



# The Opportunist

Tarryn Fisher

## Chapter One

### The Present

I am Olivia Kaspen, and if I love something I rip it from my life. Not intentionally...not unintentionally either. I see one of them now; a survivor of my tainted, acrid love. He's a hundred yards from where I stand, flipping through old records.

Caleb. His names rolls around my head like a barbed ball, slicing open feelings that have long since become scar tissue. My heart tries to punch its way out of my chest and all I can do is stand and watch him. It has been three years since the last time I saw him. His parting words to me were a warning to stay away. I suck sticky air into my lungs and try to rein in my sloppy emotions.

I want to go to him. I want to watch the hate surface in his eyes. Stupid. I start to leave and I am almost across the street and to my car when my feet fail me. The sharp tingle of agitation crawls up my fingertips. Clenching my fists I march back to the window. This is *my* side of town. How dare he show his face here.

His head is bent over a cardboard box of CD's and as he turns to look at something over his shoulder, I catch a glimpse of his offbeat nose. My heart clenches. I still love this boy. The realization scares me. I thought I was over it. I thought I could handle something like this; an impromptu run in. I've had therapy; I've had three years to...

~~Get over him.~~

Fester in my guilt.

I muck around in my emotions for a few more seconds before turning my back to the music store and to Caleb. I can't do it. I can't go back to that dark place. My foot is lifted to step down from the curb when the clouds that have been lurking around Miami for a week suddenly groan like old plumbing. Before I get two steps, the rain is assaulting the pavement, drenching my white shirt. I back up quickly and huddle underneath the music store's awning. I stare at my old Beetle through the strands of rain. Just a short run and I'll be on my way home. A stranger's voice interrupts my moment of escape. I pull back, not sure if he's speaking to me.

"The sky is red-means trouble."

I spin on my heels and find someone standing directly behind me. He is closer than what is deemed socially acceptable. I make a surprised sound in my throat, and back up a step. He is at least a foot taller than I am, all muscle, though not in an attractive way. He holds his hands at an odd angle with his fingers tensed and spread apart. My eyes are drawn to a mole that sits like a target in the center of his forehead

"What?" I shake my head, confused. I am trying to peer over his shoulder to catch a glimpse of Caleb. *Is he still there? Should I go in?*

"It's an old sailor's superstition." He shrugs.

I lower my eyes to his face. He looks vaguely familiar, and, as I consider telling him to screw off, I try to remember where I have seen him before.

"I have an umbrella." He holds up a floral thing with a plastic handle in the shape of a daisy, "I can walk you to your car."

I look at the sky, which does appear to be a dusky red, and I shiver. I want him to leave me alone and I am about to tell him so, when I think- *What if this is a sign? The sky is red-get the hell outta here!*

I study the chipped polish on my thumbnail and consider his offer. I am not one for omens, but he does have a way

to keep me dry.

“No, thanks,” I say. I jerk my head toward the store behind me, and realize I had already made up my mind.

“Okay. Hurricane’s coming, but suit yourself.” He shrugs again and steps out into the rain, not opening his umbrella.

I watch him go. His broad back curves against the downpour like a ledge for the rest of his body. He is truly huge. In seconds the rain has swallowed him and I can no longer see his silhouette. I know him from somewhere but surely I would remember such a large guy if I had met him before. I turn back to the shop. The sign above the door reads Music Mushroom, in bright curlicue letters. I look beyond the glass and search the aisles for him. He is right where I left him, his head still bent over what looks like the Reggae section. Even from where I am standing, I can make out a slight furrow in his brow.

*He can't make up his mind.* I realize what I am doing and cringe. I don't know him anymore. I can't make assumptions about what he is thinking.

I want him to look up and see me, but he doesn't. Since I don't want to lurk underneath the awning like a creepster any longer, I gather my guts, compose myself, and walk through the door. The air conditioning is icy against my damp skin and I shiver. I spot a tall shelf of bongos to my left, duck behind it, and I pull out my compact to check my make-up.

While I spy on him through the slats in the shelves I use a finger to scrub at the smudged mascara beneath my eyes. I have to make running into him look accidental.

In front of me, there is a bong in the shape of Bob Marley's head. I look into Bob's glass eyes and practice a surprised face. I am disgusted by the levels to which I stoop. Pinching my cheeks for color, I step out from my hiding place.

Here goes everything.

My heels bite into the linoleum, snapping loudly as I make my approach. I might as well have hired a trumpeter to announce my arrival. Surprisingly, he doesn't look up. The air conditioner clicks on when I am a few yards away. Someone has tied lime green streamers to the vents. As they begin to dance, I smell something—it is Caleb's smell, peppermints and oranges.

I am close enough to see the scar that curves itself gently around his right eye—the one I used to trace with my finger. His presence in a room is like a jarring physical impact. To prove this, I see women—old and young shooting him looks, bending toward him. The whole world bends for Caleb Drake and he is charmingly unaware of it. It is truly disgusting to watch.

I sidle up next to him and reach for a CD. Caleb, oblivious to my presence moves down the alphabetized line of artists. I trace his steps and just as I move a few feet behind him,—his body turns in my direction. I freeze and there is a brief second when I have the urge to run. I grind my heels down and watch as his eyes trace my face like he's never seen it before, and land on the plastic square in my hand. And then, after three long years, I hear his voice.

“Are they any good?”

I feel the shock rush from my heart to my limbs and settle like lead in my stomach.

He still speaks with the same diluted British accent I remember, but the hardness I was expecting to hear isn't there. Something is wrong.

“Ummm...”

He looks back at my face and his eyes touch each of my features as if he's seeing them for the first time.

“I'm sorry? I didn't catch that.”

*Shit, shit, shit.*

“Err, they are okay,” I say, shoving the CD back on the rack. Seconds of silence flick by. I decide he is waiting for me to speak.

“They’re not really your style.”

He looks confused.

“They’re not my style?”

I nod.

“What exactly do you think my style is?” His eyes are laughing at me and there is a hint of a smile around his mouth.

I run my eyes over his face looking for a clue to the game he is playing. He has always been so good at facial expressions, always the right one at the right time. He looks placid and only remotely interested in my answer. I feel safe so I say, “Umm, you’re a classic rock kind of guy...but I could be wrong.” People change.

“Classic rock?” he repeats, watching my lips. I shiver involuntarily as a memory of him looking at my lips that way comes rushing back to me. Wasn’t that look how it all started?

“I’m sorry,” he says dropping his eyes to the floor. “This is awkward, but I...uhhh...don’t know what my style is. I have no memory of it.”

I gape at him. Was this some type of sick joke? Some way of getting back at me?

“You don’t remember? How could you not remember?”

Caleb runs his hand across the back of his neck, the muscles in his arms flex. “I lost my memory in an accident. Sounds corny I know. But, the truth is—I have no idea what I like or liked, I guess I should say. I’m sorry. I don’t know why I’m telling you this.”

He turns to leave, probably because my face is so full of shock it makes him uncomfortable. It feels as if someone has taken a potato masher to my brain. Nothing makes sense.

Nothing fits together. Caleb doesn't know who I am. *Caleb doesn't know who I am!* With every step, he takes toward the door I become more desperate. Somewhere in my head I hear a voice scream, "*Stop him!*"

"Wait," I say. My voice is barely audible. "Wait...*wait!*" this time I scream and several people turn to stare. Shutting them out, I focus on Caleb's back. He is almost to the door when he turns to face me. *Think fast, think fast!* Holding up a finger indicating for him to wait where he is, I set off in a trot for the classic rock section. It only takes a minute to find what used to be his favorite CD. I return with it clutched tightly in my hands, stopping a few feet away from where he is standing.

"You'll like this," I say, tossing him the copy. My aim is off, but he catches it with grace and smiles almost sadly.

I watch him walk to the register, sign his credit card receipt, and disappear right back out of my life.

*Hello—Goodbye.*

Why didn't I tell him who I am? Now it is too late and the moment for honesty has past. I stay rooted in his wake, my heart beating sluggishly in my chest as I try to process what has happened. He forgot me.

## Chapter Two

At some point during the fifth grade, I watched a murder/mystery on television. The detective, who I had a ridiculous crush on, was named Follagyn Beville. A modern day Jack the Ripper was targeting prostitutes. Follagyn was hunting him down. He was interrogating an especially ratty looking hooker, with stringy blond hair that was stained black at the roots. She was curled up on a mustard yellow couch, her lips sucking greedily on a cigarette. “*Wow, what a terrific actress!*” I remember thinking. *She should like, win an Emmy for being so pathetic.* She held a rocks glass in her hand, and was taking quick, birdlike sips of whiskey. I watched her movements, hungry for the drama, memorizing everything she did. Later that night I filled a glass with ice and Pepsi. I took my drink back to the windowsill and lifted an imaginary cigarette to my lips.

“No one listens to me,” I whispered so that my breath frosted the glass. “This world—It’s cold.” I took a sip of Pepsi, making sure that I rattled the ice.



A decade and a half later and I still have my sense of the dramatic. The day after my run in with Caleb, hurricane Phoebe ripped through town and spared me from having to call in sick to work. I am in bed, my body curled possessively around a bottle of vodka.

Around midday, I roll out of bed and shuffle to the bathroom. There is still electricity despite the category three hurricane that is rattling my windows. I take advantage by running myself a bath. As I sit in the steaming water, I replay the whole thing in my mind for the millionth time. It all ends with, *he forgot me*.

My pug, Pickles, settles herself on my bathmat and watches me carefully. She is so ugly, I smile.

“Caleb, Caleb, Caleb,” I say it to see if it still sounds the same.

He used to have a weird habit of reversing people’s names when he heard them for the first time. I was Aivilo and he was Belac. I thought it was ridiculous, but eventually I found myself doing the same thing. It became a secret code that we used when gossiping.

And now he didn’t remember me. How could you forget someone you loved even if I did rip his heart to shreds? I pour some vodka into my bathwater. How was I ever going to get him out of my head now? I could make being depressed my full time job. That’s what country singers did. I could be a country singer. I belt out a couple verses of “Achey Breaky Heart” and take another swig.

I pull the chain to the plug with my toe and listen to the water gurgle into the drain. I dress and plod to the fridge, with the cheap liquor sloshing around in my empty belly. My emergency hurricane food supply consists of two bottles of ranch dressing, an onion, and a block of sharp cheddar cheese. I cut up the cheese and onions and toss them into a bowl pouring fat free ranch over the top. I put on the coffee pot and hit play on the stereo. In it was the same CD I had given to Caleb in the Music Mushroom. I drink a lot more vodka.

I wake up on the kitchen floor with my face pressed into a puddle of drool. In my fist is a picture of Caleb that has been ripped and taped back together. I feel pretty damn good even though there is a mild throbbing in my temples. I make a decision. Today I was going to start from scratch. I was going to forget what's-his-name and buy healthy crap to eat and move on with my damn life. I clean up my drunken mess, pausing briefly to toss the torn and taped picture into the trash. Goodbye yesterday. I grab my purse and head to the nearest health food store.

The first thing that the healthy crap store does is puff patchouli scented air into my face. I scrunch up my nose and hold my breath until I pass the service desk where a girl my age is snapping gum and meditating behind a counter.

Grabbing a cart, I head for the rear of the store, pushing past the bottles of Madame Deerwood's Aura Cleanser (it doesn't work), the eye of newt, and the bags of Gota Kola.

As far as I am concerned, this is a normal grocery store and not a supply haven for every new age weirdo in a twenty mile radius. Caleb and I were never here together, making the Mecca Market a memory free zone for me.

I throw some seaweed cookies and baked chips into the cart and head for the ice cream aisle. I pass a woman wearing a shirt that says, "I am Wiccan, see me Broom." She isn't wearing shoes.

Turning down the ice cream aisle, I shiver.

"Cold?"

I swing around so fast my shoulder upsets a display of waffle cones. I watch in horror as they crash to the ground, scattering and skidding like my thoughts.

*Caleb!*

I watch him pick up the boxes one by one, stacking them in his free hand. He smiles at me and I get the feeling he is amused by my reaction.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you.”

So polite. And there was that damn accent again.

“What are you doing here?” The words tumble from my mouth before I can stop them.

He laughs. “I’m not stalking you, I swear. Actually, I wanted to thank you for the music suggestion in the store the other day. I liked it—a lot actually.” His hands are in his pockets and he is bouncing up and down on his heels.

“Wine,” he says, spinning his thumb ring with his forefinger. He used to do that when he was nervous.

I stare at him blankly.

“You asked me what I was doing here,” he says patiently, as though he were speaking to a child. “My girlfriend likes this wine and one can only get it here... Organic.” The last word makes him laugh.

*Girlfriend?* I narrow my eyes. How is it that he remembers her and not me?

“So,” I say casually, opening one of the coolers and grabbing the first thing I see, “You remember your girlfriend?” I was trying to sound nonchalant, but I couldn’t have sounded more strangled if he had his hands around my throat.

“No, after the accident—I didn’t remember her.”

I feel a little bit better.

I immediately think back to the first time I set my blues on her, three years ago when I was performing the ritual of post breakup spying. I decided that I needed to see my replacement for closure. It was crazy really, but we are all entitled to a little bit of stalking.

I wore my grandmother’s red derby hat because it had a ridiculously wide rim that would hide my face, and it was as melodramatic as my personality. I took Pickles for support.

Leah Smith. That was the little beast’s name. She was as rich as I was poor, as happy as I was miserable, as

redheaded as I was dark. He met her at some swanky party about a year after we broke up. Apparently, they hit it off right away, or maybe he hit *it* right away, I can't be sure.

Leah worked in an office building ten minutes from my apartment. By the time I slid my car into a parking spot, I had an hour to spare before her shift was over. I spent it convincing myself that my behavior was normal.

Leah walked out of the building at exactly five after six with a Prada purse swinging cheerfully on her forearm. She walked like a woman who knew she had the world staring at her breasts. I watched her clip clop along the sidewalk in her green stilettos, while strangling the steering wheel. I hated her long red hair that hung in fat curls down her back. I hated the way she waved goodbye to her co-workers with a tinkling of her fingertips. I hated the fact that I liked her shoes.

Searching his eyes for answers, and trying to get my head out of the past, I ask, "So what—you guys are still together even though you don't know who she is?"

I expect him to be defensive, but instead he slyly smiles. "She's really torn up over the whole thing and is a great girl to stick with me through all of this." He doesn't look at me when he says "this".

Like any girl, in her right mind, would let *him* get away—except me of course—but I have never claimed to be in my right mind.

"Would you like to grab a cup of coffee?" he asks. "I can fill you in on my whole sob story."

I feel a tingle start at my feet and work its way up my body. If he remembered anything about me, this would not be happening. It was crazy—exactly the type of situation that I could completely take advantage of.

"I can't." I feel so proud of myself that I stand up a little taller. He takes my response the same way he'd taken all of my rejections over the years we dated, smiling like I couldn't possibly be serious.

“Yes, you can. Think of it as a favor to me.”

I cock my head.

“I need some new friends—good influences.”

My mouth opens, and lets out an extended *Pfffffffffing* sound.

Caleb raises an eyebrow.

“I’m not a good influence,” I say, blinking rapidly.

I shift from one foot to the other, distracting myself with a bottle of maraschino cherries. I could grab the bottle, toss it at his head and run, *or* I could go get coffee with him. It was only coffee after all. Not sex, not a relationship, just some friendly gabber between two people who supposedly didn’t know each other.

“Okay, coffee.” I hear the excitement in my voice and cringe. I. Am. Disgusting.

“Good,” he smiles.

“There’s a coffee shop two blocks from here on the northwest corner. I can meet you there in thirty minutes,” I say, calculating the time it would take for me to get home and de-slobbify. *Say you can’t make it. Say you have other things to do.....*

“Thirty minutes,” he repeats, watching my lips. I purse them for effect and Caleb ducks his head to hide a smile. I turn and walk calmly down the aisle. I can feel his eyes on my back, making me tingle.

I abandon my shopping cart as soon as I am out of sight and gallop toward the front of the store. My flip flops slap against my heels as I run.

I reach home in record time. My neighbor Rosebud is knocking on my door with an onion in her hand. If Rosebud catches me, I will be involved in a two hour one-sided conversation about her Bertie and his struggle with the gout. I

hide in the bushes. When she gives up five minutes later, my thighs are burning from crouching and I need to pee.

The first thing I do when I walk through my door is rescue the picture of Caleb from the trash. Dusting it free of eggshell, I shove it in my silverware drawer.

In fifteen minutes, I am walking out the door feeling so nervous I have to make a conscious effort not to trip over my own feet. The three block drive is torturous. I swear at myself and twice swerve into the turning lane to go home. I make it to the parking with a mild case of whip-lash.

The coffee shop is full of dark blue walls and mosaic patterns. It is intense and depressing and warm all at the same time. With a Starbucks only three blocks away, this place is reserved for a more serious crowd—artsy-fartsy types that brood over their Mac books.

“Hey Livia,” the little punk boy who works the counter waves at me.

I smile at him. As I pass the bulletin board, something catches my eye. A printout of a man’s face is tacked among the flyers. I walk closer, feeling prickles of recognition. Along the bottom of his face the word: **WANTED** stands out in bold letters. It was the man from the Music Mushroom—the one with the umbrella!

**Dobson Scott Orchard, born September 7, 1960.**

**Wanted for kidnapping, rape and assault.**

**Distinguishing feature: birthmark on forehead.**

The mole! That was the birthmark the poster was referring to. What would have happened had I gone with him? I shake the image out of my head and memorize the number at the bottom of the page. If I hadn’t seen Caleb that day, I might have let him walk me to my car.

Dobson escapes out of my head when I see Caleb.

He is waiting for me at a small table in the back corner staring absently at the tabletop. He lifts a white porcelain cup to his lips, and I get a flashback of him doing the same thing in my apartment years ago. My heart accelerates.

He spots me when I am a few feet away.

“Hi. I got you a latte,” he says standing up. His eyes sweep from my feet to my face in one quick motion. I clean up well. I swipe a dark strand of hair out of my eyes and smile. I am jittery, my hands are trembling. When he extends a hand toward me, I hesitate before reaching out to shake it.

“Caleb Drake,” he says. “I would say that I usually tell women my name before I ask them out for coffee, but I don’t remember.”

We smile awkwardly at his terrible joke as I allow my small hand to be swallowed in his. The feel of his skin is so familiar. I close my eyes for a brief second and allow the absurdity of the situation to wash over me.

“Olivia Kaspen. Thank you for the coffee.”

We sit down awkwardly and I begin pouring sugar into my cup. I watch his face. He used to tease me about my coffee being so sweet it made your teeth hurt. He drinks tea, hot, the way the British drink it. I used to think it was charming and distinguished, I still do actually.

“So what did you tell your girlfriend?” I ask, taking a sip. I am swinging my shoe off the end of my big toe which is something that used to annoy him when we were together. I see his eyes reach my foot and for a second, I think he’s going to grab it to stop the motion.

“I told her I needed some time off to think. It’s a horrible thing to say to a woman isn’t it?” he asks.

I nod.

“Anyway, she burst into tears the minute the words were out of my mouth and I didn’t know what to do.”

“I’m sorry,” I lie. Strawberry freckle face is cuddling with rejection tonight. It is a wonderful thing.

“So,” I say, “amnesia.”

Caleb nods, looking down at the table. He absently traces a pattern of circles with his finger.

“Yes, it’s called Selective Amnesia. Doctors, eight of them, have told me it’s temporary.”

I suck thoughtfully on the word “temporary”. It could mean my time with him is as temporary as hair dye, or an adrenaline rush. I decide I’ll take either one. I am having coffee with a man that formerly hated me, “temporary” didn’t have to be a dirty word.

“How did it happen?” I ask.

Caleb clears his throat and looks around the room like he’s gauging who can hear us.

“What? Too personal?” I can’t keep the laughter out of my voice. It feels strange that he is hesitating to tell me. When we were together, he told me everything—even the things that most men would be embarrassed to share with their girlfriends. I can still read his expressions after all these years and I can tell that he is uncomfortable sharing the details of his amnesia.

“I don’t know. It seems like we should start with something simple before I tell you my secrets. Like my favorite color.”

I smile. “Do you remember what your favorite color is?”

Caleb shakes his head. We both laugh.

I sigh and fidget with my coffee cup. When we first started dating I’d asked him what his favorite color was. Instead of just telling me, he’d forced me into the car saying he needed to show me.

*“This is ridiculous, I have a test to study for,” I complained. He drove for twenty minutes, blaring the terrible*



*rap music he liked to listen to and finally pulled up beside the Miami International Airport.*

*“That, is my favorite color,” he said, pointing to the lights lining the runway.*

*“That’s blue,” I said. “So what?”*

*“That’s not just any blue, its Airport blue,” he said. “And don’t you ever forget it.”*

*I turned back to the runway to study the lights. The color was eerie, it looked like fire when it burned at its hottest and turned blue. Where was I going to find a shirt in that color?*

I looked at him now, the memory clear in my mind and gone from his. What would it be like to forget your favorite color? —or the girl that smashed up your heart?

Airport blue haunted me. It became a brand to me, a trademark of our broken relationship, and my failure to move on. Airport fucking blue.

“Your favorite color is blue,” I say, “and mine is red. Now we’re best friends, so tell me what happened.”

“Blue it is,” he says smiling. “It was a car accident. A colleague and I were on a business trip in Scranton. It was snowing heavily and we were on our way to a meeting. The car skidded off the road and wrapped around a tree. I sustained serious head injuries...” he rattles it off as if he is bored with the story. I imagine that he has recited it hundreds of times already.

I don’t need to ask what he does for work. He is an investment banker. He works for his step-father’s company, and he is rich.

“And your co-worker?”

“He didn’t make it,” his shoulders slump. I bite my lip. I’m not good with death and the words that you’re supposed to offer as condolence. When my mother died people said stupid

things that made me angry! Soft, fluffy words that carried no weight; “I’m sorry”—when it clearly wasn’t their fault, and “if there is anything I can do—” when we both knew there was nothing. I change the subject rather than offer empty words. “Do you remember the accident?”

“I remember waking up after it happened. Nothing before that.”

“Not even your name?”

He shakes his head.

“The good news is the doctors say I’ll remember. It’s just a matter of time and being patient.”

The good news for me is that he doesn’t remember. We wouldn’t be talking if he did.

“I found an engagement ring in my sock drawer.” His confession is so sudden, I choke on my coffee.

“Sorry.” He pats me on the back and I clear my throat, eyes watering. “I really needed to tell someone that. I was getting ready to ask her to marry me, and now I don’t even know who she is.”

*Wow...wow!* I feel like someone just plugged me in and threw me in the bathtub. I knew that he had moved on with his life, I spied on him enough to know that, but marriage? It made me itch just to think about it.

“What do your parents think about your condition?” I ask, steering the conversation in a more palatable direction. The thought of Leah in a white dress made me want to laugh. She was better suited for slutty lingerie and a stripper pole.

“My mother looks at me like I’ve betrayed her in some way, and my father keeps patting me on the back, saying, “You’ll get it back soon, buddy, everything’s going to be fine, Caleb.” He imitates his parents to a “t” and I smile.

“I know it sounds selfish, but I just want to be left alone to figure things

out—you know?”

I didn't, but I nod anyway.

“I keep wondering why I can't remember. If my life was as great as everyone keeps telling me it was, why doesn't any of it feel familiar?”

I don't know what to say. The Caleb I knew was always in control. I always thought Jewel had him pegged, he was fashionably sensitive, but too cool to care. This Caleb is confused and broken and spilling his guts to someone he thinks is a perfect stranger. I want to kiss his face and smooth out the furrows in his brow. Instead, I sit frozen in my chair, fighting the urge to tell him everything that tore us apart in the first place.

“So what about you, Olivia Kaspen? What's your story?”

“I...uhh...I don't have one.” I am so thrown off guard by his question, my hands started shaking.

“Come on...I've told you everything,” he pleads.

“Everything that you remember,” I point out. “How long have you had amnesia?”

“Three months.”

“Well, for three months of *my* life I've done nothing but work and read. There's your answer.”

“Somehow, I think there's quite a bit more to you than that,” he scans my face and I get the impression he is generating a history from what he sees there.

I wish he wasn't doing that—trying to see past my walls. I was never skilled at pretending with him.

“Look, when you get your memory back and can divulge all your secrets from the past, we'll have a sleepover and I'll tell you everything; but, as far as I'm concerned, until that day arrives, we both have amnesia.” He laughs a full-bodied laugh

and I hide my contented smile behind the rim of my coffee cup.

“Well, that doesn’t sound so bad for me then,” he teases.

“Oh? Why is that?”

“Well, because you’ve just given me permission to see you again and now I have a sleepover to look forward to.”

I blush and decide that I can never tell him. He will remember eventually and this whole charade will come crashing down around me like a bad game of Jenga. Until then, I have him back and I am going to hold onto that for as long as I can.

## Chapter Three

### The Past

The day I met Caleb Drake the sun shone a little brighter on my world. It was during that insufferable time of year when finals loomed, and the entire student body was starting to look bruised around the eyes. I had just left a study session in the library and found the sky besieged by grumpy looking rain clouds. Groaning, I walked quickly toward my dorm, cursing myself for not bringing an umbrella. I was halfway there when it started to drizzle. I took shelter underneath a willow tree and glared up into its branches like I blamed it for the rain. That's when he swaggered over like he was drunk on his own good looks.

“Why are you angry with the tree?”

I grimaced when I saw who it was. He laughed and held up his hands in mock surrender.

“Just a question Sunshine, don’t attack.”

I glared at him. “Can I help you with something?”

For a moment, I thought I saw a swatch of uncertainty cross his face, but then it was gone, and he was smiling at me again.

“I was interested in finding out why this tree made you frown,” he said, repeating his lame starter line.

I looked beyond his shoulder and spotted a cluster of basketball idiots leering at us. He followed my gaze and must have shot his rat pack a fierce look, because seconds later the gathering dispersed. He turned his attention back to me.

Ah yes... I was supposed to answer his question.

I looked at the trunk of the tree, which resembled badly braided dough, and realized how intensely I must have been staring at it.

“Are you trying to flirt with me?” I sighed.

He let out a sort of strangled choke. “Caleb Drake.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“My name,” he said, offering me his hand. Caleb Drake was a notorious name on campus and I had no intention of joining his fan club. I shook his hand firmly to make sure he knew I wasn’t hypnotized by him.

“Yes, I was trying to flirt with you, until you shot me down, that is.”

I raised my eyebrows and forced a smile. Okay, I had to do this fast. Jocks had a painfully short attention span.

“Listen, I’d love to stand around and feed into your ego with chit-chatter, but I have to go.”

I moved passed him relieved to be heading toward the pint of heavy whipping cream and ice cream in my fridge. I was going to add chocolate sauce and make a bad-ass milk shake.

His laugh caught up to me as I neared the curb. I stiffened, but kept walking.

“If you were born an animal—you’d be a Llama,” he called after me.

That stopped me. Was this douche seriously comparing me to a hairy mammal?

“And why is that?” I kept my back to him, but my eye was twitching.

“Google them.”

Was this really happening? I twisted my head around, exorcist style, and glared at him. He looked so sure of himself.

“I’ll see you around,” he said, tucking his hands into his pockets and heading back toward his group.

I rolled my eyes. Hopefully, that would be never. I steamed all the way to my dorm room. Before I could touch the knob, the door was flung open with gusto. Behold my freshman roommate.

“Why was he talking to you?”

She was dulcet, bright-eyed, blond, and as much as I wanted to hate her, she was a terribly cute little thing.

“He was recruiting members for his fan club. I gave him your name, Cam.”

“Seriously Olivia, what did he say?” she followed me as I stacked my books neatly on my desk. When I tried to ignore her, she started ping-ponging M&M’s off my head.

“He was just showing off in front of his friends, there’s nothing to tell. Really!” She let me pass. I was headed for my whipping cream, getting ready to drink it straight, when she blocked me.

“You are so dense!”

“Dense?” I shook my head. “Are you calling me complicated or stupid?” I looked longingly over her shoulder at the fridge.

“Caleb Drake doesn’t go to girls, girls go to Caleb Drake. He just stepped out of his box to talk to you and you blew him off!”

“He’s not interested in me,” I said sighing. “He was showing off.”

“So he was showing off. Who cares? He’s earned the right. He’s gorgeous!”

I made a gagging noise.

“Olivia,” she begged. “There is more to life than just books and studying!” she flung my textbooks off my desk for show. “Boys are.....they can.....do things,” she finished, nodding at me.

“You,” I said poking her in the ribs “are a slut.”

I rescued a textbook from the floor and started studying.

“O-liv-ia!”

I squeezed my eyes shut. I hated it when she said my name like that.

“Hmmm?”

She snatched the book from my hands.

“You listen to me, you ungrateful prude,” she grabbed my chin in her hand and yanked it up until I was looking at her. “He is going to talk to you again, just because you rejected him. He kind of liked it—and when he does,” she clamped her hand over my protesting mouth, “you are going to talk to him and flirt with him. Do you understand me?”

I shrugged.

Cammie shrieked, “Agghh!” and locked herself in the bathroom.



I certainly didn't care what effect he had on the females on campus. Caleb Drake meant nothing to me. He would *never* mean anything to me. I was un-shmoozable. The end.

Cammie turned out to be right. Later that week, I had been studying all day when she started nagging me to attend a basketball game with her.

"I'll buy you a hot chocolate."

"With extra whipped cream?"

"With clouds, if you'll just hurry up!"

Ten minutes later, I was sitting in the stands sipping hot chocolate with extra whipped cream from a little Styrofoam cup. Cammie was ignoring me and I was already regretting my decision to come. Caleb Drake was whipping around the court like an egg beater and frankly it was making me dizzy to watch him.

Halftime came and I stood up to find the bathroom. I was trying to knee my way past Cammie when the president of the student body stepped onto the court and held up his hands for silence.

"Laura Holberman, one of our students, has been missing from the dorms for over five days," he said into the microphone. I stopped to listen. "Her parents, as well as the staff, are urging anyone who has any information about Laura, to come forward right away. Thanks guys, enjoy the rest of the game."

I shared a few classes with Laura my freshman year. College students sometimes liked to disappear for a few days when things got stressful. She was probably holed away at a friend's house somewhere, eating chocolate and bitching about professors. People always made a big deal about nothing.

"She dated Caleb Drake her freshman year," Cammie whispered. "I wonder if he will be able to concentrate on the rest of the game now that he knows."

I looked at Caleb, who was sitting on the bench, drinking from a water bottle. He looked relaxed. The jerk.

It was during the fourth quarter, when there was a minute left in the game, that the opposing team made a parting of the Red Sea comeback, tying the Cougars 72-72. I wouldn't have known this if Cammie hadn't told me, since I had spent the last twenty minutes picking fuzz balls from my sweater. Caleb Drake stood at the free-throw line, preparing for the most important shot of the night. He looked calm, like he already knew he was going to make it. For the first time that night, the gym was strangely quiet. Intrigued, I forgot my fuzz ball picking, and sat up straighter. I wanted him to make it. I know it was shameful, but I did. For once, I understood the Caleb mania. He was like a jalapeño, bright and smooth, but dangerously hot. A small part of me wanted to bite him.

I turned to Cammie, whose eyes were big with anticipation. This was major stuff—right here. My eyes drifted back to the court. I jerked. Caleb was watching me. The entire student body was watching him and Caleb was watching me. Before the ref could blow the whistle, Caleb tucked the ball beneath his arm and jogged over to his coach.

“What’s going on? What’s going on?” Cammie was hopping from one foot to another, her pigtails bouncing in time with the music.

Something didn't feel right. I shifted in my seat, crossed and un-crossed my legs. Caleb was handing his coach the ball. I suddenly felt like I was sitting in a sauna.

“He’s coming up the stairs, Olivia! He’s coming this way!” Cammie squealed.

I slunk lower in my seat. No way was this happening! He was headed right for me! I pretended to be busy digging around in my purse for something. When he stopped next to my seat, I looked up in surprise.

“Olivia,” he said, resting on his haunches to look me in the eyes. “Olivia Kaspen.” I saw Cammie’s jaw drop open and a multitude of heads turn to look at us.

“Bravo, you found out my name.” Then in a lower voice, “What the hell are you doing?”

He ignored me. “You’re quite the mystery on campus.” His voice was raspy, the kind that if whispered in your ear would give you goose bumps. I cleared my throat and did my best to look annoyed.

“Are you going to be making a point any time soon, or are you holding up the game to brag about your detective skills?”

He laughed. He looked down at the floor then back at me.

“If I make this shot, will you go out with me?” His gaze was traveling between my eyes and my lips. I felt the heat hit my face and I ducked my head. I didn’t like the way he was looking at me. It was like he was already planning our first kiss, evaluating my lips. I shook my head. It was ridiculous. He was making a production of his wounded ego and I didn’t give a damn if he made that shot.

I narrowed my eyes. “If you were born an animal do you know which one you’d be?” I asked. A flicker of uncertainty passed across his face. After our little encounter in the rain, I had Googled Llama’s just as he suggested. Apparently, they were pretty rude; spitting, kicking and head-butting were part of their social decorum.

“A peacock.”

He grinned.

“It took you all week to think up that one didn’t it?” His eyes were on my lips again.

“Sure,” I said shrugging.

“So then, it’s fair to say that you were thinking about me all week?” Now it was my turn to look shaken. Damn. Just when I had him.

“No...and.... no, I will not go out with you.”

I leaned back in my chair and decided to look at the score board. Maybe, if I ignored him, he would leave. The Black Eyed Peas were playing loudly over the speakers. I tapped my foot to the rhythm.

“Why not?” He seemed agitated. I liked it.

“Because I am a llama and you are a bird and WE are not compatible.” There was an increasing rise in interest across the gym, as people were standing up to get a better look at what was happening. I started getting nervous.

“Okay,” he said matter-of-factly. “Then what will it take?” He was leaning so close to me I could feel his breath on my face. It smelled like peppermint. I held my breath and tried to gain control of my racing heart.

And then a brilliant thought.

“Miss it.”

He cocked his head. I leaned closer, narrowed my eyes. I spoke slower this time, so there would be no confusion.

“Miss it, and I’ll go out with you.”

I saw the tenderness drain from his eyes. Asking a Peacock to pull out his feathers was a hard thing to do.

He stood up quickly, too quickly, and took the stairs back to the court two at a time. I settled back into my seat with a smug smile. Bet he wasn’t expecting that. Hotshot. Idiot.

Cammie was taking turns looking from me to Caleb. There was something like awe on her face. She opened her mouth to say something, but I held up my finger to silence her. This was not the time for Cammie’s mouth.

“Save it, Camadora,” I warned her.

I focused my sole attention on the figure standing at the free-throw line, not looking quite as composed as he’d looked a few minutes ago.

The ref blew his whistle and Caleb raised his arms with the ball held lightly in his hands. I tried to imagine what he

was thinking. He was done with me, no doubt. Probably angry that I would have the audacity to....I lost my train of thought. The moment of truth was beginning.

The muscles in his arms flexed, as the ball spun from his hands and sailed toward the hoop. In those few seconds, my mind had time to register that something wasn't right about the situation. And then it happened. The ball fell short a foot from the basket and hit the ground with a sickening thud. I watched in horror as pandemonium broke forth.

"No, no, no, no," I whispered under my breath. How could he do that? Why would he do that? What an absolute idiot!

"Olivia, I'm going to pretend that I didn't hear any of that," Cammie hissed, grabbing me by the wrist. "We need to go before someone kills you." As she pulled me through the throng, I turned back to the court for one last look at what was happening. Caleb was gone.

I didn't hear anything from him for over a week. Guilt had started seeping into my self-righteous bones and it hurt right down to the marrow. I didn't want to admit that Caleb Drake had surprised me and humiliated himself. Someone like him couldn't surprise someone like me...right?

Somehow, the news that he had sabotaged the game for a girl had spread across campus. Since it was me he had been talking to minutes before his miss, I was prime suspect. Girls whispered when they saw me and the basketball team had taken to giving me searing and menacing looks.

"She's not even that pretty," I heard one cheerleader say to another. "If he was going to sabotage his entire basketball career; he should have done it for a better piece of ass."

I ducked my head in shame and disappeared into the library. How was I supposed to know there were scouts at that game? My knowledge of sports was limited to being able to identify the different colored balls, and anyway who would have thought that he would actually have done it?

I spent a little more time in front of the mirror in the mornings applying mascara and curling my hair. Since all eyes were on me, I might as well try to be a good-looking piece of ass.

I was too pretty to be plain and my features were too round to be exotic. Men avoided me. Cammie told me once that I had a kind of fierceness in my eyes that scared people away. Yet, Caleb Drake had not been scared. He missed the hoop on purpose. He played my game and I lost.

“Olivia there’s a uuuh...delivery for you,” Cammie called through the bathroom door one evening.

A box was sitting on my neatly made bed when I emerged. I quickly removed it and dusted the spot where it had been. Cammie rolled her eyes and collapsed onto her own bed, which hadn’t been made in a week.

“Open the thing won’t you? It was hand delivered by that creepy guy from the campus post office. He even tried to smell my hair when I took it from him.”

“He has sinus problems,” I said grabbing the scissors, “don’t flatter yourself.” The box opened, and I stared into it not quite sure of what I was seeing.

“It’s a deflated basketball,” I said holding it up to show Cammie. There was an envelope attached to it. Cammie sat up her eyes suddenly alert.

“No genius, that’s *the* deflated basketball!”

I swallowed hard as I read the note:

Olivia,

Time to pay up. Meet me in the library in ten minutes.

-Caleb

“Unbelievable!” I said holding the ball in my hand. “Not even a please! He pretty much commanded me to be there!”

“You’re going.” Cammie stood up, hands on her hips.

I sucked in the corners of my mouth and shook my head-‘no’.

“OLIVIA! You ruined the most important game of the season for him! You *owe* him.”

I sort of did.

“Fine. FINE!!” I shouted, meeting her tone. I grabbed a hoodie from my closet and violently pulled it over my head. “But this is it, okay?” I said, stabbing my finger at her. “I’m meeting him in the library, and then I don’t want to hear another word about it from you or him or that damn cheerleading squad!”

Cammie beamed. “Make sure you remember every detail and try to mention my name.”

I slammed the door on my way out.

At nine thirty on Friday night, the Dart Library was practically a ghost town. A crusty-faced woman was standing behind the checkout counter glaring at two freshmen who were making out. I passed a picture of Laura Helberman on the wall with information to contact authorities if she was seen. She was pretty in a Daisy Duke kind of way. Blonde hair, lots of mascara, and puckered lips that looked like they had just sucked on a lollipop. She had been missing for sixteen days and her story was being covered by Nancy Grace—my hero.

I sighed. I was early. I decided to take a stroll to the fiction section to see if there was anything worth checking out.

Caleb found me there a few minutes later.

“Hello, Olivia,” he strolled up to me with such ridiculous confidence that I wanted to stick my foot out and trip him.

“Caleb,” I nodded at him curtly.

He was wearing a black pea coat over an expensive looking cream sweater. My heart did a little gallop. I disciplined my heart, calmed it down and turned to face him. His hands were tucked causally into the pockets of his corduroys. Very GQ. I had expected him to show up in one of those silly basketball jackets and a dingy pair of jeans.

“Why are you so dressed up?” I snapped, adding a novel to the growing pile of books on the table.

“How do you find time to read?” he asked, picking up the book and examining the cover. I wasn’t going to tell him that I didn’t have a life and that I read my weekends away. I sent him a scolding look and hoped that he would drop the subject. The stupid jock had probably never read a book cover to cover. I was about to tell him so when he walked down the aisle next to me and came back carrying a chunky novel in his hand.

“Try this. It’s my favorite book.”

I looked at him warily before plucking it from his fingers.

*Great Expectations*. I had never read it.

“You’re kidding?”

He grinned.

“Do you think that because I play basketball, I’m illiterate?”

I sniffed. That is exactly what I thought.

“Why did you ask me to come here?”

