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Dedication

For my mum, Sharon.
SILENCE deals with a subject of sensitive nature. Reader discretion is advised.
Oakley

Most people have heard the phrase ‘Silence is golden’ and many would agree with it. People with screaming children running wild around the house or working in a noisy office. For me, however, it meant something entirely different. Silence consumed my whole life. It suppressed things I could never express. My silence was responsible for my family’s happiness. Silence was my prison.

***

“Are you ready to leave, Oakley? Cole’s waiting outside,” Mum said in the soft tone she used for me. She leant against my doorframe and smiled. Through her smile I could see how tired she looked. Dark shadows were now a permanent feature under her eyes dulling blue eyes. Her smile used to be my favourite part of her. Now it was as false as my own. And it was all my fault.

Every single day I woke up wanting to tell her what happened. To have her hold me in her arms and promise me that everything would be fine, but reality stopped me every time. The fantasy I had in my head of how things would turn out was just that; a fantasy. I’d lose everything.

I knew that. He’d told me enough times. It wasn’t something I could risk. Not ever.

Placing my hairbrush on the dresser, I turned to Mum and nodded my head once. With a deep breath, I followed her downstairs.

It wasn’t until we reached the front door that she looked at me again. “Have a good day, okay?” Almost everything she said to me was turned into a question. As the words left her mouth, her eyes widened in the desperate hope that I would reply, and every time I responded with a brief nod, her shoulders would sag. She still tried all the time.

I grabbed my school bag by the door and swung it over my shoulder as I walked outside.

The morning sun beamed down on me as I turned into the street, making me squint at the brightness. It was July, and almost time for school to close for the summer holidays. I couldn’t wait.

*Two days.*
Cole beeped his car horn even though he was parked right outside my house. *Thanks, Cole, might have missed you without that.* He grinned through the window as I made my way to his car. His blue eyes glistened in the early light, making them look as pale as ice.

Cole Benson and I had been friends since we were babies. Mum has pictures of Cole holding my hand as I learned to walk. He was two years older than me, but he certainly didn’t act like it. My mum, Sarah, and his mum, Jenna, met in high school and had been friends ever since.

“Good morning, sunshine,” he greeted with a wide grin. Unlike Mum’s, the smiles I received from Cole never changed. Grinning back was as natural as breathing. His happiness was infectious. Our friendship had always been fun, affectionate, loving, and carefree. He accepted me for who I am now.

It wasn’t always a bed of roses, though. There were times when Cole would beg and plead with me to tell him what was wrong, why I didn’t speak. I found it harder than when Mum did the same. He was the one person who I could still feel normal with.

I hated hurting him.

He flicked his messy hair out of his eyes and started the engine. His rusty old car roared to life. It hadn’t been long since he passed his driving test, but he was a good driver, and I trusted him with my life. Still, I gripped the seat as he sped off. I hated school with a passion and in just a few short minutes we’d be there.

Cole talked almost continuously on the drive, chatting away about his car and what we’d do later. Occasionally, I would nod or smile in response to something he said, but apart from that I just sat and listened to him speaking. His voice was smooth and calming. Not talking to him was hard. I desperately wanted to return his quick banter with something smart of my own. But I stayed tongue-tied.

As we pulled into the half-full car park, I started to feel sick. People whispered to each other whenever I was around. I was used to it, but I still bloody hated being the centre of the jokes and bitchy comments.

“Oakley?” I jumped and looked up at Cole. He smiled. “You gonna be okay today?”

I nodded, grimacing slightly. I hated when we had to go our separate ways, and I wished I were older so we would be in the same year. Most days I could ignore the attention I got. Today I was having an off day.

*This should be interesting.*

“Text me if you need anything,” he instructed, kissing me on the cheek, making my heart jump. Cole knew I wouldn’t text him, but he still said the same thing every morning. “See you later,” he called as he walked towards the Sixth Form block next to the high school.

Once he was out of view, I let the smile slip from my face. There was no one to pretend I was fine today. Walking towards the entrance of school, I pulled my sleeves down over my hands and wrapped my arms around myself.

*Just keep your head down. Not long until school is over for six weeks.*

The bell rang to signal the start of the school day just as I got inside the old building. My form room was at the end of a corridor that seemed to stretch on for miles. I walked quickly to avoid being caught up with the people still loitering around. Some days, when it was crowded and people stared, it was like doing a bloody catwalk.

I got to the form room without incident and took my usual seat next to Hannah. Resting my arms on the desk, I took a deep breath. Mornings were rubbish as there was still so much of the day to get through. I couldn’t relax at school. I was constantly waiting for something to happen.

Hannah smiled, and I returned the gesture. We weren’t necessarily friends, but she was the closest thing I had here. She didn’t judge or treat me any differently. I just don’t think she knew how to act around me most of the time.

“School sucks,” she grumbled, tucking her dark black hair behind her ears. *Completely agreeing with you there.*
“Oakley, what did you do last night?” One of the boys shouted from the back of the classroom. I recognised his voice as Luke Davis, one of the biggest idiots of the school.

“Sorry, I didn’t quite hear you.” The room erupted with sniggers, and I rolled my eyes.

“Ignore them,” Hannah whispered, squeezing my arm sympathetically. Oh, I do.

I smiled at her as Mrs Yates walked into the room. With a quick greeting, she flipped the register open and pulled the lid off her pen. Like everyone else, she called my name, but unlike everyone else, she looked up at the same time. There was never any pressure from the teachers to talk; they made sure everything was as normal as possible wherever it could be.

After the register was called everyone chatted, waiting for the bell to ring for the first lesson. “Ready for maths?” Hannah groaned as the bell chimed. Nope. My expression mirrored hers.

Maths wasn’t my favourite subject, and today was a double lesson. “Do you think we’ll ever use anything we’ve learnt in maths in the real world?” She mused.

Most definitely.

I had most lessons with Hannah. We sat together through them all, but she spoke to her two other friends more, unsurprisingly since they actually answered her. That was okay with me, though. I preferred to just do the work to pass the time.

“Good morning,” Mr Spice greeted. “Pass these around and get started.” He handed Georgie the stack of papers and went to sit down.

The class seemed to drag on forever. For the whole two hours, we all worked from the sheets. It was almost like doing a test.

Boredom is actually going to kill me.

I flipped the worksheet over, only to find another one.

Finally, the bell rang, and it was time for the first break of the day. Stuffing my pencil case into my bag, I mentally planned my route to the next class. Helen, Laura, and Tina peered over their shoulders as they walked towards the door, snickering. My heart dropped a little, but I tried not to let them get to me. It wouldn’t be long before we would leave school and I wouldn’t have to see them again.

Heading straight to my third lesson, I kept my head down, hoping to go unnoticed. I took the longer route to my next lesson because there were usually fewer people around.

The sun was even brighter than when I left home this morning, and as it shone in my face I cradled my hand over my eyes to create a little bit of shade. Suddenly I slammed into someone who was walking around the corner. Gasping, I stumbled back.

“Sorry,” a deep voice said. I looked up and stepped back again. I felt sick as Julian grinned back at me. His smile wasn’t a friendly one, more like one from a predator that had just caught its prey. “Oakley,” he said in what he probably thought was a playful tone.

No. Not now.

I gulped and straightened my back to try to look more confident than I was. Look him in the eye!

“Miss me over the weekend?” Julian took one small, intimidating step towards me. I wanted to run. But running wouldn’t help me at all. I needed to be strong. Raising my head, I continued to stare him right in the eye while my heart went wild in the worst way.

The corner of Julian’s mouth curved in sinister smirk. There was definitely something very wrong with him. The way he acted around me when we were alone was psychotic.

“Miss Farrell, Mr Howard, get to class. Now!” Mr Simmons bellowed. I sagged in relief and scurried off to biology, refusing to look back at my number one tormentor.

I’d be happy if I could just make it through one day without something happening.
At lunchtime, I walked to the exit to eat outside the school grounds. It was just easier. As I was about to reach the front door, a manicured hand shot out. I flinched to an abrupt halt.

“Oakley,” Laura said with a fake smile. “I’m having a party on Saturday to celebrate the end of the year. You should come. Whatta ya say?” Laura and her friend, Sally, laughed under their breath. How could they still find that funny? Did they ever get bored of their own stupid, pathetic jokes?

I pushed past her, almost running towards the door. The laughing stopped as soon I was outside. I’d had enough of today already and needed to leave. Blinking the tears back, I walked quickly through the car park. How could people hate me so much for doing absolutely nothing wrong?

I swallowed the watermelon-sized lump in my throat and willed myself to not cry. I’d survived much worse, I was stronger than this, and so it frustrated me when their jibes cut.

“Oakley?” Cole’s voice called out, bringing an instant relief. I turned around to see him jogging towards me, his messy hair blowing across his forehead. I drew on the strength his friendship gave me.

I took a shaky breath and smiled. I was not going to let them make me cry again, and I really didn’t want Cole to see me upset either. He strode across the car park and stopped right in front of me.

“Hey. Are you okay?” Cole asked, scanning my face. I nodded, and he arched an eyebrow.

“No, you’re not. Hold on a minute, I’ll come with you and we can talk.”

I grabbed his arm as he went to turn away and shook my head. I didn’t want him to come with me. He didn’t need to be the boy that hung out with the freak girl who didn’t talk. I nudged him in the direction of his waiting friends, telling him to go with them. He looked to them for a second before returning to me.

“It’s fine. I’d rather come with you,” he said.

Great, I’m the loser charity case who needs babysitting.

I shook my head more fiercely and clenched my jaw, hurt and frustrated. Of all the people in the world, I did not want him feeling sorry for me.

I should’ve just stayed in bed today.

Cole gave a mock-exasperated sigh, his eyes tightening a little. “Either I’m coming with you, or you’re sitting with us. It’s up to you.” He folded his arms over his chest, challenging me.

“Cole, you coming or not?” His friend, Ben, shouted. I’d met Ben a few times before but only in passing when Cole was walking to his car with him.

“Come on, babe. I’m hungry,” some girl called.
Babe? Babe!

Cole mumbled something under his breath, but I couldn’t make out what he’d said. Who was she? Was she his girlfriend? She couldn’t be. He would have definitely told me something like that. But why was some skank calling him babe?

I felt like my heart was being squished. I didn’t want them to be together.

Perfect, now I’m jealous. All I need now is for a dog to come pee up my leg and make this the best day ever.

The thought of him being with someone made me feel sick. And, uncharacteristically, want to gouge the girl’s eyes out.

“I’m going with Oakley,” he shouted back. I slapped his chest and pushed him again, which only made him laugh. Why won’t you leave! “Eating with us it is.” He smirked, grabbing my hand and pulled me along with him.

I tugged my arm, trying to get my wrist out of his iron grip, but he was too strong. Time to start lifting. Gymnastics kept me fit and toned, but I couldn’t match Cole’s strength.

“Oakley’s sitting with us,” he explained to his group of friends.

My face flamed in embarrassment. He made me feel like a three-year-old. I was so angry I refused to look at him. How could he do that? He knew I didn’t like being in a group of people, especially one full of strangers. I felt so out of place.

They accepted it with a nod, and we all walked around the building to the field at the back. The girl who’d called Cole ‘babe’ didn’t look happy at all that I was there. She shot me the occasional discreet glare as we walked. I didn’t even want to bloody sit with them in the first place! I certainly didn’t want to sit with them if he was with her.

Eventually, we sat under some trees and Ben immediately started stuffing sandwiches in his mouth. The nameless girl, who looked a little like a Meg from Family Guy without glasses, made a huge effort to talk to Cole as much as she could. I couldn’t blame her. Cole was incredible.

I frowned at the floor and picked at the grass. I was angrier with myself than I was with Cole because I shouldn’t like him. I wasn’t nearly good enough for him, never would be.

“Oakley, you want?” Cole asked, holding his Pepsi out to me. A shake of my head answered his question and he frowned, putting the can down on the floor. “You’re annoyed with me.”

I lowered my eyes and wished I could disappear. He was actually going to have this out in front of everyone. If I could have a do-over, that’d be great.

He sighed, exasperated. “How long are you going to ignore me for?”

The length of time was directly linked to how long he kept airing our bloody business in public for. I shrugged my shoulders, still refusing to look at him. I burned with embarrassment.

“What did you do to piss her off so much?” Ben asked, not even bothering to lower his voice so I wouldn’t hear.

Cole snorted. “Nothin’. She’s just being impossible.”

How was I the one being impossible? He didn’t have to make me come over here. If he’d let me go off on my own for a bit I could’ve calmed down and sorted myself out.

Someone stepped in my light, casting a dark shadow over my lap. Looking up, I shrank back. Was I actually on some sort of sick TV show?


He and his friends chuckled – too hard for the rubbish and hugely overdone joke. His friends were sheep. They did what he said, followed where he went and laughed when they were supposed to. They didn’t bother me, they spent their whole lives desperately trying to fit in with someone who didn’t even genuinely like them. They had their own problems.

I pressed my fists into my lap and looked away. Just as they went to leave, Cole jumped up and grabbed fistfuls of Julian’s shirt. I froze in shock. What’s he doing?

“What did you say to her?” Cole growled. His knuckles turned white around Julian’s top.

Not good.
“Chill, man. I was only joking,” Julian mumbled, stiffening his back and pulling at his shirt in an effort to try and release it from Cole’s grip. It didn’t work.

I couldn’t watch, and I certainly couldn’t let a teacher witness what was looking like turning into a fight. Cole would get into trouble. Jumping to my feet, I pulled at Cole’s arm, but he didn’t move an inch. It was as if he was too angry to see me.

“Cole, let it go,” Ben demanded.

*Please, let it go,* I begged with my eyes.

“A joke, was it? Well, I didn’t find it very fucking funny. If you so much as look at her again, I’ll kill you.”

Cole shoved Julian away from us and gently pried my hand from his arm. *Whoa.* As soon as I was no longer touching him, he launched forward and punched Julian in the jaw.

I flinched in shock. Cole just punched someone. I’d not witnessed that before. He could hold his own. I knew that, but he didn’t go looking for fights.

Julian stumbled backwards, almost falling over his own legs, but unfortunately managed to correct himself. One of his friend’s hands shot out and grabbed the top of his arm to steady him. For a second, Julian glared back at Cole. He looked like he was weighing up his options.

Grabbing my bag, I sprinted towards the school gates.

I couldn’t do this.

“Oakley?” Cole shouted after me.

If I turned around I would probably cry, so I kept running. I ran out of the gates and towards the park. The muscles in my legs started to burn as I pushed myself faster and faster. I could feel a stitch pinching at my side, but I didn’t slow my pace. I pushed harder. Why were things so complicated? If I could go to sleep and wake up as someone else, *anyone* else, I’d do it in a heartbeat.
“Hey, Oakley, will you stop?” Cole’s hand circled around my wrist, and he pulled me to a stop. We were both out of breath and puffing. I rested my hands on my thighs and tried to breathe evenly. As I looked down, I felt a warm tear slide down my cheek and drop to the floor. *Not again.*

“Don’t cry,” he pleaded softly as he crouched down beside me. His finger gently brushed my cheek, and without thinking or planning it, I leant my head into his hand and closed my eyes. The comfort I felt from him was out of this world, nothing compared.

“He’s not worth it. Just forget about him.”

I was then pulled into his strong, safe arms. I breathed him in. His aftershave mixed with his own scent was all I needed to calm down. I regained control over my emotions and smiled against his chest. Being wrapped up in his arms was my favourite place to be.

Cole didn’t care that I no longer spoke. He just cared about me and over the years I started to feel much more for him than I should. Perhaps it was always going to happen, we grew up together and had been best friends for as long as I could remember. That was bound to develop as we got older.

Eventually, after what seemed like hours, yet still not long enough, I forced my head up to look at him. He grinned sheepishly. “You want to ditch the rest of the day? We could go eat our own weight in ice cream.”

That was a tactical move. He knew I loved ice cream and was using it to get himself out of trouble. Well, I already knew I was going to give in. Plus I’d rather go to a dental appointment than go back to school this afternoon.

I smiled and rolled my eyes. Cole rewarded me with his Hollywood smile. “Great. Come on then, little miss.”

As we turned and walked along the path that led into town, Cole grabbed my hand. My heart jumped as his fingers slotted perfectly between mine. The gesture was probably nothing to him, but it made my insides turn to mush.

For the entire fifteen-minute walk, Cole’s hand was wound firmly around mine. I didn’t ever want to let go. I felt safe. Nevertheless, I kept my head down, hiding behind Cole as we walked through the small town. I was in my school uniform and didn’t want to be seen by anyone my parents knew.

Dad wouldn’t like it at all.

We finally reached the place that had the best ice cream around, Julie’s Café. Cole and I spent so much time there, it was like a home away from home. We would chill in one of the
booths and eat our fill of ice cream. It looked like your typical diner-style café, with light blue walls and cream booths and blue tables. The atmosphere was warm, friendly, and welcoming.

“Oh, there you two are,” Julie yelled across the café. She was in her mid-forties and was one of the sweetest, friendliest, and most caring people I knew. The first thing I noticed about her was her new haircut. It usually fell just below the small of her back but was mostly tied up. Now it sat on her shoulders and flicked under. It made her look much younger.

“Take a seat. I’ll bring over your usual.” She ushered us towards a booth by the window. It was the one we always chose whenever it was free. The few times it wasn’t Cole would glare at whoever had taken it like they’d just spat in his face.

“Thanks,” Cole said, laughing as she fussed around, swiping up a crumpled napkin from our table. Everything had to be perfect for her customers; that was just how she was. We had barely sat down when one of the waitresses appeared with a chocolate milkshake and chocolate ice cream for Cole, and a strawberry milkshake and cookie dough ice cream for me.

I was just about to dig in when I heard a voice that made me want to throw something: the girl that liked Cole. No-name, Meg-lookalike babe.

“There you are! Why didn’t you say where you were going?” She exclaimed, throwing her arms up in the air. Ben walked over to our table with her and smiled apologetically. How did they even find us? Cole must’ve told them about our hang out. Stupidly that stung. This was our place. I felt a sense of protectiveness over something that was between us.

“What are you guys doing here?” Cole asked, his carefree expression morphing into a frown. At least he seemed as put out as I was.

The girl sat down next to Cole. I wanted her name to go with the jealous, ridiculous hate I felt burning inside my heart. She was pretty, but the fact that she liked the guy I liked made her ugly to me. It was completely irrational and I hated feeling like it but that was how jealously worked.

“Just wanted to grab a shake,” she replied in her annoyingly whiny voice. “What would you suggest?”

That you leave.

“I don’t know, Courtney,” he huffed. Courtney. I didn’t like it. To be fair whatever her name was, I wouldn’t have liked it. I needed to get a grip.

“Can I get a vanilla shake please?” Ben shouted across the room. Julie frowned at him but nodded. Oh dear. She didn’t like when someone yelled for her attention.

I stopped listening to what else Ben was saying when Courtney grabbed Cole’s milkshake and took a long sip from the straw. What the…?

“So you’ve known Cole your whole life?” I turned my attention back to Ben, who had asked the question. He was smiling nervously. His lip pulled up in a sort-of a half-smile. I dipped my head to answer.

“You’ll have to tell me some embarrassing stories about Cole so—” he stopped abruptly and his eyes widened, horrified. “Err, I mean. N-not tell but, err. Oh, shit, I’m sorry. Oakley, I didn’t think,” he stuttered, grimacing as he tried to explain himself.

I smiled and shook my head to tell him that I wasn’t offended. There was something about him that made it impossible to be offended by him. He hadn’t meant it badly and wasn’t taking a cheap shot at me. People just assume that if a person is over the age of two they will speak.

“Damn, I really know how to put my foot in it, hey?” He chuckled and his eyes lost the tension as soon as he knew I wasn’t going to run off upset, and Cole wasn’t going to punch him.

“Anyway.” He shook his head and frowned as if he was chastising himself in his head. “You should come to my party at the weekend. Cole’s gonna be there.”

Was everyone having a party this weekend?

It wasn’t often that I was invited out, but did I even want to go? It wouldn’t be much fun for Cole if I were there. I knew he wouldn’t leave my side all night. But maybe it would be fun. If the other people going were half as cool as Ben, then perhaps I’d have a good time.
If Cole looked like he was bored, I could always go home early. All I had to do was get my parents’ approval, but I would be with Cole and they trusted him so it shouldn’t be that hard. Oh great, I was nervous already and I hadn’t even accepted yet.

With a nod of my head, I agree to going to a party. My first proper high school party. It would either be amazing or tragic.

“Great, I’ll save a dance for ya,” he said, winking at me. *Whoa.* Guys didn’t wink at me all that often. Or at all. I blushed and shifted in my seat, not liking that kind of attention. I wished I was sitting next to Cole.

“You ready to leave, Oakley?” Cole snapped. Already? I hadn’t even finished my milkshake or ice cream. I was about to shake my head until I noticed Cole’s face was tense with irritation. *What did I miss?*

He got up, and I took that as my cue to leave. Cole weaved around the tables quickly and almost jogged away. *What on earth is up with him?* I ran to catch up as he power-walked.

As soon as he slowed fraction and my breathing was normal again we fell into a comfortable pace, I raised my eyebrows at him. He understood that I was asking him what the bloody hell was going on.

“It’s nothin’, Oakley.”

Nothing. He didn’t often lie to me. He shook his head, looking around to avoid me pressing the issue further, and I let it go. We walked on in an uncomfortable silence. I felt weird, hating there being anything off between us.

“So…you coming to mine?” He asked as we reached his car in the car park at school. I nodded eagerly. Spending some time alone with him was definitely what I wanted, what I needed, and I loved being at his place. Cole’s parents and his sister, Mia, treated me like one of the family. I felt so at ease there and preferred it to being at my own house, no question. Cole smiled, his eyes lingering on mine for a little longer than usual.

The way my heart went wild you’d think he’d just snogged my face off.

“Hello, sweetie,” Cole’s mum, Jenna, welcomed Cole as we walked through his front door.

“Oh, hi, Oakley,” she gushed, giving me a warm hug.

Cole mumbled something that sounded like hi and walked off to his room. He’d be annoyed about the ‘sweetie’ thing as well as whatever else had turned him moody.

“What’s wrong with him?” She asked, more to herself than to me. I shrugged anyway and smiled back at her. Jenna always smelt of coconut shampoo and peach moisturiser.

“You should follow Mr Happy. I’ll call you when dinner’s ready.” She hadn’t even asked me if I wanted to stay for dinner, she just knew I would. I’d never say no to spending time at their house.

Cole’s room hadn’t changed much since we decorated it when he was fifteen – two years ago. It was still the same shade of blue. He hated it now though, said it looked like a baby’s room. I doubted he would change it anytime soon as he was too lazy. He’d just covered the walls with posters of cars that, unless he won the lottery, he’d probably never be able to afford and motorbikes.

He was lying on his bed with his hands behind his head staring at the ceiling. His bottom lip was trapped between his teeth. Whatever was going on really bothered him.

I lay down on my side, propping my head up on my hand, and waited. It didn’t usually take too long for him to come around but after just a few minutes, I became impatient. I gently nudged him in the ribs, prompting him to spill.

“What?” He whispered, still not looking at me. I sighed and rested my head back, having absolutely no idea what was going on. Maybe the Julian thing was still weighing on his mind. He was very protective of me so it would explain his behaviour.

“Sorry,” he eventually muttered with a sigh.

*Ah, he’s back.*
I hated when he was cryptic. Sorry for what exactly? It wasn’t often that he could hide something from me, but when he did it drove me crazy. I cared about him, way too much, so I obsessed when something was off between us.

We lay beside each other in silence. As the seconds ticked by my eyes started to feel heavy. His unique smell was soothing and the sound of his light breathing was like my own personal lullaby. Without too much fight I gave in and closed my eyes. A few minutes later, Cole grabbed my hand, interlacing our fingers, and then I fell asleep.
Oakley

I woke up as the mattress dipped and caused me to roll over. Cole was getting off the bed. Rubbing my eyes, I sat up.

“Sorry, did I wake you?” He said softly, grimacing.

I shook my head even though he bloody had. It probably wasn’t a good idea to nap for too long anyway. “Liar.” Oh, yeah, he knew when I was lying. Most of the time. “Anyway, your parents are coming over for dinner, too. We’re having a barbeque. Again.”

Grinning, I stretched my arms up, unlocking my muscles. I loved sitting out in Cole’s back garden eating barbecue food. Cole’s dad, David, always forgot about the food and wandered off, only to return when it’d reached the point of no return. We ended up having to smother the burnt bits in tomato and BBQ sauce to balance out the taste of burnt charcoal. It had become a tradition, though. I couldn’t eat non-burnt BBQ food anymore.

“So, that guy at school today, Julian...” Cole said, trailing off.

Ah, so his grumpiness is about Julian.

Cole’s face was tense, he was unsure if he should bring it up or not Not would be the answer. I shook my head. School was over for the day and I was with Cole, there wasn’t anything in the world I wanted to think about other than a long summer with him. We only one day left at school. I could survive that.

“Yeah, I know you don’t want to talk about it but tough. Does he do that a lot?” Cole’s eyes pierced through mine, pinning me with his steely gaze. “We’re doing this, Oakley, whether you like it or not. Does he harass you a lot?”

Closing my eyes, I reluctantly nodded my head once. There was no point in trying to lie and assure him nothing was going on. He would only know I was lying anyway.

“I’m gonna kill him,” he growled angrily.

My eyes widened and I shook my head, desperately pleading with him not to do anything stupid. Couldn’t he see that it would just make things worse? I didn’t want more fighting.

Cole’s face softened and he groaned. “I’m sorry, Oakley. I just fucking hate that people give you a hard time,” he said tenderly. “I’ll leave it, I promise. As long as he doesn’t do anything like that again. You tell me if he does, okay?”

Sagging in relief, I laid my head on his shoulder. He instantly wrapped his arm around me and pulled me closer to his side. My heart started drumming as he rubbed circles on my arm with his thumb. I loved his touch. Not once had I ever felt sick or scared with him. It was completely different, and I never wanted him to stop.
“Wanna watch a film until dinner?” He asked as he picked up the remote and flicked through the movie channels. I nodded against his shoulder. I didn’t really care what we did. I just wanted to be around him.

We stayed in Cole’s room, watching TV until Jenna call us down for dinner. I could have quite happily stayed in his room for the rest of the night, but I knew our parents would want us with them.

Cole leapt up, and I got off the bed slowly, preparing myself to go and act normal.

“Finally. I’m starving,” Cole exclaimed. He couldn’t be starving, he ate two hours ago.

I followed Cole at my own pace, smiling at how eager he was to get food. He took the stairs two at a time and darted towards the back door.

The second I got downstairs Mum greeted me. She pulled me into a hug and rubbed my back. It was her way of trying to make everything better. A hug from Mum fixed things when I was really little, but I hadn’t felt safe like that in almost eleven years.

“Are you okay, honey? Jenna said you both came home early,” Mum whispered, stroking my hair. I pulled back to nod my head and smiled to convince her that I was all right. “Are you sure? Did someone do or say something to you?” She pressed further, her fingers squeezing my arm slightly.

Mum was desperate to fix me.

There was nothing she could do.

I shook my head and rolled my eyes, convincing her, successfully, that I was all good.

Her face relaxed and lost a fraction of the worry around her eyes. “Okay. You know you can come to me though, for anything.”

No. I smiled again.

“Good. Now, let’s eat, eh?”

I was pulled through Cole’s house by Mum tugging on my hand. Sometimes, actually most of the time, she still saw me as a little girl. It was as if in her eyes I stopped aging when I stopped talking.

Taking a seat next to Cole I watched his dad, David, stand at the barbecue for a change. My brother, Jasper, was talking to Mia, Cole’s older sister. Well, he was bickering with her as usual. No doubt he was trying to convince Mia of one of his stupid theories. His last one was: sausages and bacon coming from the same animal is all part of some big conspiracy because they taste nothing alike.

“Hello! You okay?”

I nodded and grabbed a can of Coke from the table to have something to do, some distraction.

“About school,” my dad’s voice cut through everyone else’s. I jumped and spun my head around to find him walking over to my side. “You can’t just walk out like that. If someone’s bullying you, then you need to let me know, and I will contact the school.” I cracked open the can and nodded, looking around the large, landscaped back garden. He was nowhere to be seen. Cole waved his hand in front of my face, snapping me back to reality.

“My dad is related to that.

Someone was missing from the table. Where was Dad?

I glanced over my shoulder, looking around the large, landscaped back garden. He was nowhere to be seen. Cole waved his hand in front of my face, snapping me back to reality.

“Hello! You okay?”

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So I didn’t cause a scene or prolong the discussion, I nodded.

“Good girl. Now grab a plate, I think the food’s ready.” He kissed the top of my head and went to take his seat next to Mum.

Thankfully, Cole started talking to me about a class trip the sixth-form students were taking to a theme park, and how he wished I were going, too. I threw myself into listening to him and
not dwelling on Dad being angry, but I didn’t feel hungry anymore. I knew I should eat though, all I’d had today was ice cream, and Mum would start fussing if I didn’t have a proper meal.

I was so ready for bed.

David placed a plate of burgers and sausages on the table. I took one of each and grabbed bread rolls. I forced myself to take a bite of my ketchup-smothered, charred hot dog.

“It’s agreed then? Two weeks in Italy,” Jenna exclaimed, clapping her hands together.

Italy? What had I missed?

“While you were off in Oakley land, we just planned the holiday,” Cole explained, reading my confused expression. Oh! That put a smile on my face. I felt my excitement build at the thought of going on holiday. Every year we went away with Cole’s family, and I loved every second of it.

“Italy,” Mum confirmed, her face lighting up. She seemed excited. I knew she loved spending time in foreign shops with Jenna, or sitting by the pool gossiping.

Everybody else agreed, and I grinned. I couldn’t wait to get away, to relax and hopefully forget everything for a while. Cole winked at me, and I blushed.

“Oh, God. Don’t let him see! Why did I have to turn into such an idiot when he did things like that? We’d been friends forever, even if I do have feelings for him I shouldn’t be over here blushing.

We couldn’t be together.

I would never be good enough for him.

Cole was perfect and I was broken.

Once we finished dinner, Cole and I went back up to his room so I could watch Hollyoaks.

We didn’t have Sky because Dad complained that it was a rip off, them charging so much, so Cole recorded the latest episode on E4 for me every single day.

I settled on his bed and laid my head on his chest. His heart beat steadily. It was my favourite sound.

“Whoa, bad move,” Cole called out, shaking his head at the TV. He hated the programme so much that he made a running commentary on everything that was going on.

I laughed at him, enjoying his stupid remarks. Secretly he loved it, too.

“Oakley,” he warned, glancing down. I pressed my lips together. My mouth ached where I tried to keep a straight face.

I gasped in surprise as he suddenly rolled us over, and moved over me. Oh, wow. He was hovering above me, his legs either side of mine as he pinned my hands over my head. I wasn’t scared, not at all. There were no feelings of panic or dread. I should be scared. I should shove him off. But it felt… right. So right my throat clogged and my eyes stung with unshed tears.

“Are you sorry?” He half-smiled and raised his eyebrows. I shook my head to play along but my mind was elsewhere. “Alright, you asked for it,” he said with a shrug. His face became mischievous, blue eyes glistening and his face inched closer to mine.

What...

“Oakley, your parents said it’s time to go,” Mia shouted as she burst into the room. She gasped as she saw the position we were in. Her eyes were on stalks, and I groaned internally.

This looks so, so bad.

“Actually, you know what? Why don’t you two finish first?” She grinned and popped her hip. “I’ll just go tell them you’ll be a minute.”

Cole pushed himself up off me and reached down the side of the bed for something. He threw one of his trainers at her, but she managed to jump out of the way before it hit.

“Shut the fuck up, Mia,” he growled.

Mia laughed and stepped out of the room. I really hoped she wouldn’t tell my parents about this. Not that we were even doing anything in the first place. I didn’t want them to think anything was going on with Cole because then they probably wouldn’t let us be alone together.

I needed Cole and that wasn’t an exaggeration.
Without looking him in the eye, because my face was flaming in embarrassment, I quickly kissed his cheek and hopped off the bed. Refusing to meet his eye, I got the hell out of there as fast as I could.

Today has been rubbish.

“Are you ready, sweetheart?” Mum asked, placing a protective arm around my waist as I entered the room. I didn’t reply to her question because Dad stepped in front of me.

“Let’s get you home. School tomorrow.” He smiled and stroked his hand down the back of my head. I nodded in agreement and slipped past them both, giving a little wave to Cole’s parents as I headed to the front door.

“Thank you for tonight,” Dad said to David and Jenna politely. “You’ll have to come to ours soon.”

“You’re welcome, and you know we’d love to,” Jenna responded.

I took a deep breath and watched them exchange their goodbyes. It looked so normal, just friends thanking each other, making plans and saying goodbye.

I’m the only one who can see through the façade.

“Why does it take them ten minutes to say bye,” Jasper moaned, appearing at my side.

Where had he been? I shrugged. They would say goodbye and then start another conversation. It went on like that for a while.

“We’re leaving,” Jasper called loudly. Mum gave us a little wave of acknowledgement and went back to chatting about Dad’s business, which, judging by the recent hushed phone conversations and his stressed outbursts, I guessed was in trouble.

I walked home with Jasper. He hung back to stay at my slower pace. I could tell by the way he glanced over at me that he wanted me to hurry up, probably because he was keen to get home and play computer games.

“Shit.” Jasper cursed. “You got a key?”

I sighed in exasperation and shook my head. My key was in my school bag in Cole’s bedroom.

We both turned and looked back at Cole’s house, just as our parents were walking along the path. Mum had my school bag over her shoulder. Thank God, I didn’t have to go back and get it. I wasn’t ready to see Cole again.

Dad unlocked the door and let us in. “Make sure you do any work you missed today, Oakley,” he instructed, nodding his head towards the bag that Mum let slip off her shoulder.

I nodded and took it from her. I felt so tired from an extremely long day, and just needed to be out of the way, so I went straight to my room. Just as I snuggled under my thick puffy covers, my mobile beeped with a text message. I knew it would be from Cole. Not only was he the only person to text me apart from my parents and Jasper, but he also sent me a message every night.

My skin pebbled with goose bumps as I opened the text. It said just one word. Every night it said just one word. ‘Night x’

I hit reply and typed, ‘Goodnight x’ but I didn’t send it.
I had no clue why I was waiting for a reply from Oakley. Every night I waited, knowing full well that it would never come. Most teenage girls spent half their life and their parents’ salary texting.

Tomorrow was the last day of school. We had six weeks off, and I planned to spend them all with Oakley. There were so many things we wanted to do. She was the only person I could be with constantly and not be bored of.

Next year was my final year at Sixth Form so I really had to buckle down or I’d fail my exams. The next six weeks were literally the only time I could have fun for a whole year. If I wanted to get into a decent Uni to study engineering, and I did, I had to get A’s.

I wasn’t stupid, but I also had to work damn hard for my grades. School didn’t come naturally, mostly because it bored the shit out of me.

“Alright, loser,” Mia said, leaning against my doorframe.

“What do you want?”

She arched her eyebrow, and I knew I wouldn’t like what she was about to say. “What was going on earlier?”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t play dumb, Cole, it doesn’t suit you.” She came into my room and closed the door.

“Is there something going on between you and Oakley?”

“No,” I replied.

Not that I didn’t want it to, eventually. Things were…complicated.

“Really?”

I gave her a look.

“Don’t be like that. I’m just worried about you two.”

“Why?” What was so wrong about us being together? I hated how people saw Oakley just because she was different. Nothing between us was strained or ever felt weird because she didn’t talk. Nothing. She’d be my best friend, the person I shared things with, the one I laughed with, made plans with, whether she spoke or not.

People could piss off with their judgement.

“Because of how things are.” I gritted my teeth, and Mia noticed how much that angered me straight away. She held her hand up. “Don’t. That’s not how I meant it. I love Oakley, too, you know that. The girl is like a sister to me.”

Yeah, she’s really not to me.
“I’m talking about Max and Sarah. How they see her, treat her. I’m willing to bet a lot of money on them wanting you to be with her over everyone else on this planet, but I don’t think they’d be okay with it straight off.”

I frowned. “Why do you say that?”

“Err, well, for the how they see her thing…”

They did treat Oakley like she was made of glass. I think we were all guilty of that at some point. There had been times where she’d look so lost and I’d just want to wrap her up. I looked out for her at school constantly because I knew people gave her a hard time.

We were all protective over her. I did it because I loved her. Mia was suggesting Max and Sarah were that way because of something else, too. They thought of Oakley as a child.

Damn.

The realisation was like having a hundred cold showers all at once.

That was so not how I thought of her.

I blew out a breath and sat down on my bed.

“See why I’m worried now? I don’t want you to get hurt. I don’t want you two apart if you want to be together.”

“But you don’t think anything should happen between us until her parents realise she’s almost sixteen. She’s almost bloody legal! How can they not see that?”

“I don’t have to answer that, right, that was rhetorical?”

I scoffed. “You know it was. Look, it doesn’t matter anyway, Oakley isn’t into me like that.”

“Do you know that for sure?” She pursed her lips like she knew something I didn’t.

“Yeah, I do. Look, I don’t really know how to explain our relationship, but even if she did want something to happen it’d be wanting it for the future. I can wait.”

Her grin stretched across her whole face, and I groan. I’d just admitted that I liked Oakley. Seriously though, how could I not? She was stunning, perfect. We’d been friends since before we could walk.

It will always be her.

“I just want you to be happy, Cole. I know how much she means to you and how much you mean to her. I’d hate for anything to come between that.”

“Are you telling me you think it’d be a bad idea if we wanted more?”

“Not at all. I’m telling you if you do you need to handle it properly.”

“Well, this chat’s been nice…and a complete waste of time,” I said. “I like her, I won’t lie, but I’m happy how things are right now.”

“Then I’m happy, too.”

“Great.”

Why isn’t she leaving?

She hesitated, on the edge of what looked like was going to be a confession. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure,” I replied with a shrug.

“If another girl came along, someone you was physically attracted to…”

“Would I still go there even though I like Oakley?”

She nodded, wincing apologetically. There was more to this question.

“Now, no. I’ve liked her for a while, in the sense that I felt something would eventually happen, but I still went out with a couple of girls. But the older Oakley gets, the closer to being done with high school she gets and the more she plans for Uni and the future, the less I’ve noticed other girls. I don’t know.”

Explaining was never my strong point.

“No, I get it. An innocent friendship becoming more isn’t always an overnight thing. Plus she’s still fifteen.”

“Why ask that?”

She pursed her lips, contemplating telling me the truth. “No reason. I just wondered.”
Her dickhead ex would be the reason.
“You okay? Something on your mind?”
“Nah, I’m good. Night, idiot.”
“Night.”
She left my room, and I got undressed for bed. My phone sat on my bedside table in complete silence.
You’re stupid if you think she’s going to reply. What’s different about tonight? Nothing.
Groaning, I got into bed and forced myself to look away from my phone. I had to stop obsessing over it.
And I will.
One day.
I woke up in the morning to the sunlight streaming through the middle of my curtains and someone gently shaking my arm.

“Oakley, time to get up,” Mum whispered softly. “Are you feeling okay? I don’t normally have to wake you.”

I rubbed my eyes to try to wake myself up properly. Last day of school today. *Finally.* I pushed myself up and smiled. My head was pounding and I just wanted to stay in bed, but Dad worked from home on a Thursday and Friday, and I knew he wouldn’t be happy if I missed another day, even if this was the last one. He would complain about my grades. It wouldn’t look good for his perfect family image if his daughter’s grades were anything less than A’s.

“Okay. Well, breakfast will be ready soon. I’m making scrambled egg on toast. You need a good breakfast for your last day at school.”

She left me to get ready, and I wasted no time in packing my bag and changing into my uniform. It was far too hot for the school blazer, but the teachers didn’t seem to care about students dropping like flies in the heat. I took a deep breath before brushing my teeth. *Just this one last day to get through.*

When I got downstairs for breakfast, Cole was already sitting at the table, eating scrambled eggs. “Morning, Oaks,” he mumbled, chewing on his food. I hated my name being shortened, and he knew that. *Arse.*

I sat down next to Cole and smiled at Mum, thanking her for the breakfast she just placed in front of me. “So are you two doing anything after school?” Mum asked, grinning at us both. She has a stupid fantasy in her head where me and Cole would be together. I had the same one.

“Probably get some ice cream or something, right?” He glanced at me and shovelled another forkful of egg in his mouth. I smiled in agreement. That sounded like the perfect way to end the year, unlike some of my classmates, who would be at the park downing cider from the bottle.

“Oh, come on, we’re gonna be late,” Cole mumbled, grabbing my hand and pulling me off the stool. I gasped in surprise but didn’t pull my hand back. It felt nice.

***

We parked outside the Sixth Form building as usual. It hadn’t taken long to get to school. Unfortunately.
“Look, if anyone says anything to you today just come and find me. You know what lessons I have, and if I have a free one I’ll be in the Sixth Form block.”

The only reason I knew what lessons he had was because he constantly shoved his timetable in my face so I would know where to find him. It was sweet but completely unnecessary. I would never go running into his lesson to get him.

“You could even text me, you know. I’d come and find you straight away,” he added quietly, staring out of the window as he parked the car.

I dropped my gaze to my lap. That couldn’t happen, ever. Cole sighed and flopped back into his seat. “Okay, just come and find me then.”

I felt so horrible that I just kept staring at the floor. I hated disappointing him.

“It’s okay,” he said reassuringly. “I’ll see you later, yeah?”

Finally looking up, I nodded and smiled appreciatively. We both got out of the car and waved to each other as we went our separate ways. As always, I hugged myself and walked quickly towards my form room. One more day, that was all.

My hope for an uneventful day was nearly crushed when I saw Julian standing just ahead of me, in the middle of the corridor. He was messing around with his friends, pushing and punching each other. Thankfully, there was another way I could go so I wouldn’t have to bump into him – yet. Julian’s lip looked a little swollen and bruised, but I couldn’t see properly from standing so far away, and I certainly wasn’t going to get a closer look.

“Hi,” Hannah said from behind me, making me jump slightly. I half expected it to be Laura or one of her pathetic little friends. I smiled at Hannah, relaxing my shoulders, and we walked into registration together.

Luckily, the teacher was early today, so no one had a chance to say anything to me. The morning was going well so far, but I wasn’t naïve enough to think it would continue that way all day.

The morning went by without incident and my music teacher let us go five minutes early for lunch. I packed everything in my bag slowly so I would be the last one to leave.

“You coming to the canteen?” Hannah asked as she grabbed her bag and swung it over her shoulder. I shook my head and smiled, grateful that she had at least asked.

“Okay, see you later.” She waved over her shoulder as she walked out with her friends.

I made my way quickly along the corridor. After lunch, I only had two lessons to get through. The back corridor was deserted; everyone had already gone to the canteen or outside. Someone grabbed me from behind. I gasped, panic rose inside me. Before I even had the chance to struggle, I was pushed into a classroom.

My lungs stung where I’d held my breath. I felt like a scared little girl again. “Hey, Oakley.” I recognised his voice instantly. Julian.

I felt only a tiny bit of relief that it wasn’t him, but I still needed to get away.

Gulping, I stepped back. My hands shook with fear and my heart pounded painfully. What did he want?

“I was hoping to find you on your own,” he smirked.

I felt sick and dirty. My skin crawled. It was like a thousand bugs were running around all over my body. “Come on, don’t look so scared. I’m not gonna hurt ya.” His breath smelt so strongly of tobacco it almost made me gag.

Julian leant towards me, and I recoiled in horror. Was he trying to kiss me? “I just want to talk,” he whispered, tucking my hair behind my ear. Don’t be a victim again. Don’t ever be a victim again.

I used every ounce of anger I had built up inside and shoved his chest so hard my arms ached. He stumbled backwards and swung his arm out to steady himself. I felt like screaming, like my blood was going to boil, and my teeth would snap under the pressure of gritting them so hard.
“Why do you have to be such a little bitch, Oakley? What the hell makes you better than anyone else, huh?” He bellowed and punched the wall.

I jumped back, my eyes widening in shock. What was that? Julian looked almost out of it. His eyes were dilated, and he was breathing heavily. It wasn’t just tobacco he’d been smoking. He had to be on something else, too.

“Who the fuck do you think you are?” His lips curled, baring his teeth.

Oh God, what’s he going to do to me? Nothing. He wasn’t going to do anything. I wouldn’t let him hurt me.

The door swung open, and relief flooded me. Mrs Stains, one of the teaching assistants stood in front of me, blocking the way as I dashed towards safety. “What’s going on in here?” She demanded, frowning in anger.

Julian straightened up. “Nothing, we were just talking about a project,” he said with a cocky smirk.

“A project on the last day of school?” Mrs Stains asked, raising her eyebrows in doubt.

“Not a school one,” Julian shot back.

She shook her head but knew there was nothing she could do, even though it was clear Julian was lying. It wasn’t like I was going to speak up and tell her Julian was lying. “Out. Both of you.”

I scurried past her and ran out of the building. It seemed like all I did at school was hide out and run away. I hated myself for that, but I just couldn’t deal with it. So I did what I did best and pushed my legs faster and faster, putting as much distance between me and school as I could.

