



Love and Skate

Lila Felix



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To my husband, from whom all of my male characters stem.

To my friends, who never fail to amaze me with their support.

Shelly C., Mandy A., Amanda C., Annie H., Melinda S. and Rachel H.

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I am so tired - so tired.
I see too many people,
Read too many books.
Do too many things.
I hate the theaters,
I hate my work,
I want you, - only you...
Come to me between the cool sheets
And let me burrow my head in your shoulder...
~Pauline Cohn, "Rest"

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1. Nellie

I never wanted to leave this icy heaven. I sat in the tub, filled to the brim with chunks upon chunks of ice, until I could feel the aspirins take effect. As I could feel my head start to get cloudy and the pain subside; I lifted my body out of the tub. I sat up first and waited to get my bearings. Then I pushed up with my hands bracing the sides and made one last ditch effort to get out without my face and the cold tile floor having an intimate collision. I flicked the drain plug out and got a towel. The numbness the ice so graciously afforded me now dwindled.

Still in my towel, I walked on the balls of my feet into my bedroom. I knew that if I even tried to walk on my whole foot the results would be excruciating. I grabbed some shorts and a tank top and underwear and sat on the edge of the bed. It took me a good ten minutes to pull it all on. I pulled back the cover and crawled into my heaven of a bed and tried

unsuccessfully to find a position that gave me some comfort. Finally finding an awkward position that lulled me, I fell into a deep healing sleep.

My phone was playing Cherry Bomb and I swiped the green button to answer it without even looking to see who it was.

“Nellie Michelle, it’s your mother.” The voice said.

“Hello, mother.” I groaned as I turned over and my bruises and sore muscles protested against it.

“It’s almost ten o’clock. Please tell me you are not sleeping still.”

“Yes, I was sleeping. I got in late.” *It’s not like she paid my bills.*

“Ugh, from that barbaric skating—*thing* you do, I assume.”

“It’s called Roller Derby and did you want something?”

By this time I had made it to the small kitchen and held the phone against my shoulder as I started the small coffee pot and the smell alone perked my brain up.

She rattled off something about going to a baby shower later that day for Cassandra, a girl that used to call herself my friend. But that was when I was the Nellie they wanted me to be. Cassandra knew me when I was the stooge, the model of exterior perfection, the daughter of their dreams—the puppet. That was also the period of time that Corey dumped me for Cassandra claiming that I was too nice for a guy like him. Now they were married and having another baby.

I just let her run through her paces as I fixed myself a cup of strong coffee with cream and took out the makings of a recovery breakfast. My first swig of coffee chased two more aspirins, making sure the soreness was kept at bay.

“Are you listening to me Nellie? Are you coming to Cassandra’s shower or not?”

“No, Mom, I’m not. I have studying to do today and I have to work the evening shift at the bookstore.”

“I guess I’ll have to make your regular excuses. I’ll put both of our names on the gift.”

“OK, Mom, you do that.”

“Nellie, when are you going to straighten up?”

“Never Mom, never.” With that lovely departing message I hung up and started making breakfast for myself and Amber, my roommate, my teammate and my bestie.

The table was stacked with food when Amber entered the kitchen with groans and stomps. If I didn’t know better, I would think a zombie was in our apartment. I held both hands out, one with aspirins and one with coffee.

“Holy crap I could kiss you Hellie.” I found it funny how everyone called me Hellie. My Derby name was Hellie Nellie, but everyone called me that on a regular basis now.

She choked down the aspirin and coffee and nearly broke the chair plopping down in it.

“Eat; I know you have to go to work at noon—lazy.” I goaded her.

“Lazy? I wasn’t lazy last night when I saved your skinny ass from that Amazon woman blocker.”

I laughed and the jostling motion caused my lower back to hurt on the left side. I hissed through my teeth and lifted my tank top to look, but couldn’t see all the way in the back.

“Look and see if I’m bruised.” I walked around the table and showed Amber my back.

“Damn that is one wicked purple and black mess. Looks like the bottom of a pair of skates.”

“Yeah well, we still wiped the rink with them.”

“So true. I’ll clean up. Then I have to go to work. See you later?”

“Yeah, I’m hitting the library to study and then I have work too.”

“Ok, see ya.”

“Yup.”

I went into my bedroom and picked out a pair of worn out jeans and a purple tank top with the words “Derby Girl” bleached out on the front. I bent over in the closet to get some flip flops and my new battle wound reared her ugly head.

I took a hot shower and got dressed and went to fix my hair. This month it was blue. Like a blue raspberry frozen Slushie threw up on me and I loved it. Thankfully I worked at a local indie bookstore and there weren’t many rules about hair color and dress codes. I threw it up in a messy, sloppy bun, grabbed my bag and went to study.

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2. Owen

I had been up since the break of dawn and not by choice, but force. I swore that if Dylan's snoring didn't stop or at least let up the coroner would be finding pillow down in his throat. 'Cause I was gonna smother him.

I scrubbed my face with my hands and decided not to even try to sleep any more. I needed to either get another roommate or move to another dorm. This endless no sleeping crap really chafed my ass. But then again, Dylan was my best friend since grade school...rock and a hard place.

I pulled on some cargo shorts and a long sleeve white shirt and picked up a pair of socks and some shoes, grabbed my backpack and headed out. I needed coffee and I needed it quick.

I walked to the student parking lot and got into my old Ford Bronco and headed out to the local dive to get breakfast.

After heaps of strong black coffee and a huge stack of pancakes, I headed to the library to study and found a table buried behind the law books that were dusty and rarely used. The table had etchings of people who were here or who loved each other. I chuckled to myself because it wasn't so long ago that I would've been one of those carvers.

I can remember sitting in the back of my high school library with Amy hanging on my left arm while my right hand so stupidly cut our names into the wood of the table with a pocket knife. Her phone went off while I finished the 'y' in her name and she turned abruptly from her place on my arm and feigned some best friend emergency. Funny thing was Amy didn't have a best friend, but I had two and one of them she was screwing behind my back.

Shortly after I found out I went down a dark and dirty path and it went on for nearly a year. My girl that I thought I loved was with my best

friend Lucas. I got tattoos, and lots of them. I loved my tattoos but most of them were just for the shock factor they gave my parents and my ex-friends. I came home late when I came in at all. I let my grades fall so far that I almost didn't graduate and got into college by the skin of my teeth. I partied hard until one day I was driving and as I lit my cigarette I wrapped the front of my truck around an oak the size of the highway. I came out only with cuts and bruises and a new resolve. I needed self control. I needed discipline. I needed to change. And that's what I did. But for some things it was too late. My parents were divorcing now. They said they had been having trouble but I knew better. The stress of dealing with my crap was eating them alive. I knew no man who loved someone as much as my dad loved my mom but he packed his bags and left—because of me.

Now I stayed on the straight and narrow and I mostly wore long sleeves to hide my tattoos. Everyone, and especially girls, judged the hell out of people for their ink. And the last thing I needed was judgment.

I shook my head of thoughts of the past and got my Biology book out. Last semester's Biology class had been a breeze, but Biology 212 was kicking my ass. But, I guess if I was going to be a marine biologist I had to have it and this was just the beginning. I set up my notebook and book next to each other and dug in.

3. Nellie

I never ever sat at the tables at the library. They were uncomfortable and sticky. It disturbed me to think about it. So I found a spot in the quiet zone, as I called it. It was way in the back corner of the library near some really big law books. I walked from aisle to aisle picking out my spot. There was a guy with black hair and a long sleeve shirt sitting at the back table so I kept going towards the corner of the room until I found a row that was out of sight of anyone. I dumped my bag on the floor and plopped myself next to it. I pulled out my latest read for American Literature and let myself be sucked in.

I looked at my watch and saw that I only had minutes before I had to get to work. I packed up my stuff and got up clumsily as I was still sore and my legs had fallen asleep as I sat for so long.

I walked out and made my way to Cindi's Indie, the bookstore that I worked at. Cindi seems like a good wholesome name. At first I thought maybe she would have a perfect dress on with a perfect chignon and perfect heels. But that's when I really learned my lesson about judging a book by its cover, or its name. Cindi was about four feet eight and had black spiky hair. She always, always wore a black tank top and jeans. But her jewelry, including her piercings and makeup and shoes changed and shocked on a daily basis. She was the sweetest woman I had ever known and was almost like a second mother to me. Or a nice first mother.

I stuffed my bag under the cash register and went to the back and retrieved the returns cart. Cindi waved frantically at me while she made face and pointed to whoever was on the phone. I laughed at her antics and then went to put up the returns. Cindi had several tables and couches set up and people frequently came and read entire books and left them all over the place.

I finished shelving all of the books and went to man the cash register. Leah had left for the day and I was the only one in the front left. This was the boring part. I dusted off the counter and the special signed books on the shelf behind the register. Then I sat on the stool. It made sense for me to read at a bookstore but the last time I did I was so engrossed in the book that I ignored a customer all together and she called and complained. Cindi picked on me about it for weeks.

My phone buzzed in my back pocket and I pulled it out to see what it was.

Amber: Guess what hot Mama has a date Friday night?

Me: yay! Who is the guy?

Amber: He just walked into the skating rink with his little brother. Came to rent shoes.

Me: Nice. I want to hear more tonight.

Cindi emerged from her office looking like someone had stolen her dog.

“What’s the matter Cindi?” She pulled up a stool next to me.

“Ugh—there’s just so much suit talk I can put up with. They drive me nuts.”

“Suit talk?” I half laughed half asked her.

“Yeah, you know. Inventory and percentages and import and export and sales charts.”

“Ahhh, gotcha.”

“How was your bout last night?”

“You would know. You were sitting right outside the rink. Plus everyone could hear you screaming.”

She let out a great huff. “I never was a discreet one. So, there’s only one more hour to go. Get out of here, you skated hard last night.”

“I need the money Cindi. Why don’t you go home? I’ll close up.”

“Why don’t *you* go home and I will still pay you.” She softened her face. “Seriously Nell, go home and I’ll pay you like you stayed.”

I opened my mouth to argue some more but she beat me to the punch.

“Say one more word and I’ll fire you. How ya like that?”

I gave her a big dramatic eye roll and went to get my bag. I hugged Cindi before I left and got into my ragged Honda Civic and went home.

4. Owen

Dylan had kept me up half of the night talking about the girl he asked out the day before. How she looked, what she said. He was going to take her to some frat party he was invited to on Friday night. He had been trying to get me to go for weeks. I hated frat parties or parties of any sort. Probably because my drinking days were way over—and I didn't dance. And how a man brings his little brat brother to go skating and came out with a date was beyond me.

After Biology I had to practically run to American Lit. It was all the way across campus so in order to make it I had to haul ass. It was a stadium class where you felt like you should be watching a baseball game instead of listening to a lecture. There were so many people in the class that I never sat in the same place and never saw the same people.

I unpacked my book and my notebook and prepared for the most boring lecture ever. The book wasn't boring and I did read from time to time. But the professor spoke in a monotone voice and it sounded like he was as uninterested as the rest of us were. A girl snuck into the door at the last minute and looked for a seat before she climbed the stairs.

I had never seen her before and I couldn't for the life of me comprehend why. She was drop dead gorgeous with the most perfect pair of legs not to mention she had hair the color of a smurf's ass. She spotted a seat on the other side of the aisle from me and pulled out her book. She had a black short skirt on and a white tank top and black flip flops. Her blue hair was braided down her back and as she got comfortable in her seat she pulled the braid over her shoulder and played with the edges of it.

The monotone teacher continued to drone on and on about Steinbeck. I tried not to look at her—I swear I did. I blamed it on the teacher that I couldn't take my eyes off of her while she couldn't take her

eyes off of him. His droll voice was keeping her attention, that's for sure. Maybe she just liked Steinbeck.

My fellow students packed up their belongings around me but it wasn't until one of them shoved past me that I really noticed class was over. I sat there like a tool watching her gather her things and get ready to go. I held my breath as her hips swayed side to side while she stepped down the stairs leading to the door.

I came to a quick revelation. *I like black skirts—a lot. I think I like blue hair too.*

I realized that I didn't know anything about her and wanted to badly. I grabbed my stuff and headed to the door looking up and down the hallway but came up short. She was gone. I had missed my opportunity.

A little bummed, I headed to the Union to meet up with Dylan for lunch and to possibly clobber him for not letting me sleep. I got my tray, picked out my lunch, paid and walked out to find our regular table. He was already there with a huge cup of coffee. I didn't know why in the hell he was tired, I was the one he was keeping up all night.

I sat down and groaned.

Dylan looked up from his books and said, “What up man? You look beat.”

I glared at him. “Because you keep me up all night snoring like a damned bear.”

“Come on, it can't be that bad. The girls don't complain.”

I rolled my eyes at him and dug into my burger and fries.

“So, Friday night, you're still coming right?” He looked excited.

“I hate those frat parties. You know that.” I flicked a fry at him.

“Yeah, but who's gonna make sure I get home ok? You wouldn't want something bad to happen to your best friend would you?”

I squinted my eyes and looked to the side like I was thinking about it.

“Come on dude, if for nothing else, you gotta see my hot date.”

“Ugh, fine. But this is the last one. All I do is stand there and watch you make an ass of yourself and then bring you home so you can puke all morning.”

“Who knows? Maybe you’ll meet a chick at this thing. You know, go on an actual date?”

“Oh shut up and eat.” I said as he laughed at me.

Finished with my classes for the day, I snuck back to the dorms to take a nap. I flopped into the bed and by the time I woke up it was almost nine at night. Dylan was at his desk studying. He had his iPod blaring. I could hear the music even with his earbuds in. I pulled my pillow over my head and went back to sleep. But before I did, I remembered the blue haired beauty.

5. Nellie

After American Lit I ran to the sandwich shop on my way to work and grabbed a salad. I went straight into the back and sat at the small table set up for employees. Cindi joined me. She was eating some weird looking Thai food that made me question her sanity.

We ate in silence. It seemed like she was distracted by something, but I didn't push it.

I worked my whole shift this time and helped Cindi close the shop. I went back home and Amber had made dinner and was waiting for me at the table.

"Thanks. I'm starved." I slumped down into the chair and munched while she started to talk.

"OK, so I want to tell you about Dylan."

I nodded instead of talking because my mouth was full of chicken.

"Ugh, he's so cute! Soooo not my usual type. You know me, I usually go for the bad boys, but this guy is clean cut and he was wearing a button down shirt for the love of God. But he was super nice and he was teaching his little brother to skate!"

"That's great Am. I'm happy for you. When are you going out?"

"Friday night. He's taking me to a party. I don't know where."

"Cool. Ok, I gotta go get a shower and get into bed."

Amber's phone rang and she picked it up without even saying a word to me. That girl was long gone already.

I finished eating and cleaned up the kitchen. Amber had gone into her room with her phone attached.

And for the second time today I thought about Cassandra and Corey as I readied myself for bed. Cassandra was even more perfect than I had been. And Corey, he always made sure that everything 'looked' right. We didn't kiss or hold hands in public. We didn't even sit by each other at lunch. He said just because we were together didn't mean we had to flaunt it. But as soon as he broke it off with me for being 'too nice' he and Cassandra were all over each other. They practically made out in front of everyone. And the funny thing was, I hated who I was. I hated who I was around them. And *they* didn't want *me*?

That reminds me. Soon I'm going hot pink on my hair. Yeah, like neon pink.

Two mornings later Amber and I went to class together. It was math and I sucked at it and so did she. We tried to help each other but it was like the blind leading the lame. And I was the lame part.

We got breakfast after math in the Union. While I was paying for mine, I heard a squeal. Amber was hugging some guy who I assumed was Dylan in the middle of the cafeteria. I groaned. I loved the girl, but she went through guys like most people go through bars of soap.

I walked over and smiled at her. I was happy for her, I was. I usually ran guys off with my weird hair and tattoos, not to mention guys just didn't like me. She quickly introduced me to Dylan who was very polite and a little overly charming. But I was suspicious of every guy.

I ate while Amber and Dylan went on and on about the party they were going to Friday night. They invited me, but I passed. We had a bout the next day and I didn't want to be tired. That's the excuse I used. I actually didn't enjoy being around a bunch of drunk guys. Imagine that.

I got through eating and they barely noticed that I had left. When Amber was in love, and it happened often, she was all in. And I was mostly

forgotten.

I walked to American Lit. I was always late, but I hated to get there early and pick a seat. It gave me the creeps. So I just got there a little late and picked whatever seat was left. I walked in and the only seat left was three rows up and on the right side. I sat and prepared to make myself listen to the professor. He had some interesting things to say about Steinbeck, but you had to make yourself stay awake to catch them.

He stopped talking to go into the hall for some water. Everyone started talking as soon as he left the classroom. I reached into my bag to get some gum and when my eyes drifted back I saw that the guy in the aisle next to mine was looking at me. I silently offered him some gum and he put his hands out to catch it. I chucked it at him and he caught it effortlessly. He smiled at me and it was just breathtaking. Then I remembered that he was the guy I saw sitting at the table the other day at the library.

I popped the gum into my mouth and as soon as I did the fire alarm sounded. There was one right above my head and everyone scrambled to get out of the building. People were standing around outside of the building gawking up expecting flames or smoke. I didn't see anything and assuming that the class was over, I headed over to the bookstore early.

6. Owen

If I didn't know better, I would say that the universe was goading me on purpose. Giving me that little gum moment with her and then ringing the damned fire alarm. And by the way, what the hell was I thinking? I was looking at her and then all the sudden my body acted without my permission and I was bumming gum off of her. *Lame ass.*

I wanted to know her name. I wanted to know why her hair was that color. I wanted to know what she did to get her legs to look mean as hell. I wanted to hear her voice just once. I wanted to know everything and anything about her all at the same time and then bask in the glory of it. At this point, I would take anything for another moment with her.

I went to meet up with Dylan for lunch. He was scoping out girls as usual. He was such a sleaze. Even when he was dating someone he was on the prowl. Me? I couldn't get a date to save my life. Some girls liked me until they saw my tattoos and piercings and the ones who liked my tattoos and piercings usually were a little on the crazy side. At least the ones I met.

We ate and I listened to him go on and on about Amber. And he had met Amber's friend this morning and Amber's friend had ocean blue hair and....

“What did you say?” I asked throwing my fork down on the plate.

“What part?” He looked like he had no clue.

“You said the girl had blue hair—Amber's friend. Spill it.”

“What? Her name is Nellie and she has blue hair. It's kinda freaky if you ask me. I mean I know they do that roller derby thing or whatever. But blue hair, really?”

“Nellie. Nellie. Nellie.” Just whispering her name made me feel like I knew something about her.

“Yeah. That’s her name. What the hell man? Do you know her?”

“I wish. That girl is in my American Lit. class and I’ve been trying to talk to her.”

“Well that’s easy man. I’ve got tickets to their next game or match or whatever they call it. It’s Saturday night at six at the skating rink.”

“Well I’m in. You find out anything else about her?”

“No, I know they live together. Other than that, nothin’”

“I will be there Saturday.”

“YES! Finally you’ve got the hots for a girl other than Amy.”

“Ugh...don’t remind me.”

“I told you that guy Lucas was trouble. But for a while there y’all were tighter than me and you.”

“You were right. That whole thing sucked.”

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7. Nellie

“Really Hellie? This is like really bad exercise video leotard pink. This is ‘I got spanked by Ms. America’ pink. This is...”

“Ok, ok, ok, I get it. It’s hot pink. I like it.”

“I guess so. It’s already in your hair. I’m sure it will turn out well.”

“We have practice tonight so I have to get it washed and dried. We need to practice hard. That team we’re up against Saturday looks fierce.”

“I know, I know. I’m gonna call Dylan. Come get me when you’re getting ready to go and we’ll ride together.”

“Yeah.”

I sat in the bathroom until the timer went off on my phone and then washed the pink down the drain. Wow, it was really pink. I rinsed and rinsed until I saw no more pink and then conditioned it well and let that sit for ten minutes. My poor hair, I put it through hell.

I dried my hair and then got dressed for practice. Lycra pants underneath shorts and a team t shirt. I made sure my bag had my first aid kit and all of my skates and paraphernalia. I split my hair down the middle and made two braids on each side of my head. I brought my bag and my shoes out to the living room and knocked on Amber’s door to let her know I was about to leave.

She came out with her bag as I grabbed us some bottled water and oranges. She talked on the phone from the time she left me dyeing my hair until I took it from her while we were warming up and hung it up. She was pissed, I knew she would be. But she needed to get over it. Practice was

practice and I was the team captain here. And on the rink she was no different than any other team member.

We started off practice with a round of twenty down. After we finished that we did some practice falls and some of the poor newbies, or fresh meat as we called them, looked like they were about to die. And we were only half way through. After practice was finished we were all whipped. Amber was still pissed when we got into the car and as soon as practice was over had gotten back on the phone. Now I was pissed.

Thursday and Friday went by and I didn't even see Amber on either day. I saw her as she came out of her room on Friday night, dressed to kill. She sat with me at the table where I was studying and I put my pen down to look at her.

"I'm sorry, ok? I was pissed that you took my phone away at practice but I understand. I mean I've taken phones away from fresh meat before. It won't happen again."

"Ok, good. You look great by the way." I gave her a tight lipped smile.

"Thanks. You should come with us. I hear Dylan's friend is coming."

"I need to study. But have a good time, ok?"

"Yeah, ok."

There was a knock at the door and she answered it and left without even saying goodbye. But that was typical for Amber. When she was dating a guy, I was a second class citizen.

I closed up my books, aggravated and hurt. I decided that I just wanted to take a long hot bath and relax. After running an insane amount of hot water and putting in some coconut bubble bath I slid in and tried to think of something good. Something to make me forget all the negative personalities in my life. I smiled suddenly as I finally found something worth smiling at. And he had black hair and the greatest smile I had ever

seen. I wondered, if it wasn't for that alarm, if he would've talked to me. I laid in the tub and let the scenarios wander through my head.

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8. Owen

This was the last time. And I knew that I said that the time before but this time I meant it. This is just absurd. I leaned back in the corner of the frat house with my arms folded watching the scene in front of me. It was simply mind numbing. The girls and guys who would normally act studious and intelligent were now bumping and grinding all while keeping their red plastic cup perfectly balanced, even while they sipped as they danced. Girls were wearing next to nothing and guys stood to the side making bets and bumping fists in conversations about who would screw which one next. Most people would find this everyday activity for people my age but I had been there and all it brought me was headaches and near death experiences.

A girl wearing a plaid schoolgirl skirt and a white shirt tied under her chest sauntered towards me trying to be seductive and failing completely. She was hot, no doubt, but a drunken schoolgirl trying too hard was not my thing.

“Hey, something is not wrong here.” Oh Lord, she was talking stupid already.

“Oh yeah? What’s that?” I asked as I caught her arm so she didn’t hurt herself. The poor girl was still trying to dance provocatively and all it accomplished was almost making her bust her ass.

“You’re not dance drinking dancing.” She slurred at me.

“Nope but that girl over there is talking to you.” I faked hearing something and then pointed to a random girl.

She walked over to the other girl and they started giggling like what I said was true. That was easy.

People were starting to file out and I heard from a loud guy that the keg had run dry. I looked around for Dylan and Amber but I didn't see them. I sat on the stairs and waited. I was not going up there looking for them. My phone started ringing. The caller id said 'Dylan' so I answered it.

“Hey...we are hot bubble tub.” The drunken sentences were grating on my last nerve.

“I'm on my way.” *Please don't let them be naked. Please don't let them be naked. I'm never doing this again. Never.*

I went through the back door and thankfully they were fully dressed and only had their feet in the hot tub. After some convincing, they finally agreed to let me bring them home. I dropped Amber first and Dylan insisted on walking her up to her apartment. I rolled my eyes and told him to hurry up.

9. Nellie

I woke up to giggles and shushed voices and bodies that bumped into furniture. It was Amber dragging her drunk self in. I went into the living room and helped an even drunker date get her inside and then convinced him to leave, making sure he had a driver first. I helped Amber change and get into bed. She was a lot drunker than she usually was and would pay in the morning. She went on and on in a drunken stupor about being in love with Dylan and it reminded me that I had no one.

After I got back into bed I did something that I hadn't allowed myself to do in a long while. I cried. As much as I pretended things didn't get to me, they did. Corey and Cassandra, even though it all went down over two years ago, still stung. She was my best friend. Even after the breakup I felt relieved that it was all over but it still hurt. And then to hear all of the things that were being said behind my back was vicious. Apparently it all came down to the simple point of me not putting out. They had only been together three months before she got pregnant the first time. They got married immediately and were now expecting their third.

I tried to fit in after that but I couldn't stand the looks of pity. I couldn't stand how people would touch my shoulder and ask if I was ok. Once, an older lady, who I didn't even know, hugged my shoulders and said, "There's still plenty of time Nellie." Of course there's plenty of time. I was only eighteen for goodness sakes.

But now lying here with my hot pink hair and tattoos and odd placed piercings, I didn't know. I was even so desperate that I had been

dreaming about the guy in Lit. class smiling at me when all he wanted was my gum. Ugh—I'm such a loser.

The next morning I woke up and went out to breakfast knowing that the smell of food would make Amber sick. I sat in the very corner booth and ordered the biggest stack of French toast they made. I propped my feet up on the booth on the other side of the table and ate happily all by myself. People came in and out and the bell above the door let everyone know when it happened. And it was that very bell which alerted me to his presence. The air changed from a breathable mist to a substance that could be felt on the tips of each hair on my head. The temperature rose from a comfortable warmth to a heat that was inescapable. The atmosphere itself shifted and confounded my senses.

The funny thing was, he didn't even see me. He walked right in and sat at the first booth to his right with his back to me. I was glad my meal was almost finished because my appetite had been replaced by a whole new kind of hunger. A hunger to get my fill of the view of the muscles in his back as he reached for his glass of water and as he perused the menu. I leaned my jaw on the upturned palm of my hand and settled in for the show of a lifetime. I gawked at the hard line of his jaw as he ordered what I would later find out was enough food for a body builder. He smiled at the waitress and if she hadn't been an older lady I instinctively knew I would've had the gumption to clock her just for being smiled at by him.

Suddenly my purse buzzed with the vibration of my phone and the coffee cup and silverware clanked on the table as my knees slammed into the undercarriage of the table. I looked at the phone and the text message said "Help me, I'm dying. Where r u?"

It was Amber and her alcohol was coming to get her again.

I paid my ticket and got up to leave. I, as humiliating as it was to admit, made a ton of noise trying to get him to turn around. I finally got a

snicker and a head shake from the waitress but no budge out of him. Yeah, that waitress knew what I was up to.

I passed behind him and had to talk my elbow out of accidentally slamming him in the back of the neck at one last pitiful attempt at getting his attention. Even my damned elbow had it bad for this guy. I didn't even know his name. But something in my gut told me that I needed to.

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10. Owen

I stopped everything when I smelled coconut. Chewing ceased, swallowing halted, time stood still. I didn't know why I suddenly smelled coconut. But I closed my eyes and reveled in the scent. I heard the bell above me signal that someone had either left or entered but I didn't pay attention to it. Until out of the window I saw her. I saw her profile first but now her hair was pink, really pink. I got out of the booth and almost made it to the door before I realized I was running out on my check. I slammed a twenty dollar bill on the table and ran out after her. But again, I was too little too late. I saw her in a Honda Civic pulling out of the parking lot.

“Well I'll be damned.”

For a split second I considered jumping in my Bronco and chasing her. I already knew where she lived, at least which apartment complex, from bringing Amber home last night. What the hell was I thinking? I was going to see her tonight anyway.

I got in my Bronco and headed to the gym. I was wound tighter than a spring and tired as all hell. I would wait until later before I went home and tried to sleep while Dylan was gone.

I pulled out of the parking lot, hit the gym and then went back to the dorms to shower. Dylan was gone and I had a little peace. I pulled on a pair of shorts and got into my single standard dorm bed. I thought about meeting Nellie tonight. But I didn't feel nervous at all. It was as if I had been waiting to meet her. Like everything in my life was leading me to her.

I set the alarm and fell asleep in no time.

“If you touch my shoulder one more time, I’m going to kick your ass into next week.”

My eyes were still closed and I hadn’t moved from my sleeping position, but I knew exactly who was shoving me, trying to get me to wake up.

“I’d like to see you try.” He laughed.

“Ugh—what time is it?”

“You’ve got about an hour until the game or whatever they call it.”

“Ok, I’m up.”

I got out of bed and opened my dresser. I tore out some ripped jeans and white v-neck t shirt. Certainly my tattoos wouldn’t be frowned at amongst roller derby girls, right? I didn’t really know. But I had a gut feeling that someone with pink hair wouldn’t judge me by my ink, especially since she had some ink of her own.

I went to brush my teeth and get ready to go. It didn’t take me long and I paced the floors waiting for Dylan to get in gear. I was anxious as all hell.

“Ok, let’s roll. Get it, roll? It might take us a while to get parking and the skate place is clear across town.”

“Finally” I groaned at him and he wasn’t funny.

11. Nellie

One thing I could always count on was that my team was always raring to go. Always pumped, always ready to kick ass—always. I never needed to give them a pep talk or convince them to get back out there. They were hungry for the kill, whether we were winning or not. And I loved it, every single second of it.

Everyone was suited up and ready. And suited up for us takes on a whole new meaning: fishnet stockings, tights with holes in them, short skirts, lace skirts, tall socks. I went with the short shorts and torn up pink fishnet stockings which now matched my hair. We all wore matching t-shirts but I had ripped the sleeves off of mine and most of the collar. Everyone was adjusting their skates and putting on more eye makeup and more eye makeup. I glanced around to make sure the girls had remembered to take off all of their jewelry. Not only was it against the rules, but you took the chance of getting your earlobe ripped off if you forgot to take out your earrings.

We heard the announcer call our team's name and the roar my team let out could be heard from miles away. Whatever team was waiting for us on the other side had better be scared. And if they weren't they were flat out stupid.

We skated out and made some practice round around the ring. I laughed because it looked like Slam Ya Amber had already drummed up some beef with a girl from the opposite team. The ref was already in full force and we were only warming up.

The bout went fast as always and we won but only by the skin of our teeth. The other team was fierce and their blockers were mean and huge. Not fat, just muscular and big.

I skated behind the team and had almost made it to the edge when a body slammed me from behind propelling me into someone else. Then instead of immediately recovering, I ducked my head because out of nowhere my team was on the perpetrator before she could get away. The fight didn't last long and no one wanted to get in trouble so it was broken up fairly quickly.

“Are you ok?” A very masculine, low voice said and the sound hummed against my face, which meant...

“Oh, sorry,” I said as I scrambled to get my face away from his chest.

“Are you ok?” he repeated himself.

“Look, I...” It was him, the gum guy. I had been pummeled right into the chest of the guy that I had been fantasizing about for a freakin' week now. What are the odds?

“Damn Owen, looks like a shitload of cotton candy just fell into your lap.”

He did *not* just say my hair looks like cotton candy.

I gave him my meanest glare. “Real original, douche bag.”

“Let me help you.” Owen, I knew his name now, whispered against my ear.

“I got this.” I pulled myself up and headed towards the locker room without another look at him. Once there, I slammed my forehead against one of the metal boxes. I finally met him and I acted like a spazzy angry freak. I had ruined my slim chance with him because I couldn't control my big mouth.

Everyone else changed clothes around me and I took off my skates and changed into a team t shirt and some yoga pants. I wasn't going to go celebrate with the team tonight. My back was already killing me from the slam I had taken minutes ago and the soreness from the bout had yet to settle in.

