

“I still want an explanation.”

“I don’t owe you an explanation.”

“That’s fine,” I said, and I wiped a little dribble of mashed pea from her cheek. “I still want one. Can’t I just want one?”

“No,” she said, but she was smiling. “Fine,” and she tried to sit up, but I don’t think she had it in her—that, and I wouldn’t let her. “I was a virgin.”

“What? At 23?”

“Exactly. I was embarrassed.”

“I wouldn’t say it’s embarrassing,” I mumbled, feeling a little awkward myself. “It’s surprising.”

“I was embarrassed. I wanted to, though. I really, really liked you.”

I wanted to joke about her past tense, but I figured if she didn’t owe me an explanation, she didn’t owe me an interjection.

“I don’t know. I was worried. I wanted you to like me. I didn’t want to screw it up. And I wanted to wait and know you better, but I kind of wanted it because you were fun, you were smart—and don’t let this get to your head—you were really, really cute.”

And before I could even interject this time: “Not so much anymore.”

I had to wipe her mouth again, and I almost wanted her to stop talking so she could focus on eating.

“I don’t want any more,” she said.

“Doctor said you’ve got to eat. So you’re going to eat.”

“Fuck the doctor. This stuff is disgusting.”

“They’re going to hook a line up at this point,” I told her, but I put the bowl down. “If that’s the only way they can get you calories.”

“If they won’t let me die, I’ll make it as hard as possible to keep me alive.”

“You know, you should be a little nicer to her. She’s trying her best.”

She stared at me, with that piercing look I always knew her for—even in a hospital bed, it was one of the most intimidating things in the world.

“What?”

“That. That’s why I didn’t sleep with you.”

I chuckled at that—I didn't really get what she was saying. "I don't think I was trying to keep you alive."

"No, I mean—it's the spirit of it. It's what you said to me. It scared me."

"What I said?"

I knew what I said. I didn't want to repeat it. I didn't really want to remember it, either.

"It was the least sexy thing anybody'd ever said to me. And I was almost ready to go!"

She started laughing and wincing as she did. I wanted her to stop, so she'd stop hurting herself, but how would I even ask that?

"You missed out," she said, after she'd calmed down. "Moron."

I smiled myself, but it wasn't real—I knew it—she knew it.

"I'm sorry for what I said," and I really was.

"It's okay," she replied, in the softest voice. "You've more than made up for it."

"You going to eat any more?"

"Absolutely not."

"You going to sleep?"

"Maybe. It's all I really do these days."

"Okay," I said. I was tired too, and I figured I could get some rest of my own. "I'll leave you to it."

"No, stay," she said, before I even had a chance to stand. "Please stay."

So I sat there with her, and that woman just would not sleep, so damn stubborn.

"Hey," she said at one point, just as I was falling asleep. I'd swear she did it on purpose.

"What?" I asked, and it came out a little snappier than I'd wanted.

"You should just go," she said, and she wouldn't look me in the eye.

"You want me to come back tomorrow?"

"No, I mean—stop wasting your time with me. I'm sorry," she said. "I can't give you anything back."

"Hey," I said, "you don't owe me anything."

And I really did mean it.