

HEART

pulled to

PIECES



Girlebooks Presents
Megan Trennett

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HEART PULLED TO PIECES

BY MEGAN TRENNETT

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Chapter 1

"I want a divorce," Eddie said bluntly, over a cup of coffee as if saying we should paint the kitchen. It struck me as an odd turn of conversation, so I wasn't sure I heard him correctly. After all, we had been sitting outside on the patio of our favourite cafe. We had just been talking about changing our dining room set, an item we have had since we married four years ago. I blinked, staring into his serious face.

"What?" I asked, laughing while exhaling.

"I want a divorce," he said more slowly, annunciating the words in a gentle way. He didn't want to hurt me, which was clear in his eyes. Eddie wasn't a mean guy, even to those he didn't like. "I've been thinking about this a lot." He turned his gaze down to his coffee. "And by a lot I mean for the last year. I just haven't been able to get the spark back."

Ahh, the spark. I knew what he meant by that; the spark was what ignited our friendship into a full-blown love affair. We had only been dating for about four months when the spark had led Eddie to get down on one knee with his mother's engagement ring and beg me to marry him. It sounds quick, but he and I had been friends since we were five. Our parents had expected us to marry. It didn't surprise anyone when we decided to marry in less than three months after becoming engaged.

The spark, as we so lovingly called it, caused our honeymoon passion to drag out for the first year of our

marriage. I remember we barely left our Floridian hotel room for the week we were there. It was everything we could do on the plane home to not join the mile high club. When we'd get home from work it was just a simple routine to take off our coat and shoes, followed by our clothes on the way to the bedroom where we would spend an hour there before dinner.

"Eddie, that happens in a marriage. People become comfortable, settled. *We're* just in that stage ourselves. There's no need to get a divorce." I lied, and I knew he knew it.

We hadn't just settled into our marriage. We did that after year two. It was the first time he and I hadn't finished love making, though I can't recall why. I do know that it was on our anniversary. Not a great start to the second year.

We also found our routine had changed in that second year. We would come home, take off our socks and shoes, give one another a quick kiss before making dinner, and settle in for an evening together on our living room couch, cuddling and watching television.

"I really think there is." Eddie wouldn't look up. "We've been drifting apart for a while."

By year three we had officially started drifting apart. It's not that we forgot our anniversary; we just didn't bother doing anything for it. It was on a Monday, and neither of us could take the day off to enjoy it. We never thought to celebrate on the Saturday before that, and by the end of the week, we both were so tired that a big celebration of our love was almost inconceivable.

We did make love, but only once, and I seem to remember we both dressed quickly and went out to an un-enjoyable dinner. But I wouldn't say that our marriage was lacking. Sure during the last year our routines all but disappeared, and we really didn't spend all that much time with one another. Eddie spent most of his time in the office on his computer. I spent it on the couch reading, sometimes writing on my laptop. I had, though I'm fairly certain he never knew, checked to see what he was up to in there. No dating sites, no porn sites, nothing that would make a slighted wife feel like she at least had an excuse as to why her husband had spent so much time on his own. But Eddie, as always, was the perfect gentleman. I had noticed that one of his frequently visited sites was on pregnancy, and baby names.

I honestly thought that's why he wanted to go out for coffee. To see how I would have felt about carrying his baby. After all, we had done everything else so quickly, I thought maybe he was distant because he wanted a baby and wasn't sure I would agree.

But Divorce, that was something I wasn't expecting. Divorce was not a baby; it was not asking for an increase of activity in our sex life, it was not saying he felt we had a problem. Divorce was a straightforward, cut'em loose, be all and end all of our marriage.

"You don't want to try and work it out? Fix things?" I asked, I almost begged.

“I have been, Andi. I have been for a while. I tried to be more intimate, I tried to be more involved. I tried.” Eddie tried to reason but I wasn’t hearing it.

“No, no you didn’t try to do anything, don’t you think I would have noticed if you were trying to do anything different?” I felt myself starting to panic. What was going on? Why was it that my world suddenly began to spin out of control?

“I was trying on a personal level. I know it doesn’t seem fair, I really do, and I tried to use that to talk myself out of what I decided. But Andi, I just don’t love you anymore. I feel awful, I really should have told you sooner.” He shook his head.

I wanted to slap him. I wanted to yell at him, scream at him. I wanted to throw my hot coffee in his face. I wanted to cry. I couldn’t do anything. I sat frozen in front of my husband—future ex-husband. I caught my reflection in the table. My dark brown hair was tangled in my fingers, probably from trying to grasp onto reality. My hazel eyes were filled with shock and horror, which was understandable. I was more pale than normal.

I looked at Eddie, and he was looking at me sympathetically. His blue eyes were pleading, guilty, beautiful. His black curly hair was slicked back so that only the ends of it were twisting. His five o’clock shadow was starting to come through a little early. His skin was normal, slightly tanned. In his mouth, twisted in his lips, was a small bit of relief.

"I. Don't. Under... stand." I said simply. I started to laugh out of nervousness. I really didn't know what to do. My marriage was over, and I didn't even know it until a moment ago.

"I'm sorry. I wasn't planning on throwing you out or anything silly like that. I was going to sleep on the couch."

"You have been sleeping on the couch." I replied, my voice starting to shake. "You started about two months ago when you complained the mattress wasn't comfortable anymore. I was saving for a new one, but I didn't question your choice to sleep on the couch."

Eddie just nodded. "I can put you up somewhere if you would like. I know how awful this sounds, but I was preparing for you to move out."

"What?" My voice cracked. He was already planning my departure. "Who, what..." I stammered, but I didn't know what I was trying to say.

"Andraia," he used my full name, no loving abbreviations. "I'm sorry. I know this seems sudden to you, but I'm not sure it should. I thought this seemed like it was coming for a while. We haven't been what we were. We haven't been ourselves and we just... fizzled." Eddie gestured with his hands, as if they were making such a casual comment.

"Edmund," I said his full name, though it sounded awkward, "I can't believe you're springing this on me, I can't believe." I stopped and stood. I took my coffee with me, why not, and I walked away from the table.

I passed the others enjoying their drinks. If they were eavesdropping, they made sure it didn't appear so. I stepped off the patio and walked down the road towards our apartment. The traffic was crazy, bumper-to-bumper going both directions. The noise was almost soothing, the city being alive as it was. Summer breezes blew the smells of exhaust, coffee, and fast food around me. There was nothing more I wanted in that instant than to go into the nearest burger joint and shove one down my throat.

I passed on it, moving down the street. I glanced into a shop window, seeing Eddie not far behind me. He was following me home, probably to make sure I didn't burn his clothes or toss his video game systems out the second story window. The thought crossed my mind, and it was tempting, but it wouldn't be worth it.

I walked in silence for the two blocks it took me to get home. I didn't pause to look back and see if Eddie was still close. I opened my purse with one hand searched for my keys. I found them and unlocked the secure door, not checking to see if I was alone when I closed the door.

I walked up the flights of stairs, finishing my coffee as I made it to the apartment door. I unlocked the door and stepped in. I hung my purse on the doorknob, set my keys on the kitchen counter, and set my empty coffee cup on the island. I would miss this apartment. I loved how light it was, how you entered into the giant, open living area with the kitchen on the right, and our living room on the left.

I looked around the room, feeling a wave of sadness. I wouldn't get to keep this place; it was Eddie's first after all. I would lose it in the divorce, I knew. There would be no question. With the way Eddie seemed to have had the whole thing planned out, he probably knew who would get what right down to the last decorative candle. I walked across the open space into the small hall, making my way to the master suite, hearing Eddie come in as I stepped into the bedroom. I looked around, feeling the heavy sadness fill me again.

I walked over to the bed, and sat down. I listened to Eddie moving around in the office. It seemed that he was going into the closet; I could hear the door open and close. I listened for his footsteps as they made their way around the corner to our bedroom. He stood in the doorway with a suitcase. He really did seem to have everything planned out.

"I'm going to be staying at Steve's for the rest of the week. I'm having my lawyer draw up the papers."

"Papers?" I asked, looking up to him with tear stained eyes. Eddie nodded.

"For an uncontested divorce: quick, painless. I'll have them brought over to you by Tuesday." He paused. "I won't let you go un-cared for. What I'm doing is..." He paused, looking for the words. "It's blind-siding." He turned around and left the doorway. I got up and followed him, my feet moving on their own.

He stopped at the door, looking around one last time. I think it was more a gesture for him to take in

that this would be the last time in *our* home. He looked at me as he put his hand on the doorknob. His face was sad, but not guilty. It was relieved, just not gloating. I could feel the tears run down my cheeks. "I'm sorry Andi." He said as he turned the door knob and opened the door. He didn't look back as he stepped out into the hall. He closed the door gently, no 'grand slam' for a sense of closure.

I didn't move, I didn't think. I collapsed on the light hardwood, staring at the door until the sun went down. This morning I woke up, looked at my husband and thought I was one of the luckiest women in the world; I had a guy like Eddie. Now as I went to bed I pulled back the sheets on my side of the bed and wept, the weight of the fact that I would never share a bed with him again collapsing on me. I was just left by my best friend, and I didn't even see it coming.

I called into work on Monday and told them I wouldn't be coming in that week. I had vacation time built up; I could use that excuse to not face the world as I sat on the couch in the apartment. The local paper would survive one week without my restaurant reviews. Besides, with Eddie leaving me the day before I forgot about my reservation that night. I would have had nothing to write about.

I sat there all day, surviving off of crackers and coffee, watching the weather channel, afraid to change the channel to a show with the ability to increase my pain. The phone would ring, and I would let the machine pick up. I heard one from my mom, a chipper

tone that would go flat second she heard that I, much like her, was left by my husband. At least I didn't have a child to take care of. I suddenly had a new found admiration for my mother.

Another call was my friend Ann. She was babbling on about a new club opening that night and I absolutely had to go to with her. She was forever going to bars on week nights, leaving weekends for endless shopping trips. She was a law school student with rich parents and a limit-less credit card. No man would ever divorce her. She could always have a look over the papers Eddie was having drawn up. She would know if he was being a cruel bastard, or just plain cruel.

The rest of the phone calls no one left a message. I can't lie and say that I wasn't hoping it would be Eddie every time, calling to see if he could come home to his wife, that he was stupid for leaving me. No such luck would come my way. I was still alone by dinner time.

I put on a pair of sweats and walked out of the apartment, breathing in fresh air for the first time in over twenty-four hours. I passed people walking their dogs, going for jogs, or just crowds of people making their way to their dinner destination. I was fortunate not to have passed any couples; I might have ploughed them over for being so happy, (not that I was strong enough to do that, but I would have tried).

I rounded the corner and entered the first fast food place on my left. A burger joint. I stared at the menu like I cared about what I ate, looking at the backlit images of various burgers and chicken burgers with

numbers beside them. I heard the teenage boy behind the counter ask me what I liked and I replied with whatever number my eyes last landed on, I had no idea what it was. I was in such a daze I forgot to tell the cracked-voice boy for a diet soda and salad instead of fries.

Within minutes my food was in a brown bag, a bit of grease from the fries seeping through the bag, causing a discoloration. I was handed that and my drink and was told to have a great day. I smiled and snorted a laugh; if they only knew.

I returned home, setting the bag of greasy food on the coffee table and stared at it. One thing Eddie always hated was my love of fried food. His wife, I remember him saying, well before we got together, should be a health buff like him. Salads and grilled chicken, tofu stir fry and steamed veggies, always eating breakfast and never snacking. Exercise everyday and never eat past eight-thirty at night.

I felt my face crumple as I stared at the bag. If that was the kind of girl he wanted, why did he marry me? After all, he tried to shape me into his kind of woman. He tried to make me fit into his ideals on what to eat and how to live. I didn't fit quite right, there were certain foods and drinks I loved that I wouldn't give up, plus the gym and I never had a solid relationship. Maybe that's why he left, he realized that we didn't fit. Why didn't I realize that?

Before I knew it, I was shoving salty, crispy fries in my mouth and enjoying it more than the last orgasm I

had. I went for my burger as I began to ponder how long ago that was (The sad thing is I couldn't remember). I took a bite of my burger, and felt a little more comfort. I finished dinner and began to change the channel on the television. As if fast food would be the key to getting through the divorce, I felt normal as I began to digest my food, sipping the Coke in the gigantic cup. I absentmindedly grabbed a pillow from the couch and held it against me as I landed on a stand-up comedian. He wasn't funny, but I laughed at him anyway.

I fell asleep on the couch, not bothering to retire to the bedroom and feel miserable. I refused to allow myself to feel defeated right now in this moment. I slept dreamlessly through the night.

I awoke the next morning around eight. I got up, showered, remembering that I didn't have to work, but that Eddie was in the process of ending our marriage. I wasn't happy, but I wasn't sad. I was functioning.

I dressed, made my way down the stairs, and left the apartment. It was overcast, and I didn't mind if I got rained on a little. It was two blocks to the cafe, where I would buy a coffee and a giant muffin for my breakfast. I didn't care about calories anymore.

I took my time walking back to the apartment, enjoying, in a cynical way, the misery that people felt from the weather, content that they were suffering on some level as I was, even if the reasons were very different. I shouldn't have enjoyed it so much; karma has a way of getting everyone back.

Standing on the doorstep of the apartment was a man in a trench coat. How retro he looked with his fedora and brief case. He looked like a detective in an old movie, but was young, and slightly handsome.

“Are you Andraia Lansky?” he asked as I approached him.

“Yes?” I replied, slowing my step and feeling awkward.

He reached beneath his coat and gave me a brown envelope. “These are from the office of Melanie Williams, your husband’s lawyer. If you have any questions about the document, it’s requested that you do not contact Ms Williams directly, but she has included, by Mr. Lansky’s request, a few business cards of some of her colleagues.” I felt my face contort into a mask of pain as the young man served me my divorce papers. “I’m sorry.” He said simply, though his tone said he wasn’t. He turned sharply and left down the street, flagging a cab as he moved.

I remained outside for a moment, shocked and shaken. The first rain drop hit my coffee cup with a splat, and it brought me back to reality. I dug into my pocket for my keys, and then unlocked the door, going back inside the building.

By the time I got into the apartment I was hyperventilating. I set my coffee cup and the brown envelope beside each other on the kitchen counter before I bent over and fought the tears as I grabbed my stomach.

As I stood gasping for air, the phone rang, and Ann's voice cracked over the answering machine. I had no idea what her chipper tone was going on about, but I quickly picked up and in a blur said, "you need to come over right now, I need your help, Eddie has just had divorce papers delivered and I can't look at them on my own, and I don't want a judgemental lawyer so I need you to come over now and help me please." My voice cracked as the tears hit my eyes. There was a long pause before Ann replied.

"I'll be right over," she said and hung up. The twenty minutes it took for Ann to get to the apartment felt like long, agonizing hours. The brown envelope was like a magnet for my eyes, I couldn't peel them away.

I heard the door open, though I was still bent over and holding my sides while staring at the envelope. I felt her hands on my side, as she guided me to the couch. I didn't lock the door, I had recalled as I watched the curtain of light blonde hair move around Ann's face as she made sure I was sitting up right. She then disappeared into the kitchen area and I grabbed a hold of the couch pillow and held it tight.

I could hear her rummaging through the cupboards, cursing under her breath, and then finally finding what she was searching for. The crinkle of the chip bag was clear, and soon Ann was sitting on the couch beside me, her perfectly composed and made-up self handing me the orange Doritos bag. I grabbed it from her and opened it, stuffing one of the cheesy chips in my mouth as she stroked my hair.

"Divorce?" She said the world simply, like it was a "so last year" kind of thing to do. I just nodded, stuffing yet another chip in my mouth, chewing more slowly. "Why, did he give a reason?"

"He says he doesn't love me anymore." I said with a full mouth. I didn't care.

"Wow," Ann said, blinking and looking away. In this moment of my despair and cynicism I realized how ditzy she had become in the last couple years. "That sounds like Eddie." Her voice fluctuated.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked, a little offended that she wasn't trying to say he was crazy, or a bastard, or anything that should make me feel better.

"Remember Allison Cooper? He dated her about two girls before you? The airheaded blonde chick?" The way she was speaking, she could have been talking about herself right now. I raised an eyebrow, beginning to question a lot. "Anyway, he was, like, totally in love with her. The world revolved around her. They were looking at engagement rings on Friday; by Sunday he had taken all of his hair products out of her bachelor pad and by Wednesday it was like they never dated. Totally Eddie. He just comes and goes as he pleases. It's like his emotions are on a timer, and once the *bing* goes off, he bails." She shrugged her shoulders and pouted her lips. Wow, Ann had really become a piece of work. I continued to stare at her with a raised eyebrow, slowly chowing down on my comfort food. "So," her voice went chipper, "Where are these divorce papers? I want to see what he's asking for." She said it like it was

gossip, as if she just picked up “Us” Weekly to find out why Jennifer Anniston was dumped again. I could sympathize with *her* right now.

Ann went to the table, the magnetic force of my ending marriage pulling her immediately in the right direction. She ripped open the envelope and started pulling out and examining the papers. “Uncontested,” she murmured almost disgusted, disappointment in her eyes. “I thought he’d be more vicious.” She continued to sift, and read. Her eyebrows shot up. “Wow.”

“What?” I asked terrified.

“He’s offering to front you a place to stay, so long as it is under eight hundred a month rent, for at least six months, so long as you vacate the apartment by the end of this week.” Ann paused. “What an ass.”

“Huh?” I questioned her sanity. Did she not hear herself? I considered that a pretty generous offer.

“Where in the hell are you going to find a place in the city for eight hundred or less a month and in less than a week?” Oh, now I knew why she was acting so appalled.

I shrugged. Doritos, much like my quarter pounder the night before, were acting as a wonderful numbing agent. Sifting through the terms of my divorce stung, but not nearly as bad as it would have without the anaesthetic. “So? I can always move away.”

“No you can’t.” She said raising her hands as best she could with the papers in her hands. She said it like if I left, I would be a loser. “You just can’t leave the city.”

"Why not?" I asked, stuffing a chip in my mouth. "To be honest, it's not like I'm getting anywhere in my job. And If I was to run into Eddie, how the frig am I supposed to get over a failed marriage if I'm surrounded by everything I had ever known in that marriage?"

"Like," Ann said, looking back down at the papers. "You just get over it. You're twenty-four, you've been married just over four years. Which is about as long as you two had been together." She shuffled the sheets. "Think of it as, like, the most expensive break-up either of you have ever had."

"Ha," I snorted. "It is the most expensive break up I'll ever have, for a multitude of reasons. But all that aside do you remember what I did when I broke up with Ajax? I switched colleges for crying out loud. I made sure we wouldn't even be in the same state let alone city. How am I supposed to live in the same city as my ex-husband?"

"So what, you're just gonna like leave the country?" She asked me like I was the one being irrational. And maybe I was. But I didn't think so then. I still don't.

"No, just leave the city. But enough about what I'm going to do, what do I have to do? What are some of the other things he's asking for?"

"Well, it says he should keep the furniture." Ann said as she went through the list.

"Understandably, it was all his."

"His half of the music collection."

"That seems obvious."

Ann gasped. "He wants you to cut up your credit card." She looked as if he had written in blood that I had to kill my first born child.

"I would have anyway."

"But why?" Ann was almost disgust.

I shrugged. I realized now why going over these papers wasn't affecting me as much as I thought. It was Ann. Not in a good sense, that she was there for support, but more so because her materialism and self-absorbed views of life. "Having my husband's credit cards is not something I need, or want for that matter. If Eddie wants me to cut up my credit cards, I will."

"If your *ex*-husband wants you to jump off a bridge, would you?" I didn't fail to note how she emphasized the *ex* portion. I may have been putting on a brave front, but the reference to Eddie's title didn't hurt me any less.

"No," I replied, stuffing a chip in my mouth and crunching hard. Ann rolled her eyes at me.

"Fine, it sounds fine for a divorcing couple. You two are completely civilized. You are doing this quick and efficiently." Her voice sounded annoyed. "He wants you out of the picture asap, that's obvious. He's practically trying to push you out of the city." Her eyebrows just about shot off her head, and it was clear that she was trying to suppress a smile. "Maybe there's another woman," and if that thought wasn't enough, "and he got her pregnant. It would make sense. A hasty divorce required, you needing to leave the apartment by the end of the week, his supporting you for only *six*

months and for such a small price. I mean, come on, Eddie can afford more than that. Plus this place is big enough for a family.”

Although I knew deep down that Ann was saying all this mostly to give herself some drama, I hadn’t really thought of the possibilities. I was a trusting person, a fault that I knew people always had and always will expose. So I naturally assumed that when Eddie bluntly told me he didn’t love me anymore, that that was all the truth there was. It never crossed my mind that I was being replaced. That maybe he still loved me but had felt an obligation to this mystery affair (or one night stand). That her having a child made the noble Edmund feel the need to leave his wonderful, childless wife to support his off-spring.

I hated Ann in that moment; there is no other way to put it. I thought I could manage if Eddie was just being Eddie, got tired of this, me, and decided to cut all ties. But I couldn’t bear the thought, didn’t want to contemplate the possible outcome, of Eddie leaving life with me for a life with someone else.

I swallowed hard, and looked at Ann sternly. “As an attorney, do you see anything that seems unfair?”

Ann just blinked, looked over the papers again and said, “No. It seems more fair than most divorces I’ve processed, or at least seen processed. You just have to meet in the lawyer’s office on the date given, which is tomorrow, and let her know if this is ok and sign it. If you want changes, you’ll need to negotiate.”

“Great, get out.” I stated simply.

“What?” Ann asked, blinking furiously.

“Get out of this apartment, get out of my sight.” I diverted my eyes, feeling them start to well.

Ann sighed, presumably annoyed that I didn’t want to fuel her need for drama, and left with a lot of noise, stomping her heels and slamming the door on her way out.

When the door closed, the Doritos anaesthetic wore off, and the tears began to stream down.

Chapter 2

I woke up the following morning on the couch, the pillow hugged tight to my chest, the Doritos bag on the floor. The television was one playing some infomercial. I couldn't remember what I'd watched, I couldn't remember deciding to fall asleep, I couldn't recall anything that happened after Ann stormed out and I finally allowed myself to cry.

I did remember the conversation with Ann, remembered how we went over the terms of my divorce and that I had to sign the papers in Eddie's lawyer's office. Melanie something or other was her name. I felt a pang of panic as I darted my head, searching for the clock. Not that I was in any hurry to end my marriage, but I never liked being late for an appointment. My eyes landed on the clock on the microwave clear across the apartment. Even at a distance I could see that it was still only seven-thirty in the morning. There was no way my appointment would be for such an early hour of the morning. Eddie didn't usually see sunshine himself until about nine o'clock.

I stood up, tumbling as I did, and made my way stiffly to the island in the kitchen where Ann left my papers. I scanned through the opening letter, and read that my appointment was for eleven-thirty. Before noon, I would no longer be Mrs. Lansky.

It gave me time, however, and that was a good thing. I didn't need to look at myself to know I was a mess. I could feel it. For some reason, right then, I knew there

would be nothing more gratifying than to look like a knock out in that lawyer's office. Make Eddie feel like he was making a mistake. It would be a challenge to look that good, but I would try.

I showered, shaving my legs and using a body wash that I knew Eddie loved the smell of. Shampoo never really mattered; he was never one to bury his face into a head of hair. I towelled dry, and then proceeded to blow dry my hair, a task I didn't do on a regular basis. To my distaste, my hair wouldn't do anything but fall straight; I wasn't even lucky enough to get some temporary volume.

I then proceeded with make-up and wardrobe. He never liked when I wore a lot of make-up, so I just put on a little mascara and some lipstick. I was having a good skin day in my book, so I skipped foundation.

I don't know how one dresses when one is about to end a marriage. Is it a business-like affair? As if to say ending this isn't personal, it's just good business? Or was it casual? As if to say you would let it all roll off your shoulders in a shrug the second the pen in your hand left the papers? In the state of emotion I was in, I should wear all black. I am attending a funeral of sorts after all.

But as much as I would have liked to play it up, I went simple, digging out a black skirt from the back of my closet, and an indigo blouse that I loved, and wore as often as I found the need to. To my dismay, it wouldn't button at the top. Groaning, I dug deeper for

a white camisole that I quickly put on beneath my blouse.

I looked in the full length mirror of the closet, turning around a little one way or another. I hated the way I looked in the skirt, and quickly changed it for a pair of black pants. Re-checking myself, I thought I looked pretty good. A great final touch would be my fake pearls, something to say I was still classy even though I was getting a divorce before I was twenty five.

I walked over to the jewellery box and opened it, starting my search for the pearls I was looking for. I found them quickly, but saw something in the box I wasn't expecting. A reflection from the built in mirror showed me my engagement ring still on my finger, next to the custom made wedding band.

I felt sick as I raised my hand to look at it. It hadn't been in the outline to give it back, but it was his mother's. It had been given to her by his father who was killed in a car accident when he was ten. She wanted whoever was lucky enough to be his wife to have it. My luck had run out, and I didn't feel right keeping it.

I felt my heart break as I slipped it off, looking at the vintage diamond in yellow gold. It hadn't been my choice ring, but it was special. My wedding band looked odd and out of place on my finger. I distracted myself and searched for an empty ring box, found quickly in an underwear drawer, and placed the ring in it. I would give it back to Eddie this morning.

Carrying the box like it was a bomb out into the kitchen, I set it on the island so that I could search for my purse. I knew I had it somewhere. But in the daze of everything that Sunday, I couldn't remember where I put my bag. I didn't need it for the last couple of days. I had removed my wallet... where had I put it? The back of the door clicked and I moved there quickly, seeing the black leather hanging there ever so patiently for me.

I grabbed it, taking my wallet from the counter and stuffing it in before moving to the island to retrieve the ring box. I stared at it for a few minutes before I swatted it into the bag. I grabbed my keys and stopped at the door. I looked around the apartment. I wouldn't have to leave right away, but my end was coming soon. I took a breath, opened the door and left.

After lingering in the coffee shop for about an hour, and walking the three blocks to the lawyer's office, I arrived there a half hour before our appointment. I was forced to wait outside in the waiting room with the nosey receptionist stealing glances at me with a knowing look in her eyes.

I watched the clock carefully, watching the second hand tick by. Knowing that behind the door Eddie sat with his lawyer, discussing god knows what, freaked me out. I was going to be blind-sided, or at least that's what it felt like.

It felt like hours passed before the long hand made it the six on the large clock over the door, and as it did, the click of the doorknob sounded. My eyes moved

down to the door and watched a blonde, hard-faced woman emerge.

"Andraia," she said flatly, no emotion, no greeting, and no smile. I just stood and followed her into her office. Why should I be pleasant when she wasn't?

Her office was stark, white, no pictures or artwork, no plants. There was a window to my right with closed white blinds. This woman was seriously all business. Nothing about her said that she could have been friendly. She gestured to the empty seat next to Eddie. I took that as a sign to sit down, so I did.

"Alright, I trust that you have had a chance to go over the papers that Mr. Lansky and I have drawn up." Her voice mimicked the starkness of her office.

"Yes," I replied with no emotion. I glanced to the side, to glimpse Eddie. He did the same, a trace of sadness in his eyes. I found it odd how he wore jeans and a gray sweater to the meeting. I guess if he had to dress up for the wedding, he could dress down for the divorce.

"Good, and seeing as how you brought no advocate with you, I would assume that you have no intentions to fight the offer."

"No."

"Good. In my opinion, Edmund is being far too generous. I've personally had a number of divorces, five, to put a number to it, and I can tell you I was never so generous with my exes. So, if we are really going through with this without a fight, I'll get you to sign first Andraia." I don't know why, but I thought

this to be unfair. Why should I sign first? I didn't ask for this! Yet she shoved the pen in my hand before I had a chance to protest. The papers were before me just as quickly. "Just so you know," she said before I put the pen to paper, "I have it in there that your name will be reverted back to just 'Mathews.' That after the divorce is finalized, the Lansky name will be officially dropped from your name."

"Just that easy, eh?" I asked sarcastically.

"You were a smart woman and made life easy when you hyphenated everything. There aren't as many legal complications when you drop an additional name as opposed to a full name conversion." She waved her hand, encouraging me to hurry up. I looked down; this woman was a piece of work. I signed, exactly as she told me to.

With the final pen stroke, the weight of it all crashed on my shoulders. I just signed away my life, or at least it felt like it. I didn't look up, I just slid the papers towards Eddie and handed him the pen without looking at him. I swallowed as he sighed, a lump in my throat formed and was determined to stay there. I could hear him signing the papers, the scratch of the pen making sounds like it was being used on rock.

Rock. Diamond. My ring.

"Oh shit," I cursed, and then covered my mouth embarrassed as I realized they were staring at me. I caught a glimpse of Melanie, a 'too late now, honey' expression on her face. I turned to Eddie, who stopped signing before he got to the last page.

“What is it Andi?” He asked sympathetically.

“I almost forgot, I wanted to give this back to you.” I said with such an easy tone I almost surprised myself. I could have been giving him back a CD I borrowed years ago.

I opened my purse and handed him the ring box. He looked confused as he set down the pen and took it from me with both hands, opening the green velvet box. His eyes went sad when he saw what it was. “Andi,” he shook his head.

“It doesn’t belong to me anymore. Your mom wanted your wife to have it and I’m not your wife anymore.” There was the lump again.

“But Andi, that ring. It was sized for you—we had your wedding band custom made for you.”

“You know Edmund, you didn’t sign the last paper; I can do up new ones to say she has to give you the whole wedding set.” Her tone was almost accusing towards him. Obviously he withheld that I had the family jewels. It made me smile a bit on the inside, just below the lump.

“Andi, mom loves you. She would be so sad to see you gave it back.” He tried to protest again.

“I can’t hold on to it Eddie.” I swallowed, choking on the damn lump. “It’s yours, it belongs to a Lansky. I’m not a Lansky anymore.”

He sighed, and I swore that maybe I saw the very faintest trace of tear in his eyes. “You will always be a Lansky. You’ve been part of my family for a lot longer than the time we were married.”

In that moment, with his eyes so full of sadness and heartbreak, I wanted to yell out: "Don't do this Eddie! I still love you! And I don't care if you cheated on me with a one-night stand, or full-fledged affair, I don't care. I love you and we can work through it. We'll buy a house and she'll live in our basement, just don't end this." But then he smiled very faintly, almost to the point where you weren't sure it was even there, and he looked away.

"Alright Edmund, if you are absolutely sure that you don't want to get *anything* from Ms. Lansky-Mathews, then sign the final paper and it will all be said and done." Melanie said stared him down. He inhaled deeply and signed on the last dotted line. A finality as he curved the 'y' with extra force. He handed back the pen with a polite smile and avoided eye contact with me. "Well then, by the power vested in me, I now pronounce you divorced." She said with a big, unenthusiastic grin. "It will take a week or two for the legality of it and all that jazz, but the process will be painless I promise." This coming from the woman who divorced how many men? She should have known that the process was far from painless. I held my own thoughts. I didn't smile, but I didn't cry either. I just sat there with that stupid lump in my throat.

"Thank you Ms Williams." Eddie said as he got up and shook her hand. I just stood and left. Why would I thank the woman who ended the marriage I didn't want ended in the first place?

I left the office without saying goodbye to anyone, made my way down the one flight of stairs and headed towards the restaurant district. Even the sun was mockingly cheerful. I needed comfort, and fast.

"Andi," I heard Eddie call behind me. A small bit of hope, the only portion left in my body, hoped he was coming to say he was stupid. But as you can imagine, even the hope of him saying he would come back wasn't there anymore. "Have you cut up all your credit cards yet?" Really, the guy just divorced me, got everything he wanted, and now was worried I would go on a shopping spree?

"No, I was going to leave them all on the island so that you could personally shred them yourself."

"Good, cause I don't want you to do it to all of them." Eddie walked towards me.

"What?"

"Well, I said that I would pay for your rent for six months. My lawyer didn't think that was smart but I think it's noble. So instead of me sending you checks or something, you can just use the card. That way I don't have to know where you choose to stay, you know?"

"Sure, what ever." I was proud of how nonchalant I sounded. "Any one in particular?"

"Yeah the, ah, the silver coloured visa that expires in seven months." I hated how he had a plan.

"Ah, good." I could hear the sarcasm in my voice. "That's the one that I *hadn't* changed my name on. I won't have any problems then." I rolled my eyes, though I'm sure he didn't see it.

“Andi,” there was desperation in his voice.

“What, Eddie? Do you want to pour salt on the wounds?” Salt, fries would be good. “Do you want to scar me more than you already have? You blindsided me with this. You’re kicking me out of the apartment by the end of the week. You’re leaving me with very few options for a living arrangement. Am I supposed to owe you something? Am I supposed to thank you? What do you want from me?”

“I just wanted to know you were ok?” He was disappointed with himself. He had that sad puppy-who-peed-on-the-floor look.

“No, ok, no. I’m not ok. I hate you.” I love you was what I meant to say.

“I understand.” He took two steps back. “I’m sorry, Andi.” He stood there, waved with a solemn smile, and turned around and walked away.

I stood there watching him until he disappeared, though why I’m not sure. I felt the tears come, but I blinked them away. When he was out of sight, I turned around and walked.

I didn’t get far before I decided to cross the street and catch a bus going my way. I didn’t care that it was crowded and I had to stand. I really didn’t mind, it helped me think. What was I going to do? Where was I going to go? It was Wednesday, but what did Eddie and miss Bitchzilla-lawyer-woman consider the end of the week? Friday or Saturday? Either way it didn’t give me much time, and definitely not long enough to find a

place in the city, and certainly not for the measly eight hundred a month allowance I was given.

I heard the bell on the bus sound, snapping me back to the present. I looked around and noticed I was nearing my stop. I got off when the doors opened, walking the few extra meters between this stop and the one I would have wanted. I was about to gorge myself on fried food; I could use the exercise.

I popped into the restaurant, ordering the first thing I saw, a chicken burger this time. All the while, and even on the walk home as I sipped my Coke, I was thinking of my next step. Where was I going to go?

I unlocked the door to the apartment, threw everything on the counter, and walked to the phone. I had one message. No way it was Eddie, at least I would assume. And I don't think it was my mother, she would know to leave me alone for a few days. I hit play, and the voice filled the room like she was there with me.

"Hey Andi, it's Ann. Please pull your face out of the Doritos bag. I know you think this is a horrible thing you're going through, but people have it worse. You don't even have kids, I mean come on. Besides, if you keep this up, you're going to be a fat cow, and no one will want to date you... oh shit. It's Wednesday. You're signing your papers. HEY! Like, oh my god, we should celebrate. Your singleness I mean. Fuck Eddie, we'll get you all gorgeous and sexed up. Let's just hope you still fit in your sexy pants. Ciao!"

I growled. What a bitch. Why was everyone turning against me? I couldn't move in with her, I may kill her

before the first month is up, with all this the loving, gentle support she was giving me.

I walked back to the counter and grabbed my lunch, taking a hand full of fries out of the bag and shoving them in my mouth. I didn't know where I wanted to go, but by an unexplained impulse I went into the office. I sat at my desk, looking at the clean, clutter free work space. I hardly ever worked in here, except for when I broke my leg and refused to take time off work, but couldn't make the climb up or down the stairs to leave the apartment.

I started opening drawers between mouths full of fries. I would stare at the contents, study them carefully, and then close the drawer, moving on to the next. The bottom drawer was where I kept all the pamphlets for dream vacations, and vacations past, that Eddie and I wanted or had taken. I stared at the contents in this drawer longer than I had any other. Long enough to finish my fries and start on my chicken burger. I heard Eddie in my head throwing a fit about lettuce bits falling on the floor, sesame seeds that would fall off the bun and land somewhere in the carpet where ants would infest and seek them. It made me wish I had eaten in here more often.

My eyes suddenly came upon a gray brochure corner exposed beneath the rest of them. I reached down, pulling on the corner, bringing it to the surface from the sea of information. I instantly knew what drew me to that brochure. Of all the weekend trips Eddie and I

had made. That place had been my favourite; it had not been his.

It wasn't by accident that the place was called the Tourist Trap. The town was small, and constantly bustling, but not with residents. It didn't matter what time of year it was, the freaks who wanted to get away from cold would come in the winter, and those who just wanted to get away period came all the other times of the year. It was right on a harbour, it was serene. It was three hours away from the city. It suddenly seemed so perfect I couldn't control myself.

I instantly whipped open the brochure, laying it flat on my desk while I scanned for details. I remembered the motel was really cheap, and I seemed to remember a sign for monthly rates. I searched for the number on the glossy paper before me, picked up the phone and dialled the second I found it. I wasn't about to let myself second-guess my actions. The phone rang once, twice, three times.

"Good afternoon, Harbour View Inn, how may I help you?" It was a guy on the other end, his voice deep and friendly.

"Hi, umm, I'm curious if you guys still have your monthly boarding rates and what they may be?"

A long pause, "yes we do miss. Seven hundred ninety a month. Doesn't include anything but the room though, food is extra. Of course there is a tv in there. Has some basic cable. Got a table and chair and that. You know, nothing fancy like an apartment. I know a cheap one around here is around eight-fifty."

I definitely wouldn't be able to afford the rent, yet. I would need a new job, though who's to say there would be one that would give me enough money to rent on my own anyway? I couldn't very well keep my current job. I obviously felt the need to start fresh.

"That will be fine. What information do you need for a reservation?" I asked him, almost too enthusiastic.

Another long pause. "I guess your name will be fine."

"Andraia Mathews. A-N-D-R-A-I-A, and Mathews with one 't'."

"Alright Miss Mathews, the room is booked. But, when would you like me to book it for?"

Good question, "I think I will be there tomorrow." I replied before I could think about it.

"Alright then, we will see you tomorrow, miss." He hung up and so did I.

I stood up from the desk, realizing I never let go of my chicken burger, and moved to the living room, taking bites on my way. I sat down on the couch and turned on the television. Flipping through the channels, I stopped on a CSI re-run. I set the remote down, swallowed the last bit of my burger, and began to cry.

Why I wasn't sure. I knew it wasn't entirely due to grief, though that was part of it. It was a potent mixture of that, relief, and a touch of joy. I was getting something out of this miserable situation, though I didn't know what that was yet. With each tear shed, it felt like I was healing. I cried, because I knew that this

was a chance to have a re-birth. So I sat there, watching television through tear filled eyes, and feeling like I was going to be alright, unlike the victim of the car crash that was being acted out for my entertainment.

I packed by candlelight. I knew that Ann would come by the apartment building when I wouldn't answer my phone, so the low light would mean she wouldn't try to come up stairs. After all, I hadn't returned her call, and she wouldn't be considerate enough to worry if I jumped off the local bridge. She would probably, however, start searching every burger joint between my apartment and the lawyer's office. Heaven forbid I enjoy food like a normal person.

I had put on some soft music, nothing too heartfelt or meaningful, just some random lyrics that wouldn't stir any particular memories. I wanted to continue with my bravado, the impulse that led me to the idea of my great escape.

I found three suitcases in my closet. They were a fairly large size, enough to fit a couple of seasons of clothes. I went about the closets, the one in the bedroom and the office. I only pulled my favourites, not wanting to take with me any hum-drum things or work attire that I never cared for. I even scoured through the hamper to make sure I didn't miss anything waiting for a wash.

I grabbed some framed photos of my mother and sisters, my favourite CDs (that were solely mine), and what few books I still had that Eddie hadn't made me donate throughout the years. They were all small,

insignificant things, but they were the things that mattered to me. What I would miss if I didn't take with me.

Earlier in the day I closed my banking accounts, cancelled my cell plan, and quit my job. My boss didn't care about my choice of a sudden departure nearly as much as the bank or the cell phone company. But when you're paying someone versus getting paid, it's easy to see why some would be far more upset than others to see you go.

As I did all these things, packing, saying goodbye to work and various service providers, I only cried three times. Once when I found our wedding album, and the indecision of burning it, keeping it, or leaving it behind for Eddie to dispose of came over me. The second time was when I went out for a coffee, and the young man behind the counter told me he would see me tomorrow. I at least waited until I was half way down the block before I let the tears fall. And the third time was when it came time to empty out my wallet. Simple things like my joint name on credit cards to be left behind, a wedding photo, and a few rewards cards that came in with Eddie's name kind of sent me into a sobbing fit. It was moments like that which allowed me to clue in that what I was doing was real.

I did decide when it was time to sleep to actually do so in the bed. It would be the last opportunity to do so, and I hadn't since Eddie told me we were done four days ago. Four days and I went from a contently married woman to a depressed and pathetic divorcee.

The knowledge that Eddie had been planning this all for months bothered and hurt me. How many times did we have sex in this bed? That he lied to me and said 'I love you' every morning and night. It pissed me off, and I felt the need to do something, anything that would bother him in the least little bit.

I could always get up and pour wine over his computer, maybe smash his favourite video game system. He had a collection of unique beer bottles along the kitchen window sill that would break his heart if he found them broken. But I wasn't a mean person, even when I was mad I had a hard time hurting others in drastic ways. So I did the first tangible thing that came to mind. I got up, stripped the bed of all the sheets; they had been Eddie's favourite set; and moved to the window. I opened it up, peering out and making sure the dumpster below was propped open as always. I was in luck.

I quickly went to the kitchen, feeling a childish laugh in my throat as I grabbed a garbage bag and did the one spiteful thing I could do to my official ex-husband. I gathered his favourite sheets and stuffed them in the bag, making sure every last hunter green item in the set was in there, and then tied it up. I lifted it to the open window and pushed the overstuffed bag out, peeking my head out just in time to see it hit the dumpster below with a thud. I smiled and then giggled. I went to the closet and pulled out my favourite sheets: Black silk. I made the bed and then curled into it, propping all the pillows, except Eddie's, around the

centre where I nestled in. As the thought crossed my mind that I should have thrown his pillows out the window too, I drifted off to sleep.

I dreamt about pouring beer all over his favourite gaming system and then using the system to break his computer.

Chapter 3

I wasn't exactly sure how I was going to get to my new home. There was a bus that left at nine, I could rent a car, or I had the option of a cab. The bus was cheap, but slow. The rental car allowed privacy, but I wasn't sure if there was a dealership on the other side to drop it off, and the cab would probably cost me around three hundred. That settled one option quick, the cab was out.

I gathered my suitcases, stacking them next to the door as I made my way around the house, gathering the small things: my make-up and tooth brush, my mp3 player, a pair of sunglasses I like, and my over sized purse. Stuffing my smaller one in the big one, re-thinking it, and then dumping the contents into the bigger one and stuffing the smaller one in a suitcase, I felt about ready. I gathered the other small things and put them in my large bag as well.

I stood in the kitchen and looked around. Rental car or bus? I kept repeating it in my head, trying to figure out what I would be better off in.

The phone rang. "Hi Andi, it's Ann." Her voice came over the answering machine, sounding chipper but annoyed. "You weren't home or you just weren't answering the door last night. Please don't tell me you spent the night with chips and burgers, cause honestly, hun, it's not like you were a size eight before this whole divorce thing." I'm a ten, so what? "Anyway, let's get your cellulite stuffed ass outta here for the day. Or at

least cruise around to the other city. Meet me at the rental car place thing in an hour! I'm so renting a hot car. Guys don't care if you have burger butt if you drive a hot car. Caio!"

Rental was out. At least Ann was good for one thing. I walked over to the phone now that her judging voice had ceased to speak to me over the answering machine. I picked it up, dialled, and requested a cab to pick me up, giving my address in a quick fluid response for the last time.

"No problem doll." The guy said in a kind voice. It seemed obvious that he called everyone doll. "Be there in about ten minutes."

I hung up, looked around again, and then went for the door. I studied the suitcases, deciding that all three together and my purse was not too much to handle, opened the door, and began to do my shuffle. I set them down on the other side of the door, shutting it tight, and then started to feel my pockets, searching for my keys. I didn't have them, they were on the island. After all, I couldn't take my keys with me. None of them would work in my fresh start.

I stared at the door. Then after a few seconds contemplation, I decided I would do at least one more semi-spiteful thing to my now ex-husband. I bagged my stuff and headed down the stairs, leaving our apartment door unlocked.

A random stranger who saw me coming attempted to help me with the door. I had to kick open the secure lock on my side, but he stood there and held the door

open for me once it was released. He was kind of cute; too bad he didn't live in the Tourist Trap. I smiled and thanked him anyway as he carried on with his day.

I looked up at the overcast sky. It looked like it was going to rain over the city at any moment now. It made me glad I was leaving. I saw it out of the corner of my eye as I studied the clouds above, my cab pulling up to the curb. The slightly chubby, definitely balding man got up and loaded the trunk with my suitcases as I climbed into the back seat with my purse. I watched him through the windows, saw him close the trunk and then move back to the open driver's side. He climbed in and shut the door.

"Where to darlin'?" He said as he put on his seatbelt. His accent wasn't place-able.

"The bus station please." I replied with a smile as we started to pull away from the past.

"Heading out of town?"

"Moving," I replied as I leaned back, watching the familiar buildings and streets whiz by us, studying the ones I that came into view as we yielded to the lights.

"Where to? Or do you know yet?" He asked as if he knew my plan.

"The Tourist Trap." Why not be honest, people were going to judge my choice anyway.

"Great place to start fresh." He replied with heart, he meant it. "It's small, the locals are friendly, come and go as the years pass. Lots of new people. It's a place that allows you to think about you, ya know. It let's ya clear your head and figure you out."

"That's what I'm hoping for." I mumbled from the back seat. It felt like the twenty minutes in traffic flew by, and the next thing I knew we had arrived. The driver got out and moved to the trunk. I peeked at the cab fare before I got out and took thirty out of my wallet, more than enough. I was giving him the equivalent of the fare in tip.

We exchanged suitcases for money, and I took off before he had the chance to hunt me down, though I could hear him saying I gave him far too much. I went straight to the ticket booth.

"Hi there, how can I help you?" The perky brunette behind the plastic window asked.

"A one way ticket please," I asked, offering the proper name of my destination afterwards. She looked at me funny, one eye brow raised.

"Is your husband coming too?" She asked speculatively. I could have smacked her.

"No, one ticket, please." I was colder than I should have been. She rolled her eyes and did the work, ringing me through for the forty dollars and sixty-eight cents, and handing it to me with a pleasant but judging look in her eyes. I did not thank her.

I looked at the ticket, making sure that everything on it was correct, and looked at the bus number to make sure that it was correct. I then looked up and down the concrete platform until I found my bus. I moved swiftly, though I still had about twenty minutes before it was scheduled to leave.

The driver took my ticket, ripped off the stub, and then tagged all three of my cases. He handed back my ticket. When I reached for it, I did so with my left hand, a strange move for a right handed person. Maybe I did it because my subconscious noticed there was one final thing I needed to discard: My wedding band.

Simply tossing it on the ground seemed wrong, but I didn't know what else to do with it. I looked around for a garbage can, a homeless person, anything that would feel better than the ground. I saw the lost-and-found box; I went for it. Dropping the ring into a cardboard box with a teddy bear, an address book, and a couple of wallets, made me feel better somehow. I took one long last look at the dark yellow gold band and diamonds before I turned around and headed for the bus.

I climbed aboard, picking a seat somewhere in the middle where I felt that no one would bother me. There were a lot of couples, a few loners like myself, and a family. I didn't pay attention to them after taking stock. I grabbed my MP3 player out my purse and turned it on.

The driver came on, and I knew that we would be leaving the city soon. I took a deep, nervous breath. Too late to turn around now, no looking back.

As we pulled away from the station, the most appropriate song filled my ears, and sent my heart racing with anticipation for my new life.

Four hours, three pit stops, two cups of tea, and one very loud snoring man later, I was in my new home.

The bus stop was conveniently located at the motel, so at least I didn't have to walk with three suitcases.

I actually watched the bus pull away, as if it would have helped the anxiety I was feeling. I took a deep breath, and then turned around, entering the motel's main office. There was no guy behind the counter as I was hoping, but a girl whose looks reminded me a little too much of a cross between Ann and the bitch from the bus station.

"May I help you?" She was pleasant enough.

"Yeah, I have a reservation." I said as I began to dig for my credit card.

"Name?"

"Andraia Mathews," I handed her my credit card. Why couldn't my parents just agree on a normal spelling for my name?

She started typing my name into the registry, then stopped, staring really hard at the card in her hand. I was sure I grabbed the right one, unless Eddie read the expiry wrong. It wouldn't be the first time. "Umm, it says in our registry that it we're expecting a Miss Mathews, and your cards says Mrs." She cocked an eyebrow.

"I'm recently divorced," I felt the blush move to my face. "I never corrected the man on the phone yesterday when he said 'miss.'"

"Oh!" Her eyebrows shot up, her mouth twisting into a grin. "I'm sorry, I didn't know." She looked back behind her shoulder quickly before looking back to me. "So how much do you want me to put on this bad boy?"

I can make it out, make the jerk suffer." She twitched her eyebrows.

I couldn't help but laugh, "It's ok. Part of our agreement was that he had to cover my rent for six months. I have eight hundred dollars a month." Too much information, but I didn't care.

"Oh," she smiled again. "Well, do you need to use, say, the printers? Maybe watch a movie or two on the pay-per-view? I can always add on the extra ten dollars." She grinned wide, reminding me of a begging child. She had a point though; I would need some things like printer use and such. I needed to re-vamp my resume and print copies. I would need a job, soon.