As soon as I reached the wooden shelter at the local park, I collapsed to the ground. Wrapping my arms around my legs, I started to sob. My head still hurt and I felt like crap. What the hell did I ever do that was so wrong?

I squeezed my eyes closed as I felt my phone vibrating in my pocket. It would be Cole. I really didn’t want to see him. Well, I didn’t want him to see me like this. I wished I could have been home-schooled by Mum, but she thought as long as I did well in mainstream school, then that’s where I should be.

My phone had vibrated at least ten times since I’d been sitting on the ground. A few texts and a load of missed calls. I flipped the phone open and started reading the first of Cole’s messages. ‘Hey where are you? I’m waiting near my car x.’ I sighed and scrolled down to read the next one. ‘Hurry up I’m starving! X.’ The next two were similar, but after that, he must have started to worry. ‘Oakley where are you?’ The final text message was angry as well as concerned. ‘Where the hell are you? Text me back now! I just need to know you’re okay.’

Switching the phone off, I laid down on the grass. I felt pathetic. I was pathetic. If the teacher hadn’t opened the door when she did, what would Julian have done? I didn’t believe he would physically hurt me, but I didn’t entirely trust him not to either.

“Oakley?”

I sat up and wiped my tear-stained face with my hand. How had Cole found me so quickly? I plastered on a fake smile and waited for him to appear around the corner.

Cole let out a sigh of relief when he saw me, and seeing him made me relax. I relied on him too much. It was selfish of me. My relief soured as his expression turned to anger.

“What the fuck, Oakley? Do you have any idea how worried I’ve been?” He shouted, his forehead creased in a deep frown. He looked as mad as he had been at Julian. Cole, Mum, and Jasper were the only three people in the world that I trusted entirely. My shoulders sagged.

After a few seconds of complete silence and just looking at each other, he knelt down beside me.

“What happened?” He asked softly, his voice was tight, but he was trying to be calm. I looked at him and shook my head as I swallowed the lump in my throat. I hurt to hurt him but I didn’t know how to stop.
“Nothing happened?” He asked doubtfully. Again, I shook my head. “Why didn’t you text back or wait for me before you took off like that? I was really worried about you. You don’t even seem to care!”

I flinched at his words. I did care. That was the problem. I cared about him far too much.

Cole scratched the back of his neck and groaned. “You should have at least replied. I didn’t know what’d happened to you.”

I looked away, not wanting to see the disappointment and hurt in his eyes.

“Oakley! God, you have no idea, do you?”

His sudden outburst made me jump. We had argued and annoyed each other before, but he had never been this angry. He growled and shook his head.

“Fine. Don’t worry about it. You obviously don’t give a shit about me, so just forget it. I’m done.” He stood up and quickly walked away.

I stared at his back as he left. Tears rolled down my face, dripping onto my lap. How could he think I didn’t care about him? My heart ached so much it made me feel sick.

I can’t lose him.
I stormed off, gritting my teeth and clenching my fists. She made me so damn angry. No one else could get to me the way she did. Most of the time I liked it, but today it bloody hurt.

Could she not understand how much I worried about her? I knew she was getting a hard time at school, and it killed me that I couldn’t do much about it. How could she ignore me and push me away when she knew how much it scared me when she took off like that?

She wasn’t selfish, I knew that, but sometimes it seemed like it. I had to keep reminding myself that there was something bigger going on.

There was no way I was going back to afternoon classes now. I was too worked up and wouldn’t be able to concentrate. Nothing would be done on the last day anyway; I wouldn’t miss a thing.

I stomped back to school, breathing heavily through my nose.

Ben leant against my car, doing something on his phone. He looked up as I got closer and pushed off. “What’s going on, man? You took off without a word.”

Yeah, that was a mistake. She doesn’t care.

“Nothin’,” I growled.

“Whoa,” he said, holding his hands up in surrender. “I was only askin’.”

“I know. Sorry.”

“Oakley?” he asked, lifting his jet-black eyebrow. When I didn’t answer, he nodded.

“Alright, what happened? Is she okay?”

“Who knows. She won’t tell me.”

“You guys have this telepathic things goin’ on, don’t ya?”

I gave him a look. “What?”

“You know what I mean. You get her, what she means when she doesn’t talk and all that.”

“Yeah, but usually I have something to go on. Right now she’s just pushing me away. I hate it, man. I know something happened at school today but she won’t admit it.”

Sometimes I felt so hopeless when it came to her. She was my best friend and she wasn’t happy. No one wanted to stop talking; no one wanted to have a shit time at school, no one wanted to lock out the people closest to them.

*Why won’t she just tell me what’s wrong?*

I’d told her a million times before that whatever it was I’d be there, help her, but that didn’t change her decision to keep it in.

Groaning, I closed my eyes.

Even if it wasn’t a decision, if she physically couldn’t talk, she could at least admit it.

“It’ll be cool, mate. You’ve fallen out before, right?”
“Kind of. I’ve never told her I’m done before,” I admitted, wincing. What the hell was wrong with me? I’d never be done.

His eyes widened in surprise. Yeah, the whole time I’d known Ben I’d always been fiercely protective of Oakley, so of course me telling him I was done with her was a shock.

“You don’t mean that.”

I scrubbed my eyes. “Yeah, I know that.”

She might not.

What the hell have I done?

“So…maybe you should be off tellin’ her…”

“I need to go home,” I said, digging in my jeans pocket for my keys.

“She at yours?”

“No.”

“You’re not going to fix it?” He looked at me with judgemental eyes.

“Don’t, Ben. You’ve got no idea what it’s like so just don’t.”

“Right,” he said, backing up. “Don’t want to watch you make a huge mistake, but it’s your life to screw up…”

“Thanks,” I muttered sarcastically.

“Welcome.” He dipped his head. “Later, man.”

“Yeah,” I said, getting in my car.

I drove home the long way so I wouldn’t go past the park. I wasn’t in the mood to see her right now. It killed that she didn’t care if I was worried and out searching for her or not! I’d hate to put her through that.

No one was in when I got back and they wouldn’t be until after five. I wanted to head straight for my parents’ alcohol cupboard, but I knew booze wasn’t the answer. I didn’t fancy being cut up over Oakley and have a hangover.

Angrily lobbing my bag on the floor, I gripped my hair and flopped onto the sofa. If I could just figure out what was wrong then we wouldn’t have to do crap like this. She didn’t want me or anyone else to know. I didn’t like that.

The stuff people covered were usually the worst things about themselves.

What happened to you?!

Over the years I’d become a master at getting on with it, at giving Oakley the space she needed to come to me in her own time. Maybe that was wrong. Maybe I’d taken the wrong approach.

I knew that women were supposed to be inherently complicated, but Oakley put a new definition to the meaning. I rubbed the ache in my chest that she’d created.

It was only when Mia got home that I stopped moping about. I didn’t have the energy for a full on heart to heart with her. She walked into the kitchen and headed straight for the wine in the fridge.

Her day was about as good as mine then.

“What’s up with you?” I asked.

“Ugh, nothing I want to discuss.”

That meant Chris-the-dick had done something or someone.

“What about you? Why do you look like someone’s just kicked your puppy?”

“It’s nothing I want to discuss.”

She smirked as she unscrewed the lid. “Touché. Well, how do you feel about drowning our sorrows?”

“I think Mum and Dad will have something to say about that when they get in.”

Turning her nose up, she made a disgusted sound. “You’re right, and I really don’t need the third degree from them.” Filling a large glass with white wine, she sat opposite me in the kitchen.

“Question for you: Why does life insist on throwing so much at you?”

I shrugged.
“There has to be an easier way.”

“Are we talking about Chris here? The guy is just a bellend, Mia.”

She froze mid sip and glared. “It’s not just him though, is it?”

“Are you asking me why you’re not strong enough to walk away?”

“Before you make me answer that you need to ask yourself why you’re sitting here looking like that over Oakley again.”

Yeah, it wasn’t the first time Oakley had unintentionally hurt me. Actually, it happened a lot, I just rarely let her know it. She didn’t mean to cause anyone any pain, so I couldn’t blame her for how I felt.

“It’s not the same,” I said defensively.

“The situation maybe.”

Translation: Love sucks.

Yeah, don’t I know that.

“Right. I get it,” I said. “What do we do?”

“You won’t like the answer.”

“Tell me anyway.”

“We just get on with it the best we can. We fight to be better people, more understanding, stronger. Ultimately, we’ve just got to ride it out until we’re willing to change, and we’ve got to be okay with not being perfect human beings who’re fully in control of their life…despite what their stupid heart wants.”

“Yeah, you’re right, I don’t like that.”

“And that, my little brother, is why they make alcohol.”

Laughing, I shake my head on the way to the fridge.

Mia’s right. Beer it is.

Tomorrow, when I’d cooled down, I’d work on getting my best friend back, but right now I needed to relax and forget my problems with my sister. And alcohol.
At least if Cole stayed away, he wouldn’t get any more comments about him babysitting the ‘mute freak’. He had never cared what people thought of him, at least that’s what he told me, but it must have gotten to him occasionally.

He was done.

I shouldn’t have ever let myself like him as anything more than a friend. We were never going to be anything more. How could we? I couldn’t even talk to him! There were times when he would give me a lingering look that I thought he might like me a little bit. I was sure I wasn’t imagining it, but it was hard for me to believe he’d want me.

For the rest of the day, I did nothing but sit inside the shack at the park and stare into space. After a while, I didn’t even think about anything, I just existed. As I saw and heard students walk past the park on their way home from school though, I knew I needed to pull myself together and get home.

Walking slowly, I headed home, looking down at the ground to protect my eyes from the sun. Would Mum and Dad still be there? They were attending a charity dinner and had to travel just over a hundred miles, so they were leaving sometime in the afternoon. I prayed that they would have already left.

Sighing in relief as I noticed Dad’s car wasn’t in the driveway, I walked to the front door feeling a little lighter. At least I wouldn’t have their freak out to deal with.

When I pushed the door open, I saw my lazy brother sitting on the sofa playing the PlayStation. His University had finished for summer earlier than my high school, so his summer holiday started weeks ago. One day he would have to grow up and get a house and job, but it was hard to imagine it after seeing him slob around here all the time.

“Hey,” he grunted with a little nod of his head, not even looking up from the screen. I flopped down on the sofa beside him. School was over for six weeks, but I couldn’t even feel that happy about it. All I could think of was the fight with Cole and that look on his face.

Jasper took a double take of my face and paused his game.

“What happened?” I smiled and shook my head.

“Where’s Cole?” Jasper’s face hardened, his jaw clenched and eyes narrowed. “What did he do?” He demanded. Again, I shook my head and tried to make out he was reacting over nothing. “So, if Cole’s not the reason you’re upset, who is?” Jasper asked, frowning doubtfully. Cole was the reason, but it wasn’t his fault. “That idiot at school? The one I beat up last year?” He growled, referring to Julian. Jasper was usually as soft as a pussycat but not when it came to me. He was overprotective and quick to lash out at anyone he thought was giving me a hard time.
I remembered the incident Jasper was referring to. How could I not? Jasper was still in Sixth Form. He had caught Julian saying some stuff about me. I still didn’t know what, but it made Jasper punch him a few times. He was suspended from Sixth Form for a week and then given a week of lunchtime detentions for refusing to apologise to Julian.

It would seem Cole had fully taken over his role… as a brother? Did Cole see me as a little sister? I ached with disappointment.

I shook my head in answer to Jasper’s question, and he got up and walked into the kitchen. There was no way he had dropped it just like that. I followed him, waiting at the door as he got his phone and started dialling. Oh, no! I knew what he was doing. As he raised the phone to his ear, I leapt forward and grabbed it out of his hand. He’d started ringing Cole, but the call hadn’t started going through, thankfully.

He narrowed his eyes. “Okay, I’m gonna ask you one more time. Was. It. Cole?”

I sighed in frustration and shook my head for what seemed like the fifteenth time.

“Good. You’re not gonna tell me what it’s about, are you?”

I raised an eyebrow and let out an exasperated noise.

“Yes, didn’t think so, you’re too damn stubborn for your own good! You’re okay though, right?”

I nodded and smiled. Settling on changing the subject and getting my annoying and crazy brother back, I opened the fridge and grabbed two cans of Coke and threw one at him.

“Thanks,” he mumbled, aware that I was trying to end the conversation and opened the can very carefully in case it exploded all over him. It did not, unfortunately.

“Mum and Dad left for that thing already. You’ll need to cook tonight.” He looked away, downing probably half the can at once. I knew exactly what that meant. Mum told him to cook and he was trying to get out of it.

“What’re you making?” Jasper asked casually, glancing at the oven. I rolled my eyes, picked out two Hawaiian pizzas from the freezer, and threw them at him before walking upstairs.

“As Oakley?” He shouted after me, but I kept on walking, smiling to myself. He was so lazy. Christ, all he had to do was stick them in the oven for eighteen minutes.

As soon as I closed my bedroom door, I practically ripped off my school uniform and chucked it in my washing basket angrily. I hated school, I hated Julian, but most of all, I hated myself.

From our fight earlier, it was clear Cole and I were not going to go out for ice cream, so I got into my most comfortable pyjamas and prepared for a night of boring TV. I should practice gymnastics, but I couldn’t be bothered to do anything. I was just going to embrace the mood I was in and sulk.

Marcus, my gym coach, would not be happy if I hadn’t perfected the routine by next practice. I didn’t care, though. I hated the thought of moving and going out to the garden. I had been going to gymnastics since I was seven and I loved it. Whenever I was there it took me away from reality. I didn’t think about anything or anyone. It was as if all of my problems disappeared.

I was just Oakley. I was normal.

Lying back on my bed, I absentmindedly flicked through the TV channels and settled on watching yesterday’s *Hollyoaks*. Twenty minutes later, I heard Jasper stomping up the stairs. He pushed my door open.

“Dinner! Come and get it, I’m not waiting on your arse!”

I followed him downstairs to get my, probably burnt, pizza.

“Ta da,” he said, gesturing to dinner. He hadn’t done too badly. Only the crust was a little darker than it should have been. I did turn my nose up as Jasper squirted mayonnaise all over his food, though. The only thing that belonged with pizza was ketchup.

“I spoke to Cole,” he muttered, chewing his food and giving me a good view of the mashed up pizza in his mouth. Nice. I looked down at the table and just nodded in response. “You left school because of Julian, didn’t you?”
That made me look up at him. Was he just guessing or had Cole said that? Did Cole confront Julian? Oh no.

“Just tell me,” he demanded, sounding frustrated. “Was it Julian, Oakley?”

I nodded, feeling defeated. He was going to find out anyway. Jasper jumped up, balling his hands into fists. “Little twat faced bastard. I’m gonna kill him!”

Dropping my pizza, I grabbed his arm and shook my head. What was it with the killing Julian thing? Cole and Jasper were both acting like they were in an action movie.

Jasper sighed and sat back down when he saw how worried I was. I’d had enough of it all. It was the holidays anyway, so it didn’t matter any more.

“Fine. But I swear if he comes near you again I will kill him.”

I ignored that, it wasn’t worth arguing over.

“So…is Cole coming over tonight?” He asked, trying to act casual. I could tell he was dying to know what had happened between us.

I stood up and grabbed my plate, deciding to eat in my room since Dad wasn’t here. I didn’t want to have the Cole conversation with Jasper. Or anyone for that matter. After eating, I snuck downstairs, put my plate in the dishwasher and snuck back upstairs.

Half past eight was too early to go to bed, but I didn’t want to go downstairs again and risk Jasper’s questions, so I put on a film and curled up under the covers. Cole popped into my mind about every three bloody seconds, making it hard to concentrate on anything.

I should go over there, get on my knees and plead with him to forgive me, but I was too stubborn and too scared. Cole deserved so much better and I was selfish to keep him from finding new people that he could have a normal friendship with. Letting him go seemed impossible. I didn’t know how to.

Half an hour later, I was finally feeling tired. It was still relatively early, but emotionally, I was done. It didn’t take long for me to fall into a restless sleep.
Oakley

Jasper woke me up by knocking on my door and screaming my name.

“Oakley! Get up, we’re going to Cole’s for lunch,” he yelled, much louder than necessary.

Going to Cole’s for lunch? No.

And how long had I slept for?

I got out of bed, ran to the door and pulled it open, frowning at Jasper for an explanation.

“We’re booking the holiday today, remember, so we’re all going over there for a barbecue lunch.” Barbecue again? “Get dressed. We’re leaving in half an hour.”

My heart sank. I half-smiled at my brother and slammed the door shut behind him. Lunch at Cole’s. That was going to be awkward.

There was no way I could get out of it though, not without letting my parents know something was wrong.

I didn’t bother with a shower as I didn’t have the energy to rush getting ready. Putting on shorts and a plain t-shirt, I brushed my hair and then I was done. I looked about as plain as I felt.

Five minutes later, when I was ready, I sat on my bed and waited for someone to call me down.

After twenty minutes, the inevitable happened – Mum shouted my name.

My heart dropped a little more. I was so nervous to see Cole again. He was mad at me, probably still would be, and I wasn’t sure how to fix it. Or if he even wanted to.

“You look nice, honey,” Mum complimented with a smile. I really didn’t.

Slipping on my yellow pumps I followed my family to Cole’s.

Jasper knocked eagerly at their front door, and within seconds, Jenna greeted us with a hug and then ushered us through their perfectly kept house to the back garden. I took every step slowly, delaying the inevitable.

When I got out in the garden my eyes immediately seek Cole out. He was sat at the end of the wooden table, staring into his glass of Coke. He looked sad, really, really sad. As we approached the table, he looked up and said a quick hello.

Where do I sit now? Next to him, in my usual seat, seemed too awkward now. I sat next to Mia, forcing Jasper to sit near Cole. It felt wrong but I picked up the Italy travel brochure that was in front of me to make it look like I just sat here to look at that. I hated having to calculate things in order for everything to look as normal as possible.

Nothing was bloody normal here.

Mia looked over my shoulder at the hotel we were staying in. Wow, was all I could think. It looked amazing. The hotel was a beautiful white building, halfway up a mountain. It didn’t look too busy but seemed to have enough to keep everyone entertained. According to the brochure, the
harbour was a two-minute walk away and the beach a little further, approximately twenty minutes.

The nightlife was good, apparently. There were a few bars and clubs nearby. Mia and Jasper would want to go out, no doubt. Perhaps I would be allowed to go. I was almost sixteen and if I was with Cole they’d let me go. Maybe.

I felt Cole’s eyes on me the entire time. I squirmed at the attention, glanced to the side and gave him an apologetic smile. He smiled back, eyes full of regret. Was he forgiving me? Just as I thought he was about to talk to me, David placed a plate of charred chicken kebabs down on the table, which Cole immediately grabbed and started to eat.

*Please, talk to me.*

Throughout lunch, Cole and I exchanged glances but he never uttered one word. Of course it wasn’t long before Mum noticed something was wrong between us. She looked at me, then Cole, and then back to me. I prayed that she wouldn’t say anything. Faking sickness and going home sounded like a very good idea right now.

“Oakley?” Cole said as he stood up. He nodded, gesturing for me to follow him. I got up immediately and followed him inside. He had made the first move, so there was no way I was passing up the chance to make things right again. The walk up to his room was completely silent. Cole said nothing. I hoped that he would talk when we were safely inside his room and out of the way of everyone else.

Sitting on the end of his bed, I hugged my legs and rested my chin on my knees. He sighed and sat down, facing me. The sun reflected off his face, lightening his deep blue eyes. The smell of his aftershave wrapped around me, and I relaxed. In that moment, I knew I one hundred per cent that couldn’t be without him. I had to make up for our fallout and get my best friend back.

Not having Cole in my life wasn’t an option.

He groaned as he stared into my eyes, making me feel weightless. It was like he could see right through me; see the terrified, broken little girl lurking inside. I never, ever wanted him to see that.

“Look, I’m sorry about yesterday. I shouldn’t have shouted at you, but you should’ve text me to let me know you’re okay.” I nodded and looked down at the bed cover.

“I wish I could.”

“Oakley,” he whispered, gently lifting my chin so I faced him. His fingers lingered on my chin, making my heart race. The feeling of his skin on mine felt so right it stole my breath.

My eyes filled with tears and I smiled. I had him back. Grabbing his hand, I squeezed gently in way of an apology. What happened yesterday wasn’t his fault at all. Cole had nothing to apologise for. His face lit up as he smiled.

“It’s okay,” he told me, knowing exactly what that gesture meant. Suddenly, he pulled my hand, making me fall forward. I tried to move back, but he pulled me into a tight hug. It was a little awkward as I was sitting on his lap. It was too intimate, and I wasn’t used to intimacy feeling natural and safe.

I wanted to run, but at the same time, I never wanted to leave.

Winding my arms around his neck, I ignored the tense knot in my stomach. With every passing second, I felt more and more at home. Cole would never hurt me. I knew that.

We stayed in each other’s arms for a few minutes, and I loved it. His fingertips gently tickled up and down my back. Eventually, we both pulled away and he seemed as reluctant as I was to let go.

My feelings for him grew at an alarming rate every day.

“We don’t fight again. Ever again, okay?” he said seriously, holding both my hands and playing with my fingers. I nodded in agreement. That was the easiest thing I had ever agreed to.

He smiled again, flashing his perfect white teeth.

“Good. So two weeks in Italy, hey? We have to do some water sports and hire a boat.”

I raised my eyebrow, making him laugh and shake his head. Hire a boat? Neither of us could sail, and there was no way the first time we tried was going to be alone in a foreign country.
“I guess you’re gonna go all girly on me and want to sunbathe?” I nodded and smirked. I was pasty white and definitely wanted to get a tan, even an off white would be cool with me!

“Fine, I’ll make you a deal. I’ll suffer through that if you go diving with me?”

He had been trying to get me to go diving for years, but I hated the idea of it. I’m not a fan of fish and everything in the sea was all slimy, and the sea itself was full of sewage. I bit my lip, shaking my head and trying not to smile. The deal didn’t matter. He would sunbathe with me anyway. He always did.

Cole sighed sharply, pretending to be annoyed. “Fine, but two days sunbathing max, and you have to buy the ice creams.” I pursed my lips and nodded. That part also didn’t matter because as soon as we were there he would go all gentlemen and insist on paying.

He lay down and pulled me with him. I almost landed on top of him but managed to move to the side just in time. As natural as it felt when we were close I was still trying to accept that it was okay to feel like that. We were side-by-side, hand-in-hand, both staring up to the ceiling, and I was right where I needed to be.

“We have to get your parents to let you go out at night this time,” he said after a couple minutes of comfortable silence. That was another thing I loved about him – he was always on the same page as me.

I turned my head to face him, chewing my lip as I nodded. The last time we were away, I had to be back at the hotel by nine and hang out there for the rest of the evening. We needed to think of some way of convincing my parents that I was more responsible now that I was almost sixteen.

Cole sucked in air harshly and his eyes lit on fire. He stared at me like I was something amazing he’d never bloody seen before. Then suddenly, the air in the room thickened to the point that I had a hard time breathing. Cole’s head inched closer to mine. I froze. Oh God, he’s going to kiss me.

“We’ll talk to them about it later,” he whispered and inched even closer.

“Cole? Oakley?” Mia shouted up the stairs.

Cole whipped his head around. “What?” He growled towards the door. I sat up and put some distance between us. That was the second time she had interrupted… something in two days. Mia walked in seconds later and smiled widely. Her blue eyes shone with mischief.

She tucked her brown hair behind her ears. “We go in two weeks! Oakley, I’m holiday shopping Monday if you wanted to come?”

I nodded and smiled gratefully. I definitely needed to get some new clothes.

“I’m comin’,” Cole mumbled, still frowning at his sister. Did he really want to kiss me as much as I wanted to kiss him? It certainly seemed like he did but I never wanted to get my hopes up when it came to him.

It probably wasn’t a good idea anyway. If we got together it wouldn’t work. It couldn’t. In time, my silence would drive him away.

Mia’s mouth hung open in shock. “You want to come shopping?”

“I need to get some stuff, too, but I’m not walking around every damn shop with you two. I’ll go off on my own.”

I rolled my eyes and sat back against the wall.

“Alright, but we’re gonna be out all day.”

He shrugged, “Yeah, whatever.”

Mia clapped her hands together in excitement, “I need to go and make a list!” She squealed and ran out of the room, slamming the door behind her. Mia was organised. She had lists for absolutely everything and had yet to forget a single thing.

“How the hell are we related?” He mumbled to himself, shaking his head at the door in disbelief. He really was in a mood. “So you gonna buy a tiny bikini?”

I frowned. No, definitely not.
“I was joking!” He laughed, and I smiled at him, trying to make out that his comment hadn’t affected me. There was absolutely no way that I was showing off more than I needed to.

Cole sat up against the wall next to me. His side pressed against mine as he reached over and grabbed the TV remote. My heart swelled as he pressed play on *Hollyoaks*. He’d still recorded it after our argument.

He was, without a doubt, the sweetest guy in the world, and I was *so* lucky to have him in my life. I laid my head on his shoulder and held onto his hand as we watched the show together.

“Well, that was shit,” Cole mumbled under his breath as it finished. He quickly changed the channel to some bike racing rubbish, and I smiled to myself. He always said something like that when it finished, although he had spent the whole time staring intently at the TV and commenting on everything.

To stop the boredom kicking in from the bikes zooming around in a circle, I grabbed Cole’s iPhone and started playing with one of the games I’d downloaded. My phone was old and crappy because I never used it so it didn’t matter. I had never sent a text message or made a call. The only reason I had a phone was because Mum bought it for me and insisted I used it for emergencies.

Mum got it when I was eleven. The phone had sat in my bag through two years of *emergencies* before it was over.

After a few minutes of Cole stealing little glances at me, he turned his attention back to the TV. Something between us was changing and it made me nervous and scared and excited all at the same time.

“Do you still want to go to Ben’s party?” He asked after a while. “We should leave soon if you do.”

I’d forgotten all about Ben’s party. I kind of did want to go, but I had to get my parents’ permission first. Biting my lip, I nodded.

“I’ll go speak to your dad.”

He leapt off the bed and bounded out of his room. I smiled and lay back, mentally planning what I should wear. Wow, I never thought I’d be one of those girls who planned what to wear at a party.

Things really had changed. I prayed for it to continue.
“Cinderella, you shall go to the ball,” Cole announced, doing a little bow from his doorway. I jumped up in excitement, making Cole laugh. “I’ll change quickly then we can drop by yours so you can get ready.” He pulled his top over his head.

*What the...* My head pricked with heat and I was sure my cheeks were red.

Cole didn’t even seem to notice my discomfort. He continued to change as if I was one of the guys. I didn’t know where to look. What were the rules? I mean, I’d seen him at the beach and swimming pool, but this was much more intimate than that.

*Oh bugger, get a grip!*

I gulped when I heard something heavier than a t-shirt dropping to the floor. His denim shorts? Was he only in his boxers right now? I felt like I should leave, but Cole was between the door and me.

I focused on the floor and kept perfectly still, reminding myself to bloody breathe.

When I heard him pick up his keys, I decided it must be safe to look up.

“Ready then?” He asked, swinging his keys on his finger. I didn’t acknowledge the question; I just walked past him. That was awkward... for me at least.

We made our way downstairs and found our parents in the kitchen, drinking coffee around the island. “We’re going now,” Cole told them.

“Okay. You both have a good time. Cole, please look after her and make sure she’s home by eleven,” Dad said, kissing my forehead. Eleven? I usually had to be home a lot earlier than that. What had gotten into him?

I looked up with my mouth hanging open. He chuckled deeply and ruffled my hair. “School holidays now. I guess I have to face up to the fact that you’re not my little girl anymore.”

His frown deepened towards the end of his little speech. It made me feel uncomfortable, and I wrapped my arms around myself.

“You stay with Cole the whole time and absolutely no alcohol.” Dad’s voice was stern, intimidating. I quickly nodded in agreement and pulled on Cole’s arm to get him to leave.

Just as we reached the front door, Jasper’s hand flew out in front of us. “And where do you think you’re going?” He questioned, raising his eyebrows challengingly.

“We’re eloping to Mexico,” Cole muttered sarcastically, making me grin in amusement.

Jasper glared at Cole blankly. “If you get her pregnant I will kill you!”

*What! Where on earth did that come from?*

Cole laughed and shook his head while I just wanted the ground to open up and swallow me whole.

“What’s wrong with you, Jasper? Of course, I’m not gonna knock her up!”
“You’d better not,” Jasper grumbled. “Look, if you two wanna start with the kissing and naked time, I get it and I support you, just don’t hurt her.”

I pushed past my idiot brother and jogged to Cole’s car. Going to a party was the last thing I wanted to do now. Jasper had made me feel horrible and Cole’s reaction, as if having a child with me was the most disgusting idea, didn’t help. Obviously I didn’t want a baby now, or ever actually, but it still stung.

“Good. Now…don’t have her out too late, and for God’s sake, wear a condom!” I heard Jasper yell after Cole.

Closing my eyes, I wished the ground to open up and swallow me whole. I couldn’t stay around while they joked about that stuff. I got in Cole’s car and waited for him.

Cole hopped in the car and started the engine.

“Are you okay? Ignore your brother, he’s an idiot.”

I knew he was – everyone knew Jasper was a man-child – but I wished he wouldn’t joke about things like that. I nodded, smiled and let it go. Tonight I was going to a party and I was determined to enjoy it.

Cole drove forward and stopped at my house. Smirking at how lazy he was for driving one house over, I opened my door. We really could have walked. He waited in the car while I legged it inside and took the wooden stairs two at a time. Potentially dangerous if I’d been wearing socks.

As soon as I was in my room, I stripped out of my clothes and grabbed a pair of jeans and a nice top. I wondered that since Dad had accepted I was growing up if he would let me wear make-up. I wanted to wear it, to look older, or at least my own age. I didn’t want to be seen as a child ever again.

“Oakley,” Cole shouted up the stairs, making me jump. Seriously, I’d only been two minutes. I grabbed a light jacket in case it got cold later and dashed back downstairs.

I raised my eyebrows at him and he grinned. “Got bored,” he explained. I’d changed quicker than he did, or maybe it only felt like that because he’d been undressing in front of me.

Ben lived a few miles from us so we arrived at his house in five minutes. Loud music blasted from what I assumed were huge speakers inside. Outside looked like a car park for extremely bad drivers. Not one car was straight. Dad would make some joke and call them all ‘imbeciles’. Cole parked as best he could, adding to the abandoned feel of Ben’s massive driveway.

“Ready?” Cole asked, sensing my hesitation.

Most teens don’t think twice about going out all the time and attending every party they could. To me, it was a huge deal. I felt like my nerves were choking me.

Gulping the worry away, I turned to Cole and smiled.

“Alright, let’s go, beautiful,” he said, giving me a wink, which made me swoon.

Walking side-by-side towards the door, Cole slung his arm over my shoulder. There were so many people crammed into the house; most of them were drinking in the lounge. Empty plastic cups and crumbled pieces of food were already scattered all over the floor. His parents were going to freak.

Cole pulled me through the crowd, saying hello as we walked past some of his friends, and into the kitchen. No one really gave me a second look. I loved that. Being accepted didn’t bother me, I didn’t crave being liked, but I did want to live my life without people being twats.

“Coleeee,” Ben shouted, throwing his hands up in the air. “Hey, Oakley, you came, too.”

Ben almost stumbled on the spot but managed to grab onto the worktop to stop himself from falling. Looks like he got a head start on the drinking. “Get yourselves some punch or beer or punch and I think there’s some JD left. I think I drank it, though. I dunno,” he rambled, shrugging his shoulders and chuckling.

“Okay, man.” Cole laughed at his highly intoxicated friend, tightened his arm around me and guided me to the fridge. He grabbed two Cokes and handed me one. He wasn’t going to have a
beer? Before the fridge door closed, I pointed to the bottles of Becks at the bottom. He shook his head.

“I have something very special to chauffeur home later.”

I rolled my eyes at him. That was plain cheesy, and I couldn’t deny that I loved it a lot. He winked and turned his attention to his friends as they’d started to talk to him. Sipping my coke, I watched Cole joking and messing around with his friends. It was really nice seeing him play fight with Ben and tease Kerry about her awful luck with men.

However, as I watched Cole wrap his arm around Ben’s neck, I couldn’t help feeling a little burn of envy. We’d never be able to have the fun banter they did. That’d been taken away from me and it made me burn with anger I could never show.

“Want to dance?” He asked casually, once he had gotten back to his feet after wrestling Ben to the beer-stained floor. Yuk.

As if I’d ever say no to that.

We had danced together plenty of times before so I didn’t overanalyse the gesture. Well, I did but not as much as usual. Throwing my empty can in the bin, which was much more than everyone else was bothering to do, I tilted my head towards the makeshift dance floor in the living room.

I held onto Cole’s hand tightly and pressed myself into his back as we pushed our way through the crowd. How did Ben even know this many people? He must have just put an open invitation on Facebook because there must be more people here than in the entire bloody school.

No one seemed to even notice that Cole’s mute, freak friend had come along with him, or they didn’t care. Good. Tonight I really was normal. Cole, the party, the lack of bitchiness made me dizzy in the best possible way. I’d never felt so...light before.

Cole finally stopped in a tiny bit of space near one of the speakers. I don’t think he could have found a worse spot to dance. There was barely room for one person and it was so loud. But none of that mattered when he pulled me close. I mean, he didn’t have much choice since there was only about enough room here for a toddler, but I’d take it. My chest was pressed flat against his, but I still felt comfortable. With my confidence soaring for the first time in forever, I wrapped my arms around his neck, and when he didn’t push me away, I smiled.

The song changed to Beyoncé’s Halo. It was one of my favourite songs and reminded me so much of my relationship with Cole. At lot of songs did actually but Halo was beautiful and said everything I wanted to say to him for me. If it wasn’t for Cole, I honestly didn’t know what I would be like or how I would’ve coped. Without him even knowing it, he kept my world from crumbling apart.

Slowly, he bent his head and pressed his forehead to mine. Like every clichéd romance movie, everyone but us seemed to disappear. I wanted him to kiss me so much I thought it’d drive me insane. All my insecurities of not being good enough for him vanished as his lips parted, just inches from mine.

After what felt like years, his lips brushed lightly against mine. They were soft and firm and set my body on fire. It was the most incredible and almost overwhelming feeling that had my fingers curl around his hair. His lips moved perfectly with mine, pulling, teasing.

He groaned and gripped my hips, holding me against him tightly. Then he was suddenly gone. He ripped back as if I’d burned him. Had I done something wrong? I followed where he was looking. A crowd had gathered around the stereo, which was now silent. Okay, the music was off.

Biting my lip, I forced myself to be brave and look up at Cole. He was glaring at the stereo as if he wanted to murder it, which made me feel a whole lot better about the abrupt end to the kiss.

“Wanna go outside for a bit?” He asked, nodding his head towards the door. His jaw was tight and his voice full of grit. I started following since he didn’t wait for me to agree.

Okay, act normal. This is Cole.
Ben’s front garden was trashed, too. The grass was littered with crisp packets, bottles, cans of alcohol and plastic cups. It looked like a rubbish tip. Spotting about the only clean space on the floor, I sat down cross-legged and waited for whatever was to come next. Cole lay on his side in front of me, with his head perched on his hand. He didn’t say a single thing. Usually that would be fine, but this was a different kind of silence.

I picked at the blades of grass to have something else to focus on. The awkwardness that fell over us was unbearable. The kiss meant so much to me, but it wasn’t as important as having him in my life.

Recently, it seemed like every now and then he wanted more, and other times like he was happy to be friends. I didn’t understand why so many girls gushed about liking someone; it was plain hard work. Lying down beside him, I bit my lip.

“I can’t wait to go on holiday with you.”

He wasn’t getting any arguments from me. Spending the whole two weeks with him would be perfect.

“You want to go back inside and get another drink?” He asked, after a few more minutes. Things between us were completely back to normal, although the kiss conversation seemed to be a do-not-go-there topic. I nodded and stood up. I’d come for a high school party experience so I should get in and enjoy it.

“Cole!” Ben shrieked, stumbling towards us as we walked back inside. He must have sobered up slightly because he was steadier on his feet, but the lopsided smile and glazed over eyes showed he should give driving a miss tomorrow. “Wanna do shots, guys?”

I really don’t. I’d only ever had a little wine before with dinner so I’d probably be off my face on one shot. If I went home like that my dad would never let me out again. I couldn’t be locked inside the house.

“I told you I wasn’t drinking,” Cole responded, playfully punching Ben’s arm.

“Sheezy,” Ben muttered, laughing as he dodged another swing from Cole.

We followed Ben back to the kitchen and Cole got all three of us a Coke, saying Ben needed to sober up, ready to clean before his parents arrived home. A red can flew towards me and I only just managed to catch it before it hit my stomach.

Rolling my eyes at Cole, I held the can upright and gave it a few minutes before opening it. I didn’t need the embarrassment of having Coke explode in my face. Cole chuckled and shook his head. Suddenly, he grabbed me around my waist and turned me so he could rest his chin on my shoulder.

After only a few seconds of having Cole’s arms wrapped around me, one of his friends pulled me away. What’s her problem?

“I’m Kerry,” she announced. “I’ve been waiting for Cole to introduce us, but he’s clearly trying to keep you all to himself.”

She held her hand out and we shook. I instantly liked her because she was accepting and seemed non judgemental.

I smiled at her, and that was it. Kerry launched into telling me stories of Cole and Ben doing stupid dares at school and we were insta-friends.

Kerry was a lot of fun. She had a happy personality was infectious. It was impossible not to like her. She spoke to me as if we had been friends for years. There were never any awkward
questions about why I didn’t talk and she didn’t try to find out what was wrong. She just accepted
who I was and got on with it.

She spoke a lot, but that was actually perfect. We balanced each other out, and I really hoped
that she wasn’t just being polite to me because having a girl friend was lovely.

About every five seconds, Kerry’s eyes would flick to Ben, and when she saw some girl
called Mary on his lap, she frowned so slightly that I almost missed it. Over the years, I had
gotten used to reading people’s expressions more than most.

Once Kerry’s attention was back on me, I raised my eyebrow. She blushed, knowing that I’d
captured her staring. She definitely liked Ben and from the hungry way he watched her when she
wasn’t looking he clearly liked her.

“I’ll get us another drink,” she muttered, turning and rushing towards the fridge. I didn’t
expect her to be shy about something like that. The girl was outgoing to the point I envied her.
She was beautiful with long, chocolate hair and very dark green eyes and she had the best
personality. What did she have to be shy about?

I caught Cole’s attention, looked between Kerry and Ben and grinned wickedly.

“You want to play cupid?” He pulled me back into his arms where, as dramatic as it
sounded, I wanted to die. “Good luck with that. You’ve got to get Mary off him first, and she’s
like a fucking praying mantis.”

“Wanna go for a walk, Oakley?” Kerry asked, already grabbing my hand and pulling me
away from Cole. Seriously, again?

I followed her out to the back garden and we sat down on a bench. No one else was out the
back. It was quite big but full of children’s ride-on bikes, games, and toys. It looked like Toys R
Us had been dumped in the garden.

At first I sat a little stiffly, playing with my fingers because I felt awkward being completely
alone with her for the first time. I didn’t trust easily and I only trusted three people. “Okay, so I
really, really like Ben. He’s just so…” she trailed off, sighing. “So sweet, funny, amazing, caring,
generous and so gorgeous. I mean, that dark skin, those black eyes, full lips, washboard abs…”

Her dark eyes lit up as she spoke about him. It was probably how I looked whenever I
thought about Cole.

“I know I should tell him but I can’t. I mean, what if he’s not interested? It would be so
unbelievably embarrassing if he turned me down. We’re friends. I don’t want to mess that up but
darn it, I want more. I should just do it though, right? Oh, maybe I can down a few shots and
kiss him! That way if he pushes me off I can just blame it on the drink.”

That didn’t sound like a winning plan to me but I was hardly qualified in the boy area.

Kerry obviously didn’t share my reservations because she was all toothy smiles and
bouncing up and down. I couldn’t imagine Ben not being interested in her but she was probably
going about it in the wrong way.

“Okay, so before we go back inside and I can get started on Operation Kiss Ben, we should
talk about you and Cole. I can never tell, you seem like you are but he’s never admitted it… Are
you two together?”

My cheeks burned as I shook my head. We really did not need to talk about me and Cole.

“But you want to be. I can see how you two look at each other. Seriously, Oakley, he talks
about you all the time. It’s so cute. You want to be with him, right?”

He talked about me all the time? All the time? That must mean he liked me a little bit. You
didn’t think about just anyone all the time.

“Oakley?” Kerry looked at me expectantly, waiting for an answer. I gave a little nod of my
head, confirming that, of course, I did like Cole.

She squealed and grabbed my hand, pulling me up. “Come on then! Let’s go get our men.”

I cringed. That was absolutely not happening. I guess admitting it to her wasn’t a good idea
after all. Who knows what she had planned. There was no way I was getting drunk and kissing
Cole. I would rather wait and let things happen naturally, if anything was going to happen at all. I didn’t think she would say anything to him.

On the way back into the house, Kerry spoke constantly, and I couldn’t have been happier to listen to her gushing about Ben’s abs. Having a girl friend that wasn’t bitchy was something that I definitely wanted. Hanging out with Kerry, even for such a short period of time, made me realise what I’d been missing. Cole was great but there were certain things I needed a girl for.

“I’m nervous.” She smiled, gritting her teeth as she ruthlessly pushed our way through the crowd that had gathered by the door.

Cole was still in the same place, leaning against the kitchen counter. I took a deep breath as we approached them. My heart went wild as his eyes landed on mine, as always.

Looking at him was like falling. It was perfect.
I took Cole’s outstretched hand and skipped to him, pressing my side against his. He pulled me around so I was standing between his legs. We’d been a bit touchy feely for as long as I could remember, but it was developing into something more. It didn’t seem as innocent as it was before. “You okay?” Cole whispered in my ear. I swallowed hard as his breath tickled my skin, sending a shiver down my spine. A nod of the head answered his question. Even if I could talk right now I wouldn’t be able to.

“I’m guessing Kerry’s finally making her move on Ben?”

I looked over to where he was laughing and saw Kerry with her tongue down Ben’s throat. *I take it all back. Kerry’s plan is working perfectly.*

After three cans of Coke, I was desperate for the toilet. Cole had told me it was upstairs when he went about half an hour ago so I knew where it was. I weaved between the drunken guests to go find it and had just closed the bathroom door when I heard Mary talking to some of her friends about Cole and me.

The music was still quite loud, even upstairs, so I could just about hear the bitchy comments:

‘Cole only feels sorry for her.’

‘He can do way better than that freak.’

‘She’ll never make him happy, he’ll get bored of her soon enough.’

Walking away from the door, I sat on the edge of the bath, not wanting to hear any more as my heart plummeted to my feet. What I hated more was questioning if they were right. The thing that scared me most if we got together was Cole resenting me for not having a proper relationship.

From the way he kissed me earlier, it didn’t seem like any of that bothered him. But this was early days, not a year or so down the line when the novelty had worn off.

Was Mary jealous or right?

I waited a few minutes before I used the bathroom and heading downstairs. I wanted to give them time to leave so I wouldn’t have to pass them. Thankfully, they had left and I got down without them noticing.

Cole smiled as I walked back into the kitchen and, in that moment, I decided not to let Mary get to me. She didn’t matter. *We* did. The sick feeling vanished as I watched him.

If Cole didn’t want to be with me, then he didn’t have to be. I walked straight up to him and wrapped my arms around his waist. Immediately feeling embarrassed, I pressed my forehead into his chest. *All right, me being forward really is new.*
When I loosened my grip on Cole’s waist, he pulled away and grabbed my hand, leading me out of Ben’s house. He hadn’t said bye to anyone so I wasn’t sure if that was it, but it didn’t bother me if we left now anyway.

We walked along the pavement in silence. He didn’t tell me where he was leading us, but we eventually stopped at the park. His face was blank, showing nothing at all. I followed him to the swings and sat on one. Chuckling, he started to push me. I felt like a kid again.

“Oakley, can I ask you something?” He said after pushing me for a minute. He stopped the swing and came around the front to kneel down in front of me. His face was serious, no sign of the laidback and playful Cole I was used to.

I don’t like the sound of this. His tone was very much ‘we need to talk’ and I dreaded what was coming next. He took a deep breath as if he was working up the courage first. “Why don’t you text me back?”

That wasn’t what I had expected at all and it tore at my heart.

I looked away from him, focusing the outline of a patch of mud in the wood chippings below me. That question wasn’t a new one. He’d asked me that thousands of times before, but it was the way he asked it, with so much hope he genuinely thought that I might answer.

*I wish I could.*

“Look, I’m sorry, but I don’t get it. Why don’t you want to communicate with me? Please, is something really wrong? Because if there is, I promise you it’ll be okay. I’ll help you. You just have to tell me,” he pleaded.

*Shut up, bloody shut up!*

I gulped and pressed my lips together to stop myself blurting it out. I wanted to tell him so much. I wanted to talk to him normally, but I couldn’t. It would hurt too many people. It would hurt my family. I didn’t want anyone to know how used and dirty I was, especially not someone as perfect as Cole.

“Oakley, you can tell me. You know that, don’t you?”

I nodded once. Of course, I knew that, but it was the *after* that scared me the most. Telling him the truth was not something I could ever take back. It would be out there forever and rot away at everything that was still good in my life.