I grabbed my bag and as I turned the corner I could see Amber and Dylan swapping spit near the exit and then I saw Owen. I remembered his name from Dylan saying it earlier. He was leaned over the railing of the rink swinging his keys back and forth. His elbows rested on the rail and the posture made his biceps bulge and they were all inked up. The ink enhanced every inch it touched and stirred something dangerous within me. I immediately felt the heat of a blush creeping its way from my neck clear to my cheeks.

I swallowed the enormous lump in my throat and moved towards the door ready for the let down—ready for the dismissal. As soon as my footsteps could be heard his head lifted and our eyes locked. Amber and Dylan stopped making out for a few seconds to talk to me.

“Jeez Hellie. Took you long enough. We're going out to celebrate. Let's go.”

“Thanks but I'm just gonna go home. My back is killin' and I just want to eat and go to bed.”

“Ugh...whatever. Ok, so, we can drop you off at the apartment on the way, I guess.”

A new voice, low and slow, entered the conversation.

“It's ok, I'll take her home.” His voice was warm hands to my cold trembling fingers.

“Are you sure?” The whole thing sounded too good to be true. He was too perfect.

“Yeah, of course.”

“Ok Hellie, take care of that back.” And as fast as a snap of the fingers they were gone.

I started to walk towards him and he reached out and grabbed my bag from me. It was killing my shoulder so I was grateful.

“Thank you.” I tried to smile at him and he simply nodded.

We got into his Bronco and he put my bag in the back. He got in after opening my door for me, started it up and took off towards my apartment. I needed to say something to remedy my earlier behavior but didn't know what.

“So, I'm sorry about earlier. I was just pissed about the cotton candy comment.”

He glanced at me briefly and smiled.

“It's fine. Dylan can be a jerk sometimes. And I like the pink. Blue was cool too though.”

“Thanks. So, I'm Nellie and you're Owen. Right?”

“Yeah. And it was me that dropped Amber off after the party. That's how I know the way.”

He turned into my complex and pulled into a parking space and shut off the engine. We both sat still and silent for a long time. I was sure the heat waves that flowed between us could be seen by anyone and everyone. It was stifling.

“So, I'd better go.” I whispered.

“So soon?” he whispered back.

“What?” I heard him clearly but I wanted to be sure.

“I'll um—I'll get your bag.” He unlocked the door.

He carried my bag to my apartment and as I opened the door I was compelled not to let him go yet.

“Are you hungry? I’m starving and I,” *was babbling.*

“Are you sure? I don’t want to intrude.”

“Yeah, come on. We’ll order pizza.”

“Ok.”

He came in after me and closed and locked the door like he belonged here. And I wish he did belong here.

“What toppings?” I shouted to him from the kitchen as I was on the phone with the pizza joint.

“Whatever. I’ll eat anything.”

I remembered him eating gobs of food at the diner and smiled.

“Ok.”

I ordered two pizzas with everything and two orders of cheesy bread.

I entered the living room and he was still standing in the same spot and his face was completely white. I looked around to see what the problem was but didn’t see anything alarming.

“What’s wrong?” I laughed a little because this big guy was obviously scared of something.

12. Owen

I heard her asking what was wrong with me but how could I tell her?

“I, um, I’m just nervous.” *And apparently I’m a big pansy.*

“Why?”

She sat on the couch and patted the seat next to her. I sat, stiff as could be and let out a huge breath.

“Well, I’ve tried to get your attention in class and ended up asking you for gum.”

She giggled at that and it made me relax to hear her laugh, even at my expense.

“And then this morning I may have chased you out of the diner forgetting to pay my bill. I probably would’ve gotten picked up for petty theft. I don’t know. It’s kinda surreal being here.”

Now she was really laughing. Then she threw her head back and as she did she winced and groaned, but never stopped laughing.

“Ow, that hurts.” She stopped and stretched this way and that.

“I’m glad my stalking is entertaining you.”

“I’m just glad you found me. You are way to pretty for prison.”

The doorbell rang and she got up slowly and went to her purse to get money I assumed.

“Hey, I’ve got this.” I took out my wallet and opened the door and paid the delivery guy.

I turned to her with questions written all over my face about the amount of food she had ordered.

“So, yeah, I saw you at the diner way before you saw me. You ordered enough food for three people so...”

“You were stalking me? Damn it. I thought I was the stalker.”

“Um, I think we both are.” We laughed together and it was so easy to be around her.

I let her walk in front of me on purpose, mostly to be a gentleman, but a lot had to do with the view. I reminded her to take some pain medicine before we ate.

We sat at her small table and ate while we talked. All of my nerves had calmed. We sat joked and laughed until she looked like she might fall over at the table. We stared at each other as we both realized that the night had come to a natural end. I cleared my throat to tell her to get some rest and to somehow weasel her phone number from her. But she beat me to the punch.

“Wanna know something weird?” She half laughed half whispered.

“Yeah.” *Was she kidding me? I wanted to know everything.*

“I just met you, officially, but I’m not ready for you to leave yet. Amber won’t be back for a while. Can you stay?”

“You have no idea how much I wanted you to say that.” And I meant every word.

13. Nellie

I felt so incredibly relaxed with him around. Like he had been here all along. And I had been waiting for him to arrive.

We sat in the living room on my beat up thrift store couch and decided on a reality TV show. I giggled as he groaned at the really awful parts and somehow through the hour my head ended up leaning against his arm. And then as if we had known each other forever he raised his arm and I curled into his side knowing my place by heart. The soft rhythm of his chest rising and falling under my cheek rocked me to sleep before I could attempt to stop it.

I felt myself being jostled around and then covered with a blanket but I was exhausted and I couldn't open my eyes. I heard the door close and whimpered the tiniest weary whine in protest of his absence but never opened my eyes.

The next morning I stretched and realized that I was in my bed when I fell asleep on the couch—with Owen. I covered my face and almost squealed like a girl at the extremely heroic gesture of him carrying me to my bed. The act alone was the sweetest I could imagine. And then it hit me.

“Son of a bi...” I didn't get his phone number or give him mine. I found out his last name was Black last night so I could look him up in the student directory, but how lame was that?

I flung back the covers in aggravation and went to use the bathroom and brush my teeth. I grabbed my toothbrush and as I met my own reflection in the mirror I saw a note sticking out of the side of the medicine cabinet. I smiled and grabbed it.

Nellie,

Couldn't bear to wake you. You looked so gorgeous and peaceful. Hope I put you in the right bed. My cell number is at the bottom of this note.

Thank you for dinner and letting me spend time with you. Feel better.

O

P.S. I snuck a kiss on your forehead. Couldn't help myself.

I sat on the side of the tub and read the note again and held it to my chest like a goon. I finished brushing my teeth and went directly to my phone to text him.

N: Thx for putting me in my bed.

I waited a few minutes and just when I put the phone down to resume getting dressed I heard the message tone.

O: Ur welcome. How r u feeling?

N: Sore.

O: :(Got plans today?

N: Study @ library then work.

O: I sit in the back by the law books if u wanna join me around noon.

N: K

I didn't say yes or no, I wanted to let him stew a little. I put on a raggedy jean skirt; it was raggedy on purpose, and a light blue tank top. I straightened my hair and left it down. I went out into the kitchen to get some breakfast and noticed that Amber's room was open. She hadn't spent the night here. But I knew that Dylan lived in the same dorm room as Owen. I texted him again.

N: Amber's not home.

O: I know.

N: Dylan?

O: Yeah. Slept in the Bronco.

I didn't answer that one. I felt awful that he had to sleep in his car because my best friend was so inconsiderate and so was his roommate.

N: Breakfast?

O: With you?

N: Y

O: Name the place

I told him to meet me in the diner where we had stalked each other the day before. And a half an hour later I sat across from him staring into eyes that were the color of a dark green forest. He barely fit into the booth and he ordered one of everything. I felt like a pixie in comparison to his stature. I only ate half of my waffle and when I saw him eyeing it I pushed the plate over to him. He lined it up with the rest of the plates and ate all of it. I was working on my second cup of coffee when he finally finished.

“Sorry.”

“For what?” I couldn't imagine what he was sorry for.

“A girl once told me that the amount of food I ate was sickening.”

“She was nuts. I want some pom-poms so I can cheer you on. It's mesmerizing.”

“Mesmerizing huh? You know what else is mesmerizing?”

“What?” *Who knew what this boy was going to come up with.*

“You—snoring.”

I scoffed at him and put my hand to my chest feigning insult.

“I do *not* snore.”

“Oh yeah, you do. But it’s a really quiet feminine snore, so it’s ok.”

“Um, you know that makes you a creeper, right?”

“Creeper?”

“Yeah, one of those weird guys who watches girls sleep. Creeper.”

“I didn’t watch you sleep. I heard you snore and I looked down and you were asleep so I picked you up and carried you to bed and covered you up. So, not a creeper.”

“And?”

“And what?” He shrugged his shoulders like he forgot the most important part.

“You kissed me.”

The waitress came and he smiled broad as he knew he’d been saved from admitting anything even though we both knew. He paid again and gave me a stern frown when I protested.

We left the diner and made plans to meet at the library.

I saw him park but I was already inside. I snuck in the side entrance and went to where the law books were. *Eeewww, gross, please don’t want to sit at this icky table.*

He came up and stood beside me. The smell of cedar enveloped me. The same smell I fell asleep to last night.

“Are we going to study standing up?”

“No smartass. I hate these tables. I never, ever sit at these tables.”

“Why?”

“Because they are always sticky and I don’t know what made them sticky and it freaks me out.”

“Ok, so where do you sit?”

“On the floor in between rows.”

“Well, lead the way.”

I went to the very back row and as stealthily as I could bent my legs sideways and sat down. He sat diagonal from me and I stretched my legs out so that my feet were next to him. I took off my flops and let my toes play with the cold law books.

I pulled out my reading for History and he pulled out his Biology book. He read and made notes and I read more and more about the Civil War than I ever wanted to. My toes started to get cold so without thinking I nudged them behind his back and he huffed out a laugh.

“Come on.” He whispered while patting his thigh. He put his book off to the side and propped it up on his backpack.

“What?”

He, soft as a feather, grabbed my feet and put them both in his lap and started to lazily rub my toes and the bottoms of my feet while reading his book. I was only skimming my book at this point. Rubbing my feet was stirring all kinds of thoughts and none of them were about history. Not even close.

He stopped rubbing my feet sometime later and then he did the most heart melting thing I had experienced since being put in my bed. He pulled his shirt up and pulled it on top of my feet so that my soles were up against his abs and put his hand on top of them to keep it in place. I hope he knew that he was warming up a lot more than my feet.

14. Owen

I kept turning the pages in my book like a moron even though I had no idea what the hell was on those pages. My hands were now on the tops of her feet and her feet were under my shirt. So then I started rubbing the tops of her feet. I just couldn't help myself. Those feet were connected to her legs. And her legs were just begging to be touched. And after watching her last night from the sidelines I knew why. The girl was a wicked skater. There was one time when she flew past me and I could feel the wind move my hair. And even when she screwed up her face and contorted her body to block another player, she just took my breath away. She was putting off this bad girl vibe, but I caught on quick. Because it was just that, an act. She was sweet and caring and she sucked in a breath every time I touched her. Complete innocence.

And I am a jaded jackass.

As much as I needed to stop touching her, I couldn't. And as much as I needed to leave her alone and let her find someone good enough for her, I wouldn't. She deserved so much more, but the thought of some other guy's hands on her was crippling.

I looked over to her and smiled. She smiled back at me and then both of our smiles faded and I nearly expected the books around us to catch fire. I needed to stop what was happening, but I couldn't. I lacked the sheer strength.

I put her feet back on the floor next to me and scooted closer. My hands moved of their own accord. My left hand combed through the softest hair I'd ever felt. My right hand started at her knee and splayed against her thigh and moved upwards until it met its nemesis in the form of a blue-jean skirt. God help me, her legs were like silk underneath my fingers. Her icy blue eyes stayed frozen with mine as I moved even closer but widened nonetheless.

I moved in slower because I wanted to make sure I remembered this moment in case she ever figured out who I had been. I needed to keep this moment. My eyes had moved to her lips, which were opened the tiniest bit like a door opened to let me in. They flickered up to see her eyes on my lips. They met for just a second, just enough to make my entire body come to life. I pulled away, only an inch or two, and she cocked her head to the side and smiled. And then my innocent girl grabbed me by the front of my shirt and went for it.

And just when our mouths had found where they melted just right into each other I heard a deliberate clearing of a throat.

“Damn” I whispered and Nellie giggled.

We both turned our heads to see an older man shaking his finger at us but smiling at the same time. He was probably remembering when he got some library love.

She took a look at her watch and then started packing up as he finally left us alone.

“Am I that bad of a kisser?” I laughed at her.

“I have to go to work. I didn’t realize how late it had gotten. You were distracting me.”

“But it was a good distraction.” *Way to fish for compliments dill weed.*

She rolled her eyes at me but didn’t answer. She bent her legs and gracefully got up and pulled her skirt down a little making sure she was all covered.

I stood up with her to at least walk her out.

She leaned up against one of the shelves opposite me and groaned.

“Ugh, I’m never going to be able to study here again.”

She smiled as she said it.

“So when can I see you again?” I sounded desperate, but the truth was, I was already jonesing for our next encounter.

“I have work on Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays and I have practice on Tuesdays and Thursdays. But we only have two more weeks of the season.”

“Hmmm—what time is practice on Tuesdays and Thursdays?”

“From six to eight.”

“Well, I don’t work. If I’m a good boy, which I usually am, my parents give me money to live on. So if you want to see me, just text me. And I’m going to think up some creative ways to see you in between your busy schedule.”

“Explain creative.”

“Nope.”

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15. Nellie

I worked my regular shift and went home to rest. When I got there Amber wasn't home again. Poor Owen. I wondered how girly it would be to text him and see where he was.

N: U ok?

O: Y,u?

N: Y, where r u?

O: Sleeping

N: Where?

O: Bronco

N: I got a couch with ur name on it.

O: U sure?

N: Def.

O: On my way.

I hurried to take a shower and put some other clothes on before he got here. I was starving so I ordered Chinese and lots of it. I also took out some sheets and blankets and pillows and stacked them on the edge of the couch. The Chinese food got to the apartment before he did and I did a little 'Ha Ha' in my head since I got to pay for the food this time.

I got plates and forks out and some bottles of water. I hadn't had time to do anything to my hair except to comb it out. I was only wearing purple sweat pants and a white fitted t shirt and zero make-up so I hoped I didn't scare him to death.

He knocked on the door and every time I saw him I was amazed at how huge he was. Now I wasn't sure if he would fit on my couch.

He smiled and stepped in with a bag. I closed the door and was going to ask him if he was hungry as if I didn't know he was. Before I could he grabbed me under my arms, lifting me up, and held me to him. After a few seconds of shock I threw my arms around his neck and held on to him as tight as he was holding me. He kissed the side of my neck and whispered "Thank you" into my ear. I whispered "You're welcome" back into his ear and made sure that my lips grazed his earlobe as I did. It amazed me that this little gesture could make this big guy shudder but it did. He was still holding me and I pulled back and held his face in my hands.

"Hungry?" I asked.

"Yeah, I will go get something. What do you want?"

"I want you to sit down and eat. I already got food."

"Thanks, you didn't have to."

He slowly put me down and we sat at the table together to eat.

"I hope I got something you like."

"I like anything. Don't ever worry about that." He laughed.

"Good."

"You look different tonight."

My heart sunk down in my chest. *Oh, he thinks I look like crap.*

"You're not wearing makeup." He was looking at me, scrutinizing me.

"Yeah, sorry, I just didn't have time."

He grabbed my hand across the table and squeezed my fingers to get my attention.

“Tonight is the most beautiful I have ever seen you. And I’ve been blown away by your beauty a couple of times already.”

He went back to eating as if he hadn’t said the most amazing thing I had ever heard.

I cleared my throat in an attempt to reel myself in and continued to eat. He didn’t say anything else and neither did I. I finished way before him and rested my face in my hands and truly enjoyed watching him eat.

He ate every last bite and I almost felt like clapping. He looked sheepish about the whole thing.

“So, if you want to get a shower, you can. I’ve got an early class tomorrow, so I have to get to bed. It’s ten already.”

“Ok, I’ll be quick.” He rushed to the living room to grab his bag and I heard the shower running soon after. I cleaned up the mess and readied the couch for him to sleep on.

He came out of my room wearing some gray pajama pants and a white t shirt. I tried not to stare, but I could see most of his tattoos and I could almost swear that there were some piercings under that shirt. One day I would either ask him about them or maybe if I was lucky, I would get to see them.

16. Owen

I trembled under the cold mist of the shower. I turned on the hot water at first but when I stepped in and remembered that this is where she showered, where she was naked, I turned the water to cold as quickly as possible. I hurried through it, not knowing how much longer I could stand there where she stood and smelling coconut all around me.

I got out and toweled off, even the towels smelled like her. I put on some pajamas that I went into the dorm to grab. Thankfully everyone was still dressed when I went to get them.

I walked out to the living room and she was laying out blankets for me to sleep on, as if she hadn't done enough for me tonight already.

“You didn't have to do that. You've done enough. Thanks again.”

“It's no problem, really. And I would let you sleep in Amber's bed, but there's no telling how long that girl has gone between washing her sheets. She's such a mess.”

“Anything is better than the Bronco. Trust me.”

“Good. Ok, I'm going to bed. Do you need anything else?”

“Nah, I'm good. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

I sat on her couch and then lay down, stretching my legs out. I heard her bedroom door open again, but didn't know what to make of it until I saw her leaning over the back of the couch, smiling.

“I forgot something.” She said.

“What?” I asked.

“This.”

She leaned over further and kissed me. More than a peck but far shorter than what I wanted. But it was perfectly her.

“Ok, now I can go to sleep.” She said.

“Yeah, and now I can’t.” I said loud enough so she could hear me.

I heard her bedroom door close and before I knew it, I was out.

When I heard her bedroom door again it was morning already. The sun beamed through the kitchen window pointed its glow directly at my face.

I felt her sit on the edge of the couch next to me and run her fingers through the front of my hair.

“Owen, I’ve got to leave soon. Why don’t you go get in my bed and sleep some more. You look like a giant on a toothpick.”

“What time is it?” I croaked out.

“It’s a little after six. I have class at seven, but I’m going to get coffee first. What time is your first class?”

“Ten”

“Ok, so you can sleep almost three more hours. Come on.”

She tugged on me a few times before I finally relented and slouched into her room and fell asleep.

I woke up to the sound of my phone’s alarm going off from the other room. I went in and retrieved it and went back to her bed. I set the alarm for the latest possible time to wake up and went back to sleep.

My phone did its job and I went to get my clothes, got dressed and went to leave. There was an envelope taped to the door that read ‘Owen’.

I opened it and pulled out a key and a note.

Please lock up after you leave. You can give me the key back in American Lit.

Hope you slept well.

N

P.S. You don't snore and you are sexy as hell in the morning.

I left and threw my bag in the Bronco before going to grab some quick breakfast and went to class. I had slept better those few hours in her bed than I had in weeks. How was I ever going to sleep right again?

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17. Nellie

Concentrating on math was hard enough at seven in the morning. But trying to pay attention while I knew that Owen was sleeping in my bed was torture. Even when I went into my bathroom to brush my teeth, he had left his shirt in there and it smelled like him. It was all I could do to return it to his bag. I wanted to keep it. Hell, I wanted to use it as a pillow case.

Where did tough Nellie go? She disappeared on me and in her place is sappy Nellie. Nice.

Amber and I went for breakfast after Algebra. She wasn't talking about last night and I wasn't asking. I tried not to ask about these things. It seemed like when I finally got caught up and involved the relationship ended. So the best thing was for me to listen when she wanted me to and leave it at that.

We ate breakfast in silence and then sat together. We talked for a few minutes about shallow things. How my back was, how work was, things like that. And then she told me as she picked in her eggs that she slept with Dylan the night before. I wanted to tear her ass up for not even thinking about Owen and how uncomfortable that would make him not to mention left him without a place to sleep. But that's who she was.

I opened my mouth to make a passive aggressive statement about her selfishness, but Dylan plopped into the seat next to her and I became invisible.

Not five minutes after he sat down, I got up and left. This was really getting ridiculous. I went to the library for a while and then made my way to American Lit when it was time. It was funny because I actually tried to get to class in time to get a seat next to him.

I walked in and paused by the door and saw him before he saw me. He was digging into his bag for something. I walked up five rows and sat next to him. He was still digging in his bag but he was smiling now. It was contagious and soon we were both smiling like goons.

I got my notebook and pen out and faced forward to get ready for the lecture. We had moved on to Tennessee Williams and I loved him too. I felt something being slipped into my hand and looked down to see Owen slipping my key back into my hand but this was no trivial act. It was slow and deliberate, his simple act made me want to take him into the empty hallway and do all the things I thought about doing last night, and this morning. He rubbed the back of his neck in my peripheral and I turned my head slightly to smile at him as I put the key in my pocket. He was blushing and it I swore it was more apparent than mine in the library the day before.

I would give organs to know what he was thinking about.

I stared forward trying my damndest to pay attention and failing. My fingers itched and I had to flex them and wring them with my other hand to make them cease their mission. My body had plans of its own regarding Owen. How much longer I was going to be able to control it, I didn't know.

Class ended and we stayed seated while the masses filed out of the classroom around us. I got up and looked back at him. He was smiling up at me and I wondered if he knew the profound effect it had on me.

“You have time for lunch?” He asked.

“No, I have to go straight to work.” I answered.

“Ok, well, see you later.” He answered and stood up next to me.

“Yeah, ok.” I made my way out with him behind me in silence until we parted ways outside the building. He stopped walking but I didn't stop. I didn't want to be late for work.

Cindi was perky and loud today and proclaimed that Leah and I were getting paid through ten o'clock but that she was closing the store at

eight. I was relieved as I didn't get hardly any sleep the night before knowing that Owen was just steps away.

We closed up early, having to scoot and persuade the remaining customers out. One older lady didn't want to stop reading the book she had so I told her it was my gift. It was an older paperback and we sold them for two dollars. I told Cindi I would pay her but she just laughed and said something about me loving the customers more than she did.

I went home to an empty apartment. I peeked into Amber's room and she wasn't there again. So this time I just called him.

"Hey" He answered quickly

"Are you having to stay out of your room?" I asked.

"No, I'm in my room. They went somewhere. I don't know where."

"Oh, ok, good. I just got in from work and wondered."

"I'm fine. Thanks for checking on me."

"Of course. Well, I'm gonna get showered and go to bed. I'll see you when I see you I guess."

"Goodnight Nellie."

"Night." I hung up the phone, showered and went to bed. I pulled the covers up around me and it smelled like his scent and mine mingled together. It was heaven.

I picked up my phone and texted him.

N: My bed smells like you.

O: I wish mine smelled like you.

N: Makes it feel like you are here with me.

O: I wish I was.

N: Me too.

I put my phone back to charge and curled up in my Owen scented pillows.

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18. Owen

Between Dylan's snoring and Nellie saying things like that to me I was never going to sleep right again.

I wanted to see her tomorrow, but at the same time I didn't want to smother her. Absence and fondness and all that. So tomorrow I would go to my classes as usual and then hit the gym. I put my arms behind my head and started to nod off. But I missed her already. I just felt off—probably just tired.

I woke up the next day and went to my morning classes. I ate lunch with Dylan and we were both relieved that we were almost at mid-term. It felt like this semester was lasting forever. After I went to the gym I grabbed dinner and went to the commons area in the dorms to watch the latest zombie show with everyone else. I probably looked at my phone five thousand times wondering if she had texted me or called me. But she didn't. I knew that she had practice between six and eight, so I didn't even bother looking until after that. I got into bed about ten o'clock and I had waited long enough. I wondered how big of a dork she would think I was.

O: I miss u.

N: You have no idea.

I let a huge breath escape and smiled to myself. I had turned into a certifiable sap. My phone alerted me before I could respond to her.

N: Practice was killer.

O: Did you take something?

N: Nah, just soaked in the tub.

O: Won't keep you. Get some sleep.

N: Ok. Goodnight.

O: Goodnight.

Morning came quickly and Dylan still wasn't in his bed. Poor Nellie probably had to listen to all sorts of noises last night. I looked at the time and went to eat breakfast before I went to class, just stopping at a drive-thru. Surprisingly, I arrived in class after her and she had an empty seat next to her. She damn near killed me with her sweetness, but I was drawn to it simultaneously. How in the world she managed to look at me like she did was beyond imagination. One of these days I was going to have to explain to her how jagged I still was. How the scars had faded, but were still visible. How I didn't feel like she should have anything to do with me if she knew. I felt unworthy.

Still I approached her, unable to help myself. I sat next to her stiff as a board and unable to move, strangled by my own self-loathing.

As soon as she touched me, my whole body released its stress and tension and relaxed in an instant. She slowly and deliberately ran her fingers under my wrist and lined her hand up with mine but she stopped there. She was waiting for me to complete the bond between our hands. I positioned my hand to let her fingers cross in and out of mine and she rubbed her thumb along the side of my hand.

Her poker face stood unmoved by our connection. She continued to stare at the professor droning on and on about—something. Maybe she wasn't affected by our touch the way I was. But I remembered the way she melted into me at the library so I decided to test the waters.

I unlatched my hand from hers and ran it up her shorts clad thigh and as I progressed she gasped and then feigned a coughing fit to cover it up after almost everyone in the classroom turned to look at her. I could barely contain my laughter. After she finished fake coughing I put my hand

back on her leg but this time she slapped it away. Minutes later class ended and now I didn't know if I had a lunch date or not.

She was quiet for a few minutes and I finally let out my laughter and I got slapped in the shoulder for it.

“I cannot believe you! I'm never sitting next to you again. Ever.”

She was yelling but she was laughing too.

“Oh come on. You were sitting over there so cool like you didn't care where I was. I had to make a point.”

“You 'bout done?” She asked.

“Just getting started.”

I let her put her backpack on before I grabbed her up and threw her over my shoulder. She screamed and beat on my back and kicked frantically but to no avail. Her screams turned into uncontrollable laughter and she was shaking on my shoulder.

“You're supposed to be mad.”

“I can't, it's like Shrek and Fiona!” Admitting it out loud made her laugh harder.

“Did you just call me an ogre?” I said in my best Scottish accent.

Suddenly she was pulling up my shirt in the back.

“What the hell do you think you're doing?” I said as I rearranged her so she wouldn't fall off.

“I'm seeing if you're green under there.” She laughed so hard that it now had become silent and her whole body was shaking on my shoulder.

“Put my shirt down before I hang you by your ankles.”

“OK, ok, ok. I wasn't looking at your butt crack. Jeez.”

By the time we got there she was complaining of her stomach hurting from laughter.

I sat her down at a table very non-gracefully.

“Hey! I’m not a sack of cement. Take it easy.”

I bent down and kissed the crap out of her right there in the middle of the dining tables in the Union and that shut her up.

“I’m going to get us some lunch while you recover, ok Princess Fiona?”

Her cheeks were a cute shade of red and she just nodded.

I came back a few minutes later with burgers and fries and sat across from her. She had turned serious but her blush remained.

“You ok?” I asked as I put way too much ketchup on my plate.

“Yeah.” She whispered.

We both ate and I could tell she was thinking way too hard about something. I looked up and she smiled at me.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing. I, um, I have to go to work.” She scrambled.

“Ok, I’ll throw your stuff away. Be careful.”

She stopped in her tracks as I told her to be careful and I meant it.

She turned around and walked back up to me and bent down to kiss me on the cheek and then kept walking. It was too late for me now. I was long gone.

19. Nellie

If he didn't quit being the way he was I was going to be a goner. And if I was honest with myself, I already was. I felt free. Free to be who I was without judgment or presumptions about who I should be.

I went into work and Cindi wanted to talk to me in the back. I hadn't done anything, so I wasn't really worried but it was weird. I went into her office and she wore bright yellow boots and huge yellow flower earrings but she looked serious as a heart attack.

"Yo, what's up homie?" She said and I just rolled my eyes.

"The thug thing is not working." I laughed as I told her.

"Damn. So I need to talk to you." She patted me on the knee.

"Shoot."

"Ok, I never really liked this store. I mean people read more than they buy. I've been told that selling on the internet could change that, but I suck at the internet. So I was thinking that I'd give the store to you."

I gripped the edge of her desk and looked around to see if I was on a hidden camera show. She shot from the hip, that was for sure.

"You can't be serious."

"Well, I wouldn't joke."

"Holy crap!" I screamed.

"Everyone would stay on as employees. You'd have to name a manager to be in charge when you're not here. But the profits and the running of the place would be yours."

"Holy crap!" I screamed again.

“Come on Hellie. I’m beginning to rethink this if all you can say is that.”

I just sat there amazed and frightened. This was huge.

“OK, just think it over. It will be six months before it can officially be yours. I need to get some loans paid off and leave you in the clear. So just take some time and think about it.”

“Um, ok.”

My shift ended and I didn’t remember a thing about it. All I could think about was Cindi and her offer. There was no way I was turning her down, but I also wanted to let it sit for a while to make sure I took all of this seriously.

I got home and Amber was watching some show about people singing on TV. I walked right past her and into the kitchen to make something to eat. We seriously needed to go grocery shopping.

“All we have is cheese and one egg.” Amber yelled from the living room.

“Well, why didn’t you go to the store? It’s your turn,” I yelled back.

“I’ve been busy, give me a break.” I could just imagine her rolling her eyes as she spoke.

“Did you eat?” I was now behind her while she sat on the couch.

“Yeah, Dylan and I went to eat burgers.” She said like it was no big deal that she had time to go out and sit and watch TV but had no time to buy groceries.

I took out my cell phone and texted Owen.

N: U asleep?

O: No, I live with a human chainsaw

N: Hungry?

O: Always. Where r u?

N: At home. Wanna meet me somewhere?

O: Diner?

N: Yeah, 20 min?

O: Y

I changed clothes quickly and put my hair up. I wore yoga pants and a long sleeve white t shirt. I grabbed my bag and headed out. Amber didn't even look up from the TV as I passed.

I parked at the diner and watched as Owen got out of his Bronco and made his way into the almost empty restaurant. He nearly filled the door as he entered and went to the corner booth. The waitress approached him and he waived her off, but did so courteously.

I got out of the car and went in and his smile lit up the whole place. I wished that smile would greet me as I came in instead of Amber's selfish attitude and one track mind.

“Hey.”

“Hey, I'm sorry it's so late but we had no groceries in the apartment and I was starving. And I know this great guy who is so huge that he eats almost twenty four hours a day so I called him figuring he wouldn't mind.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah, he should be here any minute.” I craned my neck and looked out the window as if I was looking for the guy instead of sitting next to him.

When I sat back down he was right next to me. I gasped as his nearness startled me. He leaned into my ear and whispered.

“Let me know when he shows up so I can stop doing this.” And then he kissed me right where my earlobe meets my jaw line. If it weren’t for my solid grip on the table I would’ve melted off of the booth.

The waitress approached and I put my hands on my face and tried to cover my blush.

She took our drink orders and he told her that we would need a minute on the food. She giggled a little and I realized it was the same waitress who saw me make a noisy fool out of myself last week.

“Is this going to become a habit?” I asked.

“What?” His face was so innocent.

“You know public groping, making out in public, thing of that sort?”

“Well, I remember the public groping, but I don’t remember the making out. Is that next? When do we get to that part?” He was practically jumping up and down.

“Oh Lord, I’ve given him an idea.” I said as I hit my forehead on the table.

I turned my head towards him as I lifted it off of the table and he had turned solemn on me.

“What?” I was confused. One minute we were joking and now this?

“Look, you need to be honest with me. If you don’t like me touching you...”

