An illustration of a hand holding a pen, positioned as if about to write. The hand is light-skinned, and the pen is black with a yellow band. The background is a vibrant pink with a crumpled paper texture. The title 'Tyler's Gem' is written in a dark brown, cursive script below the hand.

Tyler's Gem

R u a H a s a n

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Typewriter Pub, an imprint of Blvnp Incorporated

A Nevada Corporation

1887 Whitney Mesa DR #2002

Henderson, NV 89014

www.typewriterpub.com/info@typewriterpub.com

ISBN: **978-1-64434-097-4**

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TYLER'S GEM

RUA HASAN

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*I would like to dedicate this book to my mom and dad
for always being there for me through the tough times.
Thank you for motivating me to write and accomplishing my dreams!*

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PROLOGUE

I looked at my reflection with dull eyes while drops of water were dripping from my hair. The steam from the shower was fogging the mirror, but I could still see myself through it. I sometimes thought that maybe, just maybe, one day I would see a different person with happiness and confidence.

I looked in the mirror to see my flaws that I have grown to accept. The flaws everyone used against me, but why should I care?

Yes, I could be a better person. I could walk to school every day with so much confidence that would bring everyone to their knees.

But why haven't I done that yet? Why did I keep on staring at myself every morning as if it would make things better or make a difference for everyone to like me?

My chubby cheeks and fat belly were one of the reasons why nobody liked me. I was the chipmunk of the whole middle school. I would walk around while everyone called me names, emphasizing why I stood out so much.

It had been like this since elementary school. Probably because I was not much of an active person. I would usually stay home all day and watch TV. I didn't like most things except eating. I mean, who wouldn't? It helped ease the stress. My dad owned a pizza shop that was quite known in our little town of Strawberry Forest in California.

Yes, I knew it was a weird name. Our town was known for growing strawberries in the old days that covered our land like a forest.

I used to go to his pizza place every Friday just to have a bite of heaven, which was probably another reason why I became chubby.

I wrapped the towel tighter around my body as I let my short, straight hair fall down to my shoulders.

I really needed to let it grow.

Walking out of the bathroom, I then headed to my closet. I grabbed a pair of baggy jeans and my favorite sweatshirt that my mom bought me on my twelfth birthday. My fashion sense was another thing I needed to fix.

But should I really care about what everyone would think of how I dress?

I put the clothes on, let my wet hair fall down naturally, and climbed down the stairs to smell the scent of my mom's amazing pancakes. I inhaled it happily and skipped towards the kitchen to see my dad sitting down, reading a book while my mom works at the stove.

My dad was the first to notice me and gave me a smile as he put his book down. He then motioned me to come over.

"Good morning, pumpkin," my dad said, catching my mom's attention. She put the pancake she had on the pan into a plate and turned the stove off. She wiped her hands on the towel next to her and turned to look at me.

"Good morning, mom and dad," I said as I kissed each of them on the cheek. I then grabbed the chair next to my dad and sat down, licking my lips as I stared at the plate in front of me with hungry eyes.

"Is my little girl excited to finish school today?" my mom asked.

Who wouldn't be? School was a living hell because of the constant bullying from none other than Tyl—

No! I promised myself I would never bring up his name as long as I'm alive!

Okay, maybe I was exaggerating a bit. Could you blame me when everyone constantly picked on me just because of how I looked, especially if it was only because one person started it?

"Mom, I'm not a little girl anymore." I groaned playfully as I cut a little piece of my pancake and shoved it in my mouth. The delicious taste in my mouth made me want to moan.

My mom took a seat in front of me and smiled as she pinched my cheek.

"Oh, but you'll always be my little girl," she said, attracting my father's attention. He put his book down again and glared at my mom.

"Hey, that's my line," he said.

I rolled my eyes at them, knowing what they were about to start.

My mom leaned against the table as she put her fist under her chin and smiled teasingly.

“Well, I stole it. *Whatcha* going to do about it?” She teased.

“Why, you!” my dad said.

That was my cue to look away. I ate my breakfast quickly before it got cold. It was obvious that I preferred to watch the pancakes over my parents smooching.

I ignored my parents’ little playful argument which would lead to a make out session right here in front of me because trust me, it would always make me want to gag. I finished my plate and placed it in the sink. I turned around and found my parents eating each other’s faces.

Ew, couldn’t they get a room?

“Mom.” I whined.

“Dad!” I said a bit louder and heard a knock at the front door.

“I’ll get it,” I muttered and headed to the door. I looked through the peephole and smiled when I saw who it was. I opened it and jumped into my best friend’s arms as I ruffled his hair and messed it up.

I pulled away and smiled seeing Matt’s annoyed face. He was probably the only reason I wake up every morning to go to school. He was practically my rock who was always there for me when I needed a shoulder to cry on, and defended me from all the bullying.

It wasn’t like he could stop it in general, but his presence would help me cope with it.

We met somewhere in elementary school and clicked instantly. Matt was like the big brother I never had, supporting me through both the ups and the downs.

“What?” I asked with a smirk. He glared at me and pointed at his hair.

“Really? It takes me forever to fix this.” He whined as he tried to fix his hair. Sometimes, I thought he cared about his looks more than I cared about mine.

I grinned and shrugged my shoulders.

“Oh, don’t be such a grouch! It’s the last day of school, lighten up,” I said, punching his shoulder. He gave me a small smile and nodded his head.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“Yeah, just give me a second,” I said and ran back into the kitchen. “Mom, dad, I’m leaving.” They smiled and engulfed me a big hug and wished me good luck.

My parents knew that I was being picked on, but they didn’t really know that I was being bullied every single day by Ty—

No! Not again.

As I was saying, I thought it was best that they didn’t know for them not to worry. Besides, they have already reported it to the principal countless times, but nothing happened. It just wouldn’t stop.

I went to the front door where Matt was waiting and closed it behind me. The chill of the morning hit my face as the breeze quickened. It was still early, about seven something, but classes wouldn’t start until eight.

I was actually excited to finish this day without problems. Matt and I walked to the school which wasn’t too far away and talked about summer. Time went by quickly and the next thing I knew, I was in front of the place I hated the most. I started walking down the hall with Matt at my side as I tried to ignore everyone including the snickers made by some girls hanging by their lockers. As long as I wouldn’t bump into him today, I would be fine.

When the bell rang, I sprinted out of my seventh period class and down the hall to head to the school gates at the edge of the school’s parking lot. I would usually head towards that direction to meet Matt and walk home together afterwards. Surprisingly, this day just went by simply. I mean, I got called with names a few times, but there was nothing new. I guess everyone was too busy to go home from school and begin their summer vacation, so I wasn’t their priority today.

Matt and I usually took our lunch together, and as I went between my classes, I would hide in the mass of children who were bumping into each other to avoid being spotted by my enemy.

Luck was on my side for not seeing him today. I stepped out of the door at the end of the hallway, walked to the parking lot, and looked around for Matt but couldn’t see him. I assumed that I was early so I waited under a tree that was planted on the side of the gate. After all, it wasn’t the first time he was late.

Suddenly, my vision blurred as something cold hit my head. I squealed in surprise and wrapped my arms around me. When I opened my eyes, I

heard laughter echoing through the air and found myself soaking wet.

I wiped the water blurring my vision and looked up in the branches to see two boys, holding empty buckets and laughing their butts off. I was embarrassed, and I felt tears run through my cheeks, but I held them back.

Why would they do this to me? All I wanted was to go home and forget about the worst seven hours of my life that I had to repeat five times a week. All I wanted was to have a normal life like everyone else.

I pushed those thoughts away and was about to shout at the boys when someone else called my name. Shivers ran down my spine as I feared what I was about to face.

Taking a deep breath, I looked upon the face that I hated the most—the one who made my life a living hell.

Tyler Grey was holding something in his hand which I thought a water balloon.

“Just a little reminder of me throughout your summer,” he said with a smirk, and threw the balloon at me before I could even move.

Paint. It was paint.

The boys up in the tree climbed down and walked over to Tyler. They were barely able to contain themselves from laughing and gave him a pat on the back. It was then that I could no longer control the tears in my eyes from running down my cheeks. I saw Tyler’s eyes glaring at me, and clenched my fists as I watched them walk away with taunting smiles as if they had just won the lottery.

I took a shaky breath as the tears blurred my vision. My day spiraled from ten all the way to a zero because of him. I was freaking wet and my favorite grey sweatshirt now turned pink. I fell to the ground as I sobbed with my knees on my chest and hid my head.

I heard Matt call out from a distance, but I didn’t pay attention. My mind was clogged and overflowing with hateful thoughts toward Tyler Grey.

My eyes were blinded from any light that I could have seen. My ears were plugged with his words. He got what he wanted; I was never going to forget him this summer. His face would forever haunt my mind.

CHAPTER 1

I stepped out of the taxi and paid the driver his tip. My long, tan legs resembled like hotdogs that were being heated under the bright, shining sun. I pulled the sunglasses away from my eyes and rested them on my head, looking around the place I used to call home where I lived many years ago.

Once I was completely alone in the quiet, familiar streets, I made my way to the house, and could instantly tell that not much had changed. The grass was as green as ever, and the birds were flying from branch to branch. It was as if I had never left. Although, it did look like it needed some dusting and a few plants in the front yard. But other than that, everything was fine.

I had argued with myself countless times about whether to buy a new house or just come back to this place. My childhood wasn't quite the best, but I would always choose my heart's desire. It wanted to go back home—to the place where I was raised.

I decided to come back to this small town everyone called Strawberry Forest. Was going back to the same house that hold good yet disturbing memories a good idea? Would I enjoy my life here? Or would I just end up regretting my decision?

I walked to the front door and stared at it for what seemed to be hours but were only seconds. Was I ready to face the past? Coming back here after so many years could be a good thing. I may had been away for so long, but it wasn't enough to help me erase and forget the dreadful memories of what this house and town gave me. Nevertheless, I couldn't exactly stop now. I was here for a reason, and that was to stop running away. I had to face reality.

I looked around to see that the house next to us was a bit different than I remembered. Its paint was in a different color and had a different vibe radiating from it. The decorations were of a different taste than that of the previous owner.

New neighbors perhaps?

I finally gathered all the courage that I had and grabbed the keys in my pocket. I opened the door and it creaked as I opened it slowly. Dust flew in the air as the house had not been touched for years. I took a step into the house, and looked around to see memories of the past flood my mind.

The interior and furniture were untouched. I didn't want anything removed when I moved away. I didn't even let my grandma sell it, knowing that I would be back one day.

I closed the door and realized that I would need help in cleaning this place; I didn't think I could do it alone. I grabbed my phone from my bag to send my best friend a text message on my arrival, telling him that I would be expecting his presence in a couple of minutes. I rubbed my eyes to prevent the tears from falling. I was done running away and was going to start a new life now that I had returned. A life that would make my parents proud.

* * *

Three years ago

I walked up to the front door as I wiped the water off my face with the napkin Matt gave me. Matt had been furious throughout the entire walk. He was ranting about how people could be so cruel, especially on the last day of school. Well, we were talking about Tyler Grey so I wasn't surprised.

He also blamed himself for being late. In his mind, if he was there sooner then maybe he could have prevented it. I disagreed and told him that it was fine. My life had been like this for years so I was pretty used to it.

After saying our 'goodbyes' a couple of blocks away, I stood right outside the front door, too afraid to face my parents. What would they say if they saw me like this? They would definitely freak out.

What would I tell them?

I could just lie and say that it was a goodbye prank from a couple of friends. Or, that there was this activity in school where we fought with water balloons. But of course, that would be such a lame lie, and they would not believe me. They knew me too well, and would be suspicious of the pink paint that stained all over my sweatshirt.

I decided to just tell them the truth and get it over with.

I rang the doorbell, waiting for the door to open. Moments passed as I stared at the door and rang the doorbell again, assuming they may have just not heard the first attempt. I waited another minute or two until I figured out no one was going to open the door. I rolled my eyes and guessed that my parents were probably up in their room making out because this wasn't the first time they've been getting it on while I waited outside.

Sighing, I grabbed the pot that had a plant in it and dug for the emergency key to open the door. I walked in to see no one. I took the risk of going upstairs to my parents' room and was surprised to hear nothing and thought that maybe they have fallen asleep.

Pft, come on. Who sleeps at this time?

I knocked on the door and waited for an answer, but nothing happened. I knocked again but this time, I opened the door to stare at nothing. There was no one in the room. It was completely empty as if it haven't been touched since I had left for school.

I ran down stairs to the kitchen and saw that my mom haven't made dinner at all. Well, that was strange. My parents used to leave something for me to eat before going somewhere else. It wasn't that I was always hungry; I just found it strange.

I walked into the living room and grabbed the house phone. I dialed my mom's number, but no one answered. I dialed dad's number, but he didn't answer either.

I was just about to go upstairs to my room when the doorbell rang. I skipped toward the front door thinking it might be them. When I peeped through the peephole, it wasn't my parents standing outside but two men wearing police uniforms.

I opened the door and stared up at the strangers who were standing in front of me, both of whom gave me sympathetic looks for some unknown reason. I lifted an eyebrow in confusion.

"Can I help you officers?"

They both glanced at each other then looked at me.

"You must be Crystal Clare," one of them said.

I nodded my head slowly, wondering why and how they knew my name.

"Yes, that's me. Is there something wrong?" I asked nervously.

"Yes. Unfortunately, your parents were in an accident, and we need to take you to the police station for some information."

My eyes widened, and my heart started to beat so fast that I could feel it hitting my chest. I felt a lump form in my throat as his words sunk into my brain and my world started to spin.

"An accident?" I gasped softly.

I felt tears form in my eyes, and my palms began to sweat.

"Are they okay?" I asked.

I couldn't imagine living without my parents. They were one of the reasons I stayed positive in life. They were amazingly supportive and always gave me warm hugs when I needed them.

If something were to happen to them, then I would be in this life all on my own. I didn't have anyone else here in this small town to take care of me. My life would become way worse than it already was.

One of the policemen took off the cap he was wearing and looked down at me with tender eyes, shaking his head.

"I'm sorry for your loss," he said.

After hearing those words, I couldn't stop the tears from flowing. My parents were dead.

* * *

I snapped out of my thoughts when I heard the doorbell rang. I took the sunglasses off my head, placed them on the counter, walked over to the front door, and took my shoes off. I looked through the peephole and smiled.

I quickly yanked the door open only to face the sight of Matt holding a broom.

"Matt!"

I jumped into his arms, causing him to drop the broom as he wrapped his arms around my waist. He picked me up off the ground, and our laughter filled the air.

He put me down on my feet and smiled, showing me his straight white teeth. He then looked at me from head to toe and whistled as he gave me a wolf grin.

I laughed as I punched his shoulder playfully.

“Oh my god! It’s been ages,” I said, letting him in before closing the door behind me.

“Yeah, I know, right? How have you been?” he asked.

“I’ve been good. What about you?”

It’s been a very long time since I’ve seen Matt. But ever since I’ve moved to my grandparents’ house in New York four years ago, we have been keeping in touch by using *Facebook* and *FaceTime*. Later on, I bought my own phone, and we called each other every day.

“Better now that you’re here,” he answered, as we walked toward the living room.

“You look the same like I never left,” I said.

He still looked and felt like the Matt I knew many years ago, except that he had grown much taller and broader with facial hair.

“You...well, you look—”

“Different?” I asked.

He shook his head and gave me a smile wrapping his arm around my shoulders.

“Beautifuler,” he said.

“That’s not even a word, idiot.” I chuckled, punching his shoulder again.

“It is for me,” he said.

I smiled at his compliment.

Now, don’t get me wrong. It wasn’t like in the past four years I’ve been trying to change myself and get skinnier so that everyone would like me. No, that’s not what happened.

I got depressed when my parents died and lived in a place I’m not familiar with. I had to meet new people which I wasn’t a big fan of, but I found a solution to deal with it.

No, it wasn’t drugs or alcohol. It was exercise. I would go out for a run and feel free. I wouldn’t stop until I was panting for air and soaked all my clothes with my own sweat.

Doing the same routine every day, running became a hobby and made me into how I looked today.

“I hope you’re ready because this place needs some cleaning,” I said, as I grabbed his broom and threw it at him.

“Some?” he asked, as he grabbed the broom. “You mean, a lot. This place hasn’t been touched in ages.”

I cleaned the kitchen while Matt got to work in the living room. My house didn’t seem huge when I lived here with my parents. We had two bedrooms upstairs and a bathroom. But now that I was going to live here all alone, it seemed so big and lonely.

I thought about it a lot and came to a conclusion that I wouldn’t be moving out anytime soon. This place was sentimental, and I couldn’t just let it go. I was pretty sure this was what my parents would have wanted, and I booked the nearest flight ticket to return home, the minute I turned eighteen. I’ve been planning that ever since I’ve left.

I was never close to my grandparents. I appreciated them for taking me in though, but I knew that once I turn eighteen, I’d be on my own.

After an hour and a half later, Matt and I were done cleaning the first floor. I walked out of the bathroom after cleaning myself up and saw Matt in the kitchen drinking some water.

“Let’s take a break and have something to eat. I’m pretty sure you’re hungry,” he said.

I watched as Matt took his phone out and ordered pizza. I took two cups and a bottle of *Pepsi* to the living room and placed them on the coffee table in front of the couch. I sat down and grabbed my phone out since the TV wasn’t working, and it needed some fixing with the wires and stuff.

Matt walked into the room and sat next to me. We spent time talking about everything that happened in the past four years and how the people at school were sorry for me and my loss. I wasn’t planning on holding grudges against anyone, but I could never forget what they have done to me.

I told him about New York and how awesome it was. But I guess I was just a Californian girl who could never trade California for any city. I was born here after all.

Twenty minutes later, a knock was heard on the door. Matt got up to open it while I sipped on the Pepsi I had in my hand. I wasn’t such a big fan

of soda and preferred juice more, but there wasn't any in the fridge at the moment. I needed to buy groceries.

Matt came back with a box of pizza in his hand. I licked my lips as my stomach grumbled in hunger. When the box was opened, we dug in and ate until we were full. We pretty much finished the box, but you can't blame us. It's been a long day.

We sat in silence, gathering our thoughts until Matt spoke.

"You ready for school on Monday?" he asked.

I sighed. I knew this topic was going to be brought up. Besides, I still had to go to school.

I wished I could delay the time of me having to go to school sooner.

"Yeah," I said, nodding my head. Let's just hope that some things have changed while I was gone.

CHAPTER 2

I was in a peaceful place as if I was floating on a cloud in heaven. Not a sound could be heard and it felt amazing just to live in the moment. It was as if all of my problems had just disappeared with a snap of a finger.

Too bad it didn't last longer because I was awakened from my slumber by an annoying sound. I turned around further from the beeping source and shoved a pillow over my head, hoping that it would at least lower the volume that was separating me from my beautiful sleep.

I ignored it until it completely disappeared. I let out a sigh of relief as I sunk further into the comfortable mattress. I heard the sounds of birds chirping outside my window as if they were trying to wake me up, but my eyelids still felt heavy.

I needed more sleep before the dreadful Monday comes. Suddenly, the annoying sound returned. I groaned as I lifted the pillow off of my face, and turned around to see my phone vibrating on the counter next to me.

With one eye opened, I grabbed my phone to check and see who on earth was calling me at a time like this. I checked the caller ID which read Matt Jones and debated on whether I should answer it or not.

Picking the right choice, I pressed *decline* and placed my phone back onto the counter. I pulled the covers over my tired body and slept like there was no tomorrow. Well, I tried to, but unfortunately, my phone rang again. I let out another frustrated groan and got off of my bed, wanting to rip my hair out, and grabbed my phone.

I pressed the *answer* button and put my phone on my ear.

"What do you want?" I grumbled at my best friend, who had the nerves to wake me up so early.

“Rise and shine, sunshine!” His happy voice beamed through the speaker.

“Rise and shine my ass! Now, tell me what you want.”

I heard Matt chuckle on the other end.

“Oh, I can see you’re a morning person huh?”

I rolled my eyes and started to rub the sleep out of my eyes.

“Are you going to tell me or what?” I asked. “Because you’re wasting my time. I have better things to do.”

I heard him scoff on the other end of the line.

“Sure, like what? Sleep?” he asked.

I nodded my head but remembered he couldn’t see me.

“Yes, that is what normal people do at times like this.”

“Look at the freakin’ time! It’s almost eleven,” Matt said.

I removed my phone from my ear and looked at the time which read 10:49 AM. My eyes widened in surprise, and I rubbed them. How on earth did I sleep that long? My body was used to waking up early for a run, but I couldn’t blame myself for that because yesterday was a long day with all the traveling and cleaning.

I looked around my bedroom to see that it was perfectly cleaned. I mean, there were some things that needed some fixing, like the decorations that hung everywhere from my 14 year old self.

Oh, and a bigger bed of course. I placed my phone back to my ear and sighed as I realized I wouldn’t be able to go back to sleep. That’s just how my body worked. “Big deal!” I said.

“There better be a good explanation as to why you’re calling, Matt. I will walk all the way to your house and shove your head into a trumpet.”

Matt seemed unaffected by my threat and chuckled to himself.

“Yeah, that would be awesome. But unfortunately, I don’t have one,” he said, pretending to sound sad.

“Just get to the point,” I said, clearly annoyed.

“Fine! You’re boring,” he answered. “Get dressed. I’m picking you up in an hour so we can go grocery shopping. Unless, you want to starve because your fridge is completely empty.”

I let a moment of silence pass as I debated on whether I should go fill my fridge or just stay in bed all day. I let a sigh of defeat escape my lips when I realized that I needed food more.

“Fine, but lunch is on you,” I said as I walked toward my closet.

“Fine, whatever. See you in an hour,” he said.

We said our ‘goodbyes’ and hung up. I grabbed a pair of skinny jeans and a white blouse, then rushed to my bathroom. I took a twenty-minute shower, did my daily morning routine, and put on my clothes. I put a single coat of mascara onto my lashes and some lipstick to bring out my soft, pink lips.

I still had a few more minutes left until Matt arrived, and I walked into the kitchen as my stomach growled in hunger. I couldn’t survive the day without my breakfast; it was like my energy booster for the day. I’d just feel heavy and tired.

If only there was an apple I could nip on. I was sipping on a glass of water when I heard a honking sound outside my door. I grabbed my bag and walked outside my house and saw Matt waiting for me in the car as he waved.

As I closed the front door, I saw a guy open the front door of the house next to mine. I couldn’t tell who he was or what he looked like because he was wearing a hat covering his face and sunglasses. I was just about to walk over and greet him as his new neighbor, but he didn’t notice me and walked straight through the door, closing it behind him.

I shrugged my shoulders and thought about introducing myself to the neighbors later on.

I walked toward Matt’s car and sat in the passenger seat. We gave each other a hug and drove down the road. Matt had been teasing me about stuff throughout the entire ride like telling me that I woke up on the wrong side of the bed and asking what crawled up my ass.

I rolled my eyes and wondered how he could be this energetic when the first day of school was the next day. I tried to keep my mind off of what I had to face, but it kept drifting to possible thoughts of how everyone would treat me.

Would they possibly treat me differently because of how I looked?

I hoped not because my friends right there were fake. I told myself to be careful on who I hang out with and get attached to. I was just thankful that Matt was always there by my side. I was ready for what was to come because this time, I wouldn’t be crying or running away.

After my parent's death, I became a much stronger person and learned to face my fears—even if it was Tyler Grey, who I hoped had moved all the way across the globe. I haven't heard much about him since then. It's not that I care about how he's doing or anything; it's just that I didn't have the courage to ask Matt. I just didn't like his name rolling off my tongue.

A few minutes later, we parked outside the supermarket which took us forever to do. The parking lot was full, and each time we found an empty spot and attempted to take it, someone would be there before we made it.

I got out of the car as I happily finished the doughnut Matt gave me. I felt my energy boost because I finally had something in my stomach. Matt had his car locked and walked towards the entrance door of the supermarket with me following right behind him.

When we got inside, I sighed in relief, feeling the cool air from the air conditioner hitting my skin. I looked around to survey the place, noticing how it was not too full but not too empty either. Matt grabbed a cart and started to walk towards the vegetable and fruit section.

"Why are you even helping me when you could have enjoyed the last day of summer before school starts?" I asked, as I grabbed a plastic bag and started to shove apples into it. Oh, I loved apples.

"Crystal, we all know I'm the responsible one in this relationship, so I might as well help," he said as he dropped his arm on my shoulder.

"Sure, keep lying to yourself. We both know you just want to spend some time with me," I said, grabbing a bag of carrots.

"Damn it! My cover has been blown," he said sarcastically before shoving me towards the unhealthy food section. I wasn't even done getting what I wanted, but Matt seemed like he couldn't care less because he was placing stuff like Nutella and skittles into the cart.

Hey, I not complaining though.

"Besides, I need to make sure you buy healthy food so you could stay healthy and strong," he said, putting two bags of *Lays* chips into the cart.

I gave him a stern look, wanting to call him *immature* at the choices he was giving me.

I took a bag of *Lays* and placed them back onto the shelf.

"You know I don't like *Lays*," I said, grabbing a bag of *Cheetos* instead. Matt gave me a goofy smile.

“Of course, I do. Just checking to see if your taste in food is still as boring as always,” he teased, but I ignored his comments. When the cart was finally filled with a combination of healthy and unhealthy choices, we walked toward the dairy section and grabbed a gallon of milk. I took a crate of eggs while Matt put some yogurt into the cart and walked toward the meat section.

“Matt!” I whined.

He turned around to look at me sternly while lifting one of his eyebrows at me.

“Please, don’t tell me you’re tired already,” he said as he stopped the cart. I shrugged my shoulders as I placed my arms on the cart for support.

“My legs hurt.”

He gave me a pointed look.

“Says the girl who goes for a run every day,” he said.

I wrapped my arms under my chest as I pouted.

“That’s a completely different thing,” I said.

“Enlighten me then.”

* * *

Matt made sure to carry the bags to the front door with me after dropping me off. I gathered all of them in the kitchen and made sure to close the front door behind me. Once I had everything in place, I saw Matt walk towards the front door.

“Okay, I’ll see you tomorrow, Crystal. Have a ni—”

I grabbed his shoulder, turning him around as I glared at him.

“Where do you think you’re going?” I asked.

He gave me a confused look as he lifted his eyebrow.

“Home?”

“Oh, no you don’t. You owe me lunch remember?” I reminded him.

“Fine, get in the car,” he said while grabbing his car keys from his pocket.

A few minutes later, we were standing right outside *McDonald’s*. I did a little happy dance in my head when I smelled the scent of heaven from a couple steps away. Yes, I do know it was quite unhealthy, but what could I do? I just loved the food here. We walked through the door and headed to

the cashier. I followed what Matt ordered: a chicken sandwich and some fries.

When our food was ready, we walked toward an empty table that was right across a window and sat down. We ate our lunch as we chatted about random things like life, school, and aliens.

Yes, aliens. Matt and I tend to drift from one certain topic to another. It was like we were both weird in a good way and aren't afraid to show it. Matt and I also agreed to meet each other outside of school tomorrow because I've never attended the high school in this town as I moved away at the end of middle school.

We would then get our schedules together, and he would show me around the place.

I hope it would be just like it sounded. I just wanted this year to go by without any drama and conflicts. That's the only wish I had. But sadly, only one person could decide whether my last year of school would be a walk to the park or another journey to hell.

Let's just hope I wouldn't bump into Tyler.

CHAPTER 3

I walked down the stairs and into the kitchen. When I sat down, I poured milk into a bowl of cereal in front of me as I listened to the ticking of the clock. The only sound that was heard in my empty kitchen was my munching as my teeth crunched on the cornflakes.

The time was 7:15 AM, and I had half an hour left before my first period class starts.

I was all dressed in short skinny jeans and a t-shirt. I had my long brunette hair down naturally and had a light makeup on my face.

The school wasn't too far away and was only a five-minute walk or one-minute drive. But I would prefer to walk to school because traffic tends to increase early in the morning, and it's more relaxing.

I finished my breakfast and put the bowl in the sink, telling myself that I would clean it once I'm back from the 7-hour torture. I looked at myself in the mirror for the last time and grabbed my bag as I walked to the door.

I may have been cool and relaxed right now, but honestly, I was freaking out inside.

Yes, I know I'm paranoid.

I opened the front door, but before I could take a step out, I turned around and looked at the empty house which used to be the loving home of my parents.

"Mom... Dad... I'm leaving," I whispered before closing the door behind me.

I walked down the road leading to my school as I looked around the quiet neighborhood. The sun had barely been up for more than half an hour, leaving the air cold and moist. The only people in sight were the parents walking their children to school and teenagers walking themselves to school as well.

I sighed as I walked past the house next to mine. The curtains behind the glass windows were closed while a car was parked right outside the house. It's like no one was home, or they were just sleeping because it was awfully quiet. I told myself that once I was done with school, I would introduce myself to the neighbors.

I finally made it in front of the school but didn't enter it just yet. I took my phone out from my pocket and checked the time which read 7:30 AM. I still had fifteen minutes left before the class begins. I walked through the gates to see Matt waiting for me with three girls by his side.

They were smiling and laughing but before I could approach them, they hugged each other 'goodbye' and walked away, leaving Matt behind. He noticed me when I was a couple steps away then smiled and gave each other a hug.

"So, why didn't you tell me the girls are into you?" I teased, poking his stomach with my elbow.

He pulled away and plastered fake look of hurt on his face.

"Crystal, even if I didn't tell you, you should have known it with my charming looks," he said. I rolled my eyes playfully while shaking my head at his cockiness.

"Oh, shut up. It's too early to brag," I said.

He gave me a smirk and wrapped his arm around my shoulder, dragging me down the hall. We walked past a couple of doors as I looked around the place filled with teenagers, chatting about their summer. I saw a couple of unknown faces that I was thankful for because maybe I could start anew. However, there were some faces that looked familiar—from the people who would just ignore me, to the ones who would call me names.

I didn't know if they were going to recognize me as the person everyone looked down at or as a completely different person. Whatever happened, I was going to leave the past behind and start a new life with new friends and new people.

Matt and I walked through the door with the word 'office' on it. The place was pretty full with a long line of students waiting to retrieve their schedules. I walked toward the end of the line with Matt behind me.

"I hope I have some classes with you," I said nervously.

Matt put his hand on my shoulder and gave me an assuring smile.

“Don’t worry. Even if we didn’t, we could still meet up while walking to class and at lunch.”

I took my phone out to see that we had ten minutes before the class would start. I tapped my foot as I waited for the line to shorten. Finally, when I had my turn, I gave the lady behind the desk who was typing on the computer my name. She looked through a couple of papers then handed me my schedule. I stepped to the side and looked at it while I waited for Matt to get his.

I skimmed my eyes through the classes I have been put in which read:

First period: English / room 9 / Mrs. Visconti

Second period: Science / room 34 / Mrs. Montgomery

Third period: PE / the gym / Mr. Bonny

Fourth period: ICT / room 20 / Mr. Jones

Lunch

Fifth period: Math / room 45 / Mr. Tran

Sixth period: History / room 19 / Mr. Parker

Seventh period: Art / room 100 / Mr. Schubert

I groaned to myself when I saw I had math for fifth period. It was one of the subjects I hated the most apart from Science. But thankfully, I had PE for third period which in my opinion was the best, and I think I could handle Art as the seventh.

I looked up to see Matt coming my way. He looked over my shoulders to see my schedule. I waited for a moment until he was done skimming through it and heard him cheer in delight.

“Yes! I have you for first, second, and sixth period,” he said while giving me a side hug. I smiled in relief, glad I wasn’t going to be completely alone in all of my classes this year.

“That’s awesome,” I said, as we started to walk out the door and into the hallway. I looked at the class number for my first period class, which turned out to be in the front of the school. I sighed in relief because I’ll be starting off my day with a simple subject: English.

By the time we were walking to our first class, the hallway was a sea of students shoving each other. Luckily for us, we made it to our class on time. Once we were inside, I sat on a random empty seat, while Matt sat next to me as the teacher looked through a couple of papers.

When the bell rang, Mrs. Visconti closed the door and walked to the front of the class.

“Good Morning, everyone!” she said. “My name is Mrs. Visconti, and I will be your English teacher. Let’s all get along nicely.”

I leaned my back on my seat, trying to get comfortable throughout the first forty-five minutes. Since it was the first day, the teachers were light on us, but on the second day, we would have our own assigned seats and a bunch of homework that I would be dreading to do.

I glanced toward Matt who was flipping his pencil with his fingers, doodling something on the desk.

Slacking on the first day?

I sighed as I focused all of my attention on the teacher in front of me, letting my eyes flicker on the clock across the room every now and then. Forty minutes to go.

* * *

I walked out of my fourth period class, and looked around the place to see everyone rush toward the cafeteria. I felt my stomach grumble as I walked through the crowd of students. The first four periods had been going by smoothly. A couple of people recognized me and gave me welcoming smiles but other than that, nobody bothered me. I didn’t do much in my first four periods as all the teachers were introducing themselves and their rules.

I was starting to think that maybe this year would be fine, because so far, I haven’t spotted the only one person who could ruin it just yet—Tyler Grey—and that was a relief. It wasn’t like I was afraid of him. I just didn’t want to deal with the drama and conflict every time he was around. Even if he was here, I just hoped that maybe he had changed.

I walked into the cafeteria toward the long line to get my lunch. I decided to grab a slice of pizza, an apple, and orange juice. When I was done getting my lunch, I looked around to look for Matt. I spotted him at the center of the room, talking with a bunch of people near a table. I walked over to him, trying to ignore the curious stares of some students. When I got closer, I noticed that the three girls with him were the same ones from earlier this morning, with one of them was sitting next to a guy who had his arms wrapped around her.

It didn't take long for Matt to notice me. He got off of his seat, and gave me a side hug. We walked toward the table he was sitting at previously, as everyone's eyes averted toward me.

"Ready to meet a couple of friends?" Matt asked me quietly.

I glanced at him, giving him a little smile and nodded my head.

"Everyone, meet Crystal," Matt said.

I was surprised to see their eyes widened and their mouths opened.

"You mean, Crystal..." the guy asked.

"The one and only," he said, patting my back.

I turned to look at him, giving him a confused look as I lifted an eyebrow. One of the girls who was sitting next to the guy spoke first.

"Matt has told us so much about you," she said and I smiled.

"Good things, I hope?" I said.

They all nodded their heads, and I thought I was liking them already. I placed my tray on the table and sat on an empty seat. The table was filled with a total of five people, excluding me. Three girls and two boys, including Matt.

"Okay, Crystal, this is Troy, and his girlfriend, Jasmine," Matt said while pointing toward the couple smiling at me. I gave them a smile and waved.

"This is Eva and Sydney, the annoying twin sisters, who are so persistent they can make you do anything." Matt teased, and I noticed they were indeed identical.

"Hey!" The twins glared at Matt.

I smiled to myself and took a bite of pizza as I listened to Matt argue with the twins, while the others started to laugh. Throughout the lunch period, Jasmine and the twins, had been telling me the gossips of the school and who the wannabes were.

But then all of a sudden, Tyler was brought up. Jasmine said something about him not coming to school today which made me sigh quietly in relief.

Something inside me was hoping that he was no longer in this school, but I was wrong. According to Jasmine, he skipped school all the time. This meant that maybe, just maybe, I wouldn't be seeing him around that much. Maybe it would be better if he didn't recognize me.

I just had to see when the time comes.

* * *

I walked through the front door and placed my bag on the counter. I looked around and imagined my parents, welcoming me home with warm smiles.

“Mom... Dad... I’m home,” I said to myself before walking into the kitchen.

When I was done having dinner, I made my way upstairs and into my room with my bag in my hand. I threw it on my bed and grabbed my phone as I looked through *Facebook* and *Instagram*. When I was done, I felt like I couldn’t stay in my room any longer. I walked to my closet and took my sports clothes.

I put my running shoes on and walked out the door, making sure to lock it after me. I started off by jogging to a park nearby, but when I was there, I began to run like my life depended on it. I ran passed a group of children laughing and a couple who were kissing on a bench nearby.

I was so focused on running that I didn’t notice the change of a path in front of me. I turned to my right suddenly, colliding hard into someone’s chest. I would have called it a wall if it wasn’t for the fact that its owner wrapped its arms around me.

“Ugh, I’m so sor—”

I apologized for my clumsiness as I looked up to the person I bumped into, but stopped as a gasp escaped my lips. My eyes widened as I stared at the person in front of me.

Oh, why did this had to happen to me?

Of all people, I just had to bump into him—Tyler.

CHAPTER 4

I stared at the face I hated the most for ruining my childhood. The same exact person who was standing in front of me and had his arms wrapped around me. I swallowed the lump that formed in my throat as I tried to act natural. Maybe he didn't recognize me. I mean, I did look like a whole new different person after all these years. Yeah! I shouldn't fret. It wasn't like out of nowhere he would know that I was the Crystal Clare he used to bully.

Besides, if he was the hottest guy in school, I was pretty sure he'd been with a lot of girls to not remember my face.

I observed his face and was surprised to realize that Eva was right. He was indeed damn hot. Those mesmerizing eyes were looking at me with an emotion I couldn't quite figure out and his face looked like it was sculptured by a goddess.

I coughed awkwardly, and he released his hold on me. I looked at the ground, scratching my head nervously. I gathered as much courage needed to apologize to him and walk away as if nothing happened, but before I could even open my mouth, his husky voice had spoken.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he said. I looked up to see his shocked face disappeared and formed into a smug smirk.

"The one and only Crystal is back," he said, and I saw a glint in his eyes. His stare on me was so intense I shifted my legs anxiously as I glared at him, causing his smirk to widen. I could already tell I wasn't going to get along with him anytime soon. The air around us was so intense, I could cut it with a knife. It felt like all the words I was just about to say slipped off my tongue.

He looked at me from head to toe with shock in his eyes. I saw his mouth opened, probably going to state the fact about my change, but I

didn't wait any longer to hear it. It was probably the worst and dumbest idea I've ever thought, but right now, in this moment, I could only blame myself so I did the only thing that could get me away from the last person I wanted to see.

I ran away from him as fast as I could, but it wasn't fast enough to evade the look of the shock and confusion on his face. I heard him say something that sounded like 'wait' but that was the last thing I was going to do. I quickened my pace just in case he was following me which would have definitely looked weird to the others around us who may have been watching. I mean, a girl running in sport clothes with a sexy guy who looked like a Greek god chasing her.

I glanced behind me while breathing heavily to see that I was alone. I let out a sigh of relief as my heart crashed strongly against my chest. I bent over to rest my hands on my knees and recalled what just happened.

Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!

How could I be so dumb and careless? Now that I thought about it, I wish I could turn back time and stand in my place with confidence radiating from me! I told myself I wouldn't run away from my problems anymore, but look what I did! I freakin' did it again, literally. Oh, how much my life sucks!

No words could describe the humiliation I was put through because of my careless legs. But what on earth was I supposed to do? Stand as I let Tyler remind me of the times he would pick on me? I still don't even know how I'm going to face him in school.

School! Just great! Another weight to add to my shoulders! I just hope Tyler wouldn't target me again. After all these years, he just couldn't get enough, could he? I wiped the sweat off my forehead and drank some water from my water bottle which I brought with me.

I told myself I've had enough running for one day, especially after running into and away from an ugly monster that creeps into the night, just waiting to crush every girl's dream.

Okay, maybe I'm exaggerating just a little bit. I mean yes, I probably hated his guts and face, but for some unknown reason, every girl in school wanted to have a taste of him.

Ew. I couldn't believe that thought actually formed in my mind.

I started to walk further from the park and went home. By now, time was moving pretty fast as the sun started to set. I dashed to my room, grabbed some relaxing clothes a.k.a my pajamas, and headed towards my bathroom to take a cold shower and clean my sticky and sweaty skin.

A few minutes and an empty shampoo bottle later, I was freshly cleaned. I grabbed my phone and laid on my bed as my wet hair soaked the pillows, causing me to get back up in annoyance.

Was it just me or am I the only one who hated that? The same way I hated Tyler more than my period.

Ha! Just kidding. What could be worse than a girl on her period?

The world may never know.

I browsed through my contacts and called Matt. After the third ring, he finally picked up.

“Yo, this is Sparta. How may I help you?” he asked. I pulled the phone away from my ear to check the caller ID and rolled my eyes.

“Yeah, and I’m Patrick,” I said as sarcasm slipped off my tongue, making him chuckle.

“Since when did Patrick have such a high and squeaky voice?”

“Hey! My voice isn’t squeaky.” I defended myself. It seemed as if I could never get used to his insults. Yes, I did take that as an insult!

“Sure, if that helps you sleep at night.”

I rolled my eyes, unable to come up with some cool comeback like I usually do. I would let him have the satisfaction for once.

“So, what’s up?” I asked.

“The sky,” he replied. I could already see the smirk on his face.

“Ha ha,” I said in a bored tone.

“What about you?”

“Oh, nothing really, just the usual. I went for a run and bumped into Tyler Grey, my archnemesiis,” I said casually as if I was talking about the weather, swinging my feet back and forth while looking at my nails.

“What did you just say?” Matt asked, as his voice was laced with shock. He knew all too well that I hated Tyler, and if I had the chance to bury him six feet underground, then I would. He also wasn’t such a big fan of him. I mean, weren’t all guys like that when another steals all the attention from every girl?

Yeah. Every girl, except me.

Matt disliked him not for that reason, but because of the years of torture that guy had put me through. My best friend didn't have that much hatred toward him as I do. But if I decided to plot murder against Tyler, then he would definitely be on my side.

Yeah, that didn't sound as good as I thought it would.

"You heard me loud and clear. I literally bumped into him while taking a run," I said as I cringed when I recalled the memory, hoping that it was just a dream—no, a nightmare—and sooner or later, I would wake up. Though I knew too well that this was reality.

"Oh my god, I was expecting you to bump into him soon but not too soon." His voice boomed through the speaker.

"Yeah, I know. I don't think I could ever look at his face ever again," I mumbled the last part.

"Wait, did he recognize you?"

I ran my hand through my hair, irritated, before I answered.

"Yes," I grumbled.

"So, what did you do?"

There was a moment of silence as I thought about how much of an idiot I was.

"I ran away," I said quickly.

"You what?" Matt asked in disbelief.

"I said, I ran away," I said loudly this time. I knew what was going to come. Matt was like a coach on a football team, wanting to get the best out of each player. If they failed, then shit would break loose.

"Crystal! Why on earth would you do that? I thought you were done running away?" His loud voice made me bring the phone away from my ear. Once he was done, I placed it back, imagining him drawing a picture of Tyler, hanging it on a wall as he threw knives at it.

That's a sight I was willing to see.

"I am, Matt! It's just that I freaked out."

I let myself fall on my bed, letting my head get sucked in by my fluffy pillow while looking up into the ceiling.

"I didn't know what to do when I bumped into my childhood bully. Tell me, what was I supposed to do?"

"You know you're the only one who can do it for yourself, Crystal," he said. "It's your decision on how you deal with each situation. I just don't

want to see you suffer like the old days. I want you to be careful.”

Matt had always wanted the best for me, yet there were times where he would let loose. Not kidding. It was like he had two sides of him—the overly protective brother and a crazy best friend.

“I know, Matt, and I’m grateful at you for being there for me.”

We both sighed as we listened to each other’s silence which was comforting in some way.

“So, what’s going to happen now?” he asked.

I let a moment pass as I thought about his question.

“Well, there’s only one thing to do.”

“And what’s that?”

“Show Tyler’s he’s messing with the wrong person.”

“And how do we do that?”

“I honestly have no idea.”

CHAPTER 5

I walked down the hall, yawning. My backpack was hanging by one of my shoulders as I tried to straighten out the clothes I was putting on in a rush. The air was getting hotter throughout the days but never failed to surprise me every morning. I thanked the lords for I wasn't sweating by the time I made it to school.

My stupid alarm didn't go off this morning, and living all alone means that I won't have anyone waking me up if I was late. I woke up in panic, having only twenty minutes left. Thankfully, I got dressed in a new record of sixty seconds and got out the door twelve minutes before class started.

When school ended a couple of months ago, I thought of spending my summer mornings running, and sleeping till evening like others do. But ever since I moved back here and started the new school year, I found it difficult to take a run and get ready for school, leaving me with only one option, and that's running at night or when I'm not busy.

I'd rather have a run in the morning than at night, but either way, it was pretty much the same thing.

I quickened my pace as I ignored the strange stares I got from the students. Thankfully, I haven't come across some hater who would make all her best friends go against you like in the movies.

I headed to where my locker was. Unfortunately, my locker was nowhere near Matt's. At least, Jasmine's locker wasn't too far. I opened it and took the things I would need for the class.

I was startled by an unknown face staring right at me. A blond-haired guy who had a huge grin on his face was leaning against the locker next to mine. He was wearing those varsity jackets that the football players had.

He was tall and muscular, but not as buff as those boxers and wrestlers.. He had the typical playboy vibe radiating from him. His straight white teeth were shining so bright like it was a light bulb or something.

“So, you’re the new girl,” he said.

I pulled my bag over my shoulder as I lifted an eyebrow at him. I looked around to see people staring at us.

“Um... yeah,” I said awkwardly.

Then out of nowhere, he took a step forward and hung his arm over my shoulders as the grin on his face widened.

“That’s awesome. I’ve been dying to meet you like all the others!”

I gave him a confused look and took his arm off of me. Geez, hadn’t this dude heard of personal space? I mean, I didn’t even know him. For all I knew, he could be a serial killer or something.

Okay. Fine. I doubted a serial killer would attend school and play football, but hey, it’s possible. We live in a strange world.

“Like the others?” I asked.

“Yeah, everyone has been talking about the hot new girl.”

I rolled my eyes and cursed under my breath. I always hated to be the center of attention. It just caused too much drama, whether it be a good or bad thing. Besides, I was only expecting some of them to get surprised that a new student had attended, and it wasn’t always that anybody moved into this small town. I wasn’t expecting them to like me just because of my appearance either.

They weren’t too excited to meet me back in middle school.

“Uh, okay...” I said as I looked at the time on my phone. I didn’t really want to be late for first class.

“Oh, excuse my bad manners,” he said, stretching his right hand out for me to shake.

“My name’s Dan.”

I stretched my hand out and shook his as I gave him a little smile.

“Crystal Clare.”

Before he could even open his mouth and say anything else, the warning bell rang, informing everyone that it was time to go to class. I put my phone carefully into my bag.

“Well, it was nice to meet you, Crystal. See you later,” he said and winked before turning around to leave.

What a playboy.

I turned around and started walking to my first period class, this time, without Matt. Speaking of Matt, I turned my head side to side searching for him, when I felt someone drop their arm over my shoulders from behind me. I rolled my eyes in annoyance.

Not again.

I was about to turn my head to lecture the person about personal space, but stopped when I saw who it was.

“That’s enough,” I said. “I already have a heavy backpack on me, and your arm weighs more than a ton.”

My words caused him to glare at me.

“Clare, you know it’s all muscle,” he said, pointing his body.

“Sure it is. I’d prefer to call it fat.” I teased.

“Ha ha, very funny. You know, sometimes, I think you enjoy watching me suffer.”

“I do! It’s a passion of mine.”

We walked over to Mrs. Visconti’s desk and waited in a short line of students to get seating arrangements. Once it was my turn, I gave her my name and was thankful to get a seat near the back. I was hoping for a seat next to a window, but this will do. I always liked to sit somewhere behind. It was more comfortable than sitting in front where everyone could practically stare holes into your head.

I sat in my seat and watched Matt turn around, as he gave me a huge grin. He then took the seat next to mine, as he gave me a high five.

“Knew it! This must be fate,” he said, making me laugh at his silly behavior.

The final bell rang as a bunch of students rushed into the class, trying to hide behind one another so the teacher wouldn’t notice and give them detention. As everyone began to take their places, I couldn’t help but notice everyone staring at me...again.

Had they never seen a new face before? Matt seemed to notice it and turned to me while lifting one of his eyebrows.

“Since when were you this popular?” he asked, as the teacher walked to the front of the room. I shrugged and shook my head.

“I’m not,” I said.

We focused all our attention on the lesson. A couple of minutes passed as Mrs. Visconti instructed what we were supposed to do for today's lesson. She then handed out a couple worksheets to work on for the whole lesson with the person sitting next to us.

Once the word 'partner' escaped her lips, Matt and I turned our heads to each other, a smirk plastered on our faces as we nodded our heads slowly. We pretty much looked like two people trying to sell drugs to one another.

Time went by quickly, and the next thing I knew, it was time for second period. I grabbed my bag and walked out the door with Matt following not far behind.

* * *

I walked into my fourth period class which was ICT. This subject was one of those subjects I had neutral feelings for, which means one minute I'll like it, and another, I'll despise it with every fiber of my being. It really depends on my mood.

I took a seat and pulled out my notebook, waiting for the class to start. When the final bell rang, Mr. Jones walked to the front of the room with everyone in their seats. The tables in this class weren't single like all the other classes. They were the long ones meant for two people. I sat in the same seat I had yesterday with a random stranger.

"Good morning, class. Today we will start with a project I have in store," Mr. Jones said.

"Each of you will have to pair up to work on this project together, and I will be choosing your partners."

Everyone groaned in annoyance.

"In this project, I want you and your partner to make a presentation," he added. "Whether it be a slideshow or a poster on how technology changed our everyday lives including its advantages and disadvantages. I'm pretty sure that won't be hard for the start of the year."

"The partner you will be set up with will be your partner for the whole year's future projects. So, let's all get started. I want everyone to get up with all your belongings and stand at the back," he said.

Everyone followed what our teacher had instructed. Once all the seats were empty, Mr. Jones took out a paper that held all our names on it. But

before he could open his mouth, the door suddenly opened, catching everyone's attention.

My eyes widened at the person who just entered the room.

Of all people, why did it have to be Tyler? I mean, it could have been Justin Bieber or my dead grandma, but no, it was him.

I saw every girl in the class stare at him with awe. Some began to fix their hair while others applied lip gloss. A couple twirled their hair, trying to look seductive, but to me, they all looked stupid. Why on earth would they try to impress Tyler Grey? He wasn't worth it.

It was obvious that Mr. Jones was annoyed at Tyler's entrance.

"Oh, Mr. Grey. How delighted I am to see you." His voice was laced with sarcasm.

"Thanks, Mr. Jones. You know how much I enjoy your class," Tyler teased. His voice left every girl swooning except me. On the other hand, every guy glared at him, clearly jealous of all the attention he was getting.

I noticed Mr. Jones mutter something under his breath, but it wasn't loud enough for me to hear.

I swallowed a lump in my throat when Tyler scanned the whole class and felt my breath stop when his eyes stopped on me, a huge grin now plastered his face. At that moment, all I wanted was for the ground to swallow me up and cover me from Tyler's intense stare.

I noticed some girls follow his stare and sent glares at me.

Why? I don't even know.

Tyler walked to the corner of the room with his eyes still focused on me. He passed by me, smirking, and I glared at him.

Oh, how much I wanted to slap that smirk off his face!

"Okay, class. Now that you are all here," Mr. Jones said, sending Tyler a warning glare, making the latter shrug his shoulders in return. "I'm going to call out your names and assign you seats with your partners," he continued.

Everyone nodded their heads.

I closed my eyes and crossed my fingers, hoping that my wish would come true. I didn't care who I'm paired up with, as long as it wasn't Tyler.

"Lucy with Sydney," Mr. Jones began.

"Alex with James."

I watched everyone walked to their seats with their partners they would be stuck with for the whole year.

“Emily and Xavier.”

Oh please, oh please. Give me some luck!

I kept my face neutral as I tried to ignore Tyler’s stare, which was practically creating holes in the side of my face.

He just doesn’t know when to give up, does he?

“Sam with Bony.”

I held in my breath, knowing that my name would pop out soon. I prayed to the lords that hopefully I would be paired up with someone nice.

“Joseph with Amanda.”

I bit my bottom lip nervously as I watched the number of students standing decrease.

“And Crystal with David,” Mr. Jones said.

I released the breath I was holding in relief and smiled happily. I grabbed all my stuff and was about to walk to the seat Mr. Jones pointed at when he stopped us.

“Oh, wait a minute,” he said, observing the paper he was looking at.

“My bad. I really need to get some glasses. Sorry about that.” He apologized for some unknown reasons.

“David, you’re with Lilly,” he corrected, then his eyes turned to me.

I felt my heart stop as his lips opened to speak.

“And Crystal, you’re with Tyler.”

Damn it! Damn it! I felt my world stop when those words escaped his lips. I looked at Tyler to see him grinning while every girl in the room glared at me. I just wanted to hide in the corner forever with everyone’s attention on me. I sent a deathly glare to Tyler as I tried to bury him six feet underground with my eyes, cursing colorful words under my breath.

I must be cursed! That was the only explanation. My life was starting to get better until he came back into my life. It was like my luck just vanished into thin air. Now, I would have to work with Tyler for the rest of the year.

Could things get any worse?

CHAPTER 6

I grumbled to myself and cursed my fate inside my head, making up words that no one has probably ever heard of. It were times like these that made me wish there was a button that could stop time, or at least make it go slower. I'm pretty sure I wasn't the only one who wished for it every time school was going to start after a long summer break.

Or when you were being paired up with your childhood bully who made your life a living hell.

I made sure everything was in my backpack including my phone before I walk to my seat, not because I was afraid of losing something, but because I wanted to stall as much time I could. I wanted to spare the precious five seconds of looking into my bag before I had to sit in the same table with Tyler.

Yes, that is how much I despise him.

After a moment of searching, I knew I couldn't stall any longer, so I forced my legs to move past Tyler who was looking at me with amusement. I ignored the glint in his eyes, obviously enjoying the fact that I was a nervous wreck. I stomped to my seat and dropped my bag to the ground as I scooted my chair as far as I could get.

A large muscular body sat in the seat next to mine, but I didn't dare look up. His tall frame was still towering mine even when seated. I kept my face straight as I tried to ignore his stare. The scent of his cologne was overflowing my nose, making them twitch upwards. He was tapping his fingers on the desk, which was enough to distract me, but I kept my gaze on Mr. Jones who was pairing up the last couple of students.

I looked at the clock hanging on the wall, hoping that time would pass by quickly than it normally does. But who could assume that when they're in school? I mean, five minutes in bed was faster than five minutes in class.

"Psst... hey," Tyler whispered, trying to catch my attention. I ignored him and pretended to look at my notebook.

"Hey, Crystal," he whispered again, and poked my shoulder.

Was it bad that I wanted to grab his finger and snap it?

I still wasn't going to give him the time of day. I was going to face my head forward and not let him bother me, but all that confidence went away when I heard what he said next.

"So did you enjoy your run, Gem?"

I whipped my head toward him and glared. I tried so hard just to pretend he wasn't there, but sometimes, we don't always get what we want, especially when it was caused by someone whose name started with the letter T.

"What did you just say?" I asked, lifting my eyebrow.

Tyler smirked as he leaned his back against his chair with his eyes on me.

"I said, did you enjoy your run, Gem?" he repeated with amusement.

Oh, how great the urge I had to punch him in the face. Gosh, I was becoming really violent.

I shook my head at him.

"No, I mean, what did you just call me?" I hissed quietly as Mr. Jones walked to the front of the classroom.

"I don't know. What did I call you?" he asked, looking at me innocently while shrugging his shoulders.

I groaned as I ran my hands over my face then looked away and decided to drop it. I knew his intentions were to get on my nerves. I shouldn't give him the satisfaction!

I tried to give Mr. Jones all my attention but knowing that Tyler was sitting next to me just didn't help. I watched as his lips moved up and down but I couldn't quite figure out what he was saying. My mind was being bombarded with questions about what was going to happen next.

Was this just a phase? Maybe Tyler would get bored sooner or later. I just hoped that it would be sooner. But deep down inside, I knew that he wouldn't stop until he got what he wanted.

What did he want? I had no idea.

“Okay class. Now that you all have your partners. I’ll be describing in details what you’re supposed to do, and tomorrow you can all get started,” Mr. Jones said. I was listening to him until I heard Tyler’s annoying voice again.

“Hey, Gem. Do you have an extra pencil?” he asked. I flickered my eyes to his empty hand which I’m pretty sure had a pencil when he came in earlier. I rolled my eyes as I tried not to let him get me, but it was so hard not to when he calls me Gem. I mean, who had been using the word gem?

“No,” I answered without looking at him. Even if I had any, I wouldn’t even think of giving one to him. I know he was only pissing me off and it was working so far.

“No? But I saw you had two when you opened your pencil case earlier.”

I turned my head to look at him, and shot him a glare for the hundredth time today.

“Shut up, will you? I’m trying to pay attention to the class,” I said.

“But Gem—”

“Will you stop calling me Gem? That’s not my name,” I whispered. But Mr. Jones heard me and sent a warning glare at us. That shut me up immediately. I didn’t want to get into trouble on the second day of school just because of Tyler.

I tried to tune him out but he started to poke my shoulder for the second time.

“So Gem, what brings you back?” he asked normally, but when I looked up at him, a smirk was plastered on his face, probably because he knew that he was getting to me.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I said quietly as I watched Mr. Jones gave out the details.

“Oh come on. When you left, I haven’t heard from you in years,” he said.

I looked up to him to see his serious eyes.

“I’m sorry, but do I know you?” I asked, causing his smirk to return once again.

“Oh, come on Gem. Don’t be like that,” he said, leaning closer to me.

“After all, I was expecting you to remember me,” he said, as I saw a glint in his eyes. I knew he was talking about the last day of school when he and his friends threw paint and water at me! Oh, he had the nerve to remind me that to my face. But I had to control myself. I refused to give him his satisfaction.

I took a deep breath to relax my nerves so I wouldn’t hit him in his family jewels in front of the whole class. Huh, that would be a sight I’d want to see. The hottest guy in school, adored by every girl getting kicked in the nuts.

I would totally pay a million dollars to watch that.

“I’m sorry, but you don’t ring a bell,” I said, as I looked up at him with innocent eyes.

He opened his mouth to say something but was interrupted by Mr. Jones voice.

“Ms. Clare and Mr. Grey, would you like to share whatever you guys are talking about to the class?” he asked, as everyone turned their attention to us. I cursed in my head as I glared at Tyler. He looked like the Cheshire cat in Alice in Wonderland with his smirk spread across his face.

I spoke before Tyler could say anything stupid that could get us both into trouble. “No, Mr. Jones. I’m very sorry, that won’t happen again,” I said.

“It better not.” I heard him say under his breath before turning away.

“Gem, that’s really not nice of you to act like you don’t know me, I thought we were friends?” he teased, as he leaned to whisper in my ear. I shot my head to look up at him and gave him the bird.

“Friends my ass! Now, leave me alone,” I said, before turning away.

It was silent for a moment before I heard him speak.

“Wow. Since when did you get so feisty?” he asked.

I kept my face looking forward as I answered.

“Since the day I moved and never saw your face again,” I said, and glanced at him, giving him a fake smile.

“Ah! See? You do remember me,” he said, but I didn’t even look at him. I wasn’t going to waste my time and energy for him. He wasn’t worth it.

Ten Minutes passed without us exchanging words. A whole freakin’ ten minutes! Could you believe that? It must be a miracle.

I was about to let my guard down, when something hit the side of my head. I groaned to myself in annoyance and turned my head to glare at Tyler. He was grinning at me while glancing at the paper ball he threw.

I tried to kill him with my eyes but unfortunately that didn't work, so I gave up and bent down toward the floor to pick it up. Once I had it in my hand, I stared at it as if it was a bomb, ready to explode any minute.

I glanced at Tyler, then back at the paper ball. I opened it and read the words written in bold black letters.

'Can I borrow a pencil?'

I rolled my eyes and crumbled it before throwing it to his face.

"Really? Then how on earth did you write that if you don't have one?" I asked irritated.

Tyler shrugged his shoulders but said nothing.

He's only doing this to tick you off. Don't let him get to you!

Out of nowhere, the same paper ball was thrown back in my face. I grabbed it in my hands then threw it at Tyler, having enough of his stupid games.

Oh but that didn't end there. He grabbed it then threw it again at my face.

I swear, this is the most immature and ridiculous thing I've ever done. I'm pretty sure we looked like two idiots throwing a paper ball at each other, because it kept going on and on.

He threw it at me, and I would throw it much harder, wishing that it could have a little effect on his gorgeous face. But we both stopped when an angry voice boomed throughout the room, causing everyone to look at us again.

"Mr. Grey and Ms. Clare! I've had enough of your childish behavior. You can continue whatever you were doing in detention!" he said, glaring at us.

My mouth fell open and my eyes widened. I couldn't believe I got detention on the second day of school! I've never gotten any detention before. I whipped my head to see Tyler looking at me smugly with a smirk on his face as if he was happy to get detention. I swear, all this guy had ever done is smirk!

"You!" I whispered angrily.

"Shh, Gem. You wouldn't want to get into more trouble," he said.

All I wanted to do in that moment was to rip my hair out and shove it down his throat. I wondered if I ever asked Matt to help me hide a dead body, and whether or not he would be up for it. All I know was that as long as I stay seated with Tyler, this was going to be a very rough year. Not like I expected.

I didn't know how I am going to survive.

CHAPTER 7

I stomped out of the classroom as if it was on fire so I wouldn't have to see Tyler's annoying face any longer. Yes, it only lasted forty five minutes but it felt like hours. It was like an eternity and I couldn't take it much longer.

I walked with the crowd making their way to the cafeteria, and hid in there just in case Tyler decided to tag along. Not like I would let him or anything.

Just great! Not only did I have to spend forty five minutes with him every day for the rest of the year. But I also had an hour of detention after school when I could have spent time lying in bed and eating Nutella.

As I got closer to the cafeteria, I could see Matt waiting there for me with Jasmine and Troy standing by his side. When he noticed me, he gave me a smile and pulled me in for a hug.

"So, how did your day go, Clare?"

I groaned, running my hand through my hair.

"Horrible! You won't believe who I got paired up with in fourth period," I said.

"Who?" Troy asked before Matt could.

"Tyler Grey." I grumbled.

Matt looked surprised, while Jasmine's face morphed into shock.

"Oh, my gosh! Really? You're so lucky! I would do anything to get paired up with him. He's so sexy," she said.

Troy gave her a look of disbelief and slapped the back of her head lightly.

"Babe! How can you say that!? I thought I was the sexiest person you know," he said while pouting his lips and crossing his arms under his chest.

Jasmine giggled as she wrapped her arms around his waist, pulling him over for a hug. She then got on her tippy toes to peck his lips.

“I’m just kidding. You know you’re the sexiest person I know.” she cooed at him. He looked down at her with a smirk plastered on his face.

“And the handsomest?” he asked.

She nodded her head as she patted his chest.

“And the handsomest.” She confirmed.

I smiled as I looked at them in awe, loving their relationship and wishing I had someone love me like they loved each other. They were so cute together and were a perfect couple. One that nobody could tear apart. But apparently, Matt didn’t think that way. He was making disgusted faces as he gagged, pointing his finger into his mouth. I chuckled as I shook my head.

We walked into the cafeteria and I munched on French fries, as Eva and Sydney walked to the table we were sitting at. As they got closer, I could tell that one of them looked irritated at something while the other laughed.

“What’s wrong, Eva?” Matt asked the irritated twin. She turned to glare at him, as if she had gotten angrier.

“Sydney! You mean Sydney! How many times do we have to tell you? The one with dimples is Sydney,” she said, as she pointed to her dimple. Eva rolled her eyes at her twin, while Matt put his hands up in surrender.

“Sorry . . . you can’t actually blame me. You guys are like copy and paste,” he said, as he took a bite of a burger.

She groaned to herself as she ran a hand over her face and mumbled something under her breath.

“So, what is wrong Sydney?” Jasmine asked, but she didn’t answer. Instead, she took a couple of fries from Troy’s tray and shoved it in her mouth so she couldn’t speak. Everyone’s attention turned to Eva.

“Oh, come on Sydney. He probably didn’t know the difference between you and me,” Eva said.

“Even if he didn’t know, how come he didn’t ask me? Huh? Why do you always have to be the lucky one?” she asked as she laid her head on the table.

I lifted an eyebrow in confusion as Eva turned to look at us.

“Nick asked me to be his date to the party happening at John’s house this Friday,” she said. Jasmine’s mouth fell open while Troy and Matt

looked at each other.

“Ugh! You’re trying to provoke me, aren’t you?” Sydney asked, as she lifted her head from the table to glare at her sister.

“No, I’m not. I was just telling them why you’re so upset,” Eva uttered. Sydney reached out her hand to take another fry from Troy’s tray, but he slapped her hand and gave her the stink eye.

“Um, guys,” I paused. “Who’s Nick?” I asked.

I felt like I’ve been missing out on everything because I’ve just started get along with the group. These were the type of people I wished to have been years ago but unfortunately never had. At least I had Matt by my side and that was all that I needed.

“Nick is Sydney’s crush,” Jasmine explained.

I looked at Sydney to see her blushing slightly.

Wow, that was a bummer. I couldn’t believe how that would feel to have your crush ask your sister, who looks exactly like you, out. But I’m pretty sure the feeling wasn’t so great. Especially when the other might not actually like him.

“Wait, what party are you guys talking about?” Matt asked.

I looked down at my tray and frowned when I saw that I ran out of fries. I looked over at Matt’s to see that he finished his too. I then glanced toward Troy’s tray to see it full of fries and smirked to myself, delighted that I have found my one true love.

Okay, maybe I was exaggerating just a little bit; but you couldn’t blame me because fries are the best.

“John is having a party at his parent’s mansion this Friday because they’re on vacation,” Eva said.

Troy’s attention was focused on Eva’s words and I didn’t know why. I mean, when you had fries in front of you, then that should be your first priority. I scoot over just a little bit so no one would notice my hand stretching out to Troy’s plate, but it seemed like he was some kind of a ninja because he reached his hand out to slap mine away.

“No,” he said firmly.

I huffed as a sigh of defeat escaped my lips.

“Yup, and we are all going,” Sydney said, with her obvious change of mood.

Troy lifted an eyebrow as he looked at her suspiciously while resting his chin on his hand.

“Oh, really? And does it have anything to do with you pretending to be your sister for Nick’s date?” he asked with a smirk. Sydney grabbed some fries from her tray and threw it at Troy. Luckily, I caught it in time before it could hit his face, and shoved it in my mouth to let the salty taste hit my taste buds.

“Oh, my god! That’s a brilliant idea!” Eva squealed.

We all turned to look at her.

“So, you’re saying . . . you are willing to let your sister take your place for Friday’s party?” I asked.

She nodded her head and wrapped her arms around her sister’s shoulder, as she pinched her cheek playfully before it got slapped away.

“Yup! I don’t even like him anyway, so I guess it could work out. Right, Sydney?” she asked.

Sydney looked at Eva and bit her lip, as she tapped her fingers against the table. It took her a moment to answer.

“Um I don’t know . . .” she said.

“Oh, come on Sydney. I’m pretty sure it will work out. As Matt said, you guys are copy and paste,” Jasmine said as we all nodded our heads. Probably a bad idea if Nick actually knew the difference between them but it was worth a shot.

“Fine,” she muttered with a smile.

Looks like we have a party to attend this Friday.

* * *

My eyes had been staring at the clock ever since I’ve gotten here, and watched it tick as time went by. I mean, why was it always like this? When I wanted time to slow down, it would go by so fast. But when I wanted it to go fast, it would go by even slower! I guess it was just my luck.

Another reason why my luck wasn’t so great was sitting in the last class of the day with Tyler! Just great with another forty-five minutes of looking at his annoying face. At least he wasn’t sitting anywhere near me.

The seating arrangement was a bit different. The seats were split in half. Half of them were on one side of the room, while the other was right across

from it. Tyler and I, seated in the front row and there he was again, staring right across from me. I made sure to glare at him at every chance I got.

At one point, when the teacher wasn't looking, he would grab paper balls and throw them at me. Some were empty while the others had immature jokes written on them. I rolled my eyes as I tried to control my anger. I sure learned my lesson this morning. I wasn't going to throw them at his face to avoid another detention. I just wanted to make it through this day then go home. It was probably the longest day in my whole entire life.

When the bell finally rang, the teacher's assistant gave Mr. Schubert a folder. He walked to the front of the class and opened it. He then started to read the names of people for detention and I was hoping that Mr. Jones didn't give us detention or that he forgot. Maybe I'd be able to go home after all without spending it with Tyler any longer.

All my hopes came crashing down to the ground when I heard my name roll off the teacher's tongue, the same went for Tyler. I groaned to myself as I ran my hand through my hair. I tried to ignore Tyler's gaze as I look around the class.

Only a few students got detention today. I mean I couldn't blame them because it was the second day of school. The same would go for me if it wasn't for Tyler.

All the students who got called for detention got up from their seats and we formed a line, waiting for someone to assist us. I made sure not to stand behind or in front of Tyler, and had a couple of students between us. I played with the hem of my shirt as I prayed that the hour of detention would go by quickly. I then forced my legs to move and follow the group of students who were making their way to a classroom.

As I glanced at each person, I tried to figure out what they had done to get into trouble on the second day of school. It could probably be tardiness or getting into a fight. But the one thing I knew for sure was that they were certainly not here because of a specific bully. I was really starting to pity myself as I already felt homesick.

You see what Tyler had done to me!?

I walked into the class and saw a teacher standing by the door. She had the look that shouts out, "*I-don't-really-want-to-be here*" which usually ended up with everyone doing whatever they wanted during detention.

Probably a bad idea because that would mean Tyler bothering me as much as his heart would please.

I sighed to myself as I ran my hands through my hair and watched Tyler sit in a seat by the window. I took the advantage of him not being focused on me, and sat all the way across the room, far away from him.

I placed my bag on the ground and laid my head on the desk as I tried to prevent the headache that was trying to take over. I pulled my head up when I heard the chair next to mine scrape against the ground. I looked up, hoping that it wasn't Tyler who decided to change seats just to bother me, and saw a familiar face.

"Hi," Dan said with a bright smile on his face.

"Hi," I said awkwardly but gave him a smile.

"Didn't know the new girl was bad," he teased.

I let a laugh escape my lips as a grin formed on my face.

"Well, obviously you don't know me," I said.

He opened his mouth to say something but was stopped when the teacher told everyone to be silent. I laid my back against the chair as I glanced toward Tyler, seeing him glare at the seat next to mine. He obviously wanted to be the one to torment me through the hour.

Well, too bad for him!

I crossed my fingers as I wished to the gods that maybe *Beyoncé* would come in all of a sudden and save me by distracting everyone so I could flee, or that the ground would crumble underneath my feet and suck me away from this place I called torture.

But of course, we can't always get what we want.

CHAPTER 8

I didn't think I had ever been happier in my life when I heard the bell ring. It was as if heaven struck my ears, and I was the first one to dash out of the room. The other students probably didn't see me exit because I ran as fast as the speed of light.

And I know what you're going to say, that nothing is faster than the speed of light. Well, oh yeah!? I hated physics! So that rule doesn't go for me. No wait, hate is a strong word . . . I despise it. Yeah, that's more like it.

Anyways, I made sure to walk past the gates without any interaction with Tyler. Must be a miracle, because all day, no matter where I went, he was there, whether it was in real life or just in my mind. He was hiding in the corner as he watched my life turn upside down, haunting me.

One thing I learned today was never to listen to your teacher when they pair you up with the one person you despise greater than physics. Just go with your guts and say "no". And if they still refuse to listen to you then you're screwed.

I reached into my back pocket of my jeans and then took out my phone. Before detention I made sure to turn it off so that Matt or anyone else wouldn't call me and got me into even more trouble. I didn't know how many times my phone rang in the middle of the class, eventually causing my teacher to take it away from me.

I turned it on as I walked down the road and called Matt. I placed my phone to my ear as I listened to it ring. Matt picked up at the second ring.

"You know, I'm starting to think that you don't have any friends but me," Matt said through the speaker. I rolled my eyes as a chuckle escaped my lips.

"Yeah, and why would you think that?" I asked in amusement.

“Because all you do is call me. I mean I know I’m special and all but you really need to start socializing more, get to know more people,” he teased.

“I do too know other people! It’s just you don’t know about them. In fact I just made a new friend today,” I said. I heard a *pft* sound escaped his lips from the other end and I’m pretty sure he would be rolling his eyes by now.

“Okay sure. Let’s pretend you’re telling the truth. What’s her name?” he asked.

I paused as I tried to think of any names from today or any familiar faces I’ve seen earlier until I remembered a certain blonde.

“His,” I corrected.

“Oh, so it’s a guy huh? What’s his name then?” he asked sounding more interested than earlier.

“His name’s Dan,” I answered. There was a moment of silence as the only sound I heard was my footsteps.

“Did you just say Dan? As in Dan Walker?” Matt asked.

I bit my lips as my eyes averted towards the sky, trying to remember if he mentioned his last name or not.

“I don’t know about his last name, he didn’t really tell me but yeah that’s what I said. Why?” I asked.

“Dan is one of the most known people in school, quite a player if I tell you,” Matt said as he chuckled.

“Tell me about it. I knew that at first glance,” I said as I quickened my pace, wanting to get home faster so that I could watch some Netflix and eat Nutella, leaving the homework I was assigned with for tonight.

Don’t we all do that?

“Had fun in detention today?” Matt asked, clearly trying to tease me or at least hit a spot.

“Oh yes very fun, especially with Tyler burning holes into my head the whole time while Dan told me about the time he was dared to eat a worm.” I said sarcastically while cringing to myself. “The best time of my life.”

Matt’s laughter boomed through the speaker, causing my lips to tug upwards into a grin.

“Wow, I wish I was there, that sounds like a lot of fun,” he said between chuckles.

“Yeah, I wish you were there to see the disgusted look on my face.”

Throughout the entire detention, when the teacher wasn't looking, which was most of the time because she was using her phone, Dan would crack a joke or say something to get my attention. I tried to ignore him and Tyler's stare, but it was so difficult with him sitting right beside me. I wouldn't say he was that annoying because he was better company than Tyler will ever be, it's just that his cringe stories made me want to leave that suffocating room.

“So when are you planning to go on your daily run?” Matt asked.

His words brought me to a sudden stop.

“Huh, have you finally decide to come run with me?” I asked in glee, a smile growing on my face. I always wanted to have a run with Matt, wanting to see if he was as fast as I am. But he always refused when I would bring it up on the phone. I even tried to convince him yesterday at school but he was too stubborn, saying that he hates to run. I still wonder how he is so fit.

“Never,” he said simply, making my smile drop.

A groan escaped my lips as I pinched the bridge of my nose; my hopes came crashing down to the ground. I knew it sounded too good to be true.

“Oh come on! Why not?” I whined as I stomped my foot to the ground.

“Because if I do run with you then I will just crush your ego because of how fast I run and you don't want me to do that, do you?” he lied.

I rolled my eyes as I started to walk forward, my house coming into view.

“Yeah like that would happen. You know I'm too good,” I said with a smirk plastered on my face. Before he could start denying or say anything else, I interrupted him.

“So if you aren't going to run with me then why did you ask?” I asked.

“Because I wanted to know if you are free this afternoon, if you aren't then clear up your plans,” he said as I walked to the front door and took my keys from my bag.

“Why? Is this the part where you ask me out on a date and confess your feelings to me which you have been hiding for years?” I asked sarcastically.

“In your dreams kiddo,” Matt said.

“Then why?” I asked in confusion, stepping my foot into the lonely place I call home.

“You should be getting your answer by now,” he said as I locked the front door. I lifted an eyebrow as I placed my bag on the counter.

“What on earth are you talking about?” I asked.

And as if on cue, the doorbell rang, making me stop in my tracks as I was walked into the kitchen. I turned around slowly, looking suspiciously at the door, while wishing to myself that I had the ability to see through objects from afar.

I wasn’t expecting anyone.

“What did you do?” I whispered as if there was a serial killer waiting outside my door.

“Clare-bear, you know a serial killer wouldn’t ring a doorbell, right?” Matt said, sensing what I was thinking.

“A polite one would,” I said.

I heard him sigh as the doorbell rang for the second time.

“Gosh, stop being dramatic and just open the freakin’ door,” he said.

I forced my legs to walk to the front door, mumbling to myself. Who knows who would be behind that door?

I stopped my thoughts from wondering off as I looked through the peek hole to see three girls standing next to each other. I opened the door and faced Jasmine and the twins. They greeted me with warm smiles, and walked into my house as if they owned the place.

“What’s going on?” I asked Matt on the other end of the line as I closed the door slowly.

“The girls will be taking you shopping for Friday’s party. We all know you have such a bad taste in fashion,” he said, sounding like a bride getting ready for her own wedding.

“But today’s Tuesday! The party isn’t until another three days,” I whined.

“Yeah, well, it’s better sooner than never, huh?” he said.

“You mean better safe than sorry.” I corrected as I sent a smile to the girls standing in front of me.

“Oh, shut up and just end the call,” he said.

I rolled my eyes and said goodbye as I pressed the decline button. I placed my phone onto the counter as I faced Jasmine, Eva, and Sydney. They all looked like they went home, freshened up, then came here to see me because they weren’t wearing the same clothes that they were wearing

earlier today. They all had bright smiles on their faces. I could already feel the excitement radiating off of them. They seemed like children getting their presents on Christmas.

“So, you ready?” Sydney asked. I lifted an eyebrow at her.

“Now?” I asked in disbelief.

“Yup,” they all said in unison, nodding their heads.

“There’s no going back, is there?” I asked as I rubbed my face with my hands, looking at them with the best puppy face I could make.

“Nope,” they said, while popping the ‘p’ and shaking their heads.

I let a huff escape my lips as I ran my hand through my hair. I guess *Netflix* and *Nutella* will just have to wait.

“Fine, let me just go wear something else then,” I mumbled, and made my way toward the stairs, while they all nodded and sat on the couch.

I walked up the stairs and into my room, grabbed a dress from my closet and changed in the bathroom. I braided my hair into a fishtail then climbed back downstairs. I left my face without make up because I didn’t want to do all this in the beginning.

I just wanted to wear my pajamas while I stuffed my face in junk food and watched *The Vampire Diaries*. But no, I had to buy a dress for a party I didn’t even want to go to. I didn’t really like the idea of being in a place full of drunken people grinding on each other with music blasting so loud. But I knew I couldn’t convince Matt to drop the subject.

He was just as stubborn as I’ll ever be.

CHAPTER 9

I walked slowly to the front door, trying not to pull a muscle on my sore legs. They were sore to the point that I could feel a cramp coming in every few minutes and if you were just like me, then you completely despise cramps. They were just one of the most painful things in the world. But strangely, after going through the pain, I would feel satisfied for some unknown reason.

Maybe it was because I didn't peel my own skin off just to replace the pain of my muscles torturing me. Or because I didn't go crazy and made the president of the United States a prank call like I would usually do in times of need.

Once I'm in front of the door, I grabbed my purse and opened it to look for the keys. The quicker I open this door that's blocking me from falling on my bed as I snore the night away, the better. I looked through my purse which was kind of difficult because I was holding a bunch of bags that contained clothes, accessories and underwear Jasmine and the twins forced me to buy. I didn't even know why because all I needed was a dress but they insisted in buying other stuff to go with it. I put them all on the ground and continued to search for that stupid key but the sun setting didn't help at all. It was getting darker and darker by the second.

Finally, I had it in my hand and opened the door. I stepped in to be greeted with silence. I'm not sure what I was expecting. Maybe my parents welcoming me home but I knew that would never happen. I should be living in reality. I then placed the bags on the counter, too lazy and tired to bring it with me upstairs.

Once in my room, I did the thing I wanted to do most, since forever. I took off my dress and got into my sleeping clothes then crawled into bed. I

pulled the cover over me and rested my head on the soft pillow which felt like a cloud. I was simply in bliss. It felt like heaven. A small smile tugged on my lips as I felt the dark creep closer.

Today was such a long day and shopping with the girls didn't really help. Shopping with them was like going on a wild goose chase. At one point we were at a shop then the next we were in another. Before I could even blink, they were shoving clothes in my face, making me pick from the colors of blue to red. I didn't think I would want to repeat this day ever again.

My smile suddenly vanished when the song '*Thinking Out Loud*' filled my ears. In normal times I would have smiled to myself in glee and sang along because it was my favorite song. I mean who wouldn't?

But not today.

I opened an eye to see my phone vibrating on the counter next to me as the song got louder. I then closed it back and groaned to myself as I pulled the cover over my head as if it would block the sound out. I let my mind debate on whether I should answer the call or not. I finally decided to get this over with because if I didn't answer then it would just ring endlessly.

I reached for my phone and turned it over to see the caller ID. I cursed in my head when it read Matt's name. Why did he have to disturb my slumber? It just made me wish I had the ability to stretch my arm through the phone and punch the caller.

Oh, how useful that would be.

My thumb wanted to press the red decline button but I forced myself to answer the call that was keeping me from finally ending the long day with some sleep.

"Hey!" Matt's voice echoed through my ear. "How's my best friend doing?" he asked with glee.

"I hate you," I grumbled.

"Ah, I can see you're very cheerful. Was it because of the shopping trip?" he asked.

"I hate you," I repeated.

"The feeling's mutual babe," he said and I could already tell he had a smirk plastered on his face.

"Go, die in a deep black hole and never crawl out," I said, as I tried to express the hatred I had for my best friend at this very moment.

“Gosh! What crawled up your ass?” he asked sarcastically.

“I wish I could tell,” I said, as I closed my eyes, becoming more tired by the second.

“Did you buy a dress?” he asked, getting straight to the point.

“Oh yea, definitely. I also bought you some lingerie from Victoria’s Secret since you know; you love to act like a girl so much. Are you sure you’re not gay?” I asked. I had nothing against gay people. It was just sometimes, Matt’s actions and his choice of words got me into thinking outside the box. But at the end of the day, I knew he wasn’t because if he was, then he would have surely told me. We didn’t tend to keep anything from each other.

There was a moment of silence before I heard him choking on his own spit.

“Clare! There has to be a fashionista in this friendship or else you would walk around this town looking like a hobo,” he defended himself.

“Pft, sure. Explain how I managed to survive all these years without you,” I said.

“Oh, I don’t know. I was thinking the same thing. Poor people, you probably burned their eyes out with the way you looked.” His voice was laced with sympathy and I could imagine him wiping a fake tear off his cheek.

“Shut up, will you?” I grumbled. “You didn’t answer my questions . . .” I reminded him while a smirk tugged on my lips to tease him.

“Clare, you know I’m not gay. I just like to look after you, that’s all,” he assured me.

“ Sure . . . ” I said slowly. “Let’s just pretend that I believe that so it could help you sleep at night,” I said as a chuckle escaped my lips.

“Yea, yea, whatever. Think what you want,” he said, mumbling.

“So, what’s up?” Matt asked, changing the subject. A smirk curled up on my lips but before I could say anything, he interrupted me.

“And don’t say the sky,” he warned.

“Pft, I wasn’t going to say the sky . . . I was going to say the ceiling.” I corrected him.

“Can you just be serious for once?” he asked.

“Nope!” I said, popping the *p*. “You made me go shopping and now you’re disturbing my slumber. So that’s what you get.”

“Wait, disturbing your slumber? Don’t tell me you’re going to bed now?” he asked in disbelief.

“So, what if I am?” I asked.

“Clare, it’s only seven.” He pointed out.

“I’m tired,” I said. It was true because it took every ounce of my body not to close my eyes and leave Matt hanging. I was even surprised I hadn’t declined the call at this rate.

“Can’t you wait for a couple hours?” he asked. “If you go to sleep now then you will end up waking up later and won’t be able to sleep.”

“Ugh, you’re acting like you’re my mom.” I grumbled more to myself but I wasn’t as grumpy as I thought I would be, because a small smile found their way to my lips. It meant a lot to know that Matt cared about me. I was so thankful to have him by my side and telling me what not to do. Like a big brother I never had.

“Hey, as I said before, just looking out for you kid. Someone had to.” I heard him say, but his voice was getting quieter as the darkness took over my body.

“Well, too late,” I said, as my eyes fluttered closed, letting my body fall limp against the soft mattress. I was about to let my ears close for a second because of how overwhelming my body felt, and shut down my brain but a question popped in my mind.

“Matt,” I whispered.

“Yea?” I heard him say.

“Can you sing me a lullaby?” I asked.

There was a moment of silence before he spoke.

“Oh, wait what was that? Sorry my mom’s calling me. I have to go Clare.” I heard Matt scamper through the speaker. A chuckle escaped my throat.

“You live alone stupid.” I pointed out.

“Goodnight Clare,” he said, ignoring my statement.

“Goodnight Matt,” I said, before opening my eyes to press the red button, and then place my phone onto the counter as I let my eyes close again. My chest moved up and down slowly as I buried my face into my pillow, my breathing becoming steady.

The last thing that came to my mind before I drifted off to sleep was how lucky I am to have Matt in my life.

* * *

A tapping sound that came just outside my window brought me out of my sleep. My eyes snapped open almost immediately, as I shot up into a sitting position. My forehead was covered in sweat and my eyes darted across my dark room. I wiped the sweat with my sleeve, and looked to where the sound was coming from.

My eyes were focused on my window covered by the closed curtain, as I reached for my phone next to me to see the time. I groaned to myself when I saw that it was nearly midnight. Matt's words came crashing back into my head as I cursed to myself.

I was definitely not sleepy anymore. My eyes were wide open, and I was completely awake.

The tapping noise coming from outside my window brought me back to reality. I lifted an eyebrow, thinking to myself what could possibly be the source of that annoying sound.

I swung my legs off my bed and to the ground slowly and quietly. I didn't know what to expect at a time like this. It could just be a bird tapping against the window. It could be an alien waiting outside to abduct me or maybe it was Santa Claus wanting to give me my presents early this year.

Pft, come on don't be stupid! Santa Claus would for sure come down the chimney and not through my window. I'm pretty sure he wouldn't have wanted me to meet him in person or it would have just ruined the whole surprise.

Then what could it be?

I got off of my bed slowly and forced my legs to move towards the window. I felt my heart pounce against my chest with so much force. What if it was a robber? Or a serial killer? Should I call Matt for backup in case I ended up getting killed tonight? I'm pretty sure I would have wanted Matt to know that I was murdered and not suicidal.

I shook my head to get rid of the useless thoughts. Matt would be asleep by now, and I didn't want to disturb him.

Should I start writing my will?

Ugh! I slapped myself in the face. It seemed to be the only solution to snap me out of this phase. I was being dramatic and overreacting. Hopefully

I won't find myself on my deathbed today.

I gulped as I reached my hand to grab the curtain. I counted to three very slowly in my head before yanking it to the side to see the source of the sound. I let out a breath and ran my hand through my hair as I chuckled to myself.

Oh, I felt so stupid at this very moment. I was just thankful that no one was around to see me in this state, fearing over nothing.

It was a tree branch tapping against the window because of the wind. It wasn't that far from my window which was why it got so close. I then opened it to let the warm air crash in my face. It wasn't cold outside but that didn't stop the wind from doing its job. I wrinkled my nose as I poked my head outside, and glanced at the empty street from down below.

I felt a feeling of excitement overtake my body at the thought that came to my mind. I debated on whether it was a good idea to go for a run at a time like this. My mind was screaming danger, danger. While my muscles were begging me to satisfy them. I mean I didn't even think about going for a run today, so right now would be an awesome moment. Nobody was around to block my path as I let the cool night breeze flow against my skin.

It would be the perfect feeling!

I was wondering if it was safe. I wasn't that stupid to run into an alley full of dangerous gangsters where I would meet my doom.

I felt a smile tug on my lips as I dashed to my closet and changed into my sport clothes. I tied my hair into a high ponytail, and walked downstairs to grab my running shoes. But before walking to the front door, I went to the living room to search in the drawers. I might be able to defend myself if I did come across a drunken dude but I wanted to be on the safe side.

You could call me stupid for my careless decision but this wasn't my first time. In fact, I found myself in this situation where I couldn't sleep many times, so I just ran it out. By the time I got home, I'd be so tired; I'd like sleep like a baby.

I finally found the pocketknife I took with me every time I went out for a run at times like these but thankfully never had to use. I put it in the pocket of my shorts then walked out of the front door, making sure to lock it. I then put the keys into my pocket too and began my run.

I started off with a light jog and picked up my speed after a few minutes. I forced my legs to go faster as I enjoyed the feeling of the wind blowing through my hair and hitting my skin. The stars up above sent me to a peaceful state as I listened to the crickets sing their lullaby for me.

I made sure to stay on the sidewalk which led to the shops and not to some broken down buildings. By now, my breathing was starting to quicken as sweat formed on my forehead. I ran to a corner of an apartment nearby and past the park but stopped suddenly when I saw something a couple of feet away. Instinctively, I hid behind a big oak tree so I wouldn't be caught.

My heart was beating against my chest because of the running and not because of the person I saw walking into an open pharmacy. I peaked my head from behind the tree to see the door close.

Why on earth would Tyler be in the streets at this time? I'm pretty sure he would ask me the same thing if he saw me but that was a completely different thing. I was only out running. But what possible could he be wanting to get at a pharmacy at a time like this?

Could he be sick? But he didn't look like it today at school.

Oh my god! Maybe he was buying drugs! Oh god, I knew he was bad but I didn't think he would stoop to this level. I mean why drugs? It wouldn't do any help at all. Yup, that was the only conclusion! Tyler Grey was buying drugs. I shook my head disapprovingly at the thought. Who knew the most adored guy in school was a drug dealer!

Well, that's what I thought at first until I remembered pharmacies wouldn't sell illegal drugs. They sold medicine for Pete's sake! I felt myself become more stupid. How could I assume such a thing? It was like my head contained a brain the size of a peanut.

But if it wasn't drugs and if he wasn't sick, then what was Tyler doing in a pharmacy?

CHAPTER 10

It felt like hours. The breeze felt incredibly relaxing on my skin but it wasn't enough to calm my nerves. The air around me was getting colder as I stared at the empty street. I stared at the pharmacy as if I was some kind of secret spy, waiting for her predator to come out.

I could almost hear the sound of a clock ticking in my ears, telling me that it was time to go home but I couldn't do that. My curiosity would surely not let me. I had to see what my childhood bully was buying at a pharmacy in the middle of the night.

Something inside me was telling me that I already knew the answer. Tyler was the hottest person in school who could get any girl he wanted. So maybe he was at some kind of club and was buying condoms on his way home to bang some girl.

My nose scrunched upward in disgust as I thought about it. What else could he be doing?

I lifted an eyebrow when I saw Tyler coming out through the door, holding a bag in his hand while walking away. I debated with myself on whether I should just turn my back and go home which was probably the safest option, but my stupid legs moved on their own free will after Tyler.

I made sure to stay behind, not too close so he wouldn't notice me but not too far off that I might lose track of him. I passed by the broken buildings leading to a bad part of the neighborhood. My heart started to beat quickly at the sight of Tyler, walking through a door of an abandoned house. By now, my mind was coming up with endless possibilities of what was going to happen next.

Ignoring the voices inside my head, I quickened my pace and opened the door slowly once I was there. It made a little creaking sound but thankfully it wasn't too loud to blow my cover. I poked my head around to see a staircase and as I listened closely, I could hear Tyler's footsteps.

I ignored the shivers that ran down my spine and walked up the stairs slowly. It wasn't long before I made it to the second floor. I followed the sound which led to a door that was half opened. I poked my head out but hid it immediately when I saw a middle-aged man sitting on a mattress inside the room. He had a beard covered in grey hair and was wearing baggy clothes. Tyler hugged the guy with a smile and thanked him.

That was weird.