Smiling, I looked into his eyes, trying to convince him everything was all right.

“Are you scared to talk again?”

Scared didn’t even begin to cover it. I was absolutely terrified. Being mute was easier; no one could make me talk, so no one could make me tell the truth. I was trapped in here, but it was safer for everyone.

Cole closed his eyes, pained. He looked so sad it made me feel sick. Being responsible for him being unhappy felt horrible. He slowly opened his eyes and stroked my cheek with his fingertip.

“Whenever you’re ready you can talk to me, okay? Or you can write it down. We all just want to know so we can help. There are treatments specialists can try.”

Frowning in hurt, I looked away from him. Why did I need to speak or write things down? We had managed to have a pretty great friendship for almost sixteen years now, and for almost eleven of them I hadn’t said a word. Did he want me to speak before he would consider anything more? Tears rushed to my eyes before I could stop them and Cole groaned.

“Hey, it doesn’t bother me, you know that. I just want you to know I’m here if you need me. I’ll drop it now. I don’t want to upset you.”

I so desperately wanted to ask him if he meant that…and how much he meant it.

Cole sighed and stood up. “Want me to take you home now?”

I shook my head and prayed he really had dropped it. I knew it would come up again, but for now, I just wanted to enjoy the night.

“Ohay, I’m pushing you over the top!” He chuckled and walked behind me again.

*Thank God, that’s over.*
“You remember that time you insisted on pushing me on the swing?” He asked. “You pushed so hard it swung back fast and knocked you over!”

I turned my head and glared at him, which only made him laugh.

“You yelled at me for making it hit you and cried for ages, you big baby.”

Big baby? I was only four and Cole just six. I still remembered it as if it happened yesterday. I told him it was unfair that he would push me all the time, just because I was a girl, so I pushed him. I hurt my arm when the swing knocked me over. Cole gave me his chocolate buttons to make me feel better.

He pushed me on the swing until I held my hand up, getting an idea. He immediately stopped, and I jumped off, gesturing for him to sit.

“Oh, no, I’m not having you fall again and go all whiny on me.”

I frowned sternly and pointed to the swing. He was getting on it.

He laughed. “Remember to move when it comes back at you, Oaks, yeah.”

I rolled my eyes but grinned too. I’d bank that nickname slap I owed him for another time.

He got on the swing and I pushed, this time not too hard to have it knock me over. He was much heavier now, obviously, but it was kinda nice to mess around and push him too.

We fell silent for ages and then Cole stopped the swing by digging his heel into the ground.

“I’m getting hungry. Let’s get my car and go to McDonalds for an ice cream.”

I stepped back at hearing his ice cream plan and he got off the swing. With a little smirk, he added, “And if you’re a good girl, I’ll get you a milkshake too.”

Idiot.

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Once we’d finished eating, he threw our empty cartons in the bin and wrapped his arms around me. I was still sitting on the stool so we were almost the same height. His chest was pressed against mine, and my legs were over his. I liked it too much.

“It’s almost eleven. We need to go soon,” he said quietly, rubbing circles on the small of my back. His fingers brushing against my skin gave me goose bumps. Cole stroked my hair, pushing it behind my ear. With a deep frown, he stood up and held his hand out for me, helping me up.

I blushed as we walked out to the car park. Would we have kissed again back there? Should I have initiated it? It shouldn’t be him all the time, but I was far too scared to do it myself.

Stopping at his car, he turned to me and stared into my eyes.

Just kiss me already!

He cleared his throat. “Let’s get you home before your parents send out a search party.”

I opened the car door and got in, feeling deflated. Turning the dial to cold, so when he started the car it would start to cool up, I laid back in the seat.

The car ride home was strangely awkward. I watched him out of the corner of my eye. His grip on the steering wheel was a little too tight and he was over-concentrating on the road as if he had to memorise every bloody pothole.

As we pulled up outside my house I felt deflated. The night was over. I was about to head back in to reality.

“I’ll walk you in,” he said and opened his door.

I practically ran up the path, eager to end the awkwardness. Turning as we approached the front door, I looked up at him. He was standing closer than I imagined he would be. We were just inches apart, and I could practically feel the heat radiating from him.

As I reached out to put the key in the lock, he grabbed my hand and spun me back to face him. Our lips touched, and my body felt boneless. The kiss only lasted a couple of seconds, but even after he pulled away, I could still feel the pressure of his lips on mine. Cole smiled as he took the key and opened the door while I just stood there like a complete moron.
I shook my head in a daze and walked inside. Dad was the only one up, probably waiting for me. “Hi, sweetheart, did you have a good night?” He asked as he looked up from the screen. I nodded and chewed on my lip.

“Good. Well, I’m going to bed now. You should, too, okay? Goodnight, Cole.”

“Night, Max,” Cole replied and turned to me. “You really had a good time?” He sounded unsure of himself. I nodded and smiled. How was that not obvious?

“Good. I did too… Well, Miss, I should get going. Goodnight,” he said in a fake posh accent, making me grin. He gently kissed my forehead and walked backwards, closing my front door.

I went up to my room, giving Dad a quick wave as I quickly ran past him, and stripped out of my clothes, throwing on the first set of pyjamas I saw. Nothing could ruin my mood tonight, not even coming home.

As I wrapped my cover around myself, my phone beeped. Cole had written: ‘Night. X’.

I grinned like a freak and typed a reply I’d never send. ‘Night Cole. X’.
In the morning, I woke up to Jasper shaking my arm.
Could he really not just call my name?
“Get up. We’re being forced to go to Aunt Ali’s.” He scowled.
Visiting Ali was something we both dreaded. Ali was great though, the problem was my cousin, Lizzie. She was one year older than me and convinced she was going to be the next supermodel.
I doubted anyone had seen her actual face in years – it was trapped under layers of inch-thick make-up. Her hair was bleached a white blonde and sat just above her shoulders in a sleek bob that was so shiny it looked like she sprayed her hair with polish.
Lizzie strived for perfection. In her eyes if you weren’t perfect you weren’t even worth bothering about. In front of everyone, she was sweet and innocent, but once we were alone she was bitchy and judgemental. I wasn’t her idea of perfection, and she had no issue letting me know that.
Basically she was a total cow and if I never had to see her again that would be fantastic.
Jasper, seeing the distasteful expression on my face, said, “I know. I’ll have a flask of JD. Hit me up if you need a little help.” He then turned and left, closing my door on his way out.
I didn’t drink, but every visit with Lizzie made me seriously question that decision.
I dressed slowly because the later we arrived there the better. In the end, Mum yelled up the stairs. After the third time I figured that was as much as I could drag it out for.
“Oakley, if you can’t get up properly in the morning you won’t stay out that late again,” she snipped, pointing to my shoes by the front door.
Really not why I’m late, Mum.
So I didn’t start an argument or give her any ammunition to refuse late nights, I did as instructed and got my shoes on.
It took just under twenty minutes to get to their house. We hadn’t even gotten out of the car, and I already wanted to go home. As we made our way towards the house, the front door swung open and Ali rushed out.
Ali and Mum both jumped into each other’s arms and laughed. They were close in age and were like best friends as well as sisters. She gave me, Dad and Jasper a kiss on the cheek and ushered us inside.
Ali’s house was really modern. After she divorced Lizzie’s dad five years ago, she had received a lot of money from the settlement and used it to renovate. The place was decorated with the most expensive everything. The kitchen was stainless steel and looked like it belonged in a
swanky restaurant. Every one of the four rooms had en-suite bathrooms and walk-in closets. If it weren’t for Lizzie, I would look forward to visiting.

Ali led us into the lounge where she had laid on sandwiches and cakes. Lizzie was sitting on the sofa, tapping away on her phone with one hand and running her fingers through her hair with the other.

As soon as she saw us, after a momentary greeting, she launched into chatting about how she was entering a modelling contest that was being held at our local mall, and how she was hoping that would be her big breakthrough.

After what felt like half an hour of listening to her drone on about an outfit that cost her over a hundred pounds, Ali told Lizzie to take me upstairs and show it to me. Jasper was grinning as I reluctantly got up. Just because I was a girl didn’t mean I was going to go all crazy over a dress.

“IT’s gorgeous, isn’t it?” She gushed, running her acrylic nails over the fabric of the dress hanging on the outside of her wardrobe. I nodded in agreement and tried to hide my horror. The neon pink dress must barely cover her arse.

“You should totally enter the contest! You’re not exactly ugly and you can just, like, nod or something if someone asks you a question. Although, you’d need to wear something nice.”

I smiled and sat down on my hands as the urge to strangle her grew stronger and stronger. I wasn’t a violent person at all, but Lizzie really pushed me sometimes.

“Ooh, how’s your gorgeous friend? You totally should have brought him with you.” Lizzie fluffed up her hair and smirked at me.

If she uses the word ‘totally’ one more time…

“I decided that I’m definitely gonna be a model, that’s why I’m doing the contest,” she said as if I’d asked. “Modelling is more glamorous than acting, you know?”

I forced a smile, not that she looked away from the mirror to see my reaction. Thankfully, my phone buzzed as a text message came through, distracting me from wanting to murder my cousin.

Cole’s timing was amazing. ‘Heard you’re at Barbie’s! Not killed her yet? Hurry up and come home! X’.

I smiled and put the phone back in my pocket. I’d go home right now if I could.

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At seven-thirty in the evening, after a long day of unsuccessfully trying to avoid Lizzie as much as possible, Mum finally said those five beautiful words: it’s time to go home. I could have kissed her I felt that relieved.

Me and Jasper were out of the door and in the car before Mum could blink.

Waving goodbye to Ali and Lizzie, my body relaxed and I laid back against the headrest. Jasper let out a deep sigh and did the same. “Thank God that’s over,” he muttered, and I nodded in agreement.

Fifteen minutes later, we pulled into our drive. Cole appeared out from his front door as if he’d been watching for us to get home.

“Mind if I steal her?” He called across our neighbour’s garden when we got out of the car. “Back by eleven, Oakley,” Dad told me sternly.

Cole grinned as he approached and the little dimple at the side of his mouth became more pronounced. So cute. “I’ll walk her home just before,” he told my dad as he grabbed my hand.

My heart skipped a full beat at the feel of his hand in mine. Cole eagerly pulled me into his house and up the stairs to his room. He pointed to the bed, put a DVD on, and walked back out without a word. He was probably getting drinks and a snack.
I glanced at the movie he chose, sat on the bed and groaned internally. *The Hills Have Eyes.* I hated gory films. The sight of blood made me feel sick. Was he trying to make me throw up in front of him?

I got under his cover and pulled my knees up. If I was going to make it through the film, I’d need to be able to hide. I grabbed his pillow and wedged it between my chest and legs where I could tuck my head into it. He was absolutely doing this on purpose.

Laughter burst from Cole as he came back into the room and saw my position. *I don’t care.* He sat beside me with the bowl of popcorn on his lap and bottle of Coke lying between us.

“It’s not even started, you big baby,” he teased, shuffling closer so our shoulders were touching.

“Was Lizzie her usual, charming self?” *Oh yes.* I nodded. Cole knew what she was like. I think deep down everyone did, but they never really said anything to her about her behaviour because she would probably flip out.

“She’s just jealous of you.”

My head snapped up to look at him in utter shock. I raised my eyebrows sceptically. What on earth was there for her to be jealous about?

“I’m serious, Oakley. You’re smart, kind, considerate, thoughtful and unbelievably beautiful,” he whispered, looking into my eyes. “Don’t ever let anyone make you think otherwise.”

I couldn’t breathe. My lungs had deflated. That was so sweet. No one had ever said anything like that to me before. Besides Mum and she was too bias for that to count.

He closed the distance between us slowly. His eyes locked on my lips for a second and he tangled his fingers in my hair. My breath caught in my throat as his nose grazed mine and his lips parted. Cole was so close I could taste his minty breath and the shower gel he’d used.

He finally angled forwards and brushed his lips against mine. Literally less than a second later, he pulled away and stared into my eyes. I felt weightless, like gravity had been turned off and I could just float away.

His forehead creased as he frowned in concentration. What’s he trying to figure out? If this, *us,* would be worth it?

Whatever it was, he must’ve found the answer because he leant forward again and kissed me. He led, taking control. He bit and sucked until I was so wound up I felt like I was about to implode. I couldn’t understand what was happening to me.

Cole made my whole body feel hot, like my blood was boiling. I wanted to be closer to him, even though we were already pressed against each other. He was everything to me. I trusted him with my life, but I wasn’t sure if I could take things any further than this right now. Or ever.

Surrendering to the new and confusing feelings, I dug my fingers into his back and held him tighter. Whatever was going to happen I’d deal with, right now I just wanted to feel.

He ran his hands through my hair, holding my head against his, possessing and controlling in a way that I was shocked to find I enjoyed. But when his tongue grazed my bottom lip, I froze. He wanted in. It was an intrusion and no matter how good I felt it scared me to death.

Cole pulled back, his eyes wide with worry. “What? Are you okay?”

My stomach started doing flips. I wasn’t sure if it was good or bad, so I just concentrated on him. The way his head was still tilted slightly to the side from kissing me and his deep blue eyes that were staring at me with so much intensity.

*This is Cole!* I scolded myself. He would never hurt me or try to make me go further than I was comfortable. I smiled and gripped the back of his t-shirt, giving him permission to kiss me again. He didn’t need any more encouragement. His lips pressed against mine. I didn’t feel scared anymore.

Cole’s tongue stayed firmly in his own mouth as he realised I needed to take things a little slower. I ran my hands up his back until I got to his hair. My fingers knotted in the light brown
mess. Cole moaned in response, making my heart leap in both a good and bad way. He pulled away and smiled.

“You okay?” He whispered, in a quiet, husky voice.

Wow.

His lips were a little red and slightly swollen, but mine probably looked the same. I didn’t care. I nodded in response to his question and tried not to show just how overly happy I was feeling; I would probably just look desperate. I probably do.

“Um, do you want to watch something else? We can find one of those crappy chick flicks if you want?” He asked as he bit his lip and nodded towards the TV.

We both knew he didn’t want to watch anything, but I think he was trying not to push me. I shook my head. Honestly, he was kissing me so TV could go to hell for all I cared.

Someone knocked on the door, breaking our moment. I jumped up, pressing my back against the wall. Cole laughed at me and shouted for whoever it was to come in. Mia opened the door and walked in with a huge grin on her face. Do I look live I’ve just been snogged senseless?

“Hi,” she chirped, smirking in amusement. “So…what are you guys up to?”

Yes, she definitely knows.

“Yes, she definitely knows.”

“Watching a film,” Cole replied, pressing play on stupid horror. He was such a bad liar though; no one would believe we were just watching TV from the smug look on his face.

“Mmm hmm,” she sang. “Of course you were.”

Her voice was playful, but my face still burst into flames. Mia made herself comfortable, sat on Cole’s bed, and started a conversation. I loved Mia like a sister, but I really wanted to be alone with Cole again.

“Oh, I love this film and since you were only watching TV…” she trailed off, grinning. If looks could kill Cole would’ve just murdered his sister.

Me and Cole sat back and watched the awful film in silence. Neither one of us glanced at Mia’s triumphant face the entire time. By the end of the movie, it was time for me to go home. Mia skipped out, giggling and blowing us a kiss.

“I’d better walk you back, I guess,” Cole grumbled.

I reluctantly stood up and smiled. We both walked back to my house at a snail’s pace. Cole wrapped his arm around my shoulder. “Home just in time, Miss Farrell,” he said in his mock posh accent and bowed his head. I nudged his shoulder.

The atmosphere turned intense as we looked into each other’s eyes. Was he going to kiss me or not? He took the key, put it in the lock, kissed me on the forehead before he opened the door. I took the key back as he dangled it in front of me and smiled at him appreciatively.

“You’re welcome, Oaks. See you tomorrow.” He winked at me, jumping back before I hit him for shortening my name again. Shaking my head, I closed the front door, giving him a wave out of the window next to it as he started walking back home.

“Well, well, well. What time do you call this, young lady?” Jasper said dramatically, and frowned. I looked up at the clock and then back to Jasper, raising my eyebrows. I was actually five minutes early. “You and me are gonna have a little chat about you staying out all night with strange men!”

He must have been dropped on his head as a baby.

I walked past him.

“Wait,” he called after me as I got to the bottom of the stairs. “Is everything okay?”

I turned around and nodded, frowning, wondering where he was going with this conversation.

“You did use protection, didn’t you?”

Gasping, I spun away from him and stomped upstairs without acknowledging his stupid comment. Why would he even say it? He knew things with Cole weren’t like that. I could still hear him laughing as I shut my bedroom door. It really wasn’t funny at all.
The second I got into bed my phone beeped with Cole’s usual nightly text. At least, with Cole’s texts, I ended every day on a high.
That night I barely slept at all. I lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, overthinking everything that was happening with Cole. I really liked him. Too much. So much it would crush me if it all went to hell.

I prayed he felt the same. His actions suggested that he did, but I was so out of my depth here I didn’t really know what to think. If he could be friends with me for nearly eleven years without us saying a word, my silence wouldn’t matter to him if we were actually together, right? Sighing in frustration, I turned on my side and squeezed my eyes shut. Second-guessing myself every two seconds was driving me crazy.

I woke up about an hour later to my phone alarm beeping loudly. Quickly turning it off, I forced myself to get out of bed and not hit the snooze button for five more minutes. I was still tired from barely sleeping and felt like crap. Today wasn’t starting great, but I had a feeling a certain blue-eyed boy could change that.

After a long, hot shower, I got dressed and went downstairs for a much-needed hot chocolate. I rarely drank tea anything else. Hot chocolate was the drink that turned me into a human in the mornings.

“Good morning, sweetheart,” Dad chirped, looking up from behind his paper. Why was he so cheerful? I smiled meekly, waving at him sleepily, grabbed the biggest mug I could find and made a hot chocolate. “Didn’t sleep well?”

Sleeping well wasn’t something I really did anymore, but last night had been better and worse. I got even less sleep, but my mind had been filled with something else. Something good.

I shook my head and sat down opposite him, wrapping my hands around my boiling drink. Dad’s eyes bored into me, but I pretended I didn’t notice and focused on flicking through one of Mum’s Better Home magazines.

“Hey, Oaks,” Cole sang loudly and cheerfully as he walked into the kitchen. I grinned, so grateful he was with me now too. I didn’t like being alone with Dad. I could never quite predict his behaviour and how I should act.

Cole grinned and sat down beside me. He took my mug and stole a sip of my hot chocolate. How was he up and out so early? I guess he slept properly last night and hadn’t spent hours stressing over what was happening between us. I frowned and pressed my head against the table, making Dad and Cole laugh.

“Hurry up and finish your drink, Mia said we’re leaving in fifteen minutes.” He gave me the drink back.

Why did I agree to go shopping again?

Taking two large gulps, I handed the rest to Cole and made myself go and get dressed.
I had always wondered if Cole would believe me if I ever did manage to tell him everything or if Dad was right and everyone would believe him.

As much as I wanted to believe Cole would choose to have faith in me, I could never risk it. In just over two years, I would be eighteen and could leave home. There was no point in ripping my family apart and hurting so many people when I’d leave soon anyway.

I quickly got ready and sprinted downstairs. Cole stood as he saw me enter the kitchen.

“See you later, Max,” Cole said as he made his way towards me.

“Bye, kids. Have fun,” Dad called after us.

“Ready for this?” Cole asked, scrunching his nose up.

I nodded and smiled. Well, sort of anyway.

Mia was waiting for us in the car outside my house, tapping the steering wheel impatiently. I jumped in the front seat and stuck my tongue out at Cole. He raised an eyebrow suggestively, which set my bloody face on fire.

“Morning,” Mia greeted me and launched into reciting her shopping list.

Today was going to be long.

Cole followed us into the first two shops, and I could tell that he was already bored. Unsurprisingly as soon as we stopped at the swimwear he brightened up.

“The little blue one,” he quietly whispered in my ear, discretely pointing to a light blue bikini with a white polka dot pattern. Wow, when he said little he wasn’t joking.

I smiled shyly and picked it up. Oh, God, I was buying something for a guy. Should I? Was it for him? Yes, it kind of was, but it was different because I wanted to look nice for him. He wasn’t forcing me to wear anything. I got a choice.

Avoiding eye contact with him, I stepped to the side to pick out a pair of flip-flops. I also picked up a few tops, maxi dresses, shorts and new sunglasses. Cole leant against the wall near the changing room and played on his phone. There were another two men standing near him, all with the same bored look on their faces. Clothes shops needed to open a crèche for men.

“Oakley,” Mia squealed, holding up two short halter neck dresses, one in salmon pink and the other yellow, a look of indecision on her face. I pointed to the yellow. Always yellow.

“Thanks,” she shouted, slamming the pink one down on the rail and flicking through the skirts beside it. She was going all out. Cole looked like he just wanted out.

We shopped all morning and had almost everything we needed for the holiday. Throughout the morning, Cole stroked my hand or the small of my back, making it hard to concentrate on anything else. He’d gone off a couple times on his own but came back not long after.

“Can we please eat now?” He whined for the hundredth time as we walked out of another shop with all our bags.

Mia growled in frustration and pointed to KFC. “If we feed you, will you promise to stop the whinging?”

Cole grinned. “Yep.”

We made our way into the restaurant. Cole went up to order while Mia and I found a table.

“So, what happened last night?” She asked me as soon as we were away from Cole. My mouth went dry. I hadn’t expected her to come right out and ask that.

She laughed at me and rolled her eyes. “Don’t look so worried! He hasn’t said a word to me. He was just really, really happy, so I figured something happened between you two.”

He was really, really happy? I bit the inside of my mouth to stop myself from smiling.

Squealing, she clapped her hands together. “He finally told you then?”

Told me what?

“They’re bringing your burger over, Mia, since your order’s so awkward!” Cole said as he placed a tray of food and drink down in front of us.

No! Why! He had the worst timing ever. Finally told me what? I needed to know, like now.

Mia laughed and grabbed her chips. She never had mayonnaise or lettuce on her chicken burger, but for some reason it took longer for them to prepare a burger that had less on it. Cole sat
down next to me and immediately started stuffing food in his mouth. I ate at a normal speed and tried to keep a straight face as Cole stroked my knee while having a stupid argument with his sister.

Mia wanted her on/off boyfriend, Chris, to come on holiday with us. The only problem was that everyone hated him. I never got why Mia took Chris back every time he cheated on her. Or why he did it in the first place. As they argued, my mind kept flitting back to Mia’s words: ‘He finally told you then?’ How could she say that and not at least finish the rest in a discrete text message. I was dying here.

Cole’s hand waving in front of my face made me jump and snap out of my obsessive thoughts. “Welcome back.” He smiled. “Kerry and Ben are going to watch a movie tonight. Do you want to go too?”

I shrugged casually, letting him know I was cool with that. What we did didn’t matter.

“Yeah? Great. I’ll pick you up at seven. We’re eating before. We should get going. Mia’s waiting at the car.”

Waiting at the car? I looked up, and sure enough, we were alone. Whoa, I really had zoned out. Cole was messing with my mind. I stood up and chucked my rubbish on the tray Cole was holding out.

We started to walk out of the building towards the car park and he put his hand on my back again. “Oh, we’re seeing that new paranormal film, by the way.”

No. Come on! I stopped and glared at him.

“Sorry, you’ve already agreed.” He chuckled and wrapped his arm around my shoulder.

“You’ll be fine. I won’t let the film attack you.”

“There you two are!” Mia exclaimed. “I was about to come find you.” She opened the boot so I could shove my bags in. “Let’s go, I’m going out with Chris tonight.”

You can do better, I wanted to say, but even if I did it wouldn’t change a thing. Mia didn’t listen to anyone when it came to Chris. She had to realise that she was worth a million of him on her own.

“You get everything, Oakley?” Cole asked, poking his head between the front seats once we were on our way.

Nodding, I turned to him and smiled. Soon enough I’d be in Italy, lying on the beach with Cole. Wait, on a beach in my bikini with Cole. I suddenly felt self-conscious. He’d seen me wear bikinis a thousand times before, but it was different this time. We’d kissed. Our relationship was changing.

Don’t overthink.

I did gymnastics regularly so that kept me fit, but what if it wasn’t enough? My body wasn’t womanly. I didn’t have proper hips and my breasts were a small B cup. Now he was seeing me differently, would he notice that? Would it even bother him if he did?

Mia stopped outside my house.

“Now get your stuff and go,” she joked, making me grin.

Cole helped me get my bags out of the boot and walked them to my house for me. Dad came out of the house just as we had put all my bags down on the floor.

“How long do you think we’re going for?” He teased, shaking his head.

“You should see the amount of crap Mia got then!” Cole replied.

“How?” Dad picked up all the bags and turned to me. “Come on then, love, you need to spend some time with me and your mum if you’re out again tonight. We’ve barely seen you.”

That was the point.

And how did he know that I was going out? Cole must have asked him before he asked me. I couldn’t wait until the day that I didn’t need to get his permission to do anything.

“See you later.” Cole smiled and headed back to Mia’s car. I waved to them both and went inside.
“Your mum’s making cakes and wants help. I’ll warn you now that she’s planning your birthday party.” He put the bags down on the sofa and gestured for me to go in the kitchen. When Dad was like that, joking around, it made me hopeful.

Perhaps now it was all over we could be a normal family again. I still loved the dad I remembered from before. I still wanted him to be who he once was to me. If he could just be that person everything would be okay. Our family would be okay. I could live in silence for our family.

Reluctantly, I went in and sat down at the table. A birthday party was the last thing I wanted.

“Oh, I’ve got so many ideas, honey! You want to have it here, or we could hire somewhere? How many people did you want to invite? What colour scheme?” Mum gushed.

I frowned and looked down at the table. Why couldn’t she accept that I wasn’t the popular, social daughter she wanted? I would never get excited over a party or an outfit.

“Come on, love, it’s your sweet sixteen! We have to do something special. Please, please, let me organise this party?” Mum pleaded, looking at me with round, hopeful eyes. Great.

Groaning internally, I nodded in agreement. She squealed and leapt forward, squeezing me tight. I couldn’t say no to her. She deserved to throw me a party after all the hurt and guilt I had caused her. Mum blamed herself for me not speaking. I’d heard her crying over me so many times. The very least I could do was give her this.

“It’ll be amazing,” she promised.

Like hell it would.

Dad chuckled deeply. “You should hear some of her ideas. Chocolate fountains and candy floss machines. Just remember it’s a party for Oakley and not yourself, Sarah.”

Mum waved her hand at him dismissively. “Hush. You’re a man. The only part of this which concerns you is when it comes to the payment.”

“As in most things,” he countered, mixing the butter-cream icing for the cupcakes. I grabbed the chocolate shavings and started sprinkling them over the cakes they had already iced.

After decorating twenty-four cupcakes and listening to Mum go on about my stupid birthday party, I went upstairs to get ready to go out. I froze as I suddenly realised why Cole was so nervous asking me before. This wasn’t a normal trip to the cinema. Oh God, this was a date. How could I not have realised sooner? There was being inexperienced in romance and then being plain stupid.

But now knowing it was a date made me nervous. So nervous I instantly felt sick. What should I wear? Should I dress up? Swinging my wardrobe doors open, I frantically searched through my clothes. My wardrobe was fairly plain. I chucked aside any skirts or dresses, even though they were long and more casual than dressy. I didn’t want to look like I’d tried too hard. Did I?

I shook my head after fifteen minutes of looking through everything I owned over and over. Cole wouldn’t care what I wore anyway. I grabbed a nice white top with diamantes scattered over the front and dark wash jeans and put them on before I changed my mind. We were just eating and going to the cinema. Casual it is.

When it was ten minutes to seven, I brushed my hair and applied some lip balm. I heard the front door open and knew it would be Cole ready to take me on a date.

It didn’t seem real.

Minutes later, my bedroom door opened and my stomach fizzed with excited nerves. Cole walked in wearing jeans and a black t-shirt. How could he be dressed so casually but look so incredible?

We walked out to his car and just as I was about to get in, he called my name. I turned around to face him and gasped. He was standing right in front of me. My breath caught in my throat as he gently kissed me on the lips.

“You really do look beautiful,” he whispered, stroking my arm with his thumb and reaching to open the car door for me with his other hand. I smiled happily.

Once in the car I started to relax. He didn’t look like he’d spent ages stressing over what to wear. We’d done dinner and a movie plenty of times before so it was time for me to chill and go with the flow. Cole casually gazed at me out of the corner of his eye as he drove to the restaurant, and I pretended not to notice.

“It’s Chinese. That’s okay, right?” He asked as we pulled into the car park opposite Golden King Chinese restaurant. Too late if it wasn’t! Chinese was one of my favourites anyway, so I nodded enthusiastically. My stomach suddenly called out for food in a gurgle.

Cole chuckled. “Hungry?”

Blushing, I nodded and got out of the car. Kerry and Ben were waiting by the entrance, smiling at each other. They only turned away as we approached.

“Hey,” Kerry chirped, and immediately started talking at a hundred miles an hour. She grabbed my hand, pulling me ahead of Cole and Ben.

“So how’s it going? You two actually together yet? It’s so sweet how he looks at you,” she whispered so quietly I barely caught any of it. I smiled and shook my head.

“Don’t worry, it’ll happen soon. Cole’s crazy about you.”

“Crazy about me? I was really, really okay with that.”

Kerry had requested a table in the corner so we could have some privacy. As I had hoped, Cole sat next to me and grabbed the menu, wasting no time in deciding what to eat.

“You having sweet and sour chicken?” He asked, scanning the menu absentmindedly. It was pointless; we always had the same thing. I nodded and pointed to the egg fried rice too.

“I was having a great time already and we hadn’t even ordered our drinks yet. A week ago I hadn’t even had my first kiss and now I’m on a double date with the guy I’d liked for forever. Kerry and Ben were great and I was having the best time. Mostly due to the fact that Cole kept stroking the back of my hand under the table.

“We need to go to the toilet, Oakley,” Kerry announced and jumped up so fast she almost knocked her chair over and hit a server. I frowned. Why we? I’d not done the going-to-the-toilet-in-a-pair thing since I was old enough to go alone. What teen can’t pee by themselves?

Kerry ushered me to the toilets, pushing me forward as if we were in a hurry. I wasn’t that naïve enough to think we were actually going to the toilet. She wanted to talk. Great. As soon as the door closed behind us, she turned to me. “Ben asked me to be his girlfriend! Can you believe that?”

I nodded. What I couldn’t believe was that it took him so long.

She spent the next two minutes revealing the details. He’d bought her pink roses and asked her to be his girlfriend right before we came out tonight. Every word she spoke rolled into the next as she tried to get the whole story out as quickly as she could. Her excitement was infectious, and I couldn’t help smiling with her.

“So,” she took a breath, “has Cole seriously not asked you yet?” Again, no! She was impatient. I shook my head and her face fell a little. “Well, what’s taking him so long? It’s not like he doesn’t want to, duh. It’s so obvious. Don’t worry, he’ll do it soon, I can tell,” she said confidentially. It really didn’t bother me. Well, not too much anyway. I was happy to take things slowly. Rushing into a relationship when I was only just getting used to all these teenage hormones wasn’t smart.

“Has he kissed you again?”

I flushed and nodded. He had kissed me quite a lot actually. Kerry squealed.

“Aww, it’s so cute. OMG, we’re gonna be friends-in-law!”
What? I grinned in amusement and bit my lip. Friends-in-law. Was that even a thing?
“Anyway, we should get back, come on!”
Again, I was pulled along. I couldn’t be mad with her. I had a feeling she’d got away with a
lot as a child because it was impossible to be angry with her. Cole and Ben were chatting about
football when we got back to the table – my least favourite subject.
“You survived then,” Cole whispered as I sat down, careful to turn his head so Kerry
wouldn’t hear. I laughed softly. She wasn’t annoying at all. He draped his arm over the back of
my chair and kissed the side of my head. His lips against my hair gave me goose bumps. *Don’t
grin too wide or you’ll look like a desperate idiot.*
After dinner and listening to Kerry talk about the hottest celebs for forty-five minutes, we
made our way to the cinema. Cole held my hand as we picked up our tickets. I wasn’t looking
forward to watching the film, but I was just glad to go out on a double date like a normal
teenager.
The cinema was small and old. Since the new chain-cinema opened up in town, this one had
become much quieter. It probably wouldn’t be long before it closed down entirely. I loved it
though; the stained carpet, lingering smell of popcorn and ripped seats felt homely and
welcoming.
Cole stroked my knuckles with his thumb to get my attention. “You sure you don’t mind
seeing this? I’m sure we can find something else.”
I shook my head and awkwardly took the ticket he was holding out for me with the hand I
was holding my drink with. As stupid as it sounded, I didn’t want to let go of his hand.
“Okay.” He smiled and nudged me towards the door signed Screen Two. There were only
two screens. I could count on one hand the amount of people that were in the cinema and that
included the four of us.
“We’re going to the back,” Kerry announced, bounding up the stairs.
Cole carried our popcorn, eating some from the box with just his mouth. I grinned as I
realised he was doing it because he didn’t want to let go of my hand either. When we reached
the top of the stairs and walked to the end of the row where Kerry had already settled down, I
dropped my hand from his to pull my seat down.
“Scared yet?” He whispered in my ear, three seconds after the film started. I raised an
eyebrow, which made him chuckle quietly.
About twenty minutes into the film, that music started. The one where you *knew* something
bad was going to happen but not when or what. Shyness didn’t even register with me as I grabbed
Cole’s hand and gripped hard.
I jumped up on the seat as some ghost-like creature popped out from nowhere on the screen.
*This is no longer fun.* Hugging my legs with the other arm, I hid behind my knees.
My heart was beating too fast as that music blared out from the speakers again. A door, or
something that sounded like a door, slammed in the film and I jumped again. I couldn’t watch any
more. I picked a spot just below the screen and concentrated on it.
“Wanna do something tomorrow? Just us?” He whispered into my ear. I nodded and lifted
the armrest that separated us. Leaning against his side, I felt safer. Spending time alone with him
was definitely something I wanted. “Cool.”
Yeah, it really was cool.
“That was awesome! I loved the part where she was drowned in the bath!” Kerry exclaimed as we made our way out of the cinema.

Oddly enough, that was not my favourite part.

“So, where to now, guys?” she asked.

Cole’s eyebrows pulled together in a frown. I could tell he didn’t want to do anything else as a group. Ben must have noticed his reluctance because he nodded once and turned to Kerry.

“We’re goin’ back to mine,” he said. It was clear from the smirk that they were much further along in their relationship than me and Cole.

“Later, guys,” Kerry said, giving us a wave as she practically pulled Ben by the collar. I don’t think I could ever be that forward.

Cole let out a sigh of relief as we waved back. “I know they’re my friends, but I just want you,” he whined. “Ice cream now, Miss Farrell?” Grinning, I fell against his side and pushed him in the direction of his car. “Thought so!”

It was too late for the café so we went to McDonalds and sat in his car eating McFlurries. Two each. Cole didn’t make conversation as we ate because it was warm out and we needed to eat before the ice cream melted, but the silence was comfortable. I was so confused with the atmosphere between us flipping and changing every few bloody minutes.

“You okay? We can go somewhere else if you’re bored.”

I shook my head, unable to recall one single moment when I was bored spending time with him. God, if he could read my thoughts he’d think I was a proper stalker.

He suddenly laughed at something. His gorgeous blue eyes turned evil and I knew he was about to do something to me. Not kiss me either, it was something mean. He pulled a heaped spoonful of ice cream out of the tub. *Ah, no.* I watched his smile curl right around.

My eyes widened and I held my hands up in surrender.

I really didn’t want to be all sticky and gross on my first date with the guy I was utterly crazy about. Before I could blink, he flicked the spoon, sending the ice cream flying at me. It landed on my top with a soft thud and fell onto my lap. Gasping, I swung the car door open and hopped out of the car.

*Oh, you’re going down, Benson!*

Cole’s laughter blocked out the sound of a group of teens shouting and messing around outside McDonalds and the couple arguing in a car nearby. After brushing the remains of the freezing cold ice cream from my clothes, I scooped up some of mine and flicked it at him through the door.
Surprisingly, despite my rubbish aim, it landed on his chest. He stopped laughing immediately and looked down at the ice cream and chocolate sauce that was running down his t-shirt. Ha!

“You need to run,” he warned, slowly putting his ice cream down on the dashboard. With my heart flying in my chest, I sprinted off, desperate to get away before he got his revenge.

Cole’s footsteps thudded behind me, getting louder by the second. He wouldn’t be too far behind now. Adrenaline pumped through my body. Faster! Pushing my legs harder, I managed to increase my speed. It wasn’t enough. I knew it wouldn’t be. Cole’s arm wound around my waist and we both stumbled over each other’s feet and fell to the ground.

“Too slow!” He exclaimed, rolling me over and pinning me to the grass. I couldn’t move at all. I wanted to struggle and I didn’t. I kept my eyes on him, needing to know it was only him. He would never hurt you. It’s Cole. Breathe. He’s not them. Breathe!

I sucked in a fast rush of air as my dizzy head spun.

In and out. Count to ten. Breathe.

My racing pulse showed no sign of slowing down and the more I looked into Cole’s eyes the better that racing felt. I was okay. I’d got through it. Now having Cole pinning me down wasn’t bringing back memories I tried to bury every second of every day I started to enjoy it.

“What’re you gonna do now, huh?”

Gulping, I tried to work that out for myself. I didn’t usually like being held down, but it was different with Cole. This was playful and it felt natural to mess around with him. But I felt like I shouldn’t want to be close to anyone ever again. I should, at least, not let Cole get close to me. For his sake.

“You okay?” He let go of my wrists and sat up. Relief flooded my system as I was freed. It hadn’t felt wrong but it was definitely something would take a little time to get used to.

Sitting up next to him, I smiled reassuringly. Technically, he hadn’t done anything wrong. He smiled and slowly lowered his head towards mine. His eyes danced with excitement before they closed as his lips sealed over mine.

I was falling again.

His fingers stroked along my jaw and cupped the back of my neck. He groaned and pressed his mouth to mine more firmly. I loved everything he did to me when we kissed. I felt healed. It wouldn’t last, but it didn’t need to, he gave me everything when he kissed me.

I pulled away when I couldn’t take all my crazy hormones anymore. Things between us could easily get out of hand and I had to stay in control.

As usual, time had gotten away from us and we had to get back.

“Come on then,” he said, giving me one last flutter of a kiss.

My God, I was falling for him at an alarming rate.

We travelled back in silence. His hand never left mine.

Dad was sitting in the lounge, watching television when I walked in. He’d been waiting up for me again, no doubt. I always wondered if he waited up because he was worried about me or worried that I’d told someone. He would need to get to me first.

“Did you have a good time?” He switched the TV off with the remote, giving me his full attention. I folded my arms over my chest and nodded. “Glad to hear it. Come on, bedtime.”

Though he’d turned to me and spoke to me he hadn’t actually looked me in the eye once. Something’s wrong. My stomach churned with worry. I wanted to turn around and run to Cole’s. Of course, I couldn’t, so I followed Dad upstairs.

He stayed just one step behind me. I focused on the top, wrapped my arms around myself harder and held my breath. My skin prickled with goose bumps of the bad kind. What’s happening?

At the top of the stairs, Dad cleared his throat. I turned to the side so he could see some of my face. I waited. “Night, love,” he said, kissing the top of my head before going into his room.
As soon as his door was shut, I dashed into my room and took a deep breath. My nerves were fried. I ripped my clothes off and got into bed.

Cole’s text arrived seconds later, momentarily taking my mind off Dad.

*Something is going on.*

***

I woke in the morning feeling happier than I had in a very long time. Things were looking up and I was, for the first time, feeling hopeful for the future. My date with Cole had put me in a great mood. Tonight we were doing something ‘just us’ too. I felt like nothing could pop my happy little bubble. But something usually did so I tried to keep myself grounded.

As I skipped downstairs, my parents’ muffled voices became louder until I could hear them clearly. “I don’t get why you’re against this, Max! This might be the thing that works. She might be able to get through to our daughter!” Mum snapped. I held my breath and pressed my back against the wall to try and disappear.

“She won’t go to the doctor, Sarah!” Dad replied slowly. “You can’t force her, we’ve tried that and you saw what it did to her.”

Sliding down the wall, I wrapped my arms around my legs. My pulse hammered in my ears. Last time Mum tried taking me to the doctors, I was so scared. Dad was standing behind her, calmly giving me that look. The look I didn’t ever dare disobey. I completely broke down and couldn’t breathe, having a panic attack in the kitchen. I could still remember how tight my chest felt right before I passed out.

Mum sighed heavily. “I won’t let her get like that again. Are you coming with me or not?”

*Please say no, please say no.*

“I won’t do that to her. I’m not tricking my daughter into this. You remember what the child psychologist said. We shouldn’t push her. Oakley will ask for help whenever she is ready for it. When Oakley is ready, Sarah, not you.”

“Do you even want her to get better?” Mum snapped angrily. Her voice was sharp and high-pitched. I flinched at how harsh she sounded.

“How can you even ask me that? Of course, I do, but I will not force her into this. Whatever is going on with her, it will be alright. We’ll deal with it, whatever happens. If that’s her wanting help to speak again or not. She’s our daughter. If she’s happy that’s all that matters to me,” he reasoned.

I actually believed what he was saying, he was that good at lying. Dad was smooth, charming, well liked and well respected by everyone who knew him.

*You know that no one will ever believe you over him.*

“I’m sorry.” I heard Mum sigh again and everything went quiet. “I just want to find out what’s wrong. I thought it would get easier but it only gets harder.”

Her voice was muffled as if she was speaking against something. Dad’s shoulder maybe. Was he comforting her while knowing the truth? “I’m still going to take her…” I heard her say. “Don’t, Max. If she starts panicking like before we’ll turn around and come straight home. I can’t just sit back and do nothing.”

I wished she would.

Every time she tried to help me it ended with her crying and me feeling like crap. For everyone’s sake, she needed to give it up.

Taking a deep breath, I pushed myself up off the floor with shaking legs. Listening to their argument about me was getting too much. I swallowed the lump in my throat and ran my fingers through my hair. *I can do this. Act normal.*

*Damaged goods will never be normal.*
As I walked into the kitchen, they both turned and smiled at me as if nothing had happened. Mum discreetly wiped a tear from her cheek and said, “Morning, sweetheart. Hot chocolate?”

I nodded and sat down at the table. Mum and Dad exchanged a this-isn’t-over look and neither one of them could look me in the eye. That was getting more and more of a regular thing with Dad but Mum didn’t usually have an issue with it.

“Croissants are in the oven, they shouldn’t be long,” she said as she busied herself making me a drink. She was feeling guilty.

“I’m going to have a shower,” Dad informed us and walked out of the kitchen. His posture was tense so I knew he didn’t want to be around us. Fine by me.

“How was your date last night?” How did she know it was a date? Did Cole tell her?

I frowned and shook my head. She went from needing to fix me so desperately it brought her to tears to asking about my night.

“It wasn’t a date?” Her face fell. “Oh. Well, did you have a nice time anyway?”

Jasper came downstairs at the right moment and Mum closed her mouth. I wasn’t sure why I kept it from her. Perhaps the fear of having my time with Cole restricted and plagued with rules if they knew we were more than friends.

“Mornin’,” Jasper muttered, rubbing his eyes. “I’m starving, Mum.”

She rolled her eyes. “Sit down.”

“You good?” he asked me as he sat opposite.

I gave him my most reassuring smile and idly wondered how he would react if he knew the truth. Out of everyone I thought Jasper was most likely to believe me. Although there was a three-year age gap between us and he annoyed the hell out of me, we were close. That also meant I didn’t ever want him to find out. I wouldn’t be able to cope if he didn’t believe me. Closing my eyes, I swallowed the slicing pain at the thought of my brother telling me I was a liar.

“So, what’s everyone doing today?” Jasper asked and stuffed a hot croissant fresh from the oven into his mouth. I waited for him to react to the heat and spit it back on his plate but he didn’t. Was his mouth made of steel?

“I’m taking Oakley to gymnastics, then going food shopping,” Mum replied, smiling at Jasper briefly while she busied herself buttering the rest of the croissants. “What about you?”

“Computer,” he mumbled and stuffed more food in his mouth.

Jasper scrunched his nose up.

Mum rolled her eyes. “Or not.”

Lazy shit. It was my parents’ fault, though. They said they’d support us while we’re in full-time education. Jasper was going to string that out for as long as possible, no doubt.

“So, I was thinking we could go clothes shopping on Thursday? I need some final things for the holiday and thought it would be nice for us both to get our nails done.”

So the doctor appointment was on Thursday. I nodded my head and picked at my food, no longer feeling hungry.

How am I going to get myself out of this one?

“Great,” she beamed. “Now eat up, we’ve got to leave in half an hour.”

Once I had managed to force down half a croissant, I went to get ready for gymnastics. I couldn’t wait to get there and get lost in throwing my body around. Gymnastics was an escape that I longed for every day. I loved how all my thoughts disappeared and all that was left was the version of me I wished I could always be.

We left Jasper shouting at some video game and drove to my gym class. Mum dropped me off and called out of the window, “Have a good time. I’ll see you when you get home.”

I waved over my shoulder as I made my way in the tired building. Cole was going to pick me up after practice and we were going to do something together. Alone together. For the first time ever I wanted gymnastics to be over.