"Sure." I replied with a shrug, "Why not?"

The girl clapped for joy and did a small dance as she typed in my credit card number. "My husband left me four years ago," she said. This girl looked no older than me. "Wanted to make the guy suffer as much as possible. So when he called me to say he and his little hussy were strapped for cash and needed car repairs, and he wanted me to sell his fifty-two inch flat screen, I did. I sold it for five dollars and twenty cents." She laughed, and it was then I noticed the laugh lines and crow's feet. She looked good for her age. "Never gets old. I still laugh every time I think about it." She hit a key hard. "And that's that." She handed me a key that was resting somewhere just out of sight beneath the ledge. "Here's the key to your room. There is a food court of sorts down the hall here and to the right. Your room is just across the way. It'll make it easy to come

and go in the morning.” She smiled, “Let me know if you need anything.”

I thanked her and followed her directions, entering the food court (a coffee shop of sorts and a deli) and made my way out the glass doors, following the path to the row of doors on the other side. I glanced at my key, recalling the room number, and searched it out. She was right, it literally was right across the way.

I set down my cases and unlocked my door. I opened it up, grabbed my cases, and stepped in.

It wasn't that bad, really nice and open for a cheap room. There was a television on the dresser, a table and two chairs in the far left corner, a desk and chair immediately to my right, and of course the bed. It didn't look any bigger than a double, but what else would I need? I set down the cases and walked over to the desk. There was a printer there with a laminated sticker: prints will be charged to your room. Seemed smart.

I sat down on the edge of my bed and looked around. This was home, for a while anyway. I felt good, even though a tear slipped by. I felt a little empty, maybe because I was officially alone. No cell phone, yet, so no Ann, no Mom, and no chance of Eddie. I knew no one and no one knew me. I laid back, kicking my shoes off awkwardly, then flopped my arms out. The tears kept coming, but I started to smile.

After an hour of crying in silence, I decided that the good mood that washed over me with my tears would be a good way to start setting my roots. My first stop: a

new cell phone. I needed to be contactable before I worked on my resume. Something told me that just an e-mail would not leave a good impression, so I grabbed my purse, my keys, my MP3 player, and headed out the door. The clouds had grown thicker, but I hoped I would be able to get there before the rain fell. I wasn't even sure if there were cabs around, but everything was in walking distance from everything. At least, the mall was only a forty-five or fifty minute walk away. That was nothing, really, as long as Mother Nature would give me some sympathy.

I was lucky it didn't start to rain on my walk to the mall; I would have to pick up an umbrella while I was there. After stepping through the door, I looked around: a coffee shop to my right, a jewellery store on my left, and ahead of me a mall map. I could see at a glance that the drug store, a place I would need, was right across from the cell phone company. Scanning the map, I could see that there were a few clothing stores, an art supplies store, a music shop, a food court in the middle of the mall, a book store, gift shop—the basic mall merchants.

I looked up, for some unexplained reason I looked around, and then I stepped around the map and made my way to the cell phone company. I think I thought if I stood around and looked at the map, my presence would be given away. It would be like wearing a t-shirt that says 'I'm new in town, can you tell I'm a loser.' I hated feeling self-conscious, I had no reason to.

I didn't look at the shops while I walked, after my intense map studying, I felt I could redeem myself by not looking around, by making it seem like I knew exactly where I was going.

I should have known better.

I was concentrating so hard on not watching where I was going scenery wise, I forgot to actually pay attention to the people around me. The guy was tall, at least six inches taller than me, and although he wasn't outright massive, his body was hard, toned, lithe. Catching a glimpse of highlighted chest and bicep through his snug sweater, I could tell he had a great body. I flushed a little, especially when I looked up and his crooked smirk apologized while his hazel eyes assessed me. More than likely it was just for damage, but a girl could wish. "Sorry," he said. He had a great voice. He didn't continue to gaze, he turned away before my own apology escaped my lips and was far enough out of ear shot when my voice sounded that I flushed more. Great, I looked like a complete and total doofus.

I brushed at my hair as I kept walking forward, this time avoiding people, and looking above for the signs of the cell phone shop. I was extremely happy when I finally arrived at my destination. I made myself feel like an idiot enough times between the front door and this location, maybe passing over the threshold would cure my ailments.

"Hi," An overly bubbly red-haired woman with scraggly hair and freckles asked in a voice that made my

eyes shoot open. I remember many mornings wishing for a caffeine drip inserted into my veins. I took it all back, because one look at this girl said it wasn't such a good idea. "How can I help you today?"

"I'm looking for a phone." I replied, trying to keep a straight face.

"What kind of phone? Are you big on text messaging? What about browsing the Internet, do you think a Blackberry would suit you? You look like someone who would use a blackberry, would you like me to show them to you? We offer one model in four colors." She didn't know when to stop as she actually started to walk towards them before I had a chance to answer. I was definitely not thinking "big beautiful phone" that does as much as my laptop (and more, seeing as how my laptop can't call people).

"I just need a basic phone, one that flips open and closed. Preferably pre-paid, as I don't know for sure I will be staying in town, and don't need a contract. Definitely under a hundred dollars."

"Great!" This girl didn't give a moment a break, I wasn't even sure I was finished my sentence when she started leading me to the back of the store, past the clear cases displaying all the cell phones that married rich people could afford. "We have..." she spoke a mile a minute, rambling off every phone in the case beneath the header that said 'pre-paid,' whether she was only naming the phones in my price range or not, I'm not sure. I don't even think she was looking at me as she recited her lines. I spied one for eighty dollars. Black,

slender, flip open and close. I didn't need anything else. "Well?" She suddenly broke my thoughts with a question.

"Sorry?" I couldn't believe I actually tuned her out.

"What do you want your phone to do?" She asked as she smiled, holding her hands in front of her.

"I want it to call people." I replied, feeling rude. "I like that one there," I pointed to my eighty-dollar treasure.

"That's a great choice! It comes in..."

"Just black, please." I replied quickly. God knows how she would attempt to drag out the color options into a five minute speech, but I'm sure she could have.

"Ok, I will grab the phone and get it started. All I need is a driver's license." She should be slapped for being so perky.

"Oh," I started to get out my wallet. "My current address isn't there. I'm currently staying at the Harbour View inn until I can get an apartment." I admitted as I handed her the plastic Identification card with a horrible photo of myself.

"No problem, I just need it for the name, and for proof that you are who you say you are. I know the address for the motel, so I can put that in. But you should..." she kept talking as she walked away, and I wouldn't have been surprised if she continued to talk while she was in the back room getting the phone. I looked back again and she had the box in her hand was on the phone, presumably setting up my account.

I turned and gazed out the open doors into the drug store across the way, I still needed that umbrella.

"Here you go, Miss Mathews, all set up and ready to go. It comes with minutes on there, a month free from the company." She actually giggled. "I'll get you rung through and then you're free to shop." I followed her to the cash register, paid for the phone and fees, and left the store as quickly as I could.

I ducked into the drugstore quickly, bought the umbrella, and left, going the way I came into the mall. As I passed the stores, a sign in the music shop caught my eye: full-time help wanted. E-mail resume.

I flipped open my new phone and quickly texted my e-mail the address listed on the ad. It was retail, but I didn't care. I knew it would be, but a job was a job, and my luck didn't deliver me full time job possibilities this easily.

I walked briskly the rest of the way through the mall, very careful not to hit anyone, and then ducked outside; the umbrella was smart, it was down-pouring.

I found it hard to calm my nerves when there was no grease to be found in the motel other than the donuts from the coffee shop. The worst was that I hated donuts, so I had to suffer through my shaking hands as I tried to edit my resume. Coffee, at least, was a friend at my disposal, and I certainly had a large enough cup beside me. It never left my left hand as my right typed and scrolled on my laptop.

When I made it back to the motel, I realized I was about to actually apply for a job in this town. Something that shouldn't have been a shock to my system, but the enormity of it all hit me as I went by the food court. A look over the deli menu quickly informed me that this was not a place for a junk food addict like myself, yet not being able to afford another place to stay, I would again just have to suffer. The coffee shop at least offered lattes and ordering the largest size I could, I took it back to my room, changed out of my wet clothes, and started to work on my resume.

I felt nerves as I added and deleted. Did I add the wrong things? Would my short lived career as a newspaper writer give me any more credit than the two year stint I did in the University copy shop? What if I looked over qualified, or had been out of the retail market for too long? I wouldn't allow myself to think too much, just made the changes necessary, including changing my last name and my phone number, and opting out of putting an address. I also revamped my references, taking Ann off the list. I had no one to replace her with, so hopefully two would be enough.

I saved the files, attached them into a new e-mail, typed in the address and a quick cover letter in the body of the e-mail, and clicked send. I stared at the screen even after the little digital envelope left my screen, and the pop-up that the message was successfully sent had popped up. In a nervous reaction, I took a large, long slurp on my cooled latte. I couldn't

peel my eyes away from the screen. I didn't understand why, but I just couldn't.

Carefully, I stood from the desk, backing far enough away from it that I bumped the bed with the back of my legs. My sense came back to me, and I sat down on the bed. I turned on the television, started to flip through channels, and then landed on some movie, with no idea what it was. I waited until the movie was over before I moved again.

I checked my e-mail, there was a letter from my mother. She was hoping I was doing ok, that I should call her if I needed someone to talk to. A gentle reminder that she was in my shoes once, only she was there with three daughters. She also put that if nothing else, I should at least reply to the e-mail. She also wanted to let me know that Danni (Danielle) & Jo (Joelle) were also asking and worrying about me. My younger sisters wouldn't worry as much as Mom would like me to believe.

I wondered if either had talked to Dad since the news had been announced. We weren't all that close to our father, and only a tad bit more to our baby half-brother AJ (Andrew Junior). We didn't care for the father who insisted all of us have names that could be easily turned into boyish nicknames. My name itself was meant to be a bit of a female Andrew Junior itself. My father left my mother for the mistress who was pregnant. She found out in an ultrasound that they were blessed with a boy. Mom probably thought that Eddie left me for another woman.

I wrote back, letting her know I was ok. I had moved, and I would give her my address when things were more settled. I wasn't in the city any longer, and if either Ann or Eddie contacted her for any reason, not to let them know this. I wanted a clean break from both of them. I sent her, Danni, and Jo all my love, and wished them well.

I clicked send, and the message on my e-mail came up. I was both sending and receiving. My heart skipped a beat as I saw the new e-mail from Music Stop, Bayside mall.

Andraia Mathews, I was happy to receive your resume and would like to schedule an interview with you tomorrow around 2pm. Please let me know if this acceptable. I look forward to meeting you. Frank Speel.

I furiously wrote back to Frank, letting him know I would be there. As soon as I hit the send button, I jumped up excited, waving my arms in the air. This place was doing great things for my mojo, I was getting it back. Screw Eddie; Five years with him and I had never felt this good, never had this kind of luck. I looked outside at the rain, and smiled. I wouldn't cry tonight.

Chapter 4

The day before the interview wouldn't go slow. After I got my e-mail from Frank, time sped up. I had to lay out clothes that would be interview appropriate, opting for a pair of deep gray pants and a green blouse. Without realizing it, between planning, e-mailing my mother and sisters, and getting distracted by the TV, time had launched forward. Before I even realized it, it was already eight at night. I ate a light, but far too late dinner of salad from the deli, and sat in bed simply watching TV until eleven. I didn't sleep right away; instead my anxiety kicked me around like a soccer ball for a couple hours.

I woke up a little later than I would have liked, and although my interview wasn't until two, sleeping in until ten made me feel wracked with nerves. I didn't want to fuel the jitters by drinking coffee, and I didn't want to dress and head to the mall so early. I opted to do something I never do—I grabbed my MP3 player, put on my sweats, and went for a run.

The Tourist Trap was *really* small. From my motel, you could drive to the other side of the town in thirty minutes and the mall wasn't that far away, not a coincidence, I'm sure. Neither the mall nor the motel were far away from the beautiful water front, so that's where I ran, with the sun high and bright but not hot, and the breeze kept me from working up a significant sweat. I looked at the houses and small apartment complexes as I ran, hoping I would own one on my

own one day. That was supposed to be the next step with Eddie, but I pushed him back, I didn't want to think about him.

Yet he wouldn't go away. I did double takes on about three or four guys with dark hair and a similar body type. I was beginning to feel the resentment build, the tears start to well. I was doing so well before. I had done everything, tore the band-aid off so fast, and I was surviving. I felt the tears flow from my eyes—I was done crying, I *had* to be done crying, I *had* to be over him, over this. Our marriage was obviously over long before my name was signed on a piece of paper, I just had to remember that. I couldn't though, I just couldn't grasp the fact that it all happened so fast, that Eddie threw half of my life away, and I went ahead to throw out the rest.

I had no job, no friends, and no place to call home. Because Edmund made a decision; Edmund decided he didn't love me anymore and did not want to make our marriage work. Because Edmund was a jackass.

I have never hated a human being so much than I did at this moment. I hated him for making me cry in public, I hated him for making me feel like I had to change everything, and I hated him for just being him. I pulled myself together and ran back to the motel. My emotional house of cards just got knocked over again, and I had to start piling it back together.

I stood outside the Music Stop, the bright neon sign in the shape of a disc and a music note hung as the only clear sign as to what lie within. I inhaled, my

nerves going crazy and causing my stomach to flop a little bit. I hadn't been on a job interview for about three years, and I hadn't worked retail in about five or more.

I remembered this detail as I was showering at the motel, contemplating if I had a shot while I dressed and put on my make-up. Toying with the idea that I was making a mistake again as I walked very slowly to the mall for my interview. Now standing outside the store, feeling my palms get sweaty, I knew I could do nothing but go for it. I was feeling cynical, bitter, but surprisingly optimistic.

I stepped inside. The music wasn't loud or blaring, but the heavy guitars and over powering screams of the supposed vocalist didn't make it a tolerable place to be in. The girl or at least I presumed it was a girl, behind the counter looked bored and angry. She seemed to be a few years older than me, but it would have been hard to tell from all the black and white make up she wore on her face. Not to mention she had enough posts in her head she could have been a human body jewelery rack.

"Excuse me, I was asked to see Frank for an interview." I said, but stopped before saying anything else. The way she looked me up and down, the expression on her face, made me think that Frank would take one look at me and tell me to walk out. I almost did, until a chubby man with a head of dark auburn curly hair and deep brown eyes came out the back room, cursing about the music playing in the

store. He wore a Beatles t-shirt, and a pair of well worn jeans. A blue lanyard around his neck that contained a plastic name badge that said FRANKO in capital letters indicated that he could be the guy I was looking for.

He stopped at the counter, reaching behind it and feeling around for something. The music stopped, and the girl groaned audibly.

"You must be Andraia." He said with a smile, meeting my eyes. "I actually just tried to call you, but if you were in here when I did, you probably could have mistaken your cell vibration as a general disturbance." He gave a sideways glare to the clerk. "I was going to offer to meet you somewhere else for your interview, but since you're already here I may as well bring ya to the back." He nodded behind him before turning around. I followed, clutching my purse handle with a white knuckled fist.

He opened the door and stepped aside, waving me in. I walked past him with a shy nod, and waited for him to come inside. The room was furnished with a desk with two chairs, a small safe, and walls lined with shelves of CD's. The overstock, I could only assume. He gestured for me to have a seat in the chair at the front of the desk, and he sat down on the other side. He opened a drawer, grabbing a pen and closing it. He picked up a small stack of papers in front of him, most likely my resume.

"So, tell me about yourself." He said simply, leaning forward instead of back. He wasn't going to be casual about this.

“What do you want to know?” I asked, trying not to let my voice shake.

“Well, first off, why are you here in Bayside? People around our age generally don’t come here unless they’re broke or hiding.”

“A little of both I guess. My divorce isn’t quite finalized, and I wanted to get away from it all.” I felt the blood rush to my face. He didn’t need to know that, but I couldn’t just lie in an interview, even if the question was more on a personal level.

“Oh, sorry. But I guess that’s why a girl like you is applying for work in the Tourist Trap. Your resume, I must say, was a bit too impressive for the type we usually hire here at Bay Side mall. But then again,” He said as he gestured his head to the left, as if someone was behind him. “Lily out there isn’t exactly the most customer service oriented person in the entire world.” At least I knew for certain it was a girl. “She’s going where you’re coming from, and I need another full timer here to run the shop so my girl doesn’t kick me out for working day and night.” I just nodded and gave a small laugh. “So, what kind of music do you like, Andraia?”

“Umm,” I shouldn’t have made it sound like I had to think about it, “I’m a big fan of Maroon 5, The Fray,” I wanted so bad to say the Beatles, but I couldn’t do it. Not only was my ‘tell only the truth’ impulse still there, but I dreaded saying it and having to pretend to find joy in continuous *Hey Jude* sing-a-longs on the slow

days. "Stuff like that." I added at the end, "I'm a music buff in general though."

"Oh yeah? Do you play?" Frank asked sincerely.

"No," I quickly answered. "I can't sing either, so I don't." I raised my hand, "I won't drive away customers with this awful voice." I mustered an embarrassed laugh. Why did I say that? Frank chuckled.

"Yeah I know all about that." He looked over the resume again, as if there was some hidden information on it that my presence had unlocked. "So I see you've worked retail before, which is good. Would you have any trouble closing down by yourself? Would you be comfortable?"

"I worked at the Drug Store in the city," I replied, gesturing to the resume in his hands. "We didn't close until about midnight, and the buses only ran every hour, so a lot of the time I would walk home. I would be perfectly comfortable closing down here." I didn't mean it as a jab at the town's size, but I was terrified that it came across that way. Frank simply nodded to my response, staring at my resume.

"Well Andraia, I think I have learned all I need to know from our interview." That was quick. It couldn't be good, but I put on a smile anyway. "You'll be hearing from me very soon." He added with what appeared to be a fake smile. He stuck out his hand and I accepted it, shaking his hand.

"Thank You, Frank." I said with a continuous smile. He walked around the desk and opened the door again, gesturing for me to go first. His smile faded fast though

as the heavy metal music hit us both. He began to curse under his breath again as I stepped past him.

Passing the rows of CDs, I left in a hurry, just barely catching the annoyed lecture that Frank was about to give Lily as I stepped outside and back into the mall. I looked up and down the halls, trying to remember which way I came in. I remembered the cafe I passed as I entered, and now I needed a shot of caffeine in the worst way.

Once my mind clicked that I had come from the left, I moved swiftly in that direction. I suddenly felt like I counted my stars too early, because I certainly didn't feel like I got that job. Was it because I thought of Eddie? Could I blame him on this? I felt cynical, bitter, delayed emotions I should have felt before I left the city. I groaned aloud, trying to push some of the negative energy out of my body.

The cafe seemed dark compared to the bright mall, with the dark brown and black counters, tables, chairs, walls, just about everything. The stainless steel coffee machines and the bottles of flavouring behind the counters were probably the most prominent things in the store because of it. That, and the people behind the counter.

Her nametag said Bethari. She stood behind the counter in her little brown visor, and little brown apron, covering up the white blouse and black pants that struck me as an odd combination of colors for a coffee shop. Her vibrant red hair was pulled back and tied in a bun behind her head. Her eyes reminded me a

bit of Eddie, they were so pale and blue. But unlike his, hers were happy and full of light. Maybe Eddie's were too at some point, though I'm not sure.

She smiled her friendly, customer service smile. It was a quiet time of the day for them apparently, and she didn't have to speak very loud for me to hear her despite the music in the seating area behind me. At least it wasn't loud heavy metal. That would have been too much.

"Can I help you?" She asked very pleasantly. It made me chuckle a bit. I supposed I was going to have to relearn my chipper customer service voice, and somehow push it through my new-found cynicism. That may make interviews go far smoother than the one I had just had with Frank.

"Yeah, can I have a double shot latte, no foam, please." I asked as I opened my purse and dug out my wallet. "I really need caffeine to calm my nerves after my interview."

"A job interview?" Bethari asked me, her voice went a little louder for a moment. She glanced around, checking to see if there was anyone behind me in line, or within ear shot. "Dear, why the hell would you want to find a job in the Tourist Trap?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Everyone has to restart life somewhere. I could afford to live in a motel here." I handed her a five, and she took it. While she finished ringing through my order, she studied me carefully. I was really hoping the stamp of young-pathetic-divorcee didn't show too much on my face. As I held her eye, I

heard the bell of the register, and she handed me back fifteen cents change.

"You must have gone to hell and back to want to settle here." She then closed the drawer, I could hear it shut, the metal mechanism locking as she continued to hold my eye, her face softening a bit. "Where are ya working?" She asked, glancing around behind me to make sure there was no one waiting. The fact that she returned to meet my gaze let me know that there was still no one behind me.

"The CD store, if I get the job." I replied with a shrug. She wrinkled her brow, making a puckered face.

"Rob isn't gonna be happy about that." She said with a smirk. "But then again karma is a bit of bitch."

"Rob? Karma? Huh?" I stammered, shaking my head, feeling like she was speaking a foreign language, although her English was clear.

"Trust me, you'll know soon enough." Bethari smiled. A tall skinny guy with less than perfect skin called my drink out on the other end of the counter, looking down at me with an eager smile. I walked away from Bethari and grabbed my drink. "Listen," she called down the counter, "since you're obviously staying in the area, maybe you want to get a drink. Around seven? You know, so you can get to know me and some of the other people in the area." She leaned over, the counter so far that I thought she could have been laying on it. We were eye level at the counter, and I was a fairly short person.

“Wouldn’t that just make it harder if I don’t get the job?” I laughed a little, knowing that if I wasn’t able to settle here, I didn’t want to make emotional attachments. I vowed I wouldn’t make emotional attachments, they would just end badly.

“Trust me,” she laughed. She had a beautiful smile. “You’ll get the job.”

I grunted and smiled. “Ok, would you like me to meet you at the bar? Here?” I asked.

“At the bar.” She replied as people began to enter the cafe. “It’s called Draught Stop.” She practically sang the name, maybe from the rhyme. “By the way, what’s your name?” She asked with a smile.

It was until then that I had forgotten that she had no clue who I was. I knew her; her name tag told me. But it wasn’t like I had paid with a plastic card the stated my name. “Andi,” I called back, walking away after she gave an acknowledging nod and waited on the people who gathered in a huddle and stared intently at the menu.

Walking down the brightly lit corridor of the tiny mall, looking around at the shops surrounding me, I felt strangely satisfied with my brief interaction with Bethari, and my willingness to socialize. Then a feeling of dread washed over me. What if I didn’t or couldn’t get settled here? Had I just started down another path of misery? Will I suffer if I have to pack up my things and change towns?

My emotions were quickly wrangled and tamed. My cell phone began to vibrate, and although I couldn’t

hear it, I knew from the vibration patterns that it was ringing. I opened my purse one handed and awkwardly searched through it blindly until my hand wrapped around the pulsing phone. I flipped it open with my thumb. "Hello?"

"Andraia, this is Frank. I want to start off by saying, welcome to Bay Side Mall."

I was elated when I returned to the motel as I started my new job on Monday, as it wasn't customary to start during the weekend. I was also going out with some of the locals, and though I knew I could be setting myself up for disaster, I was still proud of myself for going for it.

This required me to unpack more clothes, something I was surprised I hadn't done already. I found a pair of comfy jeans and a half dress black long sleeved t-shirt. From the name of the bar, I was sure that it wasn't a place where people got all dressed up.

Too excited to sit still, I decided I would write my mother and sisters to tell them the good news. After all, with all the bad happening in sudden force, I would love to tell them that the good was coming in just as quickly.

I flipped open my laptop, scanned in my thumb print, and opened my e-mail. My mother had already beaten me to writing a letter, and from my side, it wasn't good.

Andi, Eddie called. Please call me when you get the chance. Love mom.

Just when things were going good. I looked at the motel phone, and my cell phone sitting next to it. This call was going to cost in many different ways. I took a breath. Eddie was paying for the room right? Six months worth? If I moved out early...

I walked over to the bed, climbed and leaned across it to reach the motel phone. I dialed my mother's number, hearing the traditional pause before a long distance call connects. It rang once, twice. Come on, mom, you're a retired school teacher, where the hell could you...

"Hello?" I loved how she sang the word. It made me smile, and made me realize how much I missed her.

"Hey mom." I sounded more jovial than I felt. There was a lump in my throat, and a hole in my gut.

"Andi!" She was far too excited. "I'm so glad you called. You sound like you're doing well, are you?"

"I'm fine mom, better than fine." I replied, I wasn't going to get into the details.

"Are you eating enough? I know the situations been less than stellar, but."

"Mom, I'm the child that eats through her problems, Jo's the one who starves herself." I reminded my mother.

"Oh, yes, right. You aren't eating too much are you?" She chuckled. My mother was never big, but never small. She always taught me that as long as you took care of yourself, the rest would fall into place. She was the kind of woman who could pull off just about

anything because she believed she could, and was never flashy about it.

"No Mom. Hey, guess what? I got a job!" I felt my mouth stretch into an enormous smile.

"That's great honey." She replied. "Where?" I knew it meant more than just where is my job. The in between the lines question was more 'Where the hell are you?'

"Music Stop," I paused, "In Bayside Mall." My mother knew where that was. Not only had Eddie and I come here once, Mom once took me and my sisters here on an escape. Danni hated it.

"Really?" I could hear the curiosity in her voice. "That's wonderful." But she didn't press; she had more important business to discuss with me. "Eddie called." She said it bluntly.

"Oh," I made myself sound as nonchalant as I could.

"He wanted to know if I heard from you, where you were." My mom was definitely holding out.

"Why?"

"He," She paused, her voice sounding confused. "He said he went to the apartment to talk to you, but all your stuff was gone. He sounded panicked, almost desperate, to know where you were. I just told him that you moved, and I had no way to know where you were." She paused, and I could hear her grunt a laugh. I could picture her in my head smirking on the other end. "He also wanted me to press the issue that it had nothing to do with you throwing out his sheets." She let the chuckle slide. My mom did worse to my Dad.

His brand new truck? Keyed inside and out. Leather torn, paint scratched so bad it had to be entirely recoated. Throwing out Eddie's sheets would be child's play.

"You didn't tell him anything else?"

"What else was there to tell? Up until a minute ago, *I* didn't even know where you were. I won't tell him, though. As much as I loved Eddie, if he wants you, he needs to find you all on his own." My mother sounded like this was a probability. I laughed. "So what else are you up to, Andi? A job is great. Have you made any friends?" She was such a mom.

"I'm going out tonight with some people from the mall." I offered up.

"I hope you go. I remember when you had to change schools from the divorce. You wouldn't make any new friends, wouldn't go to the school functions unless you could bring Eddie or Ann."

"Mom, I was twelve."

"Still you haven't really been out there trying to make new friends in a long time. And even still you had Eddie and Ann in your life for as long as I can remember. Now you're cutting them both loose and changing your whole life around, and Andi I must say I'm worried about you. I'm worried that you will regret all this, or that you're going to be disappointed, or worst of all, I'm scared you'll chicken out."

"Chicken out?" What was my mother going on about?

“Andi. This is big, this is great. This is something you should have done in college. You stuck to what you knew your whole life, and it took a major personal catastrophe to break free. You have to see why I’m worried you’ll try to go back.”

I could see where she was coming from. I had been safe, secure, with the same friends, and the same surroundings, and the same path my entire life. This was a big change, one I was going through alone. I knew my mother was worried, and I knew why. “Mom, this is going to be good, I know.” I said it like I meant it, and I did. I didn’t need to know my mom was reassured, because I could sense it. “Now,” I was eager to change the subject before I found out if Eddie said anything else. “How’s Jo doing in school?”

I relaxed the rest of the afternoon, even taking a nap. I dreamed of Eddie, though I didn’t remember what the dream consisted of when I woke up. I just knew he was in it.

I dressed, pushing him to the back of my mind. I popped over to the deli and grabbed a sandwich, eating it as I walked out to the front of the motel and called a cab. It was about six-thirty, and I didn’t know where the bar was, or even how long it took to get there. But I called anyway, hoping I wouldn’t be a loser and arrive too early.

Lucky for me, the cab took about fifteen minutes to arrive at the motel, my cab anyway. I climbed in. “To the bar please.” I said with a smile.

“Which one?” The cab driver asked.

I blinked, "there's more than one bar around here?"

He laughed. "Yeah, I get that a lot. There's Bombay by the Bay, and the Draught Stop." He replied, lifting a finger for each of the two bars.

"That's the one, the Draught Stop." He laughed at my excitement.

"You must be meeting someone." He said as he started the meter.

"Locals, yeah." I replied without thinking. I caught his wrinkled forehead in the mirror.

"I didn't think you looked familiar." He said matter-of-factly as he slowed to a stop for a light. "I've seen just about everyone in town, and no tourists go to the Draught Stop. They prefer Bombay because it's 'loungy.' So what brings you to the Trap?" He had a bit of an accent, though I wasn't sure if it was local, or something that came from another region.

I shrugged my shoulders as the Bay to my left started to whiz by. "I had to move, and this was where I picked. Seems like a great place to start fresh."

"That it is," he said with a nod. "When my wife died five years ago my sister told me I should move here. Something about the atmosphere and such. Not a lot of people settle and stay though. Average for someone your age is around five or six years, average, though I've been proven wrong on many occasions. Either way, you aren't alone here, even if you want to be."

He stopped the car, and told me the fare. As I handed him the bill, I caught a glance at the time in on the dash. Five after seven. At least I wasn't late.

The bar wasn't packed but it wasn't empty. I could see that this was definitely a local's bar. I didn't have to search long before I caught a glimpse of Bethari's bright red hair.

I didn't have to look hard. As I looked around, I heard the sound of a cry, a mixture of Andi and Andraia. This would be my crowd, and I spotted them, easily in the middle of the room with hands and mugs raised in the air. I recognized Frank and Bethari right away, the two most familiar faces to me in the entire town. The others seemed to be a mish-mash of people that, in the city, wouldn't necessarily be seen together. They flagged the round table, each sitting next to an empty stool, presumably left vacant for me.

Frank hadn't changed from work with the exception of the lanyard that was around his neck was now gone. Bethari had her hair down, and it hung, slightly puffy just past her shoulders. She was still wearing the black dress pants but had changed into an emerald green t-shirt. I couldn't see what was on her feet before, but she was wearing sneakers now, completely casual.

Next to Bethari, a very lean, very pretty platinum blonde sat with a measuring smile. The long pixie cut she wore allowed her bangs to brush her deeper blonde eyebrows. Her eyes were a deep brown; I could tell that even from a distance. She had a long, thin mouth, a tiny diamond stud resting just above the right side of her mouth. Those piercings had always fascinated me. Her outfit was a little more high-end than Bethari's: A dressy pink t-shirt beneath a short brown jacket, dark

wash jeans, presumably skinny jeans, and ballet flats. As I got closer, I could see she had a perfect French manicure.

Next to her was a guy, very lean, very tall. His printed t-shirt sat very snug on his body, and his jeans were only slightly looser. He had no facial hair, and his black hair was a little long, swept around his head in messy spikes. I think he may have been wearing mascara around his dark blue eyes, but it could have also been thick eyelashes. Either way I was a little jealous of him. How dare he have better eyes than any woman in the room, even the heavily made up blonde on his right.

Next to him, with a face that appeared almost cautious, was another guy. He seemed a little toned, reminding me slightly of the guy from the mall a couple days ago. It wasn't him though. This guy had caramel hair with the occasional frosted blonde tip. His hair was shorter, and more neatly styled than the guy sitting next to him. He had a soul patch, and no other facial hair. His eyes were a greenish blue. He almost seemed boyish in the face. His t-shirt was also a little too tight, but it probably wasn't intentional. It matched Bethari's eyes, also probably not intentional. I couldn't see how his jeans fit; his legs were better hidden than the rest of them. But his posture said he was somewhere along the line of metro sexual, and fluke fashion sense.

Next to Frank, and the last of the unfamiliar faces, sat a plump, but still very pretty girl. She had long sandy hair in layers, almost like my own haircut. Yet

something about her heart-shaped face allowed her to pull it off. She wore glasses; the kind without frames around the lenses, and they complimented her pretty brown eyes. No word of a lie, this girl could have been a model. She wore head to toe black, but the shirt and skirt she had chosen were cut beautifully, and made her look dressy, yet she was so relaxed she had to be casual. She had her arm looped into Frank's.

"So what is it?" Frank asked as I moved to the stool and climbed up. It was really high, and I was conscious of my vertically challenged body as I fumbled to get up. "Is it Andraia or Andi?"

"Andi, usually." I replied as the blonde guy poured me a mug of beer and slid it towards me. "Andraia is rarely used in my world." That was dumb, I should have just left it at Andi—I was nervous.

"Andi," Bethari said with a smug smile in Frank's direction. "You can call me Beth." She then gestured to her left, "This is Nikki, Tony, Steve, and Sarah. You already know Franko."

"Nice to meet you all." I smiled shyly, taking a sip of my beer.

"Oh my god," I don't know why Tony's high pitched voice caught me off guard. He was very flamboyant. "I'm so freakin' excited little miss Lilith is gonna be gone!" He clapped his hands together. "Oh Andi, dear, please tell me you don't have a fetish for death metal."

"Not unless Adam Levine switched styles." Tony looked at me, straight face, serious. I was worried I had already offended someone somehow.

"I like her," he said flatly, turning to Nikki. "She's got taste." I chuckled.

"Music taste is now a mandatory question in my interview." Frank pointed to Tony as he spoke, and then turned to me. "You had the job before you even came in unless you answered that one wrong."

"What? How?" I asked a little surprised at his candidness.

"No one around here was really looking for full time work. Everyone who lives in this small town who needed a job, has one. Some commute to the city, but those who don't want to already have work. The only other applicant was Rob."

"Ugh," Nikki verbalized. Her voice instantly reminded me of Ann, though something about her seemed like was a little nicer. "He's going to be pleasant to deal with come Monday. Does he know yet?"

"Yeah, I told him after I called Andi. It's kinda hard to avoid the subject, especially when Lily told him she was in for an interview." Frank looked at the bottom of the cup. "He was clearly pissed, but he understood enough."

"Wait, who's this Rob." I looked at Beth. "You mentioned the same sort of thing this morning."

"Rob works in the Arts and Crafts store." Beth started to explain.

"And no, he's not the Robert of Robert's Arts and Crafts." Steve added.

"But he's been trying to move over to the Music Stop for awhile." Beth shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know. He's kinda anti-social."

"It's not that." Sarah defended the missing man. "He's just..."

"Intense." Tony practically swooned.

"A jackass." Nikki sneered.

"You're biased." Tony snapped back.

"You try sleeping with him, getting all involved and emotionally attached and then have him just not call you or hang out with you again, ever." Nikki took a big gulp. Obviously this was a sore spot. Coming out was a good idea; I didn't even need to get to know these people separately, they were airing all the dirty laundry out.

"I have tried sleeping with him." Tony said as he pointed to his head. "And here I've succeeded."

"Yeah, and how've you done in reality?" Steve snorted.

"Better than you." Tony looked Steve up and down.

"HA! Dude, one, for the hundredth time, I'm not gay. Two, Rob is straighter than the floor boards of this bar." I couldn't help looking down. The boards were straight, just for the record. "The only way you would ever get into Rob's pants was if you became his left foot, and even then you wouldn't stay in them long enough to enjoy yourself."

"Meow," Tony made cat claws towards Steve. "Someone's feisty tonight."

“Rob’s a nice guy.” Sarah defended him. “But he is a bit of a man whore.” She glanced at Nikki, but she wasn’t paying attention to Sarah’s gaze. “Girls around here know what will happen if they get involved with him. They’ve got no one to blame but themselves.”

“Ok, so, lesson one: stay out of Rob’s pants.” I smiled and looked around. I swore I heard Nikki mumble something under the laughter like ‘like you would have a shot,’ but I ignored it.

“Lesson two, the Bombay is a tourist attraction only. I wouldn’t go there unless I wanted to be totally alone.” Steve pointed and gesture to the table like it was a map of the town.

“I’ll remember that.” I smiled. “So, I assume we all work at the mall together, who works where?” The people who needed to answer would know who they were.

“I work with the absolutely fabulous Beth.” Tony said as he waved his hands in her direction. “Where I get to indulge in stories of her Greek god boyfriend Gaylen.” I looked at Beth who blushed, and played with a tiny diamond ring on her left hand.

“I run the spa.” Sarah sounded proud, Frank looked at her with love and admiration. That was without a doubt his woman. The look he gave her made me smile and my heart break all at once. “A Better You. It’s right between the electronics store and the home decor store. Steve is my master stylist.”

“Really?” I asked surprised. “Can you do my hair sometime?” I tugged on the ends. I really did need a

haircut, and maybe a new dye job. He just nodded bashfully.

"I'm the manager of New York Style." Nikki smiled, "In case you need a new outfit, too." Why was just about every blonde I had ever known a bitch? My clothes were fine, and I knew it. I caught a glimpse of a look between Sarah and Beth that let me know that this was typical Nikki behaviour, and I didn't take it to heart.

"So what is there to do around here?" I asked, leading the conversation away from me again.

"Nothing," Steve and Frank said in unison, laughing, "There's the theatre down the road a bit," Frank nodded towards the bar. "And the mall, of course, but mostly a whole lot of nothing."

"People don't usually stay in Bayside for long enough to notice that there is nothing to do." Steve added to Frank's comment. "Only locals notice that there's not much on the go."

"So what do you guys do for fun?" I felt a bit of fear and a tinge of regret start to form in my chest. I went from being able to do almost anything, to being able to do almost nothing.

"This," Beth said, lifting her mug a little, "We hang around, we chill. You'd be surprised how much fun you can have doing nothing." She smiled.

I took a drink of my beer, and let myself believe that she was right. Before I knew it, I was lost in conversation and laughter. I hadn't laughed so hard in such a long time. I loved the guys, the way they egged

each other on. I loved Beth and Sarah, they seemed like my kind of girls. I would get along with Nikki, most days, I think. Though at the end of the night, when the Bar keep, a guy named Charlie, kicked us out because it was closing, I was left feeling like there was a big piece of the puzzle I was still missing.

It didn't matter though. I was back on my fast track to recovery. I had made friends, and made me feel like Eddie could take his apartment, and the people back in the city, and he could shove it.

Chapter 5

Monday morning came a hell of a lot faster than I would have liked it to. Saturday and Sunday flew by in a flash, and I hadn't really done anything except sit around watching television. I contemplated going to the mall, but the rain was falling again, and I decided that the only times I wanted to leave the room was when I needed to feed myself.

I frantically rummaged through my suitcase, searching for stuff to wear. I remember that Frank told me before we all left Friday night that our dress code was extremely casual, as long as there was actual clothing involved. I found a pair of decent looking jeans, then rummaged through the rest of my suitcase until I found a nice, flowy dress t-shirt. I looked really nice and professional. I would probably freak the customers out, but I didn't care. My really casual clothes looked wrinkled.

I put on my shoes, slipped into my coat, and then grabbed my keys as I headed out the door. I locked the deadbolt on my door, and started my walk to the mall. I knew that I would get there too early, but that didn't bother me; my plan was to grab a coffee before I started work.

The air smelled so clean, so fresh; something about the air after a couple days of rain. The sun was peeking through the disappearing clouds, shining on the water. Everything was beautiful, and I felt at peace, even when bits and pieces of almost forgotten Eddie started to

creep in. I pushed my thoughts of him from my mind, and felt great.

The parking lot seemed so empty as I walked across it. It should though, seeing as it was about seven in the morning, so I would have been a surprised if it were full. There was a beat up old Jetta, an older Sonata, a brand new Fit, and then I saw something that stopped me dead—a motorcycle. A Honda VTX1800N; It was black, beautiful, and probably a couple of years old. The only thing that distracted me from its apparent perfection were the saddle bags, and that was probably a necessity to the driver. I drooled a little as I have a definite thing for bikes.

After staring at it, then realizing that if I kept doing so I would end up being late, I quickly turned away and ducked into the mall. I made a beeline first for the cafe. Beth and Frank were having a chat from either side of the counter when I came up to them.

“Morning, Andi.” Frank raised his paper cup to me. “And how are we? First day, eh?” He seemed excited, I’m not sure why.

“Yeah.” I made myself appear excited.

“Don’t strain yourself, dear.” Beth handed me a cup. I cautiously took it as I handed her the five in my hand. I sniffed the drink.

“How the?” I started to ask.

“It’s my job to know.” Beth smiled and winked. I smiled and laughed, hearing someone came up behind me. I stepped aside as I heard the “excuse me.”

The man was bald. His scalp was perfectly smooth, with the traces of dark hair follicles beneath his skin. On his chin and upper lip was thick, dark blonde facial hair forming into a circle beard. His eyes were light brown, almost eerie, but interesting. He was lithe, though I wouldn't have called him built in anyway. He was head to toe black with the exception of a red trimmed primary blue vest. He had a white patch on the left side with the name 'Rob' embroidered on it.

Rob. Ha! If this was the infamous Rob, then I would have absolutely no problem defending myself against his charms. I wasn't fond of a voluntarily bald man. I eyed him up.

"Hey Beth," he said quickly. "The usual." He took money from his pocket, "Two, actually," He handed Beth a couple of fives.

"Two Americanos," She called down to the bar. I glanced and saw Tony grab some lids. He handed the already made drinks to Beth.

"Thanks sweetheart," he said with a wink as he took the drinks from her.

"Ah..." She started to say but he was partially out the door. He did seem to hear her though, and looked over. Beth tapped her name tag pinned to the left side of her apron. He looked down and cursed.

"I effing did it again." He took off down the hall quickly, mumbling something incoherent.

Beth was laughing. "Freakin' idiot can't even read the vest." She shook her head.

“Why , what?” I looked around as Nikki came in and walked to the counter with a disgusted look on her face. She handed Beth a bill and Tony handed Nikki a drink.

“Ugh,” She sighed, “Doug just about ran into me, I swear he was going to get coffee all over my new dress. I can’t afford to replace it.” She took a sip of her drink and made a bit of face, but didn’t say anything about it.

“Doug?” I looked to Frank for answers as we left the Cafe. Beth called out “see ya later” to us, and we both turned to wave. I noticed Nikki roll her eyes before she leaned on the counter to talk to Beth.

“Yeah, Doug’s bad for grabbing the first vest he sees. Usually he’ll grab Rob’s, but every once in awhile he’ll grab a part-timers. He once he ran through the mall wearing Emma’s.” Frank smiled at his memory.

I was a little nervous now, but I wasn’t entirely sure why. I knew that the nerves were centred around the fact that I had yet to meet Rob, but I didn’t understand why the thought of not knowing him made me so anxious.

“So, he’s not Rob?” I said, as Frank stopped in front of the store to unlock the gate. I bit my lip in concentration.

“Hey Frank.” A familiar voice said behind us. Frank glanced over his shoulder.

“Oh, hey Rob.” Quipped Frank.

I wasn’t sure I would be so nonchalant with my tone. As I turned to look at this guy, the one coming from the art store, the one who would be out to get me for getting his job, I turned bright red. I did know him,

sort of. He was my rust-haired pretty boy that I ran into in the mall a couple days ago. I silently prayed that I wouldn't be memorable. I wouldn't be lucky, I didn't have luck. If I did, I wouldn't be here, because my husband wouldn't have left me. It wasn't all that surprising when he did a double take and held my gaze. His mouth was angry-straight. His eyes were darkly focused, with no hint of what he could be thinking.

"This is Andi, my new girl." Frank turned to face him, gesturing to me as he introduced us from across the hallway. Oh what I wouldn't have given to have that hallway widen a few more feet.

"Hey," he replied flatly as he turned away sharply. He didn't look at us again, he just went down the hall, towards where we had come.

My state of shock was so heavy that I was startled by Frank's sigh. He didn't seem to notice. "I was afraid he'd be like that." He turned and gave me a quick pat on the arm. "But no worries, he'll get over it. Come on, let's get you started."

I must say, I was a fast learner. By noon, I was done training. The register was easy enough: scan bar codes, hit total, take form of payment, hand back correct change as required, nothing too fancy. The inventory database was also easy, like looking up things on Google, just without the potential porn results, for the most part anyway. I was already stocking CDs, putting them in their proper section (When I didn't know, I would type them in the database, as I like cheating) and Frank felt perfectly fine leaving me on my own.

I only had one awkward moment, around eleven thirty, when Rob came into the store. Frank was at the back, re-arranging the DVDs for the Tuesday releases, and I was watching the front. Rob looked at me like I was out of place, like I was a sixth finger on a hand, and he didn't do so with curiosity. It was like he was imagining how he could remove the finger, leaving the hand unscathed. I smiled at him, trying to be polite.

"Hi," I said, raising my hand on a slight gesture of good will.

"Hi," he replied coldly. He glanced past me, "Hey Frank, can we buy some tens from you?" He went about his mission finding Frank, and I went about stocking. Maybe he was just a cold person; he just didn't get along with anyone. I heard he and Frank laughing in the back, so I turned around, catching a glimpse of his beautiful smile, and seeing Frank doubled over with tears in his eyes. Ok, so he was only cold to annoying new girls who come in and steal his dream job. I sighed, putting away the CDs as he passed by.

"See ya," I called out as he walked by.

"Later," he waved, not turning around. Could I blame him? No.

But I could feel like I wanted to, because I should mention right here I'm a sucker for nice teeth and gorgeous eyes.

When the night time girl came in, Frank and I went for lunch. Little did I know, yet was very glad to discover, it was a ritual for the gang to gather at lunch. This gang included Rob and Doug, much to my

disliking. He was leaving a worsening taste in my mouth, especially when he didn't greet me as I sat. Frank was still gold in his book, however, so that pissed me off more.

Beth sat next to me quietly absorbing everything going on around her. Tony flanked me, putting a buffer between Nikki and myself. I did notice some things on my own: I noticed that Steve seemed to try to puff up his chest whenever he spoke to either Doug or Rob, Doug liked to think he could flirt well, Nikki was constantly trying to slide closer to Rob, and he was constantly trying to shift away. After about five minutes, I rotated around the table about six times.

As a group, the dynamics were great. Rob wasn't cold, and he couldn't avoid me. Nikki was also more tolerable, but only slightly. We all laughed and had a good time. When the food was gone, everything went back to normal.

"I'm going out for a smoke." Rob stood, picking up his tray. At least he was flawed, and that perfect smile wasn't going to be perfect forever. This made me happy.

"Do you want company?" Nikki asked quickly, following him with her eye, then extending her hand towards his arm. He shifted his entire body away from her, but she didn't seem to get the hint, she continued to smile.

"No," Rob said so bluntly and without feeling that even I felt the sting, and it wasn't directed at me. No one seemed to react to his attitude as the other

conversations continued. He turned and left, without saying anything to anyone. I watched as he set the tray on top the garbage can, thrusting his hands in his pockets as he walked away.

"Don't bother," Nikki's voice got my attention. She was leaning back in her chair, her arm draped across Rob's vacant place. "He's totally not interested in you."

"Excuse me?" I asked, slightly caught off guard.

"Just saying," Nikki said with a smirk and shrug. "You're watching him with those fascinated, puppy dog eyes and he just," she paused, waving her hand and curling her smirk higher, "doesn't look at you."

"Nikki," Sarah said, with wide eyes.

I felt smug. I folded my arms, matching her smirk with my own. "Darling, I don't know how you got shoved up your own ass, but I think you should probably crawl back out. Cause I've only witnessed, oh, about fifteen minutes of interaction between you two, and he seemed more interested in screwing Tony's donut than you."

I loved that her smirk fell, and she paled. I loved the way she looked around her as everyone started laughing in earnest, and I loved how she quickly plummeted off her pedestal.

"Wait," Tony grabbed my arm, "Which donut were you talking about? Cause I could certainly be creamed filled if he wanted me too." Tony winked as he took a bit of his plain donut and I smiled.

To my satisfaction, Nikki didn't speak for the rest of the lunch hour, and I began to relax with one problem outside, and the other having been put in her place.

Frank left a little early, my training going well enough that I didn't need any more guidance. He told me he would make me a set of keys and leave them with Tony, so I could grab them from him in the morning. I loved how trusting he was of me.

The night girl, Tiffany, a young girl who was about to start her junior year in high school, was nice and polite. I was expecting a more Lily-esque, type of employee, but Tiffany was calm and mature. She had decent music tastes, though I almost broke the CD player when she decided that the Jonas Brothers were a good choice. I begged her to wait until after I was gone before she played it again.

I left at five, taking my lanyard off as I stepped out of the shop. I found it endearing that Frank wrote Andi with a heart over the 'I.' It made me smile as I looked at it before I put it in my purse.

"Hey," Rob's voice shocked me into a frozen state, standing completely still. It was fairly quiet right now, and the sharp tone his voice made me feel like he was going to start a confrontation. I turned slowly, seeing him standing behind me with a leather biker's jacket, and a helmet tucked under his arm. Of course he'd be the bike owner. I corrected my posture, preparing for when he spoke again. "I heard what you said to Nikki." His void expression on his face disappeared to reflect a smile. I wasn't sure what to make of it until he said,

“Maybe next time you tell her where to go, you can choose a food item Tony isn’t holding.” He cocked his eyebrow as he turned his smile into a smirk. “Nikki may not be my type, but Tony sure as hell isn’t, either.” He walked past me without saying anything else, and like the day I ran into him, I was frozen while watching him walk away.

