

Broken *Pieces*



B.E.
Laine

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Pieces



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*To Max,
You always knew the right words to say.
I miss you terribly.
I hope I will see you again one day.
Love, B*

August 25, 2008



His text surprised me. Out of the blue, he said wanted to “talk” to me. Even after everything that had happened when he graduated a couple years ago? He pleaded with me that he wanted me to drive around with him tonight, and I

couldn't tell him no. One, you just don't tell Jeremy no and two, he would have made a scene. We had gone driving like this a million times when we dated so I didn't think it would hurt. I knew that asking my mother wasn't going to go well so I told him that I would sneak out later. It wasn't like I hadn't sneaked out of my house time and time again before for him. I won't dare let my best friend Daisy know what I'm doing because she would flip a lid! She always told me her brother was a player and to stay away from him. I still find myself putting my lip gloss on, making sure I smell decent, and that my attire is perfect. I also know what my mother and my sister, Kennady, would say, even though they did

absolutely love him. I had to admit that he was perfect, but he also knew it ... so did other girls.

Why am I so nervous? Well, I'm sure the main reason was because I'm sneaking out. I sat trying to calm myself, but it was no use. I actually did love the adrenaline rush I got when I would sneak out. Yes, I was an adrenaline junky. I'm sure that was the main reason I got into most of the trouble I had. My phone went off, making me jump, and I knew I had run out of time to calm these damn nerves or find a way out of it. I grab my purse, ready for this "talk" to be over with. I still didn't know what we have left to discuss.

I take a deep breath and step out

into the moonlight which, along with poor street lighting, was my only illumination on these creepy back roads. I'm extremely grateful for my simple attire of shorts and flip flops because of the late summer heat still lingering in the air. Then I spotted his tail lights, as he sat waiting for me up the road so my mother didn't hear his rumbling car. I don't know how he can talk me into the stupidest things. I have a boyfriend now that is simply amazing, and I know I need to turn around and go back into the house. Instead, with shaky hands, I open the door to his mustang and sit down in the low seats. I had done it a hundred times before, but I still had a feeling that I couldn't shake. The music is playing so

loud that I can barely hear myself think.

He takes off like a bad out of hell, as usual. I sit there waiting for him to talk, as the silence takes over. He wanted to talk, right? Isn't that whole reason I'm sitting here? As he drove further into the dark, he reached to turn the music down, and I smell the stench of alcohol on his breath for the first time. Shit!

"Well, don't you just look pretty tonight?" he slurred, as he drove into the night.

What the hell was I thinking? Obviously, nothing has changed since we were together. "What is it you wanted to talk about?" I asked, being straight forward.

“Oh, cutting right to the chase, huh?” he said, with his smartass mouth.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see him looking at me. With the way he was driving, I thanked God that he knows these back roads like the back of his hand. I have to find a way to get myself out of this situation as fast as possible.

As calmly as I could, I said, “J, you’ve been drinking. Maybe you should take me back home and we can talk tomorrow, okay?”

“I want to talk to you tonight!” I jumped at the sound of anger in his voice. It was a contrast to two seconds ago when he was sucking up. Liquor sure does have a way of producing mood

swings.

Not wanting to start an argument while he is driving me around, I tried to ease the tension in the car. “Okay, J, what is it that you want to talk about?”

He smirked “You better not sleep with him. I’m the only one that can have you.”

Hoping not to piss him off, but not going to agree with him either, I said, “He’s my boyfriend now. You need to let me go.” Even though Aaron and I are not sleeping together, Jeremy was my first and only, but he doesn’t have to know that.

I could see the pain on his face. He whispers, “Kare, I can’t.”

With those three simple words, I

knew that tonight was not going to end well. “J, you graduated and are in college, I’m sure there are plenty of other girls that you can be with.” I was hoping to reason with him, but I knew it was probably hopeless.

He seemed amused. “You don’t think I know that?!”

Getting nowhere and wanting to go home, I pop off without thinking. “Oh, I remember from when we were dating!”

Suddenly, he slammed on his brakes. My hands flew up to keep me from flying face first into the dash, as he grabs my ponytail and pulls me to him. He was so close to my face that I tried to turn my head to escape the alcohol coming from his rapid breaths.

“You have obviously forgotten how to speak to me!” he said in a low growl.

“I’m s-sorry.” It was all I could think of to say.

With a grunt, he threw me back to my side of the car like a rag doll. I just sat there in a daze trying to think of what was wrong with him, besides being drunk. He had never really been physical with me before, just controlling. I sat there quietly, hoping he would calm himself.

“So you think since you have your pathetic little high school boyfriend that you can say what you want to me?”

I just sit here, wringing my shaking hands, hoping he can’t see how scared I am. I refuse to give him the satisfaction

of knowing he got to me. I don't dare to answer the question, either. I peek over to see his knuckles turn white, as he grips the steering wheel and tries to calm down. However, with the alcohol running through his veins, there was no way of that happening and I knew it.

“Answer me!” he yelled, making me jump again.

“No, I'm sorry,” I said, hoping that would calm him down a little.

“That's what I thought!” He glared at me.

“What did you want to talk about, J?”

“I want you.” His tone softened so much that I almost did a double take to see whom I was talking to.

Oh, my god. Not this again! “You broke up with me, remember?”

“So? I want you back now.” He can’t seriously be thinking that he can just drop me and pick me back up when it’s convenient for him.

I’m sure I had a dumbfounded look on my face when I looked at him. “I would love to be friends. I still care about you, but I don’t want to be with you. I’m sorry, J.”

He sat there, still gripping the steering wheel and staring out the front window. I can tell he’s not going to let it go this time so I try to contemplate a way of getting home.

I break the silence. “I’m sorry about what happened between us, but

I'm happy now and I want you to be, too. I can walk home from here, okay?"

He sat quietly, looking deep in thought. As I go to move my hand towards the door handle, he grabs my arm. Before I could protest, he pulled me across the center console, opened his door, hauled me out, and slamming me up against the side of the car. He held my hands captive while pushing his hips into mine, making it hard to move. He leans down, almost touching noses. When I turned my head away, he released one of my hands to grab my jaw, forcing me to look at him. "Look at me!" Oh, god, it hurt!

I seized that opportunity to take my free hand and land a punch to the side of

his face. It didn't do much, but he backed away. He was more in shock than hurt, I believe. As soon as he let go, I try escaping. However, I didn't get more than a step before I was jerked back by the hair, making me lose my balance. I stumbled to stand, the grip he had on my hair was almost unbearable. It felt like he was going to rip the flesh clean off of my scalp. Before I could say anything, he threw me back up against his mustang.

I look up to meet his cold blue eyes piercing back down at me. "So, you want it rough, huh?"

Oh, no! What is he thinking? That I really sneaked out of my house just to screw him? I have to try and talk him down from the dark place he's in right

now. I have seen him drunk, but not so out of it that he wasn't acting like himself.

“Jeremy, look at me. I know you don't want to hurt me so let me go. I'll go home and you can go home, get some rest and sober up, then we can talk tomorrow, okay?”

He just stares down at me like he doesn't know me. He finally says, “You're not going anywhere. I don't want to sober up, and I want you ... NOW!” He said the last word through his gritted teeth. He puts both my wrists in his one hand, and tries to take my shorts off with the other.

Realizing that he was serious and determined to keep to his word, I start

trying to struggle out of death grip he had on my hands, but it was pointless. He's stronger than me, but I was not going to just stand there and let him do what he wanted. I try to knee him in the groin but, even in his drunken state, he registered what I was doing and dodged the blow. With his free hand, he backhanded me across my right cheek, making my head snap to the left. I probably would have fallen to the ground with as much force as he used, but his hands still had a death grip on my wrist. I have never been hit before and, holy shit, it hurt! First there was excruciating pain, then came the burn. He grabbed my jaw, holding it so tight that if I didn't already have a bruise from the blow, I was definitely going to

have one now.

“I don’t know what you’re thinking, but that was not a very smart move, sweetheart.” He sounded confident that he had the upper hand in the situation. Who was I kidding? He did, but I wasn’t giving up that easily. He should know that about me, especially after how determined I was to work on our relationship after the second time he cheated on me. Love ... more like lust ... is blind.

I refuse to give up, refuse to think he’s won.

I feel his hands loosen. He’s so sure of himself, thinking I was just going to give in and have sex with him, that I take advantage. I pull my hands from his

and take off toward the road. I make to the front of his car, where the headlights still glare into the darkness, when I feel his hands on my back, shoving me to the ground. I land on the rocky gravel and I feel his body holding me down. He goes to get up, but only enough to turn me on my back. The sharp pointed stones are digging into my back as he leans his weight on me, ignoring my wails.

“I want to see you while I make love to you!”

This is not making love, I thought, but I didn't dare to speak.

He grabs my wrists in his hand again. I try to use my legs to push him off of me, but it is useless under his body weight. For the first time, I think that

he's going to get by with it. No! I can't give up, can't let him win. I have to keep telling myself that. As he shifts his weight to pull my shorts down, I try to escape again. He slams me down, making me cry out in pain. Before I realize it, he had ripped my panties free and was unzipping his jeans. He leans up to open my legs and I try to push away from him, screaming and pleading, "JEREMY! No! Please! Stop!"

His fist connects with my face, knocking me back down. "SHUT UP...stupid bitch!"

I open my eyes and see a blurry outline of his car and the bright lights glaring in my face. I can barely see the outline of a person I don't know

anymore. I cry out in pain, as he forces himself into me. I don't know if the pain was the rocks cutting into my back, my face pulsing from when he hit me, or him slamming into me. I just lay here, knowing that no one could hear my screams and he was not going to stop. I stay mute because I will not giving him the satisfaction of hearing me cry out. Every time, he slammed into me more forceful than before, grinding my raw back against the rough gravel.

It seemed like a lifetime that I lay here, praying that he was going to stop soon, but it really only lasted about five minutes. All I can do is think about all he had just taken from me. He got done, stood up, and said, "It wasn't even

worth the fight.” His words don’t even faze me. I feel like I’m broken, no words could compare to the pain I feel after what he had done.

I try to slowly sit up, knowing I just had to get as far away from him as I could right now. While he was putting himself back together, and not knowing if my legs would cooperate for me to stand, I try to move any way I could to just get away. All I can see is darkness beyond the tree-lined back road.

Suddenly, he grabs my upper arm, hauling me up so fast that I get dizzy. I thought he was done! Oh no! Why ... what is he going to do with me now? “I’m taking you home.”

He hands me my shorts, talking like

he would talk to me every day, like nothing had just happened. Is he kidding me? I do not have the energy to fight anymore. I stand and try to put on my shorts, but the muggy heat of the summer night makes it more difficult than it should be. They cling to my legs in my attempts to drag them up my tattered legs.

He leads me to the passenger side of his car. I surrender, not knowing if I could resist him anymore. He opens the door and blandly puts me in the seat. How can he act like this after what he had done to me?

I sit with a numb feeling, while I watch him walk around the car to get into the driver's seat. That's when I

notice that the car is still running. He climbs in, puts it into drive, and punches the throttle so hard that it throws me back into the seat. I want to cry out, but I make no sound. I don't have anything left in me; he has taken it away. I am broken pieces now, and they are scattered on the side of some back road.

When I get home, I absentmindedly crawl into my bed. My comforter hugs me, as though it knows what I need. I don't know if I'm trying to process what just happened, or try to pretend it didn't happen. I have heard of having an out-of-body experience before, but I honestly never believed that it was as true as it sounded. I know I'm lying on my bed, but it seems as if I'm not here anymore.

The pain on my face and back reminds me that I'm still alive. I would take this pain over the pain inside that he has made me feel any day. I don't know how I will ever be able to move on or be whole again.

Four years later...



Roommate



My pesky roommate will be the death of me. For some reason, after we have lived together this whole school year, she now wants to coax me into going out with her. Really? We don't even communicate unless it deals with our

room. However, here she is going out of her way to make ... what? Amends? It's Friday night and I haven't been out with other people, besides classes and work, since high school. There is no way that this will go well. What the hell am I thinking?

I sit on the edge on my decrepitude dorm bed sweeping my feet across the icy floor, staring at my roommate's perfect figure, perfect hair, and listening to her outgoing personality. I start to rethink my decision. "Lauren, I really think you should just go and have fun tonight. I don't want to be a burden," I say, hoping she falls for it.

Crazy how you can go to school for three years and not know anyone, except

the person you had to share a room with or people you worked with. It was easier that way, not letting anyone break down the walls that I had built up. At school and work, it was easy to act like the person I wanted to be, no one ever thought twice about it, but I stayed away from the friendship or personal level. Knowing that, if anyone found out about my past, the only thing that would come out of it would be pity. That was the last thing I wanted. That's why I opted to keep to myself after that night.

Everyone around me knew something had changed, but I guess they knew better than to ask so they all just backed away from me. The fact that it was that really easy for them to walk

away told me all I needed to know. Sometimes I wish they would have pushed me to tell them, but they didn't. I'm sure no one wanted to deal with the drama, or maybe it was the way I turned into a zombie my last year of high school that made no one want to deal with me. Even my boyfriend at the time, who I thought would have been there for me through thick and thin, turned away and wouldn't let me finish telling him the story after I said I went to talk to Jeremy. He threw his hands up and said he was done with me, and that was all because of the rumors he had heard when we first got together. After that distinct rejection, I didn't try to tell anyone else.

The slightest aroma can bring that

night back to me in heartbeat. The summer air, pastures filled with wild flowers, a dirt road, and the undeniable smell of car exhaust. I should have known, by the feeling of unease when I went to sneak out of my mother's house that night, that something wasn't right. Of course I blew it off and told myself that I was crazy to think that something bad was going to happen. Nothing ever happened in small towns like this. Plus, he was my ex, even though I had no clue what we still had to talk about.

I must have zoned out because Lauren is waving one of her little black dresses in front of me. I shook my head and said, "Uh ... no way, Lauren. I am not wearing that!"

Hand on her hip, and dress in the other hand, she says, “Yes! You have the perfect body for it, Kara!”

Besides thinking it was a good idea for me to go out with her in the first place, now she wants me to wear *that?! I do not have the legs for that dress; plus, the few extra pounds I’m sure I need to lose would not look good squeezed in there. She’s still standing there, her soft blue eyes pleading. I really wish I knew why she was so insistent that I go out with her tonight. “Fine! I’ll try it on, but if it looks stupid I’m not wearing it,” I snap, rolling my eyes when she can’t see me.*

I stand in front of the full-length mirror, staring at my short pale legs and

the little bulge in my stomach area that really stands out in the dress. I have no clue what she plans on doing with this chestnut-colored mess of waves on top of my head. As almond-shaped, boring brown eyes stare back at me, I wonder how she is ever going to get rid of the dark circles floating underneath them. There's just no hope for my heart-shaped face and small lips, but I do have to say that the dress is gorgeous, minus me in it. It has a sweetheart neckline that flows into the beaded waist where the satin meets up with the beads at my hip. I hope the dress being black will help disguise the extra pounds.

“Get your sexy butt out here, Kara!”

Lauren is banging on the other side of the

bathroom door, as I stand there trying to pull the hem of the dress down. It doesn't make sense. Lauren is three inches taller than me. I don't know how in the world she wears this.

I take a deep breath and blow the loose strands of hair out of my face. Reluctantly, I open the door. She squeals when she sees me, "Oh, my gosh! That looks so much better on you than me! You have to wear it!" she says doing her happy dance, clapping her hands, making me smile at how excited she is.

"Okay. Fine. But no heels, and I get to put something over the top." Not only was I shorter than her, but my chest was bigger and the dress seemed to show that more than I would have liked. I am such

a pushover.

She didn't miss a beat and said, "Okay, that's fine. I have this perfect little shawl to go around your shoulders, and these cute sandals!" I started to think maybe tonight wouldn't be so bad after all; I can still have a normal life. The whole reason for moving away was to get a fresh start.

After arguing with her about my make-up and hair, but her still getting her way, I slide into her expensive beige leather seats, hoping I didn't look too much like a *stuck up bitch*, as my mother would say about the little rich girls we would sometimes see when we would come to the city to go shopping. I can remember her telling me, "They aren't

really as happy as they look. More than likely, it's those people that are more miserable than you and me". I can hear her voice in my head as she says it. I really should call her. Ever since I moved here, neither my mom nor my sister wants to talk to me because they say "I left them". Of course, I know they are really mad at my father, who left when I was little. I learned to deal with it and move on. It was his loss, right? However, my mother and sister still seemed to dwell on the fact that he left so when I left, they basically disowned me that first year.

My mother has been trying to make amends with me over the summer, though I have no clue why. It's not that we had

the worst relationship when I lived at home, but it sure as hell was not the best, either. I knew she was always there for me when I needed her, but after that night, I think that's when our relationship hit rock bottom. She knew that I was not the same, but I wouldn't open up to her about it. Being from a small town, there were accusations like "Karaline are you doing drugs? Are you drinking? Are you having sex? Are you pregnant?!" The questions never subsided so I just always gave her the silent treatment. It was better than the truth.

"Hello?" I don't know how many times she has said it to get my attention. She snaps her fingers in my face, but I don't come back to reality until I look

out my window and see we stopped. I'm guessing we are where at our destination, even though she did not tell me where that was.

“Oh ... sorry. Are we here?” I say, trying to sound more excited than I really was. I feel like a total idiot dressed like this, and I was going out with people I don't know. Really, what was I thinking? Well, I can't do anything about it now. Time to slap on a fake smile and make the best of it. This is what college is all about right?

“Yeah! Are you ready to party?” She's sporting a mischievous grin on her face.

I look around one more time before getting out. We are sitting in front of

some random house that I don't know, probably because I do not know the city very well. Just great. I'm here at God-knows-where. I start to really get nervous, sweaty palms and all.

We are parked on the side of a busy street in a neighborhood-like setting that I could never afford to live in. There are people walking around in business suits, talking on their phones. I look up and see an old building that looks like it was remodeled at one point. I look at Lauren, give her the best smile I could muster, and go to open the car door.

I try my best to get out as gracefully as possible, but the length of the dress makes me think that it's not going to be easily accomplished. When I go to step

out and stand, my sandal slips off the curb. I saw a face-plant in my future, but warm hands caught me. Embarrassed as hell, I look up to find the most gorgeous hazel eyes staring back at me. I am lost as to what I was supposed to be doing. I just stand here, staring at this perfection of a man who still has his hand gripped around my upper arm. I wanted to believe that he didn't want to let go almost as much as I didn't want him to. We seemed lost in each other's eyes.

“Are you alright?” Lauren stood on the sidewalk, fiddling with her clutch, staring at me and the stranger that is still holding my arm. Impeccable timing, Lauren.

I look over to her. “I slipped.”

“Are you okay?” The voice caused my head shoot back at him. Hearing him speak for the first time made my knees buckle beneath me. He tightens his hold a bit.

Get a grip, Kara!

I realize that he's still holding me upright so I stand to straighten myself and regain my composure. I was getting a good first look at the male figure standing in front of me. He was so close that I could smell a scent that should be illegal, and it was making me think things I have never thought before.

He was perfection. His soft black hair paired well with those hazel eyes, his straight-lined jaw went nicely with those full lips. Because I'm just standing

here, trying to memorize his every feature, he raises those sexy eyebrows, leans down to look me in the eye, and smiles. My god, even perfect smile. I realize he is waiting for me to answer. *Crap!* I'm sure I look more like an idiot than I did when I almost fell.

“Uh ... yeah, I'm okay.” It's all I could manage to get out. I was still fixed on how gorgeous this man is. I look down, hoping the ground would just swallow me up right now. This is why I do not go out.

Lauren stood awkwardly to my right, waiting for whatever was happening to be over with. She looked at her watch. “Karaline, we're going to be late.”

I had totally forgotten about the party. It was like everything from this evening had slipped my mind just by looking at him. That is when I knew I needed to get as far away from him as possible because everything I had built up and pushed out would fall apart otherwise. He was already making me forget what I was doing.

He spoke again, more concerned than any stranger should be for another. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes, thank-you for ... uh ... keeping me from falling.” I stutter over my words. I didn’t fall; I *almost* fell. I was already reaching for the door, I could have caught myself. Yeah, right, I would have totally face-planted it.

More satisfied with this answer than the previous one, he nods and says, “I’ll let you ladies get to your evening plans then.”

With that, he turns and walks away, giving me a good look at his exquisitely muscled back that shows through the black shirt as he moves effortlessly down the sidewalk. I look down at his arms to see the tattoos poking out of one sleeve and covering the other arm completely. I really need to stay away from him, but I can’t stop looking.

Lauren startles me ... where did she come from? “He’s pretty freaking hot!”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, I guess. You ready to go?” I was hoping that I wasn’t that

obvious when I was checking him out, but he really was something to look at. I am sure that is all he is, too. Aren't all guys that look like that? He turns the corner and I look at her.

She doesn't pay any mind, "Yup! Let's go have fun!"

She starts walking in the same direction as the strange guy. When we turn the corner, he's gone, but there are people everywhere. It is Friday, but do these people not have anything better to do tonight? I take in my surroundings. The street lights catch my attention, as they begin to flutter to life. I can hear the beat of the music. When I realize we are going to a club, I start to panic.

Looking at the line of people, I turn

to Lauren. “It doesn’t look like we’re getting in tonight.”

I tried to sound bummed and hide my excitement at the same time. She smiles at me with a smile that I’ve learned to recognize. I follow behind her, as we walk past all the people waiting in line. They give us bad looks. We walk right up to what I assume is the bouncer. He stands at least 6’3”, with arms bigger than my head. He is wearing a pink shirt that hugs him everywhere. Even if he didn’t pull the look off, I highly doubt anyone would tell him otherwise. I’m sure I wear a shocked expression as Lauren saunters right up to him, stands on her tiptoes, and kisses him on the cheek. She whispers

something in his ear, he looks at me, back to her, and smiles. He moves the velvet rope back, and I gape at her. She turns to me and smiles, “Come on!”

Club



Before Lauren dragged me through the door, I caught a glimpse of the name of the club. Hmm ... **Club L**, with the “**L**” in neon pink and an intricate design. I’ve never heard of it before, but how would I? The name of the club goes to the back

of my head, as I look around the inside for the first time.

It is like something you would see out of a magazine. Amazing! I gape in awe. There are white couches sitting against the walls framing the entire club. Do they really want a bunch of drunken people around those? There's a second story with more plush couches in cabana-like covers. It is so loud that I barely hear the guy ask me for my coat. A coat guy, too?

“Where are we?” I yell.

She turns, smiling. “My daddy’s club!”

My mouth drops open as I scan the room one more time. Holy cow, she can’t be serious! I knew she had money

by the way she dressed and her sports car, but this? This place is insane. The name totally makes sense now.

She turns and motions for me to follow her deeper into the club. The lights are everywhere, flashing to the beat of the music of some upbeat pop song. Not exactly my forte but, by the looks of the dance floor that is centered in the massive room, it's popular amongst others my age.

It is just one night of normal! I got this!

As always, I thought too soon. I feel a hand touching my backside. I turn to see a preppy guy that looks like he has had way too many drinks. He is dressed like a million bucks, and he isn't much

older than me. Mr. Preppy is good-looking and he knows it, which is never a good sign. I stand frozen as he all but undresses me with those ice blue eyes. The flashy lights are reflecting on his dirty blonde hair.

“Hi, I’m Collin. What could they possibly call something as sexy as you?” he says, as he leans in way to close. He’s drenched in expensive cologne, and it making me gag.

I close my eyes, as the smell of the alcohol on his breath instantly takes me back to that night. *No, not again, please!* The smell of the exhaust is flooding my brain, as I stand frozen. I try to push all the bad memories away. I’m here to have fun. I try to do what the therapists

always say in movies: go to a happy place in your mind where he can't touch you ... but it's not working. I'm freaking out on the inside, while I stand here and look like an idiot.

As quickly as the stench of his breath came, it was gone. I open my eyes to see where Mr. Preppy guy went; he probably just left, thinking I was a freak or something. That is when I look up and see that the guy from earlier, the one that kept me from almost falling on the sidewalk, has his forearm holding Mr. Preppy by the neck up against the wall.

When I finally realize what is going on, I hear tattoo guy say, "I don't think she was feeling you, man!"

Mr. Preppy smirks and mouths

back. “Just what would you know about getting a girl, you thug?”

Just then, the security guys show up and start to haul both guys out, but Lauren stopped one of them. She whispers something to the security guy, and he lets tattoo guy go. They drag out Mr. Preppy. I turn to look at her and she’s smiling at something. I look to my right and see tattoo guy, who’s cautiously looking at me like I might explode at any second.

I break this triangle we have going on. Embarrassed, I say, “Thank-you, again.”

“Anytime, Miss ...” My eyes lock with those killer hazels for the second time tonight.

Oh, crap! He wants your name, dummy! You're just standing there like an idiot again! "Kara ... Karaline ... but people call me Kara." *Real smooth, Kara ... not!* He smiles. I thought he had killer eyes; they are nothing compared to that killer smile.

I try to look at anything but the gorgeous man who had saved me twice tonight. I see Lauren standing ten feet away at the bar, sipping a drink and enjoying the show. I look back up at him. He's still staring at me, smiling. I try to talk normal, but my voice isn't cooperating. "Thank-you again ... Mr ..."

"Drew ... Andrew, but people call me Drew," he says, mocking me with a

smile.

I smile back at him while I pull myself together. “Well, Drew, thank-you again. I’m going to leave so you can enjoy your night without saving me every five minutes.”

He chuckles at that. I can feel myself caving in to the perfection of this man, but I know nothing with him will work. He is the bad boy type with booty calls on the side, I’m sure. All I know is that I need to get away. I cannot get mixed up with anyone, but then I get a whiff of him. He smelled like a fresh shower mixed with sweet musky amber. Getting close to him will ruin me, I know it.

“I’m sorry. My friend is waiting for

me at the bar so I better go. It was nice meeting you, and thank-you again.” I turn to leave.

He softly placed his warm, rough hands on my forearm. I stiffen and glance down at his hand. He catches the change and releases my arm. He gestures to his hand. “I’m sorry.” He pauses like he’s deciding in his head what to say. “It was my pleasure.” With that, he turns and walks away.

I watch him walk away for the second time tonight. I can still feel the warmth from where his hand was on my arm. I turn and see Lauren at the bar, flirting with some guy. I go to the part of the bar that is closest to me, just down from Lauren and her flirt buddy. I order

a rum and coke, something that I heard one of my mom's boyfriends order while we were out eating one night. I take a sip, it's not bad. Not bad at all. I make myself comfortable at the bar because dancing isn't really my scene.

It seems like forever that I have been sitting here, and I have lost track of how many rum and cokes I've consumed, when Lauren comes up beside me. "Hey, girl! You havin' fun?" I could tell she had a few drinks, too. She stands there, all bubbly personality, like always, with some fruity drink in her hand.

"Uh, how are we getting back to the dorms?"

She giggles. "Oh, don't worry! My daddy had my car taken back to the

dorms, and he arranged for a car to take us back!”

As I turn back to my drink, I see her smile get wider and her eyes go big. I look over my shoulder. Then I see him again. We had been here for a while. I’m here because I have no life. I wonder why *he’s* still here. He walks through the crowd with grace, but with a “don’t fuck with me” look.

I turn back to the bar, absentmindedly stirring my drink with the little straws you get with them. I act oblivious to him, as he walks up on the opposite side as Lauren. He leans in way to close for comfort. I am fighting to keep my walls up. *Just don’t look into those eyes!* I don’t have to because I can

smell him. However, there's more than that ... I can *feel* him there.

“Please tell me you have another ride home because both of y'all are plastered,” he says, matter of-fact. He confidently leans into the bar where I can see the muscles in his arm tighten.

I don't dare to look at him. “Uh ... yeah ... Lauren's dad has a car picking us up.” *Ugh!* Why am I stuttering? I am a grown ass woman, a senior at The University of freaking Tulsa, and I live by myself. Well, that last part isn't totally true, but I should still not let some random guy intimidate me. I have a new and improved self that I've worked hard to build.

Finally, I look up at him and say,

“Thank-you for your concern, Drew, but we have it covered.” Okay, maybe that was a little too bitchy.

My eyes are locked on his again. Irritation flickers through his eyes, but he has this power in them that captures me. I wonder if he can feel it, too. How can he keep doing this to me? He is making me forget who I am, who I have become. I really do not understand why he cares about some pathetic girl at a club.

He relaxes. “Okay, I’m sorry to have bothered you, Karaline.” Well, I feel like a total bitch now.

He straightens to walk away. I put my hand on his arm before I realize what I have done. There is that feeling again. It’s like a drug, I can’t get enough. I have

never felt this before. I know I should stay away ...

He looks at me when I say, “No, it’s fine. I’m sorry for being a bitch. You were just being nice.”

I don’t move my hand when his other comes up to cup my face. His face has this soft but dead serious look, and his voice is the same. “It’s fine. Just don’t ever call yourself a bitch again, ‘kay sweetheart?”

Oh, butterflies. It feels as if we’re the only two people in this crowd. He’s slowly knocking down the walls ...

I go to look down, but he takes the hand cupping my cheek and tips my chin back up. “Look at me, please.”

We stand there, staring into each

other's eyes. Everyone around us is as oblivious to us as we are to them. There is something there that draws me in; I could stare into those eyes forever. My instincts are still telling me to stay away, but for a totally different reason. I feel safe being close to him, but I don't want to fall. I know what happens then. I tried it once and it ended badly. I'm not the same normal girl that I was before. I can't just date a guy because, when he gets to close, the memories from the past come back. So I should just save both of us the heartbreak, but it's hard fighting these feelings.

It felt like forever that we stared into each other's eyes. It would have been one of those awkward silences

with anyone else, but it wasn't with him. Then he broke the silence. "Would you like to go grab a bite to eat?" He looks hopefully into my eyes.

Holy crap! Did he just ask me out? "Um ... I'm sorry, but I don't know you very well. I don't go out with strangers. Plus, I came here with Lauren." I hate what I'm saying because I really want to go. I know he is a good guy, but I just can't. The thought of being alone with a guy makes me shudder, and not knowing the guy makes me sick.

It doesn't matter how long you know someone, they can change in a heartbeat.

