

Chapter One – Not What You’d Expect

My heart started beating faster as he moved through the dark house toward his room. I could almost smell the filth even though it was only my mind’s eye with him. As he opened the door, my breath got caught in my throat... but it wasn’t what I expected; a few holes in the wall, but rather plain for a kid accused of atrocities. I allowed myself to relax a little as he grabbed a pencil and a paper from his drawer. Probably just doing homework. He’s just as misunderstood as me, I mused, moving closer to see what he was working on. I couldn’t make sense of the schematics he was mulling over, but after a couple of added marks, he quickly stood up and walked with purpose to the backyard. I affixed my view to peer down over his shoulder, like I was literally walking in his footsteps as we made our way past the small mounds of dirt to the shack in the far corner of the yard. I swallowed hard as he stuck the key in the padlocks and opened the squeaky door. I should go. I need to go. But I didn’t. I moved with him as he walked past the metal table towards the cages of whimpering and hissing animals. His hand moved towards the quiet, cowering one, then stopped before the door opened, turned around and stared right in my absent eyes, both challenging and threatening me; somehow he knew I was there.

“Ashlyn, we’re leaving for work. You need to be awake so you’re not late for school!” I heard the door close and I knew my parents were gone. My head was pounding and I reached up to feel the expected blood dripping from my nose.

“Why today?” I complained as I reached for the tissues and Tylenol I kept next to my bed. It wasn’t common that I relived that nightmare, but it’d happened enough times over the years that recovery was an old habit.

I made my way to the shower, stepping in before the water was warm, hoping the shock would help me snap out of the dark place I’d been, the dream of the last time I’d ever dared use my gift on a person. It had been more than fourteen years since I discovered my gift to influence the decisions of animals and people, and nearly five years since that day when I thought I could help Rick Thompson, the day I vowed to never again use my power on a human.

There was an obvious energy in the warm October air brought on by that evening’s Homecoming dance. By the time fourth period arrived, I had almost recovered from the dream. I walked into my senior English class and took my usual seat in the middle of the room. Jason Harrison would arrive shortly and assume his newly acquired seat next to me. He switched seats with Amber Smith as soon as I accepted his invitation to go to the dance. Jason was an okay guy; a lot of girls thought he was really hot, but mostly I think they liked him because he was considered a “bad boy”. I hadn’t really cared if I went to the dance or not, but Mom got excited when I told her that I had been asked and insisted on taking me shopping. As we shopped, my enthusiasm grew.

I got anxious when I started noticing people whispering and pointing at me as they came through the door. It felt like junior high all over again, when I was still using my gift and people somehow sensed I was different. Seven years without influencing people... seven years since the Rick Thompson encounter and I’m still haunted by it.

Jason entered the room and I started to smile, but then noticed his hand was intertwined with Abigail Water’s. People stared at me to see my reaction. I was dumbfounded. I expected this kind of thing from Abigail; she always seemed to be out to destroy the little happiness I found in life. But I thought things were pretty stable with Jason. We hadn’t been on any official dates, but he had driven me to and from school all week. Since I didn’t have a lot invested in this relationship, I should have easily shrugged it off like the rest of my failed relationships and moved on with my life. But for some reason, maybe it was my growing anticipation for the dance or that I was starting to allow myself to like Jason, it really affected me.

Tears welled in my eyes. I gathered my books and walked up to them. "What does this mean?"

"Me and Abby are sorta dating now."

"*Sort of dating?!*" My anger only increased the water gathering in my eyes.

"Nothing personal, but Abby seemed like a better prospect, so I snatched up the opportunity when I heard she dumped John this morning." He had a smug expression on his face, but hers was simply triumphant.

I couldn't take it anymore. The tears were about to crest my eyes, so I turned towards the door with my head down. I didn't have the voice to tell whoever it was I bumped into on my way out that I was sorry. I just needed to get some fresh air and to be away from everyone.

I ran as fast as I could until I slammed through the double doors leading out to the atrium by the cafeteria where I collapsed on a semi-secluded table. I couldn't leave school; I didn't have my car because Jason had driven me. Just thinking about it made a hysteric laugh slip through my lips. I was utterly humiliated and disappointed in myself for letting some stupid guy make me react this way. So I laid my head down in my arms and sat at that table the entire period unbothered.

When I heard the bell ring, I wiped the residual tears off my cheeks and pulled on my sunglasses. I felt like I was gawking at a traffic accident, but I couldn't keep my eyes off the doors that I knew Jason and Abigail would be walking out. They came out hand in hand, laughing and walking in my direction. At that same moment, I noticed a few birds flying in the area. I made a quick decision and used my gift to divert the birds to fly over the happy couple.

"Oh... my... GOD!" Abigail screamed. She had been hit by bird poop on her head and left arm. One of the droppings on her head dripped and was sliding down her cheek. It was brilliant! Jason snickered and was quickly hit by Abigail's large purse. By the time Kara found me with her lunch, I was smiling.

"What's got you in such a great mood? I heard a rumor that Jason dumped you for Abigail." She groaned when she said Abigail's name. Kara, too, had been a victim of Abigail's cruelty. In fact, that's how she and I became such good friends. I saw Kara sitting at a table in the cafeteria in seventh grade with tears streaming down her face. She had recently moved to the school and didn't have any friends yet. Abigail took advantage of this and started picking on her every chance she had. That day, her and her cronies were flicking fries with ketchup on them at Kara. I glared at Abigail and took a seat next to Kara. We instantly bonded and have been best friends ever since.

"Did you see what just happened to Abigail? Some birds just pooped all over her! It was hilarious!"

"So it is true that Jason is with her now. I'm so sorry. I know you were looking forward to going to the dance with him." She gave me a comforting hug. "You should come with me and Keith. It won't be a big deal. I promise we'll be on our best behavior." She held up two fingers, indicating "Scout's Honor". She and Keith had been dating since the beginning of the school year. Things were pretty serious between them, but I tried to tune out all the details.

"Absolutely not! I *REALLY* don't want to be the third wheel. The tags are still on my dress; I'll just have Mom take them back to the store. Maybe I'll rent some movies to watch tonight. There's that comedy that everyone said was hilarious when it in the theaters that I still need to see." I didn't want her to know how much I was affected by this breakup, especially since I was in a much better mood because of the bird incident.

At that moment, Abigail was coming out of the bathroom, complaining to anyone who would listen. I could just barely see her, but I knew Jason was there, too. Someone tall walked up to them and started saying something that was upsetting Abigail more. Half the students were getting to their feet, so I stood, too, just in time to see a fist connect with Jason's abdomen. The assailant turned to leave and looked right at me. It was Brian Turner. It looked like he gave me a slight nod and took off in the opposite direction before the guards showed up. I moved in a little closer to try to hear Jason's account

as he tried to regain his composure enough to talk to the guards. To my surprise, he didn't divulge his attacker's name. He caught my eye and scowled at me.

"Was that Brian Turner?" Kara sounded as astonished as I felt.

"I *think* so." I had a couple of classes with him, but we've never had a real conversation. Of course, I didn't have *real* conversations with many people. From what I knew of him, Brian was fairly quiet and had just a small circle of friends. He was a great looking guy, but I had never seen him with a girlfriend. Then again, I tried to not pay attention to the social scene at school. He had dark brown hair that was always perfectly styled without looking like he put too much effort in it. He generally dressed in jeans and shirts, which probably understated his apparently well toned body. Upon reflection, I was actually pretty surprised he didn't have a waiting list of girls eager to date him.

"He seems like the quiet, brooding type, but definitely hot," Kara said interrupting my thoughts, as Keith walked up.

"My ears are burning. Is somebody talking about me?" he asked as he slid next to Kara at the table.

Kara turned red, but recovered quickly and gave Keith a kiss on the lips. "Of course I was talking about you, silly!"

"I think I'll go freshen up before Calculus," I groaned as I stood up from the table, not that they noticed I was there anymore. I hadn't bothered to get anything to eat, but I wasn't hungry. My thoughts were swirling about everything that just happened. What *had* just happened? Why would Brian attack Jason like that? He caught my eye before he took off, but could that really have been about me? I felt a little flutter in my stomach as I considered the idea.

I rushed into the bathroom and splashed water on my face. I looked a little tired, but not too terrible considering everything that had happened. I had to survive two more classes and I could escape to my room for the entire weekend.

I saw Kara as I hurried to my locker to get my math book. "Hey, do you think Keith would mind dropping me off at my house this afternoon? I don't think I could stand to ride the bus home."

"It shouldn't be a problem, but I'll ask him and let you know next period, okay?"

"Thanks," I muttered as I shut my locker and walked quickly to Calculus. My stomach made a horrible noise and I felt nauseous and shaky, probably from my lack of lunch. *Maybe I could use it as an excuse to get out of class*, I thought. So I put on my best sick face and took my seat in Mr. Dillinger's class.

I could hear people whispering around me and started to legitimately feel sick. I put my head on my desk to enjoy the coolness and tried to get up the nerve to ask Mr. Dillinger for a pass to the nurse's office when someone came through the door holding a piece of paper. Mr. Dillinger nodded and called me up to the front as the boy left the class.

"Bring your things, Ashlyn. Ms. Swanson would like to see you." Ms. Swanson was the new school counselor. I was anxious about why she would want to see me. Had my breakup really gone around the school and she was concerned about me? I didn't think I'd ever given anyone reason to worry about me. I wanted out of class, but I couldn't bear the thought of having to "share my feelings" with the young Ms. Swanson as she tried to establish credibility with the students in the school. I gathered my things with a sigh and took the pass from Mr. Dillinger.

I strolled casually down the hall, not in a hurry to get to the office. As I turned a corner to head out the door, Brian was standing against the wall. He put his finger up to his lips and motioned me to follow. I felt my stomach about to make another horrible noise, but then realized it was butterflies I was feeling, not the sickly hunger from earlier. Something about his presence excited me. So I followed him outside and around to a planter on the side of the building, my eyebrows furrowed in confusion.

"I thought you could use some rescuing," he started, his voice very kind and reassuring.

I nodded. "Yeah, but I have to go talk to Ms. Swanson," I said waiving the pass.

He smirked and my heart skipped a beat. *What is going on with me?* “Don’t worry about that. She owed me a favor and I thought you could probably use a break from the rest of the day.”

“So I’m free to go home?” That was the best I could come up with. I think I lost about fifty IQ points in those few seconds.

“Yeah, if you want. Or...” he paused, “if you’re not doing anything, I was hoping you might come with me somewhere.”

I motioned for him to lead the way and followed him like an obedient puppy to his vehicle. I figured he would take me to get a bite to eat and then drop me off at my house and I’d get a head start on moping in my room for the weekend. Anything was better than being at school.

As we approached the parking lot, two girls huddled together were laughing and pointing at me. As much as I wanted to ignore them, I knew the humility I felt was far from over. We approached his fairly new looking black two-door Jeep. The weather outside was warm with a gentle breeze, so it didn’t surprise me when the top was off his. He casually reached in the passenger side to open the door and shrugged. “The handle’s broken.” He took my backpack and put it in the back seat.

I fastened my seatbelt and folded my hands in my lap, fighting back the tears. He backed out of the parking spot and onto the street.

“Don’t let them get to you. They’re stupid and Jason is an idiot,” he editorialized after we were driving down the street.

I gasped.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to pry, but you deserve much better than him.”

“Thanks,” I said, trying to smile as a tear rolled down my cheek. He reached over and wiped it away. His hand felt warm and strong.

“Turn here,” I said shakily, assuming he was taking me home.

“I’d like to take you somewhere else, if that’s okay.” He glanced over to see me nod and continued. “It’s somewhere I like to go when I’ve had a really bad day. It helps me... gain perspective.”

We drove for several miles and then headed north towards the undeveloped desert. I was familiar with this area because Dad had taken me out to learn how to shoot guns when I was a child. It was one of the few things I did that made me feel almost like a normal person. The memory made me smile.

“What are you thinking about,” Brian asked as he noticed my change of mood.

“I was just remembering coming out here as a child.”

He nodded and smiled slightly as we continued driving on the street for another few minutes. He turned onto a dirt road that headed towards a small mountain in the distance. I started feeling ill from the lack of nutrition and the jostling around and I braced myself against all the bumps. Finally when the Jeep slid to a stop at the top of the oversized hill, I put my head in hands and tried to stop it from spinning.

Without a word, Brian handed me a drink from the backseat.

“Mmmm. Dr. Pepper. One of my favorites,” I said as I felt the bubbles tickle my throat and land in my expecting stomach.

“Yeah, I always have one on hand,” he said, chuckling quietly. “Are you okay to walk?”

After I stifled a burp and blushed, I nodded and followed him. I was grateful I had worn my sneakers because the ground was as rocky and uneven as you’d expect a desert to be. We had walked several feet before I actually looked up and saw our surroundings. Just to the right of the Jeep was an old, concrete picnic bench under a concrete awning. It seemed a little out of place in the middle of the desert; someone must have planned to make this a recreational spot. There were chips knocked out of both the awning and table and someone had been there with paint cans and tagged all over it. But even those looked faded and worn.

Brian tugged on my arm and said, “The best part’s over here. Can you climb?”

I nodded again and followed his lead. He easily climbed over a large boulder. I hesitated for a moment and he reached his hand down to help me up. Even with him practically pulling me up, I still struggled to get a grip on the rock with my feet. When I got to the top, I put my hands on my knees for a second to catch my breath. Then I looked around.

Saying it was beautiful wouldn't have come close to describing it. You could see the whole north side of town in the distance and nothing but desert spanning out from it. The cactus jutted out of the brown dirt in a wonderfully chaotic pattern. I knew there was tons of wildlife out there, but I tried very hard not to concentrate on any of them. I didn't want to leave this spot, this moment. My thoughts were disturbed when a tumbleweed drifted by in the breeze. I breathed in the dry, gentle wind and felt the day's frustrations slowly leaving.

"Amazing, isn't it?" Brian finally said when he saw that I had fully taken in the scenery.

"Quite," I said, a little startled by the interruption. "Thank you for sharing this with me. I already feel much better."

"Anything had to be better than Calculus," he joked. Then he became more serious and gazed out over the landscape for a moment before looking back at me with the most beautiful blue eyes I'd ever seen. "I've never shared this place with anyone before. This is sort of my sanctuary. I stumbled upon it the summer before last after I got my license. One day, I felt the need to just drive and this is where I ended up."

"That's incredible. But why did you think to bring *me* here?" I really wanted to know what had caused him to punch Jason at lunch and then help me ditch the rest of the day, but was too chicken to be that direct. I had always been friendly to him, but we hadn't been even what anyone would consider as friends... until now.

He seemed to consider his words carefully before he answered. "I told you, I think you deserve to be treated better than Jason did, or any of the other guys you date do."

I was aware that a lot of people had the wrong impression about me, thanks mostly to Abigail and her group of friends. It had never bothered me, but suddenly I was embarrassed about the perception that others... no, that Brian had of me. I didn't know how to respond to it, so I absent mindedly threw a rock down the hill. As I followed the projected path of the rock, I saw a baby jackrabbit sitting in the afternoon sun on the ground where the stone would land. Out of instinct, I quickly used my gift to get the rabbit to move, a fraction of a second before the rock impacted with the ground.

"How'd you do that?" Brian asked.

"Do what?" I asked innocently.

"Make that rabbit jump away."

"What do you mean? How could I have made it do anything?" I felt like I was a child who got caught lying.

"I saw you do that at lunch today, too, with those birds that took a dump on Abby. Nicely done, by the way."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said with a hint of rudeness in my voice and turned my back to him.

I heard him take a step towards me, like he was going to grab my arm and turn me back around to face him, but he simply said, "You don't have to tell me if you don't want to. But I promise I wouldn't repeat anything."

I bit my lip. How could I reveal this to anyone after all these years of hiding it? Why was I even considering doing it? My best friend didn't even know what I was capable of and here I was, definitely considering confiding in Brian. There was something almost magnetic that seemed to draw me to him.

I turned to face him again and sighed. "You wouldn't believe me even if I told you, so you should probably just pretend you didn't see anything and take me home before I say something I'll regret."

"Try me," he suggested and sat down on a nearby rock like it was a comfortable couch.

I sighed in frustration with myself and the situation. "This is going to sound completely crazy, so don't have me committed or turn me into Ms. Swanson or anything. And you have to promise to never... EVER... tell *anyone*. There is no one in the world I have ever trusted with this and I think I might be going a little crazy because I'm considering telling you."

He smiled brightly, zipped his lips, crossed his heart, and held up his hand, gesturing his intentions to keep my secret and have an open mind.

"Here it goes," I said quietly, closing my eyes and taking a deep breath. "I have a gift... or a talent... I don't know exactly what to call it. Anyway, it allows me to see beings from a close, third person perspective and urge them to take an action." I peeked through my eyes to see his reaction. He looked thoughtful, but motioned for me to continue. I went into the story of the first time it happened with the dog, my neighbor's cat, and an old couple who were among the first people I had used my gift on, but left out story of Rick.

He seemed intrigued. "So you can sit in class all day and make people do anything you want?"

"Not exactly. It only works on people I don't know well." I skirted around the fact that I hadn't influenced people in years. "I used to try unsuccessfully to make my brother eat my veggies or give me his ice cream, but I just couldn't ever make it work."

He chuckled quietly as I continued. "Also, I tend to *try* to do good things." I paused, feeling a little awkward about the good part, and then continued my story as if I could guess his next question. "Doing good things feels right. It can be very powerful and makes me feel very strong. When I do things like I did today to Abigail, I am left with a terrible feeling, even if the person deserved it."

"So you could have 'willed' me to punch Jason in the stomach today." He contemplated this for a moment and then said with a smile, "But I've wanted to do that for years."

"I choose not to influence people anymore," I added quickly, with a little bit of bitterness.

"Why's that?"

Why couldn't I keep my mouth shut? "I had a bad experience in the seventh grade. I ended up with migraines and nose bleeds for months. Since then, I have refused to look in on a human's life and influence it."

He simply said, "I'm sorry. It seems like such a waste, though."

I shrugged. I didn't want to think about it anymore and stared off towards the setting sun. I couldn't believe I just exposed my secret to him. I felt the butterflies in my stomach and wondered if this had been a huge mistake.

He stood there and allowed me to be quiet for some time, staring off at the sunset with me. Then he broke the silence and said, "Could you try it on me?"

"I don't feel comfortable doing that." The words came out harsher than I intended.

He came closer and spoke in a reassuring voice. "You don't have to be scared. I just want to help. For some reason, I know you can and should do this."

Suddenly I stepped back from him and stared directly in his eyes. All I could think about was how easily I could get lost in them and then suddenly, I was seeing him from behind, looking at me. *Now what?* I thought. I willed him to reach down and take my hand, just like that old couple I'd seen walking down the street when I was little.

A warm feeling spread over me and I was immediately and suddenly back into my body. The warmth was still there and I noticed it was my hand being held. He smiled at me, still gazing into my eyes. Startled, I took my hand back and looked away. My heart was racing and I wasn't sure if it was from his touch or because I used my gift on a person after all these years.

Brian walked cautiously over to me and took my chin in his hand, gently turning my face up to his. "Don't be embarrassed. That was amazing. I had this overwhelming urge to hold your hand. It wasn't like I could resist, but it wasn't a command, either. Thank you for sharing that with me."

I didn't know what to say, but my heart was starting to regain control. It felt good to have influenced a person again, but it felt better having someone else know about my gift. And he listened to me, trusted me to use it on him, and then was there to make sure I was okay. This was suddenly too much for me and I started to sway.

Brian caught me in his muscular arms and held me. Now I understood why Jason didn't admit who hit him to the guards today. I was sure he could be completely intimidating if he wanted, but I felt completely safe.

He chuckled softly and moved back to look me in the eyes. "I should probably get you home. You aren't going to have enough time to get ready for the dance tonight."

I'd completely forgotten about the dance. "I'm not going. I'm just going to have Mom return my dress to the store. If you recall, my date sort of flaked on me and I refuse to be a third wheel with Kara." Oh, and Kara! I bet she wondered why I wasn't in PE and I forgot to text her that I didn't need a ride home.

There were a few moments when Brian was weighing something and then said, "Well, you could go with me. I mean, I'd love to be your date, if you'd consider it."

I was seriously contemplating the idea when he added, "Or I could just take you home and you could sulk in your room for the rest of the weekend. But then you'd never get to see the stunned faces of all those idiots as you walk into the dance. I'm sure Abby would fall out of her seat! You wouldn't want to miss that, now would you?"

I blushed as I thought it over briefly and then said, "Since you put it that way, how could I say no?" I flashed a wide smile at him and he smiled back with the most genuine, caring smile that melted me. Then he grabbed my hand and we walked back to the Jeep.

Chapter Two – The Dance

“Do you mind if we stop by my house?” he asked as we made the cross over from the dirt road to the paved street.

“That’s fine. As long as I can be home within an hour, before my parents get home.” I didn’t want to go into the story of the day with my parents, so if I could get home and ready for the dance before they started hovering over me, I’d be able to make a pretty clean escape with Brian.

“So, have you finished the History essay yet?” he asked breaking an almost awkward silence as he sped towards his house.

History and English were the two classes we had together. “No, I still have my research to do. I think I’m going to spend Sunday afternoon at the library. What about you?”

“I’m almost done,” he boasted. “I am sort of a history buff, so was pretty excited to delve further into the Constitutional Convention.” He seemed lost in thought for a moment and then refocused on his driving. “If you need any help...”

“I’ll definitely let you know,” I interrupted. I didn’t want him to feel sorry for me or that he had to take me to the dance *and* tutor me. “I think I know what I’m going to do, it’s something I’ve been procrastinating.”

“Okay, but the offer stands.”

It didn’t take long to reach his house. He lived a couple miles from me in a single-story, tan colored, brick construction house build in the mid-seventies, or so, similar to mine. The front yard was dirt with patches of crabgrass growing throughout.

Brian parked in the driveway in front of the closed two-car garage. “Here we are, my humble abode,” he joked. He quickly jumped out of the Jeep and jogged around to my side to open my door. I smiled and slid out of the seat. We walked in a comfortable silence across the porch and through the front door. He was about to say something to me when his sister walked by.

“Can I take the Jeep tonight? Rachael and I are heading to the dance and...” She stopped mid-sentence when she saw me. “What’s *she* doing here?” she scoffed, like she was offended I was breathing the same air as her.

Brian ignored her irritation and introduced us. “Stephanie, this is Ashlyn. Ashlyn, Stephanie.”

Stephanie looked a lot like her brother. She was thin and tall, probably about five foot ten, with dark brown hair that hung half way down her back, and the same gorgeous blue eyes; you could easily tell they were related. I stepped forward to shake her hand when she said, “I *know* who she is. Why is she in our house?” The hatred in her voice made her appear much less attractive than she actually was. She was a junior, but I didn’t know her and had no idea what I could have done to make her despise me. I put my hand down and stepped back.

Brian took a defensive stance in front of me. “We just stopped in for a second for me to grab a couple of things and then we’ll be gone. And no, you can’t use the Jeep; I need it tonight.” Then he turned to me and said, “Why don’t you wait for me in my room. It’s down the hall, last door on the right.”

I hesitated for a second.

“I’ll be right there.” He smiled and winked.

“Okay,” I managed in a small voice, feeling another flutter in my chest when he looked at me.

Stephanie made a grunting noise as I passed by her, but I continued down the hall to Brian’s room without looking back. I was nervous about going in; I barely knew him and now I was going into his most personal space. I inhaled deeply as I turned the doorknob and entered his room.

I could hear the two of them engaged in a heated discussion in the kitchen, although Brian was trying to keep the volume of the conversation down.

"Do you know her reputation? She's a freak!" Stephanie had obviously bought into the rumors Abigail perpetuated.

"Do you know who started those rumors and why?" Brian didn't wait for a reply. *"Abby Waters spreads rumors about anyone she doesn't like and Ashlyn has made the top of her list for years. You of all people should know not to listen to the gossip at school."*

I stopped listening. I was never current on rumors because I really didn't talk to enough people to get the school gossip. It sounded like Stephanie must've been a victim of the rumor mill, too.

I shook my head and refocused on the aura of Brian's room. It wasn't a clean room; there were clothes thrown all over the place, but it felt comfortable, not dirty. The walls were covered with band and movie posters. His bed, positioned a couple of feet from the closet was neatly unmade; it looked like someone very intentionally placed the sheets in the pile at the foot of the bed, but it had a very cozy feel to it. On the other side of the bed was a wooden nightstand with three bottles of half drunk water along with an MP3 player, a car magazine, and an alarm clock.

I glanced at the time. My parents would be home in forty-five minutes. I started to get nervous about having to deal with their reactions when they found out I suddenly had a different date. Would they think I was being difficult and dumped Jason for this new guy, or would they pity me and think I got dumped and settled for Brian? If they had *any* idea of what was going on in my head, they would know that "settling for Brian" was not possible; he was turning out to be my knight in shining armor. I groaned to myself at the cheesiness of that thought and continued to study my surroundings.

I walked to the bookshelf that was on the opposite wall from the bed, close to the window that looked out on backyard. I scanned the various authors: Edgar Allen Poe, Shakespeare, Jane Austen, some history books, and some more modern fiction authors. It seemed like a fairly well rounded collection. One of the books looked very old. I wanted to pick it up; it was faded black with no title on the outside. But it seemed very important and very special, so I decided to leave it as a conversation piece for another time.

I moved on to his CDs. He seemed to have decent musical taste. I enjoyed a wide variety of music from classical to new age to modern, alternative rock. I generally listened to the latter, but I had a special place for the classics, which helped me get through my months of migraines. I got lost in my thoughts of music when he entered the room, making me practically jump out of my skin.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you. I brought some water."

"Thank you," I said, smiling. "You have a very nice room."

"Yeah, it's a real mess right now. If I had known you'd be in here this afternoon, I would have made an effort to clean it." He blushed slightly.

"I'm glad you didn't. It's very comfortable." I meant it; I didn't feel like I was in a stranger's room.

He handed me the glass of water and went to straighten out the bed. "Please. Have a seat." When I hesitated, he added, "I promise I won't bite."

I smiled at him and sat on the edge of the bed, where the sheets had been piled. It was as cozy as the rest of the room felt. I took a drink of my water and ended up finishing the entire glass. "I guess I was thirsty," I said sheepishly, as I noticed one of his eyebrows raise.

He just smiled. "Sorry about my sister. She's sorta protective of me."

"No worries," I said. I was a little thrown by her reaction, but with the day I was having, I wasn't really surprised at anyone's reaction to me. I cringed at the thought of going to the dance and dealing with the entire school. "You really don't have to take me tonight. I mean, I don't want you to feel obligated to go. It's probably going to be ten times worse than the reaction your sister had. Besides," I added, trying to lighten it up a little, "it'll probably be really boring."

"I don't feel obligated to do anything. I *want* to go with you. I would have asked you sooner, but I just couldn't get up the nerve. And then Jason asked you..." He trailed off and frowned slightly. "Besides, I can't imagine being anywhere with you would be boring."

"I guess you owe a bit of thanks to Abigail, then," I remarked playfully.

He chuckled softly. "Do you mind if I take a quick shower before we go? I feel like I'm covered with a layer of dust from the drive. It will only take five minutes."

"Sure," I said, "as long as I can snoop around your room some more." I giggled as a look of horror flashed across his face.

"I don't care," he finally stated, having composed himself. "You shared with me your biggest secret; how could I even consider keeping anything you'd uncover in here from you."

"I'm only kidding. I will just sit here on your very cozy bed and try not to fall asleep." I was really exhausted.

"Five minutes," he said and grabbed a change of clothes and a towel and walked out the door, closing it behind him.

I got up from the bed and went to pick out a CD to listen to while I waited. I picked a CD that looked interesting and put it in the stereo, turning the volume way down. As the first track played, I wandered back to the bed. The song was upbeat, but soothing at the same time. My mind drifted back to the desert. I felt calm and happy as I rested on Brian's pillow, noticing his musky scent for the first time. I felt very warm and happy.

"*Brian! Stephanie! I'm home with dinner!*" A woman's voice yelled through the house and made me jump out of my daydream about his eyes.

Oh, crap! I thought. I can't imagine anyone's mother being thrilled about finding a girl in her son's room. I moved from the bed to the chair at his desk and sat quietly, holding my breath. Suddenly, there was a knock at the door. "*Brian? Are you in there?*"

"*In the shower, Mom!*" Brian shouted. I heard the water shut off.

"*I wish you wouldn't park the Jeep in the middle of the driveway,*" she said, now sounding a little farther away. "*You know I don't like parking in the street.*"

I breathed a sigh of relief. I really didn't want to be introduced to his mom like this, especially after the reception I received from his sister. They continued their conversation through the bathroom door.

The moment the door opened, his mother said, "*Wow. You look nice. Are you and Michael going to try to steal someone's date?*" I smiled at the adoration I could hear in her voice.

"*Ummm... Something like that. I'm in a little bit of a hurry, Mom. Don't wait up for me, okay?*"

"*Be careful out there and don't stay out too late.*"

"*I promise,*" he said and I heard him give his mom a kiss.

I held my breath as I heard her walk down the hall to the kitchen. I fully expected Stephanie to rat me out.

The door opened and Brian slid into the room. "Sorry," he smiled apologetically. "My mom probably wouldn't approve of you alone in my room."

I wanted to agree with him, but I was unable to speak. He *did* look stunning in his black pants and a burgundy button-up shirt, which set off his eyes. As I regained my composure, I whispered, "Yeah. Wow. You look great."

"Yeah, amazing what a bar of soap can do," he said lightheartedly. "So, how do you feel about climbing out windows?"

"Never tried it, but it could be fun, I suppose." I shrugged.

"Okay. If you go around to the side of the house, there's a gate that will get you out front. If you could walk down a couple of houses, I'll pick you up in just a minute." He looked worried. "I'm really, really sorry about this."

“No problem. I don’t think I’m quite ready to meet your parents yet anyway.” I winked at him. This seemed to put him at ease and he smiled. “I’ll see you in a minute.”

He opened the window, helped me out, and waited for me to get to the gate before I heard the window close. I quietly closed the gate, walked quickly to the sidewalk, continuing down the street to the corner, and sat down on the curb waiting.

It seemed like I was sitting there forever on the hard, ant covered sidewalk before Brian came out, got in his Jeep, waved to someone in the house, and backed out of the driveway. He pulled up next to where I was sitting and said, “Need a ride?”

I smiled and stood up as he opened the door for me. He apparently had taken the extra minutes to finish polishing his look. He looked even nicer and smelled wonderful, too. As I buckled up, I noticed the same CD playing that I was listening to in his room.

“You seemed to be enjoying this CD, so I thought I’d let you listen to the rest.”

When was I going to wake up? I was not used to being treated like this. I must have passed out while trying to escape from English and this is some dream my brain contrived as I lay unconscious in the nurse’s office.

“You OK? I could put something else on, if you’d like?” He sounded concerned.

“Wh... what? Oh, no. This is really nice. I just am not sure I’m really here, you know?”

He shook his head.

I bit my lip and tried to explain, “I’m waiting to wake up in the nurse’s office or something. This is just so surreal.”

He grabbed my hand and squeezed it. It was so warm and felt so real, I had to be awake. A sudden wave of heat went through my body, almost electrifying me. I squeezed back and said in a quiet voice, “Thank you.”

He smiled back and drove without instruction to my house. “I’ll be back to get you in an hour. Will that be enough time?”

“You’re not staying?”

“No,” he chuckled. “I want the surprise of seeing you again when you’re all ready.” He winked. “I have to run do something real quick and then I’m going to get us something to eat. Do you like chicken?”

“I love chicken. Are you sure you don’t want to stay? You could watch TV in the living room while I got ready?”

He lifted my hand to his mouth and kissed it. “I’ll be back in an hour.”

I sighed and opened the door. He handed me my backpack and said goodbye. I waited in my driveway and watched as he drove off my street. As I turned to go in my house, I caught a glance at Rick’s old house at the end of the street and shuddered.

Inside, I quickly turned on the shower and headed towards my room before I realized that Dad was already home.

“You’re home pretty late. Were you helping Kara getting ready for tonight?”

“Ummm, not exactly. I have to get ready now. My date’s gonna be here in an hour and I have a lot of stuff to do.”

“So Jason’s going to pick you up here, then?” he asked.

I didn’t expect Dad to know these details. I cringed as I grabbed a towel and headed for the bathroom. “No, I’m not going with Jason anymore. I’ll be in the shower,” I yelled and slammed the bathroom door closed.

A warm tingle spread throughout my body when I rubbed my fingers over the spot Brian had kissed. I shook my head, deciding I was letting myself get way too carried away, and stepped into the shower, getting lost in the hot water.

I took longer than usual to shower. I really wanted to be presentable, especially after seeing how great Brian looked. So I washed my hair three times before I conditioned it twice. I shaved twice just to make sure I didn't miss anything.

I was drying off when there was a knock at the door. *"Everything OK in there, Ash?"* Mom sounded concerned, so I assumed Dad had told her about my change of plans.

"Yeah, I'm great, Mom. Just trying to get ready for tonight. Could you cut the tags off my dress and put it in my room while I dry my hair?" I needed to distract her or she would try to pry the story out of me.

"Okay. Are you sure you're alright?"

"YES! I'm almost done in here and my date is going to be here soon."

As she walked away, I pulled out the blow dryer and styled my hair. It didn't look its best, but it was definitely an improvement on the rat's nest it was before my shower. I wrapped my towel around my body and walked to my room, quickly closing and locking the door. I was nervous enough and didn't need an audience while I finished getting ready.

Mom had done as I had asked and laid my dress on my bed. It was a simple black dress with rhinestones sewn around the ballet neckline. The back was low-cut and we had to buy a special bra to wear underneath it. I was thrilled that the weather stayed nice so I didn't have to wear a jacket and hide the back. It flared out from my waist into a beautiful skirt that fell right below my knees. I felt very elegant when I tried it on at the store, but now I was feeling a little unsure of myself. I put on my silver strappy heels and a delicate white gold necklace that my parents had given me as a sweet sixteen present and finished off my look by putting on a little makeup and spraying myself with my favorite perfume.

"You look so grown up!" Mom said, almost crying as I walked into the living room.

"I'm not sure I can let you out of this house, young lady," Dad said, only half teasing.

"Stop it. I'm nervous enough as it is."

"So, who is the lucky guy who gets to take you?" Dad asked in his most protective voice.

"His name is Brian. He's a friend I have a couple of classes with who offered to go with me and I accepted. He's going to be here any minute, and I really need for you guys to behave. I'm very lucky he's such a nice guy to do this for me."

They didn't have time to ask any more questions because just as I finished my plea, Brian pulled up in front of the house. The top was back on his Jeep, which I was suddenly relieved to see. I didn't even consider how awful I would look after riding to the dance with no top on the vehicle. He was very thoughtful.

As he approached the door, I jumped up and gave my parents another warning glance.

"Can I at least take some pictures?" Mom loved documenting everything with pictures, so I knew it would hurt her feelings if I told her no.

"Fine, but please only take a few. We still have to eat and the dance is starting in half an hour." Not that I was in a hurry to get there.

Mom nodded and left to get the camera off the counter. The doorbell rang and I opened it before Brian had a chance to put his hand back down at his side. His eyes went wide for a second and smiled as he reached to pin a beautiful corsage on me. "Are you ready?"

"Definitely, but is it okay if Mom takes some pictures before we go?" I begged with my eyes and hoped he wouldn't have a problem with this necessary ritual. Suddenly I realized I forgot to introduce him to my parents.

"Errr.. ummm... Mom, Dad, this is Brian. Brian, these are my parents," I said awkwardly. I couldn't recall if I'd ever had to introduce anyone to them before.

Brian reached out to shake their hands. "Nice to meet you both."

Dad eyed him a little, sizing him up, but smiled as he shook his hand.

Mom started snapping pictures. We stood next to each other and smiled for her. "Mom, we really have to go now," I said through gritted teeth.

"Oh, okay. Don't stay out too late. You know your curfew."

"I thought that we could extend it to midnight tonight because of the dance? You know, so we can go out to Denny's with Kara and Keith afterwards?" My normal curfew was ten thirty and I knew that wouldn't be nearly enough time tonight, although I was still debating on whether we should really go to the dance at all. But I knew I wanted to spend some more time with Brian, no matter where it was. Maybe we would go back out to the desert and just talk under the stars.

"Okay, but not a minute late," Dad said as Mom gave him a look.

"It was nice meeting you both," Brian said politely as we headed out the door.

"Bye!" I yelled and waved at them as they watched us leave through the blinds.

"Sorry that was so awkward," I said when we were finally heading down the street. I made it a point to look down as we rounded the corner at the end of the street. I really didn't want to remember that horrible house tonight.

"It wasn't as bad as I expected," he said politely. "You look amazing, though. I was afraid I was staring too much and your dad was going to tell me to leave without you," he said somewhat shyly.

"Yeah, I didn't know how they were going to react. I've never had to introduce them to anyone before. I think they liked you, though," I said with a smile. "Thanks again for offering to take me tonight. I really like this dress and didn't want to have to take it back." That sounded reasonable enough. I didn't want him to know that I was really glad *he* was taking me.

"Yeah, we wouldn't want that dress to go to waste. I don't think anyone else could do it justice. I mean, you really look great. It brings out your amazing eyes. They look a lot brighter than earlier today. Do you wear contacts?"

I smiled and was grateful it was dark enough that he couldn't see me blush. "No, they just change color a lot." I felt a little awkward, so I changed the subject. "So, where are we off to now?" I smelled food. My stomach was definitely pleased and started making rumbling noises. I hadn't eaten anything since breakfast and it had caught up with me.

"I thought we'd have a picnic at the park, if that's okay?" he asked sounding amused at my noises.

"Sure, but I think I might be a bit overdressed for that."

"You're just perfect. Trust me," he said and I did. I don't know why I felt this overwhelming sense of trust around him.

He drove to a park near my house where we ate dinner. Sitting in the far corner of the park kept it intimate and perfect. It was a simple dinner complete with a table cloth, candles, paper plates, and plastic forks. I giggled when he handed me a paper napkin.

The conversation remained light, but my nerves started to get the better of me and I began second guessing my decision to go to the dance at all.

Sensing my hesitation, Brian immediately jumped in to make me feel better. "I know you're nervous, but it'll be fine. I think it will make you feel a whole lot better when you arrive and shut everyone up. Did I tell you how incredible you look?"

I couldn't help but smile when he said that.

On the drive to the dance, I retreated in to my thoughts. When I looked up, we were already in the parking lot at school. I felt like a bad date because I didn't make any conversation the whole way there.

I could hear the music thumping from inside the gymnasium as we started walking towards the doors. I was relieved I didn't recognize anyone in the dark parking lot; I wasn't ready to face anyone yet.

Maybe it would be better inside where it was probably too loud to hold a conversation. I took a deep breath as we approached the table where we had to pay.

Brian grabbed my hand and took me to the side as another couple scurried past us. As he pulled my face up to look him in the eyes, he said in the most reassuring voice, "You're going to be fine."

"Thank you," I managed to say. He squeezed my hand and we walked to the dance.

Inside was dark and loud, but my eyes quickly adjusted. I was mildly impressed at how nicely the decorations had turned out. There were purple and silver streamers and banners strung everywhere, which helped hide the parts that made it look like a school gym. There were a few groups of people scattered all over the bleachers that were out on one side and a dozen or so couples sitting awkwardly as they watched the other couples dancing to the upbeat top forty song the DJ had just selected.

I tried not to look too closely at the faces of everyone, but I definitely felt the stares and somehow managed to hear whispers as Brian and I walked in. Brian kept hold of my hand and gave me comforting squeezes. "Do you want to dance?" he whispered in my ear. I didn't want to go out where I would make any more of a spectacle of myself than I already had just by showing up.

I was about to tell him that when Kara jumped on me from behind. "Where have you been?! I've been worried sick about you!" She sounded upset.

I shrugged and introduced her to Brian. "Kara, this is Brian. Brian, Kara."

Kara smiled politely and shook his hand. "Do you mind if I steal her away for a few minutes?" she asked, addressing Brian.

He chuckled and said, "Sure. I'll go see if I can find Michael." He gave my hand one last squeeze and whispered in my ear, "I won't be far. Will you be okay?"

I nodded at him and smiled as Kara yanked me by the arm and dragged me over to the bleachers. "Okay, spill," she demanded as we sat down together.

I recapped the afternoon, excluding the part about the desert. I don't know why I didn't tell her about that, but I felt like it was a special place for Brian and I didn't want to break his confidence. Besides, I didn't think I wanted her to know how much I was falling for him. I also knew I'd most likely end up telling her everything as soon as I sorted it all out for myself.

"Right..." she mused, sounding like she knew there was more to the story than I was letting on. "I almost called your house, but I figured if you were in trouble, you would have called me. Why didn't you call me?" she insisted and hit me on my arm.

"Ow!" I complained. "Sorry, I just didn't have the opportunity to call. I felt really bad when I realized you were probably wandering around school looking for me. Keith wasn't too pissed, was he?"

"No. He was a little upset that you ditched us, but I quickly took his mind off things." She was smiling remembering whatever had happened after that. "So," she continued, snapping out of her memory. "Did you find out why he slugged Jason?"

At that moment, the lights dimmed and the music slowed down. I was about to tell her about Brian's good deed when I was suddenly pulled to my feet and dragged to the dance floor by Jason. I thought I saw Kara smile as I was dragged away. *How could she have misunderstood? I didn't want to be with Jason.*

"I thought I'd give you a chance to see what you were missing," Jason slurred as we stopped in the middle of the dance floor. He forcefully grabbed my upper back with one hand and my butt with the other. His breath reeked of alcohol.

"Let me go!" I struggled against his grip, but he just held me tighter. I looked around frantically for anyone who could help. Kara had been distracted by Keith returning with punch and didn't notice my distress. Abigail was stumbling out of the gym, presumably to the restroom to throw up, with a group of her friends. I needed help... I needed Brian. But no one was paying any attention to my struggle.

I decided that I would have to force help to come; I'd have to find someone who knew Brian and use my gift to get them to go find him. But I didn't know who knew him. I was feeling desperate when I finally recognized Stephanie chatting with a friend in the bleachers. I stared at her, but was jerked suddenly by my drunken abductor and had my concentration broken. I took a deep breath and tried again, this time successful. *Find Brian. Ashlyn needs his help on the dance floor.* I didn't know what else to say.

I could make out a confused look on her face, but Stephanie heeded her instinct and started looking around for Brian. I breathed a sigh of relief, which Jason mistook for comfort.

"Having a great time, aren't you?" he boasted.

It looked like he was about to lean in and try to give me a sloppy kiss when suddenly Jason's arms released me. Brian positioned himself in front of me and glowered at him. "Do you really want your ass kicked here in front of everyone? Leave Ashlyn alone. Don't talk to her, look at her, or think about her again."

Jason backed down, even though a couple of his friends were moving onto the dance floor. He held up his hand and they all walked away.

Brian grabbed my arm and we rushed outside. I felt the tears forming, but I held my breath and maintained my composure until we reached the Jeep. I burst into a hysterical cry as the Jeep tore out of the parking lot. Brian hadn't said anything, but looked extremely mad.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered when I regained some composure.

Brian's face relaxed a little, but his words were still tense. "Why on earth would you be sorry? I'm the one who almost beat the crap out of that asshole back there. How dare he..."

I cut him off. "He was drunk," I said flatly, not trying to defend his behavior.

"Oh. Are you okay?" His words sounded less forced.

"I'll be fine. Thanks for rescuing me... again." I managed a small smile. "I hope your sister doesn't get too curious about why she felt the need to help me out."

"You used your gift on her to get me?" He seemed both shocked and pleased. "She did seem confused, but she'll probably just chalk it up her protective nature." I knew he'd keep his promise to keep my secret. "So, where to now?"

"I don't care. I just don't want to go home yet." It was only eight thirty. I still had three and a half hours before I had to be home and I wanted to spend every second with him.

I saw him grin and he seemed to make a decision on our next locale. We weren't heading in the direction of the desert where we'd spent the afternoon. I was disappointed, figuring we'd probably just end up at a restaurant instead of someplace where I could be completely alone with him. To my surprise, we drove north on the interstate for about thirty minutes when Brian took a desolate exit and headed east. We didn't go far on this road before he turned off into what seemed to be a dirt parking lot. It was dark except for the moon and stars.

"Another place you found after you got your license?" I asked in a light tone, pleased to be somewhere alone with him.

"Sorta. Michael and I have been up here a few times during the day to go hiking. I wanted to spend some time alone with you. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all," I confessed. As I stepped out of the Jeep, I felt a gentle breeze blow most of my anxiety of the day away. It was what I had hoped for. "We should have come here instead of going to the dance at all," I joked.

"Are you kidding? Did you hear all the gasps when you came in tonight?" He was being very sincere.

"I doubt that. But what I do regret is I didn't get to dance with my date," I complained playfully.

Brian jumped back into the Jeep and turned the key until the radio was on. He flipped through the stations until he found something slow we could dance to.

"Would you care to dance?" he asked as he held out his hand and bowed slightly.

"I'd love to," I giggled and accepted his hand, hoping I wouldn't step on his feet too many times.

He was a great dancer, which took the emphasis off how terrible I was. He held me so gently, but firmly, which contrasted with the way Jason had forcefully pushed me around at the dance. I felt myself melt in his arms and laid my head on his shoulder as we moved together.

"You're very graceful," he commented, pulling back a little to look at me in my eyes as the song came to an end.

I was thankful it was dark and he couldn't see me blushing, but I was sure he could feel the heat emanating from my face.

"Can I ask you something?" he said, still looking in my eyes.

"Sure. I don't have any more deeply hidden secrets left," I said half-teasing, but looking back in his eyes.

"It's nothing like that," he said, breaking our stare.

I suddenly felt a little nervous, or maybe it was excitement. There was definitely an intense energy radiating between us. *Please just kiss me*, I thought wistfully.

"I was just wondering," he began again, "if it would be okay if I kissed you?"

Did he even have to ask? Couldn't he sense how completely I was falling in love with him? No matter how I tried to reason with myself that this was too fast, I couldn't deny what my heart was telling me.

I couldn't even speak. I just nodded. Time felt like it slowed down and all the car noises from the nearby highway faded as the sound of my heart pounding in my chest and the shallowness of my breaths took over. My heart was beating so hard that I thought it was going to pop right out. He touched my face with his hand, brushing a loose strand of hair out of the way and leaned in to meet my waiting lips.

I think I had an unintended out of body experience. His lips were warm and strong as they kissed me gently. I felt like I was floating in the air. It seemed like hours had passed before we finally broke our embrace. My head was spinning as he brushed an accidental tear from my cheek.

"Are you okay?" he asked for probably the hundredth time. He held me close to his body and I continued to breathe in his intoxicating scent.

"I've never been better," I said. That sounded cheesier out loud than it did in my head.

He distanced himself from me slightly allowing me to see his breathtaking smile and then quickly twirled me around in front of him. The skirt of my dress fanned out around me and I couldn't help but giggle. He pulled me in again and kissed me passionately. It was even better than the first one.

We danced together for another song and then stood there in silence, holding each other.

"What a strange day," I mused, resting my head against his chest. "Do you mind if I ask you a question?"

He kissed the top of my head and said, "Sure. Anything."

"Why is your sister so protective of you?"

He stiffened just a little, then relaxed and took a step back from me. Holding my hand, he absently kicked a rock on the ground and started, "My sister and I were adopted when I was six." He took a deep breath. This was obviously a difficult story for him, and I was appreciative that he was willing to tell it. "Our real parents died in a car crash when I was four. We didn't have any other family that was able to take us in, so we ended up in the foster system. We shifted from foster home to foster home. There were several couples who were excited to adopt Steph; she was adorable and outgoing and drew people in, but they were unwilling to adopt me with her. She was very perceptive of how guilty it made me feel and became very protective of me." He paused for a few minutes, gazing at the stars. "Finally, a couple came to visit us at a park. Steph took her assumed role as the adorable little girl and did everything in her power to make the couple see how important I was to her. Within six months, the adoption was completed and we moved in with our new parents."

"I'm very sorry you had to go through that. Stephanie sounds like a great sister," I whispered.

"Yeah, she's great, but the protectiveness gets a little embarrassing now that I'm almost eighteen. I feel sorry for her kids someday," he added, trying to lighten things up again.

"You're probably right. I thought my parents were bad," I said with a smile.

He refocused on my face and bent down to kiss me again. "So, what are you doing tomorrow?" I was still lost in the last kiss. "Hopefully more of this," I said, standing on my toes to kiss him again.

He chuckled softly as he kissed me back. "Well, I guess that means you'd like to go out with me again tomorrow?"

"I think that's safe to assume," I replied. "Did you have something in particular in mind?"

"My family has a boat at the lake. I thought maybe you would join me there for the day."

I cringed at the thought of going on the lake. "You know how to drive a boat?" I asked, trying to sound as positive as possible.

"I learned how to drive the boat before I learned to drive a car," he admitted proudly.

"I may need some convincing to get on a boat. I'm a little scared of bodies of water," I finally confessed.

He instantly grabbed me in his arms, dipped me backwards, and slowly kissed me from my neck to my forehead, finally planting one firmly on my tingling lips. "Need more convincing?" he mused.

"No, that was pretty good, but I might need a reminder tomorrow before I get on the boat," I teased.

We continued kissing for awhile longer and then he stopped suddenly and said, "I should check on the time. I wouldn't want you to get grounded and not be able to go tomorrow."

He walked back to the Jeep by himself and I gazed up at the moon. It was almost full and looked very small way up in the sky. I had always been fascinated with the moon, probably because it seemed like a good place for me to escape from everyone and everything.

I heard him swear under his breath. "Ashlyn, we've gotta get going. It's almost eleven forty and we're half an hour away."

I sighed and hurried back to the Jeep, where Brian had already opened the door for me to get in. Where had the time gone? Wasn't it just eight thirty when we were heading here? He bent down and kissed my cheek before closing the door.

He held my hand as soon as we were driving on the highway again. I couldn't help but smile, yet I felt extremely sad.

"What's wrong? You seem to have left me," he said.

"I think I'm just exhausted," I lied, although I was pretty tired, but all I wanted was the night not to end.

"Yeah, you've had a pretty traumatic day. I mean, getting dumped by one boyfriend and then getting another one within hours..." It was almost a question, but I knew he was trying to gauge exactly what our relationship had turned into.

"Yeah, it's enough to make a girl's head spin," I said smiling. Boyfriend. That sounded nice and made me warm all over. I never really thought any of the guys I had dated as boyfriends; they had never stuck around long enough for that to be a consideration. I wasn't even sure if he actually meant he wanted to be my boyfriend, but I wasn't willing to drill down the specifics. "Although," I added, "I don't think I would actually consider Jason a boyfriend. I mean, we never even kissed."

He smiled and pulled my hand up to meet his lips as he sped down the interstate to town.

It was eight minutes past twelve when we pulled up in front of my house. I could see the TV was still on, but I doubted that either of my parents were still awake to notice that I was late.

"I hope you don't get in trouble," he said as he turned off the engine.

"I'll be okay. I don't think they're waiting up for me."

I thought he was leaning over to kiss me goodnight, but he reached into the glove box and pulled out a pen. He grabbed my hand and wrote something on it, then gently grabbed the back of my head and pulled me in for a passionate good night kiss. "Write me before you go to sleep," he requested. He had written his email address on my hand. "I'll let you know tomorrow what time we can head out. I just have to make sure it's okay I take the boat out."

"I'll email you. See you tomorrow! And thank you again for everything today." I leaned in to give him a quick kiss on the cheek and left the Jeep. He waited until I was in the house before I heard him start the engine and drive away.

I was right about my parents not being awake. Dad was asleep in the chair with the TV on some infomercial. I gently woke him and told him goodnight before heading to my room.

I took off my dress and put it back on a hanger. Before I put it away, I took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of Brian's cologne that clung to the fabric, and did a quick twirl with the dress in my arms. *Boyfriend*, I mused.

I wrote down Brian's email address on a piece of paper before getting ready for bed. Finally, I flicked the mouse on my computer to make the screen come back on. There were two emails from Kara, one from before the dance and one just a few minutes old. I opened the newest one, but before I got too far into her description about everything that she and Keith did, I closed it and opened a new email and stared blankly at the screen. What was I supposed to say? I took a deep breath and began composing:

Brian,

Thank you again for the great day and the amazing night. I'm shocked by how easy it is to be with you. I can't believe we have barely spoken to each other before today, but I feel like I've known you my whole life.

You saved me today in more ways than you know. I feel like I've had a huge weight lifted from me; maybe that's why I feel like I'm floating when you kiss me.

Good night. I hope you have good dreams.

-Ash

I was way too sleepy to care if I'd said too much. I moved to my bed and was asleep before my head hit the pillow.

Chapter Three – Dark Waters

I had expected to have pleasant dreams after the fairytale-like night I'd had. And I knew that I had at least one good one because I remember looking at the clock as I woke up in the dark with a huge smile on my face: two forty-seven. I sighed happily and drifted back off to sleep.

My dreams took a drastic turn for the worse as the night drew to a close. *I was using my gift again, observing an unknown person. We were in a dark room with only a small window allowing light in. The walls looked decayed and I could almost smell the mold growing in them. Suddenly, the person picked up a rusty knife and started moving towards the far side of the room. As we drew nearer, I noticed the heap in the corner was a person, tied and gagged, with pleading eyes... piercing blue eyes. I screamed and tried everything I could to get them to stop, to do anything but the path they were on, but I could only watch as the knife brushed Brian's neck. At that moment, the person turned, stared directly at me like I was there, and laughed.*

I woke with a scream muffled by my pillows. My head was throbbing and I got dizzy as I tried to sit up while struggling to throw the sheets off. As I opened my eyes, the bright morning light made me cringe and squint. I glanced at my pillow and noticed blood, then reached up and touched my nose. It was dried on there, too.

It took me several minutes until I was steady enough to get on my feet and start the cleanup process. Since my incident in the seventh grade, I kept pain medication in my nightstand, so I immediately swallowed two and began stripping down my bed. I didn't want to burden my parents with this again. They were so relieved when it finally stopped happening long ago and I didn't want to open up those old wounds, especially since this was two nights in a row it had happened.

I poured water from the glass on my nightstand on a towel and wiped the remnants of blood from my face. After squeezing eyes drops in my eyes, I picked up my sheets and some other clothes and left my room, prepared to put on a façade that everything was normal.

It seemed too quiet though. As I got to the kitchen, there was a note on the counter from Mom. *Went out to get a bite to eat. You looked pretty deep in sleep, so we didn't wake you. Call or text us if you want us to bring you anything back.*

Love,

Mom & Dad

I continued to the laundry room and started the wash, only half paying attention. My thoughts kept taking me back to that horrifying dream and those eyes... Rick's eyes. I didn't like them mixed in with images of Brian.

I sighed and went to the kitchen, grabbing a Dr. Pepper from the fridge, hoping the caffeine would help ease my headache. I smiled as I remembered the day before when Brian had given me a drink of his Dr. Pepper on the hilltop in the desert. *I wonder if he wrote me back.*

I wandered back to my room where my computer remained on from the night before. With a quick flick of the mouse, my monitor buzzed to life. A new email from Brian was in my inbox, time stamped from the night before. I smiled trying to picture him getting home and hurrying to his computer to see if I'd written. It probably didn't happen anything like I was imagining, but it made me giggle. I opened the email and read:

Ashlyn,

I had a great time with you tonight, too... far better than I had ever imagined. I don't think I could express in words how special you are and how lucky I feel that I got to spend the evening with you. I don't know if I'll be able to sleep tonight knowing that I won't be able to see you again until the morning.

Now that I've felt like I've said too much, I will wish you the same happy dreams. I miss you already.

-B

I couldn't stop smiling. In the middle of a daydream about kissing him, I realized I hadn't given him my phone number. Panic waves rippled through my body and I instinctively put my hands on my forehead and closed my eyes as the pain increased. After a few deep breaths, I opened my eyes again, and sent Brian a short email giving him my cell number and asking him to call me when he was ready to go. I took my phone in the bathroom with me, so I wouldn't miss the call.

I was rinsing the conditioner out of my hair when my phone rang. I nearly jumped with excitement and almost slipped as I reached for my phone, dripping water everywhere.

"Hello?" I tried to sound calm and collected, even though my heart was practically beating out of my chest. I was disappointed when I heard Mom on the other end.

"Hi honey. How long have you been up?"

"Not long, Mom. I just got up and started some laundry."

"Are you in the shower?"

I rolled my eyes at my poor attempt to hide that fact. "Oh, yeah. I was just expecting a call and didn't want to miss it."

"So things went well last night then?" I could hear the curiosity riddled in her voice.

"Yeah, Mom, we had a great time. And we were planning on hanging out again today, maybe at the lake. Would that be okay?"

"Who else is going?"

"I think some kids from school are meeting there today. I don't know all the details, but we'll just be hanging out with everyone." This was one of the many times I wish I could use my gift on my parents.

"Make sure you take sunscreen and your phone. And don't be gone all day. I expect you to be home for dinner." I could hear her amusement.

"Thanks, Mom, you're the best!"

"When are you leaving?"

"I'm not sure. That's the call I'm waiting for."

"Okay, honey. We'll be home in a bit. Love you!"

"Love you, too, Mom. Bye."

I hung up the phone and turned my attention back to the hot water. The steam was clearing my head and I focused my thoughts on what I wanted to wear. I finished my shower and mindlessly walked to my room to get dressed. I left my phone in the bathroom, but didn't realize it until I heard it ringing. I jumped at the sound of my ringtone, dropping my towel in the middle of my room, and ran to answer it.

Standing naked in the middle of my bathroom, I breathed, "Hello?"

"Ashlyn?" It was Brian.

"Yeah, of course. Who else would it be?" I tried joking.

"Hi, it's Brian. Are you okay?" He had to ask me that a lot. I hope I wouldn't make a habit of *not* being okay around him because in truth, I felt better than I'd ever felt when I was with him.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I just left my phone in the other room and had to run to get it before it went to voice mail."

"Did you sleep well?" he asked.

I walked back to my room and got my clothes out, trying to push the nightmare aside. "I think I slept soundly most of the night." I wasn't going to scare him away with the dark truths of my existence. "What about you? I saw that you got my email last night. I hope you weren't awake all night," I added teasingly.

"I fell asleep before my head hit the pillow. I guess I was more exhausted than I realized. So, are you ready to head out to the lake?"

"Sure. When are you going to be here?"

"How about now?"

I looked out my window and saw his Jeep.

"Just give me a minute to brush my teeth and I'll be out. Do I need to bring anything?"

"Just your smile. See you in a minute."

"Bye." I stood there for a minute smiling about him waiting outside for me and then frantically rushed to the bathroom to comb my hair and brush my teeth. After I grabbed my things, I left a quick note for my parents and walked outside.

Brian jumped out of the Jeep and to greet me as soon as I had closed locked the door. I practically bounced towards him. He looked great in his jean shorts and red Coca-Cola t-shirt. His hair was perfectly styled, of course, but his eyes that I had been so looking forward to staring into were hidden behind a pair of Oakley's. Was there anything he wore that didn't look great on him? I suddenly felt very self-conscious.

Almost like he was reading my mind, he whispered, "You look great," and leaned down to give me a quick kiss.

I felt the blood rush to my cheeks and excitement fill my whole body. "Thanks," I muttered and stood on my tip-toes for another kiss.

Chuckling, he said, "It's hard to believe, but I missed you even in my dreams. But your eyes were much brighter, like they were last night. You weren't kidding when you said they change color. They're very dark brown today."

"Just call me a chameleon," I said, smiling brightly because he dreamed about me and noticed my eyes. As I climbed into the Jeep, I grinned at the cooler in the backseat, hoping that meant he'd planned for the whole day together.

He held my hand the whole drive to the lake. I was getting used to his warm, strong hand wrapped around mine. The morning air was fresh and cool as it circled around us with the top off.

It didn't take long for us to arrive at the lake. As Brian parked, I noticed a number of people who went to our school, a few of which I could name. At least I'd be able to tell Mom who else was at the lake with us.

Brian grabbed the cooler out of the back and hit the alarm on the Jeep and we walked towards the marina. There were a number of people we saw as we walked along the dock: a dad with his young son, probably fishing for the first time, several serious looking fishermen that had giant tackle boxes with probably anything you'd ever need to catch any fish anywhere, and a few families standing along the railing, throwing breadcrumbs to the birds and fish below. Then there was one man that didn't quite fit in. He was sitting near other people, putting a minnow on his hook, mumbling something, and then suddenly laughed very maliciously. The laugh was so out of place, I jumped, but it seemed like no one else noticed him at all. As we got closer, there was something familiar about him, but I couldn't quite place it. I stared with a confused look on my face as we walked by, but he didn't look up from what he was doing. He seemed oblivious to everyone around him and looked like he was enjoying the pain he was inflicting on the tiny fish more than the actual fishing.

I shuddered involuntarily and rubbed my still aching head, which seemed to be getting worse again. When we were finally out of earshot I commented to Brian, "Did you see that guy back there?"

"What guy? You mean the one that was putting that huge fish in the tiny bucket? I bet it'll just jump back out in the water." He chuckled.

"Umm, no. The one who was enjoying spearing the minnows a little too much."

"No, I didn't see him. There are a lot of strange people out here. Fishing's an odd past time."

I couldn't understand how he missed that guy. He was so out of place and was pretty loud. He wasn't dressed like the rest of the serious fishermen, wearing dirt covered, holey black jeans and no shirt. His hair looked like it hadn't been washed in a month and was matted like a stray mutt's. But no

one else around the docks paid any attention to him. I shrugged to myself as we continued walking through the maze of boats.

"Here she is." He was beaming with pride as he introduced his boat. It had an upper deck with seating and a covered area where the steering wheel and captain's chair were. There were also stairs that lead down to a lower section. It wasn't the largest one docked; maybe twenty-five to thirty feet long, but definitely had an alluring presence.

Brian smiled as he looked back and saw me admiring it. He put the cooler on the deck and offered me his hand to climb aboard.

"She's a beauty, isn't she?"

I just nodded and he smiled bigger.

"It belonged to my grandfather. When he moved to Montana, he gave it to my dad. But we don't go out as a family much anymore, so I inherited it, unofficially."

"That was a very generous gift. My grandfather gave me some pennies for my piggy bank once." I smiled to let him know that it wasn't a painful memory.

Still holding my hand, he took me on a quick tour of the boat. First, we went down the stairs. There was a small kitchenette, a bed, and a restroom. I was relieved to see there was a bathroom because I didn't know how I'd be able to hold it all day and I was sure I wasn't going to get in the water to relieve myself.

Back on deck, he led me to a seat and took his place in the captain's chair. I was amazed at the ease he had taking the boat out of the marina and into the open water. As we passed by the docks, I glanced to see if the strange man was still there. The spot he had been in was empty. I felt a little relieved because I didn't want him making any of the kids uncomfortable, even if it appeared that no one else saw him.

The air was cooler on the lake and I shivered as we sped farther away from the marina. As we slowed to a stop on the far side of the lake, I was amazed by the scenery. The sun was just cresting the mountain to the east of us, sending bright rays down to the lake. I could see pools of small fish swimming where the sun was hitting the water. There were trees jetting up from tops of the cliffs and birds flying overhead. I closed my eyes to better appreciate the peaceful surroundings. I could still feel the last bits of my headache clinging on to the back of my head and neck.

"You didn't get sea sick, did you?" Brian asked as he climbed out of the seat.

"No, I feel fine. It's really breathtaking out here."

He must have noticed the tension in my face because he gave me a weary look that made me confess. "I woke up with a bad headache this morning. It's mostly gone, though."

Brian quickly moved behind me on the seat and rubbed my shoulders. His touch was electrifying. His strong hands melted me and sent the butterflies in my stomach in motion.

I smiled, closing my eyes to enjoy his touch even more, and a happy sigh escaped my lips.

"I'm guessing that means I'm getting the right spot?" he said happily.

I think he could have touched my kneecap and it would have been the right spot. I simply breathed an "uh-huh," and leaned into him a little more.

This went on for what felt like eternity before I felt guilty about how long he had been massaging me. I leaned forward slightly to break his focus and turned toward him. His face was within inches of mine. I turned my head slightly, blushing.

He quickly, but gently, turned my face back toward him and kissed my forehead. "Feeling better?" he asked.

"Much. I wish I could have a headache all day just for you to continue doing that."

"My hands are available anytime you need them," he said with a smile as he stretched out his fingers and got up.

I didn't want him to have to scoot around me, so I stood up, too. I was a little shaky, both from the relaxed state I was in and the feel of the boat rocking gently on the water.

Brian took my arm to steady me. "Doesn't look like you have your sea legs, yet," and laughed at me.

I pretended to pout and said, "Stupid lake."

"You don't really like it out here, do you?" he asked a little disappointed.

I downplayed my aversion. "I've never been fond of water of any kind. The thought of falling in with all those living things freaks me out."

He seemed amused by my confession. "We could have done something different, you know."

"And miss this beautiful morning, being secluded from everyone but you? I'll take the dark scary waters any day if it means more of this," I said with a smile.

He held my waist and closed the distance between our faces, kissing me passionately.

I was glad he was holding on to me, because my knees buckled. "Darn waves," I mumbled as I struggled to regain my balance.

We took turns putting sunscreen on each other and then relaxed in the sun and chatted about little things while we soaked up the late morning rays.

"How long have you lived here?" I asked. I remember Brian being in a few of my classes over the past couple of years, but I couldn't remember when he hadn't been around.

"My family moved here during freshman year. We lived in Chicago for a few years before that and a couple of small Midwest towns prior to that. My dad was offered a promotion and we transferred here. It was nice because my grandparents lived here back then."

"Do you ever miss Chicago?"

"With Octobers like this, how could I?" he joked. "No, this feels like home to me. I'm glad we ended up here."

"I am, too," I said quietly with a smile.

Around lunchtime we walked downstairs. I sat down on the bed while Brian retrieved food from the cooler.

"What time do you have to be home?" he asked as he handed me a sandwich and Dr. Pepper and threw a bag of Doritos on the bed.

"Mom just said I had to be home for dinner, so maybe by eight or so?" I was only half joking. I really wanted to stay with him longer and Mom didn't say I had to be home to eat dinner *with* them, although it was implied. "Well, maybe I should be home by five, just so they don't get the wrong idea of you."

As I reached for the bag of chips, Brian grabbed my wrist and flipped me on my back. He was on top of me with a triumphant smile on his face. "I don't think your gift will work on me anymore, will it?" he said teasingly, as if I wanted him to get off.

"Just because I can't use my gift on you, which you never know if I still can, doesn't mean I won't *try* to influence you in any way possible." I smiled my biggest, most innocent smile I could conjure.

To my disappointment, Brian released me and went back to where he had been sitting. "I thought you said your gift doesn't work on people you know?"

"I was just teasing," I said in a quiet voice. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean for it to come out sounding that way."

Brian was deep in thought. "Have you ever tried using it on someone outside your family that you knew or did you just always take it for granted that it was familiarity that was an issue?"

I sat up, kicking my feet as I explained. "Up until I stopped influencing people, I tried on almost a daily basis to make Abigail do something embarrassing. I've known her since Kindergarten and have never once been able to affect her. There are others, too, like teachers and students that I tried with and never had success."

“Will you try again with me sometime?” he asked hesitantly.

“If you would like, but I doubt it’ll work.”

He looked up from his sandwich and smiled a little. “Thanks,” he said sincerely, looking deep in my eyes.

We didn’t say much else while we ate. He was either very hungry or very caught up in his thoughts. After the food was gone, though, we walked back up on deck and easily picked up our conversations again. I could tell he was trying to keep the conversation light and casual and I didn’t try to change the course until there was a moment of thoughtful silence from both of us.

“Did your sister say anything about last night?”

“No. Steph was just getting home when I was going to bed and she was still asleep when I left this morning.” Then he quickly added, “But she won’t think anything of it, I promise.”

“No worries. I know I can trust you.” I smiled at him again to let him know everything was fine. “I’m still very impressed you noticed I was doing anything. I’ve been manipulating substitute teachers in the middle of classes and random kids in church for years until junior high and no one ever even raised an eyebrow to me.”

He shrugged slightly and said, “I guess no one ever took the time to really look at you, then.”

I shrugged back. It wasn’t news to me that people didn’t gravitate towards me. I did my best to keep up a strong wall to stop anyone from getting too close. I had too much at risk and never felt I could really trust anyone, especially after my parents patronized me as a child when I first tried to tell them about it.

We transitioned to talking about our friends. I told him about Kara and Keith, starting with the story of how we became friends in junior high and then continued on to her current relationship. “Kara hasn’t ever really had a serious boyfriend before, kinda like me. She went on a couple of dates, but I guess she just never found someone she clicked with. She met Keith in her art class this semester. They went out on a couple of dates and were suddenly inseparable.” I paused remembering how jealous I was of their relationship.

Brian nodded sympathetically and said, “It was hard losing your best friend, wasn’t it?”

“It was more complicated than that, though. Her happiness is so important to me and she still spends time with me. But Keith is either with her most of the time or she talks about him, which makes it feel like he’s around. He seems like a great guy, but I really don’t want to know all the details of their relationship, which seemed to get serious pretty fast.” I felt a little odd sharing this level of detail with Brian, but I couldn’t make myself stop. “I really worry about her ability to cope with everything when their relationship ends.”

“*When* it ends?” He looked surprised. “You don’t think they’ll last?”

I thought hard. “I hope they do, but they’re still in high school. They don’t even know if they’ll be going to the same college.”

“So you think high school relationships are doomed to end as life carries people off in different directions?” It seemed like I struck a nerve. I quickly picked up on the reason why and was about to back pedal when he continued. “The universe doesn’t care how old you are when it destines you to find your soul mate. If you are truly meant to be with someone, life will find a way to work out all the details.”

“I’d never looked at it like that,” I confessed. “So, how can you tell when you find your soul mate?” I asked as I leaned closer to him.

He was still recovering from his rant, but his features softened when I leaned in. “Well, first, you find yourself smiling a lot. Then, when you’re not together, your thoughts are completely focused on when you will see them again because it is almost painful to be apart. Also, a soul mate will forgive you for anything.”

Brian suddenly grabbed me and jumped into the lake. I barely had time to gasp a breath before I plunged under the cool water. When I resurfaced, I was so angry that I started swimming away from him towards the ladder on the boat.

He was laughing and grabbed my wrist. "And finally, when you kiss your soul mate, the rest of the world completely disappears and you are filled with a sensation that is so powerful, you feel like you're going to explode." And with that, he kissed me more passionately than he had ever done before.

At first, I was shocked and did nothing. Then the anger returned from being pushed in the terrible dark waters and I hit at his shoulders, trying to free myself. And finally, I forgot everything else but his strong lips moving with mine. I was having trouble breathing, but I didn't know if it was from the shock of the water or the kiss. I didn't even know how we were able to stay afloat. It didn't really matter.

He whispered, "Do you forgive me?"

"I don't think I have a choice," I smiled helplessly as he helped me climb up the ladder back into the boat.

Brian threw his wet shirt on a seat and quickly ran down the stairs. I was left shivering on the deck as he rummaged through the cabinets below. He emerged from the lower level still chuckling and looking triumphant as he carried two old looking towels. I was quite taken back by how amazing he looked shirtless.

"You can't tell me that was as bad as you thought it would be," he said, amused with himself.

"I *stink!*" I complained.

"Yeah, you do," he replied holding his nose. "But you taste wonderful," he continued as he wrapped his arms around me and kissed me again. I felt him cringe when my wet clothes touched his warm, bare chest, but he didn't seem to mind after a moment.

"Well, I can't argue with that," I smiled. "You stink, too."

His laugh echoed off the walls of the cliffs that nearly surrounded us. "So, what do you want to do now?"

"Shower," I muttered.

"We have a little time to hang out here in the sun to dry off before we have to head back to the marina."

"Is it getting that late?" I asked disappointed.

"The clock downstairs said it was three thirty. I think it's pretty close to right," he said.

I followed his gaze to the sun descending in the western sky and sighed. Another amazing day was coming to an end long before I was ready.

Brian noticed my distraction and led me to the deck to take a seat. He sat behind me and rubbed my shoulders again. "You're forgiven," I said, melting at his touch.

"So, what are you going to tell Kara about your last two days?"

"I thought I'd tell her I just stayed at home and watched movies while I drown my sorrows in chocolate ice cream," I teased as I glanced back at him to gauge his reaction.

His eyebrows scrunched together and he said, "So you're not going to tell her anything about me? I thought we made a pretty good couple. I mean, I don't know how it was for you, but you're an amazing kisser."

"Is that what you're going to tell your sister or your friends?"

"Well, maybe I'll edit a few things out. How about, 'I had such a great time with Ashlyn this weekend. She is electric to be around and I hope she'll agree to be my girlfriend.'?"

He stopped the massage and I turned so I could face him. "Do you mean it? You want me to be your girlfriend?"

"I've waited to be in a position to ask you that for nearly three years," he admitted.

"When you put it that way, I guess I've been waiting for you for forever, too. Of course I'll be your girlfriend. But no more pushing me in lakes, okay?"

"Not even if you are wearing a swim suit and are being chased by a swarm of bees?"

"Only if it's the middle of summer and the swarm has more than a hundred bees," I teased back.

"You have a deal." He kissed my forehead, turned me back around, and continued rubbing my shoulders until our clothes were nearly dry.

"I guess we should head back now. The air on the ride back should dry you out the rest of the way and help with the stink," he said as he walked towards the captain's chair.

The engine starting disrupted the peacefulness we'd enjoyed all day. We were racing the sun as we hurried back to the marina. As we approached the dock and had to slow down, I noticed the same strange man fishing again. Almost instinctively, I rubbed my temples, feeling a residual pain from my earlier headache returning. When I felt like I had it under control, I stood up and walked carefully over to Brian, stumbling a little on the way.

"Did you want to drive her in?" he asked, seemingly pleased I was coming to visit him.

"I don't think the other boat owners would appreciate that too much," I said smiling. But I quickly refocused on the real reason for my visit and asked, "Did you see that guy on the docks back there? It was the same guy from this morning."

Brian turned his head around and squinted at the docks. "I don't see anyone on the docks."

I turned around and searched again, but he was nowhere to be found. Brian continued his slow drive into the marina and quickly tied up the boat.

It seemed like no time and we were parked in front of my house. I had been completely distracted by my thoughts about the guy on the docks the entire way back. There was something familiar about him... Then I noticed someone look out the window. *Please, please give me privacy*, I mentally begged of my parents. "I had a really great time with you today," I admitted.

"It made my top five of all time best days," he said as he leaned over to put a clump of my hair behind my ear. "So, are you going to be at the library tomorrow?"

"Yeah, I have to get that paper done. I'll probably be there most of the day, but I'll call you when I get home." I regretted my tendency to procrastinate.

"Maybe I'll come rescue you again," he said and leaned over to kiss my cheek.

"Will you call me later tonight? I'll probably be up late, but I have to call Kara. She'll be pissed that I haven't called her yet."

"Yeah, I have some explaining to do on my side, too," he said as I stepped out and closed the door.

"Don't forget to mention the girlfriend part," I joked, but he smiled, obviously very pleased with me saying that.

"I won't."

I jogged to the door and waved to him as he started up the Jeep and drove off. "Bye," I whispered too late and walked in the front door.

I said a quick hello to my parents and took my leave to shower. Before going out to dinner, I checked my email and replied to one of Kara's that I would call her after dinner to tell her everything she wanted to know. As I hit send, a message came in from Brian.

Miss you!

-B

I smiled as I felt the familiar butterflies in my belly and replied back:

Miss you, too. I can't wait for your call tonight.

Now go shower! You stink!

-Ash

I hit send and went to eat.

After dinner, I went to my room and closed the door. If there was one thing I was constantly grateful for was my parents' respect for my privacy. This probably something evolved naturally over the years as I built my wall around myself to keep everyone from finding out about my gift.

"You need to call Kara!" Mom yelled at me. *"She called about fifty times today."*

"I'm on it!" I yelled back and picked up my phone.

"It's about time!" Kara answered on the first ring. She was obviously watching for my name to come up on her caller ID. *"You have to tell me everything! What happened at the dance? You were dancing with Jason one minute and the next I looked and you were gone. Gina said she saw you leaving in a hurry, but I thought she was wrong because I knew you wouldn't leave without saying anything to me. But apparently she was right! How could you do this to me?"*

She had been practicing this speech. I sat calmly and waited for her to finish.

"Hi," I started, but was quickly cut off.

"Hi?! That's all you have to say to me? Ugh! You are so infuriating!"

"I'm sorry. I promise I'll tell you everything; I just need you to be patient with me. I've had an amazing two days and I didn't want to have to come back to reality. I know that's no excuse for not calling you, but you have to understand. I mean, you know how it was at the beginning with you and Keith started dating, right?"

"You and Brian are dating?!"

"Yeah, I guess we are. But let me back up to the beginning. You have to promise not to interrupt, though."

"I promise," she said and it went silent on the other end of the line.

I told her about Brian rescuing me from Calculus and hanging out with me until I felt better, even though I had already started telling her about that at the dance. Again, I left out the part about the desert, but did tell her I got to hang out in his room while he showered. She tried to interrupt me at that point, but I quickly threatened her that I wouldn't tell her anymore if she didn't let me tell the whole story without interruptions.

She got quiet again and I told her about dinner at the park and going to the dance. *"And I can't believe you didn't do anything when Jason came and dragged me on the dance floor. Didn't you see the terror in my face and hear me calling for help?"*

I allowed her a moment to apologize and then continued. I told her about Brian coming and saving me... again... and driving up north where we danced and talked in the moonlight until it was time to come home. Then I continued with the story of the lake and his boat and the wonderfully strong hands he has and his amazing kisses and how he asked me to be his girlfriend.

Kara squealed with delight at the conclusion of my story. *"I'm so happy for you! We have to go on a double date now! Are you free tonight?"*

"No, Kara, I can't go anywhere now. I'm exhausted and will probably go to bed after I talk to Brian."

"Oh! He's going to call you tonight? Keith used to call me every night before I went to bed. I used to lay in bed listening to him, imagining he was right here with me." She trailed off. *"I should call him after I get off the phone with you."*

She decided I was finished and launched into the story of the rumors flying around the dance. Then she went into the details of the rest of her night alone with Keith. As I had done so many other times, I mostly tuned her out, saying "Uh, huh," and "Really?" in all the appropriate places so she

wouldn't know that my mind was wondering elsewhere. This time I actually got to drift off to my own happy thoughts.

"Are you still there?"

"Sorry, Kar. I'm just tired. I'm so glad you guys had a nice night and I am really sorry it took me so long to call you."

"No problem. I'm just glad you finally found someone as great as Keith." I rolled my eyes at the comparison of Brian to Keith. *"I have to do all my homework tomorrow, so I guess I'll just see you at school on Monday."*

"Yeah, I have to work on my History paper. Good luck with your homework. I'll see you Monday. And don't stay up too late talking with Keith." I snickered.

"You, too. Bye!"