After he was a small dot on the mall horizon line, I brought myself to my senses and headed for the main doors.

“Andi,” Beth called. I stopped and turned, smiling as she came closer to me. She looped her arm in mine and started to lead me out the door. “Hey darling!” She exclaimed with enthusiasm and I laughed.

“Heya, what’s up?”

“Nothing, I just wanted to walk you home.” She said as we walked out the door. I didn’t protest, I liked Beth.

“It’s not out of your way?” I asked her.

“Hardly. This town is practically a one way street. I won’t go the whole way with you, but most of it.” We started down the street, quietly walking with arms looped, not saying anything for the first five minutes of the journey. “So,” She broke the silence, “You know a lot about us, but we still don’t know about you.”

“Is that why you’re walking with me?” I asked and she giggled.

“Hardly, but I do want to get to know you. Why are you here, in the Trap I mean?” She looked at me with caring eyes. It dawned on me that Frank was keeping my secret.

I took a breath, time for a confession. "I'm recently divorced. Eddie, my ex-husband." I swallowed hard, that was still hard to say, "He got the apartment. Ann, a friend of mine, wasn't very helpful. I couldn't stay in the city, risk running into him, or not being able to afford a decent place to live. My whole life got turned upside down. I needed to start over." I looked at her, proud of myself for not welling up.

Beth smiled. "I took four years pre-law. Graduated with honours, top of my class in fact. Do you know why I'm here?" A rhetorical question, obviously. "Because I didn't want to be a lawyer. I don't know what I want to do, actually. I had dated a guy all through High School and when it came time to pick colleges, he told me I couldn't go to his choice because I wasn't smart enough. Even my freakin' hippy parents thought I was kidding myself. So I did it. I got accepted before he did, and did far better than he did. But now I'm in debt, thanks to the massive amounts of student loans I needed. I left him, by the way. I met Gaylen in my last year, and fell so head over heels in love with him there was no way I could even stay with the bastard for spite."

"Where is Gaylen?" I was curious as to why I hadn't met him yet.

"Studying abroad." Beth sighed. "He wanted to learn law in his home country as well as here. At least he has family in Greece still. He stays with his Aunt and Uncle, whom I adore and vice versa, so that makes it better. And I get a call from his mom about once a month so

she can make sure I'm doing alright." She perked up a bit, "He comes home at Christmas and in the summer. So for the next two years, I'll see him very little, but it'll be worth it."

"It's very nice that you have such a great relationship with his family."

"It helps," she nodded. "So what about you? Are you thinking this will be your permanent home?" She gestured with her hand at the town around us.

"For now, at least. Until I can get very firmly on my feet." I was confident about my answer. "I'm not looking for love, or a new family," I smiled, "so finding friends helped," I looked at Beth, who seemed to approve of my answer. "But I just need to distance myself from my past, until I feel ready to face it again."

"You can't run from your past," Beth quoted.

"But you can hide from it for a year or two." I smiled and we walked the very short distance left to her single level house. She was at the start of a small subdivision of homes just like it: slightly misshapen rectangles with slanted roofs. There was a large picture window about five feet away from the door. It looked really nice from the outside. Beth's home was brick, surrounded by mostly stone covered homes. It seemed like a nice neighborhood. While we stood outside on the sidewalk, a red Sunfire turned down the side road. It gave a honk, and I caught a glimpse of Nikki with oversized sunglasses giving a wave as she passed by.

"Well, I guess we shall see each other tomorrow?" Beth looked at me curiously.

“You make it sound like a question,” I laughed.

“No, just making sure you weren’t going to take off, and find a new crowd to hang out with.” Beth smiled.

“Is there another group to hang out with?” I asked, unsure that in a small town like this, it was possible to have so many cliques.

“Yeah, but none as cool as us.” Beth shrugged.

“I was never a cool kid in high school,” I replied.

“None of us were.” She turned towards her house and waved as I dug out my MP3 player and kept going down the road.

When I finally made it back to the motel, I popped into the deli for a sandwich and salad, something healthy to counter my burger and fries dinner I enjoyed a little too much at lunch. I returned to my room, kicked off my shoes, and relaxed on the bed. I wrote my mother, letting her know I survived my first day at the new job and that I probably wouldn’t write again during the weekend.

I turned the TV on, found my all time favourite television show, then watched as Grissom discovered a package on his office desk. It was a nice finish to a pretty decent day.

Chapter 6

It sucked walking to work in the rain. I didn't bother trying to get a cab, because I figured that in a town this small they'd already be busy trying to get people to work and school. I did have my trusty umbrella though, and apart from the bottoms of my jeans it helped me stay relatively dry. The air still smelled clean though, compared to the city anyway. It made the entire experience a little more enjoyable.

I didn't see any of the familiar vehicles from the day before with the exception of the Fit. It sat alone in the vast parking lot. It made me a little sad, that I didn't know who any of the cars belonged to, but I had a distinct feeling that not seeing them meant that today's crowd would not be the same as yesterday.

When I opened the doors of the mall, the smell of coffee hit my nose, and I was instantly salivating in anticipation. At least that was one friend that would always be working when I was. I turned in to the cafe, careful not to let my ballet flats slide on the slick floors. I smiled, seeing Tony behind the counter with the small boy with the bad acne from my first visit. I remembered Frank told me he would have the keys to the store there for me. Tony was dangling them as I came to the counter.

"Here you go, sweetie." He said with his happy sing-song voice, handing me the small ring of keys. "Taylor's getting your latte ready for ya. Need food?"

“Definitely,” I found myself being a little more girly around him, and I didn’t care. I bent down, looking into the case. “What’s really good?”

“Carrot and pineapple, if you want to be good. Banana chocolate, if want to justify a little badness. And double chocolate with a cream cheese centre.” He looked at the front of the case from behind the counter as best as he could. “Stay away from the blueberry, it’s shit, and the fat free ones aren’t worth the calories they save.”

“Hmm,” I contemplated. It all sounded so good. I glanced up at him. “I have a bad habit of gorging myself on burgers and Doritos.” I confessed, knowing my days may be filled with those willpower-demolished moments.

“Carrot Pineapple it is!” he whipped open the case and grabbed my muffin with a pair of tongs, placing it in a brown paper bag. He punched my order in to the register, and I dug into my purse for my wallet. “Andi, hon, why are you wet?” he asked, though I’m sure he knew the answer, as he didn’t even give me a chance to reply. “Give me your phone, I’m programming my number in your phone.” He reached out and twitched his fingers. I handed him my cell phone and a ten. He set the money down on the counter and flipped open my phone, furiously working through the menu and programming in his number. He seemed to take a little while to do it, but when he was finished, he snapped it shut and handed it back to me. “There, next time it’s piss-pouring rain, you are to call me so you don’t ruin

your fabulous shoes." He ran through my order and handed me my change. As I took it from him, Tony visibly changed, "Oh hello." He said in a low voice.

I turned around, seeing Rob walk in, with hair dripping, his jeans damp and slicking themselves to his skin. His helmet was tucked under his arm, and he also seemed to be sporting up a backpack. I could see why Tony was very enthralled. Rob's damp clothes were hugging his body, and it made me forget for a second he was a jerk yesterday. But only for a second.

"Hey Tony, the usual." He said as he dug out a soggy five from his jeans. He seemed to take notice that I was standing off to the side. He looked me up and down quickly and said, "Hey," without smiling.

"Hey," I replied as he and Tony swapped coffee for money.

"See ya later." I wasn't sure who Rob was saying it too, but we both waved and watched him leave the coffee shop.

"Oh what I wouldn't give to be those jeans." Tony said as he tried to peel his eyes away from the door. I looked at him and shrugged my shoulders. "Oh don't you even dare try and say that man is not the embodiment of sex."

"He's a jerk," I said as I sipped my drink, "it's a turn off."

"Andi, I don't care if he's the biggest jackass on earth, if that man goes gay tomorrow, I will be the first in line to make sure he *stays* that way." Tony tried to

lean over the counter to get one last glimpse though we both knew he was long gone.

I laughed and told Tony I would see him at lunch, then made my way down the hall towards the store. It was a mixture of eerie and peaceful, with only the sound of the fountain to be heard. All the stores were black with the exception of the occasional storefront with the lights shining dimly through the gate.

When I got to the store I dug my keys out from my purse and looked at them. It occurred to me that I had no idea which one opened the gate. I sifted them through my fingers, eyeing them up in comparison to the lock on the gate. I tried one; it didn't fit. I sifted again, trying my second guess with a similar result. I felt the blood rush to my face, the frustration was starting to get to me.

"It's the short one," I heard Rob say behind me. I turned around and saw him coming towards me, dry clothes on, with his bag, helmet, and jacket lying in a pile across the hall by his own store gate. He pointed down at the keys in my hand, so I spread them out to be seen more clearly. "The two long ones are actually to the mall, the one with the oval head is for the main doors, just in case they're locked. The other one is to get back in if the doors to the garage close behind you. The short one is to your gate. The other two, I know one would go to the safe, and the other one I think is to the register, in case the power goes out."

"Thanks." I said as I moved my fingers to grab the small key.

“Don’t thank me,” he said with a smirk, and maybe a hint of sarcasm. “If you weren’t too busy staring at me yesterday, you would have seen what Frank used to unlock the gate.” And there he goes with being a jerk again.

“You were staring too.” That was a weak argument.

“Yeah, but I know how to do my job,” he started to back up, “and maybe yours too.” That got my blood boiling. I growled low as I opened my gate and stepped inside. I locked it behind me, moving through the dark to the office in the back. “Andi, wait.” I ignored him, even though his voice was filled with guilt. He was still a jerk, a complete and total asshole. I wasn’t about to inflate his ego and calm his conscious by acknowledging him. I slammed the office door a little harder than I should have.

I walked over to the desk, about to set down my purse when I felt a vibration. My phone. Why was it vibrating? No one knew my number. I opened my purse and dug for the phone, flipping it open.

Tony: OMG Nikki is bitchzilla today. Rob told her ‘no’ AGAIN to a date last night. Muffin.

I laughed, I hadn’t known her that long, but I could see Nikki’s face all angry and twisted as she stormed down the halls with her perfect outfit and coffee in hand, receiving no sympathy from Tony.

For curiosity’s sake, I thought I should look through my contacts. It had certainly grown from my limited Mall and Motel list. Beth, Steve, Tony, Frank, Sarah, and Nikki made the list. I went through my phone

again, checking my text messages, seeing one in the sent folder. To everyone but Nikki, stating simply 'Andi's Cell,' with the call back number listed below. I smiled, though a little nervous with the fact that everyone had it. I was a little disappointed that it was a small list. Who did I want on there? Certainly not the asshole from the Art store. Not him, no, why would I want *his* number?

I flipped my phone closed and got to work.

"How was the morning?" Frank asked when he came in around noon.

"Uneventful. Sold a few of the new releases, but nothing major." I pointed to the racks at the front of the store.

"Oh, good, you got those out." Frank seemed slightly surprised. Maybe he talked to his buddy Rob before coming in, and maybe the idiot made another comment on my supposed incompetence.

"Yeah, not that big of a deal." I shrugged my shoulders. "Did I miss anything?" Why was I second guessing myself now?

"No, no, you got it all." He sighed, "It's nice coming in here and being able to hear. Lily would have given me a headache by now." He smiled and started walking to the back. "I'll be up in a second so you can go to lunch." He disappeared behind the door as Nikki came into the store massaging her temples.

"Please tell me Frank is here." She said without opening her eyes.

“Uh, yeah,” I said as I felt the confusion wash over my façade.

“Good, cause there is no way I can go to lunch with just Rob.” She put her hands out like she was trying to block something. “I don’t think I could handle it being just the two of us.”

I played dumb, “Why?”

“Ugh,” She shook her head and closed her eyes, placing her finger tips on her forehead. “After the morning I’ve had, I need a buffer if he’s in a bad mood.” She only did the block gesture with one hand this time, placing the other on her hip, looping a finger in the belt loop of her jeans.

I smiled on the inside, knowing she didn’t want to tell me the truth. Frank came out of the office with a stack of paper work, waving it with his hands towards me to get out of the store.

“You’re going to show me how to do that after.” I pointed at him as I stepped around the counter and off its platform.

“Why?” he asked.

“So I can help you with it. Remember, the whole reason you hired me.” I smiled as he was caught off guard. He nodded his head.

“Fair enough.” I didn’t have a chance to say anything else; Nikki grabbed my arm and pulled me out of the store before I had a chance.

I don’t think I had ever moved so fast, especially towards something that supposedly neither of us wanted to encounter. When we got into the food court

area, we caught sight of Rob and Tony already there. Nikki practically jumped to wave at them when they caught sight of us. Neither seemed all too thrilled. When Nikki turned away, I could see Tony and Rob both roll their eyes. Pretty sad, considering they were far enough away that I had to be told by Nikki where they were beforehand.

I went for the burgers and fries again, feeling that perhaps I shouldn't, when the all too perfect looking Nikki sat down in between Tony and Rob with a salad, no dressing. I stuffed a fry in my mouth as I sat down.

"You would not believe the day I've had so far." Nikki growled as she took a bit of a tomato. She made the same face she did the other morning, when she drank the coffee. Again, she said nothing about her food. "I had this woman try on, like, thirty different outfits and bought a scarf. How the hell am I supposed to make a good commission when she's monopolizing my time from other customers and all she buys is a stupid scarf?"

"I don't know, Nikki." Rob said as he stabbed his poutine, avoiding physical and eye contact with her.

"Well, it wasn't just her." She went on. "I actually had someone try and negotiate the cost of a dress. Asking if I could mark it down, cause it was the last in that size or something."

"Was there anything wrong with it?" Tony said this time, also shrugging her off, playing with his phone in his left hand while he held his sub in the other.

“Well, she said that it was missing a bead or something, but I didn’t see it.” She took a tiny bit of lettuce. No wonder the girl was so tiny, she barely ate. I took a bite of my burger with a fry chaser. I looked up and caught Nikki looking at me. “Burger and fries again, Andi?” She raised an eyebrow at my food. How could she say again? I’d only eaten with her two days in a row. She had a point, but she shouldn’t try to prove it so soon. I could feel Rob and Tony’s eyes on me.

“I like to eat my emotions.” I replied bitterly.

“Well, you must be a very emotional person.” Really, a jab at my weight? At least I wasn’t anorexic.

“Better than an ice cold bitch,” Rob said after he swallowed his cheese coated fries and gravy. “If we’re using food as a reflection of personality.” He gestured at Nikki’s hardly touched Veggie plate.

“Yeah I’m totally stealing one of these bitches.” Tony reached across the table and stole a fry from my tray as my phone vibrated. He gave me a knowing eye and I reached in my pocket and fished it out. I tried to discretely flip it open as Nikki seemed pre-occupied with picking at her plate.

Tony: Don’t listen to her, you are smoking fabulous.

I looked up and saw Rob peeking over my shoulder, nodding his head slightly. I hated people poking into other people’s business.

“Well, I’m going for a smoke.” He announced, much like yesterday.

“I’m coming with you.” Nikki stood up far quicker than he did. I looked between them, seeing a straight

faced Rob watching her. "I need one, it's been such a stressful day."

Tony rolled his eyes. I didn't watch them leave, I didn't want to. When they were gone, I did use the opportunity to ask Tony about the phone.

"I hope you don't mind. I thought I would let all the good ones know how to get you." He said as put the last of his sub in his mouth. "I mean, I put in everyone's number in case you needed it, but I wanted to spread the Andi greatness around". He bit his lip. "So, I hope you're not mad, but Beth told me about why you're here."

I wasn't mad. I was kind of thankful that I didn't have to spread the word around. I imagined that Frank had already told Sarah, that would be a given since they were married. "Yeah, it sucks." I said, feeling my heart break a bit. Eddie flashed in my head, but he didn't stay long.

"I wish I could tell you I came here to piece myself back together, that's the trend. I just grew up here. But seriously, Andi, if you want someone to talk to, I'll be here. I can't imagine what you're going through is easy." He put his hand on my shoulder.

"It's a day by day thing." I told him, pushing my burger remnants away. "I'll get over it. It was just all so sudden."

"Well," Tony bit his lip. "I'm sure he's kicking himself in the ass. But enough about that jerk." He waved the thought away, quickly changed the subject,

and the two of us chatted away the rest of our lunch hour.

I was getting ready to leave the mall at the end of the day, satisfied again with the day I had, when I felt the familiar twitch in my abdomen. I groaned, knowing full well what was about to happen. I turned around, heading farther away from the door and right for the drug store.

After all that had been going, could I really blame myself for not remembering that my monthly gift was right around the corner? At the very least, I was grateful that I wasn't carrying a baby that belonged to a man that didn't want me anymore.

I entered the store and scoured the aisles, searching for the feminine care section. Upon its discovery, I then started looking for my green plastic packaging of choice. I could never bring myself to use a tampon if I wasn't going swimming.

I somehow felt awkward buying just pads, and decided that I could always buff up my purchase. I went searching once more, grabbing deodorant and vanilla mint toothpaste, then headed for the register. Along the way I passed the chip rack. The single serving zesty cheese were sitting there, tempting me, and my menstrual hormones were suddenly going crazy with cravings. I didn't think long enough to stop myself from grabbing a bag and continued on my journey.

Standing in line, looking at the tabloids, I didn't pay attention to the people around me. I should have learned by now that it's never a good idea to ignore my

surroundings—I will always run into someone I wouldn't want to. I looked up to see Rob eyeing me up. It felt like he was actually studying the monster size package of pads in my hands. I felt a little embarrassed when I caught his eye, seeing one of his eye brows cock up.

What was his problem? Why was he looking at me like that? Was there a rule in this town that said a woman couldn't have a period? Or was I just not following proper etiquette in his mind by displaying my needs, my large sized needs, so openly?

I could feel the PMS hormones rising, and was about to voice it all when he suddenly said, "Sweet Chilli Heat is better."

I could feel my facial expression change, I felt my scowl melt away so now I was flabbergasted. He smiled and chuckled as he finished his transaction. "See ya tomorrow, Andi." I stood there in shock, feeling my face drain of color. This bad habit of freezing when he caught me off guard was getting annoying, and I had to do something about it soon. Otherwise, I would start wasting valuable time just standing around in shock.

"He's so hot." A girl no older than seventeen said as she started to scan my items, her eyes following Rob.

"Yeah, I guess," I said trying to shrug him off, adding, "for a jackass." Even I didn't believe it anymore. The word stirred more images of Eddie than it did Rob.

I paid and left, heading to the ladies room to prepare myself for the long walk home.

Friday came in a blur. I worked Thursday nights, and every second weekend, starting the following week. Frank wouldn't listen when I told him I would work this Saturday, and every Saturday, as I didn't have a life.

"You do have a life," Frank retorted, pointing a finger at me as he did so. "You go out every Friday night and have drinks with us." He continued to fill the CDs as I stood behind the counter and filled out the inventory reports.

"Ok, so I have a life Friday nights, but no other night of the week." I looked up when I caught movement in the corner of my eye. Doug and Rob came in. I glanced at the clock, it was only ten to five. "What are you guys doing out so early?"

"Girls came in early." Doug said as he leaned against the counter. "So I thought I would come see your lovely face." He winked. I rolled my eyes in front of him, learning from the week of interactions that Doug didn't take it personally.

"You guys coming out tonight?" Frank asked when he got off work.

"No," Rob answered quickly.

"Dude, you never come out." Frank seemed a little annoyed, which was a first for me to see. I watched Rob carefully.

"Sorry, Frank, you know I can't. I'm busy Friday nights." He raised his shoulders in a massive shrug. "What can I say?"

"You can say what you do every Friday night." Frank walked around to join us at the counter.

"No can do, Franko," Rob said as he began to back up.

"I think he's got a woman." Doug said with a smirk to the Frank and myself, "and she's ugly. That's why we don't know where he goes every Friday night." Doug turned to me. "What do you think, Andi? Rob's hiding a chick from us?"

I looked up and met Rob's eyes, keeping a vacant expression as he seemed to try and read my thoughts, squinting as he shoved his hands in his pockets. I shrugged my shoulders, "I think he wants a night to himself and doesn't want to give a reason not to come." I shrugged again, "Makes sense to me."

"I gotta head," Rob said as he pointed his thumb behind him. "See ya Monday guys."

"Later loser." Doug called to him as Tiffany walked in and moved quickly to the back. "Ah! Here's the reinforcements. So are we all meeting at the pub later?" Doug asked Frank.

"Yeah, Sarah wants to change before we head out. What about you Andi? Need to head home first?"

"Probably should." I said, unsure if I was going to be offered a ride with Frank to his place. I liked him and Sarah a lot, but I didn't really want to sit around the married couples house alone.

"You can head out, if you want. I'll wait for Tiffany." I didn't argue. I grabbed my purse from beneath the counter and headed out the door.

I did my ritual of buying my food and eating it as I made my way to my motel room. It was almost six by

the time I got in, and I didn't have that much time before I had to leave again. I jumped in the shower for a quick wash, and blew dry my hair. I threw on some clothes, a pair of jeans and a nice t-shirt, and then decided that I still had time to check my e-mail.

There was a name in my inbox that made my heart rocket up in to my throat, break, and then tumble back down in its place. I wasn't sure if I wanted to open it, wasn't sure if I wanted to read it. I knew that it would burn there with the bold letters if I didn't read it, but I couldn't delete it, never knowing what it said. I took a breath, and opened the e-mail from Edmund Lansky.

Andi, I want to talk to you. Please. Eddie.

I stared at it for a while. Really? I double checked the date it was written, to make sure it wasn't one that lingered in cyber space for a few weeks. It had only been written five minutes ago. I didn't know what to think. What could he possibly say? I stared and contemplated, hovering the mouse somewhere between reply and delete. It was tempting, very tempting, to hit the reply button. To know everything he wanted to say, to tell him everything I thought. I could do that. I could handle it. Then my logic took over, and my hand swiftly shifted the mouse to the delete button, and I clicked it before I could second guess myself. Done, gone, over.

Only it was all I could think about on the cab ride to the pub, and it consumed me as I sat with my drink at the empty center table, waiting for the others to arrive as my e-mail discovery had caused me to flee my motel

room far too early. I had put my cell phone on the table, running my fingers over the edges. I even programmed Eddie's cell number in the contacts, just in case I wanted to fulfill his request. I could text him while I waited. I could do that. I flipped open my phone.

"Andi!" Doug purred as he approached the table, Nikki and Beth not far behind him. "You are looking smoking hot tonight." He curled up beside me in a chair.

"You weren't waiting long, were you?" Beth asked as she sat next to me.

I smiled, flipping my phone shut, only peeling my eyes off of it after the bubbles finished dancing on the front screen, and shook my head. Beth was studying me with a cautious eye.

"Come on," Nikki pulled on my arm, seemingly in a good mood. "The guys are getting us a pool table near the back." I stood up, Doug following suit, and we all headed to where Frank and Steve were already setting up the table for a game. I looked around, catching Sarah and Tony at the bar getting a round.

Watching the guys play was only a mild distraction, and playing with them only freed my head from Eddie while I wasn't lining up a shot. At least I was decent at pool; I wouldn't have to give up my thoughts so easily.

It didn't matter though. When the boys wanted to play another all guy round, I sat with the girls, and Beth could read me like a book. "What's going on, sweets?" She asked me looping her arm through mine. I

glanced around, seeing Nikki sipping on her pina colada, focusing on me. Even the usually quiet and reserved Sarah was taking note.

"It's nothing." I shrugged my shoulders, trying to shake it off. Eddie's face was still front and centre; the sad eyes when I gave him back his ring.

"Don't lie." Beth snapped. "I've only known you a couple of weeks, and I already know you're lying."

I sighed. "I got an e-mail from Eddie." I braced myself from the onslaught of questioning from Nikki and Beth.

"What did he say?" Beth asked. The fact that Nikki didn't ask who Eddie was kind of surprised me. Then again, almost everyone knew who he was, or at least knew about him, even if they didn't know his name.

"Andi, I want to talk." I replied flatly and quickly.

"Want to, not need to." Nikki clarified. "Well, what would that mean?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "I don't know. He called my mother last week, wanting to know where I was, and if she would tell me to call him."

"Did she?" Nikki asked.

"Yes."

"Did you?" Beth questioned.

"No, I didn't. I was going to tonight. I was going to reply to him, I was going to text him, but I didn't, do any of those things." I shrugged.

"Look," Nikki adjusted herself in her chair. "I'm messed in the relationship department, so take it from me. If you don't want him to talk to you, then don't

talk to him. Don't reply, don't give him what he wants. If you do, you could end up hurting yourself more than you already are."

Nikki wore an expression of true sympathy, and I felt my first bit of warmth towards her. Maybe that's why she's still hanging around with these guys, because she has her moments. I smiled back, and took her extended hand in my free and allowed her to give it a friendly squeeze.

"Ladies," Steve said as he walked around behind Beth and I. "It is your turn to take over the pool table and..." He stopped short. I felt him pick up a lock of my hair. "Andi, do you work tomorrow?"

"No, why?" I looked at Nikki and Beth, both who shrugged slightly.

"Because these ends are split and dry, and unacceptable. You are coming into the shop tomorrow, and I'm going to fix you up." I turned around and looked at him, smirking. I watched as he became confused, noticing everyone looking at him. "Oh for Christ sakes, I'm not gay!"

"Oh really," I heard Tony say behind us. I glanced over my shoulder and saw him standing with one hand on the pool cue, and the other on his hip. "How many Cher albums do you have?"

I looked back over to Steve who casually shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know, ten, maybe."

"Yeah, that's what I thought." Tony said, nodding his head with a smile.

“What’s wrong with Cher?” Steve said as he moved to join the guys who egged him on about his music taste. The girls and I went to play pool.

Chapter 7

"Have you found a place yet?" Beth asked me one Saturday afternoon, roughly a month after my leaving the city and starting over. We both had the day off, and out of all the things Beth and I could have done, she wanted to get together for a cup of coffee. I suppose it was different when she wasn't working, and Nikki was forced into her second weekend shift a row.

I took a sip of my drink. "No," I replied. "But I still have another five months rent free living from Eddie."

Eddie e-mailed me every two days, usually just asking me to talk to him, occasionally he added that he hoped I was doing well. I was always tempted to write back, but I never did.

"Screw that, move in with me." Beth replied bluntly.

"Huh?"

"Oh come on, I have an empty room, I live alone, and I hate it. Please?" Beth and I had cemented a very strong friendship in a short time. She was like my sister, and I think I may have even liked her more than my real ones.

"What about Gaylen? He'll be here really soon. Wouldn't you want that time to have just the two of you together?"

"I've always had a roommate, so he's not going to think twice about it." Beth replied quickly. "And, I promise, we can try and be quiet when we have sex." I laughed a little louder than I probably should have. I

covered my mouth to stifle it. "Oh come on, Andi, give me some credit."

"Ok, ok. Maybe we can make some sort of arrangement so that I would be out of the house during those times." I replied when I finally composed myself. I couldn't believe I was saying this, but the truth was I didn't like being alone either. Plus, living at a house would curb my eating out habits. I wasn't gaining any weight yet, but I'm sure I wouldn't stay so lucky as time went on.

"So is that a yes?" I nodded my head and Beth practically jumped over the table to give me a hug.

"What? Why are we hugging?" Tony asked as he came over and pretended to wipe down a table. He didn't pretend for long, and soon he was sitting in a chair, pulling it over to our table.

"Andi is moving in with me." Beth told him.

"Oh thank god," he almost toppled me as he moved into the large embrace. "You are far too great to be slumming around in motel rooms forever." He gave me a big squeeze. I adored Tony, and I think he adored me. Lately it had been the three of us hanging around, Nikki being the tag-along.

"It was paid for." I retorted to him before I turned to Beth. "Which brings me to rent."

"It's less than what Eddie is paying for that room." She said. "Honestly, it's completely affordable. Five hundred each a month."

I snorted. "Hell I can afford that on what I make here. What about the bills? I would probably need long distance on the phone."

"Woman, I have a boyfriend who spends about half the year or more in Greece, and you're worried about getting a long distance plan?" She glared at me, the kind that couldn't be taken seriously. I smirked at her, causing her to smile. "Phone, internet, TV, it's all included. Bills split down the middle per month is about two hundred."

"Geez," Tony slapped the towel against the table, "What kind of plans are you on? I need to switch providers I guess."

"Hey, Tony, stop slacking." Rob said as he stopped by the tables for a second, dressed incredibly well with the exception of the primary blue vest he had over his black t-shirt. I studied him for a minute before I flicked the switch and made myself seem uninterested. Rob was growing on me, but only a little. He was still a jerk, most days.

"Oh and you're not on your fifth coffee break of the day?" Tony looked him up and down.

"Hey, this was supposed to be my weekend off. I'm a little tired, I didn't sleep much last night." He said as he walked started to walk away.

"Gee I wonder why?" Tony said as he rolled his eyes and stood up, flicking the towel in his hand against the empty table before he went back to work.

I looked over at Beth. She would know what's going on. "Nikki," she started with an eye roll, "made sure

everyone knew that she saw Rob leaving with Melissa from The Dairy Hut's place last night. 'Another victim of the Rob.' I mean, really, they went out on two or three dates about a year or so ago. You would think she would get over it." Beth rolled her eyes again. I grunted and took a drink. "Which reminds me," She made a face, void of all things but sarcasm, that I noticed she did when she wanted me to be prepared for something. I braced myself. "Someone is going to ask you on a date this week."

"Oh?" It was bad that my heart fluttered. The mention of someone asking me out so soon after the mention of Rob made my imagination take off. I almost hoped, though I wasn't sure why. He was really out of my league. So far out, I was still playing t-ball while he was in the majors.

"Doug." And my world came crashing back to reality. Doug, ugh.

"Wonderful." I couldn't have sounded less thrilled. "So my life is destined to be lived out in loneliness unless I settle for head-shavers with bad pick-up lines."

"No," Beth reached out and put her hand on mine. "Your right guy will come along."

"You know, it would sound so much more convincing if you weren't getting married in a couple of years." I winked and swallowed back the rest of my coffee. Beth rolled her eyes at me. "And now my dear Bethari, I must go. Steve is keeping a spot open for me so I better get there."

Beth sighed with a pout. "Fine. Talk later about moving in? Or should we just throw everything back in your suitcases and go?" She smiled as I scowled.

"Love you," I said as I gave her our customary hug and cheek kiss goodbye. She returned our farewell and I was off down the mall.

It seemed sad some weekends that one of the only things to do on my day off was to go to the mall. As long as I didn't go into the store, my sanity was usually pretty well intact. I waved to Frank as I passed it by.

I couldn't help it, but I glanced to my left. I caught his eye, and I may have blushed a little. Rob's smile was intoxicating, which I hated. I was satisfied when he waved to me, and I waved back, not stopping, but really wanting to. He wasn't busy, and I could feel his eyes watch me as I passed by. I smiled at the idea of him watching me walk away until I remembered where he supposedly spent the night. I subconsciously started walking faster, and felt my mouth curl into a disgruntled expression.

I walked into the spa, and instantly felt relaxed. Sarah had definitely known what she was doing; the place was always packed. I was told by Steve that her spa got more business than the hotels within the area did. Her atmosphere was relaxed and soothing.

She had large frosted glass doors and large frosted windows blocking the sights and sounds of the mall. There was a very low, very soft tone flowing over the spa. The lighting was bright, but soft, no traditional fluorescent lighting in Sarah's place.

The hair was all done in the front, the more spa like services held deeper in the back.

"Andi," Steve said excitedly when he spotted me coming in, "it's about time, I've been waiting for you all day." I looked up at the clock.

"Steve, you told me to come in for two, it's one forty-nine." I replied a little confused.

"I know, I know. But I've been so excited to get you all fabbed-up. Oh, you have no idea what I'm going to do with your hair, I can't wait." I looked at him, shocked. Did he really say 'fabbed-up?' I think my expression must have told him what I was thinking. "I know, I know, I sounded so gay there, but," he slapped his hands together, "I don't care. Get in the chair." He pointed with a large gesture to the empty chair at the centre of all the stations.

I walked forward, letting the receptionist take my purse as I sat down in the chair. Steve shook his cape out before wrapping it around my neck, then before I had a chance to focus on my reflection in the mirror, he whipped the chair around. He leaned down and spoke softly in my ear, "No peeking."

I watched out of the corner of my eye as Steve removed a large towel from the top of a cart beside his chair, and began to furiously mix hair color in a little black dish; I loved having my hair done. It was about as relaxing as a massage. I closed my eyes and shivered slightly at Steve's fingers began to work my hair, partnering perfectly with the brush he used to apply the dye.

"Thanks for taking me last minute, Karen." Said the woman sitting down next to me in a vacant chair. "I just really need a work over after last night."

"Ohh," said Karen as she made a rustling noise, probably moving around a cape. "Melissa, dear, it's no sweat. Was it as bad as they say?"

Melissa? From The Diary Hut? I tried desperately to see her out of the corner of my eye, trying not to turn my head. I just barely saw her and knew that this was indeed the same Melissa.

"Ha," she said almost too loud. "As bad? Karen, I don't remember sleeping with him. I mean, I remember making out at the bar, I vaguely remember him driving me home, but I don't remember getting in bed with him. I didn't even remember him leaving." She paused and lowered her voice only slightly. I could still hear her. "I wasn't even sure it happened until I checked the pictures on my phone, cause you know I would have taken a ton. Well I took a couple of good shots, and the rest were of my rapidly disappearing drinks. I finally, *finally* got the chance to be one of Rob's girls, and I don't even think we did it. I totally blew it."

"Maybe he just wasn't feeling it last night and thought it was best if you were a little more sober. Did he ask you out again?"

"No." She sighed, "I stopped by Robert's too, before I came here. You know, to tell him I had a good time, wanted to do it again. But he was distracted. He didn't seem to care."

"He'll be back."

I went back to concentrating on Steve as he took his hands away for a minute, and I heard him place the brush and bowl on to the cart. A few seconds later I was getting a fantastic scalp massage. When was the last time I had a guy make me feel like this? Who cared if I wasn't attracted to Steve, and his sexuality was still up for debate; this was practically orgasmic.

"Oh that feels so good." I groaned.

"Wow," Steve said, pausing with his fingers in my hair for a minute before he continued. "That was hot."

"Yeah, cause you soo enjoyed the sound of a woman's moan." I knew that voice. Tony moved around me, I could feel his presence, and I heard him set down a cup of coffee on the table. "Here, brought ya a coffee." He said, sounding almost pleasant. He and Steve didn't always seem to get along.

"Thanks, Ton." He took his hands out of my hair and my eyes flew open. I whipped my head around, catching Steve taking a sip from his cup. I didn't even hear him take off the gloves.

"No, no, don't stop." I pleaded.

"Oh and that's like, what, the first time you've ever had a girl say that to you?" Tony quipped, smiling as he folded his arms.

Steve set down his coffee cup and rubbed the bridge of his nose. He grumbled something under his breath, but I didn't catch what.

"Well, this coffee fairy has to get back to work." Tony said with a smile, obviously satisfied with his tormenting of Steve for a day. "Make sure she looks hot

when you're done with her. I want more than just scuzzy ol' Doug asking her out, kay?"

"You know about that too?" I asked with wide eyes. It had been the first time I heard of it when Beth mentioned it, and now it seemed everyone knew but me.

"Come on, Andi. I'm taking you to the back for a rinse so that certain people can't annoy you while you're relaxing." Steve raised his voice so Tony could hear as he was leaving the spa. I stood up, and Steve took the handle of his cart as he pushed it along, leading me to another area of the salon.

He walked into a tiny room which had a sink off to one side, a barber's chair in the middle, and a vanity on another wall. Fancy, a private room for hair styling. This must cost a pretty penny to request. I didn't wait for the cue to sit, I just moved over to the sink and sat in the chair, leaning my head back as Steve closed the door. He walked over, stood to the side of me, and turned on the water.

"Rob told us." He admitted when the water was on. He must have known something about the sound proofing in the room as he spoke just loud enough to be heard above the water, though I doubt anyone outside the room could have heard anything.

"About Doug?" What else? That was the hot topic. Steve nodded.

"Yesterday. He was trying to convince him not to but Doug thinks he's got a good shot. He wants to wait

until the end of next week so he can soften you up for it, or something like that.”

“When did this come up yesterday?” I asked, knowing I ate lunch with all of them, every weekday, except Tuesdays and Thursdays. When the hell had I not been around for this topic of conversation to emerge?

“In the cafe, after you already left to open the store. Rob told Tony, Beth, and myself. He didn’t seem to like the idea either.”

My heart skipped a beat. “Do you think he...?” I was hoping that Steve knew what I was about to ask.

“Between you and me? Rob told Frank, who told Sarah, who told me...”

“You’re such a gossip.” I teased him, and he smiled.

“Ha ha, do you want the dirt or not?” He asked, and I nodded. He turned off the water and wrapped my hair in a towel, holding it in place as he helped me sit up and move to the other chair. He hand dried my hair a bit before he combed it out and started going to work, creating his envisioned master piece. His voice was a little lower than before. “Rob didn’t sleep with Melissa last night. She was stumbling all over herself drunk, and he just didn’t want to lay a girl who couldn’t stand up. He’s a total slut, but he’s not a jackass.” Funny, I think I called him that on a couple of occasions. “Truth is, half the girls he dates he doesn’t sleep with. A few more than the national average, I’m sure, but not *every* girl.”

“Oh,” I said, my voice dripping with sarcasm, “well, if it’s only half he sleeps with.”

Steve laughed as he began to blow dry my hair. I loved the feel of his fingers going through my hair, he was incredibly gentle. He didn’t bother with any styling products, another plus for Steve.

When he was done, I couldn’t look in the mirror, he wouldn’t let me yet. He stood in front of me, fussing with my bangs and then putting his tools away. I looked down at the floor, and saw a little too much of my hair there, to *not* feel nervous. I bit my lip, and he caught me. “You don’t trust me, do you?” He folded his arms and smiled.

“There’s a lot of hair on the floor.” I wasn’t shy about telling him, but regardless of what I wanted to convey, my face betrayed my nervousness. He stepped aside and I was pleasantly surprised with what I saw.

My hair wasn’t that much shorter as he only cut maybe four inches off the length so that my now warmer chocolate brown hair hung just below my shoulders. The layers were amazing, they fit my face well, and it made my hair feel so much lighter. I didn’t think so usually, and I wouldn’t after today, but in this moment, I looked hot.

“Steve, you are a hair genius.” I stood up and hugged him, he smelled good, really good. How long has it been since I’ve been with a guy? As I let go of him, I went back to the last time Eddie and I slept together. In that moment, I came to the painful realization that I

should have seen my divorce coming. It was currently July, and I couldn't remember a time after March.

"Don't mention it." He was holding on to my arms, maybe a little longer than he should be. I had that feeling, the kind you get when you know you passed a line somewhere, that you really had no intention of crossing. I took a step back, causing him to let go; He didn't seem fazed, maybe I was imagining it. "And if you want to give me a tip..." Oh boy, maybe not. He started to lean in and I braced myself. I held my breath, but to my relief (though slight disappointment) he placed his mouth by my ear and whispered, "you can buy me a new thing of eye liner, charcoal black." He straightened and I eyed him curiously. "I'm not..." he hesitated. "I like the rock and roll eyes. I pull them off well."

I laughed a little bit and he laughed with me. I moved a little faster than I should have. "I'll slip it to you Monday." I replied before opening the door.

"Sounds great." He clapped his hands together and I took a second to look at his eyes again. His lashes still looked amazing, but I couldn't tell if he was wearing the eyeliner or not.

I walked to the counter and paid for my hair cut, not looking at the price as I punched in my debit pin. I imagined it cost me a really pretty penny to get this amazing style.

I waved goodbye to Steve who got started on another client while someone ducked into the private room to clean up. Another glance before the door closed showed

Karen standing by the door while Melissa waited with her, a towel around her head.

I popped into the drug store before heading back out, making sure I picked up Steve's request before I forgot. He never told me a brand, only a color. I chose the first eyeliner with the name of 'charcoal black' and went with it. I suppose the cost wasn't a factor, just as long as he wasn't the one who had to buy it.

After paying for that, I stuffed it in my purse, so I wouldn't forget it on Monday, and continued on down the hall. I had my eyes focused on Music Stop, looking to see if I could see Frank.

"Meee-ow." I cringed. Why I stopped, I'm not sure, maybe I couldn't be rude. I turned around, seeing Doug hanging off the metal pole railing, arms wrapped around it, reminding me of a monkey in a cage. I never understood the need for the rails, but I was told it was to make the store feel enclosed; I just thought it was strange. Rob was finishing up with a customer at the register just behind Doug. "Someone is looking sexy." He put on a snarly face and shook his head as he said it. Really, Doug? Was that supposed to seduce me?

"Doug-y boy, don't harass her." Rob said, after he thanked his previous customer. He turned around, and I enjoyed the smirk that came to his face, especially when it turned into a small, twisted smile. "Although I think she's bringing it upon herself today."

"Hey." I lifted a finger and pointed it at him. "Hey." Was all I could muster. I was lost for words, and was began to feel slightly stupid.

They laughed. "So Andi," said Doug as he straightened, looking me up and down all the while.

"So, Doug." Rob stepped forward, putting a hand on Doug's shoulder. "Lizzy told me the door crasher bin was empty or just about. Mind going to get the other box and fill it up? I'll watch the front."

Doug looked at him long and hard before nodding his head, moving towards the back. "See ya later, Andi." He waved.

Gratitude washed over me when Doug was out of sight. "Thank you," I moved over to the railing where Rob was standing now. Unintentionally, I put my hands on his, they were so warm. I inhaled instinctively when I got closer to him. His smile wasn't the only intoxicating thing about him, his cologne was positively amazing. I looked up at him. "Thank you, thank you, thank you."

"You know don't you?" He asked without elaboration. What was the point? It was clear that I knew what Doug was going to ask.

"Yes, and I don't want to have to tell him no, I'll feel bad." I said, not backing away. I liked the feel of his skin. And in all reality, this was the second time today I had a man's hands on my skin.

"You should though." Rob was serious. I hadn't seen him like this, since I first came to town, and stole his job. We were past that little bump in the road, weren't we? "Doug's not good enough for you." An intriguing statement.

“Oh?” I questioned. “And who, dare I ask, is?” That was a set-up. Why was I doing this to myself?

Rob curled his mouth in thought. He remained silent for a moment before he backed away, sliding his hands out from under mine. The rail still felt cold, though my hands were where his just were. “No one.” He shrugged. “No one around here is good enough for you.” He folded his arms across his chest.

“Great, so you’re telling me I’m going to die miserable and alone, unless I move.” I said, deadpan tone to my voice. I think he may have had a point.

“Unless you can convert Tony or Steve.” Rob was smirking again.

“I don’t think Steve’s entirely a lost cause.” I said, pointing my finger at Rob as I started to leave. I went from cynical to flirty (again) in less time than it takes me to blink.

“Yeah,” Rob said, moving to the railing. He leaned on it, preparing his last word, “and Nikki’s the sweetest girl in the world.”

I laughed: I couldn’t help it. I blushed, and I couldn’t help that either. My heart fluttered a little, and I cursed myself. Why? Why Rob? Why couldn’t I have fallen all over myself because of Steve? Or why couldn’t I sulk over Eddie as much as I used to? I wouldn’t even care so much if I was getting blubbery over the sub guy at the mall deli. But, Rob?

I made a mistake by looking back, getting another look in. He was still watching me, but looked away quickly when he retreated to the cash.

I left the mall, waving to Tony, who made sure I knew he approved of my new hair by making cat claws and mouthing the same 'meow' Doug had. Coming from Tony, it was far more flattering.

I took my time heading back to the motel. It was nice out, and I was enjoying the feel of the cool, bay air on my skin. Summers were comfortable here. It's probably why so many people flocked here. I passed more unfamiliar faces than familiar.

While listening to my mp3 player I indulged into a little fantasy as I walked, depending on the song. Mostly it was Rob, and the many things I would like to do with (and to) him. Every once in a while, to prove to myself somehow that I was not infatuated with the man, I threw Steve in the mix. Only they never stayed romantic, go figure. I guess once you buy eye-liner for a guy, you can't look at him the same way again.

When I returned to the motel room, I was greeted with a note on the door. A lime shaped post-it (shaped a frog) adhered over the room number. In bold, black letters, it read:

Go to Beth's and leave your key at the desk.

I smiled, though was a little uneasy over the fact that they had been in the room. I used my key one last time to unlock the door and make sure everything was actually gone. They did make sure that everything that wasn't bolted down was taken. My room looked like it did the day I had arrived; they even emptied the garbage. I took one last look around, as I didn't really get the chance to say goodbye. I left, entered the lobby,

and turned in my key at the desk. The receptionist didn't look up when I set down the key, as she was busy on the phone with another customer. I figured returning my key was all I had to do. My credit card was on file, and if I went a little over my budget, the fact that I still (technically) had five months free money left would probably cover them, for any reason.

I left, and started the walk to Beth's place.

"Surprise." Beth, Nikki, and Sarah yelled out as I opened the unlocked door. Sarah was holding a bottle of wine, Nikki had two glasses in each hand.

I looked around the house. Nothing about Beth's place looked different. The living room still had the same two long, straight edged tan couches which both faced the large television pushed into the corner, on the same wall as the door. The kitchen was tucked off in to the right corner, walls enclosing it, except the two entryways: one facing the door and one facing into the living room. I thought it was a strange design from the get go, to give the illusion of open space, and not doing it. There was a hall off to the right, and I peeked along it. Beth's bedroom door was open, I could see the foot of the bed, and the door to her private bathroom was also open; nothing different there.

"I don't get it." I said flatly, which seemed to cause some disappointment.

"We moved all your stuff in! Come see your room!" Beth was practically jumping on me to follow her into one of the rooms on the back wall; my room, and my bathroom.

She grabbed my hand and pulled me along to the door on the far left, and flicked on the light. She took the bed sheets I had brought with me from the city and put them on my bed; with it being a double, and my sheets a queen, they were a little long. They hung below the black comforter that Beth always had on her guest bed. There was a light wood desk where a lamp, my laptop, and a picture of my sisters, mother, and myself sat. I glanced to the side, noticing the closet open and saw all my clothes arranged on hangers.

“Come back in here,” Beth pulled me along and into the living room where she brightened the lights. Beth had a fire place that was now to my right, and along the mantel I saw the other photos I stole from home mixed in with hers. Curiosity told me to check out the CD collections. Sure enough, my music was melded with hers, all double copies together as well. I was intrigued over the amount of doubles.

I looked back up at the three beaming girls. “You broke into my hotel room, took all my stuff, then moved me in without my knowledge?” I made it sound like I was upset; I was a little, but I wasn’t as upset as they thought I was. I loved nesting, I was just sad I didn’t get to do it myself. Maybe I would re-arrange some stuff later. “Thanks guys,” I said finally, hearing them breathe a sigh of relief.

Sarah cracked open the bottle of wine and Nikki set down two of the glasses, allowing her to get a better grip on the ones still in her hands. She handed glasses to Beth and me first before she helped Sarah fill their

own. "I propose a toast." Nikki said, as she raised her glass with a strained smile. "To Andi finally getting out of the motel. Next step from here is getting laid!" She raised her glass and we joined her, although I wasn't so sure I liked the end of the toast. This was leading somewhere. "And from what I heard," Nikki said as she took a sip like the rest of us. "That opportunity is coming soon."

"Nikki," Beth glowered, "why in the hell would you think she would actually go on a date with Doug?"

"Cause he's available." Nikki retorted with a "*duh*" tone.

"I'm not saying yes." I replied to her, taking another sip. I thought about Rob, and for some reason Eddie. I don't think he would approve of Doug, either.

"Why not?" Nikki pressed. Something was up with her, but I couldn't figure out what. "Doug's nice, he can be charming. He really likes you. I think you should." She didn't give up.

"He's sleazy, and scuzzy." Sarah made the face I was thinking of making. She even shuddered for good measure. "Andi's too good for him."

"Hardly," Nikki didn't even try to hide it, but was quick to make it sound better than it did. "Doug is a sweet heart, and I think they'd be good together."

Nice try, but I had a trick up my sleeve. A half truth, if you will, that I was going to feed to Doug when he finally made his move; as long as we were out of ear shot from anyone else, that is. "I'm not ready to date yet." There, that wasn't so bad.

“Why?” Nikki looked perplexed.

“It’s... personal.” Did I really want to drag my dirty laundry out? No, not in front of Nikki. I glanced at Sarah, she knew, and Beth already did. They didn’t press.

“Well, I heard that Melissa got right back on the horse after Jeff left.” Nikki moved to sit down on the corner of one of the couches. We all ventured into the living room with her. “I saw Robert leaving her house last night around midnight. Another one bites the dust.”

“He didn’t sleep with her, Nik.” Sarah sounded like she said this for the hundredth time. “They went on a date, yes, but she got really drunk and he took her home.”

“Uh –huh, that’s his specialty, drunk girls.” Nikki rolled her eyes and took a drink.

“So, what, are you saying that you were drunk and foolish when you climbed into bed with him,” I asked as I leaned back. “Or, was that just the reason you gave yourself when he decided that you weren’t good enough for him.”

There was something about making Nikki turn red with embarrassment that was just so satisfying. She quickly changed the subject and that was the last we spoke of either Rob, or my love life, for the rest of the night.

