"Bound and riveted, readers will want to unveil the dark skeletons as a grappling strength simmers and beckons the heroes to keep on fighting. Pearl has written a thought-provoking and enjoyable story... Witty and heart-felt, Normal is a journey of self-reflection, a maze to personal fulfillment in the face of adversity, and a staggering road to recovery." –Sandra Lopez, Author of Esperanza & Beyond the Gardens

“Normal is the kind of book that opens your heart, examines its parts and then stomps all over it only to put it back together again, better than before. It’s feels overload!” – Young Adult Book Madness

“I cried, I laughed, I bit my fingernails in anticipation. It was AMAZING!!! I loved this book so much I couldn’t put it down!” – Trusty Page Turners

“This book is a gem. No. A masterpiece… The author does such a wonderful job crafting the story. The pacing was never too quick or too slow. The plot was smooth. The characters were easy to remember -and easy to love. I can't wait to see what more Danielle Pearl has in store for us.” – Of Books & Book Thoughts

“Normal was a hard-hitting, dark, contemporary novel that touches upon some heavy and emotional themes. While it isn't an easy read, it's one that captures your interest and moves you. When I first started reading Normal, I didn't expect to not be able to put it down. The writing flowed well and each chapter made me want to read the next one, and then another after that.” – Lost to Books

“Rory, Sam and Cam's story is gritty, a little dark, beautifully heart-touching with a steamy hot romance. Danielle Pearl has written an amazing New Adult story with so many fantastic characters. Normal is one of those amazing books that will totally take you by surprise with its in-depth storyline and a beautiful, hot romance. I recommend Normal as a must, must read.” – I Heart YA Books

“Wow, Normal was intense, gritty, dark, sad, uplifting, and heartbreaking all in one. This was a story rich in detail, and by the end I truly felt as if I lived in between the pages.” – The Book Hookup

“Normal is a riveting and magnetic story of abuse, love, and hope. It pushes the reader in every way possible. Normal is one of the most thought provoking stories I’ve ever read.” –Biblio Belles
Table of Contents

Skip to the beginning of the book!
Title Page
Copyright
Dedication
Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty
Chapter Twenty-One
Chapter Twenty-Two
Chapter Twenty-Three
Chapter Twenty-Four
Chapter Twenty-Five
Chapter Twenty-Six
About the Author
Acknowledgements
Dedication
For Roman, my husband and best friend, whose drive and dedication through adversity is even more inspiring than his success.
CHAPTER ONE

Present Day

It's the kind of situation most people would dread. Starting at a new high school, in the middle of my senior year, in a new town, in a new state. I know no one. No one knows me. That's what I'm counting on.

It's not like it is in the movies. You know - where you walk into the building in slow motion, and cue emo background music as every unfamiliar head suddenly turns in your direction, some internal radar having announced an outsider in their midst. Or maybe the outsiders are more noticeable in other schools- in small towns anyway. I suppose it would have gone like that in my old hometown in northern Florida. Not the part of Florida with Mickey Mouse, or retired grandparents, or even the part with the spring breakers. Or parts with spring breakers. I grew up in the part that could just have easily been in Alabama, or South Carolina. A small, southern town in Baker County where everyone has known everyone since birth, and their parents, and their parents. Linton, Florida is where my father is from, but thankfully not my Mom.

Mom grew up here - Port Woodmere, in Long Island, New York. Not exactly the big city, but thirty miles is close enough, and the three hundred or so in my new senior class certainly cast a beautiful shadow on the fifty two of my former class. Total population of my new high school? One thousand, three hundred and nineteen. Perfect.

The first thing I notice is the way people are dressed. Back home, my jeans and gray tee shirt would have blended into the rest of the student body like a uniform. My favorite black motorcycle boots in place of sneakers are the only thing that would've stood out, if anything. But here, although the guys are in jeans, they're most definitely not the kind they wear back home, but the three hundred dollar kind. The girls are mostly in skirts, or even dresses, and they look even more expensive. It doesn't bother me though. My outfit was chosen with care for one singular purpose. Not to be in, not to fit in, or to impress the in crowd. I don't want to be "in" anything except invisible. And it appears that I am.

I keep my head down as I navigate my way to the main office, just in case someone does notice me as a new girl. As someone who doesn't belong.

Someone who doesn't belong anywhere anymore, for that matter.

The receptionist is typing away on her keyboard looking disinterested in her task, and doesn't even look up as I approach. I stand there a few moments waiting for some acknowledgment, some can I help you, or even a glance. Nothing. For a second I wonder if I actually am invisible after all, and how awesome would that be? I could forgo this whole school thing altogether. I clear my throat.

"Um, hi," I stammer. I hand her the form I was told to bring today.

"Oh, a transfer," the receptionist, whose name plate reads "Ms. Sussman", mumbles unimpressed. "Aurora Pine," she reads from my form.

"Rory," I murmur automatically, and she gives me a look.

Right. She doesn't care about my preferred nickname. She's an administrator I'm likely never to interact with again. Especially if I plan to remain invisible, at least figuratively.

Ms. Sussman continues to click away at her keyboard until something spits out of the printer behind her. She hands it to me, along with a few other sheets of paper which I realize are a Student Handbook and a map of the school, and wishes me luck.

How big is this school that I need a freaking map? My old school was a box. Two floors, four hallways each, all surrounding a courtyard. Definitely no map necessary.

This building is enormous. The kind you see on television. Red brick, white columns, even a damned bell tower. The one thing both schools have in common, of course, are the athletics fields. Especially the football field. It's naked of its painted white yard lines and numbers since it's February, but it's clear that significant funds have been invested in this part of the grounds.

I was under the impression that high schools up north didn't make the same kind of fuss over football that they do back home. I'd hoped anyway. An electric current of uneasiness surges through me, making me shudder.

Fuck football. I hate it. Hate the sport, hate the people that play the sport, the people that watch it- the people who are convinced it's the most important fucking thing in the world. And fuck this school for being presumably
included in that.

I sigh and open the map, trying to find Hall 6 in Wing B. Could this have been organized any more poorly? I quickly realize that there is an older part of the building - the part with the red brick facade - and a newer part. Clearly the old building wasn't big enough to accommodate the student population and, judging by the unsightly architecture, they must have expanded it sometime in the eighties. Unfortunately they don't seem to have bothered taking the layout of the old structure into any kind of account when they drew the plans for the extension. The two parts of the building don't appear to have anything to do with one another, besides the fact that they're attached, of course.

It takes me fifteen minutes to find my way to my first class, which is of course my most detested subject, calculus. I got to school early enough to have time to go to the office and still be on time for class, but I didn't exactly account for the hallway maze.

I stand outside the door to room 313 and take deep breaths. Math has always stressed me out - as much as classes ever stressed me out anyway - but mornings are tough for me, so having it at the very start of my day just makes a bad situation worse. My pulse starts to quicken, and I briefly consider just ditching since they're already twenty minutes into the period. I bark out a short ironic laugh. Now that would make a fantastic first impression - cutting class, something I've never done in my life.

Old Rory would never have skipped class. But New Rory... I suppose I don't know her well enough to even make that determination.

My heart rate races like an out of control freight train and beads of sweat break out on my forehead. I close my eyes and count backwards from ten. Twice. Yes, math has always stressed me out, but the panic attacks - those are relatively new. Usually there are particular stressors that trigger them - ones related to what happened last year. Not something like being late to calculus. I step back from the door and lean against the adjacent row of lockers, pressing my forehead to the cold metal, hating myself for being so damn weak. This isn't me. Or this wasn't me.

I guess now it is me.

The counting isn't helping. I reach around to the front pocket of my backpack and feel for the shape of the pill bottle in the front pocket. I loathe them. I've started to try and depend on them less and less, and sometimes other coping methods, like the counting, really do help. I snort as I think of how proud I was of myself just this morning for not taking a pill to deal with my first day jitters, even though that really is an understatement as to how I was feeling. Nervous, anxious - also understatements. But no panic attacks - not until now.

Somehow just feeling the shape of the bottle, just knowing they're there if I really need them, helps me start to calm. I start counting again, but instead of counting nothing, I count how many pills I think are left in the bottle, the ones I took on the first day, the ones I took the next day, the ones I took the second day, the ones I took the third day... and on and on.

The counting isn't helping. I reach around to the front pocket of my backpack and feel for the shape of the pill bottle in the front pocket. I loathe them. I've started to try and depend on them less and less, and sometimes other coping methods, like the counting, really do help. I snort as I think of how proud I was of myself just this morning for not taking a pill to deal with my first day jitters, even though that really is an understatement as to how I was feeling. Nervous, anxious - also understatements. But no panic attacks - not until now.

Somehow just feeling the shape of the bottle, just knowing they're there if I really need them, helps me start to calm. I start counting again, but instead of counting nothing, I count how many pills I think are left in the bottle, knowing how desperately I want the last time I refilled the prescription to be the last time I fill the prescription. Because yes, they help the panic attacks, but they also make me feel completely numb.

For a while, after everything happened, numb was all I wanted to feel. In the aftermath, it felt like things just couldn't stop going wrong.

You know how when parents divorce and they assure their kids - or kid in my case as I'm an only child - that it wasn't their fault? Well my parents said that, too. Well my mom did. Only I know it isn't true.

My parents' divorce, both announced and finalized in the last nine months, was one hundred percent, without question, and undeniably, my fault. Not that my father would deny it if I confronted him, I'm sure. But that will never happen. My father's response when I told him I never wanted to see him again for as long as I lived? "I'm sorry you feel that way."

Not "I'm sorry for betraying you." Not "I'm sorry I hurt you". Because he's not. He still thinks I'm to blame for everything that happened. And that truth is, though I'd never say it out loud, sometimes I still think he's right.

Thank God for Mom - my rock. My protector, my defender. She left her husband, my father, because he wasn't on my side, and uprooted our entire lives to get me away from that damned school. From that goddamned town.

I rub my fingers over the pocket of the backpack again. There were thirty pills in the prescription I filled a week and a half ago. I took one that first day. Two the next day, when I unpacked the box with my old cheerleading uniform before I took scissors to it and threw it in the trash. I took one last Tuesday when the neighbor's creepy son leered at me when he took his trash cans to the curb as I was returning from my run, right before I went to the store to buy more modest running gear.

I took two on Friday when Mom's childhood friend, Karen, came over to welcome us "back", though I've never lived here before, and started asking questions about my dad. That leaves twenty four pills.

I'm still breathing heavily, but my pulse is slowing. Counting pills seems to have staved off the attack.

Just then the door to room 313 bursts open and out saunters a classmate. A sideways glance shows him raising his eyebrows with appraising interest when he notices me leaning up against the wall with my chest heaving. My
forehead is still pressed against the locker and I only see him in my peripheral. This is embarrassing as hell. I'm no longer invisible. *Damn it.*

"Uh, are you okay?" he murmurs, his voice deep, like gravel.

I nod against the lockers but don't turn, hoping he continues off to the restroom or wherever he was headed so I can wait for my panic attack to continue to subside in peace.

"You don't look okay. Can I get you something? Or someone? The nurse maybe?"

I take a deep breath and muster up my composure. This is the absolute last thing I need. To be labeled as the crazy girl with the anxiety issues on day one. He's just one student. I have to cut this off at the head. "I'm really fine, I just needed a minute," I assure him as I turn around and plaster on what must be an obviously fake smile.

*Holy shit.*

He is a walking trigger for me. Gorgeous. My *God* is he gorgeous. And gorgeous guys in high school are assholes. Especially jocks. And judging by his physique, that's exactly what he is. He's tall. Built. Six plus feet of lean muscle... athletic. Something I'd have found incredibly attractive a year ago.

Now all I can think is how easy it would be for him to overpower me.

No matter how many self-defense classes I take, I'm still just an average height, slight figured girl. No match against him. No match against any man really.

Suddenly all I register is the desolately empty hallway, the absence of any other souls. The fact that there are over a thousand people in this building, including thirty or so just on the opposite side of the door he just exited, is completely and utterly lost on me.

My pulse races again, ten times worse than before. I gape at him in shocked panic, but can't catch my breath enough to speak. I reach for the front pocket of my backpack again, this time for the zipper, but my hand shakes too much to get a grip on it. My gaze makes its way up this stranger's frighteningly powerful body, up past a chiseled jaw, and lips so full and soft looking they are in total contrast with his masculine jawline. My eyes inexorably continue their path past a straight nose framed by perfectly defined cheekbones, and lock on his eyes.

The sneer I expect is missing. He's not looking at me like I'm some psycho freak - though I'm pretty sure that's what I've become. Instead, he's watching me with genuine concern. His eyes are the deepest blue, like a midnight sky, and his brow is creased with worry.

And the strangest thing happens. As we keep eye contact, I start to calm. I breathe in, and out. In, and out. I am still panicking, but I can breathe, and my fingers stop shaking enough to get a grip on the zipper pull. I look down to unzip the pocket and grab the bottle, but as soon as our eye contact is broken, I can't remember what calmed me in the first place and my chest constricts. My lungs betray me. The bottle tumbles from my trembling fingers and rolls a few feet away. Before I can scramble to pick it up, he does it first.

I freeze, waiting for him to hand me my medication, but he pauses, and reads the label. His brow furrows again in concern, or consternation, and I can feel him judging me as he reluctantly hands me the bottle. But I don't care yet. I can't. I need to calm down. I need a pill. I twist open the lid and look up and down the hall, silently thanking God when I see a water fountain. I force myself the thirty or so feet to it, pop the pill, take a drink, and then lean back against the wall and close my eyes, waiting for the magic to take effect.

 Barely minutes later the chemical tranquility starts flowing through my veins, and slowly, the pressure in my chest alleviates. My breathing starts to even out, and though my mind grows somewhat cloudy - the whole reason I want to stop taking the pills in the first place - the attack is passing. A few more moments and I'll be able to open my eyes, maybe even venture into math class.

"Better?"

My eyelids fly open. I hadn't realized he was still here, let alone followed me to the water fountain.

"Fine. Like I said," I mutter ungratefully. He furrows his brow, hesitating, and I wonder why he's even still here. For a split second, even calmed by modern medicine, I worry he might want to hurt me, and I swallow a lump of nerves and hold my breath.

"Why don't I know you, Aurora?" he asks casually, as if he didn't just witness me breaking down in the hallway.

"Rory," I correct, before I realize he just called me by name. "Wait. How do you know my name?" My tone makes me sound paranoid, and the irony is that had I not just ingested anti-anxiety medication, just the idea of this tall, ruggedly beautiful boy knowing something about me I haven't offered him would send me spiraling into another attack. But I took the pill. I caved. So I can come across like a relatively normal person, at least for now.

"It was on your... um... bottle," he replies.

I look down, mortified. Vaguely I wonder if he knows what Alprazolam is prescribed for, even though he obviously just witnessed my attack. I'm thankful the bottle says the generic name, and not just *Xanax*, which teens generally recognize. Some even take it for fun, which doesn't make sense to me. There is nothing fun about any of it.
"So why don't I know you, Rory?"
"I'm new," I practically whisper.
"I see. Well, welcome to Port Wood. I'm Sam. Sam Caplan."
"Nice to meet you," I breathe, still studying my boots.
"So, can I, like, walk you to the nurse's office or something?"
Now I look up. "No. Like I said, I'm fine. I just need to get to class." I turn and start to walk back toward room 313 when another student comes barreling down the hall. I pause and step back toward the wall, out of his way.
"Cap! What's up? I'm late as fuck!" he announces to explain why he's taking the halls like a bat out of hell. As soon as his eyes skate over me, however, he skids to a stop. "Well, hi there." His eyebrows rise with interest and he rakes my entire body with his gaze, he doesn't even try to hide it.
I take another automatic step back and fold my arms protectively over my middle. I tell myself that he's just flirting. It's harmless. It's normal.
But I'm not normal.
I'm so glad I'm medicated right now.
Sam seems to sense my unease and steps in front of me, practically shielding me from someone who is obviously his friend. His friend's brows draw together as he looks at Sam, clearly confused at his stance, as am I.
"Sorry, Tuck, we're late, too. Gotta get to class," Sam explains as he gently takes my hand and leads me back towards calculus. I'm momentarily stunned by his touch. A strange man taking hold of my hand should have freaked me out, even medicated. But his touch was somehow... comforting.
"Uh, okay. Catch you later, I guess," Tuck calls out and resumes his jog down the hall in the opposite direction.
As soon as he's gone I yank my hand back, ignoring the fact that a part of me doesn't want to.
"Sorry," Sam offers.
I just shrug in response.
"He's harmless. Tuck. Tucker. He's just a flirt."
"Whatever. It's fine. I'm-"
"You're fine. I got it."
I look up at him. Back into those eyes. Big mistake. I start to feel guilty. It appears that I've grown so accustomed to being the victim that I can't even recognize when someone is trying to help me. Great. Now I'm a bitch. "I'm sorry," I mutter.
"Whatever, it's cool. You in my class? Calc?" he gestures to the door to 313.
I nod.
"Cool, let's go."
"Didn't you... weren't you headed somewhere?" I ask. After all, he must have had somewhere he'd needed to go - before he got sidetracked by the new girl having an episode in the hallway. Sam chuckles and it's a lighthearted, genuinely sweet sound. The kind of laugh that instantly puts you at ease, that intimates sincerity and warmth. I'm surprised by how it affects me.
"Nah. I just get bored in calculus sometimes and ask for a bathroom pass." He shrugs and opens the door for me.
I go in ahead of him and to my surprise, he grabs the form out of my hand and slams it on the teacher's desk. "New student," he murmurs, as if it's the most ordinary thing in the world, and then sits down in the second row.
The teacher barely looks up as he directs me to take a seat, which I do - as far back as I can - and the few students who look up, mostly girls, look only at Sam.
Not that I can blame them.
And just like that, I'm back to being invisible.

****

When the bell rings everyone rushes to pack up their things and head out the door. Sam turns around and I freeze as he makes eye contact, the corner of his mouth twisting up into a half smile.
"Rory? Is that you?" a girl's voice rips my attention from my strange, hypnotized reaction. I reluctantly pry my eyes away from Sam's and search for its source.
Then I see her. Okay, so I don't know no one. I know one someone.
And it's someone I actually like.
"Carleigh? Holy shit, Carleigh!" I'm so grateful that she's here and that she even remembers me that even as she hugs me, I momentarily forget that I can barely even bear to be touched, and I hug her back hard.
Carleigh Stanger's family lived next door to my Grandma Mimi - my mom's mom - before she passed away. We used to visit her up here twice a year and I would play with Carleigh. Always. She was my best vacation friend.
I haven't seen her since we were twelve. I peek over at the front of the room just in time to see Sam smile and walk out of the classroom.

"They call me Carl these days," Carleigh informs me. "What's up? How are you? What are you even doing here?" she asks excitedly. I laugh at her energy. When was the last time I actually laughed?

"Slow down, Carl. L.. well, I moved here," I explain.

"So you're here for good? Like you go to school here now? Like for the rest of the year?"

"That's the plan," I confirm, and I'm rewarded with her ear-to-ear grin.
CHAPTER TWO

Present Day

Carl is eager to catch up, but we both have to get to different classes. We hastily compare schedules and learn that we share the same lunch period, and plan to meet up then. My next four classes pass slowly. I feel slow in general, because of my medicine, but I'm grateful not to be panicking. None of my teachers make me do that thing where they ask you to stand up and introduce yourself. Say a few things about yourself. I couldn't be more thankful. What could I possibly say?

Everything about myself has been stripped from me.

I'm neither a tomboy nor a cheerleader. My friends aren't my friends anymore. In fact, they're my enemies. I don't like football anymore. I hate it. And everyone who thinks it's the axis the world revolves around. My boyfriend - ex-boyfriend - is my worst fucking nightmare. I've done nothing over the last nine months but cry, read, cry, listen to music, and cry. Oh, and have panic attacks. I'm sure that would all make for an inspiring introduction.

As I walk around the building to the parking lot where I agreed to meet Carl, I wonder how the past few years have changed her. No one is the same person at eighteen they were at twelve. I don't suspect she's much like my girl friends from back home - ex girl friends. The girls who, for all of last year, I tried so desperately to fit in with. As much as any innate tomboy really can, anyway. Those girls like boys, and cars, and football, being popular, and trying to become more popular - an exceptionally empty ambition in a town whose social scene is barely big enough to accommodate cliques at all. But empty or not, right now, all I want to do is figure out who the "cool kids" are here, and avoid them like the freaking plague. I hope Carl is more of an outsider type. The truth is I could use a friend, but I don't think I could handle a clique, and definitely not the popular clique.

But deep down I know Carl is no loner. She's always been friendly, and she's pretty damn gorgeous, too. The last time I saw her, her naturally blond hair hung down to her waist, but now it's cut to her shoulders in a more contemporary style. Unlike me. My auburn hair still hangs long, and I rarely style it into anything other than its natural boring waves. When I saw her this morning, Carl was wearing eye shadow, liner, the works, and she did an expert job of accentuating her bright green eyes. I used to wear makeup to school. Used to spend twenty full minutes on it every morning. Now I wear concealer, and sometimes mascara and lip gloss, and that's just to draw attention from the bags under my eyes from not sleeping. But nothing more than that. I don't want to seem like I'm trying. When people think you're trying, they think you're looking for something. And I'm looking for nothing.

When Carl shows up, she's flanked by another girl with blond hair, but it's definitely not natural, and neither are her pink dyed tips. They both smile warmly and Carl hugs me again.

"This is Tina. Tina, Rory," Carl introduces.

"Hi," I murmur, but Tina pulls me in for a hug just like Carl did. Not what I expected. I tense and hold my breath until she pulls away.

"Great to meet you, we only have forty three minutes for lunch. Diner good with you?" she says a mile a minute.

"Uh, sure." I fall into step behind them as we head to what I assume is one of their cars.

"We get to leave campus for lunch?" I ask. My old school made us eat in the cafeteria.

"Seniors only," Carl explains, "but most juniors leave too, once they get their license. The school isn't especially strict about it."

I'd forgotten that they don't get their license until seventeen in New York. Sucks for them.

Just as Carl clicks open her Audi A4, a pack of guys pushes its way through the stream of students, which parts for them like they're the chosen people on exodus from Egypt. Like I have a built-in sensor for him, my gaze shifts straight to Sam. The pack's obvious leader. Tucker - who also happens to be exceptionally good looking - is with them also, as are the four others with them. Predictable. Though none of them have anything on Sam. I don't need to ask where they fall in the high school hierarchy. One of the guys jabs Tucker with his elbow to get his attention before he turns and jogs over toward us. Tingles of anxiety lace the soles of my feet, shooting upward through my limbs, spiking my heart rate.

Tina doesn't see him approach before he grabs her, yanking her arm to pull her against him. She lets out a startled gasp.

I react.

I drop my backpack and seize his arm to unlatch him from my new friend.
"Get the hell off of her!" I hiss.
He stills. Tina stills. I retract my hand.
Finally, I notice Tina's other arm - frozen in its outstretched position, fingers affectionately caressing his cheek.
And again, I'm mortified. *He wasn't attacking her. He's probably her goddamned boyfriend!*
"...I'm sorry," I murmur pitifully.
"Rory, this is my buddy Andrew. He and Tina are together." It's Sam speaking. Sam has somehow made it over to us and has his hand set gently on my shoulder. "Andy, maybe you shouldn't sneak up on your girl like that," he adds with another of his lighthearted chuckles.
It's a kind thing to do. He's trying to make it seem like mine was a reasonable reaction. Like I'm not crazy. But instead of feeling grateful, I'm annoyed. I don't need him to make me feel normal. I'm *not* normal. And I've already accepted that I never will be again.
Andrew is still freaked out by my outburst, but he's gentleman enough to pretend otherwise. He tells me it's nice to meet me - though I know his meeting me was anything but - and shakes my hand, which I suffer through. I hate the archaic tradition. Who wants to have a strange man touch their hand? Lately I've avoided the gesture whenever possible, but after my freak-out it's the least I can do. Andrew turns back to hug Tina and whisper in her ear with a smirk. She giggles. I quickly glance around, relieved that only us, a few people directly around us, and Sam's pack even noticed my outburst.
But then I see a group of girls standing around a white BMW. There's no questioning where they fall in the high school hierarchy either. They are the popular girls. They are who I used to be. My old friends. My enemies. And the tall skinny one with the skimpy skirt and the ten pounds of makeup is nothing short of *glowering* at me. She flips her long, chemically straightened, black hair with practiced attitude. I swallow nervously before I realize where her gaze is locked, and it's not just on me - it's on Sam's hand on my shoulder. I quickly shrug out of his grip and he frowns at me.
"We've gotta go. Lunch," I explain.
I take care not to meet Sam's eyes, but his black wool coat gapes open and fully visible is his fitted tee shirt and jeans, and I realize that focusing on his body isn't any less distracting. His physique is clearly defined even through his clothing. *Is that normal?* No wonder Queen Bee over there was glaring at me. Befriending Sam is definitely not the way to stay off of that group's radar, which is currently my prime objective. I don't want the popular girls to know who I am. That is not the way to stay invisible.
And then Tucker is here. "Cap," he greets. "I see you're still hogging the new girl. Hi, new girl, I'm Tuck." I say nothing.
Sam rolls his eyes. "Rory, this is Tuck, Andrew, Marshall, Dave, and Luke." He gestures to each man as he introduces them. Marshall and Dave laugh and playfully elbow each other. "Guys this is Rory, she's new."
"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance," Tuck says mock formally.
Carl's arm slides around me and she pulls me toward the car. "Okay, Tuck, leave her alone. Can't you see she's way out of your league?" she teases.
Tuck presses his palm to his chest like he's been mortally wounded, but his eyes crinkle with an amusement. "Aw Carl, princess, you know you're the only woman for me!" Tuck calls as I climb into the back seat behind her. Carl rolls her eyes, but I don't miss the way her lips twitch a she fights a smile, before hopping into the drivers' seat.

****

The diner is no more than a five minute drive. Over lunch, Carl catches me up on life. From what she describes, I deduce that while she and Tina are not part of the clique with Queen Bee, they're nowhere near outcasts either.
Obviously, Tina is dating one of the popular guys and Carl explains that while she and Tuck have never been in any kind of serious relationship, they've hooked up several times and they clearly like each other. Apparently Tuck is just a pathological flirt, as Sam had said, and I shouldn't take any of it personally. It's his way of being welcoming. He's *harmless.*
There's that word again. But I know better. Of course he's harmless. Everyone is harmless. Until they're not.
Robin used to be harmless too. I don't say any of this to Carl though.
"So how do you know Cap?" Tina asks. I blink back at her in confusion.
"Who?"
"Cap. Sam Caplan. Cap."
"Oh. I don't really. I was just late to my first class and he found me in the hallway," I explain.
"Lucky bitch," Tina teases, and she and Carl both laugh.
I may be a lot of things, but lucky isn't one of them. Bitch, maybe.

"Did you see Chelsea give her the death glare? When Cap came over in the lot?" Tina says to Carl with a hint of mischievous amusement.

"No. But it doesn't surprise me. It bugs her enough that he ignores her when she tries to flirt with him, and now he gives a girl some attention? It must be eating her alive!" They both giggle hysterically as if the idea of pissing off Chelsea, whom I assume is Queen Bee, is the best thing ever. I really don't blame them, everything about her screams "mean girl", but the fact that I'm the thing pissing her off - that makes me a target.

"Did they date?" I ask.

"In her fucking dreams... their families are friends, though," Carl replies. "Cap doesn't really date. He has this 'no girlfriends in high school' rule - Tuck told me. He hooks up, but the girl he used to hook up with graduated. She was older. I think Chelsea thought she'd get her chance this year, but he just ignores her and it drives her crazy. And now that she saw you two together-"

"She didn't see us together. And he wasn't giving me attention. He was just being nice. Because I'm new. He was... introducing me," I shrug and try to ignore my friends' skeptical looks. "What?!" I finally snap. Carl and Tina exchange a look.

"Maybe I'd believe that if Cap was the type to just randomly chat up some new girl. I mean, you've seen him!" Carl says excitedly.

I frown. She makes him sound conceited. I hate that. But something about it rings false. Sam didn't seem that way at all to me. At my expression Carl continues.

"No I didn't mean it like that. It's not that he's full of himself. I think he just gets sick of girls falling all over themselves. Tuck says he just doesn't like attention. They're best friends, you know. If Cap wants a girl, he'll let her know. And he'll get her, believe me." I have no doubt. "The rest of it, it's just annoying I think. I mean, take Chelsea - they've been friends since we were all kids, and then suddenly we're in high school and he can't be around her without her trying to flirt with him in one way or another."

"Poor him," I murmur. It comes out sarcastic and the girls laugh. I mean it to sound that way, because for it to be earnest would sound silly. To pity someone because they get too much positive attention from the opposite sex. But the truth is I kind of know what Carl means. Not to that extent, of course. I've certainly never had boys falling all over themselves, but I understand unwanted attention. "But really, I was just having trouble finding the class, it was really nothin'," I assure them.

"And again, maybe I'd believe that if you weren't, like, freaking hot," Tina counters. I throw a french-fry at her and laugh.

"I'm not," I insist.

"You kind of are," Carl murmurs and I can see she's being genuine. I roll my eyes.

Okay, I know I'm not ugly, but I'm definitely not "like, freaking hot". Especially now that I'm dressed down and practically makeup free. Maybe I should lose the lip gloss.

****

The rest of the school day continues uneventfully. Most of the students leave through the side entrance as it's adjacent to the student parking lot, but it's also where the gym is, and the locker rooms. Rationally I know that football season is long over, and that there are plenty of people out and about in the hall that leads to the locker rooms, but my therapist says I should avoid triggers as best I can, and high school locker rooms are definitely a trigger. I make my way through the main entrance and around the perimeter of the building, like I did for lunch, and by the time I get to my car, almost everyone has left. I hop into my jeep and drive straight home to get started on my calculus homework. I'm already behind. Tomorrow I'll have to ask Mr. Frank if he has any extra help hours or tutoring.

The good news is that my AP English class is working on just about the same list of books I'd been reading back in Linton, and the ones that weren't on the old syllabus, I've already read on my own. At least that's one thing that'll make life easier. Hey, you take the good where you can find it. Or at least that's what I try to tell myself.

The next morning I make it to first period - which is now homeroom for the next ten minutes - with time to spare. Carl has saved me a desk next to her near the back and I'm grateful for it. We chat for a few minutes before the bell rings. I try not to stare when Sam walks in, but the kid is just freaking gorgeous. I try to be inconspicuous about it, and realize I'm not the only one. Most of the girls in the class are trying to steal glances at Sam. I can see why he might find it annoying, but really, who has a "no girlfriends in high school" rule? Idly I wish Robin had had that rule, but stop myself. I'm not supposed to dwell on past events I can't change. My therapist would chasten me for even thinking it.
I steal one more glance at Sam, who's simultaneously texting on his iPhone and chatting with the guy he introduced yesterday as Dave, before the teacher, Mr. Frank, walks in as the bell rings. The students settle, and just before he turns to face the smart board, Sam peeks back at me and half smiles. For a moment, I think I imagined it, but then Carl nudges me with her elbow and mouths, "see!"

I don't see really. He's just barely acknowledged me.

I don't tell her the real reason Sam was nice to me yesterday. Why he's acknowledging me today. I don't tell her he caught me freaking out in the hallway and popping drugs barely in time before I hyperventilated and passed out. Which is what happened the first time an attack hit about ten months ago. I don't tell her he's only being nice because he thinks there's something wrong with me. Because he knows there's something wrong with me. Because he pities me.

Pity.

It's funny how things change. Nine months ago I'd have welcomed it. It would have been a nice change from the accusations and scorn. If they pitied me it would have meant they believed me. Now, I don't want pity. I want to pretend like none of it ever happened. That was the whole point of moving across the country. That no one would know. But while Sam may not know what happened, he's witnessed the scars. Not the physical scar, but the emotional ones. And those are far deeper.

****

Over the next few days I fall into a routine. Classes, lunch with Carl and Tina, more classes, homework, reading, and declining invitations for any other social activities. When Friday rolls around, it becomes more difficult to use excuses about having to have dinner with my mom to get out of hanging out after school. Everyone is going to a party at Andrew's tonight. It's the kind of thing I'd have been excited about a year ago. But now, I decline.

When I mention it to my mom over dinner, she gives me that look. That sad, pathetic look that reflects that I am just a shell of my former self. But I also see her own self-pity, reminding me how much this has all hurt her too, and I make the snap decision to try and alleviate some of her pain.

I decide to go to the party.

I don't spend much time getting ready. After all, I don't want to look like I'm trying. If I can hang out for a little while - at least until Mom goes to bed - she might think I'm recovering in some way. That I'm on the road back to normal.

I wait in the living room for Carl to pick me up, aware that my mom is watching me closely, searching for signs that I'm not ready for this so she can order me to stay in. But I know that isn't what she wants. What she wants is to find the unlikely reassurance that I'm starting to be okay. So I give it to her.

Plastering on my "everything is okay" fake smile is too much right now, so I make every effort just to keep my lips from slipping into their default frown. Two honks let me know that Carl is here to pick me up. I don't panic, but I am shaking with anxiety.
CHAPTER THREE

September, Last year

I am literally shaking with excitement. Finally, finally, it's junior year. I am officially an upperclassman. Everything changed this past summer. I was never the kind of girl who had a lot of girl friends. As a kid, I was more of a tomboy. I had little interest in painting my nails or attending slumber parties. Instead I was always more likely to seek out a street game of kickball or a pickup game of basketball at Cam's driveway hoop. Cam's been my best friend since his family moved next door when we were both three, and we've been inseparable ever since.

It wasn't all that strange when I was a kid. By the time I'd started high school, it was a little unorthodox that I hung out with mostly guys, but it was what it was. I was mostly carefree and still saw the guys as just my friends, and not romantic interests. Soon enough, though, I started to feel like I was missing out on something. Cam's a great friend - the best - and I love him, truly, but while we mostly hung around listening to music or playing video games, I increasingly started to wonder if I shouldn't be at the mall or just doing something to bond with girls my age. It wasn't as if I didn't know them. Linton is a small town; we've all known each other our whole lives. And it wasn't like I was an outcast or anything. Everyone was always nice enough to me, even the girls who weren't all that nice in general.

Then, this past summer, after passing the lifeguard test, I got a job at the pool. It gets hot as hell in Linton during the summer, and we're far enough from the gulf that the ocean breeze dies miles before it's of any use to us. Most of us spend our time either at the lake, or if our parents can afford a membership, the pool at the country club.

I've known Lacey Forbes forever. Of course, everyone in Linton knows her and her family. She and her friends, Courtney, Emmers, and Stella, are the closest thing Linton has to a "popular clique", and her dad, who's the town's mayor, has been friends with mine since they were kids. So when Lacey approached me at the pool in July, I saw it as my chance to make some girl friends - to work on becoming less of a tomboy and more of a normal girl. Lacey had her own motivation.

I've always been considered pretty enough in our small town, but when a girl hits about fourteen, what makes her attractive has less to do with her face, and more to do with how fast she develops. This new rating system, along with my being seen as one of the guys, always had me left off any "hot" lists. Until now. Sometime at the end of the last school year, I sprouted breasts. Not especially big ones, but I was just happy not to be flat as a washboard anymore, and according to Cam, who grimaced when he reported it, my necessary quota for breast size was significantly lower due to my attractive face. Again, Cam's words, not mine. According to the guys in my grade - guys who had been my best friends but now suddenly saw me as a sexual object - my large B's were equivalent to double D's on a plain girl. This news sent me into a fit of laughter, and caused Cam to rub his face red with his palms. He's like a brother to me, and can't stand it when his friends - our friends - talk about me like that. But it's become clear to the both of us over the past year that this is the way of things, and we'd both have to get used to it.

The truth is I know Lacey's sudden interest in me wasn't random. Popular girls like to keep girls that are considered pretty as close as possible. I would be an ally instead of competition. That, coupled with the fact that I'm best friends with Cam and the other desirable guys in our grade, made a friendship with me appealing, and inducting me into her clique would be mutually beneficial. Lacey has a not-so-secret crush on Cam, and though Cam has hooked up with her twice, he isn't a relationship kind of guy. Lacey is just one of many to him. As many as there are in Linton anyway. And fortunately, it's common knowledge that my friendship with Cam is one hundred percent platonic, otherwise, Lacey may have chosen me as a target instead of an ally.

But it doesn't really matter to me. So what if she's basically using me? I'm doing the same to fulfill my curiosity about what it would be like to have girl friends, and so far it's going great.

We hung out a lot over the summer, and though I still spend a lot of my time with Cam and the guys, I've become pretty tight with Lacey and the girls, too.

Now that the first week of junior year is over, Lacey is having the girls over to celebrate. It's the first time I'm sleeping over her house, but she's not the reason I'm excited.

Lacey's older brother is a senior. Not just a senior, but the senior. Quarterback of the football team, the town's golden boy - stunningly handsome, and popular. For years I've admired him from afar - from the bleachers at his football games, from the lifeguard chair at the pool - but since I've befriended Lacey, I've had opportunity to admire him from a little closer. Though he wasn't around the house much when I was over at Lacey's this summer - too
popular with far too full a social calendar - tonight I know I'll get a glimpse. He can't stay away from his own house all night.

My dad drops me off around dinner time. He couldn't be more pleased with my new friendship. He and Mayor Forbes golf every Sunday, and not only have they been friends since childhood, but with my dad being the town's district attorney, they have professional dealings as well. No doubt our families would have spent a lot of time together if my mother could stand Lacey's.

Cindy Forbes is everything my mother can't stand about small southern towns. Self-important, self-absorbed, and status obsessed. Her haughty attitude irked my mother at their first meeting almost twenty years ago and my mother has been making excuses to avoid associating with her ever since.

Even after all this time my mother is still a fish out of water here in Linton, but she's refused to adapt, forcing her gills to process oxygen instead of growing a pair of lungs. She grew up on Long Island and met my father at NYU when she was an undergrad and he was in law school. They fell instantly in love, so the story goes, and when they each graduated, my mother agreed to accompany my father back to his hometown where they got married and she attended law school at the University of Florida in Gainesville. She practices as a public defender and mostly volunteers her services, much to my father's chagrin, being the DA and all. But whenever my dad tries to pressure my mom to do anything she doesn't agree with, she reminds him that she'd made the ultimate sacrifice: giving up New York for Linton.

Linton is all I've ever known, so though I keep my opinion to myself - not that anyone's ever asked me - I'm stuck somewhere between understanding Mom's disdain for the frivolity of what our community considers important - social statuses, golf and football - and my father's desire to play the game. After all, what's so wrong with wanting to be popular? With wanting friends?

"Have fun, Sleepin' Beauty," my dad says as I climb out of the passenger seat with a wave. He calls me that when he's pleased with me, and Aurora when he's not. Never Rory. My parents couldn't agree on a name when I was born, and it'd been three days before the maternity nurse mentioned something about how I was the best sleeper in the nursery, and my father took to calling me Sleeping Beauty. That's how they decided to name me after the fairy tale princess.

Dad drives off before I'm halfway up the Forbes' flagstone walkway. Our house isn't exactly small, but the Forbes' Greek revival is positively enormous, with forest green storm shutters and a wraparound porch accented with dramatic palatial columns. The lawns are immaculately manicured, as are the rose bushes that line the walkway. It isn't just a house, it's a statement. We are better than you are. And I suppose it's not untrue. A mayor, his perfect blond botoxed wife, a football star, and Little Miss Popular. Some family. Mayor Forbes must be proud.

It's no secret my dad had wanted a son. Instead he got Sleeping Beauty. Mom couldn't have any more kids - something about scar tissue from the C section that brought me into this world, and though he'd never say so, I know my dad resents me not only for being a girl, but for ruining his chance at fathering any future sons. When I was younger I was as much a son as any girl could be, but the older I got, the further my father and I grew apart. It was easy enough to please him when all I wanted to do was to throw a baseball around the yard with him and Cam, but now... he barely even looks at me.

Only when I mention something about spending time with Lacey does he even ask about my day, about my life. He's always asking Mayor Forbes - or Bobby as Dad calls him - about his son. He goes to the football games - everyone in town does - and cheers for the quarterback as if he were his own. And Mayor Forbes is all too happy to share the glory. So when I asked my dad for a ride here for the sleepover since my jeep is being serviced, he spoke to me for the first time all week. Idly I wonder who golden-haired quarterback Robin Forbes' biggest fan is - his dad, or mine. Or maybe me. And every other girl in town.

I'm only a few steps from the front door when a deep, masculine voice skates over to my spot on the porch. I pause and peek sideways as Robin comes jogging around from the side door.

"Dude I'm on my way, chill out. She'll wait on me, don't you worry," he says cockily into his cell phone, and I silently agree that whomever she is will certainly wait on him. I sure would.

He notices my presence and changes directions, and my heart takes off down a runway ready for flight as my body freezes in place.

"I'll call you back, bro," Robin murmurs, slides his phone into the pocket of his jeans, and slows to a stop a few feet in front of me.

I swallow nervously as his gaze slowly and purposefully trails me from head to toe and back again as if my cutoff shorts and tank top are something special.

"Rory." My name slides off his tongue like he's said it a thousand times, his mouth spreading into a grin, inexplicably pleased.
My breath catches in the net of surprise lodged about halfway down my throat. "H- Hi," I stutter like an inexperienced little girl rendered dumb by a cute boy. Which, of course, I am.

"You sure look nice," Robin drawls like the southern gentleman he's been raised to be, and I blush scarlet. He's looking at me expectantly, and I realize he might be wondering what the hell I'm doing at his house.

"I... I'm here for Lacey," I mutter hastily.

"Well that's disappointin', but I figured as much. Didn't realize you girls had gotten so close."

I shrug. Wait... did he just say he was disappointed that I was here for Lacey? "Um, yeah, I guess. She's just havin' a bunch of us over," I explain.

"Well I knew that, but I didn't know the guest list extended to the prettiest girl in school. I mighta cancelled my plans," he winks, exaggerating his southern accent in a way I've overheard him do when he was flirting with girls like Maddie Stern. Pretty girls. Popular girls.

Holy shit. Is Robin Forbes actually flirting with me?

Embarrassingly, it takes me a second to even realize he means me, which he notices. He smirks when I blush again, and I look down, away from his hazel eyes positively gleaming with mirth. He's flirting with me, but I have no idea how to flirt. I've spent my whole life with boys and no one's ever flirted with me. Maybe if Robin wasn't so handsome, his boyish good looks beyond distracting, I'd be able to come up with some witty response.

"I am not," I say instead, meaning to call him on his bullshit, but sounding more like I'm back in elementary school.

I gasp when his toned arm reaches out, and he pushes a wayward strand of hair out of my eyes, tucking it carefully behind my ear.

"Oh, but you are, Miss Rory Pine. And everyone knows it. In fact, my boys and I were just talkin' about it after practice yesterday. Pissed off my best wide receiver some, too," he half-smirks. His best wide receiver is Cam, and if Cam got pissed off, then whatever was said wasn't exactly innocent. "Now, he tells me you're just his friend, but that doesn't ring true to me."

What? "What do you mean? Of course I'm just his friend, why wouldn't that be true?" I ask, completely confused. This boy is the most handsome boy in town, in the whole damned county probably. Everyone knows who he is. He's a freaking football star who will undoubtedly ride a scholarship to Gainesville, and from what my dad says, will go pro after that. He gets any girl he wants with the snap of his finger, and he's never said two words to me. That made sense. Now, here he is, telling me I'm pretty and questioning my relationship with Cam. This makes no sense whatsoever.

"Why wouldn't that be true? Well, sweet Miss Rory," he says, clearly making fun of my naivety, but I can't take offense, because it's true - I am naive. "Your buddy Cameron Foster is a bit of a ladies' man, from what I hear. They sure are drawn to him." Robin is right. Cam's good looking as hell. He's one of those guys who never went through an awkward phase, and I might resent him for it if he weren't my closest friend in the world. Girls have always been attracted to his laid back personality, but he's a total player. He has no problem getting any girl he wants to hook up on his terms, but the description is just as fitting for Robin, perhaps more so. Robin's a senior, so he's got a year on Cam and me, but even so, Robin is a freaking magnet for pretty girls. But he's never noticed me before, I don't think, and I'm surprised he's even aware of how much I hang out with Cam.

"The same could be said about you," I hedge, finally finding my wits.

Robin unleashes his full-on, panty-dropping smile and runs his fingers through his dirty blonde hair, a little brighter now from months of summer sun. God, he's handsome. And he knows it too. "Well, what do you think people would say if I had the pleasure of spending as much time with the prettiest girl in school as Foster does? Do you think they'd believe me if I said we were only friends?" That's the second time he's called me that. Hearing something like that, from him, it's alien enough that a part of me still thinks he may just be teasing me.

"If y'all had grown up together and were like brother and sister, then, yeah, I'd believe it. And, of course, the prettiest girl in school is Maddie Stern, everyone knows that, and from what I understand you do spend quite a deal of time with her," I reply, vaguely wondering where this courage is coming from. Maddie is a senior like Robin, homecoming queen, beauty pageant winner extraordinaire, and everyone knows she's dated Robin on and off for years. If you could call blowjobs in the locker room dating.

"Correction Miss Rory, Maddie was the prettiest girl in school, and maybe I wouldn't have to spend so much time with her if you'd do the honor of lettin' me take you out," he drawls, as if him asking me out is the most normal thing in the world.

My wits go back into hiding and I swallow audibly. I open my mouth to speak, but my words lodge behind a lump of nerves.

Robin smirks with satisfaction. "Well I'll let you think about that a bit. Why don't you be a good girl and make sure they put you up in the guest room upstairs tonight. I'll come by later for my answer."
I'm still processing his words as he winks at me before he turns on his heel and saunters to his BMW M3 convertible, folding his tall, lean frame into the driver's seat and peeling out of his family's long drive.

It's minutes before I'm composed enough to ring the doorbell and enter the Forbes' mansion. Lacey and the girls are excited about my arrival, or so they portray. I don't mention my encounter with her brother. I'm not even sure if I imagined it or not. I spend most of the evening of movies and gossip quietly trying to sort out what the hell happened on that porch. Was he serious about asking me out? Do I want to go out with him? He makes me feel nervous. He's real attractive, but I have no experience with this. I don't know how I'm supposed to feel, how I'm supposed to know if I even like him or not. I don't even know him.

Cam is the only person I'd ever feel comfortable talking about anything this personal, but here I am, stuck in a gaggle of girls, talking about nothing real, nothing that matters. I'm weighed with loneliness, and just as I'm thinking how much I miss my best friend right now, my phone buzzes with an incoming text. Too many of the people currently in this room text me, so I know it's Cam before I even pick up my phone.

You good Rory girl?
I smile. Cam knows me so well that sometimes it's like we're the same person. Only he would think to check on me right now. Only he would know that a slumber party with a bunch of chicks who are supposed to be my new best friends isn't the most comfortable situation for me.

Yep, u got a minute?
I know he's out with Missy Potter. I know he has sex with her- but not only her. And she seems just fine with that.

I do want to talk to him, but I don't want to interrupt anything. I don't want our friendship to be a burden to him. Ever. And if he's busy with a girl, and takes my call anyway, it wouldn't be the first time he's bailed on someone else because he thought I needed him.

For you? Always. Give me 5, I'll call u.
That means he is busy. If he wasn't, my phone would already be ringing.

Don't worry about it, let's talk tomorrow.
I'll figure this Robin thing out myself. There's a good chance he was joking, anyway. I wouldn't have bothered Cam at all, except if Robin wasn't joking, then he might actually come for that answer tonight.

Not for the first time I feel overly dependent on Cam, and I feel guilty. Maybe I can just sleep in Lacey's room like the rest of the girls and avoid the whole thing. What excuse would I even have to stay in the guest room anyway? I'm about to slip my phone back into my bag when it starts vibrating.

"Hey I told you not to worry about it," I answer, "And it hasn't even been five minutes."

"Stop, Ror. If you didn't need to talk you wouldn't have asked. Out with it," he orders, straight to the point as ever.

"Those girls treatin' you good?"
"Yeah, they're fine. I'm fine," I insist. "Get back to Missy, I'll call you in the mornin'."
"Missy can wait. Don't you worry about me, Rory girl. What do ya need? If Lacey fucks with you just tell me, I swear to God-"
"Cam!" I cut him off. I'm not three feet from Lacey and I peek over at her, wondering if she could hear him through my phone. She looks at me and her eyes brighten Cam's name. I excuse myself out the french doors that lead to the side of the house as Lacey calls for me to tell Cam that she says "hi". Once on the porch, I forward her greeting.

"Yeah, yeah, hi back, or whatever," is his response. I'll dress it up when I pass it on to Lacey. "So what's up Ror? You need me to pick you up?"
"No, Cam, I'm fine, really." I take a deep breath. "Okay. I ran into Robin Forbes when I got here tonight. "So what's up Ror? You need me to pick you up?"

"He say somethin' wrong to you?" Cam's voice is low and deathly serious, the threat implicit.
"No! Jeez, Cam, why do you always assume someone is mistreatin' me? Am I such a goddamned victim?"
"Nah, Rory girl, you're no victim, but you are beautiful and innocent and Robin Forbes doesn't do innocent. What'd he say to you?"
"He, uh... he asked to take me out," I murmur softly, suddenly unsure of what Cam's reaction will be. He's always been so damn protective of me. There's a long pause and for a moment I think the call got dropped, before Cam lets out a long, resigned sigh. "Cam?"
"I was afraid a' this." Another sigh. "Damn, Rory girl, what'd you say?"
"I... said nothin'. I stood there like a stupid deer in headlights!" I grumble.

Cam chuckles. It's a comforting sound, reminding me of childhood, of home. "Well you musta said somethin'. Was he a gentleman about it?"
"Uh, yeah, I guess. He was... sweet. Kinda. I don't know. But no, I really said nothin'. When I couldn't make myself talk he just smiled and told me to think about it. That he'd come by for my answer later tonight." I don't mention that he instructed me to sleep alone in the guest room. I know what Cam will make of that, and vaguely I wonder why it's not sending up red flags for me.

"Well, don't hold out on me, what's your answer gonna be? Don't keep me waitin', Rory girl, I ain't him."

"Of course you're not, Cam. I... don't know. That's why I called you! What do I do? What do I say?" I'm desperate, completely out of my comfort zone.

"Say no," Cam says immediately, the big brother in him shining through.

"Cam," I whine.

He sighs again. "Well, hell, Ror. You're the one who's gonna have to make this call. Guys are gonna ask you out. You're too damn adorable for your own good. I was worried about this the other day. The seniors were talkin'. Sayin' how hot you've gotten. Askin' me all about you, and about you and me. They ain't gonna stop askin', and I can't hold them off forever. Forbes ain't a bad guy, but you know he gets around. You ain't that kinda girl."

"Well I know I ain't that kinda girl. But surely Robin must know that, right? I mean, why would he even wanna go out with me?"

"Cam laughs again. "Why would he wanna go out with you? Seriously Rory girl?" He lets out another frustrated sigh. "Whatever, it's probably best you keep on not knowin' what you got goin' on. But Forbes sure has noticed, along with the rest of the damn town. The fact that he must know how inexperienced you are is the only reason I believe his intentions might be alright. But that doesn't mean you gotta go out with him. That's your choice... What do you want, Ror? Do you wanna go out with him?"

"I suppose I'm not sure, Cam, can't you just decide for me?" I groan. He always makes decisions for me when I can't decide something, which is pretty often. But this is different than choosing my lunch order.

"I did, remember? I said 'no'. You didn't like that answer," he reminds me.

Lacey calls me from the living room and I realize I should get back to the girls. I tell Cam I'll call him tomorrow and sarcastically thank him for his "help".

The rest of the evening flies by and I'm no closer to knowing what the hell to do about Robin when Lacey starts telling us where we're all sleeping, which I'd thought would all be in her room. Courtney is sleeping in Lacey's bed with her, and Emmers and Stella will sleep on the pullout in the den. I have a choice between an air mattress in Lacey's room or the guest room on the third floor. She explains that it's the only room on the third floor so I may not want to be alone up there. Without thinking too hard, I tell her I don't mind, and climb the second staircase to the converted attic room.

Everyone's gone to bed, but I can't sleep. The guest room up here is lonely, like Lacey warned, but it is lovely. There's a canopy bed with a soft cream quilt that matches the gauzy drapes. The queen size mattress is comfortable, but still, I can't sleep. I can't stop wondering if Robin was joking or not about coming up here for my answer, or if he was joking about asking me out in the first place. When I glance at the mahogany wall clock and see it's almost 1:00 am, I realize he wasn't serious, or maybe he changed his mind. Part of me is relieved, but another part is disappointed, and I drift off to sleep wondering why I'm the only girl in my grade that's never even been kissed, let alone the only virgin in my group of new girlfriends.

****

I'm startled out of sleep by a bang and a muttered curse.

"Shit."

I open my eyes, but it's too dark to see the door, which I'm pretty sure has just slammed shut.

I lean up onto my elbows.

"Who's there?" I ask trepidatiously as the figure approaches my bed.

"Well, it's just me a' course. I told you I'd come, I'll be needin' that answer now, sweetheart," Robin drawls the slight slur to his accent tells me he's been drinking.

He sits down on the bed as I sit up.

"You scared me," I whisper.
Robin reaches out and brushes my hair out of my face, pushing a chunk of it over my shoulder. I must look like such a mess. "Well now I see why that daddy a' yours calls you Sleepin' Beauty." He grins sloppily and it's somehow incredibly endearing. But I can smell the beers he's drunk tonight. And perfume. A woman's perfume.

I blush at his compliment, grateful that it's too dark for him to notice as a pang of disappointment stabs deep in my gut. I wonder where it came from. I have no right to be jealous of the owner of the perfume, but part of me wonders why he's bothering to ask me out at all when he obviously has some other girl ready and willing to do whatever is required to get her scent to cling to him so fervently.

"Didn't mean to scare you, but I can't go to bed, not yet. I'll never fall asleep 'til you agree to let me take you out next Friday."

"Um..." Again, words evade me.

"How about I'll pick you up at seven, and you wear a pretty little dress for me. I'll take you out somewhere nice, and maybe, if I'm real good, you'll give me a nice kiss. How does that sound?" He smiles sincerely, and I think he's trying to ease my nerves by saying he'd only expect a kiss if things go well. The thought warms me and I smile timidly up at him in response. "Don't you worry, Sleepin' Beauty. I know you're a good girl, and I'll treat you right, I promise." He holds up three fingers like a boy scout and I laugh.

"Okay," I murmur, surprising even myself. Robin grins widely in triumph and I can't help but laugh again.

"Well you just made my night," he says excitedly, and I wonder if perfume girl hadn't already made his night before he ever got home. "How about a little preview of that kiss?"

My heart drops. Alluding to a potential kiss if we had a good date is one thing, but now?

I've never been kissed. Ever. Cam once offered to be my first kiss - to teach me, but I'd balked at the idea. I'm anxious and disappointed until Robin turns his head and points to his cheek. I smile again and press my lips chastely to where he'd just pointed.

Robin presses his index and middle fingers to his own lips and plants a kiss on them before touching them softly to my cheek. I'm actually excited to go on this date.

"Night Sleepin' Beauty," he whispers, and stands from my bed, and strolls out of the room, closing the door carefully behind him.
CHAPTER FOUR
Present Day

I climb into the passenger seat of Carl's Audi. She tells me that Tina is already at the party and we'll meet her there. I look at the clock on her dashboard and estimate that I'll need to kill about three hours before Mom goes to bed and I can sneak back home.

When we arrive, Tucker hands us both red plastic cups and points us to the keg, but I set mine down on the first flat surface I can find. I haven't taken a pill today, but I still don't really like to drink. Tina and Andrew are laughing and talking with a group of people and Carl goes off to join them while I hang back a few feet from the crowd. I watch as a minute later Tuck jogs over, slings his arm around Carl and plants an exaggerated wet kiss on her cheek. She playfully pushes him away, but it's clear she doesn't mean it. Everyone looks so happy and carefree... normal.

I don't belong here.

"Having fun?"

I startle but catch myself quickly. Somehow I recognize Sam's voice instantly, and his tone tells me he can tell just how much fun I'm having.

"Didn't mean to sneak up on you."


"A blast." He matches my level of excitement. "Can I get you a drink?" he offers.

"I don't really drink."

"How about some water?"

"I- uh-"

He hands me his unopened bottle of Poland Spring, and my lips part to thank him, but for some reason I stay silent.

"You don't seem to want to be here," he observes.

I frown. He's right, I don't, but it's rude of him to point it out, isn't it?

"Neither do you," I counter. Sam smiles, and it's an unexpectedly wistful smile. I'm surprised by it. I'd expect something more cocky from such a gorgeous, confident guy.

"Touché... I have a lot on my mind."

If he expects me to ask him about it, he's going to be disappointed. Even though I find that I am interested to know what's plaguing the mind of this beautiful boy, I worry that if I ask about his problems, then he'll have the right to ask about mine. But he doesn't give me a chance to ask, and I think maybe he didn't want me to after all - maybe he didn't even mean to say it.

"You wanna go for a walk?" he asks, nodding in the direction of the open grassy area that leads to what appears to be a pond.

Is he seriously hitting on me?

He doesn't even know me, and the one thing he does know is that I obviously have issues. He probably thinks the crazy ones are easy. My eyes narrow. I straighten my shoulders indignantly and square my stance. False confidence all the way.

"No. I don't want to go for a fucking walk. I'm not gonna fuck you, or hook up with you in any way. Or anyone else for that matter. Spread the fucking word," I growl. My throat is suddenly desert-dry, so I take a swig from his water bottle to soothe it, praying it doesn't betray my anxiety.

Sam stares at me like I've just grown another head, so I turn and stomp away from the hordes of people, toward the pond, marching in the exact direction I just insisted I did not want to go. My heart pounds mercilessly, but this isn't panic, this is anger.

"Ugh! Guys! They're all the fucking same."

"Hey!" Sam calls after me.

Can't he just take no for an answer?

He catches up to me and his unexpected grip scorches the skin of my arm like wildfire.

I don't think. I wrench out of his hold, turn, and smack him across his face. "Don't touch me!" I hiss. "Don't ever touch me!" We're now far enough away from the crowd that no one notices us, but if I scream, they'll hear me.

Sam's fingers caress his cheek where my palm made contact, eyes wide and round.
"What the fuck is your problem, Rory?! I wasn't fucking hitting on you!" He rubs his reddened cheek again.  
"Damn it!"

_He wasn't hitting on me?_

My boiling blood starts to simmer and shame floods my veins. All of a sudden I can't for the life of me remember what made me so certain his invitation for a walk was code for a hook-up - what made me think he'd want me that way at all. _God_, if he didn't already think I was crazy...

_Damn it, Rory, don't panic._

Sam is glaring at me, but something in my mortified expression must warrant pity, because he sucks in a deep breath and I can sense his anger begin to dissipate.

"I was... you just didn't seem like you were up for a party. I thought you'd want to get away from all those people." He gestures to the crowds, now off some distance, and shoves his hand through his messy chocolate locks in frustration. "I wasn't trying to _fuck_ you. I realize that we don't know each other very well, but what about me that you know so far, exactly, makes you think I'm the kind of guy who would lure you down to a lake, lay you down on the dirty ground, and have sex with you with a hundred of our friends not fifty yards away?"

I swallow anxiously. I've offended him. Moisture pricks the back of my eyes and I will it to stay put. It's beyond reason how much I've humiliated myself in front of this guy in just one week.

"I-' I choke back what threatens to be a sob, close my eyes, and silently count back from ten in double time.

When I open them again, I'm greeted by his expectant midnight blue gaze. "I'm so sorry," I breathe.

Sam exhaled sharply, his fingers raking that familiar path through his hair. "Look, I shouldn't have grabbed your arm like that. I wasn't thinking," he murmurs. Now he's apologizing and I'm more than certain he has nothing to be sorry for.

"Not just for slapping you." _Oh God, I freaking hit him! "God, but I am so sorry for that. But I'm sorry for assuming- I wasn't thinking. I... I pause and look away. "I don't know what's wrong with me." It's a lie. I know exactly what's wrong with me._

Sam's expression warms, and it's not full of pity either - it's... _compassion_. Empathy.

He sighs. "There's nothing wrong with you, Rory."

I look away again, anywhere but at the deep blue oceans that unnerve me so. They seem to know more about me than they should. "Sure there isn't," I mutter bitterly under my breath.

Sam takes an abrupt step so he's directly in front of me, silently demanding eye contact. His arm twitches, like he wants to touch me but thinks better of it.

"There's. Nothing. Wrong. With. You." He glares at me like he can convince me of this with just a look. Everything in my gut screams that he's a good guy. Like Cam. But if there's anyone whose instincts can't be trusted when it comes to guys, it's me. I was even wrong about Cam. I thought I knew everything about him. But he was keeping his secrets, too.

But Sam saw me freak out. He knows I have issues, but no one else here does. Which means he's kept my secret. Otherwise it would have been all over the school in a heartbeat. That's got to count for something.

"Sam, you... thank you. I mean it, but you know that's not true. And I know you didn't tell anyone what happened my first day. When I..." I trail off and shake my head. He doesn't need a recap, he was there. "Thank you for that. You've been nothin' but nice to me. There's nothin' about you that would make me think anything bad about you," I say meaningfully, answering his original question. "Except that you're a guy," I add quietly.

Sam looks sad for a moment, but offers me a weak smile anyway. "I was just hoping we could be friends. _Just friends._" He covers his mouth and whispers conspiratorially, "no public fucking on the grass outside of parties. I promise Not even if you beg."

I smile, but it's a wistful smile, because I could never be Sam's friend, even if something in my bones really wishes otherwise. But I no longer believe that guys and girls can really be _just friends_, and I'm too attracted to him to even try. I could never fully trust him, not really, and I could never trust myself with him.

"Why would you even want to be my friend?" I ask. Because really, if I were him I'd have fled screaming in the opposite direction.

He considers me a moment. "I don't know, Ror, you just seem... _real._" He shrugs. Something about the way he says "Ror" reminds me of Cam, and the memory of our friendship cuts me so deeply I wince.

"I wish I could be your friend, Sam," I murmur.

His eyes are full of some unfathomable emotion, and I wonder how this conversation has grown so intimate. We barely know each other. When Sam speaks again his voice is so low it's practically a whisper. "Who hurt you, Rory?"

I tell him the truth, matching his tone - barely audible. "Everyone."
He looks back at me, bemused. In my peripheral I catch a girl stalking over to where we're standing. Belatedly I realize it's that girl - Queen Bee - Chelsea. Sam follows my gaze and notices her too, and I can't tell if he's relieved or disappointed by her arrival. But either way the spell is broken, and suddenly it feels like we're standing too close, so I take a step back.

"There you are!" Chelsea says to Sam, like she's been searching all over for him.
"Here I am," he agrees. He takes her cup and gulps down a healthy sip of beer.
"So I wanted to ask if you're coming Sunday?" Chelsea asks excitedly. It's like I'm not even here, which would be fine if we were with a group of people, but since it's just the three of us, her not acknowledging my existence is just beyond awkward. I'm invisible again.

"Coming...?" Sam's expression remains blank.
"To brunch, silly. Your mom didn't tell you?"
Sam groans like this is an old argument. "Come on, Chel-"
"Cap! Come on, it'll be fun," she whines.
Sam shoots her a skeptical look. "I think you and I have different ideas of what constitutes fun."
Chelsea glares at him a moment before changing tact and smiling again. "Your mom's coming. If you come I'm sure Bits will, too. You know how much she needs to get out, Cap-"
"Alright, Chel, fine, whatever," Sam cuts her off.
"I'll be good for-"
"Have you met Rory?" Sam interrupts again and I don't know if he's saving me from being ignored, or using me as an excuse for a subject change.
Chelsea turns, finally acknowledging that I do, in fact, exist. She looks me up and down before plastering on the fakest smile I have ever witnessed.

"No, I don't believe we've met. New girl, right?" Chelsea says through overly whitened, perfectly straight teeth framed by unnaturally glossy, red lips.
I just nod. She reminds me so much of Lacey with her false enthusiasm.
"So nice to meet you."
I don't say it back. I just say "thanks." Chelsea takes a step closer to Sam and casually slips a hand over his bicep. It's a possessive gesture and he doesn't stop her. Idly I wonder if Carl and Tina were right about their relationship - or lack thereof.
"So, how do you know Cap?" she asks. She angles her body so she's beside Sam, facing me - as if they're a united front - a unit- facing off against me - the outsider. I doubt he notices, but she's making a point, and I read it loud and clear.
"I, uh, don't really," I murmur, because it's true. I don't know Sam, and I have no intention of battling Miss Possessive over a boy I can't even be friends with, and I'm a little surprised when his brow furrows considering I've just told him as much. "Um, excuse me." I spot Carl with Tina over on the deck, and head straight for them without turning back, leaving Chelsea and Sam to their private conversation.
Sam doesn't seek me out again, and other than accidentally locking eyes with him once later in the evening for barely a moment, I have no other interaction with him. I don't know why he unnerves me. And not in the way other people unnervme. Other guys. There's no fear. But there's something.
I ask Carl to drive me home around eleven and go right to bed. I pray for a dreamless slumber, but I know instead it will be fitful and riddled with nightmares. it always is.

****

The weekend is slow and uneventful. I mostly read and hang out with my mom. On Sunday afternoon I turn down a shopping trip with Carl in favor of therapy. I can't reschedule. I've tried that before as an excuse to avoid the sessions altogether, and they know my maneuvers by now. Though lately I've been more receptive of Dr. Schall, whom my doctor down in Florida referred, I've only been in New York a few weeks and we don't really trust each other just yet. Instead, I show up to my appointment and make arrangements to move my sessions to Thursday evenings so my weekends can be free to spend time with my new friends. Dr. Schall is happy to oblige me, pleased that I'm working my way back into social situations. The road back to normal. Even though Dr. Schall hates that expression. He doesn't believe in normal and he hates when I use the word.
I spend the rest of my Sunday studying calculus and realize I'm even further behind than I thought. Damn I hate calculus.

The next day I ask Mr. Frank about extra help, and he points disinterestedly to the student tutoring sign-up sheet tacked to the bulletin board. I quickly add my name to the list of "tutorees" and hurry off to my next class. When I head out to the parking lot to meet the girls for lunch, Tina and Carl are talking to Andrew and Tuck. Their
pack is close by. I see Sam, and he sees me, but he doesn't approach me, doesn't say "hi". I remind myself I told him we couldn't be friends, but for some reason his going out of his way to ignore me stings.

The rest of the week goes by like the last, except Sam still doesn't acknowledge me. When I run into him in the student lot again, I venture a greeting. It's no more than a murmured hello, but he just offers a quick, forced smile, and continues to ignore me.

I try not to sneak glances his way, but it's hard. He's really insanely attractive. I also try not to take offense to the fact that he no longer seems to notice I'm alive, and remind myself that this is want I wanted. To be invisible.

But I can't not notice how much Chelsea clings to him whenever possible, and though he doesn't seem to flirt with her or show her anything other than friendly affection, he certainly doesn't push her away. I have no right to be bothered by this, and yet...

It's finally Friday again, and while we eat lunch at the diner, Tina invites us to Andrew's again for a party tonight. Apparently his parents go away most weekends. My parents used to go away every other weekend - taking turns with my dad's brother to stay with their mother, my Nanna Joyce, since the state didn't cover weekend help and her dementia made it impossible to leave her alone. I always stayed with Cam on those weekends, until last year when I stayed at the Forbes'. It wasn't my choice. My boyfriend didn't want me staying with another man, even if things were never like that with Cam and me. We did sleep in bed together back when we were kids, but once we were eleven or so Cam started sleeping in a sleeping bag on the floor, giving me the bed. In many ways that bed - that room - it felt more like home to me than my own. My heart is crushed by a wave of regret, and I wince, excusing myself to the bathroom to blink back the sudden rush of tears and count backwards from ten. Three times.

But it works, I calm.

I find myself wondering about Sam and Chelsea's relationship, even though it's in no way my business. It's obvious - at least to me - that she wants more than their friendship. Much more. I think about how unenthusiastic he was about brunch with their families. Or his mom and whoever the hell "Bits" is. It sounds like a freaking pet's name or something.

When I return to our table, Carl is talking about some incident at last week's party that I must have missed. Apparently some girl named Sarah, one of Chelsea's minions, made a move on Sam by making some drunken suggestive offer. He just laughed her off, but Chelsea was not amused. By Monday, rumors were swirling about Sarah and one especially nasty sexually transmitted disease. Carl hedges there's no doubt as to the rumors' source.

"What is it with them?" I ask, unable to rein in my curiosity any longer. "Chelsea and Sam, I mean. You said he wasn't interested in her, but she clearly seems to have some claim on him, and their families know each other, right?"

"She wishes she had a claim on him," Tina laughs. "But I mean, yeah they're friends. They've always been friends. Cap's mom is tight with Chelsea's parents."

"Just his mom?" I ask.

"Yeah, his dad left when we were in middle school. They're divorced," Carl murmurs.

"Who is, uh, Bits?" Obviously it's someone Sam cares about if his - or her - needing to get out was enough to get Sam to agree to a brunch he was otherwise less than eager to attend.

Tina shrugs. "No idea. Sounds like a cat?"

"No, Bits is Beth. Cap calls her Bits. It's like a childhood nickname or something," Carl explains.

"Oh, right," Tina replies, nodding with some kind of understanding.

I look back and forth between the two of them. "And Beth is...?"

"Cap's kid sister."

"Oh. I didn't know Sam had a sister. But then, why would I? We're not even friends. "Does she go to school with us?" I ask.

Carl shakes her head. "Not anymore. She's a sophomore, but she's homeschooled now."

Why would she be home schooled? And why am I so pathetically interested in this guy? I don't even freaking know him. I want to ask more questions, but the subject has already shifted to Tina and Andrew and how excited she is to stay over his place this weekend while his parents are away. Apparently they've been sleeping together for a while, but haven't actually slept together. They've had plenty of sex, but she's always gone home. It seems the physical side of their relationship preceded the emotional side, but now they're catching up. Tina, it would appear, is in love. I offer a cursory smile.

I could not feel more disconnected from the conversation. How common can finding actual true love in high school really be? If there even is such a thing. I never loved my ex, but that didn't stop me from thinking I might, and the one person I was sure I really did love, was gone before I even had a chance to explore it. Sometimes I like to think it would have worked out. Others, my new cynical self is too quick to shoot down those kinds of sentimental fantasies. It can't change anything anyway, what's done is done. The truth is my only examples of "love"
are pitiful excuses for the concept. My parents' romance obviously didn't last. Even before I caused their divorce, they never matched the people described in the college love story I was told.

I wonder if Tina is sleeping with Andrew because she thinks she's supposed to. The way she talks about sex, it would seem like she really enjoys it. I wonder if she makes it sound that way because she thinks she's supposed to. If she says she loves him because she wants it to be true. In public they're always affectionate, and she does appear happy. But I know better than anyone, just because they seem like some golden couple, doesn't mean it's true. The way they act in public probably has little to do with what happens behind closed doors.

Or maybe they really are in love and she really does enjoy their sex life. What would I know about it anyway? I used to think I was just a late bloomer, but then I was convinced there was always something wrong with me. I'd said I just wasn't ready, but I was seventeen at the time, and everyone else was ready. By the time I had my first experience with actual desire, it was overshadowed by all the bad, and then gone in the blink of an eye.

Maybe that's why Sam unnerves me so much. Because he's not only attractive - Robin was attractive, Cam was attractive - but Sam, I'm attracted to him. I'm starting to think that maybe I was right the first time around - that I just wasn't ready. That I should have just trusted myself. I try to think of things I could have done differently, what I could have changed. I play this game all too often, but Dr. Schall says it's a waste of time. He says my focus should be on the future - on future relationships. But what kind of relationship could I possibly have now? I can't even allow someone to invite me to go for a walk without accusing them of trying to seduce me into God even knows what. And who would want that? Yeah, some future I have to look forward to.
The school week passes like normal, except I notice Robin notice me. I ride to school with Cam as always, and wait for him after football practice. Lacey convinced me to try out for cheerleading a few weeks ago, and it was easy enough to make the squad since I've always been naturally athletic. Our practice ends only thirty or so minutes before the football players get out, so I sit on the bleachers doing homework while Cam showers and changes every day.

Other than a nod in the hallway or a passing smile - though that's a great deal more than I've ever gotten before - Robin doesn't acknowledge that he's asked me out, and that we have plans on Friday. Cam asks me a few times if I'm sure I want to go and assures me that I could still change my mind, but I don't want to.

On Friday, the day slips by at a snail's pace. There's no game today, just a practice, so the football players aren't wearing their jerseys to class, but the cheerleaders have to wear our uniforms every Friday, whether there's a game or not. Next week will be the first away game, and in three weeks is homecoming. Though there will be a vote, there's no doubt that Robin and Maddie will be King and Queen and Cam and either Lacey or Missy will likely be Junior Prince and Princess. Other than teasing Cam about it, I'd never been interested in homecoming court, but now that I'm a cheerleader I'll at least have to ride in the parade and wear my uniform to the dance I've never even bothered attending before.

At lunch I'm chatting with the girls when Cam and our friend, Chip, join our table in the cafeteria. Lacey automatically scoots over to make room, knowing Cam will sit next to me and this way he'll have to sit next to her, too. Chip sits on my other side, between me and Emmers, whose shy smile tells me she's pleased with the arrangement. I've noticed her little crush before, but Chip remains predictably clueless. He slides his arm around the back of my chair, his other hand finding the bare skin of my knee. I roll my eyes, still so unaccustomed to my friends treating me like sexual prey. Chip and I have been friends since little league.

"Damn, Rory, I don't think I've ever seen you in a skirt outside a' church. I like it." He smirks with suggestive approval.

I swat his hand off my knee just as Cam, from my opposite side, swings Chip's arm from the back of my chair, nearly toppling Chip's over.

"Back off, Chip, she's your friend," Cam reminds him with a glare that would intimidate a prize fighter. I squeeze Cam's broad shoulder to call him off. Chip is just being Chip - he doesn't know any better.

"It's fine, Cam. I can handle myself." I turn back to Chip, "Franklin Chipley, the next time your hand finds its way to my leg, it will be returned minus at least one finger," I warn through a overly saccharine smile.

Chip splays his palms forward in surrender. "Point taken, Jeez," he concedes. "But you shouldn't prance around in short little skirts with legs like that. How's a man to help himself?"

"Man?" I raise my brows skeptically.

Chip play-punches me in the arm, and just like that I'm back to being one of the guys.

"And it's my uniform," I grumble. He knows I'm not used to wearing short skirts like this any more than he's used to seeing me in them.

"Whatever, Rory girl," he says, adopting Cam's nickname for me, next time wear those legging things underneath," he suggests.

"It's eighty degrees!"

Cam reinsets himself and it's like he hasn't noticed the jest in the exchange, though I'm not sure how it could've been missed. "She'll wear what she likes, and you'll keep your hands to yourself," Cam's voice is quiet, but full of warning.

"Whatever dude, I was kidding... sorta. Relax!"

Cam, placated, goes back to eating his sandwich, and out of the corner of my eye, I see Lacey practically swoon as she always does at Cam's protective streak. And, as always, I wish it was intended for her benefit and not mine. I can handle myself. Certainly with Chip anyway.

****
Practice always ends early on Fridays when there's no game. Cam and I make our way to his car in the student lot, and I stop in my tracks when I notice the white rose tucked under the windshield wiper on the passenger side. Cam sighs. I look at him, bemused, but he just shrugs.

"Well it ain't for me," he mutters.

I glance around and spot Robin standing beside his car across the lot, staring at me. He smiles, winks, folds himself into the driver's seat, and drives off. My blush rises to my cheeks, spreading downward with a vengeance.

"Jeez. He's pullin' out all the stops, i'nt he?" I tease. I pick up the rose and realize there's a note tucked under it:

See you at 7, Sweetheart. Can't wait.

I try to hide my smile.

"Yeah, well he should buy me a whole damn bouquet since I'm the only reason he's scorin' any touchdowns this season."

****

I've never owned many dresses, but I did purchase a few on shopping trips with Lacey this summer. I choose a short, flouncy, red dress with a fitted bodice and cap sleeves. I leave my hair loose, thankful my mother insisted on taking the time last year to teach me how to do my makeup. Lacey's tutelage left me with blue shadow and bright pink cheeks - so not me. My perpetual blushing around Robin requires no cosmetic assistance, and I feel much more comfortable in just a little earth toned shadow and mascara paired with a sheer lip gloss. I barely recognize myself in the mirror. I look like such a girl.

I can't believe I'm about to go on my first date and it's with none other than Robin Forbes. I feel as if I've stepped inside some modern fairytale. But I also feel like maybe they casted the wrong player. Like the whole thing is just one monumental misunderstanding. I have no idea how to act, what to say. He's going to kiss me - he said as much last week - and I haven't a clue how to kiss. Perhaps I should've taken Cam up on his offer to teach me years ago. Or maybe I should have listened to him and just declined this date in the first place. I text him.

I'm freaking. You around?

Yep.

His reply is not only instantaneous, but I can actually hear his laughter and look out my window to see if he's outside, but it's too dark to tell.

A knock sounds on my door and I swing it open to find Cam in his worn dark jeans and a fitted black tee shirt. He really is the epitome of tall, dark, and handsome - at least physically - right down to that perfect Florida tan. It's obvious why Lacey and half the girls in our grade are obsessed. He runs his hand through his overlong mahogany locks and I'm thrown for a second by how positively male he looks. Suddenly he's not my best buddy Cam, he's a hot guy, and I don't know where these wayward thoughts are coming from. I step back and gesture for him to enter, raising my eyebrows for an explanation for how he made it over so quickly.

We've communicated like this since we were kids. We don't always need words to have a conversation. Sometimes we can get through an entire exchange with only a few glances.

"I was downstairs," he shrugs. That means he was talking football with my dad. Dad's a fan of Cam's too. I pull him by the sleeve into my room so I can close the door. "Your dad was grillin' me about your date," he smirks.

Really? Though, I don't know why this surprises me. My father is only interested in my life when a Forbes is involved. I'm sure "grilling" is an exaggeration, but the thought that my dad might care about me or something I do gets my attention. The thought of him worrying after me positively melts me.

"What'd he say?" I ask. Because he's said nothing to me. Not one word.

Cam rolls his eyes. He gets along with my dad just fine, but I know Cam doesn't like the way my father's ignored me lately. Cam is the only one who knows how much I crave my father's affection, even if I put up a good front, even to him.

"He asked me if Forbes' intentions were honorable," he murmurs, but I can tell from his tone that there's more, and I look at him expectantly, knowing he won't lie to me, not even to spare my feelings. Cam sighs. "He wanted to know if Forbes might get serious about you or if he's just messin' around. I think he wants to know if he should get his hopes up at the chance of bein' future father-in-law to the great Robin Forbes." He speaks quickly, hating reporting anything that might hurt me, even though I just laugh it off like I always do. It's not as if I wasn't aware of the impetus for my father's sudden interest in my life.

"What'd you say?" I ask. I know Cam can detect the disappointment in my voice - there's no sense in trying to hide it from him.
He slings an arm around my shoulder. "I told him that if a guy like Forbes was gonna get serious about anybody, it'd be you Rory girl," he says meaningfully.

I turn to face him. "Do you really think that?" I don't think Cam would say something he didn't believe just to make me feel better, but I can't be sure. I know he doesn't lie to me, but I also know he'd do practically anything to keep me from being hurt, and this me-dating thing is new territory for the both of us.

"Is that what you want, Ror? To get serious with Forbes?" Cam's voice has grown quiet and I can't account for its intensity.

"I don't even really know him. I just know I don't want him to, you now, just be messin' around," I admit.

Cam offers me a half smile tinted with a hint of relief. "Look, I'm not in his head, but if he was just looking to get laid, he'd just keep doin' what he's been doin', right? He wouldn't be pursuing a good girl like you. I can't blame him though, you're beautiful, sweet... the kinda girl you marry. Not the kind you mess around with. He knows that."

I know Cam's sincere, but just because Cam believes it doesn't mean it's true for Robin.

"You're just sayin' that 'cause you love me," I grumble and flop dramatically down onto my bed.

Cam stares down at me a moment, seemingly bemused, before smiling the warm, familiar, best-friend smile he reserves just for me.

"Yeah, I'm sayin' that 'cause I love you," he agrees. "Anyway, why you freaking out, Rory girl?"

He sits down beside me.

"I don't know how to go on a date, Cam, you know that."

"There's no 'how' to it, Ror. You just go, be yourself, and have fun. Don't do anything you don't wanna do. Don't do anything you do wanna do if you think I don't want you doin' it."

I sit up. "So you mean, don't do what you usually do on a date."

Cam shakes his head. "I don't 'date', Ror. I don't give girls roses or say pretty things. But yeah, don't do what I usually do. He's looking at me meaningfully and waiting for me to call him out on his hypocrisy, which I normally would. But I don't, because I'm nowhere near ready to do any of those things anyway. Instead, I change the subject.

"Cam, he's gonna kiss me," I mutter shyly. Why am I suddenly shy with Cam? I've slept with him in his bed a hundred times for God's sake.

Cam scowls for a moment, but wipes it off quickly on an exhale. "Yeah, Ror, I imagine that he is," he concedes.

"I don't know how to kiss."

Cam gives me one of our conversational looks. He's asking me where I'm going with this.

"Will you teach me?"

"There's nothing to teach, Ror. You either let him or you don't. Do you want him to kiss you?"

"I think I do," I admit. "But I don't know what to do! I won't be any good at it, can't you show me?"

"Show you?! Rory girl, I think you've up and lost your damn mind." He shoots up from the bed and faces away from me. Not what I expected.

I get up and follow him. "But you know how to kiss - you've kissed tons of girls! And from what I hear you're pretty good at it. "I play to his ego.

"Pretty good?" he smirks wickedly. "Now I doubt that's the way you're new little girl friends described me."

He's right. According to Lacey he's incredible, and I can't help but let my gaze drift to his lips.

"Don't you look at me like that, Ror," he whispers.

I meet his eyes again. "Like what?"

He stares at me a moment, then shakes his head as if to clear it. "You'll be fine, Ror, I'm sure you'll be great. Don't worry about it. If it feels right, go with it, if it doesn't, then don't do it, okay?"

I stomp my foot like a four year old. "But you offered to teach me before! I didn't need it then. I need it now!" I argue.

Cam chuckles, and like always, the sound of his laugh banishes all of my tension. "We were thirteen! It's different now. I can't just kiss you, Ror."

"Of course you can," I whisper, and take a step forward.

He sucks in a sharp breath. He's conflicted, but I don't understand why. What's the big deal?

Cam retreats a step back and turns from me. I can't help but feel rejected, even though I know it's irrational.

"Cam?"

He faces me and takes my hand, sits on the edge of my bed, and pulls me so that I'm seated beside him. "Ror, I ain't gonna kiss you, okay? You know I'd do anything for you. Like you said, I love you. But your first kiss should be with someone you like that way, not your best friend."

"Ugh. Whatever. Thanks a lot, Cam."

He smiles wryly. "Anyway, it was one thing back when we were kids, before you got all hot and shit. You think I can kiss you sittin' here in your bedroom, with you wearin' that sexy little dress, and not get a-"
"Cameron Foster!" I stop him before he describes his theoretical erection, and we both crack up laughing. There was never anything strange or awkward about our friendship growing up, except when he first hit puberty and had little control over when he sported wood. For a good year, it was the source of endless teasing from my end, and now he's using it against me. Fair enough.

The doorbell rings and I jump up and look back at him for reassurance. "I look okay?"

He stands and takes my hand, rubbing soothing little circles into the back of it with his thumb. He always does this when I'm worrying about something. "You look beautiful, Rory girl. Too beautiful. You call me if you need me. I'll come get you. I mean it," he assures me.

"I know, Cam, thanks."

Cam nods toward my door, his expression telling me to stop stalling and to get going if I'm going to go. So I do, with him right on my heels.

****

Robin is standing in the front hall, talking to my dad about next week's football game. My dad gives me a kiss on the cheek and tells me to have a good time before excusing himself. I try to convince myself that the first ounce of affection my father has offered me in a year was not for Robin's benefit. Cam is still standing behind me on the bottom step and I shoot him a "get lost" look, but he just gives me one right back that tells me he isn't going anywhere. I turn back to Robin as he produces a bouquet of white roses, clearly the dozen from which the windshield rose came this afternoon. Heat rises to my cheeks as I quietly thank him. He greets Cam kind of coldly considering they're teammates and sort of friends, and Cam's response is equally icy.

"Remember what we talked about, Forbes," Cam mumbles, before giving me a kiss on the cheek and heading back toward the kitchen. To an outsider it would appear as if he was going to hang out in my house, but I know he's just taking the back door out to go back home. Our back doors are closer to one another than our front doors, and they're what we've always used since we were kids. I excuse myself briefly to put the flowers in water then rejoin Robin in the foyer.

He leads me out to his car and opens the passenger door for me, and pulls out of the driveway, heading toward town.

"You look real pretty, Rory," he says with a grin. "I like the dress."

I blush profusely and politely thank him.

"I made reservations at the club, if that's okay?"

"Sure," I reply. The country club. Wow. Our parents are all members, sure, but high school students having dinner there is kind of a big deal. I'd have heard about it if he'd brought dates there before. It occurs to me that he's actually trying to impress me, and I can't help but smile to myself.

"What's that pretty little smile for?" he asks, and I chew my bottom lip to force it away.

"Nothin'. I just didn't realize you took dates to the club for dinner is all," I admit.

Now it's his turn to smile. "I don't, sweetheart. But you're not just some date, are you?" I search for the jest in his tone, but he sounds so sincere.

"I'm not?"

"Course you're not." He doesn't elaborate, and I don't ask him to.

Robin pulls into the club's circular drive and waves off the valet who comes to open my door in order to do it himself. He places his hand in the small of my back to lead me inside, and I'm surprised by the way it makes me feel. I'm still nervous, but I feel special, like I matter. And the feeling is new to me. I like it.

"Hey, what did Cam mean? When he said to remember what y'all talked about?" I ask, recalling the curious exchange. It's not like Cam to keep something from me, especially a conversation that obviously concerned me.

Robin smiles, but it doesn't reach his eyes.

He leans into me like he's going to tell me a secret. "He meant for me to remember that if I hurt you, he'll kill me."

My jaw drops. Cam said what?

Robin sees my shock and chuckles. "He cares about you, sweetheart. You're not just the prettiest girl in this town, but you're innocent - like an angel. He's worried I'll take advantage. If I was him, I'd 'a been worried too. But I told him that you're special, and that I'm not stupid enough not to know it."

It's a sweet thing to say, and with his words, my nerves melt away. Robin smiles and takes my hand as the hostess leads us to a table overlooking the golf course.

Dinner is way more comfortable than I anticipated. Conversation flows naturally, and Robin tells me all about the team this year, about our opponents for next week's game and strategy. He talks about college scouts that'll be at the games and the recruiters that have been hounding him since last year. Robin explains that while it's polite to
entertain them all, his dad would never even consider him going anywhere other than UFL. I already knew that. It's where both our dads went for their undergraduate pre-law degrees.

