

LAUREN HELMS

MODERN

Pinup Collection

Pinup
Innocent
Princess

INNOCENT PRINCESS

MODERN PRINCESS COLLECTION, 2

LAUREN HELMS



Innocent Princess

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- Shake It Off - Taylor Swift
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- Everybody Wants To Rule The World - Weezer
- Starving - Hailee Steinfeld, Grey, Zedd
- Falling Faster - Andrew Ripp
- Your Song - Rita Ora
- Knock Me Out - Fancy Reagan
- Lo/Hi - The Black Keys
- Wildfire - Seafret
- home ft. WALK THE MOON - Morgxn
- Someone To You - BANNERS

To listen to the full playlist, check it out on [Spotify](#) and on [YouTube](#)!

DEDICATION

*To all the girls out there who dream of adventures, princes,
and happily ever after.*

Believe in yourself, love yourself, and be YOURSELF always.

ZELLA



STANDING IN THE MIDDLE OF THE SMALL ROOM, I SHAKE WHAT the man upstairs gave me to the right, then a little to the left. My feet ground me as my eyes close, and I move to the catchy beat.

Catchy pop songs are my kryptonite. Take Taylor Swift, for example. I love her older music – her newer stuff is a little too angry for my taste. I’m a happy person by nature, so I’m drawn to a happy melody and fun lyrics. Thank God for all my Spotify playlists. I have one for every day of the week. Music has always been important to me; it makes my unbelievably boring life feel so much livelier. I’ll never admit this to a soul, but I’ll hear a song and imagine where in my made-up life it would fit in.

Take *Shake It Off* by our beloved Ms. Swift, for example. I would fit it into the soundtrack that I would lovingly label “Zella Goes to High School”. I could imagine being the cheer captain with a loving basketball star boyfriend. Only, he wouldn’t be so loving. I’d find out he was going behind my back flirting with the star volleyball player. Cue the song. I’d embrace my inner Taylor and stand up on a lunchroom table, shake it off, and move on.

I know it sounds messed up, but if I had actually attended high school, then maybe I would aspire for less dramatic experiences. Perhaps if I actually lived some of those dramatic events, my imagination would be tamer. The keyword here is experience. Being homeschooled my whole life, living with my mother, who was as strict as a nun, meant I didn’t have

friends. I didn't play sports, and I sure as heck never got a chance to stand on a lunch table and tell everyone I was going to be all right.

It's a dumb little game I've played for far too many years. Though, I don't play it very often anymore now that I'm out on my own. Well, I'm not truly on my own. I'm away at college, and I live on campus. I'm just out from under my mother's thumb, finally. It only took twenty years.

Somehow, in my third year of college, I've found myself at Camelot University in Society Hill, Florida. Currently, I'm sitting on a stone window sill, in an old guard tower, watching CamU students milling around the grounds. There is a small group of guys playing Frisbee, and I can't help feeling like a creeper now that half of them have removed their shirts. I'm really far up, so it's not like I can see any abs or defined muscles. Plus, it's not like they can see me anyway. Still, I feel the warmth in my cheeks when I think about what it would be like if I were down there with them, standing face to face with a shirtless man.

Oh, man.

I fan my dewy skin to cool down, but also in an attempt to banish the thought from my mind. Pulling my eyes away from the show below, I scan the circular space around me. This particular tower is one of four in the main building, which is an old castle turned university. Since no one is ever up here, the vines are overgrown and crawling up the walls, making it look uninhabitable. I've claimed it as my hideaway.

Since I transferred at the start of a new year, I was able to move in the week before school started, much like all the new incoming freshmen.

I was unpacking my few belongings from my best friend's car when I ran into a guy named Warrick Wells. Tall, athletic build, blonde hair almost white. He looked like he could be a football player. He's handsome, with his large, blue eyes. He's a student as well but works on campus part-time with campus security. He offered to help me move in, and we've been friends since. It was that very week that Wells showed me this

unused space and told me that no one would care or even know if I needed to escape the craziness of campus life. As long as I wasn't doing anything illegal or breaking campus policy, it wouldn't be an issue.

My little hideaway is a godsend. I love this fresh start and campus life, but for someone without any experience in large groups of people, it's nice to escape.

The space is pretty bare and rather drab, but it works. There's an old wooden table to one side of the room and a desk chair that showed up a few days after I started doing homework here last week. When I asked Wells about it, he winked at me. It was sweet that he cared so much.

Wells and Cameron are both so good to me. I can't complain at all. Not that I would ever, but for the first time in my life, I'm making friends. Even though Cameron has been my friend since childhood, Wells was the first new friend I've made in forever. It's nice to find a place I finally belong.

Mailani, my suitemate, on the other hand, is so kind and reserved, but we hit it off instantly. We're completely different in nearly every aspect of our lives. She's shy, and I'm outgoing, but honestly, I don't think I could ask for a better roommate. A smile overcomes my face when I think of all the things I've gained in my life since transferring here three short weeks ago. At home, my boring life consisted of schoolwork, drawing, cooking, and a lot of reading. I love all of those things, but I very rarely had the freedom to really do what I wanted. Here, at Cam U, it's all so new.

Maybe I went a little overboard with my newfound freedom. I joined two different art clubs, so I spend a lot of time in Keane Hall, the art building. I also joined a book club and signed up for a self-defense class. There's so much to do, and I want to do it all.

After sliding off the sill, I walk over to the desk and grab my phone. I have a nice little break between my last two classes of the day. So I grab lunch and spend the afternoon here in my tower. I have to set alarms on my phone since I've unfortunately become addicted to social media. It's another

thing my mom wasn't keen on, so I didn't sign up for any accounts until the day I arrived on the Cam U campus. While my friend list is nothing to write home about, my Instagram account is where it's at. I love taking pictures around campus. It's a fun, visual way for me to track all my new experiences.

Nestling back into my cozy, warm-with-the-sun window spot, I slide open my phone. As I scroll through Instastories, my phone rings.

Gah. It's my mother.

Biting my lip, I debate whether to answer. I've talked to her once, and that was on move-in day. The call lasted just enough time for me to tell her I made it and was settled in. I've tried to keep my communications with her to a minimum and only via text.

Hovering my thumb over the screen, I decide not to swipe. I let it ring until voicemail takes over. I know she will leave a message, so I stare out the window and watch the frisbee boys until my phone buzzes with a new message.

I may be mad at my mother, but I'm not strong enough to ignore her completely. She's kept so much control over me that much-needed space would do us both some good.

Bringing the phone up to my ear, I take a deep breath and prepare myself for whatever she had to say.

"Zella, darling, it's your mother."

I roll my eyes. Of course I know who it is, but really, can she really call herself that?

"I know you are on this power trip right now, demanding your space and all." I picture her rolling her eyes as she speaks. "This is getting utterly ridiculous. You need to come home. This is where you belong. You belong with me."

I huff at her words. She doesn't get it.

"There is still time to transfer back here. You've proved your point, I'll give you more space. Just stop this madness this minute, Zella. You are too old for these rash, childish games."

Unable to listen to another word, I hang up, slamming the phone down on the windowsill.

Why can't she understand? It's not space I want, it's freedom.

I'm not childish, nor was my decision to transfer a rash decision. Cameron had been pestering me for two years about transferring, and it's not like the transfer process is a quick one. I had plenty of time to talk myself out of this scary-as-hell, life-changing-decision, and I didn't. Mostly, because I wanted it so badly.

I love it here in Society Hill. Florida is wonderful, and I'm almost one hundred percent sure I'm never going back to Solitude, Mississippi. The only thing back there for me is the home I'm attached to—not by choice—and a woman I've only ever known as my mother. Who turns out, is a liar.

My life has never really been mine.

Growing up didn't stop me from finding happiness in what I had or what I was given, but I never stopped daydreaming and pretending my life was so much more.

My mother always told me no. I don't remember a time she ever said yes.

Actually, I do. At the age of seven, I asked her if I could go say hi to the boy, who looked my age and whose family had moved in next door. She hesitated, just briefly, before allowing it. That day, I found my very first friend.

Cameron has been stuck with me since, and I couldn't have asked for a better friend.

I stare down at my pink-tipped toes and wiggle them. I've got a pedicure scheduled tomorrow morning with a friend from some of my art classes. I had admired her nails one day last week, and when she found out I'd never had a mani or pedi, she insisted we rectify it at once.

I'm nearly always barefoot, so it would do me good to treat my feet to some TLC. I'm excited about the adventure and looking forward to when I can set up my next one.

Let this be the year of adventures.

The year Zella Raps's life truly begins.

RYKER



THE ROOM I AM SITTING IN IS QUIET AND DARK. NORMALLY, I do my best work in the darkness of my room. So, it's not the lack of light bothering me right now, it's the quiet. I've got a kickass pair of Beats headphones I use when I'm working. I have a few dedicated mixes—all rock and major roll. When I'm struggling, I listen to some music to get me hyped.

But that's not happening now. No, at the moment, I suffer in silence. I need to be able to hear if anyone approaches the classroom. If I'm caught, then I can kiss my days at Camelot University goodbye.

I haven't gotten caught yet, and I don't plan on starting today.

The blinds in the room are open, and soft sunlight streams in, but it's late in the afternoon and slightly overcast. I've kept the lights off to not draw attention into the room. There aren't any more scheduled classes in here today, so it shouldn't be an issue.

I've got my computer open on the nearby desk, and I stand next to the window, surveying the area outside. I'm on the third floor of the Raven building on campus. It provides me a nearly perfect view of The Castle's third-floor administration offices.

Yes, a real fucking castle.

With my handy Zeiss monocular, I get a near-perfect look into Mr. Keith Cannons' office. Cannon is a financial aid manager who can never remember the network password that

changes every thirty days. So he writes it down on a sticky note and sticks it to his computer monitor. The monitor in question happens to face the very window I'm searching for.

I lean over to make sure of Cannon's calendar for the day. Hacking into his email and gaining access to his daily agenda was easy, as his password hasn't changed in over a year. *Shame on him.*

Hacking into Cannon's personal information, along with so many other's on this campus, is way too easy. Every time I steal this kind of shit, I think about how it would be nice to sit these idiots down and tell them to start using their brains. If you don't want to be hacked, start by changing your fucking password once in a while. For the love of all things, don't use words and dates that are important to you.

People like Cannon make what I do so easy. I itch for jobs a little more challenging.

Scanning his agenda, I see he's due for a management meeting in the conference room on the other side of his floor. He will be in the meeting for a while, but what I need will only take a few moments.

Looking out the window, I scan the area. I might not be worried about being caught, but I don't want to get lazy. Always be alert when you're about to steal and spy.

Ha! Great thief motto right there.

My inner joke is cut short when I hear a commotion out in the hall. I lean forward and snap my laptop shut, then stand unmoving. There's a lot of talking outside the room. It sounds like a group of people, and I hope like hell they are about to walk away and not open that door.

Sure enough, the muted voices move their way down the hall.

Phew.

I need to hurry up. I pull out my monocular and slide it between two slats of the blinds. Focusing in on Cannon's office window, I find him still standing in his office. He's leaning over his desk, typing something on his computer.

I peak at my watch and check the time.

You're going to be late.

I focus back on him; he straightens and walks around his desk and out of the office.

About time.

I locate the blue sticky note, and sure enough, the ten-digit code is written in legible scribble.

Bingo.

I pull my phone out of my back pocket with my free hand and slide open the camera app. Bringing the phone up to the monocular, I steady my hand and have the perfect shot of the code.

Voices right outside the door cause me to pause.

Looking over my shoulder at the door, I see the door handle move, and the door opens slightly.

Shiit!

I snap the picture, hoping it's not blurry and shove my phone back into my pocket. I take two steps to the desk and shove the monocular into my bag.

The door opens wider, and the voices filter in.

“Dude, I get it. You really don't want to see Mel, but the library is huge. I feel confident we can study there and not run into her.”

“I don't want to risk it. She's clingy— too clingy—and I really need to study. I'm pretty sure she knows my schedule by heart. She's probably stalking the library, waiting for me.”

The first dude laughs, and I bite back my own. Poor schmuck has himself a stalker.

“Let's just study in here.” Schmuck proceeds to push the door all the way open, and I suck in a breath. Honestly, it doesn't look like I'm up to something, but the fact that the lights are off could set off suspicion. Then again, it's just two dudes hiding from a chick, so it's probably not a big deal.

“Yo! What are you two up to?” a third voice asks.

Shit, I know that voice. Unfortunately, it belongs to my roommate, Warrick Wells., who I lovingly refer to as Wells; he isn't my biggest fan.

Wells and I used to be pretty tight, but we've gone down separate paths since freshman year. Wells got himself a part-time job with on-campus security. Me? I honed my computer technology skills and engaged in *slightly* illegal projects in my spare time.

He'd take one look at me and my computer in a dark classroom and know exactly what I'm up to.

I slowly and quietly push my laptop into my bag as Wells continues the conversation.

“Forget the classroom. There's a nice little study room down on the second floor. Let's head down there; at least we'll be comfortable in hiding.” They all laugh, and the door closes.

That was a close fucking call. I sigh with relief but decide its best if I get out of here. I lift my bag up and over my head, so it hangs across my body, and walk to the door and listen for movement.

Silence.

I open the door and poke my head out. The coast is clear.

Slipping out of the room, I head for the exit right down the hall. Pushing out into the steamy August day, I yank out my phone.

Damn it. The image is blurry. I can only make out about six of the numbers, but the letters are lost to me. Is that an 'o' or a 'd'?

I stop and look up at The Castle across the courtyard.

Think, think.

Ah! That tower. It's angled out from the building enough. I would be able to get a better view of Cannon's office. The tower wasn't utilized anymore, at least that's Wells told me

freshman year. How the hell he knew that I have no flipping clue.

The tower it is then.

I've got about thirty minutes before I risk Cannon returning from his meeting early. He normally closes the blinds in his office around four, so I need to hurry.

It doesn't take me more than a few minutes to cut across the green, lush grass of the courtyard. Everything about this campus is royal. It costs an arm and a leg to attend CamU, but I'm confident that they spend half a million a year to keep the grounds in tip-top shape.

Then again, that's private universities for you.

Walking in the side doors into the Castle, I take a moment to orient myself with the space. There are no classrooms or study rooms here, so after two years on campus, I've only been in here a small amount of time. Turning to the right, I head down the hall. Minutes later, I come to a stairwell in about the same vicinity of the tower.

Here's hoping this takes me to where I need to go.

Three flights later and slightly out of breath, I reach the top. There's a single, giant wooden door at the top of the stairs.

Yahtzee!

I push open the door and slide into the room. There are several windows, and the center is empty except for a single table. The window to the right of the door has a perfect view of Cannon's window.

Reaching into the bag at my side, my fingers brush the smooth plastic finish of my monocular. With it in my grasps, I lower my bag onto the floor. It takes only a second to zoom in on the sticky note, and I read the password out loud to myself.

Attempting another photo, I make sure the code is crisp and easy to read.

"And that's how it's done, baby," I mutter and shove my phone back into my pocket.

“Do you talk to yourself often?” I hear a light, singsong voice.

Was I followed? My head snaps up, and I glance at the door.

No, the door is shut. My gaze travels around the room, coming to a stop when it lands on... hair.

A ton of fucking hair.

It's a soft blonde color, which is normally my preference, but what I can't seem to wrap my head around is why there's so much of it. I pull my eyes away from the mass of hair and realize it's surprisingly attached to a single body. A petite girl sits in the window, her back against the wall, her legs stretched out on the sill and crossed at the ankles. She's tiny enough to fit comfortably in the window.

The hair distracts me, and I realize that while it's braided, it's thick and wild within its bind. It hangs halfway to the floor. I wonder if the tips of her hair hit the floor when she unleashes it.

“Ahem.” She clears her throat.

I'm staring. Making eye contact, I'm greeted with questioning eyes and a small smile.

“So, he talks to himself and has never seen hair before.” The pixie woman tucks a wayward hair behind her ear.

I clear my own throat this time. Where are my manners? I'd say my mother would be appalled, but I don't have one. “I'm sorry, I didn't realize I wasn't alone.”

“You didn't hear the music?” She tips her head toward a laptop on a single square table in the middle of the room. Low music pours through its speakers, some boy band pop song. I'm surprised I didn't hear it until now.

I tug at my favorite blue T-shirt, slightly embarrassed. I'm normally on my A-game when it comes to women, and this one seems to be besting me. “One track mind it seems,” I mutter.

“So it seems. By the looks of it, you were doing something you probably shouldn’t be doing.” She looks almost too innocent to trust, so I can’t help flipping the switch on my other skill. A slow grin, one I’ve been told countless times is sexy as sin, slides across my face. Cocking my head slightly, I wink at her. Lowering my voice, just slightly, I say, “How’s your day going?”

She stares. Her eyebrows pinch together, and she cocks her head slightly. “Did you just smolder?”

My face falls, and I feel ... out of place. Am I in an alternate universe? Since when did my smolder not work on the opposite sex? Not only did it not affect the pixie, but she also called me out on it. *Is my smolder broken?*

My thoughts are interrupted by an amused giggle. “Let me guess, that usually works on the ladies?”

“Yeah, I think I might be broken.” I can’t keep the pout out of my tone.

More giggles from Blondie.

“How about you try introducing yourself? Maybe I have to get to know you before the smolder is effective on me.”

Uh, maybe she’s right. I’m going to have to work my magic later on some random chick to ensure I haven’t lost my smolder mojo.

Shaking off the confusion, I get my head back into the game. “Hi, I’m Ryker Stone.”

ZELLA



“WELL, IT’S NICE TO MEET YOU, RYKER STONE. I’M ZELLA Raps.” I should probably leave my perch on the window, but nothing about this greeting is formal.

“Are you new here?” He eyes me like he’s trying to figure me out.

“I am... a transfer student. Third-year,” I say, knowing it would be his next question.

“Really? Third-year too. Why haven’t we run into each other before?” He crosses his arms but still remains casual. The tension in his shoulders constricts, and his back straightens, like a thick board down his spine. He was trying to distract me, keep my mind off the fact that I caught him doing something inappropriate.

“You mean, how have you not laid eyes on the girl with the hair for days?” Smiling softly, I pull my knees to my chest. My hair has never not been a topic of gossip.

Ryker chuckles around a “yeah” and the sound does something to me.

Small, tiny tingles work their way up my feet to my legs, all the way to my hips and into my belly. Little sparkles of something I’ve never felt before break the surface, causing my heart to race. Well, at least he’s honest.

I shrug a hint of disappointment off, wishing one day I’d meet someone who didn’t notice the hair. “So, it’s not my stunning looks and chipper personality?”

“Actually, it’s all of those things. The hair drew me in. The looks made me pause, and the personality, well, it’s the cherry on top.” He ends his sugary-sweet compliment with the smoldering look he attempted earlier.

This time, it does affect me. I don’t want him to realize it, but the knowing smirk on his face has me fighting to reach up and cover my heated cheeks.

Traitorous cheeks.

Gathering my wits with the help of a good-natured eye roll, I bring the subject back on him. “So, are you a Peeping Tom or something?”

He lets out a snort. “Uh, more like ‘or something’.”

“Hmm. So, what exactly were you doing then?”

He studies me for a moment, contemplating the truth. His pupils dilate just before he lies. “Meh.” He casually lifts a shoulder. “I was stealing a password from a Post-It note.”

What? I glance to the window he stood at and drag my eyes back to him. There’s no way; clearly, he’s pulling my leg here. He doesn’t know me, why would he trust me with the truth?

“Ha-ha. Right. Well, you don’t need to worry about me. I never saw you. You were never here.” I wiggle back into my original position in the window and wink.

He stares at me in wonder for a beat then clears his throat. “Well, I gotta run. It was nice meeting ya, Blondie. Maybe I’ll see ya around.”

Heat floods my cheeks at the nickname. “Just look for the hair,” I add as he salutes me and then slips back out the door as quietly as he came.

My eyes blur as I stare at the door for several minutes.

What the hell just happened?



THE NEXT DAY, I STILL CAN'T SEEM TO SHAKE THAT ODDLY entertaining meeting with Ryker. I really want to know what he was doing. Whatever it was, he probably doesn't want people to know about it. Maybe he would get in a lot of trouble if he were to get caught.

That thought has led me down the path of wondering what he does in his spare time. Does he do unsavory things a lot? Or was yesterday, whatever he was peeking in on, a one-off?

No, something tells me he's probably sneaking around doing things he probably shouldn't more often than not. Consider my interest piqued. I've never meant someone "bad" before.

Not that Ryker Stone is bad per se, but hanging around Ryker might lead to an adventure. Oh, how badly I'd love an adventure right now.

Sigh.

My feet shuffle against the concrete as I wait in line at Jumping Joes, the on-campus coffeehouse, waiting to place my order. Cameron is meeting me, but he must be running late.

Cameron 's been at Camelot University since freshman year, so maybe he knows who Ryker is. The student body isn't massive; there are only about three thousand students. There's a chance, since they are both in their third year, that they've crossed paths.

I'm the next person in line when someone next to me brushes my arm. Turning, I can't hide the smile I get when I see my oldest friend.

"Cam, there you are. For a second, I thought you might have forgotten our standing coffee date."

"Coffee-s'moffee. You don't even drink coffee, Zella."

I shrug; he has a point.

"Do you want me to order for you?" I ask. "You go grab us a seat. It's really busy in here today." I ask and scan the open floor. With less single, small tables, the shop is full of long

wooden tables, both short and high top. The only tables for two are up against the walls in a booth slash table set up.

“Sure. Get me that new Enchanting Frappé everyone’s drinking,” he says.

I confirm I heard him with a nod as I step up to the counter to order, he disappears behind me to find us a place to sit.

“I’ll take a large white peppermint hot chocolate and a large Enchanting Frappé, please.”

The barista runs my student ID card, and I move to the pick-up line to wait for our drinks. A few minutes later, with a hot and cold drink in hand, I find Cameron, who’s managed to get an end seat at one of the long tables. With all my hair, sometimes I feel like I take up too much room when I have to squeeze in between people already camped out in their seats.

I hand the frappé over to Cameron, and he takes a sip.

“How is it? It sure is fun looking.” I nod at the cup, it’s all pink, purples, and is that... glitter?

“It’s dreamlike, actually.” He sucks down more. “Want to try it?”

“No, thank you. One taste may put me into a sugar comma.” I take a sip of my own drink. The WPHC is my go-to drink, even when it’s hot out. My mother never let me get café drinks growing up, but she did buy me those little hot chocolate packets, which I still love.

“Maybe, but this drink is worth it. I feel like it has magical powers. Maybe I’ll turn into some mythical creature. It’s official. This is my favorite drink.” By the looks of it, I might have to agree because it’s almost gone.

“You’re always changing your favorite drink. It never lasts more than a month. You’re like a chameleon, always changing your tastes based on what’s popular.”

He thinks about my statement, puckers his lips, then nods. “True story.”

We chat briefly about our day and our shared class tonight. Cameron has been my best friend for years, ever since he

moved in next door to me when we were seven. Before I transferred to CamU, we talked via email and text nearly every day. Now that we are on the same campus, we get to see each other all the time. Somehow, I'm lucky enough to end up sharing a class with him: Western Culture and Humanities.

It's a core class, one of those classes all graduates are required to take. The class is normally full of sophomore and juniors, but if I'd been here before my third year, I would have taken it as soon as I could. I love the study of human culture, and since I'm majoring in art, learning about culture and art in history is my jam. While this humanities class isn't hard, it's a lot of work since it's a one day a week, ninety-minute night class.

"I've heard that Professor Evans hands out pretty thorough study guides for tests though, so that's good. I think we need to focus more during our study sessions with Wells." Cameron slurps up the last remaining drops of the enchantment spell in a cup then pushes it away.

"For sure, we need to stop shooting the breeze. Or maybe we all just need to hang out more so we don't get side-tracked," I offer. When Wells is around, he's always filling our ears with the gossip around campus. I don't know hardly anyone yet, but Cameron and Wells are entertaining in their stories.

Cameron leans his chin on his fist and smiles at me.

"What?" I tuck a hair behind my ear.

"You said, 'shooting the breeze'."

"Yeah... so?" I'm confused.

"Shit. You 'shoot the shit', Raps. You know, it's okay to swear, right? It's completely acceptable to cuss. You're a college student; your mom isn't going to pop up out of nowhere and scold you for saying a bad word."

I blush. He's right, but old habits die hard. "Swearing doesn't feel right."

"Come on, try it. Say 'shit'. Let's start small."

I shake my head defiantly. “Cameron, don’t make me say that.”

“Do it. I bet you’ll like it.” He’s always pushed me out of my comfort zone. Most of the time, I’ve liked it, but it still takes some mental preparation.

“Shit. That’s all you gotta say, Raps.”

“You’re a bad influence,” I hiss at him and then glance around the room.

