

HATE LOVING YOU

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WELCOME!

I'm so glad to have you as a subscriber and a fan. It means a lot to me that you've joined me on this wilde ride (see what I did there?) and I hope you know that we're in for a lot of fun.

Let's start with Bee and Dex. This sexy, sweet bad boy story is all about second chances. Love will always find a way, am I right?

Enjoy this exclusive read from yours truly, and thank you, sincerely, for all your support.

♡ amelia

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It's not often that an old man smiles at you without wanting something dirty. Leonard Howe, my boss, somehow manages to pull it off. "I don't know what we'd do without you, Abby. There isn't a soul in this company I'd trust more than you. It's the perfect promotion for you." I've worked for his company since the day I graduated college. He still looks the same as he did four years ago.

I'm going to *keep* working here. It's not that I'm leaving. Not really. I'm getting promoted, and my stomach churns at the thought.

"Thank you, Mr. Howe. It'll be nice to be closer to my parents for a while. Back near the water. It's hard to be away."

"I can understand that. Those little villages up north are God's country."

It seems like such a small thing, being away from the water. It's not. I loved the city when I moved here after high school but the endless dry roads are eating away at my soul.

I miss the lake breezes, the way the mornings are cool in the summer. You don't know what you've got 'til it's gone.

"They really are."

"Tell your parents I said hello, will you?" My parents have never met my boss, but you'd never know it from talking to him.

"Of course, Mr. Howe. I'll check in with you on Monday from the new space."

The sun still streams in through his office windows. It's just after five o'clock. The work day is about to be over, and if I didn't have to drive three hours north, I'd spend the rest of the evening outside on my patio. Well, the patio that I used to have.

I packed up the last boxes from my apartment this morning. It was bittersweet, taking the final things out of the cupboards and tucking them away in sturdy boxes. I've lived in that apartment since my sophomore year of college and loved every minute of it. It might have been small and a little on the crappy side, but it was mine.

Leonard Howe presses my hand and sends me on my way.

My four-year work anniversary is coming up. During those years Howe Marketing International has grown and so have I. Now it's my big chance to be part of the expansion.

It *does* mean living practically in my hometown, something I wasn't exactly thrilled about when Leonard called me into his office and explained excitedly that he was opening a new branch in Beechford and he wanted me to head it up. Beechford is only twenty minutes from Winthrop Harbor, where my parents still live.

I swore I'd never move back there. I've kept visits practical and minimal—some weekends and holidays. I spent a single summer there after college. But moving back was never an option.

Not after what happened with Dex.

But my parents are getting older. Not as old as Leonard, but older, and it's time I gave up my childish insistence on staying away. I can't keep letting the ghost of what could have been with Dex get in the way of spending precious time with my family.

I need to focus on the positives.

The new office is going to be mine, all mine. I'll be running the whole thing, reporting directly to Leonard remotely.

Steering my car carefully out of the parking lot, I turn right onto Parkside Drive. HMI's headquarters are located across from a sprawling county park. I'll miss walking there at lunchtime.

The only thing left to do is say goodbye to my boyfriend, Tom.

I catch myself sighing. Tom's great. He really is. Maybe he can be a little much sometimes, a little possessive, a little too into his passion for the Second Amendment, but that doesn't make him a villain. He's a decent guy.

He's just no Dex.

Even eight years later, driving in traffic reminds me cruising around town in Dex's car, holding hands with the radio loud.

I'm on my way to meet my boyfriend but the face on my mind is Dex's.

We were such stupid kids back then. You always think there'll be enough time to do the really important things, and then it gets yanked away from you. Dex used to write me a letter every day and fold it up into a paper football. I saved every one of them, tucking them neatly into a three-ring binder, each one in its own plastic page protector.

The first summer I came home from college, I threw the binder away along with all my other "high school junk."

My heart sinks just thinking of that binder.

I wish I'd kept it.

More than that, I wish he'd called to apologize, to take everything back.

I held on to that hope for two years. But he never called, and so I got over him.

At least I *told* myself I got over him.

Deep down I know the truth.

Deep down I'm still in love with him.

I hate him for what he did. And I love him.

They're stupid, absurd thoughts, and I shake my head hard to clear them away as I pull into the parking lot of the Arbor Cafe, where Tom and I eat most of our lunches and dinners out. He's waiting for me out front. He doesn't see me. His cell phone takes up all of his attention.

What would happen if I just drove away right now?

My foot goes to the brake, and my hand to the gear shift.

No.

Tom is considerate, even if looking at him doesn't send a shiver of pleasure down my spine. He's handsome in his way. Dark hair, dark eyes. But I was kidding myself if I thought our mostly comfortable companionship held a candle to the wild passion that Dex and I felt for each other. Besides, Tom has never given me the slightest inkling that he's going to up and leave. He's in it for the long haul.

Beginning with Dex, I dated a long string of men who left as soon as they got what they wanted. Tom is the first one I can trust not to turn his back on me.

Leaving the car in park, I turn it off and step out. Tom raises his eyes from his phone, and a strange smile plays across his face when he sees me. He looks nervous and shy and my gut lurches again. I don't know why this certainty is hitting me right now, and so suddenly, but it is.

Something's going on.



Inside the cafe, Tom has had our regular table dressed up with a fancy tablecloth and candles. Our favorite waitress, Candy, approaches the table, positively beaming. Her blonde hair is piled on top of her head and hairsprayed to within an inch of its life. She wears her makeup thick and heavy, layers of black mascara and bright lipstick, so her wide smile is framed by a vivid pop of color.

"How are you doing, sweetheart?" she says to me as I take my seat.

“Great, Candy. I’ll miss you, though!” She knows this will be my last meal here for a while. Is that why they’ve pulled out all the stops?

“And you know I’ll miss you!” she cries, and then gives my arm a motherly pat. “But today we’ve got a little surprise for you. Sit back and relax, okay?” She gives Tom a wink before disappearing into the kitchen.

“What, no menus?” I say to Tom, but he just quietly smiles at me. His expression is odd. It’s somewhere between smirking and lust, and I don’t like it. What the hell is up with him?

Candy starts bringing out all of my favorite appetizers, followed by my favorite meal. It’s nothing fancy, just a burger with ketchup and the spiral fries the cafe is famous for, but it’s plated especially carefully today. Candy never stops smiling throughout the entire meal. She’s normally pretty upbeat, but even this is over the top.

I’ve never felt so uneasy in my life.

As Candy clears away the last of our dishes, I glance around. The cafe’s dining area is small but impeccably kept. Jerry, the owner, has owned the place since the 1950s. It’s still got that ’50s charm but Jerry has been meticulous about refurbishing it over the years with classic, yet modern, pieces. The one thing that’s always remained the same is the long counter at the back of the room. I sit there sometimes when I’m eating here by myself. The round stools are empty right now. Except...

The rest of the wait staff, along with Jerry, has gathered in the small dining area of the cafe.

What the fuck is going on?

Tom clears his throat and lays his hand over mine on the table. It feels like he's trapping my hand there, not holding it. I want to jerk my hand away. It's not the first time I've felt that way over the last couple of months. But I can't do that in front of all these people.

Then it hits me.

Oh, my god.

This isn't happening.

But it is.

"Abigail, you're an amazing woman. Probably the most amazing woman I've ever met. And you think I'm pretty great, too."

Judging by the quirky smile on his face, Tom thinks he's being romantic, but something about his voice is off. It's not just the sound that I suddenly find grating and awful. His words seem stilted, scripted, like he's performing for the diner staff.

I try to smile back at him. Do I feel like this because of the audience? No. That's not all of it. We've never discussed plans for marriage. Not explicitly. Tom must have assumed that this is what I wanted and gone ahead with his plan without asking me about it.

I think of his odd, dark apartment, and the way he constantly talks about cars and guns but can't carry on a conversation about any topic without spouting off every available piece of information he knows about it first.

And how I don't bring Tom back to Winthrop Harbor to see

my parents very often, even though we've spent two years together. There's always an uneasiness in the pit of my stomach when I think about doing it. He's been polite to my parents on the few occasions I've taken him to visit, but I always feel on edge.

How have I ignored all this?

Because it was so easy to stay in a holding pattern with him. My career has taken up much more of my attention.

It's too much to process all at once.

But Tom is still talking.

"We're going to have a wonderful life together. Marry me, Abigail." He gets down on one knee next to the table, pulling a small black box from his pocket. When he opens it, the too-large diamond nestled inside gleams in the 5:30 light coming through the front window of the cafe.

It's all wrong. Everything about this is wrong.

When I look down at Tom, kneeling in our favorite restaurant with a ring I would never have chosen in a million years, the image of Dex's face flashes in my mind.

Dex should be the one proposing.

But he didn't want to be with me.

He didn't even want to date me.

That's how I ended up *here*.

And yet—

Everyone in the cafe holds their breath. Candy, standing in the corner behind Tom, clasps her hands in front of her

and rises up on her tiptoes in anticipation of my “yes.” I can tell she’s just waiting to rush forward and hug us both, and the rest of the staff probably has some celebratory champagne hidden away behind the counter for when this is over.

I open my mouth, color rushing to my cheeks. Sweat pricks underneath my arms. Thank god I’m still wearing the black blazer I wore to the office today. Normally I can’t wait to get out of my work clothes—I’m a yoga pants girl at heart—but the blazer is highly forgiving and right now I feel like I’m in some interrogation room with a single lightbulb shining down on me.

That’s not how a proposal is supposed to feel.

“What’s it going to be, doll?” calls Jerry from behind the counter, and everyone laughs, taking the tension out of the room.

For everyone but me.

I close my mouth, then open it again and look down into Tom’s eyes. He’s still smiling, but after another long moment goes by the corners of his mouth turn down. The excited light goes out of his eyes.

“Listen,” I croak, and I know this is not the right word. It’s not the right thing to say at all. Then, because I’m the worst person to ever walk the earth, I follow it up with something even worse. “Tom, I’m sorry.”

Candy’s hands go to her forehead. The rest of the wait staff doesn’t know what to do. Suddenly they’re all fidgeting. Looking everywhere but our table. There’s only one customer in here aside from us—an old man who seems

largely oblivious to what's going on. He doesn't even need a refill.

"I can't. I'm sorry," I say, grabbing for my purse, which I've slung over the back of the chair. I hate purses. I'd rather just carry my wallet in my hand. My cheeks are on fire as Tom awkwardly stands up and puts the box back into his pocket. My hand finally closes over a loose \$20 I knew I had somewhere in the cavernous depths of that damn purse and I throw it onto the table.

The fresh air outside the cafe tastes like freedom.

What the hell did I just do?

I climb into my car, throwing my purse onto the passenger seat.

As I pull away, I see Tom standing by our table, looking down at the ground. Candy pats his arm. It doesn't matter. He is utterly alone.

I slide out from underneath the body of the Volvo I'm working on. It's finally done, and I'm thrilled, because the guy who brought it in is one of my least favorite people on earth. I'd love to punch Patrick Stevens in the face, but it's been eight years since...

I can't think about it. I just get the jobs done and get them back out the door. I keep my mouth shut. Opening it just gets me in trouble.

There's also the inconvenient fact that Patrick Stevens happens to be my father. Not that he was a good one when it counted.

"It's all finished," I call to Mike, of Mike's Car Repair. Mike lifts a burly, tattooed arm and gives me a crooked grin. He might be a terrifying sight to some people but he's a good guy who's saved my ass more than once. When I came crawling back from a year in Chicago that almost killed me, he gave me a job tending the shop while I got my certification. For eighteen months, I

handed back keys and cleaned the place up after hours. As soon as I graduated from the program at the local trade school he hired me on, not another word spoken about it.

I'm not really worth his kindness, but I'm grateful for it anyway.

"See you tomorrow, buddy," calls Mike, wiping a greasy hand across his forehead.

"Bright and early."

Stripping off the light-blue coveralls with my name stitched in red on the front, I toss them into the laundry bin by the door to the back room. Julie, the woman who works part-time at the desk, runs them through a heavy wash cycle every night. She's a petite little thing and usually quiet, but every so often one of the new guys crosses her. That's a sight to see.

Back at my car, I slide into the driver's seat, then pull out my phone. I finally have a smartphone. It isn't the newest model, so it's slow as hell sometimes, but that's fine with me. I wait semi-patiently for the apps to load, then enter my working hours into a finance app I downloaded just for the purpose of getting the hell out of here as soon as I can afford it.

As I punch in the numbers and watch it calculate my savings goals, my cheeks heat up. Nobody's looking—we mind our own business in the parking lot at Mike's—but when my stained thumbs hit the screen it reminds me of Abby. She was always writing down numbers on paper, figuring out how we could make a life together even while she was in college. Her face lit up when we talked about

those plans, like estimating our electric bill was the most fun she'd ever had in her life.

Bee.

I try not to think of her, but she's been on my mind every damn day since I left her standing at the Overlook, tears streaking down her cheeks.

What the fuck was I thinking?

She was the best thing that ever happened to me, then and now, and I'd driven away like some douchebag.

Never got the balls to call and apologize, either.

I was an asshole, no arguments there. But it's probably for the best. From what I've seen on her profile—and it isn't much, because I never had the courage to friend her, either—she's successful and happy, just like I figured she'd be if she could just get rid of the anchor around her neck.

Me.

I've never done anyone any good.

Not even myself, until now.

I close out the app and start up my car. It's a tan Chevy Malibu Maxx, ten years old with a hatchback style only a mother could love. I pretend to hate it in front of the other guys at the shop. It's not my dream car but it gets me from A to B, so I have a soft spot for it. Other than a car that runs, there's nothing else I really need.

Except maybe a few hours in bed with a woman who knows what she's doing.

Bee always knew what she was doing. She wasn't easy, but

somehow she knew just how to drive me crazy. I can't tell you how many times we both got in trouble for staying out late. More often than not, it was because we'd been fooling around in the back of her car or mine.

I can still feel the way her lips wrapped around my cock, sucking and tugging until I exploded in her mouth.

As I steer the Malibu out onto the highway my cock twitches at the memory. She was so hot. So sweet. So mine.

If I could change anything about my life, it would be walking away from her that night.

Because, damn it, I still love her just as much as I did that day.

I always will.

Maybe someday I'll have the chance to tell her everything.

No. I can't even entertain the thought. It hurts like a bitch.

I should have told her then. She was my best friend. She would have understood. She would have had a way out.

It's too late now.

Reaching down, I adjust myself and shift in my seat. I've got about three hours before my evening class, and it only takes ten minutes to shower. Nikki, my neighbor across the hall, is usually down for a quick screw, no strings attached. It's been working out pretty well for the better part of two years. She has her issues and I have mine, and we both get a little comfort out of some skin-to-skin contact.

I'm starting to wonder, though. The looks she's been giving me lately aren't what you'd expect after a casual hookup.

Hate Loving You

But I can't do that with her. Women have fallen for me before. It's always a mess. I'm a fucking disaster for them and it's all because of Bee.

A twinge of guilt pricks at my chest. But I let myself linger in that memory too long, and it's a dick move, but I've got to get this energy out somehow. This will be the last time I knock on her door.

After this, I'll be on my own.

Shit, shit, *shit*. What was Tom thinking, proposing like that in front of Candy? Mortifying. Absolutely mortifying. I'm glad to be free of him.

On the drive to Beechford I turned the music up loud and sang along to all the shitty pop songs he hated.

He's not a bad guy. He really isn't. And I feel awful for turning him down in front of Jerry and Candy and everyone else, but with every mile I drove away from him, the better I felt. The trip home gave me a solid three hours to turn over all the reasons I didn't want to be with him in my mind, and there were many, many small things that added up to...what happened in the diner.

I don't need him. He was a weight around my neck, dragging me straight to the bottom of an uninteresting life. The kind of life you look back on with a creeping regret. Yuck. That is the *last* thing I want.

It doesn't matter now. It's behind me. I'm a grown woman with a career that couldn't be better, and I don't need him.

I'm free as a bird. Light as a feather. All kinds of flying metaphors. Everything you can think of. I always knew I had to be independent, anyway. One experience in high school can teach you everything you need to know about that. It sure as hell did for me. I didn't even know what it meant, back then. Now I know.

My brand-new condo is so cute I can hardly stand it. When I got the promotion from Leonard he made me promise that I'd find a nice place in Beechford. I picked out a condo with a view of the lake. It's not lakefront property—I *wish*—but there's still an unobstructed view from the front window.

I love it.

The only problem is that the view out on Beechford has me remembering all those *other* years. The Dex years.

No. I'm not going to do that to myself now. This new job will be the perfect way to get over Dex once and for all and take over my own life.

Stacking another box on top of the piles already delivered by the movers, I brush a few strands of hair out of my face and look around. My car didn't take long to unpack. It'll take the rest of the weekend to get all this stuff where it's supposed to be. I could get started now.

A glance out the window reveals a golden evening. My legs are itching to move.

I need to get this day out of my system. Calm down a little bit.

The boxes can wait.

The giant duffel bag I packed with all my essentials sits in

the center of the queen-size bed I had delivered last week, and instead of making the bed I unzip the bag and dig through it, pulling out a pair of running capris and my favorite sleeveless racerback top. Its neon-green shade coordinates with the stripe running down the sides of the capris. This outfit always makes me feel like a total badass.

In minutes I've pulled my hat over my ponytail and laced up my shoes. Pulling the door tightly closed behind me, I tuck my shiny new key into the pocket hidden in my waistband.

I fly down the stairs and onto the sidewalk, finally free.

When I pull into the small parking lot behind my building, Nikki's car is parked at the opposite end. Perfect. It's been a long day at the shop and I won't be able to sit through class unless I can get this weird energy out of me.

Maybe I'll take her a coffee. That would make me less of an asshole, right?

Locking my car, I step away and head around toward the front of the building. Nikki and I live in two of the four units above one block of downtown businesses. Normally these apartments would have been refurbished and rented out to rich tourists, but Patty, the woman who owns the building, is too good for that. The last time I asked her about it, she'd laughed and patted my arm.

"I'm already rich enough, Dex. I'd rather give people a place to live and work."

A rare opinion, especially in a lakeside town like Beechford. If there were more people like her, I wouldn't be planning to

move out the second I landed myself a better job after graduation.

If I *could* graduate.

I push that thought away hard. My dumbass decisions have already prevented me from graduating high school, and even if starting a real career seems pointless without someone like Bee by my side, I'm going to do it. I can't let my mom down again.

After everything that happened, she took it hard when I went to Chicago. I went with a girl who started out as a friend and turned into a nightmare. My mom left me voice-mails every week begging me to come home, to move back into the basement bedroom I'd had since I was ten years old, and start over.

But nineteen-year-olds are stubborn assholes and I was no exception. Even when the situation with *her* spiraled out of control, I couldn't admit it to anyone.

What would they have said? I already knew it was my fault.

It wasn't until she tried to push me off our seventh-floor balcony during a fight that my survival instinct did me any good, and I got the fuck out of there. But with only a GED to my name there weren't many opportunities.

Mike was the one who saved my life. Not that I'd ever say it to him out loud.

On the ground floor of our building, a tiny coffee shop is sandwiched between an office suite and an art gallery. If I don't make my own coffee, this is where I buy it, and Nikki likes their iced mochas.

I'm about to open the door when I see her.

It's Bee.

And she's running right toward me.

My entire body freezes at the sight of her, then goes warm.

My heart hammers in my chest. Is it actually her?

Even as I ask myself the question, I know the answer. I'd know that gait anywhere. She's always run the same way. The only thing that's different is her clothes. She's got some fancy exercise outfit on.

What do I do?

My hand tightens on the door handle. I can just disappear inside, and she'll never be the wiser. She hasn't seen me yet. There's a calm, peaceful look on her face, like she's thinking about something pleasant.

She comes to a stop in front of the office suite and presses her face against the window. A breeze kicks up the air around her, and I can smell her. For the first time in eight years I can actually smell her, a light flowery scent mixed with the salt of her run. My chest tightens.

A memory of her straddling me in the backseat of her car, her legs working as she pumped her eighteen-year-old body up and down on my cock, flashes into my mind. I can't shove the thought away fast enough to avoid getting a raging erection.

God, she looks fucking amazing.

Her body is lithe and lean. She was never tall, but now she's petite with a strength about her she didn't have back then.

Maybe she lifts weights. She looked comfortable as she ran, not out of breath. It wasn't a struggle. Confidence radiates from her in the way she stands, the way she shifts her weight.

She's different, but so much the same.

Her sandy hair is pulled through the opening in the back of her hat. I want to run my fingers through it more than I've ever wanted anything.

She's still peering through the window, really looking inside. Why? What could she want in there? A new sign hangs above the doorway, but it's been covered for the last week. Some new business is moving in, I guess.

Then she turns and moves like she's going to go up to the door. It's recessed in a little alcove. I catch her eye.

She gives me a half-smile, polite.

Does a double-take.

Her shoulders stiffen and her eyes go wide.

I can't run now.

There's nowhere to hide.

I drop my hand from the door handle and shove my hands into my pockets. There's still grease on my nails from the shop.

The words slip out before I can stop myself.

"Hey, Bee."

The early summer weather seeps through the open windows of my high school Spanish classroom, taunting us with its sweetness. Our teacher, Mrs. Vasquez, is really being valiant about this entire thing. She's going to teach us right up until the end.

There are two days left of school.

I'm a really good student—straight As—but I'm at the end of my academic rope. I know, and Mrs. Vasquez knows, that the papers have all been turned in and these last days of Spanish conversation are futile.

In front of me, Dex twists in his seat. He's wearing his favorite t-shirt—a soft gray Led Zeppelin shirt with a print from the 1977 tour, whatever that was—and it hugs his body in a snug, familiar away.

I don't know what I want more: for him to take the shirt off or to be able to slide my hands underneath the shirt, all over his warm skin.

We've been flirting all year. For more than a year, actually, but this year things intensified because we had four classes together.

This year I learned why it's called a crush. Whenever I look at him my chest contracts, squeezing the air from my lungs. *Crush.*

His blue eyes are on me, dancing with happiness. Dex isn't much for homework but he loves being at school. His dad is living at home this month so school is his favorite place to be.

"Hola. Cómo estás?" he says.

"Muy bien," I say, my cheeks hot.

With a sly grin, he leans over my desk. "Do you have plans after school?"

"Yes," I whisper back.

"What are they?"

"I'm going to the beach."

"What?" His whisper-screch makes me burst out into giggles.

"The. Beach."

"I thought you said something else!"

"What else would I possibly say?" Everything about him makes me giddy. I cover my mouth so that the giggling doesn't get out of control.

"Can I come with you?"

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" I heard a rumor last week

that he's dating Carolyn Cross, a girl at least twice as pretty as I am.

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"I don't know..."

He throws up his hands in mock indignation. "If you don't want me there, just say so."

"No! You should come." I search for something funny to say. "I hear the swing set is a nonstop thrill ride."

Dex opens his mouth to answer, his eyes crinkled with laughter, but Mrs. Vasquez swoops in, tapping his desk with a manicured fingernail.

"En Español, por favor," she says, trying to sound stern, and we both dissolve into laughter.

"Hola," says Dex while she sweeps away, her mouth quirked with a smile. "¿Dónde está la playa?"

"Muy bien."



Dex and I walk from school to the beach, talking over each other and laughing without a pause. I feel lighter than air. There is no sign of Carolyn Cross. Dex's blue eyes are only for me.

My heart pounds against my ribcage as we walk along the water, picking up the prettiest stones and slipping them into our pockets.

I make any excuse possible to touch Dex. I steady myself on his arm to bend down for a delicate shell. I put my feet in

the water. It's ice-cold, and when I jump back, shrieking, I clutch at his elbow.

He makes excuses to touch me, too. He chases me down the beach and grabs for my waist, swinging me up into the air.

I am simultaneously breathless and breathing the easiest I have ever breathed in my life.

We have climbed between two sand dunes and nestled ourselves in the pocket between them when Dex wraps one arm around me. I lay my head on his shoulder, my entire body vibrating with the closeness.

When he lifts my chin and kisses me, tasting like winter-green gum and love, I know pure pleasure for the first time.

I don't notice the guy in the doorway of the shop right away. All the doors on this block lead into sections of one big building, probably built in the '40s for a department store, that's been divided up into three units on the ground floor, each with their own recessed entry alcove. It's quaint in a completely Beechford kind of way.