"Where would you wanna go? I mean if you weren't already committed to Gainesville since birth," I ask.

He looks back at me, bemused. "Ya know, sweetheart, I think you may just be the first person to ever ask me that."

"Really?" I ask, and he smiles.

"Really. But I suppose it doesn't matter, does it? What about you? Your daddy sendin' you to Gainesville too or do you get a choice?"

I shrug. "I don't really know. When I was little he always talked about me going to Gainesville. At least for undergrad. But lately he doesn't really seem to care what I do. I've thought about goin' to New York. NYU. Like my mom. I don't think it'd matter to my dad either way now, but I suppose I'll end up at UFL." Just in case it might please him, I add silently.

Robin nods sympathetically. "I bet you're wrong, ya know. He cares. How could he not?"

I shrug again. I've often wondered the same thing myself lately. "Tonight's the first night in a long while he even seemed to give a damn what I was doin', and that's only 'cause I was goin' out with his favorite high school football star," I grumble, and then flush bright red when I realize I've just said that out loud.

Robin signals for the check. He reaches across the table for my hand, and his touch surprises me again. It's comforting. Sweet. "If that's true then he's a damn fool."

****

I find I'm disappointed when Robin pulls up to my house. I've been having such a good time, and I'm not ready for it to end quite yet. He opens my door, offering his hand to help me out.

He glances at my house and then back at me. "Ya know, this is the part where I kiss you goodnight, but I'm not sure I'm ready to let you go just yet," he echoes my own thoughts as he lightly strokes his fingers up and down my arm.

I swallow nervously.

"You think you, uh, wanna go for a walk around the block?"

I laugh. "Seriously?"

Robin shrugs, and if I'm not mistaken, he seems a little unsure of himself. I couldn't possibly make him nervous, could I?

"I like talkin' to you."

I smile. I like talking to him, too. He takes my smile as agreement and, holding my hand, leads me down the road, away from my house. There's only four houses on the block, including mine and Cam's. We pass them and come up to the entrance to the park I spent so many hours in as a child. I look down at our hands, fused together, and I'm struck by how tiny my hand looks in his. I'm not petite, for a girl anyway, but at six foot one, Robin dwarfs me. He's no taller than Cam, but for some reason, next to him, I feel every inch of his stature. Robin notices me looking at our hands and smiles, bringing them up to press his lips to my knuckles. It sends a shiver up my arm.

"Your hand looks real good tucked in mine, Rory," he murmurs. We stop walking and he turns and takes a small step so that he's right in front of me, my back up against the massive old oak Cam and I carved our names in as children. "I'm gonna kiss you now, sweetheart," he whispers, but waits. For what, I don't know. I think he's reading my reaction, but I meet his gaze, practically daring him to make good on his promise.

And he does.

Robin brushes his lips lightly against mine, and it's barely a kiss, but I feel the sweetness of it everywhere. He presses his mouth to mine and holds it there for a second before he moves his lips up and down, gently sucking my bottom lip between his. I reciprocate. I'm not even thinking about it, but I'm matching the movement of his lips as he continues moving his mouth over mine. It feels really nice. Different than I expected... sweeter. Then his tongue is there, softly licking between my lips, and I heed his silent request to open. He swipes his tongue into my mouth, slowly, but it's still his lips doing most of the work. They're wet and soft and I'm liking the way they make me feel. His hands are firmly planted on my waist, and, open, they span almost my entire stomach and back. His fingers move in rhythm with our mouths, but they stay in safe places, never moving too high, or too low.

I tentatively meet his tongue with my own, and we stay there like that for long minutes, exploring each other's mouths. I'm completely lost in the kiss, and practically of their own volition, my hands slide from where they're gripping his biceps up his broad shoulders and neck, until they're grasping at his hair, holding his mouth to mine.

Robin groans and pulls away, breathing hard, leaving me leaning back against the oak for support, gasping for air. His hands fall to his sides as he takes two purposeful steps back like he can't get away from me fast enough. I'm suddenly unsure of myself, surprised by the abrupt interruption to something I thought he was enjoying. Things
were going so well. Better than I ever even imagined. Familiar insecurity sweeps through me, but I've never been one to shy away from getting answers.

"Did I... do something wrong?" I ask hesitantly.
Robin is still catching his breath, and his expression morphs from intense to confused and then back again.

I blink at him. What the hell does that mean?
Robin sighs. "That was... amazing. You're amazing. But I don't wanna get carried away. And it'd sure be easy to get carried away when you kiss me like that."

If I wasn't still flushed from our heated kiss, I'd blush now. Robin's lips twist up into a smile, and I realize it's because I'm smiling. But too quickly, his smile fades and instead, he scowls. "Where'd you learn to kiss like that? Not from Foster, I hope."

I giggle, surprising myself. I've never been a giggly girl. I shake my head. "No, of course not!"

Robin sighs. "That was... amazing. You're amazing. But I don't wanna get carried away. And it'd sure be easy to get carried away when you kiss me like that."

I shake my head, grateful to Cam that I can do so without lying - only the case because he refused to teach me how to kiss earlier today. Robin narrows his eyes at me like he's trying to work out whether I'm being truthful. I look down at my ballet flats.
"No one's ever kissed me before," I admit in a timid whisper.
"Never?" Robin asks, incredulous, and I shake my head in confirmation. "Well how is that possible?"

I shrug, unsure if his question is rhetorical or not.
"Look at me, sweetheart," he demands, taking both my hands in his. "I'm your first kiss?"

I nod again.
"Well now I can't stop wondering if your second kiss will be as incredible as the first," he murmurs before once again covering my mouth with his.

It is.
He pulls away with a wide, triumphant grin. I'm sure it mirrors my own.
"Come on, we should get you home before your daddy starts to worry," he says and takes my hand to lead me back toward my house.
"He won't," I reply under my breath.

We get back to my driveway and I tell him I'm going to go around back since we never lock the back door and I never carry keys. Robin plants a chaste kiss on my lips and I smile.
"Look, sweetheart, I get that Foster is your buddy and all, but the next time I come pick you up to take you out, I ain't gonna take too kindly to another man comin' down from your bedroom with you, alright?"

I nod. It's not unreasonable, but I'm more focused on the fact that he said there will be a next time.
"Goodnight," I murmur.

Robin smiles wickedly and presses me against his car. He kisses me again, and pushes his tongue gently into my mouth before pulling away.
"I can't help myself, I sigh.
"Goodnight sweetheart."

I walk around the house and, before I round the corner, I spare a glance back to see him standing by his car door, waiting until I'm out of sight.
I sit down on the steps to my back porch, just needing a minute to myself, and listen to Robin's car drive off. Not five minutes later I hear another car pull up and wonder if Robin's returned for some reason. I creep to the side of the house and see it's just Missy dropping off Cam. She gets out of her car to say goodnight. Cam grabs her and kisses her, and it's totally unlike Robin. Cam's almost disinterested about it, and yet his hand goes straight to her breast, the other to her ass, and Missy just presses her undeniably impressive body further into him.
"Think we can hang out again tomorrow?" she asks - I can just make their voices out.
"Cam shakes his head. "Nah, I got plans." He offers her no further explanation.
"Oh yeah? With who?" She puts her hand on her hips, but Cam turns away from her to jog toward his back door.
"None of your damn business," he calls back to her, but he's smiling. That's Cam - he can say the rudest things to girls, but through that crooked smile of his, he can get away with anything. He turns toward my back porch instead of his and catches me snooping, though I don't even try to hide it.
"Hey there, Nancy Drew," he grins, slinging an arm around my shoulders as he walks me toward my door.
"Have fun with Missy?" I ask sweetly.
His smile shifts into a smirk. "Sure did." He swings my back door open, grabs a box of Oreos from my kitchen pantry, and follows me quietly up the steps to my bedroom.

I take a makeup remover wipe and start removing my mascara. "Do you ever take her out or you just hook up?" I ask.

"Her?" Cam stuffs a cookie into his mouth whole.

"Yeah, her. Missy. Lacey, whoever." I watch Cam through my vanity mirror. He's had a few drinks tonight, but not too much - I can tell by the slight gloss of his eyes, but they remain in focus.

"Now what would be the point of that?" he asks, and I roll my eyes. "So tell me about your date. He act like a gentleman?" Cam's voice only thinly veils the inherent threat in the question, and I roll my eyes again. "Ror, I mean it. He behave?"

Makeup free, I join him on the bed. "I can't believe you threatened him!"

Cam doesn't skip a beat. "Of course I threatened him," he deadpans.

I sigh. "He was a perfect gentleman, Cam."
Friday has dragged on, but I'm not exactly looking forward to tonight. Instead of last week's rager, Andrew's party will be a smaller get-together. Only about thirty or so seniors, according to Tina - their "friends". I tried to make an excuse not to go, but Carl gave me her pouty face, and Dr. Schall had given me such approval when I mentioned it during our session yesterday, and God knows how desperate I am for male approval.

But it's a great deal easier to remain invisible at a party of a hundred than at a "small get-together".

Anyway, the weekend won't start just yet. Now that the last bell of the day has rung, I head back to room 313 to see who's been assigned as my student tutor for calculus for the next month. The tutors and tutees will meet up now and make arrangements for our sessions going forward, and since we have a quiz on Monday, I'm hoping my tutor will have some time right now to go over a few things with me.

There are a few students lingering in front of the door to the classroom, and as I approach I can see the list is tacked to it. I also can't help but notice Sam leaning against the adjacent wall of lockers with his arms crossed, waiting. I hastily look away, though I'm almost positive he was looking at me out of the corner of his eye.

"You're mine," he murmurs as I pass him.

His words make me freeze. I swallow anxiously and turn to him before I even reach the list. Those words - they are a trigger, and as I feel my heart rate accelerate, I force myself to take even breaths.

Those words.

But in Sam's voice, for some inexplicable reason, they don't threaten me.

"Excuse me?" I say tremulously.

He cocks an eyebrow at me, like he's sizing me up.

I will not freak out, I will not freak out.

"You're my tutoree." I exhale. "Oh."

Damn it. This isn't going to work. For one, how the hell am I supposed to concentrate on calculus with those midnight blues and those full pink lips just inches from my face? Not to mention that chiseled jaw...

All of that is beside the point, of course, since Sam has made it pretty clear he wants nothing to do with me. He hasn't said a word to me all week and it's obvious that since our interaction at last week's party, he's realized that there is nothing appealing about a friendship with a girl who has panic attacks, snaps at people, and slaps them for no apparent reason. Truthfully, I don't blame him.

He smirks at me and reveals a perfect dimple I haven't noticed before. I force myself to gather my wits before I start drooling.

"I'll, uh, see if someone will switch," I offer.

I'm surprised by Sam's resulting scowl. "Why?" he asks. From his tone, it would seem I've offended him. Again.

I shrug. "Um... I don't know, I didn't think you'd want to, you know, tutor me." I tuck my hair behind my ear and look down. This is awkward. Everything about me is awkward.

"And why wouldn't I want to tutor you, Rory?" His question is an earnest one and I blink back at him, confused.

"Well, you've been ignoring me, so I just figured..." I trail off. He's looking at me like my words are irritating him. I'm trying to give him an out from doing something I'm sure he doesn't want to do, so why that would bug him, I can't imagine.

"You can't be serious."

When I just continue to blink at him he continues.

"Rory I haven't been ignoring you, I just backed off because I thought that's what you wanted."

"What I wanted?"

"Well you did say we couldn't be friends. And I thought... I don't know, I thought we were becoming friends anyway, at Andrew's party last week, but then you told Chelsea you didn't even know me. If anything, you're the one blowing me off." He shrugs. "It seems like you have a lot on your plate, I didn't think adding a stalker who couldn't take a hint would be very expedient, so I backed off."

You seem like you have a lot on your plate. It's his nice way of saying I'm batshit crazy.
But damn, he was trying to be respectful by giving up on this friends thing. And I've been stressing about it, though I didn't want to admit it to myself. God, I just can't get it together - first I ask him to leave me alone, then I'm upset when he does. I suppose the concept of a man respecting my wishes, taking me at my word... these are completely novel to me. And how fucked up is that?

"Oh," I whisper.
"I'm not ignoring you," he repeats.
I can't help my shy smile, and I don't even know where it's come from. I never smile. Not unless it's forced.
"So can I tutor you? I could really use the extra credit."
I snort. "Please," I say sarcastically, "you don't need any extra credit in calc." I've seen his test scores. He knows his shit.

"I do, actually. My tests are fine, but Mr. Frank and I don't exactly see eye to eye on homework. You see, I don't like to waste my time doing it since I know the coursework, and Mr. Frank won't give me my A if I don't student tutor to make up for not turning any of it in last semester."
"And God forbid you were to earn a B," I tease.
He narrows his eyes at me and smirks again. "God forbid," he agrees.
"Well I guess I can't very well be responsible for letting you mar your perfect academic record," I shrug, wondering where I've pulled this wit out from.

Sam grins.
"Do you think you could help me before Monday's quiz? I'm totally lost," I admit.
"Sure, how's right now?"
"Perfect."
Sam starts walking down the hall and I follow.
"Should we go to your house?" he asks.
I startle, though I try to hide it. "My mom's not home," I reply.
He furrows his brow. God, I wish he wouldn't do that, I don't know why but it's just adorable when he does it. When I realize he's confused, I elaborate. "I, um, I'm not allowed to have guys over when I'm alone," I lie. In fact, my mother and I have never discussed this - there hasn't been a need since I have no plans to put myself in such a position any time soon. Though, I'm sure she'd agree this rule is a good idea.

Sam looks skeptical. Obviously this isn't exactly par for the course for a normal eighteen year old, but he should already know that that isn't what I am. "What about your dad?" he asks. We're still walking, and I know he's glanced over at me, but I just continue to look down so he doesn't see how affected I am by his seemingly innocuous line of questioning.

"No Dad," I murmur as casually as I can manage.
"Oh. I'm sorry," he offers, but I shake my head.
Now I look at him. "Don't be. We're better off without him." I don't know why I give him this personal tidbit, but I do.

Sam nods. "Yeah, I can understand that." Something in his eyes tells me he really does understand it in some profound way. Vaguely I remember hearing something about his father having left his family when Sam was in middle school, and I wonder if there's more to that story, but I don't pry. "Anyway, we can go to my house," he offers.

I stop walking. "I, uh, can't," I murmur. I don't elaborate, and I inwardly curse my life that I can't even make plans to study without complications from my fucked up past.
"My mom's home. My sister too," he assures me.
It's nice of him to play to my issues, but the truth is it doesn't help. Even with his family in the house, it doesn't mean he couldn't get me alone, and if he did, I would panic. No question. "What time's the school library open until?" I ask.
"Seven, I think."

****

There are a few other students studying or doing coursework. The school librarian, Ms. Pitser, is sitting quietly at her post at the reference desk. I have to really rally my focus not to be distracted by Sam's looks, but the extra focus actually works. The way Sam explains the formulas in his deep, gravelly timbre somehow makes more sense than when Mr. Frank drones on and on in first period every day.

He has me grasping the concepts in no time, and the way he smiles at me when I get a problem right - like he's proud of me - it's an effective incentive. In just over ninety minutes he declares me ready for Monday's quiz, and by the time we're heading out of the library I'm feeling pretty self-satisfied.
The more we chat, the more it becomes clear that regardless of what I've said, we are becoming friends. There's a strange kind of comfort, a rare connection I seem to share with Sam. I realize how unlikely it is to find, and decide that maybe I should give him a chance. After all, it's not like I'm trying to replace Cam.

"So, why doesn't your sister go here?" I ask, braving a question I've been wondering about.
Sam hesitates. "She used to, but... she's homeschooled now," he shrugs.
"Why?" I blurt without thinking. I think my eyes widen with surprise at my own invasiveness.
Sam slips me a thoughtful glance. "That's kind of personal, Rory. No offense, but you're the one who doesn't want to be friends," he replies, not unkindly, and even half-smiles to soften the blow.
I frown. He's right. I stop walking and he follows suit.
"Yeah... um, so I'm really sorry about that. Actually, I think I'm probably sorry about almost everything I've said to you since we met," I let out a brief ironic laugh at my own expense. "Look, I kinda had a rough year, and I'm still kinda dealin' with things. It's not easy for me, even just this friends thing." I gesture between us. I'm inwardly cringing over how much I've revealed, by how pathetic I sound. But this is me, I am pathetic.
Sam surprises me with his grin. "Well being honest is a pretty good start." His fingers twitch once, as if he wants to touch me, but thankfully he doesn't.
Vaguely I think I might not actually panic if he did. "You know, that friends offer is still on the table. Anytime you're ready, okay?"
I smile, I can't help it. I don't respond directly to his offer. Instead I say, "I was homeschooled for a while." If asking about his sister's being homeschooled was personal, then I hope he understands that my confiding this is an offer of friendship. It's the best I can do right now. "When we moved here, my dad didn't come with us. My mom needed to work, so I had to, you know, come here," I explain. I was terrified to go back to any school, let alone a public school. But I was comforted by the fact that no one here would know me, and I didn't want to make it harder for my mom, who after years of what was basically volunteer work, now has to work long hours at a private firm to keep us afloat.
Sam starts walking again and I fall in line beside him.
"You're from Florida, right?" he asks.
"Yeah."
"We're all going down to Miami for spring break. The seniors go every year, it's kind of tradition."
"Not that part of Florida," I murmur.
Sam sucks in a deep, settling breath. "Beth, my sister, she went through a bad breakup last year. She's doing fine now, but for a while... anyway, she just fell behind a little, and it's easier for her to catch up at home with private tutors, which is why I'm so ahead in calc," he explains.
 "Oh." A bad breakup. Maybe I can use that to describe my year last year. It doesn't sound so bad.
"So, you coming to Andrew's tonight?" Sam asks.
I nod as we approach the juncture where the old and new parts of the building meet. It's also where I exit the building to avoid passing by the locker rooms "I, uh, go out this way," I say.
He furrows his brow. "That's the faculty lot. The student lot is this way," he nods further down the hall.
"Yeah, I know. I just, um, walk around from here," I explain, explaining very little.
Sam looks warily at the blackness beyond the windows. "Why would you do that? I mean, I know it's not too late, but it is dark..."
He's right, and suddenly I'm stuck having to choose between walking the perimeter of a nearly empty building in the dark and walking through an equally empty hallway, alone with a guy, past the locker rooms. 
Fuck. I swallow audibly, looking dubiously between my two options, both of them so disconcerting that my pulse accelerates exponentially. But I know there's no way I'm walking past those locker rooms, not when the hallway is all but deserted, and definitely not with a boy. I take a deep breath and turn to Sam.
"So, look, you saw me have that panic attack my first day..."
I wait for him to acknowledge this with a nod.
"So I have these triggers. I know it's weird."
"It's not weird," he cuts me off, and I blink at him for a moment.
"Well it's not normal," I counter.
He doesn't make any sign of agreement, but he doesn't argue either. "So, triggers?" he prompts.
"Um, yeah... I just really don't want to walk past the locker rooms if I don't have to. So much so that I hide in the bathroom next to the cafeteria to change for phys ed every other day."
"Okay," he replies - no judgment. "I'll walk you," he offers, and starts out the main exit, but stops when he realizes I haven't moved. He looks at me inquisitively.
I take another deep breath. "So if we're gonna do this - this friends thing - I need you to understand somethin'."
He nods to urge me on.
"Some of these... triggers... Look, I can't walk out there with you," I gesture out the doors. "Not alone. It's not personal, okay? It's got nothin' to do with you. I really don't wanna offend you. Like I've said before, you've been nothin' but nice to me." I'm rambling, my nerves betraying my otherwise carefully hidden accent, and I'm not sure if I'm making any sense.

"Okay, Rory. I get it," he says.

"You do?" I ask, incredulous.

Sam nods. "I do. How about we make a deal? When we're approaching a situation that makes you uncomfortable, you just tell me, okay? And I won't get offended and I won't judge. We can even have a safe word," he offers.

I laugh. "A safe word? What is this, BDSM?" I joke.

He chuckles. "Hey, if you want me to restrain you, just tell me, Ror."


"See... It works," he says tentatively, and I relax, which he surely notices. "But you have to pick an actual word, not just 'safe word'."

"How about calculus?" I suggest.

Sam chuckles again and it unnerves me how much I enjoy the sound. "Calculus it is," he agrees. He peeks out the dark glass doors again. "So we have a little dilemma. I can't walk you to your car, but I can't let you walk around the back of the building in the dark alone either," he murmurs contemplatively.

I want to argue that I'll be fine alone, but I'm not sure I will. I surreptitiously feel around to the pocket of my bag for my pill bottle.

"Here, give me your keys. I'll bring your car around front."

I want to argue that he doesn't have to do that, but I don't. Instead, I wordlessly hand over my keys.

"Stay here," he says, and turns to head in his original direction.

"It's the silver jeep!" I call out, but he waves me off, as if he already knows what I've done. Of course it's probably the only car left in the student lot besides his own, so it shouldn't be too difficult to deduce, especially with his math skills.

The hall is mostly empty, save a few faculty members passing by; they scarcely notice me. It's barely minutes later when Sam pulls my car around, and I thank him. It's on the tip of my tongue to offer to drive him back to the student lot, but I can't bring myself to do it. I'm not sure I can be alone in a car with him. In fact, I know I can't. So I watch silently as he jogs back into the building and cuts through back to his own car.

****

It's only a few hours later that I arrive at Andrew's house with Carl. Tina is already here. Chelsea has started a game of "Never have I ever" where someone says something they have never done, and the rest of the group must drink if they have. I sit holding my cup of beer, surprised how open people are being about such personal experiences.

Sam doesn't play. He stands in the corner with a few of his friends, chatting and sipping his drink.

"Never have I ever... had sex in water," a girl named Sandy shouts.

"Fresh or salt?" Andrew asks and Tina playfully punches his arm.

"What does it matter?! Either, both!" Sandy replies in her drunken excitement and a few people sip their drink, including both Andrew and Tina.

I shoot out of my seat and murmur to Carl that I need some fresh air. Barely a moment later, I'm through the back door where a girl I think is named Lisa is smoking a cigarette.

"Can I bum one?" I ask. I don't want to smoke, and I rarely do it, but the truth is, I find cigarettes calming. She hands one over as she finishes her own and heads back inside and I'm grateful to be alone.

I sit on one of the steps that lead from the back door to the patio and inhale long and hard, allowing the nicotine to relax my nerves. I remind myself that smoking is bad. Lung cancer, emphysema, heart disease. I've silently repeated this mantra again and again on the rare occasions I've smoked, but it doesn't stop me from sucking the thing down to the filter any more than it has the last time or the time before that.

"So that sex on school property comment sure sent you running away fast," an unfamiliar male voice slurs suggestively.

My pulse races as I turn around to see Dave leaning back against the wall of the house, sipping his beer.

"Just needed some air," I choke out.
He smirks. "So you haven't done it at school yet? You know, I'd be happy to help you remedy that." I don't know if he's teasing or hitting on me, and I don't care.

"Not. Interested," I grit out through my clenched jaw.

"Ah, a good girl. Well I don't usually do the girlfriend thing, but you know, I think I'd be willing to give it a try for a chance at a pretty little thing like-"

"Back off, Dave," Sam's low voice murmurs.

I turn. I didn't hear him come outside, and my hands are trembling, all my energy concentrated on counting backwards and taking deep breaths.

I'm relieved not to be alone with Dave, but now I'm alone with two guys. I remind myself that there's a party, or get-together anyway, just inside. I remind myself that Sam is my friend. That he's just defended me.

I turn away and silently count backwards again.

"I'm just getting to know the new girl, Cap," Dave slurs lightheartedly.

"Just leave her alone," Sam says quietly, and I peek over at them.

"Oh, sorry man. She yours?" Dave asks.

_Why are they talking about me like I'm not even here?_ I jump up, suddenly angry. "I ain't his! I ain't anyone's!"

I shout, the southern accent I've worked so hard to suppress since I moved here flooding out unbidden.

Dave raises his eyebrows, surprised by my outburst, but Sam _appears_ to be trying to stifle a smile. Dave looks to Sam, who just shrugs.

"You heard her, she's her own woman. Now back off."

Dave shrugs, and heads back inside without another word.

I almost thank Sam for standing up for me, but my gratitude dies in my mouth. Instead, I just sit back down on my step.

"You okay?" Sam asks softly.

"Yeah." I peek up at him. He seems conflicted.

"You, uh, want me to leave you alone?" he asks. He knows I'm afraid of being alone with him, but for some reason, right now, I'm not. Maybe it's knowing that there's a crowd of people just on the other side of the door.

I shake my head.

"Can I sit?" he asks, nodding at the step I've claimed.

I laugh. He's asking my permission to sit outside at a party at his own friend's house. "Sure, if you want," I shrug, and he folds his long frame to sit on the opposite end of the step, facing me. "Your friends sure are somethin'," I mutter.

"Dave has a, uh, special sense of humor, but he's just flirting. You don't need to worry about him," he offers. I don't reply. Sam sighs. "They're not gonna stop, you know. You're the shiny, pretty, new girl, and they're all interested."

"Great," I say sarcastically, but inwardly I'm dwelling on the fact that Sam just called me _pretty_, and I'm surprised it actually pleases me.

"It might help if they knew your deal. I mean, after last week I mentioned that you're not looking for a hookup, but, you know... they're guys, and you're hot."

I don't point out that Sam, too, is a guy, or ask why he's not included in the group he's mentioning. I do, however, blush at the fact that he's now called me _hot_, and for some reason - maybe because we've already discussed just being friends - this doesn't bother me, either. In fact, it just about the opposite of bothers me.

"What do you mean my _deal?_" I ask, and he shrugs again.

"Like if you're seeing anyone, or if you have a boyfriend back home," he murmurs.

"Would it help if I did?"

Sam chuckles. "Dave would probably just see it as a challenge."

"I don't have anyone back home."

Sam frowns. "You must have friends," he hedges, but I shake my head.

I look down, staring at the fingers I twist in my lap. I really don't. In fact, next to Carl and Tina, Sam - who I've only just accepted as a friend a matter of hours ago - is my closest friend. I don't know why I've chosen to confide this; frankly it's very embarrassing.

There's a long pause, but for some reason it isn't awkward. At least not for me. "You never said why you were homeschooled," Sam observes.

No, he's right, I didn't. "Same as your sister. Bad breakup," I murmur, stealing Beth's excuse. It's not really a lie, just not nearly the whole story. When I peek over at Sam, he looks distressed, and I blink at him, wondering what I've said wrong.

He rakes his fingers roughly through his hair as if deciding something. "Rory, my sister didn't just have bad breakup."

He stares at me meaningfully, and somehow I know whatever he's about to confide - it's momentous.
"She's been having a tough time for a while now. She was just a kid when my dad left, and this guy she was seeing was older, he graduated last year. When he dumped her she... kind of lost it."

I don't break eye contact, I'm stunned by how open he's being right now, and I want to be worthy of his confidence.

"She took a bunch of pills last summer. She almost died..." His eyes close. "She did it on purpose," he whispers.

I blink at him for a moment. He stares intently down at me, searching my eyes for something unfathomable. I don't know what he finds, but it isn't pity, and it isn't judgment. The least I can do is return that gift. "That must have been tough on you," I say when I finally find my voice.

It isn't the response Sam expected, and he lets out a short, ironic laugh. "It was tougher on her."

I reach over and place my hand on his arm before I even realize I've moved. He's surprised by my touch, that much is obvious, but he doesn't pull away. "Still, you obviously care about her. It must've been hard on you, too."

We sit there for several moments, eyes locked, silent, until finally, Sam sighs. "Yeah," is all he says.

I pull my arm back and start yanking on a loose thread from my oversized sweater.

"So, a bad breakup, huh?" he prompts.

"Who?" I shake my head. "The guy who broke up with you."

"You introduced yourself to me as 'Sam'." His brow furrows, and again, I can't help but think of how adorable he looks when he does that. "Did I?"

I nod. "I can call you 'Cap', if you prefer," I offer, but he shakes his head.

"Sam it is, then."

He smiles. "You know, your accent comes out when you get mad."

"I know."

"I like it. It's... cute."

"Well, kind sir, I'm glad you found it entertainin'," I joke, exaggerating my accent for his benefit, and he lets out a loud, genuine chuckle. It's positively musical - a melody of warmth and light - and I do. I like it a lot."

We rejoin the party when Andrew comes to retrieve Sam for his beer pong partner, and after confirming that Carl can get a ride home with Tuck, I decide to head home, thankful that I drove myself and haven't drunk anything.
CHAPTER SEVEN
Homecoming, Last year

It's crazy how much has changed in a year. I spent last year's homecoming teasing Cam about being Sophomore prince, and making up excuses why I couldn't go to the dance. Now, I'm waiting for Robin to pick me up, and my dad is actually giving me the time of day.

I run my hands down the short skirt of my navy blue dress for the hundredth time, the material so alien to a girl more accustomed to cotton and denim than fancy silks. My brunette hair still has some faint strawberry blonde highlights, courtesy of the never-quit-departed summer sun, making the effect a pretty auburn. Pretty. It's not something I'm used to, but the truth is, pretty is how Robin makes me feel.

Mom has freshened up my makeup for me and lectured me about being responsible for the tenth time since Robin first started taking me out a few weeks ago. We've been on a few dates since then - dinner, movies - all perfectly innocent stuff, all of which culminated in romantic make-out sessions. But he hasn't pressured me for anything more, and I'm grateful for it.

I like him, I really do, but I'm just not ready to move any faster than we already are, and the good news is Robin seems just fine with that. It's almost as if my inexperience is part of the reason he likes me, and he's being respectful of it. We haven't talked about being exclusive - Lord knows I haven't sourced the courage to bring it up - but I really don't think he's been seeing anyone else. He certainly hasn't been taking any other girls out to dinners or movies, or I'd have heard about it - small town and all.

Robin asking me to homecoming was a big deal. Cam goes stag every year. He doesn't want to go with one of his hookup girls, even as friends, for fear of giving them the wrong idea, and since I've always refused his offer to go together as friends, he goes alone. But from what I hear, he usually doesn't leave alone.

Last week I noticed Maddie Stern, who'd attended every homecoming with Robin since their freshmen year, scowling at me in the halls. It was that day, after practice, while I was trying to figure out my algebra homework while waiting for Cam to drive us home, that Robin made a big show of surprising me with pink roses and asking me to go with him. It was decidedly sweet, and all week I've found myself equal parts anxious and eager.

Now that the excitement of the game is over, my nerves have all but dissipated, and I'm just looking forward to dancing with my date. We absolutely destroyed the visiting team. Robin threw four touchdowns, three of which were highlights, courtesy of the team lifting the heroic quarterback up on their shoulders to celebrate the resounding win in his last hometown homecoming game. But after just a minute or so, Robin jumped down and his gaze zeroed in to where I was hanging back on the sidelines, smiling and cheering. He made a beeline for me, picked me up and kissed me hard, right in front of everyone. It was my first public display of affection, and it positively melted me. Robin was proud that he was dating me, and in this monumental moment in his life, it was me he wanted to share it with. I smile again at the memory of it.

When the doorbell rings, my dad gets to it first, and I obediently hang back as he dotes on Robin and discusses the highlights of the game. Robin thanks him and politely excuses himself from the conversation to greet me. He brushes his lips chastely over my knuckles and I blush as Robin tells my dad he won't have me out too late - not that my father cares - before leading me to his car and opening my door for me. The perfect gentleman.

****

The dance is fun, but it turns out Robin doesn't really dance. We mostly hang out and chat with his friends while he keeps a possessive hand on me at all times - around my waist, my shoulders, or at the small of my back.

Predictably, he and Maddie are named Homecoming King and Queen, and I clap for him and resign to hang back while the rest of the court is announced and they all dance. Cam is announced as Junior prince, and he nonchalantly hops up onto the stage and takes his crown without enthusiasm. I clap even louder.

I'm shocked beyond measure when they announce the Junior Princess and my name is called. At first, I just start my cursory clap and don't even realize it's for me until Emmer and Courtney start pushing me toward the stage. As shock subsides, anxiety registers. Lacey is supposed to be princess, and I worry she'll be angry with me. I seek her out before I make my way to the stage, finding her just a few yards away. I offer her an apologetic half-smile, but she's grinning at me, and though it doesn't reach her eyes, I know she's trying.

"Hey, it's better than losin' to Missy fuckin' Potter," she whispers, and I smile at her in gratitude.
The court dance begins, and I'm comfortably dancing with Cam, my prince, but I can't stop myself from peeking over at the king with his queen, and thinking how good they look together. No wonder Maddie was practically snarling at me in the halls all week. But Robin isn't looking at me. He's glaring at Cam, who, with his arms slung casually around my waist, doesn't even notice. It's only a minute into the dance that Robin taps Cam on the shoulder and asks to cut in. Cam searches me for my okay, which I give wordlessly, and he shrugs and walks over to an affronted Maddie, and shoots her a wicked smile. She accepts Cam's offer to dance with him instead, her blush betraying her appreciation. But, of course, Cam is no consolation prize, and Maddie doesn't so much as glance at Robin or me for the rest of the night.

****

The night is winding down, and I excuse myself from the girls to ask Robin when he wants to leave when Cam grabs my elbow. "You're ridin' home with me," he says into my ear.

"What do you mean? I can't."
"Forbes has been sippin' out of a flask all night. You're not gettin' in a car with him."
Shit. Has he?
I saw his friend Tommy offer him a drink earlier, and he took it, and then another after the court dance, but I thought it was just the two. But now that Cam's mentioned it, Robin has had whiskey on his breath all night.

Suddenly I'm anxious as hell. I can't let him drive me home, I know better than that, and more importantly, Cam would never allow it. But I can't tell Robin I'm leaving with Cam - that'd never fly. And I can't let Robin drive at all if he's been drinking like Cam says.

"I'll take care of it," I murmur, and make to head over to where Robin is standing in the corner of the gym with his buddies.

Cam doesn't release my elbow. "You won't get in the car with him." It isn't a question.
I nod. I won't, but I don't know how Robin's going to react. I've never questioned him before, and our relationship - if it even is that - is still so new an fragile. I'm not his girlfriend, I don't think, so I'm not sure I have the right to dictate to him when he's had too much to drive.

Still, I don't really have a choice.
I approach him gingerly, and can now easily see the shine in his eyes, the sloppy slant to his grin. Robin's been drinking plenty, and I can't help but wonder when?
"There she is," he announces. He grabs my hand and pulls me through the door to the boys locker room, now completely deserted.

Before I can even open my mouth to speak, I'm pushed back into the row of lockers and his mouth covers mine.
His kiss is harder than usual - more aggressive and less sweet. His lips steal down my neck, and for the first time, his hands don't stay in their safe zones. One moves up over my shirt to my chest, so I grab it, and try to push it back - perhaps a little harder than necessary - sending him stumbling a step before he regains his balance and his eyes finally focus on mine.

Robin sighs with resignation. "Alright sweetheart, let's get you home." He takes my hand to lead me outside.
I hesitate. "Rob..."
His eyes light up, but before he can mistake my hesitation as indecision as to how far I'm willing to go right now - which it most definitely is not - I explain. "You've been drinkin'..."
His eyes narrow. "So?" He doesn't deny it, and I can tell he thinks I'm being judgmental.
"So, I think you should just let Cam drive us home. He can drop you off and then take me home."
For a long moment Robin just glares at me. He steps forward, stealing the small space between us, and smirks sloppily. "You worried about me, sweetheart?" he whispers.
I nod, because it's the truth.
Robin smiles in earnest, as if I've both surprised and pleased him. He tucks a wayward strand of hair behind my ear. "Foster ain't takin' my date home for me. How about you drive me and then take my car home. I'll have Lace drive me to your place tomorrow, and I can take you to lunch to thank you for being such a thoughtful, sweet, gorgeous girl." He pecks me chastely on the lips.
My grin is impossible to suppress. He’s being so reasonable. And sweet. And I know for a fact he never lets anyone drive his car. Everyone knows it, in fact. He loves it too much. "You’ll let me drive your car?"

His drunken sloppy grin is actually adorable. "I think I will, darlin’."
The last few weeks haven't been awful. My calculus grades are up, no doubt thanks to Sam's tutoring me in the library after school twice a week. My AP English teacher agreed to write a letter of recommendation to NYU, and even though it was submitted late, my mom got the admissions office to agree to include it with my application due to my "extenuating circumstances". I applied to a few local safety schools in the city and also here in Long Island, but I absolutely need to get into NYU. Stories of my mother's undergrad experience shine like a beacon in the melancholic gloom of the past year, and it's simply the only option that offers me a future I might actually look forward to. It's why I can't let my grades slip now.

Mr. Frank hands out yesterday's quizzes just before the bell rings to signal the end of first period, and I break out into a small, seated victory dance at my ninety two. Sam peeks over his shoulder at me and I mouth a heartfelt thank you. He tosses me a wink.

Carl pinches my arm like she always does when she notices some exchange between Sam and me she swears is evidence of a secret crush. Sometimes I'm the one with the crush, sometimes it's Sam, but Carl is convinced there's something going on.

She couldn't be more wrong. In fact, we're still very much just friends, and if I'm honest with myself, in some ways he's become my best friend. I spend most of my social time with Carl, and Tina too usually, and I definitely have a more earnest relationship with them than I ever did with Lacey and the girls down in Linton. But I don't talk to them about the past, and they don't ask. Sam doesn't really know details, of course, but he knows more than anyone else.

"See you at lunch," Carl calls out as she heads toward the gym for phys-ed.

"Told you you were ready for that quiz," Sam boasts. We walk together to our next classes, which happen to be in the same wing.

"You did. You were right," I mock grumble, earning myself a smile and a dimple. Gorgeous.

I roll my eyes.

"Come on, Ror. One more time. You know I earned it."

"Fine... You. Were. Right!"

"Ah, music to my ears," he teases, and I elbow him back from earlier. "Alright, alright," he concedes his gloating.

"But that quiz was small potatoes. I had a rough time with the homework last night, and the chapter test is Friday."

"I got you, Pine. Don't sweat it," he assures me, patting me on the head like a pet.

He's just teasing me, but I smile. I know Sam can't know how significant it is that I can tolerate these casual touches. Like his patting my head, or when he took my hand to lead me down the hall last week, or the few times he's touched my arm when he thought I might be upset, or even when he playfully elbows me. All friendly, innocent touches, that for me hold a world of meaning. Just a few months ago, a pat on the back from my mother's male co-worker thrust me into a full blown panic attack. But Sam - his touch feels natural, and not only can I tolerate it, but I think I actually find comfort in it.

"See you later," I murmur as I walk into my next class. I sure hope he's right about Friday's test, though, because the coursework has grown increasingly difficult as the weeks have progressed. It's only Tuesday, so at least I have this afternoon and Thursday for him to get the concepts to stick.

When the final bell rings, I head to the library to meet Sam, and find him in the hall, talking to Chelsea. I try to slip by them to wait inside for Sam, but no such luck.

"There she is - your little student," Chelsea announces, forcing me to either stop or come off as rude as I find her. "I was just asking Cap if you're coming to Miami for spring break."

I pause for a beat, bewildered. "Oh. Um, no. I don't think so," I murmur.

"Oh, but you should!" She is beyond enthusiastic for someone who's barely said two sentences to me since I started here. "We're all going. You know - our group of friends. Think about it - it's not too late," she sings before kissing Sam on his cheek and sauntering off.
I keep quiet as I turn into the library and take my seat at our usual table, Sam following on my heels. I know all too well what Chelsea is up to, and it's deeply off-putting. She thinks I'm a threat, though I couldn't appear less threatening, and she's trying to keep her enemies close.

I don't want her as an enemy. I don't want any enemies. I don't want to play this game at all - I just want to make it through the end of high school, and never fucking look back. I've gone as far as to practically push Sam away any time Chelsea's around, but this whole tutoring thing makes it difficult. And, of course, so does our friendship. Still, I find myself unwilling to give it up just to appease a mean-girl.

For some reason, every time Sam and I end up chatting in the lot, or at a party, Chelsea seems to take note. It's like she has a real-life Google alert for Sam talking to girls, just friends or not. Sam seems mostly oblivious about it, but at the same time he does seem to have a vague idea what's going on. I suspect he's aware of Chelsea's crush, but severely underestimates it. I do think he's noticed that Chelsea's glare has me abruptly ending our conversations, but if he has, he hasn't said anything.

Perhaps he just thinks I'm crazy. He wouldn't be wrong.

"She's right, you know," Sam murmurs as we both pull out our books.

I frown at him in confusion.

"Miami," he clarifies. "It's going to be fun. You should think about coming."

"I, uh- don't think so."

"You only get to be a senior once. Carl and Tina are going," he says, as if I didn't already know this- as if they haven't already tried to convince me to join them a thousand times. "I'll be there," he adds more quietly, shrugging almost sheepishly.

He's offering me his support. Comfort. He's saying he'd look out for me - like he did when Dave drunkenly propositioned me at Andrew's party a few weeks ago. Like he's done several times since he's perceived me to be uncomfortable, usually correctly. I soften a little.

"I'll think about it, okay? But if you don't get me ready for Friday's test, I'm gonna have way bigger problems than spring break," I warn.

Sam rolls his eyes. "Do you even doubt me?" he asks cockily.

The truth is I don't. But I don't tell him that.

We work longer than usual since Friday's test really is a doozy. I stretch my arms behind my back, yawning shamelessly as Sam looks over my work. The windows behind him are black with nightfall and I'm exhausted.

I haven't been sleeping well since I stopped taking my sleeping meds. The nightmares still come almost nightly, and though it's an improvement from having them every time I fall asleep, it's still enough to keep my energy level way lower than it should be. The thing is, the pills don't prevent the nightmares. If anything, they make them more vivid, and because I'm drugged, I can't wake up. At least when I haven't taken anything I can wake up, albeit screaming or crying. Usually both.

I'm also still on the same bottle of anti-anxiety meds, which is a small victory. I still have twelve pills left in the prescription, and I'm still hopeful I can make it my last one ever.

I glance around the library, finding it exceptionally empty. We usually aren't here this late. The few students who were here earlier seem to have already left. Sam is looking over the last problem I did and I'm wondering if we should call it a night when I slip a glance over my shoulder and see the librarian's desk deserted, her computer powered down.

"Where's Ms. Pitser?"

Sam barely looks up from the paper. "Hmm? What time is it?"

"Almost seven."

"I think she leaves at six," he murmurs nonchalantly.

My pulse slams on the gas so hard its wheels spin in place before it manically takes off.

There's no one else here.

Holy shit! I fly from my chair and Sam looks up with raised eyebrows like he doesn't know what's wrong.

Is he fucking kidding me?

I want to close my eyes and count, but I'm terrified to close my eyes. I take a few cautious steps back as I break out in a cold sweat, visible beads forming on my nose and brow.

"Rory? You okay?" he asks.

"You- you said the library's open 'til seven," I barely choke out.

Sam stands slowly. "It is," he says gently, cautiously.

"But the librarian left!" I snap.

I breathe in and out, in and out. It doesn't help. We're all alone.

He had to know we'd be all alone!
Sam takes a careful step forward and I answer with one back.
"You knew she was leavin'!" I accuse.
"We both knew, Ror. Remember, she walked out the same time as us last Thursday? She leaves at six, but the library stays open 'till seven. See?" He gestures to the room. "The lights are on, the doors aren't locked." He's still using that gentle tone, like he's talking to a cornered animal.
And that's exactly what I feel like.
But he's not going to fool me with that fucking tone. He knew she was leaving at six - he had to have planned this. I snatch my bag off the floor and reach for my books, but he takes another step toward me and I back up again, my books forgotten.
My eyes well up. *Fuck! I can't cry now!*
But my eyes don't listen, and my tears start to fall. I hate myself for being so weak. But he's too big, strong and powerful - dangerous.
Just like him!
*Calculus!* I sob.
"Oh, God, Rory. Don't cry. Everything's fine. We're fine, okay?"
But I can't catch my breath, and I can't stop my tears. I feel him touch my arm, just like he has before, but it doesn't comfort me, and I start to tremble.
I reach for the side pocket of my bag, but I'm too frightened to take my eyes off Sam, I don't know what he's going to do, and I don't know how to stop him. All my self-defense knowledge has abandoned me in my state of distress.
"Please!" I sob, visibly shaking. *Please don't hurt me! Please let me go!*
Before I know what's happened, Sam has his arms banded around me, I try to shove him off, but he holds strong. I cry and cry, as my heart beats erratically, way too fast, my breath evading me each time I try to catch it.
"Calm down, Ror, you're fine. I'm not going to hurt you. You know that. I would never hurt you, okay?" he says softly into my ear.
I wait for him to push me up against the wall, or down to the floor. I wait for his hands to take advantage of my helplessness. I wait for his tone to change, for him to spit the nasty vitriol.
But it doesn't happen.
Sam just holds me and repeats over and over again that I'm fine and that he would never hurt me. I'm still not sure I believe him. I'm not sure what to believe.
His hands slide soothingly up and down my back, and I realize he's been doing that for some time. I also realize that I have, in fact, started to calm, and I suck in deep breaths, filling my lungs with much-needed air.
"That's it, Ror. See? You're okay," he whispers, his fingers stroking my hair with practiced tenderness.
I surrender to Sam's hold, vaguely aware that it's all that's keeping me together right now, and I reach around to the pocket of my bag and grip the zipper pull.
"You don't need them, Rory. Look at you. You're fine. You're calming down. You don't need a pill," he whispers insistently.
And I realize, I think he's right.
I have calmed. I haven't taken a pill.
Sam doesn't rush me, and I wait until I finally have a stronghold on my breathing to pull back just enough to peek up at him. His distress takes me aback. His strong brow is deeply furrowed, and his midnight blues glisten with unshed tears.
*God, I must have really rattled him.* Shame surges through me and I avert my gaze.
It's then that I realize he isn't just holding me, I'm clutching the back of his tee shirt for dear life.
I release my death grip and he takes it as his cue to relax his hold as well.
"You're okay," he says. It isn't a question.
I nod absentlty. Sam takes a cautious step back.
"Oh, God. I'm so sorry!" As reality sets it, so does utter mortification. I just completely freaked out on Sam - my friend. One of my *only* friends! And I thought that panic attack on my first day was bad! But hell, this was so much worse. I basically just accused him of plotting to get me alone so he could attack me, and I wonder if he realizes that.
"It's fine, Ror. I mean it," he says emphatically, but I shake my head.
"Oh, God," I sob.
*Fine. How could any of this be fine?!* I fall into the nearest chair and drop my head in my hands. *I am so fucked up.*
Vaguely I'm aware of Sam kneeling in front of me.
"Hey," he says gently, but I shake my head again. "Hey," he says again, this time more insistently, and he hesitantly wraps his long fingers around my wrists, pulling them down so I'm forced to lift my head.

He's holding my wrists. I should be freaking out again. I didn't even take a pill. But his eye contact soothes me, and right now, I really don't believe he's going to hurt me.

"I should have told you when Pitser left. I didn't realize it would matter. That's my fault. I didn't think. I am the one who is sorry, okay?" he says carefully.

I stare at him for several moments. Rationally I know I'm the one who overreacted. That he's innocent in this. Why would he think he needed to tell me the librarian was leaving? But he's taking the blame anyway.

"I don't know why you're so nice to me," I whisper, not even really meaning to say it out loud.

Sam smiles wistfully and releases my wrists. He brushes my tears away with the pad of his thumb, another gesture that reminds me so much of Cam that I have to close my eyes for a second.

"We're friends, Ror," he replies, as if it explains everything. "That's what friends are for, right?"

I nod, because I really don't know what else to do. Sam stands and goes to pack up his books. He then proceeds to pack mine as well, and slips them into my bag.

He holds his hand out to me. "I got you, Pine. Come on, let's get you home. You must be tired," he murmurs.

I take his hand, and let him lead me from the library. We make our way down the hall, but I still don't release his hand. Right now it's my lifeline, and I cling to it desperately.

We reach the main exit, where Sam usually leaves to bring my car around. But still, I can't quite bring myself to let go. It's ridiculous. He was the one I'd been afraid of. I don't know what I'm afraid of now, but he's the only thing holding me together. I think he senses this because he doesn't even try to free his hand.

"Ror?" he asks, and I know he's asking what I want him to do.

"I can't walk by the locker rooms." I look up at him meaningfully.

"Can I walk around the building with you?"

I nod, and without another word, he leads me out the main exit and we walk silently around the perimeter of the building.

By the time we reach the student lot, I've mostly pulled myself together. I take a deep breath and release his hand. I look down, suddenly unable to meet his gaze. Now that the danger of the attack has abated, as well as my perceived danger of being attacked, I feel nothing but humiliation.

"I really am sorry, Sam," I murmur to the ground.

"Enough, Rory. You have nothing to be sorry for, okay? I'm sorry for putting you in that position, but you know what? You're stronger than you think you are."

I snort.

"You are, Ror. Look, I obviously did something to trigger you to panic, but you got through it all on your own. You didn't need a pill. You did it yourself."

I think about his words for a few moments before responding. "I didn't need a pill," I agree, my voice quiet and introspective. "But I didn't do it on my own either." He's the reason I got through that. I meet his gaze. "Thanks."

Sam offers me a half-smile. "Hey, I got you, Pine. What are friends for?" he says lightly.
The Thanksgiving home game is one of the biggest games of the year. With no school the next day, all the football players, and the whole rest of the school really, goes out to a party down by the lake afterwards.

My parents stayed in town for the holiday, but they're leaving tomorrow to do their turn with my grandmother for the weekend. Lacey called me a few days ago to invite me to stay with her family. I've never mentioned anything to Robin about staying at Cam's every other weekend, but I know Lacey knows, and I'm sure she told him. I also have a feeling Robin insisted she invite me there so I wouldn't stay at Cam's. He's been a little more jealous lately of how much time I spend with Cam. He hasn't come out and said anything really, just little things - like glaring at Cam when I show up at school with him, or insisting on taking me home after practice himself.

Cam acts like he doesn't mind, and maybe he doesn't, but it's weird. If my best friend was a girl, I wonder if Robin would still insist on these things. Maybe he just likes spending the time with me.

The thing is, we still haven't discussed our relationship. He takes me out every week, and he acts like I'm his girl, but I still don't know if we're exclusive. He's had wandering hands lately, and I've been shoving them away regularly. Part of me wonders why I'm not yet ready to move things along, but I know I'm not. I do like kissing him. It's nice. It really is. But when his hands start moving over my shirt, it's like a bucket of ice water, and I don't know why.

I offer to drive tonight, since I know Robin will drink, so I follow him while he drops off his car at his house and he and Lacey pile in.

It's still pretty mild out here, even in November, so we all sit around on downed logs and some of the larger rocks. Everyone is drinking from the keg, except me since I'm the designated driver. I've never been drunk, and I think I'd like to try it, but obviously not tonight.

I'm chatting over by Chip's truck with him and Cam when Lacey walks over and runs her finger down Cam's arm. He smirks crookedly at her and I wonder if I'll be dropping her off at his house later. For the first time, the idea bothers me. I look around for Robin and spy him standing off away from the crowds with Maddie. They're just talking, but something about the way they're standing is too intimate. Of course, I know they've been intimate before. I even know they've had sex. But I didn't think he'd entertain the prospect now. I watch, my heart sinking, as she touches his chest, laughing flirtatiously. He smiles, and doesn't push her hand away either. After another minute, he seems to excuse himself and I'm flooded with relief. He was just being polite.

I realize I need us to talk about our relationship. I need to find out what we're doing. If we're exclusive. I don't know why I've let things go on this long without talking about it.

Robin scours the crowds until his gaze finally lands on me. He narrows his eyes on Cam until he realizes it's his sister who seems to have his interest tonight, and saunters over.

"So, Foster, kinda funny that you threaten me about takin' out Rory, and yet you have no problem usin' my baby sister whenever it seems to suit you," Robin slurs.

I gasp, and all eyes turn to him, shocked that he would insult his own sister that way. He's not even trying to protect her, he's just trying to call out Cam.

Lacey would never question her big brother though, so she just excuses herself to go join the girls. Cam shakes his head and shoots Robin a disapproving scowl before walking away. Cam never pretended to be doing anything other than using Lacey when it suited him, but he wouldn't insult her by verbalizing it, especially in a crowd.

"Rory, that was mean," I whisper when we're alone.

"What was?" He really doesn't seem to think he said anything wrong.

I shake my head. He's drunk. There's no point in explaining it right now. I start to walk away so we can rejoin the party, but Robin roughly grabs arm roughly and yanks me back. "What was mean, Rory?" he demands, his voice deceptively low.

"You just called out Cam for usin' Lacey, but you basically called her a slut in the process."

Robin shrugs, and I'm surprised he's not remorseful. "If she acts like a slut she should be prepared to be called out for it."

"Robin!" I hiss, horrified by the way he's talking about his own sister.
His grip tightens on my arm, making me wince. "So Foster can dictate to me about my life, but I can't call him out on his? Especially when he's usin' my own sister?" His tone is still so quiet and it's unnerving.

I know I should probably concede the argument, but I just can't. "But you're not worried about Lacey. You were just trying to be a jerk to them both."

It was the wrong thing to say. I know that immediately. Robin's eyes narrow and I try to step back, but he holds firm. He leans in close to my ear. "You do not tell me what I can or can't say. And you don't question me, and you definitely will watch what you fuckin' call me. You got that, Rory?" His tone is calm and deathly quiet. I'd prefer he yell. Robin pulls back just far enough to meet my eyes. His face is red, and I don't know if it's with drink or anger, but he raises his eyebrows expectantly.

I swallow nervously and nod. I know I shouldn't have called him a jerk. He's never called me a name. I wait to see what he'll do or say next. I half expect him to tell me he's done with me. He watches me, as if to see if he accepts my agreement to his demands.

Finally he nods. He releases my arm, which throbs painfully, but I don't move. Robin brings his hand to my face and brushes my cheek with his knuckles, and just like that, he's gentle again.

"You know I care about you, right?" he asks.

I nod again. I want to ask him what that means, but now's not the time. "I'm sorry, Rob. I shouldn't have said-"

He shakes his head. "No, sweetheart. That's all sorted out. Let's get back to our friends," he decides, lacing our fingers together. He picks up our joined hands and kisses my knuckles, our squabble forgotten. I hope.

****


I don't know what time it is, but it's late. We got home almost an hour ago, and I'm back in the upstairs guest room after changing into my pajamas and washing up. Robin already kissed me goodnight before I came upstairs. I didn't even hear him come in.

I sit up in bed. "Hey, what are you doin'?"

His mouth makes a beeline for my neck. "I missed you, sweetheart." His lips find mine and he kisses me sloppily. He sure drank enough tonight. "Real bad." He grins wickedly.


We kiss for a while, and he leans me back on the bed, climbing over me. It makes me nervous, but he's still just kissing me, so I go with it.

When his hand starts inching toward my chest, I push it back to my waist, as usual. But he's more persistent than he normally is, and suddenly, he grips both of my wrists in one hand and pins them above my head.

"Robin."

He silences me with a kiss, and his free hand takes full advantage, fondling my chest as I squirm beneath him, trying buck him off. But Robin mistakes my squirming for something else. He groans. I turn away from his kiss, but he just scrapes his lips down my neck to the bit of cleavage that shows above my neckline.

"Robin!"

"You're so fuckin' hot, sweetheart," he murmurs against my skin.

"Please stop," I beg.

"Mmmm..."

He's not listening to me. I try to talk to him - to beg him to slow down, to stop. He doesn't listen. Instead, he swallows my pleas with another kiss. Robin's hand starts pushing its way under my shorts, and my stomach rolls with dread. He's not stopping! I panic.

I bite him.

"You wanna get rough, sweetheart?" he growls, and starts kissing me so hard I can barely breathe. I scream for him to stop, but it just comes out a muffled mumble. I know he can't make out my words with his tongue gagging me.

He forces his hand between my legs and I try to squeeze them shut, but it traps his hand where I definitely don't want it, and he just keeps on rubbing. My eyes water, tears spilling down my cheeks in torrents. He's not stopping! He's never not stopped before. Finally he relaxes his grip on my wrists, and the moment my hands are free, I rally all of my strength and shove him off of me. Robin flinches, startled. He lifts his weight from me, settling it onto his hands and knees instead, and I sit up beneath him.

"What the fuck?" he barks as I scoot back against the headboard, clamping my knees tightly together. "Are you... are you crying?"

I'm still gasping for air, utterly incapable of words, and I can't quell the tears that stream from my eyes.
Robin sits back on his heels and rakes his hand through his hair in bewildered frustration. He looks me over again like he's just seeing me for the first time. I'm completely frozen, trapped in a cage fused of shock and betrayal. "Fuck, Rory. I'm sorry. I thought you were into it," he murmurs.

One broken sob escapes my lips before I snap my jaw shut and shake my head fervently. No I was not fucking into it!

Robin looks stricken- horrified. He leans forward and I automatically flinch, which startles him all over again. "No, sweetheart..." His brow furrows in distress, his mouth gaping open. "Fuck. I'm sorry!" He wipes the tears from my cheeks with his knuckles and draws me into his arms. I'm dead weight. I can't think straight, and I let him comfort me while I calm down.

After a few minutes, he pulls me away from him to meet my gaze. "You need to forgive me, sweetheart. Don't be mad at me, okay? I really thought you were into it. You know I'd never pressure you, right?"

I hesitate, but nod, though that felt a hell of a lot like pressure to me. In fact, it felt like something decidedly worse.

"It's just... it's been three months, Rory. And you're not just some girl- you're you. You drive me crazy. You're so fuckin' hot, sweetheart. And I'm a man, you know?"

He's giving me some explanation, and though it's no excuse for what he just did, I do get what he's saying. And maybe I should be ready to do more, but I'm just not. "I'm just... I'm not ready." I say the words. I've said them before.

But Robin's right, it has been three months. I feel irrationally guilty. It's his senior year, and he's him. Surely gorgeous golden-boy Robin Forbes should be with Maddie, or any one of the many other girls who would be thrilled to do whatever it is he wants. Not wasting his time with me - an inexperienced kid who may never be ready to do those things. Not for the first time the year difference in age between us feels like a lifetime. I think he'll probably break up with me. I think he probably should. Only... I don't want him to.

I should ask him about our status, but again, the timing feels all wrong. And I still feel deeply unsettled over what just happened. Maybe I should break up with him.

Robin nods. "I'm sorry, okay? You need to forgive me," he says again. It's not even a question, but I do believe he's sorry. His remorse is palpable. "You know I care about you, right?"

That same question. I nod again.

Robin kisses me, but it's back to his sweet, gentle kiss. "Go to bed, Sleepin' Beauty. I'll take you to lunch tomorrow to make it up to you." He kisses my forehead and leaves, closing my door softly behind him.

It's forever before I can fall asleep. My mind reels with the memory of feeling so powerless. I can't understand why he didn't stop when I asked. I get that he must not have heard me, that he thought I was kissing him back, but I can't get over that feeling. Feeling out of control of my own body, and the person who was in control - who had taken control - just wasn't listening to me.

I've never been touched there before. I've never even touched myself there. I didn't like it, and I wonder if it's just because I was so caught up in my fear or if there really is something wrong with me. Why am I still not ready to do anything more than kiss?

****

There's no mention of last night's incident the next day. In fact, the day is so perfect it's easy to forget it even happened. Or maybe I just want to forget.

I eat a late breakfast with the whole Forbes family, then it's off to manicures with Lacey. Afterwards, she drops me off at Cal's Coffee Shop to have lunch with Robin.

He's a perfect gentleman - opening doors and pulling out chairs. He's even more affectionate than usual, holding my hand and repeatedly kissing my knuckles. He says pretty things, and last night is all but erased.

Tonight I'm going to a movie with the girls while Robin has plans with his buddies. Cam has called no fewer than four times since last night to "check" on me. It's the first weekend I've spent anywhere but at his place while my parents were out of town since- well, ever. And it's weird for both of us. It's also the first time I've spent the night at the Forbes' since I started seeing Robin. Cam was concerned when I told him I'd be sleeping over, but I brushed it off. Now I get his concern.

Robin's still out when we get home from the movies. I change and climb into bed, but can't seem to fall asleep. I'm still apprehensive from last night.

My door swings open sometime after midnight, and my breath gets trapped somewhere in my throat.

"You up, Sleepin' Beauty?" Robin drawls, but there's something about his tone that's almost apprehensive.
I don't move. I keep my eyes shut tight, unsure of what to do. My bed dips when he sits down next to me. My skin breaks out in goosebumps as his finger sweeps the hair from my face, his warm breath caressing my cheek as he presses a soft kiss to my forehead.

Robin doesn't leave. Instead, he curls into bed with me, but over the covers, and spoons behind me. It feels kind of nice, but I'm still anxious. I wish last night never happened.

His lips brush my cheek. "Please don't still be mad at me, sweetheart," he whispers, and he sounds so earnest that I open my eyes.

Robin doesn't notice. He sits up, but before he can leave, I stop him.
"Hey," I whisper.

He turns to me with an uncertain smile. "Didn't mean to wake you."

I sit up. "You come to say goodnight?"

His smile shifts into a grin and he nods. When I don't say anything more, Robin leans in and kisses me. It's soft and sweet, and as his tongue slides tentatively into my mouth, I welcome it. I don't smell any liquor on him, and it's a relief. His scent is different than I'm used to, though. His fingers thread into my hair and he holds my mouth to his, but his hands don't roam even a little.

Robin ends the kiss and pulls away. "Night, sweetheart."

He stands and leaves, and only as I'm starting to fall asleep do I realize that the strange scent that clung to him was a woman's perfume.
CHAPTER TEN
Present Day

Sam pretended like Tuesday night in the school library never happened, and I'm grateful. I'm still struggling with my reaction that night, and I've tried not to dwell on it too much. Tonight is my therapy session, so I can wait until then to process how it is that the one thing that terrifies me most - being overpowered by a man, even if it was just a hug - is what managed to quell a full blown panic attack with just the help of a few whispered words of comfort. At the moment I'm mostly concerned about calc. Tomorrow is the big test, and I'm still having trouble with some of the material, but Sam has assured me he'll have me ready.

I rush through the rain to my jeep since it's my turn to drive to lunch today, but as I sit in the driver's seat I find I can't move. I have issues driving in the rain, so I ask Carl if she doesn't mind switching places and she agrees without question. Carl has noticed some of my issues, though she hasn't seen anything close to an attack. I've told her I went through some things last year that I'm still dealing with - the same thing I initially told Sam - and she's been sympathetic. It's good to have real friends, and while no one can ever replace what Cam and I had, I've never in my life had girl friends I actually believed cared about me. It's not something I take for granted.

I step out to let Carl into the driver's seat and Sam catches me to tell me he can't meet me in the library after school because he has to drive his sister to a doctor's appointment. I call back that I'll text him to figure it out, and hastily jump into the passenger seat before I can get totally drenched.

**What about calc test?** I text Sam.

**I can meet you after.**
But I have my therapy session at five thirty.

We pull up to the diner before I can reply, so I jog over to where Sam is getting out of Andrew's car with Tuck and Dave.

"Damn, Ror." He shrugs off his jacket and holds it over both our heads to protect us from the rain. "Don't you have a jacket or an umbrella or something?" he chides.

"No, Dad, it's just a little rain," I tease, and we both tense, aware that dads are a sensitive subject for both of us, and the truth is the rain is a sensitive one for me. *What isn't a sensitive subject for me?*

Once under the awning Sam shakes out his soaked jacket and I wait for him.

"I have a doctor's appointment at five thirty. I can't miss it," I tell him.

"I gotta drive Bits at four and pick her up at five," he replies.

"Bits is some nickname," I observe, earning a playful elbow to my side.

"Hey. I couldn't say *Beth* when she was born. I was only three. I called her *Bits*, and what can I say? It kind of stuck. Give me a break, will ya?"

I laugh. At least it's a reasonable explanation.

"Want to meet up at like seven? You could come over for dinner. My mom will be there, and *Bits* would love to meet you." He pulls the door and holds it open for me.

I actually consider it. If it's a family dinner then we won't be alone. And after my freak out in the library, the fact is, Sam's had me alone. If he wanted to do something about it, take advantage of it in some way, surely he would have already. But then, Sam has also made it abundantly clear he has no romantic or sexual interest in me - that he's only ever wanted me as a friend. I should be comforted by the fact that he isn't attracted to me. I know that.

I ignore the small pang of disappointment that tightens my chest, and remind myself that friendship is all I want, too. It's all I can handle. That’s if you call accusing him of luring me down to a pond to have exhibitionist sex, and now, of intentionally trapping me in a deserted library with nefarious intent, "handling it". For the millionth time I wonder what the hell appeals to him about a friendship with me in the first place. Maybe there's something wrong with *him*.

And how fucked up is it that I'm searching for some character flaw to explain Sam wanting to be my friend? It's utterly unfathomable that I'm actually starting to trust a guy, but *I am*. I also try not to dwell on the fact that if his sister would want to meet me, it means he's mentioned me. Why this pleases me, I don't know. We're friends, so it's normal if he's mentioned me in passing. I only hope it wasn't in a passing conversation about how I freaked out and more or less accused him of trying to trap and assault me. In inwardly cringe at the memory.

The truth is I'm curious about his sister. In fact, I'm curious to learn anything I can about Sam. After all, he knows more about me than anyone other than my mother and psychiatrist.
Yeah. I decide dinner at his house isn't such a bad idea.
"Okay, but you better get me ready for that test," I warn, teasingly poking him in his chest with my index finger. *Damn, that's muscular. Just like the rest of him.*
"Yeah?" he asks, eyes wide with both a hint of surprise and a whisper of hope.
"Yeah," I confirm, and Sam breaks out into a triumphant, lopsided grin.
It was barely over a month ago that I told him I couldn't handle being at his house even with his family there, and I know he reads the significance in the fact that I'm agreeing to do just that. He doesn't say anything more about it, though. Instead, he slings an arm casually around my shoulders as we both scan the diner for our respective groups of friends.
"There," Sam nods in the direction of the booth in which our friends have apparently decided to eat together, and leads us on.
I don't think anything of Sam's arm around me until Carl's only vaguely surreptitious look silently accuses me of a secret affair. I roll my eyes before scooting in beside her, Sam following behind me.
It's only two minutes later that Chelsea walks in with her friend Lily, and Dave calls out for them to join us. And they do.
Chelsea slides in next to Sam, and we all scoot over to make room. Dave gets up and grabs a chair, situating it at the head of the table to make room for Lily.
Carl and Tuck flirtatiously tease each other while Chelsea chats away with Sam, careful to hoard his attention. Andrew eats with one hand so he can keep Tina tucked close with the other. Dave makes eyes at Lily, whose batting eyelashes and hair flipping over her shoulder make it obvious she's receptive to whatever he's offering. It's isn't surprising. Dave is handsome like his friends, though he has the sense of humor of a perverted clown, making it difficult to take him even remotely seriously.
Suddenly I feel like the odd man out. Invisible again. And for some reason, right now, it bothers me.
They're all talking about spring break. Apparently Sam's uncle is high up in the corporate food chain at the W Hotel Group and is hooking everyone up with luxury accommodations - not standard high school spring breaker lodgings, that's for sure. I knew Sam's family was wealthy, but this is some hook up. An image of Chelsea in a string bikini, flirting with a shirtless Sam on the beach flashes through my mind unbidden.
"I think I might have changed my mind about coming," I blurt suddenly.
*And I've lost my damned mind.*
Carl shrieks excitedly and Chelsea fakes a pleased smile, but Sam is the first to speak. "Really?" he asks.
I shrug. "I've been thinking about what you said. About only being a senior once. I knew Sam's family was wealthy, but this is some hook up. An image of Chelsea in a string bikini, flirting with a shirtless Sam on the beach flashes through my mind unbidden.
"I think I might have changed my mind about coming," I blurt suddenly.
*And I've lost my damned mind.*
Carl shrieks excitedly and Chelsea fakes a pleased smile, but Sam is the first to speak. "Really?" he asks.
I shrug. "I've been thinking about what you said. About only being a senior once. I knew Sam's family was wealthy, but this is some hook up. An image of Chelsea in a string bikini, flirting with a shirtless Sam on the beach flashes through my mind unbidden.
"I think I might have changed my mind about coming," I blurt suddenly.
And I've lost my damned mind.
Carl shrieks excitedly and Chelsea fakes a pleased smile, but Sam is the first to speak. "Really?" he asks.
I shrug. "I've been thinking about what you said. About only being a senior once. I knew Sam's family was wealthy, but this is some hook up. An image of Chelsea in a string bikini, flirting with a shirtless Sam on the beach flashes through my mind unbidden.
"I think I might have changed my mind about coming," I blurt suddenly.
And I've lost my damned mind.
Carl shrieks excitedly and Chelsea fakes a pleased smile, but Sam is the first to speak. "Really?" he asks.
I shrug. "I've been thinking about what you said. About only being a senior once. I knew Sam's family was wealthy, but this is some hook up. An image of Chelsea in a string bikini, flirting with a shirtless Sam on the beach flashes through my mind unbidden.
"I think I might have changed my mind about coming," I blurt suddenly.
And I've lost my damned mind.
Carl shrieks excitedly and Chelsea fakes a pleased smile, but Sam is the first to speak. "Really?" he asks.
I shrug. "I've been thinking about what you said. About only being a senior once. I knew Sam's family was wealthy, but this is some hook up. An image of Chelsea in a string bikini, flirting with a shirtless Sam on the beach flashes through my mind unbidden.
"I think I might have changed my mind about coming," I blurt suddenly.
And I've lost my damned mind.
Carl shrieks excitedly and Chelsea fakes a pleased smile, but Sam is the first to speak. "Really?" he asks.
I shrug. "I've been thinking about what you said. About only being a senior once. I knew Sam's family was wealthy, but this is some hook up. An image of Chelsea in a string bikini, flirting with a shirtless Sam on the beach flashes through my mind unbidden.
"I think I might have changed my mind about coming," I blurt suddenly.
And I've lost my damned mind.
Carl shrieks excitedly and Chelsea fakes a pleased smile, but Sam is the first to speak. "Really?" he asks.
I shrug. "I've been thinking about what you said. About only being a senior once. I knew Sam's family was wealthy, but this is some hook up. An image of Chelsea in a string bikini, flirting with a shirtless Sam on the beach flashes through my mind unbidden.
"I think I might have changed my mind about coming," I blurt suddenly.
And I've lost my damned mind.
I nod, but I'm inwardly cringing. I know he was trying to make some point in defense of me, but what it was, I don't know. That will just have pissed Chelsea off more, and while some small part of me is satisfied by Sam making point of showing Chelsea that I'm his friend, most of me wishes he'd just let it go.

I cut phys ed and head home one period early. I make myself a snack and settle at my desk to work on my English paper. Restless, I leave a little earlier than usual to make my five thirty appointment with Dr. Schall. At five after, I sign in and, as always, wonder why they even keep a sign-in sheet when they remove it after each patient to ensure confidentiality. I'm reading on my tablet when the front door swings open, and to utter my astonishment, in walks Sam.

My mouth gapes open. *What the hell is he doing here?*

"Rory?" He seems as confused as I am.

Just then, the door to Dr. Schall's office opens and out walks a girl of about fifteen or sixteen, and though her hair is blonde, her unmistakable midnight blue eyes tell me immediately who she is.

"Hiya Sammy," she murmurs nonchalantly. She doesn't seem like a girl who tried to kill herself in the past year, but maybe I don't look like what I actually am either.


"Bits, this is- uh, Rory. My friend I told you about. Rory, this is my sister."

Bits seems confused, and maybe a little annoyed. I realize she probably thinks Sam brought me along to pick her up, and that would be a pretty egregious invasion of privacy since this is clearly a therapist's office.

"I, um, have an appointment with Dr. Schall. At five thirty," I explain nervously. This is so damn awkward. I remind myself that Sam already knows I have issues. He's seen my prescription bottle - obviously they were prescribed by a doctor. And I don't even know Bits. Anyway, she has problems of her own. Surely she wouldn't judge me. *Right?*

She visibly relaxes at my explanation. "Well that is some coincidence."

Sam and I still have our gazes locked, but neither of us speaks. I wonder if he knows Dr. Schall specializes in teen victims of violence and abuse.

_God, of course_ he does! _He must._ His sister sees him, and obviously her family - her wealthy family who could afford any doctor they wanted - did their research before choosing him. Part of the reason my mom joined the big firm was because their insurance covered him. I run through some of the crazy things I've said or done in front of Sam since we've met, and realize he's probably already deduced that I'm a victim of _something._ Seeing me here shouldn't change anything. But _God, why won't he say anything?_

"You're going to be joining us for dinner, aren't you, Rory?" Bits asks in a clear attempt to break the tension.

I force a small smile for her benefit. "Um, yeah. After my, uh, appointment. Sam tutors me for calculus and we have a big test tomorrow," I explain.

"Great, looking forward to it," she replies, and starts toward the door.

Dr. Schall emerges from his office and shakes my hand. It took us a few sessions before I felt comfortable with even that minor contact, but lately it's been fine. "Come on in, Rory," he invites.

"Yeah, me too. See you later," I murmur back to Bits.

Sam continues to stare at me. "Uh, later, Ror," he mutters, and follows his sister out the door.

****

When I leave the office an hour later, the day's rain has let up into a light drizzle.

No.

No, no no! _Shit!_

I left my headlights on. Who _does_ that? _Fuck!_

I unlock my jeep and fling myself inside. I shakily jam the key into the ignition, pray, and turn.

_Please please please..._

The engine growls half-heartedly like a sickly dog on its last leg, but it has no bite, refusing to spark to life.

I try again with no luck. _Fuck._

I don't know what the hell to do. My mom's working late and she won't be home until eight.

I suck in a deep breath. Okay, well I can't stay out here, because I can't be alone, even in my car, out at night.

It's dark. And unnervingly desolate.

_Okay, Rory, don't panic._

I scurry back inside the office, but only make it as far as the vestibule. The office door is locked. I ring the buzzer, but there's no response, and after trying several more times and knocking until my knuckles sting, I realize Dr. Schall and his receptionist must have left through the back. I'd forgotten about the back exit.
Fear rolls in my gut, my hands trembling as I take out my phone. I tell myself everything is fine, but my anxiety is a living, breathing monster, whispering that my fear is indeed very rational - the danger lurking just beyond the meager protection of the glass doors, earnest and laying in wait. My pulse races as I make to call Carl, but at the last moment my shaky fingers dial Sam's number instead.

"Rory?" he answers.

"Hey," I greet, trying to remain calm. I take a deep, steadying breath. "Look, I left my headlights on and my car won't start. I'm still at Dr. Schall's," I say tremulously. I'm trying to keep it together, but I'm frightened, and I know he can hear it in my voice.

"I'll be right there. Stay inside." In the background I can hear he's already on the move, which calms me a little.

"Everyone already left. I didn't notice, when I was trying to get my car to start. I can't get back in. I'm in the vestibule," I say a little less shakily, but not by much.

"Everything's going to be fine, Rory. Just stay in the vestibule. If there's a lock you can turn from the inside, do it. Otherwise just stay inside and I'll see you in ten minutes, okay?"

"Okay." There is a lock, so I turn it and relax a little more.

Sam takes an audibly deep breath. "You want me to stay on the phone with you?"

I know I should say no - that I'm already burdening him enough this evening with having me over for dinner, teaching me calculus, and now having to rescue me from my own stupidity. "If you don't mind," I say instead, surprising even myself with the potency of my accent.

"I don't mind, Rory. Of course not," he assures me, and goes on to apologize about freezing earlier, explaining that he was just surprised to see me here.

I tell him not to worry about it and that I was kind of stunned, too. I say Bits seems nice, because she does, and we chat about nothing and everything while he drives and I try not to freak out. He talks more about Miami, and promises it'd be no imposition to get me my own room. He even quizzes me on math.

When Sam arrives, he orders me to wait until he gets to the door to unlock the bolt. I only hang up when he's right outside the door, and as soon as I'm out of the vestibule, without even thinking about it, I step right into his arms. They wrap around me like I belong in them, and now, finally, I relax.

"Thanks," I breathe as I step out of our hug.

"No big deal. It happens. But I don't have jumper cables in my car and it's really coming down out there. Are you cool to leave your car here overnight?"

"I guess, but what about school-"

"I'll drive you."

****

We pull up to his red brick colonial just after seven. It's a beautiful house. Big, but not obnoxiously so. A traditional French style crystal chandelier hangs in the enormous window overlooking the mahogany front door. I'm feeling disheveled, and I'm sure I look it, too. My clothes and hair are damp from the rain, and it's less than ideal for meeting Sam's family. Sam keeps driving around to the side of the house, on account of the rain no doubt.

I get out and look around. It's been professionally designed and organized, that's for certain. Black and white rubber tiles blanket the concrete, making the garage feel like a room in the house. The back and side walls are all done in custom cabinetry, and there's a huge Subzero party fridge as well.

Sam takes my hand and leads me up the three steps to what I assume is the back hall. It leads around a corner, past a bedroom and a guest bathroom, right into the kitchen, which is filled with a mouth-watering combination of savory aromas, but is otherwise empty.

"Mom! Bits!" Sam calls out. "We're here!"

Footsteps pad from above and down the back staircase beside the kitchen, and Sam's sister appears.

"Hi guys. Mom's just on the phone with Aunt Cathy. She'll be right down," Bits says. "Nice to see you again. Just so you know, Sam and Mom are pretty much the only people who call me Bits. My actual name is Beth," she says with a amiable smile.

"Well it's nice to meet you Bits, Beth, whichever you prefer," I reply.
She shrugs. "Honestly, it doesn't make the slightest difference to me. Totally up to you."

"I like Bits," I admit.

"Me too," she replies and smiles conspiratorially. "I'll get the food on the table. Maybe Sammy can give you a tour.",

I laugh. "Sure, Sammy, that would be great," I tease with an innocent smile, batting my eyelashes at him.

Sam rolls his eyes and hooks his arm around my shoulder to lead me out of the kitchen and down another hall.

"She likes you," he murmurs. "She's not usually so open with new people."

"I like her, too."

Sam shows me the main foyer, which leads on one side to a formal dining room and a family room on the other. Straight back is a grand "great room", which my house - old or new - certainly doesn't have. It's all decorated in transitional furniture and decor - somewhat traditional with contemporary accents. Either it was professionally decorated or Sam's mom has a real knack for interior design.

When we return to the kitchen, Bits is still busy getting the food together. "Almost ready, go show her upstairs, it'll be ready when you're done," she calls back to us without looking.

Sam peeks down at me inquisitively.

"Calculus," I murmur. The truth is, I think I would be okay walking around upstairs alone with him - I really do. But I'm not sure - I can't be sure. Perhaps I'll never be sure. And I can't risk having a panic attack tonight. Not here. And for that reason, I use our safe word.

"Oh, you'll have plenty of time to study after dinner," Bits mutters flippantly and Sam and I exchange secretive grins. I chose a good safe word.

Sam's mom emerges from the foyer and introduces herself as Elaine Caplan. She's absolutely stunning, but looking at her children, I'd expect nothing less. Bits got her blonde hair from her mom, but Elaine's is shoulder length and layered, and her eyes are brown, similar to mine.

She invites us to sit at the kitchen table, and serves me chicken breast with rice pilaf and steamed vegetables. It's really rather good. We chat about school, and they ask minimal questions about my life before I moved here, and I wonder if Sam warned them not to pry into my past. I don't know if I'm grateful or annoyed if he did.

We study in the dining room after dinner, and by the time Sam guarantees me a ninety or better, I'm already half exhausted. My phone buzzes.

Shit, it's my mom. It's almost ten and I haven't checked in since she called me when she got home just after eight and I told her about my car. My phone screen reveals several missed calls from her, and I sigh as I answer, peaking over at Sam, who's gathering up our practice tests.

"Hi, mom. I'm fine. Just finishing up now," I answer.

"Rory, do you know how worried I've been? I've been calling for thirty minutes!" she shouts, obviously frazzled. My mother used to be a totally laid back parent. She'd get passionately riled up about clients and causes, but me she trusted implicitly. And while I think she still trusts me for the most part, my judgment is another story.

She was truly shocked to the bone to learn what happened - what'd been happening for so long right under her nose. I know in many ways she blamed herself. Blames herself. Not as much as she blames my father though, and I think that actually helped with her self-recrimination. But since everything came out, she's been making up for it.

"Sorry, I've been studying. I told you. My phone was on vibrate in my bag. I didn't hear it," I explain.

"God, Rory. I've been imagining all kinds of things. I don't even know this Sam person! How do I know-"

"Mom, calm down. Sam's my friend, okay? I told you. We're not even alone. I'm fine. I mean it," I reassure her. From hands-off parent to helicopter in one year or less.

Sam watches me out of the corner of his eye, and though he's trying to feign disinterest in a conversation that is clearly about him, I know he hears every word of my end.

My mom sighs. "Alright, why don't you give me his address and I'll come pick you up."

"It's fine, Mom, I told you he would drive me home."

"Aurora, that boy has spent his evening rescuing you from a dead car battery and teaching you math, give him a break."

"Alright one sec!" I cut her off. She's driving me crazy. I hate when she calls me 'Aurora', it just reminds me of my father. And the truth is I feel guilty, because this isn't her. This isn't the Amy Pine I grew up with. This is a woman who had the rug pulled out from under her in the worst way, all because of me, and who lost her husband and her home in the fallout. And she's right about me burdening Sam, too.
I peek over at Sam, who's given up pretending not to be paying attention. "Everything okay?" he asks tentatively.

I nod. "Yeah, my mom is just lecturing me on imposing on people. She wants to come pick me up to save you the drive, but I don't even know the address here."

Sam rolls his eyes. "Imposing? Don't be ridiculous, you just said it yourself, 'Sayum's mah friend, okay?'" he teases in an exaggeratedly southern Rory voice that sounds more like Scarlet O'Hara than me. I giggle and cover the mic on my phone.

"I don't mind driving you, really," he adds sincerely.

"Yeah but you have to drive me to school in the morning too. My mom leaves too early to get to the city for work-"

Sam has taken two long-legged steps and is suddenly right in front of me. He places his hand gently on my upper arm. "I'm driving you home, like I said I would, and tomorrow I'll drive you to school, like I said I would. You wouldn't be calling it an imposition if I was Carl, and if you were Tuck you'd be demanding I take you through the drive-thru for takeout on the way."

I stare at him up, silently bemused, because I know he's right. I don't stop him when he slowly takes my phone from my hand, and proceeds to introduce himself to my mother. He assures her it's no imposition to give me a ride, that I'd do the same for him, and that I've actually done him a favor by forcing him to study for our test. When he hands me back the phone, my mom is calm and there's a smile in her voice.

"See you soon, honey," she sings, and hangs up.

What has Sam done to my mother?

****

On the ride home I once again marvel at how comfortable I am in a situation that is, in itself, one of my most precarious triggers. I remember the last time I was alone in a car with a man - when Sheriff Chipley, the father of one of my closest friends and a man I'd known my entire life, gave me a ride home from his office last May. I freaked out. When he parked in front of my house I tried the door handle, but it was locked. I turned to find him facing me, not getting out of the car like I'd expected. In retrospect he was probably just poised to offer me some comforting words, since he turned out to be one of the few people to actually stand by me through the aftermath, but in that moment all I knew was utter terror. I smacked him, screamed, cried, hyperventilated, and ended up spending the night in the hospital.

But right now, alone with Sam, who outwardly seems to have a lot in common with Robin, I feel no fear. Because I believe that inside Sam and Robin couldn't possibly be more different. Sam is slowly earning my trust - something that just over a month ago I'd never have thought possible - and I smile to myself at the thought.

"What's with the secret smile?" Sam asks, breaking me out of my thoughts.

I look over at him, chewing my lip as I consider him a moment, before deciding to simply tell him the truth. "I beat a trigger," I reply proudly.

"Oh yeah? Which one is that?"

"I'm in the car with you. Alone. And I'm not panicking. I'm not even scared," I admit, unable to keep the self-satisfaction out of my voice. In fact, I sound downright boastful.

Sam continues to glance between me and the road. "Was that trigger specific to me? Or guys? Or being alone with anyone?" he asks.

"Guys. Men. Being alone with a guy in general is... well I haven't been in almost a year, anyway. Except for you, obviously. But in a car... I never thought I'd be able to do it again, to be honest. Not ever," I admit, wondering why I feel so compelled to answer him when he asks me a question, even an inherently personal one.

Sam considers my words, then nods. "It's the safe word. See? I told you it would work. You're comfortable because you know if I do something to bug you all you have to do is say one word and I'll back off."

I think about his explanation and determine that while the safe word has definitely helped in the way he's described, it really worked more as a facilitator than anything. Because while I may not have had "calculus" to say before, I still had "no" and "stop" and all the others, and I know better than anyone that with the wrong person, no word, safe or otherwise, is worth a damn.

"It's not just the safe word and you know it," I whisper.

We stop at a red light and Sam looks at me intently. "Like I said, you're stronger than you think you are, Ror."

I shrug and look away as the light turns green, and Sam's eyes return to the road and he drives on. I'm still not sure he's right about that.

"Are you coming to Andrew's tomorrow night? I think it's gonna be a smaller thing, not a big party." He changes the subject.
"No, I can't. My mom's friend is coming to visit and we're going out to dinner." One of her closest friends from childhood is coming out from the city and my mom is really looking forward to it. Even though she works in Manhattan, my mother rarely has time to do anything social. She usually even works through lunch or has to meet with clients.

"You and your mom are pretty close, huh? I mean you're always saying you have to have dinner with her..."

He's right. I do have dinner with her most week nights, and I've used this as an excuse many times to avoid social invitations. "We're all each other has," I shrug. "She gave up her whole life for me. I'm the reason they got divorced - my parents I mean. The least I can do is have dinner with her."

"We have that in common then," Sam says quietly after a pregnant pause.

I turn to him, perplexed.

"My dad left because of me, too."

I shake my head. "No, I mean it literally. I'm the only reason they broke up. She was on my side, he wasn't. She gave up her career, her home, her marriage, all of it, just to get me the fuck out of there."

Sam stops at another red light and turns his whole body toward me. He licks his bottom lip, unwittingly distracting me. He has fascinating lips. Full. Pink. I blink a few times to stop these wayward thoughts about someone who is supposed to be my friend.

"The last time my dad hit my mom, he broke her nose. I was thirteen. Big for my age. For the first time, I hit him back. A lot. And then I told him to pack his shit and to leave, and if he ever came back the whole town would know what a piece of shit he was, including the cops." Sam's voice is deathly quiet. "So yeah, he left because of me. I'm the reason they got divorced."

I swallow nervously. I'm struck by Sam's confession that his father was physically abusive to his mom. Elaine seems so normal, so put together. I would never have pegged her for a victim. It also kind of explains a little more about Bits. Her seeking out an older guy to date, and her extreme reaction when he abandoned her. God, it all must have been so hard on her. And on Sam, too. I wonder how many times he had to witness his own father hurt his mom, and he was only a child.