Just then, Lauren comes dancing up. "Go have fun, Kara! It's fine, don't

worry about me! My daddy's car is going to take me home." She says, as she waves her hand dismissively in the air.

I give her this look that I'm sure says it all. She leans in and whispers, "It's fine, Kara. I know him and he's nice! Go!"

I look back up at him, then wish I hadn't because the look on his face looks almost too hopeful. I have too soft of a heart and I know it. It's the reason I get myself into the majority of shit that I do. "Fine. Okay, if you can take me back to the dorms after?" That was important because for one, I came with Lauren, and two, I don't know my way around this city very well. My warning bells go off again. What the hell am I thinking going

into a city that I don't know with a guy that I don't know? True, he does not feel like just any guy to me, but still. I know I shouldn't go, but something is telling me it is okay.

“Of course,” he says, trying to hide that flawless smile of his.

Drew's Car



I took my sweet time finishing my drink so I could pull myself together before I go to eat with him. As I walk out of the club, he puts his hand on the small of my back, protectively. Who am I kidding? He doesn't see me that way. I have been

his charity case all night; I'm sure he doesn't want to have another confrontation tonight. As we make our way to the door, he stops and looks at me. Being as self-conscious as I am, I start looking down at my dress, thinking something is wrong with me. When I look back up and meet his eyes, he's amused.

“What?” I ask, confused.

He leans in really close. I tell myself that it's because we are still in the club and I probably couldn't have heard him otherwise. I can feel his hot breath on my neck, as he sternly whispers, “Stop. There's nothing wrong with you. I was going to ask if you had a coat.”

Well, now I feel like an idiot. If I had been paying attention, I would have noticed that we had walked up to the coat guy from earlier. I feel as if I have lost my mind tonight. I turn to see the coat guy staring at me. “Do you have your ticket, ma’am?” he says, impatiently.

“I’m sorry, no, I didn’t receive one,” I say, trying to remember if they gave me one. Maybe I had more drinks than I thought.

Lights from inside the club flash on my face, and the coat guy looks embarrassed. “Oh! I’m so sorry, ma’am. You came in with Mr. Harris’s daughter, right?”

“Lauren Harris, yes.”

“Okay, let me get your coat, ma’am. I’m sorry again.” Why is he apologizing to me? Does he really think I expect him to remember me from all the other people that came in here tonight? Crazy!

“It’s fine, really,” I mumble, looking back at Drew. He is quietly watching me, while the nervous coat guy leaves to go retrieve my coat. There should be awkward silence, but there’s not. I feel comfortable. When I look into his eyes, there is no need for words because our eyes say it all.

“Here you go, ma’am.” The coat guy is trying to put my coat on me, but he is shaking and can’t quite find the right hole for the right arm.

“Oh, thank-you,” I said, but before

he can put it on, Drew takes it out of his hands and puts it on me with ease.

“Ready?” he asks, ignoring the coat guy.

“Yup.” Oh, my gosh! *Yup*? Did I really just say that? He starts walking, shaking his head with a slight smile playing on his lips. Great, he’s laughing at me now. I am still amazed he asked me to go get something to eat with him. Now I’m really thinking he either does just feel sorry for me, or he just did it to get a laugh.

I stay quiet as we walk outside. I’m glad I brought a coat because it got cool. He leads me around the building where Lauren and I were parked before her dad had the car sent back to the dorms.

About three cars back sits an all blacked-out Challenger. I'm not keen on cars, but I know a good looking car when I see one. He stops and digs in his pocket for his keys.

"This is *your* car?" I was shocked. He really did look my age, maybe a couple years older. How can he afford this? *Not any of my business. His parents could be loaded for all I know.*

He looks up at me through those black eyelashes, and gives me one of those great smiles. "No, sweetheart, she ... is my baby," he says, as he pats the hood of the car.

Damn, not a guy that's all about his car. "She?" I say, raising my eyebrows at him.

He shakes his head and opens my door. I carefully climb in, remembering that I have this freaking short dress on. Reminder: kill Lauren later! He gracefully walks around the front of the car, looks up and catches me staring. I look down real fast. He is going to think I am some kind of freak. He climbs into the driver's seat, wearing the biggest smile ever.

I just sit there quietly, while he starts the car. As I feel the vibrations, I can't help but think how hot this car is. Then a rock song starts to blast, and I actually know this song. I smile as he reaches for the knob to turn it down.

Looking at me sheepishly, he says, "Sorry. I get a little carried away when I

drive alone.”

That intrigued me; I hadn’t realized that he was alone tonight. “Why would you go out on a Friday night alone?”

He looked taken back by my question. “I met a couple of friends there. Why?”

“Sorry, I’m being nosy.” I turn my head to look out the window.

He checks his mirrors and pulls out onto the road. He’s really quiet. Crap, I hope I haven’t already ruined tonight with my big mouth. The music playing in the background was another song I loved. “Saving Abel?” I say, turning to look at him.

I take advantage to check him out again. His strong jaw pairs perfectly

with the cute little dimple in his chin. How can a guy be so tanned? Don't get me wrong. I'm not complaining! His nose looks like it might have been broken at one time, but it still looks good. His sexy mouth turns up into a smirk as he says, "You know Saving Abel?"

"Yes, I like them. Why?"

"I just wouldn't have pegged you for this kind of music, that's all." I wonder what he means by that.

"What would you have pegged me for then?"

"Oh, you know, either the girly stuff or that rap shit they were playing in the club." I give him a look that says, You should know better than that. He laughs.

“I knew you were different.”

“Different?”

“Not in a bad way. Don’t worry.”

“Okay . . .,” I say, skeptically.

I stare out the window, trying to distract myself from staring at him again. Another good song comes on so I start humming to it. It’s a bad habit of mine.

Not being able to be quiet any longer, I think the alcohol has given me some balls, I ask, “Where are you taking me?”

He glances at me. “Surprise.” I was waiting for more, but that’s all he says. Fine, I can play that game, too.

I start looking around the car, giving my eyes something to do besides stare at him. It has his smell. It is really

clean for a ... wait, I don't even know how old he is! I am going to eat at midnight with a guy that I met at a club? One night and I'm doing something I would have done before ... that night.

Ten more minutes pass by. I have no clue as to where we are now. Maybe I should have been paying attention in case I needed an escape route. It is getting close to one in the morning and I don't have a clue what will be open. Then, we pull into an IHOP.

I'm trying to hide a smile as I look at him. "IHOP, really? That's the big surprise?"

He shrugs his shoulders. "Sorry, it's the best I can do at one in the morning. Next time, maybe I'll have

longer to plan a better surprise.” Next time?! He just practically said we would be going out again.

Seeing the look on my face, he backtracks. “Well, that is if ... you know ... you want to, of course,” he manages to spit out. This is a new side of him; he’s been supremely confident all night.

I smile and say, “We’ll see ...,” as I go to climb out of the car.

I didn’t make it too far before he grabs my hand, making me stop dead in my tracks. Not from him, but from the feeling of his hand on me. It’s almost paralyzing. “You better let me come and help you this time,” he says, his confident self again. He winks and releases my hand, as he climbs out of the

car. I'm still sitting there, frozen. Great, he obviously isn't going to let that one go.

My door opens and I look up at him as he extends his hand to me. "Miss Karaline." I take his hand and, as gracefully as I can, climb out. As we make our way inside, his hand finds the small of my back again. His touch sends electricity through me. It's just the alcohol, I keep telling myself.

We make our way inside and are seated. I order water with lemon, thinking I probably need to sober up a little. I don't even look up at him while ordering because I have to remind myself that I have a dress on. I'm not used to wearing these things. They suck!

As I am fidgeting with the bottom on my dress, making sure I won't show my ass when I stand, I notice Drew shaking his head and smiling.

“What is so funny?” I ask, curious as to what I did this time.

Smirking, he looks at me and says, “Oh, nothing. Just the waiter checking you out.”

Huh? I didn't even see what he looked like. I was just trying to make sure I didn't trip or do something to embarrass myself. “Oh, I didn't notice him,” I say back.

“Yeah, that's what I'm laughing at. That makes three ... the preppy dick, the coat guy, and now the waiter at IHOP,” he says, smiling.

Man, he is gorgeous. His smile can make me melt, and his raspy voice makes me squirm in my seat. I hope he doesn't notice but, by the look on his face, he did. The last time a guy could make me feel this way ... he was the total opposite of the guy sitting in front of me. The guy sitting in front of me seems like a good guy, even though other people look at his appearance and think otherwise. His tattoos and bad boy look aren't going to fool me. The person who made me the way I am today was the good boy in school, perfect all-star. He had everyone fooled with his charm, and Drew has been nothing but ... real.

He gives me this look, and I realize he is waiting for me to say something

back. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. How many did *you* have tonight?”

He really laughs then. “You really are oblivious,” he says, still giving me his hundred watt smile. I start to think I could get used to looking at that. Wait, what am I saying? I can’t get attached this soon. I don’t even know what his intentions are. Intentions? Am I crazy? He only felt sorry for me. There is no way that this insanely sexy as hell guy could want me. Boring ol’ brown hair, brown eyes, but why would he notice other guys looking at me? I need to find out what he is expecting from this because I’m not one for one-night stands.

“Why did you ask me to come eat with you?” I ask, curious.

He scrunches his forehead together, giving me a look like he is trying to get inside me. I really don't like it. I don't like when people try to get inside me and figure me out. I am too complicated, and I want to tell him it's not worth his time.

“Okay, change of subject. Well, first was because I didn't think that you and your friend could make it home okay. After I realized that y'all had a safe way back, I had to figure out a way to get to know you better. Also, before you ask, I didn't ask you to come so I could get into your pants. Like I said, you're different and I like it.”

I stare back at him. I'm shocked because no one has ever been that up

front and honest with me before. It's ... nice. I can tell he is not bullshitting me because he stares into my eyes when he talks. He does not act like he is hiding anything. After everything that I've been through, learning how to read someone has become a bad habit of mine. I try to pick them apart before they have the chance to pick at me. It keeps me at a safe distance, and is a way to make sure that I don't get hurt again.

“Oh.” Is all I could think of to say to that? “Thanks for being honest.”

He just nods, and the waiter comes back to take our order. Then, I *do* notice that he is very smiley and being extra nice to me. So I look down at my menu and hope I don't give the impression that

I'm interested. I'm not interested in a guy at all right now. I look up at Drew as he orders, and want to rethink my whole position. I could just sit and admire him all day. He turns to looks at me, and he catches me staring. Oops, it's my turn to order.

“Um ... I'll just have a small order of pancakes, please. Oh, and an order of bacon, thanks.” I hand my menu back over to the waiter.

He walks off and I look up at Drew to find him staring at me. At least I'm not the only one staring. He has his eyebrows raised, making his forehead wrinkle. How can he make that hot? “What?” I ask.

“Nothing, I just didn't expect you to

order that.”

“It seems that I don’t do or like anything you expect.”

“Nope, seems like you don’t. You are full of surprises yourself, I see,” he said.

He looks all relaxed, leaning back and crossing his arms. My eyes start to wander to his broad shoulders, down to the short sleeves on his black shirt stretched tight over his perfectly defined muscles. Then there are the tattoos. He has what looks like a tribal coming out of his left sleeve, while his right forearm is maybe sporting a quote, but I can’t tell what it says. If you look at my past boyfriends, you’d never think I’d be attracted to somebody that looks like

this. Why am I comparing him to my past boyfriends? We're just eating.

"Maybe." I sat giving him a small, sweet smile. Wait, are we flirting? I don't think I would even know how to do that anymore.

"Well, I can't wait to find out what else your hiding," he said, winking at me with a smile covering his face.

I blush and look down at ... what? I don't know, but I know I can't watch him break down the walls. I can feel myself wanting him, wanting to fall, but I can't let myself. I wouldn't have anyone to pick up the pieces, not like I did before. I know I can't do it alone again; it would break me for good.

"Don't hide. Look at me," he says,

with a voice that makes me instantly obey.

I look up to find a face that I can't read, and it scares the living shit out of me. There was a second where I thought I saw sadness in his face, but that was gone the moment I locked eyes with him. We sit and stare at each other, until the waiter breaks the spell and brings our food. We eat in silence, just sharing looks the rest of the meal.

I tell him I can pay for my meal. He slowly looks at me and gives me a look that says I better not even think about it. So I dropped it. We walk to his car and he opens the door for me. His hand grazes my arm and it gave me chills all over.

He starts the car and turns to look at me. He just sits there, not making a move to leave. Puzzled, I ask, “What now?”

He chuckles. “You have to tell me where you live, sweetheart.”

“Oh ... um ...” I look around. I don’t even know where we are. I hope he knows where the college is because I don’t know the address, either. “Do you know where UT is?”

He scrunches his eyebrows together. “Please tell me you know where it is and how to get there.”

“No,” I say in a small voice, hanging my head. This is embarrassing.

“Karaline, you seriously just went and ate with a stranger, and you don’t even know how to get back to your dorm

room? I could have been some serial rapist for all you know.” He sounded irritated.

Rapist? Oh, my god. One word, and it all comes back. Aaron laughed at me when I told him I was *raped*. He told me that I was lying and I probably asked for it because I was a whore. That was the only time I had ever said the word “raped”. I refused to believe that was what happened, even though I knew that it was.

My hands started to shake, my breathing accelerated. I think I’m having a panic attack. Everything around me is a blur. To think I could be so stupid as to get in a car with a stranger after what happened to me with someone I knew!

How stupid can I be?

“Karaline, are you okay?!” he said sounding worried.

I don't look at him. He reaches for my arm, but I flinch away and he backs off. I remember that Lauren said she knew him, and she told the security guy to not kick him out. If she thinks he's a good guy, then why am I freaking out? Because I don't even know my roommate that well to start off with, and I really don't know who this guy is. I am sitting in his car and don't know where I'm at in the city. I am so stupid.

“Hey?” he said, in a softer tone.

“L-Lauren said she knew you, that you were a good guy.”

“Lauren?” he said, looking

confused. “Oh, is that your friend?”

OH, MY GOSH! She lied! “I’m s-sorry. I have to go. I’ll find my own way back.” I open the door, jump out, and start walking. I’ve gotten myself into this mess; I’m sure nothing else can happen.

I start to walk faster, as I hear his door slam. Shit! This is where he grabs me, pulls me back into his car, and has his way with me. Please God, not again. I don’t know why this can be happening to me twice.

“Kara!” he yells.

Mistake



It didn't take much for him to catch up with me. He grabs my arm to get me to stop. I shrink back, waiting for the blows or for him to drag me back to the car. That night flashes through my mind ... the look on Jeremy's face, the headlights,

blow after blow. I can feel myself freaking out, but I can't stop it. Then the sickness comes. When the past likes to revisit my present, I get sick. I make it to the side of the building and let everything come up in their flower bed.

“Hey ... it's okay. What's wrong?” He sounds genuinely concerned, but it could be a trick.

I try to pry my arm away from his hand. “I'll let go, but you have to promise me you will tell me why you're freaking out?” he says, sounding uneasy.

“Just get it over with, please,” I say, in a small pleading voice.

Instantaneously, he lets go of my arm. I stand there frozen, not knowing what to do. I'm still shaking, going

through a hundred scenarios in my head. Should I run? If I did, could I find my way back to the dorms? Why would it matter? I would probably find a bigger creep trying to get back on my own. It's late and I'm a helpless, clueless girl. I could go back into the restaurant and use their phone to call Lauren or the guy I used work with, but it's late and I don't know if they would be up. Who knows how many IHOP's there are in the city. I'm royally screwed either way.

“Kara ...,” he says, holding his hands up in surrender. “I’m not going to hurt you. I’m sorry if I said something wrong, but I would *never* hurt you.”

He slowly reaches for me. I jump back staring at the ground. I’m hoping he

will just go get in his car and leave. We just stand there like idiots in the parking lot of IHOP. Just breathe. If he wanted to do something, he would have already done it ... or at least tried to get me back in the car so we wouldn't make a scene. I can feel myself starting to calm down. He is giving me space, but still staying close by. While I stand there, I can see that he's really concerned. I realize I have made a complete fool out of myself. I can't stop the inevitable from happening, but I need to live my life. Fate will happen either way. I wish I could have realized this before now. Before I found myself standing at IHOP with a complete stud and embarrassing myself. Life would have been a lot

easier.

I look up at him to find him running his hands through his black hair, worry etched on his face. When he looks up, our eyes meet, and I realize that he is at a loss as to what I'm going to do next. The first guy that I'm attracted to in years and I have a freak out in front of him.

"I'm s-sorry," I say, looking down again.

He takes a timid step forward, slowly raises his hand (making sure that I see what he is doing), and gently lifts my chin up. We are so close I can see that there are specks of gray in those meticulous hazel eyes of his. They are so pure that I instantly feel guilty for

accusing this nice guy or assuming what his intentions were tonight. “I don’t know what that was, but will you please come back to my car? I will take you home if you want, but I would really like to talk ... just talk,” he says, placidly.

“O-okay ...,” I say, guarded.

I start the walk of shame. I’m so humiliated. He opens my door, and I cautiously climb in. Before he gets in, I take the time to take a deep breath and calm my nerves. He doesn’t say anything, just begins to drive. I’m guessing he knows where the university is. I don’t want to ask, though.

We drive for what isn’t more than twenty minutes, and I start to recognize my surroundings. I see the corner mart

where I go to buy my food, then we pass the coffee shop that I worked at for the first three years of school so I know that we are not far from campus. I watch the street lights go by, one by one. Maybe he will just drop me off and we will go our separate ways. No way am I going to start a friendship, let alone any sort of relationship, with him after the way I acted.

He turns onto the campus and without looking at me, says, “What building is it?”

“B,” I say, while twisting my hands in my lap.

He pulls into a parking spot and turns off the car. He just sits there with his hands on the wheel. He looks like he

is contemplating something.

“Thank-you for dinner and the ride back ... and I’m sorry for the way I acted,” I manage to say.

I take a deep breath and reach for the door handle. “Wait ...” I stop and look back at him. “Maybe, it would help if you talked to someone about it ...”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say, hoping that he buys that. He didn’t because he gave me a look that says, I’m not stupid and I can’t believe that you’re trying to play me for a fool.

“I-I ... um ...” I have only ever told one person the story, and it was an agonizing ten minutes ... and I knew him. I honestly don’t know if I can replay that night to a stranger. He is asking a lot and

I'm not so sure he really wants to hear it; he only thinks he does.

"I don't think you know what you're talking about," I say, in a more forceful voice.

"I saw the way you went white as a ghost when I said ... um ... that word," he says, sounding unsure of how to proceed with this.

I just sit here, indecisive if I should tell him. I only just met him, and I'm still shocked that what already happened has not scared him off yet. If I tell him, *that* sure will.

"You're not going to scare me off, if that's what you're thinking. Listen, I know you just met me, but I honestly do want to get to know you. Kara, there's

something about you that makes me want to get to know you better. That means the good *and* the bad.” He stops talking for a minute. How did he know what I was thinking? He continues, “But if you don’t want to get to know me, I understand and you’ll never see me again.”

Okay, not what I thought he was going to say. I want to tell him, but I’m scared. Just the thought of reliving all that, even if it is only in my head, makes me feel sick. I have never wanted to tell anyone before, but maybe I should. What would it hurt if I just let loose and told all my secrets to a complete stranger? It might help me, and I might not see him again. You know what? Fuck it!

“Okay, you asked for it,” I say

throwing my hands up in a gesture of giving up. I turn my body to face him, and he visibly relaxes.

Forty-five minutes of gruesomely revisiting the past, stopping to cry a few times, I am done. Actually, I do feel better, but I don't know what he is thinking. He just sat there the whole time. A nod of the head, and some facial expressions I hope to never see again, was all I got out of him throughout the whole thing.

I take a chance and look up at him. He is just staring at me with this look that I can't read. Is he mad? Why would he be mad at me? He wanted me to tell him. He is gripping the steering wheel so tight that his knuckles are turning white

and the veins are sticking out of his arm. He acts like he is trying to choose his next words.

I just look back down at my lap, silently waiting. I hear him muttering curses under his breath, which makes me glance back up at him. His whole hand is white now and he is shaking. For some reason, instead of being scared or trying to get out of the car and run to my dorm, I just have a feeling of wanting to soothe him.

“Hey ... Drew. It’s okay. Calm down. I’m sorry,” I say, as gentle as I can, hoping to break this trance he’s in.

Abruptly, he snaps out of it, searing me with his wrathful eyes. “Don’t ... don’t you *ever* be sorry, Karaline. Do

you understand me?" At first, his voice was brutally angry, but he ended in a soothing tone. I nod and he nods back. He turns his head to look out the window again.

I give him time to calm down. I'm not sure what I should do ... leave or stay? I don't know if he still wants to talk, or if he would just like the messed-up girl to get out of his car.

He interrupts my thoughts. "Who is he?" By the tone in his voice, I know not to argue with him.

"Just a guy from where I'm originally from ... a small town a few hours away." He just nods his head again, but I can see his jaw tighten.

The silence is killing me, and it's

getting late, so I say, “I’m going to go, okay?” Why did that come out like I’m asking him? “It’s getting late ...” I’m hoping he will speak to me, but I don’t understand why I’m explaining myself.

He takes a deep breath. “If that’s what you want, but I would like for you to stay and talk to me.”

“Okay. What do you want to talk about?” I’m uncertain of where this is going.

He still doesn’t talk, just cautiously reaches over and pulls my hands apart. I didn’t realize that I was still clasping them in my lap. He holds my hand and everything inside me is awake now. “I’m sorry that happened to you, Karaline. No one, especially you, deserved that.

Okay?” He looks at me with tenderness all over his face.

“Okay.” I look down.

He takes his free hand and lifts my chin up. He waits until I am looking him straight in the eyes. “Don’t ...” I slowly nod, then he takes his hand and puts it against the side of my face. He starts rubbing my cheek with his thumb. I lean into his hand, closing my eyes, relishing in the feeling of comfort and protectiveness.

My eyes flutter open. I don’t remember the last time I have felt that sense of calmness. As I look into his caring eyes and feel his delicate touch on my cheek, he starts to lean forward. He stops to make sure I know what he’s

doing, like he is waiting for the okay from me. Nothing else has ever felt this right.

I lean in the rest of the way, and he takes my mouth into the most luscious tender kiss I could ever have imagined from a guy like him. With the rough exterior of ample muscles and abundant tattoos, I would have never expected this kind of compassion.

His lips are so soft, so luscious. There were no words for the feeling when they touched mine. I felt like I could almost combust. I want to keep this feeling in me somehow. No one can hurt me when he is touching me. I do not know what it is, but there is something about him that I know I'm not going to be

able to let go.

He breaks the kiss and leans his forehead onto mine, closing his eyes. “You are perfect,” he says, breathless.

A laugh escapes that I didn’t even know I had in me. For some reason, that was really funny to me. Is this guy seriously delusional? Not only am I nowhere near perfect on the outside, he should know, after what I just told him, that I am not even close to perfect on the inside, either.

“Hey ... don’t do that. Don’t start putting yourself down in your head. You *are* a great person.”

“Drew, you don’t even know me so you don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say, shaking my head and

rolling my eyes.

“I’m a pretty good judge of character, if I say so myself.” He puts his hand on his chest comically, making me laugh again. Just like that, all the tension in the air was gone.

“Oh, really?” I question, raising my eyebrows.

Shrugging his shoulders, he says, “I’m just saying, sweetheart.”

I just smile and shake my head. I glance at the clock on his dash. Four in the morning?! Holy shit! I haven’t stayed up this late since ... hell, I don’t even remember. I look back at him, and he acts like he knows what I’m going to say before I even say it. I sigh. “I should probably get to my room.”

“Yeah, I should probably get home, too. I have work in a few hours,” he states, dreadfully.

“Oh, no! I’m so sorry! I shouldn’t have kept you out so late.” *Crap!* I don’t want him to be tired tomorrow because of me. *Ugh!* I’m horrible.

“It’s fine, Kara. Please don’t worry about it.”

“No, I’m sorry. You’re going to be tired all day tomorrow now because of me,” I say, really feeling like shit.

“Hey, what did I tell you about the ‘I’m sorry’ business? Huh?” he says, as he takes my face in both his hands and places a light kiss on my lips. Oh, those soft, full lips again. I could get lost in those all night. No, he has work! I can’t

keep thinking of myself.

“Well, I guess I’m going to go so you can go get some sleep.” It is so obvious that I do not want to leave.

“I feel the same way. I don’t want to leave. Whatever is going on between us, I don’t want it to end.”

There he goes reading my mind again. “I know ...” I do understand where he is coming from because I am on the same page. I have not dated or anything with a guy in almost five years. It feels strange. I’m scared that I might not be ... I don’t know ... up-to-date on everything that inquires dating. I have really kept to myself over the years, learned to keep my feelings at bay. It wasn’t because I didn’t want to move

on. I did it to protect myself from getting hurt again. Now here I am considering this. I am going to have to be careful and keep my feelings at a distance for a little while. I have to make sure he's real.

He kissed me one last time before I got out of his car. I'm walking on cloud nine towards my dorm door. The last kiss gave me same feeling as the first. If it's like that every time, I'm not sure if I'm going to be able to keep the walls up.

I turn around when I get to my door. He is still sitting there to make sure I get in okay. He tried to insist on walking me, but I told him to go ahead and leave so he could get home to catch some sleep. Honestly, if he didn't leave, I might have

been tempted to sneak his hot ass into my room. I reminded myself that if we're going to try and get to know each other, it would not be the way to start out. So we gave each other our numbers, and he told me he would text me from work when he had a chance. Since I have the weekend off before classes and my new internship program starts, I'm going to have to find something to keep me busy so I won't look so desperate waiting on his texts. I could do some laundry or clean out my room ... oh, am I kidding? I'll be hanging on every last text he sends me like a freaking teenage girl.

That is probably what scares me the most ... feeling like some love sick puppy, or just some crush that will end

up making me want to go live in a cave. I know I can't be like this forever. I knew it would happen eventually. Okay, maybe I just *hoped* that I would meet a guy that I could be attracted to. I have felt like HE ruined that for me because I couldn't look at a man and not think that he could be like that. I knew him ... well, obviously, I didn't, but I thought I did so it makes me wonder how much you can really know someone. After it happened, I used to ask why couldn't it have been a stranger at least, not someone that I trusted at one point.

For years, the thought of telling anybody what happened had me scared to death. I didn't know if they would turn their back on me, or think I was a whore

and asked for it, like Aaron did. To have your boyfriend at the time accuse you of something like that was even more heartbreaking.

I know I only spent one night with Drew, but we talked so much that I feel like telling him was the right choice. Never in a million years did I think I would tell anyone, let alone a guy that I just met. I know I would have never ended up with him if I wouldn't have been drinking, and I never would have been drinking if Lauren hadn't conned me into going tonight.

Speaking of that little devil, I wonder what was up with her telling me she knew him. When I said her name, I could tell by the look on his face that he

had no clue who I was talking about. She is going to pay for that one.

Saturday



I make it back in my dorm room. I can tell that Lauren is crawled up under her bright pink comforter so I'll have to wait until tomorrow to let her have it. However, if she wouldn't have lied to me, I wouldn't have had the best and

worst night in my life. So it's on the boarder of kissing her ass or chewing her ass. I'm still thinking the latter.

I awake to the sun streaming through the curtains, hitting me right in the face. Ugh, I haven't stayed up that late in years. Did last night really happen? Did I really spill my guts to a total stranger, stay out all night with him, and kiss him?! No way ...

I lean over to unplug my phone from the charger, and to see how long I slept. I never have any messages so when I unlock my phone and find TWO new messages, I'm a little more than surprised.

First text message at 7:30 AM:

Hey, beautiful! I am up and ready for work! Told ya' I'd be okay ... Hope to hear from you later!

Second text 10:00 AM:

Coffee is my new best friend, but I wouldn't have traded last night for anything ... thank-you for going to eat with me. I hope you're having a great day!

Wow, I guess I'm not going to be waiting around for a text from him because I got not one but TWO cute morning texts! This giddy feeling when I think of him scares me to death, but I think it's about time I start living a little. This is my last semester of college. I

deserve a little fun. What do I have to lose? Well, everything I've worked for and tried to get away from. Maybe, I should think twice about all of this first. Maybe I can talk to Lauren, see what she thinks I should do. I'm not going to tell her everything, but ... wait, I still need to talk to that little ...

I look over to her side of the room to find her bed not made, but she's not in it. So I get up and get ready for my day. Throwing on a pair of stretchy shorts and a tank, because August heat in Oklahoma is brutal, I gather up all my dirty clothes and head out toward my car. I don't even make it there without some jerk from my one of my classes screaming across the parking lot,

something about my ass. I don't understand it because I don't put myself out there. I go to class and to work. I know I was a social outcast my first three years at college so why scream at me when it is unwanted attention? I can clearly see Amy, one of the biggest sluts around, standing with her arms crossed and looking mad. Trust me, Miss Slut, I don't want his attention; please, take it! I open the trunk to my car and toss my basket full of clothes in.

Hopefully, since it is only 10:45AM, there won't be too many students at the Laundromat down the street. Maybe they will still be hung over from last night. I pull in and see only two other cars here. Thank

goodness! I drag my laundry basket inside and take the first open washer, not even looking around. I like to keep to myself because it's less drama that way, and I don't get mixed up in something I don't want to be in. It's easier.

As I sit here reading some random magazine, I swear that the washer is taking longer this time than at other times. Okay, I know that's not it. It is my cell phone that is burning a hole in my pocket. I think I should make him sweat a little. I don't want to come off to eager, even though I am, but I do want to date. There is just something about him, though. I feel like I am fourteen again and talking to boys for the first time. Maybe I should start everything over.

I pull out my phone to see if I have any more messages. No, but I didn't think I would so I open his first text. It's rude not to text back, right? So I type a short message back. I try to not to sound too eager, but I don't want him to think I don't want to talk to him.

Sorry again about keeping you out late! Yeah, a grand ol' day doing laundry, yuck! Hope you're having a good day at work!