Since when did you greet your fellow drug dealers by hugging each other?

What caught me off guard was the look in Tyler's eyes. A look I've never seen him with before.

Pure happiness.

"Oh, Tyler. I don't know how to repay you. You're always doing such good things and you never fail to surprise me," the guy said.

I didn't know Tyler Grey was capable of such good things. I knew that he wasn't completely heartless and that I shouldn't judge him because of how much I have gone through but I still find it hard to believe.

"Paul, I don't want anything from you but your happiness. This is what dad would have wanted and I'm sorry you had to stay here. If only you would agree to come with me," Tyler said.

I poked my head out just a little to see the guy shaking his head.

"No, I don't want to burden you and your mother. It is enough you are buying me medicine and food. I couldn't let myself intrude," he spoke.

"You know you wouldn't be a burden. You're welcome until you can get yourself a job," Tyler whispered.

I couldn't describe what I felt. I was baffled. Flabbergasted was more of the word. I never thought Tyler would be nice to someone. I mean, I've always looked at him as a mean bully but this time, he didn't seem like it.

"You know I can't do that lad. I have to be responsible for my mistakes and fix what I have done. I lost everything when your father and I went down. It's my duty to get back up on my own two feet and you standing by my side is enough for me."

“But Paul, I’m pretty sure dad would have want—”

“Your dad would have wanted me fix the mistakes I have done.”

Tyler sighed and ran his hand through his hair.

“You sure you don’t want to stay with me?” Tyler asked.

Paul shook his head.

“Look around you. All of these were provided from you. I couldn’t ask for more,” he said.

I looked around and saw a couple of simple furniture lying around along with a table with half-eaten food and a mirror.

Did Tyler provide all this for him? This was the only stuff my eyes could find but who knows. Maybe there was more lying around in this broken place.

“I can’t force you to come with me but I want you to promise you will tell me if you need anything else,” Tyler said.

“I promise.”

There was a moment of silence and I felt the guilt in my chest taking over me. Whoever this man was, he must be very special to Tyler and his father and I felt like I was intruding. I shouldn’t be here. I took a step back and was just about to leave when a sound of a bag opening caught my attention.

“I got you more medicine,” Tyler said.

“Oh, you did?”

“I did,” he said with a chuckle.

“You’re too kind,” Paul said with a smile.

“I was on my way home from my job, and decided to pay you a visit, knowing that you would still be awake,” Tyler answered.

“Wait, did you get a job?” Paul asked.

“Yes, just a simple job to be independent,” Tyler said.

I never knew that the Tyler I hated this much would be this smart. Who knew! But still, it wasn’t a reason for him to pick on me and be such a jerk.

“What is it?” Paul asked.

“Car engineering,” Tyler answered.

“Wow, didn’t know you had it in you.”

I turned my back and walked away slowly, trying not to make my presence known. Once I was in the staircase, I speed up my pace and forced

my legs to walk faster, making sure to be quick but quiet. I smiled to myself when I was almost down the stairs, there were only a couple of steps ahead.

Unfortunately, it was impossible for me to do something right and not mess up because my stupid mouth opened on their own free will and a shriek escaped my lips when I saw something like a rat run across from me.

I heard footsteps walk closer to the staircase from upstairs which sped my beating heart even faster. I couldn't let Tyler see me. He would surely think I was following him.

Oh wait. I was following him.

But you got the point. If he found me here then he will give me a greater reason to make fun of me and pick on. I'll make a fool of myself and I didn't want that to happen. But in the end, it would be my fault because my stupidity was the one that brought me here in the first place. But oh well. I had a brain which was apparently the size of an ant.

Oh, sometimes I wish it was bigger than Matt's ego.

I then let my specialty come to use. Probably the only thing I was good at. Running. All these years of practicing came to use in this very moment. I sprinted passed the door and down the street as if my life depended on it.

Because maybe it did because if Tyler caught me then I would probably kill myself.

Just kidding. Tyler wasn't worth it.

I retraced my steps and ran to where I came from the very beginning. I ran past the park and looked behind me. I slowed down when I figured Tyler wasn't following me.

Once I was in front of my house, I let myself relax as I hit the palm of my hand on my forehead. I straightened my back and relaxed my breathing, letting my chest rise and fall in rhythm as I stared at the front door, my mind reverting back to what I just witnessed this past hour.

I was so reckless to go out for a run in the middle of the night, and saw my childhood bully buy something from a pharmacy, thinking it was drugs, but it turned out to be medicine.

I mean, who would have known?

To top it off, I also witnessed him actually acting like a decent human being for once which in itself was shocking and unbelievable.

Matt would have thought I went on some kind of mission to find out that my parents' accident was actually a murder and died in the hands of

some mafia guy who I secretly loved.

I knew I should have written my will.

I sighed, taking out the keys from my pocket. I was about to open the door when I heard footsteps and a whistling sound. I panicked and hid behind a bush.

Oh, I don't know. Maybe I was being paranoid, thinking it could be a killer.

I tried to get my breathing to slow down as I wiped the sweat off my forehead, and peaked through the bush. I cursed in my head when I saw Tyler.

But that wasn't what made my eyes widened in shock. It also wasn't why I was coming up with colorful words I never heard of in my life, and it certainly wasn't the reason why I ever regret coming back into this town to live in the same house I lived in years ago.

The reason why I'm freaking out?

Tyler Grey was my neighbor.

Great! Just great.

CHAPTER 11

I poked my head out the front door, looking at the house next to mine. The curtains were still closed, Tyler and whoever he lived with, obviously his mother, could be asleep. I don't really blame them because school didn't start for another fifty minutes but that didn't stop me.

I was freaking out at the fact that Tyler was my neighbor. Did he possibly know? If he did, then he would have knocked on my door when he found out I returned.

Oh, the horror.

I woke up early was to avoid bumping into him on my way to school. I didn't want my mood to be affected by his cold evil eyes.

Maybe I was exaggerating. I knew he had something good inside him. I just never suspected Tyler Grey to have a soft spot until that night. But that still didn't change my perspective of him. Yes, I knew he wasn't completely heartless but I still despised his guts.

I threw my backpack over my shoulder as I took a step forward on my way to school. I turned around, locking the front door, humming to myself in a happy mood because it was Friday. I had always been looking forward to have two days off, away from Tyler and his stupid handsome face.

Having to work with him was much harder than I thought. He was reckless and immature, making it almost impossible for him to pay attention in class and know what to do. For the past three days, he would spend forty-five minutes of the class goofing and joking around, trying to get on my nerves. Thankfully, the project was being done during class. I wouldn't know what I would have done if I had to meet with him after school.

Walking down the sidewalk, I prayed to the lords that the day would go by faster, so I can get back home and prepare for the party. I surprisingly

got excited for the twins' plan to switch identities. Would their date suspect a thing? All I knew was that it was going to be one heck of a day.

I was trying to walk to my fourth period in peace but somehow ran into Dan. Walking down the halls, I tried to ignore his annoying voice but every now and then, his arm would fall over my shoulders and I would swap it away. I gave him a glare but he responded with a goofy grin.

"Don't you have a class to get to?" I asked.

"Yea, but I wanted to make sure you made it safely," he said.

Gosh this dude doesn't know anything about personal space.

"You say it like I'm walking alone into an ally in the middle of the night."

"You'll never know what can happen when you least expect it. We live in a strange world," he said while pinching my cheek. I slapped his hand away from mine as I rolled my eyes once again.

"Yup, definitely strange," I repeated in a bored tone.

I finally made it in front of my ICT class and felt relieved when I realized that Tyler's seat was empty. My heart skipped a beat, and I hoped that he was eaten by a polar bear or that he somehow got lost in a rain forest.

Okay, maybe that was a bit harsh. I just wished that he somehow wasn't going to show up to class today. I turned around to look at Dan, and saw him batting his eyelashes at me with a smirk, swinging his hands around.

"What?" I asked.

"Really? I've just helped the damsel in distress arrive to her castle safely, and you aren't going to repay your brave handsome knight?" he said dramatically, as he put the back of his hand on his forehead and looked up at the ceiling.

My mouth fell open as I rested my hand on my hip.

"Really? You're seriously doing this right now?"

Dan just nodded quickly with a grin on his face.

"Fine," I muttered. "Oh, my hero! How may I ever repay you?"

"Maybe, a kiss?" he said, as he tapped his finger on his lips. I laughed and hit his shoulder playfully, pushing him a few inches away.

"Yea, in your dreams," I said, as I moved away from the door so the students could pass through.

"How do you know I dream about it every night?" Dan asked.

I was about to answer when the warning bell rang. I looked into the class to see it almost filled.

“You should get going now. Don’t want another detention, do you?” I asked, grinning.

“Yea, you’re right. But before I go, you still owe me a kiss,” he said, pointing to his lips. I rolled my eyes at him and parted my lips so I could come up with some lame comeback, but was interrupted by a deep husky voice.

“She doesn’t owe you anything.” Tyler’s voice echoed throughout the almost empty hall.

Dan and I stood dumbfounded for a moment, not knowing what to say. Dan was about to say something when Tyler grabbed my arm, and dragged me into class as everyone stared. I rolled my eyes at him as I waved goodbye, shooing him away.

I yanked my arm away from his hold and walked to our seats, and dropped my bag to the ground as I sat down. I averted my eyes away, trying not to make eye contact with anyone staring. After a couple of seconds, a muscular body sat next to mine.

“What did he mean you owe him?” Tyler asked. His ocean blue eyes were looking into my soul, waiting for an answer.

I glared at him, completely annoyed. Who was he to drag me into class as if he was a friend?

“Really? That’s none of your business,” I said, looking away. I should have known it wasn’t going to be easy to shut him up because he started to poke my shoulder with a pencil. I turned my head slowly as I sent him a piercing look, wishing to bury him six feet underground with my eyes.

“Will you stop that?”

“Not until you tell me what he meant, Gem,” he said, calling me with that stupid nickname again.

“How many times do I have to tell you, my name isn’t Gem?” I snapped.

He simply ignored me and started to poke me once again.

I groaned to myself as I ran my hands over my face and grabbed the pencil from his hand. Using all my force, I snapped it into two and smirked at him, as I returned the broken pencil but he seemed unaffected. He leaned over, took another pencil from his bag, and started poking me again.

“You know what? This is harassment,” I said, as I swatted his pencil away from me but kept on returning.

“It’s not harassment if you like it,” Tyler sang.

I rolled my eyes for the hundredth time today as I pinched the bridge of my nose, having enough of his foolishness. There was nothing I liked about his stupid behavior.

“Oh my god, you’re so annoying. Leave me alone!” I said quietly, trying to control my temper as the teacher walked into the classroom. He leaned his head closer to mine and whispered.

“I will, when you answer me,” he said.

“Sure, we both know that’s not true. You just love to piss me off don’t you.”

“True, true. It’s my passion,” he said, as if we were talking about the weather. His pencil was an inch away from touching my shoulder when I snatched it from him.

“We were just joking around. Now, will you stop acting so immature and mind your own business,” I said, dropping his pencil in front of him.

“Okay class, today will be the last day of planning your project in class. Starting Monday, you shall meet with your partner outside the class to finish it. Make sure you don’t waste too much time and hand it over on the deadline,” he said.

My mind went blank mid-sentence.

Tyler and I, had to meet up after school! Why, oh why? My life was supposed to get better but at this very moment, it just came crashing down to the ground. I whipped my head to my right when I heard Tyler speak.

“So, do you want to meet up after school today to get started?” he asked, as he rested his chin on his hand. I almost wanted to snort at him. We both knew that he wasn’t going to be much help. I was probably better off alone, knowing that he would only bug me, but I would never do it all by myself either, and let him take all the credit.

“Nope. I’m busy today,” I said, and that was true. I wanted to go home and have a nap, or just a moment to be with myself before the twins and Jasmine break into my house and throw a bunch of makeup on me like grenades.

“Busy with what?” he asked.

“I’m going to a party.” The only reason why I answered him was to avoid getting my shoulder bruised like earlier. He probably held the world record of annoying me in a span less than the life of my old pet fish Carlo.

“Really? And where is that?”

I leaned a bit so that I was a couple inches from his face and tapped his nose.

“That’s none of your beeswax,” I said, and leaned away as I shifted my attention to the class. I saw him rub his nose from the corner of my eye as he stared at me in disbelief.

“Beeswax?”

I glanced at him shortly.

“Yup, you heard me. That ain’t your beeswax.”

CHAPTER 12

I turned to the third page as I let my mind get sucked into the amazing story I probably have read countless times. It never failed to surprise me how many tears I've cried while reading this book, but it was all worth it. I remember the first time I got my hands on it, I just couldn't let go.

The Fault in Our Stars was one of the most creative and heart-wrenching books I've ever read in my whole eighteen years of living. I wasn't much of a person who reads a book more than once. But this book was the only one that got to me.

I was so consumed by the story that I barely heard the doorbell ring. I figured that it was probably my imagination and that the girls weren't here yet, but the bell rang for the second time, waking me up from my thoughts. I groaned to myself as I placed the bookmark on the page.

The party would start tonight at around eight, and it was six so that gave us two hours to get ready. We all agreed for the girls to come over at my place and help me get dressed up.

I went down the stairs to the front door. I looked through the peephole just in case, because come on, better safe than sorry. For all I knew, the Joker could be waiting outside for me when I least expected it. Making sure that it was only my friends, I yanked the door open to be greeted with three smiling faces.

Eva, Sydney and Jasmine were each holding bags in their hands; which were probably filled with their dresses and makeup. I greeted them with hugs and stepped aside so that they could enter my house. We climbed upstairs to my room as Eva and Sydney recalled their plan to switch places.

It was pretty simple. Eva would act as if she was Sydney and Sydney was to act as if she was Eva.

Nick wouldn't notice a single thing.

"So, are you guys sure he won't know the difference between you two?" Jasmine asked. I walked into my closet, and grabbed the bag on the floor, with my dress in it.

"Darling, nobody does," Sydney said.

"Everything will go just fine," Eva said.

I walked toward my bed as I shuffled through the bag, taking out the dress I bought with the girls. Personally, I would have preferred jeans and a t-shirt more, but this red dress was fabulous. The top part was strapless and tight on my chest. As it went down to my waist, there were thick shaped diamonds all around my waist resembling a silver belt. The dress came all the way to my mid-thighs but it didn't cling to my butt, making it easy to move around in.

I looked up to see Jasmine and Sydney taking out a bag full of makeup. I walked into my bathroom, and grabbed a couple of things I liked to put on my face then returned to see Eva curling her hair.

Well, here goes nothing.

I went down the stairs, holding my gray and silver heels in my hand. The girls were all behind me as I walked to the front door when the bell went off again, probably Matt and Troy. The party was going to start in a couple of minutes, and we were all ready, waiting for our ride.

I let the girls do their magic on me but not too much to show off. I looked at myself through the mirror, and my jaw almost fell to the ground in shock. I looked like a different person. It wasn't that I would look like a zombie without any makeup on, but the work they did on me gave off a whole new vibe.

I looked and felt confident.

The red lipstick stood out on my face, matching my dress color. The girls looked fabulous too, it was almost impossible for me to distinguish the difference between Sydney and Eva.

I walked to the front door and looked through the peephole as the girls stood behind me. I pulled away a couple inches as I lifted my eyebrows up in confusion. I rubbed my eyes just in case, to make sure I wasn't going blind before I looked again but saw nothing.

No one, it was just blank as the color black filled the place meaning that something was covering the hole from the outside.

I knew only two people who would be this immature and I was hoping that it was Matt and not my second guess.

“Crystal, what’s wrong?” Eva asked.

I wasn’t paying attention to her as I unlocked the door and opened it. I immediately closed it but wasn’t quite fast enough because Tyler stepped his foot in, preventing me from closing it all the way.

I tried to kick it out but he wouldn’t budge. I looked up to see him smirking at me as I glared at him. He yanked the door open as the urge to slap that smirk off his face increased.

“Well, hello neighbor,” he said, as I heard the girls from behind me gasp in surprise. I didn’t turn my head to look at their shocked yet excited faces. Maybe because the hottest and most adored guy in school was standing right outside my door clearly showing that he lived not too far away.

Oh, how amazing!

I noticed his eyes rake over my body from head to toe, and I crossed my arms under my chest.

“Damn,” he said.

I heard the girls whisper a couple of things from behind me. Something about how lucky I am and how hot he looked. I rolled my eyes as I tried to close the door once again but his muscular arms prevented me.

“What do you want?” I hissed.

“Oh come on. Can’t a guy check up on his neighbor?”

“How did you know we’re neighbors?”

“I saw you walking through the front door after school” he answered as he leaned against the wall.

I could hear the girls swoon from behind me, making me glare at Jasmine, who had a boyfriend, and merely shrugged her shoulders upwards helplessly all while giving me a cheeky smile.

I turned my attention back to Tyler with his eyes on me.

“Oh, so you were stalking me then?” I asked.

“Gem, I was walking home. You live right next to me,” he said.

“I know, such an honor.”

A car pulled up right in front of my house while Matt, who was riding his motorcycle parked not too far behind. Troy came out as he walked by Matt. They stopped for a second when they saw Tyler, and went over to us with confused expressions.

“Ok, you can leave now,” I said.

“But I haven’t told you what I’m here for,” he said, as he straightened himself.

“Sorry, we ran out of sugar,” I said, as I pinched his hand, making him flinch away. I took this advantage to close the door but he managed to take a step forward, coming back into the house.

“I’m not here for that,” he said.

“The fridge doesn’t need repairing, now please, leave,” I said, as I pushed against his chest but he was as stiff as a board.

“What’s he doing here?” Matt asked.

“I’m coming with you guys to the party,” he explained, and my eyes widened in shock.

“No, he’s not!” I said, raising my voice.

Tyler averted his eyes from Matt to mine.

“Oh, yes I am.”

“No, you’re not!”

“Yes, I am. Just give me the address, and I’ll be on my way,” he said, saying the last part to Matt. I tried to kill him with my eyes, but we don’t always get what we want in life, now do we? I grabbed Matt’s arm, yanking him toward me.

“He’s not giving you anything,” I said.

Tyler grabbed Matt’s other arm and scooted him toward him.

“Oh, yes he is,” he said.

“Oh, no I’m not,” Matt said, shaking his head.

Tyler whipped his head to Matt, giving him an icy cold glare.

“Oh, yes I am,” Matt corrected himself immediately.

I groaned to myself as I muttered ‘traitor’ under my breath.

“We can’t get rid of him now, can we?” Troy whispered to the girls from behind me. They shook their heads as if it was a good thing, while they stared at him dreamily.

Matt rolled his eyes, and hesitantly wrote the address down on a piece of paper, avoiding my eyes. This day has quickly turned from a score of ten to a negative twenty.

Once the paper was in his hands, Tyler shot me a quick smile and winked as my face turned red in anger. He stepped back and retreated back to his car.

“See you at the party, neighbor.”

“Neighbor my ass,” I whispered to myself.

He turned around with his back toward me. I instinctively took a step forward but Matt’s arms wrapped themselves around my waist, preventing me from killing him right on the spot.

“Let me kill him! I swear, I won’t leave any evidence for the police to find. There’s an abandoned building not too far away from here. We could hide his body in there,” I hissed as I tried to break free, watching Tyler get into his car and drive away.

“I can’t tell you how much that sounds tempting but I don’t want my best friend behind bars,” Matt said.

“I won’t be in jail if there was no proof,” I pointed out, finally calming myself down.

Matt released me as he rolled his eyes while the girls were swooning as if they just saw *Chris Hemsworth*, half naked right before their eyes. Troy was snapping his finger at Jasmine while I wondered what has gotten into them.

Once his car was out of sight, we all walked to Troy’s car. Jasmine sat in the passenger’s seat, while the twins and I, sat at the back. I would have preferred to ride on Matt’s motorcycle to the party, but it wasn’t an option when wearing a dress.

I leaned against the chair as I fixed my curled hair. I crossed my fingers as I prayed to myself that Tyler would get drunk early, find himself a bimbo to bang and get the hell away from me. No matter much disgusting that sounded, it was way better than having his annoying face around mine.

CHAPTER 13

"I spy with my little eye something blue," Jasmine said.

"The sky?" I asked in a bored tone.

"Oh, my god! Correct!" She squealed like a kid.

I was sitting between the twins in the car as we drove to the party with my mood now lower than my ego. Now don't get me wrong, I was so excited to get a change for once. You know, get drunk, dance like I own the place and make out with a complete stranger. It was just that I didn't plan on have fun with Tyler around, and I felt myself shudder at the thought.

I didn't know that the house was going to be this far.

It really wasn't, and I was just exaggerating. We've only been in the car for about fifteen minutes with Jasmine playing *I spy*, and her choices were obvious. I wanted to hit my head on the window so I would black out, maybe get sent to the hospital, and blame it on Tyler, then wave goodbye as I watch him head to jail. I smiled wickedly at the thought.

Maybe then, I wouldn't have to see him ever again.

"I spy, something red," Jasmine repeated.

"That zit on your face?"

"What?"

"I said that stop sign," I answered, pointing at the sign we just passed. Eva and Sydney were snickering beside me, as I saw Troy roll his eyes from the mirror.

"Love, I know you like these games, but can you tone it down a bit?" Troy asked, as he did a U turn. That made me smile in relief as I leaned against the window, but Jasmine's answer made my smile drop.

"Sorry, babe. That's not going to happen," Jasmine replied, looking out the window for something to spy. When she couldn't find any, she switched

on annoying Troy.

“Babe?”

“Yea?”

“Are you the type of person that eats to survive, or survives to eat?” she asked.

“What’s the difference?” he asked in an annoyed tone.

“Do you live so you can eat, or do you eat so you can live?”

“I live so that I can eat, of course.”

“Troy?”

“What?”

“Do you think if I stepped on a cereal, that makes me a serial killer?” she asked, as she twirled her hair with her fingers.

“Of course not, love,” Troy said with a huff.

“What if I sat on a baby? Will that make me a babysitter?”

“No.”

I glanced at the twins, trying to avert my attention to them, but they were both on their phones, not having a clue to what’s going on.

“Crystal?” Jasmine asked.

“Yes, I’m still a virgin.”

“What?” she asked

“What?” I repeated.

Finally, two hundred questions and a confused brain later, we arrived in front of a house with loud music blasting inside. I could tell how this party was going to be like and for once in a long time, I actually liked it. All I wanted to do was let loose. Who knew? I might not bump into Tyler.

Ugh! Was that all I could think about? Couldn’t I spend five minutes without seeing his annoying, yet sexy face in my head? He was physically and mentally haunting me 24-7.

Troy parked the car in front of the house with Matt behind us. Eva and Sydney got out of the car, and as I stepped outside, the cold night air hit me like a brick in the face. It was so refreshing as I breathed it in. Matt then walked over to us, and dropped an arm on my shoulders as he leaned down to my ear.

“Try not to get laid tonight okay. I don’t want to be an uncle yet,” he whispered.

“Look, who’s talking?”

We walked to the front door with Troy with the girls by our side. Matt rang the doorbell, thinking who would hear it over loud music, breaking my eardrums.

The door opened with a hot looking guy smiling at us. He gave Troy a manly hug, and welcomed us in. To what I heard, this place belonged to his parents and I pity them. This place was going to be an utter mess after this party. It was as if a hurricane had just hit the place and dropped a bunch of horny drunk teenagers.

Troy and Jasmine walked to the dance floor, while Eva and Sydney revised their plan, and went to look for Nick. I walked into the kitchen to get a drink with Matt, but I immediately turned around and grabbed Matt's arm, yanking him back.

"Whoa! Easy there, Clare," he said. Tyler exited the kitchen, holding two glasses of drinks in his hand with a grin while Matt gave me warning look. He patted my shoulder, and I gave him a glare. Unaffected, he shrugged his shoulders, and pointed a group of girls who were eye raping him.

"I'm going to get laid tonight," he said, running his hand through his hair and showing me an apologetic smile. "Good luck."

He then turned around, and began walking to the group of girls. I tried to burn a hole into his head but sadly I wasn't the *Cyclops*.

"Traitor," I muttered.

I turned around when I felt someone poke my shoulder. Tyler was giving me a weird look as he held up the drink in his hand. I stared at it as if it was some kind of alien from outer space, then glared at him as I wrapped my arms under my chest.

"You actually think I'm going to take that?" I said.

"Why wouldn't you?" he said, after gulping down his drink. He threw the plastic cup away, and shoved his empty hand in his pocket.

"Because it could be poison for all I know! Or drugged," I answered.

Tyler shrugged his shoulders, and drank the second cup before giving me a glance. He then threw it away too, and turned to me.

"Is it drugged now?" he asked. Rolling my eyes, I turned around with a huff, and walked to where Eva and Sydney were standing. As I got closer, Sydney, which I knew was her because of the dress she was wearing, was

standing a couple of feet away from Eva and Nick, glaring at them with a grumpy, miserable look.

I stopped in my tracks, and realized Tyler was behind me.

“What?” I asked.

“What?” he repeated.

“I’m sorry, but do I have a sign on my back that says please disturb me?”

“No.”

“Then, are you following me because I’m your dream?”

“Huh?”

“You know, when you follow your dreams,” I said, placing a hand on my hip.

“No.”

“Then why the hell are you following me?” I asked, frustrated.

“Because I want to.”

I could only groan to myself, and decided to go to where Sydney was standing.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” I asked.

She glanced at me, and averted her eyes to Eva, who obviously looked uncomfortable with Nick.

“That bastard knew the difference between us,” she muttered.

“Really? I thought no one knew,” I said.

“I did too, but it seems he does,” she said, noticing that Tyler was next to me. She narrowed her eyes and flickered them between us. She was about to say something but I interrupted her.

“That’s a bummer,” I said, catching her attention.

“I know. I can’t take this,” she whined as she ran her hands through her hair. I grabbed her hand and dragged her to a table surrounded by a bunch of people.

“Wait, where are we going?” she asked.

It didn’t go unnoticed when Tyler walked right behind us but I didn’t say anything. First, I didn’t want to deal with the drama he carried around wherever he went. It was like he was born in this world just to ruin my life. Second, Sydney was my number one priority at this very moment. She needed to let loose and forget about her boy problems.

“We’re going to grab a drink,” I answered, making her eyes widened in surprise.

What else would you do in a party besides to get drunk and dance? Of course, you could also make out with hot guys, break stuff you didn’t own, and start a fight because some dude hit on your girlfriend, but I doubt we’re going to do any of that.

“You mean, get drunk?”

I squeezed passed the drunk teenagers who were dancing to the beat of the music. Some were even grinding on each other. I felt my nose scrunch upwards in disgust and hoped that wouldn’t be me in my drunken state. It’s been a while since I was drunk. In fact, I haven’t drank much in my life since I recently turned eighteen. Anyway, I just hope I wouldn’t go making out with Tyler.

Ugh! How horrible would that be? I’d rather kiss a frog.

Okay, maybe I wouldn’t. That’s just disgusting. I’d rather eat more pizza and ice-cream, jump off a building, scratch the back of an old man, go on a scavenger hunt, give Matt a foot massage . . .

Oh, just the thought of food made me hungry. I licked my lips as I tried to ignore the stares of Tyler sitting on the stool beside me, while Sydney sat on the other side. We both grabbed a drink and gulped it down our throats as if we haven’t had anything to drink in ages. I was expecting Tyler to grab a drink too since he was here but he just leaned against the table, and looked around the place as if he was a bodyguard.

I averted my eyes and decided to forget about him as the drink settled in my stomach. I grabbed another cup, along with Sydney and gulped it down just like the previous one.

On our third cup, Tyler took his phone out of his back pocket, looked at the screen with a serious face, then glanced at me as if he was trying to debate on whether he should answer the call or not. In the end, he got up and went out of the door since the music was too loud to actually have a conversation on the phone.

I felt myself relax in relief. Finally having a moment to myself, I looked at Sydney to see that she was in her own little world. She was twirling in her stool while looking at the cup in her hand as if it was some kind of new creation made in a laboratory.

I knew I shouldn't have spoken too soon because not a moment later, I saw from the corner of my eye a muscular body sit right next to me. The same stool Tyler was on not too long ago. I turned my head to look at the stranger, to find out that he was not a stranger at all.

It was Dan.

He was smiling at me as he drank in my features from head to toe.

"My my, look what we have here," he said slowly.

"Hey Dan," I said as I grabbed another drink. By now I was starting to feel light-headed.

"What are you doing here?" he asked. I turned my head slowly and lifted an eyebrow.

"What else do you do at parties?" I asked making Dan roll his eyes then took a sip of my drink while glancing at Sydney, just to make sure she was still sitting in her seat beside me. I didn't want to be that type of friend where I get distracted, then let my drunk friend wander off to potentially meet a strangely hot guy. You'd think you get to know him but actually you don't. Then soon after, he drugs your drink and you wake up in a hotel room naked.

"What I meant was that you don't strike as the party girl? You seem like a goody two-shoes. Then again I did see you in detention only on the second day of school so . . ." He trailed off.

I nodded. "Yea looks can be deceiving huh?"

Dan nodded his head then leaned over the table to grab a drink. He then glanced at Sydney and gave me a questioning look at the sight of her staring off into space while twirling in her stool. I was surprised she didn't feel dizzy or barfed all her insides out by now.

"Boy problems," I said.

Dan nodded his head understandingly then parted his lips to say something but was interrupted by a deep husky voice coming from behind him.

"That's my seat," Tyler said as he glared at Dan. I turned around, confused to why Tyler's mood was so down all of a sudden. Not too long ago he was smirking as he pissed me off.

"I don't see your name written on it," Dan said.

"That's still my seat," Tyler argued.

"No it's not."

“Just move,” he said in a deathly tone but Dan didn’t look like he would budge anytime soon.

“What if I don’t want to?” he said

“Get up or else.” I was taken aback by Tyler’s threat and was surprised at how dangerous he sounded but confused to why. Did he have anger issues or something? Maybe that was the case because I didn’t like the idea of him falling in love with the stool Dan had his butt on.

It was just weird.

Dan got off of the seat but didn’t move so that Tyler could sit on it. Instead he crossed his arms under his chest and glared at him.

“Or else what?” Dan threatened him to continue but before Tyler could even open his mouth to speak, someone called Dan’s name. We all turned to look at the host of the party from earlier who opened the front door for us. He was smiling, clearly unaware of the tension going on and waved to Dan to come over to him.

Dan narrowed his eyes at him then glanced back at Tyler and me. He groaned quietly to himself which didn’t go unnoticed then gave me a small smile before averting his gaze to Tyler, giving him an icy cold glare for the hundredth time today.

“I’ll see you later Crystal,” he muttered under his breath before walking past Tyler with his hands in his pockets, purposely bumping into him with his shoulder.

Geez, what has gotten into those two?

Tyler sat back down beside me but I didn’t look at him. I stared at my cup just like Sydney did not too long ago.

Speaking of Sydney, I whipped my head to look at the place she was sitting earlier to find it empty.

Oh shit.

I looked around my surroundings but saw no familiar faces. I then got off of my stool as I took a step forward. My heart was starting to pound against my chest in panic. Where could she be? She couldn’t have just wandered off somewhere far away that fast. She had to be here somewhere. And I had to find her fast before some creep does.

We just got a freaking drunk brokenhearted girl on the loose.

And her sister is going to kill me

CHAPTER 14

I rushed past the crowd of drunk and horny teens while Tyler stubbornly followed behind. I don't know why. I was having enough stress as it was with Sydney on the loose to who knows where. And Tyler decided to tag along. I tried to tell him to leave me alone since his presence was freaking me out even more, but he didn't listen. He didn't even say a word and just shook his head as if he was a child getting told to go to his room.

Right now, I was trying to find Eva all while silently praying to the lords that she wouldn't take my head off when I told her that her drunken, heartbroken sister had disappeared. Who knew, she could be a room away. Or maybe she found an abandoned closet, opened it, and found herself in a place where animals and creatures could talk, also known as the strange world of Narnia. I felt myself panic at the thought. I didn't want to die at this age. I mean, if I had an actual death wish, I would have just shaved Matt's hair off while he was asleep.

I snapped out of my thoughts when a rough hand grabbed my trembling wrist. Tyler was looking at me with a blank expression, but there was a bit of concern in his eyes that he couldn't mask from me.

"Relax. She couldn't have wandered off too far away. She's got to be here somewhere and we'll find her." He reassured me. I didn't have time for bickering, so I simply nodded. Relief washed over my body when my eyes landed on Eva with Nick, but it wasn't long before fear took over.

What if she tried to bury me alive?

Or killed my dog?

Wait . . . I don't have a dog.

It took me a while to notice Tyler was leading me towards her with his hand on my back. I swatted it away before plastering on a calm face.

“Eva, how’s my best friend doing?” I said as she turned around to look at me. Relief replaced her look of discomfort when she noticed it was me. She smiled and hugged me. I looked at Nick and gave him an apologetic smile.

“Hey, I hope you don’t mind if I steal your date for a while,” I said as I yanked Eva away by her arm, not waiting for his answer. I led her to a corner of the room that wasn’t filled with strangers making out.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

I placed both my hands on her shoulder, looking into her eyes as if I was reaching out for her soul.

“Well, you see . . .” I trailed off.

She lifted an eyebrow, looking at me curiously.

“Yes?”

“Funny story.” I removed my hand from her shoulder to scratch the back of my neck.

She nodded her head, encouraging me to continue.

“I . . . I-I kind of—”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake!” Tyler interrupted me as he threw his hands in the air. I turned to glare at him for interrupting me but he just looked annoyed.

“What Gem is trying to say is that your crazy drunk sister, who looks exactly like you, is missing in action,” he said.

Well, talk about being blunt.

Eva’s eyes widened as she whipped her head to look at me.

“You lost my sister?” she asked.

I nodded slowly, not wanting to anger the beast.

“And she’s drunk?”

I nodded again.

“Well, you weren’t paying attention to her in the first place,” I defended myself as Eva ran her hands over her face and through her hair.

“Oh, god,” she said under her breath. Then she nodded and apologized, “Yea, you’re right and I’m sorry.”

“Let’s just go find my sister before she kills someone,” Eva said as she turned around, making me lift an eyebrow.

“You mean if someone kills her?” Tyler pointed out, but she shook her head at us.

“No, I mean if she kills someone. Have you met her?” she asked.

Tyler and I rolled our eyes before following behind her. We scattered around the place, looking everywhere for a girl with the same face as Eva but saw nothing. Halfway through our futile mission, we ran into Troy and Jasmine making out in the middle of the crowd. Once I told Matt the issue, he went up to them and smacked the back of Troy’s head before filling him in. A couple minutes later I was starting to panic. What if something happened to her? What if she was kidnapped?

My thoughts were cut off by the sound of Eva’s voice.

“Wait, did Tyler just call you Gem not too long ago?” she asked curiously.

I glared at her. “Your sister could be in the back of a dude’s car screaming for her life and that’s all that’s going through your head?”

“Yea, you’re right. I’m just curious,” she said, swatting her hands up in the air.

“Well, curiosity killed the cat,” I told her while looking around the place.

“But satisfaction brought it back to life.”

I rolled my eyes and was about to say something when I heard someone shouting from outside the house. It seemed as if no one heard it because of the blasting music, but I was able to since I was near the door. I ran out of the door with everyone following right behind me. Including Tyler.

I was met with a sight I certainly didn’t expect. Dan was holding a donut in the air while Sydney clung to one of his legs as if she was a child.

“Let go of me, you psychopath!” he shouted as he tried to break free, but she was whining and holding onto his leg as if her life depended on it.

“Who let you out of the hospital, huh? Go back to where you came from,” he yelled, but she shook her head and glared at him.

“Never!”

“You’re crazy!” he shouted. “What the heck are you do—hey, that’s my donut you bit—”

“Shut up and give me my dessert!” She tripped him to the ground and grabbed the donut from his hand, then started running towards us as if she’d won the lottery.

“Why you! Once I get my hand on you, you’re dead!” Dan shouted as he got off the ground and ran after her. Sydney ran past us while shoving the donut in her mouth without a care in the world.

Dan shouted some colorful curse words. “That’s my donut! I bought it fair and square!”

“Well, it’s mine now! Mwaha!” She laughed as she gave him the middle finger before running through the door.

Once they were in the house, we all looked at each other in silence. I blinked a few times before realizing what just happened. And to think we were afraid for Sydney? It was as if she was a whole new different person when drunk. I turned to Eva with a confused expression. It increased even more when I saw her blank face, as if she was used to it. She then gave me a sheepish smile and shrugged her shoulders.

“When we were looking for her, I wasn’t afraid something might happen to her. I was afraid for the person that crossed paths with her while drunk,” she explained. I noticed that Matt had disappeared through the door, probably to go get Sydney. Which was a good idea because leaving her alone probably wasn’t the best idea.

What surprised me was when Tyler laughed.

“Well, I like her,” he said.

What, why was he still here?

I was about to tell him to go away and that his presence wasn’t needed when Matt came back outside, looking annoyed as hell . . . while carrying a singing Sydney over his shoulders.

“I’M GONNA SWING FROM THE CHANDELIERS! FROM THE CHANDELIERS!”

I was surprised nobody inside heard all this.

“Will you be quiet?” Matt said.

“TELL ME WHAT YOU WANT, WHAT YOU REALLY, REALLY WANT!”

“Shut up!” Matt hissed.

“HELLO FROM THE OTHER SI—”

“That’s it, I give up.” Matt handed Sydney to Troy and walked to his motorcycle.

I chuckled to myself at their behavior while walking to Troy’s car. I guess the night was over already. Matt drove off while Troy placed Sydney

in the back of the car between Eva and I. I closed the door to see Tyler standing outside looking at me. I gave him a questioning look, making him smirk.

“See you around neighbor,” he said, making me roll my eyes.

I let out a breath once the car began to move. Sydney was dosing off while Eva was looking at her phone. Once in a while, Sydney would lay her head on her sister’s shoulder, but Eva would smack her in the face and call her a ‘drunken octopus’, making me laugh.

Troy drove around the neighborhood since he wasn’t drunk, dropping us home. Actually, none of us were drunk drunk. Only Sydney. First it was the twins, then it was me and Jasmine was for last. I didn’t ask why. He probably wanted to make out with her before she left.

As I walked through the front door, I turned on the lights since it was so dark inside. After gulping down a glass of water in the kitchen, I took off my heels and went upstairs to my room. Five minutes later, I had all the makeup on my face removed. Then I took off my dress, wore Matt’s oversized shirt that I stole—I mean borrowed, crawled into bed and decided to sleep since I had really nothing better to do.

But that was a lie because five minutes later I found myself watching a video about cat desserts on YouTube.

And I didn’t even have a cat!

A couple minutes later went by and I needed to pee real badly. It felt as if my bladder was about to explode, so I got up and walked into my bathroom.

I stopped dead in my tracks when my eyes landed on my worst nightmare. I felt myself go white as my breathing stopped. I screamed and started to jump around like a crazy person, looking around for a shoe or a broom to kill the disgusting creature in my bathroom.

There was a big, hairy spider just standing there in the center of my bathroom tile, looking at me with so many eyes and probably saying, “*Hi, I just need to take a dump. I hope you don’t min—hey, what’s that broom for?*”

I was about to kill it when it moved, making me scream again. I might exaggerating but who doesn’t hate spiders? Especially when they’re big, hairy ones! I hit every place it was standing but it moved so fast. I was

afraid it would go hide and call it's family, plotting to kill me while I was asleep.

Well, looks like I'm moving in with Matt.

I was beyond shocked when I felt a hand on my shoulders. I whipped my head to look at Tyler.

Tyler?

What the hell was he doing in my room?

Wait, let me rephrase that.

What the hell was he doing in my house?!

"What's wrong? I heard you screaming from all the way in my room like there was a bloody murderer!" he said while looking at me with concerned eyes.

I wanted to say that there was something worse than a freakin murderer but held it back.

"How did you get in?" I asked.

"Your window was opened," he said, shrugging his shoulders while pointing to the open window behind him. I mentally smacked myself but didn't say anything when I saw the spider from the corner of my eye. "S-sp-spider-SPIDER!" I shrieked as I gave Tyler the broom and jumped on my bed for safety.

"Kill it! Kill it kill it, kill it!" I yelled as he looked at me, dumbfounded.

He smirked and gave me an amused look. "Relax, it's just a bug," he said as I let another shriek when I saw it move.

"A big hairy one!" I yelled, hugging my pillow.

Tyler rolled his eyes before dropping the broom to the ground. He walked over to it as if he wasn't scared of that hairy creature and stepped on it without the care in the world.

I felt myself relax in relief, for once happy to have his company. I guess I spoke too soon because all of a sudden I found Tyler running towards me with a dead spider in his hand. I let a shriek escape my lips as I jumped off the bed and out of my room like my life depended on it.

"Come on, Gem! It's dead. You don't have to be afraid" he yelled from behind me.

I'm pretty sure if someone walked by my house, they would think someone was dying with all the screaming.

“You bastard!” I yelled as I rushed down the stairs, with him following not too far behind me.

“Ahh! Put it down! Put it down!” I shrieked as I found myself cornered in my own living room. He laughed in response. “I’m serious, you jerk! Get out of my house and take that thing with you!”

I grabbed the first thing I could find—a pillow on the couch—and threw it at him. It hit him in the face, making him drop the spider. He let out another laugh and picked up the spider again. I grabbed my heels from earlier and threw them but unfortunately, he dodged.

“Ok, ok. I’m sorry. See?” He walked to the nearest trashcan and was about to throw it away.

“Stop!” I shrieked. “Are you crazy? It could come back to life and kill me while I’m asleep! Go flush it down a toilet.”

He chuckled again before he walked into the bathroom and flushed it down the toilet while I waited outside. I was so caught up in that whole spider situation that I totally forgot I was only in Matt’s oversized t-shirt. I felt myself blush in embarrassment at the thought of Tyler seeing me in this. Once he was out of the bathroom, there was a moment of awkward silence. I crossed my arms and sent him an icy cold glare.

“You know I would have thanked you for killing that spider but you just chased me around my own house so that’s not going to happen,”

He shrugged his shoulders. That was when I noticed his eyes roam over my body. He clenched his hand into a fist as his eyes turned darker for some reason—and not because he was some kind of werewolf, because come on, they don’t exist.

“I didn’t know you had a brother,” he said.

I lifted an eyebrow. “I don’t . . .”

“Then who does that belong to?” he asked, making me look down at Matt’s shirt.

“That’s none of your business,” I said.

He nodded slowly as he pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Yea, you’re right. I’ll just be on my way then.” He turned and walked to the front door before slamming it shut.

I stood there for a moment, rewinding what just happened.

Well, him being moody was unexpected.

CHAPTER 15

I ran one more lap as the sun rose. The early morning air hit my skin as I quickened my pace to my home. I'd been in the empty park for almost an hour for my morning routine before my classes.

The past few days had been pretty boring yet relaxing. I spent most of them watching Netflix with Matt and his friends as well as running and reading. I saw no signs of spiders and Tyler which made them the best two days of my life. Who knew being Tyler-free felt this good? But what happened on Friday night kept repeating in my head. Not the spider but the change in Tyler's mood. He went from playful annoying Tyler to a *don't-touch-me-I'm-mad* Tyler.

I shrugged off my thoughts and ran down the quiet road. When I got home, I walked into the bathroom, took off my clothes, and had a quick shower. Ten minutes later, which was shorter than the time I usually spent showering, I wrapped a towel around my body and opened my walk-in closet. I grabbed a pair of leggings and a long pink shirt that came down to my thighs. It had big green letters that read '*I'm a ninja.*'

Once I had my hair up into a messy bun, I grabbed my backpack and walked out of my house. It took me a five minutes to get to school. As I walked down the hall, I looked at the time on my phone. I only had a couple of minutes left to get to class so I forced my legs to move quickly. I met Matt halfway running to class just like me.

We sat in our seats once the bell rang. Students were rushing into the class, hoping that the teacher wouldn't notice them. I guess luck was on our side since because Mrs. Visconti wasn't in the room and we instead were greeted with a substitute teacher.

He seemed to be around fifty to sixty years old. He brushed off the late students, and closed the door.

After an awkward silence, the teacher introduced himself as Mr. Williams, and told us to open our text books. I turned my head to look at Matt and wasn't surprised to see him texting while chewing gum. I rolled my eyes and tried to get his attention when I noticed Mr. Williams looking at his direction.

Too late.

"Excuse me, young man!" he said, making Matt raise his head away from his phone. "Cell phones aren't allowed in class, so put that away before I take it from you."

"Oh, but sir, Mrs. Visconti lets us text in class all the time."

"Really? You actually think I'm going to believe that? And that includes chewing gum," he said, pointing to the trash bin by the door.

Matt rolled his eyes but said nothing, as he put his phone inside his bag, and got up to throw the gum. Not that I'm saying what just happened was interesting, but it was something.

Second period was as boring as the first. But thank goodness, it flew by fast because I was really excited for PE.

I grabbed my bag when the bell rang and rushed towards the girls' locker room which wasn't too far from my last class. I walked into where my locker was at and took out my PE clothes. Once I was done changing, I walked past a little white board a female teacher used to write on each day's activity. I looked up to see that today we were playing dodgeball.

Damn it! It just had to be dodgeball. No matter how much I loved PE, Dodgeball or what others called *Crossfire* was my ultimate weakness. The ball always seemed to be attracted to my face!

I groaned to myself as I walked out of the locker room and into the field. From what I had heard, everyone played this game outside and I didn't know why though. Maybe it was because the ball needed more space to go around.

We spent the first five minutes stretching. When Mr. Bony would ask us to do some push-ups, I usually noticed that most of the girls would just stay facing the ground with their butts in the air, not even moving when he wasn't looking. We did a couple of jumping jacks and then headed towards the center of the field.

The game started and Mr. Bony split us into two teams, with an equal amount of boys and girls. It was actually fun until I noticed that the number of girls were decreasing. There were only three girls left, including me and a couple of boys. The other team seemed like they were going to win. I dodged a ball right before it hit my leg. Another ball came flying at my face, thrown by a blonde girl, but I caught it in time and threw it at her. It hit her arm, taking her out.

I smiled to myself before I heard the two girls on my team squeal in surprise. I turned to see that they were both taken out by a jock from the other team, leaving me and three other boys.

Just great! I'm on my own now and that very moment, I felt like a ninja. It was like I was everywhere. One moment I was standing all alone and the target of a ball, but I soon figured out a strategy to hide behind a boy from my team. The ball hit him instead and took him out. I kept moving around, and every now and then, I would grab the ball and throw it at someone.

It went on until I was the last person standing. All the boys and a few girls were shouting at one another, telling someone to take me out. One ball came close to hit me, but I managed to escape from it. I smirked to myself while the other team struggled to take me out.

"For Pete's sake! Somebody take her out! She's just a girl!" A guy yelled.

I lifted an eyebrow. *Just a girl?*

I'm just a girl, aye? I'll show you what this girl can do. I was able to catch a ball coming my way and threw it at the guy who just spoke, hitting the other guy next to him.

I waved him goodbye when he started to walk to the benches, glaring at me in annoyance. I turned my attention to the last remaining students, who looked like they were about to give up. A moment later, a girl threw the ball at me. She missed, so I took the opportunity to chase and kneel to pick it up.

As I straightened up, a poster on a pole caught my attention. I let my eyes scan the paper as a bubble of excitement ran through my body, completely forgetting about the ongoing game.

I reached out to snatch the poster to take it with me to the office and sign up for the event, but out of nowhere, Mr. Bony shouted my name. I whipped my head to his direction and saw a ball coming right at me.

It was as if time stopped and the ball was coming at me in slow-motion but I couldn't do anything about it.

The ball hit my face and left me seeing dots as they took over my vision. I stumbled backwards but didn't allow myself to fall. The ball dropped and bounced with a stain of blood on it, as Mr. Bony ran toward me. I saw my nose bleeding and throbbing in pain.

A groan escaped my lips as I covered it with my hand, trying to minimize the blood flow.

Well, at least I didn't pass out.

"Are you okay?" Mr. Bony asked.

I raised my head to look at him. My hand was still covering my nose and was starting to get soaked with my blood.

"Yea, I'm fine," I mumbled.

He shook his head.

"You don't look fine. Take this pass and head to the nurse's office so you can get that cleaned up," he said.

I took it gladly, and headed toward the main office as everyone else headed for the locker room. Some of the students stopped to ask if I was okay, but I would just nod and continue walking. It was difficult to talk, in case I accidentally swallowed some blood, which wasn't the best feeling in the world.

As I stepped into the main office, the bell rang, signaling that fourth period was about to start. Well, it looked like I wouldn't have to see Tyler for a while. I guess good things did come out of every situation. Snapping out of my thoughts, I walked to the desk and gave the lady the pass, which probably wasn't necessary. My bloody nose was proof enough that I needed to see the nurse.

"Can I get this cleaned up?" I asked.

Her eyes widened when she saw the blood, and nodded her head quickly.

"Of course, sweetie. Come with me."

She got up from her seat and knocked on a door labeled 'Nurse's Office' in black. A lady with gray hair and glasses was standing right in front of me. She looked concerned when she saw my situation but let me in before closing the door.

“Oh, dear. What happened to you?” she asked, as she sat me down on a stool.

“I got hit by a ball,” I replied.

She took out a bunch of cotton and some tissues.

“I need you to go into that bathroom and wash your face,” she said. “I’ll clean any remaining blood and give you something to ease the pain.”

I washed my face as instructed and sat down on the stool again. I thanked her for the pill she gave me and walked back to the previous office.

“Hello, can I get a pass for my next class?” I asked the lady at the desk.

She pointed at a clipboard. “Sure. Just sign in over there.”

Five minutes later, I was standing in front of my fourth period class while holding the slip in my hand. I opened the door, catching everyone’s attention. I walked over to Mr. Jones’s desk, handed him the slip and walked over to my seat, which was unfortunately next to Tyler. I sat down, ignoring everyone’s stares and his questioning look.

“Where were you?” he asked.

“That’s none of your business,” I said, which made him scowl.

“Yea, I guess everything isn’t my business,” he said, probably talking about what happened on Friday night.

I just shrugged and turned to the front of the class. Mr. Jones walked to the board and started to detail the project we were supposed to be working on after school. I wasn’t looking forward to it, but I knew that it had to be done. No matter how much I disliked Tyler, I had to get a good grade on this project.

“So, when do you want to meet up after school?” I forced the words out of my mouth.

“Oh, so now you like me?” he asked in amusement.

“Really? I said nothing about liking you.”

“Sure, okay let’s go with that,” he said.

“Just answer the freakin question,” I hissed.

“Fine, fine. How about today at five?”

I thought about it and nodded my head. I had nothing better to do, so I might as well get this over with.

“My place or your place?” I asked.

“How about your plac—”

“Na, let’s do your place.” I interrupted him. I knew it was best because at least he had his mother living with him.

“Fine, my place it is then,” he said.

I nodded and faced the board as an awkward silence took over.

“So, about Friday night . . .”

“You were being an immature jerk,” I said, glancing at him.

He gave me a confused look.

“Huh?”

“You know, about that spider situation and you chasing me around my own house.”

He scratched the back of his head as a chuckle escaped his lips.

“Oh, yea, that,” he said, but looked like he wanted to say something else.

He seemed to be pretty cool for the past week although he seemed to be acting weird now, it looked like something was getting to him. Normally, I would just laugh and take satisfaction from this but disliking him didn’t make me a bad person.

“Is something bothering you?” I asked.

“What no, of course not,” he answered. He stuck his hands in his pocket and avoided my stare. I shrugged my shoulders and looked away. Maybe it was something personal or something to do with that Paul guy whom I saw him giving medicine to in the middle of the night last week.

I stopped my thoughts from wandering and paid attention to class.

The day went by smoothly after the dodgeball event. I spent my lunch with Matt as always as we teased Sydney about Friday’s party. Eva mentioned that once they got home, she took a shower with her clothes on which wasn’t surprising. It was nothing compared to what she’d done before. The classes went by quickly which confused me the most. I mean, on a normal day they usually take forever but since today I had to meet up with Tyler after school, it went by fast.

I felt a hand on my shoulder, stopping me. I turned around to look at Tyler.

“Well, I’ll see you at five, Gem.”

He probably knew all too well what I was about to say next.

“Don’t call me, Gem.”

He only shrugged his shoulders and looked at me with a glint in his eye. His mood swings were starting to get annoying but I shoved that thought in the back of my head. He smirked at me before turning around to leave. I made my way past the ocean of students and exited the hall. But instead of walking to the parking lot as usual, I made my way to the field where we played dodgeball earlier today. It was almost empty with only a couple of students playing basketball or soccer.

I walked over to the pole I saw earlier with the interesting poster hanging from it. I smiled in relief when I saw that it was still there and took it in my hand.

The poster declared that there would be a race next month. All the schools from our district would participate in the race and anyone could join. There would only be one winner in each school and the prize was two hundred dollars.

It also read that anyone who entered would have to be trained by someone in their school so that when the time came, they'd be ready. And all I had to do was sign up at the main office. I smiled at the thought of winning. I didn't really need the money, but I wasn't going to pass up the chance to earn a little extra cash since I lived alone. Also, it would be fun participating in something like this.

Who knows? Maybe I might just win. And even if I didn't, it was worth a try.

I retreated from the pole and made my way to the main office. Just one more stop to go.

CHAPTER 16

After signing up for the competition, which was going to take place in a month from now, I gathered my belongings and headed home. All remaining information like who would train me and when we would start would be given to me by the end of the week, and I couldn't wait for it to start. Even though I might not win, it was a great opportunity to make some extra cash.

Speaking of money, I really needed to find a job. I'd been here for a week already, and sooner or later I was going to run out of it. I'd been using the savings I'd collected over the years to support myself. It wasn't that much, but it was enough. After my parents died, their belongings were transferred over to me but I never really got to spend them because I spent so many years living with my grandmother.

I also needed to do something other than slacking off all day and becoming addicted to new TV shows.

I wondered if Matt had any jobs in mind. I didn't need a tedious one like a doctor or a teacher until I graduated college. I just needed a job that would allow me to buy some food and pay the electric bill. I wouldn't mind working at McDonald's or as a waitress but not as a stripper. Then again, I heard that they made good money.

It took me not longer than five minutes to walk home. I was feeling really anxious because I had to go to Tyler's house later. Speaking of Tyler, why did he have to be so damn annoying? Everything about him made me want to punch his sexy face.

And what was with the name he kept calling me? Gem? Really, was that all he could come up with? When you would think of bullying someone or

driving them nuts, you wouldn't call them Gem! I mean I get it because my name was Crystal but still . . .

I shook my head, trying to get rid of the thoughts and assumptions of what would happen if I came back home from Tyler's house with his own keys and locked his front door so that he wouldn't ever have to come out ever again.

I walked into the kitchen and took some bread to make myself a sandwich. I wasn't that hungry but I was bored.

I walked to the living room and turned my TV on but didn't even look at it. Instead I took out my phone and scrolled down my notifications on *YouTube*.

Moments later, my phone vibrated. I looked up at the top of the screen to see a banner that showed Matt had texted me. I exited *YouTube* and went to my text messages.

'Hey, the group decided to hang out later today. You up for it?'

I let out a defeated sigh knowing what I was about to reply. Hanging out with my friends now wasn't a good idea. I had to finish the project before I got too caught up in things like finding a job and practicing for the competition. It was like I could never go a day without worrying about one thing or another.

I always wondered if things would be different if my parents were still alive. I wouldn't have to find a job at this age even though most people my age would be looking for one. I would just be a normal teenager who snuck out at night, got drunk, and hooked up with strangers. But I didn't have time for that.

I shook the thoughts off before they turned into something much more and replied to Matt's message.

'Sorry, can't go. I have a meeting with the devil.'

It didn't take Matt too long to answer back.

'Devil? Come on! Tyler isn't that bad.'

I lifted an eyebrow.

'Really? Let me remind you of the time he replaced the cream of your Oreo with toothpaste.'

'Yea, right. He is bad.'

I kept on texting Matt to pass the time and before I knew it, it was almost five. I got off the couch and turned off the TV. I walked up to my

room and changed my clothes into something less decent. I wore a pair of shorts and a plain blue t-shirt. I went into the bathroom and pulled my hair into a messy bun. Maybe if I looked a little unattractive, Tyler would get so scared he would scream like a girl and lock me out of his house. Okay, maybe that wouldn't happen but a girl can dream.

I walked down the stairs and to the living room. I grabbed my phone and saw that it was already five minutes past five. Oh well. It wasn't like he had to wait that long. I headed my way towards the front door and grabbed my converse.

It didn't take me long before I'm staring at Tyler's front door. I forced myself to press on the doorbell. After a couple seconds of silence, the door finally opened. I felt my eyes widened at the sight in front of me. My mouth fell slightly opened. All I wanted to do was retreat back to where I came from.

You might be thinking that this was one of those cliché moments when the guy would open the door half naked. No. The only reason I wanted to go back home was because of Tyler in general. Trust me, he was standing right in front of me completely covered up in clothes. It was just that I hated the sight of his face that looked like he was going to have so much fun today.

"Why, hello neighbor," he said smirking.

I narrowed my eyes at him as I crossed my arms under my chest. "Is that all you ever call me?"

Okay fine, I got that the universe hated me and wanted me to see the face I despise the most everywhere. They even paired me up with him at school, like being neighbors wasn't enough! But did he have to keep shoving it in my face?

"No. I also call you Ge—"

"I know that! Geez. For once I want to hear something other than that stupid nickname."

"Okay fine. I'll just start calling you babe," he said.

I groaned and rolled my eyes. Yea, I would probably prefer *Gem* over *babe*, but I wasn't going to admit that.

He stepped aside, welcoming me into his house. I walked inside but not before bumping into his shoulder which I knew he did on purpose!

Tyler closed the front door and walked me into the living room. His house wasn't that different from mine. It had two floors which I could see because of the staircase, and it wasn't too big or small. I noticed that the place was pretty quiet when I sat down on the couch.

"Where is everybody?" I asked.

He grabbed the laptop he had sitting on the table while I took mine out from the bag I brought with me.

"My mom's working. She won't come back for another two hours," he said making me curse inside my head.

Great. Just great.

"So. We're all alone?" I asked.

"Babe, if you wanted us to hook up, then all you had to do was say so," he said as he wrapped his arm around my shoulders.

I picked up his arm as if it was some kind of disease and put it to his side.

"Yea like that would ever happen. I just know you have something up your sleeves. That's all."

Tyler put his hand over his heart and faked a hurt expression.

"You don't trust me?"

"Nope," I answered, popping the p.

I was surprised that we actually began working and for once he wasn't slacking around or bothering me. I didn't want to ask about his father because I remembered him telling Paul about his dad being gone. Besides, it was none of my business.

Anyway, things went by smoothly. We decided to do a presentation instead of a poster. Tyler made the design while I searched for useful information on the internet and confirm it using our textbooks.

I guess I spoke too soon about peace because Tyler switched of his business mode and returned to his playful yet annoying self. You know that annoying sound the computer makes when you press on the keyboard when you're not supposed to? Yea well, apparently Tyler decided he wanted to become a musician because he kept pressing the keyboard as if he was playing the piano.

I ran my hands over my face and through my hair, trying to block out the annoying sound. I couldn't let myself get distracted. I had to finish this project without murdering someone but I couldn't keep my hands to myself.

I reached over and pinched Tyler's shoulder. He stopped what he was doing and looked at me as if I just hit him in the nuts.

"Will you stop that and concentrate on the project for once?" I hissed but he ignored what I said.

Like always.

"Ouch!" he yelled dramatically and then put his laptop on the coffee table beside him.

"That hurt, woman!"

He fell to the ground while clutching his shoulder. I rolled my eyes and pinched him again. He had it coming. He was acting like a big baby. Or wait, make that a drama queen.

"Ouch!" he yelled again, pretending to be in pain. "When did you become so violent?"

"Don't be such a baby," I said.

"Don't be such a baby? How do you expect me not to act like this when you're trying to kill me?"

He pretended to wipe away an imaginary tear.

"What would my mother say or do if she found me dead by your hands?"

"Oh trust me. If I really wanted to kill you, I wouldn't leave any evidence behind."

"Damn, babe. I didn't know you hated me that mu—"

"Don't call me babe!"

"Gem it is, then!"

He got off the floor and sat next to me.

I silently moved a couple inches away from him and looked at the screen of my laptop. I glanced at Tyler, who was staring right at me like he was lost in space.

"What?" I asked.

His face leaned in a bit closer as he kept staring. I became a little uncomfortable so I leaned away but he just moved closer. There was moment of silence as we just sat there awkwardly. I lifted an eyebrow curiously. What was up with him? He was starting to freak me out with his silence.

He finally spoke in a whisper, "You have a zit that is begging to be popped."

I grabbed the pillow next to me and threw it at his face, which made him laugh hysterically. I rolled my eyes and tried to keep my fists to myself.

It's okay, Crystal! Killing him isn't worth it. You don't want to end up behind bars. Just count to ten and relax. Yea, that's it. Just ignore him. He's trying to get to you.

"You should have seen the look on your face."

Okay that's it. I jumped on him and tried to punch him, but he held my hand back. I could see tears coming out of his eyes which made me even more pissed. Why on earth was he laughing so much? This wasn't even funny!

"Stop laughing!"

I punched him in the chest with my free hand. Oh, but that was such a bad idea because his chest was as hard as a rock. What did he take? Steroids?

I kept punching his chest taking all my anger out on him. Damn, that felt good even though it didn't really affect him at all. I had always wanted to do this.

The couch wasn't big enough to support us, we fell down on the floor with him on top of me.

"You actually think that's going to hurt me?"

I glared at him and gave him one last punch.

"You're the most annoying person I've ever met in my entire life. You think you're that awesome, but guess what?"

"What?"

"You're a nincompoop!"

He stared at me for a moment before he broke into laughter once again.

"Nincompoop?"

"Yes, and I have many other names up my sleeve!"

I realized our positions and tried to hide my embarrassment. I used all my strength to push him off me. He noticed my discomfort and went serious. I coughed awkwardly as I got off the floor and checked the time on my phone. I wasn't going to stay here any longer. I guess we'd have to finish this next time.

"I'm going to go," I said as I put my laptop in my bag.

"Now?"

"Yea. You're too annoying to actually spend some time with."

I said this with a teasing smirk plastered on my face to get rid of the awkwardness. This seemed to do the trick because he gave me a grin and then rolled his eyes.

I wasn't expecting my day to go like this. I didn't really know what I was expecting. Tyler was so strange in so many ways. One minute he was all serious and the next he was like a little child who loved to piss me off so many years ago. Maybe I wasn't really expecting to meet him in the first place. Deep inside I knew that some things would have changed, and others would just stay the same.

"Oh, but you do know you like it." He winked.

"Goodbye, Tyler. I hope I never see you again," I said as I walked to the front door. I opened it and started down his front porch, not looking back.

"Have a nice day too, Gem!" he yelled playfully before closing his front door

CHAPTER 17

There were so many times in my life when I thought of myself as a patient person. In fact, everyone else thought so. I never let anything get to me or pop a nerve. Every time I wanted to say or do something risky, I'd wait. I'd wait till the last drop of rain or till the last person came out of school. I'd wait for the right time, for that perfect moment, and when it finally came, I'd feel like I accomplished something extraordinary.

I was always patient.

Yea, well, until I met Tyler.

I tried to remind myself of the person I used to be as I walked down the hall. I passed the crowd of hungry teenagers and went into the cafeteria with Tyler by my side. It wasn't not like I wanted him to be there. It was just that he was as clingy as a crazy girlfriend and I'm not even kidding.

I got out of our fourth period class like it was on fire. I was so ready for this day to end because it was Friday—a day I'm pretty sure everyone loves. Well, not the ten-year-old me. I used to think that Fridays were my *bad luck* days. Everything unpleasant would happen on that day; like getting bullied by Tyler—even though that happened constantly when I was a kid and spilling ketchup all over my white dress.

I just wanted to go home in peace and start looking for a job. I asked Matt to help me after school and he was more than delighted.

I was trying to find him and the others, but having Tyler follow me everywhere made it difficult. His behavior didn't surprise me. What surprised me was that he hadn't done this since the beginning of last week. I never saw him during lunch. Never really cared before but now that I

thought of it, my curiosity got the best of me. Where did Tyler go during lunch?

My thoughts were cut off when he opened his stupid mouth. His pink lips moving apart. Wait! Why on earth was I paying attention to his lips?

“So where do you and your buddies hang out?” He asked as he dropped his arm around my shoulder as if we were best friends.

“That is none of your business.”

“Yea, I almost forgot everything isn’t my business.”

I stopped dead in my tracks and glared at him as I crossed my arms under my chest.

“Why are you following me?”

Tyler’s face brightened. Clearly because I was letting him get to me.

“I’m not following you. I’m just tagging along,” he said as he raised his hands in surrender.

What if I threw a ball in the opposite direction? That could distract him, right? And then I could flee and meet up with my friends. That sounded like a great idea, but there was just one problem. He was not a dog! But the way he was acting like a lost puppy sure made me want to try.

“Well then, stop tagging along.”

“What if I don’t want to?”

I groaned to myself and decided to just ignore him. Like always.

It’s okay, Crystal. He’s not here. He’s just a ghost. An annoying ghost who wants to haunt you for the rest of your life.

I might as well have grown old with him by my side because he wasn’t leaving at all. I began to walk to the lunch line when my stomach grumbled. Not too loud where everyone could hear it but loud enough for me to know that my body was begging me to have something in my system. I wasn’t too surprised when Tyler stood behind me. But what really made me lift an eyebrow was that he didn’t even grab anything to eat.

Why was he in the lunch line if he wasn’t going to, and I quote, ‘get lunch’?

“Why aren’t you getting anything?”

Oh, but I knew the answer far too well. He was just trying to annoy me and he was doing a perfect job at it.

“Aw, Gem! Do you care about my health that much?” He cooed as he pinched my cheek playfully, but I swatted his hand away.

“No! I just want you to get lost. That’s all!”

I took a step back and was about to walk away when I looked back at him.

“Oh, and for the hundredth—no, make that the millionth time! My name isn’t Gem!”

I turned around with my lunch in my hands and walked to my usual table with Tyler not too far behind. I wasn’t surprised when I saw the look of shock and confusion written all over Matt’s face when he saw us. Everyone became silent as Tyler and I sat next to each other.

Wait, let me rephrase that: Tyler sat next to me. When I sat down, I laid my backpack on the seat next to mine but he wasn’t ready to give up his act. He scooted my bag, not caring that I was sending lasers at him with my eyes.

Jasmine, Eva and Sydney were eye raping him like usual as they stared at him in awe, while Troy and Matt looked uncomfortable. Rolling my eyes, I gave up and decided to introduce him to the group. Not like he needed it because everyone knew who he was.

It was just the situation would be awkward if I didn’t.

“Guys, you know Tyler,” I said under my breath as Tyler sent the girls a charming smile, making them swoon over him even more.

“So Tyler, are you single?” Jasmine asked with a grin on her face.

I mentally slapped myself.

“Jasmine. You have a boyfriend who’s sitting right next to you!” Troy said while pointing to himself.

Jasmine chuckled and pecked his cheek as she whispered something.

“Actually, I am,” Tyler said with his eyes on me.

Wait, why was he looking at me? Do I have something on my face? Was there another zit? I cringed at the thought. Not that I was disgusted at the thought of having a zit. That was pretty natural. It’s just it wasn’t too pretty when Tyler pointed it out. You know, it wasn’t pretty at all. I mean who does that? Before anyone could say anything else, I crossed my arms under my chest and lifted an eyebrow.

“Tyler, don’t you have some where to be?” I asked, trying to hint that maybe it would be best if he left but I should have known better. I was talking with Tyler Grey after all.

“Nope, not at all.” Tyler took a fry from my tray and shoved it into his mouth, making me gasp. I swatted his hand away when he came back for a second one.

No one takes my fries! Yes, I can take Matt’s, but no one can take mine. Call me selfish, call me greedy. Call me whatever you want, but no one messes with me and my fries.

“Hey! You could have gotten your own!” I said while scooting my tray farther away from him.

“Yea, but I wasn’t hungry. I already had lunch.”

He reached for another fry. I couldn’t stop him in time and had to watch my baby get eaten by the horrible monster in front of me. Okay, I’m exaggerating just a little bit.

“Then why are you eating my fries?” I asked, totally forgetting about the fact that my friends were watching us.

“Because I want to.” He then turned to Matt as if I wasn’t here. I groaned to myself and ran my hand over my face.

Worst lunch ever!

* * *

I scrolled down the page of the website on my laptop as I searched for any available jobs while listening to some song I didn’t even know the lyrics to. It was some kind of rap that kept repeating the same word: *Panda*. It caught my attention and when I played it for the first time, I found it quite catchy. I was sitting on my comfy couch in my quiet living room. I was starting to get used to the loneliness but it never goes away. People said that time was supposed to heal, but it didn’t do much healing at all.

Huh! Wasn’t that a song? Hello from the other side! Sorry, just had to do that.

I’ve been home for almost two hours and I was all dressed and ready. I was just waiting for Matt to come pick me up so that he could take me job hunting around the neighborhood. I decided to surf the web to kill some time while I waited. Not too long ago, I was looking through the information for the competition I got from the office. I was wearing a floral dress because of the hot weather and had my hair up in a high ponytail.

The doorbell rang. I closed my laptop, got off the couch, and walked to the front door. I found it quite weird because if it was Matt, he would have just send a text to let me know he was here. I opened the door but closed it back immediately when I saw Tyler.

Great! What did he want now?

Tyler began to press on the doorbell countlessly. I mean nonstop, and it was breaking my eardrums. I put my hands over my ears as I tried to block the noise out but it was no use. Having had enough of his childish behavior, I yanked the door open and glared at him.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I hissed.

“Well, who closes the door on their lovely neighbor’s face?” he asked as he pointed to his stupid face.

I wanted to slap that smirk off so badly, but I held my fist back. “Listen, I’m leaving soon and I don’t have time for you. So just tell me what you want.”

I noticed his eyes rake over my body, observing me. I narrowed my eyes and cleared my throat on purpose to grab his attention.

“Oh—yea um can I borrow a screwdriver?” he asked.

I stared at him for a moment.

“Screwdriver?”

He nodded as he stuck his hands into his pocket.

“Uh yea you see . . . my sink broke,” he said then took out one of his hands from his pocket to scratch the back of his neck nervously.

“Your sink broke?” I repeated suspiciously.

“And tell me why you don’t own a screwdriver?” I asked as I crossed my arms under my chest.

“It was stolen,” he explained. “Yea yea stolen,” he said after he chuckled to himself.

“By who?” I asked.

“I don’t know. It was just stolen,” he said while leaning against the door. I lifted an eyebrow and thought about what he just said. It was obvious he wasn’t here for a screwdriver and I just knew it. I’m not that naive.

“Stop asking so many questions and just give me that damn screwdriver, woman.”

I told him to wait at the doorstep while I walked upstairs and opened a closet which had a bunch of things I rarely used. It took me a while to find

my dad's old screwdriver. I went back downstairs and gave him the tool.

"Happy? Now go fix your broken sink or whatever," I said while I gave him a fake polite smile.

"Have a nice day," I said before closing the front door. I then leaned against it and I let a sigh escape my lips. I really can't go a day without seeing Tyler's annoying face.

"Thanks Gem!" I heard him shout from the other side of the door before it got all quiet, confirming he was already gone.

I walked slowly to the couch and sat down. I grabbed my phone and saw a text which had just arrived. I opened it to see that it was just Matt telling me that he was already in front of my house. I grabbed my handbag from the counter and exited my house before happily jumping into Matt's car. A satisfied moan escaped my lips when the air conditioner's cool breeze hit my face. It was one of the things I loved about his car. Not that my car was any different from his. I just felt like this air conditioner was stronger. I placed my bag in the back seat and put on the seat belt, because remember, kids! Safety first!

"So where to?" I asked as Matt took off down the road.

"I know a bunch of places that might have room for you. So we're going to check all of them and see what we get."

I nodded and rested my head against the headrest. I wasn't going to go home today until I found a job and I didn't care how long it took. I just hoped it was suitable. My school schedule limited the hours and days I could work. I didn't really want to become distracted or let my grades drop, so I had to find a job with the right number of hours.

It didn't take long for us to reach our first destination but it didn't go well as expected. I didn't get the job as a cashier at McDonald's because there were no open positions, so Matt and I drove to a small diner.

Again, there were no positions.

This kept happening until we walked into a small supermarket only three minutes away from my home by car. I crossed my fingers and prayed I would get the job. Thankfully my wish came true. We talked to the owner and she said that the cashier quit just yesterday because he had to move away. I smiled in relief as I walked to Matt's car. At least I had one problem off my shoulders.

“Want to celebrate tomorrow in finding a job?” Matt asked as he started his car and drove. “It is Saturday tomorrow.”

I thought about it and nodded as my smile grew.

“Yea sure, I could use a day without stress,” I said.

“Great, so how does a museum park with the group sound like?” he asked.

“Awesome!” I squealed as I nodded excitedly.

Matt and I talked about snacks and other stuff for tomorrow. We decided to wake up early, have breakfast at some diner, and head out to start off the day. I was really excited to spend a day with the new friends I’d grown so close to. Having true friends by my side was an amazing feeling.

I was talking about Troy, Jasmine, and the twins. I had known Matt for years and he was the best thing that had ever happened to me. He’d been there since the beginning and had given me a shoulder to cry on, especially after my parents’ death.

Three minutes later, Matt had his car parked outside my house. I gave him a hug and got out. Once inside the house, I walked into the kitchen to grab something to eat. I picked a chocolate bar because, come on! Who wouldn’t?

I was about to walk upstairs to shower and change into something comfortable when the doorbell rang. I walked to the front door and looked through the peephole. I couldn’t stop the groan that escaped my throat. Great! What on earth did he want now?

I debated on whether I should just leave Tyler waiting outside or see what he wanted this time. But knowing him, he would just drive me crazy.

A defeated sigh escaped my lips as I opened the door. I crossed my arms and narrowed my eyes at him. He was swaying his hand side to side, holding the screwdriver I’d given him earlier. He gave me a cheeky grin and scratched the back of his neck as he looked at me with amusement.

“Can I borrow a hammer?”

CHAPTER 18

Have you ever waken up feeling so refreshed? I have. With no obstacles in my way, no problems, no stress, and no Tyler, I was feeling pretty good which was almost too good to even be real. I wanted to start the day off with my friends and I know that I wasn't going to let anything get to me so I shook the feeling off, rolled out of bed, before I accidentally fell to the floor with a thud.

I wanted to make the best of today before school starts and I begin my job of working three times a week for a couple of hours. I skipped into the bathroom, stripped out of my clothes and cringed when I saw the reflection of my hair. I stood still in front of the mirror for a while just checking out my butt. Hey, don't judge. I'm pretty sure every girl does this. After boosting my self-esteem, I got into the shower and turned on the water, but a yelp of surprise escaped my lips once I felt the cold water hit my skin.

"Cold! Cold! Cold!" I hissed as I backed away from the water for a bit. I waited in the shower butt naked until I felt the water become warm. A satisfied sigh escaped my lips as I got back into the water. I spent most of the time of my shower thinking than actually cleaning, like what would happen if everyone in the world jumped at the same time? Would the earth move or not?

Twenty minutes later, I walked into my closet and picked out a pair of shorts and a white blouse. It didn't take too long to get changed. Once I was done, I added a layer of mascara and smiled at myself in the mirror.

I walked downstairs to the kitchen. I wasn't going to eat anything because I wanted to save my stomach for later when Matt and the others

have breakfast together, but I couldn't wait that long because I get really hungry when I wake up so I grabbed a banana and ate it.

Five minutes later, I got a text from Matt saying that he was outside of my house. I grabbed my handbag from the counter and walked right out of the door. I spotted his car parked across the street with someone sitting next to him who I assumed was Troy, whom Matt picked up first. As I was about to cross the street, I stopped when I heard someone calling out my name. I turned around to see a middle-aged lady holding a garden hose while waving at me. She was standing right in front of Tyler's house watering the plants.

I didn't recognize her, but I assumed she was Tyler's mother with the resemblance of their eye color and hair. I smiled politely and walked over to her. Yes, I hated her son, but she never did anything to me so why should I have anything against her? As I got closer, I noticed the wrinkles on her face. She was probably in her mid-forties. I'm not sure why but she looked really happy to see me because the smile on her face only grew even more when I was only a couple of steps away from her. I felt her arms wrap around me embracing me in a hug. I awkwardly wrapped my arms around her and patted her back.

What else could I do? I barely knew this woman.

"Oh, honey!" she said. "You're so beautiful! I'm so glad you're back. Trust me, I've been planning to pay you a visit but I've been so busy with work. My, my! You have changed so much."

She patted my shoulder and I just smiled at her while putting a strand of my hair behind my ear.

"Oh-uh . . . thank you, Mrs. Grey," I said shifting my weight to my other foot.

"Nonsense, darling. You can call me Emma."

"So, how've you been?"

"I'm fine. How are you? I'm so sorry for your loss," she said bringing up the subject about my parents. I felt my smile drop within seconds at the thought of them.

"It's okay, Emma. Things have changed but I've been able to handle it."

She nodded her head. I looked behind me to see Matt still engaged in a conversation with Troy so I turned back to look at Emma, but before I could

part my lips to say anything else, she asked me a question I wasn't expecting.

"So, how's Tyler treating you?"

I stared at her for a moment. What was I supposed to tell her? That her son has been bullying me for years? Or that now he's just trying to bug me and drive me nuts? Or that he made me give him my whole tool box yesterday? Okay, fine. I only gave him a hammer and a screwdriver, but I felt like I should have so that I could get him off my back. I thought maybe I should just make a run for it and act like I never saw her, but I know I would look like a lunatic, so I just answered her questions. Not honestly, but the answer she would have wanted to hear.

"Tyler hasn't been a pain in the ass lately," I said but regretted it once I saw the look of confusion on her face. Okay bad idea.

"Uh—I mean, Tyler has been nothing but a sweetheart."

Emma lifted an eyebrow.

"Really?" she asked in amusement but I could tell she believed me. Well . . . I think.

"Yeah, he has always been helping me out for our school project and saying such kind words." I lied again.

That sounded like the opposite of him.

"Oh, well I'm very glad that's the case then. Wouldn't want him to get into trouble now, would we?" she asked.

"So, how's your sink?"

There was a moment of silence.

"My sink?" Emma repeated as she lifted an eyebrow.

"Yeah . . . your broken sink; the one Tyler was trying to fix yesterday," I said, but she shook her head.

"I think you must be talking about something else, my dear. There was no broken sink."

I was left dumbfounded at what she said. I stared at her for a moment not knowing what to say. So Tyler wasn't fixing anything from the very beginning? Why, that little rascal! He'd been playing me all along! Even when I think he's acting mature and all grown up he's still messing with me. Did he like to make me feel so stupid? Or did he just need the screwdriver so that someone could unscrew his head and place his brain back? Because, right now, I was starting to doubt that he even had one. I snapped out of my

thoughts when I heard Matt calling me from behind. I turned around and gave him a smile then signaled him to wait. I turned back around to face Emma.

“Oh, right! Sorry, I was talking about someone else,” I said, looking at the time on my phone.

“Well, it was nice seeing you Emma, but I really have to go.”

“I’m so happy I was able to talk to you. Have a nice day.”

I turned around and walked across the street to Matt’s car. I then got into the back seat and sighed once I felt the cold air of the air conditioner hit my skin. I greeted both guys then placed my bag next to me. One of the benefits of being in the back of the car alone is that I could relax and put all my things next to me since no one is using that spot. I was that one person who hated to be squeezed in a small spot with a bunch of sweating people. Maybe because I was an energetic person or Tyler once shoved me into the janitor’s closet in the fifth grade and I ended up being stuck in there for hours!

“So which diner are we headed to?” Troy asked Matt.

“*Denies*. Jasmine and the twins are already on their way,” Matt answered.

I laid my head on the window and saw the trees pass by as the car moved faster. My house became only speck on a drawing not too later as we drove farther and farther, but it didn’t go unnoticed when Tyler walked out of his house and hugged his mom. Yes, I saw it only a second before we disappeared, but the sight of that somehow made my heart clench reminding me of the mysterious night when I saw Tyler walking into the old abandoned building and helping someone in need. It felt weird to know that Tyler had a side like that, but how come I never saw it toward me? Why was he always teasing me, but was so serious when he’s around others?

I shook my head to get rid of the thoughts and leaned in towards Matt. The car was too quiet so I decided to turn on the radio. It took me a minute to find the right song which was ‘679’ by *Fetty Wap*, but my annoying little brain kept telling me to switch channels just in case there was something better but guess what? I listened to it. After a while of not finding something better, I went back to the channel ‘679’ that was playing, but a frustrated groan escaped my lips when I heard it finish.

“You know what! You find a song Troy because if I keep trying then I’m going to explode!”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! Not all over my new car,” Matt shouted playfully but I just punched his shoulder.

“Hey! Don’t hit the driver! Do you really want to die?” he asked.

“Do you really want to keep talking?” I asked as I crossed my arms under my chest. Matt playfully zipped his lips and pretended to put the key in his pocket. I rolled my eyes as I heard Troy chuckle. After a few channels, Troy settled on some rap I didn’t even know and I felt like my ears were going to bleed.

“You call this music?” I shouted because it was too loud. Troy nodded his head as he continued to look at his phone, probably texting Jasmine. I wanted to squeal in happiness and kiss the ground when we arrived to our destination.

Once the car was parked, I was the first one to get out . . . wait, let me rephrase that; to dash out as if the car was on fire. I then waited for Matt and Troy to jump out of the car. Once I was beside Troy, I glared at him as I shoved my finger at his chest.

“You, my friend, have no taste in music!” I said. “What was that? Satan’s lullaby?” I added sarcastically.

Troy rolled his eyes and was about to say something when Matt dropped his arm on my shoulders like always and pulled me away.

“Now, now kittens. I don’t want a cat fight in public.” Matt warned playfully causing Troy and I to narrow our eyes at him. Not a second later, we all broke into laughter. Troy called Jasmine to check on them but we were early so we got a table and sat down. As we waited for the rest, Matt was being himself, asking silly questions and bugging Troy. He’d get the crayons that were on the side of the table for children and start drawing as if he was a little kid. I tilted my head to see what he was drawing.

“Is that a pencil?” I asked.

“No, no. It’s a bed.” Troy said.

I shook my head.

“That’s supposed to be a banana, right?” I asked Matt.

“No, I think it’s a pair of scissors,” Troy said.

Matt raised his head to look at us and gave us an *are-you-crazy* look.

“Seriously, guys?! It’s a rocket ship,” Matt said.

Troy and I started to laugh hysterically.

“A rocket ship?” Troy asked between breaths.

“Yes, it is! Just look at it!” Matt defended himself as he turned the paper to Troy.

“See. That’s supposed to be the fire coming out of it and that’s supposed to be the rocket.”

I leaned against the table to look at the drawing but shook my head.

“Wow . . . I knew you were bad at drawing, but I didn’t know you were this bad,” I said.

Matt rolled his eyes but before he could say anything, Sydney, Jasmine and Eva arrived at our table. Troy got off his seat and gave Jasmine a kiss on the lips as the twins sat down beside me. I then looked at the menu and decided to get pancakes just like Sydney while Eva and Matt ordered waffles. Troy was the only one who wanted toast. As we waited for our meals, Jasmine was telling us the difference between Coke and Pepsi because, apparently, Matt didn’t know. Well, neither did I, but I didn’t point that out.

I took out my phone and showed Matt the first episode of the little series I found a couple of days ago called *‘Don’t Hug Me I’m Scared’*.

Matt’s reaction wasn’t what I was expecting when he said, “and I quote, ‘this is art’.” Not that I disagreed with him, it was just that I was expecting him to scream like a little girl and hide under the table. Okay fine. I never really asked for that, but I was anticipating a gag or cringe. Any reaction!

When our food was served, I couldn’t be happier because—come on! It was food! I wasted no time in gobbling up my breakfast. I was too distracted with eating and listening to Sydney and Troy bicker that I barely felt my phone vibrate in my pocket. I then put my fork down and wiped the syrup off my fingers because I was a pretty messy eater. I took my phone out of my pocket and saw a message from a strange number. I narrowed my eyes as I tried to remember if it looked familiar, but it’s the twenty first century, people. Who would memorize numbers? I then swiped my phone open and read the text.

‘Guess who?’ It read.

I lifted an eyebrow. What the hell? I really wanted to block the number because it could be a serial killer or a stalker, but the stubborn side of me wanted to play along.

“Patrick, is that you?”

“No. Guess harder.”

I stared at the screen of my phone. Who the hell could it be?

“Um... Who are you?”

“I told you to guess.”

I thought of any person I knew who liked to pull pranks or tricks on others, and the only person I thought of was Tyler, but the thing is that he doesn't have my number. I never gave it to him.

“Um . . . Dan?”

He was the only person I thought of, even though I didn't give him my number.

“Nope. Think again.”

I groaned as I ran my hands over my face.

“Is there something wrong?” Eva asked. I gave her an assuring smile and shook my head then looked back at my phone. I've had enough of guessing. This person better stop beating behind the bushes or else!

‘JUST TELL ME WHO YOU ARE BEFORE I TRACK DOWN YOUR PHONE AND KICK YOUR ASS!’ I wrote.

It didn't take long before the stranger answered.

‘Damn, gem! No need to PMS!’

I stared at the message in shock. What the hell? How on earth did Tyler get my number?

‘How did you get my number, you stalker?’

‘The day you came over, your phone was opened in front of me.’

I ran my hand through my hair.

‘That doesn't give you any right!’

‘If I tell you I'm outside your door, would you forgive me?’

I looked at the message as if it was a rat with the plague dying in a trash can.

‘No! That would make things worse.’

‘And I'm not home so . . . HA! The joke's on you’. I smirked.

‘Really? Where are you then?’

I lifted an eyebrow. This dude is really funny if he actually thinks I'm going to tell him.

‘That's none of your business.’

I then closed my phone, put it on the table and continued to eat. After a couple of bites, my phone vibrated again. I picked it up to see it was another message from Tyler.

‘Of course. I almost forgot.’

I rolled my eyes but decided not to reply back because I wanted this day to be Tyler-free. I turned off my phone to avoid him and continued to eat my breakfast as I listened to Troy talk about some girl who hit on him. Obviously, he was doing that on purpose to get Jasmine jealous. I don’t really blame him because she had done that a bunch of times to him with Tyler.

When our stomachs were filled, we got out of the diner and got into our cars sitting in the same seats. We went our separate ways and promised to meet in half an hour where the carnival was being held.

I decided to take out my headphones and listen to my own music because I really didn’t want Troy’s taste of music to make my ears bleed. I scrolled down the app I was using, *Spotify*, and picked a song called, “*Elastic Heart*” by *Sia*. I kept on listening to my own music as I blocked the sound of horror which sounded like people screaming. Who would listen to this? I snapped out of my thoughts when the car suddenly stopped. I took one ear bud out of my ear to hear Matt curse.

“Shit!” he said.

I then turned off the music and put my phone in my bag.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Shit, shit, shit!” he said under his breath.

“Bro! What’s wrong?” Troy asked.

“The tire’s flat,” Matt answered and got out of the car. Troy and I followed right behind him. We were standing on the side of the road with no other vehicles in sight. I then walked over to where Matt was and saw the flat tire. Great! Could our luck get any worse?

“Do you have an extra tire?” Troy asked.

“No,” Matt said as he shook his head.

I ran my hands through my hair in frustration.

“What now?” I asked.

“We find help,” Matt answered as he removed the flat tire.

“How? There is no car in sight and even if there was . . . it’s not like they’d actually stop for us.” Troy pointed out and I’m afraid he was right.

We were living in a world where everyone thought only of themselves, so I would find it hard to believe if someone would actually stop to help us. I wasn't saying everyone was this selfish. It was just that it would be hard to find the good samaritans in this world.

I was surprised when Matt looked at me with a smirk plastered on his face.

"What?" I asked suspiciously.

He then turned to look at Troy.

"We've got a hot sexy friend with us who can attract anyone she desires. Why not use that advantage?" Matt said causing Troy to chuckle.

"Really?!" I said as I placed my hand on my hip.

"Yup!"

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me," I said as I stepped away from them.

"But Crystal! You know that's the only way!" he whined as he got up.

"Ugh! You're really going to make me do this." I groaned.

"Please." He cooed as he gave me the usual puppy face of his as he put his hands on my shoulder. I couldn't help but glare at him.

"Don't give me that look," I said as I swatted his hands away.

"You know you're my best friend in the world, right?" he asked as he pinched my cheek.

"Yeah, yeah. I know I am," I said as I turned around and walked towards the road where a couple of cars were passing by. I took this opportunity to wave at the car for help. What else was I supposed to do? Get on my back and play dead? Or was I supposed to start flashing and hope that it wasn't an old creep driving by? But luckily, yes. For once, something good happened. A car stopped when I was seen. A smile of relief took over my face as the window started to roll down. I took in a deep breath and got ready for what's to come.

Just smile and ask for help!

Those words suddenly vanished from my mind when I saw who was in the car. I felt my throat clog up as my tongue felt tied. My mouth came crashing down to the ground as my mind started to spin . . . and not in a good way. I couldn't believe I thought my luck was good for once! I guess it kicked me in the ass when I at least expected it. I knew this would sound cliché, but wherever I went I always had to see him. It was like the universe

hated me as if it wanted to remind me that I couldn't go one day without having to remember him.

My legs moved on their own accord and turned around. Maybe he didn't see me. Maybe he thought I was someone else. Who am I kidding? We literally made eye contact and our faces were not too far away from each other. I kept walking towards the car hoping to disappear, but stopped in my tracks when I heard Tyler's voice call out for my name.

Just great. Now I truly believe the universe was against me.

CHAPTER 19

Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you wanted the ground to open up and swallow you like you've never existed before? Where you just wanted to disappear in thin air, hoping nobody saw you?

Tyler was walking right behind me and made me wish the flat tire never occurred. I debated with myself countless times on whether I should just walk away or face him. And, of course, me being the mature person I am, I turned around. As I faced him, I saw the look of shock and confusion written all over his face. Maybe it was because he found me stranded in the middle of the road.

"Gem, what are you doing here?" he asked.

I decided that it wasn't the right time to tell him for the millionth time to stop calling me *Gem*.

"The tire's flat," I muttered, pulling a strand of hair behind my ears as I pointed to the car that's not too far away. Matt noticed us and started to walk in our direction. I turned around and started to walk towards Matt with Tyler following right behind me. Tyler noticed Matt and Troy by the car, he turned to look at me with a hint of annoyance and I didn't know why though. I only shrugged my shoulders as I continued to walk.

"Do you have an extra tire?" Troy asked Tyler.

"Yeah, I do," Tyler said and walked over to his car. Not a minute later, he came back with a tire in his hands.

"You guys are lucky to run into me. I just came back from my job with this baby," he said patting the tire in his hands. Just then, I remembered the night I saw him talking with that guy named Paul saying something about getting a job where he fixes cars.

“Awesome,” Matt said then stood next to me as Tyler got to the ground. I watched as Tyler removed the flat tire using a tool he brought with his tool box. I felt myself smirk at the thought of him finally having his own tools, and at least he was not using them to drive me crazy.

“How come you keep bumping into him?” Matt whispered in my ear.