“Owen, look at me.” I grabbed his hand to get his attention. “I was truly joking. I don’t mind it at all. In fact, I wish you would be more comfortable touching me whenever you want. But we haven’t even gone out on a real date yet. So I don’t know if you’re just fooling around or...”

He got closer and nailed me with the most honest glare I’ve ever seen.

“Do you think I’m joking around here?” He asked me as he pulled my entire body towards him.

I reached out and touched the line of his jaw with the tips of my fingers. “No.”

“We’re on the same page then.” I shook myself out of my stupor and looked at the menu.

The waitress approached and he ordered pancakes, eggs, bacon, sausage, hashbrowns and a burger and fries. She laughed and I ordered French toast—again.

While we waited for the food, I told him about the bookstore and he looked amazed. He asked me what I was going to do and then congratulated me when I told him. The whole time his hands were on me. I usually hated when guys would constantly touch me, but this felt different. Not pervy or skeezy, just loving and caring. It was a new thing for me.

We ate and he finished off my food as usual and I looked down to find that it was nearly two a.m.

“It’s almost two. I’m so sorry. Do you have an early class?”

‘I don’t have class until ten. So it’s fine. I live on very little sleep anyway with Dylan.’

“That sucks. So when do I get to see you again?”

20. Owen

God, I was falling hard for this girl. She didn't play games or give me whiplash with those games people play when they're dating. One minute they're up your butt and then the next they're ignoring you. She didn't pretend that she was naïve or try to be overly sexy. She didn't do that thing girls do when you ask them out and they pretend they're busy or they don't care. She was just a natural at reeling me in without even trying. Heaven help me if she ever really tried.

She asked me straight up when she was going to see me again.

"I have something planned for tomorrow after practice."

"Ok, but I'm warning you. Sometimes I get cranky after practice."

I could not even imagine this girl cranky or mean or angry for one second.

"Ok, I will consider myself warned. But once you see me you'll forget crankiness."

"You make me forget all the bad stuff."

"One day you're gonna trust me enough to tell me the bad stuff."

"Probably the same day you trust me enough to tell me your bad stuff."

"And what makes you think I have bad things to tell?"

The waitress came and gave us the ticket and I paid it right away and let her keep the change. Nellie got up and we walked out together towards her car.

“You didn’t answer my question.” I tugged on her hand to remind her.

She leaned her back on her car and looked up like she was thinking.

“Sometimes,” she started and reached out to play with the strings of my hoodie, “You look like you’re torn. Like before you kissed me at the library, you looked like you had an angel and a devil on each shoulder. And you got the same look before you sat down in class today. And I don’t know if I’m the angel or the devil, but whichever I am, choose me.”

I stood stunned. She had known me less than a week and had me all figured out. She pecked me on the lips and left me standing there in the parking lot standing on the line that marked where her car was. But instead of feeling betrayed, I felt freed.

Damn it, I let her drive away while I stood there like a jackass.

I got into my car and gave her time to get home before I texted her.

O: You shocked the hell out of me. You know me so well already. I am torn sometimes, but I will always choose you no matter what. And one day, I will tell you the bad stuff. I will see you tomorrow after practice right?

It seemed like hours had passed before she responded.

N: Y, see you tomorrow. And I’m here when you need me. I’ll listen when you’re ready.

O: Thx. *That’s all I could bear to type.*

N: You didn’t kiss me goodnight. :(

O: I will make up for it tomorrow. Promise.

N: Goodnight Owen.

O: Goodnight angel.

I drove home and Dylan was still up. I had to include him in my plan for tomorrow since he was my connection to Amber and she was going to have to let me into their apartment.

He called Amber and we set it all up. After class tomorrow, I had things to do for my girl. I went to bed hoping that sleep helped me pass the time faster.

Thursday morning I woke up with a smile on my face. I even slept through Dylan's snoring. I went to my classes and texted Dylan throughout the day to make sure everything was set. Amber was helping the most and once I heard her say that if anyone deserved this kind of thing, it was her. I didn't think they were that close, but I took it as a good omen.

I went grocery shopping and bought everything I needed and more since she said she needed groceries. Amber had promised she would be gone with Dylan for the whole night. But that was ok; I had planned to sleep in the Bronco since my room would be occupied. It was worth it.

I met Amber at the Union at a quarter 'til six to get the apartment key from her and got to work. I made her dinner. It wasn't much, just baked chicken, sweet potatoes and salad. I paced the room until it was eight and then checked and rechecked everything to make sure it was right. I sat at the table and waited for her to come in. I heard the key in the deadbolt and couldn't wait to see her.

She came in and let her bag drop from her shoulder in a heap on the floor and threw her keys in the basket by the door. I heard another thump which was her collapsing on the floor and she started talking out loud.

"Somebody kill me. Put me out of my misery. I'm dying and I didn't even get to see Owen tonight. Cruel, cruel world."

I laughed silently. She had her eyes closed and while she groaned out her soliloquy she raised her hands in the air as if she were Hamlet in the throes of anguish. It was the cutest damn thing I had ever seen.

I cleared my throat and she whipped herself off the floor and screamed at the same time.

“Lord have mercy Owen, I nearly pissed myself. What the hell?”

“Surprise!” I smiled really big hoping it would work.

“Did you hear my little speech on the floor?” All I could do was nod.

“I’m going to take a shower and then I’m coming back out. That gives you about ten or fifteen minutes to forget everything you just saw. Ok?”

She stomped out and went to shower and change. I set the table and when she came out she glared at me with her hands on her hips waiting.

“I tried to forget, I did. But really you should be an actress.”

“Shut up.” We both laughed and then she realized what was going on.

“You made dinner?” She was only looking at the stove.

“Yeah, it’s not much but I knew you would be hungry and tired and it gave me an excuse to see you. Plus you said you needed food in the house.”

She tore open the door of the refrigerator and stared at it for a while. Then she stood up on the chair next to her and I didn’t know what the hell was going on so I just stood there. She crooked her finger at me, beckoning me to her. I stood in front of her and put my hands up in an ‘I don’t know what you want’ expression. Then I realized that when she stood on the small chair she was as tall as me. We were face to face and that’s where she wanted me.

“I can’t believe you did this.” She said but she was looking at my mouth.

I reached out and touched my finger to the spider bites on her bottom lip and she smiled.

“Everyone ignores my piercings. Like if they don’t talk about them they will go away. My mom will act like I have food on my mouth and then say ‘oh...nope...it’s just those things in her lip.’ It’s pretty damn funny.”

“That doesn’t sound funny. And these are part of you and you are so beautiful.”

“And you have some of your own.” She said as she ran both of her fingers over my pecs and it caused me to shiver.

“Yeah, that was a long time ago.”

“But you still keep them in.”

“Yeah, I like them. What you don’t like them?” Now my eyes were trained on her lips.

“I haven’t really seen them. I can’t tell yet.” One of her eyebrows popped up as she said it and it made it so much harder not to kiss her.

“Oh no. There are only three things on the agenda tonight. Eating, sleeping and kissing. Feel free to reverse that order—like now.”

And she did. This kiss was different and new. It was not the first peck or even the second bolder kiss. No this was us kissing like we had been kissing for years and years. It was easy and we moved together in perfect sync. Before I knew it, I held her completely flush with my body and her hands were tangled in my hair. Her left foot ran a trail up and down my right leg and I moved my hips away from her before she knew exactly how much I loved kissing her. She pulled away after a few minutes and held my bottom lip between her teeth as she did. We stood reigning ourselves back in and then I cleared my throat.

“Ok, you need to eat. Somehow in all of that I heard your stomach.”

“Well good for you ‘cause I didn’t hear anything but you making those noises you make.”

“I do not make noises.”

“Oh yeah, you totally make noises. That’s why old man library came to shush us. You were making noises.”

“Well, I’ll have to stop making them.”

“Don’t you dare. I dream about those noises.”

We both ate and she looked exhausted. I was going to stay for a while until she went to sleep but just as I was going to ask her Dylan and Amber came in and they had been drinking. They weren’t drunk but were clearly tipsy and had forgotten our deal.

“Oh sorry, we forgot.” Dylan whispered as loud and awkward as he could.

“It’s ok. I was just leaving.”

“You’re leaving?” Nellie looked like she didn’t want me to but she needed to sleep. I knew she had that early math class in the morning.

“Yeah, but how about a real date tomorrow night?”

“I can’t. I have to work and we have team dinners every Friday night when we are in season. I have to go. Amber never does, but I’m the team captain.”

“Ok, well then I will see you Saturday night then, right?”

She stuck her bottom lip out and the last thing I wanted to do was leave.

“I’ll text you tomorrow.”

“I want you to text me when you get back in your dorm room. Just so I know you got there ok.” She had walked with me to the door.

“Will do. Then get some sleep, ok?”

“Yeah.”

She closed the door behind me and I waited until I heard the click of the deadbolt and the slide of the chain before I walked out. I drove home a very satisfied man. Every day that I made her happy it was one more step towards actually coming close to deserving to have her in my life. I shut the door to my dorm room, went back out to take a shower and fell happily into my silence surrounded bed. Then I heard my phone vibrate.

N: R u home?

O: Y, sorry, showered and forgot to text you.

N: OK, just making sure.

O: Ur not sleeping.

N: I can now. Thx for tonight.

O: Always

21. Nellie

I sat around a huge table with my team, most of them. Amber was out with Dylan, of course and other girls had plans. Some were mothers, some were executives and some were party girls. We all came from different walks of life.

I had seen Owen in class, but I ran so late that I had to sit by a guy who kept wiping his nose. I was five or six rows above Owen so I had a good view of his antics. He nearly fell asleep several times and once I saw his head nod and thought he might fall out of his chair. He woke up and glanced back at me and I couldn't help but smile and giggle at him. After class he had to meet up with Dylan and I had to work. Now sitting here among my girls, I missed him. We ordered four pizzas for the whole team and I couldn't help but think that Owen could probably finish them all off by himself.

I itched to text him or call him, but I resisted. I drooled over him every time I saw him, I didn't want to add needy to his opinion of me. I got caught by 'Cut a Ho Jo' gazing into space. She called me out and then everyone started in on me about that guy that I landed on at last week's bout. Then I had to admit that we were dating and then the goading really started. There were several comments, most of them totally perverse and I spent the rest of the night with them giggling and covering my red face. By the time we finished eating and almost getting ourselves thrown out, it was nearly midnight.

I got home and threw myself into bed. Amber's door was shut so I knew she was home. I turned to plug my phone by my bed and noticed a missed message.

O: Hope ur having fun. Missin' u.

I didn't want to wake him, but didn't want him to think I had ignored him either.

N: Phone was on vibrate. Missin' u all day. Just got in.

He must not have been asleep because I got a return text almost immediately.

O: U home?

N: Y

O: Tmrw?

N: Y, Lunch?

O: Can't. Lunch with Mom. *Well damn, just when I thought he couldn't get any better.*

N: Awww. Ok. Goodnight. Another time.

I put my phone back and made sure to turn the ringer on. I set my alarm and went to sleep.

I made my way to work the next morning to make up for my lost hours the night before. Cindi wasn't in and I wasn't sure if the other employees knew about the offer she'd made to me or not. So, I just went about business as usual and worked five hours. I went home and did some laundry and cleaned out my bag. By the time I finished my laundry and repacked my bag, it was almost time to go. I threw on some flops and headed out.

I didn't see Owen when I got to Harvey's Skate Palace. I got dressed and went out to the rink. I saw a blonde girl outside the edge and she was bent over the table showing all of her goodies right at my man's face. I waited. It went on for way too long.

What? Since when do I call him my man?

Amber was beside me and we both stared as she turned her girls back and forth between Owen and Dylan. The look on Amber's face could kill and I was sure that mine wasn't cookies and cream. But then when the girl moved away from the table and we realized that she had a pair of roller skates on, our scowls turned to smiles. The skank was on the opposing team and she would not be leaving with her teeth intact.

“You thinking what I'm thinking Hellie?”

“Yeah, who's taking the penalty, you or me?”

I didn't care either way. I just wanted to see the ho on the flo.

“I'll take it if you set it up.”

“Is she a jammer or a blocker?” I didn't see any markings on her helmet, but that didn't mean anything. She could be waiting.

“Either way, her ass is mine.”

We watched her like two hawks looking for prey as she entered the rink and started warming up. She had no clue. I took a quick look at Owen and then to Dylan. Then back to the boob queen and back to them. Amber was doing just about the same thing and then the realization came over their faces. We weren't girls who cried or folded our arms at a threat. They were about to see what happens when girls piss us off.

The bout started but we were going to play the game first and then hone in on our target. We were already winning, so when I saw Amber nod at me while she passed, I knew it was time. I skated my ass off as Amber reached her hand out to put me in front of the pack and then I slowed down. The girl was a jammer and she had finally caught up to me and was trying to make it through the pack. I had slowed the whole pack down a bit and it gave Amber the leverage she needed. I saw her move in and then I took off. I would use this opportunity to make some points as well. I rounded the other side and saw Amber throw her entire body backwards into Ms. Show My Boobs and then get up and try to skate away, but she didn't make it far. I heard the whistle and knew that Amber was going to get thrown into the penalty box. But she went with a smile on her face.

Show My Boobs was still on her hands and knees catching her breath. Amber yelled something at her, by the look on her face she knew exactly when she had fouled up, then fist bumped me as she passed me.

The bout ended and we won again but I knew that meant we faced a really tough team next week. But for tonight we won and I wanted to celebrate. But my celebration and everyone else's were two different things. I just wanted time with Owen. But I didn't know if he would want to go out with everyone else or not.

Amber, Dylan, Owen and I went back to our apartment so we girls could shower and change. We hadn't made any solid plans but it looked like Dylan and Amber wanted to go out. Owen was quiet, so I didn't know what was going to happen. I came out and Amber was still in her bedroom getting dressed and Dylan was with her.

Owen sat on the couch and I decided to be bold and sat right on his lap. He inspected my bruises that showed through my tank top. Thank goodness I wore jeans because I knew there was a huge one on my outer thigh. It was turning black and blue before we even left the skating rink.

"I'm glad no one decided to take vengeance out on you like you and Amber did to that girl."

"I have no idea what you're talking about. She was just on the other team. That's all."

"Mmmm—Hmmm. You know you have nothing to worry about, right?"

"You mean you had no interest in Boob girl?"

"None. I'm only interested in you."

He hugged me to him and just when I was enjoying myself, Amber and Dylan came out of the bedroom and announce that we were all going to a club. I could feel the rumble from his chest and I didn't know if it was positive or negative.

"I hate clubs Amber, you know that." I whined at her.

“Whatever, we’re leaving. Owen, you coming?” Dylan took over the conversation.

“Nah, I’m not.”

Dylan mumbled something about being whipped as they went out the door. I turned back to Owen.

“You can go if you want to. I just have never been into clubs and all that.”

I started to get up while I said it so he could catch up to Dylan but he held on to me tighter.

“What’s it gonna take?” He said it so softly that I almost missed it.

“What?”

“I hate clubs and frat parties and drinking and all of that stuff. I have no interest in that stuff. Haven’t for a long time. Plus I’ve been dying to see you and I can’t really talk to you or hear your voice in a club now can I? So what’s it gonna take to convince you that *with you* is the only place I want to be?”

I caught that comment about ‘Haven’t for a long time’ but I didn’t give myself away. He would tell me when he was ready. Instead, I ran my hands along his broad shoulders and then met his gaze.

“I was hoping you would say that.” I inched forward and kissed his chin.

I continued, “And I’m starving to death.”

“There’s a place I’ve been meaning to bring you. If we leave now we can make it. You wanna go?”

“Sure, am I dressed ok?” I looked down at myself.

“You can wear pajamas for all I care. In fact...”

“Ok, ok, I get it. What’s so special about this place?”

“You’ll see.” He smiled as he picked us both up and made for the door.

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22. Owen

Little did she know that I was taking her to my Mom's restaurant in the next town. I had spent most of lunch with my mom telling her all about Nellie, even though I had spent most of our phone conversations talking about her. Mom and Dad really wanted to meet her. They had been involved, and I welcomed it, in most everything I did after the accident. I wish I had gone to them after the whole 'Lucas and Amy' thing and just talked to them. Maybe I wouldn't feel like I was always making it up to them. But I still felt guilty.

I pulled up in the parking lot and the funny thing was that Nellie never even questioned me. She rolled down her window and let the cool air blow her pink locks. I reached over to take her hand shortly after we started out and she took it without hesitation. I didn't think she was capable of pretenses—ever.

The front of the restaurant was closing down, but I told Mom there was a chance we would be coming. I walked right past the hostess who said 'hello' to me and caused Nellie to look confused.

I walked with her hand in mine on the way to the kitchen. I asked her to wait outside and pushed the swinging door open and looked left and right. Then I spotted her. She was smiling ear to ear as she mouthed 'Is she here?' to me. I nodded and she silently clapped. I walked back out of the kitchen and waited for my mom to come out. She came out quickly and looked between me and Nellie.

"Nellie, this is my Mom, Sylvia Black and this is her restaurant. Mom, this is Nellie Forrester."

Nellie was shocked for a moment and then she and my mom embraced like they were old friends. Mom kissed her forehead and complimented her on her beauty. Nellie was graceful and never showed any outward sign of nervousness. She said that my mom had a beautiful

restaurant and knew where I got my good looks from. I had yet to find anything that she wasn't a natural at. And meeting parents was no exception. Mom said we should find the family table and sit while she cooked us something special.

The family table was a circular table in the back and we sat there and waited. Nellie wasn't talking so I didn't know if she was pissed or furious or worse. She knitted her fingers with mine under the table and smiled at me and I knew it was ok.

"You could've told me. The outcome would've been the same." She reassured me.

"I didn't know. And I didn't want you to think I was weird for wanting you to meet my parents so quickly." I let out a long dramatic sigh and shrugged.

"Your mom is great. And believe me, if my parents weren't how they are, I would want you to meet them too. I'm so glad you brought me."

"You are the sweetest person in the world." I said to her, and I meant it. She was everything good and I hoped that maybe some of it would rub off on me.

"Sweet? Sweet? I am not sweet." She tried to look all offended. "I am tough and mean and very, very dangerous." She couldn't even finish the sentence without laughing.

My mom came out of the back and brought out the whole spread. I knew she would. There was enough food for five people.

"Mom, this is too much."

My mom looked at Nellie and they both laughed.

"Have you seen him eat Nellie?"

"Yes, and I don't think you cooked enough." They laughed again at my appetite, but I was used to it by now. And to see my mom and my—

Nellie get along was worth all of the nervousness.

My mom moved to go back to the kitchen but Nellie grabbed her hand to stop her.

“Please stay and eat with us or at least tell me some good blackmailing stories about Owen.”

My mom and I locked eyes for a second and I knew she wouldn't tell any compromising stories. She smiled at Nellie and pulled up a chair next to her. She started in about when I was little and we were in church. I pulled so many stunts in church that there was no telling where she was going with it.

“So, they are passing the grape juice around and Owen stands up in the pew and almost screams, ‘Are you feeling better Mom?’ So I tried to shush him, but he wouldn't listen, of course. Then I asked him what he meant, hoping that if I answered his question he would be quiet. Then he screams, ‘Everybody is taking the same medicine, so I wanna know if you feel better,’ He thought the grape juice was little cups of medicine! The whole church cracked up.”

She and Nellie laughed and Nellie leaned over to hold on to my bicep because she was laughing so hard. Mom's phone went off and she checked the message.

“Your dad will be here soon. He wants to meet Nellie before you leave.”

“Ok, thanks Mom.”

“I need to go see if everything is done in the kitchen. Nellie don't even think about leaving before telling me goodbye, ok?”

“I wouldn't dare.” Nellie answered her.

Mom made her way to the kitchen and we had pretty much finished eating.

Nellie reached under the table and put her hand on my thigh and squeezed the tiniest bit. My eyes went wide and she giggled knowing exactly what she was doing. She moved her hand away as my mom now approached with her famous lemon cheesecake. Nellie took her first bite and looked like she might slump out of her chair.

“Oh, this is the best.” She practically moaned it.

“Yeah, she makes this every Friday night. So every Saturday morning I ate cheesecake for breakfast.”

“Lucky.” She said before she put another bite in her mouth.

I saw my dad walk into the front door and my mom went to talk to him. They had been divorced for almost two years but they still talked on the phone every day and neither had ever dated. I was sure that one day they would get back together. And I was also sure that everything I had put them through had caused them to divorce in the first place. The stress of the whole thing tore them apart.

I didn't alert Nellie to his presence. Chase Black was one who needed to observe her for a few minutes before he approached her. It was his way. Mom went back into the kitchen and dad watched us a little more before he finally came our way. Nellie looked up at him and then to me and back to him.

I got up and hugged my bear of a Dad. I only had about an inch on him in height but he met me in weight. I may have had my mother's looks, but I had my father's stature and height almost identically.

My dad introduced himself and Nellie got up and shook his hand. Then he reached under her arms and picked her up and gave her one of his bear hugs that he usually only reserved for me and my little brothers. One day Nellie would have to meet them too. I hoped soon.

Nellie laughed at something my dad whispered in her ear and he was such a clown there was no telling what he said. He talked to us for just a while and then went into the kitchen. Nellie looked exhausted so we

decided to leave. We stopped in the kitchen and Mom and Dad both hugged her almost to death and then invited her to Thanksgiving.

She looked to me and then my mom backtracked.

“Why don’t you two decide what you’re doing for Thanksgiving and then let us know, ok?”

“Ok Sylvia, thank you so much for dinner and everything. It was a pleasure to meet you and you Chase.”

My parents had insisted she call them by their first names. I hugged my parents again and we headed out.

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23. Nellie

It was all I could do not to cry. His parents were warm and kind and anyone could see how much they loved him. Not once did they comment on my hair or my tattoos. Not once did they look at me like anything was wrong or different. And it was the very reason I didn't want him to meet my parents. They would probably not say anything directly to him, but they would cut me down to no end in front of him. I just knew it.

I sat in his Bronco on the way home and didn't realize that I was completely ignoring him until he started speaking.

"You ok? I freaked you out right?" He said while he stared at the road ahead.

"No, not at all. I'm so glad you brought me to see your parents. They are so nice. Seriously. It just made me think about my parents and how they are kinda the opposite of yours." I reached between us and took his hand in mine.

"They can't be that bad, they had you." He rubbed my hand with his thumb as he spoke.

"Yeah well, there's not a day that goes by that they don't regret that. Don't worry."

We pulled up at my apartment complex. Apparently I had been in my own world longer than I thought.

We both sat there and looked up at the windows which marked my apartment. Tonight had been so wonderful but I wasn't ready for it to end.

But at the same time it was already almost one in the morning and I'm sure Owen was tired.

"I'm not ready to let you go." He turned in the driver's side seat and half smiled at me.

"Me either. I..." I was always such an open book but it also meant that I took a chance at getting my heart broken.

"You what?" He said as he played with the ends of my hair.

"I feel like I never get enough of you. We've spent all this time together tonight and it's still not enough." His face stayed unmoving so I tried to backtrack.

"Sorry, I'm just tired. Can we just ignore everything I just said?" I covered my face with my hands.

"Absolutely not." He took my hands from my face and continued, "I have felt that way since I first met you. And I hope that it's never enough. I hope you never get enough of me."

I blew out a breath of relief.

"Can you at least walk me up?" I whispered.

"Are you serious? Like I would miss kissing my girl goodnight."

Before I could say anything, he got out of his side of the car and came around to open my door. He took my hand and we walked very slowly towards my apartment.

We got to the door and I unlocked it. Amber's room was shut so I assumed they had already come home. I turned to see Owen. He braced both of his hands on the top of the door jamb and he was looking down at me. He looked like he wanted to say something but instead he folded his arms around me and held me to his chest. It was much more than an embrace. For the first time in a long time I felt safe. Those arms could protect and save me from the bad friends, the ex-boyfriend, the ex-best friend, the parents and the gossipers. I let out a sigh and held on tighter. He

stroked the length of my hair as we stood there and when I looked up to thank him again he was already looking at me so seriously that I almost forgot what I wanted to say.

“Thank you for tonight.”

He closed the distance between us and when our lips touched everything went away but us. I clung to the back of his shirt then my hands traveled underneath his shirt and held on to the muscles just above his waistband. With this act he deepened the kiss and pressed me, with hands on my back, as close to him as two people can get.

“Ahem.” I heard behind us and we both stopped to look behind him to see Dylan and Amber coming down the hall.

“Hellie, your bed is all of six feet away. Don’t give away your v-card right here in the hallway.”

They squeezed past us into the apartment and went directly into her room. All of the sudden I was reminded of how I didn’t ‘put out’ and how it ruined relationships. I could almost hear a draining sound as the blood rushed from my face. I gave a small smile to Owen and told him goodnight. He looked confused. Maybe he thought we were going to... I shut the door and went to sleep. Shortly afterwards, I woke up to the sound of a text message.

O: U ok?

N: Y

O: U r lying.

N: Tmrw? Lunch?

O: Y, where?

N: Salem Park, picnic tables.

O: ok

I looked like crap the next day and the way I felt matched it perfectly. I had completely turned a cold shoulder on him at the very mention of anything intimate.

My shower this morning had revealed that the bruise on my thigh was massive. But I still had to wear shorts as this crazy southern weather had taken a turn for hotter temperatures. I put on some black shorts and a light pink tank top. I forgot to ask what time Owen wanted to meet so I texted him.

N: What time?

O: Soon.

N: Ok, 30 min?

O: Y

Why soon?

I ran to the local sandwich shop and picked up a small sandwich for me and two huge ones for Owen plus chips and drinks. I got to the park and he was already there sitting at one of the tables. I got out and got the food and made my way to him. His head was resting in his hands and I wasn't even sure if he noticed I had arrived. I sat down opposite him and he raised his head slowly. He started to worry me.

“Hey, I got sandwiches. I didn't know what kind you liked.”

“Thanks.” He said it but he didn't move to eat.

I let my hands span the length of the table and grab his. He looked down at our hands.

“What happened last night?” He looked truly concerned.

“What do you mean?”

“Amber said something about using your bed and the next thing I know, you're shutting the door on me. I wasn't expecting—that. I don't

want you to think that I'm pressuring you into anything."

I took a deep breath and tried to smile.

"Ok, so in order to explain that I'm going to tell you the story of Corey." He visibly tensed at the mention of his name even though he had no idea who that was or what I was going to say.

"So Corey and I were together for four years, from the time I was fourteen until I was two days shy of eighteen. The entire time we dated everything had to be right. I had to dress a certain way and act a certain way. I was told that we could not hold hands or kiss in public and when we kissed in private, it was like kissing a brick of ice. He basically ignored me unless it was Saturday night, then it was burger joint, movie, home. It never differed or strayed from that schedule. It was suffocating. But I was trying to make everyone else happy. So I stayed with him. He called me one afternoon, a Saturday, and said he didn't want to see me anymore. He said that I was too nice of a girl for him. Then the next Monday I found out that my best friend Cassandra was apparently not very nice. I walked into the cafeteria to no more friends, everyone talking about how I was a cold-hearted virgin and my best friend and my ex were making out in the middle of the room. They are married with three kids now. That was the day I went ape shit as my mom calls it. I quit doing what everyone else wanted me to do and did what I wanted to do. Hence, the hair and the tattoos and the piercings. Plus they always wanted me to be a lawyer and I blew that to hell too. So, Amber kinda picks on me about my lack of, um, experience whenever she gets a chance but it really hits a nerve. So I'm sorry I took it out on you. I was just embarrassed."

I had let go of his hands to make my famous hand gestures while I was talking. He said nothing.

"Get over here." He whispered. And though it was a command, it sounded like a plea.

I got up and walked around and sat next to him, not knowing what to expect.

“You know what I think?” He asked me as he pulled up the hem of my shorts a little and cocked his head to inspect the damage.

“No clue.” I shrugged. He turned to face me and pulled me closer.

“I think Corey is the stupidest asshole that ever lived. I think your Mom is mistaken. That day was the day you became who you are today. And who you are today is a gorgeous, smart, funny woman who takes bullshit off of no one except Amber. And I’ve never known anyone as sweet and kind as you in my whole life.”

“Oh,” was all I could croak out.

“And I hope when you kiss me it’s better than a brick of ice. Cause from where I stand, I almost catch fire when those lips touch mine.”

“Hey, I checked my lips for scorch marks last night.” I tried to joke around but he was still not laughing.

“It’s only been a week.” He whispered and looked up like he had realized something.

24. Owen

“What was that look about?” she asked me. I couldn’t tell her what I had just come to terms with. But I had realized through her trusting me enough to tell me everything that had happened to her that I loved her. More than that, I was *in* love with her.

“Nothing. Are you hungry? Cause I’m starved.”

“Yeah, ok.” She knew something was up but let it go.

We ate and soon after she needed to go to work. I went to the gym, and probably overworked myself because I knew that I had been too chicken to tell her what I felt. But I needed to get it off of my chest soon.

I went to eat and then to the library to study. I sat at my regular table in the back and glanced over my shoulder at the rows where she sat with that short jean skirt on that beckoned me to touch everything it didn’t.

I shook my head to myself and got down to studying. Eventually I made my way back to the dorm and thought about texting Nellie, but decided to give her some time to breathe. Some time to miss me, I hoped.

The week flew by quickly and I tried to see Nellie as often as I could. But she was practicing hard and working. Cindi was now training her to take over, even though Nellie hadn’t given her an official answer.

By Friday night I was dying to spend some time with her but she had one last Friday night team dinner before the season was over. I went to eat and play pool with Dylan since Amber had decided to go to the last

dinner with Nellie. Dylan decided to go to a bar and meet up with Amber later and I went back to the dorms to go to sleep. I heard my phone and almost ignored it because I thought it was Dylan.

N: U asleep?

O:No, laying here awake thinking about some girl.

N: Well, don't let me keep you.

O: Oh, trust me, I'm thinking about doing a lot more than keeping you.

N: I must have the wrong #, my Owen would nvr talk dirty to me.

O: Ur Owen?

N: Y, I've decided to keep you.

O: I'm a lucky man.

N: Wanna come over? I'm watching Signs and then The Village.

O: Only if you have snacks.

N: I have ice cream with ur name on it.

O: I'm in my pajamas.

N: Ooohhh, even better.

I got there and true to my word I was in my blue flannel pants and grey t shirt. She opened the door with a huge bowl full of ice cream and everything else she could think of.

“What? Don't judge. I only have one more bout. I can eat what I want.”

“I've never seen you eat that much. You look like me.”

“Ugh...come on, how long is it going to take for you to kiss me?”

I leaned down with every intention of simply teasing her with a peck but her lips tasted like vanilla and chocolate and cherry and my intentions soon were forgotten. She broke away soon after and offered to make me a sundae just like hers.

She made me one that was somehow bigger than hers and sat on the edge of the couch to put Signs on. Then she turned and lay down on the couch and didn't think anything of putting her feet in my lap. I only made it through half of the sundae she made me without starting to go into sugar overdrive. I put it down and scooted a little closer so that every inch of those legs were draped over me, even though they were covered with pink striped pajama pants. Without taking her eyes from the screen she laced her fingers through mine and at that moment I felt as content as I've ever experienced.

Her phone vibrated and she looked at it, groaned and threw it behind the couch.

“What the hell? You almost took my eye out.” I told her.

“I did not. And it was my mother. I'm allowed to throw the phone when it's her.”

“Ahhh...”

Then her phone started singing Barracuda.

“Oh Lord, now she's calling.”

She got up and answered the phone.

“Yo! Nellie's funeral home. You slice 'em, we ice 'em. Whatcha got?”