Marcus worked us hard as usual, and I loved every second.
“That was great, Oakley,” Marcus exclaimed. “You nailed it! Go again.” Nodding, I ran around to the other end of the beam to start again. Adrenaline pumped through my body. I could do this all day.

By the time our hour was up I was ready for bed. But I had something much better to do. “Alright, guys, same time Monday night,” Marcus shouted, dismissing us all.

I sprinted to the changing rooms and took a quick shower. I didn’t want to be hot and sweaty for whatever Cole had planned. The girls stopped to gossip but today I didn’t have time to socialise. I changed into some fresh clothes and tried to tame my messy hair. Looking in the mirror, I groaned. My hair looked worse than a bird’s nest.

“Need a hairbrush?” Jade offered, handing hers out. I smiled gratefully and dragged it through the unruly blonde mass. When I finished, I placed it down in front of where she was applying her eyeliner and nodded once in thanks.

“You’re welcome,” she mumbled, looking in the mirror with an intense concentration. Her bat wings had to be perfect. I wouldn’t have the patience to do that. Giving her a quick wave, I ran out of the door, eager to meet up with Cole.

I saw him immediately, leaning up against the wall in the entrance. He took my breath away. His hair was its usual styled, floppy mess and his gorgeous eyes scanned the room for me.

Sometimes I felt like I needed a minute.

Before I was ready Cole looked up. His lips curled and pushed off the wall. I stumbled towards him, still feeling completely unprepared for all of this.

“Hey,” he said and kissed my cheek. “I thought we could have lunch and go bowling now. Then I’ll take you home to get ready for tonight.”

I bit my lip to try to stop myself grinning too much and looking like a creep. Now and tonight. “I’m not telling you where we’re going tonight, though,” he teased, bumping my shoulder with his. “Just wear something casual.”

Cole grabbed my wrist and pulled me towards him. I bumped against his chest and gasped at the contact. Before I could think, his lips covered mine, and I was dizzy with happiness.

He beamed as he abruptly pulled away. “Come on, I’m hungry.”

We drove to the bowling alley and parked as close to the door as he could get so he wouldn’t have to walk too far. Sometimes he’d drive around a car park for a few minutes looking for a ‘better spot’.

The restaurant attached to the alley was a seat-yourself-and-hope-for-the-best deal, so Cole picked a table and we looked through the menu. “Let me guess…you’re having the chicken BBQ burger?” he said, raising his eyebrow. I half wanted to pick something else but that was the best thing they did. He laughed. “You’re so predictable.”

Right, like he wasn’t going to have a bacon burger.

“What can I get you?” the server asked.

“We’ll have the chicken BBQ burger, the bacon burger and two Cokes, please.”

I smirked to myself.

“Oakley,” Cole said nervously when we were left alone.

This didn’t sound good. Why was everyone being weird with me all of a sudden?

“Your mum told me something yesterday. I’m not meant to say anything, but I don’t think I can do that.”

Great, so she told Cole about my appointment and not me. I nodded once for him to continue.

“Err,” he started, rubbing the back of his neck and wincing. This was hard for him and I was really glad that he was telling me. Cole and I didn’t have secrets – besides my major one – so it meant a lot that he chose to honour me and not my mum. “Your mum is… She’s taking you to a doctor.”

He studied my face and sighed. “You knew about it already?”

I nodded in confirmation.
He thought about it for a minute, chewing on the inside of his mouth. I couldn’t read him; he was a closed book in that moment. I always worried that Cole wanted me to be magically fixed too. “Are you going?”

I shrugged my shoulders. What choice did I have? I would go, but it wouldn’t achieve anything other than wasting Mum’s petrol.

“Maybe it would be a good idea to go,” he said cautiously.

I clamped my jaw shut in frustration and turned away from him. Why did we have to talk about this?

“Sorry, I’m ruining this already, aren’t I? I just want you to be okay. That’s all.” He took my hand and interlaced our fingers. I melted a little as he stroked the back of my hand with his thumb. He wasn’t ruining anything. He couldn’t see it but he was healing me, making me stronger, giving me hope.

After dinner, we went to the alley and played three games. I won the first and Cole won the last two. It wasn’t often that I was so rubbish but my mind was elsewhere. Every little touch as we walked past each other had my heart stuttering all over the place.

Cole drove me home so I could change and get ready for our date tonight, whatever it was. Mum and Dad’s car wasn’t in the drive so I wouldn’t have to answer their questions about tonight, thankfully.

“I’ll pick you up in thirty,” Cole said as he came to a stop outside my house.

I nodded and ran into the house. Only half an hour to do something nice with my hair and pick a decent outfit. That’d be fine, he’d told me to go casual.

The house was far too quiet when I was alone, Jasper must be sleeping in his room. I read Mum’s note as I walked through the house. Dad had taken her out again. He really was feeling guilty.

Up in my room, I picked out a casual dress and tried my luck at side plait. On the third attempt it looked okay so I left it. Somehow, over the last few days I’d grown up. I looked older, more confident. I was even starting to feel it.

With minutes to spare, I ran downstairs to wait for Cole to turn up. The doorbell rang just as I slipped my shoes on. I took a second to calm down and then opened the door.

Stop being so nervous.

“Hey. Whoa.” His eyes raked over me. I tugged my dress down as if that’d miraculously make it longer. It was below my knees but the way Cole was staring made me feel like I was wearing a scarf. A transparent scarf. Blushing furiously, I smiled half-heartedly and tugged again.

“Ready?”

“Oakley,” Jasper shouted from upstairs. Guess he wasn’t asleep then. Great. He came thudding down the stairs and leant over the bannister. “Mum called. She’s been out with Dad all day buying party supplies,” he warned. “And they’re having dinner…somewhere. Dirty stop outs.”

Cole rolled his eyes. “Thanks for that, Jasper. We’re just leaving.”

Jasper’s blue eyes widened in pure evil. “Good. Have fun on your, it’s-not-a-date-but-of-course-it-really-is-a-date-date.”

I hate my brother.

Glaring back at him, I shoved Cole out of the house.

“Your brother’s weird,” he said, grinning in amusement.

I couldn’t agree more.

“Well, get in. We have a long night ahead.”

Doing as I was told, I got in and prepared myself for this long night. It was only six now and we had to be back by eleven so the night couldn’t be longer than five hours. That wasn’t nearly enough alone time with him.
Cole wasn’t lying. We’d been driving for about a bloody year and I still couldn’t figure out where he was taking me. When we turned off at a roundabout, with the sign stating the beach was five miles away, I grinned. Cole chuckled at my expression.

“Yeah, we’re going to the beach. I’ve got a picnic dinner in the boot.” He smiled sheepishly and bit his lip, like he was embarrassed to admit he’d done something so romantic.

My insides went all squishy. He was so sweet.

“Mum suggested the picnic… and she made it,” he admitted. Ooh, good, there would probably be homemade cakes and cookies. If it had been down to Cole, there would just be packets of junk food. Not that I’d complain.

We parked in the car park opposite the pier, and I turned to look at him. He was his normal casual self but he looked a little different too. With ever growing confidence, I leant over and kissed him. I could tell he was surprised as it took him a second to respond and kiss me back. He soon caught on, though.

I felt him smile against my lips before wrapping his arms around my back, pulling me closer. Apparently I’d had control for long enough. He pulled away a few seconds later and gave a surprised chuckle. I blushed and looked down to hide my flaming cheeks. Cole fingers gently cupped my chin and tilted my head.

Really not ready to look at you yet!

“Don’t be embarrassed, Oakley. I want you to be confident around me. You can kiss me whenever you want. Believe me, I won’t mind,” he said.

I pressed my lips to his again, making it clear that I got the message.

“There,” he said when I sat back up. “Anytime, babe.”

He got out of the car and walked along the shore. Both of us were wrapped up in warm jackets and Cole’s hand firmly held mine. Even in summer, it was still cold right by the sea. The sky was clear of clouds, so the moon shone down brightly on the ocean, creating a glistening effect on the surface of the water. It looked beautiful.

As we approached a set of stone stairs, I stopped. I was happy to keep walking if he wanted to, but I had a sudden urge to hit the arcades. Cole turned to me and frowned, wondering why I’d come to such an abrupt stop.

He rolled his eyes. “Arcades?”

I nodded, and he laughed, leaning in to kiss my forehead. “Come on then. Let’s go spend twenty quid trying to get a claw to grab a shitty stuffed toy.”

That’s the spirit...

He gave me a quick, chaste kiss on the lips, taking me by surprise. I was quickly growing to love his surprises. “I’ll kick your arse at air hockey.”

Bumping my shoulder against his, I narrowed my eyes, challenging him.

We spent a couple of hours in the arcades, wasting money on slot machines and riding the mechanical motorbikes. Cole won me a fluffy grey teddy bear, and it only took him fourteen tries and five quid. He won air hockey because I was too busy concentrating on the muscles in his forearms. Lizzie would be proud.

“You getting hungry?” He wrapped his arms around me. I leant into him and nodded. It was almost nine at night, so I was definitely ready to eat. “Okay. We need to go back to the car to get the picnic basket, then we can eat on the beach?”

Nodding eagerly, I pulled out of his arms and dragged him towards the door by his hand.

On the beach, I sat down beside him and opened the basket. We sat under the pier on a blanket and ate Jenna’s famous lemon cake. I looked out at the sea and smiled as the water gently lapped at the shore. The wind had died down, so it was calmer out, much more peaceful.

After eating, I snuggled closer to his side and laid my head on his shoulder, wishing we could stay here forever. If we were older everything would be better. I wouldn’t have to go home. This is how things could be all the time.

“You having a good time?” he questioned. I nodded against his shoulder.
I’m having the best time.

“Good. Me too. I don’t want to leave.” He sighed into my hair as he placed a kiss on the top of my head.

I was falling harder, faster.

“Come on, we need to get back or your dad’ll have my balls.” I tilted my head and kissed his jaw. He took a sharp breath and his arm tightened around my waist. “We’ll come back soon. I kinda need this again,” he admitted.

He had no idea how much I needed it too.

The drive home was sombre. Neither one of us wanted the night to end.

As we pulled up outside my house, ice settled in my stomach. Dad would probably be waiting up. I kissed Cole’s cheek and opened the car door.

“You’re welcome,” he said in response to my thank you kiss. “Glad you had a good night.”

That was the understatement of the century.
Oakley

The rest of the week passed in a haze of Cole, Cole and more Cole. We spent practically every minute together, hanging out and messing around. Our unofficial relationship was getting stronger. I could feel myself falling hard, and I was terrified and excited.

I couldn’t help thinking that something would go wrong.

On Thursday morning, I sat on my bed, panicking about a stupid doctor’s appointment I had no idea how to get out of. Mum still hadn’t told me, so I assumed she was just going to spring it on me while we were shopping.

If we were even going shopping at all. That could be a lie too.

As I gazed out of the window anxiously, my phone beeped, making me jump. It was a text message from Cole. ‘Good luck today. Let me know if you want me to come. X’

Cole was the last person I wanted there, but the sentiment warmed my heart.

“Oakley, are you ready to go?” Mum called up the stairs. My eyes narrowed at the sound of her voice, and I instantly felt guilty. She shouldn’t lie to me, but she was just worried. She’d been worrying for years.

Summoning up the courage, I got off the bed and walked downstairs slowly. Dad sat in front of the TV, watching some construction show. He owned a building company, but it wasn’t as big as he wanted. That always bothered him, and he was forever stressing over how to become more successful.

I didn’t measure success by money and possessions. To me, success was all about family. In my eyes, Dad lost the ability for success a long time ago.

“Okay, honey,” Mum started, blowing out a deep breath. “I need to tell you something and I need you to know that I’m only doing it because I love you so much.”

I nodded for her to continue, knowing exactly what she was about to say.

“We’re going to a doctor’s appointment.” She held her hand up. “Before you get angry, please remember I’m only ever trying to do what’s best for you.”

Her eyes welled up with tears, making me feel sick. I hated when she was upset.

“Please, please, will you just go in there with me?” She swiped away a tear that rolled down her cheek.

Do it for her, Oakley, you disappointing her in every other way.

I kept my eyes firmly fixed on the floor and nodded. “Thank you,” she whispered.

Although I’d agreed and felt horrible for making her upset, I was fuming. If my own mum couldn’t love me the way I was what hope was there for anyone else? Cole and Jasper didn’t care in the sense that they didn’t try to change me. Dad counted on me staying mute.

I needed my mum.
We left the house and got in the car. She was ashamed for how she’d sprung it on me because she couldn’t look at me. The closer we got to the doctor’s surgery the less I could breathe.

_It’ll be okay._
_No, it won’t. It’ll rip your whole world apart._
_They won’t believe you over him._
_It’ll kill your Mum, you know it will._

I closed my eyes and begged it to stop. It would be okay because I would never tell. I can keep a secret.

My stomach rolled as we parked outside the surgery.

“I’ll be with you the whole time, love. You have nothing to be afraid of.”

But she wasn’t with me when it was happening, and I had a lot to be afraid of. Mum had no idea how much she didn’t want to know.

I got out of the car and followed her to the front desk where she gave the nurse my name.

Wrapping my arms around myself, I kept my head down and stuck close to Mum.

“Oh, if you’d like to take a seat, the doctor will be with you shortly,” the greying woman behind the reception desk told us.

Mum smiled. “Thank you.”

This wasn’t our normal doctor’s surgery. It was in the same complex but in a completely different building. This one was overly white and smelt too clinical. I knew we were seeing a specialist and not just an ordinary doctor.

This specialist could just know. He or she could look at me and just know.

“Oakley Farrell?” A deep, gruff voice called.

I gulped and looked up. A plump man wearing black trousers and a smart black-and-white stripe shirt looked around the group of patients waiting in the seating area. Mum stood up first and caught his attention. He gave her a smile and gestured for us to follow him.

_He’s going to find out. He’ll tell everyone and you’ll lose everything._

My palms started to sweat as we walked along the short corridor and into a small room. I was shaking and desperately trying to breathe.

Mum shook his hand and sat down in one of the blue fabric chairs. I slumped down beside her, my mind going a million miles an hour.

_She’ll never forgive you._
_Cole will think you’re disgusting._
_You’ll take Jasper’s dad away from him._

“Well, what can we do for you then, Oakley?”

I stared at him blankly. Did he expect me to answer?

Mum squeezed my hand and started explain on my behalf. “Oakley stopped talking when she was just five years old. At first we thought it was a joke. And then we thought it could be due to a choked incident, that maybe it’d damaged her throat somehow. We thought she could be afraid it would hurt too much if she spoke…”

As Mum reeled off a list of their theories, I found myself gradually shutting out her voice. I wanted to vanish. Suddenly, I felt my hand being squeezed.

“I don’t know what to do anymore.” Mum sniffed and tightened her grip of my hand again.

The doctor nodded. “Hmm, I see. Well, fear of talking due to previous injury is possible. However, this has been going on for years, so that seems unlikely.”

He leant forwards, resting his forearms on his mahogany desk.

“Oakley, would it be okay with you if I examined your throat?”

My heart stopped. I could feel the panic rising. I tried to breathe, but my lungs felt like they were being crushed in a vice.

_No, no, no!_
I didn’t want any examinations. If they rule out anything medical, they’ll know it’s not because I can’t talk. I couldn’t have Mum turning all her attention at why I wouldn’t talk.

“What kind of examination? What would that involve doing?” Mum questioned.

“Nothing too bad, I can assure you,” he said lightly. “For today I’ll just look down her throat and see if I can see anything, scarring for instance. If there is nothing visibly wrong, and I suspect there won’t be, I’d like to perform a laryngoscopy. The procedure is usually performed under local anaesthetic, but we can do general if needed,” he explained, looking at me.

No chance.

“We’ll pass the laryngoscope down her throat which will send pictures to a monitor. The procedure itself will take around twenty to thirty minutes.”

My body turned cold from the inside out. Bile raced up my throat, and I swallowed hard. There was no way I was letting him even look inside my mouth, let alone stick a camera down my throat. I started breathing heavily as my eyes prickled with tears.

“Sweetheart,” Mum said soothingly.

He’s going to find out. Watch your world crumble around you in five, four, three...

Shaking my head, I leapt up and ran out of the room, sprinting to the surgery’s exit.

It’s all over now. I’ll never let anyone know.

I reached the car and sobbed, slumpimg to the ground. Tears rolled down my cheeks, and I gasped for breath.

“Oakley,” Mum shouted frantically. Within seconds, she was crouching down in front of me.

“Honey, please don’t cry. It won’t hurt. Please, let him do the procedure, please?” She sobbed and stroked my hair. I could barely breathe. I was so worked up I felt like I was going to pass out again.

“Calm down, it’s okay. It doesn’t have to be today. You get in the car, and I’ll go speak to the doctor quickly. We can look into the procedure a little more and then decide. Get in the car, baby, it’s okay.”

That was the best I was going to get so I nodded, even though I had no intention of ever going back.

“Here.” She handed me the car keys and helped me up. With shaking hands, I managed to unlock the car and stumble in.

Deep breaths. Count backwards from ten. No one knows a thing.

By the time Mum came back, I’d calmed down. She couldn’t make me do anything.

“Home?” she asked softly.

I nodded, staring out of the window as I hugged my legs to my chest.

I’ll never go back there.
“Hey?” Cole greeted me with a questioning look on his face. He stepped aside so I could walk in his front door. “I’d ask how it went, but I think I can guess…”

He nodded towards the stairs, gesturing for me to follow him up to his room. There was nowhere else I wanted to be. I practically flew upstairs and into his bedroom.

“So,” he prompted as I crawled onto his bed.

Shaking my head, I felt tears sting my eyes again. *Stop all the bloody crying!* I screamed silently at myself.

“That bad?” He climbed over me and pulled me into his arms. As he stroked my hair, I let the tears flow. Why couldn’t everyone just leave it? I was trying to forget and move on, but it was impossible to do when Mum was constantly trying to fix everything.

No amount of doctors, specialists or appointments could ever fix what’d happen. When you were damaged like me that was it forever. Something so dirty would never be clean.

Cole held me until I calmed down. When I was ready I pulled my head away from his chest and smiled at him apologetically.

“You okay now?”

I shook my head and sat up, wiping my face with my sleeve.

“Did you go in?”

I nodded slowly and looked up to see his reaction – which was surprise. Last time Mum had tried to get me to go to see a doctor about my ‘condition’ I didn’t even make it out of our front door.

“Did he examine you?”

I shook my head. Never.

“But you got into the room.”

He smiled, looking hopeful. I could tell what he was thinking. I made it into the room so maybe next I would allow them to do an examination.

“Are you supposed to go back?”

I nodded, grimacing. I could feel myself start to sweat at the possibility Mum pleading with me to go again.

“I could come with you if you want?” he offered, speaking gently.

How important was this to him? Did our being together properly depend upon me talking again? No matter how much I was falling for him I couldn’t do that. I wrapped my arms around myself. The thought of losing Cole was like having my chest cut open.

“Don’t do that.” He pulled my arms apart and kept hold of my hands to prevent me closing up again. “Oakley, it doesn’t matter to me if you never speak again. I’ve told you that a million
times, so please believe me. I know you better than anyone else does. I know what every little facial expression means and how you’ll react to a situation before it’s even happened. All I want is for you to be happy.”

My eyes filled with tears again. Good ones this time. See, idiot, he does like you for who you are.

“I mean it. If you’re happy as you are then that’s all that matters to me. Are you happy?”

Happy, I repeated in my head, testing the word. No, not happy, not with myself anyway. Scared, confused, broken, dirty, and lost – they all seemed to fit better. I nodded, telling him the biggest lie I had ever told.

He smiled. Wow, he bought it. Was I getting better at lying or did he just want to believe I was happy so much that he missed it? “Okay, I’ll help you tell your mum to back off then.”

That was it? I had just basically told him there was no chance I would ever talk again and he breezed past it like I’d said I wanted to trim my hair. I bit my bottom lip and smiled.

Someone knocked on Cole’s door. I wiped my eyes again, even though they were dry now and smiled. “Yeah?” Cole shouted and flicked the TV on with the remote.

Jenna pushed the door open and walked in, with a worried smile on her face. Mum had obviously told her about the doctor. “Do you want to stay for dinner, sweetie? We’re having tacos,” she offered, brushing her blonde hair behind her ear. I nodded eagerly. Mexican night at Cole’s was the best. There wouldn’t just be tacos, there would be wedges, salad, tortilla chips, salsa dips and nachos too. There was also the chilli challenge between Cole and his dad. They would both try to eat the most and see who ‘pussied’ out first.

“Great. Chris is coming, too,” she said and frowned. Jenna wasn’t a fan of Chris either. What are you doing, Mia? I hoped that one day she would realise she could do so much better than him. Cole mumbled something under his breath. I couldn’t quite make it out, but I could pretty much guess what it was.

“You,” she pointed to Cole, “had better be on your best behaviour, for your sister’s sake.”

“I would be if he wasn’t such a fuc—” I jabbed my elbow into his side before he finished his sentence. “Why’d I get hit for that one? It’s true!” he exclaimed, frowning at me.

Jenna looked like she was trying not to laugh. “So…” she said with a wide smile and sat on the end of the bed. “You two okay?”

I looked at Cole uncomfortably, and he rolled his eyes at his mum.

“Not really. I just can’t get rid of her,” he said sarcastically, tensing his body as if he was waiting to be slapped. I decided not to as he was expecting it. Instead, I shrugged and stood up to leave. He grabbed my wrist and pulled me back on the bed, making me fall onto the mattress. “I’m joking!”

Jenna made an ‘aww’ sound, which made me want to run away. It was embarrassing.

“So are you two… you know?”

“Mum!” Cole groaned and pointed to the door.

Jenna giggled like a teenage girl and started to leave. “I’m going, I’m going. I think it’s great. Not that we couldn’t all see it coming or anything.”

“Mum!” Cole snapped again. Jenna closed the door. Her laughter rang through his room, even though she was on the other side of the wall.

I looked at the wall, praying that my face hadn’t turned too pink. It would be though, of course. Cole chuckled and brushed his fingers across my cheek. “Just ignore her,” he said and flopped down on his back. “Let me know when to stop,” he instructed as he flicked through the TV channels.

We lay on his bed all afternoon watching television, messing around and kissing each other. Lots of kissing each other, actually. It was the perfect afternoon.

“Wanna go swimming tomorrow?” Cole asked casually, breaking the long, comfortable silence. I nodded and pressed my back into his chest, so I was even closer to him. His fingers brushed over my hipbone. Everywhere he touched felt as if it was on fire. I closed my eyes.
It’s okay to feel good. It’s Cole’s touch.

Half an hour later, Jenna called us down for dinner. As we walked downstairs, I wondered if my parents had been invited too. I hoped not. Holding my breath, I peered into the kitchen to see. Only David and Jenna were there. I blew out a sigh of relief and sat down in my usual seat.

“Where is he?” I heard Cole ask his mum, referring to Chris, no doubt.

“Mia’s room.”

Cole glared in anger.

“Please, don’t start, Cole. She’ll realise she deserves better in her own time. If you push her now, you’ll only push her further into his arms.”

He grumbled something that his mum probably shouldn’t hear from his mouth and slumped into the seat next to me.

When Mia and Chris walked in, the room fell silent. The atmosphere became tense, but I would still rather be here than at my house. I smiled at the two of them. It couldn’t be easy for Mia knowing that her family hated her boyfriend. Their reason for hating him was valid, but Jenna was right, Mia had to get over him and move on in her own time.

Everyone sat down, and I saw the challenging look between Cole and David. I couldn’t stop grinning as they both reached for a green chilli from the bowl.

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Dinner was delicious. I ate until my stomach hurt. The over-full feeling was worth it, though. Jenna was an incredible cook.

Cole groaned as we walked back up to his room after helping to clear up. He’d eaten three chillies and had been sick. “Lay with me?” He reached out and grabbed my hand, gently pulling me onto the bed. “I’m never eating that stuff again.”

Yeah, until next time.

I pursed my lips. He said that every time.

After chilling in his room for a while, waiting for him to recover a bit, he walked me home. I started to feel sick as I unlocked my front door and pushed it open. “See you tomorrow, Oaks,” Cole said, kissing me on the top of my head.

“Goodnight, Cole,” Mum called after him. I jumped at her voice, not having seen her approach.

“Are you okay, darling?”

I nodded, looking away from her.

“Are… Are we okay?”

We would always be okay. I loved my mum so much I was willing to keep silent for her. I stepped forward and wrapped my arms around her. It wasn’t her fault. None of it was. Mum hugged me back, almost squeezing me to death as a sob of relief racked her chest.

“I love you,” she whispered.

I smiled and kissed her cheek, letting her know that I loved her too.

When I stepped back, I could tell from her puffy eyes that she had been crying for a long time. I felt a stab of guilt.

This is not hurting her nearly as much as the truth would.

Giving her a quick half-hearted smile, I went upstairs and got into bed. Everything that happened in the day had exhausted me, and I just wanted to curl up under my quilt and sleep. I couldn’t even stay awake long enough to receive Cole’s text.
“Can you sit still for two minutes?” Cole teased and grabbed my Coke out of my hand before I spilt it. I was wriggling around in my seat in excitement. Our plane was gliding across the sky to Italy. I was so happy to be going away. I shook my head at him and stuck my tongue out.

Cole rolled his eyes. “Really, Oakley.”

I had spent every day with him since school broke up, and I still wasn’t getting bored of his company. In fact, I wanted more time with him. Although we weren’t officially together we may as well be. Neither of us was in a rush to have it official. It would only complicate things anyway. The fewer people involved at this point the better.

I was between Cole and Jasper on the plane, and for the last thirty minutes they’d been talking solidly about cars. I watched an in-flight movie to occupy myself until they’d finished and Cole started to tease me about my excitement level.

It was stupid, but the more distance between me and England the happier I felt. Dad was with me, on this plane, going to Italy, but I still felt more at ease.

“Bet I pull more girls than you!” Jasper, wiggling his eyebrows at Cole.

He would because Cole didn’t play stupid games like that, but I almost had a mini heart attack.

“I know you will, man. I don’t screw everything with a pulse.” Cole discreetly brushed his leg against mine to reassure me that he didn’t want anyone else. It was fine, I knew that he would never do anything with another person while we were ‘together’.

Jasper frowned in disappointment. I guess it wasn’t fun unless you were in a competition with someone else. My brother was disgusting. I couldn’t stand how he used women. It wasn’t all his fault – I understood that – if women were stupid enough to believe he would want more after he said he didn’t then he couldn’t be blamed for that.

“You’re young, mate! You should be getting as much as you can, from whoever you can!” Jasper was goading Cole. He suspected we were more than friends, and I could feel the reluctance to admit it from Cole. If I didn’t agree that we should be secret until we knew what was going on between us, I’d be hurt.

“You’re a pig, you know that?” Cole retorted.

Jasper laughed and nodded. “Yeah, but a sexually frustrated pig I am not! Don’t worry, we’ll go out and find you a nice blonde.”

As Cole stared blankly at Jasper, I started to find it amusing too. Poor Cole.

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As the plane started to descend, I felt lighter; like my problems had been left behind in England. I smiled, looking out of the window at the Italian airport. Time to relax. Here I could just be me. There was no before in Italy.

Once off, we retrieved our suitcases quickly and made our way to the hotel. The minicab drove up the mountain and stopped at our gorgeous little hotel. It was set into the mountain, only about a third of the way up. The infinity pool stretched to the very edge. It was breath taking, and I couldn’t wait to get in the pool and look out at the landscape.

A tall, skinny, and very glamorous woman greeted us as we strode into the entrance. She wore high-heeled black sandals and shocking red lipstick: the type of woman that made guys fall at her feet and women sick with envy. Confidence oozed from her perfect, white smile. I felt like a troll next to her.

“Hello and welcome,” she said in a thick Italian accent. “My name is Carmella, and I’m going to be showing you to your rooms.” Her English was almost as flawless as her looks.

“Thank you,” Dad responded politely, giving her that warm smile that won over absolutely everyone he met.

“That’s why no one will ever believe you.
I stepped closer to Cole.
Carmella helped us to check in and gave us wristbands that showed we were all-inclusive in the resort. Mine and Cole’s were the only ones with holes punched into them – for people under eighteen.
Cole scowled as Jasper pointed and laughed. There would be no free alcohol for him on this holiday. It didn’t bother me because I never drank the stuff. I had to keep a clear head. If you slip up the whole will find out. A drink wasn’t worth my family.

“Let’s unpack and meet by the bar in half an hour?” Mum suggested once as Carmella wished us a lovely stay and sauntered off. Jasper’s eyes never left her arse.
Jenna nodded. “Sounds great!”

My room was small and connected to my parents’, but it also had its own entrance, so I could come and go whenever I wanted. It was light, bright, comfortable, had enough storage and air conditioning. Although it wasn’t a huge suite, it had everything I needed.

I turned the locked on the adjoining door and was only satisfied when I heard the click. No one can get in.

I dumped my suitcase on my bed and opened the tiny balcony door. Stepping out into the warm air, I sighed. The view was beautiful. To my right were the mountains. Right at the top they were covered with a dusting of thin, white cloud. To my left was the sea. The sea abroad was so different to the one in England.

Someone knocked on the door. Reluctantly, I forced myself away from the amazing view and answered the door. “You’re not ready,” Cole stated, pointing to the warm England clothes that I was still wearing.

I smiled and ripped the zip of my suitcase open and grabbed a pair of denim shorts and a blue tank top. Holding one finger up, I told him to wait and went into the en-suite bathroom to get changed.

Checking my reflection in the mirror, I despaired. My hair was a mess from the sudden change in temperature.

Please don’t let my hair be like this for the whole two weeks, I prayed.

Pulling the hairband off my wrist, I tied my hair in a loose bun and got changed. There was just enough room to get dressed in here but when Cole wasn’t standing in my room I’d definitely change in there. Although it was very much a single room I loved it.

I yanked the bathroom door open, eager to grab a quick drink with our parents and then get down to the beach. My jaw dropped when my eyes landed on Cole. He was lying on my bed, swinging my bikini top around his finger.
Oh, no!

Jumping forward, I swiped it out of his hand and shoved it back inside my suitcase. My face felt like it was on fire. I wanted to kill him! Don’t meet his eye.

Cole burst out laughing. “You should have seen your face,” he choked, blocking my arm as I waved it beside me in an attempt to whack him. “Sorry. Couldn’t resist. You ready now?” His tone didn’t sound sorry at all, but then I didn’t expect him to be.

With a deep sigh, I stalked out of my room, trying not to smile myself. Seconds later, he grabbed my hand. “Sorry, but that is one sexy little bikini!”

I slapped his chest and closed my eyes, wishing the ground would open up and swallow me whole. As much as I liked when he said things like that, it did make me nervous. That side had to end sometime, right? I couldn’t be like this with him forever. If things progressed eventually the physical side of our relationship would be normal.

It has to be.

My chest ached where I willed it to be true. I couldn’t be this person for the rest of my life, hiding away, flinching inwardly at touch, wanting to cower and hide whenever someone looked at me in that way.

He laughed again, and then I felt his lips press against the side of my head. Looking up, I smiled happily and nudged his shoulder. I wouldn’t shy away from Cole’s touch, no matter how many mixed feeling it gave me. When I stripped back every ugly, self-loathing layer there was something at the very core that enjoyed everything Cole did to me. I loved how being with him, having him want me, made me feel.

I held my hand up in a ta-da manner when I was dressed. “Got your key?” he asked, and I nodded. It was Cole who forgot room keys, not me.

We headed out towards the lift, full of plans for the day. Thankfully the plane journey wasn’t long and the time difference was small so we wouldn’t have to worry about losing any holiday time to jetlag.

“Drink, then sea,” Cole said as he jammed his finger into the call button for the lift.

That sounded good to me. The beach was a fifteen-minute walk but it was all downhill so we planned to walk there and get a taxi back. It was hot, and I wasn’t walking uphill under the boiling sun.

When we got to the bar, Mum told us to skip the drinks and head straight out as long as we were back for dinner. Cole couldn’t get me out of the hotel quick enough.

“We just walk straight down there and it’s literally at the bottom,” Cole said, pointing to the path at the side of the winding road. It couldn’t be too hard to find since we could see the sea. All we had to do was walk towards it.

“Nicer than ours, huh,” he said, running his thumb over my knuckles.

We’d just made it to the bottom of the mountain and the beach stretched out in front of us. It was beautiful. The water was a clear aqua blue, and soft golden sands stretched out as far as I could see. There were people dotted around the beach, lying on colourful towels, and children running around, building sand castles. A few people were swimming in the sea and playing with large beach balls.

I looked up at Cole and smiled happily. This is where I belonged. And I wasn’t referring to our location.

We sat on the beach and watched the tide gently ripple against the shore. Cole stared out at sea. He was so tranquil it made my heart ache.

“I’d ask if you want ice cream, but that’s a pretty stupid question, right?” he said teasingly. It’d only been about fifteen minutes since we sat down, but I was always up for ice cream. Reading my overeager expression, Cole laughed, stood up and pulled me with him.

Cole ordered us both Belgian chocolate ice cream and we walked back to our spot on the sand. Before sitting down, Cole peeled his t-shirt off and spooned ice cream into his mouth. I bit my lip, frowning at the squirming feeling in the pit of my stomach.
This time I didn’t avert my eyes. His chest looked like it was carved from stone. He took care of himself and worked out, and I’d never appreciated that so much before. My heart was working overtime. The longer I looked at him the harder it beat.

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. *Calm down.*

“You okay?” he said after a minute. I nodded and scooted closer to him so our arms pressed against each other’s. The feel of his skin against mine gave me goose bumps.

I was falling again.

After an hour of lying around the beach, we decided to check out the hotel properly and grab some drinks. We walked back along the beach to find a taxi, and his hand brushed against mine. I stole a sideways glance at him. He was biting the inside of his mouth, deep in thought. Again, his hand brushed mine. He usually made the first move where handholding was concerned. And everything else, actually. *Take his hand, Oakley. Stop being such a baby!*

A small smile pulled at the side of Cole’s mouth and he wound his hand around mine, intertwining our fingers. Could he hear my thoughts?

“Oh, we’re going there,” he suddenly said and nodded his head towards a little wooden shack on the beach.

The crafted wooden sign just above where a gorgeous, honey-tanned man stood read ‘Water Sports’. Something was also written above it, which I assumed was the same in Italian.

I protested silently but followed him. Although I had absolutely no desire to get into the ocean I would do it for Cole. And it’d be good to actually do something. I shied away from anything scary, but I wouldn’t on this trip.

Time to be brave…at least this once.

“Hi, can we book diving lessons please?” Cole asked, without looking at the prices.

Tall, dark, and gorgeous nodded his head and flashed us a perfect, pearly white smile. He looked like a very gorgeous advert for surfers.

“Sure. I just need to see some ID,” he said in an Australian accent and pointed to me.

Cole shook his head. “ID?”

“Yeah, you need to be over sixteen or accompanied by an adult.” I looked at Cole and smiled victoriously.

“Here’s my ID. I’m eighteen. That counts as adult, right?”

I narrowed my eyes at him. The little bugger had a fake ID. Cole was still only seventeen. Gorgeous nodded again and checked the ID. Surely, he would know it was a fake?

“Thanks. You wanna go tomorrow at ten?”

My mouth dropped open. He’d bought it. This was really happening then.

“Sounds good, thanks.” Cole gave our details and then paid. Diving did actually sound fun, especially in the Italian sea, but I was still worried about the equipment breaking and me drowning. Or getting eaten by a shark.

“You’ll enjoy it,” he promised as he read my worried expression. I wanted to enjoy it. I gave him an ‘eek’ look, and he laughed. “You’ll be fine, Oakley. I’m not gonna let the sharks get you!” That really wasn’t helping, but I still grinned and shook my head. And how did he know about the sharks. “I’m kidding! Let’s get back now? I need a beer and some food.”

*Not with that wristband.*

We took a taxi back up and headed to our rooms to change. I was hot, sweaty and sandy. My hair was a fuzzy mess on top of my head and probably would be for the entire time.

“Where are you going?” Cole asked as I turned the wrong way for our rooms. There was something I wanted to do...

He followed behind me as I walked down the stone staircase to the lower floor. Pointing to the spa sign, I grinned. “No. Way, Oakley, not happening!”

*Yes, it was.*
I nodded and walked up to the treatment board beside the reception desk. Two ridiculously beautiful women were sitting behind the desk, looking at the computer screen. Was being stunning a requirement of working here?

“You can’t be serious?” he asked, begging me with his eyes to leave. “Do you want my balls to drop off?”

I grinned wide and cocked my head to the side.

“Let’s just go, yeah?”

Couples massage, I read in my head. Couples. I really wanted to relax together, but was a couples massage jumping the gun a little? Would he see it as a hint?

Just get a grip and do it.

Gathering the courage, I pointed to the massage and waited for his reaction.

“Just that?” he asked with a small smile playing on his lips. Shaking my head, I also pointed to the facial. He snorted. “You can do that, too, but there is no way I’m putting any of that shit on my face!”

I scowled at him.

“No. Just, no,” he said defiantly.

“Can I help you?” One of the women asked, grinning in amusement at our little exchange.

“Can we book the couples massage and the rejuvenating face thing for her, please?” Cole asked, nodding in my direction. I slapped his arm and decided to go with a different approach. I pouted and fluttered my eyelashes. Cole wasn’t budging.

“Not. Happening.”

The woman, who looked like she should be a model and not a receptionist, laughed.

“You want him to do both?” she asked. Her English was slightly better than Carmella’s, but her Italian accent was thicker. I nodded and hoped she wouldn’t ask me anything else. I didn’t want to seem rude. That was always a problem with strangers, not being able to answer them made me look like a bitch.

He groaned and turned back to the supermodel. “Okay. Both please.”

“Of course.”

She booked us in for tomorrow afternoon and handed us our appointment card. At least after diving in the morning I’ll be able to relax and get pampered. With Cole.

He tucked the appointment card in the pocket of his shorts and glared at me playfully. “You owe me big for this!” I raised my eyebrow. I owe him nothing. I’m getting in the sea tomorrow! He chuckled and casually threw his arm over my shoulder as we wandered back through the hotel.

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After eating dinner with our families, we walked along the mountain a little. It was so nice to just go out and do whatever we wanted to do. I loved it just being us.

On holiday our parents gave us a lot more freedom. As long as we told them where we were going, stuck together and met them once a day for the evening meal we pretty much had free reign.

It was getting pretty late and neither of us wanted to go into town for drinks with both our parents or clubbing with Mia and Jasper, so me and Cole decided to turn in. Our rooms were close together, but as I stopped at my door and turned to say goodnight, I met a nervous looking Cole.

“Can I stay for a bit?” he asked, scratching the back of his neck. I nodded, not wanting him to leave, like, ever. “Sure? I don’t mind if you just want to go to sleep…”

Unlocking the door, I pointed inside the room and raised my eyebrow.

“Bossy,” he muttered, walking into my modest room.
We kicked off our shoes and got on my bed. Lying next to him felt so right. There was nobody else in the world I would feel comfortable being this close to. Cole would never hurt me. I was certain of that.

“You asleep?” he whispered. His low voice sent a shiver down my spine. I shook my head and rolled onto my side. He really was impossibly good-looking.

*I love you,* I declared privately as my heart swelled double the size.

“You think I could stay here tonight? I could sneak out early in the morning.”

Biting my lip, I considered it. I wanted him to stay, but I was scared of getting caught. If we did though, we could easily lie our way out of it, say he fell asleep. I would love to spend the night with him.

Making my decision, not that it was very hard to make, I nodded, and he smiled so wide I felt lightheaded.

“Well, get ready for bed then!”

I got off the bed, flipped my suitcase open and pulled my shorts and tank top pyjamas out. Was he looking forward to the normality of being a couple and going to bed together as much as I was? I mean, *technically,* we weren’t a couple but that didn’t matter. I went into the bathroom to change and brush my teeth.

By the time I got back, Cole had taken his clothes off and was sitting in bed. Heat flooded my face. Was he naked? We had to work up to that. I’d only just got used to him shirtless. I stumbled the few steps to bed with shaking hands.

Oh, bloody hell.

I bit my tongue as I slipped into bed beside him. I was so nervous and more than a little scared. I couldn’t see if he was wearing boxers. I shuffled down and pulled the cover up to my chin, being careful not to touch him. After a minute, he did the same.

“You look tired.”

I nodded against the pillow.

Seconds later, his breathing became heavier. The atmosphere between us was thick and heated. We weren’t even touching but I was on fire. He brought me, my body, to life in a way I thought had been robbed forever. I wanted to reach out and touch him.

Groaning, he leant forwards and kissed me, taking me by surprise. Nothing mattered as our lips moved together. I didn’t care that I wasn’t good enough for him. I didn’t care that I shouldn’t want him. I loved him, and I wanted him.

I was whole.

He made a soft moaning sound and dug his fingers into my hair, holding my head in place. Suddenly, he rolled over and pinned me to the bed beneath him. I felt the initial panic start to rise, but it disappeared as quickly as it came. The panic was replaced with something else. Something I *wanted* more of.

When he pulled away just as quickly after a long and passionate kiss, I sagged in disappointment at the loss of that feeling. Cole tucked me into his arms. I was worked up and needy, but I understood why he’d stopped us. When we went further, when we touched each other, it had to be when we were official. We couldn’t be friends with benefits.

“Goodnight,” he murmured.

Wrapping my arm over my chest, I closed my eyes and fell asleep almost instantly.
I woke up to the bed dipping, stirring me out of sleep.
“Sorry,” Cole whispered. “It’s almost six, so I thought I should go. I’ll come back in a couple hours and we can go to breakfast.”
He bent down and kissed me lightly, his lips lingering on mine for a few seconds. Then I watched him creep out of my room with the hope he would stay again tonight. Waking up in the morning with him felt incredible. He seemed to unconsciously know how far to push me to get me to open up further and let him in.
There was absolutely no way I could get back to sleep now. I got up, had a long shower and dressed in my room since I was alone now. Opening the double doors, I stepped onto the small balcony and sat down on the only seat that’d fit. It was very peaceful so early. Only a few people were milling about the resort. One couple, probably about my parents age, sat at the bar drinking cocktails. It wasn’t even 7am yet.
My parents’ balcony door slid open. We were separated by the railing so they couldn’t get to my room from here. I bit my lip and looked over as Dad stepped out, dressed in shorts and a short sleeve shirt.
He looked over and saw me immediately. “Good morning,” he said. “Did you and Cole have a nice time yesterday?”
I nodded and felt my body hunch in the seat.
“Remember I want you both back for dinner each night. No exceptions, you’re still a child.”
No, I’m not.
I lift the corner of my mouth. Neither of us would skip on dinner anyway, we knew if we did that’d be the end of the freedom.
“Good. I think your mum’s waking up. We’ll see you for breakfast soon.”
He went back inside, and I could breathe again.
Just after eight, almost right on time, there was a knock on my door. Cole smiled as I opened the door. “Hi.” He stepped forward and planted a quick kiss on my lips. “Ready to go down?”
I nodded and stepped out of my room just as Mum and Dad walked out of theirs. “Morning, honey, Cole,” Mum said and gave me a hug.
“Hungry?” Dad asked.
“Starving,” Cole replied and nodded towards the lift at the end of the corridor. “You seen anyone else this morning?”
Dad shook his head. “Sarah’s just got off the phone to your mum, and they were on their way down for breakfast. We’ll meet them down there. I’ve not heard from Mia, and I’d imagine Jasper’s is…elsewhere.”
In some poor girl’s room, I imagine.
I stepped closer to Cole as we walked to the lift and waited for it to arrive.
“What do you have planned today? Your father and I are going shopping with David and Jenna,” Mum had asked me but waited for the reply from Cole.
“We’re diving this morning.”
I raised my eyebrow at him. He wasn’t going to tell them about our spa afternoon. He probably wouldn’t ever tell anyone.
“Is it safe?” Mum questioned, frowning with worry.
Dad chuckled. “Of course, it is, Sarah. There’s a qualified instructor, isn’t there?” Cole nodded. “See. They’ll be in safe hands. There’s plenty to do, and with the exception of clubbing, we did agree that Oakley could do what she liked.”
I often wondered if Dad was cool about things like this because he felt guilty. I had to believe he felt remorse for what he had let Frank do to me. I couldn’t believe that my daddy was a cold, heartless monster.
“Well, you make sure you look after her,” Mum ordered Cole.
He nodded. “Always.”
I liked the sound of that.
In the end, it was only David, Jenna and Mia who joined us for breakfast. Jasper was nowhere to be seen. Not that it was much of a surprise. He now treated holidays, or any days actually, as a chance to sleep with anything that moved.
Breakfast was an all you can eat buffet, which Cole took very seriously. I didn’t eat much because I didn’t want it to come back up again while we were diving. I was already feeling queasy with nerves.
“Have fun and be careful,” Jenna said as Cole and I got up to leave for the beach.
Fun was unlikely, but my adrenaline was pumping at the mere thought of doing something so out of character.
Cole grinned. “Oh, we will, right, Oaks.”
Maybe I wasn’t falling for him after all…
I walked down to the beach, holding Cole’s hand so tightly I was probably crushing his bones. Under my clothes was my bikini, but for diving we’d be given a wetsuit to wear over the top.
“Are you ready for this?” Cole said as we arrived back at the sports shack.
I shook my head but grinned, unable to hide the smidge of excitement I felt.
The Australian guy, who told us his name was Kyle, showed us how to use the equipment. I made sure I listened hard and repeated everything in my head over and over. We’d have an instructor with us, but I was still scared.
Stop being ridiculous. You’re not even going that deep.
Cole was practically bouncing up and down as we walked with our little group of six into the sea. Kyle instructed us in what to do, and then he disappeared beneath the water.
“Ready?” Cole asked. He stuck his oxygen thing in his mouth.
What is that called again? Bloody hell! It doesn’t really matter what it’s called as long as it works. Nodding, I took one last deep breath and mirrored his actions.
We sank to our knees and the second I was underwater I knew this was a good idea. It was incredible. I wanted to smile, but I didn’t want to do anything that could make me swallow water.
Cole grabbed my hand and looked towards Kyle, who was gesturing for us all to follow him. I didn’t have a death wish, so I followed closely behind and next to Cole. We were at the back of the group, but that was great because it felt like it was just him and me.
We swam deeper into the sea, and I wondered how much further we would be going. I knew I wouldn’t be able to stand up and have my head above the water by this point, but I wasn’t sure exactly how deep we were. It didn’t matter though, I was bloody loving it.
Cole took my hand as we watched fish swim around us. I was so wrong about the sea.
Once our time was up, Kyle gestured for us to swim back to the surface, and then he led us back to the shore. “You so enjoyed that, didn’t you,” Cole teased as we walked back to the shack to return the equipment, knowing full well that once I was under the water I loved every second of it.