“The universe is surely against me,” I said while shrugging my shoulders. I then watched as Tyler attached the tire to the car professionally. His muscles flexing under his shirt. Wait . . . why am I paying attention to that? I mean, yes, Tyler was a very attractive guy. Okay, fine. He was damn sexy, but I hated his guts! If it wasn’t for all those years of bullying, then I might have been attracted to him. I mean, of course I was but not to a point where I “liked” him. He was a guy—a really hot one who every girl is bound to drool over.

He got off the ground as he wiped the sweat off his forehead. I tried to ignore his stares like always, but it felt like they were burning holes into my head. I turned to look at him and narrowed my eyes as he stuck his hands in his pockets.

“So . . .” he said. “Where are you heading?” he asked.

“To a carnival,” I answered and walked over to grab his tools and shoved it to his chest.

“Thanks for helping us. You can run along now,” I said as I took a step back. I was about to turn around when Matt spoke.

“Hey, why don’t you come with us?” Matt asked with a grin on his face. My eyes widened at what he said as I moved my legs quickly to walk over to him.

“What the heck are you doing? I thought you hated him,” I whispered in his ear. Matt shrugged his shoulder as he gave me an innocent smile.

“Yeah, that’s you, not me. Besides, he’s a pretty cool guy,” he whispered back.

“But, what about our bro code?” I asked. Well, more like whined.

“You’re not a guy,” he replied.

“That doesn’t matter,” I said and turned to look at Troy and Tyler throwing a piercing glare at Matt. What the hell was he trying to do? He knew I hated Tyler as much as I hated spiders! Okay, I’d prefer Tyler more than a spider. Matt and I had something you’d call the bro code, and he just broke it by inviting Tyler with us. I was pretty sure he did that on purpose

just to get on my nerves. It was enough I had Tyler following right behind me wherever I go. Now my best friend, or ex best friend, Matt was trying to make my life a living hell!

What did I ever do to him other than shave his hair off while he was asleep?

Add extreme hot sauce to his food and got rid of the milk and water in the house, and made him copy my homework with wrong answers on purpose for being too lazy.

Okay, fine. Lets face it, I might not be the best friend in the world, but I would never break our bro code.

“Uh . . . no, that’s not necessary, right Tyler? I’m pretty sure you’re busy,” I said quickly. But of course, why bother, for I knew things were going to go down hill when I saw his eyes glint in amusement along with that annoying smirk that I knew too well appear on his face. I got used to it but it still never failed to tick me off.

“Nah, I’m not busy. I could use a good time,” he said while looking at me. I crossed my arms under my chest as I narrowed my eyes. I groaned to myself but kept my mouth shut.

Today was supposed to be a happy day and I wasn’t going to let Tyler ruin it. That line had become a habit for me to say every now and then. I found myself worrying he would pull some prank on me and make me leave town. Not that I was going to let that happen.

The Crystal who would let Tyler walk all over her in the past was gone. A sudden burst of confidence went through me for some unknown reason. I didn’t want to walk back to the car and let Tyler smirk at me as if he won. No, I wanted it to drop and it was my turn to smirk.

I couldn’t control my own legs when they moved on their own accord. I found myself walking towards Tyler’s car with the others curiously staring.

“Uh . . . Crystal, where are you going?” Matt asked.

I turned around to face him.

“Where does it look like I’m going? Since Tyler’s here, I thought why not have a ride with him?” I said as a smirk took over my face when I saw his drop.

“Really?” Tyler asked in shock, but the look of confusion didn’t last long because he had his cool act covering it right away as he stuck one of

his hands in his pocket, walked over to me, and dropped his other arm on my shoulders.

“Awesome,” he said while looking down at me. I rolled my eyes and dropped his arm to the side then walked to the car door. I opened it as Troy and Matt got into the other car. As I sat in, I felt my heartbeat speed up.

Wait . . . why on earth did I decide to do this? I was for sure going nuts. Never in my life would I had ever thought I’d go in the same car with Tyler willingly. If I said that two weeks ago, I’d laugh and make sure I wasn’t going crazy. But if I said it an hour ago . . . well, I’d still do the same thing.

I must be going down with a fever!

I was going to sit in this car and act like he’s not bothering me and have the best time of my life. I laid my head on the rest seat as I crossed my legs once Tyler got in. He started the car and glanced at me curiously, but I stuck a piece of gum in my mouth and started to chew on it as if I didn’t have the care in the world. Then I saw him smiling.

When he started to drive, I didn’t want that awkward silence to take over the car, so I leaned in and turned on the radio. Immediately, I found the song ‘*One Dance*’, by *Drake* and smiled. I turned up the volume so loud I knew Tyler’s ears were going to break. I started to move in my seat as the music blasted throughout the car. I started to clap and closed my eyes so I would ignore the glare Tyler was sending me.

“Gem!” he shouted.

I sang loudly instead of answering him

“Gem!” he shouted again looking at the road.

“GRIPS ON YOUR WAIST, FRONT WAY—”

Tyler leaned in and turned it off. I left my mouth open as I stared at him.

“Hey! I was listening to that.”

“Yeah, well you were listening to it too loud.” he said as he rubbed his ears.

“So . . .” I leaned in and turned it back on.

I started to sing again but was interrupted for the second time when Tyler turned it off.

“Jesus, woman! It’s not the music that is bad! It’s your voice!” he shouted as he rubbed his ears playfully. I crossed my arms under my chest as I glared at him.

“My voice isn’t that bad!”

“Oh, it is Gem!”

“Stop calling me Gem! And no, it’s not!”

“Actually it is, and I can call you Gem if I want to so deal with it—Gem.”

“It’s not bad at all! All my friends say that.” I whined as I leaned in and turned on the music again.

“I need a one dance! Got a Hennessy in m—”

“Stop singing!” Tyler shouted playfully as he turned the music off for the third time.

“You must have really bad friends if they lie to you.”

I rolled my eyes but decided to ignore him. I was hoping he wouldn’t see my hand reaching out for the radio, but it was as if he had eyes on the side of his head because he swatted my hand away and sent me a short glare.

“No music. If you sing one more time I’m going to jump out of this car.”

“Really?”

“Don’t get your hopes up. You’re stuck with me.”

“The horror.”

“But can I still turn the music on?” I asked, sending him a puppy face.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s my car.”

“Please!” I begged as I folded my hands together and sent him a fake smile.

“No!”

“Oh, come on! Don’t be such a grandpa! I promise I won’t sing!”

There was a moment of silence in which Tyler looked like he was thinking.

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

“Fine,” he said under his breath.

I smiled in achievement and turned the music back on. I started to move in my seat as if I was dancing and started to mouth out the words quietly.

Yes, I would have sang if it meant he'd jump out of the car, but then it would leave me here all alone with no one to bug. I was starting to understand how Tyler felt like when he ticked me off and I have to admit it was fun.

I was trying to annoy Tyler throughout the entire ride. Maybe he'd know how it felt to be in my shoes and give up. I found out Tyler wasn't such a big fan of Taylor Swift so I'd put on her songs on purpose and even though I wouldn't be singing along, I could still see the look of torture written all over his face.

"Are you freakin kidding me?! I told you to take that U turn!" I said as I looked out the window for another way we could possibly go.

"No, you didn't! I barely heard you! I asked you where to go and you said keep going straight." he said which made me gasp.

"Are you calling me a liar?"

"No, but I ain't calling you a truther!" he said as he turned the car around to drive to where we were supposed to go.

I punched him on the shoulder.

"That's not even a word, stupid."

"Yes, it is."

"No, it's not."

"Yes, it—hey, is that it?" he asked as he pointed to a carnival not too far away from where we were. I observed it and checked the address Matt sent me just to make sure. Once confirmed it, Tyler started searching for a parking spot which was kind of difficult to do when it was almost full.

Finally, we got out of the car and I let a small smile take over my face when the warm air hit my skin. It was a sunny day and I was thankful I brought my sun glasses with me. I then called Matt and asked where to meet them. He told me that the girls were with him so all that was left to do was for us to meet with them instead. We decided to meet each other in front of the big ferris wheel. After paying, Tyler and I walked into the carnival and started to look around.

I was surprised with myself of how calm I was with Tyler. We were walking together and one of us would crack a joke or make fun of the other. All was well until we made it at a photo booth colored in red and pink and had balloon hearts on the side.

"Would you guys like to take a picture?" A girl asked.

I opened my mouth to say ‘no’ when Tyler spoke.

“Yeah, sure,” he said while looking at me with a teasing smile, making me glare at him.

“No way. I’m not going to take a picture with you.”

“Why not? Are you scared?” he said as he pinched my cheek playfully. I slapped his hand away and narrowed my eyes.

“Scared? Why would I be scared of you?” I asked making him shrug his shoulders.

“I don’t know. I was hoping you would tell me.”

“There is no way I’m going into a little space with you in it. Who knows what could happen?!”

“So, you are scared.”

“No, I’m not! I just don’t trust you that’s all.”

“You don’t?” he asked in a serious tone.

We were just teasing each but he suddenly became serious when I said that I didn’t trust him. I mean, if I didn’t trust him from the very beginning, then I would have never got in the same car with him or went to his house for a school project.

Ever since I came back here, he hadn’t tried to hurt me physically. I didn’t know if it was because he had matured or if he just changed. Maybe it was because he was a kid back then but that still didn’t give him the right to bully me, though it was all in the past. It was not the time to be looking over my shoulders.

What surprised me even more was when he held my hand. My eyes widened and looked down to see what he was doing but looked back up to face him when he spoke.

“Hey, you can trust me,” he said.

I was extremely surprised that I wasn’t able to speak. I was afraid if I did, then it would come out weaker than I expected so I just nodded my head and let him lead me to the booth. He pushed the curtains to the side and got in first with me behind him. Tyler then inserted a coin and sat down on the seat with our hands still holding for some reason. I wasn’t sure why I didn’t pull away, but it didn’t seem to bother me at all. I then sat next to him awkwardly and watched the screen as it counted down to one.

The first picture we took was just us smiling but, of course, the serious Tyler was gone, and he did the most immature thing I could ever think of.

He put two of his fingers behind my head and made them like bunny ears when I wasn't looking. The third picture took me punching Tyler on the shoulder as he laughed. The pictures were taking all our actions because the next one took a picture of Tyler pinching my cheek playfully as I glared at the camera. As the last picture was about to be taken, I told Tyler to get all serious because I wanted this to be a good one.

Tyler didn't listen because just as the picture was about to be taken, Tyler leaned in and kissed my cheek making my eyes widen in surprise. Then snap! The picture was taken.

I felt my cheeks heat up as he started to laugh at the look of my face. I got up, still feeling Tyler's kiss linger on my cheek for a while longer. I slapped his shoulder as I sent him a glare.

"Stop laughing. That's not even funny," I said as I leaned in to the machine to grab our pictures. I looked at them and felt my cheeks heat up even more at the last one.

"See! We didn't even get a decent picture except the first one," I said causing Tyler to stand up, look at my shoulder and mess up my hair playfully.

"Oh, come on Gem," he said near my ear as he leaned in to snatch the pictures from me.

"Not decent? Are you kidding me? They look amazing," he said between breaths. His eyes landed on the last and turned to look at me. A smirk grew on his face.

"Especially the last one. Just look at your face," he said sending me a wink. I rolled my eyes and snatched it away from him then looked at the picture again.

"My face doesn't look that bad. It's just I wasn't expecting you to do that." I defended myself.

"Yeah, yeah . . . whatever, but I'm keeping that," he said making me lift an eyebrow.

I was about to object but then realized that I didn't want that photo so I decided to just go along with it.

"You can keep it. I don't want it anyways," I said and got out of the booth.

Approaching the ferris wheel, I called Matt who said he was buying the group some drinks so we decided to wait on that spot for them. Tyler gave

me the pictures we took and asked if I could keep them in my bag until we go home. Seeing that my bag was full, I picked the wallet out from my bag, placed it inside the pocket of my dress and shoved the pictures in the bag so it wouldn't fly away.

I was about to ask Tyler to call Matt for taking so long but all of a sudden I was pulled away into the arms of an old lady. She was hugging me like crazy, her arms wrapped around my waist while she squealed in excitement. I was confused on what was happening while Tyler looked the same.

"Oh my gosh! Dear, I've missed you so much!" The woman squealed when she finally pulled away. She then placed her hand on my face and looked at me with wide eyes.

"Darling! You are even more beautiful than before!" she said before hugging me again.

"Oh, god! How've you been?! It's been ages," the woman continued as she pulled away.

"Uh—I think you g—"

"Have you gotten married yet?" she asked, ignoring Tyler who was right behind me.

"What?" I asked getting even more confused. This woman must have mistaken me for someone else.

"Ma'am, I think yo—"

"No? Why not! How's your fiancé?" she asked.

"Fiancé?" Tyler asked in disbelief and sent me a surprised look. My eyes widened and shook my head furiously. I then leaned over to whisper in his ear, but he spoke first.

"Since when do you have a fiancé?" he asked.

I sent him an *are-you-crazy* look.

"I don't have a fiancé!" I whispered back a bit too loud then looked at the woman in front of me.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but I think you have the wrong person," I said making her smile drop. She started to scratch her head and looked down in embarrassment. She then removed her glasses and rubbed them with the hem of her shirt and put them back on.

"I'm sorry, dear. This is so embarrassing. Please, forgive me," she said. "I mistook you for someone else."

I smiled at her and nodded my head.

"It's okay, ma'am. Mistakes happen all the time," I said as I patted her shoulder. She smiled at me then took a step back.

"Again, I'm so sorry," she said.

"It's okay," I replied and waved goodbye.

"Have a nice day," she said as she turned around.

"You, too," I said as I watched her walk away. When she was gone, I glanced at Tyler who was looking at me.

"Well, that was something, right?" I said as I chuckled to myself making him narrow his eyes.

"You sure you don't have a fiancé?" he asked.

I crossed my arms under my chest and punched his shoulder playfully as he started to laugh.

"Okay, okay geez. Don't be so violent," he said as he rubbed his shoulder.

Matt and the others were walking over to us with drinks in their hands. Matt gave me my drink while Troy gave Tyler his and walked away from the ferris wheel. We all agreed to return after lunch and just walk around and buy a couple of things from the sights.

The place looked beautiful. Kids were playing and running everywhere. Couples were walking as they held hands while some were making out. I smiled to myself. For once, I wasn't being bothered by Tyler's presence.

I suddenly felt thirsty but realized I had consumed my drink so I asked the rest to wait for me while I buy water. It was a really hot day, so I finished my drink in less than three minutes. As I walked over to a booth selling drinks and water, I noticed Tyler walking right behind me. I turned to look at him and lifted an eyebrow.

"What? I'm thirsty too," he said while giving me a cheeky smile. I rolled my eyes and turned around. I then asked the person behind the booth for two bottles of water. I noticed Tyler taking out two dollars and it made nudge him on the shoulder.

"Don't even think about it. I can pay for myself," I said.

He was about to insist but I gave him a smile then reached over to my pocket to take out my wallet. I felt my heart drop when I felt nothing in my pocket. I could feel my face go pale as I searched frantically for my wallet. I turned around to look at the ground cursing in my head.

My wallet was gone! I knew it didn't fall to the ground or else I would've felt it drop.

"Is there something wrong?"

"My wallet is gone."

"What?"

"I mean, I can't find it. It's not in my pocket where I left it earlier," I said as I felt my heartbeat quicken. I needed my wallet! It had all the money in it. Well, I didn't put everything in it because that would be a stupid move. But I still needed them and every dollar would count.

"Okay, relax. Maybe you dropped it. Just retrace your steps and maybe you'll find it."

"No, no. If it dropped, I would have known!" I said as I wiped the sweat off my forehead.

"Then, how else could it have disappeared?"

"I don't know, but it—It was stolen!"

I whispered to myself as I looked at the ground, just realizing what happened.

"What?" Tyler asked making me look up at him.

"It was stolen!"

"But how? And who? No one got near you to snatch it away—"

"Unless . . ."

"Unless it was stolen right between my hands."

"That lady who hugged you . . ."

"Stole it from me when I didn't even notice." I finished then ran my hand through my hair in frustration.

"That little thief!" I said under my breath.

CHAPTER 20

I stared at the cold moist wall as my butt felt numb from sitting down on the icy rock ground. I would get up countless times just to walk around the little space I've been given, and feel my butt again. I must have chosen the wrong day to wear a dress because it was freezing in here. I looked up at the ceiling and wondered why my life was so miserable. This day went completely downhill and I should have seen it coming, but this time it wasn't because of a certain bully who would make sure to make every single second of my life a living hell.

I picked up the chalk from the ground and marked another tally. What on earth did I ever do to get into jail? I'm only eighteen, for Pete's sake! What would my parents think if they were still alive? That their innocent little girl has been kicked into a small room with tally marks filling the place? I felt my stomach grumble as I made my sixtieth tally mark. Sixty days! That's how long I've been here and every single day I'd feel myself getting worse. I haven't eaten in ages and my friends didn't come to visit me after what happened.

"I miss my home."

I whined as I rested my head on the cold wall.

"Oh, relax! You've only been here for an hour," Matt said, rolling his eyes from across the bars.

Okay, I might have exaggerated just a little bit.

"That's sixty minutes! Every minute here feels like a whole darn day!" I said, as I put my hand on my stomach. "And I'm starving," I said, as I fell to the ground.

I got up to pace around the small space. How long was Tyler going to take? It felt like years in here, and I won't be able to take it any longer. I just wanted to go home. Who knew this would ever going to happen to me? If you would have told me a couple of days ago that I will end up in jail, I would have laughed right in your face.

"Crystal! You've just had a chocolate bar for breakfast," Matt said, as he crossed his arms under his chest.

"I know! I know! It's just that I'm so bored and scared! What if they don't let me go? What if I stay in jail for the rest of my life?" I asked dramatically.

"Why are you acting like you killed someone? It was just a little misunderstanding," he said.

"And you're not even in jail, you drama queen! You're stuck in the security office at the back of the carnival."

I ran my hand through my hair as a frustrated groan escaped my lips. I quickened my pace as I walked back and forth. I wanted to laugh at the situation but I realized this seemed like a great story to tell my kids in the future. Anyway, it seemed like this was the most exciting thing that has happened to me in my life.

"You're supposed to be helping me through this and make me feel better, Matt! But instead, you're acting like you were forced to babysit me," I said, as I sent him a glare and watched his teasing smirk grow on his face.

"Actually, I was," he said, while nodding his head.

"I could be hanging out with the hottest chicks right now, but you had to get your little ass into trouble and drag me into this," he said, as he threw his hands in the air and spun around in the office chair he was sitting on. I then walked right up to him and punched his shoulders through the bars making him roll backwards.

"If these bars weren't keeping me from tackling you to the ground, you'd be dead," I said.

"I love you too, babe," he said, as he got off the chair and pinched my cheek. I slapped it away and started to pace once again.

"Where are the others?" I asked.

"They're taking too long! How could they leave me all alone here with you?" I asked in disbelief, as I wiped away a fake tear.

"God, you're so dramatic!" I heard Matt mutter under his breath.

“And you know they went with Tyler to clear up the situation,” he said, as he sat back in the chair throwing a piece of gum in his mouth.

“Oh, right. I guess staying in the dark for days has given me amnesia,” I muttered to myself.

“You’ve only been here for exactly sixty two minutes!” Matt groaned.

“An extra two minutes have passed already?” I asked.

I grabbed the chalk from the ground and marked another two lines.

“Time is passing by too fast and soon I’ll be growing white hair,” I said.

“Oh gosh! What am I supposed to do with you?!” he said, as he ran his hands over his face.

I knew Matt was annoyed because our day hasn’t been going the way we’ve planned, but he couldn’t possibly blame me! It was that crazy old lady’s fault! I had no idea who I was dealing with! I swear! Who knew an old lady like her had something like that in the back of her sleeve. It was totally unexpected! She’s crazy I tell you! That woman needs to be sent into a mental hospital!

A couple of hours earlier

“Okay. Listen carefully, Crystal. We aren’t going to stoop to her level. All we’re going to do is walk up to her and ask for your wallet. If she denies it, then we’ll call the cops, okay?” Matt said.

He tried to calm me down but I wasn’t paying any of my attention to him. My mind was somewhere else. My eyes were following that old hag as she wandered off from booth to booth. I clenched my fist to my side as I tried to remind myself I was dealing with an elderly.

Well, a crazy one that’s for sure. Didn’t she have anything else better to do other than steal people’s money? I know there wasn’t that much proof she took it, but it was obvious. Who else got close to me, enough to actually take it from between my own hands? Looks might be deceiving, but I wasn’t going to stand aside and let that old thief walk away with my own stuff.

“Fine, fine. I’ll try not to tackle her to the floor just because I respect the elderly, but don’t blame me if I end up in jail,” I said.

If only I knew . . .

“Promise?” Matt asked.

"I promise." I huffed under my breath. Tyler then placed his hand gently on my back and started to lead me to where the old hag was standing. It didn't take us long before we found her and the relief that washed over me was overwhelming. Tyler and Matt didn't want me to go by myself and confront her. They said it would be better if they went alone so that maybe I wouldn't, and I quoted, 'blow up'. Rolling my eyes at them, it took a lot of convincing to drop the protective act and let me face the one person who had the nerves to steal my wallet. I quickened my pace once I noticed everyone walking right besides me.

"Thank goodness, the pictures were in the bag."

I heard Tyler muttered from behind me, and I turned around to glare at him.

"My wallet is gone, you idiot, and that's all you're worried about?" I asked.

He scratched the back of his head as he sent me a cheeky smile.

"What? I can't help it. They're pretty nice pictures."

I sent him a look causing him to let out a sigh.

"Okay, fine sorry," he muttered. Just when I was about to say something, I felt my heartbeat quicken when I noticed the old lady, not too far away, turn around and walk away quickly after she noticed us walking toward her. I started to speed walk as I left the others behind, struggling to catch up, but the lady started to run!

Oh, how dare she!

"Wait!" I yelled, as I ran through the crowd of people. I heard footsteps running from behind me, assuming they belonged to my friends and Tyler's.

"Stop!" I heard Tyler yell from behind me, but she glanced at us and ran faster. Damn! Who knew she could run like that? She's even faster than me! I was about to rip my hair out of my skull when I saw her disappear. I ran to the same place where I last saw her but couldn't find her anyone. I then felt someone take my hand and saw it was Tyler. He yanked me to his side and I gave him a questioning look. I got my answer when I spotted that sneaky fox run away but this time, she was wearing a hat and a jacket to hide from us.

God, the hatred I felt right now was unbelievable.

Tyler started to run toward the woman as he kept my hand in a firm grip. I looked behind me to see Matt and the others, not too far away. The

woman then slowed down her pace, probably thinking she lost us. It wasn't a moment later before she figured out she was wrong because her eyes widened, as her mouth fell open. It looked like she was about to make a run for it, but we were able to reach her before she could slip away.

"Stop, you dirty old hag!" I shouted, which earned me a glare from Matt and a couple of confused looks from the strangers around us. I shrugged my shoulder helplessly at Matt and walked up to the lady as I breathed my heart out. I rested my hands on my knees for a second then looked up at her.

"Give me my wallet," I said simply, as I reached my hand out to her.

"What?" she asked.

"You heard me loud and clear, woman! I want my wallet back," I said, while my friends surrounded her.

"Oh dear, I think you've mistaken me for someone else. I don't know what you're taking about," she lied.

"Cut the crap. We all know you stole it," Tyler said.

"Oh, but do you have proof?" she asked, as a smirk grew on her 'oh so wrinkly' face.

It's okay, Crystal! Just count one to ten and breathe slowly. Don't let people like her get to you.

I was trying so hard to give myself a little relaxing pep talk, but the way she was looking at me like she accomplished something big, made me want to slap her face.

"Can I check your bag?" I asked, as I crossed my arms under my chest.

"No," she said firmly, as she glared at each and everyone of us.

"Why not?" Troy asked.

"Yeah! If you don't have anything to hide then show us what's inside your bag," Eva said.

"I don't have to," she said, as she shrugged her shoulders. She was starting to hit my nerves so I took a step forward, ready to tackle her to the ground but Tyler wrapped his arms around my waist, and pulled me toward him with my back gently hitting his chest.

He then leaned over to whisper in my ear, told me to relax and I felt my body losing its strength under his touch. I awkwardly moved away from him and was about to say something when I saw security guards heading

our way. I smirked to myself and was about to call them but I was interrupted by a loud scream coming from the lady who stole my wallet.

What the hell?

Her scream caught the guards' attention and ran toward our direction. I turned around with wide eyes and saw the old lady touching her chest as she fall to the ground.

What on earth was she trying to do?

"Somebody, help me!" she yelled.

Oh, no! Please don't tell me she's doing what I think she is.

"What's going on here?" one of the guards asked.

"She attacked me!" the lady said, pointing at me pretending to cry. I felt my face heat up in anger as I clenched my hands into a fist. How dare she accuse me of something I didn't do?

"What?! No I didn't!" I shouted back.

"She's lying," Matt said, as he pointed at her while Tyler and the others agreed.

"Why would I lie about something like this? You kids are the ones lying. I was minding my own business when she ordered her friends to harass me!" she said, making our jaws dropped in shock.

"Why would you do that to an elderly?" the guard asked.

Oh, you've got to be kidding me

"That's a lie! She stole my wallet," I said.

"Why would I want to steal her wallet when I have my own?" she asked.

"Oh, I don't know. I was hoping to ask you that," I said.

"Then show us some proof," Sydney said, causing everyone to nod their heads

"Yeah, do you have any proof?" I asked, as I crossed my arms.

"Why, yes I do. See that bruise on my leg? It was caused by her," she said, as she pointed to her leg.

We all looked down to where she was pointing at and saw no bruise. There was no freakin bruise, but the guards both nodded their heads! What the heck! Are they that blind not to see that this old lady was fooling them just so she could get away with stealing?

"I just want to walk away like nothing happened, so please, just return the wallet you stole from me," I said, purposely saying the word 'stole' out

loud. This caused her to turn her head to look at the guards.

“You see what she’s doing officers?! She’s harassing and accusing me of stealing!” she said, as she wiped another fake tear she managed to make run down her cheek.

“Why, you! Let me talk to her,” I yelled, as I took a step forward but Tyler and Matt held me back.

The guards must have finally noticed the tension between us because they stood between us blocking my view of that dirty hag. I let myself curse in my head when I heard what the security guards said next.

“Take them both to the cell until we figure out who’s the one lying.”

And that pretty much sums up what happened. The lady thief and I were stuck in this cell until they figured out who was lying. I just hoped they would find my wallet. That would be enough proof because they were too stupid to realize that wrinkly monster was tricking them. She looked so innocent, but she knew how to get what she wanted. The only smart thing the security guards did was put us in separate rooms. I didn’t think I would be able to control myself around her any longer.

I’ve been waiting for Tyler and my other friends to get me out. I was thankful with Matt by my side but it did annoy me a bit. I mean, Matt was always trying to find the perfect moment to make fun of me and being behind bars was a perfect opportunity for him. He would act like he was annoyed at me but I knew he would never leave me alone in a time like this.

Well, except when he left me for half an hour so he could get himself a snack because . . . hey! The little boy was hungry, and I couldn’t get in the way of his stomach, could I? That would be just darn disrespectful. It was not like I needed him to distract me from the big spiderweb hanging in the corner of the room. No, I would never break our bro code.

Not like some people.

“Matt, listen. If I end up being taken to jail I want to tell you something really important. Something I should have told you a long time ago,” I said as I walked to the bars and held them in a tight grip. Matt then got off his seat and walked over to me as he bit his finger nail nervously.

“Is this the part where you confess your love for me?” he asked.

I stared at him for a minute without blinking but then listened to our laughter as it filled the small room. I then wiped the tear which was running

down my cheek and tried to compose myself.

“Do you remember the time you tried to show me you were a better twerker than me?” I asked nervously. His smile immediately dropped.

“That was like in the seventh grade.” He pointed out as he looked at me suspiciously.

I nodded my head.

“Yeah, well . . .”

He took a step forward as he crossed his arms under his chest.

“What did you do?” he asked as he narrowed his eyes at me.

I started to play with my fingers anxiously. I then took a step backwards away from the bars he couldn’t strangle me alive.

“I might have posted it on YouTube,” I said quickly.

“What?!” he asked in disbelief.

“I said, I might have p—”

“Oh, I heard what you said!”

“Crystal, how could you! Why would you do something like that to me?” he asked dramatically.

“And how come you never told me? Is that why everyone started to stare at my butt? And I thought it was because I was sexy!” he said the last part more to himself.

“I don’t know. It’s just I thought it was funny at the time,” I said.

“And it still is.” I pointed out which earned me a glare from Matt.

“Okay, okay. I’m sorry. I should have never done that,” I said as I rolled my eyes.

“And you decide to tell me now, why?”

I shrugged my shoulders.

“The guilt has been eating me up alive.”

“For five years?”

“No, for five minutes actually,” I said as I grinned to myself.

Matt opened his mouth to say something when the door suddenly opened. I felt myself become even more anxious. What if they never found my wallet? What if they charged me for murder? But wait, I didn’t even do that. But knowing that old hag could trick them into thinking that. That was it! I was done for it. I would rather live my whole life behind bars and never see my friends ever again. Even if I would get bailed out, I’d have to

change my name to Jessie, grow a beard, get bad ass tattoos and move to London!

My life was over.

I was pulled out of my little dream world, or should I say panic attack when I saw Tyler walk into the room with the two security guards right behind him. Was this goodbye? I knew I've always hated him but knowing that this would be the last time I could ever see him felt odd. I wasn't happy; not like how I thought I'd be. There was a little sadness in me.

Okay, something was definitely wrong with me.

I felt my mouth open when one of the guard took his keys out and opened the door. I stood glancing between Tyler and the guards. I then lifted my eyebrow at Tyler curiously, but him holding my wallet with a smirk plastered on his face gave me the answer I needed.

"They found the wallet in the woman's bag with your ID in it," he said as I walked out of the cell. I let a sigh of relief escape my lips as I took my wallet in my hand. I then opened it and looked through it to make sure I wasn't missing something. Once I made sure I had everything, I looked up at Tyler with a grateful smile. He better appreciate it because it was not like I'd let that happen everyday.

"Thank you so much," I said as I started to walk with him out of the door with Matt following right behind us.

"Hey, you aren't going to thank me too?" he asked as he dropped his arm on my shoulder.

I huffed. "Thank you, Matt for leaving me all alone with an abandoned spiderweb. You are an amazing friend," I said. Matt rolled his eyes but gave me a cheeky grin before ruffling my hair.

"I know, kiddo. I try my best," he said.

We walked out of the security office and into the warm outside air. Troy, Jasmine, and the twins were waiting outside with worried faces but showed relief when they saw me holding my wallet. They gave me a group hug and I was left there standing as I looked at them in awe.

Yes, I know this wasn't such a big deal as I made it sound to be but knowing they cared about me just got to me. I was even more surprised when they all let go, but Tyler still kept his arms around me, not knowing what to do. I didn't want to move away because, and I hate to admit it, it felt good.

“What are they going to do with the thief?” Matt asked Tyler.

“They’re going to charge her with stealing, other than that I don’t really know,” Tyler answered.

I was glad they didn’t let her go empty-handed. She deserved to be punished so she could finally learn from her mistakes.

“Listen guys. We’ve just had a crazy day. Let’s go get some pizza and continue the fun!” Sydney said.

I handed my wallet to Tyler so he could keep it in his pocket until we got home. I wasn’t planning on losing it for the second time today. If you told me a month ago I’d be able to trust my childhood bully to keep a hold of my wallet then I would have thought you were crazy and sent you to a mental hospital, but I guess now things have changed.

Well, maybe I was the one who changed.

CHAPTER 21

I hid behind a big oak tree planted right outside of the school and in front of the parking lot. My chest was moving up and down as I tried to regain my breath from running. It wasn't anything compared to when I actually went for a run, but it sure did make me feel like I was running from a serial killer.

I swung my backpack over my shoulders after grabbing the water bottle I took out from it and gulped it down my throat. I then wiped the remaining water away from my mouth. and glanced behind the tree to make sure I wasn't being followed by you know who.

You know since my luck really wasn't that great, I got stuck with Tyler for last period. Not that it bothered me a lot than it used to but it did get annoying at times. He hadn't been bothering me that much because one, he was sitting far away from me and two, I was pretty sure the forty-five minutes of misery in fourth period was enough. But today was a different story, you see our assigned seats were changed and although I might not sit next to him, we still were pretty closer than before.

Yay me!

Then Tyler came up with this great idea of us going home together and 'working on our school project.' I said it that way because we knew he just wanted to gain satisfaction of seeing me go red and crazy. I laughed at his face and said 'No'.

Okay fine, I didn't do that but I really wanted to but since Tyler was being nice, I decided to decline his offer kindly. It was Monday which means I had to work from five o'clock until nine thirty PM. Yes, I could have just finished the project with him in the couple of hours I have left

before work, but I needed them to rest because I woke up extremely early this morning to run.

I was hiding behind a tree because Tyler was being his normal persistent self. The only way I managed to get away from him was by saying I needed to use the washroom with him waiting outside and I would climb out the window. I knew I had to leave now because he probably noticed I was taking so long.

Yes, I know you would be thinking that running away from him was completely useless because he knew where I lived and you were right. I was hoping I'd be able to get home in time and lock all my doors and windows before he could break in as if he was a robber.

Once I made sure Tyler was nowhere to be seen, I walked right out of my hiding place and started to walk to my car. I took my backpack in my hands and opened it so that I could search for the keys. Once I finally had them in my hand, I placed my backpack on the ground and leaned over so I could open the door but someone's muscular arms wrapped themselves around my waist and pulled me to a hard chest.

I let a squeal of surprise slip between my lips as I figured out the situation I was in. Someone's mouth brushed against my ear, making shivers go down my spine.

"You really think you could get away from me baby?" Tyler whispered at my ear.

Despite the blush creeping down my cheeks, I rolled my eyes.

"A girl could dream," I said as I escaped from his grip and turned around to look at him.

"I know girls dream about getting some of this," he said as he pointed to his body with a smirk growing on his lips, making me narrow my eyes. "But no girl I met ever wanted to get away from this." He added in a fake offended tone.

I bent down to the ground and picked up my backpack then put my hand on my hip.

"Well let me be the very first," I said as I gave him a fake obvious smile then opened my car door and got in. Tyler leaned over and knocked on the window as he looked at me as if he was expecting something.

I rolled it down and lifted an eyebrow.

"What?"

“What?” He repeated my words.

“We agreed we’d finish the project today,” he said.

“Actually you decided that on your own. I have to get home, finish my homework, get some sleep and head to my first day of work.”

“You got a job?”

I nodded.

“Yea, it’s not the best but it’ll help me earn some money,” I said as I ran my hand through my hair.

“Okay, then how about after you’re done with your shift?”

I leaned closer to the window as I stared at him suspiciously.

“Why are you so persistent to get the project finished today?” I asked making him lean away as he scratched the back of his head nervously and shrugged his shoulders.

“I just want to. Is there a problem?” he asked as he crossed his arms under his chest.

“No, not at all,” I answered as I put my hands up in surrender dramatically.

“But I leave my shift at nine thirty and I don’t think I’ll have time to finish it with you today so let’s make it tomorrow okay?”

“Wait, you leave your job that late?”

I shrugged.

“It’s not that late.”

“Oh yes it is.”

“Why do you care?”

“You know what? Let’s make it tomorrow then!”

“Get home safe,” he said with a grin and walked away.

I just stared at the distance as I tried to figure him out. Oh well, I guess that was one of the mysteries in life. I started my car and placed my bag in the seat next to be as I drove home. It took no longer than a minute and once I got out of the car, Tyler’s car was parked in the drive-through.

I walked toward my front door as I tried to ignore the stares he was burning in the back of my head and opened the door. I then got into my empty house and placed my shoes on the side as I locked the door. I was about to walk over to the kitchen when I heard the doorbell rang. Curiously, I looked through the peephole and saw none other than Tyler.

Great.

I opened the door to see him standing with his hands in his pockets.

“What do you want?”

“Where do you work at?” he asked as if he was talking about the weather.

“Why do you want to know?”

“So that I could pick you up and take you home.”

I leaned over to pinch his cheeks playfully.

“Aw, does that mean you care about me?” I cooed.

He swatted my hand away and straightened his back.

“No. It’s just I don’t want to lose my project partner when you get kidnapped because I don’t like working alone.”

“You don’t have to worry about me getting kidnapped. I can defend myself but thanks for asking,” I said before closing the door in his face.

It seemed like Tyler gave up because I heard his footsteps disappear without a trace. I looked through the peephole to make sure he wasn’t going to barge in and break the door down but thankfully I saw nothing.

I walked over to the kitchen and placed a slice of leftover pizza into the microwave. I ate my heart out and enjoyed every bite. After filling my stomach, I walked into my room and looked at the time. It was almost three thirty so I decided to get an hour of sleep so that I’d wake up at four thirty and head out.

I placed my phone on the counter next to my bed and got under the covers. I closed my heavy eyelids as I tried to get rid of the random thoughts which always appeared when I wanted to sleep. It was like a circus was in my brain the very moment I laid my head into my pillow. I felt my nerves act up once I remembered that tomorrow was going to be the first day of my training for next month’s competition. You see, I got called into the principal’s office today and was informed that I was one of the three people who entered within the first couple of hours which means they’d have to test who was the best to compete in this competition. I was going to meet my trainer tomorrow. I just hope I would make it through this round because if the school found someone better than me, then I wouldn’t qualify.

I shook off the thoughts and let the darkness take over. My body became heavy as my brain began to shut down.

I woke up to the sound of my phone vibrating next to me. A groan escaped my lips as I opened one eye and grabbed it and realized that the sound was coming from my alarm. I then remembered I had to get ready for work so I forced my eyes opened and shut the alarm off. I wish I could have stayed asleep but I knew that I had to be early for my first day. Not only that, if I slept longer then I wouldn't be able to get some sleep tonight. I removed the cover wrapped around me like a cocoon and got up as I rubbed my eyes and yawned. I walked into the bathroom and cringed to myself when I saw my hair formed like a bird's nest.

I took the shower after stripping and enjoyed the warm water hit my bare skin. Twenty minutes later, I was all dressed up and ready to go. I couldn't actually enjoy a long shower because I didn't want to be late so I did it really quick. I was dressed into skinny jeans and a blouse with my hair tied up into a messy bun. I wore my converse shoes and walked out of my house after locking it. I placed my house keys in my handbag and took out my car keys.

I decided I was going to drive to work because firstly, I had only five minutes left before it turned five. Secondly, if I was leaving late, there was no way I was going to walk home.

I let a smile of relief take over my face once the small supermarket appeared in front of me. I thanked the lords when I found an empty parking space and hopped out of my car. I opened the door, letting the sound of bells jingle above me. I looked around the place as I remembered where the manager's office was. I walked up to the door and knocked. I then opened it once I heard someone shout, "Come in!".

After greeting the manager, she gave me instructions which were pretty simple: Stand behind the counter with a smile on my face and remember that the '*customer is always right*'.

I walked behind the counter and sat on the chair as I looked around the place. It wasn't too long before I started to get a lot of customers. I was surprised to see the place full. I wouldn't have expected it because the market wasn't that big but it looked like it does quite well.

The first hour went by in a breeze. I'd receive the money of a few costumers and sat down a bit but once the sun started to set, the number of people increased. I even recognized a few people from school but

thankfully they didn't say anything. It wasn't like I was embarrassed of my job, I didn't need anyone distracting me from working.

I looked up from the counter when I saw a little girl in baggy torn clothes walk into the place. I watched her closely as she nervously walked in as if she wasn't supposed to be here. A lot of questions were running in my head. Why was she here all alone? Where are her parents? Her anxiousness made me curious. I then saw her walked behind an aisle and disappeared.

I tapped my fingers on the counter as I waited for her to show up. Not a minute later she walked up to me with a chocolate bar in her hand as she looked at the ground. I made sure to give her an assuring smile.

"Well, hello there."

She gave me a small smile but it went away quickly.

"How can I help you?"

There was a moment of silence as she slide the chocolate bar to the counter.

"Uh . . ."

"I-I'm hungry a-and . . ." She took out fifty cents from her pocket.

"How much is this?" she whispered.

I felt pity for her she mentioned she was hungry. Didn't she have parents to feed her? I then took the chocolate bar and scanned it. It turned out to be a dollar. I glanced at the child and gave it.

"Where are your parents, little one?"

"Home."

"Did you have anything to eat today?"

She nodded.

"Yea, but I've never tasted chocolate before," she said as she looked at the bar in awe.

My eyes widened and I felt bad for her. Chocolate was one of the best things a child could ever taste and her not having one just got to me. A life without chocolate was like earth without oxygen.

Yes, it mattered to me this much. It reminded me of a certain *SpongeBob* scene. You know that one episode when Patrick and SpongeBob were selling chocolate and there was this one crazy fish screaming out chocolate?

Yea . . . that would be me.

“Really?”

“Why not?” I asked making her shrug.

“My parents can’t usually afford a lot of stuff,” she muttered.

I nodded then walked around the counter and took her hand as I led her to the chocolate area. I then took a big box of chocolate which had different flavors in it and walked back to the counter with the little girl following right behind me.

“What are you doing?”

“What’s your name?” I asked dodging her question.

“Ally.”

“I’ll tell you what, Ally. Take this chocolate bar,” I said as I gave her the chocolate bar she chose earlier. “and take this home with you as a gift from me.” I finished as I scanned the box and handed it over to her. She looked at me in shock.

“B-but I can’t afford it.”

I smiled at her as I took my wallet out of my back pocket.

“It’s okay. I’ll pay.”

“What! No really you don’t have to,” she said but I shook my head.

“It’s okay dear. I’d be happy to help,” I said as I placed five dollars into the cashier.

She gave me a smile and took the box into her hands and said goodbye before heading out of the store. I then sat in my seat as I looked at the time. It was almost eight, which means I had an hour and a half left before I could go home.

Seeing that no one in at this moment, I picked up my bag and took out a couple of homework I was assigned from school. I decided to finish some while I waited. I stopped a couple times so I could take money from a couple of customers and help them around. Seventy minutes later, I placed the papers in my bag and took out some gum, popping them into my mouth.

I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket, letting me know that I received a message from someone. I opened it to see it was from Matt.

‘Have I ever told you that I loved you?’ It said.

I lifted an eyebrow as I stared at it. What was he supposed to mean?

‘What did you do?’ I asked.

It took him no time to answer.

‘Nothing’

‘Speak!’

It took Matt a whole five minutes to answer. Probably because he was either thinking of some lie or hoping I’d get fed up and not text him back but after spamming his phone, he finally answered.

‘Just promise you won’t get mad’ It read.

‘You’re starting to freak me out! Just tell me!’ I wrote quickly.

‘Just promise me!’

A groan left my lips as I ran my hand over my face. What did he do this time? I swear it’s like he was a magnet that attracted all the problems in the world but gave all the weight to me.

‘Fine, fine! I promise. There, now tell me.’

‘Well...’

‘Go on!’

‘I might have told a certain person where you work.’ He wrote.

I stared at my phone as I heard the door open. I glanced up then cursed in my head as I replied to Matt’s message which said, ‘I hate you’ then closed my phone and put it away. I let a sigh of annoyance escape my lips as I crossed my arms under my chest and glared at Tyler who was walking over to me with a confident smile on his face.

“How did you get him to speak?” I asked.

“It was simple. I bribed him.”

“With money?”

“Nope.”

“With food.”

Ugh, I should have known!

“Okay, now tell me what you’ve gained from this?”

“The satisfaction.”

“Of what?” I asked as I crossed my arms under my chest and stared at him, trying to figure out this confusing puzzle. Yes, Tyler Grey was like a puzzle and so many of the pieces were missing.

“Of knowing you’re safe.”

I couldn’t believe his words. I wasn’t expecting him to say that at all. If we were in some other universe, then yea, but not at all in this moment. Tyler was always a let loose guy, but he’d been serious around me. He hadn’t been bothering or harassing me like the old days which did surprise me.

Why would he act like he cared about me? I badly wanted to ask that question but decided not to. Instead I narrowed my eyes at him.

“You’re acting like I’m going to confront the mafia,” I said but couldn’t fight the smile that took over.

He gave me a grin and shrugged his shoulders.

“What can I say? The mafia could turn up any minute now,” Tyler said making me roll my eyes.

“As I said before, I can defend myself thank you.”

“Oh I’m not afraid for you. I’m afraid of that one person who will cross paths with you,” he said wiping a fake tear from his cheek.

“Are you done?”

“Yup.”

“Are you done?”

“Done with what?”

“Done with working.”

I took my phone out of my pocket and looked at the time. I had ten minutes left before I finished my shift which surprised me. Time flew by faster than I thought. When I imagined myself standing behind a counter, taking money from people. It sounded pretty boring and would take forever. But I guess time flies by the quickest when you least expect it.

“I have ten minutes left,” I told Tyler but as soon as I said that, the door to the manager’s office opened. Katherine, the manager, walked over to us with a smile on her face.

“Crystal, thank you for your hard work. I’m closing this place early so you can leave now,” she said.

I didn’t ask any questions. I just nodded my head then picked up my bag. Tyler and I walked out from the store while Katherine headed to her office to grab something. I looked up at Tyler to see him already looking at me.

“You aren’t going to leave, are you?”

“You’re a very smart girl,” he said as he patted my shoulder. I rolled my eyes then started to walk to the exit with him not surprisingly walking behind me.

“You do know I brought my car, right?” I asked as the cold night air hit my skin.

“And you do know I walked here, right?”

I shook my head slightly. What was I supposed to do with him?

"I'm starting to think the only reason you came to me was to get a ride home," I said playfully as I took my keys out.

"Walking all the way from my house to here and get a ride back home from you doesn't make any sense, Gem."

"That's kind of true," I admitted as I got into the driver's seat. Tyler then opened his door and sat in the seat next to mine.

"How was your first day of work?" he asked as I started my car and drove home.

"It was okay."

He nodded then leaned in to turn on the radio.

"You know that's unnecessary because this drive won't take no longer than a minute," I said as I looked out the road.

"Yea, I know. Just trying to get rid of the awkward tension," he said playfully.

"That awkward tension wouldn't be there in the first place if you weren't here." I pointed out.

"If you think that's going to make me leave you alone then you're wrong Gem," he said as he sent me a teasing grin.

"You're stuck with me for the rest of your life. You can thank me later," he said as he patted my shoulder. I glanced at him as I let him see the look of horror written all over my face.

"You say it like its a good thing."

CHAPTER 22

I've done so many things in my life which I've regretted. Things that made karma slap me in the face with a brick. Like the time when I 'accidentally' set the science lab on fire because I just didn't want to take Physics. Or when I told Matt in the third grade that he got some dangerous disease which was going to kill him in twenty-four hours when he actually got the chickenpox. All those attempts backfired on me because I got a payment ten times worse.

One, I failed the Physics final exam.

Two, I got chickenpox at the age of ten.

Yes, they would not be that much big of a deal but they did teach me a valuable lesson. Life has some unexpected turns or shall I say—Karma's a b*tch.

I knew I deserved all those punishments but I had no idea what I did to deserve this! I mean what did I ever do to the universe because they sure as hell seemed like they were against me. Did I make some kind of mistake without noticing? Or was it that I wasn't supposed to be born in the first place but a miracle happened and boom! There I was. Maybe that was why I'd always have such bad luck. I wasn't not supposed to be alive and since I was, the universe was getting back on me!

Okay, that would not be the case because hello! I'm awesome and who wouldn't want me alive? I was about to answer myself because no one else would. I was talking to myself when I was brought back to reality—school.

And you don't have to guess who was walking next to me in the crowded hall.

Yup, Tyler.

You can already see the look of annoyance on my face as Tyler walked with his group of friends while I'm glued next to him. You might be asking why I was walking with him to my fourth period class when I could be well away from him enjoying the last minute of freedom I have left.

Well the answer was simple.

Tyler was just too damn stubborn I tell you!

When I came out of my third period class, I was about to spend the five minutes I have left for the fourth class by hanging out with Matt at his locker but, no! Tyler wouldn't allow that! He just had to introduce me to his friends which I could tell were all good looking but that wasn't not the point! The point was everyone or should I say every girl in the hall were sending me death glares because I was walking with one of the hottest guys in school.

Hey! And it wasn't not like I wanted to be here! Tyler's arm was wrapped around my waist for some unknown reason making me feel weird, and when I did ask him about it, he would send me a teasing smirk saying he didn't want me to run away. You see, people? This could most likely be a kidnap because I clearly didn't want to be here.

I was brought out of my thoughts when a cute looking guy with curly hair spoke which sounded like Ryder. Well, that was what Tyler said when he introduced me to him, but I wasn't really not good with names so . . .

"Hey Gem, I was thinking maybe w—OUCH!" Ryder shouted dramatically as he held his shoulder. Let me make it clearer, his shoulder was going to make a bruise. Oh, and let's not forget the icy cold glare Tyler was sending to Ryder.

"Why the hell did you punch me dude?" he asked as he rubbed his shoulder.

"Why the hell did you call her Gem?"

"I don't know, it's just you call her that all the time so—OUCH! Stop punching me!" Ryder said making some of Tyler's friends around us chuckle and cough a few words like 'pussy' to Ryder.

"I'm the only one to call her with that name, understand?" Tyler said as if I wasn't here.

I would have pointed that out but I noticed his arm wasn't wrapped around me so I took that as an advantage to slip away but Tyler glanced at me and brought me to his chest! Like why! It's not like we were dating for

him to be this protective over me! It wasn't that I hated it, it was just so darn confusing and the glares of jealous girls were making me extremely uncomfortable.

"Jeez, relax dude. I won't call your girlfriend that sweet adorable nickname anymore. Fine. Happy?"

"I'm not his girlfriend."

I pointed out as I tried to move myself away from Tyler's chest but it only worked for a couple of seconds before I was brought back to it again. His friends glanced between us and smirks appeared on their faces but I had no idea.

"Well, that doesn't look like it," A guy with ginger hair said.

I then glanced up at Tyler, hoping that he'd say something to prove to his friends that there was no way in hell we'd be in a relationship. But instead, he scooted me to the side so I wouldn't be bumping into students hurrying to their classes.

"Me and my buddies are going to have a little talk. Why don't you go to class first?" Tyler suggested making me roll my eyes. He didn't need to ask because I'd be delighted to walk away, even though I was interested to know what they were going to talk about.

As I walked down the hall ignoring the curious stares, I took out my phone and looked at the time, I had two minutes left to get to class before I was considered late. Just as I was about to make a turn to where the class was held, I remembered that my textbook was left in my locker. I then cursed in my head and decided to make a run for it, hoping I would make it within two minutes.

I ran to my locker within seconds, opened it and grabbed my textbook. I then run to the same direction I left Tyler because it was the quickest way but I stopped running when I noticed that Tyler and his friends were not going to the class yet and were still talking.

"Okay, okay, we get it dude. No flirting with her! Fine!" Ryder said as he threw his hands in the air dramatically while Tyler stuck his hands in his pockets.

"Understood?" he said as he glanced at every one of his friends.

"Dude we get it! Why don't you just tell—" the guy with ginger hair stopped talking when he noticed me approaching. Everyone's attention turned to me, making Tyler turn around. The annoyed look on his face

immediately went away when he noticed it was me. I noticed his face brighten just for a little bit before the look of confusion took over.

"I thought I told you to wait for me in class?" Tyler said as he walked toward me. I was breathing heavily as I brought the textbook up and showed it to him.

"I forgot this in my locker."

Tyler turned to look at his friends.

"Okay, I'll see you guys later."

By now the halls were almost empty so Tyler and I decided to run hoping we'd make it in time because I really didn't want to get stuck in another detention with him. I may have not heard most of the conversation with Tyler and his friends but I could tell they were talking about someone. I wasn't that stupid and naive not to know they were talking about me, I was just confused. And what the hell did his friends mean when he said he had to tell me something?

Why did Tyler warn them not to flirt with me? I mean, yes, I know we didn't start off so great but now that we are close enough to call each other friends, that reason wasn't good enough for him to be so protective. Maybe it was just something personal.

I didn't let my thoughts wonder off too far when I walked into class with Tyler behind me. I let a sigh of relief escape my lips as I heard the late bell ring when I sat on my seat. Tyler then sat next to me as he breathed heavily then muttered something under his breath which I didn't quite hear. It came out as a blur but I did get something that sounded like 'all those years of training came to use'. I didn't know what that meant but maybe he was talking about working out and its benefits.

"So where do you want to meet up today?" Tyler asked.

"Huh?" I asked.

"You know, so we could finish the project already."

"Oh yea that, um how about my place at five."

"Fine by me."

Mr. Jones began the class without forgetting to warn us about our project's deadline. The first couple of minutes went by with me and Tyler sending notes to each other and I'm pretty sure if someone caught us, they wouldn't send us to the principal's office. No, they'd send us to the hospital for crazy people.

'So, do you think we can do it?' Tyler wrote.

'Are you crazy? Why would you want to kidnap the president's daughter?' I wrote back as I tried to keep in my laughter.

'I heard she's really pretty,' he wrote then glanced at me as if he was waiting for a reaction.

I lifted an eyebrow then glared at him as I became really annoyed. Why? I don't know, maybe it was just my hormones because my period was getting near.

'You'd be willing to put your life in danger for a girl?'

Our little moment was interrupted when the door opened and walked in a guy wearing an orange jacket, indicating that he just came from the main office. He then walked over to Mr. Jones and gave him a little slip and walked right out the door. Mr. Jones read the slip then looked at my direction and began walking towards me. Once he was standing right in front of me, he gave me the slip and spoke.

"They want you in the office for some training."

I read the slip then nodded my head and got up. I glanced at Tyler and gave him a small reassuring smile because he was looking at me in confusion then walked right out the door. I took my time walking down the hall as the sound of my shoes hitting the floor echoed throughout the empty hall. Well, that's what I thought until I found Dan smoking in an opened boys' bathroom. I walked pass it but backed up a bit and tilted my head to the side as I lifted an eyebrow.

"I caught you red-handed," I said as a smirk grew on my lips, catching his attention. He took the cigarette away from his lips and turned to look at me.

"Ah my soul mate! How are you?" he said as he walked over to me and dropped his arm on my shoulders.

"Are you trying to distract me from the fact I caught you smoking in school?" I asked.

"Yup but it's a good thing you won't tell anyone because we're really close friends," he said as he nudge his elbow on my shoulder.

"Actually we're really not that close."

"But you're still not going to tell anyone right?" he asked, as he sent me an innocent look as if he was a baby about to tear up. This made me huff.

"No . . ." I said, not really knowing what to say next.

“Great!” he said as he ruffled my hair.

What’s with everyone messing my hair? I mean I put so much effort in the morning to make it look perfect but now everyone just had to ruin it. I sounded like Matt but what could I do. He was my best friend for a reason.

“So tell me why are you skipping class?” Dan asked.

“Uh, I’m not. I was just heading to the main office when I saw you here,” I answered as I took his arm from my shoulders and dropped it to his side.

“Really, why? Are you in trouble again?” he asked as if he was a mother ready to scold her child.

“No, actually I have some training to do and you say it like I get into trouble all the time.” I pointed out.

“Because you do.”

“Well I’m not the one smoking in school.” I shot back then crossed my arms under my chest. Dan then put his hands over his heart and closed his eyes as he pretended to be in pain then fell onto his knees.

“Oh, the burn is real,” he whispered more to himself.

I chuckled to myself then took a step forward and patted his shoulder.

“I’ll just leave you here to think about what you just did, young man, while I leave.” I tried to make my voice sound like a mad mother but totally failed. He then nodded his head as he wiped an invisible tear.

“Okay, I’ll try to pay for my sins,” he said. I then turned around and started walking away but then turned around to say something, because I just had to have the last word.

“I’m keeping my eyes on yo—HEY!” I gasped once I saw Dan bring the cigarette back to his lips, making me put my hand on my hip.

“What?” he asked. “I paid for this! I can’t let it go to waste. Just one last time, I swear,” he explained as he threw his hands up in surrender.

I rolled my eyes.

“Whatever,” I said then turned around again and started to walk towards the office. Once I was there, I gave the slip to the lady behind the counter and waited until she was done doing whatever she was doing. She then got up and lead to the gym. It didn’t take long before I found myself standing in front of the big doors which lead to the gym.

After the lady left me alone, I opened the door and walked into the almost empty place. I said almost because it seems as if no one was taking a

class, only a couple of students that were standing to the side as I saw a woman's back facing me.

I started walking towards their direction, attracting everyone's attention. I noticed that there were four students in total inside the gym. One girl, other than me and two boys. I guess they were the ones who entered this competition. This made me nervous since only one of us could win and represent this school. I just hoped I'd be the one to make it to the finals.

I felt my mouth open by surprise when I saw the lady who was standing in front of the students turn to look at me. All the anxious feelings I had suddenly went away when I saw who she was. It was a face I knew all too well.

Tyler's mother.

Is she going to be the one to train me?

"Crystal dear! You're finally here. Why don't you stand over there so I can say a couple things," she said making me nod as I sent her a smile then walked over to stand next to a really tall guy.

Since when did Tyler's mom work here?

"Okay, so you all know why you're here and only one person will make it to the finals to represent our school." She began.

We all nodded.

"Now I don't want to take up much of your time because you all have classes but I just wanted to bring you all here so that I could tell you that I would like each and every one of you to come here every day after school starting today so we can begin your training," she explained. "Is that clear?"

Everyone nodded.

"Great, now since that's out of the way, I also want you guys to be dressed in your PE clothes or just any sport clothes you brought from home. It really doesn't matter as long as you have something comfortable to run in." Emma said before dismissing us.

I was about to walk out of the gym but stopped when Emma called my name. I turned around to see her walking toward me with a smile on her face, I of course returned it.

"Hi! Emma. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't surprised to see you," I said.

"It's okay darling, I never actually told you what my job was anyway."

"So how long have you been training students?"

“Quite a while now. I’ve trained all kinds of people and don’t tell this to anyone but I sure do hope you win.”

“I hope so too.”

“Don’t worry dear. I’m sure you will especially with me helping. I’ve trained my own son to win the same competition two years ago—oh and speaking of Tyler, he’s told me so much about how fast of a runner you are.”

I really didn’t pay attention to what she said next because I tuned her out when I heard Tyler entered a competition like this two years ago and won. How come he never told me that? Yes it was obvious he works out but I never expected him to actually enter something like this. Well now that I think about it, it kinda does make sense since his mother is the trainer after all.

“Tyler won a competition before?”

“Yes he has and trust me, it wasn’t easy but it happened in the end and I sure do hope you’ll make it too—no! I just know it,” she said as she patted my back. I gave her a big smile then said my goodbye and walked away.

Halfway through my walk, I decided to turn around and walk to the cafeteria when I heard the bell rang, indicating that fourth period was over. I was one of the first people in line to get my lunch which was really rare since Mr. Jones’ class was far away from the cafeteria. I then sat on the table I usually sat in and waited for Tyler—I mean Matt and my friends to arrive,

Tyler? Why on earth would I be waiting for Tyler? There’s something definitely wrong with me.

I was about to throw french fries into my mouth when I saw someone sat next to me. I turned my head and smiled when I saw it was Matt.

“Why are you so early?” he asked.

“I think I’m sick!” I said dodging his question and letting my brain space out.

“Huh?”

“I said I think I’m sick,” I said dramatically as I grabbed his hand and placed it on my forehead.

“Do I have a fever?” I asked.

“No . . .”

“Then what’s wrong with me?” I asked more to myself as I banged my head on the table.

“Crystal what’s wro—”

Matt was interrupted when someone called out my name. Wait let me correct that. My ‘nickname’, “Gem.” Tyler’s voiced echoed next to me. I then lifted my head and looked up at him.

“Why were you called into the office?” he asked.

And that’s how I spent my lunch. Sitting between Matt and Tyler, squished like a sandwich as I actually tried to eat mine in peace but I couldn’t because my mind was driving me nuts. I felt weird. Something I really couldn’t describe. I didn’t know what it was, but I do know it had to do with Tyler.

“I’ll see you at five,” I said to Tyler as I grabbed my bag and walked out of my last period class.

“You have training to do?” he asked.

I nodded. “Yea I do. It’ll only take an hour—oh and speaking of training, how come you never told me you run?” I asked making Tyler shrug in response.

“I don’t. It’s just I ran a competition to help my mom succeed in her new job she got a couple years back,” he explained.

Oh. That makes sense.

“That’s nice to know you have a sweet spot for your mama.” I teased as I pinched his cheek. He rolled his eyes then grabbed my hand and pulled it down but what really got to me was when he didn’t pull away.

“I have to admit I was a mama’s boy,” he said as he sent me a charming grin.

“Was? Don’t you mean ‘is’?”

“Don’t you have training to get to?” he asked changing the subject.

I let him get away with it.

“Yea you’re right I do. But don’t worry, I’ll tell your mama you said hi,” I said as a smirk grew on my face.

Okay maybe I didn’t.

I then walked to the girls’ locker room and changed into my running clothes. It was almost empty since everyone was leaving except the people who had practice after school.

Once I was done, I walked into the gym and found everyone ready to start their training. The training would last for a couple of weeks before the competition. Once Emma gets to know us and our abilities, she would choose the best person to represent our school. After that, she would train the chosen one who made it to the finals personally to get them ready for next month.

We started our training by stretching for five minutes. After that, we began jogging around the gym for twenty minutes. Emma began testing our speed individually. Each and every one of us would have to run three laps around the gym as she recorded our time. This went on for about thirty minutes until we were all sweating so much, the sweat would fill up buckets.

Emma then decided to let us go home five minutes earlier since it was our first day. I then walked into the girls' locker room, washed my face and arms then put deodorant because there was no way in hell I'd take a shower here. I just never liked to, instead I'd wait till I made it back home. I got dressed into my regular clothes then walked out of the locker room and stopped in my tracks when I saw someone standing outside waiting for me.

It was Tyler.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"What does it look like? I'm waiting for you. Come on let's go!" Tyler answered then grabbed my hand and started to drag me into the parking lot.

"Huh? Wait, why were you waiting for me?" I asked as I tried to keep up with his fast feet.

"Why else would I be waiting for you? So that I can take you home of course," he answered as we walked closer to his car. I decided not to argue with him since I really didn't want to be walking home with the sun shining or should I say burning me when I was already sweaty and smelly. That reminded me, I really needed to take a shower.

"Okay fine by me," I said as I got into his car.

Tyler then started his car and drove to the direction where we lived. It only took us a minute to get there. He then parked his car in his drive-through and got out with me following right behind him.

"Why'd you bring me here?" I asked as I walked to his front door right behind him. "I thought you were taking me home?"

“Relax, I’m not going to kidnap you. You live right next door. I just want to give you something really important.”

I lifted an eyebrow. What did he want to give me? And why is it so important?

“Um okay. What is it?”

He opened the front door and let me in then sent me a grin.

“You’ll see.”

CHAPTER 23

I paced around the given space I had. It wasn't much but I needed to let my legs work out the nervousness in me so I wouldn't faint in this very spot. The small bathroom made me wish I was upstairs in Tyler's room because the bathroom there was much bigger.

Every now and then I'd sit down on the toilet and just listen to the barking dogs outside the bathroom door. It had been over two minutes but it felt like hours. Where the hell was Tyler when I needed him the most? I pinched myself to make sure I wasn't in some kind of nightmare. This was the last thing I expected when I got here.

Of all the things that could have happened to me, why did I have to be stuck in Tyler's guests' bathroom?!

I clearly had enough of waiting so I grabbed my phone from the back pocket of my jeans and dialed Tyler's number. Yes, I had him in my contacts which I didn't really like in the beginning but it became useful at times like these. I then placed my phone at my ear and listened to it ring. Tyler answered after the second ring.

"Where the hell are you?" I asked as I tried to ignore the commotion going on outside.

"Uh, in the garage?" he stated it like it was a question.

"Why?" I asked.

"I told you I was going to grab something for you," he answered but I could hear the confusion in his voice.

"Yea, well can you come back now because I think your dog is trying to eat me," I told him. Now don't get me wrong. I love dogs, in fact I believe they are the most wonderful creatures on earth but when you're standing in a house with your childhood bully, nearly anyone would be terrified to see a

huge brown dog running your way. Especially with its tongue dangling out from its mouth when he barked, revealing sharp canines for everyone to see. The sight just scared the living daylights out of me so I ran to the nearest bathroom and locked it.

What else could I do? I didn't know the dog. He could probably be untrained and vicious. Consider he's Tyler's, I'm pretty sure he would have trained him to hunt down his enemies and rip them to shreds.

I was just hoping I wasn't in his bad list.

"Did you just say my dog?"

"Yea! Why is that so hard to believe?"

"Maybe because I don't have one in the first place."

My mouth fell open just a little bit.

"What do you mean you don't have one? Then can you explain the big scary yet fluffy adorable animal trying to barge into your bathroom?"

"Huh?"

"Oh look at that scratch on your door. I think he's about to break it down. Well it was nice knowing you Tyler."

I never thought I'd hear myself say that.

"Okay, okay, I got what I was looking for. Just wait, I'm coming."

"Listen Tyler. If you don't make it on time, then I want you to pay and organize my funeral ok?"

I could already see him rolling his eyes.

"You're such a drama queen you know that, right?"

"Yes, I do. But let's not forget about the fact that there's an unknown dog in your house."

"Okay, I'll be there in a second," he said before hanging up. I then turned off my phone and sat on the toilet as I waited for something to happen. The dog was still barking like crazy and I was afraid it would actually break in.

Oh please, oh please, be a cute fluffy dog who just wanted to play! I'd never have thought it would end up like this! I promise to the lords I'd never once thought anything bad about any animal! I swear! Just spare me the days so that I can see Matt finally running with me in the mornings.

I was brought out of my thoughts when I heard the door opening. I immediately got up and grabbed the roll of tissues which were sitting right next to me. What? I had to defend myself if I was going to get eaten up

alive and this was the only thing I could use. Other than the toilet plunger but I wasn't going to use that of course. I put the toilet roll back down as a sigh of relief escaped my lips when I saw Tyler standing in front of me with his arms crossed under his chest.

Okay this situation might seem confusing and will make you think that there was more to this story and I wish I could say the same thing, but there wasn't. I mean, did you know how embarrassing it was to get chased by a dog you didn't even know and then lock yourself in your friend's bathroom?

Wait, did I just call Tyler my friend?

Yes I did.

Wow, am I changing?

"You can come out now. The vicious animal who wanted to eat you is gone," Tyler said sarcastically.

"Hey don't put it that way. My instincts kicked in when I saw him running towards me." I defended myself.

"You know you're not supposed to run when a dog is chasing you right?"

I stood there in silence for a moment, thinking over what would be the best comeback.

"Oh shut up!"

Yup. Best comeback in the world!

Tyler rolled his eyes then opened the door even wider. I let a huff escape my lips as I walked out of the small space. Finally!

"So where is he now?" I asked as I looked around the empty room.

"I put him in the backyard. Come on," he said as he placed his hand on my back and led me to a glass door with curtains hanging from it. Tyler then moved the curtains to the side and revealed a big fluffy dog chasing his tail. Once he stopped, he turned to look at us with his tongue hanging out of his mouth. He then started to bark as he walked towards the glass door. After that he sat down just looking at us as if he was admiring the stars.

Was this the same dog earlier?

"He doesn't see a lot of people so when he does he gets a little bit too excited."

This did explain why he was running towards me like a fan girl running after her celebrity crush, but this just brought the most obvious question to

my mind.

I thought Tyler didn't own a dog? Well that's at least what he told me.

"Wait, you told me you don't have a dog."

"Because I don't."

I then narrowed my eyes and pointed at the brown dog in front of me. Now that he was sitting still and close enough, I could really see the cute collar around his neck. It was colored a light shade of blue with a dog chain tangling from it. On that chain, it had the name 'Sky' written on it.

"Oh, he's my stupid cousin's dog. He usually isn't responsible enough to walk him which is why he gets so excited when he sees new people so his parents sometimes brought him over so I could do it for him. My mom probably forgot to tell me he was over."

I nodded at what he said. What got me pissed was when he mentioned his stupid cousin not being responsible to walk his own dog! I mean if you're going to keep him away from that, you should at least give him to someone else because that's just torture!

"Your cousin sounds like a douchebag."

"Because he truly is."

"Why doesn't he give Sky away? Wouldn't that be for the best?"

"Trust me, he tried but my aunt won't let him. She thinks maybe he might start trying."

All this talking about Sky almost made me forget about the number first reason why I was here. I then whipped my head towards Tyler and tried to grab my attention away from the cute dog staring right at me in amazement.

Oh, his eyes. Focus, Crystal! Focus! I had to know why Tyler brought me here so that I could finally go home and take a cold shower because I definitely smelled. Still not sure why Tyler didn't say anything because knowing him, he'd want to point out my weaknesses to piss me off but so far none of that was happening. And after my cold shower I needed some time to myself before Tyler came over to finish the project with me.

"What is it that you want to give me?" I asked. Tyler then seemed to remember because he started to reach his hand over to his pocket. That's when I noticed his pocket seemed full. It was shaped into a cube as if a little box was in there.

And I was right because he pulled out a small wooden box which seemed pretty old because it was filled with scratches and dust. Tyler then

opened it to reveal a mesmerizing chain which blew my breath away. It was a golden bracelet that had a golden little horse shoe dangling on the center.

“What’s that?” I asked.

Tyler then took it out of the box and held it to his face.

“It was my grandmother’s. She used to call it her good luck bracelet and passed it down to me two years ago when I won the competition before she died.”

“But why do you want to give it to me?” Tyler stood there in silence as he scratched his head as if he was trying to find a suitable answer.

“Because I don’t really use it and I think it would be better on you.”

“So you want me to take that bracelet so that I can win the race?” I asked as I took it in my hand and examined it.

“Not really. I know you will win without it. I just want you to have it.”

“Why?” I asked as I handed over the bracelet.

Tyler let out a frustrated groan as he ran his hand over his face and through his hair.

“Just take the damn bracelet, woman!”

I threw my hands up in the air dramatically and took it back again in my hand.

“Okay fine,” I said as I wrapped it around my right wrist.

I grabbed my phone and checked the time then placed it back in my pocket. I turned around to look at Sky and smiled at him after giving him a little wave. I wondered if he understood what that means? And if he did, would he wave back if he had suitable hands? No that’s just plain stupid. Dogs could wave back using their paws. I also wonder why they—okay I was out of topic again!

“I had to get home. I’ll see you at five,” I said.

He nodded and walked me out the door. Once I got into my house and locked the door behind me, I placed all my things on the counter next to me and dashed upstairs to my room. I then took off my clothes as if they were on fire and started my cold shower. Like really cold. I’m pretty sure if I had the water running for a long time, my bathroom would start to snow and the next thing you know, I’ll be living with polar bears.

After getting in, I closed the curtain because even though I lived alone, I always feared someone would barge in and witness me butt naked. I’m pretty sure that wouldn’t be nice.

Once I got used to the cold water hitting my skin, I just stayed there staring at the wet tiles in front of me. I just spaced out for a while until I remembered I didn't even add shampoo to my hair. Thankfully this time, I didn't get any in my eyes. What a miracle! Once I was done, I added conditioner and started to scrub the dirt and sweat out of my body. I thought I might have over done it a bit because my skin started to turn pink. So I took that as a sign to finish up. After washing out everything from my hair, I stepped out of the shower, dried my body, and then got dressed into a pair of shorts and another shirt I stole from Matt.

I then crawled into bed as if I haven't been here in years and wanted to treasure the moment. I pulled the covers over my head after grabbing my phone and scrolled through *Instagram*. Five minutes later, my phone started to ring so I had to put a hold onto stalking hot guys. Don't blame me! That's probably one of the best things I was good at. I then looked at the screen to see it was Jasmine calling so I answered her call and placed my phone at my ear.

"Hey," I said.

"Hey Crystal how are you?"

"I'm fine, and you?"

"I'm awesome. Anyway, I don't want to take up much of your time. I'm just calling to ask if you're free this Friday."

"Yea, I am, why?"

"The girls and I are planning to have a day to ourselves so I was wondering if you'd like to come to the mall with us."

"Just us girls?"

"Yup," she said as she popped the p.

"Sure, I'd love to. As long as Matt isn't there to embarrass us, it's fine by me."

To be honest, Matt was really fun to hang out with and could certainly give you a good time, But sometimes, he would get pretty annoying and start acting like a spoiled child whining about when we are going to leave. There was once before I moved away, I went to a mall with Matt and lost him. I then found him in the candy section which wasn't the least bit surprising.

"Awesome!"

After that I turned off my phone and closed my eyes as I tried to get some sleep. Not much though, just a little so that I could wake up a bit. Half an hour would be good. Yea well all those thoughts went flying out the window when the doorbell rang but I just decided to ignore it. Maybe the person outside my door would finally give up if I wouldn't answer it. I guess I was right because it went off once, then twice and five minutes later the person finally gave up. I then let myself get sunk into the comfortable mattress as the silence of my own home surrounded me.

I guess I spoke too soon because I heard footsteps running up the stairs and to my room door. In a much normal time, I would have freaked out and yelled '*murderer*' but I was just too tired right and thought my mind was playing tricks on me. The door went flying and I felt a strong arm grip me and gave me a big shake. I was about to shriek when the covers were pulled away from my body and I faced the most person I hated at this very moment for disturbing my sleep.

Matt.

"Crystal, get up! I need your help!"

"How the hell did you get into my house you psychopath!"

"You gave me an extra key remember!"

"And why the hell did I do that?"

"I don't know? Why don't you ask yourself!"

"Why are we yelling?"

"I don't know!"

I then jumped out of my bed and was about to say something when Matt interrupted me.

"Hey that's my shirt!" he said as he pointed at his shirt I was wearing.

"Yea, I know that," I said as I walked to the bathroom to wash my face. Once I was done, I came out and into my room to see Matt looking through my closet as he held another two shirts of his in his hands. He then turned to look at me and gave me an expression which yelled 'what the hell'.

"So that's where they went!"

I shrugged my shoulders helplessly and dragged Matt out of my closet then sat on my bed.

"Can you give me one good explanation to why you're here disturbing my sleep?"

Matt then scratched the back of his head as he grabbed the backpack I just noticed which was lying on the ground.

"I need your help."

"Yea you said that but what's so important you had to keep me from sleeping?" I asked as I crossed my arms and narrowed my eyes at him.

"Tomorrow's test."

My eyes widened as I stared at him in shock.

"Test? What test? Nobody told me there will be a test tomorrow!"

"Relax, it's my math class you're not in."

"Ew, math."

Okay that just slipped out of my mouth. I couldn't help it! It's a reflex.

"Listen, there are some stuff I just don't get and I'm falling behind. And you know I can't fail math this year." he said as he ran his hand through his hair.

"The same way you failed last year?"

"I didn't fail! I got a C minus."

"Okay, fine, you didn't fail but why do you think I can help you? I hate math."

"Yea, well at least you're good in it," he said then took out his notebook and textbook.

"Fine. I'll help you but don't take too long with your questions. I'm busy later."

Matt nodded and took out a couple of worksheets to show me the problems he didn't get. He opened his notebook and showed me his notes and compared it to the textbook. And trust me when I say this, it wasn't easy teaching Matt. I mean I feel so sorry for the teachers who had to teach him because he didn't get anything. Nothing I tell you! His skull was as thick as a brick! But no worries people. They don't call me a skull crusher for nothing!

Except, they didn't call me that.

An hour later, we were done with everything. Thank god! Now I could finally get some rest!

Yea, I should have held that thought because just as we walked out of my room, the doorbell rang. Did you know how I feel when I was finally able to shove Matt out of my room after spending twenty minutes fighting

over who would keep his shirts I stole? I did steal them for a reason and Matt suddenly wanted them back.

Why did everyone decide to pay me a visit at this hour?

I then walked towards my front door while Matt followed behind me and opened it. There standing was none other than Tyler holding his backpack. Oh shit! I totally forgot about our project we had to finish! I cursed with colorful words when Matt appeared from behind me, catching Tyler's attention. He narrowed his eyes but said nothing. I didn't fail to notice his eyes rake over my body from head to toe. I then looked down at myself and remember I was only wearing shorts and Matt's shirt.

Well, this was awkward.

"Uh Tyler . . ."

"Am I interrupting something?" he asked in annoyance as he crossed his arms over his chest.

"No," I said then turned to look at Matt.

He then gave me a sideways hug and ruffled my already messed up hair then said goodbye before walking right out the door. I scratched my arm awkwardly as I opened the door wider, welcoming Tyler in. He then walked in as if he owned the place, making me roll my eyes.

Why did I want to punch him so bad? No, let me rephrase that, I wasn't surprised because I felt like punching him. I'm actually surprised why I didn't feel that more often with him because he did bully me many years ago.

Was it because he stopped ticking me off or because he had been treating me right?

I didn't know! The world would never know. This could as well be life's greatest mystery.

"Are you ready?" he asked as he placed his bag on the counter.

I played with the bracelet Tyler gave me which was on my wrist.

"Yea, let me just get changed into something else."

Tyler nodded then sat on the couch. I then rushed upstairs, cursing the whole time. This project was supposed to be the last in my list since the race was in a couple of weeks. But I knew I had to get it done to get a good grade so I better just suck it up and finish it when I had the chance.

CHAPTER 24

I have never been so thankful for being this athletic in my life. I've never regretted waking up early in the morning to go out for a run. Everything came with a cost, and for me to get my lazy ass out of bed and go for a run certainly didn't come empty-handed. No, it came with effort and time. Along with constant pants and a lot of sweat but you know what, I was thankful for the person I have become. People said that exercising lead to a better and healthy life and they were right. It was the only therapy I took in my dark days. A way for me to actually escape reality without feeling any guilt or remorse.

I stepped out of the girls' locker room, tired and sweaty. I knew whatever happened, whether I won or not, my hard work wouldn't go to waste. This was what I was hoping for when I stayed after school with the other students who were also working their butts off to show who was worthy enough.

I dabbed the wet towel I took out from my bag and wiped the sweat running down my forehead and neck. Anyone else in my shoes would have thought the hour of training after school was torture but to me, it was a blessing. All those years of working out weren't for getting in shape and impressing others. They were for my own satisfaction. It helped me feel much better and stronger and the hour training with Tyler's mother was a piece of cake.

Speaking of cake, I was pretty hungry. I wondered if Matt would agree to accompany me to get something to eat. As if on cue, my stomach grumbled in hunger.

I then waved goodbye to the students who were still in school, who were either waiting for someone or just had after school clubs. As I walked

down the hall, I grabbed my phone and looked at the time. Since it was Thursday, I made sure to remind myself I had work at five. It was almost three-thirty so I had an hour and a half of spare time. I walked out of the school gates as I pressed Matt's number. Today was one of those days where I didn't drive to school which was probably a bad idea because I was already worn out from training but it still didn't seem to bother me. I then waited for Matt to answer the call.

"Hey Clare!"

It's been a while since Matt used my last name instead of Crystal. He only seemed to use it when he was extra happy.

"What's gotten you all jumpy all of a sudden?" I asked with a chuckle.

"Oh, nothing really. It's just I got my results for Tuesday's exam!" he said and I could already see the charming smile he would have been giving me.

"Let me guess, you scored a hundred percent, thanks to me," I said as I flipped a strand of hair over my shoulders.

"No. I scored seventy percent but thanks anyways."

"Well, Congratulations, pal. Since you've done good how about you meet me at the coffee shop we usually go to, to celebrate in half an hour?" I suggested as I walked down the street to where my house was.

I was so caught up in my conversations with Matt, I didn't even notice the almost empty street I was walking next to. I say almost empty because there was only one vehicle moving awfully slowly. I lifted an eyebrow but decided to ignore it as I made a turn and crossed the road. Coincidentally, the vehicle also made the turn I made. As it got closer, I noticed it was an old rusty truck which looked like it was about to break down. Maybe that was why it was moving so slow. I then shrugged my shoulders and watch it pass by me and moved down the road.

"Yea sure, that would be great." Matt's voice brought me back to reality. I nodded but then remembered Matt couldn't see me so I spoke.

"Okay, let me just get refreshed and I'll meet you there," I said as I walked closer to my house when it came into view.

"Okay bye," he said.

"Bye," I said before ending the call. I then stuck my phone in my pocket and took out the house keys as I walked to the front door. I walked into the quiet place I call home and placed my bag on the couch. I found myself

running up the stairs and to my room but before opening the door, I turned around and stared at the wooden door I rarely opened across the hall.

My parents' room.

I've only been there a couple few times to clean and brush off the dust but I couldn't stand staying there for more than twenty minutes. It was as if their scent still lingered in the air, bringing the sad yet meaningful memories back to life. I would be lying if I said I didn't cry the times I've stepped in there but what else could I say? It was the softest spot in the house as if it was the heart to a body.

I then turned around and opened my room door as I promised myself up. They may not have been here anymore but their belongings are. I didn't even move anything except for dad's old tools which are now in the closet down stairs. Everything else was in its place they left it many years ago.

Once I was in my room, I walked to the closet and took out a simple dress because it was hot outside. I didn't want to overdo it because after meeting up with Matt, I'd probably need to go to work immediately. I then walked into my bathroom, stripped out of my clothes and hopped into the shower. It took no longer than ten minutes which was a world record. After drying my hair, I got dressed and fishtail braided my hair. I didn't even bother putting makeup on so I skipped down stairs and wore my sandals. I grabbed a white handbag and the house keys.

Once I was outside as the warm air hit my skin, I locked the door and walked over to my car. I didn't want to be late to work so I decided to drive there just in case. Hopping on, I drove to where I agreed to meet Matt which was a small cafe that wasn't too far away. It only took a couple of minutes by car. Turning on the radio, I found a channel playing '*Work From Home*' by *Fifth Harmony*, so I increased the volume so the music was blasting in my car. I started to sing the lyrics not caring who saw me and thought I was crazy. That thought went away when I stopped because of a traffic light. I lowered the volume just a little bit so that the cars beside me wouldn't be bothered. Or should I say, rusty old truck.

Wait, what?

I whipped my head to my right and saw the familiar truck I noticed earlier before. I wonder why I—

I shook the thoughts out of my head as the traffic light turned green. My car began to move, the same goes for all the cars beside me and behind me.

I was too busy singing out loud to actually notice I lost sight of the same truck I bumped into twice today. It wasn't too long before I was parked outside of the homie cafe. I made sure to lock my car before going inside.

As I opened the door, the bell on top of me rang and echoed through the cafe. I looked around the place which wasn't that full since they usually got costumers early in the morning. I decided I was going to order my slice of cake while waiting for Matt to arrive so I ordered a chocolate cake and sat down in a chair with an empty seat in front of me. I took out my phone and messaged Matt.

'Where are you?'

It didn't take long for him to answer.

'Just got out and ready to drive there.'

I then turned off my phone and placed it in my bag, not bothering to text him back since he was about to drive. I got bored of just sitting there so I decided to take my phone out again and look through Instagram.

This was a usual thing for me. One minute, I would close my phone and put it away, and the next, I'd take it out again because I changed my mind. This time I was scrolling down my newsfeed when I saw from the corner of my eye a muscular body walking over to me and taking the seat in front of me. I looked up expecting it to be Matt but when was I ever right?

"That seat is taken." I pointed out as I crossed my arms under my chest and glared at the person in front of me.

"Yea, I know. Why else would I be sitting here?" Tyler asked.

"Why are you here?" I asked, as I watched Tyler flip the keys in his hands around his fingers.

"I was dropping by to get something for my mom to ease her cravings when I coincidentally saw you here! What are the odds?" he said as he threw his hands up in the air. I let a sigh of defeat escape my lips as I ran my hands over my face.

"Sometimes I think you're stalking me," I muttered under my breath.

"Maybe, because I do."

"What?" I asked as I lifted my head to look at him, causing him to chuckle.

"Nothing."

"By any chance, do you own a rusty old truck?" I asked as I gave him a suspicious look making him lift an eyebrow.

“A rusty old truck?”

“Nope. Why?”

“Shouldn’t you be getting something for your mama?” I teased as I turned the conversation around. He glared at me and was about to say something when the waiter walked over to me and handed over my plate. I thanked him and took a bite out of it as I moaned silently in pleasure.

I looked up at Tyler and saw him giving me an amused look as he pointed to the corner of his mouth. I brought my finger to the same place he pointed but to mine and wiped off some remaining chocolate off my face before licking it.

“You know what else you could be licking?” Tyler flirted with me as he leaned towards me and gave me a wink, making me roll my eyes.

“Your blood off my fingers when I hand you over to Satan?” I shot back with a confident smile as I saw the look of horror on his face.

“Yikes!”

“Remind me never to flirt with you again,” he said. I was about to say another lame comeback when I saw Tyler’s eyes flicker to my wrist.

“You’re not wearing it,” he said.

“Wearing what?”

“The bracelet. I’m pretty sure I saw you wear it in school today though.”

I took another bite of my cake.

“I took it off when I took a shower earlier. Just forgot to put it back on.”

Matt walked through the door and toward our spot.

“What’s he doing here?”

“Oh he was just leaving,” I said as I gave Tyler a knowing look. “See you later, Gem,” he said as he backed away and turned around to the counter.

“It’s Crystal,” I muttered to myself.

Why did I even bother?

Matt sat on the seat in front of me as Tyler took his order then walked out of the cafe before winking goodbye. Rolling my eyes, I watched through the window as he walked out of the door and to his car. I snapped out of my daze when Matt spoke.

“Ready to order?” he asked.

I pointed to the cake I still didn't finish. He got up and walked to the cashier alone. After a moment Matt came back and sat down in front of me as he waited for his desert while I ate mine slowly.

"What did you get?"

"Cheesecake!"

"Of course! Why'd I even ask in the first place?" I chuckled and swatted his hand away as he tried to get some chocolate on his finger for him to lick.

"So . . ." I looked at Matt nervously.

"Spill it."

"Spill what?"

"Oh don't try to deny! You have something you want to say to me so just say it."

He knew me so well . . .

"Okay fine," I muttered as I ran my hand through my hair.

"I was thinking of going for a run once I'm done with work and—"

"Nope."

"What! But you don't even know what I was going to tell you!" I whined.

"Really? So you weren't going to ask me to run with you?"

I stared at him as I scratched the back of my neck nervously, not saying anything for a moment.

"Okay, maybe I was . . ."

"The answer is still no."

"Why?"

"Because you know I don't like to run and get all sweaty!"

"But you work out!"

"Well that's different."

"Enlighten me then!" I said as I rested my head on my hand.

A waiter came over with his slice of cake.

"Oooh, cake!" Matt cheered as he rubbed his hands together and licked his lips. I rolled my eyes not because of his childish behavior but because I knew he was doing it to change the subject. I decided to drop it for now but I was going to make him run with me whether it was the last thing I do! It might not be tonight but some day.

“So how was training?” Matt asked before he took a bite. I swallowed the slice in my mouth before I answered.

“It was good.”

“Do you think you’ll make it to the finals?” he asked.

“I sure hope so.”

Once we were done eating our deserts, we stayed for a while chatting about random things which wasn’t surprising. I listened to Matt explain what the difference was between *emo* and *goth*—don’t ask how we got to this subject.

As I was saying, I listened to him as I grabbed my phone from my bag and looked at the time. My eyes widened when I saw I only had twenty minutes left before it becomes five o’clock.

“Shit!” I said causing Matt to stop.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

I then placed my phone in my bag and placed my money on the container the waiter gave us earlier before standing up.

“I’m going to be late for work,” I explained.

He nodded his head then got up but not before paying for his desert too.

“Do you need a ride?” he asked.

I shook my head.

“No thanks. I drove here,” I answered.

Matt nodded his head and walked out of the cafe with me. We then hugged goodbye and hopped into our vehicles. I started my car and drove to the direction of the small supermarket.

Today was my third day working there since yesterday was my second and I was starting to get used to it. It wasn’t anything big in the first place but I still felt thankful for the opportunity I got to work in something. I just didn’t like the idea of sitting all day at home when I could be doing something to make my parents proud. Yes, I might not be doing something big like running for president, but at least I was trying.

Five minutes later, I found my car parked outside of the place I worked in. I jumped out of it and locked it before I stepped inside. I walked into the manager’s office and greeted her. I took my place behind the counter and sat waiting for costumers to walk in. It didn’t take long for the place to become full, making me busy. I looked up from the computer to see a long line of costumers holding their baskets of supplies. I began to work my

hands in scanning the items and taking their money as I hummed an unknown tune I just made up. The last person in the line caught my attention.

“Hi, um . . . I can’t find the dog food. Can you tell me where it is?” a familiar voice spoke. I looked up from the cashier and faced the person I expected the least to see—Dan.

“Crystal?”

“Hey Dan.”

“I didn’t know you worked here.”

“Yea, I didn’t tell you.”

“So how long have you been working here?”

“Not too long. It’s just my third day here.”

“Oh I see.”

“What can I help you with?”

“Oh, um . . . I’m looking for dog food. They aren’t in the same place where I looked the last time,” he said as he scratched the back of his neck.

“That’s because they were moved to the back. You’ll find them in the very last aisle behind the bags of coal.”

“Okay thanks. I’ll be right back,” he said before turning around and disappeared behind an aisle. A minute later, he was back holding a big bag of dog food.

“You have a dog?” I asked as I took it from him and scanned it before placing it in a bag and handing it over to him.

“Yea I do,” he said then took the bag from my hand and smiled at me.

“Thanks. See you around.”

“You’re welcome. Come back again,” I said as I watched him turn around and walked out of the doors. I then placed the money Dan gave me in the register and was about to sit down when Rose, a girl who works here walked towards me.

“Hey, Crystal. Can you get an extra box of light bulbs from the back?”

I nodded and walked out of the door as Rose took my place until I got back. The back was a place where they store extra supplies for when they are needed and held exactly where you’d expect it to be. In the back of the supermarket.

I walked by the dumpster and toward the wooden door. I listened to it creak slowly as I opened it and turned on the lights. I walked into the dusty

place and looked around for an extra box of lightbulbs. The place was so quiet, the sound of my footsteps echoed throughout the room. I felt my heart stop when I looked up and saw a huge, and when I mean huge, I mean a huge spiderweb! I felt my face go white and my heart started to beat quickly.

It's okay Crystal! It's just a spiderweb! No biggie!

Wait, did I see something move?

I whipped my head to look at my surroundings but saw no spider. Ugh I'm over reacting over a spiderweb! But what can I say? I'm pretty sure I'm not the only one scared of that eight-legged creature!

I shook the thoughts out of my head as I looked around for the light bulbs I've come here for. I let a sigh of relief escape my lips when I found them. Immediately I grabbed the box and ran out of the room before I'd get eaten up alive. I then closed the door using my foot and walked to the front of the supermarket. Thankful that I left the door opened so that wasn't a problem. I was about to walk through it when I heard a car stop behind me. I turned around and felt my heart drop when I saw a truck.

The same old rusty truck.

I felt my nerves go everywhere at the thought of bumping into that same truck everywhere I go. I mean it could be coincidence or just any other truck but it looked awfully familiar. I immediately speed walked into the market when I saw the door open. I gave Rose the box and took my place as I tried to get rid of the weird feeling in my stomach. I was surely over reacting but I also wasn't stupid and naive not to get suspicious. Whatever was going to happen or whoever was driving that truck was obviously not going to do anything because I was in a public place but this led to some unwanted thoughts. I shook the thoughts out of my head.

Yup. I was definitely a drama queen.