Across the street is a similar building with four shops on the street level. It's not quite a county park, but the way the sun shines down onto the street washes away some of my reservations about moving back up north. It's a couple blocks away from Main Street, where most of the restaurants have clustered, so I don't feel self-conscious about pressing my face up against the window like a kid at a pet store.

I decided to run by the office as soon as I left my new place. It took two miles to get here, but the route I took was along the new bike trail nestled along the lakeshore. The main roads would shave off some distance.

Walking home some days wouldn't be a stretch.

The office is a simple setup, but it looks like it'll be perfect. Along the back wall, I can see a small meeting room and a slightly larger office. *My* office. Thinking it makes my heart jump a little. In the larger front area, there are four computer stations set up for my new employees. Two of them are coming with me from headquarters, and the final interviews are set up for next week. But for a couple of days it'll just be me setting up shop.

I know I'm ignoring what I did to Tom back at the cafe. There's probably going to be some fallout. I should work out what I'm going to say to him.

But he hasn't texted me or tried to call me, so screw it. I'll cross that bridge if I ever come to it.

This is my moment.

I blow a pleased breath out through my lips and start to cross over to the alcove.

That's when I see him.

He's about to go into the coffee shop between my new office and the art gallery on the other side, but he's frozen, staring at me. His hand drops from the door handle.

Those eyes.

My breath catches in my throat.

My heart is instantly pounding.

I haven't seen Dex since that night at the Overlook. A couple of times that summer I thought I caught a glimpse of his shoulders retreating into a crowd, but he never came to speak to me again. And he never, ever called.

This isn't the same Dex.

He was attractive in high school, and I loved his body then.
But now—

He's something else.

The eight years we spent apart have turned him into a man. Toned muscles have replaced his lean, boyish arms, and one of his biceps is decorated with more than one tattoo. There's something harder about his face. He has a hollow beneath his cheekbones that wasn't there before. His hair is messy, but not out of control, just how I like it.

He's so hot it sends a jolt right to my core.

I want to run to him, to wrap my arms around his neck and pull him down so I can kiss him hard.

And I want to slap his face for walking away from me.

My mind races. What the hell am I going to say? What do I do? I can't get my thoughts in order. I can't get my mouth to work.

I'm overwhelmed by how close he is, and how far he is at the same time. I can't count the number of nights I spent lying awake, wishing I had his phone number. Before today I'd have said it was a good thing I didn't. I'm not stunning enough for begging to be attractive.

He speaks first.

"Hey, Bee."

Aside from my family and closest friends, that nickname hasn't been used for eight years. The instant the word is out

of his mouth my heart breaks a little. Then I'm pissed. Who does he think he is?

"Dex."

He flinches a little at my guarded tone. I only see it because I know him so well.

Knew him so well.

There was a bond between us that I thought was unbreakable, especially after...

He tries again.

"How—how are you doing? It's been a long time."

"Yeah. Eight years," I say, and there's acid in my voice. He doesn't seem flustered at all, just a little surprised, and here I am losing control of myself completely. "I'm fine," I say lamely.

"I'm glad to hear it." There's a hitch in his voice. Is his heart about to explode, like mine? Or, after all these years, is he over me? Over us?

"What are you doing here?" I say, because even though I shouldn't care, I have to know. We never spent much time in Beechford. I never thought I'd run into him here.

He cocks his head toward the coffee shop. "Just...getting a coffee."

Unbelievable.

Eight years, and we haven't spoken once. He hasn't so much as connected with me online. Practically everyone from our class is friends with each other. There were only a hundred

of us, and I know he has a profile. Yet he couldn't even bring himself to do that.

Eight years and I run into him on the sidewalk. While he's on his way to buy coffee.

My not-even ex-boyfriend, who broke my heart.

Who saved me. Then shattered me.

Back when we were an almost-item, he never drank coffee. Said he didn't like the taste. But what the hell do I know?

He knew I was never going to love anyone the way I loved him. He knew it, and he walked away anyway.

I could kill him.

I could kiss him.

I could do so much more. Looking into his eyes brings up a furious montage of everything we ever did in the back of my car. I want all of it back. I want all of it again. No other man—and I dated hard in college—could ever do the things he did to me just the way I liked.

I've spent these years wondering what happened to him, what he's done with his life. He never updates his profile picture online. The last one he put up is years old.

Not that I should be keeping track.

I would never admit to clicking over to his profile late at night. Or how, whenever his old buddies—bad boys, all of them—post a “throwback” picture with him in it, his blue eyes staring at me from the screen, my heart twists in my chest.

Now they're staring at me in real life, and I never want him to look away.

I missed him so much.

And I'm never going to admit it.

I want to say something snappy and biting, something to let him know that I don't care about running into him. That it won't have any effect on me whatsoever.

I want to say I'm not going to fall for him again, because I know it'll end in me seeing his back as he leaves me behind.

"Well," I say, shifting my weight from one foot to the other. "Have—have a good rest of your day."

Nailed it.

Shit. Could I be any less cool?

He nods, disappointment flashing across his face.

But why? What did he think was going to happen?

"You too—" I can tell he's about to say 'Bee' again, but he'd better not. Because if he says it one more time I won't be able to stand it. I'll go over and grab fistfuls of his gray t-shirt, I'll wrap my arms around my neck, I'll kiss him until we're both out of breath. I'll never let go. "You too, Abby. It was nice to run into you."

Then he turns, pulls open the door of the coffee shop, and goes inside.

Before I can follow him, I spin on my heel and take off running.

I walk up to the counter of the coffee place in a daze, my palms slick with sweat.

What. The. Fuck.

I finally see the girl of my dreams, the love of my damn life, and all I can say is “it was nice to run into you”? What the hell?

I’ve pictured that moment so many times. The moment I finally found the courage inside my shriveled man-heart to find her, to look into her eyes, and to tell her everything. In my imagination, she was Bee, and she got me, and all that shit was forgiven. We could start over afterward. In my wildest fantasies I’d be able to turn back the clock and never say those words to her at all. I’d wrap my arms around her on the Overlook and kiss her until everything was back to normal.

Her plan would have worked. Even if it didn’t, we’d be living with the knowledge that we gave it a try. Who the hell

knows? Maybe we'd have ended up in this exact situation anyway.

The girl behind the counter gives me a strange look, and I realize I've been standing there, staring up at the menu, for way too long.

The thought of knocking on Nikki's door suddenly tastes bitter in my mouth. There's no way I can touch her. Not when I've just seen the only person I ever want to touch for the rest of my life.

"Sorry," I say, backing away from the counter. "I guess I don't need anything after all."

"No problem," the girl chirps at me. She's a redhead, and she's new. Not one of the regular baristas here. Thankfully.

My thoughts are going too fast for me to sort them out, and if the pounding in my chest is any indication I might go into full cardiac arrest.

She is still so gorgeous. I thought Bee was perfect back in high school, but the woman she is now is on a different level. She's the kind of woman I would marry if I could be sure I wouldn't ruin her life.

That's not true. She's the only woman I'd marry.

But I've deserved everything that's happened to me. Even in Chicago.

Blindly, I make my way around to the back of the building, where a staircase leads up to the landing for the apartments.

I have to get a grip. But my entire body is buzzing with the sight of her. I've wanted her to be that close again for years.

I've wanted her to be much, much closer.

All through that year in the city, every time I closed my eyes to sleep, my mind would fill with images of her, of her sweet, soft body, of her flawless skin pressed against mine in the backseat of my car. That tiny-ass car. I could barely squeeze my six-foot frame into that backseat, but when she was in it with me, it became my entire world.

She always smelled so clean, so lovely.

Her hair would hang down and brush my chest when we fucked like that, and it set all my nerves on fire.

When I left her, I left the best parts of myself behind.

I finally got a chance to do something about the gaping hole in my life where she had been, and I blew it.

“Fuck.” I slam the side of my fist against the siding. It hurts. The pain jolts me out of my crazy mood.

I take a deep breath.

Let it out slowly.

I can't let the anger get the better of me. Reacting to my anger is what lost me Bee in the first place, and I'm not going to make that mistake again.

Even if she's already gone, running away from me. Literally.

When I've got my trembling body under control I walk up the stairs. I need to shower, and then get ready for class. That's what I have to do. No exceptions.

But when I step into the hallway outside my door, Nikki's swings open and she looks out at me.

The thing that drew me to Nikki in the first place was her similarity to Bee, but now that I've seen Bee again it's obvious that Nikki could never measure up. They're both petite, but Nikki has the delicate look of a former drug user, which she probably is. Her skin is too pale, like she's been inside for years, and she has a shifty way of speaking, of looking at people. I've screwed her at least twenty times and I don't think we've ever made eye contact for more than a split second.

Bee looks strong. Vibrant. She has the light tan she'd always start to get in the spring, no matter how much sunscreen she slathered on. She was religious about that shit, applying it after every shower and then again during the day. I can hear her saying, "Skin cancer is not a joke, Dex."

Nikki's once-sandy hair is bleached blonde now. She dyed it one too many times. It's just not the same anymore. And her placid blue eyes...well, they're nothing compared to Bee's electric green ones.

I give her a quick nod like I'm in a hurry and move toward my apartment door. She doesn't know class is still two and a half hours in the future.

Nikki doesn't buy it. Instead of going back into her apartment, she steps into the hallway.

"Dex. Wait."

I turn, look at her, and feel exhausted. She's not the person I want to be with. The person I want to be with, have always wanted to be with, just appeared on the sidewalk and shook me to the core.

And now she's gone. Again.

“I don’t have time, Nikki.”

“It’s important.”

The sigh I let out is a dick move and I know it, but everything about Nikki makes me sick right now. “What is it?”

Her pale eyes scan mine for a fleeting instant and dart away. She purses her lips. Nikki’s not bad, exactly, but she’s nothing compared to Bee. And I know she has a temper. I’ve heard her screaming into her phone more than a few times. She’s never tried that kind of shit with me, but strings or no, she’s not going to be happy when I quit coming around.

They never are.

“Never mind,” she says, turning back to her own apartment.

Reaching out, I catch her by the elbow, guilt already burning a hole in my gut. Guilt from the past. Guilt from now. I shouldn’t be so hard on her. It’s not my fault she’ll never measure up to a girl who doesn’t give a shit about me anymore.

“What is it, Nikki? Tell me.”

She spins back around, and there’s a strange gleam in her eyes.

“I’m pregnant.”

On Monday I arrive at the office bright and early, newly cut keys in my purse. Leonard paid the contractors overtime to finish things up on Saturday, so when I get to the building, the sign has been unwrapped and the windows are clean.

I only wish I felt so fresh.

The entire weekend was consumed with Dex. I couldn't stop myself. Every single thing reminded me of him.

On Sunday I went to Winthrop Harbor to see my parents. My mother opened the door with the widest smile I've ever seen stretched across her face, her gray eyes sparkling.

"I've been waiting for the call!" she cried, gathering me into her arms. "Where is he?"

She looked behind me, then back at my face.

My heart sank right into my toes.

Let the fallout begin.

“Bee?” she said, the smile fading from her face. “Where’s Tom?”

“He’s not here, Mom.” My voice was choked with my own guilt. I’d let Tom down hard, taking a page right out of Dex’s playbook.

She ushered me inside, closing the door behind us tightly, as if to shut out the rest of the world.

“What happened, Abby?” Her mouth was set in a thin line, her expression somewhere between disappointment and suspicion.

“Mom. What did Tom tell you, exactly? I’m assuming he called you.”

Just then my dad made his entrance, coming in from the kitchen with a folded newspaper still in his hand. He looked from me to Mom, then back again, before he spoke. “He did more than that, Abby. He drove here last weekend to ask for my blessing.”

“*What?*” The words coming out of my dad’s mouth were incomprehensible.

He’s not the kind of guy who talks about blessings. His own mother is an on-again, off-again Christian Scientist who only attends services when she feels guilty about something that could easily be smoothed over with a simple apology. Only she doesn’t *do* apologies. She does trying to control other people until they finally snap. She’s going to give herself a stroke.

Anyway, *my* mother could generously be called a lapsed Catholic, so there’s not a lot of precedent for blessings.

Where the hell did Tom get off asking my parents for their *blessing*, anyway? I'm twenty-six years old. If I want to get engaged, I'll get engaged, permission notwithstanding.

I ran a hand through my hair, trying to choose some halfway appropriate words to use instead of the ones I wanted to say. "He didn't tell me he was coming to talk to you. Frankly I find it a little creepy that he came to ask your *permission* to marry me."

"We thought it was nice, Abby. You don't bring him around very often. He was clearly trying to make a connection with the family." My mom looked a little hurt that I would turn on Tom like that. Bizarre, considering they'd never seemed to like him very much until...right at that moment.

"I don't think it's nice." I lifted my chin. It was so *not* the conversation I'd anticipated having when I got in my car to drive over from the condo, which was still a disaster zone.

What the hell. "You should know that Tom and I broke up on Friday."

Given how my parents were acting, I was surprised Tom hadn't called them himself.

"Oh, Bee," said my mom, stepping forward to wrap me in a hug. "What happened? He seemed so sincere last weekend. I can't believe he changed his mind so quickly."

Oh, for Christ's sake.

"It wasn't him, Mom," I said into her shoulder, then pulled back, freeing myself from her arms. "He proposed on Friday. I turned him down. We're over."

My dad shook his head, clearly disappointed that I'd thrown

away such a golden opportunity. “Why, Abby? I thought you two had a good thing going.”

“Something wasn’t right, Dad. Something was missing. It’s done. We’re *over*.”

Dex.

Dex was the missing thing. But I couldn’t tell my parents that. They watched me mope around the entire summer before college. I threw myself into my job at the local coffee shop and pulled constant double shifts. I blew off plans with friends. When I wasn’t working, I slept.

It was all because of Dex.

When they finally questioned me about it, I told them the bare bones of the story.

Back then they’d dismissed it as puppy love gone out of control. After that I didn’t tell them much of anything. But any time I went through a breakup in college they wanted to know if it was “another Dex situation.”

Sunday wasn’t the time to mention that I’d run into him in Beechford and hadn’t stopped thinking about him since.

After I admitted to the breakup, the visit was strained. When my parents started putting together a shopping list I took it as the perfect opportunity to leave.

As soon as I was in my car, the muscles in my back started to relax. I hadn’t known they were tense.

Striding toward the building with my keys in hand, I take a deep breath of the cool morning air, fragrant with the scent of the flowers in the city’s carefully maintained planters. Enough dwelling on the weekend.

Enough dwelling on Dex.

It was just a chance meeting.

There are no more chances.

The keys have somehow fallen down to the very bottom of my purse—I hate this thing—so I’m digging through it when the door to the coffee shop opens.

I’ll be damned.

There he is.

Again.

His hand is wrapped around a cardboard cup with the shop’s logo on it, and he’s wearing what seems to be his classic outfit, judging by our last encounter—and all of high school—jeans and a t-shirt that can’t help but display his perfectly defined arms.

It kills me to admit it, but he is *exactly* my type. Six feet tall. Muscular but not bodybuilder built. Piercing eyes. Full lips. I want to tug his bottom lip into my mouth and bite it, like I used to in the back of my car.

He raises his eyes from the sidewalk and sees me, and his body reacts before he can do anything about it. His feet jerk to the side, like he’s going to go back into the coffee shop.

Dex Stevens is trying to *avoid* me.

He’s doing a shitty job.

“Abby,” he says softly, and part of me melts at the sound of his voice.

“Dex,” I say, facing him head on.

I spent the entire weekend replaying our meeting in my mind and imagining the ways it could have gone differently. Once I'd shut the condo door behind me, my knees had gone weak. I slid to the floor against my doorway, my head in my hands.

I hated Dex.

I loved Dex.

And I wanted answers.

Why had he walked away from me?

Why had he never come back?

Did he feel the same way?

They were all questions I should have asked when I saw him the last time. But I didn't. By Sunday night I sorely regretted the way I'd acted. I knew I wouldn't get another opportunity.

But now...

Standing on the sidewalk in front of me is the mother of all second chances, in all its sexy glory.

What can I say?

I open my mouth to speak, and all of a sudden it hits me that he looks rough. On Friday, he hadn't exactly been squeaky clean, grease on his hands, grease on his jeans. But now his face looks haggard, like he's been up all weekend.

For all I know, he has.

I don't know his life.

I don't know what other obligations he might have.

I can't help it. I can't let the silence go on any longer.

"Do you come to this shop often?" I say, the words too bright, too false. Too weird.

Dex has the grace to look sheepish, giving me the same half-smile that used to get me every time back in high school. "I should have told you the other day," he answers. "I don't know why I didn't. I actually live above this building." He gestures to my office, to the coffee shop. "I work in Gannett at an auto body shop. The clothes are a dead giveaway. But I live here."

He *lives* here. Sleeps here. Showers here...

Oh. My. God.

My cheeks go bright red entirely against my will.

For eight years, I have wished every day that Dex had just come with me after high school. I've wondered about him every day. Missed him. Dreamed about him. Compared every other guy to him.

And I promised myself that I was done wasting that kind of time on a man who didn't want to be with me then and hasn't done anything to prove otherwise in eight years. Eight *years*.

So what the hell am I supposed to do now, when he's literally living on top of me?

"What about you?" he says. "Are you visiting? Here for an interview or something?"

I let out the breath I've been holding.

"I work here, Dex. My boss—he's opening a new branch of

his marketing firm, and I'm running it. I just got into town last Friday."

Dex presses his lips together like he's trying not to scream out loud.

I know exactly how he feels.

"That's close," he says, meeting my eyes. "That's pretty close. I hope it's not a problem for you."

Is it?

The air between us charged, magnetic. It's a struggle to hold myself away from him.

For an instant I consider turning around, getting back into my car, and driving back to my old job. Escaping Dex's gravity. Leonard would understand...

No. He wouldn't understand, and why the hell would I give this up just because the man I've been in love with since we were twelve years old lives ten feet from where I'm going to be spending the majority of my time for the foreseeable future?

It's time to be a goddamn adult about this.

"I'm going to be honest with you, Dex." The words, built up over the years of not speaking, tumble out of me, one after another. "I'm still pretty pissed at you for what you did. But maybe we should...sit down and talk somewhere."

The invitation hangs in the air for a long moment. His eyes are locked on mine, sending head thrumming down my spine.

Then he swallows.

“Yeah,” he says, finally, like we’re eighteen again and I just asked him if he wanted to see a movie on the weekend. He always wanted to see a movie. His friends were daredevils and spent most of their free time doing stupid, reckless shit. Dex did plenty of that, too, but he always made time for me.

Except when he didn’t.

Except when he left me.

Stop, I tell myself. This is different.

“Yeah, of course.” His voice is steady, confident, and he doesn’t take his eyes off me. “When’s a good time for you?” He glances up at the sign above my head, then his eyes go to the keys in my hand.

“Tonight.” I don’t think I can wait any longer than that. “Is there someplace you like to go around here? Maybe not the coffee shop?”

He gives me that same crooked smile, and I feel my heart crack open just a little more.

“Meet me out here when you’re done with work. I know a place.”

*M*y shift at the shop isn't a disaster, but it comes close.

I'm usually so fucking meticulous about everything I do at work, but today my mind is on fire with Bee.

I have no idea how I managed to play it so cool when she asked me to talk later.

The only thing I'm sure about is where I'm going to take her.

Jennison's is a bar in Gannett, not far from the shop. This is a little town just outside Beechford. Nobody ever goes to that bar—not anyone I know, anyway—so it'll be the perfect place to have this discussion.

I'd rather have it in my bed.

But I can't do that, because now there's other shit going on. When I saw Bee I forgot all about the situation with Nikki.

It feels slimy, calling it a situation when someday it could be a little human, but when I try to think of it like that my

mind revolts. My body recoils from the idea of having a child with a woman who means nothing to me.

How did it even happen? Nikki swore up and down that she was on birth control, and I always, *always*, used a condom.

That's what I'm thinking about when I take the wrong panel off a vintage Mustang and screw up some of the paint before Mike stops me to ask what the hell I'm doing to the car.

"Where's your mind today, buddy?" he says, giving me a hard pat on the back. The guy doesn't know his own strength. "Fix this shit up, or you're going to have to stay late to do it."

There is no possible way I'm going to be late meeting Bee. This whole situation is so tenuous, so unlikely, that one misstep on my part could sink the entire thing. Whatever this thing is.

I laugh to myself. The misstep is already in progress.

It's definitely going to go down in flames once I tell her about Nikki. For the entire morning I've thought of them as separate problems—Nikki and the baby, and Bee.

But they're not. They're on a crash course with each other, and the only outcome is that I'm going to lose Bee again.

The best I can hope for is that Bee at least lets me apologize. If she can find it in her heart to forgive me—and I wouldn't, if I were her—then I can go on knowing we're okay.

Gritting my teeth, I hustle to undo the work I've done on the car.

She's been on my mind every day. At the very least I have to get her to understand how much she's consumed my

thoughts since I left her standing by her car on the Overlook, her heart fucking shattered. I saw her face in the rearview mirror. I know how bad it was.

In Chicago I lived in a ten-by-twelve apartment with a psychopath for an entire year. All we had was a cheap futon that she'd stolen from her ex-boyfriend's house on the way out of town, a card table, and a couple of folding chairs. I took night jobs so I wouldn't have to sleep next to her on the futon, but during the day I could hardly sleep anyway.

The entire thing was torture.

And the worst part? I'd brought it on myself.

The biggest mistake had been leaving Bee, but my trail of stupidity began long before that.

But those things...I couldn't think about what had happened. I'd have to think about it soon. I'd have to tell her everything. Just not yet.

Even when things were at their worst, Bee was like—and this sounds so goddamn stupid—a guardian angel. Not that I think angels exist.

No, that's not the right way to describe it. The memory of her was like a lighthouse. I spent almost all of my time in the dark that year, and thinking of her was the only thing that kept me from going to a bar with my night-job paycheck and drinking myself to death.

My chest tightens with frustration. How the hell have I *literally* screwed myself over?

Things were supposed to get better after Chicago. Chicago

was supposed to be my escape from Winthrop Harbor and everything that happened there, and it was a disaster.

So what's the common thread?

Me.

But I just can't bring myself to crush my own wild hope.

Despite everything, Bee might still be the girl I knew. The sexy, sweet, funny as hell girl that thought I was the best thing to ever have walked the earth, even after we fought over stupid shit. And it was all so stupid. I should have asked her to be my girlfriend the moment she was allowed to start dating, and I never should have let her go.

I have to be realistic.

She's probably not that girl anymore. I'm certainly not the teenage bad boy with a heart of gold. I'm just some asshole who works in an auto body shop and goes to college at night to try to pull myself out of a sinkhole of my own making.

I was getting there, too. Things haven't been amazing, but they've been all right. There was a light at the end of the tunnel.

Now I'm headed back in.

Me, Nikki, and a baby I never wanted.

I'm no good for Bee.

I'm the worst thing for Bee.

But I can't stay away.

All I can do is tell her the truth about what happened.

Maybe not all at once, but she lives in Beechford now, so that should buy me a little time, right?

I know there's not going to be some happily-ever-after situation for me when it comes to Bee, but at least we can both get straight with each other before we go about the rest of our lives.

I pour everything I have into the rest of my work at the shop and just manage to finish it all with enough time to shower before I have to meet her. It's ten minutes back to Beechford and I can shower in three if I have to. By then, she should be just about ready to leave her fancy new job.

A part of me wants to scoff at the office gig, at the business professional outfit she was wearing this morning, at the way she's left me so far behind. But I'm mostly impressed. And proud.

She didn't let me drag her down.

In the shower I soap myself up and grab a scrub brush from the soap dish. There's always grease around my fingernails, but I scrub furiously at it, trying my best to get it off. I want Bee to see the best possible version of me.

Even if it's not worth much.

At five minutes to five, I'm standing outside her office in a clean shirt and the nicest pair of jeans I own—only one hole behind the knee. If I'd known I was going to run into her I'd have bought a new pair. Until Friday there wasn't anyone in town to impress. Well, other than Mike, and he doesn't care what I wear under the coveralls.

"That's your business, buddy," he would say, if I ever asked

him for fashion advice. Then he'd probably hand me a beer and tell me to fuck off. In a nice way.