"I'm so sorry," I murmur.

Sam shakes his head. "Don't be. We're better off without him," he echoes my own words back to me.

I nod. I'm still reeling from the fact that Sam is confiding in me. I would never have pegged her for a victim. It also kind of explains a little more about Bits. Her seeking out an older guy to date, and her extreme reaction when he abandoned her. God, it all must have been so hard on her. And on Sam, too. I wonder how many times he had to witness his own father hurt his mom, and he was only a child.

"I'm sorry, Rory," I murmur.

Sam shakes his head. "Don't be. We're better off without him," he echoes my own words back to me.

I nod. I'm still reeling from the fact that Sam is confiding in me. I've spent so much time feeling like I was a burden to him, and wondering what he's getting out of this friendship at all. Like when he told me about Bits, this confession about his father gives me a chance to be there for him. To give him something back to him.

"Can I ask you something, Ror?" he asks quietly. I look at him warily, but nod. "Did your dad... hurt you?"

I take a deep breath and shake my head. "Not in the way you're thinking."

"How then?"

I'm silent for a few moments. The car is in park, in the middle of the street, empty on a weeknight. "He didn't protect me. He didn't help me. He blamed me..."

"Didn't protect you from who, Rory? Blamed you for what?"

I glare at Sam. I don't know how we got here. He knows so much, but he also knows nothing at all, and I'm not sure I want him to know. Once he does, he'll look at me differently, that's a fact. So what if he's already deduced that I'm a victim of something? He probably thinks someone hit me, like his dad did to his mom. And I think it'd be best to let him think that.

"Calculus," I whisper, blinking through the blur of welled tears. Sam looks hurt, and I don't know if he's upset that I still won't confide in him or upset for me.

Suddenly the sound of a car horn blares from behind us. The light has turned green and we didn't notice. Wordlessly, Sam shifts gears and resumes driving me home.

When he pulls up in front of my house, the front door is open and my mother is standing in the open doorway. She may trust Sam to drive me home, but she isn't going to give him time alone with me in a parked car, that's for sure.

Sam stops me before I open the passenger door. "I'm sorry, Rory. I don't mean to pry, I just... You know you can talk to me right? If you want to, I mean. You can tell me anything, I won't repeat it, I swear. I just want to be here for you, okay? I care about you."

He stares at me intently as I process his words. They've surprised me, and I don't know why, because I think I already know them to be true. The thing is, I have talked to him. I do talk to him. More than anyone else who isn't my mother or paid to listen to me. And I know I can trust him; I know he hasn't repeated anything I've told him. I know this without him having had to tell me.
I think it's hearing him say he cares about me that's gotten to me. I remember hearing Robin say those same words. I remember wondering exactly what they meant, and believing them simply because he'd spoken them. I'd believed a lot of things simply because Robin said them, not only about his feelings, but about my own. But I'm not the same naive girl I was a year ago. Not even close.

And yet with Sam, the words seem extraneous. His actions have already proven he cares about me - that he's a good friend. And I realize I care about him, too. Very much.

"I know," I finally whisper.

Sam nods once and then I follow his gaze behind me where my mother is waving from the doorway, obviously wondering what's holding us up. Before I know what's happening, Sam has gotten out of the car and walked around to open the passenger door for me. I climb out and am about to tell him goodnight when he starts leading me up the walkway to my house.

"What are you doing?" I breathe.

Sam smiles wryly. "Walking you to your door, of course. You got to meet my mom..." 

Oh, Jesus.

Sam holds out his hand to my mother and introduces himself.

"Hi, Mrs. Pine. I'm Sam Caplan, Rory's friend, it's nice to meet you," he says politely. I roll my eyes at his formality.

"Hi, hi. It's Ms. Pine, but you can call me Amy, anyway." She seems a little flustered and I narrow my eyes at her. If I'm not mistaken... is my mother blushing? I look back at Sam and allow myself to really take him in. He really is gorgeous. His midnight blues sparkle in the dim evening light, that incredible dimple ever present with his charming smile. Okay, fine, I don't blame her.

"I hope you consider letting Rory come with us on spring Break," he says, and I throw him a death glare. I haven't even brought this up to my mother yet. My mom's eyebrows practically shoot into her hairline and she turns her gaze on me.

Great, here goes nothing...

"I'd be going with Carl and Tina. Sam and his friends are just going too," I explain. My mother doesn't say anything, I can see her turning this over in her head and imagining all of the awful things that could happen, none of them any more awful than the things that have already happened.

"My uncle works in hospitality. He's getting us a great deal on the hotel. Flight, too. It'd be no trouble to include Rory," Sam offers, but my mother is glaring at him with open hostility, any effect of his charm having been obliterated by her concern for her daughter. Sam's smile falters. "She'll be fine. I'll look out for her. I, uh, won't let anything happen," he murmurs, his voice turning hesitant.

My mother’s eyes narrow. "With all due respect, Sam, the last boy who made such promises to my daughter wasn't exactly sincere."

"Mom!" I admonish. "Can we talk about this later?" I hiss. My tone says it all.

The house phone rings and I'm grateful for the interruption.

"Rory!" my mother chides.

"Sorry," I grumble.

It's my mom's friend, Karen, who's coming to visit tomorrow. She's a talker, and she keeps me on the phone for nearly ten minutes despite my attempts to blow her off. After finally telling her I'd have my mother call her back, she lets me go. I'm surprised when I go to head upstairs and find Sam and my mom still in our modest front hall, talking. I shoot them both a puzzled look and my mother excuses herself.

"What was that about?" I ask Sam.

He shrugs. "I was just trying to soften her up about Miami."

I laugh. "Good luck with that."

"I'll pick you up at 8:10."

"Okay."

And with that, he turns and leaves.

I close and lock the door, ensuring the deadbolt is tightly secure. Not a minute later, my mother calls me into the living room where she's watching The Daily Show and going over a legal brief.

"So what is this about Miami? You haven't even mentioned it..."

"What were you and Sam talking about?" I counter.

She considers me a moment. "How much does he know?" she asks.
I don't say anything.
"Rory?"
"More now that you said that thing about the last boy who made me promises."
My mom sighs. "I'm sorry, Rory. I was just thrown by the whole spring break thing, and him saying he'd look out for you. And, by the way, you failed to mention your new friend was a bonafide supermodel. A warning might have been expedient, you know."
I roll my eyes. "What did you say to him?" I press, worried now.
She shakes her head. "It's not what I said, it's what he said..."
I give her a look to urge her on, and she does.
"He told me about his sister. That she went through a tough time, too. Then he said that he doesn't really know any details about what happened with you, but he knows you've been hurt, but that you're doing better than you realize. He insisted that you can handle going away with your friends, and that he would look out for you since he's used to looking out for his sister. He seemed so sincere... He said that obviously someone betrayed you, and me too, but that we can trust him. That he cares about you."
I sit down on the sofa, dumbstruck. "He saw me have a panic attack my first day of school."
"You never told me that," my mother accuses.
"Then I slapped him when I thought he was hitting on me. At a party. But he was just... looking out for me. And I accused him of tricking me into being alone with him in the library. And I had another attack, but he stopped it."
"He stopped it? What are you talking about? You mean your medicine stopped it," she corrects me, but I shake my head.
"No. Sam said I didn't need a pill, and he just... hugged me. Until I calmed down. And I did. I was... fine."
"You were alone with him?" my mother asks, eyes alight with both concern and hope.
I nod. "A few times now. He's my friend. He's not gonna hurt me," I murmur, realizing how fervently I believe it.
My mom sighs. "Okay, Rory. Why don't you go to bed. We'll talk about this Miami thing tomorrow, okay?"
"Okay."
CHAPTER ELEVEN

Christmas break, Last year

I never confronted Robin about the perfume, and I’m not sure why. The thing is, he never told me we were exclusive, and I still haven't found the courage to ask. I think I'm afraid of what he might say.

On one hand, it feels like a ridiculous question. We've been seeing each other nearly four months, and now that Christmas is over and my parents have gone down to care for my grandmother again, I'm staying at the Forbes' for four days. Lacey invited me, but my dad is the one who told me I'd be staying there. He said it wasn't right for me to sleep at another man's house when I'm seeing Robin - not that either of us has ever referred to my best freaking friend in the world as "another man" before. But it's stuff like that that makes it seem obvious that Robin's my boyfriend, and I'm afraid he'll just laugh if I ask him if he is. I have no experience with this, and I definitely don't want him to laugh at me.

Or he could say we're not exclusive. That we're just dating - not boyfriend and girlfriend. And I think I'm more afraid of that. And what right do I have to accuse him of stepping out on me when he's never even said he was mine?

I never told Cam what happened that night in the guest room. He'd have completely lost it, I have no doubt, and the absolute last thing I need is a fight between my best friend and my... whatever Robin is. But thankfully, it hasn't happened again.

But Robin has done other things.

He's been more subtle about pressuring me for the most part. Only when he's been drinking is he on the more aggressive side. Now that football season is over, we both have more time on our hands, and we've been spending a lot of it together. It also means he's been drinking more. We're not alone much, except in one of our cars, and he did get especially handsy last week when I drove him home after a party. He made me cry again, but he spent the rest of the week making it up to me. I didn't tell Cam about that either.

Now we're all at yet another party down by the lake. The December night air is mildly chilled, and I've already had two beers - the most I've ever had. I'm feeling a little buzzed, I guess, but I'm not sure I really like it and I'm ready to get to bed. Lacey's driving so I do a quick scan to find her, but neither she nor Robin are anywhere in sight.

I make my way back toward the dirt lot where everyone is parked, and though I still don't see anyone, I hear voices so I follow them. But I pause when I hear my name.

"Fuckin' Rory is lookin' so hot tonight, Forbes. You're lucky as hell," Robin's friend Mark slurs.

I hear a familiar chuckle from his other friend, Tommy. "He ain't lucky. He's cursed. That girl's got the face of an angel, the body of a temptress, and the attitude of a fuckin' nun! He ain't even gettin' any! Lucky, my ass!" More laughter.

"Temptress? Kinda a grown-up word for you, Tommy, isn't it?" Mark cajoles his buddy.

Embarrassment and shame paint my cheeks in a blush and tears prick behind my eyes.

"That's enough!" Robin roars.

My jaw drops so hard it practically bounces. He's defending me to his best friends. Holy. Shit.

"You motherfuckers don't look at her body. That's fuckin' mine. And she ain't no nun. She's just a good girl. Not like all your bitches who open their legs on the first fuckin' date. Ya'll think I didn't know what I was gettin' myself into with her? I don't mind puttin' my damn time in. She's the kinda girl you marry."

Silence.

"You serious, Forbes?" Mark asks tentatively.

There's no verbal response, but Robin must make some expression or gesture because Mark whistles dramatically.

"I'm about to reveal myself and act like I've only just found them when Robin speaks again, but softly. "Anyway, just cause I ain't gettin' any from her yet don't mean I ain't gettin' any."

There's a chorus of howling laughter and guffaws of reverential male approval.

"It doesn't mean he isn't getting any? My heart stops beating and I freeze in place. God, I'm so fucking stupid! The pain of Robin's duplicity lances though my chest, and it's only now, as I stand here doubly affronted by his betrayal and his remorselessness, that I realize just how deep my feelings for him have managed to take root. How much I really care for him. Cared. Care. Shit!

I'm flooded with wave after wave of shame and outrage. And worst of all - hurt.
No, Robin never said we were exclusive, but this is a betrayal. I take a few inexorable steps back, and then break into a run away from my aggrieved indignity, and the man who apparently doesn't hesitate to dishonor the girl he claimed to "care about".

I hurry away, desperate to put as much distance as possible between me and the stupid fucking party, and into the trees that surround the lake.

I was right about the perfume. Of course I was. I knew it then, and I know it now. I'm just a foolish girl who clung to denial like so many before me. Robin went out, did God knows what to God knows who - probably Maddie - and then came upstairs to make out with me. And he's just broadcasted it to all his friends.

My feelings for Robin - just hours ago a beautiful tree, slowly but surely blooming and growing, is losing its leaves like in autumn. Is it hibernating for winter, or dead? In my mind I try to rip it out like a weed, but those damned roots, they're too deep, too strong, and the harder I pull, the more I just tear apart the heart they've dug their brambles into.

I can't remember the last time I cried like this. I feel like such a fool. My phone buzzes, but I'm immobile. I sit next to a tree and hug my knees despite my dress, unable to quite can't catch my breath. I've never felt like this before. I feel humiliated, pathetic, betrayed. I am a joke to them. I am a joke to him.

It's a long time before I calm down enough to look at my phone. They're texting me. All of them. I ignore Lacey and Robin and hastily scroll through Cam's concerned texts. I hate that I've worried him, and he is the only one I bother replying to.

I direct him to where I am and ask that he please come get me and take me home.

Less than five minutes pass before I hear his footsteps crunching on the leaves and sticks of the forest floor.

"Ror?" Cam asks as he cautiously approaches me. I keep my face buried against my arms. "Rory girl, what happened?" He's horrified. I know seeing me upset hurts him deeply, and I've had some time now, so I rally to pull myself together and stand.

"Please take me home, Cam," I murmur. He steps forward and flings his arms around me, hauling me tightly to his chest.

"What happened, Ror? You need to tell me," he whispers into my hair.

I shake my head. "Please, please, just take me home."

"Aren't you stayin' with the Forbes?" he asks, confused.

I shake my head again. "Could I stay with you instead?"

"Of course, Rory girl." Cam takes a deep breath and releases me. "He do somethin' to hurt you?" he asks carefully, his voice deathly quiet.

I can't lie to him, but I can't have him going after Robin right now either. "Not in the way you think, Cam," I assure him.

"I'll fuckin' kill him," he growls.

I step up to him and clutch his tee shirt tightly, drawing from his strength. "I just really need you to take me home right now and stay with me. Could you do that? Please?" I look up at him through my lashes and his conflicted eyes undo me.

I don't deserve to have a friend like him. His arms wrap around me again and it occurs to me that he's probably stronger than Robin. They'd be closely matched, but my money would be on Cam in a fight. He's probably an inch or so taller, and his muscles are lean but built, and something about him is just stronger I think. Maybe it's just the safety I find in his arms. Cam would never, ever hurt me. In fact, he'd kill for me. I know that inherently. I can't let him get into a fight. That would be awful.

"Yeah, Ror, let's go." Cam leads me out of the trees and to his truck. When I texted him where I was I was just going to make out with him, but it's not quite right. I'm so grateful I don't have to go back to that lot.

I take a deep breath and pull out my phone again. I need to text them to let them know I'm going home and I have a ride. I don't mention I'm going to Cam's, but if either of them knows me at all, they'll know it anyway.

Cam stays quiet as he drives us home and leads me to his room. He knows better than to push me to talk. He knows me better than anyone in the world.

I lie down on his bed in my sundress since I don't have pajamas here and I don't feel like walking next door to get them. Cam offers to run over, but I don't want him to leave me right now. He's waiting for me to be ready to tell him what happened, but his jaw is clenched, his fists so tight they're turning white.

"He didn't touch me, Cam," I murmur, because I know that's what he's thinking. Not this time anyway. Cam exhales, like he'd been holding his breath, and comes to sit beside me on the bed and I turn to him. He strokes my hair.


I shake my head. Now that I've had some time to think it through, I'm not sure he did anything at all.
"Ror."

Reluctantly I meet Cam's gaze. He sighs and lies down beside me, and I roll onto my back so we're side by side staring at the ceiling. We've had countless heart to hearts just like this. "I think I overreacted," I admit.

"Ror, I found you huddled in the middle of the damn woods, cryin' hysterically. There's a million thoughts going through my head right now. Please just tell me what happened," he pleads.

"He never said we were exclusive. I never asked."

"He cheat on you?" Cam asks. I shake my head. "He can't cheat on me if he's not my boyfriend."

"You've been seeing him for months, of course he's your boyfriend!" Cam's getting upset on my behalf. I'd expect nothing less, but in this moment, it's just not helpful.

"Can you stop being my defender right now and be objective, please."

"I'll never stop being your defender, Ror, but I can also be objective, and whether you two have discussed it or not, you have the right to expect more from him." Cam shakes his head, incredulous. "He told you he's seein' someone else?"

"No."

"So why do you think he's steppin' out on you?"

I take a deep breath. "Last month, when I stayed over, I'd hung out with the girls and he went out with his buddies. He got home real late, but he came upstairs to give me a goodnight kiss."

"Just a kiss?" Cam interrupts.

"Yeah, Cam, just a kiss," I confirm. That time. "I uh... I thought I smelled perfume on him."

"It coulda been Lacey's," Cam offers. "Or one of his boys coulda had a girl with him."

"That's what I thought," I say, though I didn't really. Even then, I knew what it had meant. "No, that's not true. I suspected something. I knew he wanted more and I just wasn't ready."

"Wanted more?"

"More than kissing."

Cam lets out a growl. "Dammit Ror! A man doesn't step out on his girl because she ain't ready to sleep with him!"

I don't reply. I'm not sure he's right.

"I was looking for them tonight. So we could go home. I overheard Robin talkin' with Marcus and their boys..."

I trail off, remembering how Robin had said such sweet things... before saying that one horrible thing.

"And..." Cam prompts.

"Marcus said somethin' about me. How Robin ain't gettin' any because I'm like a nun. Robin defended me. He yelled at them not to even look at me because I was his. Basically that their girls were sluts, but I was the kinda girl he'd marry - pretty things, really..."

Cam rolls onto his side so he's looking down at me and I meet his gaze. There are tears in my eyes, I know, but they don't fall. "And then?"

My voice comes out a whisper. "And then he said that just because he ain't gettin' any from me, doesn't mean he isn't gettin' any."

Cam stares down at me for a few moments. He reaches down and brushes away the one tear that wouldn't just stay put before breathing, "The son of a bitch."

I look away, ashamed. This is the crux of the issue: I don't want to do anything but kiss. There's something wrong with me. Me, not Robin. How could I expect him to only want me when I'm giving him nothing? I'm just not enough. How could I be?

When I glance back at Cam, he's quietly seething, I can tell.

Cam suddenly jumps from the bed. "I'm gonna fuckin' kill him," he growls.

"No, Cam," I go after him.

"Yes, Ror. That threat? It wasn't a threat, it was a fuckin' promise. I warned him not to hurt you. He fuckin' knew better!"

"It's not his fault!" I shout, the words flying from my mouth before I can even process them. Cam glares at me. "It's... not." I shake my head. "He's been waitin' on me for months. I just wasn't ready. I can't expect him to... and I never asked him to either. I never told him I didn't want him seein' anyone else, never even brought it up. He didn't hurt me. It's... it's my fault," I murmur, defeated.

Cam takes two giant steps until he's right in front of me, and I'm once again struck by how inherently male he is. So handsome, so big and strong. And so damn good to me.

He reaches up to swipe at my tears, then holds up his damp thumb for me to see. "See these? These tears, from these innocent brown eyes? These are because of him." His fingers whisper down my neck and land on my sternum,
safely above the humble swell of my breasts. "This here? This is the sweetest, most beautiful heart in the goddamn world. And it's hurting. And that's because of him, too. He is the luckiest bastard on fuckin' earth, havin' a chance with my best friend in the world. And instead of cherishing that, he's goin' out with you, and messin' around on the side with some slut who couldn't hold a candle to you, Ror."

I say nothing. I just stare up at Cam, mesmerized.

"I warned him, Ror. He fuckin' deserves it," he murmurs before turning to his bedroom door. It takes me a moment to realize he means to go after Robin.

"No, please, Cam!" I latch onto his arm, and he turns back to me. I take advantage of his hesitation, stepping into his chest and banding my arms tightly around his waist. My ear is pressed against his heart, which beats in double time with his outrage. I wait for him to calm, and he does, his breathing slowly returning to normal. His arms envelop me in safety and a lifetime of unconditional friendship.

"I'm so tired. I don't want to think any more tonight. Do you think we could just go to bed?" I plead with him. Cam considers me and sighs. "Sure, Ror, but this ain't over. You go on and get into bed." I obey immediately, utterly exhausted. Cam goes to the top shelf of his closet to retrieve his sleeping bag. I scoot over to what was my side of the bed when we were kids and flip open the covers. "Cam?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you think you can handle sleepin' in the bed with me?" My voice is small. I know it's not a normal request, but I just really need him right now.

Cam stares at me, conflicted. "You need me to hold you?"

I nod.

Cam blows out a long-winded sigh, and drops the sleeping bag to the floor. He pulls off his jeans and scoots in behind me, under the covers. He slides a strong arm under my neck and slings the other over my waist like it's the most natural thing in the world.

And the truth is, it feels like it is. I feel safe. I feel loved. Cam's warm breath kisses the back of my neck, and I breathe in the sweet, clean, masculine scent that is only him, and it comforts me in a way only he ever could. I cuddle back against him. He presses his lips to my hair.

"Night, Ror," he whispers.

"Night, Cam. I love you."

I can both hear and feel his sharp intake of breath. "Me too, Ror."

****

I awaken still in Cam's arms, but we're facing each other instead of spooning. He's already awake and watching me. It should be awkward, but it's not, it's... home.

"Mornin'," I croak, and Cam smiles wistfully.

"Mornin' Rory girl. You sleep good?" he asks.

I nod. I really did.

The muffled sound of loud knocking echoes from the front door and we both jump. "Your mom forget her key or somethin'?" I ask. Cam's mom is a doctor and works at the hospital doing a lot of overnight shifts. His dad died when we were kids.

He shakes his head. "Nah, she's not due home 'til this afternoon."

The knocking sounds again, louder this time. Cam looks at me meaningfully before tucking my sleep mussed hair behind my ear. "Stay here."

He stands and jogs out of the room, still in his boxers and tee shirt from last night. I follow him to the landing, but hang back as he makes his way through the front hall. The door is hammered again and I jump. Cam shoves his hand through his hair and looks back at me up on the landing.

"Damn it, Ror! Get back in my room!"

I swallow anxiously, but shake my head. I'm not leaving him.

Bang bang!

"Stop that already! Who's there?" Cam shouts.

"Let me in, Foster! I need to talk to her!"

Holy shit, it's Robin.

He called and texted me a hundred times last night, but instead of answering I shut off my phone, and haven't yet turned it back on.

"Go away, Forbes!" Cam calls back.

"I know she's in there! You have to let me talk to her!"
I was afraid he'd be angry after I ditched him last night, but there's no anger in his voice. He's upset, yes, but he sounds distressed, almost... desperate.

Cam glances back at me again before opening the door, stepping out onto his front porch, and closing it quickly behind him. I hurry downstairs but stay inside, watching through the window from behind the curtains.

"Calm the fuck down, Forbes. You need to go home. Now." Cam folds his arms over his chest in challenge, blocking the door like a sentinel.

Robin's backed away from the door, but he doesn't back down. "I ain't leavin' 'til she talks to me," he replies. He turns his gaze to the door. "Come on, sweetheart! Talk to me! Why'd you run off on me?"

Cam takes a step toward him in warning. "You leave her the hell alone! You fuckin' bastard! Don't you even dare address her!"

Robin blinks back at him, momentarily stunned. "She ain't yours, Foster. You know that, right? I know you want her - you've always wanted her. But she. Ain't. Yours," he says carefully.

Cam takes another step forward, his arms unfolding from his chest to fist at his sides. "And yet it was my arms she slept in last night."

Robin's eyes widen and his nostrils flare, and he starts to move toward Cam. And suddenly I have wings. I fly outside and rush between them before they can come to blows.

God, I wish Cam hadn't said that. Robin will take it the wrong way, Cam had to know that. Idly I wonder if that's why he said it. But he doesn't know Robin, I do. It's not going to get Robin to back off, it's just going to make him angry. And maybe that's what Cam wants - a fight.

"Stop it!" I shout at the both of them.

Robin takes a step back, his gaze softening at my presence.

"Cam, on the other hand, glares at me. "Get back inside, Ror. I got this."

"No, Cam, I got this," I reply, and turn to face Robin. I'm taken aback by his expression. He looks... hurt.

He nods toward Cam, but he's looking at me. "You sleep with him?" he asks.

I shake my head, because I think he's asking if I had sex with Cam. "Not like that. Just sleep," I assure him.

"It ain't true, sweetheart. But we never said we were..." Robin asks quietly.

"You don't owe him shit, Ror. Don't explain anything to that son-of-a-bitch," Cam growls.

His girl? Now I get angry. Moisture pricks at my eyes and I hate that I can't just be mad without crying. I suck in a deep breath. "You think it's okay to fuck other girls when I'm your girl?" My voice is shaky and I wish I was stronger. Cam stands completely still behind me and Robin freezes, ostensibly stunned. Maybe at my gall? Maybe because he's never heard me curse before.

Robin takes a step toward me and reaches up for a hold of my arm, but in a flash Cam is a wall between us.

"Don't you fuckin' touch her!" Cam snarls.

Robin ignores him and starts pacing. "Where'd you hear that?" he asks.

What? Is he going to try and deny it? "What does that matter?" I shout back at him. Cam remains a shield in front of me as Robin stops pacing and meets my gaze.

"It ain't true, sweetheart. But we never said we were..." he trails off and rakes his fingers through his hair.

"Can I talk to you in private?" he asks, pummeling Cam with his glare.

"No," Cam spits.

"I ain't askin' you, Foster." Robin tosses back. "I'm askin' my girl."

"So now she's your girl, huh? When you want to run around behind her back, it's cool because you never said you wouldn't, but now she's your girl, is she?" Cam voices my exact thoughts.

Robin resumes his pacing until his gaze lands on mine, ignoring Cam's vigilant presence between us. "Five minutes, Rory. Please. Let me explain. You owe me that much."

"She don't owe you shit," Cam grits out through his clenched jaw.

"Please, sweetheart," Robin begs.

I squeeze Cam's bicep and he turns to face me. He knows what I'm asking without my having to say a word, and he doesn't like it. He shakes his head.

"Cam, please. I'll be okay. You'll be right inside," I offer.

Cam takes care to block my view of anything other than him. "You don't owe him anything. You hear me, Ror? You don't gotta talk to him if you don't want to."

"I do want to."

That throws him. I don't want to upset Cam, always my protector, but I want to hear Robin out. Even if we're just going to end it, I want to have the conversation, one way or another, and he done with it. Cam glares at me, frustration radiating from his every pore. But he won't stand in my way, I know that, and with reluctant acceptance, he turns back to Robin.
"I will be right on the other side of that door." Cam points behind me. "If you so much as raise your voice to her, I swear to God, Forbes, I don't care if I get kicked off the team, expelled... I don't care if I end up in fuckin' jail. You got me?"

Robin doesn't respond. It's not like him to just let something like that just go, and I know he's holding back for my benefit. Fortunately Cam turns his attention back to me.

"Cam, really that wasn't."

"It's the truth, Ror," he interrupts. "You deserve better." He takes a deep breath and roughly runs his fingers through his still-sleep-mussed hair. "Stay on the porch, alright?"

I nod, and Cam turns back to Robin to shoot him one last death glare before heading inside and closing the door tightly behind him.

Robin takes a step toward me, but I hold out my palm to stop him.

"Sweetheart."

"Just don't, Rob," I sound as defeated as I feel, and I cross my arms protectively around my middle. Robin's hazel eyes are almost green today, but they're shadowed by dark circles as if he hasn't slept. Even though I know it's irrational, I'm struck with a vague sense of guilt over how securely I slept myself, and why. Robin's wheat-colored hair, almost always perfectly coiffed, is disheveled as well. But he's still so damn good looking, and I worry that if he says some pretty things, I could lose my resolve.

My resolve for what, though? I'm not even sure what I want anymore. I'm not sure I ever really did.

"You gotta talk to me, darlin'. Let me explain.""What do you need to explain, Robin? That you can fuck whoever you want, but I can't sleep over with my best friend like I've been doin' my whole life?" I find my voice, still shaky, but at least I can make my point.

"I swear to God I haven't slept with anyone since I started seein' you."

Now that throws me. I don't move.

Robin rubs his face with his palms. "Please sit down?"

I shake my head, holding my ground.

Robin sighs. "Well I'm gonna sit, if you don't mind."

I shrug and he sits sideways, one leg outstretched, his elbow resting on his knee.

"I know you're lyin'," I hedge, but he shakes his head in denial.

"Look Rory, I've made mistakes. I won't lie to you, okay? I haven't been perfect, but I haven't fucked anyone since last summer, I swear it."

I blink down at him, completely befuddled.

"If Foster said otherwise, it's because he's jealous, sweetheart. I know you don't wanna see it, but he wants you."

I shake my head again. "You're wrong. You're so damn wrong, Robin. But the fact is, I didn't hear it from Cam. All he did was comfort his friend when she was upset. I heard it from you." I say carefully.

It takes him a moment to recompose his shock. "Look darlin', I realize I was drunk last night, but I know I didn't do anything as crazy as tell my girl I'm baggin' someone else. Especially when it ain't even true," he drawls.

Does he think this is funny? I'm about to tell him what I overheard, when I register something he just said.

"What do you mean you've made mistakes?"

Robin rubs his face with his palms. "Please sit down?"

I don't move.

"Please?"

I sigh and relent, sitting on the opposite end of his step. "I've done other things. Not sex. Just... other things. We never talked about, you know, our expectations, you and me." He presses his eyes shut, like it hurts him to even say it out loud, though I'm pretty certain I'm the one who's hurting. "I know that sounds like a cop-out, Rory. I hear the words comin' outta my mouth and they sounded so reasonable in my head." He mutters a curse to himself. "I didn't want to pressure you, sweetheart. And I want you so damn bad, all the fuckin' time. It's all I can think about most days. I don't want anyone else. But I'm a man, and..."

"And you took care of things elsewhere," I finish for him.

He shakes his head in self-reproach, but his words don't match his expression. "It's been four months, Rory. I figured when you were ready to... move things along..." He takes another deep breath. "This whole thing is just crazy, because you're the only one I wanna touch. The only one I want touchin' me. I only thought of you, sweetheart, even when I- Fuck, this sounds so bad." Robin rubs his temples with his thumb and middle finger.

"Yeah, it does," I agree.

Robin pulls his leg in and scoots closer, leaning forward to stares intently down at me. "You tell me you want it to be just us, and it's done. You hear me? I won't even look at another girl," he swears.
But as much as I want that to make it all better, I shake my head. "You knew better, Rob. I'm not stupid, okay? I know I'm not what you're used to. I know I'm makin' you wait, and I know you want more. But you knew who I was when you first asked me out, and you know who I wasn't. And... it just kills me that you went around with other girls when we were..." I trail off pathetically. When we were what? Going on dates? Just kissing?

Because Robin's definitely wrong here, but he's right, too. We never talked about being exclusive, I've known this all along. And as much as the thought of it hurts, the thought of losing him hurts more. But then, I never even really had him.

Robin grabs my hand unexpectedly. "Don't say that, sweetheart. My heart can't take it. It hurts me so bad that you're hurtin'." His plead desperately, and I'm lost. I wasn't expecting him to care so much, or the sincerity of his emotions.

"How can you get angry with me for sleeping over at Cam's when you're seein' other girls? Even if I did hook up with him, which I didn't. It just doesn't make any sense, Robin." I think in the back of my mind I hope against hope he comes up with some unfathomable explanation that warrants forgiveness, but if it exists, I can't see it.

"Rory, you know I want more. You know I've been waitin' on you. If you suddenly decided you were ready to do more, and you did it with someone else? Yeah, I'd have a problem with that." He inches closer to me.

"Doesn't sound like you've been doin' much waitin'," I mutter under my breath.

"I have with you, sweetheart. You're a female, you can't understand. But you're so damn hot. You get me all worked up, and then I can't do shit about it. I'm sorry I took care of it with someone else, but I swear, I always knew I'd stop when you were ready for more."

I don't ask him why he couldn't just take care of himself... himself. I do understand what he means, but it still doesn't sound right.

"I never lied to you, sweetheart. If you asked me to, you know, for it to be just us, I wouldn't have touched anyone else. I won't touch anyone else, Rory. Just say the word."

"I haven't touched anyone else. I mean, I haven't kissed anyone else. Ever, in fact. I didn't need you to tell me you didn't want me to," I argue, but the fight in me is wavering. "I don't know I had to articulate it. I've never dated anyone before, I don't know the rules." I stop before my words turn into sob...sniffling.

"I'm glad to hear that, sweetheart. And I admit it, it woulda killed me if you had. I'm a hypocrite, Rory. I've known you were mine, and yet I wasn't yours in return. Not completely - not like you deserved. I'm a bastard, alright? I know it. But I'm a bastard who loves you, Rory. This is all new to me, too, ya know. I've dated 'a course, but there never were any rules, because I never cared.

"But I care with you, darlin', so damn much." Robin blows out a deep exhale. "It scares me how fuckin' much, sweetheart," he breathes.

My tears fall now, and my mouth gapes open. Robin just said he loves me. He's admitted he was wrong, that he was a hypocrite, and told me he loves me. I forcibly bury his transgressions deep in my broken heart as it begins to mend itself, completely evaded by entire vocabulary.

"You gotta give me another chance. I won't let you down again." He wipes my tears with his knuckles, and I lean into his touch. "Please forgive me?" It's a request, not a demand.

"Okay." The word falls from my lips strictly of its own accord. I'm still too stunned to properly form conversation.

"You hear me say that I love you, sweetheart?"

I nod, sniffing like a child as I try to quell my weeping.

"You love me too?" he asks, eyes wide and hopeful.

I nod again. I really think I do. All I know is that even when I was hurting because of him, I didn't want to let him go.

"Well damn!" Robin cheers like he's won the damned Orange Bowl, eliciting a small giggle out of me. He leans in and kisses me softly, and I let him. He holds my face and plants small kisses on my forehead, my cheeks, my nose, and my lips again.

Finally, he pulls away and stands, taking my hand. I follow him.

"Come on, let me take my girlfriend to breakfast." He enunciates the word "girlfriend". He's never said it before, and the sound of it exhilarates me.

"I need to tell Cam I'm leavin'."

Robin's eyes narrow. "You won't be spendin' any more nights in anyone's arms but mine." It's a statement, and I suppose not an unreasonable one.

I nod my agreement.
I turn to go inside, but Cam's already emerging onto the porch. He must have been listening. Suddenly the thought of him overhearing all that unnerves me deeply, my gut rolling with doubt, and I don't understand it. I give him a hug despite knowing it'll bug Robin. Sleeping in his bed with him is one thing, but I won't stop hugging my best friend.

"Thanks Cam, for last night. For everything," I murmur as I pull away.
Cam is reluctant to release me. "You sure about this, Ror?" His voice low and hoarse.
I know he's upset by all of this - he doesn't trust Robin. But I didn't expect to see such turmoil in his eyes.
I squeeze his shoulder in consolation. "Yeah, Cam. It's fine. He's explained, and I've forgiven him. We talked about it, and, you know, now he's my boyfriend he's promised it won't happen again," I explain in a whisper, I don't want Robin to hear too much. It's awkward talking about him when he's only a few feet away, but Cam deserves an explanation.

"If that's what makes you happy," Cam murmurs. He's disappointed in me and it stings, but this is my decision, and I've made it.
"It is, Cam," I breathe, and then with a pat on his arm, I turn to leave with Robin. My stuff is already at his house since I'm supposed to stay with them for break anyway.
Robin opens the passenger door for me and as I'm climbing in, Cam calls out to me. "You call me if you need me, Ror. Whenever, I mean it!"
Robin closes my door before I can respond, but I nod to him through the windshield. I know I can always call him if I need him.
Cam stays on his porch until we've driven out of sight.
CHAPTER TWELVE

Present Day

The weekend was blissfully uneventful. Sam drove me to school on Friday and then surprised me at lunch by taking Tucker to go pick up my car from the medical office park. It was back in the student lot before I got back from the diner. That evening, I found an unexpected ally in Karen, and we spent our dinner out convincing my mother I'm responsible enough to go to Miami. Mom wasn't exactly eager to agree, but the fact that she's known Carl and her parents since I was little didn't hurt, and she's gotten to know Tina since we moved here and likes her, too.

I know my mom is anxious about the whole thing, and frankly, so am I, but I'm eighteen, and like Sam said, I'm only going to be a senior once. I don't want to let Robin Forbes take anything more from me than he already has. With Carl and Tina - and if I'm honest with myself, Sam - I think I can handle it. In fact, I'm actually looking forward to it. Less than two weeks away.

When my mom came to my room Sunday evening with my travel itinerary printed out, I had mixed feelings, though my excitement and gratitude were all I allowed her to see. Just seeing the word "Florida" in print made me break out in goose bumps. But Miami is nowhere near Linton - where I assume Robin still is. And I must admit, it gives me some satisfaction that my life isn't the only one that was irrevocably altered by him and what he did. I ruined his life too, or so he, and everyone else in town, screamed from the rooftops. And, vengefully, I wish it were true - I wish I had the power to ruin his life. But the truth is, he ruined his own damned life.

Right now, my biggest concern is Chelsea and her friends. I'd be more excited for Miami if they weren't coming too. Ostensibly, we're all 'friends'. We go to the same parties and even find ourselves at the same lunch table from time to time. But ever since Chelsea called me out for avoiding the locker room and Sam defended me, she's given up on subtlety.

I find her casting vicious glares my way, particularly when I'm interacting with Sam, but instead of backing away, now I simply ignore her. I've spent enough time letting the popular kids - and adults for that matter - wield their power over me. But Port Woodmere isn't Linton, it's not a small town, and Chelsea isn't Lacey.

Monday has dragged on and I'm relieved when the last bell of the day rings and my lab period is over. I'm not a science person - English and History have always been my thing - but since lab alternates days with phys ed, it's the lesser of two evils for me. But Port Woodmere isn't Linton, it's not a small town, and Chelsea isn't Lacey.

After school, I hop in my Jeep and follow Carl to drop off her car at home so we can go meet Tina at the Roosevelt Field Mall. Carl has insisted I do some shopping for our trip, and frankly, she's right. All I ever wear are jeans and tee shirts, but based on what she's asking me to try on, I can only surmise she's planning on pimping me out in South Beach. I decline the leather mini skirt and bare midriff halter and select a few sun dresses that aren't too revealing. I also buy two skirts, one denim and one pink flouncy one that is too girly to be provocative.

Swimsuits are a bigger issue. Carl and Tina's selections are nothing more than a few tiny scraps of material suspended on strings. I pick out two one-pieces that are probably meant more for my mother than me, but I don't care.

Carl barges into my dressing room as I'm checking myself out in a black skirted one-piece. It does nothing for my figure, but everything for hiding my scar.

"Oh, hell no," Carl declares as she hangs a few more options on the rack.

I roll my eyes and peruse her latest selections. At least she's heading in the right direction. The bikinis have more coverage, and she actually brought a few one-pieces, albeit ones that are arguably sexier than the bikinis. I finger one with a boy-shorts bottom and wonder if it will cover at least most of my scar.

"Rory, you have the sickest body. You are not covering it up on spring break! The whole point of the beach is to flaunt what you got," she admonishes.

I glance down at my skinny legs, shapeless hips, and modest breasts. Definitely not the sickest body. I pull out one of the one-pieces she brought in and try to figure out if the cut outs will be too revealing.

"That'll look great on you," Carl encourages, but my hesitation is obvious. "Rory, it's going to be fun, okay? Whatever you're worried about, whatever you're afraid of, just leave it behind. Me and Teen will be with you the whole time. It's going to be great." Great. She's sure using that word a lot.

"Except when you're off fucking Tuck and Andrew," I mutter under my breath.
"Hey. That sounded a lot like judgment."

I turn to her, contrite. "I'm sorry. I'm not judging you. In fact, I like Tuck. And frankly I think you two should quit messin' around and admit you really like each other." This shuts her up. She knows I'm right. "I was just sayin' that you both have guys going down there. That's all."

"You have Cap," she hedges.

I raise my eyebrows. "I don't have him. We're just friends. You're gonna end up with Tuck, Tina will be with Andrew, and Sam will find some girl to hook up with and I'll be up alone in my room ordering expensive room service and movies."

Carl puckers her mouth like she always does when she's thinking. "Actually Cap has been much less of a man-whore lately," she murmurs contemplatively. This catches my attention.

"How so?" I ask, trying to pretend I'm not as interested in the new direction of our conversation as I actually am.

Carl shrugs. "Well I don't know, it's not like he ever had a girlfriend or anything, but he sure hooks up a lot. Or used to anyway. He hasn't had a regular since Kendall graduated last year, but I mean, you see him at parties. Do you see him going upstairs with Lisa or Sarah or any of the other easy girls? I certainly haven't heard of his exploits from Tuck lately."

"Is that something he usually does? Hook up with a lot of random girls?" I ask, surprised. I'm not naive, I know a guy like Sam probably gets around somewhat, surely he's not celibate, but I haven't observed any of the kind of behavior Carl is describing.

"Um, yeah. They all do. Even Andy did before he and Tina got together. In fact, that's how they started, as a random hook up. And I mean, just friends or not, you're not blind, you see Cap. Tuck's more my type, but even I have to admit, Cap is fucking gorgeous. Every time I look over at the front row in calc, I think I've been transported to a GQ photoshoot!"

We both giggle. Carl is right. Of course Sam hooks up. I don't know why I haven't thought about it before. And if he's been more discreet about it as of late, I've no idea the reason, but I'm grateful not to have to witness it. Even if he's been more than clear that we're only friends, I have to admit, at least to myself, that I'd rather not witness his exploits, as Carl so eloquently referred to them.

I pick up the single one piece that is neither too revealing, nor makes me look like a grandmother, and set it aside.

"That's not all you're getting," Carl says matter of factly.

I give her a look that says "wanna bet?"

"Come on, Rory! Flaunt, remember?"

My muscles tense in frustration. Maybe this whole trip is a bad idea. Even with the sarongs and cover ups I've selected, there's no way I'll feel comfortable in beach gear. And really, what am I going to do when everyone else is hooking up? Even if Sam doesn't find some random hook up, Chelsea will be all over him, and with my friends all spoken for...

And what about my triggers? I'm bound to have a panic attack. Misgivings surge into earnest dread, and I start to think I've made a horrible mistake agreeing to this trip.

"Try on one of the bikinis I brought in. You'll look fantastic. Why cover up when you look like that?"

"Why cover up?" I hiss. My eyes sting with the threat of tears and my pulse races.

"No. I'm not having a panic attack. Not here. Not in a fucking dressing room."

I close my eyes. Ten. Nine. Eight. Seven....

I concentrate on taking long, even breaths and quickly start to calm. No, I won't panic, but that doesn't mean I'm not upset.

"Why cover up!?" I cry again. My tears start to fall, and idly I realize my reaction is over the top, but I'm upset. I'm vaguely aware of Carl's worried look as I tear at the swimsuit I'm wearing and yank it down until I'm standing completely naked except for my low-rise panties.

"This is why!" I squeal, gesturing to my scar - a full, grotesque inch of jagged, raised, pink scar tissue visible each above and below my panty line. I continue to cry as Carl jumps up from the bench and steps toward me.

"Oh my God, Rory. What happened?" she asks, bright green eyes wide and worried.

I reach up to swipe at my tears. I don't answer her.

"It's okay, Rory," she soothes.

"How?! How is it okay?!" I ask, sincerely desperate for an answer.

"However you got that scar is the problem, Rory. Not the scar. It doesn't look that bad. I mean, look at you," she gestures up and down my nearly nude body. "You're still totally gorgeous. You don't have to cover up because of that." She gestures dismissively at my scarred skin, as if it really isn't all that hideous.
We stare at each other as I absorb her words. They help, and yet they don't. My scar does not make my body ugly, according to Carl. She thinks it's totally gorgeous. But I don't want that either. To be attractive, to be desirable. To be targeted by men. To be prey. In my preoccupation over my scar, I almost forgot that it is not in itself the only reason I cover up. It's not even the main reason.

I take a deep breath and start getting dressed. I tug on my jeans and fasten my bra before pulling on my tee shirt. I pick up the bikini with the boy shorts and bandeau top. It's a bikini, yes, but it's really rather modest compared to what I know my friends will be wearing.

"Everyone will see it," I murmur absently as I inspect the bikini. "They'll know.

"Know what?" Carl asks.

I don't respond. Instead, I gather the items I've decided to purchase and with one last sigh, add the bikini to the pile, as well as one of the sexier one-pieces that's basically a bikini with a mesh scrap of material connecting the top to the bottom, even though I haven't tried on either of them. I know I most likely won't wear either, but who knows? Maybe with shorts over them. Even if they are on the sexier side, no one can accuse me of "asking" for anything by wearing beach wear on a beach.

Right?

Carl links her elbow with mine, and without another mention of my scar, leads me to the counter where Tina is already handing over her credit card.

****

On Tuesday Mr. Frank waits until the last minute of class to hand back last Friday's test. He waits until we're all packed up and filing out of the room. Carl is already out the door with her eighty five, and Sam is hanging by the door waiting for me when I'm handed my ninety four. My grin practically splits my face in two. I skip over to Sam and wave the paper in his face.

"That's my girl," he smiles, and holds out his hand for a high five. "God, I'm impressive," Sam murmurs.

I laugh. "Excuse me?" I reply, though I can't really argue the point.

"My tutoring skills. I mean, look, I turned a hopeless math failure into a brilliant student!" he boasts.

I punch him in the arm with my free hand. "I was pulling an eighty or so, hardly failing!" I correct him, and he grins.

"Details, details."

I roll my eyes.

"Anyway, you're all set for break. You and I are the only ones with single rooms. Carl and Tina are together, Andy and Tuck, Luke and Dave, Chel and Lily, Sarah and Melissa."

"I don't need everyone's rooming arrangements. Just mine is fine, thanks," I say cheekily, and Sam nudges me with his shoulder. "But why are you rooming alone?"

Sam shrugs. "Not really interested in listening to Andy and Tina screw each other. Or Tuck and Carl for that matter," he makes a scandalized face and I giggle.

"Whatever, Super Tutor, see you at lunch," I reply and turn off into my next period class.

****

We all end up at the diner at lunch again, including Chelsea. I'm a little disconcerted by the way I catch her looking at me - less combative and more inquisitive. Everyone is talking about Miami. The clubs they want to hit, the boutique shops, the restaurants. Sam and Tucker talk about surfing while Dave makes suggestive comments about taking Lily jet skiing and how he'd be happy to take her "for a ride". As I've gotten to know Dave, I've learned he never misses a chance at sexual innuendo, and while I usually find myself rolling my eyes, Lily seems to find his comments complimentary. I guess there's someone for everyone.

Tuck tries to talk Carl into letting him teach her to surf, and Sam offers to give me a lesson, which I decline. "She's from Florida. Why would she need a surfing lesson from you, Cap? She can probably ride big waves," Dave announces, smirking as he recognizes his lead-in for one of his trademark comments. "She can probably ride real big."

"Damn it, Dave, will you shut the fuck up?!" Sam growls in my defense.

I grit my teeth, and I know anyone paying me any attention can sense my tension. I remind myself that Dave makes these comments to anyone and everyone whenever possible. It's not personal. It's not about me. But even when I've confirmed with myself that I'm fine, I realize Sam's still aggravated.
"Chill out, man. I was just sayin-"

"I know what you were fucking saying and I'm saying to back the fuck off. Could you show the girl some damn respect? Jesus." Sam runs his fingers through his hair in frustration.

Dave stares wide eyed, clearly surprised by Sam's defensive response, so accustomed to slinging whatever ridiculous comment that springs to mind without consequence. In fact, Sam usually laughs. Dave says nothing more, he just looks between Sam and me as if trying to figure something out, and it unnerves me. But beside me, Sam is still unsettled.

"I'm okay, it's fine," I whisper into his ear.

He meets my gaze to confirm this for himself. "Well it's not fine with me," he mutters under his breath. Under the table, Sam hesitantly takes my hand and I grab on to the lifeline.

Out of the corner of my eye I see Chelsea spying our interaction, as she always does, and it irks me. As it always does.

"So, Florida? Is that where you're from?" Chelsea asks, her tone dripping with false cheer.

I consider her a moment, wondering at her motivation, the direction of her inquiry, before tentatively nodding.

"I was just thinking, we don't really know anything about you..." Her words sound like an accusation and I keep silent as Sam glares at her.

Carl is the one to come to my defense.

"You don't know anything, Chelsea, I've known Rory since I was like four." Carl is intentionally breezy, flippantly waving her hand as if to brush her off, but Chelsea doesn't relent.

"Is that so? How is that, since she lived down in Florida until a couple months ago?" she asks, still cheerily, as if she's genuinely just interested.

"Her grandma lived next to me. We used to play together when she came to visit," Carl explains.

"Hmm, so you hung out with her for what? One week out of the year? I'd hardly say you really knew her-"

It was two weeks, actually.

Carl narrows her eyes at Chelsea, and I'm vaguely aware that my grip on Sam's hand has tightened considerably.

"What is your point, Chel? Seriously, just get to it already," Sam demands, annoyed all over again.

"Well, Cap, I'm just trying to get to know Rory is all. I mean, we're all about to go on vacation with her, and what do we know about her really? She shows up in the middle of her senior year with no explanation and I'm just trying to figure out what she's hiding. After all, I don't want to go away with someone I don't even-"

"Then don't fucking come," I snap. I try to slide over to get out of the booth, but Sam is blocking me in.

"Excuse me," I say, but Sam doesn't budge, instead, when I try to tug my hand from his, he holds firm, his thumb tracing small circles on the back of my hand. I'm instantly reminded of Cam, who used to do the same thing to soothe me, and I wince at the symmetry. My mind starts reeling, racing with confused thoughts.

How did I get so close to Sam so quickly?

Why does it feel like I'm betraying Cam?

No. That's not what's happening here. No one could ever take his place. Never. God, I miss Cam. I miss what we had.

What the hell is Sam doing to me?

I'm so damn lost. I'm suddenly disconcerted by our entire relationship. I've only known him, what? Two months? Why does he comfort me so much, and yet make me so nervous at the same time? I thought that my jealous stirrings when Chelsea flirted with him were because I didn't like her, but what if it's about him?

What if everything is about Sam?

"You heard her, Chel. If you have a problem going away with Rory, then Don't. Fucking. Come." Sam's voice is deceptively soft and vaguely threatening. Chelsea is clearly outraged by the way her long-time friend is talking to her, but I'm still reeling, and it has nothing to do with her.

My breath comes in short gasps and beads of cool sweat pepper my face and chest.

"Rory, are you okay?" Carl asks, concerned.

"Please let me out," I plead to Sam, whose angry gaze flips to worry as it meets mine.

Finally, he scoots out of the booth to let me pass. I sling my bag over my shoulder and march toward the back of the diner where the restrooms are located, but turn and head out the back door instead. I stop on the landing of the steps that lead down to the back of the parking lot. The rain has let up into a light mist, and I soak in the cool air of early spring.

Fuck Chelsea and her accusations. I can handle her. It's Sam who has me thrown.

I close my eyes and start counting, but my mind can't focus on numbers right now. I breathe in, and out, in and out. I can't believe I haven't realized it before - how easily I've pushed my feelings down every time they threatened to surface.
In two months, Sam has forced his way into my heart, and nothing good can come of it. He's my friend - one of my closest friends! And here I am, lusting after him.

There's no point in denying it - I want him. And not just physically either. I've only ever wanted one other person in my life, and I only realized it when it was too late. And now, with Sam, it's already too late. I'm damaged beyond repair, I know it, and he knows it too. And maybe that's why he was so clear about only wanting me as a friend from the beginning, or maybe he simply isn't attracted to me. The reason is irrelevant, and I know it should make all of this easier to repress... but there's only one forgone conclusion: I will get hurt.

I am so FUCKED UP.

I drop my head into my hands and struggle to regulate my breathing. In, out... in and out. But instead of steadying, my breaths grow more shallow, until it feels as if my lungs are bound by bands of steel. I gasp in restricted gulps of air, but by now I'm covered in a fine sheen of cold sweat, the world spins around me, and I know I'm past the point of no return. Not without pharmaceutical assistance. I hastily yank open the the front pocket of my bag and grab my pill bottle.

It takes me too long to open the child-proof cap, and by the time I manage to get my hands on a pill, my vision is starting to blur. I swallow the pill dry, certain I won't make it inside for water before I hyperventilate and pass out.

I close my eyes and wait. Wait for the chemical magic to save me from my pathetic self. I count backwards from sixty, my eyes clenched tight against the dancing parking lot.

"Ror?"

It's Sam. Of course it is. I don't lift my head from my knees. I know Sam can see the pill bottle in my hand. I know I've let him down, and I also know he'll judge me for it. He'll know he was wrong. That I'm not stronger than I think I am - that I'm just as weak as I knew myself to be. And it serves him fucking right. He's not going to save me. No one is, and his unsolicited effort is just confusing me more. He keeps trying to be this good friend to me, and I don't understand why. He barely even knows me - just like Chelsea said. And I don't deserve him or his good will. I had someone. A boy I loved, who loved me. And I lost him, and it was all my fault.

Slowly, calm spreads through my veins as my damaged heart pumps my newly medicated blood through my body, scarred inside and out.

"Carl went to the bathroom to check on you... but she said you weren't in there..."

I still don't respond.

Sam sits beside me on the cold, damp concrete steps. "I just wanted to make sure you were alright," he murmurs softly.

"Fine," I whisper, finally lifting my head.

"You took a pill," he observes. A statement, not a question.

I shrug. So fucking what? They're my pills, and my doctor says I need them, so who the fuck is he to say that I don't? "Yeah, I did. I took a pill, Sam, because I needed it. And I needed it because I'm fucked up. And no amount of you tellin' me how I'm stronger than I think I am is gonna change that, okay?" I hiss in full southern drawl. I hate when I can't control my accent, and that aggravates me even more. I have no control. I have no control of anything.

Sam winces. "You're not fucked up, Ror," he insists.

"Yes I fucking am! And if you weren't so damn busy tryin' to fix me, you'd fucking see it!" I snap. I stand and face him, eyes locked, needing to know he hears me.

Sam stands slowly, following my lead. "I'm not trying to fix you, Rory. I'm just trying to be your friend," he says cautiously. He's obviously trying to stay calm - surely for my benefit - but I can tell by his clenched jaw and the way he's gritting his teeth that I'm pissing him off.

Well, good.

"You can't let Chelsea get to you like-"

"I can't? Of course I can, Sam! She was attackin' me! Accusin' me of God even knows what! But you know what? It ain't even her. I can handle her. I've known girls like her my whole life. It's you. You're the problem," I spit.

I don't know why I want to hurt him right now - maybe to get him back for making me want him, for making me care for him. But I do. I want to hurt him. And from the look in his eyes, I've no doubt I've succeeded.

Sam doesn't reply. He just stands there looking affronted.

"I am fucked up. Broken, okay? You can't fix me. I'm not fixable. I don't need you to defend me and I don't need your bullshit about how strong I am. You're not helping, you know that? You're only hurtin' me. And the worst of it is, I was almost starting to believe you. But... I am fucked up. The sooner you just accept that, the easier it'll be on both of us," I mutter bitterly. I blink back tears and take a deep breath. "I understand if you don't wanna be my friend anymore." I swipe at my wet cheeks and make my escape, fleeing down the stairs.
I climb into Carl's backseat to head back to school. She and Tina both ask if I'm okay, but I don't reply. I just ask her to drive, and mercifully, she does.

****

The rest of the day I'm numb. Or at least I try to remain numb. But thoughts of Sam and my horrible words to him creep back into my consciousness, as do words from Robin, from Cam. Words from another lifetime. One that may be over, but one so devastatingly ingrained what I've become that I can't move on to a new lifetime. I'm in limbo, and I fear I'm here for good.

I know my words hurt Sam. I meant for them to. But I'm not sure why. He doesn't seek me out, and I don't expect him to. But I'm not quite prepared when he passes me in the hall and averts his gaze. He doesn't speak to me, he doesn't even look at me. It's just like that second week of school. We've reverted back into strangers, and I'm once again invisible. I'm not sure why I expected anything else. I asked for this.

But I didn't expect it to hurt this much.

I realize he'll likely take me up on my offer to end our friendship. Why wouldn't he? I basically took everything he's ever done for me and thrown it back in his face. What I hadn't realized was how much I would miss him - how much I've taken him for granted. It's been a matter of hours, and already I feel the loss like a gaping hole in my chest. I never really considered how much I looked forward to seeing him each day. To talking to him, to joking and teasing with him. To his simple, innocent, friendly touches, that I now know were only innocent from his end.

And that's why I needed to do this, I remind myself.

I can't have feelings for Sam. I can't have feelings for anyone. Not for someone else who's just going to betray or abandon me, or find some new way to hurt me.

Yet somehow he's gotten me to trust him. And I can't understand why when I've already learned that lesson tenfold - when I know better. I'm so damn confused. And Sam says I'm not fucked up. That statement alone is enough proof he doesn't know what he's talking about. I'm fucking decimated.

I go from class to class, still on the edge of losing it, despite my medication. I consider taking another dose. It's technically too soon, but I am allowed to take two if I have a really bad attack. But I'm not about to have another attack, I don't think. Not unless I'm triggered somehow.

I grimace when I realize I'm making excuses, talking myself into taking drugs - even if they're drugs that were legally prescribed to me - to numb myself and for no other legitimate reason.

God, I'm fucked up.

By the time phys ed rolls around, I'm just happy that it's finally the last period of the day. We walk the track outside, and I'm grateful not to have to participate in a group sport right now. I walk alone, around and around, and though I'm aware of Chelsea walking somewhere behind me, snickering with her friends, I ignore her.

She's already won. She got what she thinks she wanted - to cause a rift between Sam and me. But the joke's on her. Sam never wanted me as more than a friend - it wasn't me holding him back from being with her - and now that he's washed his hands of me, he still won't want her.

I hope.

When the period is almost over, I walk to the bathroom next to the cafeteria to change back into my school clothes. I go through the motions like a zombie. I tug my gym tee off over my head and dig in my bag for the grey U2 concert tee I wore today.

Where is it?

I'm vaguely aware that there's someone else in the bathroom, which is strange. It's usually empty the last couple minutes of the school day, but it doesn't especially concern me. But my missing shirt does. I can just put my gym tee back on, but it doesn't make any sense. I put my clothes in my school bag like always and left them on the bleachers during gym...

Click.

I hear the sound of the camera app on an iPhone. And it's close.

Too close.

I hear snickering - more than one voice, several in fact, and look up to see Chelsea - that fucking bitch - taking a second shirtless photo of me.

"See guys, I knew she was hiding something!" she calls excitedly out to her partners in crime. "She has a fucking c-section scar! I knew it! Shit, Rory, you had a baby?!!" she screeches triumphantly so anyone in the vicinity will hear, and cackles with laughter.

It takes me a second to fully register what's happening.

She's photographed my scar.
I lose it.
Instead of running out of the stall, I jump up onto the toilet seat and grab at her hair.
"Ow! What the fuck are you doing? You're crazy!" Chelsea shrieks.
_She doesn't know the half of it._
She tries to push my hands away and I use the distraction to snatch her phone.
"What the fuck! Give me my phone!" she squeals.
_This bitch has balls._
I hop down, toss her phone into the toilet, and flush just as the bell rings to announce the end of the school day.
I know it probably won't go down, but the water will destroy the phone - I know from an unfortunate experience at the Linton lake - and with it, God willing, the photos.
I burst out of the stall and Chelsea comes at me. The two girls who initially flanked her - a sheepish looking Lily and a girl named Tanya - are joined by others who must have heard the commotion from outside the bathroom door.
"Give me my phone!" Chelsea tries to push past me into the stall I just exited, the stall that still has my bag with my clothes - minus the shirt I should be wearing right now - but I shove her back.
"What the fuck is wrong with you?!" I demand.
"Wrong with _me_? You're the one who had a baby and tried to hide it! Look at her scar!" she screams to the crowd that has grown exponentially in the past minute.
She pushes me again and grabs for my hair, but I duck and block her. She's startled for a moment by my self-defense, and I take advantage of her surprise.
I punch her.
Chelsea holds her cheek that landed my fist before launching herself at me with a war cry. She slaps at my face, but I block her again and knee her in the stomach.
_That's right bitch, I grew up playing with boys, and I know how to fight like one._
Chelsea is hunched over and I'm vaguely aware of the crowd's movement. Some flee to avoid the violence while shouting reports of a fight between Chelsea and the crazy new girl and my supposed C-section scar. Others flock toward the action.
I'm also somewhat aware that some of the new audience members include the male sex - in the girls bathroom - and I'm not wearing a shirt. But Chelsea swings another smack in my direction and I dart out of the way, but not before her nail makes contact with my chin and breaks skin.
"You fucking slut!" she shrieks. "Where's your baby?!
"Fuck you!" I bark back at her, pushing her away.
We square off, my back facing the only exit as well as most of our gaping peers.
Chelsea shoves at me again, claws out, and we grapple. She's scratching and slapping, but I'm punching with a closed fist just like my daddy taught me before he decided I wasn't worth a damn more than a whore linking him to a potential pro football player.
I kick her scrawny leg out from under her and she tumbles to the floor, giving me a moment to regroup.
I have a choice.
I can attack her when she's down, like she's attacked me in so many ways, or I can take the time to diffuse the situation. I can take the high road. I can be the bigger person....
I attack.
I straddle her, my fists meeting her flailing hands, landing a few strong punches, reveling in the power of having the upper hand. So many times I was the weak one. Powerless against one hundred and eighty pounds of solid muscle, exerting its will over me.
But not now.
_Now_ I have my attacker where I want her.
We continue to sling bitter curses at each other as she fists my hair tightly, and I keep trying to get enough of a foothold to throw effective hits. The crowd does everything from cheer, to yell for us to stop, to shout suggestive comments, and in the back of my mind I realize the scene is something of a wet dream for the boys lucky enough to have scored front row seats to this clusterfuck.
"Shit!" I hear Tuck's voice through the commotion, but Chelsea and I still claw at each other, neither able to do much now besides defend ourselves.
I'm too busy trying to maintain the upper hand with my hair being clutched in a death grip to do any more real damage. Somewhere I hear Tuck calling out "Cap! Cap!" and as desperate as I am for Sam not to see this, for him to stay the fuck away from this pathetic shit-show, I can do nothing but continue to push and shove as we roll and grapple.
"Fucking whore!" Chelsea's voice is a shrill, painsh, screech of an accusation.
"Fuck-"
Strong, male arms envelop me and yank me off of her. I struggle against whoever has a hold of me, but I know it's him, even before I register his scent.

*When did I become so sensitive to his scent?*

He binds my arms to my side like a strait jacket, like I've been held before, but something about his embrace is inherently protective, and I'm not afraid of him.

I'm barely aware of my half naked state as I twist and writhe, still enraged, unwilling to concede the first ounce of power I've had in a physical altercation since I fought Chip over an argument about the championship little league game when I was ten.

*No!* I will not let that bitch get away with this! Not when *I* can overpower *her*. Not when I'm finally the stronger one.

"Let me go!" I demand, still struggling against the restraints of Sam's arms, but they hold strong.

"No," Sam whispers calmly. "Not until you calm down."

Chelsea stuggers to her feet, huffing and puffing, and though I'm practically gasping for air, I'm still loaded with energy, still ready to take her down if she comes at me again. *If only Sam would just let me go!*

"Cap! Thank God! She's fucking crazy!" Chelsea screeches.

I do. Because the fight is over. My will is deflating. Goddamn it, what is wrong with me? This isn't me. I try to catch my breath as the humiliation of the situation washes over me. Sam doesn't relax his hold one bit.

"She's crazy, Cap! I told you she was hiding something! Look! She had a baby! Her C-section scar is right there! *Look!*"

I wait for Sam to look down at my hip, to see the ugly inch of jagged scar visible above the waistband of my yoga pants, but he doesn't. I can't see his face, but I imagine what he must be thinking right now, and despite the invalidity of Chelsea's accusations, I flood with shame.

"She threw my phone in the toilet! It's ruined!" she adds, as if this was the real violation here.

"You snuck into the bathroom to take pictures of me while I was changing!" I growl.

"Is that true?" Sam asks, horrified, when I've barely finished speaking. He loosens his hold marginally, allowing me a little slack, but doesn't release me.

"I knew she was hiding something. I needed proof," Chelsea explains, as if it's a reasonable excuse. Suddenly Sam moves me slightly to his side, still holding me protectively, but he's no longer restraining me, and I can finally see his face. He's distressed beyond measure. His gaze scans the room and he takes in the crowd.

"Get out of here! All of you!" he orders, and makes some kind of nodding gesture to Tuck, who instantly gets the message. He springs to action, herding everyone out of the bathroom.

"What is wrong with you, Chel? What were you *thinking*?!" Sam chides. "Imagine if you were a guy? Sneaking into the bathroom to photograph an innocent girl changing?!"

"She's not innocent! She-"

"She's just a normal girl who came to the bathroom for privacy! God, Chelsea! I don't even know you anymore!"

That cuts her. The triumph drains from her face, replaced by terror as she realizes her plan has backfired.

The excitement from the fight has worn off, and tears sting my eyes. I'm trembling, and beads of cold sweat form on my forehead and chest. I'm reminded of my state of undress and I shiver.

Sam's accusing eyes reluctantly stray from Chelsea to worry for me. He releases me long enough to shrug off the button down shirt he's wearing over his tee, and holds it open for me to slip my arms through the sleeves. I blink and try to focus my racing thoughts. I have my gym tee. It's in the bathroom stall.

"I-"

"Just put on the damn shirt, Rory!" Sam demands, cutting me off.

I swallow nervously at his intensity as a tear slides down my cheek, but I obey, still mortified from the events of the day. I remember that we're not friends anymore. That I made it so. And I wonder why he even came to my
defense, yet again, when I've done nothing but spit in his face. I wonder if his anger is for me or for Chelsea, and decide it's probably both.

Wherever it's aimed, Sam is seething mad. He glares at Chelsea as he pulls the shirt closed in front of me, until I take over, hugging it tightly around myself since there's no way I have the dexterity to work buttons right now. He glances down at me and his scowl falters. His arms wrap back around me, and he pulls me to his chest, this time facing him. I take comfort in his protection, however fleeting, and clutch the front of his tee shirt as I pathetically weep into it.

"Cap..." Chelsea's voice is unsure and pleading.
"Why? You need to start explaining, Chelsea, because right now it looks like you harassed and assaulted Rory for no Goddamn reason, and I don't give a fuck how long we've been friends-"

"She had a baby, Cap," she says hesitantly. "She's manipulating you! Can't you see? She's the one who attacked me! I mean, you saw!"

"Just because she won the fight doesn't mean she started it, Chelsea."
"She didn't-"

"You're a stupid, stupid girl," I growl, turning my head to the side, unable to let them continue to talk about me like I'm not even here.

"Excuse me?" Chelsea snarls, her voice no longer hesitant now that she's addressing me and not her Cap.
"I will not excuse you! There is no excuse! You're a stupid girl and the sad part is, you're wastin' your time! If he doesn't want you it has nothin' to do with me!"

Her anxiety is palpable as she realizes where I'm going with this - that I've known her motivation all along.

"What are you talking about, Ror?" Sam asks.

I turn to meet his gaze. "She's in love with you. She's in love with you and she came after me because she's convinced I'm the reason you don't want her."

Sam startles. He takes a step forward, and as he moves, I think he'll release me to prove to Chelsea there's really nothing between us, but instead he just shifts me so he's holding me to his side with one arm.

"So it's true? You fucking attacked an innocent girl because you have a stupid crush?!"

Chelsea winces, but then rallies for her own accusation. "So it's true you're falling for this damsel in distress act? Is she lying or are you really just friends?"

Sam's jaw clenches, and I feel his muscles tense. "We are nothing more than friends," he says carefully.

"Which is more than I can say for you and me."
"Cap!" Chelsea pleads.

"Just get the fuck out of here," he says with a look of disgust. She doesn't move. "Now!" he barks, releasing me to point toward the exit.

Chelsea huffs and saunters indignantly out of the bathroom, leaving Sam raking his hair in frustration, and me hugging his shirt around me, trying in vain to keep a dam on my tears.

"You okay?" he asks softly.
I nod, keeping my gaze averted. I'm so not okay.

"God, Ror, I'm so sorry."

My eyes shoot to his. "Why? Why are you sorry? All you did was help me. All you ever do is help me! And I've been nothing but a bitch to you... I'm so fucked up," I sob defeatedly, unable to control my words as they flood my lips.

Sam's arms are back around me as I sob into his tee shirt. I release my hold on his other shirt, the one I'm wearing, to grasp the one he's wearing, just desperately needing to hold onto something. Some lifeline. And once again, that's Sam.

His hands soothes up and down my back, the other stroking my hair in comfort. And comfort me it does, and in that moment I realize I'm too far gone. I can't let him go. I need Sam. I need him like air to breathe, and if his friendship is all I can ever have, then I'll cling to it, like I cling to his shirt.

"You're not," he murmurs into my hair. Again.
I let out an snort.
"You're not," he repeats more insistently.

I pull away and meet his gaze, riveted by the fervor in his eyes. I know the shirt I wear has fallen open, but I can do nothing to remedy it, I just stare at him, dumbfounded that he still defends me.

"We're all fucked up, Rory. I've got problems too, and you know that. You know that better than anyone. Chelsea is the one who sneaks into bathrooms to photograph girls while they're changing, and you think you're the one who's fucked up?" He pauses and takes a deep breath, and I bite my bottom lip to keep it from trembling. "You just have deeper scars, maybe. Or maybe they're just more visible. But you're not fucked up, Rory. Not any more than the rest of us, okay?" He reaches out to brush my tears from my cheek, and I shiver as warmth spreads from the point of contact. I turn into his touch, I can't help myself, and close my eyes.

He's right. We're all fucked up. Sam confided to me what his father did, and why he left, and what his sister tried to do. I don't need Sam to tell me these aren't things he tells many people, if anyone at all. I should treasure his confidence, and instead, today, I sought out to hurt him. I hurt him because of my stupid crush. I'm no better than Chelsea.

"I'm so sorry," I whisper, and open my eyes to see Sam's brow furrow in confusion. "For what I said before. I didn't mean it. Not all of it anyway. I just... I don't know what I'm doing," I admit. "I don't understand why you're so good to me. Or why you stand up for me. And it scares me, because... I care about you, and I've just... I've been hurt or abandoned by every man I've ever cared about. My boyfriend, my father, my best friend... and some of it, it was my own fault... Maybe everyone else is fucked up too, but I'm fucked up more, and I... I don't know what I'm doing." I say again.

Sam rubs his face and rests his hand on the back of his neck. "I'm not gonna lie to you, Rory. That hurt. What you said at lunch," He blows out a deep breath and sighs. "But look, you were right." I blink at him.

"I still think you're stronger than you realize, but... I shouldn't try to tell you what to do. I shouldn't have said you don't need your medication. I don't want you to think I'm judging you, I just... I think you're the one judging yourself. And way too harshly. The way you talk about yourself - that you're fucked up, that you're broken..."

"I know you've been hurt, and I don't pretend to know the details. But you're just you, Rory, and there's nothing wrong with you. You're fucking perfect, okay? The way you are."

"Why? Why do you say these things to me? Why do you defend me? Why did you tell me about your dad, about your sister?" I hold his gaze, emboldened, desperate for some explanation for this connection we seem to share.

"You know why."

I just blink at him. I have no idea why. And I have no idea why he thinks otherwise.

Sam sighs again. "Come on, Rory. We're kindred, aren't we? I don't know why, but we are - you and me. The first day I saw you have that panic attack, I was just drawn to you. At first maybe I thought you reminded me of Bits, but it took only a second to see that wasn't the case. That you were nothing like her. I love my sister, I'd kill for her, but she's fragile, meek.

"You... you always insist you're fine because you always are, even when you're not. You're tough. You protect yourself when you feel threatened, you hit triggers. You even beat a full blown panic attack without taking a pill. I was there. I saw it, remember? And you just kicked Chelsea's ass when she accused you of hiding something that wouldn't be anyone's damn business even if it were true, which it isn't."

I glare at him, defiant, and I don't know why. I'm so used to feeling like a victim that him describing how I'm surviving, it throws me. "How do you know? How do you know I'm not exactly what she says - some slut who had a baby in high school and moved away to hide it? How do you know I haven't been lying to you since the day we met?"

Sam takes the half step that puts him right in front of me. My heart races, but not from panic, just from his proximity and... desire. A feeling so alien to me it took me this long to recognize it. I swallow nervously, but suppress the instinct to retreat. I'm afraid, but only of myself.

"Because, Rory, even it were true, it wouldn't make you a slut. And not telling me something personal doesn't make you a liar. But the thing is, Rory... this," his fingertips gently graze the top of my scar, and I gasp as the surrounding skin breaks out in goose bumps. I didn't even realize it was visible. No one has ever touched me there. Not since the bandage came off. It's ugly and disgusting and I hate that Sam's seen it, hate that he's touching it. But I don't step back, don't push him away. "This is not a C-section scar."

"Oh yeah? Seen a lot of Cesarean scars, have you?" My voice is a hoarse whisper, betraying my nerves despite my bravado.

Sam smiles faintly. "Just the one. And only when my mother wears that skimpy swimsuit I hate. Because it's hidden by all the others. Because it's tiny - her scar. Much smaller than yours. And the thing is... it's here." His
fingers move about an inch toward my middle and down over my waistband. Just another inch lower and he'd be in
dangerous territory. But just as quickly as they moved, his fingers trail back to my scar, and he strokes it gently with
his thumb, as if it doesn't repulse him. "So, Rory, unless you managed to grow a baby in your hip, and then had
some quack cut it out of you with a jagged kitchen knife, something else gave you that scar."
I stare up at him. I'm stunned.
"Someone cut you?" he asks, and I know despite his veil of confidence, he's nervous to ask. I look down, but
nod. Sam grits his teeth. "Is this the person your father didn't protect you from?"
I nod again. Sam places his index finger under my chin to point my gaze back to his, and when he removes it
he notices there's a little blood. His brow furrows in concern, and despite everything I can't help but once again think
how adorable he looks when he does that.
"She scratched me. Chelsea," I explain about the blood. It's really just a little scratch.
I've had worse. Much worse.
Sam takes a deep breath. "Let's get it cleaned. Who knows where those nails have been," he jokes and I offer
him a weak smile.
Sam takes my hand and leads me to the sinks. He grasps me by my waist and lifts me onto the counter as if I
weigh nothing at all. He wets some paper towels and adds soap, and cleans the scratch under my chin. I watch him
wordlessly as he works, his brow creased adorably in concentration.
I can't help but think of Cam. Of all the times he'd cleaned up my scrapes and scratches. And of course the last
time.
"Was it a friend of your father's?" Sam asks cautiously as he dries my chin with another batch of paper towels.
When he's satisfied with his handiwork, he begins to button the shirt I'm wearing from the top down.
"I think she stole my tee shirt from my bag while we were walking the track. Chelsea, I mean. But I have my
gym tee, I could-" I'm stalling. I wonder idly if he's aware of that, but if he is, he doesn't call me out. He doesn't
pressure me.
"Just keep my shirt, Ror, okay? It looks better on you anyway," Sam murmurs as he continues busying himself
with the buttons.
Hell if that's true. But it's still nice to hear from him. I've spent so much time trying to be invisible that I
surprise myself by my desire to be attractive to him, to hear him compliment me. I never thought I'd want to hear a
man compliment my appearance again. And holding on to his shirt does have certain advantages. I wonder how long
it will retain his clean, masculine scent.
"His friend's son. My ex." I force the words out before I can change my mind, and they
emerge
as little more
than a whisper. I don't know if I even want to tell him or not, or how much. I just know, at this point, that Sam
deserves some answers. And if he's going to work up the courage to ask, the least I can do is try to answer.
"Is this the boyfriend you mentioned before? Who hurt or abandoned you? The bad breakup one, or someone
else?" He stops working after fastening the final button and meets my eyes. I'm perched atop the bathroom counter
and Sam stands right in front of me, his hands planted on either side of my hips, my dangling knees pressing against
his thighs.
"I've only ever had one boyfriend."
"And he's an ex...?"
I blink at him, perplexed. "I've already told you I don't have a boyfriend," I remind him. For some reason he
looks puzzled instead of enlightened.
"I know. I just thought... that maybe you did have someone," he murmurs hesitantly.
I shake my head, wondering why he would possibly think that. "I have no one." He knows I mean more than
just romantically.
Sam looks sad, and I didn't mean to make him pity me any more than he already does. And I hate thinking
about Robin, it only frightens and confuses me. I let out a bitter laugh. "Although, if you ask him, he probably
wouldn't agree. When we broke up... he says I belong to him no matter what I say, that I'll always be his."
"Ah, but I heard you say you, uh, 'ain't anyone's'," Sam drawls in his best Scarlet O'Hara he's convinced
sounds like Rory Pine.
"That's right," I agree.
"He cut you, Rory?" Sam whispers incredulously, leaning even closer to me. Any closer and our noses would
touch. I swallow and bite my lip. His eyes fall momentarily down to my lips and I look away, knowing the last thing
I need is to delude myself into believing he would ever want to kiss me.
"It was an accident." My voice is faint and hesitant and even I can hear the uncertainty.
"I don't believe you."
"Me neither."
Sam and I stare at each other. I know he wants me to tell him everything, but I can't. He doesn't understand that there's so much more than how I got the scar, and I can't tell him about one without telling him about it all. And I can't tell him everything. Despite what he thinks, he'll look at me differently. And even if he's only ever offered me friendship, it's one thing for him to know I'm damaged, but I can't bear for him to look at me like I'm... ruined.

We both startle when we hear my name called out loudly. We look to the door as Carl bursts breathlessly through it. She looks around and spots us - me seated on the counter with Sam standing too close. If she notices the intimacy of our position, she doesn't say anything, she just runs over to us.

"God, Rory! Everyone is saying you and Chelsea got into a fist fight!"

I look to Sam who holds out his hand, and I realize he means to help me down from the counter, so I take it and hop down.

"Chelsea's a crazy bitch. She came at Rory. Rory kicked her ass," Sam explains with a proud smirk, and I roll my eyes.

"Um, haven't you and Chelsea been friends since, like, birth?" Carl accuses Sam, who grimaces, and I feel instant guilt at putting him in a position to choose between two friends. And vaguely, I wonder why he didn't choose the one he's known for more than two months.

"Yeah. We were."

Carl's brows draw together in an inquisitive look.

I sigh. "She followed me in here after gym and took pictures of me changing, so I threw her phone in the toilet and... well, like Sam said, she came at me..."

Carl is shocked. "Wait, wait... start from the beginning, why the hell would she take pictures of you changing? That's batshit crazy!"

"Yeah, no kidding. It was her whole I'm hiding something' thing from lunch. She... she saw my scar and photographed it."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Carl screeches, outraged on my behalf. Sam doesn't leave, he just kind of hangs around looking between Carl and me, and I think he's surprised Carl knows about my scar at all. To be honest, I'm still surprised I showed it to her. She turns to address Sam. "And you saw all this, Cap?" she asks, skeptical, presumably as to why in the world he would be in the girls room in the first place.

Sam registers the accusation and holds up his hands as if in surrender. "No, no. I was walking toward the lot when people started shouting about a fight between Chel and Rory so I-"

"Came to the rescue, of course," Carl murmurs, not unkindly. Sam looks puzzled, of course he has no way of knowing about Carl's incessant observations about Sam's and my supposed mutual crushes. Though I've since realized my own isn't supposed so much as actual. Carl sighs. "Come on, Rory, I'll drive you home."

"I have my car," I reply, knowing I probably shouldn't drive right now.

"I'll get it home for you," Sam promises, and I meet his gaze.

"Thanks," I say meaningfully, for more than dealing with my car.
CHAPTER THIRTEEN

January, Last year

The past two weeks haven't been perfect, but they've had their good side. Ever since Robin and I worked things out, I've been treating me like a priceless treasure. I've been spending a lot of time with him, some with the girls, and not enough with Cam. That bugs me, but I'm Robin's girlfriend and I know he should be my priority. And really, he is. And Cam is busy anyway, too. He's been spending more time with Missy, which pisses off Lacey, but it's better that way. If he and Lacey turned into something more I think it would be weird.

I still can't believe Robin loves me, but he does. He says it all the time, and shows it even more. He calls me his girlfriend now all the time, and he always has an arm around me or some other possessive hold, even in school, where he used to be less public with his affection. It's like he wants everyone to know that I'm his. And he's mine.

The only thing is, I'm still no closer to being ready to have sex with him. Even with the love. And I still don't know why. He got really frustrated with me about it last weekend. We argued, but the thing is, I don't even really blame him. He put his hand on me, and I tried to pull it away, but he told me that if I wasn't going to sleep with him yet, and I didn't want anyone else touching him, then I needed to take care of him.

I protested, but he took out his erection anyway, and wouldn't let go of my hand. He made it like he was showing me what to do, but really he was doing it himself with my hand, and he wouldn't let go until he was finished. I was upset, but after he just kept telling me how much he loved me and how good I'd made him feel, and I realized it really wasn't that bad. I was making a big deal out of nothing. True, I hadn't wanted to do it, but he didn't hurt me, not really - just my hand a little.

It wasn't so awful. What happened on Monday was worse. We were making out in his car and he'd climbed over the console so he was on top of me. He's done it many times, and usually he just gets frustrated with me and stops it before it gets out of hand. His words. He says if he gets too worked up, he won't be able to stop it. That's how it works with guys, I guess. Cam never told me anything like that, and he's told me plenty, but I guess it was never my business with him. Cam wasn't my boyfriend.

But Monday was different. Robin held my wrists again. He hadn't done that since that first night after the lake party, but he did it again. The thing is, when he holds my hands like that, I can't push his other hand away when he's doing something I don't like. And when I try to tell him to stop, he's so busy kissing me, and so forcefully too, that he can't understand what I'm saying. He pushed his hand under my skirt, and when I squirmed to try and get him to stop, I guess he took it as a sign that I was liking it, because he pushed his fingers into my underwear and then pushed one inside me.

It hurt. It hurt a lot, and he wouldn't stop until I managed to get a hand free and smack him.

I hadn't meant to smack him, I just wanted him to hear me - that I wanted him to stop. And he did stop then, but he was so mad that I'd hit him that that's what our argument became about. Robin was so fired up that for a few moments, I really thought he might hit me back. He punched the dashboard instead.

Repeatedly.

It was kind of scary, but he soon calmed down. I promised I'd never hit him again.

But the rest of the week has been great. He's picked me up every morning and driven me to school, and we've hung out afterwards every day as well. Yesterday Robin signed his contract with UFL, to communal fanfare, and Marcus is throwing a party tonight to celebrate since his parents are in Miami for the weekend.

I leave my jeep at home and wait for Robin to pick me up. We drop my weekend bag off at his parent's house before heading to the party. Robin lets me drive. He's making a statement by having me pull up to the party driving his car. It's the same statement he's been making everywhere and to everyone he could for the past two weeks. That I'm something special to him, his girl, and it makes me feel special.

When Robin starts on his third beer I stop sipping my first. Looks like I'll be driving home as well. I don't mind really, I don't especially want to drink, but I prefer when Robin doesn't either. I don't want to nag him, so I say nothing. It's strange - when he has one or two beers, he's fine. Great even. He's fun, and flirty, affectionate, and sweet. But for some reason, I've noticed that once he has beer number four, he starts acting different. He's more possessive, and not in a good way. Unreasonably jealous, too.

I hope he stops drinking soon.
I see Cam over in the corner of the crowded living room, sipping a beer and talking to some girl I don't recognize. She must be a freshman. I walk over to say hi and notice his hand is in her back pocket. I guess he and Missy are still just messing around if he's grabbing other girls' asses at parties.

"Rory girl!" he greets me, freeing his previously occupied hand.

I kiss his cheek. "Hey Cam. Didn't know you'd be here," I murmur. It's strange. He hasn't been at the last few parties, and I honestly thought it was because he was busy with Missy. But the weirdest part about the whole thing is that Cam and I don't just run into each other. We've always been in communication - known where the other was going to be, and usually, we'd go places together.

I guess everything is different now, and the thought unnerves me. I know it's normal, but it doesn't feel right. In fact, it feels all wrong.

"Why would you?" Cam replies and I glare at him, surprised by the uncharacteristic dig. Cam sighs. "Sorry, Ror, I didn't mean that."

I offer him a faint smile, because I know this is all hard on him, too. "You gonna introduce me to your friend?"

"This is Laura. Laura, this is my best friend, Rory," he says, shooting me his signature crooked grin.

"You're Rob Forbes's girlfriend, aren't you?" she asks excitedly.

I nod as Cam rolls his eyes.

"My daddy says he's gonna play in the NFL after college!"

I give her a cursory smile. "So is your date here," I reply, gesturing at Cam, who rolls his eyes again. He could. If it was what he wanted, but I know Cam has no interest in playing pro ball.

"She ain't my date," Cam drawls through his bad-boy smile. "She's just gonna keep me company if I get a little lonely later, ain't that right Laura?"

Laura blushes and seems at loss for words. I punch Cam in the arm. He knows better than to treat girls like that, even if they know the score.

I excuse myself to go find some friends and end up spending most of the evening with Lacey and Courtney. Emmers is off somewhere hooking up with Chip, and I'm told Stella went off with some seniors to smoke a joint out back. Robin intermittently makes his way over to steal a kiss before rejoining his boys.

A few hours later it's time to leave. I stand in the front yard with Lacey and Robin, looking around for Cam to say goodbye.

He comes up behind me. "Lookin' for me, Rory girl?"

"Hey! How'd you know? We're just leavin', I just wanted to say 'bye." I say.

Cam half smiles and pulls me in for a hug, squeezing tight. "You're drivin', right?" he asks. Clearly he's noticed Robin's alcohol consumption. But then, he's always noticing everything.

I nod.

"Goodnight, Rory girl," he murmurs, planting a quick kiss on my cheek before pulling away.

"Night, Cam. Love you," I reply.

"Love you, too, Ror. Night Lacey. Forbes," he mutters coolly before walking off.

Robin narrows his eyes at him, but I ignore it and climb into the driver's seat. On the drive home Lacey complains about Cam's new friend, Laura, while I pretend to listen. Robin is uncharacteristically quiet, and I think maybe he's had too much to drink and he just needs to get to bed and pass out.

I glance over at him, and he's just looking pensively out the window. He doesn't look like he's about to pass out, which is good, because Lacey and I would have some time of it trying to get him up to his room if he did.

When we get to the house, Robin goes right to his bedroom without kissing me goodnight. Lacey goes to hers, and I just head upstairs, confused by Robin's mood. He always kisses me goodnight. Especially when I stay over. Even if he ends up coming upstairs to kiss me again later.

I'm exhausted when I crawl into bed wearing only an overlong Red Hot Chili Peppers concert tee that falls off my shoulder since I forgot to pack the shorts I usually sleep in. I consider going to ask Robin to borrow a pair of boxers, but think better of it.

I close my eyes, but sleep doesn't come. I'm thinking about things too much. Robin loves me. I heard him say I'm the kind of girl he'd marry, but does that mean he wants to marry me someday? Or just a girl like me? I know I'm too young to be thinking about this, but it's Robin's own words that put it in my head. It gives me pleasure to think he would take our relationship so seriously, but then, it also frightens me. If I'm honest with myself, I'm not sure I would want to marry Robin, and I'm grateful it's not a decision I'll have to make any time in the near future.