I hope that wasn't too much. I *was* responding to two texts. I shove it back in my pocket, and switch my laundry over to the dryers. Sitting back down, I pick up the same magazine three times,

and my knee is bouncing up and down a million miles a minute. Why does a text from this guy have me so on edge? I turn in my chair, look out the big windows, and watch people going about their Saturday mornings as if this world has no problems. Sometimes I wish everything was perfect in this world. Yeah, that is asking too much. Plus, if everyone was perfect, I wouldn't have a job when I graduate. After everything that had happened, it hit me what I should do with my life. I should take what happened to me and make something better out of it. I want to be there for the girls that feel like no one will believe them. I know I'm not the only girl in this world with a secret.

Maybe I'm crazy for thinking I can make a difference, but I figured that I should do something that is close to my heart so I picked Clinical Counseling.

The buzzing from the dryer made me jump and brought me back to reality. Sometimes I get so lost in my thoughts that I forget what I'm doing. I must have really been in my own little world because I got a text and I didn't even hear it come in!

I told you it was fine, don't worry ... wanna' do my laundry, too? Lol I wouldn't make you do that, and my day just got better! ;)

I don't know why I've got the

biggest smile on my face ever! Oh, yeah. Maybe it's because this amazingly sexy guy is texting me. I just don't understand why. Oh, what I would give to do his laundry. Okay, that is pretty pathetic. I wonder if it shows that I haven't dated since high school.

I text back:

Lol sure I will ... did you just get off work?

Stop flirty texting Mr. Hottie with Tattoos, get your laundry out of the dryer, and fold! I reluctantly get up and finish my task of the day. Gathering up my belongings, I hear my phone go off in my pocket. That made me walk a little faster

to my car. I pop the trunk and throw the basket in there, making my folding pretty much a waste of time. I really could care less right now. How irresponsible of me. I climb into the driver's seat, and dig my phone out. I roll my eyes at how girly I'm being because I'm never like this.

I wouldn't let you ... and nope, I'm still @ work.

Lol good, I'm not very good at it anyways ... oh, then why did your day get better?

I start my car and throw my phone into the passenger seat so I can head back to my dorm. I'm looking like a retard sitting in front of a Laundromat

texting some guy I met last night. Oh, what am I doing?

I'm half-way back to the dorms when I hear my phone go off. I accelerate a little more and resist the urge to pick up the phone. It's killing me to know what he said.

Finally, the longest five minutes of my life are over and I'm parked in my usual spot in front of my dorm. I hurry and get my phone and open up my new text message:

*I bet you're good at everything ...
and because u texted me, silly.*

Oh, my gosh! Really? I'm going to be waiting for something to be wrong

with this man. A part of me hopes it's not too long so I don't get in too deep.

You don't know me very well ... I don't know why me texting is anything special.

I send it, taking a deep breath and facing the reality of things. There has to be a reason why he's texting me, or why he asked me to eat with him last night. There is no way that he really has an interest in me, especially after everything that I told him last night. Why would you want to get to know someone so messed up inside, and not even that great on the outside? It doesn't make sense to me. On top of being gorgeous,

he can have any woman he wants. Why does he want me?

I make my way back up to my room, without a confrontation from one of the frat boys this time, thank goodness! Lauren is still not back. I guess I'll put my clothes away and find something to eat for lunch since its almost one now.

Hearing my phone, I trudge over to my nightstand where my phone is sitting:

Don't do that, Kara!

Um, okay, that's so not what I expected him to say. He sounds mad, but it's a text and it's hard to tell so I reluctantly text back"

Okay.

Grabbing a bag of goldfish and a bottle of water from our mini-fridge, I go sit on my bed and pull out my description of my new internship. I'm hoping that the more I read it, the more it will help me. I don't get too far into the rules of attire before my phone beeps again. I should just ignore it. That's what I will do and maybe we can put this whole charade behind us. I turn the page to scan over what's expected of me as an assistant to Mrs. Paula Martin. She is what I could only hope to be one day. She has a Ph.D. in Psychology, and has helped keep so many young girls from destruction.

There goes my phone again. I reach

to grab it, and spill my bag of goldfish all over my comforter and knock my bottle of water to the floor. As I watch it role to the other side of the room, I think that if I didn't have bad luck, I wouldn't have any luck at all.

While picking up the spilled goldfish, I slid my finger across the screen. Seeing I have two new texts, I forget the goldfish:

I'm sorry, Kara.

That's all the first one said. Sorry for what? The second one says:

It is just you saying stuff like that irritates me, but I still shouldn't have told you what to do ... please forgive

me.

He's thinking way too much into this. I simply type back:

It's fine, I'm sorry, too.

I finish cleaning up my mess. Throwing my work papers aside, I lay back on my bed and stare up at my old tiled ceiling with stains in the corners from God-knows-what. I realize that I'm more tired than I thought. My eyes won't stay open anymore.

I awake to Paramore blaring from my phone. Shit, I fell asleep. Wait, who could be calling me, and what freaking time is it? It takes me a minute to answer. "Um... hello?" I say, groggily.

“Kara?” A rough, worried voice comes through the phone. “Are you okay?”

Confused, I say, “Um ... yes. Who is this?”

He chuckles and says, “Did I wake sleeping beauty up?”

“I don’t know about the beauty part, but I was sleeping ... mmhmm,” I say, as I lay back on my bed. I’m assuming that it is Drew since no one else ever calls me, and I’m pretty sure I could never forget that voice.

An exasperated sigh comes through the phone, and I ask, “What?”

“Oh, nothing ... I thought we talked about this already today.” Yup, it’s definitely Drew.

“Oh, yeah, um ... I forgot?” I say, hoping he falls for it.

“Mmhmm ...” There was a pause. “I just got off work and was, um ... wondering if you wanted to go eat dinner with me?”

Dinner? I look over to my alarm clock. Shit, it is after four. “Oh, um ... what time do you ... I was sleeping so I’m not ... I don’t know if I would have time to get ready,” I finally manage to spit out.

“That is fine. We don’t have to go anywhere fancy. I would just like to take you out to dinner and enjoy your company.”

Oh, why does he have to talk so smooth? I don’t know if I can say no to

that. I feel like I will wake up from a dream, and that last night and today never happened. However, that little voice in my head is telling me that it did happen and that I need to be careful. Feeling this way over someone you just met can never be a good sign. I'm sure he does this with different girls every weekend. Seriously, someone that looks like him is just ...

“You still there, Kara?” he says, interrupting my thoughts.

“Huh? Yeah ... sorry.” He probably thinks I'm a weirdo.

“So, would you like to have to dinner with me?” he asks again.

I can feel a huge grin my face, “Yes!” I said, with more enthusiasm than

I should have. I hope I'm making the right choice.

He says that he will waiting outside my building at five thirty. I shouldn't be nervous, right? I went out with him last night and it was no big deal. Well, except for the fact that I told him the horror that is my life. That makes me wonder why he's so interested in me. I don't understand it. Maybe he thinks of it as a challenge? I don't know, but I only have about thirty minutes to get ready. I'm going to have to hurry or I'll look like crap.

I take a ten minute shower, and scrunch my hair because it is easier and faster that way. Because I never stay out late, I had to try to hide the dark circles

under my eyes. It doesn't look too bad so I apply some mascara and eye liner. Finally, when I'm half-way satisfied with my face and hair, I really start to panic because I don't know what I'm going to wear or where we are going! I pull out some faded jean shorts and throw on a shimmer white tank with a black see through lace shirt over it. This will do. I don't understand why girls spend so much time on their clothes, hair, and make-up. It hasn't make a difference to me since ...

"I'm not going to think about that tonight!" I tell myself in the mirror. I'm going to have a good time. I am just a normal college girl. Yeah, right ... I'm a freak.

I throw on some flip flops, grab my purse, and head out the door. I make my way outside and look around for his car. He's not here yet so I check my phone. He still has a couple minutes. I lean up against the brick wall to check the text messages he sent me while I was sleeping. I was leaning against my building to wait for him when someone stops in front of me. I look up and see that it's the jerk from earlier. Great. I look back down at my phone and ignore him, hoping he'd get the hint. I couldn't get that lucky.

“Hey, you.” he says, as he leans in and puts one hand on the brick wall. He is way too close for my comfort, I try to stay calm because getting upset will just

make matters worse. I'm not about to let this loser ruin my night. "Your ass looks sexier in these short then the other ones." He moves his hand to refer to my shorts, as he's talking.

I try to move to my right to get away from him and say, "Thanks, but please leave me alone."

I'm still looking down, as he goes to move his hand down the wall and get closer to where I am. Suddenly, I see someone else has walked up, and I hear the familiar voice say, "I believe she said to leave her alone."

I look up to see Drew with his hand on the jerk's shoulder, pushing him away from me. When the jerk goes to push him back, I make the decision to jump

between them so we could leave. The jerk pushes me instead, and I fall into Drew's arms. I feel so safe there, it's indescribable. All too soon, he moves me to the side. He looks at me, "Are you okay?"

Before I can answer, he is already heading back towards jerk guy, while making sure I'm always behind him. Having him defending me makes me feel something inside that I've never felt before ... comfort, or maybe safe.

I snap out of my trance when I hear yelling. I look up to see Drew in the jerks face, a fist full of his shirt, and the jerk up against the wall. Crap, I don't want campus police to come.

I go up to his side and put my hand

on his shoulder. “Drew,” I say quietly because I’m distracted by the feel of his tight muscles under his shirt. I wonder what he would look like without this shirt on. I look up and see him looking at me. “It is fine. Can we just go?” I say in a small voice.

“Kara, this guy just put his hands on you,” he said, more calmly than he looks. We just stand there, staring into each other’s eyes. All the while, jerk guy is professing his undying apologies to me and Drew.

Drew looks back at the guy and says, “You’re lucky today, but if I ever see you near her again, you *won’t* be so lucky. Got it?!” I jump, as he says the last part with “that voice”. The words

weren't even directed towards me, but they were eerie enough to make me jump ... they made the jerk agree a thousand times.

He lets him go and the guy practically sprints away. Drew turns to me and places a finger under my chin lifting my face to his. "Ready?" I just nod.

We make our way to his car, he opens the door, and I climb in. Smelling that familiar, comforting scent from last night, I place my purse on the floor and set my hands in my lap. He climbs in, but doesn't start the car. I look up at him. He is just staring out the window. I look to see what he is looking at, but I don't see anything that would have gotten his

attention.

In the happiest voice I can muster, I say, “So where are we going? I wasn’t sure how to dress so ...” I trail off because I get the feeling that he isn’t hearing me. I look down at my wringing hands and wait for him to speak, or start the car, something.

He suddenly grabbed my hands, making me jump and stop my nervous habit ... I didn’t even realize I was doing it. His hands are masculine, but soft. I wonder what they would feel like all over me. Whoah! Where is *this* coming from? I have never been like this with a guy.

He tilts my head up to meet his eyes, then slides his hand to the side of

my face. We just sit here in silence. “You’re scared of me,” he says, more of a statement than a question so I don’t answer. Am I scared of him? I don’t think so because I feel safe when he is here. Why would he think that?

“Why would you say that?” I ask.

“You’re jumpy if I try to touch you, and I didn’t miss your flinch when I spoke to him.”

Maybe I did jump or flinch, but that is just how I am. It has nothing to do with him. I don’t want him thinking that. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to ... it’s not you ... I’m not scared of you.”

He stares at me with a look of aggravation. I see his jaw tense, and he closes his eyes while taking a deep

breath. Is he mad at me? I don't understand so I just sit quietly. This is not how I envisioned tonight going.

"Don't say you're sorry ... for anything, Kara. Okay, I believe you, but ..." He trails off as he turns in his seat, breaking any contact he has with me and making me instantly sad.

I look at him, and his eyes closed, "We don't have to go out tonight if you don't want ... rain-check?" I say, trying to sound optimistic. I fail miserably.

He doesn't say anything. "It will be okay. I'll go so you can go ... cool off," I say. I reach for my purse and the door handle at the same time. As soon as my hand touches the strap on my purse, he grabs my wrist. I manage not to jump,

but I still freeze. I stare at his fingers wrapped completely around my tiny wrist.

“I felt that. Please, don’t go.” His hand comes up to cup my face, making me look into his pleading eyes. “Please forgive me. When he pushed you, I lost it. I can’t stand the thought of you being hurt. That’s why it’s killing me to know that you’re scared of me. I will never hurt you, I can promise you that ... physically or any other way. You are special. I would really like for you to accompany me tonight, if you would still like.”

I’m in awe at this man. He is so honest. I could only wish to have said half of that as smoothly as he did. I know

he defended me, but he needs to realize that he's not here all the time so he cannot always save me. Where would he get the idea that I would ever think he would hurt me, and why does it bother him so much? My poor scattered brain is trying to process everything. This is why I haven't gotten involved with anyone; it's just too complicated. I just wish I did not have the feeling of wanting to be involved with him. Wait, did I really just say I wanted to be involved with someone? What is happening to me?

He has a smirk on his face now. I pull my eyebrows together. "What?"

He tries to straighten his face. "Nothing. You just looked to be lost in really deep thought."

“Okay ... so why were you laughing at me?” That’s when my stomach decides to growl; how embarrassing. Then I realize that I haven’t really eaten today because I’ve been way too distracted.

He cocks his head to the side and gives me a pointed look. “You’re hungry. We should go so I can feed you,” he says, not waiting for my answer.

“Okay.” He starts the car and backs out, leaving me missing his touch already. I know I should not feel this way, but I decide to put my past and all the thoughts aside, even if it is only for tonight.

I sit here, wringing my hands together in my lap and looking out the

window when his hand appears on mine. “Oops, sorry.” I remember he asked me to stop saying that word earlier.

When he stops at a light, I look at him because he hasn’t said anything. I receive a look that I can’t quite read. “What?”

“Don’t say sorry,” he says and I just nod.

The light turns green and he presses the gas. He pulls my left hand out of my right and intertwines his hand with mine. I smile. Something as simple as holding hands can make me feel all these great little things inside. There is no way to explain the butterflies floating in my stomach, or the hot tingle I feel all over wherever he touches me. There’s

definitely no words for this goofy ass grin I have on my face. I let a giggle escape for the improper things running through my mind. It is just crazy feeling this way. Does everyone feels this way when they go out on dates? I don't really remember what it was like, or maybe I don't want to remember.

“Are you ever going to let me in on those conversations you have with yourself inside that head of yours?”

“Huh? Oh, it's nothing really.” I need to get a grip. I'm sure he thinks I'm some kind of lunatic. My stomach chooses that time to growl again. I cover it with my right hand and give him a look of remorse.

“Have you eaten today?” he says, a

little more tightly than I expected. I'm not sure I like it but, hell, it's hot. Then I think of what I *did* eat for lunch. I really don't think I should tell him I had goldfish.

"Um ... yeah, I had some lunch." I'm hoping he buys it and drops it but, of course, no such luck.

"And what did you eat?" he says, in a little lighter mood. "Don't lie," he warns.

Well, there goes the light mood. "Um, some goldfish ... water ... and I don't remember what else ...," I say, trailing off.

Yeah, there's that face again. I am almost positive I am going to hear that voice again, too. Well, I know that face

and his joking face ... now, just a million more facial expressions to figure out.

“Kara ...” Okay, maybe I don’t think that voice is hot anymore.

“I slept in, then I was busy, then I fell asleep. I’m so—” Wow, the look that I am receiving right now. Realizing that we are stopped, I look back over to the not-so-happy Drew. “Where are we?”

Café/Park



We're sitting in a parking lot at the back of a building I have never seen before. We are surrounded by older brick buildings that have been painted, but could really use another coat. I look across the street and see another

building, this one with big doors. I have certainly never been here before. I would almost feel scared to get out if I was not with Drew, but I trust him.

He shakes his head, gets out of the car, and makes his way to my side. I already have my purse in one hand and the door handle in the other. He opens the door and offers his other hand to help me out. He's smirking again, as he leads me around the building. He leans in close and says "Trust me." I shiver from the feel of his breath on my ear.

We round the corner and I can see the skyline of downtown Tulsa. The sun is peeking through the massive buildings; it's picture perfect. He stopped walking so I looked up at him to find him

admiring me, not the view. He smiles and gestures towards a door. I smile at him and walk through.

The café reminds me of the one back in my hometown, with its mismatched chairs and those hideous red checkered table coverings. It still looks fairly clean and looks to be pretty busy, which is always a good sign if you ask me.

The waitress comes over and asks us how many. Well, she asks Drew, distinctly ignoring me. I guess I cannot blame her because I'm sure she is wondering what a guy like him is doing with someone like me. They would look perfect together ... her long, tan legs; tiny waist; and blonde hair. It makes me

think again why he would want short, pale-legged, boring, brown hair me?

“We just need to see the menu for a to-go order, please,” he says to the waitress, and looks down at me.

“We aren’t eatin’ here?” I ask.

He chuckles, cups the side of my face, and says, “I love it when the southern comes out.”

I turn my face away and mumble, “Not funny,” just as the waitress returns with menus. He hands me one and turns to look at his.

The too friendly waitress returned to take our orders, said it’ll be ready in about ten minutes, and told us to have a seat while we wait. We sit and I peek a glance at Drew to find him glaring at me.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, wondering where his smile went.

“You better eat all of that chicken salad,” he says, raising his eyebrows and making his tanned forehead wrinkle. Even that is sexy, but I’m not sure how to take his tone.

“What’s the problem, Drew?” I say.

“Kara, you haven’t eaten all day and you order a salad and water,” he says, like it’s obvious.

“Okay, um ... what was I *supposed* to get?”

“You can get whatever you like. You just need to eat, okay?” he says, sounding like he does not want to have this conversation.

“Okay,” I say meekly.

He just stares outside the window and says nothing. I sit with my purse in my lap, absentmindedly playing with a string that has frayed. I know I need a new purse; maybe after I start my new intern job. I won't be making a lot, but it will be a hell of a lot more than what I made at the coffee shop. I am lucky that I still have grants and part of a scholarship for working my butt off in high school. However, I will have to get a student loan and another one at the end of the semester if I want to pursue my career any further. I know I want to, but it depends on bills and such if I decide to get my masters.

I was in deep in thought when Miss Friendly Waitress brings our food. Drew

refused to let me pay for mine again. So while he is paying for the food, I take the opportunity to get a good look at him for the first time tonight. I can see his sculpted muscles moving under his semi-tight black shirt; his tattoos cover all I can see of one arm and are sporadically on the other; those faded designer jeans hug him in all the right places.

He turns as I lick my lips and we lock eyes. He has a teasing face. “Hungry?” he says in a seductive voice. I nod my head because that is all I am capable of at the moment. He has me immersed until he breaks the connection and starts walking towards the door.

When we walk out, I start walking the way we came. “Where are you going,

sweetie?”

“Um ...,” I say, as I turn my body half-way towards him and where we parked.

He smiles and takes my hand, leading me in the opposite direction of the car, towards the beautiful skyline, and a corner intersection. He pushes the button with both of our hands, and I wonder if that’s just because he didn’t want to let go of mine. Even if that wasn’t it, the thought still makes me smile. *How pathetic.*

We make our way across the four lanes, and then I notice an inviting park. It’s all perfectly cut plush grass, which is odd for the end of summer. He walks in between two trees and just sits down,

practically pulling me with him. I almost fall backwards, and we both laugh. He gets the food out, still laughing. I finally sit upright, and notice the most spectacular view that the city has to offer. I look at him and find him intently watching me. At that moment, I wonder if I have been missing out on things like this because of what one worthless person did. I told myself that I was not going to think about those things tonight. I am going to enjoy myself and the amazing man I'm with.

We sit quietly eating our food, just exchanging smirks and glances, while enjoying the view. He finishes before me and every time I sneak a glance that way, he's unashamedly staring. I glance down

at my shirt while wiping my mouth. I look back up at him to see that smile that instantly makes me happy.

“You have nothing on you, don’t worry,” he says, answering my unasked question.

I just smile and nod, turning so I can lean on my hands behind me. I feel so comfortable sitting here with him. I have never even felt this way with someone that I’ve known for years. He has this calm essence about him that flows off onto everyone around him. It feels like I have known him longer than two days. Wait, it’s only been two days?

“When’s your birthday?” he abruptly asks.

I slightly turn my head, wondering

what he's got up his sleeve. "Okay, random. August twenty-fifth, why?" I say, skeptically.

He looks at me like there is nothing else in the world. He makes me *feel* like there is nothing else in this world that matter. *Be careful, Kara!* Ugh! I know I should be careful, but there is just something about him ...

"Oh, I was just wondering. I want to get to know you, Kara. I won't ask you questions if you don't want me to ... wait, that's in just a few days!"

Why did he have to ask that, and why did I answer?! Oh yeah, maybe it's his extremely handsome face or his voice that lures me in. I hope he will get the hint that I'm not too keen on

celebrating my birthday. It marks another year that I have survived the nightmare of that night.

“Um, yeah, it’s no big deal.” I pray that he doesn’t want to do what I think he does.

“Oh, yes, it is! We’ll have to make plans to celebrate!” How can I tell him I don’t want to do this? He sounds so excited. Maybe I could just suck it up because I would be with him, but I don’t know how much fun I would be.

He must have taken in my mood. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have assumed. I’m sure you already have plans.”

Oh, crap! I don’t want him to think I’d be blowing him off. “Um, no, I don’t have plans. I just ... uh ... don’t

celebrate my birthday.”

Pulling his eyebrows together, he asks the enviable question, “Would you like to share why not?”

Of course, he had to say it in the most considerate way. Since he already knows the story, I might as well be truthful. “The night of my birthday was when ... um ... when he ... you know ...”

He inhales sharply. “Oh.”

I drop my head. I’m not only embarrassed, but I can’t help but think he wouldn’t have to deal with this if he was with someone else.

He takes my chin, turning my face towards his, and I see a look of anger flash across his face before he pulls

himself together. “I’m truly sorry for bringing it up. It appears that we can’t have a night without it being an issue. I do promise you this year that night will be the furthest thing from your mind.”

I am stunned. I’m also wondering what he has planned that’ll make me forget that night, if only for a little bit. Why am I always stunned by his honesty? That is the only thing that anyone wants in life, right? I should just appreciate it and maybe, just maybe, take advantage of it.

“Okay, since we’re playing the question game, when is *your* birthday?” I ask playfully, as I sit up and cross my legs Indian-style so I am looking right at him. He looked a little stunned. Maybe

this wasn't such a great idea because now I won't be able to focus on what he's saying. That little dimple in his cheek when he does that drop dead gorgeous smile, those piercing eyes of his, and the muscles poking out of his shirt ... mmm ... *FOCUS, Kara!*

"Huh?" I say, realizing that he said something. I hope he didn't notice me checking him out but, by the shy smile he's wearing, I am assuming he did. Crap. He's not going to want to take "Miss Freak" out again.

"I said that's not how you play. You have to ask me a different question than what I asked you," he said.

"Oh, um ... what's your last name?" That was the first thing that came

to my mind. Well, okay, I was wondering that one earlier anyway.

“Evans.”

“Hm ... Andrew Evans.” It felt good saying his name out loud and having the feeling that name isn’t going anywhere anytime soon. Maybe I only hope that it doesn’t.

When I look back up, he is looking at me with eyes burning with desire. He smirks and seductively says, “I like the way my name sounds coming out of your mouth.”

Oh ... my ... gosh. The way he said that makes me think things I should not, but they are pleasant thoughts. Especially with him. “Oh ... um ... well ... it’s your turn,” was all I managed to

sputter out.

He let out a small laugh and puts his finger on his perfectly sculpted chin, acting like he's thinking. There are no words for this man because he's simply beautiful inside and out. After all these years of swearing off guys, I'm glad I gave him a chance. For a second, I have the thought of thanking him for getting me off of the prim, proper, preppy, jock assholes that I was accustomed to before. He did teach me that it does not matter what you look like on the outside; what counts is what is on the inside.

We end up lying down and looking at the stars. He tells me about him growing up with a single parent, like me, but no siblings. He told me his favorite

color is black, and I told him that it that was a little obvious. He cut his eyes to me, laughed, and grabbed my hand. Entangling our fingers together, I can feel the heat from him through my whole body. It takes all my energy to stay focused on the rest of the conversation.

He eventually told me his birthday is June 2nd, and that he grew up around the city. He also works for a guy that has a center close to downtown that helps kids get off the street. For some reason, it tugged at my heart hearing him talking about those kids. I can feel how passionate he is about it. He proceeds to tell me that he worked there while he went to college and that it was more than he anticipated, but was well worth it

when he got his current job at the law firm. He talks about how lucky he is to have gotten a job as quick as he did, but how he still spends every second that he can at the gym, helping with the kids.

I just lay there and stare at him as he talks so freely about his life, though there is a feeling that he's leaving something out. I hope that it's not even close to the horrors of my past, but I will not pressure him to tell me either. Hmmm, I think I can do this boyfriend thing.

"I'm sorry. I'm probably boring you with my whole life story."

"Not at all. I like to hear you talk," I reply, blushing a little at the fact that I just told him I like listening to him talk. I

always have had a tendency to say the stupidest things.

When I finally get the guts to face him, he's gazing up at the dazzling stars, a small smile playing on his lips. He has one arm under his head and he looks like utter perfection laying there. "Tell me about you," he says, sneaking a glance in my direction. I looked up at the marvelous sky again.

"Um ... okay, but there isn't much to me that you don't already know." I still can't believe that I told him that. There is no telling what he thinks of me now. I am surprised that he asked me out with all that I unloaded on him in just the first night. What in the hell was I thinking? Scaring the one and only guy I

have been attracted to in the past four years ... I really am screwed up.

He surprises me by turning on his side and resting on his elbow. He takes my face with his free hand, urging me to look towards him while he says, "What you told me last night doesn't defy you, Kara. That is not who you are. Some of the deepest pain will only empower you to grow into a higher version of yourself. You have your whole future ..."

I am so lost in his words that a bomb could go off and it would not affect me. I swear he has the ability to turn an already perfect night into pure heaven. He's always so considerate to me, but I do not understand why he's wasting his time with someone as broken

as me.

“Thank-you for that, but you really need to understand that *is* who I am now. I’m broken, and I would understand if you didn’t want to go on with ... whatever this is,” I reply sadly, as I move to sit upright and he follows suit.

“I am a big boy, Kara. Let me be the judge of what I get myself into, okay?” he says, nudging me in a playful manner.

I look up at him with raised eyebrows and say, “Okay, but you can’t say I didn’t warn you, Mr. Evans.”

That makes him throw his head back and laugh. “Okay, Ms. Brooks. How about we get out of here?”

We gather up our trash from dinner

and discard it. We make our way to the edge of the park and I notice that traffic is very light and the café is closed. I didn't think we were out there very long. A cool breeze comes through making me slightly shiver. I try to hide it, but he catches it.

"I'm sorry I don't have a coat for you. I didn't expect to be out this late," he says, looking upset.

"Oh, no, it's okay. I'm fine. What time is it anyway?" I don't like that look of regret on his face.

"Um ... almost eleven," he says after looking at his phone. The look on his face makes me think that he thinks I'm going to freak out because everything is not perfect. He just doesn't

know that everything with him is already perfect.

“Oh, okay.” I give him a little smile because I do not want him to think that he has done anything wrong.

He returns my smile and puts his arm me. I’m instantly warm all over. He opens the car door for me. I am not used to that, but I definitely think I could be. As he’s walking around the car to get in, I take the opportunity to take a deep breath. I close my eyes and open them back up. Yup, I’m still sitting in this amazing man’s car. Some things just do not seem real, especially after so many fake things in my life before. I will enjoy every bit of time he will give me. That might seem pathetic, but after feeling

dead for over five years, and you start to feel a little bit of life inside you, there is nothing that will stop you from taking the chance. It's not like there is much of me left. If I were to give what is left of me away, I believe I would be okay with giving it to someone as special as Drew.

When we make it back to my dorm, he pulls in at my building and parks. I grab my purse and set it in my lap, fiddling with the strap and not knowing what to say. He's also extremely quiet so I take a chance and break the silence. "I had a really good time tonight. Thank-you so much; it was perfect." I keep my head down and stare at my fingers, bending and prodding at the strap of my purse.

“It was my pleasure. Thank-you for coming with me,” he responds, as politely as possible. I can definitely understand why some people can take one look at him and think that he’s just some bad boy with tattoos, but he proves that judging a book by its cover can lead to you missing out on a great book. In my case, I would have missed out on a wonderful person, I am glad I took a chance.

“Well, I guess I’ll see you later?” I say, more as a question than statement.

“You *will* see me later; if you want to, of course.”

I give him a knowing look. “Yes, I do, but that depends if you want to see me, *of course*,” I throw back at him.

Smiling, he says, “Well, yeah, have you seen you lately?”

“Hmmp ... yep,” I reply with an eye roll.

“Don’t, Karaline. You are beautiful,” he starts with a stern voice, then it turns into what sounds like adoration.

“Thanks,” I say. I’m amazed at how flushed he can make me with simple words like that. I wonder what else he could do if he ... *You’re getting ahead of yourself, Karaline!*

He reaches over and takes my face in his hands. I can feel the warmth throughout my whole body with that simple touch. He caresses my face, pushing a strand of hair off my forehead,

and leans in slowly. He's making sure I know what he's doing; he is always thinking of me. I tilt my chin up to let him know that I want it, too. Then he takes my mouth with a soft tender kiss. The heat from his lips is scorching mine, but it feels nice. He slides his tongue across my bottom lip, and I oblige by opening my mouth to taste him. He tastes so wonderful that I can't get enough of him, and he acts like he can't, either. I feel like a teenager again, kissing in the car before going inside.

A giggle escapes, and he leans back slightly. There's a questioning look on his face. "What?"

"Huh? Nothing," I reply, as innocent as possible. Our first make out

session and I have to ruin it by laughing at the random thoughts going through my mind. Great.

“Tell me what’s so funny,” he asks, genuinely wanting to know.

“I was just thinking that I feel like a teenager making out in a car before I have to go inside.” I say.

He laughs. “Yeah, I guess it does kind of feel like we’re teenagers, but it won’t always be like this.”

I stare back at him. What did he mean by that? He didn’t share anything else on the subject. He kissed me again, before I finally got out of his car. I could tell that neither one of us wanted to leave, but it was getting late so I walk back to my dorm room.