She was quiet for a second while she listened to the answer. She walked into the kitchen but was so loud that anyone could hear her.

“Ugh, no. I'm not going.”

“I don’t care if she’s having her thirty third baby. I’m not going. And how many showers does the girl need?”

“Yes Mom, I know that I’ll never find anybody who loves me with blue hair. That’s why I dyed it pink.

“I could give a fat rat’s ass about what people think. You should know that by now.”

“Mom, I love you but I can’t listen to this anymore. Ok? Bye.”

She hung up the phone and went straight into her bedroom and shut the door behind her. As tough as she tried to be, I knew she was probably crying and those icy blue eyes filled with tears was a thought I couldn’t bear.

I went into her bedroom without knocking and sure enough she was sitting on her bed wiping tears from the corners of her bloodshot eyes. I sat next to her and threw my arm around her shoulders and pulled her to me.

“You mixed it up.” I said.

“Huh?” Another tear rolled down her cheeks.

“Girls cry first and then eat ice cream, right?”

“I know right? Ugh, I’m so ass backwards.”

“I’m liking your mom less and less.”

“Join the club.”

“What can I do?”

“Just be you. That’s all I need.”

It killed me to see her react that way to her mom. Especially since her mom continued to flood her with untruths and bullying. *Who tells their*

daughter those things?

I held her until she quit crying and then I convinced her to watch *The Village* with me. I didn't know anything about that movie, but maybe it would get her mind off of her mom. I felt her relax more and more next to me until she completely slumped her entire weight against my torso. I moved a little to see if she was comfortable and she snuggled in closer and let out the most contented sigh I had ever heard.

I needed to tell her how I felt soon. I wanted to tell her tonight, but after her Mom told her that she couldn't find anyone to love her, telling her now would only cheapen it and she may not believe me. But as she lay here next to me, I couldn't think of anything but how much I loved her and how precious she was to me, ever after a week.

I picked her up and put her in bed. It wasn't the first time I had done this and as I looked down at her, I couldn't ever imagine it being my last. And one day when she and I were ready, I would get in next to her and hold her while she slept.

I closed her door and intended to leave when I remembered that if I left, her door would be unlocked. So I cleaned up her monster sundae mess and crashed on her couch. I woke up a few hours later to Amber and Dylan getting in and had Amber lock the door after me.

N: Next time wake me up. It's not nice to leave me like that.

O: Like what? You were sleeping.

N: Even in my sleep I want to kiss you goodnight.

O: What about me? I didn't get a kiss either.

N: True. Then it's my turn to make it up to you.

O: Can I see u today?

N: Y

O: When?

I never got an answer. I waited for a while but eventually I fell back asleep. I woke up a few hours later and ran to shower and get dressed. I came back and she was there in my room and more importantly on my bed.

I knelt down in front of her so that we were face to face and without restraint pulled her to me. Her mouth met mine in a hungry, desperate collision. Her fingers knotted into the back of my hair and when she wrapped her legs around my torso I nearly threw her on the bed and got lost with her. We stayed that way, holding on and pressing ourselves together until not even air could penetrate the space between us. She pulled away slowly and placed softer kisses on my chin and along my jawline and made her way to my earlobe. So I decided to beat her at her own game. I ran my open mouth slowly across the base of her neck and hearing the swift intake of her breath let me know that I was onto something. I made my way up to her jawline and then to her ear.

“I love you Nellie.” I whispered into her ear and waited. I expected a laugh or a slap, but what she gave me back was nothing short of amazing.

“I’ve loved you since you asked me for gum.” She said as her right cheek was pressed against mine.

I pulled back swiftly not expecting to hear those words. I looked from one eye to the other making sure there was no deception in her confession. And in those eyes I realized—how could I ever doubt this woman in front of me?

“Say it again.” I whispered and my top lip brushed hers as I spoke.

“I love you Owen.” She smiled as she said it and I could see the beginnings of a tear forming in the corner of her eye.

Out of pure relief I rested my forehead on her chest at the base of her throat and released a sigh that I swore I had been holding since the day I

saw her. She ran her fingers through the hair at the nape of my neck and scratched my scalp with her nails.

“Can you do that every night when I’m having trouble going to sleep?” I looked at her and smiled.

“I would have last night but you were too busy leaving me.”

“Won’t happen again.”

“Promise?”

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25. Nellie

“Is that what you’ve been all pensive about?” I asked him.

“Yeah, how’d you know?” He looked shocked.

“‘Cause I know you like the back of my own hand.” I answered as we both stood up.

“OK, I’m taking you somewhere to meet someone special to me.” I told him enthusiastically.

We left a little while later after Owen put his shoes on in record time. I laughed and raised my eyebrows at him.

“What?” He said.

“Do you do everything super fast?” We walked as we talked.

We reached my car and suddenly he had me pinned to the driver’s side door and his mouth was on my ear.

“No, not everything.” I gasped and it made him laugh.

I slapped his chest and said “You love to shock me don’t you?”

“Yup. And I have some really bad news.” He looked downright sullen.

“What?” I looked around for the problem, but came up short.

“I’m never gonna fit in that little ass car Nellie. Let’s go in mine.”

“Ugh, fine, ok.”

We walked over to his Bronco and I pointed here and there to the place I wanted him to go. Cindi knew we were coming and she was as excited as I've ever seen her. He followed me through the store and into the back office. I poked my head around the office door and cleared my throat. Cindi turned around. She had paired her black tank top and jeans with pink Doc Martens and pink earrings and lid to brow pink eyeshadow.

She waved me in and simultaneously did a little happy dance. I tugged Owen in the office holding his hand and when he came into full view Cindi screamed and I squeezed my eyes shut at the piercing sound. She did a knees to chest dance and fist pumped until Owen took a step back.

“Oh my God Nellie, he is one hell of a fine specimen. You were right.”

Owen turned his head toward me and laughed.

“I did *not* say that Cindi. Tell the truth.” My hands were on my hips now.

“Ok, ok, ok, you said,” and she put both fists up to her face and batted her eyes, “Oh Cindi he's so gorgeous and he's sweet and he spends time with his Mom and the way he kisses...”

“Alright, alright, jeez. Don't tell him everything. I'm so humiliated. For this I could've taken him to see my real parents.”

Cindi visibly shuddered, “Ugh, Hellie, don't give me the heebeegeebees talking about your Mom.”

Owen interrupted our goofiness, “Cindi, it's so nice to finally meet you.”

Cindi ran over to him and hugged him around the middle and he smiled at me over her head. We both showed him the store and Cindi went on and on about me making changes when I take over. I hadn't even told her that I wanted to take ownership and she assumed I was.

Eventually, Cindi threw us out but not before she hugged the life out of Owen again.

We got back into his Bronco and went to eat. Then we went to the movies. It was a romantic comedy but Owen never complained once. He even laughed at the goofy parts right along with me.

Before I knew it, it was time to go back home and get ready for our next bout. Owen stayed with me and drove me to the skating rink. We were up against a really rough team this week and it was our last bout of the season. I came out of the locker room and looked out at our opponents. Owen came up beside me with Amber and Dylan and they looked concerned.

“What?” I asked.

Owen spoke up first. “Nellie these girls, have you seen them? Two of them were fighting each other during warm ups and they’re on the same team. Please, please be careful.”

Amber and Dylan were having their own conversation and Owen began to whisper to me.

“What’s the protocol here? Can I kiss you in front of your team or does that make you look like a wuss? ‘Cause you look hot as hell in those little black shorts.”

“If you kissed me right now, I would almost guarantee that the whole room would be jealous of me. Single, married and otherwise they would all get a taste of the green monster.”

“Hmmm...” He stalled and acted aloof.

So I made up his mind for him. But then my skates had a mind of their own. In my greed my lips went one way and my skates went the other. He ended up having to catch me half way down. Then he lifted me the rest of the way so that my skates dangled and kissed me until I didn’t think I could stand up, much less skate.

I went to warm up and Amber was showing off as usual. Then the other team got on the rink and we gave each other a ‘what the hell?’ look. They were big girls, like weight lift a car, big girls. And before the bout even started one of them got in a fight with some girl who was just a spectator.

The bout started out fine and they were really kicking our asses. Then we tied up the score and that’s when things really started getting ugly. It was like we flipped a switch and the niceties were thrown out of the window, not that there are many niceties in roller derby, but still. Before I knew it half of the team was bleeding from one place or the other and everyone was bruised and battered. But we were tough and we tried like mad to get ahead. I saw Amber’s hand and she almost had pulled me through the pack when I felt a piercing, sharp pain in my side and I hit the floor still holding Amber’s hand. I heard whistles and people scrambling around me from all angles. Then Owen was above me and he was lifting up my shirt and then he cussed such a long string that it was almost funny.

I attempted to sit up but Owen’s hand gently kept me down. He talked to me for a few minutes and then backed away when the paramedics arrived. I kept my eyes locked on him for as long as I could and then I was loaded into an ambulance and taken away before I knew what was happening.

I heard sirens and smelled alcohol and plastic and metal.

“Where’s Owen?” I said to no one and everyone at the same time.

“That man of yours? Honey, he’s in the car right behind us. Don’t you worry.” The paramedic asked me all kinds of questions and made me talk almost all the way to the hospital.

We got to the hospital and after a bunch of jostling and wrangling I was in a room and there were x rays and blood samples and people shined flashlights in my eyes. Things were written down, charts were filled out. And after all of the commotion I heard one of them say,

“Ok, you can come in now. She’s stable. We’re waiting for the doctor to look at the x-rays and then he’ll come in. Are you the next of

kin?”

I heard his voice and my hand reached out for him.

“No ma’am, I’m just her boyfriend. Her friend has called her parents. They should be here soon.”

Oh great. Who told them they could do that?

The nurse was apparently satisfied and I heard a door shut. And I know I should have more important things on my mind but all I could do was smile at the fact that Owen just called himself my boyfriend. My hand still flexed, opening and closing wishing that it was wrapped around his. Just then my prayers were answered. I heard a chair’s metal wheels screech and grind against the floor and then his hands enveloped my free one.

I looked over at him and tried to smile and then he brushed some of my hair out of my face and gave me this fake tight lipped smile like the ones I reserve for strangers.

“Hey, I’m ok. It’s gonna be fine.”

“I think I took some of your team out when I saw you go down. Your parents are on their way. I know you aren’t happy about it but Amber couldn’t find your insurance info so we had to. So, I don’t want to start any drama. Do you want me to leave before they get here?”

“No, I want you right here. I *need* you with me.”

“And I need you to be ok. What would I do if something happened to you?”

“I don’t want to think about it.” I whispered.

“Me neither. So...”

The door opened and I could smell her overpriced department store perfume before I heard or saw her. Then I heard a long sigh. Those sighs of hers meant so many things. *You interrupted my country club tennis lessons. I can’t believe I have to be here. I hope no one sees my pink haired daughter. If she hadn’t gone ape shit, I’d never be here.*

“Nellie Michelle, are you ok darling?” It poured out of her mouth like a combination of molasses and ghost peppers, both sticky sweet and mean as fire.

“Yes Mom, I’m fine. I’m sorry you had to come down here.” I tried to be polite so she’d go away.

“Mmmm...well there’s nothing we can do about that now, can we? So what has the doctor said?”

Owen answered before I could.

“He hasn’t made it in yet Ma’am.”

“And you are?” She sounded like the queen from Snow White.

“I’m Owen, Nellie’s boyfriend, it’s very nice to meet you.”

“Well, that’s news to me.” And then she glared at him up and down, “I can certainly see why Nellie Michelle chose to keep you a secret.”

I turned to Owen who looked like he was ashamed of who he was next to me and I wasn’t going to take it for one more second.

“Do you see?” I pointed my question to Owen, “Do you see why I didn’t want you to meet them? This is how they are.”

“Really Nellie? You didn’t want *him* to meet *us*?”

“Mom, I will put up with you insulting me, but I will not put up with you insulting Owen. Did you bring the insurance card?”

“Of course, I gave it to the peon at the front desk.”

“Then you can leave.”

She scoffed and acted offended and then stormed out.

“Nellie, you didn’t have to do that. It’s your mom. Maybe she should...” He didn’t sound like himself.

“Owen, there’s no one I’d rather have here with me than you. Can —can you just hold my hand?”

He took my hand that he dropped during my mom's tiny tirade between both of his strong warm ones and I closed my eyes at the sensation, letting it pour over me. Just then the doctor walked in and said that my ribs were bruised but he didn't think I had a concussion. He released me under instructions to rest the next day and take it easy for the next week.

I had to be pushed out in a wheelchair, which sucked, and Owen pulled up his car to take me home. He called Dylan and asked him to bring him some clothes to my apartment. I didn't know what that meant but I knew that I wasn't ready to be apart from him.

Tears rolled down my face as I thought about how my mom had treated him. It was one thing for her to treat me that way. I was used to it after all. But for her to treat him, the guy who had told me this morning that he loved me, like dirt under her feet was intolerable.

"Are you in pain? I thought they gave you medicine that would last a while." He was concerned.

"Yeah, no I'm not in pain." I tried to clear my tears with the edge of my shirt.

"Then why are you crying?" He lifted my hand to his lips and kissed it.

"I just hoped she would act different." I whispered, ashamed.

26. Owen

I couldn't stand to see her cry. It shattered me. I didn't say a word because I needed to say something exactly right to soothe her and right then I couldn't find the words.

We got back to her apartment and she walked through to her bedroom looking defeated. She showered and got directly into bed. I showered after her, not even asking permission. I walked out not knowing what was going to happen but also knowing that apart from her is somewhere I didn't want to be. She was laying down with her back to me and I thought she was asleep already. I attempted to sneak out and go sleep on the couch against everything that was calling out to me.

"Don't go." She sounded like she was still crying and she had her hand stretched out behind her beckoning me. I got onto the other side of the bed facing her and took both of her hands in mine and moved in as close to her as I could without jostling her. I cleared my throat.

"Nellie, I don't care what your mother thinks about me. The only people whose opinions I value are my family's and yours. It would be nice for her to like me or even act like she can tolerate me, but it's not necessary. I love you no matter what."

She took a deep breath and slowly moved closer to me.

"They're never going to approve of anything I do. Today when she said that it wasn't aimed at you, it was aimed at me. She cuts me down every chance she gets. I've learned to take it when I have to but mostly just ignore it. But you didn't deserve one ounce of it. But if we're going to be together then we're going to have to deal with it from time to time and I hate that for you."

"We'll just have to spend more time with my parents to counteract it. You haven't met my brothers yet. They are a trip." I joked.

She nodded her head in acceptance

“I’m cold.” She whispered and her body concurred with a shiver.

I put my arm under her head and grabbed the back of her thigh to move her even closer as gently as possible. Just hours ago I would’ve given anything to have my hand on her thigh but this was not sexy. This was making sure that if she was cold, I would warm her. If she was in pain, I would ease her. And if her heart ached, I would mend her. Somehow the things that I could do for her were just the things that she needed. She could’ve found them anywhere but she chose to seek them in me.

She woke in the middle of the night hurting and I gave her a dosage of the pills from the doctor and covered her ribs with ice. Minutes later one or both took effect and she fell back into a peaceful sleep. Morning came and she looked more like herself. She wasn’t as pale and could sit up without much trouble. Amber cooked breakfast for everyone. It was funny because Amber was so hot and cold when it came to Nellie. Just when you thought she had forgotten all about her, she’s there doing what she could to help.

I carried Nellie to the couch and watched everything from Master of Disguise to Paranormal Witness on TV. I sat on the floor in front of the couch and fell asleep while she played in my hair with my head lying back on the couch next to her. There was a knock at the door and Nellie asked who it was. But I already knew because I had made the call. I got up and opened the door to my mom and she had gone all out.

Nellie’s whole face lit up when she saw my mom at the door.

“Hi Sylvia! How are you?”

Mom knelt down in front of the couch after I took everything from her hands.

“I’m ok. But more importantly, how are you? What can I do for you?”

My mom was the absolute best in taking care of people. I knew that first hand.

“I’m fine. Owen has taken such amazing care of me. Really.”

“I’m sure he has.” Then she got closer and whispered something in Nellie’s ear and Nellie simply nodded. *What was with my parents whispering things in her ear?*

“I made you my famous chicken soup and some food for the bottomless pit too.”

“Thank you so much.” They hugged and my mom said she needed to get back to the restaurant. She hugged me as well and left.

“What did she whisper in your ear,” I asked her.

“Oh no, I’m the best secret keeper ever.”

“Oh, I thought you were the best kisser ever. My mistake.”

She laughed, “No, I hold that title too. So how many other girls have I beat out, huh?”

The room grew silent and she realized where joking had turned serious immediately.

“Owen, I’m so sorry. I was just kidding. I don’t care at all. I didn’t mean to pry.”

I knelt down in front of her and laid the right side of my face on her chest facing her. I thought she was on the verge of crying so I needed to fix this quick. She reached out and ran her fingers through my hair.

“Nellie, you didn’t say anything wrong. And I will tell you all of it one day. But that time of my life is something that I’m ashamed of. So to answer your question, I kissed a good number of girls. I made out with a good number of girls. I’ve only had sex with one girl and I wish I never had. She betrayed me in the worst way and I’ll never forget it. If I could take it back and all of those other girls too, I would. I would’ve waited for you. But I can’t.” Those last words barely came out.

“Hey, I don’t care about your past. I really was just kidding. All I care about is you and me. Ok? But thank you for trusting me with that. I love you so much and nothing you say is going to change that.”

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27. Nellie

Just what I didn't want to do. In fact, the only thing I made sure not to do. I forced information out of him and I felt like crap for it. Lying here with his head on my chest, I could feel the breath on my neck as he laid his confession before me. I felt the smallest twinge of hurt and jealousy to think that he had been so intimate with other girls but I tried not to show it. He loved me now and that's what counted.

He stayed there relaxing after his admittance for a long time. His eyes were closed.

"Owen." I whispered. I didn't want this moment to end badly.

"Yeah?" I could feel his jaw move against my chest as he spoke.

"Kiss me." I said as firmly as I could.

His head popped up and he gave me a look that I interpreted as relief.

"Even after..." *Did he really think I couldn't want to kiss him again?*

"Of course."

He grabbed my face fiercely but softly and our mouths and locked in harmony. He kissed me like he may never kiss me again. I heard a moan and suddenly he pulled back abruptly ending my pleasure.

"What?" I asked.

"I totally made you moan." I laughed as he kept his hands on my face. It was my moan that I heard.

"Ugh, I'm so embarrassed." I turned my face into the couch and groaned.

“Oh no don’t you hide from me.” I turned slowly and it took me a while to meet his eyes.

“That told me so much. And you never have to be embarrassed about any of that in front of me. You can tell me anything. Ok?”

“OK. There’s something very important that I want to tell you.”

“What?” he said. He totally believed that I was serious.

“I’m hungry.” He cracked up and told me to sit tight but I wanted to get up and sit at the table like a normal person.

He kissed me on the lips quickly and said “Come on tough girl, let’s get to the table.”

With Owen’s help I recovered completely over the next two weeks. He stayed with me when I wanted him to and during the last week he started going home at night. My bed didn’t feel the same anymore.

The next Friday night we were finally going to go somewhere together. Owen told me in class to pack for the whole weekend and I had never been so nervous and excited at the same time. He also told me to pack swim suits. As in swim suit plural. I didn’t know what he had planned but the thought of Owen in swim trunks with a view of those piercings, whatever they were, almost had me running out of class to pack.

I got home after class and I realized that the only swim suits I owned were old and funky. So I texted Amber and she and I went to the mall to shop. Thank goodness they still had some swim suits and lucky me, since it was fall, they were on clearance. I picked up four since they were so cheap. I also got some more flip flops. Because a girl could never ever have enough flip flops.

I rushed back home and furiously packed. I heard my phone.

O: Are you ready? I’m on my way. If not, I can wait.

N: I will be ready by the time you get here.

I wore my jean skirt with a white fitted shirt and some of my new flip flops. He mentioned that we would be travelling, so I wanted to be comfortable. I sprayed myself one last time with my coconut and ginger body spray and threw it in my bag. I heard a knock and went to answer the door.

When I opened it his mouth dropped open and I know this boy knew what I looked like. I took a quick peek in the mirror that hung to the side of the door and didn't see any zits or boogers.

“What’s the matter with you?” I asked while I giggled.

“Damn, you just look so good.” He came into the doorway and kissed me quickly.

“Ok,” he rubbed his hands together “Are you ready?”

“Yeah, let me grab my bag.” I turned around but his hands stopped me by tugging on my waist.

“Oh no, my girl doesn't carry her own bag.”

He went into my bedroom and grabbed my duffel and my purse and handed my purse to me.

“Anything else?” He looked so excited. He was like a kid going to Legoland.

“Nope, that’s it.”

We went down and he approached a big black SUV.

“What is that thing?” I asked.

“This is my Dad’s car. He said he didn’t want you travelling in my Bronco. It’s kinda old and so he lent me his Navigator to use for the weekend.”

“Me? What about you?” I laughed as I gawked at the metal beast.

“Well, apparently my Dad really likes you so this is all about you.” He laughed.

He put my things in the back and opened my door for me. He fit easily into this vehicle, not like when he was in his Bronco and his head swiped the roof. He pulled the monster out of the parking lot and we took off going South. We attended Tulane University in New Orleans, so we were close to all sorts of things: Gulf Shores, Grand Isle, Lake Pontchartrain.

“So, where are we going,” I asked.

“I’m taking you out to Lake Pontchartrain and we’re going to spend the weekend on my parents’ house boat. We can swim and just relax. No phones, no school, no parents, no cares.”

I wanted to crawl over to the driver’s side and sit in his lap for the rest of the ride. He knew exactly what I needed without even asking. I needed a vacation from everything but him.

We drove about an hour and then we stopped to eat at a little Cajun place that Owen claimed had the best fried fish and he was right. We continued on and finally reached a lone boating dock with only three or four boats, one of which was a very nice houseboat. He smiled over at me and we both exited the car at the same time.

He wouldn’t let me get anything. I stood there like a bump on a log watching him pick up some bags and walk into the boat. Then he would grab an ice chest and get on the boat. Once he looked like he was going to drop a bag and I moved to help and he just shook his head at me. He went back to the car one last time and locked it up. Then he got back on and finally extended his hand to me.

“Let the vacation begin.” He said as I stepped onto our vacation vessel.

I sat next to him as he started it up and started towards our unknown destination.

After a few hours he stopped and looked around from all angles. I didn’t know what he was looking for. All I could see was water everywhere I looked.

“This is the place.” He said as he smiled and pecked me on the lips before he went to put the anchor in place and secure us.

He came back with a grin a mile wide.

“So where are we?” I asked as he walked towards me and pulled me against him.

“Right in the middle of nowhere.” He answered. “Ever since I was little I wanted to be a marine biologist. So, my dad used to take me out here and we would fish and snorkel and scuba dive all the time. Then sometimes he would take me to the Gulf. So I thought you might like it here too.

“I love it. Thank you. It’s just what I needed.”

“Are you tired or are you up for a night swim?” He looked expectant.

“Have you heard of these things called alligators?”

“Yeah, and they won’t bother us. Trust me, I’ve been swimming in here since I was a kid.”

“Ok, I guess I trust you. But you’re totally getting in first.” I put my hands on my hips to push my point.

“Deal. The bathroom is right there so you can change. And you better hurry before I swim out too far away.” He went straight for the water. *Boys have it so easy.*

I scrambled and grabbed the first suit I saw which was a black bikini with one little red heart on the left triangle part of the top. I threw my hair up in a sloppy bun and walked out scared out of my mind, for many reasons.

He was already in the murky lake treading water with a smile on his face. My brain conjured up all kinds of scenarios. I psyched myself up and cannonballed into the water. When I came up Owen was laughing and clapping at my performance.

“Ugh...it tastes funny.” I laughed and stuck out my tongue.

“Well that’s easy, quit drinking the lake.” He gave me a ‘duh’ expression.

“I guess that puts an end to my fantasy. Damn. You’re probably not going to kiss me at all with swamp rot mouth.” He swam close to me and pulled me next to him. Instead of attempting to tread water next to my giant, I coiled my legs around his waist and held on for dear life. His green eyes reflected the almost full moon above us. His lips were wet from emerging out of the water and one lone drop lingered on the edge of his stubbled chin.

“Woman, did you just use the word fantasy? Now I’m not letting you out of this water until you tell me every single detail.” As usual, every word out of his mouth was said methodically just to get me going.

28. Owen

Did my timid girl just use the word fantasy?

I thought I prepared myself to see her in a swim suit. And the images I had made in my head had swirled through my brain all day. But when she stepped out onto the stern of the boat wearing that black scrap of fabric, I nearly came undone. And my brain needed some vitamins or something because the images it had given me were not even in the vicinity of how stunning she was. And all I could do was kick my legs and smile like an idiot.

She jumped into the water and I applauded her cannonball even though it was pitiful. My brothers and I would have to show her how it was done one day. Then out of that sweet little pink lipped mouth comes a sentence that contains the word ‘fantasy’. I had no idea what the rest of the phrase was but I know my mind was stuck on that word. So I called her on it. And before I knew it, she was wrapped tighter around me, her wet body slid against mine and she whispered in my ear about me and her and the water and I swear when she said the word ‘mouth’ the rest of my body took it as a cue to stand at attention. But she never lost her cool. After telling me things that would make a playboy blush she looked me dead in the eye as she searched for confirmation that she hadn’t said too much.

“You’re gonna be the death of me. I’m trying to be a gentleman here and you’re whispering naughty things in my ear.” She giggled a bit and then it turned into an all out gut pained laugh and I couldn’t help but laugh with her.

She finally quieted down and moved in close to my face and said, “I didn’t think I was capable of naughty things until you came along. Now I’m free to say all the dirty things I want.”

“Oh wow, I’ve corrupted you. Don’t tell my mom!”

“Ha! Now I’ve got blackmail material.” She began a giggle fest again.

“Ok, how about a race? I need to see if you’re as good of a swimmer as you are a skater.”

“Oh I can swim circles around you buddy.” I could see her expression transform into her game face.

“OK, we race over there to that log sticking out of the water and then back to the boat.”

“Eeeeewww, I am not touching that thing.” She said and her eyes got big and she clapped her hands over her mouth. I lifted one eyebrow but refused to say a word.

She splashed me. “You know what I mean.”

“OK, on the count of three. One, two, go!” I yelled and we took off at the same time.

She was an excellent swimmer, I’ll give her that but I totally let her beat me. It was getting late and we got back on the boat. I let her go up the ladder first and it had nothing to do with manners.

She went inside wrapped in a towel and I told her that she could take a shower if she wanted.

“Um, is it lake water?” She asked as she pointed to the shower and I could almost hear her brain screaming “icky!”

“No, it’s clean water in a drum. Don’t be silly.” I pecked her on the lips after I said it.

“Ugh…” she groaned loudly, “I’ll never get used to this boating stuff.”

Before I knew it the words just came out of my mouth. “Well, I’m going to be on and off of a boat and the water for the rest of my life so you might want to get the hang of it.”

I knew she was gawking at me. And I commanded my body to keep walking through the living area, up the stairs and to the top deck where I planned to set up our sleeping arrangements. If I was honest with myself it was the truth. There was no future I could imagine without her in it. But I was too chicken shit to turn around and see what her reaction was.

After a few minutes she came up and I walked past her to take a shower of my own. When I came back up she stood close to the edge of the roof with her arms crossed and there was a breeze blowing her hair this way and that. And when she shivered the tiniest bit, I realized she must be cold. I could take care of that.

I wrapped my arms around hers and she leaned back into my chest and put her chin up to look at me.

“Hey.” She smiled and I could see that there had been tears in her eyes while I was gone.

“You’re crying. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. I got ahead of myself. I got carried away.” I never knew I was such a babbler.

She turned around to face me and inched her arms around my back.

“You have nothing to apologize for. Nothing. But here’s what I want to know. Did you mean it, or was it just something you said?”

“I meant it. I can’t even imagine a life without you in it.”

“That’s good. ‘Cause I’m not planning on going anywhere.” She was dead serious and the kiss that followed proved it.

“I’m tired. Are you?” She asked me.

“Yeah, I’m pretty beat. When we were kids we always slept up here on tons of blankets so I thought you might like that.”

“Keep it up Black and I’m never going to leave here.” She climbed onto the pile of blankets and splayed her arms and legs out like she was making a snow angel.

Didn’t she know that’s what I was counting on? Making her as happy as possible was my only goal this weekend.

I laid down next to her and took off of my shirt to get comfortable. But then I realized that all of this time I had been sleeping next to her with my shirt on. And when we were swimming, most of my chest was in the water. I was actually nervous to see her reaction to my piercings. I turned to face her and she was already turned towards me with her face propped up on her palm. She reached out her hand and traced every piece of ink that was visible to her. She crooked her finger and ran it over the barbells in my nipples one by one and I loved her boldness. They were sensitive enough normally but when she touched them and I could feel her breaths quicken as she did, it drove me mad, in the best way imaginable.

My lips away from hers was no longer an option. We crashed together body against body and her fingers dug into my back. I broke free from the warmth of her lips to explore the rest of her. I started at her shoulders and kissed my way along the top of her chest. She shivered beneath me and I chuckled and pulled one more blanket on top of her.

“I didn’t shiver because I was cold Owen.” She was as breathless as I was and the fact that I could cause this beauty to shiver in pleasure was another dream come true. I hovered above her and gazed at the girl who in mere weeks’ time had completely changed my life. If I didn’t stop now, I wasn’t going to be able to stop.

I kissed her once more and lay down on my side facing her. She curled up against my chest and arms and legs tangled together as if they had years of experience in the dance. She sighed and I felt her breath against my neck.

“Thank you for bringing me here Owen.” She said as she wiggled in closer.

“You’re welcome. Anytime. I love you Nellie.”

“Me too.” She barely got the words out before her soft almost
whimper of a snore started up beside me.

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29. Nellie

Sometime in the night, or early morning I felt him break away from me. And it wasn't a natural pulling away from rolling over or getting comfortable. He purposefully and gently moved my arms and disentangled his legs from mine. The cold night air hit me where his body had laid next to mine and I scrambled to pull the covers up to fill the void.

I opened my eyes sometime later and saw him sitting on the edge of the roof with his legs hanging off of the edge. At first I thought it was a dream so I closed my eyes and reopened them to find the same scenario. I crawled the small space between us and slid my arms and legs around his back. His body shook with laughter and he pulled one of my hands to his lips.

I laid my left cheek against his back and also face to face with a phoenix in ink.

“Can't sleep?” I asked. *Duh, Nellie. Nice question.*

“Nah, snoring kept me up.” I slapped his chest and felt the rumble of his laughter next to me.

“What's the matter? Talk to me.” I said.

“Skeletons.” He said and I nodded against him letting him know that I understood.

“Nothing you can say to me will ever change my mind.” I whispered.

“In the morning, ok? I know it will make me feel better to get it off of my chest and just tell you. I feel like I'm hiding things. Right now I just want to curl up with you and get some more sleep. Is that okay?”

“I don’t know. Will there be kissing?” I put my chin on his spine and the rest of my head bobbed up and down as I spoke.

“Definitely.” He laughed and I made my way back to our sleeping place on the roof and he crawled in next to me and kissed me until dawn broke.

I smelled coffee and breakfast. What kind of breakfast could be cooked on a houseboat, I didn’t know. But it smelled fantastic. I stretched and rolled over onto Owen’s side and put my face into his pillow trying to meld his smell into my nose.

“Are you trying to smother yourself?” He laughed while still climbing up to the roof.

“Yes, trying to smother myself in your smell.” I laughed back.