These are all things that I've worried over for weeks, but tonight a new thought concerns me. The moment I saw Cam with that girl, Laura, I had the strangest feeling. Jealousy. I don't know where it came from, and I shoved
it away the moment I recognized it, and yet... when he brushed her off after I'd called her his date... I also felt relief. Even if I admonished him over it. Surely it's just a result of missing my best friend, but still, it unsettles me.

My door swings open and hits the opposite wall with a loud bang. I sit up in bed. I'm used to Robin creeping up here when I stay over, but he's usually more quiet about it. Anyway, no one can hear us up on the third floor.

"Robin?" I whisper.

He stalks over and sits on the edge of the bed, facing the door. He's not looking at me. In fact, he hasn't looked at me since we left the party.

"Is everything okay?" I ask.

"I love you, Rory," he says.

"I know, I-"

"Only you."

"I, uh, know..." I have no idea where he's going with this.

"You hear me tellin' other girls I love 'em?" he asks, finally turning to meet my gaze.

I crawl over to him and sit back on my heels. "Of course not, Robin, what-"

"You think I should have to listen to you tellin' Foster you fuckin' love him?" His voice is too low, too soft.

That's what this is about? That I said "love you" to Cam? "It's different, Robin. He's my best friend."

"Yeah? And Marcus and Billy are my best friends, but I don't go around tellin' them I love 'em all the damn time."

I bring my hand to his cheek and he grabs it and holds it there, turning into my touch.

"I love you, Robin. I love Cam, too, but it's different. It's like... you can tell Lacey you love her, can't you?" I try to make him see sense.

Robin moves. I'm flung onto my back and he hovers over me, holding my hands on either side of my head with our fingers laced. He kisses me, and it's a passionate, possessive kiss. I kiss him back. He's jealous. He's jealous a lot, and it should bother me, but the thought that he's insecure, about me... there's something sweet about it. He really cares about me - he loves me.

Robin trails kisses across my jaw. "I" kiss, "don't wanna fuck" kiss, "my sister," he mutters, continuing down my neck.

I giggle. "I sure hope not!" I tease.

Robin playfully nips at my collar bone in response, and I giggle again. He looks meaningfully down at me. "He wants you, sweetheart."

I shake my head. It's an old argument and neither of us ever concedes, but he just doesn't get that Cam and I can love each other and not want each other.

"He does. But he can't have you. Because you're fuckin' mine," Robin growls. He kisses me roughly, licking and sucking. His hand makes its way over my shirt to my breast. I don't bother pushing it away. I'd rather just kiss, but this seems the least of any evils. When it starts sliding its way down, I grab it. I know he wants to touch me under my shirt, but I'm not wearing a bra or shorts. He wrests his hand out of my grip and starts fondling my chest again. His lips make their way down my neck and across my exposed shoulder. When he starts moving down to push under my shirt again, I take his hand again.

Robin growls and grabs both of my wrists with one hand.

"Rob-" I say, but his mouth is vigorously back on mine, his tongue frantic in my mouth. My hands are pinned above my head and his full body weight grinds against me. "Robin," I plead, but my plea is swallowed by his groan.

His free hand roughly shoves my tee shirt all the way up so I'm bare from my chest down except for my panties.

I start to panic. "Stop! Please!" I cry, but it's muffled, my body completely enveloped in his. My eyes fill with tears, but Robin doesn't notice. He shoves his free hand into my panties and starts rubbing. I try to cry out for mercy again, but all that comes out is the wordless sound of my panicked voice. He lets out another groan as he pushes one finger inside of me and I scream, but again, most of its punch dies in his mouth. I can't catch my breath, and Robin's practically panting.

I bite him.

"My girl likes it rough," he growls, and he kisses me even harder. He finally releases my wrists, but suddenly he's moving with such speed and brutality that my arms aren't free anyway, and I can do nothing but cry and try to buck him off of me.

Robin start to tug down my panties, but I twist from side to side, and with a frustrated growl, he rips right through the thin cotton and tosses them aside.

His movements are forceful and savage, and I can barely register them through my sobs. He yanks my legs apart and I realize he's shoved down his flannel pajama bottoms when I feel his erection probing me where his finger had just been.
"Please stop!" I sob pathetically, but Robin is past excitement, past aggression, and it's like he can't even hear me. Like he's in his own world.

I'm paralyzed with terror. I know what's about to happen and I've no idea how to stop it. With no fanfare whatsoever, Robin starts to push inside me, but he doesn't get anywhere.

"So tight," he grunts.

"No, Robin, please!" I sob again.

He keeps going. With another growl, he increases his pressure and thrusts all the way into me. There's a sharp stinging sensation and I scream as he groans through my unimaginable pain. Robin stills for a moment before he starts thrusting violently, in and out of me, in a burning rhythm.

"So fuckin' tight. So hot. My girl is so fuckin' hot, so tight." His voice rumbles amorously, his hot breath drowning my face, my mouth. He continues his mantra about how tight and hot I am, pausing only to grunt and moan.

I am completely frozen. I am being punished, I think to myself. This is a punishment.

Unfathomably, I relinquish my fight. I try not to think about the searing burn between my legs. I just want it to be over. Robin has invaded every part of my body; he's just everywhere, in absolute control of me. But he can't control my mind. And my mind wages its own defense.

I think about how Robin was upset that Cam and I say "I love you" to each other. I think how different that love is from what Robin offers me.

Cam. He is what protects me, even now, even as my body is abused and pummeled against my will by someone who claims to love me.

I think of when Cam and I were eight years old. His father had passed away suddenly just a few months earlier, and I'd spent every waking moment with him since it happened. I'd been sleeping over in his bed with him for months when I finally convinced him to go out to the Memorial Day street fair. We'd walked through the park that starts at the end of our block, and Cam was finally having a good day. He was smiling, laughing. We'd just gotten ice cream when a wasp started buzzing around me. I was never afraid of them, being a tomboy and all, I'd subscribed to the notion that it wouldn't bother me if I didn't bother it. But I was holding an ice cream cone, and the wasp had its own agenda.

I got stung. It was the first time I'd ever been stung, and I was stung, and God how it hurt. But I gritted my teeth and choked back my tears. I was desperate for Cam not to realize what'd happened - desperate not to ruin the first day he'd seemed to be having any kind of fun since his dad died. An hour passed before he started questioning how quiet I was being, how unlike myself. Eventually he caught me swiping at a rogue tear when I thought he wasn't looking, and demanded I tell him what was wrong.

So I did.

Cam was horrified. I'd tried to hide it. He grabbed my uninjured hand and led me back to his house, where he held an ice pack to my affected wrist, all the while distracting me with some story he'd made up. He was always making up stories. He still is. He writes them down in his journal, and sometimes he lets me read them. He wants to be a writer, and he will. He'll be a great writer. I tease him about being a football player, tell him he's going to be making up stories. He still is. He writes them down in his journal, and sometimes he lets me read them. He wants to be a writer, and he will. He'll be a great writer. I tease him about being a football player, tell him he's going to be making up stories. He still is. He writes them down in his journal, and sometimes he lets me read them.

"That was so good, sweetheart. I've never been in such a good mood as when Cam and I say "I love you" to each other. I think how different that love is from what Robin offers me.

I think of when Cam and I were eight years old. His father had passed away suddenly just a few months earlier, and I'd spent every waking moment with him since it happened. I'd been sleeping over in his bed with him for months when I finally convinced him to go out to the Memorial Day street fair. We'd walked through the park that starts at the end of our block, and Cam was finally having a good day. He was smiling, laughing. We'd just gotten ice cream when a wasp started buzzing around me. I was never afraid of them, being a tomboy and all, I'd subscribed to the notion that it wouldn't bother me if I didn't bother it. But I was holding an ice cream cone, and the wasp had its own agenda.

I got stung. It was the first time I'd ever been stung, and God how it hurt. But I gritted my teeth and choked back my tears. I was desperate for Cam not to realize what'd happened - desperate not to ruin the first day he'd seemed to be having any kind of fun since his dad died. An hour passed before he started questioning how quiet I was being, how unlike myself. Eventually he caught me swiping at a rogue tear when I thought he wasn't looking, and demanded I tell him what was wrong.

So I did.

Cam was horrified. I'd tried to hide it. He grabbed my uninjured hand and led me back to his house, where he held an ice pack to my affected wrist, all the while distracting me with some story he'd made up. He was always making up stories. He still is. He writes them down in his journal, and sometimes he lets me read them. He wants to be a writer, and he will. He'll be a great writer. I tease him about being a football player, tell him he's going to be making up stories. He still is. He writes them down in his journal, and sometimes he lets me read them.

I curl my right hand - the hand that was stung by that damned wasp all those years ago - and dig my nails into my palm as hard as I can. I must be drawing blood, but it's all I can think of to do to distract from the scorching pain between my legs. I just want it to be over. Robin has invaded every part of my body; he's just everywhere, in absolute control of me. But he can't control my mind. And my mind wages its own defense.

I think of when Cam and I were eight years old. His father had passed away suddenly just a few months earlier, and I'd spent every waking moment with him since it happened. I'd been sleeping over in his bed with him for months when I finally convinced him to go out to the Memorial Day street fair. We'd walked through the park that starts at the end of our block, and Cam was finally having a good day. He was smiling, laughing. We'd just gotten ice cream when a wasp started buzzing around me. I was never afraid of them, being a tomboy and all, I'd subscribed to the notion that it wouldn't bother me if I didn't bother it. But I was holding an ice cream cone, and the wasp had its own agenda.

I got stung. It was the first time I'd ever been stung, and God how it hurt. But I gritted my teeth and choked back my tears. I was desperate for Cam not to realize what'd happened - desperate not to ruin the first day he'd seemed to be having any kind of fun since his dad died. An hour passed before he started questioning how quiet I was being, how unlike myself. Eventually he caught me swiping at a rogue tear when I thought he wasn't looking, and demanded I tell him what was wrong.

Cam's story distracted me from my pain that day. And he took care of me, when I'd been the one trying to take care of him. And the truth is, he's been doing it ever since.

I curl my right hand - the hand that was stung by that damned wasp all those years ago - and dig my nails into my palm as hard as I can. I must be drawing blood, but it's all I can think of to do to distract from the scorching pain between my legs.

I've lost all concept of time, and though it's felt like hours, it may have only been a few minutes. But eventually Robin stills and his mantra ends. All that is left is his dead weight on top of me, and the sound of his panting breath as he starts to calm.

Before I even realize he's moved again, Robin is on his back, hauling me into his side. He curls an arm around me until I'm lying on his chest, limp and wordless and breathless. He strokes my back with a tenderness that belies the act that preceded it, still oblivious to the endless flow of my tears. I feel wetness seeping out of me elsewhere, too. I know what it is, and it makes my stomach roll with nausea and dread. He didn't use protection.

Minutes crawl by, until eventually Robin sighs and kisses my hair. "That was so good, sweetheart. So damn good," he murmurs.

I whimper and choke back a sob, causing him to finally look at my face.

"Oh, darlin', no," he whispers, brushing my tears away with his knuckles. He rolls me onto my back, and part of me worries he might just do it again, but I'm boneless. I have no fight left in me. None.
Supporting himself on one elbow, he settles on his side and looks down at me. He pulls my tee shirt back down to cover me, but I don't lift to help him, and the hem bunches around my hips. I no longer care. I close my eyes as he wipes away more tears. I can't bring myself to meet his gaze.

"I know, sweetheart. I know," he says soothingly, like he's trying to console me.

What the hell is it he knows?

"It's supposed to hurt your first time, you know that, right? I tried to go easy, but you're so hot, darlin', you feel so damn good. You have no idea. So good," he says again. "I got carried away, but it's impossible not to with you, you know?"

I don't reply. I don't make a sound other than my sniffling.

"But it woulda hurt no matter what. Your first time. It'll hurt less next time, I promise. I'll make you feel real good, sweetheart."

He must register my horror at his reference to "next time", because he shakes his head with a chuckle. A fucking chuckle!

"Not now, darlin'. Don't worry, I know you need some recovery time. You'll feel sore, but don't worry, that's normal."

Normal.

None of what just happened feels normal. I'm so confused. What Robin just did was awful, so why is he acting like it's all okay? Like we're a normal couple who just had sex for the first time? Are we?

Robin kisses me softly on my lips. I just stare at him as he smiles down at me.

"Let me get you cleaned up." He hops out of bed, grinning like he's just won the lottery as he practically skips into the en-suite bathroom. He's pulled his pajama pants back up, and I realize he never fully removed them at all.

I hear him run the sink, and before I can gather even a single rational thought, he's back with a warm, wet, washcloth and he's running it gently between my thighs. And I let him.

"There, all better." He gives me another kiss and heads back to the bathroom to dispose of the washcloth.

All better? I think incredulously.

Robin climbs into bed behind me and gathers me in his arms. "You okay, sweetheart?"

Somehow, with my back to him, avoiding his eyes, I'm finally able to form words. "It... hurt," I breathe.

Robin presses a kiss to my shoulder. "I know, sweetheart. It's supposed to your first time," he repeats.

I try to steady myself with a deep breath. It doesn't help. "I... I wasn't ready." Tears resume streaming down my cheeks.

"Oh, darlin'. You were never gonna feel like you were ready. We've been seein' each other almost six months. I love you, Rory, you know that. You just gotta trust me to know what's right for us. It was time. I know it hurt, but when it stops hurtin', you're gonna like it. Trust me, alright?" he murmurs into my ear.

It has been six months, I know that. But I wasn't ready. Maybe he's right, maybe I would never feel ready. But I never thought he would just go ahead and do it anyway. I tried to make him stop. I tried to fight him off, damn it!

I sniffle.

"I love you, sweetheart. You know that, right?" he whispers.

I nod.

"You love me too?"

I nod again, automatically. I don't know if I mean it. Right now I just feel confused and numb.

"I'm gonna sleep here as long as I can. God, I wanna stay with you forever, sweetheart. But I gotta sneak back downstairs before my parents get up, okay?"

I nod again. I don't want him to sleep here. I want him to go so I can think. But he doesn't, he just spoons me and whispers pretty things and plants feathery kisses on my shoulder until he dozes off.

I don't sleep. I can't.

I can't believe that just happened. I figured I would lose my virginity to Robin, but not like that. I just don't understand why he didn't stop. He's warned me that when guys get worked up past a certain point, they can't stop. He certainly seemed like he wasn't in control. Is his attraction to me that strong? I don't get it, I just don't. And I know it was supposed to hurt my first time, but this was too much. Even in my inexperience, I know this was too much. It's not just that I'm sore - though I am, so damn sore. But, my wrists are a red and swollen, my thighs are bruised, and my muscles ache with exertion from the struggle before he forced his way inside me and I just gave up.

And that's what's bothering me most of all. Why did I give up?

Is this whole thing my fault? If I hadn't frozen, if I'd kept saying no until he heard me...

Shit. I messed up. I was kissing him and letting him touch me and I let him get too worked up. I know I asked him to stop, and I know I said no, but then I stopped fighting. I just let him do it. I wasn't even thinking about him, I was thinking about Cam. God, I can't imagine how he'd react if he knew that. He'd probably kill both me and Cam.
An unfathomable wave of guilt surges in my gut. I'm supposed to love Robin. He loves me. He says so all the time.

Robin starts stirring behind me and I glance at the clock and see it's nearly five in the morning. I pretend to be asleep. He presses a soft kiss to my cheek. "I gotta go, Sleepin' Beauty. I'll see you at breakfast," he whispers. I don't move a muscle. "I love you so damn much, sweetheart," he adds, his voice tight with emotion. And with one last kiss to my cheek, he climbs out from behind me and I listen to the door quietly open and close.

With him gone, I finally fall asleep, but it's a wretched sleep, riddled with nightmares of being held down, of being hurt, and completely at the mercy of some faceless someone who, for some reason, can't hear my desperate pleas.

****

It's already past ten when I wake, and though I manage to wash up and get dressed, I can't quite bring myself to leave the room. My wrists are wrought with light bruising, as are my inner thighs, and small red half-moons mark my palm where my fingernails cut into my skin. But the soreness between my legs is so fierce that everything else pales in comparison. Except for my heart. I've had so many conflicting emotions in the past eight hours that I have no idea where I've landed.

So I don't move. I'm sitting in the old wicker rocking chair in the corner of the room when I hear a light knock on the door. I realize I should have been down for breakfast with the family over an hour ago.

Before I can respond, Lacey walks in. "Hey Rory," she greets me warmly.
"Hey."
"You okay?"
I nod, but don't say anything. I'm not sure I can manage the words "I'm okay". They'd be my biggest lie. Lacey sits on the foot of the bed and sighs. "Everyone's waitin' in the dining room."
"Sorry. I'm just not feelin' too well," I murmur, not quite meeting her gaze.
Lacey nods, like she expected this. "Look, Rob wanted me to come check on you," she admits.
"I'll be down soon, I'm just not feelin' well."
She nods again. "Yeah, you said."
Finally I meet her eyes.
"Look, he... he told me," she says.
I glare at her. He told her?
He told her what?
Surely not that he... made me have sex with him.
"He told me you guys - you know, slept together for the first time last night. Don't feel weird about it, Rory. You know, I lost my virginity to some guy I met in the Bahamas when I was on vacation with my family. I'd only known him a week. You slept with your boyfriend of six months who you love. There's nothin' to be embarrassed about."
Oh. I'm still surprised that he talked to his sister about it, but his version of things is easier to swallow, I guess. And she's right. Robin is my boyfriend of six months, we've exchanged I love you's, he's clearly committed to me. It's okay that we had sex. No, not just okay, it's right that we did. I just wish I'd felt ready before he'd made the decision for me.
"Come on, Rory, you're still a good girl. Let's go down and eat, everyone's waitin' on us." She thinks I'm worried about my good girl rep. I never especially cared for that rep in the first place. I never wanted to be seen as a good girl or a bad girl. Hell, before this year I never cared about being a girl at all.
"Yeah, okay."
I follow Lacey down the stairs and through the foyer.
"Robby was real worried about you, you know. He really loves you." Her tone is almost disapproving. Like she hadn't expected him to fall in love with me - like maybe I don't deserve his affections. And maybe I don't. I sure never thought Robin Forbes would ever want to take me out, let alone love me.

The Forbes all greet me as I enter the dining room. Robin walks over to embrace me. He plants a chaste kiss on my lips and pulls out my chair like the southern gentleman his parents believe him to be. I dutifully sit, and breakfast commences just as it has every other weekend I've spent here.

Mayor Bobby and Cindy Forbes go on and on about Robin's UFL contract. They couldn't be more proud of their superstar son. Mayor Forbes starts telling a string of stories about him and my dad back when they were undergraduates together. He asks what I want to study in Gainesville, and I tell him pre-law, but that I'd also thought of applying to NYU like my mom, and that draws surprised glares.
"Surely your daddy would rather you go to Gainesville," Mayor Forbes hedges.
"Did you hear that directly from him?" I ask tentatively. Because my father certainly hasn't offered me any input on my college plans.

Mayor Forbes shrugs and says, "Not lately, I suppose." Yeah, that sounds about right.
He brings up our country club's father-daughter dance, which is coming up in a little over a month. He'll bring Lacey, of course, but my father hasn't bothered to take me since I was thirteen. This year it falls on one of the weekends he's out of town anyway, so he doesn't have to make up an excuse for us not attending, and I can pretend he'd take me if he could.

I'm stunned when Mayor Forbes glances at his wife, who smiles her reassurance, and he asks me if I'd accompany him and Lacey. He knows my dad will be unavailable and would be honored to stand in, so he says. I peek over at Robin who starts rubbing his hand up and down my back. This was obviously discussed by the whole family, and honestly, I'm touched. But for the past three years, when half the town was at this event, Cam and I have forged our own little tradition. We go down to the lake and he reads me some of his newest short stories. It's not a plan I want to break, not when so much has changed this year. And after last night, I'm still feeling so conflicted about everything. I tell them I'll discuss it with my parents, but I worry that Mayor Forbes will just go straight to my dad, who will be relieved to have the chance to both avoid me and please his friend.

Mayor and Cindy Forbes will be taking a trip to New York the first weekend in February, and Robin tells them he's going to have a bunch of friends over to watch the Superbowl. He doesn't ask, he just lets them know he'll be throwing a party in their house. His parents lament over what a great idea it is. Then Mayor Forbes launches into the story about how he first fell for Cindy at a Superbowl party.

"She was Cindy Parker back then. I'd known her, of course - it's Linton, everyone knows everyone. But she was just a freshman and I was a junior and, you know, it was high school. I'd had a girlfriend the first two years - nothin' really serious, but it ended the summer before. My Cindy was just as beautiful then as she is now. Long blonde hair, bright green eyes... My buddy Teddy - you'd dad knew him too, Rory - he moved away years ago, anyway, he'd invited her because he was hopin' to put the moves on her. That's the only reason she was a freshman at a senior's party." Mayor Forbes and his wife laugh and Robin and Lacey groan. I smile. I've never heard them talk about when they were kids.

"It was like magic, I swear - I give her one glance and I'm hooked. No way was I gonna let the prettiest girl in town end up with someone else, especially not Teddy Smith. So I just walked over to her and started talkin' and we talked all night - through the whole game. My box won in the pool and I didn't even know until the next day. She was my girl after that. I proposed right after her graduation and we were married before she started at Gainesville."

"How did you know?" I blurt. "I mean, that she was the one?"

Mayor Forbes grins widely. Under the table, Robin laces his fingers through mine.

"You know, I just looked at her that night, and I knew I couldn't let Teddy get near her. He was a bit of a dog, that one. And then after spendin' the night talkin' to her... I was already in love. I just knew I'd never want another girl, and I'd never stand it if she dated anyone else. We called it goin' steady back then, and I asked her right that night." They both chuckle. It's a happy memory and sweet story.

Robin lifts our linked hands from under the tablecloth and kisses the back of my hand. It doesn't go unnoticed by his family. I think I even hear his mother sigh.

Robin and I go for a walk around their property after breakfast. I'm still reeling from the events of the last twenty four hours, and I wish I had my jeep with me so I could get away and clear my head. Maybe go home, or to Cam's. But I could never talk about last night with Cam. Not ever.

Before Robin, there wasn't a single thing I couldn't talk over with my best friend. Now I feel more on my own than I have in my life. Making love for the first time should have made Robin and me more connected than ever, but I couldn't possibly feel more alone.

I think of all the things I could have done differently. If I hadn't forgotten my shorts, if I'd fought harder, or hadn't fought at all. If I'd been dressing like I used to - in jeans instead of that short sundress that Robin called sexy - that probably didn't help keep him from getting too worked up. From losing control. That first time he touched me in his car, and I smacked him, he told me if I didn't want it then I wouldn't have worn such a short skirt. I've been wearing skirts and dresses all year. From the red dress I wore on our first date to my cheerleading uniform I've worn to school every Friday during football season, and will have to wear again on game days once basketball season starts. I wonder if that's what people think of me now - that I want it. Sex.

God, even Chip, my friend since little league, put his hand on my knee and made suggestive comments - something he never would have done before - all because of thatdamned skirt.

"You're awful quiet, sweetheart," Robin murmurs.

"Just thinkin'," I reply.

"What ya thinkin' about?"
I shrug.
"Ya know, I used to gag when my parents talked like that," he says.
"I think it's sweet," I mutter quietly.
Robin stops walking and grabs my hand, pulling me so I'm right in front of him. I feel an involuntary pang of fear, but I know it's irrational and I hastily push it away.
"I used to think they were just a sappy old married couple," he continues. "But I get it now."
"Get it?"
"When I saw you last summer, at the pool, in that sexy little red lifeguard swimsuit that was somehow hotter than the slutty bikinis all the other girls were wearin'... It was like I was seein' you for the first time, Rory." He stares intently down at me.
I had no idea he noticed me at the pool. I had no idea he'd ever noticed me before that day on his parents' front porch when he first asked me out. I'm surprised, and honestly, flattered, even though he's complimented me a hundred times since then.
"I even asked Lace about you. But then when I saw you that night, standin' at my front door in those tiny little shorts, lookin' like you were nervous about somethin'... I don't know, sweetheart, it was like I was struck by lightnin' or somethin'.
"I tried to play it all cool, but I couldn't stop thinkin' about those big, brown, angel eyes. About that pretty hair you hide behind when you're bein' all shy and sweet." He tucks the small curtain of hair that's hanging over my cheek behind my ear. "I ain't been able to stop thinkin' about you since. I ain't ever gonna stop thinkin' about you, darlin'. And I don't wanna."
Robin leans down, and in complete contrast to last night, he kisses me slowly and tenderly. He lets the pretty things he's just said linger in the mild winter air. And they touch me. They really do. When he pulls away, his gaze is positively adoring.
"Robin," I breathe.
"Yeah, sweetheart?"
"... Last night... I don't wanna do that again until I'm ready," I murmur, thanking God for the courage to say the words out loud.
"I know, sweetheart," he replies, and then slides his arm around my waist and continues our walk.
CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Present Day

I don't tell my mom about the fight with Chelsea. I have a feeling she'll find out soon enough one way or another, and she thinks I've been doing so well lately, I don't want to destroy that facade for her any sooner than I have to.

When I wake up the following day, my Jeep is already in my driveway. Sam has been true to his word - not that I ever doubted him. I have no way of knowing if he, and presumably Tuck, dropped it off sometime last night or early this morning, but either way, he didn't ring the doorbell to say hi, didn't call or text. I'm not surprised, but I am vaguely disappointed, and I'm reminded again that my feelings for Sam are out of control.

I take a thirty minute shower, and when I realize I'm just procrastinating to avoid school, I decide to give myself a gift. A day. Just one day.

Tomorrow I'll go back to school and face the fallout, whatever it might be. The rumors, the consequences, whatever disciplinary action I might face - all of it.

But not today. Today I'll sit around in comfortable clothes, eat comfort food, listen to angry rock music, and reread my favorite novel.

I let my hair air dry and throw it all up on top of my head in a messy bun. I slip on yoga pants, a white lace camisole instead of a bra, and my mom's old, over-washed, navy blue NYU sweatshirt - the one she cut the neckline off sometime in the nineties so that it hangs loosely over one shoulder. This is my comfort uniform.

I power off my cell phone and decide to bake myself banana muffins. I know the muffins will be evidence of my truancy, but I'll have to tell my mom what happened when she gets home anyway, and it can't hurt to sugar coat things a bit. Literally.

I set my iPod on the dock in the kitchen and start to blast Live's Throwing Copper album, get out the ingredients, and start working.

When the house phone rings I let the answering machine pick up since I'm not even supposed to be here right now. At first I ignore the authoritative female voice that sounds through the speaker, but as soon as I hear "Mrs. Perreira, the dean here at Port Woodmere High," my ears perk up. I pause the music and walk over to the answering machine to hear the dean explain to my mother that Miss Stanger made her aware that I was out sick today, but that she was made aware of an "incident" that took place yesterday afternoon between me and another student, and she would like the parents to come in to discuss what happened and what kind of repercussions there will be.

My heart sinks. Though I silently thank Carl for having the foresight to make up an excuse when she realized I wasn't in homeroom, I'm reminded that my day of pretending nothing happened, is just that, one day of delusion.

I'm reading Peter Hamill's *Forever* for the third time, once again captivated by the fictional narrative that manages to describe the colorful history of New York City like no other, and trying to figure out where NYU's current campus falls in the city's landscape through the years, when the doorbell rings. I look at the cable box to confirm it's only just after noon. My second batch of muffins aren't even ready.

No one knows I'm home,* do they?*

*Don't panic.*

It could be a door to door salesperson, or a Jehovah's witness trying to convert me. It could be a courier service with some legal documents for my mother...

I remind myself I'm not in Linton. It can't be *him.* It also can't be one of his or his father's many minions here to intimidate me out of telling the truth. It can't be Lacey with a group of lackeys here to call me vicious names or sling horrible rumors my way. It can't be my own father here to threaten me or pretend like he's doing me some huge favor "digging" me out of my "own mess" by helping my attacker cover up what he'd done. Or accusing me of ruining all our lives.

The bell rings again, this time supplemented by a tentative knock. It isn't the knock of someone here to hurt or frighten me, and as I start to calm, I see Carl's worried face peeking in through my living room window, searching but unseeing. Of course, the thought that it could be an actual friend simply here to check that I'm alright never crossed my mind.
As soon as I open the door, Carl rushes in in a whirlwind. "Rory, I was so worried. Your phone is going straight to voicemail and there's so much going on and-"

"I'm fine," I cut her off. She looks me over to confirm this for herself, and when she's satisfied, she takes a deep breath.

"Well you could let a girl know. Jesus," she sighs dramatically before stalking to my living room and plopping down on the sofa.

"Well come right in then," I tease, and she sticks her tongue out at me like a toddler. I walk over to the couch and sit facing her. I guess I won't be able to avoid the fallout from yesterday's fight after all, even for one day.

"You're really okay?" she asks again. "When you weren't in school I-"

"I'm okay, I guess. I just wanted one day to relax before I spend the rest of the school year being accused of being some crazy slut, or whatever variation Chelsea comes up with," I explain. "The dean called the house. I erased the message but I'm gonna have to tell my mom when she gets home from work. They're gonna make her come in for a meeting." I sigh. "Do you think they'll suspend me?"

Carl stares at me wide eyed. "So you haven't spoken to anyone since yesterday? Tina? Cap?"

I shake my head, stunned by Carl's wry smile. "What? What could possibly be funny? What is everyone saying? Did I have a crack baby and then flee Florida to avoid an assault charge because I'm such a crazy, violent bitch?"

Carl sits back and makes herself comfortable, still smirking. "It smells amazing in here, have you been baking?" she asks.

I blink at her and remember my manners. "Muffins. You want?"

She nods. I grab a plate and four muffins and bring them to Carl before sitting back down and eating my own. "So?" I prompt. I know I wanted to avoid this until tomorrow, but she's here, and I can't not ask what the story is. I'm sure it's something more outrageous than my simple imagination could fathom.

"Well," Carl starts talking between bites, "the rumor is Chelsea followed you into the bathroom and took a picture of you changing..."


Carl raises her eyebrows like she agrees it's unexpected. "I know, right? They're saying she was jealous of you and Cap, because apparently you're in love, so she tried to embarrass you by implicating you in what was meant to be a nude photo/ sexting scandal. Apparently you got your hands on her phone to delete the photo, but she attacked you and you accidentally dropped it in the toilet. Apparently you have a scar on your hip from some car accident you were in when you were a kid, and everyone's making fun of Chelsea because she doesn't know where a C section scar is supposed to be." She says all of this with practiced nonchalance, chewing massive mouthfuls all the while. "Oh and because you kicked her ass even though she's the one who came after you."

I glare at her, mouth agape, completely in shock.

There is no way this is what people are saying. It's not the way things go in high school. People don't turn on the Queen Bee unless someone more powerful is pulling strings, and I'm nowhere near where she is on the food chain.

"So, I guess for once the rumor mill got it pretty close. Besides how you got the scar - unless the car accident is true..."

I blink at her, giving nothing away.

"Oh, and you and Cap being in love. Unless that's also true, of course..." Her lips twist into a playful smirk and I chuck a throw pillow at her and roll my eyes. She knows it isn't true and I don't know why she can't just let her Sam and Rory theory go. I suspect she just enjoys teasing me.

"I can't believe it," I breathe.

"I know. You must have a guardian angel up there with the high school rumor Gods," she shrugs and takes a second muffin and starts breaking off pieces to pop into her mouth. "Dese ah tho good," she mumbles through a mouthful.

"I don't understand," I whisper, still trying to figure out how a nobody new girl came out on top of Miss Popularity...

It hits me like a brick wall.

*Of course.*

Sam.

Why I didn't realize it immediately, I'll never know. The only way they'd all turn on their Queen, is if they were directed to by someone with more power - their King.

*Cap.*
Once again, he's defended me. He's cleaned up my mess, fixed my problems.
I want to be angry with him for doing all this behind my back without even discussing it with me, but I can't. I can already hear him say "I got you Pine", or "what are friends for?"
And maybe they are. Maybe this is what it's like to have friends - real friends - who stand by you and back you up when you need them most. I look across the couch at Carl, who’s still just casually munching away. She's the first real girl-friend I've ever had, and I'm eighteen years old. She doesn't judge me - doesn't keep me around to keep an eye on me, or because of some ulterior motive. And last year, when everything went down, the one person I was sure would always stand by me left me all alone to fend for myself before I ever knew what it felt like to have that kind of support system.

I launch myself at Carl and assault her with a hug. She yelps in surprise before returning my embrace.
"Thanks Carl," I murmur, "You don't know how much it means to me to have you as a friend."
She squeezes me back. "I got your back, Rory."
And I believe her.

****

Carl left to go back to school before lunch period ended. The relief from not having to deal with the rumors I'd been expecting has washed over me, and I breathe more deeply. Now all I have to worry about are the school's disciplinary repercussions, but truthfully, that was never my biggest concern. On her way out, Carl admitted she fabricated the part of the rumor about Sam and me being in love in an effort to tease me/ get me to admit to my crush, which I proceeded to deny as usual. I have to admit, I was surprised by the small pang of disappointment I felt at hearing this. I'd wondered why, if Sam had been behind the direction of the rumors, they would include him and I having feelings for one another. For a moment I wondered if maybe I wasn't the only one feeling this way. But Carl's confession made sense, and I'm back in the safe reality of just friends.

The only other issue is spring break. There is absolutely no way I can go away with Chelsea, and though I know Carl and Tina, and probably Sam, will be disappointed, I think they'll understand why I can't come with them.

The afternoon has flown by, and I put down my book and decide to bake another batch of muffins since Carl ended up eating three. I flip my iPod back on, and start singing out loud and dancing to 90's Green Day. I've just put a batch in the oven and I'm screaming about having no motivation when the doorbell chimes once again.

I look at the clock and realize school got out about ten minutes ago and it's probably Carl coming back to check on me.
"One second!" I call out, and wipe my hands on a dishtowel as I walk to the door, still dancing to the music.

I swing open the door and freeze.
It's Sam.
And I was bopping my head and singing about how masturbation's lost its fun as I opened the door. I blush bright red, but Sam has a giant grin plastered across his face.
"You know, I was a little worried about you after yesterday, but you seem to be having a good time playing hooky, huh, Ferris Bueller?" he drawls from my front step.

I wipe my hands again on the dishtowel before stuffing it into the pocket of my apron. I'm once again taken with how attractive he is. It's warmer today than it's been lately, and Sam is channeling a modern day James Dean in a simple jeans and fitted tee ensemble, complete with a leather jacket. I'm struck by his effortless beauty. It's just not normal.

"Uh... do you wanna come in?" I offer shyly. I don't know why I suddenly feel so shy with him, but I do.
He hesitates. "Is that okay? I just wanted to check on you. We could talk out here if you want," he offers.
He thinks he'll make me uncomfortable if he comes inside. He's worried about me freaking out about being alone with him, and vaguely, I wonder why I'm not. But I'm not. "Yeah, come on in." I hold the door open for him, and Sam walks slowly into the house that still doesn't feel like home. It's a modest house. Less than a third of the size of his own, which is pretty enormous. My mom bought it with the divorce settlement. It was less than she deserved, but she just wanted it over quickly, so she agreed to a lump sum that was probably about half of what she'd have gotten if she'd fought my dad in court. By that time my father was eager for us to leave since we'd become such pariahs, at least in his circle, or I bet he'd have tried to ensure she received even less.

We bought this house sight unseen. Karen came and took photos for us, and really, we only needed something small and simple for the two of us. My mom's only requirement was that it be in a safe neighborhood and within the Port Woodmere school district. And that's precisely what we got. It's a standard center hall colonial, nearly identical to the thirty others on the block just like it. I watch as Sam looks around. There are a few photos of me as a kid and a couple of me and my mom, but not much. We've only just moved in a few months ago, and it shows.
Sam turns around to face me and smirks. He reaches toward me and I swallow nervously, anticipating the warmth that I know will spread through me at his touch.

His thumb brushes the tip of my nose and I bite my lip, realizing how much I'd like for him to kiss me, to taste his lips, and also realizing how much the thought frightens me.

He pulls his thumb, now white with powder, back away. "You've got flour on your nose," he explains before reaching back and swiping his thumb across my cheek. "Here, too."

"Oh." It comes out like a gasp and I blush again. I'd pour flour all over myself if it'd get him to touch me so sweetly like that. Jesus, I can barely recognize myself in my own thoughts. I close my eyes for a brief moment to pull myself together. "Do you want to sit down?" I offer when I've reminded myself of my manners.

Sam heads to the living room and sits gracefully, stretching his arms along the arm and back of the sofa, and rests his ankle on his opposite knee. He takes up so much space with his height and build, sucking all of the energy from the room and replacing it with one that is singularly his. It's nervous and thrilling and is entirely juxtaposed by the memory of Carl sitting in that same spot only a couple of hours earlier. His hair has gradually grown since I first met him, and now it falls in a thick wave, some locks hanging into his eyes until he pushes it back again. I find myself thinking how much I'd like to run my own fingers through that hair. His deep blue eyes are intense, and they follow me across the room as I make to join him on the couch.

"So, any of that flour get anywhere other than all over you?" he asks. I look down to see that he's right; I have patches of white powder everywhere. I stand back up to untie the back of my apron.

"If Chelsea were here she'd be screamin' that it's cocaine to anyone who'd listen," I mutter.

Sam smiles as I bunch up the apron and walk toward the kitchen where the door to the laundry room is open, and toss it in the laundry basket. "Well she's not here, and my guess is she won't be anywhere you are for a while," he calls out as I put some muffins on a plate in the kitchen.

I set it on the coffee table in front of him and resettle on the couch, folding my legs under me so I can face him. "What do you mean?" I ask, but before he can respond, the floodgates open. "The dean called to ask my mom in for a meeting about yesterday. I thought everyone would be spittin' that rumor about me havin' a baby, and worse, but"

"What do you mean?" I ask, but before he can respond, the floodgates open. "The dean called to ask my mom in for a meeting about yesterday. I thought everyone would be spittin' that rumor about me havin' a baby, and worse, but"

"The dean called to ask my mom in for a meeting about yesterday. I thought everyone would be spittin' that rumor about me havin' a baby, and worse, but"

"You manipulated the rumors," I say, and it isn't a question. Sam doesn't deny it. In fact, he doesn't say anything, he just stares at me. "And the story about my scar... the car accident? That was you, too?"

Sam gives a sharp nod, still watching me intently, as if he doesn't know how I'm going to react.

In that moment I feel overwhelmed. Touched. I don't know what I did to deserve the loyalty and friendship of this man, but I value it beyond measure. I treasure it. And him. I don't mean to get emotional, but I do. I blink away tears, inwardly chiding myself for being so dramatic. "Thank you," I whisper.

Sam's relief is instant and obvious. He rakes his hand through his hair and lets out a deep exhale. "Shit, Ror, don't cry," he breathes, and swipes his thumb across each of my cheeks to rid my tears.

I shake my head. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to be so emotional." I laugh at myself, in wonder at the fact that even when I'm not upset, I'm somehow in tears. "You're a real good friend, Sam. I mean it. Thank you," I say earnestly and fling my arms around his neck in a hug. He's surprised, as Carl was, I can tell. Obviously he knows I have issues with being touched, but I've hugged him before, and I feel no fear in his arms, which after a brief hesitation, wrap around me and pull me even tighter against him. He smells so damn good. Clean, masculine, and faintly of aftershave. I want to sigh, but I hold it in, and I pull away first before I can trick myself into believing I have any right to be there - in his arms.

Sam smiles wistfully. "What are friends for?" he replies, and I laugh.

"I knew you'd say that!" I admit, and Sam's wistful smile grows into a full-fledged grin. I'm glad the mood is lightening up. I gesture to the plate on the coffee table. "So, taste my muffin, you deserve it."

Sam's eyes widen in shock. "Oh, what Dave would do with that one," he says with a chuckle as I replay my words in my head and, once again, turn crimson on him. I push at his chest playfully, but avert my eyes, embarrassed. I must learn to think before I speak.

Sam takes the plate and takes a healthy mouthful, downing half the muffin in one bite. "Mmm," he moans.

I love the sound. Even more than the sound of his laugh. And I watch as he eats, positively riveted at how his Adam's apple moves up then down as he swallows, how his perfectly chiseled jaw rolls in rhythm as he chews, and God, how he licks the crumbs from his lips. I think of how strange it is to find such a mundane thing so fascinating.

"So," he says, when he's finished the first muffin in no more than three bites. "Speaking of Dave... I wouldn't be too worried about that meeting with the dean."

"What? Why not? And what on earth would it have to do with Dave?"
"Well, apparently Lily was with Chelsea yesterday..."
Yes, I know. I was there.
"She says she had no idea what Chel was gonna do, but anyway, long story short, she told the dean it was all Chel's fault. Everything."
"Why would she do that?" I ask, skeptical.
Sam picks the plate back up and starts on the second muffin. "Well, I'd like to say she had a crisis of conscience, but more likely-
"Dave." I cut him off. "You had Dave convince her to tell the truth."
Sam narrows his eyes at me. "Well, I may have explained to him the merits of using his influence with Lily to get her to do the right thing," he admits. He pauses. "And... Chelsea's been suspended for two weeks. So she won't be back until after break." I open my mouth to speak but he holds his hand up to stop me. "And before you try to get out of going away with us, she's not coming anymore. Her mom grounded her. Cancelled her trip."
In a flash I register my shock that Chelsea's not coming, my relief, and my shock at my relief that I can still attend a trip I wasn't sure I wanted in the first place. I also wonder how it is Sam seems to anticipate my concerns, to know what I'm thinking. I had that with Cam, but Cam's and my friendship was the product of fourteen years of being inseparable. I've only known Sam a few months, and when I met him I had walls up so thick I'd never have thought anyone would break through them. How in the hell did we get here?
"Ror?"
"Yeah?" I realize I've been quiet for too long, but I don't know what to say.
"You'll still come... right? I mean, I want you there. It's our senior spring break. Chel won't be there, and that's her own damn fault, so you have no reason to change your mind about it," he insists. "I know you're worried about it, but you'll be fine, okay? It's going to be fun. You'll have your friends, and we'll have a blast."
"Yeah, I know I will. I do wanna come," I assure him, aware that I sound unsure, but my uncertainty has nothing to do with the trip, not now that I know Chelsea won't be there. It's Sam that has me confused, it's Sam that always has me confused these days, I realize, as I try to rally to get my feelings in check.
"I mean it, Ror." He leans into me, staring intently to emphasize his words.
I nod, but can tell he's not convinced.
"What is it you're worried about? Is it him? Is he still down in Florida?" he asks, and I'm momentarily stunned.
Sam narrows his eyes, his entire demeanor morphing in an instant - his jaw clenches and his nostrils flare. And pitiful me can only think, he also looks adorable when he's mad.
"Is that his name?" he practically growls. "You're not still in contact with him, are you? Is he bothering you?"
He's getting worked up, and I don't want him upset - not for me. I don't deserve any more of his defense.
I shake my head emphatically. "No, of course not. He can't anyway; I have a restraining order. But it ain't him. Linton's nowhere near Miami, anyway," I explain. "They may as well be in different states."
Sam visibly calms, but his brow furrows thoughtfully. "Do you still have feelings for him? I mean, I know these things can be complicated. My mom-"
"No, Sam. I hate him. Truly," I say slowly and carefully.
Sam scoots closer to me in an instant. "I'm not going to let him hurt you again," he vows, but I shake my head.
I've heard that before. And it didn't work out well - for me or my protector.
"It ain't your job to protect me," I whisper.
Sam glares at me. I don't know if my words have angered him or what, but they're true. As much as I might wish things were different, I'm not his, and he's not mine, and we can never be more than friends. I wouldn't even know how to be with him if he did want me, Robin and his way of things is all I know, and the reality is, Sam doesn't want me as more than a friend, anyway.
"Nevertheless," he replies, equally meaningfully. "As my friend, I'd appreciate if you were to tell me if Robin does bother you again, in any way, okay?" The contempt in his voice as he says Robin's name is enough to strike fear into anyone.
I nod, never breaking eye contact. The lie comes more easily than usual for me. I need to focus not to bite my lip, but I handle it. Because I have no intention of doing this, of course. I know I've let Sam come to my rescue several times now, but I would never put him at risk by allowing him to fight that battle for me. Nothing good can come when teenage boys full of testosterone get all riled up in defense of someone they care about. But I also don't expect Robin would ever try to contact me again anyway, so it's a harmless lie.
"It may not be my right to protect you, Ror, but I'm going to do it anyway."
I'm pretty sure I said it wasn't his *job* to protect me, and I'm vaguely confused as to how such a burden could be referred to as a *right*. Sam rakes his fingers through his hair and closes his eyes for the shortest moment and when they open again, they've shedded their intensity. "Friends look out for each other, right?" he asks, his voice lighter.

"Right," I whisper, and Sam offers me a faint smile. *Friends.*

"I got you, Pine."
CHAPTER FIFTEEN

April, Last year

I haven't been sleeping. The nightmares started a couple of months ago, not long after that first night Robin decided it was time we slept together. I'd never really had bad dreams before. Not like this. I wake up in a cold sweat, sometimes sobbing, sometimes screaming, my pillow drenched from tears. A couple of times the noise woke my mother, whom my dad has convinced that I'm just upset that Robin will be leaving for college in a few months. She consoles me by saying he'll only be an hour and a half drive away, that in a little over a year I'll join him in Gainesville.

The truth is, knowing he'll be leaving is the only thing that actually consoles me. Maybe some distance is what we need. Physical distance at least. He'll go in July for football training, and the closer we get to summer, the more possessive he becomes.

I barely see Cam. I once told myself I wouldn't stop hugging my best friend to appease my boyfriend, but now, it's just so much easier to comply with Robin's demands.

He flipped out a few weeks ago when I'd hugged Cam at school. It was the anniversary of his father's death, and I tried to explain that to Robin, but he just wasn't hearing it. He said I'd embarrassed him - that I was his girl, and that I didn't belong in another man's arms. He shouted at me, saying that if I needed a hug, that he'd give me a damned hug. Only using a lot more expletives. And then he did give me a hug. He squeezed me so tight I couldn't breathe, and only when I started crying and panicking did he let go. It left bruises on my arms and rib cage. Now I only hug Cam when we're alone, which is so rare these days, but I find such solace in his arms that I find myself looking so forward to those times. I tell myself that next year Robin will be gone and everything can go back to normal.

It isn't all bad though. Robin is a doting boyfriend. Most of the time he's affectionate and even sweet. He buys me a different bouquet of flowers every Saturday before taking me out, he drives forty five minutes out of town to pick me up breakfast from my favorite bakery every Sunday.

But he also gets pissed off at me much more easily than he used to. He just loses his temper. He says he's under a lot of pressure with graduation and then football training coming up, and I get that, I really do. But a few times he grabbed me so hard that my arm bruised, and once he'd even yanked out a small clump of my hair when I'd tried to walk away from an argument until he cooled down.

Because once he cools down, he's my Robin again. He's so contrite and affectionate that I know he really is sorry. He even bought me a beautiful necklace with a white gold football shaped pendant with a small solitaire diamond. I thanked him, but told him I didn't need gifts, I just needed him not to lose control. Because when he loses control, it terrifies me. He just tells me how sorry he is and how much he loves me and that I know he'd never really hurt me. And I used to believe it, but now... I mean, he has hurt me.

Even that isn't the worst of it. Because at least when he pushes me around, eventually he catches himself, he apologizes, he tries to make it up to me.

What causes my nightmares is that night after Marcus's party. And the nights it's happened again since. In fact, every weekend I've spent at the Forbes', Robin has forced himself on me at least one of the nights I stayed over. Sometimes both nights.

It's the same every time. We kiss, he tries to go further, I tell him no, and usually he backs off. Except on those nights. On those nights, when I tell him no, he just loses control. He pins my wrists, I fight back, I sob and plead, I beg him to stop, and he never does. And every time he forces his way inside me, I freeze. I stop fighting. Every damn time. And I still don't know why. And Robin's noticed too. He says I just like to play hard to get and I stop fighting him off when he's inside me because I like it. Because I "like it rough".

But I know I don't like it. It hurts. Every time. He keeps saying that eventually I'll start liking it more, but I think I actually hate it more and more each time.

When I freeze, I start thinking about other things. Happy things. Memories usually. It makes it go faster, I think - and the happy memories usually involve Cam. And then afterwards I feel guilty. Even though rationally I know that Robin has done something awful, thinking about another man - even if not necessarily in a romantic way - while my boyfriend "makes love" to me, as Robin calls it, is just plain wrong.

I knew Robin hadn't worn a condom that first night. When he didn't wear one the second time either, I eventually asked him why. He said that he's going to marry me anyway, so it doesn't matter either way. He didn't
elaborate, but just the thought of getting pregnant at barely seventeen, and with Robin's baby, sent me running to my doctor for birth control pills. Thank goodness my mom understood and came with me. I didn't tell her Robin won't wear a condom, just that I wanted to be extra careful. I also didn't tell Robin I take the pills, I'm not sure how he'd react.

Now that it's spring, the weather has gotten hotter again. It'll get hotter still as summer returns. I spend all my time at school, with Robin, cheering at basketball games - the only time I really spend with the girls - or trying to sneak in time with Cam.

But Cam has noticed something is off with me. I catch him casting suspicious glances my way at school or when we're all out, and though I plaster on my fake "everything is okay" smile, Cam's a tough one to fool. At least for me. He knows me too damn well. It's like that damned wasp sting all over again.

I've all but completely stopped wearing anything but jeans, except when Robin starts to complain, and then I'll wear a dress on a day I know we won't be alone together. I hope that if I wear skirts less frequently, people won't think that I "want it", as Robin put it. That Robin won't think that. Because I don't. But today and Friday there are basketball games after school and so I have to wear my uniform.

I grab a banana for breakfast and am about to head outside to wait for Robin to drive me to school when my dad surprises me by calling me into his study. "That you, Sleepin' Beauty? Come in here a minute, will ya?"

I dutifully obey. "Yes, daddy?" I stand in the doorway.

He sets down the documents he'd been poring over and removes his reading glasses.

"Bobby mentioned that Rob invited you to go down to Gainesville with him this weekend," he says. He's right, Robin has to drive down for a

He sets down the documents he'd been poring over and removes his reading glasses.

"Bobby mentioned that Rob invited you to go down to Gainesville with him this weekend," he says. He's right, Robin has to drive down for an orientation program with the athletics department and he wanted me to spend the weekend with him there, but I told him my parents would go for it. "I think it's a good idea. I mean, you'll be goin' there in a little over a year and all you've ever seen is the football stadium. And we haven't been to a Gators game in what? Three years?"

Five actually.

"It'll be a good chance for you to tour the campus," he continues as he scrolls through his phone for what I assume are work emails.

I fidget with my necklace, and for a few ounces of white gold, it weighs heavily around my neck. I nervously shift from foot to foot, searching for the courage to talk to a father I've barely interacted with in years.

"Um, Daddy, I've been thinkin' actually... I was thinkin' maybe I'd like to apply to NYU. Do undergrad in New York. You know, like Mom." My voice is a shaky whisper and I wonder where the tough girl who never had any problem saying what was on her mind has disappeared to. This gets my father's attention, though. He sets his phone down on his desk and glares at me.

"Now I know we haven't discussed it much lately, but you've always wanted to go to UFL. Your whole life. Why would you want to go to New York?"

I shrug and sit down on the club chair opposite his desk. "I just think it would be a good experience for me," I murmur.

"Aurora, I don't think that's a good idea. And anyway, Robbie will be in Gainesville, why would you want to be anywhere else?"

I shrug again.

My father sighs. "Listen, relationships are tough. Have you any idea how hard it would be for you and Rob to make it if you're in different states?"

"I know, Daddy, I'm just not sure it's what I want," I whisper.

My father leans forward in his chair and places both elbows on his desk. "Aurora, Rob is about to be a college quarterback on his way to the NFL. Do you know how many girls will be throwin' themselves at him? You've always been naive when it comes to these things, but you need to be there with him. Jesus, he's already talkin' to his daddy about proposin' and marriage. Did you even know that? He loves you! And you're 'not sure'? What is wrong with you?" He uses that tone he reserves for lecturing me. I haven't heard it in a while. I suppose I haven't done anything that's warranted his attention. But his question hits me hard. It's one I've asked myself over and over for months.

What is wrong with me?

"Look, Aurora, you're just scared. It's normal, you know, cold feet and all that. But he loves you, and you love him. You're a lucky girl." He pauses and takes a deep breath. "You'll go spend the weekend with him in Gainesville and you'll get to see how great it will be. Goin' to college with your future husband. Not havin' to be apart. If you're worried about me and your mother, don't be. You're goin' to marry the boy, I accept that you're intimate with him."

I gasp. I don't know what to do, what to say. But I do know that I can't go away with Robin for a whole weekend. It's bad enough when I stay over there, but at least his parents are around and it's only late at night that he can really get me alone. I imagine being alone in a hotel room with Robin and I start to panic. He would be like
underprivileged client. She kind of always is, but I don't blame her.

I realize suddenly that I'm about to tell my father the truth about me and Robin. I expect to feel terror, but I don't. I feel relief.

Somewhere, down this long, dark, road, I see a glimmer of light that's evaded me for months. Of hope. That I won't have to endure this with Robin for much longer. Because love or not, I can't be with him anymore, and I certainly can't agree to marry him. Not now, not ever. The thought of becoming his wife - of a forevery of this - gives me courage. I know the words will be hard to say, but once my father hears them, he will help me. No matter how disconnected we've been these past few years, my father will protect me. After all, that's his job, isn't it? I take a calming breath and rally my courage.

"No, Daddy, you don't understand. Robin - he... we are intimate, yes, but... he hurt me, Daddy." I realize my voice is too low, but the words are so difficult to force out. Especially with my father glaring at me like that.

"What are you talkin' about, Aurora?"

I lose it. Tears stream down my cheeks and I choke back a sob. "He... he forced himself on me! I told him I wasn't ready. I didn't wanna do it! But he made me," I cry.

My father registers no reaction whatsoever, but his anxious swallow tells me he's hearing me. Moments pass while I try to get ahold of myself.

"Aurora, you must be mistaken. Robin Forbes is a good man. He loves you. He could be with any girl he chooses, why would he have to force anyone to do anything? Do you understand how serious an accusation like that is?" His voice is calm, his tone accusatory, but not toward Robin, toward me.

"Yes, of course I know how serious it is!"

"When did this happen?"

"The first time -"

"The first time? How many times are you sayin' there were?!" Now my father's emotions are getting ahold of him and I'm grateful. He's finally understanding what's happened.

"A few... six... maybe more," I whisper.

My father calms again, he looks pensively out the window for a full minute before replying. "So you mean to tell me, that Robin Forbes raped you - because that is what you're accusing him of, Aurora, rape - and you told no one, and not only did you tell no one, but you continued to go back for more?" His voice is deathly calm and I can't speak.

My God, he's right, I allowed Robin to get away with this for months. It's all my fault. Maybe not the first time, but every time after that. I'm completely responsible. "Yes," I breathe.

My father shakes his head. He looks disgusted. "Aurora, you're confused. There's obviously been a misunderstanding. Robin is your boyfriend. He's eighteen, and you're practically an adult, too. If you didn't want to be intimate with him, then you obviously didn't communicate that by spending all of your time dating him. Not to mention the way you've been dressing. What's a man supposed to think when his girlfriend prances around him in those short skirts like you do? He would never do that to you if he didn't think you wanted to do it, too. Robin loves you."

My heart sinks as I realize it's me, not Robin, that my father is disgusted with. My tenuous resolve is slipping. He doesn't believe me. And even if he did, like he said, it's my own fault. And he's not wrong. What message was I sending by wearing the dresses Robin liked? By going back to him every time he hurt me.

"I told him no. I begged him to stop," I murmur, but even I can recognize the sound of my own defeat.

My father sits back in his executive desk chair. He literally looks down his nose at me. "I'm disappointed in you, Aurora. You can't run around throwin' about these kinds of allegations. Do you understand what could have happened if you'd said these things to someone who didn't know Robbie? Who hasn't had some opportunity to observe your relationship? Who knows how much Rob loves you? God, Aurora, he'd lose his scholarship! His career would be over! He could even go to jail! How could you be so irresponsible?"

"You are lucky that Robin chose you. Don't you dare forget that for a moment. You may think you're hot shit here in Linton, but you're still just a small town girl. You're a dime a dozen over at UFL and even more common out in the real world. Robin is goin' to play pro ball. Do you understand that? He wants to marry you! Don't you dare fuck that up. Do you understand me, young lady?"

I don't know what to say. I'm not sure if I could speak even if I did. I don't think my father has ever cursed at me before.

Any glimmer of hope I had earlier has been good and vanquished. I'm not even crying anymore, I'm just numb.

My mother comes by to say goodbye before she heads to the office; she's been preoccupied lately with an underprivileged client. She kind of always is, but I don't blame her. Her clients really need her.
She asks if everything’s okay. I don’t know if she’s noted my mood or if she just knows how rare an occurrence a conversation between my father and me is these days, but my father just waves her off and she leaves. He’s still glaring at me and I’m still sitting frozen in my chair when the doorbell rings several minutes later.

My father gets up to answer the door, but I don’t move.

Vaguely I become aware of Robin’s voice. My father greets him and they’re shooting the breeze when they walk into the study. Robin is here to retrieve me, and I’m sure I’ve made us late for school by not waiting outside on the porch like I usually do.

Robin takes my hand and I rise from the chair, and like I’m on autopilot, I walk with him toward my front door.

“So, you and my Sleepin’ Beauty are headin’ out to Gainesville this weekend?” my father asks Robin, who is a little surprised.

“Um, yes, sir. If that’s alright with you. Rory said you wouldn’t like it, but I’d love to show her around campus,” Robin drawls, the perfect gentleman.

“Of course. I was just tellin’ her what a wonderful idea I think it is. She’s lookin’ forward to it,” he replies.

My father shakes Robin’s hand and shoots me a look of warning before he returns to his study and Robin leads me to his car. I know what my father’s look meant. He wants me to know I’m not to repeat what I’ve told him to anyone else. He’d already made himself clear.
 CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Present Day

With Lily's intervention, Chelsea was blamed for the entire fight, and I got nothing more than one afternoon of detention, which is the school's policy for anyone involved in a physical altercation, regardless of who instigated the conflict. I served it Wednesday after school, and since my mother was mostly just worried about me, I really got in very little trouble. When my NYU acceptance letter came that same afternoon, all else was forgotten and my mom and I went out for sushi to celebrate. She's proud, and honestly I'm just happy to give her pride when I've given her nothing but pain and regret for the past year.

I'm really feeling good - at least for me - for the first time in way too long, and I try to convince myself that the fact that Sam is going to be at Columbia next year - just uptown from NYU's campus - has nothing to do with my improved mood.

With spring break starting midweek, most are treating the three school days we have left as lame duck days, starting break this weekend instead, at least in spirit. It's Friday night and Andrew's is packed. Some kids who graduated last year are home from college, and apparently reliving their high school days, or reconnecting with their slightly younger friends.

I've just barely begun to feel somewhat comfortable around the usual crowd - the people I go to school with - and seem to be the only one here less than thrilled with the unfamiliar faces. Of course, they're only unfamiliar to me.

Carl introduced me to some girls she knows from the volleyball team, and they seem nice enough. A group of guys I don't know stand around, leisurely scanning the room for girls like predators stalking their prey. I've darted a few suggestive comments. No one has said anything terribly out of line, but my line and other people's line don't exactly fall in the same place. I haven't been outright propositioned or anything like that, but if one more strange man asks to "get to know the new girl" with a cocky smirk, I'm going to lose it.

I sneak out to the back yard, which grows more and more popular as the season progresses and the air grows more mild. It's no longer an escape - just an extension setting of tonight's party. I spot Dave and Lily chatting with a few people I know and go over to bum a cigarette from Dave, knowing he always has some on him.

"Thanks," I mutter as he lights it for me, and turn to walk away when Lily stops me.

"Rory, can I talk to you a minute?" she asks tentatively.

"Sure."

We walk a few paces for some semblance of privacy before I turn to her to ask what's up. Since Chelsea has been suspended/grounded, she hasn't been around, but I assumed her friends still saw her. Then I remember that Lily was the one who told the dean the truth, and Chelsea probably deemed that a betrayal.

"I just wanted to apologize for what happened on Tuesday. I swear I had no idea what she had planned. She just told us to follow her because she had something for us to see, and of course, like idiots, we did," she says contritely.

"She's not talking to you, is she?" No, Queen Bee would expect more loyalty from her subjects. She wouldn't anyone how rare such a simple moral choice is, particularly in high school, and grateful I am. "All the same, thanks."

Dave interrupts us by coming up behind Lily and kissing her neck lewdly. It makes me uncomfortable, but I mentally shrug it off. She giggles and halfheartedly tries to push him away, but it's clear to me they're just one more pair that will undoubtedly couple off for break.

"You ladies talking about me?" he slurs playfully.

"No!" Lily replies.

"We were just talking about break," I lie.

Dave's eyes glow with excitement "It's gonna be slammin'. Drinking all day, partying all night, you all in bikinis..." He sighs dramatically. "A dream come true." Something tells me he'll be seeing Lily in even less than a bikini. Me? Not so much.

I roll my eyes and excuse myself as I smoke my cigarette down to the filter, embracing its calming effect. One cigarette a week - that is all I allow myself. Though in my internal negotiations I consider making additional allowances for vacations with friends - and several virtual strangers - that will undoubtedly include uncomfortable situations riddled with potential triggers.
I'm still on the same bottle of anti-anxiety meds, and I still have seven pills left. I'm a little worried this trip will require me to rely on them more than I've had to lately, but I've decided that the experience will be more rewarding than negative, and I'm truly looking forward to spending quality time with Carl and Tina, and perhaps now Lily, too. And, of course, Sam.

I drop my cigarette into an abandoned beer bottle that's been repeatedly used for the same purpose, and head back inside. I look around for Carl or Tina, but it's Sam I spot first.

He's standing in the far corner of the crowded living room, off on his own with one other person - a girl I've never seen before. Her long strawberry blond hair hangs loosely down her back and her fair skin is almost luminous. Sam says something with a smirk and her head hangs back with laughter as she touches his chest. Sam smiles, pleased with her response.

Nausea unfurls in my gut. She is absolutely beautiful. And it's clear for anyone to see that she and Sam are something more than friends - more than he and I will ever be. Their exchange is intimate without being necessarily affectionate, at least not in public. My heart rate takes off, but I'm not panicking. No, this is nothing more than your average, run of the mill, common jealousy.

I know who she is without needing to be told. Kendall. His "regular" hook-up before she left for college. But she's home now, at least temporarily, and Sam seems pleased with this development.

In fact, he probably knew she'd be here. He was probably expecting her. They don't look like they're catching up; they've probably been in touch the whole time. I wonder what would've happened if she hadn't gone away to school. If they'd be in a relationship. Carl made it sound like they were never serious or exclusive, and I wonder why not, when they obviously have a real connection.

Pain slices through my chest and it's unfamiliar. It was somehow easier to accept that Sam and I could only ever be friends before there was a beautiful girl hanging all over him right in front of me. One with whom he has a history - an intimate history.

I want another cigarette. Surely I can allow myself one more considering the extenuating circumstances.

I'm about to turn to go bum another one from Dave when I see Carl run over to them and hug Miss Beautiful like they're long lost friends. They fall easily into conversation and I'm even jealous of that. Of course she's friends with my closest girl-friend, and right now, I feel like I don't belong. Like I've just been a deficient, temporary stand-in for this stranger, and now that she's back, I don't have a place.

I want to go home, but I don't want to make a big deal about it. I should just text Carl that I wasn't feeling well and couldn't find her to say bye. I pull out my phone and am about to head out and do just that when she spots me.

Damn

"Rory! Come here," she calls from across the room.

Sam follows her line of sight and we lock eyes. He smiles, and I force the fake smile I mastered for Cam's benefit back when I was dating Robin. Sam frowns in response and I wonder if he can't see right through it just as Cam did.

With no other choice, I drag my feet to their corner, stopping to grab a beer on my way.

"Rory, this is Kendall. She graduated last year, she's at Northwestern now," Carl introduces.

I exaggerate my fake smile and murmur hello, silently wondering if her being in Chicago is the reason she and Sam aren't an item. Chicago isn't more than a couple hours away by plane, surely if they wanted to make a go of a long distance relationship, they could have.

"Kendall and her older brother Randy were a big deal in Port Wood. He's at NYU now, isn't he?" she asks Kendall, who'd rolled her eyes when Carl described her popularity. "That's where you're going, Rory, right?"

"Uh, yeah," I murmur.

"Ooh, maybe you can introduce her, Ken. God, Rory, Randy is so hot. We all had crushes on him freshman and sophomore year, you know, until he graduated," Carl explains.

Kendall smiles wryly, as if she's up to something, and I worry I might have another Chelsea on my hands. But of course, Chelsea lashed out at me because Sam didn't want her. Kendall doesn't have that problem.

"Carl, that is an inspired idea. Honestly, Rory, you're just his type, and he was just telling me how he'd love to meet someone and settle down," Kendall replies.

"Rory's not looking to date. She just got out of a relationship," Sam interrupts.

I furrow my brow at him and he clams up. "Uh, yeah. I'm a little young for all that settling down stuff, anyway," I murmur.

Carl and Kendall both laugh. "I didn't mean like marriage. I meant just to start taking someone seriously. But hey, if you're not looking for that, that's cool too. My brother's awesome - I'm sure he'd be happy to show you around campus, you know, as a friend. It's always good to know someone going into college."

"Carl, that is an inspired idea. Honestly, Rory, you're just his type, and he was just telling me how he'd love to meet someone and settle down," Kendall replies.

"Rory's not looking to date. She just got out of a relationship," Sam interrupts.

I furrow my brow at him and he clams up. "Uh, yeah. I'm a little young for all that settling down stuff, anyway," I murmur.

Carl and Kendall both laugh. "I didn't mean like marriage. I meant just to start taking someone seriously. But hey, if you're not looking for that, that's cool too. My brother's awesome - I'm sure he'd be happy to show you around campus, you know, as a friend. It's always good to know someone going into college."
"My cousin Thea goes there too. She can show Rory around," Sam interrupts again. "She's going to be in Miami for two days while we're there. I'll introduce you," he offers.

Kendall's smirk is back and I'm a little put off by the entire exchange. Does Sam think I can't handle interacting with men at all? That he's the only guy I can be friends with? Maybe that was true a few months ago, but I can't hide from the opposite sex forever, I realize, and my feelings for Sam are clouding my judgment.

"Yeah, well I guess it can't hurt to know some people. Why don't you give me his number and maybe I'll call him when I'm in the city," I murmur with false confidence.

"Here, give me your phone. I'll add him to your contacts," she offers with a grin, and I hand it over. I doubt I'll ever call him, but considering it, or considering considering it anyway, is a step in the right direction, I think. "Cap can vouch for him, they played football together for years," she murmurs as she programs her brother's number and hands me back my phone.

"Cap can vouch for him, they played football together for years," she says lightly, and teasingly musses Sam's hair.

"Uh, sure," I mutter, but then I turn to Sam, I can't help it, "you play football?" I ask quietly. He bristles, blinking at me, and it's Carl who replies.

"Duh, he's the star of the team. He's been the captain of every team since pee wee league. He's the freaking quarterback," Carl says with a laugh. "That's why everyone calls him Cap. Because of his last name and that he's been team captain like four times."

This irks me deeply. Rationally I know the fact that Sam plays the sport doesn't change who he is. But it's just one more thing he has in common with Robin to add to the list. Not to mention the fact that he played quarterback too and was captain. And it can't be a coincidence that he's never brought it up. It doesn't make sense. Being the quarterback of the football team, the captain, the star... it's got to have been a significant part of his life, even if the season's over and he's not playing anymore.

"Oh," I reply as casually as I can manage. I don't want anyone to realize I'm upset, because frankly I'm not sure I have a right to be. I'm just a stupid, jealous girl who's surprised to find out she doesn't know her crush as well as she thought she did. I just want to leave.

"Anyway, I'm starving, we were just going to head to the diner for a late night snack. Do you guys want to join us?" Kendall offers Carl and me. Why she would want us on her date with Sam, I can't imagine. If I were her, I'd want him all to myself, especially after being a part for so long.

"I'm actually kinda tired. I was, um, about to leave anyway. It was nice to meet you," I say to Kendall as sincerely as I can. "See you," I add to Carl and Sam, and turn on my heel before either of them can stop me.

I'm out the back door and around the side of the house before I can watch Sam and Kendall leave for their outing to the diner.

"Lookin' good, Pine," Marshall drunkenly calls out from the front of the house. I ignore him - and the wafting scent of pot smoke - and keep moving toward my car which I parked just up the street.

"Rory!"

It's Sam. He's out of breath, but I don't stop. Instead, I pick up pace. Maybe he'll think I didn't hear him.

"Rory, will you fucking wait?!" he calls out, exasperated.

I stop, and still facing away from him, close my eyes and count backwards from ten. Why did he follow me? Shouldn't he be with Kendall?

I hear him jog up behind me and stop to catch his breath. He takes hold of my arm to get my attention, as if he didn't already have it.

"For such a star athlete I'd have thought you'd be in better shape," I spit more maliciously than intended as I turn to face him.

Sam flinches and I feel instantly guilty. I take a deep breath and look down at my worn boots, contrite.

"I'll have you know I am in impeccable shape," Sam retorts through an adorable pout, and I can't help but rake him with my gaze to confirm what I already know - he's in incredible shape, all carved muscle and chiseled sinew. My eyes land back on my boots as I wait for him to explain why he's chased me out here when his girl is obviously
waiting on him. "Will you look at me?" he asks, his words drowning in frustration. I meet his eyes, and they're beautiful, but turbulent with uncertainty - so very unlike him. "What's up? You okay?"

I shrug. "Why wouldn't I be?" I know it's a childish response, but right now I don't care. How I am is none of his business. I'm not his. He runs his fingers through his hair and I'm immediately assaulted with the image of Kendall playfully messing with it.

"I don't know, maybe that plastic smile you've had on all night? Something's off. Tell me, Ror, what's up with you?" he demands.

I'm momentarily stunned at how perceptive he is of my moods. It isn't the first time Sam's noticed I was upset about something while Carl and Tina hadn't a clue. "Why didn't you tell me you're a football player?" I counter, steeling myself for this conversation. "I mean, I know I didn't ask. I know it's not like you lied or anything, but-"

"No, Rory, actually it is like I lied," he says carefully and I blink at him. Sam sighs. "I did. I lied. You know, you weren't exactly easy to get to know. Your trust in me was never more than tenuous at best, and you'd been pretty open about how you feel about football and football players in general... I didn't want to give you a reason to dislike me before you even got to know me," he shrugs.

I'm astonished. He's right, of course. If I'd learned he played football when we'd first met, I never would have given him a chance. I wouldn't have let him tutor me. We'd never have become friends.

"I never asked," I whisper, vaguely wondering why he's the one convincing me he lied and I'm the one defending him.

"Yeah, but every time it came up and I said nothing, I felt guilty as hell, Ror," he admits. "You mad?" he asks anxiously.

The truth is I'm not mad. I'm just confused, and I don't know why Sam cares either way. "Football players are a real bad trigger for me," I reply, my voice low and shaky, and I can't look at him.

"Well I'm not a football player anymore, am I? The season's been over for months, it's not like I'm playing in college," he qualifies.

I don't reply. Honestly, I don't care that he's some football star. General trigger or not, I'm standing out here alone in the dark night with him. If he were any other man, I'd be freaking out. If he were any other football player, I'd have hyperventilated by now.

No, Sam isn't going to trigger a panic attack. Not tonight, probably not ever again, and no sport he plays or playing is going to change that. I realize I only even said it to make him feel guilty, and I only wanted to make him feel that way because of Kendall. But he has nothing to feel guilty about, though his expression tells me he doesn't agree.

In my heart of hearts I know this whole football hang-up is stupid. I remind myself that Cam also played football. It just wasn't as much a part of his identity as it was for Robin. But, of course, maybe that's because I knew Cam so well. Knew all of the building blocks that made him him. And football, for him, was just one miniscule, unimportant detail. Not a defining quality. Not his life; not his future. And if I'm willing to admit it to myself, I know Sam, too. I know who he is. And whether or not Sam plays football, he's not a football player, at least not in the way I've defined it for myself.

It bugs me that he didn't mention it before, but I understand why, and I can't deny that it would have changed things for me if I'd known earlier. It's him and Kendall that has my stomach in knots, and that I could never explain, so I continue to silently pick at my nails.

"Come on, Ror, I'm still just me."

"I'm tired. I just wanna go home. You should get back to your girl," I murmur, then turn to continue to my car.

"Rory, I need to know we're okay!" he calls out.

I take a deep breath and turn back to him. "We're the same as we've always been, Sam. Friends," I reply, and climb into my car before I can turn back again.

Through the rear view mirror, I do notice that he stands in the street until I drive off, before he returns to the party, and to Kendall.

****

Wednesday is a half day, and we're all flying out early Thursday morning. There's a party at some junior's house tonight, but I stay home with my mom, who's stressing about me leaving, even if it's only for five days. I help her do the dishes after dinner, then head upstairs to pack.

I've waited until the last minute, as I do with everything, but it isn't a difficult trip to pack for. I own mostly warm weather clothes anyway, and besides my purchases from my shopping trip with Carl, I just throw in my old jeans and cutoff shorts, some tee shirts, tanks, sandals, and I'm good to go.
I set my alarm for 4:00 AM. JFK is only about thirty minutes away, but with a 7:00 AM flight on such a busy travel day, we all agreed to meet at check-in by five. Being just about the exact opposite of a morning person, I'm not looking forward to the travel part of the vacation, but maybe I'll fit in a nap when we get to the hotel.

I'm dazed with exhaustion as my mom drives me to the airport. I sip my coffee in vain, knowing nothing will fully wake me at this hour. I call Carl to tell her I'm almost there, and hear Sam in the background telling her to go get her boarding pass - that he'll wait to help me with my bags. Ever the good friend.

We pull up to the terminal right on time and my mom squeezes me zealously until I tell her she's cutting off my breathing. I wince at my own joke.

As promised, Sam is waiting for me by the outdoor check-in counter, and he opens my door for me.

"Ready?" he asks through a giant spring break grin.

"I got it," I murmur through another insuppressible yawn. "It rolls."

"Why don't you just focus on walking straight, sleepyhead. I'll check the bags."

I'm too tired to argue, so I hand it over and follow him to get our boarding passes. Everyone else has gone ahead, so it's just Sam and me going through security. I remove my jacket and shoes in a daze as Sam sets our carry-ons on the belt.

A TSA agent pulls me aside for a random additional screening and I sigh. Great, I get to go through the machine that allows strangers to see through my clothing. A machine called "Rapiscan", as if there could possibly be a more poorly chosen, and perhaps aptly fitting name.

Sam follows me to the screening area and I'm confused when we pass by the machine. "Hold out your hands, ma'am, and spread your legs," the female agent directs, demonstrating how she wants me to stand. I blink at her with wide eyes as my pulse takes off like a 747. "She's going to touch me."

Now I'm awake.

"What about the uh, scanner?"

"It's not in service," she murmurs disinterestedly. "Now please stand like this," she repeats, showing me again. Oh shit. I don't know if I can handle this. A stranger touching me. A stranger touching me everywhere. My gaze darts around in panic and finds Sam's worried eyes. He knows. Without me having to say anything, he knows.

"Ma'am."

"I uh, is there anything else you can do? I can't... I..." Fuck. They're not going to let me get on a plane if I refuse a pat down. I don't know if I can handle a freaking pat down!

"Ma'am, are you alright?"

I concentrate on my breathing, I can't hyperventilate here. I don't even have my pills - they're in my bag, and the agent took it after bringing me over here. Oh, God.

Sam's fingers find mine and wrap tightly around my hand. I didn't even notice him make his way to my side. "Ror, it's okay. You're fine," he whispers.

"Excuse me, sir, you need to wait over there," the agent orders, a warning. "Can I have a quick word?" he asks.

I don't hear the agent's response. I can't concentrate on anything other than controlling my breathing. Sam's fingers release mine and my breath catches and escapes me.

I'm vaguely aware that Sam is several feet away talking to the agent, but I can't focus. I close my eyes and count and count, my mouth going bone-dry as I break out into a cold sweat.

I blink a few times to help get my bearings. A stranger touching me like that. Anyone touching me like that! Oh, God.

My chest constricts painfully, choked by an invisible, unyielding steel band that continues to tighten incrementally, and the vaguely disembodied sound of my own gasping breaths taunt me.

"Ror, take these," Sam's voice is back, right in my ear. I close my palm around my pill bottle. He's gotten them for me. "Lidia here needs to pat you down. You're going to be okay, but if you need to take one, then take one, okay?" He waits for my shaky nod. "I explained to her that you don't like being touched, so she's going to make it as quick as possible. Right, Lidia?"

"It will take less than a minute," she assures us.

"I'm not allowed to hold your hand, but I'm going to be two feet away, see?" He waits for me to make eye contact and then takes two cautious steps back. "Keep looking at me, Ror."
I do. I keep my eyes locked with Sam's midnight blues as Lidia, the TSA agent, touches me in places I've never allowed anyone to touch me, but that Robin did anyway.

"You're done," Lidia announces, and makes some gesture to Sam I don't see since I'm so painstakingly focused on him. Sam is back holding my hand in a flash.

"See? You're fine. And you didn't even take a pill," he praises.

I whimper.

"Oh, Ror." He pulls me to his chest and wraps his arms around me. In his embrace, I can breathe again, and I do, I breathe him in.

It's over. Sam was right. I'm fine.

We stand there like that for minutes, until I'm sure I'm back to normal - or as normal as I'm capable of - and then finally, I pull away.

"Thanks," I murmur.

"Anytime, Ror. What are-" I grumble, and Sam smiles.

****

While everyone chats excitedly at the gate, I curl up in the cheap upholstery of the terminal seating and close my eyes. I don't sleep, though I'm tired enough that I probably could. But I really just need this time to get myself together. I hadn't even anticipated a TSA pat-down - didn't even consider it in my hundred reasons why this trip wouldn't be a good idea. I can't help but wonder what else I've missed.

I hope seven pills is even enough.

JFK is a bit overwhelming. I flew back and forth between here and Gainesville many times as a child, and it always struck me - the juxtaposition between the terminal here and that of my small town airport.

But this time I'm flying into Miami International. I'll never see Gainesville again.

The early spring air sends a chill through my energy-drained body as I board through the gate, and I pull my hoodie tighter around me.

Tina and Carl are seated together since they booked their tickets at the same time. Sam is with Tuck, and the rest of the group is paired off as well, except Lily and me who are both seated beside strangers since she was supposed to be with Chelsea and I booked my ticket alone. But after a quick game of musical plane seats, Carl and Tuck end up together, Lily and Dave, and Sam's with me. We both want to watch the Batman movie so we partnered up to save money by buying it on one TV and sharing ear buds. But I vaguely suspect Sam asked Tuck to switch with me because he knew how much I'd hate sitting so close to a stranger.

Sam seems enthralled with the film, but fifteen minutes in, and I can barely keep my eyes open. I yawn, like I've been yawning all morning, and pull my legs up to get more comfortable. I know better than to fall asleep in public - a situation that threatens humiliation for someone who suffers from night terrors. Sam lifts the arm rest that separates our seats and holds out his arm - an invitation to sleep on him.

I'm tempted.

God, am I tempted. All I want to do is curl up into that clean, masculine scent, close my eyes, and pretend I'm his for the next two hours. But it would just hurt more when we land and I'm thrust back to reality.

"I don't think that's such a good idea," I whisper wistfully.

Sam frowns, but nods. I know he thinks I can't handle it. Being so close to him. Especially while unconscious. He thinks I don't trust him enough for that. But I trust him just fine. It's me I don't trust.

Sam resumes watching the movie, but doesn't replace the armrest between us. He seems pensive, but then again, it's probably just Batman.

I lean away from him, against the window, and against my better judgment, let my eyes flutter closed.

I'm at a football game. It's fall in Port Woodmere, and I'm cheering again. I cheer for Sam as he throws the winning touchdown, and he takes off his helmet to reveal his triumphant grin. He's happy, and that makes me happy. But then I notice the girl cheering next to me. It's Kendall, and she runs onto the field and jumps on Sam, who kisses her ardently.

It's then that I notice the opposing team is Linton High. Robin has removed his helmet, too, and he's angry. Cam is nowhere to be found, and Sam is otherwise occupied with Kendall, as Robin locks eyes with me.

I turn and try to run away, but Robin catches me under the bleachers. Somehow, all the fans, all the other players and coaches, are too distracted to hear my cries for help. Fans stand just overhead, on the bleachers cheering, but no one looks down. No one sees that just below their feet, Robin has me pinned to the ground.
"Please!" I beg, but he doesn't relent. I fight and cry, but it just makes him more determined. I'm wearing my uniform, but I'm not wearing anything over my underwear.

Where are my spankies?

Robin tears through my one layer of protection, and suddenly he's inside me. I scream in pain, but still, no one even turns my way.

I fight and scream and-

"Ror!"
I gasp for air.
"Rory, wake up!"
My eyes spring open.
I whimper and wheeze.
I'm on the plane. I fell asleep. It was just another nightmare.

Oh, God, and Sam saw it.
I should have known it was a dream when I continued to fight. When I didn't just give up.
"You're okay, it was just a nightmare," Sam says soothingly, stroking my hair with unfathomable tenderness.

But his eyes are anything but calm. I've frightened him.
I'm mortified.

It's only then I realize that although I took care to sleep leaning into the plane window, I've ended up on the opposite side of my seat, clutching him desperately. I loosen the grip of my fingers and release his sweatshirt.

I look around to see if anyone else is staring at me, infinitely relieved to find I've only got the attention of Sam, at least for right now.

I swallow anxiously. "I didn't scream, did I?" I pray that whatever I said or did, it wasn't loud enough to garner widespread humiliation. I know I must sound desperate and frightened, but this isn't my first nightmare. Or my hundredth.

Sam follows my darting gaze. "No one else noticed," he replies, obviously recognizing my concern. But he still looks distressed.

"I, uh, sorry," I murmur, gesturing to where I clung to him in my sleep.
He looks at me like I'm crazy for apologizing to him.
"What did I, um, say?" I ask hesitantly.
Sam shoves his hand through his hair. "God, Ror, you were sobbing and saying 'please' and 'stop'," he choke out. His eyes are subtly glazed, and I wonder if he's holding back tears. God, I'm that pitiful. Without warning, he grabs me and tugs me to his chest, his long fingers threading through my hair. I allow myself thirty seconds to savor his embrace before I lift my head.

"I'm okay. It was just another nightmare," I assure him.
"You have them a lot?" he asks softly.
I let out an ironic, humorless laugh. "Only when I sleep."
"God, Ror." Sam's consternation is palpable.
"It's fine."
He looks at me in open awe. "It's so not fine, but you.. You're amazing, you know that?"

I look away. I'm many things, but amazing isn't one of them. "Can we just forget this happened?" I plead. I can tell he doesn't want to - that he wants every detail of the nightmare I just had, and probably every one I've ever had, but I can't give him that. "I, uh, need to use the bathroom," I murmur unconvincingly, and unceremoniously climb right over his lap and rush to the front of the plane, thanking God the lavatory is unoccupied.

I stay in the restroom more than fifteen minutes, until the flight attendant announces our initial descent into Miami. Sam makes no further mention of my nightmare. Instead, he goes on and on about our trip, and even gets me to agree to try jet skiing. The reformed tomboy in me can't wait.
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Spring Break, Last year

Robin has been talking about Gainesville nonstop since my father gave him permission to take me. I've forced smiles and cursory conversation, and Robin has barely noticed. When he climbed on top of me in his car last night, I didn't fight him. I didn't even say 'no'. I didn't beg, I didn't plead, and I didn't scream. I just let him do it. But I couldn't stop my tears.

I thought it would go by faster, but it didn't. Afterward Robin asked why I didn't "play" my "little hard to get game". I think he even sounded a little disappointed. I never knew he liked it when I fought back, but as I looked back on our physical relationship, I realized the more I struggled, the greater his excitement grew.

But the upcoming weekend is the most pressing matter. Every time I think about it, my precious numbness melts away and I'm nearly overcome by terror. I can't go away with him. No matter what.

I know it's not very considerate to wait until the last minute to tell him I'm not going, but honestly, I'm afraid of how he'll react. So I waited until now.

It's Friday afternoon; the basketball game has just ended. Almost everyone has left the school, and Robin is here to pick me up. He never loses control in public or when there are other people around, and I want to talk to him here so he can't flip out.

I join the girls in the locker room, and while they change and gather their things, I gather my courage. I meet Robin by the gym doors and he pulls me into his arms. "Hey, sweetheart. We win?" he asks before planting a kiss on my lips.

"You okay?" His eyes narrow slightly.
"Robin, can we talk a minute?"
"Sure, darlin'. Let's talk in the car. We got a long drive."

I bristle. We're supposed to leave right from school. His weekend bag is already in his trunk, but I never even packed. He obviously didn't notice my jeep in the lot.

"We should just talk here," I murmur. God, I need to rally my courage. My voice is weak and shaky, and I know Robin will just steamroll me if I don't exude strength. He raises his hand to stroke my face like he does, but I take another step back.

"Rory, what's goin' on?"
"I nod, stepping out of his arms. "You okay?" His eyes narrow slightly.
"Robin, can we talk a minute?"
"Sure, darlin'. Let's talk in the car. We got a long drive."

I bristle. We're supposed to leave right from school. His weekend bag is already in his trunk, but I never even packed. He obviously didn't notice my jeep in the lot.

"We should just talk here," I murmur. God, I need to rally my courage. My voice is weak and shaky, and I know Robin will just steamroll me if I don't exude strength. He raises his hand to stroke my face like he does, but I take another step back.

"Rory, what's goin' on?"
"I brace myself with a deep breath. "I can't go with you this weekend."
"A course you can. Your daddy said it was fine."

I shake my head. "I know, Rob. But I still can't go. I... I think we need some time apart. Some space."

His mouth presses into a thin, inscrutable line, and for several moments he just glares at me. "Rory, what are you talkin' about? This isn't still about your arm, is it?" He reaches for the now-yellowing bruise he put on my forearm just a few days ago, but I retract it before he can touch me. "You're not still mad, are you? I said I was sorry. You know how much I love you."

I shake my head again. "I know, Robin. It's not just that. It's just... I need some space, you know? Go to Gainesville, have a good time, and we'll talk when you get back, okay?"

"No, sweetheart, not 'okay'. This sounds an awful lot like you breakin' up with me," he chokes.

His eyes glisten with tears. They're familiar by now. They show up when he's feeling guilty about pushing me around - not once for forcing himself on me, though. But I've never seen him look this frightened, this... desperate. It almost undoes my resolve. But then I remember what will happen if I falter. The same thing that's been happening for months, only forever.