I whipped my head towards the door when I saw an old man who looked to be in his late thirties or early forties walked through the door. I gulped as he looked around the place, his mysterious aura hitting me like a brick in the face. I held my breath when he spotted me and started to walk toward me. As he got closer, I noticed the unshaved beard he had and worn out clothes he was wearing. He was looking at me as if he was looking right through my soul which made me want the ground to open up and swallow me whole. I forced the odd feeling I had in the back of my head as I tried to

give him a smile like I was supposed to give every customer but it wasn't easy.

Once he was standing in front of me, I had to tilt my head upwards to look at his face because of how tall and intimidating he was.

"How can I help you?" My voice came out low in a nervous tone but I was thankful I didn't stutter. He looked down at me as he took two boxes of cigarettes which were placed next to the register, not looking away. His gaze was starting to freak me out. He then pushed the boxes toward me, making me break the eye contact first.

"Can you put these for me in a bag?"

I got on my knees and looked through the drawers where the plastic bags were held but saw nothing. I then looked at the second drawer but it was empty too. It looked like I was out of plastic bags so I had to go to the back once again to grab some more.

"Excuse me for a bit," I said without looking at him. I walked around the counter and was about to walk out the door so I could grab some quickly for him to leave but once I passed him, he grabbed my wrist and turned me around.

"Wait!" he said as he kept his firm grip on me. I gulped as I looked up at him in hesitation. I tried to tug my wrist away from his hold but it was no use. The creepy man was looking down at me with a strange look which made me want to run home and lock all the doors but I was stuck in his hold. I felt my heart quicken when I looked around the place for help but found it empty.

Great! Just great!

What's going to happen to me now?

CHAPTER 25

I leaned against the wooden chair carefully as I crossed my arms under my chest. I made sure not to add pressure to the chair because it looked like it was about to break any minute.

Think light thoughts! I'm a bubble! I'm a feather.

I stared at the two men sitting across the table from me who were playing cards. I glanced around the small room which had a worn-out light bulb and dirty windows. Getting fed up of sitting here for almost twenty minutes I decided to sing aloud.

"Ninety-nine buckets of tea on the wall! Ninety-nine buckets of tea! You take one down! Pass it around! Ninety-eight buckets of tea on the wall"

This caused them to finally look at me.

"Does it look like we are in choir, kid?" Mr. Fatty asked, making me roll my eyes.

This caused me to sing even louder.

"NINETY-EIGHT BUCKETS OF TEA ON THE WALL! NINETY-EIGHT BUC—"

"WILL YOU SHUT UP!" he yelled, making me get off of the chair a bit too dramatically and pointing at Mr. Fatty.

"Listen old man! If I'm going to be stuck here until '*whoever wants to see me*' comes, then you might as well entertain me!" I yelled, quoting each word using my fingers as I threw my hands in the air.

They looked at me for a moment, just blinking their eyes. I then slammed my hand on the table as if I own the place.

"Entertain me!" I shouted. They pushed the stack of cards toward me and started to explain how to play the game. I obviously wasn't paying attention because I was only thinking about getting home to my

boyfriend—I mean bed while watching a whole season of *Pretty Little Liars*.

I snapped out of my thoughts when the other dude next to Mr. Fatty snapped his fingers in front of my face, making me roll my eyes. He then pointed at the cards in front of me, indicating my turn to play.

“What do I do now?” I asked Jerry, a very annoying and short-tempered uncle. The one sitting next to Mr. Fatty but I didn’t really know his name so I made it up. He did kinda look like a Jerry kind of guy anyways and the same went for Mr. Fatty.

“Jesus, kid! How many times do I have to repeat myself!” he yelled, as he slammed his hand on the table. I narrowed my eyes at him and gave him the middle finger as I crossed my legs.

“Listen Grandpa! I’m eighteen, technically not a kid.”

Jerry was about to say something when the door flew open and ran in two blonde twins or what I like to call them: thing 1 and thing 2.

“Uncle Sam! Zayn took my hotdog!” One of the twins yelled at Mr. Fatty, as he ran after his brother.

“Did not!” Zayn yelled.

“Did too!” The other twin yelled.

Mr. Fatty then ran his hands over his face as a look of annoyance took over. I leaned against the chair as I watched in amusement.

“Lucas, control your children will you!” Mr. Fatty told Jerry.

“Zayn! Did you eat Andy’s hotdog?” Jerry asked even though he looked like he didn’t give one shit.

“No, I didn’t Papa!”

“Yes, he did!” Andy yelled as he jumped on Zayn’s back, tackling him to the ground as they tried to scratch each other’s face off.

Somebody get me some popcorn!

“You two better behave or else I’m calling Granny Grace!”

It’s as if he threatened to kill them because both of their eyes widened before they got off the ground and looked at their feet in shame.

“Please! Anyone but her!” Andy begged making Zayn nod in agreement.

“Yea please! Anyone but her!” Zayn repeated.

“She made us clean her bathroom toilet the last time you told her!” Andy said as Zayn nodded his head frantically.

“Her bathroom toilet I tell you!” Zayn’s yelled. Jerry then let out a sigh of frustration and was about to say something when Mr. Fatty spoke.

“Just go play outside or something.” He dismissed them. They turned around as they whispered harshly to each other. I didn’t miss the small punches and sneaky pinches they were giving each other as they walked away but before they could walk out the door they turned to look at me. They both tilted their heads and looked at me as if they were trying to complete a puzzle.

“Papa, you got us a new sister!” One of the twins yelled as he stared at me in awe while the other one jumped up in excitement. They then both ran to Jerry and gave him a big hug, or should I say his thighs a big hug because they barely reached his stomach.

I just blinked.

“Oh my god! What should we call her?” One twin yelled as the other one walked to where I was sitting. As he got closer, I could tell some of the difference they had. Zayn, who was the one walking toward me had dimples on both cheeks while Andy had only one on his right cheek.

“You’re so pretty!” he said as he looked up at me in awe. I couldn’t help but smile as the urge to pinch his chubby cheeks increased. Andy took a step towards me too but before he could even walk closer, Jerry spoke.

“What did I just tell you kids? Huh? And don’t scare her away, we need her to calm that little brat down,” he said but muttered the last part.

Little brat? I wonder who he was talking about?

The boys snapped their heads to Jerry and nodded them before disappearing out the door but not before giving me a last glance.

“Oh and try not to kill each other,” Jerry said.

Once the door was closed, two of the men turned to look at me. I lifted an eyebrow as I glared both at Jerry and Mr. Fatty. I then stood up because my butt was getting sore. If I stayed sitting down on that icy cold chair for another minute then I wouldn’t be able to feel my own butt. I then started to pace around the given small space as Mr. Fatty stared at me strangely.

“What are you doing kid?” he asked as he pushed the stack of cards toward Jerry.

“Oh, nothing really. I was just thinking of hunting kangaroos on my free time because I don’t know . . . I’ve been stuck here for almost thirty minutes?!”

“There are no kangaroos her—OUCH!” Jerry yelled as he rubbed the spot on his arm where Mr. Fatty punched him.

“I know you’re confused but like I said, once my brother gets back, you’ll understand everything,” Mr. Fatty said.

Understand my ass.

Yea, I had no idea what’s going on and I’m pretty sure you felt it too.

Okay fine, let’s rewind a bit.

Thirty-five minutes earlier...

“Can you please let go of my wrist,” I said in a low voice as I gave it another tug but it was completely useless. I tried to remember where I’ve seen him before. I mean why else would he approach me if I’ve never met him? But no matter how much I try, I couldn’t seem to recognize him. Nope, never seen him in my life. What would he want from me? Could he be a stalker? Or a pedophile? Ugh, the questions were too much for me to handle. What surprised me was when he shook his head.

“I need you to come with me,” the stranger spoke.

“What? No way!” I said as I yanked my wrist from his grasp and took a step back. This only caused him to take a step forward. His tall frame towered over me making me crane my neck upwards.

“I’m so sorry for doing this all of a sudden but I’ll explain later.”

“Doing wha—”

I was caught off by my own squeal of surprise when he threw me over his shoulders and walked out the door.

“What the hell are you doing?” I yelled as I punched his back which came to no use.

“Put me down this instant or so help me!”

“I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry.”

“I know you wouldn’t come with me if I asked so this was my only solution,” he said as he walked to his old rusty truck, opened it and pushed me in. He then closed the door, locking it. I just stared in shock.

“SOLUTION MY ASS YOU BASTARD! LET ME OUT OR ELSE I’M CALLING THE FREAKIN COPS!” I screamed as I tried to yank the door open but why would I even try? I mean everything was always a downhill for me! Nothing ever went my way and I knew it was because there was a much better path waiting for me, and at the end everything will be okay but

why wouldn't it just happen in the moment? Did I really have to get kidnapped by some complete stranger?

Before he could drive out of the parking lot, I leaned over and started scratching his face as if I was a cat fighting off a dog.

"Listen right here, mister! I ain't no prostitute so you better let me out if that's what you're thinking!" I hissed as I used my sharp nails to create a cut on his cheek.

In another time I would have smiled to myself in satisfaction but I was caught up into the moment to do even care.

"Wait—what? I nev—"

"SON OF A B*TCH! LET ME OUT OF THIS DAMN CAR!" I yelled again but this time even louder. I was even surprised I haven't lost my voice yet at this point. The stranger then held my wrist and laid them on my lap. I was going to attack him once again until I saw the pointed look he gave me which suddenly made me stop.

"Look please! All I'm asking is one hour—"

"Of sex!" I gasped as I placed my hand over my mouth. "I TOLD YOU I AIN'T NO PROSTITUTE YOU MOTHERFU—"

"I DON'T FREAKIN WANT YOU FOR THAT!"

I shut my mouth and blinked a few times as I stared at him trying to understand what he wanted. If he wasn't trying to kidnap me, then what the hell did he want?

"Let me explain! Please! Just one hour and then you're free to go!"

I then narrowed my eyes and crossed my arms as I gave him a warning glare.

"Fine. Just sixty minutes. That's it. But don't think I'm stupid! I've got my eyes on you!"

"Wait you said you wanted to talk! Where are you taking me?" I asked.

"I never said I wanted to talk. I just said to give me an hour to explain things."

I blinked a few times then opened my mouth to speak before he interrupted me.

"I swear, I mean no harm! It's just someone really special wants to see you and thank you."

"No harm? Thank me? You just literally carried my on your shoulder and forced me into your broken truck! How should I know I can trust you?"

I asked.

There was a moment of silence.

“I’m not asking for your trust, well at least not now. All I’m asking for is an hour and for me to explain. You don’t have to trust me, just know that I don’t have any bad intentions for you.” By the time he finished talking, I seemed to calm down a bit. I knew I couldn’t just trust anyone with the snap of a finger but something told me he was telling me the truth so I just went along with it. Besides it was only for an hour. I was pretty sure I could handle that.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Ethan.”

I felt like I had someone kick me in the guts when I heard that name. No, it was worse than that. I felt my heart breaking apart. Yea, I know he wasn’t the only person to own that name. Millions of people could have the same but it never failed to surprise me. I held back the tears which were threatening to come out as I looked away from him and through the window.

Memories from the past were coming back. I honestly didn’t want it to at this very moment for every time when they do I find myself breaking down my I held my head up high then focused on my surroundings and who I was around.

“W—whats wrong? Is it something I said?” Ethan asked.

I shook my head.

“No-it’s just . . . ” I didn’t notice I trailed off until I saw the look on his face as if he was waiting for me to continue.

“Nothing-never mind.” I said as I shook my head.

He nodded and glanced at me as he kept his eyes on the road.

“What about you?” he asked.

“Huh?”

“What’s your name. If I have the pleasure in kidnapping you then I must know your name.” He joked as a chuckle escaped his lips making me roll his eyes.

“Crystal,” I answered.

I then looked at him once we stopped at a red light.

“You didn’t answer my question. Where are we going?” I asked.

“To my place so you could finally meet the person who was behind all this,” he said but I’m pretty sure he muttered ‘that little devil’ under his

breath.

“Your place?”

“Technically not my place. It’s more of my mom’s place.”

“Huh?”

“You see my family isn’t the richest in case you haven’t noticed. And my mom was raised in a big household since she was six so we all grew up there and now are raising our children there too.”

“Wait, we?”

“My siblings and I,” Ethan said.

I looked out the window and wasn’t surprised when we drove down a poor neighborhood and rusty sidewalks. If Ethan was who he said he was, then I would have been surprised if he took me to a mansion. I noticed the buildings weren’t that bad. I mean, if I had to live in there for financial reasons then I wouldn’t have denied it. Hell, it would have been a great idea since I could be away from Tyler.

I shook my head at the thought and I couldn’t help but smile. He always seemed to pop up everywhere I go and it would have truly surprised me if I didn’t see him by the end of the day . . . not that I wanted to or anything.

Pft! Come on! Yes I know I don’t really despise him like before but that was just because he doesn’t pick on me anymore.

Maybe if he was the same Tyler from many years ago then I wouldn’t have stand to see his face but the charming smirk he always gave me and the teasing looks always got to me. I couldn’t help but fear what may happen in the future. I told myself countless times not to get stuck with him but we all know that isn’t what destiny wants! In fact, I’m pretty sure destiny would have wanted for me and Tyler to elope all the way to Britain, have six children and write a book together which only made sense with all the popping up he’s been doing.

It wasn’t that I hated it. I mean maybe I did but not anymore. Knowing how we became alright with each other put me to rest but I still wouldn’t actually show him that. If he knew that I didn’t actually despise his presence then he’ll probably glue us to each other by the hip and never let go.

That’s kinda not a bad thi—

Ugh don’t think about that right now! This was not the right moment for I was sitting in a truck with a complete stranger!

I snapped out of my thoughts when I heard my phone ringing in my pocket. I nervously glanced at Ethan sideways, just in case so he wouldn't go all crazy on me and shout 'YOU'RE MY HOSTAGE!' but he gave me a smile and nodded me to go ahead.

"You're not kidnapped or anything. You can do what you want."

I checked my phone to see who called.

Speak of the devil . . .

I then answered his call and brought the phone to my ear.

"Where are you? I'm at your workplace and I don't see you," he said making me bite my bottom lip.

Shit! I totally forgot about that.

"Uh . . . you see, funny story, ha ha. You wouldn't believe me if I told you I was kidnapped by a crazy old man and was being taken to his house to meet someone I don't know—"

"I did not kidnap you!"

"You did!"

"Did not!"

"Oh, so carrying me over your shoulder and forcing me into your truck against my own free will isn't kidnapping?"

He was about to say something but was cut off by Tyler's loud confused voice. And when I say loud, then I mean loud because Ethan was able to hear it.

*"What the f*ck is going on Crystal? What do you mean you've been kidnapped and who the hell are you with?!" he demanded, his tone angry. I knew he was very concerned or at least serious because I barely heard him say my actual name and not "Gem".*

"Listen, can you knock some sense into your boyfriend. If you were kidnapped then you wouldn't be on the phone right—"

"He's not my boyfriend!"

"Oh, but I will be so if you dare to touch a single hair on my Gem, I'll —"

"Um, I'm still right here!" I interrupted Tyler's threat but I couldn't help but blush a lot at what he said. Did he just declare that he would be my boyfriend while I'm in a car with a stranger?

Oh, and don't get me started on 'my Gem'.

"I know that, babe. I wouldn't have been saying that in the first place if you weren't here," he said on the other end of the line making me roll my eyes.

Typical Tyler.

"Listen please! Just tell me where are you so that I can come get you," he said in a very desperate tone.

"You know I can take you home since I'm the one who brought you with me in the first place," Ethan suggested.

"Yea, that will happen when the day pigs fly! Totally out of the question! I'm not letting you—whoever you are take her home!" Tyler shouted.

Gosh, why was he so protective all of a sudden?

"Okay fine, fine. I'll send you the address after an hour," I said before Ethan could. I didn't want them to start fighting and then actually become a hostage because I didn't really know who Ethan was. I had to stay on his safe side even though he told me he meant no harm. I just had to trust him for sixty minutes.

*"One hour? The f*ck? You sure are crazy if you think I'm going to leave you alone with that motherf*cker for a whole hour!" Tyler said in disbelief making me roll my eyes at his choice of words. Yup, he's definitely being protective right now. But hey, not saying I hated it or anything. It was kinda hot and made me feel special in a way when knowing he cared about me.*

"Listen, just think of it like having business to do and when we are done, I'll return your sweet little girlfriend to your arms." Ethan assured Tyler.

"I'm not his girlfriend."

"Yea and why the hell should I trust you? Huh? As I said before I'm not leaving my Gem with a complete stranger!"

"Um yea hi. It's me! Crystal! I'm still right here." I pointed out as I heard a huff from the other end.

"Listen just please send me the address so that I can come get you," Tyler spoke.

"Okay I will but like I said, after an hour."

"No!" Tyler said firmly.

"Fine, in half an hour," I suggested.

"No. Send it to me now or else."

"Or else what?" I asked.

*“Or else I’ll track you down and beat up that son of a b*tch who took you,” he threatened making me glance at Ethan, who gave me a concerned look which failed to work on me.*

“Take it or leave it,” I said.

“What?” he asked.

“You heard me loud and clear, babe. I’ll text you in half an hour,” I said before ending the call.

I cursed in my head as I thought of the possible things Tyler would do when he was mad. I was in deep shit and let’s just hope whoever I’m meeting was worth my time. If they weren’t, then somebody was going to feel Tyler’s wrath and that person was either going to be me or Ethan. I then looked at Ethan when I noticed the truck stop.

I looked out the window to see us parked in front of a big building which looked like to have two floors. It wasn’t the best but it wasn’t also the worst at the same time.

I then opened my door and walked out when Ethan did the same. He started walking to the front door with me following right behind him but I stopped when turned around to look at me.

“Okay so my family may sometimes be a little intense when meeting new people so just be prepared.” he warned.

Yea and that’s pretty much it. Ethan made me wait in a small room with two of his brothers Mr. Fatty and Jerry for about thirty minutes and Tyler had been texting me nonstop to make sure I was okay, aside from the killing threats he swore to some people. But what made things worse was that I still didn’t know why I was here. I’ve been here for about thirty minutes and I had to keep my word and tell Tyler the address so he’d come and get me. It wouldn’t be that long before he was here but I still had a couple minutes to spare.

I couldn’t say this was a bad place. I didn’t know why was here but this might be one hell of an entertaining family! I mean just look at Mr. Fatty and Jerry. Probably one of the funniest people I had ever met. So inspiring with their big stomachs and cigarettes hanging from their mouths as they shouted to each other on who won the game.

Other than that, they were really energetic and when I said energetic, I mean lost in the mind. Yea, she was telling Ethan she never ordered a

prostitute. I mean can they even be ordered?

I also just met the adorable twins who were Jerry's children. Mr. Fatty also mentioned him having a son who was in college but other than that I didn't know anything else. I was about to scream and rip my hair out in boredom when the door flew open and Ethan walked in. I didn't really know where he went and left me alone in the first place but he said something about 'picking her up.'

My question was answered when I saw a small girl skipped into the room holding a backpack as she smiled at me widely. I stared down at her in surprise.

She was the reason why Ethan brought me here?

She was who wanted to see me?

Now I wasn't asking all these questions because everyone was speaking about this little girl like she was the devil or more like the boss of a gang but because I've seen her before. She looked so familiar but I couldn't quite get my tongue on it. It wasn't until she grabbed the bag the crazy grandmother gave her until I finally remembered. Because when I looked inside to see what was in it, it was a box of chocolate with a note on it.

I held the box as I read the note which read:

'Thank you for your kindness! Your simple act of generosity made my day even better. And one of the best birthdays I've ever had. I can never thank you enough!'

-Ally

This was the girl I met on my first day of work! The one whom I gave the chocolate to and now she was paying back my kindness with another box of chocolate. I let out a chuckle as I looked down at her.

"Was it your birthday?" I asked.

She nodded.

"This little brat wouldn't stop bragging about the amazing present a cashier girl gave her and how lucky she was," Mr. Fatty spoke as he ruffled her hair making her giggle. I was about to speak but was cut off by surprise when she ran over to me and gave me a hug. I knelt down to her tightly and hugged her back.

“So happy you enjoyed them,” I said as I patted her back then pulled away.

“Thank you so much! I didn’t want to walk away as if nothing happened without knowing your name so I begged papa to let me see you again,” she said as she pointed at Ethan. Wait, Ethan was her father?

“Begged? She pretty much threatened the young man! I mean I wouldn’t mind his presence being gone! It would be one less bother in this broken house! Maybe now I can get some room for a spa!” the grandmother shouted.

“I’m so sorry Crystal for scaring you. It’s just if I didn’t get you to meet Ally again then she would sure have my head,” Ethan said.

“Whipped,” Jerry said under his breath as he rolled his eyes.

“HEY YOU PUT THAT DOWN RIGHT NOW MISTER OR ELSE IM TELLING GRANDMA GRACE!” Jerry’s attention was turned as he yelled at one of the twins who ran passed the room holding something which looked like a vase making Grandma Grace to whip her head and run out the door.

“WHO THE F*CK IS TOUCHING MY STUFF?” she yelled.

Damn. She’s a grandma? Had more energy than me!

I averted my attention to Ally and smiled at her. I was about to say something when I heard a loud pounding coming from the front door. Mr. Fatty looked at everyone then shrugged his shoulders as he walked out of the room and opened the front door. We were all silent, probably because we knew who it was going to be and I was right because I heard loud footsteps rushing to where we were while Mr. Fatty shouted question like ‘*What the heck are you doing?*’ and ‘*Who are you?*’

Tyler’s angry form then rushed into the room and searched his eyes for something or should I say someone. Once his eyes landed on me, they seemed to travel all over my body to check for any injuries. I noticed the look of relief take over his face when he saw none.

He then stormed over to where I was standing. He wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me to his chest. He then inhaled my scent and nuzzled his nose in the crook of my neck as his arms around my waist wrapped around me even tighter. I felt my cheeks become red as everyone stared at us.

Pulling away, I looked up at him.

“Never ever do that again,” he said.

“Do what?” I asked.

“Scare me like that!” he answered.

I knew he was mad and concerned but I didn’t know he was scared that something might have happened to me. He looked around the room, glaring at everyone.

“Who’s the bastard you brought you here?” he asked making me gasp as I hit his chest.

“Hey don’t curse! There’s a child in here!” I said as I glanced sideways at Ally.

“I did,” Ethan spoke.

Tyler then glared at him and started to stalk toward him. He grabbed him by his collar and pushed him against the wall. I ran to them and pulled Tyler away.

“Hey, he meant no harm, trust me.”

“Trust you? I do Gem but give me one freakin reason why I should trust him? You don’t even know these guys,” Tyler said taking a step forward but I held his arm back.

“Because I told you to.”

“Not a good enough reason,” Tyler said then moved me to the side as he glared at Ethan.

I then stepped in front of him.

“He reminded me of my father!” I said.

“There! Is that a good enough reason?” I asked.

“Your father?” he asked.

“Y-yea, they have the same name and personality,” I said.

I may have not known Ethan for that long but I did know that he was one of those types who looked intimidating at first but were completely different once you get to know them.

Tyler looked at me and Ethan who was staring at me in confusion.

“Okay, fine.”

“Let’s go home,” I said as I patted his arm.

I then turned around and gave Ethan a hug and promising to see him again. I walked over to Ally and crunched down to her level and hugged her too. I then took the bag she gave me and smiled down at her.

“Thank you so much for the chocolate, love. I’d be sure to enjoy them and I know this might be late but *happy birthday*,” I said as I ruffled her hair making her giggle.

“I will see you again, right?” she asked.

“Of course,” I said then turned to wave at Jerry and Mr. Fatty.

“The next time we meet, I’ll make sure to teach you how to play cards.” Jerry promised.

I nodded then walked out the door with Tyler walking besides me. A couple of weeks ago I would have been surprised if Tyler held my hand but I guess I was used to his sudden change of mood now.

After all, he wasn’t Tyler if he wasn’t mad at one point then teasing in the other.

CHAPTER 26

“And that’s how the most life changing invention called technology changed our lives completely.” I finished off with Tyler by my side. I looked around the class and saw various facial expressions. Some looked bored while others looked like they gave no shit. There were even some who looked nervous to stand in front of the class and present their project. Today was the day we finally present our homework and get our final grade. It took a while to be handed in because there were a lot of projects to be checked.

You might have thought that I’d be so happy that the project was finally over I could get rid of Tyler but I didn’t feel any difference. This project did start it off with me seeing him often but even if we wouldn’t do anything together, he’d still show up in front of my door asking for some sugar. Surprisingly, the idea didn’t seem that bad. I guess it was because I was already used to his presence and him showing up out of the blue.

All I wanted to do was to get out of this class and rush to the cafeteria because I was starving. I thought Tyler knew because my stomach grumbled loudly a few times and he just gave me an amused look. Other than the slap I wanted to give him because he let me do most of the talking, I was pretty fine. Maybe it was because today was Friday and who wouldn’t be in a happy mood? I was just hoping this day would be less hectic because trust me, I’ve never seen a day like that pass in my whole entire life.

When I was heading home with Tyler, he was literally acting like he was glued to me. He wouldn’t even let go of my hand until we reached his car. And after getting in, he started lecturing me about safety and that I had to tell him where I would go.

Like what the hell? Why was he acting like a possessive alpha? That was completely unnecessary—but I did always wish for a possessive

alpha—Not the point!

Let me also mention his words yesterday to Ethan on the phone, claiming I would be his ‘girlfriend.’ Yea, I think it was just an instinct for him. He probably thought Ethan was a horny teenager and wanted to protect me from him by claiming I was his. I felt the heat rise up my neck and toward my cheek at the thought.

If I were his girlfriend, I wonder how he would he treat me. Would he still tease me and push me around or would he treat me with care—STOP!

Why the hell was I thinking about this?

I snapped out of my thoughts when the bell rang, signaling that the class has ended. I looked around the class to see it almost empty because everyone was making their way to the cafeteria. I was about to walk toward my desk to grab my backpack when Tyler grabbed my hand and carried my backpack for me. I lifted an eyebrow and was about to say something when he walked out the door, still holding my hand.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“Where else? To the cafeteria of course.”

All attention was on me and I wasn’t used to that. I was bullied but the attention from that was a different matter entirely. I averted my eyes from the deadly glares sent from some girls and surprisingly guys, and looked at Tyler’s grip on my backpack.

“Um you can give me my backpack now.”

Letting a huff out, I leaned over and was about to snatch my bag from him when he moved it away and gave me the stink eye. I rolled my eyes knowing that Tyler was just being his stubborn self. We then walked over to the lunch line which was surprisingly short. I yanked my hand from his hold to could carry my tray and added a slice of pizza. Since Tyler was carrying my backpack for me I decided to be nice enough and carry his tray for him too out of of the goodness of my heart.

“What do you want?” I asked.

“Pizza.” I put a slice of pizza on his tray, along with two slices of cheesecake on both our trays. Like why not? If Tyler didn’t want it then there will be just more for me.

“I didn’t ask for cake.”

“Yea I know. The lunch lady won’t let me take two slices so you’re just carrying it for me.”

“Sometimes I ask myself where does the food go.”

“What?”

“I said I hope you enjoy the sugar.”

Walking to the table, I noticed Eva, Matt, Jasmine and Troy chatting with one another without Sydney. I then sat in front of Matt as Tyler sat next to me.

“Where’s Sydney?” I asked before taking a bite out of the delicious heaven we call pizza.

Matt shrugged and turned to look at Eva.

“I don’t know,” she answered with Troy looking at her.

“How do you not know where your own sister is?” he asked.

“I’m just her sister, not her tail! You don’t see us glued to each other’s hips all the time,” Eva replied.

Tyler placed his cake on my tray, causing me to smile in delight. I then placed my pizza down because I couldn’t just wait. It’s as if the cake was screaming out for me and telling me to eat it up. I took a bite out of it and moaned quietly to myself as I let the taste hit my taste buds. I was about to take another bite when I heard Matt mutter something which sounded like, *‘Look what the cat dragged in.’*

I lifted my head and saw that almost everybody in our table was facing the doors to the cafeteria. I followed their eyes and landed on Sydney walking toward us with a confidence and a smugly smirk. I was about to ask myself why when I saw my answer walking next to her but the difference between the two was that he didn’t look so satisfied. Dan was carrying her backpack on his shoulder as he carried her food of tray and books in both hands, looking quite annoyed.

Well this is something . . .

They soon made it to our table and Sydney sat down as she tapped her fingernails on the table.

“Just place my things here and you can get going. I’ll see you later,” she told Dan who stayed unresponsive. He then groaned to himself as he cursed under his breath and walked away. The sight looked amusing and I could imagine the steam coming out of his ears.

“What the hell was that about?” Jasmine asked. Sydney did not answer and kept the smirk on the face.

“Yea, can you please explain what just happened?” Matt said.

“Well, my friends, what you just saw was Dan losing a bet to me,” she said as she patted herself on the back.

“A bet?” I asked.

Sydney nodded her head.

“Apparently, Dan thought since he was better than me in soccer. Well, I proved him wrong.”

“Oh my god! He challenged you in soccer?” Eva shrieked catching all of our attention.

“Yup,” Sydney answered.

“What’s wrong if he did?” Tyler spoke for the first time.

“In case you don’t know, my sister right here is a champion when it comes to soccer,” Eva replied.

“So, you’re making him do all your work?” I asked Sydney.

“Yup.”

“Cool,” Matt said.

Everyone continued stuffing their faces in food when Sydney spoke again, changing the subject.

“So girls! Are you ready for this afternoon?”

“Huh?” I asked.

“Oh yea, right! I totally forgot!” Jasmine muttered.

“Yea, today’s Friday.” Eva pointed out.

“What?” I asked dumbfounded.

“You know we agreed to go shopping.” Sydney reminded me.

“Oh yea! *girls’ night*,” I said as I quoted it with my fingers. “How could I forget?”

“Wait, so I can’t join you?” Troy asked Jasmine as he pouted. She pinched his cheek playfully and gave him a peck on the lips.

“Sorry babe. Not today.”

“Where will you be hanging out?” Tyler butted in like usual.

“Well we were thinking of—” Eva replied.

“That’s none of your business,” I said.

“I thought we’ve gone past that by now!” Tyler whined making me shake my head.

“Only when Matt decides to run with me,” I said making Matt chuckle. He then reached out to Tyler and gave him a sympathetic look as he patted his shoulder.

“It’s okay man, there are other fishes in the sea,” he said, making me grab a fry from Sydney’s tray and throwing it at his face.

“No, really! Why can’t we tag along? It’s a Friday which means the mall will be packed with horny teenagers!” Troy pointed out as he slammed his hand on the table.

“Babe, I think you’re exaggerating. We just want to have some fun alone.”

“I agree with Troy,” Tyler said. I whipped my head and looked up at him.

“So what if the mall is packed? It doesn’t really matter. It’s not like a group of boys will come and pick us up from our feet.” I pointed out. All the girls nodded.

“Yea well, Gem. In case you don’t remember, I recall someone throwing you over their shoulders yesterday, isn’t that right?” Tyler pointed out as he narrowed his eyes.

“That was different.”

“Sure it was,” Matt said sarcastically.

“Hey whose side are you on?” Sydney asked as she threw another fry to his face.

“I’m obviously on their side!” Matt said as he pointed to Troy and Tyler.

“I don’t even know what’s the point in this! Why are we discussing this anyways?” I asked as I threw my hands up in the air.

“Because I want to tag along!” Matt whined.

“Oh, shut up you big baby! We’ll go with you guys in another time,” Eva said.

“Come on babe! Can’t we tag along just for a while and then we leave?” Troy begged as he kissed Jasmine’s cheek.

“That’s not working with me mister,” Jasmine said.

“Why are you guys so persistent?” I asked.

“Because we want to make sure you guys will be okay,” Tyler answered.

I rolled my eyes.

“You guys are acting like we are going into battle.” I huffed.

“We are only shopping! I thought guys hated to tag along?” Jasmine pointed out.

“Yea we do but—” Matt said.

“Listen how about we go shopping and then meet you guys in the food court? Is that fine with you guys?” Sydney said.

Everyone was silent for a while.

“If it gets them to shut up, then I’m in,” I said.

“Fine by me,” Troy said.

Tyler nodded.

It was a good thing he’s finally satisfied. Who knew what would have happened if he wasn’t? The ground would have opened up and swallowed everyone in this room until he’d get what he wanted.

I was taking a bite out of my pizza when Troy accidentally spilled his juice all over the table.

“Shit,” he said under his breath.

“Babe do you have a napkin?” he asked Jasmine as she moved all her things to the side.

“No, I don’t,” she said.

“It’s okay I got it,” I said as I reached for a napkin from my pocket and stretched my arm forward to wipe it.

As I wiped from my side, I swung my arm towards my right when Tyler’s arm bumped into mine. In another time this wouldn’t have been such a big deal and it really wasn’t. I was wearing the bracelet Tyler gave me knowing that if I didn’t, he would have threw me over his shoulders, and wouldn’t put me down until I had it on. I didn’t know how I could describe it in any other way but it had a couple of old fashion spikes on the edge. I guess it was magnetic or something because when it got near to my bracelet, it was as if it threw itself on me causing one of the spikes to jab my wrist.

I flinched a bit as I saw a little minor scratch pouring out blood. When I say *minor*, I actually meant it which was no big deal but Tyler thought different.

“Shit,” he said under his breath.

I grabbed another napkin and wiped the blood as Eva took the used napkin from me and cleaned the table.

“This is my fault. You need a band-aid,” Tyler said as he grabbed my wrist.

“No I don’t,” I said as I wiped the blood that was coming out of the little scratch again.

“What if it gets infected?” Tyler asked.

I shrugged. “It’s no big deal,” I said honestly as I tried to take my wrist away from his hold but he only shook his head and got up, pulling me with him.

Of course. This is the stubborn Tyler we’re talking about.

“Come on. We’ll see you guys later,” Tyler told the group and then picked my backpack from the ground. I was about to say something when he wrapped his fingers around mine, holding my hand and walked away from the table, dragging me with him. I opened my mouth but ended up closing it, not knowing what to say so I just turned around to look at our table but saw mostly everyone smirking at me. I lifted an eyebrow then turned around and looked at Tyler as he dragged me out of the cafeteria.

“Where are we going?” I asked for the second time today. I almost didn’t notice everyone’s eyes glued on Tyler and mine’s hands as if the school always looked for some attention to focus on. No one could mind their own business. They just had to know what’s going on in others’ lives and meddle which didn’t surprise me because it was something normal you’d find in every school.

“To the nurse’s office,” Tyler answered.

I couldn’t help but let a huff of frustration out.

“This really isn’t necessary. It’s just a little scratch.” I pointed out.

“Yea, one that I caused,” Tyler said.

“Why does it matter?” I asked making Tyler stop. I stopped along with him but not before bumping into his back. I then took a step backwards so that I could tilt my head upwards to look at him.

“Because I care,” he said seriously, looking down at me. I couldn’t help but blush at his words. I knew Tyler wasn’t coldhearted and actually cared but I’d never thought he’d say it to my face.

“You care?” I asked.

“I do,” he said as he looked at me with sincerity in his eyes.

“Then why did you bully me for all those years?” I asked bringing the past up. This was probably the very first time I actually confronted him about it. I then noticed his eyes soften as a look of guilt took over his face.

“I don’t really know,” he whispered.

“I was a stubborn, spoiled brat who wanted your attention and found it the only way to get it,” he said as he ran his other hand which wasn’t

holding mine through his hair.

“By pushing me to the ground and making fun of me?” I asked, lifting an eyebrow.

“I know it was a really low move but I couldn’t help myself. I don’t know what I was thinking at that time,” he said.

It looked like he was remembering the stuff he did to me. I almost missed the look of pain which flashed in his eyes. I shook my head, thinking that this wasn’t the right moment to have this conversation when everyone was looking and listening. We needed to talk about this alone, in private. It’s not like I wanted to remind him of the times he’d bully me and give him a guilt trip after. No, that was the last thing I wanted to do.

But I really wanted some answers to where this was going. It’s really starting to confuse me. Like what are we? We act like friends but want to rip each other’s throats out from time to time.

Okay well maybe that’s just me . . .

“It’s okay. We’ll talk about this in another time,” I said, as I tugged his arm and led him to the nurse’s office to get the band-aid we came here for.

It took a while for Tyler to come back to earth because it looked like he was spacing out, thinking about what I just said but as soon as we reached the door to the nurse’s office, he looked like he remembered why we were here in the first place because his eyes flickered to my wrist.

“Shit, that’s right,” he said under his breath as he opened the door and walked in with me next to him.

The place was empty so he just walked over to a couple of drawers and started looking through them while I looked in some cabinets.

“Found them,” I said.

I took the box out and opened it, feeling Tyler’s presence behind me as the warmth of his chest hit my back.

Which was very comfortable by the way—NOT THE POINT!

I shook the thoughts out of my head as I saw Tyler’s arm reach over for one band-aid, still standing behind me as he opened it. He rested his chin on my shoulder as he took a hold of my wrist gently and put it over the scratch.

“There we go,” he muttered to himself.

“Are you happy? Now you won’t have to be afraid of me dying,” I said. He let out a chuckle.

“Yes. Wouldn’t want me to carry the burden now, would we?” he said against my ear, his breath hitting my skin, causing the hair on my neck to move upwards. I didn’t know why but I was disappointed when he pulled away. I had to keep a straight face because the frown on my lips was threatening to come out. I shook my head and called myself *crazy*, not knowing why my body warmed up to him as if he was a soft blanket wrapping me in its own warmth.

“Thanks,” I blurted out as I turned around to look at him.

“For what? The band-aid? It’s nothing,” he said.

“No I don’t mean that,” I said as I played with the good luck bracelet on my wrist nervously.

“You know for what happened yesterday. I mean for caring,” I said, looking down for a bit but couldn’t help myself as I flicker my eyes upwards to face him.

“I can’t stop, even if I tried,” Tyler grinned at me.

“But you almost made me crap my pants though,” he chuckled. I couldn’t help but giggle.

“That’s a sight I’d want to see,” I muttered to myself.

“What?” he asked.

“Uh nothing, let’s go back before the bell rings,” I said and as if on cue, the bell rang officially ending lunch time. Tyler rolled his eyes but the smirk on his face didn’t go away as he grabbed my hand and dragged me out of the nurse’s office.

* * *

“LET ME AT HER!” Sydney yelled.

“I SWEAR I HAD MY HANDS ON THE DRESS FIRST!” She shrieked at the scared lady standing in front of us who looked like she was going to pee her pants at any minute. I was starting to pity her but I didn’t have time to comfort her because me and along with Jasmine and Eva were too busy holding Sydney back and calming, well *trying* to calm her down. I literally have no idea what’s going on. It just happened so fast but I’ll tell you one thing.

Never mess with Sydney!

All that poor little lady did was grab that white dress Sydney laid eyes on first and all hell broke loose. It's as if it was love in first sight but Sydney's soul mate was snatched from her arms and into another. Yes it was this big! I would have been embarrassed because of the commotion she was making, acting like a child but I didn't have time to think about it because I was trying to prevent her from scratching the stranger's face off or else this shop will become a murder scene!

"Idiot, snap out of it!" Eva yelled as she smacked her purse against her head.

"But I want that dress!" she cried.

"Will you stop before you get us kicked out of here and never to return!" Jasmine hissed as she grabbed her ear, pulling her away from the woman who was standing there all pale, as if she was a deer in a lion's den.

"But that dre—"

"You'll find a much prettier one stupid! Now let's get out of here before you get us kicked into jail!" Eva said as she helped Jasmine drag Sydney to the door of the shop. I couldn't help but chuckle. I then turned around and looked at the lady who had the dress in her hands.

"Sorry about that!" I yelled.

"She's just PMS-ing."

"NO IM NOT!" Sydney yelled back.

Jasmine covered her stupid mouth with her hand, glaring at her as a bunch of boys walked by. They gave us looks and I ran a hand over my face in embarrassment. Remind me never—and I say *never* go shopping with Sydney ever again! Eva then pushed her out of the little shop and smacked her on the back of her neck.

"Great! Thanks to you and your stupidity, I would never go into that shop ever again or else I'd have to face that cashier's wrath!" Eva said as she pointed to the glass windows where we saw the angry cashier glaring at us for making such a big commotion.

"But I wanted that dress!" she whined.

"Mention that dress one more time and I'll smack you so hard in the face, you won't even remember your own name!" Jasmine hissed while Sydney rolled her eyes.

"Fine, fine, but if I ever cross paths with that woman, just know that if you can't find me then I'll be in jail," Sydney said as she cracked her

knuckles while I looked at the time on my phone. We've been here for about two hours and the boys must be waiting for us in the food court. We did the usual. Shop, dress, put the clothes back and take a couple of selfies. I would be lying if I said I wasn't tired.

"Come on guys, I'm hungry," I said just as my stomach grumbled.

"Same, I'm in the mood for some frozen yogurt!" Jasmine said as she licked her lips.

"Okay I can definitely agree with you on that," Sydney said as she rubbed her hands together. We gathered all our shopping bags and headed toward the food court which was pretty crowded. I looked over the booths and smiled to myself in delight when my eyes landed on Pink Berry. The girls and I walked over to it as Jasmine's phone rang.

I waited in line for my turn and Jasmine held her phone to her ear.

"Yea babe?"

Jasmine continued to listen to whatever Troy was saying when I told the lady behind the counter what flavor I wanted—strawberry. By the time it was Jasmine's turn to order, she was done talking with Troy. As she got a hold of her cup and paid, she turned to look at us.

"The boys still aren't here because of traffic which means we get a little bit more time to ourselves," she said. We all nodded and sat on an empty table, enjoying the taste of our delicious frozen yogurt.

"Man if you were a man I'd totally bang you right now!" Sydney said as she took another bite. I crunched my nose upwards just of the thought.

"Ew, that's gross," Jasmine said.

"What? Banging? But don't you and Troy do it all the t—"

"I meant banging something you eat!" Jasmine interrupted her as her cheeks went slightly pink. I smiled as Sydney rolled her eyes.

"Well then let me rephrase that then," she said as she straightened her posture and held the cup to her face.

"If you were a man, I'd definitely marry you. Better?" she asked Jasmine.

"Yea but then you'd just become a widow because he'd be gone with the first bite." I pointed out.

"True, true," Eva muttered.

"Then what else am I supposed to do with a delicious frozen yogurt man?" Sydney asked.

Eva was about to say something when Jasmine spoke first.

“Wait why are we having this conversation?” she asked.

We all shrugged.

“Because we’re weird,” Sydney answered.

“I’ll agree to that,” I said as I took another bite.

I then turned my head to my right when I saw a chair being placed next to me. I looked up to see Matt sitting down as he gave me a smile.

“Sup girls!” he said as he took my spoon and took a bite, making me gasp as I sent him a cold glare.

“Hey! That’s mine!” I hit him on the shoulder before taking my spoon back but crunched my nose in disgust and threw it away into the trash can beside me. I then grabbed the extra spoon Eva brought with her and opened it.

“Ew, strawberry,” he said to himself.

“Where’s Troy and Tyler?” Jasmine asked.

“Looking for some empty chairs. Let me tell you, this place is damn crowded so I doubt they’ll find some. I mean I was lucky to get a hold on this,” Matt said as he pointed to the chair he was sitting on.

“I can see that,” I muttered to myself.

Just when those words left my mouth, I saw Troy and Tyler walking toward us empty-handed looking all defeated and I wanted to laugh. It was their fault for wanting to tag along in the first place. Looks like they’ll just have to stand up.

“No luck?” Matt asked.

“Nope.” Tyler shook his head.

“It’s okay babe, you can sit here with me.” Jasmine said as she got up and pulled Troy down, getting on his lap. That made Tyler the only person standing up.

“Oh poor Tyler! I wonder who will give him somewhere to sit?” Eva said as she flickered her eyes between me and him. He stuck his hands into his pocket, looking down at me with a playful smirk.

“Oh who will be that generous person?” he said.

“Hey Crystal! Why don’t you help the poor boy in need?” Sydney winked at me while smirking. I lifted an eyebrow and crossed my arms under my chest.

“Nope, not happening. Why don’t you lend him your chair?” I asked her.

“Because I don’t want to.” Sydney shot back.

“Neither do I,” I said then looked up at Tyler.

“Sorry buddy but you’re standing,” I said as I gave him a fake small smile and took another bite from my frozen yogurt. I almost spitted it out in surprise when I felt his hands lift me up by the hip. Letting out a small shriek, I looked up at Tyler to see him placing me on his lap.

Like really? Was this necessary in public?

“Let go of me you cave man!” I said making everyone roll their eyes and chuckle.

“Relax, I’m not man handling you. All I need is a seat,” Tyler said as he wrapped his arms around my waist, keeping me in place which was completely unnecessary. I turned my head a little so that I was staring at him and glared.

“If we weren’t in public, I would have smacked you in the face so hard, you’d forget your own name,” I threatened.

“Hey that’s my line!” Jasmine said.

Ignoring what she said, Tyler leaned into my ear and tightened his hold. I mean why? He was acting like he didn’t want me falling from his lap. I mean it’s not like I was hanging from the top of Mount Everest!

“Oh, but it would be all worth it,” he whispered in my ear. I couldn’t help the groan of frustration because of the position I was in. I took the cup of frozen yogurt in my hands and shoved a spoonful into my mouth forcefully because if my mouth wasn’t distracted with eating then it would have done something I would have regretted later on.

Oh, wait that didn’t sound quite innocent when I think about it! No that’s not what I meant! I wasn’t thinking about kissing Tyler! No, I didn’t mean that. I meant cursing at him!

Yea that’s more like it.

Me kissing Tyler? That day will come when pigs start to fly!

CHAPTER 27

Everyone could have peace. Whether it be with a soft blanket or heavenly music to distract you from the world to sleep at night, I could honestly say that I've never found mine. Yes, I had amazing friends and that my life wasn't a complete living hell. I did lose the most important people in my life but others have it worse yet I've never actually found my peace.

But why did I feel so relaxed at this moment? Why did I feel like I could stay here forever? What would I usually think of when I wake up in the morning? The fact that I'm living another day without my parents.

What would I usually do when my eyes opened and are met with sunlight?

Acceptance. Just push it back and be grateful for waking up. Not everyone would be able to.

My eyelids were closed so I didn't really know what the warmth was wrapping around me. I had no idea what was going on but I did know one thing. I was very comfortable at the moment and didn't want to let go of the thing giving me peace. I snuggled closer and let out a satisfying moan as I felt my body float in heaven as if I was flying in thin air.

I then moved my head to the side, accidentally hitting something. At first I thought it was a pillow but then realized that it was too hard to actually be one. I was about to open my eyes to inspect it but changed my mind. It wasn't worth the effort because I was still feeling very tired and really lazy. Especially with the rare moment; I didn't want it to leave so soon so I savored it.

I felt the warm thing tighten around my waist and pulling me to a chest which was moving upwards in a slow motion. Yea, that was enough to send the red flags in my brain. It was also enough to bring me out of my own state of peace and into reality. Surprisingly, this reality wasn't that bad

when I opened my eyes. I was met with the sunlight which shone into the room. Once my eyes adjusted to the light, I was able to see a chest which kind of freaked me out. I was about to go all ninja on the person who broke into my room and break their neck but when I looked up my fast beating heart slowed down in relief.

Why did it slow down? I mean, if you told me a month ago, I'd wake up all relaxed in Tyler's arm and not freak out, then I'd call you crazy and shove you down an endless pit. But now, I'd probably just call you crazy without doing all the killing.

My eyes shot wide as I observed his sleeping face. I bit my lips nervously as I realized I was almost on top of him, half of my body against his chest while his arms were wrapped around me, caging me in his embrace. My head was laying on his chest and I listened to his beating heart and steady breathing. I would have almost had a panic attack right there and fell off of the bed if it wasn't for Tyler's hold.

I blinked once then twice. How on earth did he get in my room? How did we end up in this situation? I examined his face and noted that he was still asleep. His face was right above mine as our legs tangled with each other. I tried to steady the nerves inside me as I looked around and thought to myself how I was going to get myself out of Tyler's arms when I stopped.

I felt my breath clog in my throat as I looked around my surroundings. Or should I say Tyler's room!

I probably looked like a confused, constipated fish on drugs because I was whipping my head from side to side trying to remember or figure out how I got here.

And that's when everything came crashing back to my mind.

Last Night

I stretched down, touching my toes and stretched my arms and body in general before starting my early night run. It was probably eight o'clock on a Friday night. A whole week had passed since I went to the mall with my friends and surprisingly had a very good time, even though I was sitting in Tyler's lap for the whole time. I mean even when he was able to get an extra chair, he didn't even release me! I couldn't even move without him hissing no and tightening his arms around me. I was in the public park next to my

house so that I could do my daily run because I wasn't able to do it before school.

Apparently Tyler thought it was a good idea to show up in front of my door step half an hour before school started so that we could get breakfast together and drive me to school . . .

Yes I know, how very generous of him.

Rolling my eyes at the thought, I began to jog. I wasn't so into my daily jogs anymore. It was because I spent most of my energy and time on the hour after school to train for the big event so running was already done, just not on my own but in school. Every once in a while I tried to keep up with my routine. I started to run on the trail road made for the runners which lead deep into the small forestlike area of the park. It was filled with trees that reached out for the sky with leaves covering the ground.

It didn't take long before I was out of it and into the public area where the children played. The place wasn't that full because of the time of day but there were a couple of children playing on the swing sets. I ran a lap around it then returned once again to the trail road. By the time I was out of the forest for the second time, I was panting so hard that I needed rest. I stopped and nestled under a tree as I placed my hand over my beating heart.

Taking a sip out of my water bottle, I slowly got up and walked back to the public area but stopped dead in my tracks when I heard two male voices shouting over one another. The first voice shouted something I couldn't quite figure out because I was so far away so I started to speed walk to where the commotion was coming from.

Once I was near enough to make out the words, one of the voices shouted which was 'f*ck off!' making my breath stop in my throat. I felt my heartbeat quicken but not because of the running but because it sounded like Tyler. I ran to where his voice was coming from and hid behind a tree. As I peeked my head out I saw a guy with a hoodie turn around and stomp away in anger while a muscular back was faced towards me as it moved up and down in anger.

Right away I knew that it was Tyler's back.

Something told me not to come out and show myself, telling me that it was better to stay hidden in the dark but I refused to listen. I didn't know why but a surge of protectiveness came over me when I saw Tyler looking so

hurt and angry for the first time. He was always so playful and teasing but never once have I've seen him look so serious. I didn't know what came over me when I walked out from behind the tree to comfort him and make sure he was okay but I didn't care.

I took a step towards him but stopped when I stepped on a branch. Tyler's shoulder became even more tense as he whipped his head to look behind him. I heard a snarl escape his lips as he turned to glare at me but immediately stopped when he noticed it was me.

A look of shock and surprise took over his face as he stared at me. His shoulders relaxed as he ran his hand through his hair, letting out a frustrated groan. I rubbed my hands up and down my arms, getting rid of the chills as I walked up to him, leaving some space between us. I looked up and stared into his eyes nervously.

"Are you okay?" I asked noticing from this angle that he had a scratch near his eye and a bloody, swollen lip. My mouth opened in shock. Did someone hit him?

"How long have you been here?" he asked.

"Not too long. I just got here," I answered.

He nodded as I inspected his small injuries. Thankfully they didn't look like anything major but they had to be treated or else they'd get infected. I couldn't help but smile to myself at the thought. A week ago, Tyler was persistent in getting my injury looked at but now I was doing the same thing when I clearly was annoyed from it. My hands moved on their own record up to his face and traced the scratch up near his eye gently. I was expecting him to flinch back in pain but he did no such thing. Instead he looked like he enjoyed my touch and moved closer.

"You're hurt," I whispered as I traced my fingers down to his bloody lips and took some of the blood on my finger. Why did I care so much about him? Why did I feel pain in my heart when I saw him so furious? Tyler took me by surprise when he took a hold of my hand and rested it on his cheek as he closed his eyes and let out a sigh of satisfaction. I was expecting him to lash out on me, ask me why I was here and demand that I go back home and mind my own business. But he did none of that.

"I'm fine," he grumbled.

I shook my head and pulled my hand away not because I wanted to be far away from Tyler but because I took his other hand in mine and pulled

him towards me, dragging him out from behind all the trees.

"No, you're not," I said stubbornly causing him to chuckle.

"Where are we going?" he asked from behind me.

"Do you have a first aid kit at your house?" I asked before stopping to look at him.

"Uh-yea I do . . . "

"Great because I don't have one in my place," I said as I turned around and led him out of the park. My fingers were still wrapped around his and I'm pretty sure he didn't mind it at all because one, he wasn't complaining and two, I'm pretty sure I felt his hand tighten the grip.

"This really is unnecessary," he mumbled the same exact things I said a week ago.

"It's funny how I said that exact same sentence but you still didn't stop right?" I said.

Tyler rolled his eyes.

"Yea but it's no big deal," he argued.

"You just got in a fight with someone and it's no big deal?" I asked getting kind of pissed off. I stopped walking and turned around to glare at him.

"Aren't you going to ask who I was fighting with?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"No I'm not," I said.

"Why?" he whispered.

I stood silent as I bit my lips and looked down to our intertwined hands. I glared at it as if I was trying to find an answer then looked back up at him and took a deep breath.

"Because it's really none of my business," I said then turned around and walked down the road to where Tyler lived. Once we were standing outside of his door, I waited for him to take out his keys and unlock the door. Getting inside I let go of his hand and walked into the living room while Tyler went to get the first aid kit. I looked around and saw it empty—as empty as my house.

I then paced back and forth, waiting for Tyler to return and let out a sigh of relief when I saw the kit in his hands. I grabbed his arm and pulled him to the couch forcefully, earning a chuckle from him.

"Damn, so violent woman. I thought you were supposed to take care of me, not hurt me," he said as he added a 'tsk' and shook his head. I rolled my eyes and ignored his comment as I opened the kit and added some alcohol to a piece of cotton then shoved it on the scratch near his eye. He hissed in pain and glared at me as I sent him an innocent smile.

"Oops," I said as I shrugged my shoulders.

I then dabbed the cotton one last time on the scratch but this time gently, trying to avoid eye contact because of the awkward silence that took over. My hands moved slowly to his swollen lips and flickered my eyes up to Tyler. I looked back down to his lips when I saw the intense stare he was giving me. I took most of the blood off when he spoke.

"He was my cousin."

"Huh?" I asked looking up at him.

"The guy you saw walking away was my cousin."

"The same cousin who owns Sky?" I asked remembering Tyler mentioning something about his cousin owning that dog.

He nodded.

"Yea we couldn't get along," he said.

"I can tell," I said, tracing the cotton on his lips. I removed my hand when I noticed that the blood was gone but I wasn't able to bring it away from Tyler's face because he grabbed a hold of it.

"What were you doing out all alone at a time like this?"

"I was doing my daily run."

"Well don't stay out for too long."

"But what if I need to run? You know that's important for me."

"Can't you do it in the day? Why does it have to be late at night?"

"Why does it matter?"

"Because it's dangerous!" he answered dropping my hand and using that same hand to pull a strand of my hair behind my ears.

"I can take care of myself," I mumbled, getting up to smooth out my shirt. Tyler got us as well

"I don't doubt that."

I threw the cotton away.

"I run at night to feel the cold night breeze hit my skin. It feels amazing and very refreshing. Maybe you should try it too sometime," I said and walked toward the door, getting ready to go home.

I came here to make sure Tyler was okay. And maybe he wasn't because he fought with his cousin but I did what I can do and I had no other option. I couldn't just pry into his business, that wasn't right. Since his injuries weren't that bad I was going to go home and watch some lame movie and eat Nutella. My thoughts were interrupted when I felt a hold on my wrist, turning me around to face a muscular chest.

"Stay," he said.

"Huh?"

"Stay. You tried to help me so let me give you something in return."

"Like what?"

It looked like he was thinking because he paused for a bit then nodded his as if he just figured something out. He then moved his hands to hold mine and pulled me into the living room. I started to notice that we were holding hands a lot these past few days and I really wasn't doing anything about it. It wasn't really bothering me like I thought it would. Tyler then pushed me down so that I was sitting in his couch and walked over to the drawers next to his TV.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

He didn't answer. Instead he took out a big stack of CDs and placed them on my lap.

"Uh . . . you see my mom made her famous cheesecake and kind off threatened me to give you some so I'll go take it out while you choose a movie," he said as he scratched the back of his neck nervously, his cheeks went slightly pink.

Why was he embarrassed? Did he think I'd reject his offer on spending some time with him?

"Okay," I muttered under my breath then looked down to the stacks of movies.

So, this is how he wanted to repay me huh? By hanging out and watching a movie. I couldn't help but think of it as cute. I mean who would have thought Tyler had a spot like that? Shaking my head as I tried to hide the small smile, I began looking through the stack as Tyler walked into his kitchen.

"Wait, where's your mom anyways?" I asked, knowing that Tyler could hear me.

“At work!” he shouted back from the kitchen. I threw a couple of CD boxes of some movies I was no way going to watch with Tyler like The Notebook and Twilight. Not that I hated them or anything because I actually do enjoy watching them but with Tyler, it would be just plain awkward.

Why did he even have Twilight anyway? Just imagining Tyler cuddling with a bunch of blankets and a pillow as he cried his eyes out because he was watching The Notebook was unimaginable. I looked through the movies and decided on a Marvel movie, nothing too cheesy which was Thor two.

Oh, and he’s super hot and I liked to stare at his bare chest but that wasn’t the point.

I pushed myself deeper into the comfortable couch and crossed my legs as Tyler walked into the living room holding two plates and a big bag of chips. He placed them on the coffee table and picked up the movie I chose in my hand.

“Thor?” he asked.

“Yup.” I said, popping the ‘p.’

“Of all movies! Why Thor?”

“Because he’s hot.”

Tyler gave me an are-you-crazy look and furrowed his eyebrows.

“He’s not hot!”

“Uh yea he is!”

“Yea but I’m hotter, am I not?” he said smirking at me as he walked over to the TV and placed the CD in before sending me a wink. Rolling my eyes I spoke in a whisper.

“Yea if it helps you sleep at night buddy.”

Either he didn’t hear my comment or he chose to ignore it because he didn’t say anything. Instead, he started the movie and sat close next to me with our thighs touching. He then leaned over and gave me my plate and dropped his arm over my shoulder. I lifted an eyebrow and turned to look at him but he only gave me an innocent smile and tilted his head.

“What? Is there a problem?” he asked.

“No,” I said before glaring at him. He then turned to look at the screen as I took the fork in my hand and took a bite out of my slice. My eyes widen as the delicious taste hit my taste buds. I held back a moan and whipped my head to look at him.

“Your mom made this?” I asked.

“Yea it’s good, isn’t it?” he said as he took a bite.

I looked toward the screen to see the movie started. A couple minutes passed and we were both done with our slices of cake and moved on to the bag of chips. Once in a while we’d fight over who got to hold it because we all know that once Tyler gets his hands on food, he’d finish it all up, not leaving me some. When we weren’t arguing over such ridiculous stuff, we just zoned into the movie. I snapped out of my daze when I realized that I was leaning against Tyler as his arms rested around my waist.

Wait, how did we get into this position?

I pulled away a bit so that I could get my own personal space but it only resulted in Tyler letting out a frustrated groan and pulling me to his lap.

Oh not again!

“Why do you keep doing this?” I asked trying to get off but he tightened his hold on me and rested my head on his chest.

“Shh, trying to concentrate on the movie,” he muttered as he played with a strand of my hair. I lifted my head to glare at him but his eyes were on the screen.

“But—”

“Not now, Gem.” He interrupted me and laid my head once again on his chest so that I was rested on him but could still see the TV screen. I grumbled to myself and wished that I had the guts to smack him right across the face but I knew I couldn’t. Not because it would be rude or anything but because I wasn’t really bothered when sitting on his lap. I just found it a bit weird and uncomfortable. And I don’t think I would be able to hurt him.

You see what’s happening to me?! Not a month ago, all I wanted to do was kill him in an empty alley but now I couldn’t bear the thought of him fighting with someone and getting hurt.

I’m getting too mushy.

Just sitting on his lap was very comfortable I almost felt myself dozing off but I wasn’t about to allow it. It would be just awkward falling asleep on his lap so I told myself to stay awake and concentrate on the movie. I was doing fine until Tyler lifted his hand, resting it on the top of my head and playing with my hair as he gave it a light massage.

Damn it! Why did this have to feel so good?

My thoughts were cut off when I felt my eyelids become heavy. It wasn’t that late but maybe I was worn out from all the running I did today. I closed

my eyes for a second and then opened them back, glancing at the screen as I felt Tyler rest his chin on my head. I rubbed my eyes and rested my head in the crook of his neck, just wanting to relax a bit.

Just for a few minutes that's all. No more than that and then I'll just go home.

I was wrong because the last thing I remembered before closing my eyes and welcoming the darkness was Tyler kissing my forehead and covering me with something soft. The heat of our body blending in with one another and for once I actually found my peace.

That night was the first peaceful and relaxing night I've ever slept in for about four years.

* * *

I raised my hand up in the air and smacked Tyler's sleeping face on the cheek. Remember when I said I didn't have the guts to hurt him? I take that back because I felt like giving him the crown of stupidity and throwing him into a kingdom of donkeys who would bowed down to his stupidity at the very moment.

Somebody, help this poor child before he would get thrown into jail for looking ugly because once I'm done with him, nobody will recognize Tyler Grey anymore.

Tyler's eyes shot open and sat up quickly as his hand went up to his cheek.

"Damn it woman! Even in the morning you're violent!" he grumbled in his husky morning voice.

"Oh sorry! Were you expecting me to wake you up with loving kisses and hand over your breakfast in bed?" I asked as he scratched the back of his neck.

"Hm, that kinda sounds nice," he said as he sent me a smirk but I glared at him and got off his bed.

"What crawled up your ass?" he asked as he got up and that's when I noticed his bare chest. I covered the blush that was trying to appear it's way up my face and sent him a pointed look.

"Why didn't you wake me up yesterday?" I asked walked towards where he was standing and crossed my arms.

“Because I didn’t want to. You looked so peaceful sleeping,” he said.

“Yea and you couldn’t leave me on the couch?” I asked.

“Now what kind of gentleman would I be if I did that?” he asked sending me a grin.

I let a huff out as I tried to decide what to say or do. I wasn’t mad but a little startled and really didn’t know what to do in a situation like this so I did what any genius would do. I flicked my nails on his forehead harshly and said, “You’re a nincompoop.”

I then turned around, ignoring the beautiful sound of his laughter and walked towards the door but his arms wrapped themselves around my waist like usual and pulled me to the nearest wall. He then rested both arms on either side of my head, encaging me in his embrace and rested his forehead against mine.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re beautiful when you’re mad?” he asked, sending me a charming smile.

My mouth fell open as my cheeks reddened. I was about to say something when his hand came to pick up a strand of hair from the top of my head.

“I mean just look at this bed hair! Definitely brings out the beast inside you!” He joked. I let out a gasp and punched his shoulders, only causing him to laugh even more. I crossed my arms and walked out from under his arm and to the door.

“I’ve had enough of you in one morning! I’m going home!”

“Oh, not so fast!” he said from behind me and pulled me to his chest as I groaned.

“What now?” I asked.

“You can’t leave without eating breakfast with me.” He pouted.

“I’ll eat breakfast at home,” I said and tried to pry his hands away but he turned me around and pushed me to the wall.

Again.

“No, eat with me,” he said sending me a puppy dog look. I reached over and pinched his nose causing him to say ‘ouch.’

“No,” I said.

“Oh come on! Do you make pancakes? It’s been forever since I’ve ate them and I’m dying to have them for breakfast,” he whined.

“Then you make it for yourself,” I said.

“But I don’t know how!”

“Great then you’ll die and I’ll finally be free of you.” I cheered.

“Oh come on please! Think of all the things I’ve done for you!” he said resting his forehead on mine once again.

“You’ve done nothing really.” I pointed out.

“Then think of the things I haven’t done for you.” He joked.

“Oh there’s so many,” I murmured.

“So will you eat breakfast with me?” he asked smiling.

“No! And what about your mom? What will she say when she sees me here?” I asked as my eyes widened. Shit! Totally forgot about that.

“She’s not even here! She leaves early.” Tyler pointed out.

I let a sigh of defeat escape my lips as I ran my hand over my face and through my hair.

“Fine, but only because I want you to stop talking and to leave me alone,” I said. This made him smile and nod his head eagerly. He pushed a strand of my hair behind my ears and pulled away from me.

“Awesome! I’ll be using the bathroom in the hall. You can use mine,” he said pointing to the door next to his closet. I nodded and watched Tyler walk to the door which led outside of his room.

“I’ll be waiting downstairs, Gem.” I heard him say before closing the door. I let a sigh out once I was finally alone. I then looked around his room and thought to myself how could I let this happen? How did I just stay overnight in Tyler’s room? Oh, once Matt hears about this, he was going to freak out!

Shaking my head I walked into Tyler’s bathroom to freshen up. My thoughts were occupied with Tyler and what just happened. His words and his actions never once failed to surprise me and they were all rewinding inside my head.

I swear that man will be the death of me!

CHAPTER 28

I walked into Tyler's bathroom to freshen up. Looking around, I noticed that his bathroom was pretty neat and had no feminine products which means I had to use his. After washing my face, I inspected the shampoo and was about to strip down to take a quick shower when I remembered I had no extra clothes. I was still in my sweaty sport clothes from yesterday and I probably smelled, so not taking a shower wasn't an option. But there was no way I'd step back into these shorts and smelly tank top. I was debating whether I should just ask Tyler for something to wear or steal one of his shirts because that was probably one of the best things I'm good at.

I was about to just walk into his closet and choose a random shirt when I realized that his mom was almost my size so I guess that could work. It was better than nothing. Not wanting to intrude on their privacy, I decided just to ask Tyler. Getting out of the bathroom after brushing my hair. I walked down the stairs to find Tyler because he wasn't in the bathroom in the hall. I was on the last step when I saw his back facing the opened front door. I then opened my mouth so that I could call out to him when I heard somebody speak from the outside. I couldn't see who that person was because Tyler had the door only opened halfway and was covering the entry with his big body. I might not have seen who he was talking to, yet I couldn't help but feel like I've heard it somewhere and it sounded so familiar.

"I heard you had a fight with him once again." I heard the stranger say. I could see Tyler running his hand through his hair frustratedly as he let out a sigh.

"Yes, it happened last night." Tyler grumbled out.

"How many times do we have to speak about this kid?" The familiar voice said.

“You guys are cousins! When will you start getting along?”

Tyler shrugged.

“The day when I finally tell her how I feel.” I heard him mutter sarcastically. I furrowed my eyebrows at what he said.

What did he mean by that?

“Huh?” The person outside said.

“Nothing, forget it,” Tyler said.

“Listen, I just came here to check up on you. It’s the least I could do after everything.”

“Thanks. I really appreciate it but it’s not necessary. You should really stop worrying uncle,” Tyler said.

Wait. Did he just say uncle?

“You know I can’t do that.” The person sighed.

“You are the only thing I have left after your father. He would have wanted me to look after you.” I saw a hand patting Tyler’s shoulder. Tyler nodded his head slowly as if he was thinking.

“So how’s your new job?” Tyler changed the subject. I shifted my weight not knowing what to do. I didn’t want to listen and pry into the private conversation he was obviously having with his uncle. I was about to go back upstairs and wait until he was done when his uncle spoke.

“It’s better than nothing lad! I really can’t thank you enough!”

Tyler was pulled outside of the house and into a hug. I only knew that because I saw a pair of hands wrap around his shoulders.

“Hey don’t mention it.” He chuckled.

“Well I have to get going. I start in twenty minutes.”

Tyler nodded and closed the front door before saying goodbye. Tyler was taken back a little when he turned around and saw me.

“Oh, you startled me. How long have you been standing there?” he asked.

“Not too long. Who was that?” I asked, walking towards him.

“My uncle. I guess my good for nothing cousin went to snitch on me because he was here to check up on me,” Tyler answered as he ran his hands through his hair.

“Is there any reason why you guys despise each other?” I asked without even thinking. Maybe it was something personal and I just put myself in an awkward position.

“I guess you can say that. It’s just him in general. Completely shut off on me after a certain accident and blames everyone around him for it.” Tyler didn’t answer my question completely but I wasn’t going to insist and pressure him. If he wanted to tell me then he would but at this moment he needed time and space. Besides, it wasn’t like we were best friends now just because we slept on the same bed. Thinking about it made my face go red.

It happened so fast I couldn’t even process how I let myself get to the point I was in. I became comfortable with Tyler and would sometimes find myself admiring him and his good looks. I came to fear that sooner or later I’d become attached to him and worse! Like him!

This was the very first time I let my mind race to such decisions. I couldn’t believe what I was thinking! Me liking Tyler didn’t seem impossible. Yes, it was the last thing I wanted a month ago but that was before I spent time with him and actually getting to know the real Tyler behind all those years of bullying. If I did like him, would he return my feelings? Would he go back to the old Tyler who tried to gain my attention by calling me names and pushed me to the ground?

I shook my head. Why was I asking myself all these questions as if I actually had feelings for him? I mean, it wasn’t like I don’t. I certainly didn’t despise him as much as I used to but I did like him as a friend kind of way. I know, very confusing.

“Why are you blushing? And I thought I told you to get ready?” Tyler asked snapping me out of my own little world as he looked at me up and down.

“Oh yea about that,” I said as I scratched the back of my neck.

“I don’t have anything to wear other than these.” I pointed to my sport wear which I bet you could smell from a mile away.

“You can borrow some of mine,” Tyler said as he took a hold of my hand and walked us to the stairs.

“Uh . . . actually I was thinking of just borrowing some of your mom’s,” I suggested but he shook his head.

“It’s okay. I don’t mind you wearing mine,” he said as he dragged me up the stairs.

“That’s really not necessary. Besides I don’t think they’ll fit me. At least your mom’s right.” I pointed out but Tyler just has a thick skull. I should have already known him by now and not bother.

“I get my smallest pair and I don’t think my mom will appreciate me going into her room and look into her closet.”

“But—”

“No buts! You’re going to wear mine, period!” Tyler insisted. He then led me up to his room and into his closet. He took out his smallest pair of sweatpants and t-shirt. When I say smallest pair then I mean his smallest pair not mine because once I got a hold of them I opened my mouth but ended up closing it.

What the hell? His shirt was huge. I mean the sweatpants did look like they could fit me if I just tied the waistbands together but his shirt looked like a dress to me.

I looked up at Tyler and lifted an eyebrow.

“What?” he asked.

“Your smallest pair huh?”

“Take it or leave it.”

“I’ll leave it.” I joked and threw the clothes at his face. He grabbed a hold of them and glared at me. Tyler then took a hold of my hand and dragged me to his bathroom.

“Clean up and put these on.” I opened my mouth to protest but he growled at me.

“Open that pretty little mouth of yours one more time and I’ll have to shut it up using another strategy.”

I immediately closed my mouth as my eyes widened. I felt my cheeks heat up.

Did he just threaten to kiss me? Did he or was it just me? Why was I even assuming this? He didn’t really say that he was going to kiss me. Not that I would let him!

Rolling my eyes at the thought, I grabbed the clothes from him and slammed the door but not before seeing his everyday grin. I let a huff out as I locked the door and observed myself in the mirror. Yea, I didn’t care that I was in Tyler’s bathroom, I needed a shower. I stripped out of my smelly sport clothes, I jumped into the shower and cleaned my body from all the dirt and the sweat. I grabbed the towel from the hanger and dried myself.

Getting into Tyler’s clothes felt like me getting into a trash bag because of the size. I couldn’t walk without Tyler’s sweatpants falling down, I let my hair down to dry. I opened the door and saw Tyler sitting on his bed

waiting for me. Crossing my arms under my chest, I was expecting him to laugh because of how silly I looked but instead his eyes shined when they laid eyes on me. He got up and walked over to me as a satisfied smile took over his face, nodding his head in approval. Why on earth did he look like some kind of mother checking her daughters report card with straight A's?

"You look—"

"Ridiculous?" I said.

"I was going to say '*awesome*' but okay. Let's go with that," he said as he wrapped his arms around my waist, pulled me closer to his chest, and started to lead me out of his room.

"Yea, I'd rather stick with Matt's clothes," I muttered more to myself but I think Tyler heard because he stopped and stared down at me.

"No, I think my clothes look better on you," he said as his eyes raked over my body.

"Says who?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Tyler said as he continued to drag me down the stairs and to the kitchen.

"Would you mind if I stole this?" I asked pointing at his comfortable shirt.

I was running out of Matt's clothes that I've stolen when he took them back. I could use a new one that smelled like Tyler . . . I couldn't help but inhale his scent.

"Really?" he asked.

"Yea sure."

Tyler looked like he was trying to act cool but I could sense the joy and delight in his tone. Oh, and let's not forget about the hint of blush crawling up his neck. Nodding my head, I sat on the stool as Tyler looked around the kitchen as he shuffled through the cupboards looking for the stuff I need to make his stupid pancakes.

He then gave me a nervous sexy smile as he scratched the back of his neck.

Why the hell did he have to be so sexy?

"What's wrong?" I asked, trying to resist the urge to tackle him to the ground and kiss those pink lips.

God, what was happening to me?

"Um . . . you see . . ."

“Go on . . .” I insisted.

“We ran out of butter.”

“Huh?”

“You heard me. I forgot that tomorrow was grocery day.”

I groaned to myself as I ran my hand over my face.

“I guess we’ll just have to eat eggs then,” I said.

I was about to lean over to open the fridge when Tyler pulled me back, turning me around and facing him.

“No!” he said stubbornly, sounding like a child.

“No?”

“No!”

“What do you mean? What else do you want to eat for breakfast? Bacon?”

“No! I want pancakes!” he whined as he pushed me against the counter with his arms resting on both sides, encaging me.

“But we have nothing to make them.” I pointed out.

The look of disappointment washed over his face when he was thinking. His eyes lightened up and looked like a kid who found a pot of cookies. He then grabbed my hand and pulled me out of the kitchen to his front door.

“Here’s the plan,” he said. “I’ll take you home to get dressed and then we’ll head out for breakfast.”

“You’re taking me out?”

“That’s what I said,” he said as he opened his front door and put his keys in his pocket. I was still dumbfounded by the time he dragged me to my place. I didn’t know what this meant. Was this a normal get-together with a friend or was this supposed to be a date? Should I wear something casual or a dress? I didn’t know! The only thing I knew was that I shouldn’t have been too concerned about it but I couldn’t help it! It was the very first time I went out with him without a group of friends.

Tyler then took out my keys from his pocket and opened my front door. Don’t ask why my keys were with him. Okay fine, I gave it to him because I was afraid it would get lost in his baggy clothes.

Tyler wasn’t being himself. He wouldn’t try to do something that would make me get hurt even if he was being such a pain in the ass. It seemed like we have learned to like each other and I became used to seeing him every

day. I wouldn't know what I would be doing without meeting him, other than annoying Matt which eventually became boring.

Tyler walked into my place as if he owned it. He then sat down and looked at me.

"As much as I would like you to stay in my clothes all day, Gem, I'm really hungry and want my pancakes," he said, pointing at the clock hanging on the wall. I looked down at the clothes I was wearing.

"What's so appealing about these?" I asked.

"They suit you . . ." he said, trying to control himself from laughing.

"Really?"

"No, but it shows what's mine."

"Yours?"

He got up and walk toward me. He then placed his hand on my shoulder, and patted it gently as if I was a child crying.

"It's okay, Gem. I know it's confusing but you'll find out soon."

"What do you—"

He flipped me around and pushed me towards the stairs.

"Go, before I die of hunger right on your living room floor!"

"That would be a dream come true," I whispered to myself.

"I heard that!" he yelled, his voice disappearing as I ran up the stairs.

Geez! What was he a werewolf with special ears? Shaking my head, I couldn't help but smile. I was heading out to eat breakfast with him and this time I didn't feel like ripping my own hair out.

Well, that's new. If I went back into time and told my old self that, I would certainly get smacked in the face by myself.

I dashed into my room, not wanting to keep Tyler waiting or else he would probably barge in here while I'm half naked and drag me out. It just didn't sound like him. I mean, I wasn't stupid! I could tell that he had become overprotective but what I couldn't understand why?

Wait . . . could he? No, of course not! This was Tyler I was talking about!

Shaking the silly thoughts out of my head I walked into my closet and chose to wear something casual. I grabbed a pair of shorts and a crop top. I was just about to change when Matt called on the phone

"Hey," I answered.

"Sup, shortie!"

“Why does it sound like you’re so far away?”

“I’m helping Troy and Jasmine get ready for their party.”

“Oh, I see—wait what, party?” I asked, walking out of my closet and locking my bedroom door.

“A pool party.”

“Huh? How come no one told me about this?”

“It was unexpected but it’s a perfect time since the weather’s nice today.”

“Okay, who’s invited?”

It’s been a while since I’ve been in the waters, and the thought of doing it with my friends sounded awesome.

“A bunch of friends from school,” he answered and I suddenly felt anxious. It wasn’t that I was worried on what the people from school would think, but I was concerned on how they would treat me now that I no longer had extra fat in my body. These people were the same students who used to humiliate me and I could still recall all those years of torture.

What would have happened if I didn’t lose all those fats? What on earth was going to happen if I didn’t resort to running?

I tried to get myself together and told myself that they don’t deserve my attention. They don’t deserve the tears I’ve shed for pleasing them until I gave up. They weren’t worth it and I was going to show it. I was going to wear whatever pleases me and wouldn’t give a damn.

The bullying and picking stopped. They ignored me as if I wasn’t there, though I was not saying it was a bad thing. I just found it funny when they used to be mean and had suddenly changed.

“Hello? You there?” Thankfully, Matt’s voice broke me away from my thoughts

This wasn’t the time to recollect the past. I promised myself not to run away from any struggles. I told myself not to allow anyone step over me, and I was certain that it wouldn’t be difficult with my friends by my side and Tyler. These genuine friends would never let me down and they have been with me since the beginning and though I hate to admit it, the same goes to Tyler. I became a better person with them.

“Oh yea I hear ya! Listen I have to go. Tyler’s waiting for me downstairs,” I said.

“What? Why is he at your place on a Saturday morning?”

“It’s a long story. Don’t have time for that.”

“Fine but you better bring him with you this afternoon.”

“Okay fine. Where’s the party at?”

“Troy’s place. I’ll send you the address.”

I got dressed quickly and put aside Tyler’s clothes on my bed.

What? He did say I could have them.

“Why did you take so long? I was about to drag your ass downstairs no matter what you were wearing,” Tyler said, standing at the door of my bedroom.

“God be patient for once! I only took five minutes to get ready.”

“Yea five minutes that were damn long! I’m starving woman! Do you really want me to die?”

“All you think about is food! How are you not fat?” I asked as I poked his rib.

Probably was a bad move because I saw him smirking down at me. What did I do?

“Is that you confessing that I’m sexy?”

“I never said that!”

“You didn’t say no!”

I let a huff out as I stepped aside and walked toward the stairs, ignoring him. He grabbed my hand and pushed me against the wall.

How many times had he done that in one day?

“Just admit it! I’m the sexiest person you’ve ever laid eyes on.”

I shook my head.

“Hell no!”

“Oh, come on! Just say it!”

“I’ll do that when pigs start to fly!”

What’s with me and the pigs flying?

“Just once!” he said as he rested his forehead against mine.

“Why are you so persistent?”

“Why are you so stubborn?”

“It’s in my genes,” I replied, then pushed him back and walked towards the stairs.

Tyler followed me down the stairs, cursing. My thoughts went flying out the window when I was turned upside down and over Tyler’s shoulders.

“AH! WHAT THE HELL?” I screamed over Tyler’s laughter.

“PUT ME DOWN THIS INSTANT!” I yelled as I pounded my fists on his back.

“Not until you say the magic word!” he said as he twirled me around making me squeal as I held onto his shirt because of the dizziness.

“Tyler put me down, I’m getting dizzy!”

“Not unless I hear the magic word!” He laughed spinning me on his shoulder even faster.

“TYLER IS THE MOST STUBBORN ASSHOLE IVE EVER MET!”

“Wrong answer,” he said as he flipped me on my living room’s couch and hovered over me. He tickled the life out of me and my laughter echoed through the place.

“Say it!”

“N-n-never!”

“You asked for it!” he said as he tickled me some more, making my stomach hurt.

My vision began to blur because of the tears coming out as I laughed and screamed hysterically. I knew I couldn’t go on any longer so I gave up.

“Okay fine fine! You got me!”

“Tyler is the sexiest person on earth!”

“I can’t hear you!” Tyler laughed out.

“YOU STUBBORN ASSHOLE! YOU’RE DAMN SEXY! YOU HEAR ME NOW YOU BASTARD?!”

I let a breath of relief out as he released his hold from my stomach.

“I hate you,” I whispered as I tried to bury him six feet underground with my eyes.

“Love you too,” he sent me a charming smile then looked at the time in his phone.

“Come on, Gem, I’m hungry. Lets go,” Tyler said.

“I’d rather die!”

Tyler narrowed his eyes.

“Oh really? Would you like me to tickle you again?”

I got up quickly as I dashed to my front door. I then opened it and ran outside while Tyler followed behind me as he chuckled.

“I still hate you,” I said.

“Sure you do. Even after you confessed your undying love for me.”

“I said no such thing.” I hissed.

“You sure? I’m sure the whole neighborhood heard you scream your confession.” He pointed out as he dropped his arm on my shoulder and pulled me closer.

“Someone kill me now!” I whispered to myself.

“Where’s the fun in that?”

“Tell me, why am I having breakfast with you?” I asked as we walked toward my car.

“Because you love me!”

“I don’t see any pigs flying anywhere,” I said, looking up into the sky as if I was searching for something.

“Huh?”

I stopped walking and looked up at him then placed my hand on his shoulder as I patted it gently.

“It’s okay Tyler. I know it’s confusing but you’ll find out soon.” I mimicked what he had said earlier today causing him to roll his eyes. We then hopped into my car and started the engine.

I drove down the road while Tyler was giving me the direction to the place he wanted to eat at. I obeyed silently so I could get rid of him and stop hearing him whine about his stupid pancakes. I then stopped at a traffic light.

“Oh, there’s a pool party this afternoon at Troy’s place and you’re invited,” I said.

“Cool. What’s it for?”

“Nothing really. Just for fun I guess.”

A moment of silence passed and I decided to break it. “Do you remember in the fifth grade when we were at a friend’s birthday party and you pushed me into the icy, cold pool and ruined my new dress?” I asked as the memories came flowing back to my mind.

My mom spent so much money on that dress and I got excited when somebody invited me to a pool party for the first time. I was standing near the pool as I watched the kids played, not knowing how I was going to approach them. Some of Tyler’s friends started to pick on how I looked in my dress. They called me fat, ugly, and disgusting. I was about to walk away from them when Tyler pushed me into the pool. Did I mention that it was winter? I left home early that day with a cold—

“I never pushed you on purpose.”

“What?” I breathed out.

“I said, I never meant to push you in that pool. It was a mistake.”

“What do you mean?” I asked as I flickered my eyes to him then back at the road. I could feel the tension fill the car. It was so thick, I swear I could have cut it with a knife.

“Do you remember the dress you wore?”

“Yea, obviously. It was one of my favorites.”

“It had a zipper on the side which kept it in place because it was strapless right?”

“Well earlier I heard my ‘friends’ saying that they were going to zip it down and pour some ice down your dress and recorded you as you screamed. Then they agreed on pushing you into the pool,” Tyler confessed as I saw his eyes flash in anger.

“I was outraged when I heard it. I only wanted to stop them so I came to you.”

I was flabbergasted as I continued to listen.

“And you did that to prevent most of my humiliation,” I whispered.

“Yea, but before I could turn around to face them, I slipped, pushing you by accident,” Tyler said as he bit his lip.

I stared at him for a moment until I realized that I was still driving. I felt a small smile form on my face when I realized that Tyler didn’t actually mean it. Yes I did go home that day feeling horrible but knowing that he actually prevented everyone humiliating me further made my heart swell.

“So you never meant it?” I asked.

He shook his head.

“Yes I was mean but I wasn’t that cruel! I knew my limits but sadly sometimes I would go overboard,” he said as he looked out the window.

Why did I get the feeling he was talking about the last time I saw him in school before I moved? I couldn’t just let the awkward silence take over as our brains filled with the sad and painful memories of our childhood. My mouth moved on its own free will and said something I’d never thought I’d actually say to his face.

“Tyler?”

“Hm?”

“I don’t hate you.”

He whipped his head to look at me as a happy smile took over his face. His eyes lightened up but were soon replaced by his ordinary look of amusement. He gave me his smirk I couldn't go one day without seeing.

"I know! As I said before. The whole neighborhood heard." He winked at me, causing me to glare at him.

There is the never serious Tyler I know and hate! Gosh! For once I wanted him to be serious.

Shaking my head as I ignored the blush creeping up my neck, I looked back at the road while trying to ignore the stare Tyler was burning in the side of my head.

Let's just get his stupid damn pancakes so that I could get rid of that damn sexy face.

Sexy and annoying shouldn't go good together! But why would it fit his category so well?

CHAPTER 29

As we stepped out of my car, Tyler walked up right next to me and held my hand. He dragged me into the place as if he was going to die if he didn't eat any minute now. Rolling my eyes, I let him drag me through the glass doors as if I was a rag doll.

My mouth fell open at the sight of the place. It was full. And when I say full, I mean it looked like all the popular kids from school were here. A bunch of teenagers took up most of the seats as their laughter filled the air. If it wasn't for Tyler's strong hold on me, I would have probably backed away slowly and rushed back to my car because one thing was certain.

I didn't belong here.

Not where there were popular people who hung around the 'hot girls' and 'sexy dudes' as they gossiped about others. This place wasn't that bad and if I had my own group, I would also be having fun. But coming here alone made me feel like I was standing out, as if this place didn't belong to me.

Tyler's hands were rubbing circles on my back making me realize that I was wrong. I didn't come here alone. Tyler was with me and his arms were around me without me realizing it. I looked up to see him give me a warm smile which I couldn't help but stare in confusion. Don't get me wrong. His smile was beautiful but I was used to seeing his teasing smirk and everyday grin. Seeing this foreign smile kind of took me back a little.

I realized that Tyler was trying to reassure me. I guess he knew that I somehow didn't like being in a place full of people who put name tags on others. That was one of the reasons why I hang out at the back of the cafeteria with Matt and my friends.

"Are you going to keep staring at me as if you saw *Beyoncé* in person or do I have to drag you to a table myself so I can get my freakin' pancakes?"

Tyler's voice brought me back to reality. Rolling my eyes as I shook my head at him, I pushed back the blush when I realized I was staring at Tyler for longer than necessary.

Man, I would have to get rid of this habit of mine.

"Don't get ahead of yourself, buddy," I said, as we walked to the register to order the damn pancakes we've come here for.

"That's kind of hard when you're staring at me as if I'm your next meal."

My mouth fell open.

"I was not!"

"Yes you were!"

"No I wasn't!"

"Fine say that if it helps you sleep at night."

"I was only thinking."

"Of how much you love me?" he asked in a teasing tone.

"No. I wanted to drag you into the woods and bury you alive without anybody noticing you gone so I could move to Japan," I said as I smiled up at him.

"That's impossible because I'd still be haunting you after death." He winked.

"So, what you're saying is I'll never get rid of you. Even after you die?" I asked in horror.

"Oh, come on. You say it like it's a bad thing. You know you like it."

I noticed that we were in the front of the line as the guy behind the cashier and some students from behind us gave us annoyed looks.

"Are you going to order what you want or are you going to keep the line waiting all day?" he asked.

Tyler rolled his eyes and looked like he was about to say some stupid comeback that would probably get us kicked out of the place, leaving me with him whining about not eating his god damn pancakes! So, I jabbed him in the stomach with my elbow causing him to hiss in pain.

"Uh yea, we would like two of number three," I said as, I pointed to the sign which had a pancake picture on it, trying to ignore Tyler's mutter in pain standing next to me.

"They'll be sent to your table in ten minutes," the guy said before I dragged Tyler to an empty table.

“What are your elbows made out of? Steel?” he asked as he shook his head.

I rolled my eyes.

“You’re exaggerating.”

“Sometimes I think you hate me,” Tyler said under his breath a bit too dramatically as he ran his hand through his hair. I had to close my mouth from drooling because he looked so damn hot doing that. I don’t know what came over me but remembering that I woke up in his arms today made me blush.

Ugh, why was I thinking about that? It was a mistake and would never happen again! But if it was a mistake then why didn’t it feel wrong? Today was so different then my other days. I laughed so hard this morning, well it was Tyler’s fault since he was the one tickling me in the first place but you get the point!

Tyler’s presence just made me feel even more alive.

“Oh you just noticed that right now?”

“Gem! I thought we went over this already!”

“The day you stop calling me “Gem” is the day I’ll stop hating you.”

“Then I guess I should give up then because that day will never come.”

“Really you’re going to give up?”

Tyler looked at me as if I’m crazy.

“Geez I was kidding. Why should I try in the very beginning if I know you’re lying?” He scoffed.

“What? I’m not lying.”

“Yes, you are. End of story.” Tyler gave me a pointed look once I opened my mouth. Rolling my eyes, I crossed arms and looked away. Why does he always have to affect me? I looked back at Tyler once I heard his phone buzz in his pocket.

Lifting an eyebrow, I watched him take it out and read a message someone sent him. Not sure why but his mood suddenly lifted up and smirked to himself as he closed his phone. His smirk got even bigger when his eyes made contact with mine.

“What?” I asked.

“That was Matt,” he said

“Okay . . .”

“And he told me about the pool party today.”

“So why are you looking at me like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like you’re one of those clowns in the woods ready to kill me with your freakin’ axe.”

He laughed. I mean his eyes opened wide as his mouth led out a cheerful laugh.

“Of all things, you compare me to that?” he asked between breaths.

I gave him a pointed look.

“Are you going to keep laughing or are you going to tell me?” I asked.

When the waiter came with our pancakes in his hands, I couldn’t help but lick my lips at that delicious sight in front of me and I’m pretty sure Tyler was thinking the same thing because his eyes followed the plate like an eagle. Once the waiter was gone, I didn’t waste any time taking the first bite as I let out a small moan of satisfaction. These were so damn good.

“As I was saying,” he said, as he wiped off some syrup from the corner of his lips.

“Matt told me about your lack of sense of fashion.” He grinned.

I groaned to myself as I ran my hands over my face.

Please don’t tell me we are doing this right now! Please no! Anything but this!

I was going to strangle Matt when I got my hands on him.

“Please don’t tell me what I think you’re going to say.” I groaned.

“We . . .”

“Don’t!”

“Are going to . . .”

“Stop!” I yelled

“Go . . .”

I placed my hands over my ears, shaking my head.

“La la la! I’m not listening!”

“Bikini shopping!” he yelled as he threw his hands up in the air and started laughing.

“No!” I yelled as I placed my hands over my face.

“The horror! Anything but that!”

I was so thankful we sat next to a window in the back so that nobody could hear our conversation or else they would probably think we were some crazy teenagers that needed to visit a doctor.

“Oh, come on! It’s not that bad.” He assured me but I couldn’t help but glare at him.

“We are not going bikini shopping if it’s the last thing I do!”

“Do you have any at home?” He grinned. I blinked a few times as I tried to remember.

“That’s none of your business.” I pointed out.

“So, you don’t? Then that leaves us no choice but to go buy some.”

“I’ll do it myself! I don’t need your help.” I glared at him.

“Well you’re not getting rid of me that easily,” he spoke before taking another bite from his pancakes.