“I thought that you might be more comfortable meeting *me* here.” He perched himself on the edge of a table. “Did you think that I wouldn’t want to collect on our bet?”

I was noticing an accent for the first time. British, I thought but I couldn’t be sure. Whatever it was, it had the same effect on me as vodka.



“I asked you to miss the shot. I didn’t say I would go out with you if you did.”

“Really? I don’t quite remember it that way.” He narrowed his eyes and cocked his head, pretending to be confused. I was the only one allowed to be sarcastic.

“You will go out with me, Olivia, because as much as you hate to admit it, you *were* wrong about me.”

My mouth opened and closed. My wit! Where was my wit?

“I...uhhh...”

“No,” he cut me off. “No excuses. I’m taking you out on a date.”

“Okay.” I shut my eyes and inhaled deeply. “A deal’s a deal.”

Cammie was going to love me for this. Love me!

“Wednesday, eight o’ clock.” He stood. I backed up a step. He was so tall.

He started walking away and then stopped.

“Olivia?”

“What?” I snapped.

“I’m going to kiss you. Just so you know.”

I heard his laughter echo across the library as he left. Over my dead body. Why did he have to be so good looking? And why did my name sound so pretty when he said it?

I snatched up my books and went to checkout.

## Chapter Four

I was afraid of him. He was outplaying me, plucking all of my weapons from my fingers and making me feel like a toothless tiger. My solution was to hide in my room until Wednesday to avoid a run-in with him. Cammie kept me alive on frozen burritos and her private stash of Boston Baked Beans. I read *Great Expectations*, which as it turned out was really good. I Googled the rules of basketball so I could fully understand what had happened when he missed that shot.

When the day of the date finally arrived, I was almost looking forward to it, almost. Cammie set up a grooming station at her study desk (which unfortunately had never been used for studying), and I sat obediently like a chimp, while she groomed me. She picked at my hair, buffed my nails, and dabbed obscene smelling potions on my face. When she started lecturing me on safe sex, I jammed my headphones into my ears and turned the volume on high.

At exactly seven fifty-five, there was a polite tap, tap, tap on the door. Cammie jumped up and down, her face grotesquely frozen in silent screams.

“He’s actually going to *be* in our room!” she hissed, dancing over to the door. She ran a tube of pink gloss over her lips before unlatching the door.

I stood back while slutty mother freshman let our date in.

“Oh, hello,” she said casually. “I’m Cammie,” she offered him her hand and he shook it smiling politely. When his eyes found me he did a double take. I looked nice. Cammie had outdone herself. I was wearing jeans and a slinky cashmere sweater that slipped off one shoulder. My hair, as usual, hung in ropey waves to my waist, but Cammie had taken the time to style a poof and spritz it with sinful amounts of hairspray.

“Well, let’s go then,” I said, walking past him and out into the hall. I turned to watch him say goodbye to Cammie.

“I won’t have her back too late,” I heard him say.

“Oh, keep her out as long as you like,” she said in her southern drawl, “She needs a firm hand so don’t be afraid to use one.” She looked directly at me with that last statement. I made plans to sabotage her English Comp paper when I got back.

“She’s a character,” Caleb said as the door shut behind us.

I grimaced.

Understatement.

“She’s from Texas,” I said, as if that explained her behavior and then I blushed. Why did I say that? I looked up at his face to see him half smiling at me.

It took all of my self-control not to turn around and go back to my room. In the end, pride kept my feet moving. I didn’t want him to think that I couldn’t handle myself.

We passed two cheerleaders on our way to the elevator. Their eyes grew large when they caught sight of Caleb. He nodded at them politely, but kept moving, his hand on the small of my back. I tried to scoot away, but he was pretty adept at keeping it there.

“Do you take compliments?” he asked as we stepped into the elevator and I pressed the down button before he had the chance.

“If they’re original.”

He snickered and rolled his eyes.

“Okay, okay,” he said. He was trying not to laugh at the expression on my face. “Let’s see. You can kill with a smile, you can wound with your eyes....”

“That’s not original, that’s a Billy Joel song,” I interrupted. “And what kind of compliment is that anyway?”

We were walking toward his car. His hands were now in his pockets as we strolled casually.

“I’d say that song was written for you, but if you’re going to be picky...” his voice trailed off. “Do you want the jock to compliment you or the guy who reads *Great Expectations*?”

“Both.” I was trying to appear like I wasn’t enjoying this little exchange but I could already feel my shoulders relaxing, and now that his hand wasn’t on my back, I could think again. We reached his car and I stood at the door with my back to him, waiting for him to unlock it.

“Whether I’m standing behind you or facing you, the view’s pretty nice,” he said.

I felt my face flush as the automatic locks clicked and he held the door open for me. I could hear the suppressed laughter in his voice so I climbed in without a word. I had never met anyone so intent on making me feel uncomfortable. He took his time walking around the car. I watched him intently. He was wearing another one of those impressively well put together outfits.

I sank into the seat and breathed in the scent of his cologne. It permeated the leather seats like skin, making it smell like he was everywhere. The smell was Christmassy, like Douglas firs and Bergamot oranges. I liked it.

“Put your seatbelt on,” he said, sliding in the driver’s seat.

I pursed my lips. No way. He was not going to order me around.

“I’m not putting it on.” The restored VW Bug that I owned didn’t even have seatbelts. One of its previous owners had cut them out. I silently chided myself for not taking my own car.

Caleb raised an eyebrow, something I was starting to notice he did quite often.

“Suit yourself,” he said shrugging. “If we come to any fast stops, I’ll just reach out my arm like this to stop you from jerking forward.” He illustrated his point by extending his arm

across my chest where it came in direct contact with my B-cups.

I put my seat belt on. He didn't even try not to smile.

"Where are we going anyway?" I asked bitterly. Hopefully, we could make this quick and I could be back to my room in time to watch Grey's Anatomy. Handsome, fictional men were so much easier to stomach than real life ones who smelled of Christmas and looked like a Calvin Klein model.

"To my favorite date spot." He looked over at me as his hands shifted gears and I felt unwelcome warmth in my belly. I had a hand fetish. His hands were big, probably beneficial for that stupid sport he played. His were the kind of hands that made wedding rings look sexy—tan with vein lines that ran like snaking rivers to his wrist and disappeared under his sleeves.

"This isn't a date," I reminded him. "And, it's really lame that you just told me you're taking me somewhere you've taken other girls."

"Right. Well next time I'll remember to lie to you then," he said, looking at me out of the corner of his eye.

"What makes you think there will be a next time?"

"What makes you think there won't?"

I didn't bother looking at him I just sniffed my response and stared out the window.

Jaxson's Old Fashioned Ice Cream was located on one of the busier streets in Dania. Its neon circus sign blinked impatiently from a nondescript shopping plaza, working overtime to attract the attention of passersby. Despite the bright lights, the cutouts where tourists place their heads on animal bodies, and the blaring organ music, I had never noticed the place.

"Oh," I said, trying to mask my surprise. "This is interesting."

“Are you lactose intolerant?” he asked sliding his car into a parking spot.

“Nope.”

“On a diet?”

“Not this week.”

“Great. Then you’re going to love it.” He came around to open my door, and offered me his hand as I maneuvered my way out of the car.

We entered the lobby and were immediately greeted by an elderly man with cotton candy hair. He wheezed in excitement when he saw Caleb and shuffled over to shake his hand.

“Good to see you again, Caleb,” he said in a cigarette chapped voice. He was wearing a red pinstriped jumpsuit with buttons made to look like lollypops.

It embarrassed me.

Caleb put a big hand on our host’s shoulder as he greeted him. They exchanged niceties for a few moments and then annoyingly enough, Caleb’s hand found my lower back again.

“Harlow, is my table open?”

Harlow nodded and shuffled forward. We towed along behind him, passing through the first room and taking a small walkway between the ice cream coolers until we emerged into a second, larger room. I looked around in awe as we slowly made our way to the table. The place was a smorgasbord of twenties paraphernalia. In fact, there were so many knick knacks and doodads hanging from the walls, my eyes crossed in confusion. “Caleb’s table” was rinky-dink and small, with a lopsided baby carriage hanging over it. I pursed my lips, unimpressed. Caleb turned to look at me and smiled like he could read my thoughts.

Harlow began wheezing again as he struggled to pull out my chair.

“I can get it. Thanks,” I said. He shrugged his shoulders and disappeared, leaving us alone.

Rich, British boys didn’t eat ice cream in places like this. They ate caviar on yachts and dated rich, blond girls with trust funds. He had to be seriously flawed in some unobvious way. I went through the possibilities in my mind; bad temper, clingy, mental illness.....

“I suppose you’re wondering about the table?” he said, sitting down across from me.

I nodded.

“I’ve been bringing girls here since junior high.” He folded his hands on the sticky tabletop and leaned back in his seat casually. “Anyway, you see that table over there?” I turned to look at the corner table that he was pointing to. An old traffic light was spastically blinking red, green, red, red green above it.

“*That* is the bad luck table and I will never sit there again, not by myself, and not ever with a date.”

I turned back to him amused. He was superstitious. How tacky. I felt smug.

“Why?”

“Well, because every time I sit at that table something disastrous happens—like my old girlfriend seeing me with my new girlfriend and dumping death-by- chocolate on our laps, or finding out that you’re allergic to blueberries in front of the hottest girl in school....” He laughed at himself and I let a smile creep through my tough girl act.

A blueberry allergy was kind of endearing.

“And this table?” I asked.

“Good things happen at this table,” he said simply.

I raised an eyebrow but was too afraid to ask. Bringing a girl to an ice cream parlor that looked like it was funky in the



twenties scored pretty big points. Cammie would be eating it up. It was his sex ticket, I decided.

I was inordinately relieved when our server showed up with two waters and a colander of stale popcorn.

I was still looking through my menu when I heard Caleb ordering for me.

“Are you kidding?” I asked when our server walked away. “Are you aware that women can now vote *and* order their own food?”

“You never give an inch,” he said. “—I like that.”

I lick the salt off my fingers and narrow my eyes at him.

“I saw you looking at this.” He tapped a picture of a banana split. “—right before you started looking at the low fat ice cream.”

He was observant, I’d give him that.

“So what if I wanted something low fat?”

Caleb shrugged. “It’s my night. I won. I make the rules.”

I almost smiled. Almost.

He told me about his family while we waited. He grew up in London with his mother and stepfather. He had the type of magical childhood every kid dreams of, fancy vacations, Christmases with the cousins in Switzerland, and a goddamn pony for his birthday. They transplanted to America when he was fourteen. Michigan first, and then when his mother said the cold was bad for her complexion, Florida. There was an abundance of money, little fighting, and an older brother who did things like climb Mt. Everest in his spare time. His biological father, whom he still occasionally saw, was a womanizer who graced the covers of British tabloids by dating and breaking up with famous models. When it came my turn to spill, I filtered my story for his upper class benefit, leaving out my alcoholic father whom I just called ‘deceased,’ and replacing the projects with ‘a bad neighborhood’. I saw little reason to drown him in the ugly details of my un-charmed life.

I didn't want to bruise his happily ever after. He listened with attentiveness and asked me questions. In my opinion, one could measure a person's self-absorption by the amount of questions they did not pose. Caleb genuinely seemed interested in me. I wasn't sure what that meant. Either it was a ploy to get girls in bed, or he really was that nice.

When I told him about my mother and how she had died of cancer during my senior year of high school, I saw genuine compassion in his eyes, which made me shift uncomfortably in my seat.

"So you're all alone then, Olivia?" I withdrew at his question. It kind of stung to hear.

"Yes, I suppose you could say that if you're referring to my having no living family members."

I scooped desert into my mouth so I wouldn't have to say anything else.

"Are you happy?" he asked. I thought that was kind of an odd question. Was he asking me if I was still crying at night because my mother was dead? He was playing with his spoon, unconsciously dripping chocolate all over the table. I answered as honestly as I could.

"Sometimes. Aren't you?"

"I don't know."

I looked up in surprise. Star athlete, handsome, spoiled, how could he not be happy? Better yet, how could he not know if he was happy or not?

"What does that mean?" I asked setting my spoon down. I didn't feel like eating ice cream anymore. I didn't feel like being here anymore. The whole conversation was making me feel sick.

"I don't know what makes me happy yet. I guess I'm trying to find it. I've always wanted to get married and have a family, one where you pick someone and stay with them till

you're grey and wrinkled and have a minivan full of grandkids."

"A minivan?" I say incredulously, thinking of the licorice sports car parked outside. "Are you kidding me?"

"I'm not as bad as you think."

I poked him on the shoulder. "You don't want a minivan, you want a Porche. Fifteen years into your marriage you'll be trading in the wife and the mini for something that gets your blood moving again. You're spoiled?"

"Come on," he said, laughing. "*You* didn't get handed to me. If I had to fight any harder to get you here, I would be in a body cast."

"Either way, you wrote the book and now you're complaining about the reviews I'm giving it," I quipped.

"Fair enough." He held up his hands, "I'm going to start writing the sequel which will be considerably less narcissistic. Will you read it?"

"Only if every other girl on campus hasn't." He laughed so hard several people turned around to stare at us.

I plucked some kernels of popcorn from the colander and ate them thoughtfully. This wasn't as dreadful as I'd anticipated. I was almost having fun. When I looked up, he was examining me.

"What? Why are you looking at me like that?"

Caleb sighed, "Why are you so hostile?"

"Listen pal, don't think for one minute that I buy that sensitive guy routine you've got going. I know bippity, boppity, bullshit when I see it."

"I didn't know I was putting on a sensitive guy routine," he said sounding pretty honest.

I studied his handsome face trying to see past his looks and into his soul.

He had the kind of eyes that always looked like they were laughing at you. Their color was amber and smile lines already creased their corners like delicate folds in paper.

“Give me a break,” I said. “You bring me to this cute little place for ice cream like we’re in high school. You know that old guy by name, you’re giving me looks....” I trailed off because he was frowning at me.

“You’re not very good at reading people.” He flicked a stray kernel of popcorn at me and it hit me on the forehead. I rubbed at the spot, insulted.

I was very good at reading people.

“Maybe, I’m a nice guy, Olivia.”

I snorted.

“You can read a lot about a person by their features and what they do with them. But, getting to know someone, who they really are, takes time,” he said.

“What can you tell about me?” I asked, “—since you’re such an expert.”

Caleb squinted at me like he didn’t think I was ready for his evaluation.

“Come on,” I urged, “if you’re gonna brag about it....”

“Okay...okay. Let’s see....”

I immediately regretted my decision. I had just given him license to stare at me and I was already blushing.

“There’s something sad about your eyes, maybe it’s how big they are or the way they dip downward like they’re disappointed. They’re definitely vulnerable, but bold too, because you look at everything like you’re challenging it. Then, there’s the way that you hold your chin. You are defiant and stubborn, and you have a snobby little nose that’s always pointing due north. I think you pretend to be a snob to keep people away.”

I felt sick. Too much ice cream. Too much truth.

“And my personal favorite, your lips.” He smiled as a pink flush crept up my neck. “Full and sensual, puckered, and always turned down at the corners. They kind of make me want to kiss them until they smile.”

I balked. He thought about kissing me? Of course he thought about kissing me. Guys were always thinking about that kind of stuff, stuff that led to sex. Underneath the table my fingernails dug into the palms of my hands.

“Am I making you uncomfortable?” he was leaning back in his chair, one elbow resting casually on the table.

I swallowed the volleyball in my throat. My heart was acting the fool as it beat sporadically.

“No.”

“Good, because I don’t take you for a woman who’s ever really surprised, especially when the school jock proves her wrong.”

Now I felt ready to pass out.

Okay, so maybe there was a little more to this egg-head than I thought. I crossed my arms over my chest and narrowed my eyes like cowboys did in old westerns.

“Okay, why did you miss the shot?”

“Why did I miss the shot?” he repeated. “Because I cared more about knowing you than I did about winning another game.”

This time I didn’t even try to conceal the dumbfounded look on my face. He had just passed me the greatest compliment, even better than the one about kissing my lips. Fuhgettaboutit. I didn’t even have a quip to deliver. I didn’t care if my wit had failed me.

On our way out we stopped to browse through the candy and toys for sale. As if the place wasn’t small enough, they had to cram it full of junk.

Caleb was studying something in the corner as I studied him.

“Look at this thing,” he beckoned me over. I wedged myself between him and a row of sherbet colored Beanie Babies to get a look. It was a penny press, one of those souvenir coin makers in which you placed fifty cents and a penny. The machine would then press your penny and stamp a random message on it in its newly flattened form, keeping your fifty cents as payment. Caleb was pulling change from his pockets like he was roped on too much sugar.

“You do it,” he said, dropping the coins into my palm. I slid the change into the narrow slit on its front and pushed the start button. The press began to hum and vibrate in a polite vibrato. I was acutely aware of how close we were standing and I would have edged away if there was anywhere to go. I knocked a few of the Beanie Babies off the shelf. As we bent to pick them up, the machine made a small burping sound and the penny landed in the return slot with a tinkle. He rubbed his hands together and I giggled.

“Now there’s something you don’t see very often,” he said, tapping me lightly on the nose.

I swallowed my girlishness and resumed my dour face. My nose was now tingling.

“It’s just a souvenir machine, calm down, Stokes.”

“Aaah, but this isn’t just any coin maker,” he said, pointing to advertisement on it that I, unfortunately, had failed to see.

“This is the romantic coin maker.”

I paled.

The penny was still warm when my fingers found it. I handed it to Caleb without even bothering to see what the message was.

“Well, well.” His voice was smug. Curiosity got the best of me. I pulled his arm down until the coin was directly in

front of my face and read:

*Good for one kiss*

*Anywhere, anytime*

The nerve! I backed out of the tight spot and started walking to the door.

“Good luck collecting that one.”

He didn’t say a word and he didn’t need to. His strut and the smile on his face were enough to

tell me what he was thinking.

I asked him about Laura on the way back to the dorms. He told me that he only dated her for a week their freshman year and that she was a nice girl. By the time he walked me to my dorm room, I was so preoccupied with thoughts of him kissing me, that I stumbled over my own feet.

“Careful, Duchess,” he said, grabbing me by the elbow, “if you sprain something, I’m going to have to carry you to your door.” He laughed at the look of horror on my face.

“Most girls would be excited by that prospect, you know?”

“I’m not most girls.”

“Yes, so I see.”

He took a step toward me and I shrank back against the door, trying to press myself into the thin plywood. He was unbearably close. Placing both hands on either side of my head he was inches...*inches* from my face. I could feel his breath on my lips. I wanted to see his lips, watch what they were doing—but I kept my eyes locked on his. If I could just hold his eyes he might not notice that my chest was heaving from my labored breaths, and that my fingernails were curved into the door behind me. He moved his head closer his nose was

practically touching mine. My lips parted. How long had we been standing there? It felt like five minutes, but I knew it was probably more like ten seconds. He moved a millimeter closer. There was nowhere for me to go. If I pressed myself further against the door, I'd melt into the wood. I was so afraid...but of what? I'd been kissed before. He spoke and he was so near to my face, I could feel his lips brush against the corner of my mouth.

"I'm not going to kiss you," He said. I felt my heart lurch. *Was it up or down? Up or down?* I didn't know if I was disappointed or relieved. He backed up. "Not today, Olivia. But, I am going to kiss you."

I felt a swell of agitation swirl through my belly, it traveled up my chest and reached my mouth.

"No."

It sounded so silly; a child's word of defiance. I don't know why I said it, except to take back some of the control he had stolen from me.

Caleb had already turned to walk away, but my "no" stopped him. He turned. His hands were in his pockets. The hallway seemed to shrink around him, his presence swallowing it up. How did he do that? I expected him to say something else, maybe flirt with me some more. Instead he grinned, looked at the ground, looked back at me...and walked away.

He won again. That little move had been stronger, left more of an impression than if he had actually pressed his lips to mine. Now, I had the impending feeling of being hunted. I barely had time to process what had just happened when the door was flung open and Cammie pulled me into our room by the waistband of my jeans.

"Tell me everything!" she demanded. She had rollers the size of Twinkies in her hair and her face was lathered in something that smelled strongly of lemon.



“There’s nothing to tell,” I said mysteriously, almost dreamily.

“I’ll let you keep the sweater I loaned you.” I considered this a moment, before nodding.

“He took me to Jaxson’s ice cream...” I began.

## Chapter Five

### The Present

I have to stop daydreaming. I've been spending too much time thinking about the past and reliving how we met. I am suddenly aware that I am seated behind my desk scribbling distractedly on a document I am supposed to be transcribing into type, and that hours had passed. I brought doughnuts into work and one of the lawyers from the firm is digging around in the box getting sugar all over his sleeve. He makes his selection and perches himself on the edge of my desk knocking over a cup of pens. I cringe, but keep my hands in my lap.

"So, how's law school going?" he ignores the mess he made and bites into a jelly. I imagine the stack of law school applications on my dresser at home and sigh. Tonight. Tonight, I would be ambitious.

"Fine, thank you, Mr. Gould." I can't take it anymore. I scoop up the pens and reposition the cup.

"You know Olivia, a girl with your looks can get far in this world, if she plays her cards right."

He is chewing with his mouth open.

"Well, I was hoping that my talent and hard work would get me far in the world, Mr. Gould, not my appearance."

He chuckles at me. I envision myself jamming a pen into his trachea. Blood. There would be lots of blood to clean up. I better not.

"If you ever want to excel in this field, sweetheart, you let me know. I can instruct you all the way to the top." He smiles at me, winks, and my slime-ball radar goes off. I hate being sugar lipped, especially by a bleating goat in pinstripes.

“Instruct?” I ask with false enthusiasm. Mr. Gould picks at his teeth, flashing me a view of his wedding band, which he liked to forget symbolized fidelity.

“Do I have to spell it out for you?”

“No,” I sigh boringly, “but you’ll have to spell it out for human resources when I tell them that you’re sexually harassing me.” I pull a nail file from my drawer o’crap and begin sawing at my thumb. When I look up, his face has gone from its usual tomato red to an ugly shade of scared shitless.

“I’m sorry you see my concern for your future as sexual harassment,” he says, quickly removing himself from my desk.

I size him up, all the way from his bony shoulders, which are poking out of his Armani suit like two tennis balls, down to his regrettably small feet.

“How about we stick to work-only conversations and you save your concern for your wife—Mary was her name wasn’t it?” He turns away, his shoulders rigid. I hate men...well, most of them.

My intercom crackles.

“Olivia, can you come in here for a sec?” It’s Bernie.

Bernadette Vespa Singer is my boss and she loves me. At five feet even she has cankles, perpetually smudged peach lipstick, and wiry black hair that looks like poodle fur. She is a genius in her own right and a damn good lawyer. With a ninety-five percent prosecution rate and a stride to match any man, Bernie is my idol.

“Mr. Gould offered to help advance my career,” I say coolly, walking into her office.

“Bastard!” she slaps her palm so hard on her desk her bobble heads jump to action.

“Do you want to press charges, Olivia? Damn that cock-a-wiener bastard. I think he’s sleeping with Judge Walters.”

I shake my head “no” and sit down in a chair facing her desk.

“You’re my kind of assistant kid, tough as nails and ambitious as hell.”

I smile. That was what she said when she hired me. I’d taken the job knowing she was a little crazy but not caring since she won cases.

“What’s happening with that fellow you were telling me about?” she asks. She scratches her nose with the tip of her pen and it leaves a scribble on her face.

I blush so fiercely it is an immediate emission of guilt.

“You know he’s going to find out eventually,” she says, narrowing her already beady eyes at me. “Don’t do anything stupid, you could have one hellavah lawsuit on your hands.”

I bite the inside of my cheek.

I don’t know why I told her. I regret it now as she stares at me with her probing eyes.

“I know,” I mumble, pretending to fumble with the buttons on my blouse. “Can we just not talk about it right now?”

“What is it with this guy?” she says ignoring me. “Is he well endowed? I can never understand why pretty girls like you go chasing after men. You should get a vibrator. You’ll never go back. Here, let me write down the name of a good one for you,” she scribbled something down on a yellow post it note and hands it to me.

“Thanks.” I looked at the wall above her head and take the paper.

“Not a probby. See you later, kid.” She waved me out of her office with her chubby, ink-stained fingers.

I invited Caleb over for dinner. Same dog, same tricks. Our coffee rendezvous ended abruptly when the pimply kid behind the counter flipped the closed sign in the window and

turned the lights off in the cafe. We had lifted ourselves regretfully from the table and wandered outside.

“Can I see you again?” He was standing directly in front of a street lamp and it cast an ethereal glow around his shoulders.

“What would you do if I said no?”

“Don’t say no.”

It was another one of those moments where I flirt with my conscience and pretend for once that I am going to do the right thing.

“Come over for dinner,” I blurt. “I’m not much of a cook, but hey...”

He looked surprised at first and then grinned.

“I’d love to.”

And that’s how it happened.

Bad. Bad. Bad.

Before I leave work, I make a quick call to the number at the bottom of Dobson Orchard’s wanted poster. The detective I speak to takes my name and number and thanks me for the information. He promises to call if anything comes up. Then I call my favorite Thai restaurant and order a large tray of red vegetable curry—To Go.

Pickles is waiting for me by the door when I get home. I place my packages on the counter and grab a coke from the fridge.

“You’re pathetic, Pickles,” I say, hooking the leash to her collar. “You know I don’t have time for this today.”

Our quickie turns into twenty minutes as Pickles willfully disobeys me and refuses to pee on command. By the time we get home, I have thirty minutes before Caleb is due to arrive. I place the curry I bought into a casserole dish and stick it in the oven to keep it warm. I polish two wine glasses and then polish off a glass of wine. Then I take out all of the

ingredients to make a salad and line them up in alphabetical order on my counter.

Caleb arrives five minutes early.

“For you,” he says, handing me a bottle of wine and a small potted Gardenia bush. It is sprouting a single white flower and I pause to smell it.

“This is my favorite flower,” I say in half surprise.

“Really? Lucky guess.”

I grunt. *If only he knew.*

I distract myself by trying to calm Pickles down as she hysterically throws herself at Caleb’s leg. When he bends down to pat her on the head, she yelps and runs away.

“It’s a ‘she can touch you, but you can’t touch her’ kind of thing,” I explain.

“She’s a tease then, just like her owner.”

“You don’t know her owner well enough to make that assertion,” I smile.

“I suppose not.”

He looks around my living room, and I suddenly feel embarrassed. My home is small and there is a lot of purple. He’s been here before, of course, but he doesn’t remember that. I am about to explain why I don’t have nicer things, when his eyes light up.

“You used to have long hair,” he says sauntering over to a collage of pictures on my wall. I reach up and finger a choppy strand of what’s left of it.

“Yes, in college. I needed a change, so I took off twelve inches.” I clear my throat and duck into the kitchen.

“I kinda got a late start on dinner,” I say, picking up a knife, pausing to watch him. He is walking from knick knack, to kick knack, inspecting everything. I watch him pick up a

ceramic owl from my bookshelf. He turns it over and inspects the bottom then gently places it back. He bought me that owl.

“I’d give you a tour of the apartment,” I say to him, “but you can see the entire place from where you’re standing.”

“It’s cute,” he smiles. “Girly. But definitely you.”

I cock my eyebrow. I don’t know what he means. He doesn’t know me....he did, but he doesn’t now. I am getting confused. I viciously chop the onions.

Four years ago, Caleb helped me move in. We painted together; my living room tan and my bedroom lilac. Knowing my penchant for perfection, he dabbed his roller on the ceiling above my bed to annoy me. He left a purple stain, I was furious.

“There, now you’ll think of me every night before you close your eyes,” he had said, laughing at my mortified face. I hated imperfections, *hated* them. A stain on the carpet, a chip in a teacup, anything that marred the way things were supposed to be. I wouldn’t even eat broken chips. After we broke up, I was grateful for that blob of paint. It was the last thing I saw before I went to sleep and the first thing I saw when I woke up. I would stare at that purple scar like Caleb’s face was hidden somewhere in it. Caleb had been my imperfection, with his slightly Americanized British accent, and the way he could play any sport and quote any philosopher. He was such a mix of class and jock, romance and jerk, it made me crazy.

“Can I help you?” It was meant as a question, but he was already nudging me out of the way as he pried the knife from my fingers and went to work on the mushrooms. I pause on my way to the stove and watch him slice the vegetables.

“So...did you remember anything this week?” I pull my staged casserole dish from the oven and set it on the stove.

“I did.”

My body becomes rigid and blood rushes to my head.

“I was paging through a magazine, one of those travel publications, and there was a picture of a campsite in Georgia. I don’t know if I ever camped there. For all I know, I could be making it up in my head, but I felt something when I was looking at the pictures.”

I look away before my eyes can tell on me. He camped there all right, with a snake named Olivia.

“You should camp there. Maybe it will jog specific memories for you.” I realize my foolishness after the words are already out of my mouth. I am on team ‘amnesia’. His remembering would be the end of my foolish game.

He opens his mouth to say something but my doorbell cuts him off. Caleb looks at me in surprise, his hand suspended over a bell pepper.

“Are you expecting company?” he asks.

“Not unless you invited your amnesia anonymous group.” I dry my hands, dodging a mushroom he tosses at me and head over to the door. Whoever rang the doorbell was now resorting to pounding with what sounded like both of their fists.

I unlatch my bolt without bothering to look through the peephole and swing it open. A woman is standing in front of me, her fist poised midair.

“Can I help you?”

I rule out Jehovah’s Witnesses because they always come in twos and her makeup is too smudgy to be a salesperson. She is looking at me with a mixture of fear and anxiety. As I am about to say “no thank you” and close the door in her face, I notice a neat row of tears streaking down her cheeks. We stare at each other and then in a moment of horror I know.

Leah.

“Leah?” I hear Caleb’s voice behind me as I cringe.

“What are you doing here?”



“I could ask you the same thing,” her voice trembles as she studies each of our faces.

“I’m having dinner with a friend. How did you—?”

“I followed you,” she says quickly, you haven’t been taking my calls and I wanted to see why.” She whispers this last part, squeezing her eyes closed as if to shut me out.

“How could you do this, Caleb?”

As if on cue, she drops her head and begins sobbing into her hands. I eye her dribbling nose and turn away disgusted. I have the worst luck in the world.

“Leah,” Caleb pushes past me and wraps his arms around her.

I watch from the outside, fear twisting in my stomach like a fist.

“Come on, I’ll take you home,” he turns back to mouth a hasty ‘I’m sorry’ to me as he steers her out the door. I watch them go. She looks childlike next to him. He never made me look that small and fragile. I swing my door closed and curse. It feels as if I am a thousand years old.

The following evening I am curled up on my sofa, getting ready for an exciting night with my law school applications, when my doorbell rings.

I groan and smother my face in a pillow. Rosebud.

I open the door without bothering to look through the peephole.

Not Rosebud. Caleb. I eye him warily.

“Well, well, well,” I say, “look what the red-headed girlfriend dragged in.”

He smiles at me sheepishly and runs a hand through his hair.

“I’m sorry, Olivia, I guess she’s having a harder time than I thought.”

“Listen, I really don’t want to get involved in your girlfriend drama...”

I hit some kind of emotional nerve because he blinks like a bug just flew into his eye.

“I understand that,” he says. “She wants me to have friends. It just came as a shock.”

“She doesn’t want you to have a friend like me, Caleb, and if she told you she was okay with it, she was lying.”

“Friends like you?” he says smiling. “Are you insinuating that you’re attractive?”

I roll my eyes. Totally off topic.

“Okay, okay,” he says holding up his hands, “but, I want you as a friend, regardless of what anyone else thinks. Does that count?”

I make him wait. I pretend to be thinking about it. I bite my lip and frown. Then I stand aside and let him back into my house. He looks pretty damn smug.

We decide that we want cake. I pull out mixing bowls and ingredients and Caleb fashions chef hats for us out of paper towels. I marvel at the fact that a few weeks ago I thought I would never see him again and here he is in my kitchen. We laugh a lot and when the batter is ready to be poured into the cake pan, Caleb sours the mood.

“Leah makes the best red velvet cake.”

I glare at him because I don’t want to think about his fancy pants girlfriend just now AND I’ve never even eaten red velvet cake.

When he goes on and on about it, I pick up a handful of batter and fling it toward his face.

I miss of course, and it lands on the wall behind his head. Caleb turns to look at it.

“You know,” he says with surprising calm, “you really need to work on your aim.”

Before I know what is happening, he turns his entire bowl upside-down over my head.

I am dripping brown batter all over the floor, laughing so hard I can barely stand. I reach for the counter to steady myself and feel my feet slip out from underneath me. Caleb reaches out a hand to grab me, and instead of accepting his help, I try to smear batter on him. I smash it into his face. He yelps, and in seconds, my tiny kitchen is a war zone. We throw eggs, flour and oil, and when those run out—we launch handfuls of chocolate chips at each other. At some point, I tackle him, and we go sliding to the floor. We are laughing so hard, tears start leaking from my batter encrusted eyes. I am leaning over him, as he lays sprawled on his back. There is egg on his nose, and both of his eyebrows are caked in flour. I can't imagine what I must look like. The laughter is suddenly sucked from our throats as we realize the awkwardness of our position. We could kiss. Like in the movies.

I hover above him for a second waiting to see if he will make a move. His eyes are undoubtedly on my mouth and I am breathless in anticipation. My heart is pressed somewhere against his ribcage and I wonder if he could feel it beating around bombastically.

“Olivia,” he whispers.

I swallow.

“We still have a cake to bake.”

Baking? I look around at the mess and groan. How can he think about baking?

Two hours later we are sitting on the floor of my tiny balcony, still covered in batter, eating Caleb's cake. I pull a chunk of goop from my hair and toss it over the railing. Caleb drops another slice in my hand.

“Favorite book?” he asks.

“Madam Bovary.”

He snickers.

“Favorite pastime?”

“Depression.”

“Favorite pastime?” he asks again. We’ve been playing this game for the last hour. It’s very one sided since he can’t remember his favorites.

I scratch my chin. “Eating.”

“Favorite memory?”

I pause at this one. All of my favorite memories include him.

“There was this...guy...he planned out a super-extraordinary date. He sent me on a scavenger hunt and I had to figure out answers to clues like, where our first date was and where the best place to buy a bra was. Each time I went to one of the places in the clues, there would be a gift and another clue waiting for me. It ended with me going to the place where we had our first kiss. He’d set up a table with dinner and music. We danced. It was....” I don’t know how to finish that sentence.

Caleb is quiet. When I turned to look at him, he is staring up the sky.

“What was his name?”

I shake my head.

“No way.”

“Why? Rock my world-tell me....”

“The stars look silver tonight,” I say changing the subject. “Maybe soon you’ll remember your favorites,” I say quietly. He shrugs.

“Or, I’ll just make new favorites. Starting with you.”  
This should make me excited, but it just reminds me of the ticking time bomb our relationship resembles.

“Can I be your favorite girl?”

“You already are, Duchess.”

My vision blurs and my heart does a little skip. Did I just imagine that?

“What did you just call me?”

Caleb looks embarrassed.

“Duchess, but don’t ask me why, it just popped into my head. Sorry.”

I stare straight ahead and hope he doesn’t notice the horror on my face.

“No, no it’s fine,” I say softly. But it isn’t. Duchess was his nickname for me in college.

“I better get going,” he says, standing up quickly.

I want to ask him if he’s remembered something but I’m too scared.

I walk him to the door and he leans down to peck my cheek.

“Bye,” I say.

“Bye.” And then he walks into the stagnant night air, leaving me alone.

He is going to remember and soon! I have to think of a way to buy myself some more time.

Duchess thinks about getting drunk, but calls Cammie instead.

“Well it’s about time!” her voice sounds far away.

“Sorry, Cam, I’ve been busy.”

“Busy with what? And I thought you gave up eating chips.”

My crunching stops. I hold my half eaten Dorito in my cheek and say nothing.

“You’re up to something,” Cammie says after a minute.  
“Tell me what it is...”

“Hmmm...uhhh...” I mumble. I can hide nothing from this girl. She has gossip radar.

“I saw Caleb, Cammie,” I blurt out, biting my nail, nervously.

There is silence on the other end of the line. She knows I wouldn’t joke about something like that.

“He has amnesia and doesn’t know who I am.”

I hear her sigh.

“Olivia....tell me you didn’t.”

“I did.”

“ARE YOU INSANE?” I hold the phone away from my ear.

“Cammie, when I saw him, I felt things just as strongly as I did when we were together. It’s like everything is still the same and the past three years didn’t happen.”

“You have a right to love him, that’s not something you can control. What you do not have the right to do is take advantage of him.... AGAIN!” Where has this mature little monster come from?

“I liked you better as a freshman.”

“Yeah, well, some of us grow up, Olivia, and some of us play the same tired games forever. Have you ever thought that maybe you are not together because you aren’t supposed to be? Let go!”

“I can’t,” I say softly. Cammie’s voice is gentler this time.

“Olivia, you can have any man you want. Why him? Why is it always about Caleb?”

“Because....because I didn’t need anyone until I met him.”

“You know he’s going to find out.”

“I have to go,” I say. I don’t want to think about that. Tears start oozing from my eyes.

“I love you Olivia, be careful.” I hang up feeling like my stomach is full of rocks. He forgot me. I can make him remember not what I did to him, but what he felt for me.

I wander to my closet, reach up to the top shelf and pull down a dusty box. Laying it on the carpet, I gently remove the lid and stare at its contents. There are a couple of envelopes stuffed with letters, some pictures, and a small wooden box

with a flower painted on its lid. I reach for the box and open it. My hand sifts through the jumble of memories, a keychain, a CD, and a frayed book of matches. My hand stills when it brushes against the most important keepsake. I jiggle the box until everything moves aside and I can see the shiny oval penny.

“You,” I say accusingly, picking it up and rolling it between my fingers. “This is all your fault.”



## Chapter Six

### The Past

“I’m not getting in the pool! It is freezing!”

“It’s November in Florida, Olivia. It’s seventy degrees out. Besides, it’s a heated pool. Man up.” Caleb was wading around in his boxers in the turquoise water of the campus swimming pool. I was trying to avoid looking at his muscles.

“You can’t manipulate me into the pool by making a sexist comment,” I said, leaning down to splash him in the face. He grabbed my wrist before I had time to withdraw.

Our eyes locked.

“Don’t,” I warned. For second I didn’t think he’d have the guts. Next thing I know I was tumbling headfirst into the freezing water.

I came up gasping for air, my hair wrapped unbecomingly around my face. Caleb peeled it away laughing.

“I can’t believe you did that!” I gasped, shoving him on the chest. It felt like I was pushing on hot rocks.

“You look good wet,” he said. “It would probably be easier to swim if you took off some of your clothes.”

Shooting him a searing look, I started a breaststroke toward the side of the pool.

“Ahh, not one for fun I see.” His voice was light when he said it but there was a definite challenge in his tone.

“Screw it,” I mumbled, stopping a foot away from the ladder. I was the type of girl that *would* ‘jump off of a bridge’ to spite my friends.

I was wearing my good underwear anyway. I ducked under the water and shed my polyester skin like a snake. I resurfaced seconds later with just my skivvies on.

Caleb unconsciously mouthed “wow.”

“To your fun,” I toasted him with my sopping wet clothes and then threw them at his head. He dodged and circled around to where I was treading water.

“Nice lace,” he smirked, eyeing me without shame.

“Can you not make it so obvious that you’re looking?” I felt violated. I submerged myself under the water until only my head was visible.

“I thought our relationship was about honesty,” he smiled.

“Pffffff. Our ‘relationship,’” I snickered, “is based on dares and blackmail.”

His eyes were twinkling. He had such expressive eyes. I wanted to crush that twinkle and kick him where it hurt.

“Blackmail is such a harsh word,” he said, swimming closer.

“You threatened to tell the school newspaper that I was the reason you missed the shot, Drake.” He was way too close for comfort now. I began peddling backwards. There was a scar at the corner of his right eye that I had never noticed

before. It was just a faint crescent moon, but somehow it made him look dangerous—in a sexy way. I shook my head. These thoughts were not mine....they were Cammie's—damn her.