"Rory?" he breathes, a prayer. But neither God nor me will grant it. Not today. Today it's my prayer that will finally be answered.

Tears slide down my cheeks and I hastily brush them away. "I'm so sorry," I whisper, and flee back to the girl's locker room before the despair in his eyes can confuse me any more.
The locker room is empty by now, everyone having gone home after the game. I close my eyes for a minute and try to regulate my breathing. That was even harder than I thought it would be. I think I expected him to argue. To yell. Not to cry. Not to look so utterly heartbroken. Even after everything, I can't help but care for him in my own masochistic way, and I never, ever wanted to hurt him.

I get my bag from my locker and head to the back where the sinks and showers are. Tossing my bag on the ground, I turn on a faucet and splash some cold water on my tear-stained face.

"Rory."

Robin's voice is low and toneless. I grab a paper towel to dry my face and turn to look at him. I can't believe he's followed me into the girl's locker room.

"Robin, I."

He's on me before I even sense his movement. I'm viciously shoved back into the wall, and I cry out as my back crashes against the cold, hard tile. Robin doesn't try to kiss me. Instead, he restrains my arms at my sides and starts sucking down my neck, licking and biting with savagery.

"Ow! Stop, Rob, please!" I beg.

"You need space? From fuckin' me?!!" he roars, and crushes his mouth into mine.

I turn my face away. "No, Rob! Please stop!"

"Stop what? Doin' what you want? My girl likes it rough, remember?" He grabs my ass with one hand and pinches with enough force to mark me. His other hand pushes under my top and does the same to my nipple, his mouth moving over my skin all the while, sucking and biting too damn hard!

I cry out again in pain, using the limited mobility of my arms to try and shove him off. I bang my fists into his chest, but I can't get momentum, and no matter how I try to hit him, there's no power to my punches.

"Please, no! Robin! Don't do this! Not here!" I plead through desperate sobs.

My tears nearly blind me and vaguely I remember he likes it when I fight back, but I can't stop, I'm too scared. This isn't his usual foreplay. He's hurting me on purpose, not just to get me to comply. He wants, whatever he wants, and right now, he wants to hurt me.

I cry out in agony. "Please, no! Robin! Don't do this! Not here!" I cry out and squeeze my fists into his chest.

"You need space? You need time? From fuckin' me?!!" he snarls. "You are fuckin' mine! Do you understand me? You stupid bitch!" He hitches my shirt up, exposing my bra, and yanks the cups down. He bites my breast, and I let out a agonized scream. But Robin shoves his forearm over my mouth to muffle my cries.

"This isn't happening!"

"This can't be happening! I thought it was bad before. I hated it. Hated being overpowered - forced. Having him invade my body without my consent."

But this... this is something different. Robin is making a point. A claim. He will never let me go. I am his to do with as he wants, whatever he wants, and right now, he wants to hurt me.

He starts pawing under my skirt, but thanks to my cheerleading uniform, my panties are covered by my spankies. He rips roughly at them, scratching my skin in the process, but they're not as flimsy as underwear, and he can't just tear them off.

The sound of my muffled sobs fills the locker room, but we are utterly alone, and I know no one will come to my rescue. Robin curses viciously as he tries to drag my spankies down my thighs, but I twist and squirm to hinder his movements. He growls and removes his forearm from my face to dig in his pocket for something, and I take advantage of the access to my own voice while I can.

"Please, Robin. Please stop. I'm sorry. I'll come with you. Please! You're hurting me!"

"Too. Fuckin'. Late," he grates through clenched teeth as he pulls his hand out of his pocket along with his house keys.

He shoves them up my skirt and pulls my spankies and panties away from my hip, but not far enough. He roughly saws the key through my clothing, vertically cutting the flesh beside my right hip bone as he goes.

I scream and wail as the metal stabbs and tears through my skin in the most excruciating way, Robin continuing without hesitation, either not noticing or not caring that he's cutting me in the process. When the gash reaches the top of my thigh, I know he's cut through top to bottom.

Irritated by my incessant pleas, screams, and sobs, Robin presses his enormous hand over my face, covering my entire nose and mouth, and suddenly I can barely breathe. My spankies and panties catch on my left thigh since he's only cut away on one side, but he doesn't care. He quickly undoes his belt and fly with one hand, and pushes his jeans and boxers down his thighs. Then, with that same arm, he lifts me from the ground and slams inside me.

The force smashes my back into the wall once again, and I cry out in agony, but Robin increases the pressure of his hand, cutting off my air in earnest. My eyes go wide in panic.
Robin hammers with merciless brutality, in and out, again and again, glaring into my eyes all the while. His are filled with anger and hatred, but mine can only beg - for mercy, for air.

Somehow he gets the message. He doesn't stop fucking me. Not for a second. But he removes his hand and I gasp in precious oxygen.

"Who the fuck do you belong to, Rory?!" he growls.

"You!" I sob.

His eyes flash with victory, possession. He is in utter control of me. I am completely in his hands, and he's reveling in it.

Robin's hand moves slowly, completely out of synch with the rest of his body, which slams me unfailingly hard and fast into the tile wall. His hand lands on my neck, and something terrifying flashes in his eyes as his fingers close around my throat.

"Rob-"

He chokes off my desperate plea. I try to gasp for air, but he doesn't relent. My windpipe is completely closed and I am frozen in fear. I couldn't scream now if I wanted to, and Robin just continues on and on, his eyes never leaving my terrified ones as my lungs burn, and I start to grow dizzy from the lack of oxygen.

"You. Are. Mine!" he bellows, increasing the pace of his thrusts, if it's even possible.

Black spots dance behind my eyes and nausea consumes my gut. My eyelids droop, too heavy, and suddenly I can barely muster the strength to keep them open. My head pounds with throbbing pain, and I realize what's about to happen.

This is it.

He's going to kill me.

And perhaps it would be for the best. He'll never let me go, of that I have no doubt, and how could I doubt him when he's making his point so zealously? I'm beyond certain a lifetime with Robin isn't one I want to live.

Chocolate eyes with a ring of honey flash through my mind unbidden. Cam.

He's the only thing keeping me clinging to a shred of hope. Of survival. That Robin won't go through with it. Vaguely I hear a monstrous groan that sounds strangely distant through the roar of blood muffling my ears.

But somehow I know it's still Robin - that he's still right here. On me. In me. He stills suddenly, expelling panting breaths right into my face. My sight blurs and I can't keep my eyelids from falling closed.

Finally, Robin's cruel hand relaxes and I instantly gasp in giant gulps full of precious air. I wince as he pulls out of me, but I can barely register anything other than replacing my lost oxygen.

Robin sighs as he steps back and grasps me by the waist. He makes to set me down, but my legs don't hold, and I slide unceremoniously to the cold concrete floor, shoulders heaving and eyes raining torrents.

"Look at me," he demands.

I force my eyes open and look up at him, terrified of what he might do if I were to defy him now. He looms over me, powerful and inherently threatening, as he tucks himself back into his jeans and fastens his belt. I flinch unconsciously at the jingle of his buckle, a sound I rather die than hear again.

"You brought that on yourself," Robin murmurs.

I sit frozen, a pathetic pile on the bathroom floor, tears still gushing down my cheeks. My bare behind is ice cold against the dirty tile and my breasts are still exposed, but all my energy is devoted to breathing, and holding myself in a seated position, palms planted desperately on the floor.

"I gotta get goin'... You get this weekend, but only 'cause I'm so damn mad I can't even fuckin' look at you right now. I will see you Sunday, Rory," he spits. "And then you'll remember this the next time you think you want fuckin' space from me," he mutters bitterly.

Robin turns, and I think he's about to leave, but then he turns back and crouches down so we are eye to eye. I flinch when he reaches out to tuck my hair behind my ear. He adjusts the cups of my bra so that they are back in place, then gently takes hold of the hem of my top, pulling it back down before fixing my skirt. I have no underwear to speak of.

"You know why I had to do that, right?" he murmurs softly.

I don't know what to say, and like I'm in a trance, I just nod.

"You know I love you, sweetheart, right?"

I nod again.

Robin presses a soft kiss to my cheek, and with that, he turns and leaves. I count his footsteps descend down the concrete floor. Thirty steps. The locker room door slams.

I sit, stunned, on the bathroom floor, in wonder that I'm even still alive. Part of me still wishes I wasn't.

****
Time passes quickly... and also slowly.

It's hours before I pry myself off of the floor. The sky has darkened, and I worry someone may come through to clean. I don't dare look in the mirror. Instead, I return to my locker, and pull out a spare pair of jeans and a tee shirt. I stuff my uniform in my bag, and stagger out of the school. I fear Robin is waiting in the dark somewhere, but rationally I know he must have been in Gainesville for hours by now.

My parents are down at my grandmother's, so I could go home and no one would know I didn't go with Robin until Sunday; if at all. But I don't want to be alone. I drive in a daze and reach my house before I even realize I've left the parking lot. I stare at Cam's empty driveway. I know his mother will be at the hospital until late tomorrow morning. Cam must be out, too. I go around back to his back porch and try the handle. It's locked. I pull out the key Cam's mom gave me years ago and let myself in. I make my way to Cam's room and close the door. Only then, do I allow myself a look at my reflection.

Not as bad as I thought.

Blood stains the front of my jeans thanks to Robin's creative use of his house key. Damn, I should've cleaned that right away.

Bruising already colors my neck and wrists, which means they'll be real bad come morning. There's also a tiny football shaped indent in my neck from my necklace. I rip it from my neck and throw it across the room. I never want to lay eyes on it again.

My back aches terribly, and I'm thankful I can't see it. My face is a mess. My cheeks are streaked with black mascara filled tears, and there's pink staining around my swollen mouth from Robin's crushing kisses. There are hickies on my neck and shoulder, as well as bite marks. I can still see the perfect mold of Robin's teeth in two places.

And a burning pain radiates from between my legs. It's not unfamiliar to me, but it's more intense than ever before.

I take a deep breath, and slowly, so as to aggravate my injuries as little as possible, pull my top over my head. I undo my jeans and carefully tug them off before kicking off my sneakers and socks. I am naked but for my bra, but even through the lace, I can see the swelling and bite mark on my right breast.

My hip is still bleeding. I don't think it's so deep that I need stitches, but even so, I know where Michelle, Cam's mom, keeps her butterfly bandages. They'll have to do.

I remove my bra and let it fall to the floor. I am thoroughly disgusted with myself. I can't look at myself for one more second. I grab Cam's bathrobe from the hook behind his door and make my way to his bathroom.

I scrub despite the bruising and the soreness, but no matter how hard I scrub, his marks are still there. I wear the events of today like tattoos, and though I know at least most of my injuries will eventually heal, I wonder what will happen to the marks no one can see. If my nightmares are any indication, they will not get better with time, no, they will just fester and rot until they haunt my waking hours like my nightmares do my sleep.

I take a deep breath, and slowly, so as to aggravate my injuries as little as possible, pull my top over my head. I undo my jeans and carefully tug them off before kicking off my sneakers and socks. I am naked but for my bra, but even through the lace, I can see the swelling and bite mark on my right breast.

And my hip is still bleeding. I don't think it's so deep that I need stitches, but even so, I know where Michelle, Cam's mom, keeps her butterfly bandages. They'll have to do.

I remove my bra and let it fall to the floor. I am thoroughly disgusted with myself. I can't look at myself for one more second. I grab Cam's bathrobe from the hook behind his door and make my way to his bathroom.

I scrub despite the bruising and the soreness, but no matter how hard I scrub, his marks are still there. I wear the events of today like tattoos, and though I know at least most of my injuries will eventually heal, I wonder what will happen to the marks no one can see. If my nightmares are any indication, they will not get better with time, no, they will just fester and rot until they haunt my waking hours like my nightmares do my sleep.

Finally I get out and towl off. I clean the cut from Robin's house key. I was right, it doesn't need stitches, but it is pretty deep. It's still bleeding. I clean it again with antibacterial soap and apply bacitracin. I retrieve the butterfly bandages from the top shelf of the linen closet and it takes six of them to close the wound. I cover the whole thing with gauze and tape it down just in case it decides to bleed some more.

I wrap myself in a towel and half-heartedly dry myself. I slip on one of Cam's old tee shirts and boxers, and with my hair still sopping wet, grab my cell phone and climb into his bed.

Robin is an hour and a half away. I also know he has to be up at six in the morning and he can't be late to the program. He can't come after me again tonight no matter what. In fact, with the pre-training dinner on Saturday night, the absolute earliest he can leave is Sunday morning.

There's a storm coming Sunday too. It's not supposed to be too bad, but it has been all over the news. But my storm - the destructive torrent that is Robin Forbes - is done.

I text him.

We are over.

Nothing else. There's nothing else left to say.

I consider texting Cam that I'm here and staying over, but I don't want him to rush home for me. And I know if text him he'll do just that. I don't want to burden him. I feel like I'm a weight on his shoulders. I love him in ways I
could never love Robin. Unconditionally. Of course, Cam could never possess conditions that would make him unlovable.

I wonder if he's out with the guys or if he's with a girl. Suddenly I'm hit with that pang of jealousy that's lately become somewhat familiar. I know it isn't fair. Until two minutes ago I had a boyfriend. But, God, I haven't been able to stop noticing things about Cam that never really caught my attention before. At least not the way they do now. Like the lines of muscle in his back. The deep cut V that disappears below his waistline.

His scent.

What used to elicit comfort and security now also ignites something else. Something unfamiliar.

I close my eyes with thoughts of Cam, and somehow Robin and the terrifying events of tonight are buried somewhere deep within my psyche.

****

"Rory girl?" Cam whispers.
I blink my eyes open. "Is it okay that I'm here?"
"Don't ask stupid questions," he murmurs, and even though it's too dark to see, I know he's rolled his eyes.
Cam kicks off his shoes and pulls his flannel pajama pants from his drawer. I hold my breath as he peels off his shirt. Even in just the moonlight, I can see the definition of muscle and sinew in his chest and abdomen. And his strong arms. I need them tonight.

He removes his belt, and before he takes off his jeans, he lifts his head to look at me. "Uh, Ror?"
"Yeah?" My whisper is breathy and unfamiliar.

"You gonna turn around or should I change in the bathroom?" He chuckles.

God am I lucky it's too dark for him to see my blush. Has Cam ever made me blush before? Jesus, tonight has really thrown me off. I turn to my side and hug my pillow.

When I hear him open the closet door for his sleeping bag, I reach behind me and flip open the comforter. Cam sighs at my silent request, hesitating only a moment before sliding in behind me and wrapping me in his arms.

I find his hand, so big splayed over my stomach, and lace my fingers through his. I hide my wince from my smarting back as he pulls me tighter against him, but I'm grateful for the comfort.

"God, I've missed you, Ror," he breathes into my hair.
"Me too, Cam." He has no idea how much.
"I thought you were goin' down to Gainesville with Forbes."

I shake my head. "We... broke up."

My back smarts again as Cam's lungs fill with a sharp intake of air. He swallows, then exhales. "Do you wanna talk about it?"


"Okay. Night, Ror." He kisses my hair.

"Night, Cam. Love you." Feeling how emphatically I mean the words, I regret every time I said them to Robin. I'm quite sure now I never really loved him at all.

"Me too, Rory girl."

I breathe deeply, inhaling Cam's scent, purposefully filling my lungs with his masculine essence - clean, and strong... like home.

"Ror?"

"Yeah?"

"Did you just- uh... sniff me?" he asks. I hear the smile in his voice.

I jab him lightly with my elbow in response and we both laugh.

Finally I close my eyes, and slip back into sleep.
I'm a different person in Miami. The sun is shining, and I let the vitamin D seep into my skin. Here I don't have to be Rory: victim, survivor, or damaged mess. No - here I'm just another high school senior blowing off steam on Spring Break. I walk alone on the beach as the sun begins to set. We all spent the day by the pool, relaxing and swimming - just messing around like normal teenagers. And here, now, I can pretend I'm one of them.

I've showered and slipped on my cutoffs and a tank top, and decided to sneak in some quick alone time on the beach before I head up to Carl and Tina's room to submit to Carl's insistence on doing my hair and makeup. Tonight, we're all going out to dinner and then to club and bar hop. Dave has the scoop on which establishments don't ask for ID, and I'm surprisingly looking forward to continuing Operation: Normal Rory.

I was shocked when I saw the room Sam's uncle put me up in. It's more like a giant studio suite. A contemporary king bed dominates the large space, with a huge modern marble bathroom with both a shower and tub, not to mention a vanity area and a bidet. It has its own living area and an incredible balcony overlooking the white-sand beach. But that's not what most shocked me.

When I texted Sam that there must be some mistake with my room since the rate I paid shouldn't cover even the most basic accommodations in this hotel, an immediate knock sounded on my door.

But not the main door. No, the knock came from the door to the adjoining room.

My room attaches to Sam's suite.

And a suite it is. It's a freaking luxury apartment.

Sam's suite has a separate bedroom, living room, and even a small kitchen with a dining table. His uncle sure took care of him.

Sam even offered to keep the doors connecting our rooms open, or at least unlocked, since he has a separate bedroom anyway, but I told him I didn't think it was a good idea. I know he thinks it's because I don't trust him, not fully - not to give him unfettered access to my bedroom - but the truth is, I'm worried I'll let this new Normal Rory thing go to my head. That after a couple of drinks, I could crawl into his bed in the middle of the night like I used to do with Cam, but without the element of innocence.

I'm sure Kendall wouldn't appreciate us keeping our rooms open to one another anyway, and as jealous as I am of her, she's never done anything to me, and I wouldn't disrespect her like that.

I make my way up to Carl's room, and I'm instantly shuffled into a whirlwind of clothes, makeup brushes and sponges, hair irons, and eye shadows and lipsticks of every fathomable color. Carl wants to dress me, but I insist on wearing my own outfit, and she only agrees when I promise not to wear jeans.

Tina styles my hair in long, loose waves - a more polished and dramatic version of my natural look - and Carl goes to work on my face. Even when I wore makeup regularly it never took me more than twenty minutes, but Carl spends almost an hour doing God only knows what. She applies products I've never even heard of, and I start to worry she'll make me look like a hooker.

"You are going to get a lot of attention tonight, Rory," Carl murmurs while she works. I roll my eyes. "Hey! Don't do that, do you want your liner uneven?" she asks, and I laugh. I really couldn't care less about uneven eyeliner.

"I don't want attention. I just want to have fun with my friends. You guys aren't gonna ditch me for Tuck and Andy, right?"

Tuck and Carl have been bickering like crazy. They still consider each other a casual hookup, but it's plain for anyone to see there are real feelings there, though neither of them will admit it, and it's causing friction between them. I'm hoping this trip will bring them some perspective, because Tuck is obviously head over heels for Carl, and Carl is way too stubborn for her own good.

"We promised we wouldn't leave you alone. Relax. And I'm sure Cap will be watching you like a hawk anyway," Tina murmurs flippantly while she teases my hair.

"Why on earth would he do that?" I ask. Tina doesn't know about his promise to look out for me.

"Uh, because he always does, and you usually wear jeans and no makeup. Tonight, you're a freaking knockout," Carl replies as she turns and holds up a hand mirror to show me her finished product.

Holy shit.
"Damn, you guys are fucking miracle workers," I murmur as I glare at a version of myself I don't even recognize. I'm not a vain person. But Carl is right, tonight I look a damn lot better than I normally do.

"You're a good canvas, Rory," she replies.

"You should do this professionally," I say, and we all laugh.

Of course, she fully intends to. Carl has said a hundred times how she wants to own her own salon one day. I don't know how I seemed to miss this fact when she offered - demanded - to doll me up tonight, but the girl knows what she's doing, that's for sure. Tina, too.

"Alright, go change. We're all meeting downstairs in fifteen minutes! Hurry up," Tina shoos me out of the room.

I smile to myself when I see my reflection in the mirrored elevator doors. I really look something special tonight, I think as I enter my room. As long as I don't get triggered in some way, tonight is going to be a blast. I can't let anything ruin tonight.

I decide to preemptively take a pill - just to make sure I don't freak out because some guy ends up in an elevator with me, or bumps into me in a bar, or some other normal occurrence that for me could be catastrophic.

I pull out the semi-short, flouncy pink skirt I bought with Carl, and pair it with a plain white tank and my motorcycle boots. I'm not exactly comfortable in a skirt, but I know that compared to all of the other girls in micro-mini skirts, halter tops, and skyscraper heels, I'm basically a nun. And I have pharmaceutical help to calm my nerves.

I grab my purse and head out the door just as Sam does the same. Okay, pill or not, now I'm nervous. He's never seen me even remotely dressed up, and I'm not sure if I'm more worried that he won't like it, or that he will.

He's ending a call when he sees me, and freezes with his phone mid-air. He blinks at me, but doesn't speak, only heightening my nerves. An awkward moment stretches interminably.

"Well, say somethin', will ya?" I murmur, southern Rory in full effect. I must learn to control my accent better.

Sam is wearing jeans and a fitted white tee shirt with a stylish navy blue blazer. He looks freaking edible. I can see the definition of his chest muscles through his clothing, and his perpetual just-rolled-out-of-bed hair is still damp from his shower. My knees start to feel a little weak and I swallow anxiously.

I force myself to mentally shake it off. I need to gather my wits if I'm going to go out on the town with my crush who's supposed to just be a close friend when he's looking like something to eat. More so even than usual.

"Uh..." He's still completely frozen.

"Sam," I admonish. His silence is freaking me out!

Sam finally unfreezes and runs his fingers through his hair. "Uh, yeah. Sorry, Ror... You look... nice." He averts his gaze.

"Yeah?" I'm not fishing for a compliment. I know Carl and Tina did an amazing job with my hair and makeup, but I'm not sure it's me. And my outfit... I doubt I'll fit in with any of the other girls out tonight.

Sam takes the steps that separate his door from mine and returns his gaze to mine. "Yeah, Ror. Really, really, really nice," he assures me, his voice low and unsure, as if my looking nice isn't necessarily a good thing. "Gonna get me in a fucking fight tonight," he mutters under his breath so low I can barely make it out as we start walking toward the elevator.

I guess his frozen reaction was concern over my attracting attention, and making it more work to keep up with his protective promise. But if he thinks I might attract attention, then he really does think I look good, and the thought makes me smile to myself.

For some reason it's awkward as we wait for the elevator, and I start to feel apprehensive about the whole evening. I don't know why it's taken me until now to remember that I don't want to attract attention - that it's exactly what I've been dressing to avoid for the past year.

"I don't look like I'm, you know, askin' for it, do I?" I ask, suddenly worried I've made a huge mistake wearing a skirt. It's not too late to go change into jeans.

Sam's brow furrows in confusion. "Asking for what? What are you talking about?"

I'm hit with a wave of embarrassment, and I look down at my boots, stammering like an idiot. "I just don't want anyone to think, you know, that I'm lookin' for somethin'. Because I'm dressed like this... in a skirt. I... I-"

Sam lifts my chin to meet his midnight gaze. "Rory, no one is going to think anything about you because you're wearing a fucking skirt. They'd have no right to. I don't know where you'd get such an idea." He sighs. "You look beautiful. Really beautiful... just stick close by when we're out, okay? It'll be fun. Relax," he insists, and with his words, I do, I relax, clinging to the sound of Sam's voice calling me beautiful, and the burst of emotion that feels an awful lot like hope.

The elevator arrives, we both step in and I press the button for the lobby.
"Ready to go over the rules for tonight?" Sam asks.

"The what now? "What rules?"

"For the bars. I want you to stick close to the girls and make sure you don't get separated from the group. If they go pair off with their guys, which they will, make sure you find me first. Don't let them go off without first-"

"Why do I get rules? It's spring break, it's supposed to be fun - you've been saying so for weeks! Why doesn't anyone else get rules?" I grumble.

"They've all been out to clubs and bars in the city a hundred times, Rory. How many have you been to before?" he asks.

I purse my lips. "None."

Sam smirks. "Don't pout, you're too adorable like that and we need to go over the rules."

"Fine," I huff like a preschooler.

"First, don't accept any drinks from someone you don't know... In fact, don't take any drinks from people you do know either. I'll get your drinks for you," he decides.

"And what if you're off workin' on some random hookup when I want a refill?" I push down the flare of pain at the thought.

I don't know what would be worse, him flirting with some stranger right in front of me or him not doing so because he's being faithful to Kendall. I think the idea of him being committed, exclusive, maybe even in love... I think that'd be far worse. I'm an awful friend.

"Don't worry about that, I'm not going to abandon you, okay?" he says meaningfully.

I've heard that before, too. But people don't always have a choice. Sometimes they don't mean to abandon you, but they do anyway. Even when you need them the most.

Like when you're out at a bar dressed like a hussy with more makeup than a call girl and all your friends have paired off to go hook up...

"Ridiculous? Chelsea came after me in a bathroom stall because you spend time with me. Kendall tried to pimp me out to her own brother to keep me away from you! I'm not bein' ridiculous. They all think-"

"Rory, you have no idea what you're talking about. Kendall doesn't like me like that. That's not what that was about," he argues.

"Oh, really? Then what was that about? She sure seemed eager to set me up with... Randy, was it? You can't really think she just met me for two seconds and immediately thought I'd be perfect to 'settle down' with her brother..."

Sam takes a gentle hold of my elbow to halt our progress through the lobby. I see our friends over by the bar, but we're still far off enough that they haven't seen us yet.

"Kendall wasn't being possessive, Ror. We're really just friends. She was just messing with me," he explains, explaining nothing at all.

So the idea of me dating the "super hot" Randy was a joke? She was messing with him? I know I'm scowling, but I can't help it, I'm offended.

"No, Ror, you don't get it," Sam says, exasperated. He shoves his hand through his hair and sighs, as if deciding something. "She was just trying to make me jealous, okay? Kendall, she's a good friend - just a friend. But she thinks she knows everything, and she thinks that you and me... she just thinks I should, you know, make a move or something. With you. See if we might be more than just friends - because we've gotten so close and whatever. But I've told her you're not looking for that. The thing with Randy - she was trying to light a fire under my ass, so to speak. Push me to make a move, that's all."
That's all? I'm about to ask him why Kendall would think he should make a move on me - what he meant by "and whatever", but I stop myself. It's no different than Carl seeing all those little things she took as evidence of some secret love affair. Or crush. But Carl turned out to be right, at least about my feelings for Sam.

Could it be possible that Kendall is seeing the same thing in her friend that Carl saw in me?

I stop myself. I shouldn't let myself hope for such things - there's just no point. Because even in some crazy world where Sam could want me, it could never be enough. My feelings are too strong; I'm in too deep. And I'm not girlfriend material, even if he would ever want me as one. I'm just too fucked up, and he knows that better than anyone. He's seen my panic attacks, witnessed my nightmares, knows my triggers, seen my scars.

No. He could never want that. Who would choose that? And he doesn't deserve it even if he could. He deserves a normal girl. And, of course, there's his "no girlfriends in high school" rule.

"You and Kendall are really just friends?" I ask so softly I'm not even sure he heard me.

"Yeah, Ror. I mean, I'm not gonna lie to you, we used to hook up. But it was just that, a hookup. Physical. Kendall's got a boyfriend now - a serious one. She's in love. It was never like that with us. She's a good friend."

The relief I feel is just more evidence of how out of hand my feelings have grown. I want to ask him if it would actually make him jealous if I were to go out with Randy, but I don't. I'm not sure I'd want to hear the answer.

We meet up with everyone at the bar and pile into three taxis to head to the Mexican restaurant for dinner. I'm not usually a drinker, but since everyone ordered pitchers of sangria, I decide to have a glass. I've never had it before and it's actually really good, sweet, so I doubt it has too much alcohol.

A few glasses later and dinner is over. Everyone is having a ball - laughing, joking. Andrew and Tina are kissing, and Tuck and Carl are arguing over gender normative practices and feminine independence and who should pay the check on a date.

Lately every issue that's come up has turned into a full blown battle of wills between those two and it's getting kind of old. I wish they'd simply profess their love for one another and put the rest of us out of our misery. Because it's obvious as hell to everyone but them.

By the time we're at the third bar of the night, it's clear it's where we'll be ending the night. Everyone's drinking and dancing and flirting, and I doubt anyone would even recognize the change in venue if we did decide to go somewhere else. Carl and Tuck have gone from making out in the first bar, to screaming at each other in the second, to a mixture of both now.

I watch Tina and Andrew climb into a cab to go back to the hotel and I've no doubt as to what they're up to. True to his word, Sam has barely left my side all night. As Carl predicted, I have garnered more attention than usual from the opposite sex, but I'm confident it has more to do with the amount of alcohol they've consumed and their desperation for a random hookup than with my appearance tonight.

The few guys who had the nerve to hit on me in spite of Sam's bodyguard-like proximity all night were let down easy either by me or Sam. The one guy who took hold of my arm and almost caused me to panic nearly got his ass kicked before I could talk Sam down, which in itself distracted me from panicking.

Bottom line: I'm having fun. Other bottom line: I'm drunk.

It turns out that new Normal Rory goes out and gets drunk with her friends. I giggle at the thought and Sam shoots me an inquisitive look.

"You, my friend, are drunk," he observes dryly as he leads me out of the bar to hail a cab, and I giggle again. Who knew I could be so giggly?

In fact, I'd probably be even drunker... more drunk? Whatever, I'd be completely hammered if Sam hadn't cut me off and insisted I'd had enough thirty minutes ago. Instead, I'm delightfully tipsy.

"So are you," I reply as he slips an arm around my waist to help me walk straight. I cuddle into him and inhale his scent, now complemented with a little liquor and smoke from the bars.

Sam chuckles. "Actually I'm not. I only had a couple, and I can hold my liquor better than some people," he teases. Sam helps me into the cab and slides in behind me. I look him over. No, he's right, he does not appear to be especially drunk, and I giggle again. Sam grins. "You're a cute drunk," he murmurs.

"You're cute all the time," I counter. I'm vaguely aware I shouldn't be saying this out loud, but right now, I just don't care.

"Yeah? You think?" he asks.

I narrow my eyes at him and purse my lips exaggeratedly. "You know you're gorgeous. You ain't foolin' me," I hold my chin high in challenge. He's not going to trick me into showering him with compliments. He's an Adonis, he knows it, I know it, and I know he knows it. He isn't blind, after all.

Sam laughs a full, head thrown back, eyes closed chuckle and I giggle in turn, not even knowing what's funny. "I didn't know you thought so, Rory. Anything else you want to share while you're feeling generous with information?"
I bite my lip and think a few moments. "I love Carl," I tell him.
Sam's eyebrows shoot into his hairline. "Is this where you tell me you like girls?" he asks and it sounds like he's only half kidding. "Cause I won't judge-"
"No, shh, don't interrupt!" I whine.
Sam makes a gesture like he's locking his lips and throws away the invisible key, still making an only mildly successful attempt to hide his amusement.
"I love Carl, she's been a real good friend to me, but... you're my best friend. Not her, you," I confess. Sam's face softens, draining of mirth, and he smiles almost shyly. He opens his mouth, but before he can respond, I blurt out, "and you're super hot," and we both laugh again. I realize my accent is also extra prevalent when I've been drinking and make a mental note to try and remember that.
"I like drunk Rory," Sam says with another chuckle.
Sam's face grows suddenly serious and he leans into me. Holy shit, he's close. It feels real hot in here. Is it hot in here? I feel hot.
"Oh, I like sober Rory a lot. I just like hearing you tell me what you're thinking. And I told you, don't pout, it's too adorable," he says softly, no more than a couple of inches from my ear. His fingers inch up to my shoulder and he twists a lock of my hair between his thumb and forefinger before tucking it behind my ear.
"You think I'm adorable?" I practically gasp.
Sam smirks. "You know you're gorgeous. You're not fooling me," he whispers my own words right back to me, and I suck down an anxious swallow.
"Tell me what you're thinkin all the time," I counter his earlier comment. "I tell you all kinds of things."
"You tell me things," he agrees. "But usually not what you're thinking. Not in the moment, anyway. It's refreshing."
"Tell me what you're thinkin'," I challenge. "Drunk or not, it's only fair." I bat my eyelashes at him and wonder where this bravery is even coming from. Oh right, the alcohol.
Sam's lips twist up into a half smile. "I'm thinking... you look beautiful," he breathes, and my heartbeat takes off, but not in panic. My whole body is flushed, inside and out, and I feel it - that unfamiliar feeling. Desire.
"Carl and Tina did a good job makin' me up," I whisper back.
Sam bites his lip to suppress his laugh. "Not just tonight, Rory."
I stare at captivating midnight blue, breathing so hard my chest is practically heaving, when we arrive at our hotel and the valet opens my door. "Oh!" I yelp in surprise, and quickly compose myself to climb out of the car. I stumble. Damn, I'm drunker than I thought.
"Hold on there, Ror." Sam rushes around the car and slings his arm around me. "I got you." He guides me into the elevator and doesn't let me go as we ride up to the top floor. "Come on, give me your keycard. I'll open your door," he offers.
"But I'm not tired," I grumble with another pout.
Sam brushes the pad of his thumb across my bottom lip and a shiver shoots through my entire body. "I told you not to pout."
"Okay," I breathe, not sure what I'm even agreeing to. I'll agree to anything he says right now.
"Give me your purse." I hand it over without question and watch as he digs through it. "Where's your room key? It's not in here."
Oh, shit. I slap my hand to my forehead. "I may have left it on the writing desk... in my room."
Sam sighs. "This is why we should have left our adjoining doors open." He leads me one door over to his own room. I follow him in.
"I was worried we might end up in bed," I admit without thinking, then slap the same hand that just smacked my forehead to my mouth. Did I just say that out loud?
I peek over at Sam and he looks horrified. Oh, shit. He thinks I meant sex.
Did I mean sex?
He walks right up to me, and I may be drunk, but it seems like he's mad. "I would never take advantage of you like that, Ror. Jesus, how could you think-"
I press two fingers to his lips to stop his words. "No, Sam, I wasn't worried about you, I was worried about me," I admit. Sam furrows his brow. "You look so cute when you do that," I add, sliding my fingers to the small crease between his brows, gently feeling the soft skin.
"What are you talking about? What do you mean you were worried about you?"
We stare at each other, barely a few inches apart. I want him. I can't help it. I've never felt this way before - emotionally, physically - and I doubt I ever will again. I only ever felt anything close once, and I never explored it - I never had the chance.

My fingers move of their own volition to the back of his neck, I lean up on my tip toes, and before my intoxicated mind can remember why this isn't a good idea, I press my lips to his. After a sharp gasp of surprise, Sam responds almost instantly.

His lips move over mine, slowly, gently. God, they're soft, and somehow also firm. I push my hands up, into his hair, and tug lightly, like I've wanted to for so long. Sam moans, the sound rumbling from deep in his throat, and it's an incredibly sexy sound.

I'm on fire, like I'm possessed, wanting like I've never wanted before. Sam grabs my face and he takes control, picking up the pace of the kiss as his thumbs reverently brush over my cheeks. His lips tease mine, and when his tongue licks the seam of my mouth, I open for him, welcoming more. Desperate for more.

Sam's tongue works its way into my mouth and I revel in it. Having a part of him in a part of me. His hands caress down my neck and shoulders until one threads through my hair, holding my mouth to his, and the other slides around my waist until he's pulling my body flush against the hard planes of his own.

I tentatively move my tongue with his, twisting and licking, loving the exploration of his mouth, the taste of him - a delectable mixture of mint gum and scotch.

He sucks my bottom lip into his mouth and I moan, unabashed. The sound encourages Sam, who takes two steps forward toward the wall and I move with him until I feel a desk or table of some kind behind me. With no effort at all, Sam lifts me and sets me on its edge, pressing himself against me, never ending his kiss. I open my legs so he can get closer. I need him closer. He complies, but he's being careful, and I can feel him everywhere except the one place I really need him. I wrap my legs around his hips and pull him as close as physically possible, and I moan again as I feel confirmation that he really does want me.

I'm aware that I'm "asking for it". I'm giving him more of a green light than I ever gave Robin, and though I know I'm probably coming across like some wanton slut, I can't bring myself to care. I know that come tomorrow I will be hurt. I know I'm falling in love with my friend, and I also know nothing has changed. He doesn't return my feelings, and why should he?

This version of me - this version that goes out and gets drunk with her friends, who gives into her attraction and feelings and has the courage to kiss the boy she's been pining over - this Rory is an illusion.

I know Sam could never want the real Rory. I know he deserves more even if he could. More than a broken, damaged mess. But tonight, just for one night, I can still be Normal Rory. I can allow myself this glimpse of what it could've been like if I'd never said yes to that first date with Robin. If I went to NYU and maybe just met Sam in New York by chance. If I was really just a normal girl and he could want me.

I've never been kissed like this. Only once had it ever felt close, but it wasn't like this. And Robin - even in the beginning, before things went bad, never elicited these feelings in me, in my body or my heart. I'm desperate to know what it feels like when I'm not being forced. When I really want the person I'm with.

I kiss Sam back with all the passion I possess, running my hands up the front of his tee shirt, and I shiver again at the feel of his hard muscles. I can feel his erection firm between my legs, and a heat I've never felt before. An ache. And I know without a doubt that here and now with Sam, the act that's only ever caused me unimaginable suffering with Robin, is the one thing that can soothe that ache.

I rock my hips into him.

Sam makes a deliciously amorous sound before he unexpectedly tears his mouth from mine and wrenches from my grip. He takes two steps back from me and I sit on the table where he's set me, trying to catch my breath. Sam does the same, panting for air, and we blink at each other, like we don't know what just happened.

But I know exactly what happened. And I know before he speaks he's going to apologize, to try and back track, but I won't let him. I want this.

"God, Ror, I'm sorry. I-"

"I kissed you."

Sam stares at me, confused, like he's inwardly grappling with something profound. I know he doesn't want to lead me on - doesn't want to mess with our friendship - and I get all of that. I do. But my feelings for him, they're my problem, not his. They shouldn't preclude us from doing this, not right now when we both want it. At least I think we both want it...

"Rory, you're drunk. Whether you kissed me first or not, I shouldn't have let that happen. You're my friend." His words are shrouded in guilt.

I slide off of my perch and cover the distance between us, looking intently into his eyes so he knows I mean what I say. "Please, Sam. So, I'm drunk. So what? Half the girls in Miami hookin' up with strangers tonight are
drunk. And you ain't a stranger - you're my friend. I trust you." I look up at him through my lashes. I tentatively run my hands up the front of his shirt, just feeling his body under my fingertips. "It's not like I'm a virgin. You don't need to worry. I've never felt this way before, please, I just wanna know what it feels like to do it because I wanna do it. Because it makes me feel good. Please, Sam." I say the last part in a whisper and lean up to kiss him softly.

When he doesn't immediately push me away I move my lips a little more surely, but he only reciprocates for a moment before gently grabbing my wrists to stop the exploration of my fingers, and pulling his mouth away. His expression is a mixture of concern and confusion. I stumble a step before catching my footing.

"I really am drunk. And actually a little dizzy. "What do you mean you want to do it because you want to do it? What other reason is there?"

I shrug. I don't understand why we're talking about this when we could be doing it, and I want to get this conversation over with quickly and see if I can get him to kiss me back again.

"You know, because. Because I had to. It ain't like I always got a choice," I murmur. "But now I want to. I've never wanted-"

"What do you mean you had to? That you didn't have a choice?" he interrupts, and he's suddenly too serious. Did I just say something I shouldn't have?

My mind is cloudy with alcohol, and with all of the secrets I've confided to Sam, and all the ones I'm still keeping, I'm not sure which is which right now.

"Rory. What did you mean?" He asks slowly and carefully.

I don't know what I meant. I honestly don't even remember exactly what it is I said. My stomach turns as the dizziness in my head conspires with the nausea in my belly to make me feel ill, and I close my eyes briefly to get it all to settle and try to focus on the here and now. "I just meant... that right now, drunk or not, I know what I want, and I want-" My words are cut off with a gag.

Oh, shit. Sam's face is etched with worry and I'm no longer confident that I can push this sick feeling back down.

"Ror? Ror, are you okay?"

The room spins and all I can do is squeak out "sick" before my legs give out. Sam catches me with a muttered curse and I'm suddenly held to his chest, my legs dangling over one of his strong arms as he makes his way to the bathroom. He sets me down on the side of the tub and I clutch the tile edge as tightly as I can to hold myself in a sitting position. Sam's doing something, but I can't see what, I'm too busy trying to figure out if closing my eyes makes it better or worse.

Oh, God, worse. Definitely worse. The faucet turns on and off, and then Sam is kneeling in front of me and pressing a cool, wet, washcloth to my forehead.

"Fuck, Ror, you only had three drinks at the bars. You didn't take any drinks from anyone else, did you?" he asks, obviously deeply worried.

I shake my head. "I didn't. No, you told me not to," I assure him shakily. He runs his fingers through his hair, and vaguely I wonder if it's really that big of a deal. I mean it's a rite of passage for every normal teenager to drink too much and get a little sick, isn't it?

"How much sangria did you drink at dinner?"

I shrug. "Two glasses?" It comes out like a question, and really, it is. There were pitchers, and people were refilling generously, but I didn't think I'd had that much.

"Fuck, Rory." He narrows his eyes at me and I see four of them. Four midnight blue eyes that have seen right through me since they first witnessed my panic attack my first day of school. "Did you take a pill tonight, Rory?"

His voice is both hesitant and accusing. Tender, yet firm. Damn. I try as best I can to focus on his gaze and slowly nod.

Sam's face is etched with worry and I'm no longer confident that I can push this sick feeling back down. "Rory, Rory, are you okay?"

"Stop being cute, I'm still mad at you," he says before he turns and leaves the room.
He's back almost instantly and he twists the cap off of a bottle of water and hands it to me. I eye it dubiously. My insides twist. No, I don't believe I'll be drinking this right now.
"I can't. My stomach."
"Come," he says and holds out both hands. I tremble as I slip my small, pale hands into his large, warm ones. I wonder if the rest of me looks this pale.
Damn, I must look awful. No wonder he broke off our kiss.
Sam guides me down to the floor in front of the toilet and gathers my hair in a ponytail, secured with his grip. He rubs his other hand soothingly up and down my back. "You need to throw up, Ror. Trust me, you'll feel better," he says gently.
I can already feel that he's right. In fact, I can already feel that I won't have a choice in the matter one way or the other. I am definitely going to vomit. "Go... away," I choke out.
"Rory..."
"Please. Don't... want you to see me throw up..."
"Yeah, well I don't want to see you in the fucking hospital. So I need you to throw up for me, okay?"
"I'll do it if you leave," I squeak, but our argument over whether or not he will be present for my impending vomiting ends as my stomach wretches and empties its contents into the toilet.
I gag again and up comes more. I want to push Sam away, want privacy for my humiliation, but I can do nothing but succumb to my own body which has other plans.
Four more times I throw up and all the while, Sam holds my hair, rubs my back, and whispers encouragements as if vomiting is some great achievement. When I'm finally sure it's over, I sigh with relief and sit back, leaning my head on the cold porcelain of the toilet seat, aware that it's disgusting, but just not caring.
"That's my girl," Sam whispers.
His girl. If only I could be his girl. And I'm quickly overcome with grief and regret. Regret for what could never be, and for my pathetic self and my inability to control my feelings for this boy.
"Can I please have some privacy now?" I ask pitifully.
Sam mulls it over. "Sorry. Nope. Come on, let's get you cleaned up. I was going to call downstairs for someone to bring up a key for your room, but honestly, Rory, I think I should keep an eye on you," he says as he helps me up and guides me to the sink. I turn on the faucet and rinse my mouth out before splashing water on my face.
Sam pours some mouthwash into a glass and hands it to me and I rinse thoroughly.
I glance in the mirror, and as I expected, the pound of makeup that made me look exceptional earlier, has ended up all in different places than originally intended. I'm pretty sure eyeliner and mascara aren't meant for my cheeks.
"Face wash?" I ask, and Sam hands it to me.
I have to wash my face four times before it looks clean again, but I still look awful. Pale and worn. Sam is bustling around the suite when I come out - he's making up the couch for me.
"Sam, I think I'm okay, I just wanna get to bed," I murmur.
"That's the plan," he replies.
I eye the couch without enthusiasm. It does not look especially comfortable. Especially not with a big comfy king bed on the other side of the wall. I look longingly at the door that adjoins our rooms. I should have just listened to Sam.
While he goes back to use the bathroom I kick off my boots and socks. I can sleep in my tank top but... I pad back into his bedroom. How come he gets to close the bathroom door for privacy?
Feeling like I'm doing something illicit I open the drawers in the bedroom chest and find his underwear in the second drawer. It's organized pristinely, every item - even his underwear - neatly folded. I feel a little naughty going through them - mostly boxer briefs - and I ignore the simmer of desire that reignites low in my belly. Sam was right, I do feel much better now that I've thrown up, but I'm thoroughly mortified. I find a pair of blue striped boxers and snatch them, scurrying out of the room before he can come out, and hastily close the door.
Once I'm back in the living room, I step out of my skirt and slip on his boxers. I take my bra off under my shirt and fold it neatly with my skirt on the arm of the couch. I slip under the blanket Sam laid out on the couch and curl up on my side. I was right, it is definitely not very comfortable, but it will do. I wonder if he will just go to sleep or come out and say goodnight. I'm not even sure which I prefer right now. I'm so damn embarrassed.
Operation: Normal Rory was a complete disaster. I don't know why I thought I could have even one night of happiness. Why I thought Sam would want to hook up with me in the first place. He's certainly never given me any indication he wanted me like that. I don't know what I was thinking. And then I threw up! Right in front of him. God, what is wrong with me? I close my eyes and drown in shame.
"What are you doing?" Sam asks. I hadn't even heard him come out of the bedroom. I don't answer, I just look up at him, confused. "You're not sleeping there," he says.

I sit up, humiliated once again. But he said he wanted to keep an eye on me and made up the couch, what else could that possibly have meant other than that he wanted me to sleep here?

"The couch is for me, Rory. You take the bed." He holds out his hand, anticipating my argument. "Not a chance. Come on, Ror, let me be a gentleman."

"I wish you were less of a damn gentleman," I grumble under my breath. Maybe then he wouldn't have stopped whatever it was that might have happened between us earlier.

Sam chuckles, though I didn't mean it to be funny, and I take his proffered hand and climb from the couch. His breath catches as he looks me over.

Whoops.

I forgot I stole his underwear.

"Sorry," I murmur as I drag my feet to the bedroom.

"Help yourself," he says with another easy chuckle, following right behind.

I turn down the cover and crawl into the big, comfy bed. "You gonna tuck me in?" I tease.

"Something like that... You're okay, right? That I'm here, I mean."

I'm surprised that after everything he's still worried I might panic. Not even close. I lie down, rolling to face him. "Yeah, Sam. I've told you, I trust you. I'm pretty sure you can't trigger me anymore. Not unless you did something intentionally to."

"I would never." "I know."

Sam sighs and sits on the edge of the bed. He leans down and brushes a soft kiss to my forehead. It's somehow both intimate and chaste, but unfathomably affectionate. It warms my heart that he still cares for me after tonight's embarrassing display. He's an infinitely good friend, and I try not to imagine him as something more.

"Goodnight, Ror. Look, if you wake up and you don't feel well, or you need something - anything - wake me up, okay? I mean it," he says softly.

"Thanks," I breathe.

Sam smirks. "I got you, Pine. What-"

"are friends for, I know."

And with that, he leaves, shutting the door gently behind him.

****

The championship game is over. Sam hugs me and smiles. We've won. He's happy. Robin glares at me from across the field. He scowls. We've lost. He's angry.

"Don't leave me alone," I plead to Sam.

He smiles wistfully. "Sorry, Ror, we're just friends, remember?"

He turns and walks toward the lot. It's the Linton lot, and he walks toward Cam's car. But where is Cam?

"Sam!!" I call out as Robin prowls toward me. My stomach rolls with utter terror.

"Sorry, Ror! You're his, not mine - nothing I can do!" he calls back, and gets in Cam's car and drives off.

Why is Sam driving Cam's car? Where the hell is Cam?

I watch in horror as a tractor trailer races head-on right into Sam's path.

"Sam, look out!" I scream at the top of my lungs as tires screech, the crash of bangs and booms reverberating ominously into the night air.

My elbow is yanked and I'm forced around so I can't see what's happening. I'm paralyzed by panic; all I want to do is make sure Sam is okay.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing? You stupid bitch."

"No!" I plead, but Robin drags me up the steps and into the hall that leads to the gym. He hauls me into the locker room.

I'm frozen in fear. I can't breathe. My throat constricts and air refuses to pass through. What is wrong with me?!

Suddenly Robin slams me back into the wall. "You're fuckin' mine, Rory. No matter what you do. No matter where you go. You'll always be mine, and no one else will ever want my messed up fuckin' leftovers," Robin spits.

He tears avagely at my clothing as I start to sob.

"Please, Robin! No! Not here!" I cry and plead, but as always, it does no good. He rips my panties off, and again, even though I'm wearing my cheerleading uniform, I have no spankies on. Where the hell are my spankies?!

He slams into me and I wail in agony. "My girl likes it rough," he growls threateningly.

"Please stop! No!" I cry, but his fingers close around my throat, cutting my lungs off from precious oxygen. This is it. He's really going to kill me this time.
"Rory, wake up!"
I gasp for air.
"Rory, you're okay. Just wake up, please." It's Sam's voice.
I open my eyes. Where am I?
Oh, right. The hotel.
Oh, right. Sam's room.
Oh, right... last night...
I'm out of breath, like after many of my nightmares, and I lie back and close my eyes, reliving the mortification of last night - or perhaps earlier tonight since it's still dark.
"You okay?" Sam asks hoarsely. He's in the bed, on top of the comforter, holding me and stroking my hair.
"Yeah... just another dream," I murmur when I've caught my breath.
"Fuck, Ror. What can I do? How can I help you?" His eyes are almost wild with desperation.
I should say "nothing". I should send him back to the couch to sleep in peace, because chances are I'll wake up screaming or crying again in a couple of hours, and Sam deserves to get some rest.
The nightmares started not long after the first time Robin forced himself on me, and they got progressively worse after that last time - when he gave me my scar. My scars. Though only one is physically visible. But the few times since then I slept in Cam's bed with him, I had no nightmares. And right now, though I know I should spare my friend, I'm still reeling from my dream, and I'm feeling a little selfish, and I'm wondering if Sam might offer me a similar solace.
"You could sleep with me," I whisper.
"Ror..."
"Just sleep," I qualify. "Just... you know, hold me?" My voice is barely audible, and I know I'm just embarrassing myself even more after last night, but that was an exceptionally bad dream - the ones where I can't breathe are the worst - and I'm feeling terribly vulnerable right now.
"You sure that'd be okay? I don't want to make it worse, Ror," he murmurs tentatively, and if I didn't know better, I'd think he actually wanted this right now. To hold me.
"Please, Sam."
And with my plea, he scoots over to lift the comforter and then slides in next to me on his back. He holds his arm out and I snuggle into the nook of his shoulder, resting my head on his chest. Sam's arms wrap around me, holding me in place. He sighs, and I take it as encouragement and rest my arm over the perfect ripples of his abdomen. Who ever knew something so rock hard could be so damn comfortable? I'm tempted to entwine my legs with his, but I know it would be inappropriate. I don't want to make Sam uncomfortable, and I definitely don't want to make this so-close-and-yet-so-far situation any more blurry for myself. I force down any amorous feelings and cuddle into him, delighting in the comfort my friend is blessing me with in this moment.
No, I don't think I'll have any more nightmares tonight, after all. In fact, I feel unfathomably safe.
CHAPTER NINETEEN

Spring Break, Last year

In Cam's arms, magically, my nightmares can't touch me. Even after yesterday. But I wake before the sun in a jolt of panic. Last night, I was so desperate for the comfort only Cam can offer, that I didn't quite think everything through. I can't let him see me like this. In the light of day it will take no more than a glance for him to see everything Robin did to me.

Even with the worst of it - my back, my breast, the bandage on my hip - covered by his tee and boxers, the bruising and bite marks on my neck are visible. As is the swelling and black and blue of my wrists.

I still feel sore between my legs, but it's gotten much better over night. I've found that this has become a resilient part of me, mercifully almost always healing before Robin could hurt me again.

I slip out of bed, careful not to wake Cam. I tiptoe out of his room and carefully close his door, then pad down the stairs and out the back door.

Once inside my own house, I quickly dig out my black cotton turtleneck, grateful that it will cover both my neck and wrists. I check my cut and am relieved the bleeding has stopped. I leave on the butterfly bandages and replace the soiled gauze before I pull on loose black sweatpants. It's seventy five degrees outside and climbing, and my outfit makes no sense for the season - for any season here in Linton, really - but I've no other choice.

I don't know what to do next. I just want Cam, or my mom, but she's out of town, and Cam's asleep. I realize I left my phone in Cam's bed and try to remember if I powered it off or not.

I curl up in a rocking chair on my back porch, hug my knees to my chest, and weep while I watch the sun rise.

I don't notice Cam approach, but he doesn't startle me either. I know he'll chalk up my tears to my breakup. Silently, he sits in the chair beside me and hands me a mug of Earl Grey tea. I take a welcome sip. He's sweetened it with honey just how I like it. Of course he did.

"You look like you're going to a funeral," he gestures to my clothing. "A casual one, anyway."

I crack a smile and shrug. He's still in his pajama bottoms, though he's pulled on a tee shirt. He notices me looking and nods back toward his house. "I gotta shower and get dressed. Then we can go down to the lake and talk."

I nod. "I'll come with you." I climb out of the chair. I've had enough alone time. Cam slings an arm around my shoulders and I lay my head on his.

"Am I presentable?" he chuckles. God, it's like his laugh has healing properties for me. If I just spend enough time today listening to him laugh, I think all of my injuries just might disappear.

"You'll do, handsome," I smile and pat his cheek playfully.

****

We sit in our spot by the lake, under the weeping willow, and I listen with my eyes closed as Cam reads aloud another story he's deemed me worthy enough to hear. Or that he's deemed worthy enough to share with me.

Since we were kids he's had this recurring protagonist, a girl I've always suspected is at least loosely based on me, though Cam has always teasingly denied it. I know he thinks the similarities of character are glaringly obvious, but in truth, she's nothing like me. She's tough, strong... unbreakable. Everything I'm not.
The wind blows stronger than usual and I wonder if that storm is going to wait until tomorrow after all. But it's still pretty warm, and I'm not exactly comfortable in my black turtleneck.

Two hours have gone by and Cam has yet to ask me about Robin, but his inquisitive glances have increased in frequency, and I know it's coming.

Finally, he closes his journal. He scoots closer to where I sit, hugging my knees to my chest. I can't lay on my front like usual, my gash hurts too much. I can't lean back against the tree as Cam was, my back hurts too much. I can't even lean back on my hands because my damned wrists hurt too much.

Cam's eyes meet mine. "You got somethin' on under that?" he asks, throwing a nod at my turtleneck.

"No, why?"

He grins. "Because you're sweatin', Rory girl,"

I smack him in the arm. "Hey! I am not." I totally am. "And anyway, girls don't sweat, we glisten," I correct him.

"I see. Well, in that case, you're glistenin' like a pig," he smirks. I swat at his arm again and we both laugh.

But after another minute he gets to the point. "You gonna tell me about Forbes?" he asks softly.

I sigh. "It just wasn't workin' out. We broke up. It's over."

Cam's gaze doesn't waver. "Now I have a hard time believin' he broke things off with you, Rory girl."

I start playing with a tall blade of grass I ripped from the ground. "No. Not exactly. I guess I broke up with him," I concede. I rip out two more and begin weaving them together with the first.

"You think it's gonna stick?"

I nod. "Yeah, Cam. I'm done." I lock my eyes with his so he knows I mean it.

Now he nods. "Your daddy know yet?"

I shake my head.

Cam lets out a long, low whistle. "He ain't gonna be happy."

I busy myself weaving the braided grass into a second and third braid. "Nope. I doubt he'll ever speak to me again," I mutter numbly. My eyes sting as I acknowledge to myself that any relationship I had left with my father is over. He will never forgive me, of that I have no doubt.

"Like I said, he ain't gonna be happy, but he'll get over it, Rory girl. He'll understand," Cam counters.

I shake my head. "He won't. Mayor Forbes told him that Robin's been talkin' about proposin'. Gettin' married. Daddy told me not to fuck it up. Even though... no matter what, I mean," I catch myself. "He won't get over my throwin' away the chance at makin' him father-in-law to a pro quarterback. Not a chance."

Cam takes the braided grass from my hand in an effort to get me to make eye contact with him. "Even though what, Ror?"

Of course he caught that. I look back down and yank another blade of grass from the ground. "Even though I told him it wasn't what I wanted," I say quietly. It isn't exactly a lie, which is why I'm able to say it to Cam. But I can't bring myself to look him in the eye as I do.

"Forbes ain't as stupid as I thought," he murmurs under his breath.

"What do you mean?"

Cam shrugs. "I mean about wantin' to marry you... Did he... did he talk to you about it?"

I nod. "Not about proposin'. Just like in general, I guess."

Cam takes a deep breath. "Were you, uh, considerin' it?" His voice has grown quiet and tentative. Not like Cam at all.

I shake my head. No. I was never really considering it. 'Not really. Like, in the beginning I guess it sounded okay in the abstract. When it was like 'I wanna marry you someday'. Someday just never seemed real, you know? I think I was mostly just flattered. But as soon as it became a potential reality... No. I was never considerin' it.'

Cam breathes a sigh of relief. He takes my hand and places it in his lap. I'm careful to grip the end of my sleeve to keep it from riding up and revealing my bruised wrist. He wraps the braided grass around my cotton clad wrist and begins to weave the ends together.

"I ain't sure I coulda handled that, Ror. You marryin' Forbes, I mean. Now... someday... ever."

His admission drowns me in guilt. I know how unfair my relationship has been to my friendship with Cam. How much has changed this year because of it. When it was like 'I wanna marry you someday'. Someday just never seemed real, you know? I think I was mostly just flattered. But as soon as it became a potential reality... No. I was never considerin' it."

Cam takes a sigh of relief. He takes my hand and places it in his lap. I'm careful to grip the end of my sleeve to keep it from riding up and revealing my bruised wrist. He wraps the braided grass around my cotton clad wrist and begins to weave the ends together.

"Me neither," I whisper honestly. Cam pats my wrist where he's secured my grass-made bracelet. I hold in my wince.
"There you go."
I laugh. "Thanks, Cam."
A strong gust of wind sends my hair flying in all directions and a few locks settle right in my face. I laugh again as Cam tucks it behind my ear. We both look up in time to see ominous charcoal clouds roll in.
"Not sure that storm's gonna wait 'til tomorrow," Cam murmurs. "Let's get goin'." He stands, long limbs unfolding gracefully, and holds out his hand to help me up.
Once back in his truck I take his phone to check the local news website about the storm, since I haven't seen my own phone since last night, and see several missed calls and texts from Cam's mom. He instructs me to read them and we learn that the storm system had sped up and is expected to hit the area tonight instead of tomorrow. Michelle is planning on staying at the hospital through Sunday to help treat storm related injuries.
It's already raining hard as we pull into Cam's driveway. It's only late afternoon, but the sky has darkened considerably. It doesn't seem like we'll be heading out again today. I know I need to find my phone and check it, and I'm grateful that Robin will be stuck in Gainesville and my parents at my grandmother's.
"Hope you didn't have plans tonight," I tease as we race indoors.
"Already canceled 'em anyway," he murmurs nonchalantly.
"Oh yeah? Missy or Laura?" I tease, inwardly grimacing at the pang of jealousy twisting my stomach.
"Lacey, actually," he replies absentmindedly while he searches through kitchen drawers.
Oh.
Cam pulls a couple of flashlights and some candles out of a drawer. I doubt we'll need them, but better safe than sorry I suppose.
"You could still go, uh, see her," I murmur reluctantly, feeling guilty for ruining his plans. "I mean, I could just stay here and watch a movie. Or I could go to my house," I offer.
Cam stops what he's doing and walks back over to where I'm standing in the breakfast nook looking out the window. He tugs my arm to get me to face him, but I flinch, and without even thinking I snatch it back. He narrows his eyes at me, but doesn't call me out on my strange behavior. I was never jumpy about being touched, especially not by Cam. I wonder idly if Robin has messed me up for good.
"Like I said, I cancelled this morning... You need me, Ror," he says, softly cupping my jaw and stroking my cheek with his thumb.
"I do," I admit, turning into Cam's touch. My skin tingles from the contact and I swallow nervously. Cam has never made me nervous, but I just feel so aware of him right now, in a way I've never felt with Robin.
I inhale, careful to be more subtle than last night when he accused me of sniffing him. His scent both calms and exhilarates me. My eyes haven't left his, and I nearly gasp when his gaze drops to my lips. I worry my bottom lip between my teeth, and Cam inhales sharply. If I didn't know better, I would think he wanted to kiss me.
But I do know better.
Cam suddenly steps back and heads into his kitchen. He pulls out some takeout menus and I turn back to look out the window.
No, Cam doesn't want to kiss me. He's my best friend, I know that. But for the first time, I realize, I wanted him to.
"I should go pick up some dinner before it gets too bad out there. You want anything in particular or you just gonna look through these menus for thirty minutes, get overwhelmed that there are too many choices, and make me pick?" he asks.
"Ha.ha." My voice drips with sarcasm, but he's right. That is exactly what I would have done. I smile to myself.
"You're not goin' out in this anyway. I'll make us something to eat, you pick a movie."
"You gonna cook for me?" he asks excitedly.
I nod. It's rare that I cook, but when I do, Cam acts like it's Christmas come early. I only even know how to cook at all because my Grandma Mimi would teach me different recipes whenever we used to visit her up in New York before she passed.
"Damn, I love storms!" Cam exclaims, and his joy is like a drug to me. The shadows fade more and more with each of his crooked smiles.
After looking through the contents of his freezer and fridge I go with simplicity. I defrost some chicken cutlets in the microwave and put Cam to work peeling potatoes so I can boil and mash them. I batter and bread the chicken and start frying, and have Cam wash the vegetables for a salad.
Once the chicken is done I add salt, butter, and milk to the potatoes, dress the salad, and we sit and eat on the coffee table in the living room like we always have.
After dinner I load the dishwasher while Cam heads to his room to choose something from his DVD collection. I realize I need to find my phone, I'm sure my mom is looking to check on me, even though she probably thinks I'm in Gainesville with Robin.

Cam is still looking through his movies when I enter his room. He shakes his head when I ask if he's seen my phone, and I find it buried in his comforter, turned off.

When I power it on, I'm not surprised by the number of texts and missed calls. I quickly reply to my mom that I'm fine before I start scrolling through the few texts from Lacey and the hundred or so from Robin.

Lacey wants to talk. She writes that she thinks I'm making a huge mistake. I wonder how much Robin has told her.

Robin's texts range from desperate pleas for forgiveness and professions of love, to vicious threats. Some are unfathomably cruel, and a tear slides down my cheek before I even realize my eyes have welled with tears. He writes that I have "daddy issues", that I have problems accepting his love because my own fat her doesn't care about me, and that I'm stupid to think I can live without him. He says that my own father loves him more than he does me. And threatens to call him. And what could I even say to that if I ever did respond? We both know it's the truth.

Robin goes on to say that I need to just trust him to know what's right for us. That what happened yesterday was "maybe a little extreme", but that he was making a point. He doesn't say what that point was exactly, but I already know. He writes that I will always belong to him.

Hell if that's true. I belong to no one but myself. I knew Robin wouldn't let me go without a fight. But I'm finally ready to fight.

I nearly hyperventilate when I read the text that says the athletics department has cancelled tonight's dinner due to the storm and he's driving back early. I look at the time stamp and realize he'll be in town any minute, but his last text says he's going home to look after his mom and Lacey through the storm since his father is in New York. He wants to talk tomorrow night after the storm blows over. He seems sure that we can work out our issues. That we'll be back together by Monday.

Anyone reading through his texts would swear they were sent by two entirely different people. Sometimes I wonder if he does have multiple personalities. I don't bother responding that he's wrong, that it's really over, because right now I'm just relieved that he seems to have calmed down, even if his relief is misplaced. Because there is no way in hell I'm getting back together with Robin.

I know he can try. He could hurt me, try to force himself on me again - though just the thought has me nearly hyperventilating again. He could even try to kill me. He almost did last night.

But I will never be his girlfriend again. I will never "go back for more", as my father put it. I'd rather be dead. I will fight, kicking and screaming, doing everything in my admittedly limited power to make sure Robin Forbes never has me where he wants me ever again.

Cam's thumb brushes my tears away. I didn't even notice him approach me. He sits beside me on his bed and I sniffle.

"Jesus, Ror, you don't know what it does to me to see you cry," he murmurs despondently. I toss my phone back down on the bed. I don't want Cam to catch Robin's texts - they're too telling. "You havin' second thoughts?" Cam asks, and I frown at him in confusion. "Bout endin' it with Forbes, I mean."

I shake my head. "No. Honestly, Cam, I'd be real happy never to see him again," I whisper emphatically. Cam looks back at me, bemused. I know I don't make sense. Cam thinks I just broke up with Robin because I didn't see a future together, and that just doesn't account for the animosity in my voice, I know.

"Damn it, Ror, what's goin' on with you? I mean, you never laugh anymore. Barely even smile. Unless you catch me checkin' on you and then you throw on that fake clown grin that wouldn't fool a stranger let alone your best friend. You think I ain't noticed? I tried to back off 'cause I thought it was what you wanted. I thought he was what you wanted, but I'm so damn worried about you, Rory girl." Cam shines his fingers through his hair, his brow etched deeply with the concern he's just described. I look down at my fingernails, as if I suddenly find them fascinating.

I've already decided I need to tell Cam the truth. I need to get it out, and even if I haven't outright lied to him, keeping this enormous thing that's happened to me from my best friend - it just feels immensely dishonest, and I don't want secrets between us. He'd figure it out anyway. Maybe not the details, but enough. He already knows something's not right. But I need to figure out a plan first. I need him not to go after Robin, and I don't see how I can tell him what Robin did, and have Cam be calm and rational about it. He's too damn protective of me.

"You're right, Cam. I haven't been happy. I've told you that." I hope he allows me leave it at that, at least for now.
And with his dramatic exhale, I appear to be in luck. But if he's dissatisfied by my vague response, I am more so. Now that Robin and me are really over, I feel so dirty, so disgusting, even if rationally I understand it was Robin's fault and not mine. At least the first time. But like my daddy said, I kept going back for more, and now... I can't take it back. I hate that a part of me will always belong to Robin - that I can never undo it. I hate that he's been inside of me. That he's the only person who ever has.

Cam gently takes my hand, effectively stealing my gaze from my nails. "You're really okay, Ror?" He stares at me intently, and I find myself captivated by eyes that hold a lifetime of familiarity. He awaits my response, his face so close that even the warmth of his breath brings me comfort. His brown eyes have a ring honey around the outside of his irises. And though I've always known this, looked into these eyes countless times, somehow, right now, I find them utterly mesmerizing. His once boyish good looks are decidedly all man now, the lines of his face rougher - hard and rugged as if carved from granite. Still, his features are drawn with perfect symmetry, except for that roguish grin of his - conspicuously absent at the moment - that has always had girls' insides spinning into triple axels as if trying to perform their way into his heart. I blame them no more now than I ever have before. Cam is everything.

I'm surprised to realize my tears have dried. I'm also surprised to find my tongue wetting my bottom lip purely without volition. "I am okay now, Cam. Really." It's practically a whisper, but it's true - I am. Right now, for the first time in way too long, I am okay. Now that I'm doing what I can to ensure Robin is out of my life. Now that I'm sitting here, in a place that feels like home, with my best friend in the world, who right now, I really wish would kiss me.

Holy shit.
I can't believe I just thought that.
I can't believe I'm still thinking it. Suddenly I'm incredibly aware of the taut pull of Cam's tee shirt, the impressive outline of the his broad shoulders, his powerful upper arms, even his lean, strong, chest. Like I said, all man.

As we sit together at the foot of the bed, I feel every inch of our closeness in a way I never have before. We face each other, our knees touching, my head nearly resting on his shoulder. I am practically breathing his breath. I bite my lip to keep it from reaching for his. We've sat close like this a thousand times. We've cuddled and watched movies, hugged more times that I could possibly count, held each other in consolation when one of us was upset, hell, I've even slept in his arms. But right now, a new energy surrounds us, a pull, and it's electric.

Painfully slowly, Cam leans down, but he doesn't have far to go, and his lips brush mine with impossible tenderness. He nuzzles me, then returns to my mouth to press his lips to mine more surely. He pulls my top lip gently, I feel every inch of our closeness in a way I never have before. We fac...
"Ror-"
"He always said that you want me, but, Jesus, it's the other way around!" Maybe Robin wasn't just paranoid after all. Maybe there was something to his charges. Only Cam's not the guilty party, I am.
"Rory- Wait... what are you saying?" Cam asks carefully.
I rally and pull myself the hell together. I have to fix this. This is Cam. "I'm sorry, Cam. I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have done that-"

"You shouldn't have done that?" His eyes are wide with astonishment and he barks out a short laugh. "You didn't do that, Rory girl. I did that. And what do you mean it's the other way around? I take advantage of you when you're vulnerable, the day after you break up with your boyfriend, and you still believe I don't want you?" he shakes his head and chokes back another laugh, his eyes settling meaningfully on mine.

I'm stunned, but he's now staring at me in a way that makes it impossible to process words. The way he's looking at me has the room feeling about ten degrees warmer. I feel desperate again. I want him. It's no longer deniable. His eyes devour me. His look - it's hungry, but not predatory. Robin never looked at me like this. He had his own look, sure, but it never made me so perfectly desirable, at least not without the fear.

"How many times do I have to tell you how beautiful you are? How any man would be lucky to have you? How you're the kinda girl to marry? Jesus, Ror, I even told you I couldn't give you a little kiss without gettin' hard." It's like he can't believe I could actually doubt he wants me.

My eyes involuntarily dart to his lap and confirm his conspicuous arousal. His gaze doesn't waver from my eyes, though he couldn't have missed my checking him out. Somehow, I feel no embarrassment.

And he's right, too. He has made it clear he finds me attractive, but for some reason I always heard him say I was attractive, not that he was attracted to me, and for some reason, it makes a monumental difference. But, in retrospect, I realize he has been pretty up front about it.

I try and force myself to sober. He's a seventeen year old boy who thinks I'm "hot". His word. He's used it to describe me many times in recent years. So of course he'd be physically attracted to me.

"Yeah, I get it. You think I'm pretty. You find me attractive. You've said." I blow it off because it isn't enough right now. Though I do love hearing it from him. That he thinks I'm pretty, attractive. I realize I've always loved hearing it from him. I've always gone to him for reassurance, and he's always given it to me, even right before my first date with Robin - a guy he didn't trust. But the fact is, I've never sought it out from anyone else. Not even Robin, not even before things got bad. I understand now that it wasn't the reassurance I needed, it was hearing these things from Cam's lips. Even when Robin said the same pretty things Cam says, it never satisfied me the same way.

Why it took me until now to realize, I can't imagine. But it isn't enough. My heart is so full it might explode, my stomach tumbling like an olympic gymnast.

I have freaking feelings for my best friend, and my God, I want him. And although hearing he wants me too is a heady thing, Cam's right. He can't be a rebound, he's too important. And being intimate with him without having my feelings returned would break my heart in a way that would be far more painful than any hurt Robin Forbes has ever caused me.

"Yep. I do. I think you're real pretty, Ror, I find you real attractive," Cam drawls, his voice strangely gruff. He takes my chin between his fingers and steals my gaze. His eyes suddenly fill with emotion in a way that is extraordinarily rare for him, and my heart soars into outer space. "And I've also loved you since I was three years old, and have been in love with you at least since I was twelve."

My jaw goes slack and my heart stops beating.

Cam's in love with me? My chest surges with a feeling of elation I've never before experienced. Of utter euphoria.

If there's anything left to say, I don't give it a chance to be said. I lean in and cover the relatively small space between us. I press my hand to his chest, and my lips softly to the corner of his mouth. He watches me warily, his breathing notably shallow. But I don't pull back far, or for long. I close my lips over his, and after no more than one more second, Cam takes over. He sucks on my lower lip then coaxes my mouth open and slips in his tongue.

He groans, and like his laughter, the sound does something magical to me. But this sound doesn't relax me like his laugh does. No, this sound excites me.

I deepen the kiss, wanting to taste his mouth completely, to explore this part of this man that is unknown. There's so little about my best friend that is mysterious to me, but there are a few major things, things I'm now desperate to discover. And the sweet taste of his mouth is one of them.

My hands slide up his firm chest, my thumbs tracing the lines of its muscles before slipping around his neck to grasp the thick locks at his nape.

His arms reciprocate, completing our embrace by sliding around to my back and pulling me even closer, our mouths working all the while. I do him one better, I move my right leg over his lap and straddle him. I moan when I
feel his erection through his jeans. When I'd feel Robin's my stomach would drop in fear just knowing he was close
to losing control. But with Cam, a part of me wants him to lose control. I know without even the vaguest doubt he
would never, ever hurt me. He'd die first, and my faith in him is infinitely freeing.

Our tongues dance wildly, our lips melting together like they've always known they were meant to be kissing,
and they've just been waiting for Cam and me to catch up.

Now it's me who's losing control.

With one last tug of his hair, my hands roam back down his chest, still fascinated by its stunning masculine
design, and around to his broad back, which provides me with a whole new map of lines to explore. I am Columbus
stumbling upon The New World, discovering a treasure trove of bounty without even knowing it's what I've been
searching for all along. While I'd been distracted looking for a world that could never offer me a future. Robin was
never my future, just a misguided, dangerous excursion that nearly left me foundered and drowned. I only ever had
one true destination. One future. Because Cam is also my past - he's my everything - and I'm suddenly determined to
claim him as my present for the very first time. I rock my body against him in rhythm with our mouths completely
involuntarily. The rapid rise and fall of his chest dances heavily with my own, and I wonder if he's as overwhelmed
as I am - if he's chasing the same thrill.

Clutching his back, I pull at his weight. He responds instantly, rolling me onto my back, our bodies lined up in
a way that makes it impossible to doubt the rightness of it. My legs wrap around his waist as if the position couldn't
be more natural for us. Our mouths never disconnect, and I moan again at the friction as our hips rock gently
together.

"My sweet Rory," Cam breathes reverently against my mouth.

Yes. His. I've always been his. I realize.

Cam groans again and though the same friction making me crazy with want also aggravates my cut, I never
want to stop. But the sharp sting that leads from my hip down to the top of my thigh reminds me of what happened
just yesterday. What's happened again and again, and the shame is almost debilitating. I'm not the girl Cam thinks I
am. I may be his, but I'm not anyone's Sweet Rory - not anymore.

Cam's mouth leaves mine suddenly, and I mourn the loss. He's panting, his features strained with self-control
as he reaches around with both hands and wrenches my ankles from their locked position at the small of his back.
He rolls off of me until he rests on his elbow beside me.

I try in vain to catch my breath

"Fuck, I'm sorry, Ror," Cam whispers.

It surprises me. What in the world is he apologizing for? "Don't be. I... I want you, Cam."

He closes his eyes, as if savoring my words, smiling an entirely unfamiliar smile. A smile of contentment. He
touches his nose to mine, nuzzling me with open adoration. "God, you're beautiful. You have no idea how bad I want
you, Rory girl. I've wanted you for as long as I can even remember. But right now, we should talk. And kiss," he
amends, brushing his lips briefly to mine.

I frown, puzzled as to why, if he wants me like he says, he just wants to talk. And kiss.

"I ain't gonna move fast - not with you. I've waited my whole life, Ror, I can wait a while longer. As bad as I
want you right now, not gonna do that the same night we finally kissed for the first time."

I flood with shame. Cam still thinks I'm his sweet little Rory girl. But that's not me anymore, Robin made damn
sure of that. And so did I, when I kept going back for more. I evade his gaze. I can't bear to see Cam staring at me
like I'm some priceless jewel when really I'm no different than the rest of the sluts he hooks up with.

"I'm not as innocent as you think, Cam," I breathe. It's almost a full minute before I risk a peek over at him, his
narrowed eyes betraying his irritation, and I cast my gaze back to the ceiling.

"Hey." He tries to get my attention.

I continue to stare blindly upward, my focus on keeping my eyes dry. It doesn't work. I hate Robin Forbes. In
this moment I hate him more than I've ever hated him - ever hated anyone - for stealing this part of me. My tears are
angry ones.

"Hey," Cam says again, stroking my face with a tenderness I don't deserve. He turns it toward him until our
eyes lock. He lets out a deep exhale. "You think because you gave it up to Forbes you're some kinda ruined woman
or somethin'?), he asks softly. He's trying to absolve me of sleeping with Robin, and suddenly the levy breaks.

"I didn't! I didn't give it to him, Cam! He just took it!" I sound like a madwoman, I know. I sit up and bury my
face in my knees, wrapping my arms around the top of my head. I am hysterical. I don't know if it's my desperation
for Cam to know I didn't betray him - though I know it makes no sense since Robin's the one who was my boyfriend -
but it's the way it feels. "I said no! I begged him to stop!" My words are a shaky sob, and I don't even know if Cam
can understand them, I just know I need to get them out before they suffocate me.
I cry into my knees, trembling violently. My tears overflow, drenching my sweatpants, my shoulders heaving with my sobs.

"Rory." Cam's voice is frighteningly low and painstakingly calm, but my very unladylike sobs continue with no sign of slowing. "Rory, I need you to look at me."

I shake my head, still hidden by my protective position. He reaches for me, but as soon as I feel his touch, I flinch. I don't know why I flinch. I know Cam isn't Robin. I know he could never hurt me, but I do - I flinch, and Cam retracts his hand immediately.

I become aware of audible breathing and realize Cam isn't as calm as I thought. "Please, Rory," he begs, and it's a desperate plea I can't deny.

I turn my head just enough to meet his gaze, forcibly quelling my sobs into defeated weeping.

"You sayin' he forced himself on you?" Cam asks carefully.

I don't say anything. I don't need to answer him with words. The despair on my face, I'm sure, is all the answer he needs.

Cam closes his eyes and his hands fist at his sides. He inhales a calculated breath and when he opens his eyes, they are utterly distraught. "Yesterday?" he asks.

I nod.

He swallows thickly. "He do this before?"

"Yeah," I breathe.

"When?"

I shrug. "Yesterday. A couple days ago. Last Saturday... Whenever I stayed over there, you know, for the weekend-"

"Damn it!" Cam roars. He stands from the bed and starts pacing his bedroom, back and forth. It pulls me from my sorrowful ball and I scoot to the edge of the bed. I watch him until he pauses a few feet in front of me. "The first time?" he demands.

"The night he signed with UFL. After Marcus's party."

Cam shoves his fingers through his hair and resumes his aggravated pacing. "Months! This has been goin' on for months!" he bellows furiously.

I look down. Yes. It has been going on for months. Robin hurt me again and again and I kept going back for more. My tears fall silently as I wait for Cam's judgment. For him to ask why I stayed with Robin, why I kept asking for it.

"Oh, God, Ror!" He's desperate, his voice laced with guilt, and I can't understand why. "I'm sorry. So sorry. Fuck!"

I jump up. He's sorry? What the fuck for?

"No, Cam. It's my fault - why are you sorry?"

He stops in front of me, shocked. What did I say to shock him? "Don't you ever fucking say that!" he barks rabidly, and I flinch again. In fact, I practically cower.

Cam and I have shouted at each other plenty. Like all best friends who have known each other a lifetime, we've had our share of arguments. But I've always been one to give as well as I get. A loud voice never bothered me, but now...

Cam registers my reaction - however involuntary - at his raised voice, and this, too, he knows enough to attribute to Robin. It devastates and infuriates him at once - I can see it in his eyes. He sucks in deep breath. "No, Ror, I'm sorry. I won't yell. But, God... don't you ever say that again, okay? This is not your fault. This is his fault. This is my fault. But this ain't your fault. No fucking way, okay?"

I shake my head. "How- how can this possibly be your fault?"

"Because, Rory! Because, I should've protected you! Fuck. I knew somethin' was up with you. Somethin' was wrong. But I never thought... fuck!" He rakes his hand harshly through his hair again.

"No, Cam! You can't just fix everything for me! This ain't a damn bee sting. I'm not your responsibility. I don't know why I didn't break it off after he did it the first time. I don't know what's wrong with me. But I do know none of this is your damn fault," I mutter pitifully.

Cam brushes away my tears with his thumb, then slowly brings his lips to each of my cheeks, one at a time, and kisses their remnants away. "You are my responsibility," he whispers. "You've always been my responsibility. We've always taken care of each other, you and me." He blows out a deep exhale. "I need you to tell me everything, Ror, okay?"

I shake my head. He doesn't need details; they will only upset him more.

"Please," he implores.

"Cam, it won't change anything."
"Please, Ror. I need to know. You know I do. And you need to tell someone. Please. Rory girl," he pleads in earnest. I can't remember a single instance in our fourteen year friendship I denied him something he truly needed from me. The magnitude of Cam's torment is such that I worry he imagines mine was even worse than it was. That's the curse of a soul as creative as his. And how can I deny him the truth when I'm the cause of his pain?

I sit back down on the edge of the bed, lock my gaze on my fidgeting fingers, and I do it - I tell him.

"He'd been aggressive before. Touched me when I'd asked him to stop. I'd even smacked him once, but he got real mad. But he had never..." I pause to fight back tears. "That night, he was upset. He heard me tell you I love you. You know, when we were leavin' the party. He came upstairs after I'd gone to bed... said he shouldn't have to listen to me tell another man I love 'em. Said I was his." My eyes fall closed as I remember how fast things shifted from sweet and playful to violent and terrifying. How many times it happened since.

"He just, you know, held me down, and forced me... But then, after, he cuddled me. Like it was normal, you know, sex." My voice is soft and timid, and I wonder if Cam has ever heard me sound like this. I barely even recognize myself.

"I told him I wasn't ready, but he said I was just playin' hard to get. That I'd never feel ready all on my own, and that I needed to trust him. Said he'd waited six months and it was time. That's when he started talkin' about wantin' to marry me, and all kinds of sweet talk. I told him I didn't wanna do it again until I was ready, and he agreed...

"But when I stayed over there a couple weeks later... he did it again. The same damn thing. I tried to fight, but he liked it when I fought back, it... excited him, I think. I asked him why he did it again when he'd agreed he'd wait 'til I was ready. But he just said he meant he'd wait 'til I wasn't sore anymore from the last time. Like he was doin' me some big favor." I sniffle back bitter tears. I can't imagine what Cam is thinking right now. He's quiet and pensive, absorbing the truth, and I don't allow myself to wonder what he must think of me. Because if I do, I won't be able to keep talking. "It hurt, Cam," I breathe. "Not just the first time. Every damn time.

Cam stands still as a statue, his entire body stiff with tension. His is the stance of a man consumed by fury, but when I meet his gaze, those familiar, beloved honey-brown eyes are weighed with such profound despair that I flinch at the sight of it. And damn if they don't glisten with tears. I haven't seen Cam cry since his father died when we were seven.

He opens his mouth to speak, but nothing comes out before he closes it again. He sits beside me on the bed and hangs his head in self-condemnation. I have never before seen it on Cam, and it feels all wrong. "I'll never... I can't...". He doesn't finish his whispered phrases, but then, Cam has never needed to say words aloud for me to hear them. And I hear my best friend loud and clear. He'll never, he can't... forgive himself.

I shake my head, hating that he's drowning in guilt when he has been my only salvation. The only light in the dark hell I've been trapped in for months. "No, Cam, you-"

"Yes, Rory, I!" He sucks in a ragged breath. "I should have known. I should have protected you. I should have been here for you!" He reaches over and grabs my wrists and begins to stroke them with his thumbs, but I'm not expecting the contact and I wince. Cam's eyes widen in shock and I watch in horror as he realizes I'm hurt. And I hear my best friend loud and clear. He'll never, he can't... forgive himself.

Without further warning he yanks my sleeves up to reveal the deep rings of black and blue around my wrists. His gaze darts from the offending bruises to my eyes and back again. I'm powerless as he connects the dots, deducing the real reason for my turtleneck.

His gaze never leaves mine as he slowly reaches up to the top of the fabric covering my neck, and carefully pulls it down to reveal the ominous purple shape of Robin's open palm around my neck. Cam sucks in a gasp, but says nothing else as he let's the cotton slip from his grasp. But his silence speaks volumes. His jaw clenches, his nostrils flaring as he gits his teeth.

His fingers move to the hem of my shirt, and he carefully lifts it, watching me for my consent, which I give him wordlessly, raising my arms to assist him. I sit topless but for my bra, in front of my best friend for the first time since I grew breasts, albeit modest ones, and there is nothing sexual about it. He surveys my skin, taking in every bruise, every scratch, every bite mark.

"Oh, Rory, no," he breathes. His eyes close, his thick lashes fanning his cheeks. I watch as he battles between grief and rage, my heart aching with regret.

"What the hell, Ror?" Cam whispers. "He's been beatin' you? Bitin' you? Fuckin' chokin' you?! What the hell?!"

I shake my head fervently. "No. I mean, yeah, he's pushed me around a little, but nothin' more than a bruise here and there or some pulled hair," I tell him. "I don't want Cam to think Robin's been hitting me all the time. It wasn't like that. "He didn't beat on me. Not really. He was just real upset when I tried to break up with him yesterday, and he- well you know, he did it again. In the locker room at school. He was just more aggressive about it than usual."

"You know, when we were leavin' the party. He came upstairs after I'd gone to bed... said he shouldn't have to listen to me tell another man I love 'em. Said I was his." My eyes fall closed as I remember how fast things shifted from sweet and playful to violent and terrifying. How many times it happened since.

"He just, you know, held me down, and forced me... But then, after, he cuddled me. Like it was normal, you know, sex." My voice is soft and timid, and I wonder if Cam has ever heard me sound like this. I barely even recognize myself.

"I told him I wasn't ready, but he said I was just playin' hard to get. That I'd never feel ready all on my own, and that I needed to trust him. Said he'd waited six months and it was time. That's when he started talkin' about wantin' to marry me, and all kinds of sweet talk. I told him I didn't wanna do it again until I was ready, and he agreed...

"But when I stayed over there a couple weeks later... he did it again. The same damn thing. I tried to fight, but he liked it when I fought back, it... excited him, I think. I asked him why he did it again when he'd agreed he'd wait 'til I was ready. But he just said he meant he'd wait 'til I wasn't sore anymore from the last time. Like he was doin' me some big favor." I sniffle back bitter tears. I can't imagine what Cam is thinking right now. He's quiet and pensive, absorbing the truth, and I don't allow myself to wonder what he must think of me. Because if I do, I won't be able to keep talking. "It hurt, Cam," I breathe. "Not just the first time. Every damn time.