At 5:00 exactly, Bee appears at the door of her office. My cock is instantly hard at the sight of her in her little pencil skirt. It hugs the curve of her ass so perfectly. I want my hands all over it, but I have to take a deep breath and calm the hell down.

She's not wearing the jacket she had on this morning, when it was cooler. It's folded over her arm alongside her purse, giving me a full view of the white sleeveless top she wears tucked in to the pencil skirt. A necklace with green beads hangs right in front of her perky breasts.

Those haven't changed.

The outfit is simple, but a narrow belt at her waist matches the shade of her low heels.

Bee looks incredible.

Office door locked, she drops the keys in her purse and turns to see me loitering on the sidewalk, leaning against one of the street's vintage lampposts. Her face starts to light up, but she locks it down a little bit like she doesn't want me to know she's been waiting all day for this.

It breaks my heart a little.

"Hey, Abby." I give her a smile, pretending I didn't see the change come over her face.

She bites her lip and makes a decision.

"We knew each other a long time," she says, only a tiny hint of indecision in her voice. "Just call me Bee. It's weird if you don't."

My heart almost leaps straight out of my chest. She must want things to be normal between us—or at least better than they are now. I want to throw my arms around her, tilt her chin up, and kiss her all the way up to my bed.

Instead, I give her my most charming smile. “No problem, Bee. Are you ready to go?”

“So ready. I’ve been in the office all day. One thing, though.”

Anything.

“Can we stop at my condo first? I have to get out of these clothes.”

Never in my life has a day gone by any slower.

It only took two hours to unpack and arrange all the supplies that had been delivered over the past few weeks. I lingered over taking the plastic wrap off the new office chairs and pushing them up to the brand-new desks.

This conversation has been eight years in the making and the last day was almost the straw that broke the camel's back.

More than once, I considered locking the door behind me and heading back to my condo. Two movies would take care of the afternoon, and then it would be time to meet Dex.

But I couldn't do that to Leonard.

I spent most of the morning setting up my new computer, an iMac with an absolutely massive screen. There was one moment when I thought I might drop it in the process of sliding it onto my desk and broke out into a cold sweat. Caught it at the last moment. Thanks, biceps.

By the time I had my email loaded, there were several new messages from Leonard. I'm going to be taking on a new set of clients from this office and the sweet old guy doesn't want me to be overwhelmed, so the projects won't be fully transferred over until Friday. I tapped out several responses to him, assuring him that everything was proceeding as planned. I sent out reminder emails about parking to my two new team members and followed up with the four interviewees I'd be meeting on Thursday.

All of it left me giddy with excitement.

Or maybe it was the prospect of really seeing Dex again.

Either way, it was a good thing there was nobody in the office to see me incessantly tapping my feet and playing too-loud pop music while I took care of all the administrative shit that, to be honest, I can't get enough of. It's a marketing job, so there will be plenty of creative meetings, too, but I like getting everything in order.

That way I can be sure things are going smoothly. When I'm in charge of a team, there are very limited surprises. It's one of the major reasons Leonard chose me for the position.

After I took a break for lunch time slowed to a crawl, even more so than in the morning. I couldn't stick with a Pandora playlist, careening wildly between musical styles and getting sick of them after two songs. The only kind of music I really can't stand is country, but other than Top 40 hits, nothing kept my attention.

With nobody else in the office it wasn't easy to keep my mind from going back to the days I spent with Dex.

Those kinds of thoughts are not safe for work.

Not safe at all.

When 5:00 came I was already on the edge of my seat, coat over my arm, purse packed and ready to go. Leonard wasn't keeping track. I just couldn't bring myself to leave early.

Outside the office, Dex is waiting, leaning against one of the lampposts on the sidewalk. His hair is shiny and clean—he must have stepped out of the shower only minutes ago.

As I step outside I can smell him. My heart flips over in my chest. He still wears the same cologne, and the light scent of it takes me right back to those nights in our cars. Giving head to men isn't my favorite thing, but at that time in my life, I couldn't get enough of Dex. And Dex's reaction to the things I did with him...and to him.

I push the thought out of my mind, but the slit between my legs is already wet.

I have to get a hold of myself before we sit down to have a serious conversation.

“Hey, Abby,” he says, and I can't stand the way my name sounds in his mouth. I don't know what happened between Friday and today, but there's a part of me that's desperate for normalcy between us.

“We knew each other a long time,” I start out. We don't exactly know each other anymore, and I don't want us to get ahead of ourselves, but this seems like a small thing. “Just call me Bee. It's weird if you don't.”



I pull up in front of my condo first, and Dex parks neatly in the parking spot next to mine. When I step out of the car and shut the door, he's rolled down his passenger-side window. Tilting his head to look at me, he lets out a low whistle and darts his eyes toward the condo.

"Wow. Lake view," he comments, and his hands tighten on the steering wheel.

"Lake view, but not lake front," I say. His apartment isn't in a bad location, either, but I'm sure it costs significantly less than my condo. I'm sure because I looked into one of those apartments while I was house hunting. It doesn't matter. The minute the words are out of my mouth, I wish I could take them back. I sound like a snob.

He shakes his head a little, his mouth quirked in a smile. I loved that smile so much.

I still do.

"Are you going to turn the car off?" I ask, and I realize that the entire time I was driving here, I was assuming he would come in with me.

Why?

We're not together—we're not even close. Yet it seems like the most natural thing in the world that he would come to my condo.

Shake it off, Abby. Those kinds of thoughts are going to get you in trouble.

Dex's looking at me like I just spoke to him in Japanese. "Is it going to take you a long-ass time to change, or what?"

He's already falling back into the pattern of being friends.

Why the hell not?

"It'll be a minute," I say. I don't want to dig through my dresser in a rush and forget to brush my teeth before I head back out. "You can come up if you want."

He doesn't hesitate. He just turns off the car and climbs out before I have a chance to take back the invitation.

At the door of my condo he leans against the wall and watches me with those blue eyes while I dig for my keys in my purse. I can smell his scent—all Dex—with every breath I take, and the charge in the air is a hundred times more intense than it was on the sidewalk this morning.

Something is about to happen.

No.

Nothing is about to happen.

No way.

And yet...

I push the door open and lead the way in. The cool air washes over me, and I let out a little sigh. One of the reasons I chose this place was the abundant air conditioning, which I can control from an app on my phone. No more arriving home to a stuffy apartment. Three hours south of here, away from the water, the summers are humid and hot. All I had then was a cheap window fan that barely made a difference.

This is heaven.

Dex closes the door behind us and looks around.

What was I thinking, inviting him up here? Breathing him in at such close range sends heat rushing to my cheeks, rushing to my core.

I'm still pissed at him.

I still want to make out with him.

He takes in the apartment, his eyes falling on the stacks of boxes still taking up most of the living room.

"Yeah." I answer the unspoken comment. "I haven't had a lot of time to unpack."

"I can..." He realizes what he's offering as soon as he starts to say it, stops, and forges on anyway. "I can come by and help, if you want."

The air is so tense that I can feel the hairs on the back of my neck standing up. We're talking about unpacking when I want to unwrap him from his clothes and take him to my bedroom.

"Thanks. I've got it, though." I don't need the help. I can't say I'd mind watching him lift heavy boxes, though, and get a little too warm despite the A/C. He'd pull that t-shirt over his head and... "Let me get changed, and we can head out."

I don't have to turn back to know his eyes follow me to my bedroom door.

I didn't want to dig through my dresser but I do it anyway, my hands shaking. My heart is in my throat. He is so familiar and so thrilling at the same time that my chest is being pulled in two. He's so close.

He's still so far.

I have no idea what we're going to say to each other at this mystery place he's chosen. What if it ends in more heart-break? What if this is the Overlook, just eight years later? What if I can't keep my guard up?

It's scorching out today, much hotter than usual for early June, so I choose a red tank top and a pair of white shorts. They make my legs look more sun-kissed than they actually are, so it's a plus.

In the mirror I've leaned on top of the dresser I shake out my hair from the low bun I had it in for work and run a brush through it, then touch up my mascara. I don't wear much more makeup than that. Halfway through this routine it comes to me how absurd it is, trying to make myself pretty for Dex.

Like it could change anything.

When I turn away from the mirror, I discover that he's standing in the doorway, watching me.

"Shit," I gasp, my hand flying to my chest. "You scared me. Why didn't you say something?"

He shakes his head, like the words are stuck in his throat. "You're too beautiful."

I can't resist the gravity that pulls me across the room toward him.

It's a risky, reckless decision, and I can't stop myself.

Like I've wanted to since Friday, I close the distance between us and fold myself into his arms, breathing in the scent of his skin, the same light cologne scent I've known for years.

Dex responds with a big gulp of air as his arms go around

me. I slide my hands around his waist. He's leaner now. His abs are harder.

He's not the boy I knew any longer.

We hold each other for a minute, then another, the pleasure of being near him buzzing through my entire body. I know I have to let go, but I don't want to.

He clearly doesn't, either.

When I shift my weight to my other foot his arms tighten around me, a silent plea to stay with him.

I can't resist.

Pressing my ear to his chest, I listen to his heartbeat. The sound sends a wave of nostalgia and comfort through me.

I'll remind myself to be wary later.

For now, I'm suspended with him in this moment and I never want it to end.

We stand for three minutes, four minutes, five, and then Dex puts two fingers under my chin, tilting my face up to his. He gives me a long, searching look, then leans down and covers my mouth with his.

Oh, my god.

He tastes so minty, so familiar, and his lips on mine move in a pattern I thought I'd never feel again. The sensation is so overwhelming that I whimper a little into his mouth.

I come up for air before this can go any further. "Wait, wait, wait," I say, stepping back a few inches, putting my hands on his chest. "We can't do this yet."

Flexing his arms, he draws me in tightly one more time, then releases me and steps back. “I know. We have to talk.” Not subtly at all, he adjusts the bulge in the front of his pants. “I’ll drive. Let’s get out of here.”

I'd almost forgotten how Bee made me a better person, even against my will. It's probably the only annoying thing about her. Although I've never regretted anything she pushed me to do.

This, I'm not so sure.

It takes almost forty-five minutes for us to get to Jennison's, even though the drive is only ten, because while we're on the highway we come across a vehicle out of commission on the side of the road. A man is crouched down next to the back driver's-side tire, which has, by the looks of it, been torn to shreds, probably by some piece of garbage in the road.

We see it from a mile off, and a quick glance at Bee tells me she's concerned. Still, she doesn't say anything.

She always pretended to be a hardass. But I know, deep down, she wants to be a good samaritan whenever possible.

Her eyes dart across the car to me, scanning my face, and then she bites her lip.

It's only when I start to steer my car over to the side of the road that the characteristics of the car, and the man, click into place in my mind.

"Shit," I say under my breath, and Abby's relieved smile falters a little.

"What?" she says. "What's wrong?"

"Don't you recognize him? That's my dad."

Bee leans forward and shades her eyes with her hand, squinting through the windshield. "Oh, my god, it is," she says softly. "He got old."

She doesn't say anything else, but her shoulders go stiff.

I wasn't exactly forgiving when it came to my dad's asshole ways back in high school. Bee was polite enough to him when she saw him at all those weird occasions where you have to mingle with parents, but she was so firmly on my side—always—that she never warmed to him.

Fine by me.

Now that I've pulled over I can't exactly drive away, so I get out, gesturing at Bee to wait in the car. I'll help my dad put on the spare tire and then we'll be out of here.

"Did you run over something sharp?" I say as I approach my dad, who squints up at me with a combination of suspicion and relief. His back is terrible. There's no way he's going to be able to get this tire off and the spare on without help.

"I guess so, son," he says, standing painfully up from the

ground. He got the jack underneath his Volvo but it's not lifted nearly high enough.

I ignore the "son." There are a lot of things I can forgive my dad for, but not what happened eight years ago.

I'm still not over it yet, and fuck everybody who thinks that I should be.

Hands in the pockets of his pleated khaki work pants, he stands awkwardly to the side of the road while I change the tire. I'm bolting in the spare when he speaks again, sounding astonished.

"Is that Abby Schaffer with you?"

"Sure is." I don't offer any more information. Both my parents knew I had it bad for her back in the day. It's obnoxious how they know all that shit without you ever having to say a word.

I definitely don't need his input now. I steal a glance at my car. Abby's checking something on her phone, looking down. Like she senses that she's being watched, she looks up and smiles tentatively.

My dad gives her a wave, like he has any right.

I shove the busted tire into the trunk of the Volvo and follow it up with the car jack and tire iron, then slam the trunk shut and clap my hands together, getting rid of as much road dust as I can.

"There you go," I say gruffly, willing my father to get into his car and leave before he makes this any more awkward than it already is. The wheels are spinning inside his head, considering whether he should go up to

the car and talk to Bee like the great dad he thinks he is.

But finally he gives me a nod, hands still in his pockets. "Thanks, D. Means a lot."

His use of my old nickname, from when I was just a kid, curdles in my gut. But I'm not going to give him any indication that he can get under my skin. I'm too old for that shit.

"Not a problem."

He stands there while I go back to my car, get in, and turn on the engine. I can see him in the rearview mirror as we pick up speed down the highway, hands still in his pockets, eyes watching us go.

The house is loud and dimly lit, and it reeks of cigarette smoke and beer.

It's my first house party. My parents went out of town for the night, leaving me and Cate by ourselves. They didn't have to ask me to stay in. Cate and I ordered pizza and watched movies until she got too tired to stay awake.

But Claire, my best friend, wasn't tired. She'd been texting me all evening about the party at Missy's house—Missy, the most popular girl in our class.

You have to come, Bee! It's crazy here

Can't risk it!

Yes you can. Parents will never know

I tiptoed across the hall to Cate's room. She was breathing deeply, utterly asleep, and in that moment a wildness came over me. I could be reckless, just this once.

I opened my closet as carefully as possible and pulled out

my coolest, tightest jeans, pairing them with a plain black top. The risk was in how low it was cut.

It took five minutes to outline my eyes with heavier makeup and throw my phone into my purse.

When I checked on Cate again, she hadn't stirred. Home free.

Missy's house is on the other end of the block, which isn't your typical suburban street arrangement, so I have to walk a mile to get there. Every movement in the trees that line the neighborhood makes me jump, and by the time I get there, I'm jumpy, on edge, certain some car will go past and catch me in the act of walking late at night.

Claire materializes out of the crowd. "Bee!" she squeals, grabbing my hand. She's wearing a dress that's way too short but her makeup looks amazing. "Come have a drink."

"Where?"

"Over here!" She drags me through the house. Everyone who's anyone at school is here, draped over furniture, dancing in the empty spaces to music that's so loud I can't tell what it is.

Claire leads me to the kitchen, where a variety of shitty beers has been gathered on the round table where Missy probably eats dinner every night. She has two older brothers. I saw them in the living room, "supervising" the party with twin sneers on their faces.

Cracking one open, Claire passes it to me. I take a sip. It's disgusting.

“Claire! This is so gross!” I say, feeling electric and dangerous.

“Just drink it!” she shouts back. “You’ll like it in a little bit!”

“I’m not going to have much,” I try to tell her, but she’s not listening, she’s just pulling me back to the party.

One thing leads to another. Claire presses more drinks into my hand and we’re in the middle of all the most popular girls. Missy herself smiles at me and throws her arms around my neck like we’re best friends. She’s completely wasted. The music throbs and pulses and for the first time I dance without feeling self-conscious.

My eyes blur from the alcohol, and suddenly I need some air.

“I’m going out front!” I scream to Claire. She nods back at me seriously.

On the way out, someone comes flying down the stairs from the second story, and I almost collide with him.

It’s Dex.

I try to push past without saying anything.

“Bee,” he says, catching my arm. “You came? Where are you—”

“Outside,” I say, shaking him off.

After that kiss at the beach, Dex went off the grid for a week. When he resurfaced downtown on the first day of summer vacation, he was strolling the streets with Carolyn Cross, holding hands and laughing.

Who is he dating now? I don’t care. I’m over him.

It's Angie Michaels.

I don't care.

He follows me outside and we wander to the middle of the perfectly manicured yard, where a bench sits in the middle of a garden. All the beer roils in my gut.

I open my mouth to tell him to screw off, but it's at that moment that my stomach rejects the alcohol. I spin around, emptying my stomach into a flower bed.

"Oh, man, Bee," Dex says, his warm hands on my back. He gathers my hair behind my head and holds it, his other hand rubbing the surface of my shoulder blade. His touch sends spikes of pleasure zinging through me, but I don't want to admit it. He's just some asshole who doesn't want to date me.

When I'm finally done retching I stand up tall, trying to play it cool. His eyes are filled with concern.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm totally fine." The beer is sour in my mouth, and he digs in his pocket. I accept the piece of gum he holds out a moment later.

"Listen, I wanted to tell you I'm sorry about...you know."

"Whatever, Dex. I don't care."

I say it but it's not true and he knows it. Breathing him in in the fresh night air has my nerves on fire, and underneath it all he's sweet. He's sweet right to his core.

"I'm sorry anyway."

I'm still a little bit drunk. "Do you even like me?"

“I like you *so* much.”

“Then why did you date Carolyn Cross instead of me?”

“She asked me first.”

“The guy’s supposed to ask the girl.”

“Carolyn doesn’t think so.”

“I don’t want to talk about Carolyn Cross,” I say, throwing my hands up in front of me.

“What do you want to talk about? We can talk while I give you a ride home.”

“You can’t take me home. You’re drunk.”

“I’m not. But you are, Bee.” He’s not lying. His eyes are clear, his movements steady. I won’t know until later that he never touched a drop of alcohol in high school.

“I’m tired.”

“Let’s go home.”

We get into his dad’s car—borrowed for the night, I’m sure—and he pulls carefully away from Missy’s house.

Once we’re on the road, he reaches across and takes my hand, our fingers sliding together so naturally that I know right then he is the *one*. My heart nearly bursts from it.

“I’m going to break up with Angie,” he says quietly, and I can’t breathe for the excitement.

“I want to go out with you.”

“We’ll go out,” he says, his sexy half-smile lighting me up. “Just be patient.”

“Will you call me when you get home?” I say while he pulls his car into my parents’ driveway, shutting the headlights off just in case. My blood throbs and sparks in my veins.

“You want to talk all night?” His voice is a smooth promise.

“Yes.”

He doesn’t let me down.

*I*t's busier at Jennison's than I thought it would be, but in this case "busy" means "three other tables," so it's not a big deal. We settle in to a booth in the back and Bee immediately picks up a wrinkled menu from the holder next to the wall.

"Let me guess," I say. "You're going to order a plain hamburger. And screw the chips, you're having fries."

She glances up at me with a grin that's half cute, all sexy, and I want to lean across the booth and kiss her until the end of time. I can't tell you how many times I've watched Bee Schaffer eat a plain hamburger with ketchup and dip every last fry into the ketchup container, too.

Her sigh is playful. "You're right. I don't know why I bother reading the menu. Although...are the burgers good here?"

"I've never had one, but the other food I've had here is good." I'm usually here for alcohol and nothing else. "If you're getting one, I'll have one too."

We talk about that kind of shit—food, the bar, burgers—until the waitress comes, bringing Bee a Diet Coke and me a beer. Then she takes a deep breath.

“Well, Dex,” she says, leaning back against her seat. “I was happy to see you.”

“Same here.”

“But I’m still really pissed at you.”

I nod. So we’re there.

“You have the right to be pissed at me forever. I was an absolute jackass.”

Bee sips at her Coke. If I know Bee, and part of me thinks I still do, then she’s not going to avoid the heavy shit for much longer. That kind of thing eats at her.

“Why did you do it, then?” Her voice is soft, and her eyes are suddenly damp with unshed tears.

I don’t like to remember the way I left her, and it’s pretty clear it had an effect. She might be successful and happy, but when I broke her heart I must have done permanent damage. It kills me to see it.

“I don’t know if I have a good explanation, Bee. I was young and dumb.”

Her eyes narrow. The instant the words were out of my mouth I knew it wouldn’t be enough of an explanation.

“You weren’t *that* dumb.” She grips her glass of Coke tightly. “We had a plan. What made you change your mind? I thought...” Bee has to swallow before she can get the words out. “We were in love. Am I just imagining that?”

“No. You didn’t imagine it. We were. We really were.”

I’m back in the passenger seat of her car again, holding her hand while we drive through the dark, out too late. Holding hands with her was the most erotic shit you could imagine.

“Then just explain it to me. So I can...so we can both leave it in the past.”

“Okay.” Even remembering that time in my life sends a stab of pain through my chest, like tearing open an old wound. “Where should I start?”

“You should quit stalling, is how you should start,” she says, letting go of the drink and crossing her arms over her chest.”

“Fine.” I take a deep breath, curl my own hand around the beer. It’s so cold it hurts my skin to touch it. “You know how things were with my dad.”

Bee nods once and presses her lips together, but doesn’t say anything. I’m positive she’s remembering all the shit I spilled to her on the nights we stayed out too late, cruising the back roads and talking over music. Her car had a CD player, and we’d listen to our favorite ones until the discs got scratched and broken.

I wouldn’t call my dad abusive. That’s way too strong a word and too many people use it these days to say that somebody was mean to them. Not the same thing. But he was a dick. The things I did, in school or otherwise, were never good enough for him.

His choices weren’t so hot either, from where I was sitting. He took jobs in different states for the majority of my childhood, leaving my mom with me and my three younger

siblings. We didn't live in the same house full-time until my junior year of high school.

Midway through senior year was when it happened.

I don't want to talk about it. I don't want to remember it. But Bee has to know, because it's part of the reason I did what I did that night with her.

Fuck. This is not easy.

"And...Lisa."

The corners of Bee's mouth turn down, and she looks at the tabletop.

At least I don't have to start at the beginning with her.

I've never talked about Lisa with someone who doesn't already know. Not that I haven't tried, once or twice. There's just no way to say "my sister committed suicide" to someone and then ever have a normal conversation again.

With the exception of Bee, and a few of the others we graduated with.

That's the one thing high school was good for.

I wait until she looks back up at me.

"My dad blamed me for it."

"*What?*" She's instantly pissed, then incredulous. "I'm sure he didn't, Dex. People say things when—"

I slap my hand down on the table, shocking her. "He blamed me for it, Bee. That day at the Overlook? He came home from work and cornered me in my room. You can picture it,

right? He's an ass, but that day he was the worst I've ever seen him."

Looking away from her is the only way I can calm down enough to finish telling her this, and I do, with my dad's voice from eight years ago ringing in my ears.

Let's be clear, Dex, crystal goddamn clear, because I never want you to forget this. If you'd been home where you were supposed to be instead of fucking around with that girl, your sister would still be alive.

"I had that in my head that night when I came to meet you, and I just couldn't do that to you. I couldn't let you down like I let Lisa down." The lump in my throat that I get when I think about my sister is hard and painful, and it takes three tries to swallow it down. I'm not going to cry about this right now. "For me there was a straight line between what happened with Lisa and fucking up high school and screwing up your life like I'd screwed up mine, and I couldn't do it."

Bee is shaking her head. When I'm done talking she puts her hand on mine and locks eyes with me.

"I get what you're saying," she says in the most empathetic voice I've ever heard come out of a human. "But you're fucking crazy."

We both burst out laughing, the heaviness dissolving from the air around us. "I mean," Bee continues through her laughter, "that's some pretty serious shit you were saving me from. Didn't it occur to you that things could go differently?"

"Not then."

"What about now?"

She says it so innocently, half laughing, like she wants me to know she's not really serious, and my heart sinks into my toes.

Because there's still Nikki.

God damn it.

I'm going to tell Bee about all of it, but I can't do it right now.

"Now's a different story."

Then the waitress brings the food, and we both eat like we've been starving for years.

When our burgers are gone Dex orders another basket of fries. We're not done here yet, although with every second that passes it seems more and more normal to sit with him, laugh with him, talk about this like...actual adults.

"I still don't get why you never called, though." I dip another fry into a container of ketchup and linger over it.

"Why didn't *you* call, Schaffer?"

"I didn't have your phone number, *Stevens*. You went off the grid like some kind of hermit."

He rolls his eyes. "How much do you know about what I've been doing the last eight years? Honestly, Bee. You're probably better at all that Internet shit than I am."