“How did you get that scar?” I asked. I was shuffling along the bottom of the pool on my tiptoes to get away from him. He absently reached a finger out to touch it.

“I stole a pound note from my grandfather's wallet and when he caught me, he decided to punish me with his walking stick.”

I felt one of those, ‘this is why he's messed up,’ moments coming on and I prepared myself to understand him.

“Really?”

“No.”

I felt myself color red. I punched him on the arm as hard as I could.

“I fell off my bike when I was twelve,” he laughed, rubbing the spot where I hit him. “A very boring story.”

“At least it's the truth,” I said, exasperated. “Someone like you doesn't need to lie to be interesting.”

“Someone like me?” he asked. “You find me interesting Libby?”

“No, I don't, and don't call me Libby. You know you're really quite simple and boring,” I said, sniffing.

He was looking away from me into the water.

“Did you drop a piece of your jewelry?”

“What?” his attention had shifted so suddenly, I felt offended.

“There's something down there at the bottom of the pool.” He was pointing to a spot between our feet. I narrowed my eyes trying to see what he was staring at.

“I'm not wearing any jewelry,” I said impatiently, “it's probably just a penny or something.”

I nudged it with my toe. It was bigger than a penny. Before he could say anything else, I ducked my head under the water to retrieve it. When my head broke the surface of the water, Caleb automatically scooted closer.

“What is it?” he was staring at my clenched fist.

“Let’s see,” I said theatrically, pulling my fingers slowly away from my palm. It was not jewelry. It was an old penny, flattened, and stamped with a message that entitled its bearer one free shot of affection, a kiss.

Before I realized what I was doing, I dropped the souvenir into his palm.

“You’re full of tricks tonight aren’t you?”

He was laughing...always laughing. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Before I could retort with something clever, Caleb reached out and scooped me around my waist. Even in the cold water, his touch felt scorching hot. He pulled me toward him and our bodies were pressed together, belly to belly, chest to chest. I was so shocked, that at first I made no protest. I hadn’t been this spatially close to another human being since I was an infant. He grinned, his eyes turning smoky with what I perceived as lust. I gave up fighting and allowed my lips to be steered toward his. *This is for Cammie*, I told myself. There was no ‘nice and easy’ with this boy. He grazed his tongue along the inside of my bottom lip. He was gentle at first, trying to coax my stubborn lips into some form of cooperation. I responded with the only thing I knew: frigid prudity. Caleb, undaunted by my lack of enthusiasm pulled away from me. His hands were wrapped around my waist, his fingers positioned right beneath my panty line. Our foreheads were touching and my breath was coming out in little gasps. It was embarrassing.

“Kiss me back, Olivia.” His voice was commanding, and for a second, I felt a flare of rebellion like I did when he instructed me to put on my seat belt. I swallowed hard and

closed my eyes. I didn't win that fight. I probably wouldn't win this one either. I might not even want to win it.

I could do it. Kissing was a no-brainer, like eating or walking. His lips came back a second time and I bent my head toward him, tilted like in the movies. I was ready this time, willing even. I jumped when we connected and his lips, which were pressed against mine, stretched into an amused smile. He laughed into my mouth. It was infuriating and incredibly sexy. I tried to pull away, but he pulled me back. The kiss. The kiss. The kiss. It was chocolate cake and fizzy passion and goose bumps. No one had ever kissed me like that before.

Then, he did the strangest thing—he pulled away and held me at arm's length. The spell was broken.

“Olivia...” His voice was rough. I shook my head. I didn't want to hear what he was going to say.

“I have to go,” I said quickly. The water, which had been still, began rippling as I struggled over to the side of the pool. In one smooth motion, I pulled myself up and out of the water and looked down at my shivering body. I was canoodling in a pool in my underwear with the college Casanova. I was a harlot. Grabbing my wet clothes from the ground I looked around in alarm. Someone was going to see me walk back wearing wet clothes.

“Olivia,” he said again. I refused to look at him. “Here,” he handed me his dry sweatshirt, which I accepted gratefully and pulled over my head. He opened his mouth.

“Look, whatever you're going to say, don't!”

He nodded. We walked out the gate and into the parking lot. Caleb retrieved a gym towel from his car and handed it to me. I dabbed at my face and hair and passed it back, my eyes on the floor. I was too ashamed to say anything. My behavior had been tacky. I didn't want to give him the wrong impression. I ground my molars together and pressed my eyes closed.

“Goodnight, Caleb.” I said quickly, sounding half strangled. I could feel his eyes on my back as I walked away. Why had he pulled away like that? The first time I’d ever let myself go, and I got a hard slap in the face.

“By tomorrow, he’ll forget you,” I hissed to myself, “and then you can move on with your life and forget what kissing him felt like.”

I woke up the next morning feeling as if I had swallowed a mouthful of gravel. My throat was burning and my body ached. I burrowed under my covers and tried to shut out images from the night before. They were stupid and reckless images that kept replaying themselves over and over until I wanted to scream. There was no room for mistakes in my life. I didn’t have any family or the back-spring of money. I had one shot to make something of myself and Caleb was the type of distraction that could throw my life off balance

He called twice during the day and once after dinner. I put my phone on silent and forbade Cammie from answering it. I got dressed for class on Monday morning, still slightly green and determined to pretend that nothing had happened. We had a Sociology class together, something he probably didn’t realize since it was one of the larger classes this semester, and I sat as far to the front of the room as he sat to the rear.

When I arrived, the auditorium was filling up quickly. Bleary eyed and dizzy, I made my way to the far left side of the building. Hidden by an overhang were five coveted seats shrouded in shadow. I wanted to hide there. Their usual occupants were the class sleepers and a guy who looked like Fred Flintstone gone Unabomber. Today I was lucky. Two seats had yet to be claimed. I began trotting across the aisles, my bag clutched in an iron grip to my side. I was halfway there when I heard my name called from the professor’s podium.

“Miss Kaspen?”

I froze. Professor Grubbs was addressing me through his microphone and people were turning in their seats to stare. I tried to keep walking like I hadn't heard him.

“Miss Kaspen?” Professor Grubbs sang again, “where do you think you're going?”

I turned slowly, plastering a smile over my gritted teeth. The obnoxious, insufferable, piece of....

“Good morning Professor,” I said sweetly.

His three chins were swinging beneath his grinning mouth like a pendulum. Caleb, whose head had been bent over his textbook a moment ago pivoted toward me in his seat. Caught. I looked over my shoulder longingly as two students slipped into the chairs I was headed for.

“Is there something wrong with your regular seat?” asked Professor Grubbs, motioning toward the front row. “Is it my breath?” He blew into his hand and pretended to sniff. There was collective snickering around the room.

I glared at him and quietly made my way to the front of the room.

Professor Grubbs was a three hundred pound bull with a penchant for being controversial. Students were intimidated by the professor's booming voice and over imposing presence. I found him loveable. But, not today—today I hated him.

“It looks to me like you're hiding from someone.” He leaned on his podium, and for a second, I thought it was going to crack underneath his weight.

My eyes darted to Caleb. He was smiling.

Aaaargh!

“Hiding from someone?” I sighed as I sat. “Why would I be hiding from someone? And I thank you to not analyze my

every move, especially for the entire class to hear,” I added with a hiss.

Professor Grubbs looked at me mischievously and then he cleared his throat into the microphone.

He kept his eyes on me when he said, “Is there anyone in this room who suspects Olivia Kaspen is avoiding them?”

Caleb raised his hand.

I dropped my head until my chin was touching my chest.

“Mr. Drake?” Professor Grubbs was openly surprised. “Please come and take a seat next to Olivia so I can watch her squirm.”

I heard his footsteps, then felt his presence next to me as he slid into a chair. I kept my head down.

“You’re quite a handsome boy,” Professor Grubbs said. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you this close before.”

I lifted my head and snorted. Professor Grubbs stared us down, his eyes traveling from Caleb to me with unveiled curiosity.

“I have a newfound hunger for knowledge, sir. I think I’ll be sitting this close from now on.”

“Now, I know that the rumors are true, Mr. Drake.”

“What rumors, Professor?” Caleb’s voice was cheerful, teasing even.

“You’re full of shit.” There was a rippling of laughter across the student body. Caleb smiled undaunted. He was basking in the attention.

“Feeling better?” he said, quietly, as the lecture had now begun.

“Yes. I’m fine.” I stared straight ahead and held my breath against his cologne.



As he reached into his bag, his leg brushed against mine. I jerked away, but it was too late, I already had that fairy wing feeling in my stomach.

“Sorry,” he mouthed, grinning. I scowled at him and slapped my textbook so hard on my desk that Professor Grubbs paused in his lecture to look over at me.

“Easy Slick,” he said under his breath. “If you start acting out every time you’re around me, people will catch on to how much you like me.”

My jaw unhinged.

I tried to listen to the lecture, I honestly did, but at the end of the fifty-minute class, I couldn’t recall a single thing that had been said. I had the smell of his cologne memorized, however, and I could tell you in detail about the patterns of movement that he made: tapping his pencil on his book in sequences of three, shifting his legs out from under his desk so that one bounced up and down on the toe of his foot and the other stretched lazily in front of him. When we were dismissed, I shot out of my seat like a live cannon ball and headed for the door. He didn’t pursue me. In fact, when I turned back to get a look at where he was, I couldn’t see him at all. My first reaction was that of relief and then disappointment. Perhaps, he finally got the message, and he was out of my hair for good.

He was waiting for me in front of my dorm building later that day. I straightened my back and took the next few seconds to get my emotions under control. *Breathe, Olivia, he’s just another boy and they’re all made of the same junk.* I stopped a few feet away from where he was standing, if I smelled him, I knew I would lose resolve. This was picturesque. Us standing under a streetlight in an emotional face-off, messenger bags crossed across our chests.

“Caleb,” I said my voice too high, “I’m going to be honest.” He nodded blinking slowly.

“I’m just not interested...in what you’re...interested in. I like you, but just as a friend.” I stopped to check his face, which was as unreadable as *War and Peace*, and threw in one last jab to bring my point home. “I just don’t think we’re compatible.”

“That’s not how it feels to me.” He looked alarmingly intense and I had to stare at my shoes to avoid being sucked into his eyes.

“Um, well I’m sorry. I guess we’re just on two different wave lengths,” I stammered.

“No, that’s not what I meant. I know you like me just as much as I like you. But, it’s your choice, and I am a gentleman. You want me to back off-okay. Goodbye, Olivia.” He walked away.

I looked after him in dismay. Had I really just done that? I wanted to chase after him and tell him that I only partially meant it and that every time I was around him I felt intoxicated, and if he could please just kiss me one more time so I could be sure I was doing the right thing.

I didn’t of course.

Caleb, true to his word, steered clear of me for the next five months. So clear, in fact, that sometimes when we passed each other around campus he would stare right through me.

I kept thinking about what my mother would have said about this situation.

“A real chunk of man meat and you screw it up because you’re afraid. You’re too much like your father, Olivia.”

I was a relationship retard. I kicked, shoved, and punched people out of my life, so they never had a chance to hurt me.

Life carried on, but all of a sudden it wasn’t the same. There was a change in me. I couldn’t put my finger on it but somewhere in my brain a new door had appeared and despite my hardest efforts to keep it closed, my thoughts kept going

there, wandering around in the empty room, putting up images of Caleb. Sometimes I felt sad for days, then my mood would swing and I would feel incredible rage towards him for messing with my head. Around the second month of my emotional torture, I gave up the fight. Obviously, I no longer wanted to be an island. Maybe it was time to open up and experiment with relationships.

I became interested in boys almost overnight. I enlisted Cammie's help and she gave me lessons on blow-drying my hair, doing my make-up, and, like any true friend, introduced me to the padded bra. This new, smooth and puckered look, along with great effort on my part not to be dour, got me one date and then two. By month four, I owned my very own pair of hot rollers and had accumulated a small group of ardent admirers.

I was seeing Brian the brain who was a pre-med major, Tobey who drove a Lamborghini and took me to swanky restaurants, and of course there was Jim, a poet who was too artsy fartsy for his own good. He smoked a carton of Marlboro's day and could recite chunks of Tolstoy. He was my favorite, everything he did and said was so bold it gave me a thrill. There was of course, just one problem with all of these men: they were not filling that 'Caleb room' in my head. He was like an itch that never went away. I thought of him when I looked at trees, buildings, and when I was in the check-out line at Target choosing gum. I thought of him when I brushed my teeth and when Cammie was babbling on and on about the color of her new shoes (which she claimed were salmon, but were to my estimation, coral). After five months, I was sick and tired of seeing his face in my head. Caleb saturated my existence and I was screwed. To make matters worse—he was everywhere, involved in everything, and smiling at everyone. I couldn't get away from him. I stopped seeing Tobey and Brian and kept Jim on the backburner because I genuinely liked him as a person. I gave up dating, it wasn't me anyway, and took up professional stalking instead.

I kept up on who Caleb was dating through Cammie's gossip chain, a classic group of nosy freshman who had wagging tongues, and too little homework. I knew that he dated Susanna because she had killer legs, and Marina because she loved basketball, and she had killer legs. I knew that he took Emily to Disney World for their one-month anniversary and that Danielle got a Burberry purse for her twenty-second birthday. I knew all of these things, and yet, I couldn't bring myself to talk to him.

"You remind me of that slimy looking dwarf from *Lord of the Rings*," Cammie commented one day. I had just finished quizzing her on Caleb's evening at Passions Nightclub where she had seen him carrying on with a new blonde.

"He's a hobbit."

"Yeah. My precious, right?"

I flipped her the bird.

In early March, when the migrant birds spread their wings for home, Caleb started dating a Barbie doll. Her name was Jessica Alexander. She was a transfer student from Las Vegas, where she worked as a professional dancer in the Toni Braxton show. Her legs were endlessly long, her hair impossibly blonde, and it was widely rumored that her parents were the heirs to the Oscar Myer hotdog fortune. I stopped eating hot dogs and convinced myself that he would become bored with her, like he had with all the others. Blonde's never had much brain activity going on anyway. It was just a matter of biding my time, looking hot and being available when the right moment presented itself.

My theory crumbled when the school paper issued its February cover story. I found Jim reading a copy at the café where I was meeting him for a latte. Jessica's face was smiling up at me from the front page where a bold caption read, "*Beauty and the Books*." I snatched the paper from his hands and stared at the article with my mouth twisted in a jealous pout.

“She has the highest GPA in her major?” My stomach felt sour. “What’s her major? Pre-Polka Dots?”

Jim laughed, flicked a cigarette out of its carton and struck a match all in one cool movement.

“Actually, it’s Pre-Law. She’s one of yours and obviously doing better than you at it.”

I felt my mouth go dry.

“Why haven’t I seen her in any of my classes?” I shot back, scanning the article to see if it was true.

“Maybe she’s already taken the classes you’re in. Maybe she skipped them because she’s so smart.” I grunted and took a swig of his coffee. This was a monkey wrench. I mean—wasn’t it enough that she had her sausage money coming to her? She had to take Caleb and a stellar GPA all in one sweep? If he was going to date a smart girl, it should be me. It should be me!

He wanted me and I turned him away because pride ran thick in my veins.

I decided to befriend the enemy. Breaking into Jessica’s cabbage patch of friends was the only way I was going to be able to cause trouble. She had to like me. I began an observation of Jessica’s group of girlfriends that stuck to her like denture paste. They were impossibly friendly, but without the true loyalty of a Cammie. I coined them ‘priends’ (pretend friends). They bonded by shopping and threw the word ‘like’ into every sentence. “It’s, like, so cool to shop with you. You, like, know my style so well.” “You have, like, the best hair.” “When Brad broke up with me, you were, like, sooo my support system”.

Jessica lived just a few doors down from me and I began smiling at her as we passed each other in the hallway. Gradually, I moved on to a polite ‘hello.’ Being popular, she responded glassy eyed and with a small smile that tugged automatically at the corners of her mouth. A few weeks in, she began noticing me—waving at first, then one day telling me

she liked my shoes. I learned that pretty girls tend to notice other pretty girls, if only to size up their competition. I was somewhat proud that I had drawn the eyes of such a figurine of beauty. If she was noticing me, maybe her boyfriend was too.

Our first official chat came one afternoon, as I was in the campus laundry room. I had just collected my clean clothes from the dryer when she arrived with a basket full of her dirties. Seeing this as a kind act of fate, I dumped my neatly folded load back into the washing machine and started a conversation that went something like this....

“Watch out for that machine, it destroyed my Channel pajama’s last week.” She looked up, eyes big, her hand poised over the open washer. Of course, I didn’t have Channel pajamas, I didn’t even know if Channel made pajamas, but if they did, this girl would have a set.

“Were they the new ones? With the silver embroidery on the cuffs?” Bingo. I nodded.

“How awful. I swear this school refuses to spoon out any money for, like, decent amenities.”

I poured a capful of blue detergent into the machine and slammed it shut.

“Didn’t you, *like*, move here from Vegas or something?” I asked, as I casually walked over to the soda machine and slid my coins into the slot.

Jessica nodded. “Yea, I, like, needed a change. I came here for a semester to try it out, but then I met my boyfriend and decided to stay.”

“Who’s your boyfriend?” I jabbed the button that would give me a Coke and bent at the knees to retrieve it from the bin.

Her face changed when she said his name. I hated her for it.

“Caleb Drake. He’s on the basketball team. He’s a really cool guy—total gentleman.”

Her voice was unbelievably annoying.

“Yeah? That’s hard to find, guys now days are such....” I was trying to find the right word, the kind she would use, “stupid jerks,” I smiled.

Jessica nodded at me, her graceful eyebrows furrowed. I felt the denture-paste pull. She was accepting me into her “preindship.”

“Literally, I’m never letting him go. I’m gonna marry this boy.”

I hated it when literally was used for non-literal things. I popped the tab on my soda can and returned her grin.

Over my dead body.... *literally*.

Florida was wet. The forever blue sky was wearing chunky grey clouds like accessories. It had been like this for a week and I was sick of seeing umbrella’s bobbing all over campus. I decided to take my textbook to the student lounge to study. I tucked a few snacks and my reading material into a bag and headed out the door scribbling a note telling Cammie to bring me dinner from the cafeteria.

I took the elevator down a floor and headed west toward the quieter of the two study lounges in my building. The room was dingy and smelled like dirty socks but it was hardly ever occupied and I kind of liked the leftover ambiance of the place. I rounded a corner and saw a familiar blonde head framed in the window. Jessica. I was about to offer my most cheery ‘like hello’ when I noticed the droopy way she was holding her shoulders. They were crying shoulders. I was very familiar with this scene. I looked around cautiously. Blondes in distress were never alone. There were usually friends, comforting, patting, reassuring...

The hallway was empty. I took a step forward and stopped. Maybe they had broken up. Hope tickled my chest and I swept it away annoyed. There was no use getting ahead of myself.

“Jessica? Are you alright?” I placed a hand on her shoulder and she turned to look at me with wet doe eyes. There was a collection of soggy tissues lining the windowsill. I wondered how long she had been hiding out here.

“Hi,” she said weakly, her voice hoarse.

“What’s wrong? Why are you crying?”

She turned back to the window and dabbed at her nose. She was quiet for a long time and I shuffled my feet wondering if she had forgotten I was there. I was about to say something when she started sobbing.

“I... *sob*...think...*hiccup*—*sob*...that I’m...*gasp*—*hiccup*...pregnant...”

I let the news sink in. She had toned down her crying and was mewling softly into a tissue. I evaluated my position, her position, and his position. Things were looking shitty for all of us.

“Okay,” I breathed. “Have you told him yet?”

“No.”

“Does anyone know?”

She shook her head.

“My...*sniff*...parents would...disown me and ...I’m so scared of...*gasp*...losing him.”

“Of course.” I sounded sympathetic, and part of me actually was. A part so miniscule it made an atom look like a fist.

“What are you going to do?” I plucked the dirty tissues from the sill and tossed them in the trash.



“There’s nothing I can do. I...I have an appointment on Saturday but I need someone to take me and I don’t want to tell any of my friends, you know? I’m still pretty new here. I don’t want them to look at me differently.” I highly doubted they would. The semester before Jessica arrived two of her closest preinds were rumored to have undergone the same procedure.

“Why don’t you tell Caleb? He would understand. I mean he’s halfway responsible for Pete’s sake.”

“Nooooo,” she grabbed onto my arm and looked at me with her big eyes. “I told him I was on birth control...and I meant to start taking it again, I’ve just been so busy—school and him... I never thought this would happen. I was so careful about everything. I have no one that I can trust.”

She attached herself to me then; arms wrapped around my neck, head face-down on my shoulder. I realized with discomfort that she was hugging me, looking for some kind of consolation. I patted her back the way I would a smelly person and detached myself.

“I’ll take you.”

“Really?” she wiped away the wetness on her cheeks leaving scars of black mascara. “You would do that?”

“Of course. I’m removed enough from the situation. You won’t have to get your friends involved, and Caleb will never have to know.”

“It’s on Saturday at seven,” she replied grasping me in hug that was so desperate I flinched. “Thank you so much, Olivia.”

Now there was a surprise. After all the talking we did that day while tending to our clothes, she had never once asked my name, not even after I asked hers. Popular girls surmised that everyone knew who they were. *Duh! Jessica Alexander. Don’t you read the school paper?* Jessica had no reason to know my name.

“I don’t remember telling you my name,” I smiled at her.

“Everyone knows your name. You’re the girl Caleb missed the shot for right?” I felt the shock right down to my red painted toe nails. How could I forget my fifteen minutes of fame? My sour run with popularity? I shrank back suddenly feeling self-conscious. That had been a dark, dark time in my life.

“Don’t worry, he explained to me about your... inclinations...” *The word ‘inclinations’ rolled off of her tongue like a well sucked lifesaver. It dropped in the middle of us, shouting its scary implications at me...* “that you’re gay,” she buffered, smiling, “any woman that turns Caleb down has to either be a lesbian or crazy. See you Saturday.”

Touché.

I shuffled back to my room in a daze, considering two options.

One. Caleb, decided the only reason I could reject him was because I was gay. Two. Caleb tells everyone I am a lesbian as revenge for blowing him off. Either way, I was going to have to air my sexuality to clear things up.

## Chapter Seven

### The Past

I drove a somber Jessica to the clinic Saturday morning as scheduled. The day was fittingly dreary and she stared out of the window for most of the ride, making an occasional comment about a store we passed or a restaurant Caleb had taken her to. I was wondering if she was capable of talking about anything else other than Caleb when she pointed to a billboard for Calvin Klein and said that Caleb was so much hotter than the guy modeling the underwear. I pictured him in his boxers kicking around in the pool and suddenly got lightheaded. He was. *Filthy, girlfriend impregnating, scumbag.*

The clinic was posh, definitely not one of those shady, inner-city places that is tucked away in a storefront. This was where rich girls came to wipe away their indiscretions...Boca Raton style.

The waiting room was stuffed with oversized furniture and framed art. I chose a seat in the far corner and stared intensely at a macramé plant holder while Jessica spoke with the receptionist. She came to sit next to me while she filled out a mound of forms. The scratching of pen on paper was the only sound in the room. Before the nurse took her to the back, she looked over at me with saucer eyes and said...

“Do you think I’m doing the right thing?”

A nerve in my eyebrow started twitching. I was simply the driver. I didn’t want to be her conscience coach. If I told her ‘no’ we would walk right out of here, she was looking for a reason to leave, and if I told her ‘yes’...well...it made me an accomplice.

I thought of Caleb. He would do the right thing and marry her if she kept the baby. They would probably be divorced within five years. Broken home, broken hearts...me without him. I swallowed hard.

“Absolutely, yes,” I said nodding.

She smiled brightly and grabbed my hand.

“Thank you, Olivia.” she said squeezing. I pulled my fingers gently away and tucked my hands beneath my purse.

*Ohmygosh,ohmygosh,ohmygosh!*

She stood to leave and I had the urge to snatch her by the hand and run for the car. What was I doing? I could change her mind! She took one step, two, and the moment for goodness passed, kidnapping my conscience as it went. The nurse led Jessica through a set of double doors and then she was gone. I felt sick—like all the blood in my veins had turned to vinegar. What had I done? And for what? Him? Did I really plan on using this information to get what I wanted? I rocked back and forth my arms wrapped around my belly.

“Are you okay?” the receptionist asked, peering around the slab of frosted glass she sat behind.

“Something I ate,” I said. She nodded like she understood and pointed me in the direction of the bathroom. I hid in the handicap stall for thirty minutes with my back pressed against the door, convincing my bruised conscience that it was all her choice and I had nothing to do with it. When enough time passed I slipped back into the waiting room and took a seat.

I flipped through a couple of magazines and bit away at my nails. One other girl arrived during my tortured time there. She looked to be about sixteen and was escorted by her mother who was hiding behind a pair of dark glasses. The mother hurried over to the window while her daughter slouched down in a chair and began texting on her phone, her thumbs moving

like fast machinery over her keypad. I pulled my eyes away. My mother would have made me keep it. I remember her telling me, *“I’ll be damned if a daughter of mine walks away from her responsibility. Do it once and you’ll do it for the rest of your life.”* I really missed my mother. Maybe if she were alive, I wouldn’t be so rotten.

A nurse approached me an hour later, bending down to say something in those hushed tones that everyone kept using. *If we speak softly perhaps we won’t draw attention to what is really happening here.*

“Jessica is ready. You can pull your car around the back to pick her up.”

I flinched. They were sending her away through the rear of the building. Sneaky, like she was bad trash. I rushed out and hopped in my car glad to be rid of the place. A nurse was standing behind Jessica’s wheelchair, her hands resting lightly on her shoulders. Jessica was pale as a peeled potato. She smiled when I pulled up—a sort of relieved smile that made me uncomfortable. I jumped out of the car and hurried to open the passenger side door.

“She is to do no heavy lifting and no exercising for a week,” the nurse informed me. I nodded.

“Are you okay?” I asked her as she slid from the chair into my front seat.

She nodded weakly.

I pulled away from the curb with anxiety aggravating my belly.

I had accomplished what I set out to do, and now I needed to get Jessica as far away from me as possible. She made me feel guilt, a luxury I couldn’t afford while trying to steal Caleb.

I put the radio on as we eased onto the highway. Jessica spent most of the ride home gazing again out of the window. A part of me wanted to ask what she was feeling, if she was sad or relieved. But the part of me that wanted Caleb, kept my

tongue glued to the roof of my mouth. *This was business*, I reminded myself. I wasn't here to make a friend.

When the grey rooftops of the campus came into view, we both breathed a sigh of relief. I parked my car in front of the building and jumped out to open her door.

“Do you need me to help you to your room?”

She shook her head “no” and winced as I helped her from her seat. She was pale and her usually full lips looked limp and timid beneath her running nose. Not the Jessica Alexander that was featured in the school paper less than two months ago. Even her hair was dull and lifeless, hanging in greasy chunks around her face.

She hugged me before shuffling off toward the elevators. I watched her jab at the button, leaning limply against the wall, hugging her arms around her torso. When the elevator finally arrived, she turned one last time to wave weakly at me before climbing in and disappearing behind the doors. I slumped against my car suddenly feeling exhausted. I decided not to go back to my room. Cammie would be there and when it came to me, she was terribly perceptive. I drove, instead, to a breakfast place a few miles away and seated myself at the bar with a newspaper someone had left discarded outside.

The cover story was on Laura Hilberson and the lack of leads in her case. The detective handling the case was speculating that Laura's disappearance might not have been an abduction and that all evidence was pointing to Laura having purposely disappeared. Her distraught parents were begging someone to come forward with information.

I wished that I had paid better attention to the girl when she shared classes with me. Those were my pre-Caleb days, when I hadn't cared a thing about who he was dating and why. She didn't seem like the type of girl who would want to disappear. She was popular and perky, a communications major, according to the paper, who had aspirations of becoming a news anchor. I stared at the grainy picture of her and tried to imagine her sitting behind the anchor desk of the

six o'clock news. Now she was on the six o'clock news. I felt sad for her, wherever she was. Something had gone terribly wrong, kidnapped or not, and now it was likely that Laura would never see her dreams come to fruition.

I thought about my own dreams as I bit into my bagel. I wanted to be an attorney and put bad people in prison. Now, I was the bad person because I was plotting and scheming for a stupid boy. I hadn't even thought about my dreams lately. It was like Caleb had rooted out my ambition and replaced it with a lusty obsession. God, I was really going downhill. I finished up my coffee and tossed money on the counter. If this obsession was draining my ambition now, what would happen if I actually got him? Would I be so enraptured with Caleb that I would be satisfied with being his girlfriend and nothing else? That would mean following in my mother's footsteps and she had warned me against falling for a man before accomplishing my dreams.

I was halfway to convincing myself to forsake my Caleb obsession when I arrived back on campus. I parked my car in the student overflow lot and trotted toward my dorm building feeling resolved. I needed to stop this foolishness now before I ruined everything I was working for. As I climbed the stairs, I heard voices echoing from the third floor landing. I slowed when I realized that one of them was Jessica's. She was cooing, talking in that sweet, girly voice that advanced flirts used to charm men. I walked slowly trying to catch as much of what she was saying as I could.

"Not today. I have my...you know..."

I climbed the last few stairs and turned the corner. Jessica was on her tip toes with her arms wrapped around Caleb's neck. They were nose to nose and he was looking down at her adoringly. I stopped abruptly and they both turned to look at me.

"Olivia!" she said sounding embarrassed. "Hi."

"Hi," I said looking at Caleb. He looked right through me—like I wasn't even there. He turned back to face Jessica.



*Ouch.* Jessica was freshly showered with her hair wet and pulled back in a bun. She looked significantly more polished than when I had left her hours ago. It dawned on me then. Caleb must have hinted at sex. Jessica, who had received strict instruction to abstain from hanky-panky for the next fourteen days, was trying to deter him with a story about her period.

I shuffled my feet embarrassingly. Her face was red and she was looking at me pointedly.

“Um...” I pointed to the door, which they were blocking and raised my eyebrows to demonstrate my annoyance.

“Oh, sorry.” Jessica giggled and pulled Caleb out of the way. She made sure to wink at me as I squeezed past and I made sure to brush Caleb’s back with my arm. He jerked away from my touch and I smiled in satisfaction.

*Jackass.*

I walked quickly to my room with the faint stirrings of anger beginning to rise in my chest. How could she be all over him like that, after what she’d just done? I jabbed my key into the lock and turned it so hard the tips of my fingers hurt from the force. Hours after aborting her baby and she’s already wrapped around him like string cheese. She was an idiot and I had to have him—simple as that. I would learn to balance him with my ambition. I could have both and I would. I burst through my door with determination and told Cammie to shut up before she had the chance to open her mouth. I threw myself on my bed and pretended to read a textbook. By the end of the week, Jessica and Caleb’s relationship would be in tatters and I would have my second chance.

## Chapter Eight

## The Present

“Olivia? Will you come?” Caleb’s voice hangs on the other end of the line, waiting for my response. I sigh, looking around my apartment and plucking at my sweater. He wants me to come over for dinner and I feel like that would really be crossing the line. It’s not like I am virgin to crossing lines but I am *trying* to be a decent person. If I can keep things away from his personal life then I can make-believe that he is instigating the whole shebang.

“Seriously, Caleb, I don’t think it’s a good idea. Your girlfriend would have a breakdown if she found out. Why can’t we meet at a restaurant or something?”

“My cooking is better than any restaurant you’ve ever been to. Besides there’s more chance of her spotting us out at a restaurant than at my place.”

*Unless she’s stalking you like the last time....* I think bitterly.

“She didn’t have much of a problem finding *my* apartment,” I say sourly. “Besides, I barely know you. How prudent would it be for me to show up to a stranger’s house for dinner? You could be a rapist for all I know.”

“Olivia, you’ve already had me over to your place and survived. I’ll open a bottle of wine...it’ll be fun.”

“I’m not really a fun loving person.”

“It will be dangerous.”

I smile.

“I only drink red wine.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And make sure *she* doesn’t show up this time.”

Caleb laughs. “Really? I thought it would be nice if she came.”

We make arrangements as to what day and time and I hang up feeling anxious. I stuff my face into a pillow and groan in shame. I am in over my head.

My phone rings again. Thinking it is Caleb with a last minute detail, I snatch up the receiver.

“Hello.”

“Olivia?” It is a different voice.

“Yeeees?”

“Olivia! You sexy beast of a woman! Where have you been all my life?”

“Jim?”

“The one and only, baby. How’s life? Kicking your ass lately?”

“Hard as usual,” I say laughing, “to what do I owe the pleasure?”

“I’m in town and there is nothing I want more then to spend some quality time with my dream girl.”

“Dream girl! Last time I saw you, you called me a shrew and told me I had no talent.”

“Those are just words, baby girl. Besides, you had just rejected another confession of my love for you. Give a man his verbal abuse, huh? Now, when are you free for the taking?”

Jim. Jim. The same guy I used to make a statement about my sexuality. The one I dropped like a dirty sin the moment I stole Caleb. He remained faithful. I received a call every time his work swept him past my zip code and we would have a whirlwind night of dancing or eating or whatever other guilty pleasure suited us. Then, he would leave and I was fine with that.

“How long are you in my corner?”

“Two days—three at the most. I was thinking we could go down to the Wave, get drunk, grind around on the dance floor...”

“Hmmm...sounds romantic. When can you be here?”

“Fifteen, I have to stop for some smokes.”

“Fine,” I say. “I’ll be ready.”

I hang up and smear some lipstick on my mouth. I am still thinking about Caleb and I have force myself to stop.

Tonight was just going to be Jim and me and a good time. No obsessions. I slip on a pair of black pants and a green off-the-shoulder shirt, and pull my hair into a ponytail.

Jim picks me up outside of my apartment. I hop into his car, a restored 1969 Mustang painted green with yellow racing stripes, and smile at him across the seat.

“You’re like a Percocet on a bad day, Libby,” he says, surprising me and kissing me straight on the mouth. I pull back and shake my head.

“Mmmm, I love it when you compare me to prescription drugs.” I plug in my seat belt and begin messing with the radio. Jim likes Phish and that’s practically a sin in my books, since they’re just Grateful Dead wannabee’s.

Jim winks at me and perches a cigarette between his lips. Usually, I don’t tolerate smoking—it makes me feel gritty and it doesn’t help that my mom died of cancer. But, there is something about the way Jim smokes that makes me want to watch him. I look on in anticipation as the wick of his lighter spits out a tiny tongue of fire. He lowers his cigarette to the flame and inhales. I can almost hear the tip of his camel hiss in delight as it accepts the fire. This is my favorite part—he takes a long drag, his eyelids flutter like a junkie, then he pushes the grey smoke out of his nose and it curls into the sky, like a graceful, ashen, ghost. Beautiful.

I sit back satisfied. Jim is darkly handsome. He is wearing eyeliner and jeans that cling to his body like lizard skin. His hair is shaggy and dyed black, which makes his sharp blue eyes seem almost lavender. I always thought the British accent belonged more on him than on Caleb. I fan away smoke and hum along with the final bars of an oldie my mom used to love.

“Why are you so happy tonight?” he asks, tapping an inch of cigarette ash into an empty can of Red Bull.

“There is something devastatingly wrong with the universe when you are happy enough to hum.”

He scoots his car into traffic almost hitting the bumper of the truck in front of us.

“I dunno. I just am.”

Jim raises an eyebrow.

“Come on, Libby. I know when something is up.”

I pause. Then I say, “Caleb’s back.”

There was shocked silence. Gladys Knight was on the radio. Jim’s fingers are absently tapping the steering wheel to the beat of the song.

“He’s back.” This comes as a statement instead of a question. I can hear the distaste in his voice and I don’t blame him. Caleb had always been a thorn in Jim’s flesh, especially when I eventually chose Caleb over Jim.

“Olivia,” he turns the radio off and stubs out his cigarette, which means I’ll get to watch the whole lighting process again in a few minutes. “In what way is he back?”

I have no intention of telling him about the amnesia.

“I don’t know. He’s just back and I don’t really care why.”

Jim narrows his eyes and appears to be looking suspiciously at the road.

“I don’t know what it is with you and that asshole. Four years and a bad breakup later and you’re still in a fucking chemical romance with basketball Ken.”

I don’t want to hear it. Not from Jim. Not from Cammie. In my wildest dreams I never imagined this twist to my story. A thousand girls could tell me that they would have done something different than what I did the day I pretended not to know Caleb, and I wouldn’t care. This was my re-do.

“It happened by accident. I didn’t go looking for him, so just shut the hell up about it.”

We pull up to the front of the club and I hop out before the valet can open the door. I wait for Jim as he unwinds his long body from the car and tosses his keys to the attendant. He is pissed. I can see it on his face. More than once he’s accused me of using him as a fall back when Caleb’s not around. I walk in front of him, ignoring the beating his eyes are giving me. I feel kind of badass tonight, so it’s not hard. It’s none of his damn business anyway—meddling, eyeliner wearing, punk. Jim hates weakness, and by God, Caleb is mine. But I have faith that by the time we start dancing, he will get over it.

The Wave is filled wall to wall with vibrating bodies. Jim grabs my hand and pulls me through the throng of dancers until we reach the bar. Most of the girls turn to look at us. What is a razor edged rocker doing with a softie like me? I bristle under their curious eyes, fanning out a couple of dirty looks.

Jim lays a fifty on the slimy bar and orders four shots of tequila. I ready our limes, and smile at him.

“Are you still mad?” I ask.

The bartender slides the shot glasses towards us and we both claim two. Jim shrugs.

“Does it matter?”

I pour the first one down my throat and suck on a lime to pull the flavor. Tequila is gross.

“I don’t want you to be mad. I hardly get to see you.”

Jim does this triple blink thing that makes him look really annoyed and then he kisses me on the cheek.

“Let’s just have fun.”

He orders two more shots and we clink our glasses together. We linger at the bar for a few minutes watching the dance floor. We are still too sober to let loose.

“Let’s go do some dance floor humping,” he says, tossing his lime peel into the trash. I follow him into the wiggling crowd as the tequila finds my head.

We dance until my feet feel numb and my hair is damp with sweat. Jim touches me more than he usually does. I equate it to Caleb’s return. Men always need to piss on everything they feel is theirs. I let him pull me close. I am too drunk to care. It reminds me of the scene in *Dirty Dancing* where Baby crashes the employee party clutching the watermelon. We are dancing face-to-face, dirty. Jim doesn’t believe in the bumping and grinding, the token dance of teenagers. He calls it dirty spooning. We dance face to face. I find something very honest in that.

We don’t leave until the D.J. starts packing away his equipment.

“You okay to drive?” I ask him. I felt like I am bobbing in space.

Jim snickers. “I’m as sober as a Preacher on a Sunday morning,” he twangs in a mock Southern accent.

On the ride home I keep my eyes closed and let the wind blow over my face. We don’t speak much. Jim plays an old Marcy Playground CD that we used to listen to in college. Sex and Candy. I giggle when he sings loudly to the words.

When we pull up to my apartment, he hops out of the car and follows behind me to the door.

“Was this a date? Why are you walking me home?” I laugh. I dig around in my purse for the keys while he watches.

When I look up, he is staring at me funny.

“Jim?” I ask, taking a step toward him. “Are you okay?” I think that maybe he is sick. His face is blank and a little flushed, like someone who is deciding if they are about to throw up. I pull to a stop when he suddenly jerks forward. At first I think he is going to be sick but at the last minute he veers right for my face and tries to kiss me. I turn my head so his lips land in a wet mess on my cheek. When he pulls back, his eyes are red. “What are you doing?” I ask. Jim and I never go there. It’s an unspoken rule of mine.

He is so close that I have to bend my head all the way back to see his face. We haven’t kissed since college.

“Is it because I’m not him, Olivia? Fucking, Caleb?”

I shake my head. I feel so fuzzy. I can’t seem to formulate words quickly enough.

“It’s not like that with us, Jim. Why now?”

“You know sex doesn’t always have to mean something. It can be done for fun.”