I walk in to the familiar smell that has been my home for the past three years. One more semester, a half-year, and I won't know what to do with myself when I don't have the comfort of this room to come back to. Then, it all of a sudden hits me ... Monday is the start of my last year! I am excited but nervous because no one knows what the future holds. That's when Drew's words come back to me: *You have your whole future.* I take a deep breath, sit on my bed and think that in six short months, I will have accomplished a dream that I have had for almost eight years.

I was happy with just getting out of that town. Now that I have come this far, there is no stopping me now. I *do* have

my whole life ahead of me. Nothing from my past can keep me from living my life to the fullest. Maybe I have Drew to thank for my new found positive attitude. Even if things don't work out between us, I will always be grateful for all the words of encouragement he has given me. In just the two days I have known him, he's given me the little push I needed to get out of this rut I have been in for years. I guess I should thank Lauren, too.

Speaking of that little tramp, I still haven't chewed on her out and, of course, she is sound asleep under her comforter. I guess that's what I get for coming in so late, but sleeping looks like a good idea. This staying up late is for

the birds, but the company I have been with has made it more than worth it.

Teenage-Adult Life



I defiantly feel like a teenager again. On Sunday, while he was at the gym working with the kids, he'd text me when he got the chance. That night, we talked on the phone for hours. I really felt like I was on cloud nine when we

finally hung up.

We talked and texted about everything under the sun. His favorite food is Chinese and he likes action movies, but swore that he would sit through anything I picked out. I thanked him for the challenge. I told him that I'm going to find the most girly girl movie I can find. There are some of them that I can't stand, but that will be my little secret.

When he said that he wished he had a sibling, I corrected him and told him about my little sister, and said he's better off being an only child. He just laughed at me and started asking questions about my mom. I told him about how we were before my dad had skipped town with

his new piece of ass that obviously meant more to him than his whole family. He told me that he did not know which is worse ... a dad there until a certain point in your life and then splitting, or one that was never there. I said that it was the latter because I will cherish the memories of my happy childhood. Just not the aftermath.

He also got me to agree to let him take me out for my birthday. It is not like that day could get any worse, but I'm positive that just being with Drew will make that day better, no matter what we do. He said we could go anywhere I wanted; it was my choice.

I told him all about my new internship and how I had class in the

morning, then work in the afternoon. He was familiar with where I would be working because some of the kids at the gym go there. I also told him about how I wanted to take my career as far as I could possibly go. He told me that I deserved it and, for once, I actually believed it when someone said that.

I also got to talk to Ms. Lauren about her saying that she knew him. She admitted right off the bat that she did not know him, but she had a good feeling. That's when I about flipped out on her, and told her that he could have been some freak out to kidnap some drunk girl at the bar. That's when she said, "But he didn't. You're still here so I obviously had the right feeling about him." I threw

up my hands in exasperation and told her that it was only because I liked her, and he did turn out to be a really nice guy, that I would forgive her.

Monday morning rolled around and, I have to admit, it was a bittersweet moment. I was sitting in my first class of the day when it hit me that this was the first day of class of my last year of college. Then it's into the real world. I'm not so sure about that part but, hopefully, it will not be too bad. I'll get a glimpse of my future this afternoon when I go to at my first day of my internship.

Thankfully, I only have two classes between eight and eleven in the morning, then a two hour lunch, then on to my

internship from one until five. So maybe this year won't be too bad. All the long hours of classes is paying off because I only have two left this semester. That gives me a half-year to get experience working in my field.

I am only half-way through the day and it's been a good one. He texted me all morning, and even though I could only text him back during my breaks, he didn't seem to mind. Now I am sitting here at the small café I used to work at eating lunch, waiting to start my internship. I'm really just sitting here texting Drew like I'm in high school. How pathetic am I? I told him I could let him go so he could get some work done, but he insisted that it was fine. However,

I told him that it's almost time for me to leave in case there is traffic. I do not want to be late on my first day. Maybe I am a little too excited about it.

Seeming how I have never been this close to the city in the three years I have lived here, I was surprised that I did not get lost. When I pull into the parking lot and take in my surroundings, the building is a lot bigger than I thought it would be and nicely landscaped. The buildings across the street, however, had seen better days. As I make my way to the front door, I silently hope this isn't as bad a neighborhood as it looks. I push all that aside as I walk inside the doors and am greeted by a bubbly receptionist with a black bobbed haircut. She is

gorgeous, her make-up and hair done perfectly, which leaves me feeling a little self-conscious.

“I’m here to assist Paula Martin,” I tell her and she picks up the phone.

I look around at the typical waiting room set up. It had those awful fake trees and the magazines that are at least two-years-old. Though, the chairs looked nice and the place was clean.

The clinking of heels on tile brought my attention to the woman walking towards me that I assumed was Paula. I had not met her yet because I owed all of this to my psychology teacher that has helped and guided me throughout my three years at Tulsa. He is really good friends with Mrs. Martin

and, in fact, I do believe he has a little crush on her. Once I saw her, I could see why.

She is wearing an off-white blouse which accentuates what she has going on up top. It goes with her tiny waist and perfect hips in that black pencil skirt she's wearing. Everything fit her like a glove. Crap, I hope I'm dressed okay. I look down at my black slacks, paired with an old silk dressy shirt with weird designs on it that I have had forever. I believe I stole it from my old best friend back in my home town, well old best friend I guess.

I come back to reality when I notice the woman standing in front of me is extending her hand. Shit! I quickly

introduce myself and she tells me to follow her. We make our way through a door and, at the end of the hallway, she leads me into an office that I presume is hers. It's a pretty common office with everything you would expect. I take a seat, fiddling with the straps on my purse. I have no clue why I'm nervous, but I am. Mr. Mackey said I already had the internship. Maybe it's my insecurities, as Drew would say it. Oh, I can't start thinking about him here. I have to stay focused.

“Well Ms. Brooks, you came highly recommended from Mr. Mackey and I have to say that, by looking at your schooling, I can see why he did. You will graduate a semester ahead of when

you are supposed to, your grades and extra credits are outstanding for someone as young as you.”

I sat there quietly, just smiling and nodding when she would look up from her papers on her desk. I didn't know what to say, and I sure as hell wasn't going to elaborate on why I worked my ass off when I got to college. Everyone has their own story, and I would prefer to keep mine to myself. He was the one exception. *Stay focused!*

“I worked hard, but I still have a little ways to go before I will be happy with what I want to accomplish,” I tell her, smiling.

I am actually a little proud of myself for what I have been able to

accomplish in the small amount of time that I've had. Still, if it's up to me, I am nowhere near finished. I will only have my bachelors when I graduate, and I'd like to go for my masters. Of course, that's depending on how this internship goes and if they decide to hire me, or if I find another good paying job to pay for more schooling.

She asks me what I would like to accomplish. I tell her that if everything goes well with this internship, I'd like to have a steady income coming in because my student grants are gone and loans will be piling up. I also told her about how I plan on working full-time by next year, and going to school for my masters at night. She seemed impressed, and I

hope that it shows her that I am more than willing to work my ass off here to help me in the future.

“Well, it seems that Mr. Mackey chose a good person for this job.” She stands and motions me to follow.

We walk back into the hallway. To the left, there’s a room full of filing cabinets, a printer, and a small desk. She turns, looking a little embarrassed. “I’m sorry we don’t have an actual office for you, but I hope this will work.”

“Oh, yes, this is fine. Thank-you,” I reply, smiling.

It really wasn’t that bad and was about the same size as her office. It looked like they have been using it for storage until now. “Okay, well,” she

says, as she walks further into the storage room/office. “You will be dealing with the filing of the client’s papers and the billing for their appointments.” I nod at her as she continues. “You will also go get the clients from the waiting room and bring them to me. I might ask you to sit in with me sometimes, with their permission, so you can get a feel for how things work.” That last part made me smile. This will be the best last semester ever.

The rest of the day was filing paperwork. For the most part it was organized, but not all of it, and the incoming new clients just added more. The day went by fairly quickly, considering it was my first day. I didn’t

even know it was time to leave until Paula poked her head in the door and asked if I was going to work all night. When I checked the clock, I could not believe that it was already after five. So I gathered my things, thanked her for the opportunity, and told her that I would be seeing her tomorrow at one.

As I make my way to my car, I drag out my phone to see if he's texted. He has! The butterflies come just by seeing his name. I wait to read it until I get to my car so I have the privacy of the text all to myself.

The first one was a text to what we were texting about at lunch that I didn't get a chance to respond to:

I'll make sure that your b-day is amazing this year ...

I can feel a goofy grin on my face, but my mind starts wondering about what he's planning. He knows THAT happened on my birthday, but I'm almost positive that it won't even cross my mind when I'm with him.

I hope your first day at work is going good ... I'm thinking about you. I was wondering if the lovely Ms. Brooks had plans this evening.

I think I texted him back as fast as I have ever texted anyone in my life. Even through a text, he can make me feel things I only thought I felt in the past.

I actually can't wait until my birthday now! And I had a great first day! I hope your day was good! And no, Mr. Evans, I do not have plans ... what do u have planned?

I take a deep breath, put my phone aside, start my car, and realize that I'm the only one left in the parking lot. Yeah, I'm a loser. I manage to make it back to the dorms without getting lost. This may not be so bad after all. I make my way to my dorm room, without any confrontations this time. Lauren's in the room, and it looked like she robbed a clothing store.

“Hey, Lauren. How'd your first day

of classes go?” I say, eyeing her purchases.

I practically fall on my bed, my things falling to the floor. I lean on my side and watch her go through mounds of clothes. She doesn't even turn to me when she says, “Is that what you wore today?”

I glance down at my clothes. I didn't think they were that bad. Pulling my eyebrows together, I say, “Uh ... yeah, why?” I reply, unsure of where she is going with this.

“Well, I went shopping today and I have all these other clothes I don't know what to do with ...” she said, trailing off.

“Oh,” I say, flatly.

I wish I had that problem. It took me a while to save up money from working at the coffee shop to be able to buy clothes because I had to make sure I had money for gas and food. I'm grateful that I have grants and a small scholarship that helped me so I could save some of my money. Since I knew I had to quit the coffee shop last week, I had saved the last two checks for gas and food. I don't know when I will get paid for my internship so I don't think I should go buy a new wardrobe for work; I have to be responsible. I don't have anyone to fall back on if I come up short.

“Yep! So I was hoping that you could take a few off of my hands ...”

I think she is being subtle about

asking me if I want some of her old clothes, but I don't want her to give them to me because she feels sorry for me. I hate that. "Oh, um ... it's fine. I don't need any clothes," I say because I don't know what else *to* say.

With her hands on her hips, she turns and glares at me. "You need some work clothes, and a girl can never have too many clothes, in general. Plus, I just went shopping with the allowance that daddy gives me for school clothes every semester." She manages to say that all in one breath.

I hold my hands up. "Okay, okay! Pick out what outfits you don't want anymore," I say to lift her spirits a little bit, but I quickly regret it.

She starts freaking out, wanting me to see if this and that fit. “Ooo, I think this would look awesome on you!”

I feel like her own personal dress-up doll. When it was all said and done, I had five new work outfits and three new “club outfits”. Even though I told her I doubt I would be going to the club anytime soon, she still insisted. She also swore that I had to have these jeans and those shirts so now I have no room in my closet.

I’m standing in front of her massive mirror, looking at one of the shirts she gave me. Maybe I can wear this tonight when I see Drew. It’s a one shoulder simple shirt, but it’s a little tight and I can see the pudge poking out in the front.

Maybe, since it is dark navy blue, he won't notice. Just as I turn so I can see my butt in these shorter than short khaki shorts she gave me, I hear my phone ding.

I'm glad you had a good day, sweetie. Mine was good until now ... look, I'm sorry, but I have to stay late tonight so ...

Feeling, bummed I text back:

Oh, I'm sorry, but it's okay ... just text me later.

I didn't realize how much I was looking forward to just seeing him tonight until I read that text. Guess that

means I can change into So-Fe shorts and a t-shirt, and just relax. However, Lauren walks back into the room saying how “hot” I look and that we have to go out tonight.

“On a Monday night?” I say, hoping she takes the hint that I am not too keen on going out.

“Oh, not clubbing. Just go to the coffee shop and hang out with people from school,” she says like it was obvious.

I wanted to say, sorry to break it to you, Lauren, but I haven’t just ‘hung’ with anyone from this school. I remember when I worked at the coffee shop, and she would come in with some of her friends. From what I remember,

they weren't that bad, but I'm still not so sure about it. The club was a totally different thing. I don't really like talking to people I don't know or in front of a crowd. God, I hope there isn't a bunch of people.

“Calm down, Kara. It's just a few friends at a coffee shop. If you don't want to go, you don't have to. I just wanted to invite you,” she says, sincerely.

I know she's being honest and I don't have to go. However, when I went to the club and when I made the decision to go with Drew the other night, I decided that this year is going to be different. It is my last year and I'm going to have fun.

I give her my best smile and say, “No, it’s fine. I want to go.”

“Okay,” she says, way too cheery.

She starts in about my hair, and asks me what shoes I plan on wearing. She also informs me that the accessories make the outfit. In my twenty-one years of living, I guess someone failed to mention that to me. By the time she was done, after the matching navy wedges and from the way she straightened and styled my hair, I was a couple inches taller. She loaned me a necklace and earrings, but I drew the line on the make-up. I told her it was a waste time because I was just going to come home and take it right back off. We decided to do half-and-half. I reapplied eye liner,

she added eye shadow, and I already had mascara on. Finally, I was ready to go. I didn't understand the point, but I let her have her fun.

I make sure to grab my phone before we leave. I'm secretly hoping that he gets off work soon so I can at least talk to him a little tonight. I don't have class tomorrow, but I do have to go to work at one. Drew's supposed to work from eight to five ... except tonight, of course. I guess this is my new weird schedule I'll have to get used to. I have a feeling I will grow very fond of weekends.

New Life



We get in Laurens car, even though I told her it was only two blocks away. She said, “Yeah, and by the time we walked there, you woulda’ taken those shoes off.” Okay, I had to give her that. These shoes are not comfy, but they sure are

cute. There is a lot of cars here for a Monday night, but I shake it off and follow Lauren inside.

That's when I remember that Monday night is band night at the coffee shop, and that means I will for sure get to see the only friend I have had for the past three years. When I worked here, he was like my rock; he always lifted my spirits. I haven't talked to him since he got back from his home in Kansas. He said his father begged him to come and work the farm for the summer. Kace didn't look like he came from a farm. He didn't even look like he belonged on one with his black shaggy hair, tattoos, and rocker attire. He plays in a local band that has played at the coffee shop

sometimes, and are really good.

I looked around, but didn't see him. I did see a couple of the guys he played in the band with so I had hoped he'd be here. I follow Lauren to where her friends are sitting in the front row at one of the bistro tables that align perfectly to accommodate the stage. I recognize a few of the girls from a couple of classes I had last semester and over the summer. One was a blonde, whom looks like she wants to be like Lauren so bad she can't help it, and the other is red-head, who was too interested in her boyfriend to care about much of anything. They all seem nice, and introduced themselves. I sit and order my usual from the waitress. She had just started when I put my two

week notice in so I didn't get to know her very well, but I'm glad to see that it's working out for her.

I sit back and take a look around the place. It still looks the same. I know it has only been a couple weeks since I've been in here, but that feels like forever when I was used to being here every day for almost three years. It still had the same smell. It's the "I could get high off coffee by walking in here" smell. Trust me, sometimes I thought I did. I loved working here, but it was defiantly time to move on.

When I turn my head back around, I'm facing the door and see a hot guy walk in, carrying a guitar. He has his head down so I can't tell if I know him

or not. He sort of looks familiar. His jet black hair is spiked up in only a way that he could pull off. His red flannel shirt is undone with an old Led Zeppelin shirt under it, and he has on black skinny rocker-type jeans. I would have to say that he looks good. When my eyes travel back up, I noticed he's staring at me. Then it hits me ... Oh, my gosh! I was just checking Kace out! Holy shit! He has a few more piercings on his face, or maybe I never noticed them before because his hair used to cover them. His gauged ears and lip ring look good on him, though. I also see a tattoo poking out of his sleeves and neckline.

He walks up to me and says, "Kara, is that you?"

I'm a little confused by the way he greets me, but then it dawns on me that it's the way I am all fixed up and dressed. "Kace?" is all I'm able to say. I am in utter shock that this is him.

He gives me a rock star smile. "Wow! I can't believe it's you; look at you!" he says, pushing his guitar to his back and opening his arms to me.

I stand and embrace him for what seems like forever. I even think someone at the table I'm sitting at cleared their throat, but I did not care. I haven't seen him in a long time. He was bummed when I told him I would not be working with him anymore. He made me promise to still talk to him when I was all rich and I laughed. We had a good friendship

and I missed him.

We finally break apart, but he keeps a hand on my back while I introduce him to everyone at the table. The way Lauren acted when I introduced her, well ... everybody knows she has a crush on Kace now. I can't blame her one bit; he is something to look at. He pulls up a chair and we talk about what's been going on in each other's lives. All too soon, it's time for him to warm up with the band. He made me promise I would stay until he was done so we could catch up some more.

So I watched the band get ready, and Kace keeps glancing in our direction. I wonder if he has a thing for Lauren, too. I laugh to myself. The only

two friends I have here possibly dating. I really don't hear the conversation at the table, as I sit and drink my frozen caramel latte. Mmm, how I have missed it. I make a mental note to come back here more often.

Then I realize that I haven't checked my phone for a few hours. Crap, I hope Drew doesn't think I am ignoring him. I quickly sat my latte down and reach for my phone, and I don't have a problem finding it because it is lighting up from an incoming call. I hastily grab it and answer.

"Hello," I say, sounding out of breath.

"What are you doing?" I can tell it's Drew from that husky voice, but he

sounds ... I don't know ... irritated?

“Um, I'm at the coffee shop with some friends.” I didn't know how to answer when being asked like that.

“I'm sorry, sweetie. You had me worried. I ended up getting off work ten minutes after you texted me.” He sounded relieved for some reason. Was he really worried about me?

“I didn't mean to worry you. I thought that since you were working late and Lauren asked me to come ...,” I say. I don't know why I feel the need to explain myself.

“No, it's fine. Don't worry 'bout it. So what coffee shop are you at? The one you used to work at?” he asked. He sounds a little distracted, and I hear

some road noise.

“Yes ... and are you talking on the phone and driving?” I say, curious as to why he would do something dangerous while he is worried about my safety.

“Um ... yeah, I was kind of coming by your dorm to make sure you were okay.” He’s acting like he doesn’t know how I’m going to take it.

“Oh, then you shouldn’t be far from the coffee shop. Come on over. We just got here.”

It turns out he’s only a block away so we hang up and I not-so-patiently wait for him. When he finally walks through the door, it feels like if I haven’t seen him in years. I just want to run and jump into his arms, but I remind myself

that we are in front of a bunch of people. He looks really amazing, but he doesn't look like the Drew that I met at the club that night. The "bad boy" is gone. He's in black dress pants with a blue, long sleeve button-up dress shirt. I can't see any of his tattoos, but his muscles show through the shirt. He looks good enough to eat. Drew can pull bad boy and business man off really well.

I stand up to pull another chair closer to me, when he grabs my waist and pulls me into a hug. It seems like it means a lot more, but I gladly wrap my arms around his neck and enjoy his embrace.

When he pulls away, he just stares down at me and we have our silent

moment together. There is an unspoken truth and reassurance that everything is okay. Finally, we detach from each other, and I introduce him to everyone at the table.

“Guys this is my ... friend, Drew,” I stutter, not knowing how to introduce him to other people. We have only just met so I thought “friend” would work. But, by the looks I’m getting from Drew, that wasn’t a good idea.

So I drop my head and pick up my latte again. Thankfully, the band introduced themselves and started playing their first song. It was a song I had heard many times and was an all-time favorite of mine. Out of habit, I start humming to the music. I catch a glimpse

from Drew, but he says nothing so I start to sing along with the band.

When the song ends, Drew leans in and says, “I take it you like them?”

I turn and smile. “Very much.” He gives me his heart-stopping smile.

Drew puts his arm on the chair behind me and the moment is perfect. I’m sitting at the table with Lauren, whom I have grown very fond of; my only other best friend is up on stage doing what he does best and rocking it; and Drew’s sitting beside me. After all these years, I feel like my life means something, like it actually makes sense for once. Maybe I’m where I belong; this feels like home.

“Our next song goes out to a special

young lady that's here tonight, and our very own Kace wrote it. We hope y'all enjoy!" the lead singer pronounces into the microphone.

Kace must have met someone and didn't tell me. Oh, I will get him for that later. He could have at least texted me during the summer. I look around, trying to find a girl that I think he could've written the song for, but no one catches my attention.

They begin to play and it sounds familiar, but I can't put a finger on it. Then the lead singer starts to sing, and I freeze. I didn't think he would turn that into a song. One day, when it was slow at work, we were messing around and popping off random lyrics back and

forth. He said that he thought it would make a good song and later, after work, before I went back to the dorms, he got his guitar out of his car and played me a little bit ... exactly what he is playing now.

A part of me is happy he actually followed through with it and made it a song, but he dedicated it to a girl he's dating now which kind of makes me sad.

*Sometimes your first scars won't
ever fade away,*

*But sometimes the past is just the
past.*

Move on, move on, baby.

You're better than that.

The song is bad ass. We are definitely going to have to make more. They start playing another one that I like. Actually, I'm not sure they have one that I *don't* like. Then they say they're taking a break, and will be back in ten.

By this time, I have finished my latte and really need to use the bathroom so I let Drew know that I'm going use the ladies room. Of course, according to Lauren's rules, I can't go alone so she gets up to tag along. I stop at the trash can to throw my cup away, but Lauren just keeps treading.

"Hey," someone says directly behind me, scaring me, making me jump and throw my hand over my heart. It is just Kace, though.

“Oh, Kace, you scared the shit out of me!” I say, trying to slow my heart down.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to,” he replies, putting a hand on my arm.

I just laugh it off. “Oh, I’m fine. You sounded great up there!”

“Oh, yeah? Did you like the song?” he asked, sounding optimistic.

“I like all your songs!” I say, but I know which one he is talking about. I just want to know about the special someone.

“You know what song I’m talking about, Kara.”

“I loved it, Kace. I can’t believe we practically wrote that song while joking around in here over a year ago.

Gosh,” I say, shaking my head. I can’t believe that it was that long ago; look at us now.

“Yeah,” he says and looks down at the floor, shuffling his feet nervously. This isn’t like him; something is different.

“I’m sorry, but I really have to pee, Kace,” I say, laughing.

He’s laughing now, too. “You had a latte, didn’t you?”

“How did you know?” I raise my eyebrow, giving him a playful look.

He suddenly pulls me toward him and says into my hair, “I’ve missed you, Kara.”

When he pulls away, I just smile and nod because I really have missed

him, too. His stance changes and he has a hard look on his face. I turn to see what he is looking at and I find Drew standing behind me. I look back at Kace to introduce them. I finally catch what is going on. They are sizing each other up. Oh no, they have to get along!

“Hey, Drew, this is Kace. I used to work with him here and somehow, while we made thousands of cups of coffee, we became pretty good friends.”

I can see that Drew’s manners gets the best of him, and he sticks his hand. Kace looks more hesitant to shake, but eventually does.

“Kace, this is Drew, my new ...”

Before I can finish, Drew says, with a sly smile, “Boyfriend.”

Did Drew just say he was my boyfriend? I thought he looked a little upset about the “friend” comment earlier, but we have only been talking for less than a week. I will admit that it is different between us now. We have probably had more conversations than the normal couple does in a year, but we have not talked about this.

I look back up at Kace and, for once, I can't read his face. I'm not sure if it is anger, hurt, or a mixture of the two. I hope he doesn't think we can't be friends now because I have a boyfriend ... that I didn't even know about.

Kace says, “I have to get back to the band. I will see you later, Kara.” Why does he sounds so sad?

I just stand there, confused as to why he is acting that way. I turn to see Drew staring me down, while giving me a look that I can't quite read. It's a mixture of satisfaction and smugness, and I don't understand it. I turn to Drew, "I still have to use to the bathroom. I'll be right back." I don't wait for a response.

I silently hope that Lauren has already gone back to the table so I can have a minute of peace to sort through things in my head. When I push the door to the ladies restroom open, at least someone is on my side. She must have gone back to the table without me seeing. I duck into one of the stalls and do my business. After I wash my hands, I stand

there and try to figure out what was up with the way Kace seemed defeated when he walked off, and Drew's smug look he had when Kace walked away. I don't know what I will do if Kace doesn't like Drew. I have a soft spot for Kace. He's been through a lot growing up and when he is sad, I am sad. That has been our relationship for the past three years. We feel what each other is feeling, and make each other feel better.

I don't know how long I have been in here so I take a deep breath and walk out. When I make it back to the table, Drew is talking to one of the guys and Lauren is giving me a look that says we will talk later. I just nod. Before I sit down, I tell them I will be right back and

don't wait for their response. I walk towards the stage.

“Hey, are you okay?” I say to Kace. I'm worried about him.

“Huh? Oh, yeah, I'm fine. Congrats on the boyfriend, by the way,” he says, but adds the last part with a little sarcasm.

I stand there a minute, confused, trying to decipher his words. He is looking down, messing with his guitar. “Do you not like Drew?”

That makes him look up. “Sure, he's great,” he replies, blandly.

However, the look on his face doesn't convey his words. I have never seen Kace react this way about anything. It's time for him to go back on stage so I

will have to have a talk with him later. As I turn to head back to our table, I find Drew glaring at Kace. I wonder if I am missing something, but blow it off and take a seat.

The rest of the night went off without a hitch, except Kace made sure that he was not around me the rest of the night. Maybe it's just my imagination, but I will get to the bottom of it. Drew was especially quiet tonight, too. Since he's taking me back to the dorm, I will get my chance to see what is wrong.

Drew's Apartment



On the short walk to his car, Drew's quiet. We get in and leave, but he doesn't make the turn to the college. I'm confused. "You missed the turn."

He doesn't look my way or say a word, just nods. So I sit silently, waiting

to see where we're going. He pulls into an abandoned warehouse that looks pretty creepy. It has a few broken windows on the bottom floor, and some of the tin is covered in years of rust. I know I do not know my way around the city very well, but I do know that this is not a good part of town, that is for sure. I can see graffiti on a few buildings, and I check my door ... locked.

He must have seen my reaction. "You are safe with me."

I just nod and he gets out of the car. I take a deep breath and grab my purse, just as he opens my door. We walk to the front of the abandoned warehouse, where there is a door without a lock on it. I am mentally kicking myself for

putting myself in these situations that I know are not safe, but then I think about it. I actually *do* feel safe with him.

I step into a musky smelling room that has double heightened ceilings. It is dark, but the streetlight is shining through the broken windows so I can make out what looks like a boxing ring. I see punching bags and mats scattered everywhere. This must be the center where he contributes his spare time. It's sweet that he's showing me, but in the middle of the night?

He's a few steps ahead of me, looking at me. "You coming?" he asks, skeptical.

I follow him through the big room to a metal staircase that leads up to a

door with enough locks on it for the whole building. He takes keys out of his pocket, and starts attacking the locks. It takes him no time for him to unlock them all. He holds the door open and motions me to go in. When I step into the room, the space takes me by surprise. It is the total opposite of downstairs. Even though the floor plan is the same, this is an apartment. There are a few walls here and there, but I can see all the way through to the back of the space. One whole side is a brick wall with open duct work. On the other side is a kitchen that runs along another wall with an island in front. It's quite big, and has the clean, comfortable feeling of being lived in.

I turn to find him staring intently at me. “Is this your home?”

He smirks and nods. Then he motions me to walk into the living room. I try to take it all in at once ... the leather couch with a throw laid on it, the TV is surrounded by shelves with movies occupying them, and I think I spot a few books in there, too. I might have to check those out later. I turn and walk into the kitchen. I walk around the island, dragging my fingers along the smooth granite countertop. I stop directly on the other side and lock eyes with him. He is leaning against the back of his couch with his arms crossed, giving me a curious look.

I smile. “It’s beautiful, Drew.”

He smiles and reaches his hand out to mine. “But, you haven’t seen the rest yet.”

I take his hand and follow him. He shows me the bathroom and open office area, with more bookshelves. As we make our way down an open hallway, I see pictures that stop me dead in my tracks, and he turns to see what caught my attention. There are framed pictures of him without a shirt on, his hands wrapped, and standing in front of a boxing ring. Next to it are more pictures of him and other guys, looking the same way.

“You fight?”

He sharply says, “Used to.” He’s not looking pleased that I know, but did

he really expect me not to find out? The pictures are hanging on his wall!

Guess we will talk that out when it comes up. He grabs my hand, leading me to the very back of the apartment, and walks me around a long wall that separates it from the rest of the space. His bedroom. I am in Drew's bedroom. My mouth just went dry. I hope he doesn't think something is going to happen. I know we have a connection, but I have not known him long enough. Now that I think about it, I'm not so sure how long you need to know someone before it is okay to sleep with them. You can know someone more than half of your life and it still does not make a difference.

“I’m just showing you where I live; I’m not going to try anything.” He adds the last with a voice meant for a small child.

Actually, that kind of pisses me off a little. I know he knows about my past, but there is no reason to throw it in my face. I am a grown woman and if I want to sleep with someone, I can. I wouldn’t have come here with him if I thought he was going to “try anything” I did not want. “I know that,” I say, sharply.

He doesn’t reply. I might have been ignoring it, but there is something off about him tonight. He’s acting different, and I’m not sure how to deal with it. Maybe I should have gone home with Lauren, but I refuse to run away from my

problems this time. We have something that is indescribable; not everyone has our kind of connection.

I decide to take matters into my own hands. “Is something wrong? You have been acting strange all night. Did I do something?”

He strides to me, taking my head in his hands, locks eyes with me, and kisses me more passionately than he ever has. He’s taking complete control, and I melt at his touch. He takes one hand off of my face to move it around my waist, holding me flush against him. I easily fall into him, kissing him just as passionately. He slides his hand up the back of my shirt, and I gasp at the skin-to-skin contact. He backs me up against

the wall, the exposed brick scratching my bare shoulder. He is kissing me like he is trying to prove himself.

He finally breaks contact with my lips, and I take advantage. "Stop trying to distract me."