I shrugged nonchalantly but my traitorous lips curled.

“I knew you would. Let’s head back for a shower, and then I’ll come to your room. Wanna have lunch before the spa crap this afternoon?”

I nodded and nudged him with my shoulder. Like he wouldn’t enjoy a massage from one of the impossibly beautiful women that worked at the hotel.

We got back, grabbed a quick lunch out by the pool and then went to the spa. Cole suddenly felt ‘unwell’. “Maybe I should just wait out here for you,” he suggested, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand.

Really. I shook my head and shoved him towards the reception desk. There wasn’t a single thing he could say that would change my mind about this. He was getting a facial and a massage.

“Welcome. I’m Isabelle. How can I help?” Said an equally beautiful woman to the ones who were in the spa yesterday. If I could just see someone else who was plain looking, that’d be great.

“We have some stuff booked. Under the name Benson,” Cole said quietly as if saying it any louder would make it more real.

“Ah, yes. Okay, if you’d like to follow me, I’ll show you to your massage room.”

I followed Isabelle with a huge smile. I was feeling giddy with excitement at having a massage with Cole. Isabelle opened a door, and the smell of rose oil hit me. Two white beds were in the middle of the room. There was a chest on the far wall with loads of little draws and a huge bunch of pink orchids in a white vase on top.

“There are towels on the beds. If you remove all of your clothes and cover yourself, your masseuse will be with you in five minutes.

My eyes widened. Remove all of our clothes. Okay, I did not think this through. I’d not been naked in front of Cole before. She left the room, and I started to hyperventilate.

“You can leave your underwear on, just move your bra straps off your shoulders,” Cole suggested. “I’ll turn around. I won’t look. I promise.”

Oh, God. Breathe.

The last time I was naked in front of another person…

I squeezed my eyes closed. Don’t think about that. Cole isn’t going to hurt you. With a deep breath, I opened my eyes and removed the dress I was wearing. It’s fine; you can do this.

Cole removed his top and shorts quickly, unashamed, but he left his boxers on.

“I’m not looking, Oakley. Go ahead,” he said with a chuckle as he laid face down on the massage table. As promised, he didn’t look, and I shoved my bra straps down and got on the bed.

As soon as I was lying down, I made sure the towel covered me from my underarms to my knees.

“You good?” he asked, turning his head and smiling at me. I nodded, fisting my hands through the rapid beating of my heart.

Everything’s fine.

A knock at the door made me jump. Cole called out to let the masseuse know we were ready. Thankfully two women entered. There was no way a man, who wasn’t Cole, was going to touch my body.

Never again.

“Oh, this was a good idea,” he admitted halfway through. Yeah, I bet he thought that with yesterday’s gorgeous model massaging him. I closed my eyes as Elana worked her skilful hands over my shoulders. I had a lot of tension, but for the first time in years I was fully relaxed.

When our thirty minutes were up, I pouted and got up to get dressed as Elaina and Cole’s masseuse left the room. Cole turned around again so I could have some privacy.

Does it really matter if he sees you? I wasn’t scared of Cole or what he would do because I trusted him with my life. Impulsively, I grabbed the top of his arm and spun him around.
“What…?” he croaked. His eyes widened as they landed on my half-naked body. I was covered by my underwear, but it was still very intimate. He gulped audibly, his Adams apple bobbed. “I can turn… Um, turn around if… Err,” he stuttered, stumbling over his words. It was cute to see him tongue-tied, and it kind of gave me a thrill to know I’d made him like that.

Shaking my head, I pulled my straps up, all the while being careful not to flash him. We both dressed in complete silence, and neither one of us took our eyes off the other. The only sound that could be heard was our ragged breathing.

“You’re beautiful,” he whispered once we were dressed. He stepped closer to me, and I blushed, feeling the heat warm my whole body. My eyes prickled, and I willed myself not to cry. I didn’t feel beautiful, but knowing Cole thought I was meant everything to me.

He smiled and bent his head to kiss me. “Let’s get this face mud crap over with.”

I broke out in a smile and led him back to reception.

We were led into another room, this time bigger, and not at all private. Cole glared at me as the three young women looked up at us; their faces were smothered in a dark green paste. I tried not to laugh, but I couldn’t help it. Though having enjoyed the diving so much, I did feel bad for making him go through something he clearly didn’t want to do.

“I thought this was a couple’s thing? As in two people!”

Nope, just the massage. This is fun.

For the whole time we were in that room Cole frowned and moaned. When he looked over at me with a grey face that looked like he’d fallen in a cement mixer, I wished I had brought my camera with me. Not that the image would ever leave me.

As soon as our facemasks were off, he stood up ready to leave.

“Lunch and beer,” he announced. Beer to restore his masculinity? Bless. He’d have to hope that Jasper or Mia were around to get him a beer first. He wrapped his arm around my waist and we made our way to the outside hotel bar.

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The holiday was flying past too quickly. I hated how close we were to leaving, but I was still having the time of my life. Cole and I hung out at the beach a lot, and I was actually getting a tan. It was a nice change from my usual pasty, ghostly white. We barely saw our parents during the day, except for breakfast most morning and every evening for dinner.

I couldn’t wait until I was old enough to leave home.

Mia spent most of her time with a girl she had met on the second day. They’d go out every night and look for ‘hotties’ apparently. Neither one of them found a holiday romance, and I suspected Mia wasn’t up for it because she was still holding onto Chris. But she was having a good time.

And Jasper, well, we saw him around the hotel occasionally. He would get up at around three in the afternoon and chill by the pool bar, have dinner with us and then go out all night. I overheard him tell Cole that he’d only woke up in his room a few times. Gross.

Since the dressing incident in the spa, I grew even more comfortable and confident around Cole. We now both thought nothing of changing in front of each other. Every night he would sneak into my room and sleep in my bed. We would just mess around and kiss until we fell asleep. He didn’t try to touch me intimately, and I loved him for that. Although, while caught up in the moment, I’d wanted him to so many times.

He made me burn for something I knew would be amazing with him. I wanted to take things further, and I was getting more confident with letting him know that.

After dinner, Cole and I decided to chill in my room and watch a movie. We were going to the water park again early in the morning, so we didn’t want to be out too late. My parents were
off with David and Jenna in town for dinner and a show. Jasper was doing his usual, and Mia was out in town with Hazel.

I climbed on the bed and hovered above him, my hands beside his face. He instantly smiled, wrapped his hand around the back of my head and pulled me down. His lips captured mine in a kiss that made my toes curl. Slowly, he rolled us so he was on top.

He chuckled and kissed my forehead. “Oakley?” His voice wobbled nervously. “This is probably really late considering everything but…well, I was wondering if…” He sighed and shook his head, frowning at himself. “Shit, I’m such a twat. Will you be my girlfriend?”

My mouth fell open.

Breathe, Oakley!

His body tensed. “Err, is that a no?”

I shook my head, and he frowned.

“It’s a yes?”

I nodded and kissed him. That was the biggest and easiest yes I’d ever said. He pulled away and kissed down my neck. I froze for a second; fighting between wanting more and being terrified by how I might react.

Cole moaned as he ran his hand down the side of my body and gripped the bottom of my top. This was that defining moment where I had to decide if I was going to listen to what I actually wanted or what I thought I should want.

No more putting my life on hold. We weren’t doing anything wrong, and I wanted this.

I loved how he made me feel and how natural being with him was.

This is my choice. No one else’s.

When I didn’t push him away, he pulled my top over my head. His lips only left mine for a second while he whipped my top off. My whole body felt like it was on fire. Everywhere he touched made my skin tingle. His hands caressed my stomach and chest with such a gentle touch it almost tickled.

He groaned, and his eyes smouldered. “Maybe we should stop…” He made it sound like a question, a question he knew the answer to. Putting the last of my fears to one side, I shook my head, and Cole looked nervous.

My decision to be with him wasn’t an easy one, but I loved him and trusted him. This was about us, no one else.

“Are you sure?” he whispered. His voice was thick with lust it made my stomach clench. I nodded and ran my hand through his soft hair.

“Are you scared?”

No, not of being with you.

I shook my head, and he chuckled.

“Don’t worry, I’m kinda nervous, too.” Why was he nervous? “This isn’t just your first time,” he admitted, biting his lip. Cole was a virgin. My eyes widened, and he raised an eyebrow at me. “Not sure if I should be insulted by your surprise or not.”

I shook my head, trying to make sense of what he said. How could he be a virgin? He’d had a couple of girlfriends before, although they hadn’t lasted very long, but still...

“It took so long for me to even consider there might even be a tiny chance that you liked me the same way I liked you. I’ve never slept with anyone because… because I’ve only ever wanted you,” he whispered.

Oh.

Wow.

I felt a warm tear roll down the side of my face, which Cole wiped away with his thumb. He smiled and added, “I love you, Oakley. Always have. Always will.” Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath as warmth spread through my chest.

I felt a gentle pressure on my lips, and I kissed him back, showing him how much I loved him, too.
I lay perfectly still, so I wouldn’t wake her and watched her sleeping in my arms. She was so beautiful, and so out of my league I couldn’t believe she agreed to be with me. I was the luckiest bastard alive.

She sighed in her sleep and rolled onto her back. A mass of blonde hair lay messily underneath her. Last night was the best night of my life. The way she felt and tasted was etched into my mind. Sex was not at all underrated.

A weight had lifted off my shoulders when I finally admitted I was in love with her. I’d been holding it in for so damn long, scared that it would put her off.

It was good to finally say it out loud.

Oakley didn’t think that much of herself, and I had no idea why. To me, she was perfect. It didn’t matter that she wouldn’t talk or our relationship wouldn’t be ‘normal’ because of it. I was in love with her.

When she first stopped talking, everyone thought it was a fish bone that she’d choked on. We waited patiently for a few days, and then it became obvious that something else was going on. I still wasn’t sure, and it drove me crazy sometimes.

Oakley had to come to us. There have been so many times where I’ve wanted to beg her, make her tell me, but I knew that would push her away. My goal was to be someone she knew she could count on whenever she decided to talk.

I wanted to hear her say my name again so badly. I wanted to hear her voice, hear how it’d changed and see if I recognised it. At one point, Jasper thought she was doing it for attention, but that wasn’t like her at all.

I sighed in happiness and kissed the top of her head, hoping that one day she would let me in. I’d been patient all these years, I loved her, so I wasn’t giving up.

It was almost six in the morning, and I needed to sneak back to my room soon, but I was too comfortable, even with her sprawled out on my chest. I doubted anyone would be up at this time, but I couldn’t risk getting caught and not being able to sleep in her bed again.

Waking up next to her made me feel like a king, and I only had a few more days to do it.

Stop being a fucking creep and leave!

Throwing on my clothes, I took one last look at her and left the room.

A few people were about as I walked along the corridor, but thankfully not Oakley’s parents. I got in and headed straight for the shower. There was no way I could fall back to sleep now, so I might as well get up.
As I looked at my reflection in the mirror, I froze, realising I’d left Oakley alone the morning after we’d had sex. She would wake up alone. Each morning I’d get up and go whether she was awake or not, but it was different now.

*I’m such a twat!*

Glancing at the ceramic clock on the wall, I saw that it was now six-forty-five. Too late to sneak back. *If you hurry up, she might still be asleep when you go back. I can’t let her wake up alone.*

She set her alarm for seven-thirty, so I had to be quick. Rushing around, I had a shower and clumsily got dressed. I was in such a hurry I stumbled around like a bloody puppy learning to walk. I shoved my leg through the wrong hole in my shorts and growled. *Calm down!* I was so bloody jacked up I couldn’t even dress myself.

When I was finally ready, I only had minutes to spare. No one but Oakley had ever made me feel nervous. Other girls didn’t affect me. She was it, and I was terrified of messing things up.

Taking a deep breath, I grabbed my phone and wallet and headed to her room. The problem I had now was that her door was locked, and I didn’t have a key. Whatever happened, she would wake up the morning after losing her virginity and be alone.

*Nice one, Cole.*

Shaking my head at myself, I knocked on the wooden door and waited. As the seconds crept by, I thought a thousand different things that made my head spin. What if she’d woken up and thought I skipped out on her? What if she already left because she was angry and upset? *I should’ve left a note.*

The door swung open, and she smiled shyly. Her beauty hit me like a wrecking ball.

“Hi,” I said, giving her an apologetic grin. I was a mess of nerves and something so powerful it almost winded me. I’d been in love with her for a long time, but now I knew her feelings were reciprocated it felt more.

What now? She moved aside for me to come in, and I followed her inside where she sat on the bed. I loved that bed. I needed to say something, but when I opened my mouth nothing came out. Shit, this was awkward. It shouldn’t be awkward.

*Seriously, say something!*

Gulping, I searched for the right words, not knowing what they even were. “Are you okay? You’re not... err, sore or anything?”

Biting her lip, she shook her head. Her cheeks turned the most adorable shade of pink, almost matching her full lips. “Are you sure? I mean, your first time is meant to hurt, and if you’re sore we can get you something.” I rambled like an idiot. What the hell would you even get for that? Sitting down, I winced in horror at how pathetically tragic I was.

Oakley shook her head again and stood up, busying herself by getting her bag ready.

“Oh, Good.” I frowned. She rarely admitted when she was ill or in pain so it came as no surprise that When she had finished shoving her camera in her bag, I got up and wrapped my arms around her. She melted into my chest.

“I love you,” I whispered, running my hands through her soft hair. She stroked my cheek and my heart almost imploded.

Reaching up, she pressed her lips against mine. I kissed her back, pulling her tight against my body. I hated that we had to meet our parents for breakfast; I just wanted to take her back to bed for the rest of the day. Pulling away to catch my breath, I touched my nose to hers.

“You ready?” I asked. Her breath caught in her throat, and it made me feel a thousand feet tall. She nodded slowly, not taking her eyes off mine for a second. I kissed her quickly, and we left for the breakfast restaurant.

We got into the lift, and she smiled apologetically, pulling her hand out of mine just before we got to the ground floor. Right, so no one would see us together. I didn’t like that rule anymore, but if we kept it up a little longer we could enjoy the rest of the holiday in peace.
“It’s okay,” I assured her. “I want to be able to spend time alone with you, too. We can tell everyone we’re together when we get back, right?”

She nodded eagerly, and practically skipped out of the lift as the door opened. Laughing, I shook my head and followed.

Mum, Dad, Sarah, Max, Jasper, and Mia were already sitting at the table waiting for us. Thankfully, her parents had relaxed completely and let her go off with me all the time. I loved that they trusted me with her, but they wouldn’t let us have that freedom when they found out we were together.

“Morning,” I said as everyone greeted us, trying to keep the I’ve-just-had-sex smug grin off my face. Jasper eyes me suspiciously but that could just be his normal twattish face. There had been so many times he’d thought Oakley and me were more than friends so he wouldn’t know.

“Water park, fuckers!” Jasper said, earning a glare from Max and Sarah.

“Let’s go and eat,” Max said tightly.

We went up to get our food from the buffet table and sat down to eat. The buffet was my favourite part of the hotel. Well, second to Oakley’s bed. Jasper and I literally stuffed ourselves until we felt sick. It had kind of become a contest now, one I lost daily. I could live with losing to see him hold his stomach and groan every morning.

As I watched in shock and awe at the piles of toast, sausages, bacon, beans, and mushrooms on his plate, I sighed. Today would be no different. The guy was a machine.

I moved my leg, so it was brushing against Oakley’s. A smile crept on my face as I saw her blush.

“Mind if I come to the water park today?” Mia asked.

“Sure,” I replied. Jasper was coming along, too, so it wasn’t like I’d get to spend time alone with her anyway.

She’d been hanging out with some girl all week but she’d gone home yesterday so Mia was at a loose end.

“Right,” Max said as everyone stood up. “You four have a lovely day. Oakley, you stay with Cole. Us old four have a boat to catch, but we’ll see you for dinner. Take care of her,” he told me and kissed Oakley’s forehead.

“I will.”

He nodded and held his hand out for Sarah. He never told Jasper to look out for Oakley. Probably because he couldn’t keep a goldfish alive.

“Meet in the lobby in an hour,” Jasper said.

“Good, that’ll give my stomach time to deflate,” Mia said, patting her belly. “I’m not wearing a bikini when I’m bloated.”

I rolled my eyes and walked to the lift with Oakley close to my side. We looked innocent. We so were not.
Cole

Oakley and I went back to her room to spend the hour together before we left for the water park, and I was seriously sulking because we had to pretend to be friends all day. We had only just gotten together, and I wanted to show her off.

Groaning loudly, I flopped down on the bed. “Why do they have to come?”

She smiled in amusement and jumped on the bed. I rolled onto my back, and she crept on top of me. My heart started beating faster and harder at the feel of her body pressing against mine. I ran my hands up her back and fisted her hair. See, things were much better when we were alone.

“Kiss me,” I ordered, and she didn’t hesitate to cover her mouth over mine.

Moaning deeply, I curled my hand around her neck and kissed her back. She tasted like the strawberries and watermelon she’d had at breakfast, and her lips drove me insane. She kissed me like she had to.

Oakley pulled away too soon and sat up, smiling down at me. I squeezed her thighs and willed myself to calm down. I didn’t want to put any pressure on her, and I didn’t want her to think that I just wanted her for sex.

If I had my way we’d spend the rest of the holiday in bed, but I also wanted to do everything she was excited for while we were here. Soon, it’d be back to reality, and when we told everyone about our relationship there would be a lot more rules we had to follow.

“You sure you’re okay?” I asked, running my hands up her thighs and gripping her hips. This is not helping me calm down.

She smiled, nodded and swung her leg off me. I couldn’t tell if she wanted me inside her again or if she really was hurting. I knew she wouldn’t tell me if she was, and it drove me crazy. Maybe I should have run her a bath this morning?

God, this was all new to me, and I felt like I was constantly fucking up.

“So, are you wearing that blue bikini?” I asked, innocently. Please say yes, please, please, I begged in my head. A blush swept across her cheeks and she dipped her head. Oh, thank you. This was going to be a good day. I groaned and readjusted my shorts while she wasn’t looking.

Sitting up, I kissed her and moved my lips down her neck. “I love you,” I murmured against her skin. She gasped and gripped my t-shirt at the sides. “Okay,” I said, ripping back like she’d just kicked me in the balls. I stood up and explained, “We need to go out soon and you’re making it hard.” Really, really hard.

A loud, obnoxious knock on the door, that I knew would be Jasper, was like having a cold shower. Her brother could kill the mood in an instant.

“Let’s go,” Jasper said with a wide smile as I opened the door.
We were supposed to meet in the lobby, but I guess he couldn’t wait for that. He was probably to eager to stalk some poor, innocent girls by the pool. I couldn’t help feeling a little sorry for him. Abby, his ex, had really screwed him over.

When Mia arrived, her mood had changed completely from an hour ago. She was no longer excited to go out. Her face looked like someone had slapped her, and her blue eyes glared at everything. Obviously she had just spoken to Chris-the-dick. I fucking hated that guy, and if I knew I wouldn’t lost my sister I would’ve punched him a long time ago.

“I booked a taxi, let’s go,” she said, trying to keep her voice light.

Oakley walked ahead with Mia.

“Bet you twenty quid I score at least twice today,” Jasper said.

I looked over at him, bored. “When the fuck are you gonna grow up?”

He rolled his eyes and smirked. “Cole, man, I’ll do that shit when I’m in my forties. Why the hell would I want to settle down so young?”

“Why are you bothering, Cole?” Mia asked. “You know what Casanova is like.”

“Isn’t that the guy on the Titanic?”

Oakley snapped her head around and stared at her brother in disbelief.

I laughed at the stupid dick and wondered how the hell he got into Uni.

“What?” Jasper said, frowning in annoyance at why I was laughing at him.

“Honestly, babe, it’s a wonder you’re able to dress yourself,” Mia teased. “You think I’m good looking, sweetheart, you should see what I keep covered up.”

His lips curved. “You think I’m good looking, sweetheart, you should see what I keep covered up.”

She rolled her eyes and started walking. It was only then that Oakley shook her head and caught up with Mia. Jasper wasn’t stupid, most of the time, but fuck he did not think things through before opening his mouth.

At the water park, we split up to go to the respective changing rooms and then met outside. Jasper was immediately off as soon as he saw a group of girls walk by. They were all beautiful and probably about a year younger than Jasper. Neither one could make me turn my eye from Oakley. That girl was buried deep under my skin, tattooed all over my heart. I fucking loved her with everything I had.

With Jasper gone I looked like a bloody pervert waiting outside the ladies changing room. I averted my eyes as a group of pre-teens walked out. This was awkward. Mia came out first, looking behind her. Oakley appeared, and I lost the ability to breathe.

She was breath taking. The bikini looked like it was custom made for her. Oakley’s body was slim and thanks to gymnastics, it was toned, too. Every inch of her was perfection to me.

“Swim and then slides?” Mia suggested.

My eye twitched. “No, go away.”

I forced a smile. “Sure.”

Mia led the way to the largest pool with the rapids, and I followed with Oakley. She’d folded her arms over her chest, uncomfortable from the male attention she was getting. There was nothing for her to worry about; I wouldn’t let anyone touch her.

She stepped closer, her arm pressing against mine as we walked. I felt a twinge of jealousy every time I caught someone look at her, but I couldn’t blame them, Oakley was stunning.

“Are you okay?” I asked, and she nodded, biting on her lip. “You look beautiful, okay. Don’t be embarrassed by your body.”

She looked away and took a deep breath. I had no idea why she felt ashamed of her body. There wasn’t a single thing I would change about it.

I jumped into the warm water after Oakley. As soon as she was in the pool and her body wasn’t on show, she relaxed.

We messed around in the pool for a while before we went on some of the slides. She made me go down with her but hell, I wasn’t complaining. It was the perfect excuse to touch her.
“Wanna get some food?” I murmured against her skin as I kissed along her jaw. Mia had
gone to the toilet, and God knows what or who Jasper was off doing, so we had a few minutes.
Oakley let out a startled breath and nodded.
“Okay, let’s go.” My voice was embarrassingly urgent. I probably sounded like a dirty old
man on one of those sex phone lines. Oakley’s skin broke out in goose bumps as we walked back
to the changing rooms to get dressed and go to the restaurant.
“Hey,” I called out to her, and she looked up at me in surprise. “I love you.”
One side of her mouth pulled up in a cute little grin. She winked and went into the changing
room.
Yep, I’m definitely the luckiest bastard alive.

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The rest of the week passed too quickly, and it was soon time to go home. I stood in the
airport feeling like shit and wanting to go back to the hotel. The holiday had been the best of my
life, and every day me and Oakley grew closer.
We’d decided to wait until after her birthday to tell everyone. She would be sixteen, and her
parents were more likely to be chilled about it. Not that I thought they would hate us being
together, but I didn’t want to risk anything.
As our plane took off, I felt deflated, and once were able to leave our seats, Jasper was off
chatting to some girl he met at the bloody gate. That was fine with me though, I had my girl to
myself for a while.
“This has been the best two weeks of my life,” I said, taking her hand. She nodded, biting
her bottom lip. I’d come to know the look she was giving me right now. It was full of love and
want. We’d slept together every night since our first time. I loved every second of being so close
to her.
“I love you,” I whispered in her ear. She closed her eyes like it was too much and snuggled
into my side. I laid my head on hers and wondered if I would ever hear her say those three little
words. Not that it really mattered, I knew she felt them, and that was more than enough for me.
I felt sick to my stomach that we were almost back in England. Our perfect holiday was officially over. Cole and I would have to pretend that nothing was going on for a little while.

I had to figure out how Dad would react when we told everyone. Would he be okay with me and Cole being together? He’d already acknowledged that I was growing up, and he was giving me more freedom. I’d been two years since it stopped. Was he really ready to let me go? I hoped so. I wanted that more than anything.

Cole watched out of the window with a sad smile. What was he thinking? When it came to the two of us, I had no idea what was going through his mind.

I sat back in my seat and tried to act as if not knowing what was going on with him wasn’t sending my mind spinning. “I hate the end of holidays,” Mia grumbled, flopping down in Jasper’s empty beside me. “The plane home is the most depressing thing ever.”

I can’t agree more. Reality was the worst. I would rather live in that holiday state where everything was perfect forever. Nothing was perfect, though. I knew that. I couldn’t even fool myself into believing that I could have that, not even now. I was too damaged to have anything touch me and stay perfect. All I could hope was that I didn’t taint Cole.

“How’d it go?” Cole asked Jasper, smirking as he sat down on Mia’s seat in the row beside ours.

I don’t even want to know.

Jasper’s eyes lit up, and he slammed his fist into his chest. “I just joined the mile high club!”

Yes, I definitely didn’t want to know. I grimaced and looked past Cole and out of the window. If I had to hear about it I was going to jump.

“Of course you did!” Mia scoffed. Mia and Jasper argued like brother and sister. She hated his womanising but sympathised with the reason behind it. Jasper gave up on his cheating ex. Mia couldn’t bring herself to do the same.

“Jealousy doesn’t suit you, Mia.”

“You think I’m jealous of you screwing some random in a stinking, dirty plane toilet? Wow, you really are up your own arse,” she argued, shaking her head.

“Firstly, the toilet didn’t smell, and secondly, I got her name first, so she wasn’t random. It was one of the best experiences of my life. The girl could sure—”

“Thank you!” Cole snapped. “We don’t need your details, man.”

I pressed my leg against his and smiled, thanking him for stopping my brother talking. Jasper didn’t have a filter for when he was in the company of people who might not want to hear about his exploits.
For the rest of the plane ride, I cloud watched out of the window. Cole, Jasper and Mia bickered. Occasionally I’d listen in and want to jump again. I loved them all, but they were crazy. Cole laughed at Jasper’s stories a few times, and it made me wonder if he wanted to do those things, like having sex outside or on a plane. That really wasn’t for me. Cole had made sex feel normal and beautiful, but I didn’t think I would ever be one of those people that had to have it everywhere.

I just hoped that I could be enough for him.

***

The plane landed too soon, and I followed my family down the stairs and into the airport. All I wanted to do was get back on and fly back to Italy. Cole seemed to sense my mood and stepped closer to me, offering his support. It helped.

I hoped that we’d get to spend some time alone before we told everyone. Everything would change then. We wouldn’t be allowed to be alone in our rooms, and Dad would be checking up on us all the time. I worried about how everyone would react. I knew some people wouldn’t understand why he’d want to be with me. I didn’t either. Would people act differently towards him? Would anyone go as far as trying to convince him he can do better?

I rubbed the ache in my chest. Cole loved me, and I had to trust that I was enough in his eyes. It didn’t matter that I didn’t feel enough, that wasn’t my decision to make.

“It’s gonna be okay,” he whispered smoothly into my ear. I nodded in agreement, although I wasn’t convinced.

Once everyone had their bags we walked to the long stay car park where we’d left the cars.

“Are you coming with me, Oakley?” Mia asked as she unlocked her car.

I nodded and handed my suitcase to Dad’s outstretched hand. All I had left was the car journey. Home was fast approaching, and I needed every last second before I got there.

Me and Cole got in the back, and Mia threw her keys to Jasper.

“You drive,” she called.

My eyes widened in alarm. I wanted to switch cars. Jasper drove like a stereotypical boy racer, and I really didn’t know how he hadn’t caused an accident or got a speeding ticket yet.

“Buckle up, kids,” Jasper chirped, smiling with exaggerated, crazy round eyes.

Although I knew he was only trying to scare us, I double checked my belt. Then checked again. Whoever gave him his licence should be fired. Gripping the door handle as Jasper revved the engine, I said a silent prayer and closed my eyes.

By the time we got home, it was getting dark. The sky was a dark moody blue, the shade it usually turned before a storm. It made me miss Italy even more. While everyone fussed around getting the suitcases out of the cars, I wrapped my jacket around myself as I felt all the anxieties and fears inside of me resurface.

Back to normal. I could’ve cried.

“Right, we’d better get inside,” Dad ordered, with what felt like a pointed look at me. “We all could do with an early night.”

That meant I couldn’t hang out with Cole anymore tonight.

“Yes,” Mum agreed.

Cole pulled me into his arms. No one even batted an eyelid because the hug looked like a friendly one we’d shared a million times before. Only Cole and I knew what it meant now. “I’ll see you in the morning. I love you,” he whispered in my ear. My heart soared.

I love you, too.

We smiled at each other as we started walking in opposite directions to our houses. Mum unlocked the front door and ushered us inside. “You tired, love?” she asked.

I nodded, and she kissed my cheek.
“Okay, off to bed then.”
I wasn’t going to argue. Spending the evening with Mum and Dad wasn’t something I was going to do, and Jasper would just play his computer until he collapsed.
Dad didn’t go to kiss me, too, so I gave him and Jasper a quick wave, and legged it upstairs. I changed into my pyjamas and climbed straight into bed. Stretching out my arms and legs like a starfish, I suddenly wished Cole was with me. My bed was big and cold, and I didn’t like it.
As soon as I pulled the cover up to my chin and wrapped it around me like a cocoon, my phone beeped.
‘I miss you! Doesn’t feel right you’re not with me. Be ready at eight tomorrow. I love you so much. X’
I couldn’t wait until eight o’clock, whatever it was for. I clicked reply and contemplated sending I love you.
How bad could it be to send one text message?
Clutching my chest, I dropped the phone on the bed with a soft thud and pressed my face into the pillow. It hurt so bad my body shook with silent sobs.
You can’t. Not ever.
I knew how bad it would be.
I woke up in the morning, and my head was pounding from crying the night before. 
*There’s no point in crying; it won’t change the past or the future.*
*You’re stuck forever.*
Rubbing my eyes vigorously to clear the thoughts that kept me awake at night, I took deep 
breaths. I might be locked in silence forever, but I’d be okay.
I checked the time on my alarm clock. It was 9:52am. I’d slept in late, but I needed the extra 
sleep. Flopping back down, I covered my eyes with my forearm. In the darkness, I heard Cole’s 
laugh. Jumping, I scrambled up on the bed.
*What the hell is wrong with him?*
“And here I was thinking you’d be ready by now,” he said, grinning in amusement and 
cocking his eyebrow. I had no clue how he could be so…awake after a full on two-week holiday 
and late night. “You alright? You look tired.”
That’s because I’m tired.
He came and sat on my bed. I’d never quite get used to the way he looked at me. Cole 
reached his hand out tucked my hair behind my ear, and then he ran his thumb under my eye.
*Have you been crying? Oakley, what’s going on? Are you okay?*
I nodded, and he pulled me close to him. Right now, in his arms, I was okay, but since we’d 
got together I’d been thinking too much. “Do you still want to go out? We don’t have to. We can 
hang around here if you want?”
I jumped up and shook my head. That was the last thing I wanted. Dad was taking today off 
before he locked himself in his office again, so I wanted to be out of the house.
“You sure?” he asked. I was beyond sure. I grabbed some clothes out of my drawer and held 
a finger up at Cole, telling him to give me a minute. “Yeah, like you’ll actually be ready in one 
minute,” he called after me as I ran to the bathroom to shower and get dressed.
Right, I was slowing down because of that. Cole laughed as I slowed my pace on my way 
out. “I knew you were going to do that!”
Smiling, I locked myself in the bathroom and stripped. I turned the temperature up too high 
and got in. After stressing out about my past last night, I felt like I had to scrub my body again to 
get it clean.
*You can scrub until your skin peels off; you’ll never be clean.*
I scrunched my eyes shut, gripping the rough sponge as I scraped it over my legs. I cried for 
everything I’d gone through and everything I would continue to lose. My tears mixed with the 
water and ran down the drain. Crying didn’t change anything, but it released some of the pressure 
that constantly built inside my chest.
Get it together; you’re stronger than this.
Cole would have to wait because as hard as I tried, I couldn’t pull myself together. Sliding down the tiled wall of the shower, I curled my body into a ball.

The floor is where you belong. If Cole saw you like this he’d think you’re pathetic. If he knew he’d be disgusted. He’d hate you for letting him have sex with you. Who wants used goods?

I gripped my hair, I sobbed.

Shut up. Shut up. Shut up!

I hated that I couldn’t stop those thoughts. No matter how hard I tried to forget what happened, it was always there, lurking in the background, waiting for a glimmer of weakness so it could take hold of my mind.

I’m stronger than this. Stand up.

Cole was waiting in my bedroom for me, and here I was having a meltdown on the shower floor. I’m a survivor. I’m not a victim.

It took every ounce of strength I had, but I pushed myself to my feet, clawing at the tiles for support. I won’t stay down. Once on my feet, I put my face under the spray of water and washed it. I quickly shampooed my hair and got out.

My face was probably going to look blotchy, so I might need to borrow some of Mum’s concealer for my under eyes. Cole couldn’t know that I’d been crying again.

I really needed to get stop that.

After getting dressed and drying my hair upside down, I dared to take a look in the mirror. My eyes were slightly red, but it wasn’t anything I couldn’t touch up and conceal.

Digging in her make-up bag, I found what I needed and dabbed a little under my eyes. Thankfully, we had the same light skin tone, so I didn’t look ridiculous. My hair sat halfway down my back and a nightmare in the heat, so I tied it up and went back to my room.

Opening the door, I almost ran into Cole. Gripping my thumping heart, I scowled at him.

Who just stands outside a room like that?

He laughed, tilting his head to the side, causing his brown hair to flop across his forehead and almost into his eyes. “I’d apologise, but that was funny.” I glared at him and folded my arms over my chest. “I love you,” he whispered.

Every time he said that I felt like I was going to burst apart.

“Come on,” he said, grinning at me as he spoke. “We need to leave. It’ll take a while to get there.”

A while to get where?

Grabbing his muscular forearm, I raised an eyebrow. He’d know what I was asking. He almost always did.

“London,” he said.

I blinked hard. London? London as in the capital of the Country? The one that’s hours away from where we lived. Had he lost his mind? We couldn’t just bugger off to London. My Dad would freak.

I stared at him, waiting for an explanation as my chest burned with anxiety.

Cole shrugged. “Come on, you’ve always wanted to go to that creepy Madame Tussauds place…and on the London Eye. You love that tourist shit.”

Yes, but we still couldn’t just take off to bloody London! Could we?

He chewed on his lip as he waited for me to consider it. I wanted to go, obviously, but I worried about what’d happen if Dad found out. Cole would’ve said straight away that he’d cleared it with my parents if he had, so I knew this was a secret trip.

I dipped my head in an unconvincing nod, and Cole brightened immediately. At least one of us thought it was a good idea.

“Great. Get your arse in the car, Oakley!”
I did as I was told, and Cole lied through his teeth when Dad asked where we were headed on the way out. I felt sick as I listened to him tell Dad we were going into town, bowling and grabbing some food.

We headed to the motorway, towards London, and I got that holiday feeling again. We were completely alone. I lay back on the seat and wished we could stay in London forever. Or anywhere else for that matter.

Cole glanced over, flitting his eyes between the road and me like he had to keep looking at me. I’d never felt so safe before. The feeling was mutual, because I stared at him more than anything else.

The traffic wasn’t too bad, so we made it in just over two hours. Cole parked, and I panicked. We weren’t even in central London. The traffic and craziness of the big city would get a lot worse. Cole smirked as I looked in horror at the road we’d have to cross. He took my hand and probably regretted it when I crushed his bones.

Great, we’re going to die.

People driving we insane, but nothing was as barmy as the people who walked out into the road…while cars were coming at them.

“You need to relax, babe,” Cole said. “I promise I’ll get you home in one piece.”

He shouldn’t make promises he wasn’t sure he could keep.

I’d had plenty of experience with broken promises.

I grimaced and tucked myself into his side. Sod this; I want to go home.

Cole eventually got us to the other side safely and we only had a short underground ride to Madame Tussauds. As soon as we were back up on the normal level I was fine. People still showed a shocking lack of self-preservation, but they were all used to dodging death each day.

In the museum, Cole paid the entry fee and we went inside.

He was right when he said it was creepy. Hundreds of pairs of eyes followed my every move, kind of like when you’re late to class. Cole stared at each wax celebrity like it was some big conspiracy theory and Night at the Museum was going to happen when the lights went off.

“It’s just… Why would you want to make wax people?” he muttered, looking at David Beckham in disgust. “This man is a legend and they’ve made him outta wax. Do you not find that even a little bit—”

I covered his mouth and shook my head, grinning. I mean, when you thought about it, it was plain wrong, but that was half the fun. Most of us would never meet these people in real life so paying to see a wax clone was… Yeah, actually, it was just insane.

Cole only let me have an hour at Madame Tussauds because he needed to eat, and then we were going on the London Eye. We stood in line, full on chicken from Nando’s, waiting for our turn.

A man wearing a black puffa jacket and beanie hat flicked his finger, calling or group up as a capsule started to pass. Cole and I walked inside and went to the far wall, making sure we got a good view.

I didn’t even want to think about how high we were going. Cole wrapped his arms around me from behind, and I suddenly didn’t care if we went right up to the bloody moon.

“Hey, look,” Cole said, pointing out Buckingham Palace and then Big Ben.

Wow, I thought, staring in awe. This trip was worth the stomach ulcer I’d probably get through worrying that Dad would find out. I pressed into Cole’s chest and sighed.

“Enjoying it?” he asked when we reached the top. I nodded and interlaced my fingers with his.

We spent the rest of the ride pointing things out to each other.

“That was good, right?” he said. I nodded as we walked off and headed back to the tube. It was time to go home. We’d only been in London about three hours but we still had to drive home and Dad would become suspicious if we were too late back. I didn’t need questions.
“We’ll come again when we’ll have more time. Maybe for a weekend,” Cole said, holding onto the bars of the train above me. Instead of taking the one free seat in the middle of the row, I opted to hold on around Cole’s waist. I could feel every muscle through his t-shirt, and when he stepped closer I could feel his heart flying in his chest.

I loved him so much.

By the time we got back it was already 5pm. With the evening, rush hour traffic it would take a lot longer to get home. Shaking my head, I yanked Cole’s arm, pulling him closer to me as we walked through the car park. Chuckling, he kissed the top of my head.

I’d had an incredible day, even if it wouldn’t last as long as we both wanted it to. The fact that he had whisked me off to London to do two things I wanted was more than enough. He was the sweetest, and I was the luckiest girl on the planet.

It was getting cooler now; the cold wind bit at my face. My coat was kept my body warm, but I could feel my lips turning numb. I couldn’t wait to get into the car and turn the heat on. British summers were so unpredictable.

We got in the car; Cole started the ignition and backed out of the spot. I cranked the heat up, raising my hands to the vents to warm them up.

For the whole journey home, I stared at Cole. It was getting dark and the orange glow from the dashboard lit up his blue eyes. “You’re staring again,” he said with a half-smile.

I nodded, unashamed. I was completely in love with him, and I wasn’t embarrassed by it.

***

Two hours and fifty minutes later, we arrived back at my house.
I don’t want to go in there.
I don’t have a choice.

“Well,” Cole said, walking me to the door. “Thanks for trusting me to take you to the big city, country girl.” I bit my lip, dizzy on all things Cole and melted into his chest. I was so in love with him it was starting to make me one of those girls. I didn’t even care.

“Tomorrow,” he whispered, kissing my softly before leaving me.

Tomorrow couldn’t come soon enough.

I floated into the house in a happy daze. My little bubble was burst as Jasper paused his computer game and raised his light eyebrow.

What now?

“I think we should have a chat about Cole.”

Okay, I really don’t.

Don’t shoot daggers at me, lil sis. I know you’re together.”

My mouth popped open. I started to shake my head in denial, but Jasper scowled. “Don’t lie to me. I might not be Mensa—” Putting it mildly. “—but I’m not stupid. Do you think I can’t see how you look at each other? I know love when I see it, Oakley. I’m worried.”

Worried about what?

Cole would never hurt me. Jasper knew that, too.

He took a deep breath and rolled his eyes. “Shit. Look, I know Cole’s a good guy, but I just want you to know that I love you, and if he ever does do anything to hurt you, I need you to tell me. I would cut his balls off.” He laughed awkwardly, and I smiled. “You promise me you’ll be careful?”

I nodded quickly, not wanting him to elaborate. Jasper didn’t need to know that me and Cole had been intimate; I was still underage for a few more weeks. The few times that we’d slept together we were careful. There was no way I’d risk getting pregnant. I wouldn’t bring a baby into this world, especially at fifteen.

“By careful… Well, you know I mean—” I held my hand up and nodded again, this time with a burning face. It was unlike Jasper to be nervous or embarrassed about the subject, though.
“Okay. Well, I’m glad we got that straightened out. I’ve got a date with Carly, so I’m gonna do one.”

He remembered her name. *Well done, Jasper*. Grabbing his leather jacket he turned to me and said, “You do know that I love you, right?”

I smiled and nodded. *I love you, too.*

*You wouldn’t be living in your own personal hell if you didn’t*. Sometimes I wished I didn’t love my mum and brother. Things would be so much easier if I could allow myself to hurt them.

Jasper closed the front door behind him, and I went to find Mum.
“Oakley?” I frowned and pressed my face into my pillow to ignore Mum calling me. Why couldn’t she let me sleep? “Oakley,” she repeated. I felt like I’d only had three hours. Sighing in defeat, I rolled over and waited for whatever she needed me for at…10:30am…

Alright, so it wasn’t that early.

“Morning, honey. Sorry to wake you, but I wanted to let you know that Auntie Ali’s going away for the night, so Lizzie’s staying with us. She’ll be here soon. You need to make some room in your wardrobe for her things, okay. Apparently, she’s packed a lot and wants to hang a few things up.”

No, this is not okay. Who unpacks clothes for one night? There was only so much she could physically wear in a day. I tried hard not to show the disappointment because Mum loved her niece, but I couldn’t keep a frown from dominating my face.

“Oh, she’s not that bad! Come on, you, up. Dad’s making pancakes for breakfast.”

Mum left me to get up. I flopped back in bed. Lizzie for a whole twenty-four hours. Groaning in frustration, I jumped up and stomped around in a mood.

This is not a good start to the day.

The second I got downstairs; she walked through the front door. I didn’t even have time to drink a hot chocolate – or force down a coffee – to mentally prepare myself. Jesus, I’d literally just woken up.

“Oh, I can’t wait for your birthday party, Oakley!” Lizzie gushed, pouting her lips and fluffing her hair. Well, hello, Lizzie. “Your mum’s practically invited your whole year! She’s so cool, you know.”

No.

I was suddenly filled with dread. Did that mean Julian had an invite, too? I didn’t want to have to face my classmates until I absolutely had to – on the first day back at school. Not a nanosecond sooner.

But it’s not like I get a choice in what happens in my life. To my body.

“Pancakes, girls,” Dad announced, poking his head around the kitchen door with a celebratory smile. Dad was the self-proclaimed pancake king. Everyone raved about them; they got stuck in my throat.

I followed Lizzie to the kitchen table and sat down.

Twenty-four hours. I can do that.

You’ve had worse for a lot longer.

This will be a walk in the park.
“Hey, look who I found,” Mum said as she walked into the room. Cole trailed behind her smiling. It faded as his eyes landed on Lizzie.

“Hi, Cole,” Lizzie purred.

I rolled my eyes. He frowned and sat beside me. With a nod of his head, he replied a quick, “Hey.”

“Look what I have, sweetheart.” Mum handed me a folder. An A4 piece of paper was taped to the front with typed letters: OAKLEY’S SWEET 16.

_God. Please say this isn’t happening._ What the hell was she planning on having at this party? My skin prickled with unease.

I flipped the folder open and died a little inside. The first page was a list of guests. I slapped it shut, not wanting to know. It wouldn’t change anything. This was Mum’s desperate way of moulding me into a normal teenager, and I’d let her run with it.

