in the air.

“Yes?”

“Let me stay with you a few days at your house, and I’ll play the song for you, even though it’s not finished,” he propositions, sliding his guitar back under his arm.

Taken aback by his question, I shakily ask, “You want to barter?” Loving the idea of spending more time together but not happy about bringing River to the house that Ben and I shared, I stare blankly at him.

“Yeah barter . . .” he starts to say, then stops. Pulling me close with his free hand he kisses me. “You know what? Never mind.”

Maybe sensing where my mind is, or maybe second-guessing his idea, he points to the head of the bed. “How about you sit up there, away from me, so I can concentrate? You’re too distracting,” he says as he kisses me again.

Summoning all my willpower to not throw him on the floor as his tongue meets mine and his body presses so close to me, I pull back from his mouth and sashay toward the bed. “You’re so bossy!”

He chuckles as I walk away.

As I sit down at the head of the bed, I cover my legs with my shirt and wrap my hands around my knees. “Okay is this less distracting?” I smirk, resting my

chin on my knees.

“Not really,” he laughs.

“Well it’s irrelevant anyway since you promised a show.”

Shaking his head at me, he’s so fucking attractive as he struts and sits at the foot of the bed. “I don’t remember promising,” he smirks. Then adds, “That’s a whole other type of transaction.”

I smile at him and laugh. “I’m willing to pay,” I wink before adding, “As long as the show lives up to my expectations.”

He softly smiles at me and says, “I hope it does.”

Placing his guitar on his leg, he positions one arm around the neck and

his other over the body. “This is something I wrote this morning for you. It’s called Five.”

He begins to strum the same beautiful melody I heard earlier. I stare, mesmerized by his soulfulness. As he plays, the chords come to life with his concentration and intensity.

He sings the first two lines of the song and I listen.

*5 years, 260 weeks, 1,825 days, 2.3 million minutes. That was how long ago I met you.*

His lyrics immediately resonate in my heart. I can feel my heart growing, accepting him as the one who belongs

there, the one who is meant to hold it.

As he sings, he slips further into his music.

*If I did it all again. Would you come along for the ride? I hope so.*

*If I did it all again. Could you play this game with me? I hope so.*

Tears are stinging my eyes as I unfold my arms from my legs. He continues to sing, lost in his own music, and I continue to watch, lost in him, in awe of him. *Perhaps, in love with him?*

*And 5 years, 260 weeks, 1,825 days, 2.3 million minutes from today, will we still be together? I hope so.*

*Because I love you. Do you believe  
we will still be together? I hope so.*

*Because I really love you. Do you  
know so?*

Shaking with joy and needing to touch him, to wrap myself around him, to show him I feel the same way, I crawl down the bed as he sings his last line.

*Now you do—I love my beautiful  
girl.*

Swallowing back the tears, I'm overcome with emotion. He wrote me a love song to tell me how he feels. Sitting beside him at the foot of the bed, I'm rendered speechless for a moment. The

tears that have been welling in my eyes begin to slide down my cheeks as he sets his guitar gently on the floor.

As I open my mouth to speak, without knowing exactly what I'm going to say, he reaches over and gently cups my face in his hands. He brushes my tears away with his thumbs. He leans in, his lips practically touching mine. "Shhh . . . You don't have to say anything. I'm not expecting you to say anything. I just want you to know how I feel. How much you mean to me."

I kiss him, snaking my arms around his neck as he shifts on the bed to welcome me. When he whispers in my ear, "Dahlia, I love everything about you. I know in my heart you're my girl,



so amazing, so fun, so beautiful.” I feel my heart pounding and I know it’s about to jump out of my chest. Turning my head, I look into his eyes. The same gleaming green eyes as the first time I saw him. I thought then what I know now, that if I jump in I will never swim out. They are telling me he’s my future.

I can’t respond in words. I don’t know how. So I close my eyes, knowing I can show him how I feel. I kiss him lovingly. Parting my lips, our tongues meet and explore as if they have entered uncharted territory and are looking to claim it for their own.

Pulling back slightly, I teasingly suck on his lower lip before moving my mouth to his neck. Gliding my tongue

down his smooth skin, I plant soft kisses along the way. I can feel his taut muscles through the fabric of his t-shirt as I slowly but firmly slide my hands down his back. When I trace my nails against his skin, I can hear a low growl in his throat. My desire to make love to him is so strong; I can feel my heart beating faster with every passing second. River must feel the same because at that moment, he grabs hold of my arms and gently presses me back so I'm lying flat on the bed, looking up into his sparkling green eyes. His hands move to mine, threading our fingers together as he raises both my arms above my head while softly running his tongue across my lips. I open my mouth and let his

tongue inside as he releases one of my hands but quickly grabs it with his other, effectively keeping my arms, elbows bent, restrained above my head.

Still hovering over me, his knees at my hips, he breaks the kiss and slides his mouth to my ear. While running his free hand down the length of my arm from wrist to shoulder, he whispers in the sexiest tone, "I love you, Dahlia. And I want to show you just how much."

My body shivers with anticipation as he runs his fingers down the front of my shirt, over one breast and then the other, my nipples hardening at his touch through the fabric of my clothing. Reaching the hem of my shirt, he slowly pulls it up my body, revealing my

goosebump-covered skin. He licks his bottom lip slowly before ducking his head as he moves my shirt higher over my ribcage. His tongue touches the bare skin just below my breasts and follows my shirt's path up my body as if trying to catch it in a chase. Once my breasts are exposed, his tongue teases my hardened nipples, circling them over and over, and I begin to moan. He's still holding my hands over my head and I cannot touch him, although I want to so badly.

"River," I mutter, my eyes half-closed as I arch my back offering his mouth better access to my aching breasts. "I need to touch you."

"Soon," he whispers in response.

And with that, he pushes my shirt up

as high as it will go, sucking on both my breasts, one at a time, as if they are his lifeline. His fingers are lightly tracing patterns on my bare stomach, and the sensation is incredible. I'm so turned on as I writhe under his touch.

Lifting his head, River smiles as he brings his lips back to mine before releasing my hands from his grasp. Our tongues intertwine in our mouths, and my arms wrap around his body, pulling him into a loving embrace. Breaking away from my lips, he pulls both of us up to a sitting position. Without saying a word, he lifts my shirt over my head and tosses it to the floor beside the bed. Following his lead, I do the same with his shirt. As it hits the floor, he's already laying me

back down on the bed.

I can tell he wants to take the lead, and I'm perfectly happy letting him do just that. His every touch, his every nibble is so overwhelmingly sensual and I love it. I want to feel all of it.

Leaning over me, this time without restraining my arms, he places his hands and knees on either side of my body, supporting his own weight. As he glides his smooth tongue down the front of me, my hands travel up and down his naked back. They press into the hardness of every well-defined muscle I encounter along the way and he lets out a deep groan. Continuing his journey, he skims his nose along my skin and dips his tongue in and out of my navel, making

me squirm. Reaching the silky edge of my black lace panties, I realize where he's headed, and I'm overcome with desire.

Sliding my hands up River's back, past his shoulders and his neck, I grasp fistfuls of his amazing hair between my fingers. I gently urge his head downward, encouraging his mouth to reach its final destination. Hooking his index fingers into the waistband of my panties at each hip, he pauses a second before placing his lips between my slightly parted legs. When he softly kisses my most sensitive spot through the fabric of my very damp panties, I can practically see sparks fly from the feel of his touch. I'm getting wetter and I

want him so badly.

“You’re so ready for me, aren’t you?” he softly growls against my skin as he yanks my panties down, past my knees to my ankles, and I kick them off onto the floor.

“Oh God, I am,” I manage to whisper, as I raise my hips, offering myself to him, my hands now flat on the bed for support.

Using his hands to further open my legs, he sucks and nibbles on the skin of my inner thigh, trailing his kisses closer and closer to my slick core where I’m so eagerly awaiting his touch. When he finally strokes my sex with the tip of his tongue, it is pure heaven, and I let out a deep moan. “Oh God, that feels so good.



Please, don't stop."

I feel his mouth turn up in a sexy grin, responding to my words as he continues to pleasure me with his wicked tongue, never lifting his head from the task at hand. Arching my hips off the bed as a jolt of pleasure runs through me, I grind myself urgently into his mouth, knowing I'm so close to the edge. As my muscles start to tighten, River's tongue massages me with just the right amount of pressure. When he sucks hard one last time, I can't hold back any longer, as waves of intense, fiery pleasure ripple through my body. I cry out his name over and over in ecstasy as his tongue continues to stroke me, prolonging this incredibly wonderful

ride.

As my heavenly journey slows and returns me to this planet, I catch my breath and notice River watching me with a big grin on his adorably attractive face. “Hey, beautiful girl,” he says, leaning in to kiss the tip of my nose. His eyes meet mine as I smile up at him, still trying to regain my composure.

“Hey you,” I reply, and with that, he raises himself up and moves to stand beside the bed. Reaching into the front pocket of his jeans, he pulls out his phone, and sets it on the nightstand. He turns and quickly yanks one sheet from the glass doors, allowing the small bit of daylight left to filter into the room. I know without even looking that it’s still

raining outside. I can hear the drops cascading off the glass in a constant steady rhythm. It's soothing and has a great calming effect on me.

The calm doesn't last long though as River reaches over and grabs me by the ankles then kneels on the floor at the edge of the bed, sliding my naked body towards him. He lifts my knees, resting them on his shoulders, and I hook my ankles around his neck. I'm very aware of him, I can feel his warm breath between my thighs as he lowers his head and kisses my entrance. His thumbs gently pry my lips apart then his tongue penetrates my already slick opening and I say, "River, I don't think I can again!"

"Shhh, relax," he whispers as he

continues to suck and tease every inch of my sex. I feel myself getting wetter, it's like he's kissing me from the inside out, and I don't want him to ever stop. I smile to myself. *Maybe I can do this again?* He slips one finger and then another deep inside me and slides his tongue up and over me. As he brushes over my g-spot, I know I definitely can do this again. *I am doing this again!*

I can hear the rain pounding harder outside the window, and it's a perfect indication of the building pleasure my body is experiencing right now. My eyes close and my head turns to the side as my lips part, and my breathing becomes shallow and quick. When I feel myself getting close, he suddenly removes his

fingers, glides his tongue down deep inside me while he places both hands on my thighs. He's effectively holding me in place and it is incredibly erotic, something I've never really experienced before. I love it. Tightening my leg muscles as I feel my climax building, I want to raise my hips and thighs off the bed, but I can't. This only feeds the intensity of what I'm feeling.

"You're so close beautiful girl, just let go."

"Oh God, River, please . . . I'm . . . I'm . . ." I cry out and come harder than before. An endless wave of primal bliss overtakes me. It's like I'm being catapulted through a beautiful stormy sea, and I don't want to reach the shore.

River's tongue doesn't stop as he wrings every ounce of pleasure from my body, yet again.

I open my eyes as the aftershocks of my release fade away and focus directly on his gorgeous face.

His sexy green eyes are staring back at me. "You. Are. So. Amazing." He says each word followed by a kiss as he makes his way up the front of my body, finally landing his lips on mine.

Running my hands through his soft, disheveled hair, I pull him even closer, dragging my lips to his ear. "Make love to me River," I softly whisper as I suck on his ear lobe. I can't quite believe that after two incredible mind-blowing orgasms, I not only have the energy, but

also such a strong desire to have him deep inside of me. I'm already slightly quivering at the thought of it.

"I plan to," he says, and I know he means it.

As he stands beside the bed, removing his jeans and boxers, I take a moment to sit up and glance out the window behind him. It's getting darker outside, not just from the late time of day but also from the storm clouds that have clearly settled in. The rain is still coming down in buckets and I can vaguely make out the Hollywood sign in the distance, but looking at it still makes me smile. The dark, stormy weather outside is such a contrast to the bright, peaceful, loving atmosphere inside these

bedroom walls.

Turning to look at River, I look at his naked, gorgeous body, every inch of it from head to toe. He stares at me with a devilish grin as he wipes his mouth on his arm, and for some reason I find this incredibly erotic. I can't help but shutter with anticipation of what lies ahead.

He climbs back onto the bed, and I reach for him, longing to be entwined with him. With my arms around his neck, he gently guides me up the bed, urging me closer to the new headboard until I'm sitting with my knees folded under me, my back against the smooth cold black leather.

Reaching over my head, I grip the top of the headboard, as he kneels in



front of me. Scanning him, I can see he's so ready, his tip already glistening. I can't wait another second. I need him inside me now.

I'm trembling slightly as he parts my legs. With one swift but gentle motion, he smoothly pushes himself inside me, filling me deeply with his length. My hands are still holding tight to the headboard as I hear him let out a deep groan. "Dahlia, you feel so incredible."

Unable to respond with words, I let go of the headboard and put my arms around his body, pulling him even closer. Pressing my open mouth to his, I feel the velvety softness of his tongue stroking mine, the rhythm matching his thrusts below. Pressing my body against

the leather headboard, he continues to move. He quickly takes me and rolls us so that I'm on top. His head is resting on the soft, fluffy pillows that adorn the bed and I watch his face. His eyes close and so do mine as I push harder and faster. He steadies my hips, holding me right where he wants me to be.

I feel the familiar sensation building in my core. River's motions are pushing me towards yet another release, and I can't hold on much longer.

"Open those beautiful hazel-eyes, sexy girl. I want to be looking into them as we come together," he says before he can say no more.

That's all it takes this time. I force my heavy eyelids open, focusing as best

I can on his eyes as I find my release. He pushes me over the edge, shattering me into a thousand glorious pieces, taking me to a whole other universe.

“Oh, River,” I moan loudly, panting hard as I slowly drift back down. His movements slow as I catch my breath.

“I love you,” he groans, and with only a few more strokes, he shudders as he finds his own release. It’s such a beautiful thing, and I know I will never forget this moment.

I want to say the words back because I am in love with him and all the little things he does, but the words just won’t come out. Instead, I kiss him with all the love I have for him pouring out of me.

# Chapter Twenty - One

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## BETWEEN THE RAINDROPS

*The rain doesn't bother us  
When it's just the two of us  
Walking together hand in hand  
Living like there's only you and me  
We walk together between the  
raindrops.*



Explaining why I didn't want him to come with me to Laguna Beach was one of the most painful conversations I've ever had with someone I love. Sadly, most of the people I have loved throughout my lifetime are no longer here living with me in this world; they have all died and gone to Heaven.

Funny, I can say I love you to him in my thoughts but I'm unable to verbalize my feelings. I don't understand why. Is it

because I've lost almost everyone I've ever loved? Or is it because I've only ever been in love with one other person and those words belonged to him, were only ever said to him? Saying those words out loud to someone other than Ben scares me. To me, those spoken words convey so much more than just a simple I love you. I feel so much more than that for River. I feel like I have met someone I'm meant to be connected with. We are like two pieces of a puzzle that fit together perfectly, and that scares me.

Neither of us had eaten or even felt hungry all day, and then suddenly we were both famished, so we ordered in. Once we had finished eating an obscene

amount of Chinese take-out, I decided to approach the conversation cautiously. Sitting cross-legged on his bed, I leaned forward and pressed my palms into his thighs. “River I want to talk to you about something.”

His legs were crossed, his back was against the headboard, and his arms were folded behind his head. Uncrossing his arms, he rolled sideways to face me. Resting his elbow on a pillow, he supported his head with his hand and responded with nothing but certainty. “You know you can.”

Looking into his powerful green eyes, I said, “Promise you won’t get mad?”

“You don’t even have to ask that, but

I promise,” he said, taking his free hand and crossing his chest. I find it so adorable when he does that.

“I want to explain something to you,” I told him, caution clear in my voice.

He nodded and ran his free hand down my bare thigh. “Okay.”

Clenching his fist with both of my hands, I held his fingers in place as I explained that my house still had remnants of Ben everywhere. That I hadn’t really removed anything that belonged to him, only what I’d started to pack up before leaving for Las Vegas. I further explained my sad life over the last two years and how I’d just recently decided it was time to move. That I’d actually just put the house on the market.



He listened intently, acknowledging my words, but never interrupting until I said, “I just don’t want it to be weird for you, or me, if you come there and see pieces of my life with . . .”

Not letting me finish, he slightly lifted himself off the bed and pulled me down to him. Resting my head on a pillow, he caressed my cheek. Leaning in he kissed my nose, then slid his lips to my ear. “I understand, and I want to take you home.”

I left it at that and let him kiss me, stroke me, hold me, and love me for the rest of the night. But now, as we’re pulling up to my 1940’s Craftsmen style bungalow, I’m suddenly not sure this is a good idea. Looking at the purple

wildflowers, which have taken over the yard, and the low-pitched gabled roof desperately in need of repair, I start to feel a little uneasy.

Turning the car off, he shifts to look at me and grins. “I never pictured you living in a yellow house with a white picket fence.”

“When you want to live close to the beach, you take what comes available on the market,” I smugly answer, feeling less nervous already after his smart-ass comment.

The rain is pouring down so hard, the visibility is close to zero. There are flood warnings and I wonder if the old roof on my house is leaking again. River pulls on his beanie as he opens the door.

“Stay there, I’ll come around and get you.”

I love when he wears that hat; it always reminds me of the first time we met. He grabs my bags out of the trunk and comes around to my door. Of course neither of us has an umbrella, so as I attempt to use my purse for cover, he removes his leather jacket and tents it over my head. We both run quickly up the stone pathway to the covered front porch.

Wiping the drops from my face, I glance at the large arched front door. It is slightly ajar. Terror shoots through me as thoughts of a masked man engross my mind.

Pushing me back with his arm, he

asks, “Were you expecting anyone to be here?”

My heart starts pounding out of my chest. “No,” is all I can manage.

He moves toward the door and I yell, “No! Don’t!” My whole body is trembling, and fear surges through me. My jaw is tightly clenched and I’m feeling slightly sweaty. Ignoring my plea, he continues toward the door kicking it completely open with his boot.

“You don’t have an alarm?”

“Alarm?” I ask with a quivering voice. Then realizing that wasn’t an answer I say, “No. No alarm.”

His sharp voice pierces through the open door, “Hello?”

He starts to move inside, and I grab

his wrist. “Are you insane? We can’t go in there! Let’s go back to the car and call the police.”

Gently pulling his wrist free, he says, “Dahlia, I don’t think anyone’s still here. Let me just check it out. See if we even need to call the cops. You stay here.”

“No. You’re not going in there alone and leaving me out here,” I whisper in case someone is in there. I’m scared shitless and not sure why we’re even going in, but I follow him.

As we enter the house, my senses are on full alert. River takes small, cautious, steps as we enter the foyer and I hesitantly trail behind. Looking down I see Ben’s keychain on the tile floor next to the old key-shaped holder we bought

when we first moved in.

Peeking over his shoulder I see the family room is a complete and utter mess. What had been packed in boxes is now strewn all over. The sofa cushions are torn and stuffing covers the hardwood floors, the TV hangs by cords from the wall, various electronics are smashed on the ground, ashes from the fireplace seem to dust everything, and glass lays shattered into a thousand tiny pieces on top of the hearth.

Running to the fireplace, I fall to the ground clutching one of the broken pictures. It's a photograph of Ben and me at graduation. The frame is broken, but the photo is still intact. As I stare at the face of the man I once loved for so long,

my eyes shift to the other items collapsed around the fireplace.

I assess the damage to my most cherished memories, and I realize they are all broken. My Purple Rain tickets mounted next to my father's smiling face are ripped, but my dad's big brown eyes seem to be looking back at me, trying to provide comfort. The picture of my parents and myself outside The Greek, proudly displaying our newly purchased concert wears, lays shattered on top of another photo. This snapshot is torn in half. It is of my aunt and uncle holding me as the priest baptizes me, branding them as my godparents. My aunt's mother, Grammy, is standing next to them wearing her bounty of pearls.

River lightly places his calming hand on my shoulder as he bends to kneel beside me. “Be careful. There’s glass everywhere.”

Nodding my head, tears are steadily trickling down my face. “Who would do this?”

“I don’t know,” he says in a tone as grim as I feel.

Taking the broken frame from my hand, his eyes narrow as he stares at the picture for a long while. I feel like recognition flashes across his face, maybe even pain as he says, “Is this him?”

Turning to face River, I hoarsely answer. “Yes. That’s Ben.” I’ve noticed, that just like Aerie, he never actually



says Ben's name but for a completely different reason.

Setting the picture down carefully, he stands up and holds out his hand. "Come on, let's see if anything is missing and call the police. Whoever was here is gone now."

Clutching his fingers tightly, I feel every muscle in my body tense as I force oxygen back into my lungs to stop from hyperventilating.

He points to the small vestibule in the back of the room that leads through the old butlers pantry to the kitchen. "That way?"

Inhaling deeply, I nod my chin. "No, follow me."

Heading back to the foyer, we start

down the short hallway that leads to my bedroom and Ben's office. He pushes in front of me and I keep my eyes straight-ahead, scanning all the while for possible intruders that I know are gone. The house is too quiet for anyone to be in here. It is the same quiet I experienced hour after hour, day after day, for far too long.

A crunching beneath my feet makes me jump as we almost reach my bedroom. We both stop instantly. He turns around and we look down at my black converse sneakers as I lift my foot. Underneath it lays a crumpled up piece of paper. I recognize the golden gilded edge of the paper immediately. It is a page from one of Ben's many journals.

Bending down, I carefully pick up the waded piece of parchment, caressing the satiny edge and holding it tightly. I try to keep my tears at bay and fail miserably as tears of sadness and sorrow bleed down my cheeks. My heart breaks as I glance into the office. Ben's most cherished journals cover the knotted pine floor along with pieces of his laptop and various books torn at the bindings. Many more, once pristine, journal pages lay ripped, torn, and balled up everywhere. His beautifully scripted handwriting is still visible through the vile mess.

Covering my mouth with my hand, "No, not his journals," escapes my mouth as I completely fall apart. *Who*

*would do this? Why?*

River holds me tightly as we stand between my room and the office. “It’ll be okay. I’ll fix this for you. Come on, let’s go back outside,” he whispers.

Pulling away and wiping the steady flow of tears from my face, I shake my head. “I want to see everything. This is my life. Broken and destroyed. I need to see it,” I cry these words as I move toward my bedroom where I stand frozen in the doorway unable to move, but unable to pull my eyes away.

Pillows are torn open, the mattress is upside down, and a chair is flipped on its side. What I see next, as I glance down at the floor, tears through me like a knife into my heart. Amidst all the mess

and chaos, are my broken necklaces and scattered dolls, the items I cherish most in this room. Pearls, white and black, cover the floor, stuck in the grooves of the wood planks; some start rolling as I finally find the courage to move toward them, picking up my Ken doll as I walk.

Totally losing any sense of saneness, I put the doll on my dresser and grab the silver-plated coffee mug lying on top of my t-shirt quilt. Collapsing to the floor, I haplessly start pinching the pearls from the ground and depositing them into the cup. Ironically it is the one unbroken item in the room; the gift given to me by Ben as a gesture to fix what was once broken between us.

River bends down and takes the cup

from my shaky fingers. Furrowing his brow, and with concern in his voice, he says, "Let me do this. But first, let's get you a glass of water and take you to the car. I think you've seen enough. It looks to me like random vandalism."

Sadly enough, I think he's right. Nothing seems to be missing, but everything is destroyed. It's like a tornado ravaged my safe, but sad house, taking in its path anything that remained of the people I've loved and lost. As if my world hasn't already been torn apart enough, now I have nothing left but my own fading memories. The house looks like how my soul felt for so long after Ben's death. Swollen with emotion, my internal wounds rip apart and the old

feelings of hopelessness start to swirl around in my mind.

He's talking, but I can't hear him. A haunting ringing of my broken days echoes in my mind. Dark clouds begin to settle in before I blink away the eerie feeling. I try to see outside of my own head, but the destruction I'm looking at is causing all the grief to come rushing back. Everything is broken. Everything I have left of him, of my parents, has been taken away from me. Even the memories are surfacing less and less, and now my daily reminders are gone. I need them back. I don't want my memories to fade away.

Hysterically, I grab the cup back. "No! I have to collect these." Then

setting the cup on the floor, I crawl on my hands and knees, picking up the glistening pearls. “These were my aunt’s. She loved them. They were her mother’s, my Grammy’s, and they meant the world to both of them.”

He crawls next to me and deposits a pearl in the cup. Then stroking my cheek before gently lifting my chin, he looks at me with nothing but love. “Okay. I understand. Let me help you.”

Pulling myself together, comforted by just his simple touch and soft words, I continue to pick up what I can of the pearls before stopping and rising to my knees. He continues to collect all the magical beads and I now feel like I should explain my hysterical reaction to



my broken necklaces.

Wiping my tear-stained cheeks once again, I fumble for the words. “River,” I mumble before crawling over to him, needing to be near him. Glancing up at me, he sits up on his knees and pulls me close to him, clutching my arms and not letting go.

As we kneel on the floor that the devil just walked across, he simply presses his forehead to mine. My mouth remains stoic even as the words come out, and without looking at him I begin. “When I was a little girl I would often go with my aunt to her mother’s house to visit with her. Even though my aunt’s mother wasn’t really my grandmother I loved her so much. I called her grammy

and really she was like a grandmother to me, the only one I ever knew.”

Pausing, I pull away and pick up the cup. Fingering the pearls that are no longer connected to their splendid strands, I say, “She wore these pearls all the time. Whenever I visited her house she would put them around my neck and call them magic wishing wells.”