Chapter 8

The week had passed by fairly quickly. There were some advantages to living with Beth that I hadn't thought of before. Like how every time Tony worked with Beth in the morning, he would give us a lift. Nikki would on occasion as well, I always hope for Tony. And I could actually bring my lunch, and cook a meal at the end of the night. Beth considered this an advantage too as she wasn't exactly the greatest chef in the world. I hadn't met anyone who burned chicken noodle soup before.

The walk to work when I couldn't, or didn't want to get a lift was also a lot shorter. So when Saturday rolled around, and no one was working except me, I didn't have to leave as early to get to the store.

I got in, slightly disappointed none of my favourite coffee shop people were working, but I still got my usual drink without having to order it. I went through the empty mall, feeling a little on the lonely side, but I didn't mind. The night may not come fast enough, but it was something to look forward too.

Gaylen was coming home today, and the whole crowd was getting together at the Draught for it. I was informed by Nikki that the whole crowd meant everyone, including a pair of Art store boys. I still hadn't been approached by Doug about the whole date thing, but Nikki told me she had it under good sources that he wasn't backing out.

I didn't want to turn around as I opened the gate, I didn't want to see which one was opening. The store was still dark when I caught a glimpse of it, then movement caught my eye I looked to my right, just missing whoever it was that passed by me. I didn't want to look behind me, I really didn't, but did anyways. I caught a glimpse of Rob moving fairly quickly, unlocking the gate.

"Out late last night?" I asked. I remembered instantly that it was Saturday. The day that would be the start of the newest rumour involving him and some unfortunate girl who happened to cross his path—too bad that unfortunate girl wasn't me.

"Alarm didn't go off." He said with a smile. He was in a really good mood, he had definitely crossed paths with someone.

"Oh." I said as nonchalantly as possible. I unlocked my gate and stepped in.

"Hey, Andi," He called from over his shoulder. I stopped and turned to face him as he half faced me. "It's just me and you today. Wanna have lunch together."

I smiled. Crap. "Wouldn't Doug think you were trying to swoop in and ruin his chances?" I noticed I just made him want to change his mind by opening my mouth. "Not to mention, your spoils from last night might not have time to recover."

Rob laughed, holding my eye. "No spoils, Andi. Come on, what do you say? We can just go to lunch,

eat food like normal people. Wouldn't be that bad, just me and you, would it?"

I thought about it really, really hard. I could see so many things coming out of this. Like assumptions that I was another notch in his belt, yet would that be such a bad thing? Even if I didn't get to benefit from it? "Sure, why not." I closed the gate in front of me.

"Great. See you around, say, noon?" It was his turn to seem nonchalant. But there was something in his smile that made him appear all too excited.

"We'll see if my break girl shows up on time." I turned the lock on my gate and walked away. I could hear him cursing, and trying to shift his gate open as best as he could while I disappeared into the back.

I felt my purse vibrate before I set it down, and I knew that meant that my phone was going off. Probably Beth with a Gaylen update. I dug through my purse and grabbed my cell, flipping it open.

I hated that it wasn't Beth. Even more so I hated that I was stupid enough to publish my new cell number without filtering the information from certain people.

Do you want to know the fastest way to kill an adrenaline high from having a seemingly flirtatious moment with a hot guy? Getting a text message from your ex-husband.

Eddie: Andi Love, please, stop avoiding me. I want to talk to you, please.

I broke down and cried. Love? Why did he have to say Andi Love? It was his pet name for me, the one he used mostly when he was begging for forgiveness. Why

now? It had been well over a month. I was just starting to get back on my feet; I hated him for this.

I hated that he wanted absolution, that he wanted it to all be ok. Because he probably wanted to make sure I was all right, because that was Eddie. He wanted to make sure his choices didn't impact anyone else's lives too badly. He would want to make sure I'm surviving, that I was happy. I don't know if I was.

I cried while I did up the tills and every time I looked at my cell phone. Why was it only Rob and I today? Why couldn't anyone that I adored be working? I could have talked to Tony or Beth about it, even confided in Frank as to why I was breaking down. So I had to stop.

I cleaned up, washing all the make-up and tears off my face in the staff bathroom before I started up the day.

As I unlocked the gate I looked over, seeing Rob looking at me with genuine concern. I had three hours or so to figure out what lie I was going to tell him.

Twelve o'clock came quick, and to my relief my break girl showed up on time. I was still faced with facing Rob, and I still didn't know what to tell him. I decided I would just make it up as I needed to.

He stepped out of the store and met me in the middle of the hall. "What's that in your hand?" He asked, gesturing to my brown bag lunch. I was kind of sad even in the lunch department for the day, all Beth and I had in the house was peanut butter and bread. I think I found a questionable apple and threw it in there last minute.

“Lunch?” I replied. He snatched it from my hand and walked over to the closest garbage can, throwing it in with a hard thud. Definitely put the apple in the bag. My expression must have conveyed shock and curiosity.

“You’re sad.” He replied as he put his arm around me and led me down the hall to the food court. “I don’t know why you’re sad, and I’m not going to press because it’s not my business. But I am going make you feel better, starting with buying you lunch.”

“Rob, you don’t have to...” I started to reply before he cut me off.

“You can’t argue with me. I threw out your lunch, so I should buy you food to replace it.” He paused and stood in front of me. “You are a... burger girl.” He said after he looked me up and down. He clapped his hands together when he came to the conclusion.

“What gave me away? Was it the beefy gut, or the burger buns?” I asked with a small slap on my own rump. At least I was joking around.

He didn’t seem to find it funny, he looked at me with a glare. “Shut up, you’re beautiful. No, I just got the beef between buns vibe from you.” I giggled, and he smiled, though I could tell he wasn’t sure if he should.

Without even asking, Rob placed the order for both of us. He did give me a dirty look when I asked the clerk to change my drink to diet, so with that small exception, I was surprised he got my order right.

He insisted on carrying the tray to the nearest empty table we could find.

“Here you go miss diet soda girl.” He smirked.

“Thanks, for lunch and everything.” I said, starting to feel a little better just sitting there with him. He had a calming presence, a serene aura.

Then my phone vibrated. I looked down, and paled. Eddie, again. I glanced up, seeing Rob take notice.

“Is that guy bothering you?” He asked pointing at the phone. I teared up. I felt so foolish as his face became a mix of terror and sympathy. He didn’t ask to do it, but he grabbed my phone from the table and flipped it open. He was pressing more buttons than my brain could process and shortly after he set the phone down on the table. “He won’t, again, ever.” Then his smirk came back, “as long as you have this phone anyway.”

“What did you do?” I heard my voice shaking. Why was Eddie being so persistent? Why couldn’t he just forget about me?

“I changed the message settings so that it wouldn’t notify you about him. And I filtered him so that he goes all the way into a special folder. You should never see him appear on that phone again.” He explained, but I could barely keep up with the technicalities. I just nodded my head. I felt his warm hand on mine. “Andi, we all have pasts. Most all of us are running from them. It’s okay to cry if you need to.”

I felt one tear spill over and I was humiliated. I pulled myself together as he changed seats, sitting in the bench beside me and sharing a small space on the

table. He put his arm around me and I let a couple more tears fall.

"I don't think I want you to know." I was honest, and I don't know why I told him. I don't know why I do a lot of things around Rob.

"No one said I had to know." He replied. I looked up at him, and he looked down at me with a smile. "Now, eat. You have to make sure to keep your burger buns." He winked, I slapped his arm, and he laughed.

So maybe Rob wasn't such a jackass after all, but he did have his moments.

Despite what Rob had done with my phone, I still expected it to make a sound. It didn't. I wasn't sure if I was relieved.

It did help the day go by though, not needing to worry whether or not he was going to make me cry again. When six o'clock came around, and the mall shut down for the evening, I was thankful. I was actually eager to go out now to join the group in welcoming back, and in my case, meeting, Gaylen.

I closed the store, and moved through the silent halls. I had gotten used to the peaceful silence, it no longer bothered or creeped me out to be entirely alone in the mall.

I stepped outside, seeing that the clouds were gathering darkly around the sun. It was going to start raining before the night was out. I started to head down the road towards home.

"Andi." I turned around to see Rob rounding the corner from the parking lot. "You heading to the bar?"

“You’re going?” It was very surprising for Rob to tag along. I had to think really hard, back to when I first came to the Trap, to see if he had ever come out with us. He hadn’t.

“Yeah.” He shrugged, making it seem like he was in attendance to every little bash we ever had. “You wanna lift?”

“I should probably go home first, re-apply my make-up and such.” I said, pointing in the direction of home. I felt naked after I washed it all off.

“Don’t, you’re far prettier without it.” He replied seriously, without any hesitation. “Come on.” He gestured behind him.

I sighed, why not? It’s not like I had to get all dolled up for anyone anyway. I took a step towards him, and he twisted in his seat to open the saddle bag. He pulled out a helmet and handed it to me.

I put it on, adjusting the straps, then climbed on the back of his bike. At least I got to hitch a ride on this beautiful beast, it sounded amazing; it was fast, before I could blink we were on the road.

I loved having the feeling of the wind through my hair, and I didn’t mind the feel of my hands wrapped around his body, either. I tried hard not to, but I couldn’t help wondering if the muscles beneath the jacket were as tight as they seemed. My fingers grazed the leather as if I could feel them, and I hoped Rob didn’t notice.

I didn’t mind that it seemed to take forever to get to the bar, I was being lulled by the ride, yet we were there

within twenty minutes, arriving at the bar just a few minutes before seven. As I got off the bike I looked around the parking lot, seeing all the familiar vehicles parked beside each other. I handed the helmet back to Rob.

I stared at the door while I waited for him, then I felt his hands rest cautiously on my shoulders. "Andi, are you sure you wanted to come out tonight? You seemed to have a rough day. I can take you home, I'll tell them you weren't feeling well." His voice was sympathetic, his hands warm, his presence comforting, and although the grief was over for the day it was still nice to know that he was looking out for me.

"No," I replied, patting his hands before he slipped them off my shoulders. "I'll be fine. I probably need this."

I heard him laugh softly and then the two of us walked into the bar. Together.

That was a small mistake on my part, really, as I should have known that Nikki would be watching for Rob. She would know if he was coming, and she wouldn't miss that we walked in together.

She was also the first person I saw, sitting alone at a table for two near the middle of the bar. There was a martini glass in front of her, and a beer stein in front of the empty spot. She was dressed for sex, a small black dress, one far too upscale for the location, and heels that could pierce skin if contact was made. When she saw us come in, the look she gave me said that's probably what she was thinking of doing. I could see

how her imagination would run wild with images of her heel being driven into my skull.

"Hey Nikki," Rob said as we passed her. "Hot date tonight?"

"I was hoping." She mumbled as she grabbed both drinks and got off the stool. She followed us to the back corner where a pool game was already in progress between the boys. One very tall, very gorgeous man stood out.

Perfect olive skin, perfect shoulder length black, curly hair. Gorgeous brown eyes, straight white teeth that I could see from twenty feet away, and the physic of Hercules. Gaylen was exactly as Tony once described him: a Greek god. Beth looked so tiny and pale standing next to him, but happier than I had ever seen her. It made me a little jealous of her.

"Rob!" Gaylen exclaimed. I was expecting a thick accent, and was surprised to find it was practically non-existent.

"Gayl!" Rob called back. The two approached each other, where they reached out for each other's hands, and upon contact went in for a one armed embrace. "How was Greece?"

"Greece was Greece. Crazy aunts and uncles making sure you're fed. Boring lectures on law, you know." Gaylen shrugged his shoulders. "I'm just so glad to be back." He shrugged his shoulders.

"I can imagine." Rob then went to the men and grabbed a pool stick, and Beth rushed over to me with more excitement than I could handle.

“Oh my god, oh my god, isn’t he just...” Beth was too excited to finish her sentence.

“A god?” I offered up.

“Yes.” Her voice was high pitched as her eyes rolled back a bit.

“I’m going to want ear plugs for tonight aren’t I?” I asked, laughing as I walked up to the bar with her.

“Hey Andi, can you get me a beer?” Rob asked as he watched me walk away. I turned around, about to make a smart ass comment, but he was moving towards us.

“I got you a beer here, Rob.” Nikki offered, gesturing to the table behind the pool table. I could see the dark liquor sitting in the mug. He glanced back at it, still moving forward.

“Nah, I like light ale.” He retorted, reaching in his back pocket for his wallet. He dug out a ten. “And get you one too, for the inconvenience.” He added before jogging back to the table to take his shot.

I looked over at Beth who was looking at me with wide eyes.

“Is there something I should know about?” She asked as she looped her arm in mine.

“We just had a bonding moment today. Dare I say, Rob’s a friend.” I shrugged. “We had lunch together, I went out with him while he had a smoke, we just kinda bonded.”

“Just don’t bond too much.” Beth winked causing me to giggle.

I ordered the drinks and brought them back, with Beth following along happily. Nikki didn’t miss a thing.

She didn't miss that Rob essentially bought me a drink, or how he smiled when I brought him his beer. She made it all perfectly clear when she joined Beth, Sarah, and I at the table behind the guys.

"So, when did you start screwing Rob?" She asked, not holding back on what she was thinking.

"I'm not." I replied.

"You two are acting awfully 'coupley'." She retorted.

"Nikki, we worked together today. He gave me a lift from work so I didn't have to walk forty minutes. He didn't want your stinking dark ale. Grow the fuck up." I snapped back. I heard the guys laughing, and snuck a peek to see they were stealing glances in our direction.

"Yeah, Nik." Rob said without looking at us. He then grabbed his beer, turning around to lean on the pine structure of the pool table. "I've got as much of a chance of going home with Andi tonight as you do at going home with me." Rob drank his beer. The guys behind him erupted in a general 'Oh,' with Tony adding in a 'Snap' for good measure.

Nikki groaned and left the table in a fit, stomping her heels as she rounded the corner and disappeared in the direction of the bar.

"Well, now that we've got 'miss-cranky-bitch' out of the way," Gaylen said. "Are we gonna hit the club a little later?"

"There's a club?" I asked, taken aback. It occurred to me that their definition of a club may be different than mine. Did it mean a bar with dark rooms with spot

lights, a bar with funky drinks, and loud, thudding music?

"Absa-freakin-loutely." Tony answered. "How else do you think I shake my ass?" he then gestured to his body. "I don't do exercise."

"How did I not know about this?" I asked Beth, who cranked music and danced around the living room frequently. Or if she didn't want to disturb me, moving to her iPod.

She shrugged her shoulders. "I hate going without Gaylen. I hate guys hitting on me."

"And you don't have to worry about that now either, Andi." Doug said, moving to my side, putting an arm around me.

"Gee, Doug, thanks. I didn't realize I was so repulsive." I felt my lips curl with disgust at the touch of his hand. I wanted to shudder so badly.

"No, sweetie, that's not what I mean at all." Sweetie? Did he just call me that? I looked at Rob who was looking at us with an amused expression. The guys behind him looked equally bemused. "I gotta make sure I look after my girl."

"Your girl?" I raised my voice, perhaps a little louder than I should have.

"Yeah, Nikki told me you knew all about how I was going to ask you out and she told me you were completely stoked. Even said that I should convince Rob to take her with us on a double."

I almost felt the spray of beer that shot out of Rob's mouth from where I was sitting. "You dip shit!" Rob

cursed. "What on this Earth would make you think a girl like her was going to go out with your scuzzy ass?" I watched Frank and Gaylen get ready to pull him off of Doug if need be. As it was, Rob was practically white knuckling the pool table behind him. I quickly looked around, seeing Nikki standing by the corner. "Get your hands off of her, as she clearly doesn't want them there." Doug removed them obediently. "And a piece of advice, never listen to Nikki." Rob grabbed his jacket off the wall hook.

"Rob, dude." Gaylen started.

"Sorry Gaylen, I gotta get going." Rob wasn't looking at anyone.

"Rob." Nikki pleaded, reaching to touch his arm, and he immediately shook it off. He didn't look overly angry, but he was annoyed. He whispered something to Nikki, his mouth moving harshly, her face blushing as her eyes looked to the floor, then Rob moved to the exit.

I don't know why I got up and followed him. I knew how it would look to everyone, especially if I managed to bring him back in, or if I never came back myself, but I wanted to make sure he was doing okay. It was the biggest outburst I had ever witnessed in real life. Even my mother wasn't this irrational when my father left.

I moved through the crowd and to the exit. I didn't grab my jacket. I opened the door, feeling the cool air on my skin.

He was starting his bike when I caught up to him. He opened the visor of the helmet when I got closer, his face flat.

“Heading home so soon?” I asked.

Rob shook his head. “She’s the reason I don’t hang out with you guys. She’s so conniving and deceitful. She said that to Doug because she wanted to make sure there was no competition.”

“Is there competition?” Why did I ask that? Why am I being an idiot?

“No.” Rob shook his head. “She’s just not used to not getting what she wants. And Doug, he’s just stupid. He knows he’s not good enough for you.” Déjà vu, much? There was something about Doug that brought this side out of Rob.

“And who is good enough for me?” Bold question. I deserve a spot in the Guinness world record book for the biggest idiot in the world.

“No one.” He replied simply. “There isn’t a man in this town, in this world, who is good enough for you.” He smiled and closed his visor. “Goodnight, Andi.” He called from beneath the plastic, barely audible over the roar of the bike. He backed up and drove out, and I watched him for a moment before I returned inside.

“Oh good.” Tony said as I walked in. “Let’s go. We’re gonna go shake our groove things.” He danced his way to the door. I looked beyond him and watched everyone except Doug and Nikki file out.

“Where’s Rob?” Sarah asked after we were all outside together. She handed me my jacket.

“He went home.” I said as I put it on.
She nodded as we piled into the cars.

Chapter 9

On Monday the general consensus was that the 'club,' (an old pool hall converted into a dance hall with really crappy dance music) wasn't as fun as they all thought. The worst part was the idea that came from said horrible evening out: A weekend Road Trip to the city. My city. My old city. And I wasn't allowed to say no.

I was filled with dread as the days went by. Nothing was worse than wanting the work week to drag on and it turns out to be the fastest week of your life. I even offered to work the weekend, so that Frank and Sarah could go.

"No," he said. "Sarah doesn't want to make the trip anyway, so you guys go and enjoy yourself."

Thanks Frank, way to *not* be my scapegoat.

"So the final head count for tomorrow," Tony announced, holding a pad of paper with the plans in his hands. We sat around our regular lunch table, Rob and Nikki were coming back from a quick smoke with scowls on their faces. I was still picking at my fries, as I hadn't been interested in food today. It was Friday. The day before D-day. "We have myself, Beth, Gaylen, Steve, Andi, and Nikki."

"What am I, chop liver?" Rob asked, stunning everyone at the table.

"You... you want to come? It's just shopping and dancing?" Tony clarified, the rest of us were to shell shocked to say anything.

"Yeah." Rob leaned forward, stealing a fry off my tray without asking. I didn't care, I wasn't in the mood to fight for my greasy food. "I like the city atmosphere. Besides, someone's gotta be a jackass and make the numbers all off." He smiled, thinking he was funny. I glared at him. Right now, because he "liked the atmosphere," I agreed that he was a jackass.

"Ok, well," Tony said, becoming flustered. "I have to rearrange all the seating, who sits where in what car. I already booked the rooms, there's only three, so you're going to have to bunk up with someone." Tony let that sink in. "Though I guess that won't be a huge problem." I giggled over his emphasizing on the word huge.

"Well there you go." Rob replied. "I'm bunking with Steve." Tony rolled his eyes.

"I don't know if that's much better."

Steve, in the middle of biting a carrot, threw his hands up in the air. "Do I need a tattoo on my forehead that says it? I'm. Not. Gay."

"You could, but it would be pretty costly to remove it when you come out of the closet." Tony replied back. "And darling, you don't need a tattoo that says 'I'm gay.' That's already clear."

Steve looked around the table, sighed, and sat back, throwing his baby carrot at his tray. I put my arm around him to comfort him. He looked over and smiled. I looked up and caught Rob looking away, tossing another fry in his mouth.

"You know I don't have to go, right? Nikki and Tony can room together."

"Andi, if I hear you say one more time you don't want to go I'm going to bitch slap you from here to Sunday. And since I'm a better girl than you some days it won't be that difficult." Tony snapped. When he was done he took a deep breath in. "Sorry, sorry. Andi I love and adore you and need you to show me where all the good stores are. You're my city guardian angel." He reached out and took my free hand. His eyes were pleading.

Tony's puppy face was manipulating. I don't know if anyone was immune to its convincing powers. "Fine, I won't try to back out again." I stood up. "But I do have to get back to work."

They all stood with a groan. I was the only one who went back with enthusiasm. I was also the only one who hoped the afternoon would be extremely long.

"Andi." I heard Steve's voice speak softly to me through a dream. I woke up, seeing his face almost touching mine. "Andi, it's time to get up."

"How the hell did you get into my room?" I mumbled, pushing myself up. I was extremely thankful that I wore pyjamas, as I almost hadn't.

"Beth let us in and told us you hadn't gotten up yet. She didn't hear your alarm go off either." I glanced at the clock. It was five after six, and my alarm was set for five in the morning. I forgot to turn it on.

"Shit." I said as I got up and charged for the closet. At least I had packed my bags last night. I started

pulling down clothes from hangers. I glanced back to Steve's attire to make sure I wasn't under dressing.

"I'm going to go give you some..." he pointed to the door and moved. I heard it click and then stripped quickly. I pulled on my jeans, slapped on some deodorant, and put on a bra just in time to have the door open. I jumped when I saw Rob standing there with wide eyes.

"I'm sorry, Steve said you were dressed." He was studying me, making me blush, and very conscious that I didn't have Nikki's body.

"Ah, no, not quite yet." I pulled on my t-shirt, thinking I caught him bite his lip as I lifted my shirt over my head. He was standing perfectly placid with his hands in his jean pockets when I was completely dressed. "Now I am. Was there something you wanted?"

A pause. I loved these awkward moments. "Yeah, I thought I would help get your bags, bring them to Tony's car."

"Tony's?" Last I heard I was riding with Nikki. Tony was a far better change.

"Yeah, Beth and Gaylen are going with Nikki, you're coming with me and the guys." Rob walked up to the end of my bed where my travel bag was sitting, and grabbed it. He walked out of my room first and I followed. Nikki was standing by the door, looking unimpressed as always, as Gaylen and Beth were being cute in the kitchen.

"Great, now that the lazy one is up, let's get going. I *need* a coffee when we get to the city." Nikki rolled her eyes before examining her manicured nails.

"You could have left without me." I said as I stepped past her and out the open door. Steve and Tony were waiting at Tony's car.

"You would've loved that, wouldn't you?" Tony didn't miss a thing. He smiled, putting an arm around me and kissing me on the temple. "Like I would go anywhere near the city without your fabulous self at my side."

"You make it seem like I'm someone special." I replied as I opened the back passenger door.

"You are." The three said together.

"Darling, what are you doing?" Tony asked as he crossed his arms over his chest. Rob moved to the trunk, adding my stuff to theirs.

"Getting in my designated vehicle?" Was that not the idea?

"You're riding shot gun, by me, hello." Tony made me laugh. I left the door open, Steve sliding in as I stepped aside. I opened the front door and climbed in, hearing mine and the other three doors close one after another.

"I have one request." Rob said when Tony started the car. The stereo started playing a former Spice Girls version of 'It's Raining Men.' "Please, for the sake of my sanity, change the CD."

"Yeah," Steve made a good effort to protest. We all looked at him sceptically. "Yeah, I love Geri." He

shrugged looking at all of us. "Yeah, you know what, screw you all." He sat back and pouted.

It was a fun three and a half hour ride up.

The day went by rather quickly; Shopping was actually enjoyable, and being back on the city streets did give me a sense of comfort. I was constantly looking over my shoulder though, to see if anyone I knew saw me up here; I didn't want to re-connect with anyone.

I had never had a guy get so excited about dressing me up, and Tony was having an absolute blast throwing myself and Beth in dresses. I loved how he didn't care what Nikki picked out. "Everything she wears makes her look like a skank." He whispered to Beth and myself when she was on the other side of the store.

One of my favourite finds was a beautiful, sexy, practical black dress that Tony told me if I didn't buy it, he would have me committed. He's a bit of a fashion snob, I learned, and didn't want to think about me not owning a dress that made him "almost want to be straight." Beth found her equivalent in chocolate version. We would have to be careful not wear them on the same day, if I wore mine at all.

We returned to our hotel around seven, and I was exhausted. I had never spent an entire day shopping like I had today, though I suppose it helps when the people who didn't live here also loved to shop. My sisters and my mother didn't like the idea of bringing back expensive things to their home town. Well, my sisters did, but mom told them they didn't.

I changed (reluctantly) to go dancing. A pair of dark wash jeans, which Nikki told me made me seem like I was back in high school, and a tiny, thin strap, silver tank top. I grabbed a black sweater out of my bag at the last minute, feeling a little naked, though compared to Nikki in a mini skirt and half buttoned blouse, I shouldn't have. She looked hot in a prostitute sort of way.

I was glad to see that Beth had followed my lead, with light wash jeans and a black tank top. The boys, with the exception of Tony, went the route of jeans and dress shirts with Rob in black, Steve in green, and Gaylen in white. Tony wore a printed, tight pink shirt with tight skinny jeans. He seemed proud of his outfit, he had a little strut going on as we left the hotel and walked down the street.

"Should we eat?" He asked. "I think we should eat."

"There's a burger place around the corner. It's only about a twenty minute walk from there to the club Tony picked." I commented to the group.

Rob put his hand on my shoulder furthest away from him, leaning down and saying in a loud whisper, "Gotta keep those burger buns." We laughed.

Beth glanced over her shoulder at me with a speculating smirk, so I shrugged my shoulders, and Rob's hand slipped off.

"Well I don't want to eat anything that would make me a fat cow." Nikki threw her hands up in protest. "I don't want any guy turned off by my body when I

dance." I loved how she looked at the seemingly oblivious Rob as she spoke.

"I want a burger." Steve announced.

"Me too." Gaylen chimed in. "They just aren't the same in Greece."

"Burgers it is." Tony said as he moved a little faster. Nikki groaned, we all ignored her.

After dinner and forty five minutes of sitting around laughing and talking, we moved on to the club. I was starting to relax, because it was like having these people around me meant there was a buffer to keep all those I knew from the city from seeing me. I must have fit in to the group of small towners, or they just did so well in the city no one paid attention to us, either way, I didn't care.

I think we were getting there just in time; there was only a small line-up forming. They had a banner strung across the blackened windows that said 'Blast from the Past: The best music from the last fifteen years.'

"Ahh, see look Nikki," I said when we got our place in the line-up, hearing the thud of the music coming from the other side of the wall, "I was in high school about six years ago. So my attire actually fits in with the theme according to you." I turned, looking her up and down. "How long ago was it since you were a prostitute?"

The guys erupted in laughter, and Nikki snarled.

"You know what, Andi? You can go screw yourself. I dress perfectly fine. I hardly look like a fucking prostitute. You're just jealous because you couldn't pull

this off with that fast-food stuffed, size twelve body.” Nikki gestured between the two of us as we moved ahead in the line-up. “I mean, come on. I don’t think I’ve ever heard tell of Rob leaving a room so quickly when the girl wasn’t completely clothed.” She smiled overly confident.

“Oh for Christ sakes, Nikki, give it a rest.” Rob spoke up. It didn’t matter, she hit me where it hurt, and I felt the flood of embarrassment I had when he walked into the room, except now it was made worse by the realization that he probably didn’t like what he saw.

I swallowed hard, trying not to allow myself to get upset, and moved out of Rob’s space to stand closer to Steve and Tony. Steve put his arm around me, and I didn’t hear what Rob and Nikki were arguing about behind us as their voices had become hushed.

“She looks like the slut who slept her way through high school,” Steve whispered down in my ear, “and the one that only the principal would do.” I laughed through the pending tears.

“Yeah, I mean, come on, street walkers around here have more class than her.” Tony offered up. “So Nikki found your weak spot? Don’t let her get to you. Come on.” He said as we moved forward and entered the club. “Let’s go have some fun.”

The inside was dark, of course, with multi-coloured disco balls and strobe lights making patterns on the people and the floors. Around the dance floor there were tables that sat two people at each. A bar lined the back wall where boys in tight, bright clothes made

drinks that looked fantastic even from this distance. Tony jumped up and down, clapping his hands together. "OH my god! It's PERFECT." He sang as he jumped again before grabbing Beth's hand, saying, "Come on sweetie, let's go shake our things." Beth gave Gaylen a quick kiss on the hand before she was pulled away from him.

"Ok, Gayl, let's get us a table somewhere near these nut cases." Rob said, patting Gaylen on the back. The two had a chuckle, which means this obviously wasn't the first time the two were dragged into this sort of thing. Which reminded me of Nikki; Maybe she and Rob were a little more than people were led to believe. Maybe the two had dated more seriously than even Nikki herself hinted at. I felt a little uneasy, which is strange, because I had nothing to be uneasy about.

I followed Steve and Nikki onto the dance floor, and made our way to where Tony and Beth were already dancing. Gaylen and Rob had taken their spots at a table, a beer in each of their hands.

Nikki threw her hands up in the air and started dancing as close to Rob as she could, making sure her back was turned to him the whole time. She was putting on a show for him, that much was clear.

I didn't feel like I had any other choice, so I half-heartedly started to move, I didn't really feel like dancing any more.

"Oh come on, Andi," Steve whispered in my ear, putting his hands on my hips, encouraging me to move. "Don't let her get to you. Just move." I did pick

up the tempo a little bit, and was almost having fun by the third song in, though it could have been the two blue, very delicious drinks I had had, but what did it really matter? “See, it’s not so—” Steve stopped mid-sentence as the song changed.

He and Tony immediately held each other’s gazes. They started to sing to each other and I then recognized the song: A Cher classic. They sang a line one at a time, perfectly in time with the music, and then they broke into a perfectly synchronized dance while still singing to one another.

I looked over to Rob and Gaylen who were laughing at them, pounding the table with their fists. Beth joined them, getting most of the moves right, which made me remember as best as I could, through the terrible memory that I have, to the music video. I couldn’t remember any choreographed dancing. Yet here they were the three of them, like it was part of a fad that everyone should have known.

I walked over to the table. “Please tell me you know why they’re doing that,” I said to the guys.

“Steve and Tony went to high school together, and apparently in one of their classes they had to put together a dance as part of the curriculum. They both loved Cher and made this. It’s been about eight years since they’ve done it, and every time we’re out and this song comes in, they do it. It’s so disturbing.” Rob explained between fits of laughter.

“And Steve says he isn’t gay?” Gaylen laughed harder.

"I think Beth just sort of learned it from them," Rob added before taking a drink of beer. Nikki came up behind him and wrapped her arms around his neck.

"I'm going out for a smoke, you coming?" She asked.

"Yeah, watch my beer Gayl?" He asked before Rob got up and departed with Nikki. I watched them until I couldn't see them in the crowd. I shouldn't let it bother me as I had no claim on Rob except a minor crush that I couldn't shake. I hated it.

I could hear a difference in music, but couldn't move, couldn't look back. I didn't care that I felt Gaylen's eyes watching me, seeing if he could see what I did. I remained a statue.

Just as before I felt hands on me, sliding across my abdomen and collar bone, moving gently. "Andraia," Steve's voice, a little sterner this time, "so help me if you don't have any fun because of that whore." He never finished his threat as I turned around and caught his eyes. They were smouldering; it crossed my mind that the whore he was talking about may not have been Nikki. I got flashes of the day when, in the private room of the salon, I felt the twinge of sexual tension. He moved his hands down my arms, grabbing my hands, pulling me back to the dance area.

He pulled me in towards his body and held me against him, one hand gently placed on my lower back. I was handed a shot by Beth, and I wasn't sure if she did so because she could see that I was a little nervous, or because she and Tony were doing them. I knocked it back and started to move with Steve.

My head started to get cloudy after I don't know how many drinks; Our dancing began to feel like sex, the way he was against my body, the way we moved. I didn't care, it started to feel good to have a man's hands on my body, making me feel sexy, even if it was Steve.

I admit that to see him as more than a friend, I tried to see him as a potential date. Yet I couldn't, I just couldn't see him as any more than Steve: my Cher loving, hair dressing, eyeliner wearing, great friend.

The last thing I remember clearly was catching Rob's eye, and seeing him stare darkly in our direction, Nikki's arms were around his neck.

I blinked myself awake to sunshine, white sheets, a pillow and bed that wasn't mine. I groaned a little, feeling a small throb of a headache. I remembered now: I had been drinking in the city.

A flood of memory washed over me: Blue drinks, sugar shots, with Steve grinding and feeling me on the dance floor in the bar. I flipped over on my back, my hand hitting warm skin; that woke me up.

I looked over and saw Steve, shirtless, blanket covering him from the waist down. He was smiling, gazing at me. "Good morning beautiful." He said, reaching over and brushing my cheek.

I frantically tried to search my brain: What did I do last night? I rolled my head the other way, tossing my hand on the opposite side of the bed. My heart stopped when my skin made contact with more skin. I whipped

my head to the right, seeing Rob in a similar state also gazing at me. "And how did you sleep, Andi?"

I did a mental inventory of my own body. I could feel my pyjamas on my body, though it wouldn't have been the first time I had dressed after sex; I thought deeper and somehow I knew I hadn't actually slept with anyone. It was in then that the boys began to laugh.

"Oh man, Rob, you were totally right. That was awesome." Steve reached over me with a hand in the air, Rob rolled over to meet him, giving him a high five over my body. They threw the sheets off their bodies, revealing the jeans they wore. As I finished processing their joke, I got to marvel at their bodies before they dressed completely: Two perfect bodies. I started to wish it wasn't a joke.

"Sorry, Andi, I just couldn't help it," Rob said as he grabbed his dress shirt from the edge of the bed. "I knew you probably wouldn't remember anything right away so I thought it would be kind of funny if, you know," Rob shrugged his shoulders and smiled, looking at Steve who was laughing and pulling on his shirt.

"Oh gentleman, there is no rush to get dressed." Tony said as he walked back into the room. Looking at both Rob and Steve, he wasn't shy about checking them out. "It's bad enough you didn't want me in the bed when you pulled off your joke."

"Something about the gay guy in the bed kind of makes it a little less convincing that a threesome took place." Steve replied as he buttoned up his shirt.

“Yeah, which is why I still can’t figure out why you were there.” Tony snapped back as he set my bag of stuff down on the bed with a bounce, and I pushed myself up to look at it curiously.

“Well, it’s eight. So that means Tony lasted exactly thirty minutes before trying to say I’m gay.” Steve said as he checked his watch.

“Honey, I’m not trying to say anything.” Tony replied.

“Ok, someone needs to fill me in. Why am I in your guy’s room, and why is my shit here too?” I asked as I reached to the end of the bed and grabbed a hold on the duffel bag’s handle.

“Nikki refused to room with you.” Rob admitted hesitantly.

“Why?” I asked.

“Well,” he looked at Steve before continuing. “She didn’t like how you two were dancing, and she didn’t like that I was a little jealous.” I remembered this now. I remember dancing a little more provocatively with Steve when I realized I had Rob’s attention. “You actually didn’t seem drunk at all. You didn’t stumble, didn’t slur your words, you even told Nikki that she was, oh frig what was it?”

“You told Nikki,” Steve was giggling. “That she had nothing to be jealous of a ‘fat, junk food eating high school girl’ if she was as hot as she thought she was. I think by then Rob was laughing hysterically, and he put his arm around you for support. I had already had

my arm around your waist, that's how we walked home together." I remembered this too.

I remember being with Steve all night, I remember when we decided to leave that he didn't let me go, and did just as he said, I put my hand around his waist too, but I was more focused on Rob and Nikki. With Gaylen and Beth leading the crowd, walking hand in hand and kissing madly, and Steve and I near the back half snuggling, she kept trying to hold Rob's hand. He kept twitching it away, at one point yelling her name to get his point across and she was grouchy until we got to the hotel.

"Rob, I'm going to put the offer out on the table one last time. I am all yours, completely and totally your slave. I will fulfill your every need." She said so bluntly that I laughed.

"No." Rob was holding my eye.

"Why not?" She purred. "It's so obvious what Andi and Steve are gonna do tonight. I'll be without a roommate for an hour or so. Come on."

I looked around for the missing Tony. Where was he?

"Like hell they are." Rob shot back. "If I have to stay in the room to make sure they don't sleep together, then that's what it takes."

"Oh, voyeurism, I like being watched." Steve purred and the guys laughed.

"Oh for crying out loud, she's not even all that good looking." Nikki looked at me with disgust, but I was

feeling so good I didn't care. I wasn't feeling drunk (though I knew I had to be) but I was feeling bolder.

"I suppose not. But then again, if I'm just a 'fat, junk food eating high school girl' like you said I am, then you have nothing to worry about if you're such hot shit."

The guys laughed again, and I felt Rob put his arm around me. Two guys with their hands on me. Damn, I needed to get like this more often.

"Argh," Nikki growled fiercely. "You know what, crawl into bed with both of them. Be a slut, I don't give a shit. But I guarantee you, when they're done with you Rob will be crawling back to me and Steve will finally admit his gayness." She slammed her door.

I blinked my eyes and was brought back to the morning, to the guys telling me what was going on. "So," I started to ask. "How did I get pyjamas?"

"Beth's." Tony smiled. "I was down the hall with them. We heard the whole thing, it was freakin' hilarious. Beth gave me the pjs so that you would have some clothes. I found it even funnier when I came into the room and the three of you were snuggled on the bed watching a movie."

I laughed, the memory of Tony laying between my legs while Rob and Steve took their places on each side of me. Ironically, the same sides that I awoke to them this morning.

"So, I really hope I bunked with Tony." I rubbed the bridge of my nose.

“Unfortunately.” Rob pulled on his shirt and smiled at me.

“Ok, where the frig is my roommate.” Nikki came storming in with wet hair and a bathrobe. She looked around the room and seemed genuinely surprised that I was sitting on the bed with the sheets around me, the duffle bag on my lap. “Oh my god, Andi, what the fuck?”

“Umm, you kicked me out, I slept here.” I told her as if I was completely aware of the situation the whole time.

Nikki blushed. “Oh my god, I was totally a bitch last night, wasn’t I? Oh my god, I knew I shouldn’t have drank so much. Oh Andi I’m so sorry.” She sat on the bed and grabbed my hands, pleading. I glanced over at the guys, Tony mimicking a person chugging back a bottle, Steve nodding.

“No sweat.” I replied. She hugged me, her robe breaking open a bit. I had felt enough bare chests in a day to last me a life time. She quickly got up, not fixing her robe, flashing the guys as she left the room.

“Wow, that was disgusting.” Steve said bluntly, turning away to pack his bags.

“I didn’t think I could get any gayer.” Tony put his hands up like he was blocking something.

“How proud are you right now, knowing you slept with that once?” Steve said to Rob, patting him on the back.

“Shut up, Steve.” Rob moved to the side of the bed I was in and grabbed his bag. I gathered fresh clothes and

underwear, deodorant, and my tooth brush and made my way to the bathroom. I figured I could shower away the small hangover. I was very careful to make sure I locked the door.

I stood in front of the vending machine, staring at the Doritos bag that lay just beyond my reach. If it wasn't for the fact that Beth and Gaylen ran down to the nearby burger store to get everyone greasy breakfast, and I had no change, I would be shoving them down my throat right then. I was starving.

"I don't know." Rob said from behind me. His presence and his voice had me smiling. "I somehow don't think the Doritos will complement the burger buns." I turned to look at him, seeing his grin full of wit.

"Oh? Are you starting to imply I'm fat?" I jabbed him playfully in the gut.

He flinched. "I think a curvy girl is far sexier than a skinny one."

"Uh-huh, and that's why every girl I've ever heard has slept with you was about a size two or smaller." I enjoyed poking fun at him, and I loved when he put his arm around me.

"Come on, let's get outta here, Gayl and Beth will be back soon, and we gotta hit the road." I turned, watching him more than where I was going; I knew better than to do that.

"Oh, god, sorry," I said to the blonde I bumped into, but didn't care quite enough to get a full view of her while apologizing.

“Andi?” I froze. I turned quickly after I thawed, and looked upon Ann. She was smiling. “Oh my god, I’m so happy to see you’re still in the city.”

“Well, I...” I started to stammer, pointing behind me.

“Oh my god, I’m calling Eddie right now. You have no idea how long he’s been waiting to talk to you.” Yeah, I did. Almost two months.

“Eddie?” I heard Rob say. He obviously remembered the name.

“Ann, I don’t want to talk to Eddie, I don’t even want to look at Eddie.” I spat.

“Oh yes you do, you want this, trust me. I know you would. Why haven’t you been answering your calls? I’ve been calling and texting you like mad and, oh my god, Andi.” She wouldn’t stop.

“Andi, honey, we have to get going.” Rob said, making a show. He didn’t wait for an answer from either of us. He just turned me around and led me to the door.

When we were outside, it was almost like the movies: the getaway cars were already lined up and everyone was gathered, packed, and ready to go. Rob opened my door and gently pushed me in. No one waited for an answer, they just followed his lead and piled in. Tony had started the car when Beth called my cell phone. I flipped it open and hit speaker phone.

“She looked familiar.” Beth said as I glanced at the hotel and saw Ann standing outside, looking around for me. “What was that all about?”

“She was going to call Eddie, and let him know where Andi was.” Rob said loudly from the back seat.

“Oh fuck, that was Ann?” I didn’t reply, I don’t think I really had to.

“We did all that to get away from the former best friend?” I heard Gaylen add in. “Here I thought it was the ex-husband; Holy shit, talk about running from your past.”

We all laughed, it *was* kind of ridiculous.

“Ok, no more road trips to the city for you.” Tony said after we calmed down a bit. “Promise.”

Chapter 10

The alarm blared and my head pounded. I could hear Beth and Gaylen giggling from down the hall and I prayed that I hadn't woken up to them copulating. I heard the bedroom door open, and knew that I was in luck. I pushed myself up, groaning and rubbing my temples when my hands were free to do so; I had a feeling it was going to be a long day. I remembered it was Monday, and groaned again. As we had to reshuffle the stock for the new releases, and for some stupid reason tomorrow was a big day for new releases.

I got up, raked my fingers in my hair, and felt the knots. I looked down, making sure I was decent, then left my bedroom, I glancing at the calendar on the kitchen wall when I walked in, noting it was the end of August and this coming Friday was marked off with a black square; that was the day Gaylen had to hop a plane and head back to Greece until Christmas. Beth had asked for the day off so she could spend the time with him, and since my schedule wasn't random like hers, she knew I didn't need to write down my hours on the 'horrible day.' With the way I felt that morning I wanted to rip the damn thing right off the calendar. I thought about it. I did it. The folded piece of tape stayed there in the centre of the still blackened square. Apparently, Beth had gone over it with a marker first. I groaned and put the square back.

I contemplated making breakfast, standing in the middle of the kitchen. I could hear the giggles start

again and a yelp coming from down the hall. Then the shower started and I groaned. I knew what that meant; I hated that she was getting laid and I wasn't, and it made me look forward to Friday, the day we would be on level playing field again.

I shuffled my feet towards my own bathroom, deciding I would battle for the hot water. I started the shower, and to my satisfaction, I was winning; At the very least, I was preventing a marathon. I took my time by shaving my legs, conditioning my hair, but I couldn't stay in there long enough. I turned off the water, wrapped my hair in a towel, then did the same to my body.

I opened the door, heard a moan, and groaned. So much for the anti-marathon. I dressed quickly and grabbed my MP3 player, starting the music before I even left the house. I really didn't want to be there, and didn't care that I was going to be extremely early for work. I looked outside, watching the rain come pouring down.

I grabbed a couple of plastic bags, put on a pair of crappy shoes and stuck my good ones in the bags, protecting them. I was wearing a skirt that day, so it wouldn't matter if my legs got a little wet, I could dry those off. I grabbed my umbrella and took off.

My crabby mood made me productive: I arrived at the mall around six thirty; used my key to get in, knowing that the coffee shop folk wouldn't even be there, and walked down the slightly more deserted halls to the shop. I unlocked the gate, stepped in and went

into the office, throwing my purse on the desk. I grabbed some paper towel from the bathroom, to dry off my legs and feet and I changed my shoes, put on my lanyard, turned my store music on low, counted the till, and went to work. The store was ready to be opened, with the exception of the gate being locked, so I decided I would start on the re-shuffle.

The gate moved at quarter after seven, and I had just finished the reshuffle. "Wow," Frank said as he stepped in, coffee cup in his hand. "How long have you been here?"

"Too long." I straightened my legs and brushed my hands together. "The tills all ready to go. Mind if I pop down and get a coffee?"

"Andi, you friggin did the entire re-shuffle, got the store ready, and you wonder if I mind if you go get an effing coffee?" Frank was dumbfounded, clearly, and his voice was going higher than I think I had ever heard it. "Go get a freakin coffee."

I laughed a little and stepped outside.

"Hey," I passed a rushing Rob in the hallway.

"Hey," he said as he ran by, helmet in one hand and coffee in the other.

I walked into the coffee shop a couple minutes later, seeing only Tony behind the counter. It made me a little angrier. He called my drink to the barista and then started punching it into the register.

"Hey you." He said with a grin.

"Hey," I replied, eyeing up the muffins.

"Oh no, what's wrong. Does this have anything to do with Beth calling in sick?" My head shot up.

"She called in sick so she could have sex all day?" I couldn't believe the words coming out of my mouth. "We should all be so lucky to be able to do that."

"Ooh, someone's got their panties in a bunch." Tony said as he went for my favourite muffin.

"Tony, when was the last time you got laid?" Not that that was entirely my problem, but the lack of intimacy wasn't helping my crankiness.

He stood up slowly, dropping my muffin in my bag as he wore a very apologetic expression. "A couple nights ago." He admitted. "The hot new waiter at the Draught." He cringed. "Oh Andi, dear, forgive me. I was weak."

I snatched the muffin out of his hand and slowly gave him the ten. "You're forgiven." I said as I pulled the muffin close, reaching into the bag and breaking off a piece. "I don't live with you, I don't have to hear it." I was then handed my drink. "Thank you." I said after with a smirk.

"Andi dear, you look tired." Tony added sympathetically. "I bet you can't wait for Gaylen to get the hell back to Greece."

"No," I shook my head after taking a sip of my drink. "I just wish Beth would learn that she's not required to scream at the top of her lungs every time she has a..."

"Good morning." Nikki sang as she stepped past me. "Change in drink today Tony. I'll have two Americanos."

The change wasn't lost on me. "What's new with you, Nikki?" I had a hard tone in my voice.

"I think I made some advancements in the Robert and Nicole Department." She smiled smugly towards me. "We talked all last night."

"Oh?" I didn't even try to pretend that I cared.

"Oh yeah. Instant messaging, all night. We flirted, talked a little dirty, and well, I think I made a new impression on him." She giggled.

"Great. Happy humping." I replied bitterly before turning and leaving the shop. I didn't care if they started to talk about me behind my back. I didn't care that she was about to lay the only guy I was truly interested in.

I had made little advancement with Rob in the last month. Then again, I wasn't really trying.

I went back to the store, pushing open and closing the gate with a little more force than I probably should have used.

"Andi, you ok?" Frank said as he stood behind the counter, printing signs.

"Frank, can I work in the back this morning? I can do all the receiving and such. We can trade up and I'll work counter and you can hide out back this afternoon." I offered up.

"Yeah, sure." He shrugged his shoulders. "Sounds fine to me."

I wasn't even social enough to stick around the front until the store opened. I went into the office and dove into paper work.

The morning went by all too fast, and I wasn't actually looking forward to sitting with everyone at lunch. I was given funny looks when I sat down at the table with just a smoothie but I really didn't care.

"So, Rob, what's new with you?" Tony asked as he leaned over his tray.

"Why am I being singled out?" He asked as he leaned back with me. I looked over at Nikki, who blushed a little.

"Well I heard that there was a developing romance with your name on it. I was curious if you wanted to indulge us the details." He waved his hand as I slurped hard on my smoothie.

"I, uh," Rob started to stammer. Great, why not? Why not have Rob blubber over his newly ousted affair with Nikki, as my day was going so well. I looked around the food court, effectively tuning them out, scanning the area for something more interesting.

The day just got worse from there. It wasn't so much that I knew for sure; I mean, how many men in the world had neck length, slick backed, mildly curly black hair. How many men with that hair owned gray sweaters. I was kidding myself, and I knew it. The small tear along the collar told me that I was.

I stood up, and as I did, so did he. And the blonde that sat across from him. I cautiously moved towards him, keeping a safe distance. I heard the people at my table all start to call my name, so I turned sharply and signalled for them to hush. I then went back to my stalking mission.

He moved towards my end of the mall, where my shop was. He had his hand on her back, and I thought I caught a glimpse of a very large diamond ring on her left finger. It wasn't my ring, but it wasn't just any ring either. She leaned her head on his shoulder, and he snuggled her. Damn it, turn around so I can see your face.

I left the safety of the food court, entering the spacious hall where hardly anyone stood. I noticed we passed the shop, and thought I heard her say that she definitely didn't want to go there. That was good, now just say his name or something.