“I was thinking we could get one of those chocolate fountains, what do you think?” Mum asked, and held up a magazine cut out of a giant white chocolate fountain. I’d been warned about that one. Honestly, I was fine with chocolate, though.

I nodded along with her idea and dug my fork into my cherry pancakes.

_Picking at the pancakes, I glared at them like it was all their fault._

*Why did he make cherry?*

“Ice cream?” Cole offered.

If no one were around, I would’ve kissed him. But, then, if no one were around we wouldn’t need to escape. Nodding gratefully, I stood up and took our plates to the side. I hadn’t touched breakfast. Dad noticed, but he didn’t say a thing. Not that he would.

I had no idea if he thought about the past or if he was just better at blocking it out. It didn’t matter either way, I suppose. Nothing could change it.

“Take Lizzie with you,” Mum ordered.

I narrowed my eyes at her, and Cole’s expression mirrored mine.

“Oooh, one minute,” Lizzie sang as she ran off up the stairs, no doubt to change.

“Tell her we’re in the car, please,” Cole said to my mum.

Five minutes later, he sighed and slammed his head back on the headrest. “A minute? More like a fucking hour,” he grumbled.

Well, that was Lizzie.

Finally, ten minutes later, she strutted out of the house wearing a very short denim dress.

“Jesus,” he spat. “Where the hell does she think we’re going?”

_Hooters. Nightclub. Church._ It didn’t matter with her.

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We drove in silence. Well, Cole and I did. Lizzie sang along with the radio. Her voice wasn’t the worst in the world, but it certainly wasn’t made for the higher notes. I wanted to bash my head against the window repeatedly.

“We’re here,” Cole announced loudly, forcing her to stop singing.

_Thank you._

“Here?” Lizzie scrunched her nose up as she looked at the quaint little diner style café. What did she expect? We were fifteen and seventeen and born without a silver spoon in our mouth. I didn’t work and Cole did the odd job with his dad. This was about all we could afford.
I gritted my teeth and got out of the car. Lizzie followed behind, her heels clicking against the tiled floor.

“Do they do low fat milkshakes?” She asked, briefly looking around in bewilderment at the quiet café.

“You could have strawberry or banana. Got fruit in ‘em and all,” Cole said sarcastically.

“Oh, banana, please.”

“I’ll go order,” he replied.

“Erm, aren’t you going to ask Oakley.”

He looked at her like she was a toddler. “Yeah, I know what she wants.”

Cole walked over to the counter to order, and Lizzie didn’t waste any time in digging for information on him the second he was gone. “Is he seeing anyone?” She asked.

Yes. Back off.

I picked up a plastic coffee stirrer and debated whether I could get away with ramming it into her eye. If I nodded would she ask who? However, if I said no, she might try something on with him.

Bloody hell. I couldn’t sit here and watch her flirt with him. I gave a quick nod, hoping that would make her stop looking at him as if she wanted to eat him. “Ugh, course he is,” she grumbled and slumped back in her chair.

Surely Cole wasn’t nearly rich enough for her. Cole reappeared, holding a tray with our milkshakes and ice creams. “So, Cole, what’s your girlfriend like?” Lizzie purred.

He froze, looking like a dear caught in the headlights. “Girlfriend?”

“Yeah, Oakley said you were seeing someone.”

I watched as a knowing smile swept across his face. “Really?” He asked. “She did, huh?”

“I think she means it.” Lizzie repeated the question, needing to know what was going on with everyone.

“She’s alright,” Cole replied, lifting and dropping one shoulder in a casual shrug. “But I will say one thing, she’s incredible in bed,” he added.

What! I choked on my drink and slapped my hand over my mouth. Why the hell would he joke about that? I wasn’t sure if I was burning in embarrassment, anger or need.

“You okay, Oakley?” Cole asked innocently. I nodded and forced myself to smile at him when all I wanted to do was chuck my ice cream all over him.

“Yeah? Really?” Lizzie asked, leaning her body towards him. “You’re good, too, then?”

“Not had any complaints,” he said proudly.

Okay, I wasn’t comfortable with the direction this was taking at all. Sex wasn’t something I could joke about or even have a light-hearted conversation about. It was a huge deal to me.

Firstly, I never thought I’d ever want it. I had layers upon layers of issues surrounding sex. I didn’t want anyone knowing any details about my intimate relationship with Cole.

I concentrated on my ice cream, swirling the spoon around to soften it up.

*He thinks you were a virgin.*

*Maybe you were ‘good’ because weren’t.*

I drop my spoon and it clinks loudly into the bowl and take even breaths.

*Whoa, careful, Oakley,” Cole jokes.*

If I was at home I’d take a shower. Shame I couldn’t scrub my brain clean. I give him a fleeting smile and pick the spoon back up.

*That’s not why Cole thinks it’s good. It’s because we’re together. We are good.*

I take a mouthful of ice cream and almost choke as my throat rejects it. *Can in not even bloody eat properly now!*

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Julian and two of his friends walk past the window. *Please don’t come in here, please.*
They did. Of course. As soon as they spotted us, they strode up to our table. Cole’s body tensed when he saw who was coming. He looked ready to defend my honour again. I loved him for it, but I didn’t want him getting in another fight.

Not wanting him to cause a scene, I pressed my leg against his to tell him to stay calm. He got the message and relaxed his shoulders a fraction.

Julian and his friends ordered and sat at a table next to ours, even though the café was practically empty. Predictable.

“What’s his game?”

I smiled briefly and looked away just as Lizzie fluffed her hair seductively. Oh, no.

“Hi, I’m Lizzie. Oakley’s cousin.”

Julian smirked, his eyebrow rising slightly. “Really?”

She nodded and turned around to face him. “Yeah. So are you going to her party on Saturday?”

He looked straight at me and replied, “Yep.”

“Well, make other plans. You’re not welcome!” Cole growled.

“Actually, I am. Got an invitation to prove it,” he retorted smugly.

Great, so Mum did invite him. That’s just bloody fantastic.


Lizzie watched them with wide eyes, head flitting back and forth like she was watching a tennis match. Perfect, now she’s going to be grilling me about this.

I’d had enough and just wanted to get away, so I stood up and started walking out. I heard footsteps right behind me, and I knew it would be Cole. Then, I heard Lizzie’s heels clicking unevenly as she hurried after us.

“See you Saturday,” Julian called. Cole turned around and gestured something, but I didn’t look to see what. I got in the car and slammed the door.

“Don’t worry,” he said, stroking my hand. “We’ll stay away from him. I won’t let him come near you, I swear.”

I looked up to the roof so the tears that were pooling in my eyes wouldn’t fall. The summer holidays were supposed to be a break from everyone at school. The thought of seeing them all again made me feel sick.

“What was that all about?” Lizzie squealed so loud it made both Cole and me jump. She slammed the car door and huffed. “You were so mean to him, and he’s lovely! He called me back and asked me to be his date to your party. Can you believe that?” Yes. “I have no idea what to wear! Oh God, we have to go shopping.”

I put my head to my knees in despair. Getting the message, Cole put the key in the ignition and sped home as quickly as was legally possible.
Oakley

Everyone but Cole and I were downstairs setting up the decorations and moving furniture around to make room for the DJ. It wasn’t my birthday until tomorrow, but my party was tonight. *Don’t suppose you can skip your own party...*

“We get to tell everyone soon,” Cole said, grinning as he tied string to a balloon. He was excited to have our relationship out in the open. I was on the fence.

I dropped my gaze and busied myself with a banner.

“You don’t want to tell them, do you?” Cole asked quietly, his face falling. I hate that I was responsible for that look. “Oakley?” He prompted. Sighing, I nodded.

“You don’t mean that. You’re worried about what they’ll all say.” I nodded again. “They’ll be happy for us, you know they will. Things will calm down after a week or two when it’s old news.”

So he knew they were going to be watching us like crazy, too.

“Look, I don’t like it, but we can wait longer. Whenever you’re ready.”

He said the words, but I knew he didn’t mean it.

Smiling, I shook my head and kissed his cheek quickly. I missed being physically affectionate with him. I wanted to hold his hand and have his arms around me whenever we wanted, no matter who was around.

I missed being intimate with someone I trusted with my life, someone I knew would never hurt me. It was time to come clean about our relationship and be a normal couple.

I was ready for that.

I deserved that, surely.

*Cole deserves that with someone worthy.*

Ignoring the voice in my head, I playfully shoved his shoulder and made him laugh.

***

Two hours later, I was dressed for the party. My nerves grew with every step I took downstairs until I thought I was going to explode. I was thankful that Cole, Kerry and Ben would be with me. At least I could spend the evening with them and ignore everyone else.

People had come to see what my life was like, what my family were like. None of them wanted to celebrate my birthday.

Some of my family had already arrived and were standing around drinking and chatting. My grandparents from both sides of the family sat on the sofa with overflowing wine glasses. I didn’t
see Dad’s parents often; they lived quite far away so they only visited on birthdays and at Christmas.

_How would they react if they found out what he really was? They won’t believe you, either._

The doorbell rang, and I took a deep breath, taking a peek at Cole to stop myself freaking out. He smiled and mouthed, ‘Love you’ which made me forget everything and everyone.

“Happy Birthday, Oakley,” Julian shouted from across the room, throwing his arms out like an idiot.

Cole glared, and if looks could kill, Julian would’ve been a goner by now. There was no need for him to be here, the guy hated me? It made no sense.

I smiled through distaste, and Cole tugged me into the kitchen.

*I can do this. By midnight, it’ll be winding down and everyone going home.*

Rolling my eyes as I looked around, I shook my head. The whole house was covered in decorations. _Pink_ decorations. You could barely move around all the balloons, banners, streamers, and enormous pink feathers. Yeah, feathers. What was I, eight? It was probably what Mum wanted for her sixteenth.

My mouth dropped open in shock as I saw what was on the kitchen counter. What on earth?

Blinking in disbelief, I stepped closer to the giant ice sculpture. It was of a girl doing a cartwheel. _Me_ doing a cartwheel.

_She’s really lost it._

“Honey, here.” Mum gave me a plastic cup of punch and one to Cole, too. Forcing my lips to twitch in a brief smile, I turned, pretending to look at something different so she wouldn’t see how much I hated all of it. She still saw me as a little girl.

_Just a few hours. For her, I reasoned with myself, again._

“Well, this is all very pink,” Cole commented, stating the bloody obvious. “She knows your favourite colour is yellow, right?” Of course, he knew that. “Come on, I need some vodka in this before I hang myself.”

As we made a move, Kerry hopped in front of me and laughed as I jumped. “Sorry. Happy birthday! This party’s awesome, by the way.”

_Is it, though?_

“I’m guessing you like pink,” Ben said sarcastically and threw his arm over Cole’s shoulder. I stared at him flatly. _Nope._

“She doesn’t like pink. Her mum organised everything,” Cole explained.

“Oh. Ouch.” Ben winced in sympathy.

Kerry waved her hand. “Don’t worry, Oakley, you have us to save you now.” She pulled me into the living room. Her grip was tight, and she strode confidently through the small crowd that had gathered by the doorway.

“Sit,” she ordered, pointing to the smaller sofa that had been pushed into the corner of the room. Cole and Ben joined us, both sitting on the arms of the chair.

“This is our corner. If anyone tries to take it, kill. Okay?” Kerry looked at us sternly. I grinned in amusement and sat back in the sofa. _Maybe this party won’t be too bad after all. Or maybe those are famous last words._

We settled into conversation and managed to have a good time. Cole and Ben bickered like an old married couple which was providing most of the entertainment. I wasn’t even required to socialise with others much. Family were happy to catch up with family and leave me to blend into the background.

Occasionally, I saw Mum chatting happily and laughing with Ali and Nan. That was why I put up with the stupid party. _She’s smiling and it’s genuine. She deserves this._

Jasper knelt down in front of me and leered towards someone. I thought he had gone out for the evening, but of course he’d want to be around lots of girls.
“The blonde girl over there,” he said, gesturing towards Jennifer from my class. “She over sixteen?” I nodded, and Jasper rubbed his hands together. “Legal. Fair game.” He made it sound like a joke, but we both knew he wasn’t kidding.

Suddenly, I caught sight of Julian dancing with Lizzie. I noticed how he’d move her closer to where we were sitting until they ended up right in front of us. I didn’t know how Lizzie could even touch him. With a sick feeling in my stomach, I turned back to Cole and our friends.

“She’s not pregnant, dipshit, she’s just put on weight,” Kerry said, looking at someone in the room.

Okay, what have I missed?

***

After six cups of punch, my bladder felt like it was going to burst, so I went upstairs to the bathroom. Just as I was about to open the door, I heard someone giggle from inside my room. Oh, hell no! My room was off limits, and I was ready to flip out on whoever was in there… But I want to see whatever was happening?

No, but I had to stop it.

Pushing the door open quickly with the hope that I’ll keep dinner down, I prepared for what I was about to see. My jaw dropped. I wanted to bleach my eyes. Lizzie and Julian were all over each other on my bed, and now I was going to have to burn the sheets.

Lizzie gasped and looked up in shock. What on earth was wrong with her? Glaring at her furiously, I pointed to the door. She immediately ran out, sneering at me as she shot past me. At least they were fully dressed. It could have been much worse.

Sorry I stopped you making a huge mistake with a complete dickhead.

“Well, well, well. Looks like we’re alone now, huh,” Julian sang. I stood my ground as he slowly moved off my bed and took one step towards me. This was my room. I wasn’t going to let him intimidate me here. Straightening my back to try to make myself appear taller, I stared him in the eye.

He stopped a couple inches in front, and my stomach tightened. What was he going to do? Everything inside me was screaming to run away, but I refused to do that. I’d done that for too long.

“Sorry you had to see that, babe. She wasn’t taking no for an answer.”

Babe. No.

I glared at him. I couldn’t really care less what he did with Lizzie, to be honest, they deserved each other. I just didn’t want it in my room. Or my house. He cocked his head to the side as he watched me with caution.

“Stop playing hard to get, Oakley,” he finally said and took another step closer. We were far too close now, but I didn’t waiver. Who was playing hard to get? I wasn’t playing anything. I hated him and had good reason to.

“You think I don’t see how you look at me?”

How I looked at him? What the hell was he seeing? He’s drunk. That’s the only explanation.

“Don’t look at me like that,” he growled. “I’ve had two years of you ignoring me and pretending you don’t give a shit! I have to fucking insult you just to get you to acknowledge me,” he shouted, stepping forward one more time.

Adrenaline coursed through my veins as his arms reached out to touch me. All I could think about was stopping him. His arms stretched nearer, I balled my hand into a fist and punched him as hard as I could. We both stumbled back in shock.

Oh God.
The sound – like a dull, crunching thud – rang through my ears. Julian’s hand shot to his mouth, and he groaned in pain. My hand immediately started throbbing. I shook my hand and winced. The movies didn’t show the puncher hurting after.

Julian straightened his spine. His dark eyes were stone cold. Blood started to seep through a small slit on his lip. Whoa. I’d done that. I was a little proud of myself for standing up to him.

It felt good.
You should’ve done that a long time ago, too.
How? I was a kid.

“Stop being such a bitch,” he spat. I took a step backwards, turned slowly and walked out of my room. I half expected him to follow me, but he didn’t. Taking the stairs two at a time, I flew to the bottom.


Yes, actually. I’m really okay. Sod Julian.

Cole glared, and I spun around to see what’d earned that look. Julian, of course, was standing at the top of the stairs. He ducked into the bathroom when he noticed Cole with me.

“What happened? Was his lip bleeding?”

I smiled and held my slightly swollen hand up. Cole’s eyes widened in surprise and, I think, awe.

“Did you just punch him?” I nodded and watched pride sweep over his face. “You’re amazing,” he said and stroked my sore hand with his fingertips. “But you need to get that seen to.” Shaking his head he guided me to the downstairs bathroom.

After Cole made me keep my hand under cold water for a few minutes it was starting to feel better, but that could be just because it was turning numb. He kissed my temple and then wrapped my hand in a towel to dry it. “Let’s go get you a couple pills for the pain.” I threw the towel in the washing basket and reached for the door handle.

The pain was fine. It was a nice reminder of the fact that I’d defended myself. It was the first time.

Cole grabbed my good hand and spun me around. “Have I told you how beautiful you look in that dress?” Blushing, I reached up on tiptoes and kissed his lips. I wore a simple, summer maxi dress with a paisley design. It was nothing fancy, but I loved that Cole thought I looked good.

He made me sit back down with Kerry and Ben while he went to get me some painkillers. Julian still hadn’t left like I thought he would, he was now back downstairs with his friends. Why would he stay? If he was trying to make me feel uncomfortable in my own home he could stop wasting his efforts – I was already there.

“Here you go.” Cole handed me two paracetamol and a glass of water. Smiling gratefully, I slung the pills in my mouth and swigged a couple mouthfuls of water.

“Headache?” Kerry asked, letting Ben up for air.

I gave her a nod, not wanting to get into the real reason why I needed them.

Cole, always wanting to save me, grabbed my hand and gave it a tug. “Want to dance?”

In front of all of my family and most of the people I hated from school? I wanted to dance with Cole, but I didn’t want to draw any extra attention to myself. And I didn’t want Dad to see me and Cole getting closer. This was my bloody party though, and I should enjoy it.

I got up and followed him about three steps to where all the dancing was happening. And I use the term ‘dancing’ very loosely. Some of these people would be having sex if it wasn’t for clothes. People dry humping in her living room, that’d teach Mum for throwing a party she wanted me to have.

Dad was probably seething.

Good.

When I was in Cole’s arms, the party didn’t seem that bad at all. Nothing did.

This is going to end badly. He won’t want you when he finds out.
That was fine, because I’ll never tell.
Silencing my inner demons, I stepped closer to him. We’d been this close before. I’d left a small gap between us so we didn’t look a little too cosy. Throwing my arms around his neck, I grinned.
A few times I noticed Julian watching us dance. I was tired of being intimidated and scared, so I ignored him. The only thing I cared about was the way Cole was looked at me.
Just as I thought I could start to relax properly and enjoy the evening, the music was cut. Mum tapped a microphone, and my heart dropped.
She’s going to make a speech.
I felt Oakley’s body stiffen under my arms as Sarah stopped the music. Surely, Sarah understood that Oakley hates the spotlight?
In my arms, she squirmed in embarrassment.
“Hello, everyone,” Sarah said cheerfully.
Oakley grimaced. Fucking hell. Even Jasper looked at him mum like she’d forgotten which child she was throwing a party for.
“Sorry to interrupt and stop you dancing, but I’ll only keep you for a few minutes. I just want to say a few words about my beautiful daughter.”
Oakley cringed harder and shrank back into me so she was half-hidden. I felt awkward for her. If I didn’t know that taking her away would make thing worse we’d be outside already. She never would do anything she thought would upset her mum.
I was pissed off with Sarah. Gritting my teeth as she started to ramble on about how proud of her daughter they were, I pulled her closer. Oakley was amazing. I couldn’t love her any harder if I tried and I’d shout it from every fucking rooftop if I knew she wouldn’t absolutely hate it.
Throughout Sarah’s longwinded speech, Oakley stared at the floor in discomfort. She didn’t dare look up in case she caught someone’s eye.
“… So, please say a very big happy sweet sixteen to Oakley. Happy birthday, honey,” Sarah cheered, raising her glass. The crowd joined in, with the exception of me, Jasper, Kerry and Ben. We seemed to know her a shit load more than her own mum.
“You okay?” I asked her as soon as Sarah handed the microphone back to the DJ. She nodded, eyes still on the floor. Her cheeks flushed a deep pink in embarrassment. I groaned and grabbed her hand, pulling her through the kitchen and out to the back garden.
We were alone outside, thankfully. “Sorry. You hated that, right?” I stroked her cheek, and she smiled. Finally, she looked up at me and nodded, chewing on her lip. My pulse raced at the loving way she looked at me. Knowing she loved me felt amazing. “Wanna sit out here for a while?”
She didn’t answer, but she sat down on the bench beside the fence and sighed. Her bloody mum might have screwed things up in there, but I was determined to make sure she had a good time. Even if that meant we stayed out here for the rest of the night.
We stayed outside for a bit and tried to decide on the best way of telling everyone about us. I was all for the direct approach, but Oakley was much more reserved about it. Of course, her parents would be stricter with us, but I didn’t want that to keep us secret. Hiding our relationship any longer felt wrong, like we were doing something we shouldn’t.
We had no reason to hide.
I turned her slightly swollen hand over to get a better look at it. Oakley had never hit anyone before in her life. Well, apart from playfully hitting Jasper and me. I was actually extremely proud of her for sticking up for herself, and the fact that that she’d split Julian’s was a bonus.

*We’ll need to talk about her technique, though...*

“Did Julian try something on?”

She looked a little taken back at my timing, but not surprised that I asked the question.

“Oakley?” I prompted. She sighed and half-nodded her head but looked a little unsure. He wanted her. I gritted my teeth together.

He’d try his hardest to make her life hell, then he’d try it on.

*What the hell is wrong with the bastard?*

“I hate the prick.” She winced. “Sorry. No fighting, I promise. Think I’ll leave that up to you now.” She smirked and rolled her eyes. “You okay to go back inside now?” I rubbed her arms, feeling the tiny bumps on her arms. She was cold.

Standing, she pulled my hand, struggling since I didn’t help. I laughed, threw my arm over her shoulders, and we walked inside together. As soon as we got back into the lounge, I noticed Julian. He raised his eyebrow in challenge and grabbed the microphone.

I tensed. *Shit.*

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he slurred. How did he get *that* drunk? Max and Dad were supposed to be checking everyone’s drinks... “I would also like to say something about the birthday girl. Firstly, she isn’t as sweet and innocent as you all think.” He waved his arm around, spilling his drink on the floor. “She’s a real little tease, gets you all worked up then runs away, hey, Oakley?”

She backed up as tears filled her eyes and ran towards the stairs. My blood boiled, throat burned and my fists twitched “Secondly, she’s screwing her *best friend.*”

I was halfway across the room, level with Jasper, as we rushed to stop the dickhead. I froze at his words and looked at Oakley.

She stood deathly still on the stairs, and I started to feel sick. Max, closer than me and Jasper, grabbed Julian by his shirt and roughly threw him out of the front door. “You stay the hell away from my daughter!” he bellowed after Julian.

As he slammed the door, an eerie silence fell upon the room. Sarah finally broke it seconds later. “Is that true, Oakley, Cole?”

Oakley looked so scared. I wanted to wrap my arms around her and proudly tell everyone that we were together, but we really didn’t need the whole world knowing about our *private* love life.

The look on my girlfriend’s face stopped me admitting anything.

“No, it’s not true,” I stated confidently. Oakley let out a deep breath as soon as I denied I, and it cut deep.

“Why would he say that?” Max asked, raising his eyebrows.

“’Cause he’s a *psycho!*” Jasper shouted *psycho* towards the door where Max had thrown Julian out. “He’s the one who’s been giving her a hard time. Me and Cole have punched him a few times,” he said, with a shrug and a proud smile.

Sarah sighed, and her shoulders sagged in disappointment.

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“I think it’s time for everyone to leave.” Max gave the order and everyone obeyed. Once the guests had left and the DJ made a quick exit, saying he’d be back in thirty minutes to pack up, Max switched the main light on.

My parents had stayed back for moral support. Oakley walked down the stairs where she’d frozen halfway and stood beside me. I’d never seen anyone who wanted to fucking run away more.

“Are you okay, sweetheart?” Sarah asked her and brushed her hair out of her face.
Oakley nodded but didn’t smile. Her jaw was tight, and I could tell that she was angry with Sarah for making her have the party in the first place. So was I. Everyone would be gossiping about it for ages. It was only going to make it harder for her when we had to go back to school.

“Why don’t you two go upstairs and watch a movie? We’ll sort everything out down here,” Max suggested and ushered us towards the stairs.

We weren’t going to talk about what happened? They just believed what I said. Me and Oakley exchanged a look but quickly dashed upstairs, neither of us wanting to be in the limelight right now.

“That went well,” I said sarcastically as we both flopped down on her bed. She ran her hands through her hair, fighting a smile. “So…” I wasn’t actually sure what I wanted to say or how to word it. “You really didn’t want them to know…”

She shook her head.

“Is that because of the way they would have found out?” I asked nervously, biting the inside of my mouth in anticipation. She rolled onto her side and a nod gave me her answer.

“Okay. Good. You know it’s going to be harder to tell them now. They’re going to know we lied.”

I frowned as I thought about how we were going to deal with this. We came out of one awkward situation and dived straight into another one. Oakley sighed and shuffled over so she could lay her head on my chest.

I breathed her in and kissed the top of her head. Her hand splayed on my chest, making it hard to focus on what I needed to focus on. I wanted her hand under my shirt. Skin to skin.

Groaning in frustration, I picked up her remote and turned the TV on. We were supposed to be watching a movie.

“I think we should still tell them on Tuesday,” I said after a few minutes.

Her fingers dug into my chest, but she did something I didn’t think she would and nodded her head in agreement. Fuck. She agreed. “Okay, Tuesday we’ll tell them we’re together but nothing’s happened? We don’t need to tell them we’ve had sex. I want that between us.”

She nodded more enthusiastically. I knew she wouldn’t want to tell anyone details of our relationship. I didn’t mind the banter about girls and sex and shit; I just couldn’t do it when it was about me and Oakley.

“Hey, it’s just after midnight. Happy Birthday.” She flashed me a smile. “Can I give you your present now?”

She bolted up on the bed, making me jump at how fast she’d moved. Her huge smiled lit up her light eyes; it was fucking infectious. I chuckled and reached for the bag that I had left in her room earlier.

I gave her the yellow gift bag and lay back down with my hands under my head. “Happy Birthday, baby,” I said again.

Narrowing her eyes playfully, she reached into the bag and pulled out the card. Always the card first.

“So, what’s going on in here then?” Jasper asked, walking into her room without knocking.

“Jasper, shut up! Technically, it’s her birthday,” I said, pointing to the clock.

Jasper ran over to her, cannonballed onto the bed and grabbed her in a big bear hug. Oakley made a horrified face but smiled. “Happy Birthday, baby sis! Oww, you’re so grown up now. I can still remember when you were little and carried that blanket around everywhere with you,” he cooed, ruffling her hair.

Shoving his hand away, she pointed to the door.

“Fine, fine. I’ll go. I’ll let you two get back to unwrapping presents,” he said, making air quotes with his hands and winked.

*How is he the one who guesses first?*
Oakley blew out a breath and pulled the card out of the envelope. She smiled as she read the words and kissed me before putting the card on her bedside table. With a wicked grin, she reached into the bag again. I watched a little frown appear on her forehead as she pulled out another birthday card.

“Just open it,” I said, rolling my eyes and flicking my hand towards the card.
She practically pounced on me when she opened it. I laughed and hugged her back, enjoying the weight of her on top of me. We’d not done this position yet. Not that we were now.
Since we hadn’t told anyone about us I’d gone and bought her two cards. One was plain with a yellow butterfly on it and the other had GIRLFRIEND splashed across the front. I never thought I’d love buying a card so much.

Yeah, my balls are probably going to drop off any day now.
“I wanted to get you a proper card, but I knew you couldn’t put it up with the rest… So, I kinda got two,” I said. Even though I knew she would love it, I was still nervous. She came to me with a lot of her problems. I didn’t want her to think less of me because I’d fallen in love with her and turned into a giant girl.

Bending her head, she kissed me. I felt the fire consume me with the first touch of her lips. I wanted her all the time. She got under my skin. She was all I could think about. If Mum, dad and her parents weren’t in the house I’d take off that dress and show her just how fucking obsessed with her I was.

After a few seconds, I pulled away while I still had some self-control left. We couldn’t risk someone walking in again. My body ached to be pressed up against her again, and my jeans were getting uncomfortably tight.

“You need to open the presents,” I whispered, breathing through the pounding lust. Calm down, you’ll scare her.
She peered into the bag. Her lips were slightly swollen from our kiss. It was sexy as hell.
I’d bought her all of her favourite things. Another ‘Me to You’ teddy bear she collected, Haribo sweets, chocolate buttons, some biography of a gymnast she was looking at when we were shopping. A crazy bright purple nail polish that she liked. The one that made me look an idiot when I bought it. And finally, a white gold necklace with a little heart pendant and a diamond set into it.

I held my breath as she opened the necklace. Please like it. If she didn’t I could always take it back and swap it. She gasped as she opened the box, her eyes filling with tears. It made my heart jackhammer in my chest.

She pulled it out of the box and ran her hand over the heart. Finally, she looked up at me and moved the bag of presents to the side as she shuffled forward. We sat an inch away from each other, neither of us moved, and I didn’t say a word. It was strange how total silence could mean so much.
She couldn’t/wouldn’t talk, but she didn’t need to, I understood everything she wanted to say when she stared at me like that.

I was wrong: I can fall more in love with her.
After a minute, she entwined our fingers and kissed me.
“You like it then?” I whispered, smiling at her rosy pink cheeks. She nodded, wiping a stray tear from the corner of her eye.

Once she had finished looking at her gifts for the tenth time, we decided to put a movie on. About halfway through, I felt her head getting heavier on my chest. She was falling asleep. I wasn’t going to move her until I had to, so I stayed still and watched the rest of the movie, even though I had no idea what was going on anymore.

“She’s a lightweight.” I jumped a little at Max’s voice. Looking up, I saw him leaning against the doorframe, smiling at Oakley.

“Yeah, I know!” I said, trying to straighten up with her head on my chest. This looks good after we’d just lied to everyone about being together.
“So, about tonight…” he started, walking over to her desk and sitting on her computer chair. “You would tell me if anything has happened between you two, wouldn’t you?”

Oakley would freak if I said anything, and there was no way I wanted to tell my girlfriend’s dad we’d had sex. Multiple times. She was the one I felt loyal to. I nodded, feeling like shit for lying to him, even if it was to protect her. “Nothing’s happened.”

“Okay,” he replied, tipping his chin. “Wake her up before you leave, she won’t want to sleep in her dress.” He got up and walked out, closing the door behind him.

“Oakley.” I whispered, stroking her hair once the film finished. She shook her head and threw her arm over my lap, not wanting to move. The odds of her parents letting me sleep here were not great, especially after tonight, so, as much as I didn’t want to, I had to go home.

I gently rolled her onto her back and tried not to laugh as she frowned.

“Do you want your pyjamas?”

She shook her head and then nodded. *And what is that supposed to mean?* “Oakley, which one?”

She shook her head again and buried her head in the pillow, ignoring me. I kissed the side of her head, laughing. “Night, baby. I love you,” I whispered against her hair. She wasn’t getting up for anything, so she’d have to deal with falling asleep in her dress.

Mum and Dad had already left by the time I got downstairs. I said goodbye to Oakley’s parents and Jasper – who was currently eating the chocolate out of the fountain with a ladle – and went home.

As soon as I got to my room, I stripped and climbed into bed and sent a text to Oakley. I knew I wouldn’t get a reply, but I always sent the message.

*I always will.*

*One day she’ll reply.*
I woke up in the morning to Mia shaking my arm.
“What?” I mumbled in a grumpy tone. *Do lay ins mean nothing to my sister?*
She sighed and sat down on my bed. This wasn’t something quick. She’d sat down. We were going to talk. It’d probably be about Oakley, and it was far too early to lie to Mia’s face.
“We need to talk about Chris and how you treat him when he comes over, but I don’t like arguing.”
“I don’t like that dick cheating on you,” I shot back, raising my eyebrows. The light stung my tired eyes. *Can’t we do this later?*
“Cole, please don’t. I love him.” Her voice was laced with pain. I felt like shit.
Love wasn’t a good enough reason to let someone walk all over you. “I’m sorry, Mia, but it’s the truth. Would you cheat on him?”
“Of course I wouldn’t!”
“Why?”
“Because I love him,” she snapped, frowning at me angrily.
“There you go. You wouldn’t cheat on him because you love him. He cheats on you all the time. Just think about that for a minute.”
Her eyes filled with tears, and she looked away.
I groaned. “Look, I’m sorry, again, but you need to see the truth.”
She sniffled and wiped a tear away with the back of her hand. “And what if you were in my position? What if it was Oakley cheating on you?”
“Difference is, Oakley would never do that.”
She lowered her head, knowing I was right. I wouldn’t ever have to worry about cheating. I trusted Oakley completely. It didn’t pass me by that I had basically just admitted I was with Oakley, but Mia probably knew that anyway. Her and Jasper talked.
“I guess I’m just not strong enough. I can’t do it,” she whispered, defeated.
Chris-the-dick had done a real good job on her. She had zero confidence and didn’t think she could get anyone else. She wouldn’t leave him, and now he could screw around safe in the knowledge that he’d be forgiven.
My fist twitched to punch the shit out of him.
“I’m trying to work things out and it would be a lot easier if you eased up when he’s around. For my sake, Cole, please.” She walked out and closed my door without another word. I sighed in frustration and lay back down.
Where did that come from anyway? If he was coming over today then I was going out. Since I was up, I decided to get ready and head to the birthday girl’s early.
After breakfast at Oakley’s, we drove to the mall to do some birthday shopping. She had
received money from her family that she wanted to spend. Luckily, it was a Sunday so the shops
wouldn’t be open too late. That should mean I wouldn’t get to that point where I’d rather die than
look at another item of clothing.

We also had to be back for cake at four o’clock.

By the time she had spent most of her money and we’d had lunch, it was two o’clock, and
we were heading back to my house. That wasn’t too bad. Although, after her going back to the
shop we started at to buy the first top she’d tried on, I did want to jump out of a second floor
window.

My parents were out, and Mia was at Chris’s house. We had the place to ourselves. I
desperately wanted to finish what we’d started last night. “You want a drink?” I asked as we
walked into the house.

She shook her head and grabbed my hand, leading me upstairs.

Okay, her plan is better.

She backed into my room, biting her lip. I was left breathless at the lust in her eyes. So far
she’d been quite shy, but this was new to us both. Her confidence right now was even more of a
turn on.

When her legs hit my bed, she sat down and crawled back. My quick breath hissed between
my teeth. I kneeled on the bed either side of her legs.

She’s stunning.

I laid her back on the bed and slowly peeled her clothes off, kissing her soft skin all over.
“I love you,” I whispered and covered my mouth with hers.

We had thirty minutes before we had to be at her house, and I planned to make every second
count.

***

On Tuesday, I woke up to Oakley shaking my arm. A few days had past since Oakley’s
disastrous party, and we were going to tell everyone about us today. Her parents were watching
us closer, Mia was dropping more hints, and Jasper was dropping fucking bombs. We’d run out
of time. Keeping the lie going would only make things worse in the long run.

“Morning,” I mumbled, grabbing her hand and pulling her down on the bed with me. She
laid her head on my chest and sighed. This was harder on her, and I didn’t want to think too hard
about why.

“It’s gonna be alright, Oaks,” I said, knowing I was in for a slap for calling her that. Her
hand slammed down on my chest with a thud. It didn’t hurt at all. I laughed and grabbed her
hand. “Sorry.”

She looked like she was going to fall asleep.

“Nice try,” I teased, gently nudging her. She frowned and looked up at me. “If you fall
asleep, you’re just putting off telling everyone.”

That was probably the idea. I tried not to laugh as she sighed and sat up, pouting. I wanted to
bite that full lip.

“We should just get this over with. I’m gonna shower, then we’ll tell them, okay?”

She nodded, frowning nervously. I got out of bed and kissed the top of her head. Whatever
happened when we told them would be fine. Nothing was going to stop me being with her.

“It’ll be fine, babe. I promise.”

After taking the quickest shower I had ever had, I threw on some clothes, and we made our
way downstairs. Her parents were drinking coffee in my kitchen with Mum and Dad. Good. We
only had to do this once.
“Hey, guys, can we talk to you for a minute?” I said as Oakley and I sat down on the small sofa opposite them. Jasper looked up from the floor where he was sitting and a huge grin spread across his face. Great.

“Why, Cole, of course, you can,” he said enthusiastically, throwing down the stack of pictures from holiday that he was holding. Mia also had a shit-eating grin on her face.

Sarah shook her head at Jasper, grinning slightly at his…uniqueness. Then, her attention was on us. “What’s going on?”

Oakley visibly tensed beside me, and I took a deep breath.

*Please take this well for her sake.*

“Me and Oakley. We’re… We’re together,” I said.

Everyone fell silent. Jasper gasped theatrically and slapped his hand over his mouth. He looked between his parents and then back at us. I rolled my eyes.

*Idiot.*

“Would you believe it?”

He shook his head.

“And how long have you been together?” Sarah asked, looking at Oakley who was chewing on her lip.

Max looked angry, and my parents looked happy. Well, that was two out of the four at least. They probably all wondered why we didn’t tell them before because, let’s face it, it was obvious that this hadn’t happened since they asked us at Oakley’s party.

“Since Italy,” I replied.

Max stood up, his face hard and his eyes tight with anger. Veins in his neck poked through the skin. He looked like he wanted to strangle me with his bare hands. “So it is true?” He spat through gritted teeth.

Oakley looked lost, and tears welled up in her eyes. She grabbed my hand, squeezing tightly for support. *Hang in there, baby, I’ll fix this.*

“No, it’s not. We are together, but nothing like that has happened,” I said, lying smoothly.

Sarah came over. “Are you sure this is what you want, honey?”

Oakley nodded at the same time I snapped, “What the hell does that mean? You think I’d take advantage of her?” I actually felt sick that they would think that. I would die before I let anything happen to her.

My parents jumped in to defend me while Sarah tried calming everyone down. The room was buzzing with tension.

Max glared at me, his jaw so tight he looked in pain. “You’re seventeen, Cole! What on earth do you want with her anyway? You know how she is!” He shouted, making everyone flinch.

I felt my blood boil; I wanted to punch him so badly. ‘How she is.’ What the hell was that supposed to mean? Oakley sobbed, letting go of my hand, and she ran.

I turned to follow her, but my dad held me back. “Let him go,” he said in my ear as Jasper ran after her. “You need to sort this out, Cole.”

“I didn’t take advantage of her,” I whispered to Dad. Jesus. I didn’t ever want anyone to think that.

“We know that. All of us.”

Dad pulled me back around, and I locked eyes with Max again. *Looks like I’m still enemy number one.* Sarah held his arm, sobbing quietly and pleading with him to clam down.
I shook my head, gritting my teeth. “You know I would never hurt her.”

He took a deep breath, closed his eyes and nodded. “I know, but she’s not like other sixteen-year-old girls, is she?” There’s nothing wrong with her. “Why her?”

That one was easy. “I love her,” I replied. I wanted to be with her, and I wanted to make her happy. “She’s not a little girl anymore, Max. Just because she doesn’t speak doesn’t mean she’s a child. There are plenty of mute people out there who have everything everyone else has,” I reasoned.

I was so fucking angry. Angry at Max’s reaction and angry with myself for promising her it would be okay. This doesn’t look okay. Max laughed humourlessly and shook his head. Sarah let go of his arm and wiped away tears that fell down her cheeks.

“If you love her could you not wait until she’s got everything sorted out?” Sarah asked.

“What do you mean?” I asked, frowning.

“Well,” she started, dipping her head. “I think maybe you should wait until we’ve sorted out her speech problem.”

“Sorted out her speech problem? When are you going to realise there’s nothing wrong with her not speaking? If she wants to talk, she will, but until then, back off!” I ranted, tensing my muscles so much they started to ache.

I was so pissed off with everyone thinking that she had to be fixed. As if she was a broken doll that needed a spare part to make her whole again. I would love her to speak again, of course, but if she never spoke it wouldn’t change a thing in my eyes.

“And you say you love her!” Sarah scoffed, shaking her head at me.

“You know what? I think I might be the only one that does. You don’t see her how you used to, do you? She’s not your perfect daughter anymore.”

Sarah started crying harder. She shook her head vigorously. “I love her.”

“That’s not what I asked, Sarah.”

Her face suddenly fell, eyes widened, and she gasped. No. I spun around and saw Oakley standing by the door, looking at her mum with so much pain in her eyes it sucked the air from my lungs. She’d heard everything.

Sarah shook her head. “No, honey… I…”

Oakley’s eyes flicked to me for help. I made the few steps over there and wrapped my arms around her waist. She gripped my t-shirt and started pulling me backwards, trying to get out of the house.

Jasper glared at his parents hatefully. This was such a huge mess, worse than I ever imagined. Everyone was crying and trying to tell Oakley that she had misunderstood, but she hadn’t.

She tugged my shirt harder, and I knew I had to get her out. She was done. We should probably stay and talk so Sarah could explain, but Oakley clearly needed to leave.

“We’ll talk tomorrow,” I said over my shoulder as I slammed the front door behind us. We practically ran to my car. I locked the doors on the way, and we jumped in. The front door flew open as I tore out of the drive.

Oakley’s body shook as she cried silently, leaning against the window. Her feet were up on the seat, and her eyes were closed.

“I’m so sorry, baby,” I whispered, stroking her arm. What the hell have I done? “We’ll go to a hotel tonight, okay? I’ll sort all this out tomorrow. Everyone was upset, and we all said things we don’t mean.”

She didn’t look up or do anything to suggest she’d even heard what I said, but I didn’t stop. I had to make her feel better. “What I said about your mum isn’t true. I shouldn’t have said that, and I’m sorry, but they were talking about you not speaking. It was my fault; I kinda lost it. Oakley, it’s not true. Your parents love you the way you are.”
She sniffed and shook her head, placing her hands behind her neck, with her elbows drawn together in front of her chest. Blinking, she looked up at the roof, and I could see how hard she was fighting to stop crying.

“Sorry,” I said quietly. “I love you.”

***

It was just after eleven in the morning when we arrived at a small B&B by the coast. We were allowed straight into our room, but since we had nothing with us, we decided to take a walk along the beach first. My phone hadn’t stopped ringing since we left, so I turned it to silent after sending a text to Jasper.

Oakley had barely looked at me, and I was starting to worry.

*Does she blame me? She should. It’s all my fault.*

“Oakley, please,” I begged, stopping to turn her to face me. I lifted her chin, needing to her to look at me. “Can you forgive me?” I held my breath, absolutely terrified that she was going to shake her head. I couldn’t lose her five minutes after finally getting her. I just couldn’t.

She looked confused for a second. She finally did what I needed and nodded. I breathed a sigh of relief and kissed her forehead. She wasn’t angry with me. Though she had every right to. I was such a dick to bring those things up with Sarah, knowing it was a possibility that she could walk back in and hear. She wouldn’t have wanted to leave me to face the heat alone.

“Thank you, baby.”

She pressed her petite body against mine, and we held each other. The strong wind whipping up from the sea, stinging my skin. If I were cold, then she really would be. We’d have to go back soon.

“I honestly didn’t think they would react like that. I knew they would be upset with us for keeping it from them, but I ever expected that. It’ll be okay. Your parents just need a little time.”

Her body was rigid against mine. She didn’t move her head from my chest, so I had no idea what she was thinking or how she was feeling. It drove me to insanity. I was supposed to be the one who fixed things for her. How could I do that if I had no clue what was wrong?

*I need to lighten this up. Bright side: we’re alone for the night.*

“Hey, we’re at the coast together. Let’s forget it until tomorrow and go get something to eat.”

She pulled away and smiled weakly. I would never forgive myself for arguing with Max and Sarah when she would hear, but what I’d said was true. Sarah didn’t see the same girl, and she did want to fix her.

I wanted to help Oakley. However she wanted me to.

We got some chips and sat on the bench that was facing the dull, fierce sea. Grey clouds covered the sky. It looked about ready to piss it down. Kind of matched my girl’s mood.

“Whatever happens with the parents, you have to know how much I love you. I won’t ever give up on us,” I said, kissing the top of her head.

She made a strangled noise that almost sounded like a sob and tucked her face into the crook of my neck.

*Let me in, Oakley. Tell me what happened.*
As we sat outside in the unusually cold August air, I tried to pretend what Mum said hadn’t bothered me, but I clearly wasn’t doing a very good job because Cole kept giving me sidelong glances, looking at me like I was going to shatter.

Deep down I always knew Mum thought of me as a child still, but I didn’t know she felt like I was a stranger, a different person.

You are a different person. The old you wasn’t dirty, damaged.

I didn’t want to go home. I’d had enough. Actually, I’d had enough a long time ago.

“We should go back now. You’re frozen,” Cole said, rubbing his hand up and down my arm to generate some heat. It didn’t work, but I appreciated the gesture. I nodded and stood up at the same time his phone started to vibrate. It was about the thousandth time.

With a deep, irritated sigh, he pulled it out of his pocket and answered when he saw who it was. “Hello.”

Who is it? Then, I heard Jasper’s muffled voice on the other end.

“I’ll tell you as long as you keep it to yourself. Oakley needs some time, not for your parents to rush down here and drag her home.”

Cole’s eyes narrowed in irritation.

What’s Jasper said?

“Well, they can fuck off. She’s sixteen now. She can make up her own mind.”

Jasper said something else and Cole told him our location. After another minute of muffled noise coming from Jasper’s end, Cole hung up and looked at me, wincing.

“Jasper’s going to tell them where we are, but he won’t give them the name of the B&B. He’s coming tonight and bringing pizza.”

I gave Cole a look. All I wanted was to be alone with him and forget our problems for a while. But if I had to see anyone else it’d be my brother.

“He wants to join the party.” He grinned, rolling his eyes. “He’s also bringing Haribo and some girl he met at a party.”