“Say it...” He’s leaning in toward me, like he knows I’m about to say it.

“Shit,” I finally say in a hushed whisper.

“Yeah, baby. How’d that feel?” He’s laughing now, and I can’t stop from joining in.

“It felt ... strangely liberating,” I admit.

“Watch out, CamU! Zella Raps is about to shit all over this place.”

“Oh, my gosh Cameron Pascal, that was disgusting.” But we are both laughing, and that’s the normal with Cameron. I can’t believe I went two full years without him in my life every day.

When he went off to college and I stayed behind to commute Solitude Community College, it was one of the saddest days in my life. Mother didn’t want me leaving the nest yet. Cameron begged me for months our senior year to apply to Camelot University, but I didn’t because I didn’t want to face the backlash of being accepted and my mother finding out.

Two years later, the backlash was the least of my worries.

No, finding my birth certificate and noticing it was dated several months after I was born is a huge worry. At first, I didn’t think much of it. The longer I thought about it, the more I realized it didn’t seem right. I did some research and found it’s normal for a birth certificate to be dated only a week or two after the baby is born. I couldn’t stop researching. I kept typing every question that came into my head:

When do you file for a birth certificate?

How long does it take to file a birth certificate?

What does an official birth certificate look like?

Can you change an official birth certificate?

Turns out, when a baby or child is adopted, a birth certificate is amended, and the biological parents are removed and replaced with their adoptive parents. Then the certificate is dated the same day it's filed with the government.

How do I know if I was adopted?

I remember like it was yesterday, staring at the screen, tears filling my eyes. Was I adopted? Mother had never told me as much. I grew up hearing baby stories about myself. She had so many stories.

My father died when I was still in diapers, so I didn't remember him. It had always been Mother and me.

Suddenly, it didn't feel right. Something deep in my bones was telling me there was a missing puzzle piece. Maybe my desire to have adventures had nothing to do with my mother's strict rules, but with a part of me that I had no idea existed. The longing to be free was because I didn't know my true history.

So, I confronted my mother. She tried to play it off by telling me she lost the original and had to file for a new one. But after my research on the topic, I knew it was a lie. My mother had always pushed me academically. Why she assumed I was arrogant on the matter was beyond me.

Finally, she gave in, admitting she and my father adopted me when I was nine months old. The foster family had supplied her with baby photos and stories. She made up the rest.

To bring everything full circle, it was Cameron who suggested I transfer to CamU, and put some much-needed distance between Mother and me. So that's what I did.

It's been a dream for me, yet a nightmare for Mother.

An alarm on my phone dings, telling me it's time to head to my next class. Cameron and I both push out of our seats and drop our empty drink cups into the trash near the door. As we step out into the hot sunny day, a girl shoves a paper in my empty hands.

"The Glass Ball is coming up! It's time to buy your tickets!" She repeats over and over as she shoves fliers into more empty hands and disappears into Jumping Joes.

"What's this?" I ask Cameron as I scan the flimsy, brightly colored pink paper.

"Oh, that. It's a yearly fundraiser the University puts on. It's basically a glorified prom."

I suck in a breath. "I never went to prom." My heart pounds with excitement. I dreamed about going to prom. Cameron asked me both years he went, but Mother always said no.

"I knew you'd want to go." He chuckles next to me as we cross the campus.

"Will you go with me, Cameron? Please, pretty please?" Turning to him, I pull his arm to me and lean my head into his arm. I give him my sweetest, pleading eyes.

He doesn't shake me off but wraps his arm around my shoulders. "Raps, of course, I'll go with you. Not that I don't want to be seen on your arm, Raps, but eventually, you're going to need to find someone you actually want to date."

"Do you already have a date?" Suddenly, I'm worried about overstepping.

"No, not at all, but you really need to get out there. You need to date."

"Pfft. Says whom?"

"Says anyone who finds out that this gorgeous twenty-year-old in her third year of college has never been on a date."

"Do study dates count?" I ask.

"Was kissing involved?"

I blush. There was this one guy last year, James. We had several classes together, so we became study partners.

“Oh, my God, Raps, have you been holding out on me?” Cameron’s jaw nearly hits the ground.

“Shut up. I told you about James. There was kissing, maybe a little over the shirt, over the pants fondling, but that was about it.” James was just as inexperienced as I was, but we had some very fun, unproductive study dates.

“Oh, I remember him. The nerd.”

I push him away. “Shut up. Nerds can be very sexy.”

“Was James a sexy nerd?” He hits me with a look and tells me he’s not going to believe me if I say yes.

I sigh in defeat instead. “What does it matter?”

“You’re right: it doesn’t. What matters is that you need to have some fun. You need the full college experience. Date around, kiss some guys...”

“If I were a dude, would you tell me I needed to sleep around?” I question with a quirk of my eyebrow.

“I absolutely would, but you aren’t a dude. Your Zella Raps, and you need to take it slow. Have fun before you get freaky between the sheets.” He imitates a humping motion, and I push him again.

“This is a strange conversation.”

“We’ve had stranger,” he counters.

I nod, chewing on my lip as I think about dating.

Cameron bumps my shoulder with his as we come to a stop in front of Keane Hall and asks, “A penny for your thoughts?”

“I’m not even sure what to look for in possible dating material.”

“You’ll know.” He sounds so confident.

“How?” I ask in an uncertain tone.

“When you meet a guy that piques your interest, you talk to him. As the conversation progresses, you’ll get a sense if he’s date-worthy or not.”

“Sounds so easy,” I mutter.

“It is, and don’t be afraid to ask him out. Most likely, if you’re both feeling it, he’ll ask you, but don’t be afraid to go for it.” He walks backward, leaving me at the entrance of the Art building.

“It’s going to be fine, Zella, promise. You’ll probably even enjoy dating.”

I give him a tight-lipped smile and wave goodbye as he makes his way to his own class.

All through my graphic design class, I think about what Cameron said. About how for the first time since, well forever, I met a guy and was instantly intrigued by him. Our conversation was certainly entertaining, but he didn’t ask to see me again, so maybe the interest was one-sided.

I hope I see him again. If I’m lucky, maybe he will try his smolder on me again.

Sigh.

A girl can only dream.

RYKER



I STARE OUT OF THE WINDOW IN THE SECOND-FLOOR STUDY room in The Labyrinth, the university's well-funded library. I'm not sure why I'm here exactly, I normally do my studying in my dorm room. I can count the number of times I've stepped foot in this building to study over the past two years on one hand. Now there are other, more exciting, reasons to be here. There are some secluded rooms throughout the building if you just happen to find yourself here with an attractive and willing study partner, if you know what I mean.

Actually, I know why I'm here. I've been on high alert for a tiny blonde since I left the tower yesterday afternoon. I'm not sure when I will see her again, but I know I will. This campus isn't that big. I was on my way back to my dorm after my last class and decided I'd never find her if I hide away in my dorm, so I made a detour to the library. She seemed like the studious-type. I've spent a small amount of time here in the library over the past couple of years, so I pick a study room that is sure to see a lot of foot traffic. Plus, it has a great view of the courtyard. But as I settled in, I realize she probably did her studying in the tower.

I stay put, though. I'm not sure what I'm going to do when I see her again, but she intrigues me.

I've got my Beats on, listening to some old-school The Strokes when I hear a far-off banging. I glance around the tiny unit and see my roommate, Wells, knocking on the glass window-wall. I push my headphones off my ears and rest them

on my shoulders; the music steams from them as Wells opens the door and leans against the frame.

There's a lazy smirk on his face. "I'm surprised the building didn't go up in flames the moment you stepped inside."

"Nah, that's only the Church of Perpetual Sorrows," I joke back. Things between us haven't been easy in a while, so I play along.

"Well, do us all a favor and keep your distance." His easy-going tone clearly isn't something I'm used to. Freshman year, we were paired up with two other guys in the dorm. Despite clicking and having a blast, things changed when he found out about my computer skills. By sophomore year, he wasn't shy about his disdain of my special skill set. Second semester, things went downhill when he took a job with on-campus security. He drew a line in the sand and said if he caught me doing anything illegal, he wouldn't hesitate to turn me in.

"Will do, Officer."

He straightens, and his causal stance is a ghost in the wind.

I play it cool, of course, but it fucking sucks to lose your best friend over something stupid. Truth was, the shit I was doing, it was all stupid. Petty stuff, but it wasn't hurting anyone.

Even though we steer clear of each other most of the time, we still continue to room together. When it was time to log our request for roommates, he asked and I said sure. Now, as upperclassmen, we are in The Lofts and share a two-bedroom suite.

Really, I didn't care to have a new roommate; I'm kind of a loner. Wells feels it's his civic duty to keep an eye on me or some shit. *Whatever*. Our situation could be better; it would be nice to be friends again, but what we've got going on works.

"So, you planning on coming to class tonight?" He's clearly got his panties in a twist now that I called him officer. I don't know why it pisses him off. I've been doing it since he became a student officer.

“What’s it to you?” Humanities really isn’t my cup of tea. I went the first week to check it out but didn’t go back last week. Honestly, hadn’t planned on going this week either.

Wells shakes his head and looks to the ceiling. “You know what, I don’t even know.”

“It’s not like I’m going to get dinged for attendance. The Prof doesn’t take it. And I can always get access to study notes, and well, other things.” I smirk at him when his eyes narrow at my admission. I’ve got an old hook-up in the class, and we have an arrangement: she gives me copies of her notes, and I make sure her drunk social media posts are wiped before her parents see them.

The girl likes to party. Personally, I think she should embrace her crazy, but she’s afraid Mommy and Daddy will cut her off. Wells doesn’t need to know any of this. Let him think I hack into the school’s server for the notes and test answers.

Don’t get me wrong, I will, and have if I needed to, but not for this class.

“I’ve wondered for a couple years now, how are you still here? Your attendance rating has got to be under fifty percent.” He crosses his arms over his chest, acting like the tool he pretends to be.

Chuckles burst out of my mouth. “You really want to know?”

Wells takes a deep, calming breath. I can’t help but be entertained at his annoyance.

Changing tactics, Wells walks into the room and leans his back against the glass. “How’s your uncle?”

I know how to push his buttons, but I give the dude some credit, he knows how to push mine as well. I have more control over my emotions than he does, so I keep the smile plastered on my face.

“Uncle is good.” It’s all I offer.

“Still grumpy about your choice of extra-curriculars?” He’s referring to the fact that on occasion I’ve been on the top of the Dean’s shit list, and therefore, my uncle’s.

My parents died when I was a toddler. It sucked. I spent a few years in the system before my dad’s long-lost older brother decided to do me a solid and take me in. By take me in, I mean, he sent me off to boarding school. Since I’ve been in his care, eleven or so years now, I’ve only spent about a year’s worth of time with the old ass.

He’s a self-made millionaire, some high-powered real estate mogul living the ultimate bachelor life. He didn’t want his lifestyle cramped by some bratty nephew he didn’t want.

Don’t get me wrong, I’m grateful he pulled me from the system. However, my multi-millionaire guardian does not provide everything I want and need. He gives me just enough to get by. I never had nice, new things like my rich-as-fuck classmates, and I never seemed to fit in with the students at the expensive boarding schools I attended.

But I adapted. It’s what I do.

If I’d been left in the system, I wouldn’t have gotten the education I did. While I didn’t love living away at school, I did relish in the fact that I stayed in one place year after year. I experienced teachers who cared more for their students than my uncle ever did for me. I hadn’t planned on going to college, since I didn’t want to pay for it, but I was surprised when he requested I go to his alma mater. One hundred percent paid for, plus a tiny expense account for school-related expenses. I thought, why the hell not?

I’m living a pretty damn easy life. I do what I want. I hack into shit for fun. I do just enough school work to keep my grades passable. As long as I keep up my grades or don’t get caught hacking, I don’t hear from my uncle.

But, over the past couple of years, I’ve been stupid, and I’ve gotten caught. Petty shit, mostly, but I’ve had to answer to my uncle. I learn from my mistakes. I get smarter.

I chuckle at Wells's question. My uncle's stance on my hacking hobby remains the same. "He's always been grumpy and will die grumpy."

"True that." He laughs, and for the first time this year, I think we are actually enjoying each other's company. The moment ends, and he pushes off the wall. "Alright, well, see ya around, Ryker."

He gets a few feet out of the room when I call him back. He doesn't seem perturbed when he turns and walks back in. He steps up to the table, coming further into the room than before.

"Hey, there's this new student. Transfer. Tiny. Blonde. Lots of hair." I lift my hands and stretch my arms out to the side of my head, then drop them to the side. "Like long. Very long hair."

His eyes narrow. "Why?"

"I just met her. I haven't seen her before. Call me curious."

"I know her." Is all he offers.

"Oh, great to hear, I'm happy for you. Carry on." Clearly, he's turned back into a tool bag.

"Why do you want to know her?" He studies me, thinking I'm up to no good.

"I didn't say I did. Just wanted to know who she was." I don't mention I know her name. I also ignore the fact that I could easily log into the school registrar's system and look her up and find out her schedule, but that feels an awful lot like stalking.

He takes another assessing glance my way and puffs his chest. "She's one hundred percent *not* your type, Ryker."

The dude has a crush. I lean back in my seat and cross my arms, grinning. I can't say I'm happy about this, but I probe. "Ah, so you've got a thing for Blondie?"

"No. She's my friend. That's it." He looks flustered. It's easy to read the embarrassment on his face.

“You mean, she friend-zoned you. Shit, bro. That sucks.” This is good news, but bros before hoes and all that, I can’t let it on that I’m happy about this information.

“Not at all. Just friends. She’s not into dating. Anyway, see ya around.” He turns and stalks out.

Right before he closes the door behind him, he looks back at me. “Maybe if you came to class, you could get your questions answered on your own instead of camping out in the library, waiting for a glimpse.”

Damn. He’s on to me.

A few hours later, I walk into the small, forum-style classroom. It’s a large class of about a hundred or so. This size class isn’t the standard here at CamU.

I casually walk up the stairs of several rows of seats, pretending to look for an open seat. About mid-way up the room, I see her.

Her hair is in another braid, and she’s laughing at the guy sitting next to her. Situated on her other side is Wells. He wears the same smile on his face as the guy making her laugh. Immediately, I get it. If I had her laughing like that, I’d sport that same look.

I notice the empty seats in the row in front of her and take my chance. I side-step down the row, not bothering to apologize to the people I’m bumping into.

Before I have a chance to say something to her, her bright green eyes find mine. Her laughter dies off, but the smile on her face remains. She remembers me.

“Hey there, Blondie. Fancy meeting you here.” I drop my bag into the seat and notice Wells out of the corner of my eye, shaking his head.

I should be worried about what he might tell her, but turns out, I don’t care.

She smirks. “You don’t remember my name, do you?”

I wink at her. “Sup, Wells.”

Turning around, I sit down in my seat and hear him grumble behind me.

I feel several pairs of eyes bore into the back of my head. Wells, because he's worried about my intentions with the shortcake, and the other guy next to her is probably pissed I just stole her attention away.

And the third pair of eyes, the only ones I care about, belong to the shortcake herself, Zella Raps. I have not been able to get her out of my head. I need to see this through, just so I can get back to my normal routine.

ZELLA



HE'S SITTING RIGHT IN FRONT OF ME. I'M USUALLY A COOL cucumber, but this guy in front of me makes me giddy. He's all I've been able to think about, and I have to admit, I've been looking for him everywhere.

I'm surprised he just magically showed up in my class. *Is he in this class?* Surely, he wouldn't crash just because I'm in here. Suddenly I flush; I can't believe I even thought that. I blink quickly, forcing myself to stop staring at the back of the guy's head.

He has some really nice hair, though. It's full and such a deep, dark brown that it looks black. My fingers itch to touch it, but I pull them off the desk and fold them into my lap. There, they are less likely to reach out and run through the thick locks of soft hair.

I'm sure he can feel my stare, mostly because I can feel Cam's beside me. I look toward Cam, and yup, he's staring me down. The smirk on his face tells me he's on to me and knows what I'm thinking. I glare at him. He huffs out a silent snort.

I try to focus on the professor, but my concentration is broken moments later when I remember Ryker and Wells know each other. I straighten with the realization and peek at Wells. He's slumped back in his seat and looks grumpy.

Hmmm. I wonder if he and Ryker don't get along. Would Wells tell me more about Ryker?

I bit the inside of my cheek as I contemplate where this evening has gone.

After my conversation with Cameron about the Glass Ball, I considered asking Wells to be my date. I've only known him for a few weeks, but he's become a good friend. Besides Cam, he's one of the people I hang out with the most here.

He's kind, funny, and good-looking. Plus, he doesn't get distracted by all my hair. Trust me, it's a thing.

Only, I'm not attracted to him. I don't have butterflies when I see him. I don't have thoughts about him that make me blush and hope no one is around to see my reddened face.

Ryker, on the other hand, causes all that and more. The thought of asking Ryker to go to the ball with me makes me nervous. He'd probably turn me down. I'm not really up for my first date request to be rejected.

I'm lost in thought again, staring into Ryker's hair, when I'm elbowed in the side by Wells.

I turn to him and glare. "What?" I whisper.

"You're staring holes into his head. Trust me, he doesn't need anymore," Wells hisses back.

I give him another glare for good measure and lean back in my seat. I look down at my notebook and realize I haven't taken one note. Normally, I'm a very detailed notetaker. Apparently, not tonight.

I don't want to risk drawing attention to myself, so I scribble down a note on my blank paper then turn the sheet toward Wells.

Do you know him well?

Wells looks at my note, reads it, and rolls his eyes. *Well, dang!* He lazily reaches over and writes his reply.

I do. He's no good for you.

My eyebrows dip in confusion. I ask why.

Trust me.

I bite my lip. I do trust Wells, but there's something about Ryker. I don't believe he's bad. *How is he no good for me?* Biting my lip, I shake my head at our notes. I make a mental

note to have him explain his reasoning later. Right now, I need to focus on class.

A long thirty minutes later, class is dismissed. The butterflies in my belly take flight as I anticipate interacting with Ryker. The students around us are chatting, packing up, and leaving. I slowly close my binder, lean over, and put it away—dragging the whole process out and waiting for Ryker to turn around.

But he doesn't. He doesn't move to stand.

I must look confused because both Wells and Cameron are staring at me. My eyes go wide. "What?" I ask.

Cameron chuckles, and Wells huffs.

"You've got it bad, girlfriend." Cameron laughs.

Wells shakes his head.

I give them both a look to shut up. The last thing I need is Ryker thinking I've got a crush. Well, I do, but he doesn't need to know that yet. I drag my eyes back to where he sits.

Cameron stands, leans over, and pinches his lips together. "He's asleep." He's doing everything he can to not to laugh.

"For Christ's sake," Wells mutters. "Just leave him. Let's go eat."

I stand and sling my backpack over my shoulder. I turn to Wells. He should be ashamed of himself. "You stop it. How would you like it if your friends just left you asleep somewhere?" These boys are using up all my glares tonight.

"Friends. Eh, I don't think so. Maybe a long, long time ago, but not now. And you don't even know him." He sounds like a teenage boy. Cameron went through a phase in high school where he was all growly and whinny when he didn't get his way. This is Wells right now.

"I'm going to wake him," I insist.

"Just leave him," Wells mutters.

I take a few steps to the side and step over the unoccupied seats to stand in his row, next to him. He's leaning back in his

seat with his head leaning on his fist. His arm rests on the seat's connecting desk.

I lean down and place my hand on his shoulder and shake him gently. "Hey, Ryker, wake up."

His body tenses, and his head pops up. He looks at me and blinks, like he isn't sure what or who he woke up to. Next, he looks around the room and curses under his breath.

"Riveting stuff, huh?" I can't help my smile. He's really cute. He's just out of it enough that I can tell he probably fell asleep shortly after class started. Not to mention the red mark where his head rested on his fist.

He stretches to his full height. He's so much taller than me. I'm a shorty, so ninety percent of the people I meet are taller than me. He's got at least eight inches on me. The hem of his shirt rides up as he lifts his arms above his head. My eyes snag on the tan skin of his lower abdomen. I drag my eyes away, and as I travel back up his body, I notice his smirk before I find chocolate brown eyes watching me.

I turn fifty shades of red right there, the second our eyes connect. I hear a chuckle from behind me, but I'm stuck in place. I can't move my feet. I can't take my eyes off his, and I can't speak. *What is happening to me?*

The chuckle turns into someone clearing their throat.

Cam nudges my shoulder from the level I just left. "Zella, dinner. Let's eat."

Ryker breaks our eye contact when he slides his gaze to Cam. It gives me just enough time to shake myself out of this daze.

I turn away from Ryker, then pause, look at him, and smile. "Want to get some dinner with us?"

Wells groans, and Cameron might have clapped. I'm not sure.

Ryker's slow and sexy grin nearly melts me from within. "I'd love to."

I don't want him to see what the nickname does to me, so I quickly turn and walk out of the row.

Cameron falls into step with me as we walk down the stairs toward the exit.

“Oh, Zells, I like where this is going.”

I smile back at him because I can't help it. I do too.

Behind us, I hear Wells laying into Ryker. There are still enough students in the room that I'm unable to pick up any words. I look over my shoulder at them, and Ryker is watching me. He winks and...

Ugh. I've got to get myself under control. He cannot have this much effect on me. And even so, he can't know he does.

I need to dig deep for my inner Taylor Swift and show him who's boss. I have approximately sixty seconds before we are out of the room in a wide-open hall. Not to mention, I just invited him to dinner with us.

Twenty minutes later, we are at the Dining Hall and each of us are moving through the lines in the respective sections. Cameron and I are going through the grill line, Wells picks up some sushi, and Ryker—well, I have no idea where he went off to. I briefly wonder if he changed his mind about eating with us and left. I try not to look around the room for him. Cameron would only give me a hard time about it.

Play it cool, Zella, play it cool.

After paying for our food, Cameron and I spot Wells sitting at a four-top table. He's alone. We sit down at the circular table, leaving the chair between me and Wells empty.

I force myself not to look around the hall and make eye contact with Wells.

“He's trouble, Zella.” His voice is just above a whisper.

“Why?” I put down the straw I worked on opening. I want to know why Wells doesn't like him.

“Let's just say he doesn't always feel the need to abide by the law. You don't want to get messed up with that.”

“Like what kind of things?” Cameron asks through a mouthful of cheeseburger.

Wells ignores his own food and leans in toward me. “He’s a hacker.”

Wells stares us down like he expects our reaction to be dramatic, but Cameron doesn’t react. I, on the other hand, lean back in my chair and run through my interactions with Ryker so far.

At the tower, he told me he was taking note of the password so he could hack into the school network to change a grade. I laughed at his story. But now, maybe it wasn’t the lie I thought it was.

“You’re going to bite a hole in that lip there, Zella.” The man in question slides into the last chair and plops his sandwich down in front of him, then slides his messenger bag over his head onto the floor next to him.

I free my lip from my teeth and smile. So, the story about stealing the password wasn’t a lie.

“Sushi? Pretentious much?” Ryker nods to the sushi on Wells’s plate.

Cameron snickers, and I bite the inside of my cheek. We are always giving Wells a hard time about his affinity for sushi. Cameron doesn’t mind it, but I’m not a fan.

Wells huffs, opening his chopsticks, snatches up a roll, and he shoves it in his mouth.

“So, Ryker, what did you think about that class tonight?” Cameron asks between bites.

“Dude, that’s some boring shit, all right. That’s why I skipped last week.” Ryker’s admission stings just a bit, as I find it all fascinating.

Cameron chuckles and gestures to me with his thumb. “Our girl here is an art major, so it’s right up her alley.”

“Art major, huh?” He looks at me, assessing me. “I guess I can see that.”

“What’s your major?” I break into the conversation. Less about me, I want to learn more about him.

“Computer technology,” he supplies.

“Is that the degree most hackers get?” I dip my chicken finger into ranch dressing, then ketchup. Cameron chokes on his drink next to me, and when I look up to check on him, he’s laughing. Wells smashes his lips together, fighting the laughter as well.

When my gaze slides to Ryker’s, he’s staring at me. He doesn’t look offended, but he’s not smiling.

I play back what I asked, and oh crap. But Ryker turns his glare toward Wells. “You told her I was a hacker? Really? Is this how you want to play this, Officer?”

Wells’s smile fades. There is some serious tension between these two.

“I told her what she needed to know before getting involved with you. It’s only fair.” The anger pouring from Ryker is palpable. Cameron and I sit in silence, watching the scene unfold.

Then, in an unexpected move, Ryker shakes off his anger, his shoulders relax, and he nods. “You know, you’re right.” Ryker turns back to his sandwich and takes a bite.

Wells looks confused, and I’m not sure it’s safe for anyone else to talk yet.

After he swallows his food, he adds, “The more we know about each other now, the more fun our first date will be.” Then he winks at me.