I want to know all of what happened to him.

"Not much. You never change your damn profile picture."

"You've been looking at my *profile pictures*?"

Heat rises to my cheeks. “Like you didn’t look at mine.”

Suddenly his face is serious. “I did. I looked at all of them, more than once.”

“Okay, creeper,” I say, holding my hands up playfully. “Try to tone down your stalker side.”

“It wasn’t like that.” His blue eyes don’t leave mine. “Really. I wouldn’t...I never stalked you. But I missed the hell out of you, Bee. Sometimes thinking about what we used to have was all that got me out of bed in the morning.”

“I did hear one rumor,” I say, sipping at my third glass of Coke. “I heard that you went to Chicago with—”

“Don’t,” he says sharply, with a hint of a smile. “Don’t say the she-devil’s name.”

“So it’s true? You actually lived with...*her*?”

Talking about Carrie Witfield raises my hackles, but beneath all of it, I’m buzzing with the closeness that I finally have with Dex in this moment.

He runs a hand through his hair and rolls his eyes, blowing a breath out past his lips. My eyes settle on the curves of his biceps and I wonder how they would look propping him up over me while we had sex...anywhere. *Anywhere.*

“It was a total fucking disaster, Bee. Really bad.”

“Like, she broke up with you six times and the seventh time it finally took?”

“Like...she beat me up. More than once.” His tone is light but he doesn’t meet my eyes when he says it. “You can’t do

anything if you're a guy. The second you lift a hand to stop a psycho like that, you're an abuser."

We're veering back and forth between joking and the heaviest topics imaginable, but something about it feels natural. Right. This is how things used to be between us. We talked about anything and everything.

We *did* anything and everything.

I lean back and take him in.

He looks back at me.

I can hardly breathe.

"You only made one mistake, Dex."

"I know. And it was—"

"Picking that shirt today. I can't believe you wore a plain black t-shirt on our first date in eight years."

He laughs, and his entire face relaxes. It's a beautiful sight.

"That must have been pretty rough."

"It was. But I clawed my way out of that situation just in time."

"Just in time? How long were you there?"

"Just over a year, and then I moved to Beechford. Mike, my boss at the auto body shop, really saved my ass. He let me work there while I went to the trade school in Jackson."

Dex never wanted to go to trade school. He always talked about college like it would be his great escape from everything with his dad, from the small town, from being, as he described it, "average." He didn't have the first clue what he

wanted to major in, but he knew he wanted to go to a big school.

“And that’s where you stayed?”

“That’s where I stayed.” He picks up another fry and eats it while he watches me, probably looking for some sign that I have more questions. We’ve been talking for over an hour. I could sit here asking him questions all night.

Or I could spend the night on other activities.

“Did you think about me a lot?”

“Every day.”

“And every night?”

A half grin, a gleam in his eyes.

“*Every* night.”

The more I look at him, the more I want to be on the other side of the booth, curled up next to him. He hasn’t mentioned a girlfriend even once, and I’ve left the door open several times for him to admit he’s taken.

I shouldn’t want that. The whole thing could go down in flames, if the past is any indication. With every word that comes out of his mouth, his low voice curling around the back of my neck, I want him more, despite all of it.

But he isn’t who he was then. The years have changed him. What if they’ve changed him too much?

I watch him watching me and I know that at least in some ways, that’s not true.

“Did you have a car while you were in Chicago?”

“No, I took the train.”

“Trains don’t have a backseat. That must have been hard for you.”

He puts a hand to his forehead, tilts his head in mock sadness.

“You have no idea how hard it was, Bee. No car, no backseat, no evenings with you.”

I want one of those evenings again.

A shiver runs down my spine, remembering the evening air slipping over my naked skin, Dex slipping into my waiting body. The wild risk of having sex in a car in the middle of a parking lot makes my heart pound, even now. It’s a miracle we were never caught.

With a faint pang of guilt I remember how recently I left Tom in the diner and drove away without another word. But that’s neither here nor there. I’m sure we’ll get to it.

Eventually.

I’m already planning on more time with Dex and that’s insane. Maybe he’s single, but that doesn’t mean he’s ready to jump into anything with me. It doesn’t mean I’m ready to jump into anything with him. All I know is that I’m dizzy with how intense it feels just to look at him, in front of me, in the flesh.

Right now, the only thing I’m willing to jump into is...

“Will you take me back to my condo?”

He puts a hand to his neck and clutches invisible pearls.

“Whatever for?” His voice is joking but his eyes dance with possibility.

“Don’t make me say it out loud,” I warn.

“I would never.” He waves frantically at the waitress to bring the bill.

On the way out of the bar, I slide my hand into his. He squeezes once, gently, and holds on.



I shut the door behind us and pull my shirt over my head, showing Dex the lacy bra I wore to work for the second time today.

His hands are on me instantly, before I can turn on a light, and then I’ve forgotten all about such unimportant things like lamps and light switches.

He slides his hands down the curve of my waist, rough fingers exploring every inch of skin as our lips press hard against each other, falling easily back into the old patterns.

But knowing his kisses doesn’t make them boring. It makes them so hot I can’t catch my breath.

Dex presses me up against the wall, cupping my face in his hands, his lips driving me wilder than anything with Tom ever did. Raising my hands, I hook them around his wrists and feel his pulse underneath the skin there. His heart is beating as fast as mine is.

When he takes my bra off, his mouth doesn’t leave mine. That’s an old trick. He’s known his way around a bra since we were eighteen.

Just when I think my knees are going to give out, Dex steps back. Slides one arm behind my legs. One around my back. Lifts me like I weigh nothing. Burying my face into the side of his neck, I hold on, my grip just for looks because I know he'd never drop me, and swirl my tongue in the hollow above his collarbone. A quick breath from him tells me he still loves to have that tiny spot licked and nibbled.

I don't have to ask where he's taking me.

He puts me down carefully in the center of my bed, and I splay out before him, raising my hips in an invitation.

"You haven't changed at all," he murmurs, and I let out a soft laugh.

"Yeah, right. I've changed. But I'm still hot.

By the way he's looking at me, he agrees.

He doesn't answer, just reaches down and peels off my shorts, guiding my feet gently through the openings before tossing the skimpy fabric onto the ground.

The next thing I know, he's on the bed between my legs, spreading them wide.

"Aren't you going to take—"

"Hush," he says, giving me a wicked grin. "I'll get to it when the time is right."

When the time is right. He used to say that all the time as a reference to some stand-up comedian I couldn't name right now if there was a gun to my head.

I lay back and close my eyes, lifting my chin.

"Whatever you say. You're the man."

He huffs a silent laugh and then goes back to the business at hand.

His breath is against the waistband of my panties and he presses his lips lightly, delicately, working his way up instead of down. He kisses the curve of my stomach, the bottom of my rib cage, the underside of each of my breasts.

Every touch is a bolt of lightning, and by the time he breathes against my nipples, flicking his tongue in and out against the sensitive skin there, I'm gasping with pleasure.

My panties are still on but the hidden space between my legs is slick and hot.

Dex lifts his head from my breasts and kisses me again, his lips gentle against mine, then rough. He is an absolute symphony. His hands might spend most of their time in the hard metal bodies of cars, but he plays mine like it's an instrument he's played all his life.

It's been so long.

It's been so long since I was with a man who treated me like a queen. Tom always wanted sex for sex's sake. It should have been a sign early on that my initial attraction to him was short-lived.

Tom was a candle. Dex is the sun.

Dex lifts himself up, pulling away for a moment. When I feel this movement I open my eyes and stare back into the depths of his.

"Why did you stop?" I whisper.

"I just wanted to look at you like this."

“Like what, naked?” My mouth curves in a smile.

“Naked and gorgeous and close to me.”

“Miss me?”

“Every second.”

He lowers his head back down and drags his full lips all the way back down to my panties, then hooks a finger underneath the waistband and peels them off, tossing them to the floor next to my shorts.

With strong hands he spreads my legs apart, looking at my wetness with a sigh that sounds like all the contentment in the world.

“I don’t want to be vulgar, but your pussy is incredible.”

It’s not the first time Dex has said as much to me, but it hits me right in the joy centers of my brain. I throw my hands over my face, heat pulsing in my cheeks, and open my legs wider.

He doesn’t waste a single moment.

Diving right in, he licks and swirls his tongue around every inch of me, invading me completely, lapping up all the juices like he’s never tasted anything better. The skin of his cheeks is smooth and shaved and creates no friction when my thighs start to tense and tremble.

It’s all I can do to keep from clamping my thighs relentlessly around the sides of his head, trapping him there forever.

Instead I spread my legs another inch and work my fingers into his thick hair. The light-brown shade of it is so like mine that we’ve sometimes been mistaken for relatives, but

it feels exactly the same as it did eight years ago—soft and full.

All of this, every moment, is like the time we used to spend together, just amped up by experience and eight years of wanting.

We could have had eight years together.

The thought floats unbidden into my mind, but Dex quickly chases it away with his tongue. That time is gone and we can never get it back.

But this moment...I'm going to make this moment last as long as possible.

Dex takes me all the way to the edge of an enormous climax, then slides a one finger, two, into my soaking slit. He picks up his head to ask me one question.

“Ready?”

“Please,” I gasp, and with a curl of his fingers he's sent me over the edge.

Only when I come down on the other side, I still want more.

Dex waits another few moments before he gets to his feet, stripping off his clothes in a matter of seconds. I open my eyes.

His body is stunning.

He's muscled without being too built, and he's grown into his height so naturally he might have been born that tall. His cock stands out from between his legs, already throbbing.

My bed dips as he climbs back on, pressing the head of his

cock instantly against my warmth, then burying his face into the side of my neck. In that moment I feel his entire body relax.

But only for an second. Then he's rocking his hips gently against me, teasing me with his cock.

I draw in a sharp breath.

"You're terrible."

"The worst." He presses a little harder, the tip of his cock starting to enter me. I want to spread my legs wider and invite him in, but the practical side of me knows it's just too risky. Not tonight.

"I have condoms," I say into his ear. "The drawer of the bedside table."

He responds by kissing me again, deeply, tenderly, and possessively all at once, then presses himself up on his knees and leans over, rifling through the drawer. The foil packet rips easily in his teeth, and before I can say another word he's sheathed himself and is back between my legs, teasing my opening with his thick cock.

My hips buck underneath him. I'm dying for this. I need this so badly.

"Don't be such a tease," I tell him through gritted teeth, and he responds by sliding into me with one quick thrust, filling me completely.

I'm so wet that he hardly meets any resistance going in and my body stretches to accommodate him like he never left.

"Oh, my god," I whisper. It's just like it used to be, only better. I spent so many nights alone in bed in my dorm

room or in my apartment, getting myself off thinking of *this*.

Now it's actually happening again, and it's a million times better than any of my fantasies.

We fall into a rhythm that's natural, yet so unique to us. I've had sex with a few different guys since Dex and none of them even came close to tapping in to this beat that lives at my very core.

Rocking together in the darkness of my bedroom, I feel all the tension leave my muscles.

This is the first sex I've had in eight years that's measuring up. This is the first sex I've had in eight years that I know I won't regret in the morning.

With every thrust Dex is picking away at the anger I felt toward him, at the loneliness I felt without him. I can't hold on to it any longer. Not when I've got such a firm grip on his waist, his muscles tensing and letting go as he fucks me with the kind of abandon I'm sure he hasn't allowed himself in a long, long time.

I open my mouth and bite down gently on the skin just above his nipple, sending a shiver through his body that I feel inside me.

My body answers that shiver with a few of its own.

Another climax builds and builds with every stroke. Dex is my perfect fit. His cock was made to be inside me, bumping up against the most sensitive places.

I gasp into his ear as the shockwave of pleasure rolls over me, sweeping me under like a giant wave. My thighs tremble

and shake and my hips buck up against his in a frantic, uncontrollable rhythm. He puts a hand on my hips and applies just enough pressure to make me come again, hard. I've always liked a little dominance, and he still knows just how to get me there.

It's three to none when Dex picks up the pace, thrusts harder, deeper. Humming with the aftershocks of my orgasms I wrap my legs around him and hold on tight, drawing him in, whispering into his ear how badly I want him to feel good, feel so good, feel so good he comes the hardest he's ever come.

His little sighs tell me he's close, closer, and then, with a low cry I've heard before and thought I would never hear again, he thrusts in so powerfully that I slide several inches up on the bed. His hips work spasmodically as he empties himself into the condom.

Then, with a long, slow breath, he rests his head on my collarbone and closes his eyes.

A deep peace settles over the room.



I don't know how late it is when I wake up.

Dex isn't there.

Stretching my arms high above my head, I breathe in the scent of him on my skin. It's like coming home.

There are soft sounds coming from the master bathroom attached to my bedroom, and my heart leaps. He's still here! There was a condom to deal with, after all.

He slips under the comforter a few moments later, his breath fresh and minty, and I kiss his cheek, then pad over to the bathroom to brush my teeth and pee.

When I come back, he's lying on his back, one arm stretched out toward my side of the bed.

"So you're staying the night, then?"

"Are you?"

"It's my condo." I smile in the dark.

"I don't have to stay."

"Yes, you do."

We're quiet for a few moments and I snuggle up to him, resting my head on his chest. My body is tired but my mind is awake. It's so much easier to talk in the dark.

"So things were really bad in Chicago."

"Yeah." He sighs heavily. "I went with her because I figured I had nothing better to do. You were gone at college and I could get a GED anywhere."

I stay silent. We both went to school with Carrie Whitfield, who had a reputation even then for being more than a little unhinged. She once held a saw to the neck of one of her ex-boyfriends to try to get him to stay with her. It was unsuccessful.

"Even though you knew what she was like?"

"When we started seeing each other toward the end of that summer she acted like a completely different person. That's a girl who will become what you want for just long enough to trap you."

“How did you get out?”

“I left in the middle of the day, while she was at class.”

“What made the decision for you?” I listen to his heartbeat, thudding beneath his ribs, as mine speeds up.

“The night before, I’d gone out drinking. I didn’t have anything else to do. My life was a disaster and she was a nightmare. She’d punched me a few times before that, but always somewhere hidden—under my shirt, or above my hairline.”

My chest tightens listening to this. I want to punch Carrie Whitfield in *her* face.

“When I got home she was in a rage about something. I don’t remember what. She was always pissed because I didn’t make enough money at my shitty jobs, or I was taking too long to finish the GED class. Like I had any say.”

He stretches, and I feel him turn his head, shaking out some tension in his neck.

“I’d had a few too many and she just came at me. I know it seems fucking stupid. Some little woman beating up a guy. But I swear to god, Bee, there was nothing I could do. And I was drunk. I wasn’t in my right mind.”

“I believe you.” My voice comes out as a whisper.

“We had this tiny-ass balcony in the apartment we were living in. It was probably a square foot. Barely big enough for one person to stand on to smoke. She kept swinging at me until I had backed up through the door, and then she started pushing. We were on the seventh floor. I had no

chance. People were even coming out to watch, it was that fucking crazy, even in that part of the city.”

I know he made it out, but my heart is pounding.

“I was one shove away from falling out of that thing and onto the street. And the worst part is...”

I put my hand against his cheek.

“The worst part is that in that moment I thought, *I deserve this*. For what happened to Lisa. For what I did to you.”

“You didn’t.”

“Maybe not.” He pauses long enough that I feel like it’s still up for debate.

We can come back to that.

“In the end I started yelling. I don’t know what I said, but she backed up enough that I got back into the apartment. I went straight through and back out the door. There was a guy at work who lived close by and I slept on his couch that night. Just long enough to sober up.”

My jaw is clenched tight. *Relax*, I tell myself. It takes a few moments to stop biting down.

“The next day I sat in a shop across the street until she came out. That bitch walked away to go to class like nothing had happened. Not an ounce of guilt. I had bruises everywhere and a black eye, like I’d been in a bar fight. That’s what I told people afterward.”

He lets out a long breath. “Once she was gone I put all my most essential shit into a backpack and got a cab to the train station. It took seventeen hours to get home, and then Ryan

Ballard—do you remember him from school?—I don't know why but he answered when I called for a ride. He brought me to Beechford. I was just lucky I had enough saved up to find a place to stay.”

“Jesus,” I say softly, my chest burning with anger. Dex didn't deserve any of that shit and it breaks my heart that he thinks he did.

“What about you?” he says, and the dark moment is over. For a while.

“You know what happened to me.”

“I want to know more. I always want to know more, Bee.”

“I went to college.”

“How was it?” His voice is full of yearning. I should have forced him to go with me.

“It was...it was just like you said, Dex. It was pretty damn great.” I run my tongue over my teeth. “But I missed the hell out of you. The fact that you weren't there was always on my mind.”

“I know what you mean.”

“I met a guy there.”

His body stiffens.

“He actually...well, we were together for about two years. I met him just before I graduated and ran into him again a couple of years ago at a bar. We started dating.”

“And you realized he couldn't compare to your old not-boyfriend Dex and came running to Beechford to reunite with him?”

I let out a laugh. “Almost. This is going to sound so terrible, but he actually proposed to me last Friday.”

I can almost feel Dex's heart stop beating.

“Bee, please tell me—”

I can't leave him in misery. “I turned him down. It's been kind of weird, actually. He hasn't tried to call or text at all.”

“Maybe he was secretly over you.”

“I can only hope.”

Dex is silent for so long that I start to wonder if he's going to reveal some other secret. There has to be something.

“What are you thinking about?”

“You.”

“Really, Dex.”

“You. And how you're still naked.”

“Nothing else, while we're still having a deep, soul-searching conversation?”

“Shit. Was I supposed to be soul-searching? I thought we'd already determined that I was a teenage asshole. You weren't exactly flawless yourself.”

“Oh? Wasn't I?”

He wraps his arms around me and presses me closer. “You're right. For a small-town teenage girl, you were perfect.”

“I thought the same thing about you.”

“Then you obviously did have one flaw. Something must be wrong with your brain.”

“So harsh, Dex. Why don’t you have more self-respect? Oh, wait...”

“You’re not very nice, Schaffer.”

I don’t answer. Instead, I slide my hand gently down from his chest, trace a pattern on his hipbones, and then go lower, through the curly hair, until my hand rests on his cock, already hard, ready for round two.

“Never mind,” he says, his voice hitching a little as I begin to slowly pump his shaft. “You are absolutely, totally flawless. Not a single flaw. No flaws at all. None.”

“That’s what I thought.”

The sky is turning gray when Bee sleepily detaches herself from me, rolling to her left side. My heart, no shit, skips a beat. She stretches once, then her shoulders relax and her breathing deepens.

This is how she sleeps every night. I've just never been around to see it.

My heart aches.

If I'd just gone with Bee back when I had the chance, I could have seen this every single morning.

It's hard not to be bitter about the time I wasted without her, fucking around in Chicago with the worst person on earth, when I could have been getting my GED and registering for college. Of course she was right, back on the Overlook. Not graduating didn't have to be a life-altering problem.

I always looked at Chicago as payback for how I let Lisa down, and for what I did to Bee. But lying next to her and listening to her breathe, alive and beautiful and peaceful,

I'm willing to consider that I was wrong. I was young and dumb and I got myself into a bad situation. If she can forgive me, even a little, then it's possible it was just a thing that happened and not the thing that happened because I was a worthless piece of garbage.

Nikki flickers back into my mind. I put a hand over my eyes and shut it out, like I used to shut out all kinds of crazy shit in Chicago. In situations like that the only way to get through the day is to force yourself not to think about it. I know, I *know*, I'm not reacting to Nikki like I should be. I know I have to take responsibility and own up to this, and soon.

The blocking-it-out strategy isn't going to work for long. I don't want it to. I want to face up to this stuff before it pushes me out onto a balcony and dangles me over the edge.

Just not this minute.

I let myself linger in the memory of last night while the sky continues to lighten. Bee woke me up twice. I can still feel her lips wrapped around my cock.

If I didn't have any other obligations I'd stay here in this bed with her all day, but I'm working the early shift at Mike's. And I know that if Bee wakes up and asks me to stay I won't be able to turn her down.

How could I?

Carefully, so carefully, I flip back the comforter and slide out of bed, putting my boxers and jeans on without so much as a click of the belt buckle. The shirt I save until I'm out in the living room of her apartment.

Her keys are on the floor near the doorway, where she dropped—threw?—them last night in the wild rush to make out with me.

Damn, she was unbelievable.

Luckily one of us had the sense to turn the lock before we took things into the bedroom.

I slide her condo key off the key ring and use it to lock up from the outside, then push it through the gap underneath the door. It's perfectly sized to get the key far enough inside that it won't be suspicious to anybody who happens to walk by.

She's so precious. So priceless.

Shit could get pretty heavy, and pretty soon, because now that Bee and I have this connection, I can't keep Nikki from her. Even if it breaks her.

But as I cruise onto the highway, the sun spilling golden dawn light over everything, I feel better than I've felt in years.

I love Bee Schaffer. And after last night, I know I'll hold onto that for the rest of my life.

No matter what happens.



Mike is a morning person, and when I come into the shop and pull on my coveralls, he's whistling, halfway through what's probably his second cup of coffee.

“Wow. Why the huge grin, bud? Did you get laid last night?”

“Shut the hell up, Mike.” I can’t wipe the smile off my face, and Mike is loving it.

“Come on, Dex, share the good news!” Mike spreads out his arms. “It’s a goddamn beautiful morning, but you hate getting up early. Something good happened to you. Don’t keep me in the dark. I live for this shit!”

He’s not kidding. “I thought you lived for cars.” The tools I need for the first job on the list have all been put away neatly, but my mind is still clouded with Bee, and this untamable joy that’s filling my chest.

“Tell me.”

“Okay. I had a good night last night.”

Mike clicks his tongue at me and leans back against the front counter. “I don’t believe it. You look like a giddy school-girl and I bet it’s not because they canceled your night class.”

“I don’t have class on Monday nights, and you know it.” I only need a couple of other things...

I catch Mike’s eye and he gives me a sly smile. “There’s a lot of time left, D.”

Julie won’t be in for another couple hours. It’s just me and Mike until the day kicks into gear.

He probably doesn’t know Bee. The only con to giving Mike any information about this is that he’ll know that things were good when they come crashing down, which will probably happen sooner rather than later.

Oh, what the hell.

“I met up with an old friend after work yesterday, and it went well.”

That’s the understatement of the year. Of the decade.

Mike lets out an uproarious laugh. “I knew it! Why try to hide it from me? Mike always figures this shit out.”

I roll my eyes and pick up the last of the tools. “Can Mike figure out when I’m done talking about it?”

He slaps the counter, spilling some of his coffee. “You’re a riot, buddy. A complete riot. So, is she hot?”

I ignore him and head over to the first car, an old-as-hell Subaru Legacy that has seen better days.

“How many times did she get you off?” There’s a smile in Mike’s voice when he calls after me.

I let the grin take over again and say nothing.

“You in love with this friend, buddy?”

“Yeah, Mike,” I call over my shoulder. It sounds like a joke, but it’s the truest thing I think I’ve ever said. “Head over heels.”

My bed is empty when I wake up and it turns out to be a good thing, because during all our extracurricular activities last night I forgot to set my alarm. The only saving grace is that nobody will be waiting for me at the office. Hopefully Leonard doesn't call before I can get to my desk.

I rush through a shower and slide into my easiest office outfit, and I'm out the door in ten minutes. Normally, I'd be fighting off a sick, anxious feeling from this slip-up.

Not today.

I can't get Dex out of my head. There are still traces of his scent on my skin, even after my hasty shower.

Last night was everything I imagined when I thought of meeting up with him again. Everything and more.

Every time my mind wanders, it wanders straight to Dex circling my nipples with his tongue, then dragging it down to my belly button, then lower.

My panties are damp by the time I'm unlocking the office door and heading straight through to my desk.

No blinking red light. No missed calls.

Ah, sweet relief.

I start up the computer and let my emails download. There aren't too many I need to respond to—it's mainly just looping me in on the projects that will be transferred here as soon as I've hired in the last two people.

But one at the bottom of my inbox catches my eye. It's from Tom's email account, and the subject line is "Mistake."

The email reads:

Abigail,

I don't think you realize what an error you made in walking away from our relationship last Friday the way you did. You owe me more than that, and I think you know it. I'll be driving up to Beechford to meet you on Wednesday at 5:00. Keep in mind that I won't take you back unless you can prove you're really committed.