His eyes are blinking, blinking, like he’s trying to expel me from his vision. What am I supposed to say to that?

“I think that friends should stay friends—without the complication of sex.”

“Friends,” he croons, in a nasty hiss. “I’m sick of being your fucking reprieve.”

I shudder. It is very true, but ugly to hear.

“You’re a real cock tease, you know that?” I look up in surprise. He has called me that in a joking way many times, but never in this tone of voice. He is blotchy faced and red



eyed and he is scaring me in that deep part of a woman that tells you to run. I take a step back.

“Jim, you’re drunk,” I say slowly.

“I’m drunk and you’re a bitch.” Then he is all over me with his mouth, pushing against my tightly pulled lips, his hands between my legs. I make a muffled cry from behind my attack and I try to push him away. He doesn’t budge beneath my shoving and I realize there is nothing I will be able to do to stop him. I try to plead but everything seems to roll right off of him. He is groping at me trying to pull my pants down. My neighbor’s door is less than ten yards away on the other side of the building. If I can break free, I can run for it. Then comes a moment when he is distracted and his grip loosens on my arms. I take the chance to wrestle my hands free and I slap him hard across the face. He draws back in shock and his hand cradles the place I hit him. I am prepared for him to come back harder, stronger, but he just looks at me. There is nowhere for me to go. I am cornered against my own front door. I consider screaming, but the only person who might hear me is Rosebud and what could she do? So, I try to reason with him.

“Go home Jim,” my voice is firm. Those few seconds that he spends weighing his options become a muddy memory for me. I am angry and ashamed and scared as I watch him decide whether or not to rape me.

*Please God let him leave.*

The space between us grows, as he turns around and stumbles to his car.

I practically fall through my door. When I am on the other side, I bolt the lock, and throw myself onto my couch. I sob into a pillow until my throat feels raw and then I pick up the phone and called the only person I have ever trusted.

“Caleb...”

“Olivia?” His voice is heavy with sleep. “What’s wrong?”

“Can you come over...to my house?”

“Right now?” I can hear him shuffling around his room... turning on the light... fumbling with things.

“Caleb...please...I...”

“I’ll be right there.”

When Caleb arrives, his hair is disheveled and he is wearing shorts and a tattered t-shirt.

“What happened?” he asks as soon as he sees me. He holds my chin in his fingers and turns my face from side to side. I tell him about Jim, about the club, and about what he did after.

Caleb paces my living room. His face is contorted in anger.

“Where is his hotel, Olivia?” His fists are clenched at his sides. I am afraid that if he finds Jim, he will find out who I really am.

“No! I don’t want you to go,” I pull on his arm until he sits back down next to me. His anger gradually subsides into concern and he pulls me to his chest. I haven’t been against his chest for a very long time and I feel overwhelmed. He smells like soap and Christmas and himself, and I cry like a baby at the unfamiliar security his touch gives me. No one has held me like this before. I don’t know whether to bolt or cling on for dear life.

“Can you stay here tonight?” I whisper.

He kisses my forehead and smooth’s away my tears away with his thumbs.

“Yes, of course I’ll stay.”

I feel so relieved that I shudder pathetically. He squeezes me tighter. What would I have done if he wasn’t around? Who would I have called? Caleb is here now, but the clock is ticking. I have gotten myself into a situation where I am going to lose him all over again. The first time was bad enough. I burrow into his warmth and enjoy the feeling of being cared

for. I fall asleep with my head leaning against his chest, listening to his heart drum out the most beautiful beat I've ever heard

## Chapter Nine

### The Past

The decision was made. I told Cammie about the abortion as we sat bent over our dinner trays in the cafeteria.

"You're kidding," she said as a French-fry dropped from her mouth.

"No," I said swallowing the lump in my throat. "I overheard her talking to that tall girl about it—the one who picks her scabs."

I stuffed the last of my fries into my mouth and licked the salt off my lips.

"Nadia?" asked Cammie, pushing her plate away.

"Yes, Nadia, but you can't tell anyone I told you Cam, I mean how horrible would it be if that got out?"

I studied my roommate's pretty face and frowned. Perhaps, this would be the one time that Cammie kept her mouth shut. What would I do then?

"Do you think Caleb would care, I mean do you think he would have wanted to keep it?"

I stared at her glittering eyes and felt a sinking in my stomach. I never really thought about that one. He would have

wanted to keep it. I knew that in my heart. The way he had spoken about his family that night at Jackson's he told me that he wanted to be a father. I closed my wicked eyes and sighed.

"Why would you think I would know the answer to that question?"

Cammie shrugged. "You kinda know him. I mean you spent some time with him right, I just thought—"

"I don't know anything about him," I snapped, standing up and grabbing my tray. *Except that I wanted him more than anything else in the world.* I looked down at Cammie and felt panic. This was it.

Cammie had diarrhea of the mouth. It was going to be all over the school and fast. I had now officially secured my front row seat on the train to Hell.

*Choo choo!*

"I'm going back to the dorms," I said. I wanted her to follow me so that I could keep an eye on her. I wasn't sure that I wanted...

"Ok. I'm going to hang here for a while." Cammie smiled sugar-sweetly up at me. Her face looked innocent, but her eyes looked evil. I could see the gossip monster crawling its way up her esophagus and pushing frantically behind her mouth to be let out.

I turned on my heels and fled before she could see the tears pooling in the corners of my eyes.

*Choo choo...*

News of the abortion spun and chortled through the gossip chain until it reached Caleb two days later. It was an ex-girlfriend who delivered Caleb the blow. She took her first chance to ax Jessica in order to win him back. I had watched her give Jessica dirty looks for the last few weeks. I recognized them because I was giving them too.

The entire break up took less than ten minutes. It was witnessed by a large portion of the student body who hovered

on the scene like flies over a bleeding carcass. I was not there but was told by Cammie who had a front-row seat. The ex timed it perfectly, telling Caleb right before he was supposed to meet Jessica for dinner, and then standing back to watch. Jessica found Caleb waiting for her on the steps to the cafeteria. Their exchange was a brief. Jessica in hysterics, admitted everything to Caleb, who some say punched a wall and others say threw a bench at a tree. In actuality, he walked away from her stony faced and never spoke a word to her again. Jessica left for home a day after the commotion and purportedly left all of her belongings behind. I wondered if she knew it was me—if she even thought about me after that day or if my face blurred into that place where all of the non-popular's belonged.

I wore my guilt for a week. It was like a firm hand pressing down on the back of my neck. I hung my head in shame and lurked around the dorms like a shadow. By day eight, I was already justifying what I had done.

I was ensconced in self-love. I had taken advantage of a girl looking for someone to trust and I used her predicament for my own personal gain. I was my father's child. I hated myself.

My father—Oliver Kaspén, no middle name, was the worst sort of bastard a woman could drop from her loins. My mother used to say that he was a carbon copy of Elvis, dark and sexy, with bedroom eyes. He had the type of mouth that said pretty things but when things got thin, it would curl into a hateful grin and cut you where it hurt. But, before he would peel off the overcoat of charm he wore, and before he would tell you that the only reason he was only with you was because of the ugly brat you bore, he was all smiles and kisses and compliments. That's how he got my mother and that's how he got me—the ugly brat.

He only stayed for three years after my birth, before shuffling off with his duffel bag over his shoulder. Periodically, through my tweens he would 'reconcile' with my mom, taking up residence on the left side of her bed, before

once again jockeying off to sow his wild oats elsewhere. He gambled our grocery money, swore at us when he lost it, and he never batted a guilty eye when we had nothing to eat but a box of stale saltines. My dad.

Once, when our cabinets were empty, and I was hungrily gnawing on my thumb, he disappeared with my mother's last dollar. My five year old mind thought that he was off to find some food, but hours later, he came back smelling so strongly of Philly cheese steak, it made my mouth water. Oliver Kaspen looked out for Oliver Kaspen. Ouch. That had been the straw that broke my mother's back. She kicked him out of our crappy studio apartment with a string of swear words I had never heard before.

The feeding frenzy for Caleb began shortly after Jessica left. Girls clamored for Caleb's attention like chimps on crack.

"He's got the banana that every girl wants," Jim commented one afternoon as we watched a couple of blondes bob around him like loosely tethered helium balloons. Caleb was laughing at something one of them said. She leaned over and planted a kiss on his cheek to which he blushed and pulled back in surprise. I looked away jealous. I couldn't take much more of this. I was mentally murdering someone new every five minutes.

My opportunity came the same day I flunked my Latin test. I had never received as much as a C in my entire educational career, so the large F circled in red and underlined twice, came as pureed brain shock. I was losing my grip. I couldn't concentrate. Caleb had rooted himself in my mind like a parasite and he was feeding on my emotions and thoughts. Something had to be done. I was between buildings clutching my test to my chest and staring glassy eyed at a random brick in the wall when someone walked by and shoved a flyer into my hand. Normally I would have tossed it but this time, blame it on my moment of shock, I turned it over.

## **ZAX PARTY**

**Where? Where else?**

**When? Saturday at 10:00**

**Bring: Beer**

When I got back to my room, I shoved the flyer in Cammie's face.

"Let's go to this."

She was leaning over a poster board using liquid eyeliner to stencil in the words "Business Plan" across the top. She glanced at the flyer for the briefest of seconds and started blowing on her letters.

"Are you having some kind of midlife crisis?"

"I'm only twenty, brat; you have to be in the middle of your life to have a midlife crisis. Why aren't you using a marker?"

"I don't have one and I'm in no mood for jokes. This project is due tomorrow and the only thing I know about business is how to spell it."

"Well, you don't even know that much because you're missing an s."

Cammie frowned at her poster and went to work on the last s.

"I need you to come with me..."

I walked to my drawer and retrieved a box of markers.

"What are you going to do at a party?"

I quelled the urge to smack her and tried to sound pleasant.

"I don't know. Normal things that people do at parties... like...hang out."

"You don't drink, dance, or smoke. Sorry Olivia, nobody's going to want to talk about politics with you, unless you're going to a keg party at Beta Nu, and that would be so, so lame."

“I can dance,” I said defensively, “and anyone can drink—there’s no special talent needed there.”

“Yes, but a special talent is needed for not acting like a fool when you are drinking.” She was drawing hearts on the corners of the board and making little smiling faces in the center of each one.

She was such a waste of good air.

I sighed dramatically.

“I will do your project for you—if you come with me.”

Cammie rolled over onto her back and waved her arms in the air like she was swimming the breaststroke.

“Glory hallelujah! You’ve said the magic words.”

I grunted. I would have done it for her anyway. I’d be damned if I let my roommate turn in a business plan that looked like a Valentine’s Day card.

On Saturday I got ready with the precision of a spinal surgeon. Everything had to be just right. I was going to win this battle—be it with Mad Merlot lipstick and Sexy by Victoria Secret. At ten o’clock Cammie and I were floating up the stairs of the Zax house surrounded by clouds of exhaled nicotine. My head was spinning and my dress, which was a size too small, was hugging my chest like a boa constrictor.

“It’s a good thing you look like a normal girl,” Cammie said, smiling at me in approval.

“Normal—as opposed to what?”

I was tugging at my dress trying to cover the exposed swell of my breasts, which were rising like two plump muffins, out of Cammie’s push up bra.

She smirked at me and tugged the dress back down again.

“Well, you have those for one thing,” she poked me in the chest. “You’ve been hiding them in those ugly, outdated



shirts you wear. And makeup makes you look sexy—exotic even. You clean up nicely my friend.”

I hoped so.

“Are you ready O?” Cammie asked squeezing my arm. I felt a little sick actually but I took a deep breath and nodded.

“Good, because this is going to be the most interesting night of your life.”

The door opened and we stepped into a room so thick with bodies and the stench of beer, my first instinct was to step back. Cammie shoved me through the doorway and toward a table corrupted with bottles.

“A drink first,” she said handing me a red plastic cup, “then, you do what you came to do.”

Cammie splashed vodka into my cup and added a stingy dash of cranberry. I was so nervous. I took a sip too large for my mouth and spilled the concoction down the front of my dress.

“Careful, Julia Roberts. The plan is to be smooth.” Cammie eyeballed me disapprovingly and I took another sip, carefully this time. It was worse than I thought. People were sweating and touching everything, breathing their alcohol breath into each other’s faces...germs! Horniness! They were acting like animals. I suddenly felt a rush of panic. This was too hard—being someone else. There had to be another way to do it.

“I don’t think that I can—” I said turning around. The door was ten steps away. All I would have to do was dodge a couple of bodies and I could slip into the cool night air before I had the chance to humiliate myself.

Cammie grabbed my arm.

“There he is,” she hissed into my ear. I turned. He was in a room to our left, playing pool. Raucous laughter drifted over

to where we were standing and I caught the words “vibrator and locksmith.”

“Well, maybe we can stay for a bit,” I said weakly. Caleb was taking his turn. He bent over the table with hard concentration and knocked two balls into their pockets.

“What do I do now?”

“You have to get his attention without getting his attention.”

“I don’t speak girl games.”

Cammie waved to someone across the room.

“Look, just don’t be obvious,” she said. “There’s nothing more unattractive than a girl who throws herself at a guy.” This was coming from the same Cammie that rubbed baby oil on her cleavage every morning to draw attention to her “better parts” as she advertised them.

“How the hell do I do that?”

“You were the one who wanted to come. You figure it out.” And with that, she left me. Freshman scum. I hovered at the drink table for a few minutes then realized that I must look like a loser and wandered away. Okay, I had to do something to get his attention, to let him know that I was here.

I spotted the DJ’s booth and an idea wiggled its way into my brain. Dancing! My secret weapon!

A guy wearing a “Korn” t-shirt was typing something into a laptop behind the table. He nodded at me when I approached and his eyes immediately found my cleavage.

“Can I request a song?” I shouted above the music. He nodded at my girls and pressed a piece of paper and a pencil into my hand. I quickly scribbled the name of a song and the artist onto the paper and handed it back to him.

“My face is here,” I said reaching out and lifting his chin until he was looking me in the eye. He smiled and winked at me.

Degenerate. I kind of liked him.

“Yours is up next.” He shouted over the music. He gave me the thumbs up, as I sauntered away.

I eyed the dance floor with trepidation and saw the only person out there was a prematurely drunk guy who was shuffling around, winding his hips without a trace of rhythm. This was going to kill me, but that was obsession and I was going to do it. I took a huge swig, finishing off what remained of my vodka cocktail and summoned the memory of our kiss in the pool. The thought of it gave me a temporary surge of boldness. I want to be kissed like that again—possibly every single day of my life.

I stepped onto the dance floor as my song flowed from the speakers. It only took about ten seconds for me to take over the entire room. People simultaneously stopped what they were doing to watch me. I was good. I was really, really good. I silently thanked my mother for the eight years of free dance lessons she had wrangled out of the local studio as I twisted my hips in a complicated wind.

*I'm obsessive, when just the thought of you comes up...*

I saw Cammie's face appear around the corner to see what was happening. Her mouth made an “O” shape and she winked at me with approval.

*It's not healthy for me to feel this...*

Other people started joining me on the dance floor but they kept a respectful distance, swaying around me like my personal backup dancers.

“Looks like we have a hot one in the house tonight,” I heard the DJ say over the microphone. As more people started crowding around to watch me, I saw Caleb and his pool buddies emerge from the back room. That's right, come take a look and see what all the commotions about. I let my hair fall seductively into my eyes and swiveled my hips in his direction.

*This time, please- someone come and rescue me...*

I watched his face as he spotted me and my stomach did a little dance of excitement. Bingo! Eye contact. Other than a slight narrowing of his eyes, his face didn't show one iota of emotion. Dammit! I threw in my signature belly dancer shake and I saw with satisfaction that he raised an eyebrow. When Rhianna sang: *Just your presence and I second-guess my sanity...* I looked directly at Caleb and crooked my finger. He didn't look surprised at all. He pushed himself away from the wall and walked casually over to me, hands still in his pockets. He allowed me to dance around him for seconds, smiling at the hoots and catcalls before grabbing me by the waist and dancing in-sync with my steps. He was good- all smoothness-like I expected.

When that song ended, we danced to the next one, and the next one. My hair was damp and sticking to the back of my neck, when Caleb finally pulled me off the dance floor. I held onto his hand as he steered us through the ocean of bodies and out onto the porch. We leaned our elbows on the railing, and let the cool air run her fingers across our sticky skin.

"You're full of surprises." These were the first words he had spoken to me in months. I savored the sound of his voice before I answered.

"Why? Because I can dance?" I lifted my hair off of my neck and looked him in the eye.

Caleb shook his head and did something with his lips that almost made me keel over.

"No. Because you came...because you're wearing that dress," he smiled, eyeing my cleavage. "and not because you can dance, but because you did dance."

"You think I'm uptight," I sigh, watching a girl throw up in an Azalea a hundred yards away.

"Everyone thinks you're uptight."

I knew he wasn't saying it to be mean. It was just fact—like green apples being sour.

“You’re like a pair of boots with six inch heels. All attitude and sexiness, but you make people feel uncomfortable just looking at you.”

Well, I had officially graduated from Llama’s to footwear.

“And after tonight?” I asked him, picking at the peeling paint on the banister.

“I think you broke a heel and you’re wearing flip flops like the rest of us.” There was laughter in his voice.

“I might put my boots back on tomorrow,” I said. “And why are we speaking metaphor?”

Caleb laughed and then all of a sudden he became serious again.

“I like your boots. They’re sexy.” His voice was throaty and seductive. I knew he could get girls—maybe even me into bed, just by using that voice.

“I have something for you,” I said suddenly pulling out of the trance he was putting me in. He cocked his head. That small gesture got me so worked up I forgot what I was supposed to be doing for a few seconds. Grabbing his hand, I placed my token in his palm. He smiled at me, almost questioningly, and looked down. It was the penny. I found it in the pocket of his sweatshirt the morning after our kiss.

This time, I made the first move. I stepped towards him, eliminating the space between us, just as he looked up. His hands wrapped around my waist and in one smooth motion, he whipped our bodies around until my back was pressed up against the wall. He was trying to shield our moment from the stragglers who had wandered onto the porch. I all but disappeared behind his back, but I could still hear some snickering and exclamations of surprise.

This kiss was different from the first one. We had kissed before so there was no hesitancy or shyness this time. He did things with his mouth that purposely prompted racy thoughts. I was breathing hard when he pulled away. My hands were braced behind me pressing against the rough stucco of the

house. Caleb laughed, running his hands through my hair, tugging on the split ends.

I was still leaning against the wall, wondering if my legs would work if I took a step away. The backdoor opened, leaking out the noise of the party.

“Come on,” he said taking my hand, “I want to see you dance again.”

I fell in love hard and swift like Tyson’s uppercut. One day I just enjoyed his company and the next I couldn’t live without it. We saw each other every spare minute—even if it was just for a quick, hungry kiss before class. When our grades made the shitty plummet, we set boundaries; no talking on the phone after dark and no seeing each other during the week except at mealtimes. Most of the time, we broke our rules minutes after making them. It was nugatory trying to stay away from him. He was my crack. I could never get enough and when I had him I was already thinking about when I could have him next.

We seemed happier than other couples, permanently stuck in a state of bliss so intense our mouths were curved into smiles even in our sleep. Caleb taught me how to play—something I had never known in my youth or as an adult. He brought me cupcakes and then smashed them in my face. He took me kayaking and flipped us into the water. Once when his fraternity hosted a jello wrestling night, he convinced me to attend and then challenged me to a wrestling duel. Knee deep in jello the color of Windex, I charged him aiming for his knees. I got lucky and threw him off balance. We both landed up on our backs with Caleb laughing so hard, it sounded like he was sobbing. I loved him with everything in me. He taught me who I was, something I never would have known, without his deft handling of my personality.

That summer, I picked up a part time job at a small bookstore. I was the only employee, other than the owner, and I worked nights which required me to lock up the store around midnight. The bookstore shared a parking lot with a bar called

Gunshots and most nights I had to endure catcalls and whistling from the intoxicated bikers who were lingering outside. I hated it and kept my fists balled all the way to the car, in case I had to hit someone.

I had been working there for three weeks when Caleb dropped by to see me. His face was red and tense when he walked through the doors.

“What’s wrong?” I said coming around the counter to hug him. I peered over his shoulder, wondering if one of the bar rats had said something to make him angry. Often they made rude comments to the customers as they were coming or going.

“You’re alone here?”

“Well, there are a few customers.” I said glancing around the aisles.

“When you leave at night, do you walk to your car alone?” His voice was impatient and I wondered where exactly he was going with this.

“Yes.”

“You’re not working here anymore,” he said, with finality.

“What?” my jaw dropped. He had never spoken to me that way before.

He pointed outside to the bar. “It’s dangerous. You’re a woman. You are alone and it doesn’t help that you look the way you do.”

“You’re telling me that I have to quit my job because of the way I look?” I raised an eyebrow and walked back behind the register. He was pissing me off.

“I’m telling you that it is not safe for you to be here alone and then walk to your car by yourself.”

“I can take care of myself.” I began stacking books that needed to be shelved onto a trolley.

“You’re a hundred pounds soaking wet, and those are very drunk men.”

I shrugged.

Caleb looked like a ball of hot energy and he was making me nervous.

“I’m not quitting,” I said putting my hands on my hips. “I have to work. Not all of us have rich parents and trust funds to see us through life.”

His face became white. He hated for anyone to mention the fact that he was loaded, least of all me. He walked out of the store without a goodbye. I threw a pen at the door, wishing he was still there so it could hit him on the head.

Later that night, when I was locking up, I saw his car in the lot.

I walked up to the driver’s side window and tapped on the glass with my keys.

“What are you doing here?” I said when he rolled down the window.

He shrugged.

Annoyed, I walked away without asking him anything else.

From then on, anytime I worked, Caleb’s car was parked in the lot when I left. We never acknowledged each other in the parking lot, and we never spoke about it during our regular relationship hours. But at midnight, he was always there, making sure I was safe. I liked it.

It took me a while to get used to Caleb’s vast popularity. Maybe five people on campus knew my name, but his was a name that was engraved on brass plaques in the school’s gymnasium.

“I feel like I’m dating a celebrity,” I said, when we were out to dinner one night and a couple of girls waved to him from the next table. He rolled his eyes and played it off like I



was being dramatic. But, my jealousy weaseled its way into my mind every time some bimbo paid him homage.

Those girls had no regard for the fact that he was my boyfriend. They were waiting for the chance to pounce on him—just like I had.

And then there was the sex issue. We hadn't gone that far. Cammie quizzed me nightly on just how far our make-out sessions went.

"We just kiss," I told her for the umpteenth time. We were both in our beds, with the lights out and Cammie was sucking on a lollipop, making wet, slurping noises.

"You need to brush your teeth when you're done with that."

"And he never tries to do more?" she asked ignoring me.

"I don't want him to."

"Olivia, just looking at that man makes me want to have sex and I'm sure ninety nine percent of the female student body agrees with me. What's your issue? Wait! Were you molested?"

She pronounced it "mo-lested." I rolled my eyes.

"No, shut up. I just don't want to. Why do I have to be a product of sexual assault because I'm not jumping into bed with him?"

"Hellooo, Caleb is a man. He wants to have sex and if you're not giving it to him, he'll find it somewhere else."

I rolled over and refused to say anything more. What did Camadora know anyway? Weren't freshman infamous for being stupid and slutty? Wasn't my father famous for 'finding it somewhere else'?

No. I wasn't going to use my father as an excuse to lose Caleb again. Caleb was faithful, attentive, and he had never pushed me to do more than kiss, because he respected me. I

remembered the last time we kissed. It had been in his room, lying on his bed. His whole body had felt tense, like he was wound up and ready to spring loose. What if he was using every ounce of self-control when he was with me? The word 'cock tease' sprung to mind and I crept further under my covers in shame.

It wasn't that I didn't think about having sex with him. I thought about it all the time. But, thinking and doing were two different things. I wasn't ready and I didn't know why.

Laura Hilberson was found the same week Caleb and I messed around for the first time. The police found her wandering the Miami airport, barefoot, and her eyelids hanging low over milky eyes. Laura's story was that a man had abducted her while she was jogging on a trail at a park not two miles from the school. Calling for help, he claimed to have sprained an ankle, and begged for her assistance. He asked to be helped to his car, which was just yonder, over the rise. Reluctantly, Laura agreed. She shouldered his weight and walked the short distance to his white van. The van was an old Astro van with rust eating away the metal like cancer. Hindsight told Laura that the darkly tinted windows and slightly cracked rear door was a flashing warning sign. As she helped him into the driver's seat, he let his keys slip from his fingers and fall into the grass at Laura's feet. When she bent to retrieve them, the man lifted a crowbar from the passenger seat and connected it with one powerful motion to Laura's pretty temple. He then shoved her into the back and drove her to what the papers were calling "The Rapist's Den."

Laura remembered being kept in a basement of some sort, for a time she couldn't determine, because she had been sedated. The man, who she described as "shy," used her for sex and company. Then one day, for no good reason, kissed her on the cheek and dropped her off at the airport. She told police his name was Devon. Laura Hilberson had been missing for six months.

While Laura was lying in a hospital bed being questioned by police, Caleb and I were at a charity auction that

most seniors in his fraternity were required to attend. It was one of those fluffy affairs where everyone dresses up in expensive suits and dresses, with waiters circle the room with flutes of champagne. He spotted a group of people who were huddled together in a tight pack.

“I went to high school with them,” he said casually, sliding an olive off of a toothpick with his mouth.

“How many of those girls did you date?” I said eyeing the group. Nearly all of the girls were beautiful enough to be on the cover of a magazine and several of them had greeted Caleb with a sensual familiarity that made my green monster crack his knuckles.

“Why is that important?” he asked and I could see the amusement in his eyes.

“Because, if I made a statement like that you would want to know who I’d been kissing,” I snapped impatiently.

He smiled and obliged, bending his neck to speak softly into my ear.

“Adriana Parsevo,” his voice was so low I had to strain to hear him. I repositioned my ear closer to his lips and shivered when I felt them against my lobe. “She’s in the little silver dress,” I directed my gaze towards a striking girl whose dress didn’t manage to cover even a tenth of her never ending legs. What was it with Caleb and the legs?

“We dated for a while, She was very...experimental,” that last word and the texture of his voice hinted at so much, I felt a surge of jealousy crush my windpipe. Caleb, seemingly enjoying my reaction, continued.

“The girl she’s speaking to, the one drinking the mimosa, is named Kirsten if I recall correctly. She has a birthmark that resembles Africa on the inside of her thigh.”

I blew air hard through my nose and glared at him. He laughed—the type of naughty, sexy, chuckle that stirred the sleeping butterflies in my belly.

“You asked Duchess...”

I pictured him kissing those girls. His fingers tracing their birthmarks and my breath caught in my throat. I hated them and I hated him for liking them.

“Would you like to hear more?” he asked, lips grazing the top of my ear.

“No,” I said surly and I meant it. Asking was a big mistake.

As soon as we got in his car, I pounced on him. I kissed him hard—jumping across the seat and climbing into his lap. He laughed into my mouth knowing that his game had struck a chord and he cupped his hands around my buttocks. I ignored him and kept working intent on proving myself seductive.

Caleb’s mood changed quickly and soon all smiles were gone as we were tangled together in a kiss so intense we were both panting. I thought I was going to die when his fingers lowered the straps of my dress and I felt air on my breasts. Then there was more than air. His hands and his mouth found me and I wondered why I had never done this before. I said something. I don’t know what it was, but my voice seemed to snap him back to reality, because he tore away from me the moment he heard it and held me at arm’s length. I had never done anything as wanton, as daring, and what was kept safely beneath my bra and he had never had to stop at such an early point in foreplay.

“Why—? I was breathless and still clutching at his shirt. He kissed me softly on the lips. All sexual charge was gone. He turned on the ignition.

I climbed back to my side of the car and slumped down in my seat. It was because he didn’t want to go halfway. There was no “messing around” with Caleb. Most guys were happy to cop as many feels as they could get. With Caleb, it was different. You either went all the way, or you stayed in the shallow waters of kissing. He wouldn’t sleaze his way into sex, by pulling me further and further away from my chastity

by giving me pieces of what I was missing. I sat back in my seat and contemplated throwing all of my inhibitions to the wind. What were they anyway? I could barely remember when I thought of his hands and the way they knew exactly where to touch.

I wondered what my mother would say. She would be happy that I found a guy like Caleb, but she would still be wary of him. My father had gifted us both with a package of suspicion that sat like a teeth baring watchdog in our minds. “Guard your heart, so it doesn’t get broken like mine,” my mother would say as often as twice a week.

Sheri, my mother’s best friend, brought Oliver Kaspen’s life to an abrupt end one Fourth of July after I turned eleven. She used his own 22 gauge shotgun to do the deed, plastering his grey matter all over her pink flamingo shower curtain. Unbeknownst to my mother, Sheri was one of the many women my father used for sex and money. She reminded me of a watery eyed cocker spaniel with a personality as slimey as a raw egg. Before my mother found out about his affair with Sheri, I knew. On the afternoons that my mom worked late and my father picked me up from school, we would go visit his ‘friends.’ These friends all happened to be women, and either had access to money, drugs or both.

“Don’t you go telling your ma about these little visits you’ve been making over here with your dad,” Sheri said wagging a finger at me. “She’s got enough on her plate as is, and your dad just needs a friend to talk to.”

They talked for hours in Sheri’s bedroom, sometimes with the radio playing oldies and cigarette smoke seeping from the crack under the door. My dad would be real nice to me after he came out of the bedroom. We always stopped for gelato on the way home. I didn’t miss him when he was gone. He was just some guy who walked me home from school and bribed me with ice-cream. At the time of his death, it had been ten months since I’d last seen him, and he hadn’t even called for my birthday. Oliver Kaspen, my namesake, died leaving me with a flurry of bad memories and a deadbolt on my heart

that only he had the key to. I had daddy issues that doomed Caleb from the get go.

## Chapter Ten

### The Present

Sunday morning I wake in my bed, my hair reeking of sweat and cigarettes. I groan, roll over, and vomit into my trashcan. My trashcan? I didn't remember putting it there. Then I hear the toilet flush.

My God-Caleb!

I collapse against my pillow and put my hand over my eyes.

"Hey there gorgeous," Caleb walks in carrying a tray and smiling sunshine all over the room. I groan again and hide my face in a pillow. Last night: Alcohol, betrayal by a friend, an embarrassing phone call.

"I am so sorry I called you. I don't know what I was thinking," I croak.

"Don't be," he says placing the tray on my nightstand. "I feel honored that I was your first choice." He picks up a glass of water and a little white pill and places them both in my hand. I hang my head in shame and snack on my thumb nail.

“I brought you some toast too—if you’re up to it.” I take one look at the bread and butter and my stomach churns. I shake my head and he quickly removes the tray.

My hero.

“I called the motel this morning,” he says not looking at me. I bolt upright in bed and feel my head spin. “Your friend checked out last night. Apparently, he was in hurry to get out of town,” he leans against the wall and looks at me through his lashes. If I wasn’t so nauseous, I would have smiled at the sight of him in my bedroom.

“Some friend, huh?” I toy with my comforter.

“It wasn’t your fault. Men like that should be castrated.” I nod and sniff my agreement. “But, if he ever comes near you again Olivia, I’m going to kill him.”

I liked that. I liked that a lot.

The ‘Friends’ theme song is playing from my small television when I get out of the shower. I shuffle into the living room in my robe and slippers and stand around like I don’t know where to sit. Caleb scoots over to make room on the couch for me and I curl into the corner. I decide to make some semblance toward being honest.

“I like you Caleb,” I blurt and then I cover my face with my hands in embarrassment. “That sounded like a fifth grade confession.”

He looks up from the TV, his gold eyes laughing.

“Do you want to go steady?”

I punch him on the arm.

“I’m not being funny. This is serious. *We* are not a good idea. You don’t know who you are and I know *exactly* who I am, which is why you should probably be running for your life.”

“You don’t really want me to do that.” He is being half serious now or at least he isn’t smiling anymore.

“No. But it would be the best thing.” I am ringing my hands in the sleeves of my gown. I feel nervous and sick to my stomach, plus the way he’s looking at me isn’t making things easier.

“You are bouncing me around like a yo-yo here,” he says placing both of his hands on his knees, as if he is getting ready to stand up.

“I know,” I say quickly, “I’m thinking that I am not the kind of girl you want to be friends with.”

“I don’t *just* want to be friend with you.”

I have a moment; my vision swings in and out of focus and my wretched, evil heart swells up like a balloon. I am so confused. I should not be doing this to him, but I want to. I rub my temples. This was all too complicated and unfair. After three long years, I have what I want and it isn’t real. He doesn’t know who I am, and if he did, he wouldn’t be sitting in my living room.

I blow air through my nose. Good Olivia is begging me to break things off with him for good. She remembers airport fucking blue and paint on the ceiling and what happens when those memories blow through your empty life and remind you of how cold things are. We turn back to the TV, both of us embarrassed and awkward. Caleb leaves a couple of hours later sucking the hope from my lungs as he goes.

“Lock all the doors, and call me if you need me, okay?” I nod biting my bottom lip. I don’t want to be alone but I am too embarrassed to ask him to stay longer.

“I’ll see you tomorrow.” I will him to stay, gazing up at his beautiful face. He seems to hesitate, and for a moment, I think it’s working.

“What’s wrong?” I whisper. *Please don’t let him remember. Please let him remember.*



“Nothing...it’s just that I feel like we’ve done this before—*déjà vu*, you know?”

I do know, because this is the way our goodbyes went when we were together. He never stayed the night because I never let him.

“Well, bye.”

“Bye,” I say.

I make myself a cup of tea and settle onto the sofa. I lost him once because of my inner rottenness. My lies started unraveling one after another until he was so weighed down by the size of them, he looked me in the eyes and said goodbye forever. I remember feeling numb as I watched him leave, and then for the rest of the day, until I realized he wasn’t coming back. *Ever*. That was when the walls of my emotional dam came crashing down around me. The hurt I experienced was so potent and searing for the first six months, dominating each day like a sore throat. After that, it became a constant ache, an absence that never left your bones. *Caleb’s gone, Caleb’s gone, Caleb’s gone....*

Even now that he was back in my life, I still felt his absence. My time, I knew, was borrowed and soon the fierce pain would start again. It would only be a matter of time when he found out about our past and my sausage link of lies.

I decide to seize the day. If my time is short, I might as well be with him as much as I possibly can. I pick up the phone and punch in the number to his condo. He didn’t answer, so I chirp a message into his machine asking him to call me back, which he does, about ten minutes later.

“Olivia? You okay?”

“I’m fine, just fine,” I wave away his concern like he can see me. “I’m coming over,” I say quickly. “I’d rather not be alone and you promised me dinner anyway.”

I wait, holding my breath.

There is a pause, during which I fold in both of my lips and squeeze my eyes shut. Maybe he has plans with Leah.

“Great,” he says finally. “Do you like steak?”

“I’m all about the meat.” I flinch when he laughs. “Give me the directions.” I jot down the series of highways and streets he is rattling off, and toss my pen aside. I know the building he is describing. It was the type of thing you couldn’t help but look at as you drove across the waterway to get to the string of ritzy café’s and boutiques that lined the beach. It had at least thirty floors, a chunk of real estate that glittered like OZ.

When I arrive, I hand the keys to my Bug over to the valet attendant and step into the chilly lobby.

A doorman greets me. His eyes start at my feet and climb slowly to my face. I had seen this look a million times from Caleb’s friends. I was among them, but not one of them. Their eyes were tuned into Laboutin and Gucci, so when I showed up in my off-the-rack clothing, their looks glazed over like I bored them. Most of their conversations began, “*When I was vacationing in Italy last year...*” or “*Daddy’s new sailboat...*” to which I would be the silent listener, having never left Florida, especially not on my dead beat daddy’s toy schooner. My daddy was the guy who threw his empty beer bottles at other men’s good fortune.

When I complained about it to Caleb, he tutored me on the art of snobbery.

“Look at them like you know their secrets and you find them boring.”

The first time I looked down my nose at an heiress, she asked me where I’d bought my shoes.

“Payless,” I replied. “funny isn’t it, that our shoes are identical, yet the price you paid for yours could feed a small country for a month?” Caleb had choked on his shrimp

cocktail and the heiress had never spoken to me again. I'd felt a sick power. You didn't have to be rich and important to intimidate someone, you just had to be judgmental.

I don't look directly at the doorman, but I blink rapidly in his direction like he's annoying me. He smiles.

"Are you visiting Miss?" Are you veeesiting, mees?

"Caleb Drake," I say. "Can you tell him that Olivia's here?" Just then I hear the elevator door slide open and Ricky Ricardo nods to someone over my shoulder.

"Olivia," Caleb says, putting his hand on the small of my back. I jolt at his touch.

He smiles at the doorman.

"This guy cheats at Poker. Completely swindled me out of a hundred dollars last week." The little jerk beams in response. Why was it that attention from Caleb turned people into living glowworms?

"Sir? It was the most honest hundred dollars I've ever made."

Caleb smirks and leads me to the elevator.

"You hang out with the staff?" I ask as the doors closed behind us.

"I play poker with them on Tuesdays," he says looking at me sideways. "What? I like them. No pretenses. Besides, I don't remember any of my other friends." He lets me step out of the elevator first and then follows behind me. I get the feeling he is looking at my butt.

"It's beautiful—this place."

He makes a face. "Not really homey is it? It's a little macho-bachelor."

"Well, you are both of those things, so it fits."

"I'm sure I could have bought a house for what I paid for this."

“And a minivan,” I grin.

He grimaces. “That I’m not so sure about.”

“This is it,” he says stopping at 749. “Do not be intimidated by the eighteen foot ceilings and the plasma televisions—they are impressive, but not to be feared.”

I follow his shoulders into the living room.

His condo is impressive. The foyer, as it turns out, is as large as my bedroom. It is bare except for the massive chandelier that hangs over the butter cream tiles. I feel classy by osmosis. He leads me into the living room which, just as he promised, has impossibly high ceilings. The entire main wall is a window, which shows a view of the ocean.

“Now, tell me,” I say stopping to admire a painting, “did mommy help you decorate or did you just hire someone?”

“I don’t know,” he shrugs. “But word is—I dated a decorator just to get the free swag.”

“Is that so?” I reach out and touch a finger to the cover of a giant atlas that was resting on his mantle.

“This is the kitchen,” he says leading me into a room full of stainless steel. He leads me into a hallway and pauses before opening the door.

“My office.”

I peek around his shoulder into a room that was cased ceiling high in bookshelves. My stomach clenches in excitement and I felt an urgent need to pee. *Books. Wonderful, magnificent books.*

“You read all of these?”

“I hope not. That would indicate I had absolutely no life pre-amnesia.”

“I don’t know,” I say, my eyes sweeping over the titles. “I think you’d enjoy a good classic...maybe Great

Expectations.” I pluck it from his bookshelf and place it in his hands. He pulls a face, but doesn’t put it back, placing on his desk instead.

A framed picture of Leah sits strategically placed, probably by her, next to his computer monitor. I glare at it. It’s one of those posed studio pictures that the photographer painstakingly tried to make look natural. Leah was looking slightly to the left of the camera, and her mouth was pouty and slightly open. “*Kiss me, I’m a beautiful whore,*” it says in black and white.

“I want to have a huge office one day,” he says, following my eyes to a picture of Leah. “More books-that I don’t read- a fireplace, and one of those big, arched doorways with the heavy knockers.”

“Are you going to hang that picture up in your new office?” I ask. It hurts to see her there, so fixated in his life.

Caleb shrugs and looks at me in interest.

“Depends. The girl in the frame might be different. I do have a thing for brunettes.”

I pull a face at him.

“And my bedroom...”

His sheets are black silk and they lay rumpled and unmade. It makes me sick to think of all the women that have rolled around in his sheets.

“Where’s the bathroom?” I say in weak voice. He leads me to through the bedroom and watches me stare. There is a shower with six different shower heads and sunken bath that could easily fit five people. There is even a small wine bar built in the corner. He laughs at my expression.