It was only nine thirty and I was exhausted. The day in the sun had definitely worn me out. I wanted to lay down to wait for the call, but I had to get my sheets put back on my bed. I was grateful someone had dumped my clothes on my bed. I started putting on my fitted sheet when I rested my head on my bare pillow for a second...

At eleven forty-two, I was awoken by the sound of my phone vibrating on the night stand. The light in my room was way too bright, so I didn't even bother looking to see who was calling.

"Hello?" I said, trying not to sound like I just woke up.

"I thought you said you were going to be up late tonight?" Brian teased.

"You wear me out."

"Did your parents drill you with questions about us?" He sounded a little like he wanted me to have had a tough time.

"Not too much. They gave me a warning about getting 'too serious too quick', but I assured them I wasn't and they let it go."

"So you're not serious yet?"

"I didn't say I wasn't serious, I just said it wouldn't happen quickly. I think two days is a long time." I couldn't help but giggle a little. It was nice to talk to him because I didn't have to have my guard up. "So, what about you? Did your sister give you a hard time? Or did you tell her you were out with your friends today?" I wasn't above teasing him back.

"There are few things I keep from her, so when I got home, I sat her down and told her that I had asked you to be my girlfriend. She wasn't thrilled, but I told her she would have to trust me... and be nice to you."

"I'm sure she hated that condition." I didn't want him to know how hard it was for me to have his sister hate me. I'd been dealing with Abigail Waters's prejudice for over twelve years. But Brian was important to me and I didn't want him to have the stress of keeping the peace because I was around.

"She'll get over it. She may even grow to like you someday." He laughed a little. I wondered if he had doubts that that would ever happen. *"How'd Kara react when you told her everything?"*

"She felt the need to call Keith and talk to him while falling asleep. I guess that meant she was happy, maybe even a little envious, of me." I was beaming.

"She should be. You are incredibly lucky to have a boyfriend who has his own boat."

"Is that why I'm so lucky? I thought it was because I didn't drown in the lake today."

"Well, that, too, I suppose. By the way, did you get that awful smell out of your hair yet?"

"I washed it four times, so I hope it smells better and won't leave a lingering smell on my pillow." I smelled my pillow out of curiosity.

"Yeah, I had to throw my clothes in the washing machine on the way in the door because of the smell. Maybe there is some sanity in your dislike of lakes, but that won't stop me from trying to get you back out there again."

"I thought we agreed that it would take a swarm of over a hundred bees to get me back in that water?"

"No, I just agreed I wouldn't throw you in unless there were over a hundred bees chasing you," he clarified.

"Oh, well, I guess I should have thought out my conditions a little better," I added, smiling.

"So is there any way I can talk you out of spending the entire day at the library and spending at least part of it with me?"

"I wish. I'm afraid it's going to take me awhile to do this research. Spending another day with you just sounds so much better." As cheesy as I felt saying things like that, they were completely true. He didn't make me feel silly about it, either, which unfortunately made it easier for those types of comments to slip out.

"You could use my paper and I'll just write another one."

"Tempting, but I think I'll do it myself." A yawn seemed to come out of nowhere. "Sorry about that."

"No problem. I'm pretty beat myself. If you're sure you won't take my paper, I guess I'll just have to try to steal you away from the library at some point."

"That sounds wonderful," I said and yawned again, this time moving the phone away from my mouth.

Brian chuckled. *"I hate to let you go, but I'm afraid you're going to start snoring in my ear if I don't let you get back to sleeping."*

"Okay. I hope you have nice dreams about fish biting your toes," I said teasingly.

"Sleep well, Ash. I promise I'll see you tomorrow," he said very sincerely.

"Goodnight... my boyfriend," I said softly as I hung up my phone.

I finished putting the sheets back on my bed, got dressed in my pajamas, brushed my teeth, and turned on my stereo so I could drift off to sleep with gentle music playing in the background. It didn't take long before I was fast asleep, dreaming about those same fish I teased Brian about.

Chapter Four - Distractions

I slept much better than the night before and woke up at my normal time with a huge smile on my face, recalling the dream I'd been having about walking on the beach with Brian. As I moved a little in my bed, I could feel the sunburn on my shoulders and groaned.

After breakfast, I grudgingly grabbed my backpack, purse, phone and the keys to my car and headed for the door without even checking my email. I knew it would be a distraction if Brian had written me this morning. I would spend too much time writing him back and waiting for his reply.

I didn't even hear the music playing as I drove my old Corolla to the library; I was deep in thought about my paper, of all things. I guess it helped that Brian's scent wasn't in my car otherwise I probably would have been daydreaming about him the whole way. By the time I pulled into the parking lot at the library, I resolved that I was going to do my paper on Benjamin Franklin.

Inside I found an empty table to throw my stuff on. I grabbed my notebook and pen and sat down at the nearest computer. I was a little shocked to see to how much had been written about the founding father. I groaned and started writing down the call numbers for the most promising looking books.

On my way towards the book shelves, I was glossing over thoughts from the trip to the lake the previous day when I had a sudden urge to research something else. I realized that the guy on the docks at the lake had the same presence as the boy that once lived at the end of the street. I needed to know what had become of Rick Thompson after he abruptly moved away. Of course, there had been rumors that his dad got thrown in jail and he was in foster care. That didn't seem too likely to me because he had to have been almost eighteen at the time of the incident... I shuddered... and could have probably convinced a judge to grant him the right be declared legally an adult.

I went back to the computers and pulled up a white pages website, searching for Rick Thompson in the area. There were no matches, which seemed odd, because it wasn't an unusual name and it was a relatively large city. I Googled his name and got a few hits, but nothing that matched the boy from down the street. I wanted to do a deeper search, but I didn't have the monetary resources to conduct official searches. Besides, I was pretty sure the guy just moved away somewhere and probably continued his experiments on innocent woodland creatures or something. I shuddered again.

I finally refocused on my paper. The words flowed easily from my head and after I had written two pages with references and quotes, I glanced up at the clock. Time had flown by, but I was pleased with my progress. As I counted the quotes in my paper to see how close I had come to the required number, I was startled by someone covering my eyes from behind.

I let out a sharp cry and my mouth was quickly covered as I simultaneously heard several people angrily say, "Shhhhh!" I took a quick breath through my nose and smelled the now familiar musky, sweet sent that was Brian, and relaxed.

He kissed me on the top of my head, releasing my eyes and mouth and said, "Are you going to behave or am I going to have to escort you out of here?"

I smiled and thought it over for a moment. "I think I'd be okay with you escorting me out."

"How's your paper going?" he asked as he glanced at the books I had strewn all over the table. I saw some people throw some dirty looks in my direction, but I don't know if it was because the conversation was bothering them or if I had taken up so much room that I had denied them a coveted place at the table.

"I think I'm nearly done. I'm hoping that I'll make it flow better when I type it up at home."

"So does that mean I made it here just in time to rescue you?"

"You made it just in time. Although, I probably would have wasted more time here rewriting my paper only because I knew you'd be coming."

"I'm glad you waited," he said. "Can I help get you out of here quicker by putting these books back on the cart?"

"That would be great. Where are we going, by the way?" I hadn't thought much about how we were going to spend time together today. I just figured we'd grab a bite to eat nearby and then I'd have to head back to the library to finish.

"I don't know. It's up to you, since you're driving today."

I was glad that Dad had recently taken my secondhand car to be washed, so it was decently clean on the inside and out. "Hmmm... Let me think about it. I wasn't expecting to have any free time today. And I'm not sure how long I can pretend I'm at the library, so it will probably just have to be somewhere to eat. Where's your Jeep, anyway?"

"Steph needed to borrow it today, so I told her she could use it only if she dropped me off here. Of course she rolled her eyes, but didn't have much of a choice. It took me so long to show up here because she spent about three hours getting ready. I think she had a date or was looking for one, anyway." As much as he was jokingly bothered by his sister, you could hear the love and protectiveness he had for her in his voice. I chuckled quietly as I thought about my often strained relationship with my brother. Mark had gone out of state for college and stayed to work there, only coming home for holidays. He landed a job at a notable company that built computer parts or something. I know my parents missed him and I guess I did, too. At least his room smelled a whole lot better.

"Are you hungry?" I asked as we walked towards my car.

"Starving! Don't tell me we're going to have another picnic," he said teasingly.

"Not exactly, but I don't think I'm going to tell you what I'm planning."

Brian grabbed my hand and yanked me backwards so hard, I dropped my backpack in the parking lot. Then he kissed me and I knew I wasn't going to be able to keep anything a secret from him.

"That's not playing fair," I pouted.

Brian picked up my backpack and carried it the rest of the way to my car. "Do you need me to ask again?" he said in a hopeful voice.

I smiled widely and then made a playfully thoughtful face. He started to pull me in for another kiss when I interrupted. "There's a story that goes along with where I'm taking you," I started. "You'll have to get in the car before I will explain." And then I pulled the back of his head down to meet my lips. I forced myself back and smiled, "Get in the car, already, before we get the cops called on us."

"I'm listening," he insisted as he closed the creaky door and buckled up.

"You know how I told you I used to watch birds with my gift when I was younger? Well, it was the one thing I didn't give up when I all but stopped using my gift. I loved the feeling of soaring through the sky; it was one of the few things that made me completely happy."

"So are you going to take me to the zoo to watch birds and eat chicken then," he said jokingly.

"Ha, ha," I said flatly. "I want to fly. Not just as an observer of birds, but really get in the air and soar. One day, my family went to the small airport that's just north of here for lunch at the restaurant. It wasn't great food or anything, but you get to sit there and watch the planes take off and land all day. I absolutely fell in love with that place and the idea of flying. I've only been there a couple of times, though, because I never told anyone about wanting to learn to fly planes."

He reached over and squeezed my hand. "I think that sounds fantastic."

There was a moment when our conversation stopped. I know I was imagining flying, but I didn't know what he was deep in thought about.

"Trying to figure out what you want to eat?" I suggested, poking him with my finger to snap him out of his trance.

"Are you going to tell me why you stopped using your gift?" He completely ignored my question.

My forehead wrinkled. I hadn't been able to keep any secrets from him, but I wasn't sure this was a story that should be shared with anyone. It was *my* nightmare. How would he be able to look at me the same again if I told him of the evil I've seen and then cowered away from? And it wasn't something I'd manage to bury deep in my past. No, it was still haunting me, in my dreams and now, apparently in my waking life, as I am drawn to track him down. I guess I knew in my heart that I would have to stop Rick someday; I couldn't just allow him to be evil and do nothing. But I never dreamed it would be now or would involve anyone but me.

"I didn't want you to know this story," I began quietly and took my hand out of his. I didn't know if I should keep him out, but I told him the whole story of Rick anyway. "He was evil and I wasn't strong enough to stop him." I held my breath as I glanced over for his reaction.

"This is what caused your migraines and nosebleeds," he inferred.

I nodded, slightly ashamed.

"Did you expect to be able to end the evils of the world when you were all of eleven or twelve years old? I don't think that just because you have a gift means that you have to be a super hero." He seemed surprisingly understanding, but I was still on guard. I knew a normal person shouldn't be able to process and accept this story without it affecting them in some way.

I parked the car at the airport, but neither of us moved to get out. "Do you want me to take you home?" I asked looking straight ahead.

He was silent for another minute and then said, "Why on earth would I want you to take me home?"

"I just thought... well, I thought that maybe all of this was a little bit more than you bargained for. Have you been listening to me?" I glanced sideways to see his reaction.

"You didn't do anything wrong." His voice was kind, but his eyes were still distant. "He still haunts you, doesn't he?" he finally asked, looking at me with sad eyes.

"Occasionally," I admitted and continued against my better judgment. "When I was watching him about to do something horrible, I was screaming for him to stop, to do anything else. He did stop, but he turned around like he heard me, like I was actually right there behind him, and looked me directly in my eyes." I shuddered violently and tears rolled down my cheeks.

"I never imagined how much you suffered. I would have never asked you to use your gift again if I'd known it was going to bring back this awful memory."

I shook my head violently. I wasn't about to let him apologize. "You don't understand. I stopped myself from being who I was because I was terrified. I *needed* you to come along and bring myself back. In all these years, I never knew how much damage I was doing to myself by not doing the right thing and helping people. I have never felt more powerful or more comfortable with myself than I do when I'm with you."

"Will you try it again?" he asked, almost as a dare.

"What? On you? It won't work. I'm too close to you." My voice sounded shaky and out of control.

"Please?"

I took my seatbelt off so I could face him and closed my eyes to collect my thoughts. With a deep breath, I looked directly in his eyes, concentrating very hard. *Get out of the car and walk away.* Brian sat there, gazing in my pleading eyes. I focused harder and suddenly I was behind him. *Get out and walk away!* I was shouting at him.

His hand moved towards the door handle when he froze and said, "No." I felt him fighting against my suggestions.

You have to leave. NOW!

He gave in, opened the door and got out.

Close the door and walk away.

He complied as I jumped back to my own mind, tears streaming down my face as I watched him leave. I rested my head on the steering wheel and sobs exploded from my body. I wasn't even aware of the significance of what I had just done. I was just sad. I knew it was for the best that he got away from me... far away. I was not stable and probably insane and I didn't want to make him suffer because of it.

I jumped as my car door opened and I was pulled out so fast, it took my breath away. Brian pulled me in tight to his body and just let me cry while he stroked my hair.

"You are quite convincing," he finally said with a little chuckle and pulled me back to look in my eyes. "But you can't get rid of me that easily." He didn't seem to notice how horrible I must've looked and kissed my forehead. "So you really want to learn to fly?"

"Yes," I managed, half laughing, half crying.

"Did I tell you I have a fear of heights?" he admitted. I don't know if he was trying to make me feel better or if he was serious. "So you have to promise not to push me out of the plane once you get your pilots license. Now, are you ready to eat or do you want to hang out in this parking lot a little longer?"

I groaned. "Maybe a picnic would be a better choice," I said pulling him back towards the car.

"Not a chance. I want to see just how awful this food really is," he said and led me through the parking lot into the restaurant.

"How many?" the hostess asked, staring at my red face.

"Two. Could we have a table with a view that's a little more secluded?" Brian asked as he squeezed my hand, sensing my embarrassment.

"There's no one out on the patio right now, if you don't mind eating outside."

Brian nodded and she led us to a table outside, handing us menus.

We took a long time to eat our sub-par burgers because we had been so caught up in our conversation about nothing in particular. Brian was very careful to steer clear of touchy subjects.

Eventually we left the patio and casually strolled through the parking lot to my car. "So, I guess you really do have total influence over me," Brian said, finally returning to the delicate topic, but with his usual light flare.

"I don't know how I did that. It shouldn't have happened." I was afraid he would take it the wrong way that I was able to use my gift on him.

He put his finger over my lips and said, "It's okay. You don't have to understand it. How are you feeling now? Do you have a headache?"

I hadn't even thought about the lack of headaches from both times I had used my gift on him. Maybe I was scared for all these years no reason. "No, I feel fine. Well, a little like I've been crying all afternoon, but other than that, I've never felt better."

"That was really hard for me, you know. First, trying to not do what you were telling me to do almost gave *me* a headache. But then actually allowing myself to get out and walk away... well, it hurt more than any pain I've ever felt before. Please, *please*, don't will me away again."

"It hurt me, too. Worse than the migraines, worse than anything else I've endured. But I knew I had to give you the opportunity to leave me." I chuckled nervously.

He walked me to the driver's door and unlocked it for me. Before he opened it, he gave me a soft kiss. "I think I've fallen in love with you, Ashlyn Taylor," he admitted.

My name sounded beautiful when he said it. "I think I fell in love with you when you punched Jason in the gut, Brian Turner," I said smiling and got in the car.

"It's hard to believe we have to go back to school tomorrow," he said as I was driving towards his house.

The sun was setting and I knew my parents would start worrying if I didn't make it home soon. "Ugh. School. How am I going to make it through the day? English is going to suck." I groaned at the thought of having to sit next to Jason.

"Don't worry. I'll just steal Jason's seat so I can sit next to you. What's he gonna say?" Brian laughed and I knew it would be okay.

We could see Brian's Jeep parked in the street as we drove down the street towards his house. Unlike my house, there was no one peaking out the window when I drove my little Corolla up and parked in front of his vehicle. So there was no hesitation to the passionate kiss that we shared as we said goodbye.

"Will you call me later tonight?" I pleaded.

"As long as you're not going to be asleep."

"I'd like nothing more than for you to wake me up, but okay. I'll stay awake tonight."

He leaned over and gave me another kiss as he opened his door. "Be careful driving home."

"Thank you. I will. Talk to you soon!" I blew him a kiss and drove away as soon as his front door closed.

The front door of my house opened suddenly and Dad came rushing out before I even opened my car door.

"Where have you been? Why wasn't your car at the library?" he demanded.

The happiness I had felt the whole drive home suddenly vanished. "I just grabbed a bite to eat after I got done at the library. I didn't think it was that big of a deal."

"Don't you think you should have called? We were worried sick! Why didn't you have your phone on?" He was angrier than I'd ever seen him.

"What do you mean? I've had it on all day," I insisted as I went to grab it out of my purse. The phone was off. The battery must have died and I didn't think to check it because I was with the only person I wanted to talk to. "Oh, sorry," I said in a small voice. "The battery needs to be charged, I guess. I didn't realize."

"Were you with *that boy*?" Dad asked, accusingly.

"Yes, I was with *Brian*," I said emphasizing his name. "I didn't realize I wasn't allowed to eat with him," I continued and stormed passed him into the house.

"Are you okay?" Mom asked frantically as I stormed passed her on my way to my room and slammed my door shut.

"I'm fine, Mom. Just great!" I yelled sarcastically.

Mom opened my door slowly. "Can I heat up some dinner for you?" she asked cautiously.

"No, I just got done eating." The fight was leaving me as I looked at her weary face. "I'm sorry, Mom. I didn't mean to make you guys worry. Brian showed up at the library as I was finishing my research. I hadn't eaten anything since breakfast, so we decided to grab something to eat. I'm sorry I didn't call. I didn't have any idea my phone was dead." I couldn't hold on to my anger any more.

"Please don't hold this against Brian. It isn't his fault," I pleaded.

"We're just worried about you, Ash. You've been floating around the house since Friday evening because of this boy. We're just concerned that you are going to get hurt."

I didn't know what I could do to convince them that Brian was the best thing that had ever happened to me. "Mom, you just have to trust me that I know what I'm doing. I promise that I'm not getting in over my head. I haven't been able to open up to anyone... ever... the way I can open up to him. I know this probably sounds childish and like a crush or something... but it is different, better."

"Please just be careful," Mom begged.

"I am," I promised.

"Don't stay up too late in here. You have school tomorrow," she said and left my room.

I heard Mom and Dad having a heated conversation. I sighed as I thought about all the arguments I'd been responsible for over the years. I turned on my CD player to drown out their fight and plugged my phone into the charger, turning it back on so I wouldn't miss Brian's call. I sat down at my computer knowing that I should try to start typing up my history paper. Instead I glanced at my email and saw one from Brian from the morning. I was really glad I hadn't checked it before I left for the library. It was a short email wishing me a good morning and reminding me he'd see me at the library. I couldn't stop myself from replying.

Thank you for coming today. You just keep getting more amazing. I keep waiting to wake up. Can't wait for your call tonight!

-Ash

It was probably thirty seconds from the time I hit send until my phone was vibrating on my nightstand. "That was fast," I commented without even saying hello.

"I'm sorry you didn't get my email before you left. I'm glad you waited for me, anyway."

"I was afraid to look at my emails this morning because I didn't think I'd be able to leave if there was one from you," I admitted freely.

"Oh, so you're avoiding me so you can do more important things like school work? I see how you are," he said jokingly.

"Did you get the third degree when you got home like I did?" I asked, leading him to ask me about what I had endured.

"No, my parents are pretty easy going about my comings and goings. As long as I keep my grades up and don't get arrested or anything, they let me do whatever. Why, what happened to you?"

I told him about my cell phone dying and the ensuing panic and accusations.

"Aww, don't be too mad at them. They're just worried about their baby girl. I worry about you, too."

The conversation got lighter after that. We talked for another twenty minutes and were about to hang up when he asked, *"So what time should I pick you up tomorrow?"*

"Oh, I don't know. What are we doing tomorrow?" I was trying to recall if we had made plans for after school.

"Well, we do have school tomorrow. Unless you don't want me to drive you."

"No, I mean yes! Of course I want you to drive me. How about seven thirty?" I must've been really tired; I was completely mindless.

"That's cutting it a little close, isn't it? It only gives us twenty minutes to get there and get to class."

"I don't want to have to face all those people talking about me and staring at me still. I'd prefer to minimize my time there, if at all possible."

"So, you just plan on running from class to class with a bag on your head so no one can see you for the rest of the year?"

"That was the plan!" I said triumphantly.

"You won't be there alone. I'll be with you. We can always give everyone something to really talk about," he said slightly maliciously.

"And just what did you have in mind?"

"Nothing in particular, but I'm sure we could come up with something." He paused for a moment. "How about seven fifteen. Then we can test the waters if you feel comfortable or hang out in the Jeep if you don't, but at least we'd have options other than sprinting to our classes."

"I guess that's reasonable. Now tell me more about that plan you're formulating. You've piqued my interest."

"Another time, sweet Ashlyn. You need to get some sleep after all that research you did today."

It was generous of him to not bring up my breakdown. How did he know exactly the right thing to say all the time? "Well, I suppose I should let you get your beauty sleep, too," I teased. "And thank you for coming back, today. I don't know how..."

"You don't have to thank me. It was pure selfishness. It's good to know we're on the same page. Thank you for letting me in. You know you can always trust me."

"I know. I don't completely understand how you haven't run away from me screaming yet, but I'm glad you stayed. Good night, Brian. I'll see you soon!"

"Night, Ash. I love you." And with that, he hung up.

That was completely unfair! He didn't even give me a chance to say it back and I had to go to sleep thinking about the gravity of what he said and the guilt of not saying it back. But the happiness of hearing him say it and feeling that he meant it overpowered any guilt I might have had and I quickly fell into a deep and happy sleep.

Chapter Five – Unexpected

I forgot to set my alarm and woke with a shock at seven-oh-eight, seven minutes before Brian was supposed to arrive. Mom and Dad usually left for work before I woke up, so it wasn't any surprise that they weren't there as I rushed to get ready. I stripped out of my pajamas in the middle of my room and ran to the shower fully naked. I was clean before the shower had a chance to warm up. Shivering, I ran back to my room to get dressed, hoping Brian would be a few minutes late. Seven-eleven. I hurried to find something to wear. I just did my laundry, but I still couldn't find anything to put on. I made a mental note to take Kara shopping with me soon.

I finally decided on a pair of dark jeans and a white cotton t-shirt. Nice and boring, so hopefully I wouldn't draw unnecessary attention to myself. The doorbell rang. Figures, he was early. I hadn't even combed my hair yet.

I quickly put on eyeliner and powder and ran to the door.

"You're early," I huffed.

"You're not ready," he replied and came inside. He looked fantastic, of course. His blue eyes seemed even brighter today, happier maybe. He leaned down to give me a kiss, but I had to stop him, which was not an easy thing for me to do.

"Give me two minutes to brush my teeth and run a comb through my hair and I'll be back to pick it up from here." I smiled and rushed out of the room, leaving him somewhat confused in my wake.

Three minutes later, I rejoined Brian in the living room, with my backpack and purse over my right shoulder. He had been looking at some of the family photos in the frames on the wall. I was sure he was going to comment on some of the more embarrassing ones, but instead said, "That was longer than two minutes," and bent down to kiss me.

"Mmmm. Good morning," I managed to say and tried for another one.

"We're going to be late if we keep this up," he said, stifling a laugh and kissed me back.

"We could just ditch and do this all day, you know," I said hopefully.

He seemed to consider it for a moment and then said, "Very tempting, but I don't think I can get you excused from a whole day of classes."

It seemed like forever since he had helped me ditch school on Friday. Instead of it being three days, it felt more like three years.

"Fine," I pouted and we walked out the door. "So, what is your plan if I have a nervous breakdown?" I asked as I buckled the seat belt. I was only half kidding. The top was back on, which made it feel a little safer, like I could always hide in there all day if I needed to.

"I'll just have to carry you to all your classes and not leave your side." I knew he was kidding, but the thought of that sounded nice. "Don't worry about it," he continued. "You've worked this up in your head. You're going to be disappointed when no one even says anything about you today."

I sat further back in my seat and watched the scenery fly by. I knew he was probably right about overreacting, but also knew I wouldn't be lucky enough to avoid all scrutiny today.

"You drove too fast," I groaned as he parked in the student parking lot. It was only seven thirty-two.

He reached over and stroked my cheek. "It's going to be fine," he insisted, looking deep into my eyes.

I closed my eyes to take in his touch on my face and was startled when he knocked on my window. "You coming?"

"Fine," I grumbled and picked up my stuff and opened the door.

There were several cars just entering the parking lot as Brian and I walked hand in hand towards the fence marking the boundary of the school grounds. I tried to not look around, but I could feel groups of people staring at us.

"You look amazing today, by the way," Brian whispered in my ear as we passed through the gate onto campus. That did wonders for my confidence and I walked the rest of the way to my locker without worrying much about the whispers and stares.

I dialed my locker combination and noticed Brian was trying to hide a smile. "What?!" I insisted and opened the locker door without taking my eyes off him.

He motioned with his head towards my locker and inside was three red roses in a crystal vase. The smell was breathtaking. They were quite possibly the most beautiful roses I had ever seen. "Wow! How did you..?" I didn't even have a chance to finish my question before he pulled me in close and gave me a kiss that bordered on inappropriate for school.

"I've got connections," he said smiling brightly, his arms still wrapped around my waist. "I wanted to help take your mind off any other distractions you might have this morning."

I noticed some students gawking, so I quickly grabbed my history and chemistry books, took another deep breath of the beautiful fragrance in my locker, and closed the door. "They're beautiful. I've never had anyone buy roses for me before. Do you think they'll be okay in there?"

"They'll be fine. And when they wilt, I'll get some more to take their place, if that will make you happy."

"You make me happy," I said quietly, but just loud enough that he could hear.

"Sorry I didn't have the foresight to put a lock of my hair in there or something," I teased when we arrived at his locker. His plan had worked. I was feeling much more relaxed and comfortable.

"You're standing here with me. That's all I need." He closed his locker and we started walking to our classroom. History was the first of the two classes we shared. I was glad it was our first period class; it would help me ease into the day and the whispers I was sure to have to endure in every class.

As we got close to the door, he pulled me to the side. "Breathe," he instructed. I took a deep breath and smiled timidly at him. He decided to take a different approach to get me back in a happy place. "I meant what I said last night on the phone."

He gave me a minute to process the conversation in my head. "You're not going to do anything to make me feel fragile anymore?" His ploy was working. I knew what he meant, but I wanted to hear him say it again.

"I love you, Ashlyn."

I didn't have time to say anything before he kissed me again.

Someone cleared their throat behind us, which killed the moment. But I was still jumping up and down inside. "Let's get to class," Mrs. Harmon said as she walked by, eyeing us as she headed toward her classroom down the hall.

Brian was still smiling when we walked through the door and took our seats in Mr. Jenkins' history class. Mr. Jenkins didn't allow students to switch seats like we could in English, so I had to part with Brian at my seat towards the back as he headed for his seat in the far right corner, front row.

I couldn't pay attention to Mr. Jenkins' lecture on the Continental Congress. I was uncontrollably happy and was surprised I wasn't bouncing in my seat. I was staring at Brian, wondering if he was as giddy as me, when I suddenly was gazing at him from right behind his shoulder. *Oh! I didn't mean to use my gift now!* I wondered if I could simply talk to Brian like this, without making him do anything. So I whispered from my out of body voice, "*I love you, too, Brian,*" and then faded back into my own mind. His posture stiffened and I knew it worked.

After class, Brian immediately came back to my desk and pulled me out the back door of the building. "You're getting scary with that, you know?"

"It's your fault," I started off teasingly. "I told you that you were making me stronger. I have no explanation for what's happening. I didn't get an instruction manual or anything." I ended up sounding more defensive than I intended.

"I didn't mean that it was a bad thing," he said, interpreting my sudden change of tone. "It just startled me. I thought you had walked behind me and were whispering in my ear, but I couldn't smell you, so I had an idea of what happened. I hope no one noticed."

"I don't think anyone did. Can I try it again without scaring you?" I asked.

He just smiled and nodded.

"I love you, too, Brian." I felt the blood rush to my cheeks. I had never said that out loud to anyone outside my family except Kara, but she was practically family. But before I could stand there feeling awkward for any length of time, he picked me up in his arms, and kissed me almost as intensely as he did at the lake.

"That was what I envisioned that moment to be like," he said still holding me. The warning bell rang while we embraced, giving us exactly two minutes to reach our next class. "Are you going to be okay?"

Was he kidding? My world was spinning out of control and I didn't care. I gathered myself, nodded, and said, "Yeah. I guess okay will have to be good enough until English." That was three periods away.

With another quick kiss, we parted and headed to our separate classes. I was sprinting towards chemistry and almost ran into Abigail. Why did I have to run into her when Brian was probably already on the other side of campus?

"Watch where you're going much?" she snarled.

"Whatever, Abigail," I replied as I rolled my eyes at her and continued down the hall to my class. At least there wasn't time for any other remarks. She was late for her class, too.

I barely made it to my seat before the final bell rang. Thankfully, we had a lecture and not a lab. I was dangerous when I got my hands on chemicals, and that was when I was concentrating on what I was doing. Between the whispered remarks and the emotional high from Brian, I lacked any focus and probably would have blown up half the building.

After chemistry came my easiest class: ceramics. I made a quick stop at my locker to drop off my books and admire the roses before having to sprint again to the class. I was able to sit in there molding and remolding the same piece of clay, daydreaming during the entire class. I created a heart about fifty times before my neighbor made a weird, grunting noise at me.

The bell rang and I rushed to get to my locker, looking forward to seeing my flowers again. When I turned the corner, I got an even better surprise. Brian was waiting for me there, having a conversation with Kara, whose locker was right next to mine.

"We have to all go out together sometime, okay?" she was tittering at Brian.

He casually said, "Ash would like that a lot," and then caught my eye and smiled at me.

"Oh, hey, Ash. We were just making plans to go out on a double date this weekend. You're in, right?" Kara was practically begging with her eyes.

I looked to Brian pleadingly. He smiled and took my hand in his. "We'd love to," Brian answered as I searched for words.

I smiled at Kara, "That sounds great." I hoped it sounded more excited than I felt.

"How about Friday night? You can drive me home from school and then spend the night afterwards. It'll be so great!"

I was a little shocked when Brian interrupted her. "I can't Friday night. I have to work. What about Saturday?"

Work? I can't believe I didn't even know he had a job. I felt like the biggest idiot.

"Oh, well Saturday should work for us." Kara was as caught off guard as I was.

"As long as it's in the evening. I have to make up for all the hours I took off this past weekend," he said and winked at me.

He'd ditched work to hang out with me? I was touched, but felt very guilty and a little mad at myself for not even asking if he had a job. I suppose it was a given; most seniors at school either played varsity sports or worked after school. I was one of the lucky few whose parents wanted them to concentrate on school work and didn't force them to pay for insurance, gas, clothes, and all the other teenage necessities. I had to do chores around the house for an allowance, but my parents were very generous to me.

"Oh!" Kara interrupted my thoughts, "That will be even better. Ash and I will go shopping all day and then meet you in the evening."

"I'm sure you'll get it all worked out," Brian said with a smile.

"We'll talk more about it in PE today, okay?" she said to me. "I think we're just playing racquetball again." I could see that she was already planning every last detail and I would just have to give my blessing to her agenda.

Before I could answer, she was already skipping off down the hall, probably to find Keith.

"So, I guess my weekend has been planned," I mused.

"Weekend? We're just going out one night. We'll have the rest of the weekend to do what we want, right, I mean after I get off work?" Brian tried to sound concerned, but I could hear the amusement in his voice.

"Not if Kara gets her way," I groaned and we started walking towards English.

"Well, I'll have to find a way to steal you away from her, then. I'm sorry I have to work a lot this week, but I would gladly sacrifice having to work more during the week for the great weekend I had with you," he said and pulled me closer.

My stomach got tighter as we reached the door to our English class, worrying about the Jason confrontation. We actually made it to class early and there were only a handful of kids there. Brian took the seat recently acquired by Jason and scooted the desk a little closer to me. His closeness calmed my nerves, so by the time Jason sauntered in holding hands with Abigail, I felt completely strong and ready to face anything they had in store for us.

Abigail threw me a hateful look and continued walking to her seat. Jason hesitated at the aisle where his former seat was. I could feel all eyes looking at the brewing situation, anticipating a fight, but Brian must have thrown him a cautioning look because he decided against coming down the aisle and quickly caught back up with Abigail. He then showed his true jerk self and dumped Ryan Parker's books on the floor and claimed the seat beside Abigail vacated by Ryan. *Bully*, I thought to myself, but quickly had my focus shifted when Brian reached over and grabbed my hand.

Thanks, I mouthed to him as the teacher called the class to order.

That seemed to be the worse that they could muster because after class, they both rushed out the door without another glance at us. I heard Brian chuckle to himself as they left.

"Not as bad as you thought, huh?" he asked, still amused by their haste.

"Nothing's as bad when you're right here with me."

He chuckled quietly at my cheesiness. "Let's go get lunch."

I picked out my usual salad and followed him as he created his lunch and paid for both. "Where do you want to eat?" he asked as we took our food out to the common area outside the cafeteria.

"Kara and I usually sit over there," I said, pointing to a group of tables at the far side of the common area. "But I'm not sure it's safe to sit with her. She's going to be going on and on about Saturday night. What about your friends?"

"I'm not sure they're ready to deal with our relationship yet," he admitted hesitantly.

I knew his sister didn't like me, but I didn't realize that I was causing him trouble with his friends, too. "Let's sit over there by the tree, then," I said frowning.

As we sat under a tall ficus tree, Brian reached over and smoothed the frown mark on my forehead. "It's nothing to worry about, Ash. They've just been listening to Steph's version of things and

are a little concerned that I'm getting in over my head. They'll come around. They have to. I'm not giving you up," he said with finality and started eating his strange lunch.

I had to trust him because I wasn't going to make him force his friends to accept me. That would definitely backfire and I'd probably end up losing, especially against his sister. Instead, I decided to find out about his job. "So, you really ditched work this weekend to hang out with me?"

"Oh, right. I don't think I told you about my job, did I?"

"Nope," I said and took another bite of salad.

"It's nothing glamorous or anything. I work at the gym down the street as an exercise consultant," he said.

"That explains a lot," I remarked, more to myself than to him.

"What's that supposed to mean," he said looking slightly confused.

I had a suspicion that he wasn't confused at all, but just wanted me to say it, so I did. "It explains why you are in such great shape."

"So you like my shape, eh?" he said inquisitively.

I flashed back to Saturday at the lake, putting sunscreen on his muscular arms and strong neck, feeling his strong hands rubbing my shoulders, and noticing how great his body really was when he took his shirt off as we stood dripping wet on the boat after he had thrown me in.

"Ashlyn?" he said waving his hand in front of my face.

"Err.. yeah. Sorry. I was just thinking back to Saturday," I unwillingly confessed and felt the blood flood to my cheeks.

He laughed. "You're so funny," he said and kissed my forehead.

"I'm glad I amuse you," I said, happy to have his lips touch me again. I managed to refocus. "How long have you worked at the gym?"

"About a year now. My parents are friends with the owners and they offered me a job and all the free workouts I wanted. It pays okay and they're pretty lenient about my work schedule. Although, I had never called in sick before this weekend." He smiled at me to make sure I didn't take it the wrong way.

"What can I say? I guess I'm just a bad influence," I teased. "So, do you have any time off work this week or do I have to get a gym membership to spend any time with you?"

"I don't have a day off until Sunday. I'm working from five 'til close all week and then from ten 'til five on Saturday to make up the time."

I put on my best pouty face. "I guess I *will* have to try to convince my parents to get me a gym membership."

"You can help me study until it's time for me to go to work," he offered.

I don't think we'd get much studying done, but I was going to have to take advantage of every second we had this week. "I guess I'll have to be okay with that, then."

We finished picking through our lunches and were throwing our leftovers away when there was a commotion on the far side of the tables. Curiosity got the better of both of us and we moved closer to see what was happening, holding hands the entire way.

Abigail and her gang were giggling wildly as a group of freshman girls at a nearby table were picking spaghetti noodles out of their hair. I watched in horror as Abigail picked up her half eaten shake was about to volley it towards the girls.

Without a second thought, I stared at Abigail and told her to put the shake down and walk away. I knew my gift was working because I could see the tears in the girls' eyes at the next table as they picked food from all parts of their bodies. At that moment, she set her shake down, stood up, and walked away from the table, leaving her friends staring after her with their jaws dropped.

"That was you, wasn't it," Brian whispered as I returned to my normal point of view.

I just nodded, astonished at what I had just done, marveling in the powerful feeling I had missed for all these years.

"That was amazing. And a wonderful thing to do." He put his other hand over mine to help me stop shaking and asked in a more serious voice, "Are you okay? Did that hurt?"

I immediately felt the shaking subside and responded, "I am great. I haven't felt that feeling in so long; I'd forgotten how invigorating it really is."

He let his extra hand drop back to his side and lifted my hand up to his mouth and kissed it gently. "Is that the first time you've done that to Abby?"

"Yes. I seem to have broken through some barrier, thanks to you. It was exhilarating to have control over her." I couldn't stop smiling.

"And I thought I was the only one who could make you smile like that," he teased as we walked towards my locker.

"So, will I see you again before the end of the day?" I asked wistfully.

"Probably not. I've got to catch up on the work I missed on Friday. Ms. Swanson will have me running all over campus and then I'll have a lab to try to make up from Physics."

"If you're anywhere around Mr. Dillinger's class, you could stop in and say hi," I said jokingly.

"I'll see what I can do," he said and bent down to give me a kiss goodbye.

"See you after school. Good luck with your lab. And tell Ms. Swanson thanks from me for Friday!" I shouted as Brian walked down the crowded hallway and disappeared.

"Keith doesn't have to work Saturday night, so it looks like we're on. We're still on, right?" I nearly slammed my fingers in my locker, startled by Kara's sudden appearance.

"Sure thing," I said. It wasn't that I didn't want to go out with Kara, but it was like an automatic reflex remembering all the times I'd been the third wheel with them and felt embarrassed at their emotional displays. I guess I'd have a distraction this time, so I'd try really hard to find actual excitement to share with my best friend.

"I can't wait for PE to tell you all about what we're going to do! It's going to be such a fun weekend!" Kara closed her locker. "I'll give you something to think about until then... manicures." With that, she smiled and skipped off to her class.

Calculus was as mind numbingly dull as ever. I didn't understand most of what Mr. Dillinger was talking about because I had missed Friday's lecture and didn't bother to try to catch up over the weekend. I kept peering hopefully at the door, but Brian never came in.

After class ended, I went to my locker to drop off my books and to smell my flowers again. A piece of paper fell on the ground as I opened my door.

Sorry I didn't make it to your class. I'll see you soon. Miss you!

Love,

B

I folded the note and put it in my purse as I headed towards the gymnasium. I was shocked at how quickly the splendor of Friday night's decorations disappeared, transforming it back into the regular gym, complete with the stench of sticky socks and sweat.

I quickly dressed in my PE clothes and met Kara and the rest of the class out on the racquetball courts. Kara and I teamed up, grabbed our equipment, and headed for the farthest court. As long as we hit the ball towards the wall every couple of minutes, we'd be able to have a private conversation without getting in trouble.

"So are you really up for going out on Saturday? I mean, you don't seem too excited about it." Kara sounded frustrated with me.

"I'm sorry, Kar. I just have a lot I've been dealing with today. I am really happy we're going out this weekend." She looked a little suspicious of my sincerity, so I added, "So, what do you have planned for us?"

She smiled really big and I knew I had said the right thing. "Well first, you have to stay over Friday night and we'll do pedicures; we'll save the mani's for Saturday after shopping. You have to catch me up on everything that's been going on. I mean, you got *flowers* in your locker today! It must have been a great weekend!"

"It was nearly perfect," I beamed, remembering all the wonderful parts. I snapped myself back from another great daydream just in time to lob the ball back towards the wall and said, "I was just saying to myself this morning that I had to convince you to go shopping with me. I *hate* all my clothes."

"We'll definitely have to get new clothes for our dates. Then we can come back to my house and do our hair and make-up. Oh! It's going to be so much fun!"

Kara looked almost as happy as I felt. For all my anxieties and fears for how today was going to go, it really turned out quite well. I was almost glad Brian and I didn't ditch. *Almost*.

When we got back to the gymnasium, I showered so I wouldn't stink when Brian drove me home. I took a little longer than normal, just to make sure I was decent, and walked out to find Brian. To my pleasant surprise, he was waiting outside the locker room with my roses.

"Were you in charge of locking up today?" he said, but kissed me before I had a chance to respond.

"Mhmm," was all I managed and we started walking towards the nearly empty parking lot. "I guess that took a little longer than I thought. Sorry."

"You are well worth the wait," he said.

"Thank you for the note. You must've been pretty busy?" I asked as we reached his Jeep.

"Yeah, I was stuck doing a lot of filing and only got to run a few passes out." He was ignoring the person sitting in his backseat.

"How was your lab, by the way?"

"It was easy. It only took me about fifteen minutes, and then we just studied for the rest of the period. I got out early and got your flowers out of your locker and still make it to the gym with time to spare," he said, smiling. He gave me a long kiss and then handed me my flowers as I took my seat.

"Are you trying to piss me off," a voice chimed in from the back as Brian opened his door.

"You could've taken the bus home," he said, taking my hand and looking at her in the rear view mirror.

"I think I'm going to be sick," she mumbled to herself as we drove towards their house.

"Sorry," he whispered to me, squeezing my hand.

I squeezed back and smiled at him.

"So, I heard Abby has someone new to pick on today. You should offer your services to those poor freshmen girls, Brian," she said arrogantly.

"You better watch out or she'll turn on you again," he retorted.

She huffed but didn't retort.

"So, what does Kara have planned for you this weekend," he said, refocusing his attention on me.

"Oh, you know, lots of girl stuff. Something about nails, hair, and shopping." I didn't want to share too much information with Stephanie in the backseat.

"Do you need me to call in sick to save you?" he asked.

I could tell he was joking, but Stephanie gasped and threatened him, "I swear I'll tell Mom if you even *try* to ditch work again. You know they're short staffed as it is and Saturdays are always busy. I *knew* she was a bad influence on you!"

"Chill out, Steph. I was only kidding."

"Sure you were," she mumbled as we pulled up to their house and parked in the driveway.

"Mom's gonna be pissed if you're parked here when she gets home." Her mood was getting worse; I was looking forward to making a quick escape to his room.

"I'm not going to be here when Mom gets home," he assured her.

We parted from her as we reached the hall and she walked into the kitchen. We went to Brian's room and he closed the door, locking it. "Don't worry about her. She can actually be quite sweet when she wants to be."

I had my doubts that she would ever be anything close to "sweet" towards me.

"So, tell me honestly, was today really as bad as you expected it to be?" he asked as he dropped his school stuff on his desk and pulled me in close.

"I wasn't worried. I knew it would be just fine," I tried to lie, but ended up laughing half way through my sentence.

"Yeah, that's what I thought. Your eyes gave you away, you know. They were blackish this morning, and now they're golden brown. Let's see what color I can turn them now," he said and tucked a strand of my hair behind my left ear.

How we managed to maintain any control during the ensuing minutes is beyond me. I'm pretty sure the house could have crashed down around us and we wouldn't have noticed. The sensation of being this close to him was only rivaled by the emotional high when I used my gift for good. I had kissed a couple of guys in my life, but it never felt anything like kissing Brian did. I literally felt the strength building inside me, like his lips were doing something to me beyond the normal hormonal and chemical reactions.

He seemed to notice when I drifted too far from the moment. He stopped kissing my lips and moved to my neck, sending new shivers through my body. "Am I doing something wrong?" he asked, amused by my new reaction.

I couldn't stop my laugh; I was way beyond having any control of my emotions. "I don't think so. Why do you ask?" I had a very hard time finding my voice.

"You seemed distracted." He stopped kissing my neck and looked at me more seriously.

"I got lost in thoughts. They weren't bad, though," I confessed.

"Are you going to willingly share with me, or am I going to have to torture it out of you?" he asked with a mischievous grin on his face and leaned in for another impassioned kiss.

"It's stupid. I don't even know why I was thinking about it," I said, turning away from him.

"Tell me," he said forcefully while grabbing my hand and then added softly, "Please?"

"Ugh! You make it impossible to keep *anything* from you!" I complained.

"You're avoiding the question," he said, getting playfully impatient.

"Fine! I was just wondering how many girls have been totally rendered helpless like I am by your kisses. There, you made me say it. Are you happy?" I felt my face get hot and turned away again quickly.

He took my hand and turned me back around so he could look in my eyes. His tone was quieter and gentler, "None. Well, at least from my perspective, no one has ever inspired me to kiss them the way I kiss you."

I was still too ashamed of my question to say anything, so he continued, "And no one has ever made me feel the way I do when we're together. Not just the kissing stuff, but just being near you is so..." He paused to search for the right word.

"Electrifying?" I offered, finding my voice again.

"Yes," he agreed and lifted my chin to look into my eyes. "I have never told anyone that I loved them, well except my family, and yet, it seems so natural to say it to you. Because I am in love with you, Ashlyn. I don't know how it happened so quickly. Maybe everyone's right and we are taking things way too fast, but I don't care. This *feels* right and I'm not going to fight it."

A tear slipped from my eye. "I don't want to make you choose between me and your family and friends. But I don't want to let you go, either."

"You don't have to. I told you at lunch, my friends will come around. I just need to give them a little time." He wiped the tear away with his thumb, still looking in my eyes. "And Steph, well, she's just Steph. She'll always love me and will learn to deal with this eventually."

I was overwhelmed with emotion and wrapped my arms around his chest and held on tight. When I finally had some control over myself again, I said, "So has Steph liked any of your other girlfriends?"

He chuckled. "No, not really. One time she tried setting me up with her friend, I guess thinking it would be easier on her if she knew the person I was dating was good enough for me, but it didn't take long for her overprotective nature to take over and she ended up losing that girl as a friend."

At least I wasn't being singled out by Stephanie's anger; she didn't like anyone dating her big brother. I was feeling better, so I said, "Maybe she'd be happier if Abigail was here instead."

When Brian laughed, it seemed to melt away the remaining distress I was holding on to. "It's funny you should say that..." he said, still laughing. I tensed up a little again. "Abigail was apparently trying to flirt with me this afternoon," he began.

I was instantly horrified and started to say something, but he quickly continued. "It was so pathetic that I didn't even notice what she was doing until she huffed and stormed off. I had been trying to devise a way to steal you away from Kara early on Saturday for some alone time with you before the date. I don't even know what she said to me."

I was speechless. I knew Abigail tried to take everything away from me, but I didn't think she'd stoop to this level, especially after she stole Jason.

Brian misunderstood my silence. "Are you jealous?" He smiled.

"Only if you want me to be." In reality, I knew there was nothing Abigail had that I would ever be jealous of again. "If she succeeds in stealing you away, though, she'd be hit with a lot worse things than bird poop," I smiled, pretending to plot some devious thing.

"I think I might enjoy seeing that," he said and tossed me onto his bed.

"We should probably get some studying done, you know," I joked as he climbed on top of me, pinning my arms above my head.

"Mhmm," he said as he studied my face up close, kissing me gently as he moved down to my neck where I could feel his warm breath hover. "I see," he continued and kissed my neck under my ear and moved down my jaw until he reached my quivering lips. He released my arms and flipped me over on top of him, kissing me the entire time. "Yes," he finally said, smiling up at me with his beautiful blue eyes. "We're definitely going to need to do a lot more studying."

We continued "studying" for a while longer until Brian looked over at his clock and sighed. "I have to get ready for work now," he said sounding very disappointed.

"Do you want me to give you a minute?" I asked as I slid off him and sat at the foot of the bed.

"No, don't go anywhere," he said and took his shirt off and grabbed a clean one from the closet that said the name of the gym on it.

I nearly swooned at his well-toned torso. When he grabbed a pair of shorts from the drawer, I instinctively averted my eyes. He chuckled as he kicked off his shoes and quickly changed from his jeans to the workout shorts. "There," he said sounding pleased with himself. "Now comes the hard part," he said sadly. "I have to take you home."

I stuck my lip out, pretending to pout and he quickly bent down and bit it. Of course, it led to another several minutes of making out before he touched my face and said, "We *have* to go."

I grabbed my backpack and purse – I had left the flowers in the Jeep – and followed Brian as he led me out to the living room. "Stay here for just a second," he said and jogged to the kitchen.

"Tell Mom I'll grab some dinner on the way home from work," I heard him tell Stephanie.

"You'd better hurry or you'll be late," she lectured and then added, "Be careful, okay?" It was touching how much they cared for each other.

“Bye!” he yelled as he closed the front door and walked with me to the Jeep.

Time had seemed to stop all afternoon in his room and then sped by too fast as he drove me home and parked in front of my house.

“I suppose I’ll go try to finish my history paper, if I can concentrate,” I said with a grin and leaned into him for a farewell kiss. I sat there for a moment longer with my eyes still closed after the kiss was over. “I’ll miss you,” I confessed as I grabbed my backpack, purse, and flowers.

“I’ll call you when I get home, okay?” He looked as pained as I felt having to part.

“I’ll be waiting. Now get out of here before you get in trouble!” I said and closed the door, forcing the seemingly impossible separation. “I love you,” I mouthed as he put the Jeep in gear.

“I know,” he mouthed back and drove off down the street.

Chapter Six – Double Trouble

Monday night at dinner I asked my parents for permission to spend the weekend at Kara's house. They were suspicious and said I could only stay Saturday night. Despite their apprehension, they were pleased that I was making plans with Kara instead of Brian.

The rest of the week flew by. Brian and I continued to "study" every afternoon. Oh Thursday, Brian left my house just minutes before Dad came home. I was afraid he had seen Brian leaving the neighborhood, but he didn't say anything to me if he did. In fact, he hadn't said anything at all about Brian since Sunday night. I was pretty sure it was at Mom's request that he was keeping quiet and I didn't want to put any unneeded strain on their relationship, so I approached him after he had settled in front of the TV.

"Dad?" I asked and sat on the couch.

"Yeah, Ash, what's up?" he said, not looking away from the TV.

"I was hoping I could talk to you about what happened on Sunday."

His posture stiffened. "There's nothing to talk about, sweetie. I overreacted."

"I know you don't believe that, Daddy. I need you to trust me enough to know that I know what I'm doing."

"I trust *you*," he said, emphasizing the "you".

"I want you to trust Brian, too." I sighed. "Do you know why I didn't go with Jason to the dance last week?" I began.

He shook his head, glancing at the scores scrolling on the bottom of the TV.

"Dad! This is important! Jason dumped me in the middle of English class for Abigail. I was completely humiliated and had to run out of class before the tears burst out of me. Jason is a jerk and I should have never agreed to go with him in the first place. And then Brian stepped up and defended me."

He nodded slowly, thoughtfully. "I'm sorry, sweetheart."

"Don't be. Ugh! Don't you see? Brian didn't have any reason to defend me, but he did because he knew I deserved to be treated better than Jason treated me. As rumors flew around the school, he helped me ignore what everyone else was saying and made me feel important and good." I took a deep breath trying to get control of my emotions.

I knew Dad was uncomfortable with my outburst, but he came over to the couch anyway and gave me a big hug. When my breathing calmed down, he said, "I'm sorry for how I've been acting. Can you blame me? I see my little girl look at a boy with such affection and I get sad realizing that you have grown up into a woman and are going to be leaving soon." It was the most emotion I'd ever seen from Dad.

"I'll always be your little girl, Dad. You're just going to have to share me with Brian now," I explained.

"So, what? Are you boyfriend and girlfriend?" I was about to answer him when he held up his hand. "Wait. I don't want to know. All I want to know is that he's treating you right and you're happy."

"Yes," I said, answering all three questions.

He kissed me on my forehead and said, "I love you, Ash."

"I love you, too, Daddy." It felt totally different saying that to him now knowing that I said those same words to Brian not much before he had gotten home. It was not the same love, and I was a little sad knowing that there was a difference. I left him to watch sports highlights and went to my room to start planning the weekend.

Kara was bouncing off the walls all day Friday. She managed to adjust all her plans to work into the few hours we would have on Saturday before our date.

Her excitement wore off on me and I was unusually jittery as Brian and I sat under “our” tree and ate lunch. He looked at me with concern.

“Sorry. Kara’s got me excited about tomorrow.”

“Well, just think of me every once in awhile as you’re trying on clothes, especially ones that you have to wear heels with,” he said smiling big. “So, you and Kar are going to drive to the movie theater, get the tickets and wait for me and Keith to show up?”

I nodded. “That’s Kara’s vision, anyway.”

He frowned. “I would rather pick you up and drive you myself,” he complained

“We might not make it to the movie on time if we did that,” I teased. Brian and I had the tendency to lose track of time when we were left alone. As we were about to kiss, the bell rang, signaling the end of lunch. I chuckled at the irony.

“Okay, I guess you have a point,” Brian said as we walked to my locker.

I gave him a quick kiss and we parted to go to our separate classes.

I awoke Saturday morning to the sound of my phone vibrating on the nightstand. I picked it up without even opening my eyes.

“Hello?” I mumbled.

“Where are you?” Kara demanded. “You aren’t still sleeping, are you? Please tell me you weren’t up all night talking to Brian on the phone! Sheesh! You two are worse than me and Keith!”

I managed an “I’m sorry,” before she continued her lecturing while I attempted to open my eyes to see what time it was.

Nine forty-three. I sighed. I was supposed to be at Kara’s house at ten. I was so tired; I considered forgoing the events she had planned for the day in exchange for more sleep. Brian and I were talking on the phone until almost three and I stayed awake for another half an hour after that trying to get myself to relax enough to fall asleep.

As if Kara could read my mind she said, “Don’t even think about backing out today. I will drag you over here kicking and screaming, if I have to.”

I laughed. “Okay, okay. I’m out of bed. Let me shower and I’ll be over in thirty minutes.”

“Ugh! I’m going to take your phone away! You’re throwing off my schedule, Ashlyn!”

“Sorry, sorry. I’ll hurry. See you in a few!” I said as I hung up my phone and went to the bathroom to shower.

After my shower, I grabbed everything I would need for the date. Since my conversation with Dad on Thursday, his mood lightened up enough for me to tell them about our double date. “I promise we’ll be back at Kara’s by midnight,” I had repeated to them more times than necessary, just so they wouldn’t worry. I had also given them all the details of the day and night that Kara had planned. I was driving us to the mall where we’d spend the entire afternoon shopping. We’d then go back to her house to get ready and she’d drive us to the theater for the seven-oh-five movie. After that, we had reservations at an Italian restaurant within walking distance of the theater and would probably end the night by getting ice cream or coffee at a nearby shop. Then Kara would drive us back to her house and I’d be home on Sunday by one.

With the plans reconfirmed and a guarantee from me that my cell phone was charged and I would have it with me and on at all times, I kissed my parents goodbye and drove to Kara’s house. She was standing in the doorway and barely let me put my things away in her room before she rushed me back out the door and into my car.

“The stores opened twenty minutes ago. We’re going to miss out on some of the good deals because you were up too late.”

“We had important things to discuss,” I lied. In reality we did a lot of plotting of how we could sneak out of the movie and return just in time to have dinner with Kara and Keith without them knowing we were gone.

“Yeah, right. ‘I love you more,’ ‘No, I love *you* more.’ I’m close, right?” she made kissy faces and poked me as she spoke.

“Noooo. We had other things to say, too,” I played along.

“I was just kidding. You guys haven’t said ‘I love you’ yet, have you?” She looked horrified.

“Yeah, why? What’s wrong? You and Keith have, right?”

“Yeah, we have, but we’ve been dating for over two months now. You guys are barely working on a week. I knew things were going fast, but I didn’t expect *this*! You guys haven’t, you know...” she trailed off and made suggestive hand gestures.

I wasn’t sure if I should be as offended as I felt. I tried to calm myself down before I said, “Of course not! We haven’t done anything beyond kissing and that’s how it’s going to stay for a long time. We might have reached where we are pretty fast, but we aren’t in any hurry to go too far too fast.” I sighed. “From the moment I left school with him on Friday, it was like we’d known each other all our lives. He is the piece of me that’s been missing.” I knew it sounded sappy and naïve, but it was the truth.

Kara smiled. “That sounds like something Keith said to me before we slept together that first time.”

“It’s not like that,” I said allowing my frustration to come through.

“Sorry, Ash, I didn’t mean to upset you. I was just trying to give you perspective. As honorable as you think his intentions are, there is a part of him that wants to take it to the next step now. I just don’t want to see you get hurt.”

I couldn’t remember being closer to anyone before Kara and only with Brian since. But I knew deep down in my soul that she was wrong. And I resented the fact that she had planted the seed of doubt with me. I turned up the radio, driving the rest of the way to the mall in forced silence.

As we got out of the car and started towards the mall entrance, Kara apologized. “I’m really sorry, Ash. I didn’t mean to question your guys’ relationship. I can see that he makes you happy; I don’t ever remember seeing the sparkle in your eyes like I have noticed this past week. I guess I’m just being overprotective. I love you, sweetie.”

“I know, Kar. I love you, too. It’s just hard hearing those things from my best friend. I overreacted. I’m sorry.”

“No problem. Now let’s go find outfits to blow our guys away tonight.” We walked hand in hand into the first store.

“We still have time to eat lunch here and get home in time to do our hair and nails,” Kara said as we walked onto the escalator that was near the food court after we had finally bought the perfect outfits and accessories. “What do you want to eat?”

I was looking up to see the names of the restaurants as we ascended up the moving stairs when everything started moving in slow motion. My world slowed down to a fraction of real speed as I saw him walking a little too closely to a group of girls getting on the escalator going down. He looked out of place, even more so than he did on the docks at the lake. His hair was untamed on top of his filthy face and he wore a holey button up plaid shirt that was stained brown with dirt. His pants had rips all over, like they’d been snagged on barbed wire or slashed with knives. It looked like the girls should have been uncomfortable with someone like that literally breathing down their necks, but they chatted away without as much as a flinch. People behind him didn’t take notice of him, either, but as we passed by each other in opposite directions, he turned, still in slow motion, and almost snarled at me as he stared at me with dark, evil eyes.

“Ash? Are you OK?” As Kara said these words, time returned to normal speed and Rick seemed to vanish. I shivered and started to hyperventilate. “Ash! Come here and sit down! What’s wrong?”

I laid my head on the cool table, not caring that there were a mess of crumbs left behind, and closed my eyes trying to regain my composure. Kara was completely beside herself, looking for someone who could help me.

“I’m alright, Kara,” I whispered after several minutes.

“No you’re not. You’re ghostly white.” She was accepting a bottle of water from someone who stopped to help.

I struggled to take a drink of the water and thanked the stranger. “I’ll be fine. I think my blood sugar just dropped. I haven’t eaten anything since dinner last night.”

“I’ll go grab you some food. Don’t go *anywhere!*” Kara insisted and ran off to get me some nourishment. She returned shortly with a couple of slices of pizza and two sodas. “Here,” she said, putting the food right in front of me.

I lifted my head off the table and brushed the crumbs off my cheek. “Thank you,” I said quietly and took a bite of the pizza. It tasted terrible, but I was so appreciative of my friend’s gesture, that I ate it without complaining. By the time I was mostly done with the pizza and completely finished with the soda and half the water, I was feeling much better.

“You’re going to be okay for tonight, right? I mean, you can’t ditch me after we both found perfect outfits,” she said in a completely serious tone.

“I’m fine, thanks to you. Really. But we probably need to get going if we’re going to have time to do our hair *and* nails.” I knew she would be crushed if I had tried to back out. I was pretty anxious to see Brian now, anyway. I knew that just being near him again would help me feel better.

As we left the mall, I scanned the faces to see if I could find Rick again, but I didn’t see him anywhere. Could I have just imagined that whole thing? I didn’t just see him this time, though. I felt him and heard him, too. He had an aura about him that should make anyone stay clear of him, but this was the second time I’d encountered him in public and he was very close to people who didn’t notice him at all.

I tried to put those thoughts aside as I drove back to Kara’s house and focus on her endless chatting about how great the date was going to be.

The afternoon flew by. One minute it was two fifteen and we were talking away as we painted our nails and the next minute it was five forty-three and we were rushing to finish our hair and makeup and get dressed.

“They’re gonna beat us there, you know,” I told Kara as she changed her outfit again. “We’re never going to hear then end of it.” She had tried on about six different dresses from her closet and retried on three of those at least once more. “I really think you should just wear the dress you bought today. You look gorgeous in it.”

I was already dressed and finishing running the flat iron through my hair. When I was finally pleased with the reflection in the mirror, I sprayed a light coat of hairspray on my hair, put on my make-up and a new necklace I bought at the mall, and lightly sprayed my entire body with my favorite perfume.

Kara was finishing up in the bathroom after deciding I was right about the red dress. So instead of pacing around her room in nervous anticipation, I decided to get on her computer and do another search for Rick. I didn’t find anything more than last time, but did come across a news story that caught my attention:

“The body of thirty-six year old hiker George Green was found by a fisherman early this morning. Divers were able to retrieve the body, which had apparently been in the lake for several days. Mr. Green was reported missing on Monday. Police have not released any information regarding the case, but have

officially opened a homicide investigation, according to an inside source. Mr. Green was last seen by co-workers on Friday night, as he left work for another hiking trip at the lake. He had no family living in the state, but was considered by most who knew him to be a good man with no known enemies.”

I jumped up and quickly closed the internet window when Kara came in her room. “Wow. I should’ve had you do my hair. You look so great. I’m going to be mad if you lure Brian away from me, tonight.” I tried to pull off casual, but she looked a little suspicious of me.

“You weren’t messaging Brian, were you? You can’t let him know *anything* about what we look like. He has to appreciate the full effect of seeing it all together for the first time.”

“I was just catching up on some news. I was going to check the weather for tonight because I’m afraid I’m going to freeze, but a story jumped out at me. I promise I didn’t even *think* about contacting Brian.”

I walked over to her and gave her a huge hug. “Are we ready to go?” I was ready to be reunited with Brian.

Kara said goodbye to her parents and grabbed her purse and keys as we walked to the garage and drove away in her car. Her grandparents had unexpectedly passed away a year ago, leaving her mother, their only child, their entire fortune. Kara had a trust fund set up for her and got a brand new Ford Mustang convertible as a birthday gift. She never flaunted her wealth and was always very generous when a friend needed help.

It was six twenty and we were still ten minutes from the movie theater. The plan was for us to get there by six fifteen and buy the tickets. I was going to go inside to save seats while Kara would wait outside with the rest of the tickets. Keith was going to be dropped off by his brother after their soccer game at around six forty and Brian was supposed to be there after work.

“Drop me off up front and I’ll go get the tickets while you park,” I said with authority as we pulled into the parking lot at six twenty-six.

Kara handed me a fifty dollar bill and drove off before I could protest. I tucked it in my purse before someone saw it and decided to mug me. It was obvious by looking at me that I wasn’t going to be able to run after anyone tonight. My boots stretched almost skin tight up from a four-inch heel to just below my knee. I loved them more than any other pair of shoes I owned; I just didn’t have occasion to wear them often. I strolled mindlessly towards the ticket counter, thinking happily about my boots when a familiar voice approached from behind me saying, “You shouldn’t walk around here alone like this. You never know who might snatch you up.” Brian swept me off my feet and pulled my willing body up to kiss him. It felt as if every cell in my body breathed a sigh of relief.

“How long have you been waiting?” I was a little disappointed because I didn’t get to see his face when he first saw me.

“Maybe ten minutes. I just couldn’t stand the thought of you paying for my ticket, so I wanted to make sure I beat you here.” He held up three movie tickets and smiled.

“Where’s the other ticket?” I inquired.

“Keith’s already here, too. I sent him inside to save seats.”

“I got really lucky and found a spot right up front,” Kara said as she walked up. “Oh, hi Brian.”

Brian whistled approvingly at her. “You look very pretty,” he complimented her as he took her hand and spun her around to get the full effect.

Kara giggled as she spun. I threw her a disapproving look. “Umm, I guess I’ll wait over here for Keith and you guys can go in and get seats.”

“Keith’s already inside,” Brian said with a smile and handed her a ticket. “We’ll be inside in a few minutes, okay?”

“Sure,” she said, looking at me for approval.

I nodded and she walked away.

"Are you alright?" Brian asked when Kara was out of earshot.

"Yeah, fine," I said angrily and started walking towards the door.

Brian grabbed my arm and brought me back to him. My eyes were almost level with him with my boots on, which made it harder to avoid gazing in them. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing. I'm just being stupid," I explained.

"I don't think that's possible," Brian assured me and we walked over to a dark bench on the side of the theater entrance. "Now will you please tell me what just happened back there? I saw the looks between you and Kara. Did you guys have a fight?"

"No, it's nothing like that." I grumbled. "I told her before we left that she was going to have everyone staring at her tonight because of how great she looked. And so far, that seems to be true." I shrugged and looked at a piece of trash floating by in the evening breeze.

"She does look great tonight," he began, "but she doesn't compare to her best friend."

"It didn't feel like that when she walked up," I said, still sounding bitter.

Brian laughed. "You're a silly girl, you know? I thought you could see in my eyes and feel in my lips when we kissed how taken back I was with how you look." He still sounded amused. He stood up, clearing his throat and pulled me to my feet. "Ashlyn, you have never looked more beautiful than you do at this moment."

"That's enough," I said, smiling again. "You're forgiven; just stop now before my head gets too big."

"I don't think I went far enough to adequately describe how awed I am, so if you want me to stop, you'll have to make me," he said as he backed away from me with a grin.

I smiled and reached for his hand as he moved farther away. "You know, I can't run after you in these things," I said, gesturing to my shoes.

"That's too bad. They are quite sexy. I hate to have to get away from you so easily." But he was backing against the building, so I wouldn't have to chase him far.

I took two steps toward him, when he stepped forward to meet me, swung me around so my back was against the wall, and kissed me hard. I barely heard the people walking by, grumbling at our embrace.

"I thought you were up for a chase?" I teased as we stopped for a moment to take a breath.

We kissed for a few minutes more before he responded, "I couldn't stand it any longer. You're just too slow in those things. But I am enjoying the height."

I rolled my eyes, but I was pretty sure it was too dark to see. "We should get inside before Kar sends out the search party," I commented as I noticed Keith peak his head out the door.

"We're coming," Brian yelled to him, still holding me tightly in his arms.

Keith squinted into the dark, looking towards where Brian's voice came from. "Sorry, guys. Kara was getting nervous." He went back inside without another word. I was sure he would report back to Kara that we hadn't ditched them, so I felt comfortable spending a couple more minutes alone with Brian.

I thought back to the conversation I had with Kara on the way to the mall. A frown formed on my face as the little seed of doubt she planted started to sprout. "Can I ask you something?"

"You can ask me anything. What's up? This looks pretty serious."

"Kara said something stupid to me today and I can't shake it from my head." I led him back over to sit down on the bench and took a deep breath to try to find my courage. "She was kind of surprised about how quickly our relationship has progressed and asked just how fast we were taking things." I paused for a moment for him to get on the same page as me. "While I assured her our relationship was much more than the great passion we shared and that we weren't progressing to *that* level anytime soon, I realized that we had never really talked about where things were going."

He took my hands in his and kissed them both before responding. "We are not moving any faster than you're comfortable with. I'd be lying if I said I hadn't thought about more, but it isn't something that I'm trying to get to before we're both ready."

"I'd be lying, too, if I said I hadn't thought about that. But I know I'm not ready to go there yet. I just don't know how to know when I am ready for that."

"We'll just figure it out together. No pressure, no stress, no worries, okay?" He released my left hand and reached up to gently brush my cheek. "There's definitely no rush. I'm not going anywhere."

"Thank you," I whispered.

"Don't ever be embarrassed to talk to me about anything, okay? I'm not going to judge you. I'm on your side, remember? Now, are you ready to go in?"

I freed my other hand and grabbed his face with both hands and smashed my lips emotionally against his. After the moment of surprise left, he cupped the back of my head in his hand and kissed me back.

"Now I'm ready," I smiled and let him lead the way into the already darkened theater.

Kara punched me in the leg as I took the seat she'd been saving next to her.

"Ouch!" I said a little too loud and heard people shush me.

"Don't scare me like that again! I thought you left without saying a word!" She was acting mad, but I knew she was fine.

"I wouldn't do that to you again, silly," I whispered and kissed her cheek before I leaned to the other side to rest my head on Brian's arm as the opening credits began.

Chapter Seven – Disappeared

“Can you believe they wrecked that car?!” Keith complained as we left the theater.

“I was more upset that he let her believe he didn’t care about her,” Kara commented.

I giggled listening to the two of them go on about the movie. It was a pretty good movie from what I could tell. I spent a good portion of the first half breathing in Brian’s cologne and daydreaming about being alone with him. Aside from a couple of quick kisses, we actually behaved ourselves, though.

The four of us walked to the restaurant and were seated at a table close to the bar. Kara and I excused ourselves to the restroom while the guys ordered our drinks. After making sure we were alone, I told Kara about the conversation outside the theater.

“I can’t believe you asked him about that! He’s not mad at me, is he?”

“Of course not. I guess I owe you a bit of thanks. It feels good to have had that conversation. It puts in light exactly what he expects from our relationship. And someday, we’ll both be ready,” I said.

“And you’ll tell me when that happens, right? I mean, I told you about me and Keith.” I didn’t know why she wanted me to share that with her. I simply I nodded, which seemed to please her.

When we got back to the table, the guys had their eyes on the television set in the bar.

“Hey, did you hear about the Amber Alert that’s been issued for a girl from here? Apparently she’s gone missing from the mall today,” Keith was explaining to Kara.

The smile instantly disappeared. *It was Rick*, I said to myself. *He took her*. The surveillance video they were playing over and over on the television screen clearly showed the twelve year old girl leaving a store and a blurry figure walking out with her. I heard people commenting on how weird it was that the girl was in focus, but the bad guy was unrecognizable and I started to feel dizzy.

When Brian looked at me, he read the horror on my face. My hands were sweating when he grabbed one. I couldn’t tell anyone but him what I knew about this. I decided to use my gift to get Brian’s help without alerting Kara or Keith. *Please get me out of here!*

He looked startled for a moment at the suddenness of me using my gift on him, but then nodded. “You look like you’re going to be sick, Ash. Let me take you out for some air.”

I just nodded as he helped me out of my chair, passed the crowd in the lobby, and to the back of the building where there wasn’t anyone to overhear us.

Brian instinctively held me and I stood trembling in his arms. “It was Rick. I saw him at the mall and didn’t stop him. It’s my fault this girl is gone.”

“It’s not your fault, Ash. Let’s go to the police and give them the information you have and let them find this S.O.B.” He grabbed my arm and started pulling me back towards the parking lot.

I shook myself free. “No. I don’t have any proof. They’ll never believe me.”

“If you give them his description, they might be able to match up the surveillance video with a photo on file or something.” He was desperate to get me to allow the police handle the situation.

“Don’t you think it was odd that the girl was so clear on that video and he was so distorted, you couldn’t even make out it was a man?” I didn’t wait for him to answer. “When I saw him this afternoon, no one else but me seemed to even notice he was there, and he was literally breathing down the neck of some girls... probably the one who’s missing now. The same thing happened at the lake. Remember that guy I commented on and you didn’t see? I know it was him. It’s like he can make himself completely disappear in plain sight. But I can see him... and he knows it. He growled at me today when I passed by him. I should’ve done something, but instead I almost passed out.”

When I was done with my hysterical rant, Brian calmly said, “We’re leaving now. I’ll go back in and get your purse and apologize to Kara and Keith. I’ll just tell them you threw up and I’m taking you home. Here are the keys,” he said as he handed me the keys to his Jeep. “Go get in and lock the doors and wait for me. I’ll only be a minute.”

I felt hollow walking to his Jeep. I was only there a minute or so before Brian knocked on the door to be let in. "Where are we going?" I asked with a flat voice.

"To my house. My parents are out of town for the weekend. I don't trust you to be away from me right now."

I didn't have the ability to try to figure out what to do next. I just nodded and kept replaying the earlier confrontation in my head.

I didn't move when we pulled up to Brian's house. He reached across me to open the door and then came around to my side of the Jeep and lifted me out. He carried me to his room and gently laid me on his bed.

"Ash. Sweetheart. You have to talk to me. I don't know what I can do to help," he pleaded, trying to get me to focus on his eyes.

"I should have tried to stop him. I didn't know he was going to hurt someone." I couldn't stop the tears and buried my face in his pillow.

Brian let me cry for awhile, gently and patiently rubbing my back and stroking my hair. Finally, I just stopped, sat up, and embraced Brian, desperately trying to get him to kiss me passionately so I could be taken away from the horrible place I'd found myself.

He broke away from me, pushing me back on the bed. "You need to stop. You are completely out of control. I don't want to be with you when you are obviously not here with me."

"I'm so sorry," I sobbed. I was apologizing to him and the girl who was missing.

"Let's figure this out, okay? We need something to take to the police to help them catch the guy."

"You mean something more than my extraordinary gift of just 'knowing'?" I complained. Then I started to put the pieces together. "He also killed someone at the lake over the weekend," I said matter-of-factly.

"How do you know?" Brian looked like he was questioning my sanity.

"Can I use your computer?" I asked as I got up from his bed.

"Sure," he said and came to stand behind me.

As Brian rubbed my shoulders, I pulled up the news website and had him read the story of Mr. Green. When he was done, he stopped rubbing my shoulders and stepped back. "That happened when we were there on Saturday, didn't it?"

I nodded. He was starting to understand the horror of the situation.

"I couldn't see him, but you did. How can he be stopped if he can't even be seen?"

"I don't know," I sighed and went back to his bed, laying down and staring at the ceiling, trying to make sense of it all.

He laid down next to me and held my hand. "I'm here for you, with you. Whatever you need, I will do."

I was quiet for several minutes. Finally, out of nowhere I asked, "Could you stand right there for me?"

He looked confused, but complied without hesitation.

"I didn't get a chance to appreciate how great you looked tonight," I said after looking at him for a moment. He looked worried and tired now, but surprising good. He had already taken off his shoes, but the rest of his outfit was intact: dark blue jeans that were just loose enough to look comfortable, but tight enough to be able to make out his finely sculpted parts, a red, short sleeve, button up dress shirt, which he kept untucked, and a silver link bracelet on his right arm. The bracelet was new. He hadn't been wearing that at the movie earlier.

He smiled when he saw me notice it. "It's a gift for you," he said and took it off his arm and attached it to mine.

"It's beautiful," I remarked.

"Just like you," he said and brushed my cheek again with his hand.

I gazed up at him, allowing myself to get lost in his eyes. He bent over and kissed the top of my head. "You look exhausted," he commented and laid back down on the bed with me.

I snuggled up close to him and was asleep before I could say another word.

I woke up in a daze. I was dreaming about trying to get away from someone, but I wasn't able to run. I'm sure it stemmed from wearing my boots and Brian teasing me, but it left me feeling helpless and frustrated.

When my blurry eyes cleared, I was startled by my unfamiliar surroundings. Then I felt Brian's arm over my waist and remembered he had brought me to his home. More of the night was flooding back to me and I reached down to make sure I didn't dream the bracelet he had given me. A big smile formed on my lips as I traced my fingers over the delicate hoops resting on my wrist.

"Are you really awake this time?" Hearing Brian's voice whispered in my ear as I was waking up was even better than being woken up by his calls.

"I think so," I said. My head felt like it was in the fog and everything seemed surreal.

"It's nearly ten thirty," he said and rolled me over to face him.

I'm sure I was quite a sight after my meltdown the night before and sleeping in my clothes with hairspray in my hair all night. "How long have you been awake?" His clothes were fresh and it looked like he had gotten out of the shower not too long ago.

"I woke up around eight. I don't usually sleep in that late. Keeping up with you is really exhausting," he teased.

I sat up and hugged my knees. "Ugh! I need to brush my teeth. Shoot! Everything is at Kara's house." Then I realized that Kara didn't know I had spent the night here last night. "Crap! I have to call her. I can't have her call my house! I'll be grounded for life!"

"Relax. Everything's been taken care of. I called Kara when I woke up and explained to her that I took care of you last night and that I'd drop you by there around noon to pick up your stuff and car."

I started to say how relieved I was when Brian held up his finger for me to pause and continued, "And... there's a new toothbrush in the bathroom waiting for you."

He smiled and helped me up off the bed. I almost tripped over my boots trying to get to the door. "I thought you'd sleep better without those, so I took them off before I came to bed."

"Thank you," I said gratefully and went to freshen up in his bathroom. When I felt presentable again, I walked back into his room. He was on the phone, so I quietly sat on his bed and waited for him to finish.

"Okay, I'll see you guys tonight. Love you." He set down his phone and turned around to me smiling. "Feel better?"

"Much," I lied. In reality, I still didn't feel quite like myself. I kept waiting for my head to clear, but the haze remained constant.

He came closer so he could hold me and said, "Now, for a proper good morning hello," and kissed me with a gentle passion that felt appropriate for first thing in the morning.

"Hello," I smiled after he released me, surprised that it helped clear my head a little. "So did you just lay there holding me until I woke up?"

"Not exactly," he confessed with an apologetic tone. "You seemed peaceful when I woke up, so I got up quietly and showered. Around ten, you started to stir. I didn't want you to wake up alone in my bed, so I laid back down with you and held you until you were back in the land of the living."

"Thank you. I was pretty confused when I first opened my eyes. It was your arm around me that helped remind me where I was." I smiled brightly at him, showing him my sincere appreciation. Then I continued, "Sorry again for how I acted last night..."

He abruptly interrupted me, "You don't need to apologize. I was just glad you were able to communicate with me to get you out of there and that my parents were out of town. I didn't want to leave you last night."

"But I am most sorry about attacking you. I can't remember a time where I felt like such a failure and it had such devastating consequences. I was drowning and desperately grasping at you to ground me and bring me back to a better place."

"I understood why you were doing it. But I knew it wouldn't make anything better if I had let you. It would have been totally selfish if I *hadn't* stopped you." He forced my chin up so he could look me in my eyes. "I forgive you, if you'll forgive me for turning you away."

"But you didn't do anything wrong," I started.

"Do you forgive me?" He was very serious.

"I forgive you," I said quietly.

"Good. Now that we have all that out of the way, let me show you what I was working on half the night." He grabbed my hand and led me to his computer. He sat down in the chair and pulled me onto his lap. I leaned back into him as he reached around me on both sides to type on the keyboard. "I was able to do some research on Rick last night and found a trail he left behind after he moved out of your neighborhood." He opened a document he had typed highlighting Rick's known locations and dates up until two years ago.

"Did you have to stop or is this where his identity ends?" I asked having made sense of his document before he had a chance to explain anything.