-Tom

I can feel my forehead wrinkling with confusion as I make my way through the last line of the email. Tom hasn't made any effort to contact me until this email. Did I somehow give him the impression that I wanted to get back together?

No. I'm sure I didn't.

Sitting back in my seat, I think back over all the things that didn't sit right with me about Tom. They were easy to sweep under the rug when most of our couples' activities consisted

of watching Netflix and going to the movies. I was more interested in running and entering local road races, and he was more interested in going to the shooting range with his precious guns.

That hobby seemed more innocuous while I was actually in a relationship with him. His quirks seemed harmless, the kind of thing that a man would eventually grow out of—how possessive he could be sometimes, how I'd had to ask him several times to stop doing things like slapping my ass in public when he thought I was being “naughty.”

Now they seemed like the behaviors of a grade-A creep, and this email was just another example. The off-putting tone was something I'd written off as a teenage habit gone uncorrected.

It was something I could laugh about before.

But these words, sent to my work email? At what point did he become entitled to decide things for me?

I'm going to put an end to this right now.

Tom,

I'm sorry for the way things played out in the diner and I realize that your feelings are probably very hurt. I didn't go into our lunch date intending for any of that to happen. I was blindsided by your proposal because we never talked about marriage or getting engaged before I moved to Beechford.

I've spent the last few days thinking this over and even though I wish it had ended differently, I think that ending our relationship is the best decision for both of us. Please do not come to Beechford. I'm not available to meet with you.

I wish you the best of luck,

Abby

I send the email before I can overthink it and feel another burst of relief. The message is crystal clear. I'm truly free. For the first time in two years I'm on my own. For the first time in eight years I'm not actively longing for a man who isn't there.

Because he spent last night in my bed.

I don't know what's going to happen with Dex. Maybe he has other plans, eight years down the road.

Maybe I have other plans. I don't know yet.

But what feels so good—on top of the pleasure that's still zinging through every one of my muscles—is that the possibilities are endless.

I don't give a shit that Dex works as a mechanic. All I care about is that when his hands are on me, I feel completely myself, completely at home.

I'm in the middle of answering the rest of the emails when my cell phone buzzes.

How's the new job, sis?

My sister Catherine, two years younger than I am, is at least four times as busy. She works in New York City in the fashion industry and is literally always in the process of planning for an event, attending an event, or coming back from an event. My career is impressive; hers is going to be extraordinary. We're different enough that I've never had to feel jealous.

A little lonely for the next couple days, but it'll be great! :)

You doing OK otherwise?

***Sigh** Did Mom call you?*

No, telepathy.

I'm really good, Cate. Believe it or not!

There's a long pause, the little logo that indicates Cate's typing hovering on the screen. She's either typing me a long message or deleting and re-writing something until she gets it just right.

Believe it or not, I wasn't Tom's biggest fan. No tears shed over here ;)

I'm not entirely surprised. Cate never spent much time with Tom. They met a few times, and afterward she told me he was a nice guy. But sisters always have tells. I just ignored it at the time.

Another message from her pops up.

Are you having any fun?

"Having any fun" is our code for rebound relationships...or just rebound sex.

You won't believe me.

TELL ME NOW

Dex lives in Beechford.

NO he does not!

Not a joke—he lives in the apartment right above my new office.

Another long pause.

Did you two kiss and make up?

Promise not to tell?

Don't insult me.

I'm still really into him, Cate. Things could happen. Really really good things

As I type out the message to Cate I can feel my heart lightening, expanding, and filling with the kind of giddy warmth I haven't felt since high school. It's the same half-pain all-pleasure feeling of hanging up with the boy you love and having his voice ring in your ears as you fall asleep, knowing you have to get up for school in two hours and not caring because nothing is more important than talking to him.

Admitting it to Cate makes it...real. And I fucking love it.

When I was with Tom, I woke up most days resigned to the future. It wouldn't be very exciting but there would be moments of happiness. Vacations. Good days. But the life we would have together would not be exceptional, or particularly passionate.

With Dex in my bed, above my office, waiting on the street for me, life feels new and clean and bursting with so much possibility I'm not sure I can hold it all in. That's how it felt to be eighteen and certain that he would be by my side for whatever came next—and that didn't mean settling into a boring routine. It meant adventure.

It might be the biggest risk I've ever taken even to entertain the thought that Dex and I could have something after all this time. I might get my heart broken. But I'd rather get my heart shattered a second time than never experience the

exhilaration of jumping from a high ledge into deep, waiting water, come what may.

Cate sends me an animated picture of a sparkling heart. Then:

Mom and Dad won't like it, but this is great news. Dex was my favorite!

He's still mine.

When I get out of work, there's a text from Bee waiting on my phone. I smile at the sight of her name like an idiot. We'd exchanged numbers during the drive home from Jennison's and I completely forgot about it, what with staying up all night having mind-blowing sex.

Hey

We didn't text each other much in high school. My parents wouldn't pay for one of the plans with unlimited messaging, so what we sent was limited to pick-up locations. Highly romantic shit.

But, like a couple of lovesick kids, we did send notes. She'd push a paper across my desk in the middle of class that had one word on it, maybe two. I'd write back a letter.

Not much has changed.

My heart beats faster.

Hi, Bee. Bored at work?

Maybe...nobody else is here until tomorrow

I wonder if she's inviting me to come meet up with her in her office. That could be pretty fucking hot. I've never had office sex with anyone, but I can picture how it would go with Bee. I'd push her pencil skirt up past her hips and...

She must have realized how her text sounded at the same time I did, because a second message comes in right on its heels.

This is not a sex invite!

Her cheeks have to be more than a little pink at having to send that.

But what if it was?

Then I'd be a terrible employee. No way!

You don't think it'd be a little...hot?

I can't help myself.

Maybe a little. I'm wearing high heels...

It turns me on when you're three inches taller

It turns me on when you fuck me.

Wow, Schaffer!! Vulgar much?

She sends me a little blushing emoji. I usually don't bother with that shit, but the tiny picture is pretty goddamn cute.

Then:

Are you out of work for the day?

Just got out. Heading home to shower and change now.

Do you want to meet up? NOT at the office

Hmm. Let me see. YES

Where?

The beach

Bee will know exactly what I mean when I say “the beach.” The Overlook’s least-used feature is a staircase leading down to a small, sandy patch of land by the water. Nobody ever swims there. It’s too rocky for delicate feet. But if you want somewhere out of the way to talk...

Or do other things...

Should I bring a bathing suit?

Skinny-dipping is so much easier.

Tsk, tsk. Not in broad daylight

Sunset is only, I don’t know, six hours away?

I’ll leave here at 5:00. Have to get out of these clothes. 5:45?

I’ll be the naked guy in the water

:D



The staircase down to the beach at the Overlook is worn, weathered from years of getting battered by the rain and heated by the sun. On years when the lake is especially high the bottom few stairs are below the water line.

Needless to say, it’s not a very popular beach.

Perfect.

I'm early. I scrubbed the hell out of my skin in the shower, trying to remove every last trace of grease.

Bee probably doesn't care.

I want to tell her about Nikki so that we can both have everything on the table. If she feels as good as I did after last night...well, there's no telling what she might want. It's a mistake to assume that she's going to want to be with me.

But I did see her face, in the half-light of her room, and it was so full of love that even I could be pretty confident about it.

That's why this situation is eating at me.

When I got home from work Nikki was waiting. She's been catching me when I come home to "talk about our baby," and it's fucking awful.

From what she's said, it's still early on. Today she stood in the hall, twisting her fingers in her other hand, and told me she's considering "going to the clinic."

"Is that what you want?" I asked her point-blank. If she wants to keep the baby, I'll own up to the responsibility and support her however I have to. But we both have to know that our hookups were never supposed to lead to a family. As much as I try, I can't muster up any interest in settling down with Nikki.

The bitch of it is that I know sticking around with her is the right thing to do.

I've made bad decisions before, and this isn't something I want to have regrets about.

I'm so fucking torn. With Bee back in town I can't deny that I want to be with her. And last night proved that we're just as compatible as we always were.

Hovering over all of it, like the black cloud that followed me wherever I went in Chicago, is Nikki with this baby.

The one thing I can't do is walk out on her. On both of them. That's not how my mother raised me. That's not the man Bee knows me to be.

But it will break her heart to find out about it.

It will shatter my heart to tell her.

As much as I want to selfishly tell Nikki that she needs to go to the clinic *yesterday*, I can't. I just can't do it. In the end it's not my decision.

When I'm not consumed with thinking about Bee I've been wracking my brain to figure out how all of this could have happened in the first place. I've always been meticulously careful when it comes to sex for exactly this reason. I bring my own condoms. I use them religiously.

Nikki's timing matches up with the last time I visited her—probably two months ago—but I was sober. There's no way I slipped up.

Could the condom have broken without me realizing it?

Is it possible that I'm just experiencing another slap in the face from the universe?

Nikki always said she was on the pill, and with a condom there should have been almost no way she could get pregnant.

I guess the shit on the package is probably right. It's never 100%.

I've leaned my head on my hands and I'm thinking it through as slowly and carefully as possible when the stairs creak behind me.

I'm already smiling when I turn to see Bee, descending step by careful step. She doesn't want to hold the peeling railing, and I don't blame her—that thing is stuffed full of splinters.

"Hey," she calls over the breeze coming off the lake.

"You're not wearing a bathing suit," I answer her. It doesn't matter. She's got a pair of jean shorts pulled tight over her shapely ass and a black tank top that hugs her closely, showing off her trim waist. The years since high school have been pretty kind to her, plus all that running she does.

Her sandy hair is pulled back in a simple ponytail away from her face, and as she comes down she brushes a few flyways back from her forehead. Bee is probably the only woman I've ever met who hates having the wind in her hair. It's cute as hell.

"You're not naked," she says, sitting down next to me in the sand on the other half of the old hoodie I spread out beneath me. "I'm looking for a hot, naked guy swimming in the water."

"Will you settle for a hot, naked guy on the sand?"

She giggles and gestures to the blue sky in front of us. "What did I say about broad daylight?"

"No skinny-dipping.' Having a little fun in the sand is hardly skinny-dipping."

She glances back up at the Overlook, but there's nobody there to peer down at us.

"I missed you today."

"Yeah?" I say, pretending to scoff, looking the other way. "Prove it."

Instantly her hand is on my chin, gently turning my head toward her, and then her mouth is on mine. She tastes sweet and minty with a hint of chocolate, and I think of the mini candy bars she used to eat on the way home from school. Now she must eat them on the way back from work.

Bee takes my tongue gently between her teeth, biting down enough to make my cock hard, and then she pulls away.

"Believe me now?"

I put my arm around her and pull her in close. "We'll see. I might need you to prove it again in another five minutes."

"How about five seconds?"

"How about—"

She cuts me off with another soul-shaking kiss, and I feel another increment of the tension from the last eight years leave my muscles.

Of course, the instant her lips leave mine, I feel a chill.

What the fuck am I going to do about Nikki?

Bee is probably the one person on earth I'd ever want to talk to about a problem of this magnitude, but how can I look into her eyes and admit this shit to her?

Why does the timing of everything in my life have to be so god-awful?

I take a deep breath. The universe doesn't revolve around me. What happened before was the result of my own shitty decisions. A lot of what's happening now is the result of shit that I've done.

No matter how far I think I've come, I'm still the problem with my own life.

Still, Bee's warm body is pressed up next to mine and she smells like shampoo and sunscreen and everything good about the world.

Not yet.

Just not yet.

It's like Bee can hear my thoughts. She turns to look at me, pulling away just enough that she can see my eyes.

"What's up with you?"

Every word she says reverberates with the echoes of all the time we spent together. We might be pretending that everything is business as usual, but there's a weight to every conversation somehow, spreading across my chest, heavy and warm.

My instinct, even now, is to tell her the truth. Bee spent way too much time dragging the truth out of me before. She'd do it even if it ended in some stupid fight. And she was always right.

I just can't do it.

Since when did I become such a coward?

The faintest voice in the back of my mind has the answer, ready and waiting, as usual. That day on the Overlook. If I had to, I could probably figure out the exact date.

“Did I tell you that I’m going to night school?”

“No,” she says, her eyes sparkling. “And I didn’t ask because sometimes I’m an asshole. Wow!” Her voice rings with happiness for me. One sentence and I chased away all the concern from her eyes.

It kills me that she trusts me so much not to lie to her. Did she forget how I used to be in high school?

I try to be different but who the fuck knows if I am.

Bee settles back into my arm.

“Yeah. It took a while to get started but I only have three semesters left.”

“What are you going for?”

“I’m going to be a double auto mechanic,” I tease, breathing her in.

“Oh, stop,” she laughs, resting a hand on my thigh.

“Political science,” I say. Even from the side, I can see how wide her eyes open.

“Really?”

“Yeah, and history. It’s a double-major kind of deal.”

“I always pictured night school as...not a place with double majors.”

Now it’s my turn to laugh. “Bad choice of words. I take night classes, but they’re at the regular community college.”

“And it bothers you?”

“What, the college?”

“You were so quiet for a minute there. It was weird.”

“It’s midterms.” Another lie. Midterms for the short summer session aren’t for another two weeks, and they won’t be a big deal. It’s a shocker, but I’ve turned out to be pretty good at college.

“I remember finals,” she says, her voice hinting at being wistful.

“They had to be a different story at the big university.”

“Not really,” she says, shifting her ass a little to get comfortable. “No, you’re right. It was different. Finals weren’t fun, but it was easy to get caught up in the atmosphere. People went a little crazy. Three in the morning could be pretty interesting at the library.”

“Really? I always thought three in the morning was the best time to be in bed.”

“Dex Stevens, sleeping peacefully at three in the morning? I don’t believe it for a second.”

“I didn’t say sleeping. I said *in bed*.” I breathe the last two words into her ear and feel a shiver run through her entire body. Her toned legs flex against the sand.

“I feel like...” Bee slides a hand up the side of my neck and runs her fingers through my hair, then trails her fingers back down my arm, resting them lightly on the top of my wrist. Her touch is so delicate that it sets my nerves on fire. “I feel like we should go back to my condo.”

“My, my. In broad daylight?”

“Who the hell cares?” she says, leaping up and tugging my arm. “I don’t have anything to hide. Do you?”

Her green eyes are lit up with anticipation.

I have to swallow the painful lump in my throat.

Before she leads me up the staircase to our cars, I lie to her one more time.

“Nope. Nothing at all.”

*B*ee's condo, Bee's room, Bee's bed. I kiss every inch of available skin, pushing her up against the wall in the entryway. She's still so soft, so fucking perfect that it makes it hard to breathe.

When we got to the condo she checked something on her phone, and when she looked up I saw a flicker of worry in her eyes.

I want to wipe that worry away, by any means necessary.

So when she's putty in my hands I lead her to her bedroom and spread her out on the bed, her clothes in a pile in the hallway.

Bee closes her eyes while I run the flat of my hands over her body. She's always been ticklish, but touching her activates muscle memories and all of it comes back. I linger in the dip of her stomach above her hipbones, pressing gently, letting up.

She moans a little and starts to open her legs. It's a hell of an invitation.

I put my hands on her ankles and slide them up to her thighs, then spread her legs even farther. Her slit is already damp, sparkling, and she bucks her hips a little in anticipation.

I start slow, swirling my tongue from her clit right down to her opening, working over every inch. She rests her hands on my head, slides her fingers into my hair, and holds on.

She tastes exactly how I remember. Sweet and clean.

I could do this all day.

The sensation takes her over, and she comes into my mouth, a little burst of wetness that I lick away. Her hands tug at my head a little.

But I don't stop.

I plunge my tongue into her hot slit again, and the gasp she lets out is electric. Every breath I take is full of her. I never want to leave.

I take her right to the edge, her hips dancing with the energy that she's about to unleash, and then I go for her clit, sucking it in and drilling it with my tongue.

I stay until she can't stand it anymore, until her face is pink and flushed and she's lifting her hips toward me over and over again.

"What did I do to deserve this?" she says, her nails digging in to my shoulders, pulling me up until I'm on top of her. It only takes a second to reach for a condom and slide it on, and then I'm pressing into her, surrounded by her, fucking

her like she's all mine, and always has been, and always will be.

We're wrapped around each other, clinging tight. She feels like home.

How can I give this up?

I thrust into her again and again, picking up the pace, going in deep, and her hips come up to meet me every time.

I can't.

I can't.

Every second that we spend like this, bodies crushed together so close that it's like we never spent a moment apart, makes it harder to stomach the thought of living without her.

I surge into her, emptying myself so hard that my mind goes completely blank. She giggles softly, pure happiness, and rolls me gently off of her so that we can lay facing one another.

Her smile is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.



We lay in silence for a while, and I watch her face. She keeps her eyes focused on mine for several minutes. They slip down to my cheeks, my chest. Then she rolls over onto her back and lets out a little sigh.

“Spill, Bee.”

She doesn't look at me. Bites her lip. Thinks about it.

“Tom emailed me today.”

“You didn’t tell me much about him the other night.”

“There isn’t much to tell.” Her eyes dart over to my face, then back to the ceiling.

Leaning in, I plant a small kiss on her cheek. Just enough to let her know that I’m there.

“You don’t have to tell me anything you don’t want to.”

She sighs. “I didn’t realize how not-right he was for me until he was about to propose. Ever since I left him in that cafe the things I didn’t like about him have been on my mind. He was possessive in a bizarre kind of way. And he loved guns. Maybe too much.”

Bee has never been much for guns.

“Did he decide to take it hard, then? You turning him down?”

“He didn’t say anything for a few days, and then today he sent me a weird email. Hang on.”

She hops out of the bed, her round, perfect ass swinging from side to side as she darts out the doorway to her clothes. When she’s back on the bed, on her belly with her perky breasts framed by her arms, she scrolls through something on the phone and hands it to me. “Here.”

By the time I’m done reading it, the pit of my stomach has gone cold. Tom seems like the kind of dick who doesn’t know when to stop.

“I would have taken it hard if you turned me down. But I also wouldn’t have sent this email.”

“I wouldn’t have turned you down.”

I reach out and run a hand over her hair, smoothing it away from her face. She moves to kiss me, deeply, her breasts brushing over my bare chest, then sits back on her heels. “What did you say?”

Bee flicks and scrolls and shows me her reply.

“And you think he’ll still show up?”

“I don’t know,” she says, taking the phone back and tossing it onto the sheets. “I’ve been checking for a reply since I said it, and he hasn’t answered.”

“Maybe he got the message.”

“That’s what I’d like to think.”

“But you don’t.”

I put my hand on the small of her back and kiss her shoulder. “Does he have the address to your new place?”

“I never gave it to him. I told him I had a place, but he didn’t help me move or anything. I hired movers. He was busy. It just didn’t come up.”

Seems like a major oversight on his part, but just from this email, I’m getting the impression that Tom doesn’t really *get* other people.

“If he shows up at your office, you can always call me.”

“No way, Dex. I’m not getting you involved in this. It’s nothing I can’t handle.” The worry in her eyes turns to calculation.

I glance playfully down at our naked bodies. “I think I’m

already involved. Really, Bee, don't worry about it. He probably won't show. And if he does, I'll be around."

"I'll be fine. There will be a couple of other people in the office starting tomorrow, anyway. Hopefully that will keep things cool."

"Good." I don't want her sitting in that office by herself if this creep is going to make an appearance.

My phone starts buzzing on the nightstand, and when I pick it up, I see that the call is coming in from Nikki.

Shit.

Bee's eyes flick to the screen, but she quickly drags them away. I decline the call and roll her over on her back, covering her mouth with mine and tasting her deeply.

"I hate to end the party early," I say, "but I have to head to class."

A strange expression flickers over her face for a brief moment, and then she pulls me back down again, her tongue dancing in my mouth. "I wouldn't want to make you late."

"I wouldn't be mad if you did."

She clicks her tongue at me. "Not a chance. I refuse to be the one that derails your political career before it even begins."

"Fine," I sigh, teasing her while I throw my clothes on. "I know you always wanted to be a city councilman's wife."

"City council?" she says, wrinkling her nose. "I won't be anything less than a senator's wife."

"I'll try not to let you down."

Hate Loving You

It was hard to walk away from Bee on the Overlook. But it's even harder to walk away from her glowing, naked body tangled in the sheets where we just fucked like there's no tomorrow.

Who knows? Maybe there isn't.

There is absolutely no way that I can bring up that phone call to Dex without seeming like a paranoid crazy person, and that is the last thing he needs.

When the door closes behind him, the afterglow starts to wear off.

The shower calls to me. I switch the shower head to its most powerful setting and let the water soak through my hair. It's tangled from the visit to the beach...and the sex. Conditioner, work your magic.

While I shave my legs, I try telling myself firmly that the call could have been from anyone. A classmate. His boss. Anyone.

But by the time I draw my razor over my skin the final time, I know it's a lost cause.

I saw his face when he picked up the phone. Anger. Irritation.

And fear.

Those aren't the kinds of things a person feels when a classmate calls about some group project. God, I hated group projects in college. I bet Dex does too. In high school, whenever we were in the same class together, we'd always be partners. It stirred up drama with whoever we were dating. I never cared.

Who could it have been?

Of course Dex had to catch me glancing at his screen like a jealous girlfriend.

Alone in my shower I can admit it: That's what I want to be. Not jealous—his girlfriend. Together with him in public, for everyone to see. No regrets. Just making up for lost time.

My thoughts rattle around in my mind even as my skin is still humming from his caresses. I'm proud of him for going to college. He works full-time at the body shop. It can't be easy to go to school at the same time.

Why did his class have to be tonight? I could have worked up the courage to ask him about the call. By now I might have known it was no big deal.

It's probably nothing.

I rinse the combo shampoo/conditioner out of my hair and turn off the water. My skin is pink and warm, and my new towel is soft. For a moment I feel completely content.

The jittery, suspicious feeling comes back as I'm pulling a tank top over my head. If Dex is in class, I'm not going to text him about it. We only just started texting today.

My new couch is plush and comfortable. It's nothing like the old Ikea couch that Tom insisted on keeping to save money, even though it was a piece of shit and terrible to sit on. It fills me with a certain glee that I'll never have to make decisions with Tom again, that I didn't consult him in choosing this couch.

Clearly, in the back of my mind, I was already planning to leave him.

What am I planning to do with Dex?

Proceed with caution, that's what.

It feels good to be with him. Better than good. It feels fucking phenomenal to be with him. Almost everything about it feels right.

Still, it makes every kind of sense to go about this carefully. We've both made mistakes before. I don't want to make one with him.

I turn on a sitcom I've seen a million times and settle in. There will be people in the office tomorrow, and plenty of time to make plans with Dex, if he's available. A thrill goes up my spine.

Having him back in my life, even if it's only temporary, is making the move to Beechford seem less like a promotion to a small fishbowl and more like the kind of grand adventure I imagined as a teenager.

Even with the sitcom on he fills my mind, and I push thoughts of the phone call away, to wherever I'm storing the creepy email from Tom and the fact that tomorrow is Wednesday.

Hate Loving You

I think of Dex's head bobbing between my legs, his tongue swirling around my slickness. I'm instantly wet.

Leaning my head back against one of my throw pillows, I slip my hand into my panties and let the memory of today play in my mind.

Better than porn, any day.

Work on Wednesday is a literal breath of fresh air. I like a little solitude as much as anyone, but I've had enough of being in the office by myself.

Sandra and Eddie were hired on before I made the move. They spent time in my department at headquarters, and they're different enough to make things interesting.

Eddie comes in at nine o'clock on the dot, clutching the largest coffee they offer at the shop next door. Tall and thin with a mop of black hair, he has a deadpan delivery.

"Hey, Abby," he says, scanning the new space. "Not a bad setup, is it?"

"Not at all. Take a desk, any desk." The four desks in the main area of the office face into separate corners, each with a new iMac perched on top. A cluster of brightly colored, cushy chairs is grouped in the center. They're perfect for impromptu meetings or, as I've discovered, obsessing about your not-really-ex-but-maybe-current-boyfriend.

Eddie takes the desk in the back that's closest to my office. It's a good call. Back at headquarters we had a habit of calling to each other from our respective cubicles.