“Well, I can think of a better way to do that.” He stood right next to my head still laughing.

“Ugh...how are you so feisty this early in the morning? I need coffee and breakfast before you start with the morning dirty talk.” I got up as slowly as possible.

He laughed and showed me to the cutest little table on the front of the boat. I knew it was called bow or aft some crap. I guess I would have to learn boat lingo eventually. I tried to help with breakfast but I was shooed away.

“Owen, I need coffee. I can get it myself.” I whined.

“Nope. I’ve got it grouch head.”

I waited not so patiently and then he placed a cup on the table and a kiss on my forehead. I took a sip and it was just the way I liked it. Then he put a plate before me that had eggs and sausage and toast.

“How do you cook on a boat?” I asked, feeling like an idiot.

“On the stovetop.” He answered me like the smartass that he was.

“I know *that* part.”

“Propane, Nellie.” He might as well have said ‘Duh’.

“Ahhh. This is good by the way. Your mom taught you well.”

“Yeah, they both did.” He got that far away look again.

I ate and waited. I could tell that the wheels in his head were turning. I got up and washed the dishes and cleaned up. I walked back over and sat at the table.

“I don’t know where to start.” He said and looked back at me.

“You can start by moving your chair over here. I feel like you’re on another continent.”

He smiled a little and got up, moving his chair over by me.

“It started with Amy. She and I had been together for a little over a year when I started noticing things. The main thing being that she didn’t want to have sex anymore. She was relentless in the beginning and then it just stopped.” *Maybe I shouldn’t have eaten breakfast.*

He continued, “Then she started cancelling dates and hanging out with a new friend. I think I was so deep in lust with her or infatuation that I blew it all off. I can see it all in hindsight now. I had two best friends then, Dylan and Lucas. Dylan hated Lucas but couldn’t pinpoint exactly why. He would just say he was trouble. But he was right. Lucas and Amy were going at it behind my back and it ruined me for a while. She came up pregnant a few months later and claimed it was mine. But then she got an abortion without me knowing, so I’ll never know. I drank, I smoked, I got tattoos and I partied hard. I would get in late and miss school. And the days when I went to school I would skip out halfway through. My grades went to hell and the worst part was that my parents were at their wits end trying to stop me. They would make rules and threaten me but I always found a way around it. Dad found out that Amy had been pregnant and I thought he was going to lose it. He ran me to the hospital to get tested for

every STD possible and more. Mom and Dad fought and fought until one day Dad said he was hurting my mom too much so he packed his bags and left. That was my fault. I drove them apart with my stupidity. That weekend I went to a party. I drank some beer but not a lot. I was driving my truck home and trying to light a cigarette and I ran off of the road and into a tree. I spent a day or two in the hospital with minor injuries. I had ruined everything just because of a stupid relationship. I ruined my parents' marriage. I almost didn't graduate high school and I had to go to one year of community college before any college would accept me. And the only reason they did was because my dad is friends with one of the board members. And every time my parents smile at me or do things like my dad did this weekend for me to take you here? Makes me feel like shit for breaking them up."

He let out a long drawn out breath and clunked his head down on the table. I didn't say anything. Honestly, I didn't know what to say yet. I was happy that he admitted those truths to me, but I could never imagine that our stories were so similar. We both got hurt by significant others and best friends and we both rebelled after it was over.

He turned his head and there were tears in his eyes waiting to be released. He sat up and pushed his hair out of his face and gave me one of those straight lipped smiles.

I was on him in a heartbeat. I straddled his lap and held onto him as if the events had happened just minutes ago.

"I love you. And your parents love you. And they love each other, anyone can see that. But it's not your fault. Sometimes people just need some space to get a handle on themselves. And I could strangle that Amy wench."

"I'm so glad I don't have to carry that around anymore. It felt like I was betraying you."

"You can trust me completely Owen. I will never ever hurt you."

"I know."

After sitting there for a while, I broke my hold and proclaimed that I needed some sun. He asked if that involved being topless and I just rolled my eyes at him. Amber had talked me into buying the suit that I intended to wear. And I couldn't wait to see his face when I came out in it.

I slipped on the green and white polka dot bikini and made sure that everything was covered. It wasn't. I grabbed my sunglasses, sunscreen and a book out of my bag and made my way to the roof where Owen said he was going. While climbing the ladder to the roof I got a good look at him shirtless in the sunlight. I got all the way on top and he didn't see me yet. He turned around with a chair in his hand and then dropped it.

“Holy shit Nellie. Quit sneaking up on me, especially when you're wearing a half of a bikini.”

I looked down at myself and adjusted the top but it didn't help. So I stuck my bottom lip out and said, “I guess I'll go change then, since you don't like it.” I turned and went for the ladder before he grabbed me around my waist and put his mouth to my ear.

“Oh no you don't. But I swear if you wear that in front of anyone else I'll hunt them down just for looking at you.

“Then you'll just have to bring me back here so I can wear it again.”

“Are you kidding me? I'm thinking about never leaving.” He laughed.

The next day and a half went by way too quickly. It was the best forty eight hours of my life. We came out of it stronger and more in love than ever.

Halfway home Owen groaned and looked at me.

“Let's just go back. Let's quit school and just live on the boat. I can fish.”

I laughed but went along with it.

“Oh yeah, I can swim with the alligators all day, turn around now!”

We made up silly scenarios of swamp life all the way back to his mom’s restaurant where we ate and exchanged cars with his dad. I assured Sylvia that I would be at her house for Thanksgiving knowing that Owen wanted me to go and meet his brothers and spend time with his family. By the time we got back to my apartment I was exhausted. He brought all of my things into my room and then hesitated to leave.

“So this is the part where I go back to my dorm and make you miss me.” He joked.

“Oh? I thought this was the part where you left and thought about me in this big bed all alone. That and the green and white bikini.”

“I think I should confiscate that suit just to make sure it doesn’t get worn while I’m not around.” He got closer to me and was using that low sultry voice.

“That’s a shame. I was gonna wear it to class in the morning.” I shrugged my shoulders as if I would really wear that to class.

“Oh, now I have that image to fight with during class—you win. Ok, tomorrow is the day where I never see you, which sucks. So you gotta kiss me enough to last until Tuesday.”

By the time we ended that kiss he could barely walk out of the room. I had to push the big galoot out of the apartment and shut the door behind him. *Yeah, I’m that good.*

30. Owen

On my way back to the dorms I thought about the weekend. She didn't treat me any differently after I told her everything. She didn't even bat an eye. I guess I would react the same if she told me the same thing about her. It wouldn't change how I felt about her. I thought once I told her about Amy being pregnant that she would bail. But she didn't.

I think my parents loved her as much as I did. She agreed to come to our house for Thanksgiving, which was two weeks away. I couldn't wait for her to meet Falcon and Maddox. They were seventeen and fourteen and cocky little suckers through and through.

It was all I could do to leave her apartment especially since the weekdays sucked in terms of getting to see her. I parked at the dorms and went to my room. Dylan wasn't home so I flounced into my single dorm size bed and just laid there for several minutes before I fell asleep.

The next two weeks went by slower than usual. I was anxious for Nellie to meet my brothers and spending more time with my parents. Not nervous, because she was so comfortable around my parents and they adored her, just anxious. I just couldn't wait to see her at my family's house like she belonged there. But she did. She belonged with me as a part of my family, as my family.

The night before she was a mess. She and Amber were having a 'girl night' and she decided to dye her hair a different color. I couldn't wait to see what crazy color that girl came up with. Dylan and I had gone out to play pool and get some food. My phone vibrated in my back pocket.

N: I'm so nervous. Your parents are going to decide they hate me and your brothers are going to convince you to dump me and go get some

girl who wears v neck sweaters and big bows in her hair. Ok, just had to get that out. See you tomorrow. Love you, xoxoxo

O: How long did you leave the hair dye in?

N: Ha ha ha. So funny.

O: Love you. Tmrw @ 10.

N: yup

I showed up at her apartment about thirty minutes early. These past months I found out that Nellie is especially adorable when she's frazzled. She cusses and runs into things and calls me names. And I just stand there and laugh. Then she comes out fully dressed, beautiful as ever, sighs loud and long and it's all over. I wanted to video it.

I walked in, I had a key now. She came out of the bedroom with her towel dress. That's what I called it. It was a cross between a dress and a towel and it was weird. She had her hair wrapped up in a towel so I couldn't see what color it was but she was already pissed because I was early. So I took a seat and settled in for the show.

“Owen Black, why do you do this to me? You tell me ten o'clock and then you show up at nine freakin' twenty eight,” She checked my phone for the exact time, “looking like God's gift to women everywhere and I look like I just rolled out of hell. Damn it!”

See what I mean?

She stomped back into the bedroom and slammed the door. I heard all kinds of noises and a blow dryer humming and slamming of drawers. Then she came out and she was still in the towel dress but her hair was done and it was purple, Grimace purple and it suited her. She ran to a bag by the front door and grabbed a shoe box and said, “Don't just sit there, help me.”

“What do you want me to do—take that towel thing off for you?” I waggled my eyebrows and smiled but she growled at me and slammed the

door again.

Almost exactly at ten she came out and it was so worth the wait. She wore a black shirt with lace on the top and a black and purple skirt. And then I looked down at her shoes. They were the tallest shoes I had ever seen her wear and when she turned around I could see that her legs looks ten times as good in those shoes. She finally faced me again and sighed and threw her hands in the air in a ‘this is as good as it gets’ gesture. I practically heard the curtains close on her dramatics.

“I’ve never seen you look more beautiful and the purple is killer.”

“Thank you. I’m such an ass when I’m getting dressed and you show up early.”

“I’m used to it. It’s like our thing.”

“Sorry Owen, are you ready to go?” She picked up her purse and keys but I could tell she was nervous.

“Nellie, they love you already. And even if they don’t I will always. Got it?” I rubbed her arms as I tried to reassure her.

“Yeah, I do. Thanks for that.” She leaned up to kiss me quickly and then we left.

We drove the short distance to my parent’s house and went inside. Falcon and Maddox played the X-Box screaming at each other and moving their bodies along with their character on the TV. I stuck my fingers in my mouth and whistled as loudly as I could. With these boys it was the only way to get their attention.

One of them paused the game and they both looked while Falcon yelled.

“Owen, what the f...” Both pairs of my brothers’ eyes landed on Nellie at the same time and all talking ceased.

They both stared and slow growing smiles broke out on their faces. I caught the exact moment their gaze began to travel south and I

caught them before they could proceed.

“Nellie this is Falcon with the fauxhawk and Maddox with the buzzcut. Guys, this is Nellie. Close your mouths and quit drooling.”

They both straightened up and then went back to killing each other on the TV screen. We made our way through the living room to the kitchen where Mom and Dad were cooking side by side. I cleared my throat and the both turned around. They hugged and doted on Nellie like she was the daughter they never had.

Mom and Dad cooked everything under the sun and Nellie kept my parents and brothers in stitches with her derby stories. We all pitched in to clean up. Falcon and Maddox went back to the X box, my mom and Nellie went to look at some of my mother’s artwork. She had painted since she was a teenager. And Dad requested an audience with me outside on the back porch.

We sat and my father of few words cleared his throat.

“How serious are you and Nellie?” *Wow, right to the point Dad.*

“I love her Dad, and she loves me. I’ve told her all about Amy and my tirade. I would marry her if she would have me one day. I just don’t know if I deserve her.”

“I already knew that son. I can see the way you two look at each other. Your mother does too. She’s a great girl Owen, and pretty as all get out.”

“Yeah, she is. We’re going to her parents’ house for Christmas. That should be all kinds of fun.”

“Just be polite and leave as soon as possible.” My dad chuckled as he doled out advice.

Mom and Nellie came out while we were still laughing and when Mom asked him what he was laughing at he just said “In-laws.” She got all offended thinking that he was talking about her Mom. But Nellie just cocked her head to one side and gave me a look that meant she knew the

truth. She sat next to me and spent the next few hours talking and just relaxing. At the end of the afternoon when we made our way out, my mom pulled out a lemon cheesecake and insisted that it was only for Nellie. She goaded my brothers telling them they couldn't have any.

I brought her home and we ate almost half of the cheesecake ourselves. Well, I ate most of it. It was getting harder and harder to leave. I didn't ask if she wanted me to stay. I always left it up to her. I kept clothes in her dresser for the times that I did but all we did was sleep.

She brought me out of my own thoughts. "You've got that look again."

I chuckled at her. "What look? I don't have a look."

"Oh yeah you do. It's the leavin' look." She pointed her finger in my chest.

"And?"

"And—we don't have classes tomorrow, so are you gonna make me beg you to stay or just stand there with that look on your face?" She put her hands on her hips and I wanted my hands there instead.

I got closer to her and pulled her arms around my waist and played with her new striking purple hair.

"Begging sounds fun." I let my hands travel a slow path down her back and made them stop at the curve that marked the beginning of other places.

"Who's going to beg, me or you?" She looked up at me playing along.

"We'll take turns."

I reached down, lifted her up, pinned her against the wall and like a well-oiled machine she wrapped her killer legs around me. Before we even got started, we both turned our heads towards the front door, we heard

Amber coming in. I quickly carried her the few steps into her bedroom and shut the door behind us and re-pinned her to another wall. Our mouths met in a fury and when I heard her whimper in pleasure and tighten her legs around me I pulled back suddenly.

“Beg me.” I mouthed to her as she tried to pull me back down to her.

“Please Owen,” she breathed more than said and it was exactly what I needed to hear.

We continued until we got to that ever present stopping point and I reluctantly tried to set her down but she claimed that her legs weren’t working. I laughed and put her on the bed instead and went to take a shower, ice cold please.

31. Nellie

Hearing the shower turn on was a relief in a way. It gave me a few minutes to compose myself. Merciful heaven if he didn't stop being so damned sexy I was going to combust. And he had as much trouble leaving me as I was letting him go. I swear it got more and more difficult every single day. He didn't know it but while Sylvia and I looked at her paintings in the bedroom which was just above the porch, the window was open and we could hear everything. Sylvia and I smiled like two teenagers at the conversation that took place below us.

When he said he wanted to marry me I started to cry and Sylvia was there in an instant with tissues.

“You had to have known Nellie. That boy of mine loves with every fiber of his being.”

“I knew about it on my end, but I didn't know about him.” I looked back out of the window where I heard those words from.

“I've known since he brought you into the restaurant. I know that you know about Amy but what you don't know is that he never brought her around here—never. We met her once or twice when we saw them somewhere together but never on purpose. He was ashamed of her. She just wasn't a good apple. But the first time he had an opportunity he wanted me to meet you. That's the difference.” A single tear ran down her face and it was my turn to hand her the tissues.

“Quit dreaming about me in the shower and get your pajamas on woman.” His smartass remarks brought me out of today's events with Sylvia and back to the present.

I sat up and just looked at him for a moment. Keeping this from him was eating at me and I had to let him know, even if he got mad.

“What?” He said and he sat next to me on the bed.

“I need to tell you something that happened today and I don’t want you to get mad.”

“As long as you didn’t kiss Falcon, I think we’re good.”

“So your Mom and I went up to see her paintings which are phenomenal and the window was open...” He already knew where I was going with this. I could tell by the white hue his face was taking on.

“You heard it all.” He said but he looked like he didn’t care.

“Yeah, I’m sorry. We didn’t mean to.” I said.

“Are you sorry you heard it or are you sorry because of what was said?” He sounded the slightest bit agitated now.

“I wish I hadn’t heard it that way. I wish you would’ve told me to my face. That’s what I want. But I’m not sorry I heard it.” I got up and got my clothes and went to change.

I changed and brushed my teeth. Until I said it out loud, I hadn’t realized just how upset I was about it. I understand that he wanted to tell his dad but how could he ever think I wouldn’t want him. All of this deserving me stuff was a crock of crap.

I walked out and he was still sitting in the same place.

“Look, I’m sorry. But how could you ever think that you don’t deserve me? You’re the best thing that has ever happened to me and you think that I don’t want to marry you as much as you want to marry me? That aggravates the piss out of me.”

“All I heard is that you want to marry me.” He was smiling like a goon.

“Oh no, you’re gonna have to do better than that.” I crossed my arms.

He pulled me onto the bed and into his lap and brushed his knuckles down the side of my neck and across my shoulder.

“Nellie, I love you more than I’ve ever loved anything. How could I ever have a life without you in it? No matter what happens in the future, it won’t be worth a thing without you. So, will you marry me?”

My face was on fire and tears trickled down my face of their own free will.

“I’ve got purple hair and piercings in my lips and I don’t act like a lady and I beat up on girls in roller derby and...” I babbled off all of the reasons that I was insecure just like he thought he didn’t deserve me.

“Hey, hey, all of those things make me love you even more. You don’t give a damn what people think and it makes you that much better.” I got a hold of myself and took a deep breath.

“Yes.” I said so quietly I didn’t think I said it out loud.

“Say it again. Just so I’m sure.” He tugged at my waist.

“Owen Matthew Black I will marry you and be the most kick ass wife ever.”

“Yes you will. Now, I want to end this Thanksgiving laying next to my future wife, come on.”

We got under the covers and he took his shirt off. I don’t think I would ever tire of the way his mere presence caused my body to react. It was pure electricity.

I laid on my right side and Owen put one arm under my head and one hand on my hip pulling me to fit next to him. He moved his left arm and put it around my middle grazing the underside of my chest. I stiffened a little and he started to take it away.

I quickly moved it back.

He kissed the back of my neck and within minutes his breathing slowed and deepened.

I rolled over half awake and heard and felt a crunching under me. I turned to find a note that read:

Went to grab breakfast and coffee.

Love you.

Owen.

I got up and showered, got dressed and gathered laundry together to wash later. I heard the door open and close and I put the basket on the bed. I walked out into the kitchen and saw him unloading armfuls of white bags and travel cups of coffee.

“Oh man those bagels smell great.” I said and he smiled at me and walked my way.

“You smell great too. Come sit down and eat.”

We enjoyed the rest of the Thanksgiving break in the same way. We only had three more weeks of the semester and then we had decided to spend Christmas with my parents. Owen wanted another chance at winning my mom over but I knew my parents weren't ones who were won over even if he or I was perfect. Even perfection was criticized in that house.

I didn't work the week of finals, Cindi wouldn't let me. Owen and I studied separately knowing that if we were together absolutely no studying would get done. I also took the opportunity to buy his Christmas present and one for each member of his family. We texted and talked on the phone at night but other than that didn't get to spend too much time together. After finals were over we spent a few days with his family at their home. We put up the Christmas tree and exchanged presents early. Sylvia

made the most divine early Christmas dinner and she showed me how to make her lemon cheesecake. Owen and I also announced to them that we were engaged which went over well with everyone but Falcon and Maddox. They said it wasn't real because Owen hadn't bought me a ring yet. Falcon even broke out into the 'Single Ladies' song to drive home his point.

I didn't want to leave their home after it was all over. They gave me a family that I'd never had and treated me like I belonged there instead of a person who was just in the way. Every time I thought about going to my parents' house my stomach somersaulted and almost revolted against me.

It was a two hour drive to the Forrester mansion and I tried to enjoy Owen's hand tangled with mine but my stomach wasn't cooperating. I must've drunk an entire bottle of the pink stuff trying to calm its nerves.

"I've got an idea." Owen said as he smiled over at me.

"What? Anything will help." I shrugged my shoulders.

"Let's pull over and make out." He said and acted like he was turning off onto the exit.

"I'm right on the edge of vomiting so that might not be a good idea."

"Look, your mom already hates me so let's make sure Dad does and then Merry Christmas!" He smiled a really wide creepy smile.

"You forgot the berating and constant tattoo and piercing comments." I joked.

"Oh, my favorite. Plus with you drinking all of that stuff—pink puke would really bring out your eyes." He squirmed up his mouth trying not to smile.

"Wow," I said flatly.

A while later we pulled up to the gate and he looked at me weird.

“What?” I asked as I leaned over to key in the numbers that would let us in.

“Your parents live in a plantation, a huge plantation.” He said incredulously.

“So? I’d rather be with you in my tiny apartment anytime than to be here.”

“Good answer.” He said and smiled genuinely.

When we parked there were some other cars that I didn’t recognize but it wasn’t out of the ordinary for Mom to invite people over for Christmas dinner. After all, eating with me and my boyfriend was going to give them a migraine or an aneurism.

I opened the front door to the mansion and let the cold and empty foyer echo ‘Mom’ until she heard me.

She rounded the corner with my dad who was stiff as a board and walked as if he was taking the plank to his sharky death.

“Nellie Michelle, you’re late. You know that dinner is served at promptly noon and no later. Yet here we are at twelve,” she looked at her watch, “thirteen and you are just getting here.”

Without consent my voice changed back to puppet Nellie and I replied, “I apologize mother. Thank you for having us here. Owen, you’ve met my mother Sabrina Forrester and this is my father, Alexander Forrester.”

Owen shook hands with both of them who in turn wiped their hands on their pants, the same gesture they used after a handshake with the plumber or the gardener.

“Well, let’s not dally here all day. We have guests waiting.”

Owen held my hand while we followed, our footsteps quiet next to the tapping of my mother’s designer stilettos on the wood floors. We

entered the dining room and my heart stopped and for a moment the world became hazy.

“Nellie, you remember Corey and Cassandra and their children Christina, Colby and of course there’s another on the way. And their parents of course. Right? And everyone this is Nellie’s *boyfriend* Owen.”

I stood staring, not at the guests but at Mom. How could she do this to me? A tug on my hand brought me back to the present, the very ugly present and I called puppet Nellie forth to handle it for me.

“Yes, of course. So nice to see you all. Merry Christmas.” I sounded like a computer voice when I talked like that. We took our seats at the enormous cypress table and Owen whispered to me after a few bites.

“Calm down, she can’t eat you and neither can they. It’s going to be fine. I can take it. Your mom’s a good cook.” He was trying but I had given up a long time ago.

“We have personal chefs.” I whispered back to him and he almost laughed.

The food served was probably one third of what Owen usually ate and I knew he must be starving. The silence during dinner was smothering.

“So, Nellie, how is school?” The icebreaker was provided by Cassandra and it was a lame attempt.

“School is great Cassandra. Thank you for asking. Your children are really beautiful. I’m sorry I couldn’t come to the shower.”

We had more of that shallow conversation for the rest of the meal. It was going unbelievably well in a fake kind of way. We went into the formal living room after the meal. The older adults were partaking in bourbon.

“Owen,” my mother started in and I could tell by the intonation in her voice what was about to happen, “would you like a drink? You are twenty one right?”

Owen glanced at me quickly and winked as if he could ‘one up’ her.

“No ma’am, thank you. I am twenty one but I don’t drink alcohol.”

She raised an eyebrow and I swore I saw flames rise up in her eyes.

“Oh? It is my experience that when a young person doesn’t drink it’s because either they have an addiction problem or because they have alcoholic parents.”

Owen’s massive frame flinched the tiniest bit at the mention of his parents and I immediately opened my mouth to defend them but Owen beat me to the punch.

“Mrs. Forrester, my parents are not alcoholics and I don’t have an addiction problem. I’ve just been a witness to what happens when people drink. Insane, critical and ridiculously rude things come out of their mouths and they hurt the people they are supposed to love.”

Before I could stop it I snorted and so did Corey and Cassandra. I don’t know why they were laughing, they were pompous asses too. Mom let out a curt ‘hmmm’ and went on with her snobby chatter.

Then she started in on me.

“Nellie Michelle, you’ve gone back to purple I see. It’s been so long I can’t remember what color it naturally is.”

“Really Mom? Because pictures of prim and proper Nellie are plastered everywhere. You usually get Leslie to dust them and put them around the house before I’m coming, right? All you have to do is look at one of those.”

She acted shocked and hurt and said she always kept pictures of me out in the house but I knew better.

I announced that I was going to take Owen on a tour of the house and my mother didn’t even turn around to acknowledge it. I took him

through the downstairs rooms and introduced him to Leslie, the housekeeper and Christophe, the chef. They both hugged me and showed me more affection than my parents put together.

Owen didn't say much and then I shrugged my shoulders and said, "That's it."

"You know that's not it Nellie. You're hiding your princess bedroom."

I opened my mouth as far as it would go. "How did you know?"

"Really? Look at this house. I bet your room looks like the Easter bunny had diarrhea."

I laughed so hard I could barely walk to my room. He was exactly right.

I opened the door and he cracked up. I slapped his shoulder and it made him laugh harder.

"It's not that funny. This was my prison." I said laughing, but now he stopped laughing.

"I'm sorry. I'm so glad you got out of here. This place, as big and decorated as it is, is kinda depressing."

He walked around my room touching random cheesy things and laughed. We decided to make our excuses and go ahead and leave.

Mom and Dad looked more relieved than heartbroken that we were going and on the way out we heard them making plans to open presents with Corey and Cassandra and their family. They never mentioned a present for me; my gift was getting out of there fairly unscathed.

We got into Owen's Bronco and the doors had barely closed and he started talking.

"Please for the love of all that's holy, tell me we won't ever leave our children with those two. They'll turn into plastic or something. I know that's your parents, but they're so damned mean and hateful."

After I finished laughing I answered.

“It’s ok, when you take me on long romantic trips we can leave the kids with your parents.” I smiled and looked out of the side mirror as the mansion grew smaller and smaller behind us.

“And there will be lots and lots of trips for us if they are anything like our weekend on the houseboat.” His eyes gleamed with friskiness.

“That was a good weekend. We should do that again—soon.”

“My parents also have a small cabin in Arkansas that belonged to my grandparents—since it’s cold.” He was looking at the road but I could see the smile.

“How ever will we keep warm?” He took my hand and kissed the inside of my palm.

“I think I know a way.” His lips brushing my hand as he spoke.

“And by the way, I’m starving.” I knew he would be and quite frankly, I was too.

“Let’s go to your Mom’s place and eat.”

“Ok, let me call her and see how busy she is.” He picked up his phone and made the call. His eyes widened and he shook his head several times and answered ‘Yes Ma’am’—a lot.

“She says the next time we call ahead she’s going to maim me. So I’m supposed to bring your cute butt there before she has my hide and that’s a quote.”

“God, I love your Mom.” I said and I meant every word.

“She loves you more than she loves me but not nearly as much as I love you.”

We got to the restaurant and all ate together, even Falcon and Maddox showed up and were rowdy as ever. The three boys plus Chase, Owen’s dad, were all giving each other looks and were kicking each other

under the table. Sylvia noticed too and wasn't going to put up with it very much longer.

“All right you four, what in the hell is going on?” She commanded the attention of the entire table and some onlookers. The word ‘hell’ coming out of her mouth was odd and it was the first time I’d seen her fierceness.

Falcon spoke up first. “It’s nothing, Owen is just a chicken, that’s all.”

Maddox agreed, nodding his head up and down with a mouthful of pasta.

Chase cleared his throat and said, “Owen, I think the surprise is ruined, son.”

Owen looked deflated and pissed. But he got out of his chair and reached out a hand to his Dad. I didn’t know if they were going to waltz or what. Chase reached into the inner pocket of his jacket which hung on his chair and came out holding a black box and handed it to Owen. Sylvia, next to me, grabbed her cloth napkin from the table and hugged me around the waist in preparation.

He opened the box and looked at me and Sylvia trembled with sobs next to me. Chase grabbed her and hugged her to him as Owen bid me to stand. I stood on shaky knees next to him as he kneeled in front of me. And like a siren’s call, his kneeling attracted every eye in the place and suddenly his family wasn’t our only audience.

“Nellie Michelle Forrester, I have loved you since before I knew your name. Every time you walk into a room my breath is taken away. A life without you in it is simply unimaginable. Will you be my wife?”

I could hear the ladies in the room gasp and whimper.

“Yes.” I croaked out while the waves of water streamed down my face.

He placed the ring on my finger and I was surprised to see that it was an antique silver ring with a pink stone instead of the traditional diamond. Then again we were nothing even close to traditional, so it made sense. He stood up next to me and smiled bashfully as the entire restaurant was now clapping and his family rose from the table to congratulate us. Then as if no longer embarrassed he bent me backwards and kissed me long and hard and we received even more clapping.

He wiped my tears away with his knuckles and more moved in to replace them. Maddox and Falcon gave their brother hugs and slapped each other on the backs while Sylvia and I hugged and sobbed. It was a great ending to an otherwise crappy day.

After another hour or so, Owen took me home and I gave him my present. I bought him two things. One was a new backpack since his was raggedy. And the other was a set of rings that could be switched out for the barbell piercings. It wasn't anything compared to what he had given me, but his face lit up just the same. The day had exhausted me and while he took a shower I felt myself drifting off on top of the comforter. The next thing I remember was a hand on my hip and an arm being slipped under my head and the words, "Thank you for the best Christmas."

The rest of the semester was spent in bliss. We both got our schedules and found that we both had Tuesdays and Thursdays free of classes. Of course I had to work but only four or five hours at a time. We went out to the Black house for New Year's Eve and I got to see how much of a pyromaniac Owen really was. He and his brothers were just relentless. I swear they popped firecrackers until two in the morning. Then they had to spend an hour picking up all of the mess with a very angry matriarch on their tails. All of this happened after he gave me the most amazing kiss right at midnight. This year was starting off on a good note.

32. Owen

On my way back to the dorms after a busy New Year's Day, I called my mom. I needed to talk to her now while all of this was in my head. The phone rang only once and she answered.

“Hey honey. What's going on?”

“Hey Mom. You have time to talk?” I hoped she did, I needed her.

“Of course. Come to the restaurant. I'm in the kitchen.”

I rode over there and walked straight into the back and sat on the only countertop that wasn't used for food prep. She'd have my ass if I sat on one of those. This was our thing. I sat on the counter while she cooked. She didn't push or pry. She just waited for me to talk and listened. Then she always gave me the best advice or called my dad in to do it.

She acknowledged my presence with a nod and then went back to shaving the zest from a lemon. More cheesecake I assumed. I let out my stress in a giant ‘whoosh’ of breath and just let my brain mouth connection flow uninterrupted.

“So Nellie's parents are super rich and they hate me. Her Mom hates anyone who isn't walking perfection including Nellie. Although I can't see how she views Nellie as anything but absolutely perfect. She grew up in a plantation, a huge mansion of a house with two of everything, formal and informal. They have chefs and housekeepers. They don't even put up their own Christmas tree. They have a decorator person come in and do it for them. I'm never going to make money like that—ever. And I know that Nellie doesn't care about that stuff but what if one day she wakes up and realizes that I'm not enough? That I don't have enough to offer her? And I told her all about Amy and the pregnancy and not knowing

whether or not it was mine and she didn't come down on me about it at all. She just told me that it was all in the past. It almost would've been easier if she hated me for it because that's what I deserve. And I know that all of that broke you and Dad up and you're never going to get back together because of me. What if I do the same thing to her—to us? What if things get a little bad and I go on a tirade again? I can't lose her Mom—I won't. Shit.”

My chest felt lighter. I carried this around with me since I proposed to her here in this very restaurant. I knew it was stupid and I could negate each and every feeling with one of the opposite side of the debate but I couldn't help that they still ran through my head. Mom continued to shave each lemon one by one until their outsides were no longer yellow.

She got on her phone and called my dad and asked him to come in but never said anything to me.

My dad walked in and looked at me and then her with a 'what the hell' expression. Mom repeated the entire pathetic speech to him. Then they both lit into me. They told me that I needed to forgive myself for everything. Sounded like Dr. Phil crap to me. They also told me that they were getting back together but hadn't told us boys yet and that none of it was my fault. I didn't believe them until Dad practically bent Mom over the counter and made me gag while they made out.