"A little of both. You see, this last address doesn't exist. I tried to map it, but the address on that street has never existed. So I was left with a question that I was just too tired to answer. How did he have a registered place of residence when the address was bogus? This morning I came up with two possibilities. First, he could have found a way to perpetuate a lie, not finding a way around providing an address to get what he needed, but at the same time, not having to prove that it was real. "

He gave me a moment to process his explanation. "That's very complicated. I can't imagine a situation where someone would need an address, it would be attributed to them officially, but it never be used. What's your other theory?"

He smiled. "Who says beauty doesn't come with brains. Okay, my other theory seems more plausible." He paused to get full effect. "Someone altered the information."

"That seems likely. I'm sure a semi-skilled hacker could easily manage that. Where you able to check out the other addresses? Were they legit?"

"I did and yes, they were. Wow. You're really on today." He was impressed, but to me, this was becoming a puzzle that was meant for me to piece together.

"If he was able to falsify records, why wouldn't he just continue to do that instead of dropping completely off the grid?" I pondered.

"What if his lack of address occurred at the same time he seemed to become invisible to people? You told me that he was picked on in high school, so he hasn't always been able to escape notice. In fact, it seems like he was a magnet for it. But now, he is virtually invisible, so the need for anything that officially identifies him is pointless."

I knew that had to be very close to reality. I was in awe of how much Brian had done for me so I could wake up and feel like we were doing *something* to track down the sick bastard.

"Where did you go?" he asked, hugging me tight.

I allowed him to embrace me for a minute and then moved his arms off me and quickly turned to face him. "I was just thinking how amazing you are. I have told you an unbelievable story, a theory that I had no way of proving, and you took it and pieced all this information together for me. I'm forever indebted to you."

"Hmmm... that sounds like it comes with benefits," he said smiling.

"You have full access to exclusive, behind-the-scenes, never before seen insights into my madness," I joked.

He rolled his eyes. "I'm glad you're feeling better today. You had me pretty scared last night."

"Me, too." *On both accounts*, I added mentally to myself.

"So, I was thinking that since I did such a good job with this last night..." he started, still in a light hearted mood.

"Anything," I whispered much more seriously than he had been, kissing him lightly on his lips.

"Hmmm..." he began thoughtfully. "How about you talk your parents into letting you spend the rest of the day with me? We have a restaurant to eat at still and I'm sure we could find other things to do to pass the time." Of course, he couldn't pass up the opportunity to act immediately on his innuendo. As he kissed me, he stood up from the chair holding on to me. I wrapped arms around his neck and my legs tightly around his waist as we moved to the bed.

I couldn't imagine being anywhere, doing anything else with anyone in those moments. We probably would have stayed like that for the rest of the day, too, but we were interrupted by his door opening. I'm sure I turned every shade of red at that moment. Even though we weren't doing anything wrong, it still felt like we'd been caught doing something illegal. *Maybe this should be illegal*, I briefly considered.

"Did you consider knocking, Steph?" Brian asked, sounding both irritated and embarrassed.

"Maybe you should lock your door if you don't want people coming in," she retorted and sat down in his chair.

She had a point, I admitted to myself. But it was my fault that the door was unlocked.

"What do you want?" he sighed, knowing she was right. We were lying on our sides when she burst in and we surprisingly hadn't moved from that position. In fact, Brian had pulled me in closer, almost as if he was protecting me.

"Michael and I wanted to steal you away today to go hiking or something." She glared at me and then resumed her eye contact with her brother.

"Sorry, but I already have plans," he said, not sounding sorry at all.

"You know, you can't just blow everyone off just because you finally got the girl you've been drooling after for years." She was trying to get reactions from both of us. Fortunately, I already knew that Brian had been trying to work up the nerve to ask me out for the past several years.

She seemed to hit Brian's buttons, though, because his response was angrier than I'd ever heard him be at his sister. "Michael will understand as long as you don't make it into something more than it is. And you, well, you need to get over it. Ashlyn and I are together. It doesn't matter if you believe everything Abby or anyone else has ever said about her, because I know she is a great person and you'd be lucky to have her accept you as a friend, not that she'd want someone as a friend who's treated her so horribly."

"You're hopeless, Brian. Don't be surprised if some day you wake up from your little fantasy and find that all your true friends have left you." With tears threatening her eyes, she got up and stormed out of his room, slamming his door so hard that a framed movie poster fell off the wall.

Brian released me and rolled onto his back. I didn't want to stare at him as he processed what happened, so I rolled on my back, too. I didn't know if there was anything I could say to make everything better.

He sat up suddenly. "Don't go anywhere."

I didn't want to hear the imminent argument as Brian confronted Stephanie, so I picked up his MP3 player off his nightstand, put on the earphones, and turned up the volume. I was surprised to hear the song we'd danced to that first night as the first song that played. I was able to sit down on the bed and drift off to that wonderful memory of our first kiss. Although our kisses since were much more passionate, I would never forget that lighter than air feeling I got when our lips met for that first time.

I listened to the song three times before Brian came back through the door, Stephanie in tow. I removed the earphones and turned off the player.

Brian cleared his throat, signaling Stephanie to say whatever she had to say. "I'm sorry I've been such a bitch, Ashlyn. I know Brian loves you and you have made him happier than I've ever seen him." She stopped and looked to Brian for approval. He nodded and she quickly left the room, slamming her bedroom door behind her.

He sighed, closed and locked his door, and walked back over to the bed where I was sitting with my back propped up against the wall and my legs crossed in front of me. He laid his head in my lap and I gently stroked his perfect hair.

Finally I decided to break the silence. "You should go out with them this afternoon. You gave me a good start on the Rick thing, so I can work on that more."

"No," he said flatly. "You said you were in debt to me and I told you that you had to ask your parents to spend the rest of the day with me. That was the deal."

"How about a compromise?" I asked, but didn't wait for his response. "How about we go out to lunch together and Michael and Stephanie can meet you there afterwards?"

"That's cheating," he said, but I could tell he was considering the idea.

"I'll owe you another day on top of this afternoon, too, okay?"

He chuckled, "You make it sound like it's community service to go out with me."

"Oh, I don't think we're doing any service to the community when we go out in public," I said, remembering the night before when people were making rude comments as they walked passed us kissing. "Unless it's how not to behave in public," I added, blushing slightly.

Brian lifted his head out of my lap and turned to face me. I was a little sad that I didn't get to run my fingers through his hair anymore. "Thank you," he whispered and kissed me gently on my cheek as he got off the bed. "I'll be right back. Don't move." He ran out of his room, told his sister the new plan, and then was back on the bed with a leap. The whole bed shook as he used the bouncing momentum to spring over and grab me, pulling me onto his chest. It happened so fast that my brain barely had time to register my changing positions. I gasped with surprise and pleasure as he pulled me in for a zealous kiss.

"I should have you sleep over more often. You seem to be full of great ideas this morning." He was beaming, so I knew that the new plan was acceptable to Stephanie. "I have to get you to Kara's house now. She's going to start calling me wondering if I am holding you prisoner."

I had been completely unaware of the time. It was twelve-oh-nine, so I decided to call Kara when we were leaving so Brian wouldn't get in trouble with her. It was bad enough that his friends didn't like me, but I didn't want mine being mad at him, too.

With my boots back on, Brian was eager to kiss me again; he liked my lips being so close to his. "You have to wear these more often," he mused between kisses.

"I'll consider it only if we don't have to be anywhere at a specific time," I said, hinting that we needed to go.

"Yeah, yeah. Fine. I'll take you to Kara's house now."

On the drive, I gave Kara a quick call to let her know I was coming. She sounded suspicious and anxious to get the story, but I got off the phone before she could pry any information out of me. Brian wanted me to call my parents with him there, but I didn't think that would be a good idea.

Kara was out the door to yank me into her house before the Jeep was even in park. I had just enough time to give Brian a fast kiss before I was pulled away from him. "See you in a bit!" I yelled as Kara dragged me through her front door.

"What the hell was that all about?" Kara was furious with me.

"I was just telling him goodbye," I said, a little confused.

"Not *that*. I mean last night at the restaurant. Why did you ditch us? You don't look sick today!" She threw her arms up in the air and glared at me.

"I know 'sorry' doesn't cover it adequately, but I am truly sorry."

She made a "humph" sound, but allowed me to continue.

"I *was* sick last night. It just hit me out of nowhere. I couldn't even walk when we pulled up to Brian's house. His parents were out of town and he didn't think I should be left alone."

She looked offended. "But I could have taken care of you. You were supposed to be with *me* last night."

"Brian didn't want to ruin your and Keith's night. Besides," I added, trying to lighten it up a little, "as my boyfriend, it is his *duty* to take care of me. I think it's called the 'knight in shining armor syndrome' or something." I gave her a small smile, hoping she'd find a way to forgive me.

She couldn't stop herself from smiling, but still had residual anger lurking on the surface. "So, did anything *happen* last night after you were whisked away by your white knight?"

"No, Kara. Nothing like that. I felt terrible last night. We both slept fully dressed," I said rolling my eyes. "But I'm very sorry I hurt your feelings. Forgive me?"

"Of course," she said smiling and gave me a big hug. "I'm just glad you are feeling better."

"You mean you're just glad I was really sick last night when I left?"

"Yeah, that, too," she admitted.

"I have to call my parents." I glanced at the clock and was grateful it was still before the time I was scheduled to be home. "Brian wants to take me back to the restaurant and try the meal again."

"Here," she said, handing me her home phone. "It might seem more normal if my home number comes up on their caller ID."

I nodded, impressed at her idea.

The phone call was pretty brief. Dad answered the phone and knew almost immediately what I was going to say. I was very glad I had had that talk with him on Thursday. He seemed to be a little more relaxed about the Brian situation and gave me the okay to spend a couple more hours out.

As I hung up the phone with him, I turned back to Kara, who had been packing all my stuff. "You're the best friend ever," I said graciously.

"I know," she said. "Just be careful, okay?"

"There's nothing to worry about. I have never been better," I said in my most convincing voice.

"You keep saying that, but I just have a feeling there's something else going on."

"I think you just need to get some sleep," I said and kissed her on her forehead. "I'll try to call you tonight."

"You'd better!" she said, smiling, and walked me to the door.

After I had driven off her street, I called Brian, asking him to meet me at the restaurant.

"*You don't want to come back here first?*" he asked, sounding a little sad.

"Of course I *want* to go back to your house, but I have a feeling like we might not make it out to lunch if I do. And I'm starving!"

"*You're probably right. I don't like it, but I'll see you there in a couple of minutes. Wait for me outside.*"

"Sure," I said smiling. "I love you. See you in a few."

"*I love you, too, Ash. See you soon.*"

Chapter Eight – My Honor

I had to concentrate hard on not speeding to get to the restaurant. It was amazing to me that I was so anxious to see Brian again, when it had only been about twenty minutes since we parted. I think I would have liked to be able to use my gift on myself at that moment to tell myself to calm down and get a grip.

Brian was leaning against his Jeep, looking extraordinary as always, and smiling as I pulled into the vacant parking space next to his. He rushed behind my car to reach my door and open it for me.

“Thank you,” I said, stepping out of my tiny car. It was harder to maneuver in and out of my car with the giant heels on, but I had decided it would make Brian happy if I was wearing them when I returned, though I did change into fresh clothes at Kara’s house.

Brian took my hand and helped me to my feet, pulling me close for a perfect kiss. I reached behind me and closed my car door, which I was promptly pushed up against. “I missed you,” Brian breathed, in between kisses.

“I missed you, too,” I confessed between gasps as he moved down to kissing my neck. It was absolutely electrifying being near him and almost painful to be apart. “People are starting to stare,” I managed after several minutes of what should have been private time.

He stopped kissing my neck long enough to whisper in my ear, “They’re just jealous.”

I couldn’t suppress a shiver of pleasure. “I really need some food. I’m starting to get shaky.”

“I thought I was doing that to you,” he pouted playfully.

I wrapped my arm through his, taking his hand, and leaned into him as we walked to the restaurant. The restaurant was pleasantly empty. “How many?” the host asked as we walked through the door.

“Just two,” Brian responded. “Could we sit somewhere away from the TVs?” he requested as the host looked at his table chart on the podium, deciding which area to seat us in.

He led us to a table in the back in an area that looked like it was used for meetings, receptions, and parties. It was quiet and darker than the rest of the restaurant.

After we’d ordered and our drinks arrived, Brian took my left hand and played with the bracelet. “It really looks nice on you,” he said, seemingly pleased with himself.

“Thank you again,” I said automatically.

“I didn’t say that to make you say ‘thank you’,” he said and pulled my hand up to his lips. He was showing a lot more restraint than I wanted him to.

Sometimes it almost scared me the way Brian seemed to be in tune to my thoughts. He moved his chair from opposite of me to sit right next to me. Every cell in my body relaxed and got excited at the same time when he got close. I sighed happily and put my head on his shoulder.

“Steph was really impressed by you today,” he started, “although she’d never admit it.”

“It wasn’t Stephanie I was trying to make happy,” I confessed. Even though I knew she was extremely important to him as was her happiness, he was my focal point.

“I know,” he said. “But you were amazing when she started attacking you. You didn’t react to her remarks and then you came up with a way for her to get her way *and* still make me happy.”

I groaned. “You didn’t tell her it was my idea, did you?”

“Of course I did. I would like her to appreciate some of the reasons why you are so special to me.”

“Fine. Well, as long as she doesn’t appreciate *all* the special things,” I said playfully, but still with a warning in my voice.

“You know I wouldn’t share that,” he said.

“I know. If I didn’t trust you, I wouldn’t have let you get so close to me.” I purposely scooted my chair closer to him. “Now,” I said more playfully, “I think we need to take advantage of our VIP

treatment.” I gestured to the quiet, empty, isolated room and placed my hand on his cheek. It was warm and smooth and felt like it would melt my hand if I left it there too long.

“Can’t take you anywhere,” he mumbled, obviously accepting my explanation.

We were lost in our own private world of each other until someone cleared their throat from behind and placed our food in front of us.

“Would you like to try mine,” he offered between bites.

“Sure,” I said enthusiastically. “It looks delicious. It was one of the dishes I was considering.”

He put a bite on his fork and fed it to me. It was oddly sensual.

“Mmmm... that’s really good,” I said after I had swallowed the bite. “Here, try mine,” I insisted and fed him the best looking bite. As I took the fork out of his mouth, he grabbed my wrist and kissed me, close mouthed, before he chewed.

“I think that was much better,” he said suggestively.

“So how much longer do I get you for?” I asked sadly.

“As long as you want,” he said lifting my face up to gaze in his eyes.

Even though I knew he meant it and all I had to do was say I wanted to spend the rest of the day with him, I knew he would be happier if he was able to make his sister happy again. I sighed, “So they’re going to be here any minute, aren’t they?”

He smiled and nodded and I heard footsteps behind us.

“I could make them want to go away,” I whispered mischievously.

He chuckled and took my hand in his again, as we stood up. “You’re early,” he said with a little irritation slipping into his voice. “Ash, this is Michael. Michael, Ashlyn.”

I reached out to shake his hand. He hesitated for a moment and then shook it quickly. His handshake was firm, but not strong like Brian’s. He didn’t look me in the eyes, either. Instead he threw a look at Stephanie, who responded silently with a smile. There was obviously some joke there and I probably didn’t want to hear the punch line.

Brian also noticed the exchange and shot a warning look at them both. “We just need a couple of minutes to finish eating. Do you guys want to join us?”

“Not really,” Michael said. He didn’t seem impressed.

Brian took his keys from his pocket and threw them at Michael with a little more force than was necessary. “I’ll be out in a few. Don’t mess with the radio.”

Stephanie and Michael left without another word and Brian pulled out my chair for me to be seated again. “Sorry about them,” he said a little frustrated.

“Really, it’s all right. Like you said, ‘They’ll come around eventually,’” I said, doing a poor job of imitating his voice.

He quirked a smile. “You’re a great sport, Ash. I’m so lucky you’re here with me.”

I pushed the remaining food around on my plate, not wanting the time together to end. But all too soon, the waiter brought the bill, Brian paid and we walked out of the restaurant.

As soon as we were through the doors, he pulled me around the corner, out of the eyesight of the Jeep, and gave me a long goodbye kiss. “You could come with us, you know,” he said, running his fingers across my cheekbone and down to my lips.

“I’m not sure they would appreciate that too much,” I said, motioning with my head in the direction of the Jeep. “Besides, I don’t think these boots are good for hiking.”

He smiled. “You’re probably right. I’m going to miss you.”

“I know,” I said with a smile and then kissed him again. “Now you have to behave or they won’t let you come out with me anymore,” I teased as we locked hands and walked toward our vehicles.

His Jeep was running with Michael and Stephanie rocking out to a song on the radio inside. He grumbled as we walked behind the Jeep and around to my door, “They messed with the radio.”

I unlocked my door and turned around for one last kiss. “Be careful, okay?”

He squeezed my hand and said, "You, too. I emailed you everything I found last night. Good luck. I'll be thinking about you."

I jumped as the Jeep's horn beeped. "I love you," he said as he released my hand and walked back towards his door.

"I love you, too. Have fun!" I yelled as he opened his door and the music came blaring out. Within a minute, Brian waved as he drove out of the parking lot and headed towards the highway.

I sighed as I closed and locked my car door. I took a minute to reflect on the past couple of days before I turned the key to start the engine. As I backed out of the parking spot, I noticed a white van with red "CES" painted on the side, sitting in a spot not too far away. I flashed back to the weeks following the scarring encounter with Rick Thompson when he and his dad abruptly moved out of the neighborhood. There were strange people from CES who were there making the vacated home suitable for the next owner. I didn't know what the company did, but it almost seemed like the person inside the van was putting too much effort into not looking suspicious.

As I drove home, I closely monitored my rearview mirror to see if I was being followed. By the time I pulled into my driveway, I was able to laugh at myself for being so paranoid.

Mom and Dad were sitting on the couch, watching a movie when I walked through the door. Mom got up and followed me to my room, where she hovered in the doorway. She made small talk, trying to get all the details of the night without directly asking anything. I continued putting stuff from my bag away as Mom stood in the doorway. "Did you get that at the mall, too?" she finally asked, pointing at me and then to her wrist, indicating my bracelet.

I bit my lip. "No, it was a gift from Brian," I said sheepishly.

Instantly, Mom was at my side inspecting the bracelet. "It's beautiful. It looks like it cost a lot, Ash. How serious are you guys?"

"I don't know what you mean, Mom. We're just dating." I sounded extremely defensive, much more than I intended.

"But you have only been 'dating' for a week. Please just tell me you're not taking things too fast and I won't bug you about it again."

"Mom, I swear to you that we are not taking anything too fast. He just wanted to get me something special."

"Okay, sweetheart. I know it can be easy to be swept away by raging hormones, but don't let yourself get carried away. I don't want to see you get hurt."

"Everything is going to be fine, Mom. My hormones are in check and I'm keeping a clear head about things."

When she left, I closed and locked my door and then sat on my bed for reflecting and mindlessly touching the bracelet. When my thoughts returned to the present, I called Kara. She was disappointed we hadn't had much time to talk; she wanted to get to know Brian better. I suggested we try again for a double date and she was going to talk to Keith about it.

"I'm really sorry again, Kar. I didn't mean to ruin the night."

"It's all right, sweetie. You can't control when you get sick. I'm glad you're feeling better, though."

"Thanks. I hate to make this such a short call, but I have some homework I need to get done before it gets too late and I fall asleep. I'll see you at school tomorrow, okay?" I had actually already finished my homework on Friday afternoon so I wouldn't have to worry about it. But I wanted to read Brian's email and pick up on where he left off on his research.

"Okay. Good luck with that and I'll see you tomorrow."

"Bye," I said and hung up, already flicking my mouse to get my screen to turn on.

I had fifteen new emails, fourteen of which were spam. It was infuriating. I was going through and deleting them, when one caught my eye. The subject was "We can find anyone, anywhere". I

clicked it open and read it. It was a people finder service that promised to find the person you were searching for or you got your money back. If I had a credit card, I would have submitted a search request at that moment. But because I was jobless, I was also credit card-less, so I would have to talk to Brian about putting the charge for the search on his card.

I saved that email and continued to delete the rest until I finally got to Brian's email.

Ash,

Don't stress yourself out on trying to find this guy. We just need a little more information so we can take it to the police. Be careful with your search. We know this guy has access to technology and we don't want to tip him off that we're after him.

I'll be calling you very soon to tell you all about my hiking trip, so until then, just remember I love you.

-B

Attached were the notes we had been looking at on his computer that morning. I didn't know where I was going to start. If Rick's trail had been concealed, how was I going to find something the police could use to tie him in to the current situation? My brain was flying all over the place, trying to come up with a solution when my cell phone rang.

Brian's name came up on the caller ID. "That was a short outing," I said automatically, not bothering with a normal phone greeting.

"Ashlyn?" It was a female's voice on the other end.

"Yes, who's this?" My body tensed.

"It's Steph. Brian asked me to call you. Don't freak out. He snapped his ankle on the hike and is at the hospital."

"What?! Is he okay?" I didn't heed her warning to not freak out.

"Calm down. He's fine. They gave him a shot of morphine before they took him for x-rays. We're waiting for the doctor to look at them now and then we'll know how serious the break is."

"Can I talk to him?"

"He's resting, but you could come by."

"I'll be there in five minutes," I said with conviction.

"Tell them you're his fiancée or they won't let you come back," she said unexpectedly right before ending the call. This was the nicest she had ever been to me.

I found a ring in my jewelry box that fit on my left hand and I could put on before I walked into the hospital. After grabbing my purse and giving my parents a brief explanation about what happened, I jumped into my car and flew to the hospital.

As I walked up to the reception desk, I slid the ring on the fourth finger of my left hand. It felt very weird, but not as strange as having to tell the volunteer worker at the desk that my fiancé was in the ER and I wanted to see him.

"You must be Ashlyn," the tiny girl smiled. "You can go on back. He's in the third room on the right."

I nodded and walked through the double doors and down the hall to Brian's room. When I entered, Brian was asleep. His parents and sister were sitting in the chairs, talking quietly and watching TV.

I blushed as they looked up at me. "How is he?" I managed, glancing at his covered legs, not really sure I should be there.

"Mom, Dad, this is Brian's girlfriend, Ashlyn. Ashlyn, these are our parents."

His dad reached out to shake my hand, but his mom jumped in front of him and gave me a hug. "It's so nice to meet you," she said as she stood back to look at me, with her hands still on my arms. She was a petite woman with dirty blonde hair that fell in soft curls on her shoulders. She looked tired, but you could still see the joy lines etched in her face.

"It's nice to meet you, too, Mrs. Turner," I said stiffly.

"Please call me Margaret," she said so warmly that I had to smile back.

Brian's dad cleared his throat, trying to get Margaret to release her grip on me. "I'm Henry. Thank you for coming down here. I know Brian will be pleased when he wakes up. He was driving everyone crazy about contacting you before the morphine kicked in." His dad was a tall man with graying brown hair and wise looking hazel eyes. Even though I knew they weren't biologically related, I could see Brian in some of his expressions.

"Thank you for calling me," I said humbly, directing my response to Stephanie.

"You didn't have any trouble getting back here, did you? I told the girl at the desk that you'd be coming," Stephanie explained.

"That explains how she knew my name. It was a little strange," I confessed.

"Here, why don't you take a seat?" Henry said, leading me to the circular chair with the wheels on the bottom.

I still had my boots on, so when I sat down on the chair, my knees were unexpectedly high. Embarrassed, I stood up and twisted the seat higher and tried sitting again. As I sat down in the taller chair, they quickly diverted their eyes from me and refocused on the infomercial on the TV.

"So, how long have you guys been dating?" Margaret asked, trying to make small conversation, but also trying to get information from me that Brian apparently hadn't bothered sharing.

I could see Stephanie smirk at the sight of me being so uncomfortable. "Ummm, well, I guess it's been just over a week now," I said truthfully.

She looked shocked at my response. "Wow, with the way he talks about you, I would've thought you guys had been together for much longer."

I half-smiled at her and blushed in embarrassment. I didn't know what to say, so I simply said, "It feels like much longer."

"Mom, leave her alone," I heard from next to me. Brian was waking up, so everyone forgot about me and jumped up to fuss over him. I wheeled the chair back to make room for them next to the bed.

"How are you feeling, sweetie," his mom gushed, taking his hand.

"My ankle hurts and my head is a little cloudy," he confessed. "Would you mind finding me something to drink?"

"Of course! Henry, can you come with me so I don't get lost in this place?"

"Ummm, I'm gonna go call Michael," Stephanie said, looking for any excuse not to be alone with the two of us after the incident earlier in the day.

After the three of them had left, Brian reached for my hand and kissed it. "Didn't think I'd be seeing you again today." He smiled, but was clearly in pain.

"I knew I should've 'convinced' them to go without you," I tried to tease, but the worry in my voice clearly came through.

He laughed quietly. "Don't be silly. This isn't a big deal. I'll be chasing after you again in no time," he winked at me. "Now come here and greet me properly," he said, practically yanking me onto his bed.

I bent over and kissed his forehead gently, which immediately creased as his eyebrows furrowed in disapproval. "I'm not broken all over," he complained.

"Sorry. I didn't want to hurt you more."

He pulled me on top of him, wincing slightly as the bed was jostled, and kissed me until I forgot where I was. "That's more like it," he said finally.

Suddenly there was someone clearing their throat behind us and I quickly jumped down, feeling the warmth of embarrassment flood my face.

Brian smiled brightly, apparently very pleased with himself. "This is Ashlyn, my..."

Fiancée, I said quickly to him using my gift.

He raised his eyebrow at me, glanced at my ring finger where I was nervously playing with the ring, and then looked back at the medical professional holding his x-ray up to the light. “*Fiancée*,” he finished, grinning.

The doctor eyed me suspiciously, but I kept my focus on the x-ray. “Well, the x-ray looks pretty good. It’s only a hairline fracture, so you’ll be on crutches for about a week and in a walking cast for the next six. The nurse will be in with all the paperwork for your parents to sign and I’ll be back in a bit to cast you up.”

“Thank you, doctor.” As the doctor left the room, Brian pulled me back in to him. “*Fiancée*, eh?” He was quite amused and pulled my left hand up to inspect my ring.

I yanked my hand back and put my ring in my pocket. “It was just an old ring I took from my jewelry box.”

“We’ll have to get you a proper one for the next time you have to pretend to be my *fiancée*.” He was enjoying the situation too much.

I was grateful when his parents came back in the room. Brian told them what the doctor had said and they seemed noticeably relieved. “If you guys just want to sign the papers and leave, Ashlyn can bring me home,” he suggested. “I’m sure you’re exhausted after the trip and there really isn’t anything going on here that you need to be here for.”

“I’d be happy to bring him home,” I chimed in.

“Well, if you think you’ll be okay here, it would be nice to get home. It’s been a long weekend,” his mom said. “I’ll see if Steph wants to come home with us or would rather wait here.” She left the room to go find Stephanie.

“Don’t let them talk you into a pink cast, kid,” his dad said and punched his shoulder.

His mom quickly returned with Stephanie and picked up her purse. “We’ll see you when you get home,” she said, kissing Brian on the forehead. “It was very nice meeting you, Ashlyn. You should come over and have dinner with us sometime soon.”

“I’d love to. Thank you... Margaret.” It was hard saying her first name. “It was nice meeting you, too.” She kissed me on my cheek and left the room with Stephanie.

“Remember you have school tomorrow,” his dad said, giving him a knowing eye. “Good to meet you, Ashlyn.”

I smiled and nodded as he left the room and then sat in the chair next to Brian’s bed. “So, how did this happen?” I asked, pointing to his right ankle that was already black and blue.

He squirmed a little. “It was nothing; I just stepped wrong and heard a snap.”

I made an unconvinced face, instinctively knowing he was not telling me something. Then it hit me. “This wasn’t because of me, was it?” I was horrified.

“Well...” He sighed and continued, “Michael and I were sparring when we got there because Stephanie was talking on the phone. He said something that I didn’t like and we sort of started going after each other a little too aggressively. He got a lucky hit and I stumbled backwards on the rocks and heard a snap followed by a rush of heat and pain.”

“What did he say?” I asked in a quiet voice.

“It’s not important,” he replied.

“It’s important to me,” I corrected him.

He sighed. “Michael said with your reputation for dating certain people, he was surprised that we still hadn’t, well, that we weren’t more physical, yet.” He struggled to get that out.

“Oh,” I said blushing. “Thank you,” I added.

His smile melted me. “Now, thanks to Michael, I get to spend more time with you because you’ve been nominated to help me get to my classes.”

"Hmmm... I guess can handle that. And it would give me a good reason to be late for class for a change," I smiled remembering all the classes in the last week I had to run to. "How's the pain?" I asked, trying to not get too carried away in my thoughts.

"It went away as soon as I saw you," he said.

"Liar," I quickly retorted and poked at his ankle.

"Ow! Hey! That's not nice!" he scolded me playfully. "I might have to rescind my marriage proposal if you keep that up," he teased. He smiled brightly when I put the ring back on my finger as the nurse came in with the crutches and we continued chatting lightly while they cast his ankle.

I was in the hospital with him for nearly three and a half hours. They wheeled him to the door, but he refused to let me leave him to get the car, so he used his crutches for the first time as we walked through the parking lot.

"I'm still faster than you, even with my handicap! I think we're going to have to find you some more sensible sexy shoes." He was showing off, practically running circles around me as I tried to ignore his obnoxious behavior and just get to the car. When we finally got to my car, he of course had to show that he wasn't physically impaired by his ankle and easily forced me against the car for a long kiss as I tried to open the door for him.

"You know I'm not going to let you open doors for me," he said, staring in my eyes, challenging me to do something about my current position.

I had no desire to move away from him, but almost knocked him to the ground when I reached my arms around him and gave him a big hug. "Sorry," I said, talking into his neck, refusing to let go.

Finally he broke free. "I think I need to get my foot up. It's starting to throb. How about a late dinner? I'm starving!"

"I'm still full from lunch," I admitted. It had almost been seven hours since we ate, but it felt like we had just finished. "Where would you like to go?"

It was almost eleven thirty and I was getting tired. After a yawn, I said regretfully, "I think I'm going to have to take you home soon or else I'll have to spend the night again because I'll be too tired to drive home." No matter how long we were together, it never seemed like *enough* time.

He smiled at that idea. "Sounds good to me. You know which window mine is, right?"

I sighed at the impossible scenario. "You're going to have to settle for me coming back and taking you to school in the morning, I think."

We got back in my car and I drove him home. Before he opened the front door, he took his last opportunity to kiss me before he was in front of his family. His mom was waiting up and looked relieved to see him. His dad apparently had already gone to sleep and Stephanie wasn't around.

"Hi, Mom," he said, kissing her on the cheek as she came over to help him. "I can handle this," he said lovingly.

"Thank you for bringing him home, Ashlyn. Can I get you a drink for your drive home?" she asked, hinting I shouldn't stay any longer.

"No, thank you. We just ate and I think I'm going to float home with all the soda I drank." Turning to Brian I said, "I'll see you tomorrow. Good luck sleeping," I added, eyeing his foot.

"Thank you, Ash. See you tomorrow," he said and winked at me.

"Good night, Mrs. Turner."

Chapter Nine – Holidays

It was a cold Friday afternoon in December. School was officially out for Christmas break and Brian had just dropped me off at home so he could go into work for a couple of hours before he left to join his family in Montana for Christmas. After work he was coming to pick me up so we could spend a little time together while he finished packing.

It had been a little more than two months since Brian and I started dating and our relationship was stronger than ever. Stephanie was much more civil to me after the confrontation the day when Brian broke his ankle, but I could tell she would have been happier if I wasn't in the picture. Michael was still cold towards me.

Brian's ankle was almost healed. He was out of his cast and going to physical therapy two times a week to regain his strength. I teased him about how puny his leg looked because he hadn't got to work it out while it was in the cast. He countered by teasing me about how puny both my legs were. So I ended up agreeing to allow him to pay for a membership at his gym and went there for a few hours on his slower nights.

After a few real workouts, I felt like I was getting stronger physically, which correlated with how much more powerful I was getting with my gift. I found that I was now able to use my gift without having visual contact with the person. One morning during English, Brian and I were holding hands under our desks when we heard shouting in the hallway. Two sophomore boys were getting ready to start throwing punches when I was able to convince the bigger kid to attempt a more diplomatic solution to their problem. It caught the other boy off guard enough that a teacher was able to step in and defuse the situation before any physical fighting began.

Brian seemed to be the only one I could contact from a substantial distance, though. I could find him wondering the halls while I sat in Calculus and whisper special things to him. It still had limitations, though. One night I tried using my gift to tell him good night from home, but it didn't work and I ended up emailing him instead.

As soon as he was off his crutches, he was driving himself around again. One Saturday, we drove with his family to a big park in the city where they were having a jazz music festival. It was a wonderful afternoon, especially because Brian and I had found a way to disappear for an hour or so. We still spent some time with his parents and even danced to a couple of songs, although he was a little awkward with the cast on.

Brian spent Thanksgiving with my family. I expected it to be uncomfortable for him having to meet my entire extended family, but he handled himself well and bonded with my brother and cousin over a football game. My parents had really taken a liking to him, too. He came over almost every Sunday for lunch and to watch football with Dad.

There weren't any breakthroughs on the Rick situation. Even before we found out that the abducted girl had been found burned in the desert, Brian had agreed without hesitation to pay for the private investigator from my email, but they hadn't come back with any information except they were still looking into the case.

There were about fifteen minutes before Brian was supposed to pick me up, so I decided to call Kara and see if she had any plans for the weekend. I was completely shocked when she answered her phone crying.

"Kara? Are you okay?" I asked with total compassion.

"Keith... he... we..."

"What about Keith? Is he okay?"

"He broke up with me," she spilled out, running the words together.

“What?!” I was confused. They had happily exchanged gifts at school earlier in the day and I had seen them walking to his car afterschool, holding hands.

There were a couple of minutes of sobbing on the other end. I really needed to be there with her, but she said she didn’t want me to miss out on the last couple of hours I had with Brian, which made her cry harder. I told her I would have Brian drop me off at her house on his way to the airport and we’d figure things out.

“*Don’t hurry for my sake,*” she said, hiccupping. “*I’m not going anywhere, apparently.*” That started a fresh set of sobs. She apologized again and let me go.

“I love you, Kar. It’s going to be alright. We’ll figure it out,” I told her and hung up the phone.

Within minutes of me hanging up with Kara, Brian pulled up to my house. I didn’t let him get to the door before I was racing out to jump into his arms. We twirled around together, kissing like we’d been apart for weeks rather than hours.

“What’s wrong?” he asked while stroking my cheek.

There was no pretense between us. I didn’t worry about feeling stupid telling him things because he had never given me any reason to not feel completely comfortable telling him everything. “Keith broke up with Kar this afternoon. She’s devastated!” I sighed thinking of how sad she was while I was so happy.

“Didn’t we just see them today exchanging presents? Do you want me to take you over there?”

“Yes, but not right now. She wants us to spend time together before you leave me for five days. Then I can be just as miserable as she is.” I pouted playfully, knowing he felt guilty for having to leave me for Christmas. We tried to work it out so he could stay here or I could go with him, but neither set of parents would agree to either compromise.

Brian drove quickly to his empty house. His parents and sister had taken an earlier flight. I was worried about him having to fly all that way by himself, but he assured me he’d be fine with his MP3 player and a magazine. His family had a layover in Denver and would arrive just fifteen minutes before his direct flight was scheduled to land. As we entered his quiet house, he barely managed to flip on the lights before he attacked me.

“We have to make up for lost time,” he managed to say between kisses.

“We haven’t lost any time yet, though,” I barely managed to say as he threw my jacket on the couch and continued kissing my newly bare areas.

He lifted me up, cradling me in his arms and carried me back towards his room, still kissing me excitedly. We managed to make it through his door without crashing to the ground or running into anything. He tossed me on his bed and proceeded to kick off his shoes and take off his shirt before he joined me.

“It was getting hot in here,” he said grinning, accounting for his bare chest which I happily ran my fingers over. Shivering with pleasure, he whispered, “I’m gonna miss this.”

“You can always say you missed your flight and stay here with me,” I said hopefully.

He sighed and put his hand on mine, covering his heart which was beating fast and hard. “You are such a bad influence, Ash.”

“You could’ve let me change their minds, you know,” I said teasingly as I leaned in and kissed his chest.

“I thought you only used your gift for good.”

“Wouldn’t it be ‘good’ for you to stay here with me?”

“I think it would be dangerous for us to be left alone like this for any length of time.” He sounded more serious than I wanted. We had agreed to wait awhile before we got any more physical with our relationship, but there were times I regretted it.

I sighed and sat up. “I don’t know how you can stand it.”

“Stand what?” he asked, sitting up with me.

"How can you stand to be so in control right now?" I complained.

He shrugged. "We agreed to not get carried away. I'm just honoring that agreement. Besides, I don't want to do something we'll regret later. And seeing that I'm about to leave town for five days and wouldn't get to be with you afterwards, I consider that something very regretful."

I pouted. I knew he was right; this was not the right time to move forward with our relationship, no matter how much I wanted to.

"Hey," he said pulling my face up to look at him. "I don't want to leave for this trip with you upset with me. So let's find something we *can* do together and enjoy these last couple of hours we have, okay?"

"I'm not upset with you, just our agreement," I said trying to sound a little more playful.

He pulled me back on top of his chest and stroked my hair. "Do you think you can behave yourself?"

"I guess," I resigned and we picked up almost where we had left off before, but with me being a little more reserved.

"You know, I still have to pack," Brian said suddenly.

I was purposely not keeping track of the time. "You're such a procrastinator," I teased.

"Yeah, well someone keeps me busy most of the time," he complained jokingly.

I broke away from his embrace. "What am I going to do without you?"

"Well, I hope none of this," he said smiling and planted another kiss on my always waiting lips.

"No, I'll save up all of those for when you come home," I smiled.

He stood up from the bed and pulled out his suitcase, which was completely empty.

I laughed at him. "You really have been procrastinating."

He grumbled something and then started throwing clothes at me. "Make yourself useful while you're laughing at me."

I enjoyed it a little too much when his boxers flew and hit me in the head. "Watch it!" I giggled and packed them next to his socks. I felt ridiculously immature when I had the thought of taking a pair home with me.

When he left the room to get his toiletries out of the bathroom, I was able to sneak in a secret present I had gotten for him. It was a digital picture frame that I loaded up with some special pictures I'd taken with Mom's camera. It had been hard for me to keep it a secret from him and I was a little sad that I wouldn't be there to see his reaction. But I was looking forward to the phone call that would come immediately after he found it.

"What are you smiling about?" he asked when he returned with his stuff.

"Oh, nothing," I lied, not hiding my joy. "Is there anything else that needs to fit in here?" It was starting to look like it wasn't going to close and I was nervous about breaking the frame.

"Just you," he teased and picked me up off my feet, threatening to shove me in his suitcase.

I laughed so hard. It felt really nice to be playing, but I knew our evening was coming to an end. "It's almost time to go, isn't it?" The smile disappeared from my face.

"I'll call you every day and every night before I fall asleep, okay? It will be like I was here," he said, trying to comfort both of us.

"Except you'll be thousands of miles away and I won't get to do this." I grabbed the back of his neck and pulled his face down to mine and kissed him enthusiastically. When we broke apart, I sighed sadly and wrapped my arms around his chest, not wanting to ever let go.

Neither of us wanted to be the one to say it was time to leave, but we both knew he had to go to catch his flight. We seemed to move in unison to get his suitcase, MP3 player, wallet, magazine, keys, and phone. I walked out of his room ahead of him, carrying the loose stuff in my right hand while he carried his suitcase and held my other hand. He turned off all but one of the lights in the house and we walked out the door into the cold night.

I swallowed loudly, fighting back my tears. I didn't want him to feel guilty for leaving. It *was* only five days. I would stay busy comforting Kara and enjoying the Christmas celebrations with my family. He would be back before I knew it. I just had to keep telling myself that.

He shut off the engine in front of Kara's house and took my hands in his, kissing each of my fingers individually. "Promise me you'll be safe while I'm gone. Don't go chasing after Rick or anything, okay?"

I just nodded; I was too choked up to speak. He got out of the Jeep and walked around to open my door. While he was on crutches and not driving, his dad took the Jeep to the repair shop and got the door fixed. He was tired of me opening my door for myself. I sat there looking in his eyes, trying to memorize his features I already knew so well. Finally, I accepted his hand and got out of the vehicle.

"Is it okay if I walk you up to her door? I wanted to tell her sorry about the breakup."

"That would be nice," I managed to say while holding my breath, trying not to cry.

He stopped half way up Kara's driveway and pulled me in for a giant, warm hug. "Every part of me is going to miss you, Ashlyn. I love you so much."

I smiled as I looked up in his sad eyes and a couple of tears escaped mine. "I love you, too, Brian." I took a deep breath and said, "Now you really have to hurry so you don't miss your plane, as much as I'd like that. Please, please be careful driving and call me as soon as you get there, okay? No matter how late, I want you to call."

"I promise," he said sincerely and gave me a departing kiss.

We held hands as we walked to Kara's door, but let go as soon as she opened the door.

"Hi," she sniffled. She looked terrible.

"I'm sorry, Kara," he said with such compassion, it made me teary again. "If there's anything I can do... anything at all," and he cracked his knuckles, which made Kara laugh, "you let Ash know and I'm all over it." He flashed his amazing smile that never ceased to melt me and then gave her a big hug.

"Thank you, Brian. Ash is lucky to have you," she tried to smile, but it almost looked like she was wincing.

Brian turned and kissed my forehead. "I'll talk to you soon."

I nodded and watched him drive away. I walked inside with Kara and we went straight to her room. All her pictures of Keith were shredded into tiny pieces and thrown all over her room. I saw the Christmas gift he had given her in the trash along with the teddy bear he gave her when she was home sick for a week last month.

"What happened?" I asked quietly.

She sighed. "He just said that things were too complicated right now and he needed some space. He's having some problems with his family, but I think he might be seeing his old girlfriend again."

"I'm so sorry, Kar." I embraced her and let her cry in my arms until she was completely done. When she sat up, I suggested going to my house, eating ice cream, and watching chic flicks all night. "It will give us both something else to cry about," I said.

She forced a smile, but agreed to stay with me. I drove her Mustang to the video store and then home where I told my parents as little as I could get away with. They didn't bother us in my room for the rest of the evening.

We watched three movies before she fell asleep. She was exhausted from crying all afternoon and night; I was surprised she stayed awake as long as she had. The last movie we watched was a comedy and she was laughing by the end. I knew she was going to be fine, but there would be a few rough days ahead still.

I was startled out of my thoughts about Kara's situation when my phone rang in my purse. Tossing almost everything out, I finally grabbed it just before it went to voicemail. "Hello?" I said breathless.

"Thought you forgot about me already," Brian joked. It was so good to hear his voice.

"My phone got lost in my purse. I'm glad I didn't miss your call. Where are you? Did you make it to the airport?"

He chuckled. *"Slow down, we can talk as long as you can stay awake. I made it to the airport with plenty of time to spare. I had to sit next to this talkative woman on the flight here. She says 'hi', by the way."* He stopped to laugh and then continued, *"My parents' flight was delayed, so I had to wait at the airport here for about an hour until they arrived. We just got settled in our rooms at my grandpa's house, and now I'm calling you."*

"Thank you," I said happily. "Is it cold there?"

"It's so freaking cold here. I think it's ten below right now and we're expecting snow tomorrow. I wish you were here to keep me warm." He sighed wistfully.

"I would rather you be here. I hate the cold," I said lightheartedly, trying to make him feel better. "So, are you all unpacked?"

"No, why?"

"I wouldn't want your clothes to get all wrinkled. I mean, I did my best folding everything nicely, but I wouldn't want you walking around looking like a slob." I hoped that sounded convincing enough. "By the way, I like your boxers," I added, hoping to add a layer of distraction.

"What did you sneak in here?" he demanded. I heard him going through his suitcase and knew the moment he found it; his breathing stopped.

"I didn't want you to fall in love with Montana and forget why you should come back here," I explained, very pleased with his reaction.

"This is amazing, Ash, but I don't think I could ever forget why it's important for me to go home." He was quiet, probably looking at all the different pictures. *"When did you have time to do all this?"*

"I had some free time while you were working so hard. Mom helped get the pictures on there." I hadn't realized how tired I was until I allowed myself to relax after hearing Brian liked his gift. I still had another gift to give him when he returned.

"You're very special, Ash. I feel like such a jerk for leaving you and you go and do something like this for me. I'm so sorry about earlier tonight, too. I just thought..."

I interrupted him because I didn't want this nice moment to turn regretful. "Don't worry about that. You were absolutely right about everything. Thank you for respecting me." I yawned and laid my head down on my pillow with my eyes closed. "Right now, you're lying here in bed with me." I felt warm all over imagining him holding me close to his bare chest as we drifted off to sleep together.

"Ash? Are you still there? Hello?!"

I was startled. "Oh! Apparently my imagination got the better of me and I just fell asleep in your arms," I smiled at the memory.

"That sounds wonderful. I'm going to let you get back to that dream, but I'll call you tomorrow. I want you to have more dreams like that and wake up with a smile on your face. I love you, Ashlyn, and I miss you more than you can imagine."

"I have a great imagination, though," I laughed softly. "Good night, my Brian. I love you. I hope your dreams are as wonderful as mine." I fell asleep with my phone in my hand and dreamt about him all night.

It was tough to get through those five days without seeing him, even though I had lots to keep me busy. I had to make sure Kara was okay, which helped keep my mind off Brian temporarily. We spent all day Saturday at the mall, laughing at all the last minute shoppers. I checked in on her

throughout the week. By Christmas, she was almost her old self again, and was able to enjoy spending the day with her family.

It was in my down time that I really missed Brian. I didn't like being apart from him, even if it was only for five days. We did our best to make up for the distance, but it wasn't quite the same. We spoke first thing every morning and last thing every evening. Some of our conversations were simply about the events of the day, while others were deep and meaningful conversations about our relationship. Our Sunday evening phone call was all business, though. After I had spoken to him that morning, I was visited by a detective from the local police department.

"Ms. Ashlyn Taylor?" the police officer asked, standing up from the couch as I walked into the room. Mom and Dad were nervously watching, sitting on the adjacent couch.

"Yes, I'm Ashlyn. Can I help you?" I was nervous even though I hadn't done anything wrong.

"I am Detective John Olson. I'd like to speak with you alone, if that's okay with your parents."

I nodded to Mom and Dad and they hesitantly got up and left the room. The officer motioned for me to take a seat where they had just left and took out his notepad.

"We have been notified that you have recently submitted a search request online for a man named Rick Thompson. I need to know the reason for your inquiry." He readied his pen and looked at me for a response.

Brian and I had talked about having a story in case the search people wanted to know why we were looking for Rick. We rehearsed our answers, but I was a little nervous telling a police officer face to face the fabrication. "He was an old friend. I thought I saw him the other day, so I decided to try to track him down and make contact with him again."

The officer raised his eyebrow when I mentioned I had seen him recently. "Where and when did you last see him?" His voice betrayed him. He was caught so off guard by my comment that he didn't seem to suspect my story was rehearsed.

"The last time I saw him was right before I submitted the online request. I was shopping at the mall with a girlfriend and thought I saw him."

The officer was writing frantically. "So that was in mid-October, correct? Do you recall the news story about the girl who was abducted around that time?"

I cringed inwardly. "Yes," I said softly.

"Do you recall if it was around that time you think you saw him at the mall?"

"Yes. I believe it was the same day that the Amber Alert was issued. My friend and I were shopping at that same mall" I admitted.

Mom suddenly burst into the room. "I don't think this is appropriate. Are you trying to scare our daughter or are you accusing her of a crime?" Mom was frantic, but I wanted the officer to continue so I could try to get some information from him, as well.

"It's okay, Mom. I don't mind answering his questions. Could you and Dad give us a few minutes alone?"

She nodded and took Dad's hand and went back to their bedroom. I knew they wouldn't be listening anymore, so I decided to ask the officer some questions, too. "Do you think he's connected to the girl's disappearance?"

"I'm not at liberty to discuss current investigations, but Rick Thompson has been a person of interest in a number of crimes, including his father's death a couple of years ago. We have been unable to get any leads on him until your search was brought to our attention. If you see him or have any contact with him, please contact me immediately." Detective John put his notepad away and stood up, offering his card to me. "He is considered dangerous, so please exercise caution."

"Thank you. I'll contact you if I have any more information to provide." I showed him to the door and locked it after he left.

I immediately went to my room to call Brian, but it went to voicemail, so I started a search on my computer to get more information on the death of Rick's father. Since I didn't even know his name, I decided to do a search in archived newspaper stories. After a couple of unsuccessful tries, I managed to pull up a short story written shortly after Rick's father's body was found.

Police held a news conference yesterday afternoon about the recent murder of lobbyist Richard Thompson. His body was found in a dumpster behind a local CES building, where he frequently worked. While his death is being ruled a homicide, cause of death has yet to be determined.

The police are currently looking for his son, Rick Thompson, who is a person of interest in the case. Please contact local PD if you have any information on his whereabouts.

There were two things that struck me about this article. First, Richard Thompson was connected with the odd company that had cleaned their house when they moved and the same company whose van I thought was watching me in the parking lot of the restaurant Brian and I ate at in October. Second, there was a picture taken of the press conference for the article. It showed a couple of official looking people in suits standing up at the microphones, but someone who looked like Rick Thompson was standing almost directly behind them looking especially smug.

I immediately got up and went to my bookshelf, where I had kept my brother's yearbook that I had stolen from him when I was in junior high before my encounter with Rick. I had dog-eared the page with Rick's picture, so it was easy to turn right to it and compare the two. As I sat back down at my computer, looking between the two photos, I knew I was correct. While he looked much older and somehow more sinister, I could easily tell it was him, especially when I looked at the eyes that were permanently etched in my mind.

I assumed Detective Olson had seen the article and picture, so I wondered why they said they were looking for him when he was right there. I decided to wait and talk to Brian before I contacted the detective with this information.

When Brian called me back that evening, I told him about the visit from Detective Olson and about the newspaper article and picture I'd found. He said I was right in hesitating to contact the detective and wanted me to wait until he got back and could see the picture for himself. Then we would decide together how or if we should contact the police.

I could hear the stress in his voice as he spoke. "Nothing bad is going to happen," I promised. "This was probably the best outcome we could have hoped for. We have information that the police *are* looking for him and I have a person to contact next time I see him. This also gave us an important link to the address mystery."

"I just don't see how this helps."

"He dropped off the grid, according to the address research you so expertly pieced together, around the same time his father was murdered. Killing him allowed Rick the ability to make himself disappear."

"I'm not following, Ash."

I sighed trying to find the right words to help him understand what I had so easily pieced together earlier in the day. "Do you recall what I told you about my gift on that first day in the desert?"

"Every word," he admitted. *"You said that using your gift for good makes you feel more powerful. I've witnessed it, too, when you do something good, you seem to almost radiate an inner strength."*

"It's a lot more than that, though. I told you that it was like an adrenaline rush when I do good things. If I were to try to use my gift right after I did something good, it would be easier for me to do it. It's like exercising and getting stronger. The more good I do, the easier it is to use my gift. I imagine that doing evil things has similar benefits. After years of hurting animals, Rick moved on to people. Killing the person responsible for giving him life was evil enough to allow him to transgress what we perceive as normal physics."

"OK, that makes sense, I guess, but then how are the police able to catch other career criminals and serial murderers? It seems like they do a lot of evil, but they can't make themselves disappear."

"Because not everyone is 'gifted'," I stated simply, although I hated to use the word "gift" to describe anything Rick did. "I imagine that it's just like my gift; I've never met anyone who had a gift like mine, but I know there are regular people out there that are good, like you."

He was quiet for a few moments, processing my outrageous explanation. *"It's almost like you were given a special gift to counter the evil gifts that are out there."*

"Perhaps," I concluded.

"It doesn't seem fair," he said, unexpectedly angry. *"How are you alone supposed to counter all the evil out there?"*

"Who said life's fair?" I stated flatly. I knew after all my years of having to hide who I was from everyone that 'fair' doesn't apply to me. "Besides, I have you, which is more than I can say for Rick."

"I don't have any super powers, though."

"I think you have super powers," I admitted in a quieter voice. "You are the reason I went back to using my gift. I remember you told me that you felt like you were supposed to help me get back to using my gift."

"I still believe that I am here to support you."

"You do more than support me," I said very seriously. "You make me stronger just by being near me. Because of you, I'm able to use my gift at greater distances."

"That could just be a result of you 'exercising'," he said sourly.

"You seriously don't see how much more powerful I am because of you?"

"I'll have to take your word on that. What I do know is that you have a strong pull on me. And if you believe that I'm making you stronger, I'm not going to argue."

"I would want to be close to you even if I didn't have this gift." I was a little hurt that he thought I was just using him.

"I didn't mean it like that, Ash. I'm sorry. This is just a lot of stuff to process. I really hate being away from you. I know if I was there, you'd just stroke my hair or smile at me and I'd know everything was how it was supposed to be."

"I miss you," I said sadly.

"This is harder than I thought it was going to be," he admitted. *"I just keep looking at the pictures you gave me and tell myself that it's just a little while longer."*

I could hear the strain in his voice and knew I didn't want to end the night on this note. "Do you want to know what I got you for Christmas?" I asked trying to lighten things up.

He paused for a moment before he answered. *"I'm hoping it's you wearing a big red bow and your sexy boots,"* he said, sounding better. *"Am I close?"*

I giggled. "It feels good to laugh again," I admitted, but refused to give him any hints.

"I guess you're gonna make me wait until Wednesday to find out?"

"Wednesday?! I didn't expect to get to see you until Thursday. What time does your flight come in?"

"That's part of your surprise," he said mysteriously.

"I'm intrigued," I admitted. "My present to you seems dull now compared to all the theatrics you have planned. Maybe I *will* get a large red bow," I said, acting like I was trailing off in deep thought.

"Wow, I know what I'm going to dream about tonight," he said laughing.

"As long as you share with me," I said happily.

"We'll see, we'll see."

There was a moment of silence between us, when I was imagining the dreams I was hoping for. "I'm glad we're going to bed like this," I finally said. "I didn't mean to make you question how important you are to me." I didn't want him to react to that statement, so I quickly continued. "Being with Kara

the other day made me really appreciate what we have. I was trying to put myself in her shoes, imagining that you left me. I nearly threw up at the thought. I need you, Brian, not because you make me stronger or help my gift. I need you because you complete me. You have become my entire world. Everything I do, I wonder how you would react to it. When the policeman was here today, all I wanted was to have you here with me, holding my hand through it. And when you weren't, all I could focus on was talking to you about it. There has never been anyone in my life that I've felt this way about." I was gushing, but I didn't care. He needed to know how important he was to me.

"You really tried to imagine me leaving you?" He sounded humbled. "I don't want you to ever consider that again, please?"

"I promise," I said and meant it. It was just too painful to try to imagine.

"Thank you for being so honest with me and for loving me. I know this sounds cheesy, but I can't remember what my life was like before you were in it. It's like I'm a different person, no, a better person just because I'm with you. You trusted me from the very beginning to accept you for who you really are and allowed me to process the oddities at my own pace, without pressure. You have no idea the impact you have on my life."

"I think I have some idea," I admitted. "Did I completely ruin your good dreams tonight?"

"I think I can salvage a few good thoughts to fall asleep to," he said, with the smile back in his voice.

"Good, because I'd hate to have to send you a picture to help you out," I said teasingly.

"Hmm... well, if that offer is on the table, I'll stay awake until you send that."

"We'll see. I'll have to try to find something before you fall asleep, then."

"I look forward to it. More than you know. I hope you have wonderful dreams, Ash. I love you always," he said.

"I love you, too, and miss you so much! Sleep well, sweetheart."

"Don't forget to send me that picture," he laughed. *"Good night, my love."*

As soon as we hung up, I started flipping through my closet looking for a shirt I had bought when I went shopping with Kara. It had a low v-neck that would be just sexy enough to make him smile, but not too over the top that I would be embarrassed if someone else saw it. I put on a dark pair of jeans and my boots, although I didn't intend to take a full body picture of myself. But I knew I'd feel sexier if I was wearing them. I finished my look with my bracelet, touched up my makeup, and snapped a couple of pictures with my phone. I picked the best one and sent it to Brian with the message, "Sweet dreams," and went to sleep.

I woke up briefly when my phone vibrated for an incoming message from Brian. He sent me a picture of his boxers with a message saying, "Love you forever". I was destined to have great dreams.

Chapter Ten – Surprises

“Mom, Dad, Ash, this is Emily. Emily, this is my family.” My brother Mark and his girlfriend, Emily, arrived early for our Christmas Eve celebrations. Emily looked incredibly nervous as she shook my hand. She was a petite girl with medium length strawberry blonde hair and freckles on her face. Her blue eyes made her face pop, which drew attention away from her slightly lopsided smile. As she stepped over to formally meet my parents, my eyes focused on her left hand, where there was a beautiful diamond ring. I immediately eyed my brother and he shot me a look warning me not to say anything. I nodded and excused myself to shower.

By the time I finished my shower, I could hear Mom talking excitedly to someone on the phone. *“I just can’t believe our Mark is getting married!”*

I smiled slightly, knowing that I was truly happy for him, as well. I entered my room with only a towel wrapped around me and found Emily looking around.

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t mean to be nosy.”

I quickly glanced at my computer to make sure I had put away the yearbook from the other night and that my computer was still hibernating. “It’s okay. Is there something I can help you with?” I asked feeling slightly awkward.

She got right to the point. “I know we don’t know each other yet, Ashlyn, but I was hoping you’d agree to be one of my bridesmaids.”

My mouth opened, but nothing came out. I finally managed to say, “Oh, of course, Emily. I’d be honored. When is the wedding?”

“Saturday, March fifteenth.”

“You mean in three months?”

“Yes,” she responded, sounding a little offended.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean anything by that. I’m so happy for the two of you! You’ll have to give me all the details about getting a dress and whatever else I can do to help out. Are you getting married in California?” I hoped my enthusiasm overshadowed my initial reaction.

“No, we decided to get married here. I gave your mom all the details, and I was hoping we could go out later this week and have you fitted for your dress.”

“That sounds like fun,” I said trying to sound convincing. “My boyfriend is supposed to be back in town on Wednesday sometime. Maybe we could go out that morning? I’m not sure he will let me out of his sight once he returns,” I said smiling.

“That sounds good,” she said, apparently pleased with how our conversation was ending. “I’ll let you get dressed now.” She gave me a quick hug and left my room.

Of course, this led to another interesting phone call with Brian that evening. It was nearly eleven before he called. After the announcement and the general chaos of a family gathering, it felt like ages since we last spoke. I filled him in on all the details of our Christmas Eve celebration, including the news of Mark and Emily’s engagement.

“Engaged? Wow, I wasn’t expecting that. He talked about her at Thanksgiving, but I didn’t get the impression things were too serious.”

“Well, apparently, they are quite serious. They’re getting married in March and Emily asked me to be a bridesmaid.”

“The March that is like three months away? Wow! That’s really fast,” he said.

“Well, I guess when you find your soul mate, everything finds a way of working out,” I said, trying to loosely quote his definition from the lake.

“So, you want to make it a double wedding?” he asked, obviously teasing, but with a hint of sincerity.

"I don't know how I'd be a bridesmaid and a bride at the same time," I joked. I didn't think I'd be ready to touch this topic seriously for some time. As much as I was deeply in love with him, there was no way I could even consider marriage at my age. It was still more than four months until my eighteenth birthday.

"Don't worry, Ash, I was only kidding," he said, sensing my unease.

We spent the next hour and a half talking about random things like what we wanted to do when he came home and trying to guess each other's Christmas gifts. We had an especially deep conversation about what we saw ourselves doing in the future.

"You'd better to get sleep soon or Santa won't come," he said eventually.

It was past midnight, but all I wanted to do was stay up and talk to him some more. "I think I might have been too naughty this year to get any presents anyway," I joked.

"Who is he? I'll kick his ass," he teased back.

"It could have been you, if you weren't so frustratingly honorable," I said, but I didn't want to make him feel bad about that again, so I quickly added, "So I guess that means I probably won't make the naughty list until next year."

He chuckled. *"I think it's possible that you are just too good, Miss Ashlyn. We'll have to see what the New Year brings."*

I could hear the smile in his voice and it made me very happy.

When I didn't respond to that, he finally said, *"I really should go and try to get some sleep so I'm not a zombie when I meet my extended family tomorrow."*

"They're going to love you and not let you come home, you know," I said hoping it wasn't true. He hadn't met most of the extended members of his adopted family, so it was really going to be a challenging day for him.

"I'm a pretty good escape artist. I promise I'll see you on Wednesday no matter what," he said sincerely.

"Oh, Wednesday. That reminds me that I agreed to go out with Emily for a dress fitting that morning. You won't be back until later in the day, right? I don't want waste any time I could be with you."

"Everything will work out, Ash. Try not to stress about it and try to enjoy getting all dressed up. I can hardly wait to see how beautiful you'll look as a bridesmaid. You're going to outshine the bride, you know."

"I'm sure she's picked out an appropriately hideous dress so we won't take the attention away from her. Besides, she's very pretty. I'm sure there won't be an eye that isn't checking her out all night." Okay, so I was fishing for more compliments, but I didn't want to hang up quite yet.

"You're wrong," he said flatly. *"There's no way that I will be able to look at anything else but you."*

I sighed as I realized just how tired I really was. "As much as it pains me, I'm going to have to go to sleep. I can't wait to talk to you again later this morning."

"I hate this part of the day. I love you, Ashlyn. I hope you dream about us being together," he said with a little sadness entering in his voice.

"Good night, Brian. I love you, too. I hope you have dreams you can't share with me until we're together," I said, trying to make our last moments happier.

"Sweet dreams and Merry Christmas," he said and hung up.

Emily and I made plans to go to the store to get me fitted for my dress on Wednesday morning. I woke up just in time to down a Dr. Pepper and have a quick shower. I could hardly wait to see Brian again. I nearly skipped out the door to the rental car that Emily was driving. We drove to a bridal store near the mall and were immediately assisted by one of the consultants. The store was busy; apparently

a lot of people got engaged over Christmas. Since Emily and Mark got engaged prior to Christmas, she had already shopped for the bridesmaids' dresses. I was the last of four to get fitted; they had already had a say in the dress and were fitted before I even knew Emily was going to be my sister-in-law.

Emily's colors were black, silver, and red and she picked out a black dress with spaghetti straps that flowed gracefully to the ground with a silver sash to tie around the waist for the bridesmaids to wear. Emily didn't care what shoes we wore, so I decided I would reuse my silver strappy heels I had worn to Homecoming.

I was in the middle of being pinned when I noticed a black Jeep pull into a spot outside the door. I must've been holding my breath because the seamstress got upset with me for not holding still when I finally started breathing again. My heart began to pound in my chest as Brian walked through the door of the bridal store. He wasn't aware of everyone staring at him; his eyes were focused on me the entire time. Tears welled in my eyes until he was a blurry figure standing in front of me. Without a word, he walked up to me and kissed me passionately, much to the protest of the seamstress.

"I missed you, Ash," he whispered, looking deep in my eyes.

The mounting tears finally fell silently down my face and I pulled him in for another kiss. "How did you know where to find me?" I finally managed to ask resting my forehead against his, my heart racing even faster than before.

"I called Mark when I landed. He told me you guys were here, so I came right from the airport. You look gorgeous, by the way." He had stepped back to look me up and down.

The woman cleared her throat, eyeing Brian. "You're going to have to step back and let me finish or you'll be asked to leave." I could see some of the bridal consultants and customers around the store looking on with envy at our passionate display.

"All right," Brian said laughing, holding up his hands in resignation. "Ash, I'll be waiting outside for you." He winked and left the store.

"Wow, he's pretty amazing, Ashlyn." A familiar voice said, bringing me back to reality.

"Yes, he is," I said dreamily. "I'm so sorry, Emily. I got a little caught up there. I'll introduce you when we're done here."

"Don't worry about it," she giggled.

I laughed, too. The seamstress made a grunting noise and tugged on the dress again. "We're all done, here. I think I got everything marked correctly, but with all that moving around, we may need to make some last minute corrections. So please make sure you come back for your final fitting at least a week before the event."

"Thank you," I said through my teeth, trying to be nice.

After I carefully slipped the dress off, we walked up to the counter and I paid for it with the cash Mom had given me. She had decided not to come because she wanted to go shopping at the post-Christmas sales.

We were almost at the door when Emily grabbed my arm. "Oh, Ashlyn let me show you what my dress looks like!"

I sighed in irritation. I didn't want to be rude, but every molecule in my body was screaming at me to go outside to be with Brian. She opened a bridal catalog and started flipping through the pages. "Excuse me," she said to a passing consultant. "Could you help me find the Galina Signature dresses?"

The woman grabbed another book and quickly flipped through the pages until she came across the gowns Emily was referring to. As she stood up to walk away, she smiled brightly at me and said, "So, it looks like we might be seeing you in here for a bridal gown soon, too?"

I blushed. "Not too soon, I hope. I'm not even eighteen yet," I said, trying to sound lighthearted.

She smiled again at me and said, "We'll see. You don't often see that kind of spark between people who aren't destined to get married. Trust me; I've seen a lot of couples come through here."

Some you know are doomed from the beginning and you almost feel guilty selling them a dress. Others you know will probably survive okay. But then there are those few that you know were put on this earth to be together. I wouldn't let him go, if I were you." She winked at me and walked away.

I didn't know what to say and was glad when Emily cleared her throat to get the focus back on her and her gown. It was beautiful: floor length, white satin, sleeveless, and had a beautifully beaded empire waist. "You're going to look so beautiful in that, Emily. I can't wait to see you walking down the aisle."

I think she resented the comments the saleslady had made to me, but smiled at my effort. I didn't know if it was because she was not the center of attention or if she felt like she didn't have the same spark in her life and was questioning her choices. Honestly, I didn't care either way. I just wanted to be walking out the door and into the Brian's waiting arms.

"He's being very patient," she said, standing up and walking towards the door.

"He's a good actor," I said, laughing.

She laughed, too, and went to open the door. Before she could push it an inch, Brian was there holding it open for the two of us. My heart skipped a beat and my breath got stuck in my throat. I completely forgot to do the introductions again.

"You must be Mark's fiancée, Emily, correct? I'm Brian, Ash's boyfriend. It's nice to finally meet you. Mark talked nonstop about you at Thanksgiving." He gave her a quick hug, like she was an old friend.

She couldn't hide her smile, obviously pleased about Mark talking about her to other people. "I've heard a lot about you over the past couple of days, too. It's nice to meet you, too. Ashlyn sure is lucky to have someone as generous as you. Her room is practically filled with the roses you sent."

I smiled thinking about all the roses Brian had delivered to me while he was gone, but then frowned, feeling like I was a small child listening to her mom having a grown-up conversation with an old friend she ran into. I was glad when she told Brian she wasn't able to join us for lunch. I snapped out of my internal tirade in time to thank Emily for the shopping trip and complimented her again on her gown.

As soon as she turned her back to walk away, Brian swept me up into his arms and kissed me. I didn't care if the whole world was watching; I was back where I belonged, in Brian's arms with his strong lips pressed against mine. I was very glad he was holding me, because by the time our embrace ended, my head was spinning so fast and my heart beating so hard that I probably would have collapsed onto the sidewalk.

"I get to be with you all day?" I said breathlessly, trying not to notice all the people gawking at us from inside the store.

"The rest of your life, if you want," he said beaming. "But we should probably get out of here before someone calls the police on us. I don't think that seamstress liked me too much."

"I think everyone else in that store was pretty impressed by you, though. I was afraid I might have to fight off some brides-to-be who changed their mind after seeing you," I said playfully.

He laughed, which made me tingle with delight all over, and carried me to the Jeep. In the backseat were a dozen red roses, a bear, and a small wrapped gift. I smiled as I tried to divert my eyes, so I wouldn't spoil his surprise. I was very glad I had thought to put his present in my purse the night before.

He closed my door and walked quickly to the driver's side and hopped in. Almost as if that short separation had reignited his feelings from being gone for the past five days, he leaned over and kissed me again. "Pathetic, huh?" But he was smiling, so I knew he didn't mean it. "I can't even walk away from you for a second without missing you."

"I don't mind, as long as I'm here to receive your apologies." I had almost forgotten how electrifying it was to be so close to him. I had the sudden urge to use my gift on him again. "Let me see

if this still works,” I said with a mischievous smile on my face. I focused on his eyes and was suddenly looking from behind him. *I love you, Brian Turner. Now kiss me!* I couldn’t see him smile, but as soon as he leaned over towards me, I was back in my own mind, enjoying his lips moving with mine. “I still got it,” I finally managed to say triumphantly.

“You are so amazing. I can’t get over how weird it is to hear you in my head. It’s wonderful, but strange.” He started up the Jeep and grabbed hold of my hand while we sped out of the parking lot. “We have a little time before my family’s flight comes in, so I thought we could go back to my house and open gifts.”

“I’m all yours today. Take me where ever you are going to be,” I said, still smiling. My cheeks were going to hurt if I didn’t stop grinning.

It was intoxicating being with him again. In no time, we were back at his house, which looked the same as we had left it five days before. “You have to carry all your gifts so I can carry you in through the door,” he said as he parked the Jeep in the driveway.

I wasn’t about to argue. The last time he carried me through his house had led to some very passionate time together. And I wasn’t disappointed this time, either. He barely kicked the front door closed and he had set me down and was trying to find places to set all of the stuff I was holding while still kissing me. Up in his arms again, we were quickly down the hall to his room and on his bed. We feverishly took off our jackets and shoes, but it wasn’t enough. I wanted to be closer to him, so I took off his shirt, revealing his warm, strong chest. I was starting to feel déjà vu and was sure he was going to slow us down, but instead he reached down to take my shirt off, too. “I want to be as close as I can be to you,” he said breathlessly and then pulled away from me to look in my eyes. “Is this okay?”

I smiled as I looked up in his eyes. “Yes,” I said softly and placed my hand on his chest.

He moved his hand down my arm and placed it gently on my exposed lower back, pulling me back to him for another kiss. I shivered uncontrollably from his touch and wrapped my arms around his neck. I wasn’t too aware of how it happened, but we somehow managed to make it on his bed, where we laid facing each other on our sides. There was so much heat radiating between us, I almost forgot it was the middle of winter and a little cool in his house since the heater hadn’t been on in almost a week.

“Wow,” I finally said. “Maybe we should be apart for a few days more often,” I teased as my hand moved to feel his heart racing.

He reached up to stroke some hairs out of my face and smiled at me. “I hope you’re kidding.”

“Mostly,” I said and kissed his chest. I suddenly realized that I had put on an ugly strapless bra for the dress fitting. I was horrified that he had to see me wearing it. “I wish I’d know this is what we were doing today; I would’ve worn a cuter bra.” I crinkled my nose as I thought about how unsexy I must look.

He was amused at my embarrassment. “It will help keep us honest to our agreement,” he smiled brightly, not even trying to pretend what I was wearing was nice.

I pouted, “What if I don’t want to agree to it anymore?”

“Well, you’re not going to have that choice right now. My parents are going to be home soon and I wouldn’t want to live under the same roof as Steph if she walked in on *that*.” He chuckled. “Oh, Ash. Don’t be upset. We have all the time in the world to work up to that. And when it happens, I want it to be something special, something we can enjoy for hours without having to worry about anyone else.”

“I know,” I said, running my fingers across his chest and down his ribs, causing his stomach to twitch. “You’re just too irresistible,” I said smiling and looking up at him with puppy dog eyes.

“You’re great, Ash,” he said with a little chuckle in his voice and sat up. “How about you open your present?”

“Only if you open yours, too,” I said.

“Deal. I’ll go get them real quick. Don’t move.”

“Bring my purse back with you, too!” I yelled as he jumped up and ran down the hallway. I was feeling a little self-conscious sitting without a shirt on in his room and the room started feeling much cooler with Brian gone, so I pulled his sheet up to cover myself.

He returned quickly with my purse in one hand and the bear and wrapped gift in his other. “You should probably put this back on,” he said, throwing me my shirt after setting everything down on the bed.

I sighed, but complied, as he put his shirt back on, too.

“My parents really are going to be here any minute. It will be awkward enough for them to come home with us in here, so I think we should look like we’ve been behaving as much as possible.”

I was pretty surprised he was willing to let them see us here in his room. I reached for my purse and pulled out the box wrapped for him. “Merry Christmas,” I said smiling, handing the box to him.

Of course, he took the opportunity to grab my wrist and pull me close for another kiss. “You shouldn’t have gotten me anything. You being here with me is all I ever need.”

“Just open it, silly,” I said and pushed his shoulder playfully.

I watched his face intensely as he pulled the paper off and opened the box. He lifted the watch out and studied it. “Look on the back,” I said softly, not wanting to interrupt his inspection.

“*Counting down the seconds until we’re together again...*” he read out loud. “You are amazing, Ash. The watch is extraordinary, but the inscription perfectly captures how I feel when I’m apart from you. Thank you,” he said. He took a moment to enjoy it before he said, “Now, it’s your turn.”

I picked up the bear and hugged it before moving on to the gift. It was a small, black box from a jewelry store. My heart stuttered as I lifted the top up. It was a delicate white gold chain with a simple ring threaded through it.

Before I could find words to tell him how beautiful it was and to ask him what it meant, he said, “It’s sorta a promise ring. I know you weren’t comfortable wearing a ring on your finger that night in the hospital when you were pretending to be my fiancée, so I thought maybe wearing it as a necklace would be easier.”

“It’s amazing,” I finally managed.

“Does that mean you like it?” Brian laughed, pulling me in for a hug, sounding a little nervous and a little relieved at the same time.

“How could I not?” I countered, pushing away from him slightly to look in his eyes.

“Well, by wearing it, you are sorta promising to someday consider accepting a real proposal from me,” he said, awkwardly playing with his watch and glancing up to gauge my reaction to his words.

“Are you sure you just aren’t planning on getting hurt and going to the emergency room sometime soon?” I said suddenly and very playfully as I took the necklace out of the box and attempted to put it on.

He jumped behind me and closed the clasp. I raised my hand to the ring resting on my chest and held it in my hand. “I’d consider accepting a real proposal from you any day,” I said as I turned to look into his eyes. “I missed looking into your eyes and feeling your warm skin,” I said reaching up to touch his face.

That seemed to be his cue to lay me down on his bed and kiss me from above. As I lay there, drifting to another world while we kissed, I felt so at home with his scent surrounding me from all sides. His bed was soft and comfortable and his body was strong above mine.

“Ash, I need to ask you something,” he said suddenly and sat down on top of me.

“Anything,” I said, trying to mask my enthusiasm for his closeness.

“My family is going up north to go skiing for New Years this weekend.”

I turned my head so he wouldn’t see the disappointment in my face.

He turned my head back to face him. “I want you to go with us.”

I got a confused look on my face. Had I just heard him correctly? Did he ask me to go on a trip with him? "Of course, I want to go!" I said enthusiastically. "But is that going to be okay with your family? And how on earth could I talk my parents into allowing that?" There were too many complications.

"My parents said it was cool if you came. So you just have to convince your parents." He paused for a moment and then added, "My mom offered to call them and explain everything, if you think that will help."

My face lit up and he knew my answer without me having to say a word. With that, we resumed our previous activity until his family arrived home.

Chapter Eleven – Cold

It was late that evening when I finally got up the nerve to ask my parents. I answered a million questions and then they called and talked to Brian's mom and asked her the same ones. After his mom assured them that there'd be no boys in the girls' room and vice versa, they finally agreed to let me go if I promised to behave and follow the Turners' rules. Additionally, I had a number of extra chores to do around the house if I wanted some money to do anything other than sit in the cabin the whole time. *Although... the company would be good...* I was daydreaming but then remembered Michael was coming, too, and Brian was looking forward to snowboarding with him.

Brian was working extra hours the rest of the week because it was the beginning of the busy season at the gym and he wanted to make up for the time he missed when he was in Montana. It worked out because I needed some alone time with Kara. She helped me shop for winter clothes for the trip, which proved harder than it should – who knew they put spring clothes out in the middle of winter?

On Saturday, my parents left around four to catch a movie and then go to dinner. I decided to take advantage of an empty house and invite Brian over after work to help me pack. We were leaving early Sunday morning and I hadn't washed my new clothes yet.

I had barely started the washing machine when someone snuck up behind me, covering my eyes. I almost screamed, but could tell by his scent it was Brian.

I turned around and was quickly pinned against the washer. "How'd you get in here," I demanded, stopping him from kissing me. It scared me that he was in my house. If he could get in, who else could freely invade my home?

"I know where you hide your spare key. Now will you kiss me before your parents come home?"

We didn't move from the laundry room until it was time for my clothes to transfer to the dryer. Then we made our way back to my room.

"I have to get packed, or I'm going to be wearing the same clothes the entire trip," I complained as he laid down next to me on my bed.

"We're coming back Tuesday afternoon. It should only take you a minute to throw a few days worth of clothes in a suitcase." He was playing with a couple of strands of my hair.

"Maybe for you, but I have to actually plan what I might need. Remember, I hate being cold, so I have to make sure I am warm the entire time you're out playing on the mountain." My face scrunched a little as I thought about him leaving me all day to go snowboarding.

"Don't worry. We'll have lots of time together," he said as he softly kissed my head. "There's also that New Year's Eve party at the lodge we have to go to. It's usually pretty fun mostly because it's separate from the adult party." He smiled big, trying to be convincing that I was going to have a good time.

"I guess I'll be able to do a lot of reading," I said, motioning towards the books on my nightstand that were a Christmas gift from my parents.

Brian picked up my book and started reading. "Wow, Ash. This is really..." He couldn't quite find the word he was looking for.

"Good? Romantic?" I suggested.

"No, I was thinking more along the lines of girly, but whatever," he said putting my bookmark back in place.

"Hey, it's a great love story. I would think you of all people could appreciate that," I complained.

"I don't have to read what I'm living," he said pulling me closer.

I heard the buzzer from the dryer go off several times, but didn't really care to stop what we were doing to take care of the clothes. It wasn't until my parents opened the front door did I realize how long we had been lost in our own little world. We both immediately jumped up from the bed,

smoothing our clothes and hair. Brian was amused, of course, but I was frantic. I grabbed my suitcase and barely got it open and on my bed with a few things in it before Mom came to my door, which was wide open.

“We’re home, Ash. Hello Brian.” She did a good job of not reacting to Brian being in my room.

“Hello, Mrs. Taylor. I just stopped by for a few minutes to help Ashlyn get ready for the trip.” He was always very polite to my parents. I had to admit he *was* a good actor. It hadn’t even been a minute since we were passionately embraced on my bed and he’d managed to pull himself together enough to act completely normal.

I, on the other hand, wasn’t quite ready to speak. I was still a little out of breath from kissing him and from panicking about them coming home suddenly.

Mom eyed both of us for a moment and glanced quickly around, looking for any cause to be concerned about finding us in my room, and then said, “Well, you should probably get going soon. It’s almost ten and aren’t you guys supposed to be leaving at six?”

“Mom...” I said in an irritated tone.

“I’m just saying, Ash. You know how you get when you don’t get enough sleep.”