"I guess I can make do with this," he says as he begins opening the drawers on his never-been-touched, top-of-the-line desk. "You'd think they'd put a little more effort into the digs for a crack team like us."

"Yeah, but what can you do?"

Just then, Sandra breezes in, positively beaming. She's closer to my height but with dark hair and curves for days. Clients love her because she comes off as such a dear heart. She isn't a pushover, though. I've seen her claws come out. But she'll put you in your place with a smile.

"Good morning, good morning!" she says, sweeping through the office. "Wow! They really pulled out all the stops for you, Abby!"

"Hi, Sandra," I say. "I'm glad you guys are here—it was pretty lonely the last couple of days."

"I couldn't wait to get here. Have you seen how *cute* this town is?"

"Maybe not the whole thing, but this street couldn't get any more quaint," I say with a smile.

"You grew up around here, didn't you?" Sandra circles the remaining desks. "I'm assuming we can choose any desk?"

"Not this one," says Eddie, whipping around in his chair. "This one is mine. You can try to fight me for it but you're going to lose."

“Oh, Eddie,” says Sandra, passing by his desk and ruffling his hair. “I don’t think I could live without you.”

Sandra chooses a desk in the front, where she’ll get plenty of light from the window and she can watch people going by on the sidewalk. I would have guessed she’d pick that one.

Once she’s settled in, I go back into my office and bring out a box of pastries from the bakery down the street. “The projects from headquarters will be coming in by the end of the day, and I’ve got interviews lined up for tomorrow. I want you both in on those. But first—breakfast!”



With Sandra and Eddie bantering and bickering and sorting out the new projects, the day gets away from me. It’s 4:30 before I remember Tom’s email with a sinking feeling.

Sitting down behind my desk, I open my email and scan the new messages, looking for his name.

Nothing.

Maybe my email was enough.

I answer a few other messages and send in an upbeat report to Leonard while Eddie and Sandra are busy at their own desks, already deep into their respective projects. Leonard’s vision is that we’ll embed ourselves on the local level while still taking on targeted work for our larger clients. My chest swells a little with pride at the fact that he chose me to head up the team, even though it’s old news.

Five o’clock comes and goes. There’s no knock on the door,

Hate Loving You

nobody looking in through the front window, and I start to relax.

At 5:10, a message comes in from Dex, and my entire body heats up.

Did he show? I can be there in five minutes.

No. Thank god.

Are you okay?

Yeah! Relieved

I'm sorry I'm not there

In the office?? That could be awkward

I'd stand outside if you wanted me to

I know it

Do you want me to?

I can't afford a bodyguard

I'll drop everything right now

Drop what?

Writing a paper for class tonight

I start to type out a sassy, teasing reply designed to get him to reveal if he's working on it with somebody else, but then delete the entire thing.

Keep writing

Are you sure?

Totally. I've got two people here. Leaving soon

Talk later?

If you're not busy, college man

I won't be

I want to know what's really going through his mind. Is he offering this because of the friendship we had? Or is it to distract me from something else?

At 5:25, without consulting each other, Sandra and Eddie both gather up their things and stand up. *Why not?* I throw my phone into my purse, shut down my computer, and meet them where they're chatting at the door. I hand them both copies of the key to the office so they can come early or stay late. Eddie acts like he's receiving Excalibur.

While I'm locking up behind us, Sandra looks up at the building. "Are those apartments up there?"

"Yes," says Eddie. "We each get one as part of the package. Abby and I have already moved in. Did you miss the memo?"

She laughs and gives him a slap on the arm. "Don't be an ass."

"They are apartments," I say, giving the doorknob a jiggle to make sure it's closed. "It's an older building, which is kind of cool."

As we head around back, Sandra keeps checking out the local architecture. "What was our office before it was an office?"

I can't believe I haven't shared that tidbit with them. "You're never going to guess."

Eddie purses his lips. “A *different* office.”

“A fudge shop.”

“What?” Sandra shrieks, delighted. “With all those tables where they mix it and all that?”

“Yes,” I laugh, thinking of the pictures Leonard pulled up online to show me the space’s history. “Leonard said they needed four guys to get the marble slabs out.”

“Can you imagine?” Sandra closes her eyes, tilting her head up into the late-afternoon sun. “You’d probably smell like chocolate all the time. We should have kept one of those tables around.”

I scan the parking lot behind the building for Dex’s car. It’s not here. He must be working on his paper somewhere else.

Or...

I shut the thought down immediately. I am not going to work myself up over one phone call. No way.

“If only,” I say wistfully. I could go for a never-ending supply of chocolate.

And a never-ending supply of Dex.

But I’m not going to get swept up in this fantasy before I know what’s really going on with him. I have to go into this with clear eyes.

I say goodbye to Eddie and Sandra and steer my car out of the parking lot, looking for any sign of Tom. But the parking lot is empty, aside from us, and so is the street. I don’t see his car anywhere, either.

Just in case, I take my time driving back to my condo,

cruising slowly down Main Street and then back along the highway.

Once I'm out of my work clothes and into a comfy pair of exercise capris and a matching tank, I take a leisurely walk to the condo's office building. A walled-in shelter holds all eight mailboxes for the buildings. Mine's pretty full.

As I'm sorting through the mail, my phone buzzes.

Has he proposed yet? ;)

Cate!! It has been one single day

Not really...

She's right. Things with Dex started a long time ago.

My fingers hover over the phone's keyboard.

I want to tell her about the weird phone call, but I know that would turn out to be a bizarre, rambling text. She'll just end up calling. So I bring up my contacts list and press Cate's name. If she's texting, she'll probably be free, at least for a minute.

She picks up on the first ring.

"What, you don't like to text me?"

"Oh, stop. I love texting you and you know it."

"I get it. You missed the sweet sounds of my voice."

"Always."

"What's up, Bee? I've got a few minutes."

"Are you coming or going?"

“Going. I have a very important dress with me at this very moment, so don’t distract me too long.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it. Is the dress okay now?”

She pauses exaggeratedly. “I just looked. It’s fine. Tell me about you and Dex, immediately.”

I sigh a little. “Things are good.”

“I know that tone, Bee. What thing isn’t good?”

“Almost every single thing is great. He’s...”

“Hotter than sin?”

“Well, that.”

I climb the stairs to my condo and unlock the door, pressing the phone between my ear and my shoulder so I can juggle my keys and my mail. The sounds of New York City traffic hit my ears in intermittent bursts. It’s so busy that Cate’s phone can’t cancel all the noise out.

“Is he married or something?”

“No,” I say, but my voice sounds uncertain.

“Is he *married*, Bee? Oh, my god.”

“No!” I’m confident that he’s not. “No, he’s not married. Listen. We were together the other day—”

“Ooh. Was it mind-blowing?”

“Maybe,” I tease. “But here’s the thing, Cate. Afterward, while we were, you know, *lying* there, this call came in on his cell phone. And he got the weirdest look on his face.”

“What kind of look?”

“Scared? Irritated?”

“It could have been anybody.”

“That’s what I keep telling myself. But that look. It was something else. He’s got to be keeping something from me.”

“Ask him about it.”

Cate is always so matter-of-fact.

“I’m going to, next time we have a chance to talk.”

“Problem solved.”

I don’t say anything.

“But not really,” says Cate. “Are you afraid of what he’s going to say?”

“I don’t want to get this close and then have it get yanked away.”

“Just...try your best not to get caught up, Bee. Don’t get too excited. It’s been a long time. Maybe there were...entanglements.”

“I know.”

“Don’t let it pull you under, okay?”

“I won’t.”

“Call me once you’ve talked to him.” The background noise increases. “I’m here—gotta go. Love you!”

She ends the call before I can say another word.

My sister’s advice is sound, as usual. As much as it kills me, I’m going to try to hold myself back. It feels good to be with Dex but it will feel awful to be left again. I need to avoid it.

I throw most of the mail into the container that holds my recycling and take another look at the rest. There's a reminder for my annual gyno appointment, but I'm not going to drive three hours for it. If I don't cancel now I won't remember, so I pick up the phone and leave a message at the office.

And if I don't make a new appointment now, I won't remember, and that is not the kind of thing a responsible woman forgets. It only takes thirty seconds to look up local doctors and choose one with relatively good ratings. I can even make an appointment online.

Done and done. Seconds later, the new patient paperwork arrives in my inbox.

Abby Schaffer, independent woman, taking care of business.

I stretch my arms above my head. The evening isn't especially hot or humid, and I have time to kill before Dex will be out of class for the night.



It's nearly 10:30 when my phone buzzes again.

Am I too late?

Too late for what?

For you to be awake?

Yes. I'm sleeping.

Ha. Ha. Is everything okay? He didn't show up somewhere else, did he?

Nope. How was class?

I genuinely want to know, and this is an opportunity for him to come clean if he was working with someone else on one of those awful group projects.

Good. I got my paper done just in time. It's hard to write that shit when all I can think about is you

Blood rushes to my cheeks.

Oh, I'm nothing special

You are and you know it

I'll take your word for it

There's a long pause, and then he replies.

I want to talk to you all night but I work the early shift in the morning

No hard feelings :)

I expect him to ask if I'm free after work tomorrow, but instead...

You're always on my mind, Bee

And that's it.

I'm exhausted by the time I get home from class, and the first thing I do is sink down into my battered couch and put my feet up on the coffee table. Someday, when I retire from working on political campaigns with an assload of cash, I'm going to get the fanciest recliner money can buy.

All I wanted to do was talk to Bee today, but business was booming at Mike's and I didn't even have time for a lunch break. Afterward a reminder popped up on my phone.

With all the shit that's been going on, I completely forgot about the paper that was due.

Being in college would be so much easier if I didn't work all the time.

My laptop is a piece of shit and struggles to start half the time, so after the world's fastest and least relaxing shower I drove to the public library. It was completely redone a few years ago thanks to some massive fundraising drives. They

have three computer labs with machines that aren't falling apart.

It's also only a few minutes away from Bee's office. She said she was okay, but just in case...

It took all my willpower to sit there writing that paper. I could have been camped out in the coffee shop, looking out for the creep, but she said everything was fine and I believed her.

With ten minutes to spare before I needed to leave for class I printed out the final version. Not my best work. Still, it would have to do in a pinch.

Class was one of those arduous discussion periods that, as usual, devolved into an argument between different cliques in the class. By the end my head was pounding.

What sweet relief it was to close my apartment door behind me.

Plus, Bee's still awake.

I think she's a little bit suspicious about the call from Nikki. I can't be sure if she saw the name on my phone, but if I were her, I'd want to ask about it.

She doesn't.

We're just starting to get comfortable in our conversation—I'm sure she can't talk long, she has work in the morning—when someone pounds on my door.

For a minute I ignore it and stretch my legs against the table. Then Nikki's voice filters through the door.

“I know you’re in there, Dex. I saw you come home. Let me in.”

Jesus.

Bee’s last message blinks up at me from the screen but with Nikki practically breaking down the door I can’t think of what to say.

Standing up slowly, I go over to the door and open it.

Nikki stands just outside, one hip cocked to the side, arms crossed in front of her chest. Her eyes are red like she’s been crying.

“We have to talk, Dex.”

I put a hand to my forehead and rub, trying to get rid of the throbbing at my temples.

“I don’t know what else to say, Nikki.”

“Are you going to step up for this baby? That’s what I need to know. That’s what I need to *know*, Dex.” Tears are welling up in her eyes again, and her voice is taking on a hysterical tone.

“Just—oh, my god, Nikki, just calm down.”

This is the wrong thing to say.

“Calm *down*?” she screeches, and in that moment I’ve never been happier that we don’t share a hallway with any of the other tenants. The closest neighbor is down the hall. That’s not to say he can’t hear her.

I take my hand away from my forehead and pick up my phone, telling Bee all the truth I can in this moment.

You're always on my mind, Bee

Then I set my phone down on the table beside the door, grab my keys, and step out into the hallway. Nikki is sobbing now, her hands clenched into fists at her sides. I don't want to touch her. I never want to see her again. But I got myself into this mess.

It's the mess that's ultimately going to take me away from Bee. Permanently.

I can't come to her with this and expect anything else.

I *won't* come to her with this and expect anything else.

All I need to do now is get through tonight, and then I'll come clean about all of it.

And when she walks out of my life, I'll know I'm getting exactly what I deserve.



Nikki spends the next two hours alternately screaming at me and crying, and nothing I say seems to make any difference. I stand, my feet aching and my hands in my pockets, in her cluttered kitchen and try my damndest to be the responsible second party.

“Do you even want this baby?” she says finally, leaning against the counter. It smells like fruit gone bad in here, even though I don't see any of it out in the open. Fruit and the faint tang of unwashed hair.

Nikki isn't the cleanest person.

“Nikki, I don't know how to answer that. Right now? No, I

don't. You said you were on the pill."

Despair fills my chest. We're just circling back. Again.

"Fine, Dex. *Fine*. I'll just make an appointment at the clinic. It's still early enough." She covers her face with both her hands and fat tears leak out from underneath her palms.

"I didn't ask you to do that."

"You didn't say I shouldn't."

"Nikki, what the fuck? How can I make this any clearer? I'm not in your body. I can't make this decision for you. If you want to keep the baby, then—" Bee's face flashes across my mind and the words stick in my throat. "—then I'll do my best to support you. But if you want me to say I'm thrilled about the situation, I can't."

"Why, Dex?" she whimpers, peeking out at me above her hands. "Why can't you just lie to me for once? I know you're not in love with me. I know you can't stand the sight of me."

"That's not true."

"Shut the fuck up. You don't even like me!" She's winding up again and I'm tired. I'm beyond tired. I have the early shift in the morning and then I have to tell Bee, the goddamn love of my life, what I have done. To me. And to her.

"I *do* like you, Nikki. I do."

And because I can't stand it for another second, because her sobbing *has* to stop, I reach out and put my hand on her shoulder, patting it awkwardly.

She lets out a heavy sigh and wraps herself in my arm, pushing close to me. My body wants to recoil. She smells

like old cigarettes. Jesus. She shouldn't be fucking smoking if she's pregnant. But I don't pull back. I give her a stiff hug. Nikki reacts like I just got down on one knee.

"I'm willing to take part of the responsibility for this. You're not going to be alone." It's a knife in my heart to be saying this to Nikki instead of Bee.

"Okay," she says in a small voice and nuzzles closer to my chest.

Bit by bit the color is draining out of the world.

Somewhere, across town, Bee is going to sleep right now wondering what the hell is up with me.

I'll make it up to her tomorrow.

Just before I break her heart.

When Dex slides into the seat across the booth from me at Jennison's, I know right away that something has gone terribly wrong.

A voice in the back of my mind whispers *you were right*, but I dismiss it. It could be any number of things.

I got one text today asking me to meet him here. That was it.

He looks like he was up all night last night. The circles under his eyes are so dark that I want to let him rest his head in my lap and sleep until he feels better. He showered before he came here—his hair is still damp—but it doesn't seem like he looked in the mirror. The funny stories I had lined up about work today—the interviews, my coworkers—die on my lips.

"Dex," I say, and reach my hand toward him. Did someone *die*?

"Hey, Bee," he says, but he doesn't take my hand.

I pull my hand back across the table and put it in my lap.

The waitress comes and Dex can barely bring himself to look at her. She tries to joke with him and all he can give her is the ghost of a smile. He says that water is fine and I go along with it, my heart in my throat.

As soon as she's gone he tears his gaze from the table and looks into mine. The raw pain in his deep blue eyes stuns me.

"Bee," he whispers, and for a long moment I think he's going to cry.

He smells clean, like his body wash, and again I find myself looking longingly at the space next to him in the booth. If I could just touch him this would all be better.

"What's going on, Dex? Please tell me." My hands are shaking.

He takes a deep, shuddering breath and lets it out, his eyes still locked on mine.

"I have to tell you about something...something that happened."

"What?"

"I don't know how to—it was never supposed to—"

"Just tell me. Whatever it is, I can handle it."

He flinches, then looks back at me.

"There's a girl that I sleep with sometimes. She has the apartment across the hall. Her name is Nikki."

The pain that crosses my chest is sharp, but not world-ending. This doesn't sound like a long-term relationship. Why is he in such a panic over it?

“We’ve both slept with other people, Dex. I’m not going to—I don’t hold that against you.”

He puts both hands on the tabletop and leans toward me, his voice urgent. “You just have to understand that I didn’t think you were ever going to come back. I had no idea you’d take a job here.”

Anger boils up in my chest. Why the hell is he jerking me around like this?

“Just spit it out!”

“The day I first saw you outside your office—that’s how fucking recent this is, that’s why I didn’t tell you about it the first time we talked—Nikki cornered me in the hall and told me that she’s pregnant.”

The blood drains from my face. I feel like I’ve swallowed a gallon of ice.

Could my heart actually have stopped?

“With—” I’m whispering now, and I hate it. “With your baby?”

“Yes.”

He doesn’t take his eyes off me, and I search his face for any sign, anything, that will tell me this is a mistake of some kind, a joke. A nasty joke.

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

The waitress comes back to the table. “What can I get you lovebirds to eat?”

I want to reach up and slap her. Instead, I say, “We’re not going to be ordering food.”

“A drink, then?” She has our waters balanced on a tray but I get why she’s asking.

“Bring one Diet Coke. If he stays here, you can bring him a beer later.”

Dex stays silent. She looks from me to him and finally catches on.

“All right.” She hustles away.

My anger is white-hot.

“We slept together, Dex. We came here and talked about all the shit that’s happened in our lives. Why the hell didn’t you mention this?”

“I had to figure it out first. I was just waiting until I could figure it out.”

“Figure out what? Obviously you’re going to be pretty busy in, I don’t know, eight months?”

“Seven.”

I’m choking on my rage, drowning in it, and it tastes sharp and metallic.

“Seven months. Good. That’ll give you plenty of time to figure it out.”

“You can’t be pissed at me for this, Bee.” His voice is quiet but it doesn’t waver.

“For *what*? Which thing am I not allowed to be pissed about?”

“I didn’t mean to get her pregnant.”

“Whatever, Dex. What the fuck ever. I’m not mad about

that. We're not together. And I'm not 'pissed.' I'm so angry that..." I dig my nails into my palms. I have to get away from him.

"I knew this would be a disaster." It's cruel and I wish I could shove the words back into my mouth but they're out, as good as a slap in the face. Dex sits back hard against the booth.

"Did you? Then why did we spend all that time *catching up*?"

I can't stop.

"How the hell could you do this to me, Dex? How could you keep me in the dark about this?"

"Would it have made any difference if I told you three days ago?" His face is dark red but the look in his eyes is all hurt.

"I guess we'll never know."

I can't get my thoughts in order. I can hardly see straight. Suddenly the bar is closing in around me. It's unbelievable that nobody else can see my heart splattered all over the walls, the floor. Dex is saying something but I can't hear him over the pounding in my ears.

Cate was right. She told me not to get too excited, and I told myself that I wouldn't. I fucking swore to myself that I wouldn't get swept away by finally seeing Dex again. A hot rush of shame competes with the cold rage in my gut. How could I have let my guard down with him a second time, after what he did? How could I have let myself believe that he'd grown out of this kind of shit?

I swallow the painful lump in my throat and blink back the tears that are threatening to roll down my cheeks. I will not

cry in front of him, not about this. I will not, will not, will not.

My purse sits on the seat next to me and I fumble with it, digging deep for a five-dollar bill, throwing it on the table still crumpled.

“Bee, wait,” Dex says as I stand, banging my knee hard against the corner of the booth.

“God damn it,” I say under my breath as pain shoots out from my knee. That’s going to be a bruise.

But it’s going to be nothing compared to my heart.

“Bee, just...please.” His eyes are pleading with me to understand, to at least take a breath and talk about this with him.

There’s no way through this. Not for us.

I can’t.

“I have to go,” I say, and then I’m making my way toward the exit, back to my car, back to the highway.

I’m gone.

And this time, I’m not coming back.

D^{ex}
Fuck.

*B*ee won't call and she won't text.

I knew that she wouldn't be happy to hear this. I knew she'd be pissed. I knew she'd be heartbroken.

I also imagined that somehow, *somehow*, I'd be able to steer the conversation to a manageable place. Present the entire situation in a better light.

Just another miscalculation in a lifetime of dumbass decisions.

The look on her face when she walked out of Jennison's was a thousand times worse than when I left her on the Overlook.

The second the door closed behind her I became aware of the heavy silence that had settled over the bar. There weren't many other people in there—it was early on a Thursday night—but those that were stared at me with disgust.

They didn't have to. Nobody was more disgusted with me

than I was. Not just for telling Bee the news in a bar, in front of people, but for having to tell it to her in the first place.

Worthless.

Even the bartender, a guy named Jake who likes me as much as his surly demeanor will allow, glared at me with narrowed eyes.

“Aren’t you going to go after her?” he said, his voice booming.

My entire body felt tense. If I could have, I would have melted right onto the floor and let Jake mop me up. Throw me out with the dirty water.

Face burning with shame, I slid out of the booth and dug a ten out of my pocket, tossing it on the table as an apology to the waitress for the scene she’d had to witness. Even being near tension like that had to take time off her life.

Outside the bar, the air was languid and hot. Bee’s car was gone. I couldn’t catch my breath.

I had no business feeling like my heart was being pulled apart in every direction. The pain arced out from my chest to my fingertips. If I didn’t know better, I’d have thought I was having a heart attack.

The only comparison is how I felt after the numb, clouded feeling I’d lived in for weeks after Lisa wore off and was replaced by excruciating pain.

All I can think of is her.

And there’s nothing I can do.



I spend every spare minute from Friday to Sunday trying to get Bee to talk to me without coming off like creepy Tom. At some point on Saturday I start to lose hope. By Sunday night I'm desperate for her to say anything.

I'm three beers and a couple of shots in to some shitty action movie when my phone beeps. In my scramble to grab for it I knock it to the floor and only then does it become clear that I'm more than buzzed.

It's a lot easier to get drunk when you don't sleep.

My eyes are on fire from the exhaustion and constant attempts not to let myself break into tears. I have to squint at the screen. Finally the words swim into focus.

Leave me alone, Dex

My heart twists, then stops.

Hands clenched tight around the phone, I try to think of something to say that will get me out of this.

The moments tick by.

There's nothing.

There's nothing to say that will fix the situation with Nikki. I can't force the words I said to Bee back into my mouth. And I can't go back in time and tell myself to wake the fuck up.

I am trapped in this reality.

The only thing way out is through.

A black emptiness fills my chest, and I feel my heart freeze up. If I lose control at all I'll fall to my knees and howl.

You can't know how sorry I am, Bee. You have my number if you ever want to talk to me again.

I type it out. Delete the second sentence.

Then I hit send.

I'm sitting on my couch with my head in my hands when there's a knock at the door. When I get up my knees almost give out underneath me.

It's Nikki.

She looks rough and tired and she's the last person on earth I want to see.

"What do you want?" I say. I can't coat my voice with patience I don't have.

Nikki recoils like I slapped her, and a surge of guilt like acid reflux fills my throat. I've got to stop being such an asshole. Once Bee moves on—and she will, she won't stay in Beechford, living below my apartment, for long, I know it—Nikki will be the only one left.

"I'm sorry," I say, running my fingers through my hair. "It's been a tough couple of days. What's going on, Nikki?"

In one neat step she pushes past me into my apartment, then looks up at me with eyes huge and concerned. Looks away. Look back. I can feel myself weaving. Maybe it was my fourth beer. I've lost track.

"Dex? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. What do you need?"

She steps closer and I get a whiff of stale cigarettes. I can feel my body trying to pull away and force myself to stand there

instead of running out the door and down the stairs and as far away as my legs will take me.

“I was freaking out about everything and I wanted...but you’re in worse shape than I am.” The saccharine tone of her voice makes me sick. Or it could be the beers. Was it just the four?

“I’m...” A burp bubbles up in my gut. “I’m fine, Nikki.”

“You’re not. But I can make you feel better.” She slides her arms around my neck and starts pulling my head down toward her.

My head jerks back before I can stop myself and Nikki pulls her hands away, hurt filling her face. For a split second I don’t care. Then, through the haze of the beer, it hits me: I have to be the best version of myself in this situation. Nikki and I are going to be involved for years. Forever.