I stayed glaring at him as I shoved some food into my mouth before I could say something I would have regretted later on. This was surely going to be a very long day.

Once we were done with breakfast, I was finally at peace because Tyler wasn’t whining like a baby. We paid for our food and walked out of the place all while I continued to send daggers at the side of his head but Tyler didn’t seem to mind it because he shoved his hands into his pockets while whistling as if today was going to be the best day of his life.

He lead me back to my car but before I could open the driver’s door, he took the keys from my hand and got into my place. My mouth fell open as I stared at him.

“What are you doing? I’m supposed to be the one driving us home!” I said.

He shook his head and looked at the time on his wristwatch.

“We aren’t going home Gem. We got a couple of hours before the party starts and we need to get you something to wear.” He grinned.

I blinked as I tried to register what he was just saying. God he was so stubborn!

“Why don’t you just give up! There’s no way I’m going bikini shopping with you!” I hissed as I grabbed his arm, trying to pull him out of my seat but he was as heavy as a rock it wouldn’t even budge.

“Gem, relax! We are only going to get you something appropriate to wear. No big deal.” Tyler assured me but I only shook my head.

If anyone was as stubborn as Tyler then that would be me. I took a hold of his upper arm and put them over my shoulder hoping that I’d be stronger like this, then pulled. It was probably was a bad idea because he just yanked

his arm back, causing me to stumble backwards and landing on his lap. I opened my eyes, silently thanking that Tyler's lap was there to cushion my fall. Not like I fell in the first place but I did end up laying in his lap which was pretty awkward. I looked up and blinked once to see him looking down at me with an amused expression.

"You done yet?" he asked.

I glared at him before letting out a huff. I got off his lap and turned around, crossing my arms under my chest.

"You won't say 'no' will you?" I asked in frustration.

He shook his head and sent me a charming smile.

"Fine but only one hour! And that's it!" I hissed.

Tyler let out a chuckle before nodding his head.

"One hour is enough," he said.

I glared at him one last time as he sent me a wink before slamming the door closed, and hit his nose. I saw the look of pain flash on his face as he held his red nose. He glared at me through the window as I sent him an innocent smile as I shrugged my shoulders. He rubbed the soreness of his nose as he signaled me to get in. I sent him a wink before walking around my car and into the seat next to him. I looked out the window as my car purred to life. Tyler then drove to the nearest mall as he hummed to himself happily.

Why on earth was he this happy to buy me a freakin' bikini in the first place?

Oh, never mind, Do not answer that question.

Once he had my car parked into place, I hopped out of my car and made sure Tyler locked it before walking into the entrance doors.

Let's just get this over with before I could die from embarrassment!

We walked to the nearest shop and looked around as I tried to ignore Tyler's immature comments. Did you know what I wanted to do at that very moment? Grab an axe and chop his head off but I knew he was just too damn sexy for that. Poor me! Why did I have to get stuck with him of all situations.

'You know you like it' That little annoying voice inside my head said.

Since when did you get here?

Okay I'm officially going nuts . . .

I was brought out of my thoughts when I saw a cute bikini hanging on a hanger next to other ones. I saw a bunch of bikinis but this one caught my attention. I rushed over to it, ignoring Tyler who was following right behind me. I studied the cute black two-piece. I smiled to myself as I imagined myself wearing it. I got to say it showed a lot of skin but it was a pool party after all. And I'm pretty sure others will show much more than I would.

I took a hold of the fabric and nodded my head. I wanted this one. I was about to turn around to tell Tyler that we were done for the day when he snatched the bikini from my hand.

"No." He growled as he placed it back on the hanger.

My mouth fell open as I stared at him.

"What?" I asked.

"Not that one! Choose another one," he ordered before turning me around to face the other bikinis.

"Why?" I asked.

"That one was perfectly fine," I whined.

"I said no."

I groaned to myself and muttered a 'whatever'. There were a bunch of other bikinis here and I had a bunch of other choices to choose from. I also didn't want Tyler's grumpiness ruining my day so I decided to ignore him. I walked over to a bright yellow bikini that didn't show much skin as the previous one but it was still nice.

"Too bright. Will attract too much attention." Tyler swatted his hands as if telling me not to choose that one. Rolling my eyes I looked around and saw a one piece swimsuit that had laces coming down from the back.

"Nope. Too tight." Tyler argued.

I let a groan out. *Was it bad that I wanted to punch him right now?*

I walked over to red bikini that looked pretty sexy. I was about to reach for it when Tyler slapped my hand away.

"Definitely not that. The color is too alluring!" He grumbled as he wrapped his hands around my stomach and turned me around. I glared at him before punching his chest.

"How on earth do you expect me to buy a damn bikini if you keep saying no! Are you my father?" I asked as I placed one of my hand on my hip.

Tyler rolled his eyes.

“I’m just helping you! All those you chose were hideous! I knew Matt was right but I didn’t know you were that bad at choosing,” he said.

I grumbled to myself as I pinched his shoulders in an angry manner.

“Fine! If you’re so much better than me then you choose,” I said as I waved my hand in the air.

“Why I’ll be delighted.”

I stepped aside as I watched Tyler look around for the perfect bikini. It took him a while to actually pick one. It looked like he didn’t even want to but I knew that he was too stubborn to back down now. I waited on the side as I watched him inspect each piece. Sometimes, he would stare at one and shake his head as if he was saying a big ‘no way!’

After what seemed to be forever, he chose a dark blue bikini which didn’t show off my chest area that much. I wasn’t saying I was complaining though, but I liked its long fabric coming down from the bottom piece like a removable skirt. It would make feel less conscious. I didn’t want to admit to Tyler that I actually liked it or else he would get a little too cocky so I nodded my head and simply shrugged my shoulders.

“That’s fine,” I muttered as I took it from his hands and inspected it even closer.

I loved the feeling of the fabric.

“Fine?” he asked. “It’s perfect,” he corrected me.

I rolled my eyes.

“Yea, yea, whatever. Can we just go now?” I asked changing the subject.

He nodded and placed his hand on my lower back as he guided me to the cashier. After paying for my bikini, we walked out of the mall and to my car. We decided to go home and get ready so that we could be on time and help Jasmine and Troy around. It was a quiet ride home but very relaxing. I tried to ignore the looks Tyler would shoot me every now and then as I hummed to myself.

I kept my eyes on the window and I watched the trees and building fall behind us as we got closer to my house. Once Tyler parked my in the drive-through, we hopped out.

“I’ll pick you up in an hour,” Tyler said.

“Uh that’s not neces—”

“Just listen to what I say without arguing for once.”

I shook my head as if letting him pick my own bikini wasn't enough for me to be 'listening' to him. I was afraid I would strangle him any minute and kiss the life out of hi—

What the hell was I thinking?!

I walked through my front door as I hit my head with my fist. Tyler had been in my head these past few days and he was affecting me. I didn't know whether it was a good or bad thing. His continuous presence has taken over me.

Shaking my head, I reached for my phone and saw a text from Sydney, asking if I was going to the party at Troy's place. After texting her 'yes', I walked upstairs to the second floor then slowly into my parents' dusty old room.

I swallowed the lump in my throat as I closed the door slowly staring at the empty bed by parents once shared. I knew I had to come in here more often but it was too painful. I found myself dodging the subject so many times so that I could just ignore the pain but what I was doing was disrespecting my parents. I had to make sure this room stayed clean so that I could feel their presence.

Pushing back the tears threatening to fall, I embraced the pain in my heart, and grabbed the towel I brought with me, along with the spray I used to clean the dust. Starting with the windows, I wiped it clean to see my reflection. I had to do it even though I had a party waiting for me.

I was going to wear a bikini in less than an hour. I know I wasn't forced to wear it but I wanted to. I wanted to show myself that I was not the old me anymore and I thought I would feel accomplished by wearing it.

Moving away from everybody had changed everything in me, but not the way I feel. At some point, I felt happy for what I had become but empty at the same time without my parents. Cleaning my parents' room made me feel like my old self in some weird way.

Pushing the thoughts into the back of my head, I finished cleaning the room before getting dressed into a simple floral dress over my bikini. I then braided my hair into a fishtail and did not wear makeup. I would be in the waters anyway.

I was walking down the stairs holding my bag in my hand when I heard a car honking from outside my door. Knowing it was Tyler, I put on my sandals and walked out of my place. After locking my front door, I hopped

into Tyler's car. Tyler was wearing a white t-shirt and shorts that came to his knees.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Yup."

It didn't take long before we made it to Troy's house. It looked pretty big and I could already hear the music blasting from the backyard. I felt chills run down my spine as I jumped out of the car and smelt the fresh air. The weather was perfect for this! And I couldn't wait to get into the cold water.

I looked at Tyler who was walking beside me to the front door with a smile on his face. He grabbed my hand and twirled our fingers together as if it was a normal thing. I couldn't help but feel my heart jump up in excitement. He did it as if it was an everyday thing and I kind of liked it.

Once Troy opened the door and saw us, he gave each one of us a hug. I didn't fail to notice his eyes flicker to our hands which caused the grin on his face to get bigger. I was not sure why I didn't pull away with everyone staring at us. All I knew was I liked it and his presence brought me peace. So instead of pushing it away, I welcomed it with open arms. We wasted no time in heading to the back yard where the pool was and greeted all our friends.

"So happy you guys made it. The changing room is over there. You can get changed so that Matt could bring out the food and start the barbecue," Troy said.

We nodded and pulled apart awkwardly as we rushed to change into our clothes. I felt the excitement inside me increase when Troy mentioned food.

Hey, don't blame me! That was one of the most important things in a party! After removing my dress, I made sure my bikini was in place and kept the skirt that looked pretty cool. Tyler didn't have any fashion sense. I took a deep breath and walked towards the pool to see Matt smiling. I sent him a glare and flipped him off causing him to laugh.

"I hate you," I said causing him to laugh even harder.

"I know you do." He grinned as he pinched my cheek. I slapped his hand away and was about to say something when my attention was pulled to someone else.

Holy shit!

I felt my mouth fall open as I stared at Tyler walking towards as with a smirk on his face. I forcefully closed my mouth as I tried not to drool for the second time today. He was wearing dark blue swimming trunks that matched the color of mine with his chest on display.

“Like what you see?” he asked as Matt walked away, trying to avoid this awkwardness.

I was so tempted to say ‘yes’ but refrained from it.

“You know that line is the most cliché line I’ve ever heard in my entire life?” I asked instead.

“I know,” he said grinning at me as he dropped his arm on my shoulder, and leaned to whisper something in my ear.

“But you know you like it.”

I do.

“No I don’t.” I shoved his face away from mine and walked towards the pool.

“Feisty as ever!” I heard him say from behind me.

“But you know you like it.” I mimicked what he said.

“Yes I do!” He shook his head as I glared at him.

I then sat at the edge of the pool as I dropped my feet into the water, wanting to get used to the coldness before I actually began swimming. Tyler sat next to me and did the same thing. I tried not to look or stare at his chest, not wanting to give him the satisfaction.

“Told you I knew what I was doing.”

“Huh?” I asked.

“I’m talking about what you’re wearing. Got better fashion taste than you’ll ever have.” He joked making me punch his shoulder playfully.

“Shut up.”

“Oh, come on just admit it! You like it.” He poked my cheek.

“Yes okay fine it’s nice. Happy?” I asked.

Tyler was about to say something when Troy called out to him. We both got up but I was only going to take the skirt off so that I could swim. Looking at the pool, it wasn’t that crowded but I recognized some basketball players from school. I turned around to unclip the skirt when a big rough hand stopped me. I looked up to see Tyler looking down at me.

“Don’t take it off. At least not yet,” he ordered.

“Why?” I asked.

“I need to help Troy with something. Just wait until I get back and then we could swim together.”

I didn't know what to do so I just stood standing there like a statue. I then turned my head toward the pool when I heard someone called my name. I looked down to see a cute guy in the water waving at me with a bunch of guys surrounding him. They all stared at me from head to toe, but I ignored their stares and focused my attention on the guy who called out to me. He had curly black hair which looked familiar.

“Hey,” I greeted.

“What are you waiting for? The water is cool, get in,” Ryder said.

I bit my lips and felt unsure if I should get in. I mean why shouldn't I? Tyler wasn't my boyfriend so I guess it was okay for me to get in without him. Was he even harmful? Nodding my head, I took off the skirt and jumped into the pool.

I let out a surprised squeal as my skin made contact with the cold water. It took a while for me to get used to it but when I was about to swim forward, I was yanked back behind a large body. Looking up, I recognized the muscular back to be Tyler's. Well that was fast.

“I thought I told you to wait for me?” he hissed.

“What's the problem?” I asked.

“The problem is that you took off the skirt without me being there to cover you,” he said as he blocked me from a guys' view. What was he talking about?

“I'm perfectly fine.” I said.

“Well, I'm not,” he said, as he pulled me out of the pool and wrapped the skirt around me then dragged me to the changing room.

“Dude what's your problem?” I asked when everyone was out of sight. It was as if I flipped a switch because Tyler suddenly looked very angry. What did I do?

“My problem is that you attract so much attention,” he said.

I held in my breath as he pushed me against the wall.

“My problem is that every guy out there was watching you.”

I felt my heart beat even faster as his angry face came closer to mine and laid his forehead on mine.

“My problem is that no one can take a damn hint.” He growled.

I opened my mouth to say something but he spoke once again.

“My problem is that you don’t see it.”

“See what?” I breathed out quietly.

“That you’re damn mine and only mine,” he said before smashing his lips onto mine.

CHAPTER 30

I froze for what seemed like an eternity. Everything just happened so fast and I didn't know how to react.

I was ready to swim five minutes ago but now; Tyler was kissing me!

Holy shit! Does he like me?

I wanted to pinch myself to check if I was dreaming but he was holding my hands in place. Should I push him away or kiss him back?

I wanted to push him away and slap his face for all that he has done but I couldn't. It wasn't that I was weak. In fact, I could make him moan in pain on the ground if I wanted to. But no matter how much it took me, I just couldn't push him away. I probably did the craziest thing I've ever done in my entire life—I closed my eyes and kissed him back.

I couldn't believe what I did and thought of withdrawing from the position that I was in, but I knew there was no turning back. The kiss seemed like an irresistible temptation as he pulled me close and bit my bottom lip. I held back the moan as I rushed my hands to his neck and soft, fluffy hair. I didn't know what was happening to me but I only knew one thing; I liked him. It could be wrong but I couldn't stop this growing feeling for this stupid *nincompoop*. After all, there still weren't any flying pigs.

Yeah, you can always count on me for flying pigs in any kind of situation.

I snapped out of my thoughts when my brain went cloudy. I couldn't concentrate as Tyler's hands wrapped around my waist. He brought me to his chest and felt his heart rapidly beating. I held his hair as he bit my lip forcefully this time and I hissed quietly. What was he doing? Was he trying to draw blood? I tugged on his hair and groaned. I smirked a bit as our lips

molded. Suddenly, I felt his tongue asking for entrance and made me realize I had to stop.

Kissing Tyler was a whole new experience. It scared me to think how deep his effect was on me, but I knew I shouldn't let it go further. Besides, I wouldn't want anyone catching us making out in the changing room.

I pulled back from his greedy lips and pushed him away. I was confused whether I was happy, pissed, or excited. I knew I didn't belong to anyone and now wasn't the time. I needed to clear my head so I took a deep breath as I nervously played with the bracelet he gave me. I walked out of the changing room and ignored him calling my name. It was a good thing he didn't follow me, or else I would have been pissed. Why didn't I stop him from kissing me? How did I even have feelings for him?

I walked into Troy's house with flushed cheeks and swollen lips. Thank goodness, I didn't run into anyone on the way here. I found the closest bathroom and got dressed. I walked out the front door and headed to a park nearby. I wasn't going to ditch the party; I just wanted to breathe.

It would have been more comfortable if I weren't in a dress. Shrugging my shoulders, I kept walking towards the park situated near the woods.

Perfect! I guess this will do.

I walked past some children playing around and farther into the trees where I could hear the birds singing.

Once I was alone, I started to stretch slightly and began to run. I knew we would still bump into each other but this wasn't the right time to talk about it. Perhaps running was the best thing to do for now.

About twenty minutes later, I started to get tired and slowed down to sit under a tree to rest. I wish I had brought water with me; but who would have known I'd be running? I wasn't expecting to kiss Tyler either but it looked like destiny had surprised me a lot today. I wondered what else could happen? I'd probably be attacked by werewolves in these woods and no one would ever know.

I wiped the sweat on my forehead and got up. I looked around the trees, trying to figure out my way back. I was distracted when I heard something moved behind the bushes. I checked it slowly but saw nothing. I was about to go on when I heard a branch snap.

Shit. I wasn't alone.

Then I heard something coming closer like paws hitting the ground. Damn it! Why did my thoughts always had to come true? What could be running towards me right now? A bear? I took a step backwards, cursing under my breath. Could this be the end? Would I die right here and never see my friends ever again? I was about to run away when a furry animal jumped over me. I squealed closing my eyes and fell to the ground.

I felt the pain spreading through my back, shoulders and head. I was so frightened to see what it was and felt like I was going to pee, when I heard the creature barking on top of me.

Shit. It was definitely a wolf and I know it.

I knew I turned pale when I felt its hot breath against my neck and face. Oh no, it was going to eat my face! I was about to scream for help when a soggy, wet tongue licked my face like a lollipop, instead of canines sinking deep into my skin. I groaned to myself and opened my eyes slowly to see a ... dog? How could I be so stupid?

I was about to push it off of me when I heard someone yelled. "Sky! Where are you, boy?"

I looked at the dog's leash and saw 'Sky' written on it. It was Tyler's cousin's dog!

Sky barked repeatedly. It wasn't long before I saw a pair of sneakers coming towards me.

"Crystal?"

"Dan?"

"Why are you lying on the ground?"

I pointed to the dog on top of me. He rolled his eyes and chuckled a bit before pulling him off. I got up and dusted off my dress.

"What are you doing in the woods?"

"I was going for a run. How about you?"

He pointed to Sky.

"I was walking my dog." He shrugged.

"Your dog?"

He nodded his head.

"Yeah, my dog."

I couldn't believe Dan was Tyler's cousin! I knew Tyler seemed to despise him but I definitely had no idea they were cousins!

"So you're Tyler's cousin, huh?"

Dan rolled up his hand into a fist.

“How did you know?”

I pointed at Sky.

“I saw him at his house the other day. Tyler said he belonged to his cousin so I just put two and two together.” I shrugged wondering why he became serious. He nodded his head as he averted his eyes from me.

“Well, it was nice seeing you around but I really have to go.” Dan smiled as he grabbed Sky and walked away.

Well, that was weird.

It took me a while to find my way out since the trail was confusing but I was able to find the way back before sundown.

First, I woke up in Tyler’s arms and went shopping for a bikini with him. Second, He said that I was his. Third, we kissed. And now, Dan is his cousin! Isn’t it such one heck of a day?

I could see that we enjoyed each other’s company but I didn’t take it seriously, and I shouldn’t be jumping to conclusions. After all, it was just a kiss. He never said that he liked me. It could mean anything else.

Does he like me? Cause I hate to admit it but I do, and I should not show it!

I knew I shouldn’t hold a grudge against him forever. Besides, we’ve already fixed it and I was going to change for the better. We both changed for the better.

Matt was standing near the front door when he saw me and rushed towards my direction.

“Where the hell were you? We’ve been looking for you everywhere.”

“Sorry. I just needed some fresh air, that’s all.”

“Wasn’t the backyard enough?”

“Relax, I wasn’t eaten by a wolf! See?”

“Yeah, I can see that. You wouldn’t be here right now if you were, would you?”

Matt changed the subject.

“Come on, the food is ready. We are just waiting for you.”

I stared at Matt with a smile and hugged him. We rushed to the backyard and saw my group of friends huddling over a box of pizza. Tyler was there but he looked uninterested. His eyes were darting from place to place but seemed relieved when he saw me.

“Shit! Crystal, please, let me explain.”

For some reason, I got disappointed when he didn’t call me *Gem*. He rarely calls me by my real name.

Tyler grabbed my hand but I pulled away when I noticed a couple of people staring at us.

“Let’s talk later. I want to do right now is enjoy the party.”

He was frustrated but nodded his head.

I tried to ignore my friends’ eyes staring at me. They could probably be wondering why I left. The tension took a moment to disappear, but in a minute, we were stuffing pizza and junk food as we laughed at Matt’s stupid jokes. I continued to eat slices of pizza with my girlfriends while the guys, including Tyler, went to swim. Awesome! I could finally breathe!

“Earth to Crystal!” Jasmine waved her hand in front of my face.

“Huh?” I uttered.

“I just asked if you wanted to go swim with us. What’s wrong? You’ve been spacing out a lot.” Eva said.

I gave them an assuring smile but shook my head.

“I’m fine. I’m just tired. Not in the mood for swimming.”

The entire day was literally overwhelming and I just wanted to go home and sleep.

“You sure? I mean, you looked awesome in your bikini. Didn’t know you had such great taste.” Jasmine said.

I gave her a tight smile and controlled the urge to roll my eyes.

Great! Tyler had better taste in fashion than me!

“Thanks guys, but I’m fine sitting here. You can go join the boys.” I insisted.

They nodded their heads and jumped into the pool. I nibbled at the remaining slices of pizza while debating with myself whether to wait until they were done swimming and leave with Matt, or to book a ride. My thoughts flew away when Tyler caught my eyes and took his chance. He immediately excused himself and got out of the pool. His chest was displayed and I couldn’t resist my eyes from watching his body to his face.

Control yourself Crystal!

I took a deep breath and ran my hand through my hair nervously, as he came closer.

“Can we please talk?”

I sighed.

“Fine. Where do you want to go?”

He smiled. He grabbed my hand and led me into the house. We walked in silence to the empty kitchen. He pushed me against the kitchen counter as he laid his forehead on mine. I watched him close his eyes as he took a deep breath.

“I’m sorry.” he whispered. “I got so scared when you disappeared and that something might have happened to you because of me.”

“I just went for a run into the woods to clear up my mind.”

His eyes widened.

“The woods?”

I nodded my head.

“Yeah. What’s wrong with that?”

“You could have been lost.”

“Yeah, Yeah, I know. But nothing happened. I only ran into Dan.”

I looked up to see him pissed.

Shit!

I shouldn’t have brought it up. I could only blame my big mouth and curiosity for being unstoppable.

“Dan is your cousin, right? How come you never told me?”

Tyler closed his eyes as he breathed in and out.

“How did you find out?”

I shrugged.

“I saw him walking Sky.”

He nodded his head as he looked away from me. I was surprised to see him backed away as he had never done it before.

“Listen, Crystal. We’ll talk later. I have to go.”

Tyler left me trying to figure out what made him upset. I leaned against the counter as the tears threatened to come out. What did I do? How could I be so stupid? Boy, I messed up.

CHAPTER 31

I lifted my head off of the desk when I heard the bell rang. I looked around the classroom to see the students dashing out through the door. I wanted to go home too, but I still had to stay two hours more for the training. I used to be excited for the training but lately, I wasn't in a good disposition.

It's been five days since I haven't interacted with Tyler. Five freaking days of torture and I hated it. This was the longest time that he hadn't talk to me. I guess I was used to him bothering me so much. Matt, and the others, noticed Tyler's change of behavior, too. He wouldn't sit with us. If only I could turn back time, I'd shut my stupid mouth.

Tyler didn't come to school on Monday. I guess he wanted some time alone but I couldn't help but feel guilty. And when he returned on Tuesday, he simply ignored me. I never thought that I'd be wanting Tyler's attention.

Tyler's eyes weren't furious when I'd see him in class. He wouldn't fret over worthless things but this thing about Dan might have been serious.

I tried approaching him a couple times but he was always gone before I could even take a step forward.

I grabbed my bag and walked down the hall to the girls' locker room and changed into my sport clothes before heading to the training field.

I could tell that Emma was proud of me but she had gone tougher by pushing me to my limits. I just hope I could make it. I knew I needed to work my ass off to win the race. The prize would help me a lot with my financial problems. Thankfully, the job I had was enough to make ends meet.

I walked my way to the field, playing with the bracelet. I stopped and hid behind a tree when I saw Emma standing in front of Tyler with an irritated look on her face. I moved from my spot to hide behind a tree closer to them. I knew it was wrong but I couldn't help myself. I was so damn curious to know what was going on, especially that Tyler had been acting weird.

"I don't give a damn what happens between you and Dan, boy! But don't let it get in the way with you and Crystal!" she hissed as she slapped the back of his head.

"I know! I know! It's just don't know what to say when she asks."

"Tell her it's personal." Emma said, making me feel even more guilty.

"But I really do want to tell her ..."

"Then why don't you?"

"Mom, I don't want her in any of my personal issues."

The guilt was rising and I could no longer stand listening to their conversation. I knew it was rude so I gathered all my courage, sucked up my wimpy side, and stepped out from behind the tree.

"Hi, Emma. Sorry I'm la—"

Tyler turned to look at me and all of the courage I had worn off. Great! What should I do next? Emma stepped towards me and patted my shoulder. I did my best to avoid Tyler's eyes.

"It's okay darling. Tyler was just leaving, weren't you?" she said giving her son a pointed look.

I couldn't help but drool silently. He looked so hot! Tyler gave me one last glance and walked away.

"Okay Crystal! Let's get started with a couple stretches. This time, the goal is for you to run this perimeter in less than two minutes, okay?"

I nodded my head.

This is challenging but I'm sure I can do it.

I began to stretch my arms and legs, counting to twenty, followed by twenty *jumping jacks*. Emma took out her timer and started the timer. I immediately sprinted past the line and down the perimeter of the huge field. The field wasn't larger than the gym, but wasn't small enough either to run in less than two minutes. But I knew I could do it. All those hours of hard work after school should pay off.

Well, at least, I hope ...

I forced my legs to move even faster as I felt the speed of my heart increased. I made sure to avoid the stones on the ground where I previously tripped. Trust me, it wasn't pretty. The world around me turned into a blur until I saw Emma, looking at the timer as her mouth moved up and down. She was probably counting the seconds left. I crossed my arms behind my head, letting my lungs expand and took a deep breath.

"D-did I-m-make it?" I took a series of breath as I sat down on the bench next to her.

Emma kept on looking at it with wide eyes.

"What's wrong, Emma?"

She smiled and showed me the timer.

"One minute," she spoke, pointing at the timer. "You did it in one minute."

I was beaming for joy with my accomplishment and I had never been happier while on training. *God, you know how much I wanted to win the competition.*

Walked to the parking lot, I was about to take my keys out when I heard my phone rang and took it out of my bag. I saw an unknown number and declined the call. When I had finally taken my keys out, I started the car but got frustrated when I heard my phone rang again. I answered the call as I drove my way home but before I could even say 'hello', a low, grumbly voice spoke.

"B*tch! Why didn't you answer my call, huh?"

I lifted an eyebrow. Did a random stranger just called me a b*tch?

"Um, who the hell are you!"

"Who the hell am I?" the guy changed his voice into a high pitch tone.

Am I talking to a drunkard?

"Listen, girl! I am so mad at you for not even calling! Not that I care or anything, but because of you, that little demon hasn't left my trail!"

What the heck was he talking about. Little demon? Where did I hear that before.

"Listen big guy. I don't know wha—"

"ANDY, PUT THE SPIDER DOWN BEFORE I CALL GRANDMA!"
a little girl screamed on the other end followed by a moment of silence.

"No ma! Not the cane! I SAID NOT YOUR FREAKIN' CANE!"

I took the phone away from my ear. What was that? As much as that seemed weird, it oddly sounded familiar. It seemed like someone was running around in the background and I was sure I heard a vase break.

“DAMNIT MA! LOOK WHAT YOU DID!” the stranger yelled.

“Did you take your medicine?”

“No! Not the bat! JERRY GIVE ME A HAND HERE!”

“Hello?” I said nervously as I parked my car in front of my house. I was afraid to get out.

“You see, Andy! This is what happens when you pick on others—No Ally! Go away! I’m busy!”

“Ethan, take these demons away from me. Jesus! I’m on the freakin’ phone!”

Andy. Ally. Ethan.

“Mr. Fatty? Is that you?”

“It’s Sam kiddo. I ain’t fat!”

“Okay. How did you get my number?” I asked, opening the car door and hopped out.

“I have my ways, you little brat. Don’t ask.”

“Um ... Okay then. I’ll just pretend that I gave you my number. Why are you calling and why does it seem like a battle is happening in a bathroom?” I asked walking to my front porch.

“Listen kid! How could you steal the heart of a spoiled brat and never return?”

I chuckled.

“Yeah whatever! The point is you have to come here for dinner tomorrow!” he said.

“Aw! You want me? To come over to dinner?” I asked teasingly as I placed my hand over my heart.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself, kiddo! I just want that little demon to shut up!”

“Well, I’ll see about that. I’m a busy woman.” I said looking at my nails.

“Damn it, kid! Just for one hour!”

I sighed.

“Will Ethan be there? Does he know?” I asked.

“He’s the one who told me to call you in the first place and Yeah of course he’s going to be there. There’s no way in hell I’ll let him leave me alone with his kid!”

“You really do love children, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I just adore those little devils.”

“Well, I don’t know Mr. Fatty. I’ll have to check my schedule.”

“Listen kid! If you don’t come over tomorrow, I will have Ethan come and throw you over his shoulders like the last time!” He threatened.

“Fine, fine. I’m coming. Happy?”

“Oka—HEY PUT THAT DOWN!”

“What’s wrong?”

“MA! HOW MANY TIMES DO I HAVE TO TELL YOU! BRINGING IN A CHILD FROM A NEIGHBOR DOES NOT MAKE YOU YOUNG AGAIN!”

I couldn’t help but laugh at this wonderful family.

“No, I don’t care! I’m not bailing you out of jail one more time! Now return him at once before I let Jerry call doctor Larry!”

I pressed the red button to end the call. I then placed my phone on the counter and dashed upstairs to my bedroom. Taking a pair of sweatpants and Tyler’s shirt with me, I walked into the bathroom and took a shower.

I was ready to watch a movie when the doorbell rang. Stomping down the stairs, I angrily yanked the door open.

“Wha—”

Tyler was standing in front of my door.

“Hey,” he said awkwardly.

I was clearly confused why he suddenly showed up.

“Hey ...”

“Are you busy?”

I shook my head and blushed when he saw his shirt I was wearing. This must be so embarrassing!

“See! I told you it looks nice on you.”

“Why don’t you come in?” I asked.

“I was going to come in anyway but thanks for asking.”

He was such a weirdo! We sat on the couch and he wrapped his hands around my waist. I realized he was hugging me and it took me a moment to wrap my arms around him.

"I'm sorry." I mumbled.

"I'm sorry for being such a jerk. I kissed you and ran away."

I couldn't help but blush when he talked about the kiss we shared.

"No, it's not your fault. I kissed you back and I shouldn't have asked such a personal question."

"I'm such an idiot. I should have just told you. I'm sorry."

"No, it's okay! You don't have to tell me anything."

He pulled me back to his chest and smelled my scent.

"I missed you."

I blushed.

"Me? Well, it's feels odd without your bothersome annoying ass, too."

I joked making him chuckle.

"Sure you did."

"I mean, it was so boring not having you around to make my life a living hell," I said punching his shoulder.

There was a moment of awkward yet comforting silence.

"About that kiss ..."

"Ugh, please, no!" I begged, covering my face.

"Come, Gem. I'm really sorry but we have to talk about it."

Wait, what? Did you just call me, Gem?

"What about it?" I asked.

"Um, I don't know? I was expecting you to tell me it was the best kiss in your entire life, duh!"

I grabbed the pillow on the couch and hit him his face with it.

"Get over! I only kissed back because I didn't want to burst your ego."

He chuckled.

"Yeah, Gem. Whatever."

Her pulled me to sit on his lap and whispered in my ear.

"If I kiss you now, won't you kiss me back?"

"No way! You're crazy." I yelled, hitting him with the pillow once again.

He laughed.

"You sure?"

He started kissing my neck and I felt the sensation running down my spine, but I made sure to hide it.

“You wish!” I hopped off his lap and glared at him. “The next time I kiss you is in your dreams.”

“Sure. We’ll see about that.” he winked.

I rolled my eyes and walked away.

“Hey where are you going?”

“To get food so I can get rid of your annoying face!” I yelled getting into the kitchen.

“Get me something while you’re at it!”

“Yeah, of course!”

“How about a *Grim Reaper*?” I yelled back, opening the fridge.

“I think a jar of *Nutella* will be better but thanks anyways!”

I couldn’t believe how things happened quickly. I just wished everything would be like this all the time.

CHAPTER 32

Running one more lap, I looked at my watch and realized I had an hour to get ready for school. I said goodbye to the grass in the park and the cold breeze blowing perfectly against my skin. The sun was barely up, but running in the morning was one of the best feeling in the world. Besides, I always brought with me a pocket knife or pepper spray to protect myself at this time of the day. I still couldn't believe how my life had changed and be surrounded by people I cared about. Yet I still had a lot of questions in my mind.

I usually spent hours thinking about Tyler and how I met him. What could it be between him and Dan? What happened to his father? What could he had been doing while I was gone? All these questions demanded for answers but I knew I had to control it.

Of course, I wouldn't say that the kiss was forgotten. We brought it up once but we didn't talk much about it. Whatever that kiss meant; I wasn't going to let it ruin the relationship we had created.

It only took me twenty-five minutes to finish my shower and get dressed. I braided my hair backwards into a dutch braid, ran down the stairs to the kitchen, and made a small plate of scrambled eggs. I was so hungry that I gulped it down in less than five minutes.

I was washing the dishes when the doorbell rang. Groaning to myself, I walked to the front door wondering who it could be. I told Matt not to pick me up today. I unlocked the door and was surprised to see Dan this early. The last time I saw him he wasn't really in the best mood.

Dan gave me a smile as he scratched the back of his neck nervously.

"Hey," he said.

“Um, hey... What are you doing here?”

“Well, you see you kinda dro—”

“And how did you know where I live?”

“As I was saying before I was rudely interrupted,” he said. “I saw you pass by this morning and was calling you but you had your headphones on.”

Dan handed me something. Sh*t! The bracelet! I would have been screwed if Dan hadn’t found it and Tyler would be very disappointed.

I immediately snatched it from Dan’s hand and wore it. How on earth did I not notice it missing?

“Thank you so much Dan. It means a lot.”

He smiled at me and nodded his head.

“Wait, what were you doing this early?”

He pointed to his clothes. I realized he was wearing basketball shorts and an orange t-shirt.

“I like to run in the morning, too. It’s refreshing!”

“So, you followed me home to give me back this bracelet when you could have just given it to me in school.”

He chuckled.

“I was running at the park and passed this road where you lived, so it was just a coincidence. I don’t think Tyler would be happy to see me with you.”

“But why not? I can hang out with whoever I want. I understand that you both have unsettled issues but I’m not part of it.”

“You are absolutely right, Crystal. But obviously, Tyler has a thing for you and cares a lot about you. I’m pretty sure he wouldn’t allow you to be hanging out with someone he doesn’t like.”

“A thing for me? Someone he doesn’t like? Why do you guys hate each other?”

“I’m sorry. It’s none of my business but I don’t think Tyler hates you Dan. He never told me he’s holding a grudge on you. He just said something about an accident, and you shutting out on him.”

Dan sighed.

“I guess you’re right. Sometimes I shut everyone out but I can’t help it. This is my way of dealing with it.”

“It’s fine. I get it. I hope you both could fix it, whatever it is.”

“Thanks. I got to go and get ready for school.”

“Okay. Thanks again.”

“Oh. I mentioned Tyler having a thing for you, right?”

“Yeoh...”

“He gave you his mom’s bracelet.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Crystal, that bracelet is usually passed down within the family. If he gave it to you, then you’re special to him,” he said and walked away.

Did he just say Tyler has a thing for me? I knew I should hear it from Tyler himself but I would never ask him about that. I closed my front door and walked back into the kitchen to grab a glass of water. I couldn’t help but laugh at the thought as it seemed impossible.

I was ready for school when the doorbell rang again. This time, it was Tyler.

“This is awkward.”

“You don’t say!”

“What are you doing here?”

“What does it look like?” he pointed to his car.

“I didn’t ask for I ride.”

“I know.”

“I was planning on walking.”

“I know.”

“If I wanted a ride, I would have just used my car.”

“Yeoh, I know.”

I glared at him as he gave me his damn cute smile.

“Then, why are you here?” I asked placing my hand on my hip.

“To give you a ride.”

“But I told you I don’t need one.”

“Are you done?”

I narrowed my eyes. What was he doing?

“Um ... I guess so—”

“Great! Let’s get going then!” he said dragging me to his car.

“But I said—”

“Sorry Gem. I’m not taking ‘no’ for an answer.”

“Stubborn.” I muttered to myself as I got into the passenger’s seat.

“Only for you.”

He sat in the driver's seat and winked. I punched his shoulder as he laughed. I made myself comfortable as he started the car.

Everything was great at school. Tyler started to hang out with me and my friends like he used to. I saw Dan when walking in the hall way and thought of thanking him for returning the bracelet but decided not to when I saw him with Sydney pinned against the locker. Dan was whispering something that made her blush and she kicked him in the leg. Sydney gave him an innocent smile and stumped away. I wonder what was happening between them?

Mr. Fatty invited me for dinner. I asked him to give me the address but Ethan insisted on picking me up. I couldn't help but admire his crazy family. I got so excited to see Ally and the others. I know I only met them once but we were able to get along quickly.

Unlike mine, Ethan's house was chaotic. It was so loud and energetic; it could get a little bit overwhelming. My parents weren't loud and I grew up that way.

Half an hour later, I was dressed into jeans and a black blouse and had my wavy, braided hair down. I grabbed my white hand bag and shoved a box of *Oreos* I bought yesterday, knowing that Ally would want something sweet.

I waited for Ethan at the porch. I took the lotion out from my bag and applied some on my hands. As I put it away, I heard someone calling my name who turned out to be Tyler. He waved at me, locked his door, and walked over to me. He shoved his hands into his pockets and gave me a dazzling smile.

"What's up?" I asked.

"I was actually going to check up on my uncle."

"Oh, what was his name? Yeah, Paul."

"What about you? Where are you going?"

"I was actually invited for dinner."

"By whom?"

Just then my phone rang and saw it was Ethan. I gave Tyler an apologetic smile and answered the call.

"Hey Ethan."

"Hey kid. Are you ready? I'm a minute away."

"Yeoh, I'm waiting outside."

“Okay, see you then.”

“Okay bye.”

Tyler was tensed and confused.

“Is he the same person who kidnapped you?” he asked, making me laugh.

“What’s so funny?”

“Ethan didn’t kidnap me. He just has a weird way of introducing himself.”

Tyler rolled his eyes.

“Are you sure it’s a good idea going back with him?” he asked, crossing his arms under his chest.

“You don’t have to worry about me, Tyler. Ethan and his family are pretty good people.”

A rusty truck slowed down on the road with a broken glass window.

“I don’t give a f*ck Lucas. You’re paying for this damage Andy has made!” I heard Ethan yell. My lips twitched upwards.

“The next time you decide to teach him how to play baseball, make sure to use a real baseball and not a freakin’ rock!”

“Yup, very good people,” Tyler said as he patted my back. I shoved him with my elbow and glared at him, ignoring his hiss of pain. Ethan hopped out of the truck and smiled as he walked over to me. He gave me a hug but Tyler pulled me back. I looked up at him and stepped on his foot.

“Sh*t!” he uttered as he hopped on one leg, and I burst into laughter. Ethan flickered his eyes between me and Tyler.

“Thanks for coming, Ethan. You really didn’t have to,” I said, ignoring Tyler glaring at me.

“Come on, we are going to have so much fun tonight! Ma is making dinner. Do you know how rare that is?”

“How rare?”

“When was the last time you brushed your teeth with shaving cream?”

I gave him an odd look.

“Never!” I answered.

Ethan dropped his arm on my shoulder.

“Exactly.”

I then turned to Tyler to see him glaring at Ethan.

“We’ll be fine. Have fun checking up on your uncle.” I waved at him as I walked to Ethan’s truck and sat in the passenger’s seat.

“Call me when you need a ride home.” Tyler yelled.

Ethan started the engine while I was looking at the broken window.

“So, rocks as baseballs, huh?” I teased.

Ethan shook his head.

“Sometimes I think Lucas raised his boys to become idiots. I mean look at what he did!” he said pointing at the window next to me.

Unbelievable!

“Wait, I thought his kids did this mess?” I asked referring to Jerry’s Twins. I knew his name was Lucas but Jerry fits his personality. The same goes with Mr. Fatty.

“They did! But Lucas wasn’t paying attention when Andy and his brother decided to aim for something other than the freakin bat.”

“How’s Ally?” I asked when Ethan stopped at a red light.

“She’s annoying the hell out of me since she met you! Why do you have to give her that box of chocolates?”

“Oh relax! She can’t be that annoying.”

Ethan whipped his head to look at me.

“Has your child ever barged into the bathroom to take her to a local store where her Idol works?”

“But...I don’t have a child.”

“That’s the point! You will never know once you have one.”

Ethan reminded me of my dad. He wouldn’t like to be proven wrong. I suddenly felt emotional remembering my parents. But having Ethan by my side was a good thing.

CHAPTER 33

It wasn't long before Ethan had his rusty old truck parked in front of the house. I could feel the excitement as I stepped out of the truck and closed the door. Ally came rushing towards me. I bent down to hug her as she laughed in joy. She was jumping in my arms as her hands wrapped around my neck. I couldn't help but chuckle at her behavior. I twirled her around making her laugh even more.

"I missed you so much! Why didn't you come visit?"

"I'm here now," I said pinching her cheek.

"Did you not want to see me?"

"Of course, I'd love to see you. I was just so busy at school. I'm so sorry."

"It's okay! You're here now!"

She held my hand and started dragging me to the front door with Ethan following right behind us.

"Come on. Granny is cooking for us!"

I walked into the house hearing the loud noise. The twin boys were running across the hallway, holding to something that looked like a dead rat and stopped to look at me. They grinned and waved at me but averted their eyes to Ally.

"No." she said backing away.

"Yes." They said as they took a step closer showing the dead creature. I crunched my nose upwards in disgust and looked at Ethan. Where did they get that?

"Daddy do something." she whined and hid behind him.

Ethan sighed as if holding the disgusting thing was normal.

“Boys stand back. I don’t have time for this. Put that thing down—no, throw it out!

The boys didn’t listen. Instead, they screamed and ran towards Ally, who cried rushing down the hallway. If I were in her place, I would run for the hills.

“What the h—”

Ethan raised his hand and counted with his fingers.

“One.”

“Wh—”

“Two,” he said raising two fingers.

I stood awkwardly not knowing what would happen.

“And three.”

I was about to ask him what the counting was all about when I heard something break, and I could just imagine how startled I was. The twins came back screaming while dashing our way. Granny Grace came out of nowhere holding a cane.

“What...” I uttered.

She ran after them with as the boys cried for help and disappeared down the hall.

“The...”

Mr. Fatty appeared holding a box of pills. His stomach was jumping up and down, looking frustrated and tired.

“MA, LEAVE THE BOYS ALONE AND TAKE YOUR DAMN PILLS!”

“Hell?” I was finally able to finish my sentence.

Ally came back smiling with her hands behind her back.

“Happens all the time.” Ethan huffed.

Yup! I knew this was going to be one hell of an exciting night. I looked down at Ally who seemed to be hiding a secret behind her smile. What a sneaky little devil! No wonder everyone called her the demon.

“Come on, Lucas. Help me with the stove!” Ethan grumbled. We walked past the kitchen to see ‘Jerry’ taking the lasagna out of the stove. I licked my lips in delight. I just couldn’t wait to get my taste buds on it. Surprisingly, Jerry moved around the kitchen like a pro, though I wasn’t saying men wouldn’t be good at cooking.

“Ethan, where is your wife?” I asked as we walked into the dining room and sat down on the couch. Ally sat down on my lap and played with my hair.

“She lives in Philadelphia since our divorce.”

I looked at Ally and shifted back to Ethan.

“Ally, why don’t you show Crystal your doll collection?”

Ally nodded her head, got off my lap and dashed towards her room.

“Ally doesn’t know her mother since she was given birth and I think it’s best that way.”

My heart ached for Ally. I knew how difficult it was without a mother.

“What about Jerry and Mr. Fatty?”

“Your mean Lucas and Sam?” Ethan asked, rolling his eyes. I gave him a cheeky grin at the choice of names.

“Sam never got married but had a son with his girlfriend who left him too. Lucas’s wife died after giving birth to the twins.”

What the hell? How cruel these women were? I felt sad for Jerry, of course. I knew giving birth to twins wasn’t easy and not having enough money for medical treatments must have been exhausting.

I placed my hand on Ethan’s shoulder and smiled. Ally came running towards us with a bunch of dolls in her hands. Zayn and Andy were running after her with a toy dinosaur in their hands. Ally hid behind the couch and screamed.

“Daddy! Daddy! They’re going to eat my toys!”

I leaned in to whisper in Ethan’s ear.

“Are they always bullying her?”

“All the damn time,” he muttered taking the boys’ toys away.

“Do you want me to hand these over to grandma?”

The boys’ faces quickly turned into panic.

“No, uncle Ethan! Please, don’t!”

Ally walked over with a smile on her face. She sat next to me and gave me her dolls looking all innocent once again. This girl was adorable!

“You two never learn, do you?” He asked then huffed.

He threw their toys at them.

“Return them to your room, now, before Granny throws them away for me.”

Zayn and Andy disappeared behind the wooden doors. Before Ethan could sit down, Granny Grace, Mr. Fatty, and Jerry came into the room holding a bunch of plates and trays of glass. As Jerry laid the lasagna on the table, I noticed a slight bruise on Mr. Fatty's cheek.

"What happened to you Sam?" Ethan asked.

He turned to glare at Ethan then at his mom.

"Ma's cane happened." He grumbled to himself as he rubbed his cheek to ease the pain. Granny Grace laughed as she placed the forks on each plate. Ethan walked over to Mr. Fatty when Granny wasn't paying attention, and leaned in to whisper, loud enough for me to hear.

"Did she take her medicine?"

Mr. Fatty nodded his head.

"Had to shove it down her throat."

"So damn stubborn."

I licked my lips and heard my stomach growling.

"Well, someone's hungry," Jerry said.

Zayn, Andy, and Ally, sat on a small table to the side as Jerry filled in their plates. I sat on the big table with Mr. Fatty, Ethan and Granny Grace. Once Jerry sat down next to his mother, we all began to dig in. The food was delicious! I thanked Granny Grace countless times, after every bite I took; not as a gratitude but because Ethan told me so, or else she would flip out saying that I didn't like her food. I ate peacefully, listening to Jerry talking with Mr. Fatty about his son, Blake, in college.

"So, when is Blake coming back?" Granny Grace asked as she tried to chew on the lasagna with her front teeth.

"Probably next month. I still don't know," Mr. Fatty answered.

I finished my second plate and shook my head at Grace with an apologetic smile on my lips as she gave me the stinky eye. The food was great but I tried convincing the crazy old lady that my appetite wasn't that big and that I was full! I felt relieved when she nodded her head. at me approving and got up to pick all the empty plates.

I offered to help took the empty glasses into the kitchen. Once we were all seated down at the table, Ally came and sat on my lap. I licked my lips in an excited manner when Jerry said that he made his favorite chocolate cake. Awesome!

I'm pretty sure by the end of the day I'll gain more than ten pounds, but I didn't care. Once the plate was on my hands, there was no turning back.

"You got to give me the recipe," I said once I swallowed the cake down my throat. Ally was busy stuffing her face in cake too.

"Sorry, girly. It's top secret." Jerry shook his head.

"Stupid, old hag," I muttered to myself with a full mouth.

"I heard that."

"It was meant to be heard."

Ally raised her hand out and I gave her a high five. Mr. Fatty leaned over to Jerry's ear.

"She learned from the demon."

I finished my plate and was about to get up to put it away in the kitchen when I heard a chair scrape against the floor. I saw Granny Grace running around the table towards the twins who brought in the dead mouse.

Ew!

Grace held the cane and chased the boys around the table.

"Oh, not again!" Ally whined.

"You two put that thing down or I won't stop grandma!"

Mr. Fatty threatened the boys but they were too busy having fun running around the table.

"HOW MANY TIMES DO I HAVE TO TELL YOU NOT TO BRING DEAD THINGS INTO MY DAMN HOUSE!" Granny Grace yelled lifting the cane over her head.

"Uh, shouldn't somebody stop her before anyone gets hurt?" I asked.

"Na, don't bother. As soon as she takes her medicine, it won't go that far," Mr. Fatty said.

"Yeah, no one gets hurt—"

Jerry stopped when Granny Grace swung her cane and hit a flower pot. The pot fell to the ground and broke into pieces. She then laughed and tried to hit one of the boys.

"Sam?" Jerry whispered with wide eyes.

"Yeah?" Mr. Fatty replied.

"Did you give ma her pills?"

"Yeah, I did."

"Then wh—"

“Why is there a circle thingy in my cake?” Ally asked as she stared at her fork with a pill-like shape.

“Sh*t,” they muttered.

“She spit her pill out,” Ethan said.

“In the damn cake batter!” Jerry said in disgust. I couldn’t help but shiver looking at the scene.

“Don’t just stand there. Do something!” I said.

Ethan, Jerry and Mr. Fatty dashed to help the twins. It took them time to hold Granny Grace down and got her to swallow her medicine. Once everything calmed down, Ethan threw away the disgusting thing Zayn was holding. Somebody needed to clean up all these mess.

We sat down and turned on the old T. V. Ally sat next to me and fiddled with my hair as Jerry switched between channels. He stopped on a news channel talking about a car crash. I stared at the car for a moment that looked like Tyler’s car. Though it could be anyone’s car.

Sh*t. Tyler was supposed to pick me up. I totally forgot to call him, though he knew the address.

I looked at the time on my phone and realized that it was late. I had to be home early to finish all my homework. Besides, I was craving for a late-night run.

I excused myself and walked towards the window as the others chatted away. I dialed Tyler’s number and waited anxiously. It took a while before he finally answered.

“Hello?”

“Um, who’s this?” I asked hearing a female voice.

I bit my lips nervously. Why did a girl answer Tyler’s phone?

“Hi. Um-sorry but...are you related to the person you’re calling?”

“Um, no. But he’s my friend. Why?”

What the heck was happening?

“Your friend forgot his phone in his car. I’m an officer and I’m currently checking the damage when I heard his phone ring.”

“Wait... How could he forget his phone? Why are you checking his car? What damage are you talking about?”

I prayed to the lords that nothing was serious. If something happened to Tyler, I wouldn’t know what I would do.

“I’m so sorry, dear, but your friend has been involved in a car accident and was admitted to the hospital.”

I held my breath as tears started to fall.

“What?”

I couldn’t believe what I heard. Tyler could have been driving to pick me up while I was sitting here and having fun. I didn’t even hear what the officer had to say. My hands felt weak that I could no longer hold a grip on my phone and it fell on the ground.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

It was Tyler in the news.

CHAPTER 34

There was nothing more painful than parents' death and I promised myself not to cry after that. But things had changed when Tyler came.

We became closer. I discovered sides of him I never knew existed. We even kissed and I knew there was something between us that we both couldn't deny. I knew I liked Tyler ever since his lips touched mine. This pain was unbelievable I could feel my heart slowly breaking. Why on earth was I feeling like this?

What if I never see Tyler ever again? Memories just kept rushing and I could still remember how much I despised him when we first met.

I felt someone shaking my shoulder. I turned around to see Ethan looking at me as he held my phone. I sniffed as I stared back at him.

"Crystal, are you okay?"

I would normally smile when something went wrong. But I couldn't help it this time. I just didn't have the ability to pretend as if nothing happened.

"Crystal? What's wrong?"

This time, everyone gathered around us. It was amazing to be with people who cared about you. Ally wrapped her hands around my legs.

"Why do you look so sad?"

"I'm ok, Ally. But my heart is not."

I wiped my tears and bent down to kiss her on the forehead. I then looked at Ethan.

"I just found out my friend is in the hospital. Can you take me to him, please?"

He immediately nodded his head and grabbed his coat. I smiled to everyone as he grabbed his key.

“Where are you going?” Ally asked.

“To the hospital sweetie.” I said bending down to give her a hug.

“Why? Are you going to fix your heart?” “You can put it that way.”

Ethan and I walked to truck and hopped in. “Which hospital is it?” he asked making my eyes widened.

“Sh*t! I had no idea.”

I took my phone from Ethan’s grip and called Tyler’s mother. I listened nervously as it rang. *Come on come on! Why is she taking forever to answer?*

“Crystal?”

Emma finally answered. I could hear her voice trembling.

“Emma, do you know...”

“Yes, I just got a call from the hospital,” she said. “Crystal, I don’t know what to do. I am in a business trip and got a call that my son’s in the hospital. I’m packing my things right now but I won’t be able to make it until tomorrow morning.”

I took a deep breath to calm myself once again.

“It’s okay, Emma. Hopefully, he’ll be okay. I’m going to check up on him and let you know. Take a deep breath and don’t let yourself worry too much okay? It will all be fine.”

“Thank you so much dear! Are you on your way to the hospital?”

“Actually, that’s the reason why I called. Which hospital is it?”

I averted my eyes to Ethan who placed his hand on my knee to calm me down. I gave him a grateful smile as I ran my hands through my hair. I listened to Emma as she gave me the address.

“Thank you so much Emma. I’ll let you know when I get there.”

It felt like forever as we drove down the empty road. I was cursing in my mind for it to go faster. I knew Ethan was doing what he could and was driving the fastest his old truck could handle but I was getting impatient. What if it was too late? I shook my head furiously. I couldn’t be putting these negative thoughts into my head.

Oh, Tyler. If I see you alive, then I promise never to judge you ever again!

I bit my nails as I looked out the window remembering how I used to think Tyler was one cruel bully who only thought about himself. But all those thoughts began to change the night I saw him walk out of the pharmacy store. It all changed when I saw Tyler hand over the medicine to a poor fellow, who I assumed was his uncle. I still have no clue who he was. Maybe I was wrong but I would no longer dare to snoop around again.

Ethan must have noticed me in deep thoughts.

“Hey. I’m sure he’s fine. Have a little faith in your boyfriend.”

“He isn’t my boyfriend.” I mumbled feeling my cheeks heat up.

Ethan scoffed.

“Sure he isn’t. The last time I met him, he wanted to rip my head off for dragging you along with me. And he did mention something about being your boyfriend soon.”

Ethan tried to lighten up the mood by teasing me and nudging me by the shoulder. “Yeahh, Yeahh, whatever. Just drive, old man.”

“I’m not old,” he muttered under his breath.

It wasn’t long before we were parked in front of the hospital. As Ethan turned off his truck, I jumped out immediately and ran towards the hospital doors. I sprinted towards the reception and asked the guy behind the desk where Tyler was being held. I heard Ethan try to keep up from behind me but I guess that man was too old to keep up with an 2eighteen-Year-old runner. I would have slowed down to make him feel better but that was the last thing on my mind.

My brain was nagging at my legs to move faster until I made it to his room door. I tried to calm myself but I was so afraid to open the door.

What if something happened to him? I don’t think I can stand watching him lifeless.

But I couldn’t stand here all day as my nerves would eat me up alive. Ethan stood behind me, nodded his head, and pointed at the door. I heard a beeping noise coming from the room and it got me paranoid. I swallowed the lump in my throat as Ethan spoke.

“I’ll wait here in case you would need me,” he whispered.

I looked at the doorknob. Having enough of my wimpy side, I mentally slapped myself and opened the door to Tyler’s hospital room. I entered further into the room and stopped when something struck me in shock.

Tyler Grey was sitting upwards in his bed flirting with a nurse!

What the hell is happening here? I thought Tyler was hurt?

I saw his right leg wrapped in bandages and a pair of crutches rested next to him on the floor. He still didn't notice me because his attention was on the brunette nurse who said something to make him laugh. I felt my hands form into a fist. I wasn't jealous. No, of course not! I was just angry thinking that he was in great danger and yet he was enjoying his time with a clown. She wasn't even funny!

I wanted to punch his face and watch his blood flowing freely, but I wasn't that violent. I grabbed his crutches and swung it at him and that's when he noticed me. I whacked him in the stomach and I heard him screaming as he stuttered for me to stop. But did I? Na! I went for his thighs! Lifting the crutches over my head and hitting him as if he was a rooster on thanksgiving.

"Take that you piece of sh*t, mother f*cker!"

"Mam, what are you doing? You can't hurt the patient!"

She screeched but I ignored her. I shoved her away and began to whack Tyler once again.

"Crystal, what the hell?"

He yelled trying to get away from me but I just glared at him and smacked the back of his head with my fist.

"This is for getting me all worried!" I yelled hitting his leg; not the broken one of course. Come on! I wasn't that crazy.

He hissed in pain as he rubbed the back of his head. He looked amused but I shoved the crutches in his stomach and hit him once again.

"This is for making me think you were hurt!" I yelled as hit his hip.

"Mam?"

"Leave before I send you to your grave!"

I glared at the nurse and slapped Tyler behind his neck. "This is for making your mother worry the hell for you!" I hissed and lifted the crutches to hit his lap.

"God damn wo—"

I lifted the crutches over my head, giving him a good whack in the stomach.

"You as*hole!"

"You bastard!"

I whacked him on the head.

“You’re going to give him a concussion!” The nurse yelled.

I turned around and glared at her.

“Why are you still here? Get out or you’ll end up having brain damage!”

Her eyes widened in shock. I could tell he was trying so hard not to grin but his lips twitching upwards didn’t go unnoticed.

“It’s okay. She’s someone special.”

The nurse ran towards the door and left. She could be thinking I was crazy but I wasn’t!

“Special my ass, you son of a b*tch!”

The door opened once again and I turned around to yell at whoever just came in.

“I heard someone yell...and saw...”

I stopped when I realized it was Ethan looking at us.

“Um... Never mind. I’ll just leave and you call me when you need a ride,” he said quickly and dashed out the door.

As the door closed, I turned around and smacked Tyler on the head.

“Stop it, Crystal! You’re going to kill me!”

“Great! Let me do the honor to bury you 6 feet below the ground!”

I hissed and pulled on his hair.

“You scared the hell out of me you moron!” I screeched.

Whack!

“How could you!”

Whack!

“You got me and your mom scared out of our minds!”

Smack!

“And I come all the way here to see you flirting with some clown! Do you know how hard it is to shove down two plates of lasagna and then run here like I’m in a freakin marathon?”

He shook his head slowly.

“Exactly!” I yelled throwing my hands up in the air with one hand still holding his crutch.

I was about to hit him again when grabbed the crutches and yanked it from my grip. He placed it aside and held my wrists.

“Gem, please stop it.”

I felt myself begin to calm down as he pulled me closer to his body. He kissed behind my ear, making shivers run down my spine.

"I'm sorry, Gem," he whispered.

He pulled back and wrapped his hands around my waist, pulling me onto his lap carefully. I slowly wrapped my hands around his neck and pressed my chest against his.

"You're a moron," I whispered as I laid my chin on his shoulder.

"But I'm your moron."

"I was so scared I'd lose you."

"I'm so sorry."

Tyler pulled away to look at me and kissed my forehead as he held me tighter.

"I'm fine, I promise. It's just a broken leg and a couple of bruises."

"Well, you deserved that! You got me scared imagining you attached with tubes and cables only to find you flirting with a nurse!" I shoved my finger at his chest.

"You're so hot when you're jealous," he cooed.

"I'm not jealous!" I said punching his shoulder.

"Sure, you aren't."

"Shut up before I bruise you up even more."

I wrapped my arms around his torso and rested my head on his chest once again.

"What happened?" I asked.

"You were taking so long so I drove over to pick you up and a car bumped into mine and crashed into a tree. The guy called the cops and took me to the hospital.

"Why didn't you call anyone?"

"I didn't want anyone to worry when I found out my injuries weren't that bad. I wanted to tell you but I lost my phone. So, I ended up using the nurse's phone you called a 'clown' and called my mom."

I understood why he told his mom first. I mean, I'm pretty sure I'd do the same if my mom was still alive. His mother deserved to know. But why didn't he call me after that?

"I wasn't able to memorize your number. I only have my mom's number stuck in my head."

I remembered calling his mom so I grabbed my phone from my pocket.

“Hello?”

“Hello, Emma. Tyler’s fine.”

“Thank god.”

“He got a broken bone.”

“Let’s not forget the bruises!” Tyler joked.

“Is that him? Can you please let me talk to him?”

“Sure.”

I handed my phone to Tyler and watched as he placed it near his ear.

“Hi, Ma. I’m fine.”

He paused as he listened to his mother ramble from the other end.

“Mom, I’m not dead relax!”

“Yeahh-okay-aha-alright... No, not really. Just a sting.”

“I don’t know. It’ll take a couple of weeks, I guess. No, you don’t have to—what? You’re already on your way?”

He huffed.

“Fine. Alright I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He paused and looked at me before whispering, “I love you, too. Have a safe trip home. Okay, bye.”

“She was really worried, you know.”

Yeah I can’t blame her after what happened.” He scratched the back of his head awkwardly.

“After what happened?” I asked.

Tyler closed his eyes. I then placed my hand on his shoulder comforting him.

“My dad died in an accident. He was drunk when he was driving.”

I gasped and cupped his face tilting it towards me.

“I am so sorry, Tyler. But please, don’t blame yourself. It wasn’t your fault and nothing you would have done could have stopped it,” I said pulling him towards me. He gladly wrapped his arms around me and took in a deep breath.

“Thank you, Gem.”

“For what?”

“For everything.”

CHAPTER 35

There was something about Tyler that drew me to him. I was surprised on Tyler's revelation about her father. How could I be so selfish? All this time I only thought about myself when Tyler was going through the same thing. He only lost his father and still had his mother but there would always be something missing.

Tyler never really did say anything about his father's death until now. It made me feel so special. As I tightened my hold around him, I knew that he was wonderful person and he was no longer the same boy who I used to know. I could feel my feelings start to grow towards him.

There were many things we didn't know about each other but it's not like everything could change overnight. It had to take time. We needed baby steps and that's what we were doing at this very moment. Two months ago, I wouldn't even dare to look at his annoying sexy face, but now I realized that I couldn't go a day without him. So, I decided to do the one thing I'd never thought I'd do. That one painful story I had been holding on for so long and not telling anyone but Matt. I decided to take the pressure off my shoulders and share my story. Maybe not all.

"You remember the last day of eighth grade when you attacked me with balloons full of paint?" I asked pulling away. I was still seated on his lap and surprisingly didn't mind at all. I couldn't resist sharing each other's warmth as our bodies touched. I looked up to see Tyler's face flash with confusion at first then turned into guilt. I guess he remembered that day clearly but his cheeky grin surprised me.

"What? Pink looks good on you."

I narrowed my eyes at him which made the grin drop from his face.

“Okay I’m sorry. That was very immature and mean of me. I didn’t know what I was thinking.”

He gave my hand a tight squeeze as he looked back at me.

“It’s okay. That’s all in the past now.”

He nodded his head and urged me to continue.

“When I came back, I found the house completely empty. It was strange because my parent’s loving smiles used to greet me at the door.”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

“You don’t ha—”

“No, I want to do this.”

I looked at Tyler who seemed to be debating with himself whether he should let me continue or not.

“I heard someone at the door. Thinking that it was them, I opened it to be greeted police officers. And you can pretty much guess what happened next. I found out that my parents were involved in a car accident too.”

My voice crack and my tears started to flow. Tyler wiped the tears off of my face.

“They’re gone.” I whispered placed my head on his shoulder. I was too embarrassed for him to see me like breakdown.

“I was alone.”

“You’re not alone,” Tyler whispered as he kissed my hair.

I then pulled away and cleared my throat.

“I just wanted to tell you my story since you told me yours,” I said fiddling with my fingers.

He nodded his head.

“It was one of the most horrible days of my life. I did not only lose a father, but a special person too.” He laid his forehead against mine as his warm minty breath fanned against my face. I closed my eyes relaxing against his hold and calming down. I didn’t really focus too much on what he said because my mind was getting fuzzy and dizzy. Did he just call me special?

I then opened my eyes to see Tyler flickering his to my lips. I licked and bit mine nervously as his face got closer and closer by the second.

“Crystal?” Tyler whispered.

“Yeahh?”

“I care about you a lot,” he said before crashing his lips onto mine. I held back the moan as the rush of electricity ran through me. I couldn’t help but shiver as Tyler’s hands ran all over my body bringing me impossibly closer. I know this is very cliché but I couldn’t help it. I might not have dated a lot of guys in the past but I knew one thing for sure—Tyler was definitely a good kisser Tyler. I then closed my eyes as Tyler began to get a bit rough. It wasn’t slow and simple like the last kiss. It was faster and possessive.

I felt my cheeks turn red and my lips swollen as he kept moving against mine. I didn’t know what I was thinking—no, wait, scratch that. I wasn’t thinking at all! I could only focus on Tyler and his warmth. I held Tyler’s neck up to his hair and I heard Tyler groan.

Tyler was rubbing circles against my thigh as his other hand held me against his hard chest. I was starting to feel hot and felt as if I was on cloud nine. Just when I thought things couldn’t get any more overwhelming, Tyler bit my bottom lip causing a slight moan to escape. I couldn’t believe what I was doing but I couldn’t lie to myself any further. I knew that I liked this.

Tyler groaned as he bit on my lip once again. I crunched my eyebrows down at his aggressiveness but didn’t mind it. I opened my mouth before he could make my lips bleed, I felt him slip his tongue in. I stopped right there not knowing what to do. It was not like I didn’t like it, but it was very overwhelming and fast. I never actually went this far with any other guys and was afraid he would think I wasn’t a good kisser. He calmed down a bit and was taking things slow.

A moan escaped my lips as Tyler moved his against mine. I felt myself become light headed, I almost forgot that I was sitting on his lap in a hospital room. Tyler was taking the lead and just when I thought things couldn’t get any better, the hospital door slammed open. I jumped off Tyler’s lap all of a sudden, moving us apart. My lips were puffy and red.

I looked behind me to see the stupid nurse and a doctor. I lifted my eyebrow as Tyler stood up. I averted my attention away from Tyler but couldn’t help but notice the look of annoyance written all over his face. Just when my mind was clear enough to think, I noticed the syringe the doctor was holding.

“Where’s the crazy person?” The doctor asked making me very confused.

“That’s her! She was hitting the patient!” The nurse glared at me. I’m not crazy!

“What the hell is going o—”

The doctor took a step closer, but I was pulled back.

“It’s fine. She’s perfectly normal...I think.”

I punched Tyler’s shoulder making him groan slightly in pain.

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry geez!”

He glared at me then turned around to look at the guy in white and the clown next to him. She was glaring at me, and I couldn’t help but cross my arms under my chest and smirk back at her. For years of getting bullied, I learned that our enemies hated seeing us happy so to torture them, we have to let them know that their presence wouldn’t affect us. I stared at Tyler’s muscular back as I couldn’t help but blush. What? We were just making out right now and I’m pretty sure that was very obvious. Maybe that’s why that bimbo over there was trying to kill me with her eyes.

Or maybe it was the fact I threatened to give her a concussion...

“I was told that someone was beating up the patient and that I had to put them to sleep.” The doctor said looking very confused. I couldn’t help but laugh at what he said and Tyler did the same.

“What? What’s so funny?” The nurse asked.

“There’s no crazy person here besides you for thinking that.”

The doctor then turned his head to look at the nurse.

“You lied?”

She shook her head.

“No I swear! She was beating him up with his crutches.”

Tyler crossed his arms under his chest.

“You think she could beat me up?” he asked pointing at me then at himself.

I kicked him in the leg, making him lose his balance since his other one was broken and fell to the ground.

“You were saying?” I lifted an eyebrow.

He rolled his eyes as he rubbed the spot where I hit him.

“Violence much?” He muttered under his breath.

After getting back up by the support of his crutches, he looked back at the confused doctor and wrapped an arm around my waist bringing me to his chest. I fiddled with my fingers as two pairs of eyes stared at us as if we

were aliens from outer space. I looked up at Tyler to see him grinning down at me. I then rolled my eyes when he winked at me.

“As you can see, there’s no crazy person here. You can leave now,” Tyler said in a serious tone. It surprised me to see how easily he could change from being silly with me to serious with others. I watched as the confused doctor walked out of the room with the nurse following right behind him like a lost puppy. Just as the door closed, I scoffed.

“Why were you flirting with her anyways?”

Tyler stared down at me for a moment without saying anything. I watched broke out in a fit of laughter.

What was so funny?

“Me? Flirting with her? You’ve got to be kidding with me, Gem.”

I lifted an eyebrow.

“You weren’t?”

He shook his head.

“Of course not! Why would I?”

I shrugged.

“I-I don’t know. I just thought...”

He sat down and dragged me with him on his lap.

“Don’t tell me you’re jealous?”

The glint of amusement in his eyes didn’t go unnoticed. I stared at him with shock written all over my face. I probably looked like a dead fish but I didn’t care. All I cared about is what he said right now at this moment. Was I jealous? I never actually thought off that. I guess it happened so fast I didn’t realize that maybe I was.

But there was no way I was going to admit that to him.

“Of course not! Why would I be jealous?”

Tyler looked like he didn’t believe me but still nodded his head before shrugging his shoulders. He then pushed me against his chest as he bent down to peck my lips. I was so out of it I barely heard what he said next.

“Don’t worry, Gem. I only have eyes for you.”

“And that’s why I’m so damn miserable all the time.”

“But I know you love my presence.”

“Cocky much?” I lifted an eyebrow.

“It’s passed down through the family.”

I stared at him strangely for a bit before he started laughing. I couldn't help but join him. It's as if his laughter was contagious.

"You should have seen the look on your face," he said shaking his head.

"Shut up," I muttered laying my head in Tyler's chest. It was a very long day and I was getting very tired. I just wanted to go home and sleep.

"When are you leaving?"

"Tomorrow morning. You know so that the doctor could check if there's no problem with me." He said running circles against my back. I snapped up and pulled away looking at the time on my phone.

"It's getting late. I should go. I'll check up on you to—" I was interrupted when Tyler's hand reached up hold my wrist as I got off his lap. I looked down at him to see him debating with himself.

"What's wrong?"

Tyler let out a long sigh as he closed his eyes and ran a hand through his messy hair.

"Stay."

"Huh?"

"I said stay." He pulled me back down onto his lap.

"What?"

"Stay with me for the night."

"You want me," I said pointing at my chest. "To stay with you?"

Tyler nodded his head and tighten his hold around my waist.

"Yes. Just cuddling, I promise."

Before I could answer, he dipped his head and hid it in the crook of my neck. I let out a shaky breath as I thought about it. I didn't know what I was supposed to do. It was not like I hated the idea. I actually didn't mind it as it was not my first time sleeping in the same bed with him. I was just afraid of what might happen. But knowing Tyler, he would never do anything to hurt me.

I nodded my head and couldn't help but lean over to kiss his cheek. It's been an instinct I've been dying to do.

"Okay, fine. I'm staying but no funny business," I said pointing at him.

He smiled and nodded his head.

"Okay."

He took the sheets off of the bed and laid on it as his head hit the pillow. He placed his crutches on the floor and patted the empty space next to him.

Biting my lip nervously, I got under the sheets and laid next to him. Grabbed the remote on the counter next to the bed, I turned the lights off and looked at Tyler.

His hands held my hip and pulled me closer to him so that my head was under his chin. I rested my head in the crook of his neck and breathed in his scent. I closed my eyes and enjoyed the comforting silence. I felt very sleepy and didn't need to be told twice to sleep.

As one of Tyler's hand rested on my back, his other massaged the back of my head and played with my hair.

He kissed it before whispering.

"Goodnight, Gem."

I hummed in return and welcomed the darkness with open hands.

CHAPTER 36

I tapped my fingers on my desk as I stared at the clock hanging on the wall in front of the class. I closed my eyes as I tried to ignore the cries of help from my stomach. Ever since I woke up this morning it had been grumbling in hunger. It was my fault because I forgot to put on an alarm on my phone leading me to wake up late. Thank goodness, I was able to run to class on time because I really wasn't in the mood for detention. I licked my lips nervously and bit my finger nail. I used to wake up early. If I only had the ability to get up and run in the morning then getting up for school was a piece of cake but I don't know what happened to me.

My body would usually wake up by itself, already used to it. I guess I was just so tired from all that has happened this weekend. Not only that I visited a crazy yet amazing family but I also couldn't go to sleep after what happened to Tyler. I wasn't only worried about his leg and the accident, but I was also bombarded with possible thoughts and questions of the last kiss we shared. What would it mean? I stood up thinking for hours tossing and turning in my bed.

Did this make us friends with benefits?

If I was going to have a relationship with Tyler, I hoped it would be something stable. Usually, when I liked a guy, I'd either ask him out or the other way around but Tyler was different. He acted so sweet at one point and then silly at the same time. I recalled the countless times of him telling me how sorry he was for everything he had done and treating me like a treasure. Treasure, huh? Could that be why he called me Gem?

"Earth to Gem!"

I snapped my head to my right to see Tyler. We were in our fourth period class and I couldn't wait until lunch started. I was so hungry I could eat a cow! I know, cliché right?

"I'm hungry." I whined resting my head on the desk and groaning.

"Lunch is about to begin so suck it up."

I groaned unladylike in response.

"Well, don't you sound like an angel from the heavens," Tyler said

"Shut up and get me some food."

"Do I look like an all you can eat buffet to you?"

I shrugged my shoulders and was about to speak when the bell finally rung, saving me from my miseries. I lifted my head up so fast, you would have missed it if you blinked. My face lighted up as I fist bumped the air like a crazy person. I heard Tyler chuckle from next to me but I paid no attention to him because I was too busy gathering all my stuff and dashing towards the door.

"Slow down," I heard Tyler say.

I stopped what I was doing when I remembered that I couldn't go far without Tyler because he was still on his crutches. Tyler held my hand. I couldn't help but get really grumpy when my stomach was empty, begging for food.

"Do you know how hungry I am?" I asked tugging on his hand towards the door. Thankfully, I didn't need to do it with so much force because he came along willingly.

"You're so hungry you could just eat me up?"

"You were saying!"

Tyler sent me a glare and cursed under his breath.

"You're still violent even when I'm injured."

He brought me closer as I shoved through the sea of hungry students and I had to help in this kind of crowd. We finally made it to the cafeteria and I thanked the lords the line wasn't that long. I did a little happy dance in my head and rushed over to the short line, ready to get my food. Words couldn't describe how hungry I was. I'd eat anything so I wouldn't faint.

I stood behind a tall blond boy as Tyler stood behind me. He was tapping his foot on the ground impatiently and so was I. He didn't like waiting at all. Just as the line was about to get shorter, I looked around the cafeteria to see Matt nowhere in sight. I lifted an eyebrow as I saw the table

we usually sat in completely empty. Shrugging, I thought that maybe him and the others were hanging outside but I didn't want to waste my time looking for him when I could be eating.

That wasn't an option at all.

So I thought about texting him to know where he was. I reached my hand in the back of my pocket to take my phone out when I found it completely empty. My eyes widened as I shoved my hand in there searching for anything but I got nothing other than a few coins! Great! Please don't tell me I just lost my phone! Anything but that! And above all times, I just had to lose it when I was dying out of hunger?

"Crap." I groaned as I ran my hands through my hair.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"I can't find my phone. I think I dropped it in class."

"Do you want me to come with you to help find it?"

I shook my head.

"No thanks. You stay here."

"Okay."

He nodded his head. And with that I dashed passed him and out of the cafeteria in a hurry. I ran down the hall and passed my locker and towards my ICT class. Hoping that the teacher wasn't in there so that I could take my phone back immediately without questioning. It's as if my prayers were heard because once I reached the door, I saw the room completely empty. Thank goodness! I walked into the room to see the teacher's belongings still on their desk which meant that somebody we'll be back soon so I had no time to lose. I dashed to where I usually sat and inspected my seat carefully. I frowned to myself when I saw it completely empty.

Where could it have gone?

I then searched in Tyler's seat and the ones beside us but found nothing. Just as I was about to leave and give up, I saw something shiny on the ground. I bent down to the ground to see my phone laying there under Tyler's chair.

Must have been dropped.

After taking a firm grip on it, I clenched it to my chest and let out a sigh of relief. After walking out of the classroom, I made sure to close the door behind me. I walked down the hall in a hurry, all wanting to do was eat. My stomach grumbled as I forced my legs to move faster.

But I stopped dead in my tracks when I heard something which made my stomach flip. And definitely not in a good way.

I heard a girl crying.

Speeding up my pace, I ran towards the direction where the sound came from, and it seemed to get louder and louder each time I got closer. I ran around the corner and heard another voice. It seemed to belong to a boy. I felt my blood boil in me as I heard the shouts of a female and a cruel laugh following after it. I got confused to the point where I couldn't just back down and leave. I couldn't do such a thing. Especially not after hearing someone's cry. I wonder what was happening? Was somebody hurt?

Just as I passed a classroom, I stopped dead in my tracks. I couldn't believe what I just saw. Closing my eyes, I tried to calm myself but the rage inside me was fueling like fire. My chest rose up and down as I fisted my hand to my side. I took a couple steps back and looked inside the classroom I previously passed by. My eyes couldn't believe what saw. A girl was cowering away as she cried. Her tears were falling down her face as she stuttered something. She was wearing a *hijab* (scarf) on her head and had her hair all covered up. A huge guy was in front of her holding her from her neck as he laughed.

"S-s-stop-AH!"

She screamed as she fell to the ground.

"F*cking terrorist!" The guy hissed. I stared in disgust. Was this guy literally bullying an innocent girl and calling her the terrorist?

"P-please sto-I didn't do anything." She whimpered.

If I was a werewolf then I'd surely let out a loud growl because of how angry I was. And if all this wasn't enough, what the guy did next made me want to bury him six feet under ground and watch him suffer.

He tried to pull the girls scarf off of her head.

This was literally harassment!

"What are you hiding under there, huh?" he yelled.

"Ah!" she screamed.

"Why are you even wearing this?" He yanked it but she had a firm hold onto her hijab.

"Stop! L-leave me alone."

And that was my last straw! There was no way in hell I'd leave and pretend like I never saw this. I knew racism was a big issue these days but

this was completely harassment!

I ran towards the scene and grabbed the closest thing I saw which was a book. Lifting that book over my head, I whacked it on the guy's head with all my force. And I didn't just do it once though... I did it more than twice.

"TAKE THAT YOU PIECE OF SHIT!" I yelled out in frustration.

Whack.

"THIS IS WHAT YOU GET WHEN YOU HARASS SOMEONE!"

Whack.

I then took a chair which was right next to me with one hand and swung it to hit his back.

"LEAVE HER THE F*CK ALONE BEFORE I MAKE YOU REGRET EVER BEING BORN!"

The guy yelled in pain and turned around immediately as he glared at me coldly.

"What the hell b*tch!" He held his hands over his head as I sent him a cold icy glare and dropped the book onto the ground dramatically.

"What the hell?" I asked pointing to myself.

"I should be saying what the hell!" I yelled poking his chest.

He opened his mouth to speak but I interrupted him immediately.

"Listen bastard! I come here seeing you harass an innocent girl and you tell me what the hell?" I asked in disbelief and chuckled to myself.

"You've got to be kidding right?" I asked clapping my hands.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" he asked rubbing the spot in his head where I hit.

"What's wrong with me? You mean what's wrong with you? I'm not going around to random strangers and pulling off their clothing, am I?" I asked crossing my hands under my chest and lifting an eyebrow.

"Why are you even defending her? She's a terrorist!"

"Really? Terrorist, huh?" I said trying to calm myself. Breath Crystal! This dude doesn't deserve you going to jail. But someone better hold me before I kill him. I was definitely angry. How could people be so cruel and mean? How was she a freakin terrorist? Just because of her choice of close? I don't see her killing or bombing anyone.

"The only threat I see in this room is your ass you mother f*cker!" I yelled before lifting my knee and hitting him where the sun doesn't shine hoping that I'd ruin his family jewels. I watched as he hissed in pain and

turned around to see the girl hiding in the corner, fixing her scarf. I grabbed her hand and dragged her out of the room as I ignored the filthy peasant shouting from behind me.

What a coward! I then dragged the girl to an empty class and shut the door. I turned around to see her wiping off her tears.

“Are you okay?” I asked. Now that I was up close. I could see her much better now. To say she was pretty was an underestimate. She’s beautiful. She had blue-greenish eyes and freckles covered her face. Her teeth were white and straight and I’m pretty sure if she smiled, she would look amazing.

“Yeahh, I’m fine. Thank you,” she whispered fiddling with her fingers.

“Any time.”

“What’s your name?”

“Naomi.”

I extended my hand to shake.

“I’m Crystal.”

She didn’t take my hand to shake. She wrapped her hands around me and engulfed me into a hug.

“Thank you. I don’t know what would have happened if you didn’t help.”

I nodded my head and hugged her back.

“Hey anyone would do that in my place. That guy was a jerk. Don’t let people like him bother you.” I patted her back and then pulled away.

“Yeah, I know I’m used to it by now.”

I felt my heartbreak for her. The world we lived it in so cruel indeed.

“I’m so sorry,” I said running my hands through my hair.

“It’s okay. It’s not your fault. People are just so judgmental these days.”

She shook her head.

“I know what you’re talking about. I was in your place once.”

“Really? Then how did you get out of it?”

I stopped to think before answering.

“I fought back.”

She smiled.

“Was it easy?”

I shook my head.

“Definitely not. But it was worth it in the end. The look on everyone’s faces when they see you fighting back was priceless.” I joked, trying to lighten up the mood. She nodded her head and played with her fingers nervously. The awkward tension was becoming too hard to handle so I decided to change the subject.

“Are you new here? I’ve never seen you before.”

“Yeah actually I started school last week.”

“Wasn’t such a great start, was it?”

She chuckled and nodded her head.

“I promise things will get better if you started hanging out with my friends and me.”

Her eyes widened at my suggestion.

“Sh*t. Sorry I didn’t mean to pressure you. I was only offer—”

“Sure, I’d love too.”

The mood lightened up immediately and I couldn’t help but smile. There was something about this girl that shouted joy and love.

“Then come on. Let’s go meet them.” I said before dragging her out of the classroom but stopped when my stomach grumbled out loud. I blushed a bit as she let out a small laugh.

“As you can see, I’m starving so let’s get going.”

And with that I dragged her towards the cafeteria as if my life depended on it. It felt nice to help someone out. Even though I’ve been in her place before, I still felt like what I went through was nothing compared to hers. But the good side of the world we live in was that we could always fight for our hopes and dreams.

Yes, it could be a bumpy ride at first but everything will come to place in the end. Thanks to the people who cared about me. Sadly, my parents weren’t here to witness this but I had other loving friends such as Troy, the twins, Matt and Jasmine.

Tyler’s in a different category though. I had no idea where to place him but I was hoping to get that answer real soon.

CHAPTER 37

I placed my hand on Naomi's back and walked her out of the empty classroom. I really wished and hope that Naomi wouldn't have to go through any of that ever again and I'd be sure that if I did see it happen one more time then let's just say I wouldn't be using just a chair. But seeing what happened opened my eyes and made me think that I wasn't the only one living this nightmare. I wasn't alone and sadly this was happening all over the world yet I always only think about myself which made me feel very stupid.

I spent all these years remembering and running from what Tyler and others did to me when my situation wasn't that bad while someone was living much worse. It made me feel thankful for being there at that moment and stopping from anything going too far. I was glad to meet Naomi and I was going to show her to the group. My friends always made me feel less of a loser and I sure hoped that if Naomi found someone to care about her, then she'd feel the same.

Just as we walked down the hallway, Tyler showed up. He ran towards me with the crutches and then took a hold of my hand. A blush took over my face when Naomi stared at us but I held it back down. I felt his warmth as he pulled me in closer.

"You're not supposed to be running."

I crunched my eyebrows and stared at his injured leg.

"You took so long."

"I know. It's because I bumped into Naomi. Naomi meet Tyler-uh well my...friend?" The word friend rolled off my tongue in a weird way and I couldn't help but feel uncomfortable when saying it. It's as if it wasn't

meant to be there in the very beginning but I shrugged it off when Tyler gave me a weird look. He then turned to look at Naomi and flashed her a smile while sticking out his hand.

“Hi. It’s nice to meet you,” he said as she took a hold and shook his hand. She smiled and nodded her head.

“Nice to meet you too.”

“I’m going to introduce her to the group.”

“Where are they anyways? And did you get my food?” I asked in a hurry.

Tyler nodded his head.

“I did and they just got back from their classes. They’re hanging out in the usual spot,” he said as he dragged me down the hall with Naomi by my side. I couldn’t help but smile.

“Great! I’m starving.” I placed my hand over my stomach to prevent it from making some weird noise. When the doors of the cafeteria opened, I swear I heard bells of joy! The smell of pizza and grill cheese sandwiches hit me like a brick on the face. I felt my mouth water in hunger. Yes, I knew cafeteria food wasn’t the best in the world but when you’re dying out of hunger then you might as well eat a lizard and you wouldn’t care!

Okay... Maybe a lizard was a bit extreme but you know what I mean.

I stopped all of a sudden and turned around to look at Naomi.

“Sh*t that’s right. We need to get you something to eat.” I reminded myself. Just as I was about to drag her to the line, she pulled me back.

“No, that’s okay. I have my own lunch from home,” she pointed at her bag. That was when I noticed her holding a small lunch bag in her right arm. Nodding my head, I showed her the way to our table as Tyler walked beside me. Seeing Matt sitting with my friends brought a smile to my face and it wasn’t because I missed him or anything. It was because of the food scattered across the table.

“Mine!” I yelled as Matt reached over for a cheese burger but I snatched it from him almost immediately and shoved it into my mouth inhumanly. I munched on what seemed to be heaven as I closed my eyes and savored the taste. I could finally feel my stomach be at ease.

“Hey, that was mine!” Matt whined.

I sent him a cold glare, making him back down as he held his hands up in surrender.

“Well, someone’s hungry.” Jasmine rolled her eyes.

I swallowed my first bite before answering.

“Hungry? I’m starving!” I said before shoving the last remaining burger into my mouth.

“What a lovely sight.” I heard Tyler say in sarcasm but I only flipped him off in return. As I swallowed my last bite, Naomi sat next to me attracting everyone’s attention.

“Guys, I’d like to introduce you to Naomi.”

She gave them a smile and waved ‘hello’.

“Damn, she’s ho—OW!”

Troy rubbed the sore spot Jasmine caused. She glared at him and pinched his shoulder.

“No flirting.”

“But babe! You always flirt with him when I’m around!” he whined pointing at Tyler.

Tyler let out a chuckle as his famous grin took over his face.

“It’s my weakness! Can’t blame you.” he winked at Jasmine causing her to laugh.

“See! You’re doing it again.” Troy pouted causing Jasmine to look at him.

“Aw babe! You know I only have eyes for you.” She cooed while pinching his cheek. I wanted to gag right there on the spot when they leaned over to kiss. Turning my attention away, I leaned over to whisper to Naomi.

“Sorry about that. Just ignore them.” I said.

Naomi gave me a smile and let out a laugh.

“It’s okay. I don’t mind. Your friends seem amazing,” she whispered.

I couldn’t help but agree.

“So, Naomi where are you from?” Matt asked shoving a French fry into his mouth. All heads turned towards her in curiosity.

“I’m actually from Britain.”

“Then why don’t you have one of those sexy British accents?” Eva asked.

“I’ve lived all my life Philadelphia so I guess that answers your questions.”

“So, what can you say about California?” Tyler asked steeling a fry from my tray. I pinched his hand and before he could shove it into his

mouth, I did the stupidest thing I have ever done for food. I never expected I'd do this but when you're hungry as me, you'd do anything to save every last bite.

I bit his hand like a hungry dog.

"Mine!" I growled steeling my fry and shoving it into my mouth in victory.

"What the heck!" Tyler hissed in disbelief causing everyone to erupt into laughter.

"You just bit my hand!"

"In front of your new friends." I could hear the amusement in his voice but I could care less. All that mattered was that I took back my food and was filling my stomach with joy.

"Wow, your girlfriend is a werewolf." Naomi joked causing both heads to whip towards her.

"I'm not his girlfriend!"

"I know, tell me about it!"

We both said in the same time. We then looked at each other and sent a glare at one another.

"You better get used to that." Matt said pointing at us.

"Happens all the time." Sydney let out a sigh of boredom.

"I have a great feeling we will get along quite well," Naomi said causing all of us to chuckle.

"So as Tyler was asking, What do you think about California?" Jasmine asked.

"I love the weather here. It's so warm and sunny. Just my type."

There was an awkward silence but didn't last long because Troy spoke.

"So how did you guys meet?" Troy asked pointing towards me and Naomi. I focused on his question and not on the big doofus sitting right next to me from the other side who was burning holes into the side of my head. Either it was because he was an admirer or because I bit his hand. I'd like the first choice better but I'd say the second one seemed more logical. I couldn't help but think that he was a very hot doofus.

"Let's just say we ran into an idiot."

"A very racist idiot."

I corrected myself causing all heads of nod down slowly in confusion. The awkward moment soon disappeared when Tyler spoke.

“So when’s the big race?”

I smiled with excitement.

“Next week!” I said.

“Wait, I thought it was two weeks away?” Matt scratched the back of his neck in confusion.

“That wasn’t the permanent date. It’s completely normal for it to change.” Tyler informed which reminded me that he once won the big race. I stared at him in awe as I played with the bracelet he gave me. Knowing that he was pushed to win the race made me even more motivated to win. Not just because of the money but because of my self-determination as well. If I won this race then I’d be sure to never doubt myself ever again. It felt as if I’d take a big step towards victory and I’d finally accomplish something. I mean if Tyler could do it then what makes me any different? I wouldn’t let my sweat and pants for breath go to waist.

I was determined to win. I’ve been training for years.

“Omg! I’m so excited!” Jasmine clapped her hands.

“You’ll definitely win!” Sydney said causing me to smile in return.

“Wait which race are you guys talking about?” Naomi asked fiddling with her fingers.

“There’s this race represented by our schools district.” Matt explained.

“The one next Friday?” she asked.

I nodded my head.

“Yeah how do you know? Will you be there?” I asked in excitement.

“Oh I’ll be there all right ...”

“But?” Tyler lifted an eyebrow knowing that there was something else she wanted to say.

“Just not in the crowd.” she chuckled nervously.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I’ll be in the race too.”

“Really? But how? I was the only one representing our school.”

“I know, but my mom works there and was able to find me a spot in this race.”

“Oh I see.” I nodded my head and was about to say something when Eva jumped up and down and hugged Naomi excitedly.

“Oh gosh this is going to be so much fun! Can’t wait to see who will win!” She yelled shaking Naomi. She looked a bit taken back but let out a

laugh and patted her shoulder in relief. I guess she wasn't expecting us to take this news in a good way. I couldn't help but laugh and was about to pull the poor girl away from Eva's grip before she hugged her to death but stopped when Naomi accidentally knocked down her orange juice, spilling it all over her long red skirt which was covering her legs.

"Sh*t." Jasmine cursed.

"Uh-are you okay?" I asked grabbing a napkin to wipe off the damage.

"Oh my gosh I'm so sorry!" Eva shrieked.

"Oh no! That was such a nice skirt!" Sydney whined.

"We have to do something about it." I said getting up.