I rolled my eyes at her and she took the hint and left us alone. As she left, Brian started looking for his keys in his pocket. “Looking for these?” I asked, picking up his keys from under the bed.

“How’d they end up there?” he asked innocently with a smile.

“You don’t have to go,” I said with a pleading voice, handing him his keys.

“I think it would probably be best. I’m not sure I can stay away from you right now and I don’t think your parents would be too excited about letting you go with me tomorrow if they had any idea what I’m trying not to do with you right now,” he said with a mischievous smile. “Will you walk with me out to the Jeep?”

“Of course,” I smiled and grabbed his hand.

“Good night Mrs. Taylor, Mr. Taylor,” he said as we walked to the front door.

As soon as we were on the driver’s side of his vehicle, the side out of view of the front window, he leaned against the cool metal and pulled me close to keep me warm. “It’s going to be a great trip, trust me.”

“I do,” I said, looking longingly into his eyes. In the dark, it was impossible to see the depth of them, but as I closed my eyes, I could see them clearly.

We kissed for another minute and he let go of me so I could go back inside before I froze. “I’ll see you soon, Ash.”

“Good night, Brian. I love you.” I walked towards the house and waved to him as he drove away.

Mom and Dad were already in bed when I got back inside. “Good night,” I said as I passed by their bedroom door, carrying my warm clothes from the dryer.

“Ash?” Mom said from the dark.

I cringed and walked back to their door. “Yes Mom?”

“Please don’t give us a reason not to trust you,” she warned.

“You don’t have anything to worry about. I promise.”

“Good night, sweetheart,” she said and I walked away.

It only took me half an hour to pack. Then I made a quick list of things I’d need to grab in the morning and went to sleep.

I had especially restless sleep. At one point after waking from a nightmare, I jumped out of bed and turned on the light to make sure everything was in its place. I squinted at the sudden brightness in my room and found the picture of Brian and me on my dresser. I put it under my pillow and fell back asleep with the lights on.

It was five-oh-nine when Dad came in to wake me up. "Forgot to set your alarm?"

I nodded and sat up in bed. "Thanks, Dad," I said sleepily, rubbing my eyes.

I felt like a zombie as I showered. When I was done, I got dressed and headed to the kitchen for a quick breakfast and Dr. Pepper. I had woken up a little bit by the time I was done with my toast and soda and rushed to gather my last minute items to pack before the Turners arrived.

At six-oh-seven their blue Suburban pulled up to my house. Brian jogged towards the door to get my suitcase. I quickly kissed my parents goodbye and followed Brian back to the truck. His parents had gotten out to talk to my parents and exchange numbers. We climbed in the Suburban and crawled past Stephanie and Michael. Both were listening to their MP3 players and didn't even glance up at us as we moved to the very back seat. I waved to my parents once more as we drove away.

As soon as we were on the highway driving, I breathed a sigh of relief and leaned against Brian's arm.

"Good morning," he whispered and kissed the top of my head. "Did you sleep well?"

I sighed. "Not really. I had a bad dream about someone breaking into my house," I admitted.

"That's probably my fault, isn't it?" he asked.

"Most likely," I agreed and snuggled closer to him. He was so warm and smelled so good. I wasn't sorry we had a two hour drive ahead of us. I could see his dad checking on us frequently in the rear view mirror so I had to mentally restrain myself from attacking Brian, which seemed like a daunting task.

His parents tried to make small talk, but it was too difficult and annoying to shout between the front and back of the vehicle. So Brian took his MP3 player out of his backpack and offered it to me. I was about to decline because I had mine with me, but I noticed he had a headphone splitter in the top so we could both listen to the same music. I got my headphones out of my purse and plugged in. With Brian's arms wrapped around me, I snuggled against his chest and closed my eyes.

I awoke and sat upright as we pulled into the snowy parking lot at the ski resort. My neck was sore, but I felt rested and ready to take on anything... until Brian's parents opened their doors to get out. A brisk breeze swept through the vehicle and I shivered. Brian laughed at me, "We need to thicken up your blood a little, Ash. It's going to get a lot colder at night." He wrapped himself around me and rubbed my arms.

"Or we could just stay like this the whole trip," I said smiling at him.

"Yuck, you two. Could you *please* try to control yourselves? There are only so many places we can escape from you," Stephanie said, rolling her eyes in disgust.

Michael seemed to ignore the whole thing. He took off his headphones and turned to talk to Brian. "How many runs do you think we can get in today?"

"It depends. Are you going to help me teach Ashlyn to snowboard or are you going to go ahead of me?"

Michael groaned. "Catch up with me later." He picked up his stuff and left the vehicle. It was well timed because Brian's parents were walking out with the keys to the cabin and handed one to him. He walked towards it with his backpack and snowboard in hand.

"Why don't you go down a few times with him before my lessons start," I suggested. "Besides, I want to get my stuff unpacked and put on warmer clothes before I try to learn to not break my neck out there."

"You're the best," Brian said and gave me an enthusiastic kiss before he took off after Michael.

Stephanie and I started unloading the truck with her parents. On the way to the cabin, Brian came running towards us decked out in his snowboarding gear. "Wow," I whispered as I looked at him adoringly. He just smiled and took my suitcase and a box of food I was carrying.

The cabin felt very cozy. There was a great room that included couches, a TV, and the kitchen. On the wall adjacent to the TV was a huge fireplace, already lit. To the left of the great room was a door leading to a bedroom. On the right side of the room, there was another identical room. Branching off from the kitchen was a small laundry room and a half bath. The master bedroom was the only thing upstairs.

When we were all in the warm cabin, Brian's mom went over the rules. "I need everyone to listen carefully. There will be absolutely no going in each others' rooms. This means boys only in the boys' room and girls in the girls' room. And no one in our room," she said gesturing towards her husband. "We will be in and out of this cabin all day, so if you don't want us to see what you're doing, then don't do it here." She made a point to look a little longer at Brian and me. I felt myself blush, but she quickly continued. "We want everyone off the mountain when it closes; don't try to hide from the ski patrol to try to get to stay out longer." This was directed specifically towards Brian and Michael. "Please remember that we are not as young as you and will be in bed early. So if you decide to stay up late, keep the volume at a respectful level. There's a TV with satellite, movies and a DVD player, and games to keep you entertained. I hope I don't have to say anything this trip about not playing in the fireplace." Brian let out a quiet laugh while Michael glared at him. "Finally, if *any* of these rules are broken, I have the number to the student hostel in town and will be more than happy to drop you off there for the rest of the trip. I understand they can always use volunteers to help feed the homeless or pick up trash around town. You are all welcome to help yourself to the food we brought or eat at the lodge. Okay, that's all I have. Have a great time and be safe."

Michael immediately picked up his snowboard and hit Brian's arm, indicating he was ready to go. Brian set my suitcase at my feet and said, "Looks like you're going to have to lug this the rest of the way by yourself." He smiled and brushed a hair out of my way then bent down and gave me a gentle kiss on my lips. "Be back in a little while."

I smiled up at him, "I'll be waiting. Be careful out there." I just stood there watching him, adoring how fantastic he looked even bundled up in all those clothes.

I could feel Stephanie roll her eyes at me as she started walking towards our room. "Our room's over here, Ashlyn. I get the bed by the window."

I obediently followed her to the room that branched off the far left of the great room. It was as large as my parents' master bedroom at home and had its own bathroom, complete with a separate shower and tub, water closet, and double sink. There was a walk-in closet next to the entrance to the bathroom; I think my whole room could have fit in there. Then there were four beds arranged around the living area. Stephanie walked to the one in along the far wall, under the window which looked out at a snow-covered hill and some pine trees. I chose one that was along the wall that separated the closet from the rest of the bedroom - the one farthest away from Stephanie.

I set my MP3 player and book on the nightstand and then started unpacking all my clothes. Stephanie made a noise as she passed by my bed full of clothes on her way to the closet. I grabbed a couple of shirts and joined her in there. "I think I could live in this closet," I said with a little laugh, trying to force small talk.

"The first time we came here, I tried to convince my parents to let me stay in here. I told them no one would notice me in the closet."

"Do you guys come here every year?" I asked.

"We've been coming here since we lived in Chicago. My grandparents loved spending the holidays in the snow, so we'd join them here during our Christmas break. My mom usually flew with us and my dad would join us on Christmas Eve after he got out of work." She was lost in memories of long ago and then snapped back to the present. "Brian and I would share this room. In fact, he used to sleep in the bed you picked," she said with a hint of a smile. "I've always slept by the window. My parents would sleep in the room the guys are in and my grandparents stayed upstairs. I think my mom was glad

when my grandpa moved away and she got the master bedroom. It was probably good, too, because me and Brian were getting a little too old to be sharing a room."

I finished hanging up my clothes and putting my toiletries away in the bathroom and decided I would get some reading in before Brian returned and made me go snowboarding with him. I was in an especially tense part of the book and nearly dropped it when Stephanie started talking to me again.

"I *loved* that series," she said and came and sat at the foot of my bed. "I think I've read it four times and still get tingly all over during the romantic parts." She sighed happily.

"This is my first time through it; I just got it for Christmas. But I can't seem to put it down. Brian tried reading one of the pages last night and said it was too girly," I frowned.

"Yeah, well he's a guy and isn't supposed to like reading this stuff. He's just supposed to know he should *act* like the guys in it." She smiled at me for probably the first time since I'd known her. "Hey, I'm going to head over to the lodge to check out the guys. Do you want to come with me?"

"No, I think I'll just stay here and read some more." I tried to hide the shock in my voice.

"Okay, suit yourself, but you're missing out on some really hot guys."

"Thanks for inviting me, Stephanie," I said in my most sincere voice.

She touched up her hair and makeup in the bathroom and then left for the main lodge. I got comfortable on the bed again and resumed reading until I heard the door of the cabin open.

"Ash, we're back," Brian called. There was a knock on the bedroom door and I jumped up to meet him before he entered in and got us both in trouble. I didn't have any doubts that Mrs. Turner was serious about taking us to the hostel.

Michael was getting settled in his room. "That was fast. Did you break something?" I teased as I wrapped my arms around his waist and gave him a big hug. He was still cold from being outside and it made me shiver.

He laughed. "I hope you brought warmer clothes or you're gonna freeze out there." He was enjoying my aversion to the cold a little too much. "And it's lunchtime already. We've been on the slopes for over three hours. Have you been sitting in there the entire time?"

"Good book," I muttered as he put his cold hands on my face and gave me a kiss.

Stephanie came in during the middle of our embrace and cleared her throat. "You guys may not care if anyone walks in on you doing that, but I could do without it."

"Sorry, Steph," Brian said, but smiled at me. "I need to take some of these clothes off. It's so hot in here." He winked at me, set his jacket by the fire, and walked into his room as Michael walked out.

"Any luck finding a date for New Year's at the lodge?" Michael asked Stephanie.

She made a sour face. "No, but I still have the rest of today and all tomorrow. How'd you do?"

Michael grinned, glancing over at me, "We ran into these two blonde girls on the top of the mountain. They were visiting from Utah and ended up boarding down with us a few times. When we started back here, one gave Brian her cell number and told him to call them when we were heading back to the slopes."

Stephanie laughed. "Figures," she said. "He always seems to get the snow bunnies chasing after him. He must be a really good snowboarder."

I felt the irritation flare inside me, so I quickly moved into the kitchen to make a sandwich without looking at either of them. I had to open a number of cabinets before I found the bread and another few to find a plate, all the while slamming them closed. I didn't mean to get so emotional; Michael was obviously trying to get a reaction out of me, but I couldn't help it. I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of seeing me so upset, so roughing up the cabinets was the only way I could release some of my anger.

I overheard Stephanie talking to Michael, who was now sitting on the couch flipping through the channels on the TV. "That wasn't nice, Michael."

Brian came back into the room right as I slammed the fridge door closed. "What's all the noise about?" he asked.

"Ask Michael," Stephanie said.

"What?" he said innocently. "I was just telling Stephanie about those girls on the mountain. And now I'm trying to find something to enjoy on TV, but it's a little loud in here." He threw me a look and then went back to flipping channels.

"You can be such an ass, Michael," Brian said, throwing a wet glove at him and joined me in the kitchen.

"Don't let him get to you. He's just trying to get you mad at me so he'll get to spend more time with me."

I was still moving frantically around the kitchen during his explanation. With my back to him, I started cutting my sandwich with the sharp knife I had used to cut my tomato, making a loud clanking noise when the metal blade hit the dish. He came up behind me and put his hands on my arms. "Put the knife down and talk to me, please," he said softly, kissing the top of my head.

"Are you going to call them to go snowboarding with you later?" I said shamefully as I turned to face him.

"Even if I wasn't already spending the rest of the day with you, I wouldn't call them." He ran his warm hand down my cheek which seemed to melt away some of my anger. "I couldn't even tell you what they looked like; I just kept thinking about our lessons this afternoon and trying to envision you in a cute little snowboarding outfit." He tried to conceal his smile.

I wrapped myself around his waist and buried my head in his chest. I could hear Michael laughing in the background, but I wasn't sure if it was me or something on the TV. "Try to ignore him. I know I do."

I managed a half-hearted laugh. "Sorry."

"Silly Ash, you didn't do anything wrong. I'm sorry I didn't just tell you about those girls. Then you would've been able to just roll your eyes at him."

"You know, I don't have a cute little outfit for snowboarding. I just figured I'd wear my jeans," I admitted, trying to change the topic.

"You can't wear jeans out there, unless you plan to never fall down." He was slightly horrified. "Hey, Steph," he called, motioning her to come closer, probably to avoid giving Michael anything else to tease me about. When she was in the kitchen, he asked her quietly, "Are you planning on skiing this afternoon?"

"No," she said immediately. "I still have to find a date for the party."

"Do you think Ash borrow your ski pants?"

She looked at me for a moment and said, "They'll probably be a little long, but sure, she can wear them. Come with me, Ash, and we'll see if we can make something work."

I saw Brian mouth "thank you" to her as she led me back into our bedroom and closed the door. When we were in the closet, I could hear Brian talking angrily to Michael.

I was listening hard to try to catch some of the exchange when Stephanie touched my arm and said with a little smile, "Michael's almost as protective of Brian as I am. They're really more like brothers; he's an only child and his parents are always working or out at bars. So he usually spends a lot of time with our family."

"And I've ruined that, haven't I?" I said, suddenly understanding his coldness towards me.

"I wouldn't say 'ruined', but he definitely has had to find other things to do to occupy his time over the last couple of months," she said.

"I never meant to..." I started, but was quickly interrupted.

"You don't have to apologize, Ash. Michael just needs a girlfriend. Besides, you seem to be the best thing to ever happen to my brother. And as much as I may not like having to share him with you, I

can see that you are really special to him.” She paused for a moment, trying to decide if she was going to continue. “I’ve never seen him spend so much time picking out clothes to bring on a trip as he did packing for this trip. He started packing as soon as his laundry was done from our trip to Montana. Don’t tell him I told you that,” she added laughing.

“Thank you, Stephanie,” I said smiling at her.

“You can call me Steph, you know. It’s what my friends call me.”

“Thanks, Steph.”

She helped me into her very long silver and purple ski pants. “With your snowboard boots on, they should fit just fine.”

“Now, which top should I wear?” I asked mostly to myself.

Steph took over dressing me, thankfully; I wouldn’t have known to dress in so many layers. She even took the opportunity to braid my hair real quick so it stuck out from under my ski hat in a cute, well managed way. “There,” she said, pleased with the end result. “Be prepared for him to run into a couple of trees out there; he’s not going to be able to keep his eyes off you.”

I giggled and gave her a hug. “Thank you again, Steph.”

She smiled and said, “Wait here. Let me make sure he’s ready to go before you let him see you.”

I heard her telling Brian to grab his stuff because I was ready to go. I was admiring my image in the mirror, trying to remember how I’d ever gotten to this place. What a crazy turn my life had taken over the past couple of months. I was abruptly brought back to the present when Stephanie knocked and stuck her head in. “He’s ready for you.”

I took one last glance in the mirror and went out to the great room. Pausing at the doorway, I took a deep breath and stepped out to where he could see me. All the awkwardness I felt wearing clothes that were too large disappeared when I saw Brian looking at me.

“You look like you belong on the slopes, Ash,” he managed to say with a huge smile on his face.

Michael made a grunting noise from the couch and Stephanie threw a pillow at him along with a warning glance.

Brian and I were quickly out the door and hiking towards the lodge so I could rent a snowboard. Before we reached the end of the wooded area, but we were out of sight of any of the cabins, he pulled me over to a tree and kissed me so passionately, I thought we were going to melt the snow. “I’ve been waiting all day to do that,” he admitted.

I could feel the sharp contrast between my glowing warm face and the chilly afternoon air, which made the moment more intense. “I think I’ve been waiting my whole life for that,” I said shyly, realizing it was another one of those cheesy things I couldn’t stop myself from saying around him.

He laughed musically and pulled me in for another few minutes of kissing. “If we don’t go soon, the slopes are going to close before I have a chance to teach you anything.”

“Mmmm...” I said. “Then my plan is working perfectly.”

Brian picked me up in his arms and carried me to the lodge. “You can’t get out of this that easily,” he said playfully, kissing me again.

After I got my gear, we went to the bunny hills, where he attempted to teach me everything about snowboarding. When we finally got to the practical part of the lesson, I didn’t think I would have any problems; it had sounded so easy when he’d explained it. But naturally, I fell before I’d gone three feet. The bunny hills were slick and hard, so by the time I made it down once, my behind had had more than enough of snowboarding.

“I think I’m bruised,” I complained rubbing my butt.

“The mountain runs are much easier because they aren’t so slippery. Do you think you’re up to try those?” he asked.

“Sure.”

Brian was right about the slopes being easier than the bunny hills, but I still wasn't good. I fell trying to get off the ski lift and they had to stop it while I crawled out of the way. And after going down three times, I had had enough falling. "Can we go to the lodge and get something to eat?" I asked as we reached the bottom of the hill.

He smiled brightly at me. "You're a trooper, Ash. I thought you would've given up after that first run. You did really well." He helped me out of the bindings and carried both our boards to the lodge, where we left them outside.

We had hot chocolate and soup at the lodge and then decided to walk around the area for awhile. Brian wrapped his arm around me, holding me close to his body to keep me warm. As we rounded the corner of the building, bringing us back around to the entrance to the lodge, Brian pulled me closer and kissed me like we were alone in his room.

Breathless, I said, "What was that for? That's just something you usually reserve for our more private moments."

He laughed softly. "You inspire me. And I just wanted everyone who might have been looking to know exactly how we feel about each other."

"I hope you let people know more often how we feel about each other." I decided to play along. However, I started noticing a cold sensation in my boots. "But maybe we could head back to the cabin so I could defrost my feet."

"You're such a wimp," he said and pulled me to his side as we walked back to the snowboards. "So do you want to go on any more runs today or are you done?"

"Honestly, I think I'm done. My butt's pretty sore."

We returned my equipment to the rental place and walked back towards the cabin. By the time we got there, the rest of the family was leaving; Mr. and Mrs. Turner were going to ski some more before the mountain closed and Michael and Stephanie were going to the lodge.

Brian and I tried to behave in the empty cabin and watch a movie, but no matter the number of times we separated ourselves, we always ended right back together. Finally towards the end of the movie we decided to rub each others' feet. Not even a minute later he was on top of me. We remained this way until Stephanie and Michael came through the door.

Stephanie cleared her throat as she noticed us entwined on the couch.

"Hi, Steph," Brian mumbled, still kissing me.

"You might want to knock it off; Mom and Dad are like thirty seconds behind us."

We both quickly sat up and tried to look natural sitting on the couch watching a movie. The credits were running, so Brian found the remote in the cushions and flipped it back to the TV. Stephanie came and sat on the other couch.

By the time his parents entered the cabin, we looked almost normal sitting there on the couch, watching the news except I couldn't take my eyes off Brian. He was doing a good job of trying to look interested in the news story on TV, but I knew his thoughts were somewhere else when he glanced down at me and smiled.

The next news story brought reality crashing down on me.

"And in other news, local police are looking for a man who they believe is connected to several unsolved cases. Detective John Olson had the following to say:

'We have credible information that places Rick Thompson in the immediate vicinity of eleven year old Sasha Murphy in October prior to her kidnapping. Rick is also a person of interest in the death of his father two years ago and a number of other heinous crimes. If you have any information that can assist with this case, please contact your local police department.'

I felt all the blood drain from my face. If Rick saw this story, he would know that it could have only been me that was the credible source; I was the only one he couldn't hide from. My head suddenly

started to throb with pain. I had to get out of the room, which felt much hotter than it had when Brian and I were in the heat of the moment.

I struggled to stand up from the couch and fell back down on my first attempt. Brian obviously felt me tense up prior to standing up, so he knew there was something wrong. He helped me to my feet and steadied me while I tried to find a way to escape the room.

"I have to get out of here," I whispered to him, rubbing my head.

"Where do you want to go?" he asked in the same hushed voice.

"I... I don't know," I barely managed and he started to walk me into my room.

"Where do you think you two are going?" Mrs. Turner said as he continued to help me into the bedroom.

"Ash has a bad headache. I was just trying to help her to her room," he said.

"It's probably just the altitude," I said, wincing as every movement hurt my head.

Stephanie jumped in to help. "I'll take her," she said to Brian and walked with me the rest of the way into our room and closed the door, leaving Brian standing there looking helpless.

After she helped me into the bathroom and started the shower, she said, "What's going on? I know this is something more than altitude sickness. I saw your face when that story came on the news." She was just as perceptive as Brian.

I didn't know what to tell her, but it surely wasn't going to be the truth. "I ate lunch at the lodge. I think I must've had something that didn't sit well and it just caught up with me." I could barely think with the pain in my head, but wanted to help defuse the situation to get her to stop quizzing me. "Could you get me three aspirin and a Dr. Pepper? Maybe the caffeine, aspirin, and shower combo will help," I said forcing a smile.

"Sure," she said with a worried look on her face.

I sat on the bathroom floor until she quickly returned with the items. Brian must've anticipated what I would want and had them waiting for her to retrieve at the door.

"He wants to know if there's anything else he can do," she said, handing me the things.

"Tell him not to worry. I'll be fine after I shower."

She left to deliver the message and I undressed and got in the shower. The hot water helped relax me a little, but the pain in my head was still unbearable. I slumped down to the floor in the shower and stayed until the water temperature was too cool to be comfortable anymore.

As soon as I shut the water off, Stephanie and Mrs. Turner were in the bathroom with me. Stephanie handed me a towel so I could wrap myself up before stepping out of the shower.

"Are you feeling any better, sweetheart?" Mrs. Turner's voice was kind and concerned.

"A little, but I think I'm going to lay down for awhile." My head really wasn't any better.

"Steph, go get a bottle of water and some crackers for Ashlyn." After Stephanie left, Mrs. Turner took the opportunity to speak to me privately. "Brian really cares about you. I hope I don't need to tell you to not let things get carried away. "

The blood that left my face on the couch suddenly and painfully came rushing back. I didn't want to have this conversation with my own mom, and it was a thousand times worse Mrs. Turner. I simply nodded.

"I don't want to see either of you get hurt," she continued. "And I know things are getting pretty serious."

Before I had to find something to say in response, Stephanie returned with the items and handed them to me. She looked at her mom and then at me and seemed to know the details of the conversation that had just occurred.

"Mom, leave her alone. She's obviously not feeling well, so this may not be the best time for one of your lectures."

Her mom heeded the advice and left the room. “Thanks,” I said as I walked into the closet to get some sweat pants and a warm shirt to wear.

“You should just go to bed, Ash. You look terrible.”

“Could you do me a favor?” I asked before I moved towards the bed. “Could you get Brian to come to the door for a moment? I just want him to know I’m okay so he isn’t worrying all night.”

She nodded and left the room. I took a drink of water and staggered to the door. I heard a soft knock and knew it was Brian.

“Hi,” I said softly and reached up to smooth out his worried forehead.

“Are you going to be okay? What happened back there?”

I put my finger on his lips and he kissed it. I was able to smile and say, “I’m going to be fine. I’m already feeling much better with you here. But I think I’m going to get some rest to try to get rid of this headache.”

“I could massage your head and neck, if that would help?”

He sounded desperate to help me, so I reluctantly agreed. “Maybe for a few minutes.”

He smiled and said, “You look beautiful, you know.”

“You’re lying,” I said, but returned his smile and took his hand.

Everyone left us alone as we sat down on the couch and he rubbed my head and neck. After a few minutes of massaging, I felt a little better, but was completely exhausted. He noticed my body relaxing and bent over to whisper in my ear, “Do you think you could use your gift and tell me what’s going on?”

I shook my head. Even though I was feeling better, the pain in my head was still constant, almost as bad as the migraines I got long ago. I wouldn’t even consider trying to use my gift unless it was absolutely necessary. “I promise I’ll tell you everything later. I need to go lay down now. The lights are starting to hurt my eyes and I don’t want everyone tip toeing around the cabin.”

He wrapped his arms around me and kissed the side of my head. “I’ll see you a little while,” he whispered in my ear.

“I love you,” I whispered back and kissed his cheek before walking into my room and laying down on my bed. Before I fell asleep, I breathed deeply, imagining I could still smell Brian on the bed linens.

It was very dark and I could hear strange noises outside when I awoke. I was completely disoriented and started looking around for anything familiar when a warm hand touched my arm.

“Shhhh,” I heard. “It’s me, Ash.” I breathed a sigh of relief. It was Brian. Everything came flooding back to me, including my headache from earlier.

“I don’t think you’re supposed to be in here,” I said quietly.

“I think I’m exactly where I should’ve been all night. How are you feeling?”

My eyes were starting to focus and I could see his face close to mine in the dark. I reached up and touched his cheek. “Much better,” I said happily.

“Can you tell me what happened earlier? It was more than just remembering that girl, wasn’t it?” he leaned down and whispered.

I was enjoying feeling his breath on my neck and couldn’t help but kiss his neck under his ear. “The news story... the cop... he told Rick it was me who got the police on his trail.” I was struggling to form complete sentences.

“Calm down, Ash. He just said ‘a credible source’; he didn’t mention your name or anything.”

“Who is the only person he knows that he can’t hide from? He saw me see him at the mall that day. If he watched the news or picked up a newspaper, he knows what I did, even though I didn’t necessary intend to do it.”

“But he knew you could see him before. The cops still won’t be able to find him. So how does this change anything?”

I was worried that we might wake someone up, so I moved closer to him again. “I’m becoming more of a threat to him.” I paused to try to choke hold back my emotions. “Which means anyone that’s close to me is a target.” I ran my fingers through his hair and down his cheek. “I shouldn’t be here. I’m putting everyone you care about in danger.”

He rested his forehead against mine and breathed deeply. “You’re safe with me. And I know the rest of my family is safe, too. He’s not coming for you; he doesn’t even know you’re here. When we get back, we’ll lay low and figure out how we can help the police catch him.”

Every part of me wanted to believe him, wanted to feel like I wasn’t a magnet for something bad that was about to happen, but my brain couldn’t let go of it. I didn’t want to ruin everyone’s trip, either, so I allowed myself to tuck it away. I had to believe that Brian was right and he wasn’t going to track me this moment. “Thank you,” I finally said. “How much longer do you think you can stay here?”

“As long as you need me,” he said and laid down next to me, wrapping his arms around me at the same time as Stephanie stirred and mumbled in her sleep. “Maybe I should get back to my room before we’re caught,” he said, but didn’t move.

I rolled over so we were facing each other, our lips almost touching. The closeness was intoxicating; I didn’t know how I was going to let him go. “You’re probably right,” I said, kissing him gently as I spoke.

“You’re making this difficult,” he said and rolled over on top of me, kissing me with elevated excitement.

Stephanie stirred again, which signaled the end of our embrace. “I’ll see you in the morning,” I whispered and kissed him all the way down his neck.

“Sweet dreams, Ash. I’m glad you’re feeling better.” He got off me and started to walk quietly out of the room when he turned around and whispered loudly, “You should put on those silky pajamas,” and closed the door.

When I was unpacking, I noticed them in my suitcase. He must’ve thrown them in when I wasn’t looking. I smiled and immediately got up and changed into them. “*Good night*,” I said with my gift, as a final way to let him know I was okay.

Chapter Twelve – Misunderstanding

The next time I opened my eyes, it was morning. My head was completely better and I was excited to see Brian again. There had only been that one morning after our failed double date that I got to wake up and see him immediately. I jumped out of bed, noticing Stephanie was already awake and out of the room. I quickly went into the bathroom to brush my teeth and comb my hair. I grabbed my robe and slippers out of the closet then joined the family out to the great room.

By the end of breakfast, I was ready for a nap. “Ugh. Food coma,” I complained as Brian and I headed for the couch to watch some TV while Michael showered. Brian was going back out to the mountain with Michael for the day.

“You didn’t have to eat that much,” he said laughing and poked my belly.

“I couldn’t help it. It was really good.”

“So, what are you going to do today?” he asked, laughing at me.

“I’ll probably read for a bit; I’m getting close to being done with the second book. But I saw they had an ice rink at the lodge, so I might go ice skating instead.”

“Ice skating? Really? I find it hard to believe you can ice skate when you had so many problems with snowboarding.”

“You should come with me. I’m actually pretty good,” I boasted, trying to goad him into spending the day with me.

“I think I’ll stick to the snow; it doesn’t hurt as much.”

I pretended to pout as a last ditch effort to get him to spend the day with me, but it didn’t have any affect. “You’re still going to be my New Year’s date tonight, right?”

“Of course. I’m looking forward to it,” I said just as Michael was emerging from the bedroom.

Brian and I stood up together, like we were connected by an invisible cord. “Are you finally ready?” he asked Michael.

“Yeah, let’s get going before the lift line gets too long. You have your phone, right?” Michael looked at me when he asked this of Brian.

Brian ignored his comment and turned to me. “I’ll see you for lunch, right?”

“I’ll be here,” I smiled and stood on my tip toes to kiss him goodbye. He had to bend way down to kiss me because of the exaggerated height difference caused by his boots. “Be careful,” I whispered to him before he left my side.

“I will. I love you, Ash. Try to have fun,” he said and left with Michael, snowboards in hand.

Everyone else was gone, too; Stephanie was still looking for a date for the party and Mr. and Mrs. Turner left earlier to meet some friends and go skiing. The cabin seemed too quiet, so I decided to get dressed and go to the lodge.

It was ten o’clock when I left the cabin. Even though I was looking forward to ice skating, I couldn’t wait to see Brian at lunch, which we decided would be around one thirty.

I skated for a couple of hours until I could feel the blisters on my feet with every glide. As I made my way around the last half of the circle, some boys raced by chasing each other. As I rounded the last corner, one of the boys clipped me and I went flying through the air.

I awoke with strange faces peering over me and could feel pain in my head and coldness throughout my body. Instinctively, I reached up with my gloved hand to palpate the injury. I was startled when my hand came with red liquid on it.

I moved to get up, but I someone forced me back down. “We’re getting the medical staff to come. Just stay calm and lie down.”

I did as I was instructed, but I started shivering uncontrollably. “She needs to get off the ice before she freezes,” I heard a male voice say a moment before I was lifted up and carried to the bleachers.

“Thank you,” I said to the person who rescued me. My head was still throbbing with pain, but I could feel warmth returning to my body.

The medics arrived and took my vitals while asking me a million questions. I refused to be taken to the infirmary for treatment, so after checking my pupils one more time and making sure my head wound closed up on its own and wouldn't require stitches, they released me with strict instructions.

The bystanders had taken off my skates and put my boots back on while I was being worked on. But when I decided I was feeling okay enough to walk back to the cabin and stood up to leave, I almost fell down.

“Woah there, Ashlyn.” I didn't recognize the person who called me by my name and grabbed my arm to steady me.

“Thank you. I'm okay, really. My cabin isn't far away. I'll be fine.”

“You may think so, but if I were to let you go and you passed out in the snow, it might be days before someone found you and I'd feel really bad about not walking you there,” he said as he steadied me. “My name is Scott, by the way.” He was around my age, tall like Brian with shorter light brown hair.

“Thank you, Scott. I'm sure I'll make it just fine. I wouldn't want you to have to interrupt your plans for me.” I really just wanted to call Brian to come and take me back to the cabin.

“Well, too bad. I carried you off the ice and I'll carry you to your cabin if I have to,” he insisted. I sighed with resignation and allowed him to walk with me.

When we reached the cabin, I could see Stephanie inside and waved at her. As she opened the door, I turned to Scott to thank him, but suddenly the world spun and I landed on the ground.

“What happened to her,” I heard Stephanie ask.

“She got knocked silly by some kids skating. She's got a pretty big bump on her head and probably a concussion, too. Let me carry her inside and we can call the medics,” he explained to Stephanie.

“No,” I groaned. “I'm fine,” I tried to explain, but I was already up in Scott's arms being carried to the couch.

As soon as Scott had set me down on the couch, I heard Brian and Michael enter the cabin.

“What's going on here,” Brian said, with a hint of anger in his voice.

“Ashlyn got hurt skating and I was just bringing her back,” Scott explained.

“You can leave now,” he said rudely to Scott.

“Thank you,” I managed to say to Scott as he left without hesitation.

“What happened?” Brian asked as he knelt beside me.

“I'm not real sure. I was getting ready to be done skating one minute and the next I was laying on the ice bleeding. Scott was just trying to help me back here, you didn't have to be so rude to him,” I lectured.

“He didn't have to carry you to the couch, did he? Why didn't you call me? You knew I had my phone.” He was visibly upset by the situation, but my head hurt too much to explain things any better.

“I didn't want to bother you on the mountain. There were so many people around me and I didn't think I even needed help until I couldn't stand up to walk back here.”

For the first time, he got really mad at me. “So what, did you just pick the most attractive guy walking by and use your gift on him to make him carry you all the way here?”

I froze. I couldn't believe what happened and I didn't care how much my head hurt or if I was even going to be able to walk. I stood up and slapped him on the face and stormed out of the room with hot tears streaming down my face. Somehow I managed to make it all the way to my bed before I collapsed from a combination of dizziness and horror and cried uncontrollably in my pillow.

In another part of the cabin, I heard something hit the wall and a couple of doors slam and then it was eerily quiet. A short time later, Stephanie came in and sat on my bed, rubbing my back. "It's gonna be okay, Ash. I don't know what got into him back there, but he'll cool off."

"I'm not sure it will be okay, Steph," I managed to say through the sobs. The one person I had trusted with everything blew it all in a moment of anger. He was the one person in this world that I needed more than anything else and now he was gone. How could it get better?

I wasn't sure how long it took, but eventually I calmed down enough to sit up in my bed. Stephanie was still there, trying to comfort me. "Thanks," I said in-between hiccups.

She rubbed my arm and then took my hand. "What did he mean back there about 'using your gift'?"

As much as I wanted to disappear, I decided to tell her the truth. "Do you remember at Homecoming when you went to get Brian because I needed help on the dance floor?"

"Yeah, I remember," she said hesitantly.

"Did you ever wonder why you felt the need to get him?"

"I never really thought too much about it. It just felt like something I needed to do." She was eyeing me suspiciously.

"I told you to get him," I said quietly.

Her eyebrows scrunched together as she tried to process what I had said. "I don't understand," she eventually admitted.

I took a deep breath and began. "I have a gift that I can tell people to do things, kinda like their subconscious is talking to them. At the dance, I needed Brian to come and rescue me from Jason, but I didn't know where he was or if he'd make it back in time to stop Jason from doing whatever he was about to do in his drunken stupor. I saw you sitting in the bleachers and told you to go get him."

"I remember," she finally said. "It *was* your voice, wasn't it?"

I nodded. "Brian is the only person I've ever told about my gift. Well, until now. Now you are the second one to know. And Michael's probably the third, if he started asking Brian questions."

"How long have you had this gift?" she asked, still trying to wrap her brain around it.

"I discovered it when I was three."

"Wow. And you've never told *anyone*? Not even your parents?"

"No one would believe me and I probably would have been committed to a mental institution if I had said anything." I shrugged indifferently.

Despite the improbable explanation, Stephanie seemed to believe me, just like Brian had. I spent a good portion of the afternoon explaining everything to her in detail.

"That news story yesterday, that had something to do with you, didn't it? You were the 'credible source'." She was uncannily perceptive and able to piece everything together as well as Brian. "I overheard you and Brian talking in here last night," she admitted.

"Yes. I guess you could say that Rick is my nemesis or something. He seems to be able to escape right from underneath everyone else's detection but mine."

"That's really freaky, Ash. I don't know how you did it all these years by yourself."

"I didn't do it well," I admitted. "Brian seemed to have brought out the best in me in all areas of my life, including my gift. But now..." I trailed off, not wanting to think about what was going to happen.

Stephanie hugged me tight and then held me by my shoulders and looked me in the eyes. "He's not going anywhere, Ash. As soon as he realizes how stupid he acted, he'll be back here apologizing until you have to slap him again."

I laughed a little, but I still didn't feel any better.

"Now, we need to start getting ready for the party tonight. You have to introduce me properly to Scott. He really was hot," she said.

It was nearly six o'clock. "I don't think I'm up for going anywhere. Between my head injury and Brian probably never wanting to see me again, I just don't feel like celebrating."

"Too bad because I'm not letting you sit here all night feeling sorry for yourself." She grabbed my arm and pulled me into the closet to find something to wear. "None of this will do. Why didn't you bring anything to wear to the party?"

I quietly said, "I planned to wear these jeans and this shirt." I motioned to a shirt that I bought while shopping for the double date.

"Those are okay, but aren't going to make anyone look at you and say, 'Wow!'. None of my clothes will fit you well, so we should see if my parents will let us run into town and get you something." She picked up her phone off her nightstand and called her parents.

"Uh huh. Yeah. Okay, we will. Love you! Bye!" She put her phone in her pocket, looking triumphant. "They said we could go, but we have to be back by seven thirty. That should be just enough time. I know the perfect boutique we should go to."

We grabbed our jackets and purses and quickly walked to the parking lot. "It's gonna be alright, Ash. I promise," Stephanie said as we waited for the vehicle to warm up.

"We'll see," I said with a sigh and gazed out the side window. "Can I ask you a favor, Steph?" I asked suddenly, looking directly at her. It was amazing how much her eyes reminded me of Brian's.

"Sure, anything, Ash."

I fidgeted a little. "You know that thing about my gift?"

She nodded, but didn't say anything.

"Well, if you don't mind, could you not tell anyone about it? I really don't want to draw attention to myself and I'm afraid that if people knew, I'd be treated like a bigger freak than I already am," I said, half smirking at the last part.

"Of course I won't say anything," she said sounding a little offended.

"I didn't think you would, but I had to ask." Someone else had also agreed to never reveal my secret and that promise went out the window today. I wasn't sure if I would ever truly be able to trust anyone again. But I didn't have much of a choice at this point; I had to do what I could to minimize the damage that had already been done.

"Thank you," I whispered and returned to staring out the window. As she pulled out of the parking lot, I saw Michael and Brian walking back to the cabin. Brian looked up as we drove away and I wondered what he was thinking about.

The trip to the store took us just over an hour; we barely got back with our dresses in time to get the approving nod from Stephanie's parents. I was feeling better and was relieved that Brian and Michael weren't around. Stephanie and I grabbed a quick bite to eat and then disappeared into the bedroom to get ready. She insisted on doing my hair and makeup for me.

When she was done, I went into the closet to put my boots on. They made me a little sad and I was grateful that Stephanie thought to use waterproof mascara; I was sure I was going to be crying on and off all night. I walked into the bathroom briefly looking at myself in the mirror and grabbed some tissues to put in my purse. By the time I was done, Stephanie had her hair and makeup done and was slipping on a pair of red heels. "Those guys tonight don't stand a chance. That dress looks like it was made for you."

She smiled brightly. "I know. Have you checked yourself out? You look stunning." I was appreciative that she didn't mention anything about Brian, because I was teetering on the edge of control as it was. "You're going to introduce me to Scott, right? I mean, you owe me for making you look so hot."

I blushed. "Sure. I owe him an apology for earlier, anyway."

Stephanie clapped her hands excitedly and then grabbed her purse. It had taken us awhile to eat and get ready; it was nearly nine o'clock. She was determined to make it to the party with enough time to find a guy to kiss at the first celebration that happened at ten, so we practically ran through the snow with our heels sinking in with every step.

The organizers held a mock New Year's celebration at ten o'clock for the younger kids, complete with a countdown, balloons, streamers, and the traditional singing of "Auld Lang Syne". Apparently it was after this countdown when the real fun began. I figured Stephanie would be too busy with some guy by that point and I'd leave with the little kids.

In the lodge, lights and streamers were draped around every post, the Christmas tree twinkled in the corner, a huge fire raged in the fireplace, and there were sweet holiday scents wafting throughout. The overhead lights were dimmed and they had set up a dance floor in the middle of the room for everyone to move to the live DJ's mix. There were children as young as six all the way up to twenty year olds mingling around. Stephanie immediately began scanning the crowd for a potential date. I stood next to her, feeling awkward and alone. I knew I wasn't going to be a good companion, so I excused myself to sit out the evening by the warm fire.

As soon as I sat down, I closed my eyes and started thinking about how I was going to act when people tried to talk to me. I decided that I would use my gift to "encourage" people to do something other than come up to me. Before I had my plan completely ironed out, someone came and sat next to me on the couch.

"How's the head?" It was Scott. Stephanie was right; he *was* hot.

"Still hurts. The music isn't helping much, either. My friend wanted me come with her tonight, though. Otherwise, I'd be relaxing at the cabin." I didn't feel like being social, *especially* with him. "Hey, I'm really sorry about earlier. I wanted to thank you for being so kind to me and helping me back to my cabin. I probably would have collapsed in the snow, although right now, that doesn't sound like a bad place to be."

"Don't say that. I think it would've been a shame if you hadn't come tonight. You look really great. And I'm sorry if I caused any problems for you earlier. Well, mostly sorry. Could I talk you into dancing with me to at least one song?"

Just as I was about to "suggest" he do something else, Stephanie appeared out of nowhere. "Here you are, Ash. I've been looking for you everywhere!" She pretended that she didn't see Scott.

"Scott, this is my friend Stephanie. Steph, this is Scott, you know, the one that helped me back to the cabin today?" I gave her a little smile.

Scott took her outstretched hand and kissed it. "It's very nice to formally meet you, Stephanie."

She giggled a little; I hadn't seen her lose her composure like that before. "Scott was just inviting me to dance. My head isn't feeling too great, so maybe you could take my place?" I winked at Steph.

"That sounds like a great idea. Stephanie, would you care to dance?" Scott reached for her hand before she even responded and the two of them faded into the crowd heading towards the dance floor. Before they disappeared, Stephanie looked back and mouthed "thank you" to me.

I smiled and settled back into the couch. It wasn't long before another brave soul headed my direction. I diverted them by telling them to go talk to a nervous girl who was standing along the wall close to the fireplace. It seemed to work and soon the two of them were headed off somewhere. I was quite pleased with myself and made a game out of it. There were another five guys who started out towards me but were quickly encouraged to go do something else.

I stopped hoping Brian would show up around nine forty-five and decided that my original plan to escape with the kids after the early celebration was the best idea. As ten o'clock approached, the excitement level grew, as did the volume of the lodge. People all over had paired up and were anticipating the moment when they'd get to kiss their date.

The countdown started and everyone was shouting the numbers. I stood up and quickly walked towards the door, not looking at anyone as I passed by. At "one", I reached to push the door open, when someone from behind me pulled my free arm and I twirled into a pair of strong lips kissing me.

Shocked and scared, I tried to make a noise and get away, but I was completely overpowered and no one would have heard me anyway. So I decided to use my gift to get him to release me; I didn't want to be someone's token girlfriend that they stole a kiss from just to satisfy some immature fantasy. *Let her go*, I told the person.

To my surprise, he told me, "No," and pressed his lips harder against mine.

The lips, the scent, the voice... it was Brian. Wasn't it? Or was it just my mind's way of dealing with a stressful situation? I was careful not to move or kiss back whoever it was until I knew for sure it was Brian.

As people started walking past us out the door, I shivered as the cold air hit my exposed legs. I was suddenly pulled out of the way of the exiting crowd, which ruined my plan to squirm away and disappear with the departing kids. "Are you really that mad at me?" he asked as we stood in a quiet, abandoned side room.

It was Brian. My heart started racing and I didn't know if I should hit him or kiss him. So I did both. I hit him as hard as I could in his chest. It was hard enough for him to say, "Ow!" as I pulled his face towards mine and angrily kissed his lips while hot tears streamed down my face. As soon as I was done kissing him, I turned my back to him and took a few steps to get some distance between us as I wrestled with a flood of emotions.

He walked over and put his hands on my arms from behind. "I'm so sorry, Ash. I know that it may not be enough. I blew it big time, but I'm hoping there is *something* I can do to get you to forgive me and trust me again."

My emotions were choking me. I couldn't say anything and sank to the floor.

Brian sat down next to me and held me in his arms, just letting me cry it out. It felt so good to have him hold me again. As I sat there shaking and hiccupping, the emotions from the events of the day started to fade away. Soon, it was just Brian holding me and that was powerful enough to stop my hysterics and for me to find my voice. "How could you do that?"

Still holding me in his arms he said, "I don't know. I don't know what happened, but when I saw you being held by someone else, I completely lost it. I felt so protective of you that I couldn't control my emotions or my words. I'm so sorry I betrayed you."

I didn't know if I was ready to forgive him, but needed to see what kind of damage control I had to do. "What did Michael say about it?"

"Not much. He didn't really want the details; he just wanted me to acknowledge there was something weird about you and that was good enough for him." Brian shrugged. "Honestly, I think he was just happy that something had come between us. What about Steph?"

"She knows everything," I said flatly.

"I'll talk to her, Ash. She won't say a word to anyone. I promise," he said. But as soon as he said the last two words, I cringed.

"You don't have to talk to her. She knows it's important to keep it to herself. She's being really cool about the whole thing." I explained like it was old news.

He sighed, "Is there anything I can do to make things better?"

"Being here right now is a good start," I said and turned to face him. I touched his face and leaned in so our foreheads were touching. "Did you really think I'd use my gift to get anyone but you to carry me in their arms?"

"I didn't mean it, Ash. I was shocked and scared and jealous all at once and completely lost control. My MP3 player took the brunt of it," he said sounding embarrassed.

"I know how it feels to be jealous. Michael did a good job of working me up yesterday," I reminded him.

"Yeah, but you didn't blurt out any of my deepest secrets in your fit of jealousy," he said. Even as we sat there, I was feeling closer to him again. He reached up and touched the back of my head, which made me flinch. "How are you feeling?"

"I've been better." I told him all about the skating rink and the boys playing tag and being unconscious. "I was so out of it, I could barely find my way back to the cabin. And when I arrived, I passed out again in the snow at front of the door."

"That's when I came in, huh? You probably didn't need a jealous boyfriend screaming at you, did you?"

"No, it definitely didn't help things. I was pretty surprised I was able to stand and walk to my room."

"Yeah, I was pretty surprised when you did that, too," he said and rubbed his face where I had slapped him.

I put my hand over his, rubbing it gently. "Sorry," I said softly.

"Don't be," he said, laughing a little. "I deserved much worse."

"Yeah, you did," I said, suddenly feeling better. I kissed him cautiously, still not sure exactly where everything stood.

"Does this mean we're going to be okay?"

"I think we can probably work everything out in time to enjoy a proper New Year's kiss," I said smiling.

Brian stood up, picked me up in his arms, and kissed me. "Next time you go unconscious, could you please remember how much better it is in my arms?"

"I'll try," I said and kissed him again.

He took my hand and we walked back out to where the party was in full swing. It was nice to see that a lot of the room had cleared and just the older crowd was left. I saw Stephanie on the dance floor still dancing with Scott to the upbeat song the DJ was playing. She caught my eye and gave me the "thumbs up" sign.

Brian picked up the pace a little and swung me around and into his arms just as the DJ started playing a slower song. "You are the most beautiful girl here," he said with awe in his eyes.

"I don't know about that. Did you see how great Steph looked?" I asked and nodded my head in her direction.

He obviously hadn't seen her yet, because he scowled when he saw her slow dancing with Scott. "He couldn't have you so he went after my sister?" he said through his teeth.

I put my hands on his face and made him look at me. "It's what she wanted. Besides, you got me. Isn't that enough?"

"You know it is," he said in resignation.

"Then be with me tonight. There isn't anyone else but us," I said, looking deep in his eyes.

He bent down and kissed me again like there wasn't anyone else around. I think the song ended and we were still embraced, but I didn't want the moment to end. It felt like it had been such a long time since we'd kissed.

My thoughts were broken when he interrupted our kiss to say, "I really like those boots."

I laughed as he took my hand and twirled me around. After dancing for a few more songs, we made our way to the couch by the fireplace where we talked, waiting for the real countdown to begin.

Before long, people were gathering on the dance floor with mounting excitement. "Shall we join them," he stood up and reached for my hand.

"I just want to be with you." I stood up and got lost in his eyes.

We didn't even wait for the countdown before we were locked in a passionate embrace. I knew we reached midnight when the confetti rained down on us and people started blowing annoying horns. But we didn't move until the room had almost cleared.

Finally, I rested my head on his shoulder. I felt like my heart was going to beat out of my chest and Brian's sounded like it might, too. Smiling at the excitement I incited in him, I said, "We should probably head back before they make us help clean up."

"You know, we could fall asleep watching a movie and have an excuse for sleeping together tonight," he suggested, pulling me closer. "And since we're going home tomorrow, I don't think we'd end up in the hostel."

"I'd love that."

He wrapped his arm around me and I walked back to the cabin in utter bliss.

When we entered, the TV was on at a low volume, but the rest of the cabin was dark. We started moving towards the couch, assuming someone had just left the TV on when we heard a low laugh.

"Hold on a sec," Michael said and covered the phone. Talking to us, he said, "Is it midnight already?"

"Yeah, it's almost one. Who are you talking to?" Brian asked.

"Oh, wow. Where did the time go? It's Kara. There was a phone ringing in the cushions of the couch and I thought it was mine, so I answered it."

My mouth dropped open, but no words came out. I was grateful Brian was able to talk, but he didn't ask what I wanted answered. "Do you think we could have the couch? We're gonna stay up and watch a movie."

I wanted to know why the hell my best friend was lost in a conversation with the guy who wanted to break up my relationship with Brian. But before I found my voice, Michael got up and disappeared into his room.

"Just put Ash's phone next to my bed when you're done," Brian called after him in a loud whisper. Then he turned to me, smiling, preparing to lead me to the couch to fall asleep in his arms. "What's wrong?" he asked when he saw the horror on my face.

"You didn't have a problem with that?" I asked.

"No, why should I?"

"They 'lost track of time' talking on New Year's Eve." I was having a hard time comprehending how Brian wasn't catching the significance of it. I put my hands up to my forehead, rubbing it slightly and said, "Kara just had her heart broken and he's been trying to break us up all weekend. This just seems wrong."

Brian wrapped his arms around me and stroked my hair, careful not to touch the bump on the back of my head. "Honestly, I think it's completely innocent. It is probably hard for you to believe, but Michael is really a good guy. He tries to act like he's a bad ass, but really he's just looking for where he fits into this world. It sounds like two lonely people helped each other make it through a tough night." He bent down and kissed my forehead and moved us on to the couch where he took off his shoes and then my boots. "Please, Ash, come back to me. I really want to be with you here right now, holding you as you fall asleep with me."

I sighed and tossed my boots in front of the other couch. "Let me get out of this dress and maybe I'll feel better."

"I don't want to let you go," he said grabbing my hand as I tried to walk away.

"Come with me, then," I said, feeling my mood soften somewhat.

To my surprise, he stood up and started walking with me. "What about Steph? I think she's probably in there sleeping," I said, a little worried.

"We'll just have to be really quiet," he said sounding like a mischievous child.

I smiled and quietly led him into the bedroom, right to the closet where my silky pajamas were hanging up. "Hold on a sec," I said as I walked out of the room to check on Stephanie. She was either sound asleep or pretending to be. I tip toed back to the closet where Brian was waiting patiently. I closed the door behind me and walked over and kissed him. "Will you help me get this off?" I asked seductively.

He smiled softly and slid his hands down my sides, making me shiver with delight. Seemingly pleased with my response, he lifted my dress up, pausing at my waist to kiss me again and then lifted my dress higher. His hands were so warm and strong and I was swooning at his touch on my bare skin. I raised my arms over my head so he could slip the dress off the rest of the way, leaving me standing there almost naked. I was more exposed than I had ever been with him, but I wasn't nervous. He seemed like he was trying to be really careful and not to move too fast or do something that would have led to an uncontrollable moment of passion, but it was getting increasingly difficult for both of us, especially when my bra fell to the floor.

Instinctively, I started unbuttoning his shirt, and we started losing a little more control. I just wanted to feel his bare chest on mine, but he decided we needed to stop. "We can't do this now," he said, grabbing my hands. His face was pained. After a minute, his features looked more resolved and he grabbed my pajama top and slid it on over my head. Reluctantly, I grabbed the bottoms and slipped them on, too. They were cool compared to Brian's hot chest. He lifted my head up and kissed me again. "Don't ask how I did it," he begged. "I am fighting every instinct in my body to try to not take this further right now."

"I know," I said and laid my head on his chest, listening to his heart race. "Maybe we should get out of this closet and go watch that movie," I said, hiding my frustration. I wasn't mad at him; probably grateful that he was able to stop because I didn't think I would have. I came to a sudden realization: to him, our relationship wasn't about how far he could get or what I could do for him. He really loved and respected me. I found myself very humbled in his presence and said, "I forgive you."

We walked together out of the room where we could talk a little louder. "What do you mean? I almost blew it back there and I think you wanted me to. What could I have possibly done to deserve forgiveness?" He was very frustrated.

I put my finger to his lip. "Earlier tonight, you asked if there was anything you could do to make things right again. I think you just did." I took my finger off his lips and looked away from him because I was ashamed to say what I was about to admit to him. "I didn't know if I would ever feel like I could trust you again." I watched him cringe. "I came to the conclusion in there that I was wrong. Not only do I still trust you, I would tell you everything all over again, even if I knew that was going to happen. You told me once that you didn't have super powers, but I know you do or else you couldn't have stopped yourself back there. I shouldn't have let it get to that point; I'm so sorry I caused you pain."

"It was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do, apart from walking away from you at the airport." He sighed and held my head close to his, kissing my hair. "But I'd do it all again in a heartbeat to feel you that close to me." He looked down and smiled at me and we walked together to the couch. He quickly threw a random movie in the player, took his shirt off the rest of the way, and laid down on the couch, motioning me to lay in front of him.

I laid down facing him and shared a couple more kisses before I fell asleep in his arms.

Chapter Thirteen – The New Year

Waking up the next morning in Brian's arms was the perfect start to the New Year. Everyone in the house slept in, so we were able to enjoy a few moments alone before his parents came downstairs. They knew we had been on the couch all night when they saw Brian's shirt on the floor next to my boots. I could tell they weren't pleased, but they didn't say anything.

Stephanie was all smiles when she eventually came out of the room and sat down next to us on the couch. She was practically shaking with excitement to tell me all about her night, but Brian gave her a look that he didn't want to know, so she had to wait until we were packing our suitcases to share.

"Oh, Ash. Last night was so wonderful!" she said in our room after breakfast, while she danced around the room with a handful of shirts. She threw them into her suitcase and pranced over to me. Grabbing my arms, she spun me and gave me a huge hug that made me lose my balance. "How can I ever repay you for introducing me to Scott?"

"How about you don't knock me down and we'll call it even," I responded fearfully.

"You're so funny," she said and gave me another hug before skipping to the closet for more clothes.

I decided to prompt her for the information she was obviously dying to tell me. "So, are you guys..."

She didn't give me a chance to finish my question. "Yes, he asked me to be his girlfriend last night." She was giggling uncontrollably.

I wondered if that's how I was acting around the house when Brian and I first started dating. "That's great, Steph. I'm so happy for you! Does he live near us?"

She frowned. "No, he lives about a half an hour from here," she said with a sigh. Then she continued with the elevated enthusiasm she had before. "We're going to see each other every weekend, though. He has a car and said he would drive down and stay with a friend. And I'm sure Brian would let me use his Jeep every now and then."

As she trailed off, I weighed whether or not I should tell her how unhappy Brian was about her choice. I decided to let her and Brian work it out. I went into the closet to get the rest of my clothes and saw my dress and bra still on the floor where they had landed the night before. I sighed happily at the memory and got lost in thought.

She startled me when she came in and said, "So everything's okay with you and Brian, right?"

"Everything's perfect," I said smiling and picked up the dress, feeling a little embarrassed.

"Yeah, well I knew he would come to his senses eventually. Did you get to slap him again?"

I laughed. "No, but I hit him really hard."

"Good for you," she said. "He was being a complete jerk."

"Who is a jerk?" Brian entered our closet just as Stephanie was saying he was a jerk.

"You," she said.

He laughed as Stephanie brushed by him, hitting him a little as she swept out of the closet. "You're not packed yet?" he teased me after she was out of sight. As he kissed me, he took my dress out of my hands and threw it back on the floor. "I like it better over there," he muttered and kissed me again.

I hit him in the chest, roughly the same spot as the night before. "Stephanie's right in there," I warned.

"That didn't stop us last night," he said as he continued to try to distract me from packing.

"Maybe you could help me get this done and we might have some time to get lost in the forest," I suggested.

"Fine," he said in resignation and picked up the dress off the floor. "You'll have to wear this again when we have more alone time," he suggested in a whisper that sent shivers down my back.

Unfortunately, his help packing actually slowed me down. Between his mom coming in to check on us and his attempts to recreate moments from the night before, I was the last one to get my suitcase to the truck. Stephanie had finished long before me and went to find Scott.

I grabbed my purse and went into Brian's room to get my phone that he forgot. He claimed he was too focused on packing, but I think he was just trying to give me an excuse to go in his room. He was helping his dad fit all the suitcases in the back, so I had to run the errand by myself.

After grabbing my phone, wiping it off because I was still upset that Michael used it, and shoving it my purse, I glanced around the room to see if anything else was left behind. I noticed Brian's MP3 player in pieces in the trash. I sighed and I decided that I would get him a new one for Valentine's Day.

When I walked outside, Brian ran up to me and gave me a huge hug, twirling me around. It was snowing which made him unusually happy. "Isn't this great?" he asked, not letting me go.

"It's cold," I complained, but I didn't feel cold in his arms.

"Will you brave the cold long enough to come with me and find Steph? She was supposed to be back ten minutes ago."

"Sure. Where do you think she'll be?"

"I probably don't want to know, so I was hoping maybe you'd check around the lodge while I wait outside." He looked at me with pleading eyes.

"How can I say no to that face," I teased as he put me down and wrapped his arm around me.

I felt bad for Brian's parents and even Michael as we took our time getting to the lodge. I imagine Brian volunteered for this errand only to get me alone for a few more minutes before our long ride home. We eventually made it to the lodge. I went inside alone.

I found Stephanie and Scott sitting on the same couch Brian and I were on the night before, drinking coffee and talking softly. As I approached, they leaned into each other and shared a passionate kiss. I couldn't help but divert my eyes, feeling a little embarrassed to be walking up on them. I gave them a moment, then approached and cleared my throat.

They continued kissing, but Stephanie opened one eye to see who was interrupting them. She gave me a "go away" look. "What is it, Ash?" she finally said impatiently.

"The truck's packed and everyone's waiting on you to go," I said apologetically.

She rolled her eyes, kissed Scott one more time, and then stood up.

"I'll call you when I get home," she said to Scott as I started walking towards the door.

"See ya, Steph," he said and sat back down on the couch to finish his coffee.

When she caught up with me, I whispered, "Sorry. Brian made me come and get you."

"I get the feeling he's not thrilled about Scott," she said sourly.

"I don't think he's supposed to be," I said. "Remember how much you resented me," I continued, not really wanting her to remember it at all.

"Yeah, I know," she said, softening her tone. "And if you hurt him, I'll still kick your ass," she said completely seriously and then smiled.

"I don't doubt it," I said.

She laughed and wrapped her arm around my waist as we exited the lodge for the last time.

Brian was at my side within moments. "That was quicker than I expected," he said to me and put his arm around my shoulders. I wrapped my other arm around his waist and the three of us walked to the Suburban linked.

The drive home felt much longer than the ride up, probably because I didn't sleep. It was extremely hard to sit there so close to Brian and not be able to appreciate his strong lips touching my skin. He sensed my frustration and leaned over, gently breathing on my neck. I shivered and made a little noise, which made four sets of eyes look at me. I blushed, which pleased Brian even more.

You're gonna get it, I said silently to him, using my gift.

That made him laugh and of course, everyone looked again.

Brian and Michael unloaded the truck when we arrived at the Turner's house while Stephanie and I went inside to make sandwiches. Mr. and Mrs. Turner went to check in with their works, which left us a moment to talk.

"What was that all about in the truck?" Stephanie asked as soon as no one else was around.

I rolled my eyes. "Your brother's mean," I said in my most irritated voice. "He knew he could get away with teasing me and there wasn't anything I could do about it."

"Yeah, that sounds like Brian," she said amused. "There was a moment when he laughed. Did you use your gift to tell him something?"

"You caught that, huh?"

"If I hadn't known it was possible, I wouldn't have thought anything of it," she said, sensing my concern. "I know this sounds so tacky, but I was wondering if you could use it on me again." After a few seconds when I didn't say anything, she continued, "I mean, you don't have to or anything. I was just curious."

"I know. I was just trying to think of something to have you do."

"You could have me go punch Brian for teasing you," she said with a smile.

"Tempting," I responded. I thought about it while we continued to make sandwiches. When Michael and Brian came back into the house, I was inspired with an idea. *Tell Ashlyn an embarrassing story about Brian*, I willed her to do. It made me feel a little weird. I quickly returned to normal, hopefully before Brian noticed anything.

Stephanie smiled at me and started. "Did you know that when Brian was eight he had this bear named Mr. Cotton? He took it with him *everywhere*, even to school in his backpack."

A look of horror flashed across Brian's face; I knew this was terribly embarrassing for him and I suddenly felt really bad for making her do that. "What the hell, Steph? I thought we agreed a *long* time ago that we wouldn't talk about that again." His face was sad and angry and then it changed. "You did this, didn't you Ashlyn?" It wasn't a good sign that he used my whole name.

Michael rolled his eyes, grabbed a sandwich, and went outside.

Brian looked disappointed with me. He grabbed a sandwich and walked to his room.

Stephanie was absolutely giddy. "That was amazing, Ash! I can't believe you can just do that to people. It felt like I was making up my mind to do something, but I didn't know where the thought came from."

"Shhhh..." I insisted. I didn't want her parents to hear anything and I was ashamed of what I did. "I have to go talk to him," I said grabbing a Dr. Pepper from the fridge.

I knocked softly on his door. "Brian?"

There was no response.

"Brian, please. I'm so sorry. She asked me to do that and I was sorta mad about the ride home, so I suggested she tell an embarrassing story. I didn't mean to make you upset." I sighed and rested my head on his door.

After a couple of minutes, he finally opened the door, still looking disappointed. I held up the Dr. Pepper as a peace offering, which made him break his pout for a moment and he decided to let me in. He closed and locked the door behind him and went over to the CD player and turned it on.

I sat on his bed while he looked out his window. "You know, I might have liked it better when you and Steph didn't get along," he said without looking at me. When he turned around, he was holding an old bear. "Mr. Cotton, this is Ashlyn. Ash, this is Mr. Cotton."

I couldn't help but smile. "I am very sorry," I said again.

"You warned me," he said and he tossed the bear on his desk. Then he jumped at me, knocking me backwards onto his bed. "Now, let's see if we can recreate some of those embarrassing noises from the truck," he said with a wicked smile.

That was the last I saw of his lips for awhile. Every time he kissed me, it sent waves throughout my body until I was practically convulsing.

"Your... parents... we... shouldn't..." I couldn't form a complete sentence to save my life.

"Mmmm hmmm," he murmured softly in my ear.

Suddenly, although it had probably been ten or fifteen minutes in reality, there was a knock at the door. "Ashlyn had better not be in there with you, Brian," his mom warned.

He put his finger to my lips so I wouldn't make any noises and kissed my ear teasingly before he said, "I think she's outside."

That was my cue to exit out his window and pretend like I was having a normal conversation with Michael. As I ran for the gate, I heard Brian laugh. I ran my fingers through my hair as I rounded the side of the house to go stand near Michael in the front yard.

He shook his head when he saw me coming and kicked a rock into the street. "Do you realize how badly you're changing things around here?" His remarks were cold.

I shrugged and my smile faded. "I guess things can't stay the same forever, right?"

He snorted. "Kara needed you last night, but you were too caught up in your own selfish little world to care about anyone else."

"I guess we can't all be as selfless as you, Michael." I wasn't going to stand there and let him berate me for being with Brian. I looked towards the house.

"What, are you going to make Brian come out and save you now?"

"Go to hell," I said.

"Why don't you make me," he dared.

I glared at him, fighting back the angry tears that were mounting, and couldn't think of anything else to say to him.

"Does your best friend even have any idea of what a freak you are or are you trying to quietly ruin her life, too?" He was going to keep going until I used my gift on him. But I wasn't going to give him that satisfaction.

"Leave Kara out of it. She doesn't need to be troubled with any of this. I never wanted anyone to be burdened with knowing." I was losing control of my voice and I knew it was only moments until the tears started flowing down my face.

"Yeah, well, some of us weren't so lucky to get out of the wake of your freak show. You treat it like a game, just willing people to do what you want whenever you want. It's no wonder Brian never wants to spend time with anyone else. You've got control of his mind and he can't help himself."

I picked up a rock and threw it at Michael's head, just missing. "You have *no* idea what there is between me and Brian. Why would I possibly want to be around someone I had to force to be around me?" I walked up to him. When he didn't back away, I pushed his chest.

He grabbed my wrist forcefully to stop my jab. "You're careless and I know you're gonna hurt him and everyone close to you."

Brian walked outside and jogged over to where we stood. Michael released my wrist, which was bright red from his tight grip, and stared me down for another moment. "I'm outta here," he said before Brian could say anything, and picked up his bags and walked down the street.

"Are you okay?" Brian asked me.

I rubbed my wrist. "Yeah, I'm fine," I said with anger still in my voice.

Brian started walking after him, but I grabbed his hand to stop him. "Please don't."

"He hurt you," he said with compassion, looking at my wrist and then at my dark eyes.

I shrugged. "Maybe I deserved it. The three of you are the only ones who know. You and Steph were completely accepting of it. I guess I needed someone to remind me why I don't share it with everyone."

"I saw most of what happened, you know," he confessed. "I couldn't stand there and watch anymore when he grabbed you. I came out here to kick his ass."

"As much as I'd like to see it, I would hate to think that I was the reason you two weren't friends."

"Michael makes his own choices. Nothing that you do or don't do is going to change what is inevitable. I can't be friends with someone who hates the girl I love."

"Do you really think I'm a bad friend to Kara? Michael was the one who talked to her all night when she needed a friend. I didn't even try to take the phone from him when we got back. Ugh! I am selfish! He's right. I'm going to end up hurting everyone I care about and then I'll wake up completely alone." I fell to my knees, frustrated. I'm sure I was making a spectacle out of myself and was grateful that Brian picked me up and put me in the Jeep.

"Let's go for a ride," he suggested. He ran back into the house, grabbed his keys and a drink, put my suitcase in the backseat, and took off down the road.

We drove in relative silence until we got to our hill in the desert and walked on top. I took a deep breath and tried to regain perspective. "I assumed I'd always be alone. It wasn't like I could truly open up to anyone. You just can't have a lasting relationship when you keep secrets from people. Then you came along and turned my world upside down. And now... now I'm not sure I could survive without you. I'm not sure I'd want to."

"Michael isn't a deep enough person to incite this type of reaction, Ash." He might have been right, but it didn't matter how I got to this point; just that I *was* here and very unhappy.

I sat down on the same rock that Brian had sat on when I told him everything the first time we were there. He came and sat next to me. "Do you remember when you told me you felt like you'd been waiting forever for me?"

I nodded.

"I didn't admit it to you then because I thought it would sound cheesy, but I'd felt like I'd been looking for you for forever. When I first moved here, you were in one of my classes. You probably don't remember, but on my first day, you smiled at me and my heart started racing. It happened almost every time I was near you. And then, that day when Jason broke up with you and you ran out of English, you ran right into me. You touching me, however unintentional, shocked me and gave me the courage I had been lacking to finally talk to you."

"Do you think we're destined to be together?" I asked him, remembering the sales lady in the bridal store.

"I don't know, Ash. It feels like it, but if you asked someone else, they'd tell you they felt this way about someone before and it ended badly."

That wasn't the answer I needed to hear. "Do you think I'm your soul mate?"

He retreated deep in thought. "Yes," he said quietly. "I think I knew that after our first kiss."

"Me, too," I admitted and laid my head on his shoulder.

We sat there for a long time looking out at the scenery and holding hands. A wave of peace slowly spread through me until I felt like things were close to how they should be.

"I need to talk to Kar," I said out of nowhere.

"I can drop you off at her house," he offered.

I smiled brightly at him. "You're the best."

"I know," he admitted happily and jumped down from the rock.

He helped me down and we walked back to the Jeep and drove the short distance to Kara's house.

Kara came outside to greet me as soon as Brian drove away. "This is unexpected," she said.

I dropped my suitcase and gave her a huge hug. "I'm so sorry I wasn't there for you last night, Kar. Me and Brian had a fight and I was off sulking at the party when I should've been around for you. Can you ever forgive me?"

"Of course, silly. I had a nice time talking to Michael. I think it was three when we finally hung up."

When she said "Michael", I involuntarily cringed.

"Oh, Ash. He's really a good guy despite all the crap he's been giving you and Brian. He doesn't really want to hurt you, but he's worried about his best friend."

I was angry that she was defending him after he was so mean to me. I wanted her to know what he was really like, but decided against it because she actually looked happy. "What does this mean?" I asked hesitantly.

"What? Me and Michael? No, we're just friends, that's all. It was easy to talk with him because we are both kinda going through the same thing; our best friend is madly in love with another person and has a hard time finding any 'friend time' anymore." She didn't sound mad or resentful when she said that, but it still made me sad to hear it.

"I'm so sorry. You were so busy with..." I couldn't bring myself to say Keith's name. "You were busy with your stuff and Brian and I just sorta happened. We didn't mean to hurt you guys." I sighed in frustration with myself.

"It's fine, Ash. I'm not upset with you. In fact, I'm thrilled you and Brian made up. It would have been a little awkward if Michael and I became friends right as you and Brian broke up." She smiled and we walked into the house together.

I called my parents as soon as we were in her room, to let them know I was back and I'd be with Kara for the afternoon. Then she let me tell her all about the weekend.

"Why did you call me last night?" I asked her when I was done.

"I was going through some old pictures and there was this one that I couldn't remember where it was taken. I was hoping you would remember. I completely forgot it was New Year's Eve and you'd be at that party," she said.

My eyebrows scrunched down and I frowned, but I didn't say anything.

"What's wrong?"

I sighed. "Michael made it seem like you called because you were upset." I mentally added *and made me feel like a jerk for not being there for you.*

"Oh, yeah, well when he answered the phone, I was so shocked that I forgot why I called. It probably sounded like I was upset when I stumbled over my words. And then we started talking about how New Year's Eve sucked when you didn't have anyone to share it with. I can see how he got the wrong idea." She didn't think anything of it and I decided that I wasn't going to interfere. The problem between Michael and me went much deeper than their conversation last night.

"Okay, I just want to make sure you're not mad at me for not being there for you, last night and all the other times recently."

"I'm not, but you're forgiven," she smiled and hugged me tight. "So I guess this means I'll have someone to eat lunch with at school, since you and Brian always disappear."

We spent the afternoon talking in her room and doing our nails. When Kara had to take the trash outside, I called Brian and let him know everything was good. He told me that when he got back home, his mom lectured him about us sleeping on the couch. He was amused so I tried to be lighthearted about it, but I felt like it might make things a little uncomfortable for me around there for a while. We said goodbye just before Kara returned.

"You are pretty pathetic, you know?" she said as she came back in her room.

“What?” I asked innocently. I knew she knew I was on the phone with Brian. I guess the ‘I love you’ was a dead giveaway.

We both laughed and went back to painting our nails.

Even though Brian had to work the remainder of our week off, I spent all day with him at the gym, working out and stealing kisses with him between consultations when the owners weren’t looking. Having to return to school after spending all our waking time together was hard because we only had the two classes and lunch together.

We made the most of our time together and even ate lunch with Michael and Kara occasionally. Although they insisted they weren’t dating, they were nearly inseparable, driving to and from school together, spending lunches happily chatting with each other, and talking on the phone every night before bed. I bit my tongue and didn’t let Kara know of my objections, even though Michael was still being an ass to me behind her back.

The Rick investigation had stagnated. Within days of returning from our trip, Brian received a full refund in the mail for the search with a note explaining they could not release any information to us due to a police investigation. I contacted Detective Olson to talk to him about my concerns regarding the news story, but he didn’t seem too worried that Rick might take action against me. Brian and I continued to lay low, confining ourselves mostly to his work and his room when we weren’t in school. But because his work was so busy with new members trying to stay true to their new resolutions, he was too tired most of the time to pursue taking our relationship to the next level. I decided not to push the issue.

One evening after work we made a rare trip out and were sitting in his Jeep at the park, trying to enjoy some alone time. Scott was in town visiting Stephanie and Brian didn’t want to be at home while he was there. We started talking about his trip to Montana and a family meeting that had abruptly taken him away from my call one morning. He told me his grandfather made one of Brian and Stephanie’s Christmas presents a private investigator to track down information on their biological family, since both were practically adults and had the right to know about their other relatives. Although neither of them had ever expressed any interest in finding any blood relatives, they didn’t stop their grandfather’s attempt to investigate.

When we finally decided to go back to Brian’s house to do our homework, Scott’s car was still parked in the street in front of the house. I squeezed Brian’s hand as he grumbled under his breath. “It’ll be okay. I’m sure he’s leaving soon. Why don’t we just go back to your room and get started on our homework?”

At that moment, Stephanie got out of Scott’s car, slamming the door and ran into the house, visibly upset. Brian tensed up and started towards the vehicle. I tried to hold him back, but he was just too strong and too determined for me to do anything.

“Don’t even try, Ash,” Brian warned, not even looking at me.

Fortunately, I didn’t have to. Scott didn’t wait for Brian to reach his car before he squealed his tires and raced away.

I sighed as I walked over to where Brian was standing, glaring after Scott as he sped away. “Let’s get inside. I’ll go talk to Steph and you can get a head start on the homework,” I suggested tugging on his hand.

The house was quiet. Brian’s parents were in their office and Stephanie was locked away in her room. It was deafening when Brian slammed his door shut without saying a word, leaving me walking alone towards Stephanie’s room.

“Steph?” I asked quietly, knocking on her door. I tried her door knob, but it was locked. “You know I’m going to get in, so you might as well unlock the door now and make this easier,” I threatened her.

I heard her kick something and storm over to the door. The door unlocked and flew open without her making eye contact with. She stomped back over to her bed and buried her head in her pillows.

I sat next to her on her bed and rubbed her back while she sobbed silently. After about five minutes, her heaving back slowed. “What happened?” I asked softly.

She took a deep breath and sat up. “It’s so stupid, Ash. He said something at dinner and made my mom mad. And when I told him he offended her, he got pissed off and started telling me what a stupid family I had.”

“He didn’t hurt you, did he?” I asked cautiously.

“No, not physically anyway. I don’t know how I could have been so wrong about him. I mean I feel like this hit me out of nowhere. He never hinted that he didn’t like everyone and I don’t think anyone, but maybe Brian, did anything to change that.” She was a little hysterical, but I understood. It wasn’t too long ago that I had been rambling on the same way about Brian.

I gave her another hug and we talked for a while longer. When she was feeling better, I kissed her forehead. “You know, he’s going to call you and beg for your forgiveness as soon as he realizes what an ass he’s been,” I said with a smile, almost echoing her words to me when I was upset about Brian.

“You’re pretty great, Ash. Brian’s very lucky to have you.” She smiled and helped me off her bed. “You’d better go remind him before he decides to hunt down Scott.”

“Are you sure you’re going to be alright? You can always come home with me and stay the night.”

“Thank you. I’m going to be fine.”

I left her room, closing her door behind me. When I turned around, Brian was standing there, looking at me with awe. “I am pretty lucky to have you,” he whispered and kissed my cheek.

“How much of that did you hear?”

“Almost all of it. I couldn’t sit in my room and do nothing and I knew it would be stupid to go after him. So I’ve just been standing here.” He shrugged. “Thank you for being there for Steph... and me, too. Sorry I snapped at you outside.”

“It’s okay. I understand.” I smiled and took his hand.

We went back to his room to work on our homework. We spent the first several minutes getting out all our private moments and then tried to focus on our homework. No sooner did we get started on our work, Brian’s mom came in to check on us followed shortly by Stephanie with the news that Scott had called and apologized. He was coming back to pick her up and go to a movie. She invited us, but Brian said, “No,” before she even finished her sentence.

Chapter Fourteen – Anticipation

Before we knew it, January was over and Valentine's Day was upon us. It fell on a Thursday, so we postponed our plans until the weekend. Of course Brian made a point to lavish me with flowers and balloons at school. I actually heard guys grumbling that he was making them look bad. Stephanie had a special delivery at school from Scott. He sent flowers and a bear. She was absolutely giddy the whole day. Michael and Kara kept whatever they were doing a secret. I could tell by the sparkle in Kara's eye that there was something special going on, but neither of them was willing to share, even when Stephanie practically tortured Michael at lunch.

"I should probably stop her," I whispered to Brian as Stephanie twisted Michael's arm behind his back, "but I'm enjoying it too much."

He smiled and pulled me closer as we enjoyed the last few minutes together before lunch ended.

Friday afternoon, I was excited about celebrating Valentine's Day with Brian the following day that I annoyed everyone who was around me, including Brian.

"You are making me nervous, Ash. I'm not sure what I have planned is going to live up to all this excitement." Because the plans he made were part of my gift, he was keeping it quiet. I tried my own special brand of torture to get him to tell me, but he was able to resist. It was important enough to him so I didn't dare use my gift to force him to tell me. I had been hoping that part of the surprise was going to be the next big step in our relationship, but my body ruined anything special planned, at least for Valentine's weekend. Of course, I pouted to Brian when I had to tell him the news, but he didn't seem bothered by the information. "You can't spoil my plans," he said confidently.

We were practicing running the mile in PE, so I had some time to talk to Kara. "What do you have going on this weekend?" I said to her during the first quarter mile lap.

"Not too much. Michael and I are going out to dinner and a movie tomorrow, but other than that, I don't have anything planned," she admitted.

"Ah ha!" I said triumphantly. "You and Michael have a date this weekend. That's what you've been keeping secret!"

A momentary look of terror flashed across her face. "It's just friends going to the movie, Ash. Don't try to read anything into it," she said defensively.

"Suuure," I teased.

Her face turned red, either from her anger or embarrassment. "Don't say anything to anyone. Not even Brian. Promise me!"