We almost made it to Sarah's salon. They stopped, and she turned to give him a hug and kiss goodbye. She was standing on her heeled tip toes, extending her arms for his neck, what else would she be doing? Then confirmation, he turned his head, and my heart flew, sank, shattered, and then all but disappeared when I looked upon my ex-husband's still very handsome face.

I turned around just as he glanced my way and moved as quick as I could to the Music Stop. I was too late, I think. I'm almost certain that I heard him call my name. I slowed my pace, ducked into the shop, and finished the last forty five minutes of my lunch shaking in the office, unsure if I was crying in anger or heartbreak.

I felt kind of numb that afternoon, working mindlessly and smiling only when customer interaction was involved. All I could think about was Eddie's face, and the glimpse of shock I caught as I turned away. We

divorced about three months ago, and he was engaged. That was probably what Eddie wanted to talk to me about. He wanted to make sure I knew, just in case I was in the city.

I watched Rob leave the art store to go for a smoke. I was jealous, how much had I wanted to smoke in that moment. I did once, in high school because I thought it was cool. Every once in a while when my emotions got the best of me, I got the cigarette craving instead of the fast food craving.

I watched for Nikki to pass by—nothing.

“Andi, you want a break?” Frank asked as he popped his head out the door.

“Yep.” I said quickly and moved out the door as quick as I could. I made my way just past the food court to the small emergency exit that never triggered an alarm, the smokers exit as it were. All mall staff who smoked had to come and go from here as it led to the closed off designated smoking area.

I pushed open the door, startling Rob a little bit who was sitting on the top of an old picnic bench puffing away.

“Christ, Andi.” He cursed as I moved towards him. I sat on the seat portion by his feet. I said nothing, I just crossed my legs and took in deep breaths. Silence lingered for a long time. “Umm, Andi?”

“I’m second hand smoking.” I replied, taking another deep breath.

“What?” He laughed.

"I've had a bad day. I've had to deal with a lot of people's sex lives and someone I really didn't want to see who is..." I stopped, and took a breath. "I'm second hand smoking because I don't want to start smoking." I left off the again part. Probably for the better, as I may have been more tempted to ask for one if I didn't. There was another bit of silence. And then, for no reason but to say it, I spoke. "I'm divorced." There, that was out in the open.

"You're divorced?" He repeated in disbelief. I nodded, and Rob took a long drag, blowing slowly out. I inhaled. "Why'd he leave you?"

I snorted, "Up until this afternoon, I thought it was because he got tired of me." I inhaled again, trying to get more of the lingering smoke in my body.

"And after this afternoon?" He flicked his ashes off to the side. I looked up at his perfect face and felt it was being damaged by the cigarette in his hands. It actually didn't look good on him, his 'bad boy' looks not fitting right at the moment, but I pushed all that aside for the time being; the second hand nicotine was actually making me feel better.

"Now I know he left me for a newer model." I sighed, recounting the magnificent beauty he had to have on his arm. "Tall, blonde, perfect body, classy."

Rob started snapping his fingers, and then pointed his finger with a shaking hand. "I think I remember seeing them. She was buying scrap-booking stuff before lunch, said something about probably coming back later. He was wearing a gray sweater, he's got slicked

back black hair, kinda curly. She was wearing a black trench coat and a dress." He turned and looked at me, reading my face.

"Yeah," I groaned, "That's Eddie and his new woman," I answered. I felt the tears sting the brims of my eyes, but they didn't spill over—they just sat there. Rob took one last puff on before chucking his butt in a puddle and he never broke eye contact with me, curling his mouth to blow the smoke off to the side.

"Eddie," he mouthed, putting all the pieces together in his head. "He's a dumbass," he sounded like this was a conclusion based on scientific fact. "The fact that he left you," lots of emphases on 'you,' "For her," he laced 'her' with disgust that made him smile, and me blush. He shook his head. "Well, I don't think I need to tell you that he's stupid." Rob pushed himself up from the table.

"Thanks," I said sincerely. "For everything." He had done a lot for me since we met, a lot of soothing.

"Don't mention it," Rob replied with a twisted smile. "But if you need another second hand cigarette, you're gonna have to get your fix from Nikki."

"You're quitting?" I was astonished.

"Yeah," his smile widened. "I decided that I'd rather have a social life over blackened lungs."

"How does quitting smoking help your social life?" I stood up, smoothing out my skirt.

He shrugged. "I just have a gut feeling it will enhance my chances at a lot of things. A social life is probably one thing that would be the most improved."

He opened the door, holding it open for me. "That, and it's a great way to get rid of Nikki."

"That's not what I heard you were trying to do." I remarked.

"Oh, her all night talking to me over instant message? Yeah, that was Doug. Hacked into my account." He smiled, giggling a little.

I laughed, and we walked down the dark hall together, remaining pretty much silent. The lights in the brightly lit shopping area were practically blinding, and it took a minute for my eyes to adjust. He started to turn right, but still having a lot of time on my hands, I decided I wanted a coffee.

"Where ya going?" He asked when I made my direction change.

"To the cafe, I still have some time left." I answered as I pointed behind me in that direction. He looked behind him, contemplated something for a minute, and then followed me.

"Doug won't mind if I'm late so long as I bring him one too." Rob followed me as I led the way.

"Someone seems to be in a better mood," Tony remarked as we passed him. He was wiping down tables but stopped quickly, calling drinks out before we got the counter.

"Two Americanos." Rob added after Tony called the order. "I'm getting Doug's too." Tony started putting Rob's order in. "And don't forget to add Andi's."

“Do, I’m getting one for Frank.” I said quickly. Tony called out for a plain coffee after and rung us both through.

“So why were you getting all stalker like today? It was totally creepy.” Tony asked after a couple seconds silence.

“I uh, I just thought I saw someone I knew, that’s all.” I shrugged.

“Yeah he came in here after.” Tony said.

“What?” My jaw kind of dropped, though I didn’t know why.

“Yeah,” Tony said slowly, looking down and toying with the towel in his hands. “Umm, he asked if I knew an Andraia Lansky after the blonde went to sit down.” I think I stood frozen for a minute. “Andi, don’t worry, I didn’t say anything. Who was he?”

“Eddie.” Rob replied for me, turning me around with mine and Frank’s coffee in my hands.

I looked over my shoulder and saw that Tony understood without any further explanation.

When I left the mall at the end of the day I looked around, making sure I saw absolutely no signs of Eddie. I didn’t know what I was looking for, but I did get the vibe I was safe.

I was still in a bitchy mood, and didn’t feel like putting up with anything else that would cause me grief for the day. I also needed an outlet to channel the last of the anger I had coursing through my body. I recalled Beth calling in sick. I called the house, and as I expected, I got the answering machine.

“Gaylen, Beth.” I spoke loud, knowing the machine would pick it up. “I will be home in about twenty minutes. And so help me, if I walk in on you two having sex I will hook up my laptop so that it broadcasts your sexcapades all the way to Athens.”

It was an empty threat; I had no idea how to do any of that. But to my satisfaction, I came home to a fully clothed couple snuggling shyly on the couch.

Chapter 11

I was awakened by a slamming front door. Friday. Beth was taking Gaylen to the airport, going so far as to go through customs just to see him off right to the gang plank. It was six in the morning, and I over slept by a half hour. I had asked if she would wake me up, but should have known that she would forget. I got up swiftly and bolted for the shower.

I washed quickly and dressed rapidly. I was pleasantly surprised when I got ready in under fifteen minutes. Enough time before Tony swung by to check my e-mails, and see what was new in the life of Jo and Danni.

I opened my laptop, clicked on my e-mail, and watched as it told me I had one new e-mail, and not from my mother. A reminder notification. I wondered if at some point Beth broke into my e-mail and set up the date to remind me of her heart break approaching. I opened it.

FIVE YEARS TODAY! YAY!!!!!!

Five years. Well, I knew what that was. The damn date had been so black marked, so important for Beth to be off, and for us to all know that the date was not to be mentioned that I had actually forgot what the day was. As far as I was concerned, I should have been able to have the day off to drink away my sorrows. After all, today should have been five years of wedded bliss with my Eddie.

It would be a dark day. I already felt emotion draining from my body. I wanted to cry, but my eyes were dry. I wanted to scream, but my vocal chords were calm. I wanted to have an all-out hissy fit, storm around the house, jump up and down, and lash out at the world, but my body simply moved to the living room where I sat until I heard the horn of the Fit honk.

I went outside, locking the door behind me, and walked to the car, opening the passenger seat, and getting in.

“Woo-hoo, no more sex noises for four or five months, give me some skin!” Tony’s overly excited voice rang in the car and he sat prepared with his hand in the air. I looked over at him, unable to shake the monotone feel of depression I had throughout my body.

“Not today, Tony.” I heard it in my voice; at least it echoed the heavy emotions.

“What’s going on?” Tony immediately went to worry mode.

“It’s just,” I couldn’t even say the words. “It’s truly black Friday.”

Tony didn’t press, he just nodded his head and started heading to the mall. He put the music on softly, just loud enough to hear, but low enough still that if I suddenly felt like talking, I could.

I don’t even know what went on in the morning. I wasn’t sure if time passed quickly or slowly, I just worked. Frank had to come over and tell me it was time to go to lunch.

I moved to sit at the table, and I hadn't ordered food. By now, the sane, coherent part of myself saw and heard the worry in my friends' voices, Tony even telling Rob and Frank that I hadn't even had coffee this morning. Yet there I was not eating; they disappeared for a minute.

When they returned, Rob sat down beside me, Frank and Tony close by. I looked at his tray of food. A huge thing of fries and a large thing of chicken nuggets. I knew what he was doing, and the inside of me wanted to burst into tears from the sheer kindness of it all, but my shell just reached for a fry and ate it.

"I knew that would work." Rob said, teasing the other guys.

"Hey Andi, you still coming out to the Draught tonight?" Frank asked as he bit into his burger.

"No." I replied. "I'm staying home, sitting in a dark room, with a bottle or two of wine."

"Andi, whatever's going on, you shouldn't be drinking alone. It's not good. Come on out with us tonight." Frank pressed again.

"No, no. I don't want people who know me to see me in the state that I plan to get to tonight." I grabbed a chicken nugget, and just ate it, no sauce. I was turning into a monster.

"Then at least go to Bombay." Frank practically pleaded. "No one goes there locally. It's all tourists."

"That's a really good idea." Rob spoke immediately.

"I'll think about it." I answered.

And I did, all day. When five o'clock hit, I went back to the food court, ordered a burger and fries, and ate alone, almost hiding from Steve, Sarah, and Nikki who all had to work that night.

I was starting to feel, and the emotions were all coming at once; I desperately needed the grease to keep me together. I was shaking by the time I was finished, my soul wrenching a little bit. I dumped my garbage and moved for the door rapidly.

My instinct was to immediately run home, to go and cradle a bottle of hard liquor in a dark room. My brain told me that it wasn't a good idea. Beth would be there, possibly doing the same thing, and would want my undivided attention as she mourned the months ahead without her god. Bombay was looking very appealing. Before I could change my mind, I flagged an emptying cab and went straight to the bar.

I had been at Bombay for about two hours. I didn't know how many shots I had done. I asked Irving, the barkeep, to leave the shot glasses on the bar, so I could see exactly how drunk I was getting; After seven of them, he told me he needed to take them away so he could wash them, and have them for the other patrons. He kept me to one glass, and when I asked if he would at least put the bottle on the counter so I could watch it go down, but he told me that probably wasn't a good idea either. Though he promised that if I finished a bottle, he would let me know.

To me, it didn't feel like I was drinking enough. My brain was just fuzzy, light, and it took a lot to get me

there. I have a feeling from the taste that it was a liqueur of some sort, and he just didn't want me to do anything too hard and heavy. I wanted to be drunk though. I wanted to be toast for the rest of the miserable day.

I threw back a shot. I didn't look around, didn't make eye contact with anyone. I just stared into the bottom of my glass, waiting a while before asking for a refill. Depending on how much I thought about the situation, I either downed the shot, or I took it slow.

I only really paid attention to Irving. He was the man dishing it out, keeping me on the train to drunkville. If he asked me if I wanted another, I wanted him to think I was coherent enough to handle it. I wasn't impressed when I heard him start to pass off the bar. I didn't want him to leave. He was giving instructions to a guy named Roy, Randy, or something that began with an 'R.' R guy told Irving to have a good night, and I was sure this man would kick me out soon enough. Irving at least understood that I needed this. That, or he knew I was probably going to tip very well in my state of inebriation.

I heard a sigh. "At least you decided not to drink alone." I looked up, seeing his perfect hazel eyes looking so heartbroken. "Are going to talk to me about it?"

"What the fuck does it matter to you?" I replied, looking away. Even like this I couldn't look him in the eye and remain cruel. I wanted to be alone. If I wanted to talk to Rob, I would have.

“Andi, I’m your friend. I care about you, deeply. I’m worried about you. I’ve never seen you like this, so cold and unfeeling.”

“Huh, yeah, I suppose you would know what cold and unfeeling was like, you do it so well.” I was harsh, and Rob turned away immediately. He really didn’t deserve it, and I actually felt bad about it, it just took a second to get through.

There was only one other person at the bar, that I could recall, and he was on the other end playing video poker or some other type of gambling. Rob looked around, and then grabbed a bar rag and started whipping glasses.

I didn’t know if they had just been washed, or if bar keeps really did just stand there and whip glasses when people weren’t around. Watching him, I changed from feeling bad to downright guilty, I could see that he was enraged, and Rob didn’t deserve any of it. “I’m sorry, Rob. You aren’t like that, not anymore.” I looked back down at my glass, guilty. I knew I had his attention, I could feel his eyes on me. “Today would have been my fifth anniversary.” I said bluntly, like ripping off a band-aid. Only the band-aid covered a wound that was still wide open.

I looked up; met his eyes. They were sad, his face filled with more understanding than I deserved. He grabbed the bottle from under the counter, a green tinted thing, and poured more alcohol in my glass, then grabbing a shot glass for himself, poured another. He lifted the glass in the air. “This one’s on me,” he

said as he raised his glass in toast (and somehow in unison) with me. I didn't baby this one. I threw it right back. We sat there in silence for a long moment. "Would have been around three and a half for me." He said as he poured another shot. "Almost four."

"You're divorced too?" I asked, feeling the fresh rush of incoherency rush to my head. This one just didn't feel like it was going to stick. I really didn't want it to. I really didn't want to be drinking anymore.

"Worse," he said with a bitter smile, looking around. I think he was checking to see if anyone was in ear shot (which they were not) before he made his confession. "I was left at the altar."

"What?" I didn't believe him. Who would be stupid enough to leave this gorgeous, perfect man at the altar? He nodded his head. "It wasn't Nikki, was it?"

He laughed, "No. We met at a music festival." He took in a deep breath. He wouldn't look at me. "She took off with a friend of mine from college, who was supposed to be my best man, but a month before that an emergency came up, and he couldn't do it anymore. I guess I figured out why. She pulled a Mary-Jane from Spider-man stunt and got her maid of honour to hand me the note as the wedding march started to play. I could see past her when the doors opened though. I could see the veil on the floor, and the church door open; I knew." He poured another shot and hit it back hard. I stared at the pain on his face and I felt my heart melt. He poured me another drink, though his sad eyes could have been seeing it from a different view. Maybe

this is what he did after 'Mary-Jane' left. It made me wonder if I was really right to be doing this.

"So what did you do after that? I threw out Eddie's favourite sheets." I said, as I sipped my drink.

Rob snorted. "You were far kinder than I was." He put the drink away and turned away for a minute. He went over to the sink and started to wash his shot glass. He was drying it with another bar rag as he walked back. "She only had her wedding dress to wear, for one. She didn't have any credit cards to buy new ones with, I cancelled them. Ahh, let's see. She had no place to go, I changed the locks. I threw out her possessions. Wait, I was a little nicer than that. I put them in a garbage bag and set them outside our apartment."

"Did she come back?" I felt the smile on my face. It caused him to laugh, that or I was far more intoxicated than I thought I was.

"Yeah, oh yeah. She did. They did, actually. But I wouldn't let them in. So she could only take the bag of stuff I left outside. Would you believe she tried to get the police to intervene? When they came by, I showed them that it was only my name on the lease; I even let them look for any signs that a woman lived with me. Made her look like a total psycho." He laughed at his form of torture. "A couple weeks later I packed up and moved here. Got away from her. I think she actually rents that place now."

"I wish I could have been that cruel. I would have loved to hurt him, I just couldn't." I replied, sipping my drink.

“Well, you’re a far better human being than I.” He drew in a breath. He finally met my eye, a sense of relief radiating from the small smile on his face.

“I think we’re probably on equal grounds.” I smiled, finishing my drink. He reached underneath the bar for the bottle but raised my hands in protest. “Tea, actually, would be great. I need to sober up.”

He nodded his head, moving to the back counter again but turning on a kettle this time. As he came back a young guy approached the bar. He looked like he was barely the legal age. He ordered a pitcher and Rob filled it with skill. I could never pour beer without there being lots of foam. They exchanged beer for cash and the young man left. Rob didn’t return to me, he went back to the counter, the kettle was ready apparently. He opened a cupboard below, and reached down and snatched the tea bag so quickly it came across as a blur. He had a mug down from the rows above his head just as quickly, and dropped the bag in it, filling it with the hot water, and then turned back towards me, setting the mug down. “Milk, sugar?” he asked with another smirk. I didn’t know why he found this amusing. Maybe because people were supposed to drink black coffee to sober up, and my choice of drink was already strange.

“Milk, if I could?” I asked, feeling my mouth slur only a tiny bit. His smirk turned into a full blown grin with a hint of laughter as he reached under the counter and grabbed a milk carton. “You better do it,” I blushed. Who the hell was I kidding, I was drunk, I

wasn't going to be able to pour. He did it for me without any mocking, somehow pouring just the right amount. "So what are you doing working here? Is this the reason you never come out with us on Fridays."

"Yes." He inhaled, "it's my punishment. I spent a lot of the savings I had trying to pay off the fucking wedding." He paused as his hand rested on a scotch bottle. Scotch, I was sober enough to know what he was holding at least. He looked at it hesitantly, like it was an old friend who led him through dark times. Maybe it was, and talking about all this brought that friend back to the front of his mind. He then tossed it ever so lightly before turning back to the wall behind the bar and placed the scotch bottle among its allies on the glass shelves. "I need to get it back. It was money I was supposed to fly to New York or Los Angeles with, live on, until I got my music career going." He grabbed a glass off the counter and started whipping it down. "So it's kinda important to me that I get it. Even if I don't actually do it, I want the option to be there."

"You're a musician?" I asked, a little stunned. Of all the time we spent together, he never mentioned it. Rob nodded. "So, is that why you hated me when I was hired at the Music Stop?" I asked him, afraid to know the answer.

"Ah, yeah, I guess you could say that." He hung his head down and set the glass on the counter, when he looked back up at me, his mouth was twisted, unsure whether to smile or frown, "you saw that did ya?"

"It was hard to miss. You just didn't seem to want to have anything to do with me that first day." I replied, remembering.

"I'm sorry." He apologized, though I didn't think it was necessary. "I probably should have been a little more mature about that. I just get so sick of the art store; I would rather go from supervisor to lacky just to get away. But I'm also picky, so being near art forms, even if it isn't mine, is better than any other job."

"I would apologize for getting the job, but I kinda needed it." I smiled. It almost hurt, after a day of being so stone cold.

"Definitely do not apologize for that," he said. "Ever. You have no idea how much I like having you around."

"Can I ask you something?" I took a sip of tea, "Why hadn't you ever told me you were a musician? All the times we hung out, and everything. I mean, does anyone else know?" I took another sip. "Does Nikki know?"

He laughed. "No, Nikki doesn't know, no one does. I play here, during the week when the lounge is a little more full with tourists and business travellers. I'm a little shy about it. Becca, she was the last person whom I was decently close to who heard me play. Now I do it for strangers. It's easier." He looked around the bar, making sure no one was waiting for him. "So tell me, what's your favourite kind of music?"

"Rob, you work across the hall from me, come in every other day, and you have to ask me what my

favourite music is?" I took a big drink of tea. I slowly felt myself sobering up.

"Whenever I come in, Frank or Tiffany, or who ever play their choice of music. I've never actually been able to hear what you play when you're by yourself." He set his elbows on the table. "Come on, what are ya? Secret metal head? Gangsta Rap." I laughed. "Come on tell me."

"Fine," I rolled my eyes. "Jazzy rock, pop." I replied.

"Ew, really?" He made a scrunched up face. I picked up the towel from the counter and threw it in his face. We laughed together. I never thought laughing could be equated with an orgasm, but this one did.

The bar suddenly picked-up, Rob had to stop our little conversation. We could, however, have little spurts and banters with each other when he walked by me. I loved watching him, he was an excellent bartender. He even did little bottle tosses and turns to pour drinks. The tourists loved him, especially the young girls who tried to flirt with him. It made me feel territorial and jealous.

As the hours passed, the hands hovering around eleven o'clock, I was sober. With my senses intact and my emotions calmed, I figured it was time to head out. I put a couple of twenties on the counter, knowing that tea couldn't be that expensive but wanting to leave a really good tip, and hopped off the bar stool. I started to put on my jacket, wrinkled from sitting on it all night.

"Where you going?" Rob asked curiously as he passed by me with a drink for a patron.

"Home," I replied, gesturing in the general direction of the clock. "It's getting kinda late."

"Stick around, I'll drive you home." He said it with a half smile, and he paused in his run, putting his hands in his back pocket. "It's not like you work tomorrow."

He had me, and I didn't want to say no anyway. There was a fairly strong sense of electricity in the air when he was around, and I liked the high. I took off my coat and set it back down on the bar stool.

By the time the bar was closed, and Rob was ready to go, it was after two in the morning. He had to do a little clean up: loading the glasses in the dishwasher, sweeping and mopping the floors, putting the liquor back. I didn't mind helping him, and he didn't stop me. It wasn't a lot of work, due to the size of the bar, and it allowed us to leave by twenty after.

He locked the giant doors behind us, and then walked towards his bike. I went for the saddle bag, remembering that's where the extra helmet was, and took it out. "You're going to have to re-adjust the straps. I had to give Doug a lift home the other night." He said as he put his on. He was brave, not taking it in with him on a busy night, but he probably never did.

I put the helmet on, adjusting the strap beneath my chin and climbed on the back as he climbed on the front. He turned the key and the bike roared to life.

I didn't even have to tell him where Beth and I lived. He seemed to know the way already. Either a sign of the

size of the town, or Rob had been there before. I didn't want to know.

He pulled up by the front door, and propped the bike up on a kick stand, leaving it idle as he climbed off, and in turned helped me off. I took off the helmet and shook my hair out, not that I think it would have mattered.

"Thanks for the lift," I suddenly felt the blood rush to my face. I looked at the ground. "And for tonight. It was really..." I was lost for words.

"No problem." I knew I didn't have to say anything else. Rob and I really had bonded over the last couple of months, and was almost as good a friend as Beth or Tony.

I felt the twinge, the crush, pounding in my chest in that moment, and I wanted to look at his face. The day started out so miserably, and without my even wanting him to, he made it so much better. I forced my head up, looking into his eyes.

They were anxious, nervous, and quickly avoided my gaze, looking down at his feet. He breathed a laugh. "Fuck this shouldn't be this hard."

"What shouldn't be?" I asked him.

His eyes shot up and he clearly didn't realize he said what he did out loud. He started to look around. "Um," He shuffled his feet, "You can say no to this and all, but I would like you to come by Bombay on Tuesday night."

“Why, what’s Tuesday, do you work again?” I asked as I handed him back the helmet. He turned and put it back in the bag, buying himself some time.

“Ah no, it’s when I play.” He smiled weakly. “I’d like to think of myself as a jazzy kinda rock star.” He was nervous, he laughed at himself.

I smiled. I liked the invitation. “And what makes me so special that I get this invitation?”

He smiled. “‘Cause you’re Andi.” He shrugged. “Is that a yes?”

I bit my lip from smiling too big. “Yeah, it’s a yes.”

I thought about it. It almost sounded like a date. Just on the verge of one, but not fully. It wasn’t like he was taking me to dinner and we were going to spend intimate one on one time together. He was just inviting me to hear him play. He smiled too, not hiding it.

“Alright then. Umm, so, meet me there on Tuesday night. At seven.” He said as he climbed onto his bike. “I’ll be the one with the guitar.” He seemed excited, but that could have just been me reacting to him.

“We will see each other before then, you know. Like Monday, when we go back to work.” I reminded him, quickly reverting to teasing.

“Monday,” He closed the front of his helmet before he kicked away the stand and revved the bike. He turned away from me as I waved and drove off.

I turned back to the house, feeling unrightfully giddy. I opened the door, unlocked already, and stepped in. I hadn’t noticed, as Beth had the curtains

closed, that all the lights were on. She had been waiting up.

I would have thought she was angry with me, what with my abandoning her on the day Gaylen left, until I saw the shocked look on her face. She was standing next to the living room window with a view of the driveway.

"Was that who I thought it was?" She asked in disbelief.

"Yeah, it was Rob. He gave me a lift home."

"From where, his place?" Beth almost sounded mad with me, but I didn't care.

"No the bar." I thought about what I was going to say. "He saw me there and got me out of my drunken stupor." It was the truth, just not the whole truth.

"Stupor? Why were you drunk, darling?" She came over to me and grabbed my arms.

"It was supposed to be mine and Eddie's fifth anniversary." It sounded so unimportant now.

"Oh my god, oh I'm so sorry. Oh I'm a horrible friend. And you stayed out all night, oh I'm sorry."

"Beth it's ok. I did want to be alone, and I did want to be drunk out of my mind. But after I started talking to Rob." I trailed off.

Beth cocked an eyebrow. "Is there something you've been keeping from me? I mean, you two look like you're kinda cozy with each other. I mean, Steve doesn't really like Rob too much lately, and now you're drinking away divorce wounds with him? Are you two..."

“No, we aren’t anything.” I moved and sat down on the couch. “But.”

“But!” Beth got excited, sitting down next to me. “I like butts.” She twitched her eye brows. “What’s the but?”

I smiled uncontrollably. I blushed. I twisted my mouth before I finally said, “I think I’m going on a date with him on Tuesday night.”

I think I wanted to live in the denial that Rob could have been interested in me in that way. I wasn’t sure if my dancing with Steve counted where there were no feelings from my side of the spectrum. But even if Rob wasn’t, I could live in the dream that I was more than a friend to him.

Beth’s eyes got big as she processed what I told her and enjoyed the smile that spread across her face. “Oh my god, Nikki is going to shit!” Beth reached behind her, grabbing, and hugged a lime green pillow. “You have to tell me about it. Everything.”

I smiled, seeing my day, or at the very least my night, from a whole new perspective as I recapped everything.

Chapter 12

Monday couldn't come fast enough and I don't think I had been this giddy for the weekend to be over since I was in high school. Especially because it had everything to do with a guy. I popped out of bed exactly when prompted by the alarm, showered, shaved, conditioned, though I knew that none of these extras would actually make that much difference on my appearance. And I wanted to be very careful to not let it seem like something had changed, I didn't want him to see how eager I was for Tuesday.

I popped out of my bedroom all dressed, ready to go, and smiling. I had so much energy that I decided to mimic Beth a little, putting in an ear bud of my MP3 player in my ear and dance around the living room until she came stumbling out in her uniform, exhausted, and with a glare just for me.

"You're too peppy." Beth stated. "And Tuesday isn't even here yet."

"I know," I gushed, "But its tomorrow." I beamed.

"Yeah," Beth said flatly. "It is tomorrow. Can you turn it down a notch until then?" she asked almost coldly. I turned off my music and then put my player in my purse, taming it down as much as I could. Beth out right laughed at my efforts. "Oh my god, you're funny."

Tony honked his horn, and I noticed that it was running a little late. We grabbed our purses and headed out the door.

"Get your fabulous asses in this car. I totally over slept." Tony called through the rolled down passenger seat window. He didn't move from the driver's side. I let Beth slide in the front and popped into the back.

"Late night, Tony?" Beth asked, sounding a little grumpy with him as well.

"Yeah, totally. You know Gary, the new waiter from the Draught?" Tony started to explain.

"You mean the one you slept with last weekend?" I teased.

"Shut up. Yes. Well, he and I didn't talk all week, which I was like, totally pissed about. But, anyways, he found me on Live and added me, and we talked all friggin night long. I'm so stoked, we may totally be seeing each other again this weekend." Tony took his hands off the wheel for a second to clap them together and then promptly put them back on.

"Yeah, I saw you online at two in the morning." Beth elbowed him gently.

"And what were you doing on there? Getting cyber frisky with Gaylen?" Tony taunted right back.

"He just got back, he was letting me know all was well." Beth retorted with a smirk.

"And what about little miss perky back there? What time did you get to bed, seven?" Tony was in a teasing mood this morning, which only fed my giddiness.

"She has a date tomorrow night." Beth replied.

"Beth!" I protested.

“Oh my god! With who! And don’t tell me Doug.” Tony was trying hard not to turn around and look at me.

“Rob.” Beth smirked.

“Bitch.” Tony hissed at me.

“It’s not a date. Not exactly, we’re just going to hang out after work, is all.” I tried to defend myself, but my smile wasn’t giving me the best defence.

“Twenty bucks says he’s gonna lay her.” Tony looked to Beth as he pulled into the parking lot. He killed the engine when he reached his normal parking space.

“I don’t make bets on things that are certain.” She said as she got out of the car.

“Thanks for thinking so highly of me guys.” I said as I climbed out of the vehicle.

“She lives with you,” Tony said. “You can always manipulate the situation to your advantage.”

“True.” I followed them into the mall. It was just after seven, and the other coffee shop girl was already there, getting the coffee brewed. She scowled at Tony and Beth as they walked in though she couldn’t say anything, seeing as Tony was the head supervisor.

“Guys, it’s not a date. Honest.” I replied, leaning on the counter. “I thought that Friday, when I was a little tipsy, that yes it seemed like a date. But now that my head is clear, it’s totally just two friends hanging out.” I heard Nikki’s heels coming up behind me and moved instinctively.

“Ugh.” She groaned. “My weekend was absolute shit. Rob was supposed to meet me at the Draught Friday

night. Never showed. Only Doug came. Then the bastard wouldn't stop texting me all weekend." She put her hands up and shook her head.

"Morning guys." Rob's voice sent chills up my spine and caused a smile to try and push through the corners of my mouth. I suppressed it as best as I could. "Andi." He said with a large grin, stepping up to the counter to get his coffee.

"Hey." Nikki snapped, breaking my high. "You and I need to talk." Rob started to walk away but she followed him.

"Yeah Nikki?" I heard him say as he walked away. We all heard her go on her little rant as she stalked him down the hall.

We all looked at each other and rolled our eyes. Something about Nikki was the perfect cure for all things happy. I felt instantly normal.

"Well, I guess on that note." Beth said as she walked away from the counter to the back.

"Yeah, let us all start the day." I said as I got my drink from Tony and went to work.

Monday passed by far quicker than I thought it would. With the reshuffle taking place, and an unusually busy day for shoppers, there wasn't much time to think about anything. Even lunch felt rushed; all of us needing to pretty much eat and hurry back to cope with the especially large crowds.

When five o'clock came I passed by the coffee shop to see if either Tony or Beth would be leaving soon. I instantly noticed that the night boy wasn't there, and

the line up that the two of them had to deal with by themselves. I didn't bother telling them I was leaving. I would probably be home before they got off work.

I started walking a little ways along the front when I heard the beautiful sound of a motor cycle engine rev behind me. I stopped, fighting back the smile, and turned to face him. "Hey."

"Hey," He said after he lifted the visor. "Wanna lift?"

I walked up a little closer to the bike. "Are you heading my way?" I asked with a smirk.

"No," He replied. "I'm heading to Bombay. Gotta work tonight."

"Then no." I replied. "I don't want to make you late for work."

He nodded his head. "Still on for tomorrow night, though, right?" He asked, he wrinkled his face, like he was bracing himself for something.

"Of course." I loved how he smiled.

"Alright. Tomorrow then." He then closed his visor, revved his engine, and then took off. I watched him.

"Hey." I heard Nikki say as she pulled up her Sunfire. "What was that about?"

I shrugged. "Wanted to know if I needed a ride." I didn't lie entirely.

"So I take it you don't?" She was cold.

"No." I shook my head.

"Good, cause I need to talk to him." She didn't even say goodbye. She just took off after him. I watched her too as I walked, and watched as she made a turn left instead of right. She didn't see where he went. If his

second job was a secret, it was safe at least. I popped in my headphones and walked home.

Despite it being the big day, I wasn't as alert or peppy when I woke up. I stumbled around a bit, fumbling as I tried to start my day. At least I was starting with a grin.

Beth was snoring loudly down the hall. Tonight was her night to work, and I was trying to be extra quiet as I left and started to head to the mall. It was raining, and I hid under the shelter of my umbrella. Nikki passed me with a honk, but never bothered pulling over. At least she avoided the puddle forming on the side of the road. She could have easily splashed me if she wanted.

I went to the cafe, like any other morning, only Tony was off and no Beth, so I actually had to place an order. I then went down to the Music Stop, unlocking the gate, and stepping in. I saw the light on across the hall, and could make out the tops of Rob and Doug's heads a couple aisles back. I took a deep breath. It was a normal day, I just had to keep thinking that.

I managed to put out all the new releases, receive them, and file it all away before Tiffany came in at noon.

"Heading to lunch?" She asked, seemingly surprised.

"Should I not be?"

"No, it's....I don't know. I don't know if you want to go." Tiffany seemed a little on edge.

"What's going on?" I asked a little confused.

"Nikki, from NY fashion. She's, umm, sitting alone, in the middle. She's a little angry, I think."

"And that's supposed to stop me from eating?" I tried not to laugh.

"Well, no." Tiffany said. "It's just, I know you guys all try and eat together. But, I mean, she's kind of a bitch."

I laughed. "I'll take my chances."

I stepped out of the store, and looked over to Rob and Doug. They seemed hesitant. Maybe I should be proceeding with caution. But they came out when I did, and the three of us walked very close together while we made our way there. Along the way, we collected Steve, who waited patiently for us, unwilling to join Nikki on his own.

We could see her clearly too. It was almost like she had a light shining on her in a dark room. We all went to the burger place together, and all waited until we were all ready before moving as a group. We slowly sat together and waited for her to speak.

"Ok, get this." Nikki suddenly started. "They're saying I'm probably going to lose my position as manager when miss Heather comes back from mat leave, even though she was only assistant, because, get this, she's more friendly than I am. I apparently make the merchandisers uncomfortable, and the delivery people don't like coming when I open. Because I'm too demanding. I mean, really is it so freaking bad that I want perfection?"

"Well," Steve spoke with caution. "You could be a little nicer."

“Ugh! You’re supposed to be helpful and supportive.” Nikki stood, slamming her chair back so it fell with a large thud on the ground, and stormed off without picking it up. Steve bent down and moved it out of the way, a mother passing by, telling her kids that it’s not polite to act the way the lady just had.

“Alright. That was interesting.” Steve said after we got the table straightened back out. We started eating. “So Rob, Doug and I were going to get together with Frank and Tony and head to the Draught tonight. Guys tournament starts tonight. Whatta ya say?”

“Umm,” I saw him steal a glance in my direction. “Can’t tonight. I have plans.” He replied, stuffing a fry in his mouth while still holding onto his burger.

“Oh come on, you can screw some chick on another night.” Doug jabbed him in the elbow. Rob shot him a glare.

“I’m not screwing some chick tonight, Doug.” Well, that’s disappointing. “I’ve got plans. I can’t break them. Another night. Really, Tuesdays I’m always busy. Is it on any other night?”

“Yeah, they’ll switch to Wednesdays in a couple weeks.” Steve waved his hand. “It’s all good, we only need four to start.”

The rest of lunch passed by uneventfully, and the afternoon dragged on. I was working the counter, having not much else to do but stare across the hall to Rob, who was staring back at me. I liked this game.

When five o'clock came I ran for the doors. I don't think I moved so fast to get home, and I loved having the house to myself to get ready.

I showered, again. I dressed in what I liked to think of as my sexy jeans, the ones that hugged my hips in just the right way without giving me a muffin top. I put on a really flowy, pretty teal t-shirt. I looked hot, I looked like I was going on a date. I did my make-up, picked a pair of comfortable heels and called a cab.

I was a ball of nerves.

I walked shyly into the lounge. I looked around and felt kind of out of place. There were a lot of tourists here, and I didn't recognize any of the faces. Nervously, I headed straight for the bar. I recognized Irving, and I really hoped that if he remembered me, it wasn't for anything I did when I was drunk. He looked at me hard at first before his eyes got big.

"Andraia?" He pointed at me with squinted eyes. The man's facial expressions changed pretty quickly. I just nodded. He pointed to an empty table with two chairs sitting together. "Rob saved that table for you. What did you want to drink?"

"Umm," It was a work night. "A toasted almond?" I wasn't sure what I should order. Irving just nodded his head.

"Alright, have a seat, I'll bring it over." I went to dig for my wallet. "No no, Rob told me you weren't allowed to pay for any drinks."

I blushed, I know I did. I couldn't control it, couldn't hide it. I turned around and moved very quickly to my

seat. I reached into my purse and searched for my phone. I turned it on vibrate, not wanting it to ring in the middle of his performing. That would be humiliating. As I closed my phone, Irving set down the fancy glass with the white drink. I took a sip, it was perfect.

My heart wouldn't calm down. You would swear the way it pounded in my chest it was me taking the stage. I tapped my foot in anticipation. Then the lights dimmed, and my breathing practically stopped.

He looked good up there, holding his acoustic guitar, sitting on the stool. There was a band backing him up, but he was still the most prominent thing on the stage. His black dress shirt made his body look fantastic in the lighting, and I remembered the night in the city, and my first day in town. He wore jeans, making him feel more casual.

When he opened his mouth to sing, I was shocked at what came out. His voice was beautiful, and it just about took my breath away. The song was an original, something I hadn't heard before, and it was great. I may have been a little biased, maybe the crush that I had for Rob made me think everything he did was great, but I sincerely thought he was talented. He genuinely seemed to enjoy being up there, jamming with the band behind him. Between songs, he would thank the crowd, make a few jokes, and sometimes even tell the audience what the song was about.

"This next one," He said before one number, "is a lust song. It's written about a little fantasy of mine." It

was beautiful, erotic, and honest. I had no idea who it was truly meant for.

I was satisfied that he saw me, held my eye, smiled at me during his sets. It was feeling like a date, at least from my side. I knew I had to keep my raging emotions at bay.

It was two hours long, and when he was finished, he got a standing ovation from the crowd, with myself included. He set his guitar on his stool, folded his body in half for a large bow, placing an arm in front and behind him. When he was done thanking the crowd, he hopped off the stage and came over to the table. He sat close: I could smell his cologne, feel his warmth.

"What did you think?" He asked biting his lip. I loved that he was nervous.

"Wow," I replied shaking my head. "You are amazing." He snorted, "no really you are. Your music is so moving, so honest." I was honest, but what else could I say?

"Well, a lot of it came from honest situations." He replied with a thin smile I don't know if it was nerves or sadness, but I figured the latter was more appropriate, he played a lot of sad songs.

"It sucks, doesn't it?" I asked, a smile playing on my mouth as I thought of the irony. "We love them so much we put our lives on hold to start one with them, and then they pull the rug out from under us?" Rob looked at me a little confused. "I was going to write," I offered up my deep secret. "I was going to be a novelist and then Eddie told me I needed to be more practical.

Look where I am now. And you? She obviously did a number on your heart if you have so much real heartache in your music.”

He nodded his head. Irving brought him a beer, but Rob had hardly acknowledged him. He didn’t peel his eyes away from me. “So have you tried? Since he left?”

“To what, write?” he nodded his head and I shook mine. “I haven’t been able to. I didn’t want to write a sad story.” I took a sip of my drink as he took a sip of his beer.

He ran his finger quickly up and down the bottle. “How are you, anyway?”

I was smiling, so it was hard for me to not be happy. I shrugged. “He’s moved on, I should too. I mean, I’ve been trying anyway.” I laughed and blushed. Damn it, I wasn’t doing a great job keeping myself together. He smiled.

“You’re doing far better than I did.” He took another drink. “I really admire that about you, Andi. You have amazing strength.” He brushed a lock of hair from my face and I think my heart stopped. The brush of his skin was electrifying, and a jolt of adrenaline rushed through my veins. I think I was high then.

“Trust me,” I breathed. I felt anticipation, a new rush just pulsing through my body. He was smiling. This seemed all so easy to him, like it was absolutely nothing to make me so weak. “I’m not all that strong.” I admitted a truth that applied to so many things. His smiled faded.

"I think you are. I'm the weak one." He replied shaking his head and studying my face, eyeing my lips.

I knew I twitched, I felt it, sensing my head lean slightly. I couldn't stop it, couldn't control it, and prayed that he didn't catch it. He did. He leaned in, arm on the back of my chair, other hand on the table. He was cautious, slow, and probably pretending for my benefit to be cocky or confident.

His lips were so soft, far softer than I was expecting. He was better than I imagined, being just firm enough without being rough. There was another rush of adrenaline, another high, as I kissed him back. His hand went up and gently held my chin. I don't know how long he kissed me for, but it was gentle, easy, careful.

I opened my eyes when he broke away, catching the surprise on his face, and the fear in his eyes. He laughed nervously, cleared his throat, and looked away.

"Umm," he said as he wrinkled his forehead. "I'm, a..." He scratched the back of his head. I could only stare, and feel stupid. He composed himself, and took a drink of his beer, a long, hard, finishing drink.

And just like that, the high was gone. I made him speechless, and it didn't come across that I had done so in a good way. I wanted to run away, quickly. I even eyed up the door when he looked away from me. How long would it take me to run home? I was too embarrassed to call a cab. I didn't want to face anyone. Oh, right. Beth. No avoiding her.

I almost wanted to cry, almost. I certainly felt ashamed enough to do it, but my eyes wouldn't even sting with tears, I was still in too much shock. I looked back at Rob, to find some reason to tell him why I would suddenly bolt for the door. Maybe I didn't have to give a reason, maybe he would bolt first.

But he stayed there, looking at me, watching me, and pale. We froze there, unmoving for a while. He reached for my hair, putting his hand gently into the strands, and then froze again before pulling them out. "I imagine you probably want to get home?" He asked, sounding disappointed. Yeah, I would be too if I kissed me. I nodded my head, looking at the floor, horrified. I stood up when he did. "Come on, I'll give you a ride." He waved to Irving, letting him know we were going. He waved back, and then Rob guided me to the door.

The cool night air made my red face feel better. At least that was a good thing about being near water all the time; the summer night air was always comfortable. I spotted his bike, and let him walk me towards it. I felt like running there, maybe he did too. But Rob was polite, and didn't make the move to speed up the process of getting me out of there.

He had left his helmet on the handle, and had only needed to get the spare out of the saddle bag. I looked around us, at the parking lot, the road, seeing if I saw anyone I knew. I thought I spotted Nikki's Sunfire on the road, heading home, and I cringed.

"Andi," I heard him speak and I turned towards him. Smart move, I must say. I wound up in his arms, and he

was kissing me furiously. I wrapped my arms around his neck. If he was dumb enough to try this again, I wasn't going to stop him. I didn't think I could get any higher until he broke his lips away from mine and whispered, "don't go home, please, don't go home." I looked into his eyes. They were pleading.

"Ok," I whispered back. He grabbed a helmet from the seat. I was too pre-occupied earlier to notice he already had it removed from the saddlebag. He put it on my head and I fastened it. The straps were already adjusted to my head. I climbed on the back of the bike as he did. I wrapped my arms almost too tightly around him as he started the engine and took off out of the parking lot.

I didn't know where we were going, but he did. That was clear; he didn't seem to think about what turns to take. I quickly figured out, as we sped by it, that he wasn't taking me to the motel. Not my place, not a motel.

He pulled into another sub division, one with more boxlike houses and a cheaper exterior. He drove a little way before he pulled into a driveway. I caught the name on the mailbox. His place.

He killed the engine. I took off my helmet, shaking out my hair, and handing it to him as we dismounted. He had already removed his, and was smiling. As if I wasn't putty enough already. He put the helmet in the bag and then led me to the door. He unlocked it, opened it, and stepped aside to let me in first.

I looked around the dark rooms, the last bit of sun barely lighting it enough to get a good view of his home. I heard him peel off his coat, tossing it on a bench I passed by. He put his helmet down, it made a distinct thud, and I felt him remove my purse from over my shoulder. I turned around to have his hands engulf me, one in my hair, one at my waist. He leaned down, and I practically jumped up to meet him.

He peeled off my jacket, tossing it somewhere on top of his. As he led me backwards, I awkwardly kicked off my shoes. We tripped over ourselves as we lost footwear. I think he cared about tripping as much as I did, he never tore himself off of me.

I started for his shirt. There were no doubts where I wanted this to go. I hadn't had sex for months, I wanted him, the math was simple. I forced his hands off of me as I pulled the unbuttoned shirt off his body. When he could use his hands again he lifted me up off the ground. I wrapped my legs around him. Shame was gone. I was his next victim, and I didn't even care.

I felt my butt hit a bed as he bent down. He moved his hands down and lifted up my shirt, only pulling his lips away because it was needed. I caught a glimpse of his face. I don't think I had ever seen a man with so much desire, need. I went for his pants, he went for mine, as we pushed ourselves backwards onto the bed.

When we were naked, I moved to lay down, his hand behind my head, cradling it. He looked me over, his other hand running up and down the side of my

body. I felt wanted. I was wanted. He kissed me, and while doing so, started the passion.

I enjoyed our after glow, the way our sweaty bodies rested next to each other, the sound of his rapid heart slowing. His hand brushed my bare skin gently; occasionally he kissed my temple. I imagined it was getting late. I would have to head home soon.

He moved and stood up, moving out of my arm, and me out of his. He reached down to the floor and picked up a pair of pyjama pants. I moved too, searching for my clothes, but somehow only finding his, including the shirt I thought I threw a lot farther away than what I had. I picked it up and put it on.

“Did you want to spend the night? I need to do laundry anyway, so you can wash the bar smell out of the clothes you wore tonight.”

Whether it was the break in silence, or the question itself, it caught me off guard. I thought Rob was supposed to be a player. I figured I would be leaving soon, as he didn’t stick around after he was victorious. Then again, wasn’t he supposed to go to my place? That way he could make his narrow escape? At least, that’s what Nikki said. “Sure,” I finally answered.

His reaction fuelled my curious need to stay, his nervous expression twisted into the smile of an evil villain who just found out the hero’s secrets.

Rob pounced towards me on the bed, kissing me hard and quick before he bounced off and gathered our strewn clothes. He left the room, and left me twisting my fingers. Did we just cross a line? Had we just passed

into the realm beyond friends? Friends can spend the night, but they usually don't have sex before they do. Friends also don't make out in parking lots.

I stood up from the bed. Wearing only his shirt made me feel like I was still naked. He'd taken my underwear to be washed with the rest of my clothes. With no bottoms, and no bravery to actually search through his dresser for something, I sat back down, and pulled the sheet around my waist.

A minute or less later, Rob came back into the room, a curious smile played on his face. "What are you still doing in here?" He asked.

I blushed, "I don't have any bottoms." I pointed out the bedroom door. "And you took my underwear."

He chuckled as he walked to his dresser. He pulled out a pair of black boxers and tossed them at me. I caught them in one hand, stood up, and quickly put them on.

"You're kinda funny." He smiled, "I've never seen someone adamant on covering up just after making love to someone." Make love? Did he just say that?

"I'm a little self conscious of my body." I shrugged. Who wasn't though?

"You weren't self conscious fifteen minutes ago." He winked before he gestured out the door. I blushed and followed him out into his open living room and kitchen combo. It made me wish Beth and my place was more like this.

As I sat on the couch, he went into the kitchen. I heard him riffle through the cupboards, removing what

sounded like a bowl, some glasses, and maybe a bag. I absent-mindedly picked up the remote next to me on the couch arm and turned on the television. As I flipped through the channels, I heard him open the fridge. I could hear him cursing something as he stumbled around. As I landed on a CSI re-run, Rob came into the living room carrying a bowl of Doritos and two glasses of soda. I resisted the urge to ask if it was diet as he sat down next to me, curling in nice and close. He put the bowl between us, resting an edge on both our laps.

He picked up a chip and put it in his mouth, his eyes getting excited as he watched the TV. "Oh! This is the one where she dies!" He chewed with excitement and I laughed at his enthusiasm. I picked up a chip, and ate it. They were even my favourite flavour. I smiled, I enjoyed how comfortable we were in this moment. I couldn't believe I was so sure I had ruined things earlier. I didn't even think about my next action: I laid my head on his shoulder, and he shifted to put his arm around me. Everything seemed so natural.

Chapter 13

It was disorienting enough to wake up to a strange alarm clock, even more so when you feel a little more tired than you should, and you realize you aren't even in your own bed. The blankets were different, and I knew that the green plaid comforter would not be mine. Then I heard him groan as he rolled to smack the alarm clock, and my disorientation went away at the speed of light, all replaced with the memories of the night before. I had been out with Rob. I slept with Rob. I stayed the night at Robs, slept in his bed.

He rolled over towards me, and I felt his warm mouth on my forehead. "Wake up beautiful, we have to get ready for work." Somehow that sentence sounded amazing.

