

“Maricopa County Body Shop,” I robotically recited, twirling a pen around my fingers as the receiver rested lazily between my ear and shoulder. “No, this is an auto body shop, not a well, not that kind of body shop. We don’t do bachelor parties. I mean, I guess we could, but I don’t think you want to see Ralphie strip. I’m pretty sure it would be traumatizing.”

I wish I could say that this was the first call I’d received inquiring what it cost for three hours of work and I wasn’t talking about a tune up, or an oil change. The Body Shop had the unfortunate phone number that left it a digit off from a strip club out in Phoenix. Most days I found it amusing, playing along with the unknowing caller, but today we were without an air conditioner and I was about as happy as anyone would be on a day verging on 115 degrees.

I was the unlucky person to have to wait for the repairman while everyone else got to celebrate the Fourth of July. To be honest, I was surprised someone would even come out on a national holiday, but when my father told me Juan would be in around two, I figured he wasn’t one to celebrate such a day, or at least he was someone who’d rather get paid time and a half for a few hours of work than grill up some hot dogs with the family.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t be of more assistance,” I finally said after a few more minutes of convincing him that I wasn’t a stripper. “But if you ever need a brake job, then I’m your girl.”

I set the phone back on the cradle, my head falling to the palm of my hand as my eyes drifted down to the magazine I’d been reading before I was interrupted. I wasn’t even sure what the article I was skimming was about. All I knew was that it was out of *Car and Driver* and it was about as interesting as a brick. We were old school here at The Body Shop. We didn’t have computers and there was no wireless internet access. We kept track of records and receipts with the use of file cabinets, and appointments were listed in a book that was about as old as I was. I tried to convince my dad that a conversion to the twenty-first century would make life easier, but he was set on doing things the way they’d always been done around here.

Juan strolled in fifteen minutes before two, a rusted toolbox in his hands as he greeted me with a warm hello. “I will have air fixed in fifteen minutos.”

I just smiled, watching as he pulled open the door that led to the garage. He’d been here before when the air broke in March and I was sure he’d been the shop’s repairman of choice for many years. He had this chubby tanned face with salt and pepper hair. He always had stories to tell me when he had the time. I couldn’t understand most of them because of his thick accent, but I appreciated the gesture.

The loud cracks coming from the vents were enough for me to lose my train of thought, simply closing the magazine and pushing it to the corner of my desk. I’d only be here for twenty more minutes. I was sure I could keep myself busy, or at least I hoped I could. I tried organizing pens, tossing out the ones that were missing caps, or didn’t work anymore, but that only took me five minutes.

I was about to reorganize the already organized file cabinet when I heard the side door open. Generally we kept it locked. Most costumers used the door located next to the garage, but I left it open for Juan. “I’m sorry,” I raised my voice in hopes they would hear me. “I’m sorry, but we aren’t open today.”

I didn’t hear the door slam shut again, meaning the person didn’t hear me, or they were ignoring me. I had this whole speech in my head that consisted of telling them to clean their ears out, but I bit my tongue when I saw who it was.

“I went out of my way to bring you coffee and a scone and you tell me you aren’t open?” He gasped, holding up a paper bag in his right hand and a plastic cup in his left. “Jersey Levitz, I’m hurt. I’m so beyond hurt that I’m... I’m-”

“Stephen,” I looked up at him, my brows spiked as I set my hands on top of the calendar laying on the desk. “Shut up.”

“And then you tell me to shut up?” He shook his head, setting the bag and cup in front of me as he pulled out a seat. “What kind of friend are you, Jersey? You call me to pick you up. I bring you coffee and a scone, and-”

“You’re so dramatic.”

He shrugged, tearing open the bag and breaking off a piece of the baked good. “I try.”

We sat there mindlessly talking until Juan walked back in. His blue pants dusted with black gunk and a layer of filth covered his face, but he was still smiling. “All done.”

I nodded, pulling open the top drawer where my dad kept the checks. I flipped through the pieces of paper until I came across one with his name. I stood up, smiling as I handed it to him. “Thank you for coming out on such short noticed.”

“It was no problem.”

He shuffled out the door and when I heard it slam, I let out a sigh, grabbing my sunglasses and placing them over my eyes. I adjusted the navy colored skirt I had on, pulling it down slightly after it seemed to ride up from all the sitting I’d been doing. “Ready?”

Stephen nodded, getting out of his chair and turning toward the door. I watched him walk out of the shop, his baggy tank floating away from his body as he disappeared into the hot day. I flicked the light switch off, punching the code into the alarm system before I joined him in his jeep.

“Are you going home?” He asked, his eyes shielded by a set of black frames as he turned onto the street. “Or are you going to Sarah’s?”

Of course he forgot. He was a boy. He was practically programmed to forget. “Do you not recall the conversation we had yesterday?” I replied, my head tilted toward him. “You know, when we were laying by your pool and I mentioned this barbeque to you that was happening at Sarah’s house? And then I may have extended an invitation...”

He shot me a lopsided smile. “Was this before or after Josh jumped into the pool naked? Because everything’s a little fuzzy after that.”

I rolled my eyes, my head falling against the window as street signs and traffic lights filled the space around me. “Are you gonna come, or what? I mean, I understand if you can’t, or if you don’t want to. You’re leaving tomorrow and I know you need to pack and spend time with your family-”

“Jersey?” He cut me off, his lips tight in a smile. “I’ll come if you stop talking.”

“Fair enough.”

When we finally got to Sarah’s, the street was lined with cars. I knew there were a lot of people coming. I just hadn’t realized this many people.

I jumped down from the Jeep, pulling my skirt down once more before I slammed the door shut. Stephen was waiting for me next to the front of the car, a smile on his face as he slung his arm over my shoulders. “I’m going

to miss this.”

I looked up at him, “Walking into Sarah’s backyard?”

“No,” he shook his head. “Hanging out with you.”

“I’m sure you’ll forget all about me when you step on that plane.”

He just gave me a weak laugh. “You’re hardly forgettable, Jers.”

We didn’t say anything more, just walking in silence into the backyard, his arm still hanging over the fabric of my tank top as the sun beat down on us.

I didn’t think to pay attention to car colors, and shapes, and makes, and models because I honestly didn’t think it mattered, until I saw him standing next to the pool. His hair was shorter and tousled, like he just got it cut, and copper from the sun. He had a pair of glasses covering his eyes and despite the heat, he was wearing a thermal type shirt, his sleeves pushed up well past his elbows. I knew he saw me come in. *Everyone* had, merely because the gate leading to the backyard had this ear-wrenching squeak that always caused heads to turn.

To say things had gotten better with Garrett and I would be the overstatement of the year. In fact, things hadn’t changed much at all. We didn’t talk. We hardly acknowledge the other’s presence. It wasn’t ideal and it always made things awkward, but it had been going on long enough to not effect anyone anymore.

“You want to leave?” Stephen asked, his arm falling away from me as I swallowed the lump in my throat.

I always made it a point to never bring Stephen around places I knew Garrett would be. I wasn’t trying to hide the fact that we were friends. I mean, Garrett probably knew we hung out on a regular basis, but I also knew they didn’t get along and I wasn’t about to add anymore tension to an already tense situation.

“No.” I shook my head. “It’s kind of hard to avoid him when my best friends are his best friends.”

I took one more deep breath before I mustered up enough courage to walk deeper into the yard, going out of my way to steer clear of the pool, walking around folding tables and plastic chairs, smiling at my uncle manning the grill before I motioned for Stephen to sit in one of the two empty seats at the table Sarah and Fallon were at.

“Hey, Jers,” Sarah squinted up at me, her face pink from the lack of sun-block she was wearing. “Stephen Gomez, tell your brother that if he drunk dials me at three in the morning again, I’m going personally shove his cell phone down his throat.”

He nodded, a laugh falling from his throat. “Consider it noted.”

Sarah didn’t have a problem with my friendship with Stephen because she hung out with him on occasion as well. They were friends and they’d been friends just as long as she’d been friends with the other guys, and the fact that Garrett didn’t like him didn’t seem to bother her. Fallon, on the other hand, thought Stephen was my worst idea yet, worse than the paper and definitely worse than not telling Garrett I never passed it in. She didn’t like the way he looked at me and she didn’t like the way he always found a way to touch me. She said it was obvious that he liked me, but I continued to reassure her that Stephen and I would never be more than just friends. She still didn’t buy it.

“Have you guys finished packing?” I asked, reaching over Sarah’s plate to grab a piece of celery from a plastic container.

"I can't believe you think we've started packing," Fallon laughed, a fork lazily hanging from her fingers.

"You realize you're leaving tomorrow, right?" I asked, my eyebrows spiked as I looked back and forth between the two girls.

"We're backpacking, Jers." Sarah replied. "One backpack, that's it."

"Her idea," Fallon added. "Not mine."

Sarah twisted her head to Fallon. "It's called backpacking for a reason, Fal. *Backpacking*. We're *backpacking*, not three-suitcases-and-a-carryon-ing."

Fallon scoffed, shoving a forkful of potato salad into her mouth. "You really think I'm only bringing one bag, don't you?"

"You are," Sarah insisted. "All you need is your passport, an open mind and maybe some clean underwear."

"And Mama's Black Card." Fallon smiled.

Part of me was jealous of what would be their summer. I'd been hearing all about it since they came up with the idea in April. Just traveling around Europe's finest countries with not so much of a plan. Of course I wanted to go and they begged me to, but I'd already signed up for a summer course and I figured focusing on school was a much better idea than watching Fallon and Sarah drink around the world.

"I wish you'd come," Sarah nudged me in the side, a sympathetic smile hanging from her lips.

"Someone needs to stay behind." I replied. "Someone needs to be responsible and make sure everything for the apartment is finalized."

She rolled her eyes. "Fuck responsibility. That's what parents are for."

Those were her words to live by, but I just couldn't come to terms with that. Sure, I'd evolved over the last seven months, mostly in the fashion department because Fallon literally torched every article of clothing I owned, but I also stopped defining my life by the guilt and the pain I felt. Some days were better than others, but I was getting by and that's only because I was staying focused on school, leaving very little room to look for love, not that I needed to look hard to begin with because let's face it, I was still in love with Garrett, but I tried not to think about that.

"I gotta go," Stephen said after looking down at his cell phone. "Tour issues."

I nodded, watching as he stood up and then mocked him, wrapping my arms around his neck while he wrapped his around my waist, pulling more closer to him. I laid my head on his chest and out of the corner of my eyes, I saw Garrett mindlessly looking at us, that indifferent look resting on his face. I closed my eyes, trying to forget about him. "I probably won't see you until you get back," I mumbled, pulling away so I could see his face. "Just have fun, okay? And don't get into too much trouble over there."

"I'll try not to."

When he left, I fell back into my chair, greeted instantly by Fallon's two cents. "Yeah, and he doesn't want in your pants."

My mouth fell, but I didn't blush. I somehow managed to stop doing that, mostly because my sex life wasn't

exactly a hot topic these days, thus making the need to blush minimal. “He doesn’t...He doesn’t want in my pants. We’re friends.”

“Yeah, a friend that wants in your pants.”

“I’m gonna have to agree with Fal on this one, Jers.” Sarah said with a tight smile. “Stephen Gomez has the hots for you.”

“Stop it,” My voice hit an octave higher than it was used to. “No, he doesn’t.”

“C’mon, Jers,” Fallon said slowly. “He knew Garrett was standing right there. He wouldn’t have hugged you the way he did if he didn’t think it would hurt Garrett in some way.”

“I hugged him first.” I said defensively. “And Garrett wouldn’t...I mean, he *shouldn’t* care who I hug. You don’t see me making a big deal when he’s with another girl-”

“Because he’s never with other girls,” Sarah cut me off. “That and you run out of the room the minute you see him. So, it would be pretty hard for you to see him with someone else, not that he is. He’s a fucking moody little bitch now. Pretty much scares anything with a vagina away.”

It definitely wasn’t the first time I’d heard that and it probably wouldn’t be the last. I’d forever be the manipulative little bitch that turned Garrett Nickelsen into a moody *little bitch*. Though, no one actually referred to me as a manipulative bitch, I still knew they were thinking it.

Before I realized it, the sun was setting, the clock ticking well past eight and everyone seemed to be leaving.

“Alright,” Sarah said, standing up, the guys clustered around the table. “Five AM sharp. I swear if you assholes are late, I’ll make sure all of you lose feeling below the waist.”

“Why did we book a flight with her again?” I heard Jared ask.

“Because,” Sarah stated simply. “Because you wanted to spend as much time as possible with me before we go our separate ways in London.”

“Oh, yeah. That must be it.”

The guys didn’t hate me so much anymore. I don’t think they hated me in the first place. I’m sure they weren’t exactly happy I broke their best friend’s heart, but they never went out of their way to be rude to me. Sure, they liked to tease me about it, but it never went further than that.

“Now, Jersey,” John started and I lifted my eyes from the table cloth I was staring at, simply because I didn’t want to chance making eye contact with Garrett. “Don’t go breaking any hearts while we’re gone.”

I smiled tightly, my forehead spiked high as I drummed my fingers along the table. “I’ll try not to.”

Then they left.

And Fallon and Sarah scrambled upstairs to start packing for their eight AM flight to New York.

And I was by myself, which was how I’d be spending the rest of the summer.

I should probably get used to it.

I yawned, my eyes barely open as I tried my best to just stay awake. It was just past five o'clock, the sun still an hour shy of rising and I was sitting on Sarah's front steps waiting for the boys to get here. They were late, of course and Sarah was in the middle of having a heart attack.

"Y'know," she muttered, pacing the length of her driveway, her hands glued to her hips as her over-stuffed backpack jostled against the fabric of her t-shirt. "My parents were more than willing to drive us, but I figured that the guys were already going there, so why make them fight airport traffic if they didn't have to?"

Fallon shrugged as her head fell against my shoulder. "They're only a few minutes late and it's not like there aren't flights to JFK every hour."

"Not the point," Sarah grunted. "They're big boys. They should know how to use a watch."

"Isn't this suppose to be a carefree, go-with-the-flow kind of trip?" I asked, another yawn falling from my lips.

"Get me across the Atlantic Ocean and then we'll talk about being carefree."

I didn't press the subject any further. I didn't have the energy to deal with a stressed Sarah at this hour, or any hour, for that matter. I was merely here to see them off, wish the well and then go back to bed until I had class at ten.

"They're just so irresponsible, like how is it possible to be that negligent? Don't they know we have to check-in and go through security, and-"

"Sarah," Fallon snapped. "They're five minutes late. Give them a break."

I couldn't help laughing. With Sarah's stress level at an all time high and Fallon's sleep deprivation, they made quite the pair. They were good together, though. I knew once they got past the small bumps, they'd have the summer to remember. It was good that they were doing it together. They liked all of the same things. They had that party lifestyle, and I knew if I went I'd probably just hold them back.

"Fucking finally."

I lifted my eyes at the sound of Sarah's voice, a sea of headlights washing over the street causing me to squint. If that wasn't a wake up call, I really didn't know what was. I tried to adjust my eyes, but they just weren't mixing with the sudden brightness.

I set my hands on the top of the step, pushing my body up. I stretched my arms, my t-shirt lifting up well past my belly button, causing me to instantly pull it down as I walked to the sidewalk. There were three cars, which I guess was what it took to take a band and their instruments to the airport. I knew one car to belong to John's dad, another belonged to Jared's girlfriend and the last one belonged to Garrett's brother.

"I wish you would change your mind," Sarah said, wrapping her arms tight around my back. "You still have time."

"Have fun," I laughed, my eyes drifting over to Trey's car, Garrett sitting in the passenger seat, his gaze focused straight ahead. "Don't end up in jail. Don't fall in love with some Italian boy. And don't forget to send postcards."

"I won't," she smiled, pulling away from me as a car door slammed from behind us.

“You girls ready?” Trey asked, lifting his trunk up, his weight resting against the car. “You’re more than welcome to come for the ride, Jersey.”

“Oh, no. I’m-”

“Come!” Fallon said, her hand instantly latched onto mine. “Come. I’m not going to see you until the end of August. The least you can do is come along for the ride.”

I groaned, my eyes landing back on the boy in the front seat. I’d normally have an escape route if it came to being in the same place as Garrett, but I couldn’t really escape from something that I was voluntarily putting myself into. “I don’t-”

“You’re coming,” Sarah insisted, pulling at my other hand.

It wasn’t so much of a choice now. Sarah and Fallon pushed me into the car, conveniently putting me in the middle so I couldn’t throw myself out the window while we driving down the highway. I’d gotten so good at avoiding these types of situation that I forgot what it felt like to hyperventilate when I was around him.

“Have you guys decided where you’re going yet?” Trey asked, one hand resting on the wheel while the other was placed on his knee.

“We’ll decide once we get to London.” Fallon answered. “We’re going to pick the first flight leaving and see where it takes us.”

“A little bit dangerous, don’t you think?”

I felt Sarah shrug next to me. “It’s an adventure.”

“Just be careful,” Trey said with a laugh. “They trade women for goats in some of those countries.”

The thought of Sarah and Fallon being traded for live stalk was about as amusing as it sounded, causing me to let out a soft snicker. “I’m sure the second either one of them opens their mouth, they’d get traded right back.”

“They should adopt that tactic in the US.”

I hadn’t heard his voice in months. I never stuck around long enough to hear it, but that didn’t mean I didn’t miss it because I did, especially the way it sounded in the morning when he was still half-asleep. And I suppose I should be upset about the comment he made because it was obviously directed toward me, but I wasn’t, well, maybe a little, but I was just happy to hear him speak.

“But they should extend it past opening their mouths. Some prefer using their words in more creative ways, writing for example.”

“Okay,” Sarah said quickly and I saw Garrett tense up in the front seat. “This car is far too small for you two to get into it now. You had seven months. I think you can wait a few more.”

It would probably be longer than a few more months, considering those were the first words he’d said to me since New Year’s Eve, but it wasn’t like I didn’t try. I called him once, but it went straight to voicemail and I really didn’t think apologizing to a machine was going to get us anywhere, so I just stopped trying all together.

We got to the airport after what felt like an hour of tension. I didn’t think it would be this hard watching my

best friends leave for the summer, but the minute I stepped out of the car, everything seemed to become very clear. I was about to spend the next two months by myself and it did not settle well with me.

“I’m gonna miss you,” Fallon said as she dramatically hugged me.

“I’m gonna miss you, too, Fal.”

“We won’t have to miss each other at all if you just come.”

I think they thought that if they’d nag me enough, I’d suddenly change my mind. And maybe if I had to endure it for another week, I’d crack, but we were standing in the middle of the airport right now and it wasn’t like I could hop on a plane in my pajamas. I wouldn’t even get past security without an ID, or out of the country without a passport.

“Just have a good summer, Fal.”

It was hard watching them walk through those automatic doors, disappearing into the terminal, the beginning of their summer of adventures now starting, but I kept a smile on my face. I didn’t want them, or anyone else to know how jealous I was, or how much I admired their willingness to just drop everything to explore Europe for a few months.

When I got back into Trey’s car, the radio was blasting some morning talk show. I buckled my seatbelt, my ears trying to sort out the words that DJs were saying, but everything was sort of jumbled together.

“Y’know,” Trey started, glancing over at me quickly, the rising sun turning the sky pink and orange as we merged onto the highway. “I normally don’t take kindly to girls who break my little brother’s heart.”

My heart sank slightly. If I was in his position, I wouldn’t take kindly to me either. “I guess I can accept that.”

He laughed, “But, you’re different.”

“I’m different?”

“You’re different,” he repeated. “I mean, he pined after Olivia when they broke up. He turned into a complete pussy. But you, Jersey Levitz, you completely turned him off to the whole female population.”

I was well aware of that and to be honest, it’s the last thing I wanted. I’d feel so much better knowing that he moved on and that he’s happy because that’s all I every wanted for him.

“And do you know why?” He asked, not even giving me a second to reply. “I’ll tell you why. It’s because not one of those three billion other girls out there are you.”

I really didn’t know what to feel, or even if I could feel. I just wanted him to get over me. I wanted him to find someone who deserved him. I wanted him to be happy.

“He is so madly in love with you that he doesn’t know it.” Trey said softly. “Or he does know it. He just won’t admit it.”

I took a deep breath, my eyes lost in the sea of traffic in front of us. I didn’t know what I was suppose to say to that, but I figured the truth was a good place to start. “I guess you wouldn’t believe me if I said the feelings were mutual...”



“No, I’d believe you. I do believe you, actually.” He replied. “I don’t think you set out to break his heart. I don’t even think you set out to fall for him, but you did and now there are consequences.”

And I’d have to live with those consequences for the rest of my life.

By the time Trey dropped me off at my house, I really only had time to shower and grab an apple to go before I left for class, lazily throwing my wet hair into a bun before I ran out of the house. Betsy was about as fond as the Arizona heat as I was, meaning if it was too hot, she decided not to start.

“C’mom, Betsy,” I cooed, twisting the key. “C’mom, don’t make me late for the first day of class.” She squeaked and she sputtered until the engine finally revved.

The only good thing about taking a summer course was that the commuter parking lot was virtually empty, making it easy to get a decent spot on a hot day, but other than that, all you really had to look forward to was sitting in a stuffy lecture hall for six weeks.

I opted out of retaking psychology. It was simply an elective credit and I could make it up in a less stressful class. Principles & The History of Journalism seemed like a better way to spend my summer, at least I could start putting a dent in my major, a small dent, but a dent nonetheless. It helped that the professor was notoriously easy, not that that was what I looked for when selecting classes, but it seemed like a laidback way to spend summer and I could really use the A.

The lecture hall wasn’t completely crowded when I walked in, taking a convenient seat in the second to last row. Students were pretty spread out, leaving plenty of rows empty. I couldn’t imagine many more people showing up. Sitting in a room for three hours, twice a week wasn’t exactly on the top of most college students bucket lists.

I was in the middle of grabbing a pen out of my bag when the door behind me swung open, a mess of brown curls flying down the stairs. If the hair didn’t give him away, his sneakers and jean cut-offs did. For a second, I thought I was in the wrong class. It was a common mistake and I was in a rush when I got into the building. I must have slipped into the wrong room by accident.

“I know you were all probably expecting Professor Morison,” he started, tossing his messenger bag onto the desk before he slid on top of it. “She had a bit of a family emergency and needed to head off to Florida for a few weeks.”

This wasn’t happening. I mean, of course it was happening. This was my sick joke of a life we were talking about. I should have known taking a summer class with an easy professor was too much to ask for.

“I was a little reluctant about taking over this class,” he went on. “Journalism was my minor in college, but it never went further than that.”

I heard this story before. He mentioned it in the beginning of the fall semester when he thought we actually cared about his life.

“As some of you know, I teach psychology here at the university.”

It was then and there I knew I couldn’t last the rest of summer in this class. I just couldn’t face him knowing I failed the first class I took with him. I didn’t want to be judged based on that one decision. So I got up as quietly as possible, throwing the strap of my bag over my shoulder as I carefully climbed up the two steps leading to the door.

“Ms. Levitz?”

I stopped, the palm of my hand resting on the handle. I didn’t turn around, though. I didn’t want to see his face.

“I think maybe you should rethink your major.” He said nonchalantly. “Journalists can’t be afraid to back what they write.” Then he paused and I heard him jump down from the desk. “First lesson of journalism, folks: You Write It, You Own It.”

I knew he knew I wrote the paper. I passed in all the drafts and I’d even stayed after to get his opinions on topics. But maybe he was right. Maybe I did need to rethink my major. Maybe I wasn’t cut out to be a ruthless, conniving journalist. Maybe the past year was just the rudest of awakenings.

When I got back to my car, I cried. I wasn’t sure why, but I cried. I cried until people walking by started looking at me funny and then I rolled out of my parking spot, speeding down the highway well over the posted limit until I got home.

You could imagine my mother’s confusion when I stormed into the house, my shirt soaked with tears as I lunged up the stairs. I couldn’t tell you when I made up my mind, but I think it might have been when my teacher told me the only thing I’d ever wanted to do was probably a bad idea because I didn’t have enough spine.

“Jersey? What’s going on?”

I could barely hear her, the voice muffled by the walls of my closet as I dug through boxes until I pulled out a decent sized backpack. I didn’t bother answering her, my head running circles as I tore apart my dresser, shoving handfuls of underwear and a few bras into the unzipped bag. I followed those with two pairs of shorts, a selection of the first shirts that came into view, a dress or two, and a pair of jeans.

“Jersey, you’re acting like a maniac.”

And I suppose I was, but I didn’t have time to explain. I needed to stay focused and I needed shoes, sandals to be more specific. I was already wearing sneakers and I figured one pair would suffice.

“Jersey Rose,” she grabbed my arm, forcing me to look at her. “What the hell is going on?”

I took a deep breath, my face dropping slightly. “I’m going to Europe.”

Her eyes nearly bugged out of her head. “Europe? You’re going to Europe? I thought...I thought you were taking a class?”

“I was,” I shrugged, scrambling into the adjoining bathroom. I only took the essentials for the sake of packing light and that only included a toothbrush, toothpaste, deodorant, and a razor. “But what’s the point of taking a journalism class when I’m having second thoughts about becoming a journalist?”

“Since...Since when are you having second thoughts?”

“Since today, I guess.”

I walked back into my room, picking my purse up from my bed and dumping all the contents out. I picked through it, tossing old receipts and loose coins onto the floor, only putting my wallet, cell phone and a pack of gum back into it. “Have you seen my passport? I don’t think I’ve used it since we went to that festival in Vancouver last summer.”

She sighed, twisting her arms together before giving me that motherly stare. “Are you sure about this?”

No, I was definitely not sure about this. It was reckless and irresponsible, but maybe that’s what I needed right now. Maybe I needed to be carefree. Maybe I needed to be a kid. Maybe I just needed to make a few mistakes. “I don’t know, but it feels right.”

She nodded slowly, gnawing on her lower lip. “Your passport’s in the drawer in the kitchen. Finish packing. I’ll call the airport.”

It was that simple and it was that easy, and sooner than I realized it, I was back at the airport for the second time that day.

“Be careful,” my mother said as she hugged me. “And call me when you get to New York.”

I nodded, “I love you, Mom.”

“I love you, too, sweetheart.”

It helped that Fallon and Sarah had a five hour layover at JFK, one of the many things Sarah had complained about, but it gave me enough time to catch a 12:30 flight and make it to New York with an hour to spare before their flight to London left.

Security was a mess of hyperactive children and their unenthused parents. I was just happy to make it through before my I missed my flight, literally running down the terminal until I hit Gate 23. There was a line already formed, the door leading to the plane already opened. I tried to catch my breath as I fell into a spot behind an older man.

It took about fifteen minutes for me to get into my seat. On any other day, I’d probably be upset about it being an aisle, but I was just happy to be getting out of here to even care.

“Business or pleasure?”

I turned in the direction the voice came from. She was older, about my mother’s age and her hair was perfectly straight and cut into a chic bob. There was a magazine resting on the fabric of her expensive-looking jeans and a Blackberry on top of that. “What?”

She laughed, “Are you going to New York for business or pleasure?”

“Oh,” I smiled. “A connection,” I clarified. “I’m meeting my friends there. We’re going to Europe.”

The smile on her face grew as her eyes fell back onto the magazine she was reading. “Europe is a very big place.”

“I know.”

“I went there when I was about your age,” she started, not looking away from the article, but her face softened as the memories took over. “It was the best summer of my life. I fell in love. I got my heartbroken. I met some very interesting people. I made some mistakes, but I don’t regret a single thing.”

I wasn’t so sure about the first four things, but I knew didn’t regret this. I knew I *wouldn’t* regret this.

I wasn't much of a runner, or an athlete of any sort. I got winded too easily and tripped over virtually nothing, but I didn't have time to dilly-dally. My next flight left in an hour. The plane would begin boarding in the next forty minutes and I still needed to get a coffee because I was verging on getting a migraine.

But, as luck would have it, the line at Starbucks was about fifteen people deep and I really couldn't afford to miss my flight for a five dollar latte. I could now only hope one of the kiosks had a bottle of Tylenol I could eat and maybe one of those premade coffee drinks. And because luck was obviously on my side, Advil and Sprite would have to do. I didn't care at that point. I just wanted to get to my gate, which seemed to be an adventure in its self.

I got lost because nothing in my life could be easy, but I eventually found Gate 29. It was crowded, nearly every seat taken. I looked around, my eyes running over people until I spotted someone familiar. I found Sarah in a chair against the window, her head resting against the glass as she impatiently drummed on her knees. Fallon was sitting on the floor next to her, her legs twisted into a pretzel as she played some sort of card game with Pat. And then I saw John, arms crossed and eyes closed, sleeping. Jared was next to him on his phone, and I couldn't find Kennedy. Garrett was there, though, sitting on the floor, his knees pressed to his chest with his headphone wire floating down his black t-shirt.

I took one step toward them when Sarah saw me, her eyes going completely wide as I watched her mouth drop, an automatic, "Ohmygod," falling from them. I just smiled, taking another step before I was completely blindsided, my body jerking to the left as a set of arms wrapped around my waist, spinning me around until I felt my soda crawl up my throat.

"What the hell are you doing here?" He smiled, setting me back down on the ground.

I swallowed hard, the whole gate looking at me, and yes, that included Garrett and yes, he looked about as happy as my stomach felt. "I-I'm going to Europe."

"But what about school?"

"I-I dropped the class," I smiled back, watching Sarah stand up out of the corner of my eye. "I just...I needed to get away."

He tried to say something else, but I felt a pull in the other direction, Sarah's teal painted nails digging into my skin. "Stephen, will you excuse us for a second?"

He just nodded because it wasn't like he could stop Sarah, but I really wish I could because my stomach was jumping as she dragged me to the other side of the gate. "Okay," she started, a nervous smile toying on her lips. "I am so happy that you're here and we're going to get to what made you change your mind in a minute, but you need to know something first."

She didn't beat around the bush. Before I could even think about a reasonable response, she was speaking again.

"There's been a change in plans."

I closed my eyes, staying like that for a few seconds before fluttering them open, trying to stay as calm as possible. "What do you mean there was a change in plans? I just flew two thousand miles to go to Europe with you -"

"We're still going to Europe..."

“But...” Because I knew it was coming. There was definitely a but coming.

“But Max lost his passport and LB got mono, and the guys could really use the help around the UK.” She was biting on her lip just waiting for me to freak out, but I tried not to overreact.

“You’ve...You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“We’re still going to Europe,” she started quickly, her face forming another smile. “It’s just a two week delay.”

It wasn’t that I didn’t understand what she was saying. It was crystal clear. I just didn’t want to understand because understanding meant I was accepting, and it was pretty hard to accept this.

“It’ll be fun, Jers,” her smile fading into something more forced. “The whole trip is an adventure. We’re taking it one country at a time.”

“Yeah,” I mumbled, taking a deep breath. “Let’s just take it one country at a time with a guy who’d prefer I fall off the face of the earth.”

“Let’s not forget the boy who’d prefer all of your clothes to fall off the face of the earth...”

I groaned, my head instantly falling into my hands. I don’t know how it slipped my mind. The Summer Set was supporting The Maine. I’d been hearing about this for months and the one day I decide to take a ride of the careless side, I managed to put myself on a tour with a boy who hates me and a boy who apparently wanted in my pants. If I didn’t deserved the superlative for Most Likely To Put Herself In An Awkward Situation, I didn’t know who did.

“C’mon,” she laced her fingers around mine, tugging me over to where she was sitting. “I’m not letting a little set back get you down.”

I wasn’t down, at least not in the sad sense. I was more anxious than anything.

“I see someone changed their mind,” Fallon grinned before looking back down at the cards in her hand.

“I guess I did.”

“Are you going to tell us why? Or do we get to play the guessing game?” Sarah inquired, nudging me slightly. “Because I really don’t think you want to hear my theories because all of them include two bo-”

“I just...” I cut her off before she could go any further, afraid of what she might say. “I just...I don’t know...I just needed to get away, clear my head, y’know?”

“And it has nothing to do with-”

“No.”

I didn’t even know why she thought it had anything to do with Garrett or Stephen. For one thing, I just found out I’d be spending two weeks with them, and I’d have to be crazy to voluntarily put myself into a situation where both of them were involves.

“Dirty Jerz,” John smiled through a yawn. “You just couldn’t stay away from me, could you?”

I scoffed, looking down at the half-awake boy, “You caught me, John. I’ve been lusting after you since last

summer.”

The words barely left my lips when I heard it, a low and slightly venomous grunt. “With your track record,” he spoke, ripping the buds from his ears before shoving them into a pocket of his backpack. “I’d believe it.”

I deserved it. After seven months of not speaking to me, I suppose there was some sort of built up aggression. It was only a matter of time before it came trickling out. I just wished it could have waited until after the seven hour flight and maybe after the jetlag wore off.

“As much as I want to see you two duke it out,” Sarah started. “And believe me, *I do*. After seven months of living in this bubble of awkward tension, I think all of us could use a good screaming match, but I’d rather not do it in an airport and I’d like at least a few drinks in me.”

And like clockwork, a voice came over the loudspeaker.

*“Good evening, folks, and thank you for choosing British Airways Flight 354 with nonstop service to London, Heathrow. At this time we’d like to go ahead and start boarding rows forty through thirty-one.”*

“Where are we?” I heard Sarah ask, Fallon instantly digging around in her bag for her boarding pass.

“Well, we would have been in first class if you let me upgrade,” she mumbled, her eyes scanning over the flimsy piece of paper. “Row twenty. Where are you, Jers?”

I hadn’t really paid much attention to my tickets, merely glancing at gate numbers, but for the sake of the conversation, I pulled it from my back pocket. “Row twenty-nine.”

“You’re not too far away from us,” Sarah smiled. “Just incase you have a complete whack-job next to you.”

I really didn’t care who was next to me. It could be an ex-con and it wouldn’t faze me. I fully intending on passing out the second I buckled my seatbelt. I was running on about four hours of sleep and I could barely keep my eyes open.

*“We’d now like to invite passengers in rows thirty to twenty-one to begin boarding.”*

I sighed, heaving the strap of my backpack over one shoulder, smiling weakly down at Fallon and Sarah. “I guess I’ll see you guys across the pond.”

The line wasn’t much of a line when I got up there, more like a cluster of people waiting impatiently. I was a firm believer in organized chaos, but I really just wanted to sleep at this point and there were about fifty people between me and seven hours of uninterrupted slumber.

There was a very enthused flight attendant waiting for me when I got up to the entrance. In all honesty, she took perky blond to a whole new level and I was almost ashamed to share a hair color with her, but I suppose it could be worse. She could have dubbed me a suspicious passenger and handed me a one-way ticket to a strip search, so I probably shouldn’t be complaining about her animated ways.

I always got a little anxious boarding a plane. It never really set in until I was standing in front of the cockpit and normally it would pass, but the nervous feeling was still in my gut. I’d be flying over an ocean in less than thirty minutes. It wasn’t like we were hugging the coast, either. We’d be full-fledged over a massive body of water that could pretty much swallow us whole.

I calmed my nerves long enough to squeeze down the aisle, my feet shuffling deeper into the plane, my eyes

scanning over rows of empty seats. I'd never been on a plane set up the way this one was: two rows of two seats along the outer edges and a middle row of three seats. And all I could do was thank my sole lucky star that they put me in a row of two because I don't know what I'd do if I was stuck in a row of three.

The numbers started to get higher, after passing over twenty-one, they just seemed to come quicker. I managed to toss my bag in a overhead bin near my seat, quickly adjusting my shirt before I glanced down at the chair that would be my home for the next 420 minutes.

I would've taken the ex-con. I would have taken a hyperactive child. I would have taken just about anyone else, but my stars were so out of line that I couldn't believe this situation never fazed me. It wasn't like I could do much. The flight was booked solid, but I glanced around dumbly regardless, my eyes catching Fallon's a few rows in front of me and she instantly jabbed Sarah in the side, her eyes going wide as her lips formed a smile. I was waiting for one of them to offer me their seat, but I knew that wouldn't happen. They found this way too amusing. So, I sat down because I figured they wouldn't let me stand the entire flight.

I wasn't sure who was more upset about this situation, but I figured the fact that he suddenly found whatever was happening outside of the window fascinating, he was the more upset one. Not that I wasn't upset because, really, I'd like nothing more than to run back to Arizona right now, but I couldn't because Arizona stood for everything I was trying to clear my head of. So I really had no choice but to suffer through a seven hour flight next to the one person who wished I never existed.

To make matter worse, because they got worse, I couldn't find my seatbelt. I tried searching with my hands, my fingers running over the leather seat, feeling around for anything that felt like it could be a seatbelt. Then I stood up, trying to figure out where it could be and then I sat back down, still trying.

"I swear to God if you don't sit still I'm going to throw up on you."

I wanted to say something witty. I just wanted to throw him off guard, but I couldn't. All I really could do was glower, in hopes that my glare somehow made his skin crawl. It didn't. He seemed virtually unfazed, watching as the baggage was being loading into the cargo bay. "You're sitting on my seatbelt."

"And your point?"

My mouth fell. I think I liked it better when he wasn't speaking to me. "That is my point, you jackass."

"Oh," he laughed, rolling his eyes toward me. "Let's not start name calling, you frigid bitch."

I bit my tongue and tried not to let a slew of curse words fall from my lips. If either of us were going to survive this adventure, I needed to remain as calm as possible. "If you don't give me my seatbelt, they won't let the plane leave the runway. So, I think it's in both of our best interests if you get up so I can *buckle-up*."

It didn't take him very long to realize I was right, slowly unbuckling his own belt and standing up long enough so I could grab my seatbelt. He sat back down, our buckles clicking at the same time. I tried to get as comfortable as possible, but it was hard when he was not only taking up the entire armrest, but the tension was also suffocating me.

I was lucky enough to have fallen asleep in the middle of the safety demonstration, making me the last person you'd want to ask for help if we crashed, but even if we did crash, we'd be shark food, so my help wouldn't really be needed.

When I woke up, I was more than confused by the vaguely familiar scent of detergent I was inhaling. I thought about opening my eyes, but their lids were too heavy and because of that I almost fell back to sleep, until I

heard the faint rhythm of a heartbeat. When I finally opened my eyes, everything was blurry until I blinked a few times. The cabin was still dark, making it almost impossible to see in front of me, but with the help of a few glowing laptops, I could make out faint outlines.

My knees were pressed to my chest, my right arm resting against the space between where my chest met my thighs. I tried to adjust my head, but that's when I realized something was constricting it. I took a deep breath and everything became much clearer by the mere scent of Downey and Old Spice. My head was sandwiched between Garrett's shoulder and neck, his right arm dangling over the fabric of my t-shirt, his fingers mindlessly twirling a piece of hair that had fallen from my ponytail.

I don't know how we ended up like this and I don't know how the center armrest managed to slide up, but I'd be lying if I said I hadn't slept that well since December. And I was more than okay with falling back to sleep, losing myself in this moment for however much time was left in this flight.

*"Ladies and gentlemen, in preparation for our landing at London Heathrow, please return your seatbacks and tray tables to their original positions. All electronics you were using must be turned off at this time. Make sure your seatbelts are fastened and please stay seated for the remainder of the flight."*

We were untangled almost instantly. Garrett shooting up, quickly fumbling with his seatbelt, not giving me a second glance. I tried to stay calm because apparently that was my new thing. We fell asleep, that was it. It wasn't like we could control what happened. But that still didn't mean I could just forget about it. It had been so long since I was that close to him. After seven months of staying at an arms length, I'm not going to lie, it was nice actually being wrapped in them again.

*"Flight Attendants, please prepare for landing."*

I'd never wanted to get off of a plane as much as I did now. I needed to get away from Garrett and I need to breathe. I knew the six, or so hours we spent sleeping on each other didn't change anything. My head knew that, but my heart didn't. And if I didn't get some space soon, I'd probably fall harder for him and that just wasn't an option right now.

*"Ladies and gentlemen, British Airways welcomes you to London where the local time is just after seven AM. Please stay seated with your seatbelts fastened and carryon items stowed until we reach the gate."*

It took us ten minutes to get off of the plane, ten minutes of Garrett and I sitting in an awkward silence as the people in front of us took their sweet-ass time.

When I finally got to stand up, my legs almost gave out, but I did my best to keep myself steady. They really don't lie when they say your baggage might shift during flight and even when I rolled onto the tips of my toes, I still couldn't reach my bag. I took a deep breath, lunging myself upward, hoping that would be enough, but it wasn't. It was hopeless, until I saw Garrett roll his eyes and grab the strap of my backpack, nearly dropping it on my head as he let it go. I thought about making a comment, but I decided not to. That would have just taken too much time.

Everyone was scattered around rows of chairs waiting for us when we walked off of the plane. If I wasn't still half-asleep, I'd wonder why Sarah was smiling at me, but I really didn't care right now.

"So," she grinned, not an ounce of sleep in her voice. "You and Garrett looked awfully cozy."

I swallowed hard, watching Garrett walk over to Pat and Kennedy out of the corner of my eye, and I just shrugged. "Yeah...I don't know what happened. I just...I fell asleep and that's how I woke up."



“Well,” she started, as we walked toward everyone else. “If it’s any consolation, you two looked adorable.”

“Yeah,” I shook my head. “That doesn’t help.”

There was a steady silence in our group as we headed toward baggage claim. I was still wrapping my head around the seven hour nap I had with Garrett and everyone else looked like they were ready to fall to the floor from exhaustion. I tried not to even think about sleep because it would just make it worse.

Thankfully both bands retrieved their instruments undamaged, carefully examining the road cases before piling into a corner.

“So, what do we do now?” Sarah bit her lip, looking around dumbly until someone interrupted us.

“Oh!” She said in a sort of relieved way. “Ello! Hi, there.”

She had red hair, which was natural looking next to Sarah’s vibrant mess. Her face dusted with freckles and she had pale green eyes. She was a cross between lively and panic-stricken with some spunk thrown in for good measure.

“I’m Chloe,” she smiled, giving everyone a small wave. “Chloe Briggs. I’m with the label. I’m suppose to...Well, I’m not entirely sure what I’m suppose to do, but my boss just told me to keep you out of trouble while you’re here. Apparently, your manager has fallen ill, or something, which I guess you all well know. I’m not much of a manager myself. I’d been fetching coffee for the last four months. So, imagine my surprise when I get a call saying I’ll be overseeing a band for two weeks. I had to haul my arse out of bed and get down here before I got fired-”

“Do,” John started, looking at her with wide eyes. “Do you know how to breathe?”

She just smiled, taking a deep breath. “Sometimes I forget.”

“Okay,” he replied, slinging his arm over her shoulders. “Well, it’s vital that you remember.”

I wasn’t surprised that she was already silly-putty in John’s hands. She was cute, after all and that was really the only requirement in John O’Callaghan’s book. But I didn’t like her and it wasn’t because her fashion sense was better than mine could ever be, or because her hair could be softly curled and frizzless at the same time.

I just didn’t like the way she looked at Garrett.

My head was still swirling in jealous when I felt a heap of weight on my back, two arms dangling on either side of my neck as they rested their head on my shoulders. “Have I mentioned how happy I am that you’re here?”

To be honest, I forgot he was here. My mind was still so lost in Garrett that it was hard wrapping my head around anything else. “Well, it wouldn’t hurt if you mentioned it again.”

“Well, I’m very happy you’re here,” He smiled. “We’re going to take this place by storm.”

“Do you really think it’s ready for a Stephen and Jersey takeover?”

“I guess we’ll find out.”

I took a deep breath, my eyes wandering around the rather busy baggage claim. I couldn’t help lingering on Garrett, his head resting against a wall and his eyelids shut. He looked peaceful and almost happy, and that’s all

I could really ask for.

“Alright,” Chloe said, clapping her hands together to get everyone’s attention. “We’ve got a flight to Glasgow to catch.”

And so it began.

I wasn’t tired. I couldn’t stop yawning, but I wasn’t tired. Maybe my problem was that I was over tired, but it had gotten to the point where I just didn’t want to sleep. I was afraid to close my eyes because I was afraid I’d miss something, which was ridiculous because we were still driving. There wasn’t much to miss besides some traffic and road signs, but it was traffic in another country on another continent and I didn’t want to forget it.

I was the only one awake, which was nice. The entire bottom of the bus was silent aside from the humming of the engine and the soft singing coming from the driver. He was an older gentleman. His name was Mickey and after everyone went up to sleep, he started telling me stories about his life as a bus driver. He’d never understand why I laughed at the first words out of his mouth. He’d never understand the irony of the whole situation, but it made me smile.

*“Bon Jovi. A wild bunch of lads they were.”*

I somehow learned to accept what my life used to be. I’d always harbor some sort of resentment, but I finally understood my parents were just doing the only thing they knew how to do and that was to have fun and live life without the fear of consequence. And I knew something must have gotten screwed up in the whole genetic spectrum because those were two of my biggest fears, but this trip was about conquering those fears. If I got anything out of the next two months, I’d just want to be able to let my guard down.

I felt the bus stop under me, jerking my body forward slightly as I peered out the window. The sun was hiding behind a cluster of clouds leaving it somewhat dreary outside, but it wasn’t like I was expecting it to be bright and sunny, nor did I care about the weather. As long as it wasn’t pushing 115 degrees, I was golden.

I unfolded my legs, twisting my body off of the couch I was sitting on before I walked over to where I dropped my backpack. I pulled out a sweater, wrapping the grey material around my daffodil colored top. I slipped my feet into my sneakers and grabbed my purse from the table. I said a quick goodbye to Mickey before I pushed open the bus door.

We were in Glasgow and I could honestly say I knew nothing about this city. Growing up when I suggested going to the UK, I meant London. Never once did I say, *“I can’t wait to visit Glasgow one day.”* But rightfully so, I was here and I was going to embrace it. And if that meant I’d walk around aimlessly for the next eight hours, so be it. This was an adventure, after all. I suppose it was dangerous walking around a strange city alone, but it was just after eleven and I wasn’t worried. It was broad daylight. I’d be fine.

There was a small café a few doors down from the venue, and even though I wasn’t tired, I needed the caffeine to keep me going.

It wasn’t overly crowded when I walked in there, just a few stragglers standing over a counter pouring sugar packets into their paper cups. I just smiled, shuffling up to the girl who was waiting to take my order. She didn’t look completely bored, or unhappy to be there, but she wasn’t dripping with enthusiasm either. “What can I get for ya’?”

“Um,” I said out of pure habit. “Can I just get a large coffee with milk?”

She nodded, walking over to the pot resting on top of a heating coil, pouring the brown liquid into a cup before adding some milk. She placed a cover on it and slid it across the counter as I handed her a few bills.

“Have a good day.” I smiled, wrapping my hand around the cup.

I figured now would be a good time to make a plan for the day, pulling out of a chair from under a table near the window. I’d picked up a map while we were at the airport and hadn’t got a chance to look at it yet. I wasn’t particularly good with maps, or following directions, for that matter, but it wouldn’t hurt to attempt it.

“A map?” Someone said from above me. “Are you really looking at *a map*?”

I didn’t know who this person was and I didn’t care to learn. Yes, I was looking at a map, if that wasn’t obvious I didn’t know what was. “Yeah, I’m looking at a map.”

He gasped lightly, a smile forming over his lips. “An American.”

It always sounded so offensive, like I was some sort of bad person. *An American*. Yes, I was an American and yes, I was looking at a map. “Uh, yeah.”

“I’m Daniel, but you can call me Danny, if you’d like.”

*I don’t care to call you anything, buddy.* “Hi?”

“A skeptical one you are.”

I didn’t consider myself to be skeptical, maybe a little hesitant, but not skeptical. And I wasn’t exactly good at talking to boys to begin with, so imagine how flustered I was when one with an accent was pulling up a seat next to me.

“So, what part of The States are you from?”

I raised an eyebrow, my coffee cup hanging from my fingers as I casually took a sip. I wasn’t exactly up to speed on Scottish curiosity. This could be him just making casual conversation with an obvious tourist, or this could be him being some sort of creep who’d end up raping me and throwing my body into some body of water later. The latter was me probably just being overly cautious after watching so many news specials, but after a moment of weighing my options, I realized that this was an adventure and I needed to stop thinking like an adult. “Arizona.”

“I always imagined people from Arizona to be tan.”

I shot him a half smile, a laugh falling from my coffee infused lips. “I have a tendency to turn into a tomato unless I use SPF 100.”

He nodded like he understood, and I suppose he did. He wasn’t exactly tan either and I had a feeling it had to do with the constant rain cloud hanging over this country. “So, Arizona...May I call you Arizona?”

I shrugged. It was close enough to my actual name, but he didn’t know that.

“What brings you to Glasgow, Arizona?”

“A lifetime of bad karma.” I answered honestly because it was true. Karma was the only reasonable explanation

as to why I was in Scotland instead of France or Italy. Karma ruins everything.

“A pretty girl like yourself with bad karma?” He asked, a smile tugging at his lips as his green eyes stared deep into mine, ultimately making me lose my train of thought. “That’s impossible.”

Oh, it was very possible, but I’d spare him. It wasn’t like he really wanted to know about the past year of my life and how I single-handedly ruined it. “You’re giving me an awful lot of credit. You don’t even know me.”

“This is true,” he reasoned. “But where I come from we’re told to give the benefit of the doubt.”

“And where exactly do you come from?” I inquired curiously, taking another sip of my drink.

“Originally,” he started. “Paisley, which is just to the west of here, but I go to university down in London now.”

“What brings you home?”

His smile faded and I almost felt bad asking. “My grandmother has fallen ill.”

My mouth dropped along with my heart and now I didn’t almost feel bad, I *felt* bad. “I’m so sorry-”

“She’s doing better, at least as well as she will.”

I didn’t know what to say. I was never good in these situations. I got awkward and nervous, and I just wanted to crawl into a hole and hide.

“Do you’ve got plans for the day?”

I tore my head from my thoughts, smiling tightly as I pointed to the map. “Not yet. I’m not entirely sure where to start.”

“Kelvingrove Park, of course.”

~\*~

I wasn’t totally out of my mind. I mean, your parents always tell you to never get into a car with a stranger, well, at least normal parents do. Mine didn’t. Sure, it was implied along with other rules like no running with knives and not accepting candy from strange men in vans, but no one ever warned me about friendly Scottish boys with pretty eyes and nice smiles. So I went with my gut and my gut told me to trust him.

In one word, Kelvingrove was breathtaking. From the plethora of lush evergreens to the colorful array of flowers dusted around the grounds, I was in complete awe. I’ve been to national parks all over the US, but nothing could ever compare to this. This was just a place where you wished you could pause time and just breathe.

I could only imagine this place in the fall when the foliage was changing to reds and oranges, fallen leaves scattered across the roads, and in the winter when a coat of snow hid all the perfectly cut green grass. I tried not to dabble in my thoughts for too long because I didn’t want to miss anything.

“I never appreciated this place when I lived here,” Daniel glanced down at me, his hands tucked into the pockets of his jeans, his t-shirt floating away from his body as a light wind brushed through the trees. “It was always here, y’know? Never really had a chance to miss it until I was moved into my flat in London.”

I nodded because I understood fully after living in a RV for seven years. You start to miss things very easily. "But London is filled with places like this."

He shrugged, his feet scraping against the pavement. "But it's not home. I can't walk through a park there and remember the spot I fell and broke my leg when I was thirteen, or the spot we accidentally killed a pigeon-

"...you accidentally killed a pigeon?" I cringed.

"Like I said, it was an accident." He laughed. "The little bugger got in the way of some fireworks. Had a death wish, I tell ya'."

I decided I didn't want anymore details of that bird's untimely, probably very painful death. It was ruining the very calming, unnerved mood I had going on. "So, where do you go to school in London?"

"Queen Mary," he answered with a smile as he turned down a road, the rushing sound of a river taking over my ears.

"What are you majoring in?"

"Medicine," he replied. "At least, I hope. I've just finished my first year and I'm a bit torn."

I understood more than he'd ever know. I didn't even want to think about going back to school because then I'd have to face my academic advisor and attempt to explain why I want to throw my life's plan out the window. "I'm actually in the same boat, except I'm majoring in journalism and my professor told me point-blank that I should probably change it."

"That doesn't seem very encouraging."

I shrugged as we stopped in front of a stone railing. Before I responded, I glanced down below us, a river rushing down through the apparent bridge we were standing on. It was peaceful, tranquil almost and I just took a deep breath, drinking the view in. "I mean, I guess he's right. You've got to be ruthless to be a journalist and I don't know if I can do that."

"Think of it this way," he suggested, placing his elbows on the rail and smiling at me. "At least you're having second thoughts now and not three years from now when you've almost finished your degree."

I never really thought about it that way. I hadn't even put a dent in my major, just the basic classes everyone's required to take, which gave me plenty of time to decide what I actually wanted to do, but the idea of actually switching majors was an extremely scary thought.

"Well then," he pushed his body up, nudging his head to the left. "Are you ready for the next destination?"

"And where is that?"

He just smiled.

~\*~

I took a deep breath, trying to steady my racing heart as my lungs caved in. I was only twenty steps in and I was already panty like I just ran ten miles. I should have probably informed Daniel of my lack of athleticism, if you

would even consider climbing stairs a form of athletics. “A-are we almost there?”

He laughed liked this was nothing, and I suppose it was nothing to someone who didn’t frequent escalators and elevators when possible. “C’mon, Arizona, s’not that bad.”

Maybe it wasn’t *that* bad, but my legs still felt like jelly and I still had sweat dripping down the back of my neck, not to mention I was running on very little sleep and a whole lot of caffeine.

“Well, we’re here.”

Suddenly, climbing that spiral staircase didn’t matter. The pain pulsing in my thighs dulled down and I now had some sort of adrenaline running through my veins. I was still breathless, though, but it wasn’t because of the stairs, it was because of the view.

The Lighthouse was Scotland’s centre for architecture and design, and according to Daniel, it had the best view of Glasgow.

I really didn’t have anything to compare it to, this being my first visit to the country, but I’ll agree with him because the view was indescribable. You could just see for miles, buildings upon buildings with the setting sun as the cities backdrop.

“Was it worth the trek?” He smiled smugly and I just nodded, my eyes scanning over everything.

“It’s beautiful.”

“Figured you’d appreciate this more than the shopping district.”

I scoffed, another half smile forming over my lips. “You’re right on that one.”

We just stood there for awhile, admiring the view and watching as the sky turned a shade of purple, the day slowly drifting into night.

“Can I buy you dinner before I have to catch my redeye?”

“Oh, you don’t-”

“I want to, *Arizona*.”

“Jersey.” I corrected him.

“Jersey? You said you were from-”

“My name is Jersey.”

He grinned, his pale eyes lighting up as we began walking back down the stairs. “Well, Jersey, I know this bistro that I think you’ll love.”

I wouldn’t say I loved it. I was unfortunately extremely picky when it came to food, so I tried to stick with what I knew, which only seemed to be dessert. Something told me I’d need to broaden my eating horizons on this trip because it wasn’t exactly healthy to live off of cr me br lee for two months.

Daniel insisted on driving me back to the coffee shop we’d met in, even after I told him it wasn’t necessary and

that I could just take a cab. After I thanked him about a hundred times, he quickly got out of the car, rushing over to my side to open the door for me.

I was barely out of the car and I was in the middle of saying my hundred and tenth thank you when I felt a grip around my arm, jerking me to the left and nearly knocking me off balance. The look on Daniel's face was ghostly, and I imagined mine to be the same until I got a good look at who grabbed me and then I was just red. Daniel took a step forward, but I just smiled through my anger. "Don't worry. It's fine," I said as my heels scraped against the street. "Thank you for showing me around."

His hand was still wrapped around my arm when we crossed the street, ultimately cutting my circulation off. I wanted to tell him to go to hell and I really wanted to slap him, but he quickly cut my thoughts off.

"Are you out of your fucking mind?" He spat, his grip tightening as he spoke. "You don't even know this guy and you're gallivanting around town in a fucking car with him. You realize this is the shit the ten o'clock news is made of, right?"

I glowered, trying to keep up with him as I did my best to avoid eye contact with the people watching him drag me along the street. "Let go of my arm, *Garrett*."

"I swear to God I've never met anyone with as fucked judgment as you."

I didn't know what to say. I was too upset to keep my mind straight. He can't just ignore me for seven months and then think it's okay for him to come *rescue* me from some so-called creep. "Not everyone on this planet is psychotic," I hissed. "Which is exactly how you're acting right now."

"Oh, I'm psychotic?" His laugh laced with venom. "You just spent the entire day with a complete stranger, and I'm the psychotic one?" He was fuming, his face bright red as the venue came into view. "I had to listen to Fallon and Sarah freak out all day because they couldn't find you, but I'm sure they'll be happy to know you were just fine hanging out with some creep."

"He was visiting his sick grandmother, for God's sake," I tried to pull my arm away from him, but he just held on tighter. "He had some free time before his redeye back to London left, so he offered to show me around."

"I can't believe you were stupid enough to believe that."

I was going to say something about how I wasn't stupid, but it got lost in my throat when he opened the door to the bus, pushing me up the stairs to be greeted by an awaiting audience.

"Jersey, where have you been?" Sarah panicked, standing up from her seat.

"Yeah, *Jers*," Garrett seethed from behind me. "Why don't you tell them where you've been all day. Why don't you tell them about the adventure you went on with the guy you didn't know."

Everyone was looking at me, waiting for an explanation, but all I really cared about was telling Garrett off, but of course he didn't waste another second before he started up again.

"Did you forget to pack your fucking common sense? How the fuck do you expect to make it home alive if you go off with every guy that promises you a good time-"

"Don't talk to her like that." And I just let out an aggravated groan as Stephen's voice entered the mix. "She's not a child."

“Yeah,” Garrett nodded, scratching the back of his neck. “A child would know better.”

I couldn't even defend myself. Sarah and Fallon were hovering around me, pulling at my hands, demanding attention.

“Are you crazy, Jers?” Fallon started.

“He could have raped you and cut up your body and thrown you into a river. How the fuck do I explain that to your parents?” Sarah finished.

I just snapped, yanking my hands away from both of them, my attention focused on Garrett because he was the one I was really upset with. “Seriously, I'm not a child,” I cried. “My judgment isn't as fucked as you seem to think it is. He was a nice guy. He showed me around the city. That's it.”

I stormed off, pushing past the rest of the guys and up the narrow set of stairs that led to the second level. It wasn't like I had anywhere to go. I didn't have a bunk. There were only fourteen, after all. I didn't mind sleeping on a couch this morning, before Garrett blew the whole Daniel situation out of proportion, but now all I wanted was my own space that I could hide in until everyone calmed down.

For now, all I could hope for was sleep because no one would bother me if I was sleeping, at least I hoped they wouldn't.

“Jers?”

“I don't want to talk about it, Stephen.”

“I know,” he said softly, sitting down on the couch next to me. “I may not like that you spent the day with a stranger, but everyone's forgetting that you made it back fine. They're too hung up on the what it's. They should just be happy you're alright.”

I forced a smile, trying to choke back the tears, but my eyes were already red from crying.

“C'mon, stay in my bunk with me,” he got up, extending a hand down to me. “It'll be a little tight, but we can manage.”

I thought about everything that was wrong with this situation. I thought about what would happen if we woke up the next morning and someone saw us, and I thought about what Fallon said about Stephen and his feelings toward me, but that didn't matter anymore because as I laced my fingers with his, I saw Garrett standing at the other end of the bus, his face a mess of mixed emotions and it didn't bother me one bit.

Sarah and Fallon didn't let me out of their sight, which was a problem when I needed to pee. They were convinced I was going to run off with the first Brit that looked my way. I tried explaining to them that Daniel was just a one time thing, but they didn't seem to believe me. So, just imagine my frustration when I tried to walk across the street to get a cup of coffee unsupervised. I'd never seen Sarah Bradford run faster, not even when there was a sale at the mall, and not even when there was free alcohol.

“Jersey Rose, you're like a child,” she gasped, panting as we crossed into the small café. “I'm going to buy you one of those leashes John suggested. Y'know, those really obnoxious things with the stuffed animal on the back that tries to make it look less obnoxious, but really only adds to it.”



I rolled my eyes, walking up to the counter and ordering two coffees from the middle aged woman. This had been going on for a day, just one day and I was already sick of my new found shadow. I didn't even get to enjoy our day off in Leeds because I had to listen to Fallon complain about walking and Sarah cried about a hangover.

When the coffees were ready, I shoved one in Sarah's direction, grabbing a couple packets of sugar from a tray along with a plastic stirrer. I plopped my body down in a chair near the exit, uncovering my drink before pouring the sweetener into it.

"Don't be like this," she sighed, her elbows falling to the table. "We're all just a little freaked out."

"I was perfectly safe," I mumbled as I lifted the cup to my mouth. "Despite that picture the prick painted for you, I was not in harm's way. Daniel was just a nice guy with some free time."

"But you understand that more often than not, Daniel would have ended up being some freak that found a naïve-"

"I am not naïve, Sarah. I can't believe you would even use that word to describe me. God, you're just like Garr-"

"Okay!" Her eyes widened, a nervous laugh falling from her lips. "Okay, you're not naïve. You're just a very trusting American girl, a pretty one at that. So, can you just see where Garrett was coming from?"

I tried not to think about where Garrett was coming from, or where he was going, for that matter. For the first time in months, I suddenly didn't feel so bad about the paper because what he did to me in front of our friends was right up there with exploiting his precious heart.

"Did he apologize to you?" Sarah inquired, her face puckering at the bitter liquid, her hand instantly searching the table for a sugar packet. "Because I told him-"

"You think I want an apology from him?" My eyebrows spiked, a laugh filling my throat. "I want him to get some anger management."

"Oh, Jers, he-"

"He pulled me out of a car, Sarah," I hissed lowly. "He dragged me up a street whilst chewing my head off in front of a crowd of people, screaming about how stupid I was and how much common sense I lack. If that doesn't spell out pent-up aggression, I really don't know what does."

She took a deep breath, the exhaustion in her face softening as she stared at me from across the table. "I don't think it was so much aggression as it was him being protective."

I scoffed, my arms folding on top of each other, "Because the day Garrett Nickelsen wants to *protect* me is the day hell freezes over."