Swallowing, I set the cup back down and draw imaginary circles around my neck before continuing. “Grammy would always tell me that wearing these pearls would make all my dreams come true.” Sighing, I take a deep breath and add, “When she died, they became my aunt’s and then when my aunt died, they became mine.”

I collapse back to the ground and hang my head in my hands unable to bear the pain any longer. His strong arms surround me, and he whispers into my ear, “She sounds like an amazing woman. We’ll get her magic back, Dahlia, we will. But right now, you need to take a break.”

River’s words soothe my pain and as he pulls back, I catch his loving gaze. Exhaling the breath I’ve been holding, I feel a sense of calmness flow through my veins. New emotions bubble to the surface as I throw myself toward him. Clutching his face and staring into his eyes, the words I’ve been unable to say suddenly pour out. “River, I love you.”

He hugs me tighter than I ever

remember being hugged, and after a few moments of just embracing each other, he whispers into my ear, “I love you, too. So much. Please let me take care of this for you.” Pulling away, he crosses his finger over his heart. “I promise to pick up all the rest of the pearls off the floor.”



I’m sitting on the front porch texting Grace that we will be by in a little bit. I’d assured her I was fine earlier when I called her, but she insisted we come by for dinner once the break-in had been reported. She also invited Serena. I’m a little apprehensive about River meeting

her. She looks so much like Ben, same hair color, same forget-me-not blue eyes that after just seeing Ben's picture, River might be a little freaked out.

After nearly three hours, the police finally finished taking their report, collecting fingerprint samples, asking me about missing items, and photographing the damage.

As I place my phone down on the side table, I rock one last time in the antique chair that adorns my front porch. A black Jeep pulls up to the curb. It's still raining, but the flow has let up slightly. I recognize Ben's best friend instantly as he gets out of the car. Caleb Holt walks the few steps to the porch and hugs me before saying a word. "You

okay?”

Surprise clearly in my voice, I answer, “Yes. How did you know?”

“Serena called me right after you called Grace. She’s concerned about you and asked me to come by and check things out. Sorry it took so long for me to get here but I was in LA,” he says, walking toward the front door as River steps outside.

“Dahlia, I think I got everything you wanted. Your car is loaded so I’ll just throw this in mine,” he tells me while holding a crate of my most cherished but broken items in his arms.

Almost bumping right into River, Caleb’s eyes flicker to mine and I can see he has no idea I’m here with another

man.

They assess each other as they stand there just staring at one another. River sets the bin on the old wooden planks and glances at me, his eyes searching mine for answers. I introduce my once fiancé's best friend to my new boyfriend. The moment is awkward as neither says a word at first. Finally, River extends his hand as Caleb hesitantly shakes it.

"Sorry, I thought you were alone and needed help getting your stuff together to go stay at Grace's house," Caleb says, moving aside to let River pass.

River strides over to me and stands as close as he can. I grab his hand reassuring him that I'm okay.

"I think we got it all," River says as

he drops my hand and moves back over to get the crate. “Let me just load this in the car while the rain has let up.”

As River walks down the pathway to the street where his car is parked, Caleb looks at me. “Sorry, I didn’t realize.”

“Caleb, it’s okay. I wanted you to meet River anyway.” Then glancing at my strong, but tender man loading his car, I add, “I’m actually going to stay at his house until I can get this mess cleaned up.”

Nodding his head, he asks, “Mind if I take a look?”

Scrubbing my eyes with my palms from the pure mental exhaustion of the whole day, I tell him, “Not at all, but it’s a wreck. Police think a gang of kids



broke in since nothing was taken.”

He walks inside.

River comes back and I wrap my arms around him, resting my head on his shoulder. “Thank you.”

Snaking his arms around my waist, he kisses my nose. “You don’t have to thank me, Dahlia.”

Loosening my embrace, I search his eyes. “Caleb is a Navy Seal and Ben’s best friend since we were seven. We all grew up together on the beach.”

He shrugs his shoulders as he releases me and grabs my hand. “What’s he doing in there?”

“He said he wanted to check it out.”

“Why?”

“No idea,” I say as I follow beside

him, but stop at the doorway. “I don’t want to go back in there, River.”

“Okay baby, let me just see if he’s finished and we’ll go.”

Watching River walk down the hall that leads to what used to be Ben’s bedroom and mine feels strange to me. If it bothers River, he does a great job of hiding it, and I suddenly realize that finding my past in pieces has actually brought me closer to my future.



Before leaving the house, River and Caleb walked through it, securing all the

windows and doors. They didn't have long conversations or even really look at each other, but they did agree they would meet here on Saturday to move the unsalvageable furniture from the house to the curb. The police found no evidence of forced entry, which bothers me. *How did someone get in?* One officer told me the perpetrator knew what they were doing and probably picked one of the old locks. Then he added that maybe they had a key. I found this unsettling and preferred to think it was what the other officer had told me; that teens broke in for their own sick fun. Either way, whoever did this, did it with the intent of making my home a battlefield. It doesn't matter who it was,

what they did is unforgivable.

Pulling out of my driveway with every salvageable memento in the back of my 2009 white Audi Q7, I can clearly see my home's exterior is in need of just as many repairs as its interior now is. I've known the siding needed re-shingling and the roof needed replacement for a long time. Ben and I had planned to make those improvements. They were top on our list, but when our list became my list, I just didn't care anymore about it or the house. Now, for some reason, I do. Its sad, broken condition reminds me so much of myself before I met River. I just want to reach out and heal it like River has helped heal me. But just like me, it's

no easy fix. Sure the outside repairs are simple; hire contractors to replace and repair the worn items. It's the inside that's not as simple and like my own healing process, it will take time.

Shaking my head, I wonder how a house left empty for only six days could now look like a war zone, and just like refugees, the battle has left me homeless. But unlike the refugees, I have a safe-haven where I can stay.

As I drive past the For Sale sign in my front yard, I'm sad that I might never spend another night in that house. That I might never get to feel the warmth and comfort that I used to embrace so willingly before Ben was killed. Ben and I loved that house, picket fence and

all. I remember telling Ben I never wanted to move. Our house had everything I needed, everything that was important to me: close beach proximity, the most amazing garden, a tranquil back yard, and a front porch where we could grow old and tell stories of our adventures to our grandkids.

The sadness that now emblazons within me is not without cause. For someone to want to destroy another's personal possessions is beyond my comprehension. The things they randomly destroyed were my lifeline to my past, all I had left of the people I loved so much. Seeing my pearls ripped apart like that, taken from a beautiful circle of hope, and turned into small

desolate islands broke me once more but this time I was not alone. River was there to soothe me. After silencing my sorrow and wiping my tears with his presence, he discussed what to do next. Call the police, gather anything I wanted to take, and head back to his house.

I did agree to go back to his house, but only for the night. He didn't want me to be alone and honestly neither did I. He agreed to stop at Grace's first for dinner and to unload the things I wanted to keep safe, but didn't agree with me staying at Grace's. He wanted me to stay with him. I explained that I not only need to be closer than sixty minutes from my house for the numerous repair estimates I'm going to have to arrange, but that I

need to work on making myself whole before I can think of living with him. He didn't question my statement, he didn't argue, but he also didn't agree. Maybe sensing my confused state of mind, he let it be. Instead, he kissed me and held me tight.

Pulling up to Grace's house, I realize the storm is just about over. The wind seems to be calmer and the huge clouds that loomed over me, like a dark umbrella that felt so close I could almost touch them, are dissipating.

Standing in the driveway and waiting for River, a cool breeze of wind blasts over me as a ray of sunshine gleams down. As I look up to the sky a small drop of rain falls on my cheek, so fine



and light I don't even bother wiping it away. This is one tear I welcome. The smell of wet sand infiltrates my senses as the rain clears its way for a beautiful starry night.

I feel slightly nervous about introducing Grace to River. Although Grace is the woman who helped me through my adolescent years by teaching me how to drive, taking me shopping for my prom dress, helping me fill out my college applications, and even bringing me to my first gynecologist visit to put me on birth control, she's also Ben's mother. I'm sure she will accept a new man in my life, in fact I know she will, but nonetheless it will be awkward to introduce my once fiancé's mother to my

new boyfriend at her house. Because she's an amazing woman and because I love her as if she were my mother, I want her to meet him and him to meet her. She's who I aspire to be.

She's shorter than I am with shoulder length blonde hair. Her creamy porcelain skin never ages and her deep blue eyes are always tranquil. She's not only beautiful, but she sees the world through rose-colored glasses. She very rarely lets anything get her down. She's strong and independent, fun and loving, caring and nurturing. She's everything a girl would want in a mother, and I was lucky to have her willingly take on that role when my own loving mother no longer could.

Serena is also an amazing woman whom I'm sure will accept that I have a new man in my life. She helped me through her brother's death with such love and understanding, I feel like she is my sister too.

Walking down the stone-paved driveway toward River, I notice he's on the phone in his car. I stop, and glancing over my shoulder, I just stare at the ocean that makes me instantly smile. I love everything about the beach: its smell, its sounds, the surf, and its nature perfect picture. I haven't walked on it in so long. I actually haven't dipped my toes in the sand since . . . I shake that thought out of my head. I have enough sad thoughts I'm trying to push aside.

The beach is a constant reminder of Ben. Each time I've come to Grace's over the past two years, I've stayed inside, refusing to recognize or embrace the calm beauty of nature's most magnificent and amazing wonder. Now I welcome it. I've missed it, and I want to run towards it.

"Hey, you okay?" he says, closing his car door.

I turn, and instead of running to the beach, I run to him. Watching him inhale the crisp clean breeze, I throw my arms around his neck and inhale his fresh scent. He feels just like a warm breeze with its entire splendor as he wraps his arms around me and hugs me tightly.

"I'm more than okay," I say as I pull

back and stand there, closing my eyes. I open my arms wide, feeling the beauty of the ocean and letting my own residual sadness be swept away by the sea air. I hear chuckling, and suddenly, soft lips and strong hands meld to me. I now know that he's my home. The house we just left is now nothing but a house. Tugging on his hand, I pull him toward the front door. "Come on, I have some special ladies I want you to meet."

Grace must have heard the cars in the driveway because she steps outside before we can knock. She's wearing a simple wrap dress and flat sandals with her usual diamond earrings and the wedding band she's never removed, even though her husband died more than

twenty years ago.

She smiles at me with relief in her eyes before she throws her arms around me. “Dahlia honey, are you okay?” she asks as she pulls back and clutches my shoulders.

“Grace, the house is a wreck,” I say, trying not to cry. “But, I’m fine.”

She stares at me for a few seconds. I know she’s making sure that I really am okay because she’s searching my eyes like she does every time she sees me.

Just as I’m about to introduce her to River, she beats me to it.

She smiles and puts her hand out to him. “Hi, you must be River,” she says with a warm comforting look in her blue eyes. “It’s so nice to meet you. I’ve

heard so many wonderful things about you.”

River immediately responds with an adorable grin on his face. “Mrs. Covington, it’s nice to meet you too. I’ve heard just as many about you,” he says, shaking her hand. He really is charming.

“Call me Grace,” she says as she drops his hand and hugs him. I hear her whisper, “Thank you,” in his ear, and his grin turns into a full megawatt smile, which in turn makes me smile and melts my heart.

Looking around, I notice Serena’s car isn’t here. “Where’s Serena?”

“She had to pick Trent up at a basketball game and take him to a friends, so she couldn’t make it.”

“Oh, that’s too bad,” I say, a little sad that she couldn’t be here. “I’ll call her later.”

Staring out toward the beach, I think, *yes*, I’m still upset about my house and everything that is destroyed, but I see hope in my future and that is worth smiling about. Grace looks at me and I don’t make her search for anything, instead I give her my biggest brightest smile, the one that finally reappeared the day I reconnected with River.



# Chapter Twenty - Two

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## MEMORIES

*All of my memories have kept you  
close*

*In silent moments I've imagined  
here*

*In silent tears I promised to keep  
you near*

*I've finally found my way back into  
this life*

*Give me a sign you're okay so I can*

*move on.*



Leaning into my car, he softly kisses my lips. “You can stay here you know. You don’t have to go back,” he says for the second time since we woke up. He pulls back and caresses my cheek. I sigh and look up at his pleading eyes, then shift to take in all of his beautiful face, strong chin, perfect nose, and full lips.

Looking down to avoid eye contact, I

move my mouth to his hand. “River, we’ve talked about this. We can’t move in together after knowing each other for one week.” I say this, but I’m aware that he knows it’s not my only reason for heading back to Laguna Beach.

“I disagree, you know,” he grins as his eyes slide from my face to the words printed on my Smashing Pumpkins Teargarden Tour concert t-shirt. “You could at least stay one more night.”

Rolling my eyes, I look back up at him and smile. “Then tomorrow you’d just say the same thing.”

He surprises me but not saying how hot he thinks I look, but instead simply says, “You think you know me that well already?”

“Well wouldn’t you?”

Shrugging his shoulders, he leans in again and kisses me a little longer this time before saying, “Why don’t you stick around and find out for yourself?”

I laugh and shove him out the window. “Enough with the long goodbyes. I’ll see you in two days.”

Moving away from the car and putting both hands in his pockets, he grins his sexy grin at me. “Catch you later, beautiful girl.”

Gazing at him and giggling at his reference to one of my favorite Smashing Pumpkins songs, Perfect, I blow him a kiss. “I’ll call you when I get there. Oh, and River?” I wait for him to look at me. When he does I say to him, for only the

second time ever, “I love you.”

Smiling at me, he quickly opens my door and pulls me to him. My heart responds to his touch as it starts to beat faster. I close my eyes and lean into him, he smells so good, fresh from the shower. I press my palms against his chest and I swear I not only feel his heart beating but also hear it just as loudly. He cups my chin and looks at me intensely. “I love you so much.”



Traffic is light, as I drive the sixty minutes or so back to Laguna Beach. I'm enjoying the tranquility of the enchanting starry night as I reflect back on the past

week and how my life has changed so drastically. My emotions range from high to low, I'm happy and I'm sad.

Glancing over at the empty passenger seat while stopped at a red light, I pick up the small black rectangular picture frame I put there yesterday. The glass is gone, but the photograph, still perfect, is of my father, mother, and myself at Disneyland. I clutch it tightly against my chest remembering the fun we always had together. God, I wish they were still here with me. I miss them so much.

Tears stream down my cheeks as I'm driving, but they are tears of reflection more than sadness. We were able to collect most of my memories. Yes, most are broken and in need of repair, but I

still have them to keep and treasure. The only unsalvageable items were Ben's journals. As River crated the broken photographs and frames, I flattened all Ben's hand scripted pages, flattened them, and put them in a box. I'd never read his most private thoughts and I don't think I ever will, but I want to keep them nonetheless.

Over the course of the week, I'd finally let Ben go. He will always be with me, but I have made room for someone else in my heart now. Grace's words echo in my mind right now as I recall our goodbye last night standing outside my car. She knew I would be back tonight, but we both were aware that when I returned I would no longer

be Ben Covington's fiancé, as I'd often been referred to after his death.

Last night, as I took the engagement ring that I'd tucked away so many days ago out of my purse, I clutched it tightly before handing it to her. River was waiting for me in his car. I was going to follow him home in mine. Glancing over at him, I smiled and took a deep breath. I knew the time was right. "Grace, please keep it safe for me."

She hugged me tightly. "Dahlia honey, I will. You deserve to be happy and you're ready for this, for him," she said, looking over the man she knew I loved. "Don't cling to the remnants of your life that have been snatched away from you. Instead, look forward to your



future. I know I do.” We were both crying as we said goodbye. I knew then that when I arrived at her house tonight she would be the same loving woman she always has been, but she would no longer be my future mother-in-law.

Now, driving down Grace’s street I stop at the end of the stone driveway and slowly walk to the beach. I haven’t visited our favorite spot since he died, and I’ve missed it. The moonlit path is visible, and the old weathered planks creak beneath my feet as I cross the divide like I’ve done a thousand times before. Looking up, the dark heavens are shining with twinkling stars, and I truly believe my family and Ben are smiling down on me. The waves splash through

the surf, and it's music to my ears. The full moon's beams reflect off the glistening sand and make it sparkle like diamonds. The ebb and flow of the water moves quickly, crashing against the rocks as the white froth of sea dances across the shore.

I bend down and untie my sneakers. Taking my Converse shoes off, I tuck my phone in one and leave them in the dunes. Inhaling deeply, I hesitantly start my walk through what I have thought of as quicksand for the past two years.

As the moonlight flickers across the beach, it's as if the exhilarated moon is blinking its eyes at me, guiding my way to the beloved shore. I feel like this place is readying me for the peaceful

nights that will hopefully come after I leave, after I say my goodbyes.

The soft sand feels like grains of sugar beneath my feet and it comforts me as I approach the shore. Reaching the water, I release the breath I've been holding and think of Ben in the surf, on his board enjoying the waves. Thoughts of all our fun times here on the beach make me smile.

A cool wind blows through the air with determination, as if it's trying to get somewhere. The beautiful palm trees, bent back from so many past storms, seem close enough to almost kiss the ground.

I roll up my jeans as the healing water swirls around me, creating a

whirlpool effect around my ankles. Looking out into the darkness, the ocean seems to be laughing as it bounces up and down.

I sit down and slowly immerse myself in the water, taking deep cleansing breaths. I sit here, for I don't know how long, and let the water wash away my pain as I reacquaint myself with one of my favorite places. I know I'll never forget Ben regardless of the tangible things I may have lost; his spirit will always be with me.

Standing up, I look back up to the heavens and smile. I will never stay away from this place again. I love the beach, not despite the memories I have of it, but because of them. I realize that

although my memories might fade, they will always be the beacons on my path to the future, and I'm surprisingly at ease with that.

As I head back to Grace's house and approach the dunes, I laugh out loud as I hear Justin Timberlake's voice sing through the night. "Hey sexy."

I hear a chuckle on the other end of the phone. "That's my line, sexy girl. Miss me yet?"

"I've only been gone a few hours," I say, walking back to my car. "But yeah, I do."

# Chapter Twenty - Three

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## MILES APART

*We are miles apart, but you're in my  
heart*

*I think about you all the time  
We could make believe we're not  
living apart*

*Or you could consider turning it  
into reality*

*Just remember you're always in my  
heart.*



*River's POV*

*December 2011 - 3 weeks later...*

Waking up to the sound of water pelting against the windows again doesn't really bother me because I know we won't be getting out of this warm, comfortable bed to go running, at least until the rain lets up anyway. She's lying next to me, and I love how content she makes me feel. I love her, everything

about her. She's beautiful, tall, thin, and has these amazingly sweet doe-eyes that just give her such a look of innocence and make me want to always keep her safe. But it isn't only her beauty that draws me to her; it's many things. She's fun, playful, curious, and strong. She's always up for an adventure. She loves the outdoors and takes every opportunity to photograph the beauty she sees in it. She might never keep her phone charged and her emails might pile up, but she always keeps in touch with the people she cares about. She's not pretentious. She's kind and compassionate; she offers money to almost everyone we pass that asks for it. Her purse is so heavy because she always has about seven



dollars in change at the bottom of it. She's simply amazing.

Rolling to my side, I rest my head on my elbow and start to slide my hand up the inside of her thigh so I can feel her smooth soft skin. She shifts to face me. I lean in to kiss her and look at her beautiful face. "Good morning sleepy girl," I mutter, feeling a little sleep deprived myself. I know she must be tired because she never wakes up after me. At least she doesn't wake up at sunrise every morning thanks to the blackout shades that we installed in the bedroom.

"Good morning," she says, stretching her arms and smiling at me. She settles back down, snuggling into me, and gives

me a good morning kiss. I love it when, in the middle of our kiss, I can feel her smiling.

She pulls away, still grinning, and says, “Ready?”

Looking down the sheet at myself, I smirk, “Yeah, I’m ready.” Okay, so I guess she wants to skip the foreplay this morning.

“Great! Let’s go then,” she says, pushing me out of bed as she hops off and heads to the bathroom.

“Dahlia! No, really? In the rain? Now?” is about all I can say because I was so ready but not for running.



After our five-mile run, we stop to walk the last stretch on the street that leads back to the house. We stayed in the neighborhood and didn't veer down the trails. We're walking side by side, and she's telling me about Aerie's new boyfriend and is not bothered at all by the rain. Suddenly she stops, bends down, and starts taking off her sneakers and socks.

Breathing heavily from the run, I stop too, extremely curious as to what the hell she's doing. "Dahlia what are you doing?"

“Taking my shoes off.”

“I can see that. Why?”

“Because silly, I want to jump in the puddles.”

She says that like I’m a dumbass and should’ve known. God, I fucking love her. The raindrops fall, but all I can see is the beautiful girl in front of me. She doesn’t have to worry that her broken pearl necklaces won’t bring her magic anymore because she’s the magic.

As I continue to watch her with amazement and wonder, I no longer simply see rain falling from the sky. In my mind, the drops have become the tiny small wishing wells she once described to me and they are gathering all around her. I have this overwhelming urge to

grant this girl her every wish, but at the same time, that fucking terrifies me. What if she doesn't want me to be her happily ever after? What if the connection she had with him can't be broken? What if *he* was her happily ever after?

These are the thoughts that scare the shit out of me and keep me from pushing our relationship too far, too fast. What if she loves him more than me? Will she always love him more? As if having to compete for Dahlia's love against a ghost isn't hard enough, knowing the things I know about him just makes me hate him more. But what I know about him, I'd never tell her. I'd never hurt her that way.

After she jumps from puddle to puddle, she closes her eyes and raises her arms out to the side. She tips her head back and spins in circles like this is something people do every day. Her spirit mesmerizes me, and although I never met her Grammy, I know that woman's spirit is alive inside this girl.

Smiling, I walk over to her and her eyes open. She's blinking away the raindrops when I grab her face, pulling her to me. I kiss her hard; hoping some of her magic will rub off on me. Slowing down, I never break our connection as I concentrate on making sure this kiss lets her know how much I truly love her. When she starts to quiver, I know I've accomplished my goal.



“Surprise!” she yells, opening her trunk. Once we got back from our run, we took a shower, and she decided to run some errands while I talked to Xander about the contract negotiations.

Cocking my head to the side and raising an eyebrow, I peek inside the trunk. “What are we doing with these, running a daycare center?”

Shaking her head, she pouts her lips as she points to the boxes. “Do three year olds play Backgammon?” Every time she pouts her lips, all I want to do

is kiss her.

“I don’t know what three year olds play, but I do know what twenty-six, soon to be twenty-seven year olds play, and it’s a lot more fun,” I answer, pulling her to me and kissing her soft lips.

She steps around the car, opens her door, and grabs what looks to be a grocery bag full of food. Walking back to the trunk, she drops it to the ground near my feet, waving her finger at me. She giggles as she takes that one step keeping us apart. “You’re lucky I love you because sometimes your humor is just wrong.”

She’s only really said the words ‘I love you’ to me twice before, but I’ll count this one. She’s texted them to me



and written them in a note, but verbalizing the words seems hard for her. I'm sure it's because of him. But I don't want to think about that now, so I shake that thought out of my head and give my amazing girl my full attention.

Licking my lips, I feign ignorance as I ask, "What? What did I say? And what's in the bag?"

Grinning at me, she slides her hands up my chest, wrapping them around my neck. "Don't play dumb with me, you know exactly what you said," she mockingly chides into my ear. "And as for the bag, you'll just have to wait and see."

In a low whisper, as close to her ear as I can get, I ask, "About the games or

having fun?”

She giggles again. *God, I love that sound.*

She unwraps her arms and slides her hands to my face. I hold her as she kisses me on the lips. Her mouth lingers for a few seconds as my palms rub her back. I'm getting caught up in the moment when suddenly she pulls away and swats me on the ass. “You can't put three year olds and sexual innuendos in the same conversation! That's just all kinds of wrong.”

Crossing my arms, I narrow my eyes and point my finger at her. “I'm not the one with S.E.X. on the brain! That word never even came out of my mouth.” I spell the word pretending to scold her as

she shakes her head at me.

“Come on. Help me unload these, and I might not have to punish you,” she says, grabbing and twisting my arm toward the trunk as she picks up the bag she set on the ground.

Lifting the boxes out of the car, I turn to her and grin, “If you’d have told me at the beginning of this conversation that punishment was an option, we wouldn’t be standing here right now emptying your trunk.”

She pushes me forward and grabs some boxes herself as I follow her up the stairs, staring at her beautiful ass in her jeans.

I set the games onto the counter and I turn around, holding one of the boxes.

“I’ll only play Monopoly if you play by my rules.”

Putting her hands on her hips, she raises an eyebrow. “And River, what rules would those be? Has Milton Bradley called you with a new set? Because as far as I know, the rules haven’t changed since the game was invented.”

Shooting her my most wicked grin, I set the game down and pull out my phone. Holding it out to her I answer, “Dahlia, as a matter of fact, I got a text this morning from Milton himself informing me of one new rule.”

Smirking as she walks closer to me, she places her hands on my shoulders and looks right into my eyes. “First of

all, I'm pretty sure Milton himself died over a hundred years ago." She runs her fingers down my arms and holds my hands. "And second of all, only because I'm insanely curious and like to keep up with game changes, what might this new rule be?" she asks in her most seductive tone.

"You don't know beautiful girl?"