“Ok, ok, I believe you jeez.” They both laughed and Dad said he wanted to talk to me in private and Mom said she was going home anyway.

“Son, listen to me. Everyone hangs on to the bad things about themselves. It's just life. But don't let it get in the way of what you have with Nellie. That girl is special and anyone can see that she loves you more than most people hope for. Don't ruin it with things that happened a long time ago that you can't possibly change.”

“Ugh...why can't you just be like Mom and listen to my crap and keep chopping stuff?”

“Because your Mom's a good listener and I'm not. I'm a problem solver. So love her with everything in you and don't go to sleep angry.

Best advice my dad ever gave me except I was too stupid to follow it and I lost precious time with your mother.”

“Ok Dad, thanks. I’m going home now. I kinda just needed to vent.”

I made my way out and heard my dad yell after me. “I love you, Son.”

“I love you too Dad.”

On the way home I called Nellie who answered in her sleepy voice.

“Mmmm…” That was ‘hello’ in sleepy Nellie language and to wake up to that was heaven.

“I just wanted to call and tell you that I love you. Go back to sleep.” I started to hang up and heard her talk.

“I can’t go to sleep after you saying that. Come spend the night.” She said still half asleep.

“We have class tomorrow. You’re thinking with your—well, not your brain.” I laughed.

“Ugh—you’re so sensible sometimes.” She chuckled

“Go to sleep gorgeous. I will see you Tuesday.”

“That just makes it worse. And Owen?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you more every day. And you’re gonna miss me tomorrow and wish you’d come over here.”

“I’m sure I will. Goodnight.”

She hung up. She probably wouldn’t even remember the conversation in the morning. I got back to the dorms and fell asleep

courtesy of Falcon's Christmas present—ear plugs.

Mondays always sucked but now they really sucked. At least last semester I got to see Nellie in the morning but now I wouldn't see her at all. Most of my classes were scattered throughout the day and it seemed like hers took the spaces between, sealing our fates.

That night after I ate dinner I went straight to the dorm, showered and went back to my room. I opened the door and hung my towel on the back and turned to get into bed.

"I couldn't take it." Her voice alone made the stress of the day fade.

"Come here." She got up and I bent down to meet her and welcomed her arms around my neck. She let out a moan and I reveled in the knowledge that I could give her some comfort.

"Rough day?" I asked her.

"The worst. I don't know if it was the first day or four classes back to back or just because I missed you so damn much. It was just awful."

"It wasn't easy for me either. Why don't you stay here? I know it's not as big as your bed but I bet we can fit."

"Dylan?" she asked.

"He's at your apartment, I assume. He packed up some clothes earlier and said he wouldn't be back."

"Yeah, I need you tonight. I couldn't make myself go home." To hear her murmur that she needed me was the best.

"Come on, I'll kiss you until you forget that it's Monday."

"Best—idea—ever." She said against my neck and by the time I was done with her she barely remembered her name much less the day of the week.

I woke her early the next morning in the same way I relaxed her enough to sleep the night before.

After bringing her to her apartment to shower and change we spent the day saturated in each other's presence to help tide us over for the days when we didn't see each other. I complained about another English class while she complained about Chemistry and Chemistry lab which she called nothing more than glorified math. Her extreme disdain for all things math related was hilarious.

We looked at our schedules and picked an upcoming weekend for us to go to the family cabin in Arkansas. We had a Mardi Gras holiday coming up in February where we were off for the weekend plus Monday through Wednesday. It was perfect. She complained about having to go shopping again but I reminded her that I wasn't planning on letting her outdoors much.

Way before I had gotten enough of her she checked her watch and it was time for her to go to work. She only had to work four hours today so I decided to make a run to see my mom and tell her about taking Nellie to the cabin in case someone else had decided to use it.

Mom sent me back with tons of food for both Nellie and I along with permission to use the cabin over Mardi Gras weekend. I called Nellie and we made plans to meet at her apartment to eat.

After dinner she tried to barricade the door with her puny frame and I had to convince her, against everything my body was screaming at me, that she needed to go to sleep alone because right now the things I wanted to do in her bed were nothing even close to sleeping.

“You're killing me with all of this sensibility and common sense stuff Owen.”

She groaned out as her face lay against my chest and it kinda irked me that she thought it was so easy to be the sensible one.

“You think it’s easy being me?” My libido was winning the war so I picked her up and took her to her bedroom slamming the door behind me with my foot.

I laid her down on the bed and pinned her arms by her sides. I put my weight on the side of her body and leaned down to speak directly into her ear.

“I will always, always do what I think is best for you even if it means leaving you when you whine at me about being sensible. And don’t you dare think for even one second that it doesn’t kill me to go back to my cold, single bed when I could be here with you in my arms. Especially right now when you’ve got that blush on your face and your mouth is open just begging me in. But let me tell you this, you’ve got to marry me soon because I don’t know how much longer I will be able to keep my wits about me.”

I kissed her long and hard and then walked out the door not giving her the opportunity to protest. Because I swear at this point I would give in if I even heard the smallest whimper.

By the time I got down to the Bronco I had cooled off and I pressed my face against my driver’s side door just to chill my own fury. I got in and my phone was already ringing.

It was Nellie and I chuckled to myself before answering.

“Hello?” I said and hoped that she wasn’t too pissed about me leaving her.

“Are you pissed?” She said. I laughed a little because we both thought the other was angry.

“Only at myself, though I meant every word.”

“I know you did. So we’d better start planning this wedding.” She said and I could imagine the smile on her face.

“Yes, please.” I agreed and she giggled.

“Ok, I’m going to sleep per my future husband’s orders.”

“So, tomorrow night, you and me and wedding talk.” I hoped.

“And honeymoon talk.” She whispered in the phone.

“You just couldn’t stand it could you?” I laughed.

“Ok, ok, ok, tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow.” Not having the will to put up with any more of her honeymoon talk.

It’s amazing how fast the day goes along when you’re actually paying attention in class. But between classes was a whole other matter. In between lectures and computer slide shows I thought about Nellie.

I reigned my thoughts in while I was with her, afraid that I would allow them to come out of my mouth. I wanted so much more than for her to be my wife. I wanted a family with her, even though she was already my family. The thought of a very pregnant Nellie with blue or purple or green hair made me laugh. She was right. She would be the most kick ass wife in the history of wives and she was mine.

My last class lasted from four p.m. until six p.m. and she had World History from six p.m. until seven fifteen p.m. I went to pick up some dinner and waited for her.

She was in a mood when she got home and I could tell because she slammed her keys and threw her bag in the middle of the kitchen floor.

“Another rough day?” I asked.

“Worse than Monday. So I get to Chemistry Lab today and we got broken into pairs which will last until the end of the semester.” I dished her plate up as she talked. I put her plate down and she pulled me in for a quick kiss in between words. “I get paired with this guy Ayden. We all had to swap seats to sit by our partners and he gets all flirty with me asking if I had a boyfriend.”

I stopped eating at the word ‘flirty’ and I looked up at her swiftly. Mr. Ayden was about to get his ass beaten.

“So I told him that I was engaged, flaunted my gorgeous ring and he finally shut up. The nerve of the guy. I mean, I had known his name for all of three seconds and he’s asking personal questions.”

“So you’re gonna tell me if he continues that stuff right?” I was serious as a heart attack.

“Aww, are you gonna beat up the little flirty guy?” She cooed at me.

“If he’s really little I might just push him.” I said. I tried to be cool about it but my inner caveman was livid.

“He’s about your height but skinny, like a skeleton.” She laughed.

“Ok, I don’t want to talk about Skeletor over dinner with my girl. I wanna talk about something good.”

“Like?” She had put her real food aside and dug into her cheesecake first.

“Like Hawaii or Mexico.” I couldn’t help but smile.

“I would be happy with the houseboat.” She smiled and then blushed at the memories we made there.

“Mom and Dad offered to pay for the honeymoon, you know that right?” I didn’t want her to pick the houseboat just because of money.

“No way. I just talked to Sylvia today and she didn’t even say anything.”

“Oh, I see how it is. You called my mom today and not me? I see the hierarchy coming together now.” I acted offended but really it made me so happy to know that she and my mom talked on the phone like they were already family or friends or both.

“I thought it was cute. I got to talk to my mother-in-law-to-be about wedding type things. She’s the closest thing I’ve had to a nice mom since Cindi. Be nice.” She pouted out her lip.

“I was just kidding. I love that you think of my mom as yours. You’re family now. You’re my family.” I said plainly as it was the simple truth.

“And you are mine, Owen. I mean it. You’re staying tonight right?”

“How could I leave after you just said that?”

“Ok, I’m going to clean up, you go shake a tower.” She got up and began collecting plates.

“Shake a tower?” She laughed a little that I asked.

“Yeah, my mom used to say it when I was a kid. Instead of take a shower, she would say shake a tower. That was before they were living in a mansion with chefs and such. She was really nice then. She was normal.” She turned to the sink and I felt as if she had revealed a piece of her soul to me. A secret that she told no one else. It was then that I realized I would be her secret keeper for the rest of our lives. Her confidant, the one she whispers to in the dark, her best friend—and I was honored beyond belief.

33. Nellie

Owen got up to shower while I cleaned up and I had just confessed a memory from my childhood to him and it felt—right, natural.

I finished the dishes and walked into the bathroom and started brushing my teeth. I turned to lean my back against the sink as I scrubbed and thought about the day and the things Sylvia and I had talked about. I wanted a simple wedding but I wanted it at a church. She said that one weekend she and I would take a trip to a town about an hour away that had a beautiful white church that was begging to hold a wedding. Then she insisted on having the reception at the restaurant, no ifs ands or buts.

“What are you doing?” Owen stuck his head out of the shower and looked confused.

I turned around to spit and said, “writing a dissertation.”

He shut the curtain and even with the water going I could hear him say ‘smartass woman.’

I knew exactly what he was talking about. I never went into the bathroom while he was in there. But we were planning a wedding, I could brush my teeth while he was in the shower right? I heard the water turn off and leaned back on the sink to see how this would all play out. His towel was right next to me on the counter and there wasn’t another one in reach.

Still inside the shower he yelled, “I’m gonna count to five. Either I have a towel in my hands or you and I are going to get a lot more comfortable with each other—fast.”

“You wouldn’t dare. I could stand here all night and you would still be in the shower.”

“One—two—three—four” I let him get all the way to five and before I threw a towel over the top of the curtain.

He stepped out and he wore the rings I bought him for Christmas and I could see a drop of water hanging on to each one. He held the edges of his towel together so tight around his hips that his knuckles had gone white.

“Aren’t you the temptress tonight?” He said as he got closer to me.

I lightly ran my finger over one of the rings hooked into his chest and he visibly shuddered.

“Those look good. And all I did was brush my teeth. You’re the one who’s naked.”

“Take a shower Nellie, you’re extra dirty tonight.” He laughed as he went into the bedroom with his clothes in his hand.

I showered and I thought he would get revenge by being in the bathroom when I finished but I was wrong. I went out, fully dressed and he pushed past me with a smile and brushed his teeth.

I brushed my hair while I sat on the bed when he came back into the bedroom. I was kinda ashamed of tempting him so much, especially after his little speech the other night. Kinda—but not a lot.

He checked his phone and said something about a text message from Maddox about going to a concert with him because their Dad said he was too young to go alone.

I went back to the bathroom and dried my hair. I returned to the bed and Owen was out cold on his side facing me. His arms were crossed right under his chest and a faint smile played at his lips. I leaned sideways against the door jamb and drank him in. His coal black hair, still a little wet, draped over his forehead the tiniest bit. He complained of needing a haircut and now I could see why.

This guy was mine. After years of thinking that I would never find someone who treated me well and actually cherished me, I stood right here watching that very man asleep in my bed. I smiled to myself.

“Who’s the creeper now?” He asked as a full-fledged smile broke out over his face.

I let out a long defeated sigh. “Me, I’m the creeper. But I don’t care; I could look at you forever.”

“Don’t stand way over there when you say sweet things like that. Come here.”

I climbed into the bed with him and we talked for hours about wedding stuff and he made goofy suggestions to try and make me laugh.

We spent the next day skating. Well, I skated and Owen tried to skate but honestly he looked like the Hulk trying to glide on a Hot Wheels car. So he finally gave up and sat in the middle of the rink while I skated circles around him. The place was closed and we got in with Amber’s keys. So after an hour or so of skating I plopped down next to him.

“I love to watch you skate.” He moved some stray hairs from my shoulder.

“Feels like flying.” I said as I watched the strobe lights above me.

“Why is this place so empty” He asked.

“It’s closed during the week when school is in.” I answered and lay back on the rink’s cool floor.

“So we’re alone in this big place?” I knew what he was getting at but played along anyway.

“Yep, that means I can skate all I want to without worrying about knocking anyone over.”

“Huh” He said as he lay next to me.

“Huh, what?” I smiled at him knowing exactly what he was thinking about.

“Or we could make out right here in the middle so that every time you have a bout you’d spend the whole time in a full blush.” He shrugged

like he didn't care one way or the other.

“You'd love that you put that blush there wouldn't you?”

“Yes. Plus, I'm the last person who will ever make you blush like that.”

“Sounds good to me.” He sealed the pact with his warm, full lips on top of mine. Now the skating rink was my favorite place for more than one reason.

Weeks passed and we were both super busy. Between school and learning how to run Cindi's Indie I had little time to myself or with Owen. We stayed together on the nights we didn't have class but it never seemed to be enough. February was coming up and we were supposed to go to the cabin but somehow our getaway for two turned into a family vacation and although I loved his family, I needed some alone time. Owen came by the store a few times when he claimed he 'just couldn't take it anymore.' We had dinner with his family at least once a week and I was starting to think of them as my parents too.

One night Falcon asked Owen if he could talk to him outside and Owen agreed. They stayed outside a good while and when they came back Falcon left for the evening saying that he needed to take care of something. I gave Owen a questioning look and he whispered into my ear 'later.'

We got back to my apartment and we both got ready for bed. He lay beside me and told me how Falcon was really falling for a girl at his school and wanted Owen's advice on what to do.

“He couldn't have asked a better person. Smart kid.” I said.

“I just told him to go tell her how much he liked her, I didn't know what else to tell him.” He shrugged like he really didn't know how to woo a girl.

“You should've told him to ask her for gum and then wait for her to get knocked into him.” I giggled.

“Hey, that was all part of my grand scheme. And don’t make fun, it worked. I see a ring on your finger, don’t I?” He gave me a smug grin.

“Speaking of rings, your mom and I have been talking about the wedding.” I knew that he loved the fact that his mom and I were so close.

“And what did my two favorite ladies decide?” He lifted my hand and kissed my fingertips and moved up my arm as I tried to answer him coherently.

“Um—we didn’t decide anything. We talked about getting married the last weekend in May.” These words came out in more of a breath than a voice because now he had made his way to my shoulder and was approaching my neck.

“Mmmm” He was at the base of my ear now, “I didn’t know you two had gotten so serious.” He chuckled into that spot below my ear and a wave of heat moved down to my toes.

What was I talking about again?

“I’m being serious here. Is that too soon for you?” I hoped it wasn’t but then again I would wait forever for him.

He ran his teeth the length of my earlobe and then said “If everyone wouldn’t get so pissed I would drag you to the nearest justice of the peace tonight and make you mine. But since my mom would kill me, I will wait as long as you need me to but it will never ever be fast enough.”

I couldn’t take his breath in my ear any longer. I put my arms around his neck and fisted that raven hair in my fingers and pulled him to me. He chuckled into my mouth as if it was a game and he had just won. A simple kiss turned fervent and before I knew it we were in a compromising position and though I always thought I would wait until my wedding night, I couldn’t remember why for the life of me.

“Owen.” It was a plea and a beg and a question all at once.

He broke the kiss and pulled back looking me in the eyes. He could see what I wanted but whether he would give it to me, I had no idea.

“Nellie, don’t make me tell you ‘no’. Tell me to stop. Tell me to go home. Tell me to go to Hell. Something, please.”

“I can’t.”

“Then I have to tell you ‘no’. I don’t have your parents’ permission. I didn’t get their blessing. I asked you to marry me right here in this bed without a ring. I will make sure that at least this part is right. I will make sure you never forget the night you married me.”

“Well damn Owen, when you say it like that—I won’t tempt you anymore. I promise.”

“Just you walking around tempts me, angel. But when you actually try to tempt me it’s downright painful.” He smiled at me.

“Well that answers another question.” I said as I turned off the lamp on my side of the bed.

“What question would that be?” He whispered into my ear as we tangled together for the night.

“I will definitely need the white dress.”

34. Owen

When Mom told me that the whole family had decided to spend the weekend in Arkansas with us I groaned out loud even though Nellie had already told me.

“Come on Mom. Really?” I threw myself down on the big chair in the living room.

“Yes Owen, really. You two are getting close to the wedding and being alone in a cabin is way too tempting. You know I talk to Nellie, right?” She flipped the channels on the TV like she wasn’t doing anything out of the ordinary.

“Yes, I know that. Fine—I’ll share.” I smiled while I said it but tried to sound like I was aggravated. I could never be angry with my mom for loving Nellie.

I looked at the time and knew that Nellie got off of work soon. Tomorrow was Monday before our Arkansas weekend and we were both excited, even if it meant going with my parents and my brothers. Plus Falcon asked Kate, his new girlfriend, to come along. They weren’t much younger than us.

I didn’t see Nellie much the next week at all. She had a big project due the week after we returned from Arkansas and it required spending a lot of time with the flirty guy Ayden or Hayden or Asshat. The latter is what I called him. They met on Tuesday and Thursday in the mornings at the library and though it irked me because that was our time together I understood that she needed to get her work done so she could enjoy our weekend. The week passed slower than usual and by the time we got to Friday night I had allowed my frustration to manifest itself.

I went to Nellie's and packed her stuff up in the Navigator, again Dad didn't want me travelling with her in the Bronco. I got into the driver's side and she was staring at me.

"What?" I said.

"Why are you acting like this? Isn't this what we've been waiting for?" She said.

"Yeah, I'm just glad we're finally getting some time together." I snapped back at her and immediately regretted it.

"Huh—yeah, you look like you're really excited." She turned towards the window and opened a book.

"Yeah, and that book is really going to help us spend time together." I answered and wished that someone would invent a muzzle for stupid boyfriends like me.

She slammed the book shut and threw it towards the back of the car and I heard it 'thump' against the back window, folded her arms and put her forehead on the window.

"Look, I'm..." I started to apologize but she put her hand up and stopped me.

"Just don't Owen." She whispered it and sounded on the verge of tears.

We drove for four hours straight before I pulled over on the side of the road to stretch and use the bathroom. As soon as I turned off the ignition she bolted out of the car and straight for the bathroom. She came out a few minutes later and headed into the convenience store. She emerged minutes later with two bags and two drinks in her hands. She got into the SUV without even a glance in my direction. I got in after using the restroom myself and she was back to her window facing posture.

I reached over, no longer able to stand her despair and touched the back of her neck. She slumped her shoulders and visibly let go of her hurt.

“I’m sorry. I’m an ass.” I said and she turned to me smiling.

“You are an ass today. I just don’t understand why.” She turned in her seat towards me.

“I’ve just been aggravated all week about not seeing you. It was just frustrating.”

“Ok but we’re here now and you’re ruining it. What gives?” She took hold of my hand.

“I don’t know. But it changes right now. Ok?” I kissed the tip of her nose and it seemed to satisfy her.

“Good. I just want to get up there and forget the world.” She leaned her head against my shoulder as we drove on.

But the sad thing was, I knew exactly what it was. It had been eating at me since she told me that Asshat had gotten flirty with her in class and now she was spending a lot of time with him. Moreover, I was still coming down on myself about not being good enough for her. I had to put the flirt machine and the self depreciation behind me before it ate me alive—and took us down with it.

We got to the cabin and the rest of the family arrived earlier in the day. The restaurant was being run by management while Mom was gone. Before the front door opened, the smells of Mom’s cooking already wafted around us. I turned to Nellie and she gave me a questioning look.

“What is that look for?” She said

“You better kiss me before we go in. We might not get another chance.” I laughed and she fulfilled my request and kissed me until the door opened before we were finished.

“Ewww, get a room you two.” It was Maddox who thought we were gross.

“We would’ve taken the whole cabin but ‘no’ everyone had to be here.” I plastered on a fake smile.

“Owen, be nice.” Nellie elbowed me in the ribs.

We went in and were greeted by the whole family. It neared midnight and we were all dead on our feet.

“Owen, you will be with your brothers right next to our room.” She cocked her eyebrow as she said it. “And Nellie will be on the *oooooooootherrrrrr* side of the cabin in the loft with Kate.”

And of course Falcon had to chime in. “Dude, you just got blocked.”

“Shut up Falcon.” Everyone chanted at once.

We all dispersed to our respective sleeping areas and I couldn’t help but text Nellie before I went to sleep.

O: Meet me behind the cabin in 10 min.

N: Nope.

O: Y? U asleep?

N: Nope. Having hot chocolate w/ur Mom outside. Ur 2 slow.

O: I will find a way.

N: Your Mom’s a ninja. She’ll find out.

O: Mark my words.

I went to the window and pulled back the curtains to see Mom and Nellie outside on the porch both bundled in blankets, holding hot chocolate and giggling. Amber hadn’t been around much for Nellie since she and Dylan practically lived together now. Dylan didn’t even have any clothes or possessions in the dorm room anymore. I was glad she had my mom, I was, but damn it if I didn’t want to kiss her one last time before I went to sleep.

35. Nellie

Saturday morning the boys went fishing and Sylvia, Kate and I went shopping in the nearest town.

Kate was very sweet and told us all about Falcon and how they met.

Sunday afternoon after a very long cell phone conversation Sylvia and Chase decided it was time for them to go home. Their restaurant's manager was sick and the wait staff was having to run everything on their own. Owen was so over the top fake about his disappointment. It made me giggle.

Everyone pitched in to help get their things to the car and we waved from the front porch as they drove away. I walked into the front door and flopped onto the couch ready to relax and enjoy the rest of our trip. The couch depressed next to me and I could feel Owen close to me.

“Please tell me that you brought the green bikini.” He groaned the words out.

“Nope.” I smiled with my eyes closed as my head rested on the back of the couch.

“Ok, well I guess I'm going to get in the hot tub by myself.”

“I guess so. Have fun.” He sat there for a good five minutes waiting for me to give in but eventually I heard the back door open and close.

I ran and put on a swimsuit that was guaranteed to make more than the water boil and made my way outside covered by a towel. I opened the door and the chilling wind hit me, making me walk faster towards my destination.

He sat in the hot tub the bubbles lapping at his chest and at first glance I thought he was asleep. I let the towel fall to the floor and his eyes popped open, immediately focused on me.

“I knew you couldn’t resist.” He smugly whispered.

“I never intended to resist. I just wanted to make you squirm a little.” I laughed as I climbed the couple of stairs up to the edge of the hot tub.

“How do you manage to get more and more gorgeous every time I see you?” He asked me.

“Same way you manage to make me blush from across the room.” I stepped into the bubbling, boiling water and let the heat creep over me.

Owen met me halfway across and moved to let me sit where he sat just moments ago.

“That’s the best spot.” He said and as I felt the jets pulsing on my back I knew he was right.

He rubbed my feet as he sat next to me with my legs draped over his lap and it reminded me of the library.

“What’s so funny?” He said.

“It’s not funny. I was just smiling at you rubbing my feet. Reminds me of the library.”

“You started it rubbing your feet on my back. I love it that you were so comfortable with me already. You trusted me without a second thought.”

“Yeah, ‘cause your hands on my thighs sure felt like trust.” I giggled.

“Well, if you don’t like it I won’t ever do it again.” He smiled.

He leaned over but didn’t kiss me. He stayed centimeters from my face. But his hands were moving at the same speed and strength as they did

in the library. But this time there was no skirt stopping his ascension. I gasped as he ran his fingers under the sides of my white bikini bottom and then back towards my butt. He stopped short and began a journey upwards teasing the strings that held my top on.

“One swift move and this tiny white bikini would be history.” I could feel the words leave his mouth as his lips moved against mine as he spoke.

“I thought I was doing good to bring the white one to remind you of my wedding dress color. I thought you might behave yourself.” I was sorely mistaken.

“Oh it reminds me. And then it makes me think about our wedding night and a white dress hitting the floor.” His thumbs now teased just inside the hem at the sides of my top venturing to places he’d never ventured to before.

“How many months until I can take this off?” He bit my lower lip after he said it and I checked to make sure the damned swimsuit hadn’t melted off.

“Three? Four? I can hardly remember my name right now.”

“Hmm—I love that I do that to you.” He said and finally, finally he took my mouth with his and pressed me against him and I doubted even the water could infiltrate the space between us.

He broke our kiss much faster than I liked and my whole body was flushed and it had nothing to do with the hot tub. Owen and I together were more on fire than a thousand hot tubs combined.

Monday we completely vegged out. We watched movies and I never changed out of my pajamas the entire day. Owen stayed in a pair of shorts and a Tulane hoodie and I had never seen him as laid back and comfortable as I did that day. He laughed out loud at the funny movies and when I practically made him watch a romantic movie he hugged me to him during the sappy parts.

I started to fall asleep with my head on a pillow on his lap as he played with my hair.

“I don’t want to go back to school.” I groaned.

“I don’t want to either. Between classes and studying and your job I never get to see you anymore. I can’t wait to get this semester over with. Plus, we know that your chem. Lab partner is trying to steal you from me.” He laughed at that last part but for some reason his story about Amy came to mind and I wanted to nip this in the bud immediately.

I sat up and turned to face him.

“Are you serious or joking ‘cause I can’t tell. And I need to know if I should be pissed or laughing.” I tried my hardest to shoot invisible daggers his way.

“About what? That Ayden guy? I’m kidding. I mean he would be crazy not to want you but...” He was struggling so I decided to finish the sentence for him before he said something that made me really pissed.

“But—you know that I love you and you trust me completely so there was never anything to worry about, right? That *is* what you were going to say, right?”

“Totally.” He said and smiled at me but it was a smile that was superficial.

I squinted at him and he chuckled.

“It’s not funny Owen. I’m not Amy. I’m yours and only yours for the rest of our lives.”

“I know. And I would never stoop so low as to compare you to her. Did you know that I never brought her home to meet my parents? I don’t know why. I guess I was ashamed of our relationship. I knew my mom wouldn’t like her.”

“I know. You forget that Sylvia is like my bestie.” I said smugly.

“I love that, you know. I love that my mom loves you.”

“I’m glad. It feels like I’ve belonged in this family all along.” I laid back down and buried my face in his stomach and before long, with his hand stroking my arm, I fell fast asleep.

We packed up reluctantly on Wednesday and left early in the morning. I wasn’t ready to get back to the daily grind and neither was Owen. He had been quieter than usual after the mention of Ayden the other night and I could tell that it bugged him way more than he was letting on. But there were three more months left of the semester. We could endure anything for a few more months.

I shook his hand that held mine, “I know how I’m going to remember the boat weekend and I know how I’m going to remember this trip.”

He turned to me and smiled and it was genuine. “I know how I’m going to remember this trip too.”

“How,” I asked.

“Two words baby. Hot—tub.”

“My thoughts exactly.” I giggled.

“You have to work tomorrow?” He asked.

“Yeah, I have to work in the afternoon. Are you staying with me tonight? You can do your laundry there.”

“Are you going to beg,” he asked.

“Nope. It’s your turn.” I giggled again.

“I have no problem begging.” He kissed my hand and we continued driving to my apartment.

36. Owen

I needed to get myself in check. I had to make myself forget Amy and Lucas and all of that other crap like pronto. This was the first relationship I had been in since that whole ordeal and it was perfect except for the fact that I was letting doubts and the past and petty jealousy gnaw at me. It constantly prickled my skin and tapped on my shoulder letting me know it was there. It was like a shadowy ghost that you could see from your peripheral and feel every second but when you faced it head on it vanished only to reappear in another corner. I couldn't rid myself of it.

We reached her apartment and if I was honest with myself and her, I needed some time alone to clear my head. At the same time she was the reassurance I needed to get me through this. I put on my laundry to wash and she was showering. Her phone rang and alerted her to a text message and my caveman wanted to grab it and see who it was.

Who in the hell had I become?

She came out and I went in behind her and took a long cold shower to make myself come down from my hill of stupidity. How could I ever doubt Nellie? How? I got out of the icy waterfall calmed down and out of my fury.

I walked into the bedroom and she checked her phone.

“I put your clothes in the dryer.” She said as she punched buttons.

“Thanks. You ok?” I asked.

“Yeah, Ayden sent me a text message.” My stomach jumped into my throat at the very mention of his name. “He said something about the report won't print and he wants to know if I have a printer.”

“I do if you don’t.” *Real smooth Owen.*

“I have one. He can e-mail it to me and I can print it.” She continued to press buttons.

I got into bed on my side and watched her face screw up like she was aggravated.

“What in the hell kind of college student doesn’t know how to attach a file to an e-mail? Seriously?” She worked double time texting back.

“Ugh—he wants to meet at the library tomorrow to print it out. You have to come with me Owen. I’m gonna kick his ass.” She was so damned cute when she was pissed.

“Yeah, ok, ask him what time. I’m glad I get to meet the skinny little shit.”

She texted a few more times and then slammed her phone down in frustration.

“He says we can meet at nine in the morning—lame.”

She lay down next to me and sighed. I took off my shirt and she put her face on my chest facing me.

“Sylvia thinks we should go to Cozumel for the honeymoon.” She said and I could feel the rise of her cheek against my chest as she smiled. I rubbed her back and she writhed like a cat beneath my hand.

“It really doesn’t matter to me. Wherever you want to go is fine.” And I meant it. All I needed was my girl.

“That was easy.” She said slowly and I felt her body relax and let go in stages. There was no better feeling in the world than Nellie falling asleep on me.

My phone rang sometime very early in the morning.

“What?” I yawned into the phone not even looking at the caller id.

“Don’t you ‘what’ me Owen Matthew. I need some help today honey. Can you come to the restaurant and help out? Half of the waiters are out sick. I really need you.”

“Yeah Mom, what time?”

“I know it’s early but can you come now? The place needs to be cleaned and prepped for lunch.” She sounded worried and I hated my mom to sound worried.

“Yeah Mom, I’m on my way. Ok? Don’t worry, we’ll get it done.”

I got up but not before sneaking to kiss sleeping Nellie. It woke her up and she grabbed my arm before I could get up.

“Where are you going,” she asked.

“Mom needs help at the restaurant. Everyone is out sick.” I finally found a shirt and stretched it over my head scrambling to leave.

“Ok, tell her ‘Hi’ and after I’m done printing the paper I will come by if I can.”

“It’s fine. Why don’t you come after your shift is over? It will be less busy.”

“Yeah, ok.” She rolled over to my side and buried her face in my pillow as she always did when I got out of bed before her.

I approached the bed and lifted the hem of her shirt the tiniest bit to kiss the small of her back while she slept.

“If you don’t quit it, I’m not going to let you leave and then Sylvia will be pissed.” She mumbled it all through a mouth covered with pillow.

“Ok, ok. See you later. I love you.” I said as I closed her door.

Mom was flipping out when I got there. Thank goodness my brothers and I didn't go to school until next Monday. Otherwise, she'd be screwed. I started cleaning the dining area and changing table cloths while Falcon and Maddox placed flowers and candles and silverware. By the time Mom came out again the dining room was ready. The customers flowed in like a tidal wave and before I knew it closing time rolled around.

"You have one last table and then we're done." Maddox told me.

"Ok, I'll get it." I walked up to the table and looked up to see Nellie.

I exhaled and smiled at her. She smiled back and I cleared my throat.