Heat consumes me. Surely, my face is candy apple red right now. If I’m not careful, he’ll stop calling me Blondie in exchange for Red.

Cameron whistles while Wells rolls his eyes and mutters a curse under his breath.

“So, now that you know what I do in my spare time, what do you want to know? I’m an open book. However, I can’t

indulge too much with Captain Goody Two-Shoes here, or he might get his panties in a twist.”

Wells growls next to him.

I open my mouth to ask something when Cameron interrupts, “I’d like to know how the two of you became so close?”

Ryker chortles, but it’s Wells who replies, “Roommates since freshman year.”

Wait.

“You mean you are still roommates?” Cameron stammers.

“He’s the best roomie a guy could want.” Ryker looks affectionately at Wells, clearly to annoy him some more.

“How do you not kill each other?” Cam’s on the ball.

I’m fascinated with these two strange boys.

“We stay out of each other’s way.” Wells shoves another sushi in his mouth, and Ryker nods in agreement.

After that, Cameron and I steer the conversation to school and our class. We’ve got our first test coming up soon, and we have a lot to cover in a short amount of time. We make plans to study, and to my delight, Ryker joins our study group. I’m slightly worried Wells might not approve, but oddly enough, he doesn’t seem annoyed that we’ve added a fourth to our group. Maybe deep down, the two are friends, they just went in different directions. Maybe it’s a love-hate relationship.

I don’t know. But I want to learn everything there is about Ryker Stone, and I can’t wait until I get to see him next.

RYKER



SITTING AT MY DESK IN MY DORM ROOM, I WRAP UP MY computer project for class when I see I have an unread email.

The subject: Your Resume.

Immediately, I'm suspicious because I don't have a resume, at least not one in the traditional sense. I have the equivalent to one that I use on hacker job boards.

Once I open the email, I quickly realize it's in reference to the resume that wouldn't get me a part-time job flipping burgers. The sender's address is a mix of numbers and letters, and by the looks of it, I'm going to have to do some digging to figure out who it's from. But it's the contents of the email that captures my attention.

Ryker, your resume is impressive, though not unique. I have a job offer that I think only you would be able to pull off. Please contact me if you are interested in more details.

Cryptic as fuck, that's for sure.

I have a VPN, so all my Internet usage is done securely and nearly untraceable, though it's not iron-clad. Whoever sent this email took a risk. My interest piqued, so I shoot back a quick email. Minutes tick by and my computer dings with a reply. The content of the message is a username and a link to the ultra-secure messaging system most security-conscious computer users have on their systems. So, I pull up the software on my laptop and log on.

I'm online for barely three seconds when a message box pops up. The same username from the email has sent me job

information. Details about the job fill the screen.

Holy shit-tarts.

This job is... it's the real deal. All the hack jobs I've done have been child's play compared to this one.

Hack into the Camelot University bank account, containing all the fundraising money, and transfer the funds to several offshore accounts. The payout? Fifteen percent commission.

Last year, the school brought in more than two hundred thousand dollars. *Shit*. That would be thirty grand. Granted, thirty grand wouldn't come close to covering bail if the hacker got caught, but it sure is a pretty figure.

There is a lot to consider, and with all the jobs I take, I consider the payout and the potential of being caught, thoroughly.

I glance at the time and realize this whole exchange has me running late. I'm going to have to revisit this tonight. I log out of the messaging app and snap my laptop shut. The messaging system shows I've read the details, but I don't reply. The history of this conversation won't be saved, but if I decide to take the job, I'll have all the details I need.

Right now, I'm late for a date—a study date with Zella and company. I quickly make my way through campus while contemplating the job offer.

Several minutes later, I make it into one of The Labyrinth Library's elevators, I stare down at my phone, rereading another email that just came in. I'm not one to check my email multiple times throughout the day. It's normally just school-related, sale ads, and a few techie newsletters. However, this current email string has me pretty damn invested.

You have five days to let us know if you want the job.

That's a relief. Four days is plenty of time to assess the risk.

I step off the elevator to the second floor, which is comprised mostly of study rooms. I chuckle at the fact that

I've been in the library twice in one week. While I'm not big on study groups, I want to spend more time with Zella, even if it means more time with Wells.

We've avoided each other since the dinner incident a couple weeks ago when he tried to make me look like a bad guy in front of her. Since then, I've been to class once, which was when Zella invited me to their study session.

They didn't tell me what room they would be in, so I start walking. It doesn't take me long before I see them through the windowed wall. I slow my stride and take in the sight before me. Zella is sitting next to Cameron, and Wells sits across from him, with his back toward me and the door. Zella has a smile on her face while she listens intently to the conversation.

I eye Cameron and wonder if something is going on between the two of them. They are always together, as I've seen them from afar several times over the past couple of weeks. They seem close, but I can't tell if it's just friendship or something more.

I'm not sure there's room for one more suitor in the tiny room. Coming to a halt at the realization, I give this some thought. Clearly, Wells is into her. Though, I know Wells also has an on-again, off-again girlfriend. Maybe that ended. With the two of them, do I really want to throw my hat in the ring? I don't normally work for girls' attention, never had to. I've never had to fight another dude for one either.

Something about Zella makes me want to jump in and fight for her. The innocence that moves around her is alluring, yet when she talks, she's such a strong and optimistic personality. Not to mention the way she bites her lip just draws me in every time. She demands my full attention. Without permission, my legs move again, as if my body is drawn to her as much as my mind. I guess I'm doing this.

I'm a few feet from the door when Zella spots me. The smile that crosses her face when she sees me makes me want to puff out my chest and stake claim no matter who I'm up against. But I keep my cool. After all, I have a reputation to maintain.

“Ryker! You made it.” She moves her books around, making room for mine on the table in front of her.

“Do you not own a watch?” Cameron mutters beside her.

“Yeah, something you should know about Ryker is that he’s always late. He’s too cool to be on time,” Wells adds.

I eye him, though, because his tone isn’t laced with annoyance. I focus back on her and drop my bag to the table. “Hey there, Blondie.”

Cameron lifts his arms in a confused gesture. “What about us? No, ‘hello there, Wellsy’ or ‘hi, Cam?’”

They all snicker, but I play along. “She was the only one happy to see me. Plus, I’m only here for her anyway. You tools, I can do without.”

Zella surprises me and doesn’t blush. Normally, it’s all she does around me. Wells chuckles, and Cameron acts perturbed at my response. I really hope he isn’t into Zella as well. I like the guy; I think we could be friends.

“Okay, so what did I miss? Have you figured out how to ace this test next week?” The last thing I want to do is study. I’d rather spend the next hour getting to know Zella, alone, but I’ll have to make do.

I’ll ask her out on a date, preferably without twiddle dee and twiddle dumb around.

“Ah, not exactly. These two like to gossip.” She points with her thumb at the guys. “It’s always best if we get that out of the way first.”

They both nod and grumble their agreement.

“Time to start though,” Zella tells us.

We all pull out our study guide, notebooks, and textbooks. I’m not a notebook kind of guy, so I slide my laptop out of my bag, open up a new doc, and get ready to do this thing.

Working our way through the guide, I realize how fucking lost I am in this class. I missed three classes and fell asleep

through one of the two I've attended. So yeah, I'm fucked when it comes to this text next week.

Wells elbows me, and I snap my head toward him. He's giving me a dirty look. That's when I realize that they've been talking to me.

"Ryker, you alright?" Zella asks in her sugary soft voice.

"Yeah, yeah. Sorry." I clear my throat. "Did you ask me a question?" I look at her and grin; I'm not sure I love the concern etched on her face.

"Dude, you are not ready at all for this test, are you?" Wells narrows his eyes at me.

Not getting into this. "Nah, I'm fine. Just preoccupied," I tell him. I glance at Zella, and she still looks concerned.

I'm probably going to fail this test. Being here for this study group should help, but I can't focus, and I feel like an idiot next to these two guys. They make me look like a lazy asshole who doesn't go to class. I mean, I *don't* go to class, but I'm not a lazy asshole. I do other shit when I skip class.

"Let's keep going." I motion to the table and look down at the guide.

"Actually, I've gotta head out. I've got a date." Wells closes his book, stacks his papers on top of it, then shoves them into his backpack.

Interesting. "Oh yeah, with Louisa?" I ask him while looking at Zella, out of the corner of my eye, for her reaction. She's smiling. Hmm. Based on that, I'd say she's not interested in Wells.

He stands. "Yeah, we've been talking again."

"I'd love to meet her sometime." Zella beams up at him.

Yeah, definitely not interested.

"Yeah, sure. Maybe we can get together this weekend or something?" Then he says his goodbyes and exits.

I kind of hope Cameron scrams too, but he leans back in his seat, looking all comfy.

“So, Ryker. I’ve got to ask. What kind of hacking do you do?” He crosses his arms over his chest and looks genuinely interested. If it weren’t for his posture, I would have said he was trying to be a dick, but I don’t think that’s the case.

“Nothing major. Just a little of this, a little of that. Nothing that would get me into a lot of trouble if I were caught, which won’t happen.” I wave my hand in dismissal. I don’t bother keeping the arrogance under wraps.

Cameron smirks at my reply, but when I look at Zella, she’s twisting her finger in her hair and is wearing a tiny frown.

Damn it. That does not bode well for me. “Does that bother you?” I’d rather get this out of the way now.

Her eyebrows dip. “No, but I have a question.”

“Shoot.”

She bites her lip, pondering what she’s about to ask. “Would you be able to hack your way into some closed adoption files and find out who someone’s birth parents are?”

Well, I wasn’t expecting that. I blink a moment. “Whose parents?” I cut my gaze at Cam; his mouth is slightly agape and he’s looking at her with sympathy.

She looks down at her fingers, sitting on the table. I can barely hear her when she says, “Mine.”

I clear my throat but don’t break my eye contact. “Okay.” I drag out the word.

Zella heaves a heavy sigh. “I recently found out I was adopted, and I’d like to know who my birth parents are. I don’t know if I want to meet them, but I want to know they exist. Or that they at least did at one time.”

Fair enough. But I have questions. “How did you find out?”

I was applying for a passport, and I needed my birth certificate. I didn’t notice it at first, but the issue date was nearly a year after I was born.”

Next to her, Cameron grumbles and shakes his head, “God damn passport.”

Zella glances at him, smiles sadly, then continues on. “I did some digging and found out the only real reason this would occur is if something changes on your certificate, such as the change of parents in case of an adoption. Arming myself with knowledge, I confronted my mother about it, and after she realized lying to me wasn’t going to work anymore, she finally told me the truth. She adopted me when I was nine months old.”

“Does she not know anything about your birth parents?” I wonder how Zella managed to turn out so sweet when raised by someone who seems so controlling and very honest. After hearing muttered comments from Cam, it sounds like she was also overprotective and not extremely supportive.

“She said it was a closed adoption. That she has zero information on them.”

Cameron rolls his eyes and crosses his arms.

I lift an eyebrow and look at him. “You think differently?”

“Yeah, her mom’s a piece of work. It wouldn’t surprise me if she had names.” I nod.

Zella sighs. “Anyway, I was just wondering, since you have the skills, is that something you could figure out. I would pay you, of course.”

I reach up and scrub a hand down my chin. “Look, Blondie, I want to help you, I really do, but hacking into government servers, that’s risky.” I’m going with complete honesty here.

Cameron lifts his eyebrows and mutters, “Right.”

So, for good measure, I add, “Risky, but I could do it. It wouldn’t be easy; there are a lot of steps, and it wouldn’t be a quick hack. The government is extremely protected, and not to mention, how much trouble I’d get into if I were caught. The job would also be expensive, and I wouldn’t want to charge you for it.”

“How noble of you,” Cameron bites out.

“Stop, Cam.” Zella shoots him a glare. “I understand, Ryker. I didn’t realize it was so risky. It all makes sense though.”

I feel bad. Real bad. Everything in me is telling me to throw caution to the wind and do this for her. “I could do some digging. Maybe you have rights as an adoptee to information.”

This has her perk up a bit. “Really?”

“Yeah, let me see what I can do. What’s your birth date, and what was the state your birth certificate filed in?” I really don’t know much about her at all.

“February sixth, two thousand. Mississippi. Solitude, to be exact.”

I jot the date and town down on the corner of my study guide.

“It’s a rather fitting name for the place,” Cameron adds.

Cocking a brow, I get more intel on Cameron and Zella’s relationship. “And you’ve been there?”

“Born and raised,” is all he offers.

So, they grew up together. “Ah, so you two.” I wave my pen between the two of them.

Zella blushes, and Cameron chuckles and answers, “Best friends since seven.”

I eye Cam. Who has a female best friend for that long and doesn’t want to bang her? He reads my mind because he leans back in his chair and smirks.

Zella clears things up. “Yup. Best friends right here. I love him like my brother.”

Hmm. My skepticism was enough for her to read since she feels like she has to reassure me. Cameron, though, his expression never changes at her brother comment. So maybe he does only see her as a friend.

Cameron breaks the awkward moment. “Well, this has been fun, but I need to run.”

“Yeah, I’ve got dinner plans with my roommate, Milani.” Zella says as if she had forgotten about her plans.

I shut my laptop and gather my things along with Zella and Cam. Zella stands and slips on her light purple ballet flats. I’ve started to notice the girl prefers to be barefoot.

We are quiet as we file out of the study room. Cameron chats with Zella about nothing of importance as we take the elevator down to the first floor and leave the library. Once outside the building, Zella catches my arm as I turn to walk in the opposite direction.

Looking down at her tiny hand wrapped around the crook of my elbow causes me to pause and wonder what it would be like to have her in my arms. I pull my eyes to her face, and I’m greeted with that amazingly sweet smile of hers.

“Hey, whatever you find will be more than what I have now, so thank you. And don’t sweat it if you can’t find anything at all. Maybe, it was just meant to be—me never knowing them.” Her smile turns sad, and I immediately fight off the urge to tell her I’ll find her parents.

I bite my tongue because the last thing I want to do is promise something I can’t deliver. So, I go with, “I’ll do what I can, Zella.”

There’s no way around it. I know I’ll be spending my night and next several days trying to find out as much as I can about Zella’s parents.

ZELLA



“REMEMBER, AS YOU COME IN, PLEASE FIND YOUR TEST FROM last week. If you don’t pick it up, the grade won’t change. It’s already been entered in the grade book,” the prof tells us as we all file into the room. We had our first Western Culture and Humanities test last week, and while I thought it was pretty easy, Wells and Cameron did not. I’m guessing, due to Ryker’s blasé attitude toward it, that it was hard for him too.

Before taking the test, we were instructed to fold it in half, write our names on the back upper corner, which now makes sense as I can see all our tests piled up on the desk, in the folded form.

“A-F is in on the desk to the left. G-N on my desk and O-Z on the podium. Please be quick about it, people,” the prof yells again.

I quickly look through the stack and find my test. As I climb the stairs to our normal seats, I open up my test and see a neatly written “A” in the corner. I smile. *All in a day’s work.* Both Cameron and Wells follow behind me as we find out seats and sit.

“So, how’d you do, boys?”

“Meh, C plus,” Wells grumbles.

Cameron shows me his test, and I’m happy to see a B minus.

I pat him on the back. “Nice job, Cameron.”

Just then, Ryker shoves into the row in front of Cameron and me and folds himself into the seat next to Wells.

“What about you? How did you do, Ryker?” Cameron asks.

Ryker casually shrugs a shoulder. He opens up his test to see his grade. His facial expression doesn't change when he says, “Fine.”

I can't tell if it's the truth or if he's just playing it off.

The prof calls the class to order, and Ryker and Wells turn forward. I pull out my notebook and pen, and as I look up toward the front of the room, I catch a glimpse of Ryker's test. The way it sits on the tiny desk in front of him leaves a gap between the folded pages. In red ink, I see a “D”.

Bummer. I knew he was struggling during our study session, but I didn't realize it was that bad. I wonder if he'd take my help if I offered to tutor him. This stuff is easy, so helping him catch up would be easy.

Right then, I make a decision to offer my help next time we are together.

Later that evening, after eating dinner with the guys. Cameron heads off to Atlantica Athletic Center, and Wells, to meet Louisa.

Ryker walks me home. He's unusually quiet tonight, and I wonder if his grade has got him down.

“Hey, so I accidentally saw what you got on your test.” I give him a shy smile. It was an accident, but I was curious.

He grins down at me. “Oh yeah, an accident, huh? Nosy much?” He bumps the side of his arm into mine, and I know he doesn't really care that I saw.

“Yeah. I wanted to tell you that if you are interested, I'd happily be willing to help you get caught up.” *Please say yes, please say yes.*

“Is that so?” He looks away from me and focuses on the path in front of us.

“Culture and Humanities is kind of my wheelhouse.” I don’t care; I’ll toot my own horn. Especially when it gets him to smile. “I could help you in exchange for finding info on my parents. I’d be happy with any kind of information you could find me.”

My hopes are high, but he’s still looking forward and not at me.

This isn’t going to go my way.

He twists his lips as he considers his words. “Look, Blondie, your offer is appreciated, but I don’t need help. I can pull things around on my own.”

My hope deflates like a day-old balloon. I wanted to help him, but I also wanted an excuse to spend time with him, alone.

“Hey.” He chuckles as he slows our pace to stop. “That’s the saddest look I’ve seen all day.” When he turns toward me, his normal, easy-going smirk is back. “Are you sad because you don’t get to teach someone all you know about extremely boring humanities stuff or that you don’t get to spend one-on-one time with yours truly?” He leans down a little as he’s so much taller than me. “Cause I gotta tell ya, if you want some one-on-one time, all you gotta do is ask.”

I’ve done a good job at mastering not blushing at everything he says. At this moment, it’s taking everything in me to fight the smolder.

I give him my sweetest smile. “No, I just felt bad for you and that lonely D.” I wink at him and start walking again. I leave him chuckling behind me. Seconds later, he catches up with me. “You sure are fun, Blondie.”

I momentarily tuck my chin into my shoulder while I hide my pleased smile.

“Oh, I did want to tell you, I have actually been looking into your birth parents. I don’t have a lot of information, but I’m getting there.”

I stumble to a halt at his words. I can’t believe it. He might actually find them. I know he said he was just looking into

things, but I currently have nothing to go on, so whatever he finds will be amazing. “Really?” I squeak.

“Really, really.” The smile on his face is so authentic, I can’t stop myself. I jump into his unsuspecting arms and hug him.

I repeatedly thank him, and when I finally start to pull away from him, I realize he’s holding me up. I’m a good eight inches shorter than him, so my feet aren’t even touching the ground.

I look at his face, and all I see is warmth. I can see it on his face; molten heat fills his eyes, and I can tell that this moment means as much to him as it does me. Not only can I see it, but I can also feel the lust as if it’s dripping off him. A million tiny tingles scatter themselves throughout my body, the sliver of space between us sparks with want. I can feel my body lean closer. He glances down at my lips, and on impulse, I bite the corner of my bottom lip.

“Geez, Blondie, remind me to tell you good news more often.” He wiggles his eyebrows.

If I weren’t already in his arms, I’d swoon.

But the trance is broken as he slowly lets me drop back to the ground. A thought crosses my mind: I’ve been wanting to ask him to be my date to the Glass Ball.

I’m feeling lucky, so I press my luck.

“So, that ball the school has... I was thinking I’d really like to go. I’ve never been to a dance or a fancy event. Would you maybe, want to go with me?” My heart pounds in my chest as I draw out the words.

His lips press together in a slight grimace. He leans back on his heels, putting enough space between us to make it feel like a mile.

My luck just ran out. I turn and start to skulk toward the Lofts. He walks with me though, the awkwardness of the moment lingering heavily between us.

“Zella,” he starts, but I interrupt him. There’s no need for him to let me down easy. I’ll just act like it’s not a big deal.

It’s totally a big deal. I’m so embarrassed.

“You know what? Actually, I think I’m busy that weekend anyway, so don’t worry about it. No biggie. Forget I even mentioned it.” A shrill of nervous laughter erupts from my throat.

“Blondie, hold up.” He reaches for my arm to stop me. My forward movement stops, but I don’t twist and look at him. I steady myself, shut my eyes, and take a breath. Then I’m ready; I plaster a smile as big as Texas on my face and look at him.

He scratches his neck, clearly conflicted.

“Fancy events, ball or whatever, aren’t really my thing.” His eyes are full of remorse, like maybe he wishes they were.

“Oh, no, totes it’s fine. Really,” I chirp and wave away the problem with my hand.

“Don’t be embarrassed.” He’s all cool, and I know he’s not mocking me right now, but I don’t appreciate being called out. Forget embarrassed, now I’m downright annoyed.

“You know what? Actually, this is good. There is this guy in my graphic design class, he mentioned it, so I’ll ask him.” There’s no guy in my graphics design class. Well, there are several, but none I’d want to go out with.

Ryker’s jaw ticks at my words. “I thought you just said you were busy that weekend,” he bites out.

“Oh, yeah. Well, I’ll check my calendar.” I shrug my shoulder then force a little bounce in my step and keep on walking. He’s quiet but remains by my side. A few short minutes later, we arrive at The Lofts. Ryker puts a hand on my arm, right as I pull out my key card to unlock the door to the building. I look at him over my shoulder.

“I’ll think about it. Don’t make any rash decisions.” His hand drops, and he turns away, clearly not heading back to his room.

I step inside and let the door close behind me.

I don't know how to take his parting words. I don't want to get my hopes up, but I can't really count it a fail. It feels like a maybe, which is always better than a no.

I should be ashamed at how crazy I just acted, but I'm not. I can't fight off the smile as I head up to my suite.

RYKER



I CAREFULLY OPEN THE TOWER DOOR, THEN PEEK IN, DIVERTING my eyes to the window Zella normally occupies. But it's empty. I step fully into the room and close the door behind me.

Damn.

I was really hoping she was going to be here. I didn't come up here today to see Zella, but to get the new server password. It would have been a perk had she been here though. I slide my bag onto the empty desk and move to the window with the best view of Cannon's office. I quickly snap a picture and put my phone and monocular into the side pocket of my bag, my focus stuck on her window. I call it 'hers' because there's one of those square, decorative pillows in the windowsill. My lips turn up in a smile. She's made this place her own.

Walking over to the window, I look out to the courtyard and run my fingers over the sequined edge of the pillow. To see what she sees. Why does she love looking out across the campus? Watching all the students go about their day can't be that exciting.

The woman has me in knots. She's got me spending all my free time looking into her family, not to mention this whole, do I take her to the ball or not matter. The thought of her asking some art geek to the ball grates on my nerves. I don't want to think about this dude with his arms around her, dancing so close to her that he can feel the heat of her breath on his cheek. No, it should be me, I should be the one holding her and by her side when she experiences a fancy event for the first time.

On the flip side, the thought of a tux makes my neck itch. There's only one jacket I will wear, my brown leather one, which is not fit for a black-tie affair such as the Glass Ball. Being fancy as fuck isn't my scene.

Zella makes me do things I shouldn't, like this search for her biological parents. It's taking up all my time. So much so, that it was ultimately the nail in the coffin for me not taking the CamU bank account job.

My contact wasn't thrilled when I turned it down. He even offered to up the payout. Shit, the money was so fucking tempting. It really was. I did some research, and in the end, I was only about eighty-five percent sure I would have been able to pull off the job without a hitch. Had I taken the job, I would have done my due diligence and made sure I felt one hundred and ten percent sure beforehand, but the money wasn't enough to sway me.

I've been straddling the line for a few years now. Breaking the law just a little, and I've been okay with that. Until recently. I'll graduate eventually, and I'll have to decide: real-world, law-abiding job, or hacker. Not saying I can't do all three, but a decision will need to be made. Truth be told, the past couple of weeks, trying to find Zella's parents, made me realize using my skills to help feels pretty fucking good.

Not that I want to put on my white hat anytime soon, but I know there are jobs out there, for those who have my skill set, that don't involve breaking the law. But for now, I'll sit here with my gray hat on and continue to straddle the line of good and bad intentions.

For the moment, I'm on the good side. For Zella. I've almost cracked the missing link: the names and location of her birth parents. I'm trying not to rush my way through the process. What I'm doing leaves no room for error, but I can't help but imagine her reaction when I tell her I've found them.

I was telling her the truth that first day when I said this job would be risky. Fucking-A, it is risky. The shit I had to do to find her biological parents was intense. To be clear, I was

stealthy and on the top of my game. The riskier the job, the greater the high, that's for sure.

I pull my unfocused gaze from the courtyard below and turn to walk toward the door. I grab my bag and pass the table. I can't help the lingering disappointment that she wasn't here. Maybe I should get her phone number, then I could have asked when she was going to be here.

I could have her number. It would be super simple to get. Hell, I'm sure after some sweet talking, I could get it from Wells, but I'd really like to do things the old-fashioned way with her.