"Kind sir, if I knew, I wouldn't have to ask. Would I?" she asks while fluttering her eyes using that cute southern accent she uses when she tries to cover up trying to be a smart-ass.

I clutch her hands tightly, pull her right up to me, and whisper into her ear, "Every time you pass go, instead of collecting two hundred dollars, you have

to take something off.”

“Oh,” she says, biting her lip as she takes the game from the counter and heads to the kitchen table pulling the cellophane off the box. Sitting down, she flashes her irresistibly sexy smile and winks at me as she sets up to play our first game of Strip Monopoly.



Dahlia decided not to move back into her house. She packed up the rest of her things and has contractors making repairs so she can put it back on the market. We haven't talked about her

long-term living arrangements since the day of the break-in, but she knows I want her to stay here with me. She's here most of the time anyway but hasn't said anything about wanting to move in with me on a more permanent basis.

She's so determined to stay with Grace; she makes it a point to go back there at least every other night. Even last night, after we'd finished our little game of Strip Monopoly, she insisted on going back home to Laguna Beach. I'm not sure why she feels the need to do this, but I go with it because it works for her and it's not like I'm unhappy. I'd just be happier if she moved in with me.

We've spent almost every day over the past three weeks together having a

blast. Since Dahlia isn't working right now, and I'm waiting for Xander to iron out the band's signing contract, we've just been roaming around town and having fun with each other. At first, we picked up a few essentials for the house including a kitchen table and pots and pans, but lately we spend our days running, hiking, going to The Grove to watch movies, to the arcade to play around, or to different restaurants for lunch. Sometimes we walk along Hollywood Boulevard and other times we just hang out here at home. Most nights, she comes with me to rehearsals and then we go out with Aerie or meet up with the guys.

Regardless of what we do, Dahlia



and I usually end up leaving early because I just can't keep my hands off her sexy little body. I can tell she feels the same, and it's become a game to see who can hold out the longest before we have to leave. Regardless of who wins, making it all the way home has become a challenge and we've found some fun and interesting things to do on the way.

Tomorrow is Dahlia's birthday. I'm so stoked to celebrate the day with her, so when Bell asked if she could pull together a small party tonight, I told her yes.

Dahlia is on her way here from Laguna Beach with Aerie, and I just walked in the door. I ran out to pick up her present and was hoping Bell would

wrap it for me, but as I look around at the chaos that is my house, I think it might have to stay in the brown paper wrapping.

Bell's entourage is following her into the house with loads of party items as she's barking orders. Shaking my head, all I can do is grin. I should have known better. She points to the table as Garrett trails behind her. "Watch out!" she yells as he sets a bag full of cups and plates on the table. "If you so much as smear a speck of icing on that cake, your ass will be banned from this party!"

"Dude, your sister is so bossy," he says, looking at me.

She's unloading box after box as platters of food fill the kitchen counters,

alcohol bottles line the bar where the stools are, and a giant purple cake in the shape of a flower sits on the kitchen table.

Leaning over the bar, I'm watching the craziness unfold. Bell walks through the kitchen gripping dozens of purple balloons by their white strings.

"Bell, you've got to be kidding me!"

She's smiling, looking very pleased with herself as she ties the balloons to the kitchen cabinet handles. "What? She loves purple!"

"No not the color, Bell. This," I wave my hand around the room. "A huge blowout party isn't what I agreed to. It wasn't part of the deal."

She swings her head around to look

at me. “Deal? What deal? You said I could throw a party, and that’s what I’m doing. Now don’t be such a party-pooper!”

She’s got an annoying smirk on her face, and I’m losing patience fast. “Do you ever even listen to what you say? You said a small, get-to-know-each-other’s-friends kind of a party, and this isn’t that!”

I should’ve known better than to think she could ever plan anything on a small scale. Everything she does is over the top.

“River! Don’t yell at me! Got it? I’m doing this for you. For your new girlfriend, my new friend, and you should be appreciative about it. Not an

asshole!”

Then pointing her finger at me she continues, “And yell at me again, I’m so telling Mom.”

Shaking my head, I just apologize so we can move on. “I’m sorry Bell, darling,” I say in a drawn out mock tone. “Really, we’re a little old to threaten to tell Mom, aren’t we?” Then I remember I wanted to ask her something.

“And by the way, how do you even know Dahlia likes purple?” I, myself, have no idea if she likes it or not.

She gloats for a few seconds before answering. “River really,” she says in a rather tsk-tsk tone. “She’s named after a flower, and everyone knows Dahlias are purple.”

“Bell, are you drunk?” I have to ask this because that has to be one of the dumbest things she has ever said, and now my annoyance is back.

She frowns, “Nooo River, I’m not. Are you?”

I can’t even answer her, so I just shake my head and inhale deeply.

She starts uncovering plates of food and is setting them on the bar when she notices me glaring at her.

Pointing my finger at her, I say, “I’m blaming you if she’s mad.”

“Why will she be mad? Everyone loves a birthday party!” She gives me her biggest, brightest smile before yelling, “Garrett, where are the other trays of food?”

“I’m getting them. Just wait a second Bell!”

“Well hurry up, stop taking your sweet ass time!”

I’m not finding any of this party prep crap amusing, especially since I’m not sure how Dahlia’s going to take it. Just thinking about it again pisses me off.

“Mother fucker!” I hear coming from behind me as static and a loud piercing sound amplify through the speakers. Turning around, I see Nix has unplugged the sound system and is attempting to connect a mixer board to it.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

Smirking at me, he points his chin at Bell. “She wanted a DJ setup.”

“A DJ? For what? Why? This isn’t a

fucking dance club!”

Shrugging his shoulders, Nix rolls his eyes and points to Bell as he continues to mess with the sound system like he knows what he’s doing.

“Bell!” I yell, my patience with her running very low.

She comes around the bar and pulls me by the arm away from Nix.

Something clings to my head as she opens the sliding glass doors. The balloons are in my face and so is Bell.

“You,” she says, handing me the white strings. “Cut the shit and start helping.”

I can tell by her tone she’s had enough, so I decide to cut her some slack and see what sort of great job she has in



store for me. It's cool that she did all of this, but all I really wanted was a small get-together for the evening. I figured we'd sing Happy Birthday, eat some cake, the guests would leave, and then I'd get some alone time with my birthday girl.

Clearly that's not the plan now, so inhaling a deep breath, I look at my sister and raise my hands in surrender. "What do you need me to do?"

Glancing around, I see Xander busy sucking face with some chick he brought with him.

"See all these balloons tied together? They need to be untied and strung around the chairs."

"Chairs?" I question because I only

own the chairs around the outdoor table, and there are way more balloons than chairs.

Pinching my chin, she turns my head down toward the pool. “Those chairs, the ones you’re going to unfold and put around thooooose tables.” She points to a stacked pile of round tables over at the other side of the pool.

“Just how many people did you invite?” I have to ask because there are a lot of fucking tables and chairs down there.



Pacing back and forth between the party that is now in full swing and the empty dining room, I continue to look out the window. She should've been here over an hour ago.

Earlier, we exchanged a few texts:

*Aerie has issues with my clothing choices and insists we make a stop on the way. Be there shortly :)*

*Maybe it should've been a clothing optional party ;)*

*Hopefully later it will be. ;) <3*

I haven't even seen her yet, and I

already want to skip the party and go directly to the later.

The music is thumping out all different tunes, so I decide to put in my song requests. There are so many people here; I can't even see the Hollywood sign that Dahlia loves so much through the glass doors.

Stopping to talk to a few friends I haven't seen in a while, I finally make my way over to Daniel, at least I think that's his name. He's my sister's new boyfriend and he's DJ'ing the party. Bell is busy filling the dozens of different types of glasses that she bought with wine, mixed drinks, and who knows what else. Garrett and Phoenix are busy staying far away from her so as not to get

roped into being waiters at the party.

I head to the kitchen, grab a bottle of beer from the fully stocked refrigerator, and go sit on the couch next to Xander and some blonde. I can't remember her name, but I know he's been out with her before.

"Oh my God, River!" she says, and I instantly regret sitting here. Her tone is like a whiny teenage girl and her giggle sounds like a five year old.

Taking a swig of my beer, I lower my bottle then raise it in her direction. "Hey, great to see you again."

Xander is grinning at me as he says, "Chloe."

He really can be an asshole sometimes. Calling me out that I didn't

remember her name wasn't necessary. I mean really, he has a rotating set of girlfriends with him almost every time I see him, and this one isn't one of my favorites.

Her voice is so high pitched it actually makes my skin crawl. "So River, I love your new house. When did you move in? Do you have a decorator because my BFF is one and I could so introduce you!"

Her lips are moving, but I'm not even listening. She lost me when she actually used the letters BFF in a sentence, but I smile nicely at her. "Sure, that sounds great."

These are the kind of girls I could never stand. The ones who try to be

seductive but sound more like a whining toddler. They think they are sexy but they couldn't be more wrong. I feel like I dated a never-ending slew of them before I reconnected with Dahlia. She is nothing like those girls, and I couldn't be happier.

My phone starts buzzing in my front pocket, setting my beer on the new coffee table, I stand up and pull it out. It's a text from Dahlia.

*I'm sorry we're so late. Pulling in the driveway now. :)*

Glancing at Xander and his over-bubbly brunette, I indicate with my chin that I'm heading toward the door.

“Excuse me a minute, Dahlia’s here and I want to say hi before she hits the door.”

“Dahlia? Who’s Dahlia?” Chloe asks Xander.

Xander looks at me and answers, “The girl that has my brother pussy-whipped.”

I just shake my head and shoot him a dirty look. I’m not going to argue the semantics of pussy-whipped versus love with him, especially in front of the Valley girl.

“Aren’t I right, Loverboy?” he shouts at me as I walk away.

Opening the door, I brace my hands on the frame and watch her get out of Aerie’s car. The driveway reflectors shine upward and highlight her amazing



shape. The shameless blaze in my eyes must be apparent, but I don't care who sees it. She looks hot as hell in that little black number that Aerie must have talked her into buying.

Her dress is short, the neck is open, and her legs look a mile long with those shoes. When she turns to close the door, I have to shift a little to control myself. Her dress has no back and her blonde hair is up in one of those ponytail things so every inch of her bare skin is visible. Images of her and me alone together instantly flood my mind, and I really regret letting Bell throw this party.

Walking down the steps to meet her, I'm overwhelmed by her overall beauty. Saying hi to Aerie, I position myself

right in front of Dahlia. She's almost as tall as me in those shoes and when our eyes meet, she just looks at me, no smile, nothing, I can tell, even before her lips turn up, that she's feeling seductive.

Her eyes seem to change color depending on her mood, and tonight her hazel eyes are almost brown. They look like a spinning whirlwind of dust clouds, and I love when they're that color. I also love when her eyes turn goldish-green. There is an almost psychedelic twist to them. It's as if I can see myself staring at the same raw images she sees. Her mind is like a camera, and just looking into her eyes makes any great view even better. I told once that I notice her eyes change color depending on her mood,

she laughed and said, “So if you think my eyes are like a mood ring, what color are they when I’m being bitchy?” I just shook my head.

Leaning in, I inhale the sweet scent of her hair as I kiss the bare skin of her neck all the way up to her ear and softly lower my voice to an intimate level. “Hey birthday girl. You look beautiful, perfect really,” I say, pulling her hips to mine.

“Hey there yourself,” she says, placing her hands on my arms. “Sorry we’re late.”

Bending her neck, she allows me full access, and I can’t help but grin when I notice her goosebumps. Not being one to shy away from an invitation, I slowly

work my way down her neck to her exposed collarbone. God, everything about her is just so sensual, and I'm so turned-on right now.

"That's okay. If you're late because of this dress," I say, running my hands down the side of her body, "I definitely forgive you. You look so hot."

"Umm . . ." she moans before saying, "Thank you," in an extremely low and whispy tone.

Her seductive grin turns to a smile and she points to the driveway. "I thought you said a few people. This looks like way more than a few people. In fact, I'd say it looks like a party."

Before I can explain, I hear Aerie yell from the top of the stairs, "Caleb

you found the place!”

Caleb approaches us and I let go of Dahlia as she starts toward him down the driveway. She kisses him on the cheek and they hug each other. It shouldn't bother me that his hands are on the bare skin of her back, but it does. There's something about him I don't like. Maybe it's just because he was best friends with *him*, and most likely, he knows what I know.

She loops her arm through his, leading him back toward me. I can see the glint of that bracelet she still wears from him. I understand why she always wears it, but it bothers me. We talked about it last week, and she explained that she considers it to be her no regrets

bracelet. What am I suppose to say to that? Since it makes her happy to wear it, I'm doing my best to be cool with it.

She walks back down to Aerie's car with Caleb, and I extend my hand. "Hey man, glad you could make it," I manage, trying to keep it real. I snake my arm around my girl and pull her close. I notice his uneasiness right away. Tonight will be the first time we'll be together in a social scene and I'm interested to see how it plays out.

"How've you been? Sorry I couldn't meet you two last week for dinner. I got hung up in a meeting with a new client that needed an entire security system installed in a matter of days."

"It's cool. We'll plan it again another

time,” I reply, trying not to grit my teeth.

“Come on, let’s go in,” I say and guide Dahlia to the front of me, purposely putting my hand on the small of her back and tucking my fingers inside the cutout of her dress. I swear I see her quiver.



We all stand around the kitchen table singing Happy Birthday, and Dahlia blows out the candles. I slip my arms around her waist, hugging her close to me as I stand directly behind her. Once

all the candles are out, I kiss her neck and whisper, “Did you make a wish?”

She turns her head to look at me. “Of course I did, but you know I can’t tell you.”

I just smirk at her because we have gone through this wish thing so many times, but I plan to grant her more than one wish later, so I drop it.

Bell cuts the cake, and I grab Dahlia and pull her into the empty dining room.

“Happy Birthday,” I tell her since it’s after twelve and officially her birthday.

Glancing at my watch, she smiles at me. “I guess it’s my actual birthday. So, thank you.”

I kiss her and my tongue slips slowly into her mouth. Her fingers comb through



my hair and I pull away. “Stay here.”

She gives me a questioning look but says, “Okay.”

As I walk, continuing to face her, my eyes drift the length of her body. Before I turn around, I mouth, “stay there,” and go back to the kitchen to grab a few things.

Xander is standing near the entrance and corners me. “Did you tell her yet?”

I just look at him and walk away. I told him I don’t want to talk about it and that I’m not telling her, so why doesn’t he just shut the fuck up?

Caleb is talking to Bell, and I wonder if she knows him. He sees me and turns around.

I’ve been able to avoid him all night until now, so I make it short and sweet.

“Just grabbing a few things before Dahlia and I go to bed,” I say directly to Bell but I see Caleb flinch. “Don’t worry about cleaning up, I’ll take care of it tomorrow,” I tell her as I grab a cup of ice, a bottle of beer, and a piece a cake.

I kiss Bell on the cheek. “Thank you.”

“See, I knew she’d like it.”

My hands are full, so I say goodbye without shaking his hand. “Hey man thanks for coming. Don’t be a stranger,” I say to him as I walk away.

“River,” he says, and I turn around. “Take care of her.”

Not really sure of how to respond, I press my lips together before answering. Bell shoots me a disapproving look; so I

know my expression mimics my thoughts, 'Fuck off'. Swallowing the dislike down my throat, I respond the only way I can. "Of course I will."

Soft fingers grip my side and turn me around, taking the cake from my hand she says, "Thank you, is this for me?"

We're standing so close. Her eyes are now dark brown, and her expression tells me what I already know.

"Yeah, it's for you."

Leaning in, I whisper. "Come with me. I have something I want to give you."

As we enter the bedroom, I take her cake and set it with the beer and cup of ice on the night table.

She eyes it and says, "Party for

one?”

Giving her my most devilish grin, I walk over and run my hands down her body like I've wanted to do all night. “No birthday girl, that's what I call a party for two.”

Raising an eyebrow, she grins, “Okay, I'll bite. Spill it. What do you have planned in that dirty mind of yours?”

“Well first, I want to give you your present, and then I'll be happy to share my plan for your birthday wishes.”

I grab the gift from the closet and lead her to the bed, where she sits down. As she unwraps the paper, I know this is the perfect gift for her. I was able to score the original hand-written lyrics to

U2's song, *Beautiful Day*. I had them framed in an old-looking black frame that resembles some of the broken frames I saw at her house.

When she recognizes what it is, she lifts her hand to her mouth and covers it. Tears start streaming down her face. That was not the reaction I was expecting.

“You don’t like it?”

She shakes her head no but says yes, and I have to ask, “Yes, you don’t like it, or yes, you do like it?”

A small sad smile turns up on her lips as she lowers her hand. “Yes. I love it.”

She stares at it for a few minutes, running her fingers across a few lines of

lyrics before leaning it carefully against the table. She kicks her shoes off and stands up. I stand next to her and just watch. She unzips the side of her dress and pulls it down. She's wearing a black lace bra and panties. Stepping out of the dress she steps closer to me. Her eyes are a brownish-green color. A color I haven't seen before.

"God, I love you so much," she whispers in my ear as she wraps her arms around my neck and holds on like she might sink if she lets go.

When she says those words to me this time, I feel like she's trying to tell me something else. She moves her lips against mine and I open my mouth inviting her in.

I pause for a moment, pulling back to look at her, to tell her how I feel. “Dahlia, I love you more than I’ve ever loved anyone or anything.”

She presses my hand over her heart and hers over mine. “Not only does my heart belong to you and yours to me, but I’ve known since the first time you kissed me that we were soul mates. I knew it that first night in Vegas.”

I try to tell her I feel the same way, but she moves her fingers to my lips. “Shh . . . Let me finish.” She grabs my hands, holds them tightly, and looks right into my eyes. “River, I don’t ever want to talk about this again, but this is something I want you to know. I loved Ben, I really did, but when we were

together, I never believed in soul mates. I never even thought about it.”

She doesn't have to elaborate or go on because I understand exactly what she's telling me.

I blow out a deep breath and relief flushes through me that she feels the same way about me as I feel about her. I keep my mouth shut, nod my head, and let my silence tell her I understand.

She runs her fingers down my shirt, pausing at each button as she undoes it, bending and kissing each bare spot along the way. Her fingers skim my bare chest as her lips make their way back up to mine. She attacks my mouth as if taking prisoners and kisses me until they've been captured. She's breathless and I'm



panting, but I want to proceed with caution. I no longer want to throw her on the bed and fuck her. I'm not sure what prompted the tears and loving confession, and I want to know, but she doesn't seem to want to tell me right now.

Her hands go to my waist and her mouth goes back to my chest, where she starts placing hot, open-mouthed kisses on her way down my stomach.

I pull her back up to my face, feeling like I really want to know. I look in her now brown eyes, but they are focused on my lips.

Teetering between wanting to know and not wanting to know, I just ask, "Dahlia, when you opened the lyrics you

seemed sad. Why? Does it have something to do with him?"

Sighing, she inhales a deep breath and tells me, "No. That concert is the last concert I ever went to with my dad. It was the last time I ever went to The Greek." She cups my cheeks as she continues, "I wasn't sad when I opened it, I was happy. Those were tears of joy because you've given me back a memory just as so many were taken away."

Now I'm the one swallowing back my emotions, trying to keep it together. I feel my body start to tremble, overflowing with the amount of love I feel for this girl. She's had so much sadness in her life. As I gently pick her up and carry her to the bed, I feel so

lucky that I'm the one who gets to give her her happily ever after.

I lay her down and start kissing her stomach. She sits up on her elbows and points to the nightstand. "You promised to explain," she says and I laugh.

"Explain what?" I ask, my mind still reeling from her confessions.

"Your birthday wishes, silly."

"Ahh, my birthday wishes for you," I say smiling at her beauty and wanting to make her happy. I look at her, kiss her, then move to take a piece of ice out of the cup and let it melt on my tongue.

"What are you doing?"

"Dahlia, I'm granting you three birthday wishes.

"You can't grant me wishes if I

haven't told you what I wish for, silly, and there is only one wish allowed per birthday you know."

"Beautiful girl, you should know by now, I have my own set of rules for almost everything and birthday wishes are no exception."

Running her fingers through my hair, she says, "So tell me genie, what would those rules be?"

"Well since you asked, I'm more than happy to tell. In my world, when I get to be the genie, as you called me, I get to come up with and deliver the wishes."

She giggles that sound I love so much. She starts to squeal as I take another piece of ice in my mouth and slide my cold tongue down her body

letting the ice cube dance in and out of my mouth along the way. I pause and look up at her as she watches me. “And this is wish number one.”

A low purring sound escapes her mouth. “Oh God River, I love your rules.”

# Chapter Twenty-Four

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I WAS BORN TO LOVE HER

*I was born to love her  
Everything about her  
She is the one I need  
The one I have waited for  
She is everything.*



*River's POV*

*February 2012 - 3 months later...*

Shaking my head, I'm kicking myself for not ordering the necklace earlier. I pace the room with the phone to my ear. Mikimoto's says the package should have been delivered to Xander's house yesterday, and if the dick would answer his phone this morning, I'd know. I'm on hold with Federal Express, waiting for them to check the signature delivery log

when the doorbell rings.

Making my way to the door isn't easy. I just smile while stepping over all the boxes Dahlia still hasn't unpacked since officially moving in. Thank God she only brought what she thought we needed and left the rest at Grace's house or else there would be no where to walk. She's in the office that we setup for her downstairs. She's working on getting her new business off the ground.

We've managed to furnish the entire house and hire a housekeeper, but the unpacking is another story. For some reason, we never seem to find the time to just do it.

It doesn't really matter anyway. Since neither of us cooks, we don't need



to unpack the boxes labeled kitchen. We always order out, go out, or eat grilled cheese.

I don't give a shit about any of the domestic supposed-to-dos anyway because I got my girl, and we're living life sweet and easy.

Opening the door, my asshole brother is standing there grinning. He pushes me aside as he strides into the living room, sitting his ass on the couch. "Why have you called me three times since I got in my car this morning?"

"If you'd answer your fucking phone you'd know, dickhead."

He flops his head back on the couch and spreads his arms over the back like he owns the place. "Since I was on my

way here, I didn't see the purpose in wasting my breath," he says. Then reaching into the inside pocket of his leather jacket, he adds, "Dickhead."

Pulling out the black satin box with the white letters M I K I M O T O emblazoned across the top, he smirks, "You looking for this, Loverboy?"

Turning my head toward the stairs to make sure Dahlia isn't coming, I quickly head over to him. "You couldn't have let me know it came, assface?"

"Assface? Hmmm . . . Maybe I should have just kept it and given it to the first pretty face I saw, tonight. Since it's Valentine's Day, I'm sure a gem like this would guarantee I score."

Tucking the box away in one the

many partially opened containers blocking the pathways in and out of the living space, I walk over to sit at the counter. Dahlia insisted the movers not block the view with any of the boxes, so instead, we're tripping over whatever items she unpacks but doesn't put away every time we come in the room.

Standing up, Xander heads to the kitchen. "Dude, you live with one messy chick."

Shrugging my shoulders at him, I say, "Some of us have more important shit to do than keep house."

"But really, you have a housekeeper. She can't do it?"

"Dahlia wants to do it herself. She'll get around to finishing the unpacking

Xander, don't worry your pretty little head about it."

Smirking, he pours himself a cup of coffee. "Whatever, better you than me. This mess would drive me fucking insane." Then raising his coffee mug, he asks "Coffee?"

Chuckling and nodding my head, I say, "Xander, leaving the mail on the counter drives you nuts."

"Speaking of nuts, you were worried the necklace wouldn't get here. Weren't you?"

I swivel my chair as he walks back into the room and tap my fingers on the counter. "Not worried. Concerned."

"Well maybe next time you'll order your girl's gift sooner," he laughs, taking

his jacket off and putting it on the back of the stool.

I nod my head in agreement as he sits next to me, handing me one of the cups of coffee. “So the record contract . . .” he starts to say.

Dropping my foot to the floor, I twirl my seat around to face him. “Xander, I don’t want to argue about the label’s shitty stipulations right now.”

“Look bro, I know your mind is elsewhere,” he says, tapping on his phone’s screen and pushing it in front of me. “But we need to get this shit straightened out and sign a contract or we won’t have a deal.”

Glancing at his phone, he’s showing me an email listing the changes to our

original unsigned contract. I've seen these at least three times, so I roll my eyes.

"Xander, come on. You know the label doesn't want to negotiate, they just want us to agree before we can move forward and cut the damn album."

Also listed in the email are the promotional requirements of the band. I haven't seen these before.

"This touring stipulation is bullshit," I say to Xander, standing up and continuing to read the new requirements. "Everyone knows the only reason a label asks a band to tour for nine months is because they don't believe an album can make it on it's own."

"You need to quit being a pussy and

get over it, River,” he says as walks over to refill his coffee.

Throwing his phone on the couch, I say, “I don’t need to quit being anything, Xander.”

“Look River, just bring her with you,” he says, setting his cup down on the counter.

I throw myself on the couch and shake my head. “That’s not it,” I say, shoving my boots on the glass coffee table. “I don’t want to be on the road that long. I hate that life. Living on a bus, people in my face all day long, eating shitty food, and drinking every night, never being alone.” I finally admit to him my biggest reasons for not wanting to sign.

“Let me see what I can do,” he says, maybe finally resigned to the fact that I’m not going to sign that contract.