“This is my favorite room too.”

“Wow,” I say.

“Well, if you spend the night sometime you can have the privilege of using it.” All the blood rushes to my head.

We land up back in the living room. I slump onto the couch while Caleb goes to fetch a bottle of wine from the kitchen. He comes back with two glasses balanced in one hand and a bottle of red in the other.

He fills our glasses and hands me one, his fingers brushing against mine in the process.

When he disappears from the room to start dinner, I pour the wine down my throat like a shot and refill my glass. I half expect either Leah or his memory to make an appearance at any second and I don't want to be sober when it happens.

“So, can I see this ring you bought for your sweet little girlfriend?” I say when he walks back into the room. I don't know why I ask this but I'm sure the wine has made me bolder.

“Why do you want to see the ring?” he looks at me from under his lashes.

*Hmmm, because I want to see what could have been mine.*

“Curiosity. I'm a girl and I like jewelry. You don't have to show me, if you don't want to.”

He disappears into the bedroom and comes back carrying a small blue box. Tiffany's. How predictable.

“Whoa baby,” I say cracking open the lid. It is a carat past enormous. The most beautiful and obnoxious bauble I have ever seen. Well, aside from Cammie anyway....

“This thing needs its own zip code.”

“Try it on.” He buffers the box at me and my hand automatically pushes it away.

“Isn't it bad luck to try on someone else's ring?”

“Bad luck for the bride, I think,” he taunts.

“In that case...” I say reaching for it. “Wait!” I pull my hand back. “You have to propose first.” I hand him the box and sit back waiting for the show.

“Everything has to be a production with you doesn’t it?” he says standing up and turning his back to me. “Ask and you shall receive.” When he spins back around his features are twitchy and nervous.

“Bravo,” I clap my hands.

“Olivia,” he begins. I look at him in mock surprise. Then suddenly he is serious...or he seems so. I catch my breath. “You belong with me. Do you believe me?” I feel my sweat glands open.

Holding my breath, I nod. This is supposed to be for laughs, but it doesn’t sound funny, it sounds like something I will be replaying years from now—when I am sitting alone in a room full of cats.

“Will you marry me, Olivia? You are the only woman I know how to love. The only woman I *want* to love.” He doesn’t lower himself to his knee and he doesn’t need to. I am rocking on the edge of an emotional meltdown as is.

I know I was supposed to give some sort of response. I grope for my wit, but my mind is as dry as my mouth.

The wine speaks for me. I kiss him, because he is close and there is no other response good enough. It is just a brush of lips, warm and hasty. He freezes and stares at me with his eyebrows cocked in surprise.

“I would have given you diamonds a week ago, if I knew it would get me that.”

I shrug.

He lifts my finger and studies Leah’s diamond. “It looks.....”

“Silly,” I finish for him. “Here, take it,” I tug at the band and it rams into my knuckle. I try again. It is...stuck.

“Crap!” I moan. “I am so sorry Caleb. This was such a stupid idea.”

“Don’t apologize. Your fingers are probably just swollen. Give it some time and we’ll try again later.” And then he disappears into the kitchen to see to dinner and I am left on the couch with half a bottle of wine and Strawberry Shortcake’s ring on my finger.

“I don’t get it. How can you think so differently from before?” I ask while we sit eating dinner at his dining room table. I am buzzing from the wine and my tongue feels dangerously loose. “You don’t like the ring you chose, before the amnesia, you don’t like the girlfriend ....or your condo. How can the same person be someone else entirely?”

“No one said anything about not liking the girlfriend. What might have been my taste then is not so now.”

“So the amnesia *made* you a different person?”

“Maybe or maybe the amnesia revealed that I’m not the person I was pretending to be.”

He is right. The years that he went missing from my life, he’d morphed into a professional bachelor, right down to his cheesy, silk sheets. It wasn’t my Caleb. The one who had put that purple blob of paint on my ceiling.

“Do you love Leah?” The words are out of my mouth before I have the chance to swallow them. My mouth tastes bitter.

“She’s lovely. Very kind and sophisticated. She always says the right thing at the right time. But I can’t seem to summon the things that I’m supposed to be feeling for her.”

“Maybe those feelings were never there in the first place.”

“Do you ever think that maybe you’re crossing the line?” He puts down his silverware and rests his elbows on the table.



“Hey, we’re just two strangers getting to know each other. There are no lines yet.” I push back from the table and cross my arms. My mood had soured like old milk and I wanted to fight.

“Truce,” he says holding up his hands. Before I can agree, he grabs our dinner plates and hustles into the kitchen.

I help him stack the dishes in the washer and then Caleb retrieves some ice from the kitchen and holds it on my finger.

I watch his fingers work through languid eyes. His next move almost makes me faint. He is trying to explain the rules of football to me, which I am pretending to care about, when he reaches for my finger and gently puts it into his mouth. The ring slides off easily this time. He takes it from his lips and replaces it in the box without another word. He carries it back into the bedroom and I clench and unclench my fist.

“I need to go,” I say, standing up.

“Don’t,” he says.

My phone starts ringing and I let go of his eyes to dig around in my purse. My phone hardly ever rings. I only have it for emergencies and Cammie. I expect to see her number when I look at the screen, but instead it’s Rosebud’s.

“Some-a-one breaks your apartment,” she yells when I pick up.

“Calm down Rose, I don’t understand—what?”

“Some-a-one breaks your house!” she yells, like I had asked her to turn up the volume instead of speak clearly.

I shake my head, which is still infused with wine. Then it clicks. Someone broke into my apartment.

“I’ll be right there.” I hang up and look at Caleb. “Someone broke into my apartment,” I repeat Rosebud’s words. Caleb grabs his car keys.

“I’ll drive you,” he says steering me towards the door. He drives faster than I would and I am grateful for it. I think

about Pickles, who I had forgotten to ask Rosebud about. I silently pray that she is okay. Caleb walks me to my door where two police officers are waiting.

“Are you Olivia Kaspen?” the older of the officers asks. He is dead-eyed and pockmarked.

“Yes. My dog?” I try peering around them, but their uniformed bodies create a barrier between me and my front door.

“May we see some identification?” I pull my driver’s license out of my purse and hand it to him.

Satisfied, the officer steps aside. “Your neighbor has your dog,” he says a little more kindly. I breathe a sigh of relief.

I check to make sure Caleb is tagging behind me and step over the threshold. I don’t know what I am expecting to see. But, it wasn’t this. Everything a thief would want to steal is still there; television, DVD player, stereo. I blink confused and then my eyes catch the chaos formerly known as my home. Everything is smashed. Everything. Pictures, knickknacks, lamps. My sofa had been slashed open and the stuffing is pooling out like white vomit. I hear myself make a noise that is part sob—part wail. Caleb takes hold of my hand and I cling to him. I move from room to room my eyes bleeding tears as I survey the damage, or rather the annihilation of everything that I own. My coffee table is the only piece of furniture that remains unbroken; however, the intruder has taken the time to carve the word “SLUT” into the wood.

“This doesn’t look like a robbery,” I hear Caleb say to one of the officers. I slip into the bedroom before I can hear his reply. I step over my mutilated clothes and into my closet.

My memory box is laying topsy-turvy on the floor. I drop to my knees and begin rummaging through the bric-a-brac, running my fingers over each object in relief as I recover it. Almost everything is there. Almost. I press my palms to my

eye sockets and rock on my haunches. Why? Why? Only one person would have a use for what is missing. She is the devil's spawn, evil, with red hair and motives as big as Ursula the sea witches' ass.

My head automatically turns in Caleb's direction. Time. I was out of time. She was on her way to his condo now, no doubt, the evidence clutched in her hands. I start shaking. I am not ready. I can't say goodbye yet.

"Miss?" the police officer is standing at the closet door, looking down at me. "We need you to fill out a report, to let us know what they took?" I see Caleb push past him and walk carefully around my ruined belongings. He lifts me from the floor and leads me back into the living room, his hands are like anchors on my arms.

I feel anger bubbling beneath my eyes, my nose, and my mouth. It is coursing through my limbs and doing a tap dance across my abdomen. I want to grab that bitch by her skinny little chicken neck and squeeze until she pops. I grope with my calm and turn to the policemen.

"They didn't take anything," I say waving my hand at the television. "This wasn't a robbery."

"Do you know anyone who would want to do something like this, Ms. Kaspen? An ex-boyfriend perhaps?" he says stealing a glance at Caleb. *Did I?* I grind my teeth. I can tell him everything right here, right now—beat the bitch to the punch.

Caleb is looking at me intently. I open my mouth to say something, but he beats me to it.

"Tell them about Jim, Olivia," he says gently.

*Jim?* No—Jim would never do something this precise. No, this was a woman's work. The detail impeccable.

"It wasn't Jim," I say. "Let's go get Pickles."

After they leave, Caleb takes my hand and tenderly says, “I want you to stay at my place tonight.”

I have no intention of doing any such thing but I am on mute until I can stew up a plan. We lock up and go over to Rosebud’s apartment, where Pickles throws herself at me with rabid hysteria. Rosebud clucks around me like a mother hen, touching and prodding until I grab both of her hands and assure her I am fine.

“Wait here,” she says disappearing into the kitchen. I know what is coming. The moment she first laid eyes on me, Rosebud decided that I needed taking care of. Her first gift had been a tarnished hunting knife that belonged to her dear, dead Bernie.

“If someone breaks in, you use this,” she jabbed the knife in demonstration, slicing at the air, and then handed it to me, hilt first. I was honored and mortified, but ended up stashing the knife underneath my bed.

Now, every time she sees me, she runs back into her apartment to fetch some half-eaten or lovingly used item she had set aside for me. I don’t have the heart to refuse.

She stumbles out of the kitchen carrying a massive bag of oranges and pushes them against my chest. Caleb raises an eyebrow in question and I shrug.

“Thanks Rosie.”

“No proby,” she winks at me. And then in a very loud whisper, “You steal this boy’s heart. Make him marry you.” I glance up at Caleb who is pretending to study Rose’s framed needlework. He is trying not to smile.

I kiss Rosebud’s wrinkled cheek and we leave. Caleb takes my oranges and gives me a smile that I don’t understand.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Tell me...”

He shrugs. “Her—you. It was very sweet.”

I blush.

We climb into his car and ease onto the highway. I count the streetlights trying to think of a way to steer him away from Leah.

When we pull off at his exit, I am swearing under my breath. We are blocks away from his high-rise and if I don’t want to be caught. I have to do something—and fast.

“Can you pull over?”

“What? Are you sick?” I shake my head as he steers us into a shopping plaza. “Olivia?”

We are parked helter-skelter in a Wendy’s parking lot, and I am inappropriately thinking about a Frosty. Then I get an idea.

“Can we go camping? To that place you saw in that magazine?”

*After we get a Frosty? I add in my head.*

Caleb’s brow furrows and I wither in my seat. He is going to say no, tell me I am weird and crazy.

“Please,” I say closing my eyes, “I just want to be far, far away...” *from Leah and the truth.*

“It’s an eight hour drive. Are you sure you want to do that?”

My eyes snap open and I nod fiercely.

“I can take some time off of work. We can buy what we need when we get there. Let’s just go...please.”

He is rolling things over in his mind, I can see it in the slow movement of his eyes—he looks at his hands, at me, at the steering wheel, and then he nods.

“Okay. If that’s what you want...”

I send my deepest thanks to God and smile.

“I do. Thank you. Let’s go now, right now.”

“Now? Really without anything?”

“Well, I don’t have anything to take anyway. You saw my closet. Let’s just make it an adventure.”

Caleb turns the car around and I lean back in my seat wanting to cry. *A little while longer—please God, just give me a little more time.*

The highway spreads out like licorice before us. Caleb opens the windows allowing the wind to rush in, frisking us with her fingers. We are leaving Florida. Leaving my vandalized home and leaving Caleb’s vindictive lover. I am safe...for now.

“Caleb?” I reach out and touch his arm. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me,” he says softly, “this is for both of us.”

“Okay,” I say, though I have no idea what he means.

“Hey, can we stop and get a Frosty?”

We drive the eight hour trip to Georgia in seven. For most of the trip, we remain in a comfortable quiet. I fret over Leah and the mess I left behind in my apartment. I take to biting my nails but Caleb keeps swatting my hands away from my mouth. I look for something to harp at him about, some bad habit or annoying vice but he is all smooth edges.

I fall asleep and when I wake up Caleb is gone. I lift my head to peer out of the window and see that we are at a rest stop. I snuggle back down and wait for him to come back. I hear him coming, walking in a quickstep along the asphalt. He takes care to be as quiet as possible with the door and keys, so as not to wake me. He doesn’t start the car right away and I can feel his eyes on my face. I wait, wondering if he will wake me up to ask if I need to use the restroom. He doesn’t. Eventually the engine hums to life and I feel his hand shifting the gears near my knees.

We arrive at Quiet Waters Park, just as the pink tinged sun is lifting herself out of her slumber. The trees are wearing their fall coats, clashing oranges, reds, and yellows. We bump roughly on the gravel as he steers us toward the park entrance. I feel the full skosh of my deceit when I see the park—just as it was the last time we were here. I wonder in dismay if someone will recognize me from our last trip and dismiss the idea as absurd. The last time we were here was three years ago and the chances that the same employees would still be manning the campsite is silly, not to mention the fact that they saw hundreds of faces each year. Caleb parks outside of the rental office and turns off the radio.

“It’s cold here,” I laugh hugging my knees to my chest.

He rolls his eyes. “This is Georgia-not Michigan.”

“Still,” I say slyly. “We have no blankets or clothes, so we might need to use body heat to keep warm.”

His eyes pop. I laugh at his reaction and shove him out the open door.

“Go!” I instruct, pointing at the office. Caleb takes a few faltering steps backwards—still looking at me in mock surprise, then turns around and jogs into the small structure.

I settle back in my seat, proud of my crassitude.

Caleb exits the building about ten minutes later with an older woman trailing behind him. When he reaches the car, she throws up a hand and waves at him like he’s an A-list celebrity. Her jowls flap around like pillowcases and I snicker. He is forever making friends...or fans. Amnesia apparently does not change everything about a person.

“They don’t allow tents here,” he tells me, but they have these structures that they rent out. Looks like a tent, but bigger and it has wood floors.”

I already know this. The first time he deceived me into coming here, he told me that we would be staying in a luxury

cabin. I packed my bags, excited to be leaving Florida, something I had never done before, and wondered whether or not our ‘cabin’ would have a fireplace. When we pulled up to the camp grounds, I looked around for the cabin in anticipation.

“Where is it?” I had asked, craning my neck to peer into the trees. All I saw were tepee-like tents. Maybe the cabins were further back into the woods. Caleb had smiled at me and parked his car in front of one of the tepees. He laughed when my face turned white.

“I thought we were staying in a cabin,” I had said, folding my arms across my chest.

“Trust me, this is posh camping, Duchess. Usually you have to erect your own tent and the floor is just thin canvas beneath you.”

I grunted, and stared at the tent miserably. He had tricked me.

Despite my initial horror, it turned out to be the best weekend of my life, and I would be forever addicted to ‘posh’ camping.

“Let’s go buy fur coats,” Caleb says blasting the heat. I nod and stare contentedly out of the window.

We find a Super Wal-Mart a few miles away, leave Pickles in the car, while Caleb puts his arm around me as we run for the doors. People stare at us like we have antennae growing from our heads. Some of them are in shorts.

“Its arctic cold out here,” I say to Caleb, and he smiles like I’m silly.

“Not to them.”

I am freezing, even though it’s at least fifty degrees out, and I wonder what it feels like to be in snow. I think of asking Caleb about snow but then I remember he doesn’t have any memory of it.



We head to the clothing department first. Caleb finds a matching pair of sweatshirts with kittens on the front that says, "I'm Cat's About Georgia."

"We are getting these," he says throwing them in the cart.

I look at them in mortification and shake my head.

"How's a girl supposed to look pretty wearing something like that?"

He tweaks my nose.

"You would look pretty wearing burlap and mud."

I turn away to hide my smile.

We fill our cart with underwear, sweatpants, and socks and then head over to the food aisles.

By the time we stand in line to pay, we have enough food for two weeks. Caleb pulls out his credit card and refuses to take any money from me. We pull our sweatshirts over our heads next to the free magazine rack in the foyer and then dash to the car with our bags.

"Breakfast," Caleb says tossing me a can of boiled peanuts. I pull a face.

"I'm pretty sure I saw a McDonalds back that way." I pass the can back to him.

"No way," he shoves it at my chest, "we are doing this the right way. Eat your peanuts!"

"The right way," I mumble. "Is that why you bought an electric heater?" He looks at me out of the corner of his eye and I see a smile creeping at the corners of his lips. He always liked it when I sassd him.

We pull into our temporary gravel driveway around nine and begin lugging our supplies into the tent. I set up inside, stripping our new sleeping bags of their tags and arranging them on opposite sides of the small space we are sharing. I glance outside the tent and see Caleb arranging logs to make a

fire. After a moment of watching his strong arms tug and pull, I yank the sleeping bags closer together. I might as well stay as close as I can—while I can.

Once the fire is lively and spitting, we each grab a semi-chilled bottle of beer and cozy up on our rainbow striped beach chairs.

“So does this feel familiar?” I ask, stroking Pickle’s head. He furrows his brow and shakes his head.

“No. But, it feels good. I like being here with you.”

I sigh. *Ditto*.

“What are you going to do about your apartment?” he asks not looking at me.

“Start new I guess. I don’t really want to think about it. It’s depressing,” I pull the lid off of the can of boiled peanuts and fish one out.

“We can both start over,” he flips the cap off another bottle of beer and lifts it to his lips. I watch him quietly waiting for him to continue.

“I’m going to start living my life the way I want to live it,” he tells me. “I’m not really sure who I was before the accident, but by the looks of things I was pretty miserable.”

I down the rest of my beer and wipe my mouth with the back of my hand. I wonder idly if he was miserable because of me. Was it possible that right before his accident that he was still affected by my betrayal?

I think of Leah and I wonder if she is waiting at his condo, waiting to crack me open like the bad egg I am. Maybe I should have let it happen. It would have expedited the inevitable. I could tell him right now, but then I’d have to share a car with him back to Florida. Eight hours of torture. I deserve it. I open my mouth, the truth burning behind my lips to be let out. I can say it all quickly and then take cover. I toy with the idea of calling Cammie to come get me. I look at Caleb just as he stands up and stretches.

“Bathroom?” he says, scratching his chest. I point to a building that sits like a grubby egg-carton in the middle of the campgrounds. It is communal and it stinks like bleach. I watch him until he disappears into the building and go to the car to look for the bag of dog food that we bought. I am digging around in the backseat when I hear a rattling noise. I pull myself up and peer over the seat. His phone is lying on the passenger side floorboard. It is vibrating and from where I am I can see the name “Leah” flashing on the screen. Glancing over my shoulder I check to make sure he is still in the bathroom and snatch up the phone.

Seventeen missed calls—all from Leah. Wow! She is really gunning for me. I see my wrecked apartment in my mind and I shudder. If Caleb sees how many times she’s called, he will surely call her back. He is too considerate of a person to let her worry. I shut my eyes. I can’t let that happen. I hold down the power button and watch the screen turn black. Then I shove the phone into my pocket.

“Olivia?” I spin around. My heart is beating so fast, I can feel it pounding in my kneecaps. Did he see what I did?

I open my mouth to make some excuse, when he interrupts me.

“Let’s go for a walk,” he says.

A walk.

“A walk?”

“It’ll warm you up,” he holds out his hand and I take it. I have once again escaped the inevitable.

I grit my teeth as we walk. This whole escape-by-the-skin-of-your-teeth scenario was getting old.

Caleb’s phone feels like a wad of guilt against my thigh. I pray that he doesn’t see the bulge and make sure that he walks on the opposite side of where it is hidden.

Later, when we are back at our tent, I tell him that I need to call my boss.

“I need to tell her that I won’t be able to work for a few days,” I explain.

“Sure. Take your time. I’ll...uh....” He points a finger down the hill.

“Wander around?” I laugh.

He pulls a face and heads off.

I wait until he is a safe distance away and I head toward the lake. My sneakers suck at the mud and make revolting noises.

My message to Bernie takes only a minute. I briefly explain about the break in and promise to call back in a few days. I hit the end button and glance over my shoulder. Caleb is nowhere in sight. I pull his cell phone from my pocket and power it on. Two messages. I jab at the voicemail key and hold the phone to my ear. A voice asks for the password. *Shit*. I type in his birth date and the voice tells me that the password is incorrect. I try his birth year and *bingo!*

First message.

“Caleb, it’s Leah. Look...we really need to talk. I have some very interesting news for you. It’s about your new little friend Olivia. She’s not who you think. Give me a call back as soon as you can,” a pause, then, “I love you.”

The second message was left thirty minutes after the first.

“It’s Leah again. I’m really starting to get worried. I’m at your place and it looks like you left in a hurry. I just really need to talk to you babe. Call me.” I make a face and snap the phone closed. She has a key to his condo. Why didn’t I suspect she’d have a key? She was probably snooping around in his apartment while he was in the hospital after the accident. *The little tramp has probably already seen her ring!*

I glare at the phone, weighing my options. It has to go. It was the phone or it was me.

I walk down the little dirt incline that leads to the water’s slimy edge and watch the mosquitoes dance drunkenly

along its surface.

*“Leah,” I say looking down at Caleb’s phone. “Not yet.”*  
And then I throw it into the water.

“Olivia, Have you seen my phone?”

I am crouched over a can of beans trying to manipulate the cheap can opener we’d bought. I drop both of them.

“Shit,” I say sidestepping the brown mess that is creeping across the ground towards my toes.

Caleb grabs another can from our stash and opens it for me.

He dumps it into our hot pot.

“You can use my phone. It’s over there on my sleeping bag.”

Caleb takes two strides to where I point and lowers himself to his haunches.

“I could have sworn my phone was in the car....”

“Maybe you dropped it at Wal-Mart,” I suggest over my shoulder.

“Yeah...”

I hold my breath while he dials and pray that he isn’t calling Leah.

“Mum,” I hear him say and I slump against Pickles in relief.

“No, no, I’m fine. I just decided to take a little trip...she did? What did she want?”

I didn’t think about Leah calling his parent’s house.

“...Oh, but she didn’t tell you why?...well, I’ll be back in a couple of days, I’ll talk to her then...Yes I’m sure mum. Love you too.” I watch his face carefully. He looks worried.

“Hey,” I say taking my telephone from his hand and stuffing it in my purse.

“Come flirt with me while I heat these beans up.”

I grabbed his hand and pulled him towards the plug outlet.

For the next four days, we stay cozened in our tent as the temperature drops to forty. We eat cup o' noodles and fight over who got to sleep next to the portable heater. When it grows dark outside we pull our beach chairs together and wrap ourselves in blankets to watch the fire. Caleb keeps bringing up my failure to fill out my law school applications and I respond with a jab about his failure to propose to Leah. By the time we crawl into our separate sleeping bags at night, we have stupid smiles plastered on our faces. Every night Caleb engages me in an exchange that makes my toes tingle underneath all four pairs of my socks.

“Olivia?”

“Yes, Caleb?”

“Are you going to dream about me tonight?”

“Shut up.”

And then he laughs that beautiful, sexy laugh.

## Chapter Eleven

### The Past

“Do you love me?”

“I’m sorry—*what?!?*”

“Do you love me? That’s a simple enough question. Would you prefer if I asked you in another language?” He

rolled from his back onto his belly, rearing up above me. “M’aimez-vous? Você ama-me tanto como o amo?” Caleb, who was fluent in French and Italian, was showing off. The grass beneath my back began to itch like his question.

We had been dating for exactly one year and I had successfully skirted, ignored, and deferred my way through not answering it. It was hard work putting any of those techniques into use when Caleb Drake was inches away from your face, staring at you with his intense eyes. I took a deep breath to level myself and thought about the millions of starving children in Africa. We were in Georgia, camping much to my chagrin. I was tired and sweaty and wearing the same pair of pants that I wore the day before. We had been here for twenty-four hours and all I had received other than this rather obtuse question, was a bazillion bug bites and sore muscles.

“When I get home, I’m going to sponsor one of those kids from Kenya,” I said scratching my knee. “You know—from those Children’s Fund commercials?”

Caleb gave me a look.

“I...I...love...ice cream...” I said squirming underneath his gaze. “And I love hot showers and clean clothes.”

“Olivia?” he said in a warning voice.

“Caleb,” I imitated his tone. He frowned at me and I looked away. It wasn’t like I was holding back the Canaan wine here. He hadn’t said I love you to me either, though he asked me this question often enough.

“Why do you always ask me that?” I sighed, ripping a piece of grass from the ground. I began tearing it into little shreds and tossing it to the breeze.

“Why do you never answer?”

“Because it’s a hard question.”



“It’s a yes or no, actually. You have a fifty-fifty chance of getting it right.”

If only it were that simple. Did I love him at this point? I loved him from the first point...the point where our two lives crossed the first time. I couldn’t tell him that though, I didn’t know how and every time I tried, the words would get stuck in my throat.

“You’re pressuring me.” I pushed him away and sat up dusting my hands on my sweats.

Caleb sprang to his feet, paced, and then turned around to face me. He was seething.

“I’ve never pressured you to do anything.”

I felt my face turn white. It was true. It was a lousy thing to say to a twenty-three year old man who never complained when his girlfriend always stopped short of second base.

“You’re trying to make me say something that I’m not ready to say,” I choked looking away.

“I’m trying to find out where we are going. Olivia. I already know you love me.”

I glared up at him in shock and he shrugged.

“The fact that you can’t say it—is a problem. I love you.”

My lip trembled. Pathetic, but it did. I felt my chest heaving in an effort to breathe. He loved me.

“You can’t say it because you don’t trust me. If you don’t trust me, I can’t be with you.”

I felt panic swell in my chest. Was he threatening me?

He was still towering over me, so I stood up. It didn’t do much good because he was a foot taller.

“I hate you,” I said and he started laughing.

“You fight like a child. I’m not dealing with you.” And he walked away, leaving me both utterly bewildered and

buzzing in excitement from this new information. He loved me. I collapsed back into the grass and smiled up at the sky.

Later, when I grew tired of sulking by the lake, I went back to our tent and moped around. Caleb had yet to appear from wherever he stalked off to and I was getting hungry. I was digging around in our food stash when he walked through the flap of our fancy tent. Our eyes met and I dropped the bag of pretzels I was holding. Something was wrong, there was trouble written on his face. Was he going to break up with me now? I prepared myself and lined up some nasty things to say to him.

“You’re spoiled.”

“I’m an orphan,” I pointed out. “Who is there to spoil me?”

“I spoil you. I let you get away with too much. I give you free reign, and you take advantage.”

“You don’t *own* me, to *give* me free reign,” I said narrowing my eyes at him. “What an asshole thing to say.” I turned away but he grabbed my wrist and pulled me back.

“I own you,” he said pulling me against his chest and holding me there. I stared up at him openmouthed.

“No,” I shook my head, but I wasn’t so sure what we were talking about anymore.

My wrists were tiny and they were clamped so securely in his big hands, that I didn’t even bother trying to pull away.

“Let me go.”

He held me tighter. We were so close I could feel his breath on my face.

“Who owns you then?” he challenged.

“Me. Not you, not anyone else...ever.” I felt petulant and foolish, but I lifted my nose in the air anyway and glared at him. Caleb’s eyes were cold and hard. He laughed at me, a

deep throaty laugh. Then he looked down into my eyes and said;

“You are master of your own body, yes?”

“Yes,” I spat. Lava-like anger was erupting inside of me. I was ready to let the white trash out.

“Then you won’t have a problem controlling it,” he finished, and I stared at him through angry eyes—confused.

“What?”

He let go of my wrists, or more appropriately flung them away, but before I could move, he’d grabbed me around my waist and pulled me against him.

He kissed me, not a normal Caleb kiss, but a fierce moving of his mouth over mine. He was so in control of my mouth that I couldn’t have kissed back if I’d wanted to.

My hands pushed against his chest, trying to move the rock of him away, but it was useless.

My body started pounding in response to his touch. It was so powerful, I was sure I was going to split in half.

I picked up on the rhythm of his lips and returned his kisses, pressure for pressure, bite for bite. He broke away from my lips just when I had the hang of it and grabbed a fistful of my hair pulling my head back so that he had access to my neck.

Caleb peeled away from me and for a second I’d thought I’d won. But instead of backing away, he grabbed my t-shirt by the collar and with one tug, ripped it from top to bottom. My limp arms provided no traction and it fluttered to the ground. I stared, disbelievingly at him, and he grabbed me again, kissing my shoulders, running his lips over my collar bone. My bra came off, with a flick of his fingers and suddenly my legs lost their will to stand. Caleb scooped me up from behind my knees and placed me on my back, coming to

rest on top of me. I wasn't providing a shred of resistance at this point. My mind had stopped working—stopped making excuses. I was tangled up in the moment and for once I didn't mind.

“Are you still in control?” he said this into my hair, as his hands climbed my thigh. I wrapped myself around him and nodded into his neck. Sure, I was. I was making a conscious decision to go along with this little roll we were having. I desperately wished that he would just shut up and get on with it.

“Stop me,” he said. “If you're in control, then stop me.”

His hand was at the junction of my thighs now and stopping him was the last thing I wanted to do. I dug my nails into his arms in response. Caleb grabbed at the waistband of my sweatpants and tugged them down. Everything was blurry—everything except what I wanted to happen.

“Who owns you?” he said.

*What? Weren't we past this already?*

I opened my eyes and looked up at him and I started to grasp what was happening. Caleb still had all of his clothes on while I was lying on the floor in my panties. I had lost complete control. He was playing with me. I let my body go limp and looked into his face.

“Who owns you?” he repeated more gently, placing his palm over the spot where my heart sat. He was right. He had my heart and every other piece of flesh that was attached to it. He wasn't being a chauvinist. He was telling me something. I thought about sticking to my first reaction but the adult in me was struggling to get out.

“You.”

He stopped moving and I could feel his back heaving as he breathed. We were cheek to cheek, his arms resting on either side of my body. In one giant movement, he sprang off of me, and landed on his feet like a cat.

“Thank you.” He straightened his collar and then he walked out of the tent and left me—on the floor in nothing but my panties.

I burst into tears.

## Chapter Twelve

### The Present

“What is it like twenty degree’s outside?” I shiver and rub my arms. It is our last day and a ball of dread has taken up residence in my stomach.

“Try fifty,” he says handing me a Styrofoam cup of coffee.

I frown and climb back inside the tent to pack. I am folding clothes when I hear his voice.

“Olivia, we need to talk,” I peer over my shoulder suspiciously. He is spinning his thumb ring—always a bad sign.

I sigh. *Is this about the phone?* I wondered.

“Sure.” I am balancing on the very lip of disaster and I can feel our time sliding through my fingers like sand. I remember that creepo, rapist’s warning outside of the music shop; *You should get home before it’s too late. The sky’s red with trouble.* Red, red, red...like Leah’s hair.

I follow him outside, my coffee still in hand. He leans on the hood of his car.

“What’s up?” I try to be nonchalant as I sidle up next to him.

“What’s going on here, Olivia? What are we doing?”

“Camping,” I declare, which doesn’t even earn me half of a smile.

What does he want me to say? What’s safe?

“We are...I don’t know Caleb. What do you want me to say?”

He shakes his head. He looks disappointed. Am I supposed to spill my guts? Before I can open my lying mouth, he beats me to it.

“You can’t think of anything to say?” he quizzes. I shake my head. Why do I always lie? For real, it’s like a disease.

“All right then...” He does the unexpected, instead of pushing me for more, he starts packing up our things; sleeping bags, clothes, Pickles. They all get tossed into the car, one by one, two by two, and all I could do is watch with my mouth open. But then what could I say? I want to be with you Caleb. These few days have been the stuff of dreams. I love you more every second I’m with you.

I am in a corner. I reluctantly get into the car and stuff my cold hands under my armpits. Caleb turns the music all the way up and ignores me. I am so mad. I think about things I can say to piss him off but I am too chicken to carry any of them out. The old Caleb had a hot temper, and if this guy had inherited it, I don’t want to find out.

The hills became flatland, as Georgia melts into Florida.

I turn down the volume as we cruise through Tallahassee and turn my body until I am half facing him.

“Caleb...talk to me.”

I see a muscle in his jaw twitch, but other than that he gives me nada.

“Please—talk to me,” I try. This is going to be harder than I expect. New tactic.

“Why are you being so sensitive? I don’t say what you want to hear and now you’re sulking?”

That does it. He takes the exit, swerving to the right at the last minute. I hear a grunt from Pickles as she’s thrown across the backseat.

We are in the middle of nowhere and there is only trees and road ahead of us. Caleb zooms into the gates of what looks like a park. There are only three parking spaces and they are all deserted. He pulls into one and jerks on the brake. This place is really creepy. I fidget nervously and look at his face.

“What are we doing?” he asks again.

“I...” I look out of the window desperate for an escape. He’s trying to get me to talk about my feelings, something I

can't do with all of the lying going on. Despite my fear of the dark, I jump out of the car.

“Where are you going?” he demands, opening his door and following suit. Before I have the door shut, he walks around to where I am and corners me.

I try to push past him but he presses me against the door with his body and puts both hands on either side of my head. We are nose to nose, as he seethes at me.

“What. Are. We. Doing?” he demands.

I squirm, but there is nowhere to go. I place both of my hands on his chest. Why is he trying to milk this out of me anyway? I'd swear this is the old Caleb, not the gentle little fawn I've been dealing with.

“Okay, okay. But, you have to get out of my personal space...”

He relents a few inches and I use the opportunity to duck under his arm.

I ignore his calls and concentrate on putting one foot in front of the other. I am heading into complete darkness, but it seems better than the alternative. I need to think for a minute. I walk until I can no longer hear the hum of the highway. I am in the woods—no, I am in an orange grove. I recognize the fragrant white flowers that are peppering the trees. They smell like Caleb, of course, because everything in my freaking life has to be about Caleb? I kick a tree.

I can hear feet moving in the dirt behind me, so I stop. Might as well tell him everything now, so I square my shoulders and prepare to fight.

Caleb walks out of the darkness like a beautiful ghost. When he catches sight of me, he stops short. We stare at each other and then I cross my arms over my chest.

“What are we doing?” I repeat his question. “I am trying to escape my miserable, lonely life. I...” I take a deep breath



before I continue. “I am a liar and a wicked person. I’ve lied to you, I—”

It takes him three seconds to reach where I am standing. I hear myself gasp as he pins me against a tree. He is inches from my face, his arms braced on the trunk to block my escape.

“Stop,” he says. “Just stop.”

I look at his eyes and look away. Why is he making everything so hard? I just want to get it out already...

“Look at me,” he demands.

I do.

“You’re making excuses and you’re playing games with me,” he says.

“No—I...”

“Yes. You. Are. I don’t care what you’ve done. Just tell me how you feel.”

He looks so angry I shrink back against the tree until I felt the bark digging into my back. He wants an honest answer, but I’m pretty sure you have to be an actual honest person to give one of those. I lick my lips, thinking...thinking. I have a million thoughts a day and they’re all about Caleb. All I have to do is make them come out of my mouth.

“I want you to kiss me.”

He doesn’t look surprised.

“What else?”

His lips— all I can see are his lips, so full and sensual. My breath is coming embarrassingly fast.

If I just lean a little bit forward, our lips will touch. But, I know from years of experience that he won’t give me what I want, until I give him what he wants.

My stubbornness kicks in. I turn my head to the side. He steers it back with a little swipe of his finger.

“Olivia...” he warns. His eyes are gunning holes in my head. I can feel the heat of his chest beneath my fingertips, and I know that his heart is beating fast like mine.

“Say it, Olivia. For once, damn-it, say it.” He is looking at my lips-waiting. I think about lying. I don’t like how direct he’s suddenly become. I was perfectly comfortable playing games.

“I want...you to...” I search for the word and can’t find it. “Can you just kiss me first and then we’ll see how I feel?”

He does this thing where he puts his tongue between his teeth. He looks at my mouth like he’s considering it. I almost keel over on the spot.

He moves his hands, resting one forearm on the tree above my head and wrapping the other around my waist.

We are face to face with our foreheads touching. My breath is coming fast, my chest heaving in anticipation. I am a cliché; butterflies, tingling and heat swirling through me in the strongest form of desire I have ever experienced.

I have two fistfuls of his shirt, and I clench tighter. “What are you waiting for?”

*Game playing, red-head loving, malingering fool!*

He narrows his eyes and I want to kiss the creases that appear at their corners. His voice is gruff and exposed when he speaks.

“If I kiss you, I’m not going to stop.”

I shut my eyes. It’s a threat, but a good one.

“I won’t ask you to.” I whisper it against his lips.

The moment I feel his lips brush against mine I want to die. He nips at my bottom lip and pulls back. My hands leave his chest and wrap around his neck.

“You said no games.”

He smiles against my mouth. I am on my tiptoes, pressed against every warm inch of him. One soft kiss... two... another nip; his kisses are a lot like his personality. He’s lots of teasing; alternating between fast and slow, hard and soft. I am just getting accustomed to his rhythm when his tongue slides in my mouth. I make an embarrassing gasping noise. He smiles again, and it is so sexy I kiss him harder.

A few more feathery, light kisses and then he comes at me full force. Our mouths crush together like two angry thunder clouds. His hands move up my abdomen.

I begin to attack back because I am mad too. I kiss him for all the times I never got to kiss him, and for the times he’s been kissing Leah instead of me. I kiss him because I ruined everything and I could have had this every day. He breaks to kiss the sensitive spot at the nape of my neck.

“Olivia,” he says into my ear. I shudder at the tone of his voice. When his voice drops low like that, I know he means business. We are both breathing hard.

“Do you love me?”

I freeze. A chill runs up my spine.

He grabs my chin, and pivots it up.

I know if I don’t answer him, he will walk away. I want so much to be honest with him; to tell him how long I’ve loved him, and why I love him-but all I can manage is a weak, “Yes,” in a whisper.

“Say it,” Caleb says.

I grit my teeth.

He shakes me. “Say it.”

How does he know it’s there to say?

“I love you,” I shout at him. He looks like I’ve just slapped him. Now I’m fucking mad.

I reach for his waist and pop the button on his jeans. He wasn’t expecting that.

He is frozen. His body tense. I kiss him and try to melt away his resistance. It works and he comes at me like a flood. He breaks away from my lips to peel off his shirt and then he comes back so quickly I barely have time to breathe.

Tentatively, I reach my hands up to touch him. His muscles tense under my fingertips. He’s so beautiful; broad shoulders, narrow waist. I pull my hands away, unsure of myself. Caleb grabs my wrist bringing my hands back to his skin. He is expert and I am novice; it is very clear to both of us. He paces me, controlling the moment. Slipping my shirt over my head, he kisses my shoulders, unclasps my bra. I step out of my pants.

He pulls back.

Then, he looks at me. I am mortified, it is a savage and masculine moment and I let him have it because I never did before. I feel like I am on display for the world. I have never let anyone see me naked.

When he has taken his fill, he pulls me towards him.

“God, Olivia,” he says into my neck. I am burning red. I don’t know what his words mean. I pull back to look at his face. His eyes have shifted. They are not calm and laughing anymore. I can see urgency and lust. I am so afraid of this moment.

He scoops me off my feet in one graceful movement and I feel the cool grass prickle beneath my back. I can smell orange blossoms on the air. I curl around him, waiting.

He takes his time easing into me. Our eyes are locked; mine grow wider with every inch. I didn’t know it would feel like this. I want to moan. I want to dig my nails in his back and wrap my legs around him, but I am too proud to do any of

these things. He watches my face in fascination. He's looking for a reaction, but my reaction is all on the inside where he can't see it...where I am hiding it.

He moves out, then in. He sucks on my lower lip. He laughs into my mouth. I pull my head back to look at him.

"You're that kind of girl."

I don't know what he means. I'm not sure if I care—it feels so good.

He grabs my wrists, pins them above my head.