"Guys... It's just juice. It'll wash o—"

"Shut up!" All girls turned to interrupt Troy from speaking. He looked taken back and opened his mouth to speak but was stopped, when Tyler and Matt pinched him in a warning matter.

"Be quiet before you get us all killed." Matt hissed.

"Yeah never mess with girls' clothes." Tyler warned causing me to roll my eyes.

"Uh-it's okay girls. I'll just wash it when I get home but thanks th—"

"Nonsense!" Eva said getting up along with Jasmine and Sydney.

"That's a beautiful skirt you're wearing and if you wait till you get home it'll just dry." Sydney pointed out.

"I feel so guilty for starting this so let's get it washed up in the bathroom." Eva insisted.

"B-but—"

"No buts if I were you."

"Eva tends to get a little crazy when she doesn't get her ways," I whispered.

"Hey I heard that!" she yelled walking towards us.

"It was intended to be heard." I couldn't help but joke as we walked towards the bathroom.

"What's with girls and their urges to go together to the bathroo—OW!" Troy yelled in pain.

"What did we warn you about!" I heard Matt hiss to Troy.

"Don't question them!"

I chuckled at what Tyler said. Just before we could disappear into the crowd of students, I heard Troy grumble to himself.

“That hurt, man.”

We then walked inside the hallway which led to the girls bathroom.

“Men.” Jasmine rolled her eyes.

“They’re so stupid.” she continued.

“Maybe we should remind you that you’re dating one of them.”

“Whatever.” she grinned. All five of us walked into the bathroom which was thankfully empty. I walked towards the sink and then turned around to look at Naomi. Her red skirt was covered in a big orange stain and just by looking at it, it wouldn’t be too easy to take it off. Especially if she was wearing it.

“Does anybody have any extra pair of jeans?” I asked like looking around to each girl. The twins shrugged. Jasmine pulled out a pair of skinny jeans from her bag. I couldn’t help but stare at her strangely.

“What?” she asked. “I’m on my period! Never know when a girl could need some extra clothes.” She pointed out.

I nodded my head.

“Typical.” Eva rolled her eyes as Sydney snatched the piece of clothing from Jasmine’s grip and turned to look at Naomi.

“It’s not much but this will have to do.”

Naomi took the jeans into her hands and sent Jasmine a smile.

“Thanks a lot. I totally owe you one.”

Eva dragged Naomi into an empty stall.

“Come on! We don’t have all the time in the world. Class is about to start.”

Naomi nodded her head and closed the door. We couldn’t see her since the stall door was closed but the door didn’t come all the way down to the ground so there was a little space which was enough to see her ankles and down. I leaned against the sink as I took out my phone to check the time. We had five minutes before class started and I wasn’t looking forward for that at all. Placing my phone back into my pocket, Naomi was telling the girls something about living in Philadelphia but I wasn’t concentrating because I caught a sight which completely surprised me but none of them noticed a thing. I felt my stomach drop in pity but I pushed it deep down because I knew Naomi wouldn’t have wanted me to think about her that way. I felt my heart clenched for this poor girl when I couldn’t help but replay what I just saw for a split of a second.

I saw Naomi push the jeans up her ankle and wore her shoes almost immediately. I couldn't believe how fast she wore her shoes but I didn't miss it.

Just before she could slip into her shoes, I saw metal on both feet.

It looked like Naomi was used to wearing so fast to hide that but it didn't slip before my eyes. Naomi had no feet but fake metal ones. I couldn't believe it not because it was so sad and depressing but because she wore her shoes so fast like she wanted to hide them. I guess this was a sensitive topic for her to hide it and I know it was none of my business but it reminded me of myself. Just like when I'd run away from my problems and hide in the corner.

Naomi was hiding the truth.

I'd have to respect her for her decisions but I couldn't help but care. I tried to push down the urge to walk up to her and help but I knew that I couldn't get myself involved in other people's business. I barely knew the girl for less than an hour and it would be so rude of me to walk up to her and push her to discomfort. But that doesn't mean I'm wasn't going to try.

I was going to try to help Naomi find her comfort.

A smile took over my face when I realized something. Naomi was participating in a race to run! I'm sure that's something which will boost her self-esteem! I'm guessing that it's not that easy and to walk in those so imagine running. That would surely be a challenge for her but not impossible.

I was snapped out of my thoughts when the stall door opened and Naomi came out. Before she wore Jasmine's jeans, she threw her skirt over the door to Eva so I wasn't surprised when I saw the red fabric in Eva's hands stain clean. She then placed in a plastic bag and handed it over to Naomi.

I know... Who brings random plastic bags with them to school? Apparently, Jasmine does.

"Damn girl you look good in those." Sydney complement her causing her to blush a bit.

"Thanks. I'll make sure to return them tomorrow."

Just then the bell rang.

"Dam it. lunch is over!" Eva whined causing me to groan along with her.

“I’m guessing you’re not looking forward for your next class?” Naomi chuckled.

“I have math. What do you expect?” I said as we walked out of the bathroom and towards our table.

“Sucks. I got choir so I’ll see you girls later.” Naomi waved at all of us but was immediately pulled into a hug by the twins. Jasmine and I hugged her goodbye to and promised to meet after school.

“It was nice meeting you! See ya!” The girls left and disappeared down the hall along with other students. I turned to look at Naomi.

“Isn’t the choir class next to Math?” I asked.

She shrugged.

“I’m not sure. Is your class next to the gym?” She asked.

I nodded my head.

“Yeah it is. Come on let’s go.” I dragged her passed the sea of students.

“So are you excited for the race?” She asked out of the blue.

“Yeahh, of course I am. You?” I asked.

She nodded her head.

“Yeah, I am, but I’m also nervous. I’m not the fastest runner out there you know... And there could only be one winner.”

“I know but you have to have faith in yourself. Whatever happens, there is always a reason. Remember that.”

She nodded her head and looked down to her feet. She then looked back up at me and smiled.

“You’re right. I have to have faith in myself.”

“But?” I asked knowing that she wanted to say something.

“But I’m filled with insecurities.”

I stopped to look at her.

“So do I. Everyone does.”

“Yeah, I know b—”

“But you have to accept them. Not to hide them.” I said.

She nodded her head as she absorbed all what I said.

“Yes that’s true.”

Just as those words left her mouth, I noticed that we made it to our fourth period classes. The bell would ring any minute now and I wasn’t looking forward for detention so I hugged Naomi goodbye.

“I’ll see you after school okay?”

She nodded her head and waved at me. I turned around and was about to walk into my class when I heard Naomi call out for my Name.

“Yeahh?”

“You know that guy totally has the hot stuff for you.” she grinned.

“Huh?”

“You know your boyfriend.”

“You mean Tyler? He’s not my boyfriend.”

“That didn’t look like it.” She shook her head and walked away.

Were we that obvious?

CHAPTER 38

My eyes shot open and were met with the cold depth of the darkness. I darted them from side to side as my chest moved up and down in fright. I felt my body lay limp against my comfy mattress but was no help when I felt it soaking wet with my sweat. I used as much energy I could possibly gather, and lifted my hand to place it on top of my beating heart to steady it down. I let out a harsh breath as I moved my hand upwards towards my forehead and couldn't believe it when I felt the heat radiating from it. Groaning, I closed my eyes because of how heavy they were and let the feeling of tiredness consume me. I turned around to my side slowly and held my stomach as I felt a sharp pain burst within seconds.

I moaned in pain realizing that I was sick. Opening my eyes, I looked at the clock hanging on my wall which barely would have shown if it wasn't for the dim light of the moon shining through my window. It was around midnight and it was no surprise why I woke up at a time like this. I mean, sleeping at nearly eight o'clock with a very heavy headache and a hurting stomach wouldn't mean that I wouldn't go through the night restless. It would just mean that something was wrong with my body because come on let's face it. I never sleep at eight.

But I wished with all my might that it was the pain of my body and limbs which woke me up. But unfortunately, it wasn't. It would have been ten times better to wake up from a flu or fever than waking up from a nightmare which haunts you for your whole entire life whether you were awake or asleep. For the nightmare I go through every day and night doesn't just occur when I close my eyes, but it was reality.

My parents' death.

This wasn't bad enough waking up with a painful heart and hot tears threatening to fall down my cheek. The scene replayed itself countless times in my head as I remembered that day which changed my whole life for the better and the worst. It felt like it was just yesterday when I heard a knock on the front door which would soon lead me to my doom. I felt odd just lying there on my bed. I mean ever since I came back here to California, the nightmares stopped. Maybe it was because I was back home. New York was never a home for me and I guess that's why it triggered the dreams of my past. But coming back here and sleeping in the same very home I used to live in with my parents could have given me a sense of relief. As if their spirits still stayed in this very house and might never leave.

This was one of the reasons why I chose to come back. I mean some people would think I'm a complete idiot for doing this. Like who would come back to the same place their deceased loved ones lived in? I debated with myself and chose the right choice my parents would have wanted me to pick. I chose to return home because this house held so much memories. They wouldn't have wanted me to sell it. Instead they would have wanted me to live my whole life here. Get married and raise my kids in this house. That is what I am sure of.

Playing with the bracelet on my wrist which I never took off, I couldn't help but feel thankful for coming back. I felt the presence of the love they once gave me here. But unfortunately, I also had to feel the pain of my body begging me to get better which snapped me out of my depressing thoughts. I didn't know what hit me but it felt like a fever to me. I was sweating everywhere and felt my stomach squeeze in pain which made me very confused. If I had a fever then why the hell did, I feel like someone stabbed me in my abdomen?

Just when I thought things couldn't get any worse, I felt a lump in my throat threatening to come out. The bile was making its way up and before I knew it, my feet were on the ground as I quickly jumped out of my bed. I wobbled my way towards the bathroom and let out my guts into the toilet.

This sure felt like heaven...

It felt like hours but in reality, it was only minutes. Just when I thought I was done letting out my lunch from last night, I'd throw up more and more until there was nothing left in my stomach. I coughed a few times and

wiped my mouth clean after flushing down the toilet. I lifted my head up to look at my reflection in the mirror and noticed dark bags under my eyes. I looked as pale as a ghost and ready to pass out any minute now. But before I could return back to my bed and sleep the night away, I felt another pain strike in my stomach, so I lifted the toilet seat up and pushed my pants down. What I saw next made me groan out in frustration.

Great! Mother Nature decided to pay me a visit so that I could know that I wasn't pregnant!

No wonder I was in so much pain! That explained a lot. Not only did I have a fever but I was also having my period. I sighed and got up from the seat. Pulling my pants up quickly, I made my way out of the bathroom and into my closet. I grabbed an extra pair of underwear and a pair of baggy sweatpants. I decided to tie my hair up into a messy bun to keep it out of the way because I was now sweating buckets of water.

Maybe the sweatpants weren't such a good idea... Oh well! I shrugged my shoulders and walked to the bathroom in a hurry. I needed something that would keep me warm, so not wearing sweatpants wasn't an option. After grabbing a pad, I went to finish my business. Through every minute I would grumble to myself. Not only did I have school tomorrow, but I'd also had to wake up with a fever and painful cramps. I then washed my hands as I tried to dismiss the annoying thoughts. If I felt much better in the morning then I'd go but there was no way I'd go feeling like this.

I probably looked like an ogre.

It was a Thursday now since it was already past midnight, so I was hoping that the week would come to an end in a hurry. I didn't want to be feeling like this when the big race comes next Friday. I couldn't lie to myself. I was pretty excited and nervous in the same time. I didn't know what was going to happen but something in my gut told me that good things awaited. I was sure to win.

Dismissing those thoughts, the pain of my back and limbs pushed me out of the bathroom and down the stairs to my kitchen. I walked as the cold air of the night breathed against my skin. I flicked on the lights and wobbled to a cabinet in the corner where I usually kept all my pain killers and medicine. After gulping down two pills of pain killers, I took a spoon full of medicine which the doctor gave me last month when I had fever.

After making my way upstairs. I made sure all the lights were off and rushed into my bedroom. As I fell on my bed, I knew I was definitely not in the right state to go to school tomorrow. Screw that! So, I laid my head against my pillow as I groaned in pain and grabbed my phone from the counter lazily. I switched off the alarm which was supposed to wake me up and closed my phone so that I wouldn't be interrupted from my sleep by any calls or text messages. I placed my phone down and pulled the covers over my head as I forced my eyes closed.

It didn't take long before my body fell limp as my eyes became very heavy. This was taking a toll on me. Just before I could excuse the fact that I wouldn't be seeing Tyler tomorrow, I pushed those thoughts into the back of my head and decided to worry about that later. I was exhausted and just wanted to sleep for three days straight.

I felt my brain shut down after a couple of minutes. I welcomed the darkness and enjoy the sweet moment of not feeling any pain whether it was coming from my stomach and limbs or my broken heart. I slept through the hours like a baby even though I'd wake up once in a while in a pond of my sweat. I'd just turn around into a different position so that the cramps would decrease and I'd fall in and out of sleep. This went on for what seemed to be forever.

I woke up a couple of times in the morning like when the sun was rising but I would just close my eyes and go back to sleep. Whenever I was awake, I would just groan in pain and hope that I'd fall asleep much sooner so that I wouldn't have to feel the pain of my cramps. I felt as if I was in some kind of spell which was keeping me from getting off of my bed. I wouldn't know how long, but I felt as if I was sleeping for days. If I wanted stuck in this lonely house, I mean no one was here to stop me.

Well that is what I thought before I heard a pounding coming from down stairs. I had no idea who it was but I just ignored it thinking maybe it was Matt or something. I was too tired to get up and check. I could barely keep my eyes open to do so. The pounding on my front door went on for another five minutes until whoever it was decided to give up. I let out a breath of relief when all I could hear was silence. I was drifting back to sleep until I felt someone shake my shoulders as they called out my name.

My eyes shot open in surprise and shock. Who the hell was in my room? And how the hell did they get into my house when I'm pretty sure the

front door was locked. I turned around as I held in my breath to see who was the crazy psychopath trying to wake up a grumpy girl. But when I saw who it was, I let out a breath and sigh of a relief. You know what, I'm pretty sure I don't have to say his name because it's obvious who it would be. I mean who else would barge into my house all of a sudden and act as if it was the most normal thing he's ever done. *Ian Somerhalder*? I sure wished so but unfortunately that was never going to happen. Yup you guess it. Tyler Grey.

“What the—”

“Where were you? I was worried sick!” He sat on my bed and touched my hand but immediately pulled it away when he felt how sweaty it was. He gave me a concern look and then placed his hand over my forehead.

“Tyler how did y—”

“Sh*t you're burning hot.” He interrupted me for the second time. He then got off of my bed and started pacing around my room with his crutches as if he never treated a sick patient before.

“Tyler.” I grumbled as I sank into my mattress.

“Yeahh? Is there anything wrong? Should I take you to the hospital? Or should I call a doctor here? Sh*t maybe I should call my mom-no no-damnit Crystal, why didn't you call me earlier and tell me you weren't feeling well?” He rushed to my side and took my hand. He then kissed my palm and then took a deep breath.

“I was worried sick over you. You never missed a day of school so I thought for sure that something was fishy.” He said more to himself. “I shouldn't have waited until classes were over to come and check up on you.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “I knew I should have skipped class.” He grumbled.

“Tyler can you ju—”

“No, no. I got this all under control!” He got up and kissed my forehead. He started to pace around my room while talking to himself. I just stared at him in confusion. He was acting like one of those husbands where their wife was giving birth.

“Tyler, stop acting like I'm giving birth to your damn child!”

Tyler stopped.

“How did you get into my house?” I finally asked snapping him out of his trance.

He shook his head as if he was pushing back his thoughts to pay attention to my question. "Oh-uh well the window was open..."

"And you climb in here like a monkey owning the place? You do know that you have a broken leg that needs healing right? How the hell are you climbing houses with crutches?"

He scratched the back of his neck nervously and then walked over to where I was laying. He got to his knees and took my hand into his. "Okay fine, Matt gave me his extra keys to your house."

I lifted an eyebrow.

"I'm sorry. I was just worried sick." He looked down and kissed my hand.

I let out a sigh and ran my hands over my face. I'd be very angry at Matt. I mean who would give the keys of their best friend's house to other people? But right now was no time to be mad because I was too tired. I'll have a talk with him later.

"No, it's okay. I'm just not feeling well that's all," I said as I looked up at the ceiling. There was a comforting silence which lasted for only a couple of seconds before Tyler decided to end it.

"Gem?" he whispered.

"Yeahh?" I turned my head to look at him.

"Are you pregnant?"

I closed my eyes as I tightened my fist, trying not to beat the crap out of anyone. *Calm down Crystal. It isn't worth it.* Before I could say anything else, I grabbed a pillow next to me and whacked it on his head.

"Are you out of your damn mind? Huh!"

"Gem—"

"Why would you think I'm pregnant you psychopath?"

"Well-I-i just th—"

"Shut up, I'm talking!" I whacked the pillow at him once again.

"I'm not freakin' pregnant! How do I know that? Mother Nature decided to kick me in the guts, making my uterus bleed! And it doesn't help that I have a fever too!"

Tyler blinked once as he stared at me with concern. "Sh*t," he whispered and immediately got up. He stood on his crutches for support as he paced around the room once again. It was still a mystery to me how the hell he was able to pace around the room with his crutches.

“I'm so sorry.” He snapped his fingers and rushed over to me.

“Go back to sleep Gem. I'll take care of everything,” he said pulling the covers over my shoulders and fixing my pillow.

“What are y—”

“I'll just ask Mom the ingredients for her soup,” he whispered to himself as if he was making an agenda in his brain. “I'll go buy some chocolate and ice cream.” I just stared at him in awe. “Oh, and I can't forget about those tampons.” He rushed to the door but stopped to look at me. “Why are you still awake?”

He rushed out of my room and closed the door. I felt my heart flutter but I pushed that feeling because now I was feeling like an ogre and probably looked like one too. I'm just surprised Tyler didn't go running for the hills when he saw me. I couldn't help but smile at the thought of him worrying. I knew that I was falling for him but I couldn't help the feeling from growing. It was just impossible not to when he was doing all this for me. I would have stayed all day thinking about Tyler but my eyes were drooping and were very heavy.

* * *

I felt someone shake my shoulders gently, trying to wake me up. I opened my eyes and glanced around the room to see him holding a bowl of soup, standing next to me. My eyes widened when I saw a huge teddy bear laying right next to me with a card which said 'feel better soon.' I immediately grabbed it and brought it to my chest. I cuddled it close to me, enjoying the feeling of its softness. I looked up at Tyler.

“Did you get me this?”

He nodded his head and sat next to me on a chair. Before I could admire the adorable bear, which was the size of my body, I noticed that I wasn't laying on my bed anymore. I was on the huge couch which was placed across my bed. I crunched my eyebrows in confusion and looked up at Tyler. I was covered in a huge comfy blanket and was surrounded with pillows.

“Why am I not laying on my bed?”

This seemed to make him a bit uncomfortable as he scratched the back of his neck nervously. I was surprised to see the blush crawling up his neck

and to his cheeks.

“Well you see . . . I hope you didn't mind me cleaning your bed sheets. They're in the washing machine right now.”

He went through all the trouble to pick me up, placing me on my couch. Surround me with not only pillows and blankets but with also a huge bear, not only did he go out of his way to make me soup, but he also cleaned my bed sheets which with no doubt would have been smelly, sweaty and having stains all over it.

“Oh.” I breathed out. “You didn't have to,” I said trying to get up. He placed the bowl of soup right on the counter and helped me sit up straight.

“It's okay. I wanted to help.” I nodded my head and looked at the bowl he was holding.

“Did you make that?”

“With a little help from my mom — oh she hopes you feel better soon by the way.” I smiled and nodded my head. Tyler then proceeded to feed me the delicious looking soup. I held back the moan as I felt the hot liquid run down my throat. Wow, that felt a lot better. As I ate, I ran my hands through my hair, trying not to look like a hobo in front of Tyler. I had the big teddy bear in my arms, already falling in love with it. I couldn't help but blush at the situation. Tyler was in my room feeding me and I never thought this would have happened ever. Once I was done with the whole bowl I looked up at Tyler and nodded my head.

“Thanks — uh you didn't have to do all this but you did it.”

Tyler leaned over and pecked my lips out of the blue. “School was very boring without you today.”

I nodded my head, couldn't help but feel shy.

“Are you feeling better?” he asked as he placed his hands on my forehead.

“Yeah a bit. Can I get a glass of water?” I asked, only now noticing that my throat was very dry.

“Yeah of course, I'll be right back,” he said as he rushed towards the door.

“Careful! You're still on crutches.”

He looked back at me and nodded his head before disappearing behind the door. I just stayed there, staring at the wall not knowing what to do. So, I grabbed my phone and turned it on, forgetting that I closed it last night.

Once it was on, I noticed many missed calls from Matt, Tyler and the twins but there was a specific number which caught my attention. I had two missed calls from that number and a text message. I opened it, reading what it said.

*'B*tch you better answer my calls before I come over and knock your door down!'*

I rolled my eyes knowing exactly who it was. The number was saved under Ethan's name but I knew that it wasn't him talking. It was Mr. Fatty for sure. I called the number and placed my phone on my ear. I listened to it ring for a bit before someone answered the call.

"Hello?" I heard Ethan say.

"Hey, how are you?"

"Crystal! Hey! How're you doing? I'm fine."

"I've been better."

"Ha-ha! Yeah, it's been a while."

"Yeah, I know I'm so sorry. I've just been really busy with school. But anyways did you let any specific person take your phone earlier?" I asked.

"Uh what do you mean?"

"Check the messages."

"Um...okay."

After a moment of silence, I heard him chuckle from the other end.

"Damnit. Sam never knows when to give up."

I heard someone shout from the other end and Ethan began arguing with that person. I couldn't hear much but I knew it was Mr. Fatty.

"Okay, okay. Take her geez. You could have just asked," Ethan said. "Don't worry he just misses you that's all."

"No, I don't! It's just those demons have been bugging me all day!" I heard him shout. I waited for Ethan to give Mr. Fatty the phone before I spoke.

"Don't worry old man. I've missed you too."

"Shut up." he grumbled. "I cannot live my life normal ever again because of you."

"When was your life ever normal?" I asked.

"Shut up! Those demons won't leave me the hell alone!"

“You do know you're talking about your nephews and niece, right?” I heard Ethan say from the other end.

“Shut up you old man!” I heard Mr. Fatty mimic what I saw earlier.

“Well somebody is on their period.”

“What did you say, girly?” he asked driving his attention back to me.

“Uh-nothing just why you wanted to talk to me so badly. I know you missed me pal. You don't have to hide it.”

“Listen closely girly. You need to come over before those devils eat me alive. You hear me?”

“You know what. How about you come over instead?” I asked laying over the big teddy bear Tyler got me. I still couldn't believe he did all that for me. How could I have thought of him being so evil when he was so sweet to me?

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I've got this big race coming up next week and I'd like you to bring the whole family to watch.”

“Really?”

“Yeahh, just make sure Granny Grace takes her medicine, please.”

Mr. Fatty said something but I didn't quite hear because my attention was drawn to the open door. Tyler walked in holding a glass of water and a plastic bag in his other hand. I lifted an eyebrow and watched as he tried to hold both stuffs while still managing to walk on crutches. This boy will be the death of me. Instead of caring about himself because you know, he has a damn broken leg! He goes through all that to make me feel better.

“Listen, I'll call you later. Say hi to Ally for me ok?” I put my phone down as I tried to get up to help Tyler but he just hissed at me.

“What are you doing? Don't get up!” he glared at me. I stood frozen and watched as he made it towards the chair and sat down. When he was within reach, I took a hold of his hand.

“Tyler, give yourself a break. You can't keep applying pressure on your leg.”

“Gem, I'm fine. You should be worrying about yourself. You got a big race to look up to which is why you need to feel better soon.” He handed me the glass of water while I sat up straight and took it. I then gulped it in a hurry, enjoying the marvelous taste.

“It's next week. I'm pretty sure I'll be fine then.” I placed the glass on the coffee table next to me. “What's in that?” I asked pointing at the bag in his hand.

“Oh that?” he asked before handing it over to me. I glanced up at him before looking down to see what was in it. Inside the bag were chocolate, Oreos, chocolate chip cookies, gummies bears, and ice cream. I lifted an eyebrow at Tyler and gave him a questioning look.

“You want to give me diabetes?”

He chuckled and shrugged. “Maybe.”

I laughed a bit before leaning over to kiss his cheek. When I leaned away, I saw him grinning widely like an idiot.

“Thank you.”

He nodded his head and got up to sit next to me on the couch. He wrapped an arm around me, bringing me to his chest. “Anything for you Gem.” He kissed my hair as I opened the box of cookies. I blushed a bit but enjoyed the feeling of being in his arms. I leaned over and rested my head on his shoulders as I took a bite out of the cookie.

“Want some?”

He shook his head. “Na, I'm good.”

I nodded my head as I continued to munch on the goodies Tyler got me. We sat in silence as we enjoyed each other's presence. Tyler wrapped his arm around my waist, bringing me closer and at that time I could finally say that I was feeling a whole lot better. In and out. I owed him a lot. I then placed the box of cookies down and cuddles next to him, feeling tired once again. Tyler placed his hand over my forehead and nodded his head in approval. I felt myself drifting off into sleep but didn't miss what he said next as he kissed my hair.

“Feel better soon, Gem. For me.”

CHAPTER 39

I couldn't believe I've made it this far. I mean I still felt like the thirteen-year-old who was getting bullied in school. Time flew by so quickly, I sometimes thought that I'm dreaming. I always shake my head in shame and curse at myself for being so selfish and naive. I've always thought that my life was a living hell, wishing for a better life and holding grudges on people who destroyed me. But I was wrong.

My life wasn't that bad at all.

I lost the most important people in my life and was always tortured at school, but little did I know that I was living the life others wished they had. How could I be so stupid to believe that I was the only one in pain when many others were going through much worse. I had a house over my head, food to eat, school for education and wonderful friends when anyone else could be going through who knows what! This is what people meant when they say not to take your life for granted. It seemed as if everything was becoming okay. Finally, after so long of being alone, I found the place which I could truly call home.

Things were way different now. I had something to look forward to when waking up in the morning. I had motivation and not that same depressed thoughts which were always hiding in the corner of my mind just waiting to strike. And I knew it was because of one thing. Or should I say a certain someone. All my friends made me who I am today. But if it wasn't for Tyler then I don't know what I would have done. I found it so funny how I used to think of him. Being the cliché typical bully but in the end, he was not that at all. He was just a broken kid who wanted some attention from a certain girl.

But we all made mistakes, right? It felt like it was just yesterday when I moved back to California. It felt as if it wasn't a week ago when Tyler cared for me while I was sick. The memories would still flash into my mind as I recalled the moment which would never leave my mind. I would lay down in bed, snuggling with the huge teddy bear Tyler got me as I blushed to myself like a teenager who received a love card by her crush on valentines. I couldn't believe it. He saw me in my worst state but never left. He gave me relaxing massages and a nice warm bath.

The only thing which annoyed me was that he wouldn't even let me get up to use the bathroom on my own! And not only that, he also made me eat so much food and drink three bowls of soup. I would give him the 'are-you-crazy' look but he'd only give me a pointed look in return and continue to feed me. At that point I was sure he wanted to give me diabetes. But all those thoughts disappeared from my head when he'd push the strands of hair behind my ear and check my temperature. My annoyance would soon vanish when he cuddled up next to me, making sure I'd sleep. The attention he gave me was too overwhelming but I liked it.

I liked staring at his face when he slept beside me. I liked running my hands down his cheek and to his jaw as I inspected every inch of his face. I knew that I was falling for this man.

* * *

Today's finally Friday! I was lying in bed staring up at the ceiling, consuming myself with none stop thoughts. Thoughts about what was going to happen next? I just woke up a couple minutes ago but couldn't bring myself to move. I was letting myself get rid of all the nervousness I had for this day.

Today was the big race and it was going to be a long hectic day. I knew I was scared. Deep down I knew what I was capable of but there was always this doubt inside me that would never go away. It was the same feeling where you take an exam you studied good but still feared for the results.

Whatever happened, it would be for the best of everything. I grabbed my phone and turned it on. It was around ten o'clock. It was Friday but the school wanted everyone to watch the race as the school's representative.

Naomi would be there too. It didn't matter who won as long as we brought pride to the school. But for me, I participated in this race to make myself feel better.

I also thought that if Naomi would win, she'd feel better about herself but that would mean I'd lose. There could only be one winner. I wasn't looking for winning because of the money but because of my dream. The job I had was enough to provide my needs but this race would probably lift my spirit up even more.

I just hoped for the best.

I jumped out of bed and walked into my bathroom to freshen up. I wasn't going to get changed into my sport clothes until after an hour. The race was going to take place in Central California Park. I didn't even know if this was a real park but I just came up with the name which was pretty huge and was going to start at one o'clock. I had to have a healthy breakfast and then was going to jump into some yoga to relax my limbs. I needed to prepare myself. Just as I walked out of the bathroom after having a relaxing shower, I heard my phone ring. I picked it up seeing that it was Matt who was calling.

"Hey," I spoke as I walked into my closet to grab something comfy to wear so that I could start with my yoga.

"Clare-Bear! Baby! My love! Oh, darling it's your big day today!" he screamed through the speaker. I pulled the phone away from my ear as I cringed then placed it back.

"Please don't call me that ever again." I said as I pinched the bridge of my nose as if I've just been scarred for life.

"Hehe, sorry my bad. I'm just so excited."

I couldn't help but smile as I grabbed Tyler's shirt I 'borrowed' and a pair of shorts.

"Me too but a bit nervous actually."

"Crystal, you have nothing to worry about. I know you'll win. In fact, you have to or my life will be ruined."

"Matt what are you talking about?"

"Oh nothing! Can't a friend have a little faith in someone?"

I paused before answering.

"What the hell did you do?"

“Crystal-babe! You've hurt my feelings. Do I always have to get myself into tro—”

“Speak or else!”

“Okay fine I made a bet with Troy.”

I lifted an eyebrow and let out a huff as I rolled my eyes. Totally typical of him.

“I should have known.”

“I couldn't handle it Clare-Bear! Troy was saying that you wouldn't win! You above all people! Everyone knows that you will. Gosh I felt betrayed and shocked.”

“So, I, being the good friend, I decided to jump in and defend you! You should thank me.” he acted as if he was offended.

“When you say defend, do you mean betting with money?”

“Yup. I know you love me babe but there's no need in thanking me. I don't want anything in return. All I want is your lo—”

“Matt, will you shut up.”

“Sorry.”

“How much did you agree on?” I asked placing Matt on speaker so that I could get changed.

“Um...well you see...”

“Yeahh?” I urged him to continue.

“So-oh well look at that. My mama is calling me. So sorry but I have to go. You know how she is when I don't listen to her the first time.”

“Matt, you live alone.”

Matt had ended the call. Why that little rascal! I was going to deal with him later but for now I had to focus on getting ready for today's race. After getting dressed into baggy clothes, I smiled to myself as I smelled Tyler's scent on the shirt I was wearing, which I had to admit did give me some comfort. That wasn't creepy at all by the way.

I then jogged down the stairs as I pulled my hair up into a messy ponytail to keep it out of the way. I walked into the kitchen and grabbed an apple, eating it. Just as I was about to head up stairs, the doorbell rang, stopping me from going any further. I lifted an eyebrow as I walked towards the door. Without looking through the peek hole, I opened the door to be greeted by Tyler. His eyes traveled lower, inspecting my clothes.

“Damn. My clothes do look good on you.” he grinned.

I leaned against the door and crossed my arms under my chest as I lifted an eyebrow.

"Tyler."

"Yeahh?" he asked shoving his hands into the pockets of his jeans.

"Come closer."

He looked confused but didn't complain.

"No, closer."

He came closer to where his face was right in front of mine.

"A bit closer."

Just when he moved so that our lips could be brushing against each other, I lifted my hand and smacked him on the back of his head.

"Ow!" he yelped as he rubbed the back of his head.

"Idiot."

"What was that for?"

"For being a doofus."

"All I did was complement you, woman." He lifted his hands up into the air and I laughed. I leaned over and pinched his cheeks playfully.

"Thanks," I said as I stepped aside for him to walk in but he just stood there in his place.

"Well, aren't you coming in?"

He shook his head and scratched the back of his head. "No, actually I don't want to take much of your time. I know you're preparing for the race." He took a step closer. I nodded my head as I watched him take a hold of my hands, rubbing my knuckles.

"Yeahh, I'm nervous though."

Tyler gave me an assuring smile. "Don't worry. I believe in you." He smiled.

"Thanks."

He coughed nervously as he scratched the back of his neck and gave me a hesitant look.

"What's wrong?"

"Well, you see... I didn't come here just to wish you luck but there's something I'd want to tell you."

I nodded my head.

"Well, go on."

"I know you'll win."

“And when you do I want to ask you a very important question.”

I gave him a curious look.

“What do you want to ask?”

He shook his head.

“That's for later.”

“Let's just say I've been waiting for the right moment to ask.”

I nodded my head.

“But what if I don't win?”

“I know you will.”

He leaned over to kiss my forehead.

“I'll see you before the race begins.”

He pushed a strand of hair behind my ears. He then stepped back but before he could turn away, he stopped and looked at me as if he remembered something.

“You got the bracelet on, right?”

I smiled and nodded my head as I showed him my wrist.

“Yup. Never took it off.”

He nodded his head and waved goodbye before leaving. I closed the door, wondering to myself what on earth did Tyler want to ask me. Shrugging, I walked up the stairs as a smile spread across my face. I guess there was only one way to find out. I had to win.

Walking out of the bathroom, I ran down the stairs and towards the front door. I had just changed into my sport clothes and was waiting for Matt to pick me up. He insisted on taking me to the race because he said that he felt 'guilty' for betting on me. I just let out an unladylike snort and shook my head. Sure. I pretended to believe that but we all knew that wasn't the case. He just wanted to make sure I'd make it on time so that I could win the race and him gain his money.

What a wonderful best friend.

I looked up at the time to see that I had thirty minutes before the race started. The Central Park wasn't that far away thankfully which meant that it would take only a couple of minutes to get there. Ten the most. Just as I picked my phone to call Matt, I heard a beeping sound coming from outside. Knowing that it must be him. I grabbed my phone as the only thing I need and walked out the door. I was going to hand it over to Tyler as I ran

because I didn't trust myself to keep it safe. Letting Tyler hold it for me would be the best option.

After making sure my front door was locked, because you know, safety first. I walked to Matt's car and hopped in.

"Hurry up woman! We are going to be late!"

"Relax, will ya'? We still have twenty-five minutes. Don't make me lose the race on purpose or you won't get your money."

Matt's head whipped towards me as he sent me a deathly glare.

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Try me!"

"Whatever," he muttered as he started the car and drove down the road. I then crossed my arms under my chest and smirked in satisfaction.

"Thought so."

I looked out of the window and watched as the trees came by and disappeared as the clouds hovered above us. I tapped my fingers on my lap impatiently. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, trying to sooth myself down. I was getting anxious more by the minute but I held back all my worries. I knew I had to try my best. It didn't matter what the result was but as long as I put all my effort to it then I know I wouldn't regret.

When Matt finally parked the car in our destination, I let out a sigh of relief and hopped out. Just as Matt closed his door, I heard a buzz coming from my phone. Looking at it, I saw it was a message from Ethan.

'Good luck kiddo with the race. The whole family is here and seated waiting for you, including mama Grace... Don't worry she took her medicine.' It read. I smiled and texted him back before closing my phone. As I looked up, I saw two cars park next to ours. When the doors opened, Troy, Naomi and Jasmine came out of one while Tyler and the twins came out of the other.

I walked up to them and hugged Naomi.

"You ready?" I asked excitedly.

She nodded her head immediately as she smiled.

"Yeah but nervous."

"It's okay. Just do your best." I assured her, knowing that running in her state would be difficult because of her fake legs. Just when she thanked me, I noticed Tyler walking up to us.

"Come on guys! You're going to be late!"

Tyler dropped his arm on my shoulder and sent me a wink as his eyes flickered to my wrist.

“Good luck, even though you won't need it. Let's just hope the bracelet comes to use.”

“Let's head to the back. That's where all runners need to take their places.” I nodded my head and waved goodbye to my friends as I followed Naomi. There was a couple of minutes left before the race started and I couldn't control the excitement. We walked to the starting line with a bunch of other strangers from other schools. The race wasn't that long. It wasn't happening to see how long the runners could run but how fast they were so we wouldn't be here for that long. Naomi and I stood next to each other since we represented the same school and waited until everyone got into their places.

I felt my heart beat against my chest as I finally realized that this was going to be it. The time has finally come to see what I was capable of. To calm myself down, I looked at the crowd and saw all my friends sitting next to Ethan and his family. But what really made me smile was when I saw Ally sitting on Tyler's lap as they both waved at me. I waved back then turned to look at Naomi and stuck my hand out for her to shake.

“Let the best runner win.”

We then stepped back and got into our places as the guy holding a whistle and a flag walked towards the starting line.

“Get into your places everyone.” He said.

“On your mark.”

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes.

“Get set.”

I then opened it and looked forward at the distance I had to run.

“Go!”

And that was the last thing I heard before sprinting. I ran just like everyone else did but I only noticed a couple of runners in front of me which meant that all the rest were behind me. The path we were running on was a large circle which meant that our finishing line would be the starting. I forced my legs to move even faster as I pushed myself to my limits. There were three runners in front of me which meant that I was fourth in place.

I took a deep breath and blocked out all distractions as I tried to get past the third person on line. A smile then spread across my face as I passed the

third person. My chest was moving up and down as we made the turn which would soon lead to our destination.

I forced myself to remember all those times I spent after school training for this day. I couldn't let myself down.

I ran past the second and was right behind the person first runner. I breathed in and out heavily as I paid no attention to those around me. I didn't even realize Naomi was almost catching up to me which would normally make me smile if I wasn't sweating buckets at this point. I gave her a short nod and ran as fast as I could. I smirked as I run next to the first girl.

I gathered as much force I had and ran past her. I was celebrating when I saw no one in front of me which meant that maybe I'd win the prize to achieve my goal. But all those 'maybes' disappeared when I heard a scream coming from behind me. I kept running and I was so close to the finishing line until I saw who it was.

I stopped in my tracks as I looked at Naomi's crunching form on the ground. I then looked at the finishing line which wasn't too far away. I could have won but leaving someone in need would haunt me forever. I couldn't believe it when the other runners ran past Naomi without giving her a glance.

Without any second thought, I started to run in the opposite direction. I said goodbye to the finishing line and ran towards Naomi to see what was wrong as the others paid no attention to us.

"Oh gosh, what's wrong?" I asked, worried.

Naomi looked up at me with sad eyes as she pointed to her leg.

"I think I broke my mechanical leg," she whimpered.

I grabbed her by the shoulder and picked her up.

"Come on. I know it's hard but we have to do this." I said as I threw her arm over my shoulders, giving her my body for support.

"W-what are you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing? We're going to walk past that line together."

"B-b-but then you won't win then! You have to! Isn't that what you want?" she asked as I continued to push her towards the finishing line. We managed to get close to it even though we were probably the last ones. I gave her a sad smile before answering.

“Sometimes life isn't always about winning the race,” I said as we stepped over the finishing line. “It's about finishing it.”

CHAPTER 40

It's funny when I thought that if I'd win race, I'd feel anything but success, yet all I felt was failure. How could I be so stupid? Walking past the finishing line felt amazing. I wasn't sure how it would feel if I got the first place but I knew how it felt to walk over it as a winner. Yes, I might not have won the race but I felt good. I probably felt better than the person who won. At that very moment when I helped Naomi finish the race with me, I felt one thing—Happiness. I also realized that I didn't have to be the best to win.

I rushed towards my closet and looked at the time on my phone. I realized that it was seven thirty so I had only half an hour to get ready. Grabbing my favorite blue dress, I laid it on my bed and I couldn't believe I was doing this. I was finally going on a date with Tyler Grey! How did this happen? It felt as if it was only yesterday when I moved away to New York. I would be lying if I said I wasn't nervous. I was flabbergasted! I didn't expect it to happen but I wouldn't say I didn't like it.

I felt anxious remembering what happened two weeks ago. Tyler didn't want to be on crutches when we go out. I told him it was fine but he insisted do it once his leg felt better. Finally, the day came when the doctor said he could already move around, and he called me immediately.

He sounded so excited, like a kid on New Year's Eve I couldn't reject it. I knew that I liked him a lot and I'd just be stupid to do that. I did wish that Naomi would have at least taken the first or second place but I guess this was our fate. Nothing could change it. But Naomi didn't seem affected at all. It was as if she won the lottery when we passed that finishing line two weeks ago

Everyone was cheering when we stood next to all the runners. My friends and the people I love were clapping and giving me encouraging smiles. Ethan held his thumb up proudly. Tyler placed Ally off of his lap and patted her head and gave me a nod. Noticing that he was walking down the stairs towards me, I was about to walk towards him to when I was pulled into someone's arms.

"Thank you so much!" Naomi cried. I turned around and hugged her back tightly.

"You're right. Winning the race doesn't have to be first in line. I don't know how to ever repa—"

"I didn't do it for you to repay me. I did it because I wanted to. I'm so glad that you are happy with the results." I hugged her again. I noticed that she was only standing on one leg.

"Oh my god! Your leg! Are you okay?"

"It happened once or twice. I've been on these babies for almost sixteen". I'm used to it by now. I just need to show them to my doctor."

"Sixteen"?"

"Yeah, I was born with no legs."

"Oh."

Tyler called out for my name. Naomi gave me a wink and shooed me away towards him. Tyler came towards my way and wrapped his arm around me while I laid my head on his shoulder.

"I didn't win." I mumbled.

"You might not have won the race but that doesn't make you a failure."

He placed his finger under my chin, lifting it up so I could look up at him.

"In my eyes you're the winner."

I smiled at his sweet words.

"Thank you."

He kissed my forehead.

"Anything for you, Gem."

Once I pulled away, I looked down at the bracelet.

"Crystal."

It was weird to hear my name come out of his mouth. I gulped down all my anxiousness and looked him in the eye, sensing that something serious was about to happen.

“Yea?” I asked, fiddling with my fingers.

I watched as his hands went up to the back of his neck, scratching it nervously.

“There's something important I have to ask you.”

“And what's that?”

“I was planning on asking you when you win the race but it doesn't matter now. You are a winner in my eyes and that's all that matters.”

He held my hand.

“There's something I've been wanting to ask you for a very long time, but I just didn't have the guts to do so and I was waiting for the right moment.”

“Okay ...?” I asked.

“Crystal.”

He breathed out and closed his eyes before saying his words.

“I have feelings for you. I like you a lot and I would really like to take you out on a date.”

I was speechless. He dragged my hand up towards his mouth and gave it a small lingering kiss.

“Please give me a chance?”

He looked at me, waiting for a good answer. Did Tyler just ask me out on a date? He did! I just got asked out but Tyler Grey! I nodded my head immediately and let out a squeal of excitement as I wrapped my arms around his neck.

“Yes, of course!”

“I wanted to carry you right now and give you a twirl but I'm on crutches so ...”

“I like you too.”

“I knew it! You just couldn't resist my looks!” he said cockily making me roll my eyes.

“Don't get ahead of yourself if I were you.”

“That's kinda hard not to do when you're mine” he whispered as he pecked my lips.

“What do you mean?”

“Well I've got the most beautiful gem by my side. Either I'm just damn lucky or I got the looks.”

“Since when were you this cheesy?”

“Since you fell from the heavens.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Oh now the pick-up lines?”

“Wait, there's more. I've been rehearsing every night.”

“It didn't work.”

“Huh?” He asked.

I pointed to the bracelet.

“You said this was a good luck bracelet. But I didn't win.”

“Well it worked for me.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“Well you're mine now so I guess the good luck bracelet did work.”

I looked back at Naomi and saw her talking to a woman. She could probably be her mom; I could definitely see the resemblance. Naomi was sitting on a wheelchair as a man inspected her mechanical leg. I was about to go walk towards her when I was surrounded by a bunch of crazy people asking for details.

“I knew it!” Jasmine squealed.

“Huh?” I asked averting my attention to her.

“He totally has the hots for you.” Eva grinned.

“I can already imagine how your babies will look like.” she cooed.

“What!”

“I call dibs on being the godmother!” Sydney raised her hand.

I lifted an eyebrow at her as I crossed my arms under my chest.

“No, I'll be the godmother!” Eva argued.

“Hey, I'm the one who said it first.” Sydney said.

“Really guys?” I rolled my eyes but none of them paid any attention to me.

“I already have the names.” Jasmine spoke.

“Listen, sis. We all know that I'm the most mature one out of all of us so I should be the godmother.” Eva said.

“No, you're not!” Sydney hissed back.

“For boys, I got Jackson, Carl and David.”

“Guys, I'm still here.” I waved my hand at them but they were too busy arguing to notice.

“Do I have to remind you of the time when you almost bombed Mom's kitchen?” Eva said.

“Lucas, Mark—oh, and let's not forget my favorite, Blake.” Jasmine counted on her fingers.

“That was by accident! And I'm not the one who forgot the food in the oven!” Sydney said.

“I also wrote down a list of girl names,” Jasmine said.

“I reminded you three times but you were too busy texting away on your phone.” Eva said.

“Liza, Lilly, Ashley, Rose, Tina, Lina.”

“GUYS!”

I yelled out finally catching their attention. All their heads whipped to look at me.

“First off, Tyler and I aren't going to make any babies any time soon!” I gave them all a pointed look, ignoring the disappointment written on all their faces.

“Second, if I wanted a godmother, then I'd choose Matt!”

“But Matt's a male!”

“Well he's a woman by heart... I think.” I scratched the back of my head making them all roll their eyes.

“Okay fine, I'd choose Jasmine.” I huffed out. I Ignored all their whines and protests, I turned around and walked towards Naomi who gave me a wave.

“Hey how are you doing?”

“I'm doing great. Just about to go home,” she said. I nodded my heads and noticed her eyes shift from behind me.

“Don't look back, he's coming.” she whispered.

“Who?”

“The one who's always looking at you with sparkling eyes.”

“Sparkling eyes?”

“Yeah, like there is no one else in the world but you.”

I felt arms make their way around my waist, bringing me towards a hard chest. I relaxed against Tyler's hold as he kissed the soft spot on my neck and behind my ear. Naomi gave me one last wink before turning around the wheelchair and strolling away towards where her mom was standing.

“Ready to go home?” he asked.

I turned to look at him and nodded my head smiling.

“Ready as I'll ever be.”

After dressing into the blue casual dress, I got a thin layer of makeup done. Tyler told me not to wear anything too fancy because we were going to meet at the park. I'm not sure what he had planned but giving it a good guess, I was thinking that maybe he had a picnic planned out. Grabbing my car keys, I locked my front door and made my way towards my car. Getting in, I started the engine and made my way towards the park.

Originally Tyler was going to pick me up and take me their like any normal date but I received a text telling me that he had an emergency family meeting and told me how he was going to be late for a bit. I didn't mind driving myself there at all. I was just a bit worried about what was going on.

It wasn't long before I made it to our meeting place. Getting out of my car after finally finding a parking space, I sat down on a bench. I took my phone out knowing that Tyler was going to probably be late for ten to twenty minutes. I scrolled through *Instagram* and *Twitter* and answered a couple of messages I received. Looking around I noticed that it was already dark. I looked at the time on my phone and saw that thirty minutes had already passed by.

I didn't want to call Tyler because I was afraid to intrude. So, I just sat there waiting. I waited and realized that everyone was getting ready to go home. I mean who would stay at the park late at night? I tapped my feet on the concrete floor and got up, deciding to take a walk. I was going to wait for another half hour. I had to be patient with Tyler. I'm pretty sure he'll be here any minute now.

I felt chills run down my spine as the weather started to get colder. I sat under a tree and placed my phone on my lap, in case Tyler called. I let out a nervous breath and rested my back on the tree.

When I finally opened my eyes, the park completely empty. Lifting my eyebrow in confusion, I checked the time again and realized that another hour had went by. Did I just fall asleep? I got up, dusting the dirt off of my now wrinkly dress and made my way out of the park. I headed towards my car. It was already ten o'clock and Tyler wasn't anywhere in sight.

What the hell happened?

I couldn't help but feel annoyed Tyler should have called me if couldn't come. I was trying to hold back my tears and I couldn't lie to myself that I

was pretty excited for this date. And now that it didn't happen, I couldn't help but feel disappointed.

I just had to know what happened. I wouldn't be able to lay down in my bed and sleep at night knowing that I just went home not looking for any answers. I parked my car and marched my way towards Tyler's house and rang the doorbell. I closed my eyes, counting to ten. I had to calm myself down.

A tall man who seemed to be in his late forties opened the door. He was the same guy I saw Tyler hand over a bag of medicine and whom I assumed was his uncle—Paul.

“How can I help you?”

Emma rushed towards the door. She had black bags under her red puffy eyes and looked pale and tired.

I think this is not good timing.

Emma smiled.

“Crystal darling! I'm so glad you're here!” She pulled me into a hug.

“What's wrong?”

She gave me a sad look and flickered her eyes towards Paul.

“Did I bother you? I'll come back later if you want. I just wanted to see Tyl—”

“No. Don't worry. I was hoping you'd stop by. Please do come in!” she pulled me inside the house and pointed at the stairs.

“Tyler is ... Well, he is very upset at the moment and needs you by his side.”

She gave me a begging look.

“He's up in his room,” she whispered.

Looking up the stairs and back at her, I nodded my head and ran up to his room. This was going to be the very first time I entered his room and was very nervous. I didn't know what the hell happened but I tried not to ask any questions and pry into their private lives.

Once I was up the stair, it wasn't so difficult to find Tyler's room as there were only three doors. Two of them were opened. One was a bathroom while the other was a bedroom which looked like it belonged to his mom. I walked slowly towards the closed door and knocked on it slowly. I listened but heard nothing except for the heavy breathing and

groans of pain. I bit my lip nervously as I turned the door knob and opened the door.

The sight in front of me made me gasp. I gasped as I stared at Tyler's curled up form in the corner of his room. His body was shaking while his hands were bleeding. I noticed a dent on the wall next to him but my attention was immediately brought back to Tyler who lifted his head up from his hands and towards me.

The sight of his face broke my heart as tears fell down his cheeks as his eyes stared at me.

CHAPTER 41

I never expected to see Tyler at this state. Whenever I looked at him, I always thought that he was a man of weird things. But the only time I only got a reaction from him was at the party. Bringing up his cousin could have pulled a string on him. Tyler had a weak spot when it came to his family.

Seeing him cry was such a hard sight. We both were supposed to be happy on our first date.

I forced my legs to run towards him. My knees felt weak but I had to stay strong for him. I kneeled down to the ground and before I could say anything, Tyler's arms quickly wrapped themselves around me. He pulled me towards him as he hid his face in the crook of my neck. I closed my eyes, trying to calm my breathing down. His quiet sobs filled the room and were the only sounds other than me hushing him slowly.

He tightened his hold on my waist. His body began to shake violently, so I slowly moved my hands up his muscular body and to his hair. Running my hands through them seemed to calm him down. I felt his nails digging into my back but the pain wasn't anything compared to what he was feeling. "M-my whole life is a lie," he whispered.

"Shhh." I whispered lifting his face up and wiping the tears off his cheek. He quickly closed his eyes and hugged me closer.

"It was all a lie!"

I didn't know what else to do but hold him. Words were nothing compared to actions. I pulled away slightly, sat down next to him and pulled him down and let his head lay on my lap.

"Close your eyes," I whispered, running my hands through his hair.

I then grabbed his bleeding hands and wiped them off with a tissue. I placed lingering kisses on each knuckle, watching him close his eyes.

"I-it hurts," he whispered opening his eyes once again.

"I know, but pain is proof that you are still living. Everything will be alright."

He shook his head. "No it won't."

"Yes it will. I'll be there with you to show you."

"My d-dad, my mom! Everyone around me! It's all been a lie!" he shouted.

"Tyler,"

"He's not my father!"

"It's okay, it's okay."

"No, it's not Crystal! I've grown up to think that Thomas was my father!"

"It's Paul!"

He punched the floor, and made his hands bleed once again.

"I've lost everyone."

I shook my head. "No you haven't," I said as I held his head in my hand firmly. "You still have me." I kissed his lips and held his hand.

"Don't leave me." He lifted his head off my lap and hugged me. I closed my eyes, trying to swallow the lump in my throat.

"I won't."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

I was brushing Tyler's hair with my fingers while he was sleeping peacefully on my lap. I was careful not to wake him up. The door creaked open slowly.

"How is he?" Emma croaked out.

"Not good." She averted her eyes for a second before having them softened while looking at me.

"Can we talk?" I bit my lip hesitantly and looked down at Tyler before looking back up at her.

"I'll make some tea. Leave him to rest for a while."

I grabbed a pillow and put it on his head. I grabbed a blanket and covered his body to keep him warm. Quietly, I made my way out the door and gave Tyler one last glance before closing it.

Emma and I, entered the kitchen where Paul was. He was pacing around when he saw us and walked towards me for a handshake.

“Sorry for being rude earlier. I wasn't in my best mood. I'm Paul.”

“Nice to meet you.” He nodded his head and glanced at us before walking out of the kitchen

“Please have a seat,” she whispered as she pointed to the chair next to the table. I sat down and watched as Emma prepared the tea and placed the mugs and sugar in front of me. Emma sat down and took a sip. It was awkward.

“I'm so sorry I dragged you into this mess.” I shook my head and placed my glass in the table.

“It's okay. I don't mind at all. Tyler needs me by his side and I wouldn't leave him at a time like this.” She smiled at what I said.

“I'm thankful he has you in his life.”

“You have to cherish what you have before it is too late.”

“What do you mean?” Emma looked at the time on her wrist watch and cleared her throat.

“I guess we have some time for a story.”

“I was in my junior year when I met the two brothers. Paul and Thomas were twins but not identical.”

“Paul was the typical bad boy; a womanizer you'd have in every school. His brother was the nice dorky type who'd have everyone falling to his feet because of his jokes. We were all friends in the beginning until I started dating Paul in my last year of high school.” She paused, taking a deep breath. I watched as she took a sip of her tea.

“You don't have to tell me—”

“It's okay. You're special to my son and I want you to know everything.”

“I didn't know that Thomas was madly in love with me.” she chuckled, looking at her mug.

“He tried to warn me many times that his brother was only trying to get into my pants but I wouldn't listen. I thought that maybe I could truly change him. But I was wrong.” She looked up at me and wiped the tears falling down her cheek.

“He was in love with someone else. He only used me because he was too afraid of showing his feelings to another girl. And by the time I found

out I was already pregnant with his child. It was too late.”

“Thomas and I dated a couple of months in my pregnancy. He was loyal and sincere. He knew what his brother did but he still wanted to take care of me and the baby. He offered to be the father when Paul refused. I just couldn't reject it. I didn't want to become a single mother I; I wanted Tyler to grow up with a father. I wanted him to experience a normal childhood like any other child deserves.”

“But why did Paul refuse?”

I noticed Emma's face go white as she gulped down nervously. She averted her eyes away from me and looked at the floor.

“H-he moved in with his pregnant girlfriend.”

My jaw dropped on the floor; Not literally though.

“He loved her so much that it wasn't that hard for him to choose. He wanted to start a family with her so, being the father of Tyler wasn't an option for him.”

“But what is he doing here? “

“He's sick.”

“The doctors say that he doesn't have much time left. I guess it must be the guilt that made him come back. He wanted to spend the last days of his life with his son and I had no right to prevent that for him even though he was an a**hole. But he's changed for the better.”

I took a sip from my mug. Who knew that Tyler's life was this dramatic?

“What about his other family? What about the woman he loved and their child?”

Emma took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

“That my dear is a story for another time.”

I was still confused but decided to keep my mouth closed. I got up and placed empty mug on the table.

“Thanks for the tea but I'd like to check up on Tyler before I leave.”

I was about to turn around and walk out the kitchen but she held my holding my wrist.

“I'm not finished yet. I brought you here for another reason.”

She pointed to the chair next to me. I sat down and played with my fingers nervously.

“Paul being Tyler's father wasn't the only thing I told him. You see I've been wanting to tell you this ever since you came back. You were still a

child mourning over your parents' death. I didn't have the guts to tell you back then."

"Crystal. What I'm about to tell you is something very important." She paused before taking a hold of my hands and looking at me with anxious eyes.

"But I swear on my dead mother that Tyler had no idea until today. Please, darling don't leave my son. You're his world and I'm afraid if you leave him, it would be more painful to him. If you leave him, his world will come crumbling to the ground."

I felt the fear settle in my stomach because of her words. I didn't want to be the one breaking his heart.

"What is it that you're not telling me?"

"Will you promise not to break my boy's heart?"

I gulped down the lump in my throat and nodded my head.

"I promised.

"Crystal. I want you to listen carefully to what I'm about to say and please try not to freak out."

"Okay, I'll try not to."

"The day, when your parents died. I also lost my husband."

"Your parents died in a car crash, right?"

I nodded my head. "Yeah, some truck hit them when they were on the road."

"Darling. Did you know that Thomas was the driver?"

"No I had no idea. But where is this going?"

"Crystal. I'm so sorry to say this but that day I got into a fight with Thomas. It was always about his brother Paul. Thomas was so close to Tyler as if he was his own son that he was afraid Paul would one day knock on his door and ask for his son back."

"That day, Thomas went to work drunk."

I felt my face go white as if my heart stopped beating. There was sweat on my forehead forming as I stared into Emma's eyes. I placed my hand on my chest, trying to calm myself.

"Please don't tell me what you're about to say." My tears started to fall.

"Crystal. Thomas killed your parents."

CHAPTER 42

I woke up in Tyler's room. Why the hell was I on floor? That explained why my back was aching. Once I was on my feet, a gasp escaped my lips. Seeing Tyler stand in the corner of the room with his hands clenched into a fist made me remember everything that happened. I felt my heart burning because of the truth but I knew for sure that I mustn't leave Tyler alone in this hard situation.

I just learned something today which I did not expect but Tyler found out that his whole life was a whole lie. He must be hurting more than I am. I'll think about all what Thomas did when this was all over.

"Tyler," I whispered. Taking a few steps towards him, I wanted to give him a hug and comfort him but the look he gave me stopped me.

"Hey, hey, what's wrong?"

I forced my legs to walk towards him. I placed my hand on his arms but he slapped it.

"Get out of my house."

"W-what?" I took a step closer but Tyler extended his arms and pushed me away.

"I said, get out of my house you good for nothing b*tch!"

"What the hell is wrong with you?" I shouted.

"I know you're hurting but I'm just trying to help! I did nothing for you to treat me like this!" I cried. Tyler's jaw tightened and he stared at me coldly.

"Nothing?" His voice scared me. I took a step back when he took one forward.

"Y-yeah, n-nothing." He laughed.

“You're lying!” He held my hair, making me scream. “Get out of my house before I rip you into pieces.”

This time I couldn't stop the tears which were escaping my eyelids and down my cheek. “Tyler-you're h-hurting me stop!”

“Get out!” He shouted as he dragged me out of his room and down the stairs.

“What did I d-ah stop! Gosh that hurts!” I sobbed when he yanked me forward to follow him. Once we were in front of his front door, he unlocked it and turned to me.

“My whole life's a lie.” He hissed looking into my watery eyes with so much anger.

“First, my dad, and now you! Why didn't you tell me huh? You were just using me, weren't you!” He shouted. yanked the door open and threw me out of his house. I fell to the ground with a sob as my hands made their way up to my hair. Once I brought my hands back down, I saw blood in my fingers. Looking up at Tyler, I couldn't stop the sob which escaped my lips.

“H-how could you?”

“Scramble before I make you regret,” he said but before he could close the door, I got up and placed my hand on it, preventing it from closing.

“What the h—”

“Shut up!” I yelled.

“I did nothing for you to treat me like this. I didn't lie!” I screamed as I hit his hard chest but that was completely useless.

“You're not the Tyler I know!” I cried.

“Tyler wouldn't lay his hands on me to hurt me! He wouldn't look at me as if I'm some kind of dying rat in the back of an ally.” I breathed trying to calm myself down.

“Tyler wouldn't have wanted to hu-AH!” I cried when I felt a sting on my left cheek. My head was whipped to the side. My tears were running down my cheek like a waterfall. I slowly moved my hands to touched my now bruised cheek but flinched at the pain. I looked up at Tyler and felt a lump in my throat.

“Y-you slapped me.”

“That's nothing compared to what I will do to you if you don't get the hell out of my house.”

He shoved me out of the door step and slammed the door right in my face. My mind was racing but when I was about to take a step back, I felt my body fall to the ground for the second time today.

I opened my eyes lying in a comfortable mattress. With Tyler's arms wrapped around me. His hands were caressing my cheek and wiping the tears. I looked up at him in panic and tried to get up but he held me back and laid my head on his chest.

"Shhh," he whispered, running his hands through my hair soothingly.

"You're dreaming."

Words couldn't describe how thankful I was. for that not being real. I rubbed my eyes and pulled away a little to look at him. He still was caressing my left cheek which he slapped in the dream.

"How are you feeling?"

I gave him a comforting small smile. "I should be asking you that," I replied.

His eyes flashed a look of pain as he let out a shaky breath. "I've been better." He shrugged. I brought my hand up and placed it on his cheek.

"I'm so sorry." My voice cracking in the end. He shook his head furiously.

"I-it's not your fault, Gem. We both found out something today that hurt us."

"I know, but you must be hurting much more."

Tyler pulled me to his chest.

"As long as you're by my side, I'll be fine."

"You know you can let it out. I won't judge."

"Oh, trust me, I know. But I think I used all my tears for today." He leaned closer and kissed my forehead but didn't pull away.

"So... About that date?" He smirked as his eyes roamed around my body and stared my blue dress.

"Is it too late to tell you that you looked beautiful?"

"No."

"Well, you do."

"Thank you."

"No."

"Thank you."

"For what?"

“For not running away when you knew the truth.” Tyler looked away but I held his face between my hands and made him look at me.

“None of this is your fault. What happened with you and me was all a surprise for all of us but we did not asked for it.”

“W-what Thomas did was not your fault.”

“I know you're hurting.”

“And I know you are, too.” He pulled my head under his chin and rubbed my hair We stood there for who knows how long but we didn't care at all. I was about to fall asleep when I heard something shuffling outside of Tyler's room and I bet he heard it too because his arm tightened around me. I looked at the door when I heard it open.

Paul's face popped into the room and I could see the grim look written on his face. “Can we talk son?”

Tyler took a deep breath before shoving his face into the crook of my neck to calm himself down.

“Get out.”

“But it won't take long I pro—”

“I said, get out!” he yelled, making me flinch.

Tyler lifted his head up and looked at me with a worried expression.

“I'm sorry for yelling.”

“Hey. it's okay. You know that I don't mind.” He shook his head.

“Everything's a mess.”

“Maybe you should go talk to him.”

“I know he doesn't deserve your forgiveness and I'm not saying that you should give it to him but let him explain and then you decide.”

“But he left me and my mom all alone.”

“I grew up thinking he was my uncle only to find out that he's my father?”

“I know, I know. What he did was horrible but what happens if something goes wrong and you never gave him the chance to explain? He is sick after all.”

“Yeah, you're right. It won't take much time.” He leaned over and kissed my lips. After pulling away, he pushed a strand of hair behind my ears and held my hand tightly.

“Good luck.” He nodded his head and disappeared down the stairs. I then walked back to Tyler's room and sat on his bed waiting for him to

come back. I stared at the door and took a deep breath.

Damn! This day was a mess. I never expected it. We were supposed to spend time together. Couldn't Tyler's parents wait after the date to tell him? I then got off the bed and started pacing around his room. Thomas was the driver who killed my parents. He was the one who took them away from me. I began to walk faster as I bit my lips in a harsh manner. Why did this have to happen? Why did my parents have to be my parents? I stopped pacing when a question came into my mind. *If Paul is Tyler's father, does that make Dan his brother?* Tyler stepped in with his hands stuffed into his pocket.

"How did it go?"

He shrugged. "As I expected. He just explained to me the story like before and told me how sorry he was and asked for my forgiveness."

"And?"

"I said that I needed time. All this is still new to me." He sat down in his bed and looked at the floor.

"Well, that's a good start." He shook his head.

"Gem I don't know what to do. I don't know how I could look at him the same way."

"I know, I know. Just give it some time."

"I can't sleep here tonight. I need space."

I felt really bad just staring at him, not doing anything. Tyler had helped me through a lot of things and it was my turn to help him. I had to come up with something. I bit my lip nervously and fiddled with my fingers.

"You know..."

*Sh*t. This might be a bad idea.*

Tyler lifted an eyebrow.

But I had to do this. He needed me and I had to help.

"Maybe you can-well, I don't know but I was thinking ..."

"Yeah?"

"You can sleep in my place tonight." He rushed over to where I was sitting and knelt down, looking at me.

"Really? Are you serious?"

"Yeah."

"For sure?"

I nodded my head. "I don't mind. I just want to help." I shrugged.

Tyler placed his arm under my armpits and lifted me up, twirling me around.

“What the—”

“Thank you! thank you!” he shouted and placed me back onto the ground. I felt my head become dizzy for a bit as the world twirled around me

“Woah.”

“Oops. Sorry.”

“Idiot.”

Tyler pulled me to his couch and sat on it, pulling me to his lap.

“I'm sorry to keep you waiting. I promise I'll make it up to you.”

“You know it wasn't your fault.”

“Um, Tyler?”

“Yeah?”

“Can I ask you a question but you don't have to answer it if you don't want to.”

“Sure, go on.” He lifted his chin off my shoulder and slowly wrapped his arms around my stomach, encaging me.

“Since Paul is actually your father, does that make Dan your brother?”

“No.” He chuckled which kind of caught me off guard.

“Dan isn't Paul's son ... Thank god.”

“Then how are you two related?”

“His mother is Paul's and Thomas's sister.”

“Oh.”

Well that made sense. But why does Dan hate Tyler?

“Dan and I, used to be close. He was the brother I never had.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, but that all changed when my fath-shit, I mean my uncle Thomas died.” His voice was filled with anger and I'm not sure why he was mad. Whether it was because of him talking about Dan or because he accidentally almost called Thomas his father.

“Dan's father and Thomas worked together. They were both partners at work. One day Dan's father would drive the truck and the other Thomas did.” He explained.

“But damnit! My uncle just had to be driving it that day! Dan still holds a grudge that day. He thinks that my 'father' was the one who not only killed

your parents but also his dad. F*ck.” He cursed.

“Oh gosh I'm so sorry.”

He shook his head. “No, baby I'm so sorry.”

“But it wasn't your fault that Thomas went to work drunk. Dan shouldn't have blamed you.”

“His grief took over,” he mumbled, still kissing my neck.

“Stop,” I whispered once he kissed my soft spot. I could feel his lips twitch upwards against my skin.

“Stop what?”

“That! Stop that!”

“You mean, this?”

“Tyler you better stop or else.”

“Or else, what?”

“Or else, you won't be sleeping in my house tonight. I'll kick you out to sleep with the dogs.”

“Is that all you got?”

“I will shave off all your hair when you're sleeping, take a picture of you and sent it to the military telling them that you want to be part of it.”

“Really?”

“Really!”

“That's nice but I can't leave.”

“Why?”

“Because if I do then I won't be able to do this.” He kissed my neck once again and I smacked him on the head.

“You don't take any of my threats seriously do you?”

“Nope.” I pulled away and looked at my phone to see that it was getting late.

“Crystal?”

Sh*t. He used my real name. This mustn't be good. “What's wrong?”

“There's something I have to ask you.”

“And what's that?”

He let out a cough and a shaky breath before turning me around so that I was standing on my feet, looking down at him. “I was going to ask you this on our date because I wanted it to be special but as you see, that didn't work so I might as well do it now.”

“Do what?”

“Ask you.”

“Ask me what?”

“Crystal. Will you be my girlfriend?”

CHAPTER 43

It just hit me by surprise. I knew that he had a thing for me ever since that kiss but I was too afraid to admit it. Could I be ready to have a-boyfriend? I bit my lips nervously as I looked at the ground. Tyler held my hand and stared at me nervously as if he thought I was going to reject him.

“Crystal, be my girlfriend.”

Ok. Now he isn't asking anymore.

“Um...” Sh*t. What the hell am I supposed to say?

“W-well uh ...” I saw Tyler's eyes flooded disappointment. His face turned serious as his jaw tightened.

“Okay well you see—”

“I get it. That answer is ‘no’. Fine whatever.”

“I'm just going to go—AH!” Tyler shouted in surprise when I ran toward him and jumped on his back like a monkey.

“What the f—”

“SHUT THE HELL UP AND LET ME SPEAK!” I wrapped my arms around his neck and my legs around his waist.

“You piece of shit! Why didn't you let me speak, huh?”

“Ouch!”

“You ask me out and then walk away? Hasn't your momma ever taught you some manners.”

“Get off me, you monkey!” he shouted as he continued to twirl around.

“Not until you stop moving.” He stood still with his feet glued on the floor.

“I wonder what I see in a monkey like you.”

“You were saying?”

“Ow-uh-will you be my monkey girlfriend?”

“Excuse me?”

“Fine, will you be mine?”

“Hm... well it depends. Does that include you giving me foot massages when I'm done running?” He nodded his head.

“Will you buy me chocolate whenever I'm craving?” He nodded his head once again.

“Will you cuddle with me when I'm watching titanic?”

“Well about that... Can it be the walking dead?”

“Fine but only if you get me a jar of Nutella.”

“Deal.” He nodded his head

“Deal.” I said kissing his cheek.

“So, is it a yes?”

“No, I'm going to steal all your money and move to Australia.”

“Ha-ha very funny. Who knew my girlfriend has a sense of humor.” I smirked at him and leaned over to his ear.

“Tyler?”

“Hm?” I played with his hair and kissed the spot behind his ear.

“You better hide your damn wallet!” I jumped off his back and started running towards his bed with his credit card in my hand. I laughed out loud as I waved it in the air.

“What the—”

“How the hell won't you not get robbed when you're so careless?” I asked between laughter. I ran around his bed when I noticed him approaching me. I was about to run towards another direction but the door slightly opened and it caught my eyes. Tyler caught me and threw me on his bed. I tried to get up but he just crawled over me, pinning me with both hands. I chuckled as I handed him his credit card.

“That was too easy.”

“Yeah, only because you were on my back like a monkey.” he rolled his eyes as he stuffed it back into his wallet.

“Will you stop calling me that. I'd prefer the silly nickname Gem over that anytime.”

“You do?”

“Well, would you like me to call you golden or Mr. Gorilla?”

“Okay, you have a point.”

“Why do you call me Gem?”

“Hm ... Let's save that for another time, shall we?”

He smashed his lips onto mine and I gladly accepted his warmth, wrapping my arms around his neck. I took a chunk of his hair in my hands and gave it a slight pull. He groaned in satisfaction and bit my bottom lip, asking for entrance. But before I could give it to him, we heard a knock on the door.

“Tyler.”

“Yeah?” His lips made their way down my neck.

“Someone's at the door.”

“Ignore it.”

“Tyler!”

“Fine!” He got up and marched towards his door, yanking it open.

“What the hell do you wa—”

Smack!

“Don't you dare talk to your momma like that! I taught you better than that young man.” Emma hissed. I got off the bed and walked towards the door to see Tyler running the back of his neck.

“Sorry, Mom.” He raised his hands up in surrender. Emma looked at me with concern in her eyes.

“I wanted to check up on you. I know your mad at me and I get it but I had no—”

“I'm not mad, Mom. I understand what you had to do. I'm just a little—well you know ... disappointed.”

I walked over to him and took a hold of his hand.

“Thank you dear for helping him.”

I shook my head. “I did nothing.”

“Mom, I'm going to spend the night at my girlfriend's house.”

I sent him a glare but he was looking at Emma. Her face flashed a look of surprise before speaking.

“Girlfriend?” Her eyes flickered on our hands. Just when I thought she was about to pass out, she started jumping around and screaming happily.

I shoved my elbow in his rib cage, grabbing his attention.

“What?”

My eyes I pointed at his mother.

“Oh, yeah, about that. My mom always had her eyes on you.” he shrugged. “You can say that her ship has just sailed.”

“Oh.”

Emma then stopped acting like a teenage girl on her sweet sixteen who just met *Justin Bieber* and whipped her head towards us. “Wait a minute!”

“Did you say spend the night at her place? Oh, hell no! I am not becoming a granny too soon. I'm still young.”

My face went completely red.

“Mom you're forty-five. Your hair is as white as a cows m—OW!”

He rubbed the back of his head where Emma just smacked him. “That's child abuse.”

“You're eighteen. Why are you still living in my place, huh? You should move out and FYI, I'm thirty-six, not forty-five!”

“Emma I hope you don't mind but Tyler just wa—”

“Oh, I don't mind at all sweetie as long as you use protection.”

Oh, goodness.

“Mom, I need space and I need time to think. That's the reason why I can't sleep here tonight.” Emma suddenly went serious.

“I understand. I just don't want you to be upset.”

“I'm fine as long as she's with me.”

“Of course. Just grab a few pairs of clothes before you leave ... and maybe a box of condoms but that's none of my business.” She rushed the last part before running down the hallway and into a room. I heard Tyler chuckle before bending over to kiss my cheek.

“Could you wait in the living room while I go grab my things?” Nodding my head, I made my way down the stairs and sat on a couch. The TV was on and *21 jump street* was playing so I decided to just relax and watch a bit while I waited. Suddenly I felt my phone vibrate and saw a text from Matt.

'Sup, Clare-bear. Just wanted to tell ya that theirs a party happening tomorrow at Dan's place. You have to come.'

I lifted an eyebrow and thought about it. Was it a good idea? What if Tyler would get mad? I wouldn't want to get involved in his relationship between him and his cousin but then again it was just a party. A bunch of

people were going to be there and maybes I won't bump into him? But even if I did, it's not like something was going to happen. The tension was between Tyler and Dan not me and Dan.

'Uh, idk. I'll think about it.'

I then turned off my phone when I heard footsteps coming down the stairs. Tyler was holding a backpack which looked full and walked towards me. He pulled me towards his chest and took a hold of my face between the palm of his hands and kissed my forehead.

“Ready?” he asked.

I nodded my head. “Yeah.”

He looked at me for a second before lifting an eyebrow. “What's wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing.”

He gave me a pointed look which just made me sigh out loud.

“Fine, Matt just texted me. He says that there's a party tomorrow night at Dan's place... He wants me to go.”

“Sure, why don't you?”

“Really? You don't mind?” I

“I'm not the one holding the grudge.”

“True.”

“But I'm coming with you.”

“Yeah, of course. You wouldn't want your drunk girlfriend to be swept away by some handsome jock.”

“Not funny.”

“Oh, it is.” I turned on the lights, ignoring Tyler's threats to kill any handsome jock who comes my way. Rolling my eyes, I decided to sit down in the living room before making my way upstairs to sleep. “Would you like something to drink?” I asked as I walked into the kitchen and grabbed two cups.

“Water is fine.”

After filling in two glasses of water, I handed one over to Tyler who just sat on my couch watching me. I sat next to him and looked down at my cup. I leaned over and rested on his chest, looking over at the now turned on TV.

“Do you think this will work out?” I asked. “I mean, us?” Tyler wrapped his arms around me.

“Of course it will. I know it will.”

“Besides we made a deal. You can't leave me now.”

“That's not how relationships work.”

“I don't care how they work. You're mine.”

“Okay, Mr. Caveman.”

I rolled my eyes before yawning. “Come on. Let's go to bed.”

He held my hand and we walked upstairs into my room and into my closet. I took a hold of a pair of shorts and a large T-shirt that Tyler gave me.

“I'll change in the bathroom. You can change here,” I said.

He opened his bag and took out a pair of boxers. Five minutes later, I had all my makeup removed and changed into comfortable clothes. Finally! I walked out of the bathroom and noticed Tyler placing his bag in my closet. Ignoring the urges to stare at his muscular bare back, I got under the covers and turned off the light coming from my lamp. Tyler then crawled in with me and pulled me to his chest.

“This is a dream come true,” he mumbled.

“Huh?”

“Nothing. Just go to sleep.”

“Hm.”

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Gem.”

CHAPTER 44

I woke up to hear Tyler mumbling in their sleep. Twitching my nose as I tried to ignore it, I turned around and tried to pull away but he pulled me back towards his chest. Shifting to make myself comfortable, I sighed as I felt my body go numb. But then suddenly I heard a sound which made the person behind me growl quietly and shove their face into my neck. I opened one eye but immediately closed it when I was met with the shiny bright light of the sun shining through my window. Letting out a grumble, I cursed myself because I didn't close the curtains last night.

I simply turned around and shoved my face into his chest, keeping the light away from my face. I felt his arms around me tightened. It was quiet for another couple of seconds before it went on once again. I groaned as I forced my eyes to open once again and was met with a bare chest. Lifting an eyebrow, I looked up to see a sleeping Tyler next to me.

I was about to close my eyes when I heard the doorbell rang. How could someone had the nerves to ruin my slumber?

I pulled away slowly, trying not to wake Tyler up but I guess he had other ideas in mind because he pulled me back and threw one leg over my hip. *Really?* Letting out a huff, I tried to move his leg off of me quietly but that didn't seem to work because he wouldn't budge. I then placed my hands on his chest and pushed him away with all my might. Letting out a breath of relief when I was able to create some kind of distance between us, I was about to get up when his arms wrapped around my waist.

Again? How the hell is he doing all this in his sleep?

Tyler grumbled a couple of words which were unclear and hid his face in my neck. Now yes this was pretty comfortable and I wished I could stay

like this all day but someone was ringing on my doorstep and wouldn't leave me alone if I didn't answer. But no, Tyler was too clingy. Was he always like this in his sleep? If I didn't know better, I would have thought that he just liked to cuddle.

Maybe I should get him a teddy bear to fix that problem.

"Tyler." I hissed pulling away.

I pushed Tyler off of the damn bed.

Hearing a thud, I was expecting Tyler to get off the floor confused, asking me why his head hurt badly. But after a while of silence, I lifted my eyebrow and crawled to the edge of the bed only to see Tyler snoring on the floor.

What the hell? How was he not affected by that?

Deciding to ignore my attempts to wake him up, I rubbed my eyes so that I could wake up and walked out of my room. I was cursing in my head as I walked down the stairs. Whoever was trying to disturb me and my beauty sleep was going to get a piece of my mind. Once I was in front of my front door, I yanked the door open in a rough matter.

"Why the hell are you waking me up so early in the morning!" I yelled crankily at Matt.

He lifted an eyebrow and looked at the time in his wrist watch while his other hand was holding a white bag.

"It's 12 PM."

"Still you're disturbing my peaceful sleep you a**hole. Now tell me what do you want?"

"Well, I'm glad you are all sunshine and gummy bears this morning."

"Just spill."

Matt then raised his arms up in surrender. "Okay, sleeping beauty." He handed me over the white bag. "Here take this."

"What's in it?" I asked, taking a hold of it.

"I told you yesterday that you better come to the party tonight and knowing you, you will come up with some silly excuse of you not having the appropriate outfit. So, Jasmine picked out an outfit for you."

"Why are you so persistent in me coming?" I asked, looking into the bag to see a short jean skirt and a black crop top. I had to say that Jasmine's taste in clothes were good. I bet I'd look nice in them.

“Because we barely hang out anymore after school. You're too busy with your boyfriend.”

“What? No, I'm not!” I argued.

He narrowed his eyes. “Yes, you are!”

“You're exaggerating.”

“Really?”

“Then can you explain me that?”

“Explain you wha—”

“Sup babe,” Tyler said lazily as he dropped his arm on my shoulder, bringing me to his chest.

“You were saying?”

“We only got together like yesterday.” I said as I tried to ignore Tyler peppering kissing on the top of my head.

“Really? Well I say it's about damn time. The whole school knows that you had a thing for him.” I shot Matt a glare which could have buried him six feet underground.

“Well babe, I had no idea you were head over heels with me.” Tyler smiled cockily. I shot him a glare and shoved my elbow into his ribcage. Ignoring his hiss of pain, I looked at an amused Matt.

“Fine I'll come. Happy? And for your information, I was not head over heels with him.”

“Say what you want Gem but I know you can't resist my looks.”

“Do you ever shut up?”

“Listen I'd love to stay here all day and watch you two beautiful couples argue but I got placed to be other than here,” he said as he took a step back then looked at me. He then shot me a warning look. “I better see you tonight.”

I watched him turn around and walk towards his motorcycle. Closing the door, I turned around and walked towards the kitchen to make me some coffee. I still didn't even wash my face and I probably smelt like sweat. As I turned on the coffee maker on, I felt Tyler curled his arms around my waist. He kissed my neck as he hummed silently. I couldn't help but smile. This was very relaxing.

“What's in the bag?”

“That's the outfit for tonight's party. Matt was being too persistent.” He mumbled as he pulled away and grabbed two mugs for the coffee.

“What time will it be starting?”

“He said around eight.” Nodding his head, he walked towards the fridge, opened it and took out four eggs.

“How do you like your eggs?” Making himself at home? I like it. He was wearing a pair of sweatpants but still had his chest bare for me to see. I'd be lying if I said that I didn't enjoy the view.

“Scrambled, please?” I answered as I snapped out of my daze and turned around.

Sh*t. Did he notice me staring? I felt my cheeks burn as I tried to hide the blush which was threatening to make its way up my neck. How the hell did I get myself a hot, sexy boyfriend?

It was nearly eight o'clock. Getting out of the bathroom, I looked at the time to see that it was already seven thirty. I just got my makeup done and was already dressed into my outfit which I'd have to say, looked really good on me. I had my hair curled down and a thin layer of makeup. I was waiting for Tyler to get ready so that we could head out.

I was happy that this was happening. We needed a break from all the drama and conflict so going out to party at his cousin's party was sure to make things better. You hear the sarcasm? I was just a little nervous of what was going to happen. I mean, Dan and Tyler didn't have the best relationship in the world and I was afraid that a fight might break loose. Which was why I had to keep a close eye on Tyler.

I'm not really sure if he really wanted to go or not but knowing that he didn't want to leave me alone was one of the main reasons. Opening the door to my room, I found Tyler sitting on the edge of my bed using his phone. He was wearing a simple black shirt and jeans. He looked up at me and I couldn't help but notice his eyes roam over my body. He shook his head slightly.

“What?” Did he not like the outfit?

“Oh nothing. I'm just glad I'm coming with you tonight. Who else will keep the hungry dogs away from my girl when you're wearing that.”

“Well, deal with it; It's not my problem that I'm beautiful.”

He walked towards me and took a hold of my hand. He leaned over to peck my lips.

“Yeah, I know. Beautiful.”

“So you ready?”

Tyler nodded his head and made his way out of my room, still holding my hand. We walked down the stairs and into the living room. I grabbed my purse while Tyler grabbed his keys. We walked out the door and towards his car.

“So, are you going to be spending the night at my place?” He ran his hands through his hair. It looked like he was trying to think.

“I don't know about that yet.” He took my hand and kissed it.

“Thank you.”

“You're welcome.”

It wasn't long before we made it in front of Dan's place. The house was huge and you could hear the music blasting from outside. We walked through the open door and passed by all the drunk guests.

“Where are his parents?”

“I don't know. Probably out in some vacation,” he muttered, leading me towards the kitchen so that we could get a drink.

“Did you see Matt? Wouldn't want him nagging all day about how I spent the party clung to my boyfriend.”

“Hey, what's wrong with that.”

He placed his hands over his heart, pretending to be offended. I took the cup from Tyler's hand and took a sip of the *Pepsi* which I couldn't help but gag. I hate soda. Placing it back onto the counter, I opened my mouth to talk but stopped when I felt a large arm drop on my shoulder. I turned to look at Matt who was stuffing his face with pizza.

“Sup,” he said with a full mouth. I looked away, gagging at the sight of the pizza in his mouth and pushed him away.

“There's something called personal space. Please respect that.” I said making him roll his eyes.

“You should have said that when you barged into my bathroom while I was taking a shower and stole my towel and clothes while screaming April fools.”

“Really?” Tyler asked in disbelief.

“That was ” ago.”

I noticed Jasmine and the twins making their way towards us. I smiled and waved at them. We then gave each other welcoming hugs.

“What's up? Oh, and by the way I knew that would look good on you.” Jasmine said while nodding her head approvingly.

“Thanks I like it a lot.”

“Well the men here seem to like it too much.”

Tyler growled, bringing me closer to his chest.

“What's up buddy? You like to stare huh? Well you'll be staring with a black eye soon if you don't look away—OUCH!”

“What was that for?” I shot him a pointed look.

“Fine!”

“I see demons everywhere.” I rolled my eyes but decided to ignore his behavior and averted my eyes to look at my friends. They all were looking at us with amusement.

“What?” I asked.

They all shook their heads.

“Who wants pizza?” Matt asked with a full mouth once again. We all turned to look at him disgustingly.

“You don't know where that might have been.” Sydney pointed out.

“I got that straight out of the box,” he murmured.

Dan walked towards Tyler. I felt his arms around me tighten so I placed my hands over them. “Can we talk?” he asked ignoring everyone's stares.

Tyler looked at me. “I'll be back.”

Once he was out of sight, it seemed as if someone flipped a switch because I was being bombarded with questions.

“What the hell was that?”

“Oh, my goodness I knew that you two would go good together.” Jasmine squealed.

“It's about damn time!” Sydney said as Matt nodded his head.

“Wait, until I tell Troy.” Jasmine said as she took out her phone and began texting.

“The ship has sailed!” Eva fist bumped the air.

“We need ship names!” Matt spoke.

“How about—”

“Guys!” I yelled grabbing all their attention.

“You guys are acting as if your favorite celebrities got married.”

“Oops.” They all chuckled while scratching the back of their necks. I couldn't stand the attention so I took a step back and picked up Tyler's cup which he left behind.

“I'm going to check up on Tyler and give him this,” I said pointing to his cup.

I turned around and made my way passed all the teens who were dancing like crazy. It was like a sea of females and males grinding against each other. Looking around the place, I tried to find Tyler but then realized that if him and Dan wanted to have a serious conversation, they wouldn't be doing it around drunk teenagers and blasting music. I walked out to the front porch and smiled when I saw Tyler's back. I was about to walk towards them when I heard Dan mutter something under his breath.

“I'm sorry man.”

“Don't worry about it.”

“Damn I'm a d*ck.”

“You are.” Tyler chuckled.

“So, we cool?”

Tyler nodded his head. “Of course, fam.” He said before doing that bro handshake guys usually do and patted each other's back.

“Well I guess I'll see ya around then. Enjoy the party,” Dan said before walking passed Tyler and towards the door. He seemed to notice me standing by it because he sent me a wink and patted my shoulders.

“Sup, new girl?” he shouted over the music and walked away. I then turned around to look at Tyler and handed him over his cup.

“You okay?” I asked leaning against his chest.

“Better than ever,” he said before kissing me.

CHAPTER 45

“You sure you’re okay?” I asked Tyler for the millionth time today. We were both sitting on stools while drinking beer. Well mainly Tyler because I barely touched mine. I’m just not really much of a beer fan.

Jasmine and the twins were out on the dance floor while Matt tried to pick up some girls to could get laid. I couldn’t help but roll my eyes at the thought. He never gets enough. Unfortunately, Troy wasn’t here. He couldn’t make it to the party because he had a job and was busy, but that didn’t stop Jasmine from constantly texting him.

I was enjoying the little moment Tyler and I were having. We’ve been here for about ten minutes, just talking about whatever popped into our minds. I was still very confused on what just happened back there with Dan. How in the world did it all go smoothly with just a snap of a finger? I couldn’t quite put my tongue on it; and what confused me ever more was the fact that Tyler didn’t even look bothered. He was just laughing and smiling as if nothing happened.

Maybe they actually fixed things for once? I had no idea but I couldn’t help but worry.

Tyler dropped his arm around me and brought me closer so that my head was laying on his shoulder. He kissed the crown of my head before chuckling.

“Baby, I’m fine.” He assured me.

I lifted an eyebrow. “You sure?” I asked before kissing his jaw. “I saw what happened back there with Dan.” I pointed out. Tyler let out a breath but didn’t seem annoyed or bothered by what I said, instead he just nodded.

“Yeah, I know Gem. I guess Paul told Dan the news about him being my father and just decided to get over the fact that my now uncle Thomas was the one who killed his father.” He huffed. I narrowed my eyes and lifted my head off his shoulder.

“But why?” I asked.

Tyler shrugged.

“I don’t know. Probably out of pity or guilt,” he muttered with another shrug. I instantly felt the need to comfort him, so I reached over, took his face into the palm of my hands, and kissed his cheek. I was only planning for it to be a simple peck but it looked like Tyler had other ideas because his hands immediately went down my waist and tightened their hold.

I let out a yelp of surprise when he lifted me off the stool and onto his lap. I immediately pulled away and glared at him.

“Sorry buddy but I’m not a big fan of PDA.”

Tyler pouted his lips and looked at me with saddened eyes which I knew he was only using against me.

“But everyone here is making out with random strangers and my own girlfriend doesn’t want to kiss me?” Tyler asked dramatically as he wiped a fake tear off his cheek.

I rolled my eyes at his behavior.

“Oh gosh. Do you here that sound baby?” Tyler asked leaning over to whisper in my ear. I narrowed my eyes at him but shook my head.

“What sound?” I asked.

“The sound of my heart breaking!” He cried.

I couldn’t help but laugh. He was just too cute for me not to kiss so I bent over and captured his lips with mine.

“Happy?” I mumbled against his lips. His arms wrapped themselves around me, pulling me close to his chest so I wouldn’t be able to pull away.

“Definitely.” He grinned before continuing to kiss the life out of me.

His lips were soft and delicious. I don’t think I’d ever get enough of them. I ran my hands through his soft hair and giggled when I heard a soft groan from the back of Tyler’s throat, indicating that he liked what I was doing.

In that moment, I almost forgot about everyone who could be staring at us, but in Tyler’s arms I didn’t have a care in the world. This definitely felt like home and I didn’t want to move.

Besides, it's not like he and I would be the center of attention because just as Tyler said, everyone else was making out with random strangers, while I at least got to kiss the man I liked. My boyfriend.

I never knew that it would be so satisfying to call Tyler mine.

I pulled him closer and deepened the kiss, letting out a slight hiss when Tyler bit my bottom lip aggressively, silently asking for entrance which I gladly gave him. I pulled away to breathe for a bit before smashing my lips back to his. I couldn't help the moans that escaped my throat when Tyler slipped his tongue inside. I immediately kissed him back, enjoying the feeling.

Who knew kissing Tyler would feel this great?

After a while of just making out, we both pulled away for air but this time Tyler started to peck my jaw, leaving lingering kisses. His mouth started to make its way down my neck and to its most sensitive spot. I felt a shiver run down my back when he kissed me there and I didn't move away.

He continued kissing the same spot, every so often even licking it. I felt myself blush as I ran my hands through his hair. I looked around to see if anyone else noticed but they were off in their own little worlds, not paying any attention to their surroundings.

I then tried to pull away, until I felt Tyler bit my skin. His arms keeping me in place.

"Tyler." I breathed. My hands were trying to pull his head away from my neck but he was too strong. I felt my hands go weak when he licked the spot once more, sending another course of shivers down my spine. I held back the moan, but thankfully Tyler finally pulled away. He looked at me with a satisfied grin on his face, like a kid at a candy shop who got exactly what he wanted. His eyes were twinkling as I narrowed mine.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" I asked suspiciously.