“So, did you tell her yet?” I bolt straight up in reaction to his question. He knows better than to talk about this when Dahlia is in the house.

“No, and I told you I’m not going to.”

“Not a smart idea. What if Bell figures it out and tells Dahlia?”

“Bell’s not going to figure it out. You only did because I told you. I asked you not to bring it up again, and I meant it.”

“River, I understand your need to always protect women more than you think I do, but I think you’re making a mistake here. If she finds out, she’s going to be really pissed off at you.



“I don’t have a need to protect women, Xander. I just don’t see the purpose in unnecessarily hurting someone’s feelings.”

“Yeah yeah, I get it. You’ve always wanted a chick you could talk to, not just fuck around with. That’s why you hardly ever went out with someone more than once. I told you I get you, and I do. Really. But now you found an amazing girl, and you have it all, so don’t fuck it up. That’s all I’m gonna say about it. You know I got your back no matter what.”

As I hear footsteps coming up the stairs, I quickly throw Xander a shut-the-fuck-up look. I turn my head just in time to get a look at my hot girl coming up the stairs.

“Hey there beautiful.”

“Hey there beautiful yourself,” she says in a flirty tone.

Looking over to Xander, she smiles at him. She has the most awesome smile. “Xander,” she flatly says.

“Muse,” he says just as flatly.

“Did you park your Mercedes out front? Because if you did, I hope it doesn’t get stolen while your slumming,” she says to him, barely able to contain her laughter, and then they both start laughing.

They have actually become friends since she moved in three weeks ago. It took a while, but one drunken night and many funny stories later told about USC, they actually decided they liked each

other. In fact, she gets along great with my whole family. She goes out to lunch with my mom and sister at least once a week. My mom even convinced her buy a lot of the stuff we have in the house. Since moving in, we've actually bought everything in here together. It's like I bought this house for us. It fits us perfectly; we both love it and we both love living here together.

Dahlia enjoys the view and photographs it all the time. We even planted wildflowers together before she moved in. They bloomed last week, and the look in her eyes when she saw the flowers made me want to fuck her right there in the garden. We run the trails every morning and whoever wins gets to

soap the other one down. She thinks she wins every time. God, I love her.

She walks over and plops herself on my lap, and I start kissing her neck. “What are you doing here anyway?” she asks Xander as he walks over, picks up his phone, and sits right next to us.

He leans over as if he’s going to kiss her neck, and I shove him hard. “Get the fuck out of here man. Don’t you have someone else to go harass?”

“Actually I do have people to see and places to go,” he says as he stands up. “I can let myself out.”

“Great man because I wasn’t getting up.”

“Bye Xander,” she says, waving as he leaves the room, and I turn her so I

can really kiss her. The sound of her voice sends a jolt of electricity through my body that lights up deep within my soul.

Shaking his head at me, he slams the door as he leaves.

I kiss her soft full lips; I run my hand down her Pretenders t-shirt, then up the front of it. "Alone at last."

"We've been alone all morning silly," she says, shoving my hand away as I try to slip my fingers into her bra.

"I know, but you've been downstairs," I say as I suck on her bottom lip before moving in for the kill.

"You can visit me any . . ." she stops talking as I slide my nose over to her ear and dip my tongue in it. I know what this

does to her.

She moans a soft purr-like sound, and I grin before scooting her off my lap.

“Hey,” she says, trying to crawl back on my lap.

“I want to give you something,” I tell her as I stride out of the room and into our bedroom.

“I thought that’s what you were doing a minute ago,” she laughs. “Should I come in there?”

Now I’m laughing. She really is the funniest person I’ve ever met. “No. Stay there.”

As I come back out into the room, I tell her, “Close your eyes. No peeking.”

She does and I avert the boxes as I make my way back over to her. “Okay,

this isn't my gift to you for Valentine's Day," I tell her as I string the six or so strands of her Aunt's pearls around her neck. "This is just something I wanted to do for you because I know how much they mean to you." I put the strand around her neck and before I even finish looping the necklace she's clutching all of them. When she opens her eyes she looks down at the pearls; a treasured part of her past she once referred to as her magical wishing wells. I had them strung back together for her.

She's a little teary when she asks, "You did this for me?"

"Of course I did. I know how much they mean to you, and I wanted to make you happy."

She jumps up and kisses me before running down the hallway to the mirror while screaming, “I love you. I love you. I love you.”

Yeah, I’m good.



My heart is beating so loudly I think it’s echoing throughout the extremely noisy restaurant. I hold my breath and bite my lower lip in anticipation. She opens the box and to my great relief, she loves it. Her mouth drops open and tears run down her beautiful face as she fingers the necklace I had made for her.



“Pearls and a dahlia? How?”

Putting my finger over my mouth and making a shh . . . sound I say, “It’s a secret.” I stand up, walk behind her chair, and reach around her as I whisper in her ear, “I love you.” Then removing the one of a kind, three strand pearl necklace with a quarter size diamond dahlia connecting the individually strung strands from the box, she drapes it around her neck and I take it, clasping it closed for her.

Swiping her long hair to the side, I lean down and inhale that scent I love so much. It smells like some kind of fruit. Orange or grapefruit, I’m not exactly sure. She bows her head when I do this and I kiss the small freckle on the back

of her neck. Then I run my finger up her bare back. She is so fucking sexy. Bending down, I lean into her, dragging my tongue up the nape of her neck to her ear. “You taste as good as you look. I’d much rather be eating you than eating here.” Then I wait for the goosebumps to emerge. Sure enough, there they are.

Grinning, I walk back to my chair. “Are you ready to go?”



She throws her arms around my neck as we wait for the car, and I hold her close and tight. “I love my necklace, and I love you.”

She glides her nose over my jaw like she always does when I hug or kiss her. She likes it when I am clean-shaven, and I love how it turns her on. We break apart and I move toward the car.

I open the door for her as I say, “I love you more.”

Once I get in the car, I start it and pull away.

As she’s fumbling through her purse, she pulls out a small black bag. Pointing to the valet’s temporary holding spaces she asks, “Can you pull over there a second?”

Glancing over at her in that dress that leaves little to the imagination, I reach for her hand and grin. “Sure baby. But can’t you wait until we get home?” I

can't help but laugh to myself over my own wit.

She playfully slaps my hand away and doesn't let me grab hold of hers. "River, just pull over."

"Okay beautiful girl, your call," I say, winking at her while I continue with the game, thinking she wants me now.

I put the car in park and turn to fully face her. She looks like a knockout in that short strapless black number. The dress exposes so much of her soft skin, it's just calling for me to lick it and the bottom is so short, it's just screaming for me to run my fingers under it. What's really killing me are those thigh high boots, they made me hard the minute I saw her. Honestly, I'm having a hard

time keeping my shit together around her tonight. I really should've just taken her into the bathroom, but it's Valentine's Day, and I want to make it romantic.

I've never spent one of these heart filled days with someone I really cared about, so this is all new to me. My sister suggested taking Dahlia to a nice hotel for the night, so that's what I'm doing. I actually made a reservation at the Beverly Wilshire last month. The suites were all taken, but I was able to book a room.

She touches her pearls for a minute while the black bag rests on her lap. She seems pretty happy. Then with that seductive smile she wears that could thaw the artic, she says, "Close your

eyes, and hold your hands out.”

I swallow and nod, squeezing my eyes shut and holding my hands palms up over the console. As I do I can feel cool metal objects being carefully placed into them.

“Happy Valentine’s Day, River.”

Opening my eyes, I see six metal guitar picks, all uniquely engraved. I scan each one before looking up at her. My smile must be wider than any dam ever built to stop a flood.

Inhaling deeply, I transfer all of them into one hand and hold up the one that reads, ‘I Love You’. I stare at her with amazement and wonder. “I love you,” I whisper while trying to rein in my emotions. I lean over and kiss her,

slipping my tongue in her mouth because I want to taste her so badly. I squeeze my palm shut so I won't drop any of the picks and grab her with my free hand. I run my hand through her soft hair and over the smooth bare skin of neck and shoulders.

She giggles her cute laugh and pulls away, breathing just as hard as I am. "I love you more."

Shaking my head in disagreement, I decide not to engage in our little who loves who more game because I know I'll win. I love this girl more than anybody has ever loved anyone. Instead, I just look at her as she moves her hand to my tightly closed palm.

She begins to pull my fingers open,

one at a time, exposing the scribed picks. She takes all the picks out of my hand, leaving the 'I Love You' one in my palm. Selecting one guitar tab at a time, she says each engraving to me as if she's whispering sweet nothings.

"Hold Me," she whispers, running her fingertips over the words before gently placing it in my hand with the 'I Love You' pick. Then she whispers, "Touch Me," while placing it in my hand with the other two. She continues to whisper "Kiss Me," and "Love Me," as she does the same thing. Finally, she giggles through her words as she says, "And this is my favorite, 'Loverboy'."

Once all six gifts are safely in my hand she opens the bag for me to pour



them back in. Before I do, I take the ‘Touch Me’ one. I shake the other five in the bag.

Grinning and stretching my legs out, I lift my hips off the seat and stick that one in my front pocket as she looks at me quizzically.

“What? I’m saving it for later. You know, in case I want to cash it in.”

“They’re guitar picks silly. They’re not sexual favor chips!”

“I know what they are!” I say, sitting back in my seat and putting the car in the drive. Then glancing over at her I ask, “Did you give these to me as a present?”

Her lips purse in that adorable way she has when she’s trying to explain something. “Yessss”

“Well then, they can be whatever I want them to be.”

She just shakes her head at me.  
“Okay, Loverboy.”



We're driving down the highway listening to music when The Mighty Storm's *Through it All* comes on the radio. Dahlia is quiet as she listens to the lyrics. It's like she's absorbing the great sound, almost as if trying to memorize it. Once the song finishes, I turn down the volume and look over at her. “Did I ever tell you we opened for Jake Wethers a couple of years ago?”

“Before Johnny died? No fucking way! You knew both of them?” she responds immediately, practically jumping out of her seat.

“Yes fucking way,” I direct right back, but without any of her enthusiasm. I don’t apologize for using the F-word since I consciously decided to use it to make my point.

“Wow, you really met Jake Wethers? That’s amazing! I would love to meet him. I think he’s a musical genius. I am so sad to hear about his problems now, but I’m sure he’ll pull through it.”

“Yeah, the whole situation sucks. He had it together when we met him and his band and I’m sure he’ll pull it together again.” I stop to think how hard it would

be if I lost someone.

Shaking my head to rid those thoughts I go on. “We even hung out after the show. All of the guys were pretty cool. We actually learned a lot from them just playing with them the one time.”

“I’m impressed. Jake Wethers. Hmm . . . Who else have you met? Any of the guys from One Direction?”

“No,” I laugh. “Their music isn’t exactly my type of music, but do you like the D-bags?” I ask her, knowing what I’m about to tell her will definitely freak her out if she does.

“Of course I do! I love Kellan Kyle! You know him too?”

I nod my head. “I met him once

before we went on our first tour. He was in LA with his friend Evan, you know the drummer in his band?”

“Of course I know who Evan is! Kellan met him on his way to LA while passing through Oregon.”

“Oh I have no idea how he met Evan. Anyway, they came to Smitten's to jam with us, but that was the last I saw of them. They met a few guys here in LA and I think that's when they formed the D-Bags. I never heard of them again until they went on tour last year.” I look over at her again as I tell her, “Bell met Kellan too. She spent most of the night he jammed with us talking to him in between sets and then met up with him later after we were done.”

“Your sister went on a date with Kellan Kyle?”

“I wouldn’t call it a date, and please don’t ask me for the details because I never did.”

“See, you are famous,” she says, smiling over at me and finally sitting back down.

“No, I’m really not. I’ve told you this,” I tell her again. I’m not jealous, of course. I think it’s cute actually that she loves music so much, and certain artists get her so excited. The excitement dies down, and we talk about other artists I’ve met and she’s met.

As I pass the exit that leads to our house, she points to the sign as I zoom by it. “Wait a minute, where are we going?”

Looking over at her, I say, “It’s a surprise. You’ll see, but we’re not sleeping at home tonight.”

“So, where are we sleeping on Valentine’s Day? Please don’t tell me we’re sleeping on an air mattress.

Laughing as I turn the music up, I answer, “In a bed.”

She pouts her lips and reaches her long slender arm to turn the volume back down. “In a bed—where?

*I love when she pouts her lips like that. She looks so hot.*

Using the word she always uses on me, I say, “Yesss . . .”

“Where are we going?” she huffs out.

I have to laugh because I think she might be having a fit in the seat of my

car. “You’re not going to stomp your feet and cross your arms, are you? Because if you are, I’m going to have to pull over to watch this.”

She sticks her tongue out at me, and I try to grab it, but she moves away to quickly.

I turn the music back up and sing along, waiting for her next question, but she’s good at playing any game I throw her way. She doesn’t say anything as she shifts in her seat and hikes her dress up just a little higher. I give her a quick glance and look back at the road. I can play too. She stretches and her top slips down slightly. Damn she’s good. I keep singing and humming, thumping my fingers to the beat on the steering wheel,



trying to ignore her provocative moves.

Then, she breaks and starts to speak.

I grin over at her.

“So, are you going to tell me where we’re going?” she asks again.

“Nope.”

“Well, that’s too bad because I have a secret I want to share. And I was thinking a trade was in order. You know one for one,” she says, twisting a little, leaning her elbow on the console, and placing her chin in the palm of her hand.

“Not interested.”

“Oh I think you might be, especially since it has something to do with what I’m

wearing . . . Oh, I mean, not wearing.”

I whip my head around and glance her way. “You’re lying.”

Sitting up straight, she runs her fingers from the top of her boots to beneath her skirt where I can’t see them anymore. “Tell me where we’re going and find out for yourself.”

Instantly reaching my hand over to her lap, I blurt out, “The Beverly Wilshire.” I drive faster so I can just get there already.

Okay, so she’s good.

“Oh my God. I’ve heard it’s amazing there! How’d you manage to get a reservation so quickly and for Valentine’s Day? I thought they book out almost a year in advance.”

I have to laugh because she thinks

she knows me so well already, and actually she does.

Tapping my fingers on her leg, I answer, "I'll never tell."

"Fine, be that way."

"Providing details wasn't part of the trade. But a deal's a deal."

My fingers start to creep up her thigh. I can feel her soft skin and get hard instantly. Actually, I feel like I've had a raging hard-on since she put those boots on. I don't give a shit about hearts and flowers anymore. I want her. I need to taste her. I want to be inside her. So I drive even faster.

I run my fingers all the way up the inside of her legs. Fuck, she wasn't lying. She's not wearing panties. I start

to move my fingers and I can feel how wet she is. She's just so fucking hot. Then suddenly she presses her hand on top of mine and pushes it away.

Grinning mischievously, she says, "That's enough for now." Shocked, I look over at her, and she seems to be the perfect picture of calmness.

On the other hand, my pulse is racing, and I feel like I'm the one who's going to have the tantrum. "What? Why?" I mutter.

She takes my hand and holds it in hers as she crosses her legs. "Because, providing details wasn't part of the trade."

I'm horny as hell as I pull up to the hotel, and I hope the evidence in my

jeans isn't too noticeable as I hand the valet my keys. I've already checked us in, and I have the room key in my pocket, so we head straight to the elevators.

We're finally alone in the elevator. My heart is beating about seven times too fast as I reach out and grab her. Pressing her body against the wall, I pull her mouth to mine and enjoy the taste of her. This is not a loving romantic kiss. That time has passed.

"I want you, now," I manage between my wet and tongue-filled kisses.

"I want you too."

Staggering out of the elevator, not wanting to unlock my lips from hers, I try to pull the key out of my back pocket, but she's distracting me. Her fingers are

in the waistband of my boxers, and she's sliding them around to the front trying to unbutton my fly as I try to blindly reach behind and pull the keycard out.

We make our way to the room, and I somehow manage to open the door. As we enter, I shove her dress down, and it immediately falls to the ground. Fuck, she isn't wearing a bra either. Inhaling deeply, I step back to just look at her. She's standing in front of me in her fuck-me boots and pearls only. I really want to take a picture of her. I know I'll never forget her image like this, right now, but I want to be able to see her whenever she's not with me.

She stands there watching me watch her. I see her breath picking up as she

runs her fingers through her hair.

I take another step back and glance around the room. “Champagne? I ask pointing to the bottle chilling on the table near the window and the bowl of strawberries next to it.

“Absolutely,” she says, standing there biting her lip.

Walking over to where the bottle is, I pop the cork and pour us a glass, adding two strawberries to hers. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure, anything,” she answers, and I love that she feels completely comfortable with her body around me.

“Can I take your picture?” I’m a little nervous asking because I really have no idea what she will say, other than calling

me a pervert probably.

She slowly walks over to me and takes the glass of champagne I put the two strawberries in. She takes the berry I pushed onto the rim, dips it in the liquid, and bites it. “Maybe we can barter?”

Swallowing at the sight of her, all of my nervousness is gone instantly.

I take another berry from the bowl, dip it into her glass, and press it to her lips. “Oh yeah. What did you have in mind?”

“I want a picture too.”

Furrowing my brow, I ask, “You want a naked picture of me in pearls and boots?”

Giggling, she says, “No, silly. I want



a picture of you . . .” She sets her glass down and quickly unbuttons my shirt, tossing it aside. “Wearing only your jeans and . . .”

Moving my mouth to hers, I lick the champagne off her lips. “And?”

“Your picture first,” she says, sucking on my bottom lip before moving back.

Shrugging my shoulders, I reach into my front pocket and pull out my phone. The ‘Touch Me’ pick is in there as well. I smile as I pull it out. “I’ll save this for later,” I say, raising the tab before placing it on the table.

She starts to make all sorts of absurd poses, and I pretend to be a fashion photographer telling her what to do. We

do this for at least five minutes as her poses go from nice to naughty, and my horny meter rises off the charts from the site of her in just those boots and her beautiful pearls.

“Okay play time is over. Time for the real picture.”

“Okay, bossy pants,” she says with her hands on her hips. “Where do you want me?”

“Right there,” I point to where she’s standing as I lean over and gently kiss her. “Thank you.”

She gives me a soft smile, and I hit the camera button three times to ensure one of the pictures is good. I scroll to the camera roll and look. “You really are so beautiful Dahlia,” I say, handing her my

phone to look.

“I don’t want to see myself naked you pervert,” she quips, and I start full out laughing. I grab our glasses and handing her one, I toast, “Happy Valentine’s Day, beautiful girl.”

“Happy Valentine’s Day, River. I love you.”

We both take a sip and I grab another berry from the bowl and dip it in her glass but this time I don’t run it over lips, I trail it down her chest. Then with the tip of my tongue I follow the path I made with the champagne. Her nipples harden instantly as I circle one then the other before sliding my tongue back up her chest, her neck, and to her ear where I whisper, “I want you now.”

“Ah ah ah,” she says, waving her finger at me.

Walking over to the bed where she threw her purse, she pulls out a tube of lipstick and smears it on her lips.

“You don’t need that, you know. It’s not like we’re going anywhere,” I tell her, confused as to why she’d put that stuff on now.

“I know. It’s for my picture.”

“I already took your picture, Dahlia.”

“No silly, the one I’m taking of you.”

“Oh no, I’m not wearing lipstick,” I warn. “That wasn’t part of the deal.”

Walking back over to me with that tube in her hand she says, “Oh you’re wearing it, just not on your lips.”

Standing in front of me, she starts

firmly pressing her lips all over my shoulders, chest, and stomach. When she finishes, she pushes me over to the bed. “Lie down.”

“Who’s the bossy one?” I laugh.

She ignores me and grabs for her phone. If I’m lucky, she would have forgot to charge it again. *Shit. I guess not.* She starts snapping pictures of me.

“I’m not posing,” I say as I just lay on the bed with my hands behind my head.

“Suit yourself.”

I love how easy going she is.

“Done,” she says.

Now, finally we can do what I’ve wanted to do since I saw her in those boots, well actually, what I want to do

every time I look at her. And since it's Valentine's Day, I'm going to take it slow and make love to this beautiful, fun, sexy, and simply amazing girl.

So with that in mind, I stand up, shove my jeans and boxers off, step out of them as quickly as I can, and tell her, "Good, because I'm not."

# Chapter Twenty-Five

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## DIAMONDS

*I hold one in my hand  
It's waiting for you  
I know the time is right  
I can see light in your eyes  
So please say yes.*



*River's POV*

*June 2012 - 6 months later...*

Grabbing a fist full of his preppy ass shirt, I jerk him toward me and get right in his face. “She’s mine. You don’t deserve her, you never did.”

He stares at me, unfazed, before angrily shaking me off. Then almost laughing, he says, “Is that how you see it? I see it a little differently. You filled a



void I left behind, but that's all you'll ever be; a substitute for the real thing."

Lunging at him, a punch him square in the jaw. He doesn't move to hit me back, in fact he doesn't physically engage me at all, but the pain he causes is deeper than any physical impact could have ever been.

Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, his eyes narrow on mine. "Believe what ever the fuck you want, pretty boy. She was mine first, and she'll always be mine. Nothing you ever say or do can change that." Then he turns and fades into the night.

Yelling, "She's not your anything!" I feel a tug at my arm. I open my eyes and pop up on my elbows immediately. The

room is pitch black. I can't see anything. She shifts in the bed and a flicker of a switch has me instantly squinting. The light from the lamp shines on her golden hair as she sits next to me and strokes my cheek. "Are you okay?"

Breathing heavily, I try to shake it off. It was just a dream. It wasn't real. I will never lose her. I swallow a few times before answering. "Yeah, I'm fine."

When I lay back down, she rests her head against mine. Settling onto the pillow, she kisses just under my jaw. "Want to talk about it?"

"No. I can't even remember what it was about," I lie because I remember it well. I've been having these dreams

almost every night for the past week, ever since I bought her engagement ring.

“You sure?”

Inhaling deeply, I push back the dread that makes its way up my throat. I don't need to answer her. I'd rather show her I'm okay. I look over to her, she is on the left side of the bed, and I think about how much I love that we don't care what side we fall asleep on as long as we're together. Running my still slightly trembling hand down her back, I roll her on top of me.

A small smile quirks at the corners of her lips as she says, “Are you sure you even had a bad dream? Or did you just want to have sex in the middle of the night?” She leans her head down to my

mouth and runs her nose over my stubbled jawline. I inhale her citrus scent; feeling thankful she is here with me.

I give her a small laugh and wish that were true as I brush strands of her hair out her face. “I didn’t think I had to fake a bad dream to have sex with you. But now that you mention it, I certainly like the idea. And I figure since we’re both up, why not?”

Connecting my lips with hers, I roll her to my side. Sucking on her neck, I roll my tongue along her skin as my hand glides up the inside of her thigh. Slipping my fingers inside her, a small moan escapes her lips as her body bows up, preparing for what I hope to be able

to give her forever.



I had to approach the subject cautiously. I knew she had to go back there to see the place itself wasn't a symbol of death. Yes, death had claimed her father too soon, but The Greek was the place where he enjoyed life to the fullest. It was where they both loved to be together, connected by their passion for music, concerts, and all that came with it.

I feel that before I can ask her to

move forward with me in life, she has to accept her past. The fact that she refuses to go back there tells me she hasn't. My father used to say that scars are the roadmaps to one's soul, but her soul is beautiful and I don't need a roadmap to find it; I am able to reach it every day that we're together. What bothers me is what he said about scars that can't be seen—the emotional ones. We all have them but hers are deep. Hers are from having endured a lifetime of sorrow; from being cut at such a young age. I want to be the one to help her heal those wounds. This is why I want to take her back there. It's not only so she can see my band perform, although of course I want her to be there. It's more for her

and for the benefit of our relationship as it moves forward. But, I know I can't help her with the scars *his* death left on her. I can't even talk about *him* with her. I know it's wrong and I try, I really do. I just can't. I hate him and can't get past that. I can only hope that loving her enough and being there for her has already started the healing process for those open wounds.

I was reluctant at first when Xander told me he arranged for The Wilde Ones to perform at The Greek. Yes, it was definitely a great opportunity for the band to preview some of the songs from our new album, but I wasn't sure if I could get Dahlia to go. Then I realized this was my opportunity to bring her

back there and make it a happy place for her, once again. Also, if truth be told, I want her there with me to kick off this tour, especially since I'm not really into it. Trying but failing miserably at coming up with the right way to persuade her, I decided to call Grace and ask her to meet me for lunch. I thought about calling Serena since she and Dahlia talk almost every day, but decided Grace was the better choice since she knows Dahlia so well and they are so much alike.

Meeting *his* mother to ask for advice seems odd but feels right at the same time. Asking her to lunch, I had to put aside the *he* was her son because in Dahlia's eyes, Grace is like a mother to



her, ever since she lost her own. I just had to forget about *him* and what I know and push away my feelings like I've done since I saw *his* picture at her house.

On my way to the restaurant, I stopped by Dahlia's house to check on it. She still owns it. She's gotten a few offers but none close to her asking price, so she's refused them all. I don't want to push her, but I know her refusals aren't based on money. I think she is just having a hard time letting go of it, so I haven't pushed her.

I arrived at Caffè Riace before Grace and asked for an outdoor table. I knew, just like Dahlia, Grace loved being outside.

So now I'm sitting outside in the late afternoon under a green umbrella wishing I hadn't left my sunglasses in the car. I'm blinking the bright sun out of my eyes as I type out a text to Dahlia.