She opened her mouth to say something, but quickly closed it, knowing fully that defending Garrett was just going to piss me off. So, she took another long sip from her cup, her attention focused out the window behind me. I couldn't tell what she was thinking, or even if she was thinking, she looked lost in her head. I was about to snap my fingers when she shook her head, falling back to reality. "We need to have a discussion about the sleeping arrangements because I don't think I like the idea of you and Stephen sharing-"

"Who died and made you Ms. Responsibility?" I asked boldly, the paper cup in my hand burning the skin covering my palm. "Because if I remember correctly, I had to pull you off of a table at the pub last night, and I'm pretty sure that cancels out this conversation."

She narrowed her eyes and I could easily tell she was getting pissed off. She was hung-over and awake at eight in the morning, and both made for a very unpleasant Sarah. “I’m just saying, I think it’s a bad idea to be *sleeping* with Stephen when you still have feelings for Garrett.”

“My feelings for Garr-”

“Oh, I’m not playing this game,” she said quickly, relaxing into her chair. “I am so sick of Garrett and Jersey’s Game of Life.”

My mouth dropped, but I quickly shut it.

“*I don’t have feelings for Garrett.*” She mocked me, her voice higher than its usual tone, making me sound almost chipmunk-like.

“I don’t-”

“*I hope Jersey gets attacked by a pack of wildebeests.*”

“Did,” I stuttered, trying to comprehend what she just said. “Did he really say that?”

“I don’t know,” she shrugged, adding an eye roll for dramatic effect. “Maybe. *Probably*. I can’t keep track of his mood swings. He’s like a hormonal teenage girl, just without the crying and 3 AM Haagen-Dazs sessions.”

“Then you agree he has some sort of issue that requires therapy?” I questioned, a smirk laying across my lips.

“No,” she scoffed. “You made him PMSy. His aggression is jealousy induced, which I suppose is your fault, too.”

Everyone made it pretty clear that I was the reason for Garrett’s constant bad mood, and I understood that, but I didn’t need to be reminded every possible chance that I broke his heart and turned him into a bitter betty.

“Y’know, I think I’m going to take a nap.” I finally said, pushing myself off of the seat.

“But it’s nine in the morning...”

“Yeah, but you exhaust me.”

The bus was empty when I got on, leaving an eerie silence falling over it. The day sheet on the wall led me to believe everyone was doing press, which I suppose was good for me. I found it virtually impossible to sleep when the bus was moving, and I also found it virtually impossible to sleep with Stephen next to me, but I wouldn’t tell anyone else that. It was a small joy in my life to piss Sarah and Fallon off, and it was just an added bonus that Garrett’s bunk was right above *ours*.

It wasn’t that Stephen was a particularly loud sleeper. He didn’t snore, or talk, or grind his teeth, but he liked to cuddle. And I understood that we had very little space and had no choice in whether or not we touched, but he was clingy and his body temperature was identical to a furnace. It was different with Garrett, though. I may have fallen asleep pressed up against him, but we were lucky if we woke up on the same surface. He also had the body temperature of an ice cub and it was somewhat pleasant. Then there was the fact that I wanted to share a bed with him and didn’t feel obligated, like I did with Stephen.

When I crawled into the bunk, I twisted onto my side, closing my eyes as I curled myself into a ball. I wasn’t lying when I told Sarah I was exhausted. I got no sleep the night before. I just laid there with Stephen’s arm draped across my waist, listening as Garrett tossed and turned above us. It wasn’t exactly my favorite

soundtrack.

I was almost asleep, my lids resting heavy against my cheeks when I heard a stampede of footsteps rushing up the stairs, a string of familiar voices muffled by the curtain I pulled shut.

*"I just think you should make a conscious effort to be nicer to her."*

I lifted my eyelids, my head turning in the direction of the voice I knew to belong to Jared.

*"I'm not having this conversation again."* It was Garrett, his voice dry and steady, but I could hear his frustration. *"And I'd really appreciate it if you didn't follow me around like a lost puppy. I think I can manage to find my laminate on my own."*

*"Look, I get it, bro."* Jared said. *"She broke your heart. She crossed that line of trust that should never have to be questioned, but I know you still like her, if not lo-"*

The walking stopped and by the small breeze that ruffled the curtain, I could only imagine they stopped in front of me. *"No, I'm pretty sure the only feelings I have for Jersey are similar to those of individually pulling my leg hairs out."*

My mouth dropped as I sat up, trying to be as quiet as possible. I knew it was a bad idea listening to their conversation, but it wasn't like I had another option at this point. If I had my headphones with me, I'd pop them in and let music drowned out Garrett's snide remarks, but all I had was a pillow and a blanket, and as much as I wanted to shove my head into the pillowcase, I wouldn't.

*"You wouldn't have freaked out the way you did in Glasgow if you didn't still lo-"*

*"I just...I don't know how to do the break-up thing very well, alright?"* Garrett stammered, and I could only imagine he was running his fingers through his hair like he always did when he was frustrated. *"With Olivia, I saw it coming. She was being distant and moody, and I just knew it was ending."* I could hear him shift his weight on his other leg. *"Jersey...She...She just took me by surprise in every way possible and it was over before it even started. And it's...It's harder than I expected."*

I swallowed the lump that seemed to have formed in my throat. I felt bad. I *still* felt bad, despite what he did to me in Glasgow. And I hated that. I hated that he'd always have that over me. He was the only person that could make me go crazy with guilt because he was the only person who ever really mattered to me.

*"You were different with her, y'know?"* Jared's voice fell soft. *"And I know it sounds weird that I noticed, but we all did. You were just always so happy. She brought out the best in you and I think you know that and I think that's what you're afraid of."*

I could feel my heart slapping against my chest, eagerly waiting for Garrett to respond. I knew what was coming, though. I knew he was going to deny it until the cows came home.

*"It doesn't matter anymore,"* he replied with a sigh. *"We're over. We've been over. She's with-"*

*"Jersey?"*

My eyes grew wide and now my heart wasn't just racing a mile a minute, I seemed to forget how to breathe. Suddenly, suffocating myself with the pillowcase wasn't such a bad idea. Maybe Garrett would actually feel bad that I killed myself. Maybe he'd kill himself and we'd have that whole Romeo & Juliet thing, which was probably the craziest thought to ever cross my mind, but I was just going to blame it on the lack of oxygen I was

receiving.

*“Oh, hey guys.”* It was Stephen because the situation wasn’t already bad enough, we just needed to throw him in for good measure. *“Have you seen Jers?”*

Jared and Garrett fell quiet until Jared responded with a quick, *“No.”*

I hoped and I prayed that that was a sufficient enough answer for Stephen. He would just nod and turn around and go back downstairs to look for me somewhere else.

But really, where did wishing ever get me?

*“Jersey?”*

I didn’t see him pull the curtain back. I was too busy squeezing my eyes shut, hoping and pray that I somehow turned invisible in the past five minutes.

*“What are you doing in there?”* He asked with a laugh.

*“I was...”* I stammered as I opened my eyes, watching as Garrett glared down at me. I forced a smile, trying to figure out something to say. *“I was trying to sleep, I guess.”*

*“You just don’t stop, do you?”* Garrett shot, his face red as I stumbled out of the bunk. *“I swear to God you get off on being nosey.”*

My whole new outlook on staying calm seemed to be tossed out the window as I balled my fists. *“I was laying down,”* I shot back, the tone in my voice causing the other two boys to wince. *“Am I not allowed to fucking lay down?”* I asked, not giving him anytime to respond. *“Maybe you should check before you start spilling your feelings about a girl who equates to pulling your leg hairs out.”*

He shook his head, gnawing at his bottom lip with rage brewing in his eyes. *“This is just like you to turn this all on me,”* he spat. *“Like this whole situation isn’t your fault.”*

*“Yeah, Garrett,”* I hissed as I felt my eyes tearing up *“Everything is my fault.”*

*“Well, I think that’s the first honest thing you’ve ever said to me.”*

*“God,”* I mumbled, trying to fight back the tears. *“Could you be anymore of an asshole?”*

He simply nodded. *“I’m sure I could if I tried.”*

And just as I was about to start spilling tears, Stephen grabbed my hand *“C’mon, Jers. Let’s go. It’s not worth it.”*

I knew it wasn’t worth it. I knew that I suffered Garrett’s wrath enough and I deserved to be able to move on and be happy, but it wasn’t that easy. Despite everything, I still loved him and I wasn’t so sure if I could ever turn those feelings off.

*“Don’t cry,”* Stephen whispered as we stepped off of the bus, his thumbs outlining the bottom of my lids. *“I can’t stand to see you cry.”*

I sniffled, choking on tears and snot as I used my palm to wipe the tears Stephen missed. *“I can’t help it. He*

just...He just gets under my skin and he knows it.”

“Just forget about him, okay?” He smiled, his hands dropping to my shoulders as he slowly glided them down my arms. “Trust me when I tell you *he’s* not worth it, any of it. Because if he can’t see that you were the best thing that ever happened to him, he’s a fucking moron.”

And I just smiled tightly, hoping that would be a good enough answer for now.

~\*~

The second show of the tour went down without a hitch. Nothing got broken. No one died, so I considered it a feat. The boys were still signing and it was well past midnight, but I seemed to be the only one who wanted to sleep, not that Sarah or Fallon would let me. We were currently holding down three tables in a pub across the street, which would be fine if it wasn’t a Friday and the locals weren’t slurring angry derogatory names at us. Chloe was unfazed, amused even and that just sort of annoyed me.

“You’re at a bar-”

“Technically, it’s a pub.”

“They serve alcohol,” Sarah rolled her eyes. “I don’t really care what you call it. That being said,” she took a sip of her drink. “You’re drinking coffee at a fucking bar and you’re sober.”

“Why are you so concerned about what I’m drinking?” I asked, my fingers wrapped around the chipped mug as I downed a swig of the most bitter coffee I’d ever tasted.

“Because I want you to let loose,” she smiled as Fallon sat down, another round of drinks splashing against the table. “You’re so uptight. I think you need to get laid.”

I thought about making a comment, but I knew she was already drunk, so there was really no point. I just sat there, shrugging my shoulders as I finished off my coffee.

“I feel like I haven’t had a chance to get to know any of you yet,” Chloe said after a moment of silence, her red hair pulled tight into a neat bun while a navy colored shirt hung from her shoulders. “It’s just been go, go, go. I’ve barely had time to think. This is all so new to me. I never thought I’d be thrown into tour life. I always thought I’d have a nice office job, managing music from a computer screen, but now I’ve been dropped onto a bus with fourteen people who I know nothing about and they know nothing about me.”

We just stared at her blankly for a second and she smiled brightly at us before Fallon finally spoke, “Well, why don’t you tell us about yourself?”

“Okay,” she grinned, taking a sip of the beer Fallon brought her back. “Well, I’m twenty-one and originally from Epping, but I moved to London for university. I get confused easily and sometimes I don’t know when to stop talking. I’ve got a cat. His name is Mr. Mittens. I miss him to bits, but my flatmate promised to look after him while I’m gone. She’s not the biggest fan of him because the little bugger sheds like mad, but he’s too cute not to love. Oh, and I-”

“You really do need to learn how to breathe.”

She just smiled, taking a deep breath and another gulp of her drink. “What about you, Jersey? Tell me about yourself.”

I snorted, glaring down into my empty cup, hoping that if I thought about coffee, it would just magically appear in my cup. "I can honestly say I'm not very interesting."

"Lies," Chloe exaggerated, her elbows glued to the table. "C'mon, spill. What's going on with you and Stephen?"

If I had any coffee left, I'd choke on it. "Uh, nothing. Nothing is going on with Stephen and I. We're friends."

"Do friends normally share sleeping quarters in America?" She inquired with furrowed eyebrows.

"Only if there's a *with benefits* attached at the end." Fallon answered smugly.

We fell off of the subject of me, which I was grateful for, but it didn't mean I wanted to listen to Fallon rant on about her mother, or Sarah cry about not having a boyfriend. I got these sort of earfuls everyday and I thought this trip meant we could leave them in Arizona.

Fallon was in the middle of telling Chloe about Luka, her mother's latest boytoy when the boys began to filter in. I took a deep breath, pivoting my eyes as I watched Garrett take a seat at the other end. I tore my attention from him quickly as John placed two pitchers of beer on the table. I silently wondered where Stephen and the rest of The Summer Set were, but I quickly realized that it was probably best that they weren't here.

"What were you lovely ladies talking about?" John asked, taking the empty seat next to me.

"We were just getting to know each other."

And those words seemed to start another string of life stories, which ultimately made me want to start drinking.

"What about you, Garrett?" Chloe craned her head in his direction. "You've been awfully quiet. Tell me something about yourself. Got a lady-friend back in the states?"

Garrett shook his head, a sour expression on his face as he downed the rest of his beer. "I kind of stopped doing the whole relationship thing after the last whore ruined my life."

It stung. I don't think anything he's ever said about me stung as much as that did. I wasn't sure if it was the alcohol, or if he really thought I was a whore, but whatever it was, I got the message loud and clear, and I took no time to get up from the table.

"Jersey, stop," Sarah said quickly, sobering up as best she could, but she wasn't stopping me this time. "Garrett, what the fuck?" She spat, standing up as she tried to grab my arm.

"What?" He hissed from the other end. "Don't even try to fucking defend her. She's basically playing house with Stephen on the bus. Can't keep her slutty little hands-"

"Garrett, that's enough." I wasn't expecting John to jump to my defense. I wasn't expecting anyone to, for that matter. The only person who would was Stephen and he wasn't here right now, and I was thankful for that. "You know she's not a slut. You're still just upset about the whole situation."

I managed to pull my hand away from Sarah's, trying my best to avoid bumping into people and tables as I sprinted toward the door, the cool Leeds night washing over me as I exited the pub. I could feel the tears filling my eyes and that's the last thing I wanted to do. I'd done far too much crying for one day and I wasn't sure if I could handle another tearstained face.

“Jers?” I felt a hand on my shoulder and I turned around, Fallon’s face in my direct path of vision. “Are you okay?”

“Oh, I’m peachy,” I choked back the tears. “Never been better. I sure do love this fucking country.”

She sighed, wrapping my arms around me as she pulled me into a hug, her chin resting on top of my head.

“I don’t know if I can do this much longer. This is not how the summer was suppose to be.”

“I know,” she whispered. “It’s just going to take a little adjusting. You two haven’t exactly stuck around long enough for things to get this tense and now you’re stuck on a bus together. We just need to take it a step at a time.”

“And what exactly is the next step?”

“I think,” she pulled away, a soft smile on her gloss covered lips. “I think you should start with moving into my bunk. It’s not good for you to be in Stephen’s bunk when he clearly likes you more than just a friend...and Garrett is probably going to have an aneurism if he gets any more jealous.”

“He’s not jeal-”

“He’s jealous, Jers,” she laughed. “That scene in there was a prime example of how jealous he really is.”

If Garrett really was jealous, he just became the King of Mixed Signals.

I could honestly say sleeping with Fallon was unlike anything I’d ever experienced. I mean, I shared a room with her for the past year, but it wasn’t like I was in a bed with her. She slept on her back, which wouldn’t be a problem if the mattress we were sharing wasn’t about thirty inches wide, leaving me pressed up against the wall with very little room to breathe. She also felt it necessary to flail her arms around, so I wouldn’t be surprised if I had a black eye. But most of all, more than my inability to breathe and more than her inability to keep her arms still, she liked to talk. So, for the third night in a row, I got about three hours of sleep because Fallon wouldn’t stop talking about how desperate she was to get to Paris to get some new shoes.

I eventually had enough, doing my best not to wake her up as I climbed over her, though I wasn’t sure how she didn’t wake up when I was pretty sure I kneed her in the stomach. She simply let out a soft grunt before scooting into the newly free space.

I yawned, a chill taking over my body as I was acquainted with a blast of near-artic air from the AC. I did my best to be quiet because I was sure it was early and I knew no one else was up. For a second I thought about venturing out to get coffee by myself, but I didn’t feel like getting another earful from Sarah, so I decided I’d take advantage of the coffee maker in our *kitchen*.

I pressed one foot onto the stairs, immediately retracting it when I heard the sounds of muffled screaming. I knew I was treading on thin ice with the eavesdropping, but it wasn’t like it was intentional. I just had really bad timing.

*“You called her a whore, Garrett. You called her a whore and you called her a slut. Do you have any idea-”*

*“I know. Fuck, I know. I screwed up.”*

I held my breath, afraid that if I made any sudden noise, they'd know I was listening from the top step. And I knew I should turn around and crawl into the bunk with Fallon like I heard nothing, but I couldn't.

*"You realize you made her cry twice in one day, right? That's like a new record."* Sarah's voice was a mix of sleep deprived and hung-over. I wasn't sure how she was standing, let alone screaming at Garrett.

*"She had it coming."*

*"You don't mean that."*

*"Maybe I do."*

Part of me knew that I did deserve it. After what I did to him, after I manipulated myself into his heart, I deserved everything that was happening to me. But he was so adamant about hating me that I never got a chance to apologize. And I knew an apology wasn't going to do much, but it would have at least gave me some peace of mind. It wasn't like it mattered anymore, though. I didn't want to speak to him, let alone apologize.

*"You don't."* Sarah finally said with a sigh. *"You're just being a dick because you're jealous of Stephen."*

*"I am not jealous."* Garrett said defensively. *"It's just...It could be anybody else, but it has to be Stephen. Stephen, Sarah. Fucking, Stephen Gomez."*

*"Look, I get it. You hate him,"* She softened her voice. *"I'd hate him too after what he did-"*

*"And it's not like I didn't warn her."* Garrett ranted on. *"I made it crystal-**fucking**-clear that he was a douche bag, but does she listen? No."*

*"Jersey only sees the good in people."*

*"Yeah, well, she deserves everything coming to her and I can't wait to throw a big, fat 'I Told You So' in her face."*

I bit down on my lower lip. Seven months later and I still didn't know why Garrett hated Stephen so much. There was never a good time to ask Stephen, or Sarah, for that matter. I didn't want to seem nosy and I knew it was out of the question to ask now because Garrett already thought I was intrusive.

I decided that while their conversation fell quiet I'd make my appearance, at least that way I wouldn't interrupt what they were talking about and Garrett couldn't comment on my so-called curiosity.

I wasn't expecting him to look as wrecked as he did. His hair was messier than usual and his was still in last night's clothes. He had a fresh set of dark circles under his eyes and I could faintly smell the alcohol that seemed to be lingering between both him and Sarah. I did my best to ignore him completely, tossing Sarah a smile as I walked over to the counter.

*"Mornin', Jers."* Sarah said softly, her voice cracking.

*"G'morning."* I didn't look at her, instead I wrapped my hand around the knob of the cabinet and pulled it open, grabbing the bag of coffee that was sitting in front of a box of granola bars.

I was mid-scoop, my hand swimming in a sea of coffee grounds when Sarah announced she was going back to bed. I nodded as I dropped a level spoonful over the white filter and continued until it was filled. I turned to the sink, twisting the faucet on and filling the pot with water, unaware that Garrett had gotten up from his seat on



the couch.

I flicked the switch on, the red light glowing against my eyes as I spun around, my heart jumping into my throat as I stumbled back when I saw Garrett standing behind me. "Give me a heart attack, why don't you?"

He rolled his eyes, "About last night-"

"Oh, we are so not talking about last night." I laughed, my shoulder brushing against his as I tried to walk up to the front to sit with Mickey while the coffee brewed, but Garrett grabbed my arm, his fingers wrapped around the skin my shirt left exposed. "Don't touch me, Garrett."

He dropped my arm, his eyes watching as it fell to my side before he brought his stare back to my eyes. "I want to apologize-"

"The fact that you think I want your apology baffles me."

"I didn't mean-"

"Just stop, Garrett. I don't -"

"Would you let me speak for five seconds?" He questioned angrily. "God, Jersey, I'm trying to fucking apologize. Maybe you should take notes."

My mouth fell agape, which seemed to be the only way I could express emotion lately. I wasn't sure if he was taught how to apologize correctly as a child, but he most certainly didn't insult whoever he was apologizing to in the process. And I did try to apologize to him once. He just chose to ignore my phone call.

"I know you're not a whore, or a-"

"Just save it, Garrett," I shook my head, my eyes falling into that indifferent stare he'd been giving me for the last seven months. "I don't want your apology. I don't want anything from you." I took a deep breath, everything he said the night he found out about the paper filling my head. "If I never speak to you again it would be too soon."

He ran his lips through his teeth, nodding his head simultaneously as he took a few steps back. "Why don't you just forget that I ever warned you about Stephen, okay? You fucking deserve him."

"Are you still talking?" I spat back, but he didn't respond that time. He turned his back to me, stalking along the first level before disappearing up the stairs. When he was out of sight, I toppled over onto the chair next to me, my feet pressed firmly on the seat as I rested my head on top of my knees, tears spilling down my legs. I wasn't even sure why I was crying, but when it came to Garrett I learned to stop questioning everything because he was unpredictable, moody, and he still had possession of my heart and that left me vulnerable.

~\*~

The logic of throwing your bra on stage was something I'd never understand. They weren't exactly cheap, but judging by the age demographic, I was sure price really didn't matter because their mother's were probably still buying them. Still, I was sure their parents intentions weren't for it to be tossed up on stage to hit some guitar player in the face because if they knew their fourteen year old was doing such a thing, they'd be locked up until they were thirty-five, or at least I hoped they would.

For two girls that were set on helping The Maine around the UK, Fallon and Sarah hadn't left the two folding

chairs they were sitting on since the set started. Leaving me, the girl who didn't want to be here to begin with, to run on stage and grab the bras before someone tripped. I wouldn't have minded the job if I didn't have to continually dodge Garrett, the boy who didn't seem to care that I was crouched down next to him when he thrashed the neck of his bass around, nearly taking my head off every time I had to run over to his side of the stage.

It wasn't until my last trip on stage when things actually got a little messy. I was in the middle of picking up a leopard print number, the material hanging loosely from my fingers as I bent down next to John, who sent me a playful smile as I stood up. I lost balance for a second, my foot getting caught on the corner of the rug John was standing on, sending me staggering back slightly. I thought I could catch myself, but I was going down. My legs slipped out from under me as I tumbled to the floor, my arms flailing in the air. It wasn't until I was on the ground that I actually felt it: the stinging and the burning that seemed to take over my right arm. And when the music stopped, I knew it was bad. I hesitated, lifting my left arm and just grazing my finger tips over the throbbing section below my elbow. As I pulled it away, I saw the blood and I instantly felt faint.

When I opened my eyes, I saw Jared hovering over me, offering me a hand, ultimately pulling me to my feet. I wobbled slightly, but he kept me on balance. I tried to keep my eyes in front of me, away from the audience and away from the lights because neither were helping my slightly disoriented state. I did catch Garrett staring, well, glaring and I could only assume it was because I just brought the set to a stand still.

Once I was off the stage, Fallon and Sarah were instantly at my side, oohing and awing as they examined my arm. I hadn't realized it was that bad until Fallon's eyes grew to the size of half dollars. "Jers, this is going to need stitches."

"It's..." I mumbled, taking a deep breath. "It's fine." I twisted my arm just to get a closer look, but once I saw the stream of ruby liquid floating down and around my wrist, I got lightheaded. "I...I just need a band-aid."

I'd be the first to admit that I didn't have the strongest stomach. I got queasy just thinking about blood. It was one of the reasons my eyes were closed the moment Garrett put one of his movies on. But this wasn't a movie. This was real life and real life Jersey was bleeding profusely from her right arm.

"You need more than a band-aid, Jersey," Sarah panicked as she wrapped a white towel around the wound, applying enough pressure to make a few tears escape my eyes.

Maybe I was in shock. I wasn't entirely sure. I knew I was in a lot of pain and it was getting harder to breathe, but that was it. I've gotten paper cuts and I've scraped my knees, but that's as far as my list of injuries stretched. This type of pain and this amount of blood was a completely new experience.

"What happened?"

I twisted my neck in the direction of the voice, Stephen Gomez's panic-stricken face coming into view. As he moved closer, I could smell the Ivory soap that clung to his skin. They'd gotten off stage well over an hour ago, giving him ample opportunity to shower.

"I fell," I mumbled, but even that seemed to take too much energy. "Sliced my arm on Pat's drum riser."

"She needs to go to the hospital." Fallon added, her attention torn between me and what was happening on stage. "Why can't these little sluts keep their clothes on? They're like fourteen. This shit's a felony in most countries."

"You look pale, Jers." Stephen noted, interrupting Fallon's rant.

“Of course she looks pale. She’s bleeding.”

“She needs to go to a hospital.”

“I already called a taxi.”

I wasn’t sure where Chloe came from, and I really wasn’t sure when she found out about my accident. I suppose it was her job, though. She was the *manager* after all. She was suppose to know what was going to happen before it happened. I just wished she would have warned me that this night would take a dramatic turn.

“Why didn’t you call an ambulance?” Stephen asked.

“Because she got a nasty cut that’ll require some stitches, Stephen.” Chloe rolled her eyes. “She didn’t get shot.”

I tuned everyone out after that, the only thing on my mind was my throbbing arm and how I’d rip it off if I could. I wasn’t sure how long I stayed like that, but I wasn’t brought back to reality until I felt a hand slightly tap my shoulder blade.

“The cab’s here,” Chloe’s voice shook me from my trance. “I’ll go with you. I think that’s one of my jobs as stand-in manager.”

“I’m coming, too.” Stephen took a step toward us.

I really didn’t care who came at this point. I just wanted the pain to stop.

“Well, if you must.”

I didn’t remember much from the cab ride except the Ukrainian driver yelling at me to not get blood all over his seats, which wasn’t really a problem because the gushing seemed to subside. The pain, however, didn’t.

There was a distant, “Oh dear,” as we crossed into the fluorescently-lit Emergency Room. It was a small hospital from what I saw as we got out of the taxi and judging by the amount of empty seats, it wasn’t exactly hopping, which was good for me.

“Now, what do we have here?”

I glanced up, swallowing hard as I shot the middle-aged nurse a forced smile.

“She tripped,” Chloe answered for me. “Gashed her arm on a drum riser. It was bloody disgusting, literally.”

It didn’t take long for the nurse to whisk me off to an examining room, telling Chloe and Stephen that she’d be back for them in a few minutes.

I wasn’t particularly afraid of needles. I didn’t enjoy them, but as long as I didn’t look directly at them I was fine.

“This’ll just numb your arm, love,” She said as she stabbed me. “That way the stitches won’t hurt as much.”

I just nodded, closing my eyes as she began irrigating the cut. She was done in fifteen minutes, finishing the twelfth stitch before wrapping a few layers of gauze around my arm.

“I’m gonna have to give you a tetanus booster just to be safe, dear.”

Before I could even protest, she jabbed my left arm, which wouldn't have been a problem if it were any other type of shot. Now I wouldn't be able to move both arms for at least the next twenty-four hours.

"We'll just get you some juice and cookies to pinken you up a bit and then you'll be free to leave."

I nodded, my head falling to the wall behind me as I closed my eyes. I was so tired and I was sure I'd fall asleep right there, but the door opened no sooner than it shut and my eyes were open again.

"I got you some juice and crackers." Chloe said softly, a bottle of orange juice in one hand and a bag of animal crackers in the other. I wasn't very hungry, but the juice seemed to give me some energy back. "Quite the mess you've gotten yourself into."

I smiled, a laugh falling from my throat as I twisted the cap tighter. "Yeah, I've never been very graceful."

"I was talking about Stephen and Garrett..." She giggled.

"Oh," I bit my lip. Of course she was talking about Stephen and Garrett. After last I was sure everyone in Leeds was talking about my relationships with Stephen and Garrett. "The mess is really just with Garrett. He...He likes to think he knows everything."

"So, you're not interested in Stephen at all?"

I shook my head. I've never seen Stephen as more than just a friend. I've never even wanted more than friendship from him. I wasn't trying to lead him on, or give him some false sense of hope that we'd evolve into something more. I think everyone knew I was still hung-up on Garrett, even if I did hate him more than I've ever had at the moment. "We're just friends."

"Does he know that?"

"I think so." At least I hoped so. The last thing I needed was for Stephen to get an inkling that there was something more going on with us.

By the time we got back to the bus it was well past midnight and I could only hope that everyone was asleep. Most of them were, save for Fallon, Sarah, Jared, and of course, Garrett, who were all scattered around the front of the bus. Sarah was sitting on the couch, a magazine spread over her crossed legs. Fallon was painting her nails at the same table Garrett had his computer on and Jared was talking to Mickey.

"I was getting worried," Sarah said instantly, shutting her magazine and tossing it to the side. "What did they say? Are you going to be okay?"

I yawned. "Twelve stitches and a tetanus shot later, she said I'll be fine."

"You can sleep in my bunk tonight," she smiled. "I'll sleep on the couch."

I shook my head, tucking my leg under my body as I sat in the spot next to her magazine. "It hurts to move my arms and I don't think I'll be able to get in there without popping something."

"So you're going to sleep sitting up for the next..."

"Just until the swelling goes down and until I can bend my arm without wanting to cry."

“Alright,” she sighed. “I’m gonna head to bed. Do you need anything?”

“I’m good.”

After she left, everyone else seemed to filter upstairs slowly. Fallon went up next, and then Jared. Stephen told me he’d stay with me, but I told him that was stupid and forced him to go to bed and Chloe followed closely behind him.

If I wasn’t in enough pain as it was, I had to suffer through the tension floating between Garrett and I. He was lazily staring into his glowing computer screen, the cord to his headphones twisted against his black shirt. I did my best to ignore him and just close my eyes.

But I couldn’t sleep.

My neck was stiff and I couldn’t feel my legs, not to mention I was sweltering. Out of all the ways I could have woken up, this was by far the worst. I mean, there were probably worse way to wake up, but right now all I could think of was how uncomfortable it was to wake up this way. Even when I tried to peel back my eyelids, there was a layer of crust preventing me and the fact that my arms literally felt like jelly wasn’t helping the matter. I could have easily chalked this up to waking up on the wrong side of the bed, but I was on a couch, therefore I couldn’t wake up on the wrong side, maybe the wrong cushion, but not the wrong side.

I eventually managed to get my eyes open, a sort of distorted state taking over as I tried to come to my senses. I was in the exact same position I fell asleep in, one leg tucked under my thigh and my head balanced between my shoulder and the back of the couch. There was one very different thing, though. One thing I specifically remember not falling asleep with and I wouldn’t be so angry if I didn’t see him sleeping in the place he’d been sitting in last night, one leg dangling over the bench and his head resting on his hand. That’s when I began to rage, slamming my numb legs down on the ground, balling the yellow fabric draped around me in my hands as I wobbled into a standing position.

I stopped to look at him for only a second, admiring how peaceful he looked while he was sleeping before using all the force I had to throw the covers at him, ignoring the pain igniting in my arm. He stirred awake, his sleepy blue eyes glaring up at me as his facial expression fell into a frown.

“What the fuck is your problem?” He seethed, pushing himself into a sitting position before tossing the yellow material to the chair in front of him.

“What the fuck is *my* problem?” I hissed, my body shaking with fury. “What the fuck is *your* problem? You can’t just go putting blankets on people while they’re sleeping.”

He blinked a few times, staring up at me dumbly. “Seriously? How much blood did you lose last night?” He asked coldly. “Enough for your brain to stop functioning correctly?”

I shook my head, my face stone-like. “You think you’re so fucking clever, pulling shit like this to get into my head. Well, it’s not working.”

He laughed, a sinister tone tumbling from his lips. “You honestly think I wake up in the morning and think *how shall I go about annoying Jersey today?*”

“Yeah, I do, actually.”

“That would require me to have to think about you, which I don’t.” He replied. “I didn’t put the fucking blanket on you. Why don’t you go ask your lapdog.”

My mouth fell, wanting nothing more than to slap the snark right out of him. "Stephen isn't my lapdog."

He smiled. "You said it, not me."

I could feel my blood boil. "You implied it, Garrett." I ranted, glowering down at him. "Because if you weren't talking about Stephen, you were talking about Sarah or Fallon, and I'm sure they'll be thrilled when I tell them your referred to them as lapdogs."

He rolled his eyes, standing up and pushing past me, making his way over to the coffee maker. "Of course you'd run off and tell them."

Of course I would tell them. I told them pretty much everything and I was sure they'd want to know. It wasn't like I was going out of my way to make Garrett look like an asshole, he was doing that on his own. "What are you even doing down here? Trying to think of new ways to fuck with me while I'm sleeping?"

He didn't respond right away, simply filling a coffee filter with grounds. "Not that I need to justify where I fall asleep to you, I was editing some new tracks and I didn't feel like moving."

I crinkled my eyebrows, one higher than the other as I watched him fill the pot with water. "A new track for what? Fuck You...I'm A Giant Prick?"

He set the pot on the burner, leaning against the counter with a lopsided smile hanging from his lips. "Well, when inspiration strikes."

My eyes widened, quickly falling into a glare as I mentally tried to strangle him. He was the only person that could make me want to claw my own eyes out, but I figured that might be a little dramatic. So, I went with an the ever so original arm flail, which was my stupidest mistake to date. "I am so sick - *Fuck*."

My left hand was instantly over the gauze wrapped from my elbow down, a throbbing pain taking over my entire right side. I didn't remember it hurting this much. This was just an unfortunate form of agony.

I was in the middle of trying my hardest not to cry when I felt a hand on top of my wrist, forcing me to untangle my fingers as it pulled my hand away from my injured arm. If I wasn't so consumed in the pain, I'd probably scream at him for touching me, but my hate for him seemed to subside for the moment.

"You're bleeding." He stated simply, his fingers loosely dangling over my skin.

"Thank you, Captain Obvious." I mumbled, sucking my teeth in as the familiar pain took over my arm. "I...I think I popped a stitch or three."

I came to my senses eventually, tugging my arm away from him gently as I began to scan over the bus in hopes of finding my shoes. My eyes stopped when I spotted them next to the couch, quickly padding over there and shoving my feet into them. I grabbed my bag from the counter and threw the strap over my shoulder. My mind set on walking out of the door.

"Where are you going?" He asked dumbly, scratching the back of his head as the scent of coffee began to fill the small space.

"Where do you think I'm going?" I questioned, stalling as I turned toward him "I'm going to the hospital before this gets infected."

He let out a hefty sigh, as if he had to make some sort of big decision. "I'm coming with you."

I laughed automatically, my eyes rolling slightly as I took one step toward the door. "That's really not necessary. I don't plan on running off with any male nurses, or female nurses, for that matter." I left it at that, my feet sliding against the carpet as I made a break for the outside world.

I wasn't entirely sure where we were today. I never paid much attention to the day sheets posted on the fridge, but today I wished I had. I was left in the bustle of early morning commuters who could care less about my unfortunate situation and the blood seeping into the crevasses of my gauze bandage.

My cab hailing skills weren't up to par, especially with two arms that were virtually useless, but I did my best and managed to snag one on my fourth awkward attempt. I was barely in the car, sliding over the worn leather seats when I casually told the driver to take me to the nearest hospital. As I was about to shut the door, I quickly stopped, my eyes lost in the torso that was blocking me from grasping the handle. I knew who it was before he ducked his head in, his body falling onto the open space next to me. When he shut the door, the driver merged into traffic, leaving no room for me to tell him to leave.

"I told you not to come." I mumbled, my attention focused out the window.

"Yeah, well, when have I ever listened to you?"

*Never*, I said in my head. I opted out of saying anything else to him, awkwardly festering in the tension only known to us as the cab driver weaved between cars.

We were at the hospital less than five minutes later. Garrett shoved a bill at the driver before I could. I really wasn't sure what his intentions were, but I knew he'd use this very moment to crawl back into my head.

As the automatic doors parted, a scene so far from my last hospital visit sat in front of us. It was busy and when I say it was busy, I mean it was spilling over with people. Sick people. Injured people. Mentally unstable people. I let out a soft groan, trudging up to the window near the entrance, an unenthused nurse typing away at her computer barely acknowledged me until I cleared my throat. She tore her eyes from the screen for a second, sliding a clipboard and a pen under the glass before mumbling something that sound like, "fill this out," before turning her head back to whatever she was reading before I rudely interrupted her.

I spotted two seats amidst the crowded waiting area, planting myself in one and watching as Garrett took the other one. I knew filling out the questionnaire was going to be difficult when I tried to uncap the pen and it hurt. The second I applied any pressure with my hand, a sharp pain danced up my arm. I let out a soft whimper, my head turning toward Garrett, who was engrossed in some cartoon playing over the TV. He caught onto my staring, shaking his head slightly as if I could actually read his mind. "What?"

"I...I can't write. It...It hurts."

He let out an aggravated grunt as he ripped the clipboard and pen from my hand. I watched as he messily ran the pen over the paper, filling out my name, age, and birthday before moving onto a checklist of what I could only assume were symptoms, marking checks in certain places. When he stopped, I tore my eyes from him, pretending like I wasn't, in fact, gawking at him. He glanced over at me, his mouth hanging open slightly before he began to speak, "Are you pregnant?"

I swore I blushed five thousand shades of red, but it quickly faded into an annoyance because I knew this was just him being him. "Please, don't start now."

He rolled his eyes. "It's a legitimate question." He replied, pointing at the piece of paper. "Y'know in case you

need x-rays..."

"No, Garrett, I'm not pregnant." I answered through gritted teeth.

*"Is there a chance you may be pregnant?"*

I narrowed my eyes, refraining from grabbing the pen out of his hand and stabbing him with it. "No, *Garrett*, it's not even a possibility."

"How unfortunate for Stephen."

I didn't even justify him with a response, merely slumping into the chair as he brought the clipboard back up to the nurse's station. It seemed that I wouldn't be a priority, not with the child next to me with a whooping cough and the elderly man next to her with a nail pierced through his finger, so I was left to bask in the pain while Garrett laughed at whatever was playing on the screen.

"Jersey Levitz?"

87 minutes. It took them 87 minutes to call my name. 87 minutes of pain. 87 minutes of Garrett's melodramatic sighs. 87 minutes of me wondering if getting an infection was really all that bad.

"C'mon, dear. Bring your boyfriend along if you'd like."

I stopped midway between her and the spot I'd left Garrett in, glancing back at him, a horrified expression on his face. I fumbled with my words, turning back to the nurse. "He's not... *We're not*."

"Okay, well, whatever you kids are calling it nowadays, let's go." She looked past me, her eyes glued to Garrett. "Romeo, are you coming?"

I was half expecting him to make some snide remark, but he didn't. He just stood up, motioning for me to walk as he stumbled along behind me.

The nurse lead us into an examining room. It was behind a set of doors and the scent of latex clung to the walls. It was nauseating almost, making gag as I took a deep breath. I hated everything about hospitals and the fact that I'd been to two in less than 24 hours wasn't settling.

"What seems to be the problem?" She asked, her red hair tucked behind her ears as she gave my arm a once over.

"I... Well, I sliced my arm open last night," I started, watching as Garrett took a seat to my left. "And I went to the hospital and they said I just needed some stitches, and well, I think I popped a few this morning."

"I see," she nodded, taking a step toward me as a glove snapped around her wrist. She began to peel back the gauze. I gasped, my stomach turning as her face fell. "You've popped more than a few, dear. About half. What on earth were ya doing?"

I bit my lips, looking over my shoulder quickly. "We got into an argument-"

"She threw a book at my head."

My mouth dropped as I shot him a look, quickly turning back to the nurse. "I did not throw a book at his head." I paused, taking a deep breath. "But I should have."



She laughed, throwing the bloody gauze into a waste basket before she pulled up a stool next to the table I was sitting on. "I'll fix ya up nice and good as long as ya promise to not go throwing ya arm around."

I nodded because I couldn't open my mouth the second I looked down and saw the mix of fresh and dried blood. My stomach was instantly in my throat and closing my eyes only seemed to make it worse.

"Try not to move, hun."

I tried looking away, but the room was so small. I could either stare at Garrett, or watch her sew my arm shut. The latter seemed like the better option, but that thought soon faded when the needle grazed over my skin. It was a reflex, I suppose, jerking my arm away. The nurse looked less than enthused when her eyes darted up. "Sorry." I squeaked, relaxing as she tightened her grip, but there was no use. The second I saw the needle, I jumped again.

"You're going to make this hurt more than it needs to."

I swallowed my breath as she pierced my skin, my heart slapping against my chest. I thought I was going to pass out, or maybe get sick. I wasn't sure, but I knew I felt dizzy and I could feel myself begin to shake.

That's when I felt it. Not the needle. Not the pain. A hand wrapped gently around my own.

I pulled my eyes from the nurse, slowly rolling them from the floor up as they traveled over the body that was holding my view hostage, over his ripped jeans, over his black tank top with the obnoxious zombie, over his face that had softened to the face I used to know.

I was lost, I guess. So mixed-up in the pain and the fact that Garrett was holding my hand. I wasn't exactly sure which was making me cry, but I wasn't in the mood to pick the situation apart.

"Hey," he said softly, his voice faltering slightly. "Remember that night in the desert? When that scorpion was crawling up your leg?" He asked with a smile. "Remember how scared you were?"

I bit back the tears, a soft laugh filling my lungs. "That's really not helping, Garrett."

He sighed, stepping closer to me. His hand dropped from mine, his arm wrapped around my shoulder, completely shielding me from the nurse and what she was doing to my arm. "But you were brave and you got through it."

I didn't respond to him, instead my head fell to his chest. I took a deep breath, that familiar scent of laundry detergent and Old Spice paralyzing my senses as he held me tighter. It was just the perfect moment that I wished I could live in forever. In that moment, it was just me and Garrett. There was no paper. There was no Stephen. There was no seven months of awkward tension. It was just us, like it was suppose to be.

"All done."

And it was over just like that. Garrett pulled away, nothing but a few tears on his shirt reminding him of the past ten minutes. I sat there, more confused than ever as I looked down to see a fresh piece of gauze wrapped around my arm.

The nurse discharged me on strict orders not to throw anything or exert any sort of force for the next few days, or until the stitches dissolved. And that was fine because I didn't plan on leaving the bus until we hit London.

As we crossed through the door, it was as if a portal of sorts sent us straight back to where we stood in each others lives. Garrett made a hasty dash for the exit, leaving me in the dust. I tried to walk as fast as I could, but I had about as much energy as anyone who just got stitches fixed would.

He was waiting impatiently next to a bay of taxis, tapping his foot in annoyance as I got closer. "Could you walk any slower?"

I bit my tongue, not wanting to get into it right now. I simply slid past him, opening the door to the cab before getting in.

"The Rescue Room," Garrett said as he slammed the door.

It was another quick five minute ride. This time I was the one to shove the money at the driver, canceling out the ride Garrett bought earlier. I really didn't need him holding that over my head.

As the cab drove off, Garrett and I stumbled along the sidewalk until the venue came into view. Garrett quickly shoved his access pass at the guard at the door while I sifted around my bag for mine. Once I found it, I casually showed it to the man, walking through the door behind Garrett.

I was expecting everyone to be in there. I mean, it wasn't like I could actually get away with *spending* the morning with Garrett, not with the friends I had.

"And where have you two been?" Sarah asked with a smile from the couch. She was laying on her back, her feet resting on Josh Montgomery's lap as she fiddled with her iPod.

I swallowed hard, glancing around the room. Fallon had a flat iron in her hand, carefully sliding it over strands of Jess's hair. Chloe was on her phone. John had just stepped out of the shower, a towel wrapped around his waist and everyone else was respectably on their computers. "I...I popped a stitch...Or six. We were...We were at the hospital."

"I knew it." John clapped his hands together, a wide grin on his face. "Pay up, bitches."

I watched Sarah roll her eyes. "We're not paying up. You weren't completely right."

"I said she probably popped a stitch."

"Yeah," she replied. "While they were having raunchy hate sex."

Everyone's eyes were instantly on Garrett and I, as if that accusation was even plausible. The fact that John even conjured it up was ridiculous.

"Well...?" He pressed, a smirk still on his lips.

"No!" I spat, stomping my feet along the floor. I wasn't exactly sure if Garrett's mood swings were contagious, but I felt like I was well overdue for one.

I heard a faint, "what did you do to her," as I crossed into a connecting room. I was sure he'd lie his way out of it, claim I was just that frigid bitch who was probably mentally unstable. He wouldn't dare tell anyone what happened in the hospital room because he didn't want anyone to know that he broke down in a moment of weakness, that he held me as I cried. But it wasn't like I wanted them to know. I just want him to stop playing games.

“Jers?”

I turned around to see Fallon leaning against the door frame.

“You okay?”

“I want to go home.” I said honestly, falling onto a loveseat that was torn and tattered, cigarettes burns were the only noticeable design.

“Jersey, you can’t leave,” Fallon huffed, trudging over to me. “We’ve only got a week left with them. We’ll be in Europe in no time.”

I took a deep breath. This had been playing in my mind since the moment I found out about the detour. I was just too afraid to ask because I didn’t want to make the idea real, but now I needed to know. “Tell me that they aren’t coming.” I said slowly, my eyes squeezed shut. “Tell me, Fallon. Tell me that they aren’t coming to Europe.”

There was a long pause, which was an answer in itself. “There may have been an invitation extended...But it was before we knew you were coming.”

“I can’t.” I shook my head. “I just can’t spend anymore time with him.”

“It’s not that bad, Jers.”

“It’s not that bad, Fallon?” I cried, bringing my legs up to the cushion. “I can’t keep track of his mood swings. One minutes he’s calling me a whore and the next he’s sitting in a hospital room with me...”

“I think,” She started, sitting on the armrest next to me. “I think you two just need to sit down and have a proper adult conversation that doesn’t include you guys avoiding the obvious...”

“What are you-”

“You’re still in love with each other.”

I shook my head, avoiding eye contact. “That’s impossible,” I said softly. “We technically weren’t in love in the first place.”

It wasn’t a total lie.

Technically, I didn’t know how Garrett’s felt about me.

I ordered Sprite. I wasn’t quite sure what was currently in my cup, but it was most certainly not Sprite. I had a feeling Sarah and Fallon were behind this. I just couldn’t believe they thought I’d be stupid enough to fall for it. Sure, I’ve made a few stupid decisions in my day and despite my apparent fucked judgment, I knew when someone was trying to spike my drink.

We were at Ultra, this chic club that some boy at the show had told Sarah about. I must have had my definition of chic mixed up because that would be the last word I’d use to describe this dump. I wasn’t exactly a nightclub aficionado, nor did I want to be, but I expected more than seizure-inducing lights and some bad techno music. Maybe this is why people drank. The alcohol must numb them to this blatant lameness.

I could have easily stayed on the bus. That was my intention, after all. I was still tired from the hospital and my arm still throbbed faintly. I could have used the downtime, maybe read a book, or maybe watched a movie. The latter was probably less likely. I hadn't really watched many movies lately, and by lately I mean the last seven months. I guess movies were just me and Garrett's thing and it was hard when all the memories I had with him somehow revolved around laying in bed with a movie flashing over the TV.

"You like to dance?"

My stomach dropped, along with my face as I glanced up at the voice. I swallowed hard, forcing a smile as I tried to think of something to say to this kid. He wasn't horribly unattractive, not that that mattered, but he wasn't my type. He was buff and wearing a muscle shirt, and I wasn't sure if he was wearing lip gloss, or if he was just really sweaty. "No, I don't like to dance."

"But we have a good time, yeah?"

I shook my head, "No, I'm good."

When he walked away, I contemplated taking a swig of whatever was in that drink Fallon brought me, but I knew drinking that would just get me into more trouble.

"Jersey Rose." Sarah brushed up against me, the liquid in her cup sloshing over the edge as she drunkenly danced next to the chair I was sitting in. "C'mon, get up!" She tried to grab my hand, but she was so plastered that she couldn't hold a cup and try to pull me from my seat at the same time.

I shook my head, my fingers running over the rim of the drink I wasn't drinking. My eyes flashed around the table, running over Kennedy and the girl he was talking to, Jess and the conversation she was having with Fallon and Brian, and Garrett and how unamused he looked. I figured Sarah would have gotten bored waiting for a response, moving back to the dance floor where she could freely make a fool out of herself, but no such luck.

"Let's dance, Jers. C'mon, loosen up." She begged, an annoying whine falling from her lips.

"I don't dance, Sarah."

"You gotta loosen up, babe," she giggled. "There's like a million guys in here that would be more than willing to take you into the bathroom and fuck you mindless. You gotta show them what girls from America are like."

I cringed, a ball of disgust forming in my stomach. I understood she was verging on belligerent, but even drunk Sarah should have known my intentions of coming here tonight were so far from what had just come out of her mouth. "Uh, yeah, I'm good. I'm definitely good."

I watched her roll her eyes, slamming her near empty glass down on the table. She turned her head to me, her bright hair falling into her face as she sent me a look I'd never seen before. Sarah was normally a flirty drunk, happy and ditsy most of the time, but she looked irritated right now. "Oh, I forgot you only go for bass players."

I swore the music stopped at that very second, the only thing pulsing in my ears was the words that left Sarah's mouth. *I forgot you only go for bass players*. She was drunk. That was the only thing I kept telling myself. She was drunk and she didn't know what she was saying, but she said it and I couldn't forget it.

I ignored the looks everyone was sending me as I stood up. I specifically didn't look anywhere near Garrett because I was sure he was snickering, or rolling his eyes in agreement. I wasn't going to say anything to Sarah.

Arguing with a drunk person wasn't worth the effort, especially when that drunk person was Sarah. The last fight we had resulted in a bruised cheek and I was already swollen in enough places as it was.

I took the high road, which was really just me avoiding what could have ended in a sticky situation. I left, completely ignoring Fallon's calls. She knew me well enough to know I'd be fine on my own.

I wasn't mad at Sarah; at least I didn't think I was. I just wished that she realized that I didn't just go for bass players. I went for *a* bass player, and it didn't exactly end the way I wanted it to. It wasn't my fault Stephen just happened to play bass. That was just a coincidence, a sick one, but a coincidence nonetheless.

Nottingham rubbed me the wrong way. Maybe it was because we started off on the wrong foot, but all I knew was that I couldn't wait to get back on the bus and travel to whatever city was next on this tour route. I thought about going back to the bus now, but there wasn't much for me to do there. Besides, tonight was the warmest night of the summer and I really just wanted to stay outside and enjoy it, even if it was dangerous. You'd think my danger quota would have been filled with Daniel and my two trips to the hospital, but I thought I could squeeze a little more in there. And what was more dangerous than eating from a vendor that the Board of Health would have closed down instantly?

Ultra was on a rather busy and commercial street, making it virtually impossible to find anywhere to sit and eat my falafel. The fact that I was about to eat a falafel was a feat in itself, but I was seriously starving and I'd probably shove it down my throat so fast that I wouldn't even taste it. I gave up looking for somewhere to sit properly, simply falling against the building behind the dinky vendor and sliding to the ground.

I was mid bite; my face cringed as my teeth barely bit through the pita. Maybe I was pushing it. My diet was so Americanized that putting something this crazy into my mouth required a pep-talk and maybe some hard liquor.

"You look seriously afraid of your falafel, Jers. You realize that you're the one biting it, right? It's not the other way around."

I glanced up, pulling my sandwich-burrito hybrid away from my mouth. "I'm not afraid of my falafel, Stephen. That would be ridiculous. I'm just...I'm overly cautious."

"Well," he smiled, crossing his arms as he looked down at me. "Go on. Take a bite."

"I can't just take a bite. That would be reckless."

"It's just a falafel, Jersey."

"It's more than a falafel, Stephen. It's a life changing decision."

"You realize you're only eating a popular Middle Eastern food, right? You're not signing your life away--"

"I get lightheaded when I order Chinese takeout. So the fact that I'm currently sitting on a street corner in Nottingham with something so far out of my comfort zone is kind of life changing."

"You're insane."

I shrugged, pulling the falafel further from my face.

"You won't eat it." He mused, teetering on his feet as he shoved his hands into his pockets.

I scowled, looking up at him. “Ye of little faith.”

I heard a faint laugh slip through his lips. “Who are you trying to fool, Jersey Levitz?”

“I don’t know. Myself?”

“Oh, well, we both know you aren’t going to eat the falafel,” he said with a sigh, extending his hand down to me. “So why don’t we get off of this street corner and do something worth our time?”

“Like?” I inquired, wrapping my fingers around his as he pulled me from the ground.

“I don’t know yet.”

~\*~

“This was your big plan?” I asked with a smile, my eyes lost in the sea of green slop as my spoon plunged into the crystal glass.

I saw him shrug out of the corner of my eye, his spoon mimicking mine. “Well, it’s verging on midnight. We’re lucky this place is open.”

I wasn’t completely surprised this place was open well past normal operating hours. Hildie’s was in the heart of Nottingham’s club scene and even drunk people needed their midnight ice cream fix. I wasn’t sure how well ice cream absorbed alcohol, but I imagined said wasted people didn’t care.

“I’m a little curious,” I raised a brow, my spoon piercing my lips as the melted mint flavored cream swam over my taste buds. “As to why you’re sitting in an ice cream parlor with me and not *getting your drink on at the club*.”

He snorted, his head falling slightly as his dark hair hung around his face. “I can’t believe you just used that phrase.”

“Is that not how you refer to it?” I asked. And maybe it was a stupid question, but I honestly didn’t know. My knowledge of club lingo didn’t stretch past the *Jersey Shore* reruns Fallon made me watch.

“No, Jers, we don’t refer to it as getting our drink on.”

I spooned some more ice cream into my mouth, my free hand holding my head up. “Okay, but I’m still curious as to why you’re with me and not doing whatever you do at a club.”

“I don’t know.” His attention was focused on the melting mess in his cup. “I figured I’d have more fun with you.”

He wasn’t drunk, but he was at least tipsy because no one just wanted to hang out with me, especially if they were expecting fun. “You realize our definitions of fun are completely different, right?”

“You don’t think I can be mellow?”

I shook my head. Stephen Gomez had a reputation. He was in a band that was notorious for their partying antics, and I accepted that. I was in no place to judge when my two best friends were two of the biggest party girls at ASU. “Honestly, I don’t think you’d consider going back to the bus to watch TV fun.”

“As long as it’s with you, it’ll be fun.”

There was something about his choice of words that made me uneasy, but I tried to push those feelings away. We were friends and that’s all I wanted to be.

The walk back to the bus took about fifteen minutes. I’d be lying if I said it was enjoyable because it wasn’t. Our soundtrack was drunken slurs coming from homeless men on the corner and the traffic in the street was giving me a headache. I tried to pick up my pace, but I was already tired as it was, so I was stuck stumbling alongside Stephen until we reached the bus.

Mickey was sitting in the driver’s seat when Stephen and I climbed through the door, a newspaper resting against the wheel as he smiled over at us. I smiled back before following Stephen further in. He fell to the couch and I fell onto the cushion next to him. The remote was instantly in his hands and soon the TV in front of us was glowing with the image of a news anchor.

He flipped through the channels fast, barely leaving it on a station long enough to see what was actually playing. If I wasn’t so tired, I’d probably care more, but my lids were growing heavy with every new click. I adjusted my body, twisting onto my back, my head resting heaving against the material of Stephen’s shirt.

“What do you want to watch?”

I was about to say I didn’t care, but as soon as I went to open my mouth, I realized what movie was playing on the channel he had stopped on. I smiled, my eyes lifting up so I could see him, and that’s when I heard him groan.

“Seriously?” He whined. “I thought you were better than this, Jers.”

It felt like déjà vu, but that night was burned into my memory so that I could never misplace it. I’d had this conversation before, only the last time I had it, it was with Garrett and we were in L.A. “It’s just a movie.”

“Yeah, but it’s *Clueless*. I’m losing brain cells just thinking about it.”

I knew it wasn’t this epic movie, but it was a staple in every teenage girl’s life. Maybe that’s why boys just didn’t understand, just like I’d never understand the appeal of zombie movies or movies about world wars.

“Hey,” he said softly as I quickly realized I never responded to him. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize *Clueless* meant that much to you.”

I’d heard those words before, too, but they seemed to hurt a lot more now. “We don’t have to watch it.” I replied softly.

“No,” I felt his body shake as he twisted his head. “No, we’ll watch it.

I just smiled as I watched Brittany Murphy on the screen, losing track of time as my eyelids fell to my cheeks.

I was almost asleep, my head resting on Stephen’s stomach as the door to the bus creaked. My eyes fluttered open for only a second, but that was enough time to see who it was that walked in and it was enough time to see how pissed off he looked, but then I just closed my eyes again and drifted back to sleep, not caring one bit that *Clueless* was our movie and this was our thing.

"I'm sorry, Jers."

I'd voluntarily throw myself into traffic right now. It wasn't that I had a death wish; I just wanted to get away from Sarah. She was my cousin and I loved her, but I couldn't take this anymore.

"I'm so sorry, Jers. Like, you can't even fathom the amount of sorry I'm feeling right now."

I'd been listening to this for the past three hours. I listened to it as I brushed my teeth. I listen to it as I made coffee. I listened to it as I got dressed. I've listened to it so much that it was permanently imprinted in my brain.

"You know I didn't mean it, right?" She cried, trailing behind me as we weaved between people on the street.

"I know, Sarah." I repeated for the millionth time, adjusting the strap of my purse on my shoulder as I tried to keep up with the three girls in front of us.

"I'm sorry. Really, I am. You don't even have to forgive me." She cried again, the desperation in her voice getting more annoying by the second.

"There's nothing to forgive, Sarah." I mumbled, squinting as the sun tried to peak out from under the layer of overcast. "I'm not mad."

"But you should be," she panted as if it were actually that hard to keep up with me. "I can't believe I said that to you, especially when I obviously have no room to judge."

"I'm not mad, Sarah. Can we just drop it now?"

We were in Birmingham today and as Fallon put it, she was in desperate need for retail therapy. I wasn't exactly sure how I got involved in this adventure, but I had a feeling it had something to do with not wanting to suffer through the wrath of Garrett Nickelsen because it was clearly evident he woke up on the wrong side of the bunk this morning and I seemed to be his target of choice as of late. So it really wasn't that hard of a decision to make when Chloe invited me along to go shopping with them, even after Fallon told her there was no way in hell I'd willingly go to a mall and the only reason I'm remotely stylish was because of her.

According to Chloe, Bullring was the place to shop. It was three levels of endless stores that I could have cared less about. I know I was a girl and I was suppose to want to spend days on end in dressing rooms, trying to figure out what color suits my skin tone and what cut of jeans looked best on my figure, but I just didn't see the point, or find the need. I would have rather spent the day sitting outside with a book, but that was impossible when no one let me out of their sight, so I really had no choice but to suffer through this day of shopping.

"Are you sure there's nothing going on with you and Stephen?" Chloe asked, taking me off guard so that I nearly fell down the escalator. My face paled and I suddenly forgot how to speak, but she didn't give me much time to respond. "You two looked awfully cozy this morning."

I couldn't exactly forget about last night, not that much happened after Garrett walked in. We slept, or at least I slept. I wasn't entirely sure what Stephen did after I fell asleep, but I knew that I merely used him as a pillow. That was it. "We're just friends."

I heard Fallon grunt from behind me, her eyes hidden by her designer shades and her arms crossed. "Funny," she mused lightly, a lopsided grin attached to her lips. "That's what you said about Garrett."

I narrowed my eyes as I stepped off of the escalator, shooting her an unpleasant glare.



“Well, I think he fancies you,” Chloe ranted on. “Stephen, that is.” She specified. “He’s cute, yeah? I think you two look adorable together.”

The thought of Stephen didn’t repulse me. The thought of Stephen and I, however, was a little sickening. We were friends, *just friends* and that’s all I was interested in. “Yeah, well,” I forced a smile. “We’re just friends.”

Selfridges was our first stop. The minute Fallon saw the display of Alexander McQueen shoes she was gone, her eyes the shape of dollar signs as she foamed at the mouth. She was only setting herself up for disappointment, seeing as Sarah somehow convinced her to only bring one bag. And let’s face it, there wasn’t any room for a new pair of heels.

I found myself falling into a chair, my eyes quietly following Sarah, Fallon and Chloe around the shoe department. They were in heaven, squealing over spiked heels and Prada flats. Despite my newfound fashion sense, I still found the whole shopping experience torturous.

“He likes you, y’know.”

I almost thought whoever had sat down in the other chair wasn’t speaking to me, but once I decoded the familiarity in the voice, I realized the statement was directed toward me.

“I know it’s probably the last thing you want to hear,” Jess sighed, her face soft with a smile. “But it’s true.”

It was different when it was Jess telling me. Fallon and Sarah, and now Chloe just made an observation. Jess spent most of her time with Stephen. She knew him better than anyone else, and the fact that she was telling me that he liked me, it was kind of overwhelming.

“I...I...” I didn’t even know what to say. I was flustered and uncomfortable. “He’s just a friend.”

“And that’s killing him.” She replied with a laugh, which just added to the unsettling feeling in the pit of my stomach. “I’m sure he’d do anything for you to look at him the way you look at Garrett.”

I never gave much thought to the way I looked at Garrett. Lately, I was just hoping my eyes could somehow strangle him to death, but aside from that, I tried to avoid him like the plague. After all, I was getting whiplash from his constant mood swings. “Jess, I just...I don’t see Stephen in that way.”

She nodded, her fingers intertwining around each other as she smiled. “I know, but just do me a favor? Don’t lead him on.”

“That’s the last thing I want to do.”

Our conversation ended there. The other three girls interrupted us, frowns plastered on their faces and I could only assume it was due to the absence of bags in their hands. We trekked up to the second level after that. And after a good hour of Fallon pinning over the *most perfect* Gucci hobo, we ended up on the third floor where she continued to pine over said Gucci hobo. I found it amusing. I know I shouldn’t have, but I did. Fallon was used to having everything at her dispense and for the first time ever she couldn’t buy whatever he heart desired.

“Screw this,” she huffed, her arms crossed tightly as she stomped her feet around the mall. “When we get to London, I’m buying whatever I want and having it shipped home.”

I tuned her out after that. There was only so much fashion talk I could handle before wanting to throw myself over the railing of this three-floored complex. I sort of floated my way through the rest of the time we spent at the mall, completely oblivious to what stores we visited. I was shaken from my daze when we crossed through

the automatic doors, the warm summer air bringing me back to reality.