Right...

We walked back to the B&B hand in hand. The dull, moody weather made me in even more of a hurry to get inside. I wanted a hot chocolate and to wrap a quilt around myself to warm up. Cole opened the front door of the quaint mid-terrace town house and gestured for me to go in first.

Sighing, I placed my hands over the radiator in the entrance hall. I wanted to kiss the owner for having the heating on in August. Today felt like November.
All too soon, Cole walked up the stairs, and I had to leave the warmth behind. Where had the summer gone? Thankfully, our room was hot, and I crawled into the old-fashioned bed. My feet were numb, so I wrapped the cover around myself and waited to warm up.

“It’s not that bad, Oakley.”

_Maybe not for you!_ Cole was bigger, muscular. Whatever, I was bloody cold.

Cole flopped down beside me and rolled over, laying his head on my lap.

_Do make yourself comfortable._

“We have a couple hours before your annoying brother gets here. What do you want to do?”

From the look in his eye and the way his hand trailed up my thigh it was plain to see what he wanted to pass the time with.

His touch felt good. Every single time.

I raised an eyebrow and tugged at his t-shirt.

***

There was a knock at the door just after we had finished getting dressed. I was so grateful that Jasper took forever to get here.

Cole glared at the door before going to open it. “Hey,” he said, sounding annoyed at my brother’s presence. He wasn’t the only one.

“Sup, Bonnie and Clyde,” Jasper joked. He walked into the room and put the _one, two, three, four, five, six, seven_ pizza boxes down on the side table. Seven pizzas for four people?

“Guys, this is Casey. Casey, this is my baby sister, Oakley, and her corrupting boyfriend, Cole.”

“Hey,” Cole said to Casey. I smiled at her and moved over so we would all be able to sit comfortably on the bed. She was pretty. Her dark hair was tied to the side, styled perfectly. Her lips were painted hot pink, matching her nails. She was his type…but who wasn’t?

“What have you two been doing?” Jasper asked a little too enthusiastically. I blushed, probably tomato red, and looked out of the window. “You’d better not knock her up.”

“Shut up, Jasper!” Cole snapped. He reached over and grabbed a pizza box off the side.

“How many people were you planning on feeding?”

Jasper suddenly gasped and hopped off the bed, making all of us jump at his sudden movement. _What now?_ “Am I sitting on your sex sweat?” He yelled like a little girl, frantically wiping his bum with his hand, then wiping his hand down the wall.

I choked on nothing. _What?_ Cole just shook his head, discouraged, while Casey just looked scared. Clearly, she hadn’t known my brother long. _Run, Casey. Run fast._

After Jasper’s inappropriate freak out, we all ate. The TV was on in the background, but no one really watched it. Everything Jasper said was either gross or stupid. He raged about how chocolate bars used to be bigger, and it should be illegal to reduce their size. Why every ‘weird’ meat tasted like chicken, and my personal favourite, what was the point of belly buttons?

Casey looked more and more regretful. As crazy and unpredictable as Jasper was, I wouldn’t change him for the world, and I knew he wouldn’t change me either. I loved him so much for that. Along with Cole, Jasper was the only person who accepted what I’d become.

“Effing hell,” Jasper said, sighing heavily and shaking his head as soon as Casey went to the toilet down the hall.

_She’ll no longer get any sympathy from me if she comes back._

“Go on, what’s wrong with this one?” Cole asked, sounding bored.

“When I picked her up she made me go in her house!”

_What a monster…_
I raised my eyebrows, waiting for him to explain what was so wrong with that. “Her parents were there. I’ve only met the girl once. Once! I had an actual conversation with her Dad and ate bloody cake with them all. Jesus, it was a first date not an anniversary.”

“How awful,” Cole agreed, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

“You haven’t heard the worse part yet. Talking to the parents, I could just about handle, but the cake had banana on it.”

Cole laughed, and I smiled so wide my jaw started aching instantly.

“Chocolate belongs on a cake. Banana does not.” Cole continued laughing, clutching his stomach. “I’m serious, man! Who the hell does that to a cake?” Jasper said.

“Casey’s parents,” Cole choked out and laughed some more.

“Whatever. Back me up, Oakley. That’s weird right?”

I nodded. He was right, but it wasn’t exactly what I’d call a deal breaker.

“Thank you! At least she doesn’t live close,” he quickly whispered, as the room door opened. She came back. Wow.

“Come help me, Oakley.” He kind of made it sound like a question, but before I could answer he was pulling my arm.

We left the B&B to go to the corner shop opposite.

“You know Mum didn’t mean it, don’t you?”

“*So that’s why you wanted me to come along.*

I nodded and smiled. She did mean it, but I wasn’t looking for sympathy. *Lies are easier.*

Lies glued the broken parts of my family together.

“You don’t seem that convinced,” he muttered.

I rolled my eyes and nodded again. I knew she would change me in an instant if she could, and part of me wished she could do it, too. I’d give anything not to be locked inside myself anymore.

Anything but your and Mum’s happiness.

“Good. Look, none of us really care if you never talk again.” Making an unattractive sound in the back of his throat, he slapped his own head. “That came out wrong. We care, obviously, but you’re fine as you are,” he said, scratching his jaw. “You know I’ll always be there for you, and so will Cole,” he added.

Maybe I didn’t have the most understanding parents, but I did have the best brother and boyfriend anyone could ever want.

Jasper bought four bottles of Coke and we went back to the B&B. Cole and Casey were talking about universities when we got back. He looked relieved to see me. Probably shouldn’t have left him to make small talk with Jasper’s next conquest.

Jasper threw – literally – a bottle to each of us and then downed half of his in one go. I climbed back on the bed and snuggled into Cole’s side, laying my head on his shoulder. He handed me one of the pizzas and I arched my eyebrow. There was no way I’d be able to eat the whole thing.

“He got seven, Oakley. Do your bit,” he teased.

The rest of the evening was normal. Jasper was an idiot, and we spent most of the time laughing at him. At ten o’clock Casey began yawning. *Well done for sticking it out this long.* “I should get home,” she said to Jasper, hiding another yawn behind her hand.

Jasper nodded and stood up. “Sure. I’ll see you guys tomorrow, right?”

“We’ll be back in the morning,” Cole said.

“Look after her.” It was a demand, one he knew Cole would do anyway.

“You know it,” he replied as he started to gather up the empty pizza boxes. We had managed to eat five of them. The other two would be Jasper’s breakfast, apparently.

The second they closed the door I peeled my clothes off and dived under the soft, puffy quilt.
“You don’t have to be shy in front of me,” Cole said, smirking in amusement at how fast I’d covered up.

_ I can’t help it sometimes._

“I’ll just take the boxes out, won’t be a minute.” I nodded, curling up underneath the cover and closing my eyes.

I briefly woke up when I felt the bed dip. Cole’s arm flopped over my ribs, and he kissed the side of my head. “Night, beautiful girl.”

“Oakley, wake up, babe,” Cole whispered. I felt a soft pressure against my forehead. His lips. That was the best way to wake up.

I groaned, not wanting to get up yet. Every ugly second of yesterday’s argument came flooding back, and I didn’t have the energy to deal with it all again. Cole pulled the cover off. I gasped and covered my half naked body.

Cole frowned. “Don’t hide from me. You’re perfect to me, Oakley, and I’ve seen it all before.” He winked and walked off out of the room, probably to use the bathroom. I used the time to get dressed and run my fingers through my hair. We had nothing in the way of toiletries so I rinsed my mouth out and popped a Tic-tac in my mouth from my bag.

Ten minutes later, we’d paid the room bill and were making our way to a café for breakfast when Cole’s phone rang. He’d taken it off silent first thing, deciding we couldn’t ignore everyone forever.

I wished we could.

He pulled his phone out of his pocket as we sat down on a white, plastic looking table. He mouthed ‘your dad’ before answering. “Hello, Max. She’s fine,” he said, his voice short and snippy. “In an hour, we’re just having breakfast. Yep… Bye.”

His frown faded as he looked over at me. “He wanted to know when we’ll be home. I think they just want to sort it all out now.”

I looked at him carefully to see if he was only saying that to make me feel better. He kept a straight face, and I knew he wasn’t talking it up. Mum and Dad wanted to make amends. I wanted that, too.

“Chocolate chip pancakes?” Cole asked, looking up at me over the tatty menu. I nodded, feeling my empty stomach begging for food.

Throughout breakfast I couldn’t help thinking how this was probably the last time we would be properly alone for a while. But surely after running away Dad wouldn’t try to control our time together too much.

_Why wouldn’t he? He already controls every aspect of your life._

_You can’t talk._

_You can’t have a normal relationship._

_You don’t deserve a normal relationship._

I rubbed my forehead roughly. _Just stop._

Breakfast ended too soon. It was time to go. Cole opened the car door for me with a little bow. I smiled at how stupidly cute he was.

“Oakley?” He paused and took a deep breath. I didn’t like where this was going already. He was serious again.

“I don’t want to be the reason you’re fighting with your parents, I know you hate that. Damn, this is what Mia was talking about.” _Mia? “I will completely understand if it’s too much and you don’t think I’m worth the trouble.” _

I felt the blood drain from my face.

_He wants out._

_Of course he does._

Cole reached over and took my hand. “I don’t want to, believe me I don’t, but I don’t want you to fall out with them. If you wanted to just be friends again. If it’s too much, then we can. It would hurt like hell and suck so bad, but I want you to be happy.”
I felt sick. He really had no clue just how much he meant to me. I couldn’t go back.
“So, do you still want to be together?” He’d never looked so vulnerable or scared before. I
tsqueezed his hand and nodded. His shoulders relaxed and he smiled. “Okay, good. I terrified
you’d want to end this. I don’t know how I’d pretend like it wasn’t killing me.”
I blinked rapidly and a tear rolled down my cheek. How is it possible to love someone this
much?
“Don’t cry, babe. God, you’re such a girl,” he said teasingly, making me smile. “Oh, just so
you know, that offer was forever. Since you said you don’t want to go back to being friends you
no longer hold the right to.” He laughed. “And yeah, I’m aware of how much of a psycho I
sounded just then. I don’t care. That’s just the way it is.”
That was fine with me.
We pulled up outside my house, and I sagged into the seat. Going home always dampened
my mood. The front door flew open before Cole had even turned the engine off. Mum ran
towards us with Dad behind her. Cole’s parents also saw us arrive as they both came out of his
house. Mia and Jasper were nowhere to be seen, probably choosing to stay away from the drama.
Lucky them.
Cole jumped out and walked around to my side, ready to be at my side. I got out of the car
and stood with him. We’d show them we were serious about each other. I relaxed as I felt Cole’s
his hand rest on the small of my back.
“I’m so sorry,” Mum mumbled. She pulled me into a long hug and cried. Her body shook
with tears.
After a few seconds, I caved and hugged her back.
She loves you. She just wants the best for you.
She wouldn’t if she knew.
She’d hate you then.
When she let me go, Dad wrapped his arms around me. I let him because there was no other
choice, but my body was rigid. I forced up an emotional barrier in my mind. He couldn’t get in
there.
Lie.
“I’m sorry, too, sweetheart. And to you, Cole.” He released me, and I backed up straight
away. “Let’s go in. We all need to talk.”
We all followed Dad into the house. I sat down next to Cole on the sofa. “Calm down and
breathe,” Cole whispered as Mum put down a tray of tea, coffee, hot chocolate and biscuits five
minutes later. No one had said a word since we got in. I took a deep breath but it didn’t help
much.
Dad cleared his throat and sat forward in the chair. “Yesterday, everything got out of hand
and we all said some things that we didn’t mean. I didn’t think this would happen yet. Not until
you were older, Oakley.”
I almost choked in disbelief. How could he even sit there and pretend my age mattered? I felt
sick to my stomach. I burned in anger and shame.
Push it away.
Mum reached across from the sofa beside us and grabbed my hand. “I need you to
understand that as your mother of course I want you to talk again. But it isn’t everything. I don’t
love you any less. Nothing could make me love you any less.”
I can think of one thing.
Dad’s eye twitched.
“I’m sorry for what I said, but you have to understand that you will always be my little girl,
no matter what. However, I really am happy for you both. Just make sure you look after her,”
Mum added.
Cole smiled and threw his arm over the back of the sofa. “Always.”
There was that always again.
After the air had been cleared, we moved on to lighter subjects. I didn’t dare look at Dad again. I hated him so much, but I still loved him. I wanted him to go to prison, but I wanted him to stay and change.

I wanted him to be my dad again. It was so confusing I thought I was going crazy half the time.

*You shouldn’t love him at all. It should be that simple but it isn’t.*

I hadn’t seen Frank in almost three years so I knew for sure it was over, but I didn’t understand why things couldn’t go back to how they were before. Well, I did know why, but I desperately wanted to be carefree and have a happy family again.

*God, I’m so messed up.*

After Cole left, and had arranged to come back for dinner, I sat in my room with Mum. She had apologised a million times for what happened and was trying to think of ways she could make it up to me.

“Oh, what about a spa day? That would be lovely,” she suggested.

I did like the spa in Italy. I nodded. She was making an effort. I could do the same. She lay back against my hard wooden headboard and smiled like a teenage girl. It was nice to see her smile.

“So, how are things going with Cole? You two do make a lovely couple, I’ve always thought that.”

*So why the freak out? Oh, because she realised she’d have to acknowledge that I was growing up and still had the same issues.* I was supposed to grow out of it and that couldn’t have been easy for her when I didn’t.

In answer to her question, I smiled. And bloody blushed!

“It’s so good to see you happy, love.”

*It’s good to feel happy.*
The summer had passed so bloody quickly, and school started again on Monday. I had just two more days off. At least this was my last year at Sixth Form, and then I could concentrate on University. Now Uni was something I couldn’t wait for, I’d be studying for something that interested me – structural engineering. I wanted to be the one figuring out how big, fuck-off buildings wouldn’t fall on top of people.

“Cole, will you hurry up! You take longer to get ready than my sister,” Jasper screamed. I winced as his high-pitched, pretending-to-be-a-girl voice cut right through me.

“Jesus, Jasper! I’m standing right next to you! I’m ready.”

I grabbed my wallet, slipping it into my pocket and sprayed some aftershave on my neck. It was Oakley’s favourite, and the one she bought me for Christmas for the last few years.

I loved it.

Tonight, I was going out with Jasper and Ben. Oakley was having a girl’s night in with Sarah, Mia, my mum and Kerry. She seemed pretty excited to spend the evening pampering herself with that muddy-looking crap you put on your face. That I had once put on my face.

Never again.

“Cole,” Jasper whined. “What’s taking you so long?”

“I was in the shower five minutes ago, man, it’s not like I’ve been getting ready for an hour.”

“And why were you in the shower just five minutes ago?”

Damn. That’d be because I’d been with Oakley.

He saw my expression and laughed. “You’re so whipped. But I’m glad you are. She’s going to really need you one day.”

“What’s that mean?”

He tilted his head, looking at me like I’d just asked something dumb. “You know what that means. Whatever made her quit talkin’ to us is bound to catch up with her. I’ve been prepared to drop everything since it happened, but she won’t want me now.”

“I’ll do anything to help her. You know that.”

“I do, bro, and that’s why your area is still intact. Now, hurry up, you’re wasting valuable drinking time.”

I was distracted by his words. He was right. One day she’d have to face whatever went down. I had absolutely no idea what that was, but I knew it terrified me. I also knew there was nothing that could scare me away from her, no matter how hard things got, not matter how much it hurt.

“Cole!”

“Yeah, I’m coming!”

Don’t stress about what could happen now. Whatever’s going on you’ll fix it for her.

The past few weeks had been perfect. Oakley’s parents were doing their best to accept that we were together and to be happy for us. We weren’t allowed to sleep over each other’s anymore, as anticipated, but that didn’t bother me. It really didn’t help that Jasper was always around to offer another teen pregnancy statistic. He knew entirely too much on the subject.

“Alright, man, I’m gonna bet you right now that I get more phone numbers tonight,” he said, slapping me on the back as we walked out to wait for the taxi. We already know this.

“I’m not getting any phone numbers tonight. I’m with your sister, remember?”

“So you fold? I win?”

I sighed in defeat. “Yes, Jasper, you win.”

The black taxi pulled up outside my house. Jasper stopped and looked at his reflection in the window, messing his hair up. “Do I look okay?”

“What are you, a woman?”

“Hey, I have insecurities the same as everyone else. I may be so close to perfect it’s scary but—”

“You look fine, Jasper!” I said, cutting him off. It was generally much easier to agree with him and just go along with it.

“Yeah? You don’t think I should have gone with the blue shirt?”

I shook my head, taking a deep breath. “Are we really doing this?”

He nodded, looking deadly serious. This is going to be a very long night. “No, you shouldn’t have gone with the blue shirt.” I shoved him in the back of the taxi. “What you’re wearing looks good. So does your hair.”

He laughed and scooted over so I could get in. I gave the driver Ben’s address, and we went to pick him up. “I’m flattered, man, I really am. But you’re with my sister, and if I’m honest, man bits just don’t do it for me.”

Why didn’t I drink before I left the house? A whole evening with Jasper. I must be mad.

Ben was waiting by his front door as we pulled up. He looked like a kid on Christmas morning. Since he’d got together with Kerry his nights out had dwindled.

“Hey.” He greeted us with an excited smile as he got in the front. “Ready to get shit-faced?”

I laughed. “Oh yeah!”

It had been a while since I’d had a night out with the lads, and I was looking forward to it. Most of my time was spent with Oakley now. I was more than happy with that, but it was good to do separate things, too. We both needed time with our mates.

The queue into the club was short, and we barely had to wait two minutes before making it to the front. That probably means inside is shit. The built-to-hell bouncer shot his muscular arm out, stopping us just as we were about to go in. He must eat ten pounds of steak and raw eggs every day. Or he was on steroids. The veins in his neck poked through his skin, and the material of his black top was stretched around his bulky shape.

“ID,” he demanded of Jasper.

I watched with a smile as Jasper’s face fell and he pulled his driving licence out of his wallet. The bouncer studied it for a second and handed it back, nodding for us to go inside. We made our way through the crowd of barely dressed girls to the bar.

“I’m fucking older than you!” Jasper exclaimed, waving his hand in mine and Ben’s direction.

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“I’m fucking older than you!” Jasper exclaimed, waving his hand in mine and Ben’s direction.

“Well, clearly you don’t look it.” Or act it.

He grumbled something under his breath and walked to the bar to get the drinks in. Jasper turned to get the bartender’s attention but as she got to us, Jasper turned away.

Here we go.

“Well, hello, ladies,” he purred.
Since he was now otherwise engaged, I ordered three JD and cokes and three shots of tequila. Ben and I sat down on a stool and got comfortable, ready to watch Jasper make a twat out of himself all night.

“You wanna dance?” He smirked at blonde and scooted a little close to her.

*Give her some personal space, Jasper.* Watching him chat up women was like watching a car crash.

“I have a boyfriend,” she responded, raising her eyebrows but not actually looking too bothered about the fact. Without saying a word, Jasper turned away from her like she didn’t exist anymore.

“Wanna dance?” He asked another girl, who was standing right next to her friend. Ben laughed, and I watched open-mouthed. Why would he not try another group of girls? The blonde’s friend snorted. “Are you serious? Do I look like a backup or something?” Jasper’s face turned thoughtful.

He was taking far too long to say a simple no.

Shrugging unapologetically, he replied, “Sorry, she’s hot and I saw her first.”

I choked on my drink, my eyes widening in shock. Did he really just say that? The girl’s face reddened. She slapped his cheek, and the sound made me flinch. That had to hurt. It didn’t seem to faze Jasper, and I had a feeling that wasn’t the first time he’d been slapped.

“No need to be all touchy, love. I was only being honest! I thought women liked that?” He shouted after her as she stormed off with her friends.

“We’ve only been in here five minutes, and you’ve been slapped already. That must be some sort of a record,” Ben praised, slapping him on the back. Jasper smiled proudly and downed his shot.

Halfway through the night, Jasper ditched us for a group of Thai girls, here for a holiday. He was in his own little idea of heaven. I sat back at the bar with Ben, downing drinks.

“Never? It’s never awkward or anything?” Ben questioned about Oakley.

“Nope.” Shaking my head, I explained, “I know what she’s thinking pretty much all of the time. I don’t really need her to say it.”

He nodded along. “Wow. I have no idea what Kerry thinks, and she doesn’t shut up!” They were different ends of the extreme, one never talking, and one always talking. They balanced each other out perfectly.

“But do you ever wish she would talk? I mean, doesn’t it bother you that you’ll never hear her say she loves you? And what about the future? When you get married? She won’t be able to say the vows and shit. How would that work?”

That was something I had thought about, but surely we could get married without her actually saying the words? I’d not looked into it but there was sign language and probably other options for her. But Ben was getting way ahead of us. We didn’t need to worry about that for years yet.

“Yeah, I wish she would talk. Of course. But it won’t change anything if she doesn’t. And she does say she loves me, she just doesn’t *say* it.”

Ben’s black eyebrows knitted together in confusion. I couldn’t help laughing at him. “Never mind, it works, okay. I’ll get the next round,” I said, pulling a tenner out of my wallet.

Jasper appeared back at the bar, not to talk to me and Ben, but for the redhead standing just along from us. “This should be good,” Ben muttered. I moved slightly closer.

“Hotel room,” I heard Jasper say. Wow, he got straight to the point. A song with a lot of bass started playing, making it harder to hear. The next thing out of his mouth was, “Hitler.”

I looked at Ben in horror. What the hell was he doing? Why was he talking about Hitler? The girl frowned and started to look a little scared. What possible reason would you have to bring up Hitler to someone you were trying to chat up?
“Some good ideas. I love blondes…” I wanted to make a quick exit, but there was something about the train wreck that I just couldn’t look away from. The girl – hilariously not a blonde – glared.

Sure enough, she threw her drink in his face, and then slapped his cheek before storming off. I stood frozen. He raised his hands in celebration, looking around the club. It was a game. Between him and who?

*Please don’t see me, please.*

“Damn it,” I muttered as he turned around and grinned in our direction.

“Cole! Man, did you see that?” He asked, still grinning as he walked over to us. The front of his shirt was soaking wet. I shook my head at him. “Right in my face,” he exclaimed proudly, wiping the strong smelling wine from his chin.

I shook my head and asked the million-dollar question, “Why were you talking about Hitler?”

He shrugged and leant on the bar. “Worked, didn’t it? I tried everything else, so I thought I’d bring a little dictator into the mix and bam, drink all over me!” He pulled at his soaking shirt for emphasis.

What could he have possibly tried for that to be his last option? I stopped myself before I asked, deciding it was probably best just not to know.

Laughing, I punched his arm and ordered eight more shots. I’d need ‘em.
Oakley

On a sigh, I picked out my uniform and started getting dressed. Today was the first day back at school. Not only was it going to be a bad day, but in the evening, Mum’s friend was coming over for dinner. She just so happened to be a psychiatric doctor.

I wasn’t buying the ‘coincidence’ at all.

She’s trying to fix you. No one can fix you.

A good psychiatric doctor will know you can still talk. Then, they all will.

I won’t let them. I won’t let them.

With shaking hands, I put on the black trousers.

It’s okay. Even if they know you can talk it doesn’t mean you have to.

I’m in control of that.

No, you’re not. He is.

Mum was trying a casual since I refused to go to back to any doctor surgery. I understood how desperate she was to help me, but what she felt now was nothing compared to how she’d feel if she found out the truth.

Once I was dressed and my hair was brushed, I crept downstairs to get some breakfast. Mum was still in her room, and I didn’t fancy a conversation with her until the last minute.

“You ready for today?” Cole asked, making me jump at how close he was. I was on the bottom step so at least he’d waited until I couldn’t fall down them all to scare me.

I turned my nose up and nodded, resisting the urge to get back in bed and pretend I was ill. I’d never be ready for it, but I had little choice in the matter. There was just one more year to get through.

“It’s going to be okay. If Julian says or does anything come and get me. I’ll meet you at break and give you my timetable so you’ll know where I’ll be if you need me.”

I rolled my eyes gave him a look, feeling like a helpless little child who couldn’t stand up for herself. I knew he only wanted to protect me, but I couldn’t help feeling like his little sister when he did.

Cole grabbed my hand and spun me around so I was facing him again when I turned away.

“You can chuck it in your bag and never look at it if you want. Just take it. For me?” He pleaded, widening his eyes. It wasn’t often that he used that face on me, but it worked. Giving up, I wrapped my arms around his waist again.

“Thank you,” he whispered into my hair, sending that familiar shiver right through me.

We managed to stay away from my parents and eat breakfast in peace as they got ready upstairs. No doubt them talking longer was so they could talk about how to handle the visit from the psychiatrist tonight.
Jasper walked in as we were eating our toast. My mouth dropped open. It was before nine. Was he sick? *Oh, wait, he’s wearing the same clothes as yesterday.*

“Well, good morning, baby sister,” he chirped, ruffling my hair and laughing as I slapped his hand away.

“Good night?” Cole questioned.

Jasper grinned like an idiot and winked in our direction. “A gentleman never tells.”

“Gentleman!” Cole scoffed.

*Couldn’t agree more.*

“Anyway, we don’t have time for the gruesome details, thankfully. We’ve got to go.” I stood up with Cole and gave Jasper a wave.

“Text me if you need anything,” he shouted after me.

On the way to school, I watched the time pass on Cole’s dashboard. Wasn’t watching it supposed to make it pass slower? The illuminated orange numbers flicked by too quickly. Before I knew it, Cole was reversing the car into a space outside the Sixth Form block.

“I would give you the whole speech about today being fine and me being her if you need, but my arm’s starting to bruise!” He said teasingly, rubbing his arm where I had hit him for saying the same thing twice on the way over.

I nodded and smiled at him as confidently as I could, and he gave me a sad smile back. Sometimes I hated how well he could see through my fake happiness. But school wasn’t forever, and I could do this.

I got out of the car when we couldn’t waste any more time, and grabbed my bag from the back seat. Cole walked around to my side of the car and wrapped me in his arms. I felt so safe and protected with him. Hugging him closer, I closed my eyes and pretended we were back in Italy.

Someone behind us gagged loudly. Julian. Cole’s grip tightened around me possessively as he glared at Julian, but quickly turned back to me, ignoring Julian, which seemed to make him angry.

“I’ll meet you here at lunch and we’ll go for ice cream, yeah?” Cole said.

My throat went dry. How could he make me feel so alive, so whole? I loved him so much.

I grabbed a fistful of his t-shirt and pulled him closer so there was absolutely no space between us. He brushed his lips against mine teasingly. Usually, I wouldn’t be comfortable kissing him in front of hundreds of people but, in that moment, I didn’t care. I crushed my lips to his.

“Nice show,” a deep voice shouted. I jumped back, embarrassed. Kerry and Ben stood just by Cole’s car grinning at us. I immediately started blushing like crazy.

*Let’s keep kissing in private from now on.*

“Thank you,” Cole replied sarcastically.

I left Cole and his friends when the bell rang. Taking a deep breath, I made my way to my classroom. The familiar faded, dull blue walls matched my mood. Home time couldn’t come soon enough. This morning people seemed more interested in catching up after the long summer than poking fun at me.

It wouldn’t last.

When I walked into my form room, the teacher was already sitting at her desk. Hannah smiled as I took my seat next to her. Everyone sat in the same seat as last year.

Once the register was taken, we were given our timetables. I had double maths, then English and biology, and after lunch, it was double business studies. Double maths on the first day back was bloody harsh.

I made my way to maths, this time without Hannah as she was now in a higher set to me; she was a whiz at maths. I wasn’t bad at it, but I hated it so I didn’t put much effort into the class. I sat one row from the front, next to someone new.
He was quite petite and looked painfully shy and nervous. I smiled at him, which he returned without saying a word. I pointed to my name written neatly at the top of my notepad.

“I’m Kyle,” he whispered. “Oakley’s a weird name.” His eyes widened. “I didn’t mean weird. I mean… unusual. Sorry.”

Holding my hand up, I shook my head and smiled. It was kind of weird. I didn’t think it really suited me. I should have a common name that no one would bat an eyelid at.

About five minutes into the lesson, when everyone had settled down to work out some equations to ‘get us back in the swing of things’, the door opened. Julian. He came strutting in as if he owned the bloody place.

Great, he’s in my maths classes for the year.

“Sorry I’m late,” he mumbled, ignoring Mr Jones grumbling about his timekeeping.

“Julian, I saved you a seat,” Leanne whined, looking at him through her eyelashes.

“Get back to it. All of you,” Mr Jones barked as everyone used Julian’s entrance as an excuse to start talking. Julian chuckled and sat down on the opposite side of me.

What’s he doing? I gulped and picked an equation to start, desperate not to make any eye contact with him. He sat there to wind me up and make me feel uncomfortable.

Don’t let him know it’s working.

“Oakley,” he whispered, leaning a little closer to me. My heart beat faster in the worst way. I tilted my head so my hair fell in my face. He sighed in defeat. “Oakley… Please?”

He actually sounded… sad? Something was going on. He had been in my company for over five minutes and hadn’t made a dig or a nasty remark.

It’s a trap.

I took a deep breath and forced myself to look at him. His thin lips pulled up at the sides into a real smile. A real smile for me? Why? He was acting like we were friends and he hadn’t been a bastard to me for years.

“Look, I’m sorry, okay. Sorry about your party and everything else.” He shifted in his seat nervously. He didn’t make apologies often. That much was clear from how uncomfortable he looked. “I know I’ve been a dick to you, and I don’t deserve anything, but I’d like to be friends,” he said quickly. “I really am sorry. Can you forgive me?”

If I had been standing up, I think I would have fainted. Julian apologising and wanting to be friends. What on earth happened to him over the summer holidays to make him… nice? I wasn’t sure if I could trust him or if I even wanted him as a friend in the first place.

He grimaced. “So, can you forget—”

“Enough!”

I jumped at the sound of the teacher shouting, cutting Julian off.

“I told you I wanted silence! Detention. Both of you this lunch time.”

Did I just get detention for talking? I stared open mouthed at him. Could he not see the irony here? The guy had been my maths teacher for the past two years so it wasn’t like he didn’t know me.

Julian mumbled a string of swear words under his breath and started his work. This sucked so much. Detention on my first day back because of talking! Julian was an idiot. After a couple seconds, he nudged me and nodded to the paper in front of him. I reluctantly looked down to see what he’d written: SORRY.

How about stop doing things to be sorry for? I smiled half-heartedly just to get him to leave me alone.

At lunch, I made my way to the detention room. I didn’t even have enough time to see Cole first so he would be waiting for me by the front doors. Frowning in anger, I plopped down on the closest seat and pulled a book out of my bag.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Julian smile sheepishly from across the room. I ignored him and started to read. About ten minutes later, I saw Cole looking through the door. His face was filled with amusement.
Oh yeah, this is hilarious!

“I’ve just got to pop to the office for one minute. Do not move,“ Mr Jones ordered in his monotone voice and left the room.

The second the door closed, Julian got up and walked over to me. I sighed as he sat on the chair beside me. “Leanne’s having a party on Friday, you wanna go?” He asked, swinging one leg onto the table.

No.

He knew I was with Cole so either he was delusional or had a selective memory. “I’m trying here, Oakley.”

That was true, and I couldn’t fault him for that. It did seem like he was trying. I just wasn’t sure if it was enough. I didn’t understand why he wanted to be friends now. I shook my head but smiled. It was so hard to act normal with him, especially after what he’d done at my party. And no matter how hard we tried to be civil, I would never forget how he had made my life hell for years.

The door swung open, making us both jump.

“Get lost,” Cole growled, glaring at Julian as he slipped into the room. Julian glared and stuck his middle finger up to Cole, before returning to his seat.

“What?” Cole said innocently, surprised at my look of reproach. I rolled my eyes, smiling, and shook my head.

“So, detention, huh?”

“We got it for talking,” Julian interrupted.

Cole frowned at Julian angrily. “Are you trying to be funny?”

I grabbed his hand and shook my head.

“Wait, you really got detention for talking?” He asked in disbelief. Then, he started laughing. I sat back in the chair with my arms crossed over my chest and waited for him to get over it.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, shaking his head. “Just pretty ironic.”

You’re telling me.

Without warning, Cole leant over the table and pressed his lips to mine. Every kiss from him made me melt. He pulled away just a few seconds later and walked out of the room with the biggest, cheekiest grin I had ever seen. I couldn’t help smiling to myself.

Thankfully, Mr Jones didn’t get back from whatever he was doing until after Cole had left. I did briefly worry that Julian would tell him, but he didn’t. He didn’t do anything actually. Just stared at his phone and frowned.

That was fine with me.

When detention was over, I made my way to the bench outside the front of the school to quickly eat my sandwich before afternoon classes started.

“Oakley?” A female voice called. I looked up to see Abby jogging towards me.

What on earth is she doing here?

The last I had heard she was studying teaching at the University in London.

Does Jasper know she’s back?

“Hey.” She smiled warmly as she sat down. “Isn’t this great, I managed to get my work placement here. I’m so glad I get to see you again. I’ll be helping out in some of your English lessons so we can catch up,” she said.

I smiled sarcastically. Did she really expect me to be happy about this? She was the reason my brother had cried. She was the reason why he couldn’t trust women anymore and behaved like an arse. I hated the bitch.

This day just keeps getting better and better. This wasn’t even the worst part. I still had dinner with the doctor to get through yet.
I sat awkwardly at the dinner table. Jasper sat beside me and glared at Mum’s doctor friend, Sadie. The atmosphere around the table was tense. We all knew why she was really here, although no one said anything.

“So, Oakley, how are gymnastics going? Your mum told me your instructor thinks you could be Olympic material.”

I sighed. Marcus had said that, but I would have to put in a lot more time, and to me, gymnastics wasn’t about winning trophies. The escape and my love for it was all I was doing it for.

Mum put her wine glass down and smiled. “Don’t be shy, sweetheart. You’re so talented.”

Shut up, Mum!

“Why is it called cottage pie anyway? I mean I get the shepherd’s one for the lamb, but what’s cottage and beef got in common?” Jasper mused, staring at the large oven dish in the middle of the table.

Grinning in amusement, I poked at my carrots. He was trying to take the heat off me. It only took one look from Mum to make Jasper sit back and eat quietly, though.

Sadie’s casual questions kept coming. What classes did I like at school? Did I have a nice time on holiday? Who was my favourite football team? She never asked me anything directly, but I knew what she was doing.

It wouldn’t work.

I’ll never tell.

When the conversation turned to my childhood, I knew I didn’t have long left before the really personal questions were asked. After we’d finished eating, Mum had gotten her photo albums from the bookshelf. She had a separate one for every year of our life.

“You remember this, Oakley?” Mum asked, pointing to a picture of me on my fifth birthday. I was wearing a hideous pink dress and eating chocolate cake. There was pink icing all over my face and hair from having a cake fight with Jasper, Cole, and Mia. Once we’d finished the food fight, they crammed us all into the same bath and sprayed us clean with the showerhead. The water was gross and pink, with little bits of wet cake floating around in it. It was fun.

That was one of the last times I was a carefree child.

I nodded and looked away, not wanting to dwell on it too much. That part of my life was over a long time ago.

“And what did you do for your sixth birthday?” Sadie asked me casually, flicking through the photos. I gave her a flat look and pushed the photo album labelled ‘Oakley Six’ towards her.
She forced a smile and started looking through it even though I could tell she had no interest in seeing them at all. I got the impression that she didn’t like failing and wanted to be able to fix me. Sadie sat up straight, flicked her straggly hair behind her shoulder and asked, “What do you want to do after school?”

I shrugged, and she pursed her lips. The night was going to be a constant battle with her. She wanted to be the magical one that gave my mum all the answers. I couldn’t let her.

After Mum and Dad cleared the table, we moved into the lounge. Mum made it clear that I was to sit with them, too. Jasper was allowed to sneak off.

Sadie’s questions kept coming. She switched back to asking mostly yes or no answer questions, but she occasionally threw one in that required a proper answer.

_I could save us so much time if she just asks ‘Are you going to tell me what happened?’_

The whole time I could feel Dad’s eyes burning into the side of my head, his silent demands booming in my head. He played along, following Mum’s lead with questions to Sadie. Not even the highly paid specialist could see through him.

Seriously, what chance did I have of getting anyone to believe me anyway?

At ten o’clock, it was getting late enough for me to have to go to bed. Mum and Sadie’s frustration was clear. Mum had hoped Sadie would fix me, Sadie had hoped she’d get _something_.

I left the room to get a glass of water and wasn’t at all surprised when Sadie followed me into the kitchen. Turning off the tap, I placed the glass on the counter and waited. “Can we talk?”

I sighed heavily and nodded. “So, you were five when you stopped talking?” I nodded, furrowing my eyebrows.

“Just leave it.”

“And you didn’t have any problems talking before that?”

Problems?

“Well, any anxiety about speaking to people?” I gritted my teeth.

“Did you say something wrong, or overhear something you shouldn’t have? Anyone tease you for saying something they thought was silly?” She pressed.

I felt sick. My stomach churned. Why couldn’t she just understand I didn’t want to talk to anyone about it?

“Is everything okay?” Dad asked as he walked into the room.

“Everything’s fine,” Sadie replied. “I just thought Oakley would be more comfortable talking to me alone. Most patients I have are one-to-one.”

I’m not your patient.

“Hmm,” Dad said. “Perhaps another time when Oakley’s doesn’t have to get to bed for school.”

I faked a yawn on time and grabbed my glass.

“You’re tired, darling, go to bed,” Dad instructed.

With a little polite wave to Sadie, I did just that. Once in my room, I opened and closed the door so it sounded like I’d gone to bed and then went back to the top of the stairs. Sitting down against the wall, I wrapped my arms around myself.

My heart was beating out of my chest.

For a minute or two, they talked about Sadie’s job, but the conversation soon turned to me.

“So… you know what’s wrong with her?” Mum asked nervously. I couldn’t see her from where I was, but I knew she would be playing with her fingers or tapping her foot.

“It’s psychological,” Sadie said. “I’m almost certain of it. Oakley can talk. We just have to find out why she won’t.”

I bit my lip at the painfully long pause. Did she know? Had she guessed? I really wished I could see my parents’ faces, just to get a glimpse of what they were thinking. The longer I waited the more nervous I felt.

“But what does that mean? How can we help her? I don’t even know what’s wrong with my baby,” Mum said and took a deep, shaky breath.

Don’t cry.
“She’s very strong-willed. I don’t think you’ll be able to just find out. There is no quick fix with conditions like this. The only way to get her through this is therapy, it will be a long process and it won’t work unless Oakley wants it to. I’m sorry, Sarah, but I don’t think, for whatever reason, she’s ready to.”

“But…” Mum trailed off. I heard silence and then strangled sobs as she broke down.

Hugging my knees to my chest, I closed my eyes. *I’m sorry, Mum. I’m so, so sorry.*

“I know it’s distressing, but you have to remain positive and let her come to you,” Sadie said. “I would suggest that you don’t keep pushing her. Treat her as if nothing’s out of the ordinary. The more pressure you put her under, the more she’ll shut you out. Therapy will help, Oakley can get better, but only when she is ready.”

“So, you’re saying we do nothing?” Dad cut in. His voice was laced with anger. Fake anger.

“I think for now that’s all you can do. It’s never taken me longer than two hours to get someone to give me something. Oakley’s given me nothing.”

A metallic taste filled my mouth, making me gag. Pressing my hand to my mouth, I pulled it away and saw blood. As soon as I saw it, my lip began to sting. I stayed perfectly still as they spoke some more and then said goodbye, letting Sadie out.

“God, I need to speak to her.” Mum’s voice made me jump up. She was coming up here.

“No, wait,” Dad called. “You need to calm down first, if you go up there in the state you’re in, you’ll push her further away. You heard what Sadie said. We need to do this properly, Sarah. We should’ve done this a long time ago. Pushing her isn’t the answer. We’ve probably made the problem worse through trying.”

*He lies so well.*

“Okay,” Mum whispered, backing down and bursting into tears. I let out a big breath, sighing in relief.

“Something bad happened to her, didn’t it?” She cried harder, and I felt my heart break.

*You have no idea, Mum.*

I wiped away a tear with the back of my hands and got up to go back in my room. Jumping as I turned and came face to face with Jasper, I dropped my gaze to the floor.

“What’s wrong, I’m here,” he whispered. He looked scared for me. His jacket on and keys were in his hand. Where the heck was he going? I raised my eyebrows and looked at his keys.

“Err, I’m going to see Abby,” he mumbled quickly. “Do you think I’m crazy?”

It almost sounded like he was embarrassed. I wiped my face with my hands and shook my head. Jasper wasn’t crazy. They hadn’t properly spoken about what had happened and they needed to. He needed to. Hopefully, he would be able to move on to something better rather than meaningless one night stands.

“Want me to stay here?” He asked as he wiped a tear from my jaw. I shook my head and gave him a little shove towards the stairs. “Okay. I’ll see you later.” He kissed the top of my head and walked downstairs.

As soon as I was in bed, I curled up in a ball and buried my head in my pillow. What the heck was I going to do now?

“Oakley,” someone whispered, making me jump awake. Cole chuckled quietly and sat on the bed. I raised my eyebrows. What was he doing back here? There was no way my parents would have let him in at this time. He scratched the back of his neck, “Jasper just came over. He said you were upset and gave me his back door key so I could sneak in.”

Damn interfering brother. I loved him.

I rolled my eyes and pulled the quilt back. As I hoped, he got straight into bed and wrapped his arms around me. “Are you okay?” He murmured against my forehead. I snuggled closer, loving how perfectly I fit against him. I nodded and started to drift off, happy that I was now safe in Cole’s arms.

“I love you,” he whispered sleepily.
The next day I was unbelievably happy. Cole sneaking over was amazing. We’d just had a BBQ dinner and then gone up to my room after. Jasper sat down on the end of my bed, and I sighed.

Last night I’d heard him come home in the early hours – not too long after Cole sneaked out. I nudged Cole lightly, prompting him to ask. “Ouch,” Cole shouted dramatically.

“Oakley, stop beating up your girlfriend,” Jasper teased.

I grinned and pushed myself up to face Jasper. I wanted answers. Cole rolled his eyes and sat up, pulling me onto his lap. “She wants to know what happened with Abby,” Cole said bluntly.

I gave him a flat look; he was supposed to do that a little more tactfully.

Jasper frowned and looked… shy? No way.

“Of course she does. Look, I don’t even know myself,” he admitted. “She wants to get back together. Part of me wants that… I don’t know if I can trust her.”

I couldn’t blame him for that. I doubt I’d be able to trust someone after they let me down. 

*I don’t trust Dad anymore.*

“What did she say? Did she explain?” Cole asked.

Jasper nodded for a long time, lost in his own thoughts. “Yeah,” he finally said. “She told me that after our argument, she went to the party and drank too much. She was hurt, angry and just wanted to get wasted with her friends. She ended up in his room. They… well, you know the rest.”

He looked down, his face twisted in pain as he remembered back to that time. “I keep thinking that maybe we can try again, but is there really any point if I’m constantly thinking she’s shagging someone else?”

I shook my head. Jasper’s happiness meant a lot to me, but she hurt him a lot and I wasn’t convinced that they’d work.

“You just hate her,” Jasper said. I hated her less than I did since she apologised and explained, but I could still remember how heartbroken he was. I’d never forgive her for hurting him so badly.

He shrugged. “In the end we decided to try and be friends. We’ll see if anything can happen in the future. I don’t know if we’ll even be able to be friends or not, but I don’t want to be angry anymore. You know what I mean?”

I knew exactly what he meant. That’s why I was letting Julian into my life. Well, sort of letting him in. If he spoke to me I’d be civil, but I certainly wasn’t ready to be besties or even trust him.
“Anyway, I’m not sitting around here moping all day. I have a date with a cute little brunette tonight. Later,” he called, looking over his shoulder as he walked out of my room.

I grinned. Jasper’s back.

“Your brother’s a weirdo, babe.” Cole laughed, shaking his head. He was weird, but he was still the best brother ever.

Cole pushed me down on the bed, taking me by surprise, and peppered little kisses across my cheek and along my jaw. I wrapped my arms around his back and closed my eyes. That felt so good.

Pulling away with a triumphant smile, he arched his eyebrow. “You’re getting carried away and it’s making me get carried away. We’re not alone, remember?” He blew out a breath that made his hair kick up. “I’m gonna sit arms length away and we’ll watch TV,” he said.

I loved that I affected him so much he had to sit where he couldn’t touch me to stop him from pouncing. He made me feel amazing.

Shortly after Cole left with his family, Dad knocked on my half-open door. I nodded for him to come in, not that he wouldn’t anyway. I pushed myself up and pressed my back against the wall as he sat down on my bed.

I bit down on my lip nervously, not liking being alone with him.

“How are you, sweetheart? Okay?”

I nodded, wondering where this was going. He never just popped in for a chat.

“Good.” He turned his body, so he was facing me more. Over the past year, he had aged so much. Grey hairs dominated the previously light brown ones at the side of his head. The lines around his eyes had multiplied and deepened. Every day he looked more and more like a middle-aged man. I wondered if he felt that, too.

That he was losing his good looks and possibly his charm with it.

I wish.

“I’ve been thinking about us taking another little trip.”