*Just thought you should know how hot you looked this am in those boots I love so much. BTW not sure I'm crazy about you wearing them to meet with your first client. I love you.*

Her response is immediate.

*LOL since my first client is a 50 yr old woman I don't think u have anything to worry about. BTW even if I were meeting*

*Adam Levine you'd have nothing to*

*worry about. I love you more. <3 :-\**

I laugh to myself. I love her more than she could possibly ever know, but we have fun debating who loves whom more. There is a shadow blocking the sun as I sit here just grinning. Before I can respond to Dahlia's text, I look up and see Grace approaching. She reaches the table and unbuttons her jacket as I stand and give her a kiss. I pull out her chair and she has a seat. She sets her purse on the table and immediately puts her napkin on her lap.

We order lunch, and the waiter brings our drinks. I decide to first tell her about my upcoming proposal. Her reaction is pure happiness, as if Dahlia

is truly her own daughter. She even sheds a few joyful tears as she congratulates me and gives me her blessing. Once our food arrives, we talk about my upcoming tour and the impact it will have on Dahlia's new photography business. I explain to her that Dahlia didn't take a heavy load of clients who needed album covers worked and completed during the duration of the tour. The ones she did offer to style and photograph for she plans to fly back to LA to complete the jobs.

Finishing my sandwich, I push my plate aside and rest my hands on the table. "Grace," I say as she looks up at me. "I'm hoping you can give me some advice."

“Of course River, you know you can ask me anything.”

“Well it’s about Dahlia’s parents, her dad really. My band is going to be performing at The Greek in a few weeks and I really want her there. Not just to see us perform but because I think she needs to go back to see it’s a happy place. I want her to see it’s still the same place where she found happiness with her father before he died, and maybe if she does, she’ll let some of her demons go.”

She finishes her salad and sets her fork down, wiping the corner of her mouth. “River, that is so special. I think you simply need to tell her how you feel, how much you want her there with you.

She'll go, knowing how important it is to you. I know she will. She loves you so much."

The waiter clears the table, and Grace orders a cup of tea. You see River, I think it's just the anticipation of going back there that frightens her. She's been afraid to be surrounded by so many memories of all those special times with her father. But knowing how much she loves you and how you make her feel so safe; I believe she's ready to confront her past. I think she'll come to see The Greek as a happy place once again if she goes. And yes, I do think it will help her put some of her ghosts to rest."

I absorb all she's telling me; as she speaks I think how simple it all is. Inside

my beautiful amazing girl there still lives a scared teenager who lost her parents, her family. I can help heal her remaining scars simply by making her feel safe going back there because I'll be with her through it all. Maybe this time she can do it, and her happy memories will come flooding back, washing away the sad ones.



The drive to The Greek was quiet. I held her hand as she fidgeted the whole way there. I knew she was nervous, and

so was I. Not because I was performing, but for her. After meeting with Grace, I'd waited a few days and then, just as she had suggested, I asked Dahlia straight out to go with me to The Greek. She was hesitant at first but didn't say no. I simply explained to her that Xander had arranged the gig to help straighten out some contract issues involving the band's upcoming and that I really needed and wanted her to be there with me. That was true, just not entirely the reason. After thinking about it for only a moment, she reluctantly agreed. I even arranged for Aerie, Grace, Serena, and Trent to sit with her.

Once we arrived, her doubts passed immediately. This was evident on her



face and in the color of her eyes. It was like watching a child at an amusement park. As we walked through the gates and into the place she had once visited so many times with her father, I knew happy memories were forefront in her mind, pushing the sad ones aside.

Now, lying together on our bed, I can only smile that we took that step together. I look at her and run my fingers over her bare stomach while we kiss. She smiles and pulls me closer to her. As we lay here in each other's arms, she thanks me again for taking her back to The Greek. She laughs as she reminisces about the all the concerts she saw there with her dad.

When she's finished, I lean in to kiss

her as my hand gently rubs circles down her back. “Thank you for agreeing to go back there. I know it wasn’t easy for you, but I thought you needed to go, and it was important to me that you be there for our kick-off show.”

As I gently press kisses against her mouth, she moans against my lips. “I know, and I’m so glad I went. You were amazing; The Greek was just as amazing as I remember it. The whole night has been truly amazing.”

I pull back to look at her lovingly. “Dahlia, you’re the amazing one, and I’d do anything for you. I want you to be happy, always.”

She doesn’t say anything else; she just crashes her lips to mine as her

fingers knot into my hair. I respond instantly. My hands wander up her naked body, touching each rib, sliding along the curve of each breast until they meet her hands in my hair where I clutch them and pull them down to our sides, holding her tightly, just for a moment.

I love her so much and I want to not only show her, but also tell her just how much. Letting go of her hands, I softly trail my fingers back up her body, playfully teasing her along the way, but stopping at her heart to trace it. I can feel the goosebumps form on her skin as I lower my head down to kiss the line I just etched. "I love you."

I kiss my way back up to her lips and gently cup her chin. I look into her eyes

and tell her exactly how I feel. “Dahlia, I will love you forever.” Then I kiss her and finish telling her my thoughts. “In this lifetime and in the next.”

She clutches my face, and I see the love and desire in her slightly hooded eyes. “River, I love you. So much.”

I smile at her and have one more thing I want to tell her. “You are everything I have ever dreamed about, you are my dreams.” I see tears welling in her eyes, and I don’t want them to spill so I kiss her softly, deeply, pouring all of my love into this kiss. Her head falls back further into the pillow and her breathing picks up. I know what that means and I can’t hold back any longer. I want nothing more than to be buried

deep inside her, to feel our bodies as one, our souls forever connected.

The feel of her lips as she drags them down my jaw, along my neck to my chest makes me shiver with need. Tracing circles along the inside of her thighs I slip one finger inside of her, feeling her wetness and I know she's so ready for me. I tease her a bit as I gently circle around, in and out, until she can't take it any longer. "River," she cries out as she arches her back, her breathing quick and shallow, her eyes now shut. "Please, I want to feel you inside me, make love to me." As I easily slip myself inside her, her arms lace around my neck and her legs wrap around my body pulling me even closer and I know this is exactly

where I always want to be.



A few weeks after the concert at The Greek, I decided it was time to ask her to be my wife. I wanted her to be mine in every sense of the word, more than anything I had ever wanted. My plan to pop the question was simple. Take her to one of her favorite places and ask her. Getting her there was just as simple. All I had to do was suggest we go for a sunset run; she always wants to go running. But arranging it all to go as

planned was not so simple. There were so many restrictions and variables, so I just decided to keep it simple.

Pulling into the parking lot, it was late afternoon and one of the hottest days of the summer. Walking up to the hiker's gate entrance, she steps forward and smirks at me, leaving just a few inches between us. "You sure you want to do this? Because I know, just as well as you do, that this little climb isn't going to be easy in the scorching sun, and I'm not afraid to admit it." She steps back, and I can see her eyes are deep brown as she smiles her mischievous, seductive grin.

She lunges forward to stretch, touching her fingers to her toes as her sweat pants ride down her hips a little.

Damn, she's good. She knows I'm powerless against her when she struts her body around like that. It drives me crazy, but what she doesn't know is, I'm making this almost four mile up hill hike in the blistering sun for a greater purpose than seeing the view from behind the Hollywood sign. So I play her game and hmmm. . . and haaa . . . a little so she thinks I really don't want to do this. Damn, I'm the good one. I even paid off the guard to stop anyone from following behind us. This way, when we reach the top of the hill, we will be all alone. Just the way I need it to be.

I fold my arms over my chest and watch her.

She walks down the path and turns



her head over her shoulder asking, “You coming?” I run up behind her and pick her up. She squirms to try to free herself and she could if she really wanted to because her backpack is keeping me from really holding on tight. I set her down and laugh in her ear, “You know I never turn down a challenge.”

She is still laughing when she turns to look at me, and her beauty takes my breath away. She is just so natural and carefree. I have no doubts this is the girl for me—forever. With her I’ve had the best days of my life and there are only better ones to come.

As we approach the top, we’re walking single file up the dirt trail. My eyes follow her every move as she leans

forward, stepping up onto the plateau.

She takes her camera out of her backpack. “I just want to snap a few photos before the sun loses its glow.”

Before handing it to me, she slips her Pac-Man bracelet off and zips it safely away. “Do you mind holding this while I climb up the H?”

“You sure that’s safe?” I ask because I’ve never heard of anyone actually climbing up the letters.

She sees the worry on my face. “Hey, sure it is.” She points to the letter and says, “It’s not that high.”

“Beautiful, first of all, it is that high but I’m not thinking of up,” I say as I point down into the valley. “I’m thinking of down.”

Taking a sip of water, she nods and kisses me. “I’ll be right back,” she says as she hands me her water bottle.

“Hey,” I yell as she climbs the fence to get closer to the letters, leaving me holding all of her shit, “What do I look like? A pack mule?”

She looks over and winks at me. “Never thought of you that way. A jackass maybe on occasion, but not a mule.”

I take a gulp from her water bottle, set everything on the ground, and follow her. Does she really think I’m going to let her climb up there alone?

Standing below the H, the letters are enormous. “Umm . . . Dahlia, I’m not sure you can do this. There is nothing for

you to grip onto. You'd have to pull all of your body weight up the pole."

"Are you saying I can't?"

"I'm saying, you more than likely won't be able too."

"Care to make a bet?"

Shaking my head at her, all I can do is laugh. "Baby girl, I'm not even going to bet you on that because it would just be plain wrong."

With her camera hanging from her neck, she pouts her lips and folds her arms over each other, surveying the letter.

"Dahlia, just give me your camera, I'll take the picture."

She stands there, still pouting. Removing the camera from her neck, she

hands it to me.

Walking up to her, I take it and whisper in her ear, “Watch out, you know what your bitchy mood does to me. That look was so hot.”

True to form, she rolls her eyes and then takes a seat on the ground.

Somehow I manage to pull myself up to the first rafter and balance against the cross beams to take the picture my girl really wants.

Getting down, I give her the camera and she hands me the water. I finish the bottle and toss it next to our stuff.

She comes to stand between my legs and presses up against me, chest on chest, cupping my cheek with one hand and slipping her other hand into the

waistband of my track pants. “Thank you.”

My pulse jumps and my whole body responds, but I have a question to ask her and even though her sudden movement and closeness have me standing straight up, I have a plan that I have to stick to right now.

My voice takes on a husky tone all on its own. “Unless you want to be naked very soon, I think it’s for the best if you don’t touch me like that up here.”

Pulling up my t-shirt I wipe the sweat from my face as her hands instantly find the bare skin of my abs. I do my best to ignore the overwhelming need I have for her by chanting, ‘Stick to the task at hand, stick to the task at hand,’

to myself, and I walk over to the back pack and unzip one of the compartments and discreetly tuck the box in the waistband of my pants, careful for her not to see.

“What are you looking for?” she asks.

“My phone, I wanted to see what time it was,” I tell her as I quickly pull out my phone.

I know she’s watching me from behind, so I twist my head. Her smile, her eyes, her amazing beauty stops me in my tracks. I don’t even wink or make a comment. I just know by the way she’s looking at me right now, that this is the right time.

Walking back over to her, I lean in,

clutch her face with both hands, and start to kiss her. I trace the seam of her lips with my tongue and she opens her mouth. Pressing my lips harder against hers, our tongues meet and I feel our souls connect, in the exact same way she described it to me on her birthday. The moment couldn't be any more perfect. The sun is starting to set over the horizon; the city we live in together is below us; and the sign she loves so much envelops us.

Dropping down on one knee, I look up at her beautiful face. I can already see tears starting to form in her eyes as I begin to speak. "I never imagined I could feel so connected to anyone as much as I feel connected to you. I knew I



loved you from the moment I saw you. How could I not? Loving you is as easy as breathing.”

I open the box where the custom-made diamond encrusted pearl ring sits. Like her necklace the pearl sits inside a flower, a dahlia, but unlike her necklace the flower sits on top of a thread of eternity diamonds, representing my love everlasting. Taking the ring out of the box, my hands are shaking so badly as I set it on the ground and stand. I want to look directly into her beautiful eyes when I ask her the most important question I will ever ask anyone in my life.

“Dahlia London, you know I love you more than any man has ever loved a

woman. My love for you runs deeper than any words can convey. My heart is yours forever. Will you marry me?"

I'm still shaking, I'm so fucking nervous, this girl owns me and the fact that I want it that way scares the living shit out me and makes me the happiest man alive.

Her words are the words I've been waiting to hear since the minute I laid eyes on her. "Yes, yes, yes, yes . . ." Her yes's continue until I pull her to me and kiss her like I've never kissed her before. All the love I have for her is pouring out of my heart and into hers. She wraps her arms around my neck as tightly as she can and I swing her around in circles. Once I set her back down, I

take her hand and slide the ring on her finger. It's the perfect ring for the perfect girl.

Her tears are streaming down her face, and they are not letting up. I hug her as tight as I can. Whispering into her ear, I say, "Hey baby, it's okay. This is a happy time. Not a time for all these tears."

Kissing her neck, I graze my teeth over her skin, and she giggles. I pull back and wipe her tears with my fingers, and I can't help but smile at her when I see goosebumps on her arms. I want to cry with her, I'm so happy, but I don't. Instead, I just look at her. At the same girl who, when I first saw her across the room our eyes met and our souls were

forever connected.

# Chapter Twenty - Six

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## VICTIM

*Yes it's real  
There are victims of crime  
Sometimes it can't be prevented  
They need help to shelter the pain  
Sometimes we are just victims of a  
crime.*



*River's POV*

*September 2012 - 9 months later...*

Picking the location for our weekend getaway was simple. I know Dahlia loves beautiful views and the outdoors, so I picked a place where we can enjoy both. The reason for our weekend getaway wasn't so simple. The band finished the album and the label is getting ready for it to drop, the

promotional bonanza has begun, and the tour starts in six weeks. With all the chaos about to begin, I wanted to spend some time alone, just the two of us, so I didn't tell anyone where we were going and wanted to surprise her by bringing her here.

Once the album promotion begins, I know our life together will change for a while. I've been through it before. It will be months of craziness. We'll be living on a bus, in a different city every night, crammed together without any privacy. I'm doing this for Garrett, Nix, and Xander because if it were only for myself, I'd gladly stay in LA playing small venues, making music, and living life with her.

Dahlia's extremely excited for me; it's me that's not so excited. I like the life we have going in LA. She's agreed to start the tour off with me but has to return to LA to complete some jobs that have to be shot before the end of the year. I hate that she'll be alone. I feel like she's already spent so much time alone in her life. Now that she has me, I don't ever want that for her again.

Bell suggested Monterey Bay for our escape, but I nixed that idea immediately. Dahlia grew up on the beach; she loves it, and actually, so do I. But the reason that it's not one of my favorite places to take her, is *him*. We've gone to the beach a few times, mostly when we go to Grace's house.



But, when we're there, I feel like she's not truly with me. She stares out into the water almost like she's looking for him. I've thought about discussing it with her, but as soon as we leave the beach, she's always back to herself, and it seems unnecessary to bring it up.

Right now, as we ride the ski lift and I look over at her goldish-green eyes, I can see what she sees. All the beauty that surrounds me is her. It's because of her I see the world so differently, and I have no doubt that she loves me. There are hundreds of miles of beauty below us to be discovered. The wet snowflakes fall all around the mountaintops as the crisp, cool wind whistles in the air, carrying them across the summit. The tall

evergreen trees are reflected in the lake below us, their branches bending back and forth. We can even see the trails we ran earlier this morning leading to the breathtaking view of the stream. Now, as we sit under the azure California sky, waiting to ski down Pinball Mountain, I can see all of that. Before I met her, I would have only seen the snow-topped mountain I'm about to ski down.

Looking over at her, I ask, "You sure about this?"

She insisted we ski this mountain just because of its name. "Dahlia, it's a black diamond. Those are for the expert skiers," I laughed at her when she told me she wanted to try it.

Ignoring that important bit of

information, she shrugged her shoulders and pulled me toward the lift. Raising her skis one at a time, trying to walk, she asked, “You scared?”

Chuckling, I pointed to her skis. “I’m not the one trying to walk with my skis on.”

She stuck her tongue out at me as I skied past her and waited with my hand outstretched to pull her as she reached the lift station.

Thinking back, it was pretty dumb of me to have agreed, but who am I to say no to her? Now we’re about halfway to the top of the mountain, she’s fumbling with the goggles on top of her head, and I think she’s second-guessing herself as well.

I pull her hat down to keep it from falling off. “You nervous?”

She looks at me, her cheeks rosy from windburn, but doesn’t answer.

“Did you hear me?” I ask, tapping my pole against her ski before leaning over and kissing her. She still doesn’t answer so I suck on the corner of her bottom lip before gliding my nose to her covered ear. “Can you hear me now?”

I see her breath pick up, and even though the skin on her neck is not visible, I know she’s covered in goosebumps. She blinks her eyes a few times. “Sorry. Just thinking. We’re pretty high up aren’t we?” she says, and I know she’s nervous.

“Hey,” I say, grabbing both poles in

one hand so I can pull her chin to look at me. “I’ll stay with you, and we’ll zigzag down the mountain or walk if we have to. It’ll be fun and you’ll be able to say you skied Pinball Mountain.”

She nods her head, and I decide it’s time to take her mind off her poor decision to graduate from the much easier blue diamonds and go directly to the black.

“So are we having sex in the hot tub again tonight?” I ask, not that I really care where we have sex, but because I love thinking about her cute naked body all the time.

“River,” she says as if she’s shocked, but she’s not. “If we decide now that takes all the spontaneity out of the night,”

she grins, bumping her shoulder into mine.

Pointing to the mountain I know will take us forever to get down, I say, “Sorry beautiful girl. I forgot how spontaneous you are, but I just want to know what to expect when we finally make it to the bottom.”

She laughs and pulls her goggles down, preparing herself to exit the lift. Pulling mine down as well, I adjust my hat and get ready to ski down Pinball Mountain.

After cautiously making our way down most of the mountain, we finally get to the last slope, and I ski ahead of her. Swooshing my way to the bottom, I chuckle as I watch her snow plow down

the last stretch.

She catches me watching her as she makes it to the bottom and comes to a stop next to me. “Show off.”

“Well, I had to get some speed on this run so it might as well have been on the bunny slope. Had enough?”

She nods her head vigorously.

Moving around her, I put my pole into each of her rear bindings and she steps out of her skis. I do the same with mine. I lean our skis against the rack, and the valet comes over to take them. Wrapping my arms around her waist from behind, I lean my chin on her shoulder and whisper, “Let’s go inside and get a drink.” I walk with her in front of me, my arms still holding her tightly

as we head into the lodge.

As we approach a table near the stone fireplace, she takes off her gloves, goggles, and hat. Her beautiful, but messy, hair hangs around her head. She runs her hands through it trying to tame it, then reaches in her pocket and pulls out a hair tie.

As she pulls her hair back, I tell her, “Don’t put it up. I love your hair like that.”

“Messy and windblown?”

“I just love it down. You know that.”

She smiles and shrugs her shoulders. “Whatever. You’re the one who has to look at it.”

As she takes off her coat, I can’t help but think how fucking hot she looks and



she doesn't even know it. She has these tight little black pants on with a snug white turtleneck. I laugh to myself when I see she's wearing black and white striped socks. In the past nine months I've never seen her wear anything that wasn't a shade of white, gray, or black. She looks hot in everything, so she obviously knows what to wear.

"How about we try a hot toddy?" she says as we sit down in the chairs near the fireplace.

"I'm not drinking anything with the name toddy in it. It scares me. I'll stick with hot chocolate," I tell her just as the valet brings us our boots.

I bend to put boots on and notice she's watching me. "What?"

“Thank you.”

“For what? Not wanting a hot toddy?”

“No, silly. For helping me down Pinball Mountain.”

“Well, you know that did take an exceptionally long time.”

“Yesss,” she says in her standard response tone when she knows I’m fishing for something.

Sitting up, I roll my shoulders, one then the other. “I’m feeling pretty sore from catching you so many times.” I emphasize the word ‘sore’.

She drags her eyes slowly across my shoulders as she bites her lip. “Well then, I think you might be in need of a massage.”

Wiggling her fingers, she adds, “And as luck would have it, you’re in the company of one of the best masseuses around.”

Shooting her a devilish grin, I say, “A massage? Or anything of my choice?”

She laughs and shrugs her shoulders. “Anything of your choice, like what?”

“You’ll see.”

She shakes her head at me, and I can’t help but smile. Watching her now, so natural, so beautiful, I know why it only took that one meeting so long ago to know she owned me. It’s like I was hers from the very first time I looked into her beautiful eyes.

We decide to head to our room after we finish our hot chocolate. Once we’re

in the elevator, I grab her and kiss her. Her response is immediate, and we have a full-blown make out session right there. Barely able to keep our hands off each other long enough to open the door, we stumble into our hotel room practically wrapped around each other. Crushing my mouth to hers, I kick the door shut behind me. As I trace my tongue over the seam of her soft lips, I can taste the hot chocolate she just drank downstairs.

“Mmmm . . . you taste like chocolate,” I whisper in her ear, my hands now resting on her cute ass.

“You like that?” she answers back in her own sexy whisper.

“Mmmm hmm . . .” I moan again as I

continue etching her mouth, searching for more of that taste.

“We could order some more from room service. Or better yet, chocolate cake.”

“Whatever you want. As long as I get to taste it on you, I’m in.”

She turns her head and playfully bites my earlobe while her fingers trace patterns up and down the back of my sweater. I’m so turned on right now, but I need to take a shower. This sweater is itching the shit out of me and has me sweating my balls off.

Reluctantly pulling away, I give Dahlia a quick kiss. “Order whatever you want. I’m going to jump in the shower. I stink and I don’t want you

spending the night having to smell me because I'm having a hard time smelling myself," I tell her, walking backwards toward the shower.

Giggling, she throws herself onto the huge bed and hangs one leg off the side. "Go ahead, you've kind of killed the mood anyway by using the words stink and smell."

"Just keeping it real," I wink at my beautiful fiancée, lying on the bed where I can't wait to join her after I clean up. Then I add, "I won't be long! And Dahlia, I can bring the mood back in two seconds flat."

She shakes her head and rolls her eyes. "Whatever you say, Loverboy."

"Care to make a bet?"

“Actually, I’m going to pass on this bet because I think I just might lose,” she laughs. “Go shower, I need to call Aerie and Serena and check in with them anyway.”

She sits up and grabs her phone as I turn around.

Twisting my head back, I see my girl, once again, checking me out from behind. I catch her doing this all the time, and I love it. She’s used to getting caught, so she just shrugs her shoulders and blows me a kiss. I wink at her as she’s dialing her phone, then I hear, “Hey Aerie, it’s me.”

Turning on the shower, I hear her laughing and giggling with Aerie on the phone, and it makes me smile. I love that

sound. I could listen to it all day; it's like one of my favorite songs.

The glass walls are starting to fog up as I step inside the steamy shower. The hot water feels great on my muscles after skiing and from bending down to pick Dahlia up off the ground all day. The itching from my sweater is slowly letting up as I soap up my back. Thinking of Dahlia's face as we stood at the top of that black diamond slope on Pinball Mountain, I can't help but laugh out loud. She looked slightly petrified, but she was determined to make her way down that mountain on her own and she did, well, most of it anyway.

Closing my eyes as I rinse the shampoo from my hair, I sense her near



me. When I open my eyes I smirk because she's standing against the sink, arms crossed, just watching me.

"Hey beautiful girl, whatcha doing?" I ask, wanting her to be standing next to me, not way over there.

Attempting to lift her tight sweater off she asks, "Mind if I join you?"

"Hmmm . . . Let me think about that," I say, and then I quickly dunk my head under the water to rinse the last of the soap before exiting the shower and heading toward her. She has her sweater half way off when I grab her and pick her up, clothes and all, and haul her ass back inside the shower with me.

"Do you really think you have to ask me a question like that?"

Her breath is hitched and I know she knows she doesn't.

Setting her down under the showerhead, I lean back against the glass wall and watch as the warm water pours down her body, drenching her clothes. She's giggling, not whining or complaining but actually enjoying this. God, she's so amazing, so carefree, and so fun. I love everything about her.

But right now, I'm thinking I'd love to see her sexy body naked. Enough of the giggling. Pointing to her soaking wet sweater that looks like it weighs a ton and her wet pants that are clinging to her long legs, I tell her, "You've got too many clothes on for what I have in mind, beautiful girl. Why don't you take them

off?”

“You want me to take this off?” she asks, pointing to her own clothes.

“Yeah, I do.”

“I’ll try,” she says, looking at me coyly, purposely taking her time pulling off her sweater. I know she’s trying to tease me.

“Let me help.” I walk over to her, undo her jeans, and shove them down.

She wobbles a bit, but I hold her hips tight. She smiles down at me as droplets of water spill down her angelic face.

Standing up, I push her back against the wall and start to kiss her.

She pushes me back a little and runs her hands up her own breasts. Then, with

the most innocent smile I have ever seen her wear, she asks, “Do you want to take this off, or do you want to fuck me wearing it?”

Normally I would laugh at her use of the word fuck, but I’m having a hard time controlling myself. I practically growl as I turn her around and undo her bra. Running my hands down her hot body to her panties, I slowly slide them off, feeling every inch of her soft slick skin.

“Does that answer your question?”