The walk back to the venue wasn't long, not that I would have minded if it was. I enjoyed getting a feel for whatever city we were in, unlike my counterparts who really just wanted to get back to the bus so they could nap. I would have wandered the streets all day if they would let me, but they wouldn't, so my only option was to nap right alongside of them.

Everyone seemed to be waking up as we go back, despite it being almost two in the afternoon. They were all shoveling spoonfuls of cereal into their mouths as we pushed past them. We had to take naps, after all Sarah had found another club to go to that night. And as much as I hated going with the flow, there really wasn't a way out of it.

~\*~

Fallon still considered me to be her doll. After spending the fall semester fighting it, I just let her do whatever she wanted to come spring. She was persistent and I couldn't say no, so I really wasn't in a position to protest.

She had me in a dress, a black base with splashes of yellow, green, fuchsia, and electric blue. I never imagined those four colors on one fabric swatch, but Fallon managed to find it. She threw a jean jacket at me before attacking my hair with a curling iron. I was done within the next twenty minutes, the apples of my cheeks dusted with a pink blush and gloss coating my lips. She put so much effort into someone who was going to be sitting all night. It seemed like such a waste.

Mostly everyone was downstairs by the time Fallon and I were finished. Sarah was by the door talking to Kennedy, and Garrett was looking ever-so enthused next to the fridge with Stephen sitting at the table to his left. I took a deep breath, hoping the tension would melt away, but it didn't work.

"We almost ready?" Fallon asked, curling her right leg under her body as she fell to the couch.

"Are you sure you want to sit there?" Garrett asked before anyone could answer her question. His lips were cringed and he looked almost disgusted. "I'm just saying. I would probably get the couch steam cleaned before I thought about sitting on it again."

I wasn't stupid. It was an obvious dig at me. I thought that maybe after that day in the hospital, things might have changed a little. I was obviously wrong, considering he went out of his way to make me feel even worse about myself.

"You seriously become a bigger douche bag by the minute."

My eyes grew. My face flushing as I watched Stephen slam the screen of his computer down. This wasn't exactly the way I wanted to start my night, but I sure was considering picking up drinking now.

"Oh," Garrett turned toward him, his eyes dripping with rage as he clenched his fists. "Are you seriously going to play the Douche Bag Card, Stephen?"

"Give me a break, Garrett. You need to stop living in the fucking past."

When Stephen took a step toward Garrett, I winced. I wasn't entirely sure what was about to happen, but I could only imagine it was going to be bad.

"Maybe I wouldn't have to if I wasn't constantly reminded of what a fucking asshole you-"

"I am not drunk enough for Battle of the Bass Players." Sarah's voice instantly hushed the boys.

"You aren't drunk at all." Fallon reasoned.

Sarah tossed her head back and forth. "Good point. I need liquor in me if I'm going to watch you two duke it out over Jersey's heart."

I knew Sarah meant well. She was the comic relief, the one trying to fight the tension, but I was already visibly upset and I just needed to leave.

Birmingham seemed to cool off during the duration of our afternoon nap. It was just past ten o'clock, and the city was alive with neon signs and crowded streets. I suddenly wasn't in the mood to spend my night listening to bad techno music, gagging over the scent of liquor and cigarette smoke. I just wanted to crawl back into Fallon's bed and sleep the summer away.

"Jers?"

I didn't respond to her, simply crossing the street and planting myself on a bench in front of a closed coffee shop. I crossed my arms, falling against the back of the wooden seat as I looked to the sky.

"C'mon, Jers, say something." Fallon begged as she took a seat next to me.

I didn't know what to say, or what to think. My feelings had been so mixed up since the start of this trip, and it wasn't helping that my heart was being pulled in five different directions. "He's just such an asshole." I mumbled, my eyes burning, but there wasn't any sign of tears. "He thinks I'm this whore that'll fuck anything that walks. And the sad part is, he's the only person I've ever done that with."

"You never told him that."

I laughed, tearing my eyes from the sky. "Thank God for that. I'm sure he'd be a smug son of a bitch right now. *Haha, Stephen. I nailed Jersey before you.*"

"You know Garrett wouldn't say that."

"Really? Because I never thought he'd call me a whore, but he's obviously done that."

Fallon let out a frustrated moan. "He's jealous, Jers. If you can't see that, you're just as dumb as he is."

I didn't get a chance to respond, not that I really wanted to. A chain of people fell from the bus across the street, Sarah enthusiastically screaming at the top of her lungs about getting drunk.

Electra had the same qualities as Ultra, only it had a lot more lights and a lot less clothes. And by less clothes, I mean there were cage dancers, which made me feel about as awkward as it sounded. I was sure I was the only one who thought the whole idea of stripping in a cage was revolting, considering everyone else seemed to be drooling over various girls. I thought about using this as a way to escape, but I knew it was too easy, so I pulled up a seat and watched the night unfold.

John seemed to take a liking to a leggy brunette. Her little black dress didn't leave much to the imagination, but that didn't seem to bother John. Jared and Pat were in the corner snickering over Fallon and Kenny's apparent dance-a-thon in the middle of the floor, and I hadn't seen anyone else since I sat down, which was refreshing, to be quite honest. I didn't have to deal with Sarah forcing drinks down my throat. I could enjoy my bottle of water in peace, well, as peacefully as I could with Cascada pumping through the speakers.

I eventually had enough. There was only so much of this I could handle. I told Jared I was leaving. He didn't put up a fight, merely offering to walk me back to the bus. I told him I'd be fine. It wasn't a dangerously long walk, and I didn't mind the quiet.

I was almost out of the door, my hand pressed to the glass as my eyes shifted lightly to the right.

I felt my chest tighten, my heart instantly falling as I watched the scene in front of me. She was pressed to the wall, his arms around her waist, while hers were lost in his hair. I couldn't look away, despite the fact that my heart was begging me to. I was too lost, engrossed even, in their tasteless make-out session to even function correctly. I thought it was bad watching him kiss someone on New Years, but this was ten times worse.

I know I said I wanted him to be happy and I know I said I wanted him to move on, but things were always easier said than done. Truth is, Garrett still had a big chunk of my heart, if not the whole thing, and watching him kiss Chloe was the last thing I needed to witness.

I snapped out of it, pushing the door open with all the force I had, freeing myself into the city center.

I kept telling myself to breathe, as if breathing was really going to help me get over the last sixty seconds of my life. If anything, breathing just made it that much worse.

My fists were balled at my sides as I stumbled down the sidewalk, watching my feet as if they were actually interesting. I know I was suppose to be aware of my surroundings, making sure no one was going to jump out at me with a knife, or a gun, or a shank, but I was afraid to make eye contact with anyone because I was afraid I just might cry.

I neared the end of the sidewalk, a crosswalk in my direct view as I lifted my eyes to make sure it was safe to cross. I nearly toppled over when I looked to my left, stopping dead in my tracks as my heart sunk even lower in my stomach.

She had blond hair. Her black, strappy heel pressed to the side of the brick building as he hovered over her, his palms scrapping against the wall she was leaning on. She had her arms wrapped loosely around his waist as she played with the hem of his shirt. They were kissing, because really, what else would they be doing at one in the morning on some city corner?

I wasn't jealous. I made it very clear that I didn't want Stephen Gomez, but if it wasn't jealousy I was feeling, I wasn't sure why I cared so much that he was kissing some random British whore. Because I did; I cared. And I didn't like the fact that I cared. Just like I didn't like the fact that Garrett and Chloe were getting to know each other on a different level.

When I got back to the bus, I stripped of the dress and jacket, simply pulling on an oversized t-shirt before crawling into Fallon's bunk. I didn't cry. I didn't do much of anything. I just sat there, staring up at the ceiling as I felt my heart shatter into five million little pieces.

I'd somehow forgotten how to sleep. My sleep schedule was tossed out the window the moment I decided to come on this trip, and since then I couldn't sleep more the four hours at a time. It wasn't terrible. After all, trying to find quiet time on a bus of fifteen was an adventure in itself, so I really didn't mind my unfortunate case of insomnia. And the fact that everyone would be tending to their hangovers until noon was a gift from the heavens. If they were focused on not throwing up, they weren't focused on me, which gave me ample opportunity to explore the city on my own.

We were in Wales today; Cardiff to be more specific and I hadn't enjoyed a city this much since Glasgow. I knew it had something to do with not being followed around by my shadows, and I made a mental note to wake up at six A.M everyday to do this.

I decided not to push my luck, simply grabbing coffee at a local café and taking a walk through the park across the street from the venue. It reminded me of Kelvingrove in all the right ways. The trees were lush and the grass was greener than green. It was peaceful and quiet, and I could have stayed there all day.

There weren't many people there, save for a few joggers and early morning dog-walkers, I was left stroll down the paved roads alone. I wasn't going to lie, it was a bit lonely. At Kelvingrove I had Daniel feeding me stories from his childhood. He knew all the best spots with all the best views, but I was left to fend for myself here. It was nice finding my own favorite spots, but I still wished I had company. Not Fallon, or Sarah. Someone who would have actually enjoyed this.

A found a bench amidst a cluster of yellow and purple wildflowers, setting my cup down before I sat next to it. I pulled my bag onto my lap, pulling out the paperback I had yet to start reading. I'd read *Walden* before, and I enjoyed it about as much as the next person, but I was required to read it for next semester's Colonial Lit class, and I wanted to get a head start.

I was five pages in, and I had retained next to nothing, my head lost in the sweet smelling flowers as I flipped the pages. I felt someone sit down next to me, assuming it was just another straggler like me, I pushed over, crossing my leg and pulling my bag closer to me.

"Can I ask you something?"

I furrowed my brows, and when I realized who it was my face dropped. I sighed, bending the top corner of the page I was on before closing the book. I dropped it on my lap, forcing a smile as I turned my head toward her. "Shoot."

She took a deep breath, last night's make-up smudged around her eyes. I wasn't sure if it was due to sleep, or if her whorish make-out session with Garrett ruined it. Her hair was in five thousand directions, pulled into the neatest ponytail it could be, and again I had to wonder if sleep did it, or if Garrett did. "Did...I don't know how to say this...Did you and Garrett used to have a thing?"

I winced, my heart still floating in my stomach. Still to this day I wasn't sure what to call whatever Garrett and I were doing last fall. We never got a chance to discuss it. "Uh...Yeah, I guess you could say that."

She gnawed at her lower lip, twisting her fingers around as she swallowed. "You...You don't still have feelings for him, do you?"

This wasn't exactly the type of question I was ready for this early in the morning. Because, yes, despite it all, I still had feelings for Garrett. Feelings that would probably never go away. Did I want to discuss said feelings with the tramp that made out with him last night? No. "Why?"

"I...Well," she stammered, looking ten shades of uncomfortable. "I was just wondering..."

I took a sip of my coffee. Yes, I had feelings for Garrett. No, I didn't want Chloe to know that, but I also didn't want her kissing him, or dating him, or falling in love with him. Against my better judgment, I decided my pride was more important than whether or not Garrett was getting any action from this redheaded bitch. "Look, he's all yours, Chloe. Just beware; he's in a constant bad mood and he has horrible taste in movies."

She didn't say anything, merely giving me a deer-in-headlights look as she scrambled to her feet. Maybe my tone was a bit harsh, but I seemed to have left my soft spoken nature back in Arizona. It was about time I grew a backbone. I was my own woman and I refused to define myself by the feelings I have, or don't have for boys.

I was too angry to stay in the park after Chloe left, mostly because she knew Garrett and I had a *thing*. She was at the pub the night he called me a whore. This was just her trying to rub it in my face. She had Garrett and I didn't. She wanted a reaction, and I wasn't going to justify her with one.

I got lost. I mean, of course I did. I got bad karma points for just thinking bad thoughts about Chloe. Me getting lost was just payback for calling her a redheaded bitch, which was only me being honest. She was a bitch. She came to the park with ulterior motives. Where was her bad karma? I'm sure she didn't get lost. I'm sure she made it back to the bus just fine, while I was stumbling around Cardiff like a tourist.

When I got back to the bus, I was more annoyed than anything. I was just happy that no one else was up. Chloe was surely sleeping off the remainder of her hangover, and I didn't care where anyone else was. I just wanted to enjoy what little coffee I had left without an interruption.

I got three more sips in before people began filtering in, moaning of headaches as they fumbled with the coffee maker. I rolled my eyes, burrowing my face deeper into *Walden* as if I was actually paying attention to the words. It was kind of hard when Fallon was crying about the lack of Tylenol on the bus and John's faint whimpers weren't helping matters. I wasn't hungover and I had a headache.

"Make it go away, Jers." Fallon whined, holding her head in her hands as she fell into the seat next to John.

"Maybe you should cool it with the drunken dance-a-thons with Kenny." I smiled, eyeing her quickly before glancing back down at my book.

"Drunken dance-a-thons? *What?*"

I let her ponder it, which was just torture. It was one thing to be hungover. It was another to be confused and hungover.

I was too consumed in the complaints slipping from Fallon's mouth to realize that the cushion next to me had sunk in. I pulled my book from my face and turned in the direction of the person, instantly wishing I hadn't.

"Mornin'."

*Mornin'*. As if something as innocent as *mornin'* was going to wash away the image of him and his tramp that was burned into my brain. His feelings for me were obviously interchangeable. And I shouldn't care who he kisses because we weren't together and I didn't even want to be together. So it was just ridiculous that I was feelings whatever I was feeling for him.

"Hi." I mumbled, twisting my head back into my book. I reread the top sentence, the words swimming through my head as I felt the paperback jerk from my hands. Scowling, I turned my head to Stephen, a lopsided grin on his face as he held my book in his hands.

"You wanna grab breakfast?" He asked, smile still intact.

"No, thanks." I muttered, snatching the book back with probably too much force. "I already ate."

"Oh," he said, taken back slightly. "Maybe lunch, then?"

I shook my head, skimming over the page until I reached where I left off. “I promised Sarah I’d go out with her.”

“Okay,” he replied slowly, scratching the back of his head. “Maybe tomorrow in London...”

“Yeah,” I smiled tightly. “Maybe.”

When he left to go back to bed, I couldn’t help smiling. I didn’t exactly like being this standoffish, but it was a nice change. I let Garrett walk all over my mistakes for seven months, and I was finally ready to fight back.

“You look different, Jers.” Fallon’s tired voice brought me out of my thoughts.

I shrugged. “I guess,” I started, closing my book. “I guess I just feel liberated.”

“Liberated?”

I nodded. “Last night just kind of put a lot of things in perspective.”

“Was it the cage dancers?”

“Something like that.”

~\*~

Sarah had a sweet tooth. I guess I would too if I grew up with a mother like my aunt who baked near constantly. She couldn’t go a day with something sugary and opposed to the rest of the still-drunk people on the bus, Sarah didn’t crave greasy food when she was hungover, she craved ice cream.

“So, I think I’m going to stop drinking.”

I was mid-bite, the plastic spoon running through my lips as I looked over at her skeptically. “Did you hit your head, or something?”

She narrowed her eyes, shoveling another spoonful of coffee ice cream into her mouth. “I’m serious, Jers. I mean, I’m not even twenty-one yet, and my liver is probably damaged.”

Sarah never cared about her liver. She should, but she didn’t. And she liked drinking. She liked partying and she liked letting loose. She wasn’t exactly impressionable, so I knew this wasn’t because she’d been hanging out with me for so long. “Did something happen last night? You kind of disappeared.”

She got quiet, which answered my question. Sarah never got quiet, and she rarely got upset.

She shook her head, a soft laugh falling from her sugar-coated lips as she looked over at me. “You’re going to think it’s stupid.”

“I promise I won’t.” I reassured her. I wasn’t exactly in a place to pass judgment.

She took a deep breath, her teeth running over her lower lip as we continued to walk past a cluster of small shops. If her goal was to kill me with anticipation, it was working. “I was jealous.”

I lifted my brows, my eyes wide. “Of?”

She scoffed, tossing the remains of her ice cream in a barrel we passed. “The little slut John was flirting with all

night.”

My mouth fell, but I instantly pulled it into a smile. Sarah hadn’t even talked about John in a romantic way since September. She was set on not breaking the band apart, which was why she broke things off with John and Kenny. “John...*O’Callaghan?*”

She laughed, “Well, I’m not talking about John Gomez.”

I was still slightly confused. If Sarah still had feelings for John, I figured she’d tell me. But I hadn’t exactly been honest with her over the last year, so maybe this was her way of payback. “Have you talked to him about these... *feelings?*”

She scowled, her lips puckered as she glared at me. “Have you talked to Garrett about your feelings?”

“Touché,” I laughed, but then I remembered last night and I suddenly didn’t feel like laughing anymore. “He’s kind of busy sucking face with Chloe now, so whatever feelings I have, don’t matter anymore.”

She stopped, nearly falling on her face as she stared blankly at me. “Garrett and *Chloe?*”

“I saw them last night,” I sighed. “It was real classy, like in the corner next to the bathrooms. And then this morning, Tour Manager Extraordinaire thought it was a prime time to ask me about Garrett and our *relationship* while she still reeked of his toothpaste.”

“Garrett and *Chloe?*” She repeated, blinking a few more times.

“Yeah, but I kind of don’t want anyone to know that I saw them last night.”

“...what a little whore,” she seethed, her face turning bright red. “And he says you have fucked judgment? Because someone honestly just slapped him upside the head with the stupid stick.”

Sarah was probably the last person I should have told about Garrett and Chloe. She wasn’t exactly skilled at keeping a secret, so I was sure the whole bus would know about Garrett and Chloe’s late night antics by the time we got back. “Can you not tell anyone? I really don’t need Garrett thinking I’m stalking him, or something. Because you know that’s the conclusion he’d jump to.”

She paused, reasoning in her head before nodding. “As long as you don’t tell anyone I’m jealous of John’s bar skanks.”

It felt nice confiding in Sarah. It was almost like we were in fifth grade again, gushing over crushes as we watched TGIF, pretending to be asleep whenever a parent would walk by. Fallon had been my secret keeper for the better part of the year, simply because I lived with her. And sure, she’d find out about Garrett and Chloe’s slutty club make-out session eventually, but right now it was just me and Sarah’s secret.

~\*~

“*Seriously, Garrett?*”

She lasted longer than I expected, to be honest. She waited until everyone cleared out of the dressing room of the venue, conveniently leaving me *napping* in the next room. It didn’t start out as me eavesdropping. It started out as me napping, but these walls were thin and Sarah was loud.

“*God, Sarah, how did you even find out?*”



I needed to have at least a little faith in her, because she was virtually holding my life in her hands. If she told Garrett she heard it for me, I didn't know what would happen, but I had a feeling it included me running to the first airport I found.

*"How do you think I found out? I saw you two dry humping near the bathrooms."*

Those weren't my exact words, but I'd let her go with it. I only saw them for about sixty seconds. Things could have easily escalated from there.

*"You're exaggerating."*

I hoped she was, at least then I'd have some peace of mind that it didn't go further than kissing.

*"Am I, you manslut?"*

I snorted, my face scrunched into the afghan I stole out of Fallon's bunk. Garrett The Manslut. Eight months ago, that would have been the last word I'd use to describe him, but I wasn't so sure anymore. For now, it just amused me and it felt good to laugh.

*"What on earth are you doing?"*

My eyes grew as I watched Fallon walk into the room, her hands firmly on her hips as she glanced at me skeptically. My finger was instantly glued to my lips, silencing her before she'd throw my cover.

*"It was just a kiss, Sarah. That's it. Just a kiss."*

*"It was more than a kiss, Garrett."*

Fallon cocked an eyebrow, mouthing something that looked like "a kiss" to me as she shuffled over to the couch I was laying on.

*"Okay, it was a lot of kissing, but that's it. Why do you even care?"*

Fallon smacked my leg, tearing my attention away from the conversation that was happening in the next room over. "What?" I hissed lowly.

*"Who is he kissing?"*

*"Why do I care that you're kissing Chloe?"*

*"Chloe?!"* Fallon's mouth fell.

*"I care because you're breaking my cousin's heart."*

I felt like we were watching a soap opera, only we couldn't see them, so it was like listening to it on the radio, which wasn't as exciting.

*"Jersey doesn't have a heart. She's like the fucking Grinch."*

"I am not like the fucking Grinch," I muttered, my face falling into a scowl as Fallon snickered. "And besides, the Grinch has a heart. It's just two sizes too small."

*“Cry me a fucking river, Cindy Lou Who. Man up and stop making out with slutty Brits. You’re turning into John.”*

I was just happy Garrett didn’t see me when he stormed past the room. There was no way I could lie my way out of eavesdropping on his conversation with Sarah, and even if I could lie, he wouldn’t believe me. He saw through every word that slipped through my lips. At one point, I was okay with it, but now it made me more vulnerable than I needed to be.

“So,” Fallon broke the sudden silence, a smug smile lying on her lips. “Garrett and Chloe?”

My face fell as I threw the blanket off of me, glaring over at her before standing up. “Don’t remind me.”

Her smile grew wider, her pearly whites on full display. “And jealousy rears its ugly head...”

I thought about telling her I wasn’t jealous, but we both knew I’d be lying.

Mr. Mittens had a staring problem. Considering who his owner was, it didn’t surprise me he was lacking in the tact department, but I guess whatever he was lacking in politeness, he was making up for in fur. He was grey and mangy, and missing his left eye, which made the whole staring thing all the creepier. He hadn’t moved since we got there. He sat tight in the woven basket on the floor, his tail swinging back and forth as his sole eye glared at me.

We were staying at Chloe’s apartment for the two nights we were in town. Of course the label offered to put the band up in a hotel, but Chloe quickly declined. If I was speaking to Stephen regularly, I’d have no problem spending this stint in London with The Summer Set, but that wasn’t an option right now. So, I was stuck here with Chloe’s Pet Semetary-like cat and the ball of tension that seemed to follow me like a rain cloud.

“So, are we going to eat soon?” Sarah questioned in a bored tone as she stared blankly at the TV. “Because I’ve been in this country for almost two weeks and have yet to had the damn Fish & Chips experience.”

Fish & Chips wasn’t exactly my idea of a fun time, but I’d take any excuse to get out of this *flat* and away from the demonic excuse of a cat.

“I know just the place,” Chloe replied as she walked in from the kitchen, her hair twisted and pinned to the back of her head as she tried to slyly make eyes at Garrett. She couldn’t have been more obvious, which I suppose was her goal. “It’s just across the way.”

It took us fifteen minutes to get out of the door, which was record time for our group, and after a short elevator ride, we were knee deep in the streets of London. To say I was in complete awe was an understatement. I seemed to have been walking on a cloud, in a complete daze, just floating by. It was my dream to be here, and the fact that I was actually here, it was hard to wrap my head around.

“Arizona?”

I thought nothing of it at first, merely following Fallon closely as we weaved through the streets.

*“Arizona?”*

The voice was only faintly familiar, but it was enough for me to stop in my tracks, my sandals scrapping against

the sidewalk.

“Jersey?” A laugh was laced around my name as everything became perfectly clear.

I turned around, a smile placed on my lips as I registered those pale green eyes. His chocolaty curls tousled slightly as a wind wiped through the city. He looked a mix of happy and surprised, his smile growing wider as I snapped out of my thoughts.

“Oh my,” I stammered, my eyes growing wide as my cheeks blushed red. “Daniel! Hi.”

I forgot we had an audience as I walked closer to him. He welcomed me with a quick hug, pulling away before I could even realize I was touching him. I still couldn’t believe he was here, standing in front of me on one of the thousands of street corners in this city.

“What are you doing here?” I asked automatically.

He simply laughed, scratching the back of his head as he looked past me and to the group behind us. “I live here, remember?”

I bit my lip, blushing again as I realized it was a very stupid question. I would have probably just stood there blushing if someone didn’t jab me in the back, bringing me back to reality. I turned my head around quickly, glaring at Fallon. “What?”

She painted a smile on her lips. “Are you going to introduce us to your friend, Jers?”

As I tried to think of a suitable answer, my eyes fell on Garrett. He was standing next to John, an unpleasant look on his face as he stared daggers in Daniel’s direction. “This is Daniel,” I said coolly, my eyes still on Garrett. “The psycho you thought was going to rape and kill me.”

Daniel chuckled, which I was grateful for. I was set on him turning around and running away the minute those words left my lips, but he didn’t.

I heard a nervous laugh escape from Fallon’s mouth as she sent a sympathetic look Daniel’s way. “We said...We said no such thing.”

I wanted to tell him that that was just the least of it, but I was sure he got an earful as Garrett dragged me up the street that night.

“God, Garrett,” Sarah seethed, a lovestruck look on her face as if Daniel had charmed her. “Way to mention he’s the Scottish version of Seth Cohen. You made him sound like some dude straight off *To Catch A Predator*.”

I glanced back briefly, only to see Garrett role his eyes. It made me smile, in all honesty. I knew how he felt about Daniel and it just made this moment that much better.

“You left rather abruptly in Glasgow,” Daniel cleared his throat, drawing my attention back to him “I never got a chance to give you an e-mail address, or phone number.”

“Yeah,” I nodded. “I really didn’t have much of a choice...”

“You’ll let me make it up to you, then?” He spoke softly and I felt eight sets of eyes burning through the back of my head.

I wasn't entirely sure what he needed to make up to me. I was the one who was rudely dragged away. "You don't have anything to make up to me..."

"Of course I do," he smiled, his eyes looking past me as they shifted toward Garrett. "I let a complete mental case drag you away without putting up so much of a fight. It was completely rude of me."

"You don't have-"

"Dinner tonight, yeah?" He asked, nervously looking at me with hope in his eyes. "Seven o'clock at The Plaza?"

I swallowed hard, looking over at Sarah and Fallon, as if they could answer for me. They just glared, motioning for me to spit some sort of answer out. "Um...Yeah...The Plaza...At seven?"

"Great," he grinned, clapping his hands together as he took a step back. "I've got to run, but I'll see you tonight."

I stood there for a good five minutes, my mind in a blur as the red from his shirt still swirled around my head. Out of all the ways I thought this two day stint in London would go, this wasn't even on the list.

"Oh.My.God." Two hands were pressed to my shoulders as Fallon jerked my body in her direction. "How adorable is he?"

He was adorable, but I think that was established in the first five seconds at the coffee shop in Scotland. "I-I," I stammered, still trying to wrap my head around everything. "I don't know what The Plaza is."

I heard Chloe snort from behind me, as if I was actually suppose to be familiar with it. She was about to say something snarky when Fallon cut her off. "It's a hotel, Jers. The Park Plaza...It's...It's kind of a big deal."

The Park Plaza. The Park Plaza *was* a big deal, a very expensive big deal.

"Look at you, Jers," Sarah piped in, hand on my shoulder as she smiled. "We've been in London for .5 seconds and you already have a date."

My eyes grew wide and I could feel my throat closing. *A date*. No, she was wrong. Sarah was so far from right that it was on a different continent. "It's not a date."

Fallon's mouth formed a smile as she laughed. "It's a date, Jersey."

I shook my head, firmly standing my ground. It wasn't a date. We were going out to dinner. Since when did going out to dinner constitute as a date? "I barely know him. He's just...He's just being nice."

"He's taking you to The Plaza, Jersey," Fallon repeated, her eyebrows arched. "You only go to The Plaza with a date, or a hired escort."

I swallowed hard, panic shaking in my veins. "This...This is a date?"

Sarah's familiar laugh rang in my ears. "You sound nervous."

Because I was nervous. "I've...I've never been on a real date before."

It was the truth, so I didn't feel bad saying it, not even when I watched Garrett's face fall. We never went on an official date. Sure, we went to the movies in L.A. and we even got ice cream, but that was back when we were just having fun. And to be honest, we never really established what we were in the first place.

“What do I even wear to The Plaza?”

~\*~

Fallon had me in heels: cute, little, stylish, teal ankle boots. They weren't the highest shoes. The heel was almost nonexistent, but they were still heels and I was still afraid to move.

I'd been at The Plaza for ten minutes. Ten minutes of awkwardly standing by the entrance as the Valet shot me sideways glances. They probably thought I was being stood up, and I guess the thought had crossed my mind. Truth be told, I didn't know Daniel very well. He was nice and friendly and he had a great smile, but I didn't know anything substantial about him. I guess, in a way, Garrett was right when he freaked out, but I'd never admit that to him. He'd forever hold it over my head.

“Hey.”

His voice tore me from my thoughts, and I smiled at him. He'd changed out of his clothes from this afternoon, replacing his gangly, old t-shirt with a crisply-pressed one and a blazer over that. His hair was still wild and tousled, but it suited him.

“Sorry I'm late.” He apologized, pulling the door open for me. “I got caught up at work.”

“You're not late,” I said quickly, my eyes lost in the dim lights and chic décor. There were simple vases lining surfaces, the same light pink flowers floating freely in all of them. Save for the flowers, the hotel was merely made up of silver and black furniture. It was modern and trendy, and kind of overwhelming.

“I hope you're hungry,” Daniel said as we walked toward the restaurant conveniently next to the concierge desk. Fallon had told me about this place. She also said you needed reservations weeks in advanced, so the fact that Daniel thought we were going to walk in there and get a table was kind of scary.

“I am,” I stuttered as we approached the hostess. “But don't you need a reservat-”

“Good evening, Daniel.” She smiled, her lips glossed in pink as she wrapped her acrylic nails around two menus. “Right this way.”

My jaw dropped as Daniel motioned to follow him. I couldn't imagine anyone frequenting this place enough to be on a first name basis with the hostess. This was the type of place you were lucky to come to once a year on a birthday, or an anniversary.

“Your server will be right with you.”

Daniel thanked her, pulling out my seat for me before shuffling over to his. I was still dazed by the whole experience, and I was sure that was the reason he was laughing.

“You act like you've never been to a nice restaurant before.” He said smugly, opening his menu.

Sure, I'd been to nice restaurants, but nothing on this level. “This...It's just unexpected.”

“Unexpected?” He scrunched his eyebrows.

“Yeah,” I stammered out, glancing over the menu, silently thanking the Gods for somewhat normal food. “I mean, when you invited me to dinner, I didn't expect a place this nice.”

He smirked, closing the menu and dropping it on the table. "Don't you think you deserve to eat at one of London's top restaurants? Because I do."

I blushed, trying to hide my face as I looked away from him. If his goal was to turn me into a giggling school girl, consider it reached.

When the waiter came to take our orders, Daniel robotically recited his apparent normal meal, only this time he told the man to, "make it two." I was slightly relieved. The whole menu overwhelmed me, and I was okay with him ordering for me. I wasn't so sure about the wine, but I'm sure if I casually sipped it, I'd be fine.

"So, tell me, Arizona." He smiled, his fingers pressed over the glass filled with red liquid. "What's with the bandage I saw on your arm this afternoon?"

I bit my lip, trying not to laugh as I took a sip of the bitter drink. "I tripped and fell, and ended up with twelve stitches."

He shook his head, a soft snicker falling out of his throat. "You're alright, though?"

I nodded. "Just waiting for them to dissolve."

We continued to talk casually as the waiter brought our food. The conversation continued through dinner, and I was sure I was slightly buzzed from the wine.

"So," I said, setting my fork against my empty plate. "You said you were coming from work before this?"

He nodded, finishing off the rest of his wine. "It's really an internship."

"And where is that?"

"The D.L.C Corporation," he leaned back in his chair, a smile hanging from his lips.

The name sounded vaguely familiar, but I couldn't place it, well until I remembered the signs I saw on the highway as we got closer to the city. "Isn't the president of the company like the Trump of the United Kingdom?"

He laughed, nodding again. "Something like that."

When the waiter came back, he didn't leave a bill, merely wishing us a goodnight. To say I was confused was an understatement, but it didn't stop me from following Daniel out of the restaurant and hotel.

"Are you ready for the next adventure?" He grinned childishly.

To be honest, all I was expecting was dinner. The fact that he had planned more was a mix of exciting and nerve-wracking. "There's more?"

"Of course."

I'd never been afraid of heights. I sometimes got woozy on roller coasters, or when looking down from a really high level, but that all seemed a little petty now that Daniel and I were standing in front of the London Eye. I couldn't say it was something I was dying to do while I was here. It was completely intimidating and frightening, and I was sure to have a panic attack.

“Are you ready?” He tugged at my hand and I swallowed hard.

“Do I have a choice?” I laughed nervously as he pulled me toward the capsule. Of course I was hesitant. I needed at least a day to sike myself into doing something like this.

“It’s so good to see you again, Mr. Collins.” The host smiled, stepping out of the way so we could get onto the bubble.

“Don’t be nervous,” Daniel reassured me as we walked further in, the woman locking the door as she slid inside, standing quietly at the opposite end of the capsule as us. “You can barely feel it moving.”

I nodded, my heart thumping erratically in my chest as we were lifted from the ground. My nerves seemed to disappear when my eyes got lost in the lights washing over the city. Stars flickering in the sky as I gasped, gawking at Big Ben and the House of Parliament. My heart instantly dropped when I saw Buckingham Palace. It was in complete awe, dizzy from admiration.

“I wasn’t completely honest with you,” Daniel broke the silence we left ourselves in. I didn’t care about honesty right now. All I cared about was the chills running up my arms. “About my job, that is.”

I tore my eyes from the view, squinting at him. “You’re not an intern at D.L.C?”

“Well, yes.” He smiled. “But I may have forgotten to mention that my father is Daniel Collins...”

“Daniel Collins...” I trailed off, my mind flashing back to the billboards on the highway. “As in Daniel Collins... The president of D.L.C...”

“I just didn’t want you to think I was just this snobby, over-privileged-”

“I don’t think you’re snobby, or over-privileged, Daniel.”

He smiled. “Well, thank you.” He chuckled, bringing his gaze back out the windows. “I’m not even a big fan of my father’s. He left my mother and I when I was just a lad. Started a new family, y’know? I’ve never really forgiven him.”

I couldn’t believe he was telling this to me, a girl he barely knew, spilling secrets like we’d known each other for years. And yes, I felt comfortable with him, which was a very scary thought, but I still couldn’t believe he trusted me enough to tell me he was the heir to a billion dollar corporation.

Daniel drove me back to Chloe’s apartment after our trip on The Eye. I was still slightly shocked that the car he was driving was a piece of junk, but Daniel wasn’t the type of guy to flaunt his status, which I well learned tonight.

“I had fun.” He said quickly as I stood in front of Chloe’s door.

“So did I.”

We stood there awkwardly for a few minutes before Daniel pulled a piece of paper from his pocket. “I know you’re only here for a few more days and you probably have plans, but if you’re ever bored, this is my number.”

He placed the piece of paper in my hand before kissing my cheek, and I swore I saw stars.

He was gone before I realized it, and I was left to walk back into reality.

Sarah was lying on the couch, the TV glowing in front of her. She had a bag of chips on her stomach and a bowl of ice cream melting on the table. Fallon had mentioned going out tonight, and I couldn't imagine Sarah not going with them.

"How was your date?" She asked groggily, a bright smile on her lips.

I blushed because I seemed to remember how to do that again. "It was nice. We went to dinner and then we went on the London Eye."

"Only the best for you, Jers." She was still smiling, her eyes falling back to the TV.

I kicked off my heels, scrunching my toes to get feeling back into them. "How come you didn't go out with everyone?"

She looked over at me briefly. "I told you. I'm not drinking anymore."

I nodded, slightly shocked that Sarah was staying true to her words. "Good for you." I replied. "What are you watching?"

"*A Cinderella Story*," she mumbled tiredly.

"Let me wash this make-up off and I'll watch it with you."

I grabbed Fallon's make-up remover out of her bag before I padded toward Chloe's bathroom, at least I tried to. Things were always different in the dark and I was already unfamiliar with this layout, so finding the bathroom seemed to turn into an adventure.

The first room ended up being her roommate's bedroom and the second ended up being a closet.

As I placed my hand on the knob of the third room, it instantly jerked forward, sending me stumbling back against the wall. My head bounced off of a picture frame and as pain ignited, I realized who was standing in front of me: his pants unbuttoned, shirt off and his belt in hand. My eyes trailed up his bare chest, past his swollen lips and they landed on his tired blue eyes. His hair was messy, falling in five thousand different directions as my heart cracked underneath my chest.

He was just staring at me, as if I really wanted to be living in this moment right now, as if I really wanted to know what was happening behind that door while Daniel was kissing my cheek. I could have lived my entire life without knowing what Garrett and Chloe did in that room. I would have been just fine not knowing.

I cleared my throat, nodding my head feverishly as he ran his fingers through his hair. "I...I...Was looking for... The Bathroom...This...Is obviously...Not...It...Okay."

I turned around swiftly, rubbing at my eyes as I felt tears well in them. Sarah stood up instantly when she saw me rush past the living room. "Jersey? Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I mumbled back as I entered the kitchen, searching quickly for a phone. "I just...I ...My allergies are acting up. That fucking...That fucking demonic cat has my allergies acting up."

I found the phone mounted to the wall. I quickly pulled it off, wrapping the white chord around my fingers as I punched at the numbers, my body shaking as I counted the rings.



*“Ello?”*

“Can you come get me?”

I wasn’t used to waking up to the sound of traffic. Sure, I’d woken up in traffic, but it wasn’t the same. I guess I should be used to noise after spending the last year on the designated party floor of the party dorm, but I wasn’t. And to be honest, there was something far more annoying about the constant horn honking than Jake’s late night/early morning Barbara renditions.

“Rise and shine!”

I groaned, my body strangled by three layers of sheets and blankets. I knew I was a ridiculously unattractive sleeper and I’d increasingly become more self-conscious as I stirred awake. My hair was probably a mess. The make-up I never got to take off was probably smeared across the pillowcase and I probably had an imprint of my hand on my face because that’s how I’d fallen asleep. I was a real Sleeping Beauty.

“I made coffee.” Daniel smiled, waking deeper into the room with a blue ceramic cup extended in my direction.

I returned the smile, wrapping my hands around the warm mug as I brought it to my lips. It was bitter and strong, and I did my best not to spit it out.

Daniel cringed as he watched me, and all I could do was let out an uncomfortable laugh. “S’not good, is it?”

I bit my lip, shaking my head lightly. “I mean, I like strong coffee, but this is-”

“Shitty?” He laughed. “I can’t say I know how to use a coffee maker properly. My housemate usually does all the coffee-making in the morning, but he left for Munich around five.”

“Well,” I grinned, twisting my legs into a pretzel. “In the age of Starbucks and Seattle’s Best, there really isn’t a dire need for you to know how to correctly use a coffee maker.”

I don’t think I could express how thankful I was for Daniel. He completely dropped any plans he could have made in the twenty minutes I wasn’t with him and picked me up with no questions asked. He didn’t try to pry. He didn’t ask me why I was upset, or if I wanted to talk. He just let me be, and that’s all I could really ask for. After all, I was still trying to shake the mental image of Garrett and Chloe doing whatever they were doing.

“I’m sorry I put you out of a bed,” I bit at my lower lip again, my eyes lazily rolling up to Daniel’s.

“Are you kidding?” He gasped. “I love sleeping on the couch. You’ve got that lovely draft coming from the windows and then there’s the neighbors in the flat over cussing and throwing death threats around. I slept like a baby, which is more than I can say for the newborn upstairs.”

I felt bad. I told him I’d sleep on the couch, but he insisted I’d take his room. He was persistent and wouldn’t take no for an answer, so I really had no choice. I wasn’t going to lie, I actually slept well for the first time in two weeks.

“Alright, up and at ‘em.” Daniel said. “I know a café near your friend’s apartment that makes the best apple scones in the bloody country.”

I wanted to tell him that Chloe wasn't my friend. I wanted to tell him that I hoped she fell down a mineshaft and died. And I know that sounded horrible and that I shouldn't wish ill upon anyone, but I genuinely hated her. It wasn't just because she was sleeping with Garrett, but that was the only suitable reason I had right now.

When I got out of bed, I realized I was still in last night's clothes. The little black dress was beyond wrinkled and the tan sweater was drenched in my drool. I guess I should just be happy I managed to slip my feet into Sarah's flip flops before running out of the door last night, or else I'd be prancing around the early morning bustle in teal boots.

I didn't realize it last night, with it being dark and having just seen the aftermath of Garrett and Chloe's rendezvous, but Daniel lived relatively close to Chloe's apartment. There were a few blocks between them, but it was within walking distance. I would have preferred not to walk because the clothes I was wearing weren't exactly 8:45 AM appropriate, but I had no choice but to suck it up.

Daniel made casual conversation as we stumbled along the London sidewalks with the suits and ties. It was mostly about the weather and how it was cooler than usual for this time of year. I couldn't say I was paying much attention, simply nodding my head along. I wasn't in the mood to talk. I wasn't in the mood to do much of anything except fester in the jealousy pulsing through my veins.

I knew that I shouldn't be jealous. After months of wishing Garrett would move on and him not doing it, I kind of figured he wouldn't. He's on tour. He's in a band. He didn't exactly have time to find a girl. I just didn't think he'd find a girl while on tour. And I really didn't think I'd have a front row seat to them consummating the relationship.

"And this is Lila Rae's Muffin Den."

Lila Rae's was something taken straight from the movies, something you cringed at because it was so sticky-sweet looking. It was pink, *very pink* with floral balloon valences and matching curtains. The tables were a weathered white with bouquets of wild flowers bunched on the tops. The counter was dusted with cakes and scones and cookies, and everything else that would send you into a diabetic coma.

"Jersey?"

Daniel stopped short, sending me stumbling into his back as the voice sang through my ears. Lila Rae's was probably an even distance between Daniel's and Chloe's apartments, or course she frequented this place and of course she brought everyone here this morning to rid themselves of hangovers.

"Jersey, what on earth are you doing in last night's clothes at 9 o'clock on a Sunday morning?" Fallon furrowed her eyebrows slightly, her cup stopped midway between her mouth as her jaw dropped. "Is this...Is this a walk of shame?"

I swallowed hard, my eyes slowly scanning the coffee shop. Everyone was staring at me, except for Kennedy, who had his head resting against the table, muffled groans falling from his throat.

"Well, obviously it's her first." John added quickly, a paper cup matching Fallon's dangling in his fingers. "She's doing it wrong." He replied smugly. "You're not suppose to bring the other person with you, Jers. It kind of defeats the shame." He shrugged, setting the cup down on the table. "Unless, you're not ashamed and this is just a Fuck-Yes-I-Got-Laid-Last-Night-Let-Me-Rub-It-In-Your-Face walk. And in that case, high five?"

I thought about correcting John. I thought about telling him the only action Daniel got was with my cheek, but then I saw Garrett and Chloe sitting two tables over, Chloe focused on the teabag in her cup and the cell phone pressed to her ear, and Garrett pretending he wasn't glaring at Daniel. So, I high-fived John, which caused a sea

of dropped mouths and wide eyes, including Daniel. My grave was already dug, my image already tainted. I might as well live up to my new title as a whore.

Daniel quickly excused himself, mumbling something about getting us coffee and scones as I took a seat next to Sarah, who was grinning dumbly at me. “What?” I asked after a few minutes of trying to ignore her creepy smile.

“Alergies, my ass.” She whispered, her eyes shifting toward Daniel. “You just wanted to get frisky with Seth Cohen over there.”

I blinked a few times, staring blankly at her. The fact that she actually thought I slept with Daniel was unsettling, but then again, I was an apparent whore. So, of course she bought my lie.

“Oh, yeah.” I mumbled, falling back against the chair. “Couldn’t keep my hands off of him.”

She raised her eyebrows at my tone. “Wait. Did you not...”

I shook my head.

“But you left in such a rush...”

What was I suppose to tell her? That I watched Garrett leave Chloe’s room and I’m so ridiculously jealous that I couldn’t stay under the same roof as him? Of course I couldn’t say that. Especially not to Sarah, the master of blowing something out of proportion. I knew Garrett, at least I used to and he wasn’t one to flaunt his sex life.

“Coffee.” Daniel said, interrupting my thoughts as he placed a cup in front of me. “And a scone.”

I smiled, silently thanking him as I watched Chloe jump from her seat.

“I just got off the phone with the label.” She grinned excitedly. “And since there’s no gig tonight, they’re giving us complete access to the company box at the O2.”

“Who’s playing?”

“Bon Jovi.”

~\*~

Against my better judgment, I told Fallon about my run-in with Garrett last night. Sarah was still seemingly oblivious as to why I left in such a panic. I was sure Garrett was quick to cover up the fact that he had gotten down and dirty with Chloe. Because, after all, I was friends with his friends and they tend to make a big deal about everything, and since no one was talking about the hook-up, it was safe to say I was the only one, besides the obvious, that knew.

“Are you sure they slept together?” Fallon asked, tossing a dress out of her bag at me. We were already running late as it was, seeing as Chloe failed to mention we needed to leave ten minutes ago, but Fallon refused to walk out of the apartment in what she was currently wearing. “I mean, it’s Garrett. It took him, like, four months to nail you.”

I gasped, my jaw dropping as the dress in my hands fell to the floor. “He walked out of her room with his pants unbuttoned and shirt off. Do you suppose they were playing Candy Land?” I asked, my eyes glaring over at her. “And he did not *nail* me.”

She snorted, a slight roll to her eyes. “Oh, I’m sorry,” she started, smiling back at me. “It took him four months to *make love* to you.”

I felt my face pale, the scone I had eaten this morning crawling back up my throat. “Stop. Just stop.”

She rolled onto her feet, ripping off the t-shirt she was wearing and replacing it with a too-tight navy dress. “Fine, whatever.” She grunted, straightening out the material that was glued to her thighs. “It took him four months to fuck, bang, mount, *deflower* you. You’re honestly going to tell me he had sex with Chloe after barely knowing her four minutes?”

I shrugged, still trying to decide if I wanted to wear the dress. It wasn’t exactly me. Even with my newfound fashion sense, I wasn’t so sure if I could pull it off. And besides, I always made fun of people for dressing up for shows, especially a Bon Jovi concert. “People change in seven months, Fallon. For all I know Garrett’s a lean, mean, sexing machine now.”

She glanced at me through the mirror, one eyebrow raised as she held a tube of lip gloss in front of her mouth. “Do you know what you just said?”

“Yes.”

She dropped her hand, spinning around to look at me. “Garrett...The lean, mean, *sexing machine*?”

“You sound like that’s not plausible.”

“It’s not, Jersey.” She laughed, twirling back to the mirror, sliding the gloss over her lips. “It’s *Garrett*.”

I mean, it was a stretch. Garrett wasn’t exactly Rico Suave, but he was decent enough. “Are you saying he’s not attractive enough, *famous enough*, to be able to get ass whenever he wants?”

She shook her head as she ran her fingers through her hair, scrunching it to gain volume. “No, he’s definitely attractive and famous enough to get ass whenever he wants, but he doesn’t because he’s Garrett. He’s not a complete asshole.”

That was the biggest lie I’d ever heard. *He’s not a complete asshole*. She obviously forgot the night he called me a whore, and the night he verbally assaulted me because obviously neither of those were asshole moves. “Yeah, well, I think he has everyone fooled.”

“Just forget about it.” A shrug fell off of her shoulders as she slipped her feet into a pair of heels next to her bag. “At least for tonight. Just have fun.”

She also seemed to forget that I had some unresolved issues with Bon Jovi and that I’d rather jump off of London Bridge than suffer through another one of their concerts.

“Are you going to change?” She inquired impatiently.

I looked down at what I was wearing. I had long changed out of that dress she put me in last night, replacing it with that old Metallica shirt that somehow found its way into my backpack, a pair of shorts and sneakers. I was comfortable and if I had to endure a set I’ve seen over twenty times, I didn’t want to be uncomfortable. “No, I’m wearing this.”

“Really?” She cringed.

“Yes.” And I walked out of the room.

The O2 was a fifteen minute cab ride from Chloe’s apartment. It wouldn’t have been so bad if the car didn’t smell like something died in it and it would have been even better if I didn’t have to sit next to Chloe. But, as my luck would have it, I got outside just as cab number three was going to pull away, so it was either sit next to Chloe, or not go. I should have taken that as a sign, but I didn’t. I squeezed in next to her and watched as the cab drove off.

I also wasn’t expecting The Summer Set to be waiting for us in the lobby. I mean, I wouldn’t have minded if Stephen and I were speaking and I guess the fact that Daniel was there as well didn’t help the situation. But like I said before, my grave was dug and I just needed to live in it.

The label’s box looked over stage right, which for any fan of the band meant that the vacant spot in front of us would soon be filled by Richie Sambora. I’d only ever seen a show from this view, simply because my parents never strayed to stage left. It didn’t bother me and I never complained about it because there were always bigger and better things for me to complain about, like how horrible the set list would be. I couldn’t say I’d ever been to a Bon Jovi show where I was one hundred percent happy with song choice, and I was sure tonight would be no different.

“This place is massive.” Sarah gawked and along with everyone else, she spun around like she’d never seen a place like this before. I have. I mean, I’ve seen Bon Jovi in bigger venues with more people, *crazier* people, but I wasn’t trying to gloat, or anything. It wasn’t exactly something I was proud of.

“I’m so excited,” Chloe said giddily, her cheeks flaming red. “I swear *Cross Road* is my favorite album of the 80’s. You can’t possibly skip a track on it.”

I snorted as everyone else nodded like they agreed with her. “It’s a greatest hits album.” I added. “Comprised of all of their singles. The whole point is for you not to skip a track.”

“Oh, I hadn’t-”

“And it came out in ‘94. *New Jersey* was their last CD to come out in the 80’s.”

I didn’t mean to come off as rude, or maybe I did, I just wasn’t sure. And it wasn’t like it was my obligation to correct every little error in 80’s trivia, but I couldn’t help myself. I knew more than I cared to and I might as well educate the less fortunate.

The conversation dulled down after that, everyone shuffling out of the box and into the cluster of seats placed directly outside of it. The scent of liquor was already lingering, and you’d think I’d be used to it by now, but I wasn’t. It still made me dizzy and nauseous.

“Some of these people are mental,” Chloe gushed, her hands placed on the railing in front of the first row of seats as she glanced around the half-full arena. “They go to like massive amounts of gigs. I mean, I can understand liking a band and going to a few shows, but following them around the country? That’s pathetic.”

I wasn’t sure why it stung so much. It wasn’t like she knew what my life was like before she met me, but her comment still made my blood boil. And I knew that her views weren’t far off from my own, but I was allowed to think that way. I lived in it, after all. She was just a bystander, judging a situation she knew nothing about.

I wasn’t sure what had taken over me. It wasn’t like I spoke up. I usually kept opinions to myself, but Chloe was walking on thin ice with me and we were bound to fall through eventually. “I mean, I can understand working

for a record label and liking the band you manage, but sleeping with the bass player? That's kind of pathetic."

I swear you could hear crickets, everyone staring over at me with wide eyes. That wasn't exactly something you'd expect to come out of my mouth. I was Jersey Rose Levitz, after all. I was quiet and I kept to myself. I was everything Sarah and Fallon weren't. I wasn't the type of person that took digs at others for self-satisfaction, and I never wanted to be that girl. I didn't enjoy being mean, but I'm not going to lie, it felt good.

"You really want to talk about being pathetic, Jers?"

I knew he was going to have something to say because he always did. I just didn't want to hear what he was going to tell me because I knew it wasn't going to be pretty and I knew it was going to end badly.

I dragged my stare away from Chloe, who looked nothing short of a deer in headlights. Garrett was standing behind me, his head tilted to the side with his thick glasses resting on the bridge of his nose. His lips were pulled tight into a frown and all I could do was swallow hard.

"Because I think you take the prize on being pathetic." He started, snapping his head up as his shoulders tensed under the t-shirt he was wearing. "We've been here for less than two weeks and how many guys have you been with?"

I wanted to tell him none. I wanted to tell him the only guy I'd ever been with was him, but I didn't.

"You're a fucking pathetic whore."

I took a deep breath, glancing around as everyone stood silently, gawking at us. It would have been easy for me to just take it. I mean, I knew I said I'd stop feeling guilty about the paper and what I did to Garrett, but part of me still felt like I deserved every nasty name he called me. But I was already having a bad night and I wasn't just going to let him walk all over me.

"I'm a whore?" I said, my voice shaking slightly as I returned the glare Garrett was sending me. "If I'm a whore, Garrett, then what are you?" I seethed, but he didn't flinch at my tone. "Because you have everyone fooled into thinking you're a fucking decent guy, but we both know the truth."

He nodded slowly, sucking his lips in. "Yeah, just like you had everyone fooled into thinking you were so innocent and oblivious, but we all know you're a complete slut."

I winced, which was the last thing I should have done. Because now he knew what his words could do to me, and he'd for sure use that to his advantage.

"You slept with me for a grade, for Christ's sake." He added with a sinister laugh. "Why would anybody be surprised you fucked James Bond after knowing him about a day?"

I didn't look at Daniel first, my eyes automatically falling on Stephen, who looked hurt, which took me slightly by surprise. I snapped out of it quickly, my gaze back on Garrett. "He's Scottish, you imbecile," I twitched. "At least get your facts straight if you're going to insult someone."

He shook his head, another laugh slipping through his lips. "You'd know all about getting facts straight, wouldn't you, Jers?"

"That's me," I hissed. "Just a regular fact checker. Tell me, Garrett? Did I get everything right? Did I do your precious broken heart justice?"

“At least what Olivia and I had was real,” he started, his voice cooler than usual. “At least Olivia meant something to me. You...You meant *nothing* to me. You were just convenient, something fun to keep me occupied before tour.”

For some reason, that hurt more than him calling me names. Because he meant something to me. He meant a lot to me. And he still did. He meant everything.

I didn’t want to cry, at least not in front of him because I’d done enough of that. He didn’t deserve the satisfaction of watching me spill more tears over him. “I...I think need to go to the bathroom.”

I took a deep breath, trying to escape the looks the entire room was shooting at me, their jaws dropped as they shifted their eyes between Garrett and I. I forced a tight smile, spinning around toward the door. As I pressed my hand to the knob, I felt something on my shoulder. I glanced back quickly, not expecting to see Daniel. “Let me walk you?”

I shook my head, opening my mouth to tell him I wanted to be alone, but I was cut off.

“You know what they say...” Garrett said lowly, his voice calm and steady and laced with hostility. “The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

My bottom lip began to quiver at about the same time my eyes began to burn. And I knew if I didn’t get out soon, we’d all be knee-deep in a mess of tears. So, I shook my head again, my eyes stuck on Daniel. “I want to be alone, but thanks.”

I never ran so fast in my life, dodging already drunk concert-goers and nearly knocking over beer venders, tears welling in my eyes as I pushed open the door to the ladies’ room. And for the first time in my life, luck was actually on my side because the bathroom was empty. It took four quick steps before I was in front of the last stall, peeling the door open before twisting the latch shut. I fell against the graffiti covered wall, sliding all the way down until I hit the floor.

It wasn’t the first time I’d done this. I somehow found myself in the last stall of the women’s bathroom at every Bon Jovi show I’d ever gone to. I knew it wasn’t the same. It wasn’t the exact place it happened, but I still hoped I’d get some sort of spiritual awakening to my parents’ lifestyle and not totally resent myself for ruining their lives. It never happened, though. I still never understood any of it. I accepted it, but I never understood it.

It was different today. Today, I actually cried, drowning myself in tears and snot as my body violently shook. I wasn’t sure if it had as much to do with my parents as it did with Garrett, though. Because Garrett, more than anyone, knew how hard I tried to not end up like my parents. He knew that I blamed myself for screwing their lives up and he threw it back in my face, like that conversation in L.A. never happened, like he just lied that night about not wanting to upset me. I shouldn’t be surprised, at least not now. Now that I knew I was just a convenience, something to play with before he started his next tour, I fully understood that all Garrett ever really wanted was to have fun with me. It was my own fault for ever wanting more.

I eventually pushed myself from the floor, once the tears stopped coming there was really no use for me to sit on the grimy tile. So, I splashed some cold water on my face and pulled the bathroom door open again, stumbling around the venue until I found my way back to the box. The lights had already dimmed and everyone was sitting in the seats outside. Fallon was the first one to spot me, looking over at me with sad eyes. “Have you been crying?”

I was about to say no because I didn’t want to seem weak, like Garrett actually had that much of a hold on me, but when he looked over at me, his face softer than it had been before, I nodded. “Yeah, I have.”

And for a moment, it almost looked as if he felt bad, but then he tensed up again as the first guitar chord of *Blood On Blood* was hit and he looked away.

I took a deep breath, sighing as I fell into the empty seat next to Fallon. Daniel was sitting in front of me, next to Sarah and Jared. He looked back briefly and I just smiled weakly. And when Stephen looked back at me from his seat three rows down, I gave him that same weak smile, as if I was really okay.

I wasn't.

I don't think I'd ever be.

I woke up pressed against Sarah with Fallon trying to cop a feel underneath my shirt, if that wasn't a reason to get out of bed, I wasn't sure what was. Then, as the rays of the early morning sun poured through the window, memories of last night flooded back, and suddenly, I had a better reason to get out of bed and out of this apartment before anyone else woke up. I softly pushed my body up, trying my best not to kick Fallon in the face as I climbed over her. I succeeded in that. Getting my foot caught on the sheet, however, I did not, and I suddenly found myself tumbling to the floor, a heap of my dead weight echoing through Chloe's roommate's room.

I quickly scattered to my feet, watching Fallon and Sarah adjust into the newly freed space as I shoved my legs into a pair of capris I had found in my backpack. I ripped the t-shirt I was wearing off, replacing it with some slouchy, sweatshirt Fallon had picked out during one of our many shopping adventures. Any other day I'd be freaking out over the strap of my bra showing, but I just wanted to get out of this place, so I didn't even care that the hem of my shirt just hit my belly button. I stole one last glance from the mirror, running my fingers through my blond curls before tying an elastic around them, and running for the door.

I tossed the strap of my bag diagonal over my shoulders as I stuffed my feet into a pair of flats, trying to be as quiet as possible as I passed Pat and Jared on the couch. I was so close to the door. I could feel the knob in my hand as I stepped over Kennedy's body, but then I heard the voice that was laced with exhausted, soft and sad and coming from the kitchen, and I stopped in my tracks. I turned my head slowly, my face stone-like as my eyes caught glimpse of her in that over-sized t-shirt and those two-sizes-too-big sweat pants, her red hair knotted into a bun on the top of her head as she held a coffee mug in her hands. "Jersey?"

I took a deep breath, my eyes twitching as I gave her my full attention. I watched as she set her cup on the table, untangling her legs from her chair as she stood up. She looked nervous and uneasy, and I for sure wasn't about to play this game.

"I just want to apologize. I—I had no idea about your parents, and I had no—"

"Look." It came out calloused and cold, unlike anything I'd ever said before. I didn't want to be associated with a bitch persona, but she started it. She could play innocent all she wanted. She could apologize until the cows came home. I could see straight through it. "I don't want your apology. I don't want your anything." I took a deep breath, watching as she nervously flinched at my words. "The only thing I'll apologize for is calling you out for whatever you're doing with Garrett. Frankly, it's none of my business and frankly, I just don't want to know."

I didn't wait around long enough for her to say anything. I stormed out, my feet pounding along the hallway as I rounded the stairs, galloping down the four flights before I threw myself out of the door.

I'd grown used to the summer mornings that felt like early fall. To be honest, this was the one thing I missed



about the RV. Each city had a different feel and it kept things interesting. Arizona was so *dry*. I loved it, in a sense. It was home, after all. But there were about a million places I'd rather be living.

It wasn't a secret that I had the sense of direction of a peanut. You'd think after spending so much time on the road, I'd be able to maneuver my way around a city. I couldn't.

I got lost. I took the first left instead of the second, and the third right instead of the first. I wasn't exactly sure where I ended up, but I knew it was nearly a mile out of the way. I don't know why I just didn't take a cab. It would have saved me the blisters and the energy, but I was obviously way too concerned about getting as far away from Chloe as possible, and I did just that, unintentionally of course.

After another twenty minutes of stumbling around the city as if I wasn't lost, I got to my destination, which was, surprise, Daniel's apartment. Sure, I could have called him. I could have given him my exact location and he could have picked me up, but that would have meant I'd have to admit to being lost, which I wouldn't.

"This is quite the surprise." He said after I knocked on his door three times. "I don't normally get visitors at seven o'clock in the morning. I don't know what life is like in The States, but we sleep in on the weekends over here—"

"She tried to *apologize* to me." I seethed as I pushed past him, barely noticing that he wasn't wearing a shirt, and I definitely didn't notice that his sweatpants were hanging a little low, or that his hair was a tousled mess.

"Oh, good morning, Daniel." He muttered, shutting the door I'd left wide open. "Good morning to you, too, Jers. No, of course you didn't wake me up—"

"She wanted to *apologize* to me." I was fuming, standing in the middle of his living room with my hands firmly on my hips as I gasped for air. "I should have smacked her. That's what I should have done. Slapped the taste of Garrett Nickelsen right off of her mouth."

He stared at me with one eyebrow raised as he scratched the back of his neck.

"Oh," I shook my head. I could feel my face burning. "Don't even get me started on that fucking slut of a bass player—"

"I have a hunch you're already started—"

"I'm a pathetic whore?" I paced the length of his living room, wearing holes in his wooden panels. "Where does he get off saying shit like that? And then bringing you into it? Like he even knows you—"

"Jers—"

"You have no idea how sorry I am." I softened my voice, my arms falling at my sides. "Like, really, Daniel. I'm sorry. I invited you to a concert only for that jackass to verbally assault you."

He stared at me blankly for what felt like hours. "Were we at the same concert? Because if anyone was getting verbally assaulted it was you."

I paused for a second, catching my breath as I watched him laugh. I suppose he was right. I was Garrett's target of choice, but it wasn't like I was completely innocent. I actually spat back last night, granted I still ended up in tears, but it was a start.

"Come sit." Daniel said as he fell to his couch, his eyes landing on the empty space next to him.

I kicked myself into motion, gnawing at my bottom lip as I curled my leg under me before falling next to him.

“I think,” he started, looking over at me with sympathetic eyes. “I think you need to tell me the whole story.”