"What time is it?" I moaned sleepily as I looked into his equally groggy eyes. His hair was a complete mess, the stubble on his face a little longer than normal. Even though he was dishevelled, he still managed to look downright sexy.

"Six." He smiled thinly through the sleep. "I set it back because I figured we'd need the extra half hour for showers and such."

"We could have showered together," I said as I sat up, holding the blanket to my body.

"I thought you would be too self conscious for that," he said as he sat up and kissed my shoulder, my neck, my jaw line.

“Shut up.” I smiled, seeing his lounge pants on the floor. It made me smile more. He was suddenly up and out of bed, naked and perfect.

“Meet me in there if you want to.” He walked into the bathroom, turned on the shower, and got in.

I sat there for a moment, looking at the pile of my clothes neatly folded on a chair by his dresser. I looked back at the bathroom, seeing his silhouette through the curtain. What difference would it make if he saw me naked one last time? I got up and walked into the room, pulling the curtain back slightly, careful not to startle him. I shouldn’t have bothered.

He practically pounced me as soon as I got in. His warm mouth giving passionate shower kisses. I didn’t bother fighting back, not that I would have wanted to. I wasn’t sure how long this would last, so I might as well draw it out while I can. I ran my fingers into his wet hair and allowed him to take over.

We did need the half hour, but we only used about seven minutes to get clean. It probably wouldn’t have hurt to have another ten minutes, but we would work with what we had.

I got dressed, as did he, and then we went back out into the living room. I made sure I had everything in my purse still, keys, wallet, cell (which as blinking rapidly from missed text messages) and my lanyard for work. I walked to the doorway and put on my shoes. Rob came to my side a few minutes later.

“I’m sorry,” he said as he put on his shoes. “I don’t have anything in the house for breakfast.”

"I'm not that worried, we don't have much time, and we work in a place with a coffee shop." I replied with a smirk. He returned it.

"You have a point." He kissed my cheek. "Come on, let's go." He opened the door, smiling, and I walked out.

It was foggy this morning, and I was a little worried about the bike on the roads in this weather, but he seemed fine with the idea. He opened the bag and gave me my helmet before he got it started. I climbed on the back and we were off as soon as he was sure my grip on him was tight.

We made it to the mall just as the clock hit seven. I hopped off as he killed the engine. I took off my helmet, my hair was still quite damp, and handed it to him. He unzipped the saddlebag and popped the helmet in. Tucking his helmet under his right arm, he tucked me under his left. "Shall we?" He asked with a smirk as he walked to the mall, not waiting for the answer.

I wasn't sure what to make of all this still, I was just waiting for Rob to let go of me, and either pause as I moved forward, or run far ahead. I don't know why I thought he would, but where things went so far the night before. And this morning...

Yet he kept himself by my side, and kept his arm around me even as we approached the door. It did drop, so it wasn't around my shoulder, but around my waist. Even more so, he steered me towards the cafe,

not moving his hand out of sight as it rested on my hip.

“Rob?” I was confused. I honestly wasn’t expecting him to be seen with me in public. I looked up and watched as Beth watched us come into view. An eager, worried face melted as her jaw dropped and her eye brows rose.

“I asked you to spend the night, and I didn’t even feed you breakfast, the least I could do is buy you some.” He said as we approached the counter. He stopped, stepping to the side, keeping his hand on me, as he looked me up and down, assessing me maybe reminding me of the day a month or so ago when we had lunch together on a Saturday. I glanced at Beth, she was smirking now. “Let me guess,” Rob said after his fake assessment. “You’re a mocha girl.” He looked over to Beth for the answer.

“Ah, no.” She trying so hard to suppress a smile. “Vanilla skim latte and an Americano.” She called to the side before she turned back to us. “I’ll let you guess the muffin.”

Rob looked into the case. “She’s not a blueberry girl,” he eliminated out load. “Carrot Pineapple.” He snapped his fingers and stood up. Beth nodded her head with approval, clearly impressed that he got that right. “Make it two,” he looked at me with a smirk. He took his drink and muffin from Beth and then looked around at the empty tables. Was he really thinking of sitting down? Then something caught his eye and he glanced behind him. “Ah, shit. Doug’s heading to the

store." He handed Beth a twenty and grabbed his coffee and muffin as she set them on the counter. "I'm sorry," he clearly meant it. "Catch up later?" He asked his smile confident, his eyes not so much. There was something I really liked about his vulnerability.

"Yeah," I simply replied. What else was there to say? He smiled, leaning in just a little, and then stopped himself. He then brushed his nose against my hair, his lips grazing my forehead and then bolted off in the other direction.

I watched him go out of sight, then turned back to face the smiling Beth. "So, good night?" She asked, though I don't think he could have made it any less obvious.

"It was nothing." I felt the blood rush to my face as I sipped my latte. "I just, it was. Nothing, really, just, something, that happened." I stammered as I felt Beth's eyes watch my reaction.

"Oh my, you guys did it." Beth really wasn't shy about saying the blunt obvious.

"You and Rob?" Tony froze upon going behind the counter. He looked like he had another long night of chatting with Gary. "Oh my god."

"I thought you guys were just hanging out?" Beth twitched her eye brows.

"That's all it was supposed to be," I waved at my cup like it was nothing. I couldn't make eye contact. "It just sorta happened."

"It's what they all say." Tony rolled his eyes in seeming disappointment. He walked around a little further behind the counter

"Oh but he didn't come to our house," Beth caught his arm, stopping him just behind the pastry case. She didn't have to, his interest was recaptured. "She went to his place." And then for added measure, she looked back at me. I could hear Nikki's heels on the floor, and I was praying Beth would keep her mouth shut. I really didn't want to deal with the wrath of Nikki. "She stayed the night at his place." Tony's eyes went huge and he smiled.

"Bitch." He said as he grabbed the tongs from the pastry case and snapped them at my face. He smiled.

"Who's house did you stay at?" Nikki asked as she took a pre-made drink from Tony, handing the bill to Beth. "And why are you a bitch?"

Please, Beth, please don't say...

"She stayed at Rob's." Damn it, Beth.

"Really." Nikki didn't smile, and she drug the word out as if she was disbelieving. "I find that hard to believe. What makes you think that?" She looked at me with a flat face, though I knew I wasn't supposed to answer.

"She didn't come home last night," At least Beth seemed happy I got laid. "And Rob brought her in this morning, bought her coffee, because, and I will try to quote: 'I asked you to spend the night, and I didn't even feed you breakfast, the least I could do is buy you some.'"

Nikki didn't seem to buy it. "Right, I'm sure he did. Cause Rob is anything other than a total player out to get in between every woman's legs in the Trap. If you stayed the night, you must have been pretty sad looking." Ouch, Nikki's words stung. I thought back to the night before. There didn't seem anything sad and pathetic, once we got to his place at least. I decided I would keep my mouth shut, even to Beth, about anything Rob.

"I tried to tell her it was nothing." I said as I looked to Beth and sipped my coffee.

"Walk with me?" Nikki asked, a more friendly tone to her voice. I looked at Beth and Tony, feeling the fear in my eyes. They looked as terrified as I did. Nikki looped her arm in mine, and started to pull me with her through the mall.

She practically forced me to make small talk on our way to the stores. Small talk on anything but Rob, or at least it felt like it. She walked a little way past me as I stopped in front of the CD shop.

"So what are you doing Friday night?" She asked me with an excited tone.

"Nothing, why?"

"I'm thinking you and Beth, Sarah and I can go out together and leave the boys to fend for themselves." She took out her key.

"Sounds great." I replied but she wasn't looking at me. She was looking in the direction of the art store. My heart dropped, and I turned around. Rob was looking over at me, smiling. He lifted his coffee in an

effort to say hi. I wasn't sure if it was smart, but I returned both the wave and the smile. I looked back at Nikki. She was gone, stomping her heels on the floor.

I admit I spent my morning looking over at the Art store whenever possible. I never caught much of a glimpse of him when I did, and I don't know if he even knew that I was stealing glances at him. I'm sure he did, but I didn't want to make myself feel like a loser.

I did get just busy enough around lunch that I didn't see Frank come in, though I heard him at the back. When my small crowd died down and went away, Frank surfaced from the office, a large grin on his face. I had to admit, I hadn't really seen Frank like this, and I was a little worried.

"So," He dragged out the word in a long drawl. "How was, uh, how was the secret date with Rob that none of us knew about until today?" He twitched his eye brows. He already knew the answer.

"How did you know about that?" I asked him, unable to look at him as my face flushed slightly.

"Ok, I lied, me and the guys found out about it last night. I asked them why Rob didn't come with and Tony spilled the beans. You should have seen the look on Doug and Steve's face when he told them. Priceless, total freak out. I had to go by the art store to find out how Doug was feeling. Totally doubled his alcohol intake after he heard that."

I didn't care too much about what Doug thought of the situation. "What about Steve?"

"Ah, he mumbled something about treating you right and went on with the night. But, anyway, when I went into the art store Doug was still totally pissed at Rob. Mostly because Rob told him about last night." He twitched his eyebrows. I think I turned every shade of red possible. "Doug told me, though it's pretty much a given if you go out with Rob, you sleep with him."

"Great!" I sighed. "I'm thoroughly humiliated now. Do you think I could go to lunch now? I need to find a dark hole to crawl into." I asked, stepping down, knowing what he would say.

He looked past me at the door. "Yep, your man's here so I better send you on your way."

I felt his arm around me before I saw him. "Funny, Frank." I looked up to see he was grinning like a mad man. He looked down at me. "Ready?"

I nodded, unable to speak, and allowed him to guide me out of the store. Doug was coming out of the Art store, clearly frustrated, hands in his pockets. I looked up at Rob but he didn't seem to care. "What are you having for lunch?" He asked me. I shrugged my shoulders. "You ok?" He asked, stopping me in the hall, putting his hands on my waist.

I glanced behind him at the food court, at the table that our comrades sat around. I could see Nikki and Steve watching for us, or maybe they had seen us. "I'm not sure if I want to face them." I admitted.

"Are you ashamed of us?" Rob asked me.

"Is there an 'us' to be ashamed of?" I asked him. He raised an eyebrow. Of course there was an us, why

wouldn't there be. How foolish of me to think that the guy who was out of my league would still remain out of my league. "I just, I don't want to know what they think about 'us', this." I offered a little more.

He leaned his head down and gave me a soft, quick kiss. Somehow that struck me as far more sensual than the passionate ones. "What they think doesn't and shouldn't matter. They are going to give us guff for awhile, yes, because my reputation, no matter how stretched, is still there. Andi, I have just slept around, yes. I admit that. But I wouldn't just sleep around with you. You are very different. Nikki is just going to have to get over that."

"And what about Steve?" I didn't bother worrying about Doug. Honestly, I didn't care enough.

"Steve needs to come to the conclusion that what attracts him the most to you, is that your nickname is 'Andy'." He smiled and moved back to my side. "Now, what do you want for lunch?"

"You aren't buying me lunch." I replied as entered the food court. "You can't buy me breakfast and lunch."

"Says who? I don't remember there being rules about that. Besides, if I want to get you into bed with me again, shouldn't I wine and dine you with more burgers and fries?" he twitched his eyebrows.

"No more burgers." I shook my head.

"You can't have just a smoothie, I won't allow it." He fired back.

I didn't respond, I just made my way to the deli to get a toasted sandwich and a chocolate milk. He followed me, even ordering from there which I had never seen him do before, and attempted to pay. I beat him to it. "I'll get his salad too." I pointed to Rob's tray and handed the clerk the bill before he could protest.

"What the hell?" He asked as we headed to our table.

"Well, if I want to get you in my bed, shouldn't I wine and dine you." Clearly, he enjoyed me twisting his words.

It seemed like we were travelling to the table in slow motion, with the eyes focused on us as we went. I sat down hesitantly, Rob far more secure with the situation than I was. He sat down, pulling his chair in closer to mine. I couldn't help but feel stared at, probably because I was.

"So, what's the word of the day?" Rob finally broke the silence, taking a bit of salad.

"You." Was that every person at the table? Yes, yes it was.

"Oh yeah? What's being said about me?" Rob chewed then took another bit. I wanted to find that hole in the ground again.

"Oh cut the crap, Rob." Nikki threw a cherry tomato at him. "What the hell are you doing?"

"I'm eating lunch." He responded after catching the tomato, examining it, then popping it in his mouth.

"No, I mean this bullshit." Nikki gestured to the two of us. "This acting like a couple bullshit."

"We're acting?" Another open ended comment shot back at Nikki. Rob was smirking, clearly he was enjoying himself.

"Oh please, Rob. Buying her breakfast this morning after she stayed the night. Cut the bull and just admit that you crossed the line, you slept with your friend, and felt guilty so you didn't throw her out on her ass last night. I mean honestly, do you really think we believe that you *asked* Andi to spend the night?" I glared at her, but she didn't acknowledge it, she wanted answers from Rob, and only Rob.

I looked over at Steve, who looked embarrassed. Perhaps the two of them came up with a plan to confront us, and Nikki was causing it to go horribly wrong.

"What makes you think I didn't?" Way to defend my honour Rob.

"Because you're a man whore. You sleep with women and then bolt from their homes. You don't fucking date."

"You know what, Nikki? Yeah, I've slept around, and I go back to their place because the last time I brought a girl to my place she stayed the night without asking. And yes, in fact I did ask Andi to spend the night." Rob's voice was growing loud.

"Yeah, I believe it." Nikki rolled her eyes.

"I don't care what you think." I shrugged my shoulders, taking a bit of my sandwich and leaning back. Rob wrapped his arm around me. "If I'm just

another one of his victims then so be it. I got laid, I'm content."

"And you got a free muffin and coffee." Rob added with a smirk. "And Doritos and snuggles last night."

"Wait, Doritos, what flavour?" Beth asked, her interest captured from her phone. She was probably texting Gaylen while the fight broke out. Up until that point she hadn't been paying any attention.

"Zesty." I smiled.

"Oh, yeah, that was *definitely* premeditated." Beth said with a smile. "Setting the trap with bait."

"Now come on, Bethari, give me more credit than that. I wasn't trying to get laid." Rob took another bite of his salad.

"Oh?" Steve tried to sound disbelieving and angry, but his curiosity was coming through in his voice. "What were you trying to do?"

He looked at me with a smile. "I was kind of hoping that we'd get all caught up in conversation and you'd have to spend the night at my place cause it was too late to go back to yours." He shrugged his shoulders. "Something better happened." For a split second I think he was lost in the moment. He leaned in a little and brushed his lips against my forehead like he had earlier in the cafe before he turned back to his food, his eyes on his plate. I was a little dumbfounded, and didn't know what to say.

"This. Is. Such. Bullshit." Nikki cried in frustration. She caught his attention again. I had never seen her so furious. "Call her your girlfriend." She demanded.

"What?" He snapped back.

"Call her your girlfriend, Robert Amirault." She was almost screaming. I didn't want to look to see if we were drawing a crowd, though I would have been surprised if we hadn't. "Say it."

"No." He replied simply, harshly. It stung. I knew the word was the truth because Rob would not commit to someone, truly, after everything that happened with Becca. It just didn't make it any easier to hear.

Nikki leaned in, a smile on her face, content that she caught Rob with her game. "That's exactly what I thought." She was so smug about. "She's nothing more to you then another fuck buddy. So stop pretending, it doesn't look good on you." She stood up. "Which is a sin, because everything else does." She looked at me with a hint of disgust, and major disapproval. "Well, except her." And she walked away.

I hated Nikki.

"I'm sorry." Rob whispered in my ear, pulling me in closer to him. "I just didn't want to give her any satisfaction, and I went about it the wrong way."

"It's ok." I whispered back without looking at him. This time his lips made contact with my temple. I looked at him after that. There was resistance in his eyes, I liked it.

"Huh." Steve said, catching our attention. He leaned back, studied us. "You guys are like a couple."

"No," I shook my head, laughing nervously.

“Yeah, you are. You’re like an actual couple.” Steve studied us for a bit. “It’s, it’s kinda weird. I’ll have to get used to the idea.”

“Yes yes, well, that’s great and all but can we change the subject please?” Thank god for Tony. “Like, say, what we want to do for our Christmas party?”

I blinked. “Tony, September starts next week. Christmas?”

“Honey, you’re looking at the Christmas party committee for Bayside mall, minus three because Frank and Sarah aren’t here, and Nikki stormed off, plus one, you, ‘cause you’re fabulous.”

I was glad the attention was no longer on me and my, well, my Rob. I spent the rest of lunch talking about themes for the upcoming Christmas party while wrapped in my Robs arms.

Chapter 14

My alarm went off and my eyes shot open. I did the same as I did the other morning, I instinctively felt around on my left side, and was disappointed when he wasn't there. Once again, the incredibly sweet dreams that had been floating in my head were gone, and sadly unreal.

I reluctantly sat up, holding the blankets to my body, feeling the cool morning air on my bare skin. I was trying to rub the grogginess from my face when I heard a familiar voice out in the kitchen. I don't know why it took me so long to figure out it was Tony. He'd stayed over the night before, after another long night of Christmas party planning. I groaned, bending down and feeling around on the floor for my robe.

I put it on, got out of bed, and ducked into the bathroom as Tony continued to ramble on. I glanced in the door way before I went in the bathroom, seeing an exhausted Beth sitting at the table with her head on her arms.

I showered quickly, running back into my room and dressed. I didn't care about my hair, my make-up, anything.

"Wow," Tony said as I came out of my room. "Someone looks like hell today."

"Thanks." I replied sarcastically.

"Does this," he asked pointing a finger up and down at my physique. "Have anything to do with the fact you and Rob haven't been, umm, couply since

Wednesday?" So I was practically entirely ignored by Thursday. So Nikki was practically saying I told you so all day. So what? Should that mean I would automatically mope about?

Yes, it did.

"It's because it's Friday and I really don't feel like trying to look decent." I walked over to the fridge, pulling out a yogurt for breakfast. "Besides, this was supposed to be my day off." Lame reasoning, but I had at least thought of one.

"That's no excuse for looking frumpy-dumpy." He gestured to my clothes again. Were Jeans and a plain t-shirt really that bad? "At least let me put make-up on your gorgeous face so that the way too casual look seems like it was done on purpose." He dashed off to my bedroom before I had a chance to refuse. He was back in a moment, forcing me down in a chair and giving commands like "close your eye, open your eyes, look up, look to the side, tilt your head" and so on and so on until I think he applied every variety of make-up I had in my bag. He flashed a mirror in from of my face.

"Ok, I look kind of hot." I hated to admit that Tony made me look better than I could make myself look. "Am I allowed to go to work now?" I asked.

"Yes, as long as you promise not to wash the make-up off your face the second you get the mall." Tony scolded me. I hate that he knew what I was thinking too.

I sighed and followed him and Beth as they moved towards the door. She paused, letting Tony go a few feet

in front of us. "If it makes you feel better," she whispered, "he went through my underwear last night and threw out everything that wasn't a thong. Not only do I have to buy underwear tomorrow, but now I'm going to have a perma-wedgie all day." It did make me feel better, and I laughed. At least Beth found the humour in it too, laughing along with me.

The day passed almost too quickly, with too much disappointment. No Rob, No Steve, too much Nikki, while Tony and Beth were too busy at the cafe to break during our normal lunch hour.

I was now dreading the promised girls time, after spending all my free time with a gloating Nikki all day.

"I *knew* you and Rob weren't really a couple. You two just aren't suited for each other." I was really beginning to believe her. It's a good thing I braced myself for that Wednesday morning. Otherwise, I would have been seriously disappointed. Or at least, more than I am now.

"You're right Nikki," I replied sarcastically from the back seat. Sarah rode up front with Nikki and was currently looking out the window. I could see by her reflection that she was about as interested in Nikki's choice of conversation as I was.

"Well, I mean really. Did you think that he was all of a sudden going to change his ways for you of all people?" She continued to ramble on.

"Nikki was soo, right." Beth impersonated Nikki's tone with an eye roll. She was texting Gaylen, informing him of Nikki's annoying rants.

"You got me." I replied "He didn't. Now, can we please change the subject. I mean, don't get me wrong. As much as I *love* you telling me how completely and totally right you were, I think Sarah and Beth have had enough of the topic of conversation."

"Andi. Stop trying to avoid the fact that Rob and you aren't actually a couple." She said firmly. "Changing the subject is pretty much you being in denial."

"Nikki, I've heard this all day at work. Sarah and Beth listened to it all through dinner. I think, honestly, you've gotten your point across." I was about to snap.

"So do you get now that you should just stay as far away from Rob as you possibly can?" Her tone changed, the end was coming.

"Yeah, sure whatever will get you to shut up." I flung my arms up and hit the roof of the car with my fingers. It kind of hurt.

"Promise." I mumbled and grumbled but said no real words.

"Great! Oh this is great, Andi, really, that you *finally* got the hint."

I felt my phone vibrate in my purse. Twice. I dug it out and flipped it open. One from Beth, one from Sarah. Both saying they were thankful in some way or another that Nikki finally shut up.

We pulled into the Draught, the parking lot not quite full for a Friday night. Then again, it was only eight o'clock. The night was still technically young. We climbed out, only Nikki did so with enthusiasm, and walked into the bar.

“Ladies!” The young and very attractive bartender behind the counter said with a wide smile. We walked up to the bar. “Nikki,” he added with a wink. Ugh, just what I need. Not only was Nikki thrilled that Rob flicked the switch and stopped talking to me, but now she had the guy at the bar hitting on her. This was going to be a marvellous night out. “I understand that you wanted a table away from where the boys would be playing tonight.” He gestured to our left. “I’ve saved you a spot over there. I will bring over the drinks Nikki already ordered in a minute.”

“You already ordered drinks?” Beth was cautious. “What did you order?”

“Blue raspberry martinis!” Nikki replied with a giddy clap of the hands as she made her way to the table set aside for us.

“So to Nikki, a girl’s night means coming to the same place we do every Friday except she orders drinks no one wants to drink but her?” I asked Sarah in a hushed tone, as Beth was yanked away from us by the arm and given a small lecture about texting Gaylen on a girl’s night.

“Don’t forget looking for and at boys.” Sarah rolled her eyes and sighed.

“But you’re married, and Beth is practically married. Nikki and I are the only single girls and, to be honest, I’m only really interested in looking at one particular boy.” I knew Sarah wouldn’t judge my response, or at least not openly.

Sarah looked at me sideways. "I didn't say it was a fun time."

We sat down, the drinks arriving as we did, and Nikki started to ramble on. I was bored and miserable within minutes, practically downing the disgustingly sweet martini in front of me just for the sheer need of a numbing agent, to make tolerating her easier.

My phone vibrated. I instantly glanced up to Beth. Her head was down, looking at something beneath the table. She was still texting. I discreetly went for my phone, flipped it open.

Rob: Nikki's car is in the Draught lot. Is that where you guys are tonight?

I quickly wrote back that we were. A couple seconds later the door of the Draught opened and the sounds of loud, familiar laughter filled the air. I couldn't help but smile; it was all the boys, including Rob. He searched the room, found me, and smiled.

"Ugh, really? I mean, yes, I knew that all the other guys would probably be here tonight, but him?" Nikki looked at me sternly. "You aren't talking to him."

"Who said I was going to?" I asked her harshly. She rolled her eyes and continued her story, or rant, whatever it was.

My phone vibrated again.

Rob: you look like you're having fun.

I tried not to smile. I furiously texted back, asking him why he was here, not at Bombay. I closed my phone just in time for Nikki to think I was paying full attention.

"So, I'm totally going to be getting laid this weekend. I know I will. Have it all planned out." I tuned her back out at she looked away seconds after I vibrated again.

Rob: I've been switched to Thursday nights. Do you want to get out of here?

I sighed, suddenly afraid I was caught in my texting. Nikki looked over at me sternly.

"Tell me you aren't thinking of talking to him." Nikki was exasperated.

I felt my phone vibrate. "Nikki, had it ever occurred to you that maybe I just got sick hearing about you? Why don't you let Sarah or Beth talk, huh?" I asked.

She rolled her eyes. "Whatever, you interrupted my story. So, anyways..." She continued on with her tale and the second she looked away from me, I flipped open my phone and looked down.

Rob: go to the bar. Stand next to the two guys in the black.

I looked up, seeing a group of guys who seemed to be on a pub-crawl, standing near a bigger man who gripped his glass like it was the only thing keeping him from falling off the deep end. The crawl guys were wasted, and I almost felt uncomfortable going over to them. Almost.

"I'm going to get a drink." I said to apparently no one. Beth was lost in communication with Gaylen, Sarah pretending to have interest in Nikki's story.

I walked up to the bar, bringing my empty martini glass and standing closer to one of the crawl guys, putting a buffer between myself and the very annoyed

man. Not to mention it shielded me a tiny bit from Nikki's sight line. The bar tender came right up to me. "Another one, on Nikki's tab please." I smiled like it wasn't a big deal, like I always put my drinks on her tabs. I could feel someone coming up to stand beside me. I glanced over and saw Rob gazing solidly at me, eyes unmoving. I glanced behind me, seeing the sea of people had parted to reveal where I was. Nikki's face contorted in anger; she was getting ready to get up. I was caught. I looked back over at Rob, meeting his eyes. He twitched his arm.

I heard glass break, and felt Rob practically dive towards me as he knocked us both out of the way of the now fighting men. Fists were flying, and pretty soon it wasn't just the two guys, the big one and the crawl guy I was standing next to, but a crowd of them. I looked around, but all I saw were men trying to pummel the crap out of one another. I looked up at Rob who grabbed my hand, proceeding to lead me to the door as a few different people either ran to watch or break up the fight.

We ran towards his bike in the dark parking lot, laughing like we were sneaky teenagers. When we got to the bike, he quickly went for the saddle bag and pulled out my helmet.

"What the hell are we doing?" I asked him, though I was fairly certain that my smile gave away my knowledge of the answer.

He grabbed my face and kissed me a little harder than normal, a little more urgency. "Your place or mine?" was all he said.

"I don't have to work tomorrow." I replied coyly.

"I do. How about we go to my place, get some clothes, and then head to your place?" He contemplated.

I heard the doors open behind us, and was suddenly in a greater hurry to get away before we were caught. It was only the fight moving outside, but still. I put on my helmet. "How fast can you get your stuff?" Beth would probably be dragged home by Nikki.

"Not that fast." Rob replied. I think he knew what I was thinking. "My place and I drive you home before work in the morning?" He put on his helmet and hopped on the bike.

"Ooh, I'm spending the night again?" I asked, genuinely a little surprised but also equally excited.

"You have no idea how much I want you in my bed every night." I wasn't going to argue that. I wouldn't mind being in his bed every night. I looped around him, held on, and within seconds we were off.

When we made it to Rob's, we were laughing again. I put my helmet down on the bench at the entrance, laying my jacket on top of it. He removed his jacket first, dropping his helmet on top of it. But unlike my first time here, he didn't immediately go for my clothes. He put his arms around my waist and pulled me in, kissing me softly.

"What's up with this?" I asked him, faking disappointment.

"I missed you." He said honestly. "I haven't gotten to really kiss you since Wednesday.

"You could remedy that." I said as I reached up and kissed his neck. It was all I could reach when he stood up straight.

"I hate PDA." He emphasized 'hate.' "I love having my hands on you, but I draw the line at lips in public."

"Oh?" I teased, kissing his collar bone, "and what about in the bar on Tuesday."

He swallowed. "It was uncomfortable."

I moved back up to his neck. "And in the parking lot after."

"Necessary," his voice shook. "I wanted to prove I was better than my first impression let on." He tilted his head back.

"And tonight?" I slid my hands up his shirt, feeling his back. He shivered.

"Shut up." He groaned with a smile. Then he engulfed me, growling as he picked me up off the ground. He didn't have a good grip on me, and ended up dropping me near a wall. He pressed his body against mine. After a couple of strong kisses, he pushed himself away.

"What?" I asked him breathlessly.

"I don't know if we should do this." I could see he was being honest with me, but it didn't stop my blood from boiling. "I don't want you to feel like this is all I want from you." That calmed me down, but only a

little. It was enough to remind me that my hormones were now raging uncontrollably.

"Rob, I want this." I went to kiss him but he moved his head back. When I leaned back against the wall, feeling a little unwanted, he put his hands on with either side of me, propping himself against the wall.

"What would you say if I told you that I may want more? My problems with public affection aside, I don't want anyone else to have that option with you. I mean, I want you for me." I could feel my face contort to reflect the confusion I was feeling. He bent over a little, laughing out of what I could only assume was embarrassment. He was a little red in the face, "I'm not very good with words. I think what I'm trying to tell you is you stole what fragments of a heart I had left. I mean, umm."

I put a finger on his lips. "Shut up." I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him as deeply as I could. He moaned, and kissed me back, picking up exactly where we had left off before. He picked me back up, and I wrapped my legs around his waist, pushing my body to be as close to him as physics and clothing allowed. He put his hand behind my head and the next thing I knew, we hit the bed.

"Leave it." Rob's digital voice echoed through the answering machine on the night stand. He had one in the living room too, being digitally linked so that they receive and delete everything at the same time.

We had already checked the caller ID; a quick break from making out, to make sure it was no one of great

importance. When the name Nicole White came up, we ignored it, continuing to focus on each other's mouths.

"Robert!" Nikki's voice broke over the speaker. "So help me god, you better not have Andi in your place right now or I will..." Her threat died off. "She is over there right now isn't she? Rob pick up the phone, I know you're home. I drove by, your bike's in the driveway. Pick up, stop screening, only losers do that. Ok, fine. Andi? Andi I know you're there. I will be here when you get home. You won't get away with this. You promised you would stay away from him."

"You promised to stay away from me?" Rob broke us apart, holding my body hovering over his body.

"No, but let her think what she wants." I went to kiss him.

"Stop making out now and answer the god damn phone!" Nikki yelled. We both looked over to the little speaker on the answering machine. We looked at each other, our expressions clear that the mood was officially killed. I rolled off of him and we both got up, getting dressed in fragments of clothing, me in his t-shirt and my underwear, him in only his jeans. Nikki kept going. "Stop screwing, stop kissing, just stop, stop, stop, stop and pick up the phone. Rob." It started to sound like she was going to cry.

"Ok, Nikki, I think we figured out that they aren't there." We heard Beth's voice start off in the background and grow louder. "I'm going to take the phone now, ok? And I'm going to keep telling them to pick up so you can go calm down." We heard Nikki

burst into tears and I think I detected Sarah in the background. After a couple of seconds of Nikki's whimpers fading, Beth spoke again. "I'm so sorry guys, we tried to keep her off the phone but we turned our back for a second. Have fun, and Andi, you owe me babe. Love you!" She hung up and the beep of finality sounded.

I felt Rob come up behind me as I stared the machine. "Now what?"

"Now," I replied. I turned to face him, to wrap my arms around his neck. "We can just relax. Get cozy on the couch until you have to go to bed."

"You're staying aren't you?" He asked me.

"If you want me to." I replied with a smirk, and he met it with a smile. There was no doubt in my mind where my head was going to lay tonight.

Chapter 15

“So where did you two go off to Friday night?” Nikki asked us bitterly as we regrouped Monday at lunchtime. Rob sat down beside me, putting his arm around my shoulders.

“Out to a Scrabble match.” Rob replied sarcastically, smirking as he did so. Beth out right laughed, and I couldn’t help but join her.

Beth and I spent the weekend laughing at Nikki as she told me what happened after we left. Nikki apparently took notice I wasn’t to be found. But instead of fearing for my safety due to the massive fight that broke out, she stormed over to the boys and asked where Rob was. When Steve bitterly confessed that Rob said he was planning to scoop me away, Nikki threw a fit. She had forced Beth and Sarah to accompany her on a drive by, and was only hindered from storming Rob’s place by Beth reminding her that we could be doing something she didn’t want to see. It was then, so says Beth, that they returned to our place where Nikki proceeded to get trashed and mope, taking a couple of minutes every few to complain how I stole her man from her. That’s when the phone call from her cell happened.

From the time Beth told me the story, every time someone on the TV or on the streets did something even slightly like Nikki we would crack up laughing.

“Are you dating?” Nikki refused to acknowledge Rob’s tone.

"Define dating." He asked her before he took a sip of his Coke. I glanced up at him and he smirked back at me, adding a wink for good measure. She was annoying him, but he was enjoying messing with her head.

"Are you more than just screwing her brains out, or are you actually making an effort in seeing her outside your bedroom?" Nikki looked up at him and glared.

I looked over at Beth, who just shrugged her shoulders, pretending to ignore Nikki. I caught a glimpse from Steve, seemingly wanting me to answer the question.

"We haven't exactly had time." Rob replied carefully. Nikki rolled her eyes.

"OK, seriously, new subject please?" Tony spoke up. "I mean, really, as much as I love picturing Rob naked, I really don't want Nikki jealousy clouding over my lunch."

"Whatever, Tony." Nikki threw her fork on her tray and leaned back. She had hardly touched the salad in front of her.

"So!" He clapped his hands together. "I think I know what we can do for our Christmas party."

"It's September." Frank grumbled through his mouth full of burger.

"Shush, great parties take time to plan. So, here's my thing. I see tables of white cloth, a band, gold trimmed chairs." Tony started to describe with large gestures.

"So you want the Waterview Hotel." Beth said, stopping him from continuing.

"You bet I do." Tony clapped his hands together. "Oh we can make it so perfect, and just a little bit Christmas without making it look like Santa threw up everywhere. We're classy Christmas." He stopped with his face frozen in an expression of excitement.

"Sure, sounds great." Beth tried not to laugh at the man beside her.

"I know it is! It's fabulous." He looked over to me. "So little miss, what do you think?"

"Sounds nice," I replied shrugging my shoulder.

"Of course it does, hello!" Tony bounced in his chair.

I laughed at him, we all did. But my laughter was cut short, my phone vibrating. I pulled it out of my pocket, seeing a number I hadn't recognized on the screen. I felt my face pale: it was a number from the city.

"Can you check that for me?" I asked Beth, handing her the phone. She looked at the number, flipping the phone open, and making a face.

"I think it's one of your sisters." She said handing the phone back to me. I read the screen.

"No, it doesn't seem like one of them." I shook my head.

"Well what does it say?" Tony asked, his excited energy switching to suspense.

"Call me when you get this." I read the words.

"So call it." Nikki shrugged.

"No way. What if it's Eddie? Nu-huh, no way am I calling a number from the city." I shook my head and deleted the message.

"Probably smart." Rob said to me softly.

“Probably.” I repeated, though I can’t lie. I had an urge to call the number, to find out who it was. I didn’t recognize it, so curiosity was there, but the fact that my ‘Eddie’ folder in my e-mail was filling up more and more, and I had never replied to any message he would have sent to my phone, it was very possible that he changed his number so I would fall into a trap.

It had been four months since I left, since the divorce, since I started over. Life was getting good, why would I want to go backwards?

Wednesday morning my alarm went off. I went to get it, smack it, tell it to shut up so I could sleep for ten more minutes, but I couldn’t get it. Rob was in my way, laying between me and the annoying blaring noise.

We had gone out again the night before. I wanted to make sure I was there for his Tuesday night show, listening to his sultry voice sing sweetly. We didn’t stick around the bar long after his performance; instead he took me out to a cafe by the boardwalk. The sun was already set and we watched the lights of the boats dance along the rippling waves. It was actually kind of romantic, having coffee by the water and talking about ourselves, our families, getting to know one another more.

I couldn’t help but ask him if he wanted to come back to my place, and was thrilled when he said yes. When we came through the door, Beth was already in her bed sound asleep. We were extremely quiet, and I don’t suspect that Beth even knew he was here.

Rob reached over and hit the alarm. "And I thought mine was loud and obnoxious." He grumbled as he rubbed his face and rolled over to me. He started kissing me, climbing over me. I desperately wanted to keep him there.

"Why don't we take the day off work and just stay here like this?" I asked him, causing him to smile.

"Oh that's tempting, oh it really, truly is. But I think we should go, may look bad when we don't show up." He pushed himself up, throwing the blankets off of him. "Are we showering together?" He asked.

I didn't answer; I just got up and grabbed his hand, opening my door, hearing Beth snore softly down the hall. I then pulled him out of my room and dragged him into the bathroom, locking the door.

We were quicker than our first time together in a shower, and a lot quieter. I don't think we were in there any more than about ten minutes, seventeen if you include actual cleaning time. It was hard to suppress the giggles as we towelled off. I wrapped my towel around my body, opening and closing the door carefully as I stepped out.

Beth was walking half asleep down the hall, fully dressed and ready for the day. "Morning," she grumbled as she walked into the kitchen.

"Morning," I replied a little more enthusiastically than I should have. I walked into my room, stepping into my closet and quickly throwing on some clothes. I was running the towel over my hair when I heard Beth yelp. I ran out to see what was going on.

She stood in the pass way to the kitchen, catching her breath and grasping her heart. Rob was holding his towel, a wonderful masculine color of pink, tightly around his waist and trying hard not to laugh. "Hey Beth."

"Hey," she replied, trying not to look at him. Her eyes were huge. "Umm." She looked at me. "I can see why you enjoy his company. I think I have seen all too well why you enjoy his company." I looked over at Rob who burst into a loud fit of laughter.

"I may have dropped the towel a little when she startled me." He shrugged. He then walked over to me, kissing my cheek as he walked into my room. I looked over to Beth, her eyes still huge.

"I'm awake now." She said, turning around and walking into the kitchen.

"So you saw Rob naked," I waved it off. "Who hasn't?"

She stopped and turned, giving me a knowing glare and a smirk. "Don't be coy with me." She replied. "No need in trying to be little miss 'Rob's-just-a-fling' around me." She pointed a finger in my face. "I know you better than that."

"Fair enough." I said as we moved more into the kitchen.

"Am I allowed to tell Nikki?" Beth asked, the evil smirk coming back.

"Why wouldn't you?" I asked.

"He's your man. And you know Nikki, as much as I would love to say I saw him in less than a towel she'll

have a rumour going by the end of the day that you walked in on the two of us screwing after finding out your great aunt died." Beth said as she got a glass down and poured some milk.

"My great aunt?" I questioned while she gulped her drink down.

"Pick a relative. The idea is that Nikki will have it spread across the mall by noon that you mean nothing to him." Beth made her point.

"Let her," Rob said as he walked into the kitchen, grabbing an apple from the fruit bowl on the counter. "I know how I feel about Andi. She knows how she feels about me, and you know what we're like behind closed doors." He shrugged, taking a bite.

"Do I?" Beth mocked. "This is the first time you've been here and already I've seen you naked. Doesn't bode well for the 'solid relationship' bit."

"Shut up." He said as he wrapped an arm around my waist. He was still warm from the shower.

"Knock knock." I heard Tony's voice call as he walked into the house. I loved how he never knocked, but made a quick mental note that there would be times I would need to lock the door. He walked into the kitchen and stopped short. "Well good, morning Rob." He looked him up and down. "Don't you look all showered and unshaven and totally like you spent the night here unprepared."

"Beth saw me naked," Rob said as he took another bite from the apple.

“Ok, that’s it, I’m moving in tomorrow.” Tony said as he threw his hands up in the air. “So I take it Andi won’t be requiring my services of a drive to work today?”

“No, no I guess not.” I replied as the phone rang. I walked over to it, not even thinking about checking the caller ID. “Hello?”

“Andi,” my mother’s voice broke out over the other end.

“Hey mom what’s up?” I asked her in a tone far too chipper for the time of day. There was a long pause.

“Andi, are you alright?” I thought I heard a click on the line. It wouldn’t be the first time Danni or Jo would pick up the phone at the possibility that my life was in shambles. It wasn’t in a mean way; it was what we did as a family, group crisis curbing.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just really awake.” I replied.

“And her boyfriend’s here.” Beth said into the line. I turned to the kitchen and couldn’t see her any longer.

“Beth!” I tried not to yell into the phone.

“Andi, you have a boyfriend?” My mother was clearly thrilled about the fact.

“No, Mom,” I tried to protest.

“Yeah, his name is--“

“Beth!” I cut her off.

“Ok, ok, I’m going. Bye Ms Mathews!” Have I mentioned how much my mother loved Beth? I came home from work at night on a couple of occasions and found the two talking on the phone, waiting for me to come home. It was fine, until now.

“Bye, Beth dear, have a great day.” We waited for the click of Beth hanging up. “So can I meet him?” My mother asked me with so much enthusiasm you would swear I was telling her what I was buying her for Christmas.

“Mom, no, I’m not bringing him down home.” I replied, stuttering. I looked up, seeing Rob looking at me with intrigue. I then looked over a bit, seeing a tiny shadow of Beth standing behind Tony.

“You won’t need to, your sisters and I are coming to see you this weekend.” She replied. I could hear the sounds of her clapping with excitement in the background.

“You’re coming to visit this weekend?” I think the horror was clear in my voice.

“You didn’t have any special plans with your man, did you dear? Cause you know I don’t care.” I loved my mother. I loved her a lot. I loved that she was a plane and a bus trip away. Why couldn’t she stay a plane and bus ride away?

“No, no, Rob, and I, er...” Damn. Not only did I say his name, but she caught it, and so did he. I could see his face contort, trying not to laugh as he walked over to me, grabbing on to my waist.

“Rob! He has a name! Well, then, I hope *Rob* isn’t too busy to meet me Friday night. Now go, get to work.” She said.

“I look forward to meeting you Mrs Mathews.” He called in the direction of the phone. I think I died a little on the inside.

"Oh. You better tell him it's not Mrs. Don't want him losing brownie points by a small thing like that. Love ya, hun." She said.

"Love ya too, Mom." I replied and I heard the click. I hung up the phone and looked at Rob with a scowl. "You're in trouble." He laughed, as did Beth and Tony. I pointed at her. "As are you."

"What?" Beth asked as we all started filing for the door. "I told your mother what I knew you wouldn't. She has the right to know. She's been worried you weren't getting over Eddie." She opened the door and turned the knob to make sure it locked behind us.

"Uh-huh." I said as I stepped outside in the cool morning air. I walked over to Rob's bike, getting out the helmet from the saddle bag. "Likely story."

"Is it really so bad if I meet your mother?" Rob asked as he put on his helmet. He got on the bike, Tony and Beth climbing into Tony's car. He started the Fit's engine.

"It wouldn't be," I replied, feeling a small bit of resentment to him. It dawned on me why I didn't want them to meet, not yet, and I was in no way afraid to tell him. "If you were my boyfriend, it would make sense. But as it stands, I've just been your screw buddy."

I was expecting a lash out of anger. But I caught Rob smiling in the bike mirror, rolling his eyes before shutting his visor. He didn't take me seriously. Damn, this was going to be harder to discourage than I would have thought.

I thought it was awful that while putting out the late shipment of new releases, I was trying to think of ways to convince Rob not to meet my mother, or my sisters. Jo would probably fall over herself in a crush, she was into musician-bad boy types and Rob fit that role. Danni would think he's a loser, because he works in an art store, and a bar, and rides a motorcycle; Guess which sister loved and adored Eddie, and which one wasn't sad to see him go. My mother would be the wild card.

All I could think of was using the status of our relationship against him, or the lack of status. It would be a hard sell, and Nikki would enjoy watching the conversation unfold far too much. But in reality, I didn't know what else to do. I only had two days.

When lunch time hit, Rob came into the store to get me, escorting me out with a hand on my lower back. "So what's it today." He stopped, moving in front me and holding me at arm's length. This was a game we hadn't played in a while. Ok, so in at least a week. "I think you are in a.... just a smoothie mood. Which aggravates me a bit." He smirked at his assessment. It was also right.

"Well, I really don't care if you're not impressed by my choice of food, or lack thereof." I grinned back and continued to the food court. I was preparing him, at least. Annoyance could work to my advantage. Rob went off to the burger stand, and I ordered and had my drink before he even made it to counter. I walked over to the table, Nikki already there with just a coffee.

"Well," She said looking at me with a sideways look. "I heard what happened between Beth and Rob this morning." She made it sound like there was something to hear. I knew Beth or Tony had been telling people about the wake-up call. "How does that make you feel?"

"I don't know, Nikki." I replied coldly, taking a sip of my smoothie. "How should I feel about my roommate seeing Rob naked?"

"You know what's going to happen next, don't you?" She snarled back.

"Oh you mean how I'm going to cheat on Gaylen and jump into bed with Rob?" Beth said as she sat down a couple of seats away from Nikki.

"You just tell me when, Beth." Rob said as he sat down next to me. "Kidding, for the record." He raised his hands in defence before he pushed his chair as close to me as he could.

"Once a man whore player, always one." Nikki glared at him.

"You know Nikki, you keep that scowl on your face and you're going to develop wrinkles early." I smirked at her.

"I'm sorry, all I heard was 'moo.'" She smirked back, taking a sip of her coffee.

"Suit yourself." I shrugged my shoulders and leaned back.

"So, where are you and Rob taking your mom and sisters out to?" Beth asked as she twirled Spaghetti around her plastic fork.

"What?" Nikki asked her eyes bugging open just as Steve and Tony took their places across from Beth.

"Rob and I aren't taking them anywhere." I answered. "*I'm* taking them out to that really nice restaurant on the waterfront where a lot of the tourists go. They'll like it."

"Whoa, wait a minute." Rob said as he shifted in his seat to look at me. He appeared truly surprised. "What changed?"

"You were never going to meet them to begin with. That's not going to change." I replied. I caught Steve and Nikki leaning forward a little bit. Tony was making a face at Beth across the table, pointing at the two obvious ease droppers.

"Umm, why wasn't I going to meet your mother?" he chewed on a fry, nerves on his face.

I shrugged. "You aren't the kind of guy you introduce your parents to."

"I knew it." Nikki's voice was all too excited. Steve remained silent, a small gleam in his eyes.

"Why the hell aren't I?" I don't think I had ever heard Rob's voice go that high, let alone crack. I couldn't believe he was so upset about the whole thing.

"Because we don't date." I finally spat it out. I could hear Nikki's victorious chuckles, but I didn't care. "All we've ever done is hang around the lounge on Tuesday Nights and sleep together."

"We don't date." Rob repeated, stunned and annoyed. "That's why you won't introduce me to your mother, because we don't date?" He looked at his tray.

"Huh," he said before he turned back to me and said, "well we could date."

"After she leaves doesn't count." I pointed at him, ignoring Nikki's overzealous excitement at finally hearing what she wanted.

"What about tomorrow?" he asked, slapping his hands down on his lap. "I mean, come on, Andi, it's not rocket science. We still have a night before she comes. You're off, I'm off, what's so hard about going on one date before she comes?"

"Wonderful. One date, last minute, the night before my mother comes just for the sake of saying we dated. How romantic." He was really rubbing me the wrong way today. Why wouldn't the guy just admit that he wasn't the guy, even if I really hoped he was?

"You want romance? I can give you romance." Rob smiled surely.

Nikki burst into a loud, echoing laugh that I'm sure they could hear down at the salon. Everyone in the food court looked at her.

"You're going to give me romance with a little over twenty-four hours of planning?" I chuckled a little myself at the idea.

"Yeah," Rob said confidently. "I can sweep you off your feet." That part wasn't as sure.

"Fifty-bucks says his idea of romance is chicken wings and a motor cycle ride along the board walk," Steve said quietly to Nikki.

“No no, scented candles in the bedroom and fifteen minutes of cuddling before he kicks her out of bed for the night.” Nikki replied to him.

“Wouldn’t you like to know, Nikki, just how romantic I can really be?” Rob looked at her and smiled.

“I would, actually.” Nikki replied, leaning back and folding her arms.

“Ok, ok, we get it, Nikki. You still want to ride a lot more of Rob than his motorcycle. We get it, some of us agree with you, namely me, but I’m tired of it. Ok. Just,” Tony put his hand up put it at a right angle to his leg and slowly lowered it.

With Nikki thoroughly embarrassed, we started on various other topics of conversation. I could still feel Rob’s eyes on me, watching me as I made small talk with some of the others at the table. But he was distractingly focused.

I looked up at him, seeing him smirk. He leaned down and whispered, “By the end of tomorrow night, I plan to make you never want to introduce your mother to another man for the rest of your life, if you catch my drift.”

Chapter 16

"You still have that dress I made you buy in the city?" Tony asked me through the bathroom door. I had just finished shaving my legs, and was being forced to apply a lotion that was supposed to make them better. It was one of the many things Tony insisted I do to get ready and go out on my first (and probably only) date with Rob.

"Yeah, it's somewhere in my closet." I replied, finally finishing with the lotion that stung my legs. I made sure that the towel was still secured around my body. I went for the door, opened it, and was generally surprised when Tony wasn't there. I looked at Beth, already in her pyjamas, sitting on a stool and leaning on the small portion of completely enclosed wall between our living room and kitchen. She was eating chips, and I was envious at how comfortable and content she was.

"If it makes you feel better," she said between mouthfuls, "Tony made me go through the same thing when I first went out with Gaylen."

"Yeah," Tony said as he walked out of my bedroom holding up two pairs of shoes. "And I bet he really misses the days when you looked like sex in heels when you went out." He then turned his attention to me. "Which one of these is more comfortable?"

I wasn't sure, so I randomly picked one. I was glad there wasn't a definite answer. The ones that I didn't pick got laid out on the bed while the others were put

in the closet, and hopefully in the spot he found them. I looked at Beth who just gave me a knowing look. 'He's yours to deal with tonight' was the thought I was sure was going through her head. I rolled my eyes and walked into my bedroom.