She reaches around to grab me but I shift to redirect the showerhead. Moving back over toward her, I kiss one of her shoulders and then the other as I reach my hands around to her front and touch

her everywhere.

Turning her around, I press her against the wall. “You were suppose to give me a show,” I tell her, dunking my head down to her hard nipple and sucking on it.

“I never agreed to any such thing.” She’s panting now, but I know I can get her to give me one anyway.

“Remember you said massage or anything I choose? My anything is a show.”

I continue to lick and suck her breasts as her hands slide down my shoulders to my arms.

“Okay, anything,” she easily concurs, and I can’t help but grin.

When she starts to moan, I move to

the other breast as she braces her hands on my shoulders. When I pull her nipple forcefully with my mouth, she screams out, “River, please!”

I know what she wants, but I ask anyway, “Please what, Dahlia?”

“I want you inside me. Now.”

She’s watching me. I grin at her and suck harder, tugging a little with my teeth as I rub circles around her other nipple.

“I will be soon, I promise.”

She has the tiniest, most beautiful breasts, and as I slide my tongue down her stomach her hands come to cup them. I’m torn between watching her and pleasuring her. The thought of either, or both, has me throbbing. Slipping my tongue in and out, I move it faster and

then I slip two fingers deep inside. As soon as I do, I watch the pleasure wash over her face and I know she's coming hard. "Oh God River!" she screams out as I continue to move my fingers until the trembling subsides.

Standing up, I take a minute to admire her. Her once too-thin body has taken on the most sensual shape. I can't get enough of her, regardless of her body type, but I know the way she looks right now is because she's completely happy. I feel like I own her body.

Grabbing the soap, I start washing her arm. I slide the soap up toward her shoulder and then drop the bar to the ground to run both my hands up and down her soapy limb. As the soap

lathers, I move my hands upwards and with my legs, I gently move her back and press her against the glass wall.

She gasps when I rest one of my legs between her thighs as my hands find her chest, and I gently rub circles around her nipples. The soap makes my fingers slide easily. The water sprays down, and I move the showerhead so just a slight trickle is hitting us.

Bending down to pick up the soap, I decide to lather her leg. I do the same as I did with her arm. But this time, once I meet the apex of her thigh, I press a little harder and rub smaller circles around her.

She moans softly and as I look up her eyes flutter shut. I brush my thumb over



her and she squirms in a way I know she's enjoying it.

"Please, River," she whispers, her eyes still closed.

I plunge my fingers deeper then pull them back. I grin as she tries to follow my hand with her hips.

"Please River, please!"

I know she wants me and her asking me for it really turns me on, but I'm not giving in that easily, although I really want to.

"What Dahlia? Please what?" I tease her, knowing exactly what she's asking for.

Moaning a little louder as I continue to plunge my fingers, sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly, she begs, "Please

fuck me now.”

Kissing her jaw, I can't help but chuckle at her use of the word fuck. I remember when we first met how cute I thought it was when she would swear, something I always tried not to do in front of her. Now, her saying the word fuck isn't cute. It's so hot, and really, all I want to do is fuck her now.

Sliding my tongue up to her ear I whisper, “I swear I will. I swear I won't stop until your legs are shaking and every hotel guest on this floor knows my name.”

I feel a smile form on her mouth. She's breathing very heavily as she bites my earlobe.

I press her back further into the wall

and replace my fingers with my cock. She instantly responds, trying to wrap her legs around me, to push me further inside her, but I resist and just lightly slide in and out of her.

I'm torturing myself, but I'm enjoying watching her more. She's trying to grip the wall, but there is nothing there. I stand still a few moments, drawing out her anticipation, trying to get myself under control as she continues to try to push her body closer to mine.

I enter her with my tip only, over and over. As she moans, she continues to call out my name. When I see her body start to tremble, she's screaming my name, "River, please!" I have no willpower left.

In one swift motion, I grab her and lift her up, pushing her body up against the wall. She responds instantly, wrapping her legs around me as I plunge inside her hard and fast. I have to remember to breathe, she feels so good. I continue to watch her, as her eyes start to roll, and I know she's so close.

I want to take it slow and make her come over and over, but I need her too much. I start moving faster, thrusting into her over and over again, each time harder and faster. When I see the look of pleasure come across her face, I know she's there, again. She screams my name one final time as I hold her hips in place and yell out her name. Leaning in I kiss her hard as sensation overtakes me.

As our bodies quiver, I swallow her cries of contentment, wanting to taste and feel every inch of her happiness.



Citizens' song Amazing Grace startles me awake. It's playing from Dahlia's cell phone, her ringtone for Grace. Reaching for her, I realize she's not in bed.

"Dahlia, your phone!" I yell, yawning and covering my head with the pillow.

She doesn't answer. I call out to her again, but the room is too quiet. Looking

around I realize she's not here.

Scanning the area to find and silence the fucking phone, I see a note on her pillow. I roll over and grab it.

*I know how tired you are from 'skiing' so I thought I'd let you sleep in. Just running the shorter trail then I'll bring coffee back. I love you more.*

Blinking the sleep out of my eyes, I remember she woke me up earlier and wanted to run the lake trails to see the sunrise. I told her to give me a minute, but shit, I must have fallen back asleep.

Lifting my head off the pillow, I see her phone. I sit up and grab it from the bedside table where it is plugged in. The

battery must have died again, so she left it to charge. The song keeps playing, and the message light is blinking ten missed calls. The time reads 6:14am.

Scratching my chest, I decide to answer it. "Hello," I mumble into the phone as I balance it on my shoulder and situate myself on the bed.

I'm surprised to hear Serena's voice instead of Grace's. "River?" she asks and then she's oddly silent.

I flop my head back on the pillow and stretch out. "Serena? What's . . ." I start to say when she interrupts, "I need to talk to Dahlia." Her voice is a little off, and she sounds sad or nervous, I'm not sure which.

Taking the phone in my hand, I sit

back up immediately. “Serena she’s not here. She went running. Is everything okay? Is it Grace?” I have to ask, but pray it’s not.

“River you need to find her. We need to talk to her now.” Her tone is urgent, and I have to know what’s going on.

With concern clear in my voice, I ask, “Serena, what’s going on? What’s the matter?”

Her voice is muffled through the phone for a few seconds, and I can’t really hear what she’s saying when Grace gets on the phone.

“River, we’ve called the police,” she tells me, her voice quivering as she speaks.

“Grace, I’m lost. What do you need



the police for?”

“Didn’t she tell you?”

My heart is racing, and I really just want her tell me what the fuck she’s talking about. “Grace, what are you talking about? What’s going on?”

“I left Dahlia three messages last night. They let him out on a technicality.”

“Grace, who did they let out?”

“The man who shot Ben. He’s out,” she’s telling me this and I’m trying to process what’s going on.

I look at Dahlia’s phone and hit the home button. I see three messages from Grace that haven’t been listened to, and fifteen missed calls from Grace and Serena.

“Grace, she hasn’t listened to your

messages yet.”

She’s crying and I think she is unable to speak but she manages, “Hold on.”

Caleb gets on the phone. “Hey man. Where is she? I’m not sure what’s going on but we need to keep an eye on her.”

I’m trying not to get annoyed at this prick and his use of the word ‘we’ as I answer, “She went running. What the fuck is going on?”

I can hear him inhale a deep breath, “Look man, I think the guy that shot Ben is looking for something. I drove by Dahlia’s house last night just to check on it, and someone broke in again. I drove over to your house looking for her, but they wouldn’t let me in the gate and neither of you answered their calls. I

called your sister and she gave me your number. I called you all fucking night.”

I bolt out of bed and look frantically around for my pants. Running to the bathroom, I find them on the floor. I pull them on and find my phone still in the pocket. My hands are trembling. “Caleb, I’ll call you back when I find her,” I tell him and hang up.

Calling hotel security, I hastily explain the situation. Whether it’s necessary or not to send someone to find her, I have no fucking idea, but I want her found now.

Just as I throw on my shirt and sneakers and head for the door, the hotel phone rings. I’m torn between answering it and running out to find her but since I

did call security, I turn around and go back. I silently pick the phone up.

“Mr. Wilde?”

“Yes,” I answer with concern clearly in my voice.

“Sir, we’d like you to come down to the lobby and we’ll escort you to the hospital.”

I swallow a few times trying to catch my breath as all the air leaves my lungs, and my knees buckle beneath me. As I’m searching for the courage to ask the question I already know the answer to, I hear the ambulance sirens in the distance and I don’t need to ask anything.

Wiping a tear from the corner of my eye, I bolt out of the room and take the ten flights of stairs down to the lobby

where security is waiting for me. I can hardly think, but I know I can't lose her. I can't lose my best friend, my soul mate, my smile, my laugh—my everything.



They say she's already on her way to the hospital in the ambulance. I want them to take me to see her now. No one knows what happened, just that someone heard screaming and called security. This car ride feels like the longest fifteen-mile drive of my life. My phone keeps ringing, but I can't answer it. I just have to see her, my beautiful, perfect

girl. I need to know she's okay.

I slide open the photos I have of her. Some are serious, some are funny, some are quirky, and some are downright hot. All of them a reflection of her beautiful face, and the tears I've been holding back start to flow like the unease I feel about my inability to keep her safe.

Absorbed in my thoughts and the quiet of the car, I can barely even hear my own breathing. The heat is blasting and even though I'm not wearing a coat, I'm sweating. The security chief is talking to me, but I'm not listening until I realize he's telling me we're at the hospital. Rushing through the emergency room doors, I make my way through a very packed waiting room toward the

small glass window at the reception desk. As I get closer I think I see Dahlia back behind it, but once I'm there, I realize it's only wishful thinking.

Holding myself up against the counter, I feel slightly queasy. My nerves are getting the best of me. My heart is pounding a thousand beats a minute, my stomach is in knots, and the chill running through my body is making the shivering painful.

“Can I help you, sir?”

Putting aside any preamble of a greeting, I blurt out what I need from her. “My fiancée was just brought in and I need to see her now!” I'm raising my voice at this nurse and getting looks from others waiting behind me, but I don't

give a shit. I'm desperate to find my girl.

Her standard reply throws me into a tailspin. "Sir, are you family? Only family members are allowed back," she says, handing me a form to fill out that reads: Non-Family Member Patient Inquiry.

I'm trying to keep my patience but losing the battle as I take the clipboard from her and repeat, "I told you, we're engaged."

She looks up at me with an expression that says she's heard this before. "Sir, like I said, access is for the patient's family only. Please fill that out, and have a seat. We'll inform you of her condition once we get her permission."

"She has no fucking family! I am her



family!” I frantically yell through the window.

Taking a deep breath, I pull myself together. I complete the form and hand it back to her. I stand there trying to figure out what to do when I see the doors to the emergency room corridor open, and a patient is being wheeled out with her leg in a cast.

Looking at the nurse behind the desk engaged in talking to someone behind her as my clipboard lays idle in front of her, I know I have to do something. So without thinking of any consequences, I quickly walk through the open doors and enter the never-ending long hallway of drawn curtains. Once inside, I pause for a minute deciding the best way to go

about finding her. I'm praying she's actually back here and not in some operating room. Starting with the first curtain, I poke my head in trying not to disturb the person in there.

After I've done this a few too many times, I see a doctor walking down the wall. "Excuse me, doctor," I say to the short brunette woman in a white lab coat, "Do you think you could help me? My wife is back here and I can't remember what room she's in. I had to go out to the waiting room to use my phone to call and check on our daughter." I'm making this up as I go, and I'm actually wishing it were true, hoping it will be true someday. "And now I can't remember what room she's

in.”

Smiling, she says, “Sure. What’s her name?”

“Dahila London,” I tell her, and I really wish I was saying Dahlia Wilde.

She walks over to the desk and looks on a clipboard. She then directs me to curtained room number ten. It’s no more than ten feet away, but the walk feels like miles. Memories flood my mind with visions of her dancing in the rain. Her carefree take on life and the beauty she finds in everything is awe-inspiring. What’s ironic is she thinks everyone around her is amazing, but she’s the amazing one. The one I was supposed to take care of and failed miserably at.

My phone is ringing again and the

nurse walking down the corridor shoots me a look, “Sir, your phone is supposed to be turned off when you’re back here.”

Reaching for it in my front pocket, I hit the vibrate button. “Sorry, Miss,” I say as I see seven missed calls in the last thirty minutes, all from Caleb.

I hold my breath as I reach to open the blue curtain. Fear and dread flow through my veins until I not only see but also hear the voice of the girl I’ve fallen so deeply in love with.

“River, is that you?”

I yank open the curtain to see her sitting in the bed with her head propped back. There’s a bruise on her cheek, and her lip is swollen. She has a bandage wrapped around her wrist where she

wears the bracelet from *him*. But thank God she's sitting up and she's talking to me.

Swallowing hard, I can't suppress the tears as they instantly start flowing down my face. I jet over to her side and gently wrap my arms around her, careful of the wires connected to her body through the hospital gown.

She pulls me to her even tighter.

I whisper because I'm barely able to speak, "Are you okay?"

Crying, she nods her head, "Yes."

I gently cup her beautiful face in my hands, and stare at her. I press my lips to hers, careful to not actually apply any pressure. As relief washes over me that she's all right, I put my head in the crook

of her neck and stay there, unable to move. She's become so much a part of me in such a short period of time; I can't imagine my life without her.

She holds on to me, and I not only feel the strong physical connection she needs from me right now but also the deep emotional connection that binds us together. Her crying continues as I attempt to soothe her. Each of her tears is a tug I feel in my own heart.

I want to ask her what happened. Who did this? Did he touch you? How did he touch you? I want to fucking kill this man, but right now what she needs from me most is just me. So I hold in my questions until later and just hold her tight thanking God she's alive and okay.

Her cries turn into my cries as I kiss her on the forehead. “Everything’s okay now, baby. And I promise I’ll never let anyone hurt you ever again.”

# *Chapter Twenty - Seven*

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## CONNECTED

*We've taken this journey  
Down this happy road  
Discovering our love  
And we know we will never be alone  
We feel connected...connected  
forever.*





## *River's POV*

### *3 days after the attack...*

Wrapped in her concert t-shirt blanket, she's wedged in between my legs as we lie outside on a lounge chair with the sunrise and the Hollywood sign as our canvas. Her head rests on my chest, our fingers laced together, and my arms wrapped around her, holding her tight, where they've been since the

attack.

She was released from the hospital yesterday. Caleb and Xander drove up to Tahoe the day of the incident and stayed until it was time to leave. Caleb asked her more questions than the police, but the story was always the same. It was filled with very few details and a vague recollection of what the guy even said.

She didn't see who attacked her. He grabbed her from behind and threw her down, shoving her face into the ground. The only thing he said to her was to give it up and she wouldn't get hurt. Those words still send shivers down my spine. He pounded her head into the stony trail a few times as she tried to scream around his hand. When someone started

yelling from a distance, the guy fled.

Xander insisted on driving us back home from the resort, and Caleb took my car. Dahlia is physically all right, but she's shaken. I'm more than concerned about the incident. Caleb has really stepped up, and I've decided to suck up my dislike for him and let him help. He's installing a state-of-the-art security system and has a rotating crew of bodyguards on call.

We decided to wait a few days to tell her about *his* shooter's release. We hope that with the reported attack, he will be picked up again, and she won't have to worry. I felt bad deleting her messages, but I had to, for her.

Not being able to see her when she

was in the emergency room weighs heavy on my mind, and I wonder why we decided to wait until after the tour to pick a date to get married. So, as we lie together in the calm of the bright crisp morning, I ask her, “Why are we waiting to get married?” I kiss her hair and continue, “It seems like all I was really doing was waiting for you my whole life anyway, and I don’t want to wait anymore.”

She shifts her body so she’s lying on her side and looks up at me. Laughing a little, she responds, “I’m not really sure. But, when you put it that way, I don’t want to wait either.”

“How would you feel if we charter a plane to Las Vegas and get married

today? I can have it arranged in a matter of hours. We can fly up there, get married, and be back here by sunset.”

“You don’t mind if your family’s not there?”

Sitting up, I pull her to me and straddle her legs on each side of me. Gently tucking her hair behind her ear, I gaze into her beautiful eyes. “I won’t be satisfied until I wake up next to my wife every morning. Dahlia, all I want is you and I forever. We can celebrate later once you’re feeling better. We can even have another ceremony here, but what happened in the hospital I never want to happen again. So will you marry me today?”

Tears drip down her face, but this

time they're not tears of sadness. She leans in and kisses me. When she pulls away, she says, "River Wilde, I would love to marry you today."



Six hours later, she's wearing the most beautiful white dress. We had decided not to tell anyone what we were doing, but when Aerie stopped by unexpectedly this morning, Dahlia caved and told her. Aerie ran out and bought her a dress. It's short with pearls all over it, and she looks amazing. The bruises on her face are more than

evident, but neither of us cares. Pictures can be taken another day. Today is about us, for us. Once she marries me, we will be connected forever.

Caleb has security set. He wasn't exactly happy about our impromptu trip. I'm not sure if it was for personal or professional reasons, but he insisted he be the one to accompany us. I agreed because I know she means a lot to him, and he would do anything to protect her.

We're ready to go and I glance over at Dahlia who is plugging her uncharged phone into the wall behind the kitchen counter. Chuckling, I tell her, "Come on, beautiful. You don't need that today." I'm laughing because I'm usually telling her she needs to charge her phone earlier

than five minutes before we're walking out the door.

I walk over and pull her to me as I gaze into her now brownish-green eyes. "Are you ready to become my wife?"

Pulling back, she looks at me. "Only if you promise to love me forever."

I cup her cheeks and say, with absolute certainty, "Beautiful, I made that promise to myself the first time I kissed you." I cross my finger over my heart and add, "I promise to love you always. How could I not?"

Hugging her as tightly as I can, I know I will never let her go. After I kiss her, I slide my nose to her ear and whisper, "And the instant you become Mrs. Wilde, I'm going to show you just



how much.”

She nods her head and I see the goosebumps emerge, and I can't help but smile. Grabbing her hand, we head toward the door. Amazing Grace starts playing from her phone in the kitchen just as we're about to take our last steps as River Wilde and Dahlia London.

# Epilogue

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## BREAKEVEN

*What am I supposed to say  
When the best part of me was  
always you  
And what am I supposed to do  
When you're here but not with me  
I'm falling to pieces.*



## ***Ben's Journal***

***February 19<sup>th</sup>, 2010***

Caleb called me today and told me he had a story for me, if I dared listen. Of course I wanted to listen. I've always been game for a dare. He told me it was not a laughing matter, but it was a story that would make my name synonymous with the best of investigative journalists.

So of course I agreed.

*February 21<sup>st</sup>, 2010*

Caleb and I met today and what he told me blew me away. I didn't believe him at first. I found it odd that someone would contact him just as his tour in Afghanistan ended with an offer like this. He told me *their* initial contact with him had been immediate. He gave me a USB drive with information I needed to research. When I came home, I loaded it and shit, when he said he had a story that would rock my world, he wasn't shitting me. I was actually a little sickened by what I saw and knew the story had to come out. This was going to be a walk in

the park and I'm going to be famous.

*February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2010*

I've been up for twenty-four fucking hours straight. This is so much bigger than Caleb ever thought. I called him and left him a message over six hours ago, and the asshole hasn't called me back yet.

*February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2010*

Fucking Caleb Holt. He's been missing for two days, and then he calls and tells me I have to kill the story. He wants me to forget he ever told me.

Well, he knows me better than that. I'm not fucking doing that. I started writing the article today and plan to release it the night of my awards show. I have to because it's not only about me, but about helping other people too.

*February 26<sup>th</sup>, 2010*

When Caleb told me today what he told me, at first I didn't believe him. I thought he went fucking nuts. He told me if I didn't disappear, die actually, Dahlia and I really would end up dead. I walked out of the bar planning to ignore every fucking word he told me and publish that article. When I got to my car there was an envelope on the window.

Sitting in my car, I opened it up. Someone had been photographing Dahl everywhere she went. There was even a picture of her with a man behind her at a coffee shop pointing a knife to her back. I threw up instantly. I know these people aren't messing around. Fuck, what am I going to do?

*February 27<sup>th</sup>, 2010*

I spent the last eight hours with Caleb planning it. He had it all figured out. He paid someone off to take the fall for killing me. They would eventually be released on a technicality. He even managed to acquire a bag of blood that matched my type so that when I'm shot it

looks like I'm bleeding. He wanted all the evidence back. Fuck that, why would I give it all back? I gave him enough and hid the rest in the house, a place no one would think to look.

*February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2010*

I have less than a week left with the girl I've spent my whole life with. Fuck, this is killing me, but I can't bring her with me. She wouldn't be happy living on the run. Today I sent her flowers just because I never do that. I know she's going to think something is up, but I want her to remember how much I love her—forever.



## March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2010

I took my Dahl to lunch today. I don't know why I never did that more often. I even brought her a bag of her favorite peppermint patties. I would've gotten her some fancy chocolate, but I know she loves mints the most.

## March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2010

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. I met with him less than two weeks ago, and tomorrow I have to die. I've tried to back out but I'm in too deep and *they* want me dead. So today I'll spend every minute with her making sure she knows how much I love

her.

### *March 3rd, 2010*

Today was the happiest and the saddest day of my life. I love her like I've never loved before. I knew it was our last time together, and I needed her in a way I can't even explain. We shared a bond I've never felt with her before. Maybe it was because I knew I'd never see her beautiful smile again, touch her sexy body again, kiss her soft lips again, or even walk this sandy beach with her again. She had no idea what was going to happen or why I was so emotional and that just tore me apart.

I gave her a bracelet to symbolize my

love for her, and I hope she never takes it off. Saying goodbye was tough, but I had to do it to protect her, to save her. Leaving her alone in the fucking car wrecked me. She pleaded for me not to be the hero. I was no fucking hero. I was doing what I had to do to save her. When I looked at her one final time, I wished I were actually going to die. I left her lying on the floor of the car. She believed I was getting out to save her from a crazed lunatic. I guess in a way I was, but her painting me to be some hero made me want to throw-up. I certainly wasn't her hero. She was in danger because of me. Still, you'd think that I'd sleep better knowing she will always have those final thoughts of me as her

hero, but I know that I won't. I made Caleb bring me here one last time to say my own silent goodbye. I just can't leave without seeing it. This was our favorite place to be. I may never be able to come back here so I want to say goodbye. Goodbye to the beach, goodbye to my mother, sister, and nephew, and goodbye to her.

I have visited this place many times, but today it's different. I'm alone. There are no comforting arms around me. My body trembles but not from the cold; it's from the realization of fate. A single tear slowly drips down my face as I look into the night and scream, "Why couldn't we just stay together?!"

As the wind moans in the distance,

thunder crashes and lightning strikes. I stand here just hoping the impending storm will carry me away and erase the shadow that looms over me. A slow soothing rain falls from the blackened sky, but it provides no relief to my ravaged soul. A mist slowly rises into the night, puddles form in various spots, and the cold air sends shivers down my spine. The dark, the storm—they are both upon me.

As a lone figure, I huddle to the ground feeling completely lost. As my tears merge with the rain into one slow dance, they only fall further into the darkness. No one is here to see me. No one knows where to find me. Only the vultures notice me as they fly swiftly

overhead, seeking shelter against the cold rain. I'm not looking for refuge in this place I now despise, but I have nowhere else to go. I have no hope. I have no future. This is where I belong—in the darkness.

### *March 4th, 2010*

I was killed in a random carjacking gone badly. I'm in New York City now. Caleb dropped me off at some apartment he rented under my new name and got me a job as a college professor. Shit, I fucking hate him. If it wasn't for him, I'd be alive today. I left everything behind except this one journal. I have nothing, and I'll never see my Dahl again.

*November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2011*

Caleb showed up at my apartment after one of my classes. He told me something was going down, he didn't know what and he was worried. He informed me that the house Dahlia and I shared together was ransacked like they were looking for something. He asked me if I had given him everything.

I lost my shit and just started pounding him uncontrollably and he let me. He never even tried to hit me back. I only stopped when I saw the blood running down his nose had soaked into his shirt and down onto the carpet. He grabbed a towel and held it to his nose

but continued talking as if nothing happened.

I didn't let him finish as flashes of my Dahl hurt, lying on our floor, kept flashing in my head. I think he sensed my concern, and with a nervous edge in his voice he told me Dahlia wasn't around that weekend, so she wasn't there when our house was broken into.

All I could think was *thank fuck*, but then I asked Caleb where she was. At first he shrugged his shoulders and turned away from me to sit on the couch, but I pressed him until he finally told me. He said Dahlia had come back to the house with some guy. I pressed further; I wanted to know what guy. Who was he? I got even more irritated as I silently



worried. Was he using her to find the information I'd hidden so well?

My fifty questions continued, and I never paused to let Caleb answer. I didn't know if I wanted to know the answers. All I knew was I had to get back there to see her, to be with her, but Caleb insisted I stay dead for her safety and for mine. He said *they* wouldn't hurt her since she didn't have anything to do with *it*, and I was dead.

I went to sit on the couch next to him. I told him he owed it to me to tell me what he knew. So he did. He said he was pretty sure Dahlia was fucking the guy he had seen her with. He told me he was really sorry after the words reluctantly came out of his mouth. Caleb went on to

explain that he had followed them to some swanky LA neighborhood in the Hills. And as far as he could tell, she was staying there. Dahlia in the Hills. What the fuck?