My heart fell, the seams I stitched shut slowly breaking apart. Of course he wanted the whole story. He deserved it after last night. That didn’t make it any easier. I’d put it in the past. I locked it up and threw away the key, the only reminder being Garrett. Living it was painful enough. I didn’t know how I was going to tell Daniel everything without completely breaking down. “And you mean everything, don’t you?” I wince and he just slowly nodded. “From the very beginning?” And he nodded again.

I took a second to just conjure up a suitable place to start. He wanted everything from the beginning, and I figured the very beginning was the only place to start this story.

“So...I was conceived in a bathroom at a Bon Jovi concert.”

And everything fell into place from there. I told him about the RV and I told him how much I had resented my parents. I told him about going to ASU and I told him about Sarah and Fallon, and I of course told him about Garrett. I told him about the paper and I watched as his lips twitched slightly as I went into further detail about how I befriended Olivia. I told him how I let myself fall for Garrett, the PG version of course because I didn’t think he’d want to know the gory details of me losing my virginity on Thanksgiving. And as his face softened as he drank it all in, I gave my last detail. “I didn’t pass the paper in.”

His mouth dropped, as if he was watching a movie and the ending was the last thing he expected. That was my life, after all. A really bad movie ending where everything is broken and the main character ends up a sad old lady with twelve cats, which would be a problem with my apparent allergy. “So...” He took a deep breath. “So, you’ve decided you’d much rather torture yourself than tell him the truth?”

It wasn’t the first time I heard this. I’d been hearing this almost every day for the last seven months from Fallon and Sarah. “It’s not about whether I passed in the paper, or not. I wrote it. I can’t forgive myself, so I don’t expect him to either.”

He shifted his eyes, sending me a painful glance as he adjusted himself on the couch. “But don’t you think he should be able to decide for himself?”

I shrugged, falling against the blue cushion. “It’s easier this way.”

He sat up abruptly, his eyes growing wide. “It’s easier this way? Jersey, he’s attacking you. He’s calling you nasty names and acting like a pompous prick. You don’t deserve that.”

I shrugged again. “Maybe I do deserve it.”

He just shook his head, a look of defeat washing over him as he settled back into the couch. He took another deep breath before looking over at me again. “What about the other boy? The one that looked like you stabbed him in the heart?”

I didn’t really need to think about it, but I acted like I did, as if I had that many boys pining away for me. “Stephen? Oh, well, he—he, well, he—he doesn’t know what he wants.”

He arched his eyebrows. “Did you write a paper about him, too?”

My mouth dropped. I closed it quickly, searching for something to respond with.

“I’m kidding!” He laughed, shaking his head. “But, you know what I think?”

“I have a feeling you’re going to tell me...”

He smiled. “I think these boys need a taste of their own medicine.”

I wasn’t exactly sure what he meant, not that he gave me much time to ask. He shot up from the couch, padding his bare feet across his floor until he stopped at the wall in the kitchen. I didn’t know what he was doing, or looking at, for that matter, but curiosity took over and I was standing next to him almost instantly.

Now, I wasn’t the most organized person, but I’d perfected my own sort of organized chaos. This, well, this was just chaos. I suspected there was a calendar under the three layers of pink and green post-it notes, all scrawled over with his messy writing. Before I could even comprehend it, he was peeling the tiny papers off, interchanging them through the weeks of July. Daniel was a smart boy. His father owned a billion dollar company. I suspected he had funds to buy a phone with calendar capabilities, or at least a proper planner.

“What if I drive you to Brighton? That’s where you’re going next, right?”

I blinked, still lost in the mess of his monthly itinerary.

“I mean, if you want, of course. Because my dad has a condo down there and I’ve got the key, so it could be fun.”

I swallowed, tearing my eyes from the calendar. “Aren’t you busy?”

He laughed, a shrug to his shoulders. “Perks of being the boss’s son. Y’know, the boss that is completely guilt-stricken after walking out on said son. I can do virtually whatever I want.” He replied. “I don’t because I never really had a good reason to.”

“I’m a good reason?”

He smiled, “You’re a great reason.

~\*~

I slept on Daniel’s couch. I was offered his bed, but I graciously declined. I listened to him complain for three hours until I pretended to fall asleep, and when he tried to carry me to his room, I gave him a swift smack to the chest and he backed off. I wasn’t trying to be difficult, but I had already put him out of a bed once and it didn’t feel right doing it again.

I knew it was trouble letting him come to Brighton, but I had to stop thinking about everyone else. I wanted him to come. He was a nice guy and I had fun with him. Wasn’t I allowed to enjoy this trip? I didn’t care whether or not Garrett liked him, or if Stephen was giving him the stink eye. I was allowed to have male friends just like they were allowed to make-out with slutty whores.

Daniel was in the shower and seeing as I was still in yesterday’s clothes, there wasn’t much getting ready I needed to do. I was left to sit on his couch and listen to his phone ring because I felt awkward answering it, but the machine picked up soon, leaving me in peace.

*“Um, hi, Daniel. This is Fallon, uh, Jersey’s friend. She’s kind of missing? I mean, she’s probably not missing. That just sounds dramatic. She’s...Well...She’s misplaced.”*

“Fallon?” I said into the receiver after getting up and walking across the room to pick up the phone.

*“Jersey?! What the fuck? Do you not know how to use a phone? If your goal on this trip is to age me ten years, consider it achieved.”* She paused, taking a deep breath before continuing. *“Do you have any idea how hard it is to find Daniel fucking Collins’ phone number? Do you know who he is, Jersey? Do you know who his father is? Since when are you schmoozing with billionaires?”*

“I’m not schmoozing with billionaires.” I shrugged, not that she could see. “And why didn’t you just check Chloe’s caller-ID? I called him from her house phone.”

*“I did that after I called D.L.C throwing my mother’s name around like it meant something. Fun fact, real-estate moguls don’t care about super models.”*

I laughed, crossing my arms as I fell to the wall, the phone cradled between my shoulder and ear. “Can I help you with something?”

*“Can I help you with something? Yeah, you can get your ass back to the bus before we leave without you.”*

I bit down on my lip, trying to figure out how to phrase my next statement. “Yeah, I’ll just meet you in Brighton.”

There was a long pause which allowed me to hear Sarah in the background and the colorful names she was calling me. *“What? What do you mean you’ll meet us in Brighton? Have you completely lost your mind—”*

“I’ll see you there, Fallon.” And I hung up.

“Who was on the phone?” Daniel’s voice sang through the apartment. I turned around, smiling when I saw him. His jeans were tight and his plaid shirt wasn’t completely buttoned. His eyes were hidden by a pair of sunglasses and water droplets clung to his chocolate curls.

“Wrong number.” I answered with a smirk. “Ready?”

He grabbed his keys off of the table, sending me another smile. “Ready.”

I can’t say I would have changed anything had I known they were standing right there. I mean, I suppose it would have affected my hand placement and the near-panicked expression on my face, but I can’t say I would have stopped it. That being said, I was surprised. I hadn’t realized Daniel’s so-called medicine would have to be administered orally on a street corner in the middle of the afternoon giving everyone on the Brighton Pier a clear view of us. And when I said everyone, I meant *everyone*.

Twenty minutes ago we were just enjoying each other’s company. We were causally walking down the beach. Daniel was feeding me stories from his childhood summers here. I wasn’t much of a beach person. I didn’t like the sun and humidity tended to attack my hair, but Brighton was different. At least it was today. It wasn’t very warm and I didn’t have to worry about the sun because it was hiding behind the clouds. It was just calming and relaxing and everything this trip hasn’t been.

We had just climbed up the stairs leading the sidewalk, Daniel’s promises of ice cream still clear in my head when he quickly grabbed me. I didn’t even have a second to react. His lips were firmly pressed against mine and his fingers laced in my hair. I melted into it, my body turning to complete jelly as I clung to the fabric of his shirt to keep me from falling. The kiss was rough, sloppy even, but I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t floating. His lips

were smooth and they tasted slightly like mint, and I swore I could have stayed like this all day, but just as he went to deepen it, the clearing of a throat pulled us apart.

I didn't turn in the direction of the sound, instead I ran my fingers softly over my lips before shifting my eyes up to Daniel. He was smiling, his cheeks forming dimples as he peered over my shoulders.

"Uh, Jersey?"

I'd forgotten about them. I'd forgotten they were the reason I was in this country. I'd forgotten about the conversation I had with Fallon over Daniel's *mobile*. I'd forgotten that this is where I told them we'd meet. I'd probably forgotten my name if she didn't just remind me. And this was all thanks to Daniel and his kiss that sent me lightheaded, of course.

"H-hey, guys." I slurred as if he'd gotten me drunk. I didn't look at Fallon, or Sarah. My eyes were instantly glued to Garrett. He didn't look fazed. I mean, I saw his lip twitch, but I didn't read into it. I guess I was disappointed. I wanted him to be jealous. I wanted him to feel everything I felt after seeing him with Chloe, but he just gave me that indifferent look that had been torturing me since New Years. And as I was about to tear my eyes from him, because really, it hurt too much to look into his eyes, I watched as his hand fell onto Chloe's. His fingers laced with hers, my heart sinking faster than it took him to tug her into motion. They stormed past me, a soft wind brushing through my hair that smelt softly of Garrett and whatever perfume Chloe was wearing. He craned his neck back quickly, quirking his eyebrows in my direction before disappearing into the venue around the corner.

I could feel my blood boiling as I balled my fists, my eyes landing on Stephen for just a split second. He looked like he'd been hit by a bus and I wasn't sure why. And to be honest, I really didn't care. I was too enthralled in my Garrett-and-Chloe induced rage to even wonder why Stephen Gomez looked so upset. Mr. Drunken-Slutty-Make-Out-Session-With-Some-Random-Drunken-Whore had no right to be upset.

"...and next time on *Young and the Restless*..." Sarah mumbled, eyeing me quickly before leading the group in the same direction the *other two* had went in.

I couldn't help noticing Daniel leaning against the building next to us, a small smile clinging to his lips as he bit back his laughter. I was so not in the mood for his Scottish wit right now. "I have no idea what you find so funny right now." I said through gritted teeth.

His smile widened. "I have no idea what part of this you don't find funny."

I narrowed my eyes, my arms folded across my chest. "You can take your medicine and shove it—"

"My *medicine*," He pushed himself into a standing position. "Worked just perfectly, thank you very much."

My mouth fell. I wasn't exactly sure if he witnessed what had just happened. "Your medicine...It worked perfectly?"

"C'mon, Arizona," He said with a hint of laughter. "You could've cut the jealousy with a knife. Garrett's wound so tight, and look at you—"

"What about me?!"

"Little Miss Defensive..." He trailed off. "God, you were ready to pounce on the redhead like she was some sort of lioness trying to move in on your territory."

I just glared at him, afraid to admit that he was right. But instead of doing that, I just rolled my eyes. “You’re talking crazy. I told you you shouldn’t have gotten coffee at that gas station. It was sketchy. It was probably laced with—”

“You’re really bad at diverting a topic, love.”

“Just...Just shut up.” I said before walking over to the venue.

~\*~

I’d taken quite the liking to the couch in the dressing room of the venue. I wasn’t sure why. It wasn’t particularly comfortable. It pretty much reeked of bodily fluid and I was sure I’d end up contracting some disease from just sitting on it, but it was better than the alternative, which was the chair next to Garrett, or the loveseat Chloe was on.

To be honest, I wasn’t sure why I was here (the backstage area of the venue, not Brighton. I knew why I was in Brighton. I had a momentary brain lapse resulting in me jumping on a plane and flying halfway around the world). Daniel had promised me a day of Brighton fun, but he was too busy debating gaming consoles with Josh and Jared to even care.

“Jers?”

I pulled my eyes from the group of boys, my arms still crossed tightly around my chest as my left foot viscosly shook against my right leg. “Yes, Fallon?”

“Are you okay?” She asked slowly. “You’re looking like you’re ready to explode.”

I could only imagine how peeved I looked. I couldn’t exactly hide my emotions well, so it probably read loud and clear across my face what I wanted to do to Chloe. “I’m fine, Fallon.”

“Okay.” Her eyes grew wide as she teetered on her feet. “The girls and I are going out to lunch. Do you want to come?”

I stared at her dumbly for what felt like ten minutes. She couldn’t be serious. Unless, you know, she was, but the only way she could be serious is if she wasn’t including Chloe as a girl because she wasn’t. She was a slut and sluts had their own category. “You really want me to go to lunch with you guys? You really want me to sit across from Chloe and ponder how many strands of her precious red hair it would take for me to choke her to death?”

Fallon winced slightly, but it wasn’t like I said it loud enough for Chloe to hear. Not that I really cared if she did. She might as well have had a neon arrow above her head that read ‘I’m a giant hand-holding slut. Take me as you will.’ “Okay, crazy lady,” Fallon forced a smile. “You stay here...You stay here and play with your new toy.”

I rolled my eyes, relaxing into the couch. “He’s not a toy, Fallon. His name is Daniel and he’s a human being.”

“Alright, then play with your human being. Just don’t get him too excited.”

I was about to say something witty, but she turned to leave, calling for Jess, Sarah, and Chloe as she walked out of the door.

Daniel was still holding up his end of the argument, even after the girls and hand-holding slut left. It was currently Sega versus Nintendo 64. As if I wasn’t bored already, I couldn’t even get up to get my book. My bag had been conveniently dropped next to the chair Garrett was on and I wasn’t sure if I could resist the urge to

punch him in the face if I got up. Because, really, I wanted to, but we all knew I wouldn't, or more like couldn't. He deserved it, though. I mean, he really deserved it.

I suppose I eventually got fed up with all the Duck Hunt talk. There was only so much one could handle. So I pushed myself up from the chair, pulling down the dress I had changed into earlier and took a deep breath before I even thought about walking near Garrett. I mentally told myself to not look in his direction. I told myself to completely ignore his presence, but we all knew how well that worked. My eyes lazily drifted over to him as I made my way to the door. All I could do was hope he didn't notice, but really, he did. He lifted his eyes from his computer screen and my face instantly puckered.

"Keep making that face and it'll get stuck that way." He replied before focusing his attention back on whatever he was reading.

How was I even suppose to respond to that? Was I even supposed to? Of course I was. I couldn't just let him get away with being a dick.

But I did.

I slipped out the door, Garrett's words ringing clear in my head as I exited out of the venue. I didn't have a destination in mind. All I really knew was that I wanted to get away from Garrett because he seemed to be the only person to get in my head.

The beach seemed like a good idea. It was close enough where I wouldn't get lost and far enough away where they wouldn't see me if I tried to drown myself, not that the other hundred inhabitants wouldn't see me, but better than people I know. Though I was sure the people I didn't know would make a bigger deal about my attempted suicide than my friends would, but it wasn't like I'd actually do it. I'm not that desperate to get away from Garrett.

I slid onto the stone wall enclosing the beach, my feet disappearing into the sand as I dug my toes further in. I could hear the waves crashing in the distance, sending my head into a sort of zen-like atmosphere. For a minute I almost forgot about the first leg of this adventure. I forgot about what Professor Good-Looks said. I forgot about Garrett's apparent anger management problem. I forgot about him calling me a slut. I forgot about the first trip to the hospital and I definitely forgot about the second. I forgot about my *date* with Daniel and I forgot about catching the aftermath of what Chloe and Garrett did. I forgot about the Bon Jovi concert and I forgot about Chloe trying to apologize. And I really, *really* forgot about the kiss and how it completely backfired. I wish it was permanent, my memory of the United Kingdom floating out to sea never to be thought of again. I knew it couldn't happen and maybe it was a good thing. Remembering the pain reminded me that I was human and I was allowed to feel. I just wish I didn't have to feel so heartbroken all the time.

"Jersey?"

It was as simple as my name being called to bring me back to reality.

He sat down next to me, his sneakers dusted with sand as he drummed his fingers over his thighs. He was wearing sunglasses, but I could see him squinting through the lenses. I knew I shouldn't want to see him for reasons I still couldn't understand, but it felt nice to have him here. "Yeah, Stephen?"

He took a deep breath, his dark hair swirling in the wind as he tilted his head toward me. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" I asked shyly. I knew he wasn't apologizing for hooking up with some girl on a street corner because he was so drunk I doubt he remembered.

He shrugged, a half smile forming over his lips. “Everything.”

“That’s pretty broad, Mr. Gomez.”

“I know,” he said in frustration, biting at his lower lip. “I just—I know I did something that obviously you aren’t happy with. And I don’t even care what it was. I’m just sorry, Jers. I really am. I miss hanging out with you. I miss hearing you laugh and I—I just miss you.”

I wasn’t sure why I blushed and it felt really weird doing it. Garrett made me blush. Stephen Gomez wasn’t suppose to, but he did and it made me nervous, mostly because despite everything, I missed him too. “I miss you, too, Stephen. A lot.”

Then he slung his arm over my shoulders, my body falling against his as we watched the waves crash against the shore. “Good. I’m glad.”

~\*~

“Jersey. Jersey. Jersey.”

I knew who it was. I could tell by her voice. I just couldn’t see her, not with the crowds of people and the blinding lights. We were at the pier. It was sort of an end-of-the-tour send off with about a thousand other people who were currently in my way of getting near Fallon.

We’d been here for about an hour, we being Daniel and I. I had opted out of watching the last show, so while the bands finished up, Daniel and I got a head start on all the pizza and ice cream we could eat, which was a lot and I currently felt like barfing.

I was finally able to push through the wall of preteens. Fallon grabbed my hand, causing me to stumble forward. I couldn’t help noticing the smile painted on her lips, which worried me.

“So I know you’re going to freak that I even brought it up—”

“Brought what up?” I furrowed my eyebrows curiously.

“At lunch,” she started, still smiling. “I may have asked Chloe what her intentions were with Garrett—”

“Oh, Fallon.” I groaned, my hands instantly covering my face. I know her intentions were pure, but Fallon asking Chloe about Garrett just made me seem nosey because I guarantee Chloe saw right past Fallon’s curiosity.

“No, no, no.” Her voice grinned as she pulled my hands away from my face. “It’s all good, Jers. They were just having fun.”

The world seemed to pause. Garrett and Chloe were just having fun, as innocent as Fallon made that sound. *Fun*. They were having fun. Fun.

“Isn’t that great, Jers?” She asked.

Oh, it was so great. Garrett and Chloe were having fun. Garrett and I were just having fun once. That must have been his thing and that was definitely all we ever were. At least as far as Garrett was concerned.

“Jersey?” Fallon said slowly. “Are you okay? I figured you’d be happy that—”



“No,” I nodded. “Of course I’m happy. I—I just forgot that I promised Daniel I’d meet him at the Ferris Wheel.”

“But Jers—”

I was gone before she finished, messily pushing past that same group of preteens. My mind was racing and I just wished it would stop.

I found Daniel leaning against a fence, his fingers pressing at buttons on his phone before he rolled his eyes up at me. A smile formed over his lips as I approached him and I eagerly grabbed his hand, pulling him toward the line-less ride.

“Well, someone seems to have had second thoughts about the *Wheel of Death*.”

“Shut up,” I laughed. “I did not call it that.”

“Mmm.” He pulled his smile tight. “You did.”

I rolled my eyes, my hand still laced with his as I handed the man in front of the gate our tickets. He stepped aside, motioning for us to sit in the chair waiting at the bottom.

You’d think my fear of heights would have subsided after riding The Eye, but as soon as we were lifted into the air, my knuckles turned white from holding on so hard.

“You’re fine, Jers.” He whispered, his lips so close to my ear. I felt a chill run through my body. I hadn’t realized we were sitting so close, but I was glad. He made me feel safe, even on this rickety old ride.

As we rotated in the night sky, my eyes were fixated on the water to our left. It was so dark that you could barely see it, but if you focused hard enough, you could see the white foam of the waves. “It’s so pretty.” I said mindlessly.

“Kind of like you.”

At first I thought the world had actually stopped, but then I realized it was just the ride and we were stuck at the top. I tried to breathe, but I couldn’t. I wasn’t sure if it was because I was petrified, or if it was because of what Daniel had said. “What—”

“You’re beautiful, Jersey.” He said slowly and his face inched closer to mine. This time the kiss was softer and innocent, everything our first kiss wasn’t.

When he pulled away, he pushed a piece of hair out of my face. He was smiling widely and all I could do was try to remember how to breathe.

“I hate that you’re leaving tomorrow.” He whispered softly. “You’re a great girl, Jers. You deserve the best, whether that’s Garrett or Stephen or some boy you haven’t met yet. Just do me a favor, yeah? Don’t ever let anyone else tell you otherwise. You’re worth more than anyone could ever realize.”

I had to stop myself from crying. I mean, come on. I had a Scottish billionaire telling me I was worth the stars. I had the perfect boy, the boy girls would kill me to have, and he was so willing to let me go because he knew I couldn’t stay, even if I wanted to.

“If you ever get tired of The States,” he said with a laugh as the ride began to move again. “There’s a boy in

England who's waiting for you."

I don't remember anything after that. I seemed to have gotten off the ride and floated back to Daniel's condo because the next thing I knew, I had a glass of expensive champagne in my hand, and we were currently listening to Chloe give a toast.

"I just want to thank you all for letting me be a part of such a wonderful experience." She started, her eyes wandering around the room, stopping on me longer than I would have liked. "You are truly some of the most down-to-earth people I've met in this industry and you deserve all the fame that's coming to you, and I hope you have a wonderful time on your next adventure."

When she was done, I downed my drink, hoping that would be enough to take the edge off of the rest of the night.

"Jers?"

I turned around, setting my empty glass on the table before smiling. "Yeah, Stephen?"

"Are you ready for some good news?"

"I could sure use some." I laughed because it was true. What Daniel had said to me left me shaky and I could use something to take my mind off of it.

"I'm coming with you." He smiled. "Jess, Josh, and I. We're coming to Europe."

And I knew it had bad news written all over it, but I hugged him regardless because if Stephen was there, it meant I could keep my mind off of Garrett.

When she said she lived in a village, I had actually thought she meant a village, not that I know what a village is supposed to look like, but this was definitely not it. This was a just a small town, a *really* small town. It reminded me of this place up in Maine I had visited with my parents a few summers ago. It was stale with the stagnant scent of summer in the air. The skies were grey and cloudless. The most happening place to hang out was the local ice skating rink, and in this case, the place to be was some run-down coffee shack. I was as open-minded as they come when it came to unfamiliar places, but save for Fallon, everyone else looked scared, as if stepping away from a Starbucks for a few days was actually frightening.

We had arrived in Falun almost an hour ago. We had to take two flights: London to Stockholm and a connecting plane from there. It was a little shaky and I'm not going to lie, I thought I was going to die, but once we landed, my heart vacated my stomach and I was alright, which was more than I could say about Kennedy and John, who I'm sure regretted drinking as much as they did last night. I mean, I guess it was a good thing. While they were revisiting last night's champagne, it gave us time to call a taxi service that took roughly thirty minutes to get here.

I spent the duration of the cab ride with Sarah's sleepy head on my shoulder, intently listening to Fallon talk the driver's ear off. I hadn't realized she spoke Swedish fluently. It was amazing just to hear the excitement in her voice. I, of course, had no idea what she was saying, but I still found it fascinating.

By the time we reached the house, my shoulder had fallen asleep. I didn't even know that was possible until Sarah used me as a pillow for forty-five minutes. As Fallon thanked (I assumed she was thanking him) the cab driver profusely, I stumbled out of the car, stretching my arms as I yawned. I tilted my head to the left only to

see Garrett fall from the cab he shared with the rest of his band. He looked tired, his hair standing in a million different directions, but before I could stare at him any longer, an unfamiliar voice shook me from my thoughts.

“Fallon Williams.”

I instantly heard Fallon groan and I took that as my cue to turn around. I wasn’t exactly sure who he was. Standing just over six feet tall, he had perfect blond hair and icy eyes. He had sort of an athletic build and a cheeky smile that didn’t seem to amuse Fallon.

“God, Quinby, don’t you have a life?”

He patted his chest as if what Fallon had said hurt him. “C’mon, Fal, I know you missed me. I didn’t get to see you when you were here last. I was off in Cannes with Dad and Stepmom Number Three.”

Fallon rolled her eyes, an uninterested expression painted on her face. “How unfortunate.”

I was curious; I’m not going to lie. Who was this boy? Why did Fallon dislike him so much? And why did he speak English so well?

“Are you going to introduce me to your friends?”

She rolled her eyes once more before turning to us. “Guys, this is Quinby Ludvik. Quin, this is everyone.”

He gave us a once over, his cheeky grin attached to his face.

“Quin goes to school in New York.” Fallon said unenthused. “His mom is my mom’s manager/best friend.” She added with a shrug, “He’s also a complete prick half the time.”

“Oh, Fallon!” He gasped. “What would your grandmother say if she knew you were calling me such awful names?”

“Speaking of my grandmother...” Fallon interjected. “We better be going.”

“So, I’ll see you at the lake tonight, then?”

Another eye roll took over Fallon. “I don’t know, Quin.” She groaned. “We’re only here for two days. We’ll probably be busy.”

He shook his head. “Don’t give me that, Fallon. I’ll see all of you at ten.”

Once he was gone, I turned back around just in time to hear Sarah say, “he seems nice.”

Fallon tossed a glare at her. “Don’t fall for his charm. The kid thinks he’s God’s gift to man.”

“That doesn’t make him any less attractive.” Sarah smiled.

Fallon simply shook her head and started toward the house the taxi had dropped us off in front of. To be honest, I wouldn’t even call it a house. It was more like a cottage: cobblestone bricks on the outside with clusters of bright wild flowers outlining the garden. It was like something from the movies. It was just so perfect.

I also had no idea how eleven of us were supposed to fit in it.

The moment Fallon pushed the door open, we were met by a shrill shriek and sooner than I realized, a woman had Fallon engulfed in her arms, a woman I could only assume to be her grandmother. She was on the shorter side, her blond hair only peeking out from under Fallon's shoulders. When she pulled away, I got a good look at her face. It was heart shaped and reminded me of the pictures I'd seen of Fallon's mother.

I didn't know what I was expecting her to look like. I mean, I knew she wouldn't look like Fallon, not with Fallon's warm caramel skin and her grandmother's snow-like complexion. I was just expecting more of a structural resemblance, but Fallon was tall and thin, and her grandmother was shorter and curvier.

When she was done with Fallon, she came over to each of us, kissing everyone's cheek as Fallon introduced us. She was a sweet lady, not entirely grandmotherly. She was young. Mid fifties, maybe and she smelt softly of lilac, which was the exact opposite of my grandmother, who smelt like mothballs.

She was done hugging everyone eventually, her face still burning red from smiling so much. She clapped her hands together and motioned for us to follow her up the narrow set of stairs.

I quietly admired the pictures lining the wall as I walked up the steps. They were mostly of Fallon, actually, they all were of Fallon. Fallon at her ballet recital. Fallon at the beach. Fallon at Disney World. Fallon at the Eiffel Tower. Fallon at her high school graduation. As far as I knew, her mother was an only child and so was she, so I feel that's why she's so close with her grandmother.

"Girls' room." Fallon's grandmother said in her heavy accent as she pointed to the first door on her left. "Boys' rooms." She pointed to the two rooms on the right side before shoving through the group of us. "I make lunch." And she disappeared back downstairs.

Fallon pushed the door open, the stagnant scent of lemon cleaner filling the hall as Jess, Sarah, and I followed her in.

It was pink, as if some Disney princess had thrown up lace and tulle. It was a little girl's room. That was the only proper way to explain it. The bed was draped in something that resembled a doily and the curtains seemed to match. There were stuffed animals tossed over corners and slightly creepy porcelain dolls resting on shelves. I wasn't so much shocked as I was confused.

"Don't mind my room." Fallon sighed, tossing her bag onto the bed. "It needs a makeover."

"No," Sarah said quickly. "It's cute. It'll be like my tenth birthday. We can stay up all night and talk about boys, except we won't be gossiping about who kissed who by the swings." Sarah paused briefly before looking over at me. "We'll be gossiping about how good Daniel was in bed."

"I did not sleep with him!"

I wasn't sure how long it would take to convince them of that, but I felt like it would be the entire trip.

~\*~

I thought Fallon would be able to convince everyone that Quinby's party was a bad idea. She was a persuasive girl, after all—she was *Fallon*. I'd learned in my time knowing her that she could probably talk boys into jumping off of bridges for her. But talking this particular group out of a) a party and b) free alcohol, well, she might have been a goddess among women, but she couldn't exactly perform miracles.

I'd never been to a lakeside party. I mean, let's be honest, I hadn't been to many parties at all. But this one was

so typical teen movie, so *cliché*, I almost found it hard to believe. They had *abonfire* for god's sake. I expected the typical "beautiful people" to be gathered around it, too, especially after Quinby's good looks set such a high standard, but everyone looked pretty normal.

The only thing that *wasn't* normal was how everyone was staring at us.

Fallon cleared her throat. "I said this was a bad idea, right?" she muttered. "Because I quite clearly recall saying that this was a bad idea."

You literally could have heard a pin drop in the middle of the forest a mile away.

"Okay, no reason to look so shocked," Quinby called, making his way through the crowd as he addressed them—and maybe us. Then he turned to our group and said, "Feel free to grab a drink. I think there's just a bit of shock going around at all the new faces. Small town, you know?"

As soon as everyone kicked back into motion, conversation erupting around us while someone turned up the volume on a portable stereo. I didn't recognize the music—I didn't expect to—and so I took that opportunity to take the scene in while everyone else went for the booze.

There was a trail not so far from the party. I knew it was probably a little dangerous, but wasn't that what this trip was supposed to be about? Not danger so much, but adventure. And maybe going off by myself in some secluded wooded area wasn't the safest of plans, but it was a sort of thrill, not that I was much of a thrill seeker to begin with, but maybe it was time for a change.

I could hear crickets chirping as I weaved through a cluster of evergreens, dodging loose branches and rocks like it was my job. I couldn't see more than a few feet in front of me, but from the side of my eyes, I could see the lake, or at least, I could see the moon casting over it. I decided to bang a quick left, ditching the trail as I stumbled down a slight hill to get closer to the water.

I could still hear the party and if I squinted, I could sort of make out figures. I hadn't exactly gone far, but there was enough of a distance so that they couldn't see me.

There was a dock resting just on the edge of the lake. It was weathered and old, but still looked to have some life in it. I took a deep breath before I set my foot on it. It bounced under my weight, but I took it in small strides. I sat down once I got to the end, twisting my legs into a pretzel as my eyes fell onto the water.

Something about the sound of the ripples in the water sloshing against the dock was calming. I felt myself at ease, which was odd because there was a party happening a few hundred feet away and I couldn't remember myself ever being at ease at a party. Something bad always happened, so I guess I was considering this the calm before the storm.

I had a hard time controlling my thoughts at that point. I think it had something to do with the eerie silence, which wasn't so silent, but the stillness of the night made it feel quiet. I found myself slipping deeper into my head and I wasn't so sure I could escape it.

Coming here was the biggest mistake of my life. Deep down, I knew staying in Arizona would have been the best for everyone, but mostly me. At least if I was there, I'd be by myself and I always seemed to do fine on my own. I was alone before Fallon and even Garrett, and I managed.

I don't know what I was expecting to get out of this trip. Some sort of ah-ha moment? Some sort of sign that would tell me that everything would eventually be okay? Did I really think one trip overseas would change me? Was I really expecting to go back to Arizona as a new and improved Jersey Rose Levitz? If anything, I was more

broken than before.

I wasn't supposed to be feeling the way I was feeling, not about Daniel, definitely not about Garrett, and I'm still not sure what I was feeling for Stephen, but it was something and it scared me. I never wanted to be that girl that defined her life with boys. That girl that totally lost herself in the idea of falling in love, and I hated that I found myself walking down that road again. Because when it all came down to it, I'd kill to feel the way I felt with Garrett. And it scared me because knew how it could end, and I never wanted to experience that again.

I wasn't sure how long I was sitting there for, paralyzed by the water and frozen from the air. I was cold, but I was so numb that it didn't bother me.

*"Jersey Rose."*

His voice blew over me so softly that I thought it was just the wind, but my first notion was proven wrong when the dock started bouncing and I felt him next to me.

*"Stephen James."* I mocked playfully as I tilted my head toward him.

"You're missing out on the party." He nudged me. "They have quite the characters here."

"Really?" I raised my eyebrows, pretending to actually care about what he was about to tell me.

"Really, but they can't hold their liquor for shit. I reckon it's a hazard to be partying so close to a body of water."

I bit back my laughter. "Did—Did you just say *reckon*?"

"Maybe." He replied sheepishly. "Do you have a problem with my vocabulary?"

I shook my head. "No, of course not. I—I reckon you spend too much time watching western movies with your father."

"Well, I reckon you're being antisocial."

"Enough with the reckons." I twisted around to face him. "And I'm not being antisocial. I just—I don't like parties."

He let out a soft sigh before slinking his arm over my shoulders, pulling me closer to him. He got ready to say something that sounded like *I know*, but his voice instantly faltered as he jumped back. "Jesus, Jersey, you're freezing."

I hadn't realized. Like I said, I was sort of numb. Maybe that was the reason. It seemed pretty reasonable. It wasn't frighteningly cold, but wearing shorts and a t-shirt on a night around 50 degrees didn't seem very logical.

I soon felt the numbness melt away, the feeling in my arms slowly coming back as Stephen wrapped his sweatshirt around me. I smiled over at him, silently thanking him.

His hand was wrapped around mine almost instantly, pulling me up with him. "Let's get you near the fire before you freeze to death."

I rolled my eyes, stumbling along next to him as we walked down the dock. "You're so dramatic."

He didn't respond, instead we walked in silence back to the party.

The party was still swinging when we got back. It seemed like the locals could speak English, and John and Kennedy seemed to have jumped at the opportunity to mingle with a couple cute blonds. Jared was talking with a group of boys I didn't know with Pat and Josh. Jess was sitting at a table with a bored-looking Fallon, and I had no idea where Sarah was.

I found my eyes practically glued to Garrett as I walked by. He was sitting alone in a folding chair next to the fire. His head was hung low as a can of beer was loosely wrapped in his fingers. He looked sad, maybe even depressed. Did he really miss Chloe and their *fun* that much? I tried to ignore him, forget about him, even, but it was hard.

"I'm gonna grab another drink," Stephen started. "Do you want anything?"

I shook my head, a tight smile on my lips. "No, I'm good. Thanks, though."

After he wandered off, I shoved my hands into the pockets of my shorts. Stephen's grey hoodie may have been keeping my arms warm, but it was doing nothing for my hands. I took a few long strides and I was in front of Fallon, who seemed to be nursing a can of Coke, which was more surprising than anything. "You okay, Fallon?"

"Yeah," she shrugged boredly. "I'm fine."

"You don't look fine." I bit my lip as I took a seat next to her. "You look like you want to be here as much as I do, except you're showing it a lot more."

"I just—I know these people," she snapped, but she quickly lowered her voice. "I may have only been around them in the summer, but I know them. And I know the things they used to say—the things their parents used to say—about my mom. And they suddenly want to go around acting like it never happened? Like, I didn't completely dread coming here in the summer because I looked so different. God, you were a spectacle if you showed up here with red hair and brown eyes, so just imagine my mom showing up with me."

It was hard to take in. Fallon came off so confident at home. She was this gorgeous person, on the inside and out, but seeing her in this element had shown me a different side of her, a more vulnerable side where she actually cared what people thought about her.

"I don't even know why I care so much," Fallon continued on. "They're all stuck here, besides Quinby, at least. They're going to die here, but I have endless options. I can go to Rome. I can move to New York. I can do anything I want because of the resources my parents have and they can't, but they still get under my skin, like they always have."

"They aren't worth it, Fal." I smiled at her. "You're a better person than they could ever hope to be."

She looked over at me with side eyes, a soft grin hanging on her lips. "Thanks, Jers."

"Just tell me if you need me to inflict pain on any of these girls," I laughed. "It's the least I can do after you stuck by me this past year."

She scoffed, shaking her head. "Thanks for the offer, but if I needed someone to cause physical harm to any of these broads, I'd ask Sarah first."

I would, too. After all, we all saw what she did to my face after the whole Garrett debacle. "Speaking of Sarah, where is she?"

Fallon shrugged. "She was here a few minutes ago."

"Should we be worried?"

"It's a small town, Jers. It's kind of hard to get lost, or kidnapped."

I nodded, still not completely sold on the fact that I didn't know where Sarah was, but I forgot about it long enough for Fallon to lean into me, sending me a skeptical look. "What are you—"

"You smell like a boy," she said slowly, pulling herself back. "Now that I think about it, you ran off awfully fast... Who were you with?"

"Myself." I answered honestly. "But Stephen may have dropped by..."

"Oh, Jersey—"

"He was there all of five seconds before he made me come back because I was shivering."

She shook her head, disapproving wholeheartedly of Stephen and I's friendship. "Who would have thought you'd be the one to get the most ass on this trip?"

"I—I can't believe—"

She just smiled. "Are you ready to leave? Because I'm ready to leave."

I narrowed my eyes. She actually thought she was going to get away with changing the subject like that. And she did because as much as I wanted to defend myself, I wanted to leave even more. "I'm ready, but I don't think the rest of our alcoholic friends are."

Fallon shrugged as she stood up from her chair. "Like I said, it's a small town. It's kind of hard to get lost when there's only one main road. They'll be fine on their own."

I sighed, standing up before looking over at the rest of the group. "We should tell them we're leaving."

There was a heated debate going on when Fallon and I interrupted them. Though, I wasn't sure how heated a debate about vodka could get, but I imagined a group of borderline belligerent twenty-somethings could get very passionate about their brand of choice.

"Uh, we're leaving." Fallon said bluntly.

"So soon?" A blond girl replied.

"Yeah, Sofie, I know you'll miss me terribly."

The blond rolled her eyes, turning back to the boy she was speaking to prior.

I scratched the back of my head, nervously twiddling my fingers. I was okay with leaving, but I wasn't okay with leaving and not knowing where Sarah was, so I spoke. It wasn't to anyone in particular, but I was looking at John and he was looking back at me, his eyes red and puffy, looking as if he was already in a drunken haze.

"Has anyone seen Sarah?"



He lifted his can of beer to his lips, taking a long sip before crushing the aluminum in his hands. "I'm not her keeper."

I was taken back by his tone. I'd been around John plenty when he was drunk and he was normally happy and flirty, but tonight he looked almost angry and I wasn't sure why.

Fallon and I left it at that. We said our goodbyes and trekked back through the lightly wooded area and back up that long road until we hit her grandmother's house.

It was pitch black, not just the house, but the entire street. There was one lone streetlight and that barely lit itself. Fallon didn't bother taking out a key, the door was already open. I couldn't imagine living in a place where they didn't use a lock.

I followed Fallon up the stairs, turning into the room we were in earlier. She didn't even turn the light on, simply falling into her bed in the same clothes she'd been wearing all day. As I crawled in next to her, I couldn't help wondering if there was more to her story. I felt like she wasn't telling me something, actually, I knew she wasn't telling me something.

I just wasn't sure if I'd ever find out.

Kennedy snores.

I could have lived my entire life without knowing that, but alas, I did. Sometime between now and when I went to bed, he managed to curl up into a ball between Fallon and I, as if there was actually enough space on this bed for him to curl into such a position.

I was awake now, despite it still being relatively dark outside, and I knew I'd never be able to get back to sleep, so I rolled out of bed, leaving Kennedy in the middle of the mattress, his head nestled on Fallon's pillow. I slinked out of the room quietly, adjusting my arms into Stephen's sweatshirt and then I softly shut the door.

The house was still and quiet, and maybe even eerie. The stairs creaked under my weight as I climbed down them, my eyes casually drifting over to the window. The sun was peeking out from the clouds, turning the dark sky a mix of pink and orange. I smiled, reaching the last step only to hear the sounds of a kettle whistling. I curiously quirked an eyebrow as I passed by the living room and crossed into the kitchen, a shadow casting over the floor as I got closer.

Fallon's grandmother stood next to the stove, clad in a fuchsia velour track suit that I'm sure Fallon would burn if given the opportunity. She held a teapot in one hand and a cup in the other, her blond hair hanging in her face. "Tea, Jersey?" I hadn't realized she noticed me. She hadn't turned around and I hadn't made any sort of noise.

"Yes, please."

She grabbed another cup from the cabinet, the blue floral pattern adorning it matched hers. She spun around rather quickly for someone holding two scolding hot glasses of tea. I was quick to grab mine from her, fearing it might spill. I pulled out the seat opposite of Fallon's grandmother and sat down.

"Fallon talks much about you." She said softly as she pressed the cup to her lips. "She thinks of you like sister."

I smiled, mostly because the feelings were mutual. Fallon was the closest thing I'd ever have to a sister. Sure, I

had Sarah, but Sarah had her loyalties and I understood and respected that they would always be with the boys. Fallon was there for me no matter what, even when she knew I was wrong. As far as I was concerned, she was my sister. “I feel the same way about her.”

“My Fallon was such lonely girl. She stay in her room all the time. She no talk to anyone.”

Maybe she was confused. I knew her English wasn’t very good, so maybe she was confusing her words. Fallon not talking to anyone? Fallon staying in her room all the time? That just wasn’t right. Fallon was barely in the dorm. She was always at the school’s TV station playing Barbara Walters. She was a self-proclaimed social butterfly.

“She come home last winter and all she talk about was you.”

I almost blushed. Had I made that much of an impact on Fallon? Because I always thought it was the other way around.

“I never see my Fallon so happy.”

I wanted her to elaborate. I wanted to know more about Fallon—the girl I guess I didn’t know so well, but her grandmother quickly cut me off with a smile.

“Time for morning walk.”

She was gone in a blink, her bright pink outfit fading into the early morning. I turned back to my tea, which had long gone cold. I sighed, falling against the back of my chair, still trying to figure out what Fallon’s grandmother meant about her being lonely.

There was a loud crash in the living room that sent me flying from my seat, fearing the worst, and that being Fallon’s grandmother had came back into the house and fell.

Thankfully, it wasn’t her and more thankfully, Sarah was home.

Her eyes were wide and her hand was clapped over her mouth, the loud crash seemed to have come from her purse that fell to the ground.

I wasn’t sure what the protocol was for this. Was I supposed to just glare at her like a disapproving cousin who just intercepted what I think was a walk of shame, or was I supposed to fawn over her, spilling words that made it seem like I was happy she was home safe. I didn’t get the chance to do either.

“Look what the cat dragged in.”

I craned my neck around, staring up at John’s sleepy and shirtless figure standing at the top of the stairs. I just ignored him, or at least I tried to, focusing my attention back on Sarah. “Are you okay?”

“Of course she’s okay, Jers.” John said as he descended down the stairs. “She was with Quinby all night getting her Swedish world rocked.”

Sarah rolled her eyes, “Give me a break, John.”

“Whatever, Sarah,” He shrugged. “Whore yourself across the whole fucking continent for all I care. It’s not like you’re any different at home.”

My eyes grew wide as Sarah's jaw dropped and before either of them could do anymore damage, I intervened. "Sarah, you need to shower."

She didn't respond, at least not verbally. She gave John the finger and walked up the stairs.

I took a deep breath, turning to John. "Are you taking Douchebaggery 101 with Professor Nickelsen this summer?"

"Look, Jers." He ran his fingers through his messy hair. "There's a big difference between you and Sarah. I watched her sleep her way through high school. This justifies her being a whore." He took a deep breath. "Garrett knows you're fucking perfect and can't think of anything more clever to call you except a slut, when we all know you aren't."

"I'm not perfect." I said automatically. "And you don't mean anything you're saying. You're just jealous."

"I don't get jealous, Jersey."

"You're human, John. You're allowed to."

That didn't seem to be an acceptable response. He simply rolled his eyes and turned to go up the stairs, leaving me at the foot of the first step as what sounded like a rooster bellowed from the front yard.

~\*~

After breakfast I found Fallon alone in her room, a magazine sprawled over her lap as she continually pushed her hair behind her ears. I didn't like the idea of cornering someone for an explanation, nor did I want to force her into telling me something she didn't want to, but I was curious. "Fallon?"

"Jersey?" She mocked, looking up at me with raised brows.

"I—Um—Can we talk?"

She looked puzzled, her forehead scrunched as she closed the UK issue of Elle she bought in London. "What's up?"

"I—I guess I'm just curious about something your grandmother told me."

"Jers," She laughed. "My grandmother can barely speak English."

"I understood her just fine." I took a deep breath as Fallon stared me down. "She—Um—She just said that you were lonely, and I guess I'm just not sure what she meant by it."

I watched as her face dropped, a frown adorning her lips as she looked anywhere but at me. "You wouldn't understand, Jers."

I bit down on my lip, falling to an empty space on the bed as I looked at her with a smile. "Try me?"

She sighed, nervously almost. She looked up at me with sad eyes, as if I had just ripped off some sort of emotional band aid. "I cramped her style, both of my parents, actually."

I was suddenly prepared to listen.

“You want to talk about being a mistake, Jersey? I think I take the prize.” Her voice quivered. “Mom was just starting out and dad just got drafted. There was no place in either of their lives for a baby, so they pawned me off on my grandmother. Mom worked her ass off to get back down to a size zero and dad went on to be a wide receiver for the Eagles. I was just that inconvenience they visited on Christmas and her birthday, which are only two days apart, so they practically killed two birds with one stone.”

She paused for a breath.

“Then when I was six, she came back. She made a name for herself. She was world famous, everything she wanted and more. Then there was me—this little girl— who just didn’t understand why her mother and father left her.”

I swore there were tears in her eyes. I hadn’t meant to upset her.

“God, Jers, she explained it to fucking Oprah before she explained it to me. I’m sure you can find the clip on Youtube.” She wiped the tears away. “It was horrible, y’know? Having to listen to her spout out this sob story about how she really wanted to take care of me, but she knew both of our lives would have sucked, so my grandmother took care of me until she got her big break.”

And she went on. “When my parents finally got married, there was this big spread in People, showing America just how far these two *celebrities* had come. Then they divorced two years later, a real Hollywood happy ending.”

When I thought she was done, I spoke the first words that popped into my head. “I thought you only spent summers here...”

She scoffed. “Summer sounds a lot better than my parents abandoned me until I was six.”

I guess I just wasn’t expecting any of that. Fallon listened to me complain for months about my parents and now it seemed so petty.

“Why do you think I hate Quin so much? I was so jealous of him the first six years of my life. His mom actually made time for him and mine didn’t. And why was I so lonely? Because his friends— those kids from the party— liked to exclude me from everything.” She sighed. “Do you have any idea how lucky you were that your parents wanted to take care of you? I would have killed for that, Jers.”

I never even thought about it that way. They *wanted* to take care of me. They didn’t have to. They had so many options, but they took care of me because they wanted to. I may not have liked the choices they made, but taking care of me was never an obligation. They did it because they loved me.

“Most of the time I don’t even consider her a mother,” Fallon frowned. “My grandmother has been more of a mother than my real one could ever be and I’m okay with that.”

“Fallon, I—”

“It’s okay, Jers, you don’t have to say anything. I’m just glad you know now. And I didn’t keep it from you because I don’t trust you. I just know how much your parents effected you and I didn’t want to give you any more of a burden.”

I found that to be more shocking than the actual story. “Fallon, you would never burden me. If anyone is burdening anyone, it’s me burdening you.”

She leaned off of her pillow, wrapping her arms around me and pulling me closer. “Now that this sob story is over, maybe we should find the others and do something.”

~\*~

Fallon’s idea of something was canoeing, which was all well fun until Sarah tipped her and Jared’s canoe and everything became significantly less fun. We found ourselves back at the house, bored and on the verge of falling asleep at three in the afternoon, so Fallon took charge. She didn’t want to ruin the start of our adventure because she wanted to visit her grandmother, so she quickly found a computer and booked eleven plane tickets to Copenhagen.

I could sense her grandmother was upset when Fallon broke the news to her. We were only leaving a day early, but a day was a lot to a woman who was lucky to see her granddaughter once a year. Fallon reassured her she’d be back for Christmas, claiming there wasn’t any other place she’d rather be. I somehow ended up in on that as well, which would be news to my parents when I tell them I’d be spending the holidays with Fallon and her grandmother in Sweden. They had eighteen Christmases with me. I’m sure they could handle one alone.

We were packed and into taxis within the hour, another forty-five minutes spent with Sarah sleeping on my shoulder. By the time we got to the airport, it was a mess, as you would imagine with eleven travelers. John’s full name wasn’t spelled correctly. Josh somehow ended up with a ticket to Oslo and Pat didn’t even have a ticket. After everything was sorted out, it only gave us twenty minutes to catch our flight.

We were barely through security when they pulled Garrett aside. They claimed it was a random search, but I had a feeling the permanent scowl attached to his face made him look suspicious. So we spent the next ten minutes watching some large, Swedish man pat down every inch of Garrett’s body, the lines on his forehead deepening with every exaggerated grunt. I know I should feel bad. I mean, it was embarrassing getting your junk felt up in front of an airport full of people, but it was Garrett and he deserved it.

When he was cleared, we had to run to catch the flight, dodging scattered luggage like our lives depended on it. They were already calling final boarding when we got there, and I’m sure the flight attendant was more than enthused to have eleven people shoving tickets at her, but she took a deep breath and started scanning.

The plane was full, save for the eleven empty seats that belonged to us. Thankfully, I was sitting with Fallon, who seemed awfully smug about something. “Why are you smiling like a crazy person?”

She just nodded her head to the row in front of us. I furrowed my brows, watching as Stephen sat down and I tossed him a smile before looking back at Fallon. “What?”

She nudged her head again and as I looked in that direction, I saw Garrett. His lips were hanging in a lazy frown as he glared down at his seat number.

7B.

Stephen was in 7A.

When Garrett fell into his seat, his head bouncing off the chair directly in front of me, I looked over to Fallon and whispered, “You did this?”

She smiled. “Granted, I feel bad now that he just got manhandled.”

“Don’t.” I smiled back.

*"Would you stop hogging the fucking armrest?"*

And then I relaxed into my seat. Well, I got as relaxed as I could for a flight that was only an hour and fifteen minutes. But I knew I'd have plenty of time to relax on the fourteen hour train ride from Copenhagen to Amsterdam.

"You excited for tomorrow?" Fallon looked over at me.

I nodded. "Mostly for the stroopwafels."

She looked puzzled, so I elaborated.

"They're like waffles. I saw them on some Travel Channel show."

She laughed and now I was confused. "That's not what I meant, Jersey. You didn't forget, did you?"

And I guess I did. At least for a minute.

Tomorrow was my birthday.

And for some reason, I didn't think I'd be getting any stroopwafels.

"Make a wish, Jers."

It wasn't that easy. I couldn't remember a time when it was easy. There was so much pressure that you end up wishing for something that you didn't really want, and to be honest, I couldn't think of anything that I did want. Okay, that was a lie. There was something I very much wanted and he was sitting at the opposite end of the table looking completely bored out of his mind, but I wasn't even going to go there. I was going to pay him as little attention as possible in hopes of at least enjoying what was left of my birthday.

I admit this wasn't the best birthday I'd ever had. After a fourteen hour train ride, all you really wanted to do was sleep somewhere that wasn't in continuous motion, so needless to say, the minute we checked into our suite we passed out for a good eight hours. I wasn't disappointed. I was in Europe with my best friends. There was nothing to be disappointed about. Alright, another lie, but I already said I wasn't even going there and I'm standing firm on completely ignoring Garrett for the rest of the night and maybe even the trip.

"If you don't make a wish soon, Jers, I'll make it for you." Fallon seethed through gritted teeth behind me. I wasn't so sure if it was because she really wanted a piece of cake, or if it was because she wanted to get out of this restaurant.

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, trying to think of something quick to wish for before I took out the seven flickering flames. I couldn't. Not even my overly imaginative mind could think of something, so I just blew them out. I wasn't sure if there was some sort of bad luck stigma attached to not wishing on your birthday candles, but I suppose we'd find out soon enough, not that I have particularly good luck in the first place.

"What'd you wish for, Jers?" Sarah asked, not bothering to cut a piece of cake, simply sticking her fork into the white frosting.

"It won't come true if she tells you." Jared said as he finished off his drink.

It wouldn't come true regardless. There wasn't a wish.

"Alright," Fallon said, pushing the cake away from Sarah. "Time for presents."

My mouth fell when Fallon dropped the pile of cards on the space in front of me. I didn't expect anything. I knew that they were my friends and this is what friends do, but they still didn't need to feel obligated to get me birthday gifts. "You guys didn't—"

"Open the gifts, Jers."

I grabbed the closest one to me, which happened to be a rather festive looking bag. I scrunched my eyebrows, pulling out a light rose-colored envelope. I ran my finger under the fold and pulled out the card. "*With deepest sympathy.*"

John cleared his throat. "It was the only English card I could find at the train station."

I laughed, sending him a smile before tipping the bag so I could see what was in it.

My smile quickly faded and I felt my cheeks burning red. It was John. I mean, I should have expected something like this, but it was still slightly embarrassing. "Thanks for the—Um—Thanks for the condoms and gum, John."

"Better to be safe than pregnant." He grinned. "Also, it was the only suitable gift I could find at the train station that wasn't a map of Copenhagen."

"It's—It's exactly what I wanted." I laughed. "Thank you."

I went through the rest of the cards fluidly. Fallon gave me a promise to revamp my wardrobe once we got to Italy and Josh gave me a bottle of vodka. Sarah hand delivered a card from my parents and everyone else resorted to Starbucks gift cards because there was really no flaw with that.

I was on the last card. It was wrapped in a mint colored envelope and as I pulled the paper apart, I realized the card nearly matched. There was a lily on the front, the petals spread so that it was in full bloom with *Happy Birthday* sprawled in fancy print over the top. I peeled the cover back, fully intending on reading whatever the inside said, but before I could do that, a tiny piece of paper fell out and onto my lap. I was confused at first—until I got a good look at it—but then I was just angry. It didn't even matter that there wasn't a name signed at the bottom. I knew exactly who this was from.

"You almost done, Jers?" Fallon asked from the seat next to me. "We've got quite the night planned for you."

I was beyond nervous to find out exactly what their plans were. We were in a city famous for some antics I was definitely not okay with.

~\*~

My friends didn't disappoint.

I mean, really, I didn't expect them to. I actually had already prepared myself for this. Obviously I hadn't done enough preparing because I was still virtually mortified walking down this street.

"Enjoy it, Jers!" Sarah grinned.

But I didn't see how I was supposed to enjoy this. We were in the Red-light District and it was about as disgusting as you'd imagine. Granted, the guys seemed to enjoy it, but they were guys and there were almost naked women in windows. What wasn't there to like?

"Loosen up, Jersey Rose. It's your birthday."

It was my birthday. I almost forgot. It's kind of hard to remember when you aren't enjoying yourself. "I don't want to loosen up, Sarah. This place makes me uncomfortable." I didn't want to be a downer, but I really didn't know what they were thinking bringing me here.

"C'mon—"

"I'm just gonna go back to the hotel."

"Jersey—"

"I'll be fine. It's like a five minute walk."

I didn't give anyone a chance to object. I turned around, quickly shuffling in the other direction. I made sure to keep my eyes forward, fearing I'd catch a glimpse of something I didn't want to see if they strayed.

In all honesty, I didn't want to go back to the hotel. I didn't want to fill the few hours left of my birthday with Dutch TV I didn't understand. I wanted to have fun, just not the kind of fun my friends wanted to have.

I walked for about ten minutes without a destination in mind. I passed through what seemed like a town center. There was a river to my right, rushing wildly under a bridge and some shops to my left. Sandwiched between a convenient store and a tailor was a coffee shop and I figured that would be my most obvious stop.

The coffee shop was empty, so empty that I wasn't even sure if it was open, but the door was unlocked, so I went in. The air was laced with smoke so thick that I could barely breathe without choking. I don't know why I didn't turn around and leave. Maybe I was feeling adventurous, or maybe I was just curious.

At first I thought it was because of the smoke, but I quickly realized the lights were just dim. The walls were red and coated heavily with nicotine. It smelt strongly of liquor and I was suddenly wondering what sort of coffee shop this was.

"What's your poison?"

I spun around, my hair slapping against my shoulders as I faced the voice. He was standing behind a counter, his elbows perched on top of the worn mahogany top. He was smiling cheekily, dimples forming in his cheeks as his dark eyes ran over me.

"My—My poison?" I stammered as I took a few steps toward him.

He simply snorted, his smile growing. "Your Poison." He repeated. "The reason you're gracing me with your presence."

"Oh," I said softly. "Coffee. I'm here for coffee."

He lolled his head lightly, rolling his eyes to the counter and then back up to me. "Seriously?"

"Um." I swallowed hard, my bottom lip caught between my teeth. "Yeah."



He pushed himself up, quirking his eyebrows before turning around. He took two steps to his left, picking up a pot off of a burner. He poured it into a chipped cup before setting it down on the counter. "Coffee."

I smiled lightly before pulling out a stool and hopping on it. "Thanks." But once I took a sip, I quickly regretted my thank you. The coffee was bitter and thick, as if it had been sitting out all day.

"Here." He said quickly before grabbing a bottle out from under the counter, pouring a stream of amber liquid into the ceramic cup. "It'll loosen it up."

My mouth fell open. I didn't live in a box, despite what Sarah would say. I knew exactly what he had just put in there. "That's—Um—That's whiskey."

He just laughed. "You aren't from around here, huh?"

"What was your first clue?"

"The fact that you came in here looking for coffee."

"I—Um—I'm Jersey. I'm from Arizona."

"Bram." He stated simply.

I brought my cup to my lips, nearly choking as the coffee-whiskey mix burned my throat. I kept drinking it, though. I wasn't exactly sure why. It tasted awful and my stomach was turning, but it was my birthday and I was going to be reckless. "Do people not come in here for coffee?"

He shook his head. "It's not exactly our best selling item."

Now I was really curious. "Then what is?"

His smile began to grow and his eyebrows wiggled slightly before he turned around. He pulled a drawer out, his finger searching through it before he turned back around. Whatever he grabbed was balled in his fist. "Are you sure you want to know?"

And I did. We all knew I was a naturally curious person, so not knowing what he just pulled out was virtually killing me. "Well, it is my birthday, so I think you're obligated to tell me."

"Well, in that case." One by one, he unrolled his fingers. He started with his index and by the time he got to his ring, I knew exactly what it was. I'd seen plenty of those plastic baggies being passed around parties Fallon dragged me to.

"I—Um—I don't do that."

"But it's your birthday." He smiled. "We have a Birthday Girl Special around here."

A Birthday Girl Special sounded like something I'd see on Dateline, or the front page of the newspaper. Even though I was verging on tipsy, I knew when to say no. "Oh, I'm—I'm good. I wouldn't—I wouldn't even know how to do that."

Again, he just smiled and turned back to the back counter. He turned around a few minutes later, a joint pressed between his fingers as he placed his elbows on the free space in front of me. "You sure? It is your

birthday..."

I bit down on my lip. It was my birthday, after all. I was in a different country. I should be able to let loose and have fun. So against my better judgment, I grabbed it out of his hands.

"There we go." He grinned, pulling a lighter from his back pocket.

My heart was lodged in my chest as I pressed the joint between my lips, waiting anxiously for him to light it. I heard the end fizzle and I was so distracted by that, that I almost didn't hear him when he told me to breathe.

I choked on the first puff, my lungs heaving in and out as smoke filled my body. I could hear Bram laughing over my spastic coughing. When I finally got it under control, I took another drag. It took a good four hits before I wasn't choking anymore and everything came so fluidly after that. I'd take a drag and then I'd take a drink and this repeated until giggles were spilling from my lips.

"Oh my god." I could feel my cheeks burning red, my smile so wide that it hurt.

"You like?" Bram asked.

When I giggled again, he seemed to take it as an answer.

I wasn't even sure how long I was sitting there for, just laughing and smiling as I looked at the foam left in my empty coffee cup.

"You okay?"

"Me?" I cackled, my laughter nearly bursting at my seams. "I'm so good. I'm fantastic. I've never been—I've never been better."

He nodded slowly and I watched as he walked around to where I was sitting. "You want to get some air?"

"I love air."

"I'm sure you do."

I felt his hand wrap around mine and suddenly I was standing. He kept me balanced as we walked out the door.

I was oddly fascinated by the traffic lights. They changed from green to red almost magically. I stopped to ponder how they worked, but Bram dragged me across the street before I could figure it out.

"Sit." He instructed and I obliged.

The minute I hit the bench everything started spinning—the lampposts, and the street signs, and the buildings around me. I quickly snapped my eyes shut, but that only seemed to make it worse. And when I reopened them, Bram was gone and I didn't even have it in me to wonder where he went.

I did know one thing and that was I couldn't stay seated, so I stood up. I staggered slightly, barely catching myself before I stumbled into the railing that seemed to have saved me from falling into the river below me. I let out another string of giggles before letting my eyes run freely.

I couldn't remember a time when I was this free. Actually, I couldn't remember much of anything. All I really knew was that the way the moon was casted over the water made it look like the streetlights were dancing

around it.

“You really need to stop running off.”

I wasn’t running anywhere. If anything, I was spinning, but that was only in place.

“Okay, I’m really not in the mood for this.” His voice sounded tired and strained. “Can you just come back to the hotel with me before Fallon has a heart attack?”

I spun around to face him. Exerting that much force was probably a bad idea. The spinning seemed to quicken and I for sure thought I was going to fall over.

“Are you drunk?”

I smiled, but he still didn’t look amused. He had that pissy expression attached to his face like he did every other day. “Of course I’m not drunk, Garrett. I don’t get drunk.”

He scrunched his eyebrows, his lip cringed slightly as he continued to study me. “Are you stoned?”

I snorted, clapping my hands over my face. “Noooo.”

He shook his head, stomping over to me and lacing his fingers around my arm. “Let’s go.”

I quickly pulled back, glaring at him when he released his grip. “No. You don’t get to do this again.”

“Let’s go, Jersey. I’m not in the mood for your games.”

I came down quickly from my high. I wasn’t so happy anymore, but Garrett Nickelsen seemed to do that to me. He was the buzz kill of all buzz kills. “My games, Garrett? You really want to start talking about *my* games?”

I had to take a deep breath before I exploded. It didn’t work.