Several minutes later, I cut through the courtyard and unexpectedly spot Zella across the way. She's lying out on a large blanket, leaning back on her arms, her legs stretched out in front of her. Her hair is braided and hanging back behind her. Her face is upturned to the sun, as if soaking up all the warm fall heat. I'm too far to make out her expression, but I'm guessing there is a smile on her face.

Two reasons lead me to that assumption: she's always smiling, and Cameron is sitting next to her. After the night in the library when I found out Cameron and Zella grew up together, I feel at ease in regard to their relationship. However, the past week or so, Cameron's gone out of his way to turn up the charm when I'm around. I'm about eighty percent sure he's fucking with me. It's enough to keep me on alert.

I really want to like the guy, he's a cool dude, but my mind is made up. I want Zella, and I don't want to fight against a childhood best friend. He'd have an unfair advantage.

I can't keep my eyes from her though. She's so beautiful. In the sun, she nearly glows. The way the light shines down on her makes it nearly impossible to look anywhere else. Fortunately, I don't need to look away in order to move a little to my right to a bench, one of many placed sporadically throughout the courtyard path.

Call it creepy—hell, watching her from afar is creepy as fuck—but I'm just close enough that I can study her without risking getting caught.

I'm lost in the moment when I hear a voice next to me.

"The creeper vibe isn't a good look on you, man."

Wells. Fucking Wells. This should be fun.

I tear my eyes from Zella, swivel my head toward him, and glare. He's sitting right next to me. I'm surprised I didn't hear him approach or notice him take a seat.

"Why would you think I'm a creeper? Can't a dude just chill on a bench in the middle of the day?" I grumble my point.

He chuckles at my disdain. I give him the stink eye; I've got sunglasses on, so I doubt he catches it.

I turn my attention back toward Zella but make a point not to look at her. We are quiet for a few moments before he breaks the silence.

"I'm happy you are helping her find her parents." He looks out over the yard, talking to me but not directly.

"Does that mean I'm back on your good side now?" I smirk at the dig. I know it's going to take a lot more than helping a chick find her parents to bring my best friend and I back to where we started.

He grunts. "You're on the right track. Though, I'm still not condoning all the ways you are breaking the law to find the information you need."

Tipping my head, I give him that one. He does not want the details.

"Not that your feelings or thoughts matter in this; she deserves to know who her parents are and who she is. If the only way for her to find that out is with my help, I'll do whatever it takes." And I will. I fought it at first, opting for the "it's too risky" route, but seeing the look of hope in her eyes when she found out I was digging around was enough to push me all the way in.

I can feel Wells's eyes on me; the side of my face starts to burn with his attention. I don't give him mine.

“She’s too innocent for you, Ryk. I know you teeter on the line of right and wrong, and I know you’d never do anything to hurt her on purpose, but she’s delicate. I see the way you look at her...” he trails off.

“And how’s that?” I bite down on my anger. He’s looking out for her. If anyone knows me, it’s him, but I don’t like what he’s implying.

“Like you want to devour her. Fuck man, you’re sitting on a bench watching her. When was the last time you sat on a bench watching the world around you? You hide out in your room or empty classrooms doing God knows what on that computer you are attached to. When was the last time you got to know a girl enough to have a crush on her?”

“Who said anything about a crush?” I quip. He’s got a point though. This isn’t my scene. I’m pretty much a loner.

He makes a dismissive sound. “You’ve got it bad, brother.”

“If it wasn’t for you recently hooking back up with Louisa, I would have said the same thing about you.” I give him the side-eye checking to see how my words landed.

He sighs and gives a quick shake of his head. “I’ll be the first to admit that Zella is attractive. There’s something about her that screams for you to notice her.”

The truth flowing from his mouth seeps in and hits every jealous bone within me. I’m not the only one who’s interested. I’ve seen guys on campus turn and look her way. This isn’t news to me.

Wells continues, “Even if it weren’t for the fact that she friend-zoned me in the first five minutes of meeting her, I’m not right for her.”

I stare at him. For one, after spending one dinner with them, I knew she’d friend-zoned him. However, I’m interested in why he doesn’t think he’s right for her.

He reads my mind, turns toward me and sighs. “You, on the other hand, are exactly what she needs. Be careful with her.” With that, he stands, claps me on the shoulder, and adds, “Stop being a creeper and ask her on a date. She’ll say yes.”

Then he walks toward the girl in question, leaving me to watch his retreating form.

I'm exactly what she needs? Why? I must say it out loud because he stops, looks over his shoulder, and says, "Because you would give her the adventure she desperately needs."

I sit there for a moment and chew on his parting words. *Could I give her adventure?* How does a guy, whose main source of entertainment comes from breaking down codes and firewalls and playing around in the deep web where he doesn't belong, bring adventure to a girl who's been sheltered and lied to her entire life?

I shake the thoughts away, stand to join them, and maybe take Wells up on his suggestion to ask Zella on a date. As I get closer to the group, Cameron walks toward me. He's got his backpack slung over his shoulder, so I assume he's leaving. I take the opportunity to set the record straight on where he stands with Zella.

As he passes me with a nod, I stop him. "Hey, so you and Blondie are just friends, right? Or is there something more going on?"

Cameron wastes no time before throwing his head back and laughing. Once he gets himself under control, he answers, "Don't worry. She's not the one I'd be interested in." He smirks and walks off in the direction I just came from.

Interesting.

So, that means he's not going to be an issue, right?

ZELLA



I CAREFULLY SMUDGE THE CHARCOAL TO ADD DEPTH TO THE drawing I'm working on for my class. I'm sitting in my window in the tower switching between two of my favorite things: drawing and people watching. I don't have any more classes today, so I came to the tower about an hour ago. I'm about done with the drawing when the door swings open.

I snap my head toward the door to see who it is. I know who I want it to be.

Ryker pops his head in, and the grin on his face causes a rapid-fire beat in my chest.

"Hey there, Blondie." He walks all the way in and closes the door behind him. "I was hoping you were here."

"Oh, yeah?" *He was looking for me?* I tramp down the excitement building in my stomach.

"Do you realize that you never gave me your number?" He carefully places his satchel on top of the desk.

I scrunch up my face. "Uh. I didn't even think about it. You're right, but you could have gotten it if you really wanted to, right?" I mean, it's his thing.

"Blondie." He places his hands upon his chest and stumbles back a step. "I'm hurt that you'd think such a thing. I'm an old-fashioned kind of guy. I'll wait until you're ready to give it to me."

I shake my head but smile. "You're exactly the kind of guy who would find a girl's number by hacking into the school

directory.”

His eyebrow dips. “You wound me.”

“Is this your way of asking for my number?”

He walks toward me with his hands in his jean pockets. “Nope.” He pops the word as he says it.

“Uh, huh.” I cross my arms. “Would you like my phone number, Ryker?”

He’s standing next to me, staring out the window when he shrugs. “Nah. I’ve already got it.”

I can’t help it. I reach up and push him. From my angle in the seat, I know the force isn’t strong, but he pretends it is as my hand moves away from his upper arm. He’s got a huge smile on his face when he looks down at me.

That smile is real; it’s not the smolder he pulls out when he’s trying to get me to swoon. But a real smile, one I cause by just being me. It does things to me. Mostly, it causes warmth to pool deep in my belly.

I cock my head at him. “Do you really already have it?”

His return smile tells me all I need to know. “Nah, I wanted you to be the one to give it to me.” He lifts a shoulder as if his reply isn’t one of the sweetest things ever.

I smile up at him. Trying to tamper down my inner girl, who’s doing a happy dance and squealing over him wanting my phone number.

He nods to the large sketch pad in my lap. I look down to study my work, a charcoal drawing of the inside of this very tower. I’m actually quite pleased with it.

“Will you draw me like one of your French girls?”

When I look up at him, his eyes are sparkling and he’s sucking in a smile. My face scrunches, and I mentally try to figure out why the line sounds vaguely familiar.

“Please tell me you were able to watch movies back home. I know you were sheltered, but...” he trails off and scrubs a hand over his chin.

I can't fight back my laugh. He's cute.

I did watch movies all the time, and I remember what movie he's quoting now.

"As long as you promise to never let go." The relief on his face makes me roll my eyes good-naturedly.

I shake my head. "O ye, of little faith."

He smirks, but then something happens. We stare at each other, grins on our faces, saying nothing. My heart starts to beat harder as the moments tick on. He's smiling at me, I at him, and I couldn't be happier than at this moment. My body is drawn to his, though I don't let myself move. My fingers itch to reach for him, but I slide them underneath me, sitting on them and trapping them.

He snaps out of it first, his grin disappearing. Before my own can falter, he flashes me an all-knowing smirk. Whatever is about to fall from his mouth will probably be entertaining. He's so darn charming even his arrogance makes me smile. I'm almost always smiling when I'm around him.

"I came up here to find you for a reason." He balls his hands into fists at his sides.

"Yeah? What's that?" I place my sketch pad to my side, so it's no longer in my lap.

"Brace yourself, Sweetheart."

And I do, I grip the edge of the window beneath me, waiting patiently for his news.

He smiles slowly as he says, "I found your parents."

My eyes widen. I take a second, and then another, and then another to process what he said. "You mean..." I trail off, unable to let myself believe it.

"Yeah." He nods, understanding laced on his face.

It all sinks in. He found my birth parents.

Oh, my God.

I launch myself off the window and into his arms. I don't feel the floor under me, only Ryker's arms as he catches me. I pull him into me while I laugh, which is uncontrolled excitement mixed with shock. He's laughing too, most likely at my erratic behavior. I'm hugging him as if my life depends on it. Just as I start to worry that maybe I'm going overboard, I feel him hugging me back just as tightly.

I lean back, bringing us face to face. I gaze into his eyes. "Ryker. You have no idea how happy this makes me." I'm fearful my smile may split my face in two.

"Oh, I think I can guess, Blondie." He doesn't let me go. We just stand there, well he stands there, me in his arms, nearly nose to nose, smiling at one another.

His gaze drops to my mouth, and I bite my bottom lip on impulse. I want to kiss him so badly. I start to lean in just as my phone pings with an incoming text.

How such a tiny noise has the ability to break such a massive moment between us, I don't know, but his grip lightens as I slide down and out of his arms.

I ignore the alert on my phone. I'm way too interested in what he has on my parents to care. I take a few steps back and lean against the window.

"So, tell me everything." I pull a piece of wayward hair from my braid and twist it around my finger.

"Their names are Fred and Anna Corners. They live in Golden Springs, Texas."

I repeat their names, trying them out for the first time.

Ryker continues, "It's about a fifteen-hour drive from here."

Fifteen hours, that's so close yet so far away.

"They also know about you."

I straighten at this. "I would hope so, but explain." I motion with my hand for him to go on.

“I reached out to them. I needed to make sure it was the right Fred and Anna. So, they know you were looking for them.”

“What... what does that mean?” I stumble over my words.

“It means they want to meet you.” His voice is soft, but I can read the underlying tone. He’s concerned.

I chew on my lip. They want to meet me.

Meet me.

This is nearly information overload. My overactive thinking is interrupted when Ryker clears his throat.

“Are you mad that I contacted them before I told you?” I slide my gaze to his worried face.

I think about it for a moment. “No, I’m not mad. I’m not sure I would have been able to reach out to them had you put the ball in my court. So, thank you.”

He lets out a relieved breath and starts to say something just as Cameron walks through the door. He doesn’t hang out with me a lot up here, but he occasionally does. I’m guessing he might have been the one texting me moments ago.

“There you are. I was waiting for you.” He stops, then looks between Ryker and me. “What did I just walk in on?”

“Ryker found my parents.”

“Shut the front door!” Cameron walks to the table and plops down on top of it, his feet on the chair.

“Fred and Anna Corners. They want to meet me,” I tell him. I sneak a peek at Ryker, he looks right back at me, but he looks slightly uncomfortable.

“Wowzers,” Cameron mutters then asks, “When?”

Shoot, that’s a good question. I turn to Ryker, but I don’t have to ask.

“Actually, Fred is heading out on a month-long business trip. They were hoping to meet you this weekend.”

My jaw hits the floor.

Cameron lets out a whistle.

“This weekend?” I repeat.

Ryker looks sheepish when he replies, “Yeah, I told them I didn’t know. You’d have to miss some classes, but they really want to meet you. Now that you know you exist, they are chomping at the bit.”

“Where do they live?” Cameron asks, and Ryker answers while I mull all of this over.

I’ve only known about them for a few months, but in those months, I’ve dreamed about meeting them. I was worried they wouldn’t want to have anything to do with me, but it feels like that’s not the case at all.

This is all so fast, but isn’t that better?

The boys let me think. Ryker stands quietly next to me, Cameron still on the table. Just as I’m about to tell them I’m ready, Cameron whistles again.

“So, bad news. Airfare to Texas is stupid high.”

I bite my lip. “Like how high?”

“Like eight hundred a ticket. It’s normally more like three hundred.” He’s still scrolling through his phone.

Ryker leans on the sill beside me. “Have you ever flown before, Zella?”

I pinch my lips together as I turn my head and shake it. “No, it’s on my bucket list, but I’m not sure I’m mentally and emotionally ready to just hop on a plane in two days.”

His gentle smile matches the soft feel of his fingers as they brush mine where they rest on the sill between us. My eyes briefly flicker to our touching fingers then back up to him.

“I get it.”

“You could always road trip it,” Cameron offers still staring at his phone completely oblivious to the moment Ryker and I are having.

“I don’t have a car.” Mother was unwilling to let me bring my car with me since she said I was betraying her by leaving. So, Cameron and I packed up my life into his tiny sedan and called it a day.

Ignoring me, Cameron adds, “You’d want to leave tomorrow though. Stay in a hotel somewhere, then finish the drive Friday morning. If you leave Sunday afternoon, you’ll make it back Monday night. You’d miss three days of class.”

“Cameron, I don’t have a car.” He knows this. No way would he let me take his for a road trip.

“Duh, Zella. But Ryker does.”

I straighten.

I’m scared to look at Ryker, what Cameron just suggested is crazy. There’s no way. I laser focus on Cameron; he and Ryker are having some kind of silent conversation. Cameron is fighting back a grin. Maybe he did catch our moment earlier.

Ryker looks at me, his face impossible to read. “I’ll take you.”

I take my time replying. I don’t want to sound hopeful, because the last thing I want is for him to be taking me out of pity. But if he wanted to take me because he wanted to be there with me, that has me hopeful. “You would take me?” I ask carefully.

“I was planning on it, whether it was on a plane or driving you myself.”

“You were?” I swallow the lump in my throat.

“Yeah, Blondie. I’m in this one-hundred percent. I’ve already mapped out the trip.”

I fight back tears because I don’t want to scare him away with my emotional state. But what he’s done for me and still doing means the world. So, I offer him a watery-eyed look.

Cameron clears his throat breaking through the silence. “Then it’s settled. You two are heading to Texas. You sure you’re good with missing so much class, Zella?” A laugh plays on his lips. I detest missing class, or even being late to

class, but this is a huge, life-changing event. Meeting my biological parents is so much more important than three days of class.

“I’m okay with it, as long as I can find people to take notes for me, which shouldn’t be a problem.”

“All right, well, I’m gonna get out of here. I need to take my car in for an oil change and get packed. Meet me in front of your building at eight tomorrow morning.” Ryker smiles and pushes off the window sill. He nods to Cameron as he passes and walks right out of the tower room.

I let out a huge sigh, my hair lifting gently from my face. I look at Cameron, and he’s wearing one of his up-to-no-good grins. “What?”

“Nothing, Blondie.” He emphasizes the name, laughs, and jumps off the table. “Come on, let’s get out of here and get you packed.”

His use of Ryker’s nickname doesn’t have the same effect on me. Which he senses because he chuckles as he grabs my bag.

“I just want to make sure: you know, you just agreed to go on a five-day road trip with a dude you’ve known for a little more than two months, right?” He closes the tower door behind me.

I narrow my eyes at him as we descend the three flights of stairs.

“What? I’m just making sure you know what you are doing.” He shrugs.

“I’m pretty sure you’re the one who brought up the road trip idea in the first place. You know darn well I don’t have a car.” I push his shoulder with my finger.

He gapes. “Are you insinuating I set this whole thing up?”

“No, I’m suggesting you wanted him to offer to take me. Don’t play the concerned best friend right now, Cameron.”

His lips twist, before he speaks, “I could tell it wouldn’t take much. He clearly digs you and would have offered to go

with you anyway. I just helped it along.”

I shake my head. I can't be annoyed though. There are more prominent emotions swirling around inside me: shock, excitement, nervousness, and something else I'm not entirely familiar with.

How am I going to spend the next five days, alone, with Ryker Stone?

RYKER



WE'VE BEEN ON THE ROAD FOR ALMOST TWO HOURS NOW, AND Zella is a fucking mess. She was relatively quiet for the first hour, but in the last thirty minutes or so, she's been all over the board. I figured she'd have some excitement mixed with nervousness, but I wasn't expecting this.

Right now, she's feeling really fucking guilty about meeting her birth parents.

"I shouldn't be doing this. Oh, my God. What have I done?" She's barefoot, her legs are pressed against her chest, and her face buried between her knees. "Mother will be so disappointed in me."

In a few minutes, she'll tell me meeting her birth parents is the right thing and that her mother did the wrong thing by lying to her. Then she'll revert back to this blubbering mess. We have approximately eight more hours of driving time today; I need to move this mental break down along.

"Blondie." My voice is firm. She needs some tough-love right now.

She turns her head my way, keeping it rested on her knees.

"You need to snap out of this," I tell her, keeping my eyes on the road. "Did your mother lie to you about being adopted?"

"Yes," she squeaks.

"Did she make you spend the past twenty years under lock and key? Keeping you from being able to experience normal,

growing up experiences?”

She whines another affirmative.

“Then what’s the worst that can happen? She finds out you found and met your real parents, disowns you, and never speaks to you again?”

“Why would you say that?”

I steal a quick glance at her. Her head has lifted in alarm, but I don’t pause.

“Because that’s the worst thing that could happen, and you’re currently not speaking with her. You’re about to meet your birth mother and father, who already adore you and they don’t even know you yet.” Another glance reveals she’s chewing on her bottom lip, processing my words. “My point is, your worst-case scenario probably isn’t going to happen, and if it does, you’ll deal because your *Zella Fucking Raps*. You’ve got Cam, Wells, Fred, Anna, and me. Who else do you really need?”

She doesn’t say anything. She stares at me but isn’t really looking at me. I let my words float around the car. Some classic rock song plays low on the radio.

A few minutes tick by before she speaks. “You know what? I think you’re right. I made the decision to find my parents, so I could meet them, and that’s what I’m doing. I’m not going to feel bad about this for one more minute.” She picks up my phone in the middle console and scrolls through my playlist. She settles on some upbeat Weezer remake.

She turns to me and places her hand on my lower arm. “Thank you, Ryker.”

I smile at her. “Anytime.”

Hours tick by. I was worried the drive would feel long, but we alternate between listening to music—she sings, I don’t—and talking. The drive doesn’t feel as monotonous. The conversation between us is easy, and when we don’t talk, it’s comfortable silence, until she breaks out in song. The girl loves music. She knew a lot of the rock and alternative songs on my favorite playlists, but her heart lies in pop music. It

didn't take me long to cave and let her take over as music master. I'll never admit this to anyone else, but I can't help getting caught up in the catchy tunes that she has a love for.

"So, what's one thing you wanted as a kid but never got?" she asks, her bare feet propped up on the dash, her flip flops somewhere on the floor below. We've been getting pretty personal with the questions as of late, but I don't mind at all. I'm quickly realizing Zella can get away with just about anything, and I wouldn't bat an eye.

But I eye her and the question. She does know I grew up with my uncle, who didn't care much for my presence. She nods and lifts her hands in surrender.

"I know, I know, but I mean, every kid wanted something they couldn't have. I really wanted a membership to the local community center, you wanted?"

"I wanted a dog." It's the one thing I have ever asked my uncle for. He didn't have time for a kid, let alone a dog. So, I never got one.

Her eyes go soft and dreamy. "Oh, a dog. That's fantastic."

I chuckle and add, "Yeah, the last foster home I was in had a dog—it was the best thing—but it came down to being out of the system or having a dog. I guess getting out of the system is the better choice."

Zella thinks hard, with her lip pulled between her teeth.

She cocks her head, still looking out at the road. "I'm glad you were able to get out of the system, but I wish you would have gotten that dog you wanted." She looks over at me now. "But you seem to have turned out all right on your own, so it's probably for the best."

I chuckle when I see the silly face she makes at me.

"Alright, my turn."

"Hit me," she says, readjusting in her seat.

"We need to talk about the hair."

She groans.

“What?! You have to admit, it’s topic worthy.” I reach out and snag a piece that has fallen from the braid. She glares at me and shakes her head lightly enough that the hair falls from my grasp.

“Okay, fine. But the hair question is my answer to the question you just answered. Everyone wants to know about the hair.”

“There’s a lot of it.” I laugh.

“Yeah. I know.” She looks out her side window as she explains. “My mother loved my hair long. I hated it at first, but by the time I was ten, I was braiding it and having fun with it, and it made Mother happy, which was important to me.” She draws her knees back to her chest.

“You’re an adult now, and you’re not really doing things to make your mother happy anymore, so why not cut it?” I question.

“Eventually, I will. Since I’ve been at CamU, I’m kind of over being the girl with the hair.”

“Zella with the good hair, though,” I add for good measure.

My chest warms as she giggles.

“I’m going to cut it. Really. I want to cut it so badly. It’s on my bucket list.”

“What else is on this bucket list?”

“Well, in addition to cutting my hair, I’d love to dye it some super fun color. As you know, I’d like to fly on a plane, but also get a tattoo, sing karaoke, and tons of other random stuff.” Her face flushes a bit, and she bites that plump lip again.

Interesting. “I could help you mark off some of those items,” I hedge.

She blushes more. I’m willing to bet she’s got some items on that list I’d enjoy way too much. I really want to know what they are, that’s for sure.

She clears her throat. “Have you thought about putting on your white hat and using you hacking for good?” She whips out the question so fast, it nearly gives me whiplash.

“Huh.” I swallow hard.

“I mean, I know you had to do a bunch of not so legal stuff to find my birth parents, but you were doing good. What if you did more good? What if you helped people more? Did less of the changing grades, signing people up for inappropriate websites and dating apps?”

Shit, she doesn’t even know the half of it.

“Someone’s been brushing up on hacker lingo.” I smirk.

She makes a face just shy of sticking out her tongue. “Well?”

“I’m just not sure it’s my thing. I kind of like playing by my own rules, Blondie. How much fun would it really be doing good all the time?”

She shakes her head. “I don’t know, Ryker. I think you’d make one helluva white hat.”

She leans forward in her seat and turns up the music a little, giving us a reprieve from the questions. Truth is, I’m not ready to think about how good it felt to do some good. Maybe it’s more rewarding helping people who deserve it rather than people who want to hurt others. I don’t know, but it’s something to think about.

Zella is lost in the music, and I’m lost in my thoughts about how I’m going to use my hacking skills once I graduate. I glance at the dash to check my gas levels when I notice my temperature gauge is getting pretty hot. I shut down the AC and crack the windows.

Well, damn. That’s not good. I’m not sure we are anywhere close to a town, so I hope it doesn’t get any hotter. We have about two hours left on the trip before we can stop for the night. I just hope we can make it. We haven’t gotten dinner yet, but Zella bought up all the snacks when we stopped for gas just before lunch. We’ve made good time, only needing to stop for gas once and a few quick restroom breaks.

Another twenty minutes pass, and the needle on the gauge is only climbing. I know I can't drive any further, as the needle is now in the red zone.

"Shit," I mutter.

This alarms Zella, and she snaps her head toward me, grabbing the oh-shit handle above her door when I slam on my breaks and pull off to the side of the road. "What's happening?"

I ignore her panic as I maneuver the Jeep to a stop. Smoke billows up from the hood as I shut the car off.

"Shit," I grumble under my breath.

"Ryker, what just happened?"

"We overheated. That's what just happened. Stay here." I unbuckle and check my side mirror to see if anyone is coming down the two-lane highway. We've been pretty much the only car on the road today, so I'm not surprised when I see open road in both directions.

Jumping out of the Jeep, I walk to the front and pop the hood.

Immediately, I'm assaulted with smoke. I leap back, waving it away and out of my face.

I hear the slam of a car door and wonder if we've been rescued when Zella comes to stand next to me. Figures she wouldn't listen and stay in the car like I asked.

"I'd feel better if you'd stay in the car, Zella." I glare down at her. She's wearing tight gray capris that look painted on, a purple T-shirt that says, "best day ever" on it, and matching purple flip flops, which I'm glad to see her wearing. Who knows what we might find out here.

"I wanted to see what's going on. Plus, what's the big deal?" She lifts her arms from her side and makes a show of looking around at our surroundings. "There's nothing to worry about."