I was fucking furious at him, at me, at her. She's already shackled up with someone? I really wanted to kill the guy, and I wanted to beat the shit out of Caleb. The thought of my Dahl fucking someone else drove me to the verge of insanity.

I knew she'd move on eventually, but hearing it was something else entirely.

I had walked over to the CD player on a table in the corner of the room and just stared at it. The song playing, ironically, was Go to Hell by Go Radio.

Fucking appropriate, huh? I couldn't help myself. I pounded my fist on the player so hard it smashed into a thousand pieces on the floor, and I broke my fucking hand.

Caleb took me to the ER where they put a cast on my broken hand. God, could they just put a cast on my broken heart? I sat there in the ER, thinking back to Dahlia, and wondering why I hadn't just insisted she marry me when I first asked her. Not that it would have mattered that much. Shit, either way I would never see her again.

Caleb left the next day. He assured me he'd watch out for her and said he wouldn't contact me again.

*September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2012*

Sitting here now at the large wooden conference table with a room full of suits from some government section I still don't even know the name of, I can hear every tick of the clock hanging on the fucking wall. All I can think about is that, after almost three years, I'm finally going to see her again touch her again, love her again. I gave up everything to keep my Dahl alive, and now I'm going to be able to finally get it all back.

Caleb told me she's with some douchebag, supposedly it's pretty serious, but I know the minute she sees me here in the flesh it'll be over. We just have too much history for it not to be.

Damn, why did I have to be so fucking good at my job? Why did I want to make my mark on the world of journalism? Today, I couldn't tell you why because I lost it all in the blink of an eye. Back then I was hungry for it, and nothing else mattered. Well, that's not true. I cared about all those people and what they were allowing them to do. I really did care.

I hadn't heard from Caleb in almost nine months until he called me a few days. I knew something was up, but had no idea what. He asked me again if I had kept information, and once again, I lied and assured him I hadn't. I tried to ask how my Dahl was, but he just hung up.

So when they called me yesterday

and told me they were bringing me back in, I knew something must have happened. All they told me was that it wasn't over, but they wanted me back here. I was accompanied by one of the suits and on the next flight from New York to LA. The only thing the suit told me was my house had been broken into again. I wondered if this time they found the information, but how could they? I asked if she was okay, but he didn't answer.

And now I sit here. Where the fuck is Caleb? I asked them but got no answer. The answer I have received in the last twenty-four hours is, "Yes we have notified your family." But I'm hanging patiently here because I can't believe

it's actually going to happen when I never thought it would. My story will eventually come out. I will be free of *them*. Free to be with my Dahl. It seems surreal but so fucking real at the same time. My mother is on her way, and once I see her and tell her my story, I'll finally get to call my Dahl.

# *Special thanks to...*

My family. And those words aren't nearly enough. You have truly supported me through this crazy, fun, invigorating, and inspiring process known as—writing a book. You not only dealt with a messy house, dirty laundry, and many lists of groceries that were never purchased; you also gave me the time I needed to write this book. So thank you to my wonderful husband and my four beautiful kids. XOXO

To the woman who very quickly



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better. Jessica Hayes and America Matthews, you were with me from the start. You have my most gratitude. And a special thanks to Jessica for your help in music selection and for letting me use your quote; “Everyone has a destiny, it just matters which road you take to get there.” Also, Kristina Amit, Rebecca Berto, Kathryn Crane, Melanie Dawn, Jessica Dow, Ellie Lovenbooks, Nichele Reese, Nacole Stayton, Erika Taylor, Deb Tierney, and Summer Van Vynckt who all beta read Connected. Your input was invaluable and you helped shape this book into its final product.

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To Kimberly Brower of Book Reader Chronicles—All I can say is I will be forever grateful.

Finally, to the readers and bloggers. I hope you enjoy reading Connected as much as I enjoyed writing it, and again thank you so much for your time.

## *♥ About the ♥ Author ...*

Kim Karr lives in Florida with her husband and four kids. She's always had a love for reading books and writing. Being an English major in college, she wanted to teach at the college level but that was not to be. She went on to receive an MBA and became a project manager until quitting to raise her family. Kim currently works part-time with her husband and recently decided to embrace one of her biggest passions—writing.

Kim wears a lot of hats! Writer,

book-lover, wife, soccer-mom, taxi driver, and the all around go-to person of her family. However, she always finds time to read. One of her favorite family outings was taking her kids when they were little to the bookstore or the library. Today, Kim's oldest child is seventeen and no longer goes with her on these, now rare and infrequent, outings. She finds that she doesn't need to go on them anymore because she has the greatest device ever invented—a Kindle.

Kim likes to believe in soul mates, kindred spirits, true friends, and *Happily-Ever-Afters*. She loves to drink champagne, listen to music, and hopes to always stay young at heart.

*Connected* is Kim Karr's debut novel and is available at Amazon, Barnes & Noble, iBooks, and Smashwords.

# *Author note 2...*

COMING Fall 2013

## **TORN**

(Book Two of the *Second Chances*  
Series)

*Can a 'Once in a Lifetime' survive  
when secrecy harbors doubt?*





For a glimpse into **TORN** please  
visit [www.authorkimkarr.com](http://www.authorkimkarr.com)

*“There are all kinds of love in the  
world, but never the same love twice!”  
~F. Scott Fitzgerald*

# *Author note 3...*

Turn the page for the first chapter of  
Nichele Reese's debut novel,

## **JULLIARD OR ELSE**

a New Adult Romance  
COMING Late Spring 2013

This is a twisting story of young  
love, but what happens when the world  
won't let Abigail and Tucker be  
together? What do they have to sacrifice

to be together? Tucker has nothing, but Abigail has everything to lose.

Following a glimpse into *Julliard or Else*, I have a special treat for you. Melanie Dawn's *So Much It Hurts* will capture your heart like nothing else. This is a story of love, loss, redemption, and hope. Enjoy this sneak peek into her debut novel, due out EARLY FALL 2013.

# Julliard or Else

## CHAPTER ONE

*Tucker*

“This going to be enough?” The stranger asked looking at what I had given him, opening his hand then closing it fast.

“Should be,” I answered quickly, then glanced down the street because I heard police sirens getting closer to us as they headed our way.

One police car rounded the corner and I watched it as it pulled over to the

curb to stop in front of us, with its lights flipped on. "Stay still man," I told the stranger who complied. "Whatever you do, don't run." I turned my body and looked at the lit up vehicle. Of course, I'm pretty sure I knew who was driving it, the one and only, Officer Daniels. He always patrolled this area and knew me pretty well; including all the shenanigans I had gotten myself into over the years.

Sure enough, it was Officer Daniels who stepped out of the patrol car. He slowly walked over to us, taking his sweet time, one slow step after another. He had on his usual policeman attire, but today he had on an extra jacket. The weather took a turn for the worse, making it a very cold and windy during

this early morning. It almost felt like tiny paper cuts on my face, the wind was that cold. It always got really windy around the beginning of September in Brooklyn, to remind us that winter was coming.

“Tucker,” Officer Daniels growled and nodded his head. My body went stiff as a board when he used my name like that. He already knew what I’ve been doing this morning.

“What, Daniels?” I snapped, shoving my hands in the front pocket of my hoodie.

“I hope you’re not selling your product out here to this guy... or I should say boy,” I glanced over my shoulder at the kid, who slowly backed away from me. I knew he was young, but he was old

enough to know what the hell he was getting himself into by coming into this part of town and even contacting me. Watching him back away from me some more, I already knew what he was planning to do, and before I could say anything to stop him, he took off down the sidewalk at full speed.

“God damn it, Tucker! You promised you were done with this shit!” Officer Daniels yelled at me, while pulling off his Walkie Talkie to give out the description of the kid who took off and which direction he was headed in.

I heard the sirens of the rest of the cop cars that always patrolled this area with Daniels. No matter what, the kid was going to get busted; he didn't stand

a chance against the cops around here. He was a noob in the drug world, even I could tell. But if I didn't get rid of it fast, my buddy would be in trouble more, life or death kind of trouble.

Daniels just glared at me, "You said you were done Tucker, or should I just finally take your ass into custody?" Daniels knew my situation at home. He knew I didn't have any money to get myself out of jail; my mother wouldn't bail me out either. She didn't have a dime to her name and even if she did, it would evaporate faster than water.

I put my hands up defending myself, hearing more sirens coming in our direction. "I'm done Daniels, swear."

He let out a big breath that I could



see in the cold morning air, “Get outta here,” he warned me and he jerked his head to the side.

“Alright man,” I muttered at him, turning around to leave, cutting through the alleyways to head back where I belonged - Bushwick, Brooklyn.

The morning sun was beginning to shine through the tagged buildings, marked up in graffiti. The sound of beer cans echoed through the empty alleyways as the cold wind blew around them.

I made my way back to the rundown apartment I shared with my mother. The cold air was hitting my face harder than before, so I pulled up the hood from my gray hoodie, to help keep warm; wishing

that I had worn something heavier.

As I rounded a corner, I kicked an empty pop can most of the way back. Thinking about what Officer Daniels just told me, I really did need to stop dealing, or I was going to find myself in a situation I would regret. As I passed more buildings, black trash bags lined most of the front walls, just another day to show that the garbage man could give two shits about our trash. Most people considered where I lived an unwelcome part of the neighborhood and it was. You shouldn't be caught walking around here after dark, carrying any money or wearing any sort of jewelry on you. It was simple; you shouldn't come to this part of town, but if you did and you were

smart, you'd carry a gun.

A screaming woman on the sidewalk shouting at her husband didn't make me move any faster as I buzzed myself in to my cold dirty building and walked up the creaky four flights of stairs to my apartment. The screaming woman reminded me of my mom and my dirt bag of a father always fighting. When I was eight, I would scream at them to stop, my dad just ended up beating me until I stopped, or passed out. They could never get along and my dad finally left us. He left me and my mom dirt poor and in a shitty apartment. He never came around at first, but then he started coming around sporadically to beat my mom and take what little money she'd

had, but I haven't seen him in a couple of years, so I don't know what's happened to him.

As I climbed the stairs, my eyes scanned over the dirty green and brown flowered wallpaper stripping away, the holes in the walls seemed to grow larger by the day, and the broken banister looked like it had its day a hundred years ago, when the building was first built. The hallway lights flickered as if they were trying to stay on but the electricity was deciding on something else. This building was so run down and old that you had to watch your every step on the stairs, or you might just fall through the boards, each step almost felt like it would be your last.

A little warmer now that I was inside, I pulled my hood down as I reached the top of the dirty stairs. I paused a moment as I heard loud bass music coming from the end of the hall where my apartment was.

Groaning, I knew when that type of music was playing, it meant Skinner was with my mom. I made my way down the hallway to my apartment and reached above the doorframe for the little copper key. When I stepped into the apartment, all the lights were off. The music pounded away as if the speakers were ready to blow and my eyes scanned around the room, looking around for evidence of Skinner.

Inside the apartment was shittier

than the building itself. Garbage was everywhere, fur stuck to the carpet from my mom's three cats, and the crappy furniture looked even trashier since she never vacuumed. Dishes flooded the sink with old food stuck to them. Newspaper was crumbled up all over the counter and table. I stomped my foot hard at one of the cats, making it hiss and skitter away fast as lightning.

*God, I hated cats.*

I turned down the stereo in the living room and walked into the kitchen to the fridge for a beer. When I opened the fridge door, it smelled as if something had died in there because of all the rotting food. Mold contaminated a full loaf of bread; I don't know which

revolted me more, the rotting food smell or the loaf of bread that had just gone to waste.

When I was a kid, that bread would have lasted me at least a week. When my dad left us, my mom stopped trying to take care of me. I taught myself to make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for my main meal of the day and wash my own clothes in the bathtub. Sometimes, it was days before I could eat because she went on a drug spending spree. Now sitting here in the fridge was a loaf a bread, just fucking rotting away.

Out of anger and pure disgust, I slammed the door shut, causing the fridge to rattle and bang into the wall behind it. I stalked my way to my mom's

room and turned the doorknob, but it was locked. I banged on the door with my closed fist and yelled for her, but no one answered . . . no sounds...no movement. I tried again . . . nothing.

With my hands clenched in fists I yelled, “I’m gonna break down the god damn door if you don’t answer!”

Nothing.

“Mom!” I pounded on it again, hoping Skinner or my mom would finally answer.

I hated to cause more damage to this shithole of a place and have Skinner bitch at me for more money that I don’t have...or so I told him. I banged on the door once but no one answered. Grabbing the doorknob, I slammed my



body into the door. It gave away fairly easily and I watched as the door fell back into the wall, barely hanging by its broken hinges.

My mom, who was beautiful at one point in her life, was motionless; her body was sprawled out on the bed, in her dirty pink nightgown just barely covering her body. Her eyes were closed as Skinner crouched over her right arm.

Heat blazed my face as I saw the rubber strap wrapped tightly above her elbow. Skinner was drawing a needle out of the vein from the crook of her arm.

He whispered to her, "Sleep now, baby girl," and then kissed her cheek.

I walked over to her in two short

steps and pulled her nightgown down to cover her more modestly. “Damn it, Mom.”

I pulled on her free arm but she didn’t move. I expected her eyes to flutter open, but when she was high like this, she never opened them. I looked up at Skinner, who was now injecting the same crap in his own arm, using his belt and the same damn needle he just injected into my mom’s arm.

*Shit!*

He inhaled a rush of air and looked up at me. “Now that’s some good shit.”

I watched as his eyes rolled into the back of his bald head. He deeply exhaled and opened his eyes to look back over at me. I just wanted to punch

him in his stupid fucking face for always doing this to my mom... to us. So what do I do? The answer was simple; I punched him in the face.

He didn't even see it coming. I reached over my mom, grabbing the front of his white shirt and punched him straight in the nose. Blood sprayed across my gray sweatshirt and onto my mom's pink nightgown. The punch didn't even faze Skinner because he was so out of it. All he did was smile in my direction, his nose dripping with blood, and it covered his teeth, and for some reason, that pissed me off more. So, I punched him again and he fell backwards on the bed, and then landed onto the floor. My mom stirred and

mumbled something, I tried to shake her awake, but nothing happened.

“Damn it, Mom, every time,” I yelled, hoping she would be her old self and talk back to me for yelling at her.

I heard groans coming from the opposite side of the bed and Skinner stumbled to his feet. He dabbed his face and glared across the bed at me. “Did you hit me?” he asked though clenched teeth.

“No. You’re a clumsy ass who fell off the bed,” I said, turning to leave the room, but Skinner grabbed the hood of my hoodie, tugging me backwards, spinning me in the process, so I would face him directly.

“You hit me!” he yelled, while

spitting blood in my face. I quickly wiped away the splattered blood with my sleeve.

I shoved him hard off me, but he came back swinging, hitting me in the jaw. I heard and felt a pop in my head. Skinner tackled me with a blow of his shoulder, slamming me back through the open door of the room, and into the wall in the hall. The wind burned from my lungs and I could hardly breathe.

“You fucking hit me, Tucker!”

Now more than ever, I was really angry. I could feel the rage boiling through my veins, my face burned and my heart started to race faster. “You fucking hit me too!”

I shoved at his shoulders to release

the hold he had on me. He stumbled back into the room and fell on his ass; his head hitting the metal bed frame as he went unconscious.

I fixed my sweatshirt and made my way towards the front door. I couldn't stay another damn minute with that jackass; he was a loser. I locked up the apartment and went back down the crappy stairs. I banged on the manager's door and waited for him to answer. Bouncing with rage, I felt like I was going to explode. When he finally answered, he looked at my bloodied hoodie and shook his head.

"Skinner is causing problems again," I said through gritted teeth. Then I started explaining what had happened.

He shook his head some more. “Your problem, Tuck,” he told me, then slammed the door in my face.

*Shit!*

I raked my hands through my long brown hair. Normally, he would call the cops to get Skinner to leave the building; I guess Sam was done helping my deadbeat drug addict mother and me.

Finally leaving the dirty building, I decided to take the subway and two buses to get to Central Park to a little hide out I always hung around. Some of my friends, that I’m not proud of, hung out there with me. I’ll admit, they’re not good people, but it’s where I belong. They felt more like brothers to me. They came from the same out-skirts as I did

and always understood my problems with Skinner. Pulling out a fresh pack of cigarettes from my back pocket, I grabbed one and lit it up. Smoking is a bad habit, something I wish I could break, but never could. I sucked the tobacco down in record time and flicked my butt in the street.

Of course, in the main part of the city, close to Central Park, cabbies honked their horns non-stop. So when I crossed the street and a cab honked at me, it was a chain reaction to flip him off. I kept my head down as I walked down the street, the cold air turned warmer with each passing hour, but out of habit, I pulled my hood up and decided to take shortcut through an



alleyway and that's when I saw *her*.

A car was parked up against the curb, with the darkest tinted windows, and a girl like no other. Suddenly, an urge came over me to watch her, to stay still. Everything about her looks screamed innocence as she stepped away from the black Bentley Mulsanne.

My eyes took in her pale skin. Her blonde hair was pulled back in a tight bun thing that girls do. She wore jeans that clung to her body, with black boots that made her legs look twice as long and a black leather jacket. I was too far away to know what color her eyes were, but whatever color they were, I'm sure they were perfect. I could clearly see her smile from the alleyway. It was simple,

yet, wonderful. It brightened up her pale face.

When she walked toward the moving truck, I felt like I could hear every step her black boots made against the asphalt. One of the moving men met her at the back, while the rest opened up the big lift and handed each other pieces of furniture.

Everything screamed out to me in a rush of words, *spoiled, rich, snob, brat, daddy's girl*, but I brushed it off. She was the most gorgeous girl I'd ever seen.

What's a guy like me doing checking out a high class rich girl on the Upper East Side of town? Central Park West no less... I had no idea.

She moved back to the Bentley as a window was rolling down. She was speaking to whoever was inside, and for some reason this bothered me. Whoever was in the car didn't show much respect to the vision of this beautiful girl I was looking at. They should have walked her to the door of her new place in New York, or at least made sure she had a key or something.

As she stepped away from the car, it sped off. She was alone now with a big purple bag in one hand, just staring at the back of the Bentley's taillights. She walked over to the three movers and pointed up to an apartment in the building. The man spoke to her and nodded. She looked back up the street to

where the Bentley was disappearing around the corner.

Looking up towards the sky in the morning street, she inhaled a deep breath, and began smiling like she didn't have a care in the world at that very moment. She was too breath takingly beautiful, even for her own good. I couldn't help but stare.

Turning, she lowered her head; the beauty of her neck stretched gloriously around as she looked down the alleyway. I couldn't tell if she saw me. Most of my body was behind a dumpster and my gray sweatshirt hood covered my head, but I swear I saw her little innocent smile curve up on the corner of her mouth before she turned back to the

movers starting up the stairs to her new apartment.

# So Much It Hurts

## Chapter One

Each thundering crash of the ocean waves in the distance administered a dose of therapy to my soul. With my towel draped across my lounge chair, I reclined by the water's edge sipping a Piña Colada from a hurricane glass adorned by a tiny pink umbrella. My life had all but suffocated me the past few months, and I desperately needed a change of scenery.

Lisa's voice interrupted my thoughts. "Come on, Kaitlyn, let's go inside and

get ready to par-tay,” she called from the edge of the pool, overemphasizing her last word.

I suppressed a laugh. Only late twenty-somethings remember when it was cool to pronounce it ‘par-tay’. No need to point out the fact that we were nearly too old to hit the clubs.

Two guys standing at the tiki bar turned to stare at Lisa as she stepped out of the water. She reminded me of a super model as she brushed her long brown hair away from her eyes. I met Lisa soon after she found out she was pregnant with her second son. I thought she was the most beautiful pregnant woman I had ever seen. However, Lisa’s sweet disposition far outweighed her

attractiveness. Like the fair-complexioned cartoon princess, I could almost picture the birds singing to her while they helped her fold the laundry at home. Unaware of the caliber of her beauty, she never seemed to notice when other men were checking her out. She had been happily married to her high school sweetheart for almost seven years.

I chuckled under my breath while I watched the two beefcake rubbernecks at the tiki bar gawk at her over their mirrored aviator sunglasses.

“Ok, let’s go,” I replied before I gulped the rest of my drink.

The other girls were toweling off and grabbing their bags to head upstairs



to the condo. I looked around my mini-paradise, content with my surroundings. The palm trees swayed against the warm breeze, while the seagulls flew overhead searching for their next meal. The stark white sand glistened for miles under the hot sun, while the swells of the ocean waves toppled against the shore. For the first time I felt a freedom I had not experienced in a long time.

I left my single life of drinking and dancing behind the day I found out I was pregnant with Eli. Michael and I had no plans of marriage until we saw those two pink lines on that cold November morning. I had set my future of becoming a pediatric psychologist aside while I made arrangements to become a stay-at-

home mom. My entire life seemed to have been on hold the last five years. I quickly learned that being a stay-at-home mom was not all picnics and play dates. I felt trapped under the interminable mountain of laundry, amid the infinite overflow of dirty dishes, by the everlasting song of the purple dinosaur, and with the incessant whine of a tired and cranky child. I could not remember the last time I had enjoyed a night out. I was actually looking forward to it.

I assumed Michael and Eli were just sitting down for dinner at Burger Land. Michael, the staunch and successful CPA at a prosperous accounting firm, was much too busy to cook while I was away. He almost balked at the idea of

my weekend escape.

*“Kaitlyn, I just can’t afford for you to leave right now. I need to go into work in the coming weekends to prepare for several big upcoming meetings. Work is just more important than some silly girls retreat right now.”*

*“That’s the problem, Michael. Your work. Our lives revolve around your work. You always put your work before your family.”*

*“My work pays the bills! Last time I checked, dishes and laundry don’t pay the bills.”*

*“That’s just it, Michael. Dishes and laundry don’t pay the bills, nor do they create a fulfilling life! I’m worth more*

*than just being slave for this family! Do you know how depressing it is when your daily goal in life is to sweep up Goldfish off the floor and dig rocks out of pants pockets before throwing them in the washing machine? I feel like I'm in solitary confinement most of the time. And then my husband comes home and carries his plate of supper into his office only to disappear for hours on end, coming to bed well after I've gone to sleep. That happens so often these days that sex is not even in our vocabulary anymore. I've spent the last five years in this unfulfilling life, wiping asses and noses, sweeping crumbs off the floor, and passing a practically nonexistent husband*

*occasionally in the hallway!”*

*Five years of pent up frustration barreled its way out of me in harsh tones and salty tears.*

*“We all need a break sometimes, Kaitlyn. Don’t you dare think you are the only one sacrificing your needs and wants for this family. I make sacrifices too!”*

*“Oh, really? You laugh it up with your coworkers at your lavish dinner meetings eating filet mignon with lobster tail and drinking \$300 bottles of wine while I sit at home eating chicken nuggets for the third time in a week. When Eli was a baby, you played your endless golf games and slept soundly in your luxurious hotel rooms*

*while I sat at home breastfeeding until my nipples were raw, and spent my nights cleaning up explosive diapers! I never realized those fringe benefits at work were considered sacrifices for you! Please forgive me if I was mistaken!" My seething comments oozed with sarcasm.*

*Michael glared at me under furrowed eyebrows. He wanted to say something, but refrained. Instead, he just huffed and stomped to his office, slamming the door behind him.*

*I stared at his office door, half expecting him to open it back up and say whatever it was he seemed to want to say. But, it remained closed. I could already hear him pecking away at his*

keyboard on his computer. What had happened to us over the past few years? It's not that we hated each other. We were still cordial most of the time, but our marriage had become stale, stagnant, and downright boring. We worked great together as a team to run a household and raise a child, but most of the time I felt like we were just roommates passing each other in the bathroom, taking turns using the sink. Our conversations used to be interesting and compelling. Now, it seemed the only thing we discussed was whose turn it was to put Eli to bed. His office was his sanctuary, and my nose stayed in a book.

Slowly, I turned around and walked

away from his closed office door, in search of my e-reader with its newly downloaded novel.

*“If you really want to go, then go. I can rearrange some things at work,” he muttered later that night as I lay in bed scouring the beach resort pamphlet that had come in the mail that afternoon.*

*“You have no idea how much I need this,” I sighed.*

*“Then go, enjoy your weekend. I’ll do what I can to make it work,” he grumbled.*

*With that, he grabbed the blanket and rolled over to go to sleep.*

I felt slightly guilty that he would



have to rearrange his schedule, but not guilty enough to stay home. I deserved this break. I ***needed*** this break before I completely lost my mind.

So, here I was at the beach taking advantage of my much needed getaway, while Michael and Eli probably enjoyed a Classic Burger from Burger Land. Eli would be overjoyed with the idea of a Junior Meal for dinner. He had been begging for one of the new Space Deputy toys for a week.

“Hello?”

“Hey, sweetie,” I cooed.

“Hey, Mommy,” Eli said happily, “Guess what? I got the new Captain Neptune toy tonight!”

I laughed. “I figured Daddy would

take you to Burger Land.”

“Yeah, and it’s so cool, Mom!”

“I bet,” I agreed.

“Wanna talk to Daddy?” Eli blurted out, obviously too busy with his new toy to spend another second talking to me.

“Sure, sweetie. Bye, I love you.”

“Love you too, Mommy!”

“Hey you, are you having fun?” Michael asked as he brought the phone to his ear.

“So far I am. We’re going out tonight too. Karaoke, I think.”