“Why did you give me the movie stub from LA?” I screamed at him, the memory of my birthday dinner playing in my head, my heart sinking faster than it did when I opened his card. “Why did you even *keep* the movie stub from LA?”

His ran his fingers through his hair angrily, glaring at me before opening his mouth again. “In London you said you’d never been on a real date before.” He seethed. “What the fuck do you think that was, Jers?”

I was taken back slightly, but then the rage boiled over. “We were just having fun, Garrett.” That phrase was burned into my memory. “Remember, Garrett? Fun. We were having *fun*. You labeled it. Not me. So forgive me for not realizing that was a date.” I snapped. “You were never exactly clear on your intentions.”

He laughed, shaking his head before taking a step toward me. “Oh, it was my intentions we weren’t clear on?” He asked. “Really, Jersey? Do you need to be reminded about the fucking paper you wrote?”

I felt my heart skip a beat. I wasn’t sure if it was from the whiskey, or the weed, or Garrett’s presence. The fact that he even thought I could forget about the paper was idiotic. Even in my current inebriated state, I knew what I did. “You really think I need to be reminded about the fucking paper I wrote, Garrett? I’m reminded every single day.”

He just looked at me. For the first time in months he was actually looking at me and not through me. His eyes

were glossed over with rage and anger, but they were locked with mine and it felt like we were there for days. He was just staring, his chest caving in and out, and I could almost hear his heart beat. He flinched slightly and I felt some sort of magnetic pull, my heart leaping into my throat when I watched him lean in. My eyes grew wide and then suddenly...

"I'm going to be sick." And I took two steps to my left and threw myself against the railing.

I was too late. I was already covered in my own puke before I was even close to the ledge.

I could feel myself gagging as the smell set in, so I did the only thing I could think of. I took my dress off, tossing it over the railing and into the river. It seemed like a good plan at first, but that was only until I realized I was standing in the middle of Amsterdam in only my bra and underwear.

"Are you out of your fucking mind?" Garrett hissed, ripping off his hoodie before throwing it over my shoulders, shoving my arms into the holes and zipping it back up. "Seriously, Jersey, how stoned are you?"

"Well, Garrett." I said slowly. "I'm a slut, remember? And this is what sluts do. They take off their clothes."

"You're ridiculous, you know that? So fucking ridiculous." He grabbed my arm again, but this time I wasn't in a position to fight it. I was nauseous and dizzy and currently having the worst birthday of my life. "Sit down." He said once he dragged me over to a bench. "Don't move until I get back."

"Where are you going?" I asked dumbly.

"To find a phone and call a cab."

"But the hotel is just down the—"

"If you walk down the street in what you're currently wearing, someone's going to ask how much you charge for an hour."

I didn't get a chance to respond. He disappeared across the street and I was left to sit on this bench and make sure no one could see my lady parts.

"Here." He said when he got back a few minutes later, a bottle of ginger ale cupped in his hands. "It'll help with the nauseous feeling."

"Thanks." I said weakly.

The cab ride back to the hotel was short and filled with an awkward tension, the moment before I threw up all over myself replaying in my head. Was he going to kiss me? Because that changed everything. He can't just go seven months without speaking to me and then in the heat of the moment think it's a good idea to kiss me. It so didn't work that way.

The minute we were out of the taxi, Garrett was glued to my back. I was well aware his hoodie wasn't doing a great job at covering everything and believe me, I was mortified when I had to stand in the elevator for eight floors with a family of four sending me disapproving looks.

I wasn't sure how late it was, but I prayed it was late enough so that everyone was sleeping. I didn't even want to think about walking into the suit with merely Garrett's sweatshirt on.

But luck was never on my side and when Fallon opened the door, her jaw was on the ground. "You were wearing

a dress the last time I saw you.”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

“Where’s your dress, Jersey?”

“In the river.”

She squinted, her eyes focused on mine. She looked confused and maybe even worried. “Are—Are you okay?”

“She’s stoned.” Garrett said before pushing past us, quickly disappearing into the room he was sharing with John, Jared, and Pat, leaving me in a complete daze in the doorway.

Fallon looked like she wanted to say something, but I quickly shushed her. “I just don’t want to talk about it.” I mumbled before heading in the direction of my room.

“I think we need to talk about it!” She shouted after me.

I shut the door behind me, my attention focused on the bed Sarah was already sleeping in. I signed, kicking off my sandals before sliding in next to her. It took me a few moments to get comfortable and when I finally did, we were left in silence.

“You smell like weed, Jers.”

I sighed again. “I know.”

I hadn’t realized how hard it would be to shower the next morning. I mean, I thought the worst would be getting out of bed because at the time it felt like agonizing torture, but no, showering was ten times worse. You figure it would be relaxing watching all of your birthday mistakes float down the drain, but there was nothing relaxing about it. Choking back the urge to spew all over yourself was almost as hard as trying not to slip and smash your head against the wall. I figured the nausea would subside at some point, but I wasn’t exactly an expert on hangovers. I just hadn’t realized I’d feel like a bus ran over me and then reversed and did it again.

I was about three seconds away from toppling over when someone started banging on the door. There were two bathrooms in the suite and that wasn’t exactly convenient for eleven people, but I’d barely been in here ten minutes. “I’ll be out in a few minutes.” I sputtered over the water filling my mouth, nearly choking as some slipped down the wrong tube.

The knocking didn’t stop. If anything, it got worse. It was just one long chain of constant noise and my head was on the verge of exploding. I did my best at getting the remaining conditioner out of my hair before turning the water off, wrapping the flimsy towel around my chest before stepping out of the tub. I didn’t bother drying my hair, simply letting my damp blond curls hang freely as I lunged at the door. “What is your problem?” I hissed as I pulled the door open, not bothering to wait to see who it was before deciding if they needed such an attitude. I had a headache. My stomach was turning. I really didn’t care who I was unleashing my *fury* on.

“I need to brush my teeth.”

I just glared at him, a shiver shaking through me. Not because it was him of all people, but because the AC was on full blast and I was about to turn into an icicle. “Well, you’re going to have to wait.” I spat.

“You’re in a lovely mood this morning.” He smiled cheekily, leaning against the doorframe as if we were really about to get into it right now. His arms were crossed tightly and I could see his Cardiology tattoo peeking out from under his grey t-shirt. “Too much whiskey, or did you hit the—”

“I really don’t need your two cents right now.” My face stiffened, completely unamused by his early morning antics. I liked it better when he was depressed and avoiding me.

“You sure needed them last night.” He replied quickly—smugly, even.

“Please, don’t even get me started on last night because I remember everything.” I swallowed hard. And I wasn’t lying. I wasn’t using this as a tactic for him to fill me in on what really went down last night. I remembered everything, but I honestly wished I didn’t. “I remember exactly what you *almost* did.”

He straightened up, narrowing his eyes from under his glasses as if I had just exposed some deep, dark secret. “And what did I almost do, Jersey?”

“You know exactly what you almost did, Garrett.” I said lowly. “And don’t for one second think I’m the only one playing these so-called games because you fucking take the prize for mixed signals.”

He didn’t say anything, simply tensing up. His jaw was clenched tight as if I had just struck a nerve, and I’m sure I did. “Like I said, I need to brush my teeth.

“Well, you’ll just have to wait.”

After shutting the door, I placed my hands on the sink vanity, taking a deep breath before I got enough energy to get dressed. I slipped on some shorts and a strapless white top embroidered with tiny flowers that were barely noticeable. I pulled a raspberry colored zip-up over that and ran my fingers through my hair, clustering the wet mess at the nape of my neck in a bun. When I pulled the door open, Garrett was still standing there, toothbrush in hand, looking more annoyed than ever. I smiled tightly before shoving past him, a slight roll to my eyes as I walked into the room I was sharing with Sarah, Fallon, and Jess. I dropped my clothes into my bag before turning back to the door, my heart nearly leaping into my throat when I saw someone standing in the doorframe.

“Jesus, Stephen, give me a heart attack, why don’t you.”

He smirked as I walked out of the room, closing the door behind me. “How are you feeling?”

I don’t think there were words to properly describe the way I felt. “I feel like I made a lot of really stupid decisions last night.”

“I think your quota for good decisions was up. You need a little stupid in your life, Jers.”

I had no idea what he was talking about. I couldn’t remember the last good decision I made.

“You want to grab some coffee?” Stephen asked and out of the corner of my eye, I watched Garrett stumble out of the bathroom. He glanced over at me for only a second, but I just smiled and turned to Stephen.

“Do you even need to ask?”

There was a coffee shop near the hotel and I made sure that it was a real one before even thinking about stepping foot in it. The idea of coffee wasn’t exactly settling right now, but I figured it would help with my headache that I needed to get rid of within the next few hours. We had a four and a half hour train adventure in

a couple hours and I barely managed the last one. There's no way I could survive this one hungover as hell.

"So, I never got to give you your birthday present." Stephen said as he handed me my latte. "I wanted to give it to you last night, but you were a bit—uh—under the weather."

"You didn't have to get me anything." I smiled, finding a seat near the window and pulling it out.

"Of course I did." He smiled back, lifting his cup to his lips. "But I can't give it to you now. It's got to be special, so I'm holding out until we get to Paris."

"You know I hate waiting, Mr. Gomez."

"Which is exactly why I'm making you wait, Ms. Levitz."

It was nice just sitting there with Stephen. We talked casually. Well, he talked casually. I couldn't stop myself from staring out the window, watching people pass me by. I was never much of a people watcher, which I found odd because I always wanted to be a journalist. But in the time I've spent across the pond, I seemed to have found a new pastime. I was just so curious about where these people were going in such a rush. To school maybe. Work most likely. Maybe they had just spent the night with their secretary and were on their way to buy their wives a bouquet of flowers, so she wouldn't get suspicious. The options were endless, each more unrealistic than the next, but I couldn't stop myself from thinking them up.

"So what do you think?"

I tore my eyes from the window, a smile taped to my lips as if I'd been listening the whole time. "I think it's a great idea." I lied, hoping I could get out of the hole I hadn't meant to dig for myself.

"I figured you would. I think it'll be fun. We haven't got to hang out much, so this'll be perfect."

I took a sip of my drink, nodding. "Definitely."

"I'm not sure how we'll get there yet, but we'll just wing it." He downed the rest of his coffee, the empty cup echoing as he set it on the table.

"Get where?"

He just laughed. "Verona, Jers. We've only been talking about it for the past ten minutes."

"Oh." I tried to hide the fact that my voice faltered. "Verona, of course. We're—We're going to Verona."

I wasn't even really worried about the whole going to Verona with Stephen thing. I was more worried about telling Fallon I was going to Verona with Stephen. That was just a scary thought and I planned on holding off telling her as long as possible. Maybe I won't have to tell her. I wasn't sure how that would work right now, but that's the plan I want to go with.

"You ready?" Stephen asked as he stood up from his chair. I quickly followed and we headed out the door.

It was a nice day. It wasn't too warm and it wasn't very cold. I was comfortable in my shorts and hoodie, even though I knew in the back of my head Fallon would be scrunching her nose at me when she saw that I even brought a hoodie with me.

We weren't walking for long when I felt his fingers intertwine with mine. And I suddenly erupted with chills. I

wasn't sure if it was because I liked it, or because his hands melted perfectly with mine. I didn't pull a way, though. I didn't even flinch. I just smiled up at him like this was normal.

"I don't know what I'd do without you, Jers." He said softly, his voiced muffled by the sounds of morning traffic as our arms swung in sync. "Sometimes I think about my life without you in it and I realize I never want you out of it. You're special, y'know? You're unlike anyone I've ever met."

"It's kind of scary thinking of an instance when you aren't here, Stephen. I seriously don't know what I'd do if you didn't stick around. I'd probably be in jail for trying to kill Garrett."

"Let's not talk about him. He's sort of a downer."

"Truer words have never been spoken."

The rest of the walk was silent. We ended up back at the hotel rather quickly and everyone seemed to be awake, which was a bit unnerving seeing as I was sure they were all well informed of my choice of birthday activities.

"Had I known you wanted to get high, Jers." John smiled as he stuffed his suitcase with clothes. "I would have bought you weed at the train station, but someone said that was inappropriate...*Sarah*."

"And condoms and gum were appropriate, *John*?" Sarah snapped, a toothbrush hanging from her lips as foam dripped down her chin.

"No time for chatting." Fallon whizzed by us, an arm full of clothes in hand. "Our train leaves in two hours."

"I thought this was supposed to be chill?" Josh stumbled out of the bathroom, sleep filling his eyes. "Y'know, no time table. Real go-with-the-flow."

"Like I said." Fallon shrugged. "We'll *go-with-the-flow* when we're in France and Italy and wherever we end up after that. But for right now, I just want to get there."

I smiled, shaking my head as I followed Fallon into the room we shared, leaving Stephen to go collect his things.

There really wasn't much for me to do. After spending so much time on the road, I was a master at living out of a suitcase, and in this case, a backpack. Everything was in order of how I'd use it. I did this when I was bored in Nottingham one night and it seemed to have worked. Fallon, however, was violently searching the room like she had enough time to lose something.

"Where did you and Stephen go?" Fallon asked as she shoved the dress she wore last night into her bag.

"Just for coffee." I shrugged.

"Did you thank Garrett for last night?" She turned to me with her eyebrows raised.

I raised mine right back at her. "Thank him for what?" I asked. "For causing me to throw up all over myself or for being the king of mixed signals?"

She dropped her bag on the bed. "I was going to say getting you home in one piece, but elaborate on this mixed signals thing..."

I shook my head. "It was nothing."



“It was obviously something if you brought it up.”

I sighed, biting on my lower lip. “He just...He just...H—He almost kissed me.”

I watched as Fallon’s eyes grew. “He...*What?*”

“He almost kissed me.” I threw my hands up. “We were fighting and then he started to lean in and then I threw up all over myself.”

She shook her head. “You really know how to ruin a moment, Jers.”

My lips cringed. “Ruin a moment? You obviously weren’t there. There was no moment. It was just Garrett being a dick, as per usual.”

“Yeah, but if he was going to kiss you, he was at least making an effort.”

“Yeah, an effort to be an even bigger dick.”

“Whatever.” She laughed. “It’s your life, Jers. If you want to play house with Stephen, I’ll support you, but—”

“I am not playing house with—”

“We’ve got a train to catch.”

By the time we got to the train station, I was ready to fall asleep. I didn’t get much sleep the night before, so I was more than okay with a four hour ride to Paris, even though I knew trying to fall asleep would probably take the full amount of time it took to get there. It was worth a try, though.

“Let’s take this group.” Fallon said when we stepped onto the train. It was nearly full, which was a huge change from the train from Copenhagen. We had virtually the only car to ourselves. “And then we can have three in back.”

Everyone went off in different directions. Sarah, Fallon, and Kennedy went to the group of three seats and I watched John, Jared, Pat, and Garrett take the seats in front of them. I was pushed into the corner with Stephen next to me and Jess and Josh in front of us.

I fell to my seat, my backpack on my lap as I unzipped a few pockets and grabbed my iPod out.

“You gonna sleep?” Stephen asked, his feet perched up on the empty space between Jess and Josh.

“I’m going to try.” I smiled as I popped the earbuds into my ears, setting my music to shuffle.

I took one last glance around the cabin, my eyes falling to my left and for a second, I caught Garrett’s gaze. I quickly tore my eyes from him, smiling as I let my head fall to Stephen’s shoulder. I closed my eyes and let the music fill my head.

~\*~

I didn’t like French food, but that really wasn’t a surprise.

We were at L’espoir. It was Fallon’s mom’s restaurant. Things about Fallon had stopped surprising me lately. Of course her mom owned a restaurant in Paris. I mean, why wouldn’t she? Just like she had an apartment looking

over the Canal Saint-Martin. None of it surprised me.

“Here.” Fallon said, dropping a plate in front of me. “Boiled chicken and white rice. It’s bland and boring and it probably tastes like shit. And I’m pretty sure you just insulted Vicq.”

I wasn’t about to tell her I wasn’t hungry. After she just stormed the kitchen, demanding a world famous chef make something more to my liking, I had to choke it down no matter how nauseous I still was. “Thanks, Fal. You really didn’t have to.”

The rest of dinner was spent discussing how we were spending the next day and a half. Sarah and Fallon wanted to shop, not caring about the historical aspect of this city. A good majority of the boys wanted to sleep all day and drink all night—those boys being John, Josh, and Kennedy. I wasn’t too sure what everyone else wanted to do, but I knew for sure that I’d be up early and hauling ass to the Musée d’Orsay, the Louvre, Versailles Palace, and the Notre Dame Cathedral. I missed everything I wanted to see in Amsterdam and I refused to do the same in Paris.

“So, are we done?” Fallon asked as she wiped off her hands.

There was a collective “yes” and we filtered out of the restaurant.

Fallon had a car service driving us around, claiming they owed her mom a favor. No one was complaining, but I was looking forward to taking the Metro tomorrow.

The van was mostly quiet. Everyone’s eyes were glued out the window, completely mesmerized by the city around us. I couldn’t help holding my breath as we passed by the Arc de Triomphe. Never in my wildest dreams did I ever think I’d be here and not for one second did I want to forget it.

When the van stopped, we were in front of the Eiffel Tower. I was just awestruck, my breath taken by its massive beauty. The setting sun was its backdrop as it glowed in all of its glory.

“I can’t believe I’m standing here.” I heard Sarah say, her jaw dropped to the grass below us. For the first time in a long time, I actually could agree with her.

I was standing in front of the Eiffel Tower. Me. Jersey Rose Levitz. I was standing in front of the Eiffel Tower in the city of love and all I could do was stare at the boy a few feet in front of me. His hands were tucked into his pockets as he teetered back and forth on his feet, his head tilted to the sky and I swore I felt my heart break.

“Onze.” Josh repeated to the woman for probably the twelfth time, holding up all ten of his fingers plus one of Jess’s for confirmation. I don’t know how two years of high school French qualified him to be our translator, but everyone else seemed to have faith in him. My faith in Josh went out the window one night last March when he decided climbing on top of Stephen’s roof drunk and naked was a good idea. “Merci!”

As he walked back toward us, I was still fighting with the kiosk. I’d been trying to print my ticket for the ten minutes it took Josh to figure out how to get to the Musée d’Orsay.

“Alright.” He said as he approached the group. He looked somewhat apprehensive, but he continued. “If I understood her correctly, it’s three stops on line eleven. We transfer to line one for two stops and then transfer to line five for two stops. The Cathedral is the first stop on line C and the Musée d’Orsay is the second.”

“And you’re positive about this?” I asked, tapping the machine that refused to print my ticket.

“Chill, Jers.” He smiled. “I got a D in French.”

“That’s supposed to reassure me?” I quirked an eyebrow.

“Yeah. It’s not like I failed.” He shrugged.

I shook my head, focusing my attention back on the kiosk. If I kicked it one more time, I was sure the security guard that was eyeing me would come over and detain me for damaging government property. So instead, I took a deep breath and pressed the button again.

“Jers?” Stephen said as he placed his hand on my shoulder. “We’re gonna head over to the platform. They said the train’s approaching. You okay by yourself?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I’ll be right there.” I watched him slide his ticket into the ticket collector, quickly scurrying over to where Jess, Josh, Pat and Jared were standing. I focused my attention back on the machine, tapping it lightly once more.

“What a gentleman.”

I sighed. “There are five other kiosks you can use, Garrett.”

He ignored me. “Will you be okay by yourself in an unfamiliar city at a train station while I go make sure I won’t miss the train?” he mocked in a voice I could only assume he meant to be Stephen’s.

“Why do you care?” I snarled, shooting him a fierce look over my shoulder.

“I mean, I would assume he’d hope to get stranded here with you,” he continued blithely, unfazed by the fact that I’d spoken at all. “I know he’s such a smooth operator, he’d be sure to get *something* in the most romantic city in the world.”

“Five. Other. Kiosks,” I repeated. “I don’t think I can say it any slower for you.”

“None that take cards,” he finally replied haughtily.

“Sucks for you.” I mumbled, and just as the words left my mouth, the kiosk let out a surprising noise and my ticket popped out. I smiled, yanking it from the slot just as I watched the train pull up. I quickly shoved my wallet back into my bag, ignoring Stephen’s panicked calls as I stumbling over to the row of scanners, shoving my ticket into the slot and I waited patiently for the revolving bar to unlock.

The minute I lunged at the train, the doors closed, leaving me two steps from falling into the tracks as my friends disappeared into a tunnel.

I thought about burying my face in my hands because, really, could this day get any worse?

“Are you serious?”

Yep, it just got worse.

I turned around, my jaw clenched shut as I watched Garrett slide his wallet into his back pocket. “Yep.” I mumbled, spinning back around to face the empty tracks.

“Whatever.” He shrugged. “It’s not like there aren’t trains every five minutes.”

I rolled my eyes. “Do you happen to remember the directions? Because I sure as hell don’t.”

He shrugged again. “It was like three, two, two, one. Or two, three, three, one. Something along those lines.”

I was about to say something. I was about to tell him that *something along those lines* doesn’t work. *Something along those lines* will take us to god knows where.

“Look, a train.” He said with about as much enthusiasm as I expected—none.

When the doors parted, Garrett stormed past me. I took a deep breath before following him in. He was already seated at the end, sandwiched between an empty seat and the door to the next car. I left about four seats between us before sitting down, pulling my purse onto my lap as other people filtered in.

I stared at the stops as we passed them, racking my brain for any trace of what Josh had repeated to me. But all I could remember were numbers—three stops on line one or eleven stops on line three and then switch to line B? There were too many letters and numbers involved in this process, and my brain was in summer mode.

We were about two stops in when a woman got on and sat between Garrett and I, in the seat beside mine. I was beginning to panic a bit, watching the names of the stops as we passed them, so I was a bit relieved when she sat down.

“Excuse me?” I said timidly, turning toward her.

She looked at me, tilting her head slightly.

“I’m looking for the Musée d’Orsay?”

She continued to stare at me, lifting her shoulders slightly. “*Je ne parle pas anglais.*”

I nodded. “Of course, yeah, right. Um...” I glanced around, screwing my mouth up on one side. “The... train?” I pointed at the floor, making a circle with my fingers. “This train?”

“*Le train?*” she said, imitating my hand movement.

“Yeah, okay, this train... Where?” I held up my hands in an exaggerated confused pose. “Where does it go?”

She squinted. “Euh... *Ce train va à Porte de la Chapelle.*”

“Chapelle? As in ‘comma Dave’?”

Obviously she didn’t understand that reference.

“Okay,” I said, “well, that doesn’t sound familiar. This train.” I pointed at the floor again, trying to keep with familiar movements so she wouldn’t get more confused. Then I lifted my hands in my “confused traveler” look and said, “Musée d’Orsay?”

“*Vous cherchez pour la musée??*”

I stared at her. “Um... could you repeat that?”

Garrett let out a heavy sigh. “Jersey, just leave her alone,” he snapped, leaning forward to look at me. “We’re on the right train.”

“What are you, a fucking world traveler now?” I shot back. “Can it really hurt to ask directions before we get lost in an unfamiliar city?”

“We’re not getting lost,” he argued. “We’re *on the right train*. She doesn’t even know what you’re saying. In case you forgot, you aren’t speaking French.”

“Well, I’m sure I can find someone around here who speaks English!”

The woman watched us as we argued, her eyes darting back and forth between us like we were in an intense tennis match. I sort of wished we were in an intense tennis match, so I could beat Garrett over the head with my racket.

Suddenly the woman jumped to her feet, shaking her head quickly. “*Vous êtes fou!*” she exclaimed loudly, startling Garrett and I both into silence. Then she walked over to Garrett and grabbed his arm, pulling him haphazardly to his feet while he protested, surprised.

“*Vous restez ici! Vous restez ici et ne parlez pas avec moi!*”

The rest of her babbling was lost in the roar of the train as we screeched to a halt at the next stop. The woman took that as her opportunity to move to the opposite end of the car, leaving Garrett and I alone in our section of seats.

“Good job,” he muttered, bumping against me as the train lurched forward again.

I squirmed in my seat. “You’re the one who freaked her out,” I mumbled. “She liked me. She was trying to help.”

“We don’t need help,” he said firmly. “We’re on the right train.”

“No we’re not!” I cried, exasperated. “She said this goes to Porte de la Chapelle!”

He sighed. “Jersey, these trains have more than one stop. That’s probably just where *she* was going. Did you think of that?”

“No,” I answered. “I was too busy panicking about being on the wrong train. Which we are.”

“No we’re not,” he maintained.

“And how can you be so sure?” I challenged, turning in my seat to face him.

“Because... Because this is our stop!” he announced, jumping up.

I scrambled out of my seat, following him off the train and onto the platform, still unsure why I was following him at all. I couldn’t really decide what was worse—being lost alone, or being lost with Garrett.

He was wrong.

He’d never admit it, but he was wrong. He was so wrong that he wasn’t even in the ballpark of being right.

“Alright, Mr. Directions.” I said through gritted teeth after looking around the crowded street, groups upon

groups of tourists in every direction. “Now where?”

He shrugged. “I’m sure one of these groups are going in the right direction. We’ll just follow them.”

I don’t know why I listened to him. If I left him after our first train transfer, I’d probably be at the Musée d’Orsay, fawning over some work of Monet, but no. I was following some Japanese tour group with Garrett, wandering the streets of some Paris neighborhood like a lost American girl.

“We stick out like a sore thumb.” I mumbled, lagging further and further behind with each step. “You couldn’t have picked a group that we blend into?”

“Sorry.” He shrugged again. “I couldn’t find a group of uptight bitches.”

I thought about slapping him. I really considered it, but our tour group came to a halt and that meant we did, too.

The Sacré-Cœur Basilica was my salvation. It was also what the Japanese tourists were drooling over.

“See, a museum.” Garrett said proudly.

At that point, I couldn’t hold back. I slapped him upside the head, glaring at him like he was some sort of child. “It’s not a museum, you idiot. It’s a church.”

“I don’t care what it is.” He mumbled, rubbing the spot on his head I just hit. “It’ll get you off my fucking back.”

“You just swore in front of a church. I hope you get stoned.”

“Speaking of getting stoned...” He snarled.

I ignored him and began climbing up the massive set of stairs.

The basilica was gorgeous and an apparent tourist trap that I hadn’t researched. It had three arches and was gleaming white. Two bronze doors at the entrance lead to the main room of worship, an altar of the same bronze resting in front of us. Somehow, this made up for not going to Notre Dame.

“It’s gorgeous.” I said in awe as my neck was craned back so I could get a better view.

“Yeah,” Garrett said. I almost forget he was there. He’d been uncharacteristically quiet the hour or so I putted around the church. I actually managed to enjoy myself.

I sighed, taking one last look around before turning to the stairs. “Alright. I’m ready to go.”

I slumped down the stairs, taking it one step at a time as I crossed my arms. I guess I was still disappointed. I mean, I don’t think I was asking for much. I just wanted to do a few things anyone would want to do when in Paris.

“I don’t know why you’re being so pissy.” He said, trailing three steps behind me. “You just went to the Basilica de whatever.”

I shook my head, twisting my arms tighter together as I glanced back at him. I wasn’t being *pissy*. “It’s not the place I wanted to go to, Garrett.” I replied. “This trip has just been one wrong turn after another. I should have never come.”

He didn't say anything for a few seconds and I thought he was going to leave it at that, but then I heard him clear his throat. "I'm going to have to agree." He said. "You should have never come."

I shook my head, my face stiff. "You're such a bitch."

He laughed. Yes, he *laughed* "I'm just being honest." I heard the shrug in his voice. "Maybe you should take some notes. Lesson one: honesty is the best policy."

He really wanted to get into this now. Right here. In the middle of Paris. On some street corner. In front of a few hundred tourists. "Fuck you."

"Yeah," he said coolly, his words short and fluid like. "You did that for a grade."

My breath was caught in my throat and I could feel my face burning red. I twisted around to look at him, ignoring the family behind us that was cursing because we stopped short. "God, Garrett." I seethed. "I did not sleep with you for a grade."

He rolled his eyes up to the sky as he shook his head, his tongue rolling over his lower lip. "Oh, so you didn't bed me to get an A on that paper?"

The way he put it sounded so tacky. He made it seem like every move I made was perfectly choreographed, like the whole plan was for me to get between the sheets with him, like I purposely intended on falling in love with him because it was going to add some sort of spice to the paper. I don't think he'd ever know what it actually meant for me to *bed* him and if I had it my way, he'd never find out. "I did not sleep with you for a grade, Garrett." I tried so hard not to get emotional, but with the day I just had, there was no way I could stop my eyes from tearing. "If you think for one second that's the reason I went that far with you, you're a fucking moron."

I promptly turned around, pushing the tears from my eyes as I swiftly walked down the street.

"Jersey, wait." He called after me, his voice getting louder as he caught up to me. "Slow down for a second, would you?"

"Fuck you, Garrett." I stammered, my voice still lost in my throat. "You make it really hard to feel bad about writing that paper when you're such a goddam asshole."

When I turned away from him, I saw the sign for the Metro. I automatically sighed in relief as I hobbled down the stairs, the blast of hot air not bothering me one bit. Before getting on the train, I walked over to the service station, snatching a map from the broacher rack before holding it up to the woman behind the window. "Canal Saint-Martin?"

She pointed and held up fingers, and I was sure I had it figured out.

I spun back around, Garrett standing too close for comfort, looking as if he wanted to say something. I ignored him, walking straight over to the awaiting train. I was just happy the train was nearly full. I sandwiched myself between a child and a woman on her cell phone, and out of the corner of my eye, I saw Garrett walk to the other end of the car, grabbing hold of a metal bar as the train fell into motion.

We were back at the original start of our journey within fifteen minutes, only having to transfer trains once. I secretly hoped Garrett wouldn't see me get off, but he did and he's been trailing me like a lost puppy the whole mile it took us to walk back to Fallon's mom's apartment.

“Are you just going to ignore me?” He asked, his voice faltering as I picked up speed.

“That’s the plan.” I mumbled. “I had seven months of practice.”

“No,” he said quickly. “You don’t get to throw that in my face, Jers. Not after what you did. I shouldn’t even feel bad about that scene we caused thirty minutes ago. I shouldn’t, but I do.”

“Whatever, Garrett.” I shrugged him off, the street lamps reflecting off of my eyes in the most annoying manner. I didn’t want to get into another fight, at least not now and definitely not here. The streets were overrun with small bistros and people eating outside. I didn’t need them seeing the encore of Jersey and Garrett’s Shit Show.

“It’s not whatever, Jersey.” He grabbed ahold of my shoulder, jerking me back. “What the hell were you talking about back there? What’s the reason you *went that far* with me? If it wasn’t for the paper, then why’d you do it?”

I could feel my heart slamming against my chest. I silently wondered if he could hear how nervous I was.

Why did I do it? I did it because I was in love with him. I did it because I trusted him and I wanted everything to be with him. But why would I tell him that? So he could just throw it in my face tomorrow, or the next day? Why would I put myself in that position? It made no sense to open myself up to a guy who obviously didn’t care and wouldn’t care. So I lost my virginity to him. Was that suppose to change his current opinion on me? No. I could guarantee he’d still make snide remarks about me being a whore, so I wasn’t going to bother being honest with him.

I didn’t say anything to him. I just shook my head and thanked god we were standing in front of the apartment building. After one incredibly awkward elevator ride, we were standing in front of Fallon’s mom’s door, knocking until someone opened it.

Fallon took one look at me, frowning at my puffy cheeks and probably red eyes. She tried to give me a soft smile, but I just shook my head again, pushing past her.

“Jers?”

I smiled as I watched Stephen walk in from the kitchen, a smile that matched Fallon’s on his face as I fell into his open arms.

“Today sucked.” I mumbled as I buried my face into his shoulder.

“If I had to listen to someone tell me, ‘Jersey’s fine. She’s with Garrett,’ one more time, I thought I was going to explode.” He laughed and I smiled as I pushed away from him.

“I so wish I spent the day with you.” I whispered.

“I wish you were there, too.” He whispered back. “I got you something.” He grabbed my hand, leading me over to the coffee table in the living room. He bent down slightly, grabbing the plastic bag and handing it to me. “I know it’s not going to make up for you not being there, but I thought you’d like it.”

I dug my hand into the bag, lacing my fingers around whatever it was that Stephen had bought me and pulled it out. I couldn’t stop myself from smiling as my eyes ran over it. It was a notebook, a picture of the Louvre as the front cover. I lifted my eyes to his, my heart slowly mending itself back together. “You’re so sweet, Stephen.” I caught his cheek in a kiss, pulling away quickly, still smiling.



I know I've said it before, but this time I meant it.

I was over Garrett Nickelsen.

Fallon was ready to explode. I could just tell by the way her upper lip was spazzing. The fact that her arms were crossed so tightly only added to it. She was livid. Beyond livid. And I guess I couldn't blame her.

"He knew we were coming." She said as she paced the length of the dock we were standing on, the pillars bouncing in the water, causing the muffin I'd eaten on the train to threaten to come back up.

We were in Nice—right smack-dab in the middle of the French Riviera—where the beaches were endless and the clothing was optional. I had a hard time picturing myself here, mostly because I wasn't much of a beach-goer. I wasn't much of a goer to anything that meant I'd be sitting out in the sun on sand that seemed to find its way into the most uncomfortable places. But my friends were looking forward to some *fun in the sun*, so I had to suck it up.

Fallon was the one most looking forward to this. It was all she could talk about after I got back to the apartment. We were lying on her mother's bed and she kept saying how excited she was to just lay on a beach all day. And up until ten minutes ago, she was still eager to do so, but it changed very quickly when an unexpected guest arrived.

"This is just like him." She shook her head as her face flushed. "He's such an inconvenient little prick. If we were seven, I'd tattle on him."

I tried not to laugh because this was obviously upsetting her. And I guess I'd be upset too if the guy I hated just showed up out of nowhere, spilling with invitations to go out on his father's yacht. The only difference was I had to see the guy I hated everyday and his father didn't own a yacht. But I really couldn't compare Garrett to Quinby Ludvik because I really didn't know Quinby or his intentions, but I figured I'd have plenty of time to get to know him seeing as Sarah had already accepted his offer on our group's behalf.

"He's just...UH!" Fallon clenched her fists. "He ruins everything."

I sent her a soft smile. "Just think of it this way, we're spending the day on a yacht—"

"I've been on the yacht, Jersey. It's nothing special."

There was no use even trying to get her to look on the brightside. She was going to be miserable until we hit the water and then she'd realize we were on a yacht in the middle of the French Riviera and she'd snap out of it. At least I hope she would because I really didn't need to comfort her while I tried my best not to get seasick.

"Ay!" Quinby called, half of his body hanging off the boat as he smiled at Fallon and I. "We're about to set sail."

Fallon groaned, but I grabbed her hand. If I was going along with this, then so could she.

The yacht was basically a small cruise ship. I wasn't even sure how wealthy people afforded something like this. I feel like keeping it this pearly white color must cost my entire college tuition. And we can't forget all of its amenities: the Jacuzzi, the flat screens, the marble counters, and Italian leather. It was all so indulgent.

"Who's Antoinette Nouvel?" I asked mindlessly as I glanced up at the perfectly scripted letters painted on the

side.

“My half-sister.” Quinby answered, holding out a hand as I climbed onto the boat. “She’s a bit of a brat, but I love her.”

“It must be in your genes.” Fallon mumbled from behind me.

“I don’t know why you’re being such a spoilsport, Fal. We’re going to have a wonderful couple of days together.” He grinned. “We’ll sail around today. Maybe stop at a few beaches before we get to Cannes. We’ll drop our stuff off at the condo and then head out to some clubs.”

Fallon’s face fell flat. “I can’t wait.”

Eventually, we managed to regroup with our friends. They were in what I equated with a living room, practically drooling over the seventy-three inch plasma.

“Make yourselves at home.” Quinby said after following us in. “I’m going to have a chat with the captain and then we’ll be off.”

When he disappeared up a set of stairs, Fallon took no time to start firing off questions. “Who told him where we’d be?”

The answer was obvious. Sarah was a terrible liar. She looked guilty the second the words left Fallon’s lips. There was really no way out of it. “It just slipped out!”

“How does something like this just slip out, Sarah?” Fallon questioned.

Sarah didn’t get a chance to answer, but John did. “Well, I’m sure it was sometime either before, during, or after he fucked—”

“Fuck off, John.” Sarah barked. “Why don’t you go jump off the boat, or something?”

“We’re in like five feet of water, genius.”

I know I shouldn’t be happy they were at each other’s throats, but it was just nice to not be the cause of the drama for once. I hadn’t even spoken to Garrett since last night. I hadn’t even looked at him. Well, I tried not to look at him. It was hard when he was always there. But other than that, everything had been oddly quiet. Until now.

When Quinby rejoined the group, he was smiling more than he was before and I knew Fallon was getting aggravated. I suddenly realized why she didn’t like him—they were so much alike. They both took charge. Everything had to be their way or no way. It was no wonder Fallon didn’t get along with him.

“We’re going to spin around the bay for awhile and then we’ll dock at this private beach just a little north of here. We’ll hang out for awhile and then jet up to Cannes and we can stay at my dad’s condo.”

Everyone but Fallon was okay with this. Like I said, I understood, but I still wished she would go with the flow.

After the boat pulled out of the dock, it was smooth sailing. The sun was high in the clear sky and waves were rippling around us. I found myself out on the deck with Fallon. She didn’t want to be around Quinby and I didn’t want to be around Garrett, so I was more than okay being outside, even if it made my stomach slightly jumpy.

“You never did tell me what happened with you and Garrett yesterday.” Fallon looked over at me, but I kept my attention focused on the white foam floating in the water. I didn’t want to tell her what happened yesterday because I knew what she’d say. She would have told me to just be honest with Garrett, but I wasn’t ready for that. I’d rather keep the secrets if it meant I could move on with my life.

“Nothing happened,” I shrugged. “We just walked around until we found someone who could give us directions back.”

“Are you lying to me?” She asked.

I shook my head. “No.”

~\*~

The sand was hot and I was uncomfortable. And maybe the sun had something to do with that, but I think it had more to do with the fact that everyone was taking their clothes off around me. And yes, they were wearing bathing suits, but I still found it incredibly awkward.

“Are you going to stay in your clothes, Jers?” Fallon stood over me, her eyes shielded by her sunglasses. She had fallen out of her clothes before we got off the dock.

“Uh...I don’t know. I guess?”

She shook her head. “Now’s not the time for body issues.”

“I don’t have body issues.” I didn’t. I mean, maybe a little. I was just shy. I wouldn’t even let Garrett watch me get changed when we were doing whatever we were doing those seven months ago. I wasn’t about to let a whole beach watch me. “I just...I don’t know.”

“Take off your shorts, Jers.” She moved her hands to her hips, staring down at me like she was my mother. “Get some sun on those pasty legs.”

I just groaned, pushing myself off of the sand. The moment I went for the button on my shorts, I felt like everyone was watching me. I knew they weren’t, but like I said, I never let anyone watch me get undressed, not even Fallon or Sarah, so this was a pretty big deal.

“Look at you, Jers.” Fallon grinned. “Look how cute you look in your teeny, tiny bikini.”

She really knew how to make me uncomfortable. I mean, really. It wasn’t teeny, tiny. She picked it out, which I guess was probably a bad idea. But I thought it was a suitable swimsuit. It had a bandeau top and was sort of a pink and blue tie-dye with a little yellow mixed in. I liked it. I liked it more when it was just Fallon, Sarah, and I sitting by my pool.

“Do you have a hair tie?” I asked as I fell back to the sand.

Fallon peeled one from her wrist and tossed it to me. I clumped my hair messily on the top of my head before wrapping the elastic around it. I laid down, using my elbows to keep me propped up as I watched our friends splash around in the water.

I guess it was relaxing. It wasn’t terribly hot with the sea breeze, but I still wasn’t sold on this whole beach thing. I was going to be burnt in ten minutes and the rest of the trip would suck.

“You’re going to give Garrett a heart attack.” Fallon giggled and I turned my head toward her, my eyebrows furrowed. “He’s looking at you like he hasn’t seen you in less and by less, I mean naked.”

“Fallon!” I gasped, desperately wanting to cover up. I hadn’t realized Garrett had gotten out of the water. He was seated about ten feet to our left, sitting on a towel as water droplets clung to his hair, his cheeks already red from the sun.

“Oh, come on, Jers.” She pulled her glasses down, smiling in his direction. “Let’s not pretend you haven’t slept with him. I remember him coming over to the dorm on more than one occasion returning a bra you left at his house...”

“Fallon!” I snapped again. It happened once and I was so embarrassed that I made sure I left his house with everything I came with after that.

“I’m just sayin’.” She threw her hands up. “He’s looking extremely sexually frustrated these days—”

“I’m sure he got enough ass to last him a lifetime with Chloe.” I rolled my eyes. “This conversation is over. I really could care less about Garrett’s sexual frustrations.”

“You should care. You’re the one causing them.”

I glared at her. “I think Garrett’s made his opinion of me very clear.”

“Still doesn’t mean he wouldn’t take you on this beach right now.”

I shook my head. “Just stop talking, please?”

I closed my eyes after that, moving my arms to the back of my neck. I knew I had to keep myself from falling asleep, but I couldn’t lie, the sand got rather comfortable once you got used to it.

I was about three seconds away from falling asleep when I thought a cloud had blocked the sun. I pulled my eyes open curiously. The last time I checked, the skies were clear and perfectly blue.

“C’mon, let’s go swimming.”

I raised one eyebrow as Stephen hovered over me, drenched in water and smelling like salt. “Uh...No, I’m good.”

“C’mon, Jers.” He begged, a grin pulling at his lips.

“I’m definitely good.” I repeated. “Salt and sea creatures and sharks.” I shook my head. “Yeah, I’m good right here.”

“I am not taking no for an answer.” He leaned down, his hands clasped over my wrists as he pulled me to my feet. My toes dug deeper into the sand as I tried to resist.

“Really, Stephen.” I whined as he pulled me to the water.

“Really, Jers.” He laughed, the dry, warm sand turning into a muddy mess as we padded to where the water met the shore.

“I swear to god, Stephen Gomez,” I cried, the warm ocean water washing over my feet. “If by some freak accident a shark eats me, I’m going to haunt your ass.”

“I think I’m willing to take that risk.”

The water was warm and so clear that I could see my feet. I had a hard time being afraid of freak shark attacks. I was too distracted by my friends and the fact that the salt they were splashing at me was burning my eyes.

We stayed in for another fifteen minutes before my fingers had pruned up and my skin had dried out. Stephen and I stumbled back to the sand, collapsing onto my towel, which didn’t seem to amuse Fallon.

“If you get me wet, I’ll castrate you.” Fallon snapped, her voice muffled by her arms. She was lying face down in the sand, her back turning a pleasant golden brown.

“Someone’s a little uptight.” Stephen noted.

I nodded. “I think it has more to do with her *sexual frustrations*—”

“Bite me, Jers.” Fallon shot back.

I just laughed, leaning over to my bag and grabbing a bottle of sunblock and handing it to Stephen. “Can you get my back?”

He didn’t hesitate, or even stop to think about what I had just asked him. He simply popped the cap off and lathered up his hands. When his fingers grazed over my shoulders, I jumped slightly, the cold cream causing a chill to shake through my body. I tilted my head to the left softly, giving Stephen better access. What I didn’t expect was for Garrett to be watching and I really didn’t expect him to be glaring. I just smiled. I mean, what else was I suppose to do? Pretend that his apparent jealousy didn’t make me happy? Because it did and I was going to embrace it.

~\*~

I wasn’t completely sunburned, but I was burnt enough for it to be uncomfortable. Fallon gave me shirt to wear and some cotton shorts. I hadn’t exactly done laundry since we were in the UK. I took full advantage of Quinby’s offer to use the shower in the master bedroom (because yachts had master bedrooms) and I was beyond thrilled to get the stench of the French Riviera off of my skin.

When I got back to the living room, there was some sort of karaoke competition going on. Fallon was sitting on the couch, drinking a probably very stiff drink while Kennedy and Sarah belted out their rendition of *Don’t Stop Believing* and as much as I would love to watch them embarrass themselves, I managed to slip away from everyone. They were too busy raiding the bar to even realize I’d wandered off.

There was another lounge on the upper deck. It wasn’t as big as the lower one, so it wasn’t ideal for large groups of people. I quite liked it, mostly because it was quiet, but also because I could hear the ocean sloshing against the side of the boat. I couldn’t see much through the window, the night sky kept most of it hidden, but I did catch a glimpse of a few stars.

I sat down on the couch, bringing my legs up to my chest as I rested my head on top of my hand. The ride to Cannes wasn’t supposed to take very long. Quinby said no longer than forty-five minutes, but I wasn’t so sure if I’d last that long. I was exhausted from the sun and all I really wanted to do was sleep. At this point, someone would probably have to carry me to the condo.

My lids grew heavy as I let the water lull me to sleep, dreams of finally getting to Italy filling my head. As I twisted myself further into the couch, curled into a fetal position as my left arm was cupped around my head, I felt it—the soft weight only a blanket could bear.

I took a deep breath—my eyes still closed—and I could smell the salt that still clung to his skin, like he was taking it home as a souvenir. He pulled the blanket up and over my legs, not stopping until it hit my shoulders. I could feel him standing over me and then he just sighed—in defeat, almost—and shifted his weight and walked away.

“Stephen,” I murmured, not finding the energy to pull my lids open. “Thank you for everything.”

When he didn’t respond, I fluttered my eyes open, figuring that he had left before hearing me, but the moment my vision cleared, I realized it hadn’t been Stephen at all.

The blue eyes staring back at me were filled with guilt and regret. A soft silence fell over us as we were frozen in the moment. I felt my heart plummet to the pit of my stomach as soon as he walked back down the stairs, his head hung low as he gradually disappeared. And all I could do was throw my head back in frustration.

If I was over him, then why did I feel so guilty?

I woke up on a couch, legs curled to my chest and my head resting on someone’s lap. And though I remember falling asleep on a couch, it wasn’t this one. The couch on the boat was leather and this one was suede. I guess I really shouldn’t be too concerned about the couch situation. I should probably be more concerned about the person that I was using as a pillow.

Stephen.

I mean, I guess I didn’t really have to think about it. I could smell the salt and the tequila and the scent of his skin perfuming through his clothes. I guess I just didn’t want it to be Stephen. After everything that happened with Garrett last night, I wanted to put at least a little distance between Stephen and I.

Stephen didn’t flinch as I sat up. I casually wiped the stream of drool running down my face as I stood up. The scent of coffee lingered in the air, sending my senses into a high. I wasn’t sure where it was coming from, but I did a 360 to see if I could find the direction.

Quinby’s dad’s apartment was the size of my house. It had an upper and a lower level, connecting both by a spiral staircase with cool green paint on the walls. The presence of white furniture gave off a very mod feel and I almost felt like if I touched something, it would break.

I followed the faint coffee smell through the living room and down a hall until I was met by a plethora of stainless steel kitchen appliances and also Garrett. He didn’t notice me at first, fully focused on the brown liquid brewing in the pot. The constant drip-drop lulled me into his trance. I wasn’t sure how long I was standing there watching him, but when the dripping and dropping finally stopped, he craned his neck toward me.

I felt a lump in my throat as I met his gaze. He looked tired. His eyes were lined with dark circles, sort of like they were the drive back from L.A. I couldn’t stop myself from going back to that night—how even though there was a van full of people—it still felt like it was just us. And then we went back to his house and crawled into his bed like we did so many times before and it was just perfect. Somewhere in the back of my head I still missed the scent of his sheets. Seven months later and I still couldn’t figure out what detergent his mother used, but

even if I did, it still wouldn't be the same. It would just be whatever scent the soap was. It wouldn't be Garrett.

We stood there silently, still just staring back at each other. I couldn't stop myself from wondering about last night. I was over him. I understood that, but I was confused about almost everything. "Uh...About last night..."

He shook his head as he grabbed a coffee mug. "There's really nothing to talk about, Jersey."

There was so much to talk about. So much that I couldn't properly list it in my head. I could easily just forget about this. Forget about last night, but somewhere I'd still be kicking myself for not trying. "I...Um...I think there is."

He took a sip of his coffee. Milk and three sugars. I didn't even need to watch him do it to know. "I don't."

Of course he didn't think there was anything to talk about. He was Garrett. He got off on making things difficult. "You put a blanket on me."

He shrugged, leaning against the cabinet. "You looked cold."

I let my frustrations get the best of me, clenching my fists as I squeezed my eyes shut. "I'm not just talking about the blanket, Garrett." I hissed lowly. "I'm talking about everything. You're like one giant mood swing. I can't keep track anymore."

He laughed, sending me a crooked half-smile. "You have yourself to blame for that."

"This isn't my fault." That was the biggest lie ever, but it just slipped out. I knew fully well this was my fault.

"If that's what you need to tell yourself."

I crossed my arms, staring straight at him as the sun peeked out from under some marshmallow clouds. "I don't know what more you want me to say, Garrett."

He straightened up, narrowing his eyes. "I want you to admit what a manipulative bitch you are."

I froze as the words stabbed straight through my chest. I gained a little composure, trying to act as if that sentence didn't just sting. "And what if I admit it? What then?"

He shrugged again, pushing himself from the counter. "Then nothing."

When he walked out of the kitchen, I felt like screaming. We were obviously getting nowhere and I was sick of trying. I just wanted to enjoy the rest of this trip without having to tiptoe around Garrett.

~\*~

"You seem distracted, Jers." Fallon glanced back at me as she sifted through some dresses. We were at some overpriced store where Fallon would rack up a bill that resembled a semester of tuition. Sometimes I wondered what it was like to live like that—to not care about a price tag. I shopped at Target and contemplated for hours whether or not I wanted to buy some twenty-dollar shirt. Fallon was buying thousand dollar dresses she's probably only wear once without a second thought.

"I'm not distracted." I shrugged. And yeah, I guess I was. The conversation with Garrett was still pretty clear in my head. I kept running over it like I'd miraculously find some sort of hidden message. I just didn't understand him at all. One minute he's putting a blanket on me and then the next he's telling me there's nothing I could

ever do to change his opinion of me. It was just so frustrating.

“So, do you know what’s going on with Sarah and Quinby?” Fallon asked, her fingers running over a bubble gum pink tube dress.

“I know they hooked up in Sweden—”

“And last night.” She added quickly.

“...and last night, but other than that, all I really know is that John’s jealous.” If that wasn’t obvious, it didn’t know what was. Anyone could tell John was on the verge of bubbling over with jealousy, which I didn’t quite understand. He had the chance to be with Sarah, but he just let her give up. “Quinby, he’s a nice kid, right?”

Fallon removed the dress from the rack, slinging it over her arm before walking up to the cash register. “Despite being arrogant, the kid is a complete marshmallow.”

I knew Sarah and Quinby weren’t going to be anything more than sex, but I know Sarah—and she may hide it well— but she was never just about sex. With John, I think it was love; I think it still is love. With Kennedy, I think she was confused, or at least trying to fight her feelings for John. Because, let’s face it, John had a reputation and I don’t blame Sarah for guarding her heart.

“So, you fell asleep before we got to tell you about our plans for tonight.” Fallon said as she handed the woman behind the register her stack of clothes. My eyes grew bigger as the number glowing in front of me increased. “We’re going to this club—”

I didn’t need to hear anymore. She lost me at ‘club’. “No. No way. No how.”

She groaned, handing the woman her mother’s card. “C’mon, Jers. We haven’t gone to one since the UK.”

“I know.” I said automatically. I remembered the trips to Ultra and Electra very well—too well. And what I remember most is having my heart ripped out and tossed into a blender. If she thinks I’m going to watch Garrett stalk out tonight’s prospect, she was on drugs. “I’m not going, Fallon. I’ll stay back at the apartment and I’ll start the reading for my fall classes.”

She shook her head, smiling before grabbing the bag she was being handed. “You’re coming. You’re not staying in the apartment by yourself. You get into too much trouble when you’re alone.”

“I do not.” I defended myself as we walked out of the store.

“Let’s see.” Fallon pondered as she slid her sunglasses over her eyes. “You went off with some random dude who ended up being the heir to some billion dollar corporation in Scotland. You got drunk and high in Amsterdam. You got lost in Paris—”

“Garrett got me lost in Paris.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Fallon shook her head. “With your luck, you’d probably end up dead.”

“I could die at the club.” I retorted because it was true. You always hear about people getting shot at clubs.

“Not with Stephen attached at your hip.” Fallon shot me a tight smile. “He won’t let you out of his sight.”

Right now I really didn’t want to be anywhere near Stephen’s sight. I mean, he had no idea what happened



between Garrett and I last night, but I did and I just had this weird feeling.

“And neither will Garrett.” She added with a smile. “He’s always chasing after you; always a nervous wreck when you go off on your own. He’d never admit it, but I can see it in his eyes. It’s like he still feels the need to protect you, y’know? Even after everything that happened.”

I wish she’d stop talking because I didn’t want to hear any of it. As far as I was concerned, Garrett was not worried about me. I’m sure I could jump in front of a bus and he wouldn’t flinch.

“What an awkward threesome that would be.” She giggled to herself and I felt my face pucker.

“*Excuse me?*” I choked.

“You, Garrett, and Stephen.” She smiled over at me. “I mean, you’re going to have to choose eventually, but until then you can have awkward threesomes.”

“I really need you to stop talking.”

Fallon grinned wider. “What would we call the sex tape?” She pondered out loud. “Two Bass Players, One Jersey? I’m sure I can come up with something more clever if you give me time.”

“Stop.” I begged. She was sick and twisted and I swear she enjoyed making me feel uncomfortable. “That is the most disturbing image to ever cross my mind. Thank you.”

“Oh, c’mon—”

“Stop talking, Fallon.” I said quickly as the apartment came into view. “Never speak again.”

When we got back upstairs, everyone was in the living room, as if I really needed to see them at that very moment. My cheeks were still blushed from Fallon’s inability to keep her thoughts to herself. The last thing I needed was for someone to notice.

“You’re so red, Jers.” John smiled from the couch, a coffee cup in hand. “Were you talking about sex?”

Our group of friends caught onto things fast when they realized they could use something to their advantage—aka make Jersey feel as uncomfortable as possible. They did it far too often and I don’t think I’d ever get used to it. “Please, just let’s not talk—”

“Bass Slides Between Jersey’s Thighs.” Fallon blurted out before slapping her hand over her mouth.

“Now I’m real curious.” John leaned back against the couch, his smile still intact.

I just shook my head as my face burned red, quickly turning and walking out of the room. *Bass Slides Between Jersey’s Thighs*. She had no idea how to sensor her mouth. I mean, I don’t think it would have bothered me as much as it did if the only two bass players on this trip weren’t sitting in the room. Also, it wouldn’t have bothered me much if I hadn’t been romantically involved with one and sort of—at least a little—involved with the other.

“You okay?”

I didn’t turn around when I heard his voice, simply placing my hands on top of the sink as I took a deep breath. Through the window, I could see the beach thirteen stories below us. The waves were crashing against the sand

and it was all so peaceful, which was the exact opposite of my head at the moment. “I’m fine.” I said calmly, at least as calmly as I could with my hands shaking.

“Fallon won’t explain what she was talking about, so don’t worry, okay?”

I mean, I knew she wouldn’t explain. She’d take it to her grave. She was good about things like that, but it was still embarrassing. Our friends weren’t stupid—sometimes, maybe—they could put two and two together. I’m sure they could figure out the gist of what Fallon was talking about. “I’m fine, Stephen. Really.”

“Alright.” I could hear the smile in his voice. “Cheer up. We’re going to have some fun tonight.”

I was positive tonight would be anything but fun.

~\*~

Le 7 was exactly like Ultra and Electra. It was loud, full of lights, and morons. I just didn’t understand why anyone would enjoy this. I know I wasn’t like most people, but I feel like most people would agree that fist pumping to some techno song wasn’t going to help you advance in life.

“I swear if your ass is parked in that seat the whole night, I’m disowning you.” Fallon said as she watched me sit down.

“You’ve already been disowned.” She knew I was kidding. Yes, I was still upset, but it wasn’t like I could stay mad at the girl who never once passed judgment on me.

“Fine.” She shrugged, tossing her clutch at me. “At least watch my bag while you’re being lame.”

I rolled my eyes, bringing the metallic bag closer to me. Everyone went off in different directions—to the bar I assumed—leaving me alone at the table with Garrett, nothing but four chairs separating us. I tried to keep my attention focused on my hands, my eyes running over the chipped red nail polish on my fingers. There was still so much tension between us; tension that I wasn’t sure would ever go away. I mean, I guess it would go away if I was just honest with him, but even then I wasn’t sure. Garrett was unpredictable and moody, which were my two least favorite attributes.

“Sprite.” Stephen said as he set a cup in front of me and I just smiled as my eyes fell on the bubbly, clear liquid. Everyone seemed to follow him back. First it was Jess and then Josh, and then I watched as Jared handed Garrett a beer. I didn’t let my eyes linger long, afraid that he might notice me staring, so I pulled them back over to Stephen.

“You excited for tomorrow?” He asked, sipping on whatever he was drinking.

I nodded. “I’m actually really excited to get away from everyone and obviously I’m excited to see Verona.”

“I figured you would.” He replied. “And it’ll give us a chance to hang out. I feel like we haven’t really done anything fun together since we were back home.”

I just smiled tightly. I wasn’t sure how to respond. It wasn’t that I felt uncomfortable around Stephen, I’ve just been in a weird mood.

We were an hour into our club adventure and I was working on my third Sprite. Fallon and Sarah had barely been at the table. Sarah was all over Quinby and Fallon seemed to be fine dancing by herself. All I really knew was that I wanted to leave.

“Vous êtes follement mignon!”

I was blinded by her hair. The way the lights bounced off of it made it look frighteningly white. I suppose if I wasn't so distracted by her hair, I would have noticed how little she was wearing—nothing more than the tiniest black dress covering her over-tanned body. And maybe if I wasn't preoccupied with that, I would have realized whose lap she had fallen into.

“Hyper séduisant!” She screamed over the music, her arms draped around Garrett's neck.

He looked scared—nervous, even—like he'd never had something like this happen to him. I suppose he hasn't. At least in the time I've known him. He may have had a slutty make-out session with Chloe in a club, but a girl has never fallen onto his lap.

“Nous devons danser!” She giggled, sliding off of him as her fingers laced with his.

“Oh, no.” Garrett tried to protest as he was brought to his feet, but she wasn't backing off.

“Vite! Vite! Vite!” She brushed up against him, running her index finger down his cheek before reconnecting their hands. “Nous danserons!”

I watched carefully as she dragged him onto the dance floor, my stomach rising to my throat with each new click of her heels. I wasn't jealous. At least that's what I was telling myself.

Garrett stood still as the song changed, the blond rubbing up against him. Her hands were placed on his shoulders as she shimmied and shook, her hair spinning in circles as she whipped her head around. When I saw her lean in, sloppily trailing her lips over his neck and the corner of his mouth, I lost it.

“I need to leave.” I fumbled over my words as I scrambled to my feet. I dropped Fallon's purse into Jess's lap before bolting toward the door.

“Jersey. Stop.” Stephen called as I stumbled down the street, the warm summer night whipping through my hair. I wasn't even sure which direction I was going in and I really didn't care.

“I just need to go, Stephen.”

I wasn't sure how long we were walking, but we'd gotten pretty far down the road before he grabbed my arm and jerked me toward him. “When are you going to get over him?” He asked, his voice soft and steady, his eyes turning into melting pools of chocolate.

“What?” I shook my head, my eyes squinted at him as the moon reflected off of them. “What are you—”

“When are you going to get over Garrett?” He clarified, his voice turning cold.

I swallowed hard, trying my best to avoid his eyes. “I am over him.” I said meekly.

“Prove it.”

I moved my view from my feet to his eyes. “I'm going to Verona with you, Stephen. I think it's pretty clear that I'm over him.”

“That wasn’t so bad.”

I merely groaned in response as I stumbled off of the ferry, my hands carefully guiding my body down the ramp leading to the dock. I guess I lucked out on the yacht because the water was pretty smooth. The ferry, however, was rocking like a seesaw and I spent a majority of the three hours with my head between my knees just trying to breathe.

“Cheer up, Jers. It could have been way worse.” Fallon slapped me on my back, which nearly sent my empty stomach up through my throat. “You could have actually gotten sick and that would have just been embarrassing.”

I just ignored her because my insides weren’t settled enough for me to speak. I simply pushed away from her and caught up with Sarah. She wasn’t exactly in a good mood, so even if I walked with her, I wouldn’t have to worry about making conversation.

“He’s such a bitch.” Her arms were crossed so tightly and her face was redder than her hair. And with one deep breath, my hopes of a silent stroll to the next port were erased. “I’m a slut, really? Is that the best he can do? If he thinks that’s going to offend me, he obviously doesn’t know how thick my skin is.”

I tried to drown her out, but it was hard when she was so set on telling the whole city how much John O’Callaghan disgusted her.

“He had the chance, Jersey.” She seethed. “He had five years of chances. He had me naked on prom night. He had me naked on my bed. He had me naked on *his* bed, but all he wanted was the sex. He didn’t want a relationship.” She ranted. “He made me this way. All of this...It’s his fault.”

I wanted to ask her to stop. I really did, but I knew she wouldn’t. She’d just rant on and on until I physically threw myself off of the dock and killed myself.

“Quinby wasn’t even good.” Sarah rolled her eyes. “I’d never tell John that. For all he knows, Quinby was the Brad Pitt of making me org—”

“Enough, please.” I finally said. “I just...I can’t take it right now. It’s early and I’m nauseous.” And I know I should be listening to her rant and rave about John, but it was barely six in the morning. I didn’t sleep at all last night, mostly because I had Stephen’s voice ringing through my head. *Prove it*. But I had bigger things on my plate than John calling Sarah a whore for the umpteenth time.

“You’re such a bitch in the morning.” Sarah mumbled before storming off.

It didn’t bother me. Normally it would have, but today it didn’t bother me at all. Sarah would get over it eventually, probably by the time we boarded the next ferry and I’d be listening to her rant on about John for another three hours as I tried to convince myself not to spew all over the deck.