"It's nearly dark, we are in no-man's-land, and I would feel better if you got back into the car." I look back at the engine;

most of the smoke has cleared.

She giggles beside me. “What? You think the boogie man might get us? Or I don’t know... maybe a lizard? I heard lizards out in these parts can be ravenous.”

I get it. She’s making fun of me. Still, I don’t want her getting hurt. I move closer to the Jeep and ask, “Why don’t you go look up the nearest town. Maybe search for a mechanic or something in case I can’t fix this.”

She giggles again. “Roger that.”

Good.

She’s heading back to the car now, but before she opens the door, she adds, “For the record, I’m only getting back in the car because I’m hungry, and there are snacks in here. I wouldn’t want to draw the attention of the ravenous lizards with the tasty smells of my yummy snacks.”

I bite back my grin as she climbs back in the car and shuts the door.

RYKER



AFTER A FEW MINUTES OF STARING DOWN AT THE ENGINE, IT'S no use. The thing is hot, and I can't fix the issue right now, even if I wanted to. I crouch down to look under the car. There's a drip. *Fuck*. I bet I've got a coolant leak. *I need a professional*.

I leave the hood propped open, walk back, and get into the car. "I can't fix it," I growl as I sit down.

"Well, unfortunately, we have crappy signal out here. We have very slow Internet, but no bars. I can't call anyone. There is a restaurant about three miles up this road. Then past that, a town that has a mechanic. We can walk to the restaurant and call from there." She reaches behind her seat and grabs her small purse and shoves her phone inside. I grab my own from the middle dash, and we get out of the car.

"Stay close, Ryker. I want to make sure you're safe from the lizards and boogie men." She chuckles because she's just so funny.

"Watch it, Blondie," I bark, but my bite is half-hearted. I can't fight my smile when she's acting like she's my bodyguard. I nudge her away from me but not far, as our arms are touching. "If anyone is going to protect someone, it's going to be me."

She shakes her head and mutters something about men under her breath.

The walk isn't bad, but it takes us a little more than an hour. When the restaurant comes into view, I notice that this

isn't just any restaurant. No, Blondie here leads us to a biker bar. Unease settles deep in my gut.

“Uh, Blondie, this is not a restaurant.” I move closer to her. Who knows who's out here?

“That's what it was listed under online. Cuddle Ducks. It's such a cute name.” She's such a girl, getting sidetracked by cute things.

“This place is a biker bar. They don't take kindly to outsiders. They are not people you want to mess with.” I issue my warning as we get closer.

“I've heard of bikers, but I've never seen them in the wild.”

She's mocking me; I can hear the laughter in her voice. I grumble.

She continues her mockery, “Are they thugs and ruffians, Ryker? How are we to deal with thugs and ruffians?” She leans into me and grabs hold of my arm. Instinct has me starting to shake her off, but the unease in my gut turns into something else entirely, and I have the urge to pull her in closer to me, to wrap my arm around her waist, and show her what happens when she gives me a hard time. It turns me on, that's what fucking happens.

She giggles and doesn't let me go.

I stop as we come up to the bar. It's ranch-style with reddish-orange paneling. There are dozens of bikes parked out front, and rock music can be heard from outside and from across the street where we stand. There are stairs to the side that wrap up to the side of the building and leads to, what looks like, a rooftop deck.

The hairs on the back of my neck prickle with the feel of being watched. I pull out my phone, and damn it, still no signal.

“Zella, listen to me.” Using her real name causes her to look up at me with seriousness. “You aren't twenty-one, and neither of us belongs to this particular club. We won't be welcome, but we need a mechanic and a way into town. Don't

draw attention to yourself. I'm going to sit you down at a table near the door, and I'm going to find a phone. Sound like a plan?"

"Don't draw attention to myself. Get in and out quick. Got it." She nods with determination.

"All right." I blow out a breath. "Let's do this."

We cross the street, with me gripping her hand, and walk up to the bar. I pull open the door, and loud music pours out of the building. Walking inside, we take in the room. The smell of cigarettes fills my nostrils, and I grip Zella's hand again. The floor is sheet vinyl, like the kind you might find in a workshop. Aluminum covers the bar tops, and dozens of neon signs line the walls. The tables are high with bright orange tops and black leather-backed stools. Several pool tables line the back as well as a jukebox.

My eyes land on the jukebox at the same time I hear Zella make a tiny, delighted sigh. I pull her close and whisper down into her ear, "Whatever you do, don't touch that jukebox, Blondie. Bikers are known to not take kindly to outsiders messing with their music." She nods, and I find an empty booth near the door. As planned, she slides in. I make eye contact with her. "Don't move, and don't piss anyone off."

She smiles up at me. "Aye' aye, Capitan."

I turn on my heel and walk up to the bar, where a big, hairy bartender glares daggers at me.

I smile and turn on my charm. "Good evening, sir. My lady and I had some car troubles down the road a bit, and I need to find a mechanic." I give him my best, I'm-not-here-looking-for-any-trouble smile, and it does nothing for me. If the look he's shooting my way could kill, I'd be six feet under.

I clear my throat and try again. "Our car broke down, and we need—"

He interrupts me, "I heard you pretty boy, but you'll find no help here." He grunts as he dries off a glass. I eye a sign on the wall near the bar that says there is free Internet and to ask

for the password. Alright, maybe I can at least get the password out of him.

I point to the sign just past his head, “Could I get the WiFi password? Then we can be on our way.”

“No,” he grunts.

I try again. “Look, I don’t have cell service here, and without Internet, I can’t look up a name. So if you could help me out, that would be awesome. Do you have a payphone somewhere?” I dart my eyes around the bar, hoping to spot one. *They still put payphones in bars, right?*

I thank him and walk down the dark side hall where the bathrooms and back exit are. I find an old, nasty black payphone with a phonebook shoved haphazardly in a cubie under the phone. I pull out the book and flip to the yellow pages, locating the page for mechanics.

The page has been torn out.

“What the fuck?” I mutter. I don’t even have the book closed when I’m pushed from behind.

I stumble forward before looking over my shoulder. A giant of a man, decked out in sleeves of tattoos and piercings, towers over me. He’s got on a dingy white shirt and, of course, his black leather club vest.

“Excuse me,” I say, righting myself.

“What’s your problem, little man? You come into my den and fucking swear at my phone?”

Shit. The last thing I need is to pick a fight with the biker boss. I lift my hands in surrender. “I’m sorry, man. I just need a mechanic, and the page for mechanics has been ripped out.”

“You little fuck-witt, there’s only one mechanic worth calling in this town, so there’s no need for a fucking page of them.” He’s surly, and he’s pissed.

I’m a little pissed myself, but I keep clam. I keep my hands in front of me and walk backward a few steps.

He closes the gap I just put between us.

“That makes sense. If I could just get that number, we could be on our way.”

The biker boss growls. I pick up speed in my backward walk until I bump into a barstool. Turning slightly, I move around the bar. The bartender watches from behind the bar but doesn't say a thing. I've gotten in plenty of fights in my day. I know how to fight. But this hairy motherfucker is three times my size, he has back up, I don't, not to mention, I've got Zella to worry about it.

I look over my shoulder, and the man is following but not as quickly. When I look ahead at where I left Zella, I come to a stumbling halt.

Just as I realize that the bar is eerily quiet, I notice at least eight bikers of all shapes and sizes gathered around her booth. I can't see her exactly, but I see hair, so I know she's there. I feel the fiery breath of the biker boss down my neck and continue slowly to gather Blondie so we can get the hell out of here.

As I get closer, I hear one of the bikers ask, “I don't understand why she would keep that from you.”

Zella's angelic voice rings in response. All the men gathered around her are completely enamored with her. *Shit, do I know the feeling.*

“I really don't know, Stan. I don't know, I'm past that, and I can't wait to meet them.” Upon closer inspection, I realize nearly everyone at the table is smiling. Yikes. Happy biker dudes, it's a strange sight.

I clear my throat, and all eyes dart to me. “Uh, yeah, Blondie. Looks like it's time to get out of here.”

Her face brightens. “Oh, wonderful! I was just telling the boys about our trip.”

“And her bucket list,” a tiny fellow chirps from the other side of the booth.

I mutter under my breath. Leave it to her to share her whole story with a bunch of scary-ass biker dudes.

“You know, we could take care of that tattoo right here, darling,” another one tells her. This particular guy is sitting in the booth behind her but turned in the booth in a way that allows him to be part of the group.

“No thanks, fellas, but we’ve gotta get this show on the road.”

I break through the crowd. There’s no way I’m letting her get a tattoo in a biker bar in the middle of nowhere. If she wants a tat that bad, we will swing by the parlor I go to on our way back home.

The biker, scooting out of the booth to let Zella out, glares at me. Great. I’m the bad guy here.

Then a gruff voice from the bar adds, “You let us help your girl mark one thing off her list, and I’ll give you the contact of the mechanic.”

I zero in on the bartender, and as badly as I want to get out of here, I really need that mechanic. Honestly, I will not allow a tattoo in this dingy place, so I’m wondering what they could possibly help with. I cock my eyebrow, and he grins. He’s missing a tooth or two.

From the bar, he bellows, “The lady mentioned she wanted to karaoke. Let’s help her check that off her list, boys.”

My jaw nearly hits the floor, but I gulp and turn to Zella. She’s bouncing with excitement in the booth. She’s all smiles and happiness. *Who am I to take that away from her?*

I nod, and the group disperses in a flurry of leather vests and chatter as they set up the tiny wooden stage I didn’t see in the corner.

Never saw this turn coming.

ZELLA



THE LAST CHORDS OF THE FAMOUS MUSICAL DUET COME TO A close. I hug the burly man who just helped me nail the song. The performance was super fun and required the audience's participation when it came to singing the chorus. The man smells of outside, and there's a faint hint of cigarette, but I don't mind. We've been hanging out in Cuddle Ducks for more than an hour now, and I'm almost used to the smell.

Tiny, the man I just debuted my Grease duet skills with, picks me up and spins me around the small stage. When he sets me down, I find Ryker in the crowd. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to see that the guy is on edge. He's been cheering me on but refused to come up and sing. Every time I get up here with one of Cuddle Duck's regulars, he stiffens in his chair. I don't know if he's feeling protective or possessive, but I can't deny the thrill running through my blood.

I throw him a bone though. This has been a rough night for him, so I put down the mic and step off the stage. A few steps bring me face to face with the stressed-out Ryker.

"Did you get the contact info for the mechanic yet? I'm ready to get out of here." I can see the relief drip from him as his shoulders relax.

"Hawk is contacting him." He tosses his thumb over his shoulder back toward the bar. The bartender, who I'll be the first to admit scared the bejeebies out of me when we first came in, has turned out to be quite surprising. He's got a voice on him, too. He took a break from the bar and belted out a wonderful rendition of Whitney Houston's, *I Wanna Dance*

with Somebody. I think the whole bar was shocked by that performance.

“That’s great. What time is it anyway?” I guzzle down the water that Ryker keeps having refilled for me.

“It’s nearly eight. I’m worried about how much time we lost today.” He hasn’t messed with his phone once since we’ve been here. His focus has been on me. The power of having his whole focus really boosts a girl’s confidence. Now that I’m sitting next to him at the table, he pulls up his map app on his phone and studies the route.

“When did you plan on stopping for the night?” I wasn’t positive about the sleeping arrangements he’d planned. Truthfully, I hadn’t asked because I didn’t want to fret over it.

“I’d planned on us stopping around nine. So, we lost roughly three hours of drive time.” He’s still fiddling with his phone when Hawk approaches our table.

“Little lady, you were fantastic tonight.” He smiles down at me, and there is a warmth in his eyes. He slides his eyes over to Ryker, and they immediately harden. I fight back a giggle. Poor guy can’t catch a break tonight. “I called in a favor, and Big Ben is going to open up his shop tonight and work on your car. The last thing we want is for Miss Zella to miss out on meeting her parents.”

Emotion crawls up the back of my throat. I smile at him because it’s all I can manage. Ryker expresses his thanks, stands, and sticks out his hand, surprising Hawk. They shake, some kind of manly understanding passes between them.

“I’ve got my truck in the back. I’ll drive you to your car so you can get your stuff then back in to town. There’s a motel; it’s pretty nice for these parts. Tiny’s family owns it, and they are getting a room ready for you guys. It’s on the house. Your car will be parked out front and your key left in the office in the morning when you wake up.”

I’m speechless, and a tear leaks from my eyes.

Ryker shakes his head. “Wow, thank you so much. Your hospitality is greatly appreciated, but please, don’t comp the

work on the car.”

Hawk nods and says all right, though I get the impression from the look on his face that Ryker’s bill won’t be the full price.

We follow Hawk out of the bar.

Before we leave, Tiny catches up to me. “Miss Zella, I followed you on Instagram. Make sure you post pictures of meeting your parents and as you mark off items on that bucket list.”

I laugh and promise him I will share all the pictures.

Thirty minutes later, Ryker and I check into a tiny one-bedroom with two full beds. Like Hawk said, the room is pretty nice. The decor isn’t outdated much, and the room looks and smells clean. Ryker seems at ease as he tosses his duffel on the bed closest to the door, then gently lays his satchel next to it.

“I know we ate bar food at Cuddle Ducks, but there is a convenience store a couple blocks away. Let’s take a walk and get some popcorn or something, and some of those boxed donuts for the morning. That way, we don’t have to waste time getting on the road.” He unzips his bag and digs around for something as I put my own bag on my bed.

“Sounds like a plan,” I tell him, as I look around the room. There’s a tiny microwave and coffee pot on the desk across from the beds.

“Here.” I look up as Ryker tosses me a sweatshirt. It’s a little chilly out, and I didn’t expect to be walking around this late. I have a light sweatshirt in my bag, but I don’t mention it. As I pull the cozy hoodie over my head, I’m engulfed in Ryker. The smell of him seeps through the fabric, and I imagine what it would be like if it were Ryker who was wrapped around me. I discreetly pull the collar up to my nose and inhale. I may just sleep in this fabric cloud of heaven.

“Let’s go,” he says from the door as he opens it. If he witnessed my sniffing of his hoodie, he doesn’t show it. I gather my pride and follow him, grabbing my purse as I leave.

We spend ten minutes in the tiny store, gathering food and drinks. Ryker tells me he needs to grab something in the back and tells me to meet him upfront. I wander around the front and am trying on sunglasses when he appears at my side, a few bags in hand. “You already paid?”

“Yeah, you were engrossed in the glasses.” He chuckles.

“I would have paid. This is my trip.” I huff. I hate that he’s footing the bill.

“No worries, Blondie. Think of it as me treating you to dinner.” I giggle and nod. He has a point.

Back in our room, I kick off my flippies and start to pull out the provisions, wondering if he’d mind if I opened the donuts now.

“Hey, I got you something.” He’s standing next to me, close enough that our arms are nearly touching when he hands me a box. I take the box from him and realize it’s a box of purple hair dye. The grin grows on my face, and when I look up at him, his smile matches my own.

“It’s semi-permanent, so after a few washes, it’ll come out. Thought I’d help you mark off another bucket list item.” He lifts his shoulder like it isn’t a big deal, but it is to me. Turning slightly, so I’m facing him, I catch him off guard with a hug. He laughs as he hugs me back.

“Gotta admit, Blondie, I’m liking how you thank me.”

“You give the best presents,” I say as I lean back from him, bringing us face to face.

He smirks—a cocky, sexy smirk. “I give good—”

I place my hand over his mouth. “Don’t ruin the moment, Ryker.”

He winks at me, then kisses the palm of my hand. Tingles shoot through my hand, up my arm, and straight down to my core. I blink and slowly remove my hand from his mouth. The flush creeps up my neck and stops at my cheeks. I step back, and he lets go of me.

“I’m going to do this now. You good out here?” I walk backward, taking the box with me.

He winks again. “I’m sure I’ll find something to do while I wait for you and your purple hair.”

“That’s good.” I scurry into the bathroom and close the door.

Thirty minutes later, I open up the bathroom, and a rush of cool air hits my skin as all the steam that was held hostage in the tiny bathroom escapes. Upon reading the directions on the hair color box, I realized there was no way I’d be able to dye my own hair. There is just too much of it. So I decided on a nice sized chunk near the front of my head and dyed that instead. Then I showered off a day’s worth of travel and biker bar stench. I normally don’t blow dry my hair, mostly because I don’t have time for that, but using the compact blow dryer in the bathroom, I now have a section of dry, purple hair.

The bathroom mirror clears from its fog as I braid my hair. I absolutely adore the pop of color. That’s it. I’m going to make a hair appointment when we get back home, and I’m getting my hair cut. I want more colors in my hair. I’m going to have to revisit all the pictures I have saved in a special folder on my phone, so I know exactly what I want.

Stepping out of the bathroom, I see Ryker on his bed, leaning against the headboard, arm behind his head, watching something on the television. He focuses on me and drops the remote in his hand.

“Well, let’s see it, Blondie.” He kicks his feet over the side of the bed, sitting there waiting for me as I walk to him. I sit down opposite of him on my bed and pull my braid over my shoulder and turn the side of my head toward him.

“I didn’t have enough for all my hair, so I just did a strip. I love it.” I tell him as I face him.

His smile is soft and sweet. “It suits you. I almost think the strip is better.” He lifts his hand and snags a piece of purple hair that has already fallen from the braid. I swear, my hair has a mind of its own, and right now, it’s asking for Ryker’s touch.

He gently toys the strands, twirling them between his forefinger and thumb. I don't realize I'm leaning in toward him until I notice how close we are. He's leaning in too, my hair drawing us together.

I bite my lip as my gaze drops to his mouth. The corner of his mouth tips up in a smirk, and my eyes dart back to his. He isn't looking at me though. No, his focus is on my hair that is within his grasp. He must sense my gaze because he slowly drags his eyes to mine, then they drop to my lips.

My body flushes with heat as I sit there, still as can be, hoping and praying that he kisses me. My breath hitches as he drops my hair and catches my chin between his fingers. Tilting my face up, he's all slow and steady. I struggle to catch my breath and play it cool.

He leans in closing the distance and presses his lips ever so lightly on mine. His kiss is gentle, but he moves his against mine with such intimacy, it steals my breath away. I return the kiss with fervor, matching his lips' sensual caress. He breaks the connection all too soon, but it lingers, and I'm slow to open my eyes.

Blinking, I'm greeted with his handsome face.

"I've been wanting to do that for a while now, Blondie." He's back on his bed, and I can tell from his distance, he doesn't plan on taking this further.

"What took you so long?" I challenge, because dang it, I want more. So much more.

"Just want to do things right with you, Zella." While I love it when he calls me Blondie, hearing my name on his lips sends thousands of little shivers through my body.

We are lost in the moment, both smiling at each other, heat raging between us. He abruptly stands, and I slowly drag my eyes up his tall, athletic form.

"I'm gonna shower. I'll be quick, but I rented us a movie on demand. Some chick flick about some college acapella groups."

It's my turn to smirk as I push myself further into my bed. "We'll want to leave this part out of the tales we tell back at CamU. Wells and Cameron will revoke your man card for sure."

"Hardy, har, har." He smiles at me as he digs around his duffel for a change of clothes. "It looked like something right up your ally, so I rented it."

"Well, thank you. I appreciate that, Ryker." I nestle into my pillows and pull a paperback out of my bag next to me. He ducks into the bathroom, and I decide not to mention that I've seen this movie so many times, I could star in it.

I take the next several minutes to center myself and pull myself out of the sexual haze he seems to be putting me in more and more often. Knowing he's been wanting to kiss me, helps my resolve in wanting to pursue him. Taking things slow and doing things right is honorable, and the gentlemanly thing to do, but I'm only going to let that go on for so long.

With the world the way it is today, if I want something bad enough, I just need to take it. I'll make Ryker Stone my next adventure, and he won't know what hit him.

ZELLA



THE SOUND OF THE ROOM DOOR CLICKING SHUT WAKES ME from a restless sleep. Slowly blinking my eyes open, I take in the room. I'm lying on my side, facing Ryker's bed. It's empty. I roll on to my back and push myself up into a sitting position against the headboard. I look around the tiny room, noticing the bathroom door is ajar, lights off. He's clearly not here.

As I reach for my phone on the nightstand, which is bolted to the wall between the beds, I see a piece of paper lying over my phone. Picking up the Big Bear Motel branded paper, I read a note from Ryker.

Blondie, gone to get the car settled. We need to hit the road, so if you're reading this, get that pretty ass out of bed and get ready. You're meeting your parents today.

It's signed with a simple R. I reread the note over a few more times, memorizing his messy scratch. Just then, my phone chimes for the six o'clock alarm I set.

I jump out of bed and get ready for one of the biggest days of my life.

I'm ready and waiting, watching a cooking show, munching on donuts thirty minutes later when I hear the door unlock. Swinging it open, Ryker walks in.

"Oh, good. You're up." He smiles.

"You mean my pretty ass? Yes, we are both ready to go." I flip off the TV and offer him a donut. He winks, snags one, and eats it as he walks through the room, checking for items he

might not have packed. He picks up a stray sock at the foot of his bed and shoves it in his duffel.

“Let’s get this show on the road, Blondie.” He hoists his duffel on his shoulder then reaches for mine. I grab our room keys and close up behind us.

After dropping our keys off in the office, we are settled and ready to go. He starts the car and looks over at me.

“You ready for this? We’ve got about five hours of driving left.” I nod. I cross and uncross my legs, unable to get comfortable.

“I’m so freaking ready. Let’s do this.” I motion for him to drive. He chuckles in return and pulls out of the dusty, quiet motel parking lot.

A little less than five hours later, we pass the “Welcome to Golden Springs” sign.

I take a deep breath, trying to control the mix of excitement and nervousness coursing through my veins. Ryker’s GPS feeds us directions in a female Scottish accent. I changed the accent early in the drive yesterday to remind me of one of my favorite historical romance heroes, but Ryker pitched a fit, and we compromised on the female voice.

The accent was still sexy.

We drive to the tiny town. I study the strip of fast-food chains and car dealerships and tiny strip malls as we roll through. When we carefully make our way through the town square, there are remnants of some kind of event still happening on the courthouse lawns. Clothing, boutiques, coffee shops, sit-down restaurants, and specialty stores litter the square. Without even stepping foot in the town, I can tell by the look, feel, and the smiling people milling about, that I’d love this town. It’s small but inviting. Being a girl who grew up not being able to wander around town and meet neighbors and other people in town, this place warms my heart.

Oh, what would it have been like to grow up in Golden Springs?

The navigation on Ryker's phone takes us past the downtown area. No more than ten minutes later, we pull onto an old dirt road about a quarter-mile long.

Turns out, it's a driveway with a beautiful ranch-style home at the end. The yard is large and from the fresh-cut grass smell coming from the open windows of the car, recently mowed.

On the other side of the driveway, farther back on the land, is a barn and stables.

"Oh, my God. They have horses." I nearly lean out of the window, drawn to the majestic animals. I've never seen a horse in real life, and I'd love to ride one if given a chance.

Ryker chuckles next to me. "Let me guess, bucket list?"

"Top twenty for sure."

He pulls up to a clearly marked parking area, room enough for four or five cars, and he shuts off the car. He turns to me, and I look at him, not bothering to mask my emotions.

"You ready for this, Blondie?" Concern pours from his body, and he visibly lets most of it go when I nod furiously.

"Yes, I'm ready. Thank you so much for this, Ryker." I lean in and kiss his cheek.

Just then, the door creaks. I jerk my attention to the front porch. The thin wooden door bounces closed behind the couple that just came out.

Ryker and I get out of the car, and I have to stop myself from running to them. Ryker must feel it too. As soon as I'm by his side, he grabs my hand. I smile, giving him a silent thank you with my eyes. He winks.

As we approach, Fred and Anna Corners descend the two steps from the porch. Fred is tall and has a strong build. He's got thick, bushy, brown eyebrows, but his nose reminds me of my own. Anna, though, my steps falter. She's tiny, like me, and her green eyes are full of tears, but it doesn't dull the brightness of the color. Her face, as I get closer, has the same smattering of freckles, paired with slight wrinkles and laugh

lines. She's stunning. Her hair is the same yellowish blonde as mine, and even though it's cut to her chin, it's thick and has the same natural wave.

Coming to a stop only feet from her, we take each other in. It's as if I'm looking at myself in a mirror.

Her smile is warm, tears falling down her cheeks. Neither of us can speak. Ryker comes to the rescue.

"Mr. and Mrs. Corners? I'm Ryker Stone, and this is Zella Raps."

It's clear we've found my parents, we've arrived at the correct place, but we all seem to appreciate the introduction, anyway.

I offer a slightly hesitant smile, tears threatening to flow, but still, no words. Fred clears his throat and offers his hand to Ryker. Anna and I continue to stare, taking each other in.