He had just found the dress, laying it down beside the bed. "No pantyhose." He pointed a finger at me sharply. "I will not have you do all that work on those perfect legs and not make them available for his stroking pleasure."

"I think the idea of tonight was that there would be no stroking," I replied; the disappointment wasn't hidden well.

"That's a shame." Tony sighed. "But then again, it is Rob..." he looked me up and down, assessing me, glancing at my dress. "Do you have one of those bras that wrap around your mid section?"

"I have one with clear straps." I grinned, pretending to care.

He glared at me, rolled his eyes, and physically sighed. "Well, I guess that's going to have to do." He then went for my underwear drawer and started rummaging through, trying to find the bra. "Andi, what is all this?" He asked, holding up handfuls of my panties.

"Underwear?"

"HELLO!" he exclaimed. "Have you ever heard of panty lines? How are these sexy?"

"He's in your underwear, isn't he?" I heard Beth ask from the living room.

“Tony, have you seen any panty lines on me?” I asked him, taking the underwear out of his hands, finding my favourite black lacy ones, and the black bra with the clear straps.

He sighed. “No.”

“Well, then, don’t worry about it. Now shoo, so I can change.” I made the motion and he laughed. He left the room and I hurriedly dressed, remembering to put on the deodorant after I put on the dress. He was right. The way this dress hugged the curves of my body, making my butt look fabulous, and gave the illusion that I was a little less of a burger fiend. The spaghetti straps didn’t even appear to be too tiny on my shoulders. I looked at myself in the mirror for a few more minutes. “Ok, Tony, you can come do my make-up now.”

He opened my door and stopped. “Well hello.” He said checking me out. “Make me Steve, so I can pretend I’m straight and tell you how absolutely smoking you look.” He walked over towards me, gesturing for me to spin as he nodded his approval at every angle. “Now sit. I’m giving you smoky eyes.” I did as I was told and he went to work. I was always surprised when he used so much make-up, yet at the end of it, I looked completely natural. He put long, silver, dangling earrings in my ears and a small white gold chain and diamond charm around my neck, raiding my jewellery box to find them.

I walked out into the room, and Beth hooted at me. "Look at you, sexy thing." She smiled. "He's here by the way."

"What?" I asked at the same time Tony screamed the word.

"Oh my god, I don't have time to do your nails!" He was pulling at his hair.

"Tony, I don't think he's going to care. As it is, I think I'm probably a little over dressed to be riding on the back of a motor cycle." I walked over to the door and opened it.

I stood frozen. It was almost corny, the look of Rob standing on my door step in a black suit and a light blue dress shirt with a perfectly matching tie. There was even something about his hair that seemed different, but I couldn't pin point it. He had shaven, clean shaven. *He* was sex in dress shoes. I think I drooled a little inside. At least he wasn't carrying a rose, or any flower for that matter.

"Andraia," he said with a smile, reaching out for my hand. Tony ran over and threw a black wrap across my shoulders. I glanced back at him, catching him mouth the word 'bitch' with a smile before I looked back towards Rob. They closed the door behind me. I looked around for his bike, not seeing it anywhere.

"What are we walking on this magical night?" I asked sarcastically.

"No," I didn't rattle him. "We're driving." He pointed to a brand new, shiny black mustang.

"When did you get a car?" I asked him, admiring its beauty. I still preferred bikes, but this was a pretty car.

"I didn't. I have it for a little while, courtesy of my dad." He walked over to the passenger side, opening the door for me. I got in, sliding on the leather interior. It smelled new.

"So," I asked when he got in and fastened his seat belt. He pulled the car keys out of his coat pocket. "Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise." He smiled, starting the engine, and moved the manual shift into drive. I glanced back at the house, seeing Tony and Beth's silhouettes pressed up against the window.

It seemed strange being in a car with Rob. I could look over at him; see the small smirk on his lips as he drove. It was exhilarating, really. It was a new thing for me to find attractive about him. I looked at him so much I didn't really see where we were going. I had the sense of him pulling in somewhere, and then he parked. I looked out the windshield, and my heart sank with disappointment. It was starting out so good.

"Bombay?" I asked, not hiding my true feelings. "Your idea of a romantic evening is taking me to a lounge?" He got out of the car. I sat frozen, annoyed, and feeling slightly sick. He opened my door and stuck out his hand.

"Think of it as a gateway." He said. I cocked an eyebrow. "Ok, bad terminology, I admit, but ignore what you see here." He said as he waved at the wood panel exterior with the blue neon lights. He continued

to hold my hand as he walked me to the door, only letting go when he opened the door and gestured for me to enter.

I walked in, seeing it a little more crowded than usual. I could barely see if there were any seats. The bar as full, the tables were crowded. Great, this is turning out to be a great evening. I felt his hand find mine again, and he pulled me towards the back, on the left of the stage where he played on Tuesdays.

There was a sign over the top of the door way that read "Patio," and a sign tacked to the door that stated the patio was only open from June to the end of August.

"Umm, Rob?" I questioned but he turned around, clearly excited by his plan, and gestured for me to wait a minute as he pushed open the door.

There were lights strung around the high posts surrounding the patio. I think they were Christmas lights due to the shape of the bulbs, but they were all white. I walked up the small set of steps, moving around to the back of the building. A grill came into view, one of those large fancy barbeques that men drool all over in the stores. There was one singular table set out, the blue and white umbrella open with a few more lights strung up inside. I could see the other tables of its kind and the rest of the chairs pushed up against the far end of the deck. There was a kitchen cart set up with towels covering bowls and plates. On the table there was a bucket of Ice, a bottle of white wine,

and two wine glasses. With the beach and the water just behind us, it was actually very impressive.

He put his hand on my back and guided me over to the table, pulling out a chair for me. I sat down as he opened up the wine bottle and poured a couple glasses before he removed his jacket and draped it over the back of the other chair.

"So, what? Is Irving going to leave the bar and come out and cook us dinner?" I asked him as I took a sip of the wine which happened to be perfectly chilled.

"No," he laughed. "I wanted to take you to the best restaurant in town when I finally got the chance to take you out." He walked over to the grill, turning it on. "But, we're going there tomorrow night with your mother and sisters. So, I wanted to take you to the second best place for food in town. However, making you get all dressed up and taking you to my place would not only be sad, but would probably give you the wrong idea about what I consider romance." The flame spewed high for a second before simmering down to a low light.

"You consider yourself one of the best cooks in the Trap?" I cocked an eyebrow, trying not to laugh.

"Did I ever tell you that, before moving to the Trap I was a chef in a restaurant? Never went to college for it or anything, but I was good and they hired me." Rob shrugged his shoulders as he uncovered the stuff on the cart. I burst out laughing when I saw some of the more obvious items.

"You're making hamburgers?" I asked after eyeing up the fancy buns.

"Not your run of the mill ones. *Gourmet*, something different for your fixations." He said as he flipped a couple on to the grill with a sizzle. "And I'm not telling you what's in them or on them. It's a surprise."

"I don't have a fixation." I retorted, taking another sip of wine.

"Andi," He turned around and looked at me with a smirk and a spatula in his hand. He looked good like that, all dressed up and cooking. More men should do this. "I've known you since you came here, ate lunch with you practically every day. You have a diverse diet, but the three things you eat most are salads, smoothies, and most of all burgers. You have a fixation. Not that I'm complaining."

"Are you trying to say I have a cushiony body?" I was a woman; I had to tease him that it sounded like he was implying something.

"You have curves," he said with his back to me, flipping the meat on the grill before closing the lid. "But they are sensual." He kneeled by the cart a minute and brought out two plates and two bundles of silverware. He brought them over to the table, setting them down at our places. He kissed my cheek before he returned to the cart and grabbed a silvery bowl covered with a dishtowel. He sat it down on the table and uncovered it. A mixed green salad. "No, the dressing is not low calorie, I made it myself, and I'm not telling you what I made it with." He said as he used a pair of

forks already in the bowl to scoop it onto my plate. "But you will enjoy it, I promise you that much."

I took a bite. Damn, he was right, it was good.

"So, did you do this sort of thing for Becca?" I asked him. I couldn't help it. I found the whole thing surreal, like maybe he'd used the idea somewhere else.

He looked at me sideways, "Umm, not like this. I mean, I've made her dinner before."

"No, but I mean, what was the most romantic thing you'd ever done for her?" I sipped my wine, watching him carefully.

He was thinking about it, chewing his greens while he thought about the answer. "I think it was probably when I proposed. I had a key to her apartment, so I left work early. Now she was an incredibly girly girl. Loved everything girly: pink, flowers, especially roses, and men in full blown tuxedos. I knew she had a big day at work, she was getting a promotion at the bank, and she would want to get together with a few friends after work for drinks to celebrate. So I broke into her apartment, got all dressed up, had a full bloom red rose for every day we were together, which by then it had been a year, so as you can imagine that's a lot of roses. I got prepared, I lowered the lights, and waited for her down on one knee with an un blossomed rose. When she came in she was surprised, umm." He paused, taking a bit of food. He chewed really slow. "Are you sure you want to hear this?"

"I wouldn't have asked if I didn't want to know." I replied, though I was a little uncomfortable. I had no

idea what Becca looked like, so I found myself picturing Nikki in her place.

“Well, she was a little overwhelmed, and was definitely not expecting it.” He laughed at the memory. “I looked at her and said, ‘Rebecca, there is a rose in this room for every day I’ve loved you, and this one in my hand, it hasn’t blossomed because it’s for all the days I want to give you, love you. I ask that you accept this rose, and accept my proposal. Will you marry me?’ And she took it kind of hesitantly, which I knew she would because there was no ring. Well I put it up around the bloom, and she wouldn’t have seen it until she took it. It was a princess cut pink diamond. And I don’t think I had ever been tackled so quickly.” He smirked, “well, except for when you finally came back to my place.”

I smiled, finishing my greens. It wasn’t my thing, but it was obviously something she enjoyed. Rob finished eating and then jumped for the grill, lifting the lid to flip the burgers. The smell was practically intoxicating. He did his thing, and I sipped my wine, looking out over the water.

“So,” He said as he sat back down beside me. “What was the most romantic thing Eddie had ever done for you?” I think I made a face. “Oh come on. You’re allowed to bring up Becca but I can’t ask about Eddie?” He jumped up again and moved over to the grill. He turned it off, and started to put together the slightly humorous main course.

“It was his proposal to me too. It wasn’t like yours or anything spectacular, it was sudden. We were shopping and I don’t know why but he was making me look at pool sticks. He had handed one to me, asking me to have a look at the tip. He gave me his mother’s ring.” I shrugged, realizing that there wasn’t all that much romance in my relationship with Eddie. It had just been love.

“Really, that was it?” Rob brought over what had to be the most fancy looking piece of meat on a bun I had ever seen. It made me want to eat it with a fork and knife. “Man, if I had known I had so little to live up to, I wouldn’t have gone to this extreme.” He smiled. He also used his hands to eat.

Dressed up, gorgeous man using his hands to eat what was supposed to be a romantic, elegant dinner with his hands. Oh well, when in Rome...

For the record, and it surprised even me, at no point during that meal did it taste, smell, or even think that I was eating a burger. It was sweet, and tangy, and I wasn’t even sure it was beef. I didn’t ask, I didn’t want to offend the good-looking chef.

After dinner, which also included feeding me the best chocolate mousse cake I had ever had, Rob dragged me out on a walk along the water front. I took off my heels, cursing Tony for his choice, regardless of how great they looked with the dress. Even sitting down, they hurt my feet. Rob laughed at me, thinking it was funny that I wanted to walk in bare feet on our date, and then proceeded to do the same.

"So is there anything I need to know before your mother comes by?" Rob asked as he rubbed my arm with his free hand, the other one already tightly gripped in mine.

"Don't call her Mrs. Mathews," I said quickly, smiling as I remembered my mother's warning.

"Ok?" he laughed.

"She's divorced too. And she and my father didn't end their marriage well. So being called Mrs isn't a favourite of hers."

"That makes more sense. What about your sisters?"

"Danielle is Danni, and Joelle is Jo. We were never really called by our full first names, so if you use them, they may think you're uncomfortable, sorta like sensing fear." I stepped a little closer to him, smelling his cologne. The aroma of the food and the new leather of the Mustang didn't allow me to capture his scent before.

"Good to know." Rob laughed, growing nervous again. "And what about you? What can I do to make it more comfortable for you?" He pulled me around, holding me close to him in a loose embrace.

"Show up." I replied flatly. "On time, and be the charmer I know you are."

"When have I not shown up for something?" He asked me in a teasing tone.

"This is our first date," I replied. "I don't know what you're like."

"This isn't our first date." He wrinkled his forehead. "It's our second, third if you want to count the other night."

"Watching you play in the lounge is a date?" I questioned this, even though on a good day, I counted it as a date.

"Ok, so maybe this is just our second date." He caved. "But it's also not going to be our last." He raised a finger, as if I was going to interrupt him.

"No?" I asked him as he started to lean me back.

"No." He replied as he kissed the parts of my chest that were exposed. I looked around almost frantically. Didn't he say he hated public displays? We weren't that far away from Bombay. He travelled up to my neck, causing my heart to pound faster, making my head dizzy when being partnered with my low hanging head. He paused after hitting my jaw bone, studying my reddening face before he softly brushed my lips with his before he gently kissed me. I reached my hands up to grab his neck, trying so hard to keep in his tender mood.

He brought me back up straight without breaking our kiss, and only did so when my feet were firm in the sand. I looked into his eyes, and saw a different Rob. There was passion, but it was subdued with a need of tenderness. They were sexual, but more the making love kind than the animalistic one he wore our first night together. It was the kind of look that makes a girl's heart stop and her breath catch when the thought

darts across her mind that maybe he feels the same way.

Which scared me a little, because what I saw in his eyes I didn't realize I felt myself.

His smile was twitching. "Would you like to go home?" He asked softly. All I could do was nod, the emotional shock still there. "Ok," His smile stopped twitching. "Let's get our shoes and head home."

I woke up in a state of pure bliss. I had no idea where I was, or even when it was, I just didn't care. I could feel his arms around me, his naked body against mine, and remembered with extreme clarity the date we had. It was far from typical romance, probably wouldn't even send a normal girl to cloud two, but I loved it. And what both terrified and thrilled me was that I was practically in love with him.

But the alarm wouldn't allow the bliss to stay. He groaned as he killed it, mumbling something about needing to shower. I suddenly remembered why the night before took place to begin with: my mother was coming tonight. I groaned.

"Andi, hon, you ok?" he asked with genuine concern somehow coming out over the grogginess.

"My mother's coming." I grumbled as I rubbed my face. He laughed at me.

"Yeah, she is." He kissed me quickly before he pounced out of bed. He looked around at the floor, finding his dress pants from the night before and slipping into them. "I gotta grab my clothes out of the car." He gestured behind him at the bedroom door.

"Wait," I said, sitting up, holding the blankets to my body as I realized how cool the room was. "You brought a change of clothes?"

He gestured at his body. "Did you think I was going to wear a suit to work?" He smiled.

"You *expected* to stay the night?" I stood up, hauling the thinner sheet off the bed as I moved towards him. "What if the night didn't go as you planned?" I kissed him. He felt like mine to kiss, or maybe that was just my newly discovered feelings talking.

"If they didn't go as planned, I would have been pretty heartbroken." He winked before kissing me again and opening the bedroom door. "Back in a minute." I watched him walk to the front door, slipping on his dress shoes before he ran out the door. Beth walked into my view from her hallway, Tony following shortly behind.

"You stayed the night?" I asked him, grabbing the back of my sheet and wrapping it around my body a couple of times before I stepped out of my bedroom.

"Do you really think I would have gone home when I thought I had a chance of catching a glimpse of Rob's perfection?" He asked me like it should have been the obvious answer. I shook my head.

"What if we went back to his place?" I asked him with a smirk. Tony contemplated but never answered, Rob coming back in the house before he had the chance to.

"Morning ,people." He said with a smile as he carried in a grocery bag, presumably with his clothes in it.

"Didn't realize there was a party going on here last night."

"I did," Tony grinned. "I'm kinda offended that I wasn't invited. Sounded like a good time."

Rob nodded, the faintest trace of red coming to his face. "Ok, well, I'm gonna go for a shower now." He pointed to the bathroom then looked over to me. "If anyone wants to join me."

"Oh! Oh! Pick me, pick me!" Tony jumped up and down excitedly.

The guys laughed hard as Beth and I looked at each other, feeling the discomfort that the boys should have been feeling. Didn't seem that way though.

"Yeah, Tony, I'm not Steve." Rob said as he headed for the bathroom.

"Yeah, I think you're hot." Tony replied with an eye roll as the door closed behind Rob before he turned and looked at me. "I hate you," he said with a smile, running over to me and giving me a hug. "I hate you so much right now, it's disgusting. Tell me every disgusting detail. Everything. Come, you're showering in Beth's bathroom so I can sit on the toilet seat lid and listen without wanting to peek in through the curtain to see his bum."

Beth followed us, and I ended up telling them about the whole night as I showered, Beth did her hair, and Tony just sat and listened. They agreed about the burgers, but also saw the sentiment Rob associated with them, thought the walk was nice.

"So, what about after the walk?" Beth asked.

"And before you came home and had wild monkey sex." Tony asked, his silhouette doing a waving gesture.

"Well, umm," I didn't know what to tell them. It wasn't so much that something happened, that I could describe what was in his eyes, or what I went through. How scared shitless and elated I was to be feeling what I was. "Nothing happened, really."

"I don't buy it." Beth's knowing tone chimed.

"What's not to buy?" I asked, shutting off the water and reaching for the towel she sat on the edge for me. "We went to dinner, took a walk on the beach, and came home and did... stuff." I pulled back the curtain after I was dried and covered.

"You're different this morning." Beth said with a shrug.

"No I'm not." I laughed.

"Yes you are. You're giddy." I raised an eyebrow. "Ok, so you're giddy for someone like us. He's giddy for someone like us. It's the kind of giddy that's going to make Nikki hang herself with one of her over priced scarves. What was said?" She out the emphases on said, smirking afterwards.

"Nothing." I replied, flatly, harshly, coldly. "We just came home."

"And here I dreamed a dream of change." Tony slapped his hands on his thighs, his work pants muffling the smack only slightly. "Like maybe Rob the player was going to turn into a pot of goo and just change."

"You think he's still sleeping around?" I asked, leaning against the wall. I hadn't thought about that. I bit my lip, wondering if maybe...

"Would he be willing to meet her mother if he was?" Beth asked Tony, a half glare reflecting in the mirror.

"Well you kinda put him on the spot." Tony looked at her, raising his hands in defence. "You're the one that told her mother about her boyfriend. A term which, if I'm not mistaken, either of them have used." Tony pointed at Beth, proving his point. She went to argue it when she turned and looked at me inquisitively.

"You haven't, have you?" I shook my head in response to her question. "And I really did volunteer that, didn't I?" I nodded again. "Well, aren't I a shit friend."

"Shut up," I said as I walked over to her and hugged her from behind. "You're the best." I kissed her cheek and went for the door, letting out a yelp after I opened it.

"I'm sorry," Rob said trying not to laugh. "I didn't mean to scare you. I was about to knock." He pointed to the door as I walked past him and down the hall towards my room.

"What were you doing out there?" I asked when we entered my room. He shut the door behind him.

"I was listening in." He shrugged and put his hands in his pockets. "I figured you wouldn't tell me what you thought of last night but you would tell them. Those are your best friends in there."

"Yeah," I replied as I took off the towel and went searching for comfortable underwear. "And my other best friend is in this room and he just had to ask me what I thought and I would have told him," I paused as I stepped into my panties and put on my bra. I then took another second to find my black dress pants. "I had a wonderful time last night." I hopped into my pants and buttoned them, feeling a little self conscious of the fact that I had to suck in a bit. I quickly went for a camisole to cover my gut.

"Just a wonderful time?" Rob asked, faking a hurt tone. "It wasn't amazing, or crazy romantic, or absolutely perfect? I'm hurt. I guess that means I don't get to meet your mother, huh?"

"If you don't want to." I shrugged my shoulders and grabbed my cardigan.

"Andi, stop." I obeyed; his tone of voice forced me to. I looked over at him, and the annoyance was obvious, and on the borderline of anger. "I'm not sleeping around on you, I'm meeting your mother, and you and I both know." He stopped, his voice growing to the point of yelling. He took a deep breath. "Come on, we're going to be late for work." He opened my bedroom door.

"Rob," I said but he waved a hand to stop me, and then motioned for me to go with him. I did, reluctantly.

The ride to work was quiet, and upon arrival neither of us stuck around after getting our morning coffee. We opened our stores and started the day without speaking.

I can't even really tell you what happened that afternoon during lunch hour. I know Rob sat with his arm around me, and I leaned against him, but we didn't speak, and we didn't really get involved in conversation. In fact, we hadn't spoken until he walked me back to the shop and asked, "When's your Mom coming?"

"She says she'll pick me up around four-thirty here at the mall." I replied.

"K, I'll meet you at the restaurant." He said before he tried to turn away.

"Rob," I reached out and grabbed his hand. He turned around, but did so reluctantly. I walked up closer to him, kissing his cheek as I wrapped an arm around his neck. I made sure it was discreet. He had sad eyes. "I'm sorry if I hurt you somehow." I whispered in his ear.

"I'll see you there." He said as he walked out of my half embrace and re-entered the art store.

Damn it. I know how to ruin a good thing.

"Andraia!" I heard my mother's voice from the front of the store. I turned around away from the CDs I was arranging and found myself genuinely happy to see her. She looked good, hardly a wrinkle on her face. Her eyes were greener than mine, but they seemed just as young. I loved how she could pull off the short hairstyle, dark brown with the odd gray. I really was a miniature version of her, as she was fond of describing me.

I hugged her tight when I got close enough, and she returned the tight embrace. I looked to her right, seeing

the only blonde child, Danni, getting ready to pounce on me.

"Hey sis," She said with an embrace as tight as her tiny frame would allow. Danni took after Dad. Petite, blonde curls which she wore down to her lower back, bright blue eyes, and freckles. She was the youngest, and despite being seventeen still looked like she was just starting the seventh grade. I remembered after seeing her again how she complained often about never getting a date.

After I was done with Danni, I was attacked from behind by Joelle. Jo, when last I saw her, had long straight brown hair like me. Now she had short, spiky, deep purple hair. She had earrings traveling along the lengths of her ears. All studs. I was pleased to see that she at least wore her glasses; Jo was practically blind without them. Despite her punky appearance, she looked almost too sophisticated to be nineteen.

"Whoa," Frank said as he came out of the back room. "I thought Andi said she only had two sisters."

"And who is this charmer?" My mother asked with a smile.

"My boss, Frank. Frank, this is Cynthia, my mom, and Danni and Jo." I gave the quick introductions.

"Darn," mom smiled. "And here I thought this was the infamous Rob."

"He can't be that infamous, mom, you only heard about him two days ago." She shrugged me off.

“Andi, why don’t you head out for the night?” Frank gestured to the front. “It’s not a big deal for you to take off. Go on.”

“Thanks, Frank.” I said giving him a hug and taking off my lanyard, setting behind the counter.

I motioned for my family to follow me as I left the store. I was careful not to make an obvious glance in the art store’s direction. I thought I caught a glimpse of Rob, but I didn’t want to check to be sure. I kept leading them to the front entrance. “Did you want to meet Beth?” I asked my mom as Danni and Jo looked around at the shops.

“Absolutely.” My mom replied excitedly as we turned into the cafe. I didn’t even have to wait to point Beth out, she practically jumped the counter to come over, she and mom embracing as if she had been my friend my whole life. “Oh my god, Beth, it’s so great to meet you.”

“Hi mom,” Beth was beaming.

“Oh my god, Andi, I see where you get your absolutely fabulous self from.” Tony said as he quickly joined Beth, sticking out his hand to make an introduction. “Anthony Marks. You know, like Mark Anthony, only way better.”

My mom laughed, something I was expecting. “I’m glad to see Andi’s been making such great friends. Tell me, Tony, what do you think of my Andi’s Rob?”

Tony smirked and twitched his eyebrows. “Do you want the truth?”

"Ok, Mom, let's get going." I said as I tried to usher her out.

"No, no," Jo said instead. "I would like to hear this." She had raised a hand to me, stopping me, smiling. I could always count on Jo to make sure that I had no secrets, and no surprises.

"How old is that one?" Tony asked pointing to Danni.

"I'm seventeen." She replied offended.

"Ok, censored version." He looked Jo up and down. "You'll like him." He gave her a knowing nod and a wink. I don't know how, but Jo seemed to understand what that meant. She nodded her head with approval.

"Alright, let's go, please?" I practically begged.

"Well wait, wait," My mother said as she waved good-bye to Beth and Tony as I proceeded to drag her out of the cafe. "What about Rob?"

"He's umm," I stuttered. "He's meeting us there. He has to stay until five." I finally spit out as we left the mall.

"But it's ten to five, we can wait." Mom continued though she led the way to the car.

"He said he wanted to meet us there, so he can take his car." I added quickly, waiting to see how my siblings were going to file into the car. Danni and Jo climbed into the back. I guess I was riding shotgun with Mom.

We made small talk on the way to the restaurant. Mom asking how work was, how life was, if I'd heard from Eddie.

I asked my sisters how High School and College was going. I asked if either of them were dating anyone (Jo yes, Danni not so much, as twelve year olds aren't her type).

When we got to the restaurant it was already ten after five, and I felt a bit panicky. Mom drove slow, and made a wrong turn. Rob drove fast, and knew the town. He should have been there when we arrived.

I hid my anxiety, knowing if I let just the tiniest bit of it slip out, mom would catch on. I watched my cell phone clock discreetly. Time was going by, twenty-five after five.

"Can I get you ladies something to drink?" The host asked after he sat us at the table for five, though the fifth had yet to show.

"Three red wines and a soda." My mother instantly replied. "Did you want to order something for Rob?" Five twenty-six.

"No, he'll order when he gets here." I replied, picking up the menu and pretended to be interested. I could faintly hear my sisters talking about something, Danni's requirement for an ID for the rest of her life or the like. I was too concentrated on not watching the clock.

"It all looks so good, what do you think Andi?" Mom asked me, barely looking up. Five-thirty one.

"I'm thinking the salad." I replied without looking.

"Are you ladies ready to order?" Our waiter came by again.

“No, we’re still waiting for one more.” Jo spoke up quickly, sending the waiter away.

I looked at her with thankful eyes, though my mother caught it. “Andi,” She started in her tender ‘are you trying to hide something from me’ tone. I was cracking, I stared at my mother in shock, my mouth started to try and form an excuse, a reason, as to why he hadn’t shown up.

I think sweat started to dot my forehead. I could feel it getting warm, a little damp. Then I realized I was feeling a pair of lips, pecking me quickly. “I am so sorry I’m late,” His voice was smooth and easy. He pulled the chair beside me away from the table and sat down. “There was a huge paint explosion at the store, I had to help clean up. My boss wouldn’t let me leave until it was, and of course I got it all over me.” He smiled and laughed a little.

I glared a little, unable to comprehend how he would do this to me. Was it revenge from this morning? Was he just proving a point that he wasn’t someone that could be tied down and committed? I felt my blood boil, and was about to hit him under the table when I caught a glimpse of something in his hair. Green paint, and a spatter of blue, and a bit of yellow.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Robert.” My mother said as she extended her hand. Rob shook it lightly, smiling. “I’m Cynthia Mathews, you can call me Cynthia if you wish, though I hope you will be willing to call me mom.” She winked.

I was surprised by how well dinner went. Rob was an absolute natural when it came to winning over parents, or at the very least a mother. He wasn't even shy about telling Mom about Becca when she asked her idea of a pivotal question: Are you/were you ever married.

I was right about my sister's reactions. Jo was smitten; Danni was more interested in texting her friends back home.

"So, Robert," my mother seemed to love using his full name. He didn't seem to care. "Do you plan to make my Andi an honest woman?"

Leave it to my mother to ask that question.

Rob laughed nervously. "Um, well, Cynthia, I've only been privileged enough to be with Andi for a little over a week. I'd like to wait a while before I asked Andi if that's what she wants."

At the end of the night, Rob followed us in the Mustang as my mom drove her rental car back to the all too familiar motel. I knew I wouldn't get away without my mom adding in her two cents about Rob.

"He seems nice." She said simply at first. She chuckled, "if you had known each other back then, he could have easily given Eddie a run for his money."

"You make it sound like if I knew Rob way back when, I wouldn't have picked him." I replied with a smirk.

"Honey, he's handsome, and charming, and probably someone who would make a great husband if given the chance. But Eddie was handsome in a very different way, far more charming, and did make a great

husband. You would have picked Eddie.” My mother was so sure.

“Well, I did, and look where that got me.” I hated that she preferred him. I had a feeling it was coming. Mom loved Eddie, and I doubted that the divorce would change that.

“Eddie made a mistake,” my mom said evenly.

“Yeah, well, he doesn’t see it that way.” I replied, looking out the window and into the mirror, watching Rob behind us.

“He does.” My mom started to say.

“And how would you know? Do you talk to him on a regular basis or something?” I asked sarcastically. I looked over at her, seeing the guilt in her eyes. “Oh mom.”

“Andi, he’s been trying to talk to you since you left. You won’t answer his messages or his calls...”

“And you do?” I demanded. “You talk to him and remain all buddy buddy?”

“What do you want me to do, Andi? He’s,” I cut her off.

“I want you to not talk to him. I want you to do what Dad does and hang up on him. I mean come on, Dad may not be the best father in the world but he at least knows not to talk to his daughter’s ex-husband.” I was starting to yell. I could see Danni and Jo in the rear view mirror watching us carefully.

“If he didn’t run off with that tramp and have AJ, then he probably would still be talking to him too. Eddie was like a son to me. And Rob clearly isn’t...”

“Isn’t what?”

My mother stopped, took a breath. “When I get to the motel, I’m calling Eddie, and I’m telling him...”

“Nothing!” I snapped. “My life as it is right now is none of Eddie’s business. None. Ok. Let me make that exceptionally clear. You are not to tell him where I live, whom I’m seeing, if I’m seeing anyone at all, not a single thing. I’m your daughter. Ok, let me repeat that one. I.Am.Your.Daughter. Your flesh and blood who was left heartbroken and mangled by that jerk without a reason. Don’t talk to him about me anymore. Even better, don’t talk to him period.”

I was pleased to see that we had pulled into the motel parking lot. I climbed out of the car, slamming the door behind me, the headlight’s of the mustang lighting the scene. My mom climbed out of the car.

“Andi, honey, he’s been trying to tell you that...” she stopped. My sisters climbed out of the car. I watched my mother puff her face, balling her hands into fists at her side. “Just talk to him.”

“No,” I replied sharply, calming. Rob got out of the mustang, hanging back by his still open door. “Goodnight.” I waved to my mother, going up and hugging my sisters tightly. “Have fun shopping in the city tomorrow.” I snapped a little.

“Andraia Marie.” She snapped back. I walked over to Rob’s car and opened the passenger side door.

“Let me know when you get home safely. Love you all.” I said before I climbed in. Rob called to my mother a goodnight, a pleasure to meet her. He then swiftly got

into the car and closed the door, shifting gears on the car and drove away.

We were a couple minutes away from the parking lot when I burst into tears, sobbing uncontrollably.

"Hey," he said gently as he reached over and rubbed my back while I bent over in sobs. "Andi, honey, I'm sorry I was late. I mean, no Doug didn't *make* me stay but I was the dumbass who cut the box too deep so I thought I should..."

"It's not you Rob." I pushed myself back up. "It's got nothing to do with you. It just... there were things said in the car that..."

"You don't have to tell me." He said softly. "I'm not sure I want to know. I got the vibe from your mom and Danni that they didn't think I was a great guy. Jo, she loves me, but she doesn't want to feel liked an out cast." He moved his hand from my back to my thigh. "I figured out that I was being compared around the time she asked about Becca." I looked over at him, disappointment lingering on his face. "I'm sorry about this morning, and this afternoon. I was an ass."

"I'm sorry too," I replied.

We pulled into my driveway. The lights were all off, and I remembered that Beth had to work the early morning shift at the cafe. I got out of the car, and walked up to the door, noting the lights of the Mustang turning out behind me. I unlocked the door, feeling his hand on my lower back. I led him inside, closing and locking the door when he was inside.

I walked into my room, knowing he followed me. He closed the door and came to me. I followed my instincts; I kissed him, then I went straight for the zipper on his jeans, wanting to remove his dress jacket next. His hands grabbed onto mine, and I stopped everything. "Not tonight, hon." He said softly. "Tonight we just sleep."

Chapter 17

"Are you sure she's going to show up?" Steve asked as he tacked a lime green streamer to the far corner of my living room.

"Why wouldn't she?" I called back to him from the kitchen. "Gaylen told her the other night he would be calling around seven-thirty. He's in on the whole thing. Beth *never* misses his calls, and he always calls when he says he will." I grabbed the plastic bowls I had hidden for tonight's special occasion: Beth's surprise birthday.

"I don't think she's going to like this." Nikki said, handing Steve the orange streamer, the last that formed and 'x' over our heads in the living room. They hung balloons in the middle. Every decoration was coloured lime green and bright orange, her two favourite colours.

"She's going to love it," Tony was sure. He had helped me plot the whole thing, including Beth getting the abnormal shift at the cafe of nine until seven. "It's the perfect distraction for the fact that Gaylen couldn't make it down for another couple of weeks. He couldn't get a cheap flight until half way through December."

"Yeah, so try and keep the couple bullshit to a minimal tonight, won't you Andi?" Nikki snickered at me.

For the record, Rob and I hadn't actually been all that couple-like in front of the others. An arm around me at lunch wasn't all that concrete. The only ones who had actually witnessed Rob and I act like a couple were Tony and Beth, and even they didn't get the full

glimpse. Rob was still very much against any public displays of affection, even if it was in my own house; the second my bedroom door was closed, or we walked into his house, it was a different story.

"For the hundredth time, Nikki, Rob's not going to be here. So you can slow down on the drinks, cause he's not going to be here for you to throw your sloppy self all over him." I retorted with a smile.

"Gee, would you let me?" Nikki asked, trying to poke the beast. She didn't even pay attention to Steve who was motioning for some tape.

"Just to see you try." I ended the small spat as I walked over to Steve and handed him the roll of tape Nikki refused to.

"Thanks." He glared at her then finished the decorations.

"Alright," Tony slapped his hands together. "We have food, we have drinks, we have decorations, we have everything set. We just have to wait for the others to start showing up." He did a little jump of excitement.

"Who all is coming?" Nikki asked, her voice sounding annoyed like always. She walked over to the counter and downed the last of her third cooler. It wouldn't have been so bad except it was ten to seven; we started decorating and getting ready at six.

"Frank and Sarah should be here any minute. Doug will be coming with them, I think and then a few others from the mall will show." Tony rattled off the guest list.

"You know, I think this will be the first time we'll all have hung out together in months! This will be awesome." Steve noted as he walked over to the fridge and grabbed a couple of beers. He twisted off both caps and handed me one of them with a wink.

"Except Andi's man." Nikki replied with an eye roll.

"He's not my 'man,'" I snapped back. It sucked that after all that time he still had never called me his girlfriend, his girl even, and had never told me he loved me. We dated, though not to the extreme we did the night before my mother came. We did spend the night at one another's house without it leading to a roll in the sack, but our relationship was never properly defined. At least it wasn't to me.

"He puts his arm around you every day at lunch, and you guys go out together, and sleep together. Just cause he won't say it doesn't mean you don't think of him as your man." Steve sounded bitter, taking a long drink of beer before he made eye contact with anyone again.

"Yeah, and you know how straight men are when they're territorial." Tony rolled his eyes as the doorbell rang. Despite it being my house, Tony skipped to the door.

"Hey, I'm proud of you. That's the first gay jab you gave me in about a month." Steve called to Tony and raising his bottle in fake cheer.

"Really?" Tony turned around with his hand on the door knob. "Gee, I must be slipping." He opened the door and a surreal flow of people started to come in.

Sarah and Frank led the pack, followed by Doug and a bunch of others.

Within seconds the house was filled with music and people, noise from wall to wall. I watched the clock carefully, making sure that everything was running smoothly. Beth would be home soon. I just had to be patient.

"Hey," Steve said, putting a hand on my shoulder. I jumped a little. "You ok?"

"Yeah," I replied with a smile. "I'm just really nervous. I got Beth an awesome gift, and I don't know how she's going to react to it." I could feel myself blushing. I was proud of myself for keeping my perfect gift a secret from everyone, except Rob. And as he was working at the lounge, I knew I didn't have to worry about him spoiling any surprises.

"You sure it's got nothing to do with him?" Steve asked me again, squeezing my shoulder.

"Steve." I said flatly. "It's got nothing to do with him." Though the more Steve mentioned him, the more it brought to the front of my mind that, despite knowing about this event from its conception, Rob switched shifts with Irving. I didn't feel I had the right to even ask him why.

He looked sceptical of my words but shrugged it off as the head lights showed through the window and curtains. Tony ran for the stereo and turned it down, signalling for everyone to hush.

I could hear Beth hit her keys against the lock, and curse loudly at it through the door when it wouldn't

turn right away. She came through the door, looking a little pissed at first, then her eyes bugged out of her face.

“Whoa,” She said at first. Then she smiled really big and threw her hands in the air. “Party at my place!” And then Tony hit the music.

“Surprise!” Nikki yelled really loud with a drunken voice. “What! None of you other fools said anything.”

Tony came over to stand beside me as Beth made a bee line in my direction. “You two did this didn’t you?” She asked and hugged us both tightly at once.

“Maybe.” Tony sang, making his best angel face. “Now go get changed, I put an absolutely smoking outfit on your bed. My gift to you.” He kissed her cheek. “Happy Birthday babe.”

Beth didn’t need to be told again. She turned quickly around and went down the hall, eager to get out of her uniform, I would imagine.

“My gift’s better,” I mocked him with a smirk.

“I don’t see it anywhere.” Tony gestured around the room.

“Just because you don’t see it, doesn’t mean it’s not here.” I winked at him and he slapped me on the arm. It killed him not being in on the surprise.

She came back down the hall a few minutes later, a beautiful purple blouse, paired with nice medium washed jeans. Tony knew how to dress us; the color was perfect for Beth’s complexion.

“Nice.” I complimented with a smile as the phone rang. I glanced over at the microwave, reading the time

on the digital clock. It was seven twenty-nine. Someone turned off the music

"That must be Gaylen." Beth jumped for the phone and picked it up. "Hello!" She was overly excited, her voice bubbly. One second she was smiling, the next her face paled and her jaw dropped. I instinctively knew it wasn't Gaylen. "Umm, yeah... she's home." Beth looked at me panicked. "Umm, I don't know if she's..." Beth's voice faded.

Tony walked over and took the phone from her hand. "Hello, who's this?" He asked as bubbly as Beth had at first. His facial expression changed as well. "You have nerve calling her you fucking asshole. Now do us all a favour, don't do it again. What? NO! Do I sound like the kind of guy that dates women?" Tony hung up the phone and just gave me a nod.

"Umm," I closed my eyes as I heard a voice; so much for the surprise. "I can go back out the door, and come back inside in a minute." My gift from Greece had arrived on time.

"Gaylen." Beth burst into tears. "What are you doing here?" She ran over to him, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"I'm your gift from Andi." He replied as the music started back up and the party resumed. Beth looked at me with tear filled eyes. "She paid for an earlier flight so I could spend more time with you for the holidays."

"Don't." I said as I put up my hands. She was about to leave Gaylen to give me a hug. "Just enjoy. I know how much it's appreciated. And," I added raising a

finger, "you aren't allowed to leave your party. You'll get the house to yourselves tonight."

"Damn," Tony whispered when Beth turned away to socialize. "I should have just put my name on your card."

I smiled and turned away. I walked over to the phone while Steve and Tony went to say 'hi' to Gaylen. I flicked the caller ID list, seeing who it was that phoned. I felt a small bit of panic when I read it. Blocked ID, followed by a city number: the same number that came up on my cell phone a couple months back.

"Beth," I called to her, but she was already lost in the crowd, socializing with Gaylen and the others. I didn't want to bother her with my personal problems on her birthday. I decided that perhaps I shouldn't involve Tony anymore than what he was currently. I finished my beer, and went to the fridge to get another one.

I hung around the kitchen for a while, not really wanting to socialize. I was trying hard to think about who the number could have belonged to. It was a cell phone number that much I knew. I wanted desperately to know. But this was Beth's night, and I didn't want my newly soured mood or insatiable curiosity to ruin it for her.

"Hey," Steve came up to me after an hour or so. "Wanna head outside, get some fresh air?"

"It's cold out." I replied with a tone equal to the temperature.

He shrugged his shoulders. "We'll wear coats." He gestured his head to the door. "Come on, let's go."

He walked over to the fridge and grabbed a couple of unopened beers. I went over to the entry way, grabbing my coat and zipping it up as Steve put on his. I opened the door, glancing behind me to see Steve doing the same.

There was nowhere to sit outside except the front step. I checked to see if there was any ice before I sat down, Steve doing the same as I checked my cell phone for the time. Eight thirty. It was a little later than I expected it to be.

I looked over at him, seeing he was studying my face in the dim light, a kind expression on his face. The whole scene felt vaguely familiar, though I wasn't exactly sure why. I hadn't had a moment alone with him since the first time he did my hair. After that, Sarah usually took time out of her day to sit and chat while he worked his magic.

"So, what's going on?" He asked as he took a drink, his eyes never leaving my face.

"Nothing." I replied unconvincingly, the blocked caller id running through my mind.

"Why are you upset?" He shifted a little closer to me.

"I'm not." I took a big drink.

"Don't lie to me, Andi. I know you are, I can see it. I want to know why." He stared at me when I didn't answer. I tried to peel the label off my bottle instead but the cool air was making it hard. My fingers were a little numb and the condensation that formed when I

was inside was starting to turn to frost. "It's Rob, isn't it?" I shot my head up and caught a quick glimpse of the angry expression on Steve's face before changed it.

"No, it's not Rob." I laughed at the thought. Would it be so bad if I told Steve my theories?

"Uh-huh." Steve smiled. I could see his tongue run along the inside of his cheek. "Sure it's not."

"It's not." I actually smiled a little bit, trying not to laugh at him. "It's..." I ran my finger around the mouth of the bottle. This sucked. "It's my ex-husband."

"Huh?" Steve laughed.

"Eddie, I mean, I think he was the one who called the house. The number was a blocked number from the city." I took a breath. I should just tell him the whole thing. "He's been writing me e-mails, and texting me and all that for a while. He's been trying to get me to talk to him. It started a couple days after the divorce. I have him filtered on my e-mail, and Rob did something to my phone that sent his text messages to some far off place but..."

"Fuck," Steve said it long, drawing out the word for a couple more syllables. I looked over at him, and he turned away. He threw his head back and proceeded to chug back the last of his beer, opening another, and taking a long drink out of the new bottle. He audibly finished as he cursed under his breath.

"Steve?" I asked him, trying not to laugh. "You ok?"

"A guy only talks to his ex for one reason." He grumbled. I caught on to what he was saying, and I shook my head in disbelief.

"No, Steve, I don't think it's that." I tried to say but he turned back to me, setting the bottle down on the cement and grabbed my hands. One was colder than the other.

"Andi I like you." He said point blank. "I like you a lot. Way more than that fucking man whore does. You're the first girl, first person, that I could actually say I wanted. And you're wasting your time on losers who dump you and use you to get back at ex-girlfriends."

"Steve, you're drunk." I tried to reason though I knew he wasn't. I wanted to stop him, tell him to smarten up, but... what was the comment about using me to get back at ex-girlfriends.

"No, Andi, I'm not drunk, ok. I'm about as drunk as you are. And I'm telling you straight up, no hiding behind any foolish rules about public displays that weren't in existence when a certain someone dated a certain bitchy blonde. I'm not sure what Eddie's trying to do if he's trying to do anything, but I'm not going to play their fucked up games. I like you Andi. And if you don't see me that way, fine, I don't mind. Just know that when he's done screwing you around I'm gonna be waiting. And you know what, if you even have a twinge of feeling for me, if this moment is making you feel like there is a small maybe then ditch his ass before he hurts you." He was almost yelling. Steve was growing passionate, squeezing my hands as he spoke. I couldn't move my eyes away, he would just adjust his head, his body, to catch me.

I didn't want this, I didn't need it. I would have gone on perfectly fine not knowing Steve had feelings for me, could have been even better if I hadn't picked up the not-so-subtle hint that Rob and Nikki were a lot more than the notion of a fling. Could the night get any worse?

"What's going on?" I shot my head up as I saw Rob walking into the light. He was pissed. Yep, it could most definitely get worse. Steve let go of my hands and I stood up, moving to Rob slowly. I hadn't seen this look before, and he actually kind of scared me a little.

He was still physically tender to me, opening an arm for me to go into, but he didn't look at me when I got there. His eyes were focused on Steve.

"We were just having a chat." Steve said with an expressionless face and a shrug of his shoulders as he folded his arms across his chest.

"Bullshit." Rob cursed as he stepped away from me. "I had gotten a call from Nikki when I was just about to leave the bar. She said you guys left the party about a half hour ago." His tone was cold and questioning.

"Why are you off early?" I asked, slipping in front of Steve. My heart shot up in my throat when I made the mistake.

"Irving hired a couple more people for the holiday season and it was dead." He didn't turn to look at me, but his tone said he wasn't mad at me for making the slip. I still couldn't breathe a sigh of relief. I watched anxiously as Steve and Rob walked a little closer to each

other. "What I want to know is why you were holding on to my girl?"

Would it really be too much to hope that Beth's party wasn't going to be ruined by the two boys puffing up their chests? I looked over at the window, cringing. No one was watching except for Nikki. She had both hands on the glass, her eyes peering through the window as the curtain shielded the party behind her from the display outside.

"I wasn't holding on to *your* girl." Steve replied with smugness. He folded his arms across his chest. This wasn't turning out good. "I was holding on to my friend. But since you brought it up, I don't think I had ever heard you call her that before. Ever. So how exactly was I to know she was spoken for? After all, you made more claim to Nikki than you did Andi. That's a whole bunch of mixed signals, Rob."

"I'm sorry," Rob said sarcastically, taking another step closer to Steve. "All passed relationships and how I handled them aside, let me make this abundantly clear for you: Touch Andi again, and I will mess up your pretty little face. Got it?" he snapped.

"You don't scare me." He said confident and fearless.

Rob took a swing and I was surprised when Steve caught it, appearing to do so with little strain. He then pushed back on it, causing Rob to lose his footing and slip on some black ice. He didn't fall, just stumbled a bit. I couldn't see Rob's expression, but Steve smiled a little wider, folding his arms across his chest again. "Like I said, you don't scare me." He stepped backwards

onto the step. "Goodnight, Andi." Steve walked into the house, closing the door behind him. I glanced at the window and saw the curtain flutter, but no Nikki.

I looked back at Rob, a little taken aback by the fact that he was fuming and the anger seemed to be directed at me. "What the fuck is going on, Andi?" He yelled at me.

I returned his anger with my own. "Nothing, Rob, not a damn thing is going on." I yelled back.

"Then why did you leave the party with him, huh?" His voice was cracking.

"Oh for frig sakes, Rob, I went outside with a friend to get some air and have a quiet chat, ok." I threw my hands up in disbelief.

"Air, yeah, that's it." He rolled his eyes at me. "I'm not blind, Andi."

"You know what, Rob, you're not blind but you are stupid. Steve told me all about you and Nikki." Or at least he hinted strongly at it.

"He doesn't know shit about me and Nikki." Rob pointed a finger in the direction of the door. That stung, and the pain was clear on my face. He softened a lot. He must have realized that I wasn't informed on any major details.

"He knew that there was a you and Nikki, which is more than I did." I heard the sadness in my voice, but knew my eyes weren't quite there yet. If I was lucky, I wouldn't break down. I felt strong enough not to.

"I don't know about every guy you've ever dated." He snapped back, but his argument was weak.

“Nikki isn’t just some girl, Rob. She’s your ex. She was your girlfriend.” I used the word. I had to, I wanted to see his reaction, hear his response. After all, he never called me that.

“She didn’t mean to me an eighth of what you do.” He replied after he took a second to compose himself. He walked up to me and held me, though it felt wrong and uncomfortable. “I didn’t tell you about Nikki because she was just an over extended fling that just wouldn’t go away.” He brushed the hair off the side of my face. “Now please, and don’t lie: What was going on when I got here?”

“Steve just wanted to make sure I was happy. I’ve had a bad night, and I guess I didn’t hide it very well.” That was a good enough sum of it all. No need in feeding the fire by adding Steve’s confession of emotions or his opinion on mine and Rob’s relationship.

“Ok,” Rob said softly.

“How was your night at work?” I asked him, feeling his warmth wash over me. He remained silent for a minute.

“It was ok.” He replied with a touch of sadness. I didn’t want to press the matter, he looked like he was happy, but only looked it.

We stood there for a minute with our foreheads touching, our noses brushing together. I almost said the words. They lingered on my lips and almost passed through a dozen times in the moment we stayed like that. It would have been easy, concrete. Three words

that would either make him say them back or turn around and walk away. But I chickened out, and the moment was over. "Come on, I wanna see Gayl before we head to my place." He stepped past me and went for the door.