"Relax your legs."

For the first time in my life I do what I'm told. All of a sudden it feels even better. I press my lips together and roll my head to the side to hide my face from him. He runs his teeth along my earlobe and goose bumps skitter across my body. "Look at me." His voice is raspy. I look at him. He moves harder. My breath hitches. Harder... and I'm breathing like I've just run a marathon.

"You feel so good."

That does me in. Something like a moan gets lost on his collarbone as I press my face against his chest. When I look up he has a Eureka look on his face. "That's how I make you moan?"

After that he says really dirty things in my ear. He's found my weakness. I make noises I will regret until the day I die.

I feel myself climbing, but I don't want it to be the end. He is in complete and utter control of my mind and body. I don't like the feeling of not being in control. When he bends his head to my shoulder, I take the opportunity to flip myself on top of him. He lets me steer our movements for a few minutes before taking control of my hips. Two can play at this game. I lean down to say something into his ear.

“Harder Caleb... and don’t pull out...” His eyes close and his fingers dig into my thighs. I feel a slight victory until he flips me onto my back.

“I wasn’t planning on it.” My orgasm punctuates his sentence.

I do not make a sound.

We don’t speak on the drive home. Caleb helps me clean the mess in my apartment. We fill ten giant trash bags with the leftovers of what used to be my life, scooping broken plates, and glasses into one and the shreds of my clothes into another.

We work in silence with the radio playing softly in the background. I keep pausing in the middle of what I am doing to think about what happened in the orange grove.

I taste salty tears on my lips when I lift my Thomas Barbey print from its cracked frame. It is just a print but still it is mine and I loved it. Before I can crumple it up, Caleb rescues it from my hands, and sets it to the side.

“We can fix that one,” he says running a finger along my jaw.

When I find my grandmother’s antique porcelain figurine lying in shards on the floor, I lock myself in the bathroom to cry. Caleb sensing the importance of the hand painted shepardess leaves me be, and discreetly disposes of everything aside from her face, which miraculously stayed intact. I find it later, wrapped in tissue paper and tucked in a box of barely salvaged items he thinks I would want to keep. When everything that used to be mine sits in ten garbage bags by the front door, Caleb hugs me and leaves. I lean against the window overlooking the parking lot and watch him walk to his car. I feel a loneliness so violent my lungs feel like they are closing. I place both of my palms on my temples and squeeze. I can’t do this. I can’t lie anymore. He is too good. He doesn’t deserve the wickedness I deliver and he deserves to hear the truth from me, not Leah. I run for the door and rip it open. “Caleb wait!”

He is almost to his car when he stops and turns around.

I run to him, not caring that all I am wearing is an old football jersey and fling myself around him.

“I’m sorry I’ve been such a horrible person,” I say pressing my face against his chest. “I’m so sorry.”

“What are you talking about?” he grabs my chin lifting my face to look at him. “You’re a good person.”

“No, no I’m not,” I shake my head violently from side to side. “I’m desperately wicked.” He smiles at me rubbing my

back like I am a child. Then he bends down and I felt his lips on my neck. He kisses me lightly, intimately.

“Why do you keep saying that about yourself,” he laughs softly. “I like you a lot, Desperately Wicked.” His feet start moving in tune to some silent song and I fall into step with him. I am conscious of the air on my bare legs, on the warmth of his hands on my back and laced through my fingers.

“*That* is all I care about Olivia.”

“You’ll change your mind,” I tell him. “When you... realize who I am.”

“I already know who you are.”

I shake my head the inevitable tears brimming beneath my lids.

“You don’t know anything.”

“I know everything I need to know. Be quiet.”

So I shut my mouth-shut it tight and bit back my confession....again. I can feel the truth pressing hard against time. But, right now he is humming *Yellow* and we are dancing under the sky, tangled together for the last time. Let Leah tell him. I will remain the coward.

Later that night I am in my robe, towel drying my hair when I hear a sharp rapping on my door.

I toss my towel aside, and fling the door wide, expecting to see Caleb.

“Hello Olivia.”

*Leah.*

She is smiling casually at me like we are old friends.

“What the hell?” I say this more to myself than her, but she looks amused anyway. I stand aside to let her in.

She fidgets with her hair, winding a strand of it around one of her milky, white fingers. She strolls in casually and



surveys the room.

“You cleaned up.”

I raise my eyebrows, bored. If she was coming for a fight—I wasn’t interested.

“Well?” I say, “What do you want?”

“Oh, I’m here to make a deal with you,” she looks at me expectantly, narrowing her nut shaped eyes.

She stinks of expensive perfume and new clothes. I watch as she perches lightly on the arm of my sofa as if she’s too good to actually sit on it.

She looks like a china figurine in a thrift shop. I walk to where she is and face her.

“Say what you came to say and get out,” I demand.

She clears her throat, a delicate chirping noise, and folds her hands in her lap.

“I’m sure you are aware by now that certain incriminating things have come into my possession.”

“I am aware that you stole my pictures and letters, yes,” I manage.

“It was clever—what you pulled on Caleb,” she pulls a monogrammed cigarette box out of her purse and flips open the lid. “He told me you were manipulative when we first started dating. But wow!”

She taps a cigarette into her palm and runs her thumb along the wheel of her lighter. I remember Jim doing the same thing. I have lost my fascination with the process.

“You’re like a bad cold, Olivia that just won’t go away. But, you *are* going to go away and you’re going to leave my fiancée and I alone.”

“He’s no more your fiancé than he is mine,” I snip. “In fact, as far as I know, there is an engagement ring sitting in his

sock drawer that he never plans on putting on your finger.” I watch in satisfaction as the color drains from her face.

“If there hadn’t been an accident, if you hadn’t shown up, I would be wearing that ring right now. Do you know why? Because he chose me. He dumped you and moved on to me. You are just his little distraction. You mean nothing to the real Caleb.” She is panting, her eyes on fire like her stupid hair.

I feel gunpowder ignite in my veins. She didn’t know anything about Caleb. I was the one he fell in love with first. I was the one who hurt him most. I was tied to him by broken hearts and tears and regret, and by God, it was more of a bond than she was ever going to have with him.

“If you see me as so inconsequential, then why are you here?”

She thinks about it.

“I’m here to offer you an escape.” I watch her scarlet lips suspiciously, as they curl around the cigarette.

“I’m listening.”

“If Caleb finds out how you’ve taken advantage of him...well, I’m sure you know what will happen,” she taps her ash onto my scarred coffee table. “If you stop seeing him—if you disappear, I won’t tell.”

“*You won’t tell?*” I mock her kindergartener choice of words and roll my eyes. “He’s going to know what I did when his memory comes back. What difference will it make to me if you tell him now or he finds out later?”

“You get to walk away by choice. Keep some semblance of integrity. Think about it darling, you’re going to be humiliated when he discovers your little lie. There will be a confrontation, tears, and hurt that will take a long, long time to heal. Don’t get me wrong. I don’t give a damn about you—it’s Caleb that I want to protect.”

“Somehow, I find it hard to believe that your sole concern, in this matter, is Caleb,” I say blandly. She stands up dropping the butt of her Charleston onto my carpet and stubbing it out with her toe.

“You’re the selfish bitch Olivia. Let’s not confuse things here. I would never do what you have done. Never!” Her words sting me with their truth. Even this disease of a woman would never have deceived the person who she loved. I am so horrified by her words, that I take a threatening step towards her.

“When I met him, he was still dealing with the hurt you caused,” she points a finger at me.

“It took me a year to make him see that you weren’t worth it. A year,” she hisses. “You are nothing but white trash and I will not let you near him again! Do you understand me?”

I did. Maybe if I’d fought for him like she was doing, we’d still be together.

I sigh. If I refuse her offer, she would go right to him with her proof. Sure, I could bring up the wrecked apartment and the blackmail but even weighing her crime against mine left me in a bad place. I was diarrhea and she was merely a bad case of indigestion. And what about Caleb? He would surely cut Leah off if he knew her part but that would leave him hurt and alone. What type of monster would I be to let him hurt—again? Especially, just so I could spite Leah? If I disappeared, he would eventually forget about me. He had once before.

I concede.

“Fine. Get out.” I walk to my door and open it without looking at her. I want her gone, out of my home, and out of my life. There was no person I hated more, other than myself. She pauses on her way out and looks me in the eye—bitch to bitch.

“I always win.” She tosses an envelope at my feet and walks away. I slam the door and then kick it. I pace my apartment yelling every swear word I can think of.

It is time for me to forget. My heart feels like it is going to explode from the pain. I slide down the wall and pull my knees to my chest. I have to get out of here, out of this place that is saturated with Caleb. *That's it!* I decide. I am leaving and I'm never coming back.

## Chapter Thirteen

### The Past

I was introduced to the viper Caleb called “mum” on the first day of September, just a couple of months past our one year anniversary. We pulled up to the two story colonial around four o’ clock. I immediately started ringing my hands. Caleb parked next to a large fountain that was spitting water rudely in my direction. I looked away feeling snubbed already.

“It’s just a statue, Duchess,” he said smiling at my expression. “She doesn’t bite. I’ve done several drunken dives into that fountain, I should know.”

I smiled weakly and took the long way around the car to avoid looking at it.

Caleb took me firmly by the elbow as we approached the door. I had the distinct feeling that he thought I was going to run. I wanted to.

As the door swung open, I was given a brief glimpse of what his mother thought of meeting me. She was caught off guard, perhaps we arrived a minute earlier than she expected. Her face was set in a hard scowl as she faced her husband, as if they had just exchanged bitter words. I saw him look at her in disapproval and I knew—a gut feeling that it had been about me. Seconds passed, the air argument was swept under the rug and they were both smiling at us, welcoming me into their

home. I stood to the side like a forgotten accessory as Caleb embraced his mother, kissing her on the cheek. She was evaluating me even as she stroked his hair and marveled out loud about how handsome he was. I could taste her dislike in the way her eyes darted to my hair and back to my face as she waited politely for her beloved son to introduce us. At last, Caleb gave his stepfather a slap on the back, man to man affection, and turned toward me.

“This is Olivia,” I heard him say and I smiled timidly stepping out from behind his broad shoulders.

Mother Dearest eyed me like I was a rotting carcass and stepped forward to take my hand. I was annoyed by her immediate dislike of me. I wanted her approval. I wanted it like I wanted him.

“Caleb, you’ve found yourself the prettiest girl in Florida,” his stepfather said, winking at me. I relaxed.

“It’s very nice to finally meet you,” his mother nodded tightly.

I saw Caleb look from me to his mother and I inwardly cringed. He knew. I looked down at my cheap shoes in shame. I had bought them especially for this occasion. I wished I was better at hiding things from him. I wished I had bought a more expensive pair of kickers.

“Dinner is just about ready; shall we move to the dining room?” She motioned for us to follow her with a light flick of her wrist. The walk to the dining room was torturous. I felt like an outcast following at the back of the line. Mother and son trotted in front of me, their arms clasped intimately as she giggled at everything he said. Caleb’s stepfather had disappeared right after dinner was announced only to reappear once we were seated at the table. I wondered bitterly if they would even notice if I disappeared.

I sat rigidly in my chair as his stepfather asked me polite questions about my studies and his mother sized me up like a Thanksgiving turkey. Luca, as everyone called her, was five

feet even, with long blonde hair and startling blue eyes. She looked more like Caleb's older sister than his mother and I suspected that there was a team of plastic surgeons somewhere to thank for that. She was beautiful, well-bred and opinionated and I am sure her opinion would be that I was not good enough for her Caleb.

"What do your parents do, Olivia?" she asked me, taking a delicate bite of her lamb.

I had never eaten lamb and was trying to smear a blob of the brightly colored mint jelly onto a chunk of it.

"My parents are both dead," I said. The next question was the one I always dreaded answering.

"Oh, I'm very sorry to hear that. May I inquire as to how they passed?" I looked at her pearls and her cream colored pantsuit and I wanted to say 'no you may not' in that same haughty tone she was using with me. Instead, I bit my tongue, for Caleb's sake.

"My father committed suicide when I was thirteen and my mother died of pancreatic cancer during my senior year of high school. When they were alive, my mom taught fifth grade, and my dad just kind of hopped from one job to another."

She looked unruffled but I saw a slight tensing of her hand as it clutched the stem of her wine glass. I was no good riff-raff. A stain on her high society living. She would be mortified if I became her daughter-in-law.

"How did you manage?" she looked genuine this time, sweet even, and I saw what Caleb saw—a good mother.

"You'll be surprised what someone is able to handle given no other choice." Caleb squeezed my hand under the table.

"That must have been very difficult for you," she said.

"It was." I bit my lip because now I wanted to cry. I responded to sweetness like a fucking fruit fly and now she'd

managed to disarm me.

“Caleb, love,” she said in that same honeyed tone. “Did you make any decisions about London?”

*London?* I looked at his face. He was holding his breath, his eyes amber intensity.

“No. We’ve already discussed this.”

“Oh, well you best hurry up, an opportunity like that won’t be around forever. Besides, I can’t see any reason why you shouldn’t go,” she pointedly shot a glance in my direction.

“London?” I said quietly. I saw her raise an eyebrow out of the corner of my eye. Gloating.

“It’s nothing, Olivia,” he smiled weakly, and I knew it absolutely was ‘something’.

“Caleb was offered a job in London,” Luca said, folding her hands beneath her chin, “by a very prestigious firm. And of course he still considers London his home because all of his friends are there and most of his extended family as well. We are very supportive of his making the move.”

My mind went blank. I felt like someone had just dumped a bucket of cold water over my head.

“I don’t want to go,” he looked at me now—only me. I searched his face, trying to decide if he was being sincere. “Maybe if you had already graduated, you could go with me. It would be a possibility. But, as long as you are here, that’s where I am going to be.”

I froze. He had just thwarted his mother in front of me and made it known that I was his number one priority. If there was an altar of Caleb, I would have gladly worshiped there.

“Caleb, you can *not* be serious,” his mother’s face twitched as her good breeding fought against her outrage.



“You barely know her. I hardly think that you should make a decision based on some fling.”

“That’s enough,” he said it calmly, but it was easy to see that he was ruffled.

Caleb tossed his napkin into the plate in front of him and pushed back his chair. “Do you really think that if Olivia was just a fling I would have brought her here to meet you?”

“Well, she’s certainly not the first girl you’ve brought home. You were very serious about Jessica and—”

“Luca,” this warning came from his stepfather, who until now had been observing the whole exchange in silence. “This is none of your business.”

“My son is most certainly my business,” she spat, lifting her small frame from the table, “I refuse to watch him throw his life away for an opportunity hungry...”

“Let’s go, Olivia.” Caleb grabbed my hand and pulled me up from the table. I was holding a mouthful of half chewed potato in my cheek. I swallowed it abruptly and looked at Caleb in growing confusion. Was he really walking out in the middle of supper because of me? Should I do something?

“I have never spoken harshly to you before and I’m not going to start today,” he said to her calmly, though by the rigid set of his shoulders and the firm grip he had on my hand, I knew his calmness was a farce. Caleb’s anger boiled beneath the surface like hot lava and when it erupted, there was no getting away. “If you don’t accept Olivia, then you don’t accept me.” And then he walked me out of the room so quickly I barely had a chance to digest what had just happened.

“Caleb?” I said when we were in the driveway. He stopped walking and I almost toppled over as I was pulled to a skidding halt. Before I could say anything else, he spun me around like we were dancing and pulled me against his chest.

“I’m sorry, Duchess,” he said kissing me softly on the lips. Both of his hands were on my face and his eyes were

locked with mine in such intensity I wanted to cry.

“What are you sorry for?” I whispered, leaning up on my tiptoes to kiss him again.

“For that,” he said beckoning to the house with a nod of his head. “I was expecting her to give you a hard time, but nothing like that. Her behavior was inexcusable. I’m so ashamed I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything. She’s your mother and she wants the best for you. I would probably be suspicious of me, too.”

“You are my family now,” he said earnestly, “and if they can’t accept that then to hell with them.”

He hugged me tightly and led me to the car. I followed him mute and trembling. No one had ever done anything as tangible to let me know that they loved me. Caleb’s family meant the world to him and he had just chosen me over them. I clung to his hand in the car on the ride home and tried to make sense of things.

When we arrived back at the dorms he came around the car to open the door for me. We walked toward my building, neither of us saying a word when Caleb suddenly stopped.

“Will you dance with me?” he said holding out his hand. My first instinct was to look around to see who was watching us.

“No, don’t do that,” he said, “just for once, don’t care.”

I took an unsteady step toward him. Could I do that?

His hand was warm and it swallowed mine. He put the other one on my lower back and pulled me close to him. I could hear voices. There were people around and they were going to see us. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes.

“Be brave,” he said smiling at me. “Open your eyes.”

I did. His feet started moving and I automatically followed him. He was a smooth dancer.

“There’s no music,” I was trying to see who was watching us out of the corner of my eye.

He started humming. I closed my eyes again but this time out of pleasure. His voice was decadent.

He was humming *Yellow*.

“This is where we first met,” he said nuzzling my neck. “It’s where the trouble all started.”

He was teasing but to me his words held so true.

“Why did you do that?” I asked with my eyes still closed. “You shouldn’t have done that.”

“Because I love you. She’ll come to her senses, I know her.”

“You’re a good guy, Caleb Drake.”

“A man is only as good as what he loves most, right?” I flinched. Hopefully, that wasn’t true. I was about as rotten as a month old egg.

“Your mom is so beautiful,” I said into his shoulder.

He laughed and grabbed a handful of my hair, pulling my head back until I was looking him in the eyes.

“You are going to destroy me, you know that?”

I knew.

After he kissed me goodnight, I wandered back to my room and collapsed into Cammie’s beanbag chair.

It was all too good to be true. Nothing good ever lasted. Our time was running out. I could feel it. There was only so long before he discovered who I really was and wanted nothing to do with me. He was light and I was darkness.

“Olivia, what’s wrong?” Cammie asked, emerging from the bathroom in a cloud of steam.

“I’m going to lose him Cam,” I said hiding my face in my hands.

“No, no,” she said quickly coming to kneel besides me, “he loves you too much. Everyone can see that.”

“Oh—screw love,” I said, more to myself than her. “It doesn’t always survive the bad things.”

“What bad things, Oy, you’re being dramatic,” she pulled up another beanie and sat down in front of me. “What have you done?”

“Cammie,” I said looking at her in horror. “Really, really bad things. And the worst part is—I don’t know if I’ll ever stop.”

Cammie looked at me with sympathy. “You are not as bad as you think. Whatever you’ve done, Caleb will still love you. You have to let him love you Olivia and more importantly you have to love him back.”

Six months later, I moved out of the dorms and into my own apartment. I had one semester of school left and I was eager to see it over. Caleb and I had gingerly started talking about getting an apartment together when I graduated. He had spent the last six months working for his stepfather and I was seeing him less and less.

We decided to take a short trip together. Somewhere close where we could lie in the sun and do nothing but nothing. We settled on Daytona Beach and made plans for him to pick me up after he was done with work. I was packed and ready after my last class. My overnight bag was at my feet and my hands clasped nervously in my lap. I wanted this weekend to be perfect. I had made my first visit to Victoria’s Secret and picked out something I thought he would like. Tonight was the night. We had been together for a year and a half. Cammie had wailed in excitement when I told her.

“Finally, you stupid cow,” she said handing me a supersized box of condoms. “Do you know how everything works? Because I can walk you through the basics.”

“If I wanted advice from a slut, I’d call a nine hundred number,” I said, snatching the box from her. She’d laughed and doled it out anyway.

Caleb’s knock never came. I tried calling his cell, which went straight to voice mail. Caleb was never late; he arrived everywhere he went at least ten minutes early. I tried to curb the thoughts of him being in an accident; however, eventually my worry got the best of me. I called the hospital but they informed me that no one by my description had been admitted that night. I thought about calling his parents, but considering how my last meeting with them went, I couldn’t get myself to dial the number. I re-cradled the phone and bit my nails instead. There was only one other option. He was still at work and had lost track of time. That had been happening a lot lately anyway, his job was so demanding he sometimes forgot the time we were supposed to meet somewhere or that it was our year and a half anniversary and we were supposed to buy each other garden gnomes in celebration. I wasn’t mad. I was okay with it. I would just drop by the office to remind him. Yes. I grabbed the keys and sprinted down the stairs.

The office building that housed Fossy Financial was located in the sugar district of Ft. Lauderdale, two blocks past the Bonjour Bakery where Sylvester Stallone bought his croissants at seven bucks a pop.

The building that housed Fossy was also home to numerous other services that only the wealthy could afford, so naturally there was a guard. He peered at me through swollen eyes that suggested too much liquor the night before and issued a grunt.

“Buildings closed for the evening,” he shot at me in an irritated voice.

“So why, are the doors open?” I cheeked, eyeing the few people milling around in the lobby. They were all swathed in buttery colored silks and custom made tuxedos. The whole scene screamed ‘Behold the Wealthy’ in the most obnoxious of ways.

“There’s a party on the fifth floor—a *private party*,” he emphasized. “The doors are closed to all customers.”

The fifth floor was Caleb’s floor. I realized this with a sinking feeling in my stomach. He never mentioned a party to me. True, he had an especially busy week at work but how does one forget something like that?

“Well, I just happen to be attending the Fossy party,” I said using my best snooty voice.

“Yeah? I don’t think so,” his eyes were roving over my jeans and t-shirt.

“My names on the list pal,” I said quickly. I didn’t even know there was a list. “Ava Lillibet. Check for yourself.” Ava was a colleague of Caleb’s, he spoke about her horrid garlic breath and melon sized breast implants often. I stuck out my chest just in case. My feeling about the list was correct and seconds later, the fat eyed guard located my fake name on the paper in front of him.

“Okee dokee, Ms. Lillibet. You can go right up,” I didn’t look at him as I whipped around and headed over to the elevators. Hopefully the real Ms. Garlic-breath wouldn’t make an appearance any time soon and blow my cover. The elevator ride was torturous. When I heard the ‘Ding’, I sprang out almost tripping over my own feet. I batted my eyes in surprise. There was no sign of desks, or fax machines or poker faced employees. The entire floor had been cleared of its serious nature, and replaced with elegantly laid dinner tables with floating candle centerpieces and polished crystal goblets. All of the shades in the office were open to show the impressive view of the Ft. Lauderdale waterway. Beautiful people mulled over trays of caviar that were traveling across the room in the hands of white-gloved servers. I pressed myself against the closest wall and began scanning the room for his face. No Caleb. Not with the flighty group of secretaries that always kept me on hold way too long and not with his stepfather, whose smile was now turning on a group

of investors. I felt a rush of anxiety. What if he was waiting for me at my apartment right now and here I was snooping around his office like a paranoid...

I would do the halfway decent thing and leave, before I made a total ass of myself. I shimmied towards the exit sign hoping to find the stairs. I would have to pass through a corridor of what looked like offices but there was little chance any of them would be occupied while there was a party in full swing. I made a dash for it. I was almost to the end of the hall, perhaps three steps away from the stairs, when I heard his voice. I found it strange that over the trilling of Chopin and the constant humming of a dozen conversations, I heard his voice.

I heeled to a stop and cocked my head, not because I heard him speak, but because of the way he was speaking—urgent and intimate. I leaned in toward the closed door of *his* office and heard a woman's throaty laugh. My heart kicked into third gear.

"Would you like to find out?" her voice was clearly flirtatious. You couldn't mistake that, not even through the two inch paneled door. Chopin's trilling *Appassionato* was playing in the background, as I jerked back.

*Find out what?* I held my breath and pressed my ear against the door. Did I even want to know?

"*Some things are better left in the freezer,*" my mother used to say.

I pressed closer until my face was squashed against the paneling. There was no more talking. Whatever was happening on the other side of that door was happening quietly. I took a step back. This was my cue—enter crazy girlfriend. *I will not yell*, I told myself. *I will handle this with class and decorum*. I grabbed the doorknob, twisted it and flung it open. The door moved aside like a curtain, revealing a scene that would be embedded on my memory for always. It would change everything. Ruin everything. Break everything.

## Chapter Fourteen

### The Present

I left. Leah could have him, but I didn't want to be around when she did. I didn't take much; a couple of books and photo albums that belonged to my mother. Everything else had been destroyed. I stuffed everything into the car along with Pickles and hit the gas. I'd left my box of Mr. X memento's laying in the center of my scarred coffee table, along with the envelope of pictures that Leah had stolen. She had stuffed five one hundred dollar bills into the envelope as well...I left those too.

If I was going to do this—it had to be *done*. No more toting around trinkets that had the power to turn my heart into ground beef.

Before I'd walked out the front door for good, I'd held the penny, face up in my palm. Damn penny. Damn Caleb. I closed my fingers and squeezed as hard as I could, until my



fist turned white and I was sure that the words, “Good for one free shot of affection—A KISS!” would be stamped on my skin. Then I’d opened my hand and let the penny drop to the carpet. I slipped a goodbye note underneath Rosalie’s door, in which I lied about a job in California, and promised to write to her as soon as I was settled. I dropped my keys off at the leasing office and I drove. I felt an emotional weight lift from my shoulders when my car eased onto I—95, and I felt free when I crossed over the state line into Georgia, but I felt absolute relief when Cammie threw her arms around me.

“Welcome to Texas, best friend,” she smiled kissing me on the cheek. “Let’s begin your new life.”

### The Past

Wind battered angrily against the car, howling her protests at not being let in. Outside, the cracked glass of the windshield gathered the dancing snowflakes from the air, spreading a blanket of white across the red tinged spider web. Two passengers sat slumped and bleeding in the front seats, neither was conscious and the driver was soaked in his own blood. No ambulance had been called, as the car had yet to be spotted in the snowstorm. The passenger woke moaning and clutching his head. When he pulled his hand away there was blood smeared on his finger-tips.

He looked around at the dark interior of the car wondering where he was and who the bleeding man beside him could be. He felt odd, like all of his organs were straining inside of his body. Feeling along the door, he grabbed hold of

the latch, but it wouldn't budge. Then he realized the obvious, something his cloudy mind hadn't registered at first. The car was crushed to half of its original size. He released his seatbelt and felt around his pockets for a phone, after finding it, he hit 911. When the female operator answered he spoke, not recognizing his own voice.

"There's been an accident. I don't know where we are," *or who I am* he wanted to add, but didn't.

He set the phone next to him and held his head. A police car would be sent once they tracked the signal. He waited, shivering whether from the shock or the cold, he didn't know. He tried not to look at the body next to him. Was it a friend? His father? His brother?

He knew help had arrived when out of the corner of his eye he saw the reflection of the cruiser lights dancing on the windows. Voices called and doors slammed. Soon there were people reaching in and pulling him out of the car.

"We have to use the Jaws of Life," he heard a fireman say. Someone was shining a light in his eyes; another was wrapping him in an orange fleece. They loaded him onto a stretcher as the snow landed on his face. A voice that sounded far away asked him what his name was. He shook his head wondering if he should make one up. Josh was a good name, he could have said Josh, but he didn't. He wondered if the man next to him was alive and then he heard the sirens of another ambulance and the skidding of wheels on gravel as it pulled away sirens screaming. He lay back against the flat pillow and tried hard to remember.....and then he did. Things good and bad came seeping back into his brain like warm water through a cracked block of ice. He flinched as he remembered things that he'd rather forget.

The EMT asked him if he was all right. He shook his head yes, though on the inside where it counted, where wounds couldn't be salvaged and sewn, he wasn't. He rubbed his head, knuckles against temples and wished that he couldn't remember. How easy it would be if his mind had been wiped

clean like an eraser board. No trace of the happy or miserable, just a clean fresh start. The ambulance came to a smooth stop and the twin doors were opened by a set of gloved hands. He allowed himself to be pushed and pulled and prodded through the emergency room doors until he lay in a stark white room waiting for an MRI. He remained silent. A doctor entered the room where he waited for his results. He was an Indian man with a kind face. He wore a wedding band on his ring finger with three rubies embedded in the gold. His name tag read Dr. Sunji Puni. He wondered if Dr. Puni was happy and if those three red stones symbolized his children. He wanted to ask, but still he said nothing. The doctor in his accented voice spoke.

“You have a serious concussion. I want to run some more tests on you to be certain that there is no extensive damage to your brain. The EMTs informed me that you were having some confusion as to who you are.” The patient said nothing, though he stared at the flat white ceiling as if it were a great work of art.

“Can you tell me your name?” Still, he said nothing, his eyes moving back and forth, back and forth.

“Sir? Do you know who you are?” the doctor’s voice was concerned now, having hit an octave higher than before. *I know, I know!* His mind screamed. The patient turned his head until he was looking into heavily lined black eyes. He’d made his decision right then and there. There would be a lot of trouble over what he was about to do, but he didn’t care. He had to find her.

“No,” said Caleb Drake. “I don’t remember anything at all.”

# **One Year Gone**

# **Two Years Gone**

**Three Years....**

**Four**

## Chapter Fifteen



Four years pass. They taste like cardboard.

I am different. I am a galaxy away from where I used to be. I live in the solar system, “Sooo moved on”.

Mr. X is just a memory now. Heck, I’m not even sure all of that even happened. My reality is that I went to law school, graduated, got a job as an associate at a large firm.....

After I graduated, I bought a townhouse with Cammie with the last of my mother’s insurance money. It’s a good thing I got the job too, because my bank account was dwindling down to empty. We drink a lot, eat out more, and spend all of our free time at the gym, working off the alcohol and restaurant food. Cammie is working in decorating, a practically extinct career nowadays, but somehow she managed to land a job with a company that decorates for the immensely wealthy. We both do well. I win most of my cases. I still have the ability to twist the truth, something that has come in handy in my field.

A month ago, I got a call from my old boss, Bernie. She wants me to come and work at her firm, says if I do well she’ll make me partner. Cammie and I drink on it all week. She’s wanted to move back to Florida for years. Cammie says that its time I face South Florida again. She says it’s where I belong. Texas is for friendly people, she tells me. I belong somewhere fast paced and rude. We decide to sell our townhouse and transplant our lives.

I have a boy, well, male friend—did I mention that? He is wonderful. He promises that we can make our long distance relationship work until he can be transferred to be with me. I believe him. He wants to marry me, he says so all the time. I believe him on that, too.

I pack my things into a U-Haul with the help of Turner, that’s my boyfriend, and we drive across three state lines listening to the best of the eighties. Cammie calls every thirty minutes to check on me. She is following in a few months, probably with three U-Hauls.

Turner massages my neck while I drive. He's such a peach. When we arrive at my new condo, which I will not be sharing with Cammie, there are men waiting to carry my furniture into my new home. Turner hired them to help, so we wouldn't have to do it ourselves. I wouldn't have minded, but Turner hates to get his hands dirty. After the movers leave I wander from room to room admiring the very impressive view. From the south side windows I can see the ocean as it melts into the horizon and from the west, every rooftop in a mile radius. The condo is in Sunny Isles and it cost me more than my mother had made in her lifetime. I am a good defense attorney, I am an excellent liar. Life has turned out the way I always wanted it to. Except for... anyway... I love my condo. Turner and I will no doubt christen it tonight. Fun. Yay! He is very handsome in a conventional, clean-cut way. He is tall, olive skinned, and pretentious. He wears dress shirts all the time. No seriously—he does. He is also a lawyer, so we have lots and lots in common. Real Estate law—but still...

Oh and he hates basketball, just like me. Fabulous right?

I met him the day I took the Bar. He asked to borrow a pencil. *What type of idiot comes to take the bar without a pencil?* I think. When I handed it to him he just sat there and looked at me.

“What?” I said, not even trying to hide my impatience.

“I need your number, too.” He said it so ‘matter-of-factly’ that I gave it to him. I respected the gall.

I am happy.

After the movers leave, we order sushi, or I do, because Turner doesn't eat ‘raw fish.’ I walk around my new condo in one of his t-shirts because I haven't unpacked my things yet. We have sex. He takes me to the BMW dealership the next morning and buys me a car as a house warming present. Wowzer, right? At six o' clock that evening, I drive him to the Ft. Lauderdale airport in my new, red sports car, and we kiss before he gets on the plane.

“This will work,” he tells me.

“How do you know?” I say, smoothing the lapels on his jacket.

“Because we’re going to get married.”

“We are?” I reply with mock surprise. He always says this, and I always say that.

“We are,” he affirms and then he gets on his knee and pulls a box out of his pocket.

I drive home, engaged. I look at the ring all the way there, as if it’s going to bite me. It’s a Tiffany’s iceberg—big and gaudy. It reminds me of something but I can’t remember what since I have soooo completely moved on.

In three months I have taken the Florida Bar Exam and passed. I start my new job as a Defense Attorney for Spinner and Associates. The secretary ooh’s and aah’s at my ring. She asks me about Turner, what he does, what he looks like. She has a slight gap between her two front teeth which I stare at as she sings the names of her two miniature cockapoo’s: Melody and Harmony. She tells me how her grandmother’s garden gnomes were stolen from her yard in broad daylight. *Broad daylight!* In Boca Raton nonetheless. I sympathize with the gnome situation and set up a play date for Melody, Harmony, and Pickles.

When I settle behind my desk for the first time, I feel accomplished. My things are unpacked at the condo, my drivers’ license has been changed back to Florida, I have groceries, and yesterday I visited my mother’s grave to fill her in on my engagement. This is my new life, I realize with mild surprise, and then I lower my head to my desk and cry because it is really my old life with hollow upgrades. I call Cammie to tell her this and to tell her that I made a big mistake moving back here. Big. Huge. She listens to me cry and then tells me that I’m stupid and she’ll be here in three weeks, to hold on and hold down, things will get better.

“Okay,” I say, but I don’t believe it—not even for a second.

But things do get better. At first, I adjust to my new routine anxiously. When I fled to Texas four years ago, I arrived practically empty-handed. I built a brand new life there, filling my cabinets with plates and glasses and a new Thomas Barbey print for the hall. There was nothing left to remind me of my adventures in Florida. Now, when I walk through my new home, I am putting on the same lamps and making tea in the same kettle that was part of my Texas life. It is confusing. But with all things new, there is a stage of uncomfortable acclimation. After a few weeks, Sunny Isles becomes my home, Spinner and Associates becomes my job, and the Publix at 42<sup>nd</sup> and Eisenhower becomes my grocery store. Cammie arrives with Pickles a week later as scheduled. She stays with me for a month before moving into her own place, which is a short thirty-minute drive away. Cammie doesn’t like Turner. Did I mention that already? She says that he is as predictable as a virgin’s period. I mean, she doesn’t hate him, but she could definitely do without him, as she reminds me on many occasions. I like Turner. I really, really do.

He visits me every two weeks or sooner if his schedule permits. He always brings Pickles a pair of his old socks to play with, which she rips apart in about two hours. I find his sock gifts slightly disturbing, especially when I start finding remnants of the soggy wool stuck in-between the couch cushions. I wish he would just buy rawhide instead. I make this suggestion one night as we are driving to a new restaurant on the south side. The humidity has mellowed and the air that is blowing in the open windows of the car is whipped and cool. It reminds me of a warm winter so long ago.

“They are chewy bones,” I hear myself say in a slightly bored and detached voice. “She likes them.”

“Okay, babe.” Turner places his hand on my knee and starts bopping his head to the music on the radio. He has such square taste in music. Square, square. I hum the Sponge Bob

Square Pants theme song and look out the window. My body freezes up almost instantly, Turner looks at me in concern.

“What’s wrong babe?” he asks and slows down the car.  
*Babe.*

“Nothing, nothing,” I smile to hide the salt water in my eyes. “I just got a cramp in my leg—that’s all.” I pretend to rub it.

But that wasn’t all. While staring out of the window, the spastic blinking of colorful lights has caught my eyes. When I focus in on them my stomach clenches painfully.

### Jaxson’s Ice Cream Parlor

It was like a door opened and all the memories I had hidden away came tumbling out. Pennies and kisses and pools and all the things I had condemned to Hell. Blast. The last thing I felt like doing tonight was entertaining a sulking heart.

“Why don’t we go there for dinner?” I say in a fake, cheerful voice, nodding towards Jaxson’s. Turner looks at me like the crazy woman I am.

“There?” he says. The disgust so obvious in his voice, I flinch.

“Sure. Don’t you ever get sick of all the frou-frou restaurants we go to? Let’s do something different. Come on...” I stick my bottom lip out a little because that usually works with getting my way. He sighs dramatically and turns into the plaza. I wonder what the hell I am doing and why I am such a sucker for punishment. I want to prove to myself that this is just another food providing establishment. There is no magic, there is no escalated romance, and most of all, I want to be able to be in a place that holds old memories and not have a mental breakdown. Hellloooo Jaxson’s.

It was much the same as it was over seven years ago, the only thing missing from Jaxson’s is Harlow—whose absence is noteworthy. I see his picture on the wall by the register and beneath it are the dates *August 10<sup>th</sup> 1937 to March 17<sup>th</sup> 2006*. I

smile at him sadly as we are led to our table by a gum snapping teen. *She doesn't have class.* I think ruefully.

“Nice place.” Turner’s sarcasm is not lost on me as I gaze at the unlucky and lucky table.

“Shut up. Stop behaving like a snob.”

He immediately softens up.

“Sorry sweetheart,” he says taking my hands in his. “I’ll be open minded, okay?”

*Sweetheart.* I nod surly and turn to studying the menu.

So far so good. At least I wasn’t shaking or crying or anything. Maybe I really was okay. We eat our dinner and order desert. I try not to think about the conversation that transpired under this roof years ago, but occasionally phrases like: “because, I cared more about knowing you than I did about winning another stupid game” pops into my head. I sweep them out quickly and look at my wonderful fiancée who has lowered his standards tonight to eat with me here. Blessed. I am so blessed.

When we leave, I stop at the penny machine and my heart rate accelerates. *Maybe Turner will notice it,* I think. Maybe he’ll do something cute and romantic with one of the messages. But, Turner walks right out and I trail after him, disappointed. I do not have sex with him that night.

A week later there is a knock on my office door.

Ms. Kaspen?” it’s *the* secretary. “Ms. Spinner would like to see you in her office.”

*Crap!* Bernie always sees through me. I compose myself, running my fingers across the front of my Dior skirt. I like to buy expensive things. If I wear something that costs more than a month’s salary, I amply feel that the rotting carcass of me is at least shrouded nicely.

I head over to her corner office, practicing my ‘life is great’ smile. I knock and she bellows for me to come in.

“I have both good and bad news for you,” she says when I enter. *Same ol’ Bernie, she always has cut right to the chase.* Gesturing for me to take a seat in one of her cow patterned chairs; I sit and cross my legs.

“Which would you like to hear first?” she asks. Bernie has silver in her hair now and a life partner named Felecia.

“The good,” I say biting the inside of my lip. Bernie’s bad news could be anything from “I am shutting down the firm to become a caterpillar farmer” to “I lost the number to my favorite deli.” I feel the need to mentally prepare.

“The good news,” she begins, “Is that I’m giving you, your first big case—and it’s a big one, Olivia.”

“Oh...kay,” I say feeling a bubble of excitement well in my stomach. I have the urge to jump up and *ra ra sis boom ba!*

“What’s the case?” I say calmly.

“Ever heard of a little pharmaceutical company called OPI-Gem?” she asks.

I shake my head “no”.

“They’re one of the baby pharms. Six months ago they released a new drug named ‘Prenavene’ into the market. Three months after its release date, twenty seven separate hospital reports were filed in which Prenavene was found in the systems of heart attack cases, two of those being under the age of thirty with no prior health problems. “There was a formal investigation and the Feds dug up a whole lotta poop on these people.”

“What kind of...poop?” I ask.

“During their testing period, blood clotting showed up in thirty-three percent of their human rats. Thirty-three percent Olivia! Do you know how big that is? It’s big like a two foot cock.”

I flinch. For a lesbian, she referenced male genitalia an awful lot.

“Big enough for the FDA to ground the product six months before OPI had a chance to market it.”

Bernie tosses me a gargantuan file.

“So how did they get themselves on the market without FDA approval?” I ask.