“I’m sorry, Nikki, but I really don’t feel well. I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

For once, she doesn’t argue with me.

The minute she’s gone I bolt for the bathroom. With my stomach emptied I feel bare and cold.

It’s time to face the music. No version of me will ever be decent enough for a person like Bee. I have to let her go.

I make it through Friday by the sheer force of my will, but by Saturday morning I'm a wreck.

I can't believe it. I can't fucking *believe* it.

My entire body feels tired, wasted, but I can't sleep in and so I haul myself out of bed, pull on the first workout clothes I can find, and put myself through the paces. I run ten miles, eleven, twelve, only stopping when the sun gets so hot I'm on the verge of getting heat stroke.

Wouldn't that be perfect. Dying of heat stroke because I tried to run off a broken heart.

After half an hour in the shower I order a pizza and turn the air conditioning up so high that I need a blanket. It takes three-quarters of the pizza and four episodes of some show Netflix thought I would like to get me to a place where I can nap.

I dream about running into Dex ten years in the future, in some generic supermarket. He's with Nikki and I want to tell

him that this was all a mistake, that I should have listened to him, but he can't hear me.

I wake up to another one of Dex's messages and ignore it.

Every time he sends one it's a bolt of pure pain through my heart. I want to answer him so badly that my arms ache, but silence is the only way I can protect myself from hearing more of the awful truth from him. I'd rather tuck away the memory of the few days I spent blissfully fucking him somewhere safe, somewhere he can't destroy them with any more details about his baby mama situation.

Thinking about it makes my stomach turn.

The disappointment is almost too much to bear.

But over the course of the day, something else comes into focus. I'm disappointed in what Dex did. There's no getting around that. But couldn't I have been more sympathetic?

No. Forget it.

A full day of moping makes me feel heavy and exhausted, and so on Sunday I decide to visit my parents.

Their white two-story home is cleaned top to bottom by my mother every Sunday. When I pull up in front of the house she's leaning out one of the second-floor windows, carefully washing the glass. A big smile moves across her face and she gives a little wave.

"Hi, honey. How was your first full week at work?"

"It was good!" I call up to her. I spent the drive over arranging my face into a facsimile of happiness, singing loudly along with the radio and sipping on a 32-oz Diet Coke straight from the fountain at the 7-Eleven on the way

out of town. There's no way I'm going to bring Dex into the picture. Not until they've gotten over Tom.

It almost fools my mother.

"Did something happen?" she says, one hand bracing against the window as she finishes the final pane.

"What?"

"You look like you've been crying, Abby."

The truth is that I forced myself to stop crying sometime yesterday, so I tell my mom a half-truth. "I was running this morning. All those flowers are in bloom."

"Take a bottle of Claritin from the cupboard downstairs. We have an extra. It's generic, but it works." She scrubs once more at the glass, then smiles down at where I stand in the middle of her driveway. "I'll be down in a few minutes."

The front door is unlocked and the moment I push it open I'm hit with the light, airy, flowery scent of my sister's perfume.

My mom can be pretty devious when she wants to be.

Cate is standing in the kitchen, a wide grin on her face. "Surprise!" she screams, and we run toward each other in a mockery of a grand gesture that turns into a real hug.

"Cate, what the...I didn't know you were visiting!"

"I wasn't going to," she says with a half-smile. "But my boss gave me a few days off, and I couldn't resist. How *are* you?" She pushes me to arm's length to look at my face. Her eyes narrow. "Bee..."

“I’m great!” I say, too loudly. “When did you get here? And why is Mom still cleaning?”

“This morning,” she answers, but I can see I’m not off the hook. “I surprised her. Yet... there’s no way I’m going to mess with her routine.”

I nod knowingly. My mom always “wants” help cleaning the house but her desire to have it all done her way is much, much stronger.

Cate is dressed down, but she still looks amazing. My younger sister is a few inches taller than me, with shining dark hair and the same green eyes. She’s wearing yoga pants that look like they cost a week’s salary—even my relatively unfashionable eye can see that the fabric is much nicer than the Nike capris I threw on under two layering tank tops. She looks me up and down.

“Let’s go for a walk.”

My parents’ house isn’t in a suburb; a “trip around the block” amounts to two miles. It’ll give us plenty of time to talk.

Above us, I hear my mom crossing the floor of her bedroom. She always does that room last.

“Mom!” Cate calls up the stairs. “We’re going walking. Don’t call the police.” When we were younger my mom would always make a big production if we came home late about how she’d had to call the police. For whatever reason, it was a joke that wore on me until I moved out. Now it’s just a joke.

“I won’t!”

We set off down the street. It’s hot, but on this side of town,

closer to the lake, the air isn't quite so sticky and the established trees shade most of the road.

Fifteen steps in, my sister pounces.

"Bee. What the hell is going on with you?"

I pick up the pace a little, then back off. My muscles are still tight from yesterday's epic sadness run.

"It's—"

"Don't even try to tell me it's allergies. That's bullshit and you know it."

"It is *not* bullshit. I have seasonal allergies."

"I didn't bring you here to talk about seasonal allergies."

I laugh and my heart lightens. Not enough, but a little. "You didn't bring me anywhere. I came of my own free will."

"Bee!" Cate reaches out a hand and shakes my shoulder. "Tell. Me. What. Happened. I know something is wrong. I can see your face."

As I search for the words my throat closes up again, and I let out a frustrated bark of a laugh.

"Dex got some other woman pregnant."

"*What?*" Cate stops short in the middle of the road, and I have to pull on her arm to get her to keep walking. If I stop, I might crumple right down onto the pavement and never get up.

"Yeah."

"What the fuck, Bee? Weren't you two seeing each other?"

“If you call hanging out a few times ‘seeing each other.’” I let the silence between us hang in the air. “But of course I got ahead of myself, Cate. Everything’s been so...intense...since I got to Beechford.”

Cate is shaking her head, her lips pressed into a thin line. “How *dare* he?”

“I think it was an accident.”

“No, how dare he string you along like that without telling you?”

“The whole thing is pretty fucked up.”

When the words come out of my mouth a new understanding washes over me. Dex *couldn't* tell me right away. It was so disorienting for me to suddenly see him on the street after eight years apart. It must have been the same for him. In the same moment he learned that Nikki was pregnant.

If I had been in his shoes, I'd have given myself a few days to figure things out, too. Especially after all that happened between us.

“But I get why he did it.”

“What reason could he possibly have for keeping it to himself?” Cate’s face is flushed with the heat and her own anger.

I shrug. “It was a lot all at once. He didn’t expect to run into me. Why would he tell me something that huge during our first real talk? It could have gone nowhere.”

“Well,” Cate says dismissively, walking a little faster, “you don’t have to put up with any of it. You can wash your hands of him once and for all.”

“Yeah. I can.” It’s best to agree with my sister in this moment.

But inwardly, I know I can’t.

There’s too much between us, even now, to forget about him completely.

Because Dex did save me once. Before he broke me.

Dex breaks up with Angie, but not fast enough. Every time I see him with his arm around her waist, his fingers wrapped in her red hair, a cold rage settles in the pit of my stomach.

In the meantime, I start dating Matt Taylor, one of the school's star football players.

There are parties every weekend.

My parents never suspect a thing.

I am meticulous about the amount I drink, about the time I am gone, the rides I get, and how quiet I am when I sneak back in. They never know.

Some parties, though smaller, have a different, darker character. There's more than just beer at those parties. But as Matt's girlfriend I have to show up.

In fact, as Matt's girlfriend, I am at the top of the heap.

I can't help but love it a little.

Everyone wants to hang out with me, be seen with me, and Matt and I are the golden couple of the fall. I stand next to him at pep rallies, even though I'm not a cheerleader, and our picture is even in the paper on homecoming weekend.

It eats Dex alive.

We still see each other. We can't stop seeing each other. We have classes together and he haunts the public library where I do my homework after school.

Everything is cordial.

I am sick of cordial.

One day after school I'm working on a big English paper when Dex slides into the heavy wooden seat beside me.

"Hey, Bee," he says.

I give him a big smile. "Dex."

"How's things?"

I know he's asking about Matt. "Good. Better than good."

He tries to hide the disappointment in his face and fails. "Glad to hear it."

"Do you have homework?"

"Yeah," he says, but his backpack isn't with him. "I'll do it at home later."

Something is off. He's jittery, nervous. I can't play the ice queen with him for long. Dex is my best friend, even when we're shattering each other's hearts every other week. "Are you okay?"

"My dad's back again." The tension in his house skyrockets

whenever his dad is off a job. The more that asshole tells Dex how lazy he is, the more Dex blows off school and lurks around the library instead. He took a job at one of the little shops downtown and works there on the weekends. It's like he's purposefully taking up his time so he'll flunk.

"That sucks."

The tension between us is heavy and thick and when I look into his eyes I see everything. I want to take his hand but I can't.

"Are we good, Bee?" he says, something raw and real in his voice.

No, I want to say. No. I want to be with you every single day. I want to date you and let the whole school know. The whole world know. I spend every spare moment thinking about you.

"We're fine. Don't worry about us."

"Are you going to the party on Friday after the game?" Somehow, though Dex does not play football, he's always invited to every party. He is the great cliqueless wonder of our school.

"Yeah, I'll be there."

"Could we hang out?"

My heart speeds up. I know what he's asking me for.

"Matt will be there too, Dex."

"I know. Stupid question."

I want to give it to him.

“I’m sure we can sneak away.”

The magnetic pull between us can only be denied for so long before we have to satisfy it, and I can tell by the look in his eyes that he can’t wait much longer.

Neither can I.

“I’ll see you there, okay?” he says, standing up suddenly. *Stay*, I think. But I have work to finish, and he clearly has somewhere to be.

“Okay,” I say.

He’s already gone.



The party is wild. Everyone is drunk. The football team is bursting with testosterone from the win and I have the feeling that it could spiral out of control at any moment.

The girls gather in the center of the living room, dancing furiously, and I am in the middle, the queen Bee.

Matt is nowhere to be seen.

The beer must have been spiked, because it’s hitting me harder than usual. When my head starts to spin, I stumble to the side of the room, collapsing onto the couch.

Craig Winters, Matt’s best friend, slides into the seat next to me and leers at my chest.

“You’re so hot, Bee,” he says, his smile too wide.

“Thanks, Craig.” He smells like beer and cologne and it’s too much for my drunk head.

“You’re too good for Matt. Do you know that?”

“No, I’m not.”

“You are. You’re so fucking hot and sweet. You should be with a guy who can really take care of you.”

“Like you?” I say, wishing he would disappear.

“Yeah. Like me.” He leans in closer and tries to whisper in my ear, but he’s too drunk to control the volume of his voice. “If you come upstairs with me right now, I’ll give you a taste of a real man.”

The smell of his breath makes my stomach tighten. “Back off, Craig.” I push at his chest, but he doesn’t back up.

“You don’t mean that.”

“I do mean it. Go somewhere else.”

His tune changes so fast I get whiplash. “Don’t be such a bitch, Bee. You’re not any better than me.”

“Just leave me alone.” I stand up, too quickly, and almost lose my balance. Craig follows and locks his thick hand around my arm. It hurts.

“Let go of me.”

“You need help,” he says, his face twisted into a smile but his eyes black.

“I don’t.” I look around the room for Claire but she’s nowhere to be seen. Matt’s gone, too, and the people here are too wasted to pay attention.

Craig doesn’t take no for an answer and before I can tear my arm away he’s dragging me toward the stairs, then up

each one, my feet hitting the edges. I can't get my balance.

"Craig. Stop—"

"Shut up. You're a huge cocktease, Bee, and everybody knows it."

I'm not. Maybe Matt has been talking in the locker room, but if he has, it's been lies. We had sex one time and it was awful. I'm still getting over it.

"I see you flirting with that Dex kid when you think nobody's watching. It's fucking disgusting. My boy Matt doesn't deserve that kind of shit from you."

"I thought I was too good for Matt." Craig pushes open a bedroom door. It's pitch-dark inside and he shoves me in ahead of him. I turn and try to go back out, but he blocks me with his body, his frame filling the doorway.

"Did I say that? I meant to say that you're not good enough for Matt. And as his best friend, I'm going to teach you a lesson. Maybe then you won't be such a slut."

A chill settles in the pit of my stomach, competing with the sickly warmth of the beer. Craig isn't going to let me out of here before...

He picks me up and sends me sprawling across the bed. I scramble to get up but he pushes me down with one massive hand.

"Don't even try, Bee. Nobody's coming to save you." He laughs, a cruel sound. "Matt doesn't even give a shit. You know where he is right now? In the basement, fucking your friend Claire. Some boyfriend, huh?"

“You’re lying,” I fill my tone with acid, but how can I be sure? A sting of hurt flickers through my chest and then melts into relief. I love standing in Matt’s spotlight but it’s exhausting, pretending to be someone else. If Matt’s done with me I can be with Dex.

“Shut your mouth.” Craig’s hands are on my breasts, fondling them too roughly, and then he’s shoving my skirt up over my hips. Matt likes skirts. He doesn’t love my jeans.

“Stop.”

“I said shut up.” He’s clawing at my panties now, pulling them down, and I thrust my hands between his and try to pull them up. With one movement he has both my wrists pinned above my head.

“Simmer the fuck down,” he growls into my face, and my body goes still.

I’m flooded with the sick certainty that Craig really isn’t going to stop.

No. No. I don’t want this. I don’t *want* this.

He has my panties almost at my knees when I snap out of it, adrenaline surging through me. I tug at his grip but he only holds on tighter.

It pisses Craig off. “Hey, you stupid whore,” he spits into my face, “lay down or I’ll fucking tie you up.”

I take a deep breath, fear spiking through my entire body, and scream. “Dex!” My own cry is so loud that it rings in my ears. I won’t realize until later that I should have called for Matt.

Craig's other meaty hand comes down out of nowhere and slaps me across the face. I'm instantly in tears.

"Shut your damn mouth!" he shouts into my face, and I think, *this is it*. His hand goes back to my panties.

Just then a shadow appears in the doorway and launches itself at Craig, yanking him backward. He's so surprised that he loses his balance and stumbles back a few steps, his back connecting solidly with the wall.

That's when Dex punches him in the face.

I'm sobbing with relief and horror at the sound of skin meeting skin but Dex doesn't turn. Craig blinks, his face contorted with rage, but he's drunk and too slow to react. Dex puts all his strength behind another hook. He's as tall as Craig but not nearly as heavy and another wave of fear crashes over me. What if Craig fights back?

But Craig is wasted, and after two solid hits he sinks down to the floor, clutching at his face. Blood streams from his nose.

Instantly Dex is at my side helping me tug my panties back into place. He smooths my skirt down and then puts his arm around my back, lifting me carefully from the bed and setting me on my feet.

"Are you all right?" he says into my hair, walking me out into the hallway. The party is still in full swing.

"He—he—" I can't get the words out, can't get my breath. Tears streak down my face one after the other, too many to count.

"I know," Dex murmurs softly. "I know." He has me wrapped in his arm, pressed closely to his side, as he leads us down

the stairs. My coat is on a coatrack by the door, underneath a hundred others. Dex throws them all to the ground and grabs mine, throwing it around my shoulders. "We're going. Don't worry, Bee. We're getting out of here."

He has the door open when a voice comes from behind us.

"Where do you think you're going with my girlfriend?"

Matt stands at the foot of the stairs, beer clenched in his hand, eyes narrowed.

Claire stands next to him. Too close to him. Her hair is mussed just slightly. And her makeup. But the giveaway is her guilty expression.

"She's not your girlfriend anymore, Taylor," says Dex, and he walks me out into the chill of the night, closing the door behind us.

While Dex's car glides through the night I try to stop the lurching sobs and swear silently to myself that I'll never be so helpless again.

There has to be some good in all this.
Somewhere.

On Monday I haul myself out of bed and into the shower. Work. No class. I'll stop in and spend fifteen minutes with Nikki before I go home to finish the assignments for this week.

I go through every motion, not missing a beat, but I feel dead inside. It feels worse than the time I spent in Chicago. At least when I got out of that situation, I felt like there was something ahead of me.

Now there's nothing ahead of me.

The baby...I don't know what to think about the baby. I guess when it comes it'll be different. That will give me something to live for.

A hundred times a day I try to shake it off and a hundred times a day I fail.

I should feel good about telling Bee the truth. That should give me a little comfort.

But it fucking doesn't.

It gives me nothing at all.

I am nothing at all.

Every morning I wake up and for a minute, before I remember, everything seems fresh and new.

Then the bruised, aching feeling descends back onto my chest.

Dex hasn't sent me any more messages.

I haven't seen him outside the office.

Some nights, when I come out to my car, his car is in its usual spot. But no Dex. He must be timing his comings and goings so that we don't see each other.

I should be glad for it.

I should be glad that I dodged a bullet named Nikki. But the more I think about Cate's words the less I can force myself to agree.

Try as I might, I can't just forget about Dex.

I've been trying for eight years and failing.

At work, even Eddie has noticed that something is off. But I don't tell him, or Sandra, about Dex. It still feels so unresolved. I want to keep it professional, and bursting into tears in the middle of the office is...not that.

We decided on the two new hires, Becky and Colin, and I'm in the middle of getting all their paperwork together for their start date next Monday. Leonard also sent extra work, so at least from nine to five my mind is mostly occupied.

Back at my empty condo is when things start to unravel.

I've gone for an evening run and settled into an armchair when my phone rings in my hand. I spent a lot of time staring at it, waiting to see if Dex will send me another message, but he's taken my words to heart.

He is leaving me alone, just as I asked.

And I hate it.

It's Cate calling, and from the background noise she must be backstage somewhere.

"How are you, noted fashion careerist Cate Schaffer?"

"Busy as hell!" she laughs. "I'm on a break. Just calling to check in."

"Oh, stop," I say with a little groan. "You don't have to check in with me. I'm fine."

"Are you? Really, are you, Bee?"

There's something odd in the tone of her voice.

"Yeah, why?"

"I've been thinking." There's a crinkle of packaging. She's spending her dinner break calling me. "About Dex."

"You're welcome to him," I say, trying to keep things light.

"Seriously, Bee. After I flew back here...well, I think I was too hard on him."

"He got a girl pregnant and didn't tell me. That's pretty high on the list of shitty things a person can do."

"But like you said, it all happened fast. And Bee..."

"What?"

"I saw your face when you were driving away that night. It's okay if you're not over him."

"I know, Cate, but it's nice to hear."

"I mean..." She sighs heavily, chewing. "This is going to sound so stupid, but what if you guys could make it work somehow?"

"Now that he's got a *baby* on the way?" I screech, rolling my eyes. "How the hell are we supposed to do that?"

"I don't know. I don't know! I just think, you know, maybe you should talk to him."

"*Why?*"

"Because eight years is a long time to miss somebody," my sister says simply. "On the flight back all I could think about was you spending another eight years missing him, wondering if there could have been another chance."

A chill runs down my spine.

Eight years. Sixteen years. A lifetime.

Baby or not, I'm the one who walked away from Dex at the bar, not the other way around. That conversation ended because of me. He was willing to have it and I wasn't.

This sadness, this unbearable, unlivable sadness, is because of what I did. What I chose.

It clicks into place, how he felt all those years. My throat tightens.

"Bee?" Cate says into the silence. "You still—hey, I gotta go. Break's over. Think about what I said. I love you!"

"Love you too, Cate." I manage to get it out just before the line goes dead.

The next day at work, Leonard calls. We've mostly been emailing, and it's nice to hear his voice.

"How is everything in Beechford, Ms. Schaffer?" he asks, even though I keep him constantly updated.

"Excellent! I'm getting the paperwork together for our last two hires, and then we'll be a full house."

"I'm very impressed with the way you've handled this transition, Abby," he says, the warmth in his voice coming through even over the phone.

"I'm glad to hear it."

"I'm calling because there have been a few things in the works in upper management here over the last couple of weeks. There could be some changes made."

"What kind of changes, Mr. Howe?"

He lets out a breath. "I'm not sure now is the best time to go into those details. I just wanted to let you know in advance

that we'll likely need to have a discussion about them in the near future."

My stomach does a slow flip. Is he telling me that I'm going to lose my job? So soon after he put me in charge of my own branch of the company? He did say he was impressed with me, so that's probably not it.

Please, no more upheaval.

"I'll look forward to that discussion, Mr. Howe," I say, keeping my tone upbeat. "In the meantime, it'll be business as usual—unless you feel there are changes to be made at this level."

"No, no," he laughs, and I relax a little. "Continue on as you have been, Abby. There are nothing but good things to come."

If only he was right about that.



It's the middle of the night when I can't stand it anymore.

I can't go another minute without telling Dex that this recent disaster between us is my fault.

He came to me with a problem and I acted like a shitty friend. I'm supposed to be his friend. A good one. Time and distance haven't changed that. The only thing that's changed is me.

And I'm tired of being afraid of losing him.

He was never mine to lose in the first place.

I love Dex Stevens. I'm wild about him. But sometimes the

world doesn't deliver everything to you wrapped up in a neat little bow.

My fingers freeze over the keyboard of my phone and I sit up straighter in bed, my heart pounding.

Cate is right.

Cate is *right*.

And I have to tell him.

It's late—way too late—but instead of texting I press *call*.

He answers on the first ring, voice gravelly. "Lo?"

"It's me."

"Bee."

"Hi."

"Hi."

At the sound of his voice my entire body relaxes.

I listen to him breathing for a moment.

All the other shit that's going on is secondary. This is the feeling I've been chasing for eight years, and I'll be damned if I'm going to give it up because I think he purposefully had a pregnancy accident.

"I miss you," I whisper into the phone, my voice suddenly choked with tears.

"I miss you too."

"Dex, I'm sorry."

"You don't have anything to be sorry about."

“Yeah, I do. I was an asshole at Jennison’s. It must have been torture for you to tell me that stuff.”

“I mean, it wasn’t waterboarding or anything.” There’s a note of laughter in his voice.

“I’m still sorry.”

“Apology accepted. I’m sorry for getting somebody else knocked up and not telling you.”

“It’s okay.”

“I’m happy you called.”

“I couldn’t wait another second. I know it’s late.”

“You know you can call any time, Bee.”

“Good.”

The next words I say are the hardest I’ve ever said.

“I know you have to be with her—with Nikki. You’ve always been a stand-up guy.”

“I’ve never been a stand-up guy.”

“You were, and you are. We all did stupid shit as teenagers, but when it really counted—” The memory of that party, the way he came when I called, even though we weren’t *together*, surfaces and then dissipates. “You were there when it counted. I’ll be there for you, too. I really want to be friends again.”

“Thank god.” The relief is palpable. “I was going to have to move. It’s killing me to avoid you.”

“Well, you’re doing a damn good job.” We’re both laughing now, even if it’s laughter tinged with tears. “I won’t keep you

up, but I...I wanted you to know. Anything you need, I'm here for you. And I know the circumstances aren't great, but...congratulations."

"Thanks, Bee. It means everything, coming from you."

"See you around?"

"Of course."

"Good." I want to say more, but my throat is so tight that I can't. "Bye, Dex."

"Goodnight, Bee. Sleep tight."

For the first time since our conversation at Jennison's, I wake up feeling okay.

I want to be with Bee more than anything. *Anything*. But she's right. I couldn't live with myself if I walked out on Nikki. Accident or not, that situation is about to become another human, and I can't shrug that off.

For once in my life, I'm absolutely sure I'm doing the right thing.

It's ten in the morning when the first "friendship" text comes in. There are no words, just an emoji of a smiley face sticking its tongue out.

My heart twists in my chest when I think of her face, of her body spread out on the bed beneath me, her soft skin pressed against mine. Our bodies synced up so perfectly you'd think we'd been practicing for eight years instead of fucking around with other people.

At least I'll still be able to hear her voice and see her face.

I send back an emoji of an eggplant.

It's better than nothing.

The aching hole in my chest gets a little smaller every day as the third week of June goes by.

I keep it casual and jokey with Dex. It's not perfect. In an ideal world, I'd be in his bed every night. No. In an ideal world, we'd have a place together and share a bed. But this is the mature solution, given the situation. I'd rather be an adult about this than lose him completely.

We have a lot of lost time to make up for.