"Ahem, table for one Ma'am?" I cocked my eyebrow at her.

"No, for two—I'm waiting on my fiancé. He's a very tall, built sexy guy—green eyes, black hair. Have you seen him?" She looked around and checked her watch.

"Ha ha, so funny." I walked over to peck her on the cheek.

"Sylvia, can't you please give him a small break?" She looked behind me and I turned to see my mom watching the whole scene.

"Sit down with my favorite daughter Owen; I'll bring y'all some cheesecake." She went to the kitchen and I did as I was told.

I sat down next to her and laid my head on the table and she rubbed my neck without being asked.

Mom brought food to the table a few minutes later but I was too tired and had looked at too much food during the day to eat. Once you've seen that much food all day the last thing you want to do is eat it.

"Eat Nellie, I'm just exhausted." I moaned as she moved her massage to my lower back.

"Cindi bought me dinner. I just came to see you." She said.

“I have to stay and clean up. I’ll be home later.” I slipped and called her apartment home but she never missed a beat.

“Oh no, I’m staying to help.” She got up and I couldn’t let her work by herself. I did, however, watch her for a few minutes just because of the view.

We cleaned up in record time and all closed up together. Nellie got in her car and I got in mine and we both headed back to her apartment. She went straight to the bathroom and came back with three pain relievers and a glass of water.

“Three for the big guy.” She said, “And I’m running you a hot bath.”

“Baths are for chicks.” I laughed at her.

“Just try it for me this one time and I’ll never say anything about it again. It’s like the hot tub. It will relax you. Trust me.”

“Ugh—I don’t think I can get up.” I groaned at her.

“Come on Owen. I’ll help you.”

She led me into the bathroom by the hand and pulled my shirt off. I took my shoes off and then my socks. We locked eyes as the next natural stage of undressing crept up. Her fingers ran down my sides roller coasting up and down my ribs and settled on the waistband of my pants. As the tips of her fingers skimmed the top of my waistband they journeyed to the center. Her stare never faltering she unbuttoned my pants and they fell down and I stepped out of them. My ears pounded from the sound of my heartbeat. Ragged breaths barely escaped my mouth. I wasn’t embarrassed. That wasn’t it at all. It was just a whole new stage of intimacy and it tempted me beyond belief.

She leaned over and kissed me in the middle of my chest and walked out, her hand leaving a trail across my abdomen as she walked away.

“Enjoy the hot bath and relax.” She said while the door closed.

I shucked the shorts and stepped into the hot water. I lay back in the tub and of course she was right. It felt so good on my tired muscles. Before I knew it, my eyes were closing on me.

There was a knock on the door but at this point I had no energy left to answer her.

I heard the creak of the door as it opened.

“Come on Owen, don’t drown on me. Get out.” I opened my eyes and she had her whole head turned as much as it would and a monster towel held out in front of her. Her eyes were closed so tight I doubted she’d be able to open them ever again.

I got out of the tub and felt like a skeleton covered with Jell-O, my muscles melting off of me. I reached out for the towel and she turned her back while I wrapped it around my waist.

“Clothes on the counter.” She called as she left me again.

I got dressed and walked out of the bathroom. I hadn’t bothered with the pajama pants or the shirt. I got into the bed and Nellie was already lying facing my side of the bed.

“Well, was I right or was I right?” I knew she couldn’t help but gloat over the bath thing.

“You were right. It was a long day. How was yours?”

“It was alright. I taught Ayden how to attach a file to an email. He didn’t even have a pass to get into the computer lab at the library. I know he’s new to this school and all but jeez.”

I stiffened at the mention of his name. I didn’t even know why this was worrying me so bad. Something about his name gave me the creeps. It seemed familiar but I didn’t know why. I didn’t want to be filled with jealousy. And I didn’t want to admit to myself how much I was comparing this situation to Amy and Lucas. It was like my brain played the reel of the relationship as background noise and it just wouldn’t stop. I hated it and I

hated how it was clawing and gnawing at me. Maybe Dr. Phil wasn't such a bad idea after all.

“Why do you do that?” Her tiny voice broke into my thought train like a scratch on a record.

“Do what?” I focused on her pale blue eyes instead of off in space.

“You zone out. It happens a lot lately. And it happens a lot when I mention Ayden. And it's gotten worse since the mention of Amy in Arkansas. Just be honest with me. Let me in. I'm not stupid and I know those little quirks of yours. Your whole body freezes every time I mention something about him.” She squeezed my hands with every plea but I couldn't bear to tell her how far gone I was inside.

“I'm fine—I just don't like—you said he flirted—I just don't like it.” I rambled and babbled in an attempt to feed her half truths.

“You're not fine. And you're lying to me. And apparently you don't trust me. Because if you trusted me there would be nothing to be upset about with Ayden. And if you trusted me you wouldn't be lying to my face right now. I am *not* believing this shit.”

She got out of bed and walked out the bedroom door slamming it behind her.

A few seconds later I heard the front door slam.

I jumped out of bed and started towards the door when I realized I was only wearing a pair of boxers. I threw on some shorts and a hoodie as fast as I could and rushed out of the door and to the parking lot. She was already gone and I was the asshat now.

I must've called her phone eighty nine times. I paced in front of the door until Amber came out to see what was wrong.

“What the hell Owen?” She asked half asleep.

“Ipissedheroffshelleftshewon'tanswerherphone.” I said in words run together.

“Ok, let me call her.” She went back into her room and came out phone attached to her ear.

“Ok, I’m sorry—No, he didn’t tell me—I was just checking on you for the love of God—Don’t jump my ass—Ok, ok, I’ll tell him.” She yelled at Nellie and then hung up.

“She says to stop calling her she will be home in ten minutes.” She went back to her room and slammed her door. There was a lot of slamming doors tonight.

I sat on the couch and bounced my knees until they bounced on their own without effort.

True to her word, about ten minutes later, she walked in and glared at me.

“Go home Owen.” She said and went straight into her bedroom and when the door closed gently and almost silently I knew that her anger had turned to hurt.

I went into the bedroom, grabbed my keys, wallet and backpack and left. She was in the bathroom and the sound of her crying killed me. I got into my car and drove home ashamed of myself and for letting the green monster take hold of me.

The next day we both had classes all day and instead of bugging her relentlessly, I handed my phone to Dylan in the morning and asked him to turn it off and not give it to me until Saturday. I didn’t trust myself to leave her alone. What I wanted to do was find her and beg her forgiveness. I wanted to reach inside myself and remove the history of hurt that continued to creep into my love for Nellie.

Saturday morning I heard Dylan’s phone ringing early, very early. I went to sleep about four in the morning and it felt like I had been awake all night.

“Answer the phone Dylan, that Nickelback crap is driving me batshit.”

“Hello?” He answered and then threw the phone at me.

“What?” I answered not knowing who would call me on his phone.

“Why is your phone off? I’ve been calling you since yesterday afternoon.” It was Nellie and I could’ve cried at the sound of her voice and I’d never been a crier.

“I didn’t want to bother you. I was going to turn it on this morning.”

“Wanna have breakfast?” She still sounded agitated but at least she was speaking to me again.

“Diner in thirty minutes?” I asked hoping that the venue would help my case.

“Yeah.” She hung up and I threw my phone back and hit Dylan in the chest.

“I knew that wouldn’t last long.” Dylan laughed referring to Nellie and I fighting.

I showered and dressed in jeans and a thermal shirt. I put on some Chucks and headed out determined to get there early.

I got in and sat at the booth in the corner ready to get this over with. I ordered her some orange juice and waited. She approached the booth. I knew it was her without even looking up. I struggled to look her in the eye. I couldn’t tolerate hurting her.

The waitress approached and she ordered for the both of us. I waited for her to crack the silent barrier.

“I’m sorry for making you go home but I’m not sorry for what I said. It was the truth. If something bothers you, it bothers me. If you’re hurting, I’m hurting. If you’re distant I can feel it. And when you lie, it kills me.” She played with her orange juice using a straw to stir it.

“There’s something going on with me. And it’s not about Ayden, though that little punk seemed to make it worse. It started after Christmas. I had a meltdown in the kitchen of the restaurant on New Year’s night. I still feel like I don’t deserve you. Seeing your parents and how they live and that huge house made me think that one day you’ll wish I could give you those things. Then there’s something about this Ayden guy. It’s like he seems so familiar to me even though I’ve never even seen him. And no matter how hard I try, that thing with Amy and Lucas...” I cleared my throat and continued, “I trust you. I do. I just need to clear my head of these demons. They’re eating at me and I can’t make them stop.”

She exhaled long and hard. The waitress delivered our food and neither one of us moved to eat.

“I don’t know how to help you Owen. I already know about what you said on New Years to your Mom. I talked to her yesterday and she told me. I’ve done nothing to make you not trust me. I’ve done nothing to make you think I was even remotely close to being like Amy. I love you and I want to marry you but you’ve got to get past this first. If we don’t deal with it now it’s going to be bigger later. But I can tell you this. I won’t settle for someone who lies to me and doesn’t trust me.”

“I don’t either. I don’t know what to do. But I can get past it. I can.”

“Ok. You have to work on it. And I’m here if you need me.” That’s all she said before she pulled her plate towards her and ate more than I’ve ever seen her eat.

“Hungry much?” I laughed at her.

“I didn’t eat all day yesterday. I was all upset. I didn’t even go to any of my classes.” She shoveled more food into her mouth.

“I went but I didn’t want to and I couldn’t tell you one thing that was said.”

We laughed and it felt like we were back to normal. At least I’d hoped we were back to normal.

“What are you doing today?” I asked her hoping that she hadn’t made plans.

“Spending the day with you if you’re not busy. I just need you today. I feel like we’re falling apart.”

“I’ve got an idea. Are you up for a surprise?”

“Yeah.”

“Good, let’s go.”

I paid for the check and we dropped off her car in her parking lot.

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37. Nellie

I rode in his Bronco, holding his hand and I felt a little better. They say recognizing the problem is the first step, right? He admitted that he was having some self-worth issues and some jealousy. I hoped he could get past them. I wanted him for the rest of my life but I wouldn't stand for a marriage without trust.

We pulled up at one of my favorite places and I should've known that my future marine biologist would love it here too. We bought tickets and headed into the Aquarium of the Americas. We walked through a tunnel under a shark tank. Owen pointed out each and every animal we saw and identified it like he was the embodiment of National Geographic. He made me stand on top of a glass circle which overlooked sharks. And I squealed every time one swam under me.

We spent the day happy. I needed happy. My phone rang and I looked at the phone to see that it was Sylvia. I answered and told her that we were fine. She also told me she loved me before she hung up. She started saying that after Owen proposed and it made me smile every time. And of course, I loved her too.

The next couple of months were more of the same. He told me everything—even when the jealousy hit. He told me when the doubts hit and they were becoming less and less. It reminded me of an addict telling their sponsor when they wanted to use. But I appreciated the honesty. I asked him several times if he wanted to meet Ayden but he declined saying that he trusted me.

I had a roller derby exhibition coming up in two weeks. Owen came with me to practice before it and then we were getting married in three weeks. Cindi gave me extra time off so I could prepare even though

the team wasn't having official practices. He could finally make it around the rink without falling.

I had a huge project in Chem. Lab to complete instead of a final exam. We had to create the experiment, document everything, complete the experiment, record the results and when we were finished we had to write a two thousand word report on everything. It was a pain in my ass. Not to mention I had to spend almost every Tuesday and Thursday morning stuck in the library with Ayden instead of with Owen. But this was a huge project and Chemistry and the lab class were non-negotiable parts of my curriculum. So I had to get a decent grade.

Cindi planned to officially give the store to me next week as a wedding present. She taught me everything she knew and hired a girl who was going to start the store a website and began selling Cindi's Indie books online.

Owen applied for an internship with a Marine Biology professor who spent the entire summer on a boat in the Gulf of Mexico doing research. It was a great opportunity for Owen and I didn't complain even though the thought of him spending two months away after we were just married was saddening to say the least. He wrote a paper and went through several interviews with the professor and waited impatiently for the decision.

My chem. Lab project was due on a Monday. I had the exhibition that on Saturday night and plans with Owen to make final arrangements with the pastor and the church on Sunday afternoon. Saturday morning Owen and I had breakfast and vegged out until the afternoon when I met Ayden at the library to print out our report and make sure everything was good to go for Monday.

Ayden was really a nice guy and funny as all heck. I could be friends with him if Owen would ever accept it. We printed everything and I looked at the time and the exhibition started in a little over an hour. Ayden walked me out to the parking lot, just being nice. I got into my car and it

was parked next to his little Toyota truck. I put the keys into the ignition and turned but the only thing I heard was a clicking sound. I turned the key again and only heard the clicking sound again.

A knock on my window brought me out of my cussing wave at my car. I rolled down the window and Ayden smiled.

“Your battery is dead. That’s the clicking sound. I don’t have jumper cables though. Do you want a ride to the game?”

“It’s a bout and yeah, I guess I do. Let me grab my bag.”

I grabbed my bag and got into his little truck and he drove us to the skating rink.

When we arrived he offered to take my bag and I thought nothing of it.

We walked in and he almost hit me with the door and I laughed at his horrified face.

I saw Owen with his back turned to us and Dylan looked like he saw a ghost or a devil.

Owen turned around and the next thing I know, Ayden was on the floor—and bloody.

38. Owen

After our first fight, that's what I called it, I got myself in check for the most part. I still had my moments but confessing them to Nellie made everything better. I trusted her. I did. So I acted like it. I declined meetings with Ayden.

About a month before the end of the semester Nellie came home very agitated. I had to pry it out of her but eventually she told me. She didn't want to and I knew exactly why. In her words Ayden forgot himself and reached over in the middle of working on their report and held her hand and tried to move in to kiss her. She immediately backtracked when she saw the rage in my face and said she was probably mistaken, she misinterpreted. She said she reiterated that she was engaged and about to be married and they were just friends. I believed her, I did. But it wasn't her I was worried about. I gave her a fake laugh and a fake smile and shrugged it off. But this added to that growing tension inside of me. It added pressure to my chest which already felt like it stretched my skin as far as it would go. And the added pressure made it feel like I could snap at any minute. The jealousy pumped and throbbed in my veins and I was afraid that one day it would explode.

Our wedding planning was going great, from the guy's perspective. Mom and Nellie did all of the heavy lifting. They made me go to the church. And Mom was right, it was beautiful. It had dark, worn wood floors and tons of windows. They picked the music and the dresses and they even picked out my suit. All I had to do was show up and try it on.

One night Nellie flew up from a sleeping position to sitting up and exclaimed, "I have to dye my hair back my natural color!" And then she lay back down and went to sleep. I stayed up for thirty minutes afterwards

laughing my ass off. The next morning she said she had a dream that she was sixty years old looking at her wedding album and she had blue hair. She didn't want her wedding picture to have blue hair. Something about her grandchildren getting ideas. That just sent me on another laughing fit. I got slapped in the arm but it was worth it.

One day while I was going from Biology, the second one, to lunch I spotted a flyer on the cork board by the Biology Department's office. It was a paid internship with Dr. Callahan, who was a pretty big deal in the Marine Biology world. The only drawback? It was the entire summer long aboard a boat with no forms of communication. Not really ideal for a newlywed situation. I spoke to Nellie about it and of course she was nothing short of supportive. She said she would miss me but it would help my career immensely.

I wrote a report and had several interviews, one with the department head and one with Dr. Callahan. He seemed receptive to my ideas and was happy about my experience on the water and with boats. I hoped I got it but another part of me hoped I didn't.

Nellie had been busy with an end of semester project for chem. lab. I hit the gym as often as possible working off stress. Plus one night when we were having a family dinner Falcon goaded Nellie about having the hots for my muscles and she blushed harder than I've ever seen. I didn't want to disappoint her on our wedding night.

On Saturday before the wedding, Nellie had a roller derby exhibition and I helped her to practice a few weeks before. Five minutes back on her skates and she was as fierce as ever. But tonight was going to be epic. It was a chance for her team to really show off. I talked to Dylan while I waited for her to arrive. She had to finalize her project with Ayden and should have arrived a few minutes ago.

"You've got to be shitting me." Dylan looked behind me and I didn't even turn around at first. That guy was so dramatic, it was probably nothing.

“Owen, turn around now.” He looked me dead in the eyes and his face had lost all color.

I turned and the scene slammed into me before my entire body completely faced them. It was Nellie, my girl, my fiancé, my future wife. She walked next to someone and laughed at their joke. He held her bag. He opened the door for her. He acted comfortable around her. He was too close to her. He was Lucas, he had aged but he was still Lucas and all I could see was red.

My feet took off before my brain could register the situation. He was still looking at her when my fist connected with his boney jaw. He hit the floor and I shook my fist out readying it for the next blow. There would be many next blows. I knelt next to him and delivered the second blow to the other side of his face. After the third punch he groaned and rolled over. Dylan walked up from somewhere and turned him over so I could get another jab at him. I heard Nellie screaming from somewhere to my left and I knew she told me to stop but I couldn't. Blood covered my fists. Cuts marred my knuckles. I dropped back on my haunches, finally giving up.

I heard someone, a man, he yelled and blew a whistle and Dylan dragged me out of there. I don't remember the car ride. I don't remember undressing or getting into the shower. I don't know who bandaged my hands.

Some people's memories are triggered by smell, some by touch or place. Mine was triggered by a scene. A scene of Amy and Lucas walking through the school doors the day after I found out the truth about her. He held her bag and she laughed at something he said. Then he put his arm around her with no shame or regret. And what did teenager Owen do? He walked away and then proceeded to act stupid.

What a bastard I've turned out to be.

Dylan handed me some white pills and I took them hoping maybe they were a narcotic that would knock me out until I was sane again.

Whatever they were, I was knocked on my ass within minutes. I woke up some time later to Dylan shaking my leg.

“Wake up man. Amber is bringing Nellie over here and they are both pissed like I’ve never seen a woman pissed. Get your ass up now.”

I sat up and paced until I heard them coming down the hall. People in Mississippi could probably hear them yelling.

Nellie came into the room and she looked haggard and she had a black eye. I took two steps to inspect her eye and she stopped me.

“Owen Black I swear if you even attempt to touch me I will castrate you where you stand.”

“Fine.”

“Explain Owen. Start explaining now.” She nearly spit it at me.

“Me explain? Why should I have to explain anything?”

“You need to explain because it took me thirty minutes to convince Ayden not to press charges against you. He couldn’t even defend himself. So yeah, you need to come up with something and fast.”

“You convinced Ayden? You convinced Ayden? I don’t know who that bastard Ayden is but I do know that the person I laid into was Lucas Barringer. Ayden Lucas Barringer. And I can’t believe you’re taking up for him.”

“Lucas? Like that Lucas? How in the hell was I supposed to know Owen? You don’t think maybe you could’ve—I don’t know—talked to me? Pulled me aside and let me know? Jesus Owen, what is going on in that head of yours? I thought we were getting somewhere. I thought you trusted me. We’re getting married in seven days.”

Amber and Dylan stood watching the whole thing go down.

“I do trust you. It’s him I don’t trust.” I seethed through a clenched jaw.

“He didn’t do anything wrong and neither did I. We’re just friends.”

“Yeah, I know. Everything is innocent Amy—shit.” The moment it came out of my mouth Amber gasped from the side of the room.

“Oh shit.” She covered her mouth after she said it.

I couldn’t tear my eyes from Nellie. She wasn’t angry anymore. She didn’t yell. Tears ran down her face. We stood there for what seemed like centuries.

“You son of a bitch.” She whispered and walked out of the door.

I took a step after her and Amber stopped me.

“Take another step and your balls will be handed to you.”

“Amber,” Dylan started.

“No Dylan, she needs me.” Amber walked out and slammed the door behind her.

That’s it. I knew I would ruin it. She was gone.

39. Nellie

Owen beat the hell out of Ayden. One of the management at the skating rink took him to the hospital but not before I convinced him not to press charges against Owen. And I was left there waiting when Amber pulled me to the locker room to get ready.

How in the hell was I going to skate like this? All I want to do is find out what in the hell is going on!

I puked three times before my skates even hit the rink. I skated the first heat and got into a fight with a girl and it escalated to the point where I was banned from the rest of the bout. But by then she was beaten to a pulp and I had a new black eye. And I could care less.

I left the rink to watch from the sidelines and Cindi found me and checked out my eye. I left and ran to the bathroom to puke again.

The exhibition bout was finally over and Amber ran out of the locker room to meet me.

“Let’s go find out what in the hell is going on.”

She drove and my body shook the entire way. I didn’t cry. I didn’t whine. I shook with fear. I just knew in my gut that whatever had taken place was going to be the end of us.

We arrived at the dorms in just a few minutes, Amber drove like a maniac.

Owen saw my black eye and immediately made a move to check on me like he hadn’t just flipped the hell out at the skating rink and everything was hunky dory. I threatened to castrate him and that put a stop to him.

He went on and on and soon it felt like I was an outsider, a spectator looking in on a soap opera. Then I heard him say something about Ayden really being Ayden Lucas or just Lucas to him. Yeah, that Lucas, he confirmed. I tried to tell him that we were just friends, tried to tell him that I didn't do anything wrong.

Why was I defending myself? I didn't do anything wrong.

I don't know what he said before it, I couldn't remember. But I knew what came next. He called me Amy. He said her name to me like I was the same as her, guilty of her transgressions, guilty of hurting him and scarring him. Even though the outside of my body stood still in shock, my insides quaked and pushed tears down my face.

He called me Amy. I repeated it to myself. The person he despised the most. The woman who broke his heart and caused irreparable damage to him. He called me by her name. And I only had one name to call him back. I wanted to yell it. I wanted to grab his face and scream it into his head making it sink in deep where he would feel it like I felt *Amy*. Only it came out as a whisper.

“You son of a bitch.”

I turned to leave. My car sat stuck at the library with a dead battery. I didn't care. I needed to walk.

Halfway through my walk home Amber pulled up beside me and I got in. My bones and muscles moved but I was numb. Anger left me and was replaced by more than hurt or sadness. It was replaced by betrayal. Owen worried about Ayden or Lucas or whatever his name was but in the end his own distrust betrayed me and him. It ruined us.

I got my phone out of my pocket and saw that I had missed calls from Owen, Sylvia and Falcon. I even had a missed text message from Owen's dad Chase. I sent one text back to Sylvia, Falcon and Chase together.

N: Will call tmrw. It's over.

I never got a text back. I went home and took a hot shower in Amber's bathroom. I couldn't even look at my bed or my bathtub. Amber got me some pajamas from my room and pillows and blankets. I laid on the couch turned to face the cushions and let myself cry.

Amber's phone rang and she answered and finished the conversation with one line, "Don't ever call my phone again asshole."

I knew who it was without asking. I didn't even acknowledge I heard the conversation. I closed my eyes but the only thing I could see was Owen's face deranged in anger.

I finally got up and checked the time on the clock since my phone was now off and would be off indefinitely. It was a little past three a.m. I wandered into the kitchen, my stomach wanting to eat.

Amber heard me get up and as I poured myself onto one of the kitchen chairs she heated up pizza in the microwave. My stomach rumbled as she placed the plate in front of me. I ate it without tasting it. I chewed—I swallowed—I breathed. And then when I thought about what Owen had done, what happened to us—I heaved.

Sunday morning there was a knock on the door and Amber opened it. I refused to pull my face from the hiding place of the couch cushions. Amber answered the door, said nothing and then closed the door again. Someone sat on the couch and I swore to myself that if it was Owen he would get kicked in the junk.

"How is she?" It only took those three words and I knew who it was—Sylvia.

I turned over and the tears and sobbing started. She opened her arms and I crawled across the couch to her and sought shelter there. We didn't speak for a long time. She cried right along with me. She held on to me like a mother would, like my mother hadn't since I was a child. I finally got up to get some tissues for her and me.

"I brought you some breakfast Nellie. I'm sure you haven't eaten. Right?"

“Yeah, ok.” I went to the kitchen and she had picked up bagels. She folded my blankets and picked up my pillows and brought them into my room. She sat next to me and ate breakfast with me and soon after Amber joined us.

Sylvia cleared her throat and I knew that she was going to bring Owen up.

“I don’t know what to do Nellie. I already know what happened. Owen came to the house last night and he and his dad stayed up all night talking. Falcon and Maddox woke up this morning and he told them too. I know he’s my son but he was dead wrong for acting that way and for calling you...” She cleared her throat.

“I’m sorry.” I said and she looked at me confused. “I mean, about cancelling the wedding, I’m sorry. You worked so hard to plan it.”

“Nellie, I don’t give a damn about any of that. I care about you and Owen. It’s Sunday so I will call tomorrow and cancel everything. I hate it but I know that if you two ever get over this, it’s not going to be in a week. Maybe it’s better this way. Maybe these things happen for a reason. Maybe I’m babbling.” She giggled and I smiled a little.

“Ok, I’m going. I will tell Chase you are—ok. I won’t tell Owen anything if you don’t want me to. And Falcon requested that you call him. That boy loves you like you’re his sister.”

She got up from the table and I took her hand.

“Thank you Sylvia. And tell Owen the truth. I’m not ok. I don’t know if I ever will be. That’s the truth.”

“Ok sweetie,” she kissed my forehead. “Call me when you need me. Nothing has changed. I love you.”

“I love you too.” She hugged Amber who looked shocked and walked out of the door.

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40. Owen

I was a miserable, insane, rat bastard and now instead of keeping it hidden, everyone knew. Falcon refused to speak to me. He mumbled something to Dad about fixing it and he used the 'F' word. Not a typical thing for Falcon to do.

It was a week today that I made the biggest mistake of my life. Today was the day when Nellie and I were supposed to get married. She was supposed to walk down the aisle in her beautiful white dress and let me promise my love and commitment to her. I hadn't spoken to her in seven days and every single hour drug on forever. I sat with Mom as she cried about cancelling the church and the pastor. It was like I was torturing her all over again.

I drove to the church on time anyway. I pulled up to the tall white building and walked up to the empty worshipping place. I held on to the door jamb and worked up the courage to face what could have been and what I'd done. I made my feet move halfway up the aisle and sat in a pew and let my sorrow wash over me.

I deserved to be hung for what I'd done to her. She loved me with a love I'd never known but all I could do was constantly compare her to someone who was the exact opposite just because she broke my heart. Nellie was kind where Amy was cruel. Nellie was considerate and loving where Amy was aloof and cold. Nellie wanted me, past tense, and Amy cheated on me and then treated me like last week's trash. How in the hell I allowed her into my love for Nellie, I'll never know.

I heard footsteps behind me and didn't want to know who it was unless it was Nellie. And it wasn't her. I would know her footsteps on a New York City street at rush hour. An older man in a blue button down shirt with the sleeves rolled up and a pair of gray pants sat down on the pew

in front of me. I realized that I had been crying so I wiped them on my sleeve.

“It’s a shame to see this church empty on a beautiful Saturday in the summer.” He said in a voice that reminded me of a grandfather. Though I’d never met mine.

“It’s a beautiful church. There really should be a wedding here.” I said truthfully.

“I heard there was supposed to be one here today. Must’ve been mistaken.” He looked up at the ceiling and crossed his arms.

“Yeah, there was. Got cancelled.” *Nosey bastard.*

“Nothing could’ve kept me away from my bride on my wedding day. I was more excited than she was. We would’ve been married fifty three years today.”

“I was supposed to get married here today.” I blurted out.

He turned around and he had gray eyes, almost as gray as his hair.

“Well, what happened?”

“I screwed it all up. She’s the most amazing girl I’ve ever met and I let an old breakup influence my view of what we had. She didn’t deserve it. She didn’t deserve anything but the best. And she chose to love me. And I f—messed up.”

“You know what the great thing about messing up is?” I shook my head, not really in the mood for his silver lining crap. “The great thing about messing up is that usually, if you’re smart—you don’t repeat the same mistake again.”

“I wouldn’t ever repeat that mistake again. Problem is, I don’t think she’ll ever speak to me again.”

I didn’t wait for him to answer. I looked up one last time at the altar and walked out. I made my way to the restaurant to help out.

Everywhere I turned there were pieces of her. When I reached to put the Bronco into reverse I noticed her hair bands hanging on the shifter. There was a sticker on the inside of the visor that read ‘Roller Derby girls do it on all fours’ that she giggled about for days on end. I knew it was there, I didn’t have to look at it. On the way to the restaurant I passed the flower shop where she found the perfect silver roses for our wedding. She was in every corner and every cranny. I welcomed in it. It kept the pain notch kicked up to ten. It zapped me when I almost smiled. It throbbed in my chest and kept a steady beat in my head like a snare drum.

The restaurant was busy, the parking lot fuller than I’d seen it in a while. I walked in and went straight into the kitchen to wash up and grab an apron. I pushed the heavy swinging door open and apparently I was unexpected. Dad, Mom, Falcon and Nellie stood in a huddle and Dad had a familiar black box in his hand. Nellie sobbed while she turned the ring back and forth on her finger and then released it, retracting her agreement to marry me. She placed it back in the black box and my dad put it in his pocket. It was like an engagement moment on video but it was being played in reverse.

Falcon saw me first. He walked up next to me, grabbed an apron and a tray and pushed me in the shoulder so hard that I nearly toppled over.

I looked back and the ends of purple hair went through the back kitchen door and it closed quietly behind her.

Another nail in the bastard’s coffin.

41. Nellie

My dress hung on the door frame which partitioned my room from the kitchen. I couldn't make myself return it. I should've returned it. I was going to the restaurant later to return the ring only because it was a Black family heirloom and if Owen and I weren't together then I had no business keeping it.

So my wedding dress was the only thing I would have left. I ran my hand down the ruffles and lace. It was a vintage dress that I'd found in an obscure dress shop. I would've loved to see Owen's face as I walked towards him in this dress.

My parents had said they already had plans when they received the wedding invitation in the mail. It didn't surprise me and to be honest, I was relieved.

I passed by the Biology Department office the day before and saw the internship choice posted on the bulletin board. Owen Black was listed as the chosen student and I reached up to trace his name with my fingers as a silent congratulations. He worked his butt off for that internship and now he didn't have to worry about leaving a wife behind. I couldn't be prouder of him.

Everyone expected me to be angry. They expected me to scream and throw things and paint 'Douchebag' on his car with pink paint. But I didn't scream, instead I buried my face in his pillow that stayed on his side of the bed and cried until I passed out every night. I didn't throw things. But every morning like a person on the edge of sanity I took out all of his clothes from the bottom drawer, inhaled the cedar scent and refolded each one, a reaffirmation that at one time he was here and he loved me. I dialed his number nine times a day but never pressed 'send'. I painted 'Hellie Black' on the bottom of my skates with pink nail polish where no one would see.

I loved him and no matter how much it hurt I always would.

Cindi officially put the bookstore into my name. I kept the name Cindi's Indie, just because I loved it. I started full time on Sunday, the same day Owen and I were supposed to go on a cruise to Cozumel.

I went to the restaurant to meet Chase and return the ring. He said I didn't have to and that I should just keep it. But one day Owen might—well, he might need it. I turned the ring and just my luck, the damned thing was stuck on my finger. I finally pried it off, put it back in the box and that's when I saw Falcon break from our huddle in the kitchen. Then I saw Owen.

He looked awful. He was thinner. His shirt was loose. There were dark circles under his eyes. He had dark circles under his eyes when I met him but after spending most nights at my apartment and sleeping well, they had gone away. He turned his attention to Falcon who was more disappointed than angry with his older brother though it all looked like anger to an outsider. I took my opportunity and slipped out of the back kitchen door.

I drove straight to the skating rink and skated with the crowds of teenagers to the sound of cheesy love songs until there was no one left and I had no energy left to cry.