“Oh, they got their approval. They falsified data submitted in seeking FDA authorization to market Prenavene, which is a generic drug. They submitted its original version for the FDA tests.”

Ahhh—the old switcheroo trick.

“But why would OPI take the risk after what their independent testing found? They must have known that eventually the whole thing would come crashing down around them.”

“Most fraud in clinical trials is unlikely to ever be detected. Most cases, which do come to public attention, only do so because of extraordinary carelessness by the criminal physician.”

“Hmmm,” I say.

“They’re not our case,” she says plucking the file from my fingers and replacing it with another one.

“The CEO and co-founder of the company had a massive heart attack and died about two weeks ago. All eyes then fell on his daughter, a twenty something spoiled brat, with an Ivy league education and too much signing power.”

“Her title?” I ask.

“Vice president of internal affairs. The DA is coming at her hard. They are building their case against her as we speak.”

“What do they have on her?” I flip through the file, my eyes scanning the boring law jargon.

“Her signature was on the release forms that were turned in to the FDA, which means that she oversaw the entire



project. She knew they were testing the real drug and not Prenavene.” I blow out a low whistle in response to this news. The prosecution already had one hell of a case. I plop the file down on her desk.

“You’ve discovered the bad news without me having to tell you,” she says grimly. “She’s guilty as sin, admitted to the whole thing to us.” I snatch the file back up.

“We want to take a risk on this one,” she says bouncing a pen off of the wall. “This case is going to be all over the media, it will boost us to the next level of firm.”

“Sooo, the next question would be...why are you giving a case this size to the rookie?”

“Two reasons, my prodigal daughter. One, because I like you, and two, because the client asked for you specifically.”

“What? How?” I had covered many cases in Texas, but nothing that would garner any type of attention to me. I was a relatively unknown litigator.

“The client was shopping for you.”

“What’s her name?” I ask, not sure what all of this means.

“Smith, Johanna Smith.”

“I’ve never heard the name before.”

“They might have read about your cases in Texas or perhaps you came recommended by previous client of yours, either way, you’ve got it, kiddo. Don’t screw it up.”

I stumble to my office with the case file clutched to my chest. Was I ready for this? One good case, correction—one impossible case, *if* won, would boost me to partner...

I hole myself up in my office for the rest of the afternoon, re-reading the file again and again until the words become a blur and I have a raging headache. The secretary has left for the day, along with most everyone else. I nod a greeting to the cleaning lady on my way to the car and mentally plan out the conversation that I am going to have

with Johanna Smith in the morning. *Crap!* The case was too big for me.

On my way home I call Turner to tell him the news and fill him in on the case. He sounds less than thrilled.

“I don’t know Olivia. The DA is going to come after this girl pretty hard. Are you prepared to lose your first big case?”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” I snap into the receiver.

“Look, I believe in you—I do, but this is a tough one. They have direct evidence tying her to the fraud, they have two witnesses willing to testify that she was involved. If you lose the case you can kiss partner goodbye.” *What an ass.* I tell him that my boss is calling on the other line. When I hang up, my eyes are pooling with tears.

“This is my break!” I scream at the car in front of me, “and I’m going to take it!”

At seven the next morning, I arrive at the office to find a sweet charcoal Jag in my parking spot. I find a space a few spots away and march through the doors wondering who had the audacity to park where it says *Reserved Kaspern*. The secretary greets me with a cup of coffee and then blocks the entrance to my office with her body.

“There’s something that I should tell you before you go in there,” she says as I take a sip from my pink mug.

“Did you poison my coffee?” I ask, peering at her over the rim.

“No, but—”

“Then you can tell me while I turn my computer on,” I reach past her and turn the doorknob.

There is a man in my office. I see his back first, as he is studying the numerous plaques and photographs I have on my wall. I shoot the secretary a look and she mouths “Johanna

Smith's husband" to me, before making a discreet exit. She has lipstick on her teeth.

"Mr. Smith," I say confidently, though I am quite flustered at the surprise. My briefing with them wasn't scheduled for another two hours.

He turns slowly, his hands clasped behind his back. I see his grey suit, the white collared shirt unbuttoned at the top, the golden tan, and I choke on my coffee.

"It's Drake, actually," he says in an amused voice.

I back away, trying to catch my breath and find myself pressed against the wall.

"Surprise," he says, and then he laughs at the look on my face.

I shimmy away from the wall because I look like an assault victim and attempt to stroll casually to my desk. I collapse into a chair and stare at him glassy eyed.

"What the hell?" I say.

Aside from a different haircut and a few more eye crinkles, he looks exactly the same.

"I looked for you."

"Did you now?"

"For a year after you left..."

"You must not have looked hard enough," I quip, though I know it isn't true. A year after I left Florida, Bernie called to tell me that a gentleman was calling the office inquiring about my current whereabouts. She said he had a British accent.

"I married her Olivia."

"Who?"

"Leah."

"I thought you were Johanna Smith's husband?" My head is spinning.

“Leah’s her middle name, she’s always gone by Leah and she kept her last name. Johanna Leah Smith.”

The word “married” rings in my head repeatedly and I rub my temples at the ugliness of it. Caleb was married. Wedded. Bedded. A family man.

“Caleb,” I choke on his name. “Why are you here? Actually, don’t answer that—just get the fuck out.” I raise my voice and stand up.

“I wanted to see you, to speak to you before you saw me for the first time in front of everyone.”

I sit down again.

“You were the one looking for me? You were trying to find me to take Leah’s case?” He nods.

“No,” I say. “No way—ever. Never. No.”

*Maybe she never told him about what I did. He just thinks I picked up and left. He still hasn’t got his memory back!*

“Yes,” he says standing. “You’ll do it. She’s guilty and you’re the best liar I know.” *Okay, maybe she did tell him.*

I snort and look away.

“I have no motivation to win this case for you,” I smirk leaning back in my chair.

“You owe me,” he smiles. “I know you don’t have much of a conscience, but I think after what you put me through, *twice*, you might want to consider taking the case.”

“I would have told you the truth eventually,” I mumble. That’s if Ariel the pharmaceutical fraud hadn’t blackmailed me, but anyways....

“Would you have Olivia? Or, were you waiting for me to find out for myself when my memory came back?”

I look up at the ceiling and frown.

“Look, I’m not here to discuss the fact that you are lying, manipulative, and heartless.”

*Ouch...*

“I’m asking for a personal favor. I know how you feel about her. I know what she did but I need you to make sure she doesn’t go to prison.”

“I want her to go to prison.”

Caleb looks at me strangely, his eyes roam over my face then my hands.

“I don’t. She’s my wife. And, I’m asking that you take my feelings into consideration for once.”

It hurts so much to hear him say ‘wife.’ I know it shouldn’t, but it does.

“You can’t guilt me into defending that viper! Besides, Leah would never agree to it,” I shoot back at him, “there is a mutual hate between the two of us, *in* case you haven’t noticed.”

“Leah will do what I tell her to do. I need your assurance that you will do everything in your power to help her.”

I feel a rush of adrenaline. I could take the case and loose on purpose! Yes! But, I know I would never. My days of toying with people’s lives are over. O.V.E.R.

“I can’t,” I am digging my fingernails into my thighs to keep from screaming.

“Yes, you can,” he says, placing both hands on my desk and leaning towards me. “You’re obsessed with your own success—always have been. Take it. Win the case, Olivia. You’ll be rich, famous...and I might even consider forgiving you.”

*Forgiveness?* I picture myself having dinner at their house; just me, Leah, Caleb and their kids...

I almost laugh out loud.

I glare at him. He's still the most handsome man I've ever seen. *Red-head marrying, amnesia getting, bastard!*

"I'll see you in the boardroom at nine o'clock to let you know my decision," I say, ending the conversation. He gives me a look I can't decipher and he straightens up to leave.

"Make the right decision, Duchess," he says before walking out the door.

"Duchess," I snicker and I throw a stack of sticky notes in his wake.

I take exactly one hour and forty-five minutes to compose myself. The indescribable shock of seeing him after so many years has left me slumped in my chair like a discarded rag doll. I keep seeing the part where he turns around and I splatter coffee out of my nose.

I do breathing exercises. I tranquilize myself with thoughts of happy rainbows and ice cream, but the colors keep turning black and the ice cream melts into a dismal mess. When I have grasped onto some semblance of calm by stabbing a letter opener repeatedly into Leah's case file, I head over to the boardroom.

"He is hot!" the secretary whispers to me as I pass her desk. I feel my eye twitch.

"Oh, shut up."

When I walk into the room, I see Leah first. How could I not? She is still surrounded by a halo of red hair. It seems brighter than four years ago, more vibrant. I wish I had listened to Dobson the rapist, that day in the rain and gone home, than none of this would be happening.

Caleb stands when I enter. *Charming.* Leah looks away. *Bitter.*

"Olivia," Bernie says beaming at me. "I'd like you to meet Leah Smith and her husband Caleb Drake." We all shake hands and I take my seat across from them. Caleb who has his

arm slung over the back of Leah's chair, smiles at me like we're old buds and then winks.

*So unfair.*

Leah looks at me through her lashes and doesn't even attempt to smile.

"I've reviewed your case, Mrs. Drake—"

"Smith," she corrects me.

"Right. I pride myself on being honest, so I'm going to tell you upfront that the prosecution has an air tight case."  
"

Caleb grunts a little at my mention of honesty. Leah looks green. I continue, despite the dirty looks Bernie is giving me. She thinks I'm going to scare them off and ruin the firm's chance with the case. "They have witnesses that are willing to take the stand and testify that you had everything to do with doctoring the results of the drug, Prenavene."

I clasp my hands beneath my chin and watch Caleb squirm next to his filthy, disgusting wife.

"The current DA has the highest prosecution rate in the state of Florida. They are going to come after you for this with their guns pointed, do you understand that? Everything that you are, who your father was—it's all going to come out in court. When they are done, there won't be a lie left to expose."

Leah stares at me blankly. I know I have scared her far worse than I should have. There are tears swimming in her eyes. I go in for the kill.

"You don't always win," I say, looking at her pointedly. She looks up at me, recognition fresh in her eyes. The room is quiet. Everyone is either aware that there is something going on or they are asleep. I don't move my eyes from Leah.

"Can you help me?" she says, finally and I hear the desperate strain in her voice. I sit back in my chair.

This is something—my nemesis asking me for help. I knew karma would come for both of us but geez, it's really kicking her ass. I have control of her life. I look at Caleb. I have control of his life too. I take my time answering her. Standing up, I walk with my hands clasped behind my back.

“I can.”

She seems to visually sag in relief. “What are you willing to do to be found innocent in this case?” She was silent for a moment as she studied my face, the same way I was studying hers. Then, she leans forward in her seat, resting her bright red fingernails on the conference table like she is touching piano keys.

“Anything. I'll do anything.” And as I sit there bound in a moment so frigidly tense I get goose bumps. I believe her. We are the same. Both of us are willing to barter with our souls to ensure our happiness. We've loved the same man. We've engaged in a dirty, tug-of-war to possess him, and we both have something to atone for.

I take the case. I will have to discredit their witnesses, demonize her father and paint Leah into the good person that she is not. I'm not doing this for my career—despite what Caleb thinks. I'm doing this for the time he pulled over and refused to keep driving until I sang along with “Achey, Breaky, Heart,” and for the time he kissed me on his bedroom floor while holding my hands above my head. I am doing this because he still calls me Duchess.

It's the same guilty game I've been playing all along, to be near Caleb regardless of the circumstance or cost.

Caleb, Caleb, Caleb.

We end our meeting with plans for the next and we all make a big to-do about shaking hands. Bernie is big on shaking hands. Afterwards, I rush to the bathroom and stick my hands underneath the scalding water until they turn bright red. I hate it that I had to touch her. Bernie is waiting for me at my office.



“What was that about?” she snaps, which is very uncharacteristic of her.

“None of your business. I have the case and I’m going to win it, so back off.”

“That’s my girl,” Bernie croons, and then she walks off without anything else from me.

## Chapter Sixteen

After nine months of preparation, the case goes to trial. One of the prosecution's witnesses is male. When I cross examine him he gets angry at my accusation that he was jealous of Leah's promotion, and calls her a spoiled bitch from the stand. The second of the witnesses was laid off by Leah's father a few months into the clinical trials of Prenavene. I show the jury five separate letters the witness wrote to Leah's father, first begging for her job back, and then threatening to destroy him in any way she could. The third witness was not at work the day she claims she saw Leah changing the trial results in the computer. I have a speeding ticket and a video of her auditioning for American Idol to prove it.

I am master of the façade; when Olivia the lawyer walks into the courtroom, she is poker faced and collected, a poster child for female equality and young strength. I am so good at pretending, that sometimes I lose track of who I really am. In the evenings after court, I unravel my bun, run my fingers through my hair and walk down to the ocean to cry (Yes, I am still melodramatic). I wish that my mom was still alive. I wish that—

Caleb is in the courtroom every single day. I am forced to see him, smell him, interact with him...

He still spins his thumb ring. I notice that he does it most when I am talking. He's waiting for me to do something crazy and irrational, I know. But, I am in control, I have a job to do and no, it's not about winning the case for me anymore. It's about him and my atonement.

My witnesses take the stand one by one, and my case builds muscle. I handpicked the desperate—the people who have the most to lose if Leah loses, the retiree's that will not see their pension, the young chemists who are just beginning to propel their careers.

Leah watches me through narrowed snake eyes as I carefully clip the strings of incrimination from around her. Sometimes I swear I see admiration there, too.

On my birthday, I am early to the courtroom because there are some things I want to go over before the trial starts. Caleb is sitting in his usual spot without Leah.

“Happy Birthday,” he says as I snap open my briefcase.

“I'm surprised you remembered,” I say, not looking at him.

“Why is that?”

“Oh, you've just been forgetting an awful lot of things over the last couple of years.”

“I never forgot you,” he says, and it looks as if he's about to say something else, but then the prosecutor walks in and he clamps his mouth shut.

By week nine of the trial, I have called seven witnesses to the stand. Out of the thirty employees who worked under my client to formulate Prenavene, only seven are willing to come forward and testify on her behalf. Of those seven, are three whose loyalties to her are unwavering and four I manipulated onto the stand.

I take what I can get and spin their testimonies to my advantage. When the prosecutor places his witnesses on the stand, I discredit them. A woman has lost her husband to a

heart attack, brought on by the premature launching of Prenavene. I showcase her husband's pre-existing heart condition and his unhealthy diet. A Veteran has hundreds of thousands of dollars of medical bills due to his treatment, after the drug ate through his liver and he needed a transplant. I bring to light his alcohol addiction which destroyed his liver long before Prenavene had a go at it.

We paste the weight of the blame onto her father, who cannot suffer the consequences from his grave. It grieves her to do this, to tarnish his name, but I remind her that if he were alive, he would be sitting where she is and would have gladly taken the fall for his little girl.

Leah takes the stand last. We contemplate not putting her up there at all, but decide it necessary for the jury to hear her sweet voice and look into her terrified eyes. She plays vulnerable well.

“Were you aware, when you signed the release forms, Mrs. Smith, that it was not Prenavene that was handed over to the FDA, but in fact it's non-generic version-Paxcilvan?” I stand slightly to her left, my eyes reminding her to remember how to answer the questions, which we had rehearsed a dozen times.

“No, I was not.” She raises a pink tissue to her inflamed nostrils and blows gently. I look at the jury out of the corner of my eye. They are watching her carefully, probably wondering if she was capable of such deceit—this delicate girl in her lavender dress. I remember the time in my apartment when she was blowing smoke from her crimson lips, her eyes lined in black kohl. *She is capable*, I tell them in my mind, *of that and so much more.*

“What did your father, the late Mr. Smith,” I say looking at the jury, “tell you that you were signing?”

“Releases,” she admits weakly.

“And did you read these releases before adding your signature to the page? Did you observe the results

yourself in the lab?”

“No,” she looks at her lap and sniffles, “I trusted my father. If he needed my signature, I gave it to him without question.”

“Do you believe that your father was aware of the inaccurate results of the testing of the drug Prenavene that was in those documents?” This was it—the hard part. I see Leah struggling with herself, trying to coerce the words from her lips. It made it all the more believable to the jury, her hesitancy to badmouth her daddy.

“Yes, I think he was aware,” she says looking directly at me. Tears are pooling in her eyes. *Cry them out*, I will her with my mind, *let them see how destroyed you are over this*. Her tears gush down her cheeks and I see her again standing on my doorstep the night Caleb was at my apartment for dinner. Manipulation tears.

“Ms. Smith,” I say finally giving her a second to compose herself, “do you have anything to say to the families of the victims of this drug—the families who lost their loved ones due to the deceitful, careless behavior of OPI-gem?”

“Yes.” At this point she breaks down, hugging herself and sobbing, her tears dripping from her face into her lap. “I am so sorry. I am disgusted and deeply remorseful at the fact that I took part in their deaths. I would do anything to change what happened. I want them to know that I recognize that my apology is worthless, that it will never bring mothers and fathers and daughters and sons back, but that I will see their faces till the day I die. I am sorry,” her hands come up and cradle her face. *Bravo*.

I breathe a sigh of relief. She did it—she pulled it off.

“Thank you, Ms. Smith. That will be all Your Honor.”

The prosecutor cross-examines Leah next. She stands firm. She plays dumb so well. I silently applaud her wide-eyed terror.

When she walks down from the stand and takes her seat, our eyes meet in a knowingness that transcends a normal lawyer/client relationship. *Did I lie okay?* Her lashes ask me. *Am I being soft enough to convince the jury?* Her mouth pouts.

*You are a gifted actress.* I say with a flick of my eyes. *And I hate you.*

I turn in my seat to look at Caleb. He is looking at me and not his wife. He acknowledges the success with a tight lipped nod of his head.

We break from trial on the first of September. In the morning Leah's verdict will be read. I am a mess. I am lounging around in my condo. It is dark outside and I can see a few twinkling boat lights creeping along the ocean's surface. I haven't washed my hair since yesterday and I am wearing sweats and an old t-shirt when the doorbell rings. Funny. Usually if I have a guest, the front desk will call up before opening the elevator. I plod to the door in my socks and open it without looking through the peephole which is a very bad habit. Caleb is standing in my doorway in a wrinkled suit, with a bottle of wine in one hand and a greasy bag of take-out in the other. I let him in without a word. I am not surprised, I am not mortified. I am Olivia and he is Caleb.

He follows me to the kitchen and he lets out a low whistle when he sees my view. I grin and toss him a corkscrew for the wine. He opens the cork, while I go to the cabinet for two glasses. I start carrying everything to the table, but he points to my balcony. It faces the ocean and the only way to get there is by walking through my bedroom.

We carry everything outside and sit at the wrought iron table that has never been used. He brought sushi. We prop our feet up and eat in silence, watching the waves lick at the sand. There is a heaviness between us, but isn't there always? After tomorrow there will be no more excuse to see each other and though we have not said much on a personal level, there have been looks exchanged, small words...

I am so tired of this cycle, this constant struggle to breathe the same air as him. I look over and see that he is watching me.

“What?”

“Don’t marry Turner.”

“Pfffff,” I say. “Why do you hate him so much?”

Caleb shrugs and looks away. “He’s not your type.”

“Really,” I mock. “What do you know anyway? You have terrible taste.”

We sit in silence for another few minutes, and then he says, “If you’ve never trusted me on anything, trust me on this.”

I sigh, and change the subject.

“Remember our tree?”

“Yea, I remember,” he says softly.

“They cut it down.”

His head snaps over to look at me.

“I’m just kidding,” I giggle.

He smiles and shakes his head.

“What difference would it have made? Our whole relationship was cut down,” he grins, but it is a bitter grin.

“Put through the grinder,” I remark.

“Pulverized,” he adds.

He leaves after that. Hours after he’s gone, I can still smell him in my halls. My condo feels cold and empty without him. I would give it all up, the money, the fancy job, the condo...*I could live in squalor with him and be happy.* I think. Why didn’t I realize that before? Before, I screwed it all up. I can’t sleep, so I sit on the couch and stare at the ocean. I am still sitting there when the sun rises. I get ready for court,

make myself some coffee, and walk out my door. Today is the last day.

We win the case.

Leah is found not guilty of falsifying documents, not guilty of clinical trial fraud, and guilty of ethical misconduct of responsibilities. She pays a fine of one million dollars for the latter and is sentenced to two hundred hours of community service. I am not celebratory. I could have put that bitch in prison and stolen her husband.

The victory dinner is held at a posh restaurant in South Beach. I am extricating myself from a handful of well-wishers when I spot her sashaying over to me. I eye her sexy black dress with distaste. She is so polished and coiffed, she looks like a magazine cutout. I am wearing a simple, cream sheath dress. She is the Devil tonight and I am the Angel.

“Olivia,” she purrs, sauntering up with a glass of wine in her hand, “cheers to our win. It was all very well done.” She clinks her glass with mine and I smile tightly.

“Thank you?”

“I don’t suppose I’ll ever understand why you did it. You saved me. Unless, it’s because *he* asked you to.”

As if on cue, we both look over at Caleb, who is laughing and chatting with a group of friends.

“It must have been very hard for you to be around him.” She is watching him, possessively. I am struck by how much I miss hearing his laughter. It rips me to my core, that he belongs in her life and not mine.

“He’s not the kind of man a woman can easily forget,” she continues sweetly, and if I wasn’t the type of girl that played her game, I would have thought her sincere.

“No, he’s not,” I admit freely.

“You watch him all the time—I see you do it, Olivia.”



I look at her bored. She is playing games with someone who knows how to play them better.

“Does he look at you, the way I look at him?” I ask casually. Ahh, there it is—the ill-disguised anger.

And, by the look on her face, I know I’ve struck a nerve. She opens her mouth to say something but I hold up a hand.

“Leah, go be with your husband,” I say, “before he realizes that he’s still in love with me.”

And as if right on cue, Caleb turns to look at me, not at his wife—at me. Our eyes lock for the briefest of seconds, Caleb’s and mine, amber and blue. Leah witnesses our exchange and though she remains the epitome of decorum and class, I see a whiteness appear around her lips. Her anger rolls toward me, though what I feel coming from him pushes it away. He is longing, as am I. I garner what remains of my self-control and tell myself the truth: *Not mine, not ever.*

I set my wine down on the nearest table and walk quickly out of their lives. Some things were better left alone.

The following morning I turn on the TV only to see a familiar mug shot. I squint at the picture and groan when I hear the name.

“Dobson Scott Orchard was detained by police at the Miami airport last night trying to board a plane to Toronto. Police have taken him into custody where accused rapist is being questioned. Among his victims are seven women whose ages range from seventeen to thirty. Five of them have come forward and positively identified him as the man who kidnapped and sexually assaulted them. Police are urging anyone else victimized to step forward at this time...”

The camera then shifts to a picture of Laura Hidleson, naming her as Dobson’s first victim. I wave at her picture and shut off the TV. Life is all about choices, I decide—good ones, bad ones, selfish ones. But, it seems the safest one I ever

made was not walking underneath his umbrella, the day I ran into Caleb.

## Chapter Seventeen

Turner decided to move to Florida after I won the case. He sold his house in Grapevine, bought a new wardrobe of pastel oxfords, and traded his Lexus for a shiny, yellow corvette. I feel invaded when I come home one day and find my living room filled with his neatly labeled boxes. *Downstairs Closet, Game Room, Office*, they proclaim in handwriting that I know must be his mother's. I wander through the maze of Turner's belongings and hope that he doesn't plan on unpacking them here. I have no room for dartboards and autographed pictures of Diego Maradona. We argue about it for a week and eventually he agrees to put his belongings in storage. With the boxes gone, I work on adjusting to my new 'live in' who patrols the hallways of my condo in white jockeys, singing show tunes in a Texan drawl. My fridge is filled with beer and salsa, and for some wild reason this annoys me more than the piles of dirty laundry that I find tossed around the house.

One morning I wake up to find the words 'You're Hot' scrawled on my bathroom mirror in lipstick. I grit my teeth throwing away the destroyed fifty dollar tube of Wine Gum and then spend ten next minutes scrubbing away the residue with vinegar. When it happens a second time, I hide my lipstick. Between the months of March and May, I find seventeen curious stains on my ivory sofa, twelve shoe scuffs on my wall and thirty seven bottles of beer left haphazardly around the house. He takes me out to dinner on our

anniversary and wears a teal button down, with white pants and white crocodile loafers. I remember Caleb's tasteful choice in clothes and I feel embarrassed by Turner's flamboyance. This is not a game of comparisons, I remind myself. He tells me he loves me a whole lot and each time I inwardly cringe.

*Oh, what do you know about love?* I silently complain. *You've never cheated to have it.*

Handsome Turner, who adores me and treats me like an expensive accessory, I even hate the way his pillow smells.

Caleb brought this on, damn him. I was happy, in a delusional sort of way, but happy nonetheless. And now—and now, all I can think about is his crooked smile and his smell and the way his eyes rake over the world in amusement. I psychoanalyze my relationship with Turner and when I can come to no sound conclusion, Cammie and I meet to discuss the matter.

We chose a small French café down Las Olas Avenue and drink coffee from a French press.

“He's a filler,” Cammie says with more conviction than a suicide bomber.

“What does that mean?” I am studying the menu, contemplating an almond croissant.

“You know—stuff something into your heart quickly to stop it from cracking open...from bleeding out...”

“Like, I dated Turner to stop thinking about Caleb?”

Cammie nods.

“Why couldn't you just say that?”

“Because, when you speak figuratively, it makes you sound smarter.”

I blink at her a few times before tossing aside my menu.

“So what do you suggest I do, smarty pants? I already had his wife acquitted of her crimes.”

“Wait,” Cammie says. “I’m not even talking about Caleb, here. All I’m saying is that Turner is wrong, wrong, wrong for you.”

I sigh. Why does everyone keep saying that?

Two weeks later, I am at my absolute wits end with ‘faking it.’ Turner is all over me and I am tired of pushing him away and finding excuses. I decide to take a day to myself. I part with my frowning fiancée at the front door, giving him a hasty kiss on the lips. He’s calls after me, asking when I am going to be home, but I ignore him and keep walking. When the elevator doors close, I slide to the floor and place my head between my legs. I feel like I can breathe again. Shopping sounds nice or maybe some time at the spa, I know a girl who can get me in at the last minute. But then my thoughts titter and drift to the man that I am still in love with, and I know that a day anywhere, is a day away from him. So, I settle for the next best thing, something that I haven’t done in a very long time. I pull my cell phone from my too expensive purse and hit number ‘one’ on my speed dial.

“Cammie, it’s me,” I whisper into the phone, although I am obviously alone and no one can hear me. I feel guilty for what I am about to say. “Do you remember the old days in the Detective Gadget mobile?” There is a long pause in which I check the screen to make sure we are still connected.

“You’re out of your mind,” she says finally. Then after a long pause, “Who are we spying on?”

“Who do you think?” I ask, toying with the strappy thing on my purse.

Another pause.

“NO! Absolutely...NO! I can’t even believe...where the hell are you?”

“Come on Cam, if I had another friend to ask, I would...”

“You certainly *would not* ask anyone else to do something so psychotic. *And*, if you did, I would be highly offended.”

“I’m on my way to your house,” I say throwing my car in reverse and curtailing out of my spot—diva style.

“Fine. I’ll be ready and waiting. Make sure you pick up the coffee”.

Thirty minutes later, I arrive at Cammie’s neat, cul-de-sac house and park my car haphazardly in her driveway. She has flower boxes on the windows and garden gnomes in the peonies, a lovely cottage for such a witch to live. She opens the door before I can ring the bell and pulls me inside by the waistband of my pants.

“What car are we taking?” she says all businesslike.

“I thought you didn’t want to.”

She snatched the coffee from my hand and looks at me over the rim.

“Of course I want to, but I would look like a bad person if I didn’t object at all.”

I shrug. I stopped trying to soothe my conscience years ago, but to each his own.

“Your car. He’s never seen it, so we have less chance of being spotted.”

She nods while grabbing a duffel bag off the couch.

“Do you know where this joker lives?”

“I totally know,” I mock her tone and follow her into the garage. “I am his lawyer—duh!”

“Yea? So, what position do they—” At this point Cammie says something really crude. I flinch. I have grown to dislike the ‘f’ word. Pretty and delicate Cammie started swearing after Steven, who cheated on her twice and stole seventeen hundred dollars from her dresser drawer. Ever since that fateful afternoon when she found Steven copulating with his secretary, she developed an obsession with saying the ‘f’ word, and calling girls ‘trashy bitches’.

“Probably the same position Steven and Tina were in when you found them doing the nasty,” I say.

“Touché,” she replies. “So are we spying on the trashy bitch, too, or just Mr. Wonderful?”

“Caleb,” I say decidedly. “I want to spy on Caleb.” Cammie nods her head and puts her black SUV onto the highway.

“Call his office.”

“Why?” I ask rummaging around in the duffel to check the supplies.

“So we know where he is and what he’s doing today, genius.”

“I can’t,” I say my finger poised above the buttons. Cammie snatches the phone from my hand and dials herself.

“Weakling,” she mutters and then, “Hello, hi, I’m with Sunrise Dental and I’m trying to locate Mr. Caleb Drake. He missed his appointment this morning and...oh yes? Really? Well that’s perfectly understandable then...all right...I’ll call back to reschedule, thank you.” She hangs up the phone and smiles triumphantly.

“They’re out of town!”

“Okay,” I say shaking my head in confusion. “Why are you so happy?”

“Because now we can break into their house!” she states, making a truly demonic face at me.

“You are crazy,” I say turning away from her and staring out the window. “Why is it that I need to vomit all of a sudden?”

“You’re going to love it, trust me. I broke into Steven’s place after he screwed that trashy bitch and found all kinds of interesting stuff—he had this thing for Asian...men.”

“You broke into your ex’s apartment?” My head was swimming now. “How do I not know about these shenanigans and when did you turn into me?”

“You’ve been busy. Lucy and Ethel didn’t break in to spy—Ethel broke in to find her grandmother’s earrings which she had left there.”

“Okay, first of all, stop referring to yourself in first person, Ethel and second of all, I am not breaking into their house!”

“Since when did you become the moral police?” she took a violent sip of her coffee.

“I am a lawyer.”

She frowned.

“And an adult.”

She snorted.

“And I have already caused a lifetime’s worth of trouble for that man.”

That last statement seems to enrage her because she starts sputtering. She comes back at me in full Texan drawl.

“And he for you!” she points a finger at me and then slaps the steering wheel. “He keeps coming back! Damn it Olivia, he keeps finding you and you have the right to know why. He’s messed up your life at least four times now. I HATE IT WHEN PEOPLE DON’T USE THEIR TURN SIGNALS!” She bares her middle finger at a Mercedes as we speed past. “Besides, let’s not forget that Leah did a little of her own breaking and entering back in the day, when she went all *Fatal Attraction* on your apartment.”

That was oh-so-true.

“I know their house alarm code,” I say weakly.

“How?” her eyes are wide with admiration.

“Something set it off once while Caleb, Leah, and I were in a briefing and the alarm company called his cell to verify the code before they would deactivate it.”

“Now all we need is a key,” she smiles at me and turns off the Parkland exit.

“They keep a spare in a birdfeeder in the backyard.”

“How do you know *that*?”

“I heard him telling the maid on the phone when she locked herself out.”

She swears at me, uses the “F” word and calls me creepy.

“Yes, and you’re a trashy bitch.”

We are standing in the foyer of Leah and Caleb’s mammoth house. I, guiltily, while biting my nails, and Cammie without concern is strolling around touching their things. I watch her and wonder who would win if she and Leah were to get into a fight.

“Look at this?” she says, lifting a filigree egg from an ornate gold table. “This is worth at least a hundred Cartier purses.”

“Put it down,” I hiss at her, spitting a piece of acrylic from the corner of my mouth. Their house was a museum and Leah was its main attraction. Everywhere I looked there were paintings and photographs of the red-headed beast, some of them gracious enough to include Caleb. I shimmied out from under her gaze and went to stand under an alcove.

“We’ve already broken in, we might as well make the best of it,” she chirps at me.

I follow her to the kitchen, where we look inside their fridge. It is stocked with everything from Bulga caviar, to Jell-O chocolate pudding. Cammie extracts a grape from a bunch and pops it into her mouth.

“Seedless,” she mumbles. Juice squirts from her lips and onto the refrigerator door. I wipe the smudge off with a paper towel



and toss it into the trash.

We make our way up a winding flight of stairs, our heels clicking against the butter colored marble.

Cammie pauses at what appears to be the master bedroom door.

“Uh, uh I’m not going in there,” I say, backing up a few steps. I would rather sever a hand than see *their* bedroom.

“Well, I’m looking,” and with that she pushes the door open and disappears inside. I stroll in the opposite direction. I walk down a long hallway that is lined with 8x10 black and white photographs. Caleb and Leah cutting their wedding cake, Caleb and Leah standing on a beach, Leah smoking a cigarette in front of the Eiffel tower—I turn away disgusted. I don’t want to be here anymore, this is their place; where they laugh and eat and have sex. I can’t believe how things have changed. I feel slightly left behind; like I am waking from a coma and finding out the world moved on without me. Why do I still feel the same when everyone else is different?

I head back downstairs to wait for Cammie. And then I see it—a door, an oval door. Caleb always told me that one day when he built a house he wanted to have the door to his office resemble one of those heavy medieval things you see in movies. I edge toward it and reach out to lift the circular handle that is almost as big as my head. It swings open and the sigh of new house and cologne hits me in the face.

It doesn’t even smell like him. In the last four years he has changed his cologne, I get that coma feeling again.

There are walnut bookshelves lining every wall, filled with novels and textbooks and the occasional knick-knack. I veer toward the desk and seat myself in his enormous swivel chair. I take it for a spin and wheel myself around. This is his favorite room in the house. I can tell. Everything he loves and likes and hates is in here. Autographed baseballs in a wall rack. I can almost see him extracting one from its display and tossing it into the air a few times before he lovingly puts it

back. A very diverse music selection sits in a messy pile next to his computer monitor. I notice in mild delight that the CD from the music store is among them and then there's the model Trojan horse that his father gave him when he missed his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday party. It was made out of solid bronze and needless to say, it was very heavy. Caleb hated the thing, but he always kept it on display because he said it reminded him to be a man of his word. I pick it up and turn it over until the horse's belly is facing up. There is a small trapdoor there that nobody knows about. Caleb once told me that he stored memories inside of it—memories that he didn't want anyone else seeing. I bite my lip before pulling it open. What was one more crime right? My spreadsheet was already extended past 'far gone'.

My fingers grab onto something thin and papery. I tug it out gently and unroll a vellum script of some sort. It is a drawing done with the snubbed tip of a charcoal pencil. At the bottom of the page the artist signed his name: C. Price Carrol in large, flowing letters. The artwork is of a woman's face. She is smirking and there is a slight smudge of a dimple on her cheek. I stare at the face I recognize, but can't quite place—not because it is bad artwork, but because it has been a long, long time since I have last seen it.

"Jessica Alexander," I say outloud, studying her wide eyes, "another person who trusted me and I screwed over." I re-roll the paper and set it to the side. I wonder how often Caleb still thinks of her. Does he picture what his life would have been like with her? Does he picture what it would have been like with me? Does he even think of me? I reach in again and this time I pull out something metal and round. Caleb's thumb ring: the one with the star and the diamond that I gave him for a birthday. I sigh as I put it to my lips. So, he hides it away? At least he kept it, right? Maybe some nights when he is alone and listening to that CD, he pulls it out and thinks about me. A girl can only hope. I pull out a miniature hourglass after that, in which the tiny grains of sand are silver, and then a small booklet, whose colored pages of: black, red, white, gold and green have no words. I don't know what

memories these trinkets come from, after me, I guess. I place the ornament upright on his desk and small tinkling catches my ear.

Where had I heard that sound before? My gaze sweeps the desk, and then the floor around it, looking for the culprit. Where...where? There! My hands scoop it up and a bleat escapes my throat. I don't know if I am surprised or if I knew that he would find it all along, but my mouth feels dry as I turn the object over in my palm. The penny, *our* penny. Had he gone to my apartment after I left, to find me? Had he seen it lying there on my abused coffee table? My eyes tear up as I imagine how confused he must have felt. How had he known to take the one thing that symbolized the start of our romance? Leah must have told him, I realize bitterly. Despite her promise to me, she must have dished up the truth with a sick satisfaction. To keep him away from me, because she must have known he would try to find me. I am sulking, slouched, and nauseated when I hear my name being called. It echoes across the big house like it is being sung by a backup singer.

"Olivia!" Cammie comes careening into his office, snapping me out of my daze. She is waving something in her hands, her blonde hair bouncing every which way in her excitement.

"Olivia," she says again, her eyes wide. "There is something you need to see."

She holds up a manila envelope, which she then tosses towards me on the desk.

"Where did you find this?" I don't want to touch it.

"Just shut your mouth and open it," she folds her arms across her chest and I can't help but notice how worried she looks. I reach out to grab it and gently push open the top allowing its contents to spill onto Caleb's desk. Letter's, pictures.....I study them for a minute, before I feel shock waves pass through my body.

“Oh my gosh! Cammie?” I look at her shaking my head. I am so utterly confused.

“I told you so,” she says. “Read them.”

“Lying on the desk are pictures of me...and Turner. There is the engagement shot, the one that we had professionally taken after he proposed and a shot of us at the zoo together during our first year of dating.

“I don’t understand—” I say blankly and Cammie, dear, detective Cammie, points to the pile of letters.

“Am I going to be upset?” I ask biting my lower lip.

“Very.”

I pull at the first letter. It is written by hand on plain white sheet of paper.

Hello Jo,

I know you hate it when I call you that, but I can’t resist.

It’s a strange request that you’ve propositioned me with, and I must admit my curiosity is peaked. I don’t know what trouble you’ve gotten yourself into now, but if its anything like high school.....I’m in!

Joking aside, I do owe you one. Superbowl tickets are worth my firstborn, so if you want me to take a pretty girl out on a date, I'm not going to complain.

Anyway, gorgeous I'll keep you updated on the status. She better be smokin!

Turner

My wail of anger starts out as a groan and gradually escalates until I sound like a fire truck's siren. Cammie looks worried, so I calm myself and stop.

"Next one." I hold my hand out to her, and she places another sheet of paper between my fingers.

**Jo-Jo,**

**Can't believe this is happening! I mean what the Hell?**

**I'm sure you'll be happy to hear that we are getting married. I finally took your advice and asked her.**

**Wow! I guess I should say thanks. Thanks!**

**I'll be in Florida visiting her next month, maybe we can all do lunch; your man and O and I. Won't kill you to talk to her!**

**I know there's some kind of sordid past between the two of you, but whatever it is, she'll get over it. You are the force that brought us together after all. Let's talk soon.**

**The Engaged,**

## Turner

“Fuck,” I say.

“That’s an understatement,” Cammie walks around to where I’m sitting and flips open Caleb’s copy machine.

“She set me up! She somehow knew I went to Texas and she had one of her friends make moves on me—to keep me away from Caleb!” my voice is getting louder now and Cammie pats me on the shoulder sympathetically.

“Turner is Leah’s friend. She used him and he didn’t even know.”

“Well, she gave him Superbowl tickets. Those aren’t easy to come by you know,” Cammie pushes the start button and a whirring noise fills the room.

“I am engaged to Leah’s stogy.”

I feel like balling my eyes out and breaking her filigree egg at the same time. How could I have been so stupid? No, I wasn’t stupid. There is no way I could have known that Turner and Leah were connected. But, I should have known that she wouldn’t trust me to stay out of Caleb’s life and that she would take extra precautions. I was planning a wedding with *her* precaution!

“Let’s burn her house down,” I say standing up.

“Now, now, Lucy, this is Caleb’s house, too. No need to punish him for what Leah’s done.” Despite the fact she’s supposed to be Ethel, she uses a Ricky Ricardo accent.

“I just saved her from a twenty- year jail sentence,” I moan. “I defended that disgusting, evil, treacherous little bitch.”