The way he glares down at me proves just what his intentions were with that kiss. If he is keeping things from me, and will not communicate this soon into our relationship, then we will not make it far. I am not the type to just sit aside and keep my mouth shut, especially when it has to do with me. However, I bite my tongue and wait for him to speak. "I want you to be mine, Kara."

Puzzled, I stare back at him. "I

don't want to *be* anyone else's."

He lets out a breath that he's been holding, and relief washes over his face. What could make him ever think someone would not want him is beyond me. It is him that I do not understand wanting me. He could have any girl he wants, yet he wants *me*. I am the girl that is fucked up inside, the one that doesn't even know if she can do this relationship thing. I guess everyone needs a little ego boost sometimes. Shit, I know I do a lot of the time, but that has to come from within me. How else could I have gotten this far with my school, but I can put myself aside for him. That is what people do in a relationship, right?

I break the silence. "So are you

going to tell what this is all about?" My voice is small.

He closes his eyes before he begins. "I don't know what it is about you." He strokes my cheek with the back of his hand. "When another guy looks at you or touches you, I want to hurt them. You mean so much to me already that it scares me. I'm sorry for going weird on you tonight."

I feel as if the air has been knocked out of me. I knew he must have liked me. but I would have never guessed that I mean so much to him. On the other hand, I don't want to jump into this relationship with him too fast and risk scaring him.

I lean into him and say, "You mean

a lot to me, too, but you don't have anything to worry about with me."

"Are you saying you have something to worry about with *me*?" he asks while he stares intently down at me. He is still holding me against him, not looking like he's going to let me go. In a weird sense, maybe I don't want him to.

"No ... um ... it's just that I don't know what we are ... um ... doing here," I stumbled.

He bores into my eyes. "I want to be with you. I know your past has been anything but sunshine and flowers. Let me be your sunshine, and I will buy you millions of flowers."

I lean against the wall for support. I wonder if he knows what he's asking for.

I want to tell him that a relationship with me won't be easy. That, with my past, I am not even sure if I can be in a stable relationship without screwing it up. On the other hand, I don't want to throw something great away just because of my insecurities.

“I want to be with you, too, but I don't know if I can do it. I mean, I haven't been in a relationship since ...”

He takes my face in his palms, looking me square in the eye. “You were *not* the problem in that relationship. We both want this so how about we take a chance and see where it takes us. One condition, though ... no other guys.”

I nod my head in agreement. “Okay ... and no more girls?” I raise my

eyebrows.

A hint of a smile plays on his lips. “There is only you, sweetheart.” He kisses my forehead and moves away.

I am guessing he saw the bewildered look on my face because he starts to explain. “If we are going to be together, I want to do this right.” He says the next part as if he’s not sure how I will react. “Because of what happened in your past, I think we should take things slow, get to know each other and let the chips fall where they may. No rushing, okay?”

I freeze at the mention of my past, but at least I didn’t freak out. I totally agree with him about taking it slow. If we rush into things, I think what we have

would be taken away. Plus, I don't know if I could handle it. How pathetic that we have to do things differently than normal people ... because of me. Do I really want to put him through this? I know it is not fair to him, and I feel selfish.

“I don't want you to do anything differently than you normally would do with a ... um ... girlfriend ...”

Oh, wow! Did I just use the word girlfriend? What is wrong with me?! I look down in embarrassment and start wringing my hands together. I hardly ever notice when I do it, but he reminds me by putting his hands over mine, pleading me to stop my nervous habit. I look up into those imploring eyes. “One, I don't want this to be like any other

relationships I have had in the past. Two, girlfriend is the right word to use.”

There’s a glimmer of hope in his eyes. I just smile and nod. He smiles, grabs my hand, and leads me out of his bedroom and to the couch. He sits me down and goes to grab us drinks. He returns with non-alcoholic ones which make me frown, but then I remember that he has work at eight in the morning. I sigh and take a sip of my drink. It’s some mix of cranberry juice and orange juice, I think. I really don’t care; it tastes wonderful.

He sits beside me and puts his arm around me. We sit back and relax, and it feels nice and normal. Maybe we can have a normal relationship.

We watch some late night shows on the satellite. Well, between making out like teenagers and talking about his life when he was fighting, we really didn't watch them. I was surprised to learn that he fought all through college so that he could pay for it. He promised me that he does not do it now. It makes me sad to think of him having to stoop to that level just to achieve a college degree. I feel proud of him, though. From what he has told me about his past, it wasn't smooth sailing for him, either.

His mom would come home drunk from the bar every night with a different guy. It pissed Drew off that his mother didn't care about her health ... or him, for that matter. He told me that, after his

dad left him and his mother to fend for themselves, she let herself go off the deep end. That's how he found himself here, at the gym.

Not only did he learn to fight here and then moved in, he helps out every chance he gets. It makes me smile that people my age still care enough to donate their time to kids that don't have a role model. I don't know what I did to become lucky enough to have someone like him in my life, but I hope that he stays.

Someone is shaking me. I tense up, jerking my eyes open and scanning wildly around the room. They finally rest on him, and I instantly relax. He pulls me to him, wrapping his strong

arms around me and making me feel safer than I have ever felt. “I’m sorry I scared you. You fell asleep, sweetie,” he tells me in a soft voice.

Crap, I feel asleep. He probably wants me to leave so he can get to bed. How rude of me. He has work in the morning. “Oh, I’m sorry, Drew. I didn’t mean to be a burden. I will go so you can get some sleep,” I say groggily, trying to sit up.

“You don’t have to leave unless you want to.” He pulls me to him and I lay my head on his chest. “I would like you to stay the night ... if you want to, of course. Nothing will happen,” he says, almost a whisper.

“Okay,” I say, weakly. He has a

way of breaking down walls, and makes me *feel* again. It is scary, but I think I like it.

We stand and walk to his bedroom. He pulls a t-shirt out of his closet and hands it to me, telling me I can use the bathroom to change. I smile and walk to the bathroom. I take off my clothes, fold them, and place them neatly on the vanity. I will have to wear the same clothes tomorrow anyway. I normally don't sleep in my bra, but I'm hesitant whether I should leave it on or not. I don't want him thinking that I want to do something. Well, I want to, but I don't think I am ready for that, and it would ruin what we have right now.

I smile at myself in the mirror. I

don't ever remember being this happy, nor did I ever think I would be this happy again. I take a deep breath. "Baby steps, one step at a time," I say into the mirror. I tried to fix the mess of top of my head. I feel like I'm channeling Lauren. I finally give up; that is as good as it's going to get. I finish by using his mouthwash, hoping he doesn't mind.

He gave me a white shirt with black and red writing on it. I have no clue what it says, but I think it's a fighting shirt. I finally decide I can sleep one night with a bra on. I make my way back through the quiet loft to his bedroom. As I poke my head around the wall, I see that he's already under the covers.

He has his hands behind his head, making those muscles flex in just the right way. I am finally getting a good look at his bare chest, only to find more muscles and more tattoos. I know he said he wanted to take things slow, but I'm not so sure I can. The tattoos lead downward, right to his ...

I giggle at the thoughts going through my head. He cocks his head, giving me a puzzled look, which makes me giggle louder. He really has no clue how adorable he is when he does that.

“Are you enjoying the view, baby?” he says in a seductive voice, and it immediately halts my giggles.

I catch his smoldering eyes fixed on mine, and I feel a thousand feelings that I

have never felt before run through me. I feel drawn to him, just like a moth to a flame. In a daze, I start walking towards him. He sits up to pull the covers back for me, but when he moves so do those muscles. I catch my eyes wandering and hope he didn't notice.

I climb into bed and we instantly snuggle up against each other, our bodies fitting perfectly like they belong together. Everything would have been perfect, except now I remember why I do not sleep in a bra. It is poking and prodding me whichever way it possibly can.

Drew notices my discomfort and slightly pulls back. "What's the matter?"

Feeling my face flush bright red while I try to figure out how to get out of

this one, I decide the truth won't hurt. "Um ... I don't normally sleep in a bra and it's ... uh ... bugging me ... sorry," I say, abashed.

"Oh, well, I want you to be comfortable. Here ...," he says, as he reaches around me.

"Wait ... I ... uh ... I can do it. I will do it." How much more humiliating can this be?

I reach behind me and try to undo the three little hooks, but it is much harder lying down than standing. I get one hook undone but the other two suckers will not budge. He takes my arms and pulls them back around to the front, clasping my hands in his and brings them up to his face. He kisses my

fingers. The streetlight is reflecting through the windows, illuminating half of his perfectly sculpted face.

Seriously, he says, "Trust me."

I slowly nod my head. I lean into him, laying my head down on his shoulder, as he moves his hands around to my back. He takes his time pulling my shirt up, as if show me exactly what he is doing as he is doing it. Once he makes it to the hooks, he undoes them with ease. It makes a dreadful thought pop into my mind but, as fast as it was there, I push it away. I'm not going to let my foolish thoughts ruin the moment.

He begins to move further up my shirt, and I tense. I don't want him to stop because his hands feel so good on

me, but I know we shouldn't. It is too soon.

His hot breath gives me chills, as he whispers in my ear, "Trust me, baby. I'm just going to help you take it off."

"Okay," I say, breathless.

I settle back onto his chest, as he effortlessly maneuvers to pull my arms out of the straps of my bra without taking my shirt off or touching me. He pulls my bra out from beneath my shirt and nonchalantly leans over me to put it on the floor beside me. Having him that close to me makes me sense everything ... the weight of the shirt on my bare breast, his defined abdomen leaning close to me, his musky cologne mixed with a hint of his own personal scent.

That mix can be intoxicating, and I think I'm getting drunk on Drew right now. I need to pull myself together. We talked about this. We're taking things slow.

The way his breath hitches as he leans over tells me I am not the only one feeling this attraction. As he goes to lie back down, he slides his masculine hand to my neck and pulls me to him. He takes my mouth like it is the first time tasting me, or as if it's his last. I slide my tongue along his lips and he opens his mouth on contact, massaging my tongue with his. He pulls on my bottom lip and I, in turn, start to suck on his tongue. He hastily pulls away, shaking his head and mumbling, "You are going to kill me, baby." He kisses my forehead while he

puts an arm around my waist, pulling me flush against him. That's when I feel *how* I'm going to kill him.

I have the dumbest grin on my face. The fact that I can do that to him is enough to put me on cloud nine. For the longest time, I didn't think anyone could be attracted to me after HE ruined me. However, Drew is attracted to me and that is all that matters. He nuzzles my hair, pulling me tightly to him and I fall into a comfortable sleep.

Boyfriend



In the morning, I got up when he did and enjoyed watching him stroll through his loft getting ready. He was in his own little world, though every now and then he would turn his head and smirk at me. He knew that I was up to no good but,

since I didn't have class that morning and my internship didn't start until one, I was in no rush.

He had insisted on me staying in bed and getting more sleep, telling me that he would take an early lunch and take me back home so that I could get ready. I told him there was no sense in that. I could just get up when he did and he could take me home when he left. It was more like I did not feel completely comfortable alone in his apartment.

Lauren, my roommate and friend, has been telling me that she can't believe the change she has seen in me the past couple weeks. I agree with her. I am a little different, but I think it's better. I feel like I am finally coming out of the

slump I have been stuck in for the past four years. I have someone that truly cares for me now.

Things have been pretty perfect these past two weeks, even after our rough start. Once we got it out there how we both felt and what we both wanted, everything else seemed to just fall into place. We try to see each other every night, although that does not always happen. We both understand our busy schedules and promised not to let it come between us.

I have stayed the night with him a few times. It's normally the same every time; we have our little routines now. It's sweet. Even though we both agree that we should take things slow, it

doesn't mean that it is easy to keep our hands to ourselves. There have been times that, if he would not have stopped us, we would have gone all the way. It feels different with him and I want it, but I'm scared that pushing the relationship further than it is ready to go will backfire.

Geez, I'm at work daydreaming again. I need to get my head in the game. So far it has been everything I'd expected, and my boss has been a huge help in getting me to understand what will be expected of me when I graduate and actually get a real job. Everyone has been extremely welcoming here, which is good considering I was so nervous that I would screw this opportunity up.

The only drawback of the whole situation is the son of the guy that owns our office building. This afternoon, as I was making my way into work, I ran into one of the people I wish I would have never seen again. I mean “ran into” literally. I was looking down at the stack of papers, making sure I had all of them in order to file, when I ran right into the shoulder of Collin.

He had to have seen me coming so I think there was a little participation on his part to make it happen. He helped me gather the papers off of the floor, like the gentleman he was ... yeah, right. Of course, he insisted on making sure I made it to my office without any other mishaps. All I could think of was that if

he wouldn't have stepped to his left that "mishap" would have never happened.

Thank goodness he left after walking me to my office, but he insured that I would be seeing him around. All I could think was great, and I really do not want to tell Drew that the jackass that he saved me from that night practically owns the building that I am interning at. I decided that nothing really happened so, to keep things okay, I would keep it to myself. Maybe, he's only an asshole when he is drunk.

Just as I make my way to my car to head back to my dorm, my phone dings. There is only one person that it could be from. Before I even pull out my phone, I am smiling ear-to-ear. Just the thought of

him does that to me. He makes me believe that maybe someone that has had nothing but bad in their life will get some good. I am done dwelling on the past; I am now looking towards the future. Whatever that might hold for me, I am up for it. I grab my phone and look at his text:

You, me, Chinese, a movie. Get your butt here! ;)

That is what I like about him. He cuts right to the point, which is probably why I feel like I can trust him. Whatever the reason, I find myself at his loft forty-five minutes later. First, I went by my dorm to grab some extra clothes, just in

case I end up staying. I never count on staying the night, but I never count it out, either. Maybe I look a little too hopeful by bringing clothes, but I decide not to think too much about it.

I make my way inside the gym to find a few guys still working out, and two in the ring throwing a few punches back and forth. I wince as the smaller guy takes one to the gut. I do not understand how or why they would put themselves out there for destruction. I normally take the side door up to his loft if I think there are still guys here because one, I do not want to disturb them, and two, I don't want to have to walk through a gym with only guys because you feel like you are a show.

As soon as I thought they could eat me alive with their hungry eyes, Kenny appears from the other side of the ring and gives all the guys a stern look. He is the guy that took Drew in when he was just a kid and helped him straighten out his life. He has been a godsend for Drew, and I will always be thankful to him for helping him through the rough times in his life.

Kenny could easily put the fright in you with his 6'2", 240-pound frame. He is not one to be messed with. His dark black buzz haircut has specks of gray poking through, which gives it that salt-and-pepper look. It works for him, though. However, don't let his age fool you. I have seen him scrap with a few

guys within the couple weeks that I've been around, and I would not want to piss him off. I am glad that he and I hit it off from the start, and I can see why Drew looks up to him so much.

“Hey, Kara! How're you today?” he says politely, as he gives me a half-hug.

“Oh, I'm better now that I'm off work. How are things going here? I'm sorry. If I knew there were still guys here, I would have gone in the side door.”

He dismisses that with a wave of his hand. “Oh, don't worry about these guys. They need to work on concentrating when there is a pretty lady around, or else they're going to get their

asses whipped. Things are going great. That's why I am here so late. I have more appointments than time." he says with a hearty laugh.

"Well, that is good for business, but not for a personal life." I have been hinting to Drew that we need to find Kenny a lady friend.

He shakes his head, laughing. "I better get back to work, and I bet Drew is waiting on you."

As if on cue, Drew is already making his way down the stairs and striding towards us. How such a masculine man can walk so gracefully is beyond me. "Kenny, are you keeping my girl held up down here?" he asks, jokingly.

Kenny throws his hands up in defense, laughing, “Don’t worry, dude. I know she is all yours.” With that, he goes back to his training.

Drew grabs my hand and leads me upstairs. As soon as we make it inside and the door closes, he pushes me against it and kisses me ferociously. His hands roam freely over my body, on my neck, down to my hip and squeezing, before making his way to the small of my back, molding me to him. I drop my belongings to the floor so that I can run my hands down his sculpted back. We fit perfectly into each other and, one of these times, we are not going to be able to stop despite our wishes of taking things slowly.

Drew always has more willpower than I do. He stops kissing me to wrap his arms around me and mummurs in my ear, “I missed you.”

I giggle, “I think I can tell.”

He gives me a wide smile. “I think you missed me, as well, Miss Brooks.”

I shiver at his tone, then playfully shove his chest, laughing. “Hmm ... I don’t know, maybe.” I give him a sly smile.

“Ha ha. You hungry? I got Chinese,” he says, as he turns to gesture me further into the apartment.

“Yes, I’m starving,” I say, smiling.

We make our way into the kitchen where we get plates, forks, and drinks. It’s as if we have done this for years. We

take our seats at the island and start dishing out the food, but not without a few playful nudges.

Life could not feel more normal at this very second. I stop eating to relish what I have sitting beside me. He is more than I could have ever wished for. I am beyond happy that I never gave up on my dream to get out of that shit hole of a town because if I let all the bad define me, I would not be where I am today. I wouldn't be staring at the most amazing man God could have created for me, either.

He cocks his head and raises an eyebrow. I know he is trying to read my mind. This makes me smile and wink, as I turn to finish my food. Figure that one

out, Mr. Evans. With a smirk on his face, he turns to demolish his dinner.

When are done, we practically fall on the couch, laughing because we ate too much. He puts in a new movie he has been dying to see. It's an action one, but I don't mind as long as I get to sit here and ogle him the entire time, which is exactly what I do the whole movie. He kept giving me shy looks throughout the movie, letting me know that he knew exactly what I was doing.

When the movie is over, I stand up and stretch. "Well, I better get back; it's getting late."

He grabs my hips and slowly pulls me to him. My eyes fix on his, as he whispers, "Stay." There is so much

meaning behind just one word.

I feel like putty in his arms. All I can manage is a measly, “Okay.”

I get one of his megawatt smiles, which gives me the best feeling inside. “Do you want to go get your clothes?” he asks.

I smile, sheepishly. “Um ... I already have clothes in my car.”

I glance up at him, as he raises those meticulous eyebrows of his. “Oh? Did you plan on staying here tonight?”

“I ... uh ... no, I just thought that maybe ...,” I stammer.

He interrupts me. “It’s fine. I am just giving you a hard time. I’m glad you want to stay. I want you here.”

He insists on going to get my bag

out of my car so I give him my keys. When he returns, we go through our nightly routine that has become commonplace over the past couple weeks. I change and finish in the bathroom, while he changes in his room because he takes showers in the mornings. I feel comfortable enough to not sleep in my bra now because I know that he won't try anything. We haven't messed around that much, other than the occasional make out session and roaming hands.

I stride my way through the familiar loft right to his bed. As always he is lying there and waiting on me with the covers pulled back and, as always, I halt at the entrance of his bedroom and take

in the whole picture. His eyes could burn a whole through me, as I stand there admiring his exquisite body. With the sexual tension that thick, I know we will not be able to hold out much longer. I saunter over to the bed, having more confidence than I even knew I had in me. I cuddle up next to him, but I do not stop there. I boldly put my hand around to the back of his neck, lightly pull him towards me, and take him in a feverish kiss. He is a little stunned, but it does not take him long to fall into rhythm.

He reacts immediately, drawing me towards his hard body. I feel it all over ... my breast rubbing on his tight chest, his strong hand on my back makes me tingle all over. I hike my leg up on his

hip and he takes advantage, grabbing my ass and putting his hardness between my legs. The friction makes me throw my head back and moan, as he keeps the movement up while licking and sucking my neck.

I never knew that it could feel this gratifying. With every kiss he plants on me, he erases another awful memory. With time, I feel like he could make me forget all the abominable times. Every time Drew touches me, another memory fades. When I think about what is happening right now, the past is the last thing on my mind. All these years, I assumed that I would be in this position one day. I always pondered how I would feel. Would that nightmare come haunting

my mind and ruin the moment? It might have if it was not Drew that had his arms wrapped firmly around me.

He pulls back, both of us breathing hard. “We better stop.”

Between breaths, I say, “Don’t stop.”

He blows a deep breath out and leans his forehead onto mine. “As bad as I want to, I want you to be ready.”

I believe I would know when I am ready. “I am. I want this ... with you.”

“I know, but I just think it’s too soon, baby.” He runs his hand down the side of my face.

I’m giving him a full pout now. It makes him laugh. “But that doesn’t mean we can’t do ... *other* things ...” He lets

it trail off as he starts kissing me, making his way down my neck to my chest, where he pulls my shirt off carefully, making sure I know what he is doing. Exposing my bare breast, he starts back at my neck working his way down, eventually taking one nipple in his mouth while caressing the other with his hands. My back automatically bows off the bed. He takes that opportunity to wrap his arm around my waist, holding me in place.

He continues to kiss his way down my stomach, around my belly button. OH, he is going down there. I have never done that or had anyone do that to me. “Drew ... um ... I-I have never ... well, no one has ...”

Thankfully, he cuts me off by seductively saying, “Shh, baby, I will take care of you. Trust me. All you have to say is stop if you don’t want me to.”

The vibration from his talking so close to down there was heavenly. I probably want this more than he does. I understand his worries about my past and how things could possibly scare me off, but I know myself. I wouldn’t be doing this if I thought something bad could come of it. I trust my instincts more now than I did before.

He is kissing, sucking, and licking all around me down there, making me squirm. He places his hands on either side of my hips, glaring up at me through his dark eyelashes, “Do you want me to

stop?”

I try to concentrate, but his warm hands on my sides, holding me still, make it difficult. I manage to shake my head through my erotic breaths. “I want to hear you say it,” he demands in a low, raspy voice.

“No ... don’t stop,” I say, breathless.

That was all the encouragement he needed. His hands torturously make their way down my sides, his thumb hooking in my panties, pulling them down. Then begins the most mind blowing sensations I have ever felt. The way he’s caressing and licking me makes me feel exceptional, like I am the only person that matters.

When I come apart, I am at a loss. My entire body is tingling; every inch is feeling what he just did. I lie there, trying to come back down to earth from the magical place he took me, as he slides back up my body and makes me shiver. He encircles me with his arms, holding me tight to him. He takes a deep breath and kisses my head before asking, “Did you like that?”

My brain is still scattered so all I’m able to mumble is, “Mmm ...” His hearty chuckle it is the most comforting sound I have ever heard.

Then it hits me that he took care of me so I need to return the favor. I have never done that before so I’m not sure if I should just go down there or ask him

first. No, that would be stupid. Maybe I can just hint around to it, but what if I don't know what I'm doing once I get down there. If I screw up, it will ruin everything. Do I want to risk that?

I turn towards him, and start kissing and nibbling on his neck. I'm slowly making my way down when he grabs my chin, pulling my face to look at him. "What are you doing?"

He is going to make this more humiliating than it has to be. "I-I was just going to, um ..."

Looking me square in the eyes, he says, "Don't worry about me, darling."

"But I don't want you to, um ... I want to ... do that to you. I will feel bad if I don't," I finally spit out.

“I will survive. There’s nothing for you to feel bad about, baby.”

Before I can protest, he pulled me into a kiss. I can still taste a hint of me on his lips, and it is sexy as hell. I kind of feel like a slut for wanting to jump on top of him and demand him to have sex with me, but I will control myself. It is for the better ... I think.

He adjusts himself, and then pulls me against him so we are spooning. I can still feel his hardness at my backside. Almost as if I have no control over it, my hips start to move. He squeezes my hip bone and growls in my ear, “Don’t, baby, please. I don’t think I could control myself if you kept that up.”

An evil smile breaks across my

face, and naughty ideas go through my head. I sigh and push them aside for another time. “Okay, sorry.”

“It’s fine. One day, though ...” He trails off, as we both begin to nod off.

Normal?



My life has never felt more normal than it does right now. Everything feels like it is where it belongs. I have a wonderful boyfriend, an awesome new best friend, and the best internship I could ask for. Maybe that saying is right ... “good does

come to those who wait.” Sometimes I stop to look around and take it all in, enjoying it, because I am one that knows it can be taken away in a heartbeat.

My classes are easy because I had actually done my homework in the prior years. I am learning so much from my internship, though. Even Collin has been scarce lately. My hopes are that he got the hint. Everything has been ordinary. That’s what life is supposed to be, right?

Every chance we get, Lauren and I hang out. Even though she does not know about my past, she still tells me that she thinks Drew is good for me. She has seen me the past couple years, and I’ve changed in these last few weeks. Who would have thought that a half-semester

could change your thought on your future again? I feel like there is actually hope.

Drew and I have been together for a couple months now and even though we still have yet to have sex, we have managed to find other ways of having fun. About a month later, I finally convinced him that I wanted to go down on him. Even through my inexperience, he was champ. I would have to say I have improved since! Things could not be any better between us. We get along as if we have been together years; we have a connection. Although we still may have the occasional argument over movies and stupid things, we still could conquer anything that life throws at us.

I just got out of class and went to

the coffee shop for coffee and a bite to eat before I head into my last day of work for the week. Sitting here looking around, I realize I really miss this place. I will always be grateful for my old boss giving me this job; it was a lifesaver when I first came here. I never thought I would be sitting on the other side. So much has changed for the better since then. There will always be things you can't change, though. For instance, my mother called me last week, for the first time since school started, to tell me what kind of trouble my sister was in. I really do not understand what she expects me to do, but I can't let things like that get me down when I have what I have now ... even though it hurt like hell that she

did not once ask about how I was doing.

I am absentmindedly turning my cup when I heard the shop door open, making me look up. That is when I see someone I have not seen in months. The last time was here when his band played, the first night I spent at Drew's place. The thought makes me smile.

"Hey, Kace!" I say, as I jump up to give him a hug.

I really have missed him. He was always there to listen to me when I needed to vent, when I had no one else. I know he had to think that I was a poor pathetic girl, but he always made me feel better. I wonder what he has been up to. I have been by here a few times, trying to catch him, but he is never working

anymore.

His face lights up considerably when he sees me. “Hey!” He comes straight for me, through the crowd of people waiting for their coffee. He scoops me up into a hug and just holds me there. I awkwardly pull back, putting some space between us. He throws his hand up, gesturing to one of his friends behind the counter to make his usual, before he sits down at my table. One of the perks of working here is not having to wait in line.

“So what have you been up to?” I cheerfully ask, pushing through the awkward fog.

“Oh, you know, same ol’ shit. I only work here on the weekends now. My

band's got more gigs lined up than we can keep up with."

"Oh, well, that's great! I was wondering why I haven't seen you around much."

"Yup," is all he says?

Then there is an uncomfortable silence that has never been there before with us. I wonder if something is going on with him that he isn't telling me. I hope that he would know I would be here for him like he was for me when I needed a shoulder to cry on.

"Are you still with *him*?" he asks, sounding annoyed. Where did that come from? Talk about random, and I do not know why he asked like that.

"Yes, we are. Is something wrong?"

I say.

He shoots me a look that says I should know, but I am confused by his actions. “No, I’m sorry for being a dick. I’m just tired. It’s been a long week,” he states, even though it doesn’t explain why he asked that questions or why he asked that question. I decide to let it go, as I take a sip of my coffee.

“So how’s life?” he asks blandly like he doesn’t really want to know.

I simply state, “Good. Classes are a breeze and my internship is going great.”

“That’s great,” he mumbles, then his friend calls to him to say his coffee is ready. He says he has to go to band practice and that he will call me. I don’t plan on waiting on that phone call,

considering how he was acting, but I just hope that he knows I'm here.

Well, that was a short, but not-so-sweet reunion. I don't have much time to ponder on Kace's actions because I am going to be late for work if I do not get my ass in gear. I make a mental note to call him later, though.

I make it to work in the nick of time, thanking God that traffic was light. It looks as though a storm might come up, as I make my way inside the building. I don't put much thought into it because it *is* Oklahoma.

I smile and make small talk about the weather with Asha as I walk through the door. We really have hit it off these past few weeks and I could see us

becoming good friends, if we hung out more. She really seems down to earth; everyone here has been so welcoming.

I sit at my small desk, getting everything ready for the day, when Paula knocks on the open door. “Hey, I was wondering if you would like to assist me with a client today. All you have to do is sit in, and then we will talk about it afterward?”

I am beyond excited. “Yes! Thank-you!” Okay, maybe that came out a little more enthusiastic than it should have, but that doesn’t mean that I don’t feel it any less.

At least I have a couple hours to compose myself before the appointment. I know my nerves will still get the better

of me, but I have to remind myself that I can do it. This is what I chose as my career. There is no backing out now.

The two hours went by quickly, as I silently give myself a pep talk. I walk out of my office, down the hall, and to the waiting room. There are a few kids waiting so I look down at my chart to see who I am looking for. “Breann Turner?” I call out, only to see the last person I expected to stand up.

This girl looked like the epitome of a popular cheerleader, and I wonder what could bring her here. With her blonde hair and blue eyes, she is beautiful. I guess I should keep my judgmental thoughts to myself. Everyone has their own story, including me.

When we are settled in Paula's office, she begins to ask Breann typical questions: "How have things been?", "Anything new going on?" ... etc. It's only when Paula brings up the subject of her ex-boyfriend that Breann's posture completely changes, and it captures my full attention. I sat in awe at what I was hearing. It was eerily familiar. The rest of the appointment went by quickly. As Paula showed Breann out, I tried to gain my composure before she made it back.

It was like I was listening to exactly what happened to me, with a slightly different analogy. My first sit-in with a client and that is what happens? What am I thinking going into this field? One hour is all it took to get me second-

guessing what I have been working towards for almost four years! How in the world did I ever think that I could choose this field after what happened to me? I can't sit there and listen to someone else's horror when it is so close to my own. Now I'm questioning my choices with my life. I want to be the best at the career I choose. I am not so sure I can be my best at this.

I didn't realize I was frozen to my chair until Paula came back into the room. I immediately go to retreat to my office when she tells me to have a seat. Oh, yeah, how could I forget? We're going to talk about how the session went. I wonder if I will be able to answer her questions because I feel like I blacked

out for most of the hour.

She starts off by saying, “She has been through so much in her short sixteen years, huh?”

“Um, yes,” I stumble to say.

“What would you say would be the main goal to acquire in her sessions with that situation?” she asks professionally.