Bastia to Livorno was a four hour ferry ride. Livorno to Milan was a four hour train ride. Milan to Verona was roughly a two hour train ride. If I don’t completely lose my sanity, Stephen and I should be in Verona by four-thirty, depending on if all trains and boats are on time.

Our second ferry left without a hitch. We were sailing the high seas, my stomach rocking in sync with the boat. I wasn’t exactly sure where the motion sickness came from. Maybe it was from all the trains I’d been on, or maybe it had been there all along, but I just never realized. I was just happy when the boat docked in Livorno. The next time someone suggested a boat, I’d be sure to vocalize my opinion.

“We need to hightail it to the train station, or we’ll never make the eleven-thirty train.”

Fallon had turned into some sort of tyrant. I guess we should have expected this with her personality, but for someone who wanted to go with the flow, she was pulling against the current. This whole trip was her idea. She wanted to take her time and get a real feel for each city, but with her strict schedule, it was becoming hard to handle, which is saying something coming from me. I loved schedules. I loved plans. I should be in my glory, but I was tired and nauseous and I really didn’t want to go on another train.

“I got us something to do on the train.”

I turned my head when I heard the voice, smiling lightly when I saw Stephen’s face. Things were a little awkward, but they always were. I tried my best to forget last night, but I couldn’t. I was still kicking myself for what I said, because really, going to Verona with Stephen had nothing to do with whether I’m over Garrett or not. I’ve wanted to go to Verona since I was seven and fell in love with Leonardo DiCaprio’s Romeo. “I hope it’s a Sudoku.”

He laughed, shaking his head. “I got a map of Verona. They were selling them at the dock. I figured we could check out sites to see.”

“Sightseeing.” I smiled. “That’s exactly what I needed to hear.”

On the train, I ignored Fallon’s demands to sit next to her. I slid into the seat next to Stephen and we started circling places on the map. There wasn’t much I knew about Verona, just that I wanted to go there, but the one thing that I did know was that we had to go to Casa di Julietta. That was about as far as we got. Our lack of sleep caught up to us and we didn’t see daylight again until we were in Milan.

I may have forgotten to mention to—well—everyone that Stephen and I were going off on our own adventure. I mean, I knew what Fallon would say and I knew what Sarah would say. I really didn’t want to deal with their disapproving little stares, so of course I waited until the last possible second.

“Uh, Jersey, this way.” Fallon said as we stepped onto the train platform.

I didn’t know how to say it. I know it shouldn’t be this hard and maybe it wouldn’t be if it was just Fallon and I, but the whole group was with us—and staring at us—and it made it that much harder. “I’m...Fallon, well, I’m going to Verona.”

She quirked an eyebrow. “Excuse me?”

I cleared my throat, shifting my eyes over to Stephen for a second. “Stephen and I...We’re going to Verona.”

She laughed. “Stop fooling around, Jers. We don’t have time for this.”

I gnawed at my lower lip as everyone stared at me with confusion spread over their faces. I’ve done crazier things. I don’t understand why this bewildered them. “I’m not fooling around, Fallon. Stephen and I are going to Verona for a few days. We’ll meet you back here Friday.”

Fallon slowly started to understand, her face stiffening as her eyes grew wide. “Jersey, I don’t think—”

“We’re going to miss our train.” I gave her a quick wave as I turned around, trying to shake the feeling of Garrett’s eyes lingering on me.

Stephen and I made it to our train with five minutes to spare. We quickly fell to our seats and waited for the

train to pull out of the station.

Two hours later we were in Verona, completely in over our heads with no idea where to go.

“Maybe we should ask a local.” Stephen suggested.

“We don’t speak Italian.” I sighed. This language thing was getting a little annoying.

Stephen took it upon himself to figure out directions and that meant asking the coffee vendor, who—surprise, surprise—didn’t speak English. With all the hand gestures going on, I wasn’t exactly sure what they were trying to communicate, but when Stephen turned around smiling, I felt a little relieved.

“He says we shouldn’t stay in town.” Stephen told me. “There’s a hotel about five miles up the road. He said we’d enjoy the walk, but we could also take a cab.”

We took a cab. I mean, really. I wasn’t about to walk five miles in the dead of summer on no sleep. That was just asking for trouble.

I’m not sure what I was expecting the hotel to look like. Somewhere in the back of my head I thought it would be sort of like Tuscany with lavish hills and grass stretching on for miles. I was a little disappointed. I mean, I knew we weren’t in Tuscany, but I guess I would have just rather stayed in the town center, not five miles (which really ended up being about eight miles) out of the way.

“Hotel’s nice.” Stephen smiled as we stood in the elevator.

I nodded. “I don’t think we’ll be spending much time in it.” I added. “We’re going to be perfect little tourists. Sun up to sun down.”

He groaned, dropping his head to the wall. “I’m going to regret suggesting this, aren’t I?”

I grinned. “Probably.”

The room was bigger than I expected. It was divided into two sections. There was a small living area with a couch and coffee table, the walls painted a welcoming yellow. On the other side of the room, there was a door that led to a bedroom. The walls were painted a shade darker than the living room and the windows were draped with curtains that matched the bedspreads. Vases filled with wild flowers were placed on the nightstands, giving off a fresh aroma as I walked through the doors.

“I’m gonna take a quick shower.” Stephen peeked his head into the room. “Then, if you aren’t tired, we can go into town and start your touristy plans.”

I smiled and he disappeared into the bathroom.

I thought about crawling into one of the beds and taking a nap, but instead I dropped my backpack on the mattress and began unzipping. I quickly stripped of my shorts and t-shirt, replacing them with a nude colored dress trimmed with lace. I pulled out the jean jacket I forgot to give back to Fallon and slung my arms through it. I probably should have put sneakers on, but I decided the sandals I was already wearing would look better. I wasn’t sure why I was going out of my way to dress nice, but I was just going to go with it.

As I started to pull my hair up, someone knocked on the door. Curiously, I walked out of the bedroom and back through the living room until I landed in front of the door, slowly pulling it open.

“Fallon?” I gasped. “What are you doing here?” My voice faltered as I pulled the door open further, the stagnant scent of the hotel hallway filling the frame. As I got a better view of her, I noticed the two boys standing on either side of her—one boy who I’d rather not have seen and I’m guessing by his facial expression, he’d rather not be here either. I was confused to say the least, not just because Kennedy and Garrett were here, but because Fallon was here as well.

“Is that any way to greet your best friend in the entire world?” Fallon smiled as she pushed passed me, motioning for the boys to follow. I stumbled out of the way as Garrett’s shoulder brushed with mine, a scowl falling upon my lips. I knew this wasn’t some gigantic romantic getaway, but I did not appreciate the Three Stooges crashing it.

“What’s going on?” Stephen asked mindlessly as he walked out of the bathroom, water droplets clinging to his hair as he ran a towel through it.

“About an hour after you guys left I realized I’ve never been to Verona before.” Fallon shrugged, falling onto the small couch. “I mean, I lived in Italy for five years and never ventured into these parts. I think a visit was overdue.”

I didn’t believe her. She was a good, convincing liar on most days, but I could read straight through her. Fallon made my business her business, and I loved that she was there for me no matter what, but she wasn’t my mother.

“I also I had this great idea that instead of taking the train back to Milan to meet everyone, we’d rent a car—which I already have conveniently done—and we can take a small little road trip and just meet up in Rome.” She grinned excitedly. “It’s only about five hours away, but we can take our time and see the sites.”

Fallon wanted to see sites. I think my heart stopped functioning.

“And...Uh.” Stephen scratched the back of his head as his eyes fell on Garrett and Kennedy. “You two shared Fallon’s sentiments?”

Kennedy smiled nervously as Fallon shot him a look. “Totally. Garret and I...We’re big Verona fans. Also, we love road trips because, y’know, being in a van or bus nine months out of the year is never enough for us.”

Stephen looked about as convinced as I did, but I knew he wouldn’t say anything, so I took it upon myself. “Fallon?” I looked over at her. “Can I talk to you for a second?”

“We’re talking now, Jers.”

“In private.”

When we got into the bedroom, I closed the door. I turned around to face Fallon and took a deep breath.

“Fallon...Why are you here?”

She sighed dramatically, rolling her eyes. “Why am I here, Jers?” She questioned. “Why does anyone come to Verona? I’m looking for my Romeo—preferably a six-foot-something, brown haired, brown eyed, Italian Stallion that doesn’t have suicidal tendencies.”

“Fallon...” I groaned in frustration.

“Jersey...” She mocked.

She knew what she was doing to me. She knew that this was exactly the thing that would get under my skin. And she really knew that if Garrett were here, I'd be on edge ten times more. "Why is Garrett here?" I finally asked.

"Don't blame me." She threw her hands up in defense. "I dragged Kennedy with me." She started, slowly folding her arms over her chest. "Kennedy wasn't and I quote, 'suffering in hell alone,' so he dragged Garrett, who surprisingly tried to resist. He's usually all over anything that revolves around getting Stephen away from you."

Garrett was usually all over anything that caused me some sort of aggravation, but surprisingly, I could have cared less about Garrett at that moment. Fallon was my main source of irritation at the moment and I didn't plan on letting her off easy. "Why don't you trust me?"

She dropped her hands to her waist, staring me down with that look that haunted me all through the fall semester—that look that was soft yet stern, loving yet angry. It was that look that made me feel so little. "I do trust you, Jersey." She said softly. "And I love you and that's why I'm here. I'm saving you from doing something you'll regret later."

I didn't plan on doing anything I'd regret later. I planned on exploring Verona with Stephen. I planned on having a good time—something I haven't got to do this whole trip. I wasn't planning on doing anything with Stephen that wasn't G-rated. "What kind of girl do you think I am, Fallon?" I asked defensively because I knew what she was insinuating. "You knew what it took for me to do anything with Garrett. I can't believe you think I'm the type of girl—"

"You're a girl that's desperately trying to convince anyone that'll listen that she's over a boy that she's still obviously in love with."

"I'm not—"

"Jersey, I'm not like everyone else." She sighed, her face falling. "I'm not going to let you lie to yourself. You love Garrett. You've always loved Garrett. I don't care how many Daniels you kiss. I don't care how many Stephens you try to move on with. No one will ever be Garrett and you know that."

I could feel my heart lodge itself in my throat, the ability to breathe slowly getting harder. I mean, she was right. I could deny it all I wanted, but she'd always be right. No matter how hard I tried, no one would be Garrett. Not Daniel. Not Stephen. And it sucked because Garrett would never be mine again. I wasn't even sure if he was ever mine in the first place. "I'm...I need to take a walk." I stuttered out as I turned to face the door.

"Jersey..."

"I'll be back in awhile, Fallon." As I stormed through the small living room, I ignored Stephen's calls and Garrett's curious looks. I walked straight out the door as I grabbed my purse off of the chair. I didn't have a destination in mind. I just kept my attention on the street in front of me and let my feet take control.

"You're not seriously writing Juliet a letter..."

I was having such a good time by myself. In all honesty, I was actually enjoying myself, despite leaving the hotel such a mess. I seemed to let it go so I could enjoy what little time I had in this place. I was doing it on my own. I was exploring the things I wanted to explore. He wasn't going to ruin this for me. "You're not seriously stalking me..."



“Don’t flatter yourself.”

I rolled my eyes, dropping my hands to my lap as I glared up at him. I was so not amused with him interrupting my letter writing, even if that letter was being written on the back of the receipt for my train ticket. Juliet wouldn’t judge. “Why are you here, Garrett?” I asked. “Really. I’d like to know.”

He shrugged, avoiding eye contact as he glanced around. “Stephen’s asleep and Kennedy and Fallon are passed out on the couch.” He replied before looking back down at me. “Y’know, I think there’s something going on between them.”

“I doubt it.” I said as I shoved the receipt I was writing on back into my bag. “Kennedy isn’t Fallon’s type.”

“What’s wrong with Kennedy?” Garrett inquired as if I had somehow offended him.

“Nothing.” I stood up, pushing the strap of my bag further onto my shoulder as I crossed my arms. I was a little bit dizzy; I’m not going to lie. I may have stopped at a small restaurant and the owner may have been feeding me wine. I was never much of a wine drinker—or drinker in general—but I may have found my newest guilty pleasure. “Fallon just has a type and it’s not Kennedy.” I answered him. “I’m still confused as to why you’re here, though.”

He gave me another shrug before shoving his hands into his front pockets, teetering on his feet as he looked to the sky. “Well, your boyfriend didn’t seem to be too concerned about your whereabouts and you don’t exactly have the best track record in foreign countries. I figured I should probably find you before you end up dead or something.”

“Aw, Garrett.” I placed a hand over my heart. “Do you care?”

“Not really.” He rolled his eyes. “But I’d rather save myself the trouble of explaining to Fallon that you’re dead, so spare me your dramatics and let’s go.”

I wasn’t sure why I followed him. He wasn’t my father. I didn’t need to listen to him, but still, I found myself lagging behind him as we weaved through the streets of Verona. The rental car was about five blocks away, but it felt longer. Even in the night, the dry summer heat still lingered. It was as if we were still at home.

The car ride was filled with an uncomfortable silence as Garrett turned corners and merged between lanes. If I could strangle myself with the seatbelt, I would have, but for some reason I was focused on the street signs. I couldn’t make out what they said, but I knew the big, bold words were city names and after thirty minutes of driving, none of them said Verona.

“We’re driving in the wrong direction.” I looked over at him, but he stayed focused on the road, completely ignoring me. “We’ve been driving for an hour, Garrett. It didn’t even take me ten minutes to walk from the hotel to the center of town.”

“We’re going the right way.” He replied in a bored manner.

“You can’t even read the signs. You don’t know which way we’re going.”

“I know it’s the right way.”

I rolled my eyes, sinking lower into my seat. “You’re such a guy.”

“And you’re such a bitch.”

My jaw fell and I glared over at him. I had to take a few deep breaths before I was calm enough to rationally think. If I murdered him, there was a chance I’d never make it back to the hotel. If we stayed driving, there was a chance we’d never make it back to the hotel. It was a lose-lose situation.

He continued driving until the car started making funny noises. In all honesty, it sounded like a five year old asthmatic kid in dire need of an inhaler, which I knew wasn’t good. Garrett barely flinched. Even when the car started to slow, he didn’t budge.

“What’s going on?” There was a slight panic in my voice as the car rolled to a stop. My hand was clutched around the door handle, my knuckles turning white as I squinted to see past the dark road. “Why did the car stop?”

“If I knew, don’t you think I’d be doing something to fix it?” Garrett hissed as he cut the ignition, immediately trying to restart the car. The engine sputtered and fizzled, and the next time Garrett turned the key, nothing happened. “Great,” He mumbled before throwing the door open.

I followed behind him, quickly scrambling to my feet. He had the hood popped up as I rounded the front of the car. He stared down at the engine, his eyebrows scrunched as he looked for an answer. “What’s wrong with it?” I asked out of instinct.

He turned to me, shooting me a disgusted look before bringing his eyes back down to where they were before. “Does it look like I’m a fucking mechanic? You’re the one with the auto body shop in your family.”

Yes, my dad was a mechanic and yes, I was his secretary, but that didn’t mean I knew anything more about cars than he did. I answered phone calls and confirmed appointments. My knowledge for carburetors and fuel pumps was vastly lacking. “Well, aren’t you a fucking peach.”

“I’m sorry I’m not happy enough for you, Jers. You kind of ruined the emotion for me.”

Oh, I ruined happy for him? Well, he kind of ruined happy for me, as well. “You know what, Garrett? I’m so sick —”

“No, you don’t get to be sick of anything, Jers.” He yelled, slamming the hood of the car back down. “You did this. All of this. It’s your fault. You don’t get to be mad, or upset, or heartbroken. That’s not how it works.”

“Then why the fuck did you come get me?” I asked, mostly because I was curious. It was obvious I meant so little to him. Why was he going out of his way to play a super hero?

“Because you were alone in a fucking foreign country, Jersey. Your track record thus far isn’t very good. You’d think your boyfriend would be—.”

“Can you get it through your thick skull that he isn’t my boyfriend?” I screamed, my fingers running through my hair as I turned around, not wanting to face him “*Jesus Christ.*”

“I wouldn’t go shouting that around here. People take religion pretty serious in these parts.”

I couldn’t repeat what he said. I couldn’t even remember. Whatever words just left his lips went in one ear and out the other. I was fuming, my blood boiling under my skin. This is what he could do to me and he knew it. He’d push and push until I just snapped. “I made a mistake, Garrett. Okay? I made a real big mistake.” I screamed at him, my voice traveling through the empty street, completely lost in the night. “And I’m paying for

it. God forbid you try to move on with your life. That's what I'm trying to do."

He shook his head and I watched as he swallowed hard. "Yeah, I'm sure you're moving on just fine with Stephen."

I shook my head this time, avoiding his gaze as I looked to the sky. Stars outlined the moon and I realized I've never seen the night so clearly. "I don't know why you care so much about Stephen and I. You hate him, remember? You made that very clear on Halloween, but you know what, Garrett?" I asked, bringing my eyes back down to him "Think what you want about us. I don't care anymore."

"I try not to think of either of you at all."

I wasn't sure why I chose now to lose it. I guess I could blame the wine, but I hadn't drank that much. Maybe it was just seven months of keeping everything so bottled up. I was bound to explode at some point. I just wanted to do it gracefully with at least a little self-respect. I didn't want to cry, or blubber, or become so overwhelmed with emotion that I'd say something I'd regret. And for a minute, I actually thought that's how it would go down, but then he looked at me with that indifferent stare and those sad blue eyes and I lost it.

"I called you." My voice was just above a whisper and shaking. He turned his head slightly, our eyes locking, and I felt some sort of pull. "I wanted to apologize." My voice got caught in my throat as I felt my eyes start to burn. "You *never* even let me apologize. You never let me tell you how much I regretted writing the paper. You never let me tell you any of it."

His face tensed up as he took two steps toward me. He looked straight through me, like nothing I could say would ever matter. I felt so little and helpless and he knew. "Was that too harsh, Jers?" He asked as he stepped even closer. He was completely blocking my view of anything that wasn't him. "Was completely cutting you out of my life too harsh?" He seethed, his face turning red. "Harsh was you writing a paper about everything I told you about Olivia. Harsh was pretending to care about me for five months so you could get a fucking A on a psychology paper, so please don't try to make me look like the bad guy for ignoring you."

I could feel my heart slamming beneath my chest, a hundred beats per second as I tried to collect myself. "I spent eighteen years never caring about anything and then I met you." My hands were shaking at my sides and as much as I wanted to look away from him, I couldn't. "You were just this boy my cousin was friends with. That's all you were supposed to be. And yeah, I made a really big mistake—a mistake that I can never take back—but don't say I never cared about you, Garrett because you are the only thing in the world that I've ever cared about and I would have never failed that class if you didn't mean something to me."

It was just silence for so long. It was deafening and painful and all I wanted to do was disappear. "Excuse me?" He finally said, his voice trembling worse than my hands.

"Nothing." I shook my head, wrapping my arms together as I tried to look away from him. "Never mind."

"No." He said as he forced me to look at him. "Jersey, it is something. What did you just say?"

I couldn't repeat it. I wouldn't repeat it. It hurt thinking about what I just said. I wasn't used to being this open. It was so easy keeping secrets. Telling the truth...There was nothing harder than telling the truth. "Nothing. I said nothing, Garrett."

"No." He repeated, this time grabbing my shoulders. I winced slightly and slammed my eyes shut. "What did you just say, Jersey?"

"I failed the class." I whispered, tears spilling over my closed eyes. "I never passed the paper in, okay?"

Telling the truth was supposed to free you, right? You were supposed to feel liberated, but if anything, I felt more trapped than before.

I eventually pushed myself away from him, still holding my arms close to my chest. I didn't walk far, only a few feet. I was still close enough for him to hear me. "I never passed it in, Garrett." I said slowly as I tried to steady my voice. "Do you have any idea how much it hurt seeing your face when you found out? Do you have any idea how *bad* I felt that I caused you any amount of pain?" I asked him, but I didn't want an answer, at least not from him. "No, you don't because you just cut me out. You just let me fester in guilt for seven months like you were the only one that got hurt. Because, *fuck*, Garrett, it hurts everyday that I don't get to see your face, or hear your laugh. God, I'd kill for you to just look at me the way you used to."

He fell silent again. I wasn't sure what he was thinking, or if he was thinking at all, but I for one knew I was thinking. My head was racing a mile a minute and I somehow lost function of my mouth.

"Do you realize how hard you've made it on me?" I asked. "Garrett, you make it a point to find me whenever I wander off. You're always there saving me and I don't understand why you care so much. You didn't care seven months ago, so why now? What changed?"

He didn't say anything, merely avoiding my gaze like his life depended on it. After a few minutes, he finally turned to me. "We better start walking. It looks like there's a town up ahead."

I didn't wait for him. He turned back to the car and I just walked. Part of me hoped he went in another direction. I just didn't even want to think about any of this right now. If the last ten minutes of my life could be erased, I'd delete it in a heartbeat. I let myself become more vulnerable than ever and I couldn't even run away. I was lost with the one person I wanted to run from.

I could hear him behind me. His feet were scrapping against the dust-covered cement. I imagined his head to be hung low, his hair brushing over his eyes and he'd be doing everything in his power to push it away, but it always fell back. I tried to forget he was even there. I tried to just focus on the dry air and the stars leading me to wherever we'd end up, but I could hear him breathing and that was all it took for me to see the face that haunted my memories.

The first sign I saw read "Parma" in big green letters. Thirty minutes of walking and that was the first mark of civilization I'd seen, except for the occasional cow or horse. As I walked further into the city, everything started to become more normal. There were houses and stores and churches. All were old and rustic and had that Verona feel. It was so late, but I could still sense the history. Though I wasn't sure what that history was, I figured I'd have some time to find out.

"I'm going to find a phone," were the first words Garrett said to me. We were stopped in front of a hotel that seemed to be in the center of town. I didn't want to follow him in, but it was late and even the most historic cities were seedy at night.

The inside wasn't what I was expecting, not with the cobblestone and weathered brick buildings outside. The tile pattern on the floor was almost hypnotizing. Salmon square after white square, I was lost as I trailed twelve steps behind Garrett. The ceilings were high and chandeliers hung throughout the lobby. There were sculptures and artwork plastered over the mint green walls. It didn't feel like a hotel. This was a museum. It was gorgeous and breathtaking and if I wasn't so lost in my head, I'd be reveling in it.

I found myself sitting in an overstuffed chair diagonal from the bar with a view of Garrett. He was standing in front of the counter, drumming his fingers along the top like he did when he was aggravated. He must not have liked what the woman was telling him and I knew that if he didn't like it, I'd hate it, so I could only imagine

what she was saying to him. About five minutes later, he let out a heavy sigh and stalked over toward me. Neither of us said anything and then he scratched the back of his neck nervously. "We can't get the car towed until tomorrow."

"And?" I looked up at him.

"The busses stopped running at seven." He went on.

"And?" I repeated.

But instead of saying anything, he just showed me the key.

"You're kidding me?"

"I'm not exactly in a joking mood right now." He mumbled and I just ignored him. I stood up from my chair and walked over to the elevator, pressing the button viscously until the doors parted. Garrett stepped in after me and immediately pressed the number seven. Thirteen awkward seconds later, the doors parted again and we stepped out into a hallway with décor that matched the lobby.

Room 704 was waiting for us down the hall and to the left. I waited impatiently as Garrett slid the card through the slot and waited for it to turn green.

I suppose most people would notice the raspberry colored walls first and maybe those curtains that were stripped with the same color as the wall and a mayflower blue. Most people would be admiring the sixteenth century artwork hanging next to the window and the fact that they had the most perfect view of the entire city. Most people wouldn't have thought twice about the king-sized bed in the middle of the room, but I did.

"Great." Garrett mumbled from beside me, but I ignored him, which seemed to be turning into a pattern.

"I'm taking a shower."

It was an easy getaway. The walk had left me sticky and sweaty, but also I just wanted to get away from him.

I closed the door behind me quickly, my back to it as I dropped my head against the wood. I shut my eyes, just trying to catch the breath that I lost nearly an hour ago. I silently wondered when the relief would set in because I was ready for it. I just wanted to feel okay. He knew. Seven months and he finally knew. I just never expected it to feel this way.

I took a cold shower, not because I was overwhelmingly hot, but because I wanted to make sure I wasn't completely numb to feeling. And after twenty minutes of freezing water washing away seven months of bad choices, I stepped out and wrapped a towel around me.

I stepped in front of the sink, placing my hands on either side of the marble counter as I slowly rolled my eyes up to the mirror. I expected to look different, like honesty had changed me, but I was still Jersey. I was still blond haired and blue eyed. I still had freckles scattered over the bridge of my nose and that small scar just above my lip. I was seemingly the same, at least on the outside. Inside I was still all screwed up and maybe I'd be that way forever.

"Jersey?" And then there was a knock on the door.

My heart jumped and I tore my eyes from the mirror. "Ya...Yeah?"

“I...Um.” He stammered, his voice muffled by the door. “I...Uh, I grabbed my bag from the trunk before we started walking. I have some...Uh, I have some clothes...If you want to change into...Uh, something.”

I wanted to say no. I didn't want him to think I needed anything from him, but my dress wasn't exactly appropriate sleeping attire, so against my better judgment, I pulled the door open. He didn't see more than my extended arm and once I felt the fabric hit my hands, I quickly shut the door.

When I pulled his shirt over my head, every memory I had of him came rushing back. His scent paralyzing every sense I had, and I found myself out of breath once again. I snapped out of it quickly, flattening out that Whiskey & Cola top over my stomach before pulling the sweatpants over my hips. Everything was baggy, mostly in the length of the pants, but I decided not to think about it and I walked back into the room.

Garrett was standing near the end table, pulling a shirt over his head as he looked over at me. I had to look away, afraid he'd think my eyes were lingering too long. He quickly cleared his throat, awkwardly scratching the back of his head for the twentieth time in the last half hour.

“I called Fallon.” He informed me. “I told her that we got lost and that the car is getting fixed tomorrow.”

I just nodded and walked over to the bed, pulling back the comforter that matched the curtains and then I looked over at Garrett and he seemed to have read my mind.

“I...Uh, I'll sleep on the floor.”

I shouldn't have felt guilty, but I did. And instead of just letting him, I sighed. “Don't be ridiculous.” I mumbled. “You don't know what's on these rugs.”

He scoffed. “Because this place looks overrun with vermin.”

I decided not to respond to him. Instead, I climbed over the sheets, wrestling with the blankets and pillows until I was comfortably facing the wall opposite of Garrett. For a minute, I thought he was going to sleep on the floor, but then I felt the other side of the bed sink in.

We just sat there in silence. Neither of us were sleeping, I knew that. We were just laying there in the dark with tension so thick that you could cut it with a knife.

“I didn't sleep with Chloe.”

I opened my eyes at the sound of his voice, but he didn't know that. I wasn't sure if he thought I was sleeping, or not, but that didn't stop him from talking. I wished it would, though.

“I mean, I almost did.” He let out a sigh and I could feel him shifting in the bed. “I just...I couldn't.” I couldn't understand the tone in his voice. It was a mix of relief and regret. “She wasn't you.”

I ran my bottom lip through my teeth as my heart began to race. I could feel my skin growing warm as I tried to speak. “Why...Why are you telling me this?”

There was a long pause and for a second, I thought he'd fallen asleep. “Because.” He finally said. “Because for the first time, I thought we were being honest with each other.”

I didn't know how to respond, so I didn't. I just closed my eyes and fell asleep.

I woke up alone, at least the second time. The first time I stirred awake it was still dark, the sky a dark shade of purple as the sun threatened to rise over the horizon. I had a hard time keeping my eyes open because it was so early, but also because I was so comfortable. I remembered the position I was in well—probably too well. Seventy-six inches of mattress space and Garrett and I managed to get by with about thirty. His arm was draped carefully over my waist, his fingers resting softly over the skin my shirt left exposed. Our legs were intertwined. I wasn't even sure how we managed that, but we did. And instead of just laying awake and enjoying how close we were, I fell back to sleep to the rising and falling of his chest.

I can't say I was too upset when I woke up alone. I mean, imagine how awkward it would have been if we woke up at the same time, tangled together like it was seven months ago and his mother was making us breakfast downstairs. I was more than okay with the way this panned out.

When I sat up, I let out a yawn. I rubbed the sleep from my eyes before blinking until my vision was back. The clock on the nightstand read ten-thirty-four in bright, green numbers. I couldn't remember the last time I slept that late and as much as I would have loved to fall back to sleep, I swung my legs over the edge of the bed, letting out another yawn as I reached for the phone.

I knew Fallon would be going crazy, despite Garrett calling last night. And maybe I was going a little crazy as well, which was why I was calling.

"Hello?"

I guess it would have been too easy for it to be Fallon. "Hey, Stephen."

"*Jersey, Fallon told me what happened.*" He said quickly, almost like he was in a panic. "*I'm so sorry you're stuck there with him.*"

"Yeah." I stammered, swallowing a knot in my throat. "Me too."

"*You're okay, though?*" He asked. "*He hasn't driven you to the point of—*"

"I'm fine." I cut him off. This wasn't something I really wanted to discuss with him. "I just...Is Fallon there?"

He told me to hang on a second and I waited what seemed like hours until Fallon picked up. "*Jersey, hey.*"

"He knows." I blurted out.

"*Excuse me?*"

"Garrett." I clarified as my heart lodged itself in my throat. "He knows about the paper."

There was a long pause before she let out a giggle. "*And here I thought your little adventure would end badly.*"

Her definition of badly was definitely not the same as mine because I'd say this little adventure had already started out badly. Garrett was never supposed to find out about the paper, at least not that way. "Yeah, about that." I said, referring to this *little adventure* "I'm not entirely sure what's going to happen, but if worse comes to worse, I think you guys should just take the train to Rome tomorrow and we'll meet you there."

"*I mean, yeah.*" There was a shrug in her voice. "*If that's what you want to do.*"

I wasn't totally convinced that was what I wanted to do. Spending another day alone with Garrett was only asking for trouble, but right now I didn't have a choice, so I'd just have to deal. "And Fallon?" I asked as the

conversation with Garrett from Casa di Giulietta popped into my head.

“Yeah?”

“You’d tell me if there was something going on with you and Kennedy, right?”

I thought the line had gone dead until I heard her clear her throat. “*Of...Of course I would, Jers..*”

“Alright.” I wasn’t convinced by her answer, but right now I had more important things to worry about. “I’ll call you as soon as I know something.”

When the phone call ended, I really didn’t know what to do with myself. I flipped the TV on, but every channel was in Italian and on any other day, I’d probably sit there and try to figure out what they were saying, but my head wasn’t in the right place today. Instead, I stood up from the bed and quickly slid out of the shirt and sweatpants Garrett had given to me, quickly walking into the bathroom and slipping my dress over my head. My jacket went on after that and so did my sandals. I took one look at myself in the mirror and groaned as I pulled my hair from the ponytail. All I could do was run my fingers through it, letting my blond waves float freely. I sighed, rubbing chapstick over my lips before going back into the main room.

I still wasn’t sure what I had gotten dressed for. I mean, I wouldn’t mind going out to explore, but I didn’t want to listen to Garrett bitch. As I listed things off I could do in the hotel in my head, my eyes fell to the table near the door, an oversized backpack obstructing my vision and I thought why the hell not.

Now, don’t get me wrong. I enjoyed doing laundry as much as the next person, but I really had nothing else to do and I knew Garrett’s feelings about laundry were right up there with his feelings for Stephen. I also figured I could use a few good karma points.

I wasn’t sure what I was expecting from the laundry room in the hotel. I mean, it was a relatively upscale hotel. I wasn’t expecting the Ritz of Laundromats, but I was expecting more than one washer and one drier in what looked like a crack den. I was almost reluctant to separate his clothes on the table supplied, afraid that there might be some sort of disease lingering on it. Eventually I sucked up the hesitation and started to separate the lights and the darks.

As I looked around the room, I realized the walls were yellow not from paint, but from cigarette smoke. I hadn’t realized it before, but there were butts strewn around the room, tucked into various corners. This must be where the staff goes when they needed a smoke break on the clock. I guess I couldn’t blame them. If I had to tend to every guests beck and call I’d probably pick up the habit as well.

Once the dark load was in the washer, I took a deep breath before hopping onto the table. There weren’t any chairs and I didn’t feel like standing the entire thirty-minute cycle. There was a TV in the corner and a remote to my left and out of sheer boredom, I turned it on. As I flipped through the channels, I realized every station was the same. It was talk show after talk show and before I got aggravated, I just left it on whatever station it landed on. There was some overdramatic woman screaming at her cohost and I couldn’t help laughing. Despite not knowing what was going on, I still knew she was pissed.

With each passing commercial, I found myself becoming lost in my head. I hadn’t really had a chance to dwell on what Garrett had said last night. *I didn’t sleep with Chloe*. I was relieved. I wasn’t sure if I was supposed to be, but I was. And that meant when I watched him walk out of her room he hadn’t just *finished*. He had actually just stopped himself, but why? *She wasn’t you*. That left me more confused then ever. He didn’t want me anymore; that was pretty clear. Why would it matter that Chloe wasn’t me?

I never got to answer the question, the washing machine stopped and I found myself tossing the clothes into the



drier. Once the drier beeped, I enveloped the clothes in my arms and dropped them on the table, mindlessly folding them.

“Are you doing my laundry?” His laugh brought me back to reality and all I could do was smile nervously.

“Uh...Yeah.” I stammered, the fabric of the shirt I was folding balled tight in my fist. “I mean, I had nothing else to do and I know your mom usually does it for you at home and I figured—”

“I got you coffee.” He cut me off with another laugh as he held out a paper cup to me. “It was a little strong, so I put an extra sugar in there for you.”

“Thanks.” I smiled as I took the cup from him and slowly brought it to my lips. He was right. It was strong, but the extra sugar helped. “So, how’s the car?”

“They towed it about an hour ago,” he answered. “The mechanic said it would be fixed by tomorrow. At least, that’s what I’m assuming he said.”

“Let’s hope.” I raised my eyebrows as I smiled.

I didn’t expect it to be this awkward. I mean, tension was so thick that I could barely breathe. He just stood there, seemingly unfazed as I tried to look anywhere but at him.

“Do you...Um, do you want to do something?” He scratched the back of his head and I was forced to look at him. His hair was in its naturally messy state and his sunglasses were hanging in the center of his grey shirt. He had a plaid shirt over that, unbuttoned and hanging just above his belt. I tried to pull my eyes from him, but they were stuck. “I know Verona isn’t going to happen, but I think we can find something here that’s equally interesting.”

I just nodded because I’d apparently forgotten how to speak.

“Okay.” He laughed as he put the rest of his newly clean clothes back into his backpack. “Just let me bring this back to the room and then we can figure out what to do.”

The concierge was more the ready to help us when we got downstairs. It was like no other guest had ever asked her for a suggestion. She gave us brochures for museums and local wine tastings, but nothing seemed to have excited her more than the last thing she told us. “Es...A...Cucina...Ah...Cooking. Sì. Sì. Sì. Classe di cooking.”

“A cooking class?” Garrett asked skeptically, glancing down at me.

“Sì. Sì. Sì.” The woman answered for me as she frantically came out from behind the counter. She wedged herself between Garrett and I, grabbing ahold of both of our hands as she dragged us down a hallway. “Molto divertimento.”

I wasn’t sure what that meant, not even a clue. There wasn’t any room for resisting, though. She was not going to have it, so we were stuck, whether we wanted to take a cooking class or not.

“Carmella is great teacher.” The woman ranted on as we continued to walk. “Best in country.”

When she stopped us in front of a room, I was hesitant. There were tables set up like a chemistry lab, each equipped with stovetops and mixers. It reminded me of that episode of Friends when Monica and Joey crashed a cooking class. Though I found it amusing, I couldn’t see myself in one. I could cook, but not well. And I guess that was the point of a cooking class, but I was used to excelling in school and I knew I would not be excelling in

this class.

“Well aren’t you two adorable.” I was taking back by the level of volume in her voice. She was American—very American—and if that wasn’t obvious, I wasn’t sure what was. She had that southern accent and that bleach-blond, housewife hair and a figure that was enhanced by surgery. “Look at them, Bill. Too cute.”

The whole class was looking back at us like we were some sort of circus show. I wasn’t much of an attention seeker, so this was making me uncomfortable and for a guy who preformed on a stage most nights, Garrett wasn’t too amused by the eleven sets of eyes staring him down.

“You two can take the table in the back.” The woman up front smiled. “I’m Carmella and we were just starting our introductions.”

I smiled back nervously as people began spitting off names. Mister and Misses America were Jenny and Bill Larson from Chattanooga, Tennessee. And those were the only specifics I remembered. I knew the couple in front of us was Nigerian and the couple to their left was from Dublin. The couple next to Jenny and Bill was from Toronto and the couple at the table in front of them was from right here in Parma. Everyone was married with two and a half kids...and then there was Garrett and I.

“You two aren’t married—” Jenny asked when it was our turn for introductions.

“No.” Garrett said quickly, scratching the back of his neck like he always does when he’s uncomfortable.

“We’re...Uh...Backpacking.” I nodded. “We...Um...Got separated from our friends, so we’re here until we can get to Rome.”

“Well, we’re happy you could join us today.” Carmella smiled before going into further detail about the class. She was a professor here at the University of Parma. She’d been head chef in restaurants ranging from New York to London to Paris, but her main passion was teaching. We’d spend the next six hours learning the craft of Italian cuisine and I was a little bit overwhelmed. “We’re going to start out with a classic dish: Gnocchi Alla Sorrentina. It’s your basic gnocchi and marinara sauce. We’ll take it step by step. We’ll make the dough for the gnocchi and then we’ll make the sauce. Next we’ll be making Saltimbocca di Pollo, which is chicken stuffed with pancetta and sage. And we’ll top the whole meal off with my grandmother’s tiramisu recipe.”

Things just got a whole lot more overwhelming.

“This is a far stretch from French toast and mac and cheese.” Garrett laughed as he pulled the required apron over his shirt.

“Tell me about it.” I replied as I grabbed my apron from the hook. “I just hope we don’t burn the place down.

It wasn’t as bad as I was anticipating. Carmella was true to her word, walking us through every ingredient step by step. I seemed to pick it up quickly. I mean, there really wasn’t a science to it. As long as you followed the directions, you did fine. That wasn’t a problem for me, but for some it was a bit of a feat.

“You really don’t like following directions, do you?” I glanced over at Garrett for a second before focusing back on the sage I was chopping. “Is this some sort of guy thing I wouldn’t understand?”

He set the measuring cup on the counter, raising his eyebrows as he looked at me. “I know how to follow directions.”

“Really?” I smiled as I set my knife down, picking up the sheet of ingredients. “Because according to this we

only need three tablespoons of heavy cream and you measured out..." I looked over at the measuring cup. "...three-fourths of a cup"

He glared at me. "A real chef doesn't use measurements."

"Because you're totally a real chef."

I was taking back by how normal this felt. I mean, I spent seven months avoiding him at all costs. Part of me wondered if the truth came out at a different time, would it have been this easy? Or is it because we're stuck together that it panned out this way. Because even I didn't think it would be easy. I figured we'd have to work back to being civil to each other, but here we were in the middle of a cooking class acting like I never wrote that paper.

"So, where are ya'll from?"

It was that time in the class when you got to eat everything you made. I graciously handed the chicken over to Garrett, who didn't think twice about digging in. I mean, I would have been a little reluctant. We made that chicken. I wasn't totally convinced it was cooked fully.

"Arizona." I smiled as I picked up my glass of wine. Another thing I was surprised about, I enjoyed the wine a little too much.

"Ya'll said you were backpacking?"

Garrett nodded. "Something like that, but I think we've stayed at more luxury hotels than normal backpackers would."

I didn't even consider what we were doing backpacking. Like Garrett said, we were going from luxury hotel to luxury apartment. It wasn't like we were going from hostile to hostile.

Conversation erupted from there. Bill and Jenny told us about their kids and the couple from Dublin told us about their many trips down here. It was casual and comfortable and for the first time, I was actually enjoying this trip.

"Now how long have ya'll been together?"

I picked the wrong time to go for Garrett's drink. My wine had been long gone and I think it was obvious he didn't like his. I just wished I waited a minute because the second the liquid hit my lips, it instantly started dribbling down my chin. My dress wasn't my first priority. I mean, it should have been. The chances of this stain coming out were slim to none, but there were bigger fish to fry. "Oh...We aren't...We're not together."

"Really?" Jenny scrunched her nose. "Because I would have bet my life on you two being in love."

"No." Garrett said quickly. "We're definitely not together."

That's how things ended. We cleaned up. Carmella thanked us for coming and class was over.

The walk to the elevator was short and the ride up was even shorter. For once, the silence wasn't awkward and filled with tension. It was just silence.

"Are you sure you know how to do it?" I giggled from behind him when we stopped in front of the room. It was painfully obvious the wine had gone to my head, making his inability to unlock the door amusing.

"I'm pretty confident in my ability to open a door, Jers." He glanced back at me briefly before inserting the card again.

"Just checking." I bit back my laughter as I watched the light turn green. Garrett walked in and I followed, shrugging my jacket off as I entered the room. I tossed it at the table and watched as I completely missed, the jacket falling to the carpet and I sighed. I placed one hand on the doorframe, using it as leverage as I unbuckled my sandals, kicking them off as I caught glimpse of the stain on my dress. "I can't believe I managed to spill this much wine on me."

"I know." Garrett replied, his voice muffled by the bathroom. "Considering I didn't think you left enough in the glass to make that much of a mess."

"Hey." I looked over at the bathroom as he walked out. "You shouldn't have left your glass unsupervised."

He laughed. "I think you would have drank it whether it was unsupervised or not."

I quirked an eyebrow. He was probably right.

"Here." He smiled, placing a wet and soapy facecloth in my hand.

"The fact that you think soap and water are going to get red wine out of a nude dress is almost hilarious." I glanced up at him as he blotted the stain, not realizing he was standing so close. For the second time that day, I felt my heart in my throat.

We weren't standing there very long, but I could feel every passing second. Our eyes were locked, paralyzed by each other as I felt my breathing go shallow. He leaned in hesitantly, like he was scared to even touch me. He brushed his thumb over my lips, and then he smiled. When he leaned in closer, I froze, because it hit me at that moment that this was really happening and I had no control over it. But maybe I didn't want control. Maybe I wanted whatever was going to happen to happen. I spent so much time being cautious and following the rules. Maybe now I just wanted to live. That was what this trip was all about in the first place.

His kiss hadn't changed. It was still soft and careful, like he had every move planned in his head. It brought me right back to that day in the desert when he kissed me for the first time, and the day he told me I'd taken him by surprise, and every day in between. I was so lost in my mind, so consumed in the familiarity, the sweetness, the *relief*, that I didn't realize he'd pulled away.

"I...Um." He stammered, taking a step back "I shouldn't have—"

I cut him off, connecting my lips back to his. We fell against the wall as he moved his hands to my hair. My lips were raw and swollen as he moved his mouth over my jaw and down my neck, landing on the spot that made me buckle at my knees. I pushed his flannel off, running the hem of his grey shirt through my fingers as I felt him smile into my throat. He detached his lips just long enough for me to bring the shirt over his head, tossing it to the corner before he connected our mouths again.

It was safe to say this was never part of the plan. I mean, I figured we'd at least have an adult conversation before we went this far. Yesterday we could barely tolerate standing in the same room together and now I was pinned up against a wall with my dress pushed up over my waist as my hands feverishly tried to undo Garrett's belt. But for the first time in forever, I didn't care about any of this making sense.

I felt a shiver shake through me as Garrett pulled my dress off, tossing it to the same corner as his shirt. We spun around, stumbling toward the bed. I hit the mattress first, Garrett straddling my waist. His hands were

cold against my skin, causing me to erupt in tiny bumps as he grazed over my ribs.

A whimper escaped my throat as his lips left my mouth. He trailed kisses over my jaw and back down my neck and then moved his lips over to my collarbone. His hands brushed over the underwire of my bra, using the fabric as a guide as his fingers slipped behind my back to unclasp it.

“God, you’re perfect.” He whispered as his lips ran over my ear, bringing them quickly back to my lips.

I didn’t want to think about the fact that it was probably the first decent thing he’d said to me in seven months. He’d done a complete one-eighty—we both had—and suddenly I’d gone from being the manipulative bitch who broke his heart to being perfect. It was a euphoric feeling, just knowing that, one that sent me soaring at the mere thought. It wasn’t the physical aspect of Garrett that made everything seem right, it never had been. He’d been able to upright me from day one, before I even knew what upright felt like.

When we were done, I collapsed against my pillow as my chest caved in and out, desperate for air. I was dizzy with emotion, my head filled with unanswered questions and a twinge of guilt, but I didn’t want to dwell on any of it. I just wanted to live in this moment.

“Hey.” Garrett said softly, stealing my attention back. He leaned over, kissing my forehead and then my eyelids, moving down to the tip of my nose before landing back on my lips. He captured them softly, pressing his forehead back to mine as he smiled.

I knew this wouldn’t make sense in the morning, but right now I didn’t care.

I had a hard time opening my eyes the next morning, or even moving for that matter. It wasn’t because I was comfortable—I was, don’t get me wrong—it was because Garrett was on top of me. Literally, his entire body was diagonally across mine as he grabbed the ringing phone off of the nightstand.

“Hello?” His voice was hoarse, still dripping with sleep. “What? I can’t...I don’t understand what you’re...The car? Is this the mechanic?... Oh, yeah...Uh... Sì...Two o’clock?...Er...Uh...*Grazie*..”

I giggled, the sounds muffled by the pillow my face was buried in. Maybe I was still drunk off of last night because I couldn’t remember the last time I was this happy for no reason. And I was almost afraid to be this happy in front of Garrett because of what happened last night. I wasn’t sure how he felt about it. We were never really good at telling each other anything. I decided to just let it go for now because it was early and I was tired and all I really cared about was the fact that I was wearing Garrett’s shirt and his arm was tucked around my waist.

“You need to brush up on your Italian, Nickelsen.” I lifted my head from my pillow, smiling over at him as he fell back to the mattress.

He just gave me a tight smile before relaxing into his spot, taking his arm with him.

That’s all it really took. I knew things wouldn’t go back to being like they used to. I mean, I hoped they would, but one day in Parma wasn’t going to fix us. I wasn’t even sure if you could fix us. We had sex because it was the heat of the moment. I was a fool to even think it was anything more than that.

“What time is it?” I asked after a few minutes of uncomfortable silence. I knew if I didn’t make some sort of effort to stay awake, I’d fall back to sleep.

“Eleven.”

“Eleven?” My eyes grew, almost in disbelief. “I can’t believe we slept that late.”

“Yeah, well, we were up awfully late.” I could hear the regret in his voice and it was like a knife through my heart. Even if it meant nothing to him, it meant something to me. We could repeat this awkward morning after a million times and it would always mean something to me.

“Should...Should we talk about...Last night?” I was embarrassed to even ask because we never talked about it in November. It just sort of happened and we left it at that. But November was different. We didn’t have seven months of bad blood between us.

“Uh...” He stammered, untangling the white sheet from his body as he fell out of the bed. “We have to check out soon. I should...I should shower.”

I dropped my head to the pillow in frustration, my mind racing with unanswered questions. I didn’t have a chance to think about them any further. The phone on the nightstand next to me began to ring and I had no choice but to roll over and pick it up. “Hello?”

“*Don’t tell me I woke you up.*” Fallon’s voice filled my ear, causing me to pull away slightly because of the volume. “*It’s almost twelve, Jers.*”

“I...uh...” I stuttered, rolling onto my back. “I had a long day yesterday.” It wasn’t a lie. The cooking class was long. I just chose to leave out the details of the night being longer.

“*Well, I’d love to hear all about it—and believe me, I intend to—but I’m just calling to let you know our train leaves in ten minutes.*” She went on. “*We should be in Rome by three. When should we expect you and Garrett?.*”

If we were being honest, I wasn’t sure. We couldn’t pick the car up until two and we still needed to get directions. With Garrett’s track record, we had to factor in getting lost at least twice. We would be lucky if we ever got there. “I’m not sure, Fal. We’re picking the car up at two and we’ll have to get directions—”

“*Please don’t tell me this is your way of saying Garrett and I ran off somewhere and we won’t be coming to Rome..*” Fallon groaned dramatically. “*Because really, it was hard enough explaining to Sarah that you and Garrett got lost. I don’t think I can handle telling her you guys bought some grape vineyard in Tuscany and never plan on going home.*”

I had to stop myself from laughing, which caused Garrett to shoot me a funny look as he walked out of the bathroom. Water droplets clung to his hair as he pulled on a pair of jeans. “I promise you we will be there tonight. Just give me the name of the hotel.”

I scribbled down what she told me on the notepad sitting on the nightstand, hanging up shortly after that.

“Fallon?” Garrett asked, his voice muffled by the shirt he pulled over his head.

I nodded. “They’re getting on the train now.” I pushed myself up, twisting my legs together under the sheets as my eyes followed Garrett around the room. “Fallon said they should be there by three.”

Twenty minute ago, part of me would have rather just stayed here—Twenty minutes ago when I still had hope that maybe Garrett and I were better, but now I couldn’t wait to get to Rome because Fallon was there and she’d know what to do, even if I was still reluctant to tell her every detail.

“Are you going to get out of bed?” Garrett asked, rustling his hair into its normal messy state.

I bit down on my lip because there was definitely a reason I hadn’t got out of bed. “My dress is covered in wine...”

His eyebrows spiked and he scratched the back of his neck before he walked over to his backpack. With the way he was tearing through it, I could only assume my folding job had gone to waste. “These should fit.” He tossed a pair of faded jeans at me. “And you probably don’t want to wear that shirt.” I looked down at his grey v-neck that I pulled on at some point last night and as I looked up, another shirt hit me in the face.

I threw my legs over the bed, watching as Garrett wandered back into the bathroom. I stood up, pulling on the jeans. They were slightly looser and a lot longer than I’d like, but there was nothing I could do, so I bent down and rolled the fabric up until I saw my ankles. I quickly scanned the floor, spotting my bra under the table. I grabbed it, throwing it around my shoulders, buckling it together before I threw the t-shirt Garrett had given me on. He came back into the room a few minutes later, avoiding eye contact as he walked over to his backpack.

“Are you ready?”

I nodded as I slid my feet into my sandals. I grabbed my purse from the chair and followed him out the door.

It didn’t take long to check out. Garrett casually brushed off the questions the woman was trying to form in broken English, simply smiling his way out of answering them.

Parma was unusually busy for midafternoon. I mean, I understood it was peak season, but it was the middle of the week. I tried my best to keep up with Garrett, but he was walking faster than normal. I could only hope the mechanic was close because I couldn’t keep up with him much longer.

I thought I’d lost him when he ducked down a side street, but after bumping into a few German tourists, I managed to catch up with him. We weren’t walking much longer, an old, shack-like building coming into view. Old tires and bumpers were strewn everywhere and I could only assume that this was where the car was.

The garage smelt like home and by home, I mean it smelt like the auto body shop. I hadn’t really missed home until that familiar scent of oil and gasoline reminded me. Sure, the phone call I had with my mom in Nice left me a little homesick, but not enough to want to go back anytime soon. There was just something about this place that made me genuinely miss hearing my dad and Ralphie crack jokes as they worked on a carburetor and the times my mom would show up with a plate of cookies because she was on this Holly Homemaker kick. I was so set on using this trip as a scapegoat to my ordinary life, that I forgot that there were parts of that life that I loved.

I stayed behind when Garrett went to get the keys, afraid that if I stepped in any further I’d be overcome with emotions about home. For once I was actually okay with staying outside in the heat, not even caring that the cloudless sky left nowhere for the sun to hide. I’d take a sunburn over a reminder of what I left behind any day.

“Car’s out back.” Garrett said coolly, brushing by me so quickly that a breeze whipped through the air.

I trailed behind him slowly, the sun burning at the skin on my neck the ponytail left exposed. He was already inside by the time I got to the door. I barely had it shut before he started to back out of the spot.

It was hard just thinking about enduring this four and a half hour drive. Garrett was obviously set on not talking to me and it was hard reading road signs when I didn’t understand Italian.

I thought about trying to talk to him, but I wasn't sure what to say. The only question on my mind was why was he acting this way, and for some reason, I knew he wouldn't answer it. I didn't want to spend the rest of this four-hour drive staring at the endless farms because once you've seen one cow, you've seen them all. I just wanted things with Garrett to be okay. I thought we were making progress before we slept together; I didn't want to ruin that. "Fallon said the hotel is right across from the Trevi Fountain." I finally said, drumming my hands on my thighs as I looked over at him.

He didn't say anything, or even look at me. He kept his attention focused on the road.

"I guess her mom knows the manager." I went on, my eyes falling back to the window. "She got us the penthouse suite. I mean, it's not really surprising considering the other places we've stayed at—"

I was cut off. No, not by Garrett, but the radio.

I glared over at him, my mouth slightly ajar.

"I like this song." He mumbled, his eye squinting under his sunglasses.

He didn't like this song. He couldn't even *understand* this song. This was just him being him and that was a far stretch from the boy who was calling me perfect less than twelve hours ago. I guess I should have expected it. When in my life has anything ever gone the way I wanted it to?

I could feel my eyes drooping three hours into the drive. The sun had already fallen below the horizon and the sky was an odd shade of orange and purple. Maybe if I focused on that I could forget about my empty stomach, or the fact that if Garrett hit one more pothole, I'd pee my pants. It wasn't like he showed any signs of stopping, so I really just had to cross my legs and pray we ended up at the hotel soon.

"Why didn't you tell me you didn't pass in the paper?" If the fact that he was speaking to me didn't take me by surprise, the question he just asked.

I thought about ignoring it—ignoring him—but it was hard when I didn't want to. I wanted to talk to him. We *needed* to talk. I'd finally understood what Fallon had been trying to push me to do for months. "Because it wouldn't have changed anything." I finally said. "I still wrote it."

He didn't reply. I wasn't sure if I was expecting him to.

"Look, Garrett," I started, taking a deep breath. "About last night—"

The radio went up another notch and I let out of sigh as my head hit the seat.

~\*~

The four and a half hours of silence seemed like nothing compared to the mile we had to walk from the rental car depot. It was getting close to ten o'clock and it seemed like everyone Garrett and I passed on the street was so happily in love that they couldn't keep their hands, or lips off of each other. And yeah, I was slightly bitter, mostly jealous, and a little disgusted. I guess I just thought after last night, Garrett and I would be one of those couple. I mean, I didn't want to make out with him on the street corner, but I wouldn't have minded holding his hand.

I was so distracted by Garrett and I's lack of communication, that I walked through the doors of the hotel without even glancing back at the reason why I wanted to come to this city in the first place. And I knew I had plenty of time to see it in the three days we'd be here, but you don't just casually stroll by the Trevi Fountain



without stopping. You just don't.

After a long elevator ride—courtesy of the child that pressed every single button—I found myself standing in front of the room Fallon told me they'd be in, silently debating when would be the appropriate time to knock. Apparently I was taking too long because Garrett reached around me, slamming his fist on the door and it almost instantly pulled back, revealing Sarah's smiling face. "Well, look who finally decided to join us."

Garrett didn't saying anything and all I could do was weakly smile as I walked into the room. Everyone was sitting around on couches and chairs, a TV flashing in the background.

"Did you two have a nice little romantic getaway?" John smiled from the couch. That got him a cold look from Garrett and his smile fell. "I'll take that as a no..."

"Are you guys hungry?" Fallon's voice came from the corner she was hidden in. "We've got a bunch of leftovers from dinner."

I shook my head, despite my stomach growling. "I...uh...I'm kind of tired...Where am I sleeping?"

"The last room on the left." Fallon replied. "With Sarah, Jess and I."

I nodded before weaving between people, ignoring the look Stephen was sending me.

Once I shut the door, I fell to the bed, my head bouncing off the mattress as I closed my eyes. I wasn't tired. Sleep was possibly the last thing on my mind. I really just wanted to be alone. Distancing myself from everyone—Garrett especially—was the only thing I could think of doing. I knew it wasn't going to make any of this easier, but I could at least try.

"Jers?"

She stayed away longer than I expected. I figured she'd be right on my tail. "Yeah, Fal?"

Before she said anything else, I heard the door click shut. "Did something happen with Garrett? I mean, I know you told him about the paper, but I just expected—I don't know—I expected things to be different."

So did I. "Nothing happened, Fal. I'm just tired."

"Why are you wearing his clothes?"

I didn't bother opening my eyes, or even moving. "I spilt wine on my dress."

"Wine?"

"Yep." I replied. "I'm a wino now."

I heard Fallon sigh. "Are you sure you're okay?"

She wasn't going to leave me alone, so I did the only thing I could. I sat up and looked her straight in the eyes. "I'm okay, Fallon."

"Alright." She didn't sound convinced. "Are you going to sleep? I'll tell everyone to keep it down."

I shook my head. "I think I'm going to take a walk."

“I’ll come—”

“I’ll be fine by myself.”

After she left, I quickly got off the bed and grabbed my backpack from the floor. I stripped of Garrett’s clothes, replacing them with a pair of shorts and a t-shirt before putting my shoes back on and walking out of the room.

Nothing seemed to change in the fifteen minutes I was gone. The only noticeable difference was that I couldn’t find Garrett, not that I was looking for him, or anything.

When I got outside, I took a deep breath before crossing the street. It was right there. It was sitting in front of my in all of its glory—the one thing I’d been dying to see since I watched the Lizzie McGuire movie. Now I was here and I couldn’t help feeling slightly overwhelmed.

I took a seat on the steps, my heart racing as I watched the lights glow from under the water. I was afraid to blink, scared that if I closed my eyes for even a second, this would all go away. I didn’t want that to happen ever. I just wanted to live in this moment because I finally felt at peace, like this was exactly what I’d been waiting for.

“You’re supposed to make a wish.” I jumped at the sound of the voice and I could hear him laugh from above me. “Y’know, to ensure your return to Rome.”

“I know, Stephen.” I looked up at him, a smile spread over my face.

“Well,” He extended a hand down to me and I latched on before he pulled me to my feet. He stuck his other hand in his pocket, pulling out a silver coin and placing it in my palm. “I never got to give you your birthday present.”

“A quarter?” I grinned. “How did you know that’s what I wanted?”

He shook his head, a string of laughs falling from his lips as we walked closer to the fountain. “Just throw the coin into the damn fountain.”

I smiled again before turning around so my back was to it. I closed my eyes, taking a deep breath before I tossed it over my left shoulder.

As soon as the coin left my fingers, I felt his lips press to mine. There was something so familiar about it, like we were standing in Sarah’s living room and it was New Year’s Eve all over again. Except this time it wasn’t so urgent. It was sweet and soft and I could feel his smile as he pulled me closer. His hands were resting at the small of my back and I mindlessly wrapped mine around his neck, my fingers lost in his mess of dark hair. He pulled away slowly, his forehead resting against mine as I fluttered my eyes open. My breath was caught in my chest and all I could do was smile back at him. Stephen pushed his hands into his pockets, nodding his head as he stumbled back. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow, Jers,” He called before jogging up the stairs.

I watched as he disappeared across the street, fading into the crowds of people. All I could manage to do was bring my fingers to my mouth, softly brushing them over my lips that still tingled from his kiss. I wasn’t sure why it felt like an eternity. I knew only a few seconds had passed, but still, it felt like I’d been standing there forever just savoring the taste Stephen left on my lips. And still, all I could do was smile.

*"I've been waiting for this for so long." He whispered as his lips slid over my jaw, running slowly down my neck. He landed on the spot, suck and biting at the skin until a whimper escaped from my mouth. I could feel him smiling into my throat as I wrapped my arms around his neck, my fingers lost in his hair as I pulled him closer. He brought his lips back to mine, capturing them quickly before pulling away. He stayed like that for a few seconds, his face just hovering over mine as he smiled. "I love you, y'know? I've been in love with you for so long, Jers. I'm just sorry it's taken me this long to tell you."*

*I could feel my heart racing, my body warm and tingly as I pressed my lips back to his. "I love you, too, Garrett."*

*He smiled again, his lips connecting to mine. His fingers left goose bumps as they crawled down my skin, quickly moving to the mattress as he pushed himself up. "There's just one more thing I need you to know." He mumbled before kissing my neck.*

*"Mhm?"*

*"I had sex with John."*

*"I had sex with John."*

My eyes snapped open, what I can only assume was a horrified expression glued to my face. What met me was a pair of big blue eyes, so close that our eyelashes were practically touching, blinking rapidly at me.

"Jesus!" I shouted, shooting up in bed. Our foreheads smashed together, and we both cried out in pain. I fell back against my pillows, my eyes watering as I pressed my hands against the tender spot. My head throbbed as she curled up at the end of my bed, whining at me.

"Fuck, Jersey!" she screeched. "What's wrong with you?"

"What's wrong with me?" I shouted back. "You're the one who was trying to mesh our faces together just now!"

Fallon groaned from the other bed. "Will you two shut up?"

"For real," Jess agreed, poking her head up from Fallon's other side. "What time is it, even?"

"Six-thirty," Sarah answered immediately. "But that's not important right—"

"SIX-THIRTY?" Fallon shrieked. "WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU?"

"I AM HAVING A CRISIS, IN CASE YOU DIDN'T HEAR," Sarah shouted back. She jumped up onto her knees, bouncing hard on the end of my bed. "We were at this rave all night, and I took some E, and then I guess, y'know, John and I had sex."

I started to speak, but she kept going, talking over me like the Energizer Bunny.

"So then I got in this cab and I barfed in the backseat, so the cab driver kicked me out—I mean, I think he kicked me out, but I don't speak French, so maybe he was just yelling, but either way I threw some money at him and jumped out. I went in this store and bought an energy drink, but I'm not sure what kind of energy drink it was, and there were warning labels in French, so my heart may or may not give out by the end of this conversation. But I had sex with John. And I wanted to be awake enough to make it the rest of the way here and manage to tell you all that without going into a coma."

"Jesus, Sarah," Fallon said, "are you still rolling?"