"Okay, okay. I promise. Not a word." I pretended to zip my lips and throw the key in the bleachers we were jogging past. "So, is this like an official first date or have there been others?"

"We go places together all the time, Ash. You do realize I don't sit around all day waiting for you to call me to do something when you can't be with Brian." She still had an edge to her voice that I didn't like.

"I'm happy for you, Kara." I thought if I warned her to be careful, she might get upset again.

After we showered and were dressed, I gave her a big hug. "Have a great weekend, Kara. Will you call me on Sunday?"

She smiled warmly. "Of course. I want to hear how you like Brian's surprise."

"What?! You already know what he has planned?!"

"He needed Michael's help with something, so I found out that way."

"Ugh! Michael knows, too? This is driving me crazy!"

She just smiled at my frustration. "Have a wonderful day, Ash. I'll talk to you Sunday."

As usual, Brian was waiting for me as we came out of the locker rooms. I walked passed him and around the corner before he grabbed my arm and pulled me back to him. "What's wrong?"

I punched him in his arm and turned away. "I can't believe I'm the only one who doesn't know what you have planned for tomorrow."

He laughed, rubbing his arm. "Those workouts really seem to be working. Oh, Ash. Don't be mad."

I was still pouting, so he pushed me back against the building and made me forget everything. It wasn't until I heard horn beep that I remembered we were still at school. "You can't be doing that here," the petite security guard said as she drove by in her golf cart. As soon as she was out of sight, we kissed again in defiance before walking out to the Jeep.

Brian drove me straight home after he got off work on that night. "I've got a few things I need to take care of tonight."

"I have something to do, too," I lied as he parked in front of my house. I didn't have anything but a small gift for Brian. I didn't save enough money to buy him a new MP3 player, like I'd planned. So I got him an engraved silver heart keychain and attached a copy of my house key to it. I hoped I would have enough to buy the MP3 player for his birthday in March.

He laughed. "Well, just try to stay out of trouble tonight and I'll see you around two tomorrow."

"That's a long time," I complained. He had changed his work schedule so he could get off early to take me out.

"It'll go by fast and then we'll have the rest of the day to be together uninterrupted," he said and motioned his head slightly to indicate someone in my house was peeking out at us.

"Fine," I pouted. "Have fun tonight," I said sarcastically.

"I love you, Ash," he said and kissed me gently on my lips.

"I know. I love you, too. See you tomorrow."

I walked back to my room and took the wrapped present out of my dresser drawer and looked at it. Feeling like I hadn't done enough, I sat down in front of my computer and started looking for clever last minute gift ideas that I could make. Nothing was really jumping out at me until I found a website to create and print your own personalized coupons. I had a lot of fun designing them, imagining exactly how we'd use each one. When I finally looked at the clock, several hours had passed. Maybe Brian was right and the time would fly by.

Before getting up from my computer to get the coupons I printed, I checked my email. To my disappointment, Brian hadn't written. I wondered idly what was keeping him so busy that he couldn't call or write while I started deleting all the junk email that had filtered in: hair growth, buy meds online, increase your manhood - all irritating reminders that I needed to be careful who I gave my email address to. Then there was one that caught my eye. The subject was "Thought you might be interested", which sounded like spam, but before I deleted it, I noticed the email address was "afriend@ces-corp.com". It took my brain a fraction of a second to tie the email to the strange vans I had seen at Rick's old house and then again at the restaurant. I clicked it open, but it was blank with only an attached file. I knew I shouldn't open it because it was most likely a virus that would render my computer useless, but I had to know. When I double-clicked it, there was an aerial photograph of a lightly wooded area near a lake. I was about to close the picture, when I noticed a strange part of the picture. I zoomed in and was able to make out the blurry outline of what appeared to be a shack. A stabbing pain shot through my head. I closed the attachment and hit "reply" on the original email.

Thank you for the picture. Could you give me more information about what I'm looking at?

Where is this? Who does the shack belong to? Who are you?

I hit send without signing the email. Almost instantaneously, another email arrived in my inbox: "Undeliverable as addressed/unknown recipient". *Crap.*

I called Brian to get his take on it, but it went immediately to his voicemail. I hung up without leaving a message and hoped he would call me later. When I tried to open the attachment again, it said it was an unknown file type. I didn't know much about computers, but I knew that if I had just opened something up, it shouldn't have had an error when I tried to open it again.

After an hour and fifteen pieces of paper crumbled and thrown towards my trash can, I was finally satisfied with the simple drawing of what I could remember of the image. It showed the relative position of the shack to the lake and a few power lines that lined a dirt road not too far from it. I folded the paper and put it in the drawer of my nightstand, then looked at my email once more and checked my phone for any missed calls. There was no word from Brian, so I went to bed.

The next morning, I awoke to Mom knocking at my door. "Ash, it's nearly eleven. You really need to get up."

I groaned. How could it be eleven already? My neck hurt; I must not have moved all night. "Can you start the shower for me, Mom?"

"Sure. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Mom. Just slept wrong." I heard the shower start and forced myself out of bed. My eyes scanned the room and I noticed all the pieces of paper thrown on the floor near the trashcan. *It wasn't a dream, I guess*, I thought to myself. Then I noticed the coupons I'd printed, still sitting in the printer tray waiting to be cut and put together. Only three hours until I got to see Brian again. My excitement from the previous day returned and I practically bounced to the waiting shower.

It took me nearly thirty minutes to shower and another forty-five to dry and style my hair. I took a break after my hair to grab a quick bite to eat.

"Wow, you're quite the work-in-progress," Dad commented as I walked past the living room to the kitchen. He got up from the couch and joined me. "I need you to be safe today, honey. Don't feel like you *have* to do something you're not ready for just because of the occasion. You're not ready for that, right?"

I hated these conversations. They were so embarrassing for both of us. "Don't worry, Dad. I promise we're not doing anything like that."

"Okay. I just needed to remind you that you don't have to rush to grow up."

"I'm almost eighteen, Dad. I think I'm growing up much faster than you want to admit." I walked over and gave him a hug. "I love you, Daddy. I'll always be your little girl, but you need to trust that I'll make the right decision, okay?"

He kissed my forehead. "I do trust *you*."

"Then trust me enough to know that if I trust Brian, you can, too. I know you've enjoyed having him here on Sundays to watch games with you. Just because football season is over, doesn't mean that you have to treat him bad."

"Fine, but you're asking me to break the father code by being okay with the boy you're dating," he said with a slight smile.

"I promise I won't tell anyone," I teased and gave him a big hug. "Dad? I was hoping that my curfew could be extended tonight. Brian's planned a surprise and I'd hate to ruin it by having to come home early." I did my best sad puppy dog impression, complete with pouty lip and batted eyelashes.

"Okay, how about midnight?" he offered.

"I was hoping for one o'clock?" I said, asking rather than telling.

"You're pushing it, Ash. Twelve thirty and that's my final offer."

I squealed with delight and jumped up and gave Dad a kiss on the cheek.

"You'd better hurry and eat. Brian's gonna be here soon and you look like you still have a lot left to do."

I frowned at him as he left the kitchen, stealing the sandwich. Then I made and ate another sandwich and ran back to my room to finish. I quickly realized I had made a huge mistake by fixing my hair before I put my dress on. Brian had requested I wear my New Year's dress and boots again, but the dress had a turtleneck collar. I stretched it out as much as I could and tried to slip it over my head without destroying my hair, but of course I failed.

I hurried to fix my hair and put on makeup, finishing off by putting the ring from the necklace that Brian had given me for Christmas on my left hand. I smiled while I admired its simple beauty and then took it off my ring finger and slid it on my right hand, just in case my parents noticed.

As I was finishing, I heard Brian's Jeep pull up. My heart immediately started racing as I stuffed the coupons in an envelope and grabbed Brian's actual gift, putting both in my purse. I started towards the living room just as Brian knocked on the door.

Mom was there with her camera, snapping pictures of me as I came down the hallway, blinding me with the flash. "Mom! I can't see!" I complained as I felt my way around the corner, squinting to try to get my vision back to normal.

I smelled Brian before I could see him clearly. When my eyes did focus again, I was speechless at how amazing he looked and how he still managed to take my breath away and make me swoon. Suddenly remembering that I was in the presence of my parents, I cleared my throat and tried to regain my composure as I walked over to him. He smiled, enjoying my reaction, and pulled me in close so Mom could take pictures.

Eventually Dad said, "You two be careful out there. I imagine it's going to be crowded everywhere you go." I think he was fishing for an idea of where we were heading.

"We'll be careful," Brian promised, not giving anything away, and led me to the door.

"Bye," I said happily as Brian and I walked out the door.

When we were halfway to the Jeep, Dad called me back to the porch. "I just wanted to tell you that I do trust you and that you look beautiful," he said quietly to me and kissed my forehead. In a louder voice, he said, "Not a minute late. I'm taking a nap and will be awake this time."

We departed quickly and drove out of my neighborhood before Brian pulled over and gave me a welcoming kiss. "I could hardly stand not to do that back there when I saw you," he said with his face close to mine. "In case you didn't know, you look amazing."

I lost all ability to focus on anything but his lips. Then sensation lasted long after we parted. "Are you okay, Ash?"

"Mmmm... I think I might need a little more of that," I said dreamily, opening my eyes to gaze into his beautiful eyes.

"Your eyes are pretty dark today. Did something happen last night?"

I was still impressed that he recognized a correlation between my eye color and my general state of mind. "Yeah, you weren't around," I teased. I didn't want to ruin the mood by talking about the strange email. "I woke up with a stiff neck, so I must have slept pretty hard last night. Mom had to wake me up at eleven," I reluctantly admitted.

"I'm sorry. I'll be able to rub your neck in just a little bit. But now, we have to get going."

"Are you going to give me any hint?" I pleaded.

"No," he said flashing me a mischievous smile as he started driving again.

Chapter Fifteen – Unexpected

That night was nothing short of magical. Brian took me to dinner then out to the desert where he presented me with a certificate for my very own star he'd named "Ashen B", which took me a minute to decipher as "Ash and B", and my signature tattooed on his shoulder. My keychain and coupon book paled in comparison, so I was more determined to get the MP3 player for Brian for his birthday. Shopping online, I found one, but still was short about fifteen dollars. I begged my parents for an advance, but they refused. So I asked Kara if she could loan me the money. Of course, she insisted that I didn't have to pay her back, but I wouldn't feel right if I didn't. We bought it on Monday while Brian was at work.

While shopping, I didn't have to endure too many details of Kara and Michael's new relationship. I wondered if it was at his request that she wasn't sharing much information. What I did find out was they went to the movie after helping Brian set up for our evening and by the end of the movie, they were holding hands. By the end of the night, they had had their first kiss. But despite being happily involved with my best friend, Michael was still cold towards me. When I complained to Brian about it, he explained that it was just because he was uncomfortable with my gift and the fact that I was keeping it from Kara forced him have to keep it from her, too.

I still hadn't told Brian about the unusual email. I wasn't intentionally keeping it from him; it just never felt like the right time to go down that dark path. Over the next week, I pulled up an aerial photo of the lake and tried to find the location of the shack, but without any success.

On our Valentine's date, Brian and I had made plans for him to stay with me for the week my parents were going out of town for my brother's pre-wedding party. But the day before they were scheduled to leave, their plans suddenly changed.

"Your dad has to work this week, so we won't be flying out until Friday after he gets off work." She sounded almost as disappointed as I felt.

"Aren't you gonna miss the party?" I asked trying to keep focused on her disappointment rather than mine.

"No, they're having a family dinner on Friday night and the big party on Saturday afternoon. We should arrive just in time to make it to dinner. But I won't get to do any of the fun stuff like making the party favors or taking pictures for the whole week."

"You could go tomorrow without Dad and he could catch a flight on Friday," I suggested.

Her eyes lit up. "That's a fantastic idea, Ash." She bounced away to go talk to Dad and came back shortly completely jubilant.

"I guess that means you're still flying out tomorrow?" I asked.

"You're a genius, Ash. I can't believe I didn't think of that!" She kissed my forehead then flitted off to call Mark and start packing.

My plans were still ruined, though. It wasn't like Dad was going to live at the office for the week. When Brian picked me up after work that night, I broke the news to him.

"You look unusually sad to see me," he said with a worried look on his face.

I sighed and told him, but he didn't seem to think was so bad. "Steph will be relieved she won't have to cover for me. I think she was really stressed about that," he said light-heartedly.

"I'll have to apologize to her. I know she's got enough to worry about," I said.

Brian eyed me, not wanting to discuss her relationship. She and Scott seemed to always have problems. After he blew up about her family, things were good for a couple of days. Then he accused her of cheating on him. They had even fought over dinner on Valentine's Day weekend. Now she thought he was cheating on her, so she planned a trip up north on Friday to find out. She begged me not to tell anyone and I told her I wouldn't as long as she promised to text me often so I knew she was okay.

We took Mom to the airport on Sunday night. She was so grateful I came up with the idea for her to go without Dad. Dad didn't seem to mind, either, because it meant that he could eat fast food all week without Mom getting upset with him.

As the week drew to a close, Dad got a little suspicious that I might have plans for when he left, because I kept neurotically cleaning the house. He told me on a few different occasions that he had associates that were going to stop by to check on me, but I was sure he was just trying to scare me.

Friday finally came. Brian and I went shopping for groceries afterschool. It was nearly four when we finally pulled up to my house, Dad long gone to the airport. The ice cream was barely in the freezer before we were in each others' arms, heading down the hall towards my room.

I was taking off his shirt when his phone rang. He glanced at it, but ignored it. I looked down at it when he threw it on my nightstand; it was his parents. My shirt had just come off when my phone rang.

"I have to see who it is," I barely managed to say because I was breathing so hard. I looked at my caller ID and saw it was Brian's house calling. "It's your parents," I said between kisses.

He didn't say anything, peppering my neck with kisses.

"Hello?" I said, trying not to sound so out of breath.

"Ashlyn? It's Margaret. Do you know where Brian is? I've been trying to reach him." She sounded worried.

Worried about her tone, I told her, "Yeah, Brian's with me. I think he's in the other room." Brian chuckled quietly and bit my earlobe.

"Ash, Steph's at the hospital. Something happened..."

I froze. "What hospital?"

Brian grabbed the phone from me. "Mom? What happened?"

He was quiet, only muttering a few "uh huhs" and "okays". Then he hung up the phone and started getting dressed.

"What's going on?" I was on the verge of a panic attack.

"I have to go, Ash. Steph needs me." He grabbed his phone and keys off the nightstand and walked out of the house.

"I'm going with you," I said, but he wasn't listening. "Brian! Stop!" I demanded.

"This isn't your business, Ash. I have to be there for her. I should've been there for her." He was losing it quickly.

"Let me take you. You're gonna get in an accident if you try to drive right now," I insisted.

He didn't argue. I took the keys from him and got in the driver's seat. It took me a minute to adjust the seat so I could reach the pedals, but soon we were speeding down the road towards the hospital.

While Brian checked in at the desk in the emergency room and went back to see Stephanie, I took a seat in the far corner of the waiting room. It was excruciating not knowing, so I used my gift on Brian to hopefully get some information as to what happened. I had a terrible feeling that it had something to do with Stephanie's surprise visit to Scott. Her last text message was around lunchtime and she was heading into his school.

As I connected with Brian using my gift, I cringed internally at how bad Stephanie looked. I decided to let Brian know I was there.

How's she doing? I asked.

His parents were in the room, but he didn't hide the fact that he was talking to someone. "She's sedated right now, so we don't know what happened."

Brian's parents looked at him questionably. "What did you say, Brian?" his mom asked.

He shook his head and realized I wasn't actually there talking to him. "Oh, sorry, Mom. I guess I left for a moment. I think I'm going to go let Ash know what's going on so she can go home."

I scowled. *I'm not going anywhere*, I told him, but he didn't say anything.

I stopped using my gift as he approached the doors leading into the lobby. He looked pale and distressed as I ran over to him to hold him, but he didn't hold me back.

"Where'd Steph go today?" he asked without emotion.

"She went to see if Scott was cheating on her," I confessed quietly, stepping away from Brian.

His face turned white then red and he grabbed his keys from my hand and started out the door.

"Brian! No! You can't do this!" I pleaded with him. *Go be with Stephanie*, I demanded of him.

"Stop it, Ash. Not now," he said angrily, holding his head.

Stephanie needs you. Go back and be there for her. I wasn't going to let him go.

He stopped dead in his tracks. I ran over to him, wanting to comfort him, but was too afraid he hated me. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"She made me promise," I said regretfully.

"You could've stopped her. You could've done what you just did to me to make her stay."

"I didn't think anything bad would happen. She was sending me text messages all day, so I knew she was okay."

"But she wasn't, Ash." It would have been so much better if he would have just yelled at me, but his voice was calm. He was right; I should have stopped her. Finally, he sighed and took my face gently in his hands. "I'm sorry. I know this isn't really your fault. I just feel like I should've known and been able to stop this."

I silently took his hand and led him back to the waiting room. We returned to my quiet corner and sat down. Brian had his head in his hands and I was rubbing his back.

Finally he broke the deafening silence. "We don't know much. An older woman saw her stumbling and bleeding in the restroom at the rest stop outside of town. They wanted to call an ambulance, but Steph insisted she didn't need one. So the woman drove her here in her car while her husband followed in theirs."

"Wow. Why didn't she call me?" I asked more to myself than to Brian.

"She knew we had plans and didn't want to bother us, probably," he said sadly.

Of course. She was covering for him with their parents since he was staying at my house. I sighed and decided I'd use my gift on his mom to see how she was doing. Since she wasn't that far away, I knew I could easily will my way in there and get some information to pass to Brian so he didn't have to leave me.

After assessing the situation in Stephanie's room, I returned to myself. "She's awake now. You should go back there. I promise I'll leave you alone in there," I said softly.

He didn't move for a minute and I wondered if he even heard what I had said. Then he lifted his head and stood up without looking at me. "I'll be back in a few minutes. Thank you, Ash."

"I love you," I whispered as he walked away.

I sat there alone for about an hour without hearing anything but the screaming kids and the angry visitors being denied access to their friend who was in the emergency room. "Only immediate family is allowed back there," the volunteer at the desk explained for the fiftieth time.

I could see the anger rising in one man, so I decided to quickly diffuse the situation. *Go outside and wait patiently*, I commanded. The guy motioned to his friends to follow him and they went outside to have a cigarette and wait.

Finally, Mrs. Turner came out to the waiting room to talk to me. I was disappointed Brian hadn't come, but I understood that he needed to be with Stephanie. "Hi, Ashlyn. Thanks for driving Brian and being here for him and Steph. I know they are both very grateful," she began.

"How's she doing?" I managed, offering Mrs. Turner the seat next to me.

She looked tired and old. "She'll be okay, but they want to keep her overnight for observation. Nothing's broken, thankfully, but the bruising on her face is pretty bad and they want to make sure she is monitored."

"Did she say what happened?"

"No, she won't tell us, but we know it had something to do with that Scott boy." Mrs. Turner said his name spitefully.

I felt horrible; it was my fault Scott was even a part of this family's lives. If I only hadn't gone skating that morning... "Do you think they'd let me back to see her?" I asked meekly.

"I think I can sneak you in," Mrs. Turner said and patted my hand.

We stood up together and walked past the reception area without anyone saying anything to us. Once we were through the double doors, I breathed a momentary sigh of relief. When I entered in Stephanie's room, that relief was swept away as I saw firsthand how bad she looked.

She tried to smile, but it looked like it hurt when she did, and motioned for me to come closer to her. "Ash, I'm so glad you're here."

I walked to her side and took her hand. "I'm so sorry, Steph. I should've talked you out of going." I quickly hid my head on the side of the bed to hide the tears that were streaming down my face.

"I don't think there was anything you could've done to stop this, Ash. I'm going to be fine; nothing a little makeup won't cover up," she said, trying to sound brave, but the pain was still in her voice.

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Yes. Make sure Brian doesn't try to do something stupid," she said, obviously aware that Brian could clearly hear her. In a quieter voice she said to me, "And take care of him. You two have something I could only dream of having; don't let that go."

At that moment, a couple of nurses came in the room. "We need to move her to a room upstairs. Her parents can come with us but you two," one of the nurses said looking directly at Brian and me, "will need to take the public elevators."

"No, you guys should go," Stephanie insisted. "You had plans and since I'm not going anywhere, there's really no need for you guys to sit in this boring place all night." She winked at me.

"I'm not leaving," Brian said defiantly.

"We can call you if anything happens," Mrs. Turner insisted.

I remained silent. I knew that even if we left, we wouldn't have the night we had started out having. I decided once we split apart from Stephanie and her parents to take a separate elevator up, I'd go home.

On the way to the elevators with Brian, I stopped in the lobby. "I'm gonna just walk home so you can be with your family," I said, fighting back my tears. I didn't want him to decide to stay with me because he felt guilty for making me sad.

He looked genuinely shocked. "You don't have to go," he said quietly.

"I know. But I feel like everyone, including myself, is blaming me for Steph being here. I just don't think I can be supportive of anyone right now." A single tear escaped my eye and I wiped it away angrily. "Besides, I think the walk might do me some good," I added with a small smile, trying to recover.

"No one blames you," Brian tried say convincingly, but it got a little stuck in his throat.

"You do," I said quietly, and turned away quickly as the tears flowed from my eyes. I walked away uncontested. He just stood there and watched me leave.

I took my time getting home because I knew there would only be reminders everywhere of the night that was supposed to happen: the groceries that didn't get put away, the overly clean house that

I'd spent the entire week making look just perfect, the wrinkled sheets on my bed from where our perfect night had ended before it began...

It was past eight by the time I reached my quiet, dark house. The door had been left unlocked, but I made sure it was locked after I entered. I didn't bother flipping on any lights as I walked back towards the bathroom. I was hoping maybe I'd feel a little better if I let the hot shower run on me for awhile. I undressed and mindlessly stepped into the water stream before it was all the way warm. The shock took my breath away, but it was oddly refreshing. As the water heated up, I started relaxing. I didn't know how I was going to face Brian again, knowing that he didn't deny what I said. Of course, fresh tears flowed when I thought about how much I messed up by keeping things from him. I decided that if he ever spoke to me again, I would tell him everything, including the mysterious email and picture I had received. My thoughts drifted to the Rick situation and how I could help the police capture him. I was thinking about driving towards the lake and looking for the road with the power lines when the shower curtain was suddenly ripped open.

Without hesitation, Brian pulled me out of the shower, turning it off with his foot, and carried me into my room, kissing me with intense emotion that I'd never felt from him before. He continued kissing me as he put me on my bed and kicked off his shoes. I pulled his shirt off as he worked to remove the rest of his clothes. I barely had time to be cold from sitting naked and wet on my bed before he was on top of me and my entire body felt like it was on fire. I quivered with anticipation and apprehension, but our bodies easily melted together.

My mind unwillingly drifted elsewhere; I saw Stephanie sitting in her hospital bed, then followed the nurse out the door into the hallway at the hospital. I fought hard to not be carried away; I didn't want to miss a moment of being with him. Our lips desperately kissed as many parts of the other that we could find. Hours seemed to have passed, but we didn't slow down.

I was long dry from the shower, but by the time we stopped, we were both dripping wet with sweat that belonged to us both. I was breathless and speechless. It was different than I'd expected, so much better. I felt so close to him as our breathing started to return to normal.

"Are you okay," he asked finally, his arms wrapped tightly around my body.

I couldn't stop smiling. "Yes," I giggled.

I could feel his body relax and enjoyed the touch of his lips on my head. "I was so afraid of hurting you, but I lost all control when I came in and saw the remnants of earlier in the day. Then heard you in the shower and I couldn't stop myself. I'm so sorry if I scared you."

"How did you get in?" I asked, my thoughts becoming a little clearer again.

It felt good feeling his bare chest move against my skin as he laughed softly. "You gave me a key for Valentine's Day, remember?"

We were both silent for a few minutes, but he continued to run his fingers through my hair and hold me close. "Why did you come back?" I whispered, still remembering his look when I left the hospital.

He was silent and I thought he was thinking about his answer because he had stopped stroking my hair. But he didn't answer; he'd fallen asleep. I laid happily in his arms, taking in every sensation and happily drifted to sleep.

It was bright in my room when I finally woke up. I opened my eyes and saw Brian's watch on my nightstand and tried to feel his arms wrapped around me, but my nerves woke up and I realized he wasn't there.

Startled, I sat up and looked around the room for signs of him. His clothes were gone. I looked out the window, and his Jeep was gone, too. *Maybe he went to get breakfast*, I thought, calming myself.

While looking around my room, I noticed a note on my keyboard. It was just what I needed to help settle my nervous stomach.

Ashlyn,

I didn't want to leave like this, but you looked so peaceful that I couldn't bear to disturb you. First, you need to know that last night was probably the best night of my life. But I can't escape the fact that I let my family down. Because of me, my sister is in the hospital. When you left the hospital, you knew that a part of me blamed you for what happened, but I don't anymore. I know if you would have tried to tell me, I wouldn't have wanted to listen. Yes, you could have stopped her with your gift, but you can't see the future and you couldn't have known what the outcome would have been.

I love you, Ashlyn. Please don't think that I don't, but I have to let you go so I can take care of my family. I was hoping last night would make me forget these awful thoughts. And it did, for a time, but when the sun came up this morning, everything came crashing down around me. I worry about the terrible things out there that I won't be able to stop if I couldn't even stop Scott.

You are the most amazing person I've ever known and I know you're going to change the world. Right now, I have to take care of mine. I know I don't have to ask you to not try and change my mind. Please just respect my decision and move on with your life. And you have my word that the secret of your gift will go with me to my grave.

Goodbye Ashlyn.

-Brian

I had to read the note three times before it made sense. Between the tears blurring my vision and the utter shock, I had a really hard time processing the meaning. When the gravity of it finally hit, I stumbled backwards to sit on my bed. But I missed and hit the floor. It didn't hurt; my body was completely numb. I curled up in a ball and laid there on the floor, naked and crying.

I don't know how long it had been, but suddenly there was someone in the room with me.

"Ash, Ash! Come on, get up off the floor. Here, let's get you dressed." The voice was familiar, but my brain stopped processing anything.

Surprisingly, I felt the coolness of a shirt go on over my head, but there was nothing else. The tears kept streaming down my face, but my hysteric crying had stopped long ago.

"Michael called and told me I had to come over here right now because you needed me, but he didn't tell me what happened. "

I handed Kara the note and stared blankly at the wall. I didn't even care if she read the parts about my secret.

"Oh, Ash. I'm so sorry," she said. She wrapped her arms around me and held me as I cried some more. "You need to get dressed the rest of the way and come home with me." She tried pulling at me, but my legs weren't moving.

"No," I managed to say.

"You can't stay here like this," she insisted and tried again to get me up.

"You should go," I said, surprised by the sound of my own voice. "There isn't anything you can do for me."

"I can't just leave you," she insisted.

"That's what Brian told me and he managed," I said with more anger than I meant. I decided that talking to her wasn't going to convince her to go, so I decided to use my gift on her, something I'd never done.

I focused really hard on making her leave, but I couldn't make it work. I couldn't get in her head and tell her to leave me. "Go home, Kara," I said flatly, hoping it would have the same effect, but she just sat there with me, combing my matted hair with her fingers.

I had no concept of time; I lost the ability to accurately feel anything in the world around me. I had imploded. I know a lot of people say that it feels like their heart has been ripped out when they lose a loved one, but I knew mine was still firmly planted inside my chest. I could feel every painful beat.

I was aware that Kara's phone rang because she was talking, but it wasn't in the soft voice she had been using with me. She turned back to me and spoke quietly and carefully again, "I have to go, Ash. Do you want me to call your parents and have them come home early?"

"No, please just go," I said feeling a little more lonely. "Could you help me to my bed now?"

"I'm going to be back in the morning," she said kindly as she pulled the blanket up over me. "Try to get some sleep tonight and I'll see you in about nine hours."

Kara returned in the morning, as promised, and tried to get me to eat some food. But my body refused to allow me to even think about eating. She stayed with me until my parents came home and explained to them what happened without giving too many details.

Mom ran into my room and held me in her arms, crying the tears I no longer had. I heard Kara tell me goodbye, but I wasn't able to speak out loud anymore. Mom eventually kissed my forehead and went to bed, leaving me exactly how I'd been all day: catatonic.

Chapter Sixteen – Broken

Mom and Dad left me alone except to bring me food and tell me goodbye when they left for work. It didn't registered with me that I was supposed to be at school; I had no desire to exist, so school, talking, and eating seemed like annoyances. Kara came to check on me afterschool on Monday and tried telling me about something silly that happened to Abigail, but she left after a short time when I didn't react.

This routine went on for several days until they had had enough. "Ash, if you don't get up and go to school, we're going to take you to the doctor. This isn't healthy anymore." More than upsetting Mom, I didn't want to have to explain to a doctor how I was feeling. So I agreed to let her call Kara to take me to school on Friday.

Kara arrived at my house Friday morning right as my parents were leaving to work. She got the basic rundown of my mood, which hadn't changed since Saturday, and came in to help me get ready. She picked out my clothes while I showered and tried in vain to feel the temperature.

I dutifully put on the clothes and swallowed a piece of toast, barely chewing it. I was hoping to blend in and not have any attention drawn to me as I suffered through my first public appearance. I was actually envious of Rick's ability to be able to completely disappear. I would have given almost anything to switch gifts at that point.

Thankfully, we arrived at school early. There were less people to gawk at me as I forced my legs to move me to my locker and first class, which was sure to be the hardest because it was the first time I would have to see Brian. My heart started racing and I almost hyperventilated as I sat at my desk staring at the board, watching for him to enter the class through my peripheral. The tardy bell rang and his desk was still empty. Part of me was relieved and part of me was sad.

I could feel people staring at me everywhere I went, so I was sure that some rumor about the breakup had gone around. I was way beyond caring what people thought of me, though, so I just retreated further into myself and tuned everyone out.

The day was uneventful until English. I assumed that since Brian wasn't in History, he wasn't at school for the day. But I was wrong. I was in my seat staring at the board in front of me when I saw him walk in. Almost as if he'd been looking for me all week, he glanced at my seat. When he saw me, a look of shock flashed across his face as he made his way to his new seat, which was several rows over and a couple seats back. *At least I wouldn't have to look at him the whole class*, I thought. But that didn't help my heart, which ached in his presence. It started beating irregularly, my breaths got shallow, and my hands and feet went numb. My new neighbor got concerned about my appearance and tried to get me to go to the nurse. He was drawing unwanted attention to me, so I voluntarily got up and left the room with all my stuff. The teacher felt the need to send someone after me to make sure I made it to the nurse's office okay. Unfortunately, that person was Abigail.

"I swear to God I'll hurt you if you say *anything* to me," I threatened as soon as I saw her matching my pace. To my surprise and disappointment, she didn't say anything, but just walked me to the nurse's office then left. The nurse couldn't do anything but give me Tylenol and let me rest on a cot until lunch.

Since I wasn't hungry and didn't have anywhere to go, I wandered aimlessly around the campus for the entire lunch period. I passed by our favorite tree, which was occupied by a freshman couple feeding each other French fries. Every inch of the school grounds held a painful memory for me and I started considering Mom and Dad's offer of sending me to a doctor instead of being here. Maybe they could lock me away somewhere until graduation.

I was pulled from my fantasies of isolation in a rubber room when Kara grabbed my arms. "How are you holding up?" she asked while her eyes searched my face for a reaction.

I gave her a thumbs up sign and fake smile, but didn't say anything. I was afraid my voice would betray my true state of mind.

"I heard that you spent last period in the nurse's office and you threatened to beat up Abby. Are you sure you're okay?"

I knew she had better things to do besides babysit me, so I reassured her I was fine. "Abby has a big mouth," I concluded.

This was apparently funny to Kara and she gave me a big hug and kissed my cheek, promising to see me in PE.

I made it to Calculus with lots of time to spare, so I laid my head down on my cool desk and closed my eyes. Breathing slowly, I was able to feel as the coolness gradually got warmer from my touch. It was an improvement. I was starting to think I might be able to survive the last two hours without having a complete breakdown. Then someone came into class and handed Mr. Dillinger a pass.

"Ashlyn? Could you please bring your things up to the front of the class?"

I grudgingly complied. The pass was to go see Ms. Swanson and I had a sudden flashback to Homecoming day. Was it possible Brian was in the hallway waiting for me again, that he had to see me and was unable to keep his promise to stay away?

I walked a little faster, hoping to see him waiting for me around the corner. But no one was there. My pace slowed and my body returned to being hollow and numb as I walked the rest of the way to the office.

I walked into Ms. Swanson's office and closed the door. "Hi, Ashlyn. How are you feeling?"

I was pretty sure the expression on my face was more descriptive than any words I could muster. "I'm fine," I said flatly.

"That's good to hear. Your parents gave me a call this morning and explained that you might have some difficulties at school today. I see that you have been out all week. Is everything okay?"

I was irritated. She had to know what was wrong with me. It was all over school and Brian was an assistant for her, so he had to have a conversation with her sometime in order to get his schedule rearranged. "My parents shouldn't have called you. I don't need help. I just want to go to class and go home," I said through my teeth.

"Your parents called because they are worried about you. We are all a little worried about you, Ashlyn. You'll feel much better if you can talk about it," she said, trying to get me to open up.

"I prefer to just be left alone," I explained.

"If you are a threat to yourself or a disruption to other students, I have to intervene," she explained, getting a little more authoritative.

"I'm not hurting myself and I'm not causing any problems in my classes, so am I free to go?"

"You threatened another student this morning, which falls under the category of disrupting students, so no, you cannot go." It sounded like I was pushing her buttons; there was a slight edge to her voice.

"I threatened Abigail Waters that if she started harassing me about my situation, I was not going to just sit there and take it. Maybe you should invite her in and have a discussion about all the disrupting of students she has done over the last thirteen years of school."

"And what is your situation?"

Crap. I had just admitted I had a problem, which was like striking oil for a shrink. "My boyfriend broke up with me. It happens every day, right? I'll get over it and move on." I tried throwing all the clichés people use to tell someone when they've had their heart broken and are trying to diminish the emotional impact of it.

"It sounds like you have everything under control then," she said sarcastically.

"It would appear so," I said coldly.

“I’m going to let you go back to class, now, but I want you to know that if this doesn’t improve by mid next week, I’m clearing my entire schedule for you, so be prepared to be a lot more open than you are now,” she threatened.

I stood up and walked out her office, slamming the door behind me. I was surprised when I looked at the clock and saw it was already time to be in PE. The idea of drawing attention to myself again made me more upset with Ms. Swanson, so I decided to ditch and wait for Kara by her car.

It was a warm day in early March and she had left her top down. She never had her alarm on at school, so I jumped into the backseat and laid there. With nothing else to do, I sent a text message to Kara, letting her know I was waiting for her and closed my eyes, feeling the warm sunshine spread over my body like a blanket, enjoying the rare sensation of an external stimulus. *Maybe the worst of it was over*, I considered. I had made it through a whole day of school and only lost my composure once. I had the whole weekend to readjust myself to interacting with people and it was a definite good sign that I was almost enjoying the feeling of the sun warming my skin. I opened my eyes as a couple of birds flew overhead. It had been too long since I enjoyed the simple freedom of flying with the birds, so I used my gift on the slower one and soared high over the school. A peaceful sensation spread throughout my body; everywhere but my heart.

I was thrown back into reality when the bell rang. I sat up in anticipating for Kara’s arrival, but was sorry as soon as I had. Brian was the first person heading towards the parking lot, walking with his sister. Stephanie was doing a lot of talking and he looked distracted. My heart started overreacting again, so I tried to not watch as they walked towards his Jeep, but I couldn’t keep my eyes off him.

He suddenly looked over at me watching him. A pained look washed over his face, which was still beautiful in its sadness. Stephanie noticed his lack of attention and followed his gaze to me. She looked better than she had a week ago, but you could still see the bruises that were turning green on her cheeks and eye. She flashed me an apologetic smile and tugged Brian’s arm to get him to focus on something other than me.

I felt so stupid staring at him. Why was it so hard to let go? I used to be a pro at dealing with being dumped, but that was with guys that I didn’t have anything emotionally invested in. I sank back down in the seat, wishing for the ability to disappear again.

It apparently worked because Kara didn’t see me when she walked up with Michael. They exchanged a few words, reconfirming plans they had for the weekend, and then proceeded to make out. I closed my eyes, trying desperately to transport myself home. I must’ve made a noise because Michael made a disgusted sound and told Kara goodbye. I opened my eyes just in time to see him glare at me.

“Sorry about that, Ash. I didn’t see you back there,” Kara was flushed and nervous about how that scene might’ve affected my psyche.

“It’s your car,” I said without emotion and jumped into the front seat.

“I missed you in PE,” she said, trying to start a lighter conversation once we got going. “I had to partner with Julia. She is the worst softball player that ever existed. She didn’t catch one ball I tossed at her, and I was being nice!”

I appreciated her attempts, but just wanted to be back in my room with the covers over my head. I decided to not tell her the story of Ms. Swanson and instead just let her continue on about how terrible PE was without me.

Kara pulled up to my house and turned off the engine. “Kara, you don’t have to come in. I promise I’m not going to do anything to hurt myself. I’ve just had a long day and want to take a nap before my parents come home and insist on me putting on a half-way normal face.”

Kara sighed, but didn’t offer any resistance.

“Have a nice weekend. I’ll be able to drive myself to school on Monday, so you and Michael can carpool again.”

"It's no problem to drive you, Ash. I like spending the time with you," she said, but I knew she'd rather be spending the time with Michael.

"I'd prefer to drive myself, actually. That way I won't have to wait in your backseat again if I decide to ditch," I said, flashing my best attempt at a smile.

That seemed to soften her up a little and she started her car. I went directly to my room where I was surprised to see nothing had changed from Saturday. Brian's watch I had given him was still on my nightstand and my sheets still hadn't been washed since Brian's visit. I almost hated to wash them because it would erase his scent. But I figured it was pretty gross to continue sleeping in the sweat and bodily fluids left behind from that wonderful night, so I ripped the sheets off my bed and threw them quickly in the washing machine before I could change my mind.

Returning to my room, I decided I needed to make some changes so I wouldn't be painfully reminded of Brian. I started with his watch, but I couldn't bring myself to throw it away. I ended up putting it on my wrist, first tracing the inscription on the back in a masochistic attempt to hold on to him. Next, I took the picture he had given me as one of my Christmas gifts with the intention of throwing it and the watch into the drawer of my nightstand. As I opened it, though, I saw his wrapped MP3 player sitting there. Brian's birthday was just over a week away and it was yet another painful reminder that I didn't have anything to look forward to anymore. Since I was less attached to it, I decided it would be the thing I threw away in defiance. I moved from my nightstand to my computer, where I decided I couldn't delete all his emails, so I created a folder and put them all in there then archived it.

Little bits of progress meant that I was going to be in better spirits when my parents got home. When I felt like I had done enough, I laid down on my naked bed and fell asleep.

I woke up angry and with a headache. I had had a dream that was familiar to me and then I realized it was the dream I had had after our first date. Brian was tied up in a shack somewhere and was about to be assaulted by the person who I was using my gift on. I begged the person to stop, but when they did, they turned on me, looking in my eyes that weren't there, and laughed.

I could hear Mom and Dad in the kitchen and assumed they were getting ready for dinner. I quickly grabbed three Tylenol from my nightstand and headed out to see if I could help. I figured if I seemed better, they would ask fewer questions.

I was shocked when I walked through the kitchen and saw Emily and Mark sitting at the table. "Hi Ash," Mark said, waving.

I noticed Mom give him a warning look before turning to me. She had apparently informed Mark and Emily of my situation. "How are you feeling, sweetie?" she asked.

"A little tired still," I admitted. "Hi Mark, Emily. I didn't expect to see you here tonight."

"Oh, you didn't forget about your dress fitting this weekend, did you?" Mom asked with a worried look on her face and glanced at Emily.

Emily looked irritated, but I didn't feel like trying to decipher what was going on with her. My head hurt too much. "I remember, Mom. I just didn't realize they were going to be here this weekend." I tried to sound diplomatic, but I was feeling a little hostile.

"We are just doing some last minute preparations, Ash," Mark said kindly. I appreciated his attentiveness to my mood.

"Cool. Well, it's good to see you both again," I tried smiling, but after a week of not smiling, my muscles felt stiff and I'm sure my smile looked forced.

"We got pizza," Dad said happily.

"Sounds good. I'll just take a piece and eat on the couch so it's not too crowded at the table," I offered.

Apparently everything I said was rubbing Emily the wrong way and she sighed in irritation. I glanced at Dad for support, but he just shrugged. So I took my slice of pizza and grabbed a Dr. Pepper from the fridge and went into the living room to eat in solidarity.

I wasn't half way through my slice when Mark came in and sat on the couch with me. "How'ya holding up, Ash?"

I knew he didn't want to hear about my failed love life. "I'm fine. I wish everyone would stop worrying about me. There are other fish in the sea, life goes on, yadda, yadda," I said flinging my arm in the air while trying to hold back the tears I could feel trying to pool in my eyes.

"That's good to hear. You look like crap, though." In a quieter voice he continued, "Emily's worried that you are going to ruin her wedding because you're so depressed and everything. I tried to tell her you'll be fine by then, but she's thinking about dropping you from the bridal party."

There are very few times in my life when I've been so mad that everything flashed red; this was one of those times. "I'd hate that the fact my heart just got ripped out of my chest is going to inconvenience anyone. God forbid I show a little emotional instability on the first day when I actually had to face him again. I'm dealing with this the best way I know how and if I'm too much of an embarrassment to be in your wedding, then I won't be there at all."

I threw my plate across the room, hitting the TV and stormed back to my room. Unfortunately, I could hear them talking about me still, which coupled with the staleness of my room, made me feel claustrophobic and angrier. I grabbed my purse and car keys and stormed out the front door. Everyone seemed to be focused on Emily's emotional well-being, so I made a clean break from the house. It wasn't until I was backing out of the driveway, when Dad came out.

"Please don't try to stop me," I begged.

He must have felt sorry for me because all he said was, "Be careful and come home soon."

I didn't know where I was going to go. A week earlier I would have ended up at Brian's house, crying it out in his strong arms. But I didn't have him anymore and Kara was out with Michael. So I just drove. I didn't feel like I was consciously making decision on which way to turn and was genuinely shocked when I found myself at the top of a hill in the middle of the desert. I don't know how my old car made it down the bumpy road or up the incline to the area that had once been cleared out for a parking lot.

From the months of working out, I was easily able to climb the large boulder that Brian had to help me up five months prior. I reached the top just as the sun was setting and gasped in surprise at the beauty of my surroundings. I stumbled back to the rock Brian had sat on to listen to my unbelievable story and traced my hands over it, searching for something that would bring me closer to him. As I climbed up on it, I closed my eyes and imagined he was sitting there with me, holding me close. I could almost feel his warmth, but it was probably just heat radiating from the rock.

I sat there for hours, watching the sky fade to black and the stars shift position in the sky and the nocturnal animals come out of their holes to hunt, waiting for the peacefulness of the place to settle into me. I was far from finding peace, though, but did end up feeling a little better by the time I decided to leave. I had to face reality; Brian was no longer part of my life, Kara too involved in her relationship to be a replacement, and Emily and Mark probably banned me from their wedding all together.

I didn't talk to anyone when I got home. Mark and Emily had left and Mom and Dad were in their room watching TV and gave me my space. I curled up on my bed and drifted into a restless sleep.

Chapter Seventeen – Returning

“I’m still in the wedding?” I asked cautiously when Mom woke me for the dress fitting. She hesitated. “We paid for the dress, so you need to pick it up regardless.” She sounded frustrated.

“Fine,” I said and got up.

Mom remained silent as we drove to the store. I felt bad that she was so upset with me that she couldn’t even make small talk, but I was also grateful I didn’t have to put on a happy face. It was painful for me to return to this store. I sighed at the happy, but painful memories from the last time I was there. I just hoped that no one would remember me.

The moment we walked into the store, I knew I had been recognized. The woman who had asked me if I was going to be coming in soon for my bridal gown came over to greet us. “It’s wonderful to see you again. Are you looking for wedding gowns today?” She was a little too happy for it being so early in the morning.

Mom eyed me with confusion and then spoke for me, “No she’s just a bridesmaid. We’re here for her final fitting.”

Just a bridesmaid, I grumbled to myself. It’s probably all I’d ever be, if I even got to be that anymore. I snapped back to the present when the saleslady asked me a question.

“So, is your boyfriend coming by again today? It’s one of my favorite stories to share with customers. You’re somewhat of a celebrity around here, you know.”

Mom looked unhappy and decided to ask her own question instead of allowing me to answer. “I’m afraid I don’t know this story. What did I miss?”

The saleslady opened her mouth, but I interrupted before she could start. “No, he won’t be coming by today.” I shook my head warning Mom not to pursue the story.

“Oh, that’s too bad. Well, just promise you’ll come back here to get your wedding gown,” she said and then whispered, “I’ll give you a great discount as long as we can display your wedding picture on our board.”

I forced a smile and nodded as she left to get my dress.

“What was that all about, young lady?” Mom was really irritated by the story.

“Mom, please just drop it. It’s really nothing... promise,” I could feel my emotions starting to rise to the surface. I squeezed my eyes shut to try to block everything out.

“Here you go,” the saleslady said with a smile. When she looked at my pained face, her expression changed. “Is everything alright?” She looked back and forth between Mom and me, not knowing who was going to answer.

I took a deep breath in and managed, “Yes. Where can I go to change?”

She led me to the dressing room with a confused look on her face, but didn’t ask me any more questions. When I emerged, a smile actually formed on Mom’s face. “You look beautiful, Ash.”

I just shrugged and went to stand in position for the seamstress to start pulling and tugging at the dress. It wasn’t a surprise that there was quite a bit of tailoring to do. I had been working out in the gym almost every day for the past several months and I had hardly eaten anything in the last week. I was glad the wedding was two weeks away, although I doubted I would be invited at all anymore.

As I was about to carefully worm my way out of the pinned dress, Emily walked through the door and marched towards us. Mom stood up to run intercept, but I waved her away. I needed to face Emily, and it was probably best it be in a public place where I might be able to control myself a little better.

“I want you to be in my wedding still, Ashlyn. I’m sorry if I caused you more problems.” She sounded like she’d rehearsed this speech all morning. She continued, “But I need to know you’re not

going to lose it in the middle of everything. I am so stressed about trying to make sure everything turns out just perfect that I can't bear the thought that my new sister-in-law will destroy my perfect day."

I was pretty surprised that I maintained my emotional indifference. "I have enough that I'm dealing with that I don't need to stress about whether or not I'm ruining your big day. So if you don't want me to be in your bridal party, I won't take it personally."

Mom nearly choked when I said those words. "She doesn't mean it, Emily. Of course she is honored to be your bridesmaid."

Emily looked back and forth between the two of us and then spoke carefully. "Thank you for your honesty, Ashlyn. I really want to start things off on the right foot, so I really would like it if you would still consider being in my wedding."

I expected, and maybe hoped a little, that she would slap me and storm out the store. I took another deep breath and said slowly, "I'll try my hardest to put on my best face. I'm sorry if I've caused you any unnecessary anxiety."

The entire store exhaled collectively. I hadn't been aware of the audience we'd attracted until everyone quickly seemed to go about their own business again when Emily came up and hugged me. I gave her a careful hug and then went back towards the dressing room. I saw Mom wipe away a tear and go and hug Emily. Reflexively, I rolled my eyes and closed the door to get dressed.

We went to a restaurant that night with Emily and Mark. Emily sat next to me and tried to keep my spirits up by talking to me about all the wonderful things that were happening for the wedding. I used the time to practice the fake happiness I knew I'd have to master for the wedding. As much as I wanted to be kicked out so I didn't have to go, I knew it was important to my family and I didn't want to let them down. Brian had left me to take care of his family; it was the least that I could do for mine.

Mark and Emily left the following afternoon and wouldn't return for a week and a half, the Thursday prior to their wedding. Emily had given me a task to do in her absence; buy ten boxes of wedding bubbles for the reception. I made sure to let Mom know so she could help remind me to get it. My mind was definitely not on embellishing someone's most romantic night. I spent the rest of Sunday lying in the backyard, staring at the sky, and using my gift on random birds flying by. Mom and Dad left me alone, probably because I had made such an effort the night before.

I cringed when my alarm went off Monday morning. Thanks to the wedding drama, I had been nearly successful in stopping myself from having emotional breakdowns all weekend. The bridal store was the worst by far, but I managed to dodge unwanted questions by not admitting that their fairytale relationship had ended. The drama between Emily and me was apparently quite common in the salon as the stress of the event frequently got to nervous brides.

School was going to be hard, well, at least English class; it was the only place I had to actually face Brian and I still hadn't worked out what I was going to do to cope with it. Thankfully, it was the last week before Spring Break, so I just had to make it five days and I would have nine days to myself.

I drove myself to school and arrived early. I was careful to not pay attention to the vehicles in the parking lot because I didn't need an early morning reminder of Brian. I got to my class ten minutes early and rested my head on the desk, trying to focus again on its coolness. I heard some students getting in a heated argument in the hallway. This time it was a girl who was yelling at her boyfriend. I tried to use my gift to help diffuse the escalating situation, but I was unable to connect with either of them. Confused, I stood up from my desk to get a visual on either of the students. I was able to see the boyfriend towering over the crowd of onlookers, so I tried again to use my gift, hoping to get him to back down and apologize or something. But I still couldn't make a connection. My head started hurting as I tried again, so I went back to my seat and tried to figure out what went wrong. Over the past months, my gift was getting stronger and I was easily able to make connections with anyone within earshot, even people I knew well. This was the second time I'd tried to use my gift on someone since

Brian had left and been unable. Something in my core, aside from my heart, was broken. I needed to allow myself to let Brian go if I ever expected to use my gift on people again. And I knew this was important because Rick was still out there gathering strength. As much as I wanted to fade out of existence because of my misery, I couldn't let Rick win.

My resolve gave me strength enough to endure sitting through English. My heart hurt as he entered the room and took his seat, but I immersed myself in the story we were reading and allowed myself to forget there was anyone else in the room. After class, Brian stayed in his seat, allowing me time to exit without an awkward encounter.

I was proud of myself as I drove home alone that afternoon, having made it through every class without a single tear. Maybe I would be able to avoid another visit with Ms. Swanson.

Tuesday went off without much of a hitch, also, but English was still difficult to get through and I was still struggling with trying to let go of Brian so I could get my gift back. On the drive home, I had an epiphany; I was going to return his ring to him. It seemed reasonable that it was responsible for keeping me tied to him. I went home and looked for it on my nightstand. Of course, I hadn't worn it since the night Stephanie went to the hospital, but I hadn't moved it, either. I frantically looked everywhere for it.

I woke up mad at myself the next morning for not finding it. I started to consider that maybe Brian had already taken it back when he left his watch. That thought made me incredibly sad; surely he wouldn't have taken back his promise ring, even if he was backing out of it. It was too special to me and I didn't think he could have been that cruel.

In my frustration while getting ready for school, I knocked my keys on the floor. They slid far under my bed and I couldn't reach or see them. After returning from the garage with a flashlight, I got down on the floor and peered under my bed. My keys were almost at the wall, but something in the corner caught my eye. When I fished it out, I saw it was the necklace with the promise ring on it. Immediately, a stabbing pain shot through my heart and I had to grab my chest to make sure my heart didn't burst out. The tears that had been absent for days flowed rapidly from my blinking eyes.

I continued to weep for nearly an hour. Finally, I had enough control of myself to call Mom and tell her I overslept so she could call me in and excuse me from my first two classes. It gave me a little time to try to regain my composure and make it so I didn't look like I'd been crying all morning. It also gave me time to consider how I was going to give the ring back to Brian, something that I hadn't thought about once since I decided it was what I needed to do to get over him.

As I pulled into the parking lot, I made sure to find a spot far away from Brian's Jeep. I knew this was going to be especially difficult and didn't need to have to share any unnecessary time close to him. It took me until I was walking to English to finally decide on a plan. I had considered putting it in his locker or his Jeep or even giving it to Stephanie or Kara to give back to him. But I wasn't a coward, or at least that's what I was telling myself. I had to be the one to give it to him, to look in his eyes and let him know I wasn't holding on to him anymore, regardless of how much my heart was telling me it was a lie.

I didn't look at him when he came into English and took his seat far away from me. It took me the entire class of repeating in my mind what I needed to do to allow me to get up at the end of class and walk over towards him instead of making a quick departure.

Brian wasn't paying attention to anyone around him as he slowly put his books in his backpack. I walked up to his desk unnoticed and set the necklace down in front of him without a word.

Startled by the sound, he looked at the necklace and then up to see who had set it there. There was nothing but sadness in his beautiful blue eyes and it killed me to be standing there any longer. As I turned to walk away, he finally said, "This was a gift. You don't have to give it back."

I stopped dead in my tracks and fought with every bit of strength I had not to turn around and grab the necklace back. "It doesn't belong to me anymore," I whispered to the wall in front of me, trying to keep my rising emotions at bay.

I heard him stand up and take a step towards me. I refused to turn around, but my legs wouldn't move forward. "This wasn't how it was supposed to be," he said sadly and walked past me out the door.

I breathed in his scent deeply as he swept past me and then stood there until the teacher returned to class and asked me if everything was okay. I just nodded and walked out the door. I felt the depression settle back into my bones and decided I needed to be home. When I started down the steps to the parking lot, I noticed Brian's Jeep backing out of its spot. It paused for a moment longer than necessary to simply put it in gear, so I knew he spotted me trying to escape, too. There was a small amount of comfort in knowing that he was having a hard time, but that quickly turned into anger. He could have grabbed me in that classroom and kissed me passionately like he used to, completely melting away the past week and a half. But he walked out on me again.

I ran to my car and locked the doors before I started sobbing uncontrollably. When I finally calmed down, I drove straight home and pulled the covers over my head. I didn't hear my phone ringing five different times when Kara was trying to find out what had happened to me. I didn't hear my parents come in and offer me food. I didn't even hear my alarm go off the next morning. When I finally got out of bed, I had already missed my first two classes. I called Mom again and let her know I was okay and was going to school; I had a midterm test in Calculus that I had to be there for. She said she'd call me, but I had to promise to make it on time for the rest of the school year. I didn't know if that was possible or not, but I made the promise anyway.

As I pulled into the parking lot, third period class was just ending. I rushed to my locker to grab my English book and ran to class so I would have time to put my head down on the desk before Brian entered. I knew I wasn't strong enough to face him today, but I couldn't afford to ditch English again; my grade had dropped from an A to a B minus in the few months that Brian sat next to me.

I lifted my head when the teacher started talking about the book we had been discussing all week. I tried to concentrate on the lecture, but found myself trying to look at Brian. I was shocked when my eyes focused on his desk and he wasn't there. I didn't notice if his Jeep was in the parking lot, but I assumed that it had been. Suddenly I felt really bad about giving him the ring back and started considering all the bad things he could have been driven to do.

The feeling was amplified on Friday when he didn't show up again. It was the last day of school before Spring Break and most of the classes had midterm exams scheduled, including English. I was left with the guilt of not only breaking Brian's heart, but now he was going to flunk out of school in the last half of what was supposed to be his last semester. But I had plenty of time to beat myself up, as I returned to my bed immediately after getting out of PE.

I shared in the excitement of the other students because it was Spring Break, but it was for a completely different reason. Many were headed off on extravagant trips, trying to enjoy the last vacation of their high school days. Others were excited to spend time with their friends without having to worry about homework and exams. I was happy because I got to spend a week not having to be around anything that reminded me of Brian. I was planning on spending most of the week in my room with my covers over my head or lying in the backyard watching birds. I was able to momentarily put out of my mind my obligations at the end of the week when my brother was getting married.

I was peaceful in my solidarity during the first several days of my vacation. Mom and Dad were busy trying to get all the last minute stuff ready for the wedding. Kara left with her family on Saturday morning for a five day trip to Hawaii. She was going to return just in time to go with me to the wedding. I planned to spend Friday night with her so she could help me get ready on Saturday. The limo was going to pick us both up an hour before the ceremony. I was glad my best friend was going to be my support during the event that was surely going to push me to my limits.

On Tuesday night, Emily called and reminded me to get the bubbles. I had procrastinated because I didn't want to go out and interact with people. But I promised I would take care of it and I still needed to pick up my dress, too.

On Wednesday afternoon, I drove to the bridal shop. I had to try on the dress one more time to make sure everything was just right. It took about fifteen minutes and I was back out the door with only one more errand to run.

Getting the bubbles was easy; I was in and out of the party supply store in five minutes. I smelled burgers as I stepped outside and suddenly felt the need to grab a bite to eat before going home. Pulling up to the restaurant, I noticed the drive thru line was extraordinarily long, so I decided to go inside. As I approached the door, I looked inside and saw Brian sitting at a table with Stephanie and two other girls. One girl I recognized as Stephanie's friend, Rachael, but the girl who was sitting next to Brian was not familiar to me. I thought she was the new girl who started school in the middle of February, but I wasn't sure. She was obviously flirting with him, touching his arm, and he was laughing along with whatever had just been said.

My stomach lurched and I ran over to a bush to throw up. A passerby came over to see if I needed help, but I waved them away. When I saw a couple of people change their mind about dining at the restaurant, I decided I needed to get out of there as quickly as I could. I looked one last time inside, just to make sure I'd seen everything correctly, as I rushed back to my car.

I guess I always knew he'd move on, but I had secretly hoped he would stay as miserable as I was until we had graduated and gone our separate ways. It hadn't even been two weeks since our breakup and I thought what we had was worth a little more mourning time. I sped home and retreated to my bed where I cried myself to sleep.

Thursday morning, Emily called to find out if I bought her bubbles. *Those damn bubbles*, I cursed silently, but tried to keep my composure as I assured her everything went well. She was going to be busy all day, but told me she was looking forward to seeing me at the rehearsal on Friday evening. That left me the rest of the day plus most of the next day to figure out how I was going to put on a convincing show of happiness.

Dad surprised me on Friday morning by taking my car to the shop to have the oil changed and tires rotated, leaving me completely stranded. It was one thing to self-inflict seclusion, but when it was forced on me, I felt claustrophobic and needed to get out of the house.

I called Kara to see if she could hang out with me, but she said she was jet lagged and needed a few hours to get caught up on sleep. I didn't have a few hours; I was going to go insane if I sat around the house any longer. So I decided to walk up to the grocery store near my house.

On my way home, someone walked up and matched my pace behind me. I clenched my hand into a fist and turned around quickly to take a swipe at my would-be assailant. My fist connected with his jaw and he yelled, "Ow! What did you do that for?"

His voice was familiar, but I couldn't place it until he stood up, rubbing his jaw. "What do you want?" I snapped at Michael, rubbing my knuckles.

"I broke down over there and saw you walking, so I thought I'd see if you'd let me use your phone to give Kara a call," he said.

"I don't have my phone on me and Kara said she was sleeping," I said with spite.

"Could I use the phone at your house? I mean, you don't live *that* far."

I closed my eyes and took a couple of breaths before I said, "Fine," and resumed my walk at a quicker pace.

Michael didn't have any trouble keeping up with me, but hung back a little.

When we were getting close, I broke the silence and said, "You can use the phone in the kitchen, but I have shower."

He ignored me and he said, "You know, he's completely miserable, too."

I just growled quietly at his remark. "Why are you doing this?"

He ignored me again. "Are you really that heartless that you don't even care that he's hurting because of you?"

I turned around to face Michael, hoping I'd have another opportunity to punch him. "It was his choice to leave. I am trying my damndest to understand why and how to move on, as he apparently has. I don't need you lecturing me." I turned around and walked away shaking. I expected Michael to give up and find another way to call for help, but he caught back up with me and continued to push my buttons.

"I tried to warn you both that you were going to hurt everyone who was close to you. Maybe I have a special gift, too," he said arrogantly.

"I never asked for any of this. I wish everyone would just leave me the hell alone so I could go back to living my life safely behind the walls I worked so hard to build up." Tears were starting to stream down my face and I was embarrassed that I lost control in front of Michael.

Thankfully, we were walking up my driveway. I focused on getting my key out and opening the door. Without looking back at him again, I said, "The phone's in there. You can wait in here or outside."

I left him in the living room and headed straight for the bathroom, slamming the door shut loudly before turning on the water. I took an extra long time standing in the hot water, crying uncontrollably, hoping he'd be long gone by the time I got out. I felt dirty everywhere, even after I had washed twice. As hard as I tried, I just couldn't wash away my misery.

Finally, I turned the shower off and wrapped myself in a robe, glancing at myself in the mirror on the way out. I looked almost as bad as I felt. I was really hoping Michael was gone so he wouldn't have the satisfaction in knowing how much he had upset me.

"Michael?" I called out as I opened the bathroom door.

I listened very hard for any signs of someone being in the house, but it was completely silent. I let out a sigh of relief and walked towards the front door to lock it.

As I rounded the corner to the living room, I let out a little scream, startled by a person standing there. I was furious that Michael hadn't answered my call and I opened my mouth to yell at him when my eyes focused and I saw it wasn't Michael; Brian was standing in my living room, looking at me with an unfamiliar expression.

I started shaking uncontrollably. "You're not supposed to be here," I stuttered.

He took a step towards me and started to speak, but I took a step backwards and then hit the floor before his words reached my ears.

I woke up on the couch with my robe still wrapped around me. For a moment, I thought maybe I had just imagined Brian being there, but then he shifted next to me and I knew I was either still dreaming or he was really there.

I opened my mouth to say something, but he put his finger to his lips and said in a soft voice, "Ash, please give me a chance to explain. Then if you still want me to leave, I'll go and never bother you again."

I closed my mouth and nodded.

He sat silently for a few moments, just looking in my eyes. "I've never seen them so black," he finally said sadly. He went to reach for my cheek, but then he shook his head, breaking our eye contact. "I was wrong," he started with a determination in his voice. "It wasn't your fault I wasn't there for Steph. She didn't need me there to keep her safe; she needed me to be her brother. You were the one she turned to when she needed help, not me. I blew it all by myself. And then I turned my back on you to help my family not realizing that you had become an important part of that family." He stopped and closed his eyes, allowing a single tear to fall down his right cheek.

I fought not to reach up and wipe it away.

After the tear fell off his jaw, he cleared his throat and continued. "I had a lot time to think over the past two weeks; in fact, that's mostly what I did. It was so painful to be away from you and when you gave me back the ring..." He sighed. "...it felt like everything we had meant nothing to you. I tried to blame you for taking away the little bit of us I was holding on to, but going away for those five days allowed me the time and distance I needed to put everything in perspective. I don't deserve your forgiveness, but I'm asking for it anyway. I'm hoping you were as miserable away from me as I was from you and will give me another chance."

When he stopped, I could feel the electricity in the air just being close to him. It was getting harder to resist jumping on top of him and losing myself. But I had to be strong. I couldn't just give in to my heart when my head had so many questions. "You promised you were going to be there for me afterwards," I said softly, but I didn't let him respond. "All those times when it would have been so easy to let ourselves lose control, but you stopped so you would be there for me afterwards and you left anyway." I could feel a ton of emotions fighting to get to the surface. I never thought I would get to voice all that I'd been feeling since he left. "You destroyed me when you left, but I couldn't hate you for it. I blamed myself for letting you get close to me. I blamed myself for Stephanie getting hurt. And I felt terribly guilty for hurting you when I gave the ring back to you. But it wasn't my choice to leave. It wasn't me who was out with a bunch of girls the other night, laughing with the cute one flirting with me." Anger was apparently winning the fight for control of my emotions. Everything was coming out and I didn't even know if I was making sense anymore. "You could've stopped me when I gave the ring back. How could you just walk away? Didn't the last five months mean anything to you?" I couldn't control myself anymore and the tears I'd been fighting back exploded out of me.

If I hadn't upset him by all my accusations, I was sure my hysterics scared him away. I couldn't see or feel anything while I lay broken on the couch. And then I felt his hand touch my face, wiping a stream of tears away. Instinctively, I threw my arms around him and buried my head in his chest, sobbing harder.

He initially seemed shocked, but stroked my hair and kissed the top of my head. His scent, his touch, the energy between us all helped me get control over myself, but I refused to let him go. I was afraid that if I did, he would get up and leave. I held him tighter.

"Can't breathe," he said and I released him.

I cringed internally as I waited for him to stand up and leave. But he just sat there staring at me. I eventually got brave enough to look in his eyes, hoping I'd get some clue of what he was thinking. But before I had time to wonder, he pulled me in and kissed me. Tears flowed down my face, but it didn't stop either of us for a long time.

When we eventually parted, I sat there with my eyes closed, trying to hold on to the sensation of his lips on mine. I had one last question to ask before I would allow myself to believe any of this was real again. "What about next time?" I asked quietly.

"What do you mean?" Neither of us had moved to put any distance between us.

"What happens next time you question yourself because something bad happens? Because bad things are going to happen around me and everyone close to me is at risk. Are you willing to put yourself - your family - in danger to hold on to this?" I asked, gesturing to the two of us. I swallowed the emotion that was threatening to erupt again. I wasn't sure I wanted to hear his answer, but I had to know the answer before I allowed myself to get lost in him again.

"You can't know for sure that something bad is going to happen," he said questioning my reasoning.

"Yes, I can. I have to show you something, something that I should have told you about long ago," I said and walked to my room.

He followed, but paused at the doorway as an apparently painful memory passed through his mind. It was at that moment I realized that the last time he had been there was the day he left me. And I was standing there in only a robe. I suddenly felt very self-conscious and pulled the straps tighter.

"Sorry," he said and came over to where I was standing by my nightstand.

I took out my drawing of the shack and showed it to him. He looked at it and then at me with a confused expression. "What's this?" he said, trying to keep the skepticism out of his voice.

I told him about the mysterious email. "This was the best I could do to recreate what I saw in the photo," I explained. "I tried locating it using satellite maps, but I haven't been able to find it."

"What do you think it means?" he asked, sounding very concerned. I wondered if he was considering my question about really wanting to be with someone who had danger following them around.

"I think it means that someone else knows about me and wants me to confront Rick." I was surprised when the words came out of my mouth because I had never really considered why I had received that message.

"You can't do that, Ash. He's a murderer. Just because you can see him doesn't mean that you are responsible for stopping him." His eyes were pleading me not to continue this line of thought.

"I have to do this. And if you can't promise me you'll stick with me through it all, no matter how bad this gets, I need you to go." The words hurt coming out of my mouth. Before he had a chance to answer, though, I continued. He had to know all of it. "When you left, more than just my heart broke. I lost most of my ability to use my gift. I couldn't connect with people anymore. That's why I had to give you the ring back. I was holding on to you and it was making me weak. I can figure out how to use my gift again without you, but I need you to make the decision that's right for you and everyone you care about."

He sat on my bed holding his face in his hands. After a few minutes, I decided to get dressed. I was sure once he left, I'd end up in a heap on the floor and I didn't really want my parents coming home to me lying naked on the floor of my room.

I opened my closet, pulled out the first shirt I could find and slipped it over my head, allowing my robe to fold down to my waist. Then I walked over to my dresser and pulled out a pair of panties and slid them on, completely unaware of my audience. Once I got my pants on and threw my robe in the dirty clothes pile in the corner, I turned around to see Brian looking at me. "Are you trying to influence my decision?" he asked with a hint of amusement.

"Oh, sorry," I whispered.

When he stood up, I expected him to walk out the door, never looking back. But instead, he walked over to me and held the back of my neck in his strong hands. This was going to be a lot harder than I imagined.

"I don't know what it is about you, Ashlyn Taylor, that makes it impossible to want to go even after everything you've told me. I tried to convince myself to leave. I know what you told me is true and the likelihood of really bad things happening is very good, but I couldn't come up with any scenario where I would leave you again. I think you're stuck with me, if you will take me back."

I didn't even think; I just pulled his lips to mine, kissing him with a passion I thought had died when he left. As we moved together towards the bed, I stopped. "We can't do this. Not now." I don't know how I did it because I wanted nothing more than to be with him again.

He stepped back from me and I nearly fell trying to find my balance again. "You're right," he said and smiled. "We have a couple of days of Spring Break left. Stay with me this weekend."

My face got sad as I said, "I can't. I have my brother's wedding tomorrow and the rehearsal tonight. I'm staying with Kara tonight so she can help me get ready tomorrow. We're being picked up from her house and going straight to the church."

“Oh, yeah,” he said, suddenly remembering my plans. “Maybe you could stay with me tonight instead of going to Kara’s? I promise I’d have you to her house in enough time for you to get ready,” he said hopefully.

“I’m sure Kara wouldn’t mind,” I said hoping I was right. “Would you be my date for the wedding tomorrow?” I asked awkwardly.

“I doubt that would go over with your family after all I’ve put you through,” he said cautiously.

“Please? You don’t have to go to the ceremony; Michael’s going to meet Kara at the reception. Maybe you could go with him?” I begged.

“Ash, I’m not going to leave you. Let’s just see what happens, okay?” He lifted my chin so he could look in my eyes. “They already look happier,” he said peering in my eyes and leaned in to kiss me gently. “How long do we have now?” he asked looking at the clock.

“The rehearsal’s at five with a dinner afterwards. I can probably escape unnoticed by eight or so.”

“It’s eleven thirty now, so that doesn’t give us a lot of time,” he said with a mischievous smile.

“Do you think you can behave?” I asked flirtatiously and kissed his chin.

“I’m not gonna make a promise I don’t think I can keep,” he said both playfully and seriously. Within a second, our lips were locked in a passionate embrace.

“I think I’ve reached my limit. Anymore and I think you’re in trouble,” he warned after we’d been kissing for a long time.

I smiled brightly. It seemed like an eternity since I’d been happy. “Trouble is my middle name,” I said innocently, but moved back to give him some space. “So, you said something about you went away for five days. I knew you weren’t at school, but I thought I had driven you insane or something,” I said lightheartedly, although at the time, it didn’t feel so ridiculous.

He smiled, melting me. “My grandpa paid for me to fly up to his house to celebrate my birthday,” he said.

I frowned remembering I had forgotten his birthday Monday. I didn’t even remember what I was doing that day, but I know it had something to do with trying to forget him.

“What’s wrong? What did I say?”

“I missed your birthday. I’m so sorry,” I said.

He laughed. “Would it have been better if you *had* remembered it?”

I shrugged and then remembered his present was still in the trash can. “Close your eyes,” I said suddenly. I didn’t want him to see that I threw it away.

When he shut his eyes, I walked quietly to the trash can and retrieved the gift from under the papers and used tissues. I walked back over to him and held the gift in front of him. “Happy late birthday,” I said apologetically.

“What, no red bow?” he joked and then reached to take the gift.

“You’d better let me unwrap it,” I said as I crinkled my nose thinking about all the snot that must be all over the wrapping paper. I carefully picked the paper off the box and handed it to him. “I hope you didn’t replace yours already,” I said.

“This is really cool, Ash. I have no idea why I never bought another one after New Year’s. When I was on the airplane, I was kicking myself for not having it.” He dropped it on my bed and grabbed my waist, dipping me backwards, kissing me all the way up my neck to my lips. I shivered with delight.

“So you’re officially an adult now. Scary,” I teased him.

“It doesn’t feel any different. I was expecting something life changing to happen, like a secret power that emerged when I reached adulthood. It was disappointing, really.”

I laughed. “So there really isn’t anything for me to look forward to? Just getting older and being able to vote?” I joked.

He chuckled but was obviously already thinking about something else. "You owe me big for missing the actual day. I'm thinking a private party tonight on my boat," he said confidently.

"Fine, fine. I'll call Kara," I said reaching for my phone on the nightstand.

As soon as I had it in my hands, Brian pulled me down on the bed and sat on top of me while I dialed Kara's number. "Kara? Hey, quick question," I said.

"Are you okay? You sound... different," she said sounding worried.

"I'm fine. Really," I said reassuringly.

Before I could ask her anything, Brian grabbed the phone from my hand.

"Kara? It's Brian."

I heard a squeal in the phone as Brian was forced to move it away from his ear.

"Are you okay?" "Are you sure?" "Okay. Listen real quick. I need to borrow Ash tonight. Do you think you could cover for her?" "Uh huh." "Of course." "I promise I'll have her there by then."

"Okay, I'll tell her." "Alright. I'm going. Bye."

"Kara wants you to call her as soon as I'm gone," he paraphrased.

I smiled. I was glad she was still my friend, even after the burden I'd been for the past two weeks. "When are you going?" I asked.

"Whenever you take me home, I guess," he said mysteriously. "Michael took my Jeep when I arrived."

"You sure had a lot of faith I'd accept your apology," I started. "But I don't have my car today. I think Dad's supposed to bring it back around two. I hope you didn't have anything to do before then."

"I had nothing planned for today but making up to you for the past two weeks," he said sincerely.

"Did you really have this planned?" I asked.

"Not the specifics, but yeah. Pretty much after I saw you the other night, I knew I needed you more than anything. So I asked Kara and Michael for suggestions."

"So Michael was a total ass to me because you asked him to be?"

"I didn't tell him to do anything particular, just to make sure you were home and I could come by. Why? What did he do?" He sounded honestly surprised by my question.

I edited the events a little. "He just told me that you were unhappy, too. Maybe he was trying to feel the waters for you or something. He got me pretty upset, though, so I wasn't sorry I punched him in the jaw when he first walked up behind me."

"You punched him?" Brian laughed so hard he rolled off me and onto the bed. "I wish I would've seen that."

There was something that was still bothering me. "I don't understand something. When I saw you the other night, you were laughing and looked like you were having a good time with Steph and those other girls. I was pretty sure you had gotten over me and..." I trailed off because it was painful remembering how much that had hurt.

"You thought I was on a date with Heather?" He sounded offended, but I wondered if he was just playing it up a little.

"She was obviously flirting with you. Don't tell me you didn't notice," I scolded.

"I didn't. I don't even remember laughing. I was pretty miserable, but Steph insisted that I get out of my room and interact with people again before I became legally insane."

"Was she trying to set you up with that girl?" I asked feeling betrayed.

"You'll have to ask her about that, but I think she was Rachael's friend and begged to come when she heard I was going to be there." He shrugged indifferently.

"It looked pretty bad from my perspective," I said sadly.

"I guess we'll just have to make sure she sees us on Monday at school," he said and rolled on his side to kiss me again.

"Except we only have one class together now," I complained.

"I might be able to switch it back. I just thought it would make things easier if we didn't have to be around each other."

"You're probably right," I agreed. "Will you come back and sit by me again in English or is your grade as bad as mine and think you'd be better off sitting away from me still?"

"Are you kidding? And deprive Abby of her daily irritation? You know she's insanely jealous of you, right?"

"I doubt that, but if it gets you back next to me, I'll go along with it," I smiled.

"I missed you," he said caressing my face with his hand.

Our foreheads touched and I sighed happily at our closeness.

"So tell me about your trip," I said while we were still ridiculously close.

Brian told me that the private investigator his grandfather had hired at Christmas had found some important information on their past. Apparently, there had been a lawsuit filed on their behalf after his parents' accident. The other party settled the wrongful death suit for a large sum of money, which was put into a trust fund for Brian and one for Stephanie. They could receive their inheritance on their eighteenth birthday, but since their adoption records had been sealed, no one was able to contact them.

"I'm so sorry," I ended up saying to the news.

"Don't be. I mourned for my parents for many, many years and have accepted their passing. In fact, it was because of you that I was finally able to really move on." He took a deep breath before he explained. "I had always felt sorry for myself because of everything I'd had to suffer through when I was younger. But when I saw you for the first time over three years ago, I felt like maybe there was a reason for everything that happened. When we started dating, I found myself feeling grateful for all that had happened that had led me to you. Who knows where I'd be now if things didn't unfold the way they had? And now, if I invest wisely, I'm pretty much set for life with the money I have."

"What did Steph say about it?"

"She was shocked and then tried to get me to loan her enough money for a new car until she gets hers in a year and a half," he laughed.

I laughed, too, and then asked a little more seriously, "How's she doing?"

He shrugged. "She's almost back to normal, but still won't talk to anyone about it. Scott had the nerve to send her flowers after she refused to take his calls, but she threw them away without even reading the card. We haven't heard anything from him since."

"Good for her," I said distantly.

"Hey, I hope you aren't blaming yourself for what he did," he said with concern.

I didn't respond. I suppose it really only mattered that she was okay.

He sensed my hesitation and quickly changed the topic. "So, how's everything going with the wedding stuff?"

I laughed remembering the past two weeks and told him about all the drama.

"It was probably my fault, huh?" he concluded after I'd finished.

I nodded. "I didn't want to be the token bridesmaid anyway. She was bound to find something to get mad at me about. I was either going to be too happy or too depressed. We managed to work everything out, though."

He held me close and ran his fingers through my knotted hair the whole time I was talking.

I cringed at how awful I must look. "My hair dried before I combed it. It's gonna be a pain to do anything with now," I complained.

"Do you have spray conditioner?" Brian asked out of nowhere.

I went to my parents' bathroom and got the spray conditioner, returning quickly to Brian. I took a seat in front of him and he sprayed my hair and started gently combing through the knots. It was so

relaxing to sit there and have him take care of me. I started drifting off to sleep. Before I was completely out, Brian scooped me up and laid me on the bed. He laid down next to me and held me in his arms. I felt so warm and happy all over, I didn't want to fall asleep and miss it. But sleep came quickly.

I awoke suddenly when I heard the front door close and Dad yelling for me.

"Ash, are you here?"

Oh, crap, I thought. It didn't look good that I was barely dressed and lying in bed with Brian, who had also fallen asleep with me. I gazed at him lovingly for a moment, watching him sleep peacefully, and then shook him gently to wake him up.

"Dad's home," I whispered frantically to him.

He shook his head and rubbed his eyes, trying to focus on where he was. I could tell when everything hit him because a smile crossed his face.

"Go in my closet," I begged, still whispering.

"Ashlyn, are you okay?"

"Yeah, Dad. I was just taking a nap. Give me just a minute and I'll be out," I said trying to keep the urgency out of my voice.

Brian was amused and decided to take advantage of my terror. He slowly moved his hands up my side all the way to the back of my head and kissed me passionately for just long enough for me to try to push him away.

I was swooning from his touch, but scared that we'd get caught. *"Please,"* I begged pushing him backwards into my crowded closet. *"It'll just be a minute. Promise. Please just keep quiet."*

He finally walked in and sat on the floor of my closet.

I fanned my face trying to compose myself before walking out to the kitchen. *"Hi Dad. Everything okay with my car?"* I tried to ask casually.

Dad eyed me curiously. *"Yes, your car is fine. Are you okay?"*

"Yes, why wouldn't I be?" I thought I was doing a good job acting normal, and then I realized *"normal"* for me over the past two weeks was depressed.

"You look happy," he said curiously.

I shrugged indifferently. *"I guess the excitement of the wedding is starting to wear off on me,"* I lied.

"It's nice to see you like this again," he said with a grin. *"Don't forget you have to be at the church by five tonight."*

"I'll be there, although I'm not sure what I need to rehearse. I mean, my role is to walk down the aisle holding a bouquet and not fall down. I think I've rehearsed walking enough that I shouldn't have to go tonight."

"Ash, please be on your best behavior. This is important to your mom and Mark," Dad warned.