I have studied this for years. I used some of the information I was studying to help myself during my own hardships. I know this by heart. “You would need to objectify her; repetition. Ask her the same questions over and over. The more retelling of the story, the less traumatic the details will seem to the brain. The cognitive in this type of intervention is a way of saying imagined, or visualized,

in the brain,” I reply, remembering what I had read over and over.

“Yes, that is correct,” she says, as if she already knew what I was going to say. “What do you think will happen if she were to keep it bottled up and refused to talk about it?”

“She would not be able to acknowledge her own feelings of hurt and anger toward her assailant; therefore, she would eventually turn to feeling guilty,” I say, in a monotone.

“Absolutely. So ... why don’t you start talking? My next hour is free.” She leans back in her chair, getting comfortable. That pulls me out of my trance, throwing my head up to look at her with wide eyes. She continues, “I

have been doing this for years, Kara. I can tell. Mr. Mackey had his suspicions also, but thought that you had moved past it. After seeing your reaction when Breann was retelling her story, I can tell that you have yet to push past that part of your life.”

I am sitting there, stunned. Is this even professional? Should I open up and tell her? She plainly knows. If she didn't, my facial expression right now is a dead giveaway. Oh, I hope this does not mess with my internship. I don't know what I will do without it. *Shit!* Why couldn't I compose myself better than this? I know I told Drew, what happened, but I thought I would never see him again. Although that played in

my favor, I don't think that telling my secrets to my boss will help my career. Also, Drew is the only person that believed me. Aaron told me I was a liar, and I never bothered telling anyone else.

"Um, I don't think ... am I going to lose my internship?" I ask, as I watch everything I have worked for slip through my fingers.

"Oh, no! It is not that I think everyone that has been through a traumatic episode in their life chooses this career choice, but I do think that the ones that have been through those horrific times make a better therapist in the long run."

"Oh ... okay. Um, I did have a similar thing happen to me when I was in

high school. On my seventeenth birthday, actually ...”

I talked the entire hour. I told her more gruesome details than I told Drew. At first, it felt weird because I looked to her as my boss and the ticket to launching my career, but she really cares. I went through each and every horrible detail, and then she suggested that I go home and write it in a journal. She also said not to shy away from expressing my feelings in my relationship with Drew. Also, if I ever get that urge to talk about it or if anything triggers one of my “episodes”, I can always call her and that if Drew is as amazing as he sounds, he would listen at any time. We chatted about life in

general, then her last appointment came in for the day and I got back to my work.

It felt good to tell someone else. I had thought that I had dealt with it in my own way, but talking about it really does help the brain come to some sort of closure. I now know that I am not completely over it. I always thought that, with time and when I had other things going on in my life, I would eventually forget about it. That is far from the truth or I wouldn't have had my freak out with Drew, or would I have been frozen that entire hour when I was supposed be working. I feel a little lighter, as if a weight had been lifted off my shoulder.

The last hour went by in a flash, and I practically skip to my car. I'm so

excited to get to Drew. Not even the dark clouds and cold rain can dampen my mood. My enthusiasm quickly comes to a halt when I try to start my car and get nothing. Seriously? I drop my forehead against the steering wheel. *Ow, that will leave a bruise.* I rub my forehead, but then it hits me that I have someone to call. I am not used to having people I can rely on.

I try Lauren first because I do not want to call Drew while he is at work, but I forgot that she went away with her dad for the weekend. So I call Drew and, of course, he says he will be here as soon as he can; he has to finish up with a client.

I pull my mirror down to try and fix

the mess on top of my head. I had finally given up when someone knocked on my window, making me jump. Assuming it was Drew, not thinking that it has not even been five minutes yet, I hop out of my car. I notice that the rain had let up to a drizzle, then I look up and see Collin.

Bad to Worse



Shit! Just play it cool. Yeah, I would play it cool if everyone else hadn't already left for the day. Deep breath. "Hey," I say. I felt that if I didn't say something, he was going to completely undress me with his eyes. *Ugh!*

“What are you still doing here?” he finally replies with an unusual tone.

“Car troubles,” I state.

“Oh, do you need a ride home?” he asks, more hopeful than he should be.

“Um, no, my boyfriend is coming to pick me up ... should be here any minute,” I say, looking around and silently praying that he does arrive soon because Collin gives me the creeps!

“Well, I’ll wait with you. A pretty girl like you shouldn’t be standing out here all alone.” He’s laying it on thick, with a dash of sleazy.

I know his daddy is all high and mighty, owning the building and all, but that still doesn’t mean I have to put up with his vulgar son. He has a sleazy

smile, preppy wardrobe, and spiked blonde hair.

“Oh, it’s fine, really. I will be okay. Thanks, though.”

He obviously is not taking the hint because he takes that time to lean on my car beside me and run his slimy fingers down my arm, making me gag. Don’t get me wrong. I guess he’s cute and has money, but he is definitely not my type. The stench of his abundance of cologne makes me cough. *Okay, think, Kara. As long as I stay calm, I have control of the situation. In other words ... don’t freak out!*

I make a move to back away from him when it starts raining harder. I really want to scream. “Thanks, really, but I’m

just going to wait in my car!”

I open my door and start to get in when I feel the weight of him pushing me, smashing my ribs with the center console. He leans all of his weight on my back, bashing my ribs ruthlessly. It all comes back in a flash like lighting ... “SHUT UP ... Stupid bitch!” ... the rocks digging in my back ... the headlights in my eyes ... him slamming into me over and over again. The memories feel so real that I barely notice the weight of him being lifted off of me. I curl into a ball, cradling my aching ribs, and start sobbing. I’m wishing all the pain from the past and present would go away when I feel strong arms encircle me. I gasp in horror before I’m engulfed

with that scent. His scent. I instantly relax inside while molding to him, but my body is shuddering from crying.

I hardly notice when he picks me up, murmuring in my ear, “Shh, baby, it’s okay, I have you now. You’re safe. Shh, baby ...” He continues to repeat himself, as he opens the passenger door to his car and sets me down. He shuts the door and, against my better judgment, I raise my head and glance out the window, only to see Collin on the ground with blood everywhere. Drew is standing over him, then leans down close to his ear. Just the look on Drew’s face makes me shudder. I hope I never have to see that face again. As the last thought runs through my mind, he looks up, locking

eyes with me and his expression instantly changes. He turns his face, quickly finishes what he was saying to Collin, and rises. He retrieves my belongings out of my car, gets into his, and stays deadly silent, as do I.

After what seems like forever, he finally says, "I'm sorry, sweetheart. I just needed a minute to calm down. I didn't want to drive irate with you in here."

I nod and look down, which makes him blow out a breath with a growl. By now, I know that he is pissed because he thinks I'm scared of him. Maybe, right now, I am, but I think I have a reason to be. Even though I didn't see it, I still know what he did to Collin, and it

frightens me what he is capable of. I know he would never hurt me, though.

The thought of Collin makes me glance out the window. He's still lying on the ground in the pouring rain, bleeding. For a second, I feel bad and want to go help him, but I put that out of my mind. It's not only because of Drew, but I think about what just happened. I instantly feel nauseous and barely get the door open before I vomit.

Drew went from panicked to understanding in a nanosecond, reaching over to get the hair out of my face. When I think I'm finished, I slowly sit up, shut the door, and wipe my mouth with the back of my hand. Then I start wringing my hands together, as the realization just

came into play. Collin tried to force himself on me, the son of owner of the building I work in! Then I assume Drew beat the shit out of him, and now he is just lying there in the rain. The cops will be here any second, I know it.

He leans over, placing his hand firmly on both of mine, and kisses me on the side of the head as he says. "Let's go home, baby."

"But, um ... what about ..." I gesture out the window. "Won't the cops be here any second? They will probably arrest you but, if I tell them it was self-defense, hopefully they won't keep you. Oh gosh, I don't want you to leave me ..."

He interrupts my nervous

blubbering with his calm voice. “Shh, it will be okay. I took care of it. He won’t hurt you ever again, I promise. The cops will not be involved, don’t worry. I’m not going anywhere, sweetie.”

“He will press charges, his dad owns this building. I’m going to lose my internship!” I continue, frantically.

“Not after what I told him will he press charges, and I have a good feeling your job will be waiting on you Monday,” he says, confidently.

“But, how can you be so sure?” I counter.

He smiles and begins to back out of the parking lot. “Considering what I told him, I believe he is a smart enough man to take the easy way out.”

“Okay,” I say, unsure.

“Don’t worry about anything, okay?” he replies, as he precisely maneuvers his car through traffic.

I sigh, leaning back in the seat and feeling a wave of exhaustion take over my body. As much as I try to fight it, I fall asleep. Almost immediately, it seems, I feel Drew picking me up. I wince as his hand comes into contact with my bruised ribs. He instantly sets me back down and I hear him mumble expletives.

“I’m so sorry. Are you okay?” he asks, concerned.

How could he ever feel as if this was his fault? “I’m okay. Please don’t be sorry, baby. You didn’t do anything,” I

pleaded with him.

He closes his eyes, falls to his knees, hanging his head in defeat. I react right away and grab his head, kissing all over and softly saying, “Hey, it’s okay. You did nothing wrong. I’m sorry.”

Suddenly, he jerks his head up and frames my face with his strong hands. I melt at the warmth ... until I hear his tone. “Don’t be sorry! And do not comfort me! That’s what I am supposed to be doing, and I’m doing a shitty job of it!”

“Hey, don’t be like that! You are doing an excellent job!” I say with all the energy I have left in me. I will not have him putting himself down for something that happened to me. “Let’s go

to bed.”

As he is gathering my things, I manage to stand up through the excruciating pain that's shooting in my side, and I tough it out all the way up his moronic stairs. He tells me to lie on the couch while he tries to muster up something for us to eat. I feel nowhere close to being hungry, but I am not going to telling him that. I let him work his magic in the kitchen. I know it makes him feel better if he feels like he's doing something.

He brings me a pain pill with my dinner and I gratefully accept it. I try to eat as much as I can, or at least push it around my plate so that it looks like I ate, so I can appease him a little. When

I'm done, he talks me into taking a hot shower. I know it will help, but I don't know if I can stand the entire time.

He helps me to the bathroom and follows me in, shutting the door behind him. I give him a questioning look, but he gives me a stern *don't even think about it* look. I roll my eyes at his attentiveness. I am not helpless. I don't dare say that to him, though.

He starts unbuttoning my blouse, keeping his eyes glued to mine the whole time. His stare makes something as innocent as him helping me get ready for a shower a sensual experience. He pushes the blouse off my shoulders, letting it fall to the floor. When he freezes and sucks in air, I look down.

Bruises are starting to outline my dainty ribs. He drops to his knees and begins to faintly touch and plant soft kisses where the bruises are forming. Then he moves to unbutton and unzip my slacks, pushing them down over my hips, keeping eye contact with me the whole time. I grab his shoulders as I step out of my pants and he rises, lightly brushing a few strands of hair out of my face, and whispers, "You mean so much to me. I don't know what I would do if something happened to you."

He gives me a soft kiss, then goes back to the shower task. Turning the water on, he makes sure it's the right temperature. He gets all the necessities ready, then turns to look at me. I know

him well enough that I know he is silently asking permission to continue to undress me and assist me in showering. I nod, answering him. Not once does he take time to ogle or make me feel cheap. Drew has a way of making me feel like I am worth more than all the money in the world.

Any other time I would feel so self-conscious in a lit room completely naked, but I know he is not gawking at me or taking advantage of the situation. All he cares about is me and my needs. He fills that emptiness that I have felt for years. I feel whole when I am with him. Even when something like this happens, I still feel like smiling when I look at him and realize that he is mine.

He looks at me when he notices me openly staring at him with a smile plastered on my face. “What?” he asks.

I smile shyly and shake my head, “Just you. Thank-you.” I hoping he can feel how much I appreciate him being here for me.

“It’s what I am here for, baby. I’m here just for you.” That is when all the air leaves my body, apparently making me lose oxygen to the brain because I forgot about my aching ribs, wrapped my arms around his neck, and double over in pain. Man, I hope they are not broken.

“Why did you do that? Take it easy,” he says, as he rubs my back.

“I know, but you just have that thing about you.” He pulls his eyebrows

together, like he is concentrating on something really hard, so try to explain. “You make me forget all the bad in my life; you are my good.”

“Oh, baby ...” He carefully pulls me into his embrace.

When we reluctantly let go, and only because the water is still running and I am standing there totally naked, he turns to leave. “Where are you going?”

“I am going to let you take a shower,” he says, like it’s obvious.

I grasp his wrist with my hands, which are much smaller than his, and pull him back to me. “Will you take a shower with me ... please?” I say in the most tempting voice I could muster.

He looks towards the door as

though he is indecisive on what he should do. Instead of ripping me heart out by saying no, he starts to undress. I do a little happy dance in my head, and then turn so he can't see my evil grin.

The hot water feels so good. I really needed this. I mentally note that I'll be thanking him later for taking care of me. I'm standing under the water with my eyes closed, running my hands through my hair to ensure that I got it all wet, when I hear a low growl. My eyes snap open to catch Drew's smoldering glare. I take a tentative step towards him, leaning my head back to hold his stare. I place my hands on his defined pecks, and he places his hand over mine. With his raspy voice, he says, "I'm not

sure I can control myself.”

“You don’t have to, baby.”

He looks away, clenching his jaw.

“Did you forget what happened today? There is no way I am doing that after ... *that!*” he spits out.

My heart shatters as he speaks his last word, and I slowly take a step away from him. He doesn’t want me anymore! That’s why my body didn’t do anything for him when he was undressing me, and why he didn’t want to take a shower with me. He thinks I am disgusting, I know it. Tears form in my eyes, as I drop my head.

He steps toward me, capturing my chin and drawing my face up. “Hey ... hey, what’s wrong?”

He looks as if he is at a loss. “I understand.” I say through sniffles.

Those sexy eyebrows of his pull together before they shoot up in understanding. “OH! No, baby! No! I always want you! I love you ... I’m sorry that what I said made you think that I didn’t *want* you! I just meant that you have been through a lot today. Hell, you have bruises!” He makes a noise of disgust before he finishes. “I could not imagine what you are going through, and I will not take advantage of you in such a vulnerable state.” He is caressing me as I lay my head on his chest, listening to his heartbeat.

Whoa ... did he just say he loves me? I freeze, not knowing if he realized

he said it in his banter. Is he waiting for me to say it back? I do not know what to do. His heart rate picks up a notch before he stumbles, “I, uh ... I’m sorry I said it. No, I’m not sorry because I mean it. Damn. It’s just, um ... I was waiting to say it when I knew you felt the same about me, but it sort of slipped out just then.”

I raise my head, meeting his worried eyes. “I do feel the same,” I say in a small voice.

His eyes go wide. “You do?”

I smile and shake my head. “Yes, I do. You are crazy to think otherwise.”

He cautiously wraps his arms around my waist and says playfully, “Well, then, why haven’t you said it?”

“I didn’t know if you felt the same,” I say, somberly.

That night, Drew was a perfect gentleman, as he made sure I was comfortable and had everything I needed. He must have been exhausted because he passed out as soon as we lay down. I’m just laying here, staring at nothing. My side is still pounding, but I lied and told him that the pain medicine worked so he would not worry. It doesn’t help that I am lying on my back with Drew’s massive arm draped over me, but I could not wake him if I wanted to. He looks so peaceful.

I wonder if I am being selfish wanting to be with him. I have too many problems; he deserves someone as

perfect as he is. I absolutely hate that he has had to save me so many times. He should not have to keep watch over me. It is not fair to him. What if we stay together and he wakes up one day and realizes that this is neither the life nor the girl he envisioned for himself?

I shake the crazy thoughts from my head, as I'm finally starting to feel sleepy. I close my eyes and I see the inside of my car, feel him behind me. I open my eyes and it is gone. *Deep breath!* I lean into the sleeping Drew, breathing in his scent that instantly relaxes me. I put my arm on his and it is enough, the touch and smell of him, to let me fall into a peaceful sleep.

Time Flies



These past few months of my last semester of college with Drew have gone by so fast, compared to the last three years of college. For a month after the incident with Collin, Drew treated me like I was glass. I finally convinced

him that I was not going to break. What I really wanted to tell him was that I have been through worse, but decided against it.

He has been the picture perfect boyfriend ... surprising me with flowers at work, taking me on too expensive dinners that I insist he not do again because it was not my scene, though Drew fit in perfectly.

Before he took me out on one of those expensive dinners, I had never thought about how he's only twenty-six, drives an expensive car, and can afford the lavish things he purchases. I, having the big mouth that I do, asked him while we were just lying around on the couch one lazy Sunday. "I know you work and

all, but how do you have all that you have at such a young age?" I'm trying to sound nonchalant while I pick at my nails.

"Well, my car is paid for, Kenny practically lets me live here for nothing, and ...," he takes a breath, "I made a lot of money while I was fighting."

"Oh, I see." I try to make it sound like no big deal, even though I think it is.

He fought that much? It scares me to think of him fighting, possibly getting hurt. I do not know what I would do if he decided he wanted to do it again. I want to think that I would stand by him and support him but, in all reality, I don't know if I am strong enough. It feels horrible to think that I might not be there

for him like he has been here for me. I'd definitely try, though. He has been a blessing in my life; I owe him more than I will ever be able to repay.

I didn't ask any more questions after that. Who am I to ask him to explain it to me? He dropped the subject also, but that did not stop him from showering me with gifts. I hated the thought of him giving me all these nice things when I could not give him anything in return. When I told him one night how I felt, he simply said, "You being here with me is worth more than anything you could buy me."

"I feel the same way, Drew. I don't need all these things to make me happy. I just want you."

He just smiled, pulling me to him, and kissing me. When he pulled back, he said, "That is what I love about you."

I had a new pair of diamond earrings, a new purse and, between him and Lauren, more clothes than I could wear in a month. Speaking of that rascal, we have become best friends. She is always there when I need to talk or for clothes advice, which has been more often recently because of all the nice restaurants Drew has been taking me to, and just wanting to look good for my man, in general. I have tried to be there for her in return, but with finals coming up and being in the middle of my internship, things have been hectic for me. Oh, and how can I forget my

boyfriend?

I hope to be there for her in the coming months. With the holidays around the corner, I am sure we will have plenty of shopping trips to go on since I have a boyfriend and a best friend to shop for. I would have another friend to shop for, but he seems to not want anything to do with me for some reason. I've tried to call him and talk to him every time I see him in public, but he just ignores my phone calls or says he's in a hurry. Lauren said she has talked to him a few times. I didn't ask why because I knew she had a crush on him, but she said he has been busy with his band and that he says he will call me soon. I am still waiting for that.

Thanksgiving came and went. Lauren went with her dad for a family dinner, and I am glad she has him. Drew insisted that we cook a meal for us to eat together. His friend was supposed to show for dinner, too, but bailed at the last minute. Drew said that he was surprised with my cooking skills, but I was at a loss for words with his. He put me to shame in the kitchen. I wondered how we could have dated this long and I did not know he could cook like that? I told him my cooking skills came from having to fend for myself when I lived at home. He said his did, too.

Sometimes I like to think that maybe fate had a little to do with me and Drew. Two lost souls that finally found

their match. I think that what screws relationships up before they can even get started is how we picture a relationship is supposed to be. You go into a relationship thinking the other person is flawless, utter perfection. Okay, maybe I think Drew is, but my point is that we have had our arguments and disagreements. I know everything will not be perfect all the time. If it were, we would all be characters out of a movie. I don't expect perfection from Drew; I want him to be exactly who he is.

With graduation next week, I have been looking for an apartment I can afford but still be close to my job since Ms. Martin asked me to stay her assistant! I was beyond excited when she

told me. There is nothing else I could ask for in life.

Drew has been telling me not to waste time looking for an apartment, that I can just stay with him. I think that is a step to soon for us. Even though we are doing great, I do not want to complicate things.

I asked Lauren to go with me today to look at this apartment that is thirty minutes away from work. I know it's not in a good neighborhood but, with my budget, I just need to find something quick.

“Kara, you are *not* going to live there! I will not allow it! Did you see the landlord checking us out?” She makes a disgusted face.

I sigh. “I know, but I really don’t have a choice.”

She gives me a pointed look. “Yes, you do.”

“Lauren, please don’t start ...” I let that sentence trail off, as I bang my head against the steering wheel.

She is being way to quiet. It takes me by surprise so I look up and, as soon as I see her face, I roll my eyes. “What?”

“I was just thinking ... I’m not sure if I have talked him into it yet, but ...”

“Spit it out, Lauren,” I say, bored.

“I have been talking to daddy about me getting an apartment and, of course, I would have to have a roommate ...”

“But, you still have one semester left. You don’t want to live at the

dorms?”

“No! I have to be there enough as it is. Living there is beginning to become a little overrated.”

“I’m not sure I could afford ...,” I start to say.

She holds up a hand. “Nope, daddy will pay for it.”

“I am sure he will not want some random girl living in an apartment that he is paying for,” I say, trying to reason with her.

“If I say I don’t want to live all alone ...” She drags out “all alone” while making a pouty face. “Then he will be perfectly fine with it, I’m sure of it.”

“Okay, but I have to be out of the

dorm by next week when I graduate.”

“That’s fine. He’s already been looking.” She turns her head looking out the window, then suddenly looks at me. “He’s already found one! We move in this weekend!”

I sit there astonished. “Lauren ... I can’t. I mean, I already feel like I am taking advantage of you and your dad.”

“Trust me, you are not. Let me do this for you.” She sounds so grown up. “Plus, daddy has it all taken care of. Now, would you like to go see our new apartment?” There is the Lauren I know.

I just shake my head, trying to process all of this. In two seconds, what has been stressing me out for the past two weeks is solved. I guess having a

daddy that actually cares makes stuff happen like that, or maybe having money makes it that easy.

She instructs me on how to get to our new apartment. I am really wishing she would have driven because I really hate driving in the city. I am not paying any attention to my surroundings, purely concentrating on not driving down one-way streets. She finally tells me to pull into a driveway. I look away from the road for the first time, and see several brick buildings of different sizes. They look pretty brand new, and pretty expensive.

“Uh, Lauren ... are you sure this is the right place?” I’m hoping she’s wrong and right at the same time.

“Yep, I have already picked one out for us and have the key.” She holds it up.

I look at her to see if she is bluffing. I glare at her. “Why didn’t you tell me about all of this?”

“Because I knew you would say no so I just told daddy that I wanted it.” She knows the truth at least. “Let’s go!”

She instructed me to park in the covered parking garage so we can be as close to our new apartment as possible. Our apartment, here? This will take some getting used to. I do not know how I will ever repay her for her kindness to me. We take the short walk from the parking garage to the apartment, and I roll my eyes at the astonishing size of this place. Because she’s already seen

the inside, she opens the door for me to walk in.

I walk in the door, passing a smiling Lauren, into a clean entryway with arched doorways. This is too crazy! I see what looks like a bedroom straight ahead and, to my left, I walk through the arch to see windows covering the far wall. Everything is remarkably clean and new. I run my hand along the curved bar area, as I walk further into the living room. It's already furnished!

Confused, I turn to look at Lauren but, before I can say anything, she beats me to it. "I hope you like the furniture! I picked it out, but we can always change it."

"Uh ... no, it's beautiful, Lauren

...” I never cry, but this time I do.

I launch at her and engulf her in a hug. She squeezes me right back and whispers in my ear, “I’m glad you like it. I know you have been through a lot in life and, hopefully, you will tell me one day. You deserve this. Do not think otherwise, okay?”

I pull back, tears still running down my face. “Thank-you so much! I don’t know how I can ever repay you for your generosity.”

She pulls out of the hug, throwing a hand up. “Don’t worry about it. I was going to find my own apartment whether you moved in with me or not. I’m glad you are, though.”

I look around at the already

decorated and furnished apartment that is going to be paid for. I can't wrap my head around this. She ushers me onto the patio, and shows me the most incredible view of the lawn and other buildings. She shows me her room. She finally has a closet big enough to house her massive collection of clothes, and a bathroom to match. She has her own balcony with a great view, and the décor is unbelievable. I know she personally decorated the apartment. She is good at those things.

We head back over towards the foyer, to the door I saw when I first came in. She opens the door further and I see a beautiful white bed, which looks like it belongs in a beach house, with

matching dresser and night stands. It has a canopy with white sheer drapes hanging dramatically from the top. Then I see I have two windows framing a door that leads to the patio. I turn to Lauren, picking my jaw up off the floor. “This is my r-room?”

She gives me a hearty nod, “Yes! Do you like it?”

“YES! I love it!” I say, as I make my way to my own walk-in closet.

“You have to share the hall bath with guests, though. They didn’t have two suites.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. I promise I will survive. Thank-you again!”

She talks me into going back to the

dorms and packing right away so we can get completely moved in. I don't have much to pack, though. All I brought with me from home are clothes and a few pictures. With Lauren's and Drew's help, I have accumulated a few more items that I do not think will fit in my car.

I decide to call Drew to tell him about the apartment and to see if he can help us move. He doesn't answer, and it sends me to voicemail. I shrug, throw my phone in my purse, and get back to packing. Lauren's dad has hired a truck to move our belongings so I guess I did not actually need Drew's help. I really just wanted to talk to him, but I'm sure he is busy at work.

By the time it's dark out, we have all of our boxes in our new apartment. We spend the evening drinking wine and unpacking. We talk about the past three years and how we both have changed. I am so glad I have someone like Lauren in my life. We giggle as we find old pictures and remember when we first met. It's only when she stands and yawns, saying she is going to bed, that I realize Drew has not called or texted me.

It is getting late. I have never known him to work this late. Then the surge of panic goes through me. What if something happened to him? I do not know what I would do if anything did.

I knock on Laurens door and she

answers half-dressed, “Sorry, but I haven’t heard from Drew since early this morning and I tried calling him. It’s getting late and he never works this late. What if something happened? I don’t know what to do.”

She stops me in my rant. “Breathe, Kara. I am sure he is fine. Try calling him one more time, or go to his house. He might have passed out when he got home. Just see if his car is there.”

“Yeah, okay. I’ll do that. Thanks!” I say, but I’m already walking away to get my keys.

I hear her yell, “Be careful!” as I close the door on my way out.

I call him one more time, straight to voicemail again. I am so scared that

something horrible has happened. I have always said things can never be *this* good, something always has to go wrong. It's freezing out and I forgot my jacket, but I don't care. I am not cold anyway because the adrenalin running through me is enough to keep me warm.

I am amazed that I made it to his street in half the time without getting pulled over. I pull into the parking lot next to the center and let out a breath I did not even know I was holding. His car is here, I suck in another chilly breath ... there is another car here, too. Maybe one of the guys that work out here left their car ... yeah, right. I know that is not Kenny's car, and it's too late for anyone to be training so there is only one

thing that car could be here for.

I go to put the car in reverse because I don't want to know. I am not strong enough to handle this. Everyone has a short relationship throughout college. *You have to learn to let go.* Hmmm, where have I heard *that* before?

I sit in my car, debating whether I should leave or face the problem. All the things he taught me ... to be strong; to stop letting people run over me; to take control, if not for myself then for my future. Well, looks like my future with him just went to shit. He wanted me stronger? Here I am.

I walk with confidence. Oh, who am I kidding? I am pissed. He ignores me all day, no phone call or anything,

and now has somebody else at his apartment at eleven o'clock at night? Not going to fly.

I make it to his door before I realize where I am. My hands are shaking, my nerves are shot. Then I get frantic. Would he really cheat on me? Here I was worried about his safety while he is getting it on with some bimbo. This irritates me even more since he is the one that wanted to wait. Now I know why! That was enough encouragement to knock ... no, beat on the door.

When the door swings open, there's a poor, skinny woman standing there. I am taken back when I see her. She has dark circles under her eyes, and looks to

be way older than she really is. She is wearing some slutty clothes, but she looks like she would be pretty if she cleaned up a bit.

My eyes finally make it back to her face, where her brows are raised, and grimy hands on her boney hip. She is much older than I thought. “Hello?!” she says, as she waves her dirty hand in front of my face.

“Who is it?” I hear his voice holler from his bedroom!

I have no idea where I got the balls to do what I did next. I push past the skanky woman and walk directly to his bedroom. When I come around the doorway, he is putting on a shirt. I freeze.

He's pulling the shirt over his head so he can't see who is standing there when he says, "Who was at the ..." He stops when he sees me.

"What the hell, DREW?" I shriek.

A look of panic covers his face.

"What are you talking about, baby?"

"Oh, do not even play those fucking games with me! You have ignored me all night! I come here to make sure you are okay, find another car in the parking lot, and then some woman answers the door!"

I want to leave; I should leave, but I want to know what the hell he has to say for himself. He exhales. "Baby, it is not what you think. She is my ..."

I don't let him finish, and throw my

hands up. "I can't do this, Drew." I turn and walk away.

He follows into the living area and I note that the skank is nowhere in sight, but the bathroom door is shut. Hmm ...

He grabs my arm to stop me and I jerk away from his hold. I cross my arms and glare at him. He is running one hand through his hair, the other hands on his hip. He extends his hand, trying to reason while he talks. "Will you give me a minute to explain?"

I look up at him through my lashes and give him a stern nod. Then I look back down, focusing on the wood grain in the floor. "Will you please come with me?" he pleads.

I gesture with my arm and he starts

to walk towards the front door. I follow him down the metal stairs, and he keeps walking until he gets to the main fighting ring in the middle of the massive room. He leans back on it, crossing his legs and arms. I just stand there waiting. He should be the one talking.

He takes a deep breath. “She is my mother,” he says, somewhat embarrassed. I look at him in utter shock. “I know I should have called you. I’m sorry. I just didn’t want you to have to see this. She is a drug addict and a drunk. She only comes to me when she wants money. I have been trying to call rehab places all evening and talk her into going, again. I didn’t mean to ignore you.” He goes on to explain his mom’s

situations that she gets herself into and how he has to help her.

He was not cheating on me. He was trying to help his mom. I deserve all the guilt of accusing him and the hurt of thinking he was capable. "I just assumed ... Oh, Drew, It is me who should be sorry!" I look down, feeling tears prick my eyes. Geez, again? I feel so lousy. I know what a good guy he is, yet I put him down.

He takes a step towards me, grasping my chin and making me look at him. "Don't cry, sweetheart. I'm sure I would have assumed the same if things were reversed ... even though you should know by now that I would never do that to you." He kisses my forehead.