Cam stands still as a statue, his entire body stiff with tension. His is the stance of a man consumed by fury, but when I meet his gaze, those familiar, beloved honey-brown eyes are weighed with such profound despair that I flinch at the sight of it. And damn if they don't glisten with tears. I haven't seen Cam cry since his father died when we were seven.

He opens his mouth to speak, but nothing comes out before he closes it again. He sits beside me on the bed and hangs his head in self-condemnation. I have never before seen it on Cam, and it feels all wrong. "I'll never... I can't...". He doesn't finish his whispered phrases, but then, Cam has never needed to say words aloud for me to hear them. And I hear my best friend loud and clear. He'll never, he can't... forgive himself.

I shake my head, hating that he's drowning in guilt when he has been my only salvation. The only light in the dark hell I've been trapped in for months. "No, Cam, you-

"Yes, Rory, I!" He sucks in a ragged breath. "I should have known. I should have protected you. I should have been here for you!" He reaches over and grabs my wrists and begins to stroke them with his thumbs, but I'm not expecting the contact and I wince. Cam's eyes widen in shock and I watch in horror as he realizes I'm hurt. And I hear my best friend loud and clear. He'll never, he can't... forgive himself.

Without further warning he yanks my sleeves up to reveal the deep rings of black and blue around my wrists. His gaze darts from the offending bruises to my eyes and back again. I'm powerless as he connects the dots, deducing the real reason for my turtleneck.

His gaze never leaves mine as he slowly reaches up to the top of the fabric covering my neck, and carefully pulls it down to reveal the ominous purple shape of Robin's open palm around my neck. Cam sucks in a gasp, but says nothing else as he let's the cotton slip from his grasp. But his silence speaks volumes. His jaw clenches, his nostrils flaring as he gits his teeth.

His fingers move to the hem of my shirt, and he carefully lifts it, watching me for my consent, which I give him wordlessly, raising my arms to assist him. I sit topless but for my bra, in front of my best friend for the first time since I grew breasts, albeit modest ones, and there is nothing sexual about it. He surveys my skin, taking in every bruise, every scratch, every bite mark.

"Oh, Rory, no," he breathes. His eyes close, his thick lashes fanning his cheeks. I watch as he battles between grief and rage, my heart aching with regret.

"What the hell, Ror?" Cam whispers. "He's been beatin' you? Bitin' you? Fuckin' chokin' you?! What the hell?!"

I shake my head fervently. "No. I mean, yeah, he's pushed me around a little, but nothin' more than a bruise here and there or some pulled hair," I tell him. "I don't want Cam to think Robin's been hitting me all the time. It wasn't like that. "He didn't beat on me. Not really. He was just real upset when I tried to break up with him yesterday, and he- well you know, he did it again. In the locker room at school. He was just more aggressive about it than usual."
Cam leans forward until our faces are almost touching. "You mean, more aggressive than rape?" he asks carefully.

I blink at him, hating how right he is.

He shakes his head incredulously. "Damn it Rory! 'Pushed you around a little'? That's abuse! That's fuckin' assault! Fuck!" He drops his face into his hands and catches his breath, and when he meets my gaze again, he's intently serious. "Forbes raped you in the locker room at school? Yesterday?"

I nod. Cam's the first one to use the R word besides my father, and my father was using it to condemn me. Somehow, giving it a name, calling it rape, makes it that much more real. With every word, Cam just keeps stripping away all of the gray I've been living in for so long, that I've been clinging to so desperately, and as he shines a spotlight on the black and white, I try not to drown in shame.

"I messed up, Cam," I murmur despondently. "I waited 'til right before we were supposed to leave for Gainesville to tell him I didn't wanna go. He came to pick me up at school after the basketball game, and I told him. I said I needed space, and I thought he took it okay. I was worried he'd be angry, but... he just seemed real sad."

Cam shakily lifts his hand, gently brushing his fingers over the preserved mold of Robin's teeth on the cleavage of my right breast. For the first time I can remember, I can't read his expression. "It doesn't look like he took it okay."

"No. He didn't. He followed me into the girls locker room. I didn't hear him comin'." I swallow anxiously as the events of the previous evening assault my memory. There's no way to sugar coat this. "He, uh... pushed me up against the wall. And, you know, like I said, he did it again. He was tryin' to make a point - that I couldn't end it. That I was his, that I didn't have a say."

"He coulda killed you, Ror." Cam's torment torments me in turn, and I'm rendered powerless all over again. "He didn't."

Cam grazes his knuckles along my neck, his touch as tentative as his words. "He ever do that before? Put his hands on your throat?"

I shake my head adamantly. "Never. Like I said, he was makin' a point. I know it. He had his hand over my mouth at first, because, you know, I was screamin'. But it was covering my nose, too, and I couldn't breathe. I don't think he meant to cut off my air at first, but then when he realized..." I pause, my fingers involuntarily shooting up to my throat. "He, uh... he made me say I belonged to him, and then... then he choked me." I don't describe the maniacal look in Robin's eyes as he watched the terror in mine with sickening satisfaction, or the fact that I'm not sure he even knew if he was going to let go or not.

I don't know why I'm explaining any of this to Cam. Lord knows I don't want to pour any more gasoline on his already all-consuming fury. But the truth is I'm still scared. Because Robin wasn't just trying to make a point. He made it quite effectively. He can take my life into his hands whenever he chooses. And I know I need to figure out some course of action, but I'm not sure what. Obviously breaking up with him didn't work, and I'm not sure how to stop him.

"You musta been so damn scared," Cam breathes.

If my tears ever fully stopped, they return now with a vengeance. "I couldn't breathe," I admit. Cam already knows that, of course. The mark on my neck isn't subtle. It's a dark, telling contusion that spans nearly the entire circumference of my throat. It speaks of malice - of intent. The thought reminds me how vulnerable I really am.

Rationally I know I should stop talking, stop detailing the horror of it all, but for some reason, unloading my pain to my best friend gives me a small slice of relief, and I'm desperate for it.

Cam leans in slowly and I don't move. I think he's going to kiss me again, but his lips aim lower, and he brushes them ever so gently over the skin of my neck, as if he can kiss it and make it better. And, even if only slightly, it does.

"God, it kills me how you talk about bein' pushed around, about screamin' for help, about bein' fuckin' raped so damn matter-of-factly. Like it's just a normal part of life." He shoves his fingers harshly through his hair. "Fuck, and it was for you, wasn't it? You know that ain't how it's supposed to be, right? It's not normal - what he did. That's not what havin' a boyfriend is supposed to be. You should never have to know that shit, Ror, not for a minute! Jesus, I'm so damn sorry. You'll never know how fuckin' much."

I hesitate. Logically I know he's right. That ours wasn't a normal relationship. But Robin was my first date, my first kiss, my only romantic encounters, and I wonder if I'll ever really know which parts were normal and which were just more symptoms of his abuse. "That shit", as Cam calls it, is all I know. But the bottom line is, none of it is Cam's fault.

I reach up to caress his devastated face, to offer him comfort. "I know you won't listen to me, Cam, but I mean it, this just wasn't your fault. Not even a moment of it was your fault. He doesn't listen. His features are still shrouded in guilt as he looks down in shame. "You even told me to say 'no' when he asked me out, remember?"
But he doesn't respond. He doesn't even hear me.

It's only then that I realize when I reached out to touch him, the movement caused my sweatpants to ride down just a bit. Cam is glaring at the small piece of medical tape peeking out from my waistband. This time he doesn't ask for permission, silently or otherwise. He gently grasps the cotton and slides it down, just a little. He swallows nervously when he sees the bandage, and realizes it just keeps going and going. When he reveals my panty line, he finally meets my gaze.

He says nothing as he gently slides his fingers over to my left hip, and pulls my waistband down so that my sweatpants still cover the most intimate part of me, but expose my whole hip.

It wasn't long ago that Cam was kissing me, and it was the best kiss of my life. It was the best anything of my life, and I wanted more. Now I sit topless in front of him, my pants pushed down, my hip bare, and I wonder if for him, our kiss is long forgotten. I can't believe he can see me that way anymore. Certainly not right now. And the irony is that his kiss was the only thing that made me forget all about Robin and what he did to me, the only thing that distracted me from my pain.

"Cam..." I whisper, but he doesn't respond.

He carefully peels back the tape and removes the bandage.

He swallows his gasp.

I look down and see that my cut is already starting to heal. Cam grazes his finger gently down my hip, alongside the cut, careful not to touch it.

"What the fuck..." His voice is a stunned whisper, his eyes glued to my hip as if he can change what he's seeing if he stares hard enough. I know he's trying to temper back any major reaction, but the clench of his jaw, and the wetness in his eyes give him away.

A full minute passes before he meets my gaze again. I don't speak. I wait. I don't know what's left to say.

"He use a knife on you, Rory?" Cam asks hoarsely.

"No."

"God, Rory!" He jumps up and starts pacing again. I hurriedly grab the gauze and replace it on top of my injury, knowing as long as it's visible, Cam will never let it go.

My heart stops when he slams his fist into the wall at full force, obliterating the sheetrock in its way.

"Cam!" I shoot up off the bed, but before I can even reach him he throws two more punches until there is a gaping hole in his bedroom wall.

I grab his bicep to stop him and he turns to me, enraged. I jump back. I've seen Cam mad, but never like this. He's beside himself that he's frightened me, but I'm not afraid of him, I'm afraid for him. His knuckles have already begun to swell.

He thrusts his fingers into his hair and pulls. He's jumping out of his own skin, at a loss for what to do with his fury, unable to unleash it in front of me because of my pitiful reactions.

He turns away, sucking in several deep breaths before staggering over to the corner of his bedroom and sliding to the floor. He sits with his knees bent, his elbows resting atop them, his head hanging down, his hands in his hair.

"How, Rory? How did you get that fuckin' gash? What else haven't you told me? Tell me everything. No more hidin'. Please, I can't take anymore. Just get it all out, whatever else there is. Now. Please, Ror. Just tell me, please." He's rambling and begging and I'm destroyed by his pain. I'm not sure I've done the right thing for Cam by telling him this last part, and I don't want him to have to hold in his steam for fear of frightening me. I sit down on the floor a few feet away, leaning against his bed. He doesn't lift his head.

"He tried to rip off my underwear like-" I'm about to say "like usual" again, but Cam has said how it affects him to hear me talk about these things so matter-of-factly, so I catch myself. "I had my uniform on, so they were covered by my spankies. He couldn't just tear through them and he got real frustrated. He, uh, used his house key."

I'm aware of Cam's knuckles fisting in his hair, so tight they're turning white.

"I don't know if he even knew he was cuttin' me. He was just tryin' to get them off," I offer. I'm defending Robin.

Why the hell am I defending Robin?

All of a sudden, Cam shoots up from his corner. "Stay here," he murmurs, and stalks toward the door.

"Cam-" I go after him, of course I do. He stops in the doorway and turns; I nearly smack into him.

"I'll be right back, okay? I promise. I don't want to scare you, Rory girl, and I just really need to yell and hit something right now." He follows my gaze to the giant hole he punched into the wall just minutes earlier.

"Something else," he amends, and then leaves, roughly closing the door behind him.
I cry face down on Cam's comforter that right now offers me no comfort whatsoever. I know Cam's in the garage, taking it all out on his punching bag. I hear his yells and grunts even through the floorboards. He doesn't let up for at least thirty minutes, and neither do my tears.

I don't hear him reenter, but I feel the bed dip as he sits beside me. I turn my head to find him shirtless and dripping with sweat, his muscles bulging from his workout, and I'm reminded that I'm still topless but for my bra. Cam holds up a first aid kid. "You gonna let me redress that?" he asks softly, his fingertips gently grazing the side of my hip over my pants.

"It's fine," I murmur.

"Come on, Ror," he pleads, and I relent. He's right. The gauze should be changed. I roll over and sit up, wincing when he starts to roll down my waistband. "These are pressing on the wound, Ror," he chides.

I hold back from spewing some suggestive comment like "so take them off" and let him put ointment on the cut and redress it. I silently grumble to myself over the direction the evening has taken. I can't help but resent the fact that in such a short span of time, Cam has gone from seeing me as something to be desired, to some kind of pathetic, abused puppy.

Cam lightly runs his fingers from my hip up my side, stopping just under my bra. I shiver.

"God, you're beautiful," he murmurs as his eyes rake me from head to toe. I can't help but roll my eyes before glancing down, my gaze lingering on the particularly excessive damage to the limited cleavage of my right breast. I look anything but beautiful.

"I mean it, Ror," he says, obviously guessing the root of my skepticism. His thumb gently brushes over the offending injuries - an especially vibrant bruise flanked by slightly lighter, smaller marks, all just under a perfect mold of Robin's teeth, all in black and blue.

His touch makes me tremble, and it's such an alien feeling - to be trembling from desire and not fear.

"Even with his marks all over you, you're the most beautiful thing I've ever laid eyes on... This?" He strokes my bruises again, then gestures to my cut. "It'll heal, Rory girl. But until it does, it still doesn't change how I look at you - how I've been lookin' at you since we hit fuckin' puberty, okay Ror?"

I blink at him, trying to process how he can find me attractive in this moment, but even more, how he always knows exactly what I'm thinking. My every concern, my every fear.

Cam leans in slowly, and kisses me softly. But before I can deepen the kiss, he pulls away, leaving his forehead pressed to mine. "This sure ain't how I imagined gettin' you topless for the first time," he murmurs, and we both laugh.

"I had no idea you'd ever imagined it at all," I admit.

Cam grins. "Only every five minutes since we were like twelve," he replies. "And that ain't all, either." He raises his eyebrows suggestively, and instead of laughing, I feel my pulse quicken.

"No?" I ask, willing him to elaborate.

"No," he mouths.

Cam stands abruptly, walks over to his dresser, and takes out his Linton football tee shirt with his last name and his number, twenty two, on the back. He slips it carefully over my head and I push both arms through the sleeves as Cam arranges it to cover my waist and hips, then gingerly reaches under the hem for my sweatpants, carefully tugging them over my hips, and I lift my backside to help him get them down.

Cam stares at me meaningfully, his eyes shining with a new kind of affection, one he's never openly shown me before. "We're gonna get you all better, Ror. We're gonna deal with Forbes. And then, when the time is right, I'm gonna show you how it's supposed to be when you have a boyfriend. How a man is supposed to treat the girl he loves, okay?"

My throat is completely dry, I can't speak, so I nod my eager agreement instead. I wonder how long it will be before Cam decides the time is right. I also wonder what exactly he means about dealing with Robin. But I don't want to think about that. I only want to think about the rest of it, because the idea of having Cam be my boyfriend, it's strangely both thrilling and calming. Like it was always supposed to be this way.

"When's he supposed to get back?" Cam asks.

I hesitate, an instantaneous battle waging internally. But the need to keep Cam with me, from going after Robin and likely getting arrested, wins out.

"Tomorrow night," I mutter, not meeting his eyes, forcibly resisting the urge bite my lip. I tell myself it isn't really a lie. Robin is supposed to get back tomorrow night, he just happened to have come back early. I tell myself that this little semi-fib will give me time to figure out what to do. I know I have to do something, but what? File a police report?
Cam takes my hand. "And your parents?" he asks.

"Same." They will actually be returning tomorrow evening, and since the storm is expected to rage on until the afternoon, they will probably be back late.

"You have to tell your daddy, you know that, right?" Cam asks meaningfully.

I look down. "It won't-"

"Ror, he's the DA. If we go straight to the police it's gonna be passed on to him anyway. I know how hard it is on you, I really do, but I'll be with you the whole time, okay?

"Tomorrow I'm gonna go see Forbes - alone - and then we're gonna tell your daddy what he did. He's never gonna hurt you again, I swear to fuckin' God, you hear me?"

Cam's being so supportive, of course he is. He's always been here for me, my whole life, no matter what. But in this case, I don't think his support will be enough. And I can't let him go "see" Robin - I know what that means. But I have all day to prevent that confrontation from taking place, and right now I need Cam to help me figure out how, because obviously my father isn't going to be any help. Not for me, anyway.

"You don't understand," I breathe, pausing to swipe at my tears with the back of my hand. "My daddy, he's not... we gotta figure somethin' else out, okay?"

Cam lifts my chin so our gazes lock. He doesn't say anything - we are having another one of our silent exchanges. He's asking me what I'm holding back and I'm telling him it hurts to say. He doesn't relent, and I know I have to tell him why going to my father isn't an option.

"Look, he's not gonna help me. I already tried, okay?"

Cam narrows his eyes, but doesn't release my chin. "What do you mean?" he asks carefully. I know he's going to get angry all over again, and I question why I'm holding back my own anger. My own father betrayed me, I know it, yet, every time I think about it, his words haunt me all over again, and I question, for the millionth time, how much of this I actually brought on myself.

"I tried to tell him. No, I did tell him. I didn't wanna go with Robin this weekend, but my daddy thought it'd be a good idea to tour the campus since I'd be going there next year. That I had to if I wanted things to work out with Robin. I told him it wasn't what I wanted anyway. But he said that there was somethin' wrong with me, that I was lucky Robin chose me and... I panicked, and I told him! I told him Robin hurt me, that he made me!"

"But Daddy got mad. He said I was mistaken, that Robin could have anyone he wanted and I was just a small town girl - a dime a dozen. He said Robin would never have to make anyone do anything. And I know that, I know Robin could have anyone, but he did, he made me!"

I sniffle and reach over to Cam's nightstand for a tissue to wipe my nose. I feel so defeated. "He said if Robin did that then it was my fault - that I asked for it by the way I've been dressin'. That Robin misunderstood because he'd never do that to me if he didn't think I wanted him to - because he loved me. He said not to fuck that up."

Cam is silent for minutes. When he finally speaks, his voice is a low rumble, weighed down by a calm fury.

"Well, shit. I always knew your dad was a dick, but... shit."

He wraps his arms around me, tucking my head under his chin, and in his embrace, I can finally think straight.

I let out an short laugh. "Yeah, he is," I agree.

"When was all this?" Cam asks.

"Monday."

I feel Cam tremble with rage, but he holds it in, and his arms hold me tight. "Then what happened yesterday was his fault as much as Forbes's." He huffs a deep breath. "I'll never understand why you didn't come to me, Rory girl," he says shakily, so softly I'm not sure if it was meant for me or himself, and before I can even open my mouth to tell him I never will either, he continues. "I don't know yet how we're gonna handle him, Ror, but he doesn't deserve to be a daddy. Definitely not your daddy, and I ain't gonna let him get away with this, I swear it."

I nod against Cam's chest. I can't argue with him, because he's right. It was the hardest thing I've ever done, telling my daddy what Robin's been doing, and he rejected it - he rejected me. And both times it's happened since then, including yesterday, is on his shoulders. He was supposed to protect me. I know that. And right now, I realize how much I hate my father. He doesn't deserve my forgiveness. I grip Cam so tight my bruises smart, but I need him. He's all I have in the world.

"We'll go straight to Sheriff Chipley. File a report - get it in writin'. They won't be able to cover it up after that - we won't let them, okay?" he says with gentle fervor, but it sounds like he's trying to convince himself as much as me. "They're gonna try, you know. Mayor Forbes will, and if your daddy is on their side... we're gonna have a fight on our hands. But I'm standin' by you, Ror, okay? He ain't gonna hurt you again. Not ever."

I nod again. This is what I needed - a plan. Chip's daddy is the town sheriff, and I can't be sure, but I don't think he would help the Forbes cover this up. He's not the country club type; he doesn't care about all that. From
what I know about him professionally, he believes in justice, doing things by the book, and I'm counting on it, because Cam's right - this is going to be a fight.

"Everyone is gonna know," I whisper. My gut rolls with thoughts of the humiliation I'm bound to endure. People will take sides, and even those who take pity on me, they'll see me differently.

Cam doesn't argue the point. He knows I'm right. He just squeezes me tighter. "I know, Rory girl. But we're gonna get through this, okay? I promise you that." Not "you're gonna get through this", but we.

I nod again. "Okay."

Cam sighs. "Alright, let's get to bed. You must be exhausted, and I need a shower. You want me to run you a bath in my mom's bathroom?"

"Nah," I reply, pulling out of his arms, "I just wanna sleep." Cam lifts the comforter and I slide underneath it and curl up on my side.

While Cam showers I plan it all out in my head. He's going to want to wait to talk to the sheriff until tomorrow night, after he has time to confront Robin, which I absolutely cannot allow to happen. I know I'll have to do this part alone.

Cam hasn't willingly woken up before ten in the morning since we were kids, so all I have to do is wake up early and drive over to the Sheriff's station. God willing, Robin will be arrested before Cam even knows he's back in town, and I can prevent their confrontation.

After his shower, Cam climbs into bed behind me in just his flannel pajama bottoms and pulls me back against him. I twist around so I'm facing him instead, and tuck my head under his chin, nuzzling the nook between his neck and shoulder, and breathe in his clean, familiar scent. I don't bother trying to mask my deliberate inhale - I don't care if he knows I'm sniffing him. Cam tightens his hold, tenderly strokes my hair, and whispers how everything's going to be okay. I think I'm actually starting to believe him.

****

It's still dark when I wake next, save for the moonlight and some bright distant light source I suspect to be the flashlight app on Cam's phone. I know what he's up to before I even open my eyes - the same thing he always does when he can't sleep. My eyes flutter open and I confirm that he's seated at his desk, furiously scribbling away in his journal. I watch him as he writes, his bare, broad shoulders tensely flexing with the effort, until he peeks over at me and catches me spying.

"Didn't mean to wake you, Rory girl," he murmurs.

"Then come back to bed," I croak.

Cam smiles weakly before abandoning his journal, and returning to his rightful spot to resume his hold of me.

"I can't sleep without you," I whisper into his chest. I'm certain I can't live without him either, but I don't say that, not now when I've already burdened him enough.

Cam soothes his fingers through my hair. "You got me, Rory girl. You'll always have me. I love you so damn much - I ain't ever gonna leave you," he breathes. And with those comforting words, despite all of my pain, all the hell I've been living, and the tempest I'm about to unleash on this town with tomorrow's confession - one far more tumultuous than the storm currently raging outside - I feel an unfathomable contentment, and drift off to sleep, safe in Cam's arms.

I have no way of knowing how short lived my contentment will be. No way of knowing that Cam's words will be his last to me, and thus, a lie.
CHAPTER TWENTY
Present Day

I wake to morning light creeping in through the curtains. I'm alone in the bedroom of Sam's suite, so I take a few minutes to reorient myself and try to recall everything that happened last night. Parts are so very vivid, and others quite hazy. The effort just makes my head pound even more than my hangover does.

*My first hangover.* Well, Operation: Normal Rory was an epic failure.

I remember leaving the bar with Sam, and that I forgot my room key. I remember some of our banter and I smile to myself.

And I remember our kiss. *God,* do I remember that. Just the thought of it - the memory of him positioned between my thighs, towering over me tall and strong, his delicious tongue plundering my eager mouth - it has my entire body heated and desire simmering low in my belly.

The door to the living room is slightly ajar - probably so Sam would be alerted if I had another nightmare. I wonder when he got up, and vaguely I think it couldn't have been too long ago, or another nightmare is exactly what would've happened.

Could he really have such power over me so quickly? The ability to quell months of night terrors with just the security of his arms? It would seem impossible, and yet, here I am.

I slip out of bed and head directly into the bathroom, locking the door behind me. I wash my face and rinse with some mouthwash.

Scenes from last night resurface unbidden.

*Oh, damn, I threw up.*

*I threw up a lot.*

That's when I remember how our kiss ended.

*Oh, God,* and begging Sam for sex! *Did I really do that? What the hell is wrong with me?*

I sit on the edge of the tub and try to remember everything I said, everything he said, but I can't. I can only remember remnants of conversation, and none of it makes me feel any less humiliated.

Knock, knock.

I startle.

"Rory, you okay?" Sam asks.

"Fine," I reply through the door as I use my fingers to tame my unkempt hair. I sigh as I survey my reflection. I've definitely looked better. I gingerly open the door and Sam rises from the edge of the bed where he's waiting on me.

"Morning, Sleeping Beauty," he drawls with a smile.

I freeze.

I feel the blood drain from my already pale face as my pulse starts to race. I take a deep breath and swallow down my nerves. *Sam is not Robin and Sam is not my father.* I close my eyes and pull myself together.

"Ror-"

"Don't call me that," I say as firmly as I can manage. When I open my eyes Sam is standing right in front of me, his brow etched with concern.

"I always call you 'Ror'. I didn't think-"

"Not that. The other thing."

I march out the door into the living room and grab my bra off the arm of the sofa. I face away from Sam to push it under my shirt, and secure it without having to remove my top. I'm wearing a white tank top, and small or not, my breasts weren't exactly concealed. Idly I wonder if Sam even noticed, or if the fact that he's not especially attracted to me blinds him from my sexuality completely.

I'm still working out everything that happened. I kissed him, but he also kissed me back. And *God, did he kiss me back.* Do guys just kiss any willing girls that way? I can't imagine it - I've never been kissed like that in my life, and I've certainly never kissed anyone like that. Not even close. Except for the one kiss I ever shared with Cam. But still, last night's kiss with Sam was in a league all its own.

In those moments I was certain he wanted me - I felt his desire, and I was sure it was for *me.* I realize now of course that Sam's temporary interest had more to do the fact that I was simply a willing body, and he's a guy, that's
all. But my realization comes too late to save myself the humiliation. Because if he could break it off so easily, pull away like he did, then clearly he didn't want me. Not really. Not like I wanted him.

Like I want him.

"Sleeping Beauty?" Sam asks, perplexed.

"That's the one," I murmur as I walk around the room searching for my purse. I need to check my phone. And take my birth control pill. Though I've been less than perfect with the whole take-them-at-the-same-time-everyday thing since it's not like I'm actually having sex, I do still take them just in case. Not in case I have a one night stand - that's not something I ever so much as considered before last night - but in case I encounter someone like Robin. Someone who doesn't give me a choice.

"Okay, I won't. Any particular reason?" Sam asks, and he must get frustrated by my stomping around his hotel room and not meeting his eyes because he grabs my hand and gives it a gentle tug to get my attention. I don't know why, but it pisses me off. He had my attention last night. My full attention. And he didn't want it.

"Yes, there's a particular reason," I hiss. "Rory is a nickname for Aurora, remember? I was named after Sleeping fucking Beauty. My father called me that. Robin called me that. Don't call me that. Ever. Okay?"

Now our eyes are locked, and Sam nods slowly. "You mad at me?" he asks softly, and I look down at my bare feet. I am. I am mad at him, but I know I have no right to be. Surely I can't be angry with my friend for not wanting to sleep with me. Imagine if the situation were reversed?

I sigh. "No, I suppose I'm not," I murmur defeatedly on an exhale, still looking down.

Sam lifts my chin with his index finger to meet his gaze, a familiar gesture now. "That wasn't very convincing."

I say nothing. What can I say?

"You know," Sam murmurs tentatively, "Aurora wasn't just a Disney princess..."

I narrow my eyes, unsure where he's going with this, and Sam's lips quirk up into a half smile.

"She was a Roman goddess - of the dawn," he continues. "According to myth, she renews herself every morning and flies through the sky announcing the arrival of the sun."

I blink at him. I've read only the most basic mythology, and it was mostly Greek, not Roman. But still, it's my own freaking name, how have I never heard this? "How do you even know that?" I ask Sam, who simply shrugs.

"I might be known to crack open a book from time to time... Come on, I got you some orange juice and aspirin. You must be feeling crappy," he offers, pulling me to the couch, which has been stripped of any evidence that anyone crashed there last night. At least until I begged him to sleep in the bed with me instead.

"God am I pathetic."

We both sit and I take the pills and down the entire glass of juice. I glance at Sam who seems pleased. No doubt he was expecting an argument, but I just don't have it in me right now.

"You don't look like crap."

I roll my eyes. Great, here come the platitudes.

"You look like a beautiful girl who drank too much last night and is paying for it now," he asserts.

"Yeah, because men always reject beautiful girls who beg them for sex. I hate that I'm so pitiful he needs to console me with bullshit. Sam is right about one thing though; I sure am paying for last night now. In truth, it feels like I'm paying for a lot of things, and I have been for a long time.

"Can we talk about last night?" he asks hesitantly.

"Do we have to?"

"Rory." My name comes out like an admonishment. Like he's talking to a child who's done something wrong. And maybe, right now, that's precisely what I am. I am the one who is in the wrong here. I'm the one who violated our friendship.

I meet his eyes. "Look, Sam, we really don't need to do this. I get it. And I'm real sorry. You've made yourself real clear about only wantin' to be friends. I don't know what I was thinkin'. I shouldn't have kissed you. And I shouldn't have asked you to... I just thought..."

I thought that when you shoved your tongue in my mouth and pressed your body against mine it meant that you wanted me too.

I sigh. "I know you don't want me like that. And I knew it long before last night, so I really don't know why I thought last night you might..." I take a deep breath to stop my rambling. "Can't we just chalk it up to my bein' drunk?"

"Is that what it was? You being drunk?" he asks, his gaze intent, his voice sober.

I should say yes. I should blame it all on the alcohol.

I shake my head instead. What the hell is wrong with me?
Sam lets out a deep breath. He looks down for a second, closes his eyes, and shakes his head once. He lets out a short, ironic laugh. "God, Ror, there's so much wrong with what you just said. But I need to talk about something else you said first. When you--"

"Can't we just pretend like it never happened?" I try one last time to avoid this conversation. I can't seem to lie to this boy, and I don't know how it's going to end, but I fear I may give something of my feelings away, and if I do, I could lose my friend.

"No, Rory. There's no way I can pretend that never happened."

My head drops and I stare at my lap. I must look like I've just been sentenced to be executed. I palm my forehead and rub my temples with my thumb and middle finger.

"Rory, last night when we were talking about hooking up, do you remember what you said?" Sam asks cautiously.

I shrug. I remember saying that I wanted him, but not specifically how I propositioned him, other than our kiss.

"I kissed you," I whisper.

Sam nods. "Yes. After that. Do you remember what you said? About wanting to do it because you wanted to do it?"

"God, this is mortifying. Why is he making me relive this?" I shrug again. "I don't really remember what I said, Sam," I murmur, meeting his gaze. "But I know it was me who kissed you. Me who propositioned you. I don't blame you for any of it. I don't understand why we have to talk about last night - it's over. Are you the one who's mad? Are you punishing me or somethin'?"

It was the wrong thing to say, I know that immediately. Sam looks horrified. "Of course not, Rory. How could you even think that?"

I look down again. The truth is, right now, I really don't know what to think.

Sam sighs. "This isn't about last night. It's about something you said last night, yes, but..." He shoves his fingers through his hair, exasperated, then takes another deep breath. "Please look at me." His tone is gentle and pleading and I comply. "You said you wanted to know what it felt like to do it because you wanted to do it. And when I asked what you meant, you said that you had to. That you didn't always have a choice."

My eyes widen in horror.

I said that?

Sam glares at me. He's waiting for a response, but I'm not sure I have one. The words he claims I've said, they're too telling, and they can't be explained away. He knows what they meant, he must, so why is he even questioning me about them?

I do the only thing I can, I shrug.

Sam takes this as confirmation of his obvious conclusions. His eyes close, only for a moment, as if in grief. "I didn't know," I murmur out of habit, and Sam's brow furrows and his glare intensifies.

"It's not fine, Rory. How can you say that?"

"I didn't mean it's fine. I just... what do you want me to say, Sam?" I ask. "You need all the details of why I'm fucked up? You need to feel bad for poor little victim Rory?"

"Damn it, Rory! Stop saying you're fucked up! You're no more fucked up than the rest of us, remember? You're not the only one who's ever been hurt, you know! I'm just trying to understand you! I--" Sam stops. He shoves his fingers through his hair again, and I'm idly aware that I didn't even flinch when he shouted at me. "I care about you," he says more gently.

I'm instantly awash with guilt. "Look, I know I'm not the only person who's ever been hurt. You told me about your mom. I get it. I didn't mean to imply--"

"Not just my mom, Ror." Sam's eyes are utterly solemn, and I understand his meaning immediately. His father didn't just beat his mother. He beat Sam, too.

"I'm so sorry," I utter the words I never found comforting when said to me. "I didn't know."

"No one knew. No one knows. Except my mom and Bits - well, and Tuck... and now you."

I look down. The sorrow for Sam I initially felt upon hearing his admission is evolving into something else.

Anger. Outrage for the little boy whose father betrayed him in the worst way. "I hate that he hurt you," I grate.

Sam offers me a faint smile. "Now you know how I feel. Somewhat. It just kills me that you went through that, Ror. After you said that last night... I can't stop thinking about it. I've been thinking about it all fucking night. I just can't understand how someone could do that to a girl... to you. Violence is bad enough, but, God, Ror. He was your boyfriend, he was supposed to take care of you, not-" He takes a deep breath. "Is that why you broke up with him?"
"Yes. I mean, there were a lot of reasons, but yes, that was the main one."

Sam shakes his head with incredulity, as if he's still trying to wrap his mind around this, and I really don't understand what's so difficult to comprehend. He already knew Robin hurt me. So he thought he just hit me or something. Is it really all that different?

"So one day he's your boyfriend and the next he attacks you? Is he in jail?" Sam has a million questions. Of course he does. But he doesn't understand.

"It's just so much more complicated than that, Sam. I get that you didn't anticipate this, and I know it's my fault for drunkenly blurtin' it out last night, but-"

"How is it more complicated? Explain. Make me understand." He's staring at me intently, his words adamant. He wants to know what happened to me to make me the way I am. I can understand that. He's seen so many of my scars. And he knows that I know I can just say calculus and this conversation will be over. But I'm tired of being a coward.

"Robin was... is a big deal in Linton," I explain. "Football is a bigger deal there than it is up north. And he was the quarterback, the star, and he was real good. Not just small town good. He got a full ride to University of Florida, and everyone said he'd go pro. No question.

"And it wasn't just Robin - it was his whole family. His dad was the mayor. His sister's Miss Popularity. And I was... just me. I wasn't especially unpopular or anything, just... nothin' special, you know?" Sam narrows his eyes at me and I can sense that he wants to interrupt, but he doesn't, presumably afraid that if I stop talking even for a moment, I might rethink confiding my story at all. "I was a tomboy growin' up," I continue. "I liked sports and video games, and my best friend was a boy."

This time Sam can't help himself, he interrupts. "You've mentioned him... in the group of men who have only hurt or abandoned you," he says accusingly.

I nod. "Cam would never have hurt me," I assure him, but I hastily move on, knowing there's no way I can talk about Cam. My newfound strength does have its limits, after all. "Robin's a year older, but his sister Lacey's our age, and when I started hangin' out with her, I guess he started to notice me. Everyone kind of knows everyone - it's a real small town. Our dads grew up together - they're real close - but my mom didn't like theirs, so our families never spent much time together, and Robin had never said two words to me. Until the night he asked me out."

"That's why your dad didn't help you? Because Robin's father was his friend?" Sam is disgusted, and he should be - my father is disgusting.

"That's also more complicated," I murmur. It isn't really. A shot at being related to a pro quarterback was more important to him than protecting his daughter from a monster. Simple.

"So you and Robin started dating..." Sam prompts.

I continue. I explain how Robin was my first date, my first kiss, my first everything. I describe how he was at first, and for a long while, really. How he was such a gentleman, treating me like a princess, always opening doors and bringing me flowers. How he'd drive out of town to get me foods I liked. But how, despite all these things, I never felt ready to be intimate with him.

I tell Sam about the time I overheard Robin say he was stepping out on me. How sorry he was, how he told me he loved me, and how like a stupid, naive, little girl, I said it back - even though I really just nodded when he asked if I loved him too.

"Did you? Love him, I mean," Sam asks.

"No." I don't elaborate. I never loved Robin, I know that without question.

I tell Sam how kissing Robin never felt more than just nice, and that he started to get frustrated with my innocence. How he started to make me touch him, how he touched me even though I'd asked him to stop. I don't give too many details, just the gist of the incidents a smarter girl would have taken as warnings. As giant, gleaming red flags. I tell him how stupid I am that I stayed with him even then. Even when all the signs were there. But I didn't see them - I didn't want to.

Then I tell him about the night he heard me say 'I love you' to Cam.

"Did you love him?" Sam asks.

"Yes." I don't elaborate on that either. The truth is, sometimes I think I could have grown to be in love with Cam. Sometimes I think I already was. Mostly, though, I have no idea what I really felt. But I do know I loved him. I've known that since I was three.

I tell Sam about that night. The first night Robin raped me. I explain how he thought I wanted it because I'd been wearing skirts and dresses. And because he thought I was playing hard to get. That when I cried and said no and begged him to stop, he thought it was all a game. He thought I would like it "rough", or so he said. Even though it was my first damn time. I sound bitter, I can't help it. I am bitter.

"That's how you lost your virginity?" Sam is horrified again. But what can I do? He wanted to know.
It’s a funny expression - *lost your virginity*. As if you can just accidentally drop or misplace it. But the truth is, you can’t just *lose* your virginity. For most people, it's something you choose to *give* to someone, for one reason or another, but not for me. Mine was stolen.

I tell Sam how confused I was afterwards. How Robin acted like he'd thought I'd wanted it. Like it was normal, like it was *right*. I tell him how he cuddled me and told me he loved me, and how the following morning he started talking about wanting to marry me someday.

"Did you want that? To *marry* him? At seventeen?" Sam is astonished. Of course he is.

"It's different where I'm from. Our parents were all married young. And it wasn't like he was proposing, he was just saying he wanted to marry me *someday*. It wasn't until later that I realized he meant sooner than I thought. But no, I never wanted to marry him. But it did confuse me more. It was a really confusing time for me in general."

Then I tell him the most humiliating part. I explain how even after Robin raped me, I stayed with him. I went back for more. And more he gave me, again and again. Every time. No matter how loud I tried to scream, how hard I cried or tried to fight, or how desperately I begged. I explain how controlling and possessive Robin became. How rough he got with me even when it had nothing to do with sex. How I had to wear warm clothes in freaking Florida to hide bruises. How I protected the person who was hurting me.

This, though, Sam understands. He says his parents used to make up stories about his injuries, always blaming football, and it made him resent the sport itself, until his father finally left them when he was in the eighth grade. He says his mom did the same thing. Hiding her bruises behind modest clothing.

I'm crying now, and Sam's eyes glisten too, so I start talking faster, desperate to get the story over with. I'm also vaguely aware that although I know this will change the way Sam sees me forever - and not for the better - somehow, like with Cam, the more I tell him, the more unburdened I feel.

I tell him about the Gainesville trip. How my fear of being alone with Robin, unlimited by time and space, struck me with enough terror that I knew I had no choice but to finally tell my father what had been happening. Sam takes my hand now, and not gently either. I squeeze his back, clinging to the strength he offers.

Sam grits his teeth as he listens to me explain how sure I was that with my confession to my father, my suffering would be over. But that isn't what happened. I describe the things my father said to me. How it was my fault - that I'd asked for it, and how. How I had to listen to my father attack my character while he defended that of my assailant. How I watched any ounce of hope I had die with his words, just minutes before Robin arrived to collect me for school, and how my father shook his hand and told him he'd consented to my joining him for the weekend.

"So your father handed you over to your fucking rapist?!!" Sam growls.

I shrug. Yes. That is exactly what he did. "I guess we both have sucky fathers, huh?" I murmur.

"That's an understatement," Sam replies bitterly, and squeezes the hand he still holds. He scoots over, just a little, so that we're sitting closer. "Tell me you didn't go away with him. Tell me he didn't have you to himself for a whole weekend," he pleads soberly.

I shake my head, hastily swiping at my cheeks with my free hand to rid them of tears. "I didn't," I breathe, and Sam's relief is palpable. "I knew I couldn't. But..." I steel myself, and as I do, I realize I'm saying the same words I said to Cam exactly one year earlier.

"But?"

I sniffle. This is the part I can't even think about, let alone describe, without reliving the terror I felt in those moments. Sam slides even closer until he's right beside me, so close our knees are touching. He doesn't release my hand, and his other hand reaches up to tuck my hair behind my ear, lingering to brush my cheek with the pad of his thumb. I close my eyes, just for the shortest second, relishing the feel of his touch, so impossibly comforting to me. I picture Sam as a little boy, terrified of a tyrant father. It is not my experience, but it has some symmetry, and I feel for him deeply. I stare at the man before me, so kind and compassionate despite his violent upbringing.

It's that moment, right before I confide one of the worst horrors of my life, that I realize I've already fallen in love with him. Another tear falls, clinging to the line of my nose, and Sam's thumb gets to it before mine does. But this tear - this tear I don't shed for Robin, or for my father, or even for Cam. This tear belongs solely to Sam - the boy he was, and the man he is.

"I waited until the last minute to tell him I wasn't comin'," I whisper. We sit so close that it doesn't matter how soft my words are. "I was so scared of his reaction, and I didn't want him to have time to get my dad to make me go with him. He met me at school after the basketball game. I had to cheer at it, and we were supposed to leave right from there." I pause and swallow, my throat bone dry. Sam notices, and he hands me the bottle of water that sits in front of us on the coffee table and I take a sip.
"I told him I didn't want to go and that we needed space. At first he was just, like, sad. He looked like he was gonna cry. And I don't know why I cared - he'd made me cry a thousand times, but... it confused me. I ran off before I could waver, into the girls locker room.

"I didn't hear him follow me. Everyone was gone. They' all changed and left after the game. It was always like a switch would flip, you know? One minute he'd be one person, and the next..." my breath hitches in my throat.

Sam's hand squeezes mine, and in his eyes I can see that, yes, he does know.

"He was real mad. He slammed me against the wall. He... It was worse than before. Much worse." I start to tremble at the memory, and Sam's hand drops mine and wraps around my shoulders, pulling me to his chest. In his embrace, it's easier to continue, or maybe it's because I no longer have to look into his eyes, no longer have to watch him digest what happened to me. What I allowed to happen to me.

"He did it right there in the girls locker room. I tried to fight. He was so rough. So much rougher than usual. He was just so strong and I'm just- I really tried so hard," I sob. I don't know why it's so important to me that Sam knows I tried to stop Robin, but right now, it is.

"I know you did, Ror." I can't see his face since mine is cradled against his chest, my head tucked safely under his chin, but his voice is earnest. He does. He knows I fought.

"He always ripped off my underwear, because I would always try to fight him off. But I was wearing my cheerleading uniform. We wear these spandex spankies over them-"

"I'm familiar." 

Of course he's familiar with what cheerleaders wear over their underwear. I push away my jealousy as quickly as it surged. I just don't have time for it right now.

"Well he couldn't tear them. He got frustrated and used his house key."

"Your scar," Sam breathes, and if his lips weren't so close to my ear, I might not have even heard him.

I nod against his chest. "But even that, it wasn't the worst part. He... he'd been real controlling for a while - possessive. So when I told him I needed space, it really got to him, I think. I didn't mean to- I just wanted to make it stop." I take a deep breath and my hand involuntarily shoots to my neck. "He just kept sayin' that I belonged to him, and then... he, uh, choked me. I couldn't breathe. I thought I was gonna pass out. I thought he was gonna kill me. But he didn't. He let go when he had, you know, finished."

I feel Sam's adam's apple move with his swallow, feel his clenched jaw at the crown of my head, the tremors in his arms, his chest.

"That was the last time. He went off to Gainesville for the weekend and left me there, on the locker room floor," gasping, crying, bleeding... I pause, trying to force away the memory, and unsure how to explain the rest. How I finally made it stop. There's too much to tell and too much I'm still not ready to talk about. That I'll probably never be able to talk about.

"Eventually I told someone, and once my mom knew what'd happened, that was it. She swept in and did everything she could. But Robin's dad was the mayor and my dad was the DA and neither of them wanted to get him in trouble. And the whole town loved them."

"So he's not in jail," Sam seethes. It isn't a question.

I shake my head and then pull away so I can look at him. His arms loosen to allow it, but he doesn't release me.

"When my mom found out my dad knew, she couldn't even look at him. She kicked him out, and guess who he stayed with... Even after everything he still thinks it was my fault. It didn't help that Robin told everyone I was just lashing out at him because he broke up with me. He even offered to 'take me back'. That's what most of the town still believes happened. That I'm a crazy bitch who accused their golden boy of doing something terrible because I didn't wanna lose him.

"The last time I saw my father he'd tricked me into being in the same room as Robin. He was trying to broker a reconciliation. Robin kept professing his love and apologizing for 'upsetting me', which he claimed he did by dumping me... I had another panic attack. I ended up in the hospital again. My mother filed for divorce after that, and I never saw my dad again."

"So you're telling me he just got away with it?" Sam growls, and I shake my head, but then nod. And then shake my head again.

"They couldn't prove rape. By the time I'd told, it was too late for a, you know, kit. They were only able to prove assault because there were photos."

"He took pictures?!

"Not him. Cam. I didn't even know about them until later. They were on his cell phone. He took them when I was asleep - of some of my injuries. Just in case. I didn't even think about doing that, but that's Cam, always thinking of everything."
Pain slices through me. I choke back a sob and look away. I can't talk about Cam with him. Not now, probably not ever.

"So this best friend of yours, Cam, he was supportive enough to photograph your injuries for the police, but then he abandoned you?" Sam asks, astonished.

I can't do this. I have to change the subject

"He didn't mean to. That's also complicated."

"Rory-"

"Robin got community service and probation. Which was basically nothing. And everyone thought I'd made it all up."

It's not like they saw the pictures, and it wasn't like I was going to show such intimate photos to random people.

"But my mom, she contacted the UFL athletics board herself, sent them the police report." And the photos, I later learned, because according to my mother, they needed to understand exactly what they were inviting onto their campus.

"Robin lost his scholarship. And that wasn't nothing. But everyone blamed me for ruining his career, his life. Nobody cared that he'd ruined my life, too."

"People were awful. His sister was basically their leader. I couldn't go to school anymore. My mom quit her job and home-schooled me, but even that didn't work. Lacey and her friends - my former friends - started showing up at the house. They even spray painted slut and liar on my driveway. At least I think it was them. It could've been my own father for all I know. I had a restraining order against Rob so he couldn't do his own dirty work. And Mayor Forbes sent men from his office a few times to try and get me to rescind the charges. They even wrote up a whole statement for me, saying I made it all up - all I had to do was sign."

"You didn't, though." Sam is sure.

"How do you know that? Maybe I did. Maybe I just wanted it all to stop." I did want it to stop. It was unbearable.

"Because you're strong. You didn't. I know you didn't." He doesn't doubt me, and his faith in my strength makes me feel stronger than I really am. Or maybe he's been right all along. Maybe I'm stronger than I thought.

"I didn't," I confirm. "I couldn't. He took so much from me - I couldn't let him take back the one thing I took from him. His career, his scholarship, was all that mattered to him. Anyway, as soon as my mom got the house sold, we moved here. And you know the rest."

Moments pass and we simply stare at each other.

"You're remarkable," Sam says finally, as if he's in awe. I roll my eyes. I am far from it.

"What is so remarkable? I let him hurt me for months and then fled when I couldn't handle the fallout. And I left with an anxiety condition and issues I'll probably never get over."

"But you've already gotten over some of them. You beat triggers, remember? You're beating one right now, sitting here with me. In a fucking hotel room, by the way," he reminds me. And he's right. I am sitting alone in a hotel room with a man. I slept in bed with that man last night. And I'd have done more than that if he'd let me.

"I'm just surviving, Sam. It's not remarkable. It's not like there's any other option," I whisper. The truth is, for a while, I was barely even doing that. Surviving.

"But there is, Ror," he breathes, and his eyes reveal something profound.

And I feel immediate guilt. Of course there is. He means Bits. And her suicide attempt. He's right - there is another option.

"There is. And surviving is a choice. And you're not just surviving. Not anymore. Look at you - you're on spring break with your friends. Last night you went out and partied, and if I'm not mistaken, had a pretty good time until you got sick. That's not just surviving, Ror, that's living."

I wince at the reminder of last night. I was having a pretty good time, but not until I got sick, only until I got rejected. "Yeah. Last night was... somethin'," I mutter, and when I lift my eyes, Sam's are even closer, and there's a heat in them I'd thought I saw last night, but I was mistaken. As I'm mistaken now, surely.

But just below those eyes, is his perfect nose, and below that, his full, pink lips, and they part slightly as his face inches closer. "Sam." I exhale his name. I don't know why, but it's the only word my lips can manage. And then his lips are on mine.

I gasp, right into his mouth. He kisses me softly, almost reverently, and I let him. And not only do I let him, but I kiss him back.

I kiss him back hard.

Sam groans, like he did last night, and God, the sound lights me on fire. But wait, what the hell is going on?

"I did," he agrees.
"But last night-"
"I kissed you last night as well, yes."
My eyes widen. That is not what happened. I thought I was the drunk one. "Um, no, Sam, actually I'm the one."
"Yes, you kissed me first. But I kissed you back, in case you didn't notice. I kissed you back a fucking lot."
I stand up and take a few steps away from where he remains seated on the couch. I simply can't think with him so close. I shake my head. "But you stopped it," I argue.
"You were drunk. I couldn't take advantage of you," he says, still unmoving, save for his eyes which follow me as I pace in front of the coffee table.
I shake my head again. "But I told you I knew what I was doin'. God, I even asked you to..." I rub my face with my palm, blushing scarlet, beyond ashamed.
Sam stands, and gingerly approaches me. "I couldn't risk it, Rory," he says carefully.
"Risk what?" I ask earnestly, looking up at him through my lashes.
"Risk that you were just saying those things because you were drunk. Risk fucking us up when you regretted it in the morning."
I shake my head again. "I already told you."
"That it wasn't because you were drunk, I know. So now, tell me, did you want to sleep with me because you trust me and you want to know how it feels to be with someone other than him? Or because you wanted me?" His intensity radiates from his every pore and finds its way into mine. He is beautiful and I am riveted. His hand reaches out and pushes a lock of hair back behind my ear, his thumb lingering on my cheek, and I turn into his touch. "Tell me, Rory."
"Both." I answer truthfully. "But... but you said you only wanted to be friends."
"I did want to be your friend. I am your friend. But, come on, Rory, of course I want you."
"I don't understand," I admit.
Sam sighs. "I'd just met you, you know? I didn't want or not want anything in particular, I just knew I felt some... I don't know, connection, and I needed to get to know you. So when I offered to go for a walk and you made it very clear you were not interested in, well, fucking me by the lake, but I assumed you meant any kind of, you know, romantic relationship at all, I got that we could only be friends.
"So I took what I could get, Ror, can you blame me? And you've reminded me many times since then, by the way, that we're just friends. In fact every time I started to hope for something more, you reminded me. In the bathroom with Chelsea, even last Friday, when you found out I played football. We're the same as we've always been, Sayum, friends!," he drawls in his Rory imitation, with a slight smirk.
I breathe out a short laugh.
"So which is it, Ror?" Sam asks again, his timbre low and deep, like gravel. I shiver, in spite of how hot I feel right now from his proximity. "Are we just friends... or something more?"
I don't answer him with words. Instead, my arms, quite possibly of their own volition, slide up around his neck and I push up onto my tiptoes and press my mouth to his. I practically, literally, throw myself at him.
"Rory," he breathes my name into my mouth and kisses me even harder.
His tongue slips past my lips and I don't hesitate, I stroke it with my own, and deepen the kiss even more. We're all wet lips and tongues, sliding and crashing against one another. I'm in heaven, but I want more. He's walked us back to the sofa before I even realize we're moving, and he sits, pulling me down with him. I climb onto his lap and sit astride him, leaving no gaps between our bodies.
His fingers clutch my hair and his lips move with mine. I'm not expecting the relief I feel in his arms, with my mouth against his. It's as if I'd been unsettled all this time, floating alone and desperate somewhere in space, and now finally, with his admission that he does, in fact, want me too, and the confirmation of his kiss, I'm finally back on solid ground. Sam is my anchor.
His arms wrap around my waist and yank me against him and I moan at the feel of his hard body against my soft, modest curves. Sam pulls my top lip between his and sucks, and I moan again, too thrilled to feel embarrassment.
"Rory," he breathes my name into my mouth and kisses me even harder.
His tongue slips past my lips and I don't hesitate, I stroke it with my own, and deepen the kiss even more.
"We're all wet lips and tongues, sliding and crashing against one another. I'm in heaven, but I want more. He's walked us back to the sofa before I even realize we're moving, and he sits, pulling me down with him. I climb onto his lap and sit astride him, leaving no gaps between our bodies.
My hands slide up his arms, exploring the taut muscles of his biceps and shoulders. His strength and power don't frighten me - no, they exhilarate me. My fingers run up the back of his neck and tug on his hair and he groans again.
The simmering desire inside me boils over until I'm desperate and panting between kisses. Sam's hands conduct an exploration of their own, running over my backside and just under the hem of my shirt. They feel my
lower back, his thumbs roving over my hips, including my scar, which somehow does not repulse him. I sigh against his lips and then rock my hips against him completely involuntarily. I can feel that, yes, he does want me, and the proof of it is pressing against me in just the right spot. Holy shit that feels good.

"Fuck, Ror," he groans, and then he's moving again and he lifts and rolls until I am on my back with him hovering over me, careful to support most of his weight on his forearms.

But my legs wrap around his waist and pull him down to me.

My fingers find the hem of his shirt and lift. Sam pulls away just enough to allow me to tug the whole thing over his head, and I toss it on the floor next to us. I take a moment - just one moment - to rake his body with my eyes. His physique is exceptional. Every muscle perfectly outlined, and I find myself thinking I'd like to kiss it everywhere. Robin was in great shape, but Sam, he's perfect. I've no doubt that Sam would win in a fight, and even though I know it will never happen - that I'd never even want it to happen - in a cavewoman sort of way, the thought pleases me deeply.

I run my hand from his neck down his strong chest, and trace the lines between each pronounced part of his perfect six pack. I watch as they each jump in the most sexy way at my touch.

He comes back down, flush against me, his hand firmly running up my side, pushing my shirt up as he goes, stopping under my bra. His thumb brushes my stomach, which rises and falls dramatically with each deep, panting breath I take.

Sam's lips crash back to mine, kissing and sucking, until he trails small, sweet kisses across my jaw and down my neck. My head flies back as his mouth and tongue gently work the column of my neck, a secret spot just below my ear, and the sensitive hollow of my throat. It's as if he knows exactly where I want his mouth, and he's happy to comply.

I've never felt so desired. And not just my body - no, there's deep emotion in Sam's eyes, a reverent affection in his touch, even in his kiss. I can feel it. I know he cares for me, he's said as much, but for the first time, I wonder if maybe it's more than that.

"You are so beautiful," Sam whispers between kisses. "So fucking perfect." Kiss. "I think about you," kiss, kiss, "all the fucking time," he confesses.

I sigh again. I've never been more thrilled by words. He thinks about me. I can't believe it.

"I-" I start to admit that I, too, think about him way too much, but am startled by a knock on the door.

Sam's brow furrows as his gaze darts toward the door, still laying on top of me, where I desperately want him to stay. Perhaps with fewer items of clothing between us. I press my fingers to the crease between his eyebrows; it's so incredibly soft. He turns back to me and narrows his eyes, smirking. If he's going to tease me about my fascination with his eyebrow crease, I cut him off.

"Are you expectin' someone?" I ask, careful to keep my voice below a whisper.

He shakes his head. "Probably just housekeeping. They'll go away," he decides and then resumes kissing me.

Knock, knock.

"Go away!" Sam calls out between kisses.

"Come on, Cap! Your phone's off! Let me in!" Tucker shouts through the closed door. Sam pulls back, his eyes wide with surprise, surely mirroring my own.

"What's he doin' here?" I whisper and Sam shrugs. I glance at the clock on the side table that says it's nearly noon.

"Cap!" Tuck calls again.

"One minute!" Sam calls back. He climbs off of me and I mourn the loss of his weight. I sit up and pull my shirt down to cover my stomach.

"You look fucking incredible in my underwear," Sam murmurs with a wry smile, and I swat his arm with a giggle. Tuck knocks again.

"Just wait a minute, will you?!" Sam yells again, his fingers raking through his hair. I grab my skirt and start searching for my purse.

"I put your bag on the night table," Sam whispers and I rush into the bedroom and grab it.

"What do I do?" I ask him, completely flustered. I know I can't handle Tuck finding me here, now, in yesterday's clothes, not to mention Sam's underwear. No, I can't handle the knowing look, or the vulgar teasing. I stare at Sam, desperate for his directive.

"It's fine, Ror. I had them unlock the adjoining door this morning." I breathe an audible sigh of relief and start to pad toward my room, grateful that Sam had the forethought to get me access. He's like Cam in that way. Always thinking ahead, always considering me and my needs.

Sam grabs my hand as I pass and tugs me back to him before I can make my escape. "This," he gestures between our bodies, "isn't over," he says meaningfully.
I nod helplessly. It's difficult to focus with him shirtless right in front of me.

He releases my hand and I continue to my room, glancing back at Sam and laughing softly when he adjusts himself inside his jeans. I quietly open both doors, and sure enough, they're unlocked. I close them carefully behind me and lean back against mine.

Holy fuck was that intense.

I've never felt such lust.

I've never felt such love.

I jump when I realize I can hear through the hotel room wall.

"Dude, what the actual fuck? What took so long?" Tuck asks, exasperated, his voice barely muffled by the wall between us.

"I just got out of the shower," Sam replies nonchalantly.

I shouldn't listen. Eavesdropping is a terrible habit. My mother said so.

I do it anyway.

"Your hair isn't wet," Tuck observes.

"Did you need something?" I hear an exasperated sigh. "Dude, Carl is driving me nuts!"

Sam chuckles. "My guess is the feeling is mutual."

"Caaaappp."

"What would you like me to do about it?" he asks patronizingly, like he's talking to a child.

"I don't know! Maybe get Pine to talk some sense into her? One minute she's all over me and the next she hates me. And sometimes she's all over me even when she hates me and I don't know what the hell to do with that!" Tuck is as frustrated with his relationship - if you can even call it that - as the rest of us are, apparently.

"Did you try to talk to her about it?" Sam asks rationally.

"Of course not. What am I supposed to say? Stop being a crazy bitch?"

"I wouldn't suggest those exact words, no. But maybe, just maybe, if you admit to her that you care about her as more than a fuck buddy, it might help the situation," Sam suggests.

"I told her she's my favorite hookup!" Tuck says this as if it's some heartfelt declaration of affection.

"Again, not the words I would have suggested," Sam replies. "Well maybe I'm wrong. Is that really all she is to you? Because it doesn't seem like it to me, and I've known you a long time, Tuck."

I hear a long, dramatic sigh. "I can't tell her, Cap," his words now barely audible through the wall.

"Why the hell not?" Now Sam is the one exasperated.

"Well, I don't know," Tuck murmurs sarcastically, "why can't you tell Pine you're totally into her and this whole 'just friends' thing is a fucking joke?"

"Dude, what's between me and Rory is between me and Rory. Mind your own damn business."

"You're asking about me and Carl!"

"Hey. You came here practically beating down my door for advice about Carl, not the other way around," Sam reminds him, and Tuck practically growls in frustration.

"Whatever we'll talk about it later at boys' dinner. Everyone's gonna be down by the pool by now. I gotta go before Carl accuses me of being late because I was picking up some bitch in the lobby or something," he grumbles.

Sam laughs. "Maybe she wouldn't feel so insecure if you referred to her as more than your 'favorite hookup',"

he offers.

"Whatever, Cap, I'm fucked. I just left her fifteen minutes ago and I already fucking miss her."

_Well those just might be the sweetest words I've ever heard come out of Tuck._

"That might be the kind of thing she'd like to hear," Sam suggests. _Way to go, Sam._

"Yeah, cause chicks are always into pussies."

Sam chuckles and I idly regret that I can't tell Carl about this conversation since I'm only listening to it illicitly and repeating it would be a betrayal to Sam. At least Sam is pushing Tuck to come clean about his feelings, which is the same thing I've been doing with Carl from my end. I also try not to feel giddy about the fact that Tuck said Sam is entirely into me and Sam didn't deny it. Idly I wonder if he knows I can hear them or not.

"And speaking of pussies, Kendall and I have a bet going for break. She says you're finally gonna grow a pair and get with Pine, and I say you're still just a pussy, you fucking pussy, so keep bitching out. I've got a hundred bucks riding on it and-"

"Christ will you shut the fuck up about that already, Tuck?" Sam growls, and Tuck laughs, seemingly amused by his friend's irritation.
I never could quite understand how men relate to one another. They're best friends, and Tuck's way of encouraging Sam to pursue me is to call him a fucking pussy. Or not to pursue me, perhaps, since he has money wagered that he won't, apparently. Who knew Kendall would be an ally for me?

"Right, I got it. She's just your friend that you talk about every five minutes. Rory said this today, Rory did that yesterday... Sorry I can't go out with those hot slutty college bitches, Tucker, but I have to tutor Rory for math--"

"God, shut the hell up already! Stop projecting your Carl problems onto me!"

Tuck laughs again and I jump when I hear his footsteps before I remember that I'm hidden in my own room.

"Whatever, you coming?" he asks.

"I'll be down in a bit," he replies.

"Yo, speaking of Pine, Carl's all worried because she isn't answering her phone and she was pretty smashed last night. Have you--"

"She's fine."

Silence.

"I checked on her this morning," Sam explains, and I know that if I can detect the hesitancy in his voice, certainly his best friend can as well.

"I'll bet you did," Tuck teases and I hear the door open and close, then his footsteps pass my door on his way to the elevator.

I jump as the door I'm leaning against is knocked on. "Ror?"

"Damn, I don't want Sam to know I've been standing here listening. I tiptoe into the bathroom, turn on the faucet and start to brush my teeth. Sam knocks again, so I walk back and open the door, mouth full of my toothbrush, hoping it will appear that I've been in the bathroom washing up the whole time.

"You okay?" he asks, eyeing me suspiciously.

I nod and turn to go back to the bathroom to spit and rinse. Sam leans on the bathroom door frame.

"So you've just been... brushing your teeth?" he asks, eyes narrowed and full of mirth. He's totally on to me.

I nod anyway, grateful that the rinsing cup hides my lip biting - my insuppressible tell. I am a terrible liar, always have been.

Sam laughs and shakes his head and I'm relieved he finds my fib endearing and not offensive. "Everyone's down at the pool. They're waiting for us."

"Um, okay. I just need to shower and change. I guess I'll meet you down there," I offer.

"Why do you need to shower to go to the beach?" he asks, bemused.

I pass him as I walk to the dresser and start sifting through my clothing for my beach wear. "In case you forgot, I threw up a little last night. I think I could use a shower."

Sam smiles. "I didn't forget anything about last night," he says intently. His gaze has magical powers over me and my blood heats in its wake.

I shake my head. "You need to go. You're too distracting." I push at his chest to urge him back toward his suite. I'm not strong enough to actually move him if he didn't want to let me, but he grudgingly does, walking slowly backward with a half-smirk.

Sam's arm suddenly slings around my waist and pulls me to him. I gasp in surprise as he reaches up and brushes his thumb just under my bottom lip before sucking it into his mouth.

"Damn, that's hot. Why is that so hot?"

"Toothpaste," he mouths.

I stare up at him, swallowing anxiously. He can see how he's affecting me, and I can see that it pleases him. He does that self-satisfied smirky thing he's been doing lately any time I act like a foolish lovesick puppy, and then plants a simple, chaste kiss on my lips.

"I'll wait for you," he says simply, and then turns me around and gives me a small nudge toward the bathroom for my shower.
CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Present Day

I take my time in the shower and process the events of the morning. I can't believe Sam and I are happening. Of course, I don't yet know what that even means. I can't know if he just wants to be friends who hook up, or if he wants a go at a relationship, and truly, I'm not sure if I'm even capable of one. And of course there's his whole no girlfriends in high school rule to contend with.

All I know is we're no longer "just friends". We're something more. And for the first time in the longest time, I allow myself to indulge in something I never thought I'd have again – something I've only had vague little inklings of in recent days.

Hope.

I smile as I dress in the one bikini I own, thanks to Carl. I pull on my cutoff shorts and a black tank top and knock on the door that connects my room to Sam's before I can back out and change into a one piece. I open the door on my side and find that Sam never even closed his.

Sam is in gray board shorts and a black tank top, almost matching me, except he looks utterly stunning. His slightly overlong, messy hair is pushed back by wire framed sunglasses, and I sigh when I realize how much attention he's going to get with those defined arms out there on display like that.

His are heated, and I'm not expecting it. "Those are some short shorts," he murmurs, almost disapprovingly. I frown. He's right. I should go change.

God, what was I thinking? And I'm wearing a freaking bikini!

Sam approaches me and bends so our gazes are level. "You don't look like you're asking for anything, Ror, so stop freaking out. You just look hot. You always do. Covering up more isn't going to change that. So relax and let's go have a good time with our friends, okay?" he says cautiously.

I'm not sure I agree, but I nod anyway and sling my beach bag over my shoulder, letting him take my hand and lead me out the door.

"Hey, do you mind?" he asks, reaching into his pocket to produce his cell phone and room key. "Since you have a bag? I know I'll forget and jump in the pool with it."

I laugh and open the bag for him to throw his things in. Sam drops my hand and slips his arm casually around my waist and I suppress my sigh. I wonder if this is how it will be now - if I get to be in his arms whenever I want.

Which is all the damn time.

****

Sam and I are alone in the elevator when backs me into the corner. "You know what to say if you're ever uncomfortable, right?" he asks softly.

I nod. I know our safe word. But my discomfort has nothing to do with fear and everything to do with my unquenched desire. Sam brushes my hair over my shoulder, bends, and starts kissing my neck.

"Oh, my."

I turn my head to give him better access and he smiles against my skin. "You smell different," he observes, nuzzling my hair.

"Huh?"

"You usually smell like honey and vanilla." He plants small kisses along my jaw.

"You know what I smell like?" I ask, incredulous. Honey and vanilla is the scent of my conditioner at home. Of course, I know his scent very well, but then, I'm in love with him, so the playing field isn't exactly level.

Sam nods and I feel rather than see it.

"I, uh, used the hotel's conditioner," I explain, and he doesn't respond, he just starts nibbling on my ear.

"Holy hell, that's hot."

The doors open and Sam steps away, but not far, and I'm once again left reeling as three men, presumably other spring breakers, enter the elevator and shamelessly check me out. I swallow nervously, but Sam pulls me possessively to his side, glaring at them. And I'm grateful.

"Just lookin' bro, no harm," one of them draws, palms forward in a show of pacifism.

"Look somewhere else," Sam shoots back.
The stranger laughs. "No need to go all territorial, dude. If you don't want other guys checkin' out your girl you should probably get a less hot girlfriend, and you definitely shouldn't have brought her to Miami for spring break," he slurs. "How is he drunk already?" It's barely one in the afternoon.

Sam subtly maneuvers me behind him. "And if you want to keep you fucking face arranged like it is, you should probably look. Somewhere. Else," he says both calmly and completely menacing.

The elevator pings again and the doors glide open. Without breaking his glare at slurry stranger, Sam guides me out and starts pulling me through the lobby, and I practically have to jog to keep up with his long, agitated strides.

"Sam, it's fine," I murmur, and he finally casts me a glance, his gaze softening instantly, the tension in his muscles easing. His gait slows until I'm walking beside him instead of being pulled like a puppy on a leash. He releases my hand and slings his arm around my shoulder, pressing a sweet kiss to my hair.

"He was right, you know," he mutters. "It would be easier to get guys to stop looking at you if you weren't so motherfucking hot."

I laugh. I love that he thinks of me that way when for so long I was sure he wasn't even attracted to me. "But then you might not want me," I reply, trying on his trademark smirk.

"Don't be ridiculous."

*****

We join the others by the pool, and though it isn't really all that odd for Sam to have an arm around me in a friendly sort of way, Carl still notices and shoots me a subtle smirk. I roll my eyes dismissively. Tuck sits behind her on a lounge chair, rubbing sunblock onto her shoulders.

"Hmm, you two showing up together, how interesting," Dave drawls.

"Quiet, Dave," Sam gestures for me to take the lounge chair next to Carl before settling on the one beside mine.

Lily is apparently asleep next to Tuck and Carl, and Tina and Andrew are in the pool.

"Hey Rory," she calls from the water, and I give her a small wave.

"Damn it, Tuck, grow up!" Carl admonishes when Tuck's hands wander past the sides of her bikini top.

"Hey, I don't want these babies to burn," he fires back.

"What do you care? It's not like you'll be touching them anyway if you keep acting like such a jerk," Carl spits, and Tuck falls back onto the lounger in dramatic exasperation.

"Too much information, you two. Get your shit together," Sam murmurs.

"Like you two did?" Dave teases, nodding to Sam and me, and a blush rises to my cheeks. "Interesting that the last time I saw either of you, you were stumbling into a cab together, and now here you are. It makes me wonder-"

"Don't get too excited, Dave. Cap was alone in his room this morning, so I'm pretty sure the only place he touched Pine was in his dreams," Tuck informs the group.

I throw my arm over my face as if I can hide from the idiots that are Sam's friends.

"You two are fucking morons," Sam mutters, blowing them both off.

"Seriously," Carl agrees. "Do you want some tanning oil, Rory?"

"I removed my arm from my eyes and shake my head. "No thanks. It's hot. Anyone wanna go down to the ocean?" I ask. I've always preferred the ocean to a pool. Something about the salt water and the infinite vastness of the sea makes me feel like my issues aren't as devastating as they seem. Like I'm just one ephemeral piece of a boundless world - a part of something far greater than just myself and my troubles.

"I'm in," Sam murmurs, and I bite my lip to stifle my grin.

I tug my tank top over my head and stand to shimmy out of my shorts. I picture Sam kissing my neck in the elevator to distract me from my nerves at our friends seeing me in a bikini. Carl and Lily are wearing barely more than a few scraps of material connected by thin strings, so I don't feel too self-conscious.

Sam has removed his shirt, but seems to be making no move to join me. "You comin'?" I ask.

"Yeah, Rory. You go ahead, I'll be right behind you," he murmurs.

I frown in confusion, but grab my towel and start across the pool deck anyway. Sam is still seated when I glance back, and despite the fact that he's slipped on his sunglasses, I'm fully aware that he's staring at me walking away.

It strikes me that Sam just had me go ahead of him so he could stare at my ass. Is it normal that I'm flattered instead of outraged?

I roll my eyes and continue onto the boardwalk that connects the resort to the beach, and wait on Sam there, where our friends can't see us.
"Boo!" I shout when he reaches me, pleased when he jumps in surprise. Sam recovers quickly, though, sliding his arms around my waist to pull me against him. He kisses me hard and fast before pulling away far too quickly to lead me down the steps to the beach.

"You're a sneaky little thing, aren't you," he muses.

I laugh. "Me? I'm not the one who told you to walk ahead of me so I could stare at your ass," I tease.

Sam smirks. "I didn't realize I was quite so obvious, Ror. I'll try and be more subtle next time."

"Next time... just ask," I reply as seductively as I can, completely out of character, and then drop my towel in the sand and race toward the waves. But Sam is faster than me and he catches me before I reach the surf. I giggle as he wraps me in a hug, his hands wandering up and down my back, and vaguely I think he's going to feel my ass rather than just look at it this time. I'm also quite certain I have no intention of stopping him. I want his hands on me. But they land on the back of my thighs instead, and he lifts me without warning, tossing me over his shoulder with minimal effort.

I yelp and swat at his behind, but he just chuckles and walks languidly into the water. I realize he's going to throw me into the water and my pulse accelerates. I'm a get-used-to-it-gradually kind of girl, definitely not one to take the shock all at once. But I do want to be a good sport for Sam, especially after that elevator stranger pissed him off because of me.

I brace myself to be tossed, but Sam slides me down the front of his body instead, torturously slowly, and I feel every inch of it - every warm, firm ridge - against mine.

Holy shit.

I don't even register the frigid water, even though we're waist deep. I feel anything but cold.

Sam gazes down at me. "Hi," he says softly.

"Hi," I reply, smiling timidly up at him even though I was teasing him about looking at my ass mere minutes ago.

He takes my hand and leads me deeper into the water until it's up to my chest and his waist. His hands roam over my hips, my back, and my stomach, lingering on the half inch of scar that peeks out above my swimsuit bottoms. I shiver, and it has nothing to do with the cold. My breaths come a little more quickly, and I just stand here, staring up at him from beneath my lashes, waiting. For what, I haven't a clue. I don't know what I expect him to do here.

Sam gently cups my jaw like he's holding a treasured possession, his midnight blue gaze making silent promises I can't begin to understand. His fingers thread through my hair as he bends, achingly slowly, his eyes darting around to ensure our friends aren't in sight before - finally - his mouth captures mine. His kiss is teasing and sensual, his lips caressing mine in an equal exchange of affection and hunger. I find myself smiling even through our kiss, and I can feel it against my mouth when he returns it. He sucks my bottom lip into his mouth and I moan, but he pulls away and presses his forehead to mine.

"God, Ror, no more of those sexy little sounds. Not in public. You're killing me," he says gruffly.

"So let's go back inside," I whisper.

Sam pulls away to look down at me with narrowed eyes, like he's sizing me up. "You're trouble, you," he decides, and then suddenly dives under the water, surfacing no fewer than five feet away.

I grumble to myself, but when I catch Tuck and Carl splashing in the shallows with Tina and Andrew following from the beach, I understand.

"Fine, you win. Let's go join them." With no other choice, I concede, and start making my way to our friends.

"I, uh- need a minute," Sam says, still with that husky tone that affects me in a decidedly physical way, his gaze accusatory as he nods for me to go ahead.

I laugh, but honestly, the knowledge that he's attracted to me, that I can affect him, it's a heady feeling, and I revel in it.

****

We lay on the white sand, lazing in the dwindling afternoon sun. Tuck and Carl are getting along for now, and he sits behind her with his arms wrapped possessively around her middle. Sam lounges on my towel, and I lay perpendicular to him, my head pillowed on his perfect abs. The slow rise and fall of his breathing threatens to lull me to sleep, and I can't risk another nightmare in public. Yeah, no thanks - I learned that lesson on the plane.

I sit up. "Who's hungry?" I ask.

"Ugh, definitely not me. I'm still stuffed from brunch," Carl replies, playfully slapping her flat tummy. I guess they all ate before we came down this afternoon.

"Come on, princess, I want food," Tuck argues. I learned he originally started calling her "princess" to poke fun of her family's extreme wealth, which in this group is saying something. It seems to have evolved into a term of
endearment, though, and one can usually tell whether or not they're getting along for the moment by his tone, which ranges from adoring to exasperated.

Sam stands. "Come on, let's go get some smoothies," he decides.

I smile. A smoothie sounds perfect.

We all get our things together and I slip my shorts on over my sun-dried swimsuit. We push a couple of tables and chairs together on the pool deck's lounge area to accommodate our group. Sam asks me what I want and I tell him to surprise me. Raising his hand in salute, he shoots me an adorable wink, and off he goes with his marching orders. As the boys wait for our drinks, Carl, Tina, Lily and I sit around and talk about them. I sense that Carl is dying to ask me about Sam, but she wouldn't dare in front of an audience, and I'm grateful for the reprieve, fleeting as it may be.

Sam brings me a strawberry-banana smoothie and I start gulping it down, only now realizing how hungry I was. I'd eat something more substantial, but with dinner only a few hours away I'd prefer not to spoil my appetite - an long-standing pet peeve of mine. Tonight we're having separate dinners for the boys and girls - spring break bonding and all that. I was looking forward to it before this morning. Now, not so much. It's interesting how many of us have kind of coupled up. Not surprising really - except for Sam and me - but interesting.

Of course, I'm not sure if Sam and I are actually coupled up, or just exploring that "something more" he spoke of. I'm afraid I'll end up hurt, but I guess that was a foregone conclusion the moment I tripped over the edge of that cliff we called friendship, and started falling hard. But at least now I've got a shot at temporary happiness before the inevitable crash-landing. Stupid, slippery fucking cliff. I should've seen it coming. But then, the drop was too sudden, too steep, its hazard signs hidden by the hazy of his masculine beauty, his generosity and kindness, and the kindred connection he once tried to explain. But you can't explain the inexplicable, and I was hurtling toward my impending heartbreak from the moment he stumbling upon me panic outside of calculus.

"So we'll all meet up at the bar after dinner?" Andrew asks.

"Yeah, around eleven or so," Carl confirms.

"How's your smoothie, Rot?" Sam asks quietly.

I nod and smile, still lost in thought.

"Ha, Rot. Do you call her that because she's so good in bed that that's what she makes you do when you fuck her? Ha! Roar! Get it?" Dave guffaws like the ape that he is, and I suck in air and try to pretend someone did not just reference fucking me.

"Ten, nine, eight-

I'm yanked from my internal counting when Sam leaps across the table, knocking an empty chair to the ground in the process, and grabs Dave by his shirt. He drags him from his seat and shoves him up against the wall behind him. "I told you to show her some fucking respect!" Sam snarls.

"Cap," Tuck warns.

"Dude, I was just fucking kidding. She can take a damn joke!" Dave defends, obviously frazzled, bordering on frightened.

"Cap, he got it," Tuck tries again to intervene.

Sam's jaw clenches, he bites his lip, and then I see his hand fist, and his arm rear back...

"Sam!" I yelp.

He freezes. His fist opens, and closes, then falls limply to his side. He takes an audibly deep breath.

"You will watch how you fucking talk about her," he says simply, his calm tone belying the serious threat. To his friend.

Without another word, Sam turns and walks back toward the hotel lobby. I stand to go after him, but Carl grabs my arm to stop me.

"Rory, just watch him a few minutes, okay?"

"I'm just going to make sure he's alright." I try to pull away, but she doesn't yield.

"He's fine. Just let him cool down." She lowers her voice. "Look, Cap has anger issues. He used to get in a lot of fights. Not so much lately, but... if he's angry, just let him cool down."

"But-" Tucker sets a supportive hand on Carl's shoulder. "Rory, I promise he's fine. He just needs to be alone for a bit. He'll come back. Trust me," he assures me, and I hesitantly sit back down.

I frown. Just leave him alone? When he's upset?

No, that doesn't feel right.

I stand back up, and with Carl's guard down, I get a distance away. I know she's scowling at me, but no one comes after me, so they can't be too worried about Sam's anger.
I head straight to the elevator, idly aware that I didn't bring my bag or even my shirt. One other person is in the elevator with me, and belatedly I realize he was one of the guys with that slurry asshole that pissed off Sam earlier. He looks me up and down and I ignore him, pretending not to notice.

"Where's pretty-boy? Your tough-guy boyfriend left you all alone?" he taunts.

I try to hide my startle and my anxious swallow. The old Rory would just murmur that he's not my boyfriend, I don't think, and perhaps cower in the corner. But I've had plenty of self-defense classes and I'd have no qualms about kneeing this loser in the balls. He'd never see it coming. "Fuck off," I growl instead.

"Ooh, we have a live one," he sneers, "Well, shit. I guess he didn't teach you to watch your fucking mouth when you talk to men."

I narrow my eyes. "No. But he taught me how some men treat girls. And I know how to handle those men. So unless you want to see how a crazy bitch reacts when she's backed into a corner, I suggest you... fuck. Off." I say carefully.

The only boyfriend I've ever had did teach me how some men treat girls. And because of that, I took the classes. Loser's eyebrows shoot up through his forehead. He was just expecting to bully me a little and then walk away. And it's not like he's going to beat on a teenage girl in a public elevator equipped with a camera.

Ding.

The elevator arrives at his floor, and with a scowl but without another word, he turns and exits the car. I breathe a tremendous sigh of relief when the doors close and the lift begins to rise. I hadn't quite realized how anxious I was. But I didn't freak out. I didn't panic. I was strong.

And I know who has helped to make me that way. To give me this confidence. Who offered me comfort when I was upset. And now he's upset, and they all want me to just leave him alone?

Hell no.

I get out on our floor and head straight to Sam's room. I know how it feels to want to be alone, and his hotel room is the only place he can do that here in Miami.

I knock, and wait.
And knock, and wait.
And knock.
And knock.
And wait.

After five minutes of knocking, I go next door to my own room, grateful that I happen to have the room key in the pocket of my shorts. I open the door that leads to his room. The door on his side is closed, but when I turn the handle, I find it isn't locked.

I go in. Of course I do.

"Sam?" I say hesitantly.
I look to my right, where the living and kitchen areas are.
Empty.
I take a few steps toward the bedroom door and say his name again. Nothing.
I make my way back in the other direction and notice the sliding balcony doors are open, so I step tentatively through them.

Sam is leaning on the rail, pensively looking out at the ocean, his back to me. "Sam," I say timidly, worried I may be intruding after all.
He doesn't turn. "Sorry about that, Ror-y. I just need a few minutes, okay?"
"Yeah, okay," I murmur. I nearly head back inside to afford Sam his privacy since he seems to prefer it to my company right now, but I just need to say this one quick thing... "But... don't just stop calling me 'Ror' because of some stupid comment Dave made, okay?"

Sam turns to me, and instead of retreating, I take another hesitant step toward him. "It pissed me off that he said that about you... That douchebag in the elevator pissed me off too," he mutters.

I nod. "I know. But you do know Dave is just an idiot. That he means no harm, right?" I say gently.

Sam glares at me a moment and then nods slowly, just once. "I almost hit him," he says, so quietly I can only just hear him.

"But you didn't," I remind him.
Sam takes a deep breath. "But I wanted to... I'm no different than him."

"Than who?"

Sam glares at me. The truth is it doesn't matter who he means. His father, Robin, they're all the same. Assholes who make themselves feel more powerful by hurting other, more vulnerable people.
"Sam you're nothing like him. So you got pissed off and wanted to hit someone? That happens to everyone. You didn't do it."

"But, I wanted to," he repeats.

I cover the rest of the space that separates us. I reach up and caress his jaw, feeling the soft scratch of his stubble, and after another moment he visibly calms. "You didn't," I say again. "Violence is a choice. Like survival, remember? Everyone has those impulses when they get angry, just like we have the impulse to give up when we're, you know, hurting. You made the right choice, Sam. You're a good man. Nothing like him," I assure him intently. "I know the difference, Sam, trust me," I add more softly. I hate that he's beating himself up over something he stopped himself from doing.

He holds my hand harder against his cheek and turns into my touch, planting a soft kiss on my palm. His other hand skims the line of my jaw, his fingers combing through my beach-messed hair. "I'm sorry I overreacted."

I shake my head. "Don't apologize to me. You didn't do anything to me. You were just being protective, and honestly, I'm grateful. For a long time I needed that, and I didn't have it. But Dave isn't a threat to either of us, you know that."

Sam nods. "I know. You're right. Of course you're right."

"It's my fault. For dumping all my crap on you earlier. It rattled you, and I'm sorry. I'm so used to it that I forget how crazy it all was and-"

"Stop it, Ror. Never be sorry for talking to me. I want you to talk to me," he insists, his hand still running tenderly through my hair as he gazes intently down at me. God, he's beautiful. His midnight blues glow with emotion, his lips slightly parted. It's impossible for me to keep my focus; he's just too gorgeous for his own good. Or mine.

"And I want you... to kiss me," I whisper.

And he does. My God, he does. It's not a sweet, gentle kiss. It's hungry - all-consuming. It's like he's been holding back all along, and now some hold has been broken. His hands sift through my hair, down my neck and around my back, his thumbs caressing my bare midriff.

His tongue pushes its way into my mouth and I welcome it, brazenly stroking it with my own. Our lips crash together in a desperate union, each trying to steal a piece of the other, trying to leave some of ourselves behind. I tug on his soft, thick hair, loving the feel of my fingers running through the silky locks. Sam groans in response - he loves it too.

He grabs the backs of my thighs and lifts me, perfectly aligning our bodies as he guides my legs around him. I lock my ankles at the small of his back, kissing him back with equal fervor.

I'm somewhat aware we're moving through the suite. Sam swings the bedroom door open so hard it slams against the opposite wall. But I have no fear, I'm equally as impatient right now. I brace myself to be thrown onto the bed, but Sam doesn't do that. Instead, he gently lays me down on my back, completely out of sync with the intensity of the way he kisses me. I grasp blindly for the hem of his tank top to yank it over his head, and he pulls back to assist me.

"You sure about this, Ror?" he asks through panting breaths.

I nod adamantly. I've never been so sure of anything in my life. My body is on fire, the desire that's simmered from the first touch of our lips threatening to combust in an inferno of need for something I'm not sure I fully grasp.

"You know what to say if you change your mind?"

I nod again.

"Say it. Say the word," he demands, his hands smoothing up my sides and over my stomach, my chest rising and falling madly with my frenzied breaths.

"Calculus."

Sam smiles approvingly, his eyes hooded and shrouded in lust. He stares down at me like I'm a delectable feast he's dying to consume, and then, as if he couldn't possibly wait a second longer, he resumes his kiss. I moan into his mouth, completely unabashed. His lips sweep across my jaw and start working their way down the delicate skin of my neck. "Oh, God," I exhale.

I feel his grin against my skin. "Just so you know," he breathes right into my ear, "'stop', 'no', or any other variant will also work. Any time, no matter what. Okay, baby?"

I sigh amorously. Only for me would it be such an incredible turn-on to be reminded that I can tell him to stop. But I have absolutely no intention of doing that. And that endearment. Baby. He's never called me that before. No one has. And, God, do I want to be his baby.
Sam starts kissing across my collarbone, his hands roving over my breasts, molding - exploring. "I think you wore this bathing suit to torment me," he rasps, reaching around back to pull on the knot. "To punish me for stopping it last night."

I laugh as he tosses the bandeau top over the side of the bed. His lips whisper sweet kisses down my sternum and between my breasts before he takes one in his mouth and lightly sucks. My head rolls back, my eyes close, and my back arches all on its own, thrusting my chest toward his mouth. I have no control over the moan that rips from my lips.

This never felt good when Robin did it. When he forced me to let him do it. But, God, does it feel incredible now. Like my breasts have some secret connection wired right to the core of me. I open my eyes to find Sam watching me intently, silently cataloging my every reaction. His hand slips down, down, and slides between my thighs.

I let out a sharp gasp. Oh, God.

My hips move mindlessly in rhythm with his hand, and I'm barely even aware when he undoes my fly. And then his hand is gone and I whimper my complaint at the loss. Sam's lips stretch into a pleased smirk as he slowly - torturously - slips my shorts off until I'm naked except for my swimsuit bottoms.

"So beautiful," Sam breathes as his gaze rakes my body. He presses his lips to my stomach, brushing a trail from hip to hip and down the top of my scar.

Holy shit.

"You have no idea how much I've thought about this, baby." Sam's hot breath against my skin is somehow just as erotic as his touch.

"God, Sam. Please," I beg, and I'm not sure for what. I'm practically writhing, a torrent of sensation concentrated between my legs, where I've never wanted anyone, but where I now want Sam desperately. I ache in a way I've never experienced, and I know Sam can fix it, can give me what I need, even though I don't exactly know what that is.

Sam suddenly pulls back just enough to meet my gaze. He furrows his brow in that way I love, as if he's considering something. "Rory... you've had an orgasm before, right?"

I blink at him, eyes wide, mortified.

"He ever make you come? Before it got bad, I mean? You ever make yourself come?" His tone is soft and gentle, trying not to embarrass me, but I'm afraid right now that is impossible.