"It's nice to meet you both. Zella, we've been waiting a very long time to meet you." His voice is deep and full of emotion.

I pry my eyes away from Anna and smile up at him. A lone tear runs down his cheek; he makes no move to wipe it away. I look back down at my... at Anna. She can't seem to stand still in this moment of intense emotional joy.

"My baby," she whispers and engulfs me in a hug.

My arms tighten around her, memorizing everything about this embrace. Then my father is there, towering over us, pulling us both into him.

Moments later, my mother pulls away, holding my face between her hands. "I've thought of you every day for nearly twenty-one years. My dream of holding you in my arms has finally come true. I can't believe you are finally here."

Guilt slams into my heart. "I'm so sorry. I didn't know. I would have fought to find you sooner... I didn't know."

"Oh, baby girl, no, no. Don't you for one minute be sorry for any of this." She hugs me again.

Fred chuckles beside us. “Let’s take this inside, get some tea, and some of those cookies you made, Anna.”

She pulls away and nods her agreement. Looping her arm through mine, she leads us into the house. As my feet hit the porch step, I look over my shoulder in search of Ryker. That had to have been awkward for him.

But he’s there, not far behind me, and when I glance over my shoulder, he grins and winks at me.

If it weren’t for the emotional overload of meeting my birth parents, I would have swooned right there on the front step.



WE’VE BEEN SITTING AROUND THE WOODEN FARMHOUSE TABLE drinking lemonade and eating cookies. Their house is all wood floors and clean, but there is an outdoorsy smell within the walls. The layout is roomy and comfortable. Antiques and older looking furniture outnumber newer and fancy stuff, but I catch Ryker admiring the big-screen television, brown leather couch, and recliner set in the living room, which can be seen from the kitchen table.

After sharing basic information, they know all about my hobbies and school. I’ve told them about Cameron and about the karaoke at the biker bar. In turn, I’ve learned Fred is a soil and water conservationist, and Anna is an artist. She specializes in ceramics. My jaw nearly hit the floor when I found that out. Our faces nearly identical when I told her I was an art major.

There is a quiet lull in the conversation, the first since we sat down over an hour ago. I want to ask more personal questions—ones that might be difficult for them to answer—but I don’t want to ruin the reunion.

Ryker, who’s sitting next to me with his arm slung over my chair, leans into me. “We are here for a reason, Blondie. Don’t hold back.”

I gaze up from my lemonade into his supportive smile. I know they heard him, he wasn't all that quiet, but I refuse to be embarrassed. I hear a deep sigh from across the table, and my eyes snap up to Fred.

"He's right. Please ask us whatever you want. We will tell you everything you want to know." Fred stands from his chair, moves to the center island in the kitchen, and leans against it.

Anna's expression has turned sad, yet she nods, urging me to ask.

"Why?" My voice is barely above a whisper. Ryker adjusts himself before one of his warm hands lands on my leg, above my knee, and squeezes.

Fred sets down his glass behind him and crosses his arms. "We were both still in high school when we found out we were pregnant. Anna, just seventeen. Me, eighteen and getting ready to graduate. We'd been dating for a while, and well, we got careless. When we found out, we knew we wanted to stay together, and we wanted to raise the baby, but our parents had different ideas. They were not happy."

"My parents told me they were not ready to be grandparents, and we were not ready to be parents," Anna adds.

"I had a scholarship and was heading to college. Anna still had a year left of high school so, she and the baby—you—wouldn't have been able to come with me. With Anna's parents refusing to help, I couldn't stand to leave. My parents were upset, but when they found out I was considering transferring to a local college, they were livid. A youth pastor at Anna's church helped us think through all our options. Eventually, adoption seemed like our only option." Fred looks forlornly at the floor.

"It broke my heart, giving you up, Zella, but we wanted what was best for you. Two teenage parents, without any support, struggling through high school and college, would have been so hard. That's not the life we wanted for you." Anna sniffs.

I nod in understanding. I can't fault them for putting the needs of their child above their wants.

"I do understand. I do appreciate that; I didn't have a bad childhood."

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Ryker make a face. I fight back a glare and ignore him.

Hesitantly, Fred asks, "But you didn't have a great one?"

"No, it's not that. My mother loved and cared for me greatly. Life was never hard, but she was very protective." I fidget in my seat.

"She pretty much kept Blondie here under lock and key. No friends, no public school, no normal every day experiences that most teens get to have. She's being polite right now." This time I do glare at Ryker. He only chuckles.

"I wish I would have known about you. I would have liked to of known the truth." I want to be completely honest with them. I'm over secrets and lies.

"We had a semi-closed adoption. While we never met your mother, we were given her name. The agreement was that we were not allowed to reach out unless she chose to contact us. She sent us photos for a couple years, but when you were five, we stopped hearing from her."

I chew the inside of my cheek, thinking about everything I've just learned.

After a few moments, Anna pushes her chair out and stands. "Would you like to see my workshop, Zella?"

"Absolutely." I smile as I stand.

"Why don't you help me prepare the steak for dinner, Ryker?" Fred says, granting Anna and me some time alone. Though Fred might be a stranger, he is technically my father, and I'm about to willingly leave him alone with the guy I'd like to call my boyfriend.

Ryker clears his throat, clearly having the same realization I just had. "Yes, sir." He nods and swallows.

I bite back a smile and follow Anna through the house to the back, where there is a large room, partly covered in windows. The studio, which resembles a sunroom, is filled with everything an artist would need. There are a few easels and a full wall of shelving with art supplies. A table near the middle of the room is clearly an organized mess, with papers and several sketch pads lying about.

“I do my painting and planning in here.” She points to a door on the side of the room. “That leads out to my pottery wheel and kiln.”

I wander around the room, running my fingers along the plains of the table and supplies. “This is an amazing workspace. I love it.”

She smiles, looking around. “This was an add-on we had done a couple years after we moved here. What is your specialty?” she asks from the doorway.

“I love to draw. Pottery is fun, but I’m not amazing at it.” I giggle and remember the vase I made in my ceramics class last semester.

While taking in everything about the room, I notice a painting on one of the windowless walls. It’s a willowy sunflower, and I gasp when I realize why it looks so familiar.

“What?” Anna’s alarmed voice sounds from behind me now.

I point to the painting. “Where did you get that?”

“I drew that. It’s one of my favorites.” She doesn’t say anything else.

My eyes dart around the room. “I’ve seen this before,” I tell her. I don’t mention that I drew a similar version.

Hope shines through her eyes. “We broke the rules a little when it came to contacting you. Once we had your address, we sent you a birthday card every year. I like making my cards. For a while, all my cards had this flower on it. We never knew if you got them, but since they never came back to us in the mail, we at least assumed that they were delivered.”

The pain of knowing they tried to reach out makes my heart hurt. I don't tell her the whole truth: I found a card once—just the front of the card with the flower design—and it has always stuck with me. I no longer want to dwell on secrets.

“Well, I love it,” I say softly.

Her smile is kind when she puts her arms around me. “Let's check out the workshop outside, then I'll take you to meet the horses. We have two. Have you ever ridden a horse?”

RYKER



SITTING AT THE BIG WROUGHT IRON PATIO TABLE, I'M LOST IN the moment while I watch Zella toast marshmallows with her mom. The sun sets, and darkness is quickly approaching. Dinner was easy. Truthfully, everything has been pretty easy since we arrived yesterday afternoon. Zella is on cloud nine, and I can't say I blame her. Anna and Fred are amazing people, who harbor so much love for a daughter they never knew.

They seem to all fit seamlessly together. At the risk of sounding like a tool, it makes my heart pound with a little more gusto. *I made this happen.* I won't take the credit for this meeting, but I won't deny that without me and my computer skills, this wouldn't have happened.

Zella pulls a marshmallow out of the fire and blows on it furiously then giggles at something Anna says in response to Zella's fifth burnt marshmallow.

I smile at the scene. Anna and Zella could pass as twins if it weren't for the fact that Anna doesn't hide her age. Know what they say, if you want to know what your girl will look like when she's older, just check out her mom. Not that Zella is my girl, but if she were, I definitely have something to look forward to.

And I totally just checked out her mom.

Chuckling, I bring the glass of iced tea to my lips and swallow it down. It's sweet tea, and I'm not a fan of it, but I'm going to drink what is offered.

I hear the screen door creak behind me, and Fred lumbers out. He stands next to me, laughing at the sight of them burning more marshmallows.

“I’m wondering if they’ll run out of marshmallows before they get a decently toasted one,” he muses. “Here, thought you might like this.” He places a beer bottle in front of me, and I look up and tell him thanks.

He cups my shoulder, looks down at me as a fatherly expression crosses his face. “Thank you, Ryker. Thank you for finding us. We all needed this. She’s lucky to have you.” He moves to the seat next to mine and continues to stare out at them.

“I’d do anything to make Zella happy. This is what she wanted,” I tell him honestly.

He nods.

I take a swig of my beer, glad to be drinking something other than the tea.

“Look! I did it, finally! Two perfectly toasted marshmallows!” Zella says, walking toward the patio.

“Nice.” I laugh while Fred congratulates her.

“I brought you one.” She carefully pulls the first marshmallow off and hands it to me, then the second. She studies her work with a smirk, then shoves the whole thing in her mouth. She’s fucking adorable. I pop mine in my mouth and taste ash, but I don’t complain.

She falls into the chair next to mine, Anna next to Fred. Easy conversation flows once again.

“Oh, my God! Are those fireflies?” Zella points out toward the backyard.

We follow her gaze.

Anna laughs as she speaks, “Yes, just wait. In about five minutes, you’ll want to walk further out past where the porch light reaches and take it all in. There will be hundreds. While you’re there, you should check out the stars. It’s a clear night,

so you'll see everything. Actually, let me get you a blanket." She jumps up and hurries inside.

"That sounds amazing." Zella sighs.

Soon after returning with a blanket, we walk into the darkness of the yard, alone. Anna and Fred head inside.

In the shadow, where the porch lights no longer reach, I lie out the blanket and sit down. Before she sits, Zella kicks off her flip flops. I grin to myself.

She's still, and just as I turn to look at her, she gasps. Immediately, I understand why.

Hundreds of fireflies creep up from the grass and float through the air—tiny flickers of light all across the yard and nearby field.

"It's breathtaking," she whispers.

I agree, but I'm not watching the light show anymore. My eyes are fixed on her. Her smile is a mile wide, and when she grabs my hand, I pull my eyes away from her beautiful face and look at our intertwined fingers.

"Hold on to me, Ryker, so I don't float away on all the happiness I'm feeling right now."

I squeeze her hand. "I won't let you go, Blondie," I tell her. I see her smile, but she's still in awe of the fireflies surrounding us. I swat one away. I look up at the sky and see all the stars.

I lay back on the blanket and put my free hand up behind my head. I tug her down next to me.

Another gasp when she sees our new view. I have to admit, the stirring in my pants wishes she were gasping for other reasons.

We lie in silence for several moments. Finally, she speaks. "Thank you for making this happen. This is the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me." She looks over at me.

"Anytime, Blondie." I wink. I expect her to laugh or shake her head, like she normally does when I use her nickname, but

instead, I'm greeted with heat-filled eyes. Darkness surrounds us, except for the moonlight. I can barely make out her features, but I feel her desire. I'm surprised when she leans in and steals a kiss.

Her soft lips firmly land on mine for a quick moment before she starts to pull away, but I reach over and place my hand at the back of her head to pull her into me. I'm not ready to let her go just yet.

Moving my lips against hers, I swipe at her with my tongue. Her mouth opens, a welcoming invitation to deepen the kiss. Finally, a gasp of my doing falls from her mouth as I slide my tongue between her lips. I can still taste hints of marshmallow and think about how this is so much better than the actual one I had earlier.

Without breaking contact, I push up and lean over her, lying her flat on her back. My arm cradles her neck, and my fingers strum her soft hair. My other hand wanders down her body, eliciting more throaty moans from her. Then, unexpectedly, she throws her leg over my hip.

Fuck. She's so damn sexy. I hook my hand under her knee and yank her closer to me. We briefly break apart, and I take a moment to explore her jawline and neck. Her skin tastes like sun and happiness, and I could get lost in the taste for hours. I'll surely crave her from this point forward. My free hand slowly slides up the back of her shirt, feeling her bare skin beneath my palms. Her skin is cool to the touch, but there's a slight sheen of sweat since it's still eighty at this time of night.

My hand wanders to her stomach as I capture her mouth for another deep kiss. Suddenly, she pulls away, gasping a little when the fresh night air hits her lungs. I pull back, just slightly, and smirk as I take in the sight of her.

"I'm a virgin," she sputters, and the smirk falls right off my face. "I thought I should tell you, in case that's a problem."

I shouldn't be surprised at this revelation. She's so damn sheltered, it doesn't make sense for a girl who wasn't allowed any freedom, hardly any outside relationships to have sexual

experience. Deep down, I thought her and Cameron might have done something.

The thought of him, or anyone else for that matter, with their hands on her makes my blood boil. This means, if she lets me, I'll be her first. While that's normally not something I seek out, because it's Zella, the thought makes me about ten times harder than I already am.

"So you thought now was a good time?" I joke.

"Well, it didn't seem right to just mention it on the drive here, or at the Cuddle Duck, or you know, in front of Fred and Anna." She huffs, and it's fucking cute.

"I know, Blondie. Now was the right time." I lean in and kiss her nose.

Her breath hitches.

"I'm glad you told me, but what does that mean for us?" I readjust myself because having this conversation with a giant boner digging into her heat is just fucking distracting.

She swallows and nods. "Right. Well. I'd like...." She's having trouble spitting it out, so I lean in and kiss her cheek.

"What do you want, Blondie?" I whisper.

"I want to have sex with you." She says with all the confidence in the world. A slow grin grows across my face.

"That's good to hear because I want to have sex with you too." I can't help but chortle.

"You do?" She's surprised, and if I could hang my head, I would.

Instead, I lean in and rest my forehead on hers. "Very much so, Zella. I've wanted you for a while. Thought I made that clear last night."

"I guess you did, but I don't have a lot of experience with this kinda stuff, so I wasn't positive."

"Well, now you know." I lean in and kiss her other cheek. Now that I've started, I can't stop.

“So, what now?” she asks as I kiss down her jaw.

“Now, we head inside and go to bed. We’re not going to have sex for the first time, on a scratchy blanket, in the backyard of your parents’ house.”

She giggles.

“When I make love to you for the first time, it will be in a bed, where we are alone and at no risk of being interrupted, and I’m going to take my time. I’m going to kiss every inch of your body and make sure your first time is nothing short of amazing.”

She shivers.

I kiss back up the path I just made down her neck. “You like the sound of that, Blondie?”

“Yeah,” she breathes.

I’m tempted to take her right here and now, but this needs to be special. Reluctantly, I pull away.

“But right now, we are going to bed. I knew we don’t leave until lunch, but I could spend hours devouring you, and I don’t want to drive on little sleep.” I roll from my side and push up off the ground.

“Fine,” she slights with mock annoyance. “Whatever you want to do.”

I chuckle as I wait for her to stand, then I fold up the blanket.

We walk hand in hand back to the house. It’s not terribly late, but I expect to toss and turn with sexual frustration for a good while tonight. The longer I spend with her, the more I’ll want to say “fuck the waiting”. With us staying in the Cornors’ guest rooms, I know it would be in poor taste to do all the things I want to do to her here. *Gotta be fucking patient.*

Outside of Zella’s room, I pull her in and give her the sweetest goodnight kiss, leaving the pixie breathless.

“Night, Blondie.” I pull myself away from her and walk a few feet to my own door. “See ya in the morning.”

She mutters something in the dreamy tone of hers and slips into her room.

I fall asleep with a damn grin on my face and hand on my dick, with thoughts of Zella naked in my bed.

Talk about sweet fucking dreams.



FRED AND ANNA SEE US OFF RIGHT AFTER AN EARLY LUNCH. The send-off is teary but hopeful. They make plans for Zella to come out over Christmas break. Though she doesn't want to leave them yet, she's in good spirits on the way home. Unlike the start of our trip, when she couldn't get a grip on her guilt. I'm curious to see if she ends up telling her mother about the meeting, but I don't dare bring it up right now. I refuse to ruin the moment.

Zella is once again singing to the music feeding through the car stereo. She's wearing a light pink skirt that comes to her knees but rides up every time she shifts in the seat. I have to say, it's making my mouth water being able to see the creamy skin of her thighs. We've been holding hands, but I can't hold back any longer.

Letting go of her hand, which is resting on the armrest between us, I reach over and place it on her upper thigh. I look at her from my peripheral vision and wait for her to grow uncomfortable. Instead, she weaves her arm through mine and continues to sing along.

After a few minutes, my fingers itch for her skin. I brush my thumb under the hem of her skirt. Still no reaction. Moments pass, and I casually adjust my hand fully under the hem and up a few inches. This time she smiles.

Just as I consider trying my luck at moving further up her thigh, she giggles.

“You might want to save it for the hotel tonight, big guy. I'm not sure I want roadside sexy time starting out.”

I push out my bottom lip in a pout and move my hand back to where I started but leave us skin to skin.

“You have a point, Blondie.” Once we get her good and sexed up in the bedroom, roadside sexy time is back on the table for sure. I’m personally adding that to her bucket list.

Unable to keep my thoughts off of sex, I decide some conversation is necessary to keep my sanity in check.

“I’ve been thinking about your bucket list.” Taking my eyes off the road briefly, I find that I’ve got her attention.

“Oh yeah? Tell me about such thoughts.” She props her elbow on the middle console armrest and leans her chin on her fist.

“How serious are you about getting a tattoo?”

“Very. I know what I want.” She leans down and pulls something out of her bag, a thin journal. She flips through it, and I realize it’s not a journal, but a drawing pad. She turns it my way, and there are several sketches of a whimsical sunflower, but in the center is a tiny firefly. The drawing is feminine, but not at all childish, which is what some girls get when they go with flowers or animals.

“That’s wonderfully you, Blondie.” I smile at her, and she sets the pad in her lap. “I’ve got a buddy who has his own studio. He did a couple of my older tattoos. With just a short detour, he’d be an easy stop. It would only set us back a couple of hours. It would get us to the hotel later, but I’m good to drive.”

“I love this idea. I was going to ask you to take me anyway, since I don’t know anything about tattoos. And I’m ready to get it today.” She slides her drawing pad back into her bag after gifting me with the brightest smile.

God damn, she’s gorgeous.

ZELLA



“TO BE CLEAR, BLONDIE, NOT ALL TATTOO PARLORS ARE created equal. You want to make sure you do your research before you get a tat. James’s place is top-notch, up to code, and clean. Some places are not.”

The space we are in is part of a strip of small retail shops in the middle of a tiny college town. The shops range from clothing boutiques and a dog treat bakery, to what you could refer to as hippie-type stores. There are tons of restaurants and bars and even a late-night cookie delivery shop. At eight at night, the streets are full of college-aged students. The music from the bars and street chatter carries in through the tattoo parlor windows as Ryker and I sit in the empty lobby at the front of the store.

The parlor closed to the public an hour ago, but the owner, James, was thrilled when Ryker called, and he offered to open it up for us to both get tattoos. I’m a mix of excitement and nerves as we wait for James to transfer my tattoo to his guide. I hadn’t done a lot of research on the art of tattooing, but Ryker said they could use my drawing to create a guide, and then I would have my own artwork as my tattoo.

I clutch the notebook, that holds the recently ripped out page, and look around at all the artwork on the walls. I take it all in.

“Nervous, Blondie?” Ryker asks as he grabs my hand and brings it to his mouth and places a soft kiss on my knuckles. Since last night under the stars, he hasn’t been able to keep his hands to himself.

I can say with absolute certainty that I love every minute of it.

“Yes, but in a good way,” I tell him, leaning into him so I can place my head on his shoulder. “Are you getting a tattoo tonight?”

“I wasn’t planning on it. The one I want to get is going to take a while, and I don’t want to be here all night.” He kisses the top of my head.

“How long do you think mine will take?”

“Probably about thirty minutes or so,” James answers as he walks out from the hall that leads to the back. “I’m all ready for you, Zella, if you guys want to just follow me back.”

We stand and do just that. The area is an open space with three work stations. There are two small rooms, and then the hallway continues further back. I look around, eyeing the tiny rooms before sitting down in a dentist-like chair.

“Those rooms are for piercings and tattoos that you wouldn’t want other customers to see,” James says as he sits on a stool next to the chair.

“Why get a tattoo if you don’t want anyone to see it?” I frown.

Besides me, Ryker snickers, and James nods.

“Oh, no. I mean in places on the body, like in the genital area or on the ass.” He waves a hand over his crotch, and my face flushes instantly. I must be as red as a tomato because Ryker laughs harder.

“Blondie, people get a lot of things done here that others might not want to see, let alone think about.” He takes his own seat on a stool from a nearby station. Using his feet, he rolls himself next to me.

“All right, you said you wanted to do this on your shoulder, so you’re gonna have to take your shirt off.” James gathers some supplies. Thank goodness I’m wearing a thin camisole under my shirt. I’m not totally down with Ryker

seeing me in my bra for the first time with another guy in the room.

I hand my discarded top to Ryker, and he surprises me when he folds it carefully and sets it in his lap.

While he didn't grow up with an easy life, he's never known hard labor, but he's got a little bit of a gruff look. He's a mix between clean-cut and bad boy, and I can't get enough. While I haven't had a chance to see them all, I know he has several tattoos. The boots on his feet make him look like he fits in at the Cuddle Duck more than he does at Camelot University.

So the gentleness he uses with my shirt, the delicate way he reaches for my hand, and the sweet smile he gives me, heats me from my core. I cross my legs and squeeze my thighs shut at the thought of him finding out just how gone I am for him right now.

His sweet smile fades into a knowing smirk and wink just as James asks me if I'm ready. He instructs me on how to sit, which brings me face to face with Ryker.

James informs me, "It's going to pinch, a fuck ton. Since there is less meat back here on your shoulder blade, it's gonna hurt like a bitch. You sure you want it in this spot?" I bite my bottom lip and nod. I've always wanted a tattoo here, I don't want to back down from a little pain.

"All right, here we go," he says from behind.

I slam my eyes shut, and Ryker places a kiss on my forehead right as the first pinch of the ink stains my skin. I don't know if the pain was offset by his kiss, but the feel of the tattoo machine on my skin barely registers on my pain scale.

Ryker chats with me and catches up with James over the next half-hour, and before I know it, the sound of the gun stops, and James tells me he's done. He grabs a hand mirror, and we walk over to the floor-length mirror.

I lay eyes on my new tattoo.

A feeling of breathlessness washes over me at the meaningful image on my shoulder. "It's perfect," I whisper.

James smiles and walks back to his station. I meet Ryker's eyes in the mirror, and I'm struck by the lust I see in them. Breaking the connection, I turn back to James, and he tells me about how he's going to bandage it up and how to care for it.

As we head back up to the front, I ask James about the bill, and he tells me that it's been taken care of. I start to object, but he interrupts me. "I owed Ryker a tattoo, so don't worry about it." His smile is warm; I can tell an argument would get me nowhere.

We say our goodbyes, and Ryker promises to visit James over the summer break.

It's a little past nine when we decide to grab a bite to eat before finding a place to stay for the night. Even though Ryker was willing to drive some more, it's late. I really don't care if we get home later than we planned tomorrow.

After burgers, fries, and milkshakes, we stop by the cookie shop and buy some for the road tomorrow. That's my excuse at least, Ryker jokes that all the cookies will be eaten before we fall asleep.

We are able to find a tiny motel, ten minutes outside of town, with only one room left.

Ryker carries both of our bags, and I grip the key in my hand as we climb the rickety stairs to the second floor.

"I don't have high hopes. This place isn't as nice as the last one we stayed at," he mumbles.

When I unlock the door, we are greeted with a sparse room. A slight musty smell hits my nose, but it's not completely unpleasant. It isn't the smell or the lack of decor in the room that garners my attention, it's the full size, singular bed in the middle of the room that makes me gulp.

A strange feeling runs through my veins. I'm excited for what's to come with Ryker; I'm ready to lose a piece of me that I've held so close for so long. Ryker feels right—he's the right person to do this with. I hope, not just once or twice. At the same time, I'm nervous. What if I'm not good at the whole sex thing? I'm not a sexy person, I'm inexperienced and

innocent. I need to find my inner confidence, so I overcome the unsureness of it all.

I watch Ryker walk across the room, he lays my duffel on top of the tiny dresser under the television and places his on the floor.

“I’m going to grab a quick shower.” He fishes through his bag and disappears into the bathroom. Seconds later, the shower turns on.

I let out a breath and walk to my own bag to find a pair of sleep shorts and a tank. After changing, I walk to the bed and prop up the pillows and try to find the right position to lay that keeps my weight off my back shoulder. My new tattoo doesn’t hurt much, but it’s tender and isn’t all that comfortable when I put pressure on it.