“I love you.”

That is when I break into a full blown bawl bag, “I-I’m s-sorry.” I fall into his strong arms, laying my head on his chest. Twenty minutes ago, I thought I would never get to be in this spot again and that makes me cry harder. He stays quiet and just holds me.

When I am able to talk, I tell him, “It has been a very emotional day. Lauren and I moved into an apartment downtown and I wanted you to be the first one to know, but you wouldn’t answer your phone. Then I was scared that something had happened to you ...,” I say, as I wipe the last of the tears.

“You don’t have to explain yourself, and I know about the apartment

already. Lauren told me yesterday. I am happy for the both of you, even though my bed is always available.”

“It still is?”

“Always, baby, always,” he mumbles, as he pulls me back to him.

End of One Journey



There comes a time when you have to say goodbye to one life and hello to another. I did that not three-and-a-half years ago. I will be doing it again tonight. “Ouch ...” I give Lauren dirty looks in the mirror, as she finishes up my

hair for graduation tonight.

She's done a damn good job at making my hair look ... well, just do anything, for that matter. I don't understand why I have to get all dolled up for tonight. I still have not achieved my goal ... yet. Is a dress really necessary? I don't think so, especially when it is forty degrees out. She insisted that I needed to be dressed up, but I do love the pea coat she loaned me to wear over my dress.

It is off-white with back buttons going down the front across from each other. I am hoping the shawl collar will help keep me warm tonight. The skirted bottom looks like it is going to cover the bottom of my short black dress. I do

have to say that I feel a little sexy, though. The ruffles flowing down the front accentuate my breasts, and they connect with the opposing ruffles coming around my sides, which makes me look thinner than I am. I like it.

As I step into my black heels, which are coated with red on the underside, I realize that this dress is really short. I'm worried about Drew's reaction. Maybe I can hide it for a little while with my pea coat, then my graduation gown.

I slip the crisp white pea coat on. There is no telling how much she paid for this. It is so soft and, just as I suspected, it covers the dress.

I look in the mirror. I don't

recognize the girl looking back at me ... the expensive clothes, the overdone make-up, the perfectly curled hair hitting right above my breast. Any other time I would say this is not me, but maybe this could be a new me. The past is the past; I have a future to look forward to. I will be damned if I'll let what has happened to me in the past affect my future.

“Kara! You are going to be late!” Lauren bellows from the foyer.

“I’m coming, I’m coming! Hold your horses!” I grabbed the loaned purse that she said “totally matched,” making sure I have my necessities, and walked towards the living room.

“What horses?” she asks, looking confused.

I giggle. “Never mind. Let’s go.”



The graduation ceremony was angelic; blue and white flowers along with sheer white tool decorated the massive stadium that I had yet to see until tonight. Three-and-a-half years and I have never stepped foot in here.

Not surprisingly, my mother called to inform me that they could not make it. Even though I knew better, I thought that because her first born was going to be graduating college, maybe she might show some interest. She didn’t even say anything about it not even taking four

years, not an “I’m so proud” or “Congratulations” ... nothing.

I am so thankful for my “celebration dinner”, as they are calling it. I could not ask for a better friend than Lauren, and I don’t know where to begin to explain what Drew has made me feel these past few months. Even though I wish my only other friend I have in the city would show his face tonight, I guess I can’t have it all. I already made sure that Lauren invited him to dinner when she talked to him last week. Guess we will see if he shows.

The restaurant is posh, that is for sure. It’s not normally my kind of place, but tonight I feel like I fit in. Lauren blends in like she has done this her

whole life, which she has, and Drew just has this sophisticated look to him. He fits in anywhere and no one would dare tell him otherwise.

This is the first time that Drew will see me without my coat on and see the short black dress! He arrived late to the ceremony so he didn't get a chance to see me before I had my graduation gown on. The coat guy takes my coat off my shoulder. I don't see Drew's glare burning through me, but I sure can feel it.

I look up to see his eyes burning. I try to put on a smile as I slip my arm through his, gesturing towards our table where Lauren is waiting on us. He is taken back for a second, then composes himself. He leans down as we are

walking and rumbles in my ear, “That’s too short for public, but I will enjoy taking it off of you later.” There is so much promise with that statement.

He pulls my chair out, then sits himself. I sit quietly, wondering why he is acting different. I brush it off, as Lauren pulls me into conversation about graduation and my plans now. I tell her about the application I put in for graduate school and that I’m waiting to hear back, even though I don’t know how I will afford it. Student loans, here I come.

That makes Drew speak for the first time. He starts on the same speech I have heard for the last three weeks about how I don’t need to worry about the money;

and if I want to go, then I should go. I refuse to let him pay for my schooling, but I say nothing when he gets done. The waiter arrives to take our drink orders. When I look up, a familiar face catches my eye.

I automatically stand up and start striding towards him. He looks more stunning since last time I saw him. My eyes are drawn to his black skinny jeans with subtle rips throughout them. He fills the jeans out well. The studded belt is resting low on his hips, connecting with his fitted black shirt. He finishes the rocker look with a black leather jacket.

His jet black hair has grown a bit, but he has it styled up. His tattoos are poking out of his shirt onto his muscled

neck. Wait, he has bulked up since I last saw him. However, Kace has a lean look to his muscles, compared to Drew's stocky build. He still has those piercings, which I'd call ugly on anyone else, but they could never be that on Kace.

When my eyes finally lock on his, he is standing in front of me with his arms crossed and an eyebrow raised. "Like what you see?" he says, cocky.

That breaks my trance. Shit, was I just checking Kace out? I smirk, shaking my head and go to him and engulf him in a hug. With my arms wrapped around his neck, I mummer, "I missed you." He squeezes harder.

I eventually break away when

Lauren comes over to give him a hug, too. I try to make it look like we normally do that. I don't know what is wrong with me. I pretty much attacked him with a hug. Oh, shit! I casually turn back to Drew and take my seat. Even though we both made it clear at the beginning of our relationship that there wouldn't be anyone else, I have never known him to actually be jealous. Right now, I would be wrong in that assumption.

It is written all over his face. I just keep looking down to avoid eye contact because I can feel the anger radiating off of him. He keeps quiet, but I see him nod at Kace. I hope my foolish actions haven't ruined the night. While Kace and

Lauren take their seats, I chance a look at Drew. He has a deadly look on his face. I follow his gaze to find him burning holes in Kace's head. This is not going to be a good night. Maybe I can calm him down if I get him to look at me.

I place my hand on his thigh to advert his attention to me, but all I get is an ugly side glance. I decide that I am not going to let his attitude ruin the whole night. I have two other friends that are here to celebrate with me. "So, Kace, where have you been hiding?" I say, putting up my best façade.

He turns and smiles. "Oh, ya' know, here and there. Been busy with gigs and stuff."

"Oh so the band is doing well

then?”

“Yeah, we go on tour this summer,” he says proudly.

Lauren chirps up then. “Oh, you better tell us where and when. I wanna go!”

“Yeah, don’t leave your *friends* hanging!” I say.

Lauren and Kace continue the conversation about his tour. I take that opportunity to see if I can get Drew to lighten up a bit. “Hey, is something wrong?” I say in a low voice.

His reply is cold as steel. “Don’t act stupid, Kara.”

I give him a look of confusion, and he narrows his eyes at me like I should know. I know something else is

bothering him because he was acting weird before Kace showed up. I know that is *one* of the problems, but I can tell he's off tonight. I shut up and listen to my two friend's conversation, and then we get our food. That takes some of the heat off of the situation.

I try to make small talk with Lauren and Kace, considering Drew is not talking at all. I know Lauren has picked up on his mood because she gave me a questioning look, but I just discreetly shrug my shoulders.

In the midst of the small talk, Drew placed his hand on my thigh. It feels possessive, and I do not like it. He needs to know I am his but that he doesn't own me.

“So, Kace, where did you say your tour will be going?”

Drew squeezes my thigh; not enough to hurt, but enough for me to know that he knows what I am doing. Soon after that, he starts ordering drinks.

“Denver, Nashville, Houston. Oh, and your favorite Kar ... LA!” Kace answers.

“Oh, really! Well, I will have to come to that one!” I say enthusiastically.

As soon as I finish, Drew’s hand squeezes my thigh harder. Without thinking, I make a face from the pain and try to slyly look at him. Kace catches my face and he glares at Drew. I try to put on a happy face, but I totally lost my appetite. I am assuming Drew also has

since he stopped eating and starting drinking a half-hour ago.

I try to be good the rest of the night, and either shut up or talk to Lauren. Although, Kace has different plans because he keeps asking questions about my internship and my application. I answer his questions because it would be rude not to. I think that Kace knows it is pissing Drew off every time he talks to me, but he just doesn't know that my leg is in excruciating pain. Every time I answer Kace's question, Drew squeeze's a little harder. I know he is just trying to get his point across and, believe me, I got it. The alcohol is making it ten times worse, though.

Finally, the night is coming to an

end. With some encouragement from Drew, Kace is going to take Lauren back to our apartment. Maybe I can get him to talk but, seeing how drunk he already is, that is probably wishful thinking.

We all hug and say our goodbyes. Except, when I'm hugging Kace, Drew grabs my arm, pulling me away and telling me we have to leave. The look on my face is all it took for Kace to shove Drew's shoulder. *Oh, shit!*

"Don't touch her like that EVER again! Got it?!" Kace says with an eerie calmness, as he takes a step which makes him nose-to-nose with Drew. The first thing that comes to my mind is that I never noticed Kace was that tall. No, stop! I need to keep both of them calm.

“You do not tell me what I can and cannot do with MY girlfriend, *you* got it?!” Drew says not-so-calmly, getting right in Kace’s face. He’s asking for a fight, I know it. I have to stop this and now.

“Hey! Kace, I’m fine,” I say, looking up at him with my most encouraging voice. “Let’s go home Drew, okay?” I turn to Drew, who is enraged. I place a hand on his cheek, and he comes around enough to see me. He nods his head.

“No way am I letting you go anywhere with him, Kar! Come with us and let him go cool off.”

“No, it’s fine, Kace. I will call y’all tomorrow, okay?” I try to reason.

Drew has the audacity to act proud of me deciding to go with him instead of them. This is going to be a long night.

“Call me at any time if you need me, Kar!” I just nod and turn to walk towards Drew’s car, not waiting for him.

I go to his driver’s side and wait for him to stumble over to me. I roll my eyes at his idiocy. “Give me your keys.”

“What?” he says, confused.

“Drew, you’re drunk,” I calmly reply.

“I can drive! Get in!”

“Uh ...” I do, just to avoid more confrontation.

We sit so silently the entire way to his apartment, I think I might scream. On a good note, maybe he isn’t that drunk

because he is driving perfectly fine. I made a couple failed attempts at talking, but he insists on ignoring me.

We make it to his loft in one piece. He gets out of the car and leaves me to fend for myself. I catch up a little, but I'm still at least ten feet away because he's walking too fast for me to keep up. When I finally make it to his door, I see that he left it wide open for me, at least. I walk in, shut the door, and see him tilting a drink to his mouth, then slamming it onto the granite. Great!

I walk into the living room, throw my purse down, take my coat off, and fall into the sofa. I lean my head back, closing my eyes, and take a deep breath. I hear another slam. We are not going to

settle anything with me sitting here and him drinking away the night.

I go to the opposite side of the island. He slams another drink down. When he automatically goes to refill it, I say, “Drew, we need to talk and I do not think that whiskey will help.”

He puts both of his hands on the edge on the counter and drops his head in a look of defeat. My heart instantly feels for him. I am sure he’s under a lot of stress at work and with his mom, and the way I acted stupid tonight didn’t help matters. “I’m sorry about the way I acted tonight.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong. My jealousy got the best of me. I have a lot going on right now,” he mumbles, with

his head still down.

“I know. I should be here for you and I’m failing.”

I start to realize that he’s always been there for me, no matter what ... when I dropped the biggest bomb on the very first date to when I was attacked at work. My body shudders at the thought. When things were hard for me, he was there. Now when things are hard for him, I just make it worse.

I walk around the island and start rubbing his back. He grabs my waist and places me in between the island and him. He puts his hands on either side, trapping me. I don’t mind, though. He smells of sweet whiskey, a fresh shower, and Drew. Even though I could do

without the one smell, the mixture is still my favorite. I slide my arms around his neck and he immediately reacts, wrapping me in his strong arms. “I’m sorry, sweetie.” His voice is muffled, as he kisses the side of my head.

“Mmm ...” I close my eyes and get lost in his scent while his hands roam over my back.

He places his hand on the small of my back and slowly pulls me to him, as he pushes me further into the island. I open my eyes and see that his eyes are smoldering. I run my hands through his hair, pulling his lips to mine. He pushes his hips into mine, and I can feel his hardness against me. Suddenly, he lifts me onto the island, and I let out a little

yelp and a giggle. He finally breaks into a smile.

He runs his hand down my legs to my heels. “You’re gunna’ leave these on, baby.”

Oh, my! After all this time, we are actually going to do it! I have tried to make it crystal clear that I am ready and just waiting on him. He would always say he wanted to wait, but maybe he has changed his mind.

He starts kissing me, working his way from my neck to my bare shoulders. He pushes my dress up further, as he slides his hands up to the thin strap of my panties. He pulls back and gives me a devious smile, like he is up to something. When he starts to pull the thin

fabric down, I lean my hands back behind me on the counter to hoist my ass up to make it easier. He freezes. He is looking straight down and frowning so I follow his eyes to the handprint that is beginning to show on my pale skin. I have always bruised easily so I figured it would leave one, just not that big.

I take my legs and try to pull him back to me, but he loses it. Effortlessly, he maneuvers out of my grasp and starts to pace, murmuring profanities that I can't make out. I place my head in my hands and sigh. This night could not get any worse but, as always, I spoke to soon. I hear a loud crash that causes me to jerk my head up.

I see a hole the size of a grapefruit

in the wall. Drew's leaning his head against the wall with arms stretched above. *Shit!* Not-so-gracefully, I jump off the counter. I forgot about having the damn heels on so I cling to the edge of the counter for dear life, as I steady myself to take them off.

I run to him, placing my hand on his back and try to soothe him. I talk like I'm talking to a child. "Drew, baby, look at me." I try to place myself between him and the wall, and he adjusts so that I can fit. He is squeezing his eyes shut and tensing his jaw. My only strategy is to be calm so I can calm him.

Firsts



“Drew, I know you did not mean to do that. You are not that person. Please, don’t beat yourself up over it. I’m fine.”

He huffs in response. I lay my head on his shoulder and wrap my arms around his bulky chest. “I love you,

Andrew,” I breathe in his ear.

That does it. He instantly relaxes, engulfing me in his secure arms. “Oh, baby,” he whimpers. We just stand there, holding each other.

Eventually, he pulls back. When he goes to place a hand on my cheek, I see blood. I automatically grab his hand and start inspecting. “Oh, let me get you a towel ... and ice.” I rush back to the kitchen, and retrieve a towel from the drawer and ice pack from the freezer.

I make him sit at the bar while I wipe the blood off and place the ice pack on his swollen knuckles. He stays quiet as he I clean his hand. He runs his hands through his hair, making him look like pure sex.

I finish cleaning his hand, and openly admire the most handsome man I've ever seen. He looks up at me through those dark lashes of his. I take my time to admire the man standing in front of me. He is all mine for the taking ... and I think I shall take.

I drop the towel, place my petite hands around his face, and move in between his legs. He doesn't think twice about wrapping his muscled arms around me, pulling me to him. As I stroke his face with admiration, we have our silent look into each other's eyes. As he takes my mouth in a forceful kiss, I push back just as hard. I run my hands through his messy hair as he stands up. He lifts me slightly so that we won't break our

heated kiss.

He talks against my lips. “Wrap your legs around my waist, baby.”

I obey, and he begins walking towards his bedroom. Butterflies ... more like freaking birds ... are going crazy in my stomach. I have no clue why I am nervous. I want this. I have wanted this for the past six months so why am I feeling this way? I trust him; I know he will be gentle with me.

My thoughts trail off as he starts to suck on my neck. My back automatically bows to him. I melt into him, stretching my arms around his massive shoulders. He puts one knee on his bed and slowly lays me back.

As he pushes a curl away from my

face and looks deadly serious, he says, "Are you sure?" I nod, looking him straight in the eye. "Say it."

"Yes, Drew."

That is all it takes for him to slide his hot tongue down my neck to my collarbone, leaving light kisses as he goes. I start clawing at his back in an attempt to pull his dress shirt up. I hear his shoes hit the floor and, in one quick motion, he pulls me into a sitting position. I look up at him, awaiting his next move. He moves to unzip my dress; I lean into him to make it easier. He slowly drags the top down just past my breast. Even though he has seen every part of me, it still seems like if this is the first time, for everything.

From somewhere inside, I find boldness and reach up for the buttons on his shirt. Passionately, he looks down at me. I push the silky dress shirt over his shoulders and he lets it fall. I run my hands over his chest, feeling the ridges of his hard muscles. He grasps my chin in his hands, making me look up at him. "You are beautiful." His voice is more husky than normal.

With shaky hands, I undo his belt and unbutton his dress pants. Just as I go to push them down, he lowers me back onto the bed and begins to slide my dress further down my body. I arch and move to accommodate him. Each time he pulls a little more, he places one kiss, then another. I start wiggling in

anticipation, grabbing his hair in my fist as he makes his way down. He maneuvers effortlessly to take off my dress, as well as his pants.

Gently, he grabs my leg and starts to trail kisses to my upper thigh, spending extra time where his hand left marks. At this point, there is no reason for any foreplay on my part because I can feel how wet I am, but who am I to stop that talented mouth of his?

He kisses all around me down there, then puts one finger inside my folds, "Oh, baby, you are so wet already." He licks, then pulls away, leaving me wanting more.

He takes my panties off, then moves to my bra. Out of all the times I imagined

this moment, the first time with a guy since that night, I do not feel close to what I thought. I always thought I would feel scared but, with Drew, I don't.

He is on his knees, admiring the view. I should feel embarrassed, but the only thing I feel, as I see the desire in his eyes, is excitement. I am panting just seeing him enjoying the view. I never knew that could be a turn on.

He places his hands on either side of my head and lowers himself above me, holding his weight up. I raise my hands to run them down the tensing muscles in his arms. As he pushes my legs apart, he presses his hips into mine, making me feel his penis at my opening. I gasp at the foreign feeling down there.

He starts kissing me across my cheek, down to my neck, to my ear. He softly mumbles, “You have to relax, baby. I don’t want to hurt you.”

I nod against his shoulder. He moves down to my breast, kissing all around my nipple, taking it into his hot mouth. He flicks his tongue around my hard nub before he moves to do the same to the other.

I am writhing against him while he teases. When he leans up to look me in the eyes, I feel him push the tip in. I don’t know if it is because I have not had sex in years, or if it’s because he is really just that big. I’m thinking the latter.

I close my eyes, as he starts to enter

me more. "Open your eyes." he rasps, making my eyes shoot right to his. "I want to see you."

He takes his time as he pushes completely into me ... and stills. I start to think something is wrong until I hear him mumble, "Holy fuck." I am taking that as a good sign. His eyes are starting to roll back so I make a move to grind against him. His eyes bolt open, dark hazel eyes look drunkenly at me. "Better not do that. I want it to last more than five minutes."

"Okay," I meekly reply.

He begins to move slowly at first. The more I turn my hips to meet every thrust, he starts to go faster. "You feel good, baby," he manages to say. I moan

in response.

I stare at the man I love. This feeling is exhilarating. I never knew that it could be like this because all I have ever known was bad.

“Oh, baby, I can’t last ... I’m com—” I can feel him break apart. “I’m sorry,” he sheepishly says, after he catches his breath.

I giggle. “It is fine.” I place my hand on his cheek in comfort.

I get a huge smile in return. He leans down and starts kissing me all over: cheek, nose, forehead, and chin. I am giggling hard now. He looks at me and, in a serious tone, says, “I love you, Kara. You know that right?”

“Of course I do, and I love you.”

Why he would even ask?

He kisses me once more, then sighs and rolls to his back. He pulls me to his side and I lay my head on his shoulder, wrap an arm around him, and hoist my leg up. His breathing is still rapid; his heart is beating hard. As he begins to calm, I feel so thankful to be able to hear that heartbeat. It is music to my ears.

We lay in silence for a bit. Then he simply states, “My mother called me tonight before your graduation.”

“Is that why you were late?”

“Yeah, sorry about that. She got into some trouble again, but I told her that I couldn’t help her this time.”

“Oh.” I do not know what to say back because I never had to deal with

my mother. “Was that what was bothering you tonight?” Besides Kace, but I keep that to myself.

“Yes, among other things.”

“I’m sorry about her.” I genuinely am.

“It is not your fault. I shouldn’t have brought it up. I want this night to be perfect. Well, as perfect as I can make it after acting a fool.”

“It’s fine. I knew you had things on your mind,” I say, as I absentmindedly rub his abdomen. He tightens his hold on me, and we both fall into a peaceful sleep.



All too soon, the alarms are going off. Wait, it's Saturday. It's Drew's phone, but what time is it? It is still dark out. He moves to answer his phone, and I see it is only 3:30 in the morning. Who could be calling at this hour? He gives a groggy hello, and then falls silent. Abruptly, he stands up and puts on a pair of jeans. It must be serious, but all I can think of is that he's going commando? He ends the call and sits on the bed, his head dropping into his hands.

“Hey, who was that?” I move to sit beside him, stroking my hand down his back.

“She's gone,” he whimpers between breaths.

It takes only a second for me to realize who he is talking about ... his mom. I suck in a breath. “Oh, Drew. I-I don’t know what to say.” Even though I did not know her, there is a tightening in my chest for Drew.

“I guess it was bound to happen with her antics.” He quickly jumps off the bed, grabbing a shirt on his way to the bathroom.

I drag myself out of bed and start going through the clothes that I have accumulated over the months. At least I have a simple pair of jeans and a hoodie. I am pulling the hoodie over my head when Drew walks back into the room. “What are you doing?” he asks, confused.

“I just figured that we ... you need to go, um, deal with things.” I have no clue how he is going to take the news he just received. I know they were not close, but she was still his mother.

“Yeah, I do need to go to the police station, but you can stay here and get some more sleep.”

“I want to be here for you. Please don’t push me away now.”

He sighs. “Okay. I just don’t want you to have to deal with this mess. What she was into was not pretty.”

I try to sound strong, “I know I can handle it.” Can I?

He goes to make some coffee, giving me time to get ready. In ten minutes, I somehow manage to get my

hair under control, my shoes on, and do bathroom duties. I make my way into the kitchen, where I find Drew staring off into space. He's holding hot coffee so I don't want to startle him too much. I softly say, "Hey, I'm ready."

He composes himself. "Okay, do you want coffee?"

I nod and he starts to make mine in a travel mug. He knows exactly how I like it. I try to tell him I can make it, but he insists. I hope he does not try to put the façade on like everything is fine because I know it is bothering him.

He acts like a robot the whole way there. When we get inside the police station, we are taken to a Detective Parker. He looks to be in his late fifties.

What he has left of his silver hair is combed over. When he stands, he has to be at least 6'2". Drew is exactly 6' and he has a few inches on him, although Drew has more build.

Drew puts a stoic face as he greets us. I sit silently, wringing my hands in my lap as the detective goes through the usual questions "When was the last time you saw or spoke to your mother?", etcetera.

At some point during the questioning, Drew places his hands over mine to stop my twisting hands. I zoned out of the entire interview, only speaking to tell the detective that I had only met her once. I also account for our whereabouts last night.

It continues for another hour. Lastly, the detective says that we can finish another time; we need to go identify her at the morgue. I am at a loss on that one. They know who she is. Why does he have to identify her? I know I just feel that way because I am terrified for Drew to see her like that.

He doesn't speak on the car ride over, just holds my hand and squeezes every once in a while. From my schooling, I know that there are stages to mourning. Drew is acting fine now, but he will break eventually. I just know that I have to be here for him when he does.

When we arrive, he tries to talk me out of going in with him. I tell him I am here for him. He eventually caves and I

find myself standing here, staring at the body of the person that brought this amazing man into the world. She lies there lifelessly. She looks the same as when I saw her last ... dirty fingernails, ratty clothes, very pale. Now, her face is sunken in more, and she looks like she has lost forty pounds. There are two holes in her tight shirt that I am assuming are from bullets.

I look up to Drew. He has not let go of my hand the whole time. With a tense jaw, he nods at the mortician, who covers her, and he turns and heads for the doors, dragging me along.

The rest of the day goes by in a fog. He calls the funeral home, then makes the very few calls to family to break the

news. I made some lunch, even though he refused to eat it and said he was not hungry. I tried to let him have his space to let it sink in, but I don't think that is helping.

“Do you wanna talk about it?” I sit beside him on the couch.

He stays quiet for a while, staring at the wall. “I refused to help her,” he solemnly says.

I'm shocked. He thinks it is his fault because he blew her off for my graduation last night.

“It is *not* your fault! I didn't know her, but I do know she chose this life. Whether you went last night or not, I believe there are reasons for why things happen the way they do. We just may not

agree with it sometimes.”

He just nods so I continue, “I know you helped her multiple times. You did all you could. You can’t help someone that does not want to help themselves.”

He pulls me onto his lap and just holds me. “Thank-you,” he whispers.

“It is what I am here for. I am here for you. Always.” I kiss his forehead as he lays it on my chest, and I cradle him in my arms.



He did end up breaking down that night; he wept for the mother he lost, and the mother he never had the chance to have.

He shared stories about his past. How he would come home at the timid age of seven and find her so drunk that he would have to fend for himself for dinner and for bed. She had stuck to drinking until he was in high school, then she found harder stuff. That is when he started fighting the drug dealing boyfriends of hers.

That was the first time I ever had to help plan a funeral, and I hope to never have to do it again anytime soon. Today is the day that the love of my life will bury his mother. My only goal I have is to be here for Drew in every way and through everything. I called Paula and told her what happened. She was happy to give me a few days off. He has been

through so much that he deserves some good in his life, and I hope I am the one to give it to him.

He finds me standing in front of the mirror in the bathroom. I went and bought a new black dress with three-quarter length sleeves. Although, I know I will still freeze. It has a fitted skirt that I have paired with plain black heels and black stockings.

He is immaculately dressed in solid black dress pants and white shirt that he put a black jacket over. I know I shouldn't be thinking like this right now but, damn, he looks good. "You look beautiful as always, baby." He kisses the side of my head, as I meet his mournful eyes in the mirror.

I give him a half-smile. “I’ll be right out.”

He nods, leaving me standing here, wondering if I am strong enough to be here for him at this time. I am broken in so many ways, and he is the only reason I have not broken entirely down. Now that I have to be the strong one, I am apprehensive if I can.

“I have to be,” I say in the mirror. I breathe in and blow it out. It does not matter if I am ready or not. It’s time.

Falling Apart



Drew opted for a graveside service, and my coat isn't protecting me against the wind at all. It is the normal set up ... those green tents with chairs, covered in more green, lined symmetrically underneath. He told me to choose the

casket and flowers, considering that there was no one else besides him to do it. How do you choose something personal for somebody you did not know personally? I chose a pale pink with silver handles for her casket, and an arrangement of pink lilies with white roses. The setup is as beautiful as a rainbow on a rainy day.

I am not paying much attention to the scenery. My eyes are focused on one single rip in the green artificial carpet they laid down to cover the ground. It looks like someone's heel punctured it at one time or another. I am present and absent at the same time. I feel horrendous about not being able to take the pain from him during this time. It

feels as though there should be something I could do to help him, but he assures me there isn't.

Not a moment too soon, the preacher announces a prayer to end the service. Afterward, we stand and Drew is greeted by distant family and friends. He introduces me to his mother's cousin, I think. I'm not sure, everything is a blur. Drew says he would like to introduce me to one of his friends and the guy he told me about helping him at the center. That is when I hear the last voice I ever expected to hear.

I turn in the hope that I heard wrong. There is no possible way that HE could be here. Drew places one hand at the small of my back and the other

gesturing to his friend. Oh, my god. “Kara, I would like for you to meet Jeremy.”

When my eyes come into contact with HIS, I gasp. I can’t breathe. Please tell me this is not happening. I think I may be sick. I can feel my world crashing down around me. I’m pretty sure I am supposed to be saying “Hello” to Drew’s friend, but this is the person I never wanted to see again. How am I ever going to tell Drew that his friend, the one he thinks so highly of, is the person that ... I can’t even say it? I guess this proves I am not over it.

When it registers to HIM who I am, he smirks. “Hello, Kara.”

“Baby, are you okay?” Drew asks,

concerned.

I snap out of it. “Um ... yes, I’m okay. Hello ...” I can’t spit his name out of my mouth.

Please don’t reach to shake my hand. Please don’t! He extends his hand; I really think I’m going to be sick. “I’m sorry, Drew. I’m going to the car. I’m suddenly not feeling well,” I spat and walk off.

Why, out of all the guys, out of all the towns, out of all the fucking funerals?! What did I do to deserve this? No, I can’t cry. Drew will know something is wrong when he comes to check on me in a minute, which I know he will. I should have composed myself better. I do not want him to find out. It’s

not fair to him to lose what I guess he would call a “good friend”.

I am rushing, as fast as I can in heels, back to Drew’s car. The chilly air is not helping the tears that are already pricking in my eyes. I hug my coat to cover me more, or maybe I want it to make me disappear. I almost make it to his car when a rock causes me to stumble. This obviously is not my day. Then warm hands swiftly capture me, keeping me from face-planting onto the concrete.

I jump back, trying to get out of the hold when I hear his voice. “Karaline?!” I instantly melt into him.

He says nothing more, just holds onto me. I manage to compose myself.

“I’m just going to call Lauren to come pick me up so you can stay and visit. I will call you later, okay?”

“We can leave now if you’re not feeling well,” he argues.

“No, you stay. There is family that you haven’t seen in forever. I will be okay.” I try to make my voice not waiver, but fail.

He turns to look behind him, then back at me. “Okay, if you are sure you’re going to be okay?”

I give him a flat smile and nod. I get my phone out and wave him off. I walk along the narrow paved road that runs through the cemetery, hearing the crunch of each distancing step. Drew is intently gazing at me so I wave and smile as best

as I can. I turn away and dial the first person that comes to mind, and it is not Lauren. I can't handle the questionnaire she will have for me right now.