"No!" Sarah replied, looking outraged. Then she sank down a bit and said, "I mean, I don't think so. But I'm still sort of horny, so—"

"Whoa!" I shouted, slamming my hands over my ears. "Overshare, Sarah!"

She just giggled and fell onto the bed, rolling around a bit like a crazed toddler.

"I won't be able to sleep. Please, please, can we go get coffee?"

"You don't need coffee," Fallon snapped. "You need some downers or something."

"That works too," Sarah replied, jumping to her feet. "But I need to get out of this hotel room."

After ten minutes of convincing, Sarah managed to get Fallon and Jess out of bed so that they could get coffee—or something not caffeinated, in Sarah's case. If I wasn't still obsessing over the dream and the kiss with Stephen, I might have gone with them, but I needed this alone time to think. Also, I needed to shower. I wasn't like Sarah, who didn't really seem to care that she smelt like smoke and bad decisions. I could never get away with that. She, however, didn't care what people thought about her. She would frolic in the attention she'd get from wearing a tiny metallic dress and smeared make-up at eight in the morning. Just thinking about Sarah's hygiene made me want to shower, and also maybe the fact that I still reeked of Garrett.

I rolled out of bed and stumbled toward the bathroom, barely managing to turn the light on. I avoided the mirror the first time I passed it, simply opening the shower curtain and turning the water on, but as I pulled my shirt off, I noticed something reflecting back at me—something of the brown and purple variety hovering over my collarbone. As much as I watched to smash my head against the wall, I refrained. I just let out an exaggerated sigh and stepped into the shower.

It took twenty minutes for me to fully believe I smelt like a girl again. I turned the water off and reached for a towel, wrapping it around my body as I stepped back into the steamy room. I decided against drying my hair. It was hot enough as it was, so a ponytail would do.

I opened the door to the bedroom and a blast of cold air washed over me. I mentally kicked myself for not bringing clothes in with me. My bag wasn't very far from the door, so I could get something on before I died of hypothermia.

"Uh...hi?"

I jumped back, my heart lodged somewhere in my throat as I clutched the towel tighter to my body. "*Fuck.*" I hissed, trying to calm my breathing. "What are you doing in here?" I asked, staring over at him. He was sitting on the bed I'd been dreaming of him in and I knew he didn't know that, but it still felt weird.

"I wanted to talk." He replied with a shrug. He looked tired, like he hadn't slept. And I couldn't help but wonder what had kept him up all night.

"You want to talk...now?" I raised an eyebrow. "I wanted to have this conversation twenty-four hours ago, Garrett."

"I know, Jers." He said, getting up from the bed and walking over to me. "I just—I just think we need to talk."

"Which is why I wanted to talk yesterday." I replied, my knuckles turning as white as the towel I was

desperately trying to hold up. "I'm sorry, Garrett, but I can't keep doing this whole back and forth thing." I told him as I carefully watched him scratch the back of his head. "We had sex, and you just blew it off like it was nothing—like it meant *nothing* to you. And maybe all you wanted was sex and I get it, you're a guy—"

"I don't...I mean..." He stumbled over his words. "It wasn't just sex, Jers, and I...I just want to talk, but I don't want to do it here. Not where everyone can hear us."

I took a deep breath, trying my hardest not to read into this.

"Will you meet me at the fountain tonight? At like eight?"

"Fine." I nodded. "The fountain at eight."

He smiled weakly back at me as he put his hand on the door. "And Jers?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry." His eyes glanced down at where my hand was resting on the towel. "I'm sorry for the...uh...the *flat iron burn*."

He was gone before I realized what he said and all I could do was hope I had a shirt cut high enough to cover it.

~\*~

I wasn't really the lounge chair type of girl. I mean, I was fairly certain that some girls were just made to look good on a lounge chair in their teeny-tiny bikini with their sun kissed skin and their luscious blond hair. I just looked dumb sitting there in a pair of shorts and that worn out Metallica shirt.

"Jersey, why aren't you in your bathing suit?" Fallon stood in front of me, her hands firmly on her hips. "I thought we got over your body issues in France..."

I set my book on my lap and glared up at her, but she couldn't tell because of my sunglasses. "I don't have body issues." I said for starters. "But if you really want to know, I'm bloated and I have cramps and I really don't feel like swimming."

I was sure that was the only excuse I could use to get her off my back. If she thought I was feeling *under the weather* she would leave me alone. At least I hoped she would. I really didn't feel like telling her the reason I wasn't in my swimsuit was because I had a hickey the size of Europe on my chest.

She was about to say something, her lips perched to speak, but she was cut off.

"Bro, why are there scratch marks on your back?"

Fallon quickly swung her head around, giving me a decent view of the scene unfolding by the pool. Once I realized who John was talking to, I was more than a little mortified, but I had to contain myself. I didn't need Fallon to get suspicious.

"It's just...uh...It's just a sunburn." Garrett stammered as he tossed his shirt at the fence. "Sunblock got streaky when I tried to, y'know, get my back."

John seemed sold with his answer and he let it go. I thought I was free and clear, until Fallon turned around slowly. One eyebrow was raised as she took a step toward me. I swallowed hard as she grabbed the collar of my

shirt, pulling it down just enough for her to see the hickey.

I pushed her hand away, straightening out my shirt as a scowl appeared across my face.

“What exactly happened in Parma, Jers?” She asked quietly, taking a seat at the bottom of my chair.

“Nothing happened.” I couldn’t not try it. It was at least worth a shot.

“Really? The claw marks you left on Garrett’s back say otherwise.”

I thought about denying it, but it was Fallon and she knew me better than I knew myself. I’d save us both the trouble if I just let it all out.

“How did it happen, Jers?”

“Oh, y’know, he tripped and I broke his fall.” I rolled my eyes. “How do you think it happened, Fal?”

She narrowed her eyes, staring at me as if she was about to eat my soul. “Were you drunk?”

I wasn’t drunk. Yes, I had some wine, but I wasn’t drunk. I was drunk in Amsterdam. I was not drunk in Parma. “I had a little wine, but I knew what I was doing.”

She didn’t look convinced. “Could you have passed a field sobriety test?”

“I couldn’t pass one even if I was sober.” I replied uncomfortably. I didn’t want to talk about this anymore. I mean, I get that Fallon is the only person I would want to talk about this with, but this was not the time, or place for us to have this conversation.

“I just wish you wouldn’t have, Jers.” She sighed, disappointment laced in her voice. “You two need to work out your issues before you jump back into bed.”

I knew that, but I couldn’t change what happened. And I wasn’t sure if I wanted to change it. It felt right and that was all that really mattered. “Fallon, I’m a big girl. I can handle this.”

I couldn’t. I couldn’t handle any of this. Not sleeping with Garrett. And definitely not kissing Stephen. It was so much at once, and I was ready to freak out.

“Alright.” She stood up from the chair, smiling down at me. “Consider this me butting out.” I watched as she turned around and walked toward the pool. “If any of you get my hair wet, I’ll scratch your eyes out.” She said loudly as she climbed into the water.

I brought my attention back down to my book, but it wasn’t like I could focus. I reread the same sentence nearly fifty times and I still didn’t know what it said. I wanted to nap, but I was afraid to close my eyes—afraid that the dream would pick up where it left off.

“Not in a swimming mood?”

A waft of chlorine hit me in the face as I looked up from my book, watching closely as Stephen fell into the chair next to me. “Not really.”

I could feel the tension set in as soon as he sat down, and I bet he could to. This was the first time I’d seen him since last night. He had spent most of the day trolling the city with Jess and Kennedy trying to find Josh, who

seemed to be missing after that ecstasy binge at the rave. I still wasn't sure how Stephen felt about talking. Getting Garrett to talk was like pulling teeth and he was the only other experience I had with guys. Well, besides Daniel, but he was perfect, so it was kind of hard to compare.

I decided to go with my gut and my gut said we needed to talk about the kiss. "About last night..."

He shook his head, a small smile on his face. "It's cool, Jers." He shrugged. "It doesn't have to change anything. It was just something I needed to do."

That was too easy. It was just something he needed to do? It didn't have to change anything? I thought communication was supposed to make things more clear. "Are you sure?"

He nodded. "The last thing I want is for things to be weird between us."

I decided to just let it be. I mean, I had bigger things to worry about, like the conversation I was going to have with Garrett and something told me it wasn't going to be as easy as this one.

~\*~

I expected it to be more congested like it was last night, but the Trevi Fountain was virtually a ghost town. There were a few people taking pictures and embracing their Roman adventure, but it wasn't as crowded as I had anticipated. I took a seat on the same step I had last night, my hands resting on my thighs as I watched the water slowly sway with the wind. It was hypnotizing, slowly lulling me into my thoughts.

I was so bad at waiting. And I knew I should be reveling in this—the fountain, the people, the whole aspect of being in Rome—but I couldn't. At least not right now. My head was so lost in a conversation that hasn't even happened yet. It worried me a little. I knew what I wanted to talk about, but what was on Garrett's mind? Did he regret what we did? Could he never forgive me? And I understood if he couldn't, but why make me wait? Why not just tell me right there? Why suggest we talk later?

I couldn't stop my head from wandering, though. What if he wanted to get back together? Were we even together in the first place? What if my dream from this morning was coming true? Not the him fucking John O part, but what if he loved me? What if that was what was so important? What if that was the reason he was so lost yesterday? Maybe he just needed to think things over. I mean, everything happened so fast that there was no thinking involved.

I just had to keep telling myself that. I had to let myself think that he was in love with me and that we'd get our storybook happy ending because if I didn't, I'd dwell on the fact that he was late. Not fifteen minutes. Not twenty minutes. He was forty-five minutes late. And as the hour mark passed, I slowly started to come back to myself and I began to realize the one thing I was dreading:

He wasn't coming.

And part of me knew that long before I sat down. I just wanted to believe that he changed. I wanted to believe that we lived in a perfect world where we could live happily ever after, despite seven months of bad blood. I wasn't sure why I even let myself become this vulnerable, patching up my broken heart just for him to shatter it. That was what I regretted the most—I let myself think things could change. And that was probably the stupidest thing I could have ever done.

I wasn't going to cry, though. Because in those sixty-five minutes of waiting, I realized that I deserved better than Garrett. I deserved someone who wasn't going to continue to make me question everything about myself. I just wanted to move on. I wanted to start a new chapter of my life.

“Jersey?”

I took a deep breath, smiling tightly as I brought myself to my feet. Still smiling, I turned to face him. His face was slightly pink from too much sun and despite it being after nine o’clock, he was still wearing sunglasses.

“Are you okay?” He asked softly, tilting his head to the side. “Your eyes look a little glassy.”

I laughed. “I’m fine, Stephen. Really.”

He nodded, as if he accepted my answer before he nudged his head to the left. “I was going to grab some gelato. Wanna come?”

I didn’t answer his question. Instead, I let my smile grow as I took two steps toward him. It took less than a second for our lips to connect. I pushed myself onto the tips of my toes, my arms wrapped around his neck as my fingers swam through his hair. He pulled me closer, his hands resting on the small of my back as he deepened the kiss slightly.

It was summer. And I was in Rome And I was being kissed—*for the second time*—in front of the Trevi Fountain. Nothing could ever ruin this moment.

When Stephen pulled away, my lips were tingling, along with every other part of my body. I couldn’t help noticing his smile and how perfect it was—something I never realized before. Everything about this moment was perfect—the weather, the lights, the complete and total atmosphere. And I just wanted to live in it forever.

But Stephen’s smile quickly fell and out of curiosity, I turned around to see what had caused the sudden change in mood. And as quickly as Stephen’s smile fell, so did mine. Because there was Garrett, looking like twelve millions shades of heartbreak as his eyes fell to the ground.

I wasn’t sure what I was supposed to feel and because of that, I felt nothing.

He only stuck around long enough to give me a disappointing nod, his head hung low as he turned back toward the hotel.

“You should go talk to him.” Stephen said softly, his voice faltering.

All I could do was stare back at him, my attention lost in his dark eyes. I found myself picking apart everything I never realized I liked about him. It was his smile mostly and the way he held me; it was the way his lips tasted and the sparkle to his eyes. I just wished it hadn’t taken me this long to notice. “I want to stay here.” I told him. “I want to stay here with you.”

Sarah was in the middle of a psychotic break. And by psychotic break, I mean she was compulsively shopping to forget about the conversation she had with John earlier this morning. I mean, it technically wasn’t a conversation. It was a “we need to talk,” but those four words were easily enough to send Sarah into panic mode.

“What does that even mean?” Sarah asked for what felt like the hundredth time since nine o’clock.

“I don’t know, Sarah.” I replied, my fingers casually flipping through the racks of flora fabric as a store clerk kept a close eye on us. “The last time someone told me they wanted to talk, they didn’t show up.”



That was as much as I told them. As far as Sarah, Jess, and Fallon know, Garrett simply didn't show up. Stephen and I both agreed to let that blow over before we even thought about telling everyone about us. I mean, Garrett knew, at least about the kiss. The fact that he's been AWOL since last night is a pretty good sign he hasn't told anyone.

"But you and Garrett are different, Jers." Sarah sighed, taking a pink and orange dress off the rack and bringing it up to the nosey cashier. "You guys were good together. John and I have only ever been no strings attached sex. I mean, except for that time last year when I tried to choose between him and Kenny, but I'd like to forget about that."

"Garrett and I weren't good together." I replied quickly, probably too quickly to even be believable. I was being honest, though. Garrett and I weren't good together. Sure it was fun, but the closest we got to an emotional relationship was when we had sex for the first time, but even that was more physical than emotional, seeing as I forgot to mention the fact that it was my first time.

"Don't give me that, Jers." Sarah said as she handed the lady a few euros. "You guys were the poster kids for perfect couples. You both practically glowed when you were together. And if you weren't together and someone mentioned the other, you both turned into a mess of smiles."

It bothered me, not because I was "with" Stephen now, but because Garrett and I weren't together long enough to be considered perfect. There was also the paper I wrote that pretty much canceled out any hope of ever being perfect. And I guess being perfect never really mattered to me. You had to work for a relationship to last. You needed to fight and laugh, or else it would never work. If you think about it that way, then I guess Garrett and I were great together. We fought and we laughed—our own perfect balance of normal and dysfunctional. But that wasn't even worth dwelling on because Garrett and I would never be together again.

"How about we focus on you and John right now." I changed the subject as we walked out of the store.

Sarah groaned in frustration as she slipped her sunglasses over her eyes. Rome was hot and sunny on this Thursday morning. It was the kind of hot that reminded me of Arizona. And as much as I loved it over here, I was slowly starting to be okay with going home. I needed to get back to a place where I had school to focus on and where I didn't have to see Garrett everyday.

"I just don't understand what he wants to talk about. I get that we had sex in some seedy bathroom in the back of a rave, but it's not like I did it because I was hoping to get a relationship out of it. I was high. I would have fucked anyone at that point."

I understood where she was coming from. I mean, I didn't sleep with Garrett in hopes of us getting back together. Sure, it was a thought in my head the morning after—that maybe that had fixed us, but the reason we slept together was simply because it felt right in that moment. "Do you want to be with him, Sarah?"

There was a long pause and I almost thought she hadn't heard me, but when I looked over at her, there was an expression on her face as if she was searching her head for the answer.

This was something about Sarah I've never understood. It was almost as if she was afraid to fall in love, which confused me. Her parents had been married for nearly twenty-five years. She has had nothing but positive examples of what love is like. But maybe it wasn't love she was afraid of. Maybe it was who she was falling in love with. I mean, John had a reputation. He liked having fun. He liked girls. He liked having fun with girls. No wonder Sarah was afraid.

"I've always wanted to be with him." She confessed. "He's just...He's just John and he's never done

relationships. And I guess I just don't want to get hurt."

This was so not my forte. I was the last person that should be giving relationship advice. This was Fallon's area of expertise. "Have you ever thought that maybe John feels the same way? Maybe he doesn't want to get hurt either?"

She was gnawing at her bottom lip as if she didn't like the answer I'd given her. It was probably easier for her to think John didn't want to be with her, at least that way she could blame him and not herself for not having the courage to actually open up to him.

"He's had his chance, Jers. I mean, why would he be afraid to open up to me?"

"The same reason you're afraid to open up to him?" I replied with a half-smile as we stopped in front of the café we left Fallon and Jess at. Believe me, I was more than confused when Fallon said she didn't want to shop today, but I quickly understood her bad mood when she stormed out of the hotel this morning in search for Midol. "Look, Sarah." I finally said, pulling the door open, spotting Jess and Fallon huddled tightly into a corner near the back. "I think you should just hear John out."

I could see her smiling out of the corner of my eye.

"What?" I asked.

"Ever think of following your own advice?"

I was just happy I didn't get a chance to respond. Fallon quickly cut us off. "Are you done shopping yet? You've been gone for, like, a year."

Sarah merely smiled. "You are in such a lovely mood, Fallon."

"Bite me." Fallon narrowed her eyes.

"I take it you're not going to play tourist with us today?" Sarah asked, grabbing the coffee cup in front of Jess and quickly downed the rest of the liquid, which only got her a rather cold look from Jess.

I was shocked that Sarah was even considering *playing tourist*. But, I mean, this was Sarah we were talking about and her idea of *playing tourist* most likely included a visit to Rome's finest wineries.

"The only place I'm going to be touring is my bed." Fallon said as she stood up.

Sarah shrugged. "Fine. I'll get you a souvenir at The Colosseum."

My eyebrows shot up as I looked over at her. "You want to go to The Colosseum?"

Sarah shrugged again. "Isn't that what you're supposed to do when you go to Rome?"

I wasn't about to let Sarah's enthusiasm for all things touristy go to waste, so we quickly left the café and walked back to the hotel. I needed to change my shoes and Jess thought we should ask the guys if they wanted to join.

"Just let me put my sneakers on." I called as I walked into the room, my eyes scanning the floor for my shoes. I didn't remember where I put them, or even the last place I took them off, but if we were going to walk the Spanish Steps and attempt to make it to The Colosseum, I needed a good pair of shoes.

I found one by the closet, but the other still seemed to be missing. I stood there silently, my lips pursed and my hands on my hips as I tried to remember the last time I even wore them. I felt something grab my arm mid thought, jerking me into the bathroom as my heart leaped into my throat. I had zero time to think, or even react. All I really knew was that I was pushed up against a wall and a set of lips were attacking mine.

“Do you normally lurk around bathrooms?” I mumbled, my voice muffled by his mouth.

“Only when I’m desperate to get a girl alone.” Stephen murmured.

“That’s not the least bit creepy.” I giggled and I felt him smile into my lips.

We continued like that for a few minutes and I was so lost in the kiss that I hadn’t realized I ended up on top of the counter, my legs draped around Stephen as his hands hung around my hips.

“Have I told you lately how cute you are?” He kissed my forehead and then my temple before moving down to my cheek, ultimately landing on my lips. I giggled, my fingers laced around his belt loops as I wrapped my legs tighter around his waist. I wouldn’t say we were hiding; we were just trying to find some privacy in a very crowded suite and it just happened to be that the bathroom was the only unoccupied place. “Because, Jersey Levitz, you are quite adorable.”

I smiled again, my cheeks blushing red as I crinkled my nose. “You may have mentioned it once or twice.”

“Just making sure.” He replied, his hand cupped over my cheek as he kissed me again.

I wasn’t sure if I liked having to hide this from everyone, but that didn’t make it any less enjoyable. Because, let’s face it, I was probably enjoying this a little too much.

“Jersey, do you have a tampon—”

I mean, it happened so fast. And I guess it was our own fault for not locking the door, but Fallon could have at least knocked before she barged in.

“I...Um...” I stammered. Stephen had already jumped about two feet back, awkwardly scratching his neck as Fallon glanced back and forth between us. “Sarah...Uh...Has some in her bag.”

There was a gruelingly long silence. I wasn’t entirely sure what I was supposed to say and Stephen looked like he wanted to claw his eyes out. This wasn’t how this moment was supposed to end.

“Jersey, can I talk to you?” She couldn’t even look me in the eyes, her attention focused on the floor as I scrambled off of the sink. Stephen ducked his head down, smiling weakly over at Fallon before crossing out of the bathroom and out of the room I was sharing with the girls. Fallon just stood there quietly and all I could do was clear my throat as I walked out of the bathroom, figuring that really wasn’t the place to have this conversation.

“Look, Fal,” I finally said as she followed me into our room, her arms crossed tightly. “I know I should—”

“How long has this been going on for?” She asked coolly as she basically stared right through me.

I couldn’t lie to her. I couldn’t tell her nothing was going on because it wasn’t true. I mean, it was Fallon. I was actually surprised she hadn’t figured it out sooner. “He kissed me the night I got here.” I swallowed hard, avoiding her stare. “Nothing’s official, but—uh—I guess to answer your question, last night.”

She nodded, taking in a sharp breath. "Why didn't you tell me he kissed you?"

"Because I knew you'd overreact." I answered honestly because I knew in about ten seconds, she'd be freaking out. "You'd try to convince me to forget about it."

"You bet your ass I would have." She snapped. "Did you or did you not tell me last night that you slept with Garrett in Parma?"

I knew she wasn't intentionally being loud. That's just how her voice worked, but that didn't make this suite any less small. And I knew nine sets of ears were eagerly listening to this conversation through paper-thin walls. Did I want the entire group to know I slept with Garrett? No. And I especially didn't want Stephen to know. "What does that have to do with anything?" I yelled back.

"It has to do with everything, Jersey." Fallon hissed. "I think it's pretty obvious you still have feelings for him."

I shook my head as I crossed my arms. Whatever feelings I had for Garrett went out the window the minute he decided it was okay to be over an hour late to have our *talk*. "For once you're wrong, Fallon."

She rolled her eyes. "You're such a liar."

"You have no idea what you're talking about."

"And you have no idea what you're doing." She seethed. "I mean, really. Have you lost your mind?"

I knew things were going to be bad when I told her. I just hadn't realized it would be this bad. "No, Fallon, I haven't lost my mind. If anything, I can finally see things clearly."

She scoffed, shaking her head. "You can finally see things clearly? Jersey, you were fucking making-out with Stephen. *Stephen Gomez*, Jersey. I mean, are you really that desperate to forget about Garrett?"

I really wanted to blame Fallon's mood on PMS, but I've seen her when she was crabby and this was so far past that. "I'm not with Stephen to forget about Garrett. I'm with Stephen because I want to be." I screamed back at her. "If you haven't realized, I'm nineteen years old. I'm allowed to make my own decisions, *Mom*."

"Apparently not good ones." She mumbled. "God, Jersey, you should have told me—"

"What? I have to tell you everything?" I could feel my face turning red. "Just like you tell me everything, Fallon?"

"What's the supposed to mean?"

I shook my head. "You know exactly what I mean," I snapped. "I'm supposed to tell you I'm with Stephen, but you can't even tell me what's going on with you and Kennedy."

"Don't bring Kennedy into this, Jersey."

"Why?" I yelled. "Why is it okay for you to hide that from me? But the second I don't tell you Stephen kissed me, I'm a bad person?"

"BECAUSE I'M NOT IN LOVE WITH MY EX-BOYFRIEND." She hissed and I instantly felt my eyes grow. "I'm not using Kennedy to forget that. And that's exactly what you're doing with Stephen and you know it."

I was completely numb to what she said, my entire body shaking with rage. “Fuck you.” I snapped before throwing the door open.

I wasn’t really good at dramatically storming out of a room. I was far too clumsy to pull it off without bumping into a table, or tripping over a pair of shoes on the floor. I tried to do it with as much grace as possible, but it was hard when there were nine people staring at you, pretending they didn’t just hear arguably the worst fight you’ve ever had. I didn’t give anyone a second glance—not Garrett and definitely not Stephen—I just walked straight out the door and out of the hotel.

I really wasn’t sure where I was going. I just knew I needed to get far away from Fallon and her stupidly untrue accusations. I mean, really, who did she think she was? She lived with me for a year and suddenly thinks she knows every which way my mind functions? No. Just because she’s some sort of freaky know-it-all doesn’t mean she knows everything about me. I was capable of hiding feelings from her and I did it for this exact reason. She knew exactly how to take something out of context.

I was fuming and I really just needed to cool down, but that was hard when it was verging on a hundred degrees. I found an empty bench outside a string of shops and sat down. I took a few deep breaths, just trying to calm myself down, but it wasn’t working. I’d never been this mad before, not even with Garrett.

My thoughts were quickly interrupted when I saw him sit down and suddenly I wasn’t so angry anymore. I was more embarrassed than anything. He definitely heard everything Fallon said. How was I even supposed to start that conversation?

“I should have told you what happened in Parma.” My attention was focused on my hands, as if my chipped purple nail polish was really that interesting. I was afraid to look at him—afraid that the argument I had with Fallon would change things. I understood if it did. I mean, she basically accused me of only being with him because I was too stubborn to admit I wanted to be with Garrett. I know if the roles were reversed, I wouldn’t want to be with him. No one wants to be second best.

“It’s none of my business.” He said quietly, looking over at me. The sun was still high in the cloudless sky, reflecting off of his sunglasses, sending an unpleasantly bright glare down at me. “And I know it should bother me, but it doesn’t. Because if he wasn’t such a complete moron, I wouldn’t be able to kiss you whenever I want.”

I tried to hide my smile, but it was hard when all he did was say sweet things that instantly made me beam from ear to ear. It was such a different feeling—being able to smile just because. And what made it even better was that there was a guy who truly just wanted me to be happy. I still wasn’t even sure if I deserved someone like him.

“I guess the only thing I’m really upset about is that I’m the reason you and Fallon are fighting.”

As much as I wanted to forget about that, I knew I couldn’t. For one, we still had another country to get through and also, we signed a three year lease on an apartment in Phoenix in June. I’m pretty sure I couldn’t avoid her until I graduation, but I could at least try for the next week.

“It’s not your fault.” I told him. “Fallon and I...We’ve never really had a big fight. I guess we were overdue for one.”

I had to keep telling myself that this would eventually blow over, or else I’d be miserable for the rest of the trip.

“C’mon,” he said as he stood up, holding his out to me and I quickly latched on. “We’re in the middle of Rome and I know for a fact you haven’t done one touristy thing.”

I tried to stop myself from smiling, but I failed miserably.

“So, tell me,” Stephen smiled back. “Where do you want to go?”

I didn’t even need to think about it. It was the one place I wanted to see almost as much as the Trevi Fountain. “The Colosseum.”

He pulled on my hand and we started walking. We only got a few feet before he stopped, turning to me with a grin on his face.

“Why’d you stop?” I squinted up at him.

He just smiled before he dropped my hand, tucking a loose strand of my hair behind my ear. He gently cupped my cheek, lowering his lips down to mine. It was soft and sweet and everything a midafternoon kiss in the middle of Rome should be. “I just had to do that.” He told me, my cheeks burning from smiling so wide. “I just want to enjoy the next week with you. I want to go to Greece and go swimming in the ocean and see all the sites.” He said. “But most of all, I just want to be with you.”

I didn’t know how to respond. At least not in proper sentences, so I just smiled and rolled onto the tips of my toes and I kissed him once more.

“Could this plane be any smaller?” Sarah drummed her hands over her legs. She wasn’t much of a flyer. She normally had to self medicated to get through a flight. Thinking back, when we were younger, my aunt used to crush Benadryl into her juice before plane rides to Disney World.

But instead of actually responding to her, I just laughed.

“What’s so funny?” She asked, glancing over at me.

“Nothing.” I shrugged. “Just the way you said *could this plane be any smaller*, I just pictured Chandler saying it.”

Sarah just shook her head and leaned back in her seat, closing her eyes. It wasn’t a very long flight, so I wasn’t sure why she was so fidgety, but as I pulled my eyes away from my magazine, I realized who was sitting in the two seats in front of us. She and John hadn’t had their talk yet and I knew it was slowly killing her, so I understood why a two-hour flight was going to basically torture her.

She stayed relatively still through the safety demonstration and her eyes snapped shut the minute the plane started moving and they stayed that way until the pilot turned off the fasten seatbelt sign. After begging me to close the window shade, she seemed a little bit calmer.

“Sarah?” I took a deep breath, lowering my voice. “Why don’t you just talk to him? I mean, I think this is a good opportunity. It’s not like one of you can run away, unless you feel like skydiving over the Mediterranean.”

She glared over at me. “Okay, while I’m at it, why don’t you have a conversation with Garrett, or maybe Fallon because that hasn’t made the past two days awkward as fuck.”

I didn’t say anything, my eyes casually falling over the person in the seat next to John. Talking to Garrett was worthless because, really, there wasn’t anything to talk about. And I didn’t even want to think about talking to Fallon because that just made me mad. “Stop trying to change the subject.” I told her. “You guys need to talk.

One of you just has to suck it up.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’ve never had a problem sucking it up.” I could see her smiling.

“Sarah!” I said louder than she would have liked. “Really!?”

She laughed, grabbing the magazine from my lap.

“No,” I said, snatching it back. “I’m putting my foot down. Talk to him.”

She hesitated, not even flinching. I knew it was hard. Believe me, I knew. But someone needed to push her, or else they’d never talk.

“You’ve got an hour and a half, Sarah.” I whispered. “Ninety minutes can change a lot.”

I watched as she took a deep breath, slowly unbuckling her seatbelt. She leaned forward slightly and shook the back of John’s chair. He craned his neck around, his eyebrows spiked in alarm. “Can we talk?” Sarah asked meekly.

“We are talking, Sarah.” He replied.

“No.” She cleared her throat. “Can we—um—Can we *talk*?”

His eyes grew. “*Now?*”

She nodded.

“Don’t you think we should do this face to face? Not—er—Face to chair?”

She thought for a moment, her lips caught between her teeth before she stood up, smacking Garrett on the back of the head. “Switch seats with me.”

I almost choked on my breath, watching as Garrett turned around with an annoyed expression on his face. “Fat chance, Sarah.”

“Garrett, I will throw you out the emergency exit if you don’t get up.” Sarah hissed.

“You realize I’d rather take my chances with that, don’t you?”

She rolled her eyes again. “Don’t test me, Nickelsen. I made you cry in ninth grade, I can do it again.”

Don’t get me wrong, I really wanted John and Sarah to workout. I, however, didn’t want to have to suffer ninety minutes next to Garrett for it to happen. I didn’t see much of a choice, though. Sarah had already pushed him into the seat next to me.

We’d managed to avoid each other the last few days in Rome. He spent most of his time with Kennedy and Fallon, and Stephen and I were pretty much attached to the hip. There really wasn’t time for us to cross paths and I was more than grateful.

I tried not to pay him much attention. If anything, I was too focused on being nosey to even remember he was sitting next to me.

*"I don't want us to be just sex."* John said quietly. *"I've never wanted that, Sarah.."*

I tried to hide my smile. It was a side of John I've never seen—or I guess, heard. And I knew this was the side Sarah was so desperate to see. She needed him to show her that he cared because that was what it was going to take for her to open up to him.

*"What do you want, John?."*

He paused and I could hear him take a deep breath. *"I don't know. I just know that I want you—I've always wanted you."*

It was sweet—sweeter than I ever imagined it to be. And I know this was supposed to be private—shared by only them—but I couldn't help wanting to hear more.

"It's not going to last." Garrett mumbled from next to me. I could hear the eye roll in his voice.

My jaw dropped and I glared over at him. "Why would you say that?"

He shrugged. "Because it never works, so why even try?"

Now I understood his sentiments, and maybe that's why he never showed up. It never works out, after all, so why bother trying? Everything made perfect sense now. "Thanks for clearing that up for me, Garrett. It really explains a lot."

He shrugged again. "I'm only being honest."

"You were always so good at that."

"And you were always so bad at it."

I had to clench the armrests, fearing that I just might strangle him. "I'm so happy that you're back to being a miserable dickhead. I've really missed it."

He smiled. "Well, my main purpose in life is to please you."

"Then *please* jump off the plane right now."

"You're such a pleasure, Jersey. *Really*. Now I see what Stephen sees in you." He smiled, which left me confused. "You meet all of his qualifications—a blond-haired, blue-eyed ball of charm."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I snapped furiously.

"Nothing." He mumbled before twisting his head to his left. "Kennedy, switch seats with me."

He couldn't just say something like that and then not explain. I mean, he was Garrett, so of course he would, but that didn't mean I had to like it.

"I'm not giving up my window seat, bro." Kennedy glanced over at us briefly before letting his eyes fall back to the small window.

*"What's that supposed to mean, Garrett?"* I repeated, but he continued to ignore me.



“Fallon?” He asked nervously and my face instantly paled.

She put her magazine down, glaring over at me before narrowing her eyes at him. “What drugs are you on that make you think I would even consider sitting next to her?”

Her? *Her*? I had a name. I was not *her*. What drugs was she on that made her think she could get away with referring to me as *her*?

“C’mon, Fal,” Garrett begged.

“Garrett,” she said slowly. “I would honestly rather eat my own eyeballs than share an armrest with Jersey.”

My mouth fell. “I can hear you, y’know?” I hissed.

Fallon rolled her eyes. “You’re three feet away from me. I would hope you could hear me.”

I was ready to leap over Garrett. I was ready to strangle her, but of course someone got in my way.

“Is everything okay down here?” At first I thought it was a flight attendant, but then I remembered our flight attendants didn’t speak English. Also, they were all female and didn’t sound like Stephen.

“Awesome.” Garrett said, standing up. “You deal with her.”

“I have a name!” Was all I could say as he hobbled down the aisle to take Stephen’s seat next to Josh.

Stephen sat down quietly, buckling his seatbelt before looking over at me. “Is everything okay?”

I frowned, my head falling to his shoulder. “It is now.”

~\*~

“Are you trying to kill us, Jers?” Sarah panted, twelve steps behind me.

I merely shrugged. “I only have one day in Athens. That’s, like, two thousand years of history compressed into five hours.” I looked back at her. “But to answer your question: no, I’m not trying to kill you. I’m just trying to expand your knowledge of the ancient world.”

“Can’t I expand my knowledge in an air-conditioned gift shop?”

No one wanted to be here right now and I’m sure they wouldn’t be if the hotel let us check in. I just couldn’t understand why they wanted to come to Europe if all they were going to do was drink beer that would cost them double what it would in America after the exchange rate. And yeah, it was a little hot to be trekking it up to the Parthenon, but we were from Arizona. Today equated to a cool, comfortable day back home.

“C’mon, guys.” Stephen said as he walked up behind me, slinging his arm over my shoulders. “Pity her, will you? Tomorrow we’ll be in Santorini and you can drink yourselves silly. Besides, we have a seven a.m. ferry to catch in the morning and the chances of us making it if we’re all hung-over are slim.”

It was nice having Stephen there to stick up for me, mostly because it made me smile, but also because he seemed to convince everyone that visiting the Acropolis was a better idea than visiting a bar.

“Thank you.” I smiled up at him as he unwrapped his arm from my shoulders, dropping it before he intertwined

our fingers.

“For what?”

“Just being you.”

We were barely there fifteen minutes. I got all of three pictures before a bee stung Sarah.

“MOTHER FUCKER!”

I swore the whole place went silent, dozens of tourist groups staring at Sarah with wide eyes as she clutched her calf. I mean, I knew Sarah wasn't very tactful and she had a very normal reaction to getting stung, but we were in the middle of ancient history and she was swearing like a sailor.

“They're going to kick us out of the country.” I mumbled, trying my best to ignore the lady glaring at us as we walked back down to civilization.

“It wasn't that bad.” Stephen reassured me, our arms swinging together as we climbed down the stairs. “It's probably the most action this place has seen in two thousand years.”

For some reason, that didn't make it any better.

“You're not allergic to bees, right?” I heard Fallon ask Sarah.

“I think I'd be dead by now if I was, Fallon.” Sarah grunted through gritted teeth. “It just hurts like a bitch.”

That was reason enough for everyone to find a bar. Sarah would drink until she didn't know what a bee was and everyone else would get so wasted that we'd probably miss the ferry in the morning.

“We don't have to go.” Stephen said as we lagged behind the group.

Stephen liked to go out, which was something I'd have to get used to. He enjoyed drinking and going to clubs. I couldn't ask him to change and I wouldn't because that wasn't my place.

“No,” I told him. “You go. The room should be ready by now. I'll just go back to the hotel and grab something to eat.”

“I'll come with you.”

I shook my head. “That's really sweet of you, but I know you like going out. I'll be fine. I promise.”

He was hesitant, staring at me skeptically. It wasn't until Pat decided to come back with me that Stephen seemed okay with it.

Pat and I got about twenty feet before someone shouted for us to wait up. Now, I knew who it was without even needing to turn around. What I didn't know was why he was coming with us. I mean, he could barely handle sitting next to me on a plane. Why would he go out of his way to go to the same place as me?

“I thought you were going to the bar, Gar.” Pat said once Garrett caught up to us.

“Nah.” He shrugged. “I'm kind of tired.”

“Oh, alright.” Pat replied. “Jers and I were just going to grab something to eat before going back to the hotel.”

I tried to not pay him any attention, but it was hard when he was walking so close behind me, dramatically sighing any chance he got. “Is that really necessary?” I asked after five minutes of walking.

“I’m sorry, am I bothering you?”

I wasn’t sure why his response annoyed me so much, but it did. “You know what, Garrett?” I stopped short and he nearly crashed into me.

“What, Jersey?”

“You don’t get to be an asshole anymore.” I said, trying to remain calm. “You had your chance and you blew it.”

I didn’t wait for him to respond, the dumbfounded expression on his face was answer enough. It was also enough for me to lose my appetite.

~\*~

Sarah reeked of vodka and cranberry, and I had the misfortune of sleeping next to her. She, along with everyone else, stormed in a little less than an hour ago, slurring and stumbling like the unattractive drunks they were. I pretended to be asleep, not really wanting to talk to anyone because I figured that if I pretended long enough, I’d actually fall into some sort of sleep, but that was hard when Sarah was next to me, tossing and turning like mad.

Not wanting to smell the alcohol oozing from her pores anymore, I sat up and got out of bed.

“Jers, where are you going?” Sarah mumbled half-asleep, one eye open as she tried to lift her head off of the pillow.

“I have to pee.” I lied, hoping that was enough of an answer for her.

It wasn’t. It never was.

“Then why are you putting your shoes on?”

I groaned, turning back to look at her. “I’ll be right back, I promise.”

“I swear to God,” she muttered, her head hitting the pillow like a ton of bricks. “If someone kidnaps you and trades you for a goat, I’m not going to feel bad.”

I rolled my eyes and watched as she drifted back to sleep. I didn’t need to worry about being traded for livestock. For one, we were in Athens, not some village in the middle of nowhere. And also, I didn’t plan on leaving the hotel.

I slid my other shoe on without her waking up again, and I walked out of our room. It was unusual for everyone to be sleeping at one in the morning, but it seemed that a serious case of jetlag and overall drunkenness had washed over the living room. I tried to be as quiet as possible—leaping over John’s unconscious body and nearly tripping over Kennedy—before I successfully managed to make it to the door.

It wasn’t that hard finding the staircase. The big red EXIT sign helped me just a little and before I knew it, I’d climbed five sets of stairs and I was on the roof.

It was warm, but not unbearably warm like it was earlier in the day. It was sort of relaxing. There wasn't much quiet time with a group of eleven, so I planned on taking advantage of this moment.

I wasn't sure why I was up here. I mean, I overheard a couple talking about the view and it left me curious, but I wasn't sure if I was curious enough to come up here at one in the morning. Mostly, I just wanted to think—to just clear my head.

This trip was practically over—a few days in Santorini and then we were going home. It was hard wrapping my head around these past few weeks. I left Arizona thinking this would be some life changing experience, and I guess it was in some ways, but mostly it's just been one long winding road of boy problems. I didn't regret any of it. I mean, it was hard to regret someone as wonderful as Daniel and even with Garrett, I couldn't regret that night we spent together because I'd been wanting it for so long. But I had Stephen now and I needed to focus on that and the only way that would happen is if we were home.

"You aren't going to jump, are you?"

He was trying to lighten the mood, but it was hard with tension this thick. I wasn't sure why he was bringing L.A. up, or maybe he wasn't. Maybe it was just me who automatically went there with those words. That moment was virtually burned into the back of my mind. I couldn't forget it if I tried.

"It's funny." He cleared his throat, his hands tucked into the pockets of his jeans. I wasn't sure why he hadn't changed out of them, but that wasn't really something I cared to dwell on. "I was laying on the couch and thinking that if this all ended tomorrow, would I be happy with what we did."

So it wasn't just me who went back to L.A. He'd gone there, too, probably long before I did. Still, I wasn't sure why he chose to bring it up now, or why he was even on the roof with me in the first place.

"And I'm not." He took a deep breath. "I just—"

"What are you doing here, Garrett?" I asked coldly, crossing my arms.

"I owe you an explanation." He said slowly, walking closer to me.

I shook my head, diverting my gaze from him. "I don't want an explanation, Garrett."

"Just hear me out—"

"You were an hour late." I snapped, my face going red as I glared at him.

"I know—"

He knew. Was that supposed to make all of this okay? Was an apology really supposed to suffice after completely blowing me off? "How long did you expect me to wait, Garrett?"

He stayed quiet, his face completely still. "I didn't..." He stammered. "I didn't expect you to jump into Stephen's arms the first chance you got."

He had a lot of nerve turning this on me, like I wasn't the fool who pathetically sat and waited an hour for him. "I can't spend my whole life waiting for you, Garrett." I finally said. "I've given you so much time to think—to make something of what happened seven months ago and to make something of what happened five days ago—I just can't wait anymore." I tried to stay calm, not wanting this to be anymore dramatic than it needed to be. "I

want to move on and I want to be happy. I've spent so much time wishing that we'd get some sort of happily ever after and now I've realized I'm not going to get that with you."

I thought I should feel something after saying that—liberation, freedom, over all peace of mind—but I couldn't feel anything. I was completely numb, as if everything I had just said were merely words with no meaning—words that sounded right at the time, but really held no significance.

I managed to muster up enough courage to turn around, but I got all of a foot away before I felt him grab my arm, like he did so many times before. He pulled me back toward him, my heart lodged somewhere in my throat as he stared at me for what felt like hours. When he started to lean in, I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do. I just stood there, a mess of nerves as his lips just brushed over mine. They didn't linger, or even stop for a second. He just kept moving them until they hovered over my ear. "You are the worst thing that has ever happened to me, Jersey Levitz."

I couldn't think. I couldn't speak. I just stood there, my face completely frozen as I watched him walk away. I wasn't sure why I felt so broken. After everything that has been said and done, he wasn't supposed to have that sort of hold over me. His words shouldn't have this effect on me, but they did. No one wanted to be the worst thing that has ever happened to someone

How I got back to the room, I really couldn't tell you. I was lost in my head, Garrett's words playing on a constant loop.

I can't say that I made a conscious decision to go into his room. I was more just drawn to it like a magnet of sorts. I carefully crept over stray shoes and backpacks, trying my best not to step on whoever was sleeping on the floor. When I finally made it to the bed, I took a deep breath before pulling down the covers.

"Jers?" He asked quietly, his voice dripping with lost sleep. "Is everything okay?"

I fell to the empty space next to him, sending him a weak smile that he couldn't see in the dark. "I just missed you."

As I slid further down, I felt him turn around and bring his arm over my waist. I closed my eyes and tried to steady my breathing, silently reassuring myself that this was what I wanted.

I was seasick, sunburnt, and I got all of ten minutes of sleep in the last twenty-four hours. I wasn't happy. I think that was more than clear and I was sure that was the reason my friends were staying as far away from me as possible. They thought I was acting this way because we missed the first ferry, but that was literally the last thing on my mind. For the past eight hours the only thing I could think about was Garrett and what he said to me on the roof.

I shouldn't be upset. I shouldn't even be mad, but I was. If I was the worst thing that had ever happened to him, then why did he want to talk? Why did he follow me onto the roof? I mean, I knew he was a pro at the whole mixed signals thing, but this was so far past that.

I had to channel Fallon because she always knew what to do in these types of situations. She'd want me to talk to him. She *always* wanted me to talk to him and confront the situation. She'd want me to be open and honest like she begged me to do so many months ago. And maybe that's what I needed to do. After all, this trip was all about changing, so maybe I needed to confront my problems.

Luckily, Garrett wasn't downstairs in the air-conditioned cabin with everyone else. He was standing about

twelve feet away, his arms dangling over the side of the boat as he watched the ripples sway in the ocean. Part of me knew that this was the only chance I'd get. He didn't have very many options to get away from me that didn't include jumping into the water, so I sucked up whatever courage I had and walked myself over to him.

"You owe me an explanation." I said, my voice shaking slightly. He didn't bother looking at me, or even flinching. He just stayed in his same position with the sun reflecting off of his sunglasses and his hair rustling in the wind.

"You didn't want an explanation, remember?"

I sighed heavily, trying my best not to get frustrated. "That's not what I'm talking about. I honestly could care less why you were late. It really doesn't matter anymore." I told him. "I want to know why you said what you said."

His pulled his eyes from the water and moved them to me. His skin was pink—his nose and cheeks more than anything—that was really the only thing I noticed that was different about him. "And what did I say to you, Jersey?"

He was going to make this difficult. "You know what you said, Garrett."

"Care to refresh my memory?"

I balled my fists at my side. It was far too hot to get this heated. "You said I was the worst thing that ever happened to you."

He didn't look fazed. "And?"

And? *And?* "And I'd like to know why you'd say something like that."

He furrowed his brow. "My mother told me never to lie?"

I took a deep breath, holding it in as I forced a smile. "Would you stop being an asshole for just one second? Seriously, Garrett, why would you say that?"

He pushed himself off of the railing, standing up straight as he looked down at me. "My life was fine and then you walked into it and fucked everything up." He said slowly. "That's why I said it, Jersey."

He was gone, my head left spinning for the second time in the last eight hours. This was why I didn't try. Fallon—and my inner Fallon—didn't understand that talking to Garrett got me nowhere.

By the time we docked in Santorini, I'd cooled down a little bit. That doesn't go to say I wasn't still pissed off—I was—I just didn't look like I was ready to throttle anyone. I decided a few moments after Garrett walked away that I was going to enjoy the last two nights I had in Europe, despite wanting nothing more than to just go home.

"There is a beach calling my name." Sarah nearly knocked me over as she rushed off of the ferry, her flip-flops slapping against the hot cement. It was verging on a hundred and ten degrees, a rather unfortunate reminder of home.

I didn't even acknowledge that she said anything, simply shrugging my backpack over my shoulders as I caught Stephen out of the corner of my eye. I smiled at him and he slipped his hand around mine.

“Where did you disappear to?” He asked quietly, sleep still clinging to his voice.

I shrugged. “I was just out on the deck. The water, it’s really pretty to look at.”

He smiled, kissing the top of my head. “Kind of like you.”

I could feel myself blush under the throbbing sun, which just made me that much more uncomfortable. Everyone knew I wasn’t one for heat, or hot weather in general. I’d be more than happy to hide in the hotel room until the sun went down, but I knew that wouldn’t happen, especially with the group of people I was with. Sarah (and everyone else) had been itching to get back to the beach since we left France.

Sarah allotted us ten minutes at the hotel. She had somehow taken over Fallon’s obsessive-compulsive role these past few days. I didn’t have time to dwell on it, simply tossing my backpack on the bed I was sharing with Jess before changing into my bathing suit as quickly as possible.

“Let’s go, Jers.” Sarah banged on the bathroom door. “Time is a wasting.”

I rolled my eyes as I pulled my shirt over my head. I barely had the door open before she grabbed my hand and pulled me out of the room completely. I didn’t even get the option to protest. If we were being honest, I didn’t even want to go to the beach, but I apparently didn’t have a choice.

“Put a smile on your face, Jersey Rose.” Sarah nudged me as we reunited with the rest of the group. “We’re going to the beach!”

I gave her the smile she wanted as I slid my sunglasses over my face, sighing as the sun stung my skin. I didn’t pay attention to any sort of conversation, simply letting my eyes drink in all of the colorful architecture. There was something refreshing about Santorini. There wasn’t the hustle and bustle of a big city like Athens. Things were calmer here and I could definitely use some relaxation.

“Sand!” Sarah exclaimed, ripping off her sandals. “Miles and miles of sand! And ocean! Mile and miles of ocean!”

Sarah was already in the water before the rest of us could lay towels down, splashing away like she’d never seen a beach before. I decided against following everyone down to the ocean, perfectly fine with falling asleep on the sand.

“You sure you don’t want to swim?” Stephen asked as he kicked his shoes off.

I shook my head. “I’m definitely fine right here.” I told him. “Go have fun.”

He took off, his feet lost in the sand. By the time he made it to the water, he’d jumped onto Josh’s back, sending both of them deep under the Mediterranean.

I didn’t mind staying back and just watching. There was just something about watching my friends have fun that warmed my heart. That’s what this trip was supposed to be about, anyway. We were supposed to have adventures and just have crazy fun. I can’t say that it’s been all fun for me. There were a few moments, but if I was being honest, I’d say Europe was just one giant mistake. I should have just taken my chances with the journalism class.

Mostly, I just think I was tired of adventures. I spent seven years of my life living in my parent’s journey back to their lost youth. And I think that filled my adventure quota. It took me seven countries to realize that I was happy just being in Arizona living a normal, boring life. I loved school and I liked my job. Maybe that’s what I

was really destined for. I just wanted an everyday sort of a life—a life where there were no surprises.

“Whatcha thinking about?” Stephen fell to the towel next to me, the smell of salt clung to his skin.

“Just life.” I replied.

He smiled. “You look ready to go home.”

I scrunched my eyebrows. “We don’t have to go back to the hotel yet.”

He laughed. “I meant home, Jers. As in Arizona.”

“Oh.” I giggled. “Yeah. I’m definitely ready to go home.”

“Soon enough.”

After Stephen went back to the water, I found myself drifting to sleep. I hadn’t realized what a bad idea that was until I woke up and I was the most unpleasant shade of red.

“It’s nice to see you not so pale, Dirty Jerz.” John smiled as he hovered over me. “The color looks good on you.”

I couldn’t even glare at him because it hurt too much.

“I think there’s a club down the street from the hotel.” I heard Josh say as I attempted to get up from the sand.

I could tell it was late by the color of the sky. It was a light shade of purple and the sun had disappeared behind the horizon. It hadn’t cooled down, though. It was still hot as hell.

“C’mom.” Stephen said as he grabbed both of our towels. “Let’s get dinner and we’ll watch a movie, or something.”

“You don’t have to—“

“I want to, Jersey.”

We ended up stopping at this small restaurant next to the hotel. If I wasn’t so hungry, I would have told Stephen to forget about it, but I was verging on starving, so I really didn’t care what I was eating. And to be honest, I had no idea what I was eating. I choked it down until my stomach was satisfied.

“You can go to the club with them, y’know?” I said to him as we stopped in front of his hotel room.

“Jers,” he smiled, motioning for me to go in. “Do you realize I’d much rather spend the evening watching TV with you instead of watching Josh get rejected by a group of Greek girls?”

I can’t explain why I did it. I wasn’t even sure if I thought about what I was doing. Maybe it was just because he was Stephen and he said such sweet things and I guess it just felt like the right thing to do. But regardless of the reasoning, I kissed Stephen rougher and more passionate than I had in the week we’d been together. My fingers were lost in his hair as we spun around. His knees hit the back of the bed, sending us both onto the rickety mattress.

I pulled myself on top of him, my legs straddling his waist as he brought his hands under my shirt. His fingers left tiny bumps on every inch of skin they touched. I tried to stay focused on the kiss, not realizing that both of our shirts were piled on the floor. I was just so lost in everything.



It wasn't until he detached his lips from mine that I got a reality check. He trailed his mouth over my jaw before landing on my neck, sucking at the spot that normally made me feel lightheaded. I felt nothing, though and that's when I realized this was just a really big mistake.

"I can't do this." I panted, quickly retracting my hands that were roaming around his bare chest as I rolled off of him.

"Jers, it's okay" He sat up hurriedly as I searched the floor for my shirt. "We don't have to do this today."

"No," I shook my head, pulling my tank top on. "Stephen, I can't do this...ever. I'm... I'm just... You're not..."

"I'm not Garrett." He said with disappointment reigning over his voice.

"I'm...I'm sorry."

I barely had my shoes on when I stormed out of the room, my eyes clouded with tears as I stumbled around the hallway. I was just grateful no one was there. The last thing I needed were some tourist gawking at the blubbering American girl. They're probably snap a picture for their scrapbooks.

I can't say this is how I planned on this night ending. Actually, I hadn't planned this night at all, but I knew it shouldn't have ended with me in tears. Stephen was a great guy—he was sweet and he made me smile. He was everything a girl should want in a guy. I was crazy to get out of that bed, but what kind of girl would I be then? I'd be that girl who was leading a guy she'd never really want on.

Fallon was right. I mean, she was always right. I was using Stephen to forget about Garrett. Because, really, I thought that eventually my feelings for Stephen would grow past friendship and I thought that maybe I could fall in love with him. But now I knew that wouldn't happen—couldn't happen—because the feelings I had for Garrett never really went away.

"Jersey?"

I'd never understand my chronic bad luck. I'm sure this was karma and months of lying coming back to bite me in the ass because what other reason would explain why Garrett was standing in front of the hotel at eleven o'clock at night and not at whatever bar he was supposed to be at.

"Jersey?" He repeated, sounding almost concerned that I was an emotional mess of running mascara and snot. "Why are you crying?"

I wasn't sure if this was him being sincere, so I went with my gut and my gut told me that this was just Garrett being a dick. "I'm fine." I told him, wrapping my arms around myself as I tried to pass him. He grabbed my shoulder, though, his fingers sliding down the length of my arm and he pulled me back to him.

"I know when you're lying." He said lowly as he let go of me.

I took a deep breath, a laugh falling through my lips as I shook my head. "Please, Garrett, don't pretend that you care."

"Yeah," he returned the laugh. "Let's pretend I never cared at all."

I really wasn't sure where he was going with this. If his goal was to confuse me even more than I already was, well, he could consider that achieved. "That's the thing, Garrett." I finally said. "You didn't care. You already

made that pretty clear.”

He ran his fingers through his hair, scratching the top of his head as his eyes fell to the ground. They lingered there for a seconds before he brought them back to mine, a forced smile plastered across his face. “And it’s really sad that you believed me.”

“What am I supposed to believe, Garrett?” I spat. “You like me. You hate me. You like me. Oh, there’s Jersey the manipulative bitch. I’m getting whiplash from your mood swings.”

“Let’s blame this all on me, like always.”

I was ready to pull my hair out, frustration setting in as waves crashed against the wall next to us, splashing water over the railing. I tried not to let myself get distracted by it, but it was hard when I was contemplating throwing myself over the ledge. I’d do just about anything to get away from him. “This is your fault, Garrett.” I told him because it was the truth. “You had me in Parma. You had me in Rome waiting for an *hour*. You had your chance.”

He nodded and I could see him take a deep breath. “And now you’re with Stephen.”

“Do you always have to—”

“Your shirt’s on inside out. Backwards, too.” He said slowly and I couldn’t stop myself from glancing down, a tag dangling in my face as I felt my heart sink. “I take it you slept with him? How long did that take?” He asked snidely. “A week? You move quicker these days.”

All I could do was close my eyes, the ocean spraying around me. On any other day, this would have been calming, perfectly peaceful, but not today. “I didn’t sleep with him.” I wasn’t sure why I told him that. It wasn’t like I needed to justify myself to him.

“Oh,” he laughed. “You found some morals, then?”

It was hard trying not to cry. I mean, I had so many emotions running through me that I was surprised it took this long for me to really breakdown. Sure, I was a mess before, but this—his insinuations—they just took me to a whole different level. I could barely breath, choking on the tears that were pouring down my sunburnt cheeks. It wasn’t my finest moment, but for once I didn’t care.

Amidst my very obvious meltdown, I realized that I needed to get away from him. It wasn’t that I was embarrassed to look this way in front of him—red from the sun and the rush of blood, sweaty from the heat, and just my general unattractiveness because of the humidity—I was just afraid it would get worse the longer I had to look at him. But I barely had time to turn around before he was invading my personal bubble, a horrified expression on his face.

“What—Why are you crying?” He stammered.

“Why am I crying?” I managed to sputter out. “Because you think I’m a whore.”

“Jersey—”

“Y’know,” I paused, collecting myself as best that I could. It was hard, though. Between the salt from the ocean breeze and the tears filling my eyes and the convulsions in my chest, I was just a mess. “Up until a week ago, I hadn’t slept with anyone in seven months and up until seven months ago, I hadn’t slept with anyone ever.”

Garrett just stood there, his face still and unresponsive.

I never intended on telling him that. I just never thought it would matter to him. And part of me still believed that it wouldn't change anything. I mean, why would it? It was my first time. It wasn't his. It was only supposed to be emotional for me. "And now you're here calling me a whore and I'm starting to regret ever going that far with you."

"You mean I was your..." He said slowly, his mouth falling slightly agape. "That night in your dorm..." And as he went on, his face unthawed and he looked almost like he was angry. "Fuck, Jers, that's a really big decision to make."

I furrowed my brows. "And it was mine to make."

"But I was your boyfriend." He hissed. "I should have been apart of that decision. It should have been special... Not.... Not.... Not because—"

"I wanted to do it, Garrett." I screamed back. "I wanted it to be with you—I wanted *everything* to be with you—because I trusted you and I loved you and you made me feel safe."

His eyes went wide and I could practically hear his heart slamming against his chest. "You... You loved me?"

I shrugged, a stray tear slipping down my cheek, leaving a salty taste on my lips. "Why is that so hard to believe?"

He stayed quiet, just staring straight into my eyes.

"But now... Now I just think it was a mistake." I said softly before turning around.

"Jersey!" He called after me, a sort of desperation in his voice, but I just shook my head and walked back into the hotel.

All I wanted was for this trip to be over.

"I just don't understand why you're leaving."

I was sitting up in bed, my legs twisted into a pretzel as Jess's snoring tried to drown out Sarah's voice. I wasn't sure what time it was, but it had to be early. It felt like I'd just fallen asleep, mostly because I was pretty sure I just did. Sleep wasn't exactly my friend these days and that had everything to do with Garrett.

But right now this wasn't about me, or my Garrett induced insomnia. This was about Fallon, who'd apparently decided to leave Greece a day sooner than expected.

"I just want to see my grandmother before school starts. That's all." She shrugged as she pulled her hair into a messy bun. "School starts in two weeks and I just think I'd rather spend that time with her."

"But, Fallon!" Sarah whined.

"Sarah, I promise there is no underlining reason to why I'm leaving. I genuinely want to see my grandmother."

Sarah scowled as she fell to her bed, arms crossed tightly while her eyes watched Fallon run around the room.

“Do you want me to come with you? I don’t know if I like the idea of you running around Europe by yourself.”

Fallon simply laughed, coating her lips with gloss. “Sarah, I’m going to take a ferry to Athens and then hop on a plane to Stockholm where I will then take a taxi to my Grandmother’s house.” Fallon turned around to face Sarah. “I love that you’re worried, but I promise I’ll be fine. I’ll call tonight and leave a message at the front desk if it’ll make you feel better.”

Sarah cracked a smile. “Of course it’ll make me feel better.”

When Sarah stood up to hug Fallon, I felt a twinge of jealousy. It should be me worrying about Fallon, and I guess I was silently. I didn’t like the idea of her going to her grandmother’s by herself and if we were speaking, I’d be going along with her whether she wanted me to or not. And I knew I could have easily tried to fix things right here—at god knows what hour of the morning—but before I could even open my mouth to wish her a safe trip, Fallon was gone.

I fell against my pillow, bouncing slightly as I looked over at Sarah.

“What do you want to do today?” She asked, lying back on her mattress. “I mean, you already look like a lobster, so I figured we’d load you up on SPF 100 and do something that doesn’t involve the beach.”

I laughed. “You’d seriously not go to the beach on our last day in Greece for me?”

She nodded. “I figured you made a lot of sacrifices this trip and the least I could do is give up a day at the beach.”

“I kind of wouldn’t mind a low key kind of day.” I told her. “Maybe just get lunch and we can walk around.”

She rolled onto her stomach, cupping her arms around her head as she looked over at me. “You think Stephen’ll let you out of his sight for that long?”

By the time everyone got back to the room, I was already pretending to be asleep. I didn’t get the chance to tell Sarah what had happened with Stephen, or even Garrett. “Yeah... I really don’t think that’s going to be a problem.”

She pushed herself onto her elbows, her eyes going wide. “What happened?”

I shrugged, biting at my lower lip as my eyes fell to the blanket. “Can we talk about it later? I just want to go back to sleep for awhile.”

~\*~

Sarah was waiting for an explanation. We were sitting outside on the terrace of the restaurant we were at, listing to the people at the beach below us. We’d been there for at least twenty minutes, still waiting for our drink order. People in this country enjoyed a leisure pace. It wasn’t like I was avoiding her question—okay, I was—I just didn’t know how to begin.

“Anytime you’d like to talk, Jers.” Sarah smiled as she ripped a piece of crust off of the loaf of bread before dipping it in olive oil.

It wasn’t a particularly long story, so I really didn’t know why it was taking me so long to conjure up a suitable explanation. “It’s just... Stephen and I aren’t together anymore. I mean, I don’t even know if you could consider us together in the first place. It was like a week.”

“What happened?” Sarah asked as the waitress brought our drinks out.

I bit my lower lip, twirling my straw around in my drink. “We almost slept together.”

Her eyes went wide. “Almost?”

I nodded. “And then I realized that he didn’t make me feel the same way Garrett did. And I realized that Fallon had been right the whole time and I was only using him to forget about Garrett.”

Sarah sent me a sympathetic smile. “Have you thought about talking to Garrett?”

I couldn’t help laughing. “After last night, I don’t think I want to talk to Garrett for a long time.”

She furrowed her brows. “Wait. Did you guys talk after he left the bar?”

I don’t think I considered what Garrett and I did last night talking. “It was more like we screamed.”

“Care to share?”

And so I did. I told her everything, at least I told her everything I could remember. I tried to block most of last night out, but there were still a few memories that would never fade—mostly the look on his face when I told him he was my first and how upset he was that I didn’t tell him. I knew those images would never go away.