"I... I'm not sure."

Sam just stares a beat before I detect what is undoubtedly a mischievous gleam in his eye. "Oh, baby, if you're not sure, then you haven't. Trust me," he informs me.

I don't know what to say, but before I can try and think up a response, Sam's lips are back on mine. He kisses me hungrily with renewed urgency. He drags his lips back down my neck, licking and sucking as he goes, and peels my bathing suit bottoms down my legs.

He looks me up and down. "Fucking beautiful," he growls appreciatively. He shoves his board shorts down and tosses them with the rest of our discarded clothing. Now it's my turn to check him out, and God, he's the beautiful one. He's all sun-kissed rippling muscles, and they're as tense with desire as mine are.

Every inch of him is unfathomably perfect. I want him inside me. I've never wanted that. Ever. And, I realize, he's bigger than Robin, both in length and girth. I know how much that would piss Robin off to know, and the thought pleases me deeply. I let out a giggle before I can stop myself and Sam pauses his reverent kissing of my neck and collarbone.

"You know, baby girl, laughter isn't exactly what a guy wants to hear when a girl sees him naked for the first time," he teases.

I laugh again. "I'm sorry..." This is all so surreal for me. Sex was always something that was done to me, not something I did with someone.

"What is it, Ror? Come on, we're naked - it's definitely not time to get all shy on me," he urges, and I laugh again.

Is there always this much laughter during foreplay? Because there definitely should be. It's putting me infinitely at ease. Reminding me who I'm here with - one of my very best friends, whose company is everything, and who I want to connect with in the deepest way possible. It reminds me how much I've already confided in him - that I can tell him anything. So I do. "It's just that... you're... so much bigger than him," I explain, not sure if what I'm saying is even appropriate.

Sam's eyes widen in surprise, and then he grins wickedly. "Now that is exactly what a man wants to hear," he murmurs, and resumes the work of his mouth with a new determination - perhaps a reward for my honesty.
He kisses his way down between my breasts, dipping his tongue into my navel, and I moan again. He traces his lips down my scar. "You're fucking perfect," he says huskily, his mouth moving to the inside of my thighs. His stubble scratches softly against my sensitive skin, and my legs pull together toward the novel sensation. I'm idly thankful I waxed for this vacation.

"Sam..." His name comes out as a plea, and again, I'm sure he knows what I need far better than I do.

"You trust me, baby?" he asks, looking up at me from between my legs.

I nod desperately, and Sam kisses me there. A hot, wet, open-mouthed kiss.

"Sam!" I cry out, and he explores me in earnest until my moans fill the room in a carnal song I can hardly believe is my own.

He concentrates his tongue in one sensitive spot before slowly pushing two fingers inside me, circling them around and around until I grind my hips against him, out of my mind with need.

"Fuck, Ror, you are so fucking sweet," he growls against me.

I shoot off like a rocket, my head thrown back and mouth open, mind-numbing pleasure radiating from where he touches me throughout my entire body. I arch my back mindlessly and shamelessly moan while Sam's motion slows, but doesn't stop. I gasp for air as if I've just run a marathon. Holy fuck, is that what I've been missing?

Now I know what he meant. You can't be unsure about that.

I feel the absence of his mouth, and then his fingers, and when my eyes finally open, Sam is hovering over me, gazing down at me with his weight on his elbow, our bodies aligned. His fingers graze tenderly over my stomach.

"Hi," I finally manage.

Sam offers me a smug grin. I don't blame him. He has every right to be smug after what he just did to me. "Hi," he replies before feverishly taking my mouth. His body comes down over mine and I feel his arousal press against me. I wrap my legs around him and pull him harder against me and Sam groans, but pulls away as if he's still hesitant.

"We can wait, Ror. I can do that again, if you like," he offers with a cocky smirk.

Oh, God would I like him to do that again. And again. But no, it's not enough right now, not by a long shot.

"No, Sam. I want you." I grind my hips against his.

He lets out an amorous grunt and his head flies back. "Fuck." But when his eyes come back to mine, he's concerned, like he's waging some internal war.

But I don't want his concern - not right now. "Sam, if I didn't want to be here with you, I wouldn't be here with you, okay?" I insist. I can see him considering me, feel him weighing his desire against his concern over my past. I run my hand over his sharp jaw, imploring him. "Please, I need you, Sam. Inside me."

His eyes slam closed. "God, Ror, if you're going to say things like that, I'm barely going to make it inside you, baby," he growls.

"Well then don't make me ask again. Are you really going to make me beg you after last night? You know I have more bathing suits like that one to torture you with," I tease, though I most certainly do not. But I can always borrow one from Carl.

Sam jumps off the bed and my eyes follow him to the drawer in the nightstand. He retrieves a condom packet.

It doesn't make sense, but I don't want him to wear one. I don't want anything between us. I need him to wash away every time Robin took me without my permission and, irrationally, I'm not sure I'd feel the same way if he did it with a condom on.

"I'm on the pill," I murmur. Sam freezes, and eyes me warily. "And they, um, tested me in the hospital. After... you know. I've never been with anyone else."

"I trust you, Rory," he replies. "And just so you know, I've never not worn a condom. Not once."

I nod. When he doesn't make a move, I grab the packet out of his hand and toss it to the floor. Fire flashes in his eyes and he's immediately back on top of me, kissing me fervently.

He positions himself, and though I know it isn't true, part of me feels like it's my first time. It is the first time I've ever invited this, the first time I've ever asked a man to take me this way, and it's a detail that is very meaningful to me. Sam pulls his face away just enough to meet my eyes, and I see a question in his gaze. He's asking my permission one more time. I give it wordlessly.

"I love you."

I want to say the words, but I know I can't. I probably never will. I have no business even thinking them.

Sam watches me intently as he slowly enters me. I sigh at the instant jolt of pleasure, the incredible sensation of being filled by him. I was a little nervous it would be painful. Sam is significantly better endowed than Robin, but I understand now it always hurt with Robin because that was what he wanted.

Sam continues to push forward and I realize he still isn't even all the way inside me. He's holding back, afraid to push me too far too quickly. He's watching for my every reaction, and I lift my hips to encourage him. Sam
groans deep in his throat as he slides home. Figuratively, and somehow, also literally, because with him inside me, it feels as if this is where he is supposed to be. Home.

He stops to let me acclimate to his welcome invasion. "You okay, baby?" he asks hoarsely.

I lift my hips again, needing more. "God, yes, Sam. Please, move," I beg.

Sam tentatively rears back, and surges again. We moan together. It feels incredible. I never knew it could feel like this and I relish it. Being as connected to him physically as I feel emotionally. Even if I know it's mostly one sided, I do know he cares for me. And right now, I'll take what I can get from him. I know how screwed up I am and I know this is likely the closest I'll ever get to real love.

Sam begins a rhythm, equally sweet and possessive, and I tentatively raise my hips to meet his thrusts. He kisses me fiercely, our tongues tangling together, passion emanating from everywhere we connect. I tighten my thighs around him. He's so deep, and I can't help but think I want to stay this way forever.

"You feel so fucking good, Ror. So tight, baby. Fucking God." His rhythm picks up and he starts to surrender his control. And that's exactly what I want. Sam as lost to me as I am to him.

I moan his name, my hands delving into his hair, tugging roughly. Vaguely I worry I might hurt him, but I'm not in control right now. I have completely submitted to him and my own body, which somehow knows exactly what to do.

My eyes close as I succumb to the sensations. To the grind of his hips, the heat of his mouth, the blanket of his weight, the stretch of him filling me. It's a heady combination and I bask in it.

"Look at me, baby," Sam rasps. God I love his voice like this. I love that I've made it like this.

My eyes snap open to collide with enrapturing midnight blues, glazed with emotion and laced with lust, just inches from my own, our faces so close our noses brush with each rock of our hips.

Robin never looked at me like this. I never looked at him either. His face was always buried in my neck or chest, my eyes clenched shut, my mind decidedly elsewhere as it would inevitably slip away to some distant memory, in some far off time and place. Except for that last time, of course, when he intently watched and relished every bit of my helplessness and terror, until I wondered whether or not I'd survive, and began to consider that, perhaps, I wished I didn't.

But with Sam I'm completely present. And I know he's right here with me, savoring this moment.

We gasp together, our breaths mixing intimately in a whirlwind of passion, his exhales the only air I breathe. I am living on Sam. With the emotion in his gaze, I pretend he could love me, too. That this is more than just sex to him. Because I'm making love, and it's the first time I've ever done that.

"You're so fucking beautiful, Rory," Sam breathes between his sexy groans and grunts. And repeated muttered expletives.

Sharp waves of pleasure seize me with his every thrust as my climax starts to build. Even after the magic of his mouth, the sensation is utterly unfathomable. It feels different somehow. Stronger, deeper. But I'm not sure it will happen again, especially so soon. I don't care either way, I realize. I'm in heaven regardless, and my chest swells with adoration for this man who is absolutely everywhere. On top of me, impaling me, around me, but most importantly, inside my heart, positively owning it.

"Baby..."

"Oh my God, Sam..." And it's settled. I don't know how I ever even doubted him. Because I'm going to come again. I need to. It's almost painful how badly I need to. But it's a beautiful kind of pain, one that precedes only the most mind-blowing pleasure, and I moan his name, along with other carnal sounds I can't even describe. But I have no way of helping it. I'm lost to him in every possible way.

Sam kisses me again, ardently, deliciously, and he shifts, his hands sliding under my backside and lifting me. The angle changes and he dives impossibly deeper inside me.

It's all I can take.

I cry out what is meant to be his name, but sounds more like the mating call of some unnamed animal, as I explode around him, exponentially more intensely than before. My eyes flutter closed and my limbs seize, holding him to me like a vise, my nails unconsciously raking his back. I scream in delirium, time suspending as I ride each wave of ecstasy.

"Fuck! Rory," Sam groans, his voice a breathy rumble. He thrusts into me just twice more, hard and fast, before following me into oblivion.

When I return back to earth, Sam is dead weight on top of me, both of us panting like animals. He nuzzles my shoulder softly as I trace the lines of his back.

Sam's gently pulls out of me and rolls onto his back, taking me with him so I lay on him like a blanket, my face tucked into the nook of his neck. I inhale deeply, relishing the scent I've become so familiar with, now mixed with
salt from the ocean and sweat. Sam strokes my back lightly with the tips of his fingers, and I shiver as chills break out on my skin.

"You alright, Ror?" he asks softly. I nod against his skin, eyes still closed, still half in another world - one of nothing but pleasure and love and Sam.

"Mmmm," is all I can come up with.

Sam chuckles and kisses my hair. "Well, that makes two of us, baby."

I sigh contently. "You've never called me that before."

"Called you what?" he asks. I lift my head just enough to look at him, not wanting to pull my body off of him any more than I have to - not sure if and when I'll have the opportunity to be so close to him again.

"Baby," I remind him.

Sam's brow furrows, like he didn't realize he even said it, and he said it plenty. "Hmm, I guess I did call you that. I don't know what you're doing to me, Ror. Honestly I've never called a girl a pet name in my life," he chuckles lightly.

"I liked it," I admit timidly.

Sam grins and his huge palm spreads around the back of my neck, pulling me down for a kiss. I sigh again. I scoot down and over just a little so he doesn't have to bear all of my weight, laying half on his chest, our legs intertwined, his fingers ghosting up and down my back.

I could stay like this forever.

The thought is bittersweet. I remind myself that this is all temporary. Because even if he could return my feelings, it wouldn't be right. What kind of person would I be if I allowed the man I loved to tie himself to such a broken mess?

All because of Robin.

I wish with all my heart that I could go back in time. That I could get back what Robin took from me. That Sam could have been my first. All this time I had no idea sex could be like that - so satisfying, both physically and emotionally. I wonder idly if Sam knows how significant this was for me. My hate for Robin suddenly consumes everything, bubbling up from the marrow of my bones.

"Oh, baby, no," Sam whispers, his knuckles brushing away liquid regret. "What's wrong?" His anxiety is palpable, and I suspect he thinks my regret is about him and what we just did.

I shake my head, denying his worry. "I'm fine," I mutter.

Sam rolls to his side, guiding me to face him. He slips an arm under my neck, and the other caresses my face, his thumb banishing another rogue tear. My leg bends between his, and in this position, with our eyes level and barely inches apart, I can't hide from him.

"Please tell me what I did," he pleads.

My eyes widen in horror. He thinks he's done something to cause my tears, and my stomach rolls with his unearned guilt. But how can I tell a man I wish he was the one who'd taken my virginity? How can I tell him I want to erase all memories of Robin and replace the memory of my first time with today. I don't know much about men other than the monster who broke me, but I'm quite sure they generally freak out at the responsibility of taking a girl's virginity, even if only figuratively.

"Nothin', Sam. I mean it. It's just..." I trail off.

It's just what? It's just, do you mind if I pretend you were my first?

"It's not you, I was just thinkin' about Robin..."

Sam blanches, and I realize that didn't come out right.

"I mean... I was just thinkin' that this is what my first time should have been like, that's all."

Sam's entire body relaxes beside me. "Nothing he did was the way things should have been for you, Ror. I wish you never had to go through any of that," he says intently.

I nod. Me too.

"I wish it could've been me." He adds more quietly, "you have no idea how much."

I blink at him. "Really?"

Sam nods. "Really."

My brows pinch together. Awe for this man strikes me dumbfounded. "I didn't know guys like you existed."

He laughs. "It's not me, Ror. I told you, you're the one doing this to me. Trust me, normally just the thought of sleeping with a virgin..." he trails off with a dramatic shudder and I giggle.

But he sobers quickly, and I instantly regret bringing up Robin at all. I wish I could undo what he did," he breathes.

"It was kind of a first for me," I say softly. "I mean, you know, consensually. I've never... I..." I don't know how to explain it without revealing my feelings for him so I just trail off pathetically.
Sam presses a quick kiss to my lips. "I know, baby," he says gently. His brow furrows as if he's considering something. "You know, if you want to consider this your first time, I'm okay with that," he says meaningfully, and I blink at him, astonished at his compassion for me and my past.

I kiss him.

I kiss him hard. His free hand holds my face to his as I silently marvel at how lucky I am to have him in my life. Even if we end up just being friends, even if this "something more" can never really be what I wish it could be.

I can't believe how this day has unfolded. I awoke in a shroud of humiliation and rejection, and now, I lie here completely naked and blissfully sated, gazing into the midnight blues that have had such an unfathomable on my life in such a short time. Sam rolls onto his back, pulling me back to his side and I rest my head on his chest.

Exhaustion expands my ribcage and climbs from my throat in a wild yawn. I never knew a couple of orgasms could wipe me out like this. Of course, why would I, since apparently I'd never had one before.

"You sure swear a lot during... you know," I say through another yawn.

Sam frowns. "Do I?" His lips quirk up into a small smirk. "You know, you can say 'sex', you don't have to be embarrassed, baby. Especially since we're still naked."

I shove at his chest and let out a laugh.

"Well, do you want to know what you sound like during sex?" he teases.

"God, no!" We both laugh and I cover his mouth with my hand, but he nips at it playfully.

Sam sighs. "You sound - and look - like every fucking fantasy I've ever had," he admits.

I doubt it, but it's still nice to hear. "Is it always like that?" I ask quietly. I just can't believe that's what I've been missing out on. That it's what everyone experiences. That mind-blowing, life-changing passion. Why would anyone do anything else?

"No."

I look up at him, bemused.

"It's never like that, Ror," he says meaningfully, and though I don't know his exact meaning, I let myself believe I'm special to him. That even though I know he's done what we just did many times and with many different girls, that this time was special to him.

I cuddle into his side and his arms tighten around me. I stifle another yawn, sinking slowly into my exhaustion. My eyes lose their battle, and they drown in sleep.
CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Present Day

Sam kisses me fiercely, my entire body alight with desire. He hovers above me, touching me everywhere but where I really need him, his hands roving over my tingling skin.

I love you.

I think the words, because I know I can't say them aloud. I want him more than anything, but still, he doesn't take me.

"Please," I beg, wrapping my legs around his waist, trying to pull him down to me, to get him to align our bodies just right.

"Baby," he groans, and I love the sound more than I should. I lift my hips, but he's still out of reach.

"Oh, God, please!" I plead desperately.

Finally, he enters me slowly, and I cry out in triumphant pleasure.

Our hips rock together in perfect rhythm.

Mustering confidence I never knew I had, I roll so I sit astride him, kissing him with everything I have. It feels so good this way, I think, as we continue to move together.

"Oh, God!" I scream.

"Ror!" Sam pleads.

"Rory, wake up!"

My eyes shoot open.

It was only a dream.

I'm gasp in thick air, my body turned on, unaware that it only took place in my subconscious. I'm so disappointed it was just a dream that it takes me a few moments to remember the events that led up to my being asleep, utterly naked, in Sam's arms.

"Oh, right. The incredible sex. I blush at the memory, and then again at the memory of the dream.

"Well that's new."

I haven't had anything but night terrors since Robin, and I've never had a sex dream in my life, ever. When my eyes finally find Sam's, I realize they swim with worry.

"You okay?" he asks.

I nod, mortified, as if he can know my thoughts.

"You were begging again." His tone is threaded with distress, and it finally registers that he thinks I just had another nightmare.

"I'm fine," I insist, but he's not placated. Of course he's not - I always insist I'm fine.

"Another nightmare?" he asks somberly.

"Um... no, just a- uh, dream," I reply noncommittally.

Sam's eyes narrow. "It didn't sound like just a dream," he accuses, and I know he thinks I'm lying - just trying to brush off a nightmare, and rejecting his empathy. "I thought you said you always have them. That you don't have regular dreams."

He's right, I did tell him that. I shrug. "I don't. I mean, I haven't. But, I guess I was wrong, because it was just a dream, Sam."

He furrows his brow and shakes his head. "But you were begging, like before. You said 'please', and 'Oh my God', and..." he trails off.

I raise my eyebrows, watching midnight blues, waiting for them to dawn with understanding. My skin hums with awareness of our nudity, of his strong arms around me. I have no idea how long I've been asleep, how long ago we made love, but laying here in bed with him, after that dream, I'm having a hard time not climbing on top of him just like in my subconscious fantasy.

"Rory..."

"Yes?" My voice has grown breathy again.

"Was I in this dream by any chance?"

I bite my lip and look up at him through my lashes. "Maybe."
Sam's fingers start trailing up and down my side and he moves so he's on top of me. He captures my mouth in a kiss and I sigh. *This is exactly what I wanted.* And I can feel that he's in complete agreement with me. In fact, I can feel it against my thigh. I push my tongue into his mouth and deepen the kiss. His hands become more bold, molding my breasts, his lips trailing down my neck, eliciting a lustful moan.

"Tell me about this dream," he urges, pulling back just enough to look at me.

"It's the first good dream I've had in over a year," I whisper.

Sam smiles wistfully. "I'm glad, Ror."

I nod. "Me, too."

"Why do you think that is?" he asks cautiously.

I laugh. "Well, considering the nature of the dream, I think it may have something to do with you," I tease.

"Yeah?" he asks hopefully, and I nod. "So why don't you tell me a little more about this dream?" He smirks as his hands renew their exploration of my overheated skin.

"Hmm..." I pretend to think about it. "Nah."

Sam pouts adorably and I smirk right back at him.

"I could... *show* you," I offer instead.

His eyes brighten as I push at his chest so he rolls off of me, and I begin to play out my dream.

The real thing is far better.

****

I collapse on top of him and catch my breath, my face buried against his neck. I'd never been in charge before, and though I was uncertain at first, Sam guided me, and, *God,* he certainly knows what he's doing.

"I think I have a new favorite pastime," Sam drawls as he catches his breath.

I giggle. "I'm pretty sure sex is every guy's favorite pastime."

Sam lets out a short chuckle. "Not just sex, baby. Though I'm not gonna lie, I've always been a fan," he says through a smirk. "It's watching *you* come apart under me, or on top of me, or-"

"Sam!" I cut him off, playfully slapping at his chest, but I can't help another giggle.

He grins. "It's the most beautiful fucking thing I've ever seen." He throws his head back onto his pillow with a sigh.

I both love and hate these incredibly romantic comments. I wonder if he'd be so recklessly saying such things if he knew how I felt about him. Probably not. He'd probably be running in the opposite direction.

"Don't say things like that," I whisper, careful to hide my face against his shoulder.

"Why the hell not? It's the truth," he retorts.

I sigh, scooting off of him and under the duvet, suddenly very aware of my nudity. Sam turns to face me, his fingers tracing the line of my jaw, his eyes cautious. "You have no idea what you do to me," he says carefully, gazing at me intently.

"Yeah? And what's that?" I ask under an arched brow.

The corner of his mouth lifts into a half smile. "You make me feel fucking invincible."

I burst into a fit of giggles. "How the hell do I do that?"

"Well, we both know you're the most gorgeous thing I've ever seen-"

I open my mouth to argue, but he presses his index finger to my lips to shush me.

"You tell me things you don't tell anyone else. I *love* that. You let me touch you, you let me hug you, hold you. Then you *kissed* me last night. That was fucking awesome, even if you were drunk off your ass. That kiss alone would've made my whole trip. But *now,* you let me make you *come.* I gave you your first-"

"*Jesus,* Sam!" I try to stop him, because though every word he says is true, he is *mortifying* me.

"Shh, don't interrupt. Your first orgasm." He licks his lips so subtly I'm sure it was completely subconscious. "No one can take that away from me, you know. *And...* He pauses and his smile becomes less smug and more wistful. "You let me take away your bad dreams."

I don't say anything. He did. He took away my nightmares.

But Sam's smile shifts back into a smirk. "And not only that, but if I recall correctly, it wasn't one, but..." he bites his lip and pretends to count before holding up three fingers, counting how many times he got me off. "And counting," he adds with a devilish grin.

I blush bright red, but I can't help but laugh. "Sam, my *God!*" I admonish, but his smirk only grows.

"Exactly my point," he teases. "And when you say that when you're about to come, baby girl, I *feel* like a fucking god," he drawls as he plops dramatically down onto his pillow, and I'm caught between a fit of giggles and extreme humiliation.
I throw my forearm over my face, unable to look at him. "I guess you kinda are a god in that respect," I murmur. I'm enjoying his ego right now, happy to please him when he's done so much for me. Sam pulls my arm away and I find him looking down at me with wide eyes. "In what respect?" he asks excitedly, smiling like the Cheshire Cat.

I bite my lip, trying on my own smirk. "In bed," I say with a shrug, totally nonchalant. A growl rumbles from his throat and he bends to kiss me deeply, and I kiss him back eagerly, happy to redeem my reward for playing this game with him. For being truthful instead of drowning in embarrassment.

"You sure know what to say to a guy, Ror. Tell me how big I am again," he demands playfully and I laugh. We kiss, and laugh, and kiss some more.

I can't believe how comfortable I feel with Sam. I never thought I could feel this way, not with anyone. Not even before Robin.

"Do we really have to go to separate dinners tonight?" I whine, wincing when I realize how clingy I sound. "Hmm... We can ditch our friends... Stay right here, order room service," Sam suggests, brushing my hair off of my shoulder before cautiously pressing his lips to my collar bone. My skin tingles. How does he know how to find these secret spots? My fingers comb through his hair all on their own accord.

"That sounds real good," I murmur shyly, not quite sure how serious he actually was, but the idea of spending the evening the same way we spent the afternoon is too appealing to simply brush off.

Sam's responding grin tells me he wasn't kidding. "Say the word, Ror, I'll text Tuck right now and make up an excuse." I bite my lip, considering it. "If we both make up excuses to ditch them, they'll know somethin's up, Sam." I don't bother concealing my disappointment. "They'll think you and me are..." I trail off. They'll think we're what? Hooking up? Something more? I don't even know what we're doing.

"I got news for you, baby - they already know. I'm pretty sure they knew before we even did," Sam retorts matter of factly. "Come on, Ror," he says gently, "even if they hadn't already noticed something was up, it's not like we can hide it indefinitely, right? I mean, I can't just *not* kiss you now that I know how fucking great your mouth tastes." He leans in and proves his point.

Tuck and Carl are technically just hooking up, and they're as likely to engage in public displays of affection as any real couple, although they're also fairly likely to engage in combative arguments as well. Why should I have to resist the same affections with Sam?

And who am I kidding? Carl already knows something - she has since the beginning. And the fact is, I'm not sure I wouldn't want to tell her myself. I'm so confused, I need someone to talk to, and apart from Sam himself, Carl is the best friend I've got.

I sigh. "Yeah, you're right." Sam smiles in triumph. "So does this mean you're going to let me kiss you in public, or that you'll ditch our friends to hole up in a hotel room with me tonight?" he asks, wide eyes brimming with promise.

"Hmm... I'm not sure. Maybe both, maybe neither," I tease with a shrug. I'm vaguely aware that last year, being holed up in a hotel room with my boyfriend was my greatest fear, and now...

*He's not your boyfriend, Rory!*

I wince at my own reminder. No, he most certainly is not.

But what is he? What are we? I don't ask him. I can't. I know enough about guys like him to understand that right now we are probably just friends who have just incorporated some kind of "benefits" into the relationship, and asking him to define us would probably ruin the whole thing. Though Sam isn't really like those guys - he's not like any other guy really. But still, I can't risk it. Because, as he said, at least to me, he is a freaking god, with the power to quell my night terrors, and make my body sing. Not to mention my heart.

"Come on, we can order a movie, your choice," he tries to convince me, as if a movie is as appealing as what we did this afternoon.

"Does the room service menu have coffee ice cream?" I ask.

Sam grins. "I bet it does. And if not, I'll get someone to go out and get some for you, deal?" he asks hopefully. I pretend to mull it over. "Okay, fine," I agree.

I'm rewarded with another kiss, and I allow myself to melt into it, into him.
We're startled out of it by knocking. Sam groans and slides out of bed, grabbing a pair of boxers from the drawer I raided the night before, and pulling them on on the way to the door. I follow him, slipping on the shirt he wore this morning and my bathing suit bottoms. He looks through the peephole and shrugs.

"Nobody's there," he says, and I blink at him, perplexed.

Knock, knock.

Oh, shit. It's my door.

"That's your room, Ror. It's probably housekeeping. Why don't you let them in. Just hang out here while they clean," he suggests.

I pad through the adjoining doors and am about to pull open my door when I decide to peek through the peephole. I jump back.

Knock, knock, knock!

I hurry back to Sam, taking care not to make noise.

"It's Carl!" I loud-whisper. Surprise widens Sam's eyes.

"Rory! Wake up! I have your phone and I need to talk!" Carl calls through the door.

"She and Tuck have some seriously bad fucking timing," Sam grumbles. I bite my lip to stifle a giggle and push up on my tip toes to kiss him. "I have to let her in. She needs to talk."

Sam's bottom lip pouts his disappointment, so I kiss it. "I'll be back," I whisper, and turn to go back to my room.

Sam swats my behind. "You better be, baby girl."

I practically swoon. I love his pet names. I was never such a sucker for endearments. Even before things with Robin got bad, his sweethearts and his darlin's never felt this sincere, and definitely never gave me this rush.

"Roryyyyy!" Carl whines through the door.

I swing it open. "Jesus, Carl, I was sleepin'!" I lie, my lip involuntarily sliding through my teeth.

"Well wake up, you need to start getting ready for dinner soon anyway, and I need to bitch about Tuck," she mutters. I lead her to sit with me on the sofa in the living area. Carl has already showered and blown out her chic blonde hair, which she's flattened straight, though she hasn't done her makeup for tonight. She's in sweatpants and a pink tank top, clearly in lounge mode before what I assume she expects to be another wild night out on spring break. She hands me the beach bag I left behind when I ran after Sam earlier.

"What'd he do now?" I ask.

Carl sighs dramatically. "I don't know what the fuck to do with him anymore, Rory, I swear. After the beach we all went back to our rooms to shower and whatever and Tina wanted to go see Andrew so I went with her, but Tuck wasn't there. So I went down to the lobby thinking he'd be by the bar or the pool or something, and these drunk guys started talking to me. They were such dicks, they started hitting on me in the stupidest way, and I blew them off, and when I walk away, I see Tuck over by the gift shop giving me the dirtiest look, and he comes over and starts accusing me of looking for a hookup! From those drunk fucking assholes!"

Carl continues to rant about how Tuck gave her shit about being an "independent woman" who doesn't need a man and saying she acts all tough, and asking why he bothers wasting his time hooking up with "some bitch who obviously thinks she can do better". She's really upset. Idly I wonder if the "assholes" who hit on her in the lobby are the same group that I met in the elevator.

But Carl doesn't seem to realize that Tuck's accusations are just manifestations of his insecurities about their relationship. "Carl, honestly, you guys are driving each other crazy, and your friends too for that matter. He cares about you. In fact, I'll bet he's missin' you right now. I think he's probably in love with you, which is why he freaks out when he sees you talking to other guys."

"I was blowing them off! You know, when we first started hooking up, he was the one fucking other people, not me. I haven't so much as kissed another guy in like a year!" she argues.

"Does he even know that?"

"No. I mean, I don't know what he knows, but I haven't advertised it. It would freak him out."

"It wouldn't freak him out, Carl. In fact I think it would make him real happy to know that," I counter.

"Yeah, because guys just love it when their casual hook ups get all clingy and committed," she spits sarcastically. I laugh, I can't help it. She sounds so much like Tuck saying that girls don't like "pussies". I can't help but think that if Carl got a little clingy and Tuck acted a little like a pussy, they might find happiness together.

"Do you think he'd get all upset about you talkin' to other guys - even if you were just blowin' them off - if he doesn't want more with you? Honestly, if you were just a casual hookup, why wouldn't you be allowed to talk to whoever you wanted?"
Carl sighs, and her eyes start to glisten. She's holding back tears, and it's the most emotional I've ever seen her on her own behalf. I've seen her get worked up for friends - for me even - but never over her own personal life. I slide closer to her and slip my arm around her shoulders.

"He said I'm his favorite hookup, Rory. That's it. He could have said whatever he wanted, and that's what he said." She wipes at her cheek before her tear can fall too far. I rub her arm in comfort.

"And did you tell him how you feel? Or did you just say the same bullshit?"

"Same bullshit," she breathes.

I nod. "Tell him how you feel. Just tell him. You guys are two, normal, eighteen year olds. There's no reason you can't have what you want." Unlike me, I think sadly to myself. "I think he loves you. I do. And I'm pretty sure you feel the same way. And if not, then what do you have to lose? You two are miserable like this. You should be together. For real."

I expect Carl to argue, to deny she loves him, and to insist she can't say these things to him, but she doesn't. She just sits there for a few moments, taking in my words. I sincerely hope that they can work this out. That they can find happiness.

Again, I think about how much I hate Robin for stealing that opportunity from me, possibly for life. For making me a hypocrite. Because whatever advice I give Carl, I can't follow myself. I can't tell Sam how I feel, because even if he could love me back someday, how long could it possibly last before I freak out again and scare him away? How could I ever be capable of a normal relationship? I need to remind myself of this, again and again, because after an afternoon like the one I just had, it becomes easy to forget. "I'm glad we're having a girls' dinner tonight," Carl rallies to pull herself together. "I could use some girl time to figure this shit out. Before seeing Tuck later, I mean."

I feel my evening holed up with Sam slip through my fingers. Carl's eyes narrow suddenly. "Hey, what ever happened before? Did you ever find Cap? He wasn't taking Tuck or Dave's calls."

Heat creeps over my skin, and I worry my friend knows me well enough by now to notice. I reach into my bag and pull out Sam's phone in explanation. "He asked me to hold it for him earlier. So I guess you had it."

Carl's glare doesn't waver. "You didn't answer my question. Did you find him? What have you been doing all this time? Just sleeping?" Her questions come out as an accusation and I'm quite sure they were meant to. Her eyes skate down my body. "Rory... is that Cap's shirt?"

Oh, shit.

My blush returns with a vengeance and I chew on my bottom lip, thinking of what to tell her. I do want to talk to her. And I do trust her. I know she won't repeat anything I confide, not even to Tina. She's proven that time and time again.

"I found him. You were right, he was fine, just needed a little time," I murmur.

"And...?"

"And what?" I play dumb.

"Did something finally happen with you two last night? Dave said you left the bar with him, but I didn't think anything of it since you're always with him, but you're being all blushy now so...?"

"I kissed him," I confess.

Carl's eyes go saucer-round and her eyebrows shoot into her hairline. "You what? Holy shit, Rory! I would've bet my life he'd be the one to make the first move! Tell me everything that happened last night!"

I take a deep breath. "Well actually he stopped it," I admit. "I mean, he kissed me back at first, but then he stopped it. Oh God, and then I got sick! I threw up all over his bathroom!"

"No!"

"Yes!" I cover my face with my palms and flood with shame at the memory. "Oh my God, I can't believe he stopped it! That makes no sense. I was sure he was totally into you. I mean I know he doesn't really do the girlfriend thing - his rule and all - but honestly, I thought it'd be different with you." Carl openly ponders my very personal life. "At the very least I was sure he'd jump at the chance to get you into bed!" We both giggle. "What'd he do when you threw up?"

I smile faintly. "He held my hair and helped me clean up. And then slept on the couch in his suite so he could 'keep an eye' on me."

"Aww, that's so sweet," Carl gushes.

"Yeah," I grumble. "But that wasn't the only part of him I wanted on me."

Carl cracks up, and I follow her, our hysterical girlish laughter echoing around the luxurious hotel room.

"Well at least you finally admit it! But I still can't believe he turned you down. It doesn't make any sense."

"This morning he said it was because I was drunk. He said he was worried I'd regret it."
Carl nods, as if it explains everything. "And...?" she prompts.
I sigh. "We kissed."
Carl shrieks. "I fucking knew it! And...?!
"And it was unbelievable. But then we got interrupted and went down to the pool to join you guys."
"Right, where Cap nearly killed Dave basically for being Dave, yeah, I was there. And then you chased after him, and then...?" she urges me to continue. She knows there's more. She knows me well.
"I found him in his room. We talked. And...?" I sigh again, resting my head on my bent knee.
"God, Carl, we hooked up. It was amazing," I practically swoon again at the thought of him.
Carl grins. "We're talking sex, just to be clear, right?"
I nod my confirmation.
"Oh my God, Rory! He's so fucking hot! I bet he was incredible, was he incredible?" she gushes.
"Honestly, I don't really have much to compare to, but... yeah, he's a god," I admit.
"Holy fucking shit. If Tucker only knew what I was picturing right now..."
"Hey!"
"Sorry," she murmurs sheepishly, "but can you blame me?"
"Yes!"
"Fine, whatever. Hey, it wasn't your first time, was it?"
"Not exactly," I reply, my voice barely more than a whisper. Carl has seen my overreactions to accidental touches, she's seen me nearly panic on occasion, but she doesn't know details.
"How do you mean? You can't be half a virgin," she says gently.
I shake my head. "No, I wasn't a virgin. But... my ex, it was different than it was with Sam, that's all." I chicken out. Part of me wants to tell her about Robin, but most of me just wants to forget.
Carl considers me. I'm not sure if she's buying my explanation. "Do you think you and Cap will, like, be together now? Did you talk about it?" she asks instead.
I shake my head. "No, I don't know what he wants, but like you said, he doesn't do the girlfriend thing. And I'm not girlfriend material anyway," I mutter defeatedly.
Carl nods. "I get what you're saying, Rory, and if you don't want to talk about it, then we won't. But for the record, I think you're wrong."
I don't respond. What would be the point? She doesn't know how screwed up I really am, so she can't understand why Sam and I could never happen, not for real, and just debating it is making my heart ache in the worst way. After such a wonderful afternoon, I was in such good spirits, and I don't want to be brought down.
"Alright, you need to shower and get ready if we're going out," I say, shaking off the melancholy that threatens to overtake my mood. Carl glances at her watch and jumps up.
"Damn, we're meeting in the lobby in an hour and I haven't started my makeup!" she yelps.
I laugh. I have to shower, dry my hair, and get dressed in the same hour she's concerned about completing her makeup. The truth is I could be ready in twenty minutes.
I see her out and walk back to Sam's suite to give him the bad news about tonight, but the way he's standing there staring at me makes me think he might already know.
"No room service?" he says with a disappointed pout.
I shake my head in confirmation. "Carl needs girl time and I owe her, she's always there for me."
Sam closes the distance between us and slides an arm around my waist. "Yeah I know." He leans down to kiss my hair. "But I don't have to be happy about it."
I laugh. "We're all meeting up after dinner anyway," I offer in consolation, to him or myself I'm not sure.
"Wait, how did you know our night in was canceled?" I narrow my eyes at him. "Eavesdropper!"
A chuckle bursts free from his chest. "Hey! At least I admit it! And at least I stopped listening when you started talking about me," he adds with a wry smile.
"I have no idea what you're talkin' about," I tease, biting my lip to suppress my telltale smile.
"Is that so, baby girl?" he says softly, bending at the knees so we're eye to eye. My breath catches in my throat. He really is stunning. "So you telling Carl that you bet Tuck misses her right now, that was just a coincidence?" he asks, his eyes alight with humor.

I try to come up with some witty response, but with Sam's face so close to mine, all I can focus on are his full, pink lips, slightly swollen from a day's worth of kisses. "I... may have inadvertently overheard a small part of your conversation," I whisper.

Sam grins triumphantly. "That's what I thought," he breathes, and leans down for a kiss, but I pull away at the last second as retribution for forcing my confession.

"Hmm, well I guess I need to go shower and get ready for my girls' night," I tease, and turn to walk back to my room, intentionally giving him time to stop me, which he does by grabbing my hand and yanking me back to him. I laugh.

"Girls' dinner," he corrects, and then kisses me in earnest, liquefying my knees and making me reconsider prioritizing my friendship with Carl over a night in with him.

He pulls away with a satisfied smirk, clearly pleased with my punch-drunk reaction. "Hurry up, beautiful girl, I've got to be down there in less than an hour and I need to kiss you some more before dinner to hold me over."

I nod and wordlessly head back to my room to take my shower.

I want to hurry, as he instructed, but if I plan to be intimate with him again tonight, I have to make this a utility shower. My bikini line is waxed, but I take the time to go over my legs with my razor carefully, knowing that if the evening goes the way I hope, his hands will be all over them in just a few long hours.

I don't bother drying my hair, instead I sit out on the balcony, allowing the wind to dry it into beachy waves, and light the cigarette I bummed from Dave last night, but never got around to smoking. Fortunately it was still in my bag, unbroken.

I try not to think too much about this thing with Sam and me. I know if I analyze it any more, I will just come to the same conclusion I've already come to over and over again. That it is temporary and I will end up being hurt. But right now, on spring break, I intend to enjoy every minute of it I can - this small taste of a normal, happy, future that simply isn't in the cards for me, thanks to Robin Forbes.

I slip on a white sun dress and dress it up with a thin black belt around my waist. I pair it, as usual, with my black motorcycle boots. It's a little short for me, but it comes to mid-thigh, and I know it will be longer than anything the other girls have on tonight.

I know I won't look nearly as dolled up as I did last night without Carl's cosmetic expertise, but it doesn't really matter. I feel more comfortable in just a little mascara and lip gloss anyway, and it isn't as if Sam didn't already know what was under all that powder and shine.

When I'm satisfied that I'm presentable enough, I knock timidly on the adjoining door to Sam's suite, not wanting to catch him getting dressed. Well, maybe that's not true, but knowing it would be impolite to just barge in as if I had some inherent right to be there.

Sam opens the door with an inquisitive look, as if he disagrees that I should have hesitated to just walk in, but his expression changes immediately as he looks me over. He's in jeans, the waistband of his boxer briefs peeking out from the top, and nothing else, making it impossible to look away from the taut muscles of his perfect pecs and six pack.

"You're so fucking beautiful," he murmurs, wrapping his arms around me. I sigh, breathing in the clean scent of a freshly showered Sam. He's freaking delicious. "Let me just grab my shirt." He releases me and heads back into the bedroom. I see his tablet sitting on the coffee table and remember I need to email my mom to check in since my forgotten phone died in my beach bag hours earlier.

"Can I use your iPad to email my mom?" I sit on the sofa and pick it up.

"Sure," he calls from the bedroom, "just, uh, wait a minute."

Sam rushes out to me, but it's too late, I'm already powering it on, and my heart stops the instant the screen lights up.

"Ror."

"What the fuck?" I breathe.

I jump up from my seat and stare with wide, horror-filled eyes, as Robin's deceptively boyishly-handsome face smiles at me from his Facebook page. Shock flies from my throat in a gasp as the tablet tumbles from my trembling hands, and I close my eyes and start counting backwards in an attempt to control my racing pulse.

It all comes crashing back - the terror and the hopelessness - and I flinch away from the hand on my shoulder. My eyes spring open, and I stumble and nearly fall to the ground before catching myself on the arm of the sofa. Sam is beside himself, his face drenched with worry, at a loss for what to do with me. He reaches out to touch me again,
and I take a cautious step back. I don't know why. I know he won't hurt me, but I can't think straight right now, and
my instinct is to protect myself.

Sam backs up a few small steps, his hands held up in surrender. I close my eyes again and shake my head,
trying to pull myself together.

Nothing's changed, I remind myself. I'm in Sam's room. Sam, my friend. My something more. He wouldn't hurt
me. Robin isn't here. It's only his picture. He can't hurt me now.

But why the fuck is Sam's Facebook account open to Robin's page?

I take a deep breath and lean on the arm of the sofa. I should sit. I should calm down. But I can't. I need to stay
on my feet. I'm jumping out of my own skin, and I can't escape the feeling that I need to be ready to run.

"Rory, it's okay," Sam says carefully. "I'm sorry-"

"Why?!? I demand, desperate to know why I've just been made to look into the hazel eyes that not only haunt
my nightmares, but my every goddamn waking moment.

"I didn't mean for you-"

"Why?!"

"Fuck, Rory, I'm sorry! I didn't mean for you to see that. I was just... curious. I knew his first name and the
town you're from. After everything you told me this morning... I just- wanted to look him up, that's all," he shrugs.

"That's all? Is he serious?! "I don't want him to be a part of this," I mutter in frustration.

Sam's brow furrows. "A part of what?"

"Us!" I shout. Oh, shit, I didn't mean to say that. There is no us, not really. I rake my fingers through my hair.

"I mean... us - our friends, and my life now. Just all of it. I'm trying to move on," I backtrack.

Sam takes a cautious step toward me and when I don't retreat, he takes another. "He's not, Ror," he whispers.

"I'm sorry. Please don't let this upset you. I just wanted to know what he looked like; I never meant for you to have
to see his photo," he assures me. His fingers tentatively trace my cheek, and I turn into his touch automatically.

"That part of my life is over, Sam. He's nothing, he doesn't matter," I murmur, trying to convince myself as
much as him.

Midnight blue flashes with resentment. "How can you say that? Look what he's done to you, Rory! You can't
even see his photo without nearly panicking!"

I narrow my eyes at him. "I thought you said you were just curious?" I accuse. "But now it sounds like more
than that, Sam, so I'll ask you again. Why were you lookin' him up? What are you plannin'?"I try to sound calm, but
my heart thumps in my chest like a snare drum. I know this man, and I know this isn't just casual curiosity. His face
is hard, impassive. After all the details I admitted this morning about all the things Robin did to me, Sam is not
simply curious. I recognize the same thing I saw in Cam's eyes the night I told him the same thing. Wrath.

This is why I didn't want to tell him in the first place.

"I'm not planning anything, Rory," he says carefully, and though my gut tells me he isn't lying, he isn't telling
me everything either.

But it's not his job to protect me and it certainly isn't his job to avenge me. Nothing good can come of this, only
pain and loss - two things I can bear no more of.

"You'll swear to me you ain't goin' after him?" I mean to come across as foreboding, but instead I sound
desperate and childish. I may as well ask him to pinky swear.

Sam doesn't respond at first, he just glares at me. "I told you I'm not planning anything," he repeats.

"That ain't what I asked!" I shout.

His fingers shove roughly through his hair. "I don't know what you want to hear, Rory! I fucking hate him! I
hate what he did to you, and I hate that he just got away with it!"

"He didn't."

"Don't you tell me again about his stupid fucking scholarship! He deserves to be in jail! He deserves to be
fucking dead!" Sam's eyes flame with contempt, his muscles tense with hatred.

"It ain't your job to mete out punishment, Sam! I don't want you to!"

I can't let him put himself at risk. Doesn't he understand that he's the one who could end up hurt or in jail if he
went after Robin? Or worse? I couldn't handle losing him! Doesn't he get that?!

We glare at each other for several moments until my eyes glisten with tears. He's grappling internally, it's
palpable, but I don't care. This isn't his fight.

Finally he sighs, exhaling his defeat. "I wasn't planning anything, Rory. I wasn't going after him, but that
doesn't mean I don't want to," he says slowly.

"I don't want you diggin' into my past. It's got nothin' to do with you," I say equally carefully.

Sam winces, like I've offended him. He watches me for a few moments, and I can see the cogs turning in his
mind as he considers me. I've never wished I could read someone's thoughts as much as I do right now.
He chews the inside of his cheek and swallows, immediately putting me on edge. "Tell me something. Why is it I couldn't find this best friend of yours on any social media sites? This Cam?"

Pressure seizes my chest. Why the hell was he looking up Cam?

"What?" It comes out as a gasp, and this makes Sam suspicious. But I can't talk about Cam - not with him - not with anyone. I don't even talk about him with Dr. Schall.

Sam shrugs, but his expression is anything but casual. "Like I said, I was curious. And I couldn't find anyone anywhere close to our year that could go by that name."

My voice lodges in my throat, and I just blink at him, half in shock.

"What am I missing, Rory? How does someone go from your best friend who photographs your injuries for the police, to just abandoning you? It doesn't make sense," he accuses. What he's accusing me of, though, I've no idea, but I still can't form words. The mention of Cam has my pulse flying somewhere in outer space, and my heart in ruins.

My fingers gingerly feel the purse strap on my shoulder, because it contains my pills, and I just need the reminder that they are there.

"Are you and this Cam more than just best friends, Rory?" Sam asks, his voice deceptively softer.

"I... We..." I stammer like an idiot, trying to figure out how to explain what I don't even know myself.

Sam chews on his bottom lip and nods as if I just made some kind of confession. I can guess what he's thinking, but I can neither confirm nor deny anything. I can do nothing more than stand here like a pathetic fool.

"And what would he say if he knew what you and I were up to all afternoon?" Sam asks, devoid of any discernible emotion.

I narrow my eyes, scowling in what is obviously a defensive maneuver, but it's all I can do. I take a deep breath. "He wouldn't be pleased," I snap. No, as it turned out, I know now that Cam wanted me for himself.

Sam's eyes narrow even further. We seem to be at a standstill, and I don't know what to do. I don't want to fight with him, but I don't know how to fix it. This is none of his business, damn it! This is no one's business!

"I see," Sam mutters quietly.

"No, you don't!"

"Then make me, Rory! Make me understand!"


Sam's mouth drops open, his eyebrows raise in astonishment. "Seriously?"

I say nothing. My fingers drift to my purse, making out the shape of my pill bottle and grabbing it through the thin fabric, just feeling the shape of it, reminding myself again that I have them.

Sam's gaze follows my hand and he winces. He shoves both hands through his hair, one after the other before closing his eyes and shaking his head once. "Whatever, Rory, forget it," he mumbles defeatedly.

I open my mouth to speak, but words evade me and we just stare at each other.

And this, I remind myself, is why we can never have anything real. I knew, at some point, I would fuck it up. My scars run too deep. Like Sam said, I can't even look at a photo of Robin without panicking, and how is that normal? And even that - it's just a symptom of greater damage. Because Sam has a right to ask questions, if we were going to be something more, but I can't give him answers. Not all the answers he wants.

And I can't even handle the inquisition without relying on medication, and how is that fair? How is it fair that Sam must concede because I cry mercy with a safe word or by feeling for a pill bottle? How could he not resent that? Even I resent it.

This was always going to be temporary. I've known it all along. Sure, I hoped it would have lasted for more than twelve freaking hours - at least for spring break - but better to let go now. If I'm this attached already, imagine how far I'd be in three more days? I try to convince myself of this again and again, though in my heart I already know I'm as in love with him as I could ever be. That there's no coming back now. The thought hurts, but what difference does it make?

He could never have returned my feelings anyway. I know the pain is coming, but I don't cry. Not in front of him. Right now, I force myself to feel numb, because I don't deserve any more of his sympathy.

My only hope now is that we can still stay friends. I told him he was my best friend, and it's true. I can't handle losing him. Not completely.

My phone buzzes and I hastily grab it from my bag, glad for the distraction, needing an excuse to break our mutually turbulent gaze. Because his eyes see everything - they have since the moment we met.

It's Carl. I'm late. Which mean Sam is, too.
"It's, uh, Carl," I say shakily. "I gotta go. I'm makin' us late." My voice is barely more than a whisper. I don't meet his gaze again. I can't. I sniffle, trying to disguise it as a sneeze, and turn away before my tears become noticeable.

"Rory," Sam breathes.

I stop, but don't turn, waiting, giving him a chance to say whatever it was he wanted to say.

But he doesn't. And after a couple moments, I just continue back to my own room and close the door behind me.

I lock it.
I don't go straight downstairs. I go to the bathroom and splash some cool water on my face, fix my makeup, and try to calm myself down. I think pretty soon I'll be able to compose myself, come across as okay - an act I've learned well - but I need more time and everyone is waiting on me.

So I take a pill.

I guess I won't be drinking tonight. Not that I really wanted to after last night.

When I finally actually feel the numbness I forced myself to feign in front of Sam, I head down to the lobby and meet up with the girls.

I don't want to do this right now. To go out to a fancy restaurant for dinner with a gaggle of girls. But I am glad to be with Carl. Hopefully I can help her resolve her Tuck issues and at least one of us can be happy. And Tina too. I hope she appreciates what she has with Andrew. They really do make a great couple.

We squeeze into two cabs and get to our restaurant twenty minutes late for our reservation. The boys are eating at a steakhouse a few miles away and we're supposed to meet in a couple of hours at a bar less than half a block and across the street from our hotel.

I'm quiet over dinner as Carl talks about Tuck, and Tina and Lily give her the same advice I've been giving her, and like earlier in my room Carl seems more receptive tonight. I start to think she might actually consider having an honest conversation with Tucker about their relationship.

Guilt over Sam surges and quells throughout the night. It's an impossible situation and I've no one to blame but myself. It was my fault for falling in love with him. My feelings are my problem, I've known that, and now he's probably blaming himself for causing me to nearly panic. God, if he knew I took a pill he'd be so disappointed in me, and he'd probably blame himself for that, too.

And what did he do that was so wrong? Ask about Cam? His big crime was simply asking about someone I've mentioned to him several times now. Because I talk to him. Like he said, I tell him things I don't tell anyone else. And he said he loved that. I groan inwardly. I loved hearing him say that.

But why can't I talk to him about Cam? I was so shocked by Sam bringing him up, and so soon after being confronted with the visual of Robin's photo, that I didn't even think about why I couldn't just tell him the truth. I couldn't talk to my mom about him, I couldn't talk to Dr. Schall about him... I guess I'm just so used to not being able to talk about him that I didn't even consider that maybe I could to Sam. I've talked to Sam about plenty I haven't told anyone else.

And he's done nothing but comfort and support me. He's never pitied or judged me. He's even helped me beat triggers. He's always there for me. He's been there for me since the day he found me freaking out outside of calculus. When I was nothing more than a stranger. And what do I do? Throw it back in his face when he asks one reasonable question.

No, Sam has been nothing but wonderful to me. Of course, that's why I fell in love with him in the first place. Even if he doesn't know it, even if he'll never know it.

I give myself a small, secret smile.

In another hour I'll be at the bar and I can apologize to Sam, and if he'll listen to me, and he still wants to know about Cam, I think I can tell him.

Maybe I don't have to give up the something more just yet. Maybe I'll get to feel his arms around me again. Feel his lips caress mine, the weight of him above me. Warmth unfurls within me, and I bite my lip to keep my smile from growing.

But as we all climb back into cabs to head to the bar just over an hour later, my apprehension returns, trickling into the security of the confidence I found during dinner. I can't stop picturing Sam's face when I used our safe word. I can't stop thinking about his reaction.

Seriously?

And I don't blame him. He's one hundred percent in the right. There's something wrong with me. Of course, we both already knew that. But despite how well he's gotten to know me, he could never really understand. How could anyone understand that after everything I've already confided to him, after all the time we've spent together, after being vulnerable and intimate with him, after sleeping in his freaking arms, I couldn't just answer a simple question.
Because it isn't a simple question, not really. Of course, the answer as to where Cam is isn't especially complicated, but it certainly feels complicated.

The bar is buzzing tonight, full of spring breakers, and an overflow of people spills out onto the sidewalk, smoking cigarettes and chatting drunkenly. We head inside. Most of the girls go straight to order drinks. Carl and Tina go to the bathroom, and I hang back, trying to spot Sam - hoping to have the opportunity to apologize outside of the group setting. I stand just inside the door, scanning the crowd.

Some guy bumps into me and I recoil from the stranger's accidental touch, taking two steps back. He begins to apologize, before conspicuously checking me out. I hold my breath. I know that look - he's about to make some suggestive comment, or hit on me in some juvenile way - so I turn away from him, my body language unmistakable. Back. Off.

Fortunately, he does, muttering something under his breath I can't quite make out, but I don't care.

Just then, my eyes latch onto Sam. It's just the back of his head I can see over the top of the crowd - thanks to his six plus feet of stature - but I know it's him. I'd know those messy locks anywhere.

I prepare to brave my way through the crowd, a significant endeavor for me - one full of strangers and more potential accidental touches - and in this moment I'm grateful I took a pill earlier. But after just two steps, Sam turns, barely sideways, so I can just make out his profile, but I can see his dimple with utter clarity, indicating his gorgeous smile. I guess he isn't too upset about our earlier row after all. The realization hurts. It's not as if I expected him to be drowning in sorrow, but seeing his wide smile only reminds me that I'm the one with the oversized feelings, not him.

This isn't news, I remind myself.

But then there's a small break in the crowd, and I see where his smile is directed. I'm assaulted with the image of the pretty redhead he has his arm around. I watch as they exchange words, and her resulting smile.

My insides twist, sickness rolling through my gut.

God, I'm pathetic. Here I am, over analyzing every part of our argument, and Sam has already forgotten it ever even occurred. In fact, it would appear he's already seeking out alternative company for tonight. The knowledge hits me like a brutal punch to the stomach, my heart fracturing viciously.

I turn around and push through the faceless bodies, back through the exit as tears prick my eyes.

Was this afternoon always supposed to be a one-time thing? Or is he just moving on because of our argument about Cam?

Maybe that's how this whole thing is supposed to work - that we hook up with each other, but we can also hook up with whoever else we want.

Of course he's allowed to hook up with whoever he wants, why wouldn't he be? I have no claim on Sam, no matter how fiercely my heart wishes otherwise. If only the stupid organ could be as practical as my brain, but it seems that my heart and mind have a severely defective connection - faulty wiring - and they just can't seem to get on the same page.

The torrential ache in my chest just grows more and more potent with every step I take away from Sam and his pretty new companion. I cross the street to get away from the drunken partiers lingering outside of the bar, grateful that the other side of the street is more quiet. I swipe at my cheeks angrily, furious at myself for being unable to stifle my pathetic tears. I just want to order ice cream from room service and cry in private.

I reach the quiet side of the street and start in the direction of our hotel.

"Well hi there, Sleepin' Beauty."

My breath catches in my throat and my heart stops beating. I freeze.

That voice. Those words.

It can't be.

I close my eyes and take a wheezing breath, wondering if it's finally happened - if I've completely lost my mind - because truthfully, that would be preferable to the alternative. But when my eyes open again, he steps out of the shadows.

Robin.

My brain tells my legs to run, tells my vocal chords to scream, but I can't. I can do nothing but stand here and stare in frozen dread.

"I missed you real bad, sweetheart," Robin drawls, taking the few steps that separate us.

I open my mouth and choke in air. But it doesn't fill my lungs. My heart races instead of my legs.

Robin takes two more steps toward me and I retreat until my back hits the brick facade of a closed storefront. I want to scream. I want to run. At the very least, I want to fucking form words! To ask him how the hell he knew I
was in Miami, to ask him what he's going to do to me, to beg him to leave me alone. He's violating his restraining order! Doesn't he know that? He could be arrested! He should be arrested!

But I say none of those things, I simply stare at him in terror, my eyes clouded with tears, unblinking and mouth agape. My lungs burn with the need to take a deep breath, but I can't inhale past the dread lodged in my throat. Robin dips his head and I turn my face away and clench my eyes shut.

"I said I missed you real bad, sweetheart," he repeats, his voice oozing with disapproval at my reaction to his presence.

*What the hell was he expecting? For me to jump willingly into his arms?*

His lips make contact with my cheek, and I cringe, but he just steps forward again until he's right up against me.

*I need to get out of here!*

I twist away in revulsion, trying and get him to back away, and he lifts his mouth from my face, but doesn't release me.

"I think we've had enough time apart, darlin'. I forgive you for what you did - all those lies you spread about me. I still love you. No matter what. I'll never let you go sweetheart, and I miss you so damn much it's makin' me crazy," he says softly, but his hands grip my upper arms savagely, his fingers digging painfully into my skin.

I inhale a desperate gasping breath and whimper. I close my eyes and count backwards from ten, but Robin crashes his mouth into mine, kissing me brutally. I don't kiss him back, I just close my eyes, boneless, completely and utterly terror stricken.

Ten, nine, eight...

His lips drag down my neck, sucking and biting hard enough to leave marks. And that's what he wants, of course - to mark me. To remind me that no matter what I do, no matter how far away I get, and no matter how much time passes, I will always belong to him in this terrible way. Because even the marks that have healed - they've emotionally scarred me deeper than any physical mark ever could, just as surely as these will tonight.

*Please! Please leave me alone! Please don't touch me! Please let me go!*

I beg and plead, but the words remain trapped inside me. I still can't vocalize a single thing.

And then it happens. My mind drifts, just like I programmed it to do. My eyes open, but they don't see. I am elsewhere. I'm not with Cam though. No, right now, my mind has rewound the day. I am not on the quiet side of an otherwise busy street, less than half a block from my hotel as my worst nightmare runs rough hands all over my body and works his vicious mouth down my neck. Instead, I am in Sam's hotel room, smiling and laughing as he touches me, kisses me, and tells me that I make him feel like the god I know him to be.

And then he's there. Not just in my mind, but in my reality. Sam has exited the bar across the street and looks around, seemingly searching for something, or someone.

"I missed you so fuckin' much, sweetheart," Robin growls, but I barely even hear him.

Sam finds me, and our eyes lock.

Thank you, God.

I can't move, I can't scream, I can't do anything at all, but stare at Sam's horrified expression and wait for him to help me. I'm past my desperation to keep Sam out of my troubles for his own protection. I've gone into survival mode, and I need Sam to save me from my monster. To be my hero - my knight in shining armor - and drag me out of this hell.

But he doesn't run over. Instead, his features screw up into a disgusted scowl and his head shakes once in disapproval before he turns and walks right back into the bar.

I gasp. He's not going to help me.

It finally registers that Sam didn't recognize Robin by the back of his freaking head. And why would he? He's seen his photo on Facebook once. From the look on his face, one thing is clear - Sam is disgusted with me. He thinks I am here - in this monster's arms - by choice.

It snaps me back to reality.

"Please stop," I croak.

Robin startles, his face lifting in consternation as he meets my eyes. "You think you have the right to tell me to stop? After everything you put me through?! When will you get it through your pretty fuckin' head? You're mine!" he hisses through clenched teeth, shoving me back into the wall, and smashes his lips against mine.

No!

I push at his chest with all of my strength. He's too big and strong for me to get free, but his mouth releases mine. I take the opportunity to take a deep, somewhat steadying breath.

*Please leave me alone, Robin! You're not allowed to be within-*
"Don't you quote that fuckin' restrainin' order at me! That thing is your fuckin' fault!" he snarls. His enormous hand covers my mouth and then I'm being grabbed and shoved, and before I can even register what's happening, I'm practically thrown into an empty alley - presumably where he'd been hiding in the first place. My bag is lost somewhere in the struggle, and I worry I'll need my pills, but my worry is cut short, I have bigger things to deal with right now, literally.

Robin is on me instantly. Fight sparks in my chest and pumps throughout my limbs. I shove and twist in my struggle for freedom, but he's as immovable as ever. Excitement flashes in his eyes and I remember - he likes the fighting. I start sobbing defeatedly.

How is this happening right now? How are we here?

"Why do you always have to make everything so damn hard?! Don't you know how much I fuckin' love you?! Damn it!" he barks. His eyes fall closed and he takes a few deep breaths to calm himself.

I blink at him through my tears, stunned with fear, helpless and waiting.

Robin's eyes open, intently serious. "When your daddy told me you were comin' down here, I figured it was time to stop this bullshit. I mean, you came to Florida, sweetheart, haven't you been missin' me?" he asks carefully.

And I know what he wants to hear. I know the right answer. But I can't give it to him. I can't give him even the smallest thread to start pulling, the ammo to say that I asked for it, that I wanted him.

"No."

I watch the outrage draw over his face.

"No. Rob, we broke up. I ain't yours. You hurt me! You raped me!" I say the words I was never before able to say, never directly to his face. "Please let me go. Please! If you ever loved me at all, just let me go. I won't even tell anyone you were here. I won't get you in trouble. Just please don't hurt me!" I beg him. I plead with my words and with my eyes, and for a moment, I can't be sure if I'm reaching him or not.

But then his eyes narrow, and the Robin I know is clear and present.

"You ain't mine?! You crazy bitch! I hurt you?! How fuckin' dare you! Everything I ever did was because you wanted me to!"

"No!" I cry, but his hands are everywhere. He forces his forearm over my mouth so I can't cry out again, his free hand pawing under my skirt.

"No. No fucking way!" I snap back into action.

I bring my knee up to his groin, but Robin twists, and the contact is mitigated. Still, he grunts in pain, and I seize the opportunity. I wrench from his grip and spin away from the wall, but Robin has a hold of my wrist and he tugs hard, slamming me back into the bricks. I cry out in pain as the side of my face meets the rough, hard surface. My vision blurs, but only for a moment, and I don't have time to recover. I try to twist away again, but my wrist is still caught in the vise of Robin's grip.

Forty feet away I catch Sam rushing past the alley. I know it's him, I'd know that hurried gait anywhere.

I scream. "Sa-!"

But Robin's hand shoots over my mouth and the other yanks my hair, stinging my scalp with searing pain. He forces my head back until I'm staring up into hazel eyes burning with contempt.

"Sam?" he spits.

My eyes flash with panic that he heard what I screamed, and I know Robin can see it.

"Is that the loser you've been followin' around like a stupid fuckin' puppy?" he snarls.

Holy shit, he's been following me! For how long? Days?

My pulse passes the speed limit as terror squeezes my chest. Robin removes his hand from my face, but the one in my hair only tightens as he begins what is surely meant to be a sensual caress under my skirt. I twist and squirm, but his six foot frame cages me in, and he bunches my skirt up around my waist.

I suck in gasping breaths, but they don't reach my lungs, and a cold sweat rushes my entire body. But I can't succumb to panic. Because that would leave me totally helpless.

What if I pass out? What will he do to me then?!

"P-please, Rob... I need... my... medi... cation," I choke out.

Robin scowls. "Right, your panic attack bullshit. Anything for a little attention, huh, Sleepin' Beauty? You'll be fine. You're with your man; I'll take care of you."

My eyes fall closed and tears stream down my face. I have no other choice. Every ounce of my energy is focused on trying to control my breathing. I cringe as Robin's calloused fingers find the scar he gave me barely a year ago, and my eyes fly open to find him smirking in satisfaction.

"It scared," he breathes in appreciation. "See, Rory? You'll always be mine. My mark is here to remind you in case you ever forget again." He follows the jagged line of scar tissue, dipping his fingers into my panties.

"P-please, don't," I beg once more.
"Tell me, sweetheart, has anyone else seen my mark? This Sam?" he asks, deceptively calm, but I know the threat is there. "Did you fuck him?" he asks. "Even though you belong to me?"

I know I should deny it, but I don't care. "Yes!" I scream defiantly. I know he'll probably kill me now - beat me to death or strangle me - but if I lied he would've just raped me anyway, and I'd rather be dead than have him inside my body even one. more. fucking. time.

"You fuckin' whore!" Robin thunders and he grabs me by my throat and slams me back into the wall, the unforgiving brick a fierce weapon. The force steals the air from my body and my head swims with fog as I stumble to find my footing.

But it doesn't matter, my feet leave the ground anyway as Robin's hand tightens around my neck, choking away any air I had left. My eyes spring open in renewed terror as I realize that, yes, he really is going to kill me, and as his free hand frantically rips at my panties, I realize he's going to rape me one last time as he does.

And then he's off of me. I'm released so suddenly that I can't catch my footing and I stagger to the floor. A whirlwind of commotion unleashes in front of me. Someone else is here. Grunts and muttered curses barrage the air, but it takes me a moment to understand that the second man is Sam, and that he and Robin are fighting.

"Tuck, over here!" Sam calls out behind him as he lands a solid punch to Robin's jaw. While he's off balance from the hit, Sam kicks out his leg and Robin falls to the ground.

Sam lunges on top of him, landing punch after brutal punch. I still can't move, I simply look on in horror, knowing I should stop Sam before he kills Robin, but unable to bring myself to help a man who I believe with all my heart was about to kill me, and who was certainly about to rape me.

Suddenly more people flock into the alley, but still I can't get up, I can't even move. I can just make out Tucker in front, holding back whoever is behind him.

Tuck barks some order about watching the girls before racing down the alley toward us. I don't meet his gaze. I'm too ashamed. And when Tuck approaches me, I whimper, irrationally cowering against the wall, hugging my knees to my chest. I don't raise my eyes above his waist, but I can sense his hesitation in his stance, at a loss for what to do with me. I can only imagine what he must think of me right now, and I see him change direction to where Sam hovers over a barely conscious Robin just five or so feet away.

"What the actual fuck?" Tucker demands.

"He attacked Rory," Sam says simply. "Keep him down. He doesn't get up," he orders, his voice tremulous and deathly serious, betraying his barely contained rage.

Sam approaches me cautiously, crouching down so that we're eye to eye. I meet his midnight blues and despite their devastation, I feel immediate relief.

I'm safe.

My arms fling around his neck as I fall onto my knees, launching myself into his arms. Sam catches me, squeezing tight. Safe.

"He found me," I sob over and over, unable to elaborate, drenching Sam in my tears. "I don't know how, but he found me, he found me..."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so fucking sorry," Sam repeats on loop. What he's sorry for, I can't imagine, but I can't break my rambling sobs to ask him. I just bury my face in his shirt and cry.

I draw strength from the innate security of Sam's embrace, and try to get ahold of myself. I lift my head to find him watching me cautiously. Robin lays on the ground, bloodied but awake, with Tucker's shoe pressed atop his neck in warning. No one else is in the alley, but I suspect the rest of our group is lingering just out of sight.

Sam looks me over, cupping my face and tracing his thumb over the place where my cheek hit brick. He winces with me when he touches what will surely be an ugly bruise.

"I'm sorry," he whispers again. He proceeds to lift each of my arms in turn to search for injuries, but I only have some scrapes and bruises. I've had far worse.

His gaze continues down, and he reaches for my skirt and pulls it over my thighs. I didn't even realize I was sitting here, completely indecent. Sam completes his inspection and his eyes return to mine. Guilt stains each of his features, as if he's the one who attacked me and not Robin. "Tell me you're okay," he pleads.

I nod. "I'm okay."

"I'm so sorry, Ror. I'm such a fucking idiot. I came outside to look for you and... I saw you with him, but I didn't realize- I just thought you were with some guy and I just..." He rakes his fingers through his hair in frustration. "I'm so fucking sorry."

I want to ask him why he's sorry, to absolve him of his unearned guilt, but I'm too shaken to form a comprehensive thought, let alone speak again. Before I can form a response, Sam slides his arm under my thighs and I'm scooped up from the ground.
"Some guy? I'm her fuckin' boyfriend!" Robin growls belligerently from the ground. "You're fuckin' mine, Rory! You hear me, you!"

Tuck digs his shoe into Robin's throat, turning his rant into nothing but a strangled choking sound. Sam stiffens and I tighten my hold on him. I feel in each of his tensed muscles that he wants nothing more than to punish Robin for his claim - to resume his brutal beating. But he manages to compose himself.

"I'll be right back," he tells Tuck. "Keep him down."

Tuck nods once before his eyes meet mine, his brow furrowing in concern. I avert my gaze in shame. I hate the way my old and new lives have collided tonight. Sam is one thing. I wanted him to know, to confide in him. It was my choice. But now Tuck heard Robin say he was my boyfriend. Oh God, and my pitiful rambling! It doesn't take a genius to figure out what just went down in this God forsaken alley, and Tucker's no idiot.

I cringe when I picture myself cowering against the wall with my skirt around my hips and a nasty, tell-tale bruise right on my cheek. No wonder Tuck is looking at me with such pity. I am pitiful. I'm vaguely thankful he had the foresight to ensure the rest of the group stayed back from the alley, but I know it won't stop the story from spreading for long.

"I can- uh, walk," I murmur to Sam. I can tell he disapproves, and the truth is I don't want to be anywhere but his arms, but he places me gently on my feet anyway.

Sam wordlessly firms his palm on the small of my back for support, and I'm grateful for the contact. When we reach the entrance to the alley, I'm relieved to see that only Carl, Dave, Tina, and Andrew remain. I look only at Carl, too mortified to see the others' faces right now. She is stricken with worry. She immediately grabs me and hugs me fiercely.

"My God, Rory! What happened? Where did you go? What' going on? Where's Tuck?! No one will tell me anything!" she rants. I say nothing, do nothing, but hug her back.

"Call the cops. Tell them you need to report an assault. Then stay here with the girls, and make sure one of you lets me know as soon as you hear a siren, okay?" Sam instructs Andrew and Dave before he looks to Carl. "You got her?" he asks carefully. I feel her nod against my shoulder.

He starts to leave, to go back to the alley, and I pull out of Carl's embrace.

"Wait! Where are you goin'?" I ask desperately.

Sam looks as if he's the one in pain when he meets my eyes. "Please just stay here with Carl. Okay, baby? Please."

I nod, and Sam stalks purposefully back into the alley. I know Carl wants to ask more questions, but she won't in front of anyone else, so she just asks after Tuck again.

"I don't know!" I cry. "He came after me! And then Sam saved me, and then Tuck was there, and now they're all there, and I don't know what's happening!" My chest is tight with frustration, starving for some semblance of control, and all I really want is to be back in Sam's arms, to apologize for our earlier fight, to beg him to forgive me.

****

The sirens sound and the rest of the night is a blur of activity.

Robin is arrested in front of everyone, but because of the beating he took from Sam, and probably Tuck too, he's taken away in an ambulance instead of a police car.

I'm treated for my scrapes and scratches in the back of another ambulance while I relay the events of the evening to a female detective. Someone scrapes under my fingernails, takes photos, and asks me technical questions about the attack, and I'm glad no one I know is close enough to hear me. Andy took Tina back to the hotel at Sam's insistence, Tuck and Carl talk to a second detective, and although Sam stands with them, he doesn't take his eyes off of me.

I'm released from the ambulance with an appointment to go into the local precinct tomorrow afternoon, and the detective moves on to Sam, so I follow her, hanging back with Carl and Tuck who have finished making their statements.

I listen to Sam explain how when he saw my friends had entered the bar, he'd asked after me, but no one knew where I was - they thought I was right behind them. He went outside to look for me, but when he saw me in Robin's arms, he didn't recognize him, and he just thought I'd met a guy. He says he returned to the bar, but after a minute or so, he realized it didn't make sense - that something was wrong - so he gestured to Tucker to follow him outside, and started back to where he'd seen me and continued in the direction of the hotel.

"How did you realize something was wrong?" Detective Mora asks.

Sam chews the inside of his cheek and frowns. "Rory would never just go off with some random guy. I should've realized it right away, but I was just- distracted, I guess."

"Distracted by what?" Mora asks, and I can't help but recall the pretty redhead he had his arm around earlier.
Sam hesitates before answering. "Jealousy."

Detective Mora nods in understanding and I'm suddenly utterly riveted by Sam's account of what happened. I'm vaguely aware of Carl taking the direction of Sam's statement as her cue to lead Tuck a little further down the sidewalk, so they are no longer listening, but I don't move. I'm not even sure if Sam knows I'm there, hanging on his every word.

"I see. But how did you know Miss Pine didn't just decide to engage with a stranger? Plenty of young girls use spring break as an excuse to engage in activities that would otherwise be out of character for them."

Sam runs his teeth over his bottom lip, but his eye contact with the detective doesn't waver. "Not Rory," he says simply.

"How can you be certain?" Mora presses him.

"Because I know her. She has a history that... affected her... in certain ways. And one of those ways is that she doesn't like being touched, not even by her friends for the most part, and definitely not by strangers." Of course, Detective Mora already knows this from my own statement and the medical history I gave to the EMT. Sam closes his eyes for a moment and shakes his head. "But honestly, even if that wasn't the case, she still wouldn't do that, spring break or not," he adds definitively, and my heart twists in my chest at his faith in me.

"Okay, let's rewind a bit. When you exited the bar for the second time, what did you do?" Mora asks.

"Like I said, I looked for Rory where I'd last seen her, but she wasn't there. I just shouted at Tuck to find her and took off across the street in that direction and then started toward the hotel since it's just down there," he points in the direction of our hotel. "But I heard her scream and I... I panicked, I couldn't find her-

"You heard her scream? How did you know it was Miss Pine?" the detective cuts him off.

Sam's brow furrows, he rakes his fingers through his hair and his stress is palpable. "I... I don't know. I know her voice, I guess... and I already thought she was in trouble... and I was pretty sure she'd said 'Sam' -"

"Which would be you," she interrupts again.

Sam nods. "Yeah."

"So then what did you do?"

Sam takes a calming breath, it would seem he needs it. Then, he starts to explain how he thought my scream had come from behind him so he turned back in the direction he'd come from, but no one was there. Tuck had followed him out, and apparently the rest of our group realized something was up and had followed as well because Sam noticed them across the street, standing around outside the bar in consternation.

"What were your other friends doing at this time?" Mora asks.

Sam shrugs. "I don't know. I just barely noticed they'd come outside. I was busy," he says irritably.

"Busy looking for Miss Pine?"

Sam scowls in exasperation, clearly annoyed by the detective's thoroughness, at her stating the obvious. I can't say I blame him.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Caplan, but I need to ensure that I understand the details correctly. It's my job," she says apologetically.

Sam sighs in acceptance. "Yes, I was looking for Rory. I pointed down the street, in the opposite direction, for Tuck to run ahead of me, and I ran after him. But then I noticed the alley and I just... stopped. I heard them, and it was dark, but I could make out figures, and-

"You say you heard them?"

"I heard Rory shout 'yes'. She sounded, like, distressed, and then a man's voice said something and I ran to them -"

"Could you understand what the male voice said?" the detective interrupts again.

Sam's hesitation tells me he heard exactly what Robin's awful words were. Sam nods and the detective raises her eyebrows expectantly. "He called her a 'fucking whore!'," he says quietly. Detective Mora bristles in place in obvious discomfort at hearing Robin's vitriol, and I wonder what the hell she expected to hear when she came to investigate what she referred to as an "attempted sexual assault".

"What happened next?" she prompts.

"He had her up against the wall, holding her by her neck," Sam grits out. His fingers rake through his hair again and he bites his lip harshly before taking a deep breath. "He had her skirt hiked up, and he was... hurting her. As soon as I reached them I pulled him off her and he swung at me. We fought. Eventually I got him down, Tuck came over and kept an eye on him while I helped Rory and we called the police, and that was it," he says with a shrug.

"By 'Tuck', you mean Tucker Green, correct?"

Sam nods.
"Let's just back up a moment, Mr. Caplan. When you reached Mr. Forbes and Miss Pine, did you recognize him?"

"Yes. I'd seen his Facebook photo," Sam replies.
"You say he was hurting her. Can you elaborate?" the detective presses.

Sam swallows audibly. "Like I said," he says carefully, "he had her up against the wall by her throat. He was fucking strangling her... She looked so fucking scared," his voice breaks. His head drops, his eyes close and he rubs his face with his palm.

I just stand there, mesmerized by how affected Sam is by the night's events. The realization of what he went through tonight - from thinking I would hook up with some random guy, to searching for me frantically... to finding me in that fucking alley, being attacked, God, and fighting for me - it washes over me in a tidal wave of grief. I hate that he saw me like that - so helpless and frightened. I feel so pathetic.

This is what Robin does to me, how he makes me feel - that I have no control in my own fate. That I only matter, only exist, in reference to him. My father's words forge their way back through my mind unbidden, reminding me that I am nothing but a small-town girl, common and unimportant. Worthless.

But Sam, he has the opposite effect. He cares about me. To him, I matter. And with every selfless gesture of friendship, of affection, Sam has managed the impossible - to revive a sense of self-worth Robin - and my own father - spent so much time obliterating. The realization calms me, even as it overwhelms me with emotion.

I blink back tears as Sam continues his statement, "I knew what he was going to do."
"And what is that?"
Sam lifts his head and glares intently at the detective. "Rape her."
"And just to be completely clear, you knew this because he had her skirt hiked up?"

"He was trying to get her fucking underwear down and hold her legs apart. And he'd done it before. Several times. He's obsessed with her."
"Miss Pine told you this?"
"She told me about the- uh, assaults, and about their history. She didn't say he was obsessed with her. That's my own conclusion."

Sam finally notices me in his peripheral, staring at him in awe, and we lock eyes.
"So you pulled Mr. Forbes off of her," Detective Mora prompts, but Sam just continues to stare at me with profound emotion. I wrap my arms around myself protectively, still feeling so vulnerable, and I can't help but wish they were his arms instead of my own.
"Mr. Caplan?"
Sam blinks and returns his gaze to the detective.
"So you pulled him off of her," she repeats.

"Yeah. We fought until he was down, Tuck found us and held our friends back, told them to call the police, which they did."

Detective Mora glares at him for a few moments as if she's trying to decide whether or not she wants to say something. Finally her eyes narrow slightly. "So after you helped Miss Pine from the alley, did you return to Mr. Forbes?"

Sam nods. "Tuck and I made sure he didn't get up. I didn't want him to come after Rory again."
"That's all? You just held him down and waited for the authorities to arrive?"
Sam considers this a moment, and then nods.

I am literally shaking with anxiety. But not for myself - for Sam. I don't have to have seen what happened at that point in the alley to know that Sam and Tuck didn't simply wait for the police to arrive, I'd have known that even if he hadn't ensured they'd be warned as soon as anyone heard sirens. I saw the look on his face, and just like Cam, I know he couldn't just let the police handle Robin without at least getting in a few more good hits.

I'm just glad Sam didn't kill him. That he's not in jail right now. The last thing I'd ever want is for Sam to get in trouble because of me and my past. Sam looks over at me again, as if now that he's realized I'm here, he can't keep his eyes off of me for long. Part of him is probably irrationally worried that Robin will come out from nowhere again and attack me. Part of me certainly is.

Detective Mora, obviously annoyed at Sam's distraction, follows his gaze. "Miss Pine, I have a few more questions for Mr. Caplan, and you've had a long night. You can go back to your hotel now; get some rest."

Carl must overhear this because she's at my side almost immediately. She puts her arm around me and suggests I come back to the hotel with her, offering that Tuck stay with Sam. I'm too overwhelmed to think anymore, and even though every cell in my body wants to stay with Sam myself, I let her lead me back to the hotel. Sam doesn't say a word to me as I leave. In fact, I realize, he hasn't said a word to me since he begged me to stay with Carl outside the alley.
Carl walks me to my room without a word. She follows me inside and sits on the sofa while I change. I head into the bathroom to wash my face and brush my teeth, trying desperately to rid my mouth of Robin's rancid taste. It won't do; I'll need a shower. I'll need to rigorously scrub every part of my body Robin touched, but it will have to wait for now.

Finally, I join Carl on the sofa.

"Are you okay?" she asks softly.

I shrug. "Yes, no... I will be. I've been through worse." I explain to her a little about Robin, though I don't offer many details. I just say that he's my ex and that he used to hurt me, including forcing me into sex. Her eyes fall to my hip, and I know she's making the connection to my scar, but she doesn't press me to elaborate and I'm grateful. I give Carl the okay to tell Tuck the truth since he's probably figured some of it out already and, frankly, he deserves it after helping me. Carl swears that she and Tuck won't tell a soul, that they'll tell the rest of the group that some stranger attacked me, and that Robin and our sordid past doesn't have to follow me back to Port Woodmere. I want so desperately to believe her.

"Where did you go? I mean, you came into the bar with us. I saw you. But when I got back from the bathroom you weren't there. Cap asked where you were and no one had seen you since you walked in, and he kinda freaked. He yelled at me for leaving you alone and ran out the door. But then he came back in a couple minutes later and he seemed even more pissed off and before I know it, Tuck is following him back outside and we all kinda followed Tuck."

"I- well, I left." I take a deep, calming breath. "Sam and I had a fight earlier, right before we left for dinner. It was why I was late comin' down," I explain. "The whole thing was my fault. I was just bein' stupid. So when we got to the bar, I was lookin' for him to apologize. But then when I saw him he had his arm around some girl, and he was laughin' with her and smilin', and... I don't know, I just couldn't handle it. I know we're not, like, together and he doesn't owe me anything... But we'd just hooked up a few hours ago, you know?"

Carl furrows her brow. "He had his arm around a girl?" She's in disbelief.

"Yep," I confirm. "And she was pretty, too. A redhead."

Carl's eyebrows shoot up and her jaw drops, and I just stare at her blankly. "Shit, Rory! That was Thea, Cap's cousin."

Now I'm sure my stunned expression mirrors hers. I am so freaking stupid. I drop my face into my hands in embarrassment, and Carl's hand soothes up and down my arm in consolation.

"Well, obviously I didn't know it was Thea, and bein' the psycho jealous bitch that I apparently am, I left. I was gonna text you when I got to the hotel. I mean, it was right there. But Robin came out of nowhere and I just... froze." I don't give the details I had to give the detective. I just tell her how Robin pulled me into the alley and was all over me. That I tried to fight him off, but he was rough and pushed me around, and then Sam came and pulled him off of me.

When I finish speaking, Carl hugs me again for a long time. When she pulls away, honestly, I do feel a little better.

"Do you want a distraction?" she asks.

"Depends," I say warily.

"You'll like it," she assures me with a smirk, so I agree. "Tuck and I are officially together," she says, and I actually squeal with happiness for her.

"Really? That's amazing! You have no idea how happy I am for you, Carl! How did that happen?" I ramble, thrilled that after the awful night I've endured, at least one good thing has come of it.

"Well, you know, when Tuck and Cap were in that alley and I was with you, I was crazy worried about him. I thought I was going to lose my mind - I didn't know if he was hurt, or what. After the cops got there and he came out, I literally jumped on him and started crying. I have no idea what got into me, but I just hugged him so hard and it just came out. I told him how worried I'd been and that I love him and he said he loves me too! Can you believe it?"

"Uh, yeah," I say sarcastically. Of course I can believe it, I've been telling her this for months.

Carl rolls her eyes at me. "Well anyway, he kissed me and we talked, you know, while you guys were giving your statements and everything, and... you were right, he was just worried I'd freak out if I knew how he felt, and I admitted the same, and, well... we're together!" she says excitedly, and I grin widely. I'm truly ecstatic for her and I tell her so.

Carl offers to stay with me tonight, but I'd just keep her awake with my nightmares if I ever did manage to fall asleep, and anyway, I still want to apologize to Sam. And to thank him. And I know I'll feel unsettled and restless.
until I do. Carl is reluctant to leave me alone, but when she gets Tuck's text informing her that Sam is done with his statement and they're both heading back to the hotel, I insist that I'll be fine and that I still want to talk to Sam tonight anyway. Carl texts Tuck to meet her at my room and she stays with me and we talk until he knocks on my door.

I walk Carl to my door and hug her fiercely. She'll never know how much I appreciate her, how much I value the sincerity of our friendship.

When she steps outside, Tuck grabs her and kisses her hard on the mouth and I blush. Their PDA is usually more lustful than affectionate.

"I missed you," Carl whispers timidly, completely out of character, especially for how she usually interacts with Tuck.

Tuck smiles. "Me too, princess," he admits, and I can't help but smile at what a difference a day makes. Tuck turns to me. "You okay, Rory?" he asks.

I shrug, but nod. I don't know how to react to this serious version of Tuck.
"Cap's really beating himself up over what happened."
"But it's not his fault," I argue.

"Well Cap doesn't seem to agree." By Tuck's tone I would think he agrees that Sam is at least partially to blame for what Robin did, and I can't help but wonder why? "But just so you know, that guy would have to have a death wish to come near you again. Cap made it very clear what would happen if he did. I got a few in myself. We got your back, Pine. You know that, right?"

I blink at him for a moment, genuinely touched. It's not that I didn't consider Tuck a friend. I did. Of course I did. I just never really considered whether or not he'd be there for me if I needed him. I suppose I never considered a situation in which I would need him. But I guess I did, and I guess he was.

"Thanks, Tuck. I mean it. Really," I say hoarsely, and he smiles sympathetically. "Is Sam back in his room?"

Tucker shakes his head. "Nah, he went for a walk on the beach. Said he needed to clear his head."

"Oh." I try to keep the disappointment from my tone, but I fail, and they both look at me in pity. "Well, I guess I'll see you guys tomorrow," I murmur.

"Are you sure you don't want me to stay with you, Rory?" Carl offers one more time.

"Thanks, but I'll be okay," I insist, and hastily say goodnight and close the door.

I hurry into the shower, washing every inch of my body, including my hair, scrubbing furiously where I can still feel Robin's hands on me. I scrub my scar raw, unable to stop picturing his fingers proudly stroking his mark. I don't feel totally clean, but it's not nearly as bad as the last time. Because he didn't succeed - didn't get what he wanted - and the thought is gratifying.

I slip on a camisole and the boxers I stole from Sam last night, knowing they'll offer some comfort.

I know I'll need to tell my mother what happened. I know it won't be long before she hears it herself. Because I'm eighteen, the police didn't contact her themselves, but I've no doubt that come morning, Robin will have contacted Mayor Forbes to bail him out, and Mayor Forbes will call my father, who will call my mother, accusing me of God knows what. I wonder how they will try to make it my fault this time, but I've no doubt they will.

One thing keeps bugging me though. Robin said my father told him I'd be down here, but how did my father even know? I was under the impression he and my mother barely even spoke, so why would she tell him about my spring break plans?

I decide to call my mother in the morning and tell her what happened. I know she's going to freak out, and demand I come home, but I won't allow Robin Forbes to ruin my spring break. He's ruined enough of my adolescence. I hope my mom gets it, because I know she's going to be upset - understandably - but I'm not going home early. Tomorrow I have to go into the local precinct where they'll explain the logistics of the charges and how everything will work with the restraining order and the case.