I’m leaning against the headboard, scrolling through my Instagram feed when the bathroom door opens. Ryker is in a pair of gym shorts and nothing else. His hair is spikey with wetness, and as he walks in front of the bed to put his clothes in his bag, a few remaining drops of water glisten on his chest. His shoulders are spectacular. The smooth skin of his broad, muscular shoulders is painted in several tattoos, mostly tribal-like designs.

My fingers itch to trace every single one. His skin isn’t covered, there’s more tanned skin than art, but there’s enough to keep my fingers busy.

Just like that, heat pools in my core and creeps up my body, desire overtaking all my emotions. His calf muscles are strong, and I wonder if he works out. He’s crouched in front of his bag, looking for something.

It gives me more time to take him in. I’m looking forward to when he turns around, so I see what art covers his chest.

He stands and turns, catching me staring. He smirks and walks to the opposite side of the bed. I take the opportunity to feast my eyes upon the amazingness of his chest. He tosses his wallet onto the bedside table.

“Blondie, you like what you see?” His voice is husky, and his expression is unwavering.

I drag my eyes up to his chest to his face. My mouth is dry, so I just nod.

Fire flashes in his eyes as he lowers himself to the bed. My heart pounds in my chest. He sits facing the headboard, placing us face to face as he slides in next to me. He leans his hand on the bed next to my hip and uses his other to gently caress my cheek.

“Watching you get that tattoo was sexy as hell, Blondie.” He digs his fingers into my hair.

I smirk but narrow my eyes. “Yeah?” My voice comes out breathy.

“Yeah, made me want to do a bunch of stuff to you.” He leans in, I can feel his breath on my cheek. “Made me wish like hell that we had been alone.”

I clear my throat. “What kind of stuff?”

“Where to start? I wanted to kiss you,” he says, as his eyes drop to my mouth.

I smile, looking up at him beneath my eyelashes. “And?”

“I wanted to rip your clothes off.” He leans into my neck, and I stretch to the side, providing him easy access.

All I can muster in response is a “hmm-hm.”

“I want to plunge my fingers into your hair and...”

Normally, I’d be okay with that, but I startle us both by interrupting him. “Watch the hair, buddy! If you mess it up, I won’t be able to get it back in a braid in the morning.” He blinks at me, and I add, “Lifting my arms hurts, so it will be hard to re-braid.” And suddenly, I’m embarrassed at my predicament.

He lets out a deep laugh. “You are the sweetest fucking thing, Zella.” He calms his laughing, but a huge smile covers his face. He leans in again. “I promise to watch your hair, this time.” And he kisses me.

The kiss is passion and desire. It's warm and wet. The taste of his peppermint toothpaste on his tongue leaves tingles on my own. Suddenly, thoughts of all my insecurities about being intimate with Ryker flee. His hands cup my cheeks, my hands on his chest.

My hunger to be closer to Ryker is nearly impossible to ignore. Without breaking our kiss, I get on my knees. He starts to pull himself off the bed but refuses to break the connection, so he gently pulls me along with him until he's standing next to the bed in front of me.

"Clothes, off. I need them off, Blondie," he commands, his hands reaching down and pulling off my tank.

Suddenly, I'm naked from the waist up, and he's devouring me with his eyes, then with his mouth.

His lips pepper kisses and nips all over my chest. My breasts are full and heavy with a need I never knew possible.

With my hands in his hair, he leans forward, worshiping my body in a way I'll never forget. I tug too hard. His head pops up, and he stares me down as he takes a deep breath and breaks all connection between us.

"Zella, I need to know how far you want this to go tonight? I need to know now, so I don't push you."

My heart melts with his concern—another reason why he's the one. I lift my hand to his face; he leans into my palm. "I want it all with you, Ryker. I'm ready."

His eyes close with my words, a small smile playing at his lips. "I want it all with you too, Blondie." The moment between us is sensual, but it doesn't last long. He points to my tiny sleep shorts. "Off."

I get them off as he pulls down his own, and I'm struck stupid at the sight.

I might be a virgin, with little-to-no-experience when it comes to being with men, but I know how to research. I know how to please myself. But seeing Ryker now, the real deal, right in front of me, I could stare at him forever. I want to feel

him. I want to feel his hard length in my hands, against my body, inside me, and in my mouth.

I pull my eyes away from his cock at the sound of his low growl. My voice barely above a whisper, “I want it all.”

He pounces. We’re a tangle of arms and legs. Our skin, coated with a light sheen of sweat, causes us to nearly stick together— as we touch, kiss, and explore. Soon, his hand traces a trail down my stomach, to my hip, thigh, and ending between my legs.

“I want this to be so good for you. Don’t hold back,” he says in my ear, as his fingers run through my wet folds. I let out a moan when one finger enters me, then another. He works me up to the top of a cliff, and it’s long until I’m blissfully falling over the edge.

He lets me catch my breath while he places tiny kisses across my collarbone. When he leans away, I force my eyes open to see why. He’s reaching for a condom, and within seconds, he’s positioning himself between my tired, languid legs.

“How’s the shoulder?” His voice is low, husky, and sexy as sin.

“What shoulder?” I offer.

He smiles, but his expression turns concerned. “You need to tell me as soon as anything starts to hurt, that includes your shoulder. I’ll stop, we’ll readjust, or be done. Up to you.” He’s so sweet, but I’m already too far gone to stop now, so I answer by wrapping my arm around the back of his neck and pulling him down to me. I kiss him with as much fervor as I can to show him just how ready I am.

He lines himself up with my center, and before I have a second to think, he pushes in.

My gasp, due to the shock shooting through my body, causes him pause.

“Zella,” he whispers, searching my face. Whatever he sees causes him to place a sweet kiss on my cheek. Then another

and another, as he slowly pushes in further. The initial pain and sting fade as he slowly starts again.

Only moments later, it's like I'm back in the field full of fireflies. Thousands of tiny lights float around in my vision as I clutch to him. He holds on to me as I fall into a sea of stars, and then he finds his own release.

We lay there, wrapped up together in silence. The AC unit in the room kicks on, and I realize how hot it is in our tiny room. I run my hand up his back and feel his shiver at my touch.

“You alright, Blondie?” he asks into my neck.

“Best. Day. Ever.” I smile.

RYKER



WE WAKE LATER THAN WE PLANNED, BUT WHEN YOU STAY UP too late having the best sex of your life and eating cookies, what do you expect?

I woke her up a couple of hours before our alarm went off for another round. When her alarm finally rang, we snoozed it. Just a few times.

We've been on the road home for a few hours, and our drive is much the same — music, talking, but this time around, a lot more touching. Seems as if I've awoken some kind of sex kitten; Zella can't get enough. I have to admit, it makes me really fucking happy. Not that she wants me so bad, but the fact that I woke something up inside her.

She's scrolling through her phone when she gets a text.

"That was Cam. He said Wells has been trying to get a hold of you." She looks up from her phone. I look around for my own phone. "Now that he mentions it, I haven't seen you on your phone in days. Did you lose it?" Her expression is full of alarm.

"Nah, I put it on do not disturb the other morning. I wanted to take a break. Since we've got the GPS in here, I thought I'd disconnect for a couple of days." Truth is, I needed this. I needed to take a couple of days off from my phone, potential jobs, and the dark web. I still love hacking shit, but it's refreshing not being on my computer. I admit, my fingers are itching to hit my keyboard.

“I was wondering about that. I haven’t seen your computer the entire time we’ve been on the road. Did you even bring it?” she asks, looking over her shoulder into the back seat.

“Yeah, I don’t go anywhere without my computer.” I actually have a hidden compartment under my seat that you can access from the back. I slide my messenger bag into it when I need to. That’s where it’s been the whole trip, minus the night my car was in the shop.

She snickers at my response but goes back to her phone. I start to think about why the heck Wells might be trying to get a hold of me. Did our loft burn down? Surely, Cameron would have relayed the information to Zella if it were an emergency. As the minutes tick on, I struggle with the decision to dig my phone out of my pocket and turn it back on. For the first time in my life, I actually turned my phone off last night. I’m curious as to what Wells wants, but at the same time, this trip with Zella is nearly over. We have only a few more hours together, just us, before it’s back to real life.

I’m caught up in my struggle when Zella puts her phone down in her lap and turns toward me. I can feel her staring at me. I glance her way, and she’s got the biggest grin on her face, but she’s also fluttering her eyelashes, and she’s got the equivalent of puppy dog eyes going on.

I chuckle at the sight but get my eyes back on the road. “What’s going on, Blondie? I get the feeling you’re up to no good.”

“Ryker. I like you, like really, really like you,” she states, and I glance at her again. I see no nervousness or worry etched on her face. Whatever she’s about to hit me with, she’s confident about. It’s sexy as fuck, and before she continues, I know I’ll give her whatever it is she wants.

“Yeah, I really, really like you too, Blondie.” Her smile is sweet, and her cheeks tinge a tiny pink color at my words.

“That’s wonderful news.” She nods, still smiling.

“It really is,” I offer.

“With that all being said, I think it’s a good time to define what this is.” She motions between us. Damn, she’s cute when she thinks she’s calling the shots. Whatever it is she wants to call us, I’ve been hers since the first day. “I’d like you to be my boyfriend, and me, your girlfriend.”

She’s so matter of fact, almost business-like; I hold back my smile and play along.

“Are we exclusive?” I ask.

She doesn’t even think before answering. “Absolutely.” I nod in thought, still keeping my eyes on the road. Damn straight, we better be exclusive. I’m not going to share her with anyone else. Cameron should consider himself one lucky bastard.

“I don’t expect you to pay for everything, like when we hang out and stuff,” she adds.

“They are called dates. And I’m not sure I agree with you on that, but if it’s something you’re passionate about, I’ll allow it. Occasionally.” I risk a quick glance. Yup, still business mode. I bite the inside of my cheek.

“Good. And my last order of business, the ball. I know it isn’t your thing, but I’m going. I already have tickets, and I don’t want to go alone. I can’t very well go with someone who isn’t my boyfriend, so it seems as if your only option is to go with me.” She takes a breath.

That sneaky little pixie. She knew exactly what she was doing when she gave me those puppy dog eyes.

I bark out a laugh. “You play hardball, Blondie. I fucking love it.” I reach over and grab her hand.

“So, do you agree to my terms?” she asks seriously.

“I agree to the exclusive relationship and occasionally letting you pay for shit.”

“Yeah? What about the last part?” I can see her out of the corner of my eye, and she’s so damn hopeful.

“Yes, I’ll take my girlfriend to the damn dance. But you owe me, big time.” I growl my disdain but add in a wink.

“Anything you want.” She pulls my hand into her with excitement. I wiggle my eyebrows, and she gets the hint and giggles.

“So do we need to shake on this or something?” she asks so innocently. A laugh erupts from my belly. I can’t handle her cuteness right now. I want to bury my face in her neck and kiss her stupid.

“How about a kiss instead?” And before I take my next breath, she’s leaning toward me and placing an excited kiss on my lips. It’s a struggle to keep my eyes on the road, but I manage it. She’s laughing as she sits back in her seat, and I’m cursing under my breath.

I’m driving a fucking car right now and not able to give her a proper kiss in return.

The relationship conversation was good. It was enough of a distraction that I forgot about my turned-off phone in my pocket. At least for a little while. With a groan, I maneuver the phone out of my pocket and power it on. I slide it under my thigh while I give it time to welcome its self back to life. All too soon, my phone feels like a damn vibrator with the constant notifications as it plays catch up.

Shit. Something’s going on.

I’m not about to try to read my messages while I’m driving, nor ask Zella to read them to me, so I check the next mile marker sign and see that we are less than ten miles from an exit. I’m hoping there’s a gas station.

Sure enough, we’re in luck.

After getting gas, I pull the car up to the side of the station and finally peek at my phone.

I’ve got a half a dozen texts from Wells, plus two calls. What surprises me more than the few missed calls from an unknown number is that I have four missed calls from my uncle.

Pulling the phone up to my ear, I listen to the only message he left me. “Ryker, this is the last time I clean up your fucking

messes. I'll see what my lawyers can do, but you might be shit out of luck."

His pissed off tone is enough to send shivers down my spine. But the message was short and didn't give me a lot of information. I open up my messages and start to read the several from Wells.

Wells: There are some suits here on campus asking about you.

Wells: Holy shit, Ryker. What did you do?

Wells: You need to call me ASAP.

Wells: I really don't want Zella to get hurt, but if you don't contact me soon, I'm going to have to call her. Shit isn't looking good for you right now, man.

My stomach drops, and sweat prickles on the back of my neck. I have no idea what the fuck is going on, but it doesn't sound good. No way did campus security catch on to my server hack. We're talking about a few semester grades, no biggie. The dudes who paid me weren't there on scholarship or anything.

I hear Zella before I see her. She must be heading back to the car, so I fire off a text to Wells.

Me: Phone's been off. I have no idea what's going on. Be back in about five hours.

Hitting send, I slide the phone back in my pocket.

"Did you get a hold of Wells?" she asks as she comes up to stand in front of me. I'm leaning against the side of the car. To calm my nerves, I place my hands on her hips and pull her into me. She moves effortlessly as if she were waiting for an invitation. Leaning down, I find her lips and kiss her. The kiss doesn't last long thanks to the vibration in my pocket, bringing me back to reality.

"I did. Hop in the car. Going to run to the restroom real fast." Regretfully, I let her go.

"Already got you some snacks," she replies in a sing-song voice. She slides into the front seat and closes the door. I turn

and walk into the building, barely waiting a second before checking my phone.

Wells: Come to campus security as soon as you drop off Zella.

Damn it. The next five hours are not going to be easy. Since I don't know what kind of trouble I'm so obviously in, I better make the most of my time with Zella. After I find out what the hell is going on, who knows if she'll still be into me.

The time somehow simultaneously drags on and passes at light speed. Before we know it, it's ten o'clock at night and I'm pulling up in front of the Lofts. Cameron is waiting just inside and meets us right as I pull the key from the ignition.

I drag myself out of the car and grab Zella's bags from the backseat. I get a look of concern from Zella when I hand her bags to Cam. She must be expecting me to come up. I badly want to come up with her. Hell, I'd stay the night with her if I could, but I can't. I can't ignore whatever real-life bull shit is waiting for me at the campus security building.

"All right, Blondie. I've gotta run, but we'll talk in the morning." I try not to be a dick, but I can't stay.

Her eyebrows crease. "Oh, okay." She turns away to follow Cam, who's clearly giving me the cold shoulder. But I'm not leaving things between us like this. I reach out and catch her hand, stopping her. When she looks back at me, I pull her arm, and she follows. I dig my hands into her hair and kiss her with passion. I hear a throat clear somewhere behind her but ignore it.

Slowly breaking the kiss, I smile down at her dazed, blissful face.

"I had an amazing few days with you. Don't forget to put lotion on that tat." She looks up at me and nods. She breaks away from me and walks back toward the building entrance.

"Night, Blondie." I try to keep the panic out of my voice.

With a half-smile, she waves and despairs into the building.

Slowly, I get back in my car and drive myself into what's surely about to be hell. Minutes later, I walk into the campus security building. There are a couple campus security guards milling about, and I briefly wonder what they normally do this late on weeknights while they are on call. One of the guards recognizes me; he walks over and knocks on a door. It opens and out comes the security director, followed by two men in dark suits and a police officer.

"Ryker, nice of you to show up," the director says. I've met him a few times. Over the years. You'd think I would know his name, but I don't. I've always thought of him as a joke though.

"I've been out of town," I offer.

"Mr. Stone. I'm Special Agent Black, and this is Special Agent Graham. We need you to come down to the station with us. We've got some things we need to talk about." Black is a tall, thin man; he looks like he's in his late thirties, but I'm not sure. Graham looks older and stockier.

I glance at the officer standing next to him, and then the campus police standing at attention, both strategically placed and ready for the chase if I were to run. That isn't going to happen though. I don't run. I'm not a coward.

"Am I under arrest?" I eye Black.

"Why don't you just come willingly? That way, we don't have to make a scene," he replies, but the officer looks disappointed. Douche.

"I'd like to call my lawyer." Technically, it's my uncle's lawyer, but he's helped me out before.

The good agent curses under his breath. "Yeah, I'm sure you do. Come on."

With a sigh, I nod. I want to get to the bottom of this, then I want to crash because I'm fucking tired from the ten-hour drive I made today. I walk out into the night with Agent Black and Graham and some douchebag officer. I leave my car in the parking lot and hope like hell this is all a huge misunderstanding.

ZELLA



TEN DAYS AGO, I WAS ON CLOUD NINE. TODAY, I COULDN'T BE further from the sky. Ten days ago, I had a boyfriend sitting next to me in the car, holding my hand and singing along to whatever song I played. Today, I don't know what I have, but it's not a present boyfriend.

I haven't heard from Ryker since he dropped me off in front of my building. I should have suspected something was wrong when he didn't come up to my room. Though we didn't talk about it, I thought for sure he was going to come up. I would have even asked him to stay if I'd been given the chance.

He didn't show up in class Tuesday night, which pushed me over the edge. I might not have a lot of experience in the relationship department, but I don't want to be a clingy girlfriend. When you spend five days with someone and then get no texts, no calls, and don't see them for over a week, it's rough.

I knew something was wrong.

He regretted his time with me. I knew it. I could barely keep it together through class. Cameron kept giving me the side-eye. He'd try his best to comfort me. "He's probably just tired and missed class."

As the days went on, Cam's tune changed; he was no longer defending Ryker, which I assume a best friend does when your heart is broken.

I guess what's got me so upset is that I don't know where he is. It's like he just fell off the face of the earth.

Two days in with no contact, I wanted to march down to the police station and file a missing person report. That's when Wells stepped in. He said Ryker was involved in some bad stuff, and he's either in police custody or hiding.

That promptly started an argument because I know Ryker well enough to know he isn't a coward. He wouldn't hide. He would face up to whatever it was he did. Wells wasn't as sure. I told him that as Ryker's best friend, he needed to have more faith in him. That earned me a sad, shameful response, ending the argument.

Which brings me back to today. I'm standing at the counter in the lobby of the tiny campus security office. Once again, not getting any stinking answers.

"I'm sorry, Miss. I've told you already, we can't give out any information on students, especially ongoing investigations." The officer sighs. I've been in here two other times, and I'm getting nowhere with this guy.

"So you admit he's involved in an investigation?" I'm smart enough to know I'm not going to get any more out of him. Though this is the first time I've dealt with him, none of them have given me what I want.

He blinks slowly at me, refusing to verbally acknowledge my question.

I hang my head in defeat.

"I'm really am sorry I can't help you." His voice is genuine. "If no one down at the station can tell you anything, then we definitely can't."

"Can you at least give me the name of someone that can help me? Maybe a detective on the case?" If my hands weren't resting on the counter, I would have them crossed, hoping to hear something I can use.

He shakes his head in disappointment. I don't know if it's because he can't answer my questions or if I can't take a hint.

“I think you should probably be on your way.” He’s not wrong, but I’m offended he’s not more help.

My shoulders sag, and I turn to leave. I reach my hands up to push open the door when he calls out to me. “You should check with his family. His parents, I’m sure, have information they can give you.”

I can tell he thinks he’s offering up good advice, but it’s worthless. I nod and push out of the building.

I had Wells try to get a hold of Ryker’s uncle, and all he supplied was, ‘Ryker is fine. He’s taking responsibility for his actions.’ That’s about it. At least I have confirmation my boyfriend is alive. Though, whatever is going on, I highly doubt he hasn’t had a chance to contact me at least once.

The anger at him not contacting me bubbles up, but then guilt and worry take over. What if he’s in jail? Oh, my God. Whatever he did, he doesn’t deserve to be in jail. I know hacking is bad, but Ryker is a good person. Then a thought crosses my mind: *what if he got caught for what he did to find Frank and Anna?*

Panic starts to rise from my belly up through my chest. *What if this is my fault?* Tears prickle at my eyes as I walk back through campus. I pull out my phone and call Wells.

“Hey.” His voice is gruffer than normal.

“What if this is my fault?” I blurt into the phone.

“What?”

“Why Ryker was arrested. Could it be my fault?” I bite back my tears.

“First of all, we don’t know for sure if that’s the case. The fact that it isn’t public record makes me believe he wasn’t arrested. And secondly, how in the hell did you come to that conclusion?”

“I asked him to find my birth parents, what if he got caught? Whatever he did to find them was risky. He could get in a lot of trouble if he were caught,” I whisper this into the phone, worried about anyone around me overhearing.

Wells blows out a deep breath. “Look, Zella, I really don’t think you have anything to do with the trouble he’s gotten into. I think he will show back up eventually, and when he does, we will get answers. And if we don’t, I’ll kick his ass for you.” I can tell by his tone that he’s dead serious; the sentiment isn’t lost on me. It helps.

I let out a small laugh. “Okay, okay. I’m just... not handling this well. I miss him, and I’m so worried.”

“I know, sweetie, I know. I’m trying to get as much info as I can when I’m at work, but they know I’m his roommate, so they are careful about what they say.” It helps to know Wells has his ear to the ground.

“All right.” I sigh into the phone.

“Aren’t you going with Louisa to pick up your dress for the ball?” He, just like Cam, has been trying to get my mind off missing Ryker. When Louisa asked to have lunch, pedicures, and dress pick up, I knew it was on Wells’s request. I really like Louisa, but I don’t know her well, and it felt like something a very close girlfriend would do with you, not the new girlfriend of one of your guy pals. But she seems nice enough, and it will be a distraction.

“Yes, I’m walking back to the apartments to meet her now,” I tell him, then we say our goodbyes. I welcome the distractions, but I doubt picking up a dress, that I’m supposed to wear to a ball with a boyfriend who probably won’t show up, is going to be much of one.

Sure enough, nearly two hours later, it’s not. I’ve enjoyed some girl time. Getting our nails done relaxed me a little. Lunch was spent with light chit-chat, but picking up my dress was another story.

I found my dress two months ago before I even had a date. I saw it and knew it was the perfect gown. It’s a light purple, A-line gown with a mix of lace and tulle. The bodice is fitted and covered in flowers with tiny dazzling sparkles within each piece. Thin capped sleeves and a rounded sheer fabric keeps the V-cut of the bodice innocent, though I still feel sexy. The long, full, but relaxed, delicate tulle skirt has an easy flair.

Satin ribbons lace up the back of the dress, and I can't decide if that's my favorite part of the dress or if it's the way the dress lightly swooshes as I move.

I didn't have Ryker in mind when I picked it out; it's one hundred percent for me. When I had my fitting last month, even though he hadn't said yes, I imagined what he would say when he saw me in it. Suddenly, the gown felt like so much more. I sniffle a little as I try on the dress one final time before leaving with it.

When I get home, I carefully hang the dress bag in my closet. Standing there, staring at it, I decide I've been waiting for a dance like this Glass Ball my whole life. I don't want to waste the experience being depressed. I'm going to go, and I'm going to have fun.

Wells and Louisa will be there, as well as Cam, so I know it will be a good night. I hope and pray Ryker will show up, but I won't check my heart at the door.

I'm going to live in the moment and check one more item off my bucket list.

RYKER



MULTIPLE TIMES IN THE PAST TWO WEEKS, I'VE HAD TO TAKE A moment and wonder, how the hell did I get to this point in my life? I've tried to pinpoint the exact moment in my life where I was set down this path that I'm on. I've identified several possible events that could have put me here, but no matter which way I turn the puzzle around in my head, I think I would have ended up here all along.

Maybe, I was set on this path when I was too young to make my own decisions. It's an easy enough excuse. I could ultimately blame being dropped in the system and being stuck there for too long.

I won't sit here and place blame. The long and the short of it is, I got cocky somewhere along the way when it came to hacking my way through petty Internet crimes. Over the past several days, not knowing if I'd only see the inside of a jail cell for the next few years has really got me rethinking my life. I didn't want to have to beg my uncle for help, as he's already grudgingly given me more than he thinks I deserve. Did I really want to continue down this path? Have I always made the right choices along the way? I can't say I'd change the choices I made up until this point, because if I did, I wouldn't have found Zella.

I know I'm going to be one lucky motherfucker if she'll take me back after nearly two weeks of radio silence.

I've thought about her often, mostly when I'm alone. They confiscated my phone and laptop the minute I walked into the police station. While I wasn't arrested, I was still only allowed

one phone call, which was to my uncle. I did ask him to contact Wells, the only friend I've ever had, but knowing my uncle, Wells might not have gotten my "I'm all right" message.

Twelve days ago, I was taken in for questioning for the attempt to steal upwards of two-hundred and fifty thousand dollars from the university. That fucking job I was contacted about months ago came back and bit me in the ass.

The first day was hell. They accused me of the attempt. No matter what I said, they didn't believe me. It was rough because they weren't letting on as to what all they had on me. I didn't want to give away anything from past jobs that could jeopardize myself or anyone else.