“It’ll get easier, Jer.” Sarah reassured me. “I promise that once we get home, this mess will sort itself out.”

It was nice that Sarah was being so positive about this, but I knew it wasn’t going to be that easy.

“Hello, ladies.”

I looked up when I heard John’s voice, smiling as he kissed Sarah’s cheek.

“Am I interrupting girl talk?” He asked, sliding into the seat next to Sarah.

“Of course not.” I spoke up first, afraid that Sarah’s mouth would start to run with everything I didn’t want her to tell John.

After lunch, John tagged along with us. I wasn’t mad. It wasn’t like I was desperate to get some Sarah-Jersey Bonding Time in. If anything, I was just jealous, which I found completely mindboggling. I was jealous of Sarah and John—two of the most commitment phobic people I knew. I was jealous of the way he held her hand and the way he looked at her like she was the only thing in the world. Was it so wrong to want that? I didn’t think it was. It was just that I couldn’t have that, at least not with the person I wanted.

Maybe I was just too stubborn. I mean, I knew that if I knocked on Garrett’s door right now, he’d want to talk because he definitely wasn’t finished last night. I guess I was just scared. Everything was out in the open now. I officially had no secrets and that just made me vulnerable.

“Jers?”

I snapped out of my thoughts, looking over at Sarah. “Yeah?”

“Do you want ice cream?”

I nodded, not able to find any words. I watched closely as she and John disappeared into the small shop, leaving me by myself amidst a million tiny stores.

Part of me couldn't believe the trip was over. This time tomorrow I'd be on a flight to London and then on a flight to New York. It sort of felt like it just started. I know it's been almost two months and I'd experienced more things than I'd ever planned on, but there was still something that was missing and I couldn't place it.

"I got you vanilla." Sarah handed me a cone. "Because you're a very vanilla person."

I smiled, a stream of melted ice cream swirling down my wrist. "Gee, Sarah, thanks."

She simply smiled, her hand latched onto John's once more as we started to walk again. I made a pledge to myself that I'd forget about everything for the next few hours. I just wanted to enjoy the time I had left in Greece. I didn't want to worry about what would happen when I got home tomorrow. I deserved at least a few hours of peace of mind.

~\*~

Sarah claimed that she wanted to be fashionably late, but I had my suspicions about what she was really doing in John's room for the past hour. It wasn't that I was thrilled about going to this *celebration*, I just didn't like waiting around in a room that didn't have a functioning TV. Sure, I could have went by myself, but that would have been pointless because the only reason I was going was to make sure Sarah didn't end up at another rave when we had a seven a.m. ferry I refused to miss in the morning.

"You ready, Jers?" Sarah popped her head in the doorway, a mischievous grin pulled over her lips.

"I've been ready, Sarah." I stood up from the bed, flicking the light switch off before pushing her out of the room.

"You should really keep the lights on." Sarah said as we shuffled down the hallway. "Don't you watch Criminal Minds? Freaks just wait there for you to return. We could get back to that room tonight and some Greek dude could be sitting at the desk with a machete and we'd never know."

I just let her rant on about her paranoid theories as we climbed down the stairs, not really caring. If there was a guy waiting for me when I got back with a machete, he'd only be putting me out of my misery.

The party was in full swing when we got to the poolside bar. And by "full swing" I mean Josh was already staggering dangerously close to the pool that had tiny candles floating in it. This was what I expected. I mean, no one in this group could hold their liquor. It was going to be a shitshow that I'd unfortunately have to watch unfold.

Sarah and I barely had the chance to order our drinks before I saw Stephen out of the corner of my eye. I wasn't really sure what I was expecting out of him. We were barely together in the first place, so maybe I shouldn't be surprised that he was already talking to another girl—a girl who was practically a Greek goddess. And what surprised me even more was that I didn't even care. I was actually happy for him. I knew that this would only result in a one-night tryst at most, but still, he deserved to be happy.

"This is not going to end well." Sarah handed me my coke as we turned toward the closest table we could find.

"What are you talking about?" I pressed the straw to my lips and shifted my eyes in the direction Sarah had nudged her head in.

I hadn't even noticed Garrett, which was slightly disappointing because I was normally very aware of whatever was going on around me. But there he was, sitting at a bar stool next to Jared with an empty glass and his jaw clenched tight as he glared over at Stephen.

"Does he know you and Stephen aren't—well—does he know there isn't a you and Stephen anymore?" She had her eyebrows raised.

"I... I didn't get... No, he doesn't know."

It seemed that just as the words left my lips, Garrett got out of his seat. It was pretty obvious where he was going, his eyes focused on Stephen and his modern-day Aphrodite. I just wasn't sure what was going to happen, or why Sarah was chomping on her lower lip.

"You don't change, do you?" Garrett's voice traveled through the whole area, his words laced with a sinister laugh.

I watched as the girl Stephen was with casually slipped away, leaving only Garrett and Stephen in the small corner. My heart was slapping against my chest and I felt it quickly grow tight as I tried to swallow.

"Garrett," Stephen pulled his eyes closed, tilting his head to the star-studded sky. "You don't want to do this."

Garrett shook his head, another laugh piercing his lips as he took a step toward Stephen. He swiftly slapped his hands against Stephen's shoulders, sending him back against the wall.

"Seriously—"

"Didn't you do enough damage to Olivia?"

My eyes went wide as I brought them over to Sarah, expecting some sort of explanation. Stephen and Olivia? I could have thought about five hundred other reasons why Garrett would hate Stephen, but it was because of Olivia?

"Garrett, you have no idea what you're doing." Stephen pushed himself off of the wall, their faces inches away.

"Maybe not." Garrett shrugged. "But I sure as hell know what you're doing."

"I'm not—"

"Cheating on her?" Garrett spat. "Because it fucking looks like you are."

I could feel my face pale as Stephen looked over at me. He quickly pulled his attention back to Garrett. "I can't cheat on someone I'm not with, Garrett."

Garrett took a step back, his face falling.

"I can't be with her, *Garrett*." Stephen seethed. "You have her wrapped so tight around your finger that she can't physically be with anyone else. And it's a fucking shame because you don't deserve her."

My heart was in my throat as I watched Stephen brush by Garrett, storming back into the hotel. I wasn't sure what to think, or what to say. There were far too many questions running through my head that I couldn't even form correct sentences.

“Kind of disappointing.” Sarah mumbled. “Garrett punched him last time.”

“*Excuse me?*” I sputtered out.

“I mean, it was a real sweet gesture, but it’s Garrett, y’know? He’s not exactly intimidating. It was more funny than anything.”

I had no idea what she was talking about and as much as it pained me to ask, I knew I had to. “What just happened?”

Sarah downed the rest of her drink. “You want the full story, don’t you?”

I nodded.

“Okay,” she started, taking a deep breath. “Before there was a Garrett and Olivia, there was a Stephen and Olivia.” She went on. “They were young, at least Olivia was. The annoying little bitch was in love with Stephen since she was like twelve.” Sarah gagged. “But whatever, when she was fifteen, Stephen and her started going out.”

As the story continued, I found out the basics. Garrett had always liked Olivia, despite Sarah trying to convince him otherwise. And he was less than thrilled when she and Stephen became an item.

“Stephen was a little older, though. Not much, but there was still that maturity thing. I mean, if you would even call Stephen mature, but he went to this party at ASU and he hooked up with some chick.”

I guess I never expected that from Stephen. But really, who’d expect their boyfriend to cheat on them?

“Y’know?” Sarah laughed. “I still don’t understand why Garrett hates him. I mean, if Stephen didn’t cheat on Olivia, Garrett would have never gotten to pick up the pieces. He really owes Stephen a high-five, or something.”

I didn’t want to hear anymore. It was so much to take in at one time, that I really just wanted to block it out.

I stood up from the table, shaking slightly as I walked over to the bar. “I just...” I said to the bartender. “I just need a bottle of anything.”

I forgot that I didn’t like the taste of it after the third sip. And after the sixth, I forgot just about everything else. I forgot why I was here and all the mistakes I made. I forgot that I was still in love with Garrett and I forgot the fact that I could never forgive myself for the choices I’ve made. But most of all, I forgot the fact that when the alcohol eventually wore off, none of this would have actually mattered.

“Jersey?” Sarah’s voice filled my head and all I could do was giggle in response. “Jersey, I think it’s time to go back to the room.”

“No.” I said sternly, cracking a smile as I pointed my finger at her face. “The party is just s-staring.”

Why I stood up on the chair, I’d never know. I was just surprised I didn’t break a bone as I attempted to dance.

“Seriously, Jers, you’re going to hurt yourself.” Sarah groaned.

“Who died and made you Fallon?” I slurred. “You’re sucking the fun out of my...fun.”



"This won't be fun in the morning when you're puking your brains out."

I stopped listening to her, merely swaying to the music with my bottle pressed firmly to my lips.

"Sarah," I heard a voice sigh over the music. "*Just let me deal with her.*"

"*I don't think that's a good idea, Gar. I get that you want to help, but you're the reason she's about to break her leg.*"

"*I know. That's... That's why you need to let me handle this.*"

I could feel myself growing increasingly dizzy with each new sway. The contents in my stomach were spinning just as fast as the rest of the world.

"C'mon, Jers." He said, his hands wrapped around my waist as he pulled me off of the chair.

I thought about yelling at him, telling him that he had no right to stop my *fun*, but the minute my feet touched the ground, I found myself collapsing against him. My face was buried in his shirt as I let out another string of giggles. "You smell so good."

"Let's get you to your room." He said softly, his arm enclosed around my waist to keep me balanced.

I guess if I was sober I'd be embarrassed. That was probably an understatement; I'd definitely be mortified. I just wasn't the type of girl that stumbled around a hotel lobby, drunk out of her mind.

"I think I'm going to vomit." I whined as we entered the stairwell.

"You're such an attractive drunk, Jers." Garrett replied, guiding my body up the first step.

His words seemed to float through my head and I couldn't help laughing. "You think I'm attractive."

I didn't realize how much of a feat climbing two flights of stairs was. I mean, I got winded walking up them when I was sober, but it seemed ten times harder drunk.

"Can we just...sit?" I mumbled, wiggling out of his arms as I tried to sit down. "I really don't feel well."

"It's just a few more steps, Jers." He sighed, pulling me back onto my feet.

I merely groaned in response, dragging my body up the remaining three steps. It wasn't much longer to the room and I soon found Garrett slipping the key out of my purse.

"Wait!" I slapped his hand away and he just stared at me blankly. "What about the machete?"

"The machete?"

"The man with the machete."

"Jersey, you're drunk."

"Shhh!" I slapped my finger over my mouth, giggling slightly. "He can hear you."

Garrett ignored me, sliding the key into the door. He turned the lights on before pushing me into the room. I staggered slightly, my entire body falling onto the bed. The mattress seemed to muffle my fit of laughter and as I turned onto my back, I saw Garrett in the corner by the window, carefully unzipping my backpack and pulling out a shirt and a pair of shorts.

“Here, Jers.” He sighed. “Put these on.”

I stared up at him, a smile attached to my lips. Even in my drunken state, I could tell he was aggravated.

“C’mon, Jersey, take off your dress.”

I snorted, hiding the amusement on my face with my hands. “Are you trying to get me naked, Garrett?” I slurred. “Just because I’m a little wasted doesn’t mean I’m easy.”

He scratched the back of his neck as he sighed. “I really don’t think I need you to be drunk to get you naked, Jers.”

“What are you implying, Garrett?”

He shook his head. “You are seriously the only drunk I know that can form proper sentences.” He groaned. “I’m implying that if you don’t take your dress off, it’s going to get ruined when you puke all over yourself.”

“Are you implying I can’t hold my liquor?”

“I think that much is obvious, Jers.” When I refused to stand up, he pulled me to my feet. “C’mon, lift your arms up.”

I smiled. “You... You are so... So... *Attractive*.”

“Thanks.” He mumbled, grabbing the fabric of my dress at my waist and pulling it off of me. I felt a shiver shake through me as the air-conditioner blew over my skin, but not even that was enough for me to forget that I suddenly felt an overwhelming sense of nausea.

“I think I’m going to be sick.” I clapped my hand over my mouth before I stumbled toward the bathroom. My knees crashed to the ceramic tile, my head in the toilet as I heaved out a stomach full of alcohol.

“Hey,” Garrett whispered in my ear, rubbing small circles over my back as he crouched down next to me. “You’re going to be okay.”

I guess it was only fitting that I started to cry. I was drunk and sick to my stomach sitting in the bathroom covered in my own vomit with the guy I was so obviously still in love with trying to tell me I was going to be okay. Crying seemed like the natural thing to do. “No, I’m not.” I wept, falling against his chest. He pushed himself against the wall, my body crumpled over his legs as he continued to rub my back. “I ruined everything.”

“You didn’t ruin anything, Jers.”

Jersey?”

A soft knock hit the metal door and I merely groaned in response. We’d been at the airport in Athens for forty minutes and of those forty minutes, I’d spent thirty of them in the second stall of the women’s bathroom, sick

and hung-over.

“Jers, you okay?”

Every so often she’d say something to make sure I was alive, which was a lot more pleasant than how she woke me up this morning; that involved her foot and the back of my head, which only left me more confused as to why I was on the floor of the bathroom in only my bra and underwear.

“Jersey, I love you dearly, but we’re going to miss the flight.”

I mumbled something I didn’t even understand back to her, pressing my hand to the metal lever and flushing last night’s mistakes down the toilet. I undid the latch on the door, swinging it open, only to see Sarah jump off of a sink as she shoved a toothbrush in my face.

“You look like a million bucks, babe.”

I didn’t have the energy to say anything, simply grabbing the brush from her hands and lathering it with toothpaste.

“I’m just happy you smell better than you did this morning.” Sarah went on. “I mean, out of all the things you could have drank, you picked Ouzo? I get that we were in Greece, but you smelled like a rotting piece of licorice. I don’t know how Garrett stayed with you all night.”

I nearly choked on the foam in my mouth, quickly spitting it out and wiping my mouth with a paper towel. “What are you talking about?” I asked, completely confused by her previous statement. I think I would have remembered Garrett being with me.

She raised an eyebrow as I slipped my toothbrush back into my backpack. “You don’t remember anything, do you?”

I shook my head. “Only Stephen and Garrett fighting. Everything goes blank after that.”

Sarah smiled weakly. “Garrett brought you upstairs last night. He tried to get you into your pajamas, but you got sick before he could.” She added with a laugh. “He stayed with you all night, Jersey.”

“Why would he... I don’t... I just don’t...”

“He loves you, Jers.”

“No...”

“Jersey,” her voice was laced with frustration. “He laid on a floor with you all night while you reeked of puke and Ouzo. Are we really going to stand here and argue whether or not the kid’s in love with you?”

It wasn’t like I hadn’t seen Garrett today. I saw him this morning in the hotel lobby and I saw him on the ferry. He had plenty of time to talk to me, but then again, I probably wouldn’t have given him the chance to. “But why didn’t he say anything, or at least try to while we were on the ferry?”

“You were kind of busy puking.”

I groaned as Sarah opened the door for me. I wasn’t entirely sure what to think. I had to stop myself from reading into the fact that Garrett had stayed with me all night. It was sweet, which was why it had left me

beyond confused. We weren't even speaking right now, the fight outside the hotel still vivid in my mind. I honestly had no idea why he would do what he did for me last night.

"C'mon, Jers." Sarah pulled at my hand, forcing me to jog along behind her as she weaved through people. "The plane is boarding."

Running wasn't exactly what I should have been doing, not with my stomach still lodged in my throat. I was three seconds away from making my second trip to the bathroom when a heavily accented man called the row number on my ticket. I weighed my options and I decided I'd rather use an airsick bag than accidentally miss my flight, so I swallowed the urge to spew and got in line.

Sarah tried her best to sweet talk the attendant into getting all of our seats together, but she wasn't exactly as charming as Fallon. Also, the plane was apparently over sold and we were lucky to even get seats to begin with.

It wasn't until I actually stepped onto the plane that I realized how crowded it was and I found myself growing increasingly more nauseous with each step. Four hours on a plane was the last thing I wanted to do right now.

When I got to my row, I was less than relieved. I was in the middle seat in the back of the plane and due to my cosmic bad luck, I had the pleasure of sitting next to Stephen for the next two hundred and forty minutes.

"Hey." His voice was tight as I sat down, pulling my seatbelt over my lap.

"Hi." I managed to say back, suddenly wishing I didn't remember the scene that went down with him and Garrett last night.

There was a long pause, his attention focused on the aisle. I wasn't sure if it had anything to do with me, but he looked less than amused. I almost thought about looking up, sensing that someone was hovering over me, but before I got the chance, Garrett was already in the empty seat next to me.

"I thought Sarah said she couldn't get us seats together?" Garrett muttered.

"You're more than welcome to find a new seat." Stephen replied.

I let out a weak groan, my head falling into my hands. I was hung-over, sleep deprived and now I had to be sandwiched between the two guys who nearly got into a fistfight because of me. I was just happy that the flight attendant started the safety demonstration before they could exchange any more words.

We weren't even an hour into the flight and the turbulence had already caused me to bring my knees to my chest, my head resting on top of them as I tried my best not to get sick.

"You should drink some ginger ale." Garrett said.

"I'm fine." I mumbled back, afraid to even open my mouth.

"It'll help settle your stomach." He pressed.

"She said she was fine." Stephen hissed from the other side of me.

"No one asked you, Stephen." Garrett seethed.

This was ten times worse than the flight from Rome. I couldn't even attempt to change my seat because one, I was afraid to get up, and two, I didn't even know where anyone else was sitting. My only option was to sit here

and to pray that they'd just ignore each other for the rest of the flight.

"It's your fault she's this hung-over." Stephen spat and I could feel him lean forward. "She didn't hit the bottle because of me."

"Shut up." Garrett replied. "You have no idea why she—"

"*She* is right here." I interrupted them, using every ounce of energy I had to lift my head. "And *she* does not appreciate either of you screaming in her ears."

I hadn't realized shutting them up would be that easy, or else I would have done it sooner. To my surprise, they both sat back and shut their mouths for the remainder of the flight, which was all I could really ask for.

~\*~

I had mixed feelings when I stepped off of the plane. We were only in London for a few hours until our flight to New York left, but even a short amount of time was long enough to revisit old feelings.

London—The UK in general—was a whirlwind of mixed feelings, broken hearts, and adventures I could never forget. I knew that each of those experiences would eventually lead me to grow into a stronger person, but right now all they were doing was making me miss something I didn't think I could. It was two weeks. That shouldn't be long enough for me to grow attached to a culture. Part of me just felt guilty. I was leaving too soon. I hadn't properly experienced everything London—Europe even—had to offer.

I'd left loose ends in every place we visited, never allowed the time to tie them up. I think that's what I regretted the most. I played it safe most of the time. I kept close to the group and I went with the flow, and that's when I was most miserable. They didn't appreciate the things I appreciated. And I understood that they just wanted to have fun and I respected that, but the most fun I had was when I was off by myself. Don't get me wrong, Europe was eye opening. I learned a lot about myself and I got to see places I only dreamed of, but there was still something missing. I just couldn't place it.

"How are you feeling?" Sarah came up from behind me, her shoulder brushing against mine.

I shrugged. "Better I guess. I still have a headache, though."

"Hopefully you'll sleep on the flight to New York." She smiled.

All I could do was grunt. "Not if the seating arrangements are anything like the last flight."

She frowned. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure the entire plane felt that tension."

"And I was smack-dab in the middle of it."

After everyone got through customs, we took over a small seating area outside of the security line. We still had an hour until our flight started to board and no one seemed to be in that much of a rush. It was a nice change of pace after a summer of just constantly going.

I found it hard to sit still, partly because I was anticipating the six hours I'd be cramped on a plane, but also because I found my eyes carefully following Stephen. I'd been successfully avoiding him these past couple of days, but the plane ride here left me feeling guilty. I knew that we needed to talk and I knew Sarah said that I should wait until we got home, but I wasn't sure if I could leave this place without closing our book properly.

I don't know what propelled me to get up at that second. Maybe it was because I saw Garrett and Jared disappear into some fast food chain and I felt slightly guilty talking to Stephen in front of him, but I knew this would be my only chance, so I sucked up some courage and shuffled over to the spot where Stephen was standing.

"Hey." There was a shake to my voice as my nerves took over.

"Hey." He replied back, his words soft and broken.

"I just..." I stammered, twisting my fingers around each other nervously. "I owe you an apology."

"Jersey..." He sighed. "You don't—"

"No," I said firmly, swallowing a lump in my throat. "It was wrong what I did to you. I should have never led you on, Stephen. I guess part of me just thought that I'd eventually be able to fall for you. I mean, you're a great guy, Stephen. Any girl would be lucky to have you."

He cleared his throat, his eyes glued to the floor. "I wanted you to like me, Jers. I wanted you to like me the way I liked you since the moment I saw you at that party." He looked up at me, a soft smile on his lips. "I would have killed for you to look at me the way you look at Garrett. I would have done just about anything." He took a deep breath. "I just want you to be happy, Jersey. And as much as I don't like Garrett—and that's a lot—he's what makes you happy."

It was different when Stephen said it. I mean, I heard it from Sarah and from Fallon, but when Stephen said it, it just made it more real. I knew it would always be Garrett—I knew since the first kiss. And that was scary because we were so young. I'm nineteen. I wasn't supposed to find the person I wanted to spend my life with at this age. And I still wasn't completely sure if he wanted to be with me forever. Yeah, Sarah said he loved me, but he never said it. I openly admitted to being in love with him, but I didn't stick around long enough for a response. The more I thought about it, the more it sunk in and the more I panicked. What if Garrett didn't want to be with me? Just because someone stays with you all night doesn't mean they want to stay with you forever. And forever was such a big word—a scary word, maybe even a word a nineteen year old shouldn't be using.

"Jersey?" Stephen interrupted my thoughts. "You're looking a little pale. Have you eaten anything today?"

How could I eat anything when I suddenly felt so sick? "I... Yeah... I'm... I'm fine. I just... I need to... Sarah... I have to talk to Sarah."

I stumbled away from him, my thoughts lost in a haze as I spotted Sarah sitting on a bench next to John.

"Hey, Jers." She smiled up at me. "You okay?"

I wanted to tell her that I wasn't okay, but something stopped me. Maybe it was the airport full of people, but I wasn't sure, so I just shook my head. "I'm fine."

As I sat down next to her, I caught Garrett out of the corner of my eye. He was laughing as he and Jared returned to the group. I was sure he caught onto my staring, which was why I quickly looked away, my heart racing as my fingers began to pull at the fabric of my shorts.

I didn't have much time to dwell in my head. Sarah had started to pull at my hand, telling me that it was time to go through security.

By the time we got to our gate, they were already calling final boarding. I had my ticket in my hand as I stood

behind Sarah, fully prepared to say goodbye to summer, but as I stepped up to hand the flight attendant my ticket, something stopped me. I wasn't ready to go home and fall back into my mundane life. I needed more time to think and to grow and I couldn't do that in Arizona. At least not yet.

"I'm sorry." I pulled the ticket away from the woman waiting to take it. "I can't..."

I watched as Sarah turned around, all ready to walk down the tunnel to the plane. Her face was twisted into a horrified expression, her eyes going wide.

"Jersey?!" She panicked.

"I'm sorry." I took a step back and turned around, my heart racing in my chest as I bumped into someone.

"Jersey..."

I hadn't realized he was behind me and the way he said my name made me feel guilty.

"Garrett," I said slowly, my voice shaking. "I have to..."

His hand slipped over mine, our fingers laced together. "What is it going to take for you to realize—"

"Sir, your ticket?"

Garrett glanced back at the woman briefly. "Jersey, you can't keep running away from this...*From us*. I know I made a lot of mistakes and... *Fuck*, I'm sorry, but I can't let you stay here and pretend that I'm not the one that you want."

"I'm... I'm sorry, Garrett."

As the flight attendant grabbed Garrett's ticket, ultimately ushering him through the door, I felt a weight lifted off of my shoulders. Maybe this was reckless and maybe this was stupid, but I couldn't go home when I still had unfinished business here.

I stood in front of the door for at least five minutes before knocking. I knew that I shouldn't be nervous. After all, I was given an open invitation to come anytime I'd like. But still, I wasn't entirely sure how welcomed I'd be.

When there was no answer on the second knock, doubt began to set in. I mean, it was nearly ten at night. That was a reasonable time for someone to be sleeping, or out getting a few drinks. And here I was knocking on a door, expecting someone to be home or awake to acknowledge it. Was it frustrating? Yes. Disappointing? Even more so.

I slowly backed away from the door, my hands tucked into my pockets as I sighed. All I could really hope for was to find a phone booth, so I could call a cab and hopefully catch a redeye out of here.

I couldn't say that I regretted doing this. I needed to at least try. Did I regret walking away from Garrett—the guy who finally let down his guard and actually admitted to wanting me? More than I can even say right now. But I needed this. I needed to be able to clear my head and I needed to be sure that I could go home and not regret everything.

"You're giving up awfully fast these days."

I stopped in my tracks, nearly falling over myself as I turned around. “Fallon—”

She crossed her arms, leaning against the doorway with an unpleasant expression on her face. “What are you doing here, Jersey?”

I wasn’t sure, to be honest. I walked out of Heathrow fully prepared to find Daniel, but somewhere near the West End, I told the cab driver to turn around. Fallon had stuck by me through the good and the bad, and right now I needed her more than ever, so I guess that’s why I was there. “I needed to talk to you.”

“And that couldn’t wait until I got home Friday?”

Maybe this was a bad idea. I think it was fairly obvious that Fallon wasn’t ready to be friends again. “Fine.” I threw my hands up. “Whatever. This was a bad idea.”

“Jersey...” She straightened up, stepping out onto the porch. “Jersey, wait.”

“What do you want me to say, Fallon?” I screamed, nearly forgetting that it was a little late and we were outside. “Do you want me to tell you I fucked up and that you were right?” I asked, lowering my voice. “Because I fucked up, Fallon.” I pulled my arms tight around myself, a tear slipping from my eyes. “And you were right... You’re *always* right.”

Her face softened as she bit on her lower lip. “C’mon,” she said, one foot in the house as she looked back at me. “Come inside before the neighbors call the police.”

I took a deep breath, slowly gliding up the steps and through the doorway. It was a euphoric feeling being back in that house. In a sense, this place brought Fallon and I closer. She was able to open up here and I could only hope that it would work its magic on me.

I set my backpack down on the chair as I watched Fallon fall to the couch, her legs twisted together as one hand rested behind her head. I wasn’t sure where to begin, or even if this was an open invitation to be honest with her, so all I could really do was sit down on the empty space on the couch and drum on my legs.

“You’re supposed to be in New York right now.” Fallon broke the silence, looking down at her watch. “You’re supposed to be getting on a flight to Phoenix in forty-five minutes.”

I nodded as I tore my attention away from my legs. “I couldn’t go.”

“Why?”

It was a simple question and yet it was so hard to answer. “I guess I just... I just needed to make sure that... Everything was just happening so fast... I didn’t... I *don’t* know...”

She untangled her legs, scooting closer to me. “What happened, Jersey?”

I bit back the tears that were welling in my eyes, looking over at her. “Everything you said that would happen.” I started. “I was... I was using Stephen to forget about Garrett and I didn’t realize that until we almost slept together.” I could sense her eyes going wide. “And then I ran out in a panic and Garrett was there and we fought, like we always do.” I took a deep breath. “I didn’t mean to tell him that he was my first, but it just came out, and I, of course, ran before he could say anything.”

She didn’t respond and part of me knew she wouldn’t. There was a lot more to this story and I knew Fallon



could sense it.

“I guess after finding out that Stephen cheated on Olivia, things just got complicated.” I said. “Garrett and I... We had no more secrets and it was scary.” I took a deep breath. “And I ended up getting drunk and Garrett took care of me.” I felt a tear slip down my cheek. “Sarah told me it was because he loves me and I guess I didn’t believe it until we were standing in our terminal and he basically begged me to come home so that we could be together.”

“But you ran.”

I nodded. “Everything is just happening so fast... I mean, he’s spent so much time just being an... An asshole... And now he wants to be with me? I just...”

“Jersey.” She said quietly. “You love him, right?”

“Yeah.”

“And do you remember what I told you the day he found out you wrote the paper?”

I searched my memory, thinking back to arguably the worst day of my life.

“I told you that you needed to give him time.” She smiled. “Jersey, you hurt him and you broke his heart, but that doesn’t mean he completely forgot about the way you made him feel.” She went on. “You spent seven months avoiding each other at all costs and then somehow ended up on a trip together where you were with each other everyday. And I know a lot of bad came out of it, but you were actually able to be honest with him.” She straightened up, sending me a motherly look. “And here he is trying to be honest with you—he’s finally coming around to the idea of being with you again—and you’re pushing him away.”

When she put it that way, I realized that there was more to me and Garrett’s relationship than just me. Somewhere down the line I forgot that I was the one that ruined it and if anyone should be this hesitant, it was Garrett. He’s the one that had his heart broken. And yeah, mine got broken, too, but it was still my fault.

“Jersey, I know you want to be with him and I know you’re afraid, but you need to remember that he’s just as afraid as you. Do you realize how much courage it probably took him to try to stop you?”

I’d never felt so low before, my heart breaking against my chest. Garrett let his guard down and sucked up all of his pride just for me to walk away. I knew that if I were in his position, it would turn me off to even thinking about trying. For the first time in our relationship, he was the vulnerable one and I wouldn’t blame him if he never spoke to me again. “I... I really messed up, Fallon.”

“I know.”

~\*~

I woke up the next morning with the sun blinding my eyes. Fallon was asleep against my back, her breathing steady. We didn’t do much more talking last night. Since I was honest with her, she was honest with me. There wasn’t anything going on between her and Kennedy, at least not at the moment. They were just *hanging out*, but we all knew how that normally ended. I guess it was just nice to have Fallon back.

“What are you thinking about?” Fallon rolled over, her voice still half asleep.

“Just that my parents are probably freaking out right about now.”

Fallon laughed. "The plane probably landed about an hour ago."

"Sarah's probably telling them that the flight was overbooked, and that I voluntarily gave my seat up."

"She was always such a good liar."

I was just hoping that this was the story Sarah was feeding my mom and dad because I wasn't sure how I could explain the truth.

"We can catch a flight home today." Fallon looked over at me. "I mean, if you want to."

I raised my brows. "I wouldn't mind staying here for a few more days."

She smiled. "I think my grandmother would love the extra company."

When Fallon and I rolled out of bed, an hour later, her grandmother was in the kitchen, clad in that fuchsia velour suit and drinking a cup of tea. I smiled weakly at her when she caught sight of me, throwing her arms up as she got off of her chair.

"Jersey!" She hugged me, kissing both of my cheeks before letting me go. "What great surprise."

It was hard to forget a woman as great as Fallon's grandmother. She was just so genuinely sweet and proud. And as I sat down at the table next to her, I slowly started to realize where all of Fallon's good came from.

~\*~

There wasn't much to do here in the summer. Falun was big on winter sports, ski lodges advertised for miles, but they'd be abandoned until December. Fallon and I found ourselves back at the lake, our feet scrapping at the rocks on the ground. It wasn't particularly warm, but not cool enough for a sweater. We were just enjoying the clear blue sky and the evergreens that went on for miles.

There was something about this place that was so free and calming. You could just get lost in your head and it didn't matter because the days went on forever. As much as I loved it, I couldn't help wishing for a distraction. My head was filled with Garrett and every bad decision I made. I probably ruined us for the second time, and I was sure getting over him would be harder this time around.

"Have you thought about what you're going to say to him?" Fallon asked, her attention focused on the small, grey rock she'd been kicking for the twenty minutes we'd been walking.

I tried to conjure up something, but what do you say to the guy you left at an airport? I'm sorry I stomped on your heart? I'm sorry I had to question whether or not I loved you? It sounded so easy in my head, like the minute I said those words to him everything would be rainbows and blue skies. I knew better, though. I knew that it wasn't going to be that easy, especially not with Garrett. "I know that sorry won't be enough... I'm not even sure if he'll want to speak to me, to be honest. I mean, I wouldn't want to speak to me. I'd hate me—"

"He doesn't hate you." Fallon said quickly. "Trust me, Jers. It's going to take a lot more than you not getting on that plane for him to hate you."

I wanted to believe her, but I'd done so much this past year. There had to be some sort of quota. "I guess... I guess I'd be okay if he doesn't want to be with me. I mean, in time I will. I just hope he lets me apologize."

“I think you’re worrying too much.” Fallon replied. “Jersey, he’s not going to let you go that easy. Trust me, he’s probably going crazy right now.”

I tried not to think about that because it just made me feel even more guilty. I know that wasn’t Fallon’s intention, but thinking about Garrett blaming himself for the mess I made, it wasn’t settling right with me.

“Are you happy you did this?” Fallon asked, stopping as she turned to the lake. “Y’know, dropping your class and doing Europe on a whim?”

I took a deep breath, my eyes focused on the water sloshing with the wind. “In a way, I guess.” I answered honestly. “I mean, I know I made a lot of mistakes, but I don’t think I could have ever been completely honest with Garrett if I didn’t come. It was just way too easy to avoid him at home, y’know? And I know I never intended on being this honest with him, but given the situation, I think it was for the best.” I turned to her, the sun glaring in my eyes. “What about you? Are you happy with how this summer went?”

There was a long pause before she turned to me. “It had its ups and downs.” She nodded. “I just feel bad, mostly.”

“What? Why—”

“I was way too hard on you.” Her face softened. “I guess I’ve always been hard on you, but this summer I think I just crossed the line.”

“Fallon, you didn’t—”

“You needed to make your own mistakes, Jersey.” She sighed. “I just didn’t want to see you make them.” She bit down on her lip. “You’re my best friend, Jers, and watching you make all of these bad choices, it killed me. But now I realize that, that’s what you needed to do to get to where you are now.”

The only problem was that I didn’t know where I was, or how to even begin to fix this.

I wasn’t sure what I was expecting when I got off of the plane in Phoenix. I felt the same, maybe just a little more anxious than normal. I’d eventually have to talk to Garrett and the idea of that just made me feel sick. Mostly, though, I was just dreading seeing my parents. I panicked when Fallon and I got into Philadelphia, simply leaving a message on my mom’s voicemail, telling her our flight got in at eleven-thirty. I still wasn’t sure what Sarah had told them, so I figured a voicemail was the least stressful way of assuring Fallon and I had a ride home from the airport.

“I don’t know why you’re so nervous.” Fallon looked over at me, sucking down what was left of her latte. “Fuck, I forgot how hot this state is in August.”

I wasn’t sure why I was nervous either. I mean, I’m nineteen and I didn’t even live at home anymore. I had every right to stay in Europe if I really wanted to. “You know how parents are.” I told her.

“No, I don’t.” She laughed. “I know how nannies and grandmothers are, but not parents.”

“Same thing.” I shrugged. “When I decided to even go on the trip, I barely gave my mom an explanation and I didn’t exactly call her a lot, so I’m sure she wants to kick my ass.”

“I doubt it.” Fallon said as we walked through the automatic door leading to the arrival bay. “I think your

parents have only transformed into adults this past year. I'm sure they appreciate your sense of adventure."

I could only hope.

Fallon and I weren't waiting long. In the long line of traffic, I spotted my mom's car almost instantly. I watched as she pulled over to the side, cutting the engine as she jumped out of the driver's seat. "Jersey Rose."

I couldn't tell if she was mad, her voice distorted over the honking of horns. "H-hey, Mom."

She pulled me into a hug, nearly cutting off my oxygen supply before she moved on to Fallon. "I can't believe what you two did for that poor widow."

I shifted my eyes over to Fallon nervously. "Excuse me?"

My mom kept smiling. "Sarah told me about the woman whose husband passed away." My mom said. "She needed to get home and the flight was overbooked, so Fallon gave up her seat."

"Oh." My voice shook. "Yes, the widow. I couldn't let Fallon stay back by herself, so we decided to go visit her grandmother for the week."

Fallon smiled over at me. "She was very happy to see us."

I was relieved once we got into the car, no longer worried about my mom freaking out. I had to hand it to Sarah, she was an exceptional liar.

"I'm sure you two want to go to the apartment." My mom said as she merged onto the highway. "Sarah's been there for the week. The painters finished painting right before she got back. I think you guys will love it."

It was exciting. When Fallon, Sarah, and I decided to move in together, we weren't really sure what to expect, but I think the summer brought us closer. I knew it would be an adjustment, but after sharing hotel rooms for the last two months, we were slightly more prepared.

The apartment wasn't far from the airport. We picked an equal distance between Sarah's campus and me and Fallon's because we figured that was only fair.

After Mom dropped us off, it was only a quick elevator ride up to the apartment. Paint fumes still lingered as Fallon and I stopped in front of the door. I pushed it open, bracing myself for what Sarah had done when she was alone for the week.

I was surprised how put-together it looked. I mean, Sarah's room at her house looked like a cyclone hit it, and I guess that's what I was expecting the apartment to look like, but it looked exactly the way I pictured it would when we signed the lease.

The walls of the living room were painted a yellowy- green, which contrasted the white couch perfectly. The color flowed into the kitchen and the hallway that led to the bedrooms. Everything was in place, aside from the boxes on the kitchen table that were overflowing with bubble wrap and dishes.

"I could kill you." Sarah shut the cabinet she was stocking, glaring over at me. "That move you pulled... *I could kill you.*"

I winced. "It wasn't my best decision."

“Fucking right it wasn’t your best decision.” She shrieked, her arms flailing. “You basically punched Garrett in the heart... *Again*.”

I definitely didn’t need to be reminded of that. I could still see his face when he begged me to stay.

“Did you sort everything out?” Sarah asked, one hand resting on her hip and the other on the counter.

I nodded.

Her face softened. “I’m glad you guys are home. It was lonely here without you.”

Fallon’s face fell as she tossed her backpack onto the chair. “Oh, please. I could walk into your room right now and John O would probably be passed out on your bed.”

A smile crept onto Sarah’s face.

“See.” Fallon rolled her eyes. “I’m sure you were *plenty* lonely.”

It was so easy to fall back into our old routines. I mean, there was so much drama in Europe that I didn’t think anything would ever be the same again.

“So, we’re going camping.” Sarah said as she went back to stacking cups. “Sort of like a goodbye to summer celebration.”

“Camping?” Fallon replied skeptically. “Like, in a tent?”

Sarah laughed. “In a tent.”

“Why?”

Sarah shrugged. “Because it’s fun.” She shut the cabinet. “You’re both in, right?”

Fallon cringed her lips. “Eh... Why not?”

When they both looked at me, I bit my lip. “I think... I’m good. I need to recover from my last trip before I even think about camping.”

Sarah merely scowled. “Suit yourself. We’re leaving tonight.”

I left Fallon and Sarah to discuss their camping plans, slipping out of the living room and down the hall to my room. When I opened the door, I was met by the grayish-purple color I’d picked out months ago. My bed was pushed against the wall, draped with a white spread, pillows overflowing on top. Boxes were scattered around the floor and bare shelves nearly begged me to fill them. I had no energy, though. All I could do was fall to my bed and breathe it all in.

~\*~

I hadn’t realized how lonely the apartment would feel without Fallon and Sarah. It was just so quiet, save for The Nanny re-run playing over the TV. I didn’t regret not going camping with them, I just hadn’t expected it to feel this empty. I tried my best not to think about it as I fell to the couch. Classes started next week and I should be enjoying this quiet time before schoolwork consumes me again.

I'm not going to lie, it was hard to even focus on watching TV. Garrett was still in the back of my head. I knew I'd have to talk to him eventually. I'd probably have to grovel at his feet. I guess I deserved that after what I did to him.

The credits started rolling and I felt a yawn slip through my lips. Jetlag seemed to be catching up to me quickly and all I could think about was going to sleep. I turned off the TV, standing up from the couch, fully prepared to go into my room and crawl under the covers. Just as I went to flick the lights off, there was a knock on the door.

I glanced over at the clock quickly, the big and little hands read 11:32. Skeptically, I walked over to the door, undoing the chain and twisting the bolt. I pulled it open slightly, and I felt my heart sink into my stomach. I snapped out of it quickly, opening the door the rest of the way. "Garrett—"

His hands were cupped around my cheeks before I could get another word in, his lips pressed to mine as we stumbled back into my apartment.

"I can't not be with you anymore." He said breathlessly, stealing another kiss, his lips dripping with desperation. "I'm so sick of missing you."

My heart was beating against my chest, leaving me unable to focus on anything. This wasn't how it was supposed to happen. I walked away from him. I was the one that was supposed to be groveling. Not him. "Garrett—"

"Just... Just let me talk first." He said, catching his breath. "I spent seven months trying to convince myself that I hated you—trying to pretend that I didn't miss you every single day. And then England happened and I really thought Chloe would help me forget about you, but she only made me realize that I only wanted you. But you had Daniel and then Stephen and I figured that maybe I didn't matter as much to you as you did to me. So I decided to hate you because that seemed like the easiest thing to do, at least I thought that it would be easy until you and Stephen went off on your little adventure. I was just so jealous, so I convinced Fallon to follow—"

"You... Convinced Fallon?"

"I thought we were letting me talk?" He laughed softly. "So we're in Italy, alone on some abandoned highway, and you tell me you never passed the paper in and it changed everything. And then... That night... I just wanted to remember what we had and I didn't expect to be as confused the next morning as I was. We just... We just jumped from not speaking to being that close. And I screwed it up and I can never forgive myself for making you wait that hour. I just... I couldn't find the right words to say to you... And I really thought I lost you. I thought Stephen had finally got you, but then you told me I was your first. And obviously that meant I meant something to you. And that's all I'm really going on right now. You trusted me once and I just want you to be able to again."

"Garrett—"

"I don't even care that you went to see Daniel, Jers." He cut me off. "It... It just doesn't matter. I just need you to tell me that you want to be with me. And if you don't, then fine. I'll walk out of this door and we'll just be done. I won't... I won't try anymore."

"I didn't go to see Daniel, Garrett." I smiled, looking into his eyes before I pressed my lips to his. "I want to be with you. And I'm sorry... I'm sorry that I had to question that—"

"Don't apologize." He said softly, his fingers pushing a piece of hair out of my eyes before our lips met again. He pulled me closer, his hands resting over my lower back as he deepened the kiss. I felt myself going lightheaded, my fingers lost in his hair. I pulled away slowly, softly pushing myself out of his hold. "What... Where are you

going?”

I smiled, taking a few steps toward the door and pressing my palm to it. I twisted the deadbolt until it locked before turning around to face him, a smile pulling at my lips. He was next to me almost instantly, his lips back on mine as we fell against the door.

It was hard thinking of a moment that felt this right, *this real*. At the time, I thought nothing could feel as perfect as the first night we’d spent together, but this was different. For the first time, it was just Garrett and I with no secrets to hide behind. It was just us, like it was always meant to be.

I laced our fingers together, my lower lip caught between his teeth as I pulled away. He was about to say something, but I simply tugged on his hand, sending him a knowing smile as I led him through the living room and past the bathroom and Fallon’s room before stopping at the last door on the left. He returned the smile as I opened the door, his lips attached to mine as we crossed over the threshold.

We wasted no time, simply stumbling around my pitch-black room, too consumed by the taste of each other’s lips. I pulled at the hem of his shirt, lifting it up over his arms before I tossed it aside. He kissed me quickly, his hands dragging the fabric of my tank top around my shoulders, ultimately pulling it over my head. His lips found my neck, biting at the spot that he knew drove me crazy.

I know it hadn’t been long since the last time he kissed me, but I’d forgotten what it did to me. Everything about it made me weak in the knees—the way he bit at my lips, the way he always lingered on my neck, the way he knew how to leave me wanting more.

I felt his fingers crawl over my ribs, his thumbs tracing the wire and lace of my bra as his fingers slid behind my back, undoing the clasp. He slipped it off my shoulders, tossing it to the floor before his lips found my mouth. My hands glided down his torso, stopping once they hit the leather of his belt. I tried to undo it as fluidly as possible, not wanting to break the kiss, but after three failed attempts, I pulled away in frustration.

“Fuck.” I gasped, my fingers still pulling at it. “Why... Why are you wearing a belt?”

He laughed, pushing my hands away as he undid it himself.

We staggered back as our lips touched again, not stopping until the back of my knees hit the bed. I fell back, Garrett on top of me as we crawled to the top. He was straddling my waist, his hands firmly pressed to my hips as he trailed kisses over my shoulder and up neck, stopping before he hit my lips.

My chest was caving in and out, completely breathless as my lungs begged for air. I wanted to ask why he stopped, but he didn’t give me a chance.

“I love you.”

I knew he did, but it was a different feeling when he said it. Because those three words, they meant everything. “I love you, too.”

When he pressed his lips back to mine, everything fell into place. I wasn’t afraid anymore. I didn’t need to run away from the feelings I’d kept bottled up for so long. I had him and that was all that mattered.

When I woke up, I seriously thought it had just been a dream—a dream way too good to be true, but then I felt Garrett’s chest moving against my back, his hand resting on top of my stomach and I knew that this was real life.

“Good morning.” He said groggily, his lips pressed to my shoulder, trailing them slowly up my neck before catching the corner of my mouth.

My cheeks burned from smiling so wide, a blush falling over them. I twisted myself onto my back, clutching the sheet to my chest as Garrett propped himself up on his elbow. “G’morning.” I replied softly.

He smiled as he stole a quick kiss, grabbing me at my waist and pulling me on top of him. I let out a string of giggles that ended up lost in his throat when he pressed our lips together.

I had a hard time figuring out how I ever thought I could let him go. Because it was moments like these that just made me realize how miserable I’d been without him all of those months. It wasn’t even the intimacy of him touching me, or kissing me that I missed. It was just waking up next to him and seeing his face. It was just something as simple as that.

I dragged my lips over his jaw, bringing them down his neck and trailing them over his chest before bringing them back to his mouth. I smiled into him, tugging at his bottom lip before I pulled away. “What do you want to do today?”

He laughed, his fingers drumming over my back. “I am very okay with this.”

In a way, I guess I was, too. Staying in bed all day with Garrett was something I’d never complain about and maybe I was stupid for even considering another option. I mean, it wasn’t like we could get away with it for long, not with my current roommates. I should be taking advantage of the fact that they’d be gone until tomorrow.

“But I guess,” he said as he rolled over, pinning me to the mattress. “We can go meet everyone at camp, if you really want to.”

I could sense the guilt trip coming, even before he pressed his lips to my clavicle.

“I understand...” He moved his lips to my neck. “...if you don’t...” And then to the corner of my mouth. “...want to stay...” He brought them back to my jaw. “...in bed with me...”

I dropped my head against the pillow, unintentionally giving him better access to my neck. “Why are you making me feel bad?” I whined as his lips connecting to my throat.

I felt him smile. “I’m just giving you a taste of what you’re going to be missing.”

Defeated, I brought my arms around his neck. “I didn’t say we had to get out of bed right now.”

We spent another two hours in bed—kissing, touching, and making up for lost time. Eventually I had to roll out of Garrett’s arms, claiming that I needed to shower before we even thought about leaving the apartment. He, of course, protested, but I was already locked in the bathroom before he could make me feel bad.

It was so easy for the feelings I had for him seven months ago to come rushing back. I somehow managed to forget about all the name-calling and the tears, and I was able to remember every ounce of happiness he left me with and that’s all I could ask for right now.

“Jers?” He knocked on the bathroom door the second I decided to pull it open, a waft of steam filling the hallway as I walked out.

“Yes, Garrett?” I smiled, flattening out my shirt.



He just shrugged. "I missed you."

I kissed his cheek quickly, walking back into my room. He'd gotten dressed already, wearing the same clothes from yesterday. I grabbed my backpack from the floor, not wanting to fiddle with unopened boxes. "I'm ready."

The walk to his car was agonizingly hot, the sun beating down on my neck. Sure, the Mediterranean was hot, but nothing quite compared to Arizona in the summer.

The drive wasn't long, but it was filled with all sorts of memories I couldn't help getting lost in, like the day after I'd fallen asleep at his house for the first time and he drove me home the next morning, and then there was the night we drove to Max's party with Jake. It all seemed so long ago.

Garrett stopped the car in front of the driveway, cutting the engine and opening the door. I followed in suit, smiling as he waited for me with his hand extended.

"Garrett?" I heard his mother call as we walked through the front door. "Is that you?"

"Yeah, Mom." Garrett shouted back, his foot already on the first step leading to the second level.

"Where'd you go last—" She started as she walked out of the kitchen, dishtowel in hand as she tripped over her words. "OH!" She smiled, her eyes landing on me. "Jersey, it's so good to see you, sweetheart."

"It's good to see you, too." I smiled back as Garrett pulled on my hand.

"We're—uh—We're meeting everyone over at Granite Basin Lake, so I'm just going to grab some clothes." He nudged his head toward upstairs before scratching the back of his neck. "We still have that tent in the garage, right?"

His mother placed a hand on her hip. "Of course we do, Garrett. Your father can't part with anything, including a tent he hasn't used in ten years."

He shot her a smile before pulling me up the stairs, navigating me through the hallway that I knew all too well.

His room had an empty feeling to it. It hadn't changed from the last time I'd been in it, but there was something missing. Maybe it was the scent, the stale odor of cleaning products lingered in the air. He hadn't lived in it in two months, maybe it would just take some time for it to feel like someone actually lived there.

"Why are you even looking through your drawers?" I asked, a smile on my face as he turned around, his eyebrows raised. "We both know you haven't unpacked your backpack, so why don't you just save yourself the trouble and take that with you?"

He dropped the t-shirt back into his dresser, taking two short steps toward me and grabbing my hips. "You think you're so smart, don't you?"

I shrugged. "I'm just being logical."

His kissed me, long and slow, like we had all the time in the world. I was stupid for melting into it, my arms lazily wrapping around his neck. It had been so long since I'd been able to do this, so forgive me for letting my hormones do all the thinking.

"Garrett." I whined as he let go of my lips, trailing his down to my neck. "We can't do this." I wasn't really sure if

I thought that would stop him from pulling me down to his bed. I'd forgotten how comfortable it was, memories of the mornings I'd woken up in it filling my head as I felt Garrett undo the button of my shorts. "Garrett—"

"Shhh," he said softly, silencing me with a kiss.

I twisted my head, letting out a fit of giggles as his lips landed sloppily on my cheek. "It's a two hour drive, Gar." That still wasn't enough for him to remove his hands from under my shirt. "And your mom is downstairs." And that's what it took for him to retract his hands, collapsing onto the free space next to me, a frustrating groan escaping his throat.

"You really had to pull the 'Mom Card,' didn't you?"

I jumped off of the bed, rebuttoning my shorts. "I'm sorry, but I had to."

"You didn't *have* to." He mumbled as he stood up from his bed, slumping over to his closet and grabbing the backpack I knew hadn't been unpacked. With a hefty sigh, he opened his door, motioning for me to go first.

We said a quick goodbye to his mother before Garrett slipped into the garage. After ten minutes of fishing through Christmas and Easter decorations, he pulled out a tent and two sleeping bags before returning to the car. He threw everything in the trunk and fell into the seat next to me.

~\*~

There was no traffic on the road, which I found odd for a Saturday afternoon. I wasn't complaining, though. Not that I would have minded a slight delay. It was nice just sitting in the car with Garrett, music blasting through the speakers and the AC blowing through my hair.

"Can I ask you something?" Garrett looked over at me briefly before focusing on the road. "But you have to promise you won't get mad."

I ran my teeth over my bottom lip as my heart jumped. "Um... Yeah, of course."

"Why... Why did you write the paper?"

As fast as my heart jumped, it sank to the pit of my stomach. "Garrett, I—"

"It's not going to change anything." He said softly. "It's not going to make my feelings for you just disappear. I just... I'd like to know."

I took a deep breath, trying to search for an answer. To be honest, I never really thought about why I wrote it, just that I wrote it in the first place. "You were just... You were so open with me about... About everything you felt for Olivia... And I thought... Well, I guess I didn't think." I took another deep breath as I felt him lace his fingers with mine. "I thought I was strong enough, I guess. I thought I would be able to get that close to you and not end up falling for you, but I was very wrong."

He didn't say anything for a few minutes, the music filling the silent void. "When... Uh... When did you know that you... Um..."

"When did I know that I was in love with you?" I laughed softly.

I watched as he smiled.

“L.A.” I told him. “When you told me that you just wanted to have fun... I guess in my heart I knew that I would never be okay with just having fun with you.”

Again, a silence fell over us.

“It was the first kiss.” He said, his cheeks slightly pink. “I knew I loved you from the first kiss... It was nothing I’d ever felt before... You were different, Jer. I never thought you’d—”

“Break your heart?” I said softly, my smiling fading as my heart sank.

“I never thought you’d be the one.”

I looked up at him, trying to hide my smile.

“Because you’re the one, Jers.” He continued. “You’re it.”

It was hard explaining the feeling I got when he said things like that. It was a mix of complete and utter joy with a twinge of guilt that I knew would never go away. And I guess that was okay because I should feel guilty and I should remember what I did to Garrett because despite it all, he still wanted to be with me.

~\*~

“Well, well, well.” I heard a familiar voice tease as Garrett and I got out of the car. We managed to make it to the lake in under an hour and a half, the sun still high in the sky. “Is that Jersey and Garrett... Together... Holding hands?”

I felt a blush creep over my cheeks as Garrett pulled his arm around my shoulders. We stumbled over to our friends, the camp fire roaring in front of them.

“Pay up.” John pressed his bottle of beer to his lips. “I told you she wouldn’t even be home a day before they got back together.”

I really wasn’t sure how I was supposed to feel about them betting on our relationship, so I chose to ignore it.

“So...” Sarah smiled, nudging me as I sat down. “How did it happen?”

I started to open my mouth, but Fallon cut me off.

“But you can spare us the details on the make-up sex our apartment probably reeks of.”

My cheeks went red as I looked down to my hands, unaware that Garrett had gone off with a couple of the guys to set the tent up. “He... Um... He came over last night and we talked. Well, I guess he talked.”

“So, you guys are good, then?”

“We’re great.” I smiled.

We spent the rest of the day doing everything you’d do while camping. We went swimming and hiking, and when we got back to camp, we roasted marshmallows, like we were living in some sort of perfect TV sitcom. Despite all the fun we were having, I couldn’t help the exhaustion washing over me.

“You tired?” Garrett whispered into my ear and I just nodded. “C’mon,” he stood up, his hand out and waiting

for mine. I latched on to it and he pulled me up. We said a quick goodnight to Jared and Max before walking over to our tent.

“I had fun.” Garrett said, slipping into his sleeping bag. “I’m glad we came.”

And I was, too. Sure, we spent the whole summer together with our friends, but we were all so distant and doing different things. This was the first time that we got to have fun without the obvious tension.

“C’m on,” Garrett smiled as I tried to get comfortable, which was hard when there was a rock underneath me. “Get close to me.”

“Any closer and I’d be in your sleeping bag.” I laughed.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

I smiled, placing my head on his chest as he wrapped his arm around me. And while his fingers twirled around a piece of my hair, I found myself falling asleep.

*“GET IT OFF OF ME!”*

I shot up, Garrett lagging behind me as he wiped the sleep from his eyes. This wasn’t exactly the wake up call I’d anticipated, or wanted, for that matter. I was more than okay with staying asleep for at least another hour.

*“KENNEDY, GET. IT. OFF. OF. ME.”*

It was Fallon; that much I knew. Her voice had a way of traveling at even the earliest hours. I guess the only thing we should be happy about was that there wasn’t anyone besides us on site.

*“I CAN’T GET IT OFF IF YOU KEEP MOVING.”*

Garrett fell back to the pillow, bringing me with him, softly groaning as he buried his face into my neck.

*“FUCK NATURE. FUCK THIS TRIP. FUCK WHOEVER’S BRIGHT IDEA IT WAS TO COME HERE..”*

“She is so unpleasant in the morning.” Garrett mumbled against my skin.

“Try living with her.” I laughed, rolling onto my side, so that I could see him.

*“CALM DOWN. IT WAS JUST A SPIDER.”*

*“SPIDERS DON’T BELONG ON JUICY COUTURE, KENNEDY. THEY BELONG ON TREES AND ROCKS AND WHEREVER ELSE FUCKING SPIDERS HANG OUT.”*

“We could be in your apartment right now.” Garrett murmured lazily. “Y’know, laying on your bed and not in a tent.”

I laughed, kissing him quickly before falling back to my spot. “You were so glad that we came last night.” I teased.

“Yeah,” he nodded, his arms wrapping behind his head as he laid down. “Well, last night Fallon wasn’t

screaming about a spider.”

“It could be worse.” I reasoned, shrugging as I sat up.

“How on earth could it be worse?” He asked, twisting onto his side and resting his head on the palm of his hand.

I licked my lips, smiling. “I could have been a scorpion.” I laughed, unzipping my sleeping bag.

“Where are you going?” He wondered as I rolled onto my feet, my hand lazily resting on the zipper to the tent.

“I fear that if I don’t go mediate, Fallon will kill Kenny for not getting the spider off fast and efficiently.”

Garrett groaned. “No one cares about Kennedy. Stay in bed.”

I sighed, a laugh begging to escape my throat. “We’re in a tent, Gar. There is no bed.”

“I don’t care.” He mumbled. “Stay with me.”

“You’re so needy.” I shook my head.

“It’s been seven months, Jers.”

I glanced back at him quickly, a smirk tugging at my lips. “And I’ll make you wait seven more.”

Fallon was sitting at the picnic table when I finally got out of the tent, a can of bug spray in her hand as she carelessly sprayed the air around her. I laughed to myself, walking over to her and taking a seat on the opposite side.

“I think you’re repelled, Fal.”

She glared at me, slamming the can down on the table. “I hate nature.”

“It’s not so bad.”

“Oh, please. You’re too busy living in your own little fairytale right now to even care if you had a tarantula crawling on you—”

“*IT WAS NOT A TARANTULA.*” Kennedy screamed through the thin material of his tent.

“And I’m not living in a fairytale.” I added quickly.

“Seriously, Jersey?” She asked. “You’ve got that Disney Princess glow. It’s sickening.”

I glared at her, not entirely sure why I was so offended. “Disney Princesses have their obstacles.”

She furrowed her brows, her jaw dropping slightly. “Two rock stars and a billionaire? Yeah, those were some real obstacles, Jers.

I rolled my eyes. We both knew it was more than that—so much more. And yeah, Stephen and Daniel were part of it, but they weren’t everything. It was trust and it was honesty, and that’s why Garrett and I were back together.

Within the hour, everyone began stumbling out of their tents, confused and tired from the night they spent drinking. I still couldn't stop myself from drifting into my head, unable to grasp the fact that my life, at this moment, was perfect. And I still wasn't completely sure if I deserved to be this happy.

"What are you thinking about?" I hadn't realized Garrett was sitting next to me, his head resting on my shoulder as he placed a sloppy kiss on my cheek.

I smiled, "Just everything."

I found myself spending a lot of time watching John and Sarah, slowly realizing that they fought just as hard as Garrett and I to get to where they are today. They were the least likely of any of us to end up in a relationship and here they were, holding hands as they watched the sun rise over the lake. And I was so happy for them—so happy that they could put aside their fears and admit to each other what they'd known for years.

My mind slowly fell to Fallon and Kennedy, who weren't exactly in love, but you could see it in the way they looked at each other that they were well on their way. Fallon deserved someone like Kennedy and he deserved her. I knew she was afraid, though. She was probably more afraid than Sarah and I combined. People always seemed to leave her, and the fact that Kennedy was in a band that travels nine months out of the year was definitely going to be an adjustment. It would work out, though. I could feel it.

"Jersey Rose."

I smiled as I watched Sarah sit down next to me. "Yes, Sarah Elizabeth?"

"It's good to see you smile."

I felt a blush creep over my cheeks. "It feels good to smile."

I guess I couldn't ask for a better way to end this summer—a summer I couldn't forget if I tried. It was the summer of falling in love and getting my heart broken. I saw some interesting places and met some interesting people. And despite all of the bad, I don't think I'd change anything.

"I think we should pack up." Fallon sighed, standing up from the table. "Summer's over."

~\*~

"Garrett, you missed the exit." I said quietly, sleep suddenly tugging at my eyelids. We'd been driving for an hour and each mile it grew harder to stay awake. I wasn't sure where the exhaustion came from. I hadn't slept as well as I had these past few nights in a long time.

"I know." He replied back just as softly, his right hand casually draped over the wheel.

At first I wasn't sure where he was going, my sleepy eyes engulfed in miles and miles of abandoned highway, but the deeper he drove, the quicker I realized. As the sun set behind the mountains, I slowly became more comfortable with the surroundings—the complete and utter stillness and familiarity. It had been so long, but I could never forget.

It was another ten minutes before he stopped the car and unbuckled his seatbelt. He smiled over at me as I pushed the door open. He waited for me at the hood of the car, his arm extended out and I grabbed onto his hand.

Our short walk was filled with memories I seemed to push to the back of my head—the smell, the tiny purple wildflowers sprouting from the ground, the way the dust danced perfectly in the wind. I'd forgotten the feeling I was left with the first time he'd taken me here. It was the first time I realized I was in too deep.

"I came back here a lot after what happened in December." Garrett said as we fell to that spot free of flowers and cacti. "But it just felt so lonely and I think that's what made me miss you most—I was just so lonely all the time."

I place my head on his chest as we laid down, one of his arms wrapped tight around my shoulders and the other elevating his head.

"But being here with you now..." He said slowly, his chest raising and falling. "It just feels right, like if we just spent the rest of our lives laying here, I'd be okay with that."

I smiled. "G-Garrett?" My voice quivered.

"What?" He asked quickly, almost nervously. "Please, don't tell me it's another scorpion."

I laughed, picking my head up so I could see him. "It's just... I love you. And that time we spent apart... It was the worst time of my life... And I just... I don't want to lose you again."

He pulled me closer, pressing his lips to the top of my head. "I'm not going anywhere, Jers. I love you too much."

It might seem like this was the perfect fairytale ending, like we had everything figured out, but we didn't. And maybe we never would, but that was part of the adventure.