“Yes. Too bad you’re such a kick ass lawyer huh? Anyway, there’s more bad news...”

“More? How could there be more?”

She pulls a stick out of her back pocket and places it in my palm.

“What is it?” I choke, blinking back my tears. Cammie rolls her eyes.

“A fertility monitor.”

“Huh?”

“It’s a test stick used to monitor hormone levels present in your urine...so you can get preggers...”

I flip my hand over and drop it.

“They’re trying to have a baby?” I gasp. Why hadn’t he told me that?

“*She* is trying to have a baby. I found that little sucker hiding out in a ‘secret’ shoebox with those letters,” she nods to Turner’s correspondence, “and a fertility chart. If they were both trying to have a baby, don’t you think her baby gadgets would be in the bathroom cabinet?”

I stare at her blankly.

“O-livia! She is trying to get pregnant because you are back on the scene She’s scared of losing him. Caleb doesn’t know! You have to stop them before he is trapped forever.”

“Why? I can’t—” I say, miserably slipping into the chair.

“A fertility chart,” I repeat and I have no idea what that is.

“Yes, it tells her the days she will be most likely to be able to conceive. What century are you from?”

“Did the fertility chart say this weekend?” I feel the breath sucked out of me now, like someone just punched me in the stomach.

Cammie nods.

“Here,” she hands me the photocopies of the letters from Turner. “Look, it’s time to do something. And I’m not talking about your usual routine of sneaky and dishonest. This time

you need to tell him the truth and come clean about everything.”

“Like what? What’s left to come clean about? He already knows the big stuff.”

“Like, telling him that Leah ran you off when you left Florida and that she tried to bribe you with money...how about that?”

“That’s not going to make a difference. He already knows she’s as rotten as I am. He freaking loves immoral girls.”

“What about confronting him about his feelings for you? He found you again, even after he knew what you did when he had amnesia. He’s still in love with you, Olivia. You just have to convince him of that.”

I think about how he showed up to my condo the night before Leah’s sentencing. He was always showing up wasn’t he? Showing up at the music store, showing up at the grocery store, showing up in my office. Damn it. Cammie was right, there had to be something to that.

“Okay,” I say.

“Okay,” she agrees. “Now turn that computer on, we have to find out where they went.”

Two hours later, I walk through the door of my condo. The windows are open and the salty sea air hits my face. I take it in in great gulps and start searching for my rat fiancée. I remind myself to be calm, to act like a lady, but when I see him sunbathing on my oversized patio I swear at him loudly, so that he spins around almost dropping his water.

“Here,” I pull the ring from my finger and toss it at him. It goes careening across the tile and spins to a stop at his feet. “I’m going on a trip. When I get back, BE GONE.”

He jumps up looking confused. He is looking left to right like the answer for my erratic behavior can be found there.

“Wha—?”



I take in his salmon colored swim trunks, his Gucci sun glasses, the way he moves like a robot, and I inwardly cringe. What was I thinking?

I wasn't! I was stuffing something in my heart. Cammie was right!

"You know Leah! All these months of me defending her in court and you never said a word!"

Turner's face goes white, despite his ridiculous tan. He flaps his hands around like he can't decide whether to surrender or point at me.

"You dated me for Superbowl tickets!" I am yelling now.

"Yes, but—"

"Shut up! Just shut up."

I collapse onto a lawn chair and put my head in my hands. I feel like I am ninety years old.

"Turner, we're not right for each other. I don't want to marry you, I'm sorry."

"Well," he puffs. "Don't I get a say in this?"

I look at him from between my fingers.

"No, actually," I sigh and stand up. "I have to go pack."

I head inside.

"Why?" he calls after me. "Why can't we work it out?"

I pause looking over my shoulder.

"There's nothing to work out. I can't give you something that I don't have.

## Chapter Eighteen

Eight hours later, I am sitting in business class, sipping on a coke and drumming my fingers impatiently on the beverage tray in front of me.

Caleb and the Scarlet Beast are in Rome. Yes, that's what I said, *Rome*. The Bahamas weren't good enough for her and neither was Marco Island; both of which were listed as top baby making locations on her computer's Internet history. Instead, she opted for The De La Ville Inter-Continental hotel where her favorite actress Susan Sarandon became pregnant. How do I know such a personal detail? Because, along with breaking into her home with my psychotic best friend, I also hacked into her email account and read a correspondence between her mother and herself.

“Is this your first time to Rome?”

I look over and see a pair of very green eyes looking at me from the seat next door.

“Um, yes,” I clip my words so that I sound as rude as possible and look back out the window. *Yucky—chit chatter*. I am in no mood to converse. I am on the most important mission of my life.

“You’re going to love it. It’s the best place in the world.”

“Yea, to make babies,” I mumble.

“I’m sorry, what was that?”

“Oh, nothing,” I say. “I’m going there on business, so it’s all work and no fun for me,” I laugh shrilly and pretend to dig around in my purse for something.

“Too bad. You should at least make time to see the Coliseum—absolutely amazing.” I look over at him now because that’s actually not a bad idea. Holy crap! I’m going to Rome! I’m now officially excited. In all the commotion of booking a ticket, throwing things in a suitcase and breaking up with Turner, it completely escaped me.

“Maybe I will,” I say, smiling at him. He wasn’t bad looking. Actually, he was roguishly handsome with coal black hair, caramel skin, and a chiseled jaw. He had one of those distinctly Jewish noses. I suddenly feel self-conscious about my pasty complexion.

“Noah Stein,” he offers me his hand and I take it. “Olivia Kaspen.”

“Olivia Kaspen,” he repeats, “That’s a very poetic name.”

“Well, that’s about the strangest thing anyone has ever said to me.”

I pull a face and he smiles.

“What do you do for a living?” I ask, trying to sound pleasant. *Oh, my gosh—I just broke up with Turner—oh-my-gosh!*

“I own my own business. You?”

“Lawyer,” I say. I look down and see that my hands are shaking.

“I have to go to the ladies room, do you mind?” He shakes his head and scoots out into the aisle so that I can get past. I almost knock a little girl and a stewardess over as I stumble toward the signs for the lavatory.

Once inside, I collapse in front of the toilet and throw up.

*Shit, shit, shit, shit.*

My entire life has changed in the last few hours and I’m just now realizing it. Turner, poor Turner, but not really, because he dated me for Superbowl tickets. But he loved me, right? Did I love him? No. It was the right thing to do, breaking up with him. It was the only thing to do. I rinse my mouth in the sink and lean back against the wall. This was insanity; rushing off to Italy, chasing after my ex-boyfriend—all on a whim. What would my mother say? I stifle a sob and bite my lip. Alone in Rome; I didn’t even speak Italian, for Pete’s sake. This was bad. This was really, really bad.

I go back to my seat and Noah graciously lets me in without a word about my swollen face. After taking a few large swigs of my flat soda, I slide two fingers underneath my eyes to clear up any smudgy mascara and turn to Noah, frowning.

“I’m not going to Rome on business,” I say, and he doesn’t look surprised. Why should he? He doesn’t know that I’m a perpetual liar.

“Oh,” he says, raising an eyebrow, “Ok.”

I take a deep breath. It feels exhilarating to tell the truth.

“I’m going to find Caleb Drake and when I do, I have to tell him the truth about everything. I am so scared.”

He looks at me with new interest. I’ve transitioned from being a pretty girl, to a woman of intrigue.

“What type of truth is it?”

“A messy one. There’s going to be a lot of clean-up,” I sigh.

“I’d like to hear about it.”

I shift under his gaze. He has the intensity of a nuclear weapon in those two green orbs.

“It’s a long story.”

“Well,” he says raising his hands and looking around the cabin. “It’s going to be a long flight.”

“Okay. I’ll tell you on one condition,” I say, pulling my legs up to my chest and holding them there. Noah looks at my knees and then my face like he can’t quite grasp why a grown woman is sitting like a little girl. “You have to tell me the worst thing you’ve ever done.”

“The worst thing I’ve ever done?” he looks off into some distant memory and grimaces.

“When I was in the ninth grade, there was this girl in my class whom we called Felicity Fattness. As a prank I snuck into her backyard and stole a pair of her underwear off the line and then hung them on the schools front door with a sign that said, Felicity Fattness Wears Parachute Panties. When she saw it, she burst into tears, tripped over her school bag and had to be rushed to the emergency room to have five stitches put into her chin. I felt horrible—still do actually.”

“That was mean,” I say, nodding.

“Yeah, she’s a total babe now. I saw her at my high school reunion and asked her out on a date. She laughed at me, said I’d already seen her panties once and it wouldn’t be happening again.”

I laugh—a real laugh, so that my whole body shakes. Noah joins me. I am still smiling, when I realize that I have another boy scout on my hands.

“So, Felicity? That’s the worst thing you’ve ever done?”

“I stole a magnet from the dollar store once.”

“Oh boy,” I say. “I’m not sure you’re ready for my story.”

“Try me.”

I look at his face and remember how Caleb once told me that you could judge someone’s personality by their appearance. If this is true, I decide that I can trust Noah because he has the kindest eye’s I have ever seen.

“I fell in love underneath a tree,” I began.

### Twelve hours later

It is raining in Rome and I am standing outside of the De La Ville Inter-Continental Hotel, hiding underneath a goofy yellow poncho that is barely shielding me from the pouring rain. I don’t know why I am here right at this moment, as nothing can be accomplished with me looking like a drenched rat. But, I feel the need to see his window and to look at the view his own eyes had been enjoying all morning. Their hotel is small but opulent and it sits majestically on top of the Spanish Steps. I can imagine that you can see the whole city from their little balcony. How romantic. I sigh and continue watching. There is movement behind the window and then a familiar red head emerges and crowds under the awning with a glowing cigarette in her hand. Didn’t she know that nicotine negatively affected fertility?

“Keep smoking,” I whisper, narrowing my eyes. A second later the door pops open again and looking like a Roman god, Caleb emerges to join her. He is shirtless and his hair is damp from a shower, he most likely just took. I pretend that my heart is not doing the electric slide and wipe two

fingers underneath my eyes to clear away the mascara that is pooling there. *Don't you touch him, don't*—she reaches out a hand and runs it along his chest seductively. Caleb catches it at the waistline of his pants and laughs.

I look away when he pulls her towards him and wraps his arms around her. My heart begins to ache, a feeling I have been best friends with for the last nine years. I stomp my foot on the pavement agitated and an animal wail emerges from my mouth. I am so freaking sick of loving him.

“Okay Olivia, they are about to put the fertility thing to the test. I have to stop Leah’s spawn from happening,” I sing this to myself while pulling my cell phone from my pocket. The call was going to cost me a fortune, but who cares right? You can’t put a price on love.

Dialing the De La Ville’s number, I stuff myself underneath the overhang of a perfume shop and wait impatiently until I hear the short burst of ringing.

“Buona Sera, De La Ville Inter-Continental. Non ci sono titoli che contengano la parola?” a female voice answers.

“Um...hi...do you speak English?”

“Si. How can I help you?”

“I am trying to reach a guest of your hotel. Mr. Caleb Drake—it’s urgent and I was wondering if you could page him immediately and have him return my call.” I hear her typing something into the computer.

“And your name?” *Uh oh!* What was his secretary’s name again? It rhymed with Pina Colada...

“Rena Vovada,” I breathe. “I’m calling from his office, tell him it’s important that he calls back right away. Thank you so much.” And I hang up before she has the chance to ask me anymore questions. With the task done, I scurry back into the rain where I have a view of their balcony. Caleb and Leah are still there. She is stubbing out her cigarette with one hand and allowing him to pull her back into the room with the other. I see his head jerk towards the inside of their suite and then their

hands break loose as he disappears through the door. I imagine that I can hear the distant trill of their room phone.

Good. That would buy me at least a half an hour. Hopefully enough time to kill the mood. Satisfied, I head back to the Montecito Rio, the hotel I had booked myself into earlier. It wasn't as flashy as the De La Ville, but it was charming nonetheless and I didn't care a thing for Susan Sarandon.

My shoes are soaked and sloshing water when I traipse into the lobby. The girl behind the counter glares at me and picks up the phone to call maintenance.

"You are Miss Kaspen, no?" She calls after me as I head towards the elevators. I hesitate before turning around.

"Yes."

"I have a message here for you," she extends a piece of paper my way and I grip it gingerly between two of my driest fingers.

"From whom?" I was almost too scared to ask, but when she replies, "a Noah Stein," I feel a calm wash over my anxiety. Noah, the complete stranger that I spilt my guts to, it was nice that he called. It made me feel like being in Rome was no big deal. I had friends here.

I take my note and my still dripping poncho up to my room and climb into the shower without bothering to read the message. Everything including my new buddy Noah was on hold until I was warm and dry.

When I finally emerge, I curl up on the miniscule bed and unfold the wet paper.

Dinner at eight

Tavernetta

You have to eat...



I smile. I did have to eat and why not with someone that I really liked. I pick up the phone and dial the cell number that Noah handed me in the airport before we parted.

“For emergencies only,” he said winking at me. “Don’t abuse my secret cell number.”

I hesitated only for a second before taking it. I was alone in Rome. I might need him.

“Noah, it’s Olivia,” I say into the receiver.

“I don’t want to talk to you unless you’re telling me that you’re coming.”

“I am,” I laugh.

“Good. The restaurant’s a little bit dressy, are you equipped?”

“Let’s see, I came here to convince the love of my life that he needs to be with me again...I have four “take me back and love me dresses.” Which one would you like?”

“The black one...”

“Okay,” I sigh. “I’ll see you at eight.”

I hang up feeling giddy with excitement. This was it. I was taking control of my life again. Tonight I would eat dinner and relax. Tomorrow I would find Caleb and tell him everything. The Cherry Tart had no idea what was coming. Hurricane Olivia was about to rip through Rome and stir things up.

As I get ready for dinner, I think about the last straw that broke our relationship. The way my heart pounded as I stood outside of Caleb’s office, knowing that the person I loved more than anything was betraying me at that very moment. I considered walking away, pretending that there was someone else in his

office with the flirtatious girl. Then I thought of my father, and the way his cheating had hurt my mother more than the cancer ever could. I had to see. Not just him, but her. Who was the girl that had the power to break us apart?

### The Past

This was going to be super bad. Hurtful. Life altering. The door slid open noiselessly, so noiselessly in fact that neither Caleb nor his collaborator knew that it was open and that there was a very stunned audience standing in its wake.

“Caleb,” I said in a dry voice, because at this point, the life was already sucked out of me.

Their two heads snapped apart and he took a jerky step back. I eyed the way her dress was hiked up her thigh with a sinking feeling in my stomach. This was reality—her, him, and my life falling apart. There was no way he could explain this away and there was no possibility of me believing him even if he tried.

I looked at his face. It was very, very pale.

“Caleb,” I said again. He looked so stunned I cringed. *Sorry for being caught.* His mouth opened and closed, but nothing came out. The girl looked smug. I wanted to scream *Her? Why her?*

“I loved you,” I said and that was the first time I had ever said it.

His face crumpled with emotion. How cruel was I to tell him something he’d been waiting for, in the moment of his faithlessness? It was a low blow but this was a fight and I was ready to go down swinging. The little trampette on the table looked at us in amusement.

“You must be Olivia,” she said, hopping down from the desk. I felt revolted at the fact that she knew my name. Did they talk about me? A framed picture of me was positioned near where she had been sitting. My face was witness to their carrying on. I didn’t look at her. I couldn’t. She left the room in a swishing of skirts, leaving two broken people to face each other.

“I never meant for this,” he said when the door clicked shut.

“To be caught? Or to be cheating?” I tried to control the tremor in my voice but it was useless.

“Olivia,” he pleaded taking a step towards me.

“No!” I held up my hand for him to stop. “Don’t you dare come near me. How could you? There is nothing worse that you could do to me. Just like my father,” I spat.

“Your father and I are nothing alike. You have used his sins as an excuse not to love for far too long.”

I couldn’t believe he said that. I loved people, I loved lots of people. I just didn’t tell them.

“You make me sick,” I said. “You could have just been a man about it and told me that you didn’t want me anymore.”

“I’ll always want you Olivia. It’s not about not wanting you, it was about wanting you too much and you not wanting me back!”

I swiped at an angry tear that was ripping across my face and smiled venomously. “So, it’s about sex then?”

Caleb threw up his hands in exasperation and looked at me with more anger than he ever had.

“I think that I showed you time and time again, that it was never about sex,” his voice was low and menacing. “I loved you enough to put aside every one of my feelings to accommodate yours. What did I get in return? Coldness and emotional detachment. You are selfish and bitter and you wouldn’t know a good thing if it fell out of the sky at your feet.”

I knew what he said was true. I was all of those things and more, but he could have just left, he didn’t have to make a fool out of me.

“Well then, let the healing process start for you right now.” I left him standing in semi-darkness and walked calmly to the nearest exit.

*You will not hurt, you will not hurt, you will not hurt....*

I hurt like hell. I hurt so violently that I could barely walk down the stairs, so I sat. I sat and I shook and I wished for a meteor to fall to earth right at that moment and hit the spot where I was sitting. I felt raw and exposed like all of my insides had been turned out and I was bleeding all over the floor. How could this happen? Why? He was all that I had.

I heard the exit door a flight above me open and a burst of music followed the breeze down the stairs. Fearing that it was Caleb coming to find me, I hopped up and ran the four remaining flights not stopping until I was in my car.

I turned the key in the ignition with force and the car hiccupped to life.

Damn him. I could love. I had it all inside of me. If he knew so much about me, why couldn’t he see that?

If I didn’t love him, how could it hurt so badly? Nothing, gave him the right to cheat—nothing!

Instead of heading home my tires swerved right and I merged onto the 595 almost sideswiping a minivan. He had all of me,

everything I had to give, and look what he did. I trusted him.

“No, no, no, no,” the tears started pouring in masses down my face. “This can’t be happening.” I pulled over, afraid I was going to kill someone with my driving. My mind was unhinging, my light was turning dark.

“Caleb, no,” I tasted salt seep into my lips. I hated myself, more than I hated him and more than I ever hated my father. I was a tragic mess. The ugliest kind of person. I started driving again. I couldn’t go back home, he would come find me. A hotel was still booked, just a couple of hundred miles north, I would go there.

Caleb tried calling my cell phone. I sent his calls to voice mail and turned up the volume on the radio, anything was better than the sound of my sobbing.

The hotel Caleb had booked for us was nice. I remember the fountains and frescos in the lobby and the way the employees greeted you with genuine smiles, but that night my eyes were blind to everything except Caleb’s betrayal. I checked in and carried my overnight bag up the stairs, to the room.

It was still early when I had taken my shower and dressed. I pulled out the dress I had bought just for this weekend. It was airport blue, with just a little bit of black lace on the waist—his two favorite things. I pulled it over my head and went to stare at myself in the mirror. I looked beautiful. I was so ugly on the inside though, what did it matter? I couldn’t stay here in this room by myself, I’d go mad. I grabbed my purse and ran to the door, trying not to see his hand on her thigh.

I knew what I was going to do, something that would hurt him more than he hurt me. That’s the way I fought, dirty. An eye for an eye.

I wandered the busy Daytona streets, staring blankly into store windows. I found exactly what I was looking for a couple of blocks away, Swig Martini Bar. It was subdued and desperate, just like me. I entered through the broad doorway

and flashed my ID to the bouncer. A mixture of smoke and a sweet perfume hit me in the face. The smell reminded me of the night I went to Caleb's frat party on a mission to win him back. How depressing. I crowded to the bar and ordered a whiskey sour. The bartender eyed me curiously when I downed it in one shot and asked for another. I saw him pour an extra shot into the second one—bless him. I took my second drink to a little patio outside where I secured a table facing the ocean. It was a good setting. Mysterious, alone, and looking thoughtful. It was a trick that the best of women knew. Separate yourself from the herd, look beautiful, and a man would wander over.

He did. Tall, blonde, and in dress pants with a tie pulled in disarray around his neck.

“Hard day?” he asked, leaning on the banister and looking out over the water.

“Yes. You?”

“Very.” He smiled at me and I saw by the yellowness of his teeth that he was a smoker.

“Can I buy you a drink?” he nodded toward my empty glass and I shook my head yes.

“A shot of anything.”

“Okay.”

He came back with two. Good. I thought. My travels to wasted land would go all the faster.

We drank for over an hour before I invited him to the dance floor. He was a mediocre dancer but what did it matter at this point? I ignored my disgust at the way he rammed himself into the back of me and kept moving, focusing on the swirling in my head. The night became thick with hasty kisses and liquor provoked fondling and by midnight we were skipping through the streets toward my hotel.

“Hold on,” he said once we were inside and he was lying on top of me. I remember seeing him pull a condom from his

wallet. He slapped it in the palm of his hand like I had seen people do with cigarette cartons and then ripped the packaging open with his teeth. I cringed, disgusted.

And then I remember feeling nothing. I just lay there and he didn't seem to care at all. *So this is how I am losing my virginity.* I remember thinking. *To a stranger, not to Caleb.* When it was done, he fell asleep. I laid awake all night, sick to my stomach and hating myself. In the morning he left early. I never got his name. I waited anxiously for the guilt to come but all I felt was numbness. I knew that if I searched hard enough for those feelings that were lurking beneath the surface, I would find revulsion, but I wasn't ready to hate myself. I was too busy hating Caleb. Around midday I heard a fumbling outside of the door. I knew he would come. He obtained a key to the room at the front desk and let himself in. I was sitting at the window when the door opened, I hadn't showered and my hair was a rat's nest around my face.

He didn't say anything when he saw me, his eyes roamed around the room looking for signs of my pain. The mess, my clothes tossed here and there. His eyes fell on the condom wrapper that was ripped and perched on the nightstand. His hand on her thigh—my condom wrapper. These two images are burned into both of our memories forever, reaching out as a stumbling block into future relationships.

Unbeknownst to me, Caleb would never again be able to look at a condom wrapper without feeling sick. I saw realization snap into his face. His hurt came in the form of a twitch and then a gentle draining of the light from his eyes. I took it a step further, because remember, I fight dirty.

“I took Jessica Alexander to get the abortion. I told her to do it.” It took him a minute to grasp what I was saying. I looked at the cars that were driving by. I pictured myself putting my emotions in one of those cars and then watching it drive away. *Feel nothing,* I told myself. *Feel nothing like he felt nothing when he cheated on me.*

“I wanted you so badly that I connived and manipulated to get you. I stalked you for months. I knew every girl you dated. I knew every place you took each one. I planned it all out.” He still said nothing but I could feel his silent raging somewhere behind me. It was building and rolling off his body in waves.

“I always loved you. From the moment you first spoke to me.” Still nothing.

“I had sex with a stranger, to hurt you.” Those words sucked the air right out of the room. I felt my lungs constrict as the weight of what I had done started pressing down on me. *Oh god, oh god, oh god.....*

I heard a thud and I turned slowly to see Caleb, on his knees, his face fallen into his hands. I could see his body shaking, from tears or anger I did not know. He made no sound; there were just those silent convulsions that I would remember forever. My body started to tremble as I realized what was happening. Everything was gone now. Me, him—us. We were forever changed. I didn’t want to live. I considered hurling myself out of the window so I wouldn’t have to face the agony of it all. I had hurt the person I loved the most, the only person I had. All to avenge myself. And in the end, I had destroyed myself. Minutes passed, then an hour. I wanted to go to him, to beg him to forgive me, to tell him that I would kill myself if he didn’t, but I couldn’t. I had too much cold in me for that. Why didn’t I see it before? The person I really was. How had I never known that I was an empty hole incapable of loving?

When he stood up, I looked away.

“I’m sorry, Olivia, for hurting you,” he said hoarsely and my heart heaved in my chest. Why was his voice so gentle? Why wasn’t he screaming at me? I was the one who did the hurting. It was me. My fault. My sin. My mess.

“You will never see me again after today.” He paused and his next words struck me so deeply I would never recover from them. “I will love again, Olivia, *you* will hurt forever. What you’ve done is...You are worthless because you make



yourself that way. You will remember me every day for the rest of your life because I was the one and you threw me away.” And then he left.

## Chapter Nineteen

Noah was waiting for me outside of the restaurant when my cab pulled up. Before I could reach for my purse, he pulled a bill from his wallet and handed it to the cabbie, motioning for him to keep the change.

It was a hundred euro.

“You look ravishing,” he says, kissing me on the cheek.

“Thank you,” I take the arm that he offers me and we float into the most charming restaurant I have ever seen.

*I am in Italy.*

“So, how do you like Rome so far?” he says.

Driving here in the cab, I had seen a city both old and new. Crumbling buildings defiantly stood where they were

placed thousands of years before, right in the midst of brand new architecture. It seemed like magic every time you turned your head and get a glimpse of forever ago, like the past was rising up out of the ashes and reminding you she was still there. And then there were the motorbikes and the scooters and the teeny tiny cars that careened and swerved and honked hysterically at everything in their path. The laundry that fluttered merrily on almost every balcony and the way as people walked down the street you heard music drifting out from here and there, providing Italian life with a continuous soundtrack.

“I wish I never had to leave,” I admit. “I’ve never seen anything like it.” Noah nods and waits for me to be seated before he seats himself.

“The first time I was here, I thought the whole place looked like a ghetto. It took a couple of days for me to fall in love, but ever since then, I find myself craving this place when I’m home in America. I do everything I can to come as often as possible.”

I could see that happening to myself. No wonder Leah wanted to make her baby here. She must have visited before. All rich girls made a pilgrimage to Rome at some point in their lavish lives, for shopping of course.

When we both had a glass of wine in front of us and the waiter was walking away with our order in his head. Noah turned to me with a concerned look on his face.

“Did you see him? Your Caleb?”

“From a distance,” I laugh because he was so far from “my Caleb” it was ridiculous. “I was five floors below, spying on their hotel window.”

“Do you know what plan of action you are going to take yet?”

I shook my head.

“Not a clue, but I have to do it. I’ll figure it out...I have a couple of hours to come up with something.”

“An honest something?” he teases, cocking his head in a way that made his hair fall attractively into his eyes.

“Yes,” I laugh. It was so nice to laugh.

“You know, Olivia. What you’re doing. It’s the right thing.”

“What? Being honest?” I take a nervous sip of my wine. There was nothing more uncomfortable than discussing my integrity, or lack thereof.

“No.”

I look up surprised.

“Going after what you love. Despite everything you’ve done, and I won’t sugarcoat, you’ve done some pretty lousy things, but you did it all because you love this single human being so much you couldn’t help yourself. There is an honesty in that,”

“Ha! There is no honesty in me, I assure you.”

“You’re wrong.”

I cock my skeptical head. No one in their right mind would call me honest, especially if they’d heard my story.

“I’ve never met someone who’s quite as honest about their bad deeds and who speaks with so much candor about their feelings. Are you a bad person, Olivia?”

“Yes,” I say easily.

“See. Your behavior is the problem. You allow yourself to act on every feeling rather than taking the time to be virtuous.”

“Virtue,” I repeat the foreign word, trying my hardest to concentrate on its meaning.

“It’s funny how your life keeps bumping into his,” he says, changing the direction of the conversation. “I mean what are the chances of his getting amnesia and then running into you twice in twenty-four hours?”

I shrug.

“—only to strike up a conversation with you, both times, and then ask you out to coffee?” he continues.

“I know,” I sigh, “I bought a subscription to irony the day I met him.”

“There’s something more there, that you’re not seeing.”

“What? Like a fate thing?” I hated fate. He was a bored little brat who couldn’t let people heal in peace.

“I don’t think so.”

“Then what *do* you think?” The space in between his eyebrows was puckered and his eyes were seeing something I was dying to get a peak of.

“I *think* that after the first time you give your heart away, you never get it back. The rest of your life is just you pretending that you still have a heart.”

“Okaay...”

“So, just think about that,” he shrugs casually. “He’s living, but he’s broken.”

“How do you know?” I ask. Caleb didn’t look broken to me. He appeared to have completely moved on.

“Because from approximately twelve hours of knowing you, I have decided that I will never forget you, even if we never speak another word to each other. You leave a very strong impression. I can only imagine how that poor bastard feels after so many years of keeping company with you.”

“It feels like a very hard blow to the head,” I laugh, but I am sadly serious. He stares at me for what seems like forever and then he says, “Fight clean. Be honest. That’s the way you’ll win him back. But, if you see that he’s truly happy, leave him be.”

“I don’t know if I can do that,” I say honestly. “I’m not sure I’m capable of walking away.”

“That’s because you don’t know how to love.”

“Are you saying I don’t love him?” I am shocked. After everything I told him, I thought that my love was obvious. Who would fight this hard without love?

“I’m saying that you don’t love him as much as you love yourself.”

*Silence.*

I take several seconds to cultivate my anger.

“Why? Why do you think that?”

“He has carved for himself some semblance of a life without you. You are willing to uproot that, throw his life into turmoil once again. Have you thought about the fact that more than one person will be hurt? He belongs to Leah now, too, and what about the child that might already have come into existence?”

I flinch. I hadn’t thought about the baby.

“There is more to loving someone than just making yourself happy. You have to want him to be happier than you are.”

“He’d be happier with me,” I say confidently. “We were made for each other.”

“But he would have guilt. For abandoning his wife, his child, for missing out on years of your life. And where would the trust be? Do you think that he won’t remember what you’ve done?”

I bite back tears.

“We can fix it. Sure, there will be scars, but there will be love enough to cover them,” I was begging him to side with me now, for him to see what I saw. Caleb and I were supposed to be together. No matter how we tried to stay apart, something kept guiding us back together.

“Maybe, but are you willing to put him through the whirlwind for a broken dream?”

I sniff.

“Olivia,” he laid his hand on top of mine, “There was a time for you and Caleb. You chose and now it has passed. Until now, you have proven that you are capable of pretty much anything.” I flinch at the truth of his words. “Prove to yourself that you are capable of something selfless.”

I want to argue with him, beg him to understand that my life will be tasteless without Caleb.

“You are a very wise man, Noah,” I smile miserably.

After dinner, we share a cab back to my hotel. Noah steps out to say his goodbye before continuing on to his hotel.

I don't know why, but I am terribly sad. I feel the burning of tears in my eyes.

And then I know without a doubt that if I were a whole person, Noah and I would have had a chance together. He is so wise and good, I would have been able to fall in love with him and we would have married and had a family. I saw it all in a flash second. Noah and I. Maybe he saw it too, because at that moment he leaned down and kissed me on the lips. It was a sad kiss, full of what ifs. When he pulls his lips away, my head is spinning and I feel like I have a gullet full of grenades.

“Good luck, Olivia,” he smiles, “Choose wisely.”

And then he lowers himself into the cab and is driven away with all my thoughts trailing after him. I stand on the sidewalk and watch the tires of his cab spray up the day's rain. It is drizzling outside, but I don't care. I like the rain. I decide to walk, and as I do, I think about what to do. Surprisingly, there are no thoughts of plotting revenge. I am thinking about my own inner decay and about how selfish I have always been. I count the times I have made good decisions in my life and come up with only five. Deciding to go on that first date with Caleb, telling him the truth about what I'd done, becoming a lawyer, breaking up with Turner, and coming to Rome and meeting Noah. Five good decisions. It seems like such a

shabby number. But, my pitiful handful represents a small possibility. Noah saw something in me and he took the time to nurture it. Now, I had to imprint truth in my heart. I was not going to repay evil for evil. Leah had won him and she deserved to keep him.

I wander, wet and shivering, to the Trinità dei Monti, the beautiful church built by Saint Frances of Paola and I stand looking up at the Obelisco Sallustiano. This is where I make my final decision, in front of a building that represents goodness. *You better get home before it's too late.* This time the sky was not red. I was sidestepping trouble, saying a final goodbye to it. I wonder if I can make a habit out of doing the right thing and then I smile because I know what a long journey that will be for me.

When I feel ready, I head back towards the De La Ville where Caleb and Leah are staying.

The quietness of the streets speak of the lateness of the hour. I stand looking at his window once again but this time my mind is made up. I am saying goodbye. I think about Caleb as a father and I smile to myself. He would be great at it, like he was at everything else, and then I think of Jessica Alexander. He would have been a dad already, if it wasn't for me. I suck my lungs full of the sweet Italian air.

“In a sense I'm so far gone, I don't know what to say,” I begin. “I love you so much, and there are so many things that I didn't get to tell you. I was so scared of the way that you loved me, Caleb.” I swipe at a tear that is leaking from my eye and continue. “You changed everything. I was so frightened of losing you that I did everything in my power to drive you away. I thought that if I didn't, eventually you would see that you were wasting your time with me and leave anyway. I miss you. No, not just miss you, my heart aches every day because you're not there. I am so sorry for what I did. All of it. Please, please don't forget me, because the possibility of that hurts more than anything else.”

“I never forgot you.”

I get chills. It takes a minute for the impossibility of the situation to sink in.

“Caleb,” I sigh his name as I turn around to face him. I do not feel terribly surprised at irony’s latest joke. There is something about my life that is scripted with his. We keep crossing—no, crashing together. Caleb is standing a few feet away from me with a plastic shopping bag in his hand. I can see a bottle of wine poking out over the top.

“What are you doing here?” he asks shaking his head in amazement.

“I came to find you,” I say honestly. “To tell you that—” I glance up at his window to indicate the point of my speech.

“You weren’t going to say it to my face?”

“No.”

“It’s a very far way to travel to say something that important to my hotel window.”

“I had no right to come,” I admit, shrugging. “I’m sorry. I broke into your house and found out you were here.”

He squeezes his eyes shut and it looks like he wants to laugh.

“Cammie help you?”

I nod.

“I’m glad you came,” he says softly, “I was just thinking about you.”

I jerk in shock. “You were?” He smiles at the look on my face.

“Sure. I think about you all the time.”

I bite hard on my bottom lip to keep from crying. I am so confused I don’t know what to say.

“Let’s walk,” he says, and I fall into step beside him. “I never forgot you,” he says again.



“Well, you did for a while,” I say, studying the ground.

“No, that’s what I’m trying to tell you. I never had amnesia. I faked it.”

I stop walking.

“You did what?”

“Olivia,” he stops and looks me in the eyes. “I faked my amnesia.”

I feel like the world is falling out from beneath my feet. Caleb and I are in Rome. I am in Rome. He never had amnesia. He thinks about me all the time. He never had amnesia.

“Why...what...why?” I want to grab him by the shirt collar and shake the answer out of him. Instead, I stand with my hands clenched at my sides.

“After everything happened with you and me, I tried to heal. I knew that I needed to forget you and move on. I hurt so much; everyday felt like a death sentence. I mourned you like you were dead and then, I met Leah. We were set up on a blind date and I remember feeling hope that day. It was the first day in a year that I felt hope. We took our time getting to know each other, I bought her a ring.” He shot me a look to see if I remembered the iceberg.

“And then, all of a sudden I missed you again. I mean, I never stopped missing you, but this time it hit me hard. I couldn’t go to sleep for a single night without seeing you in my dreams. I compared everything Leah did to everything I remembered about you. It was like the old wound opened itself up again and I was bleeding out my feelings for you.”

I close my eyes at his words. Words that I want to hear badly but that are making my heart ache so terribly I can barely breathe.

“I went on that business trip to Scranton and I was glad to get away from her for a few days. I needed to think and sort things out before I gave her that ring. Then the accident

happened. I woke up in that car with the person next to me dead and I didn't know who I was. My amnesia was induced by massive stress and the concussion to my head. By the time I reached the emergency room, I remembered everything. I lay on that bed in the hospital and I kept thinking, if only Olivia were here.

I would be happy if Olivia were here.

And then the doctor asked me if I knew who I was and I said no. I just said no. I made that decision in a split second because I didn't know who I was without you and I knew that I had to try to find you. I lied to Leah, my family, and none of it mattered to me because my amnesia bought me time and an excuse. I went everywhere I knew you would go. The day you saw me in the music store, I knew you would be there; I had this feeling. I was still shocked, not because you showed up, but because you came right over and pretended that you hadn't seen me standing there before you came in."

I smile. He saw through me even then.

"But why didn't you just tell me, Caleb? What could I have said after everything I did to *you*?"

Scenes were flashing in my memory like a jerky movie. Caleb calling me Duchess accidentally. Caleb bringing me my favorite flowers the night Leah crashed our dinner date. Caleb saying "I never forgot you" in the courtroom on the day of my birthday.

He pursed his beautiful lips.

"Because I wanted to go back to the beginning. I wanted us to have a clean start. And then you left—"

"And then I left," I repeat. I wasn't going to tell him about Leah, about how she pretty much drove me out of town. That was pointless and it would only hurt him.

"So, why did you find me again to be her lawyer? What in the world possessed you to do that?"

He laughs.

“I wanted to torture you. I wanted you to pay for leaving me a second time. I only ended up torturing myself, of course.”

“No, I was pretty tortured,” I smile. “And just think, I could have her in prison right now, with you all to myself.”

He looks at me in amusement.

“So, you still love me?” he teases, reaching out and tucking my hair behind my ear.

“More than anything,” I say. “I was waiting for you—for years. I didn’t live. I just waited for you to come back.”

He squeezes his eyes shut and I know that he is thinking what I am thinking. *What if?*

He pulls me to his chest and holds me there.

“I love you too, Olivia. More than I could ever love another soul. There hasn’t been a single hour in seven years that I haven’t thought of you.”

I cry into his shirt. If only I could die right now, then I would never have to live without him, I would just be gone.

“Don’t cry,” he says, gently lifting my face to look at him.

“You will forever be loved first, nothing will change that.”

“But what does it matter if I can’t be with you?” I wail. “I can’t live without you.”

“But you have,” he smiles, though it is a sad smile. “You have and you will.”

I nod bravely because it’s true. Life always keeps moving even if it has to drag you along, kicking and screaming.

“Don’t forget me either,” he says. I laugh now at the ridiculousness of that.

“That would be impossible.”

“Okay,” he smiles and then he leans his head down and kisses me. It is the last real kiss of my life. I forever cling to that kiss. It was goodbye and I’m sorry and I love you so much. When it is done, he presses his forehead to my own one last time and then he is gone.

I am broken.

## Epilogue

How did I get here? Where have the last ten years of my life gone? I feel like a piece of paper, taken by the wind and blown

in every direction. I am a victor in a way—a survivor. Because I fought the monster in myself and I won. But what have I lost in the process?

I do not deceive—not anymore. Truth is important to me. How sad that something of such worth only became a priority when it was too late. I altered the course of my life, because I was afraid. I am still afraid. Caleb was like a hurricane that swept through my life, stirring up things inside of me that I never knew existed. He is a longing I will never cure.

At thirty years old I am sitting in the Bridal chamber in my wedding gown. I haven't a clue as to who I am, because who I was before was a bad person and who I am now is undecided. I lost myself, but yet I had never found myself. I am very saddened by the fact that I wasted so much time. I know that it is not too late to figure things out, to find what I love, and who I am. But, then again, I am not sure that I want to know. I am afraid that I missed who I could have been. Yes, I still love him with all my heart. But I fought and I fought and I tore into pieces what should have been protected and nurtured. Life balances itself on a precarious ledge, we can stay safe up high or propel off the edge. Noah tells me that all the time. Noah, who has taught me to be good, gentle, and has shown me so much truth about myself. I changed for Noah, because I didn't dare hurt another person who loved me. I will have a good life with him. I adore him. But he doesn't have my heart. You can only give your heart away once, after that, everything else will chase your first love.

I have finally accepted that there are consequences to every action. I earned them and they are rightfully mine. There is no time to make bad decisions. Every step is precious. The definition of living is mine.

And so, I think once more of him before I leave the room because, after today, I have to send him away as well. He is happy and I am satisfied with that because I have finally learned to love someone more than myself. I hear the bridal waltz— my cue. I stand in front of the closed doors of the church and for a second, as they swing open, I see Caleb. He is at the altar waiting for me. I blink twice and things are back as they should be. Noah is beaming at me. Cammie is crying. I take my first step and then my second and right before the door closes, I look once more over my shoulder. Caleb is still under the tree, he winks at me, and I smile.