"Damn I did good," he said to himself, ignoring my question. I lifted an eyebrow as my hand made their way towards the spot where he was biting on and I hissed slightly when I felt a sting.

"No!" I gasped.

"Yes." He grinned.

"You gave me a hickey?" I hissed, pinching his shoulder. This time he didn't hiss in pain dramatically like he always does. His eyes were staring at my neck in awe and satisfaction as if he just drew a masterpiece. He then

turned me around so that my back was laying against his chest and kissed my cheek.

“Yes I did. Now everyone will know that you belong to someone,” he whispered before kissing the hickey once again. I turned around and pinched his shoulder even harder, this time actually earning a reaction from him.

“Stop it. You’re making me sound as if I’m some kind of belonging.” I glared.

His smile dropped.

“Gem baby, you aren’t,” he said, taking my face into his hands before kissing my forehead. “To me, you’re more like a treasure that I want to cherish,” he said before kissing my lips.

I pulled away and narrowed my eyes at him.

“Treasure?” I mumbled.

He nodded.

“A valuable one I must protect.”

“Is that why you call me Gem?” I asked before kissing him back. He mumbled something which was unclear to me. I was too busy loving the feeling of his lips against mine to care.

Before we could go any further like last time, I heard a voice next to us speak up, causing us to pull away from our little trance. I turned away from Tyler and looked up to see a stranger with black hair and pierced ears. He was very muscular and was wearing a hoodie. His eyes were staring right at me which brought chills down my spine and not the same ones Tyler caused. He looked . . . well what was the word? Gothic.

He also looked to be around the age of twenty and was holding up a tray which I now noticed were filled with cups.

“Drinks anyone?” he asked in a bored tone as if he didn’t want to be here. I couldn’t help but avert my eyes from his cold ones which were starting to creep me out. I shook my head and mumbled a no. I guess Tyler noticed him staring too because his hands tightened around me and glared at the stranger.

“No.” He growled. “Can’t you see we’re busy?” he asked glaring at him.

“Busy sucking her face off?” The stranger asked, clearly not liking Tyler’s attitude towards him. My eyes are widened as my mouth fell open

slightly. My cheeks heat up in embarrassment. I knew PDA wasn't such a good idea.

"Dude, that's none of your business. F*ck off!" Tyler growled.

The stranger lifted an eyebrow and scowled at Tyler but didn't say a word. Instead, he sent him a glare before turning around to walk away. After a moment or two, he disappeared into the crowd.

"Well that was weird." I mumbled.

"Who does he think he is staring at—" Tyler stopped mumbling to himself angrily once he noticed the glare I was sending him.

"You were saying?" I asked, crossing my arms.

His serious tone was gone and a cheeky grin took over.

"Um . . . would you like to dance with me?" he asked.

I looked up and hummed to myself, tapping my finger on my chin as if I was thinking this over carefully.

"Hmm . . . well it depends. Will you buy me Taco Bell afterwards?" I asked grinning as I wrapped my arms around his neck and laid my forehead against his.

Tyler grinned and kissed my lips.

"Anything for you baby girl." He promised.

I giggled and nodded before jumping off his lap and grab his arm.

"Then come on! Let's dance," I said enthusiastically before pulling him to the dance floor.

"Woah someone's excited to eat Taco Bell." He teased.

I laughed and shook my body to the music.

"What? I can't help it. I'm hungry!" I defended myself. Tyler laughed before placing his hands on my hips and rested his forehead against mine.

"You're gorgeous," he whispered. As I looked into his eyes, I immediately forgot about everyone else around us. My attention was slowly focused on him and I felt my cheeks become warm. I couldn't help but smile.

"Thank you." I grinned, pecking his lips but pulled away quickly before we would get lost in the moment like before. This time we weren't alone in the corner and were surrounded by a bunch of strangers. Tyler's hands moved on their own and gently tugged a strand of my hair behind my head.

"I was just pointing out the truth, Gem."

CHAPTER 46

I let my attention focus on the paper in front of me, refusing to let it go elsewhere. My hands were starting to hurt because of how fast I was writing. Right now, I was in my fourth period class and was sitting next to Tyler as usual, filling in the answers of the exam our teacher decided to surprise us with.

I didn't study. In fact, the minute I heard the word 'pop quiz' from the teacher, I could have sworn I had a mini heart attack right then and there. If it wasn't for Tyler comforting me, and promising to somehow hack the school's website and give myself an A+, I would have fainted.

Oh how I wish he could do that but unfortunately, the only thing Tyler knows how to do is scare off any random guys within seconds and still be loved by the entire school.

How? I have no idea. It's as if everyone in this horror place were blind but me.

Once the bell rang, everyone got out of their seats, many of whom sent the teacher icy glares including myself. While I was too busy mentally strangling a certain teacher to their death, Tyler took ahold of my hand and smiled as if he just won the lottery. I grumbled to myself and handed in my paper, mentally wishing that somehow a huge hairy spider would pop out of nowhere and eat the damn lunatic alive.

"What are you staring at?" I grumbled.

"What crawled up your beautiful bum?" Tyler asked grinning.

"Really? Beautiful bum?" I narrowed my eyes and gave him a bewildered look. Tyler shrugged and pulled me to his chest.

"Beautiful bum. Nice behind. Sexy looking ass. Attractive butt. You get the point."

My mouth fell open as I stared at him as if he grew two heads. "Tyler!" I shrieked. My cheeks going pink as I hoped and begged to the heavens that nobody around us heard what my idiotic boyfriend just said.

Tyler's smile got wider as he tilted his head back and let out a loud laugh. I couldn't help but roll my eyes. We were walking towards the cafeteria, holding hands as we tried to ignore everyone's stares of awe, curiosity, and jealousy.

Wait, let me rephrase that. *I*, at least was trying because Tyler really couldn't give a damn about what other people thought. Not that I blame him. It was so much easier this way. He was used to the attention while I tried to get rid of it ever since elementary school.

"Ugh, what am I going to do with you." I ran my hand through my hair and let out a sigh.

"Babe, I know you're stressed out and all because of that stupid exam but please don't take it out on me," Tyler said in a fake defensive tone.

"Trust me, babe. If I was taking my anger out on you then you wouldn't be able to walk for days." I shot him a fake smile but instead of him flinching as I expected, he chuckled and pulled me closer.

"Kinky. I like it."

After punching his shoulder, I walked over to the lunch line and took a tray and started filling it with random food which I hoped would make me forget all about my misery.

"Hungry?" Tyler asked as he stared at my tray.

I groaned in response.

Once we were done, we walked to our table where we usually sat in and I dropped my tray roughly next to Matt's. He jumped up slightly, startled while I sat down, ignoring everyone's stares and shoved a fry in my mouth.

"What's up with her?" I heard Troy ask as I flickered my eyes up to see Tyler shrugging.

"I don't know man. Maybe it's that time of the month?" Tyler whispered back, not wanting me to overhear but it wasn't quiet enough. I grabbed another fry and threw it at his head. His eyes immediately averted from Troy's to mine, and I sent him a glare which would have him six feet underground if look could kill.

"Babe, I appreciate it if you didn't talk about my personal life with others." I then glared at Troy who hid behind Jasmine. The latter slapped

him across the head and mumbled 'idiot.'

"Heh sorry." Tyler scratched the back of his head nervously.

I went back to stuffing my face with food as I listened to the conversation around me. I looked around the cafeteria to see it full with hungry students like me. I felt myself drift off into my own la la land, not listening to what my friends were saying. I had to go home today and get ready for my job. I haven't been working lately because I was too busy training for the big race but since that's out of the way, I had no choice but to go back.

"So Crystal what do you say?"

I snapped out of my thoughts and whipped my head to the side to look at my friends.

"Huh?" I asked.

"We were talking about meeting at the twins' place," Jasmine explained.

"Yeah it's been a while since we had a movie night." Sydney pointed out.

"You in?" Tyler asked wrapping his arm around my waist.

"Uh I don't know. Depends. When will it be?" I asked taking a bite out of my burger.

"I was thinking tonight," Eva said.

Everyone nodded but me.

"Guys I can't tonight. I'm working." I pointed out.

"Then what about tomorrow? It's better to have a movie night on a Friday than on a Thursday anyway." Troy pointed out to which everyone agreed.

"That's fine, even better." Eva shrugged. I smiled at all of them and leaned over to Tyler as I took a fry from his tray and ate it. He sent me a playful glare to which I only gave him an innocent look. He leaned over to kiss my cheek. It always amazed me how Tyler showed his affection for me in front of everyone. It was as if he was stating a claim. That I belonged to him and that he belonged to me.

"What time does your shift finish?" he asked.

"I usually finish at nine thirty but today I'm getting off at seven because the manager has to close the shop early," I explained. "Why?" I asked.

"So I could pick you up of course."

I nodded and gave him a grateful smile before I continued eating. Just when I was about to get up to throw my tray away, I felt my phone vibrating in my pocket. Sitting back down, I took it out to see Ethan calling me. I couldn't help but roll my eyes. Doesn't this man know that I have school?

"Hello?" I spoke into the speaker.

"Hey! You busy kiddo?" Ethan asked.

"No not really. What's up?" I asked.

"Well Ally didn't quite get to see you very well during the race so she insisted that you come over for dinner," he spoke.

I smiled at the mention of Ally's name.

"Like the last time?" I asked recalling what happened the last time I ate dinner at their house.

"Yeah like last time but this time I promise ma will take her pills." He chuckled.

"Sure. I'd love to." I grinned.

"Okay that's great. Ma's making spaghetti and tacos." He cheered, making me laugh.

"I can't wait. I'll be there at eight," I said.

"Okay see ya then." And with that, we both hung up. I placed my phone down to see Troy, Jasmine, and the twins having a heated conversation while Matt and Tyler gave me confused looks.

"Who was that?" Tyler asked.

"Ethan. He wants me over for dinner tonight." I shrugged my shoulders.

"Oh." Tyler said, nodding his head slowly.

"Wait. So you can have dinner at some crazy families house but you can't hang out with us?" Matt asked in disbelief. I rolled my eyes.

"Matt. It would have been rude for me to decline and it's much better to have the movie night tomorrow on a Friday anyway." I shrugged my shoulders. Tyler nodded, agreeing with me. his head along with me.

"True true," he muttered.

"I'll take you there then." Tyler suggested.

"Okay. Fine with me." I smiled before I leaned over to kiss his cheek. Matt and Troy pretended to gag while the girls swooned in awe.

"Hey! How come no one swoons when they see me and Troy together?" Jasmine pointed out.

“Because darling, Troy’s looks are no where near Tyler’s level.” Sydney grinned.

Jasmine’s mouth fell open before she began to laugh while Troy placed his hand over his heart.

“Well geez thanks. I feel loved.” He rolled his eyes.

“Well, I got to say I agree with Sydney,” I said with a nod. I laughed when Tyler cheered in approval before lifting me up to sit on his lap. He kissed me on the lips and grinned.

“Now that’s why I like you.” He started to kiss every inch of my face. I noticed a lot of people staring in awe from the corner of my eye.

“Baby! Why aren’t you doing something? Defend me!” Troy cried out dramatically.

“I would honey but just look at those two. They’re probably the cutest couple in this school,” Jasmine said.

“Damn it!” Troy cursed as he crossed his arms and glared at Tyler.

“I hate you,” he mumbled in a low tone.

“The feelings mutual, brother.” Tyler smirked.

I laid my back against Tyler’s chest, trying to get comfortable and enjoy the last remaining minutes of my free time before classes started. I couldn’t wait for tonight. If it was just like the last time then things were definitely going to be good.

* * *

I made my way towards Tyler’s car after locking my front door. Since Tyler wanted to take me to Ethan’s house after my shift, I decided not to drive to work since I was going to go to Ethan’s home after I was done. I also wasn’t going to stop by my house so Tyler suggested that it would be much easier to just pick me up.

After I hopped in, I kissed his cheek in greeting.

“You know the way right?” I asked placing my purse on my lap.

“Yup.” Tyler nodded.

It didn’t take long before he had his car parked in the parking lot.

“You stopping by?” I asked.

He shook his head.

“Nah. I’m going to go back home to finish some work and then pick you up later. Text me when you’re done,” he said.

“Okay. See you later then,” I said waving him goodbye before hopping out of the car and towards the entry. I greeted the manager before taking my place behind the cash register. Popping some gum into my mouth, I greeted a couple of customers and checked their items. This went on for an hour before the place started to get empty. I sat down on my chair and read a text which I just received from Tyler.

‘Text me if you need anything.’

After replying to his text, I placed my phone back into my pocket and walked down the aisle of random junk food. I looked around before grabbing a box of chocolates chip cookies and chocolate. I walked back to the register with both boxes in my hands and placed a ten dollar bill into the register. I couldn’t just go over to dinner empty-handed. Especially since I knew that Ally loved chocolate so much.

“Crystal?” I heard the manager call out for my name. I placed the boxes which I now had in two plastic bags on the ground by my chair so I wouldn’t forget them on my way out and looked up.

“Yes? Is there anything I could do?” I asked sending her, sending a polite smile.

“Yes actually. I need you to bring me some light bulbs from the back and place them in aisle three please.”

Nodding my head, I moved away from my desk and walked out the door to the back. Opening the door, I turned on the lights of the dusty room and looked around for a box of light bulbs. Once I finally found one, I took a hold of the big box and made my way out the door. As I walked back into the market, I saw a muscular back walk through the door and down aisle four but I couldn’t make out who he was because of the hoodie covering his head.

Shrugging my shoulders, I struggled to keep the box balanced in my hold before finally placing it on the shelf where it belonged. I then stretched my arms out and made my way back to where I was supposed to stand. As I turned around, I couldn’t help but jump back a bit in surprise when I saw some one make their way towards me. It was the same guy in a hoodie I saw not too long ago, but that wasn’t the reason why I was startled.

It was because he was the same stranger I met at the party not too long ago. The same one who saw Tyler and I kissing.

Great! How embarrassing.

I swallowed the lump in my throat as I watched him walk towards me, holding a bag of spaghetti and cake batter. I smiled at him politely as he placed the items in front of me but said nothing. I took the items in my hand and swiped them under the sensor.

“That’ll be twelve ninety nine,” I mumbled flickering my eyes to look up at him. He was staring at me as if he wanted to say something but grumbled in response and took out his wallet. He handed me thirteen dollars after placing his stuff in a paper bag. I handed the change and the receipt over to him and sent him another small smile.

“Have a nice day and come back again.”

Please don’t . . . You creep me out.

He nodded before turning around. Just when he was about to walk through the door, he stopped and turned back slowly. I lifted an eyebrow in confusion as I watched him walk back towards me.

Was there something else he forgot?

“Um can I speak to the manager?” he asked shoving his hands into his pocket. I pointed to the door to my right, not looking away and spoke.

“Her office is right there.”

He nodded and slowly walked towards the door, knocking on it before walking in. I watched in confusion as he disappeared behind, not missing the single glance he sent me before closing the door. I shrugged and shook my head slightly, trying to figure out what on earth he wanted from the manager.

Maybe he needed a job?

After what seemed to be ten minutes, the stranger walked back out and towards the door, staring at me the whole time. I shifted my feet awkwardly as I tried to give a polite smile, since he was a customer after all but I just couldn’t. The looks he was giving me were putting me on edge and was creeping me out. He nodded, acknowledging me before finally walking out the door with the plastic bag in his hand.

I let out a breath of relief as I watched him disappear.

Well, that was strange.

CHAPTER 47

It wasn't long before my shift was finally over. I took my purse and slung it over my shoulder as I took the two bags of chocolate and cookies in my hands. I texted Tyler not too long ago to pick me up so he should be here any minute now.

Walking out of the small market, I made sure to tell the manager that I was leaving. I stood outside of the shop, just waiting for Tyler's car to arrive. The bags in my hands were starting to feel heavy so I placed them on the ground and I took my phone out of my pocket, realizing I received a message from Tyler.

'Just got in the car. Be there in a second.'

Once I was about to place my phone back into my pocket, I felt it vibrating in my hand. I looked down to see Ethan's name flashed on the screen. I clicked on the green button and answered the call, placing it over my ear.

"Hey what's up?" I asked.

"Nothing much. I was just wondering if you needed someone to pick you up?" he asked.

"No that won't be a problem. Tyler will be the one picking me up but thanks anyway." I told him.

"Hm . . . your little boyfriend?" He teased and I could already see the smirk on his face, making me roll my eyes.

"Yeah yeah whatever." I huffed.

"I knew that boy had a thing for you," he said, making me roll my eyes once more. "It was clear as crystal, my dear even a blind person could see that."

I scrunched my eyebrows and opened my mouth to say something when Ethan suddenly excused himself. Over the line, I could hear him talk to someone else. I didn't know who it was but it sounded like a guy's voice. I then heard Ethan thanking the person along with the sound of plastic bags in the background. It wasn't long before Ethan return.

"Who was that?" I asked.

"Blake, Sam's son who just returned the other day from New York," he explained.

"Oh." I said with a nod. Once I looked up, I saw Tyler's car parking right in front of me. "Well my ride is here. I'll see you in a bit." And with that I hung up. I then hopped into the car to see Tyler grinning at me. I sent him a smile before I gave him a skeptical look.

"What?" I asked suspiciously, lifting an eyebrow.

"Oh nothing really. It's just with all the places I've been taking you in my car, I was kind of expecting something in return." He grinned like an idiot.

"You're the one who suggested picking me up." I pointed out, but he shook his head.

"Still! Can't a guy get something in return?" he asked while placing his hand over his heart, making me roll me eyes.

"Fine." I huffed as I crossed my arms and stared at him as if I knew that whatever he was going to come up with wasn't going to be good. "What do you have in mind?" I asked.

"How about you sit on my lap and we make out?" he suggested as if he was talking about the weather. I stared at him for a moment before I tilted my head backwards and laughed.

"What? No!" I shook my head.

"But why not?" He pouted.

"Because if we do that then I'll be late to dinner!" I exclaimed, knowing that if I did agree to his suggestion, he'd want to make out for hours.

"Damn it," he cursed under his breath before starting his car. "Stupid dinner. Stupid crazy family. Stupid car," he mumbled to himself. I couldn't help but find his behavior amusing. I leaned over to kiss his cheek and whisper in his ear.

"Maybe next time?" I suggested only to make him feel better. He grinned to himself and flickered his eyes to me as he drove down the road.

“I’ll be holding on to that promise, Gem.” He winked at me. After a moment of silence, Tyler took ahold of my hand and placed it on his lap before giving it a lingering kiss.

“So about that date?” I finally spoke, breaking the silence.

Tyler flickered his eyes towards me then back at the road as he let out a long sigh.

“I’ve been wanting to talk to you about it but you know after everything that has happened with me, I don’t know when to take you out. I want to do it in the right time, not when both of us are stressed out you know?” Tyler huffed. I squeezed his hand and sent him a reassuring smile as I leaned over to lay my head on his shoulder.

“Take your time. I have no problem waiting. Once you settle down with Paul then it’ll happen,” I said. He kept his eyes on the road but turned his head a bit to kiss my hair.

“Thank you, Gem,” he whispered.

“Anything for you.” I smiled up at him, kissing his jaw.

Finally, after what seemed to be ten minutes of silence of just enjoying each other’s company, we made it in front of the house I know too well. Tyler parked his car in front of it but not in the drive-through.

“This is where I stop. Make sure to text me if you need a ride okay?” He reminded, pecking my lip as his arms snaked around me to pull me to his chest.

I nodded and hugged him back goodbye before hopping out of the vehicle. I waved goodbye to Tyler and turned around, walking towards the big yet old house I’ve come to love. Making it towards the front door step, I rang the door bell and waited for someone to open it for me. It wasn’t too long before I heard a click, which must be the lock unlocking and the door suddenly opened.

The smile on my face immediately fell once I saw what was in front of me.

Nothing.

Lifting an eyebrow I was about to open my mouth to call out for someone when I felt two tugs on both my legs. Jumping back in surprise because it caught me off guard, I looked down to see two twin boys staring up at me in awe. I let out a chuckle as the smile on my face returned. I bent down to their height and hugged them both.

“Hey Zayn! What’s up Andy?” I greeted, messing up their adorable hair.

“I told you Granny was going to buy her.” I heard Andy whisper to his brother which was loud enough for me to hear. I lifted an eyebrow in confusion.

Huh?

“No she’s not.” Zayn argued back.

“Yes she will. She’s crazy I tell you. She needs someone to wipe off her butt. Dad is getting tired of that job.” Andy pointed out as he crossed his small arms and stared at his brother as if they were having a staring contest. A look of realization spread across Zayn’s face as he cringed slightly at what Andy just said and slowly nodded.

“Yeah, you’re right,” he whispered then looked up at me as if he was inspecting me. “Do you like to wipe butts?” he asked innocently. I’m pretty sure the look of horror on my face was obvious.

“No,” I spoke quickly.

“See! I told you so! Dad will just have to stick with it,” Zayn told Andy and ran passed him to go inside. Andy watched his brother leave before looking back up at me.

“If you’re not going to wipe her butt then are you here to feed her?” he asked.

I shook my head slowly.

“Teach her?”

“Teach her what?” I asked the little boy.

“Manners,” he answered.

I shook my head.

“Are you going to put her to sleep?”

I shook my head once again.

“Bathe her?”

“No!” I said quickly.

Then all of a sudden, a huge smile took over Andy’s face.

“Are you here to take her away?” He squealed.

“No . . .” I trailed off.

The look of disappointment flashed across his face.

“Dang it! You mean I still have to live with the devil?” he cried before turning around and ran towards the house and disappeared through the door. My mouth fell open.

What was that all about?

But before I could contemplate on the ‘conversation’ I just had, I saw a large body appear in front of me, snapping me out of my own thoughts.

“Little girl. You’re late,” Mr. Fatty said.

“Hello to you too.” I rolled my eyes and moved forward to hug him but was pushed away before I could do so.

“Don’t get all touchy with me. I’m forced to hang out with you,” he said glaring at me. I couldn’t help the grin which took over my face.

“Sure you are,” I said, walking passed him and into the house. I sniffed the air and moaned silently as the delicious scent filled my nostrils. I rubbed my hands together and turned to look at Mr. Fatty who was locking the front door.

“I’m starving,” I said rubbing my stomach.

“And I’m annoyed but you don’t see me complaining,” he grumbled.

I let out a huff. When will this guy ever warm up to me?

“So where are the others?” I asked ignoring his comment.

“Lucas is in the kitchen taking over Ma’s clumsiness while Ethan is trying to get her to take her damn pills,” he muttered but stopped before muttering again, “As usual.”

He then lead me to the living room. I sat down on the couch and nodded before looking around. The twin boys were playing around which caught my attention.

“Where’s Ally?” I asked.

“In her room. She’ll be out in a minute,” He spoke before walking out the door while mumbling something about checking up on his son. I then smiled widely as I saw Ally run towards me while holding something in her hand.

“Crystal! Crystal!” she yelled. I got up and bent down to her level to hug her. She wrapped her small arms around my neck while giggling. I let out a laugh too before getting back up.

“How’s my little angel doing?” I asked grinning.

“Great now that you’re here!” she answered hugging my leg. I smiled down at her then took ahold of the two plastic bags I brought with me.

“Here. I got this for you.” I handed it over to her and watched as the look of amazement spread across her face. She immediately opened the two

bags and squealed out loud when she saw the boxes of cookies and chocolate.

“Yay! My favorite! Thank you so much! I’m going to show these to Daddy.” She turned around to run out the door but stopped when Ethan walked into the room with a smile.

“Daddy Daddy! Look at what Crystal got me.” Ally shoved the two bags towards Ethan. He chuckled when he looked in them and nodded at his daughter.

“That’s wonderful dear. Why don’t you go place them in the kitchen and give some to your cousins?” He suggested. Ally shook her head immediately.

“No! She got them for me, not for them! I’m not sharing my present with those rats,” she said stubbornly while backing away so that she could hide behind my leg. I let out a chuckle as I watched her protest as if her life depended on it. The look of annoyance and tiredness flashed on Ethan’s face as he glared at his daughter. He then let out a sigh of defeat and shook his head slowly.

“What am I going to do with you?” He breathed out. “Fine. Do what you want but you better hide them or else ‘those rats’ will steal them,” he warned. She nodded, smiling victoriously before running off. Once Ally was gone, Ethan turned to me and smiled.

“Crystal! Glad you made it,” he said before hugging me.

“Glad I could.” I smiled back at him.

“It’s been a while eh? The last time I saw you, I couldn’t actually talk to you because of what happened but I have to say that what you did was very brave of you.” Ethan nodded as he recalled what happened at the big race and how I helped Naomi finish along with me.

“I did what I had to do.”

Ethan nodded again.

“So are you hungry?” he asked leading me to the big dinning table. Lucas, or should I say ‘Jerry’, walked through the door holding a huge plate of spaghetti. He placed it on the center of the table and smiled at me with a wave. I waved back before turning towards Ethan.

“Hungry? I’m starving.” I grinned.

“Great because we cooked a lot of food which will last us for the winter.” He joked.

“Blake! Did you buy the soda?” I heard Mr. Fatty ask before walking through the door holding a cigarette. I heard a rough voice come from behind him but I couldn’t make out what they said.

I watched as someone made their way passed the door while holding a plastic bag. They were wearing a hoodie which looked awfully familiar. Their back was facing towards me so I couldn’t see their face, but I knew it was a he because of their silhouette. Just when the stranger turned around, his eyes met mine almost immediately. My mouth fell open as I tilted my head to the side, recognizing him.

It was the strange man from the party, and the same one from earlier today.

He was Sam’s son?

“Ah, dear I’d like you to meet Blake,” Ethan said, pointing to the guy in front of me.

“He’s my son.” Sam—I mean Mr. Fatty spoke.

I nodded my head slowly as if trying to absorb all the information in my head.

“Nice to meet you,” I mumbled awkwardly.

Blake nodded while staring at me as if he knew what was on my mind.

“We’ve met before.” He pointed out.

“Yeah,” I whispered. “I know.”

“You have?” Ethan asked. We both nodded.

“At a party.” I shrugged my shoulders.

“And in a supermarket.” He pointed out while shoving his hands into his pocket.

“Well that’s great! I bet you two we’ll get along well,” Ethan said happily, making me roll my eyes.

“Yeah I bet,” I mumbled to myself in disbelief as I shook my head.

“Dinner is ready!” Jerry yelled. I was probably the first to turn around and dash towards the table. It was a way for me to escape the awkward situation.

I smiled at Jerry as he placed a plate of tacos on the table. I licked my lips at the sight and sat down as I waited for the others. Ally and the boys came running towards the table, taking their own seats. I turned my head to the side slightly to see Blake taking the seat next to me.

Great . . . this was going to be fun alright.

“When we met at the party.” Blake started. I turned to look at him.

“Wasn’t the best first impression was it?” I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders and said nothing.

He’s definitely a quiet one.

Just when I turned around, I saw Granny Grace making her way towards the table with a cane in her hand. It’s as if she didn’t see me because she sat down on a chair and began eating.

“Excuse her, she’s been a bit tired lately.” Ethan told me. Nodding my head, I grabbed my fork and began placing spaghetti onto my plate. As I ate, I tried to ignore the awkward tension. I listened to what Mr. Fatty said next.

“Did you find a job?” he asked Blake. I lifted an eyebrow and turned to look at him in confusion. He flickered his eyes to me then back to his dad.

“Yeah,” he mumbled.

“Is that what you needed the manager for?” I asked.

He nodded. *Huh, I guess I was right for once.*

“Did you get the job?”

He nodded once again.

I looked away to my plate while thinking. I guess I have a working buddy now . . .

“Wait. You’ll be working with Crystal?” Mr. Fatty asked.

Blake shrugged his shoulder.

“I guess.”

“That’s good then.” Ethan nodded.

This is what caught my attention. I lifted my head up and turned to look at Blake then at Mr. Fatty.

“But last time I was here, I remembered you were supposed to be in New York studying for college.” I pointed out, confused.

There was a moment of silence before Blake spoke.

“I got expelled,” he grumbled looking down at his plate.

“For what?” I asked.

“Drugs,” Mr. Fatty spoke.

“Attempt of murder.” Jerry said with a shrug.

“Burned down the building,” Ethan spoke.

“RAPE!” Granny Grace yelled for the first time since I’ve been here. She got off her chair and glared at Blake before pointing her finger at him

while Blake kept a bored look on his face.

“That demon tried to rape a dog!” she screamed hysterically. I cringed at what everybody said and turned to look at Blake in confusion. He rolled his eyes and looked at me as if this was normal for them to accuse him of such things.

“I got kicked out because I couldn’t pay the fees,” he answered simply.

Oh . . . well I guess that makes sense.

I nodded and watched as Ethan forced his mother to sit down.

“She’s been seeing things,” Blake whispered as he looked at his grandmother.

“You mean like illusions?” I asked.

He flickered his eyes to me and nodded.

“Always blaming me for seducing her husband.” He shook his head in disbelief and looked at me. “He’s dead.” He chuckled. I couldn’t help but do the same.

“When do you start work?” I asked.

“Tomorrow,” he answered simply. I nodded, remembering that I had no work tomorrow. Thankfully I was off the hook. I looked back at Blake and couldn’t help but wonder why he looked so . . . what’s the word? Depressed? He didn’t seem like a bad person as I suspected but just off. Like there’s something strange about him.

“Excuse me for asking but why do you seem so . . .”

“Familiar?” he asked. The twinkle in his eyes didn’t go unnoticed. I lifted an eyebrow in confusion. *Didn’t we already talk about this?*

“No.” I shook my head.

“Oh,” he whispered then looked away to his plate as he took a bite out of his taco.

“I was about to say gloomy,” I said.

He chuckled to himself and looked at me with his strange cold eyes.

“I got kicked out of college because my family couldn’t provide me the money and it was the only place I could be able to escape to,” he said glaring at Andy who tried to steal his taco. He slapped his hand away and scowled at him before continuing.

“And now I’m back to a place called torture,” he mumbled.

I stared at him then looked around the table.

“Torture? There’s nothing but happiness here.” I pointed out. He shook his head slowly.

“They’re all evil,” he whispered and leaned closer, pointing to Mr. Fatty.

“He eats all the food.”

I chuckled.

“She’s a nightmare in disguise,” Blake said while pointing at Ally.

“She’s crazy.” He pointed to Granny Grace.

“You have a point there,” I mumbled back.

“The twins are a pain in the ass, always bringing dead stuff into the house.”

I nodded. “That’s true.”

“The only people in this room who are next to normal are Uncle Ethan and Lucas,” Blake said pointing to both men who were eating.

“I can see that. But everything you described is what brings this house to life. What makes it exciting. Let me ask you this. Is it better to eat alone in a place that’s quiet and lonely or eat in a place like this?” I asked looking around the room and smiling at most of the reasons why I love being here. It’s certainly better than being home all day doing nothing. I then looked at Blake who was also looking around the table. His cold features were gone still blank. He then looked at me and nodded slowly.

“I guess here,” he mumbled.

I gave him a small smile and turned to take a bite out of my taco.

I continued to eat the delicious food around me, almost too distracted but there was one thing I didn’t miss. It was the look he gave me. Just when I thought things couldn’t get any weirder, I heard Blake whisper something to himself which I’m pretty sure he didn’t want me hearing.

But I did. The words that slipped off his tongue made me scrunch my eyebrows. I stared at my plate in confusion as if it was some kind of puzzle I was trying to solve. His words continue repeating in my head and wouldn’t leave until I get some kind of answer.

“You haven’t changed one bit.”

CHAPTER 48

Once the bell rang, I got up along with everyone else who were just about ready to go home and start their weekend. It was the last period of the day and I couldn't wait to go home and leave this place of horror. I was also really excited to hang out with my friends tonight at Sydney and Eva's place. I heard that they got an apartment for themselves after so long and wanted everyone at their place to celebrate by eating popcorn and binging on movies.

After swinging my backpack over my shoulder, I turned around to see Tyler walking towards me. He held my hand as we walked out the door, all while trying to avoid bumping into the sea of students. The rumors have died down, just like the whispering and staring did. I guess the school finally came to terms with the fact that a girl like me was dating the hottest guy in school, who also just happens to be a nincompoop at times. Still, I didn't expect everyone else to know that.

No one knew Tyler the way I did. In front of the world, Tyler was probably the happiest person there, living his life with amazing charm but it wasn't all like that. He was also a broken child inside who realized that his whole life was planned out for him. That it was a lie. I find it funny how he and I were almost alike. Well, at least the me from many years ago who often got bullied.

I was pulled out of my thoughts when Tyler squeezed my hand in his hold and brought me to his chest, kissing the top of my head.

"What are you thinking about?" he whispered in my ear, only now that I realized that we were standing outside of the school.

"Us," I answered, looking up at him with a smile.

“Hmm . . .” he muttered before dipping his head down to capture my lips in his. As I said before, I wasn’t such a big fan of PDA so I didn’t really let our kiss go too far with everyone around us staring, but I couldn’t exactly resist his soft lips either. They somehow always managed to blow my mind away.

Pulling away, I gave him a look which said ‘no more.’ Tyler rolled his eyes although the playful grin still remained on his lips. He then muttered something which I couldn’t make out and took my hand before leading me to the parking lot and towards his car.

Today was another day where I came to school in his car. I’m not sure why but Tyler enjoyed picking me up in the morning. Maybe because he liked being around me or because he liked the awed expressions on everyone’s faces when I get out of his car. In a way, he probably wanted to prove to everyone that he really was my boyfriend, and not just someone who was taking advantage of my feelings.

Once Tyler unlocked the car, I hopped into my usual seat. I watched as he inserted the keys in the ignition and started the car. Right after he drove out of the school’s parking lot, I spoke, interrupting the silence.

“So at what time will we meet at the twins’ house?” I asked. Today, I was going to drive myself there. I knew for sure that if Tyler didn’t have an evening shift at work today, he would have insisted on taking me there. I turned my head from the window to see Tyler flicker his eyes towards me then back at the road. He shrugged.

“Well since it’s movie night, Troy said it’ll be around seven to seven thirty. I might not make it until seven thirty though because my shift doesn’t end until seven fifteen,” Tyler explained.

I nodded.

“Okay that’s good. I’ll probably be there before seven to help Sydney and Eva with the snacks,” I said.

“Sounds good to me,” Tyler murmured as he parked his car in his drive-through although neither of us left. We stay seated, enjoying the silence around us before we had to say goodbye. I turned to look at him and grabbed his hand.

“How are things going?” I asked, referring to the situation with Paul. Tyler ran his hands through his hair in frustration and turned to look at me, giving me a reassuring smile.

“Things are getting better,” he said honestly with a nod before he swallowed then looked away. “I mean at first I was mad. I-I felt betrayed and broken but things weren’t all that bad.” He paused to look at me with sadness in his eyes.

I felt my heart break at the sight so I did the one thing I could do. By doing the one thing he liked. The one thing he was asking for yesterday. I unbuckled my seat belt and hopped onto his lap. I saw the look of amusement flash in his eyes for a second before it disappeared. My arms made their way up his neck as I rested my forehead against his.

“Things will get better.” I promised as I looked into his eyes. His lips twitched upwards before speaking.

“Yeah, I know. As long as you’re by my side I’m okay.” He rested his head on my neck and inhaled my scent to calm himself down.

“Remember the promise you made yesterday?” Tyler lifted his head up to look at me with such glint in his eyes. I couldn’t help but grin.

“Yeah what about it?” I teased, breathing against his cheek as I tried to hold in my laughter.

“Well, we are in a car, and you were sitting on my lap.” Tyler smirked as he pointed at me then at him. “All we need now is dramatic music and we’ll be in a cliché movie.” He joked, making me laugh. I then moved myself closer so that my chest was pressed against his. I pecked his lips before pulling away but Tyler was nowhere near being finished because he placed his hand behind my head, bringing me closer to his lips. He kept me firm against him before he molded his lips onto mine.

I tilted my head to the side so that I could get better access of his delicious lips. I felt Tyler grin against my lips as I bit his bottom one.

“Easy there.” He chuckled. “If you wanted me that bad you could have said so.”

I pinched his shoulder as I sent him a glare.

“Way to ruin the moment with your cockiness.” I rolled my eyes and open the car door, hopping out and off his lap.

“Aw come on! We still didn’t even make out yet!” Tyler whined as he rested his head on the wheel. I tilted my head back and laughed.

“That’s what you get for being a show-off,” I said as he walked out of his car. He shook his head slightly before pulling me back to his chest.

“I’d continue inside but I got a job to get to.” Tyler breathed out annoyed. I nodded, grinning as I got onto my tiptoes to kiss his cheek.

“I also have to go. I’ll see you tonight okay?”

He nodded and gave me one last smile before pulling away. We both waved goodbye before going off on our own separate ways. I grabbed the keys from my bag and unlocked the front door. I then walked into my quiet empty house and placed my bag onto the couch. I walked into the kitchen to grab myself something light to eat since I knew that I was going to eat a lot later today. After filling my stomach with an apple and a bag of chips, I walked to the living room and turned the TV on.

After searching for anything to watch, which was nothing by the way. I grabbed my phone and my bag before making my way upstairs to do my homework. I didn’t want to forget anything because I wanted to have fun tonight with nothing hovering over my shoulders. I took out my binder and some papers as I got lost into the world of studying.

* * *

After what seemed to be forever, but was actually only a couple hours later, I got out of my room after changing into some decent looking clothes and made my way down the stairs. I just got off the phone with Tyler who said that maybe his manager will let him leave half an hour early but is still unsure about it. I checked the time to see that it was around six thirty so I dialed Sydney’s number and placed my phone to my ear.

“Hey what’s up?” she greeted from the other end.

“Nothing much. How’s everything going?” I asked.

“Great. I was just baking some brownies and cinnamon buns while Eva gets the house clean. When are you coming?” she asked.

I walked towards the door and grabbed my sneakers.

“I’m actually getting ready to help you guys. Do you need anything on my way there?” I asked.

“Nah I don’t—oh sh*t!”

I lifted an eyebrow.

“Uh what’s wrong?” I asked.

“Eva did you finish the damn popcorn?” I heard Sydney yell. After a moment of silence I also heard Eva reply but it wasn’t clear.

“Of course! Why am I not surprised? You’re always eating everything in this house!” Sydney shouted.

I couldn’t help but chuckle.

“So . . . you sure you don’t need anything?” I asked.

I heard her huff from the other end.

“You know what? Change of plans. I need you to stop by the supermarket and get us some popcorn—sh*t! And you also finished the freakin soda?” There she was back at it again.

“What else did your stupid mouth gobble up? Hey you stay away from those brownies!” I heard her warn Eva.

I rolled my eyes as I grabbed my set of keys.

“Popcorn and soda got it. Anything else before I leave?” I asked catching Sydney’s attention.

“No at least I don’t think so. I’ll call you if I notice the fat ass over here stealing more supplies,” she said in annoyance.

“Okay. I’ll be there in about fifteen minutes,” I said before hanging up. I then opened my front door and made my way to my car before locking it. I placed the keys in my bag along with my phone and hopped in. After starting the car, I drove down to the supermarket I worked in. It wasn’t long before I had my car parked into the parking lot.

As soon as I got out and closed the door, I heard my phone ring. Taking it out of the bag, I saw Matt calling and I answered within seconds.

“Yo Crystal I need your help,” Matt said.

I walked towards the market.

“What is it? I’m buying a couple of stuff for the movie night,” I said as I got closer to the entrance.

“Perfect! Just what I needed,” Matt cheered. “You see I promised to get the ice cream, and cookies but I’m running late and the supermarket next to my house is closed so I can’t go to the one which is far away,” he explained.

“So you want me to by them?” I asked lifting an eyebrow.

“Yes please. I’ll return the money though.” He promised.

I walked through the door and towards the junk food aisle.

“It’s okay. I’m already in the market. I’ll grab those on my way out,” I told him as I walked towards the fridge which held the drinks and took out a large bottle of soda, and placed it in the basket which I grabbed on my way here.

“Thanks! You’re a lifesaver.” Matt sighed in relief. I let out a laugh as I also grabbed some chocolate and strawberry flavored ice cream. I placed them in the basket before speaking.

“You’re welcome. Well, I have to go. I’ll see you tonight.” And with that, we both hung up. I walked over to the chips aisle and dropped a bunch of bags of hot Cheetos because I wanted some and a couple of Lays because I knew how much Matt loves them. I then placed the popcorn in the basket, not wanting to forget them or else Sydney would have my head.

After grabbing two boxes of chocolate chip cookies and a box of Oreos, I made my way towards the cashier with a heavy basket. Next thing you’ll know, Troy will be calling me, asking me to buy gummy bears or something.

Once I made my way out of the aisle, I walked towards the cash register where I usually stand behind three days a week but this time I wasn’t the cashier. Instead, the cashier was Blake and I immediately remembered yesterday when he said he was going to start working here. I noticed his stare but I only sent him a polite smile as always.

“How’s the first day of work?” I asked as I watched him shrug. I placed the basket in front of him as he took all my items and began to scan them.

“It’s okay I guess. This is only temporarily until I find something decent enough,” he mumbled, placing all my junk food in multiple bags.

“Well I wish you luck then. Planning on going back to New York?” I asked.

Once again he shrugged his shoulders.

“I don’t know. I might just find a college here that I can afford.”

I nodded.

“I also used to live in New York,” I murmured, taking out my wallet. I saw something in his eyes flash, he almost looked interested.

“Hmm . . . really?” He hummed. “Which school did you attend?” he asked, placing the last item into the bag.

“A small school called Benrit high school,” I answered taking out a twenty dollar bill.

Blake immediately turned his head to look at me and I couldn’t help but notice the glint in his eyes.

“Well that’s odd. I went there too.” He grinned for the first time since I’ve met him. My mouth fell open as I stared at him in shock.

“Really? You did? When was that?” I asked in disbelief, handing over my money.

“I spent the tenth grade there but moved away the next year here to study in California before I moved back to New York for college,” he explained.

“How old are you?” I asked curiously. I still couldn’t believe that Blake went to the same school I did.

“Nineteen,” he answered, returning my change. I placed the coins in my wallet.

“So you’re still in your freshman year of college?”

He nodded.

“Was actually.” He pointed out.

I nodded my head awkwardly and looked at the time on my phone.

“Well I have to go. Um, see you around I guess,” I mumbled the last part. I turned around and walked out of the shop, letting out a breath I didn’t know I was holding back. It was already seven o’clock sharp and would take only about seven minutes to get to the twins’ new place which means that I wouldn’t be late. I got into my car after placing all the bags in the back seat and drove to my destination, mulling over Blake’s words.

If he’s only a year older than me and attended the same school as I did then that means I was in the ninth grade when I attended the school, but how come I don’t remember seeing him there?

Shrugging the thoughts away, I drove for another six minutes as I recalled the address Eva sent me. Once I was there, I carried the bags to the front door and rang the doorbell. The person who opened it made me smile.

“Tyler! You’re early.” I pointed out as I placed all the bags near my feet and wrapped my arms around his neck, hugging him. He chuckled as he wrapped his arms around my waist and hugged me back.

“Yeah. Luckily I finished the job early.”

I nodded and pulled the two bags into my hand while Tyler took the last three. We walked into the neat apartment and saw everyone here including Naomi.

“Hey, it’s great you came.” I smiled, walking up to hug her. She smiled back and returned the hug.

“So glad I could come. I brought a couple of movies with me even though we might just be watching from Netflix.” She chuckled.

I then gave my bags to Matt who took them to the kitchen. Naomi and I walked towards the couch, greeting Sydney and Jasmine who were also seated. I sat on the empty couch along with Tyler and watched as Matt, Troy, and Eva brought a bunch of plates filled with heaven.

“I think I’ll leave with diabetes after this,” I mumbled as I ogled at the junk food in front of me. Tyler laughed and brought me to his chest, but I pulled away and stole a brownie from the plate earning many glares from everyone around me. I took a bite and moaned.

“This is so good,” I said with my mouth full, closing my eyes.

Sydney slapped my hand and glared at me.

“Not now! Wait until we decide a movie.” She hissed but I gave her a cheeky grin.

Tyler then stole one when she wasn’t looking before taking a bite.

“Mmm . . . who made this?” He moaned.

Sydney opened her mouth as if she wanted to scold him but ended up closing it and rolled her eyes.

“I did.” She sighed before walking away.

“So . . .” Naomi trailed off. “Who wants to watch Marvel?”

CHAPTER 49

“So I was thinking maybe in the winter break?” Tyler suggested.

I shrugged.

“That’s like a week away and it could give me time to settle things with Paul beforehand. Maybe we can go away for a bit?” He flickered his eyes from the road then back at me. Just when those words slipped out of his mouth, a huge smile took over my face, and I whipped my head around to look at him. I jumped up and down in my car seat and squealed.

“Oh my gosh really?” I asked. “Do you mean like a road trip or something?” I leaned over to peck his cheek countless times.

He let out a laugh.

“Yeah sure. If that’s what you want.” He grinned. I nodded my head enthusiastically. Right now we were on our way to school and we’re discussing when and where our first date should be since Tyler was actually settling things around his house.

You could say things have been getting better for him which is what I had hoped. I hated to see him so depressed and sad. It just broke my heart. I was so used to seeing Tyler’s usual grin that when I don’t see it I felt odd, like there was something wrong in the world. So I was hoping that if we went away for a bit, we could forget about our problems even for a little while. Also since our date was ruined in the first place, Tyler wanted to make it special so the subject of going away for a bit was a great idea especially since we lived in California and the weather here was great.

“I can’t wait!” I squealed. “It’ll be just you and me. I’ll pack my bags and a bunch of snacks. Do you think we can go to Las Vegas?” I wondered.

Tyler nodded.

“Sure. That sounds great but hold your horses, Gem. We still have another week of school though.” He pointed out, making me huff. I rested my back on my car seat and crossed my arms in disappointment.

“Damn it,” I cursed under my breath. I heard Tyler chuckle at my reaction causing me to pinch his shoulders. He yelped dramatically but sent me one of his cheeky grins.

“Awe . . . Is my Gem excited to run away with me?” he cooed, pinching my cheek. I felt them go red as I glared at him and slapped away his hand.

“Shut up. I’m only excited to finish school that’s all.” I denied, making him roll his eyes and turn his attention back on the road.

“Sure,” he said, his words laced with sarcasm. I watched as he parked his car into the school’s parking lot and turned off the engine. We both hopped out at the same time before Tyler locked all the doors.

I then walked over to him and took his hand. I felt my eyebrows lift in confusion when I didn’t see any student around us. Tyler seemed to notice this too but didn’t say anything until we walked towards the school’s entrance. We stopped dead in our tracks when we noticed a huge crowd gathered around the front doors, clapping their hands and cheering on with some even laughing their butts off. I turned to look at Tyler in confusion but he had the same look on his face.

“What the hell?” he whispered. I frowned, wondering what the hell was attracting every single student here. What really made me want to know was when the fact that I heard two people shouted, and they sounded awfully familiar. It looked like Tyler knew exactly who I was thinking about because his eyes widened in shock.

“Sh*t!” he cursed.

“They wouldn’t . . . ” I breathed looking back at Tyler in worry. Tyler flickered his eyes to me then back to the crowd as he shook his head slightly.

“Oh they would.” He breathed out, and with that I tugged on Tyler’s arm and ran towards the crowd to see if my assumptions were right. I pushed the students away along with Tyler right behind me.

“Excuse me.” I said countless times before reaching the front of the crowd. When I did, my eyes widened at the sight. I felt Tyler’s presence behind me as I heard him suck in his breath. I couldn’t believe my eyes. It

was actually happening and once this was over I was going to give both of them a piece of my mind.

Both Matt and Troy were standing in front of the school entrance attracting everyone's attention. Troy had a dress on, exposing his muscular hairy legs while Matt was wearing clothes which seemed to be from the eighties. But that's not all, there also seemed to be a guy spraying water from a hose up from the roof.

"Why didn't you write me?" Troy cried out dramatically as he placed his hand on his forehead. The crowd erupted into laughter. I felt my hand cover my face in embarrassment.

Gosh . . . They were actually doing this.

"Why? It wasn't over for me!" Troy yelled as the water from the hose drenched Troy and Matt. I looked up to see the guy up in the roof laughing as he sprayed both boys with water. They definitely didn't seem to mind.

"I waited for you for seven years!" Troy shouted at Matt. "Now it's too late!"

I felt Tyler stand next to me as he took in the sight.

"I can't believe they're doing this," he spoke, shaking his head. I flickered my eyes to him before immediately looking back at the scene.

"I wrote three hundred and sixty five letters," Matt spoke finally, causing everyone around us to cheer on. I couldn't help but roll my eyes. This was ridiculous.

"I wrote you everyday for a year!" Matt shouted at Troy.

I winced as I watched both Matt and Troy reenact the famous scene from *The Notebook*. I knew they said they were going to prove us wrong, and I thought they were bluffing, but I had no idea they were actually going to do this in front of the whole school!

"You wrote me?" Troy cried.

"Please don't kiss," Tyler whispered, closing his eyes.

"Yes! It wasn't over!" Matt shouted back under the spray of the water which was supposed to be rain.

"Don't kiss." Tyler shook his head disturbingly.

"It still isn't over."

I placed my hands over my eyes, too afraid to look but when I removed them, I saw Matt lifting Troy and twirling him around into the air. Thankfully, they weren't kissing or else they would have left me blind. Not

that I have anything against gay people but never in my life would I think that I'd see my two best friends kiss. Matt continued to twirl Troy's large body as if they were kissing just like in the movie, causing everyone around us to erupt in laughter.

"Don't let go Jack!" Troy cried. Matt stopped and fell Troy to the ground before slapping the back of his head.

"You idiot! How many times do I have to tell you? That's Titanic!" He hissed.

"Oh . . . sorry."

So you might be very confused to what was going on. Well let me explain. It all started three nights ago when we were having our movie night . . .

* * *

Friday Night

After watching a Marvel movie, Jasmine insisted on watching something romantic next such as Titanic. I didn't mind at all but all the boys were gagging and arguing, saying that it was a soppy movie only made for wimps.

I rolled my eyes, sending Tyler a glare which said '*shut up and let us ladies do the picking*' which actually worked because during the whole movie Tyler wasn't complaining unlike Troy and Matt. Maybe because he was so engrossed in my neck. In fact, during the whole movie, he didn't seem to look up at the screen, not once, and would either keep himself busy by kissing my neck which was very distracting, or scroll on his phone.

Matt and Troy, on the other hand, wouldn't let us watch the movie in peace and would continue to bicker.

"Cringe," Troy muttered, earning a slap on the chest by Jasmine who was so persistent in getting her boyfriend to watch the movie, that she wouldn't let him use his phone for one second.

"Such horrible acting." Matt shook his head in disappointment. He also couldn't use his phone because the twins held it hostage in their bag. I guess they enjoyed watching him suffer.

After Titanic was over, I saw Troy and Matt visibly relax. Well that is until Naomi spoke.

“Who wants to watch The Notebook?” she asked.

Everyone nodded, including Tyler but Troy and Matt were the only ones who looked completely horrified. Wow, now I’m actually very grateful for my boyfriend. I guess Tyler didn’t care what he watched as long as I was sitting on his lap.

“Please no!” Matt begged.

“We already went through with your stupid movi—ouch!” Troy hissed in pain as he rubbed his shoulder which Jasmine just pinched.

“Do not insult my favorite movie or else I will chop you into pieces!” Jasmine threatened, sending him a glare. Troy rolled his eyes but kept his mouth shut, knowing that was what’s best because no one wanted to see Jasmine’s bad side.

“At least return our phones,” Matt whined, staring at Sydney. She smirked at him and shook her head.

“No can do buddy.” She crossed her arms. “Watch the movie quietly. Maybe if you actually gave it a chance then you’ll like it.” She pointed out to which we all nodded and stared at the boys.

“I’ve watched this movie million of times with Jasmine! And I still don’t like it.” Troy huffed.

“Oh stop being a baby.” Naomi shook her head while grinning.

“I’m not being a baby.” Troy shot back.

“Are too.”

“Am not!” He glared at her.

“Then prove it! Watch this movie and keep quiet if you’re a man.” She sent him a pointed look.

Troy crossed his arms and flickered his eyes to Matt before nodding.

“Fine I’ll watch it! But it doesn’t mean I’ll like it,” he groaned.

Naomi smiled in satisfaction and got off the couch to pick up the remote in her hand. It wasn’t long before we had the movie playing. As the movie came to an end, I noticed that Matt and Troy weren’t commenting on the movie, instead only gagging when a love scene would come up. I flickered my eyes over to Matt to see him shake his head slightly as he stared at the screen, while Troy would look at the TV in misery as if his eyes were bleeding.

I almost pitied them.

Finally, when the credits began to roll, Troy and Matt jumped out of their seats in joy.

“Ugh that was awful!” Troy cried.

“Yeah I know right! Their acting was so horrible.” Matt shook his head and gagged.

“Are you being serious right now?” I asked Matt. “There was nothing wrong with their acting.”

They both sent me pointed looks.

“Really? Twilight was better than that,” Matt shouted pointing to the TV.

“Stop complaining!” Eva shouted at them. “You two were the only ones who didn’t like the movie.”

They shook their head furiously.

“Tyler didn’t like it too either. Right buddy?” Matt asked looking at him as if he was expecting him to nod his head but he only shrugged his shoulders. I sent him a satisfied smile and pecked his lips.

“See. He didn’t have a problem with it.” I smirked resting my back onto his chest. Tyler wrapped his arms around my waist, bringing me closer.

“Well that’s because he was too busy creating hickeys on your neck.” Troy pointed out, making me gasp. My hands flew to my neck almost immediately, covering as much skin as possible. I turned to look at him, lifting an eyebrow and sent him a pointed look as if waiting for some answers. He just sent me a small smirk and pecked my lips.

“I might have gotten a bit distracted.” He shrugged his shoulders.

“What’s so distracting about my neck?” I asked in disbelief.

“Everything,” he murmured, removing my hand away from my neck as he stared at it like it was some kind of masterpiece. I couldn’t help but groan in embarrassment as everyone stared at us.

“I can’t believe you.” I shook my head.

“Hey! At least I wasn’t complaining during the movie like some people.” Tyler looked up at Matt and Troy.

“Way to throw us under the bus, man,” Matt muttered rolling his eyes.

“You can’t blame us! The movie was so—ugh.” Troy shivered.

“Like you could do any better,” Sydney said while rolling her eyes.

“Of course we can!” Matt said lifting his head up high as if trying to prove a point.

“I bet if you two were put on stage, the only thing you’d be good at is acting like a bunch of chickens,” Naomi said while laughing. I couldn’t help but grin at her statement. Just when I was about to say something, I turned to glare at Tyler who started pecking my neck once again.

“No more,” I whispered.

He looked up at me and pouted his lips in disappointment.

“Fine,” he muttered pulling away.

I turned around to see Troy whispering something into Matt’s ear. Matt’s mouth fell open before a huge grin took over.

“Fine! We’ll prove you all wrong!” Matt shouted pointing at all of us.

Jasmine laughed at his statement.

“I’d like to see you try.”

Troy walked over to Matt, nodding his head before dropping his arm onto his shoulder.

“Well then. I guess we have some rehearsing to do.”

* * *

And that pretty much explains it. I genuinely thought that they were just going to show up in our places and act it out but it never crossed my mind that they’d actually do something like this in front of the whole school.

I got to say, for them to make complete idiots out of themselves in front of everyone, they must be really stupid or really brave. Or both.

Shaking my head slightly, I walked over to them when the guy from the roof turned off the hose.

They turned to look at me and Tyler along with the twins who just arrived and looked as if their eyes will bleed at any minute now because of the scene in front of them. Let me tell you, Troy in a dress is not something you’d want to see. Matt had a satisfied smirk on his face while Troy grinned.

“You two,” I said pointing at them. “Are bunch of idiots.” I shook my head in disbelief.

“Well that’s not what the crowd thinks.” Matt laughed. Both him and Troy were practically soaking wet at this point.

Just when I was about to say something, I was shoved aside immediately by a frantic looking Jasmine. Luckily, Tyler was right beside

me to help me regain my balance. I turned to glare at Jasmine but stopped when I saw the look of horror on her face when she spotted Troy. It looked like she wasn't here when the 'play' was happening because she was starting at her boyfriend, who was wearing a dress, in confusion. After a moment, her face went extremely pale as if she was going to faint any minute now.

I watched as she slowly walked up to Troy like he was some delicate creature she was afraid to scare away. She then placed her hand on Troy's shoulder and looked him up and down.

"Baby . . . if you're having second thoughts about your sexuality then you could always talk to me," she said slowly, looking at him as if he was a child.

Troy's face immediately went blank for a moment before he stared at his girlfriend in confusion.

"Jasmine, I am a hundred percent straight," he muttered.

She lifted an eyebrow and looked him up and down, especially at the dress he was wearing.

"Um okay. As you wish but you don't have to be afraid to tell me if—"

"I'm not gay!" He exclaimed with a huff, crossing his arms. I couldn't help but laugh at the situation.

"The only thing you two are, are a bunch of idiots," Sydney said as she looked at them strangely.

"Hey but we proved our point!" Matt smirked.

"The only thing you two proved is Sydney's statement." I grinned.

"Oh come on! Our acting was awesome," Troy said causing everyone to roll their eyes.

"Is that why everyone is laughing at you two?" Eva asked.

Matt and Troy glared at her.

"They're laughing with us, not at us," Matt mumbled.

"Then why is the principal walking towards us at this very moment?" Tyler asked, lifting an eyebrow.

I nodded my head with a laugh.

"Yeah, I bet he's on his way here to 'laugh' with you guys." I chuckled.

Matt's face went pale while Troy cursed.

"Sh*t."

CHAPTER 50

Once the bell rang, Tyler took ahold of my hand and walked us out the door of our last class of the day. He seemed a bit on the edge which I didn't know why. I tried to grab his attention but his eyes were focused in front of him, or anywhere else but me.

I squeezed his hand and sent him a small smile, grabbing his attention. He whipped his head towards me and tilted it to the side as we walked down the hall which was very crowded by all the students who wanted to get home.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

Tyler lifted an eyebrow and shook his head slightly.

"Nothing," he muttered.

I sent him a pointed look.

"Don't lie to me," I spoke firmly. Tyler glanced at me from the corner of his eye and let out a long sigh. We stopped right outside of the school before walking towards the benches.

He sat down with me right next to him.

"Is this about Paul?" I asked, concerned.

He nodded.

"Gem, I don't know why but I-I . . ." He trailed off, looking into the distance.

"You're what? You know you can tell me anything." I wrapped my arms around him and hugged him comfortingly. He let out a breath before running his hands down my hair.

"I'm scared," he whispered.

"Of what?" I asked.

“Of giving him a chance. What if something goes wrong?” His voice was so soft that I could barely hear it. I looked up at him and took his face in between my hands.

“What do you want to do?” I asked.

He paused for a moment as if he was thinking of an answer.

“I want to give him a chance before it’s too late. I lost the person, I thought was my dad a long time ago. What if I lose him?” he asked as he rested his chin on my head. I ran my hands up and down his chest, trying to soothe him.

“Then I say take the risk. It might be hard because of what he has done but work it out slowly. I’m not saying you should start treating Paul like the father he deserves but at least acknowledge the fact.”

Tyler pulled away slightly and nodded.

“You’re right. Things won’t get better immediately. It takes time,” he muttered.

“How’s Emma with all of this happening?” I asked.

“Her and Paul are getting along, I guess.” He shrugged. “I still don’t get why she’d let him come back after getting someone else pregnant.” He shook his head slightly at the thought of having a half sibling, not knowing anything about them.

“Tyler. He’s sick! You don’t know, he could disappear any minute now.” I pointed out.

He let out a huff.

“Yeah I know. It’s all still a shock to me.”

I nodded and rested my head on his chest. His arms pulled me closer, seeking for comfort. I let out a relaxed sigh and pulled away slightly to kiss his cheek, letting it linger for a while.

“If you’re all stressed out then we don’t have to go away this winter break,” I suggested, causing him to shake his head furiously.

“No!” he said immediately. “You deserve this. We both deserve this. A couple of days away from reality. It’s going to help me relax a bit, away from all the tension,” he explained.

I smiled in return. Just thinking about going away with Tyler, just him and me, sounded amazing. Away from everyone and all the drama.

“I can’t wait.” I grinned. I felt Tyler’s chest vibrate as he kissed the top of my head.

“Me too—” He paused suddenly, as if something was on his mind. He looked into the distance and the look of realization soon spread across his face. I snapped my eyes away from the crowd of students walking out of the doors, to their cars, then back at Tyler.

“Sh*t,” he cursed.

“What is it?” I asked, pulling away. Tyler snapped his eyes to me and ran his hands over his face as he groaned.

“Damn it I forgot!” He grumbled.

“Forgot what?” I asked.

“My mom . . .”

“What about her?” The look of confusion on my face was pretty obvious.

“She wants you over for dinner today,” he said, looking at me nervously as my eyes widened.

“And when were you supposed to tell me this?”

Tyler shrugged his shoulders as I saw his cheek go pink for a second before it disappeared.

“Probably two days ago . . .” He trailed off, looking down at his feet. I felt my mouth fell open as I stared at him in disbelief.

“And why on earth did you choose to tell me now?” I hissed glaring at him.

Once again, he shrugged his shoulders.

“As I said before. I forgot.”

I couldn’t help but roll my eyes at him.

“And what time am I supposed to be there?”

“Around five,” he said then looked back up at me. “But you don’t have to go if you don’t want to.”

I looked at him as if he grew two heads and took his face into my hands for the second time today.

“Baby why would I not want to? I really like your mom,” I said with a smile. “She’s really . . . uh what’s the word?”

“Intense? Too much? Wants to become a grandmother to soon?” Tyler asked.

I shook my head with a laugh.

“I was going to say sweet but that works too.”

Tyler grinned and was about to say something when he stopped and looked over my shoulder. I watched as he furrowed his eyebrows before his mouth fell open. Slowly, his lips twitched upwards into a sly smirk. I stared at him in confusion but soon got my answer when I turned around.

Right behind us were Matt and Troy. Both still had their outfits on, the same ones they wore for their ‘play’ this morning.

I tilted my head back and let out a loud laugh as I stared at the looks of annoyance evident on both their faces. I had no idea they were still wearing their clothes. After the principle took them to his office, they weren’t seen for the whole day, and didn’t even show up at lunch. Matt wasn’t there in any of the classes we shared together, so I just assumed he went home. I even tried texting him but didn’t reply.

“Aw baby look! It’s the cute couple in love!” I cooed.

Tyler leaned closer as if inspecting them and nodded his head slowly as he chuckled.

“They sure are cute aren’t they?” Tyler said then looked at Troy who was still wearing the small dress over his muscular body. “I mean just look at that hot chick. I mean da—”

“Speak any further and I’ll shove these heels down your throat.” Troy glared as he took off the red heels which I had no idea how he was able to walk in. Tyler shot his hands up in the air in mock surrender and laughed.

“Okay okay geez.” I felt his chest vibrate against my side. The sight in front of us was hilarious.

“Why didn’t you two change?” I asked.

“The f*cker decided on a better punishment other than give us detention,” Matt grumbled, referring to the principal while looking down at his clothes which weren’t nearly as embarrassing as Troy’s.

“And what was that?” I asked, grinning.

“We had to pass all the fliers for every single club to every single class in this whole damn school!” Troy cried out in horror. “In these clothes!”

Damn well . . . That must have been awful. But I couldn’t help but laugh. I mean if I were in their places, I would have been extremely humiliated but I had to admit, it was also funny.

“It’s nice to know that both of you care,” Matt said, annoyed as he sent both Tyler and I icy cold glares.

“Sorry, but one day you’ll both be looking back at this and laugh,” Tyler said. I nodded, although Matt and Troy didn’t seem to agree.

“Laugh? Do you know how much trouble I went through?” Matt asked, earning the attention of Troy. He whipped his head towards him and punched his shoulder.

“You went through? You’re not the one dressed like a girl! Just look at this!” Troy shrieked, pointing at his outfit. “My own girlfriend thinks that I changed my sexuality overnight! Now she’s talking about couples therapy!” Troy cried dramatically. Matt rolled his eyes and crossed his arms.

“It’s not my fault you chose to wear it.” Matt shot back.

“I chose to wear it? You’re the one who barged into my room at two AM in the morning throwing rehearsal scripts at me.” Troy pointed at his chest.

Matt’s mouth fell open.

“It was your idea to act out that stupid scene.” Matt glared.

“Yeah and that’s because I didn’t want to act the one in bed!” Troy shouted. I tilted my head back and laughed, enjoying the looks on both of their faces.

“What’s going on here?” Jasmine asked rushing towards them. I saw the look of concern appear on her face as her eyes landed on Troy.

“Nothing baby. Matt’s just being a jerk,” he mumbled, causing Jasmine to gasp.

“What?” She shrieked and whipped her head to look at Matt in disbelief.

“Matt, I should have known you better.” She shook her head in disappointment.

“Uh-what?” Matt uttered in confusion. Jasmine glared at him and walked over to him, shoving her finger to his chest.

“You don’t have the right to bully someone over their sexuality.”

Troy slapped his forehead.

“Jasmine I’m straight!” He cried out for the hundredth time today but she didn’t even spare him a second glance.

“I love my man!” She choked. “And if he decides that he wants to dress up like a woman for the rest of his life then I’ll support him.” By the end, I was surprised to see her eyes glossy as if she had tears behind them.

“That’s it. I give up!” Troy threw his hands up into the air in defeat before walking over to the bench and sitting down next to Tyler. I watched as he placed his elbows onto his knees before sighing out loud. Tyler chuckled and placed his hands on his shoulder, trying to comfort him but also trying to keep in his laughter.

* * *

After changing into a simple black blouse and jeans, I tied my hair up into a messy ponytail and rushed out of my room. I was in a hurry now because being five minutes late to your boyfriend’s house wasn’t something you’d want to happen, especially if it’s your first time having dinner there. So I ran as fast as I could, and grabbed my keys and phone before rushing out of my house. Thank the lords, I was living right next door.

After stepping into their front porch, I rang the doorbell and waited for someone to open the door. I fiddled with my fingers nervously but looked up when I heard a click. I watched as the door opened, revealing a middle-aged man I knew too well. Paul. Surprisingly, he sent me a small smile and nodded his head in acknowledgment as he opened the door wider.

“Crystal please do come in.”

I walked into the house. Paul led me to the living room and turned to look at me.

“Have a seat. Tyler’s up in his room getting changed.”

Nodding my head, I sat on the couch and watched as he sat at the end of the couch.

“Where’s Emma?” I asked.

“In the kitchen. She’ll be here soon,” he answered.

“Oh,” I muttered awkwardly. What the hell was I supposed to say at times like these?

‘Hello Paul who I don’t know very well! How’s your day been going so far? How’s your health? Are you treating Tyler well? Betray him and I will kill you!’

Too much?

“So how’s your relationship with my boy?” he asked rubbing his chin.

I paused at his question.

“Uh . . . it’s going good. Amazing actually,” I answered as I scratched the back of my head.

“Well I’m glad to see that someone’s actually making him happy,” he whispered ever so slightly.

“So how long are you planning on staying here?” I blurted out all of a sudden. I immediately cursed in my head when I realized what I just asked. That sounded so rude. Gosh why do I always mess up?

I wanted to smack myself but didn’t get the chance to when Paul spoke, bringing me back to reality.

“I’m staying until the day I die,” he said seriously as he stared at me like he was trying to read my soul. I stared at him not knowing what to say because of my stupid mouth.

“Uh . . . I-I, well geez I’m sorry I didn’t . . . ” I stopped stuttering when Paul started laughing loudly.

What did I do?

“Works every time!” He cheered.

“Huh?” I asked in confusion.

He shook his head with a chuckle.

“Don’t worry about it, child. I was just messing with you.”

I nodded my head slowly like an idiot. My mind was still trying to figure out what just happened, but before I could think any further, Tyler came rushing down the stairs and towards me.

“Gem! I’m glad you’re here,” he said before hugging me. Once I snapped out of my trance, I hugged him back. Just as we pulled away, Emma came walking out of the kitchen.

“I hope you’re hungry,” she said with a huge grin. “Because I made my homemade pizza!”

I smiled and was about to thank her but stopped when I heard something beep from the kitchen. Emma held a finger up, excused herself, then turned around, running back into the kitchen while holding her oven mitts. I leaned over to Tyler as I watched her rush back.

“If we’re eating pizza then why not just order it? Why go through the trouble?” I whispered into his ear. Tyler grinned, showing me his perfectly straight teeth

“Wait till you taste her pizza, then you’ll be coming back here every week. You won’t be able to order just any old pizza ever again.”

I gasped, placing my hand over my heart dramatically.

“It’s that good?” I asked.

Tyler nodded, before answering.

“Yup. It’s that good.”

CHAPTER 51

The days went by in a blur. You could say that it was one of the longest days of my life. Probably because I was so anxious to finish school, and probably because I couldn't stand the load of work and exams I had on my shoulders. There was one thing I knew for sure though, and that was the fact that I was excited for break. The reason? Because I wouldn't be a lazy potato for two whole weeks like I usually am, but instead am actually going to go away for a while and spend some quality time with Tyler.

I knew for sure that he needed this. A time away to think, and maybe once he returns, he'll be able to accept Paul as his father. Maybe then he'll have his mind all cleared up and know what was the right thing to do. When I ate dinner at their house, I noticed that the tension in the air was thinner than before but that still didn't make things okay for Tyler himself. I knew that whenever he smiled or had a friendly conversation with Paul, it was only him showing it out of respect, and not affection.

Who knows, maybe this trip might benefit for the both of us which was one of the reasons why I spent the whole week waiting for this day to come.

It was finally Friday, the day every student went home happy because of the much needed break they were looking forward to. Not that the trip was going to last for two weeks, of course. Tyler and I agreed to be home back on Monday so we could spend the rest of the break with our friends and his family. Over all I was just pretty happy that things were going smoothly between me and him.

I was dressed in comfortable clothes since the ride was going to take almost four hours of driving and I didn't want any of my muscles to become sore, especially my butt. I wore a pair of grey sweatpants and a hoodie to

stay warm. I heard that it was very hot over there in Las Vegas but at night it could get a bit chilly. Tyler already booked a hotel we were going to stay in with a pool and everything. I was just sitting on my couch, scrolling through my phone as I waited for him to give me a call, telling me he was ready.

Remembering the snacks I had in my kitchen, I walked over to the bag and opened it, checking if I had everything ready for the trip. I was sure going to need something to snack on but cursed when I looked inside the bag.

“Damnit Matt.” I groaned as I shook my head. I knew it was a bad idea to have him over yesterday, knowing he was going to be an eating machine and finish up all my food.

Letting out a sigh of annoyance, there was only one thing I needed to do now and that is to stop by a market and grab a few stuff. Looking at the time on my phone, I knew that I had no time at all to do that on my own, which meant that Tyler will have to stop by a supermarket on his way down the road.

Just when I walked out of the kitchen, my phone vibrated in my hand and as I looked down, I noticed that the caller was Tyler and I answered it immediately.

“Gem, I’m right outside,” he spoke through the other end.

“Okay I’ll be right there,” I said before hanging up. I rushed to the door and grabbed all my bags which were only a backpack and a traveling pack.

As I opened the door, I was met with the sight of a smiling Tyler. He leaned over to kiss my forehead, mumbling a hello before grabbing my bags. After locking my door, and placing everything I needed in my purse, I walked over to Tyler’s car to see him talking with Emma. I gave her a small wave once she noticed me and she immediately pulled me into a hug.

“How are you dear?” she asked.

“Better than ever.” I grinned.

“Well now that everything is ready, we’ll be going then,” Tyler said as he dropped his arm on my shoulder, tugging me towards him.

“Well I hope you two have a safe trip. Please don’t do anything reckless and remember . . . ” She paused while looking at Tyler. “Don’t be silly, wrap your willy.”

Tyler smacked his hand over his face in embarrassment while I couldn't help but laugh.

"Mom!" He groaned.

"What?" she asked innocently.

I could see the hint of pink which was making its way up his neck and to his cheeks.

"You know what? Nothing. We'll just be going," he mumbled. Letting out another laugh, I hugged Emma and waved goodbye as I got into the car and sat on the passenger seat beside Tyler. As Tyler moved to walk around the car, Emma rushed over to me and popped her head in through the opened window.

"Have fun but don't have too much fun, if you know what I mean." She winked at me, causing me to roll my eyes. "Oh and just a little tip, Tyler's favorite color is red." She smirked. I tilted my head and gave her a confused look.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked but before she could give me her answer, in came Tyler who was now seated in the driver's seat.

"Mom can you please stop assuming that we're going away just to have sex?" Tyler grumbled to his mother. Emma let out a dramatic gasp and placed her hand over her mouth.

"I thought of no such thing, mister!" She hissed.

Tyler rolled his eyes and let out a sigh before starting his car.

"Sure. Is that why you placed two boxes of condoms into my bag and asked if Crystal was on the pill?" He smirked, causing my face to go red although I couldn't help but chuckle. Emma shook her head slightly and shrugged her shoulders innocently.

"Hey, it's better to be safe than sorry!" She looked between Tyler and me. "Beside I'm too young to be a grandmother." She pointed at herself.

Tyler rolled his eyes once more.

"Okay Mom, I get it. You want to wait until you're eighty to actually accept the fact that you're getting old but—OUCH!" Tyler yelled in pain as he rubbed his shoulder which I just pinched violently. I did it to keep him quiet because the look Emma was giving him looked like she was going to drag her son back into the house and ground him for the rest of his life.

"Will you stay quiet so you could drive us there with all your limbs in place?" I hissed quietly.

Tyler nodded, giving me a glare.

"Geez fine," he mumbled.

"Well I'm going to pretend that I didn't hear that and just let you two get going." Emma smiled at me but glared at her son.

"Stay safe you two."

"On the road or in bed?" Tyler mumbled to himself but it was loud enough for the both of us to hear. I punched his shoulders, keeping him quiet while Emma sighed.

"Both young man," she said sternly, causing me to laugh. Tyler shook his head before waving at his mom.

"Love you too," he murmured before driving down the road.

"I'll see you on Monday!" Emma shouted, waving her hands up in goodbye. I grinned as I looked at her by the car mirror and stuck my hand out of the window to wave goodbye. When we were out of sight, I crossed my arms behind my head and rested my back in the seat.

"I love your mom." I giggled.

"Do you love her or do you love the way she treats me?"

"Both I guess," I said with a shrug.

Just when Tyler made a turn, I saw the nearest supermarket which also happened to be the same one I worked in. That's when I remembered that I needed to stop by for a couple of snacks.

"Tyler, wait. Can we just stop by to get a couple of snacks?" I asked pointing at the supermarket ahead. Tyler lifted his eyebrows, flickering his eyes at me.

"I thought you already had that covered? What happened?" he asked.

"Two words," I said, lifting up two fingers. "Matt happened."

Tyler grinned at the answer and parked his car into the parking lot.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"Just a couple of things," I said as I unbuckled my seat belt.

"It's okay. You stay here and I'll get them." Tyler insisted but I shook my head.

"Are you willing to buy me a bunch of snacks along with some tampons and pads?" I asked knowing I might get my period sooner or later.

Tyler shrugged.

"I bought you them last time." He pointed out.

"Yeah, the ones I don't like." I rolled my eyes.

“What’s the difference?” he asked, confused.

“Everything,” I said while opening the car door, and hopping out along with Tyler.

“They’re all the same.” Tyler threw his hands up into the hair.

“No, they’re not.” I shook my head. Tyler then opened his mouth to say something but I spoke first, interrupting him.

“Are you the one who wears them or me?” I asked shutting him up.

“Exactly.”

And with that I walked towards the entrance with him by his side. I heard him mumble something but it wasn’t clear enough. As we walked into the place, I told Tyler to grab me a couple of snacks such as chocolate and chips while I grabbed the pads.

On my way there, I also grabbed some baby wipes to wipe my hands while we’re on the road and to probably take off my makeup. As I put the items into the basket, I heard someone call my name but it wasn’t Tyler. Turning around, I saw who it was.

Blake.

“Uh-hi,” I said, watching him place a couple of boxes to the ground.

“How are you?” he asked.

“I’m fine,” I said.

“You?” I asked.

“I’m doing good. So what’s up?”

Well things started to get awkward . . .

“Nothing really . . .” I trailed off. “Just grabbing a few things.” Blake nodded and was about to say something when Tyler walked around the aisle and was heading towards me. He had a basket full of goodies which made me lick my lips. You can always depend on me to think about food in the worst scenarios.

“Gem, which would do you want? The hot or—” He stopped talking when his eyes landed on Blake. He narrowed his eyes and walked closer so he was standing right beside me. He watched Blake closely, crossing his arms while still holding the basket, before giving him a look as if he was trying to remember who he was.

“Wait a minute! I know you.” Tyler pointed out. “You’re that jerk from the party!”

I couldn’t help but roll my eyes.

"I was only offering you drinks." Blake pointed out, causing Tyler to shake his head.

"Yeah whatever," he mumbled then looked at me

"What are you doing?" he asked curiously.

"I was just grabbing some wipes before saying hello," I mumbled with a shrug.

"Wait you know him?" he asked pointing at Blake.

"Yeah we've met before," I answered.

"Where?"

Before I could answer, Blake beat me to it.

"At dinner."

Wrong answer.

"What?" Tyler asked in disbelief before glaring at him.

Here we go again.

"You had dinner with this jerk?"

"Dude, I did nothing," Blake said in a bored tone.

"It wasn't with him. It was at Ethan's." I corrected.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked.

"I didn't think it was important," I said honestly, causing Blake to roll his eyes.

"Whatever," Tyler muttered as he grabbed my basket in his hands.

"Let's get going. We have a whole day ahead of us."

Nodding my head, I turned to Blake and gave him a small smile.

"Tell Ethan I said hi." And with that we both walked to the register and had our things checked out. As we walked towards the car, I heard Tyler grumble.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I don't like him," Tyler grumbled.

"You don't like anyone." I pointed out.

"I like you," he said looking at me.

I couldn't help but smile.

"Of course you do. Who doesn't?" I asked.

"That's the problem." Tyler hissed as he got into the car while I chuckled at his behavior. "Too many people like you."

"Yeah, I don't blame them." I joked closing the door.

Tyler shook his head slightly.

“Gem, you will be the death of me,” he murmured as he started the car. I leaned over to kiss his cheek before whispering in his ear.

I know.” And with that, Tyler drove down the road to our destination. The whole time I had a satisfied smirk on my face. I really did enjoy Tyler’s behavior. I couldn’t help but like his jealous side. I had to admit...it was hot.

* * *

Four hours, three empty bags of chips, and an empty bag of Oreos later, we made it to our destination. It was around eight o’clock and I couldn’t wait to get into my hotel room and sleep. Tyler said we were going to have dinner first before hitting the hay, since we needed a proper meal before he head out tomorrow to sightsee and swim. I really was excited and couldn’t help but wish that tomorrow would come quickly.

After Tyler parked his car into the parking lot, we both hopped out almost immediately. I was thankful I didn’t wear jeans because I slept for an hour on the way here. Tyler, on the other hand, didn’t seem tired or sleepy at all as he unloaded the trunk and took out our bags.

“How did you find this place?” I asked looking up at the hotel which seemed really pricey.

“I’ve been here a couple times with my friends and family. It’s been a while since I came back,” he answered, taking my hand as he held his bags with the other. I threw my backpack over my shoulders and I rolled my other bag in my hand.

“And how did you get the money to afford all this?” I asked worriedly as we walked into the lobby. My eyes traveled around the place in amazement.

“I’ve been saving up for a while.” He shrugged. “Also my mom insisted. She let me borrow some money, but I’ll pay her back.”

Nodding my head, we walked towards the desk where a young man was standing.

“I have a hotel room booked under my name,” Tyler spoke. The guy nodded and went back to typing after Tyler gave him his full name.

“That’ll be on the third floor, room 301,” The guy said while handing Tyler the keys to our room. I stretched my arm as we headed to the elevator.

“Hungry?” he asked.

I nodded while patting my stomach.

“There’s always some room for food.”

After looking around our room, we placed our bags onto the bed, before heading back out of the hotel. Tyler took my hand in his as we walked towards the parking lot where he parked his car.

“Where exactly are we going?” I asked.

“There’s a place nearby where my dad—uh I mean Thomas used to go to,” he said. We hopped into the car before he continued. “It’s close by and isn’t really the fancy type but the food there is delicious.” He smiled.

“I don’t care where we go. So long as you’re there with delicious food.” I sat on the edge of my seat, clearly excited. Tyler chuckled and drove for about five minutes before stopping in front of a cozy looking restaurant.

“What do you feel like eating?” he asked.

I shrugged.

“I’m not sure. I’ll decide once I see the menu,” I answered. Tyler placed his hands on my back as he lead me into the warm place.

“Do you think my outfit is suitable?” I asked, only now noticing that I was still in my sweatpants and sweatshirt. I didn’t really care what I wore or what strangers say but I also didn’t want to embarrass Tyler. He then stopped and looked at me with a nod.

“Of course Gem. You look beautiful.” He kissed my nose before walking to the woman behind the desk. Once we were seated in our table, my stomach grumbled. Tyler grinned and handed me the menu.

“So I was thinking pizza but after your mother’s, I don’t think I’ll eat anywhere else but hers.” I chuckled as I examined the menu.

“Told you so.” He grinned.

I placed the menu down and rested my back against the seat.

“I think I’ll just have steak,” I said.

Tyler nodded then looked back at the menu.

“Same here.”

* * *

After what seemed to be forever, Tyler and I finally finished our food. We paid, well Tyler paid most of it since he said he wanted to but I made

him split it for the both of us. After the five-minute drive, we made it back to the hotel room.

"I'm exhausted," I mumbled, walking over to my bag to take out my pajamas. Tyler hummed in response and laid on the bed, suddenly grabbing me from behind and pulling me on top of him. I let out a yelp of surprise as I punched his chest.

"Tyler, I'm tired and I want to sleep." I whined. He only shoved his face into my neck in response and inhaled my scent. I let out a groan as I tried to get up but he shoved me back onto the bed.

"Stop moving well you? I'm trying to cuddle with my girl," he mumbled, wrapping his arms around me.

"We'll cuddle once I get changed," I answered as I huffed.

Tyler shook his head.

"Babe, you're already wearing comfortable clothes." He pointed out.

I rolled my eyes and turned to look at him. I sent him a glare as I noticed the smile on his lips.

"Don't look at me like that."

"Like what?" He grinned.

"Like that." I pointed at his face. He only dipped his head without responding and kissed my lips. At first I thought it was going to be just a peck but once Tyler started to move his lips against mine, I got lost in the moment.

Tyler crawled on top of me as my hands made their way around his neck and found his soft and smooth hair. I pulled away for a bit to take a deep breath before Tyler started trailing kisses down my jaw and towards my neck. I groaned, knowing I was going to fall asleep soon but Tyler wanted a makeout session.

"Damn it!" I cursed under my breath as he pulled away.

Tyler smirked then dipped his head back down to capture my lips. I opened my mouth when I felt his tongue make its way into my mouth. I kissed him back but apparently wasn't able to satisfy my needs when he pulled away.

"I thought you wanted to sleep?" he asked.

"Shut up." I grumbled before pulling his lips back to mine. Tyler leaned over and rested his weight on both his shoulders so I could feel his chest

against mine. I felt it hum as he let out a groan of satisfaction. I felt my lips twitch up against his, forming into a smirk.

I don't know where all this braveness came from but I did something I never thought I'd do. I took Tyler's shirt off and ran my hands over his chest. Tyler grinned before kissing me back once again, leaving me out of breath. I felt his hands run down my body and under my wrinkled hoodie. I couldn't help but shiver as I felt his cool hands touch my skin. Sparks erupted every where, every time his hands brushed against my skin.

I have to admit, I loved this feeling.

"This isn't cuddling." I pointed out under my breath in amusement as Tyler pulled away, tugging on my hoodie. He smirked at me and looked down as if asking for permission to take it off. I gave him a stern look.

"What? You took off my shirt? It's fair enough to take yours off. We'll be even." He grinned. I rolled my eyes but smiled as he pulled it over my head. I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding when I noticed that I was wearing an undershirt under my hoodie. Tyler didn't look satisfied when he saw it and furrowed his eyebrows. His hands made their way to tug it off but I pulled his hands away.

"Nah ah ah!" I said, shaking my finger at him. "You only said that I had to take off my hoodie to be fair. Nothing else," I said sternly, causing him to pout.

"Damn it!" He whined but then suddenly his face lit up.

"So what you're telling me is if I take off my pants, you'll take that off?" he asked, clearly excited.

I gave him a pointed look.

"No one is taking off anything." I laughed.

I watched as the smile on his face quickly disappeared in disappointment. He then wrapped his arms around my waist and rested his head on my chest like it was a pillow.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I want to cuddle," he whispered closing his eyes. I smiled as I ran my hands through his hair, feeling his arms tighten around me.

"Hmm, I should sleep like this every night," he murmured to himself. We just stayed there, resting in each other's arms as we enjoyed the comforting silence. Tyler stayed rested on top of me, his head lying on my

chest like it was a cloud. I stared at his beautiful face, noticing how peaceful he looked with his eyes closed. Everything was amazing.

I felt at peace. I wish this moment wouldn't end. I wished that we could stay like this forever but everything has to come to an end. And so it did, when Tyler's phone started to ring a couple of seconds later.

At first we both ignored it, not wanting it to interrupt us but after it went off, it started to ring once again. I knew Tyler needed to answer it. What if it was important?

"Tyler," I murmured.

"Hmm," he mumbled, his eyes were still closed.

"Tyler get up. You need to answer your phone."

He turned around and hid his face away from me.

"Tyler!" I groaned, shaking his shoulders.

"What?" he asked, opening one eye to look at me.

"Answer your phone. It's ringing."

"I don't want to," he mumbled, closing his eyes once again.

"What if it's important?" I asked.

He just groaned in response. Letting out a sigh of defeat, I grabbed Tyler's phone from the counter next to the bed and saw the caller, who was surprisingly Dan. I accepted the call and placed the phone against my ear.

"Tyler! Where the f*ck are you?" Dan hissed.

"Hey it's me Crystal." I corrected him.

"C-Crystal? Uh-where's Tyler? I need to talk to him!"

"Uh, he's a bit busy at the moment," I murmured while looking down to see him open his eyes curiously.

"I don't give a damn! Hand him over. It's important." He demanded. I murmured a quick 'okay' before handing Tyler the phone.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"Dan. He says it's important," I whispered.

It seemed as if Tyler got the hint because he finally got off me and sat on the edge of the bed to grab his phone.

"Hello?"

I watched silently as his bare muscles became tensed.

"W-what?" He stuttered. "Dude please tell me this is some kind of joke," he growled, getting up from the bed. He paced around the room as he

listened intensely to what Dan was saying, his hands running all over his hair and face.

“Sh*t!” he cursed, suddenly stopping.

I got up and walked towards him anxiously, wondering what the hell was happening.

That’s when I saw the look on Tyler’s face which made me stop in my tracks. All the color on his face was long gone, like he just saw a ghost. His hands were clenched into a fists as he continued to listen what Dan was telling him. I immediately walked up to him and placed my hand on his arm to calm him down but he didn’t seem to notice.

“Damn it!” he yelled, surprising me.

“How are they?” he asked, his voice cracking in the end. I felt a lump in my throat as I watched the look of pain flash before his eyes.

“Okay okay! I’ll come back as soon as possible,” he whispered urgently before hanging up. Once he turned to look at me, I felt my heart break at the very sight. A single tear slipped out of his eyes, he looked so broken.

“Baby, what’s wrong?” I asked worriedly.

“We have to head back home,” he said, rushing passed me to grab his shirt. He pulled it down his head and walked over to his bags immediately.

“Wait why? We just got here.”

Tyler turned to look at me with painful eyes.

“We have to get back immediately,” he repeated in a low tone.

“Why? What happened?” I asked.

Tyler took a deep breath as if he was trying to calm himself down. He closed his eyes and covered his face with both hands before pulling them away.

“It’s my parents. They’re in the hospital.”

CHAPTER 52

It's been one of the worst four hours of my entire life. You could say that it felt like forever driving back home, especially with Tyler who looked like he was going to break down at any minute. Throughout the entire ride, I held his hand, trying to comfort him but it was as if he was in a trance. Like his eyes were only there to focus on the road, as he hoped to get back to the arms of the people he loved.

Of course, I offered to drive. At first he didn't listen. For some reason, he wanted to be the one to drive us back home as soon as possible. He was the fast driver, after all. I don't blame him. Maybe he was afraid that I'd be too late to make it back home only to find his parents already gone.

I tried to reassure him countless times, telling him that his parents were my parents too, and that I cared for them deeply but he was too stubborn. Not that I blame him of course because the only trip we wanted to go to was canceled because his parents were in the hospital.

After an hour of trying to sleep, I just couldn't. The guilt would have eaten me alive if I closed my eyes and relaxed while Tyler was suffering right beside me. After putting in more effort, I pleaded and threatened for what seemed to be hours, promising Tyler that I'd drive as fast as I can if he just crawled into the back and slept for a bit. Maybe then he'd relax.

So here I was, an hour away from home, driving as if my life depended on it, while Tyler laid in the back seat of the car but I knew a hundred percent that he was not asleep. I could hear the clear whimpers of pain coming from him which broke my heart. I tried to keep myself from crying, knowing I should concentrate on the road but it was almost impossible not to cry when the love of my life was broken and I could do nothing to save

him. It was torture and what broke me the most was that I knew Tyler was suffering more.

Tyler was my man, but unfortunately he had been broken way too many times for him to stare at me and call himself that. He first lost the man he once called his father, then found out the truth which would scar him for life. And now things have taken a drastic turn and he might, God forbid, lose his parents.

Shaking my head, I tried to get rid of the horrible thoughts. I couldn't do this to myself or to him. I had to be the strong one to keep him standing. If one of us was going to be the one who was falling then the other had to stand up and stay strong. I promised myself that I'd try to help him no matter what. I couldn't lose Tyler, and I wouldn't allow it.

After calling Dan and speaking with him through the phone, he gave me the address to the hospital. I finally felt myself relax a bit and let out a sigh of relief when I drove into our town after four hours. Nevertheless, I was still tense because the hospital was located near Tyler's house which could be bad. There was no other way to get to the hospital without passing Tyler's house. I knew that if Tyler saw just one glance of his home, he'd break down. Not because of the memories he was afraid to lose, but because of what he might see. The cause of what brought his parents to the hospital in the very first place.

I feared that he'd see it long gone. Burned to the ground, which was what Dan told me over the phone. After the big fire, nothing was left. The hungry flames ate his house as if it hadn't eaten in years, leaving nothing behind. Not even his parents moving. The only good news was that they were able to take Emma and Paul out before they could burn into ashes but that was it. Nothing was out yet. Whether they'd live and walk as if nothing ever happened or if Tyler had to say goodbye was a question that still lingered in the air.

I swallowed the lump in my throat as I drove down the road which would soon lead me past Tyler's house. I prayed to myself silently, as I'd flicker my eyes to the mirror every so often, hoping that Tyler would be asleep or at the very least not look outside the window and see his house long gone. I prayed that maybe he wouldn't notice that I was driving down the road which led us to our school. I hoped and held with all my might that maybe Tyler didn't snore in his sleep but I knew deep down that I was

wrong. He did, after the countless times of sleeping in the same bed with him, Tyler did snore quietly in his sleep and he wasn't snoring now.