But tonight, the only thing I want to deal with is Sam. I still owe him an apology for our fight about Cam, and I also owe him a serious thank you for saving me tonight. I wonder if he's still walking the beach "clearing his head". I hate that I've complicated his life. That he's spending even a moment of his own spring break upset because of me. I want to go down to the beach to find him, but I know there's no way I can handle walking around the resort alone right now. Not at night.

I decide to check if the adjoining door on Sam's side of the room is locked, and if not, to just wait for him there. I won't be able to sleep until we talk, though I expect he probably locked the door after our argument. I wouldn't blame him.

I'm astonished to find his door isn't even closed, let alone locked. I pad though the room, just in case he did come back and is asleep, not wanting to wake him. I notice the room has been cleaned since I was here before dinner. When I determine the main part of the suite is empty, I tiptoe into the bedroom and find the bed made up and
undisturbed. I'm almost disappointed the evidence of our intimate afternoon has been eradicated. Like it never even happened.

The whisper of an ocean breeze caresses my skin, raising goose bumps, and I look to my right, finding the sliding glass door that leads to the bedroom balcony open. I walk toward it, but slow my gait when I realize he's there, sitting on the chaise lounge, looking troubled. I pause when I get outside, waiting for him to look up, but he doesn't.

"Sam." My voice is a shaky whisper, betraying the stress of the night.

He startles and turns to me, making to stand, but I gesture for him not to. Sam blows out a deep exhale, raking his fingers through his disheveled hair, before settling his hand on the back of his neck. His eyes skate around the balcony, meeting every surface but my eyes.

"Can I, uh, sit?" I ask trepidatiously. So much has happened in the past twenty four hours, and my earlier confusion over where we stand has only compounded and multiplied.

Sam's brow furrows, and he nods. I can't help but think how beautiful he is, how especially stunning he looks with his bemused expression, and my fingers itch to trace the soft crease of his forehead, but I don't. I'm not sure he wants me to touch him right now, since we haven't resolved our argument from earlier, even though I realize it's been overshadowed by what happened with Robin.

I settle on the foot of the same chaise, and Sam scoots back, bending his knees to make room. We're so close, but not touching, and it's strange considering how accustomed I've become to his casual touches, even before we hooked up. His fingers shove through his hair and his tongue slips out to unconsciously lick his bottom lip before he leans forward and rests his elbows on his knees, radiating intensity and resignation.

"I'm so damn sorry, Rory. I fucking saw you. I know you, and I know you would never do that even if we-" He takes a deep breath and sighs. "I know you wouldn't just go hook up with some guy. You couldn't. But-"

"Sam-" I want to stop him. I don't need him to apologize for not having psychically known what was going on, and the last thing I want is for him to wallow in this self-recrimination when in fact he was the one who saved me, but he rejects my interruption with a shake of his head.

"Rory, I don't even fucking recognize myself anymore. I don't want to be this guy. I don't want to give ultimatums, and the last thing I want is to cause you any more stress, but I can't do this with you."

My heart stops. This is it. I'm too much trouble; he's ending it.

"I want to give you all the time you need. I know this isn't easy for you, and I know how hypocritical this is. Especially after everything you told me about him - how possessive he was..." Sam scoots a little closer and takes my hand, lacing his fingers through mine. "But you don't know what you're doing to me - how I felt when I thought you were just with some other guy. I felt sick, Ror."

"I can't do this half way - not with you. It's messing me up, you know? Everything I know about you tells me you would never do that, and yet when I came outside looking for you and saw you with him-" Sam practically growls the last bit before pausing to regain his composure. "I turned into an insecure, jealous little girl."

He looks down to gather his thoughts, and his gaze returns to mine uncharacteristically nervous, but also determined. But I still don't understand what he's trying to say - if he wants to give up on us because I come with too much baggage, or if he still wants me. One thing is clear though - I'm almost positive this is Sam's first experience with jealousy, and I feel guilty at how gratifying the thought is to me.

"I can't handle it, then just tell me. We'll go back to being friends - I understand, okay? But if you still want me, Ror, I need to know that it's just you and me. I'm sorry if that makes me possessive, but I can't help the way I feel. I want- no, I need, for you to be only mine, if we're going to do this, I mean."

*He wants me to be only his? I stare at him, stunned and completely overwhelmed. I open my mouth to speak, and then close it again. I take a deep, steady breath.*

"Do you know why I left the bar tonight in the first place?" I ask finally, aware that my voice betrays my emotionally drained state, but unable to do anything about it.

Sam furrows his brow. *Gorgeous.*

"When I got there, I was looking for you, and when I saw you, you had your arm around some pretty girl, and... I couldn't take it. I left," I confess.

Sam shakes his head. "Rory, I'm not interested in any other girls. The only girl I was even talking to was my cousin."

"Thea, yeah, I know that... now."

The corner of Sam's mouth twists up in the beginning of a faint smile, but it fades quickly. "That's my point, Ror. You left a bar *alone*, walked right into his trap, and I saw you! Believe me, I wanted to beat the living shit out
of him just for touching you, before I even realized who he was - what was happening. I should have known, I could have stopped it right away, but this jealousy... this not knowing whether..."

"I know."

Sam swallows anxiously and takes a deep breath. "So you don't want anyone else?" he asks cautiously, and I stare at him like he's crazy. Who would want anyone else when they could have Sam?

Who the hell could I want?

And then I remember our earlier fight, and I deflate. Of course. I look down. "You don't understand," I whisper. But he doesn't argue, not this time. He doesn't demand I make him understand, and for some reason, because he doesn't press me, I decide that I can, in fact, tell him. "I don't talk about him with anyone. Cam I mean. Not to Dr. Schall, not even my mom."

"You don't have to, Ror, I should never have pushed you. I feel like a huge dick for it; I'm sorry."

"No, Sam, I'm sorry. In fact, I was looking for you at the bar tonight so I could apologize."

"Rory."

"Please, Sam, just let me explain, okay?" I plead, and he nods.

"Okay, baby," he whispers, tightening his hold on my hand, "but not over there."

Sam scoots over to the side of the chaise and pulls me next to him. He slings his arm around me and I cuddle into his comfort, inhaling deeply and letting his intoxicating scent fill my senses.

"Cam and me... we were just friends - best friends, but just platonic friends - since we were three. We lived next door to each other; we did everything together, literally. It wasn't until after I broke up with Robin, after that last time, you know, in the locker room, that Cam told me he loved me. I mean, he'd always told me he loved me, but that night he said he was, you know, in love with me. And I realized I had feelings for him, too - that I'd had feelings for him even while I was dating Robin." I shake my head in self-condemnation, ashamed, knowing how it makes me sound, but the truth is the truth.

"Once Robin started hurting me, and, you know, forcing me, everything changed for me," I add in my own defense, but Sam just stares at me, betraying no emotion, and if he's judging me, he's reserving it so that he can at least hear what I have to say. "We kissed that night," I admit.

"Cam is the person I told, in the end, and telling him was the impetus for making it stop, but..." I choke back tears, it's so hard to talk about Cam, especially about that night, and even more so the following morning. "I honestly don't know what would've happened, what we would've been. We never figured it out, never had the chance because... the next morning..." I close my eyes and take deep breaths, holding up my hand when Sam tries to stop me, because I know he thinks I'm panicking, but this isn't panic. This is just plain, old, gut-wrenching grief.

"He died, Sam," I whisper, "and it was all my fault."
I wake up just after seven alone in Cam's bed. I assume he must have gone to the bathroom because the boy would
never get up this early if he didn't absolutely have to. I groan inwardly, knowing I'll have to feign sleep until he
returns and falls back into a deep slumber - deep enough that I can slip out of bed undetected.

I have it all planned out in my head. I'll drive to the sheriff's station, tell Sheriff Chipley what Robin did, file
the complaint, and then come back here. By then Cam should just be waking up, but just in case, I'll leave him a
note that says I went to the store to buy "girl stuff", which he will take to mean tampons. He'll give me grief for
driving in the rain, but fortunately the storm has already begun to quell. It's still pouring out, but the winds have
died down. I'll have to drive extra cautiously, but as long as the roads aren't too bad, I should be able to get to the
station okay.

I hate lying to Cam, but it's my only option. Because if he knew where I was really going, he'd insist on coming
with me, but not before making me agree to wait until after he has time to go confront Robin.

And that's the last thing I'd ever want. Even though Cam would certainly hold his own in a physical
altercation, Robin can do damage. I know that better than anyone, and I couldn't bear it if Cam was to get hurt.
Especially because of me. He'd also likely be brought up on assault charges if he went after Robin, and that's the
last thing he needs. God, if he did anything to jeopardize his plans to study in New York, I could never forgive
myself.

God, if he did anything to jeopardize his plans to study in New York, I could never forgive
myself.

I force myself to keep my eyes closed and regulate my breathing, waiting for Cam to climb back into bed
beside me. When five more minutes pass, I risk peeking, and find the room still empty.

Can he really be up already? And where the hell would he have gone?

I roll over to the night table on my side of the bed to get my cell phone.

Where is my phone?

I definitely left it here, I know because I wanted it handy to check the time to make sure I got up early enough,
and I didn't want to have to pull out of Cam's arms to see the cable box, for fear my movement might wake him. I
slip out of bed and look all over for it - under the night table, under the bed, under my pillow, but it's nowhere.

Great. No Cam and no phone.

I tiptoe into the hall, still in just Cam's football tee shirt, but the bathroom door is wide open, clearly showing
the empty room. I pad downstairs and find the kitchen empty, along with the rest of the house. I check the garage,
thinking he may be working out - probably beating the sand out of his punching bag again - but it, too, is deserted.

I hurry upstairs, increasingly unnerved. Where the hell is he?

I grab one of his portable landline phones and dial his cell, but it goes straight to voicemail without even
ringing. I pull on my sweatpants, thinking he must have gone next door to my house for some unsurmisable reason.

I look around again, my brows pinched together in confusion, and then I see it. Cam's journal is open on the
foot of his side of the bed. It's completely out of character for him to just leave it so carelessly around like this. He
treats that thing like a priceless treasure.

A quick glance shows me that there is no note, just a long - and judging by his handwriting - rushed and
angry, journal entry. I quickly avert my eyes, knowing that he would never want me to read one of his journal
entries, and in my hasty glance, I saw my name, so I know it's about me.

Of course it's about you!

I cringe, knowing that Cam got up in the middle of the night to vent because of me. Knowing that he was so
preoccupied about me and Robin, and everything I told him last night, that he forwent sleep to unload in his journal.
I never wanted to be a burden to my best friend, and now, I fear, that's exactly what I've become.
But where the fuck is he?
I try his cell from the landline once more with the same frustrating result.
I don't know what to do next. I need to get to the sheriff's station soon, or my plan won't work.

I war with myself. I know that Cam's last journal entry might give me a clue as to where he went, and I've never betrayed his trust in the fourteen years we've been best friends, and I really don't want to start now. I change my mind back and forth at least twenty times before I compromise with myself. I decide I will read just the last sentence, because if the information I need is in there, that's likely where it is, and if it's not, then I'll just need to find him some other way.

I sit down, careful not to even touch the journal in case he remembers exactly how he'd left it and catches me in my transgression that way. I'm incredibly anxious - I've never read one of Cam's personal journal entries before, ever; I've only ever read his stories, and only with his express permission.

The last sentence reads:

I still can't shed the feeling that she's left something out - that there's something she still hasn't confided, and considering the horror of what she has told me, I can only imagine what it might be, and for the first time in my life, I curse the vivid imagination I've supposedly been "blessed" with, and I wonder if it would be the worst kind of betrayal if I was to search for the answer in her phone-

It's a long run-on sentence, completely unlike Cam, and there's no period, making it look as if he stopped writing abruptly. I sit here for a moment, perplexed, before the panic sets in.

My phone.
Where the fuck is my phone?!
And then I see the corner of it peeking out from beneath the journal, and I realize that Cam did, in fact, look through my phone. Which means he saw Robin's messages. I don't know why this bothers me so much, honestly, they just confirm the story I already described to him. In detail. So he'll see Robin insisting that I belong to him, analyzing my "daddy issues", calling me stupid, so what?

I try to convince myself I believe this - that I'm not suffocating from shame knowing that Cam, my best friend and the person I love and respect most in the world, saw firsthand how I've been letting my boyfriend treat and talk to me, as he said, for months.

And then my heart stops.

My breath catches in my throat and a wave of nausea rolls through me as I finally realize where Cam is. I grab my keys and try his cell again as I rush out of the house, pausing only to pull on one of Cam's hoodies that hangs on the stair rail and shove my feet into a random pair of his mom's shoes before running to my jeep. Cam's phone goes straight to voicemail again so I hit redial as I pull out into the rain.

Damn it's still coming down hard.

I have no idea what time Cam read my text messages and realized Robin was already home - that he's been home since last night. I loathe to think how long Robin and Cam might have already been alone together and what might have happened. I just pray I can catch them before their confrontation unfolds - before it escalates into something terrible. I curse myself when I realize how much time I wasted traipsing around his house looking for him like an idiot when the answer was right in front of me the whole time.

My windshield wipers swipe back and forth over the fogged up glass as fast as the settings will allow, and still I squint and blink in vain, barely able to see more than a few feet in front of me. I dial Cam again as I turn onto Maple Drive, heading into town. I'm stuck at a red light before I can turn onto Main Street and my cell phone rings.

Thank God!
But when I look at the caller ID, I see it isn't Cam. I press "reject" when I see it's Chip calling me, knowing I don't have time to bullshit with him right now. My jeep progresses down Main Street at little more than a crawl.

Chip calls again, and I press "reject" before the first ring has even finished. I bet he's looking for Cam, too, and decided to try me when he got his voicemail.

As I creep down Main, I start to make out lights in the distance. As I approach, I recognize the flashes of red and blue through the fog, and finally, I'm stopped by a police officer in full storm gear flagging me down. I pull over and roll my window as little as I can get away with to avoid getting completely soaked like he is. He's a young officer, and I don't recognize him, which is strange since I know most of them here in Linton. But I guess most isn't all.

"You gotta go around, road's closed," he shouts to be heard over the loud rain.
Damn. There must be a power line down - it always happens when there's a bad storm. I can go around, of course, instead of straight through town, but it will add at least twenty minutes to the trip in this weather and I'm not sure I have twenty minutes. God only knows what's already happening between Cam and Robin at this very moment.

"It's kinda an emergency. There's no way I can just drive through?" I plead, but he shakes his head.
"Sorry, sweetheart. And you should get on home, shouldn't be drivin' in this," he admonishes.
I scowl. "Don't call me that," I mutter and hastily close my window, reverse, and head back to Maple to go around the park. An ambulance flies by me in the opposite direction, and I grumble under my breath that they're not being made to go around the park.

My phone rings again.
Chip, again.
Why is he bugging me anyway, shouldn't he think I'm in Gainesville with Robin?
Although I guess if he spoke to Cam at any point yesterday he might have mentioned I'm not... or Lacey might have mentioned Robin came home early.

Finally, after what feels like a lifetime, I arrive on the Forbes' block. My heart races more and more the closer I get to the house in which I'd been hurt so many damn times. Beads of sweat break out all over my body as the it comes into view, and my breaths come short and quick. I don't know what's wrong with me and I park outside the house, not sure if I can even drag myself out of the car.

I'm overcome with terror at the prospect of seeing Robin again, and as a phantom steel band tightens around my chest, I realize something. Cam's car isn't even in the driveway. He's not here.

What the fuck?
Where the fuck is he?!

My phone rings again. Chip again! Ugh, I do not have time for this!
"What?!" I answer finally. I hear him breathing on the line, but he hesitates.
"Rory?" he asks tentatively. Well who the hell else would it be? He called me!
"Yes, Chip! I'm busy, what's up?"
And then my world is thrown off its axis.

****

I sit in the back of the police cruiser doing nothing but counting breaths in a pointless attempt to both calm my breathing and to make the longest car ride of my life go faster.

When Chip asked where I was, something in his voice made me tell him the truth. He insisted I wait right there, but wouldn't tell me anything, and already I knew something was very, very wrong. He came with his dad to pick me up, and now, time stands still as I sit here in the backseat, curled in a pitiful ball, while Chip stares at me in worry, and his father, the sheriff, drives us to the hospital. Their words replay in my mind.

Cam was an accident.
We don't know anything yet.
It's bad, Rory.
I take wheezing breaths and don't make eye contact with either Chipley man. They've given up on reassuring me or asking if I'm alright. It's more than obvious I'm not alright.

Cam was in an accident. He was the reason Main Street was closed. And I was there! I was right there and I never thought...

I just turned right around and continued on to Robin's house.
No one could tell me anything about Cam's condition, but his car is completely totaled. Michelle, his mom, is already at the hospital, of course, she was on call and has been there since Friday.

I cry silent tears and count, and pray, and count, and pray. I pray to a God I'm not even sure I believe in, because I know Cam does believe, and right now, I would do absolutely anything for him to be okay.

I don't even let myself consider the worst, because I know it isn't possible. I know I couldn't survive without my best friend, not even if I wasn't dealing with my own personal issues, because those don't compare to the prospect of Cam being hurt.

I just sit here in my little ball, replaying Cam's promise over and over in my mind. He said he'd never leave me, and Cam has never lied to me, ever. He wouldn't start now. Not when he knows I need him more than ever.

When we finally arrive at the hospital, I don't wait for the car to fully stop outside the emergency entrance before I try to flee from the back seat. But the door handle won't budge. I yank and push and even kick it as Chip tries to calm me down, reminding me that I can't open the back door of a police cruiser from the inside, but I barely hear him.
I'm screaming my lungs out in desperation when Sheriff Chipley finally opens the door and I practically tumble out of the car. I don't cry anymore, I try desperately to focus, I need to find Cam, he needs me right now. Both Chipleys shout after me as I bolt into the emergency room and ask the first person I see where Cam is, but I'm told to have a seat and wait.

Wait?! I can't fucking wait!

I start shouting at the poor woman stuck at the reception desk, demanding to see Cam, but she just glares at me as if she sees a crazy girl flipping out in the waiting room on a daily basis, which she probably does, and it frustrates me even more.

I throw Cam's mom's name around, and that gets a reaction. Dr. Michelle Foster is a big deal here, but though the reception nurse picks up her phone to make a call on my behalf, she isn't moving fast enough, and I'm jumping out of my skin, looking around in desperation. My eyes dart to the automatic doors that lead past the waiting room, and when Sheriff Chipley asks the receptionist about Cam's status, I take advantage of her distraction and run right through them without looking back, only vaguely aware of my name being called in an attempt to stop me.

Not a chance.

I look up and down the hall in both directions, at a loss for where to go, so I make a choice and turn left, alternately shouting for Dr. Foster and Cam's name. A doctor I don't know tries to stop me but I push past him looking into the patient rooms as I pass, but all I see are a bunch of people I don't know with various injuries. I still don't cry, but I can't get a hold on my breathing, and my lungs are in a constantly unfulfilled state, getting enough air to take short breaths, but not enough to satisfy the burning sensation.

I'm grabbed from behind and I scream and flinch back, trying desperately to wrench myself out of the stranger's grip, but he doesn't relent. I hurt all over - my injuries smarting from his hold and my resistance.

Belatedly I realize that it isn't a stranger at all - it's the sheriff - but this realization doesn't stop me from struggling. I need to find Cam!

"Rory, please calm down!" Sheriff Chipley loud whispers into my ear as Chip looks on in stunned horror. But he's not looking at me like I'm crazy, no. Because even though he is more composed, I know he shares my distress. Cam is one of his best friends, too.

But Cam isn't just my best friend. He's the only person in the world who really knows me, who I trust. And I need him! Especially now - he knows that. He knows that. I finally take a deep breath. Yes, he knows that, and he promised I'd always have him, that he'd never leave me, and Cam would never break a promise.

But I need to find him, to see that he's okay with my own eyes, to tell him I'm sorry he got hurt because of me.

I scream his name as loud as my vocal chords will allow, and out of the corner of my eye, I see a doctor rush out of a door halfway down the hall. I turn toward the white coat and see that it's Michelle. I pull myself away from the sheriff, who finally releases me, and run to her. She throws her arms around me and I cry into her scrubs.

"Come on," she says weakly when I've begun to calm down, and she nods for the sheriff and Chip to follow us as she leads us to the doctors lounge.

There's only one other person in there, a doctor I recognize as a friend of Dr. Foster. Michelle tells me that Cam is in surgery. He's suffered extensive internal injuries and subdural hematoma, which translates to bleeding in his brain. It's touch and go. I don't ask her if he's going to be alright. From the expression on her face, I can feel her fear, and I'm not sure I can handle the answer.

I know I've gone white as a sheet, and I still haven't quite caught my breath. The doctor's lounge is empty save for the five of us, and I sit here, frozen, gripping Cam's mom's hand as time barely seems to pass at all.

I couldn't begin to guess how long it's been when the landline in the doctor's lounge rings and we all jump. I release Dr. Foster's hand as she gets up to answer. I can only hear her side of the short conversation.

"Okay... sure... show them to the lounge," she murmurs, her voice weak and shaky, nothing like the Dr. Michelle Foster I've known almost my whole life. She's scared, really scared, and that knowledge terrifies me all the more.

God, please let Cam be okay! I'll do anything! I silently plead, bargain, negotiate, and beg. Michelle is back on the phone asking someone about Cam's status in surgery, but judging from her face she isn't getting any useful information, so I just sit there trying to breathe.

And then the door to the lounge opens and my eyes widen in horror. Robin is here.

God, no!

I stare in shock as he rushes over to me and wraps his arms around me in attempted comfort. Lacey hangs back, her eyes glistening with tears as Cindy Forbes rubs her back in consolation.

And suddenly, I can take no more.

"Don't touch me! Don't you fuckin' touch me!" I screech, wriggling from Robin's arms and shoving at his chest to get him away from me. I shoot out of my chair as soon as I'm free of that monster's hold and back away from him.
I'm vaguely aware that everyone in the room is staring at me like I've lost my mind, but I don't care. I can't let him touch me - never again. Robin looks stunned, and I resent him all the more. He approaches me cautiously, and I retreat until my back hits the wall, but still he stalks toward me.

"Sweetheart, it's okay," he coos.

I hold out my hand to stop him. "Don't you 'sweetheart' me! Don't you come near me! This is your fault!" I rant, and I know I sound insane, blaming Robin for Cam's car accident, but it is his fault! He's the reason Cam was driving in the storm - the reason he was distracted.

Robin doesn't relent, he takes two slow steps so he's right in front of me, and when he reaches out to touch me again, I lose it.

Screams rip from my throat, my hands swatting at him in hatred as he tries to placate me, telling me everything is okay and that I don't know what I'm saying. But I know exactly what I'm saying.

"No! Don't touch me! Why are you even here?! You hate Cam!"

Sheriff Chipley, suspicious of the entire exchange, sets his hand on Robin's shoulder in warning, and when Chip grabs my arms from behind me, I realize I haven't stopped hitting Robin. I try to wrench from Chip's grip, but my friend whispers for me to calm down and tightens his hold, and I wince as my injuries are aggravated.

"I'm here for you, sweetheart! Why are you actin' like this? I love you!" From Robin's expression one might believe that he is truly innocent - genuinely confused at my outburst.

"You love me?! You don't love me! Cam loves me! He would never hurt me! I hate you! This is your fuckin' fault! I told him what you did to me and he was comin' to confront you! He's hurt because of you!" I scream, and continue to rant, and Chip releases my arms and steps in front of me, his face hard and inquisitive as he grabs one of the sleeves of Cam's hoodie, and shoves it up my forearm.

There is a collective gasp as my wrist is revealed, but my glare never leaves Robin, pummeling him with bitterness and rage.

This is all his fault!

Sheriff Chipley takes hold of Robin's shoulders.

"You need to come with me, son," he mutters, his voice is deceptively calm, professional, and though I don't move my eyes from Robin's even for a moment, I can sense the sheriff's hostility.

Robin, the fool, resists. "She's lyin'! I never hurt her!"

He actually has the nerve to deny it! Fury rushes through my veins, compromising my air, and I breathe so hard my injuries smart with every rise and fall of my chest. Slowly and purposefully, I unzip Cam's hoodie, just enough to reveal my neck, never once taking my eyes off Robin's.

I watch as his expression morphs from anger at my accusation, to fear that he's actually going to be exposed for what he's done. Everyone will know what a monster he is, and I know I'm striking him where it will hurt him most - his reputation.

Dr. Foster is instantly at my side, examining my bruised neck, though I didn't even notice her move toward me. Her lovely features, so much like Cam's, are etched in grief and worry.

"Fuck, Rory," Chip breathes, his eyes wide.

I know they're all shocked. I know no one ever thought that hometown hero and all around golden boy, Robin Forbes, would hurt any girl, and certainly not me, whom he's claimed to love so fiercely. But the marks on my skin tell a different story, and though they've faded a bit since Friday, they still speak volumes. Especially the dark shape of Robin's huge open palm around my throat.

I don't reveal the rest of my injuries - not now, when Cam is fighting for his life. I just need Robin away from me or I wouldn't have caused this distraction at all.

"Robin," Sheriff Chipley says more sternly, "You need to come with me. Now."

Robin huffs indignantly, still glaring at me murderously, but puts his hands up, palms forward, and lets the sheriff lead him out of the room. His mother and sister, eyes wide with shock, follow him without so much as looking back.

"Rory," Chip starts, but I shake my head.

"Not now." My voice is barely a whisper, and my friend nods in understanding.

I stand there, in the back of the doctors' lounge, trying to force my breathing to slow back to normal, or as close to normal as it's been today, as Michelle, her doctor friend, and Chip stand there gaping at me, at a loss for what to do right now.

And then the door opens again, and my heart races in fear that Robin has returned.

But it's not Robin. It's a surgeon, still in his sullied medical scrubs. And as Michelle grips my hand tightly, I immediately wish that it was just Robin returning. Because I know, before the surgeon even shakes his head, that Cam didn't make it.
I can feel it. Deep in my soul, I can feel that he's gone. That my anchor to this world has vanished. And I'm already utterly lost when the surgeon I already hate with every fiber of my being makes that small gesture with his head that confirms that I am truly, forever, alone.

I close my eyes, and, finally, the tears I've been holding back flow out like white water. I cling to Michelle, sobbing desperately, and my legs give out as we both slide to the floor, still holding on to each other for dear life. But there is no dear life. Not anymore. I wail uncontrollably, but there's no stopping it - no relief.

With no Cam, I am completely untethered from a world that I, quite honestly, want nothing to do with. My shoulders heave and I hold Cam's mom even tighter, only vaguely aware that her grip on me is just as strong. I don't know what else is happening, what anyone else is doing, because my eyes remain clenched shut. I don't want to see a world that doesn't have Cam in it. I don't want to exist in that world.
CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Present Day

Sam has held me tighter and tighter as I regaled him with the story of the worst fucking day of my life. Now, I lay in his arms as I tell him how at first I clung to that untethered feeling, as agonizing as it was, because it felt as if I could leave the world along with Cam. But as the minutes went by and reality sunk in - that he was really gone, but that I was still stuck here, in a world with no Cam, but one with Robin Forbes - I couldn't breathe. The feeling of injustice was despairing, the fear of having to deal with Robin without Cam's support terrifying, but the simple knowledge that I would have to continue to exist in that world was utterly unbearable.

I don't remember the rest of that day. I woke up more than twenty-four hours later, still in the hospital, but admitted as a patient. Cam's mom never left my side, and I found out later that when my parents arrived late that first night, she informed them of everything that happened. When my father tried to brush off my outburst as a grief induced rant, my mother was horrified. My father admitted what I'd told him earlier that week. He recited the same response he'd given me - that it must have been a misunderstanding, that I'd asked for it by dressing in "skimpy skirts", and that Robin loves me and would never have intentionally hurt me.

My mother threw him out of the house as soon as I was released from the hospital and he went to go stay with the Forbes, in the same bedroom, in fact, in which Robin stole my virginity and forced himself on me all those other times.

Two weeks passed before Robin was arrested. The rumors started before I even left the hospital and Robin was sure to build the foundation for his defense early. His story was that we'd gotten into an argument on Friday and he broke up with me, which is why I didn't accompany him to Gainesville. My accusation that he'd hurt me was simply my revenge for his dumping me, mixed with grief over Cam's death. The story was that I was being irrational - misplacing my grief - and my panic attack and consequential hospitalization, along with the fact that I didn't speak to anyone for more than a week after Cam died... people took Robin at his word.

At the same time though, Robin spread the word that he still loved me. That we were going to get back together. I didn't know it then, but he was laying the groundwork to explain the text messages. The thing that was "maybe a little extreme" that happened on Friday did not refer to raping me in the school locker room, but to breaking up with me. It helped his story that he really did try to get back with me. Again and again.

But I didn't hear about any of that until later. After I was released from the hospital, I holed up in Cam's bedroom, and didn't leave for nearly two whole weeks. I didn't speak to anyone for the first week, except brief one word exchanges with Michelle or my mother. I had no idea what was even going on in the outside world until Chip came to visit me.

That was when I first realized how fucked up I was. When my friend since childhood entered Cam's bedroom and I cowered in a corner, terrified of being alone with him. Chip was horrified, but he was one of the few people who believed me. He'd seen my wrist and my neck in the hospital, and he knew me, he knew I was telling the truth.

Chip didn't know how to handle me, which wasn't surprising since I didn't know how to handle myself. He cooed at me, bargain with me, and in the end, shouted at me that I needed to make my statement about Robin. He yelled at me that I was letting Robin spread these rumors about me, and that I was just letting him get away with it. And while I was too petrified to even leave my corner, let alone respond to him, I knew he was right.

The problem was, with Cam gone, making Robin pay for what he did to me didn't feel as important anymore. If I'm being honest, nothing felt important with him gone. Everything just felt so... empty. Hopeless.

Once I even imagined - no, not imagined, fantasized about - Robin coming back for me and strangling me, but not stopping this time. It would solve everything, I thought. Robin would be put away for murder and I would be with Cam. I don't tell Sam this though.

I do tell him how Chip came to visit me again the following day, and finally got through to me when he reminded me that Cam would never want me to let Robin get away with this. That Cam risked his life to make Robin pay for what he did to me, and ended up losing it. It was all Robin's fault.

It woke me from my daze. Blaming Robin was all I had, and getting justice gave me a purpose. A reason to continue to exist when the only person who mattered to me was gone. It lit a fire in me, forcing my mind onto this single track, and I clung to it desperately. Because I knew if I allowed myself to think it through, I would return to my initial conclusion - the real truth: that Robin wasn't the one responsible for Cam's death. I was.
I'd let Robin do what he did to me again and again. I'd *gone back for more*. And then, only when I feared for my life did I confide in my best friend. My best friend who had been insanely protective of me for as long as I could remember. Who I knew loved me fiercely, even if I didn't yet know he was in love with me.

*And I didn't protect him.* When it counted, I let him fall victim to my own weakness, and risk his life. And lose it.

I finally made my statement to Sheriff Chipley after those weeks, in Cam's bedroom, with Michelle present, but not my mom. I couldn't bear to be alone in a room with a man, even a man I should trust, but I also couldn't allow my mother to hear the details. It was a selfish thing, putting Cam's mom through hearing all that when she was grieving for her only son, but I wasn't thinking straight at the time.

My injuries had mostly faded by then, and there was no forensic evidence that Robin had done anything at all. Even the evidence they collected when I was unconscious in the hospital was circumstantial, save for the bite marks, which Robin claimed were just a result of "rough sex", which he claimed I had a thing for. And this, too, made its way around the entire town.

After Robin was arrested, I went from being a crazy girl who reacted irrationally to a tragic loss, to someone who was threatening the life and career of the town's beloved golden boy.

I was a pariah.

A few days after I finally made my statement, I had to go into the station to file the restraining order. My mom had to be in court, and I insisted I was fine to drive myself. And I almost was. But Lacey and my "friends" were waiting for me when I left, hurling awful accusations, and I ran back into the station and hid until the sheriff drove me home. When he dropped me off at my house, the car door was locked, and when he turned to me, probably just to offer some words of comfort, I panicked, hyperventilated, and ended up back in the hospital for two more days.

The harassment worsened. I had to delete any social media accounts, and leave school permanently, not that I was well enough to attend. My mother had to take an immediate leave of absence from work to homeschool me before I got too behind to finish the year.

I couldn't even go to Cam's funeral.

The entire town was there, Chip later told me, and though Michelle offered to have a private service - just family, me and a few of Cam's closest friends - I couldn't be that selfish.

My selfishness had cost Cam his life.

In the end, I sobbed hysterically in Cam's bed, hugging his pillow, sniffing it frantically, desperate to inhale what remained of his scent, while the town that hated me said goodbye to the boy who loved me.

Michelle had found photos of my injuries on Cam's phone from the night before he died, taken while I'd been asleep, and they are the only reason Robin didn't get off completely scot-free. They are what got the judge to sign my restraining order, and despite the best efforts of Robin's father and mine, they couldn't cover everything up. But the case wasn't strong enough, and even my mother, who acted as my lawyer, knew our best hope was a plea deal.

My father, being the DA, of course, is the one who negotiated the deal, and there was nothing either my mother or I could do about it.

Robin agreed not to fight the restraining order if he could get away with community service and probation, and I couldn't risk losing the restraining order. Without it I had no he'd never leave me alone. Ever.

But before the judge signed it, my father summoned me to the DA's office and distracted my mother with legal paperwork while he set me up in a conference room that Robin just happened to wander into. He begged me to drop the whole thing and take him back. He still loved me, he said, he'd do anything to win me back. He was "so sorry" I was upset, and he would never do anything to upset me again. He was careful not to admit to any specifics, though, about how it was that he'd upset me. He accused me of "ruining both our lives", insisted that we were "meant to be together" - that I was going to be his wife one day and I just needed to trust him. But I barely even heard him, I was too busy crying and hyperventilating against the wall in debilitating terror.

My cries and screams echoed throughout the office, pouring out of the room, and when my father tried to calm me down because I was "overreacting", I made it clear I wanted nothing more to do with him ever again. That was the last time I ever saw my father and the third time I wound up in the hospital that month, this time with an anxiety disorder diagnosis and a pocketful of prescriptions for anxiety, depression, and insomnia.

Even after all that, the Forbes and my father did everything they could to hide it all from UFL, but my mother took that into her own hands. I learned later that she sent them a copy of the police report, including the photos of my injuries, and spoke personally with the athletics director.

Robin lost his scholarship and his place on the team.

The town hated me even more.

When they started showing up at my door to shout obscenities at me, and spray painting my driveway with the same malicious words, my mother put the house on the market. I spent the rest of my time in Linton numbed by a
myriad of prescription medication. Only when I realized the effect it was all having on my mother did I resolve to try and put on a brave face. I weaned myself off of the antidepressants. I never did rely too much on the sleep medication because they didn't help my nightmares, they only trapped me inside them. I came to rely less and less on the anti-anxiety meds until I only had to take them in the case of a panic attack, which have happened less and less since Sam came into my life.

As I finish explaining about Cam and the aftermath of it all, I realize how big a role Sam has somehow already managed to play in my recovering, in reattaching me to this world. In giving me a reason to want to be attached to it. I realize how just knowing that such an incredible man exists in this world has changed my entire view of it. He hasn't replaced Cam. No one could ever do that. But he has renewed my faith in people. The world in which I exist is that much less awful, and while I loved Cam more than anything, I'm in love with Sam, and somehow, in the short time I've known him, he has become the center of my universe. My anchor to it. I'm no longer just surviving, as he said, I'm living.

And Sam is the reason for that. His faith in me, his patience, his loyalty and his affection, inspire me.

I cuddle closer to him and he tightens his hold on me even more and whispers how brave and strong I am, and I let him.

"I'm so sorry about earlier, Ror. I had no idea. I don't know what I was even accusing you of. I was just being jealous and paranoid. And possessive..." he murmurs introspectively. "You should know, I have no fucking clue what I'm doing." His smile is small and sheepish. "I've never been in a relationship. Never had a single jealous feeling over a girl. But with you..." He shakes his head in self-condemnation. "I overreacted when I should have just trusted you. It helps knowing we're on the same page, but look, I shouldn't have pushed you."

I shrug, conceding my role in our argument. "It's my fault, Sam. I should've just told you. I just... It's just... hard to talk about."

Sam's fingers stroke my cheek, and I think he wants to kiss me, but he doesn't. Tonight has been too intense. Between Robin's attack, and telling Sam about Cam, a strange, wistful mood lingers.

"I'm glad you told me," Sam admits.

"Hey, tell me somethin' about you no one else knows." After all, I've confided in him like no other.

Sam considers me, his eyes simmering with such profound emotion that I'm sure my attempt to lighten the mood did not have the desired effect. He bites his lip, seeming to think it over. "How about I tell you something everyone else knows... apart from you, apparently," he counters.

I blink at him in confusion.

"Rory..." His voice drops to a whisper, his gaze locked intently on mine.

"Yeah?" I breathe.

"I fucking love you."

I gasp. My chest explodes with love, the unfathomable thrill of its reciprocation. Sam loves me! Even with all of his romantic declarations, I never let myself imagine hearing those words, and I stare at him, utterly dumbfounded.

Sam's fingers slowly find their way into my hair, and he tentatively pulls my face to his. I realize he's hesitating because of what I went through tonight with Robin, and I refuse to let that bastard ruin one more moment of my life. My kiss surprises Sam, but he recovers quickly, devouring me with his affection.

His kiss feels like home. Like in the connection of our lips, we recognize a piece of each of us in the other, and I'm lost to him. Hearing him confess his love for me was surreal, and it has utterly exhilarated me.

And terrified me.

Cruel doubt uncoils in my gut, piercing my delusion bubble of joy. I pull away abruptly.

He can't love me!

How can I let him do this to himself? Why would anyone want to be stuck with the crazy girl with the panic attacks? Only Sam and his twisted perspective of my issues - his unique ability to acknowledge only the best in me - would blind himself to the reality of what a relationship with me would mean. And blind me, too. Apparently. God, how easily he makes me forget myself, all that is wrong, all that is broken.

"Ror?"

"You... you can't," I decide. No, I've always known Sam deserves better than me, even if he can't see it himself right now.

His brow furrows, in that adorable way, and my heart wrenches. "I can, baby girl," he counters, the corner of his mouth quirking up at what I'm sure he misreads as disbelief at his proclamation. I pull out of his arms and stand, needing some distance from the source of my confusion - and of my happiness - and try to steel myself against my own selfish desires.

Sam grows increasingly worried, scared even, but I can't let him do this to himself.
"No, Sam."
"It's okay if you don't feel the same, Ror. I didn't mean to pressure you, or-"
"No, it's not that! Of course I love you, Sam!"

Shit! I didn't meant to say that out loud!

"Damn it!" I rub my face with my palms and take a deep breath. "Sam, I... I do love you," I admit again, this time intentionally. "Which is why I can't do this. Why I can't let you do this. You - you're amazing. You deserve a normal girl, with a normal life, and normal problems. Not..." I gesture to myself, "Me. A broken mess."

Sam stands, tense with brimming anger, but I feel no fear. Instinctually I know he would never hurt me. "Don't talk about yourself like that! We've been over this!"

I shake my head. "Yeah, everyone has issues, I know. But mine are worse, remember? No matter how strong you think I am, I'm still-

"You're still my Rory. And I fucking love you. If I'm so damn amazing then don't I deserve to be with the girl I'm fucking in love with?" His voice lowers, his expression softening. He reaches out cautiously, and brushes my hair behind my ear. "I know what I want, Ror. Maybe even more so because it's not something I've ever wanted before - something I ever even thought I could want. But whatever you say, whatever you want, whatever you decide - it isn't going to change how I feel.

"I'm not just going to move on and find someone else because you still think you don't deserve this - that you're not normal. Because what you don't get is that you're right, you're not normal. But not because you have fucking anxiety. Because you're better than normal, Ror. You're fucking incredible. You're beautiful and smart and strong and loyal. You're fucking everything to me. If you don't want this - me - then that's one thing, but if you do... Don't let him win, baby. After everything... you deserve to be happy, Ror. We deserve it."

And what can I do? I want to protect him, but when he says these things to me, I start to believe him, and when he looks at me like that, I melt.

Sam really loves me.

Why didn't I see it before? My eyes prick with tears, but his thumb wipes them away before they fall far. He watches me under a furrowed brow, midnight blue drowned in shadow as if he's awaiting the deliberation of a jury. And I'm the jury.

What will it be? Exonerate us from our demons, or punish us both for crimes committed against us, not by us...

"I still think you deserve better," I whisper, and Sam takes a step so he's flush against me and I have to look up at him through my lashes.

"There's no such thing, Ror," he rumbles in that perfect deep timbre of his, and then his lips crash against mine, his mouth capturing mine in a kiss that promises love and passion, a future I glimpse for the first time with earnest hope.

I moan into his mouth, trying to push all my love for this boy into this one kiss. He feels it. I know he does. Sam pulls away breathlessly and scoops me up to carry me back inside. He lays me gently on the bed, and after hastily tugging off his jeans, follows me as I scoot under the duvet, pulling me tightly to his side.

I sigh contentedly.

This is where I want to be.

But something isn't right. There's too much clothing between us. And I need to feel Sam's skin against mine right now more than I need air. I'm desperate for more intimacy with this man I love so deeply, this man I never believed could love me - or should love me - but somehow does. But for now he seems content to simply hold me in the comfort of his arms. I gingerly reach for the hem of his shirt, slowly lifting my body away from his to peel away the material, and he maneuvers to assist me. When I reach for my camisole, his hand locks around my wrist, halting my movement, and I lean back to meet his eyes inquisitively.

"Let's not test my self-restraint any more than we have to, yeah?" he says lightly.

I frown. Self-restraint? "I didn't ask you to restrain anything," I say breathily, and peel my shirt up a few inches more.

But his grip on my wrist tightens again to stop me. "Baby, you've been through hell tonight. You're hurt," he reminds me, his free hand gently tracing the darkening bruise on my cheek. From his expression one would think it hurts him more than it does me.

I nearly retort that I don't need him to remind me, but then I realize that, in fact, I do. I am completely distracted by him. By his declaration of love, by my own feelings for him, and right now, more than anything, by my
overwhelming attraction to him and his perfect, sculpted body. But what's wrong with that? Robin doesn't deserve
my attention, and certainly not Sam's. Sam, on the other hand, deserves everything.

"I just... need to feel your skin against mine," I breathe.

Sam releases my wrist and I quickly pull off my camisole, and before he can stop me, push my shorts down
enough that I can kick them off so we are both in just our underwear. Only then do I return to my place in his arms,
skin to skin.

I sigh. This is so much better.

"God you're beautiful," Sam whispers. I cuddle into him even more, licking my face back into his neck. I
brush my lips softly back and forth over the soft skin and I feel Sam shudder beneath me. "You trying to torture
me?" he teases.

I shake my head against his throat and he lets out a short chuckle. He kisses my hair, inhaling deeply. "Ror?"
"Yeah?"

"What were you talking about with him? What did he ask you that you said yes to. You know, that set him off
like that?" Sam asks tentatively.

I hesitate. I'm worried he'll be angry with me if I tell him I risked angering Robin even more by admitting my
relationship with Sam. But he won't understand that telling Robin what he wants to hear doesn't work with him. That
even if he wouldn't have been set off to choke me, it wouldn't have stopped him from forcing himself on me, and I'd
rather be dead than live through that again.

"He, uh... he found my scar... He was so damn happy that it did scar - that I had his mark to remind me that I'd
always be his no matter what I do...",

I feel Sam's entire body stiffen beneath me, his jaw clenched in quiet fury, and I pull back so I can look at him.
Even in contained rage, the man is positively breathtaking.

"He heard me scream for you, you know, when you ran past the alley... He's been following us, Sam, for I don't
know how long. Maybe he saw us leave the bar last night. Maybe he was even around the hotel," I realize, my
breathing picking up dangerously.

Sam grits his teeth, but his hand soothes up and down my back, reminding me that Robin is locked up, and I
am here, safe, with Sam. "He's been fucking following you?"

"Us," I correct him. Sure, he was following me, but I've barely been apart from Sam since we arrived in Miami,
and Robin has certainly noticed. He made that clear. And Sam needs to understand that with Robin, there is a danger
in being with me. A danger in loving me. One that may never go away.

"What did he ask you?" Sam asks again.

I take a deep breath. "He asked if anyone else has seen his mark. If you... if I fucked you even though I
belong to him."

Sam tenses even more. "And you told him the truth?" he grates incredulously.

"I couldn't bear to deny it, Sam - to give him the satisfaction. Of thinkin' I'd still only been with him, that I still
belong to him. I... I choke back a sob, "I couldn't."

Sam hauls me to his chest, furiously kissing my hair, and I'm grateful. He understands. He just gets me in some
unfathomable way. "You're not his, Ror," he growls intently. "And nothing he can say or do can ever change that.
I'm never going to let him fucking get near you again. I swear to fucking God."

I kiss him. The truth is, I appreciate his sentiment, and in a primitive way, it turns me on even more. But the
rational side of me is more frightened by it than anything. I don't want Sam risking himself for me. Not ever. Not
like Cam. And tonight he got into a fight because of me. Any number of terrible things could have happened, and
they would have been my fault.

Sam slips his tongue into my mouth and suddenly Robin is far from my mind. I'm back in the here and now
with the man I love, who by some miracle or curse, loves me back. I deepen the kiss and reposition myself so that I
lay fully atop of him. I can feel his lack of restraint through our underwear and I'm desperate to prove - to him, to
myself, perhaps even to Robin - who it is I actually do belong to. Sam groans deep in his throat before tearing his
mouth from mine.

"You're killing me, baby," he rasps, and I realize he still thinks we shouldn't do this tonight. I slip my hand
between us, over his boxer briefs, and am once again struck by the sheer size of him. I both hear and feel his sharp
intake of breath. "Fuck, Ror..."

"Sam... I need you. I ain't his. I'm yours. And I need you to remind me of that, right now," I plead.

And that is all the encouragement he needs. He resumes his perfect kiss, rolling until I am pinioned beneath
him, and my legs wrap around his waist automatically, my welcoming thighs cradling his deliciously narrow hips.
I moan. Yes. This is what I need. To give myself again to the only man I've ever given myself to. For him to take his possession of me. To quell the secret fears lurking deep within my darkest thoughts that whisper Robin is right - that a part of me will always belong to him no matter what I do.

"You. Are. Mine," Sam growls between kisses. "You hear me, baby girl? And I'm fucking yours. For as long as you'll have me."

****

It's so late, and even as I start to doze, I realize that Sam lies wide awake, gazing thoughtfully at the ceiling, looking down at me every now and then, perhaps to see if I've fallen asleep.

Finally, sleep does come, and I drift into blissful dreams of beaches and hotel suites. And Sam.

Sam and I walk along the beach, but someone is following us. I don't know who, and I don't even know how I know, because I see nothing to substantiate my suspicions. It's just a feeling. A scary, unsettling feeling that someone - someone dangerous - is watching us from the shadows.

Somehow I know that I am the target. The target of what, I don't know, but I am who he wants to hurt. I try to get Sam to go somewhere else, out of the line of fire, so to speak, but he won't leave me.

It's like he doesn't believe the danger is real, or he's just so sure he can handle it that he doesn't take it seriously. But I, on the contrary, am terrified.

The beach morphs into a city street, and we continue to walk. Sam takes my hand, and my eyes dart from corner to corner, but can't find the danger I'm certain still follows us. I try to pull my hand back, and vaguely I think I'm being foolish - that I'm just once again worried that Chelsea will see us being too friendly and target me for some stupid, malicious, sophomoric revenge. I tell myself I can handle Chelsea. That Sam was right, this is just my paranoia, not actual danger.

And then I am yanked into an alley and Sam has magically vaporized.

"Hello, sweetheart," Robin drawls. My stomach plummets and dread fires straight to my heart.

"No! Sam!" I call before I can stop myself, but it's too late, Robin heard me.

"Sam?!" Robin snarls with disgust. He shoves me up against the brick wall and pain shoots throughout my entire body.

Please! No!

Robin holds my wrists above my head, but then leaves me. But I can't move. It's as if he's secured me to the wall with invisible restraints, and though I frantically twist and struggle to free myself, it's no use. And then Sam has rematerialized, but he's walking casually down the street, unaware of any danger. Robin sprints toward him, and I open my mouth to scream a warning, but my voice won't work.

No! Sam! Look out!

But it's too late. Robin is on him in a flash, and they fight, both landing punches, until Sam is flung into the street and an oncoming car screeches ominously, unable to stop in time.

Oh, God! Sam! No!

I bolt up in bed, my eyes darting around the moonlit room, gasping in terror as Sam coos that it was just a dream, that I'm okay. And that he's sorry, he's so sorry. I try to catch my breath as I wonder what he's sorry for, until I realize he's sitting atop the duvet, as if he's just run back to bed to wake me from my dream. He must have gotten out of bed, unable to sleep, surely still rattled from Robin's attack.

I fling my arms around his neck and weep quietly against his chest, absolutely mad with relief that Sam is here, that the dream wasn't real. That his fate didn't mirror Cam's.

Not yet, my subconscious whispers unkindly, and I blanch.

Sam continues to whisper words of comfort, but I say nothing. This was the worst dream I've ever had. Losing Sam. How could I possibly survive such a thing? After everything I've already survived. Surely everyone has their limit of heartbreak and grief before their heart simply refuses to continue to beat.

Sam asks if my nightmare was an especially bad one and I just nod against his chest. He has no idea. Perhaps worst of all is that it echoed my darkest fear, and that I know that fear is not unfounded.

Eventually I calm, and we settle back into bed, Sam promising he won't leave me while I sleep again. He castigates himself for doing it in the first place, and I want to tell him it's okay, that it isn't his fault, but I can't find my voice. And even if I could, I'm not sure I could bring myself to lie to him. Because I know if he'd stayed with me, he'd have kept the nightmares away.

****
It's morning when I next wake, and Sam is still fast asleep, though I've no idea what time he finally shut his eyes last night. I know I should let him sleep, so I gingerly slip out of bed and pad to the bathroom to wash up. I shower thoroughly and creep back into the bedroom, where Sam stirs a little, but remains asleep, and I pull on his boxers and my camisole from last night.

Sam stirs again and I still until he turns over and settles. He was such a restful sleeper the few times I slept with him, and it unnerves me that he's tossing and turning now. He mumbles something in his sleep and I tiptoe closer to the bed. It's then that I notice his beautiful features are screwed up in distress.

Should I wake him?

"No," he mumbles, his body tensing. "Away..."

Suddenly he thrashes violently onto his side and kicks at the covers. "Don't touch'er!"

My jaw drops in horror and I jump onto the bed and start shaking him. "Sam! Wake up!" I beg, but he pushes me behind him and kicks out again at some invisible attacker at his front.

"No!" he cries.

I shake him desperately. "Please, Sam! Please wake up! You're dreamin'! Please!" I plead with his unconscious self.

His eyes shoot open suddenly and shoot around the room like he's still trying to locate the attacker, and I just gape at him with wide, tear-filled eyes. I see the moment he realizes he's been dreaming and understands where he actually is. His hand flies to rake his hair and he closes his eyes again to get his bearings. The entire sight is positively heartbreaking.

So this is what it's like for him to witness my nightmares, I realize with profound despair.

"You're okay," I whisper shakily.

Sam blows out a deep exhale and, eyes still shut tight, nods vaguely. He rallies to pull himself together before composing himself to ask if I am okay. I glare at him incredulously and he sighs.

He starts to sit up but I push him gently down and settle on his lap, raining soft kisses on his cheeks, forehead, lips, even his eyelids. It's all I can think to do.

He takes my face in his hands, brushing my few fallen tears away with his thumbs.

"It was about me?" I ask hesitantly, though I already know it was. He doesn't answer me, he just turns to his side, repositioning us both so that we lay side by side, facing one another.

His knuckles brush over my bruised cheek and he winces. His fingers trail down to my neck, and I read in his sorrowful expression that he sees the bruise there too. His fingers continue their route over my shoulder, and his gaze follows them. "I love this shoulder," he murmurs.

"You... what?"

"I never realized how sexy a shoulder could be. Until I came to your house that day. You know, when you offered to let me taste your muffin," he smirks wickedly and I blush.

I'm vaguely aware that he's trying to distract me from his nightmare, and that he's succeeding. "You were wearing that NYU sweatshirt that fell over your shoulder, and I couldn't stop staring at it, thinking it was the most perfect fucking shoulder I'd ever seen. And that I'd like to lick it... not that I didn't also want to lick your-"

"Sam!" I giggle, swiping a residual tear from my cheek.

He smiles wistfully.

"So you're a shoulder-man then?"

"I'm a Rory-man," he corrects.

"Hmm," I muse, "so what were you before I converted you to shoulder worship?"

Sam considers me. "I guess an ass-man," he decides. "Though I've always been a fan of these too," he adds, his fingers continuing their light exploration, delicately trailing along the cleavage line of my camisole and I break out in goosebumps.

"Well, I'm glad you like them." I mean to sound playful, but my voice has dropped to a breathy whisper at his touch.

"Love," he corrects me again. "I love every part of you, baby. Especially this." His fingers move marginally upward, over my sternum, and settle right over my heart.

He kisses me, sweet and gentle, like he's just trying to reaffirm that his dream was just that, a dream, and that I am really here, really okay. I hate that he's upset because of me. That my life - my past - has come back to bite him.

This isn't what a relationship is supposed to be. What love is supposed to be. Sam has been through enough in his life and here he is, on spring break, what is supposed to be the epitome of carefree fun, and he's gone from babysitting me, to caring for me while sick, to arguing with me, to fighting because of me, being so upset he needs to walk to clear his head - so upset he can't even sleep - and now he's having nightmares. I'm flooded with guilt, and
once again wonder if I can really do this to the man I love. Bind him to me indefinitely when I know what that will
mean for him.

"You ever have a dream like that before?" I ask tentatively.

Sam rakes his hair, exasperated. "Ror... don't."

I frown.

"Look, it's not your fault I had a bad fucking dream, okay? You can't imagine what it's like to see that, Ror. To
see that fucking piece of shit pinning my girl to a wall with his hand around your throat, trying to-" his voice cracks
and he trails off, his eyes falling closed.

I swallow nervously. "How is that not my fault?"

Sam's eyes shoot open in disbelief.

"If it weren't for me-"

"If it weren't for you, I'd be a miserable shmuck with a pathetic rule about not having a girlfriend because I was
sure as shit that if love did exist, which I didn't think it did, it certainly wasn't possible to find in high school."

I blink at him.

"He is the problem. Not you. You are fucking perfect. How many times do I have to say it?"

I don't respond. I don't know what to say, but I do know that he believes me infallible. That he doesn't
understand that at least in part, my own choices allowed Robin to do what he did back then, and that I'm certain last
night was somehow my fault, too.

My old, familiar blame-demons resurface in the worst way, and my mind reels with all the things I could've
and should've done differently last night. That I should've done differently a year ago. And a part of me wonders if
I'm simply suffering the consequences of my own mistakes.
CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX
Present Day

Carl and Tuck, true to form, took care to ensure our group was carefully fed the story about the random attacker coming after me in an alley. Besides the two of them, only Tina, Andrew, and Dave know the truth, though not in detail. They just that my attacker was my ex-boyfriend. I know Tina and Andrew will keep it to themselves, and I can only hope that Dave can keep his mouth shut as well.

But still, I don't feel up to seeing everyone, don't think I can fake-smile my way through a social situation right now. So Carl and Tuck join Sam and me for lunch on his balcony before Sam and I head to the precinct for my appointment.

I decide not to call my mother until after. If my father had contacted her, I'd already have heard about it, and the fact is, as my lawyer, she would insist on flying down to be present for this afternoon, and that would be the end of spring break for me. I know my choice to keep what happened from my mother, at least for the time being, is a questionable one at best. I know I owe her more than that, especially after hiding Robin's abuse from her last year. We've had countless talks since it all came out about confiding in one another and trust, support and all that, and I know that delaying this phone call is a kind of betrayal. That I'm being selfish. Again.

But the truth is I'm still hoping I can salvage this trip. That I can get through this appointment, figure out how to deal with the logistics of whatever the legal consequences are, update my mom, and try to enjoy the last couple days of my vacation. Is it an ambitious plan? Sure. And, honestly, a part of me does want my mother here with me, for comfort and support. For so long she was the only person close to me who really stood by me, who knew everything I'd been through, eventually anyway. And not just with Robin, but with my falling out with my entire hometown, with my father, my anxiety... And, of course, the worst part of all - losing Cam.

If I didn't have Sam, I would have called my mother last night. Who am I kidding, if I didn't have Sam, I wouldn't be here at all. But I do have Sam. He cares. He loves me. And he knows everything. Everything I went through, and everything that happened last night. He saw it, though I wish he hadn't, wish I could erase the image of Robin hurting me - the one he described earlier - from his memory. The one that caused his nightmare. Idly I hope his bad dream was an isolated incident, and not the start of an ongoing issue. Like mine. How could I forgive myself otherwise?

Sam keeps a fierce grip on my hand as he leads me into the precinct. It's nothing like the sheriff's station in Linton. Much more expansive and modern, compared to Linton anyway. More like what I've seen on television or in movies, except messier.

A frazzled and overworked older detective asks us if he can help us and is no more enlightened when Sam introduces us and explains why we're here. The stress of the situation is getting to me, which Sam notices, and he directs me to sit in a random empty seat next to a random empty desk while he seeks out someone who can actually assist us.

I startle when Sam returns with Detective Mora minutes later, and she greets me with what I read as genuine concern before leading us to a sparsely furnished interview room. She explains that as the case progresses the prosecutor would be happy to meet me in her office, but since this is just an informal meeting to follow up my statement and the complaint, it was easiest to procure the interview room. I don't feel any less nervous. All I can think is that this is where criminals are interrogated. A small metal table sits in the center of the room, surrounded by four wooden chairs, and not much else. Except the two way mirror.

Detective Mora is joined by another detective who was on the scene last night, a young man who can't be much older than Sam and me. I'd guess early twenties, twenty five at the oldest. He reintroduces himself as Detective Karanek and begins to explain that Robin will be arraigned tomorrow at which time bail will be set. He's confident he will be remanded, meaning no bail, especially since there is a violated Injunction for Protection, but I know better. As soon as our fathers work their magic, the tune will change. Even down here.

They ask me about the restraining order, or "Injunction for Protection" as it is formally called, since Detective Mora seems to think the history I recounted should've called for one of the specific kinds, but Robin's is the standard one. I vaguely remember that I didn't qualify for "domestic violence" since Robin and I never lived together - my weekend stays did not legally count. There was also one for "dating violence" but since I was still a minor at the time, my mother had to sign it on my behalf and to qualify for "dating violence", or even "sexual violence", she would have had to have witnessed one of the incidents, which obviously wasn't the case.
I don't know if it would have been different if the Mayor and District Attorney weren't in Robin's pocket, but it is what it is. Detective Mora gives some information I scarcely register. Sam asks a question and the other detective responds. I feel strangely numb. As if it isn't me sitting here in this room. As if I'm watching the scene from somewhere else. Like I'm on the other side of the two way mirror.

This is how I felt last year too, during the aftermath. In some kind of perpetual daze. Dr. Schall called it a coping mechanism, and perhaps he's right. Perhaps my mind has read the symmetry of my situation - sitting here in a police precinct - and triggered the familiar physical effect.

Thank God for Sam, I think idly. At least he's paying attention, surely asking the right questions, while I watch the pitiful girl with the bruised cheek and tired eyes as she tries to draw strength from the beautiful boy beside her.

"You should know that Mr. Forbes denies he knowingly approached you." Mora starts, but Sam interrupts.

"He didn't approach her. He stalked and assaulted her," Sam corrects her. "Knowledgeably," he adds resentfully.

"I understand, Mr. Caplan. I'm only informing you of his story so that you are aware and prepared," Mora replies, but all I hear is that Robin has his own story, and all I know is that the last time Robin told stories about me, he was the one everyone believed.

Mora continues, addressing me. "Forbes claims he believed you to be in New York. That he just happened to come to Miami and ran into you. He claims you came on to him, and that he was receptive, but that you became angry at some point during the encounter and began to strike him. He maintains that when Mr. Caplan came upon the two of you in the alley, he was simply trying to restrain you from assaulting him, and that Mr. Caplan proceeded to attack him and Tucker Green joined him."

My jaw drops and my eyes widen in horror; Sam's entire body stiffen beside me.

"I... he-" I choke on my own words.

Sam leans forward, placing his elbows on the table, but I squeeze his thigh to stop him before he loses his temper.

"He's lyin'. It's what he does. He waited for me to leave the bar in that alley and then-"

"We already have your statement, Aurora," Mora assures me.

"Rory," I correct her, though I already asked her not to call me Aurora last night.

"Yes. Right. Rory. I only wanted you to be aware of his story. I understand it is upsetting."

"He's been followin' me," I murmur.

"What do you mean? That isn't in the report," Detective Karanek says.

"He stalked her," Sam says heatedly through a clenched jaw, clearly working to keep his control.

"When I screamed for Sam, Robin asked if that was the name of the..." I trail off, hesitating, embarrassed by Robin's description - and the accuracy of it - and when I continue my voice has dropped to little more than a whisper. "He asked if Sam was the guy I'd been followin' around - like he'd been watchin' me."

"Did he say that he had followed you?" Mora asks.

"Um, no, he, uh... just implied it, I guess," I mutter dejectedly, aware that his words are not enough to prove that he did in fact follow me - not in court, and therefore, not at all. The detectives exchange a glance, confirming that Robin will at least get away with stalking me, and I wonder if there's anything he won't get away with.

For the first time I think I'd rather just get back to New York as soon as possible. Why did I think it was a good idea to finish out this vacation? What the hell is wrong with me? Robin is here! What did I think? That he'd stay locked up? Surely by now I should know better.

"One more thing, Mr. Caplan," Detective Karanek rips me out of my epiphany.

"Mr. Forbes maintains that not only did you attack him while he was restraining Miss Pine from assaulting him, but that you continued to beat him while he was down, that Tucker Green did so as well, and that after you escorted Miss Pine from the alley, you returned and began to beat him all over again while threatening his life."

Karanek says this as if it's the most casual thing in the world - what he's accusing Sam of, what it would mean if Robin's accusations are taken seriously.

Sam grits his teeth, like he's holding back from saying what he really wants to say, and I silently implore him to defend himself. To deny Robin's story. But deep down I know that at least part of it is true.

When Sam remains silent, I can't help but come to his defense. "Like I said, he's lyin'. Sam would never... he didn't-

"With all due respect, detectives, I gave my statement last night. I realize I'm not from around here, but I'm sure this is not the first time you've had a violent offender attempt to blame the victim or her friends for his crime. And I'm sure you wouldn't give such a blatant attempt at this any credence." Sam comes across cool and collected, like an attorney, and I blink at him, wondering where he learned it from. It's exactly what my parents would have
said, would have advised him to answer if either of them were his counsel. Of course, my father is probably counseling Robin, and my mother is still in the dark about last night.

"Mr. Caplan, our job is to investigate all claims before drawing conclusions, with all due respect," Mora replies. "But yes, we do have your statement. Again, at this point we are simply informing you of Mr. Forbes's story."

At this point? I swallow anxiously and Sam takes my hand, squeezing once. What if they believe Robin? Sam and Tuck could get in real trouble. Because of me. They could get arrested! I try to take deep breaths, but I'm too worried. If Sam gets arrested he could end up with a criminal record. It could destroy his college plans, his life.

"He's lyin'," I repeat shakily. "Robin. He came after me, he tried to kill me! Sam just... he saved me. What was he supposed to do?" I choke out, "Just let Robin-"

My anxious rambling is cut off when Sam stands suddenly, his chair scraping loudly against the concrete floor. I look up at him, but he doesn't meet my eyes. "Can I speak with you in private for a moment?" Sam asks the detectives.

I blink up at him, completely bewildered, but both detectives stand and casually follow Sam out of the interview room and before I know it, I'm sitting alone in here like some freaking criminal.

It's barely minutes before they return. Sam takes his seat beside me again and Detective Mora continues as if there was no interruption. She explains that there's no reason for me to attend the arraignment and that they will contact me when they need me if there is a trial. Sam asks why there wouldn't be one, and Karanek explains that if Robin is "smart" he will "plead out", and assures Sam that considering the circumstances and the violated Injunction for Protection, he doubts Robin will avoid jail time.

I can't help my snort.

"He's lyin'," I repeat shakily. "Robin. He came after me, he tried to kill me! Sam just... he saved me. What was he supposed to do?" I choke out, "Just let Robin-"

"He's not getting away with it, Ror."

This time I do suppress my snort, but Sam knows me too well. He laces his fingers with mine and begins to rub small circles on the back of my hand.

"No. Sam. Robin will get the minimal possible punishment. It's just how it works for people like him. But soon I'll be back in New York, and I can get back to my new life away from him. They're already accusin' you of assaultin' him! I don't want you in trouble and Robin's not worth it." I'm not worth it, I add silently. "And how are you so calm when he's accusin' you of attackin' him? You sounded like a freakin' lawyer."

Sam tucks a wayward lock of hair behind my ear. "No, Rory. That's not how it's going to go down this time. Don't you dare worry about me. My father, for the abusive, drunk asshole he was, is also a high powered attorney. I know the system, too. We are going to figure this out, you and me, together." He takes a deep breath before pressing his lips softly to my forehead. "I love you."

He wraps his strong arms around me and hauls me onto his lap, hugging me to his chest. I let him. I let the security I feel in his embrace wash over me and fool me into believing him. Into believing that somehow, for once, Robin will be punished for what he's done to me. That I will somehow, at some point, be able to put this horrible history behind me. But my scar stings with a phantom pain, reminding me of Robin's words and of their underlying truth. That I wear his mark on my soul just as surely as I wear it on my skin. That no matter how much I heal, no matter how frantically I try to give myself to Sam, a part of me will always belong to him.

The only question left is how much of myself has been forever tainted, and is there enough left of me for Sam. Enough to make him happy, to outweigh all of the bad that comes along with Robin's constant shadow. Enough to be worth it.
But I'm afraid I already know the answer. That I've known it all along.

"Hey... why did you ask to talk to them alone?" I ask in a whisper. I resettled back onto my own chair, still in his embrace, and pull back to look at him.

His hand slides up to cup my jaw. "I just didn't want them upsetting you any more. You've been through enough."

"Me? They were accusing you?"

"They were repeating his bullshit, and it was upsetting you, Ror. You know what they said to me out there?"

He nods toward the door.

I shake my head.

"I told them if they were going to charge me with something they should do it so I can call my lawyer, and if they had any more questions they could ask me in private. Karanek told me that, hypothetically, someone was to beat the living shit out of a rapist who was attacking his girl, theoretically, it isn't the kind of case they spend their time on down here in Florida. So don't worry, okay? Not about me."

Sam stands and holds his hand out to me. For a split second I just look up at him and soak in his perfection. Tall, lean and muscular. Strong, but protective in his strength. And his stunning face with its unnatural symmetry, sculpted jaw and defined cheekbones. But more than anything, those sparkling midnight blues - dark, hypnotic, and adoring.

"Our friends all went shopping in South Beach and there's still an hour or so of sun left, let's forget about that piece of shit for now and go make out on the beach," he offers with an irresistible half-smirk. An offer no girl alive could refuse, least of all me.

I let him lead me out of the interview room, allowing the alien feeling of hopefulness to seep in. Sam's hand holds mine tightly, giving me the illusion that I'm really all his, that he will make everything okay.

And then I get the wakeup call I needed.

****

Two middle aged men dressed smartly in suits stalk purposely through the precinct and I freeze, my face draining of color so quickly that Sam takes a couple more steps before he even realizes I've turned into a terrified statue.

They don't see me. Not yet. But I can't close my eyes, can't count, can't do a single damn thing besides stand here and wait for whatever will come.

"What's wrong, baby girl?" Sam's worried voice barely registers. I can't imagine what I must look like right now, but I can't tell him I'm okay, I can't lie. I can't even look at him, because right then the men's gazes fall upon me and I can't even breathe.

"Aurora!" my father calls from across the room. Beside him, Mayor Forbes remains silent, but his hostile glare holds me in place.

They approach me together, and instinctively I unfreeze and take several unconscious steps back. Sam steps in front of me like a shield, but still, I can't tear my gaze from my father's.

"Aurora, what is wrong with you? You need to come with me right now and take back your ridiculous story! Haven't you put the poor boy through enough?" he accuses, ignoring Sam.

"I've put Robin through enough?" he accuses, ignoring Sam.

"I'm Aurora's father."

"I'm Rory's boyfriend, who is the hell are you?" Sam matches my father's tone, though I suspect he knows exactly who he's speaking to.

Still, Mayor Forbes speaks only with his eyes, but they speak volumes, and it is impossible not to feel every bit of his contempt.

"I'm Aurora's father." My father says this as if it's some trump card. As if this gives him some all-powerful claim over me. I can't see Sam's face since he is positioned in front of me, but I see his entire body tense and I can feel his revulsion for the man before him.

"I see," Sam replies. "And I suppose you're here to help Rory's rapist get away with trying to do it again? That's what you do, isn't it?"
I gasp, shocked that Sam has the nerve to say such a thing. It is the first time anyone has called my father out so blatantly.

"How dare you? You have no idea what you're talkin' about, boy!" My father takes a deep breath as if to calm himself, and then looks Sam over curiously. "Look, son, I understand. My daughter is beautiful, and she sure has a way of gettin' to boys. But she has serious issues. Do you have any idea what she did to the last boy that fell for her? Don't fall for her lies, you'll be her next victim," he warns.

"Rory is the only victim here, and you're the one falling for lies. How could you? You're her father! You're supposed to protect her!"

"Son-"


Mayor Forbes bristles uncomfortably. "I don't have time for this. I'm goin' to find the lead detective," he murmurs to my father who nods without taking his eyes off Sam. Mayor Forbes walks away, presumably to find Mora and work his magic, and I know it's only a matter of time before Robin is released and I'm the one being accused of God only knows what.

"You're makin' a big mistake," my dad warns Sam before returning his attention to me. "Aurora, you need to come with me right now and tell them Robin didn't assault you. You never understand the implications of your stories." He makes to go around Sam and reaches out to take my forearm so I can do as he says.

But before I can even react, Sam shoves at my father's chest so he stumbles back, away from me, but my father steps forward again, red-faced with fury.

"You have three seconds to get the hell outta my way, son!" My father threatens, poking Sam in his chest.

"I am not your fucking son, and Rory isn't yours either, and you have three seconds to back. The fuck. Off!" Sam growls back, and all I can do is look on in horror as Sam swats my father's hand away from his chest, my father lifts his hand as if to strike, but not before Sam's fist decks him in the jaw at full force.

My father's head swings sideways and he wobbles for a split second before he becomes enraged all over again and grabs Sam by the shirt. I choke on my own breath and back away in horror until I feel the wall behind me, halting my escape. I am trapped in a nightmare, watching Sam relive the worst experiences of his life - being struck and abused - only this time not by his father, but by my own.

But Sam is no little boy, and he wrenches free, pushing my father away, before Sam, obviously the stronger of the two, throws another forceful punch. The two grapple for what feels like forever before officers swarm them and pull them apart.

I can't breathe. My chest tightens dangerously, a cold sweat blanketing my skin, and I know it's only a matter of time. I hastily shove my hand into my bag, luckily finding my pills immediately, and I swallow one dry.

Numb. I need to feel numb.

The torrent of activity is a blur. Sam's arms are twisted behind his back as an officer slaps handcuffs on him. I'm vaguely aware of my father murmuring accusations while showing his palms in an offer of pacifism before straightening his tie. He is not handcuffed, but he is led off by a different officer nonetheless. But he takes a moment to look back over his shoulder and shoots me that glare. It is the same look he gave me the morning I told him about Robin. He is warning me, but though I can do nothing more than gape back at him, I will not heed his warning. Not this time. If Robin gets away with what he's done, it won't be because I was too weak to tell the truth.

Sam is taken away and I am left here, frozen and alone.

It's a long time before I pull myself together enough to act. My worst fears have all been realized. My father is here to save Robin, he hit Sam, and Sam is in trouble - in handcuffs, and could even be arrested for all I know.

Reality floods in, bitter and unforgiving, as if to taunt me for doubting it for even a moment. I am a selfish girl. I knew better.

But now I know, beyond a shadow of any doubt, what I have to do. And so I rally and begin to fix what I've broken.

****

My first call is to my mother. It is long and torturous and riddled with tears and anger, but she agrees to my request as I knew she would. In fact, if I hadn't asked, I'm pretty sure she would have insisted on it anyway.

My next call is to Carl. I need her and Tuck. I need them to help me figure out how to help Sam, but before they even arrive, Detective Mora informs me that an officer witnessed the altercation and neither party will be charged. I breathe a sigh of relief, but as I take in her pitying expression, I know what is coming.

"He's gonna get out, isn't he?" I ask softly. I know she knows I mean Robin.

She offers me a weak smile. "I hope not, Rory."
I know what that means. She believes me, like Sheriff Chipley did, but my dad and Mayor Forbes, they'd have gone over her head, above her pay grade. It is completely out of her hands.

Carl and Tuck rush into the precinct and make a beeline for me. Carl pulls me in for a hug before I meet her worried eyes. I tell Tuck that Sam is being released any minute and ask to talk to Carl in private. I need her help, too.

She doesn't approve of my plan, but she has no choice but to do what I ask. She won't change my mind, not after I had to witness Sam collide head-on with my past, and end up as collateral damage. No, I have finally found my clarity and am done being selfish. I love Sam, so fucking much, and I will not make the same mistake with him that I made with Cam. If I have to let him go to avoid losing him completely, then that's what I'll do.

Sam's expression is unreadable as he strides towards us from whatever unknown room he'd been led off to earlier. He does his handshake-half hug thing with Tuck and nods to Carl before his eyes lock with mine. He says nothing to me, but he doesn't break our gaze for a second, like he's trying to get some kind of read on me, or trying to tell me something, I don't know which.

"You good, man?" Tuck asks and Sam nods once. "Good, let's get the fuck outta here."

We all get into a cab, Tuck taking the front passenger seat and I am sandwiched between Sam and Carl. No one says anything, and I fix my gaze on my own lap and twist my fingers nervously. Sam stares straight ahead for the most part, but I can feel him casting me glances, like he's trying to feel me out.

Tuck does the same thing to Sam, intermittently glancing back as if to check if his friend is really okay. Sam's face inches closer to mine until he leans into my ear.

"I'm sorry," he breathes.

I shake my head, barely perceptibly, but I know Sam sees. He has nothing to be sorry for, and he certainly shouldn't be apologizing to me. But I don't know what to say, if there's anything I can say, that will make this easier. So I continue to say nothing at all.

Instead, I grant myself this cab ride to soak in his love, because I know it is all I have left. I scoot over the inch that separates us and cuddle against him, leaning my head onto his shoulder. I feel his entire body sag with relief, and feel such guilt that I know how short lived it will be. Sam slides his arm around my shoulder, pulling me more firmly to his side and kisses my hair, inhaling deeply, as if scenting me.

I close my eyes for a moment and try to suspend time. I vaguely notice Tuck watching us out of the corner of his eye, his brow furrowed as if trying to work out the depth of our connection when we have known each other barely a few months, and only just admitted to being something more than friends.

When we arrive at the hotel, Carl takes her cue to distract Tuck while I let Sam lead me up to his room. As I watch Sam walk through the kitchen area of his suite and start to down a bottle of water, I gather all the strength I have left in my broken self.

"Sam..."

He secures the cap on the water bottle and gives me his full attention. Vaguely I think we should sit down, but I'm too overcome with determined energy to do anything but nervously shift from foot to foot in the middle of the room.

"We need to talk," I begin.

"I'm so fucking sorry, Ror. I don't know what came over me. Your dad... I just saw red." "Sam, I don't wanna talk about my father, okay?" I cut him off. I can't bear to hear any more of his apologies, not when I'm the one who's to blame for everything that's gone wrong.

I watch his features shift as he detects that something is up with me. Something more than being upset over his fight with my father, or over any of the other terrible events of the past twenty-four hours. I see his concern, his fear, but I also see his determination. That he will fix it, that he can save me. And that is what I must overcome. Because he can't. I've known this all along and yet at the same time I've finally just realized it.

"I can't do this," I force out.

"What do you mean?" Sam asks carefully.

I take a deep breath and then gesture between the two of us. "This. Us. I'm sorry, Sam. So sorry, but I- I just can't." I want to come up with something better, with some eloquent explanation. Some magic words to undo that past two days. To change us back into just friends, though in the back of my mind I fear that's never really what we were.

"You're serious?" Sam asks simply, his jaw tense and his brow furrowed in that gorgeous way that makes my heart break even more, not only for myself but for him.

"You said... "Just say it, Rory! "You said if I couldn't handle it, I could just tell you, and we would go back to bein' friends," I shakily remind him.

"I... I did say that," Sam reluctantly agrees.
"Did you mean it?" I fight back tears, mustering all my strength, because there is nothing I could do in this moment that would be more selfish than to cry.

Sam hesitates, and I know him well enough to know he's holding back his own emotions, surely for my benefit. "I... Yeah, of course I meant it, Ror." His voice cracks on my name and I suppress my wince at his pain.

Every instinct I have is telling me this is wrong. That we should be together. Every cell in my body hurts being even just a few feet away from him, every fiber of my being desperate to be back in his arms, to feel his lips on mine.

But this is not for me, I remind myself, this is for him.

"But I think you're wrong, Ror. You can handle more than you think. I..." he trails off defeatedly, vaguely shaking his head. I don't think he can bring himself to give me a pep talk about my strength after the past twenty four hours. Or maybe he's finally realized how weak I truly am. I snicker silently at the irony - that he may finally recognize my fragility when I'm finally actually exercising strength in letting him go.

"Look, I'm gonna go back to New York," I murmur.

Sam looks as if he's about to argue, but mercifully he jumps to accepting my decision instead.

"Okay," he says, "I'll go with you."

I shake my head. "No way, Sam-"

"Yes, baby girl. You're not going alone, and whether you want to be with me or not, I'm still your best friend, or is that over too?" he asks, his tone mildly accusatory. His words startle me, because he does have a point, but no way am I letting him forfeit the rest of his vacation when I've already ruined so much.

"My mom can fly down," I murmur, trying to hide the lie, because my mother is already en route, planning to meet me at the airport in just a few hours to fly back to New York,

"That's really not necessary, Ror. If I stay here I'm just going to worry about you. We can fly out together tomorrow. It's only a day or so early anyway," he argues.

I don't bother fighting him. "Let's just figure it out tomorrow, okay? I just want to take a shower and go to bed," I lie, hoping he hasn't yet figured out the significance of my lip biting. I need to pack and get to the airport. Carl will ride with me there and then come back to the hotel. Tuck will be at Sam's suite soon to do whatever it is boys do to get their mind off of girls.

"Okay," Sam mutters, but his eyes narrow in skepticism, and I question if he's buying my bullshit at all. I've never been a good liar. Even as a child, my parents could always detect if I was hiding something, and Sam knows me better than anyone now.

He walks cautiously toward me, and I don't back away. I let him hug me, sagging into his embrace, and tell myself it's just a friendly hug. Just a friendly inhale of his incredible, masculine scent. A friendly awareness of the muscle and sinew of his arms and chest. A friendly wave of love and desire that threatens to overwhelm my senses.

I choke back tears, grateful I can hide my face in his tee shirt while I pull myself together.

"You're not going to sleep here, are you." It doesn't come out like a question.

"I... I can't, Sam."

He pulls away enough to look down at me, but doesn't release me. He tenderly brushes his fingers over my injured cheek. "But what about your dreams?"

"I have to get used to sleepin' alone again anyway," I murmur sadly, in awe that it has only been two nights when it feels like a lifetime. I swallow nervously and tell myself to do a better job disguising my tone. He's supposed to think this is what you want, I remind myself.

"Ror..."

Whatever he wants to say, I don't let get said. The wrong words, or the right ones, depending on how you look at it, could be my undoing.

I twist out of his embrace and mutter a forced goodbye, hoping he doesn't read too much into the fact that I said goodbye and not goodnight.

I walk through our adjoining doors and close mine securely behind me. The soft slam resonates in my bones. It's far easier to close a literal door than figurative one.

****

It's less than thirty minutes before Carl knocks tentatively at my door and I let her in. I'm nearly finished packing by then. She reports that Tuck is next door, being there for Sam. Whatever that means for guys. I wonder if I'm being presumptuous in even thinking that he'd be upset and in need of support. Just because I am. Just because I'm fucking heartbroken. I have Carl, and then I'll have my mom. Otherwise I don't know how strong I'd be in seeing through this whole 'letting Sam go' thing.

My heart hurts. It does. I know it sounds trite, but it does, it hurts.
But it's not just my heart. Emptiness haunts my insides, unsettling my stomach. Like something's not right and there's no way to make it right. Like hopelessness.

*It's grief,* I realize belatedly, and I feel guilty that I'm feeling even the smallest piece of what I felt when I lost Cam.

*I'm not losing Sam,* I remind myself, he just can't be mine anymore, and the whole point is so I don't lose him. It's a strange contradiction, giving him up to avoid losing him, and I'm so confused by the juxtaposition of right and wrong. What I intelligently know to be right feels wrong and what I know to be wrong feels right.

Carl watches me warily while I finish packing and I try to remain numb. Every now and then I swipe at my cheeks to banish rogue tears, and if Carl notices, she doesn't mention it.

Finally I grab the hotel stationary from the writing desk and write Sam a note. I don't want him to worry when he wakes up and realizes I'm gone. Carl will tell Tuck I left once I'm on the plane and it's up to Tuck to tell Sam whenever he thinks it best.

I hear muffled voices talking in hushed tones coming from next door, but don't bother trying to make out the conversation. It really is none of my business.

I rewrite the note no fewer than four times. In the end, I simply tell him that my mother flew in to retrieve me and that I didn't want to wake him to say goodbye. I thank him for everything he's done for me and for his support in dealing with Robin. And for saving my life. I tell him that he is still my best friend in the world and I love him for it. I beg him to try to enjoy what's left of his spring break. And I apologize.

A loud bang crashes against the wall, instantly followed by the unmistakable sound of shattering glass, and Carl and I both startle. My eyes dart to Carl's and I second-guess my decision for the hundredth time. Carl offers me a sympathetic smile.

"Anger issues," she shrugs. "He'll be fine."

"Yeah... yeah, you're right. Of course he will," I murmur.

*But will I?*

I slip the note half under our adjoining door, not wanting him to notice it until later, or preferably tomorrow morning.

"Come on," I urge Carl. "Let's get the hell out of here before I change my mind."

Carl stands and opens the door so I can roll out my luggage. "Maybe if you're so close to changing your mind about Cap it's because you're not sure you're doing the right thing..."

"Well I know the right thing for Sam isn't what he went through the past couple of days. Would you stay with Tuck if it meant he could end up hurt or arrested?" I ask her pointedly. "Or worse," I add more quietly, knowing she won't get the reference to Cam, but my words are more for myself than for Carl.

She doesn't answer me. She knows she couldn't possibly put herself in my shoes. She could never understand what it's like to wear my scars. To have to live with my choices, and their consequences. And Robin's perpetual shadow. To have no way of knowing when it might find me again, or what might happen the next time it does. But I have to do everything I can to get the target off of Sam's back, and to do that, I need to put enough distance between us so that he won't become collateral damage in the disaster that is my life.

I leave any remnants of Normal Rory behind - she was only ever an illusion anyway - and ride to the airport in a melancholic silence. Carl holds my hand, giving me a supportive squeeze every now and then.

My mom is waiting when we arrive at Miami International. She is disheveled and emotional and reminiscent of the version of her I remember from a year ago - from the aftermath - not the strong woman who in recent months had begun to heal along with me.

We say an emotional goodbye to Carl, and on the flight home, I tell my mother everything. Everything that happened, not only with Robin, but with Sam. She doesn't offer me advice, only love and support, while she tries with all she has to comfort my broken heart like only a mother could. I know she's in some semblance of shock, and I suspect it has more to do with Sam and me than what Robin did.

She whispers soothing words and promises that everything will be okay. But I know from experience that some wounds, they're permanent. That even if they heal, they scar so profoundly that you are never, ever okay again.

*Not The End*

####
Read what happened from Sam’s point of view in *ReCAP*, Book 1.5 of the Something More series!

Read what happens next with Rory & Sam in Book 2 *OKAY*, Available NOW!

Help readers find the *Something More* series! Please consider posting a review for *NORMAL!*
About the Author

Danielle Pearl lives in New Jersey with her husband, two delicious little boys, and one teapot yorkie. She is a life-long book enthusiast who has been writing ever since she could hold a pencil, predestined to write romance novels after having been named after Danielle Steel by her book-loving mother.

Follow Danielle on Twitter (@DaniPearlAuthor)

And Instagram @DaniellePearlAuthor

Become a fan on Facebook

Check Danielle out on Goodreads

Swing by her website: DaniellePearl.com

Want to learn more about the inspiration behind NORMAL? Click here!

Reading Group Guide – Discussion questions for NORMAL
Acknowledgments

Normal is the first novel I published, but certainly not the first I wrote. The woman to blame—who bought me those blank-paged journals as a child that never ended up filled with anything other than pure fiction, who enlisted her magical nagging powers that she'd probably refer to as "encouragement", and mixed in a little expert Jewish guilt—yep, you guessed it—she's my mother, Margo. From naming me after her favorite novelist, to slipping those random you should be a writers, and you were born to writes, into any random, completely unrelated conversation, my mother's unwavering support, although invariably rewarded with an eye-roll at best, is without a doubt, the reason I am here writing acknowledgments for a completed novel today. She also did me the favor of marrying my father, Jay, whom no one can deny contributed at least the vast majority of my genetics, including that Defiant spirit I've so often been accused of.

I also must thank Lana, more mother than in-law, unpaid nanny and life saver extraordinaire, without whom there is no question this novel simply wouldn't exist. The same goes for Mike, my go-to babysitter and carpooler, handyman and engineer, who creates time for me by taking on everything himself. They are, without question, the elusive X in the equation:

X + two pre-school aged boys = Completed Novel (Sorry guys, they're all mine).

To Drew "Drewdle", who will forever hold the honor of being the first person to read Normal (or any of my novels, in fact), and whose kind words and support gave me courage to take the steps from wannabe writer to published author.

To Rebecca and Gabi, the sisters who never hold back their opinions, and on whom I can always count for brutal honesty.

Normal was inspired by an article in a blog I happened upon several years ago, the source and author of which, for the life of me, I cannot remember. What stood out even more than the blog itself—which was a compelling story of courage and strength by a teen victim of abuse and sexual violence—were the readers' comments. Comment upon comment of victim blaming and she should have just dumped hims, as if it was all black and white, quite frankly, horrified me. So some time later, I decided to write the gray, and Rory's story was born.

Thank you for reading!

Continue reading the Something More series in Book Two, Okay, available now at all ebook retailers!