On day three, things shifted.

Agent Black gave me a hard look across the table after an hour of grueling questioning. "Truth is, Stone, we don't think you did it. We know you turned the job down. But we've got you on so much shit we could lock you up for years."

I wasn't surprised; Black and Graham seemed competent at their jobs.

"So what do you want from me? Why else would you hold me here if you don't think I did it?" I was tired and annoyed with their games. I wanted to get all this shit behind me.

"We want you to find out who did it. Who set up the job?"

It was all starting to make sense now. They needed me, and they're going to use my past discretions over my head as leverage.

"Don't you have guys for that? Clearly, you've got the funding." Wasn't this the kind of thing Zella told me I should consider after school? Isn't there a need for guys like me, who are willing to wear white hats?

"We'll give you credit, Stone. You're good. Better than our guy, but don't tell Antonio I said that." He chuckles, now acting all chummy.

I didn't buy it; there was no pretending I could be friends with the man someday. That ship sailed days ago.

However, I didn't see another option. Help take down what Black and Graham had divulged as a crime ring. Turns out, several Universities had large amounts of fundraising money stolen in the past several months. These fuckers never thought I did it in the first place, just wanted my help. Not too thrilled with their methods. I'd have to find other ways to use my hacking skills for good. Working with the authorities hasn't been a walk in the park.

No, it was either help them, or they had me on identify theft, data fraud, and computer fraud—just to name a few. Sure, the first two sound really fucking bad, but what I did was so minor compared to what I could have done.

If I helped the cops, I'd walk away from this with a clean slate, and I had to promise to keep my nose clean. I made the deal, accepted my punishment, and agreed to help them. I thought that meant I might be able to give Zella a call, to let her know I was okay. I was wrong. Immediately, I was transferred to a safe house, no outside contact until the job was done. While I balked at their reasoning for the safe house, they insisted on keeping me safe while I assist them in taking down a crime ring.

The safe house was decent. The set up the Feds gave me was grade-A. They monitored the shit out of what I did though. I had to fight for the opportunity to run through everything the original hacker did, so I could find a trace of him. Every hacker has a fingerprint. They leave something behind with every job. While the hacker who attempted to steal the money ultimately failed, there was no doubt in my mind I'd be able to find him if I could figure out who he was.

Following the rules, made the job take ten times longer than it should have, but I finally had a breakthrough on day ten. I had officially assisted the Feds in the arrest of not only the hacker behind the botched job, but also, the man who set up the job.

Heading home was in my near future. Upon my return from the safe house, I'm granted my phone, which is dead, my laptop and the rest of my belongings. I'm going to have to wipe everything and then get a new system, who knows what they might have done. They said they were going to keep an eye on me, so I'll just have to start new. Don't get me wrong, I'm gonna keep my nose clean, but only clean enough to not get me in too much hot water.

I shrug, not going to stop cold turkey.

Once I get back to my car, I plug in my phone. It will take a few minutes to boot up with enough juice, so instead of waiting to call Wells and Zella, I head home.

I pull in to the Loft parking lot just as my phone comes to life. I've got so many goddamn messages, I don't know where to start. That's a lie. I know where to start: with Zella's. Her messages and texts range from worried to mad, to scared, to desperate. They stopped about four days ago. My stomach is sick with fear that she's not going to want to have anything to do with me now. But I'm going to try my best to win her back.

Still scrolling through my phone as I walk up to my building, I hear Wells up ahead.

"Well, look what the cat dragged in." He's leaning against a lamppost, and I can't read the expression on his face.

"Yeah. I know. Good to be home," I offer.

He pushes off the post as I meet up with him. "Man, we've been so fucking worried about you. You all right?" He—the old Wells, the guy who truly used to be my best friend—claps a hand on my shoulder. "It's been two weeks from hell. What do you know? Anything? I gotta find Zella as soon as possible. I'm sure she hates me."

Wells's eyes sadden and panic kicks in. "All I know is they wanted to bring you in for questioning. Then we didn't see or hear from you again." He walks with me as we enter the building.

"I asked my uncle to contact you," I grumble. He's such a dick.

Wells nods. “When I finally got a hold of him, he was cryptic. Said you were fine but finally taking responsibility for your actions. He wouldn’t give me anything else.” He pauses, turns to me, and asks, “Dude, were you arrested? The police were unhelpful; I couldn’t get a straight answer from them.”

“No, I wasn’t,” I spit out. “You went to the police?” I asked, a little surprised he cared so much.

He slides a glance my way as we enter the elevator. “No, I didn’t, but Zella did. Multiple times. She got nowhere.”

My heart tightens at his words. Zella must have been freaking out. “I need to call her. Go see her. I’m going to change first.” I look down at my pants and shirt. The clothes given to me at the safe house didn’t fit well and were super cheap. Never thought I’d miss my own clothes so much.

“That’s going be a problem,” he says as we come to a stop in front of our apartment.

My ears perk up at that. “What do you mean?” I question, he doesn’t sound angry or disappointed, so I don’t understand his meaning.

“Well, she’s on her way to the Ball. I’m actually heading there myself.”

That’s when I look at him for the first time and realize the dude is wearing a black suit, pants, and a soft blue button-up.

“Shit. That’s tonight.” I close my eyes in defeat.

Fuck, I messed up.

Wells grabs my shoulders. “Hey, Ryker, it’s all good. I got wind yesterday that you were going to be released. So I picked up a suit from the place I rented mine. It was cheap, it probably doesn’t fit right, but it’s all I could get on short notice. If you hurry, we can head over there and not miss too much.”

I stand there, in the middle of our shared living space and stare at him. “I don’t... okay... okay... this is good.” I look around, seemingly dumbstruck with what to do next.

Wells laughs. “Dude, shower, fast. You can tell me all the details about where the hell you’ve been on the way.” He pushes me toward my room, and my feet thankfully move.

Through my quick shower and getting dressed in a surprisingly comfortable slim-fitting navy suit, I keep up hope that I can save things with Zella. I can explain everything, answer her questions, so we can get back on track.

Then I’m going to fucking kiss the daylights out of her. If I’m lucky, do a lot more after this fucking dance is over, and I can get out of this penguin suit.

ZELLA



FOR SOME REASON, WELLS DOESN'T ESCORT US TO THE DANCE. Louisa said something work-related came up but promises he won't be late. Louisa doesn't seem bothered by his absence, which makes me wonder if things aren't going well for them, or maybe she's just as laid back as she seems.

We arrive in the Glass Room; I'm in awe of the space. I've never stepped foot in here before though, I've thought about it over the months. The area is large with ornate hand-painted ceilings and mirrors line the walls, giving it its name. Multiple fireplaces fill the room, yet as I look closer to them, I see they are no longer in use and probably haven't been for some time.

Cameron bumps my shoulder. "Isn't this place over the top?"

I snort. "You could say that again. It looks like a ballroom right out of a fairytale."

"I think that's the point." He chuckles. He nods his head toward one of the fireplaces. "A lot of these fireplaces used to lead to secret passageway throughout campus."

"Really? That's amazing." I study the one we stand next to more closely.

"Yeah, there are several underground tunnels that take you to places around campus, but most of them have been sealed off. Though, I'm told that there is one that still usable."

"Oh, I want to find it." I glance around the room, noting now is not the time for an adventure. "Maybe we'll sneak in here sometime and find it."

“Sounds like a plan to me. Do you want to dance? I’m going to get bored real fast if all we do is stand here and chit-chat.”

I laugh because he warned me this thing would be boring, but if the right music was playing, he would just dance the night away. So it doesn’t surprise me that he’s ready to move it.

“I’m going to run to the ladies’ room real fast, then I’ll find you on the dance floor.”

He leans in and kisses my cheek before turning and wading into the large group of ball gown and suit-clad attendees.

To get to the ladies’ room, I have to wander back out of The Glass Room, but as I make my way through the growing crowd, I catch sight of Wells. He’s standing with Louisa and another man. I make a mental note to find him on my way back in before making it to the dance floor.

After maneuvering my way in and out of the tiny restroom stall, I slowly wash my hands. I’ve been looking forward to this event for months. My dress, I’m in love with it. My hair is braided to the side, my hair swept over onto one shoulder. The stylist who spent two hours teasing, curling, and braiding my hair talked me into some side bangs to give my braid more depth and delicately pinned little white roses throughout the braid.

I have to say, despite the gobs of hairspray and bobby pins used, I’m absolutely in love with what she did. As I sat there, she shared some ideas she had for my hair if I wanted to try something new and get it cut. While cutting my hair is something I want to do, listening to the style ideas she has makes me so much more excited. I know, without a doubt, I’m going to come back to her soon.

Staring at myself in the mirror, taking in how much more grown-up I look, and feel, at this point in my life, I can’t help but think of Ryker. While I took the first leap and got myself here, he helped me through all the tiny steps I still needed to take.

Him not being here makes my heart hurt.

Two women come into the restroom, both chattering away, happy as can be. They both glance at me, smiling at me through the wall-length mirror. I force a smile back and turn off the water, drying off my hands. It's time to get back out there.

Suck it up, buttercup, I tell myself as I push out the door of the restroom.

My heart races when I'm greeted with a familiar pair of eyes. He's leaning against the opposite wall with his hands in his pockets. He's wearing a dark navy suit with a white button-up shirt. His tie is skinny and matches the suit. I drink him in but can't help wondering what he's doing here. My eyes travel up his body, chest, and then land on his face. He's freshly shaved, no five o'clock shadow in sight. His hair is a bit on the shaggy side, but it suits him.

His chocolate brown eyes are intense as they stare me down. I had stopped walking, so I force myself to take a few steps toward him. Forcing myself not to run into his arms hurts more than I expected. I've been worried sick about him, but also mad as hell. I didn't expect to want to fling myself into his arms at my first sight of him in two weeks.

"Blondie, you look... you look absolutely stunning." His voice, while music to my soul, forges time into hooks and draws me to him.

"Ryker. You're here," I say, my voice barely above a whisper. Tears prick at the back of my eyes, but I fight against them.

"Want to come a little closer? You're kind of blocking the hallway." Laughter dances in his eyes, and I snap my head to the side. A few couples try to make their way around us.

I mutter an apology and walk closer to Ryker. He starts to reach for me but drops his hand at my subtle head shake. I need answers, and I won't be able to think straight if he's touching me.

“Where have you been, Ryker?” I gather my courage and fight through my desire to jump him right here and now.

“It’s a long story.” He smiles sadly.

“I’ve got time.”

“Do you want to do this somewhere else? Maybe later? After a dance or two?” He doesn’t look like he’s trying to get out of explaining. He’s facing me, I hold all of his attention, and he has all of mine. So I don’t miss his hand ball into a fist after he starts to reach for me.

My eyes dart around the hallway right outside the restroom, which isn’t the best place for a reunion and interrogation.

Without hesitation, he grabs my hand and pulls me behind him back toward The Glass Room. I follow on his heels, but he doesn’t stop when we get to the giant double doors, he keeps walking. The hallway is relatively empty, but we walk just a bit further until there are no other people within earshot.

Coming to a stop, I drop his hand. Control, I need to keep it, and I cross my arms across my chest and ask again, “Where have you been?”

He nods, readying himself for his explanation.

“Before I start, please know I can’t tell you everything, but I will not lie to you. I’ll tell you everything I possibly can, but I might not be able to share every detail.” He’s more serious than I’ve ever seen him. Suddenly, I’m scared for him, and my relief at him being here morphs into worry.

I nod; concern must show all over my face because he lifts his hand and gently strokes his thumb down my cheek.

“Blondie, it’s okay. Everything fine now.”

I bite back a whimper, from both his words and his touch.

“Right before you asked me to help you find your parents, I was contacted for a job. It was big. Huge! The payout was more than I’ve ever received, but the risk was just as big. This job was different than anything I’ve done before, and I didn’t know if I wanted to go down that road, but after I started

working on finding Fred and Anna, I decided I wasn't interested in the other job, so I turned it down. Well, fast forward to the day we got back from our trip to Texas, the reason why Wells was trying to get a hold of me was because the Feds were looking for me."

I gasp.

Then he launches into what happened and why he couldn't reach out to me.

"I asked my uncle to reach out to Wells to let you all know I was fine, but I'm starting to think it was never relayed to you."

I shake my head. "No, it sure wasn't."

He mutters a swear under his breath. He reaches for my hand and clasps it in his own. "Zella, I tried to contact you so many times, but I wasn't allowed. It killed me nearly every day. I couldn't talk to you, and not knowing if you knew drove me fucking insane."

Tears threaten to fall, but I hold them back. Looking up into his face, I ask what's been gnawing at the back of my mind. "Were you in jail?"

He gives me a half-smile. "No, but it sure as hell felt like it. After a few days, after they had proof I didn't fuck up this hack job, they admitted they never thought it was me, but wanted to get as much information as they could. They also wanted me to help them take down the organization that was behind the job. They held the fact that they knew all about my past jobs over my head, gave me no choice really, but I helped. They kept me under lock and key while I worked with their guys to identify the players. Once that was done, I was free to go."

"What about all the past jobs? What happens now that they know what you've been up to?"

He chuckles. "Apparently, they've wiped my slate clean. Told me to stay out of trouble."

I think about everything he just shared. It's crazy and doesn't feel real, but I know crazier things happen in this

world. I know he wouldn't lie to me.

“That all sounds too easy.” I mean, the Feds just letting him walk away?

“Yeah, tell me about it. But what I did, helping them bring down a crime organization, it wasn't easy, took a lot of work, and a deal is a deal.” He shrugs.

I stare up at him, still processing everything.

He looks down at me with hope-filled eyes. His voice low and guttural. “Blondie.”

I open my mouth to tell him the truth—what I went through without knowing where he was, if he was safe or hurt—when I hear my name from down the hall.

“Zella, come on girlfriend, you're missing the ball.” Cameron walks toward us as he speaks. He nods at Ryker, like he isn't surprised he's here. “You've been looking forward to this thing for a month. Your man's here. There's time for talking later; it's dancing time now, baby.” He smiles wide, and it's contagious.

Next to me, Ryker chuckles. The sound soothes my soul.

“All right, you've got a point,” I tell Cam, but turn to Ryker, holding out my hand. “Come on. You owe me some dances.” I smile up at him, and for the first time tonight, he looks utterly relieved. Maybe things are going to be alright. He grabs on tight, and we walk hand in hand into The Glass Room.

Surprisingly, Ryker leads us out onto the dance floor, just as the DJ starts playing a slow song. He pulls me into him without missing a beat. I wrap my arm around his shoulder, and he takes my other hand in his and places them on his chest.

“Blondie, I heard the heels, but how are you still so short?” He laughs, and I just smile softly and lean into him. Truth is, I've got on three-inch heels. He's right, I'm still short, but he's not that much taller now.

We dance in silence for several minutes, and as if the DJ knows we need more time, the song flows right into another.

“Blondie.” My name vibrates through my body; we stand so close. I pull back slightly and look up at him. “The past two weeks have been hell without you. You are all I’ve thought about. I’ve craved you, missed you—wanted you so fucking badly.”

My heart hammers in my chest at his words.

“The conversation we had in the car, on the way home, I still mean it all. You and me. I don’t ever want to be apart from you again. Please tell me I’m not too late.”

I blink back tears. “Ryker, I fell for you the moment you showed up in my tower. I’ve craved you, missed you, and wanted you so much too. I’ve been a wreck. Between worried out of my mind and mad as hell, one thing remained consistent.”

He leans down and presses his cheek to mine. His warm breath in my ear. “What was that, Blondie?”

“That I love you and just wanted your arms around me,” I whisper.

I know he hears me. He turns his head slightly, so we are nose to nose. His breath now tangled with mine. “I love you too, Zella.” He lingers as I let out a shaky sigh, and then he kisses me.

EPILOGUE

THREE MONTHS LATER

RYKER

“OH, MY GOD. I CAN’T DO IT,” ZELLA CRIES FROM THE passenger seat.

“Blondie, you promised,” I tell her.

She sighs and slumps back in the seat, covering her face with her hands. I can barely make out her muffled words, but I’ve become a bit of an expert when it comes to Zella Raps over the past few months.

“I’m sorry, did you say you were freaking out because you were scared?” I tease, she might be freaking out, but my girl is not scared.

Her hands drop from her face, and I’m greeted with the most beautiful glare. “I’m not ducking scared, and you know it.”

I chuckle at her use of the word, ducking. Collectively, Cam, Wells, and I have been trying to expand her vocabulary to include more unsavory words. She’s hard to break though. Using similar words in place of the ones that make her blush. For example, saying duck instead of fuck. It’s cute. It’s also a step in the right direction, but then again, I wouldn’t change a thing about her.

I toss my hands up in surrender. “My bad. But you do have an appointment, and you’re now two minutes late.”

She hangs her head. “Blah! Fine, I’m going.” Her head shoots up, and she points a finger at me. “If I look like a monster when this is all said and done— so help me— if you laugh, I’m cutting you off.”

I grin because she might not be able to swear but damn she’s a sex kitten. She wouldn’t be able to handle cutting me off.

I wink at her. “Right, Blondie.”

She pushes out of the car. “Ugh. Fine.”

“I’ll be back in two hours,” I yell behind her as she slams the door. I chuckle as I watch her disappear into the hair salon.

I pull away from the salon and head to a coffeehouse nearby. I’m going to get caught up on some homework. I’m working with one of the professors on campus to create a computer coding camp for younger kids. I’ve stayed true to my agreement with the Feds and kept my nose clean. Well, for the most part, but nothing that would have them come knocking.

With Zella’s encouragement, I reached out to the head of the Computer Technologies Department and explained my skill set and asked for help putting on that proverbial white hat. Together, we created a career path and were able to map out my last three semesters of course work. Once I graduate, I’m going to look into becoming an Information Security Analyst. Professor Evans, the department head, said there are companies out there that hire hackers to bring down their systems only to show them how to build up their security. It sounds right up my alley.

I’m excited to have a chance to work with kids and teens and help them learn to code and Internet safety. We have our first run at the camp during spring break in a few weeks, and if it goes well, it could be a summer program.

Sitting at a small table in the corner of the shop, I set up my laptop and pull up a study guide for an ethics class. Not sure why everyone who finds out about me being in an ethics class thinks it’s a good idea. I’m not some petty thief.

I get lost in my reading and highlighting when my phone buzzes. I pull it out of my pocket and swipe open the text from Wells.

Wells: We still on for a double date tonight? Louisa says they want to go bowling. You know anything about this?

Me: Yeah, it's on Zella's list. You ready to be beat by girls, man?

Wells: Shit. You know I hate bowling.

I chuckle because the dude sucks at bowling. Wells and I have gotten along a lot better these days. He still walks the straight and narrow, but we agree to disagree, and that's okay. We actually enjoy being around each other again. I gotta say, I missed the guy.

Louisa and Zella have become pretty close. Cameron likes to whine that she's replaced him as her best friend. Zella laughs, tells Cameron that's never going to happen, and that seems to satisfy him. Though, when she's not looking, I make it a point to let him know I'm her number one. It's fun fucking with him. He's a good guy, and we tolerate each other more often than not.

I'm a little early, but I can't focus on this ethics shit, it's enough for one day. So I pack up my stuff and head back to the salon. About twenty minutes later, there's a tiny tap on the window. My head snaps up, and I look out my window.

I'm stunned to silence. A beautiful, tiny pixie stands next to my door with a huge smile on her face. I take her in— her green eyes, freckled nose, her kissable pink lips. Finally, to the bouncy, short, softly curled blonde hair.

I roll down my window, a smile plastered on my face. "Hey there, little lady. I've got a girlfriend, but what she doesn't know won't hurt her."

"Ryker, you're a handful." She giggles and tucks a strand of hair behind her ear.

I reach out and run my hand through her light locks. Soft pinks and purple hues randomly streak through her beach blonde hair.

“It’s incredibly fitting.” I can’t pull my eyes from how it looks flowing through my fingers.

“I know, it’s everything I never knew I wanted,” she sings.

“How much did they cut off? How do you feel?” I wonder how much she’ll love having so much less hair now.

“Twelve inches. And I feel about ten pounds lighter.”

I fight from showing the surprise on my face at how much they cut. Her hair is still past her shoulders; anyone who’d never seen her before would consider her hair long.

“Well, think of how much longer your shampoo will last,” I say. I want to say, think of how much less hair you’ll leave behind. Look, I know girls shed, but Zella, her hair was so long, one strand looked like ten.

More giggles come from my girl, and I thread my hand through her hair one more time before moving it to the back of her head. I pull her into me and kiss her. Her own hand reaches up and cups my cheek. She emits a little moan. I pull back and smile, our noses still touching. “You should hop in, Blondie. I don’t want my girlfriend to see me with such a knockout.”

This earns me a playful eye roll, but she moves around the car and gets in the passenger side.

“I need to send a picture to Anna,” she says, pulling her phone out of her purse.

As I drive away, she takes a selfie. She and Anna talk nearly every day. We flew out to visit them over Christmas break and spent a full week with them. Zella wanted to drive, so she could catch up with her friends at The Cuddle Duck, but I suggested that would be a better trip come summer. Fred and Anna have been wonderful, and the more I get to know them, the more I know I did the right thing helping them come together.

Zella hasn’t been able to completely cut ties with her adoptive mother, but their relationship is rocky at best. They email on occasion and hardly ever talk on the phone. Zella hasn’t seen her mother and has no plans to do so any time soon. When Zella told her she’d met her birth parents, she

really laid on the guilt. I'm proud of my girl, though, she stayed strong and didn't waver on feeling bad about her new relationship with Fred and Anna. I know it's hard for Zella, and sometimes, I hear her cry. It's hard for her to separate the woman who raised her from the woman who hid such a huge part of who Zella is with all her controlling and boarder line emotionally abusive nature. It was all lies, and she was so strict that it's hard for Zella not to resent her.

I have confidence that she'll be able to work through it. As long as I'm by her side, I'll help her through anything. This girl is my world, and I've made it my mission to make sure she has a happy and fulfilled life.

"So, Blondie, I hear we are bowling tonight." I glance at her in the seat next to me.

She claps her hands together. "Yes, I'm so excited. Louisa tells me Wells isn't happy."

"That's because Wells is a horrible bowler. An eight-year-old could beat him." I chuckle. I'm pretty sure an eight-year-old did beat him last time we played.

"Well, I'm just happy to mark one more thing off my list." She digs around her bag for a tiny leather journal. It's the size of her smartphone. She flips it open and finds the page she is looking for and crosses out a line with a purple pen.

I peek over at her list and can't help smiling. I bought her the journal for Christmas, and she's been filling it up with all the things she wants to do and experience. The list has grown so much over the past months. It's almost a game to see how many items we can cross off each week. Some weeks nothing is crossed off, other weeks, two or three. I've even added a few items.

"Got anything new on your list? Chopping your hair off was a pretty big one, only seems fitting to have a new one," I added something just last night, I'm not sure she's seen it yet. I smirk to myself.

She thumbs through the pages until she stops and lifts the journal up closer to her face to read what's written on the page.

A tiny gasp escapes, and I bite back a laugh.

I pull my eyes from the road briefly, finding her cheeks pink with a blush. “Ryker,” she whispers.

“Blondie,” I return.

“I’m not sure I’d be any good at that.” She snaps the book shut and shoves it in her bag. She doesn’t say anything for a few moments.

My smile is huge. I can’t keep it from my fucking face. “You’re thinking about it now, aren’t you?”

She looks out her window, evading my words.

“You’re picturing how we’d line it up, aren’t you?” she squeaks. “You dirty bird, you. I love it.” I laugh, and she turns and smacks me in the arm.

“Ryker Stone, you’re going to be the end of me someday.” She can’t fight it anymore; she’s all smiles and giggles.

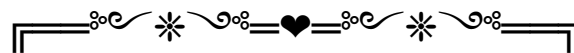
“You love it.” I laugh.

“I love you.” She smiles softly.

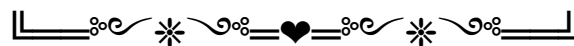
I grab her hand, lacing my fingers with hers. I bring our hands to my lips and kiss the back of hers. “And I love you too, Blondie.”

The End

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lauren Helms is a romance author her nerdy and flirty contemporary words. Lauren has forever been an avid reader from the beginning. After starting a book review website, that catapulted her fully into the book world, she knew that something was missing. While working for a video game strategy guide publisher, she decided to mix what she knew best—video games and romance. She decided to take the plunge and write her first novel, Level Me Up. Several published novels later, Lauren, with her book bestie, also formed PR company, Forever Write PR, to help other authors promote their books.

Lauren lives in Indianapolis, Indiana sharing her love of books and video games with her own Gamer Boy husband and three little kid nerds who will hopefully grow up to share the love of things that united Lauren and her husband on their own happily ever after.

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