He sends me messages on his lunch break and before his classes, telling me about the obnoxious things his classmates do or the crazy people that visit the shop. I tell him about running an office.

It's a balance I'm still learning to strike—being the boss, leading a team, and still being part of it.

I'm messaging him on my lunch break one afternoon, trying to make something Cate said to me on the phone the other

night seem funny out of context, when Sandra knocks at the door of my office, Diet Coke in hand.

“You got a minute, boss?”

I laugh and wave her in, sending the text and a quick apology that it’s not my best work.

“What can I do for you, O favorite employee of mine?”
I joke.

“Don’t let Eddie hear you say that.”

Eddie’s head perks up at the mention of his name. “I heard that.”

Sandra lets out a musical peal of laughter and Becky and Colin join in a beat too late. I hide my laugh behind my hand. They’ll be all settled in soon enough.

“I wanted to talk to you about some scheduling stuff,” says Sandra, reaching around and pushing my office door closed. I frown. My door’s almost always open, unless I’m making client calls and don’t want to disturb everyone else’s flow.

“Okay. Hit me with it.”

The hundred-watt smile fades a little from her face. “At my last...annual appointment, some of the tests came back positive for pre-cancerous cells.”

My heart skips a beat. I lean forward onto my desk toward Sandra. “Shit.” It’s not the most professional reaction, but I’m human.

Sandra nods. “My doctor said not to get too worked up about it, but I’m going to have some appointments during the day. We’ve got the official sick time and all that, but I

wanted you to know. I'm not sure how many there will be, depending..."

I'm already shaking my head. "Don't worry about it, Sandy. I'm serious. Take whatever time you need."

Her eyes are shining with tears, but Sandra is not much for office breakdowns. It takes a moment but her characteristic grin lights up her face again. "I knew you'd understand, boss woman."

I give her a little salute and a confident smile. This all had better amount to a false alarm. Sandra doesn't deserve anything worse.

She pulls open my office door and Eddie's deadpan voice floats through. "...definitely shows favoritism around here. You'll see." Colin laughs nervously.

"Give them a break, Eddie!" calls Sandra, sweeping back to her desk. "He's a teddy bear on the inside," she says to Colin, then gives Becky a little wink.

I turn back to my computer and blow my breath out between my lips. I hope Sandra tells me if she gets good news.

Just then, a reminder pops up in the lower lefthand corner of my email window.

Gyno appointment, 1:30 p.m.

"Shit!" I whisper under my breath. It's 1:10 right now, and I need to be there ten minutes early to give them my insurance information. Why didn't I set the reminder for earlier? Grabbing my purse, I switch off the screen and bolt out of my office.

"I've got an appointment, guys!" I call as I whip past, digging my car keys out of my purse. "I'll be back by 3:00!"

Sandra waves to me through the front window as I rush by, her smile giving nothing away.



I make it to my new doctor's office just in time, my hair a little windblown, a little out of breath. The receptionist, a tall woman with a mass of curly hair and a giant smile, waves away my apologies.

"Plenty of time. Did you have a chance to print out the new patient paperwork?"

"Yes. It's right here." I filled it out just after I made the appointment and stowed it in my purse. The pages are slightly dog-eared.

"Wonderful!" She takes my insurance card and makes a copy, and my shoulders relax.

This new doctor works as part of a dedicated women's health care clinic, and everything about the waiting room has been carefully designed to be comforting without being over the top. Sleek chairs in neutral colors are tastefully arranged around coffee tables with a selection of new magazines.

In one corner, a small play area for children sits empty. There's only one other woman here—an older lady with a crocheting project in her lap. She sticks the tip of her tongue out as she works, totally absorbed.

The nurse calls my name after a few minutes and leads me

through the usual routine. We stow my purse in one of the exam rooms. When I come out of the bathroom she takes my weight, then guides me back to the room, chatting about the lovely weather.

When we're back inside she hands me a sheet. "We don't make you wear a gown here. Bottom things and bra off, but you can keep your own shirt on." She pauses in the doorway. "The doctor will be in—"

Just then, a smooth female voice calls to her from one of the other exam rooms. "All right," answers the nurse, then turns to me. "It'll just be a few minutes." Her smile is contagious.

"No problem," I say. It only takes a few seconds to shed my extra clothes and arrange the sheet.

I realize too late that I left my phone in my purse, so I have nothing to do but look at the art—photos of cute babies—on the walls of the exam room.

The nurse breezes back in. "Sorry for the wait. It'll only be a couple of minutes more, okay?"

"Totally fine," I assure her. The door starts to close behind her and stops a few inches short of the doorframe. I can just see the hallway outside.

I scan the photos again. Soon there's movement outside my door. The doctor—I assume it's the doctor—is out of sight, but a woman's back is to the open doorway. She's about my height and if her roots are any indication she once had hair like mine.

"...everything checks out, Nikki. But if you want to switch back to the pill, we can schedule a removal for the IUD."

"I'm so relieved," says the woman. I can't see her face, but her voice is rough. Worn, somehow. "Maybe I'll give it a few more months."

"Either way, it's your decision. We're here to support you." The doctor pauses. "Which pharmacy do you want this prescription sent to?"

"Walgreens is fine."

"Perfect."

Just then, the nurse appears. I can only see her shoulder. "That's a negative on the pregnancy test, Nikki," she says. "But I'm sure you expected that. Not much chance with an IUD and a backup method!"

Nikki laughs. "No surprises there."

My blood goes cold.

They tie up the loose ends with the prescription, and Nikki and the nurse disappear from view.

Water runs in a nearby sink for nearly half a minute.

Then there's a knock at the door, the doctor's face coming into view.

She's a stocky woman with red hair pulled into a low ponytail, and she has one of the warmest faces I've ever seen. Immediately she extends her hand and smiles. "I'm Dr. Warren," she says, then glances down at her clipboard. "And you're Abby Schaffer?"

"Y-yes," I answer, still trying to process the conversation I just overheard. What are the chances...

“No need to be nervous, Abby,” Dr. Warren says, and I realize I’m wearing a rather stricken expression.

I laugh it off. “Oh, I’m not,” I say. “My mind was elsewhere.”



My thoughts remain elsewhere throughout the appointment.

If that was the same Nikki, then she’s been taking Dex for a ride.

I stop at the reception desk to schedule next year’s appointment, and as the receptionist pulls up the available slots, the nurse bustles over to the round desk in the center of the office and picks up the phone, a stack of prescriptions in her hand.

“Hi, George. It’s Vicky.” She laughs. “Yep. The first one is for Nicole Tripp.”

My heart practically jumps out of my chest.

I agree to the first thing the receptionist says and practically sprint out to my car, snatching my phone out of my purse. My fingers pause over the keyboard for only a moment. This is no time to be subtle.

D—this is a weird question, but I need to know. What’s Nikki’s last name?

On Thursday I wake up with a song jammed between my ears that I can't get out.

Thursday I don't care about you, it's Friday I'm in love...

No chance of that. I'm firmly on the "I don't care" side today.

I tried again with Nikki last night. We have to at least be friends if I'm going to make it work. She wanted me to commit to a quickie wedding.

I'm not thrilled to see my dad's Volvo parked outside Mike's when I pull in. I'm even less thrilled to see that he's leaning against the driver's side door.

I have ten minutes before my shift starts. Can't drive away now.

There's an empty spot on the other end of the row from him, so I park there and stride over.

"Morning," I say, standing in front of him with my body angled toward the shop.

He takes his hands out of his pockets and begins to reach toward me, then stops himself. Instead, he takes a small envelope out of his shirt pocket.

“Hey, Dex. How you been?”

“Fine. Car break down again?”

“Nope, the car’s...the car’s all right. You boys did a nice job. Got new tires, though. At King’s, down the street. Pretty fair price, too.”

I lean toward the shop. My shift is going to start soon, so if he has a point, he’s going to need to get to it.

“I just came to thank you, son, for your help with the tire the other week. I’ve been meaning to bring this by sooner. I would have been pretty screwed if you hadn’t come by.” He holds out the envelope toward me.

I only hesitate for a moment before I take it. There’s something plastic and hard inside—a gift card, probably.

“Thanks. It was no problem.”

“Yeah, but...” His face twists a little bit before he can rearrange it. “You didn’t have to stop. I’m glad you did.”

I take a deep breath and let it out.

Sooner or later I’m going to have to get over that shit with my dad. Neither one of us is ever going to bring it up again.

And he’s going to be a fucking grandfather.

At some point down the line, I’m going to want this kid to have a family beyond me and Nikki.

“Really, Dad, it was no big deal.”

His shoulders relax a little as he registers the tone of my voice.

“If you ever want...” He clears his throat. “If you ever want to stop out at the house, you can come by any time. Your mother’s going a little stir-crazy in retirement. She misses you.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell him that I’ve been busy trying to make a life for myself after he played his part in ruining it, but I bite back the words.

This isn’t the way.

“I’ll try to make it over there soon.”

“Good,” he says, raising a hand to the back of his head. It hits me all of a sudden how thin his hair is, how old his hands look. He’s not sixty yet, but he’s not looking forty, either. “Good.”

Time. It’s a bitch like that.

“I better head in.”

“Right,” he says, and turns to open the car door. Stops. Turns back.

This time, when he extends his arm, I step into it and give him a quick half-hug, patting him on the back.

“See you later, D.”

There’s a strange lightness to my chest as I head toward the shop.

“Hey,” he calls across the parking lot. When I turn around he’s got one leg in the car.

“Yeah?”

“Are you seeing Abby Schaffer?”

God, I wish. I *wish*.

“Not at the moment.”

“You should. She was one of the good ones.”



I'm putting the finishing touches on some rich lady's SUV when my phone buzzes in my pants pocket. I usually take it out before I start work, but after the conversation with my dad I forgot.

I have to unzip my coveralls to get to it.

D—this is a weird question, but I need to know. What's Nikki's last name?

What?

Bee and I never talked that much about Nikki. For obvious reasons.

Tripp. Why?

Her answer comes fast.

Come by my office at 8:00

I want to know what the hell this is about, but Mike's giving me a look from across the shop. I can see him opening his mouth, getting ready to make some remark about how being lovesick isn't an excuse to be texting on his time. The message I send takes only a second more.

I'll be there

My nerves hum, on the verge of overload, and I can't get my heart rate down.

Nikki isn't pregnant. *She's not pregnant.*

Dex is free.

I rest my head against the steering wheel of my car and take cleansing breaths.

There's no guarantee that Dex will even want to be with me after how I reacted. Which was understandable, but not the kind of levelheaded response he probably wants from a woman.

Our new—old—friendship is just getting its sea legs and the water is deep.

He might not be willing to give that up.

Even if I'm ready to take the leap with him.

Everything is coming down to this moment, this day. And there are hours until eight.



The appointment ate into my workday, and we're finishing up some work with short deadlines, so it's the perfect day to stay late at the office.

It's torture to concentrate on anything but Dex.

Management is a different beast and I want to do it right. So even though my fingers feel electric with the need to spill everything to Dex via text, I throw myself into putting together a new process that will, hopefully, result in fewer late nights.

I send everyone else home at six. Sandra more than anyone needs to put her feet up. True to form, she's the last one out the door with a jaunty wave and a cheery smile on her face.

The minutes drag by.

I send replies to every outstanding email and create an entire suite of documents that we can use to shape future projects.

At 7:30, out of desperation, I dust all the furniture in my office. We haven't been here long enough to make it worthwhile, but I run a cleaning cloth over every surface.

My heart pounds.

The room spotless, I take a seat behind my desk.

Fiddling with my phone eats up a few more minutes.

I lean back in my chair and close my eyes.

When does Dex get out of work? For the life of me I can't

remember what his Thursday shift is. But he said he'd be here.

He'll keep his promise.

He's probably pulling in behind the building right now, driving a little too fast. Closing his car door a little too hard. Taking the stairs up to his apartment two at a time.

I haven't been there yet but I can see it. Small, a little rough around the edges, but mostly clean.

Dex always showers after his shift, scrubbing the grease from his skin. Letting the hot water run down over his shoulders. His muscles lift and work as he raises his hands to his hair and rubs shampoo in to the roots. Rinses it out. Soap on his face, on his body, dripping down the curves of the defined muscles of a man who moves through the world by brute force.

I bite my lip.

There would be room for me. Droplets would run down his face, drip from his eyelashes, but he wouldn't take those deep blue eyes off me. Hands cupping my face. Lips on mine. Tongues dancing, dueling.

Nothing would be easier than reaching down and gripping his hard cock in my hand, feeling it jump and pulse. Harder kisses. Wet bodies together. Heat between my legs, blooming, while my hair gets soaked.

No towels. His bed. Spreading wide, my hands on his shoulders, pulling him in...

But I'm not there. So he'll turn the water off with a jerk of his hand and reach for the nearest towel. Whip it over his

skin. Throw on the first clean clothes. Run down the stairs, around the side of the building, and down the sidewalk...

The outer door to the office creaks as it opens, and a second later it clicks shut. My eyes snap open and I leap to my feet. I have to fight to keep a wide grin off my face—what if this is news Dex would rather not hear? I'm at my office door, mouth open, eyes bright, words on the tip of my tongue, in four steps.

But it's not Dex standing in the middle of the office, just next to the clutch of comfortable chairs.

It's Tom.

My heart sinks.

"Expecting someone else?" he says, and at the harsh, nasally sound of his voice, the smile drops off my face. His eyes are dark, glittering.

My stomach drops to my toes.

He has his hands in the pockets of his khaki pants. They're too tight on his oddly proportioned legs. I don't let the flash of disgust show on my face. What did I ever find attractive about him?

Tom doesn't have a poker face. His thin lips twist into a sneer. "Did you hear me?"

"Yes," I answer, my voice flat.

"Were you expecting someone else? You looked pretty excited when you ran out here, Abigail."

I hate the sound of my name on his lips. He is the only

person who ever insisted on calling me that, aside from one truly ancient teacher back in middle school.

“I don’t see how that’s your business, Tom.”

“Really?” His jaw works. “You humiliated me at Arbor, and then you ran away like a coward.”

“And I apologized for that. You took me by surprise, Tom, and it wasn’t exactly—”

“That’s no excuse for your behavior.”

I let out a sharp laugh. “No excuse for my behavior”? You’re my ex-boyfriend, Tom, not my dad. And I’m too old for that shit.”

He narrows his eyes and clenches his jaw, and icy dread drips down my spine. For the first time since he walked in, it occurs to me that Tom has actually come unhinged.

As the certainty settles over me a jolt of adrenaline surges through my entire body. One breath in. One breath out. I lower my shoulders. I go still.

“You can’t walk away like that.”

I keep my voice level. “I can, and I did. I wish the situation had played out differently. But what’s done is done.” I gesture toward the door behind him. “It’s time for you to go.”

Now it’s his turn to laugh. The sound of his voice grates against my ears. “I’m not leaving. We’re going to have a conversation, Abigail.” He blows a breath out through his nose, a habit I have always detested. Then, because he either doesn’t care what I’m saying or he’s lost all understanding of the English language, he begins the conversa-

tion. “I’ll take you back, but I’m going to need some things from you to prove you’re really committed. First, I’m going to need a key to your apartment.”

“That’s not going to happen—”

“Shut your mouth, Abigail. Shut your goddamn mouth.” He spits the words at me, his nostrils flaring with rage for an instant before he controls himself. Barely. “I’ll need access to your email and phone so I can be sure you haven’t been cheating on me.”

Yes. He is insane.

I stop listening, stop looking at his face, and dart my eyes around me.

I’m standing right next to Eddie’s desk.

He keeps an oversized “World’s Best Boss” mug next to his computer with his favorite pens and, bless his heart, a pair of scissors. I silently praise the universe for giving Eddie a penchant for working on paper.

The scissors probably won’t come into play, but it doesn’t hurt to know their exact location.

I put my fingers down on the surface of the desk just as Tom takes the first step toward me.

All my senses have gone into overdrive. I can smell the sickly scent of his cologne, which clashes with the deodorant he wears. He’s sweating slightly. When he’s not talking his jaw is clenched tightly.

I scan his clothes. I don’t think he has a gun, but I can’t be 100% sure.

If he does, he could shoot me.

I accept that possibility and dismiss it. Panic won't help me now.

My phone is still clutched in my left hand. With the smallest movements imaginable, I angle the screen behind me. Swipe once to unlock it.

Tom's mouth is still moving, but the sound is irrelevant.

He takes another step. Eight more and he'll be right in front of me.

Seven.

Six.

Five.

I'm almost out of the shop when Mike calls me back and asks me for a second opinion on the car he's working on. I bite back my irritation.

Whatever Bee has to tell me can probably wait another few minutes. Otherwise, she would have put it in her text.

Five minutes later I'm out of my coveralls and in my car.

I push the speed limit on the way to my apartment.

Bee's car is still in the parking lot.

Shower or not?

It was hot today. Shower. But fast. If I only spend three minutes, I'll be at Bee's office early.

Four minutes later I'm taking the stairs three at a time.

The air outside is humid and sweet.

I feel hopeful. I don't know why.

Running around the corner would be a little much, so I

settle for walking quickly. My favorite jeans are soft against my skin and I can still smell the detergent on my t-shirt.

We're pretty damn near the solstice so a golden light spills over the street. This block is mostly businesses. Not many cars at this hour.

Just one, parked across the street from Bee's office. A late meeting, maybe?

I'm underneath her building's overhang, inside that old-fashioned alcove, my hand on the door's handle, when I register the guy inside the office.

At first, I don't see Bee. She must be standing behind him. It's hard to tell exactly what's going on—the street is reflected in the glass pane on the door—but the hair on the back of my neck stands up.

The way he's standing, at the back of the main office like that—that's not a client meeting.

And the bulge at his waistband, at the small of his back, not nearly concealed by his too-large dress shirt, is not a phone.

He turns a little and she comes into view. His hand is locked around her upper arm.

Before my brain is finished putting the pieces together, I've yanked the door open.

At the sound his head starts to turn.

He's got maybe six inches and forty pounds on her, and I can't get there.

I have no plan.

“Bee!” I shout, hoping against hope he’ll keep turning his head.

Please, let that be enough.

The next instant I hear the dull thud of skin on skin and the guy’s head snaps to the side. It was a pretty vicious roundhouse.

Please, let that be enough.

He howls, one hand flying to his face, the other reaching for her hair as he hauls himself back to center. I catch one glimpse of her before she shifts her weight and he’s in front of her again.

Then her hands are on his wrist, yanking him forward as she drives her weight upward, the top of her head meeting his nose with a sickening crunch. His scream is high and thin.

For a guy who’s carrying a gun, he’s surprisingly fragile.

He doesn’t reach for it.

Instead he stumbles back, his hands clutching at her shoulders for balance. Bee twists again, wheeling both her arms against his to break his grip. At the same time she leans to the side and plants one foot behind his legs, bringing one hand up to the center of his chest. She shoves him backward and he falls hard, the back of his head connecting with the floor.

Three steps and I’m standing above him.

There’s not much left for me to do.

He curls to one side, then the other, grabbing at the wreckage of his nose.

I look from the human garbage to Bee. My heart starts beating again.

“Shit, Bee.”

Her eyes are laser-focused on the man lying on the floor, whimpering. She’s wearing low heels and her feet are planted, stable. Ready.

Coolly, Bee lifts her phone, glances once at the screen, and taps at it. Then she holds it up to her ear. As she speaks, she bends down, nudging him to one side with her foot.

“I’m at 230 Jefferson. I’d like the police to come, and an ambulance. A man assaulted me and I acted in self-defense.”

She tugs the gun out of the holster. Straightens up. Sets it on the desk next to her.

“No. I’m not in any more immediate danger.”

Another pause.

“His nose is pretty badly broken.”

A longer pause.

“I’m all right. There’s someone here with me now.”

A final, shorter pause.

“I don’t need to stay on the line. Thank you.”

The police station in Beechford is less than a mile away, and the 911 dispatch in the little town works fast. She’s barely disconnected the call when I hear the first siren.

Hate Loving You

Bee's eyes go between me and the guy on the ground, and then she locks eyes with me for a long moment. "Tom," she mouths, and it all makes sense.

Her eyes are wary until the smile starts to grow on my face.

In general I try to avoid beating the shit out of people.

But I'm so fucking proud of her.

*I*n the gray half-light of the early morning, I come awake slowly, sweetly, and breathe in.

I'm in Dex's bed.

The kiss led to another kiss, which led to Dex backing us up to his doorway. He only stopped kissing me long enough to unlock it.

I took over once we were inside, backing him into his bedroom, pushing him down onto the bed. As I straddled him and his hands went to my hips—right where they belonged—he sighed, then smiled at me, eyes glistening with tears.

He peeled my shirt over my head and I unhooked my bra.

Then the love of my life worshipped each one of my breasts until I was writhing on top of him, so wanting, so ready.

By then we were both naked and he pushed inside of me, claiming me even as I bucked against him, riding his cock for all I was worth.

Nothing in the world has ever been more right.

I leaned down to press my lips against his chest as he pulled my hips down hard with every thrust. Every nerve was on fire.

It wasn't long before he began to pull out, to stretch his arm across to his bedside table for a condom.

With a hand on his wrist, I stopped him.

"Are you sure?" he said, low and urgent.

"Yes. Yes."

It wasn't a risk. Not with Dex.

I rocked my hips, drawing him in, taking him to the edge as I reached mine and plummeted over, crying out into his kiss.

Now, in the very earliest stages of dawn, I can't ignore the heat between my legs.

Dex sleeps on his back, arms thrown above his head. I put my hand on his gorgeous abs and start to slide it lower, lower...

At my touch he stirs, and a sleepy, sexy smile spreads across his face.

It's the smile I've waited all my life to see.

It's the smile I thought I'd never witness.

It's the beginning of everything.

EPILOGUE

DEX, TWO YEARS LATER

The ultrasound technician slides her wand back and forth, looking, looking again.

My eyes are glued to the screen. A lump is in my throat. I get that same joyful tightness at every single appointment.

Bee reclines on the examining table, beaming at the screen. With one hand she props her head up, and with the other she clutches mine.

We wait approximately forever before the tech finally speaks.

“Everything looks great.” She pauses, looks again, and then: “Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Stevens. This baby is a girl! And so is her roommate!”

Bee lets out a screech of joy and squeezes my hand.

A few tears squeeze out of the corners of my eyes. My smile is so wide it hurts. The tech takes a few more pictures, then excuses herself. “I’ll be back with a CD for the two of you.” She leaves with a grin.

“Well,” I say, wiping my face with the back of my hand. “Should we call your parents?”

“Let’s just drive over,” says Bee, practically vibrating with excitement.

“They’ll hear the news in twenty minutes. Are you glad you stayed?”

Her happiness is incandescent. “Oh, my god, *yes*. Leonard’s offer was so flattering. But this is the right place for me.” She gives my hand another squeeze. “For us.”

Twenty minutes later, we’re walking slowly through the parking lot to my car, the swell of Bee’s belly preceding her. It’s a goddamn miracle, being with her.

It was like night and day once we got together, and Bee let everyone know it. We got married in a restaurant downtown and moved into her condo while I finished school. Sometimes I even invite my parents over.

The feeling I have when I’m with her—like I’m getting everything right, even when I screw up—is priceless. I never imagined I’d feel like this. Every day practically explodes with possibility.

She turns to me just as we reach the car and kisses me, tasting sweet and clean. When she pulls back, she claps her hands together. “We have to celebrate!”

I pull her in close and kiss her hair, breathe in the scent of her shampoo. “Every minute that I’m with you is a celebration.”

“Who knew you were such a romantic?” she teases.

“Me? No way. But I’ll still buy you a burger.”

“I knew you would.”

“Cate got into town yesterday, didn’t she?”

“Yes. Perfect timing, too.”

“Call her. Tell her to meet us at the diner and bring your parents. We’ll get some girly balloons on the way and surprise them.”

Bee looks up at me and smiles, her face pink and just a little fuller than it was five months ago.

“And then we can go home?”

“Home?”

“To *bed*?” A sly grin.

“You don’t have to ask me twice,” I say, opening her door for her.

She climbs in, her laughter sending warmth down my spine.

“You sure you don’t want someone a little sexier?”

“I’ll only ever need you, Bee.”

“Forever is a long time.”

“Not nearly long enough.”

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