Which meant that he was awake.

I wanted to drive fast and pass by his house quicker but I knew that if I did then he'd get suspicious and look out the window. Which meant that I'd have to stay at my pace and act as if everything was normal. As if I wasn't driving by his burned down house.

I could almost hear the sound of my heart beat against my rib cage when I saw my house from afar. I held in my breath as my palms began to sweat. If you listened carefully, you could have sworn you'd hear my heart tear apart before it dropped into nothingness.

My mouth fell open at the sight but I didn't dare say a single thing. Nothing came out of it. I didn't breathe. If I was reacting to the sight of the burned house which was next to mine then how would Tyler react to it?

I felt my knuckles tighten around the wheel as I drove closer. My eyes would flicker every now and then to the back to make sure Tyler was still there. I would hope that Tyler didn't notice a change in my behavior. That maybe he was too lost in his own little world to notice. But as always, things didn't go as planned.

Because once I drove passed his house, and finally letting out a breath, I felt my heart stop when Tyler spoke. It was the very first thing he said after finding out that his parents were involved in a fire. After talking with Dan over the phone and after driving here almost immediately. The words which made my stomach drop.

"Stop the car."

I wanted to drive away, to not listen to what he just said for his own benefit, but after hearing his desperate words again and knowing that if I didn't listen and that he'd certainly get mad at me, I did as he said.

"Crystal, I told you to stop the car." His voice cracked in the end.

And so I did. I stopped the car and watched as he got up and opened his car door. I watched with teary eyes as Tyler hopped out almost immediately and turned to look at the space where his house once was. I unbuckled my seatbelt and ran out, the cold dark air of the night greeted me with open arms. It was already midnight and I couldn't be more tired but I knew that even if I wanted to sleep, I couldn't. My eyes wouldn't close unless I knew that Tyler was okay.

But he wasn't.

I watched as he took small depressing steps toward his house. His whispers slowly turned to sobs. His shoulders began to shake as he ran to where his doorsteps were once held. I ran after him but didn't say a single thing. The words were long gone, as I watched my man break down and fall to the ground. I watched as he got to his knees, his hands lay there on the concrete. His sobs began to grow louder and I couldn't stop the small ones which escape my mouth as my vision began to blur.

The sight was too much for me to handle.

I thought the day when Tyler found out that Paul was his father was bad. But I was wrong. So damn wrong. This was the worst. This was the horrible sight that left my shoulders shaking.

Tyler's sobs began to increase as his fist banged the hard ground, knowing soon that it would leave his knuckles bleeding. I slowly walked over to him, wanting to whisper his name but was too afraid to do so. I was afraid that I'd snap something in him. So I just walked over to his slumped form and placed my hands on his violent shaking shoulders.

His sobs turned into cries as tears fell down his cheeks like a waterfall. I got down to my knees and wrapped my arms around him, bringing him closer to me so he'd cry in my arms. He wrapped his arms around me, and hid his face in the crook of my neck. He wailed loudly as his fist took hold of my clothes, trying to seek some comfort. I cried too, as I ran my hands through his hair. I held him tight, not wanting him to doubt for a moment that I'd leave him.

"Shhh," I whispered in his ear, as I tried to calm him down. I ran my hands up and down his back but the sobs and cries wouldn't stop.

"I-It's gone!" He cried out.

I felt the tears fall down my cheeks at his vulnerable voice.

"Everything is g-gone." He sobbed into my neck.

I couldn't bring myself to say anything. Sometimes words weren't the things that helped people heal but actions. So I took his face into my hands after holding my tears back and wiped away his. I kissed his tears away which were still running down his cheeks and watched as his lips trembled.

"I'm right here," I whispered. "I'm not gone."

He shook his head and held me tightly.

"B-but my parents a-and the fire."

“I know, I know,” I whispered with a nod before pulling him with me.

“We still don’t know how they are, which means that we have to get back into the car and drive to the hospital.” I tried to reason with him. Another tear slipped out of his eye as he nodded, taking deep breaths. He looked back at his burned house and held his fist to his mouth, letting out a loud sob before to which I responded by pulling his head to my neck so I could hide the sight which broke him the most. He nodded his head as if he tried to reason with himself too and took a deep breath.

“You’re right,” he whispered, before looking back up with his red puffy eyes.

“I have to check up on them. On my m-mom and d-dad.” He gulped down his words and wiped the tears off his cheek. I took his hand as I kissed his lips softly.

“Everything will get better. You’ll see,” I told him.

Tyler only looked at me with sad painful eyes before walking away to his car. I followed him and opened the door to the driver’s seat so I go as fast as possible. Once I made sure that Tyler was seated next to me and that he had his seat belt on, I started the car and drove down the road to the hospital. I felt my heart beat race rapidly by the second as my hand still held Tyler’s, rubbing circles in the hopes of calming him down.

Time flew by too quickly for my liking and before I knew it, the car was parked right outside the hospital where we would either find the good or the bad news. Once I stopped the car and pulled out the keys, Tyler immediately hopped out. I did the same and took his shaky hand.

We walked quickly to the entrance and looked around the empty place, knowing it was probably because everyone else was sleeping. I walked immediately to the woman behind the desk who was reading a magazine and asked her where Emma and Paul were held.

Tyler was quiet through the whole time, his hands tightening their grip on mine. I sent him a reassuring smile and turned to walk quickly towards the elevator. As we waited for it to take us to the fourth floor, I could hear Tyler’s voice loud and clear.

“I-I can’t.” His voice was shaking nervously.

“Tyler I’m right here by your side. Dan and all our friends will be there too. We are all here no matter what, okay?” I sent him a small sad smile but it didn’t reach my eyes. He gulped down and nodded as he stuck to my side

the entire time as we walked to where his parents were held. To the emergency room. We stopped in our tracks once we saw everyone we knew were waiting outside. Dan was pacing around with his hands running through his hair.

Everyone turned to look at us, the minute they noticed we arrived. Tyler let go of my hand suddenly and ran to his cousin.

“H-how are they?” he asked under his breath. Dan had tears in his eyes, as all of our friends ran up to Tyler to comfort him. Dan shook his head and swallowed a lump in his throat.

“I have two bad news but one good news.” He breathed out as tears blurred his eyes, I walked over to them, acknowledging everyone and placed my hand on Tyler’s arm.

“What happened? Are they dead? No! No it can’t be!” Tyler cried.

“Tyler, please sit down so that I could tell you,” Dan said in a shaky voice. Tyler sat down on a chair as his hands and shoulders started to shake once more. I sat down next to him, trying to hold back the tears which were threatening to fall out. Dan kneeled down so he could look right into Tyler’s watery eyes and took a deep breath, bracing himself.

“The bad news is . . . ” He breathed out, clenching his fists together before opening his eyes. “That Paul’s dead.”

Once those words left his mouth, Tyler screamed out a bunch of curse words and closed his eyes. I knew what upset him the most was that Tyler wasn’t able to get a chance to spend some time with his real father nor accept the truth. He was still close to him after all, even when he thought he was his uncle.

“What about my m-mom?” he asked, his voice cracking.

“That’s where the good news comes in.” Dan breathed out. “She’s still alive.”

Tyler immediately got up, running his hands through his hair and to his face as the tears continued to fall. I let out a breath I didn’t know I was holding back and got up to hug Tyler.

“Thank God.” I heard him whisper to himself. He turned around to hug me, holding himself close. But then all of a sudden he stopped, and pulled away turning back to his cousin.

“You said there were two bad news. What’s the second one?”

Dan took a deep breath before looking at everyone then to Tyler.

“She’s in a coma. We don’t know when she’ll wake up,” he said sadly, looking down to his shoes.

Tyler let out a loud cry, ignoring everyone’s attempts to comfort him and sat back down. He hid his face into his hands as he cried his heart out. I felt the tears run down my cheeks also as I hugged him before looking back up at Dan who was also crying.

“How did that happen?” I asked quietly but knew that Tyler and the others heard me.

“She isn’t in the coma from the fire. She was found right next to the front door laying on the floor with her head bleeding which was why she didn’t die from the flames because she was the first one to be taken out of the house. But it looked like she fell from the stairs while trying to escape because the doctor says that she hit her head real hard,” he explained.

Tyler lifted his head to look at Dan.

“W-what about my father?” he asked, stuttering.

“That, we still don’t know. We don’t know how the fire started or why he wasn’t able to escape. The police are investigating the house for any clues but the only thing I know was that he was inside the bathroom when the fire started.”

I took a deep breath and looked at Tyler, who was looking down on the floor with heavy bags under his eyes. Just when I was about to say something, I saw everyone around turn to look at someone. I got up and saw two police officers holding a clipboard, walking towards us.

“Is anyone here related to Mrs. and Mr. Grey?” One cop asked, referring to Paul’s last name. Tyler immediately got up and rushed to the officer.

“I am. I’m their son,” he said.

“Well we would like to ask you a couple of questions.”

Tyler nodded and sat down as the officer looked at some papers and started asking Tyler about his life at home. At first they were ordinary questions but then they began to change. He started asking if there were any abuse or drugs going on. Tyler answered them all calmly, even though he looked confused to why the man was asking these kind of questions. It wasn’t until the last question which got us all suspicious.

“Was Mr. Grey acting weird and depressed?” he asked.

Tyler furrowed his eyebrows and shook his head.

“He was nervous because he knew he was going to die soon but he wasn’t acting weird at all,” he answered. “But why? What’s going on that I don’t know of?”

The officer looked down at the clipboard before looking back up.

“At first we thought the fire started because the stove was left open.” He began. Tyler nodded his head slowly. “But now we think that it was a suicide attempt.”

“W-what?” I breathed out.

“Why would you think that?” Tyler asked loudly.

“We found Mrs. Grey laying down in front of the front door beside the stairs. We first thought that she might have slipped while trying to escape but we think someone pushed her down the stairs.”

“And why would you think that?” Dan asked suddenly.

“Because we found Mr. Grey locked inside the bathroom the whole time.” The officer confirmed.

“So what’s that supposed to mean?” Tyler asked.

“Mr. Grey,” The officer spoke. “The bathroom was locked from the inside, not the out. Which meant that Mr. Grey had the ability to unlock the door, run down the stairs and help Mrs. Grey out of the house in time, but we found his body laying in the bathtub all burned up,” he explained.

My mouth fell open.

“So what you’re trying to say is that my uncle tried to kill himself. But why not cut himself or the usual? Why burn down the house down and push Emma down the stairs?” Dan asked.

The officer shrugged.

“That we still don’t know. Which means that we won’t have any answers until Mrs. Grey wakes up.”

Tyler stood still before falling to the ground. He banged his fist to the ground and cursed loudly. Everyone rushed to him, trying to calm him down but he wasn’t listening to anyone. Not even me.

“Tyler baby, please calm down!” I cried.

He shook his head as he shouted.

“I cant! I don’t know what to do or believe!” He cried out.

“I wanted to trust that bastard as my father knowing that he was sick and about to die soon. But why do this? Why try to harm my mom?” he shouted. The officer rushed over to him after calling a doctor.

“We think that might have triggered the suicidal thoughts. Maybe it was that or something personal that we still don’t know of,” The officer spoke but Tyler shook his head. A nurse rushed over to us, holding a syringe but Tyler backed away and hid behind me, holding his hands up.

“I’m fine, I’m fine.” He assured the nurse who was looking at him with concern. I hugged Tyler, pulling him to my chest while giving the nurse a slight nod. Tyler once again hid his face into my neck and breathed out loudly while shaking. Dan walked over to us and patted Tyler’s shoulder.

“Things will get better once Ema wakes up. You’ll see.” Dan assured him but Tyler didn’t lift his head up to look at him. He kept his arms around me while he whimpered. I ran my hands through his hair and gave Dan a small sad smile knowing that he was trying his best to help.

“Thank you. I’ll take it from here,” I said but he shook his head.

“Tyler’s my cousin and I know we haven’t been getting along lately but I have to stay by his side. That’s what family is all about. Besides, he needs a place to stay,” he spoke. Tyler slowly pulled away and nodded his head at Dan but I spoke up suddenly, causing both of them to turn to me.

“You can stay at my house.” I suggested, the words blurted out of my mouth out of nowhere. Tyler’s red eyes stared at me, probably wondering on what to do next. I looked at him then back at Dan.

“I mean if you don’t mind. I just want to help too,” I whispered, fiddling with my fingers.

Tyler nodded then looked back at his cousin.

“Thanks, but I think I’ll stay with Crystal. I know that your mom will be mourning her second brother’s death so I don’t want to intrude. Paul was all she had left. Now he’s gone.”

Dan took a deep breath but nodded.

“You’re right. I understand.” He then looked over to me. “I have to go check up on her. Please take care of him.”

I nodded and held Tyler’s hand, pulling him to the seats. I watched as Dan walked away while Tyler laid his head on my lap. He closed his eyes in exhaustion as we waited for the doctor to come out, telling us when Ema’s room will be ready. As I waited with Tyler’s head on my legs, I knew one thing.

That no matter what happened, nothing will ever be able to separate me from Tyler.

Well that's what I thought.

CHAPTER 53

It's been a week. A long and tortuous week. The bags under my eyes were getting darker but what actually brought me down the most was Tyler. Knowing that every single time I suffered, he was suffering ten times more. Knowing that while I was getting tired of all this, my man was screaming in his sleep, seeking for comfort. The last seven days had been a living hell for all of us but mostly for Tyler. He got little to no sleep and when was able to finally close his eyes, the nightmares would haunt his dreams.

Every single night I'd sleep by his side, but other than that he'd refuse to sleep a wink. I got so scared that I'd stay up late at night with him, just running my hands through his hair because I knew he liked it. He liked to sleep in my arms as I massaged his head. That was the only way his eyes would willingly drop.

Sleeping wasn't the only problem. Tyler has been so caught up in waiting for his mother to wake up, he'd spend hours just staring at her still form without eating.

The doctors said that Emma could wake up any minute now. But the problem was that we don't know when. She could wake up tomorrow or maybe next year. It was a mystery. But Tyler wasn't willing to let go. He held in all his demons and waited for the daylight would shine back into his life. Just looking at him made me want to hug him with all my might but it's as if things weren't going to get any better until Emma opens her eyes.

That was what Tyler said the other day.

The days went by slowly but I couldn't help but at least be grateful because there was still no school. We had one week left till the break was over and I don't know how Tyler or any of us would be able to catch up

with all of this stress. School was the least of our problems right now compared to the dark clouds that hovered over us, causing gloom to every single person who ever cared about Tyler. It ate us alive just to see him like that. But we had to be strong. I knew that every single day when Tyler sees me and everyone else he cares about.

It might not be a whole lot but it's a start.

The days and night flew by as we spent each and every hour in our own thoughts. I spent most of my time in the hospital with Tyler, looking down on Emma, wishing she'll wake up soon. And when we weren't in the hospital, we'd spent the seconds and minutes in my house, trying to pretend as if everything was normal. But I knew that it wasn't. It was anything but, yet that still didn't stop me from trying.

Matt would try to decrease the tension with his usual stupid actions while Troy would make up some kind of joke. When Jasmine would come over, she'd bring her delicious chocolate cake that Tyler loved so much. The twins also tried to help me around, giving me advice while Naomi prayed for the best. But still, none of us were able to bring a smile back to Tyler's face.

Not even me.

The only time I noticed Tyler's eyes shine was when he was holding his mother's hand, waiting to see whether it would move or not.

So as you can see, it's been a hectic week for all of us. The only thing I used to look forward to on a heavy day was to get into bed and sleep but unfortunately, things have changed with all the nightmares Tyler has been having. Every single time I close my eyes, I fear that I'd wake up to a screaming Tyler.

"Gem, Troy is coming to pick me up. He's taking me to the hospital. Do you want to come?" Tyler asked popping his head into my room. My head lifted up and turned to look at his tired face but knew all too well that once he sees his sleeping mother he'd feel better. I nodded my head and smiled.

"Of course. Let me just change quickly."

Tyler nodded.

"I'll be downstairs if you need me."

"Okay," I muttered, watching him as he tried to force on a smile but it didn't reach his eyes so instead he walked over to me and kissed my forehead. I held his hand and gave it a squeeze, hoping that this simple

gesture would somehow comfort him. He nodded his head slightly before turning around and walked out of my room so I could change. Once the door closed, I walked into my closet and grabbed some simple clothes to change in. Right when I was about to take off my pajamas, I heard my phone buzz on the counter.

Placing the clothes on my bed, I walked over to my phone and picked it up, realizing it was a message from Dan. I started reading the message which brought a frown to my face.

‘Troy is on his way to take Tyler to the hospital. But don’t go with him. I need to see you immediately. It’s important.’

I furrowed my eyebrows in confusion, wondering what was so important that I couldn’t go with Tyler when he needed me the most but I knew that Dan wouldn’t stop me from going for no reason. I replied a quick ‘okay’ and turned off my phone before putting my clothes away. I walked down the stairs to see Tyler sitting on the couch, waiting for Troy. Once he noticed me in the room, he looked up and realized that I still haven’t changed.

“Why aren’t you changed?” he asked, tilting his head. I bit my lip nervously, not knowing what to tell him. What can I tell him without having to lie? It was obvious that Dan didn’t want Tyler to know that he wanted to tell me something or else he wouldn’t have wanted to come when Tyler wasn’t here. I gulped down my anxiousness and walked over to where he was sitting. I sat down beside him and took his hand in mine.

“Tyler, I was thinking of driving myself there after half an hour. I have this major headache and I think I’d like to rest a bit.” The lie slipped out of my tongue in ease and I couldn’t help but feel the uneasiness, not liking one bit that I was lying to him. I never lied to him. Tyler didn’t seem suspicious at all but I could see the pain in his eyes. Maybe he thought that he was the cause of my fake headache? He nodded before kissing my nose.

“I’m sorry I’m keeping you up all night because of me,” he whispered.

I shook my head and took his face in my hands.

“You know it’s not your fault. Besides, I’d do anything for you,” I whispered back before kissing his lips. I felt his lips tremble against mine before pulling away. He rested his forehead on mine as we stared into each other eyes for what seems to be forever. If only time could stay still so we

could treasure moments like these. I sent him a small smile as I cupped his cheek with the palm of my hand.

“She’ll wake up soon. You’ll see.” I assured him.

Tyler’s eyes began to water but I knew he was holding himself back. He slowly nodded his head and pulled away once his phone began to ring. He flickered his eyes to his phone then back at me.

“It’s Troy. He must be outside,” he muttered, before getting up. He then answered the call and placed the phone to his ear.

“Yeah hello? Okay I’ll be right there.”

And with that Tyler hung up and turned to me.

“He’s waiting for me. Text me when you decide to come—” He paused, taking ahold of my hand before giving my knuckles a kiss.

“Thank you so much Gem for everything you’ve done for me,” he said sincerely, taking my head in between his hands and leaning over to kiss me. “You mean the world to me. I don’t know what I’ll do without you,” he whispered.

I rested my head on his chest and wrapped my arms around him.

“I’m right here. No matter what happens I’ll still be there.” I lifted my head to look up at him and kissed his jaw. “I’d do anything to see your daily grin once again,” I whispered sadly.

Tyler’s lips twitched up but it wasn’t a smirk or anything like that. Instead it was a sad smile.

“You’re the only thing right now that’s keeping me sane,” he told me. I gave him a smile and kissed his cheek as I wrapped my arms around his neck, pulling him closer. I ran my hand through Tyler’s hair and kissed his lips before pulling away.

“It’ll all be over in a blink of an eye. You’ll see.” I assured him once more. He nodded before kissing my forehead and pulled away. He waved at me and walked towards the door but stopped suddenly and turned around once again to look at me.

“I know you’re tired. Sleep as much as you want. You deserve it.”

And with that Tyler walked out the door before closing it.

It was really hard for him. Everything was. I wanted to tell him that he deserved the world. That he was so strong with dealing with the plague that spread through his life, especially when he was living right next to the house that burned down only a week ago. I can tell that living here wasn’t

easy. But he wanted to do this. I asked countless times if he was okay with it and he gave me the same answer over and over again.

His answer was that he lost too many people and couldn't afford to lose me. So he stayed over at my house instead of Dan's, making sure that I was by his side. Besides, Dan's mother wasn't in the best state. She was still mourning for Thomas's death, now she had Paul on her conscience as well. I guess Tyler and I weren't the only ones who had a bunch of problems on our plate.

I snapped out of my own thoughts when I heard the doorbell ring. I turned around facing the door and began walking towards it knowing that it must be Dan. I started to feel nervous all of a sudden. My heart began to beat against my rib cage for some odd reason and I couldn't shake the feeling away. Dan was here for something important. I don't know what it was but if he wanted me to lie to Tyler then I had to see or at least know the reason why.

Opening the front door, my eyes met a pale Dan who looked as if he just saw a ghost. He had dark bags under his eyes which meant that he wasn't sleeping well, or at all, and gave me a grim look. My mouth fell open anxiously as I opened the door wider for him to come in. He immediately walked in and sat down on my couch, waiting for me to sit down as well.

"What's going on?" I asked.

Dan closed his eyes before taking a deep breath.

"I needed to show you something very important but you have to be seated," he said.

This confused me even more but I merely nodded and sat down beside him.

"It's that important?" I asked.

He nodded.

"I'm afraid so." He breathed out before taking out something from his pocket. I lifted an eyebrow and saw Dan holding a phone.

"Crystal." He started as he passed me over the phone. I took it in my hand, still very confused and began to inspect it. "That is Paul's phone."

I lifted an eyebrow.

"How was it not burned with him?" I asked.

"The police searched Emma's car for any clues and found his phone inside. I guess he left it there," he explained.

“Okay but how is this important?”

“I’m getting there.” He let out a breath before he started. “The police handed it over to my mom since they found no clues of the suicide attempt. My mom thought nothing of it when she saw the picture inside. I didn’t either until I looked really closely and figured out something which got my heartbeat to stop.” He gulped.

“What did you figure out?” I asked nervously.

Dan gestured me to open the phone. And so I did. But what I found inside made me wish that I never opened it. Once the phone was unlocked, I was already in the photo app. There were normal pictures of food and selfies inside but there was one particular picture that stood out and it made all the color from my face instantly disappear. One picture that caused more confusion and made my heartbeat stop for a moment.

It was a picture of a younger Paul, holding a beautiful woman in his arms. They looked to be very young, but that’s not what surprised me. It also wasn’t the fact that the woman seemed to be pregnant because her stomach was large. The fact that they seemed to be in love and very happy in the pictures wasn’t what surprised me either. It was the fact that the woman looked awfully familiar.

The pregnant woman in the picture was my mother.

“I figured out that the girl in that picture looked exactly like you.” Dan’s voice brought me out of my trance. I looked up at him with shaky hands and blurry eyes.

“I-I I don’t get it,” I whispered. “Why is my mom in the same picture as Paul? Did they know each other? Why does he have a picture of her?” I asked, feeling a lump in my throat.

Dan shook his head slightly.

“I have no idea. That was the only picture I found. I was hoping that maybe you’d have more clues. If Paul has a picture of your mother then maybe your mother has a picture of him.” Dan suggested.

I let out a loud sigh and ran my hands through my hair in frustration. Several thoughts were clouding my mind along with multiple possibilities.

“You might be right.” I bit my lip at the thought and got up, looking at the picture once again. “My mom was certainly a person who loved to treasure things. She might have some clues on what happened. But what

really shocked me was that they know each other.” I shook my head in disbelief.

“I had no idea they were friends,” I said more to myself as I stared at the picture which seemed to be taken from an old photo album since it wasn’t the best quality.

Dan got off the couch and took the phone in his hand.

“I have to go now, but please tell me if you find anything that might clear this up.”

I nodded.

“Okay, I’ll searched through my parents’ stuff. I’ll see if I find anything useful.” I assured him.

Dan gave me a small smile and waved goodbye before disappearing out of the door. I took a deep breath and placed my hand over my beating heart, still not believing what I just saw.

Something was definitely suspicious.

Something snapped in me, a part that wanted to look for answers, so I immediately dashed to the closet where my dad used to keep all his stuff in. That was the first place I was going to look in. If I couldn’t find anything in here then I’d have to kick it up a notch and look in my parents’ old bedroom which I hoped I really didn’t have to do because it felt wrong going in there and looking through their stuff.

I opened the closet and took out my dad’s toolbox. I then set aside a couple of books he used to read along with some dusty shoes before I basically went through all his things at every corner. I opened all the boxes only to found more books.

Well that’s what I thought until I suddenly noticed the last thick book in the bottom of the box. Only it wasn’t a book.

It was a photo album.

I opened it in a hurry and looked through every page, hoping to find something that would catch my attention. Unfortunately, the only things I found were pictures of me and my parents along with a couple of baby pictures some sightings my mom took when we were on vacation.

Letting out a sigh of frustration, I closed the album and shoved it back into the box along with all the others. After five minutes of just placing everything back to where it was, I closed the closet in defeat and took a deep breath.

This could only mean one thing.

That I had to search through my parents' old room.

Knowing what had to be done, I forced my legs to move, despite the fact that I didn't want to intrude. Deep down, I knew I had to do this. It's been years since they've been gone but I could still feel their presence in this house. Even though I cleaned their room every now and then (some dusting and sweeping here and there), I still didn't went through the room thoroughly, but that will have to change.

After what seemed like forever, I finally found myself standing in front of their door. I slowly lifted my shaky hands and clenched the handle tightly. I gave myself one final pep talk before I took a deep breath and yanked the door open. The sight in front of me will forever haunt me.

It was an empty room.

I closed the door behind me and looked around the place in sadness. I tried to push away the depressing thoughts because I knew I was here for another reason and not to mourn for their death. I knew that was very hard to do, but I had to be strong.

I lifted my head up high and began to walk towards the drawer which was placed right beside the bed my parents used to sleep on.

I opened it slowly for the first time in years and welcomed the dust that hit my face. I probably should have went through and cleaned them back then, but I guess I just never had the guts to open their stuff. which didn't belong to me.

After a moment of just staring at a couple of pins, hair clips and some keys, I closed it and opened the drawer under it. The same thing went on with all the other two. I found nothing that would help me, not even a clue. After looking under the bed, I only found a couple of bags and shoes my mom used to keep under there but nothing interesting at all. So I went over to their closet and opened the door. I walked in to see many of their old clothes hanged onto the rack. I looked through the dusty clothes and into all the shoeboxes but once again found nothing which frustrated me.

Getting back up from my knees, I was about to give up and walk out the door but stopped immediately when something caught my eye.

Something silver.

I kneeled down and got closer to the shiny surface which was hidden right behind all my dad's large coats. I moved them to the side and gasped

when I saw a small silver door attached to the wall. It seems to be a safe because when I tried to open it, it wouldn't budge. There was a lock but the problem was that I had no key. Maybe this was where all the money was kept?

I was about to give up and walk back downstairs. I was ready to tell Dan that I found nothing when I suddenly remembered the random keys I found earlier in the drawer. I got up and ran out of the closet and to the drawer. I opened it and took all the keys in my hands before running back to the safe, all while praying to the gods that one of these keys would work and open the safe. I wished and hoped that there would be something in there that might ease the confusion.

Finally, my silent prayers were answered. After trying the third key, I heard a click. I opened the safe to see a brown shoebox. I blinked once more before taking the box into my hands and placed it onto the floor. After taking a deep breath, I opened it to see countless pictures.

They were almost the exact same ones that Dan showed me before.

I took all the pictures in my hand, ignoring the small book right beside them and looked through each and every one. As I examined every photo, I felt the colors from my face disappear once again.

All the pictures were my mom and Paul smiling to the camera. Some where they looked to be young, while others were Paul holding my mom in his arms as his hands rested on her large pregnant stomach. I felt my stomach clench in confusion as confused tears blurred my eyes and I suddenly found myself wondering what the hell was happening! *Why the hell was Paul holding my mother in his arms as if they were lovers?*

I was starting to fear the possibilities that clouded my mind. I examined every single picture, and looked at every corner but found nothing that could answer all my questions. I swallowed the lump in my throat and rubbed my eyes with the palm of my hands. I placed the photos down to my knees and clenched my fist as I again, looked through every picture but found nothing.

Well, that was before I looked back into the box and noticed the small book inside. The same one I paid no second glance to until now. I averted my eyes away from the photos and immediately grabbed the book. I opened it to see something that could probably answer all my questions.

A diary.

I flipped through every page, reading through the pages when I noticed that it belonged to my mother's. Her name was written on the front page in bold letters:

'Ruby'

I couldn't help but feel like I was intruding in my mother's personal life but I knew that nothing could stop me at this very moment, especially after seeing countless pictures of Paul hugging my mother. I flipped through the first couple of pages, and stopped halfway through. As I turned every page, I read the first line before I continued to skim.

'Today's weather was very gloomy but I couldn't help but notice something strange in the sky. I could already sense a storm coming.'

Flip.

'I should have never eaten that pie I bought from that old lady who was selling them right outside of Walmart. Right now I have a really bad stomachache. I can't stop throwing up.'

Flip.

'I'm not sure why but the days have been getting too long for my liking. I've noticed that I've become a very lazy person, always sleeping.'

Flip.

'Today might be the best day of my entire life. It's been a very long week for me but it seems as if things have finally been getting better. Paul decided to move in with me and our love has been growing by the second. You can say that a future with him was sure to happen.'

I felt my heart stop as I finally found something which would soon lead me to my doom. I couldn't believe what I was reading. I felt tears burn behind my eyes but I urged myself to continue reading my mother's writing.

'Today, I found out why I was such a lazy ass and why I kept throwing up all morning. It turns out that I'm pregnant! I couldn't believe the news myself! It's a miracle and the greatest thing is that Paul is the father! I bet we're going to have the happiest life that anyone could ever imagine. Just me, him and our child. I still don't

know if the baby is going to be a boy or a girl. That'll have to wait for next time.'

I placed the diary back down as I felt tears run down my cheeks. I couldn't believe it. Paul and my mother were lovers. The same thought I've been dreading ever since Dan showed me the picture, but I was too scared to face. I was too afraid to accept the truth.

Still, I forced myself to pick up the book and flip to the next page.

'Who knew being pregnant could be this tiring. Walking up the stairs was a hassle, gosh.'

I flipped to the next page.

'Today is Paul's birthday. I might not know his siblings very well but I invited them anyways and got all my friends over for a surprise party. It was very tiring since my belly was getting bigger by the day but it was worth it.'

I flipped it once again, my heart beating that it was ringing through my ears.

'I finally have some great news! Today is my doctor's appointment. I was very nervous about finding out the gender of the baby but I knew that once Paul was by my side, I'd feel better. Once Paul found out about news he was thrilled! He was so happy to hear that he was getting a princess! A baby girl to spoil! I couldn't help but cry in joy at the news. He and I debated on what the name should be, and since we found out that a girl was on the way, we decided to use the one I came up with, Crystal!'

I couldn't stop the tears which were now running down my cheeks. The diary fell on to the floor as my hands flew to my mouth in shock. All the answers were beginning to sink into my mind but I wished that I didn't have to find out this way. I wished that I didn't have to find out at all! This was horrible. I felt myself shake as I crawled away from the box, my back hitting against the wall.

My mind was cloudy but my cries were loud and clear.

The truth hurts . . . a lot.

My mother, Ruby, was the woman Paul got pregnant. I didn't want to admit it but I was their child. I wasn't only Ruby's daughter but also Paul's. The baby in my mother's stomach was me! Which could only mean one thing and that truth which will forever scar me and kill my soul.

Tyler and I shared a father.

Which meant that Tyler was my half brother.

CHAPTER 54

Have you ever felt your heart break into millions of pieces and you wished you could just turn back time and fix everything?

I knew if I had the chance to turn back time then maybe I could change my fate.

Why was the world so cruel?

Why did it have to be me?

Why was I that one person who had to find out that the guy I really cared about and called my boyfriend was actually my half brother?

I felt my shoulders shake violently as the truth sunk into my mind. I felt as if I wanted to throw up. I began to feel dizzy as the world around me began to spin. The tears continued to run down my cheeks and they weren't going to stop anytime soon.

I was sitting in the closet, just staring at the diary which will forever haunt my life. I had my phone in my hand, waiting for Tyler to text me and tell me that he was home.

After what seemed like forever of me crying because of the truth, I began to wonder what did I do to deserve this. What the hell did Tyler do to also deserve this? We both needed the truth no matter how much it hurt, but we also can't go on living like this, living a lie.

I called Tyler a while ago but I couldn't hold back my sobs. Once he heard that something was wrong, he immediately got out of the hospital to see me.

I was still in shock. I didn't know how I was going to break the news to him. That we shared a father. A father that killed himself and put Emma in a coma.

No, no I couldn't believe it. I just couldn't bring myself to accept it. So I grabbed my mother's diary, going to the end of the pages to search for something. Anything that will show that Tyler and I aren't related at all. I flipped through the pages as tears began to spill onto the pages. I wiped them away and continue to flip through the diary, but the tears wouldn't stop. I was scared out of my mind and I couldn't handle this. So I went to the very last pages my mom wrote and read it even though all I wanted to do was sleep and never wake up.

'Things have started to get strange lately... I'm not sure why but Paul's on edge. He's always staring at the baby. At my beautiful Crystal. But not with awe. He isn't staring at her with adoration. It's something strange that I can't put into words. Whenever he carries her or looks into her eyes, it's as if he's trying to find out something. Something that he doesn't know. It's starting to put me on edge too but I'll find out soon.'

Just when I was about to read the next paragraph, a loud sound brought me out of my own thoughts. It was the doorbell. I took a deep breath, and brought my sleeves to my face to wipe away the tears even though Tyler would soon find out that I was crying because of my red puffy eyes.

I gathered all the pictures and the diary into the shoebox before I closed it then carried it with me downstairs into the living room. My hands were shaking as I placed it on the coffee table first before opening the door.

Once I opened the door, I was engulfed in a huge comforting hug. Tyler's arms immediately went around me, pulling me to his chest. I hugged him back for a moment, not knowing how much his presence affected me.

Once the truth snapped in my mind, I immediately pulled away to look right into his worried eyes. The same eyes that haven't slept in days because of everything else that was going on in his life. Tyler lifted his hand to wipe a tear on my cheek which I still didn't notice until now. After a while, I opened the door wider for him to come in.

"Gem what's wrong? Why are you crying? What happened?" Tyler bombarded me with several questions. I held my hand up to him after wiping my tears once again.

"There's something really important I-I have to show you." I hiccuped before closing the door behind and walked to the couch, where the coffee table stood next to it. On the surface was the diary I placed earlier.

Tyler looked very confused and already tired because of what happened with his mother. Still, it would be very selfish of me to hide all of this from him. He deserved to know.

Tyler sat down next to me and took ahold of my hand, looking at me with concerned eyes.

“Baby what’s wrong?” he whispered.

Baby . . . Once he finds out the truth he won’t be able to call me that. I held back the tears as my vision began to blur. I shook my head slightly and wished that my beating heart would give me a break.

I took the box into my hands and passed it over to Tyler with all my strength because I felt weak at this very moment. I felt as if I was going to pass out any minute now. Tyler noticed my pale, tired face before looking down at the box. He lifted an eyebrow and spoke before I could.

“What’s this?” he asked.

I took a deep breath, bracing myself for what’s to come. I opened the box and took out the same picture Dan showed me which was in Paul’s phone before passing it to Tyler with shaky hands. Tyler looked at it with confusion and narrowed his eyes at me.

“D-Dan was here.” I managed to swallow my nerves. “And he found that very same picture in Paul’s phone,” I said softly, trying to prevent the sobs from escaping.

“W-what but I don’t get it,” he muttered before looking away from the picture. “Isn’t this your mother?” he asked.

I nodded as a tear slipped from my eye.

“It is. And that’s the problem,” I said with a shaky voice. Tyler’s eyes stared at me with confusion and pain as he watched the tears run down my cheek.

“But I still don’t get why you’re crying, Gem. Please tell me, you’re starting to worry me,” he said as he took ahold of my hand. I pulled away and opened the shoebox once again, this time pointing out all the pictures and the diary inside. Tyler’s eyes widened when he saw the countless pictures of Paul and my mother.

“What the f*ck is all this?” He growled, taking every single picture in his hand and examining it.

“Tyler,” I spoke, grabbing his attention. “It turns out that Paul and my mother were l-lovers.” I cried.

Tyler said nothing, he stared at me as if he just saw a ghost. He ran his hands through his hair and got up before pacing around the room.

“Crystal, you’re sh*tting with me right?” he asked as he stopped in front of me and bend on his knees so we were on the same eye level. He took my hand before squeezing it, staring at me with pain while I knew deep down that he was holding himself back from crying, from breaking down once again right in front of me.

I shook my head.

“I wish,” I whispered looking down, then took ahold of the diary.

“I-I read this.” My voice cracked once I noticed the look of horror written on Tyler’s face. He didn’t let me finish because he got up and started to pace once again.

“F*ck!” He cursed. “Please tell me they were only lovers but nothing really happened.” He begged as I noticed his eyes began to water. I gulped down the lump in my throat but couldn’t stop the sob which escaped me.

“Tyler, this is the truth.” I sobbed before getting up to hand him over the diary and opened the pages to the part where my mom revealed that I was Paul’s daughter. Tyler stared at the book as if he wanted it to burn in hell. Nevertheless, he took it anyway and for a moment everything was quiet as he read the lines which will soon ruin his life. The silence was suffocating me because I knew how this was going to end.

In disaster.

This was the calm before the storm.

I watched as Tyler’s eyes moved from line to line, a single tear slip out from his eye. He continued to stare at the book, before he turned around and grabbed a vase, throwing it to the wall as it smashed into several pieces. I flinched and took a step back but didn’t say anything. I watched in horror as the man I loved and cared about broke down once again. He was a mess.

“F*ck!” he yelled, smashing his hands to the wall. “This c-can’t be true,” he whispered to himself before turning to look at me. He then stalked towards me and held my shoulder in a tight grip.

“No-no this must be some kind of misunderstanding.” His voice cracked in desperation. I shook my head as the tears continued to fall.

“Tyler it’s not.” I sobbed. “You and I share the same father.”

“No!” he yelled backing away before looking back at the diary. He was already sobbing and shaking as he flipped through the pages.

“We can’t be siblings!” he shouted before looking back up at me.

“I love you!” he cried. “I can’t do this. This must be wrong.” He ran his hands through his hair before facing the wall and resting his forehead against it as he cried. He banged his fist as the other one held the diary close to him.

“I can’t fall in love with my sister!” he shouted. I let out a sob as I walked over to him.

“T-Tyler,” I whispered but backed away once he turned to look at me with dull eyes.

He shook his head furiously.

“No, this isn’t right,” he whispered as tears fell down his cheek. He took a step forward and looked at the dairy.

“Something’s wrong. The world can’t be that cruel.” He sobbed. He then flipped through some more pages and sank to the ground before letting out a loud cry.

“Tyler please don’t do this.” I cried, running up to him.

“Do what Crystal? I just found out that the girl I loved for years is actually my half sister!” he shouted before hitting his forehead with his fist. “I-I can’t handle the pain,” he yelled. “It’s too much! You were all that I had left! Now everything’s gone.”

I fell to the ground with him and took his hand as I sobbed out.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, shaking my head. “I wish this didn’t happen b-but it seems that the world is against us.”

Tyler shook his head and hid it in his hands, letting out a bunch of curse words before lifting his head up.

“No, this isn’t correct,” he said looking back at me with hope in his eyes. “We aren’t siblings. If we were then my mom would have said something. Think about it! Why would she ship us so badly if we shared the same father?” he asked.

My mouth fell open at what he said and I couldn’t help but agree. Why didn’t Emma ever say anything? She said that Paul got another woman pregnant but was so happy when she found out that Tyler and I got together. There was still something that we didn’t know about.

“You’re right,” I whispered. “Emma would have told us that we were siblings in the very beginning to prevent any conflicts but then what does this mean?” I asked pointing at the diary.

Tyler looked down at it and took a deep breath.

"I don't know," he whispered before opening it once again. "There must be something we've missed. Something that might give us some clues," he muttered as he read through every page and flipped it in frustration when he found nothing.

"W-what about the very last pages?" I suggested. "I didn't read them so maybe you'll find something."

Tyler looked up at me with his tired eyes but nodded anyway. He skipped to the last couple of pages and began to read. Whatever he was reading caused his brows to furrow in confusion. He then flipped to the last page and continued to read while I continue to watch his reaction. I saw his eyes light up as he read something.

"Tyler, what is it?" I asked.

He looked up at me and I immediately noticed the look of hope written across his features. He turned the notebook around so it was facing me and pointed to the very last paragraph on the last page.

"This doesn't say much but it gives us some hope."

"Some hope for what?" I asked.

Tyler pointed back to the diary.

"Read and you'll see."

So that's what I did. I looked down at my mother's writing and began to read.

'My beautiful Crystal is almost five months old, and since she's starting to grow, her looks have started to appear and I've noticed one thing. That she doesn't look like Paul. At first I thought that was normal. I thought that she just looks more like me than him. Back then, I thought Paul was just jealous that his only daughter didn't look like him which as why he started to eye her weirdly. Little did I know that jealousy wasn't the only thing running in his mind. It was suspicion.

I couldn't believe the words I heard yesterday coming out of his mouth. The words which left me confused but I knew if I denied it then Paul would get even more suspicious. Maybe he was starting to doubt that he was the father because of my past? Maybe he thought that I still held onto Sam? I couldn't believe that Paul

would actually doubt me and think that I still had feelings for my ex.

Still, I did it. I listened to what he asked me to do and the results will come out soon. And when they do, I'd like to see the look of defeat written on his face. I'd like to hear his apology for ever doubting me and his child because Paul demanded a DNA test.'

I stared at it for what seemed to be forever before looking back up at Tyler. His tears were gone but his eyes were still red and puffy.

"So what's that supposed to mean?" I asked.

Tyler placed the book back to the floor before taking my hand, looking deep into my eyes.

"It means that Paul was doubting that he was the father. We might not have enough clues but this is enough to know that you could still be the child of someone else."

I fiddled with my fingers then took ahold of the dairy and read it once again.

"Who's Sam?" I whispered, looking up at Tyler.

"I don't know but this is enough to give me some hope."

"Hope," I whispered.

Tyler nodded.

"As you said before. Once my mom opens her eyes then things will get better," he said before engulfing me in a warm hug.

CHAPTER 55

“Tyler,” I whispered, lifting my head off his shoulder to have a better look at him. We were still seated on the ground, not knowing what to do but just listening to the sound of our beating hearts. Just the silence was enough to comfort me and my depressing thoughts and fears. Thankfully, those fears have been minimized since Tyler got here. His presence always managed to calm me down even though we had to learn the truth which would haunt us for the rest of our lives.

“Hmm?” He hummed looking at me.

“Why don’t we take a DNA test to see if we are actually related?” I asked. “I mean what’s the point in waiting? Yes I do hope that Emma wakes up but I can’t wait any longer to find out.” I sighed looking down at the diary in my hands and placed it to the floor. I flipped to the last page only to see it empty. Nothing was there.

“There’s no more clues left,” I muttered under my breath. I then tilted my head up to look at Tyler when I heard him let out a long sigh. He nodded before speaking.

“Yeah, you’re right. We’ll see if we can get that done tomorrow,” he said.

“Okay that sounds good.” I smiled, trying to ease the tension. I really hoped that once we get the results, it would turn out to be good news.

“But...” Tyler hesitated, running his hand through his hair in frustration.

“But what?” I whispered nervously.

“B-but what happens if it turns out that we’re actually related?” His voice cracked in the end. I saw his eyes stare into the distance as worry overtook his features. written all over his face.

“What happens if we actually do share the same f-father?” He whispered, turning to look at me with watery eyes. I swallowed the lump in my throat as I tried to calm my beating heart. I opened my mouth to speak but Tyler was ahead of me.

“I mean we can’t keep doing this.” He breathed out. I watched as his hand went up to rub the place where his heart was held. “It’ll hurt so much. It already hurts.”

I took his hand in my hold and gave it a squeeze.

“D-don’t think like that,” I whispered, holding back the tears because the sight of a broken Tyler was too much for me to handle. “We have to think positive. Whatever happens will be for a reason. We have to stay strong.”

Tyler wiped his eyes with the palm of his hands and nodded.

“Yes, I know.” He sighed before pulling me to his chest. He buried his face into my hair and inhaled my scent. “I just don’t want to lose you.”

My hands wrapped themselves around Tyler’s neck.

“I don’t want to lose you too.” My voice cracked. I couldn’t hold the tear which slipped from my eye as I feared for the future. We stayed in that same position for what seemed to be forever, enjoying the silence around us. We stayed together as we hoped that maybe Paul was right to be suspicious, which was probably the only thing keeping us sane. I closed my eyes and hoped that the universe wasn’t this cruel to pair me up with my half brother.

Our moment was interrupted when Tyler’s phone rang. We both pulled away after a sigh and accepted the fact that moments like these wouldn’t last forever.

I pulled a strand behind my ear as I watched Tyler take his phone out to check who was calling. I saw his face light up for a split-second before turning to face me with hope in his eyes.

I lifted an eyebrow curiously and tilted my head to the side.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

Tyler pushed his phone in front of my face to show me the caller’s ID.

“It’s Dan. D-do you think it could be good news?” he asked nervously.

I shrugged and smiled at him.

“You won’t know unless you answer the call.” I pointed out. Tyler immediately answered the call.

“Hello?” He breathed out anxiously. “Yeah? Okay. Yes I did. Wait what? Really!” he shouted, getting off the ground as he sprang on to his feet.

“Yes that’s amazing. Okay okay I’ll be there as soon as possible,” he said as a smile finally spread across his face after what seemed like years. I got up immediately and stood beside him, wanting to know what was the reason which made him smile.

“Yes okay I’ll bring her with me. Thank you. I’ll see you soon.” And with that, Tyler hung up and turned to look at me with happiness in his eyes.

“What is it?”

“My mom.” He smiled. “She’s finally awake.”

My eyes widened as a smile spread across my face, finally reaching my eyes.

“Really? Oh gosh that’s amazing!” I squealed, jumping into Tyler’s arms to hug him. He let out a loud happy laugh as he spun me around in his arms.

“I know I know!” He grinned, placing me back to the ground. “We have to go.”

I nodded and rushed to grab my purse while Tyler grabbed his car keys. Just as we were about to rush to the door, I remembered something so I placed my hand on his chest, stopping him from moving any further.

“Stop,” I said.

“What’s wrong?” Tyler asked, lifting an eyebrow. I held my finger up, signaling him to wait for me and rushed back into the living room. I took the shoebox in my hands which was still lying on the floor and turned to rush towards Tyler.

“I’m bringing this with me,” I said, showing him the box.

“Good idea.” He agreed before opening the front door. We ran to his car and hopped in. Tyler started the engine and began to drive to the hospital. It was only a few minutes away but it felt like hours. I bit my lip anxiously as Tyler finally made it in front of the hospital. I tapped my finger on my thigh, trying to be patient but it felt almost impossible because I was so excited to see Emma once again. After Tyler finally parked the car, we both hopped out of there immediately.

We rushed into the hospital with the box still in my hands. When we finally got to the floor where Emma was staying, we saw Matt, Troy, and Jasmine waiting outside with smiles written across their faces. Their grins only grew wider once they noticed we were here. Suddenly, Matt rushed to hug me while Troy and Jasmine waited for us to walk over to them.

“Where’s Dan?” Tyler asked.

“He’s in there with Emma, the cops will be here soon to question her,” Troy said. Tyler and I looked at each other before we gave him a nod.

“You go in there first and see your mother. I’ll come once the time is right.” Tyler nodded before kissing my forehead and opened the door of Emma’s room.

I sat down in the seat next to Jasmine as I waited anxiously for Tyler to come out but at the same time, hoping he’d have more time to check up on his mother. Matt and Troy were having a conversation while Jasmine leaned over to look at the shoebox resting on my lap.

“What’s in that?” she asked, pointing at the box.

I shrugged my shoulders and let out a sigh.

“It’s a long story but I’ll tell you later.”

She nodded and was about to say something else but closed her mouth at the last minute. I tapped my shoe against the floor, waiting for a couple of minutes when Tyler finally came out of the room. And boy did he look different. Aside from the tears that were running down his cheeks, which I guess were happy ones, his pale face was suddenly gone and he looked more alive than ever as he smiled widely at me.

I smiled back at him and got off my seat after he gave me a short nod. My feet moved quickly towards him and I took his hand.

“How is she?” I asked.

“Doing good. The doctor says that she’ll be able to go back home by the end of the week.”

I nodded and watched as he stepped aside so I could walk in.

“Come on, let’s get this over with. The cops will be here soon to question her about the whole accident,” he said, running his hands through his hair nervously.

I swallowed my fears and stepped into the room, trying to steady my rapid heart beat as I saw Emma lying on her bed. Her face looked pale and tired as she looked away from Dan who was seated on a chair right next to

her bed and made eye contact with me. A small smile took over her face, brightening up her look.

“Emma,” I whispered before I rushed over and gave her a welcoming hug. She let out a low chuckle and patted my back.

“Hello Darling.” She laughed.

“I’m so glad to have you back,” I said, pulling away to give her some space.

“I’m so glad to be back.” She smiled as Tyler sat next to her, lifting her up with a glass of water in his hand.

“The doctor says it’s time for your medicine.” He handed her two pills.

She nodded and downed the pills, taking the glass from Tyler’s hold and drank the water. Tyler walked up beside me, looking very relieved to see his mother awake.

“How are your burns?” I asked in concern. Emma opened her mouth to speak but Dan interrupted her.

“Thankfully her burns aren’t severe. But it’ll take a while for them to heal.”

“That’s good,” I said, sending Tyler a grateful smile, until I noticed him eyeing the box. He cleared his throat and scratched the back of his head nervously, tilting his head at me as if giving me the ‘go’ signal to start asking questions, but before I could, he walked over to Emma and took her hand before kissing it.

“Mom, Crystal and I would like to ask you a couple of questions.”

Emma lifted an eyebrow.

“I thought the cops were going to question me about the fire?” she asked.

Tyler shook his head.

“No mom, not about that.” He breathed out before signaling me to come over. Dan stood up and walked out the door to give us some privacy.

“What’s going on?” she asked, only now noticing the box in my hands.

“Um . . .” I trailed off, not knowing what to say. I then opened the box with shaky hands and took out the same picture Dan found in Paul’s phone.

“This photo was found in Paul’s phone and also in my parents’ closet along with a bunch of other pictures.” I began, handing Emma the picture of my pregnant Mom with Paul right beside her.

“M-my mom-is she pregnant with me in this picture?” I asked nervously. My eyes flickered to Tyler who was also staring at his mother in fear of what she was about to say. I looked back down to Emma and saw her eyes scan the phone before her face went pale and a long sigh of escaped her lips. She placed the photo down and looked up at me.

“I didn’t want you to know this way,” she whispered.

My eyes widened.

“S-so she is pregnant with me?” I asked feeling a lump in my throat.

Emma examined the picture one more time before nodding her head.

“Yes,” she whispered.

My hand flew over to my mouth, trying to prevent the sob which was threatening to escape.

“I can’t believe it,” I whispered, shaking my head as my eyes watered.

“F*ck,” Tyler cursed, clenching his hands. “Why didn’t you tell me? Why didn’t you prevent me from falling in love with my own sister?” Tyler whispered.

Emma lifted an eyebrow and flickered her eyes to the both of us. She gave us a confused look before narrowing her eyes.

“Sister? I never said you two were related.” She pointed out.

“B-but you said my mom was pregnant with me in this picture,” I said in a shaky voice.

“Yeah that’s what I said.”

“So then that means we share the same father. Which makes me her brother.” Tyler tried to calm his voice down but it was obvious he was hurting.

“I never said that Paul was your father. I don’t even know who is,” she admitted.

Tyler and I stared at her for a long time.

“W-what do you mean?” I whispered.

“That’s exactly what I mean. I didn’t want you finding out that Ethan wasn’t your father by this picture.” She sighed, handing me over the picture.

“I wanted to tell you the same day when I told you that Thomas was the drunk driver who killed both of your parents but you fainted and I just didn’t have the heart to do so.” She shook her head, looking down at her lap.

I ran my hand over my face.

“S-so Ethan isn’t my father? Neither Paul?” I asked.

Emma shook her head.

“No they aren’t.”

“But how?” Tyler asked all of a sudden. “Crystal’s mom clearly says in her diary that she thinks the father is Paul,” he said before taking a hold of the box and opening it. He took out the diary and flipped to the part where my mom clearly mentions that I’m Paul’s child before showing it to Emma, who scrunched her eyebrows and nodded.

“Oh, now I remember,” she whispered.

“Remember what?” I asked.

“When Ruby and Paul got together, they first thought that the child belonged to him. I don’t know much of the details but the only thing Paul told me was that the reason why he and Ruby broke up was because she lied to him. He never told me who the father really was.”

I sat down on the chair next to Emma’s bed and ran my hand through my hair in frustration. I let out a groan but calmed down when I felt Tyler’s comforting hand on my shoulder.

Half of me was happy that I wasn’t Paul’s daughter, meaning that Tyler and I weren’t siblings, but another half of me was also frustrated for not knowing who my real father really was. I was disappointed and angry at my mother for lying to me for years but I couldn’t help but feel sad because Ethan will forever be my father who raised and took care of me. I was just so confused.

“I don’t think Crystal’s mom meant to lie,” Tyler spoke, grabbing my attention.

“Huh?” I lifted my head to look at him.

Tyler walked over to the bed and picked up the diary. He pointed to the same paragraph that I read earlier when my mom mentioned her ex.

“She seems as if she wasn’t afraid to take the DNA test and show Paul that you really were his child. Which means that she didn’t mean to lie. She seemed persistent in taking it to prove him wrong.” He pointed out.

Emma and I nodded.

“Yeah, you’re right but that still doesn’t tell me who my father really is.” I let out a sigh.

Before anyone can say anything, there was a knock on the door. We looked around to see Dan who popped his head into the room.

"The cops are here," he said, opening the door.

"Let them come in," Tyler said.

I stood aside, watching the two police officers walk into the room holding clipboards. Tyler placed his hand on my hip, bringing me to his chest. He kissed my head and leaned over to whisper in my ear.

"I'm so relieved."

I nodded and smiled at him.

"Me too," I whispered back.

"We're going to celebrate later." He grinned, winking me. I couldn't help but laugh as I hugged him back, feeling myself finally calm down in his embrace. I turned to look at the cops who were questioning Emma as I listened in on their questions.

"How did you fall off the stairs?" one asked.

"He pushed me." She breathed out, causing Tyler to go tense.

"Why?" Tyler asked, not leaving any room for the officer to speak.

"Paul was acting weird. He wasn't taking his medicine. He kept reminding me that he was going to die soon and said that maybe it would be better if we all died with him." She shivered, shaking her head.

A gasp escaped my lips as I held Tyler's fist tightly, trying to calm him down.

"So when I saw him spill gasoline all over the house, I tried to run out to call for help but before I could, he pushed me down the stairs."

"That motherf*cker!" Tyler cursed under his breath.

I rubbed my hand up and down his arm.

"Shh...he's already dead." I whispered.

"Then he's damn lucky. I don't care if he's my father, anyone who tried to hurt my mother or anyone I love will pay." He growled shaking his head.

"Well he's already paying in his grave." I heard Emma mutter under her breath.

"So you are admitting that this was a suicide attempt?" The cop asked.

Emma nodded.

"It sure was."

"Well then, now that we've gotten all our answers, we'll be going. Feel better soon," The other officer said. Emma sent them both a polite smile

and muttered a soft thank you.

Once we were left alone in Emma's room, everyone who was waiting outside walked in, giving Emma their best wishes. Tyler sat down next to me and took my hand in his. He bent over to kiss my lips.

"It's been a long week," he muttered.

"Yeah, I know." I sighed, resting my head in his chest. Tyler was playing with the strands of my hair while Dan and Troy had a conversation with Emma on how she should apply toothpaste on all of her burns. Jasmine was trying to whack some sense into her boyfriend when he said something about pouring urine instead which earned him a slap on neck.

I couldn't help but finally feel at peace. Even though there was something left missing in my life, like who the hell was my real father. Everything else was perfect. Tyler was finally by my side and Emma was awake.

Until another thing happened all of a sudden.

What you might be asking? Well the door to Emma's room burst opened and in came the two people that I least expected to see.

Blake and his father, Sam or as I like to call him, Mr. Fatty. But before I could question any further to why the hell they were barging into the room. Or why it looked like Mr. Fatty didn't want to be here. And why Blake had the look of determination written all over his face, something popped into my head. Something which blew my mind.

The name Sam.

Sam . . . Why the hell did it sound so familiar, and why did I feel like I was missing something?

Sam.

Sam...

Crap.

My mind went back to when I read my mother's diary. She mentioned that she had an ex named Sam which was the reason why Paul was so suspicious of me not being his daughter.

Sam.

Mr. Fatty.

Blake being all weird.

The puzzles in my mind started to put themselves together. Leaving me with only two words in my mind.

Well sh*t!

CHAPTER 56

“What the hell is going on here?” Tyler asked as his eyes remained fixated on Blake. My mouth fell open, yet no words were forming. I looked at Tyler, then at Blake, then his father. I tried to push the thoughts which were threatening to come out and show me the truth but I refused to accept it. I was afraid and scared of what may come if my assumptions were right. Yet at the same time, how could I assume such a thing like that? With only a snap of a finger?

I shouldn’t jump to conclusions but it seemed all too real not to think about it. It’s as if my mind was sending me signals and trying to put the puzzle pieces together. I swallowed the lump in my throat and shook my head.

“I-I don’t—”

“I’m here to see Crystal,” Blake said interrupting me.

“W-why?” I asked but before Blake could speak, Mr. Fa—I mean, Sam spoke.

“Why the hell did you bring me here then? This place smells like your grandmother.” He pinched his nose, trying to prevent any sort of scent from entering. Blake rolled his eyes and looked at his father.

“Pa! This is important, please.”

Sam raised his hands in the air.

“Okay okay whatever, just make it quick.”

Blake turned around and walked towards me, and as he did, I noticed he was holding something in his hand. He turned around when he noticed that Sam was still not moving.

“Do you mind coming over here? This involves you too.” Blake gestured him to come over to where Tyler and I were standing. The rest of the visitors in the room, including Emma were staring at us in confusion, the same goes for Tyler, who leaned over and whispered,

“What’s going on?”

I shrugged, not knowing the answer to that yet.

“Blake, why are you here and what does this have to do with your father?” I asked.

“You just brought the words right out of my mouth, Girly,” Sam said earning a glare from his son.

“I’ll explain right away, can we talk in private?” he asked, gesturing the rest to go outside.

“Uh, it’s okay we’ll just get going,” Troy said as everyone left the room. The only remaining people were Tyler and Emma since obviously the latter wasn’t allowed to leave her bed. Blake flickered his eyes to Tyler as he stood next to me.

“I’m not leaving,” he said firmly.

Blake let out a sigh of defeat before shaking his head and muttering a ‘whatever’. He then turn to me and gestured to sit of the chair. I followed suit and watched as he sat beside me while a confused looking Sam followed right behind him.

“Can you explain why you dragged me here son?” he asked.

“I’m getting to that.” Blake breathed out and then took out the paper which was still in his hand and unfolded it. He stared at it for a couple of minutes before handing it over to Sam. I wasn’t able to see what he was looking at but it sure made me curious.

“You know this picture right?” Blake asked.

Sam looked at the picture and nodded.

“Of course. I’m the one who gave it to you,” Sam answered.

I lifted an eyebrow and looked at Tyler, who was staring at Blake in confusion. Tyler then walked over to Emma who was lying on her bed and sat down beside her. I looked away, wondering what all this was about.

“And you know who the woman in this picture is, right?” Blake asked.

Sam nodded.

“Of course. She’s your mother.”

This caught my attention. I remember Ethan telling me when I was having dinner at their house for the first time, that Sam's girlfriend left him when she gave birth to his son, Blake. But I never knew who she really was.

Blake then took the photo from Sam.

"I still don't get what's going on here." I pointed out.

"Same here," Sam agreed.

"And here." Tyler spoke from the other side of the room.

Blake rolled his eyes and turned his attention back to me.

"I'm going to explain." He assured then looked back at his father.

"When I was a little kid, you always told me that I had no mother. But when I grew up you informed me that she just left us. Is that correct?" Blake asked.

Sam looked at the ground with a nod.

"I'm afraid so," he whispered.

"You lost everything you knew about her. She just disappeared with no trace, leaving nothing behind but memories right?"

I watched as Sam nodded again. I still don't know where this was going but I was anxious to find out.

"But she left one thing." Blake breathed out and turned to look at me.

"And what was that?" I asked curiously. Blake took the paper from his father's hands and passed it over to me.

"This photo."

I turned the picture around to look at it and for just a split-second I think I felt my heart stop. My breath was stuck in my throat as my hands began to shake. My eyes widened as I stared at the picture in front of me. With shaky hands, I held it tighter as I raked my eyes over everything. I tried to steady my now beating heart but it seemed impossible. I examined the photo as I felt the confusion within me expand.

I stared at the image of my own mother hugging Sam with a pregnant belly.

"W-what is this?" My hand flew over my mouth in shock. The assumption I had earlier returned, flooding my mind. I was scared and afraid to admit that they were right and it looked as if maybe my thoughts were becoming reality.

"That's my mother who left me and my dad many years ago."

“What?” I whispered getting up and pacing around the room. I could see Tyler taking a step forward to approach me but Emma held his arm, pulling him back and giving him a stern look as if telling him that this was none of their business.

“T-this can’t be.” I shook my head. “How can this be your mother when she’s also my mother?”

I turned to look at Sam for some answers but he looked equally confused as I was.

“What?” He turned to look at Blake.

“Is there something you’re not telling me son?” he asked. Blake walked over to me, trying to calm me down.

“Crystal please be patient with me, so I could explain.”

I took a deep breath and looked back at the photo in my hand.

“M-my mother left you guys?” I asked looking up at Sam and Blake.

Sam did nothing but Blake nodded.

“Yes,” he whispered.

“B-but how? I mean how did you know that she was also my mom? A-and how did you find me? I’m so confused.” I raked my hands through my hair in frustration. Blake took the seat next to me and took ahold of my hand.

“Remember how I told you that we used to go to the same school in New York?” he asked.

I nodded, recalling the event.

Well I remember meeting you there. You might not remember me but I would see you around school from afar. We also had some mixed classes together. You were kind to others and very generous.” He began as he scratched his head. “But one day, after you moved back to California, I was scrolling through the Internet and stumbled upon your Facebook page,” he explained.

I stared and waited for him to explain further.

“And you saw the pictures of me and my mom?” I asked.

He nodded.

“When I did, I felt very confused and betrayed that she left us but when I realized that you were her daughter, I figured out that she started a new family.”

I swallowed nervously and turned to look at Sam to see his face showing several emotions other than annoyance for once. His face was pale as tears began to form in his eyes. His hands were clenched beside him as he began to breathe heavily.

“So what you’re saying is that Crystal’s mother is also my ex-girlfriend?” Sam whispered, confused.

“It all makes sense,” I whispered, looking at him.

“Yes, that’s what I’m trying to say dad. I think Crystal is my half sister since we both share the same mom,” Blake said confidently.

“I don’t think I’m your half sister Blake,” I said in a shaky voice. Blake’s face turned into confusion.

“What do you mean? I’ve spent years trying to look for the daughter who shared the same mother as me. When I finally come back home, you were right there. Don’t you think this is fate trying to pair us family together?” he asked.

“Of course I do. I just don’t think I’m your half sister.” I tried to explain before flicking my eyes up to Sam. I took a deep breath before speaking.

“I think I’m your sister, as in sister-sister,” I said.

Blake lifted an eyebrow.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“As in, we don’t just share the same mother.” I breathed out looking back at Sam. His face immediately turned from confusion to horror.

“Somebody hold me, I think I’m going to faint,” Sam said, as he placed his hand over his heart.

Blake got up immediately and stared at me with wide eyes.

“Wait hold it!” he said before looking at his father. I could almost see his lips twitch up as if he was happy about what he just discovered.

“Dad, did you ever meet my mother after she left?” he asked.

Sam rested his back on the wall and looked up to the ceiling as if he was trying to remember.

“Maybe,” he whispered.

“When and where?” I asked.

There was silence for a moment as Sam closed his eyes.

“I-I think I saw her at a bar . . . I don’t know. I remember drinking a lot and then a hotel room was involved,” he sighed running his hands over his face.

I looked at him then at Blake.

“So you slept with her?” I asked.

“Please don’t talk about my sex life with my ex.” He breathed out.

“Dad just answer the question!” Blake yelled.

“Did you?” I asked.

Sam said nothing as he stared at the floor.

“Did you or did you not?” Blake asked.

Again we were met with nothing.

“Dad is Crystal your daughter or not?” Blake shouted.

“I don’t know okay!” Sam looked up. “I remember sleeping with her but after that we never met again. For all I know, maybe you aren’t my child,” Sam said, looking at me with a sad expression. I bit my lip as I mulled it over.

“But there’s a great possibility that I am. I’m not Paul’s or Ethan’s child. So who else can I be? This means that my mom cheated on Paul and if it wasn’t you then who else could it be?” I sighed, sitting back onto the chair. Tyler immediately rushed over to me and gave me a hug. He also kissed my cheek, trying to comfort me while rubbing circles all over my arm.

“Well, there’s only one way to find out then,” Blake said.

“How?” I asked.

Blake looked at Sam then at me.

“A DNA test, of course.”

EPILOGUE

Four years later

I turned around in my bed when I felt strong arms wrap themselves around me in my sleep. I snuggled against a warm chest as I was being pulled closer to it. I let out a satisfied sigh as I opened my eyes, watching the light shine into the room from the window. I looked up to see a sleeping Tyler who looked so innocent and peaceful. My hands moved on their own free will and cupped his cheek as I began to stroke it, running my thumb in circles, as I watched his eyes fluttered open.

I smiled at him, earning one back.

“Morning beautiful,” he murmured in his sleepy voice. I leaned over to peck his lips before pulling away immediately.

“Ew morning breath,” I muttered more to myself.

“Well, I feel loved.” Tyler rolled his eyes.

“Morning to you too, handsome.” I chuckled. Tyler stretched his arms up and suddenly turned us over so he was hovering over me. He began to trail kisses all over my face and down my neck. I’d giggle every once in a while as he whispered loving things into my ear.

“Yesterday was amazing.” I sighed, recalling the events that happened.

“Hmm,” he muttered, nuzzling his nose into the crook of my neck.

I lifted my hand up to my face and stared at the ring Tyler gave me.

“It’s beautiful,” I said in awe.

“You’re beautiful.” Tyler grinned before pecking my cheek. I blushed but couldn’t help but smile.

“I still can’t believe you proposed yesterday.” I grinned. After four years of dating, Tyler finally proposed. Then again, it’s not like I was

waiting for it the whole time. I mean it would have been awesome if it happened earlier but we were just so caught up with our studies for college which was a major headache. We barely even had any time to ourselves. Our studies took up most of our time but that didn't keep us from seeing each other. Besides we shared an apartment and been living here for the pass four years now.

"Believe it or not, baby. You're my fiancé now." Tyler lifted his head away from my neck, a grin plastered on his handsome face.

"I love you," I said, before kissing his lips.

"I love you too, Gem."

I pulled away and lifted an eyebrow.

"It's been four years and you never get tired of that name." I chuckled.

"Why would I?" he asked. "You're my Gem. My treasure and my life."

I took his face into the palm of my hands and stared at him in awe.

"How am I that lucky to have someone like you by my side?" I whispered.

Tyler shrugged.

"I could say the same thing." Tyler leaned over to kiss me but I pulled away, when I suddenly remembered that I had something very important to tell him.

"Tyler," I said nervously.

"Yeah?"

"There's something I have to tell you." I gulped.

"What is it?" he asked lifting an eyebrow.

"Dad invited you over for dinner."

"Sh*t," he cursed, running his hand over his face. I couldn't help but chuckle at his behavior. It's been four years and my real father still doesn't approve of me of having a boyfriend. Call it silly if you want, but if you weren't there for the first eighteen years of your daughter's life then you tend to get a bit overprotective.

"And that's not all." I grinned.

"What is it? Please don't tell me you told Sam that you're pregnant." His face went pale. "Sh*t sh*t sh*t. He's going to kill me." He banged his fist to his head then whipped his face to look at me.

"F*ck no! He'll do much worse. He's bound to cut off my balls." Tyler cried.

I tilted my head back and laughed.

"That's not all I told him." I teased.

"Are you trying to kill me woman? Do you really want to attend my funeral and watch your father go behind bars?" Tyler shouted, horror written all over his face.

"Tyler calm down. I told him you proposed after finding out that there's a baby on the way. You could say that he was satisfied that you're taking responsibility." I shrugged.

Tyler let out a breath of relief.

"So he doesn't hate me?" he asked.

"I don't know. We'll have to see this afternoon."

"But he's not going to kill me right?" he asked, his eyes widened. I rolled my eyes and shook my head.

"No he's not."

"So I'm not going to die?" he asked, smiling in joy.

"Tyler, you still have to deal with Blake remember?" I pointed out. The smile on his face immediately dropped.

"F*ck," he whispered.

"And Ethan." I shrugged my shoulders.

Tyler let out a dramatic cry.

"I'm going to die! That's it. I'll never see my son or daughter!" He wailed.

"Let's not forget Granny Grace."

"Damn it! You just had to remind me of that crazy woman. The last time I saw her, she threatened to sell my balls on eBay." Tyler shivered. I let out a loud laugh and patted his shoulder.

"It's okay. I won't let that happen." I grinned.

Tyler sent me a glare.

"You better," he mumbled. "I still wonder how the hell is that woman still alive . . ."

I shrugged my shoulders before pinched his cheek roughly earning me a slap on the hand.

"When's dinner supposed to be?" Tyler asked.

"Ethan wants us home early. Maybe at two thirty," I said.

"And what time is it now?" he asked.

I shrugged before I grabbed my phone. I took it from the counter besides the bed and turned it on to look at the time.

“Sh*t.”

“What’s wrong?” Tyler asked.

I immediately got up and ran to the bathroom to wash up.

“It’s one fifty-five!” I shouted. “We have only thirty-five minutes to get ready.”

“So?” he mumbled while walking into the bathroom to see me strip my clothes off before hopping into the shower.

“Do you really want to be late? That’ll only make Dad and Blake want to throw you into the river even more.” I pointed out, as I closed the curtains.

“Sh*t, you’re right!” Tyler shouted, rushing out of the bathroom.

“When will I ever impress your family?” Tyler screamed from our room. The water was already running and I was scrubbing the shampoo off my hair before I spoke.

“When Grandma becomes sane.”

“You’re not helping, Gem!” He shouted, running into the bathroom naked.

“Hey, can’t you see I’m trying to shower alone here?”

“I don’t want to be late.” Tyler jumped into the shower.

“Then use the other bathroom, idiot.”

“Yeah and miss a sight like this? No, thank you.” He grinned, taking the shampoo bottle into his hands. I gave him a stern look.

“Keep your eyes to yourself.” I pointed my finger at his chest. “They’re the ones who got me pregnant in the first place.” I mumbled, shaking my head. Tyler chuckled before pecking me on the lips.

“Hey, I can’t help it.” He shrugged innocently.

“Is that what you’re going to tell dad when he asks why you got his daughter pregnant?” I teased.

His face immediately dropped.

“Damn it Gem, you’re not making me feel any better.” He hid his face into his hands.

“Baby, I’m just joking with you.” I laughed before turning around to face the water.

“Maybe . . .” I mumbled.

After what seems like forever, we finally hopped out of the shower and got dressed. To say that Tyler was scared for his life was an understatement. He was practically in fear of losing it. He didn't even touch me throughout the whole time of showering which rarely happens. But other than that everything went smoothly. We both got ready under twenty minutes and headed outside to Tyler's car. The drive wasn't long. The apartment was only five minutes away from dad's house.

It still amazes me how much things have changed these passed four years. I finally have a wonderful yet crazy family who cared and loved me a little bit too much. Everything was amazing. Now a baby was on its way and I'd soon have a loving husband, that is if no one kills him, of course; and even though, everything may seem wonderful, I still hold a place dear in my heart for my dead parents.

They might not be here but I know for sure that they'd be happy for me. And even though Ethan was never my real father, I still considered him my dad. After all, he did raise me and love throughout the years.

I remember the day the DNA test results came out many years ago. It still feels as if it was only yesterday. That day was so overwhelming. Not only did I learn that I had a dad, but I had a brother too, and two uncles and three amazing cousins. Oh and let's not forget a grandmother, of course. They all treated me as if I was never gone in the first place, and I know hearing about my real father being overprotective might seem odd because let's face it, when did he ever care?

But it looked as if things have changed for him since I came into his life. I mean yes, he still acted grumpy and cranky with that big belly of his but I knew deep down he cared about the daughter he never knew he had. I will never forget the scene I saw that day when he read the results. His tears will never leave my mind.

To this day I don't know why he cried. Were they happy tears or were they sad ones? Were they disappointed tears because he was almost too late to witness my childhood? Unable to see me grow up?

I snapped out of my thoughts when I felt the car come to a stop. I looked out of the window to see the familiar house. I remember I tried to buy my family a new house. I wanted to help but granny refused. She started shouting, telling me how this was her mother's house and how she'd

never betray her by leaving so I just left it to that. It seems as if this house was very important to all of them so I wasn't going to take it away.

Tyler and I stepped out of the car and walked to the front door. Tyler was shaking the whole time, so I held his hand, assuring him that things were going to be okay.

"Relax," I whispered as I knocked on the door. Tyler took a deep breath as the door open.

"Everything's going to be oka—"

"DUCK!" We heard someone yell. Tyler and I ducked just in time to see a vase being thrown over our heads. My eyes widened when I heard the crash from behind and I looked in front to see Andy running pass us right outside the house as Zayn followed behind.

"Run for your lives!" Andy yelled.

"The demon's awake!" Zayn cried.

"And she's angry!" They yelled at the same time before rushing around the house and towards the backyard. Tyler's face went pale as he noticed the old terrifying woman, who was holding a cane, run towards him. It looked as if Tyler was about to pee his pants and make a run for it but Ethan and my father showed up out of nowhere and shoved a pill down her throat. I heard Tyler let out a sigh of relief.

"I thought I was a goner for a min—" Tyler shut his mouth immediately when he noticed Blake marching at us.

"Run," I whispered, only now noticing the furious look written all over my brother's face.

"W-what?" he asked, whipping his head to look at me.

"I said run. Can't you see the look on Blake's face?" I whispered harshly.

"What look?" Tyler asked, taking a step back as Blake got closer.

"Like he wants to kill."

And with that Tyler turned around, and ran towards the backyard, screaming the fact that he wanted to live.

"Hey! You get back here and face me like a man!" Blake yelled before running past me.

"Don't scare him too much! I want him alive! He's the father of your future nephew or niece!" I yelled at Blake but he paid no attention to me. I

then saw Blake take off his shoe and throw it at Tyler's head before shouting out some curse words.

I rolled my eyes and turned to look back into the house. This was completely normal for me. Blake always treated Tyler like this. Not like it was something big but I couldn't help but think that it was funny.

Shaking my head, I stepped into the house, ignoring uncle Ethan's screams and dad's attempt to calm his mother down before walking over to the kitchen to see Lucas, who I used to call Jerry, cook with Ally by his side.

"Crystal!" Ally yelled running towards me.

I leaned over a bit to hug her now taller frame before ruffling her hair.

"How's my little angel doing?" I asked.

"Doing much better now that you're here!" She grinned. I smiled at her before I looked up at my other uncle.

"What's up with Grandma?" I asked.

"She heard that she was going to become a Great Grandmother and flipped." Lucas chuckled while shaking his head.

"Say, where's your boyfriend?" he asked.

I ignored the fact that he used the term boyfriend instead of fiancé and answered his question.

"As usual." I shrugged my shoulders. "Running away from Blake."

"Like always," he muttered.

I was about to say something else when I heard loud footsteps heading towards the kitchen. I turned around and watched as Tyler ran towards me, looking like a deer who was running away from a hungry lion. At first I thought he was going to hide right behind me but he ran passed me and towards the kitchen window. He then opened a drawer quickly and took out a butcher knife.

"Uh...Baby what are you doing?" I asked, concerned.

"Saving my life!" he shouted. "Your brother wants to kill me!" He cried.

I rolled my eyes.

"Tyler, Blake always wants to kill you." I pointed out.

"Yeah well it seems as if today is the day where his dreams finally come true because I just ran around the whole damn house being chased with a shovel." He breathed out, wiping the sweat off his forehead.

“Oh come on, you’re exaggerating.” I chuckled. Tyler opened his mouth to speak but shut it immediately when Blake came running in and indeed was carrying a shovel.

“Didn’t I tell you not to lay a finger on my little sister before marriage?” Blake hissed.

“Crystal baby, do something,” Tyler whispered, standing right behind me.

“Blake! Stop! You already scared the living daylights out of him, now look he already has some white hair.”

Blake let out a huff before glaring at Tyler.

“Fine, but I got my eyes on you mister! We’ll be having a talk soon after dinner.” And with that Blake turned around and walked out of the kitchen with the shovel still in his hand.

“Idiots,” I muttered under my breath and walked out of the kitchen to check up on my father with Tyler following right behind me. I could already tell that this was going to be a very long day.

* * *

Once dinner was over and Tyler had the talk with almost everyone, coupled with being threatened multiple times (including one where his balls would be sold off on eBay) while being the receiving end of glares, we finally got into the car to drive home. As Tyler was about to drive down the road, I immediately stopped him and asked him to drive in the other direction.

He asked me why many times but I stayed quiet, telling him to just drive us to the nearest flower shop which would be open. After buying some flowers, Tyler asked where we were going once again.

“I want to tell my parents that I’m pregnant and am getting married.” I smiled.

Tyler gave me a confused look.

“But Sam already knows.” Tyler pointed out.

I gave him a pointed look.

His eyes widened a look of realization dawned on his features.

“Oh!” he said before driving to us the graveyard where my parents were. Once we made it there, I gathered all the flowers in my hands and

told Tyler to hop out of the car with me.

“Y-you want me to come?” he asked surprised.

“Of course,” I whispered.

Tyler nodded then opened his car door. We both hopped out and walked beside each other in silence, our hands intertwined. Once we made it to my parents’ grave, I sat down on the cold ground and placed the flowers by their headstones. I rubbed my belly as Tyler sat beside me, taking my hand. I pushed back the tears which were threatening to come out as I looked at Tyler. He gave me a sad smile along with a brief nod of encouragement.

“Mom. Dad.” I breathed out. “As you know, Tyler is my boyfriend but we have some great news,” I said, trying to keep my voice from trembling. Tyler pulled me to his chest and kissed my cheek.

“Go on,” he whispered.

“We’re pregnant. I-I mean I’m pregnant but we’re getting married.” I corrected myself as Tyler laughed softly at my mistake.

“And we’re very happy.” I smiled up at Tyler, kissing his lips.

“Very,” he whispered.

I turned my face to look back at my parents’ stones.

“You might not be here with me now, but I know that you’ll always be in my heart. You don’t have to worry about the child. He or she will grow up with an amazing family who will love and care for them no matter what.” I choked as a tear slipped down my cheek. Tyler’s hands made their way up to my face and wiped it away.

“I promise I’ll take care of both you two, and the ones in the future,” he said as he placed his hand on my stomach.

“Mom, dad,” I whispered looking up at the sky.

“I’m finally at peace.”

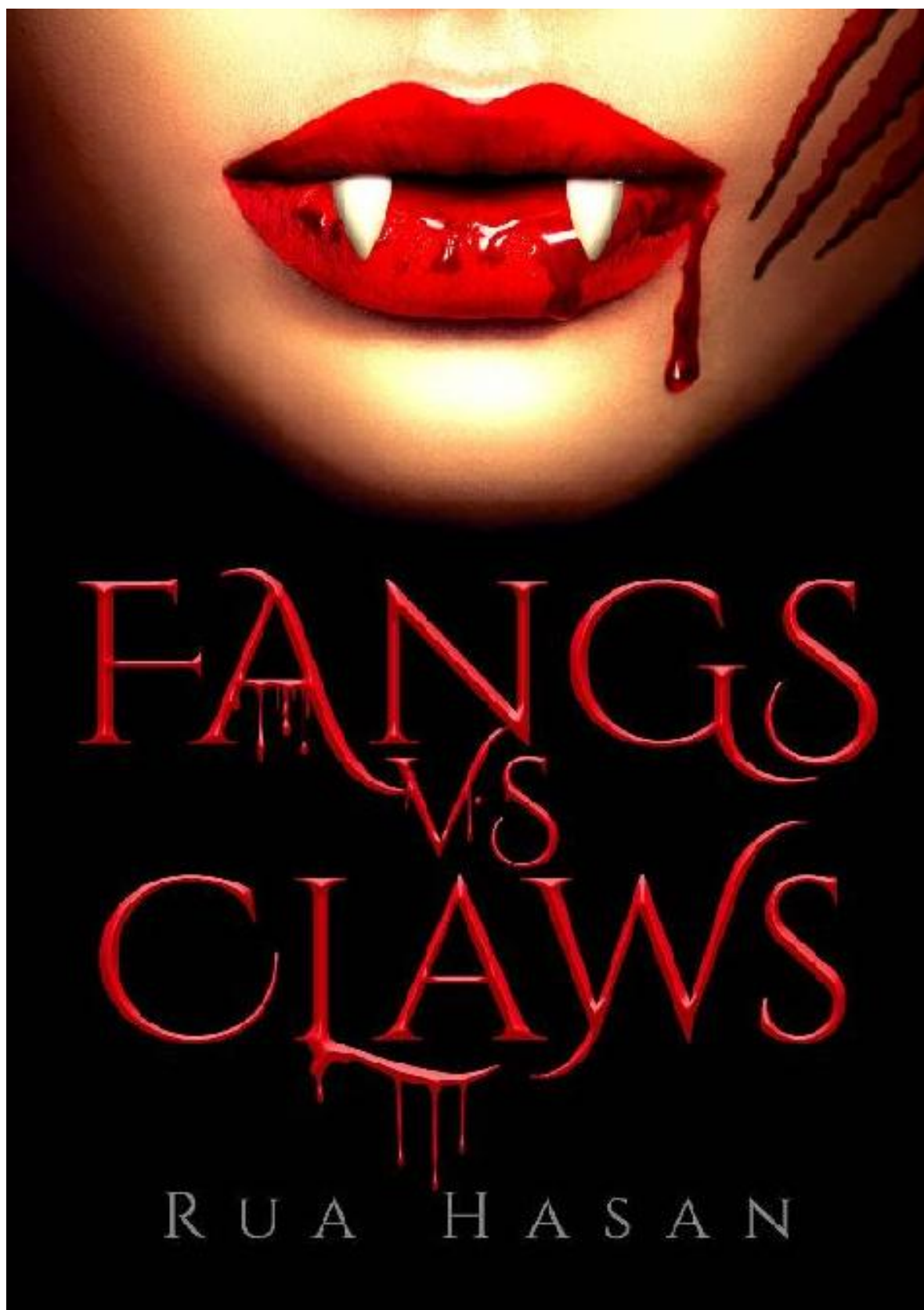
THE END

Can't get enough of Crystal and Tyler? Make sure you sign up for the author's blog to find out more about them!



Get these two bonus chapters when you sign up at rua-hasan.awesomethors.org.

Here is a sample from another story you may enjoy:



CHAPTER 1

STELLA

“Alice!” I yelled.

“I swear to God, if you don’t come out from where you’re hiding, I’m leaving!” I threatened.

Again, I was met with silence.

I swear this girl is crazy; she does this all the time — tells me to go grab something, and when I’m back, she’s gone. Yes, she’s my best friend and is like a sister to me. But come on, let’s face it, she can get distracted pretty easily.

A couple weeks ago, I gave her one thing to do. One thing! And that was to watch over Billy, a six-year-old human that could get a little too excited at times. His parents were out celebrating their seventh year anniversary, and they left him in my care.

I was so busy that day; I had a dance rehearsal at two, and then, had a choir concert at three. Living for so long gives you the advantage to try out new things. Anyway, I had to watch over Billy at two thirty. I was so stressed out to the point where I called Alice to watch over him for one hour. One freakin’ hour!

And you know what I found when I came back? A pile of Billy’s dad’s collection of shoe laces put together to make a piece of art by my not so smart best friend.

And you want to know where Billy was at the time when Alice decided to become an artist and touch things that don’t belong to her? At his grandmother’s house which was five blocks away. That little troublemaker

walked all the way there, and when I came back, Alice didn't know where he was and started to panic.

We looked for him everywhere while I was giving Alice a useless lecture that I wished actually helped. Half an hour passed, and his pissed off parents came home with an annoyed grandmother holding a sleeping Billy.

I swear that day I heard so many "You should know better than this," and "How could you leave a child alone out on the street?" and also some complaints from Billy's dad on who touched his collection.

A sound behind a couple of bushes broke me out of my thoughts. I stopped and started to tiptoe to where the sound was coming from. Once I was near it, I bent down, getting ready to attack. I counted to three in my mind, then I jerked up and jumped over the bush.

I landed heavily over Alice eating a bag of chips.

"Oh my gosh. Stella, get off me. You're too heavy. What did you eat for breakfast? A horse?"

I got off her, ignored her comment, and gave her a pointed look.

"Really, Alice? What on earth are you doing?" I yelled. "You know I'm supposed to be home by four. My parents think I'm at school studying with a couple of vampire friends."

She gave me a lazy smile while she continued to stuff some potato chips into her mouth.

"Oh, relax. It's only three thirty. See!" She pointed at her watch.

"And besides, I was hungry. I just went to grab a snack," she said, pointing at the large supermarket a few blocks away.

I raised one of my eyebrows at her.

"You do realize that I went to grab some sandwiches from the car, and it would have taken only a minute. How on earth did you get there and come back that fast?" I asked.

"There's something called werewolf speed, my vampire friend. It helps to use it," she said with a full mouth.

I just slapped my forehead and gave her an annoyed look. "Well, my werewolf friend,"—I threw my hands up, making air quotes—"your stupid watch is broken. It's four already, and I'm going to get into so much trouble."

Her eyes widened then she got up from the ground, grabbed, and shook my shoulders.

I gave her a questioning look and tried to stop her from shaking me, but it was no use. She just kept on shaking me.

“What are you doing?” I yelled at her.

“Get up,” she said. “You’ve been sleeping for hours.”

□

What?

Slowly Alice’s voice started to fade and grew more like my mom’s. I opened my eyes to find my mom shaking me from the front seat while holding a sandwich and a blood bag.

“Hey, sweetie. You’ve been sleeping for hours. Have a bite,” she said while handing me over the sandwich and the blood bag.

I was lying down in the back seat of our car. It’s probably been days since we first landed in America. We were in London before and now traveling to California by car. It was a usual thing for us.

My mother, my father, and I have been traveling ever since I was born. It was normal for us vampires because we stopped aging at the age of twenty and wanted to avoid any unnecessary questions from humans. I’d been everywhere. Just name it. Living for two hundred years became quite boring at times, so traveling helped.

I smiled at my mom while taking a bite from my sandwich, and I crunched my nose when I realized that my dad was singing some Backstreet Boys song while driving. I wasn’t such a big fan of his singing.

My parents were around six hundred years old but looked like they were in their twenties, while I was born in 1816, which made me two hundred years old. I stopped aging one hundred and eighty years ago when I turned twenty.

Usually, when humans asked how we were related, we would say we were siblings because of how we looked. Yeah, I know. Weird.

I took a sip from the blood bag, enjoying the wonderful taste. We didn’t drink blood from humans. We believed they deserve to live as much as we do, so we learned to control ourselves around them. It was not a problem for us. We learned to hide our cravings around them throughout the years.

Besides, we usually drank from rabbits and blood bags. One of my mom’s human friends was a doctor who lived in the Philippines, and she sent us our blood supplies.

“Where are we?” I asked my parents.

My dad looked at the GPS and said, "We're somewhere in Los Angeles."

He paused.

"Or is it Orange County?" he said more to himself than to us.

My mom looked at him with an annoyed expression and started to rub her eyes with the palm of her hands.

"Lucas, please don't tell me we're lost again."

He glanced at my mom then looked back at the road and said, "Bella, sweetie, relax. I know what I'm doing."

Sure.

He said that all the time, and the next thing we knew, we were in China. Don't ask.

I lay my head on the back of the seat and got comfortable.

This is going to take a while. We're definitely lost.

My mom always tried to convince my dad to ask for directions, but he always refused, saying that he knew what he was doing.

I couldn't help but notice that something in the air smelled funny.

It smells like wet dog. Or maybe I'm just imagining things.

I shrugged off the thought when the memory of the dream I just had came into mind. Sadness crept into my heart. I tried not to let it get to me, but the memories overtook my mind. I held back the tears threatening to come out. Thinking of Alice always did this to me.

I took another sip from the blood bag when the car came to a sudden stop. My head was about to hit the front seat, but I was held back by the seat belt.

I heard my dad cursing some colorful words which increased my confusion.

Suddenly, that strange smell I noticed earlier hit me like a brick in the face. It smelled so familiar, but I couldn't seem to figure it out. I heard my mom gasp. But that was not what caught my attention. It was what she said next.

"Werewolves."

My eyes widened when I realized what was going on.

Oh, shit. No, this can't be happening.

I looked at my dad who had a worried expression on.

"Dad, please don't tell me you led us into a pack."

He looked at me but said nothing.

So that was why the strange scent smelled so familiar. It was the smell of werewolves. It was similar to Alice's smell.

My mom was lecturing my dad, saying how reckless he was to lead us into a suicide mission.

Let me tell you that werewolves and vampires didn't get along. They hated each other, which was the reason why every time Alice and I met, it had to be done in secret. My parents didn't like the fact that I was hanging out with a werewolf. But that didn't stop me. I didn't exactly hate werewolves; it was just I respected anyone who respected me.

The smell got stronger, and my parents got out of the car when a strong voice boomed through the forest.

"You bloodsuckers are trespassing."

When I got out of the car, I was met with about ten werewolves standing side by side. The guy standing in the middle of the group had power radiating from him; but thankfully, I could guess that he was not the Alpha. I guessed he was the one who was just talking.

Wait. Did he just call us bloodsuckers? That mutt!

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank everyone who told me I can do it. Thank you Wattpad for giving me a platform to write in for so many years. Thank you to my readers who supported me throughout my struggles with writing and handled my flaws. Thank you for always sending me love and being patient with me when I needed it that most. Thank you to my friends and family members for always being there for me when I needed the most. And most of all, thank you Typewriter Pub for always giving my imperfect books a chance.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you so much for reading *Tyler's Gem*! I can't express how grateful I am for reading something that was once just a thought inside my head.

Please feel free to send me an email. Just know that my publisher filters these emails. Good news is always welcome.

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One last thing: I'd love to hear your thoughts on the book. Please leave a review on Amazon or Goodreads because I just love reading your comments and getting to know you!

Can't wait to hear from you!

Rua Hasan

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Rua Hasan is a major bookworm who loves to read and write. She was born in Palestine and grew up between California and Jordan. She is a psychology major and is currently attending college to pursue her dream in becoming a therapist one day. She started writing at the age of 14 and wrote her first book at the age of 15. She published her very first book 'Fangs Vs Claws' at the age of 17 and hopes to do more in the future. Rua's goal is to write and spread her words all across the world, hoping that it will make at least one person's day.