He answers on the second ring, "Kar? Are you okay?" I immediately relax, as the familiar voice comes through.

"Can you do me a favor?" I say timidly.

His responds without delay. "Of course."

I instruct Kace to drive to my apartment and retrieve my car, then tell him where I am at. Questions about why will be answered later. I knew what would happen if Drew saw his car arrive to get me instead of mine or

Lauren's. He appears not even ten minutes later. I quickly hop in the car, hoping Drew can't see who is driving through the tint.

"Take me far away from here," I tell him, as I physically relax into the seats in my car. The familiar smell is comforting.

He asks me if I want to go back to my apartment. I gave him a deranged look. I replied, "He knows where I live; he doesn't know where *you* live."

He signals with his head that he understands. Kace has always understood me. He knows I need silence and to be away from Drew for a bit. Before Drew, he was the only person that remotely knew anything about my

past. He never asked questions. He said him being here for me was more important than details. That never kept him from trying to pry, though.

We arrive at the townhouse where he lives with two of his band members. It is a quaint little place, two story brick with a two-car garage. By looking at the outside, you would never guess that a bunch of rockers live here.

He parks in the driveway, and we get out to make our way inside without a word. We walk in the front door and are greeted by the sounds of “Rock Band”. His roommates have friends over. This is definitely a bachelor pad. There are pizza boxes and beer bottles strewn all over the living room. The stench reminds

me of boy's locker room ... foul. The rest of the room is bare, with nothing on the walls. I can just imagine what those inky leather couches have been through. I scrunch my nose in disgust, and look over at Kace. He shrugs his shoulders in apology and gestures up the stairs. The guys never even notice us.

When I step into his room, I am taken back. From seeing the rest of the house, I expected his room to be the same. He takes care of his space better than his roommates. I also expected rock posters scattered across his walls, and black everything. Instead, I see taupe walls with a massive four poster mahogany-colored bed in the center of the room. There are deep burgundy

curtains that match the bedspread. One wall is covered in exquisite guitars; the other wall has two doors that frame a flat screen TV.

He motions for me to sit on the chestnut-colored leather couch at the foot of his bed. I sit on the edge, trying to see if I missed any more of my surroundings. He sits with ease, throwing one arm on the back of the couch.

I really look at him for the first time today. His jet black hair is styled the Kace way, he has on his signature T-shirt and red flannel, and those jeans ... nope, not going to look ... yeah, he still fills them out nicely. My eyes roam back up to his smirking face, and I drop my head

in shame. I should not be looking at him in anyway, I have a boyfriend.

“Why did you stop checkin’ me out for? I was thoroughly enjoying it.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to. I have a boyfriend, and we are friends. That was wrong of me.”

“I didn’t mind it. So, do you want to talk about why I had to discreetly pick you up from a funeral today, or are we going to ignore that pretty pink elephant in the room?”

I fall back into the lush couch and sigh. “Do I have to?” I poke my lip out and look up at him.

That makes him laugh out loud. I have missed that laugh. I sit and admire the friend I have missed, until his long

fingers come up to push my bottom lip in. Oh, my gosh. I probably looked like an idiot. However, that thought quickly disappears as his finger comes into contact with my lip. My breath catches as I stare into long amber-colored eyes.

He moves towards me and I quickly sit up. "I'm sorry ..."

"No, it's my fault." He doesn't act too sorry. "Would you like something to eat?"

We walk back downstairs, passing the obnoxious guys in the living room on our way to the kitchen. We decide on simple subs; me a ham and cheese, while he opts for the turkey and Swiss. I make a gagging motion when he goes to put spicy mustard on his. He just laughs and

nudges me with his shoulder. We figure if we take our food back upstairs, we might be able to eat in peace.

As soon as we walk in the door to his room, I can hear my phone vibrating in my purse. Without looking, I know exactly who it is. I put my plate down and blow out a breath as I roll my eyes. I am really not ready to deal with this. Can't I just hide from reality for a little while? I guess that is too much to ask, considering Drew has already called about ten times.

"You don't have to answer," Kace says.

"I can't ignore life too much longer."

"Yeah, you can." He takes my

phone and turns it off.

Oh, great. He will start calling Lauren when he can't get ahold of me, then she will tell him that she did not come and pick me up. I glance at the clock; it won't be long until he knows who picked me up. Maybe I can just ignore life for a night?

Without the buzzing of my phone, I peacefully eat my sub while we watch some reality show. I feel so comfortable with Kace because I don't need to pretend to be something I am not. He tells me stories about each guitar, from his very first to the one that he waited in line four hours to get signed by Van Halen. I just laugh, shaking my head. I feel thankful for having him, and for the

break.

I notice that it is getting dark out; time flew while we were catching up on what we have missed in the past few months. He asked me what happened the night of my graduation dinner, even though I tried to avoid that conversation. I told him everything, I mean everything! He was quiet for some time afterward, but eventually told me that he is not the person to judge me for my actions and that he just wants the best for me. Under the rock façade that he wears, Kace is a considerate person.

While he had me on a role, he asked me about today. I pause, as I gaze up at the ceiling. We somehow moved from the couch to the floor. He is leaning

his back against the couch, and I am laying down with my head in his lap. He used to always massage my scalp; it relaxes me.

“The funeral we were at was Drew’s mother. The reason I called you was because one of his friends showed up.” I don’t divulge too much.

“Okay ... that does not seem like a reason to call someone you don’t even *like* to come pick you up,” he says, playful.

“I just didn’t want to be there,” I say, hoping he’ll drop it.

“Mhm ... spill it!” He gives me a pointed look.

“Drew’s friend ended up being ... HIM.” Kace doesn’t know his name or

details about what happened, just the basics.

“What! Why didn’t you tell me when I picked you up that he was there?” He is acting like he’s mad at me.

I move to a sitting position, looking down, “I’m sorry. I didn’t want to make a scene at the funeral.”

“What did Drew say? Wait, does he know about ...”

“Yeah, he knows about my past. No, he does not know it’s his friend.”

“Oh, fuck. You know that when he finds out he is going to flip, right? Well, he better because if it was me ...” He lets that one trail off, and I don’t argue. I don’t want to have that conversation.

I try to go a different direction. “It

is getting late so I better go.”

I move to stand, but he grasps my hand. “Stay.”

“I want to, but I should go deal with walking out on my boyfriend’s mother’s funeral. Gosh, now that I say it out loud, I feel horrible.”

“No, you’re not, and one night of no drama might help clear your head. Look, I’ll sleep on the couch and you can have the whole bed to yourself.” He is practically begging. How can I say no to that face? I am really too soft-hearted.

“Okay, fine.” I fall back to the floor.

“Do you want to change? I have some T-shirts and sweats that I think you could fit into.”

I walk into his bathroom, which is too clean for a male, especially a rock star in the making. It has all the typical features, though. I change into a black AC/DC shirt and roll my eyes. This is so Kace. When I go to put the sweats on, I realize I still have my “girly panties” on. Shit, I don’t want to ask him for a pair of his boxers.

This is beyond humiliating, “Hey, Kace.” I lean my head around the edge of the door.

He jumps up, “Yeah? Do they not fit?”

“Um ... yeah, they do. It’s just that I dressed in *all* dressy clothes today ...” I can feel the heat rising on my face.

“Just tell me what you need, Kar.”

He is so impatient.

“Uh, some boxers?” I mumble, as I turn my head away.

“Some what? I didn’t hear you.”

“I need boxers!” I bark at him.

He obviously finds this humorous. “I heard. I just wanted to make you say it again.”

I gawk at him and, before thinking of what I am wearing, I lunge at him, tackling him to the floor. I grab his wrists, placing them above his head as I straddle him. The one thing I managed to forget was that I have his shirt on and a very thin lacy thong ... and that is it.

“Why must you be so mean to me? Tell me now, or I will never let you go!” I say with an old English accent. He

arches a brow at me.

He bucks me with his hips and, all of a sudden, he is sitting on my legs and leaning over me, holding my hands above my head. He leans down towards my face. “Oh, really now ...,” he says, cocky.

My ass is bare on his plush carpet, and he is lightly grazing my breast with his chest as he leans down. Then he rolls his hips into me, making me feel his hardness. The rough texture from his jeans on my lacy thong makes me instantaneously bow to him, closing my eyes. He leans down slowly, breathing his hot breath in my ear. “I’ve always wanted you, Kara.” He begins kissing below my ear and, for some reason, I

don't have anything in me to stop him. I know this is wrong. I need to stop him. Commotion from downstairs does it for me.

“Fuck!” he says through a clenched jaw, as he jumps to his feet. I stand, find a pair of boxers, and retreat back into the bathroom. I throw the boxers and sweats on; they keep it *freezing* in this house. Then I hear an all too familiar voice.

Breaking Hell



I rush down the stairs, only to skid to a stop, the carpet burning my feet. Drew is here, drunk and throwing a fit in Kace's foyer. He is pointing a finger at Kace, "I know she's here, and I know you picked her up!" Then he sees me.

I notice the other band players standing around, not knowing what to do, so I try to calm the situation. “Drew, let’s go outside and talk.”

I move down the last few steps when Kace gets in front of me. “Are you sure?”

I inhale, nodding slightly. He hands me one of his jackets, and motions for me to put on his slippers. I see Drew out of the corner of my eyes shooting daggers at Kace. Oh, boy ...

When we are outside and far enough away from the window so we cannot be heard, I say, “Look, I know you’re mad, but—”

He cuts me off. “Yes! You are right about that! I am *pissed*! What girlfriend

leaves their boyfriend at his own mom's funeral?!"

I feel selfish for the first time. Not once did I think of how my actions would affect Drew. I was only thinking of me. I am a horrible girlfriend. While I have my head down, wringing my hands, I mutter, "You're right. I shouldn't have left. I'm sorry."

He makes a frustrated sound. "No, that's not what I meant. Why did you lie and say Lauren was picking you up?"

"Because I knew that you wouldn't like it if Kace did, and I didn't wanna *listen* to Lauren's inquisition at that specific time."

He blows out a breath and steps towards me, grasping my fidgety hands.

“It doesn’t matter. Are you going to tell me what happened today?”

I look up, meeting distressed eyes. How can I tell him his best friend is the person that damaged me? That took my dignity from me at a young age and, when I finally feel like I can have a life, he shows back up? He doesn’t just show back up, but is in the life of the person I love?

My lip is quivering. “I can’t.” It kills me to say that.

“What do you mean you *can’t*?” His voice beams with agitation, “TELL ME!”

I jerk my hands away to cover my mouth. No, please, not now. Not the sickening feeling I get every time that

night goes through my mind. I make it to the bushes at the side of garage before I spew everything. Drew is by my side. “Are you okay?” He holds my hair back until I finish hurling.

I stand and wipe my mouth off with shaky hand. “Yeah, I told you I wasn’t feeling well today.”

He doesn’t look convinced. “Are you sure it’s you not *feeling well* that’s the problem, or something else?” I look at him with wide eyes and shake my head.

He runs his hand over his head and down his face as he shakes it. “Okay, will you come home with me then so I can take care of you?”

“I’m not sure that I should.”

“Well, I am sure that you don’t need to stay here.” He places his hands on his hips propping one leg in front of the other.

“Are you telling me what I can and can’t do?” I counter.

“No, but—”

“Okay, I will talk to you later then.” I try to sound confident, but fail horribly.

“You expect me to go home alone when my mom just passed and *something* is bothering my girlfriend?”

I let that sink in, putting myself in his shoes for once today. I should put myself aside and go with him. He needs me right now in this trying time. I will have to distract him from asking questions because I don’t want that

conversation to rear its ugly head.

This is going to piss Kace off, but ... “Okay, let me go change.”

I start towards the front door when I hear Drew mumble something he thought I couldn’t hear. “Yeah, you better.” I didn’t miss a beat in my step, but I definitely heard it.

I don’t even get a step inside when Kace is by my side. “You okay?”

After I take his jacket off, I walk past him. “Yeah, I just have to change.”

“Why!” He follows me into his bedroom.

“Please, don’t do this,” I plead with him.

He stops me from shutting the bathroom door. “You’re going with

him?” I ignore him and take the sweats off, leaving me in his boxers and shirt. “He’s not good for you, Kara.”

“Let me decide that, okay? Can you shut the door so I can change?”

He cocks his pierced brow, leans against the bathroom doorway, crosses his arms, and looks utterly fuckable. He is shirtless, sporting his tattoos that cover his lean muscles. When my ogling eyes make it to his face, he flicks his tongue ring off his teeth, giving me an irresistible look of lust.

I challenge him. “Fine then.”

Two can play this game. I give him a little smirk and stick my thumbs in the elastic of his boxers. That got his attention, he straightened up. I may have

done a little more hip movement than necessary when I pushed his boxers to the floor. I cross my arms, fisting the edges of his shirt and raising it a smudge.

I test him. “Will you shut the door now?”

He smirks. “No way in hell, sweetheart.”

“Okay, then.” I pull the shirt over my head, letting it drop to the floor.

He takes a step in my direction ... shit! I should not have played games with him, even though it *was* fun. He locks eyes with me; we both can feel the sexual tension swarming around us.

He delicately strokes my cheek with his tattooed knuckles. I fall into his

hand, as he covers my cheek with his warming palm. With tear filled eyes, I say. "Please, Kace. Don't make this hard."

I close my eyes and a tear escapes. Without a word, he walks out the door and closes it behind him. I wrap my arms around myself to hold the pieces that are left of me together. I don't know how much more heartache I can handle. I love Kace, I know that now. I would never feel those feelings when we are together if I didn't, but am I *in love* with him?

Reluctantly, I put my dress back on. As I put on my heels, I am reminded of walking away from that monster. The thought makes me shiver. It was only

hours ago, but feels like a lifetime.

“I can do this,” I chant to myself.

I get to the bottom of the stairs and see Kace sitting on the couch with a beer in hand. He glances at me, but says nothing. I guess I don’t get a good-bye. I go outside where Drew is sitting on his hood. “What took so long?”

That makes me stop in my tracks. I don’t understand why he has this attitude towards me. Trying to avoid a fight, I say, “I’m sorry.”

I turn to my car, but he stops me. “You’re going to ride with me.”

“What about my car?” I hold my hand out, gesturing.

“I assuming that his is at your apartment. He can switch them.” He gets

in his car.

Okay, he might have had a point, but he didn't have to be such a damn asshole about it. I am already rethinking my decision to go home with him.

He doesn't acknowledge me the entire way to his loft so I stare out the window. The sidewalks blur, as he speeds down the blacktop. It's a great metaphor for my life. I have always said that no one has a perfect life, but I would like to know what I did to deserve my father leaving me at a young age; why my first boyfriend, my first love, my first everything destroyed me. In one week, I went from being on the top of the highest building in New York to the bottom of the freaking Grand Canyon. Now I

graduated, had my boyfriend and two best friends, a new job, and an interview for graduate school. Everything was too perfect, I guess ...

The tears spill over the edge of my eyelids. He pulls into the parking lot for the center. I raise my head and swipe the tears away. There is a cold spot on my forehead where I leaned on the window for support, and even it left marks.

I get out and start walking in a haze, dragging my heels on the concrete which makes an eerie scrapping noise. As I trudge up the stairs and turn into Drew's loft, it feels different. I toss my stuff on the floor by the door and kick my heels off.

“Would you snap out of it?” he

says, exasperated.

I glance at him through my lashes, drop my head, and go towards the bedroom to change. I understand that he does not have a clue what's bothering me, but can't a girl have some space to think? Obviously not because he just stomped into the room.

I sigh. "I'm going to take a shower."

"We need to talk first," he says, sternly.

"There is nothing to talk about. I feel horrible for leaving you today when you needed me." I grab some underwear and one of his shirts.

"I believe that you feel horrible for that, and we will talk about who picked

you up later. Why won't you tell me what is bothering you?" His voice sounds sincere for the first time tonight, but it only makes me feel more like shit. Why do I have to be the one to ruin things?

"I'm fine. Some ... old memories came to mind and I let them get to me. It is nothing, really; no need to worry." Hopefully that sounded convincing. I don't wait too long for a response before I head to the shower. He doesn't follow so maybe he bought it.

A hot shower is just what I need. I used to wish I could wash away all the memories, feelings, and the hatred. That is the worst part, being left with all of that to live with day after day. Through

the years, I have learned to deal. Yet, with everything resurfacing, I don't know if I can keep it together. First the incident with Collin, then Jeremy deciding to show his face, and I hate when Drew and I argue.

I hear the door open. I lost track of how long I have been standing under scalding water wishing to wash everything away again.

It is quiet, but I can hear Drew shuffling around. I pay it no mind. When the curtain is pulled back, I don't even bother to cover anything. He steps in, showing all of his glory. I grab the soap and move so he can have water. He gratefully accepts it; he looks tense. He waits until I have rinsed before he spins

me to him. I'm not even surprised. He grasps my neck, pulling me towards him so he can place a chaste kiss on my forehead. Then he engulfs me in a hug and I fall into him, missing the feeling of his skin on mine. The heat shoots towards my lower abdomen, as my nipples make friction on his rock-like chest. I run my hands over the bulges on his slick biceps to his face, pulling him to me to take him in a kiss. He kisses me back with feverish lips, gliding his calloused hands across my delicate back. I moan into his mouth.

He stops and squeezes me, hard. "I know what happened today." I hold my breath, not moving. "It's him, isn't it?" His whole body tenses.

Maybe if I play dumb, he'll drop it.
“I don't know what you are talk—”

He halts me in midsentence.
“Stop!”

It makes me jump, I close my eyes and try to pull away, but his grip is tight.
“Drew, don't,” I beg.

“Tell me it wasn't him then!” he commands, but I hear the longing.

My eyes are fixed on the black, gray, and white striped curtain. Black, then gray, then white, repeat. The black stripe is biggest, the gray is smaller, and the white is the thinnest. A perfect pattern that will never change. After the black, you know the gray will come; after the gray, you know the white will come. Repetition. Methodical. I should

have known. It was bound to happen; it happened before.

He shakes me out of my stupor and whispers, “Kara, answer me. I need you to answer me.”

“Yes.” My voice is barely audible.

His breath is starting to come rapidly. However, he hasn’t let me go; one arm is draped around my shoulders, the other is cradling my head to his chest. I try to keep the sobs at bay, but the shudders that are racking my body are a dead giveaway.

He effortlessly maneuvers to shut the water off, jerks the curtain back, and hands me a towel. I numbly take it from him, not noticing that he already has boxers on before I can wrap myself with

the towel. He makes sure not to look at me, and then he is gone.

I fall to the floor and let lose. I don't hold back at all; I let it all out. When I feel like I can't cry anymore, I make myself stand and get dressed. I feel the fluffy rug between my toes, reminding me of my mother's house. Everything was always in its place, and the rugs had their certain spot. She couldn't stand it if they were out of place; just the slightest angle off and she knew it. I shake my head to get the thoughts of my mother's obsessive compulsive disorder out of my mind; she denies it to the day, though. Maybe there was a reason she kept things in their place.

My eyes are swollen, tinged with a blush of redness. I run my hands through my damp hair in an attempt to rid the knots. I eventually give up and brush my teeth. My eyes are droopy; it seems like this day has lasted weeks.

I step out into the open loft, my eyes scanning for him. I find him sitting on the couch, his hands fisted into each other, his elbows resting on his knees. He put sweats on but no shirt. I take a cautious seat on the wooden coffee table directly in front of him. His eyes are fixed on the floor.

“Drew.” My voice breaks.

I try to hold the tears back; I could only imagine how he feels right now ... his best friend and girlfriend. “Don’t,”

he says, blandly.

I stand and go to his room. I know this is for the best. I'll just keep telling myself that. I throw on some shorts, because that is all I have clean here, throw on a college hoodie, and go back out. He is gone from the couch, but the bathroom door is shut. I guess he thinks a quiet and clean break is the best.

I can handle this. I have been through much worse. I have never walked out on the love of my life before. I try to stop the tears so I can see to put my jacket and shoes on. He still hasn't come out so I write him a note on the back of an envelope that is on the island.

Drew,

If saying I'm sorry was enough, I would have already said it. I want you to know that I'm sorry for causing a problem between you and Jeremy. I also hope that, one day, you can forgive me for walking out on your mother's funeral. I do think this is the best thing for us; a clean break. No reason to drag the pain out any further. I wish you the best. I love you. Always.

Love,

Kara

I am out the door and down the street before I know it. I know I could call Kace to come get me, but I feel like

a walk. Maybe it will clear my head; I don't think a cross-country run could do that.

When I look up, I don't have a clue where I am, and there's buildings I don't recognize. I give in and call Kace.

"Hello?" a voice that is not Kace's answers.

I look back at my phone. I dialed right. "Um, is Kace there?"

"Yeah, he's asleep though," he says with a gang-like accent.

Shit! I didn't think of the time. "Oh, okay. Will you tell him to call Kara when he wakes up?" Strike one, Lauren's next.

"Kara Kara? That was here earlier?" he says with more interest.

“Yeah, that is me.”

“I’ll wake him.” I hear movement.

“No, don’t wake him. I am on my way there. I just got a little ... lost?” I say, more as a question. I am lost in more ways than one.

“Oh, well, hell, why didn’t you just say so? Where ya’ at and I’ll come pick ya’ up and bring you to Kace myself!”

“Um ... I don’t know.” I look around at my surroundings. Anything sounds better than creepy sidewalks with flickering street lamps. “Fine.” My teeth are beginning to chatter. The hoodie is not making up for the lack in pants.

I tell gang dude what street signs and buildings I see. Thankfully, he

knows exactly where I am. Less than ten minutes later, an older Toyota pulls up and he rolls the window down. "Kara?" the guy says. I nod and get in the passenger seat.

"Thanks."

"No problem. Kace speaks highly of ya'. What the hell are ya' wearin', girl?" He reaches for the heater.

I learn the gang dude's name is Dane, and he plays drums in Kace's band. He has a red Mohawk with tattoos to his ears, literally. His ears are gauged way more than Kace's, I am secretly glad that he didn't decide to go that far with it. Kace's are there, but simple enough. Dane has a spike through his chin rather than a tongue ring; trust me, I

heard all about that.

It is a relatively quiet ride, other than him talking to hear himself speak. I breathe a sigh of relief when I see Kace's townhome. I feel my phone buzzing in my purse and don't bother to look because I already know who it will be. Better turn it off now before the tears start.

Dane lets me in the house and tells me I know where to find Kace. I take my shoes off at the door and start up the stairs, freezing when they start to creak. I don't want to wake anyone. I quietly open his door, just enough for me to squeeze through, and softly shut it. I throw my hoodie off and drop my shorts, leaving me in a tank and panties.

I scan the room. It looks like it did earlier, except that he's sleeping on one side of the bed. I tiptoe across the shag carpet to the side of his bed and pause. I take a moment to admire him. He has one arm draped over his forehead and the other resting on his hip. He is shirtless and the sheets are pretty low. I am wondering if he is wearing anything at all. I stand there like a psycho, just ogling him. His abs flex every time he exhales; the pistol he has tattooed on his hip grows, then gets smaller.

I timidly climb into the bed, not knowing what his reaction will be. Maybe I should have thought about just waking him. Then again, what have I thought about lately? Not only have I

been making rash decisions, but acting like I have no common sense. I should have stayed and faced our problems instead of just walking out. He probably had a coronary when he saw that note. I know I would have if he had left it for me. I ruin everything good that is given to me. I shouldn't be here because I don't want to ruin Kace, too.

I hiccup, as I try to keep the sobs from breaking through. "Kara?" I hear him groggily gasp.

I turn so I can see him. I breathe out, "Kace ..."

I break.

DREW



How could she have not told me that is was him? Granted, she didn't know that he *was* one of my best friends. I still would have known if she said his name. I'm one shitty boyfriend for not knowing. On top of everything, I have been

treating Kara like shit. I know it is wrong and I fucking hate myself for it. She means the world to me. Work has been a living hell, my mother was calling everyday wanting money, and then my jealousy getting the best of me was certainly not the best. That is no excuse, though! She's different, and I want to keep her.

Jeremy had sex with ... no, fucking *raped* ... the love of my life. The mental images bring tears to my eyes. My thoughts are going to get the better of me.

“Man the fuck up!” I tell myself, while I stare back into the mirror at the man I never wanted to be. I never wanted to treat a woman like my father treated them. I haven't done anything

compared to him, but I am scared that if I keep letting my anger escalate, it is only a matter of time. I want to deserve her; I need to prioritize. Her first, me second, and Jeremy ... dead.

I have fucked up so many times already. She deserves someone so much better than me. She thinks her past defines her; it only made her tough as nails. I could have never survived what she has. I think the world of her, and I don't know what I would do if she was not in my life.

The thought of our first time goes through my head. It could have been so much more perfect. I was drunk, punched a wall, put those awful bruises on those delicate legs of hers. I still hate myself

for that because my jealousy was uncalled for. I should still be making up for that. She is so strong, though. I could see the pain in her eyes when I pushed inside her. I know she hasn't had sex in years, probably since that motherfucker ...

Deep breath. I close my eyes, whispering, "I am going to kill him."

When her deep brown eyes connected with mine, I almost lost my load right then and there. She has a power over me that no other girl ever has. I try to control it, but it is utterly pointless. She has trapped me and I'm not fighting it. I want her, all of her. Forever.

It was like fate intervened that

Friday night when I saw a head full of the most beautiful brunette hair flying through the air just as I was walking by. I saw she was going down. I reached out to catch her before I knew what I was doing. When those soft, innocent brown eyes looked up at me for the first time, I knew I was a goner. As hard as it was to walk away from her that night, I knew it wouldn't be the last time we saw each other. We had a connection from the moment our eyes met, and she felt it, too. I know it. I won't give up.

I feel like I have brought her down since I met her. She was a shy, but a happy young woman with ambition. I admired that about her, especially after she told me what happened. I knew I had

to get to know this girl that was strong enough to pick herself up and do something with her life after being through what she had. She had all the reason in the world to give up, but didn't.

I remember the look on her face when I said the word "rapist". I thought she was going to pass out, she went so white. Even if she had chosen not to tell me, I still would have known something happened. Never in a million years would I have thought that it was the one good friend I thought I could depend on. I have known Jeremy for about four years now. I knew he was a womanizer, but did not think that he was capable of doing what he did to Kara. He made her

fragile, but I'm strong enough for the both of us to hold the pieces together. (wanna incorporate for the both of us)

Then when I pulled up and saw that piece of shit Collin half-way in her car, I lost it. I haven't fought since I graduated and swore I would never again, but he pushed the wrong buttons. Normally, I would say that people do not deserve what I did, but he definitely did. I don't remember a damn thing after I saw his legs sticking out of her car. I blacked out, which is never a good thing. I used to drop motherfuckers like nothing, which is exactly what he got. Her sobs broke through my trance, or I might have killed him. But, I knew she needed me and that was enough. She is special.

The thought of it, the thought of him and her, make my whole body tense. The thought of that good for fucking nothing best friend of mine makes me seethe. I came in the bathroom to calm down. I don't like being this mad when I am around her. Not that I would ever touch her like that, but I am seeing red right now. It took a little while for the realization to hit. I raked my brain all day, trying to figure out what could have made her suddenly go cold on me. I put the puzzle together, though. He will get what's coming to him because he hurt the woman I love. I can't rid her of those memories or take the emotional pain away, but I can break him like he broke her.

She is more important than anyone. I need to put my shit aside and tend to her, and just her. She needs me; I live for her. I never thought that I would be tied down to one woman, but I have to admit that she has won me over completely. She has me so much that the diamond ring I bought her is burning a hole in my sock drawer. I have kept it in there, not wanting to scare her off. I want to wait until Christmas. I always worry that we are moving too fast, but it feels right.

The whole damn reason we have to move slowly is because of that piece of shit. "Damn it!" I slammed my palm on the cool surface of the vanity.

I rush out of the bathroom, just needing to feel her precious body in my

arms. I can protect her, and will from now on. I don't see her in the living room or kitchen. I head to the bedroom next; nothing. I storm back into the main living area. Her purse is gone. She is gone.

I notice a lone envelope on the island.

Drew,

If saying I'm sorry was enough, I would have already said it. I want you to know I'm sorry for causing a problem between you and Jeremy. I also hope that, one day, you can forgive me for walking out on your mother's funeral. I do think this is the best thing

for us; a clean break. No reason to drag the pain out any further. I wish you the best. I love you. Always.

Love,

Kara

“FUCK!”

She left. I can't lose her. She can't be far; her car is at her apartment. Fuck, that means she is out there in the cold, walking. I hustle to throw on the first pair of shoes and jacket in sight, shooting for the door. I leave like a bat out of hell.

I call her nonstop and, of course, she isn't answering. I search every street within miles of my apartment, nothing.

Shit, what if some lunatic picked her up? My foot pounds on the gas. I call Lauren. Please let her be there. She says that she has not heard from her in a while. I tell her nothing is wrong, not wanting to freak her out. There is only one more place she could have gone.

I park my Challenger two houses down, on the opposite side of the street from Kace's house. I know she is here; I feel it in my gut. I don't want to lose her, and I especially don't want to lose her to him. I have had a sickening feeling about this dude since I first laid eyes on him. I knew he wanted her, I could see it in the fucker's eyes. After she saw Jeremy, she ran to him and not me; that really hurt. I want to know why she feels like she can

talk to him and not me. I am her boyfriend. I understand having friends, but this asshole doesn't want to just be friends. She is mine, and I will get her back.

Before I have a chance to think any further, I'm standing in front of Kace's front door.

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the *Broken Series***

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Acknowledgements



I may have typed every word of this book, but I was not the only person who had a hand in it. First and foremost, I want to thank my husband for being there for me every step of the way. I say every step and I mean it. Poor guy, he was

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Making my first appearance in the “Author World” was not an easy one. It takes encouragement to get people to take a chance on an unknown author.

About the Author



B. E. Laine enjoys long walks on the beach, candle light dinners, eh wait this is not some fairy tale. This Oklahoma girl, born and raised, recently learned she had a passion for reading. Then realized she had an even bigger passion

for writing. All the stories that have been storming through her brain all these years are finally being written.

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