"Fine," I said. *"I'll behave. Do you have to go back to work now?"* I hoped I didn't sound desperate for him to leave, even though I was.

"Yeah, I have a client meeting this afternoon and then I'm going to join everyone for drinks before the rehearsal. You can come, too, if you don't mind sipping on Cokes while the rest of us try to drink enough to make the rehearsal more enjoyable."

"No, that's okay. I think I'll just meet you all at the church," I said.

"Okay, well, I'm going to grab a quick sandwich and then go. Your keys are on the hook by the door."

"Thanks, Dad. You're the best," I said sincerely.

"It really is good to see you back to yourself again. I'll see you this evening."

"Bye, Dad," I said and walked quickly back to my room.

"Stay there until he leaves," I whispered to the closet.

“Stay where?” he asked from behind me. He was lying on the bed with his shirt off.

I lost my train of thought for a moment as I marveled at his well defined chest. “I thought you wanted to spend the weekend with me,” I scolded him when I’d finally recovered and walked over to the bed.

“I can always stay with you here if you get in trouble,” he offered. “But your dad isn’t going to come back here. He’s too pleased that your eyes have their sparkle back in them again.” When he said that, he sat up and ran his thumb across my right eyebrow. “They’re almost green again,” he said happily.

He was just too irresistible sitting there with his shirt off. I sat down next to him and traced my fingers over his chest, eliciting shivers all over his body. It was nice to make him swoon like he made me. I had to keep in mind that Dad was still in the house, but I couldn’t resist leaning in and kissing his chest right above his heart. I felt it speed up as my lips touched his bare skin.

Without being aware of what I was doing, I focused hard on making Dad leave. *You should go before you’re late.*

A moment later, Dad yelled, “Bye, Ash. See you tonight!”

“Love you,” I yelled to Dad, staring directly at Brian.

“I love you, too,” Brian answered. “Did you just do what I think you did?”

“That depends. If you think I had something to do with Dad’s departure, yes,” I said smugly. It really felt good to be able to influence people again. In reflecting on it, I was pretty sure that was the first time I’d ever used it on him.

Suddenly his body posture shifted. “Do you really think I broke you when I left?” he asked a little sadly.

“I think that you have made me stronger from the first afternoon we were together. You are like an extra muscle I get to flex,” I said, squeezing his arm. “When you left, I lost the strength that you added to me.”

“I felt broken, too,” he admitted. “It never felt like I’d done the right thing. I don’t know why it took me so long to come back to you.”

I resumed tracing his muscles on his chest, enjoying every shared touch and every involuntary twitch I caused. I sighed, “You really should put your shirt back on before you get yourself in trouble.”

“Silly, Ashlyn,” he said and kissed the top of my head. “So, do you want to go get something to eat?”

Chapter Eighteen – Rehearsal

It was hard to drive away when I dropped him off at his house after lunch. We spent a couple of hours talking like the past two weeks never happened. The whole day seemed surreal, especially reflecting back on it. Within a minute of pulling away from his house, I received a text message.

Call as soon as you get away. I miss you so much. –B

I had about thirty minutes before I had to be at the rehearsal, so I decided I would call Kara from the church before I had to be inside. As I waited for her to answer the phone, I glanced around the parking lot noticing all the unfamiliar cars, feeling very disconnected.

“Okay. So tell me what’s going on?” She startled me when she answered the phone.

We briefly talked about who coordinated what with the reunion and how it all happened.

“So you guys are really going to do something together tonight? All night?” she asked with great curiosity.

“I guess so. He seems to think we need to celebrate his birthday. Something about his boat or something. The details didn’t seem to matter too much,” I said trying not to smile too big.

“It’s nice to hear you happy again, Ash. You don’t know how bad you scared me these past two weeks. I was starting to think your parents might have the right idea by sending you to a shrink.”

“Thanks for being there for me. I know I wasn’t easy to be around. You really saved me that first morning when you came over. I don’t think I ever thanked you for that. But I think I owe you my life for everything you’ve done.”

“How about you tell me what Brian meant in his note about your gift and the ‘secret’ he was going to keep?” She sounded like she’d been dying to ask me that question for weeks.

I sighed. *“I’m not sure you really want to know,”* I said sadly.

“I know that Michael knows, too. He won’t say anything to me except it is your secret to tell. Please, Ash. I’m your best friend. Don’t keep me in the dark on something that is obviously so important to you.”

I couldn’t argue with her logic and I didn’t know how to avoid telling her any longer so I just blurt it out. *“I have the ability to influence people’s decisions by willing them to do things.”*

There was silence for a few moments while she processed what I had said. *“If you don’t want to tell me, Ash, just say so. You don’t have to make up things.”*

“I’m not making anything up, Kara. I’ve had this ability all my life. Do you remember that day when Jason broke up with me to take Abigail to the dance? When she and Jason walked outside?”

“Yeah,” she said hesitantly. *“Of course. People talked about the timing of those birds for months. It drove Abby crazy to hear people laughing at her.”* She was almost beside herself as she thought about Abigail being humiliated. Then I heard the realization hit; she took a sharp, sudden breath in. *“You didn’t... I mean that couldn’t have been you, was it? How is that even possible? Are you like the bird whisperer or something?”*

She was taking it better than Michael had, even if she sounded a little hysterical. *“I can will animals to do things, but people, too. Please don’t freak out on me or anything. I’ve never used it on you. Most of the time, I use it to talk the Brian across campus. But when I need to, I use my gift to do good things like break up fights or prevent someone from breaking the law or something.”*

“Will you show me how it works sometime?” she asked innocently.

She was my best friend and I owed her for so much. *“Of course. But can I ask you a favor?”*

“Sure,” she said quickly.

“Please don’t tell anyone about this. There are a lot of bad things that go along with having this gift. Also, tell Michael that you know now. Maybe he won’t hate me so much if he knows I told you,” I added.

“He doesn’t hate you, Ash.”

I rolled my eyes, but suddenly realized the time. "Kara, I have to let you go. It's time for me to play the dutiful sister-in-law and go pretend to be happy."

"*But you are happy, Ash. I can hear it in your voice,*" she commented.

"I love you, Kara. I'll bring my stuff by later tonight, okay? Your parents won't think it's weird if I leave my car there, will they?"

"*No, they went up north to the cabin for the weekend. Maybe I'll invite Michael over if you're not going to stay the night,*" she said trailing off to a happy thought.

"I'll call before I come over. See you later. And thank you," I said and hung up the phone.

I walked into the church, trying to hide my smile. Before I had a chance to find anyone I knew, I was pulled into position at the front of a procession line.

"You two will be the first to walk in," the wedding coordinator was explaining to me and the groomsman next to me.

When she moved on to the next couple, I tuned her out and started looking for my parents. Dad was by the altar with Mark, laughing a little too loudly; they obviously enjoyed a few drinks at the bar. Mom was talking with a homely woman, who I guessed to be Emily's mother. Other than that, I didn't see another familiar face.

The groomsman decided to try to get to know me while we waited for everyone else to get their instructions. "Hi. I'm Brandon. Are you a friend of Emily's?"

I decided to be polite since I was stuck in the church for the next hour. "Not really. I'm Mark's sister, Ashlyn. I think I remember Mark talking about you. You guys work together, right?"

"Yeah, we became friends when we started carpooling to the office. I didn't see you at the bar before."

"Since I can't legally drink, I didn't think it would be much fun," I said.

He laughed. "I didn't have a thing to drink and had a blast. Your dad is quite funny once he's had a few."

"Oh, no. He didn't sing, did he?" I was so embarrassed that Dad was already making a spectacle of himself and the wedding was still a day away. No wonder Mom wasn't looking at him.

Brandon laughed some more. He had a very pleasant laugh. "Yeah. I can't wait for the reception tomorrow. Might be worth staying sober for."

I wanted nothing more than to be done with the whole wedding thing. I didn't know how I was going to survive the reception if Brian didn't show up. *Maybe I should make him reconsider,* I thought to myself and smiled.

"What's so amusing?" Brandon asked, apparently paying attention to me still.

"Oh, just remembering some of Dad's 'songs'," I lied. I decided I needed to change the topic really fast. "So, are you in town for just the weekend or are you staying longer?"

"I'm heading back to Cali on Monday. Know of any good places I should visit? I have all day Sunday and half of Monday to find something to do."

"There are lots of golf courses, if you're into that. There's also a music festival downtown all weekend. It sounded like it was going to be pretty fun and there are even a couple of mainstream bands playing."

"That sounds pretty cool. Would you like to go with me?"

I had to quickly think of an excuse. "I already have plans for the entire weekend. I'm gonna try to ditch out of this as soon as I can. My girlfriend and I are having a slumber party tonight."

"Oh, sounds more interesting than the bachelor party," he commented. "So you're not headed out with the other girls then?"

"I think I'd ruin their plans if they had to take a minor along with them." Secretly, I was a little hurt that Emily hadn't said anything to me. I was sure my reasoning was correct, but still... I also wasn't too much fun to be around the last time she was out, so I'm sure that weighed in her decision.

Thankfully, the wedding coordinator returned and cued Brandon and me to start walking down the aisle. As directed, I had to put my arm through his as we walked towards the front of the church. When we got to the end and were supposed to part, he reached around and grabbed my backside.

I was upset with myself for not handling it better. I didn't need for some guy to be hitting on me, ruining my perfectly wonderful day. As the next couple came and took their places, I saw Brandon bump knuckles with his friend who had just joined him.

I shot an angry look at Mark, but he was too busy laughing about something to notice me. Mom glared at me when she caught me making faces at Mark. So I gave up. The rest of the rehearsal went by slowly. I just stood there and became nearly invisible. It was ironic that had things not changed, this is exactly what I would have wanted.

After the ceremony, the bride and groom walked out of the church and we filed out in reverse order. When it came time to latch on to Brandon, I said, "I think I got this part," and took a detour to go sit by Mom.

She was in the middle of a conversation with Emily's mom, but at a lull, she introduced me. "Helen, this is my daughter, Ashlyn."

"Nice to meet you," I said cordially.

"Emily's told me about you. I hope you'll be able to put a smile on for pictures tomorrow," she said curtly.

My eyes got big as I looked to Mom for help. Instead, she said in a patronizing tone, "She's going to be on her best behavior."

My mouth dropped open then I stormed away. Maybe it wouldn't be so hard to hide my newfound happiness. I found Dad to get directions to the restaurant, but was hoping to get the reprieve to ditch dinner all together.

"Dad, please? Can I just head over to Kara's house now? No one here will even miss me," I begged.

"Your mom's already mad at me. I'll be on the couch tonight if I let you leave early. Sit by me and I'll try to keep it interesting for you," he said with a wink.

"Fine," I sighed. "But I'm leaving as soon as I'm done eating."

"Do you have plans or something?" Dad asked suspiciously.

"Just going to Kara's."

Suddenly, Mark and Emily were walking towards us. I tried to find an escape route, but failed. I turned away and cringed as they walked up and greeted Dad.

"Oh, hello, Ashlyn. I didn't see you there," Emily said innocently.

I rolled my eyes and turned around with a fake smile on my face. "Hi, Emily. Well, everything seemed to go well here today. How was your flight?"

"It was horrible," she started.

I tuned her words out as she started explaining about a seat mix and having to sit next to a man who smelled. I kept smiling, nodding and responding when appropriate.

"Well, we should get going. Our reservations are for six and it's nearly five forty-five now," Mark said, obviously tired of hearing the story, too.

I stuck close to Dad as we walked out of the church, assuming I'd be safe with him. But when we got just outside the main doors, Brandon was standing there waiting for me.

"Hey, Ashlyn. Can I get a ride with you to the restaurant?"

I started to tell him no, but Dad gave me a nudge and nodded his head in encouragement. "Yeah, sure. I'm parked over there," I said reluctantly, glaring at Dad.

"Great!" he said enthusiastically. "Hey Darrin, I'm catching a ride with Ashlyn," he yelled to one of the other groomsmen who gave him an enthusiastic thumbs up.

I walked to my car at a fast pace and he almost had to jog to keep up. "What's the hurry?" he asked as I reached the driver's door.

"Oh, I just wanted to make sure I got a place to park," I said and shrugged.

When I sat down in the car, I tried to see if I could use my gift to contact Brian, but I was too far away. I checked my phone, but there weren't any new messages. I frowned in frustration as Brandon sat down and closed his door.

"Expecting a call?" he asked.

"Sort of," I said, but I wasn't going to elaborate.

The restaurant was only a couple of minutes away. Unfortunately, the parking lot was full and the only spot left was in the far corner. I turned the key off and reached for my door handle when Brandon grabbed my right hand and pulled me over to his lips. I struggled, and even with my toned muscles, I wasn't able to get free. *Stop kissing her and get out of the car*, I commanded, instinctively using my gift to free myself.

I felt him smile and back off, reaching for the door handle. I was so furious that I jumped out of my car, slammed my door shut, and ran into the restaurant. I went straight to the bathroom, where I washed my mouth out at least ten times before going into a stall to call Brian.

"Hey, Ash. Are you done already?"

It was so nice to hear his voice again. I almost forgot why I called... almost. "Brian, something bad just happened. I'm so angry and embarrassed. I don't know what to do!" It was hard to keep my voice down.

"Calm down. Tell me what happened."

"The stupid groomsman started hitting on me in the church then made me give him a ride to the restaurant. And when I tried to get out..." I started crying and could say it out loud.

"Ash? What happened? Did he hurt you?" I could hear the anger in his voice.

"He didn't hurt me. He kissed me." I burst out hysterically, but Brian was silent. When I calmed down, I continued. "Did you hear me? He grabbed me and kissed me. I tried to fight him off, but I wasn't strong enough. I had to... you know... to make him leave me alone. And then I ran in here."

A little laugh escaped from Brian's side of the phone. "*Let me guess*," he started, "*he told you he was going to have nothing to do after the wedding and asked you for ideas.*"

"Yes," I said sounding very confused.

"*And then when you gave him some suggestions, he asked you to go with him, right?*"

"Yes, but I told him I was busy all weekend" I said.

"*You do realize that you sounded like you were playing hard to get. You didn't tell him about me, did you?*"

"Well, no. I wanted to wait for the right time to let everyone know we were back together." I suddenly felt really awful about not telling him about Brian.

"*It's okay, Ash. I know you are painfully naïve sometimes. He probably won't bother you anymore,*" he said kindly.

I felt better that Brian knew what happened. "Can I tell him you'll kick his ass if he tries it again?" I asked hopefully.

He laughed again. "*Of course you can. So was he a good kisser?*" he teased.

"Not funny," I said angrily.

"*Ash, I was only kidding. Try to relax a little and go back out there and eat your dinner. Thank you for calling me.*"

"Thanks for making me feel better. I'm going to call you when I am leaving the restaurant, though, in case he tries to follow me out, okay?"

"*I'm looking forward to the call. Love you, Ash,*" he said.

"I love you, too, Brian. Bye." I hung up the phone and unlocked the stall door. I was relieved no one else was in the bathroom and headed back to the sink to splash water on my face. I really did look like I'd just lost my boyfriend. I guess it would make it easier to play along with the illusion that I was still depressed.

When I got back out to the lobby, I tried to find Dad, but he was at the bar already. So I took a seat on the couch and put my head in my hands to avoid eye contact with anyone else.

People were involved in conversations in cliques in the waiting area, which made it quite loud. Over the noise, though, I heard Brandon's voice saying, "*Yeah, she did.*" "*No, I'm positive it was her.*" "*Okay. I'll back off.*" And then I didn't hear him speak again.

As our party was called to go back to the private room, I stood up and glanced around again to make sure I wasn't going to end up walking with Brandon. I spotted him by the other groomsmen, completely unaware that I was even in the building. I quickly walked over to Dad and wrapped my arm through his so I wouldn't lose him.

When we sat down, Dad said, "He seems nice," motioning towards Brandon who sat at the far end of the table.

"Not really," I complained.

"Oh, Ash. You can't hold on to Brian forever. You have to move on and what better time than at your brother's wedding?"

He had obviously already had too much to drink. I didn't want to continue the conversation, so buried my head in the menu. "I'm leaving as soon as I'm done eating," I grumbled.

I continued looking at my menu so I didn't have to make conversation with anyone else until the waiter came to take our orders and took it away.

Dad was sitting on my right side and another bridesmaid was sitting on my left. "Hi, I'm Sharon," she said holding out her hand to me.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Ashlyn, Mark's sister," I said shaking her hand.

"Oh, I wondered why you were in the wedding," she said thoughtlessly.

"How do you know Emily?" I asked trying to be polite.

"We grew up together. We've been best friends since the second grade. Do you know the other girls?" she asked.

"No, I haven't been introduced to many people," I admitted. I wanted to add that I didn't really care who these people were, but kept it to myself.

"That girl over there," she said pointing to the blonde haired girl sitting next to Emily. "She's Emily's sister and the Maid of Honor. I can't believe Em chose her over me. They've never gotten along," she grumbled.

"Maybe her mom forced her to pick her sister. She seems like a type of woman who can get people to do what she wants," I said insightfully.

"Yeah, you're probably right. Okay, the other bridesmaid down there flirting with all the groomsmen," she said motioning down to the other end of the table to the strawberry blonde girl who was batting her eyes at the four groomsmen while sipping her beverage from the bar. "That is Tracy. She's friends with Em from work. They go out to the bars a lot, even before Em was twenty-one."

She continued to rattle off the names of all the groomsmen, the family members, and the miscellaneous others around the table.

"Well, you'd have my vote for Maid of Honor. That was very impressive," I said sincerely.

She and I talked until our dinner arrived. Then we were too busy eating to have much of a conversation. When we were done, though, she started asking more personal questions. "So, are you bringing a date to the wedding?"

She seemed very nice and I felt like I could trust her with a little information. "It's still up in the air," I said honestly, hoping Dad wasn't listening. But he laughed really loud at that moment, and I knew he was involved in a different conversation.

"Sounds interesting. New boyfriend?"

"No. It's complicated. I'm hoping he'll surprise me by showing up at the reception. But I am bringing my best friend," I said with a smile. "What about you?"

"I've been sorta on again off again for months with Brandon," she said, motioning to the other end of the table. "Who knows what will happen tomorrow," she said wistfully.

"Yeah, anything could happen at these things," I said, feeling awkward. I reached for my purse. "I think I'm gonna sneak out now," I whispered to her. Turning to Dad, I asked, "Is it okay to go now? I'm finished."

"Yeah, sure Ash. Make sure you tell your mom goodbye. Have fun at Kar's," he said and turned back to the person to his right to continue the story he was telling.

"It was nice meeting you, Sharon. I'll see you tomorrow," I said as I stood up.

I walked over to Mom's chair and leaned in to whisper in her ear. "I'm done and Dad said it was fine if I left."

"Oh, Ash. I wish you'd stay longer. Just make sure you're ready by three thirty. That's when the limo should be at Kara's to pick the two of you up."

"Thanks, Mom. I'll be ready, I promise," I said and kissed her cheek.

As I was walking out the restaurant and about to dial Brian's number, someone grabbed me from behind.

"Are you leaving already?" It was Emily who had rushed to catch me before I left.

"Yeah, I have to get my stuff before I head over to my friend's house for the night," I said.

She gave me an unexpected hug. "I'm so sorry for all the trouble I've caused. I'm glad you decided to be here for us."

I shrugged. "I'm glad you still wanted me."

"You know, we're heading out for a girl's night out after this. You're welcome to join us," she offered.

I was happy that she finally asked me. "Thank you, Emily. But I actually have a whole night planned. I hope you have a great time. Give me a call if you need me to do anything tomorrow."

"Thank you, Ashlyn. Have a good night," she said and walked back towards the private room.

I glanced around real quick to see if there was anyone else following me and then walked outside and called Brian.

Chapter Nineteen – Together Again

I reached Kara's house before Brian and Michael arrived. Kara ran outside to help me bring all my stuff inside. "Wow, this is all for the wedding? I hope you're gonna be here by ten; it looks like you'll need lots of help," she teased.

"Some of it's for tonight," I pouted playfully.

"Oh, right. So do you know what you guys are doing yet? I mean, other than *that*," she said suggestively.

"Just because we're spending the night together on a secluded boat doesn't mean..." I couldn't even finish the sentence without laughing. "And what about you?" I asked trying to take the focus off me. But before she could answer, I held up my hand, "Wait. I really don't want to know."

She smiled big. "No, you probably don't."

We both laughed and gave each other a hug. "I'm so glad to have you back, Ash," she said.

I decided not to wait to show her my gift. *Go get Ashlyn a glass of ice*, I suggested.

She looked confused for a moment and then stood up. "I'll be right back," she said as she walked towards the kitchen.

I heard a cabinet close and ice fall into a glass. Kara skipped back to the room and handed it to me.

I decided to play with her. "What's this for?"

She looked confused for a moment. "I'm not sure. I thought you might be thirsty, I guess."

"It's a glass of ice, Kara," I said and then smiled. "I'm sorry. You asked me to show you my gift sometime, so I thought I'd surprise you."

I could see her brain trying to wrap itself around what just happened. "But I..." she started and then stopped to think some more. Her eyebrows furrowed together, and then her eyes got bright. "That was incredible, Ash. How can you stand to not do this on everyone to get your way all the time?"

I shrugged. "It makes my head hurt if I do it too much. And besides, it doesn't 'feel' right if I do it for selfish reasons."

She laughed with excitement. "Have you ever done it on Abby?"

I smiled. "Yeah, I've got to stop her from being mean to several people over the last couple of months. Until I met Brian, I wasn't able to do it to people I knew. But Brian seems to make me stronger. It's hard to explain."

"You two were really meant to be together," she said with awe, but she looked a little sad. "I wish I could find that person."

"Who says you haven't? You and Michael have seemed to click from the start." As much as I kept wishing it wasn't true, they really made each other happy.

She shrugged. "Maybe. I'm trying to keep my head about things. It hurt too much when Keith left and I'm a little afraid Michael is going to take off on me, too."

"It's possible. But if you don't open yourself up to get hurt, you'll never get close enough to someone to know if they were the right one."

I saw lights flash through Kara's window and heard the familiar sound of Brian's Jeep coming to a stop in the driveway. "Are you gonna be alright?" I asked her before I made a move to go see Brian.

"I think so. Thank you, Ash."

I gave her another hug and said, "They're gonna beat down your door if we don't go answer it."

She laughed and we walked holding hands to the door.

There was a moment of awkwardness when the door opened. We all just stood there looking at each other. So I decided to make the first move. But instead of wrapping myself around Brian, I walked up to Michael and gave him a friendly hug. "Thank you," I said. Then added in a whisper, "If you ever

treat me like that again, you're gonna wish I only punched you in the jaw." I stepped back from him and grinned, but eyed him so he would know I was serious.

He rolled his eyes and walked inside to be with Kara.

Brian gave me a curious look, so I grabbed him and gave him a kiss, not caring that we had an audience. I had been looking forward to that since Brandon assaulted me. I needed to remember what a real kiss was like. "Hi," I whispered finally.

He just stood there smiling at me. "Maybe I should go and come back again," he teased.

"We're leaving now," I said to the occupied Kara in a slightly elevated voice.

Kara waved to me, but didn't stop what she was doing. As we were walking out the door, the two of them were moving towards Kara's room. I shivered involuntarily and grabbed on to Brian's arm as we walked to the vehicle with my overnight bag.

"What was that all about back there?" Brian asked as we started driving down the street.

I grinned. "What? I just thanked him for helping us out with everything, you know," I said innocently.

"Yeah, right. It sounded like you threatened him," he said suspiciously.

I shrugged and held back a laugh.

Brian laughed, "That's what I thought."

It wasn't long until we were floating peacefully on the dark lake. I was standing on the deck of the boat, looking into the sky while Brian dropped the anchor. It was ominous being the only ones there surrounded by unfamiliar landscape that only lit by a half-full moon, so I tried to stay focused on Brian to keep my thoughts from thinking bad things. I knew Rick was out there.

Brian startled me when he wrapped his strong arms around me, kissing my neck. "Everything okay?"

"It is now," I said as I turned to face him.

He brushed a strand of hair off my face and looked deep in my eyes. "I wish I could see what color they were now," he said.

"Do you really have to see them to know how completely happy I am?" I asked and kissed him gently.

He didn't answer with words, but swept me up in his arms and carried me towards the stairs. He set me down and held my hand as we walked down to the lower level.

I felt very anxious. On the one hand, there was nothing I wanted more than to spend a night locked in a passionate embrace with Brian, but a part of me was scared that I would wake up and he'd be gone again. I took a deep breath and sat on the bed.

"We don't have to do this," Brian said, sensing my conflict.

I smiled at him. "Come here," I said, motioning over to the bed with me.

He cautiously sat down with me and took my hand. "I can't believe how stupid I've been," he said regretfully.

"Then you'd better make it up to me," I said playfully and slid onto his lap, kissing him. Before things went too far, I pushed away from him. "Stay right there," I said, but was quickly pulled back on top of him.

After a few more minutes, I broke away from him again. "Seriously, it will just take a second," I begged and quickly went over to my bag. I pulled out a red bow I had grabbed from home and turned around to face Brian. "Happy birthday," I said as I held the bow on to my chest.

He laughed and pulled me back onto the bed. The bow and our clothes were thrown everywhere as we struggled to get as close to each other as possible. If someone had walked in on us, it would have been impossible to tell where one of us ended and the other started.

I could feel a new level of strength growing inside me as our bodies moved as one. It felt like we existed outside of time. When reality returned, I found enough strength to move my body closer to his and rested my arm across his still heaving chest. I enjoyed feeling his accelerated heart rate gradually slow down as he stroked my arm with one hand and held me close with the other. "How are you?" he finally said, still caressing my arm.

"Hopelessly in love," I said and kissed his moist chest. "Are you alright?"

But he laughed. "Are you kidding me? I don't think I've ever been more okay. Well, except I'm completely exhausted."

"Does that mean we have to sleep now?" I asked dreamily.

"Only if you don't want to look like a zombie at the wedding tomorrow," he chuckled.

"That might be fun..." I said mischievously.

"Good night, my Ashlyn. Thank you for being here with me tonight," Brian said and kissed me gently on my head.

"Good night, Brian. Thank you for being in my life," I said softly, but I could tell by his breathing that he was already asleep.

I laid there for awhile, watching his chest rise and fall peacefully, but I wasn't able to sleep. I quietly got up from the bed and found his shirt by the stove. I smelled it, enjoying the scent of his body, deodorant, and cologne and slipped it over my head. Unfortunately, I glanced at the clock: five eighteen. I walked up on the deck to get some fresh air and watch the stars slowly fade away and the eastern horizon get steadily brighter.

I had been sitting there in deep thought when Brian came and sat behind me. He wrapped his warm, bare arms around me and rocked gently with me. "I didn't like waking up and not finding you where I left you," he said softly and kissed my cheek.

"I couldn't sleep," I sighed, enjoying his body wrapped around mine.

"Why don't you come back downstairs with me and I'll rub your back." He stood up and offered me his hand.

I reluctantly accepted; I felt so calm and peaceful sitting there with the stillness of the lake around me. I was almost appreciating it.

Brian misinterpreted my hesitation. "What, you don't trust me to just rub your back?" he asked playfully hurt.

I smiled and felt the tiredness starting to settle in. "I trust you with my life," I said more seriously than he'd expected.

Downstairs, I took off Brian's shirt and laid on my stomach on the bed while Brian straddled my hips so he could lean over and massage my back. He lost focus a couple of times, running his hands up my sides and kissing my neck, but everything felt so good, I didn't mind, falling asleep a little too quickly.

When I finally woke up, I felt refreshed and extraordinarily happy and then a sudden wave of terror shot through me; I didn't feel Brian next to me. I found his shirt exactly where I'd left it and pulled it on as I walked upstairs.

I was momentarily blinded by the bright sunlight that was coming from high in the sky. It was much later than I expected it to be. When I was finally able to focus, I couldn't see Brian anywhere. Then I heard a noise coming from the side of the boat. I went over to investigate and found Brian's boxers thrown on the deck. "Isn't the water cold?" I said, smiling down at him.

"A little, but it's refreshing. I hope I didn't wake you," he called up.

"No, I think sleeping on the hard bed woke me," I joked.

"Definitely not a quality mattress," he said smiling. "But I didn't notice it much." His smile got bigger and he winked at me. "Why don't you join me? The water's invigorating."

I could see him shiver slightly. "How about you join me up here? I'll go find you a towel," I said and walked downstairs. I grabbed one off the stash of old linens and walked back to the deck.

My eyes focused on my signature tattooed on Brian's back, but they soon wandered elsewhere. He was standing with his back to me, dripping wet, completely naked. I quickly diverted my eyes as he turned to take the towel. "I think we're past that, aren't we?" he said playfully. "I don't know about you, but I think I'm quite familiar with every inch of your amazing body."

"I suppose, it was just a reflex," I admitted.

He wrapped the towel around his waist and walked over to me with a playful smile on his face. "It's not like you are wearing much of anything yourself," he commented rubbing his hands on my sides.

I shivered with pleasure as his hands went back up my sides, taking his shirt off me as he went along. It didn't take much before his towel joined the shirt at the bottom of the stairs, where we headed to familiarize ourselves with each others' bodies again.

"Are you sure you can't ditch the wedding and stay here with me longer?" he pleaded and kissed the nape of my neck.

I was still amazed by the reaction he caused just by the touch of his lips. "I would, but you smell like lake. I think we both could use a shower," I said wrinkling my nose. "Besides, I think Kara's gonna kill me if I don't get to her house with enough time for her to fix me up." I glanced at the clock; it was already eleven forty-three.

"You're probably right. And after she's murdered you, she'll be after me," he said with a smile and started putting his clothes back on.

"Can I keep that?" I asked as he reached for his shirt.

"Sure. It probably looks better on you anyway," he said tossing it at me.

"I doubt that. You look amazing in everything... and nothing," I added with a sly grin. "But it smells like you and makes me feel like you're wrapped around me."

"Last chance to stay here with me for the rest of the weekend," he said as he pulled a fresh shirt out of his bag.

"Don't do this to me," I pouted. "You know I want to stay with you. Why don't you come with me?"

"Because I can't do this at the wedding," he said and pulled me in for another passionate kiss.

When his shirt hit the floor, I had to stop us. "As much as I don't want to, we have to stop this. I can't ditch this stupid wedding because my family will disown me." I was so irritated at Emily for making me part of the wedding party.

"You could come live with me," he suggested. "After all, I am filthy rich," he smiled.

"More like filthy," I said wrinkling my nose again.

"Fine, fine. Let's head back to the marina and get you to Kara's before she sends the police looking for us." He reached for his shirt and pulled it back over his head while I watched and frowned. It was a shame that he had to wear clothes.

Noticing my disappointment, he said, "Did I do something wrong?"

"No, no. Just sad this is ending," I said and kissed his newly shirted chest. I couldn't keep the disappointment out of my voice.

"We could do something like this again tonight after the wedding. We don't have to come out on the boat; we can go anywhere."

"That sounds nice. But it's going to make me anxious to see you the whole night," I complained.

"Good, then maybe you'll find a way to leave early. You do feel a little hot," he said with a smile, feeling my forehead.

As we were walking to the Jeep, we were stopped by a park ranger. "Good morning, folks," he said in an official tone. "Have you been out on the lake all night?"

I got a little nervous that we were doing something illegal. Thankfully, Brian kept his cool. “Yes, sir. We were out over there all night. Is there a problem?”

“Did you guys see anything unusual?” he was avoiding answering Brian’s question.

“No, we were inside most of the night,” Brian said and gave me a wink.

“Okay, you may go. Just be careful coming around here at night. We’ve had an unusual number of dead animals turn up lately on the north side of the lake. We’re trying to track down the person or people responsible.”

I was very upset by the news. “Rick is the one they’re looking for,” I said when we were safely inside the Jeep, driving down the highway.

“Ash, you don’t know for sure it is him killing those animals. There are lots of weird cults and groups of kids that come up here on the weekends and do unspeakable things.”

“I’ve got to do better than this, Brian. I have to find him and stop him before someone else gets hurt.”

He took a deep breath. “I know,” he said sadly. “You warned me, but I didn’t realize how serious you were.”

It suddenly felt like I was going to hurl the little bit of breakfast I’d managed to eat on the boat.

Brian saw my paleness and pulled over to the side of the road. “Ash? Ash? What’s wrong?” He was shaking my arm, frantically trying to get me to respond. But I wasn’t going to respond. He was about to tell me he was leaving me again, that he couldn’t handle a freaky girlfriend with her mind set on tracking down a psychotic killer that no one else could even see.

Before I knew what was happening, he opened my door, undid my seatbelt, and pulled me out, cradling me in his arms. “Ash, talk to me. You’re scaring me.”

I looked in his eyes and said distantly, “You’re leaving me again.”

His eyes got big and struggled to say anything. “Is that what you think?” he finally asked, his voice more steady than his expression led me to believe.

“You said you didn’t realize how serious I was, which translates into ‘I didn’t really commit to this,’” I said coldly.

He set me down. “Is that what you think of me? I’m just gonna bail on you anytime you decide to do something I don’t think you should do?” He was angry.

“That’s what it sounded like you were saying,” I said sadly, kicking a rock on the ground.

He lifted my chin up, so I was looking in his eyes again. There was a fierce determination in them. “I promised you I was staying, didn’t I? There’s no chance that I’d let you do something like this without me. In case you haven’t noticed over the last fifteen hours or so, I’m one hundred percent in love with you and would turn around right now and go after Rick if that’s what you needed me to do.”

Tears streamed down my face. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to doubt you and I didn’t mean to scare you with talking about going after Rick. I know I have to do it, eventually. I guess I overreacted to the news back there. I plan to take it slow and will hopefully have your help to get stronger so I can help stop him.” I couldn’t take my eyes off him.

“I’ll do what I can to help, Ash. If it’s simply being here with you or something more, you can count on me.” He wiped some tears off my face and then kissed me. “Are you going to be okay, or am I gonna have to stand here and kiss you until your eyes brighten up again?”

I was about to tell him he needed to kiss me some more when my phone rang. We both knew who it was, so Brian went back to the Jeep and grabbed my phone. “Hi Kara.” “Yeah, we’re almost there now.” “She knows.” “Okay, see you soon. And tell Michael to be ready. Bye.”

“We need to go,” he said, grabbing my hand and pulling me towards the Jeep. With one more kiss, he took me in his arms and set me back in the seat.

He squeezed my hand when we were driving. “Are you back with me again?”

“Yes. I’m sorry. I guess I’m just a little scared of losing you again,” I said feeling horrible for admitting it.

“I’m sorry I gave you reason to doubt me,” he said.

Brian walked around and opened my door for me when we arrived at Kara’s house, taking my bag in one arm and wrapping the other one around me. I felt very secure and loved. We had to knock on the door, to my surprise, but Kara was there quickly with Michael in tow. She immediately grabbed my arm and pulled me to the bathroom.

“Bye,” I yelled to Brian as I disappeared. I was disappointed I didn’t get to say goodbye properly and pouted as Kara brought me a towel and my toiletry bag.

“Don’t even look at me like that. If I had let you say goodbye like you wanted to, the limo would’ve shown up before you were done,” she scolded me.

I smiled considering her words.

“I’ll tell him you said goodbye. Now get in the shower.”

Chapter Twenty – Always a Bridesmaid...

Kara was waiting for me with everything I needed to get dressed the moment I stepped out of the shower. She was already dressed in a sexy black dress and ready to go. I quickly put on all my undergarments and then she helped me into my bridesmaid dress. I did a little twirl in the mirror to see how it flared out.

“We don’t have time for that,” she said and pulled me towards the bathroom to fix my hair.

While helping me get ready, we did a lot of laughing which still felt foreign to me. She shared with me some details about her and Michael’s evening and I told her that I got to watch the sunrise in Brian’s arms and then later I caught him swimming naked.

When she finished, I marveled at myself in the mirror. “You’re a miracle worker,” I said, still trying to believe I was actually looking at myself. “Too bad Brian isn’t going to see it,” I said sadly.

“What do you mean? He’s not going?”

“No, he doesn’t think my family would be too happy if he showed up there after the mess I’ve been since he broke up with me.” I shrugged. “He’s probably right, but I still wish he was going to be there with me. I’m going to be so miserable.” I sighed.

“Why didn’t you ‘make’ him come?” she said.

I shrugged. “I wouldn’t want him there with me if it wasn’t something he wanted to do.”

“I guess that makes sense. Well, you can hang out with me. We can make fun of all the drunk people,” she said rubbing her hands together.

“The only problem with that is half those people will be related to me. And you’ll be off somewhere with Michael, anyway,” I added sourly.

“Well, hopefully we can ditch out early, maybe after they cut the cake. Michael’s driving my car there, so we can leave whenever you’re ready.”

“Thanks,” I said, but I still felt miserable thinking about how lonely I was going to be. The other possibility was I was going to be harassed by Brandon all night, which sounded equally as miserable.

I didn’t have time to wallow in self pity for long before the limo pulled up and honked the horn. Kara and I grabbed our shoes and purses and walked out to the car.

I waved to Dad as I caught his eye when we arrived at the church. He gave me the thumbs up sign then I went to find Mom. Kara stayed with me as we found the room where Emily was getting ready.

There was a lot of commotion in the room, so no one paid any attention when I walked in. “Is there anything I can help with?” I asked Mom as she fumbled through drawers of a caddy.

“Yeah, find me some hair pins. We need to pin Emily’s veil on,” she said without looking at me.

I walked over to another caddy and pulled out a box of bobby pins and handed them to Mom. “Here you go,” I said casually.

“Oh, Ash. You’re a life saver,” she said patting my arm, and rushing past me.

I worked my way past the five women fussing over Emily. “You look beautiful, Emily. Do you need me to do anything?”

“Yeah, stop time for about fifteen minutes so I can get ready without breaking a sweat. Ugh! I can’t believe how hot it is!”

We left the room and I made small talk with Dad and Mark while the groomsmen checked out Kara, who was completely content with the extra attention.

Soon the wedding coordinator came over and started explaining what was going to happen. “And you’re not supposed to be out here,” she said to me.

“Sorry, I was just wishing my brother good luck. Where do you want me to be?”

“Go back to the bride’s dressing room and wait to be called on,” she commanded. “And you,” she said facing Kara. “You don’t belong here. Take a seat and wait for the ceremony to begin.”

“I’ll just go sit over there,” she said. “Don’t trip!” she yelled to me as I was dragged away by my arm.

I chatted with Sharon for a few minutes, getting all the details about the girls’ night out. I tried to listen as she told me about the hot guys at the bar hitting on them, but all I could think about was my night. A wave of pure happiness washed over me remembering how wonderful it was to be with Brian again.

“Ashlyn, are you ready? You need to go first,” Emily said politely.

I followed the wedding coordinator down the hallway to the doors leading into the church, which were closed. I could hear the crowd inside chatting noisily, anticipating the start of the ceremony. The groomsmen joined us shortly and I started to get nervous.

“You look nice,” Brandon said as he stood next to me.

“Thank you,” I said abruptly.

He didn’t get the hint that I didn’t want to talk to him. “So, did you have fun with your girlfriend last night?”

“I had a great night,” I said flatly.

“We got pretty crazy out last night. You should’ve come with us.”

“I don’t think I need to see my brother getting ‘crazy’ on the night before he’s getting married,” I retorted.

“Who knows, maybe we’ll get lucky and have a wild reception. I’ll be sure to grab a drink for you,” he said and winked at me.

I was about to tell him to go to hell, but the doors opened and we were prodded to go in. We walked down the aisle with all eyes turning to watch. I was pleased that he behaved himself and parted without the extra grab.

As I took my spot, I spotted Kara in the audience. She smiled at me before her eyes were diverted to the ring bearer coming down the aisle followed closely by the flower girl. The doors at the back closed again and Mark stepped up to the head of the aisle, giving high fives to his groomsmen as he passed by. Finally, the music started playing and Emily entered the church on the arm of her dad.

It was warm in the church, but thankfully everyone made it through the ceremony without fainting. We filed out of the church and went to have pictures taken. My cheeks hurt by the time we were done and I swore to myself that I wasn’t ever going to accept being in another wedding. I hoped my wedding would be in a drive thru chapel in Vegas.

Kara rode with me and my parents in a limo to the reception. By this time, I was so hungry because I didn’t have time to eat lunch while Kara got me ready and I had only had a small breakfast. I was grateful when Dad offered me a soda from limo’s bar and Mom grabbed a package of crackers from her purse.

“Thank you,” I said as I took a drink of the Coke and hungrily ate the crackers.

We were announced as we entered the reception hall and took our seats at the designated tables. I was sad I didn’t get to sit with Kara, but she seemed to be fine sitting at one of the far outside tables. She was more outgoing than me, so I was sure she wouldn’t have any problems making friends while she waited for Michael to arrive.

After Mark and Emily arrived, they quickly had their first dance and sat down for the toasts. The best man rambled on for what seemed like hours before he finally made his toast and the food was served.

Only the cake cutting left and I can make a break for it, I thought to myself as random people approached our table to talk to Mark and Emily. After they finished eating, they stood up and started making the rounds to all the guests. I got up and found Kara outside talking to Mom.

"Hi Ash. I see you finally got away," Kara said happily.

"Yeah, I didn't want to leave while Mark and Emily were still at the table."

"Kara was just telling me about the great time the two of you had last night," Mom said smiling. "You seem to be in good spirits today. How are you holding up?"

"Everything's great, Mom. Gotta put on a good face for pictures, right?" I said a little too sarcastically, still mad that she betrayed me at the rehearsal the night before.

Kara picked up on the tension and asked if Mom wanted anything from the bar. Mom thankfully said she had to go find some family members and be social, so Kara took me back inside to get a Coke. "What was that all about?" she asked when we were in line for a drink.

"She just wasn't very nice to me last night and made a comment to Emily's mom."

"Oh. As long you are holding up still," she said.

I was about to ask the bartender for a Coke when Brandon suddenly appeared next to me and ordered two rum and Cokes.

"I hope you don't mind me cutting," he said, not really caring what my answer was.

"Whatever," I grumbled.

He took his drinks and walked back to where Sharon was sitting. I decided that I needed to say something to her, so I excused myself from Kara and started walking towards where they were sitting.

As I was about to reach their table, I was intercepted by a woman wearing a wool business suit she'd dressed up with a long beaded necklace. She had short, cropped black hair that hugged her head with no style. She was the kind of person who looked familiar because she didn't have any distinct features. But I knew I'd never seen her before and was shocked when she addressed me. "You're Ashlyn Taylor, correct?"

"Yes. I'm Mark's sister," I added.

"Oh, yes, of course. I'm Lana Brown. I work with Emily here in town. I'm her accounts supervisor."

"Nice to meet you," was all I could say.

"We've heard a lot about you. If you're ever in need of employment, I hope you'll give us a call," she said and handed me her business card.

I took it from her and put it in my purse without looking at it. I couldn't imagine what job skills she thought I possessed. "Thank you, but I'm hoping I don't have to get a job until after college," I said politely.

"Well, if your situation changes, please give me a call. It was nice to finally meet you." With that, she walked away into the crowd.

After a moment of trying to figure out what had just happened, I resumed my original mission. I was very happy to see that Brandon had just gotten up and was walking in the same direction as Ms. Brown had gone. I pulled out the chair next to Sharon and sat down.

"Hi, Sharon. How're you doing?" I said to her.

"Oh, hi Ashlyn. I'm great. Brandon just got me a drink from the bar. I think I'm finally ready to start enjoying the night," she said and raised her cup in the air and took a drink.

"That's nice. Hey, I wanted to talk to you real quick about Brandon," I said awkwardly. She raised an eyebrow at me, but didn't say anything, so I continued. "He was sort of hitting on me last night. And he, well, he kissed me," I said cringing a little, both at the memory and the fear of her reaction.

She took another drink and said, "I know."

I was shocked. "You know? And you're okay with that?"

“Oh, yeah. He told me last night at the hotel. Something about work or...” she stopped mid sentence.

“Work? What are you talking about? I said he kissed me,” I repeated, thinking maybe she heard me wrong.

“I don’t know, Ashlyn. I don’t think I’m supposed to be talking about this. Don’t worry. Everything is fine between me and Brandon. Thank you for letting me know,” she said nervously as she stood up and left.

Kara walked up with our Cokes and took a seat next to me. “What was that all about?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I think I need some fresh air,” I said standing up.

“I’ll go with you to keep you company,” she said, but her eyes were diverted to the door where Michael had just walked in.

“No, I’ll be fine. Go be with him,” I said feeling a headache coming on. I had been holding on to a shred of hope that Brian would have changed his mind and come with Michael.

“I’ll come find you after cake so we can sneak out, okay?” she said as she skipped off in Michael’s direction.

I watched her just long enough to see her jump in Michael’s arms and give him a big kiss. In a small fit of jealousy, I abruptly turned to head out on the patio, but ended up running into Mark. “Sorry, Mark,” I said apologetically.

“Woah. Are you okay?” he said helping me steady myself.

“I’m fine. I wish people would stop asking me that, though. I’m not gonna make a scene or anything,” I said somewhat angrily.

“Sorry. How about you allow me to have a dance with my little sister to make up for it?” Mark held out his hand and led me to the dance floor.

It wasn’t a romantic song, but it was still slow enough that people were dancing close. I spotted Kara and Michael dancing and talking in the corner, which seemed to make my mood even worse. I put my hands on Mark’s shoulders and we swayed awkwardly in the middle of the floor.

“How’s Emily holding up?” I asked, trying to make small talk to dispel some of the weirdness.

“I think she’s ready to go,” he said laughing. “I know I am, but we still have a ton of people to visit, the cake to cut, and the bouquet and garter toss. We probably won’t get to leave for another three hours,” he said and frowned slightly.

“It’ll go by quickly,” I said with encouragement.

“I was hoping you’d have a better time,” he said somewhat sadly.

“Don’t worry about me,” I said indifferently. “Kara and Michael are gonna sneak me outta here soon,” I added with a wink.

Mark was about to say something, when we were interrupted. “Would you mind if I cut in?”

Brian was standing in the middle of the dance floor and the rest of the world seemed to disappear. He looked so amazing that I could hardly stand to not jump in his arms right then. But I tried to maintain my composure, if for no other reason than to not draw attention to us.

Mark looked at me with concern and said, “Is this what you want?”

I nodded as tears pooled in my eyes, making it hard to see anymore. “Yes,” I whispered.

Mark stepped back and allowed Brian to take his place. He stood there for a moment to make sure I was going to be okay with Brian and then he disappeared with the rest of the room.

A couple of tears fell down my face as I looked into Brian’s eyes. “I didn’t think you were coming,” I said.

He reached up and wiped a tear away. “I didn’t think I was either. But I couldn’t stand not getting to see you all dressed up, so I convinced Michael to let me come along. Besides,” he continued,

reaching in his pocket, “you forgot this.” He pulled out the promise ring necklace and asked with his eyes if he could put it on me.

I turned around and he slid the necklace around my neck and fastened it. I immediately put my hand on the ring and smiled as I turned to face him again. Nothing else seemed to matter at that moment; not the stares from the people Mark had just told what happened, not the strange lady that seemed to know a little too much about me, not Sharon and her peculiar responses. He was with me and my world was complete. “Why didn’t you come in with Michael?”

“I was parking the car,” he said with a shrug. “And then when I came in, Michael was nowhere to be found. I spotted you immediately, though. But I didn’t want to ruin your dance with Mark, so I waited as long as I could before interrupting.”

He pulled me closer and we danced a couple more songs, just enjoying being close to each other. It was odd that we had been so close for this long and hadn’t even kissed yet. I think we were both showing restraint. “Are you ready to do this?” he whispered in my ear.

I knew what he was referring to; we had to interact with other people again, which meant having to deal with the questions and dirty looks from all who witnessed me barely surviving the past two weeks. “No,” I admitted with a smile and held him tighter. “Can’t we just slip out the side door and wait for Kara and Michael by the car?”

Brian laughed. “No, I don’t think that’ll be possible,” he said and motioned his head at someone approaching.

I quickly took a defensive position between Dad and Brian. “Dad, please don’t say anything. Kara and I ran into Michael and Brian last night and we had a chance to sit down and talk. Everything is fine.”

He ignored me, so I had to stop him again before he made a scene. “Dad. You told me you trusted me. And if I trusted Brian, then you would, too. So please trust me now when I say that this is what I want and there isn’t anything you can say that will change that.” I was holding my breath, hoping he would just walk away and not make a scene.

But he had to say his peace. “You want to be with someone who made you so miserable that you nearly ruined your brother’s wedding and hurt the rest of your family? I can’t just step aside and watch you make the same mistake that’ll lead to more of that pain.”

I took a step towards him and gave him a hug. “Thank you, Daddy. Thank you for caring so much about me. But you are wrong to hold anything against Brian. You have to let me make my choices and I choose to be with him. Please, Dad. Just be happy for me.”

Dad eyed my necklace, but didn’t comment on it. “Are you positive he is worth all that? All the pain you’ve been in, all the stress and heartache?”

“Yes. I’ve never been more sure about anything,” I said, stepping back to Brian and taking his hand.

“I’ll try to convince your mom that you know what you’re doing,” he said, still looking at me. He couldn’t even bring himself to look at Brian.

When Dad walked away, Brian squeezed my hand and whispered in my ear, “That wasn’t as bad as I thought. Anyone else I should worry about?”

I breathed a sigh of relief and smiled as I faced Brian again, “I hope not.”

Brian took my hand and we went to find Kara and Michael. “I last saw them dancing over there,” I said pointing in the corner, but there was no one there now.

We continued to wander around the room fused together at the hands, looking for our two friends. Mark and Emily were visiting some friends at one of the outer tables when we walked by.

“Ashlyn,” Emily called.

I closed my eyes, but managed to turn around with a smile to greet her. “Hi Emily. You remember Brian, right?”

Her eyes widened; apparently Mark hadn't told her that Brian showed up. Then it became apparent why he didn't. "Oh, yes. I remember Brian. Everyone in the bridal shop remembers Brian." She sounded jealous and petty.

"Was there something you needed?" I asked, gritting my teeth.

"I was going to introduce you to someone..." She trailed off and shot Brian a look.

I couldn't win with her; she was mad that I was miserable and she's mad that I was happy again.

"Thank you for thinking of me," I said honestly.

"We should go. I think it's about time to cut the cake," Mark said, tugging on Emily's arm.

She looked at Brian and then at me and stormed off.

I shrugged it off and resumed walking when Brian suddenly pulled me into the dark corner and backed me against the wall. "You just don't get it, do you?" he said with a smile. "You are radiating happiness. Emily is jealous of you, just like Abigail. Sure, Emily is happy with Mark, but she doesn't have someone that will make a whole bridal store talk about her long after she's gone."

I didn't have long to consider what he said before we were finally kissing. I could hear in the background the cake cutting ceremony going on and I was glad I was missing it. Apparently, something funny had happened, because the crowd erupted in laughter and claps.

"I guess we can leave now," I said smiling at the closeness of Brian and the thought of being anywhere else where we could be really alone.

"You don't want to miss the bouquet toss, do you?" he teased and then kissed me again.

"We should probably find Kara and Michael," I suggested eventually.

"Or we could just find you," Kara said coming into view from behind Brian.

"Not that it was hard or anything," Michael complained. "Can you two go anywhere without people talking about you?"

I was glad we were in a dark corner, because I felt my face get red hot with embarrassment. I hadn't realized we were making a scene.

"They're not talking about us because of anything we're doing over here. I think you're just mad that we found a better spot than you," Brian said to Michael.

When the guys were done with their playful bickering, Kara chimed in. "We're thinking about going goofy golfing. What do you think?"

I looked at what she was wearing and what I was wearing and said, "Goofy golfing? Are you nuts?"

"Yeah, probably. But doesn't it sound like fun?"

I laughed. It did sound fun, even if I was wearing four inch heels and a bridesmaid dress. But what other chance would I have to get out all dressed up like this and do something so silly?

"I'm game, but it's up to him," I said looking at Brian.

"I guess I'm outnumbered," he said. "But it sounds like fun to me, too," he said in a whisper only to me.

"I should probably say goodbye to some people first," I said regretfully. "Maybe you should wait here," I said to Brian.

"Are you sure? I don't mind all those stares and rude comments, if it'll help you," he said supportively.

"No, I can't do that to you," I said and took a deep breath before I turned to walk away.

"I'll go with you," Kara said suddenly, sensing my hesitation to do this alone.

I grabbed her hand as we walked back towards the crowd of people. "Thanks."

Mom was sitting at her table talking to one of her cousins. "Hi Gracie," I said to the woman who could easily pass as Mom's sister. Then I turned to address Mom. "Mom? Could I talk to you for a minute?"

“Ash, I’m really not in the mood for more of your attitude right now. We can talk tonight at home, okay?”

“That’s sort of why I’m here. I was hoping it would be okay if I left a little early and went out with Kara, Michael, and Brian. Kara said I could stay at her house tonight, too, since my car was still there.” I was begging Mom to let me go without having to use my gift on her, which at this point, I wasn’t above doing.

“Your father told me Brian was here. He certainly has a lot of nerve showing up.”

I knew I would probably regret the words that I couldn’t stop from coming out of my mouth. “He’s here because I invited him and he knew this was going to be hard for me. He’s not the villain that everyone is making him out to be. I’m so sick of the looks and the whispers around here. Can’t anyone just be happy that things are working out for me, too? Or is happiness only afforded to those in white dresses and tuxedos today?”

“Ashlyn, you are way out of line,” her voice was getting louder.

“Am I?” I asked, matching her volume. “During the past two weeks, did you *ever* hear me say anything bad about Brian? Did you ever consider that maybe there was a situation that you didn’t know about that made us break up? Not that it’s any of your business, but thanks in part to me, his sister ended up in the hospital after her boyfriend nearly beat her into a coma. So don’t go judging him when you don’t know the whole story.”

She sat in a shocked silence. People were approaching, so I decided it was time to leave. “I’ll be home sometime tomorrow probably. Don’t forget to put on your best face or Emily’s mom might think you’re trying to ruin her daughter’s special day.”

I turned away from her and started towards the door. I saw Emily scowl at me as I crossed the dance floor to meet up with Brian and Michael, who were walking towards us. Brian wrapped his arm around me without a word. I probably would have said something regretful to him, too. Kara kept quiet. She knew all too well from experience how infuriating moms could be.

Michael, on the other hand, couldn’t keep his mouth shut. “Nice and subtle as always, Ashlyn.”

I growled at him and Brian hit him in the arm a little harder than a friendly punch. “Don’t,” he warned and Michael didn’t say another word.

We were almost at the door when Brandon and Sharon stepped out in our path. “Leaving so soon, Ash?” Brandon asked innocently, like he wasn’t aware of the scene I just made.

I grimaced when he called me “Ash”. This was a name reserved for my friends to call me. “Yeah, I have somewhere better to be,” I said coldly and tried to continue walking.

He stepped in front of us again and Brian released me so both his arms were free. “Let me guess, this is actually who you had a great night with last night,” he said motioning to Brian.

“That’s none of your business,” I said through my teeth. “Now if you’ll please move, we’d like to leave without making another scene.”

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to hold you up. I just wanted to congratulate you on being offered a job by Ms. Brown. It’s quite an honor to be sought out by her. You must have quite a talent.”

“I think she has me confused with someone else,” I said coldly. Then I turned to Sharon and said, “It was nice meeting you. Good luck with everything.”

Brandon and Sharon moved to allow us to continue out the door. Michael and Kara went to get the car while Brian and I sat on a bench off to the side of the reception hall.

We didn’t talk because I was deep in thought. It troubled me that Brandon knew Ms. Brown and was aware that she had made me an offer. I got a little sick to my stomach when I started piecing everything together: Brandon’s overly aggressive behavior followed by the unusual phone call, the employment offer by Lana Brown and Brandon knowing about it, Sharon knowing about the kiss and saying it was something about his job, and Brandon’s use of the word ‘talent’ to describe what Ms. Brown was seeking me out for.

I started digging frantically through my purse for Lana Brown's business card. There wasn't a company name on the card, but when my eyes panned down to her email address, it said "lbrown@ces-corp.com". My hands started shaking.

"What's wrong, Ash?" Brian had been quietly supportive the whole time I'd been trying to work everything out in my head.

I handed him the business card. When he got down to the email address, his eyes got a little bigger. "This woman offered you a job tonight?" he asked curiously.

I loved the fact that I didn't have to hand feed him all the details for him to catch up with where my thoughts were. "Yes. Last night was a setup. He forced me to use my gift to verify everything they suspected about me was true."

"But they've been trying to help you, right? I mean with that email and now a job offer. It sounds like if they do know about you, they want to help you catch Rick. That's a good thing, right?"

"I think this company is very bad, Brian. If they were trying to do good things and help me, why would they have to trick me into using my gift?"

Brian was thoughtful for a moment and then said, "I think if you can get information from them without giving anything of yourself away, you should take it. They may be the only resource you have to help track down Rick."

Michael honked the horn before we noticed them. "Are you guys coming?" Michael asked impatiently.

"You don't have to make any decisions right now. Let's just go and enjoy the rest of the night. I do get you the rest of the night, right?" he asked with a hopeful grin.

I managed to smile back. "You can have me for as long as you'd like. I don't think I want to go home for a very long time," I said and gave him my hand to help me to the car.

Chapter Twenty-One – Aftermath

The problems that started for me at the wedding didn't disappear quickly. Mom was so upset, she refused to talk to me, which made Dad upset with me, too. I was serious when I told Brian he could have me with him for as long as he liked; I didn't want to stay at my house and I had nowhere else to go. Brian considered getting an apartment, but I didn't want him to upset his family by moving out. I packed a suitcase full of my clothes afterschool on Monday and left a note so my parents wouldn't worry about my safety. I spent a few nights secretly in Brian's room, but his mom got suspicious when she found my toothbrush in the bathroom. So I ended up staying with Kara. Her parents didn't ask too many questions, they just wanted to know if I was in trouble with the law or involved with any illegal activities. Since I was neither, they happily welcomed me in their home for as long as I wanted to stay.

Brian took me to an in-town resort on the weekends to make up for me not getting to stay with him during the week. On Easter weekend, we left town and went to an observatory. Brian had arranged for an astronomer to help us locate our star. It was still very distant and almost looked like two stars fused together. It was absolutely perfect.

The first Monday back to school after Spring Break was interesting. Brian and I arrived at school early to see if he could get his schedule changed back. Looking back, he probably would have had more success if I hadn't been there; I don't think Ms. Swanson liked me much after our meeting that one afternoon. It wasn't like we got to sit together in History anyway, so we decided we'd suffer through the last two months with only having English together. I still had fun secretly "popping in" on him randomly throughout the day. He even started writing notes to me on his paper in class when I came to visit.

English class was nice because Brian reclaimed his seat next to me, much to the dismay of Abigail. It was somewhat sweeter knowing that she was jealous of me. I was radiating so much happiness that first day back, that it made Brian laugh quietly a couple of times.

"You're amazingly beautiful when you're this happy," he commented as we walked to lunch.

I was about to make a clever remark when he suddenly swept me off my feet and kissed me so passionately, it left me breathless. As I swooned in his arms, I realized the occasion. "Heather walked by, didn't she?" I asked delightfully.

He answered with another kiss.

Our tree had been taken over by a freshman couple, so we ate lunch with Kara and Michael. Michael was still not friendly with me, but at least he wasn't outright rude anymore. I suspected it had more to do with me telling Kara about my gift than the punch to the jaw.

Brian made good with his promise to help me with the Rick situation. We practiced increasing my range which I could connect with him. I had a brief moment when I was able to connect with him when he was at home and I was at Kara's house. After the night on the boat, the strong sensation I felt growing in me continued to get stronger. I was starting to be able to connect with Kara and Stephanie across the school. I didn't have nearly the range, but I could let Kara know when I was ditching PE or let Stephanie know when the guy in my ceramics class asked me about her.

On the Sunday after the wedding, Stephanie and I spent a long time talking in her room while Brian was sleeping. I tried talking her into pressing charges, just like everyone else had, but she said it would just make her have to face him again. She didn't have any permanent damage, but emotionally she was still healing. It was great to resume our friendship almost where we had left off. If anything, it was stronger because she knew it was because I kept my word to her that Brian broke up with me. We laughed and cried a lot and by the time Brian woke up, we were acting like sisters again.

During the little free time I had, I used the computers in the public library to research CES. I found out that CES, or Corporate Enterprise Solutions, was a huge conglomerate that took over the

management of smaller companies. They were heavily involved in the community, helping to build parks and public service facilities, as well as large donors to political causes and candidates from all parties. There didn't seem to be a rhyme or reason between their acquired companies, political donations, and charitable works, but they were a well funded, heavily profitable company. The woman who approached me at the wedding, Lana Brown, was in upper-middle management, and was responsible for maintaining relationships with most of their subsidiaries in the Western United States, including the company that Emily, Mark, and Brandon worked for.

I stayed away from home for nearly three weeks, only returning during the day to wash some clothes, pick up new clothes, and leave a note for my parents to let them know I was still alive. Mark and Emily were pretty upset with me. I tried calling Mark, but he refused to return any of my calls. Since I wasn't on speaking terms with anyone who was at the wedding aside from Kara, Michael, and Brian, I could only guess at how much I messed up their night.

I didn't know how I was going to approach my parents, but Brian said I needed to confront them before graduation or I would regret it. Graduation was still a month and a half away, but since Dad had left me a note in my room one day during the week, begging me to come home, I decided to make amends with them the first weekend in April.

I waited for Brian to get off work and made him drive me to my house, but wait outside. I needed him there for support, but I didn't want his presence to aggravate the situation.

I used my key to open the door and walked in calmly. Dad was watching TV and jumped up as soon as the door opened.

"Ash! It's so good to see you," he exclaimed and gave me a big hug. "Elizabeth! Ashlyn is here!" he yelled to Mom in the other room.

She was walking a little quicker than normal to get to the living room, but then composed herself as she entered the room. "Hello, Ashlyn," she said calmly, but the tears in her eyes betrayed her true emotions.

I got choked up and burst into tears, running over to hug her. "I'm so sorry, Mom," I sobbed. "I never meant to hurt you."

When we both calmed down, we moved to the couch. We talked about where I'd been staying and how school was going. And then we finally got to the topic of Brian. "I asked him to wait outside because I didn't want anything that we wanted to say to be influenced by his presence. With that said, I am committed to being in a relationship with him," I stated and started playing with my promise ring necklace nervously.

Mom sighed. "You don't have to grow up so fast. It's easy to get swept up in the emotions of young love, but that doesn't mean he's the person you're going to spend the rest of your life with."

"Just because we're young, doesn't mean that we aren't going to last, either," I said countering her argument. "Look. I'm not here to argue with you about whether or not Brian and I are going to last. I'm with him. Period."

I started to get up to leave, sensing this conversation had reached a stalemate, but Dad stood up and stopped me. "Ashlyn, we aren't trying to make you decide between him and us. We want you to be happy. Look at it from our perspective for a minute. Suddenly one day you meet this guy, go on one date, and can't leave his side. Then, when something happens, he's suddenly gone and you are so depressed we almost took you to the hospital." He paused for me to interject, but I was willing to let him get everything out, so he continued. "Then out of nowhere, you are suddenly happy again and he shows up at your brother's wedding, upsetting quite a few people, including Emily. So from where we sit, this relationship that you're so committed to comes at a pretty high cost to everyone around you."

I sat there for a few moments trying to formulate the correct response. "I'm sorry you see it that way. I wish I could tell you something that would change your mind about us, but I don't think there is anything I can say now that I haven't said already. I don't want to cause any more problems. I

love you both very much and hope that you will find a way to be happy for me someday.” I stood up to leave, when both Mom and Dad jumped to stop me.

“We do want you to be happy, Ash,” Mom said.

“But we need you to understand how your actions are affecting the entire family,” Dad added.

I sighed and sat back down. “Has anyone ever considered how their actions are affecting me? Like how I wasn’t able to do a single thing right for Emily. She was jealous and petty when I was happy and angry when I was sad. Or how everyone was so quick to attack Brian for the breakup without even asking me what had actually happened?” I continued despite the emotion in my voice. “I’m sorry I was so depressed for those two weeks; I wish I could explain to you why and it’s more than just a high school crush gone bad. The people in the bridal store saw it when Brian surprised me after Christmas; why is it so hard for the people I love most to see that Brian and I are supposed to be together?”

Everyone remained quiet and I didn’t know if they were going to believe what I said or not, so I finally said, “Look. I don’t want to force you guys to accept things if you’re not ready. I can stay with Kara until I turn eighteen next month and then I will get my own place. I have a job offer and I can borrow from Brian until I can support myself. Maybe if I’m not around, you will finally be able to see that I am more grown up than you think and will accept the choices I have made.” The words nearly got stuck in my throat; this wasn’t what I wanted, but I wasn’t going to back down. I held back the tears to put on a strong front.

Mom couldn’t take it anymore. She got up and ran out of the room, crying hysterically. Dad gave me a look and went after her.

I guess that’s it, I thought and walked out the door. As I approached the Jeep, the tears were falling down my face. Brian jumped out and ran over to me just as Dad opened the door.

“Ash, don’t do this,” he demanded.

I wrapped myself around Brian and sobbed quietly in his chest, not acknowledging Dad.

“Brian, talk to her. She’s gonna kill her mother if she leaves like this,” Dad pleaded and went back into the house.

I kept my arms wrapped around Brian as he stroked my hair. “What happened?” he asked calmly.

I was glad he wasn’t just trying to convince me to stay. “I don’t know,” I managed through hiccups. I took a deep breath and trying to control myself. “One minute we were catching up on things and the next I was telling them that I was moving out.”

“Oh, Ash. I’m so sorry. I could go in there and get everything from your room and from the kitchen so you would have lots to eat in your new place,” he said sincerely, but with a playful tone.

I let out a little laugh. “Stop trying to make me feel better,” I complained.

“Can’t,” he said joyfully.

“I know I have to go back in there. If I left now, it would just validate their thoughts that I’m not mature enough.”

“I could go in there with you and show them how serious we are,” he said suggestively.

I hit him in the shoulder. “That’s going too far,” I warned him, but smiled. “Thank you,” I said and kissed him deeply and then turned to walk back in the house.

I knocked quietly as I opened the door. Mom and Dad were in the kitchen at the table, so I slowly walked in. “Hi,” I said cautiously.

Mom started crying again, but Dad motioned me to join them.

“I’m sorry I upset you... again,” I said with remorse. “But I can’t fight with you guys anymore. I can’t explain everything to you, but I have some big stuff I have to deal with right now and I need for the people in my life to just be supportive.”

“You’re not pregnant, are you?” Dad asked.

"No, it's nothing like that. I need you both to just trust me because I'm your daughter and I've never given you reason not to. If you don't think you can, then I understand; I know I'm not giving you a lot to go on. I won't hold it against you, but I will have to leave so I can focus on what I need to do without having to worry about people trying to devalue me and my choices."

"Are you involved in something illegal?"

Dad wasn't getting better at his guesses. "No, of course not. Please stop trying to guess; I'm not going to talk about it. I just need you to trust me that I know what I'm doing. Can you do that?"

"Yes," Mom replied solemnly to my surprise.

Tears returned to my eyes. "Thank you, Mom. And I am very sorry for hurting you."

"I'm sorry we didn't trust you. You're still our little girl. We want to protect you from all the bad things in the world and it seems like we're failing."

If only she knew how right she was. There wasn't any way they could protect me from the evil that was out there waiting for me. But at least they didn't have to know what those bad things were. "I'm not a little girl anymore. But I do need you guys more than ever to just love me for who I am and for the choices I make."

Mom and I hugged for a long time. We cried a lot and laughed a little, especially when Mom admitted how annoyed she had really been with Emily's mom the entire time. "When did you grow up?" she said as we were starting to get back ourselves.

All of a sudden, I realized I'd left Brian outside. "Oh, no! Brian's been outside this whole time!"

"No he hasn't," I heard him say from the living room.

"Dad? Are you in there, too?" I called out while standing up from the table.

"Yeah. Who do you think invited Brian in?" Dad said matter of factly.

Mom and I entered the living room where they were watching SportsCenter.

"Did you ladies work everything out?" Dad asked looking between the two of us.

I looked at Mom and then said, "I think so," and put my arm over her shoulders and squeezed her close to me.

"Brian, I want to apologize to you for how we all have acted. Ashlyn has told us how much you've been there for her, even when we weren't. I hope you can forgive us," Mom said.

I left Mom's side to go stand with Brian. He immediately took my hand and squeezed it.

"It's okay, Mrs. Taylor," he said sincerely.

"Would you two like to join us for lunch? We were just about to go out and grab a bite," Dad offered.

"We actually have plans already," I said.

"Well, maybe another time then," Dad said and shook Brian's hand.

"I just have to grab something out of my room. I'll be right back," I said leaving Brian standing there with my parents.

I ran back to my room to grab my lotion from my nightstand. My room looked a little like a museum. Nothing had changed in weeks and a layer of dust was settling on everything.

As I turned to exit my room, I noticed something wasn't quite right. My picture Brian gave me for Christmas wasn't where I had left it. In fact, it wasn't anywhere. I remembered putting it back in its place while getting ready to go to Kara's on the Friday of the reception. Still, I rummaged through some drawers and looked all around on the floor, but couldn't find it.

Confused, I headed back down the hall to the living room. "Did you guys do something with my picture in the silver frame?" I asked Mom and Dad.

"I haven't been in your room at all," Mom admitted.

I knew Dad had been in there, so I looked at him for an explanation. "I didn't do anything with it, Ash. Last time I was in there, I thought I saw it on your nightstand. Did you look around the floor?"

"I looked everywhere. Are you sure no one else has been in there?" I asked.

“Not that I know of. We haven’t had any company since Easter, but I’m sure I saw it after that,” Dad added.

“Okay, well I’m sure it’s just misplaced,” I said figuring Dad was mistaken about when he last saw it. Emily probably wondered in there at Easter and threw it away or something.

I gave Mom and Dad a hug. “I’ll see you tomorrow sometime,” I said as I grabbed Brian’s hand and headed towards the door.

“You’re not coming back tonight?” Mom asked with concern.

“I already have plans to stay with Kara tonight,” I lied. Brian and I had reservations at another resort. I was getting too used to the pampered treatment and the hours of true alone time I got to spend with Brian.

“Just be careful,” Dad said with suspicion. “It was good to see you again, Brian. I hope you’ll be around more. Preseason football is just around the corner.”

Brian and I waved as we drove away from the house. “How are you feeling?” Brian asked as we were driving towards the hotel.

“Like I need a massage,” I said jokingly. “I guess I’m feeling a little better. Kara will be thrilled to have her bathroom back again, too.”

“You look like you’re feeling a lot better. The stress was really starting to show. I didn’t know how much longer my massages were going to help before you snapped.”

The following weekend was girls’ weekend; Kara and Stephanie needed to shop for their prom dresses and I decided to tag along with them even though I was going to recycle my bridesmaid dress. Brian paid for a suite at a hotel by the mall so we could shop all day and then have a slumber party at night without having to go far.

“You get treated like this every weekend?” Kara mused as we sat in the spa on Saturday evening getting pedicures. We had spent most of the day shopping and were in desperate need of some pampering.

I shrugged and continued enjoying my treatment, knowing that Kara enjoyed the same luxuries.

“He’s gonna blow all his money before I even get mine,” Stephanie pouted as her feet were being massaged with lotion.

“I doubt that,” I said eyeing Stephanie. Kara didn’t know the story of Brian and Stephanie’s adoption nor of their inheritance. I told her that Brian had a trust fund his family had set up for him that he was given when he turned eighteen. “You’ll probably have to pay him back for this,” I teased.

She just smiled at me, knowing that she was only a little more than a year away from her share.

“How are things going with you and Cory?” I asked. Cory was the guy from my ceramics class that kept bugging me about Stephanie. After I got the go ahead from her, I answered his questions. A couple of weeks after Spring Break, the two of them were the hottest new couple on campus.

“Amazingly well. He’s quite the gentleman and really funny. Even Brian approves of him... mostly,” she said dreamily.

I smiled remembering how stressed Brian had been when Stephanie announced she was dating Cory. I told him everything I knew about him and then reminded him that it was better for everyone if he was nice. He grudgingly agreed to behave so Stephanie wouldn’t shut him out like she had with Scott, but I always heard about it when Stephanie shared too much with him.

“Yeah, he seems to be my best friend in ceramics now. He can’t stop talking about how great you are, Steph. It’s quite annoying. I’ve considered telling him all your bad habits so he’ll shut up,” I teased.

“You wouldn’t dare,” she said angrily.

“I suppose I can try harder to tune him out,” I said playfully.

"Don't forget all the dirt I have on you and Brian that I could let slip in front of my parents," she threatened.

I rolled my eyes at her. "Like they don't already know what we're doing when we go away every weekend. Besides, he's eighteen now. I don't think they can say much without him just moving out," I said arrogantly.

"You're mean," she pouted and then laughed.

"How are your parents handling things now, Ash?" Kara asked.

"They're trying to be good with everything, but I suspect they 'know' where I go every weekend, too. They've been extremely nice to Brian and lenient with me, so I can't complain too much," I said with a shrug.

"What's Michael up to this weekend," I asked Kara.

"Brian didn't tell you?"

"No. I asked him and he said something about having to work most of the weekend."

"Michael's parents are out of town, not like they're ever there much anyway. So Michael was going to talk Brian into going camping or fishing."

I suddenly was concerned about where Brian might be. He knew I wouldn't want him going anywhere near the lake.

"Ash, what's wrong?" Stephanie asked.

"Do you know where they were planning on going?" I asked Kara, ignoring Stephanie's question.

"No. I assumed they would probably just end up on the lake," she admitted.

I tried to use my gift to talk with Brian while my nails were being painted and Stephanie and Kara were talking about a dress they'd both tried on, but didn't buy. I became more concerned when I couldn't make a connection.

"I'm gonna head up to the room and order some food. Do you guys want anything?" I said, trying to give a valid reason for me leaving abruptly.

"You're gonna call Brian, aren't you?" Stephanie accused.

I continued walking, not bothering to respond.

"Ash, we promised no guys this weekend. They're gonna be fine," Kara pleaded.

"You're probably right, but I still need to make sure, so I can enjoy the rest of the night. I won't be on the phone long. And I really am gonna order food."

I wrote down their food orders and went up to the suite to call in the order and then call Brian. There was no answer on his cell phone, so I attempted to use my gift again. This time, I was able to connect with him. I briefly looked around him as much as I could to see if I could tell where he was by the surroundings. Of course, Kara was right. They had taken the boat out on the lake.

You didn't have to lie to me, I told him.

He was visibly startled by my voice. Brian sighed and took the phone out of his pocket. It had been turned off, so as soon as I saw him calling me, I broke my connection and opened my phone.

"I didn't lie to you," he said as soon as he heard me pick up my phone.

"You didn't tell me you were going there, either."

"I didn't want you to worry unnecessarily." He was speaking quietly.

"I wish you guys could've picked a better place to go," I said sadly.

"I know, Ash. Michael was really happy to get to do something with just me. We used to always come out here, so it made sense. Do you forgive me for not telling you?"

"I suppose. Just please be careful," I begged.

"We will," he promised. *"I have to go, Ash. I love you. Please try to enjoy the rest of your night."*

"I'll try. I miss you. Good night, Brian," I said and hung up the phone. *And I love you more than anything, so don't do anything stupid out there,* I said when I reconnected with him real quick before

Stephanie and Kara walked in. I could see him smile when he heard me again and I left him for the night.

“They’re at the lake,” I announced as Stephanie and Kara walked carefully into the suite and sat down on the couch. It looked like their toes were still wet and they were being unnaturally careful not to ruin them. “And our food should be here any minute,” I added just as room service knocked at our door.

We laughed as we ate all the food that was delivered and considered raiding the mini bar. Instead, we got into our pajamas and ordered a chic flick movie, turning down the lights. The rest of the night was spent watching the movie and talking about plans for prom, which was two weeks away.

We fell asleep on the couches, but I woke up around one in the morning and moved to the big cozy bed in the master bedroom. By the morning, Kara and Stephanie had both made their way to a bed, Kara in mine and Stephanie in the bed in the other bedroom.

In the morning, we ordered breakfast in the room and scheduled a massage for later in the day before going back to the mall for more shopping. Since Kara and Stephanie had bought dresses the day before, we were going to spend the day shoe and accessory shopping. On our way to our third shoe store, we passed by a jewelry store and a bracelet caught my eye.

“Oh, let’s go in there real quick,” I suggested tugging on Kara’s arm.

Much to the dismay of the saleslady, we took turns trying on bracelets and necklaces and giggling uncontrollably. I found a beautiful bracelet and earring set, but besides it costing more money than I’d ever had, it was completely impractical.

We spent another couple of hours trying on shoes and looking at purses then went back to the suite. Brian reserved the room until Monday so we had time to relax in the spa before we had to go home.

I was in the middle of a massage when my masseuse was suddenly called out of the room. I had had enough massages over the past several weeks to know this wasn’t the norm, but I was so exhausted from shopping for two days and staying up late watching the movie, that I just closed my eyes and started drifting to sleep while I waited for my massage to continue.

I was woken up when it did resume, but they were different hands touching my bare back. As I was about to say something and look back to see who was there, I felt lips press against the small of my back.

“That’s one of my favorite parts of your body, you know,” Brian said softly as I nearly jumped off the table.

As soon as I realized it was Brian, my body both relaxed again and got really excited. “I had no idea that you had favorites,” I said, wrapping my arms around his neck and kissing him gently.

“Well, I like all your kissable parts, best. Like this,” he said kissing my nose, “and this,” he continued, kissing my neck, “and this.” He kissed most of my body until I was tingling from head to toe.

When I was able to talk again, I asked, “How did you get in here, anyway?”

“I guess I’m just that charming,” he said arrogantly and kissed me on my lips not quite so gently. “I told you I would be safe. Did you like the flowers?” He had flowers delivered to our door when we woke up.

“Of course, but I think Kara and Stephanie enjoyed them a little more,” I said.

He laughed. “Aren’t you supposed to be getting a massage right now?”

“I think I like this much better,” I said and pulled his face closer to mine to kiss again.

When we took a break to breathe, Brian said, “You do realize your shirt is over there,” he said motioning to the corner of the room where I’d taken it off for the massage.

I shrugged. “If it makes you uncomfortable, I can put it back on. But I thought we were past that,” I said, mimicking what he said on the lake after he had been swimming.

"I'm not suggesting you put it on for my sake," he said, but then added, "Okay, maybe a little for my sake, but only because I can't enjoy the rest of you right now."

I pouted a little, having forgotten that my body was off limits for the weekend. "My time is probably close to being up anyway. Have you eaten lunch yet?"

"No, we came right here from the lake," Brian said.

"So Michael came, too?" I said a little sadly.

"Yeah. And we called Steph to have Cory come by, as well. He's coming over after he gets off work in a couple of hours. We figured we all might as well enjoy the suite."

"That was very generous," I commented with adoration and went to put the rest of my clothes on.

When we got back to the suite, Kara and Michael were in the bedroom with the door closed. I gave Stephanie a questioning look when we came in, but she just shrugged and said, "It's been pretty quiet in there... thankfully."