“Sounds fun. I hope you girls have a great time.”

“Well, I guess I better go get ready for our big night out. I’ll talk to you

later.”

“Ok, goodnight. Talk to you later.”

“Who’s ready for a night on the town?” Shannon called from the bathroom as she stood in front of the mirror adding the final touches of her makeup. Shannon had been a stay-at-home mom for the last ten years. The epitome of homemaking, she always left me envious of her organizational skills and her level head. Shannon always seemed to have it all together.

“I know I am!” Tori yelled from the kitchen as she poured some vodka into her glass of orange juice. “I can’t remember the last time I’ve been out with the girls!” Without a doubt, Tori was the most physically fit mom of our

group. Almost nothing prevented her from keeping her strict workout schedule at the local YMCA. She had muscle definition in places I couldn't even imagine having muscles at all.

Together, we were excited to have a few nights of fun without catering to the needs of our families.

I sat with my back to the stage. I had immersed myself so deeply in the conversation that I barely noticed karaoke had ended and a band had started setting up on stage. My friends and I were laughing hysterically at the fools we had made of ourselves during our poor rendition of Aretha Franklin's song, Respect. Downing a few drinks prior to our performance gave me the

courage to embarrass myself on stage.

In the background, a voice emerged from the microphone.

“Testing...one, two, three... Testing...”

The hair on the back of my neck stood upright. My body seemed to recognize the smooth and soothing voice, but my mind could not recall it.

I quickly spun around in my seat and stared at the figure on stage. We sat too far away from the stage, and the terrible lighting in the bar restricted my view.

“What’s the matter, Kaitlyn?” Shannon sounded concerned. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“That voice. It sounds so familiar. I’ve heard it before,” I stammered.

“Honestly Kaitlyn, the sign on the door said this band is debuting tonight and besides, who do you know that lives at the beach?” Tori asked.

“No one, I guess,” I sighed.

But, there was something about the voice that I recognized. I felt sure I had heard it before.

The mysterious voice began to sing and my thoughts drowned out the conversation around me. I dug deep into my memory grasping for any recollection I could muster.

Nothing sprang to my mind. But, that soothing melodic voice, crept up the back of my spine, tingling and sensuous, radiating through my chest. I just could not conjure up the face connected to the

voice. The timbre resonated familiarity, but the perplexity remained.

“Seriously, Kaitlyn, what’s gotten into you?” Tori looked at me wide-eyed. “You don’t look so good.”

I didn’t realize it until she said it, but my face felt flush and my palms felt sweaty.

“I don’t know, guys. I just can’t explain it. I think I know the lead singer of this band. What was the band’s name again?”

“Big Five, or something cheesy like that. Why?” Lisa piped up.

“I don’t know. I just can’t place it...”

The voice on the stage mesmerized me. The face connected to the voice remained a mystery as the conversation

swirled around me. I sat there and considered just getting up and walking toward the front of the stage to get a good look and quickly solve the mystery. But, to avoid looking like some desperate middle-aged groupie heading to the stage for attention, I stayed seated and half-heartedly listened to Tori drone on about her workout routine and her ‘clean eating’ diet.

Suddenly, the voice was behind me.

“Kaitlyn?”

The girls at my table froze. Their eyes looked up at the mystery man standing behind me. I whirled around to see who caused my friends’ jaws to drop in awe. My breath caught in my throat while my heart immediately began



pounding in my chest. A face from a long forgotten past stood in front of me.

His name immediately sprang from my lips, “Chris!”

“Wow, Kaitlyn. I can’t believe it’s really you.”

“Chris,” I said again almost breathlessly, “how long has it been?”

“Eight years and five months, almost to the day,” Chris blurted without even taking time to think about it, as if he had been etching hash marks on his wall for each passing day.

“Unbelievable,” I said with a hint of nostalgia as my mind tried to drift back to a time I had tried earnestly to erase from my memory. But, immediately I snapped myself back into reality.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“I live here. I write music by day, and play music by night. Our band is working on its first album....what...are you doing here?” Chris looked around the table. The girls stared up at him. I could not tell if they were ogling him because he was stunningly gorgeous, or if they were just shocked by the fact that another man, besides my husband, so obviously took my breath away. Deep down, I hoped they did not even notice my breathless anguish.

“Oh wow, where are my manners?” I said, embarrassed. “These are my friends... Lisa, Shannon, and Tori. We’re here for a ladies’ weekend retreat.”

The girls continued to look up in awe. Chris looked as handsome as ever. His breathtaking physique defined itself beneath his tight black T-shirt. They sputtered and stammered their hellos, and he politely smiled. But, his eyes quickly diverted and caught my gaze. Those same dark eyes that melted my heart more than eight years ago were searching mine. I hoped my friends were not aware of the pounding in my chest. The awkward, yet intimate moment stirred emotions I had not felt in many years.

“Well, I guess I better get back to the stage. The boys are ready to play again,” Chris smiled amiably at my friends. His eyes searched mine, and he beamed that

same wide grin that once made my heart turn flips in my chest.

“Ok,” I grinned back, trying to suppress the feeling that was welling up inside of me. “I’ll see you around.”

I watched Chris walk back toward the stage. Shaking my head in disbelief, I looked back at the girls sitting around the table. They all stared at me in wide-eyed astonishment.

“What?” I blinked my eyes innocently.

“Who. Was. That?” Lisa asked, emphasizing every word.

“Oh, that was just a guy I knew from high school,” I shrugged indifferently.

“No, Kaitlyn.” Tori remarked emphatically. “That was not *just* a guy.”

“Yeah,” Shannon announced, looking over my shoulder, “Wow.” She stared in his direction, bewildered.

“Guys!” I snapped. “Stop staring, ok? He really was just a guy I knew from high school....who I happened to be in love with at the time.”

“Whoa, I bet that was a blast from the past!” Lisa exclaimed.

“Yeah,” I sighed, “something like that.” I looked down at the trembling hands in my lap. I had no idea that seeing him would stir up so many emotions in the pit of my stomach.

“Oh honey,” Shannon patted my shoulder. Finishing her sentence seemed unnecessary. I felt her sympathy.

The rest of the night blurred by as my

mind focused on the tranquilizing voice that poured from the speakers. Occasionally I would sneak a peek toward the stage. I could feel his eyes settling on me, even in the darkness.

His voice, gravelly and breathless behind the microphone, felt warm and comforting like a soft blanket on a cool night. The quiver in my stomach and the tremble of my hands were evidence of the effect Chris had on me. Ashamed, I tried in vain to hide my anguish. Occasionally, Shannon would pat my hand, out of sight from the rest of the girls. I smiled meekly at her as she nodded her head in understanding.

“So, are you guys ready to call it a night?” Shannon’s eyes looked tired as

she sipped her last Cosmo.

We all agreed, began to gather our purses, and stood up to leave.

“Kaitlyn,” Chris spoke from behind me again.

The sound of his voice startled me, and I dropped my keys.

“Oh, sorry,” he said as he quickly bent down to pick them up.

“It’s ok,” I laughed, “I’m not usually so clumsy.”

His fingers brushed mine as he handed them back to me. The tingle from his touch radiated up my arm. I heard a nervous giggle escape from my lips. My hand flew up and covered my mouth, and I immediately felt embarrassed.

“You really made my night,” Chris

declared with a crooked grin. “I can’t believe it’s been eight years.”

“Me either,” I concurred.

“See you again tomorrow night?” he asked hopefully, “I mean, let’s not let another eight years go by.”

“Absolutely,” I agreed without thinking. “We’ll be here all weekend. I’m sure I’ll see you around.”

“Great!” he replied, flashing his perfect smile at me.

As hard as I tried not to notice, Chris looked absolutely amazing. His black T-shirt clung to his well-formed chest. The smoldering intensity of his eyes staring into mine sent chills rippling through my body. “I look forward to it,” he admitted.

“I just can’t believe it’s really you.” I



could barely contain the elation in my voice. Without thinking, I reached out to hug him. He seemed shocked, but welcomed the hug.

He enveloped me in his arms and whispered, "I've never forgotten you."

His breath was hot against my ear. I inhaled the mixed aroma of aftershave and breath mints as I tried to burn his scent into my memory. A breath escaped my lungs and lodged in my throat. *'I'm a married woman,'* I rebuked myself. Quickly, I pulled away from him and practically ran to catch up to my friends.

"Oh my goodness, girl! Tell us everything!" Lisa exclaimed as we walked into the living room of our condo.

“What’s there to tell?” I asked.

Shannon spoke up. “Well, for starters, did you see the way he looked at you? And, did you see the way he looked in that shirt? Wow!”

I laughed nervously. While these girls were my closest friends, I did not feel emotionally prepared to rehash the history I had with Chris, nor did I feel strong enough to reopen old wounds I had spent years trying to heal.

“C’mon, Kaitlyn. Give us the scoop,” Tori whined. “We want to know about this hot mystery guy.”

I sighed, preparing myself for the heartrending wave of emotion I knew I was about to experience by divulging the intimate details of my past.

My mind, as it creaked open the lid of the proverbial can of worms, drifted back to a time and place it had only visited in my dreams since the girl I once knew well, but barely recognized anymore, had sped away in her fully packed VW Jetta with hope to start a new life in college.

Each thundering crash of the ocean waves in the distance administered a dose of therapy to my soul. With my towel draped across my lounge chair, I reclined by the water's edge sipping a Piña Colada from a hurricane glass adorned by a tiny pink umbrella. My life had all but suffocated me the past few months, and I desperately needed a change of scenery.

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*“My work pays the bills! Last time I checked, dishes and laundry don’t pay the bills.”*

*“That’s just it, Michael. Dishes and*



*laundry don't pay the bills, nor do they create a fulfilling life! I'm worth more than just being slave for this family! Do you know how depressing it is when your daily goal in life is to sweep up Goldfish off the floor and dig rocks out of pants pockets before throwing them in the washing machine? I feel like I'm in solitary confinement most of the time. And then my husband comes home and carries his plate of supper into his office only to disappear for hours on end, coming to bed well after I've gone to sleep. That happens so often these days that sex is not even in our vocabulary anymore. I've spent the last five years in this unfulfilling life, wiping asses and noses, sweeping*

*crumbs off the floor, and passing a practically nonexistent husband occasionally in the hallway!”*

*Five years of pent up frustration barreled its way out of me in harsh tones and salty tears.*

*“We all need a break sometimes, Kaitlyn. Don’t you dare think you are the only one sacrificing your needs and wants for this family. I make sacrifices too!”*

*“Oh, really? You laugh it up with your coworkers at your lavish dinner meetings eating filet mignon with lobster tail and drinking \$300 bottles of wine while I sit at home eating chicken nuggets for the third time in a week. When Eli was a baby, you played*

*your endless golf games and slept soundly in your luxurious hotel rooms while I sat at home breastfeeding until my nipples were raw, and spent my nights cleaning up explosive diapers! I never realized those fringe benefits at work were considered sacrifices for you! Please forgive me if I was mistaken!”*

*My seething comments oozed with sarcasm.*

*Michael glared at me under furrowed eyebrows. He wanted to say something, but refrained. Instead, he just huffed and stomped to his office, slamming the door behind him.*

*I stared at his office door, half expecting him to open it back up and*

say whatever it was he seemed to want to say. But, it remained closed. I could already hear him pecking away at his keyboard on his computer. What had happened to us over the past few years? It's not that we hated each other. We were still cordial most of the time, but our marriage had become stale, stagnant, and downright boring. We worked great together as a team to run a household and raise a child, but most of the time I felt like we were just roommates passing each other in the bathroom, taking turns using the sink. Our conversations used to be interesting and compelling. Now, it seemed the only thing we discussed was whose turn it was to put Eli to bed. His

*office was his sanctuary, and my nose stayed in a book.*

*Slowly, I turned around and walked away from his closed office door, in search of my e-reader with its newly downloaded novel.*

*“If you really want to go, then go. I can rearrange some things at work,” he muttered later that night as I lay in bed scouring the beach resort pamphlet that had come in the mail that afternoon.*

*“You have no idea how much I need this,” I sighed.*

*“Then go, enjoy your weekend. I’ll do what I can to make it work,” he grumbled.*

*With that, he grabbed the blanket*

*and rolled over to go to sleep.*

I felt slightly guilty that he would have to rearrange his schedule, but not guilty enough to stay home. I deserved this break. I ***needed*** this break before I completely lost my mind.

So, here I was at the beach taking advantage of my much needed getaway, while Michael and Eli probably enjoyed a Classic Burger from Burger Land. Eli would be overjoyed with the idea of a Junior Meal for dinner. He had been begging for one of the new Space Deputy toys for a week.

“Hello?”

“Hey, sweetie,” I cooed.

“Hey, Mommy,” Eli said happily, “Guess what? I got the new Captain Neptune toy tonight!”

I laughed. “I figured Daddy would take you to Burger Land.”

“Yeah, and it’s so cool, Mom!”

“I bet,” I agreed.

“Wanna talk to Daddy?” Eli blurted out, obviously too busy with his new toy to spend another second talking to me.

“Sure, sweetie. Bye, I love you.”

“Love you too, Mommy!”

“Hey you, are you having fun?” Michael asked as he brought the phone to his ear.

“So far I am. We’re going out tonight too. Karaoke, I think.”

“Sounds fun. I hope you girls have a great time.”

“Thanks. Well, I guess I better go get ready for our big night out. I just wanted to call to say goodnight and check on Eli.”

“We’re fine,” Michael assured me.

“I’ll talk to you later, then.”

“Ok, goodnight. Talk to you later.” I heard the phone disconnect and I sat there, dumbfounded.

“Love you too,” I grumbled at the blank screen, a common occurrence when ending my conversations with Michael. In fact, I couldn’t even remember the last time he told me he loved me. Most of his ‘I love yous’ were saved for Eli....and that bimbo from his



office...what was her name? Dollface? Homewrecker? Oh yeah, Bridget.

*“Hello, Weston and Associates. This is Mr. Thomas’s office. May I help you?” a perky voice answered my husband’s phone one day from his private office line.*

*“Who’s speaking?” I asked sharply.*

*“This is Bridget, Mr. Thomas’s new personal assistant. How may I help you?”*

*“Well, Bridget, this is Kaitlyn Thomas, Michael’s wife. May I speak with him, please?”*

*“Sure, Mrs. Thomas. Just a moment, please.”*

*I heard indistinct sounds and*

*murmurings as the phone was being passed to Michael.*

*“Hey,” Michael sounded annoyed. “What’s up?”*

*“I...uh...” I couldn’t really remember what I needed. Bridget’s perkiness coming from my husband’s personal phone had completely messed with my mind.*

*“Oh, and Bridget,” Michael’s muffled voice echoed through the phone as if he had a hand covering the speaker. “While you’re out, will you stop by Starbucks for me?”*

*“Absolutely, Mr. Thomas” she cooed.*

*God, I hated her.*

*“Do you want your usual?”*

*He has a usual?*

*“Definitely. Thanks, babe. Love ya, mean it.”*

*Thanks babe? Love ya, mean it? What the hell?! Heat coursed through my veins as I struggled to contain my rage.*

*“Sorry, about that,” Michael’s voice rang clear as he dropped his hand from the phone speaker, indicating that, once again, he was speaking to me. “Did you need something, Kaitlyn?”*

*Yeah, I need that tramp to get fired.*

*“Yeah, I just wanted to remind you that Eli’s tee ball game is tonight at six.”*

*Michael sighed. “Sorry, I have to work late tonight.”*

*“Of course you do.” I said snidely.*

*“What was that for?” Michael snapped.*

*“Thanks, babe. Love ya, mean it” I mocked him in the same pouty voice Bridget used to get his attention. “What the hell, Michael?”*

*“What? It’s totally innocent. Bridget knows that. I just say junk like that so she’ll bring me my coffee. It doesn’t mean anything.”*

*“Right. I guess that’s why when I fix your coffee for you every morning you barely take time to thank me, much less tell me you love me.”*

*Michael huffed. “I don’t have time to argue, Kaitlyn. I’m sorry. If it makes you feel better, I won’t say it again.*

*Bridget knows I'm teasing her. It's nothing. I swear."*

*"Ok, Michael. Whatever. I guess we'll see you after the game."*

*"Fine. See you later."*

*Michael disconnected, and I gripped the phone angrily as if taking my frustration out on the electronic device would somehow rectify the situation.*

*"Love you too," I muttered, as the words 'thanks babe' and 'love ya, mean it' bounced around in my mind like tiny wooden balls tumbling in a bingo cage.*

*"Who's ready for a night on the town?" Shannon called from the bathroom as she stood in front of the*

mirror adding the final touches of her makeup. Shannon had been a stay-at-home mom for the last ten years. The epitome of homemaking, she always left me envious of her organizational skills and her level head. Shannon always seemed to have it all together.

“I know I am!” Tori yelled from the kitchen as she poured some vodka into her glass of orange juice. “I can’t remember the last time I’ve been out with the girls!” Without a doubt, Tori could claim to be the most physically fit mom of our group. Almost nothing prevented her from keeping her strict workout schedule at the local YMCA. She had muscle definition in places I couldn’t even imagine having muscles at

all.

Together, we were excited to have a few nights of fun without catering to the needs of our families.

.....

I sat with my back to the stage. I had immersed myself so deeply in the conversation that I barely noticed karaoke had ended and a band had started setting up on stage. My friends and I were laughing hysterically at the fools we had made of ourselves during our poor rendition of Aretha Franklin's song, *Respect*. Downing a few drinks prior to our performance gave me the courage to embarrass myself on stage.

In the background, a voice emerged

from the microphone.

“Testing...one, two, three...  
Testing...”

The hair on the back of my neck stood upright. My body seemed to recognize the smooth and soothing voice, but my mind could not recall it.

I quickly spun around in my seat and stared at the figure on stage. We sat too far away from the stage, and the terrible lighting in the bar restricted my view.

“What’s the matter, Kaitlyn?” Shannon sounded concerned. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“That voice. It sounds so familiar. I’ve heard it before,” I stammered.

“Honestly Kaitlyn, the sign on the door said this band is debuting tonight



and besides, who do you know that lives at the beach?" Tori asked.

"No one, I guess," I sighed.

But, there was something about the voice that I recognized. I felt sure I had heard it before.

The mysterious voice began to sing and my thoughts drowned out the conversation around me. I dug deep into my memory grasping for any recollection I could muster.

Nothing sprang to my mind. But, that soothing melodic voice, crept up the back of my spine, tingling and sensuous, radiating through my chest. I just could not conjure up the face connected to the voice. The timbre resonated familiarity, but the perplexity remained.

“Seriously, Kaitlyn, what’s gotten into you?” Tori looked at me wide-eyed. “You don’t look so good.”

I didn’t realize it until she said it, but my face felt flush and my palms felt sweaty.

“I don’t know, guys. I just can’t explain it. I think I know the lead singer of this band. What was the band’s name again?”

“Big Five, or something cheesy like that. Why?” Lisa piped up.

“I don’t know. I just can’t place it...”

The voice on the stage mesmerized me. The face connected to the voice remained a mystery as the conversation swirled around me. I sat there and considered just getting up and walking

toward the front of the stage to get a good look and quickly solve the mystery. But, to avoid looking like some desperate middle-aged groupie heading to the stage for attention, I stayed seated and half-heartedly listened to Tori drone on about her workout routine and her ‘clean eating’ diet.

Suddenly, the voice was behind me.

“Kaitlyn?”

The girls at my table froze. Their eyes looked up at the mystery man standing behind me. I whirled around to see who caused my friends’ jaws to drop in awe. My breath caught in my throat while my heart immediately began pounding in my chest. A face from a long forgotten past stood in front of me.

His name immediately sprang from my lips, “Chris!”

“Wow, Kaitlyn. I can’t believe it’s really you.”

“Chris,” I said again almost breathlessly, “how long has it been?”

“Eight years and five months, almost to the day,” Chris blurted without even taking time to think about it, as if he had been etching hash marks on his wall for each passing day.

“Unbelievable,” I said with a hint of nostalgia as my mind tried to drift back to a time I had tried earnestly to erase from my memory. But, immediately I snapped myself back into reality.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“I live here. I write music by day,

and play music by night. Our band is working on its first album....what...are you doing here?" Chris looked around the table. The girls stared up at him. I could not tell if they were ogling him because he was stunningly gorgeous, or if they were just shocked by the fact that another man, besides my husband, so obviously took my breath away. Deep down, I hoped they didn't even notice my breathless anguish.

"Oh wow, where are my manners?" I said, embarrassed. "These are my friends... Lisa, Shannon, and Tori. We're here for a ladies' weekend retreat."

The girls continued to look up in awe. Chris looked as handsome as ever.

His breathtaking physique defined itself beneath his tight black T-shirt. They sputtered and stammered their hellos, and he politely smiled. But, his eyes quickly diverted and caught my gaze. Those same dark eyes that melted my heart more than eight years ago were searching mine. I hoped my friends were not aware of the pounding in my chest. The awkward, yet intimate moment stirred emotions I had not felt in many years.

“Well, I guess I better get back to the stage. The boys are ready to play again,” Chris smiled amiably at my friends. His eyes searched mine and he beamed, that same wide grin that once made my heart turn flips in my chest.

“Ok,” I grinned back, trying to suppress the feeling that was welling up inside of me. “I’ll see you around.”

I watched Chris walk back toward the stage. Shaking my head in disbelief, I looked back at the girls sitting around the table. They all stared at me in wide-eyed astonishment.

“What?” I blinked my eyes innocently.

“Who. Was. That?!” Lisa asked, emphasizing every word.

“Oh, that was just a guy I knew from high school,” I shrugged indifferently.

“No, Kaitlyn.” Tori remarked emphatically. “That was not *just* a guy.”

“Yeah,” Shannon announced, looking over my shoulder, “Wow.” She stared in

his direction, bewildered.

“Guys!” I snapped. “Stop staring, ok? He really was just a guy I knew from high school....who I happened to be in love with at the time.”

“Whoa, I bet that was a blast from the past!” Lisa exclaimed.

“Yeah,” I sighed, “something like that.” I looked down at the trembling hands in my lap. I had no idea that seeing him would stir up so many emotions in the pit of my stomach.

“Oh honey,” Shannon patted my shoulder. Finishing her sentence seemed unnecessary. I felt her sympathy.

The rest of the night blurred by as my mind focused on the tranquilizing voice that poured from the speakers.



Occasionally I would sneak a peek toward the stage. I could feel his eyes settling on me, even in the darkness.

His voice, gravelly and breathless behind the microphone, felt warm and comforting like a soft blanket on a cool night. The quiver in my stomach and the tremble of my hands were evidence of the effect Chris had on me. Ashamed, I tried in vain to hide my anguish. Occasionally, Shannon would pat my hand, out of sight from the rest of the girls. I smiled meekly at her as she nodded her head in understanding.

“So, are you guys ready to call it a night?” Shannon’s eyes looked tired as she sipped her last Cosmo.

We all agreed, began to gather our

purses, and stood up to leave.

“Kaitlyn,” Chris spoke from behind me again.

The sound of his voice startled me, and I dropped my keys.

“Oh, sorry,” he said as he quickly bent down to pick them up.

“It’s ok,” I laughed, “I’m not usually so clumsy.”

His fingers brushed mine as he handed them back to me. The tingle from his touch radiated up my arm. I heard a nervous giggle escape from my lips. My hand flew up and covered my mouth, and I immediately felt embarrassed.

“You really made my night,” Chris declared with a crooked grin. “I can’t believe it’s been eight years.”

“Me either,” I concurred.

“See you again tomorrow night?” he asked hopefully, “I mean, let’s not let another eight years go by.”

“Absolutely,” I agreed without thinking. “We’ll be here all weekend. I’m sure I’ll see you around.”

“Great!” he replied, flashing his perfect smile at me.

As hard as I tried not to notice, Chris looked absolutely amazing. His black T-shirt clung to his well-formed chest. The smoldering intensity of his eyes staring into mine sent chills rippling through my body. “I look forward to it,” he admitted.

“I just can’t believe it’s really you.” I could barely contain the elation in my voice. Without thinking, I reached out to

hug him. He seemed shocked, but welcomed the hug.

He enveloped me in his arms and whispered, "I've never forgotten you."

His breath was hot against my ear. I inhaled the mixed aroma of aftershave and breath mints as I tried to burn his scent into my memory. A breath escaped my lungs and lodged in my throat. '*I'm a married woman,*' I rebuked myself. Quickly, I pulled away from him and practically ran to catch up to my friends.

"Oh my goodness, girl! Tell us everything!" Lisa exclaimed as we walked into the living room of our condo.

"What's there to tell?" I asked.

Shannon spoke up. "Well, for

starters, did you see the way he looked at you? And did you see the way he looked in that shirt? Wow!”

I laughed nervously. While these girls were my closest friends, I did not feel emotionally prepared to rehash the history I had with Chris, nor did I feel strong enough to reopen old wounds I had spent years trying to heal.

“C’mon, Kaitlyn. Give us the scoop,” Tori whined. “We want to know about this hot mystery guy.”

I sighed, preparing myself for the heartrending wave of emotion I knew I was about to experience by divulging the intimate details of my past.

My mind, as it creaked open the lid of the proverbial can of worms, drifted

back to a time and place it had only visited in my dreams since the girl I once knew well, but barely recognized anymore, had sped away in her fully packed VW Jetta with hope to start a new life in college.