My blood ran cold. I felt it drain from my face. I clenched my hands into fists to stop them shaking.

No, not this. Not again. No, no, no.

Tears sprang to my eyes, welling up and making my vision blurry. I wanted to run, to get as far away as I could as fast as I could.

He held his hands up. “No, sweetheart. I want us to go. To reconnect. Just us, I promise.”

My heart rate slowed slightly, but I still couldn’t relax. I didn’t want to go anywhere with him.

What’s going on? Why does he want this? Why now?

“Do you remember when you were younger and you would ride around on my back, laughing as I bucked you off onto the sofa? Or when I would come home from work, and you would run out of the front door to greet me?”

Yes, I remember, but that was in a different lifetime.

Nodding my head slowly, I forced myself to take deep, even breaths. Thoughts of Frank and his overbearing frame looming over me filled my head. I could still smell his whisky tainted breath and feel his rough stubble scratching against my skin.

My lungs burned as I tried unsuccessfully to get enough air.

Breathe. You’re fine. It’s over. You’re fine.

“I know things have been hard, but I want to change that.”

Hard? Hard didn’t even begin to cover it. No word was big enough to describe what he had done. How badly he had let me down and betrayed me. I’d trusted him. He was my hero. I’d looked up to him and loved him so much. He’d ruined that. He’d ripped apart my faith in him and ended my childhood.
“Oakley, I want that relationship back. I want us to do things together, watch a movie, or go for a bike ride. I want us to do normal father-daughter things. Most of all, I want my little girl back.” His eyes filled with tears.

Was this genuine or not?

I swallowed a sob and wrapped my arms around myself. Don’t trust him, a voice niggled in my head. But I wanted to. As much as I shouldn’t, I wanted all of those things. I wanted to be one of the girls I used to watch dragging their dads around shops. I wanted a normal life.

I didn’t want my dad to just be a monster.

But could he change? I wanted him to so badly it hurt.

Give him a chance.

I could have it all again. We could work at getting back to normal. I could forget the past, put it all behind me to get my family back to how it was. We’d all be happier. Mum and Jasper would be happier.

Peering up into his eyes, I saw how broken he was. Real emotion or fake? I could usually tell, but I wasn’t sure this time. He looked genuine, but maybe I just wanted him to be so much that I was missing the trap.

There’s no trap.

But there might be.

You’ll never know if you don’t try.

If you repair this you could get your voice back, pretend you were just scared, and make everything right for everyone again.

“Oakley, my business isn’t doing well at the minute. I’m afraid it will fail. I don’t want to fail at another thing in my life. I don’t want to look at us as a failure anymore. Let me make it up to you. Let’s draw a line in the sand, put the past behind us, and be a proper family. You, me, your mother and Jasper. I’ll never be able to fix the past, my mistakes, but I can change going forward. I want us to be a happy family again.”

Do it. For everyone’s sake, do it.

“Please, give this a chance. Let us get to know each other again. Let me be your daddy again.”

Searching his muddy green eyes for any hint of a lie, I sagged. We had to try.

For Mum and Jasper. And for the chance at a normal relationship with Cole.

Gulping, I nodded, and he smiled. “Thank you,” he whispered. “Thank you for trusting me to repair what I broke. I won’t let you down again. Now, get some sleep, sweetheart, it’s late.”

As he walked out of my room and closed the door, I ducked under my covers. Confused by my own conflicting feelings for my dad, I curled into a ball. In the past I’d loved and hated him. He was my dad, and I wasn’t sure how to give up on wanting him to be better, wanting our relationship to heal, wanting my family back.

Despite everything, I wanted to love him again.

You’ll never be able to love him, even if you get your voice back, not even for your family. Maybe not, but I can pretend.

I’m very good at pretending.
I reluctantly went back to my house. I hated the part of the day where I had to leave her. Max and Sarah had said there would be no sleepovers until she turned eighteen. I knew they’d say that when they found out about us, but it didn’t make me hate the rules any less.

Mum and Dad had gone out and Mia was probably with Chris-the-dick, so the house was dark and deserted when I got in. I liked the peace though, and I couldn’t wait for Uni when I’d really have my own space.

I sent Oakley a text, telling her that I loved her and I’d pick her up for school in the morning. She wouldn’t reply of course.

At least it was Friday tomorrow so we could spend a little more time together in the evening. Not that it would do much good, this weekend she was going fishing with her dad again. Jasper had gone with them a few times but quickly lost interest in being without his PlayStation.

I had been a couple times, too, and I wanted to go this weekend, but I think they needed time alone. She was going out with her mum, so it was only fair that Max got to spend time with her as well. And it was only one night.

Mia strolled into my room without knocking. “Do just come in,” I said sarcastically. When did she get home anyway?

“I need to talk to you and you can’t get mad. You have to let me finish. Okay?” Mia rambled, waving her hands around in the air. Well, this sounds interesting. “Promise me, Cole.”

“Alright, I promise,” I replied.

She sat down and blew out a huge breath. “Me and Chris broke up.”

“Well hal-le-fucking-lu-jah,” I called out, throwing my arms up in celebration.

“And I’m pregnant,” she added quickly.

My heart stopped dead. Did she just say…?

“I’m sorry, you’re what?”

“Pregnant. With child. Knocked up. Have a bun in the oven.”

I jumped up, furious and ready to kill. Chris-the-dick knocked her up and left her. I was going to strangle him. “That bastard got you pregnant and ditched you.” I knew he was a useless waste of oxygen, but I didn’t think he would go that low.

“Wait,” she shouted, holding her finger up and frowning at me. “I told you to let me finish! And don’t shout, I’ve not told Mum and Dad yet.”

“Shouldn’t have agreed to listen first,” I grumbled, sitting back on the bed. My hands shook I was so angry. As soon as she was finished, I was going to his house. Mia might be a fool for taking him back so many times, but she didn’t deserve this. What was going to happen to her now? How would she cope with a baby and trying to achieve everything she wanted.
She took a deep, calming breath, threaded her hands together and continued. “I found out a couple days ago that I’m pregnant. It’s made me look at everything differently, you know. My relationship with Chris is… Well, let’s face it, it’s shit. I don’t think we’ve ever gone a few days without arguing, and then there are the other women. I don’t want my baby growing up around all that.”

She uncoupled her hands and touched her flat stomach tenderly. Jesus, there was a human growing in there.

“This baby is the most important thing now. I know I have to be away from Chris to be the best mum I can be.”

About time. Some of my anger melted as a huge grin crept across my face. I was so proud of her for finally ditching his cheating arse. And I was going to be an uncle. Way too early in life but we’d all make it work.

“That’s great, Mia. You and the baby deserve so much more than him. What did he say?”

“Said I’ll go back to him soon enough. He shouted a bit, said I’d tricked him into getting pregnant,” she explained. “I don’t care what he thinks though, I didn’t get pregnant on my own, and I certainly didn’t plan it! Not sure how much involvement he’ll want, but I won’t stop him seeing her if he wants.”

“Her?”

Mia shrugged, smiling. I hadn’t seen one of those smiles in a long time, the ones that lit up her whole face. “I don’t mind what it is, but I have a feeling it’s a girl.”

“Well, I hope Chris does the right thing by the baby but if not you know you won’t be alone, right? He or she will have their Uncle Cole.”

Mia threw her arms around me, almost knocking me back and squeezed the life out of me. Was this good for the kid? “Alright, but you know you’re probably squishing the baby right now,” I teased breathlessly as she tightened her vice like arms.

“Thank you, Cole,” she whispered. “And she’ll have her auntie Oakley!”

I ran my hand through my hair. The enormity of being with Oakley was still overwhelming. We had a lot to deal with, and I was still getting used to how good it felt to know she was mine.

“Yeah.”

I really should marry that girl one day. The second she was ready.

“Cole,” Mia snapped, waving her hand in front of my face.

I shook my head, clearing my thoughts. “Sorry.”

“Thinking about her?” She teased.

Narrowing my eyes, I sat back on the bed. “Maybe.”

“Aww, you’re so cute,” she gushed, reaching out to pinch my cheeks, but I managed to bat her hand away before she could.

“Don’t call me cute. Anyway, when are you telling Mum and Dad? They’ll be pissed, you know that, right?”

Mia’s face dropped. She was almost twenty, but Dad still thought of her as his little girl. He would definitely not be happy. Well, not at first at least. I knew he’d love that little baby to death once he’d gotten his head around it.

“I’m telling them in a minute actually. I am not looking forward to it, and thanks for your overwhelming words of encouragement, by the way.”

“You’re welcome. It’ll be fine.”

“Seriously, thanks for being supportive. It means a lot.” She stood up to go tell our parents.

“Oh, and if you hear shouting, come save me.”

“Yeah, good luck, Mia… It was nice knowing ya.”

She rolled her eyes and walked out of my room slowly, groaning to herself.

I stripped out of my clothes and slipped into bed, noticing how silent the house was. I wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or not. Suddenly, Dad erupted. Damn. I couldn’t hear exactly what
was being said as his words blended in furious babble, but he was never going to be calm when she dropped that bombshell. He’d come around quickly, I was sure of it.

I should’ve gone down there, but they needed to talk it out between them. If it got worse, or if I heard Mia cry, then I would. After a minute, everything settled down. I imagine Mum would’ve told Dad how ridiculous he was being or Mia had just said she’d ended it with Chris-the-dick.

***

The next day, school passed painfully slowly. Thankfully it was now over, and I was waiting for Oakley by my car. Kerry and Ben loitered around with me, flirting with each other and play fighting.

Just what I wanted to see.

“You wanna tag along with us tomorrow? You know, so you don’t look so pathetic being alone on a Saturday night,” Ben said.

“Hmm, do I want to be a third wheel on your date? No, thanks. I think I’d rather be pathetic.” The thought of watching them sticking their tongues down each other’s throats all night made me want to hurl.

Kerry rolled her eyes and grabbed Ben’s hand. “Fine, loser,” she chirped and pulled on Ben’s hand. “Come on, take me home.”

Ben waved over his shoulder, and I nodded.

Moments later, Oakley walked out of the building with Hannah and some other guy, who was looking at her for slightly too long. If he valued his eyeballs he was going to need to look away real soon.

Oakley smiled as she saw me, and I couldn’t help smiling back.

“Bye, Oakley,” Hannah said, giving her a little wave, which she returned.

I held my arms out for her, and I nodded.

Moments later, Oakley walked out of the building with Hannah and some other guy, who was looking at her for slightly too long. If he valued his eyeballs he was going to need to look away real soon.

Oakley smiled as she saw me, and I couldn’t help smiling back.

“Bye, Oakley,” Hannah said, giving her a little wave, which she returned.

I held my arms out for her, and she gripped hold of me so tight, it took me by surprise. It was as if she was scared I would run away or something crazy like that. “I’ll miss you this weekend, too,” I whispered in her ear, predicting her problem.

She nuzzled my neck, confirming my guess.

The weekend would no doubt pass slowly. I definitely needed to go out and do something to make the time pass faster. Jasper was talking about doing something so maybe I should go with him. It’d be much better than being a third wheel on Kerry and Ben’s date.

Maybe I could also stop Jasper from getting too drunk and calling Abby again. Last time he’d ranted about how she broke his heart and was an evil witch for making him still love her.

Or maybe not. It was funny.

I took Oakley for ice cream after school. With all the drama recently and Oakley’s extra gymnastic classes, we hadn’t been in a while. We took our usual seat in the booth by the window, and Julie called to say she would bring our usual order over.

“So you’re leaving at eight tomorrow morning and will be back at three in the afternoon on Sunday, yeah?” I questioned, making sure I remembered right. I was planning to pick her up at four on Sunday so she could have some time to shower and change, and then I was taking her to the arcades and dinner.

She nodded.

We were given our order and wasted no time tucking into the ice cream. She moaned as she ate the first mouthful. I closed my eyes, feeling my blood heat.

“Hey, if we can’t get the house to ourselves soon we could always take my car in the woods or something,” I suggested, only half joking. A light pink blush crept over her cheeks, and she flicked her straw at me. Ice-cold milkshake hit me in the face.

\textit{Oh, you’re going down.}
I dipped my fingers in my drink and she took off, running towards the door. I jumped out of my seat, laughing as I sprinted after her.

Oakley could run pretty damn fast when she wanted to, but I soon caught up to her and grabbed her around the waist. With a low, deep chuckle, I ran my index finger down her cheek, leaving behind a trail of chocolate milkshake.

“Love you,” I mumbled against her neck and tightened my arms. I always thought men were pathetic for being so under the thumb and thinking about their girlfriends twenty-four-seven. Now I was one of them, and I couldn’t have been happier.

***

Groaning as my phone started making a hideous sound; I pushed myself up and turned the damn thing off. Getting up at 7:30am on a Saturday was hell, but there was a very good reason for me getting up so early. I wanted to say goodbye before Oakley and Max went off for the night.

I dressed in record time and ran over to her house just as Max was loading their tents and fishing equipment in the car.

“She’s inside,” he said, laughing at how eager I was.

I smiled sheepishly. “Thanks.”

Oakley was hugging her mum, who was telling her to have a good time. “I’ll let you say bye,” Sarah said, nodding towards me.

Oakley turned around looking confused. She smiled as she saw me, and, like always, it made me feel a hundred feet tall. I walked up to her and placed my hands on her slim hips.

“Hi.” She smiled wider and pushed herself up on tiptoes to kiss me. My body reacted immediately. I groaned and kissed her back passionately, my body bursting into flames. Pulling away when I felt my self-control slipping, I pressed my forehead against hers. “You have a good time. I’ll see you in thirty-two and a half hours.” The corner of her lip turned up. Yeah, I’d worked out the hours.

Cole Benson was now officially a pathetic, whipped, lucky bastard. And I was proud.

“I’m gonna miss you so much. I love you.”

She gripped my hair and kissed me hard.

If you throw her down on the sofa and have your wicked way with her, Max will cut your balls off. You like your balls.

The way she was kissing me drove me wild. What the hell was this? She wasn’t usually this forward. I loved it. She was the one that pulled away first. Her breathing heavy and laboured and sexy as hell. With a sigh, she took my hand and pulled me outside.

Giving me a sad, longing smile that my heart plummeting, she got in the front seat of the car and Max drove off. I’ll miss you, too.

For the entire morning, I was unintentionally annoying my parents and Mia. Apparently, I was intolerable when I was away from Oakley. Mia had entertained me for a couple hours, talking about the baby and her plans. She was doing amazingly well getting over her relationship with Chris. This baby was the best thing that could have happened to her. I was happy that she was finally happy.

Eventually, I decided that I was going to go out with Jasper, so we arranged to call a taxi and go on a pub-crawl. Getting off my face would pass the time tonight and a hangover would pass the time tomorrow morning.

Yeah, I’m a pathetic mess without her.

Just as I was about to start actually tidying my room to have something to do – it had gotten that bad- my phone started ringing. I froze. It played The Most Beautiful Girl In The World by Prince.
Sweat broke out all over my body.
I had never heard that song come from my phone before.
That was the ringtone I had set for Oakley, and he’d never called before.
Reaching out with a shaky hand, I grabbed the phone and pressed answer. Immediately, I heard quiet sobs. Each one cut through me. I felt sick.

*Why is she crying?*

“Cole,” she whispered in a meek, scratchy voice that sounded painful. “*Help me.*”

My world crashed to a halt.
I swallowed hard.
She just spoke. Help me. Her voice, her tone, her words splintered my heart.
“Oakley?” I mumbled in disbelief. I was scared and elated. She’d spoke to me, but it was to ask, beg, for help.
“Cole,” she repeated. Her voice was quiet and broken. I’d always wondered what she would sound like now. My eyes started like a bitch.

Keep it together.
She coughed. “Help me.”
Oh, God. I snapped into action, no longer fixed on the fact that she’d spoken. “What’s wrong? Where are you?” I questioned, and frantically searched for my keys while my heart was beating all over the place. “Oakley, where are you?” I repeated sternly.

Please, just tell me, baby.
Something was really, really wrong, and I was terrified.

“Um,” she whispered, trying to catch her breath as she sobbed. It took her a minute to explain to me where she was, but I got it. Her voice sounded like it agony to use.

I kept her on the phone, sprinted downstairs and out to my car. I just need to get to her. Right now. She was on her own near a layby off the motorway. What the hell was she doing there?

“Cole?” Mum shouted, jumping up as I ran past her and Dad on the sofa. I should probably stop to tell them, something could’ve happened to Max, but I was too distracted to think straight.

A journey that should have taken thirty minutes didn’t even take twenty. I slammed my breaks on and pulled over at the side of the road where she thought she was. Jumping out of my car, I shouted, “Oakley? Oakley?”

Seconds later, she appeared from behind a row of trees. She stumbled on the uneven ground as she made her way to me. Why was she hiding?

I closed the distance between us quickly and wrapped my arms around her. “What’s wrong?” I mumbled against the side of her head. Thank God, she’s okay.

Her body trembled under mine and she gasped for air.

“Oakley, calm down.”

Sobbing, she tried to calm down, but she was breathing so hard and gripping me so tight her nails cut into my skin. Whatever had her so terrified send chills down my spine. I stroked her hair and whispered into her ear until I felt her relax.

I just had to get her to calm down. “I need you to tell me what’s wrong, okay?”

She nodded against my shoulder. I gripped her upper arms and tried to pull back to see her, but she clung to me tighter and whimpered, burying her head in my chest. “What is it?”
“I– I don’t want you to l-look at me,” she whispered, her voice cracking and body shaking with silent sobs.

My stomach twisted with unease. I was almost too scared to ask. “Why wouldn’t you want me to look at you, baby?”

She was quiet for a minute. “I can’t… I can’t do it again.”

“What can’t you do?”

She shook her head and dug her fingers in my back harder. My back stung, but I didn’t care. “You can tell me anything, you know that. Why is this so hard for you to tell me?” I asked her. “Oakley, please, what can’t you do?” I was getting desperate, and I just needed to know what was wrong so I could fix it. “Why are you alone?” Where the hell was Max?

“I thought it s-stopped.” She took a ragged breath and continued, “It stopped when I was thirteen, but he’s… he’s ba–back.”

“Who’s back? What stopped?” I shook my head, trying to make sense of what she was saying. Something stopped when she was thirteen, but someone’s back? Who? It didn’t make sense. No one left when she was thirteen.

“F-Frank,” she stuttered, sobbing harder. Her legs gave way, and she slumped against my chest.

“Who’s Frank? I don’t know anyone called Frank.” I had to wait until she calmed down again. I held her closer and kissed the top of her head. “Shh, it’s okay,” I whispered.

Those two minutes were the longest and most painful of my life. But when she did, she continued, “You met him at the Christmas party at that hotel.”

I did? The only Christmas party I remembered was Max’s company’s, but that was years ago. I didn’t remember anyone called Frank. “I remember the party but not him. Who is he, baby?”

“He’s the man who… He’s the o-one who hurt me.” Her voice was quiet as she confessed, so quiet I barely heard her.

“Hurt you,” I repeated. “How did he hurt–”

I froze mid-sentence as I realised what she was trying to tell me.

“No.

I felt like I’d been punched in the gut.

“Hurt you. He… touched you?” I couldn’t say the words. She didn’t need to confirm it. Her reaction did. She burst into fresh tears, crying hysterically and pressing into my body like she was trying to disappear.

I had no strength left. Her confession knocked everything out of me. We both fell to the floor and she landed in my lap. I gripped hold of her and buried my face in her hair. My lungs burned. Every single muscle in my body ached. Someone had hurt her. Badly. I squeezed my eyes.

I wanted her to tell me I’d made a mistake.

“Where is he?” I asked through clenched teeth. Wherever he was, whoever he was, I was going to fucking kill him.

“At our c-camp,” she murmured against my neck, stuttering and sobbing. My heart stopped. Why would he be at their camp?

“But your dad’s there.” Her body turned to stone.

No. No.

“Oakley?” I whispered, terrified of her answer to my next question. “Does Max know?”

I held my breath, waiting for her answer. Please say no. Please. She dipped her head once in confirmation. I gagged and swallowed bile.

He knew some sick pervert had hurt her, and he was sitting around a fucking campfire with him. I pulled back to look her, but she lowered her head, staring at the ground in shame. I cupped her chin and tried to lift. “Look at me.”
She shook her head, letting out a quiet sob. Tears dropped from her chin to the floor. I'd never seen anyone so broken. “Please, baby.” I bent my head down awkwardly and managed to see most of her face.

“Oakley, did your dad… did he? Did he… you know?”
She shook her head again. That was a small mercy.
“No, he didn’t but he...he let him.”
She broke down and I was so painful to witness. Max was her dad! How could he? He should be the one protecting her. My hands shook in anger. I felt ill and so murderously angry I just wanted to murder them both.

Oakley curled up on my lap and sobbed. The sound shredded me.
I knew it had to be something big but I never imagined this.

How could I have missed it? I should have known. I’d been there through her entire damn life and I didn’t know a thing!

“Where is you camp?” I asked slowly, trying to keep the anger out of my voice. It didn’t work.
She gasped and pulled back. Her face was soaking wet with tears. “N-no. You can’t, Cole” I can’t? How could she expect me to do nothing after what I’d just found out?

“Please. I-I can’t. My mum. Please, don’t,” she rambled, her voice cutting out occasionally.

“Shh,” I whispered, wiping the tears from her cheeks. I didn’t know how I managed to stay so calm and not jump up and go look for them. I didn’t feel calm, but she came first, and I needed to make sure she was safe before I did anything.

I pressed my forehead to hers and felt a tear slide down my cheek. Shit. “What about your mum?”
“I-It’ll break her heart. I can’t. I don’t want to hurt her. I don’t want her to hate me.”

“Is that what he told you?” I spat angrily. God, I was going to be sick. I took a deep breath and swallowed.

She nodded weakly, her head barely moving. “I w-wanted to tell her. I tried to when it first started, but D-Dad walked in. He shouted at me when she left. I was s-so scared. I didn’t want to hurt Mum. He said it would kill her.” She coughed to clear her throat. “He told me not to talk.”

If I wasn’t holding her together I’d have jumped up and paced. I needed to stand, to punch something, someone, everything.

“That’s why you didn’t speak for almost eleven years?” Her dad was the reason. The hatred I felt for him coursed through my body, making my hands shake.

“Oakley, where is he?” I asked again.
Her eyes widen in panic. “You can’t. P-Please, Cole.”

She begged me not to go after them. As much as I wanted to go and rip both their heads off, I couldn’t leave her alone. She was so broken and vulnerable. I hated seeing her like that. I wouldn’t leave her terrified.

I sighed and lifted her chin again, but like before, she refused to look me in the eye. I hated that she felt ashamed. None of this was her fault.

After ten minutes of sitting on the ground holding her, crying together and trying not to throw up, I finally came to a decision. If she didn’t want me to go find them, we were reporting them.

“We’re going to the police.” They were not getting away with what they’d done to her.
She gasped and pulled back. “No. Mum will—”

I pressed my finger to her lips and shook my head. I wasn’t having that. I had to get it through to her that he had to pay and it wasn’t her fault. No one was going to blame her. “Oakley, your mum is not going to hate you, she couldn’t. What happened wasn’t your fault. You’re her daughter, and she loves you. She won’t hate you,” I said fiercely, begging her with my eyes to believe me.

She had to believe it.
“Look at me, please.” She raised her head slightly but still wouldn’t look directly into my eyes. “Everything’s going be okay, I promise. We just need to go to the police.”

She shook her head defiantly. “I can’t.”

“Let’s get in the car and get out of here,” I said. “We’ll talk about it on the way back.”

She was boneless so I had to carry her to the car. She gripped on around my neck for dear life. I put her in the car and kissed her forehead. “I’ve got you, baby,” I whispered.

On the way back, I begged and pleaded. It took almost half an hour to convince her going to the police was the right thing to do. She was petrified. I was going to the police whether she agreed to it or not, though. There was no way either of them was getting away with it.

Once we got to the station I sat her down and went to get help. As soon as I said I needed to speak to someone about acts of abuse to a child things moved quickly.

I knelt down in front of Oakley and stroked her cheek. I loved her so much I hated seeing her in pain. There was nothing I wouldn’t do to get her through this. “Someone’s going to be out to see us soon.”

They were arranging for a female officer to interview her. She hadn’t said one word since agreeing to this, and she still hadn’t looked at me. However she felt about me at the minute wasn’t as important as putting those sick bastards in prison.

“Hi. I’m Marie. Do you want to follow me through to the interview room?” Marie said, smiling warmly at Oakley.

She nodded and got to her feet with shaking legs. I stood up, too, but she shook her head. “I want to do this alone.”

What the hell?? I didn’t want to leave her alone for a single second. How was she going to cope going over it all when she completely broke down telling me before?

“Please, Cole, I don’t want you to hear it all,” she whispered, a tear trickled down her cheek and she walked away from me without another word.

I sat down in a daze. Was that what she was worried about? I knew I didn’t want to hear it. It made me sick, but I wanted to be there for her. I’d do anything for her, no matter how much it hurt me.

As I waited for her, so many things passed through my mind. I tried to think of something, any little clue that I’d missed, but there was nothing. She never seemed scared of Max. He didn’t act any differently towards her. He was the perfect, concerned, protective father. Of course, he was, you prat, that’s how he got away with it.

I gritted my teeth and hung my head. She’d gone through hell for years right under her nose and no one knew a thing. No one helped her when she needed it.

I would never let her down again.

When the door finally opened, I jumped up and rushed to her side. She looked exhausted and slumped against my chest. “What happens now?” I asked, holding her close.

“We’ll arrest Mr Farrell and Mr Glosser and bring them in for questioning,” Marie told me.

“Glosser. That was his surname.”

“I want to go now,” Oakley whispered, gripping hold of my shirt. I nodded reluctantly.

There were thousands more questions that I wanted to ask Marie, but Oakley looked so defeated. I knew I needed to take her home...where she was going to have to go through it all again.

As soon as we got close enough to her house, I tensed. Max’s car was in the drive, along with a police car. Oakley looked at me with a horrified expression.

“No,” she whispered.

“It’s fine, baby. We won’t go in yet.” I stopped the car at the end of the road so we could wait until they had left. “Are you okay?” I stupidly asked.

Are you okay? Of course she isn’t okay!

She shrugged, her eyes dazed. Everything had happened so quickly my head was spinning. I still couldn’t process everything properly. “It’s going to be alright. We’ll do it together. I’ll be right with you every step of the way. I promise.”
She fell into silence again, using physical actions to reply to questions, so I gave up asking. We weren’t going back a step. If she needed time that was fine by me. Whatever helped her.

I looked back at her house as the door opened. Max was being walked to the car with his hands behind his back in handcuffs. Seeing him made me want to start the car and run him down.

Oakley shrank in the seat. She looked like a scared, lost little girl. Swallowing a lump in my throat, I squeezed her limp hand, trying to comfort her.

“Time to go in,” I said when the police car drove off.

“I’m scared.”

I parked outside her house. “I know you are. I am, too, but we’re doing this together, remember? You’re amazing, Oakley, and so brave. I’m right here. I’m not going anywhere.”

She looked over with tears in her eyes. “How can you still say that?”

I didn’t even want to think about why she thought I’d do a runner. It pissed me off too much.

“I’m staying because I love you and nothing in this world will ever change that.”

She took a deep breath and opened her door. I followed.

Sarah practically jumped on her daughter as we walked inside. She pulled Oakley in her arms and sobbed. “Oh, sweetheart, you’re okay,” she mumbled, pulling back to look at Oakley. I wanted to interrupt but I waited. “Listen, everything’s going to be okay. I don’t want you to worry, but your dad’s been arrested for…” She stopped talking and whimpered. “Well, it doesn’t matter because it’s not true. I’ve got to go to the station, so you wait here with Jasper, okay?”

What? I was just about so scream at her when I realised she didn’t know yet. Of course the officers that arrested Max didn’t stay around to chat about it and offer explanations. I didn’t know what he’d been arrested for but it was clear that whatever it was it didn’t give away what he’d done to her.

I was just about to open my mouth and explain for her when Oakley stepped forward. “I...is true,” she confessed in a croaky voice, barely above a whisper.

The room fell so silent you could hear a pin drop. Everyone’s mouths fell open in shock. I watched Sarah as the shock from Oakley talking turned to horror as she registered exactly what she’d said. Sarah gulped; her eyes were wide with fear and she shook her head.

“How do you? You’re talking… Oakley, honey, what are you saying?”

Oakley said nothing, but she didn’t need to. Her tired, broken eyes said everything.

“No. Please, tell me it’s not true. Please, please?” Sarah asked desperately.

She stepped back, pressing her body into mine. “I’m sorry, Mum,” she whispered, looking at the ground. The hatred I had for Max doubled as she apologised. Oakley had nothing to be sorry for. We were the ones that should be apologising to her. Eleven damn years she had been living with this and we had no idea.

“No,” Sarah sobbed, her voice broke, and she clamped her hand over her mouth.

Oakley cried as Sarah ran to the bathroom, crying hysterically and gagging. She turned around and fell into me. “She hates me! Oh God, h-he was right, she h-hates me,” she murmured.

“Shh, no, she doesn’t. Not you, never you.” Looking up, I saw that everyone was still frozen in their seats. I pleaded with my eyes for one of them to do something. Anything. I was so fucking lost here.

Jasper suddenly jumped up as if it had finally sunk in. “I’m gonna fucking kill him,” he raged, turning red in anger. My dad grabbed Jasper just as he was about to run for the door. “Get off me! I’m gonna murder him. I’ll murder him!”

Oakley turned around and whispered desperately, “Jasper.”

“He touched you.” Jasper’s face crumpled in pain as he looked at his sister. “Oakley.” She shook her head and pressed into me. I was strong enough this time to hold her up. Carrying her to the sofa, I sat her down on my lap and wrapped my arms around her fragile body.

“No? He didn’t?” Jasper questioned. The look of desperation on his face mirrored mine earlier when I willed it not to be true.
“Not h-him, but he knew,” she explained. Her voice cracked, and she coughed, rubbing her neck.

“Oakley, sweetie, I…” my mum said, trailing off, unable to find the words. Mum had mascara running down her face and puffy eyes from crying. She looked a total mess, and usually it would bother her, but right now, I could tell she couldn’t care less.

The bathroom door clicked open, and Oakley tensed. I looked down to reassure her but stopped open mouthed as I saw her peering up like a scared little girl. Seeing her like that was like taking a bullet. Was that terrified expression how she looked up at her father when Frank abused her?

No, don’t think of that.

I clamped my mouth shut so I wouldn’t throw up.

Sarah walked over to us, and I had never been so nervous before. You have to believe her. She pulled Oakley out of my arms, and they both sank to the floor. “It’s okay, honey,” she whispered, stroking Oakley’s hair soothingly. “Shhh, it’s okay, I’m here. I’m here.” They cried together and clung to each other. “I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry. You’re safe now, sweetheart. I promise. Oh God, I’m so sorry,” Sarah sobbed.

I leant down and held my head in my hands. Why her? Things like that happened to strangers not to someone I loved. All the time she’d been keeping that secret in, afraid that it would break her families’ hearts or that no one would even believe her.

How could we all have failed her so badly?

We all cried together. It felt like I was trapped inside a nightmare, but I knew I wouldn’t wake up from this.

“What happened?” Jasper asked. His eyes were haunted. He slid to the floor with his mum and sister.

Oakley looked up and pressed her back against my legs. Clearing her throat, she slowly told her story, stopping to cough or to regain control. As she explained that at the age of five, shortly after Jasper refused to go on any more camping trips, Frank started to turn up. She told us in as little detail as she could what happened.

She told us that the first time Frank raped her was when she was just ten years old.

Bile rose to my throat. I clenched my jaw together until it throbbed in pain. Taking deep breaths, I tried to stay calm for her sake. She was just ten.

“It stopped when I was t-thirteen. Dad never explained why. He didn’t even tell me s-shouldn’t talk still, but then he didn’t n-need to. I really believed him when he said it was over. At first I was scared to go away again, but he said he wanted to…”

She paused and took a deep breath. Wanted to what? I stroked her hair, trying to give her strength I didn’t even have inside myself.

“That he w-wanted our relationship to be how it was when I was little. Before. I wanted that, too. I wanted him to be a p-proper dad again. I really believed him.”

She broke down again, and I felt like I was dying.
Seven days later, Mum and Jasper and me sat on the new sofa in our living room. Mum had donated the one Dad bought last year and got a good deal on this new one seen as it was in stock and being discontinued.

A lot of things had changed in our house. It looked completely different. Mum was trying to get rid of Dad but his shadow ran deeper than objects and pictures. He was locked up, but he might as well be wondering around the house.

I couldn’t relax. Everything had me on edge. Being here was like drowning.

Mum looked exhausted. She’d barely slept.

But she believed me.

She chose me.

Jasper was mostly angry. He cried the first day but after that he just wanted to punch things. I just wanted to sleep somewhere that didn’t remind me of the past.

“How are you feeling?” Mum asked.

I’d lost count of how many times I’d been asked that. Mum wanted to know how I was feeling every second of the day. I wasn’t even sure of that.

“I’m doing okay,” I replied. This minute I was alright. It could change so fast, though. “You two?”

Jasper shrugged, gritting his teeth. He was going to grind them down if he kept it up.

“I’m okay,” Mum whispered emotionally.

She was not okay, and that was one of the main reasons I kept quiet for so long. But I felt so much better that it was all out in the open and my family stuck by me. When they didn’t question if I was telling the truth, for the first time ever, I felt like it wasn’t my fault.

Stopping blaming myself completely was difficult but Mum, Jasper, Cole and his family made it easy.

Cole had barely left my side. He was only at his house now because I needed time with my family. Dad had been charged. There would be a long investigation into his and Frank’s activities but they were somewhere they couldn’t hurt anyone else.

“I want the sentencing over with,” Jasper growled.

He hoped they would admit what went on. So far neither of them had, and I didn’t expect them to. I was fully prepared for it to go to trial, and I was terrified. I’d have to stand up against my dad and the man who’d abused me for years.

But I’d do it because I wasn’t prepared to be a victim. No matter how hard being a survivor was I was determined not to let them ruin my future.

“I don’t think it’ll be that easy, Jasper.”
“He owes you that much!”
I got off the sofa and went so sit on the two-seater with him. He took a deep breath and wrapped his arm around my shoulders. “He owes all of us that much but that doesn’t mean he’ll do it. We’ll be fine if we stick together.”
“Will we?” he asked. “None of us can sleep in this fucking house. Everything here is rotting. I want to get out, go somewhere far away. Neither of you can tell me you haven’t thought the same. I see you both struggle just as much as me.”
Mum looked away, confirming that Jasper’s observation was true.
If it was that simple I’d be gone by now. We couldn’t just take off. We didn’t have the kind of money it took to up and move so quickly. The house would have to be sold.
We could go somewhere, though. We had family…in Australia.
I almost didn’t want to suggest it.
I’d have to leave Cole behind.
Curling up, I laid against Jasper’s side. I couldn’t leave Cole. I loved him so much; he’d been the one who’d given me the strength to carry on all these years.
But how could I stay here when I felt like that scared little girl still. I could tell everyone I was fine, I could be strong and not blame myself, but that would never stop the memories. It wouldn’t make me feel pure again. It wouldn’t give me back everything that was taken away.
I don’t ever want to be that little girl again.
You’ll always be here. Here, especially.
England is where you were abused.
This house is where you stopped talking.
I scrunched my eyes closed, feeling my heart beat too fast, my lungs constrict and my hands start to shake.
I can’t stay here.
“We could go to Pete’s,” I said before I could stop myself.
Australia was a really long way away.
I’d have to end things with Cole.
Jasper looked at me with his mouth open, and I burst into tears. How the hell could I actually leave Cole if I cried at the thought of it?
“Don’t cry,” Jasper whispered. “Right now we’ve gotta do what we’ve gotta do. It wouldn’t have to be forever.”
No, but I couldn’t leave him hanging.
“Oakley, we don’t have to go that far,” Mum said, crouching down in front of us. “We can work something out. I have enough savings for a few months and could pick up work. It doesn’t have to be that far.”
It didn’t have to be, but Australia, about as far away from England as you could get, seemed so good. None of us could stay here, and Australia had family.
With everything that’d gone on recently, we didn’t need to add money worries to it. I couldn’t put that stress on Mum.
“I think we should do it,” Jasper said.
Mum nodded. “I do, too. It wouldn’t be permanent, we’d have to come back eventually, but my main concern is getting you somewhere you can heal. I don’t care where that is or what I have to do to achieve it.”
“Neither do I,” Jasper said.
“You’d be giving up so much,” I whispered. “I can’t ask that from you.” As much as it’d hurt to be here and relive everything all the time I couldn’t make them leave their life behind.
Jasper had Uni, friends and maybe Abby. Mum had a career, family and friends.
“You’re not askin’,” Jasper said. “We stick together. I don’t care about anything other than you right now.”
Smiling through my tears, I grip Jasper’s arm.
“Okay,” Mum said. “We do this together. We’ll go to Australia for as long as we need. We’ll heal there. I’ll get us all through this. I promise I won’t let either of you down again.”

The enormity of our decision hit me. I sobbed into Jasper’s shoulder while Mum stroked my hair and cried.
It had been ten days since Oakley spoke up about what’d happened to her and ten days since I had slept properly. I stayed at Oakley’s house and held her while she cried herself to sleep every night. When she fell asleep I watched her until I managing to drift off for a few hours.

The police had searched the house and taken Max’s PC away. The next morning, Sarah had packed up all of his things and thrown them all out. There wasn’t a trace of Max in the house, everything he owned, everything that reminded Sarah of him was gone, She’d even burned every photo he’d been in.

Oakley blamed herself whenever she saw her mum or brother upset. I’d told her a million times that none of it was her fault, and I’d tell her a million times more until she believed it.

She rolled over in bed and snuggled against my chest. Her long blonde hair was fanned out on the pillow behind her. When she slept, she looked so peaceful. It was the only time she did now.

Every morning I hoped she would sleep just a little bit longer so she wouldn’t have to deal with everything. It was strange that now, when everyone was falling apart, Oakley was the one picking us all up. She was the one who’d endured the worst thing imaginable.

She was the strongest person I knew.

For the past few days, she’d been so distant it was like she wasn’t here. We were together most of the time, but her mind was elsewhere. Whenever she looked at me she had goodbye in here eyes.

I just have to be patient with her.

“Good morning, beautiful. Are you okay?” I asked as her bright blue eyes fluttered open.

“Yeah.” She lied.

I frowned. “Why can’t you look at me, Oakley? Are you angry? I know I should have seen what was going on, I know that, and I’m sor—”

She pulled back and pressed her finger over my lips. “Don’t ever think that. It’s not your fault.” I knew she wouldn’t ever blame anyone else, but no matter what anyone said, I would always feel guilty.

We all would.

I kissed her forehead, my heart jumping at the sound of her voice. It was quiet and husky, and I wasn’t sure if that was because she’d not used it in so long or if that was just how it was. I loved it whatever.

“Oakley, we slept together…” I trailed off not really knowing exactly how to put it. I needed to know that she wanted to be with me and I hadn’t taken advantage of her.

She’d said yes, I knew that much. But did she mean yes?
She stiffened, looking at me in horror. “I know. I’m sorry, Cole. I shouldn’t have let you. It
was really selfish.” Her eyes filled with tears.

Wait, selfish? She didn’t think I would want to after knowing the truth. Hatred for Max and
Frank burned deep inside me. “Don’t. Oakley, that’s not what I meant. I hate what happened to
you, and I want to kill them for doing it, but it’s not changed how I feel about you. You’re still
the most perfect girl to me. I still love you more than anything,” I told her honestly. “You
definitely wanted to? I mean, we didn’t have to.”

“Yes, I wanted to. Being with you was something completely different to Frank. You made
me feel safe and loved and special. It wasn’t the same, Cole, it just wasn’t.”

I breathed out a sigh of relief.

“It almost feels like it happened in a different life,” she said. “When I was thirteen and Dad
said it was over and I shouldn’t think about it anymore, I did. Well, I tried to. It was always at the
back of my mind, sometimes the front, but in a way, I did move on. I felt like because it was over
I could start being a normal teenager. Or sort of a normal, I still wasn’t allowed to talk. I just
couldn’t go back to that place again, Cole. When I saw Frank, I knew what was going to happen.
I couldn’t do it.”

“You shouldn’t have ever had to. Your dad should’ve…” I took a deep breath, seething. “He
should’ve done a lot of things, we all know that. I’m just so sorry you couldn’t come to me.”

“What did I say about blaming yourself,” she scolded with frown.

You don’t have to be the strong one.

I kissed the tip of her nose and hugged her tighter. “I still don’t know how you managed to
not talk to anyone. I never understood why you didn’t ever text me back…”

“I didn’t want anyone to get hurt. If I kept quiet everything would be fine. If I started texting
you would have asked why I didn’t speak, wouldn’t you?”

I nodded. I would have. Of course.

I kissed the tip of her nose and hugged her tighter. “I still don’t know how you managed to
not talk to anyone. I never understood why you didn’t ever text me back…”

“I didn’t want anyone to get hurt. If I kept quiet everything would be fine. If I started texting
you would have asked why I didn’t speak, wouldn’t you?”

I nodded. I would have. Of course.

And I did reply back, every night. I just didn’t send any of them.” She reached across me
and grabbed her phone from the bedside table.

I took the phone and looked at what she was showing me. There was a huge list of text
messages in her outbox, all to me. I looked up at her in shock. She replied every night even
though she could never send them. Flicking through the newest ones, I saw her declarations of
love and her telling me how happy she was.

“I love you, Cole. For a long time.”

Closing my eyes, I smiled. I never thought I would get to hear her say that.

“I love you, too,” I replied, pressing my lips to hers.

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The next day I tried calling Oakley again, but it went straight to answerphone. She was
spending time with Sarah and Jasper again, and although I knew they had a lot to deal with
together, I didn’t like not seeing her.

The need to make sure she was okay was overwhelming.

“Cole, you need to come downstairs right now!” Mia shouted breathlessly.

I jumped off my bed, heart in my stomach, and ran downstairs. What the hell is going on?

“What?” I questioned. When I saw Oakley, Sarah and Jasper by the front door, I froze.

They were all crying. So were Mum, Dad and Mia.

“What’s going on?” I asked cautiously, my eyes fixed on Oakley.

She took a deep breath and stepped towards me. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “We’re
moving. Now.”

“Moving? Where?”

“To my uncle Pete’s.”
“Pete,” I repeated. Sarah’s brother. The one who lived in Australia.
I can’t stay here anymore. None of us can.” She shook her head and added, “There are too many bad memories. I love you so much, Cole, and this is killing me, but I have to go.”
She sounded broken and desperate when she told me she had to leave. It was like there was no other option.
“You can’t.” I shook my head, trying to make sense of what she was saying. They were moving halfway across the world.

She’s leaving me.
Pain cut through me. It was like taking a chainsaw to the chest.
“Don’t. Don’t, please.” I closed the distance between us, wrapping my arms around her, and touching my forehead to hers. I didn’t care who was with us. “I love you. You can’t go. You can move in here if you can’t live at yours or we can go somewhere else. We’ll go to a different town. Jesus, Oakley, you can’t just leave. Please,” I begged desperately.

She clung to me as she cried her heart out.

Oh God, she’s really doing this.
“I owe you so much, Cole. You gave me my life back, and I will never stop loving you. If there was a way I could stay I would do it, but there isn’t.”
She pulled back, and I tightened my grip. No, no, no. I could barely breathe. She’s leaving.
“Please. Don’t do this, please. Oakley, don’t,” I rambled, holding her tighter and never wanting to let go. “I’ll come with you, baby.”

Your life is here.” She pulled away just enough to look me in the eyes and touched my cheek. “You can’t give up your life. Not for me.”
I shook my head, frowning at how stupid she was being. “You are my life.”

She sobbed and closed her eyes. Tears spilled over and poured down her beautiful face. Do something, Cole. Don’t just let her go! Pressing my lips to hers, I kissed her with everything I had.

She kissed me back and whimpered. “I love you,” she whispered and started to pull away.
“No. No, don’t do this,” I pleaded, panicked. Her hands gripped mine and pulled them off her. My vision blurred as I started to cry. Stop fucking crying and make her see sense! “Don’t.”

I had no idea it was so hard for her to be here that she could walk away from me. What the hell was she silently going through?

This is happening too fast.
She walked backwards and mouthed ‘I love you’ before walking out with her mum and brother. Mia gripped my shoulder and helped me stumble to the front door. I stared in horror as she got into the car.
Neither of us looked away from each other as Sarah started the engine. I was vaguely aware of my parents and Mia standing close, but all I could focus on was Oakley curled up on the back seat, crying in pain.

I watched numbly as their car disappeared. My heart broke further with every inch of distance that was put between us. Everything hurt so much it winded me.

She was everything to me, but I wasn’t so selfish that I wouldn’t let her do what she needed. We all owed her that.
It was agony but I watched her leave my life.
I loved her so much.
More than anything in the world.
Enough to let her go.
Cole and Oakley’s story continues in Broken Silence

Four years after Oakley, her mum, and brother fled to Australia, the trial is ready to begin. Oakley makes the decision to return to England and face the people who hurt her in person. Her love for Cole never faded, but how will he react to seeing her again? Will they be able to put everything behind them in order to get their happy ending?

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