I laughed and turned on the TV, increasing the volume just in case Kara and Michael decided to not be so quiet. About a half an hour later, there was a knock at the door and our lunch arrived followed closely by Cory. We sat around the living room area talking and laughing for most of the afternoon. Cory was quite funny; it was neat to see how much Stephanie adored him

After a while, Kara and Michael joined us, too, and we discussed plans for prom night. We all agreed to go together in a limo. Brian agreed to get us a suite at the hotel for afterwards.

Stephanie clapped enthusiastically and then kissed Cory. Brian tensed a little, so I leaned into him and kissed him gently. "It's okay," I promised.

He smiled and then wrapped his arms around me. "How about a movie before we have to leave?" Brian suggested.

With curtains closed and lights dimmed, we all sat in the dark with our significant other and enjoyed the movie in our own way. Afterwards, Cory took Stephanie and her purchases for prom home and Michael and Kara left with Kara's flowers, bags of new clothes and shoes in her car. Brian and I stayed behind to straighten up before we went to check out.

"It's a shame no one will be staying there tonight after you paid for it," I commented in the elevator on the way down to the lobby.

"You're welcome to stay here, if you'd like," he offered. "I'll just sign for everything tonight so you can still order up room service or whatever you want."

"Won't you to stay with me?" I said sadly, looking away to hide my disappointment.

He reached over and stopped the elevator, making the alarm go off. Seemingly unaware of the blaring noise, he made me look in his eyes and said, "I thought you'd never ask." He hit the stop button again without even looking and the elevator jumped as it started moving. When the doors opened in the lobby, we were locked together and heard some people clearing their throats. "Oh, we're going back up," he said with a laugh and hit the button to go back up to the suite.

Chapter Twenty-Two – Retribution

The energy level around the school increased over the next couple of weeks as prom approached. Tons of people were vying to be prom royalty. I normally wouldn't have been paying any attention, but Stephanie and Cory seemed to be big contenders for prince and princess and for best couple. Stephanie convinced me to hand out "Vote for Steph and Cory" buttons around school for her.

Brian laughed at my discomfort, but held my hand as we visited every table at lunch on the Tuesday during prom week. I had been smiling at everyone, but not really paying attention to who I was handing the buttons to, so I was genuinely surprised when Abigail scoffed at me and refused to take one.

We started walking away when she yelled, "You guys don't really think you'll win best couple, do you?"

Brian tugged on my hand to walk away, but I couldn't stop myself from turning around. "We'd have a better chance at winning than you and any of your boyfriends."

The students at tables surrounding us were watching with anticipation as Abigail stood up and walked over to me, stopping just short of my face. Brian squeezed my hand, but then released it, allowing me to do whatever I needed to do. "I think I liked you better when you were a pathetic loser who kept her mouth shut. You must've taken his backbone to be standing up to me now," she said motioning to Brian.

In an instant, I released thirteen years of bottled up hatred. Without a word or any hesitation, my fist connected with her perfect nose, sending blood raining down on those who had dared stand too close.

A huge smile crossed my face as the crowd erupted in gasps and cheers. I saw a smile briefly flash across Brian's face before he grabbed my hand and pulled me away through the crowd.

"I'm gonna get suspended for that, aren't I?" I said remorsefully once we were in the parking lot.

"Probably, but wasn't it worth it?" Brian said trying to contain his pride.

"Yes, but I feel bad about it, too. I mean, it was like I became a completely different person." The farther we drove from school and the more I thought about it, the worse I felt.

"Take me back," I said suddenly.

"What are you talking about?" Brian asked with concern.

"I have to face what I've done. If I don't, then I'm no better than Rick."

Brian pulled into a parking lot and stopped the Jeep. "You can't compare yourself to Rick," he said angrily.

"Can't I? I hurt someone and now I'm running away to hide. I've completely lost myself. I used to only use my gift to help people. When was the last time I did that? I was even considering using it to get myself out of trouble when I did have to face what I'd done. This is not why I was given this gift. I have to go back and make things right."

Brian looked concerned, but didn't try to talk me out of it. As we drove back into the parking lot at school, he suggested, "Maybe if you talk to Ms. Swanson and tell her the circumstances, she can talk to the principal and try to work something out."

"It's worth a try," I shrugged. "I know I'm frustratingly complicated. I don't know how you put up with me sometimes, but thank you."

He grabbed my hand and we walked in silence to the office. A few of Abigail's friends were in there, throwing me dirty looks as I walked past them to Ms. Swanson's office.

Brian knocked on the door and when she motioned him to come in, he pulled me in behind him, closing the door.

"Hi, Brian. Is everything okay?" Ms. Swanson said with concern, looking only at him.

"Ashlyn needs to talk to you about something and I was hoping that you might be able to help her out," he said directly to her. He turned to me and said, "I'll be outside. It's going to be alright." He kissed my cheek and walked out the door, closing it behind him.

"Have a seat, Ashlyn. What's on your mind?" She was being very polite and I wondered if it had anything to do with the fact that Brian had asked for the favor.

"I'm not sure if you've heard, but I was involved in an altercation at lunch today," I started. I could tell by her blank expression that she was already aware. "I know what I did was wrong, and I'm willing to accept the consequences of my actions. But before this gets blown way out of proportion, I needed someone to hear my side of it."

"Please continue, Ashlyn. I'll listen to everything you have to say, but I can't promise there will be anything I can do to help. Suspension is mandated for fighting," she stated very factually.

"First, I need to let you know I'm not telling you any of this as an excuse. I just need you to have all the information. Abigail Waters and I have gone to school together since kindergarten. From the beginning, she singled me out to pick on. I have listened to her snide comments, endured her cruel jokes, and looked the other way when she has done things to humiliate me. Today, all those years of holding back came to the forefront and I acted without thinking. I am very sorry that I hit her. I am not a violent person."

Ms. Swanson was quiet as she wrote some notes down. She finally put her pen down and looked at me. "High school's a rough place. Hormones are raging, friends change, there is a lot more social pressure to be popular or do the things that everyone else is doing. It doesn't surprise me when a few good kids end up snapping and lashing out at whoever is near them. Don't beat yourself up over this; you're not the first and won't be the last. I'm proud of you for coming and talking to me. Most people have the tendency to either run away or completely shut down and not talk at all. I can't promise anything; you will face punishment for attacking Abigail, but let me go talk to Mr. Deevers and see if there might be an alternate to suspension." She stood up and smiled at me. "Wait here," she said and walked out the door.

Brian came in the office as soon as she walked away. "That was quick. Is everything okay?"

"It's not great, but it'll be okay as long as Abigail doesn't press charges against me," I said with a slight grin.

"You don't think she will, do you?" Brian asked genuinely concerned.

"No, I think she'd rather get back at me some other way. Who knows? It was only her nose. Maybe she'll stop sticking it in everyone's business," I said and giggled.

Brian laughed, too. "You seem like you're feeling better now."

"I am, although I'm a little worried about the punishment," I admitted.

"Well, if you get suspended, I'll take a couple of days off so you won't be bored," he said happily.

"Don't you think people might get a little suspicious if you ditched when I was out on suspension?"

"I don't have any tests coming up and I haven't missed that many days this year, so I can afford a couple of unexcused absences," he said confidently.

"What's this about unexcused absences?" Ms. Swanson said as she returned to her desk.

"Oh, nothing," Brian said and started to get up to leave.

"Please stay," I begged, looking at him and then at Ms. Swanson for approval.

She nodded and Brian sat back down, holding my hand with both of his as I awaited the verdict.

"Mr. Deevers listened to your version of the story and has decided that suspension is still warranted in this case. Normally, there is a week suspension from all school activities in the case of violence against another student." She paused to see the horror pass over my face.

"But prom is Saturday. Everything's already planned," I stammered.

"A week's suspension from all activities is the normal punishment," she repeated, "but Mr. Deevers agreed with my assessment that because you have never had any other issues, your punishment could be reduced to three days. The suspension starts immediately and will go through Friday. Saturday, you are clear and will be allowed to attend prom."

"Thank you so much," I started, but was quickly interrupted with more conditions.

"You are going to be on probation for the remainder of the school year. If you so much as look at another student wrong, you could face suspension for the rest of the school year and would have to take summer school to graduate. Additionally, I will be making a phone call to your parents to let them know what happened."

"I understand. And thank you," I said looking down.

"If you hadn't had come back this afternoon, the punishment would have been much more severe. I'm proud that you made the choice to do the right thing and that's why I stood up for you in Mr. Deever's office. You see, Abigail tends to be pretty persuasive and would have probably convinced him of a much harsher punishment."

"Is she going to be okay?" I asked, shocking both Brian and Ms. Swanson.

"I believe so. The nurse doesn't think it's broken, but she's going to go to the hospital to have it checked out," she explained. "You should stay clear of her, though," she warned. "We don't need another incidence."

"I'll leave her alone. Hopefully she'll have moved on to something else by Saturday," I said.

Brian chuckled quietly knowing that prom was going to be much more interesting.

"I guess I'm heading home to start my suspension now," I said with resignation.

Ms. Swanson stood up and shook my hand. Brian and I were walking out the door when she called him back in. "I'll be right back," he whispered.

I took a seat near her office and closed my eyes thinking about how the conversation with Mom and Dad was going to go tonight at dinner.

Within a couple of minutes, Brian and I were walking out to his Jeep. "What did she want?" I asked curiously.

"She tried to lecture me about if I ditched to be with you this week, it would be setting a bad example for you," he said and laughed tensely.

"Well, you are a terrible influence on me," I said as I pulled back on his arm so I could kiss him.

"Hey, now," he said, "you're supposed to be in trouble. What makes you think you are going to get any of that? It wouldn't be much of a punishment if we were completely inseparable during the next three days," he teased and pulled me closer for another kiss.

"Hmmm... I think I need to be punished more often," I said playfully as I ran my fingers through his hair.

"We need to get you home before they extend your suspension," he said, obviously not worried about my suspension as much as getting home as quickly as possible.

Saturday, Stephanie and Kara arrived at my house together around one thirty. I was grateful my parents still allowed me to go to prom after the fight. I was grounded all week, but it didn't matter because Brian had ditched school to serve out my suspension with me.

The guys were going to pick us up in the limo around five after they dropped off their vehicles at the hotel. We listened to music while we did our hair, makeup, and nails. It was so much fun that we didn't realize how fast the day had gone. Mom had been in and out all day taking pictures, but suddenly she was there to let us know the guys had arrived.

"We can make them wait for a few minutes," Stephanie said calmly as she looked at herself again in the mirror. She looked stunning in her short, dark purple, sleeveless dress that really showed off her extraordinary long legs.

Kara had chosen a long, floral print dress. It had a sequenced strap that went across her right shoulder only, leaving her left one bare. The large hibiscus flowers placed perfectly on the top and the bottom of the dress along with the dark and light blues, purples, and black made the dress seem very Hawaiian.

I wasn't excited about my dress since I'd already worn it in Mark and Emily's wedding. I chose not to wear the silver sash, but everything else was identical, including my necklace with the promise ring attached hanging from my neck. Even my hair was the same.

Mom came back to check on us again. "The guys are getting their tuxes all wrinkled waiting for you," she said with a smile.

"I guess we should go then," I said as we all took one last look in the mirror.

Mom rushed out of the room to get in position to take pictures as we walked down the hallway. We were holding hands as we rounded the corner to the living room. I stayed back for a moment to let Kara and Stephanie through and to watch all the reactions when they all saw each other for the first time. It made me smile to see how excited Kara and Stephanie were as they greeted their dates. Mom was rapidly taking pictures, trying to capture it all. When I finally turned to walk to Brian, everything else disappeared. He was wearing a traditional tux: black pants, single button jacket, with a gray vest and tie. I couldn't believe that he was mine. Without thinking about it, I was suddenly in his arms, kissing him like there was no one else there.

Brian eventually broke away and laughed quietly. Then he whispered, "You do remember where you are, right?"

I felt the blood rush to my face as I heard Mom and Dad make a disapproving noise. Michael let out a laugh which was sharply cut off, presumably by Kara elbowing him. Smiling, Brian pinned my flower to my dress as Mom took more pictures. We all lined up for a group photo inside and then once more outside in front of the limo before we got inside and rode to the restaurant.

I sat quietly, resting my head on Brian's shoulder while he stroked my hand gently. Out of nowhere, he released my hand and grabbed something that was next to him. I sat upright and watched what he was doing with concern.

"I wanted to get you a little something to go with your dress because I know you're sad that you didn't get a new one," he said, handing me a rectangular black velvet box.

Everyone's eyes were on me as I took the red bow off and opened it. I saw Kara and Stephanie smile brightly as I let out a little gasp. "How did you know about this?" I asked Brian as he took the diamond bracelet I'd worn when we were shopping out of the case and put it on my wrist.

"I had a little help," he said eyeing Stephanie.

I reached up to take my old hoop earrings off and replaced them with the new diamond ones that matched the bracelet. They were easily a carat each and were very heavy on my ears. "You really shouldn't have done this," I said softly, still in awe of the gift. "I don't have anywhere to wear these."

"You're wearing them now," Michael said sarcastically. Kara smacked him with the back of her hand on his chest.

I kissed Brian gently. "Thank you," I whispered.

"Okay, show's over guys," Brian announced and everyone resumed their previous conversations. Then he whispered to me, "You look beautiful, by the way. Those diamonds accent the sparkle in your eyes. I'm glad to see it has returned along with your green eyes. They're my favorite."

The restaurant was crowded with couples enjoying their prom night meals. Even though service was slow, the food was delicious. By the time we were done, I was ready to have a nap in the hotel room. In fact, the more I thought about facing everyone at the prom after being suspended all week, the less I felt like going at all.

“Maybe we could just sneak away and have our own private prom,” I suggested to Brian as we were walking towards the elevator after putting our things away in the room.

Stephanie overheard. “You have to be there for me,” she insisted. “If I don’t get crowned Prom Princess, I’ll need someone to take with me when I run to the bathroom crying. And if I am chosen, well, I want you there to celebrate with me.” She batted her eyes at me.

“Fine,” I said, “but if I get in a fight with Abigail and get suspended for the rest of the year, it’s your fault.”

“Thank you, thank you!” she squealed and hugged me.

Everyone laughed and the elevator opened on the ground floor. We could hear the low beat of the music playing as we walked through the crowded lobby towards the ballroom. The guys handed our tickets to the chaperone at the door and we entered in the dark, noisy room. There were round tables set up for us to sit at when we weren’t dancing and a large wooden dance floor set up in the middle of the room. We took our place in the long line to get our pictures taken.

I was desperately trying to stay inconspicuous as we waited for our turn with the photographer. Stephanie, however, wanted everyone to see her and waved to just about everyone who looked in our direction. Consequently, there were a lot of people who ended up pointing towards me while talking to someone.

I groaned to Stephanie, “Do you think you can handle this on your own now?”

“Don’t be so dramatic,” she responded and waved at another couple who decided to avoid the photography line.

“It’ll be over soon,” Brian said and squeezed my hand.

After pictures were finally taken, I still didn’t feel much like dancing, so Brian and I found a quiet table away from the dance floor. We were in the middle of a conversation when we were interrupted by a girl I’d never met before.

“You’re Ashlyn Taylor, right?” she asked shyly.

“Yes,” I said trying to hide my confusion.

“I know we’ve never talked before, but I wanted to thank you for what you did the other day at lunch. I know you got in trouble for it, but I’m really glad to see they let you come tonight.” She was speaking quickly, like she was nervous.

“I was wrong to hit Abigail,” I said flatly.

“Maybe,” she said, “but there are a bunch of us who have been terrorized by Abby for years. It was nice to see someone finally stand up to her. I don’t know if anyone’s told you, but she’s been much more reserved since then, almost like she’s scared the next person she picks on will fight back.” The girl was smiling at the thought.

“I guess I’m glad some good came out of it, then,” I admitted.

The girl gave me a quick hug and then disappeared with her date into the crowd.

Brian smiled and patted my hand. “See? Even when you think you’re being a terrible person, you’re spreading goodness around,” he said only half joking. A slow song started playing and he added, “Now, are you ready to dance with me?”

I reluctantly took his hand and he led me to the dance floor, close to where Michael and Kara were dancing. Brian wrapped his strong arms around me and led me around so effortlessly, making it easy to get lost in his eyes and his scent. We moved together like we were made to exactly fit with the other, matching every movement like our bodies were actually one. As much as I didn’t want to be there, the longer we danced, the more I wanted the song to never end. I was completely lost in him and didn’t have to worry about anyone pointing at me or talking about me.

When the music picked up the pace again, everyone started jumping and dancing crazy around us, so Brian took my hand and walked with me back to the table we had previously occupied. There was another couple sitting there, looking like they were on an awkward first date, but we sat down anyway.

Ask her to dance, I told him with my gift.

He immediately stood up and offered the girl his hand. "Would you care to dance?" he asked, sounding much braver than he had looked a moment ago.

"Yes!" she said enthusiastically and took his hand as he led her to the dance floor. I watched them momentarily as they coordinated their movements and laughed.

"That was very nice of you," Brian commented, looking deep in my eyes.

I shrugged. "They both wanted to, but were going to spend the whole night sitting here feeling awkward."

After awhile, Michael and Kara got tired of dancing and joined us at the table. Not too long after that, Stephanie and Cory came over, but didn't sit down. "I can't believe you guys are gonna sit here all night. Come dance with us," she insisted, pulling on Brian's arm.

So we joined them on the dance floor, enjoying the rhythms of the music pulsating through our bodies until we were too hot to continue. "I need some air," I yelled to Brian over the music.

By this time, most of the students had arrived and were enjoying the night. Brian and I made our way through the sea of couples, past the lobby, and out to the pool area where we used our room key to gain access.

It was a warm night in early May, but there was a slight breeze that blew cool air off the water. Brian took a seat on a lounge chair and motioned for me to sit in front of him. I was a little awkward sitting down in my dress, but once situated, he wrapped his arms around me and kissed the top of my head. "How's your evening going, Ash?"

"Much better than I'd expected," I admitted.

"Maybe later we can escape and go out to the desert for awhile," he said.

"That sounds wonderful." I smiled and closed my eyes, snuggling up closer to him.

We spent awhile sitting by the pool, reminiscing about the first night, marveling at how long ago that seemed. "I still don't understand how you tricked me into trusting you from the beginning," I teased.

"You think I tricked you?"

"No, not really, but I'm still at a loss to understand what made me tell you. I'd kept it from everyone without a second thought, but you..." I paused for a moment to find the right wording. "When I saw you in the hallway when you got me out of class, did you know I felt butterflies in my stomach and my heart started racing? I thought I was completely losing it. I mean, I had just been humiliated and the whole school seemed to know about it and just seeing you in the hall, waiting for me, made everything else not matter so much. It was very unnerving," I said with a small laugh.

"You have no idea how many times I'd envisioned doing that, sneaking you out of class and taking you away with me somewhere. It was kinda odd that when you ran into me on your way out of English, I suddenly knew exactly what I was going to do. I never imagined it would actually work," he said and I could feel his smile when he kissed my head again.

"I bet you never imagined what a crazy girl you were getting caught up with, either," I remarked.

"Oh, Ash. You make life so much more interesting than I thought possible."

I sat up and turned around to face him, making him look at me curiously. "Do you ever wonder if we had a choice in being together?" I asked.

"I believe we have choices and have to decide whether or not to act on them," he said.

"What I mean is what if there is someone else out there like me who 'suggested' we should be together and that's why we're so inseparable, kinda like I did with that couple back there to get them to dance?"

Brian contemplated my question quickly. "No, Ash. There is no one out there like you. I knew from the moment I saw you I wanted to get to know you and it wasn't a voice in my head that told me to do it. Everything about you made me want to get closer to you and not acting on that for three years

didn't cause me pain like I get when I try to not do what you suggest. I think the universe is a better place because we're together; you're using your gift again and I've let go of all the anger and sadness I'd carried for all those years. I don't have any doubt when I'm with you that I've found my soul mate."

I was so touched by his unexpected explanation, by how well thought out it was, that I was rendered speechless. So I did what my mind instinctively told me to do and I kissed him, trying to convey through my touch how much he meant to me.

After a few minutes, he suggested, "Maybe we should take this up to the room."

"Steph will be pissed if you miss it," I heard Kara say from behind me. "Sorry," she added and sat down on the end of the chair Brian and I were in.

I sighed, frustrated with the interruption, frustrated that I was being pulled back to a place I didn't want to be, frustrated because I knew that's where I should be to support my friend.

"They're getting ready to announce the royalty," Kara said softly, but with some urgency to her voice.

"We'll be inside in a minute," Brian said calmly.

"Okay," Kara said standing up. "I really am sorry."

Brian held me for another minute before saying anything. "Are you gonna be alright?"

"Are you going to be with me?" I asked looking in his eyes.

"Of course," he said.

"Then I'm going to be just fine," I said smiling as I moved my hand down his face.

He grabbed my wrist and kissed the palm of my hand and we stood up together and walked back inside.

"I'm gonna kill you, Ash. You were supposed to be here with me," Stephanie whispered as the student body president was thanking everyone who helped put the prom together.

"I am here, Steph. If it makes you feel any better, I'll call you Princess Stephanie the rest of the night," I said, trying to calm her down.

She laughed loudly, which made some people turn and look. For the first time since Tuesday, I saw Abigail as she turned and threw me a look that might have intimidated me a week earlier. Although it was pretty dark, I could still see the blackness around her eyes that couldn't be completely covered by makeup. Instead of reacting to her glares, I looked away and pulled Brian closer to me, resting my head against his chest.

"And without further ado, let's announce this year's prom royalty. And the winner of the title of Prom Princess goes to..." there was a collective inhale from several girls in the crowd while the envelope was opened. "Stephanie Turner!"

The crowd of students clapped enthusiastically. She squealed with delight and gave Cory a quick kiss and me a sloppy hug that nearly knocked me down before going up front to receive her crown.

"And you should have dragged your date up with you because the title of Prom Prince goes to Cory Cummings."

Brian and Michael both slapped him on his back as he jogged up to stand by Stephanie. She was beaming as she stood up there with Cory.

"Can we leave now?" I whispered to Brian, but Kara stamped on my foot in disapproval.

"Ouch!" I said, glaring at her.

We stood there and applauded politely as they announced the Prom King and Queen. The two couples took to the dance floor and shared a dance while everyone who didn't win looked on with envy. Kara, Michael, Brian, and I all took a seat at a table, waiting patiently for Stephanie and Cory to rejoin us so we could congratulate them. Finally, their dance was done and they walked towards the photographer to have their pictures taken with their crowns.

"Want to go dance while we wait to congratulate them?" Brian suggested.

"I'd love to," I responded with a smile.

It wasn't a slow song, but we decided to dance to our own song rather than the one playing. People all around stared as Brian dipped me gently and kissed my neck. I wanted nothing more than to be anywhere else, but tried to enjoy the closeness we were allowed. I didn't even know who was near us because I couldn't take my eyes off Brian.

Suddenly, we were both being hugged by an overly excited Stephanie. I stared in Brian's eyes for another moment before I turned my attention to Stephanie. "It suits you," I said, commenting on her crown.

"I couldn't have done it without you," she said, hugging me again. "Thank you for giving it to Abby," she said.

I hated how conflicted it made me feel to be thanked for that, but I pushed those feelings aside to allow myself to just be happy for her. "So, am I free to leave now, your highness?" I said in jest.

"I suppose," I she said, still smiling so big it looked like it was starting to hurt.

I gave her a kiss on her cheek and whispered in her ear, "You would have won without me, you know. I hope you enjoy your night."

"Thank you, Ash. I'll see you later." She gave Brian a kiss on the cheek and whispered something to him. He nodded and then took my hand to leave.

I waved to Kara, who was still dancing with Michael and we walked towards the door. Once outside, Brian swung me around and kissed me like we had been kissing out by the pool. "Let's try this again," he said. "Shall we head up to the room?"

He didn't even wait for me to answer and picked me up to carry me off to the elevator. I could hear someone talking again on the microphone, but I didn't make out what they were saying, nor did I care. Brian and I were finally free.

"Ash! Brian! You have to come back!" I heard Kara yelling after us.

"No we don't," I whispered to Brian, smiling.

Somehow, Kara was able to run all the way down the hall and reach us before the elevator doors opened. She was out of breath, but managed to say, "You... back inside... won."

"What are you talking about?" I asked her, sounding a little more frustrated than I intended.

The elevator door opened and we started to head inside. Kara pulled at Brian's arm. "No, you have to go back," she insisted, having regained her ability to speak.

"Did something happen to Steph?" Brian asked setting me down.

"No, nothing like that. Come on!" she insisted.

We followed her back to the ballroom, but as soon as we entered, I was sorry we had. "There they are," the boy on the microphone said, pointing in our direction. All eyes in the room turned to stare at us as we walked closer to the crowd gathered on the dance floor. Kara continued to push us up front until we were standing next to the student body president. "You guys weren't trying to leave without getting your award, were you?"

I looked at Brian with terror and confusion and then at the crowd of people staring at us.

The boy with the microphone handed us a trophy that read, "Best Couple". I rolled my eyes and handed it to Brian. He was much more amused than I was and decided to put on a show for everyone who was just waiting for us to do something. He winked at me and then pulled me close and kissed me passionately. The crowd clapped and whistled and then we were forced apart by a nearby teacher.

I couldn't help but laugh; the whole thing was ridiculous. I had worked so hard for so long to remain anonymous and now, at the end of my school career, I had won an award because I was so madly in love with the man in front of me that we had drawn the attention of the entire school. I glanced around just in time to see Abigail scoff and storm off, her date chasing after her.

We were forced to lead the students in a slow dance, which I was happy to do. Kara and Michael soon joined us, followed closely by Stephanie and Cory. A few minutes prior, I was so glad to be

getting far away from this celebration, but now I was quite happy to be sharing these moments with the people I cared about most.

When the slow songs ended, we finally were able to leave the party. We had to stop and receive congratulations from several couples on our way to the photographer and then we were able to leave for good. As we walked down the hallway again towards the elevators, we kept checking behind us. We laughed happily as the elevator doors closed and we were on our way up to the suite.

Chapter Twenty-Three – Alone

After getting a few things from the room, we snuck out the back of the hotel to avoid the prom traffic. He drove to our part of the desert where I quickly lost all track of time. There was something magical about that place, something that drew both of us there repeatedly. While we talked in the Jeep, I admitted to him that I came out to our spot the night I almost got kicked out of Mark and Emily's wedding.

"I'm touched that even after I'd hurt you so much, you were still looking to be with me. I'm pretty lucky," he admitted. He walked around to help me out and held my hand as we walked towards our spot. Because of my heels and dress, I had a terrible time trying to climb up the large boulder. Without any effort, Brian lifted me up and set me gently on the ground at the top.

"Would you care to dance?" he asked as we reached the familiar outlook.

"We don't have any music," I said, but still moved in close to him.

"Have we ever needed music before?" He grabbed my hand and pulled me in close.

We swayed together gently. I shivered as the cool desert breeze blew up my dress and tried to get closer to Brian.

"Here," he said as he released me and took off his tux jacket to wrap around me.

I breathed deeply through my nose, enjoying the smell of Brian while feeling the warm of the sleeves that were now wrapped around me.

"Better?" he asked smiling at my enjoyment.

"Much," I said dreamily.

Brian laughed softly and picked me up in his arms, kissing me gently. He carried me to the rock, setting me down on it while he climbed up next to me.

"This is nice," I commented, putting my head on his shoulder. I was completely content just sitting there with him. "What do you think is happening back at the hotel?" I asked eventually, knowing that Stephanie was having a few friends over to celebrate after prom.

"I don't want to think about it. I'm enjoying this too much and I'm a little worried about what we'll go back to," he admitted.

I laughed a little. "Sorry. I didn't mean to make you tense," I said and reached around to rub his shoulders.

"Mmmm... That feels wonderful," he said.

I positioned myself behind him and started undoing his tie. "Careful," he warned.

"What if I don't wanna be," I said playfully and unbuttoned the top of his shirt, exposing his neck.

"These rocks are a little hard, you know," he said.

"Who said that's what I was thinking?" I said, kissing his neck.

I could feel all the stress of the night leaving Brian as I wrapped my hands around his torso, unbuttoning the rest of his shirt.

When he couldn't stand it anymore, he pulled me around to his front so he could kiss me back. Then without a word, he lifted me up and carried me to the Jeep. Brian ripped the jacket off of me and threw it in the backseat. I grabbed the blankets and was quickly back in Brian's arms and moving towards the old concrete table. Brian sat me down on the edge and took the blankets from me, throwing them hastily over the slab. Then the details got fuzzy.

Our clothes ended up scattered around. I'm not even sure how I managed to get one shoe off, but the other was still strapped to my foot. All I know is that I had been cool without Brian's jacket, but now I was sweating with nothing on.

As we laid in each others' arms, the peacefulness of the night returned. Brian's closeness helped keep the cool breeze from chilling me. Even if it hadn't, I don't think I would've said anything.

"You're pretty amazing," I said lovingly as I kissed his chest. I knew he hadn't fallen asleep, but he was being unusually quiet.

As I sat up, he pulled me on top of him. "You're not getting away that easily," he said and twisted his fingers around some loose strands of my hair.

"I wasn't going anywhere; it just felt like you left me," I said with concern.

"Nope. Just enjoying the moment," he said.

I relaxed and rested my head on his chest and he continued stroking my hair. Exhaustion was setting in and I knew it was probably worse for him. "Are you gonna be able to drive back or are we camping here tonight?"

"I can make it back to the hotel if you want or we can sleep here."

I liked the idea of sleeping where we were, but the table was so hard and the blankets weren't thick enough to provide any level of comfort. "Anywhere with you is good, but I think it might be hard to get sleep out here."

"Now's the tricky part then. We have to find where our clothes went," he said with a tired laugh.

"We could always sleep in the Jeep," I suggested.

"I wouldn't get to hold you in my arms, then. Really. I'm fine to drive back. And it's late enough that hopefully the party will be over."

I had completely forgotten about Stephanie's party. In fact, I'd barely remembered we had been at prom at all. Suddenly, the whole night flashed through my head and I remembered Brian's gift. My bracelet was still attached to my wrist, but when I went to feel my earrings, the one in my right ear was missing.

"Brian, I lost an earring," I said in a slight panic.

He had just found his pants as was putting them back on. "Don't worry. We'll find it," he said calmly and walked to the Jeep to get his flashlight. As he looked around the ground, he randomly threw pieces of clothes at me so I could get dressed, too. "Only one shoe?" he commented as he gently tossed it to me.

"Yeah, I don't know what happened. I must've been too busy to take the other one off," I said casually as I went to put the shoe back on. "Well, I can take a guess at what happened now," I laughed, dangling the broken shoe in the air so Brian could see it when he flashed the light over to me. "Would you mind carrying me?"

"Sure," he said happily and scooped me off the table. "I'll come back during the day and find the earring. Don't worry about it, okay? No one else ever comes here, so it's not going anywhere."

"I'm sorry," I said softly as he set me in my seat.

"Don't be. It's probably my fault it got lost anyway," he said smiling.

I couldn't contain my smile, either, as bits and pieces of the last few hours came back to me.

It was after two in the morning when we pulled into the hotel. Everything was quiet as we entered the room, only half dressed. There were a couple of people sleeping on the couches, but our room was still closed as were the other two bedroom doors. Brian quickly surveyed the damage, but as far as I could tell, everything was as we left it.

"I'm gonna have a quick shower," I whispered as we entered our room.

"Do you mind some company?" he asked cautiously.

"You're always welcome," I said, but then added, "but you have to behave. I'll probably fall asleep if you try to make any moves on me." I giggled and walked into the large bathroom getting

undressed along the way. The box the bracelet came in was sitting on the counter, so I gently laid it and my one earring in the box and closed the lid after admiring it one last time.

Brian came up behind me, running his hands down my arms. "I'm glad you liked it," he said in my ear.

"You really shouldn't have spent all that money on me. I'm already madly in love with you," I said turning to face him.

"Well, you're just gonna have to accept my random gifts to you," he stated and kissed my forehead.

"How did I get so lucky?" I said as we walked towards the shower.

"Luck had nothing to do with it," he smiled and followed me in to the warm stream of water.

I awoke the next morning to laughing from the other room. I rolled out of Brian's arms to see the time: nine forty-eight. I sighed knowing we were quickly running out of time. Check out was eleven.

"Hey, where did you go?" Brian asked as he pulled me back.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you," I said, enjoying the sensation of our bare skin touching.

"I've been awake for a while," he admitted. "I didn't want you to wake up alone."

I was pretty sure he still felt guilty for leaving me after that first night we slept together, but I was strangely okay with him holding on to that guilt if it meant waking up in his arms. "We have to check out soon," I said sadly while running my fingers down his neck and onto his chest.

"We can call for a late checkout," he suggested.

A big smile spread across my face and I nodded eagerly.

Brian jumped out of bed and wrapped the towel from the night before around his waist. "Cover up," he instructed. He opened the door just a crack to see who was up. "Hey, Cory. Can you have Steph call down and get a late checkout?"

"Sure," he said and Brian closed the door, locking it behind him.

Brian turned around with a huge grin on his face. "There's a large tub in there. It would be a shame to not try it out," he said suggestively and threw his towel at me.

"Sleep well?" Cory asked us, holding back a laugh, when we finally came out around noon.

Stephanie smacked him on the back of the head. "Gross," she complained to him.

The guys thought it was funny, but I turned bright red. I left Brian's side and walked over by Stephanie and decided to get both our minds off that awkward situation. "How was your party last night?"

Her face lit up. "It was great. And we didn't destroy anything," she added loudly so Brian would hear.

He was talking about something quietly with Michael and Cory. He gave her a thumbs up, but didn't look at her.

Kara looked like she hadn't slept and was in desperate need of a shower when she finally joined us. "Are you okay?" I asked as I grabbed her arm to guide her to a seat.

"Yeah, just a little too much fun last night," she said.

I really didn't need *those* details, so I steered the conversation in a different direction. "How long did you guys stay at the dance?"

"We were close to the last ones to leave," Stephanie said.

"Yeah, they wouldn't let us come back to the room without them," Kara complained.

"I needed you guys to help me keep the party under control. I knew if you came back before us, you would disappear for the night," Stephanie pouted.

Kara laughed. "You're probably right," she admitted. Then turning to me she asked, "So where did you run off to?"

"We went for a drive and then watched the stars and talked," I said happily.

"Lots of people were looking for you two after you left," Stephanie said.

"Why? I've never spoken to most of those people that were there tonight. I don't even know how we got voted best couple," I snapped.

"You may not pay attention to people at school, Ash," Kara began, "but it's hard to not notice you and Brian. I seriously think you've been the cause of at least three couples breaking up over the past several months."

"That can't be true. That doesn't even make sense," I insisted.

Stephanie shrugged. "I've heard that, too. No one could possibly compare to the way the two of you are always looking at each other adoringly, even if you are just talking about what you want for lunch. Not to mention the kissing," she said making a gross face. "I can't believe you guys haven't been written up for indecent public affection or something."

"We're not really that bad, are we?" I asked almost horrified.

Kara and Stephanie both nodded.

I blushed and put my head down. "Sorry," I said in a little voice.

They both laughed, which made me feel worse. "Don't be sorry, silly. It won you a fantastic trophy and the envy of most every girl there last night," Stephanie said brightly.

The guys joined us to see what all the laughing was about. "Nothing," I grumbled, which made Kara and Stephanie laugh harder. Brian, Michael, and Cory looked between the three of us and shrugged.

"What were you guys whispering about over there," Stephanie asked after she stopped laughing and wiped a tear from her face.

"Nothing," the three said almost in unison.

Stephanie jumped up and tackled Cory. "Tell me," she demanded as she tickled him.

Kara made a move to do something similar to Michael, but he ran away into their room before she could reach him. Their door slammed closed and muffled laughter could be heard through the door sporadically.

I sat at the table, frowning, as Stephanie and Cory's game took them back in their room, too.

"What's the matter?" Brian asked sitting next to me.

"Nothing," I lied, but knew he wasn't going to let it go. So I quickly added, "Did you know that we caused relationships to end this year?"

It wasn't what Brian was expecting and he let a little laugh escape him.

"It's not funny," I said angrily. "Why is everyone laughing at me?"

"No one's laughing at you, Ash. It's just ridiculous to feel responsible for breaking up a relationship when you didn't do anything intentionally." He reached over to smooth out the frown lines on my forehead.

"Were you aware of how we kiss in public?" I was still horrified.

"Yes, actually I am quite aware of that," he said smiling. "Weren't you?"

"I didn't know we were such a spectacle, if that's what you mean," I said flatly.

"Ashlyn, don't be upset. This is all a good thing, you know. We are so obviously in love that we're setting unrealistic expectations for all those flighty high school romances. They probably were going to fall apart without us, anyway," he said lifting my chin so he could look me in my eyes.

"I know, but I just didn't realize everyone else saw us that way," I admitted.

Brian smiled, melting me a little. "Do you want to know what we were talking about," he asked quietly.

"You're not even gonna make me torture you?" I asked, starting to feel better.

"Not unless you want to," he said suggestively.

"Hmmm..." I pondered. "What time do we have to check out?"

Kara and Michael were still locked in their room when we finally made our way back out to the living area. Stephanie and Cory were sitting together on the couch watching a movie. We sat down on the other couch and tried to catch up.

“So, did she get it out of you, too?” Cory asked Brian. I had forgotten there was an actual reason we ended up in the room again.

Stephanie smiled triumphantly. “He didn’t stand a chance,” she said poking Cory in the arm.

Brian laughed and kissed my head, knowing I felt completely left out. “We’re taking you ladies on a real trip after graduation. We’re thinking a beach somewhere, maybe San Diego or down to Mexico.”

Stephanie squealed happily hearing the news again. I immediately flashed to the dream I had had so long ago of Brian and me walking down a beach. “That sounds wonderful,” I said to Brian.

It felt really nice hanging out with friends and laughing. I would’ve never guessed a year ago that this was how my life was leading to. I snuggled close to Brian, gently running my fingernails down his arm.

“What’s all the noise about,” Michael said as he and Kara rejoined us.

They sat on the floor in front of the TV and watched the rest of movie with us. Afterwards, we packed our things and straightened up, making sure there wasn’t any unnoticed damage. Satisfied, we went downstairs and checked out.

“I had a great time,” I admitted as we drove towards my house.

“Me, too,” Brian said squeezing my hand.

“Do you want me to help you look for my earring? I’m sure my parents would let me stay out awhile longer if they knew I was looking for it,” I said.

“Well, they might wonder how you lost an earring in the middle of the desert and I don’t think I’d want to have to look your dad in the eyes and explain it to him,” he said.

“You’re probably right. But I feel really bad I lost it,” I added as we pulled up in front of my house.

“It was most likely my fault, so stop apologizing. I’ll call you as soon as I have it, alright?” he said, brushing his thumb across my cheek as if wiping away an imaginary tear.

I smiled. “I love you, Brian Turner.”

“I know. I’ll call you in a bit.” he said as I opened my door and started getting my things out of the back.

“Would you mind taking my dress to the cleaners with your tux?”

“That’s probably a good idea. I’ll drop them off tomorrow after school,” he said.

“Thank you. You just saved me from having to come up with a good excuse,” I said and leaned over to give him a kiss goodbye. “Be careful,” I added and waved as I closed the door.

I stood outside and watched him drive down my street and around the corner before I picked up my bag and went inside to wait.

Chapter Twenty-Four – Dark Room

After giving my parents a quick overview of the night, I took my things to my room and reminisced as I put the trophy on my desk next to my computer. I waited anxiously for Brian's call, but it never came. Hours passed and I hadn't heard from him. I worried that he couldn't find it and was afraid to call and give me the bad news. Finally, when it was too dark out to be looking for it anymore, I called him. His phone immediately went to voicemail.

My next instinct was to use my gift to make a connection with him and let him know it was okay if he didn't find it. Since we had gotten back together over Spring Break, my gift had grown steadily stronger. I hadn't been able to find a distance where I couldn't contact Brian, although since the incident at school on Tuesday, I hadn't used it to talk to him at all.

I sat on my bed and focused on Brian, but I couldn't make a connection. Frustrated, I decided to pull out the shirt he had given me at the lake in March. I kept it under my pillow, and brought it out only when I needed to be reminded of him. I had held it a couple of times when I connected with him. But it didn't help this time. I started to panic and called Stephanie.

"Hi, Ash. Whatcha need?" Stephanie asked as she answered her phone.

"Do you know where Brian is?" I asked, trying to remain calm.

"No, I thought he was still out with you," she said casually.

"I lost an earring last night and he was going out to find it. But it's been hours and he hasn't called," I said as the panic started coming through in my voice.

"I'm sure there's nothing to worry about, Ash. He probably stopped by Michael's or something. I'll give Michael a call and call you right back," she said and hung up.

I started twisting my hands together, not being able to stay still. I tried again to connect to Brian, and was able to form a connection for a moment, but it was almost like I was looking through blurry glasses. *Brian? Are you okay?* I asked.

I briefly saw a dark, dreary room around him and his head shake before I lost the connection. It was almost like the nightmare where Brian was being held captive by Rick. A wave of terror shot through my body as I started putting pieces together. I never found that picture of Brian and me; Emily didn't have it. It had to have been Rick. He came in my home and took it either to show me he could get to me or to actually try to get me, but I wasn't there. I jumped out of my dark thoughts when my phone rang.

"Something's wrong," I said answering the phone, having briefly glanced to make sure it was Stephanie calling.

"You're just being paranoid. I'm sure he's out doing something special for you," she reassured, but I could hear a little bit of worry in her voice.

"Steph, I saw him," emphasizing 'saw', hoping she'd understand what I meant. *"He's not okay. I think he's hurt."* The tears started mounting in my eyes as I admitted out loud my fear.

"Could you be wrong?" she said, almost challenging me.

"No," I said and knew it was true. *"Can you call the police and report him missing?"* I gave her Detective Olson's number and instructed her to tell him that I said this might have something to do with Rick.

"Who's Rick? What's this about, Ash?" She started sounding frantic.

"I can't tell you. You just have to trust me. Please Steph. I need you to do this. I am going to retrace his steps to see if I can find him or where he could have gone. You can have the detective contact me on my cell if he has any questions." I felt strong and resolved as I gave her the instructions.

"Promise you'll call me and let me know what's going on," she demanded.

"I'll call you when I can. I have to go. Please call Detective Olson now," I said and hung up the phone.

I grabbed my purse, phone, and keys and ran for the door.

"Where do you think you're going?" Dad yelled as I opened the door.

I barely heard him and only paused to tell him something happened to Brian.

"*Call us if we can do anything,*" I heard Dad yell as I ran in my car.

I couldn't get there fast enough. Even though I was speeding, I seemed to hit every light red. I knew I couldn't run it without possibly causing an accident. In those moments, I wished that I could use my gift to influence the traffic lights.

I was about a mile from my house when my phone rang. "Hello?" I asked frantically.

"Ms. Taylor? This is Detective Olson. I received a phone call that you might have information about Rick Thompson?"

He missed the point of Stephanie's call completely. "My boyfriend is missing. I think he's been taken by Rick," I tried explaining.

"I instructed Ms. Turner to file a missing person's report after he's been missing for twenty-four hours. Until then, unless there is something that indicated he could be in trouble, I do not have the authority to do anything."

"Proof like his Jeep on the side of the road, completely wrecked?" I asked as I pulled off the road behind what used to be Brian's Jeep. I looked inside the upturned vehicle: blood, his tux, my dress, some snacks from the night before, some more blood... no Brian. Tears were streaming down my face; I was surprised I was able to talk at all.

"What is your location? And how do you know this has anything to do with Rick Thompson?" he asked in an official tone.

I gave him directions to where the Jeep was. "I can't stay here and wait for someone to show up. Can you meet with me? I have something that you need to see." I decided that if I was going to convince Detective Olson to save Brian, I had to provide him some proof that I knew more about Rick than he suspected.

Mom followed me down the hall and stopped in my doorway as I tore through my drawers looking for the newspaper article and my drawing of the shack. "What's going on, Ashlyn? Is Brian okay?"

"No, Mom. He's been in an accident. I have to go meet with the police," I said without even looking at her. I rushed by her to the front door and yelled, "I'll call you when I can!"

As I rushed into the lobby of the police station, I startled the clerk. "May I help you?" She sounded irritated as she scrambled to do something with her computer.

"Detective Olson, please," I said trying to catch my breath. "He's expecting me," I added.

"Your name?" she asked, still upset with being disturbed.

"Ms. Taylor." Detective Olson came out of a side office at that moment. "Come this way, please."

I followed him into a small room, sparsely decorated with a desk that had a tape recorder on it and two hard-looking chairs on either side of the desk. He motioned for me to take a seat in the first chair. "This is going to be recorded, so please try to speak as normal as possible."

"No, this can't be recorded. I am only bringing this to you because I need your help getting my boyfriend back before Rick does something to him." I tried sounding calm, but I think I came across a little insane.

He nodded suspiciously, so I proceeded. "I need you to take a look at this," I said as I grabbed the copy of the newspaper story from my purse.

He glanced down at it and pushed it back towards me. "This is the story that ran after our press conference regarding the murder of Rick's father. What's this got to do with anything?" He seemed irritated with me.

"It's the picture. Do you notice anything about the people in this picture?" I asked, trying to let him make the discovery himself.

"Let's see, that's the Chief and someone from CES and some investigators in the background. What am I supposed to be looking for?" He was definitely losing his patience with me.

I pointed to a person in the middle of the picture and didn't say a word. Detective Olson picked up the paper again and stared for a few moments at the person I had pointed to. I could tell the moment he finally got it. "How did we miss this? He was right here the whole time."

I nodded.

"I don't understand. I have this posted on my case board in my office. I look at this every day and never saw him." He was completely stunned.

"No one sees him because he doesn't want them to. Well, almost no one. I see him. He can't hide from me and he knows it. That's why when the news story ran over New Year's, I was worried he would come after me. We laid low for a long time, but didn't hear anything from him. The mysterious murders stopped, the abductions stopped; I hoped he decided to just go away, but deep down I knew I was wrong," I said sadly.

"How can you see him and no one else?"

I shrugged. I wasn't willing to give him that piece of information, even with the recorder off. Now that he was paying attention to what I was saying, I pulled out my drawing. "I was contacted anonymously by email a couple of months ago. I was sent an aerial picture of a shack near a lake. I believe it's where Rick has been hiding out and where he has taken Brian."

"Why would he take your boyfriend?" he asked.

"He came after me several weeks ago in my house, but I wasn't living there at the time," I started. "So he took a picture I had left there of Brian and me. I thought I had just misplaced it, but when Brian went missing today, I knew it had been Rick in my room. I think he's going after people I care about to try to lure me to him."

Detective Olson studied my crude drawing. "This is on the northwest side of the lake. I recognize the road, I think," he said, still studying the picture. "I'll send out a team to go investigate. Thank you for your help, Ms. Taylor," he said as he stood and held out his hand for me to shake.

I didn't shake his hand. "I'm going with you. Your 'team' won't be able to find him without me," I said arrogantly.

"It's against regulations for you to come with me," he said officially.

"You know I'm right. You won't be able to find him without me and he'll kill Brian. I'm going out there, if I have to follow you in my car," I said defiantly.

He left the office to call reinforcements. When he started walking towards the door, he looked back at me. "You have to keep up if you want to come," he commanded.

Throughout the entire ride, I kept trying to connect with Brian. In my brief glimpses, I tried to tell him we were coming, but I wasn't sure if he heard me or understood what I was saying. I was able to make out the dried blood on the side of his head and could tell he was tied to a chair.

Detective Olson received several calls along the way. First was from the officer investigating the accident. Apparently there was evidence that the Jeep was hit from the side and forced off the road, when it rolled. Another call was from a detective on the case, who said he had secured a helicopter to assist in the search.

"You know more than you're telling me," he said out of nowhere when we were almost at the lake. "You realize it's a crime to impede an investigation," he warned.

"I assure you, I've given you all the information I have regarding this case," I said very plainly. He eyed me, trying to figure out exactly what I was saying, but didn't press the issue further.

It was too dark for me to try to find out how close we were by locating the power poles, but I knew when we were on the west side of the lake heading north. We reached a clearing and pulled off the road. There were already two other squad cars waiting and I could hear the helicopter approaching.

Detective Olson got out of the vehicle and instructed me to stay inside. I used the time to try to contact Brian again. This time, he was awake and I was able to connect with him.

It's gonna be okay, Brian. We're close, I said trying to reassure him.

He shook his head, but I didn't know what he meant by that.

Can you see Rick anywhere? I was aware that Brian probably couldn't see him, but knew probably knew he was in the situation because of Rick... because of me. I fought back the emotions and tried to stay focused on Brian.

He shook his head again.

I have the police with me. I'm not coming in alone. I need your help, though. We don't know exactly where you are. When you hear the helicopter getting close or see the spotlight, give me a subtle sign. I don't want you saying anything that would make Rick act against you. Do you think you can do this? I asked. I didn't know if the terror or sadness I felt in my heart came across when I used my gift. I hoped Brian just heard my voice and it helped.

I saw Brian nod that he understood. About this time, I caught a glimpse of Rick, but it didn't look like Brian noticed him. He was pacing; he obviously heard the helicopter, but I didn't know how he could know it was looking for him. He was pacing with a knife in his hand. Occasionally, he would stop and thrust it into the air, like he was battling an invisible foe and appeared to be mumbling, too, but I couldn't understand what he was saying.

The door of the cruiser opened and the detective got back in. *I love you, Brian. Hold on for me. I'll be back, soon,* I said before returning back to where I was sitting.

"The helicopter's on its way. We should be able to locate the shack from the air and then go in with the vehicles," he told me.

"He's got a weapon," I announced before I realized I shouldn't have known that.

"We always presume they're armed," he said, seemingly unaware of my wording.

"How long until the helicopter's here?"

"They are starting their search already over there," he motioned to the far south side of the lake. I could make out the helicopter spotlight searching.

"They're too far away. It's not over there," I complained. "They need to get closer over here now," I demanded.

"You can't be sure," he replied.

"Yes, I can. The shack is farther north. Please get them to search this way," I begged.

He eyed me carefully, but didn't move.

"Please," I pleaded with tears in my eyes.

"How do you know? You obviously haven't been there before or you would've given me something more than a drawing of a picture you'd been given."

"I need you to trust me. I know Rick has Brian tied to a chair in his shack. I know Brian's pretty hurt and fading in and out of consciousness. Rick has a knife and is moderately worried about the helicopter he hears. Please, before he does something drastic, call the helicopter to search over there," I said motioning more north.

Detective Olson paused for another moment and then got out of the car. He was discussing something with another officer, pointing north. I saw another officer get on the radio and the helicopter started moving closer.

Brian, we're getting closer. Please hold on, I begged.

I didn't have time to say anything else because Detective Olson jumped in the car and started the engine. "We're moving farther down the road towards the dirt road you drew," he said. "The helicopter is going to concentrate their search over here. I hope you're right about this."

"I am," I said quietly.

The vehicle transitioned to a dirt road. As we drove, I could make out a few telephone poles and knew we were getting close. The helicopter had caught up with us and was shining its light in the lightly wooded area next to us. Soon we stopped, but no one got out of their vehicles.

Can you see the spotlight at all? I asked Brian.

He picked his head up and looked around slightly. He nodded his head and then put it back down. I could see the pain on his face.

"They're close," I burst out.

At that moment, a call came on the radio that they had found something that could be a shack, but it was hard to see. Detective Olson started his car and took off in the direction of the light.

We need a distraction. They can't see the shack clearly, I said, hating to make Brian do something that could put him in more danger.

I kept my connection with him and watched sadly as Brian started talking out loud. "*They're coming for you, you know,*" he said without raising his head and then coughed.

Rick seemed shocked by being addressed, but then laughed and approached Brian, threatening him with his knife. "*Let them come,*" he challenged. His voice was raspy, but steady. I looked at his eyes as he stood there in front of Brian. They were still the eyes that had haunted me all these years, but they were more evil and insane.

"They've located the shack. We're heading in," Detective Olson told me. "When we arrive, you will stay in the car. I don't need to worry about you getting in the crossfire."

I didn't argue, but I also knew they weren't going to be able to catch him without my help. So I just nodded. The pain in my head was steadily growing as we got closer to our destination, but I fought against it and tried to connect with Brian again.

We're almost there. Hold on, I begged him.

He nodded and then said, "*Be careful.*"

This caught Rick's attention and he quickly turned and put the knife to Brian's throat. "*Shut up,*" he growled.

Out of pure instinct, I left my connection with Brian and moved to Rick. *Drop the knife,* I commanded.

He laughed and removed the knife from Brian's throat. "*You came!*" he said triumphantly.

Walk outside and give yourself up, I instructed him.

This was apparently more amusing to him than my first command. "*Your silly tricks don't work on me, you stupid girl.*"

While connected with Rick, I got a better look at how hurt Brian was. He had a deep gash on his forehead and a trail of dried blood that went all the way down staining his white shirt. His cheek was puffy and red and it looked like he was struggling to breathe. His arms were restrained behind his back and his legs were strapped to the legs of the chair. *My poor Brian,* I thought, but then remembered I had to stay focused. Rick was apparently immune to my suggestions, but I still could connect with him.

Rick quickly turned his head and looked out the window. The police were approaching on foot with their guns raised. "*Is this the best you could do?*" he asked mockingly.

I wasn't sure if he was talking to me or just out loud. I knew I had to do something when I heard the officers say they spotted Brian, but were unable to locate Rick. They were planning on just going in there and rescuing Brian, thinking that Rick had run when the helicopter started circling.

Rick laughed and took a position behind Brian, the knife starting to cut into Brian's neck. Brian winced, but had no way of defending himself.

Enough! I said to Rick. *It's me you want, not him.* My only thought was to try to get Rick to come after me so I could save Brian.

"You're wrong. I want everyone who you've ever told about me," he said and removed the knife from Brian's throat so he could wave it around while soliloquizing.

"We're going in," I heard a voice say.

I wanted to scream "No!", but I couldn't leave Rick for fear he would attack Brian. I had to find a way to make him visible so the officers could capture him.

You should torture him, first. Make him know real fear before you kill him, I suggested to Rick. *Let him know that he never had a chance to get you.* I hated myself for saying those things and it made my head hurt so bad, I had a hard time staying connected to Rick.

It seemed to be enough. Just as he yelled, *"Get out of my head!"* and backed away from Brian, holding his hands to his head, I heard Detective Olson yell, *"There he is!"* and burst through the door.

I lost my connection with Rick and ran towards the shack. I got there just in time to see Detective Olson shoot his taser and hit Rick. Surprisingly, he reached down and grabbed the barbs out of his upper chest and pulled them out, laughing. In an instant, the knife that had been in his hand was thrown precisely across the room, connecting with Detective Olson's stomach. He stumbled backwards and fell to the ground while Rick escaped out a window on the far side of the shack.

As I ran in, I reached up and felt the blood that was dripping from my nose. My head was still throbbing with pain, but I quickly forgot about that. An officer was attending to Detective Olson, calling for two ambulances. I ran passed them to Brian, who was being untied by another officer. I was relieved to see that the fresh wound on his neck looked minor. He was so incredibly beat up; it was painful to look at him.

"Brian!" I yelled as I crossed the room, tears streaming down my face. He didn't move when I started kissing his face, frantically trying to get him to respond to me. When I released his face, he didn't make an effort to hold his head up. "Please look at me," I begged.

With an obvious effort, he lifted his head and I saw the corner of his mouth raise just slightly. "I missed you," he struggled to say and allowed his head to fall forward again.

I let out a noise that was a combination of a laugh and a cry. "I'm so sorry," I sobbed, burying my head in his lap. Brian managed to move his left arm and stroke the back of my head as I knelt there, unable to move. I could hear the two officers in the background, talking to Detective Olson, telling him he was going to be alright.

"Ashlyn, come here," Detective Olson requested, coughing and sputtering blood.

"Go to him. I'm not going anywhere," Brian said as I remained motionless in his lap.

I gently took Brian's left hand and kissed it before I stood up and crossed the room. I knelt next to Detective Olson as he lay slumped up against the wall, blood pooling around him. The other officers stepped away as I took position at his side. "How did you know about the knife?" he whispered, subtly motioning to his stomach.

"I saw him," I admitted, but quickly continued before he tried talking again; it looked quite difficult. "I was able to connect with Brian and see that Rick had a knife. I tried to stop him, but he wouldn't listen to me," I started, sounding a little frantic recalling the events.

"He wasn't there and then suddenly we saw him. How did you do that?"

I shrugged, glancing around quickly to see if the other officers were listening. "I'm not really sure. I told him to hurt Brian, hoping that by saying something he wouldn't expect it would be shocking enough to break his defenses momentarily and allow you to see him. It took him by surprise and he got frustrated that I was in his head telling him things. I thought he was about to attack Brian when you guys saw him and went in." I cringed after the words left my mouth, afraid that Brian heard my confession and would hate me for using him like that. I glanced over to see Brian's reaction, but his face was resting in his hands.

"You did great work today, Ashlyn. We've never been so close to catching him. Thank you for all you've done," Detective Olson said as the ambulances pulled up outside. I could hear the helicopter circling around the area still, but I knew they weren't going to find Rick.

"Please don't put any of this in your report," I begged. I didn't even know if he was going to survive, but I needed him to understand that the information he had just been given was strictly off the record.

"If I make it to write up the report," he said a little too casually, "I can only put in it my account of the events. If you'd like to make an official statement, you know where my office is..." He trailed off and coughed again. "And get yourself checked out," he said motioning to the blood drying on my face.

"Thank you," I whispered, touching his hand that was clutching the knife that was still in his abdomen.

The paramedics rushed in and pushed me aside so they could stabilize Detective Olson for transport. "He's gonna need to be airlifted," the head medic stated. An officer standing at a distance got on his radio and started instructing someone on the other end to recall the search helicopter so they could take the detective to the hospital.

I slowly backed away from the scene and walked over to Brian, who was being attended to by another medic. They got Brian up on the gurney and headed towards the ambulance without having to do much stabilizing. As they loaded him in the back of the ambulance, they blocked me from jumping inside.

"You'll have to meet us at the hospital," the one medic instructed me.

Let her ride with him, I silently commanded.

The medic sighed and then motioned for me to jump in. "Hurry up," he said and turned back to Brian to do more evaluations.

The ambulance jerked to a start as it drove towards the dirt road to get to the highway. Every bump we hit made Brian wince, making me feel worse. I kept going over everything in my head. If I hadn't lost the earring, Brian wouldn't have been run off the road by Rick. If I had just stayed true to my vow to never let anyone know about my gift, which felt like a curse at this moment, Brian wouldn't be laying here, bruised and broken. My head was spinning and I felt like I was going to throw up.

Brian must've been watching me because he frowned and shook his head at me.

I'm so sorry. You probably hate me for this. I'll go once we get to the hospital and leave you and your family alone. Tears streamed down my face. The medic rolled his eyes when he saw me as he reached for another bundle of gauze to apply to Brian's wounds.

"Don't leave, Ash," Brian said out loud, which noticeably caused him pain.

The medic gave him an odd look and said, "She's not going anywhere. We're on our way to the hospital." He then injected something into Brian's IV, making his eyes roll back in his head.

"Promise me," he managed to say while he fought against the effects of the drug he'd been given.

"I promise," I said out loud for the benefit of the medic. Then added privately, *As long as you want me, I'll be here for you.* Between my tears and his fading mind, I wasn't able to hold on to the connection any longer.

Chapter Twenty-Five – Recovery

With the fuss of Brian being rushed in, I was easily able to take a seat unnoticed in the corner of his room. It wasn't long before they took him away for a CAT scan and x-rays and I was able to start making calls. First, I called Stephanie because I knew she was probably going out of her mind having not heard from me in hours. I told her that Brian was in an accident and was at the hospital and tried to leave everything else out.

"I don't know how bad he's hurt, though. They just took him to get x-rays. I'm pretty sure he's got a concussion and possibly some broken bones," I said, trying to fill her in as much as I could.

"What did this have to do with that Rick guy?" she insisted.

"Nothing." After Rick revealed he wanted to hurt everyone I'd told about him, I hesitated in telling Stephanie anything.

"Ash, you have to tell me. He's my brother and I need to know. What happened?"

"He was kidnapped and used as bait to get to me," I said reluctantly.

She gasped and couldn't find any words to say.

"I'm so sorry, Steph. I didn't know I was putting him in danger. I would have never..." I trailed off, not being able to say out loud that I wouldn't have ever gotten close to him. Because despite the fact that it was my fault he had been attacked and kidnapped, I couldn't imagine him not being a part of my life. I hated myself for being so selfish.

"I'm coming down, Ash. Don't leave. He needs you despite what you are thinking," she warned and hung up.

I called my parents next, telling them only about Brian's accident. "It appears to be a hit and run," I explained.

"Oh no, Ash. Do you want us to come down?" Mom asked, sounding very concerned.

"No, there's nothing you can do here. I'm going to stay as long as they let me and then I'll be home," I explained.

"Okay, sweetie. If there's anything we can do..." she started again.

"I'll let you know," I finished for her.

I was about to hang up when she added, "I'm so glad you weren't with him."

That hit a nerve with me and my eyes filled with tears again. "Goodbye, Mom," I managed before the tears choked me up.

My phone dropped to the floor and I followed it, sobbing uncontrollably. A nurse poked her head in and asked if I was okay. I nodded and she left without any other questions. By the time Brian returned, I had composed myself a little.

Brian was awake when they wheeled him in and apparently feeling better because he was joking with the nurses. As soon as they saw me in the room, the laughter stopped and the nurses quickly left.

"Jeez, Ash. You look about as bad as I feel," he said sounding much better.

I shrugged. "I feel pretty crummy, too," I complained, but then felt bad about it because he was obviously in much worse shape. "I'm glad to see you're awake," I said, trying to take the focus off myself, but I kept my distance from him.

"Will you come sit with me?" he said, all joking gone from his voice.

I shook my head. I was afraid I would hurt him more if I was close to him.

"Don't be like this, Ash. This isn't your fault," he insisted.

The more he was accepting of me, the more I hated myself. I stood up, not to go sit with him, but to leave. I didn't deserve to be close to anyone.

"So what, Rick didn't do a good enough job of hurting me, so you're gonna leave and completely break me?" he said angrily as I headed for the door.

I stopped dead in my tracks, tears flowing down my face again. I took a breath and turned around to face him. "You're here because of me and you're almost not here because of me, too," I yelled.

"You saved my life and I'll never be able to repay you for that. And as for it being your fault I'm here, no that was all Rick. If it wasn't me, it would've been someone else who didn't know you and they wouldn't have fared so well. So I need you to get over this self pitying phase you're in and get over here and help me feel better."

I didn't move. I needed him to understand what I was struggling with. "I can't win no matter what I do. If I stay, I'm being selfish and putting you and everyone else I know in greater danger. Rick isn't going to just disappear and leave me alone. He's coming back and going to get revenge for failing today. If I leave, I'm hurting you."

"I'm not giving you an option," he said plainly. "I'm not letting you go, so you have two choices: you can either get over here and be with me willingly, or I will get out of this bed and bring you over here kicking and screaming."

"I think I'd have an advantage, you know," I said, allowing a little of the anguish in my chest fade away.

"Don't let these bruises fool you. I can still take you," he said and started sitting up. He gave away his tough guy demeanor when he winced as he tried to sit.

"Really?" I said, unable to hide my smile and went over and sat on the foot of his bed.

"You're not gonna break me," he said unhappily and patted for me to sit closer to him.

I sighed and pulled the doctor's chair over and sat down, resting my head on the bed next to his shoulder. Regardless of what he said, I knew he was in a lot of pain.

"Are you trying to torture me?" he said, lifting my head up and pulling it towards him.

I finally gave in, seeing how much he was trying to be strong for me. As I leaned over him, careful not to put pressure on any part of his body but his lips, I kissed him gently.

He was frowning at me when I sat back down. "You kissed me better than that in front of your parents," he complained.

"You didn't wince so much when I kissed you in front of my parents," I countered.

"Inside I did," he joked and then mustered enough strength to sit up. "Now make me forget that I'm at the mercy of pain killers."

I rolled my eyes, but stood up and moved closer. I closed my eyes before our faces were close because I was afraid I'd chicken out if I saw up close how hurt he was. He got impatient at my caution and pulled me in the rest of the way. I felt the IV line brush my shoulder and then I felt nothing more than Brian's strong lips moving with mine.

"That's more like it," he said happily, holding the back of my neck so our foreheads remained touching.

We kissed a couple more times before he was willing to let me go, but I didn't retreat from him. Instead I gently traced my fingers on his face. At that moment, I would've given anything to trade my gift for the gift of healing.

Brian stared deep in my eyes, watching me evaluate his face. "I wish they were still green," he said remorsefully.

"I wish we were anywhere but here," I said, melting as I looked in his deep blue eyes. I managed to snap out of my pathetic mood and told him his sister was on her way.

"I tried to keep everything from her, but she already knew about Rick. I'm so sorry," I said for the hundredth time.

"It's okay. I'd rather not keep things from her. We've done too much of that to each other this year and it's really put a strain on our relationship," he explained.

Almost on cue, Stephanie knocked on the door and opened it a little. "Can I come in?" she asked cautiously.

"Of course, Steph. We were just talking about you," Brian said, trying to sound mysterious.

"Wow. You are really messed up. You look worse than your Jeep," she said.

"Oh, no. I forgot about the Jeep. How bad is it?"

"I'm sure they'll total it," she said haphazardly. I was a little bothered by how much she didn't seem to care, until she added, "I guess you'll just have to buy a new one."

"I like my Jeep," Brian pouted.

"So get another one just like it and you'll never know," she said happily.

"It won't be the same. I guess you'll just have to drive us around now, Ash," he said.

"I think I'd rather you get a new vehicle. Mine is pretty pathetic, you know," I reminded him.

"I kinda like that idea. Maybe I'll just get you a new vehicle and be helplessly stranded all the time."

It was good to hear him joking. I couldn't help but look at him in awe. I was pretty sure if I'd been run off the road, had my car totaled, been kidnapped, tortured, and almost killed, I don't think I'd be in the mood to joke.

"Umm, I think I'm gonna let everyone know you're alright," Stephanie said, misinterpreting my gaze.

"Everyone?" I asked. I had only called her and my parents and I knew they didn't come.

"I needed a ride here, so I called Cory. And Michael knew something had happened, so when I called to tell him you were here, he insisted on coming down, Kara in tow." She shrugged and moved towards the door.

"What about Mom and Dad?" Brian asked before she left.

"They're dealing with the insurance people and the police right now. They'll be by as soon as they can."

After Stephanie left, we were silent for a few minutes. I couldn't stop staring at him.

"I look pretty bad, huh?" he finally said.

"I was just thinking how surprisingly good you look," I admitted unintentionally.

"Oh, yeah. This hospital gown is quite stylish," he joked.

"You don't have to put on an act for me. I promise I'm done feeling sorry for you," I said half teasing.

"Actually I don't feel too bad right now," he said. "The pain meds help a lot. I'm sure tomorrow I'm going to feel like I've been hit by a train, though. You should take advantage of the situation while you still can."

"I don't think that'll go over well with the staff," I said remembering the last time he was in the emergency room and I was caught on top of him.

He laughed, obviously remembering the same thing. "You're gonna stay with me, right?"

"As long as you want me to and they let me, I'll be here," I said just as the doctor was coming in.

"How are you feeling?" the doctor asked as he looked at Brian's chart and put up an x-ray on the screen.

"I've felt better," he admitted, but grabbed my hand and squeezed.

"Well, it looks like you have three broken ribs on the right side, but your head scan was clear. We're going to give you a couple of stitches and keep you overnight for observation, but you should be released in the morning."

"Thank you, doctor," Brian said and the doctor left the room.

"See? Not as bad as you thought," he said happily.

"Three ribs? That means you're gonna have to take it easy for awhile," I teased.

"I think that means *you're* gonna have to take it easy on *me*," he corrected.

We were both laughing when Stephanie came back in with their parents. "You're in a pretty good mood," his mom said as she came in and kissed Brian on the forehead.

"But you look terrible," his dad added.

"Any news from the doctor yet," Stephanie asked.

Brian filled them in on what the doctor had just told him. "You guys don't have to stay. I'm gonna be alright. Really," he said encouragingly.

"I hate to leave you here," Mrs. Turner said hesitantly.

"Ashlyn's gonna stay with me. It'll be fine," he assured them.

"Okay, sweetheart. Give us a call if anything changes. We're going to go finish the insurance paperwork and then head home."

"Thanks, Mom. I'm glad you guys came. And thank you for taking care of the car stuff, too."

"It looks like we're going to be shopping for a new vehicle for you as soon as the insurance paperwork clears," his dad said.

"Sounds good, Dad. Thanks again," Brian said waving as they left.

"Steph, are you gonna be here for a few minutes?" I asked suddenly. I realized that Detective Olson was probably brought to this hospital and I felt I needed to see how he was doing. I also wanted to talk to Kara and let her know she could go home. It was getting late and we had to go to school in the morning. I was going to try to talk my parents into calling me in sick so I could help Brian home get home.

"Yeah, sure. What's up?" she said sitting in the doctor's chair and spinning around like a child.

"I need to go call my parents and I wanted to let everyone know that he's okay and they could go home," I said looking to Brian for approval.

"Hurry back."

"I will," I promised and hurried out of the room.

I asked at the nurses' station and they directed me to the fourth floor, which was surgery and ICU.

"Thank you," I said gratefully and ran towards the elevators.

As soon as the door opened on the fourth floor, I knew I was in the right place. There were a lot of officers mulling around the waiting area. I scanned the faces, looking for one of the officers that was on scene. I spotted the one who had called for the helicopter sitting next to a woman in her mid-forties who looked stressed.

"Excuse me," I said quietly as I walked up to the two of them.

The officer recognized me and stood up. "Hello, Ashlyn. I'm surprised to see you here. This is Mrs. Olson," he said, motioning towards the woman who remained seated.

"Hello," I said politely, not knowing what else to say. I turned back to the officer and asked, "How is he?"

"He was rushed straight to surgery. Been in there for over an hour. We haven't had any updates, but we figured no news is good news," he said with a little laugh.

Mrs. Olson didn't look as amused. I knelt down in front of her and said, "I'm very sorry. Is there anything I can do? Would you like something to eat or drink?"

I could see the dried tear streaks on her face, but she appeared to be all cried out. "No," she said sadly. "Thank you."

I stayed there for another moment, looking into her eyes, wishing I had done more to stop Rick from throwing the knife. Then I stood up and addressed the officer again. "Could I leave my number with you so I can know when he's come out of surgery?"

He nodded and took my number down on his notepad.

"Thank you," I said again. "I have to get back downstairs to my boyfriend."

I took the elevator down to the lobby and walked towards the emergency waiting area. When I entered, Michael was sitting in a corner, watching the silent television by himself. "Where'd everyone go?" I said as I approached him.

"Cory went to grab food and Kara's in the bathroom," he said.

"Oh, okay," I responded, feeling awkward. I took a seat near him to wait for Kara to return.

He laughed quietly to himself and turned to me. "I could tell you 'I told you so'," he said, "but I don't think that's really fair."

"I probably deserve whatever you have to say, so you might as well let me have it before Kara comes back and stops you."

"I didn't know about Rick," he admitted. "When I said that, I didn't really mean that I wanted something like this to happen."

"What do you know about Rick?" I snapped.

"Just what Steph told me. That he is wanted by the police for some pretty bad things and that he did this to Brian to get to you." He shrugged.

"I don't want you to know about him. It's not safe for anyone to know anything that I'm dealing with right now," I said somewhat angrily.

"I won't tell Kara, but you should know we're here for you, whatever you need," he said sincerely.

"What did you do with Michael?" I asked curiously.

He laughed. "I'm really sorry, Ash, for everything."

"Just keep Kara safe, please? Rick's not done with me yet and I don't want anyone else to get caught in the crossfire."

"I won't leave her side," he said happily.

"Thank you. You won't be able to see him coming, but I think if everyone tries to stick together as much as possible, you will be safer." I saw Kara coming out of the bathroom and said quietly, "Please don't let her know. She doesn't need to worry about this."

He nodded and then stood up to greet Kara. "You two looked like you were plotting something," she said and came over to give me a hug.

"Just talking about our post graduation trip," Michael lied and winked to me.

I rolled my eyes out of habit. I was about to brief them on Brian's status when Cory came through the doors carrying bags of food.

"Hey, Ash," he said happily, and then his expression changed. "I didn't get you anything. Here, you can have mine," he said handing me a bag.

"It's okay," I said refusing the food. "I'm not really hungry." I still had a headache, which did wonders for killing my appetite.

"Take it to Brian, then," he insisted.

"I don't think they're letting him eat right now," I said.

"Oh, okay. Well when you guys get hungry, let me know and I'll make another run," he said.

"Thanks, Cory."

"So, how's Brian doing?" Kara asked as the three of them sat down and started taking out their food.

"Three broken ribs, a concussion, and he'll need some stitches on his head and neck," I reported. "You guys really don't have to hang out here anymore. They're keeping him overnight, but he should be released in the morning, according to the doctor." The smell of the food got to me and I was suddenly hungry. So I stole a fry from Kara, who smiled and offered me the rest of them.

"I have to wait for Steph, but you guys can go," Cory suggested to Michael.

"It's okay. We'll wait here with you," he said and then looked to me for approval.

I mouthed 'Thank you' to him and Kara eyed both of us.

I laughed and handed the French fries back to her. "Thank you guys for coming. It means a lot to Brian, to both of us, that you're here," I said sincerely and walked back towards the emergency room.

There were doctors and nurses fussing around Brian when I got back to his room. I looked at Stephanie for any information as to what they were doing.

"They had just gotten done stitching him up. We were just talking and he..." she started, but got choked up. "He had a seizure," she finally said with tears streaming down her face.

"What? He was just fine," I said in horror.

"I don't know," she said as she reached for me.

We both stood there, holding each other. After a few minutes, they wheeled a sedated Brian out of the room. An older doctor stayed to talk to us. "Seizures are common with head injuries. We're going to do an EEG and then monitor him for a few days. Since the brain scan was clear, we're not too worried." He smiled and patted Stephanie on the shoulder. "He's going to be taken to a room up on the third floor. The nurses there can let you know what his room number is. You can go and wait for him there, if you'd like," he said kindly.

"Thank you," I managed as the doctor turned and left us alone in the room. Turning back to Stephanie, I said, "You should have Cory take you home. You know better than I how boring this place is and if he's just going to sleep all night, there's really nothing we can do for him."

"You're gonna stay, though, right?" she asked wiping some tears off her cheek.

"I'm hoping they'll let me," I said.

"If you can't stay, call me and I'll come back. I don't want him waking up without one of us here," she said and gave me a big hug. "Don't blame yourself, Ash," she whispered. "Brian doesn't blame you and he needs you to be here because you love him, not because you feel like you owe him something."

I nodded at her. "Thank you," I said and walked towards the elevator.

I waited impatiently in Brian's new room for him to be brought in. I tried to busy myself and called my parents to let them know the new developments. They weren't thrilled that I was planning on staying the night, but they didn't try to talk me out of it. They were hesitant to agree to call me in at school so I could stay with Brian all day, so I told them I'd call them in the morning and we'd decide what we were going to do then.

Around nine o'clock, Brian was finally wheeled into his new room. He was awake, but looked very groggy. Once the bed was in place, the nurse turned to me and said, "Visiting hours are over."

"Please," I begged. "I need to stay here with him."

"Only family is allowed to stay and only if there's room," she said.

I glanced around the room; the other bed was empty. "I'm his fiancée," I pleaded. *It's not a busy night. It'll be fine if she stays*, I silently told her.

She looked around the room and back at me, "It'll be fine. You can't use this bed, but I can bring you a blanket and you can sleep in that chair over there." She pointed to the vinyl covered chair in the far corner by the window that I had already been sitting in.

"Thank you. You are very kind," I said.

"Ashlyn?" Brian was starting to come around again. "Ash? Is that you?"

"Yes, I'm here," I said and moved towards the bed.

The nurse maneuvered around me to go check on Brian and make sure he was comfortable. I sat quietly in the chair next to him, stroking his arm until she left.

"How are you feeling," I asked and kissed his arm.

"Remember that train I thought I'd feel tomorrow? Well it arrived early," he said with effort. "My head feels like it took the brunt of it, too. What happened?"

"You were talking with Steph and had a seizure. The doctor said it's not uncommon after a head injury," I explained. "They took you to have another test done, but no one's been by to explain anything."

"I guess that means I'm not getting outta here tomorrow, huh?" He sounded discouraged.

"No, not likely. But I convinced them to let me stay here with you tonight," I said trying to sound positive.

"You 'convinced' them, did you?" he asked curiously. His mood seemed to be lifting, but it still sounded like he was struggling to maintain his composure.

"They didn't stand a chance," I whispered in his ear.

He was hooked up to a heart rate monitor, which became slightly elevated when I whispered in his ear. "That's interesting," he said with a laugh.

"Yeah, I guess we're gonna have to behave or the nurses will come check on you," I teased.

I turned on the TV and he insisted I lay next to him. I carefully got up on the left side of the bed, opposite his broken ribs, and laid my head on his shoulder while he wrapped his arm around me, careful not to pull out the IV. Within a couple of minutes, he was sound asleep. I didn't care about the TV, so I laid there with my eyes closed and tried to remember how we had spent the previous night. It seemed like such a long time ago. Yesterday, my biggest concern had been whether I would end up in another fight with Abigail.

I was taken away from my thoughts when I heard my phone vibrating in my purse. I carefully got out of the bed and answered it just before it went to voicemail. "Hello?" I whispered, trying not to disturb Brian.

"Miss Taylor?" a man asked.

"Yes, this is Ashlyn."

"This is Officer Baxter. You had given me your number earlier this evening and asked me to contact you about Detective Olson. Is this a bad time?" he said.

"No, not at all. Thank you for calling. How is he?" I asked a little louder.

"He got out of surgery about fifteen minutes ago and is in recovery. He lost a lot of blood, but the doctors were able to repair the damage and stop the bleeding. He should make a full recovery."

"That's great to hear. Do you have any idea when he'll be allowed visitors? I'd like to stop by," I said.

"I'm not sure. I'd guess he'll be in ICU for a couple of days. You could stop by then and see if he's allowed visitors," the officer explained.

"Okay, I think I'll do that. I'm sure to be in the area," I laughed a little, which made Brian stir.

Officer Baxter didn't find any humor in my statement and simply said, "Okay then. Have a good evening."

"Good bye, and thank you again," I said and put my phone back into my purse.

I tried to quietly snuggle next to Brian again, but he was awake. "Who was that?" he asked.

"It was one of the officers from earlier just giving me an update on Detective Olson," I said.

"The one who was stabbed, right? Is he going to be alright?"

"They think so. He's up in the ICU recovering. I'll visit him in a couple of days," I said.

"They almost caught him, didn't they?" Brian asked, remembering the events from earlier in the day.

"Yeah," I said quietly not wanting to dwell on everything that had happened.

"We'll stop him, Ash. Don't worry," he said, trying to be strong.