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Sunday morning I opened up my shop at nine o'clock sharp. It was easy to open up that early when you lived just upstairs. That was a surprise that I was supposed to share with Owen last Sunday. Instead of moving into my apartment, we were going to have an apartment of our own. Along with the bookstore, ownership came with the apartment upstairs from it. I could never thank Cindi enough and she finally relented to letting me pay her seventeen percent of the profits from the store. I started haggling at twenty five percent and she talked me all the way down to seventeen percent. It was an odd number but she said she liked things odd.

But I would never get to share that secret with him.

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## 42. Owen

I moved back home for the two weeks between the end of school and the start of my internship. Dad and I went and got the needed gear from Dr. Callahan's list and some extra things for my trip. He had that look on his face the whole time like he was disappointed and peeved all at the same time.

"Just spit it out already, Dad. I can't take it." I wanted to clear the air before I left tomorrow.

"What do you want me to say, Son," he asked.

"I want you to say something. Tell me I'm a jackass. Tell me I screwed up again. Tell me I didn't deserve her in the first place. Tell me I'll never find another girl like her—ever. Say f—freakin' something"

"You did mess up, Owen. But you know that. What I can't get through my head is how you can just give up. You haven't tried to go see her. You haven't called her. Nothing. You have always deserved a love like she can give you. But I don't recognize the man beside me who won't even try. Don't you get it? She's not the one who stopped loving you. You're the one who didn't trust in what she gave you. Think about it while you're gone."

"What if she's moved on by then? What if she won't take me back?"

"If you think that for one second, then you never really knew her at all." He shrugged.

When I got upstairs Mom had already packed and I added the stuff that Dad and I had bought earlier.

“Mom, you didn’t have to pack for me but thanks.” She nodded and never looked up from zipping my duffle bag.

“What’s wrong Mom,” I asked.

“Two and a half months is a long time.” She said and sat on my bed.

“I know. I’m going to try to call when we go in for supplies.” I hugged her shoulders and she leaned her head down into my chest.

“OK. If you can.” She whispered.

I drove out to Grand Isle the next morning early after saying my ‘goodbyes’ and prying myself from Mom. Falcon came downstairs and waved. But that was more interaction that we’d had since Nellie and I broke up. Dad told me that Falcon was upset with me for sabotaging myself. He said I’d had it all and ruined it. Apparently it also had to do a little with Kate breaking up with him for another guy.

I got to the dock and started unloading my gear. Dr. Callahan was there already on the coolest boat I’d ever seen. I went aboard and the work started immediately. I checked gauges and inventoried the tools and computers and lab equipment. I kept busy after everything was done cleaning Dr. Callahan started the boat and the dock grew smaller and smaller behind us.

Dr. Callahan, or Drew as he wanted me to call him, told me to try to get some sleep. That night we were going to be doing some night research. The man didn’t waste any time. I went down into the belly of the beast and got as comfortable as I could on a five foot long hammock which hung from the rafters and tried to sleep.

*I should’ve at least told her goodbye.*

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## 43. Nellie

Sylvia called me as soon as he left and we cried together over the phone. Later she came to the bookstore and we went to lunch. She told me about the conversation Chase and Owen had before he left and it gave me some hope. We talked on the phone almost every day. I stopped myself millions of times from going to him and throwing myself at him before he left. I don't think my heart had any pride at all.

Amber and Dylan had decided to see other people and it broke Amber's heart but she tried to keep a 'tough girl' persona around him. She quit working at the skating rink and now worked at the bookstore with me. She had a new roommate, Huxley, and her name reminded us of those creepy Teddy Ruxpin dolls.

I sometimes made it through an hour or even a stretch of hours between consciously thinking about Owen. But if I were honest with myself he leeches onto every thought that ran through my head. Amber laughed at me when I zoned out. What would happen when he came back I didn't know. Maybe he would change his mind. Maybe he wouldn't want me anymore. Maybe he would be happy at the way it all went down.

Halfway through the summer the bookstore was doing so well that I decided to take the next semester off of school. I was going to go back in January but I wanted to take the rest of the year to really solidify the bookstore's online store.

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Owen was scheduled to come back home in three days. I've never been so nervous. Amber threatened to spike my coffee with Xanax if I didn't shut up about it.

"Just shut up Hellie. He's going to come back and be all Crocodile Dundee looking and tell you he couldn't quit thinking about you while he

was on the boat and he's a big oaf of an idiot and he wants you back. The end. Happily Ever After. So shut it already."

"How did you come up with Crocodile Dundee," I asked.

"You know he's studying crocodiles and stuff. That's how."

"It's alligators Am, alligators."

She gave me the death stare. "What—Ever."

We ate for a few minutes before she started up again.

"And nice touch with the blue hair again. He's going to remember when he fell in love with Smurfette."

"Shut up Amber."

44. Owen

By the time the summer was over and Drew and I made our way back to the dock he was sick of me. Even though it was a working internship we both talked about our families. He talked about his wife and I talked about Nellie. I talked about her a lot. I talked about her so much one day that Drew pushed me off of the moving boat.

I learned so much about marine research that summer. We tagged animals and took blood and tissue samples. And I spent more time in the water than I ever had in my life. For once in my life I was excited to get back to school and complete my degree. Drew said when I finished with school that there was a possibility that I could be his research partner.

I needed to figure out a plan to get Nellie back. We belonged together and I was determined to do whatever I needed to prove that to her.

I thought about her almost every minute. I replayed the short span of our relationship over and over. I pinpointed where our flowers and happiness path turned hopeless and met its end. I also realized how I had ruined it. It wasn't that we didn't love each other, it wasn't a trust issue—it was internal. My self loathing attitude had ruined us. My constant comparison of our relationship to my relationship with Amy took precedence over a lifetime with Nellie. I was ashamed of allowing those things to occur.

I stepped off of the boat and onto the dock a few hours later. After helping Drew unload all of the equipment and helping him clean the boat, I got into my Bronco and headed home and towards Nellie.

45. Nellie

While I was out at a local book festival I received a text. I didn't look at it for a long time because I knew exactly what it said but looking at it made it real. Looking at that text was going to set things in motion.

During the last twenty four hours I had decided that even if I wasn't in the wrong, even if it wasn't me who took what we had for granted, even if I had to beg, I wanted him back and I wasn't going to let my pride get in my way. I took a breath and slid my finger across the screen to look at the message.

Sylvia: He just walked in the door. He's got a beard.

I wanted to give him a few days to get settled before I called him or went over to the house. I didn't have a specific plan other than to take a chance and hope he wanted me back as well.

I left the book festival with some really good books and most of them were signed. I went back into the bookstore through the back door and walked into the office. I piled up all of the books on the counter. It paid to be a bookstore owner. I would be putting all of these in my personal collection.

I turned to go to my desk and check my e-mail, distracting myself from running over to the Black house.

"I always did like the blue." I froze in place and I closed my eyes at the sound of that deep, haunting voice.

"Amber said you'd remember when you first saw me with the blue." I barely croaked out.

“I never forgot.” He said.

I finally opened my eyes and stood in awe of the difference one summer could make.

He had a baseball hat on and out of the back, I could see that his hair had grown a lot. He had a full beard and even though I always thought I hated beards, it suited him.

“You look different.” I said.

He scratched at his beard, “Yeah, I just got in this morning. I couldn’t think about anything other than getting to you.” He shrugged a little like it was no big deal.

“Why is that?” I asked. My heart knew already, but my brain needed to hear the speech.

“Can I sit?” He said.

“Yeah, sit.” He took one of the chairs in front of my desk and I took the other one.

“You always looked better in person. My brain can never get you quite right.”

He reached out and ran a finger down my jawline and I had to remind myself to breathe.

“I’m not a big fan of things ‘happening for a reason’ and all of that. But in this case, I think it did.”

Oh God, he’s moved on. He doesn’t want me.

“I hate the way it happened but at the same time it gave me the time I needed to straighten myself out. Remember what you said about people needing time apart to straighten themselves out?”

I nodded.

“That’s what I needed. I needed time to put the past behind me. I needed to be alone to realize who I was and as stupid as it sounds, I needed

time to forgive myself.”

This is it. We're done.

“I also missed you every single second. The water reminded me of you. The boat reminded me of you. Every piece of clothing reminded me of a time when I was with you. And when I went to the church...”

“Wait, when did you go to the church?” I leaned towards him in my chair.

“I went at the exact time we were supposed to be married. So there was this man there and he told me that the great thing about mistakes was that if I was smart, I wouldn't repeat the same mistake twice.”

Tears blurred my vision of him and I had to blink to let them out just so I could see him clearly.

“So, I'm here—wanting to start over or move forward. I promise that I will never ever make the same mistakes I did before. I will never compare you to my past again and I will never distrust the love I have for you and that you have or had for me.”

“Have.” I said.

“Have?” He questioned.

“Yes, have. It took this fight and separation to make you come back to me. I never stopped loving you or waiting for you to come back. It was worth it.”

He took a deep breath and I saw tears in his eyes for the first time in my life.

“I thought I would have to explain for hours to convince you. I thought it would take weeks or months of pleading.” His hands reached out for me and then twitched and pulled back.

“Stop second guessing. Stop hesitating. I love you; that had never changed. Do I have to beg?”

He slumped to his knees in front of me and laid his head in my lap as if the whole thing had broken him. But sometimes things must be broken and put back together again.

I pulled off his ball cap and I ran my fingers through his longer hair.

“Did you remember the ring this time?” I joked.

“No, but Falcon reminded me in the driveway.” He laughed.

He pulled it out and before he put it on my finger, he proposed—again.

“The first time I proposed we were in your bed, the second time in front of my family and this time, it’s just me and you again. I hurt you once, broke your heart. I’ll spend the rest of my life trying to fix it. Will you marry me, take a chance on me again?”

46. Owen

There was no one in the church except those who mattered to us. My parents, Amber, Dylan and Nellie's roller derby team. Her parents had opted out of the first wedding and not to our surprise, made excuses for this one too.

Turns out, the man who changed the way I thought was the retired pastor of the church and he showed up as well.

My dad walked Nellie down the aisle. She had brown hair, just like the pictures her mom threw up on the walls when she thought Nellie was visiting. She wore the dress that she never brought herself to return. She held the silver roses that she always wanted. In all my life I had never seen her so incredibly beautiful as she was that day.

We listened and recited the vows and she cried through most of hers. And as she said 'I do' everything else was washed away. And as I took her lips for the first time as my wife there was nothing but her and us on my mind.

47. Nellie

Instead of our planned honeymoon we opted to go back on the water in his parents' houseboat for our honeymoon.

Owen's smiles reached his eyes now. His laughter deep and sincere. He seemed free and I hadn't seen him that way since we were at his parents' cabin. We were both quiet on the way down to Grand Isle because we both had the same thing on our minds.

I waited again on the dock while he unpacked everything. When he was done he picked me up and carried me aboard. We sat together watching the sun set on the horizon of the lake.

"Are you ready to go to bed Mrs. Black?" He whispered in my ear.

"Yeah, I'll be there in a minute." I went to the bathroom and changed into what Amber helped me pick out for my wedding night. It was more like nothing than something but I guess that wouldn't matter soon.

He sat in the middle of the tall pile of blankets that we always slept on and I sat in front of him. With hands on either side of my waist he pulled me onto his lap and we sat there face to face in the dark.

"I love you." He said as he pushed my hair behind my shoulder.

"And I love you." He moved in to kiss me and I stopped him with my hands on his shoulders.

"What?" He smiled.

"There's something I want to hear." I said.

He looked confused and looked me dead in the eyes. "Anything."

"I want to hear you beg." And with those words I pressed myself closer to him.

He chuckled a little and before he took my lips under the full moon, he said “Gladly.”

The End.

Thank you for reading.

Other books by Lila Felix: *Emerge* *Perchance*

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Smash Into You

A novel

SHELLY CRANE

OceanofPDF.com

Jude has spent the whole twenty three years of his life running. From what, he wasn't quite sure. His mother tried to keep him safe; a low profile, a constant move on the horizon, a week's pay always stashed away. She tried to instill in him that he was special somehow, though would never elaborate. He never felt different. He was so completely normal and vanilla that he wondered if it had all been in her head. But then she was murdered and all he saw was a running silhouette of a man as his mother said three final words to him. Three words that changed his whole being.

Never stop running...

Now he's semi-settled into a big town. The college is huge and easy to blend into. It's been three months since he had to move because 'Biloxi', as he calls the man who killed his mother, found him once more.

Then Marley, an eighteen year old girl who is as infuriating as she is blissfully ignorant of her gorgeousness, smashes into his car with hers. Then smashes into his life as he realizes that whatever it is he has that Biloxi wants, she has it, too. And now, they're after them both.

It was a case of mistaken identity.

The worst kind.

The kind that ended with appalled, parted lips and evil glares.

The girl was cute enough. Cute wasn't the problem nor the solution for me. I needed to blend and be invisible in the most plain-as-day way and girls like this, girls who just walked up to guys because they had hope somewhere deep inside them that I would fall for that pretty face were the opposite of plain-as-day. Those kinds of girls got guys killed. At least the kind that were on the run.

She had mistaken me for a normal guy.

And this girl who approached, who could see that I was already surrounded by more girls than I knew what to do with, must've thought I had a hankering for something sweet. Because when she spoke, her words were soft and almost made me want to get to know her instead of send her packing. But I couldn't stay in this town. It was better to hurt her now when she wasn't invested than it would be to leave one day without a trace.

The girls who were currently soaking up the attention of mine that they thought they had, they'd move on to their next prey and forget I ever existed. But sweet girls got attached and asked questions.

Don't stop running...

I swallowed and stared bored at her as she finally made her way to me from across the hall. She tucked her hair behind her ear gently and smiled a little. "Hi, uh, can I just-"

Showtime. "Honey, that's real sweet, but I'm not interested." I slid my arm around one of my groupies. I didn't even know her name, but they were always within arm's reach. "As you can see I have my hands full already, but thanks for offering."

She scoffed and looked completely shocked. I took her in, head to foot. She was cute. She had a great little body on her and her face was almond shaped. Her lips looked...sweet. She was not the kind I wanted within ten feet of me. She was still standing there. I had to send her packing.

I grinned as evilly as I could muster and felt a small twinge of guilt at the vulnerable look of her. I looked away quickly. I didn't even want to remember her face. "Run along, sweetheart. Go find a tuba player, I'm sure he's more your speed. Like I said, I'm not interested."

She didn't glare, and that was a first. Most of the girls who approached a guy were confident, I mean that was the reason they thought they had a chance, right? But she looked a little...destroyed. When her lips parted, it was in shock, it was to catch her breath. I continued my bored stance, though at this point, it pained me in my chest.

But I was doing the best thing for this and any other girl. People who got involved with me were collateral damage when Biloxi came around. He was a ruthless bastard and if found me and knew someone cared about me, or worse, that I cared about someone, he'd be all over them.

So when she turned without a word and swiftly made her way down the hall, I was thankful. I probably saved her life, though she had no idea. She thought I was an ass, but I was really looking out for her. That's what I told myself as I watched her go. That I had hurt her feelings for a reason, and that she'd get over it.

A slender hand crawled over my collar.

"What's this for?" she asked in a purr and slid her thumb over the long scar from my ear all the way to my chin. "Mmm, it's so sexy."

It followed my jaw line and it was not sexy. Unfortunately it wasn't the first time some girl had said as much and it pissed me off to no end that they thought that, let alone said it out loud.

It was my reminder of what happens when I let my guard down and it was anything but sexy.

I bit down on my retort and sent her a small smile that showed her I was listening, but she had to work for my attention. "Is that right?"

"Mmhmm," she said and kissed my jaw. "I have a little scar, too." She pointed to the place between her breasts. "Right here. Wanna see it?"

I managed a chuckle. "Is there really a scar there?"

"Pick me up tonight and you can find out," she purred, making her friend giggle.

"Don't think so. Busy."

"Ahhh, boo." She pouted and let her fingers of her other hand hook a finger into my waistband. "Well here's something to keep you company tonight."

And then she pulled me down by my collar and kissed me. I tried not to cringe away, but her lip gloss was sticky and sweet. When she tried to open my mouth with her tongue I pushed her away gently with my hands wrapped around her bony arms.

"Let's keep this PG, honey. Settle down."

She giggled. I knew she would.

It was the last week of school. It was my last week to pretend that I was still *in* high school. The next time I made a move to evade Biloxi, I'd enroll in college because I was getting too old to be a high schooler. I didn't know where I was going. I would have graduated from high school years ago, but at the rate I was going, I didn't know if I would have *actually* graduated or not. School was not a place of learning for me, it was a cover, a place to blend in and be normal until Biloxi found me and then I'd be gone to the next place.

This was my life. No time or want for girls, no parties, no movies, no parents.

This was my life, but it wasn't a life at all.

Six months and one lonely birthday later...

College sucked.

The big one.

I had only been going to class for a couple of days and was already dreading the long classes. It was part of my cover. I practically chanted those words in my mind as I trudged everywhere I went. But one thing remained the same. Desperate girls ran rampant and I still wasn't interested. Every once in a while, they were good for a distraction if need be, but mostly...not interested. There was this one chick, Kate, who would not take no for an answer. She'd 'found' me over the summer when I was apartment hunting and hadn't 'lost' me yet, no matter how hard I tried. To get her to go away one time, I'd even given her my phone number. I was going to ditch it in a couple weeks anyway when I undoubtedly had to move again, so it didn't matter, right?

Wrong.

The girl was as annoying as a Chihuahua all hopped up 'cause there's a knock at the door. The texting and come-hithers in text code were nonstop.

And now, as I stared out into the rain to see a POS car sideways in the road, I knew the world hated me, had to, because someone had just smashed her car into my truck.

I got out and braced myself. It wasn't easy to pay cash for new cars every time I needed to skip town. It was hard living when you couldn't be who you really were. Finding people to pay you under the table was almost impossible these days.

I groaned and glared at the beauty standing at the end of my truck. "Look at that!"

"I'm so sorry," she began. I could tell she really was, but I was beyond pissed. "I call my insurance company right now."

That stopped me. "No!" I shouted and she jolted at the verbal assault. "No insurance."

"Well," she pondered, "what do you mean? I have good insurance."

"But I don't."

She turned her head a bit in thought and then her mouth fell open as she realized what I was saying. "You don't have *any* insurance, do you?"

"No," I answered. "Look. Whatever, we'll just call this even-steven."

"Even-steven my butt!" she yelled and scurried to jump in front of me, blocking my way.

"And what a cute butt it is."

Even through the noise of water hitting metal, I heard her intake of breath. The rain pelted us in the dark. I hoped no one came around the corner. It would be hard for them to see us here in the middle of the road. She might get hurt. Then I wondered why I cared. I

"Look, buddy," she replied and crossed her arms. It drew my eyes to her shirt. My eyes bulged 'cause that shirt...well, she was see-through now. She caught on and jerked her crossed arms higher. "How dare you! You're on a roll in the jerkface department, you know that!"

"My specialty," I said and saluted as I climbed in my truck. "Get your pretty butt in your car and let's pretend this never happened, shall we?"

Because if cops and insurance were brought into this, I'd be on the run sooner than I thought.

She huffed. "Excuse me-"

"Darling. Car. Now." She glared. "Like right now."

She threw her hands up in the air and yelled, "I knew chivalry was dead!" before climbing in her car and driving away. She didn't know it but I was being as chivalrous as they come. I made sure she got out of the rain and back into her car, even though she didn't like the way I did it, and I got her as far away from me as I could.

In my book, I deserved a freaking medal for being so chivalrous. Because people that stuck with me didn't live long.

Just ask my mom.

Oh, wait, you can't. She died long, long years ago saving my life. I refused to bring anyone onto this sinking ship with me. If it finally did go down, I was going down alone.

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Now, an excerpt from Airicka Phoenix' *Touching Smoke*

Chapter 1

“What’s the matter?” Mom honed in on my mood before I even realized I was chewing anxiously on my thumbnail.

“Nothing.” I quickly wiped the spit off on my jeans and stuffed my hands into my lap. My torn and bloody thumbnail glared up at me, a sick mockery of my lie.

“Fallon...” The warning tone was in effect.

“Nothing.”

It was a risk telling Mom when something was wrong. Her tendency to overreact was legendary. I spent a great deal of time and effort practicing to lie convincingly.

“Don’t lie to me.” But even practice didn’t help sometimes.

I gave my head a shake, fixing my attention out the passenger side window in clear avoidance. Pale sunlight splashed over blooming treetops. The golden rays spilled through the knotted branches in splinters that lay broken across the forest floor. Birds flittered from tree to tree; I could hear their elated chirping over the Rust-Bucket’s roaring engine.

“Fallon!” My mom seemed to think that the more she said my name in that I’m-your-mother-and-you’ll-answer-when-I-ask-you-something tone, I’d cave.

Usually, it worked. I may have been sixteen, but I feared my mother’s wrath like nothing else. She was downright sadistic when she wanted to be.

“It’s nothing!” I insisted, already knowing even before the words were out that she wouldn’t believe me.

“Okay.” Her sigh resounded of feigned remorse, as if she really didn’t want to have to do it and it hurt her more than it would hurt me — as if I believed that. Her hand wandered off the steering wheel and inched towards the radio.

I caved faster than a house of poorly placed cards in the wind. There was nothing worse than country music, and not just any country music, the old western kind that only played when you're in the middle of nowhere and only two stations worked on the radio: ancient western and some guy ranting about the end of the world and demons.

Give me the crazy guy any day. Unfortunately, he only came out at nights, when he knew he could give you nightmares.

“Okay! Fine!” I grabbed her wrist before she could touch the knob. “I’ll talk!” I would have made a lousy spy. If I were ever captured, all the bad guy would have to do is threaten me with country music and I’d sing like a canary.

She didn’t actually smirk — my mother didn’t do that — but there was a satisfied tilt to her lips as she sat back and waited patiently for me to begin. I faltered in my explanation. Every thread I grabbed proved to be the wrong way to start. My jumbled emotions kept knotting up inside me like yarn, tying up my tongue, making every attempt to speak impossible. Mom never interrupted me. Maybe because she knew how hard it was for me to talk about things I didn’t understand myself. I knew she would sit there, for hours if she had to, waiting, never breaking my concentration, until I was ready to speak. Just so long as I told her, she would wait.

“I had another dream,” I finally said, staring down at my lap as if the rest of my courage was somehow sitting there, waiting to be plucked up. But the only thing there was my hands, clenched together between my jean-clad thighs. Sweat squished between my palms. I wiped them on my jeans.

“What was it about?” she asked, casual with a tense undertone she was failing miserably to conceal.

Her knuckles blistered white around the steering wheel and there were slight pinch lines on either side of her lips. She stared with such fierce determination out the windshield that I half expected there to be scorch marks on the glass.

Mom was very pretty, much like those old black and white movie starlets they showed every so often on basic TV. She had beautiful cinnamon-colored hair that was naturally wavy when she didn’t cut it pixie-style and it

always carried the lingering scent of citrus from her shampoo. She also had beautiful hooded, viridian-green eyes that seemed to always be shimmering like sunlight over a lake. Her complexion wasn't as pale as mine, but porcelain, and she was willowy, not gangly like me, but... graceful, like a dancer. No one ever believed Erin Braeden was my mother. We were as different as night and day physically. My hair was thicker, curlier and highlighted with streaks of blue and it hung to my waist. It also had a life of its own, constantly creeping into my eyes when it was down, catching on things, and when the wind blew through it, the whole thing was one giant bird's nest. I tried cutting it more than once, but it had a maddening way of growing back, longer and thicker than before. I eventually gave up and kept it in a tight braid down my back.

"Fallon?"

I averted my gaze. "I don't remember."

Liar, liar, pants on fire! But it was either lie or tell her about Amalie. Lying was safer.

The dreams had begun six months before and I could never remember more than a few seconds of it. It was always dark with flashes of light, like someone spinning around and around with a camera in a room full of candles. Every so often I would see a flicker of a

hand holding a pen over a faded journal, but the image would always dance away too quickly for me to read what was written. There were only two instances where I actually caught a glimpse of something tangible and both times it was a name:

Amalie Nicolette Dennison

I didn't know who she was or why she kept popping into my dreams every night, or why I would wake up in the morning, dizzy with the salty scent of sea breeze hanging thick in the room, but I wished she would stop. I wasn't sure my brain could take any more sleepless nights.

"Where are we going?" I asked, needing a change of topic.

Thinking about Amalie always creeped me out and I didn't like it. I refused to believe that I was some pod for spiritual communication as I'd heard it once called on a TV show somewhere in Alberta a few months back. The

whole show had been ridiculous. Spirits from the beyond had better things to do than wander into the minds and dreams of the living. Besides, Amalie hadn't left me any subliminal messages or announced the name of her killer — assuming she was murdered. She just kept trying to make me nauseous with the spinning and the lights, or she was trying to drive me crazy from lack of sleep.

Honestly though, I blamed the whole thing on my mom. Would it have killed her to spend one night somewhere that didn't look haunted? It was no wonder I was getting crazy dreams. My subconscious was begging for a hint of normalcy. But Mom wouldn't see it that way.

"I was thinking we could just drive west for a while," she answered, rhythmically tapping her unpainted fingernails on the worn leather of the steering wheel in a way that

meant she was in deep thought but was answering because she believed children should always receive an answer when they ask a question. "What do you think?"

I thought I would like to head back to Nova Scotia, rent an apartment and stay there. But that answer would only earn me a deep sigh and a long speech about firsthand experiences and how every teenager in the world would have loved to be in my shoes and how I should enjoy it and blah, blah, blah. I'd heard it all before.

So, instead, I replied dryly, "West — fun. Nothing there we haven't seen a million times before."

She either didn't pick up on my sarcasm, which was unlikely, or she chose to ignore it, which I was sure of, because nothing ever passed over her head.

"Actually, there's a school I called the other day—"

Reflexively, I groaned. "Not another one..." I was ignored again.

"—they teach Latin and French."

"Wow! Latin! That should come in handy, oh... never!"

She spared me a glower from the corner of her eyes. "You will like this one and it's only for a little while!"

Every time our funds began to decrease, Mom would stuff me in the most heavily guarded private school she could possibly find, while she worked herself silly earning more travel money. She claimed it was a good opportunity for me to make new friends and learn something new. It also gave her a chance to do what she needed to get done without having to worry about leaving me alone in a motel. But what I never confessed to was that I stopped trying to make new friends after leaving the fourth grade for the sixth time in one year. I learned everything I needed to know from the mountain of textbooks, worksheets and

notes I carted around with me from all the schools I had left behind over the years, and there were tons of those. The number was mindboggling so I never kept count. But she always insisted.

“Can’t we just use the money dad left me?”

I knew it was useless to ask, even before she speared me with a dark scowl. Mom never touched that money, except to pay for all the high priced schools she thought I needed. I think it was her way of making it up to me for missing out on so much of my childhood to the open highway. Not that being stuck behind towering walls and iron gates was any better and I was sure dad would have told her so as well, had he not died when I was four.

“That money is for you to start your own life one day.”

One day. I knew my dad would have wanted Mom to use the money instead of working herself to death, but Mom refused to touch a penny of it in any way that didn’t involve my education.

“How long are we staying there?” I sighed heavily.

Mom shrugged. “I don’t know yet.” In other words: until she had enough cash to keep us afloat for a few months. That could be anywhere from three to six months.

Well, maybe it would be different this time. Maybe Amalie would behave for once. Maybe she’d go away. I believed that nearly as much as I believed the sleek, black motorcycle racing to catch our fender was on its way to rescue me.

The sun gleamed off the rider’s black helmet, and as I watched, he raised a hand and gave me a two-fingered salute.

My lips twitched and I raised a hand and waved back through the side mirror. Deep down, I stifled the mindboggling pulse of familiarity that warmed in my chest. I didn't know him, yet the pull was unmistakable, As was the distinct sense of déjà vu at seeing that exact bike a few days ago at a gas stop in Nova Scotia and then again periodically for as long as I could recall, but always from a distance and always gone when I tried to get a closer look.

I must have been waving for too long, because my mother's voice broke through my train of thought. "Fallon? What are you doing?"

I quickly stuffed my hand back between my thighs. "Nothing."

But Mom wasn't fooled. She took one glance into the rearview mirror and lost all coloring in her face. She cursed under her breath and floored the gas pedal.

Somewhere on highway 1 heading west, four sets of jagged burn marks mar the asphalt where the Impala had all but ripped through the concrete. Black smoke billowed, choking the clear sky with the stench of burned rubber. The motorcycle screeched, swerving under the attack. But where most would have shaken a fist and thrown a few curse words, the rider righted himself, leaned over his handlebars and sped up.

We were doing a hundred kilometers, and climbing. The needle quivered as we accelerated to speeds the Rust-Bucket was not accustomed to; the Impala groaned and shuddered, but kept pace.

"What's going on?" I shrieked, partly out of soul chilling terror, partly to be heard over the clashing roar of two engines battling, one ours, the other the speeder behind us.

"Get down!" Mom shot back, hunched over the wheel, eyes narrowed on the road.

I wasn't given time to follow orders. I was thrown back into my seat as the acceleration jumped nearly off the radar. I didn't even think the Rust-Bucket could go that fast.

"Hold on!"

Jagged gashes scarred the leather dash where I clawed for bearing as I was smashed against the door. My skull ricocheted off the glass with a sickening

thud, sending a burst of light exploding before my eyes. My spleen slammed into my ribs when Mom suddenly hammered down on the brakes. My heart had already taken shelter in my throat, thrashing like a captured bird struggling for escape. I would have been panicked, but I was already having trouble reminding my lungs to breathe and my brain not to explode. The Rust-Bucket nearly flipped. For a split second, that's exactly what I was expecting, and in that second, my heart forgot to beat. I watched, paralyzed from the brain down, as the car skidded as though on ice, rolling dangerously close to the ditch on the side of the road. The world seemed to clash, swirling in smears of greens and blues. I might have screamed, but even that seemed unlikely when I'd forgotten how.

Behind us, the motorcycle screeched, sounding like a desperate cry before it swerved under the rider's erratic attempts at trying to miss the back end of the Impala. I was twisted in my seat before it even registered that I was no longer frozen. The leather headrest tore under my nails as I scrambled into the backseat, over duffle bags, blankets and fast food wrappers to watch with crippling horror as the bike squealed once more before disappearing over the edge, into the ditch.

My soul screamed before the sound tore through the soft tissues of my esophagus and exploded from my lips. Time screeched to a halt. Everything froze, except the loud cracking of my heart, and the bike doing a nosedive over the lip and crashing.

“No!”

“Fallon!” Only when my mother's blunt nails peeled the skin on my arm did I realize she'd stopped me from throwing myself out the door.

I kept screaming. My insanity raged against reality. The world spun and dipped, and flashed crimson. Everything roared, swallowing the animal-like howls tearing through my lungs. I felt deranged, completely unhinged, like someone losing something so utterly precious to them that the very idea of living was unbearable. It was inconceivable. I wanted to die. I wanted to throw myself out of the car and dive into the ditch and... and what? What was wrong with me?

“Fallon? Fallon, calm down.” Although soothing, my mom's tone did nothing to calm the hysteria eating me up inside.

“Don’t leave him!” I pleaded, only just then realizing I was sobbing like my heart would cease beating if I stopped. “Don’t leave him! Please!”

“We have to go,” she said, still holding on to me as she used her free hand to maneuver the Impala back onto the road.

“No!” I shrieked, renewing my thrashing, throwing myself against the door. “Don’t leave him!”

But she didn’t stop and I was taken away; away from the other half of me.

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