"I don't want you to worry about it at all. I just need you to get better," I said defiantly.

Before Brian could protest, a doctor entered the room to give him the test results. "The tests looked normal," he started, but sounded a little distressed.

"That's good, right?" I asked before he continued.

“Yes, it is good, but we were hoping to find some abnormality to explain the seizure. We will continue to monitor you here for a few days, Mr. Turner. If you have another seizure, we will prescribe you medication. Regardless, you will have to return for more EEGs every six months for the next couple of years. Do you have any questions?”

“No, sir. I think I’ve had just about all the information I can handle for one evening,” he said rubbing his head.

“We can get you more medicine for your head,” the doctor said and hit the button for the nurse.

After instructing the nurse to bring more medicine for Brian’s IV, the doctor took the chart and left. Brian relaxed back into the pillow and closed his eyes.

It killed me to see him in so much pain. I sat next to him in the chair again, knowing the nurse wouldn’t be thrilled if I was lying with Brian when she came in, and gently ran my fingers through his hair. I was careful to avoid the area with the fresh stitches, but couldn’t help but be amused that it was probably the worst I’d seen his hair look.

“What are you watching?” he asked.

“You,” I said softly. “I was just admiring your stitches,” I teased.

“Oh, right. I almost forgot about those,” he said, raising his hand slowly to feel the right side of his head. “Wow, I’m a monster, aren’t I?”

“I wouldn’t go that far, but I’m definitely pleased to see there is something that could finally mess up your perfect hair.”

“That’s not nice, Ash. If only you knew how much work actually went into making my hair so ‘perfect’, as you put it,” he said.

“Drying it off with a towel and running your fingers through it doesn’t constitute a lot of work,” I criticized. “Remember, I have been around you when you’ve gotten ready.”

“Hmmm... I guess you’re right. There must be gaps in my memory. I guess you’ll just have to fill them in when I get out of here,” he said suggestively.

Before I could respond to his innuendo, the nurse from earlier walked in the room with some medicine for Brian’s IV and the blanket she had promised me. She looked at the heart monitor and frowned at me disapprovingly as she handed me the blanket. Brian was completely amused and laughed, but this made the nurse angrier. “She’ll have to leave if she doesn’t let you rest,” she warned Brian.

“We’ll be good,” he promised.

“This will probably knock you out. If you wake up in pain, please hit the nurse’s button. We’ll be in to check on you periodically through the night,” she warned.

“Thank you,” Brian said and the nurse left, leaving the door open. “Maybe you should close that,” he suggested after we could no longer hear her footsteps.

After closing the door, I returned to my previous position, snuggled up next to Brian. The news had just started and I was about to change the station, but the lead story was about the near capture of Rick.

“Damn it,” I mumbled to myself as they drew attention to the lake, shack, and Detective Olson’s injuries. Surprisingly, there was no mention of Brian’s capture or my assistance anywhere in the story. I breathed a momentary sigh of relief until the next three stories ran: three separate brutal crimes had been committed within hours of our struggle ending. The news didn’t connect them, but I knew Rick was responsible for them all.

“I have to do something soon,” I whispered to myself in frustration.

To my surprise, he was still conscious. “You don’t have to do anything now. Please just stay with me?” he begged.

“I’m right here with you. Try to get some rest. I love you,” I said and kissed him gently on the lips. I was pretty sure he was asleep before I did that because he didn’t kiss me back.

I was woken up around two in the morning when the nurse came to check on Brian. She scowled and told me I had to sleep in the chair. Grudgingly, I got up and covered myself with the blanket, but I couldn't get comfortable enough to fall back asleep. So I slipped back in bed next to Brian and didn't wake up again until the morning when he tried to move and forgot that his ribs were broken.

I jumped out of bed, afraid that I had hurt him, but ended up falling to the floor. "What's wrong?" I called up to him.

"Just a little sore this morning," he said trying to breathe normal again. "Did you lose something down there?"

"Maybe a little dignity," I said standing up. "You should call for the nurse to come give you more pain meds," I suggested.

"I'm not sure I want any more. I don't want to be knocked out all day," he said scrunching his eye brows.

"They can bring you something weaker. At least it would help lessen the pain," I said while I ran my thumb across his forehead to ease the tension.

"I suppose some Tylenol wouldn't hurt," he resigned.

While we waited for the nurse to bring him the medicine, his breakfast arrived. He offered me some, but I refused, even though I was starving. Not only didn't it look appetizing, but he hadn't eaten anything since lunch the day before and was actually hungry enough to eat everything, including the chewy bacon.

The nurse arrived with a doctor just as Brian was finishing his milk. I decided to take a couple minutes to find a vending machine and call my parents. "It looks like you have your appetite back," I heard the young doctor comment as I walked out the door.

I took the elevator down to the first floor and went outside to get some fresh air while I called my parents. I paced in the shadows in front of the building while I told Mom about how Brian was feeling. She wouldn't call me in for the day, threatening that they wouldn't let me graduate.

As I was walking back in to tell Brian the bad news, I ran into Detective Olson's wife. "Good morning, Mrs. Olson," I managed to say politely, despite the irritation I felt from talking to Mom. She looked tired, but better than she had the night before.

"Oh, good morning, Ashlyn," she said.

"How is your husband doing?"

"Surprisingly well. He's a bit grumpy from being hooked up to all the machines, but he's been alert and awake for a couple of hours. He asked how you and your boyfriend were doing. Is your boyfriend still here?"

"Yes. Brian's going to be here for a few days. He had a seizure last night, so he has to stay longer," I said.

"Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that," she said sincerely. "You should stop by and see John, if you have a chance. He was pleased to hear that you came by last night."

"Thank you," I said. "I'll probably poke my head in on my way out this morning."

We continued on our original paths in opposite directions. By the time I got back in Brian's room, he was being helped back in bed by a nurse. I wasn't thrilled that a cute, young nurse was laughing as she helped my almost naked boyfriend back in bed.

"Here she is now," Brian said happily as he spotted me frowning by the door.

The nurse smiled at me, "I feel like I know you already, Ash."

I looked suspiciously between the two of them as I hesitantly approached the bed and said, "Don't believe a word he said." I was a little shocked at how playfully the words came out of my mouth. I walked past the nurse and very purposefully took a seat on the bed next to Brian. "You sound much better."

He leaned over and gave me a quick kiss on my lips. "Yeah, they talked me into some stronger meds, but promised me they wouldn't knock me out," he said throwing a playfully warning glance at the nurse.

"You may wish you were knocked out when you go in for your MRI," the nurse said. "I'll be back in a bit to see if you want anything stronger," she said and left the room.

"She seems friendly," I said with a hint of jealousy leaking out.

Brian rolled his eyes at me and then kissed me again. "So, where did you disappear to?"

"I needed to call my parents to see if they'd call me in at school," I said.

"So you are staying with me all day?" he asked excitedly.

"No, Mom doesn't think I should miss any more school after being suspended last week. I know she's right, but I should be here with you," I whined.

"I'm not going anywhere, Ash. Besides, can you imagine the rumors that would fly around school if both of us didn't show up after we got voted 'Best Couple'? They'd think we ran off to Vegas and got married or something," he said smiling.

"That would be better than what really happened," I mumbled, still feeling sour.

"You should go home so you can shower and eat before school. Maybe that will help your mood a little," he said.

"Sorry," I said softly. "Are you going to be alright here today? I could still ditch and just have it as an unexcused absence."

"No, you have to go or you won't graduate. That'll completely ruin our post-graduation trip. Besides, if I get bored, I can always call Nurse Teresa back in," he teased.

"I have to leave with that thought in my head, too? Are you trying to give me a migraine?" I complained and stood up to leave.

"Get back over here. I'm not done with you yet," he said and reached for my hand, pulling me back to the bed. The pain meds must've been working well, because he pulled me on top of him and kissed me like he wasn't lying broken in a hospital bed. "I want you to leave with that thought instead," he said softly, stroking my cheek with his hand.

"It just makes it harder to leave," I sighed happily. "Call me if you need anything. I'll be back as soon as school lets out."

"I'll be counting down the seconds," he said and helped me climb down.

I went to visit Detective Olson before I went home. I was unsure about how much of the last conversation I had with him he would remember. I hesitated in the waiting area for a couple of minutes before I finally knocked quietly on the door.

"How are you feeling?" I asked as I approached the chair by his bedside.

"Like I've been cut in half," he said with a forced laugh. "How's Brian doing?"

"He's been better. Hopefully he'll be going home in a day or two," I said.

There was a moment of awkward silence. Then he said, "I need for you to promise me that you won't go after Rick by yourself."

"I can't just sit around and wait for him to attack another one of my friends," I said defiantly.

"Regardless of what you're capable of, you need help. I'll be out in a week or so and back to work soon afterwards. Wait for me and we can come up with a strategy so no one else gets hurt," he insisted.

"I can't promise anything; if I see an opportunity, I'm going to take it," I explained.

"Hand me that piece of paper." I retrieved it from next to the sink and handed it to him with a pen from my purse. "If something happens and I'm still in here, call my partner. He will help you as best he can. I don't want you pursuing Rick by yourself." He wrote down his partner's name and phone

number. "He doesn't know what you're capable of, but he will at least be there to take care of the situation if one should arise."

"I can do that. Thank you. And thank you for believing me and saving Brian. He really didn't have much longer..." I trailed off, not wanting to recall the events.

"I'm glad I could help. We'll catch him soon," he said.

"I should get going. I have to get to school before they kick me out for ditching," I said, trying to smile. "Is there anything I can bring for you when I come back to the hospital later today?"

"No, my wife will be back soon with the few things I need. I hope you will visit again when you have more time. I'd love to ask you a ton of questions about what you can do."

I chuckled nervously and stood up to leave. "I'll try. I hope you feel better soon."

The entire drive home, I was focused on trying to find some way to stop Rick before someone else got hurt or killed. But in the shower, with the warm water hitting my back, I was inspired. I quickly got and ran to my room to sort through my purse from the wedding. Inside, I found Lana Brown's business card. Since she was connected with CES, I decided to see what information they could provide me.

"This is Lana," she said as she answered the phone.

"Umm... Ms. Brown? This is Ashlyn. Ashlyn Taylor. We met at my brother's wedding in March," I said, very unsure of myself.

"Oh, yes! Ashlyn Taylor. I'm so happy you called. Have you reconsidered my job offer?"

I had played out the conversation in my head while still in the shower. "I'd like to keep my options open. I was hoping I could meet with you sometime and find out more about your company."

"I have some free time in my schedule today, if you'd like to meet now," she suggested.

"I'm on my way to school, but I could meet with you after school tomorrow," I countered. I knew I needed to get back to the hospital after school today because Brian was expecting me.

"We can get you excused for the day, if you would like to meet now," she suggested.

As far as I knew, only parents or guardians had the authority to call in a student for an excused absence. "Ummm... well, I guess that would be okay, as long as I could get the absence excused."

"It won't be a problem. Why don't you meet me at the address on my card in an hour and I'll take you on a tour and answer any of your questions," she responded pleasantly.

"I'll be there," I responded and hung up, threw on some clothes, and left my house.

Chapter Twenty-Six – On the Inside

Regardless of what Brian said, I knew that there was something wrong with CES. The way they seemed to be spying on me, how Brandon had tricked me into using my gift to apparently validate I had it, and the general wealth and power of the company all added together to create a relatively unflattering picture of the company I was about to visit. I couldn't figure out their angle, though. The email I received in February made it seem like the person who sent it wasn't supposed to provide me with that information. But Lana Brown was almost aggressive in the way she sought me out.

Endless questions formed in my head as I drove downtown. I parked in the visitor parking area and walked into the building with growing apprehension. The building was one of the larger ones in the area, probably around fifteen stories or so with an exterior made of glass. An older gentleman held the door open for me as I passed into the main lobby and moved towards a reception area in the middle of the room. It felt like a hotel as the natural sunlight from the roof high above brightened everything and all the floors looked down on the lobby.

As I approached the reception area, I noticed a number of people glancing at me as they moved about the first floor. I looked down at myself to make sure the dark blue skirt I had chosen to wear wasn't stuck in my underwear or something just as horrifying. I quickly smoothed my clothes and approached the middle aged woman who was busily typing on her computer at the desk.

"Good morning. May I help you?" she asked in a pleasant voice.

She had a headset in her ear, so I had to make sure she was speaking to me before I answered. She stared at me in anticipation for another moment before I said, "Yes. I'm Ashlyn Taylor, here to see Lana Brown."

"You can take a seat over there while I call her," she responded, directing me to the leather couches just off to the right of the reception area.

"Thank you," I said and sat down on the soft sofa.

About five minutes later, Lana Brown came out through glass double doors that were behind the reception area. "Ashlyn, it's good to see you again," she said as she approached me with her hand outstretched.

I stood up and shook her hand. "Thank you for meeting with me," I said.

"Let me take you on a tour," she said, motioning for me to walk with her.

I followed her from floor to floor, walking by about twenty different conference rooms, a large cafeteria, a surprisingly large library on the third floor, and a laboratory that had a number of scientists in white coats busily working. I was introduced to several people from middle and upper management from different departments, but nothing seemed unusual or special about any of the people or departments and I was beginning to feel like maybe my trip was in vain. Then we came to Lana's department. There were probably twenty employees doing various tasks at their desk, but as soon as we entered the area, all eyes turned to watch Lana and I walk to her office.

She closed her office door and motioned to a chair. "Please take a seat, Ashlyn."

I obeyed, sitting down in the chair on the front side of Lana's desk. The desk was covered with papers and files. Lana straightened her gray suit and sat down in front of me. "So, what did you think?" she asked, leaning back in her large black leather chair, twirling a pencil with her fingers.

"It is very large," I said.

She chuckled a little. "Yeah, we have a lot of business that has to be done which requires lots of employees."

I didn't know what else to say, so I decided to get straight to the point. "I don't know where you got your information, and while I'm flattered to be offered a position, I'm not sure where I'd fit in here. I have no experience doing anything like any of this," I admitted.

“Not all experience comes from working in an office, Ashlyn. I would’ve thought you’d be able to appreciate that,” she said, dodging my attempt to get her to tell me what I really wanted to know.

“I assure you, I don’t have a lot of experience doing much of anything, unless you intend to hire me to clean,” I retorted.

Lana laughed at my comment. “We have spoken with enough people who know you to realize you have talents far beyond your cleaning ability.”

“What is it exactly that you think I could do for this company?”

She leaned back in her chair again, contemplating her answer. “There are several departments that would like to get their hands on you, but at least in the beginning, you’d start as my assistant, travelling with me as we worked out terms and conditions with new and existing companies under our umbrella.”

“Travel? Well, that wouldn’t work well while I was in school,” I said noncommittally.

“We are able to provide tutors and have close relationships with many colleges around the country. There would never be a problem with you missing classes,” she assured me.

“That sounds intriguing,” I lied. I had no intention of being used to influence people for this or any other company, but I still had to get more information from her.

“You would never be bored here, Ashlyn. I’m hoping I can convince you today to come back and shadow me for a day, when you don’t have other things on your mind. Sometime when you’re willing to have an open mind for the types of opportunities you should be afforded. How is Brian doing, by the way? Is he going to be released soon?”

It wasn’t reported on the news, so I didn’t know how she knew Brian was in the hospital at all. This put me on edge, so my response was a little harsher than I intended. “He’s going to be fine.”

“That’s good to hear. We were saddened when we heard that he had been taken. We didn’t expect him to emerge so unscathed.”

“Well, thankfully Detective Olson and his team were there to save him,” I said coolly.

“Yes, and I understand you were instrumental, as well,” she retorted.

“I was only able to help with the general location. I had a sketch I drew of the area awhile ago, which seemed to fit the type of location he was likely to go to,” I said and shrugged.

“Well, it was lucky that you had that drawing,” she said smiling.

I was getting fed up with the double talk and suggestive knowledge of things. “Look, I need to know if you can provide me with any information that could help if this situation were to arise again in the future,” I said a little abruptly.

She looked a little shocked at first and then mildly amused. “Unfortunately, my department only deals with relationships with our companies. But Mr. Henley could answer some of your questions. I’m sure he’d like to pick your brain a little, too.”

I hesitated with my response. She took my silence as an opportunity to continue, “But he’s out of town dealing with some business today. I can have you meet with his assistant and set up a better time to connect,” she said happily.

“I think that would be an excellent idea,” I responded. Meeting with his assistant might provide me with some more information without the cost of having my “brain picked”.

Lana picked up her phone and dialed called Mr. Henley’s assistant to set up a meeting. “That sounds perfect. I’ll take her to lunch and then bring her by. Thank you, Sonya,” she said and hung up the receiver. “Sonya can meet with you at one,” she said. “I would enjoy talking with you more, if you would care to join me for lunch.”

“That will be fine,” I said against my better judgment. If I had any hope of getting information, I would have to suck it up a little longer.

“Great!” she said enthusiastically and shuffled some papers on her desk before standing up to leave.

When the office door opened, I could see a number of people suddenly try to look like they were busy doing something. I sighed quietly, not enjoying the attention I was generating.

We took the elevator down to the second floor and entered the half-full cafeteria. From the wide selection of food, I picked a simple salad and followed Lana to an empty table in the far corner. She asked me a lot of questions as we ate our food. But the most shockingly one was how I enjoyed prom.

“My friends and I had a great time,” I said between bites.

“Brian seems to be very generous with his newly acquired wealth,” she commented casually.

I tried not to choke on the bite I was chewing; I was taken completely off guard... again. I didn’t talk to many people about Brian’s trust he received when he turned eighteen, so I was a little upset that this woman had that knowledge. “Brian has always been a generous person,” I responded.

“Indeed.” She was amused by my reaction and my response. “We make it a point to do thorough background checks on people we choose to bring in,” she said trying to ease my concern. “We were actually able to assist the private investigator with gathering information on Brian and Stephanie’s past.”

I wasn’t sure how that was supposed to make me feel better. It seemed like their connection with me and my friends was somehow directly related to the knowledge that Rick had. I suddenly felt like a pawn in this company’s elaborate game of chess. “Thank you,” I managed, trying to keep my tone neutral.

A couple of times during our elongated lunch people approached the table and introduced themselves. After looking to Lana for direction, they quickly left and found another table to sit at. “Don’t be fooled by the size of this company, Ashlyn. You can’t keep a secret from anyone around here,” she said with amusement.

“I didn’t realize I was such a topic of conversation,” I replied.

“I told you, there are many departments that would kill to have you work for them. I was afforded the first opportunity to get you on board,” she smiled.

When we finished, we took the elevator to the tenth floor. “You’ll be meeting with Sonya Johnson, Mr. Henley’s assistant.” Lana was beaming, probably because she thought she had convinced me to return. When we reached Sonya’s desk, Lana did the introductions and then excused herself. “I’m happy that you called today, Ashlyn. I hope we’ll see you again soon.”

“Please take a seat,” Sonya said motioning to another office chair in front of her desk. “Have you enjoyed your time here today?”

“It has been interesting,” I admitted.

She smiled brightly. “A little overwhelming, huh?”

“It seems like I’ve been given a lot of undeserved attention. I’m not sure I am really an ideal employee, you know?”

Sonya laughed musically. She was a pleasant woman in her mid twenties with dirty blonde hair that was pulled back in a bun and clothes that were a little more stylish than Lana’s. “I think you’re just being modest. You must have some remarkable talents to get the attention of so many here.”

“I didn’t realize I was generating that kind of attention. I try to keep to myself as much as possible,” I admitted. It seemed easier to talk with Sonya than it was with Lana.

“Yeah, most of us are usually caught off guard when someone comes to recruit us. It is really a magnificent company, Ashlyn. I’m sure you’re going to enjoy working here,” she said smiling.

“You were recruited?” I asked in amazement. I didn’t care if she thought I was going to accept the job offer or not. Her wording made me feel like maybe she had a secret that got her noticed, too.

“Yeah. I was in college when Mr. Henley approached me and offered me this job. I don’t get to travel much like you will working for Lana, but my talents are better suited to dealing with the daily grind here.”

“Are there lots of ‘talented’ people here?” I asked.

“There are a few extraordinary people that have worked here over the years. Most have moved to the research department and aren’t seen much outside of there anymore,” she said, frowning slightly. But her frown quickly faded back into her pleasant smile. “Have you had the opportunity to check out our conference rooms?”

I followed her down a long hallway where a large room was positioned at the end. It was glass on two sides, which made it very bright, but it was as cool as the rest of the office. Sonya closed the door as she entered behind me and motioned to sit at the far end of the table. She sat down next to me and took my hand. I was surprised that she passed a piece of paper to me before speaking in a hushed tone. “There are a lot of people in this office that know what’s going on everywhere.” I followed her gaze as she looked around the room at the cameras stationed in the corners.

I nodded and closed my hand around the paper she had given me.

“Pretty much every floor has a large conference room like this,” she said a little louder. “As Lana’s assistant, you’ll be spending a lot of time in one observing the meetings.”

“It’s very comfortable,” I commented.

“Well, I should probably get back to my desk and find a time for you to meet with Mr. Henley,” she said and stood up.

In the hallway, I glanced at the paper she had given me. “You’re on the right track” was scribbled on the yellow scrap of paper. I closed my hand around it again and glanced at Sonya to see if she could give me any more information.

“Use his nature against him,” she said softly before we entered back into the main floor area.

I felt a sudden spark of hope and couldn’t wait to leave and tell Brian about my day. I was struggling up to this point to decide if I was even going to mention it to him because it seemed like such a huge waste of my time.

Back at her desk, Sonya opened Mr. Henley’s schedule on her computer. “It looks like he has an opening on Wednesday in three weeks. I think it’ll be after your school is out. Do you anticipate any conflicts?” she asked before she committed my name to the schedule.

“I might be out of town. As soon as those plans are firmed up, I’ll know for sure.”

“I’ll put you down for ten o’clock. If you aren’t able to make it, please let me as soon as possible so we can fill this slot with other meetings. Mr. Henley likes to keep busy all day while he’s in the office,” she said with a smile.

She walked me out to the elevators. “Do you think you can find your way out from here?”

I smiled and shook her hand. “Yes, I think I’ve got it. Thank you,” I said, “for everything.”

She nodded and gave me a big hug. “It was nice to finally meet you, Ashlyn. I hope everything works out.”

I took the elevator alone down to the first floor and left the building without speaking to another person. As I got in my car, my phone beeped and I saw I had three missed calls. I hadn’t heard it ring in the building. Feeling troubled, I dialed in to retrieve my voicemails. There were two: one from Stephanie and one from Kara. Both wondered why I wasn’t at school and if I was okay. Apparently, Stephanie had spoken to Brian after I left and he told her that I was going to school. I quickly dialed Stephanie’s number and let her know I was alive and well. “I just had an errand to run. I’m sorry I made you worry,” I apologized.

“You pretty much had us in a panic, Ash. Kara didn’t suspect anything other than you deciding to go back to the hospital, but those of us who know about Rick were really worried. Have you called Brian yet?” she asked.

My stomach dropped when she asked that. “He knows I wasn’t at school?” I asked nervously.

“Yeah, well, I had to call him to see if you were there. You’re the one who told us to stick together and then you go and disappear all day without answering your phone?” she lectured me.

"I'm really, really sorry. I had a good reason, but apparently I need to call Brian before I give the hospital another reason to keep him longer. Could you please let Kara know I'm okay?" I begged.

"Fine, Ash. But next time you decide to disappear for the day, let one of us know or answer your phone," she said angrily and hung up.

I put the car in gear driving towards the hospital and called Brian. "*Where have you been?*" he answered, sounding both upset and relieved.

"I'm sorry. I promise I'll tell you everything when I get there. I'm downtown, but should be at the hospital in twenty minutes," I said apologetically.

"*Downtown? Ashlyn, what the hell were you thinking? You need to stay safe, not wander away and not answer your phone,*" he said angrily.

"I know. I had to check something out. I don't want to tell you about it over the phone, but I'll be there very soon."

He sighed. "*Please be careful.*"

"I will. I love you," I said and waited for him to respond, but the phone went dead. I didn't blame him for being upset.

The entire drive to the hospital, I agonized about how Brian was going to react to me. I hoped that he had time to cool off a little, knowing finally that I was safe. But I was pretty sure that I was in for a well deserved lecture.

Walking into the hospital felt like a death sentence, but I kept moving forward to the elevators and up to Brian's floor. The nurses looked at me as I walked by, apparently aware that I had caused Brian some trouble, but didn't say anything. I took a deep breath before I entered his room and was relieved to see that he was still without a roommate.

He didn't smile when he saw me, and I knew I was in for the worst of what my brain had thought up on the way there. "Hi," I said remorsefully.

"Hi," he said flatly.

"How are you feeling?" I asked as I walked over to the chair next to his bed and took a seat.

"Better, now that I know you're safe. You really had me scared," he said sounding a little more relieved.

"I'm sorry. In the shower, I set my mind to do something and things fell into place before I had a chance to consider all the consequences of my actions." As I said the words, the potential horror of my actions really struck me. I fell back into the chair and rubbed my forehead.

He gave me a couple of minutes to reflect and then he said, "Are you gonna tell me what was so important that you had to scare so many people?"

"Do you remember that woman from Mark's wedding that offered me a job?"

"The one that works for CES, right?" he responded.

"Yes. Lana Brown," I added. "Well, after talking with Detective Olson this morning, I decided I needed to do something other than just wait around for another attack. The only place I knew to turn was CES. So I called Ms. Brown and said I was reconsidering her offer. I hadn't intended on meeting with her today, but she said they could excuse me from school."

"Excuse you from school? How could they do that?" Brian was pretty shocked.

I shrugged. "I don't know. But in our conversation, she assured me the company has connections with a lot of universities and there would never be an issue with me missing classes. I assume that translates down to high school, too."

"You spent all day there? Did you find out anything helpful, other than they can get you out of school whenever you want," he said a little sourly.

"You're the one who said it was a good idea to see what they could offer," I reminded him as I stood up and started walking away.

“Ash, come back. I’m sorry. I’m just upset that you didn’t think to call me and let me know what was going on,” he said apologetically. “I’m done giving you a hard time.”

I paused for a moment and then turned back to him. “They know about you, Brian.”

“What do you mean?”

I told Brian everything that happened at CES from the strange looks I kept getting to how they knew about him being abducted by Rick and about how they helped connect Brian and Stephanie to their trust fund.

Brian looked distressed and I started worrying about triggering another seizure with all the stress I had caused him. “Did you come away with any helpful information?”

I reached into my purse and handed him the note Sonya had given me. “Another assistant discretely gave this to me. She said to focus on doing things he’s naturally prone to do,” I said proudly. After all the bad stuff I had had to tell him, it was such a relief to finally get to the good news. “I think she had a gift, too, but it was different than mine. She suggested there are others there, too.”

“I guess we have a lot of work to do, then,” Brian said and handed me back the note.

“You have to get better first,” I told him.

“So, you’re gonna ‘make’ me obey? Because if not, you aren’t going to be able to stop me from helping,” he said somewhat playfully.

As much as I liked his improving mood, I didn’t like him provoking me. “I’m serious. I need you to get better. No matter how many times you tell me it’s not my fault, I can’t help but feel like a terrible person for allowing this to happen to you.”

“Maybe they would let you check in and stay with me for a few days,” he joked. “You are completely stressed and could really use a few days off from everything. Will you come sit with me now, or are you still too upset with me?”

“I’m not upset with you,” I said and sat down next to him on the bed.

He pulled my head over to rest on his shoulder and squeezed my leg. “So, what do you want to do for your birthday?” he asked trying to change my mood.

“I just want you to be out of here and then maybe have a nice quiet celebration somewhere.”

“I think the girls are planning a party for you and your parents already called to see if I would be out to celebrate it this weekend. I don’t think a quiet celebration is in the works. Besides, it’s the big eighteen. You have to celebrate it!”

“I didn’t get to celebrate yours with you,” I said sadly.

“Well, that was my fault, wasn’t it? And we made up for it later,” he said with a huge smile.

We relaxed for the afternoon in his bed except when the nurses came in. We watched TV and talked about his MRI, his pain management, and nothing in particular in-between visitors. Kara and Michael showed up around five with burgers and fries. Stephanie arrived with her parents around six thirty and stayed for about half an hour, just talking about family things and the results from the tests.

I called Mom and asked to stay another night. She hesitated, but finally decided there wasn’t much she could say about it anymore. Brian took care of convincing the nurses to allow me to stay, so around ten he requested his IV meds be administered and he held me in his arms as we fell asleep watching the news.

The next morning, I woke up early enough to make it home for a shower and arrived at school with just enough time to run to History. Of course there were the expected whispers and gossip flying around about why Brian and I weren’t at school the day before and where he was now. Fortunately, Stephanie was able to head off most rumors the day before. Several people I didn’t know came up and congratulated me at lunch. It felt good to have people be supportive of me. Abigail was mad about not winning, but she kept her distance.

Stephanie was still upset with me for ditching and not telling anyone, so after we were done eating lunch, we went for a walk around campus and I told her everything about CES and my unusual job offer.

"I don't like this, Ash. How do they have so much information on us?" she complained when I told her that they had helped the private investigator obtain information to connect them with their trust funds.

"I don't know," I admitted. "Lana told me they do a lot of research on the people they invite to work for them. And they appear to be well connected to everything, so I guess that's how they were able to help."

She was still troubled, but honestly, I was, too. The only thing that was keeping me from being completely outraged was the fact that someone there was actually feeding me helpful information.

"You're not really considering working there, are you?" Stephanie asked with wide eyes after I was done telling her everything.

"Of course not!" I said defensively.

"What about Rick?" she asked suddenly.

I realized that I'd never really given her the whole story on Rick. She knew he was bad and out to get me, but not much else. "Well," I began and told her the entire story, starting with my first encounter with him in the seventh grade, then when I saw him again at the lake in October, the kidnapping at the mall, and all the information we'd been able to gather about him.

"Why do you think he's doing this? I mean, I know he's evil, but what's he getting from all the violence and murder?" she asked intrigued and horrified.

"I wish I knew. I know his mom was never in the picture and he was the victim of bullying," I shrugged. "The only theory I have is that he's like me."

She gasped and shook her head. "You can't mean that," she said.

"Just listen. The more I use my gift, the better I am at it and the easier it is for me to use it. From what we've been able to discover of him is that the more evil he does, the more powerful he gets."

"That's creepy, Ash. How do you get power like that?"

"Lots of people out there are bad, just like lots of people are good. But it seems like there are some of us that for whatever reason were given a special gift, which encouraged us to do more because we benefitted from it. I hate to think there are other people out there like him, but since I've found out there are other gifted people like me, I can only assume there are others that are equally as gifted oppositely. Kinda like the universe is using us to keep things in balance."

When we returned with our arms around each other's shoulder, apparently in much better moods than when we left, our friends eyed us curiously, but we both refused to share our conversation with them. It was a relief that Stephanie knew everything and we were back to acting like sisters again.

Chapter Twenty-Seven – Getting Stronger

Graduation was two weeks away, but you could tell that everyone was ready for the end of the year. Unlike most, I was being good and attended every class for the rest of the week. No one questioned my absence on Monday, but had a ton of homework to make up. I took Brian his school work and we spent the afternoons getting it done. By Wednesday evening, we were both caught up on the work we'd missed from the previous week and Brian was nearly done with the work he was missing while in the hospital.

Detective Olson was moved from the ICU to a regular room. He was even filling out paperwork on the Rick incident when I visited him on Wednesday night. Even though I knew he wasn't supposed to, he gave me information on their lack of progress in tracking him down. He knew that the spike in violent crimes was mostly due to Rick's anger at almost getting caught. Although I didn't admit it to him, I suspected that Rick was trying to get stronger so he wouldn't be so vulnerable the next time we met. I promised him I'd visit again before he was discharged, which was looking to be around the beginning of the following week.

Brian's IV was removed Tuesday evening because he was eating and drinking normally and was exclusively taking the pain medicine orally. I stayed with him every night, even though we really weren't worried about anything happening to him. The nurses eventually gave up telling me to get out of his bed, too. He was complaining less about his ribs, but I could tell they were still bothering him when he tried to move too quickly or at an unusual angle.

By Thursday evening Brian hadn't had any more seizures, so after another MRI came back clear, they released him. His parents came down to the hospital to help with the discharge, but we'd already made plans to go out to eat, so they basically came to sign paperwork and get his prescription to fill.

I left Brian and his parents to get the discharge instructions and went to get my car. Since I visited CES earlier in the week, I had made myself be more aware of my surroundings. I was shocked, but not surprised when I saw a CES vehicle parked in the parking lot a few rows from mine. It looked like no one was inside, but I couldn't be absolutely sure they weren't still watching me. I had seen them one other time during the week and it made me wonder if they'd been around this whole time and I just wasn't paying enough attention to notice them. I quickly got in my car and locked the doors before driving around to the hospital entrance.

"You take it easy and come back to say 'hi' anytime," the young nurse Theresa told Brian with a smile as I opened the door for him.

He smiled at her and then turned to his parents and said, "I promise I'll take it easy. We're just going to get some dinner and then I'll be home."

He climbed in and we both waved as I drove off.

"Sheesh!" he exclaimed. "You'd think I was four years old by the way they treated me."

"They're just worried about you," I explained. "Now, what are you in the mood to eat?"

I awoke extra early the next morning so I would have lots of time to help Brian get ready. By the time I was out of the shower, though, he had already sent me a text message asking where I was. So I quickly dressed and grabbed my school stuff and was at his house in record time.

Stephanie answered the door as soon as I knocked. "It's about time. He's in a bit of a mood this morning," she said to just me. Then she yelled so he could hear her, "But he doesn't have to take it out on me!"

I could hear him grumble something and push something around a little too forcefully. "Is Cory on his way?"

"He'll be here in like fifteen minutes, but I'm not waiting in there. Good luck," she said and swept passed me to go sit on the curb.

I took a deep breath before I walked down the hall to Brian's room. "Hi," I said softly as I entered.

"No, I'm not staying home today," he said, trying to anticipate my next words.

"What can I do to help?" I asked calmly.

His demeanor changed and he stopped throwing things around his room. "Can you help me find my wallet? I've been looking for it for the last ten minutes."

"Where's your stuff from the hospital?" His mom had brought home a bag of his personal items the first night in the emergency room.

"I don't remember putting it in the bag when we left yesterday," he said, looking through his bag we brought home with him the night before. "It's still not here."

I left the room to go find the original stuff that his parents brought home and returned within a minute with his wallet in my hand. "Is this it?" I asked holding it up.

His tone became much gentler. "Thank you."

"Are you gonna tell me what's really bothering you?" I asked as I handed him his wallet.

He sighed. "I just didn't sleep well. Those stupid pain killers they prescribed me actually kept me awake for hours, my bed felt more uncomfortable than it ever had before, and..." he paused for a moment, "I missed you."

I moved close to him to give him a gentle hug. "I didn't sleep well, either," I admitted.

"Can we escape somewhere in town this weekend?" he suggested hopefully.

"I think I could be persuaded into going somewhere," I said and moved my face closer to his.

"But I need to go somewhere public and use my gift as much as I can. I have to get stronger," I added.

After a quick kiss, he said, "Can I help?"

"I don't know, but I'd love your company regardless."

After several minutes of closeness, Brian got his backpack and we left his house for school.

"Don't let me forget that my parents are throwing a party for me on Sunday," I reminded him.

"I didn't forget," he said sincerely. "And Steph and Kara have something planned for you tomorrow night," he added.

"Didn't you tell them I didn't want any fussing over this?" I complained a little.

"Like they'd listen to me," he laughed.

"Is it something you get to do with me?" I asked hopefully.

"They'll kill me if I say anything..." he confided, "but I know you could get it outta me if you really wanted, so I'll just tell you yes, I'll be with you still."

"Thank you," I smiled as we drove towards the school.

At school, a few people were brave enough to approach and ask how Brian was doing and try to find out what happened. While Brian was more than happy to answer their questions and lament about his lost Jeep, I couldn't help wishing for the day to end and be heading towards the hotel to relax. He squeezed my hand frequently through his stories, either to hopefully make me not feel guilty for what really happened or to make me feel more comfortable about the current situation.

Afterwards, Brian went home with me to help me pack a bag for the weekend. I called Mom to let her know I was going to be away for the weekend, but would be back on Sunday in time for the party. She told me to be careful in her "I know what you're doing and I don't want to be a grandma yet" tone.

After getting Brian's stuff from his house, we drove to the hotel that Brian had reserved for Stephanie, Kara, and me when we went shopping for prom dresses. It was close to the mall, where I had decided would be a good place to exercise my gift.

We arrived in our room and ordered room service before familiarizing ourselves with the bedroom. It was frustratingly hard to remind myself to be gentle, but I tried to hide it from Brian. "It's good to have you back," I said happily as I lay in his arms.

"Don't think that I have ever regretted being with you because of what happened," he replied seriously.

I sat up and moved my hand across his face and was about to say something when there was a knock at the door. I sighed and said, "Let me get it."

He pulled me close for one last kiss before I scrambled to find something to wear. The gentleman who brought our food wheeled it into the living room and placed it in front of the couch. I was about to sign the receipt when Brian emerged from the room wearing just a pair of shorts. The man winced slightly as he saw Brian's bruised side and then he quickly looked at me and smiled.

I blushed uncontrollably as Brian signed the receipt, showed the man to the door, and joined me on the couch to eat. "He thought I did that to you," I said sheepishly.

"What do you mean? Oh!" Brian's eyes got big and he laughed loudly as he realized what I was saying.

"Maybe you should put a shirt on next time," I chided.

"I would if you weren't wearing it," he said, still amused.

I looked down and noticed that I was wearing Brian's shirt, inside out. "Oh, right."

After dinner, we showered and went to the mall where we spent a couple of hours walking around. There were lots of opportunities for me to use my gift and by the end of the night, I felt confident I was getting stronger.

Back at the room, we laid in bed talking about a boy in the elevator who was fascinated by Brian's stitches.

"That was strange," I commented.

"It's a boy thing," he said shrugging. "Blood and guts and beheadings... that kid's gonna sleep good tonight."

I couldn't help but laugh. Brian was such a good person and it was terrible that he had to be a target of such a bad person. "You're gonna be the talk of his preschool come Monday," I commented and then added, "and you're gonna make a wonderful dad someday, too."

He gave me an odd look before he responded, "Is there something you're not telling me?"

I decided not to joke about it. "No, nothing like that. I just meant someday in the way far off future, you're gonna be a great father to some lucky kid."

"Or kids," he added with a smile.

In all our conversations, we never had this discussion. We had talked numerous times about where we'd like to live and what type of house we should buy when we got married, but for some reason, children never came up.

"How many kids are you planning to have?" I asked curiously, trying to mask my unease.

"I don't know... maybe four or five," he said casually.

"Who's the lucky lady that gets to give birth to all of those babies?" I said, somewhat horrified.

"Well you, hopefully, unless you are just using me for my good looks and money," he said jokingly. "Why, how many kids do you want?"

"I never really envisioned myself having children. I mean until you came along, I didn't really believe I was going to find someone who I could really be open enough with to have a real relationship," I said with an uncomfortable laugh.

He let the conversation drop there and we snuggled together a while longer. After watching most of a sitcom, Brian muted the TV and sat up to talk to me. "I want you to close your eyes now and picture our future," he said seriously.

I did as he requested and closed my eyes, imagining our white two-story house in the middle of a huge piece of property. There were trees in the close distance that made a barrier around the acres of grass that led to our house. In the backyard, there was a pool and spa. My mind took me to sitting by the pool with a cool summer wind gently flowing through the trees when I gasped unintentionally.

“What is it?” Brian asked concerned.

I went back to my daydream to make sure I’d seen what had startled me. “I was just picturing us lying by the pool in our enormous backyard, enjoying a summer day when two children jumped in the pool, splashing us. We laughed and you jumped in after them.” I opened my eyes and looked up at him with awe. “I’ve never imagined something like that before... a family.”

Brian gave me a few moments to take in what I’d seen before he settled back down next to me and laid his head on my stomach. “Are you sure there weren’t five kids?” he joked and kissed my belly.

“Only two, but who knows. I never thought that was even possible. But it looked so nice... so right,” I said, still intrigued by my thoughts, which remained with me as I fell asleep.

Chapter Twenty-Eight – Surprises

It was very bright outside by the time I awoke. I heard Brian in the shower and smelled warm food. Grabbing a shirt off the floor, I threw it on and walked into the bathroom. “Good morning,” I said happily, sitting on the counter.

“Oh, hey Ash,” he said through the shower door.

“Are you okay?” I asked, surprised that he didn’t seem happier to see me.

“Yeah, just a little sore,” he said, turning off the shower.

“I’m sorry,” I apologized and then jumped off the counter to go investigate the source of the food aroma. I found the room service plates on the coffee table in the living room area, where we had eaten dinner the night before. I peaked under all the plate covers to see what Brian had ordered. It all looked and smelled so good. I grabbed one of the orange juice glasses and sat down on the couch to find something on TV.

About third time flipping through the channels, Brian joined me on the couch. “Where’d you go? I got out of the shower to see you and you had left.”

“I didn’t want to bother you. You sounded like you wanted to be alone,” I shrugged.

“Not really. I was just lost in a thought when you came in. Why didn’t you start without me?” he asked handing me a plate.

“I figured you waited for me, so I’d wait for you. It all looks so good. Can we share?” I asked as I took the lid off the plate of eggs.

“That was the plan,” he said and smiled slightly.

“What were you thinking about that’s gotten you in such a strange mood?”

“Oh, just a dream I had,” he said nonchalantly.

“Look, if this is going to bother you all day, you’re going to have to give me more than that,” I responded.

He sighed and paused for a moment before he elaborated. “I had a dream about my parents,” he started. “My *real* parents. I haven’t dreamed about them since before we started dating. It was just a little unnerving.”

“What were they like?”

He told me everything he could remember about them, including his last birthday he celebrated with them and the special present he received. “I think the most special thing they gave me, which I didn’t appreciate at the time, was an old book. It was an early addition of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, a book that my great grandfather’s dad had from his childhood. It’s one of the only things I have that belonged to my real family.”

“The black one on your bookshelf?” I asked as he got lost in his thoughts again.

“What? Oh, yeah. The black one. I feel bad that it just sits there collecting dust, but I don’t want to destroy it, you know?”

I reached over and squeezed his hand. “Maybe we can get a special box for it or something,” I suggested.

“That might be a good idea. I think I’d like to be able to pass it on to my kids someday, too,” he said and smiled. “I guess all that talk about family last night brought back a lot of old memories.” He carefully leaned over and kissed my forehead. “I enjoyed hearing your vision,” he said sincerely. “I promise I’ll snap out of this. But we should eat this food before it gets any colder.”

Brian’s mood was almost back to normal after breakfast. After I showered, we walked back to the mall to get in some more practice before Stephanie and Kara met us for whatever they had planned. I had a really good day and an easy time using my gift on people. I managed to go the whole morning without getting a headache or feeling exhausted.

"I think it's working," I commented to Brian as we ate lunch at a burger place. "I can feel myself getting stronger. Everything is easier today." I was so excited, I couldn't stop smiling.

"Hmmm... maybe I should take you car shopping today and you could get us a really good deal," he teased.

"That might be a very interesting place to use my gift on evil people," I said wrinkling my nose.

"How about one of those exotic car dealers? We could test drive a Lambo or Ferrari," he said hopefully.

"What time and where are we supposed to meet Steph and Kara?" I asked, starting to consider his idea.

"Five o'clock at our room," he said with a little excitement entering his voice. Brian looked down at the watch I had given him for Christmas. "It's eleven forty-five now. We have lots of time." His eyes were practically begging me.

"You know, it's gonna take a lot of 'convincing' to get them to let us test drive," I warned.

"Perfect," he smiled and grabbed our tray to throw the trash away.

The outing was a success; Brian drove an Aston Martin DBS while I got talked into test driving a BMW M5. We talked non-stop about how cool the cars were the entire way back to the hotel. He admitted he took his up to one hundred without even realizing it.

I was feeling good about how well I had done using my gift, even on the evil car salesmen, who were actually quite nice. I didn't get a headache and I got to drive a completely unobtainable car; it was a successful day.

"We still have time to test out the bathtub," I suggested happily as we walked into the room.

Within moments, we were both in the oversized tub, enjoying our little bit of alone time until my friends arrived.

When we heard a knock at the door, we slowly got out of the tub and put our clothes back on.

"I didn't hurt you again, did I?" I asked cautiously.

"Not even close," Brian replied, kissing me on my lips as he helped me button up my shorts.

After a louder knock, I escaped Brian's embrace and skipped to the door, looking back as Brian pulled his shirt on and ran his fingers through his hair.

"It's about time," Stephanie said impatiently as she walked into the room and over to the couch.

"It's good to see you, too," I said sarcastically and gave Kara a hug before she entered.

"So, what's the plan for tonight?" I asked, taking a seat next to Stephanie.

"Everything is going to be a surprise, but you'll definitely need to change into something nicer," Stephanie said, eyeballing my brown shorts and white cotton shirt. "The guys are all going to be dressed up, too, when they meet up with us later."

I frowned slightly, but dutifully went back into the room. "I thought you were going to be with me all night," I pouted as I wrapped my arms around Brian's neck, careful not to brush his stitches, eyeing the new outfit laid out on the bed.

He kissed me gently and said, "I'm sorry I misled you. They want to do some girl stuff with you before us guys show up and ruin everything."

"What are you going to do while you wait for Cory to come?" I asked with concern.

"I'm sure I can find something to do... massage, pedicure, birthday present shopping..." he said mysteriously.

"No cars!" I warned.

"Fine, fine, no cars," he said laughing. "Now get dressed before they start knocking down this door." He left the room to go talk to his sister and Kara.

I could hear them laughing while I pulled on the clothes Brian had picked out for me: a slinky silver blouse, probably borrowed from his sister, my knee length black skirt, and of course, my black

knee-high boots. I ran a comb through my hair, touched up my makeup, sprayed myself with perfume, grabbed my purse and walked out to join my friends.

As soon as the door opened, they got unusually quiet, aside from the giggle Kara couldn't contain. Stephanie smacked her leg and they stared at me as I walked towards them. "Do you need me to leave?" I suggested.

"No, Ash, we're just talking," Brian said and motioned for me to join them. "You look great," he whispered as I sat on his lap.

"That's more like it," Stephanie remarked. "Cory will be here at seven so you guys can meet us. Be ready or you'll throw off the schedule. And please wear what I picked out for you," she instructed Brian.

"Fine, fine," he said and helped me stand up.

Kara and Stephanie walked out the door ahead of me and gave Brian and me a moment to say goodbye. "Be careful," he said softly as he stroked my cheek. "And don't forget to have fun."

"I'll miss you," I replied and gave him a goodbye kiss.

My birthday outing included a visit to a bear building store and a trip to a day spa, where they gave me a completely new hairstyle, did my makeup, and gave me a manicure. That was followed by a nice dinner, where we met up with the guys. Brian was shocked when he saw me, but he admitted later that he thought it suited the "almost adult" me. Finally after dinner, we drove across town to see a band play in a club. We rode in the back of Cory's car while Michael and Kara drove separately.

"I can't believe how amazing you look," he managed to say while we took a moment to catch our breaths as we waited in the parking lot at the club for Michael and Kara to arrive.

As he moved down to my neck, I asked, "You don't think it's too short?"

"Nuh-uh," he mumbled, still busy.

Kara and Michael eventually showed up and we joined Cory and Stephanie inside. After the band, there was a DJ and we danced until we were too exhausted to move anymore. Around one in the morning, we talked Michael and Kara into driving us back to the hotel and crashed almost as soon as we were able to get our clothes off.

It was around two the next day before we finally got out of bed and started getting ready to go to the birthday party my family was throwing for me.

"Maybe we should move in here," I suggested as we packed up our things to check out.

Brian laughed as he carried his bag to the door. "I don't think we'd ever make it to school," he said.

"You're probably right, but we're gonna be graduating in a couple of weeks. It's not like they're teaching anything new now," I tried to persuade him with my bizarre logic.

"Or we could just drop out and travel around the world for the rest of our lives. Who needs a high school diploma to do that?" he teased as he pushed me backwards onto the bed.

"Fine, fine. You win. Can we move in after we graduate?" I asked hopefully.

He tickled me and said, "We have to go or you're gonna be late to your party."

I was surprised when I saw Mark and Emily in the kitchen when I entered.

"Hello. Sorry we're late," I said closing the door.

Mom came and hugged me while Dad, Mark and Emily hung back.

"What are they doing here," I whispered to Mom inconspicuously.

"They're here for your birthday, Ash. Don't be so suspicious," she warned in my ear. "Hi Brian. How are you feeling?" she asked, turning to hug Brian.

"I'm doing much better. Thanks for asking," he said politely.

“Wow, Ash! Your hair looks great! You look so old,” Mom said, turning back to me.

“Thank you,” I said softly as Mark and Dad came in to greet us; Emily stayed behind in the kitchen. After we said hello, the guys walked outside to look at Dad’s new car. I followed Mom into the kitchen where Emily was helping cook.

Neither of us said a word, so Mom finally broke the silence. “Emily was just offered a promotion at work that would bring her and Mark back here. Isn’t that great?” she asked enthusiastically.

“Oh, that’s nice,” I said, trying to be positive. “Would you be working out of the downtown office?”

Both Mom and Emily threw me looks. “Yes, I would be working directly with my current boss, Lana Brown.”

“Oh, yes. We met at the wedding,” I added, trying to keep my voice neutral.

Mom stood up from the table where she had just sat down. “I’m going to go check on the guys. I can’t imagine looking at a car would take that long. It didn’t take us this long to purchase it,” she said, excusing herself.

Awkward silence filled the air after Mom left the room. “So, you’re planning on becoming Lana’s new assistant?” Emily finally said, looking up from the pot she was stirring.

“I haven’t made any decisions yet,” I replied.

“Yes, well that’s a highly coveted position. People have been interviewing for it for months, including me,” she admitted. “So hopefully if you turn it down, I’ll be in the right place to step in.”

I didn’t like her preemptive tone, but decided not to pursue it because about that time, the guys came back in with two of my aunts and some cousins following close behind.

I was about to join Brian and go outside to wait for more people to arrive when Emily asked, “Ash, could you come stir this for a few minutes? I have something I need to take care of.”

I caught Mom out of the corner of my eye throwing me a warning look, so I said, “Sure.”

After passing me the spoon, Emily walked directly towards Brian and said something to him under her breath. I threw him a questioning glance, but he just shrugged and followed her out of the house.

I continued to stir the food impatiently while my aunt was trying to hold a conversation with me. I did my best to respond appropriately to her, but I really wanted to use my gift on Brian to get some idea why Emily had asked him outside.

“...and she decided to visit them in Virginia this weekend,” my aunt continued.

“Oh,” I said reflexively, not really hearing who or what she was talking about.

Mom came over to look in the pot and grabbed the spoon from me. “You’re gonna ruin it,” she complained.

Relieved to be released from kitchen duty, I went outside to find Brian and Emily. As I was about to open the front door to go out, Emily burst through it, almost breaking my hand. She looked angry and stormed off.

I walked outside to find Brian to find out what was going on. *Is everything okay?*, I asked him privately as I put my arm through his and pretended to be interested in the conversation he was having with my cousin.

He nodded and squeezed my hand without looking at me. I continued to listen to their sports conversation until I got bored and went back inside and sat on the couch.

Mark came over and sat down next to me. “Hey, Ash. I’m sorry for not returning your phone calls. I shouldn’t have let things go this long.” He looked down at his hands and continued, “I hear things have been pretty bad around here, too. Are you even living here anymore?”

“Of course I am,” I said somewhat surprised that he was asking that. “I’ve been back for over a month now,” I added.

“How’s Brian doing? Dad told us about the accident. I’m sorry.”

“Brian’s going to be okay, thankfully. He just has to get a new vehicle.”

Our conversation lightened up after that and we enjoyed a casual chat about nothing important until Mom came up to Mark and whispered something in his ear.

“It was nice talking to you again, Ash,” he said as he stood up.

“Are you going to make it to my graduation?” I asked, standing up with him.

“I’m going to try, but we’ll have to see if I can get time off from work,” he said and left the room.

I looked at Mom, but she ignored me and went back into the kitchen where all the food was just about set out. As I started after her, Mark and Emily came into the living room, moving quickly towards the front door. Emily was carrying her purse and Mark had his keys out.

“We have to go, Ash. Sorry. Emily’s not feeling well,” Mark explained.

“I’m glad you came,” I said gratefully to Mark. “I hope you feel better,” I managed to say to Emily who refused to even look at me.

“What was that all about?” one of my cousins said from behind me after the door closed.

I shrugged. “Who knows,” I said not masking my irritation and turned to the kitchen to get some food.

“That was fun,” Brian commented as I drove him home.

“It was nice so many people came,” I replied. I waited another couple of seconds and then added, “So what did Emily want with you outside? You seemed to have pissed her off nicely.”

Brian shrugged. “She was just trying to get my help with something. And I wasn’t in a helpful mood,” he said mysteriously.

I took my eyes off the road to glare at him.

“Hey! Watch where you’re going!” he shouted anxiously as I swerved into the next lane.

“I wouldn’t be distracted if you just told me what was going on,” I remarked.

“You’re gonna be mad,” he warned.

“I’m already mad, so you might as well tell me.”

“She wanted me to convince you to go to work for Lana Brown,” he said.

“What?! She pretty much told me that she hoped I didn’t take the job because she wanted it.”

“Well, that’s not how she put it to me. When I told her I wouldn’t do that, she got angry,” he continued. “She told me I needed to stay out of the way and not interfere.”

“Interfere with what?”

“I guess in their ‘recruiting’ you. I don’t know,” he admitted.

I sighed as I parked in front of Brian’s house. “I just want them to leave us alone.”

“Come inside and I’ll rub your head and shoulders,” he said softly.

“No, I think I need to get home and go to sleep. I love you very much. Thank you for an amazing weekend and for all your help,” I said sincerely.

“Are you sure I can’t persuade you to come in? I barely got to spend any time with you tonight,” he pouted.

“I’m afraid I wouldn’t be able to drive home if I came in. I’m just so exhausted.” I kissed him with a gentle passion and rested my forehead against his. “I’ll see you in the morning,” I said.

“I love you, Ash. Call me when you get home, okay?” he asked.

“I’ll talk to you in a few minutes,” I replied, letting my hand fall down his cheek.

He kissed me more forcefully than I had and got out of the car. I waved goodbye and drove home, lost in thought. As soon as I got in my room, I called Brian and went to bed.

After school the following day, I went to visit Detective Olson again in the hospital while Brian was at work. Because he was unintentionally off the entire previous week, Brian decided he had to go in

so he could help answer the phones and members' questions; he still wasn't healed enough to assist with or lift weights himself.

"I'll be back as soon as I'm done at the hospital," I said when I stopped in front of the gym.

"Say hi to Theresa for me," he joked as he closed the car door.

I made a disagreeable noise and then drove off, watching him laugh at my displeasure.

The third floor was quiet as I stepped off the elevator to visit Detective Olson. I knocked quietly so I didn't disturb him if he was sleeping.

The TV turned off and I heard him say, "Come in."

"Hello, Detective Olson," I said as I walked towards the chair in the corner of the room.

"It's good to see you again, Ashlyn. I didn't think you were going to come back," he said as he repositioned himself and pulled the blanket up slightly.

"Sorry it took so long; I was away for the weekend," I said. "How are you feeling?"

"Bored. I have just a couple of days left and I'll be released," he said rolling his eyes.

"I'm glad to hear that." A moment of awkward silence followed, which I decided to break by asking, "What do you know about CES?"

"The company? Not much. I have interviewed some employees there for a couple of crimes, like when Rick's father was murdered, and I know they donate a lot to the community, but other than that, I really haven't had any involvement with them. Why do you ask?" he responded.

"Oh, it's nothing really. They just offered me a job and I didn't know much about them," I lied.

"I'll look into them when I go back to work next week," he said.

"It's fine. I just didn't know if they did anything that I should be concerned about."

Detective Olson got lost in a thought and I was worried that he was going to draw unnecessary attention to himself by looking into CES. But then his face changed and he asked me about my gift.

I spent about fifteen minutes trying to explain what I do and why I was apparently such a threat to Rick. "Without me, you guys really don't stand a chance at even finding him," I concluded.

"You do realize you sound insane, right? If I hadn't witnessed what you did, I would probably be hitting my nurse button and having them drag you away," he admitted.

"If you hadn't witnessed it, I wouldn't be here telling you this. Honestly, I never intended to tell anyone. But this school year I've learned to trust a little. Unfortunately, it's backfiring on me now, but since you are already aware of Rick and hunting him yourself, I didn't see the harm in telling you," I explain. "However, you have to swear to never tell anyone. Please."

"Of course I wouldn't tell anyone. They would probably think I was crazy," he laughed and winced slightly.

His wife walked in the room as he spoke the last words. "I keep telling people all the time he's crazy," she said happily and walked over and kissed her husband's forehead.

I smiled brightly. She looked years younger now that the stress of her husband's injuries had passed. It was touching how loving the two of them were. "I should probably get going," I said standing up, feeling like I was interrupting their time together.

"Oh, no, Ashlyn. Please don't leave because I showed up," Mrs. Olson pleaded, standing up to stop me.

"I really should go. I imagine Brian has probably about had it with working for today," I said.

"How is he doing?" they both asked in unison.

I couldn't help but smile at their synchrony. "He's much better. The ribs are still healing, but other than that, he's good."

"Well, tell him we said 'Hi'," Detective Olson said.

"I will. Thank you," I said and left the hospital.

Chapter Twenty-Nine – Milestones

My eyes opened suddenly. It was just starting to get bright outside and I knew there wasn't enough time for me to fall back asleep. I rolled over and glanced at the clock: four fifty-five. Mom and Dad were in the kitchen having breakfast. I got out of bed with a sigh.

"Happy birthday, honey!" Mom said, rushing over to give me a hug as I shuffled into the kitchen.

"I guess we won't have to wake you before we leave, now," Dad said as he joined Mom in hugging me. "Eighteen years. Where has the time gone?"

"It's just another day," I said trying to act casual. I could see the tears mounting in Mom's eyes.

"Are you and Brian going out tonight or should we expect you home for dinner?" Mom asked, already knowing the answer.

"Brian's taking me out." He really hadn't talked much about what we were going to do, which usually meant he had a surprise planned.

"You've grown up way too fast, Ashlyn. Where's that little girl who used to sit quietly and watch the neighbor's cat all day?" Mom asked sadly.

"She's still in here, Mom." I said handing Mom a tissue.

I left the room to shower so they could finish their breakfast. I realized as the hot water ran over my body that it wasn't just another day; I was feeling stronger and older.

The euphoric feeling lasted until I arrived at school and was assaulted by Kara carrying a bouquet of balloons. "Happy birthday, Ash!" she squealed and threw her arms around my neck.

"Thank you, I think," I said taking the balloons from her. "I don't suppose I will be able to pretend it isn't my birthday with these things, will I?"

"What would be the fun in that?" Stephanie added as she and Cory walked over.

I questioned these words over and over throughout the day as the balloons made a spectacle of me. Brian also felt the need to draw unnecessary attention to me and had a dozen roses delivered to me during first period. I'm sure I turned as red as the roses.

Somehow, I made it through the day without dying from embarrassment. Brian still hadn't mentioned what he had planned for the evening, so I finally asked him on the way to his house afterschool. "So, is anything special planned for tonight that I should know about?"

He chuckled nervously and said mysteriously, "Nothing in particular."

"I've been good and not pressed you about it all day and that's all you're going to tell me?" I asked with a hint of hurt in my voice.

"Yes," he said happily and squeezed my leg.

When we pulled up to his house, he didn't move to get out. "Ash, I need to borrow your car for a bit."

I scrunched my forehead and handed him my keys while biting my lip. "You promised no car," I said in warning.

"I swear I'm not getting you a car. Sheesh! You're so suspicious!"

"You haven't given me reason to not be suspicious," I complained and got out, leaving the balloons and roses in the backseat.

"It's nothing to worry about. I'll be back in just a bit and we'll go out and celebrate your legal status," he said jocularly.

"Be careful," I pleaded.

"See you soon," he said as he hopped in the driver's seat and drove away.

I fell asleep in Brian's room while I waited and had a wonderful dream about playing with my children. I was awoken by a sweet kiss from Brian. "Dreaming about me?" he whispered in my ear.

"I should sleep here more often; I have really nice dreams," I smiled.

“Are you ready to go?” he asked helping me up.

“Lead the way,” I said happily.

He walked me outside where a limo was waiting. “Where’s my car?” I asked nervously.

“It’s fine. We’ll meet up with it later,” he promised and helped me in the back of the car. “I just wanted to be able to give you my full attention tonight.”

The limo windows were tinted exceptionally dark, but I didn’t have much time to focus on where the driver was taking us. I could feel Brian’s anxiety when he kissed me, but I sat back and just let things unfold.

Before we arrived, Brian pulled out a blindfold. “You have to put this on now,” he said, maneuvering behind me.

“This is different,” I said, trying to play along. I was really uncomfortable with not being able to see, but I was trying to calm myself and trust Brian to get me where we were going safely.

He led me through a parking lot and down a sidewalk where I heard doors closing and people idly chatting. When we came to a stop, he whispered, “Close your eyes while I take this off. I want to see your reaction.”

I nodded and waited patiently for him to tell me to open my eyes. I stood still and tried to guess what I was about to see, focusing on what my reaction should be. The blind fold was taken from my eyes and Brian took an opportunity to kiss my neck before he told me to look.

“Okay,” he said softly. “Open your eyes.”

I struggled for a moment to focus, but as the blurriness faded, I saw I was standing outside a door that was wrapped with a red bow. I looked at Brian with a confused look on my face and asked, “What is this?”

He scooped me up off my feet, opened the door and carried me inside a well furnished condo, complete with couches, a fireplace, a gorgeous kitchen with my flowers on the stone counter, and stairs leading up. To the right was a hallway leading to what appeared to be more rooms. Near the kitchen was a dining table setup for dinner.

“This is gorgeous,” I commented, still looking around. “Is this where we’re staying tonight?”

“Sure. Tonight... tomorrow night... any night...” he said with a smirk, setting me down.

“This is yours?” I asked with astonishment.

“Actually, it’s yours, if you like it,” he said and handed me a set of keys.

Brian misinterpreted my shocked silence. “You don’t like it, do you?”

“I love it! You’re giving me a condo?! It’s too much. I don’t even know what to say.”

“You told me I couldn’t get you a car,” he said playfully, “but you never said anything about not getting you a place to live. Besides, you said you wish we could live in a hotel room. Isn’t this much better? We actually get to keep it at the end of the weekend.”

“It’s amazing, Brian. I don’t know what to say except thank you,” I said sincerely and wrapped my arms around his neck.

“Dinner was wonderful, Brian. How long have you been planning this?” I asked as we sat on the couch trying to digest all the food we’d just inhaled, admiring the view out the back terrace.

“I’m glad you like it. Would you like to check out the upstairs?” he asked, avoiding my question.

“I’d love to,” I said seductively, expecting to not even pay attention to the rest of the tour.

Brian cradled me into his arms and walked up the stairs. “See, I told you I was still strong,” he whispered as we reached the loft.

There was a small sitting area at the top of the stairs and a pool table to the right, in the middle of the loft. To the left was a set of French doors, leading to the master bedroom. I couldn’t help myself and ran and jumped on the bed like a little kid. “I don’t know how you did all of this, but it’s insanely wonderful,” I laughed, throwing a pillow at him.

"You can change anything you want. I just had someone come in and decorate it how they wanted," he explained, walking over to sit on the bed next to me.

"Everything's perfect," I said jumping on his lap and knocking him backwards onto the soft bed.

"This private balcony is wonderful," I said wearing only Brian's shirt and staring out at the darkening sky. "And the view is beautiful," I said dreamily.

"It's even more beautiful from back here," Brian commented from the doorway. He had gone downstairs to grab some drinks while I went outside for some fresh air.

I turned around to see him staring at me with adoring eyes, leaning against the doorframe wearing only his shorts. "Where's the water?" I asked with concern.

He didn't say anything, but moved towards me, still gazing in my eyes. When he was right in front of me, he took both of my hands in his and said, "I don't know how I got lucky enough to get you to fall in love with me, but I know I never want to lose you again." He pulled a box out of his pocket, got down on one knee and said, "Ashlyn Taylor, will you marry me?" He opened the box to reveal a large diamond ring.

I gasped as it felt like all my air got sucked out of me and I started shaking. I somehow managed to whisper, "Yes." He barely had time to put the ring on my shaking hand before I wrapped myself around him, kissing him eagerly.

Much later in the evening, I was lying next to him admiring my ring. I couldn't stop smiling.

"I hope you're not getting too attached to that," Brian said after minutes of watching me enjoy my jewelry. But he quickly added, "This is just a loaner. Your ring is being custom made."

"This is surreal," I said finally taking my eyes off the ring and snuggling closer to Brian. "Please tell me we don't have to leave... ever," I begged.

He kissed my head and laughed. "I can't promise we'll never have to leave, but we can stay here tonight, if you'd like. I know the owners."

"I love you, Brian," I said sleepily.

"I love you, too, Ash. Did you have a good birthday?"

"Best birthday ever," I said happily and fell asleep in my new bed.

Brian and I spent the entire weekend at the condo studying for our final exams and completing our final papers for English and History. I slowly started moving some of my personal things over, but I didn't have the courage to tell Mom and Dad yet. Kara and Stephanie found out almost immediately. Kara was excited for me, but Stephanie not so much. I think she was sad that Brian was moving out.

Brian and I decided to wait to tell everyone about our engagement until after graduation. We wanted to head off any unnecessary attention we would receive from people at school if they found out. Besides, I was afraid it would get back to my parents and I wasn't ready to have that discussion with them yet. *After graduation*, I repeated to myself. So I kept my ring in my purse with me at all times.

After our last final exam on Wednesday, we invited Kara, Michael, Stephanie, and Cory over for a small party.

"This is gorgeous, Ash," Kara said in awe as she moved through the rooms.

The guys had gone upstairs to play pool, but the girls stayed downstairs to talk about our upcoming trip and other plans we had for the summer. We all agreed that our post-graduation trip would be to San Diego and were leaving on Saturday. Kara postponed her European trip until Christmas.

"I can't wait to get there," I said. "It's just too hot here. Maybe we should stay longer than a week."

"I agree. Let's just stay there all summer," Kara agreed giggling.

“Cory was lucky to get the week off work. Mom says I need to find a job this summer, too. I don’t understand; I’m going to inherit an insane amount of money next summer. Why do I need to work?” Stephanie started into another rant.

“You still need to learn to appreciate earning money and working hard,” Brian called down from the loft. “It will make you appreciate what you have more.”

She stuck her tongue out at him and got up to go get a bottle of water from the fridge. “You’re so lucky, Ash,” she said returning to the couch. “Your parents didn’t make you work and now you have Brian to buy you everything you could ever want,” she said motioning to the condo.

I resented her insinuations that I had it easy. Yeah, I knew I was getting pretty spoiled, but it wasn’t like I didn’t know what it was like to have to work hard. I glared at Stephanie in disapproval.

Kara stepped in to break the mounting tension. “So, what are we going to do after the ceremony tomorrow night?”

“My friend’s band is playing. We could go see them,” Cory yelled down.

Before I could say that sounded like fun, Brian said, “I think I’d rather come back here and watch some movies or something else quiet. You guys are more than welcome to crash here, too. We’ve got the two spare rooms.”

“Maybe Steph and I will go to the show and then stop by afterwards,” Cory said diplomatically.

The guys continued their pool games while we flipped through our yearbooks laughing at all the pictures.

Despite what I really wanted, I decided to spend the night in my bed at my parents’ house that night. It was possibly the last night I would spend there because I was determined to tell my parents about everything after the graduation ceremony. I laid in bed that night, unable to sleep in my seemingly lumpy bed, wondering if this was what it would feel like the night before I got married. Since the engagement on my birthday, Brian and I only spoke a little bit about the wedding. It wasn’t happening soon, so it went to the back of our minds while we focused on our final exams.

When the afternoon came, I finally migrated to the shower and then dressed in a nice skirt and blouse; I was carrying my cap and gown to the auditorium where the graduation was being held so they wouldn’t get wrinkled. Mom and Dad took me out for lunch beforehand. Mark met us at the restaurant, but Emily wasn’t with him. It felt good to have a meal with my entire family again.

Brian was also spending time with his family. They knew he had bought the condo and had already started moving his stuff over. Because of this, I gave Stephanie very specific instructions to keep their parents far away from mine for fear that they’d find out about the condo before I had the chance to tell them.

I met up with Brian as we got in place to walk in. Brian convinced the two people in-between us to let me move back so I got to sit next to him.

“I have something for you,” he whispered as we stood there waiting to march into the auditorium. He pulled up his robe and reached into his pocket, pulling out another velvet box. As he opened it, I saw my new beautiful white gold ring, uniquely designed with leaves and swirls on the band. It reminded me of a grape vine, with our birthstones attached instead of grapes.

“I’ve never seen anything so beautiful,” I marveled.

“I have,” he said, lifting my face up to look into his eyes.

Our moment was interrupted by gagging sounds coming from behind Brian. “Can someone *please* switch me spots?” Abigail complained.

Brian laughed and kissed me passionately. I heard a few whistles and cheers before Brian finally released me.

“Do you think I should wear it now?” I asked hesitantly.

“I’d love it if you did,” he said sincerely.

The line started moving and we walked hand in hand into the auditorium. We quickly took our seats and the ceremony began as soon as the deafening applause, whistles, and shouts from the family and friends quieted down. Brian and I held hands and gazed adoringly at each other while Abigail continued to squirm in frustration.

Finally it was time to walk to the stage to get our diplomas. As I walked up the stairs to the stage, I noticed someone standing backstage. It was dark and hard to see who it was from where I was, but it didn't look like they were supposed to be there.

At the top of the stairs, I handed the teacher my name and walked towards the principal as it was read. After shaking his hand, I glanced up again at the person behind the curtains. They were watching me as I watched them while I exited the stage. I didn't even notice the cheers for myself or Brian coming from the crowd; I was too focused on the mysterious person.

Brian grabbed my hand and helped me down the stairs and back to my seat. "Are you okay?"

"Hold on," I said, holding up one hand. I focused my eyes on the side of the stage the person was hiding on and used my gift to try to see who was there. As soon as my focus changed to him, I knew who it was; Rick was standing backstage at my graduation. No wonder no one appeared alarmed that there was someone lurking back there. He must have sensed my presence and laughed before I lost my connection.

I gasped loudly, but there was too much clapping going on for anyone but Brian to hear me. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"He's here," I muttered, grabbing Brian's hand tightly.

They had just finished calling all the names and everyone stood up to ceremoniously throw up their hats in celebration. But I remained seated and Brian stayed beside me. "Who's here?" he pleaded.

I shook my head to snap myself out of the trance and turned to look at him with my determined eyes. "Rick has come for me. He's backstage."

"Why would he come here? What's the point of trying to get to you when there are so many people around?" Brian asked, trying to maintain the calm in his voice.

"Because there are so many people around. He's obviously gotten stronger and with it, more arrogant. He probably thinks he can finish this anywhere and chose now because I'd be at an obvious disadvantage." I put my hands up to my temples and rubbed them, trying to devise a plan to get Rick away from people before he hurt someone else. "I have to lure him away," I finally said. "Can you get my parents to leave? Then call Detective Olson," I said, trying to hand Brian my phone.

"I'm not leaving you," he said defiantly and refused to take the phone.

I sighed and decided to use my backup plan. *Steph, get your parents and mine out of here quickly*, I commanded. I waited to see her nod before I broke my connection with her. "Steph's taking care of our parents. Let's get outside and try to get him away from here."

Brian and I locked hands and started running towards the exit. We almost ran into Kara and Michael and I quickly told them to go with Stephanie and Cory to the concert across town.

"We'll call you when we can," I said frantically.

"What's going on?" Kara asked.

I looked at Michael with pleading eyes, hoping he could come up with an excuse for our hasty departure. Without another word, Brian and I continued our sprint. We rounded the building and got stuck in the herd of people moving towards their cars.

I quickly scanned the crowd, looking for any sign of Rick when I suddenly spotted him walking a little too close to Abigail. "Get away from her!" I shouted, causing a group of people, including Abigail to turn and glare at me.

"What's your problem, Ashlyn?" she said rudely. At the same time, Rick was toying with me, hovering his hands close to her head, acting like he was going to squeeze it until her brain popped out.

“Get out of here, Abigail!” I yelled. “I swear I’ll break your nose again if you don’t go,” I threatened.

She turned and quickly walked away. Rick laughed, but glared at me.

“What’s he doing?” Brian whispered.

“He’s toying with me, pretending like he’s going to go after someone here,” I said, momentarily taking my eyes off Rick. When I went to make eye contact with him again, he had disappeared. “He’s gone,” I said desperately and scanned the crowd and surroundings for any sign of him.

“I’ve got to get him there,” I said to Brian, pointing to the three-story parking garage in the distance. “Please call Detective Olson and have him meet me there.”

“I’m not leaving you, Ash,” he insisted.

“I need you to do this. I can’t put you in danger again and since you can’t see him, you’re going to be an easy target. Please call Detective Olson and stay away,” I begged.

He grabbed my face and kissed me hard. “I can’t let you do this alone,” he said.

“You have to,” I said, fighting back the tears. As I kissed him again, fearing it might be the last time, I connected with him. *Take the phone and call Detective Olson to help Ashlyn. Then stay away from the parking garage,* I instructed him. It killed me to have to force him to do something, but I needed to know he was going to be safe.

With sadness in his eyes, he took the phone, paused for a moment, and then left me to go do as I asked.

I paused for a moment and watched him leave. Then I took a deep breath and ran towards the garage. I couldn’t see Rick, but knew he’d be there.

I had to climb a fence in my skirt and heels to reach the garage and then ran up the stairs to the second level. There were a few cars parked there, but it was mostly open. I slowly walked around, scanning the level for Rick, but I couldn’t find him anywhere. “I know you’re here,” I called out. “You know you can’t hide from me,” I warned. He didn’t respond to my vocal taunts, so I decided to connect with him. As soon as I did, I saw he was on the far side of the garage, watching me walk around from behind a parked vehicle. He crouched behind the tire, fidgeting with the knife in his hand. *There you are,* I said mocking him.

He growled as he became aware that I was in his head. I broke my connection and started making my way across the garage to the car he was behind. When I was about half way there, I could hear the police sirens in the distance. *You should just turn yourself in,* I suggested to him as I stopped walking and connected with him. *They’re going to catch you this time.*

“Get out of my head!” he shouted and jumped out from behind the car.

I smiled smugly; it was working. I was bringing him out in the open and throwing him off his game. I had strong hope that Detective Olson was going to be able to capture him. *Drop the knife and lay on the ground until the police arrive,* I demanded with a bit of arrogance.

Rick laughed demonically and started walking towards me again as we both focused on each other. Suddenly, we were distracted by the sound of someone running up the stairs. The sirens were still a little ways away and I immediately became fearful that whoever it was would reap the immediate wrath of Rick. He started to move towards the stairs. I knew he wasn’t going to put up with distractions and wouldn’t hesitate to swiftly eliminate Brian as soon as he emerged from the stairwell.

I quickly reconnected with Rick. *It’s the girl you want this time,* I reminded him.

Surprisingly, it was enough to get him refocused on me. As he changed his direction and started back towards me again, I heard Brian shout, “Ashlyn!”

This broke my connection with Rick. I knew Brian couldn’t see Rick and didn’t know he was in imminent danger, with Rick a mere fifteen feet in front of him.

You have to leave, I pleaded with Brian. *Please trust me. Turn and leave now.* He started to go back down the stairs and then turned back holding his head. “No, Ash. You’re not doing this alone.”

I have to. It’s the only way. I have to know you’re safe this time. Please? I begged. *No matter what happens, I need you to know how much I love you and want to be your wife.* With tears streaming down my face, I broke my connection with Brian and turned my focus back on Rick.

“Look at you crying! Did you think you ever had a chance against me?” Rick soliloquized.

From a distance, I heard Brian yell, “*Up here!*” It was a slight relief to know the police had arrived, but now I had to do something to make them be able to capture him; I had to make him come after me.

Rick had lost interest in me again and was annoyed at another distraction. He was determined to silence everyone who was getting in the way of his mission to get rid of me and started moving again towards the stairwell.

I took a deep breath and prepared myself to make Rick become visible at just the right moment. *Look at her standing there, so weak and helpless. You could be done with her before anyone could reach her,* I prodded him.

He started walking towards me again. I was about to continue when we both heard the police at the far end of the garage. Rick growled again.

They can’t even see you, I said quickly. *Just one quick stab to the girl’s heart and it’s over; there’s nothing they will ever be able to do to catch you.*

As I broke my connection with him to check on the position of the officers and look for Brian, I saw a glint of red flash across Rick’s eyes. He turned back towards me and started twirling his knife in his hand. “So, pathetic,” he said. It was almost shocking that even his voice didn’t give him away; there wasn’t any hint of echo as he spoke out loud in the vacant garage.

He’s twenty feet in front of me, to my left. I’m bringing him closer to me. Be ready for him to appear, I instructed Detective Olson. He looked shocked to hear me like that, but was professional enough to maintain his composure and direct his team. I broke my connection as soon as I saw them get their guns out and point them in my direction.

Taking another deep breath, I refocused on Rick. He was getting closer and started to raise the knife to striking position. As he got close and I could see myself from my gift eyes, I shouted at him *Watch out!*

He was startled mid-swing by the suddenness of my voice in his head and I broke my connection with him just in time for me to dodge slightly. A sharp, burning sensation spread through my left arm. I screamed in pain when I reached up and pulled the knife out, throwing it across the ground. This seemed to please him and he refocused his sadistic eyes on me. A sick, twisted smile appeared on his lips as he moved towards my body lying on the ground.

Despite the throbbing pain in my head from connecting with him and the burning pain in my shoulder, I managed to reconnect with Detective Olson for a brief second. *Ready?*

Then I used my gift on Rick for the last time; my plan was either going to work or I was going to die. *Goodbye, asshole,* I said to him smugly.

Everything moved in slow motion. My connection with Rick was broken suddenly as Rick’s fist connected with me, sending me flying across the floor of the garage. I came to an abrupt stop when my head hit a pillar, making a cracking sound. Almost at the same moment, I heard an officer yell, “*There he is!*” and guns started firing.

I fought my eyes closing, but the blackness was quickly taking over everything. I managed to stay focused just long enough to see Rick’s body being jolted by the multiple bullets that struck him. He fell to the ground with an unceremonious thud and didn’t move.

I was losing my battle to stay conscious. I struggled to pull my injured left arm up just enough to look at my ring one last time and whispered, “I’m sorry.” Blackness engulfed me and I lost the ability to

control any of my muscles. My hearing seemed to be the only thing of my life that remained intact. Brian's voice got closer as he yelled, "*Wake up, Ash! Stay with me! Fight, damnit!*" I wanted to reach out to him and tell him it was okay and he had to let me go, but I couldn't do anything but listen to his voice, which eventually faded, too, until there was nothing but absolute darkness.