I watched him open the door and go inside without me. I just stood there, frozen and strangely heartbroken. He didn't deny Nikki was his girlfriend, a title he had yet to use for me. I hadn't heard him say he actually felt anything. Without knowing what he felt about Nikki, I couldn't simply do the math and figure out if I myself wasn't just a better fling or something more; I wanted to be, felt like I could be, but I didn't know for sure.

Chapter 18

"Andi, Honey, you gotta get up." I felt him kiss my forehead, but it lacked something. It was a quick peck with little affection and it caused my eyes to shoot open. The bedroom door was open a crack, the yellow glow from the kitchen shining in. I looked up at Rob. He was dressed, holding a coffee cup in his hand.

"What time is it?" I asked as I pushed myself up, swinging my legs over the edge of the bed.

"It's six." He replied, taking a sip of what I assumed was coffee.

"How long have you been up?" I asked as I put my feet on the cold floor and moved to the closet.

"Just about fifteen minutes." He said, adding, "I didn't sleep well."

"Too many nights in a row here?" I asked him as I gathered clothes for a shower. He shrugged his shoulders.

"I've just had a lot on my mind recently." He answered. He'd been distant the last couple of weeks, ever since Beth's birthday. I asked him on numerous occasions if it had anything to do with Steve, Nikki, or anything else. He said it was nothing; It didn't feel like nothing. December just started, I hadn't finished my Christmas shopping like I normally would have and I wasn't sure if I was going to have to get a relationship type gift, or just wait and see if I drew Rob's name in the secret Santa draw.

"Anything you want to talk to me about?" I asked, pausing in the door before I went for the shower.

"No." He replied simply, smiling a little. "It's nothing."

I had to take his word for it. I went to the shower, washing, contemplating how things changed while I stared at a tile on the wall. I must have stood there a while, just thinking. I heard a knock on the door, and then the click of the knob turning. I poked my head out from behind the curtain, seeing Beth come in.

"What's up?" I asked her as I went about showering.

"I want to make sure you're ok." Beth put down the toilet lid and sat down. "You and he haven't been..."

"I know." I snapped, not meaning too. "I don't know why, do you? Has he said anything to Gaylen?" I could hear the anxiety.

"No," Beth replied with a disappointed tone. "I wish he would, though."

"Beth," I popped my head out the curtain again, brushing the soap from my forehead before it fell in my eyes. "He's not with me in public, you know? He doesn't even put his arm around me anymore. He's working more at the bar, or at least that's what he said." When I told Beth what happened outside the day after her birthday, I informed her of Rob's second job, knowing that she would keep her mouth shut about it. "I went to see him play last Tuesday and when he finished he told me I couldn't go to his place and he wouldn't be coming here. Beth, he's screwing someone

else isn't he?" I threw the curtain back and rinsed my hair.

"I don't think he is." Beth was being honest. "I think he cares about you." I snorted. "And respects you," she raised her voice a little, "too much to do that to you. Maybe he's just got a lot on his mind. Maybe he really is just working late at the bar, maybe it's because of the holidays."

"Has he ever radically changed his attitude the second the holiday season came around?" I asked after I shut off the water. I reached out to the towel bar and grabbed my fluffy black towel.

"Well," I could hear how bad she wanted to lie. "No, he hasn't."

"Then what am I supposed to do?" I asked her as I stepped out of the shower. I turned my back to her and started to dress.

"Wait it out?" I knew she had turned her back to me as well, her voice sounding like it was bouncing off the walls. "You could always just tell him how you feel, maybe it will smarten him up?"

"Yeah, and make myself the blubbering idiot so he will stay with me." After getting on my jeans and bra, I turned back around, pulling on my sweater. "As much as being straight forward would work, something tells me that's not going to make him keep me."

"Well, I don't know babes," Beth turned and faced me, shrugging her shoulders. "Maybe you and he have just..."

"Don't say it." I said, pointing my finger at her sharply. "If I'm lucky, he'll wait 'til January so I don't have to be dumped twice in the same year."

Beth rolled her eyes at me. "He's not going to dump you."

"Yeah," I laughed, "and I'm still married to Eddie." I opened the bathroom door and pulled on my socks as I hobbled into the living room.

Gaylen came down the hall in his chef's uniform. The future lawyer worked in the health food restaurant in the food court when he came home, though last time he was around he didn't get all that many shifts. The holidays meant more hours even in a small town. "I'm gonna grab the Christmas tree on the way home tonight. We can always decorate it later on," he said as Beth walked past me and over to him.

"Sounds nice," she said as she gave him a peck on the lips.

"You gonna join us tonight, Rob?" Gaylen asked hesitantly. He was a little surprised when he came home and found we weren't quite the couple Beth told him we became. It didn't take long for Gaylen to pick up on the pending end.

"No," Rob replied quickly. "No, I don't think it's a good day. Plus I have to work tonight."

"Of course you do." I muttered low. "Are we ready to go?"

"Yeah," He said as he bitterly swallowed the last of his coffee. Clearly my remark didn't go unnoticed.

It was an uncomfortable ride to work, and like the day my mother came, it was an awkward morning working across the hall from one another. I could feel the waves of annoyance radiate across to me. I don't think I was helping, sending them right back in his direction. I still smiled at the customers, Christmas purchases starting to pour in; It was keeping me somewhat distracted.

At lunch, I sat down a little closer to Beth than usual. Rob didn't move to close the distance. I looked up from my plate of pasta, seeing both Nikki and Steve take a very long look at the small but clear rift. Jerks, they shouldn't be allowed to enjoy this.

"So," Nikki started, her voice more chipper than normal. "Christmas party next Saturday. Is everyone excited?"

"Stoked," Rob replied sarcastically, shoving a fry in his mouth.

"Thrilled," I added with equal enthusiasm. I looked at Beth, who made a face and I wasn't sure if it was supposed to be sympathetic or something, but it tipped off the others.

"Trouble in paradise, Andi?" Steve asked me, trying not to smile.

"Shut up, Steve." Rob hissed.

"I'm sorry, I was talking to Andi. Not you." He shook his head from side to side a little.

"It's fine, Steve." I answered his question though not convincingly. I glanced at Rob. He glared at me. What the hell was going on?

He then jumped up, taking his cell phone out of his pocket and answering it. I didn't even hear it ring. None of us had. We watched him disappear for a second.

"Well," Nikki bubbled, getting us back on topic. "I can't wait. I have this dress that looks absolutely spectacular. And it's green. Bonus!"

"Oh, you mean you aren't going to treat us to the usual slutty red number you normally wear?" Tony faked shock, slapping his cheeks with both hands Macaulay Culkin style. "Are you feeling alright?"

"Fine," Nikki shrugged with a smile. "I've just been inspired in recent weeks to try something different."

"Gee, I wonder what brought that on." I was too bitter and cynical to be socializing right now.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Nikki smiled knowingly. Bitch.

"What did I miss?" Rob said as he sat down, sliding his chair a little closer to me. I wasn't the only one who noticed his change in mood.

"Well, mister mood swing, Apparently Nikki's not going to be a slut this year." Tony answered matter-of-factly, provoking Nikki to slap him on the chest.

"Ha! Little late in the year to start that resolution, Nikki." Rob laughed. "Maybe you should just hold out a few more weeks and try that again next year." He leaned back, putting his arm around me, startling me. He looked at me, trying not to laugh. "You ok, Hon?"

I eyed him suspiciously, "Yeah, I'm fine."

Through the rest of lunch he was a little more cuddly, putting his arm around me for the first time in a while. I'm sure he could feel my hesitation as I was a little squirmy in his presence.

When our break was up he walked me down the hall, holding my hand as he did so. When we were alone as we could get in the Christmas coated mall, I stopped and asked him, "What's going on."

"Nothing, why?" Rob asked, shrugging his shoulders.

"You're different." I retorted.

He laughed nervously. "I'm not different."

"You are. You have been for the last couple of weeks." I was starting to speak quickly, my voice shaky. He put his hands on my shoulders. "You're distancing yourself, and now..."

"Andi," he said flatly, "would you like to come to my place tonight?" I melted a bit, but didn't falter, not right away.

I glared. "You work tonight. Why would I go to your place to just sit around outside and wait for you to come home?"

"No, no. That was Irving who called, he cancelled my shift." Rob shrugged. "So come on, what do you say? Me and you? All by ourselves? We haven't had me and you time for awhile."

"We both know whose fault that is," I grumbled and looked at him. He was pleading. I caved. "Sure." I shrugged. "Why not."

I was a little surprised when I got to Rob's and he had a small tree sitting in the corner of his living room.

It was decorated too, though sparse. It was sitting on a table, and the gifts that sat on the floor around it would have been bigger than the tree if sat side by side.

"It's early December." I commented, pointing to the oddly large amounts of gifts.

"My mom and sister like to send them to me early." He shrugged as he went around and turned on the lights. "Want chicken for dinner?" He asked as he went into the kitchen.

"Only if you want to cook." I called behind me, hearing him laugh in response. This, I admit, felt more natural than I was expecting.

I got nosey and walked over to the tree. I poked at some of the tags, seeing a couple of 'from Zoe's' one, 'from mom,' and two 'from Dad and Marion.' I smiled. Dad did the same thing, always signing that it was from him and Vanessa, when really she to this day wasn't able to call me her daughter, though maybe Marion hadn't broken up a marriage. I sat down on the couch cushion closest to the tree, deciding to poke at some of the Simpson ornaments on the tree.

As one swung on its hook, a tiny box beneath the branches caught my eye. My heart stopped. It shouldn't have. It was a box under his tree, it could have easily been a second one from his mother. But the eight year old Andi in me wanted to peek really badly. I glanced over at the kitchen, seeing Rob was busy.

I reached beneath, careful not to disturb the branches or the ornaments too much and pulled it out.

I glanced over again, he was still busy. The tag was a fold over.

"I don't have any potatoes or fries, will rice be ok?" he called again. I just about fell off the couch, bracing myself against the arm as I tried to calm my heart.

"That's fine." I called back as chipper as I could. I double checked to make sure I wasn't caught, then flipped open the tag.

To Andi. Merry Christmas – Rob

Despite the shape and size of the tiny box in foiled paper, I had never been so disappointed. Maybe it was earrings, a charm, an odd necklace box, or exactly what it appeared to be: a ring. But there was no love with this gift. Two names and three words made up the kind of sentiment you write on the gift of someone you don't know well.

I put the box back and was very careful to not let on that I knew about it. I smiled and chatted with him during dinner but stole more glances at that tiny tree than did of him. It was like a beacon, a neon sign that said 'this relationship isn't what you think, sweet heart.'

"Do you mind giving me a hand with the laundry?" he asked me after dinner. "Just folding. We could call it even since I helped you with the dishes the other night." He stood from the table.

"Sure," I replied quietly. I followed him into his bedroom, where he grabbed me by the waist and tackled me onto the bed. I yelped and he laughed. He

started kissing me on my cheek, my neck, unbuttoning my sweater. "Rob."

"Yeah Andi?" he asked breathlessly.

"Can you stop?" I asked.

He did, sighing and standing up right. He practically pulled his hair out as he rang his fingers through his hair. "I'm sorry, I know I've been a little distant. I've just been really busy lately, and I mean Steve..."

"Rob I told you, we went out to talk that night."

"I know what you told me. I know, but I approached him about it that Monday. He said he told you..." He stopped and looked at me, messing up his rust coloured hair. "He said he told you that he had very deep feelings for you."

"So?" Really, was what Steve said to me such a valid reason for Rob to have taken a hiatus from our relationship or whatever you call this mess?

"So? So, he's your friend Andi." Rob actually yelled, getting up off the bed.

"He's your friend too." I argued back, standing up and button my clothing back together.

"No no, you don't get it. He told me *everything* he told you." Rob was getting animated.

"I still don't get..."

"He practically told you he loved you." He sighed again, a long deflating breathe. "Why are you still with me?" He demanded. My jaw dropped. Did he just ask me what I think he did?

"Excuse me?"

"Why are you still with me? Huh? I mean, honestly Andi who are we kidding? You would have a twinge of something for him cause he's your friend, and of course you would care for your friends." He rambled.

"Rob!" I yelled at him, causing him to stop moving. "What the hell does Steve have to do with anything? I'm still here so I obviously *don't* feel anything for him."

"So why are you still here, Andi? Tell me, cause if he's got the idea that he has the opportunity to plead a case then..."

"Because I love *you*, you moronic, thick-headed, stubborn man." I yelled over him. He stopped right around the time my heart did. I couldn't believe I just said that; I don't think he did either. He just stared at me, breathing heavily, jaw dropped. I realized that what I said to Beth earlier was right. There was only one way to find out where this was going, where Rob stood. "I love you, and I'm still here because I don't know how you feel about me. I have a hunch, I have a notion, but nothing concrete. So that's why I'm still here."

"Andi," he said softly, but I raised my hand to stop him.

"Rob, I'm a patient woman. We've been seeing each another for four months, and I was fine with you not telling me or anyone else that I'm your girlfriend. Ok, Steve was right when he said that you never stated a claim on me. And maybe he was right about the whole PDA thing with Nikki, I don't know I wasn't around for that. But Rob, I need to know: am I someone to you?" I

felt my knees want to collapse, felt my heart splinter, but my eyes were proud and wouldn't give away the weakness that surged through me right then.

"Andi, I do, it's just." Rob stuttered softly.

"You do what, Rob?" I asked him. He looked at me with bugged eyes and an open jaw. He stuttered and tried to move his mouth, moving his hands in circles as if to get momentum. "Tell me, do you love me?"

"Andi." He breathed.

"Tell me, say it, do something to let me know that I'm not a complete and total idiot for just admitting that I love you." I yelled with a stronger voice than I thought possible.

He shook his head and bowed it, looking at his feet. "I can't." He turned his head away from me.

I took in a breath. I was pissed, embarrassed, and crushed. "Fine," I said, lifting my arms and dropping them like dead weight against my thighs. I stormed out of the bedroom and headed for the entry way. I put on my boots, and my coat, wrapping my scarf around my neck as I heard him come into the entry way.

"Andi, wait." He was pleading.

"No," I shook my head. "I'm done waiting." I opened the door and slammed it shut behind me.

I walked home, unable to cry, barely able to breathe. I was going through more emotions than I knew how to handle. It took me twenty minutes to walk from Rob's subdivision to mine. He never followed me, and I never looked back to see if he had started to.

I walked into the house, seeing Gaylen and Beth standing around the tree putting up decorations. I may have slammed our door too.

“Andi, what’s going on?” She asked as she hopped off her footstool. I removed all my outerwear before I answered her.

“Rob and I are done.” I stated firmly, walking over to the fridge and sifting through the bottles until I found one of Nikki’s leftover grape coolers.

“What! Andi, oh my god, are you ok? Do you need a Burger? Doritos?” She rambled off the list.

“No, no I don’t need any of that because I’m the one who ended it. No, what I need is mild intoxication.” I curbed my anger and replaced it with sarcasm. I could see Beth’s eyes tear up. “I’ll be ok, babes.” I replied and let her hug me. “I’m gonna go into my room for the rest of the night, leave you two to enjoy your evening.” I really didn’t want to ruin it for Beth.

“Are you sure?” She asked, gripping onto my arms. “Don’t be alone if you don’t want to be, we won’t mind, honest.” She barely glanced at Gaylen for approval.

“It’s ok.” I replied as the phone rang. Gaylen moved to get it. “Honest.” I looked at him before he reached the receiver. “Is it Rob?”

Gaylen wrinkled his forehead. “No. Baby, do you know this guy?” He pointed to the phone like it was a picture.

Beth stepped away from me and looked at the caller id, her eyebrows just about shooting off her face when

she read the name. She picked it up quickly. "Hello? Yes she's here, but she doesn't want to talk to anyone right now, especially you." There was a long pause, close to a minute. "Tell her yourself, then." She said and then hung up the phone, pulling the cord out of the wall. She then walked up and gave me a kiss on the cheek. "If you need me, just call me in there." She went back to her tree with Gayle whom began to ask whispered questions.

I changed into my pyjamas, sitting on my bed in the dark on my laptop reading the news and e-mails from my sisters and brother that I hadn't had a chance to. When I was done my cooler, and my eyelids started to get heavy I ducked out long enough to brush my teeth and washed my face. I used the washroom and tip-toed back into my room, catching a glimpse of Beth and Gaylen snuggled on the couch watching Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer.

I crawled into my bed, exhausted. I reached out instinctively, to touch something that wasn't there. I wanted to cry when I realized I was back to sleeping alone, but I didn't. My heart was cracked, bruised, but not broken. Tears couldn't fix the damage, nothing would. I was alone. Again.

When my alarm went off I got up, showered, dressed, and got ready for work like it was any other day. I refused to act like it wasn't. I wouldn't give anyone that satisfaction.

“Good morning,” I said in my best happy voice as I walked out into the kitchen, joining Beth and Gaylen. They watched me carefully.

“Morning,” he said carefully. “How’d ya sleep?”

“Fine,” I smiled. “What did you guys do after I went to sleep?”

“I talked Nikki last night.” She started to explain. “Rob had been begging you to talk to him in his statuses last night.” I had seen this, and on some level it satisfied me. That is until I closed my web browser, read an e-book, and forgot about it.

“So she knows.” I shrugged my shoulders. “I imagine she’s thrilled. What did she have to say?”

“She didn’t say anything.” Beth replied. I found it a little hard to believe. “She’s just happy you weren’t in too too deep.” Oh how little Nikki knew. “She promised not to gloat.”

“That’s big of her.” There was sarcasm in my voice, but I did find the humour in the truth. For Nikki not to gloat would be pretty big. The phone rang and I glanced at it, and then glanced at the clock. It was twenty to seven. “Is that her?”

Beth looked at the caller id, and seemed extremely reluctant to answer the phone. She did so hesitantly. “Hello? Yes.” Beth glanced at me, but then looked away. “No. Yes.” She was being too evasive. I had never heard Beth simply give yes or no answers in a phone call. “Yes.” She hung up after a pause, and then avoided my eyes as we heard Nikki’s horn honk outside. We grabbed our stuff and headed for the door.

"Who was that?" I asked her on the way to the car.

"No one," she still wouldn't look at me. It must have been Rob. Hearts shouldn't soar and break at the same thought.

"Morning ladies." Nikki was extra perky this morning. No surprise, her man was back on the market. "Andi, you and Beth and I are having lunch alone today."

"No Sarah?" I asked her.

"She's not working today. BUT what we are going to do is go boy watching." Nikki smiled.

"Oh, I like boy watching!" Beth faked excitement. I caught her in the passenger mirror rolling her eyes.

When we got to the mall, I was surprised to see Tony's fit in the parking lot. I looked at Beth, a little confused as to why Nikki picked us up, if Tony was working. I shrugged it off, figuring Nikki wanted to drive us in to see if I was a 'sad Andi.' I was pleased with myself for disappointing her.

When we got inside, I caught Tony and Steve whispering before I came into view then they suddenly stopped. Great, rumours were already circulating. I wonder how long it would be before Steve would assume I left Rob for him?

"Here you go, dear," Tony said as he handed me a drink a little larger than my normal drink. "An extra large skinny vanilla latte. It's on me."

"Great, thanks Tony. Did it come with extra pathetic, or did you mix that in there for me? Cause I

must not have enough if you're buying me drinks." I took a sip, at least it was good.

"Ouch," Tony tried to fake a pained face, but his grin was showing through. "Someone had an extra bowl of bitch this morning."

"Well, I used a lot of bitchy up last night, as you've clearly heard, so I needed some way to get it all back." Tony made a kitty claw gesture with a smile. I chuckled a little at him

"Ok, seriously. How are you not crying your eyes out, like, right now?" Nikki finally cracked. She looked completely frustrated. I shrugged my shoulders, not satisfying her with a vocal response.

"Excuse me, morning." Rob parted the crowd to get to the counter. I didn't move, though I did steal a glance at him before he got too close. His eyes were red, and he looked like shit. It broke my heart and satisfied me. "Andi." His voice was sad and remorseful. I refused to cave.

"Robert." I was cold. Maybe that's why he didn't stick around after paying for his Americano. He quietly asked people to excuse him and left shortly after arriving. I didn't realize I had been holding my breath.

"Umm, Nikki, I think you got your wires crossed." Tony pointed his finger at her and moved his head in a z shape. "Because that to me looked like Rob is all miserable and heartbroken and Miss Andi is the Queen of all." He looked at me with an approving head to toe examination. "You effing go girl."

I decided it was best to walk away and leave it at that. I left the cafe and headed for Music Stop, glancing only once in the art store, seeing him standing sullenly against the counter. He was looking sad enough for the two of us. I just had to keep telling myself he deserved it.

“Ok, so how this game works is you check out a guy, and you just say if you would do him. If you get ballsy enough, Beth excluded, and you ask him out, you are like, Queen for a day with everyone’s respect.” Nikki explained the rules of the crazy ‘fishing for men’ game we were apparently playing.

“It sounds stupid.” I commented as I played with a fry. Despite not being furious any longer--my anger losing footing some point half way through the morning and my favourite Maroon 5 cd--I still wasn’t sad, and definitely not hungry. I could feel Rob watching me and I just refused to acknowledge him.

“Oh shut up, it’s soo much fun.” Nikki wrinkled her face. “OK Beth, you go first.”

“OK, umm.” She scanned the food court. “Him, him, definitely him, oh hello. Him, ahhh, buddy in the back, but not his friend. Umm, him, him, him, and him.” Beth sipped her Coke with a slurping noise.

“Wow, someone’s a fake whore today.” Nikki was a little too excited. “Though I think Gaylen was one of them, and that doesn’t count.” She elbowed Beth whom just shrugged.

“Ok,” Nikki said as she looked around the food court. “He’s hot, he’s hot, he’s not, no, yes to him, yes

to him, no, no, maybe, no, no, no, no.” She went on for what had to be fifteen minutes, pointing and grading every guy in the food court.

My brain wandered while she went on and on. I looked behind me, over to the other side where I knew the guys had convened. I knew I shouldn’t, but I had a weak moment. I met his eye, and my heart crashed as it tried to soar again. I still wore a cold glare, still putting on the brave face. I looked away before my walls broke down, and I would be willing to hear him out. He mouthed ‘I want to talk to you.’ Funny, I think I heard that before.

“Ok, Andi, you’re turn.” Nikki clapped her hands together.

“Nah,” I replied.

“Oh come on, please?” I shook my head. I was no longer in the mood to look at anyone who was classified as male. “Ok, I’ll point them out, you tell me yes or no. Uhh, him.” I humoured her and looked over. A tall lanky guy. Yep, this was going to be a fun game: Nikki pointing out the ugliest guys in the food court.

“No.”

“Him?” A guy checking out the girl ahead of him in line for the salad bar: mildly attractive but clearly sleazy.

“No.”

“What about him?” A slightly chubby guy in line at the burger place. I shook my head with a loud sigh. Kill me now.

“Well what about that guy over there? He looks kinda like a model?” Beth pointed at a guy at the ice cream stand. I looked over at her with a small scowl, but she just shrugged her shoulders. She was just playing along, keeping Nikki happy.

“Oh my,” Nikki said biting her lip. “How about tall and handsome. Blue eyes, black hair. OH, he could definitely be a guy for you Andi, even if he’s hot.” I bit my lip, finding the description a little unsettling. Guys like that were not on my list of attractive faces. “I love the way his hair curls at the ends. And he’s totally casual, he’s so perf...” She stopped mid-word. “He’s coming this way. Oh my god his coming up to the table.” My heart began to race, and I somehow knew I didn’t want to see him.

I looked at the clear surface of the table, seeing the reflection of everything behind me: the other patrons, the trees, a bit of the fountain, and the man in question. I knew him, of course I would. I didn’t have to turn around, but I did. The guy in the reflection stood with a smile of a man who’s found exactly what he was looking for. He was fidgeting with his tan laptop bag strap, a sign of nervousness. He was rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet, hoping that I would turn around, knowing I would. My curiosity always got the best of me. He knew that. He had always known that.

All that was left to do was acknowledge his presence. “Edmund.”

“Hi, Andi.”

Chapter 19

"Why are you here, Eddie?" I asked him, trying to sound as harshly as I could. I pulled him away from the girls and was careful not to sit near the guys.

"You know I have to say I'm impressed at how long you've gone without replying to any of my messages." Eddie smiled, beamed was more like it, as he studied me. He leaned forward a little, putting his hands out on the table, palms up.

"What do you want, Eddie?" I asked again, my edge failing a little. He looked at my hands and gently picked them up off the edge of the table. I didn't look at his hands, but I felt a ring on his left ring finger. The bastard was married.

"You." He replied flatly. I think I yelped the laugh out loud, and I pulled my hands away from his to cover my mouth.

"What?" Had I heard him correctly?

"I. Want. You." He said with a smile. I think I almost vomited.

"You're married." I said, almost yelling. "And I have work to get back to, so if you'll excuse me." I tried to get up, but he reached out and grabbed my hands again. Why I sat back down, I don't know. But I did. I wanted to hear what he said next, probably because I'm a glutton for punishment.

"I already talked to Frank, and let him know that you would be late and it would be because of me." He

was so smooth about it that I barely sat up and I was already sitting back down.

“Wait, you talked to Frank? My boss Frank?” I think my jaw hung open. “How much do you know about me?”

“I figured out where you were after a while. And I remembered the day I saw you here in the mall. I never forgot where you ducked into. I went there before I found you in the cafeteria and asked if you worked there.” Eddie studied me, probably seeing if I could tell if I knew what he was talking about. “Remember? I was with Maya.”

Oh I remembered. I remembered a tall, beautiful blonde. “Maya, your sister? That wasn’t Maya, Maya’s like two hundred pounds.”

“Yeah, I know, she was. But she lost all this weight. I mean, remember how she wouldn’t come to any family function for a year, and mom just about had a conniption because of it?” He laughed. I laughed too, the memory of Eddie’s mother having a tantrum because her eldest daughter wouldn’t come home was very vivid. It happened about a year ago. Christmas dinner was the last time I spent with his family. “Maya had apparently been half way through a weight loss plan that she didn’t want to tell mom about. She was afraid that when she came home, mom would ruin her diet.” He paused, rubbing his finger against mine. “She heard about our divorce and came to visit me, to get me through it. The day we saw you, I had decided to get out of the city.”

He was pulling on my heart strings. I thought I had cut him completely loose. I guess some part of him hadn't left. "Eddie... Why? What do you mean help get you through..."

"I've not been able to stop thinking about you. Ever." He said it point blank.

Somehow, his words, the way he said it, made me snap back to the reality of the moment. "Ok, get to the point." I asked, wishing he would hurry up.

"Andi, I don't want to come out and..."

"Please, just come out and say what you have to say..."

"We're still married." Ok, yep, that was getting to the point. For the second time in a short span I sat there in shock. I think it was a full minute before Eddie finally spoke again. "I was distracted, so caught off guard when you gave me back mom's ring that I missed a paper. Melanie didn't catch it before hand, and she didn't get a notice about it until our divorce proof was supposed to come in the mail.

"I tried calling you, but you had already disconnected your phone number from the city, and when I e-mailed you. I wasn't going to tell you in an e-mail. I had to ask Ann to find your new number on that face-pad-thing, whatever it's called." Eddie was never keen with technology. "I texted you, two, three times a day, but you just wouldn't respond, no matter what I put." My heart ached again, but this time for a different reason. It was difficult to not look for Rob.

“Ok, so why didn’t you just sign the damn paper and end this?” I asked, becoming irritated.

“Well there were a couple of reasons. One, we had to fill out all new ones. Melanie has them saved and can print them off and we can sign it, and this will really be done. But Andi, all I had thought about when she told me we weren’t divorced was that I just lucked out. I was saved from making the biggest mistake of my life. I never really stopped loving you, but I didn’t know what else to tell you when you wanted and answer. I just wanted to be free.”

I felt my blood boil, my jaw drop. Weeks of torment, agony, because he thought he wanted out. And now he had never been out and I had been married this whole time.

There are no words to describe the mixture of shock, anger, and horror I was feeling.

“Hi.” The sound of his voice would normally send me to cloud nine. But since I was in hell, Rob’s voice only brought me as far as earth. When I looked up he was standing over Eddie with a smile. “You must be Eddie.” He said pleasantly. “I’m Rob.” He held out his hand for a handshake. Peculiar.

“Hey,” Eddie said as he stood up, getting ready to take Rob’s hand.

If I had blinked any slower, I would have missed it. Rob decked Eddie, actually causing Eddie’s body to move a little as Rob’s fist made contact with Eddie’s face.

"Thanks," I said to Rob as I stood up. There was no emotion in my voice. "Saves me from doing that myself." I turned and walked away from them.

"Andi, please, I want to talk." Rob called. He would have to step around Eddie to get to me. "About last night."

"What about it?" I spun around, my voice snapping with my body. "Did you want to clarify the part where you couldn't tell me how you felt, or the part where I walked out because of it."

"Andi, let me explain." Rob pleaded after me.

"You know what." I tried calming my voice, but it wasn't going to work. I stopped and turned to look at him, seeing Eddie had joined Rob in the pursuit. The two were standing beside each other, Eddie rubbing his jaw as they both looked at me. "You two have a lot in common. Like breaking-up with me and then going, 'oops, sorry, change my mind.'" I attempted my escape again. I heard Rob argue in a pleading tone that he didn't want to break-up, Eddie arguing that he was stupid. I didn't want to listen to either of them

I threw my hands up in the air, sighing with annoyance, and headed back down the hall.

"Andi Love," Eddie called over Rob's voice. This caused me to snap back around again, pointing a finger at him with fury

"Don't 'Andi Love' me. Just because you forgot to sign your name on a piece of paper doesn't mean I'm still emotionally or mentally married to you." I almost

left, and then added for good measure. "And I'm not *physically* married to you either."

I walked away. I didn't respond to any of their calls, or any of their pleadings.

I entered the shop and walked right to the back of the store. I looked at Frank, catching him checking his watch as I walked in. "You apparently already knew I was going to be late, so I'm sorry."

"Andi," Frank stopped me. "Andi, sweetie, you're, like, twenty minutes early." He stepped off the platform and raised his hands with a small laugh. I looked past him, seeing Rob and Eddie walking into the store, looking at each other wearily as they came in side by side. I looked back at Frank.

"I'm going to go and finish my lunch in the back, then I'm going to be a sweetie and do all the receiving paper work, also in the back. Pretty much, Frank, I'm going to be finishing my shift in the back room and away from the possibility of seeing either of those guys until the end of the day. That ok with you?"

Frank looked over at them. "Well I know what Rob did, but what did you do to piss her off?" He asked Eddie as he gestured at me with his thumb.

"Hi, Eddie Lansky. I was supposed to be her ex-husband but I just told her we're still married." Frank shook Eddie's hand, eyeing him up before he turn back to me.

"Yeah, Andi. Go and hide." He looked back to the guys. If looks could kill, Rob would have turned Eddie to dust. "Now."

I sat at the desk in the back for the last fifteen minutes of my shift rubbing my left finger along the naked line that my wedding band once sat. I was still married which made the whole affair with Rob an affair. Or was it? And did it matter when he had no emotional investment in it himself?

I sighed. Would they be waiting for me when I left? I wanted so badly for Rob to be there, to be the arms I used so many times to fall into and feel better. But I let him go. I was right to let him go. I wanted so badly for Eddie to vanish. Even better, I would have loved to wake up and return to this time yesterday, like it was all a bad dream.

I couldn't take sitting back there anymore. I couldn't bear to be alone with my thoughts any longer. I grabbed my purse and headed out.

"Do you mind covering for me on Saturday, Andi? I know it's an extra shift, but I can make it up to you somehow." Frank asked as I approached the counter.

"I don't mind at all," I replied simply. "You and Sarah have fun shopping in the city." I smiled, pretending I felt fine. I don't think I was fooling anyone.

"Andi, dear." Frank leaned down on the counter, motioning with his finger for me to come closer. "That Eddie guy has been pacing the front of the store for the last half hour. And Rob," he inhaled. "He's been coming over frequently to see if he can talk to you."

"Well isn't that just wonderful," I replied sarcastically. "What other information could he

possibly not be able to tell me? Night Frank,” I said, giving him a quick hug around his neck and left the store.

Sure enough, Eddie was waiting for me. He was wearing his glasses now. I looked down at his laptop bag. He spent the afternoon writing. Probably in the coffee shop. “Andi.” He called after me.

I ignored him, making my way to the front of the mall. He remained quiet. I walked into the cafe, seeing Tony and Beth standing on the other side of the counter for a change. They were chatting with Steve and Nikki when I came in. Nikki was beaming, no surprise, and Steve eyed up the man following me closely.

“Andi,” Eddie said again now that he had a chance to come closer. “Talk to me.”

“What’s there to talk about?” I asked, not caring if two of the biggest gossips in Bayside were standing behind me. “You said you wanted a divorce, you didn’t sign all the papers resulting into us only being separated instead, and now you came all the way here to tell me you still love me and want to give this another shot. Did I miss anything?”

“Yeah,” Tony’s voice snapped behind me. “He’s moving to the Trap, where he can be close to you so you can work this out.” He put his hand on my shoulder. “That’s the part you missed, Andi.”

“That’s great.” I threw my hands in the air, shaking my head and fighting back the tears that wouldn’t come before. “Please, someone drive me home now so

I'm not tempted to run into the bay and drown myself."

"I'll drive you and Beth home," Tony said in a soothing voice, patting me on the shoulder before leading me out the doors, and past Eddie.

When we got into his Fit I burst into tears. Tony didn't say a thing as he started the car and took off before Nikki or Steve could see.

I sat on the couch with a glass of Tony's extra strong homemade wine. It was a little something he decided to pick up before heading to our place. That along with a change of clothes and his toothbrush. I guess I was in need of a pity party.

Gaylen made us a fantastic Greece dish that I couldn't pronounce if my life counted on it. Beth could, in fact Beth surprisingly could speak fluent Greek. Go figure, the girl was incredibly smart.

Gaylen was trying to teach Tony how to speak it, and I in my light inebriation found this humorous. It made every stray thought, every lingering emotion tolerable. I was fully aware of everything, I hadn't been slurring my words, but there was a comfortable cloud lingering in my head.

"I can't do it." Tony giggled after about an hour of trying. "I'm just going to have to let you be all sultry and intoxicating." He said pointing to Gaylen as he filled up his glass.

"You don't need to be sultry," I gave Tony a one armed hug, feeling the lightened mood since we first came home would allow me to do this.

"So are you saying if you were a guy you'd totally do me?" he asked as he gestured between us.

"Absolutely. You'd even be my pick over Robert." I said with a grin. People who are ok make jokes. Then again, people who aren't ok would make jokes using the name of a person they really wanted, especially when the joke was of a sexual nature.

"Oh my," Tony covered his mouth in faint shock. "Such scandal. But wait, what about the messed up Stephen?"

"Still only number two." I giggled.

"I'm so telling him that tomorrow," he said as the doorbell rang. Tony, even though it wasn't his house, got up to get it.

"He really might, you know." Beth warned me when Tony left the room. I looked at her with a devious smirk, giving the wine in my glass a small swirl.

"I can't be held accountable for anything I say or do tonight." We laughed and Gaylen groaned.

"Andi, babe." Tony called cautiously from the entry way. I set down my glass and moved steadily (Ha! See, not drunk) to where Tony had gone. "If you don't want to talk to him..."

"No please, Andi." I heard his voice and cringed a little. "Please, Love, just hear me out."

I took a breath and stepped into the entry way. I folded my arms, trying my hardest to look peeved, annoyed, and not like I'd been crying and drinking wine. "Yeah, Eddie?"

"Please, will you just come outside and talk to me?" he was practically begging. I glanced over at Tony, seeing if I could read his assessment of the situation.

"Don't leave the yard," he warned, though I wasn't sure who it was directed too. "I want to be able to see if I need to call the cops." Still, I didn't know who he was actually warning.

I grabbed my coat and scarf, bundling up to go and stand outside. I noted that Eddie still had the gray wool coat that I got him last Christmas. He still had his favourite leather gloves that were cracked and hardly weather proof. I wanted to throw those gloves out.

He closed the door behind me, as if it was the chivalrous thing to do. I moved away from the step, leaning against Tony's fit. Gaylen's Versa was right behind it; I hadn't looked to see if Eddie brought a car.

I watched him as he nervously stood in front of me. "How've you been?" He asked with a small smile on the corners of his lips.

"I was doing great before I found out I was still married." I replied bitterly.

"I forgive you for having an affair." He thought he was funny, clearly.

"Eddie, shut up. Just because we are on paper doesn't mean..." He raised his hands and stopped me.

"I know, I know. I deserve to have to work at getting you back." He replied with honesty and it made me pain a little, made my heart strings pull a bit.

"What makes you think you have a chance?" I asked him bluntly.

"Because I find it oddly wonderfully timed that you and your boyfriend broke up the night before I came to Bayside." He replied, stepping closer. "I promise, no more digging for information on you. I asked the blonde you were sitting at the table with what the story was with you and that Rob guy."

"Great, then you know everything about he and I don't you?" I pushed myself up, watching where my feet were. He grabbed me gently by the shoulders, holding me in place. I stopped, not wanting to struggle, feeling an odd sensation of comfort with his hands on me again. I didn't like it. I looked at him, seeing that he was no longer smiling.

"Yes," he replied simply at first. I let the silence hang in front of us. "I know as much about you and him as he probably knows about you and me. I know you two had been together for a few months. I know that he met Cynthia and Jo and Danni. I know that he took you on a date the night before to prove he was ready. I know that he tried to punch out a gay man over you." I caught him glancing at the living room window and I laughed. It's almost like Nikki was still there, watching an altercation of a different kind. I looked back at Eddie, and saw him smile. His perfect smile, with his perfect white teeth that made his blue eyes shine. I hate that I never knew I missed it.

"You don't know everything." I cautioned.

"I don't want to." He brushed my cheek.

"I can't say if I'm going to want to give us another shot." I wanted to be honest. If he was moving here for

that intention alone, I wanted to make it clear that I wasn't sure there was an option for that.

"It doesn't mean that I'm not going to try. I lost you once." He sounded so cheesy.

"You sound like one of your plays." I mocked.

"Maybe so, but I'm being honest. I'll fight for you, whatever fighting for you means." He smiled.

I shook my head, my emotions leaking through again. I could hear Rob in my head saying that he couldn't tell me how he felt. I felt that pain. I could hear Eddie saying the four fated words, and I felt that pain too.

He took it the wrong way, thinking I was emotional for other reasons. I closed my eyes to fight back the tears, to stop them from coming. Men are idiots, and Eddie was no exception. Before I had a chance to take the deep breath I so desperately needed, to stop the tears that wanted to spill, Eddie kissed me.

It was soft, tender, and familiar. Not because it reminded me of Rob, but because it was a kiss I had known so well. I knew what it meant, I knew every emotion, every want and need that came with it. It was how Eddie kissed me the first time he ever had, how he kissed me on our wedding day, and here it was again on my front lawn. I broke away before I could feel anything else.

I felt his breath on my neck, I could hear the subtle growl that flowed with it. He looked up slowly, meeting my eyes before asking, "Can I come in?"

Chapter 20

I woke up with the warmth of a good man in my bed. It was a nice feeling. He shut off the annoying alarm clock that blared on the opposite side of the bed, rolled over, put his arm around me and gave me a peck on the cheek.

Except, he groaned at the alarm, slapped his arm against me, and when I say peck I mean a very quick, friendly one before Tony said, "Morning sunshine. Better get up so you can start your day of beating boys away with sticks." I laughed sleepily, pushing the blankets off of me and put my feet on the cold hardwood floor.

Tony was going to be my guardian angel, making sure I didn't make any dumb choices. Starting with coming outside just as Eddie asked to spend the night, and told Eddie politely that he was interrupting our couples night and he should go home. I thanked Tony profusely for stopping me from making a mistake right off the bat.

His response to that was, "Umm, excuse me, but if he stayed the night where was I going to sleep? The couch? I don't think so, honey, this body does not do cushion." To which he giggled a little and the night resumed as if nothing happened.

I grabbed my clothes out of my closet, Tony assessing them in the low light of the bed side lamp and telling me what I should change and what I should change it with. After his approval I jumped into the

shower, cleaning quickly, dressing quicker, and went into the kitchen.

"Morning Mrs. Lansky." Gaylen stood over a cutting board, chopping strawberries for the French toast he had already made.

"That's a dangerous thing you just said there." I warned with my pointed finger, trying not to laugh at the giant Greek man giggling.

"What? Morning? How else should I greet the day?" He laughed as Beth hit him in the gut.

"Piss her off, and you get in trouble with me," Beth also warned as she went to stand next to me. I went on my tip-toes, retrieving some plates from the cupboards. "And how did you know her married name?"

"You told me last time I was home." He pointed to the phone on the wall, "and if you don't believe that story, I flicked the caller ID and found Mister Eddie's name and number from yesterday morning."

"He called here yesterday morning?" I questioned Beth. She shrugged her shoulders.

"He wanted to find out if you were working, if I would tell him where, and stuff." She shrugged her shoulders. I eyed her suspiciously.

"Like what stuff?" I asked, handing the plates to Gaylen so he could serve up breakfast.

She shrugged her shoulders again. "He wanted to know if you were seeing someone. I said yes."

"Beth!" I slapped her.

"What?"

"Why would you say that?" I demanded.

“Because he’s Eddie. I didn’t want him to come into town with the satisfaction that you were available. I was really hoping that by some miracle you would be so taken aback when Rob punched him out that you wouldn’t drum up the fight or break-up.” Beth shrugged her shoulders with a smirk.

“Did you encourage Rob to do that?” I asked, smirking a little while I replayed the punch in my head.

“No,” She sounded disappointed, “he did that one all on his own.”

“Ok, ladies, breakfast is ready.” Gaylen cut into my conversation. “So I suggest that we eat now so we can go to work soon?” he handed us plates with the toast done up so fancy it could have been done in a restaurant.

“Oh hello,” Tony said as he came out of my room fully dressed. His hair was wet, and the funny thing is I don’t remember him going for a shower. “What the hell is all this? Normally when I stay here I end up eating breakfast at work.” He took a plate from Gaylen and started to eat. “Oh my god, it’s sex on a plate.” He moaned. “It’s official, I hate you both.”

“Why?” I asked him, scarfing down the breakfast faster than I should have.

“Because she’s marrying the Greek god of law with the gift of cooking, and you have two very gorgeous men pining after you.” Tony quipped back.

“One man pining,” I corrected bitterly. “The other is just pissed that his free ride has left the building.”

“Andraia, honey, I love you.” Tony said in his ‘ima-tell-it-like-it-is’ tone. “And trust me when I say that there are two men pining after you.”

“Oh right,” I said sarcastically as I moved to put my plate in the sink. “I forgot, Steve.”

“Steve?” Tony cocked an eyebrow.

“Oh yeah, the night of Beth’s party he confessed how much he cares for me. It’s the reason Rob and I started fighting in the first place.” I ran the water over my dish as Gaylen and Beth added theirs to the pile.

“What are you? Crack for single straight men and confused boys?” Tony asked me with a glare. “For frig sacks, even Steve wants you. Oh, and I’m sure we can add Doug to the pile.”

I thought about it for a moment, “How about we chalk it up to I’m still the freshest meat in town and everyone’s scared to get between Nikki’s legs.” I tried not to laugh at myself.

“I love it when you’re bitter and resentful.” He said as he finished forking his breakfast in his mouth. “Now, come on, let’s get going. Miss thing at the cafe will probably bitch that we’re late.”

“Tony, you’re the freakin manager.” I commented as we moved to the door. “Tell her to learn her place and be done with it.”

“Oh I have, and believe me if I could get rid of her I would.” We bundled up for the cool air and stepped outside.

“Oh my god, what is he doing here?” Tony whispered into my ear as we walked towards the cafe.

Eddie looked up from his laptop, smiled and waved. We walked past him and headed to towards the counter.

"He's a play writer. He's probably here working." I whispered back. "Have you heard of Mund Sky?" I asked still in a hushed tone.

Tony got visibly excited, "Oh my god yes, I adore that man. If I was a woman, I would have his children."

"Have you ever met him?"

"No." He sounded so disappointed.

"Well," I glanced back at Eddie who watched me with a smile. "You did yesterday."

Tony gasped, "No!" He looked back at Eddie, his jaw still open. I looked back in Eddie's direction and was mildly amused by the baffled expression on his face.

I laughed at Tony and approached the counter, taking out my money and getting ready to place my order with the annoyed looking red head behind the counter. "Don't," she said quickly, and almost a little too loud. She turned away from me for a second and then came back with a sweet smelling drink and a bag. "That extremely good looking man over there wanted me to tell you that your breakfast was paid for. Caramel Latte and a Blueberry muffin." I looked at the combination with speculation. I didn't notice, but I wasn't the only one.

"Caramel?" Beth questioned. I looked at her sideways.

"The latte is a decent guess, she's ordered that a couple of times with me. But Blueberry?" Tony added.

I turned away from them and made my way over to Eddie. He took off his glasses as I sat down across from him. "Good morning love," he said with a smile.

I slammed the drink and muffin on the table. I was actually kind of surprised that it didn't spill. "What the hell is this?" I demanded as forcefully as I could.

"It's breakfast." He replied, unwavering in his chipper mood.

"I already had breakfast." I said as I pushed the muffin in his direction. "And I hate blueberry."

"Since when do you hate blueberry?" He asked trying to stop a laugh. Why was it men laughed at me when I tried to prove a point that I was angry and bitter?

"I've always hated blueberry." That was partly bull. I just don't like the blue berry muffins here. Every other place I've had them I've liked them. Eddie nodded, making a face that caused his cheek to puff.

"So how did you sleep then love?" He asked as I took a sip of the latte. He smiled. Damn him for catching me having a drink.

"Fine. I had a wonderful man in my bed and he kept me warm all night." I was smug, though I shouldn't be.

"You aren't going to make me jealous with Tony. I know he's gay, you'd have to be blind and deaf to not."

"Don't make fun of my friends." I warned him

"I'm not." He looked at the entrance, doing a double take. "That girl over there, walking in with that Rob guy, she kind of reminds me of Ann."

I don't think I had ever spun around so fast before; I think I almost gave myself whiplash. Sure enough, Rob was walking into the coffee shop with Nikki on his arm. Nikki, who was smiling like she won the lottery. Maybe she had, Rob didn't appear nearly as upset as he did yesterday. My blood began to boil as I watched her. Rob grabbed his drink and started to walk away but Nikki pulled on his arm and stopped him, kissing him on the neck. He looked annoyed, but he mouthed 'see ya.' He didn't look over at us.

I bolted from the chair and moved over to the crowd in front of the counter. A smug Nikki stood, holding her drink and smiling almost angelically. "So," I asked her as calmly as I could. "What was all that about?"

"Let's just say you aren't the only one who gets to spend the night." Nikki turned away, walking down the hall with a certain click of her heels. All I could hear was 'I win' over and over in my head. Bitch.

"Oh she didn't." Tony said in a shocked voice behind me.

"Didn't what?" Eddie asked as he joined us, appearing just as smug as Nikki. It was like they were in on this horrible turn of events together. Now I was growing paranoid that Nikki happened to answer the phone on a night when Eddie called. Like the night of Beth's party, maybe while I was outside with Steve or after I left with Rob. Maybe they plotted this whole thing.

"Nothing." I replied bitterly. "I'll see you guys later." I said to the others as I started to leave the cafe.

“Andi, wait.” Eddie said and began to follow me as I headed for the exit. I stopped and turned abruptly, a scowl of annoyance on my face. “Can we have lunch together?”

“No.” I snapped back.

“Andi, come on.” Now he was getting annoyed. “What will one day of lunch with me do?”

I turned around, looking at him and seeing he had the begging puppy look in his eyes. I caved, and I hated that I caved. It meant that there was some small part of me, probably the part that his presence kept gnawing at, that didn’t want to say no again. “Fine, but it’s lunch with the group, not alone.” I replied and walked away, surprised he didn’t follow me down the hall to the Music Stop. Then again, he left his laptop on a table in a cafe where he wasn’t sure if anyone was a kleptomaniac. I liked the small advantage it gave to me.

I fumbled for my key when I got to the gate, and even fumbled with it trying to get it in. I hate days like this, when I couldn’t get myself together because all my personal problems were laid out in front of me. Sure the days were few and far between, but when they showed up...

“Andi,” I cringed at his voice.

“Robert.” I replied without turning around. I finally got the key in and unlocked the gate.

“Andi, listen to me, please. Ok, I was stupid, I was a complete idiot.” He began to plea. I pushed the gate opened and turned around.

“Yeah, I would say you’re an idiot.” I huffed. “Nikki?” I don’t think I had ever heard myself say her name with such disdain.

“What about Nikki?” He asked, acting like he was completely clueless.

“I realized now that I meant dick-all to you, but Nikki? If you were going to fuck someone else to get back at me for leaving you I would have hoped you would have picked someone better.” I snapped at him, turning around and stepping into the store.

“Andi.” He sounded so shocked, so confused. He looked it too. The expression on his face was almost the same one he wore when I told him I loved him. It pissed me off, and I slammed the gate in his face, locking it and heading into the back to count the till and open the store.

I sat at the usual table by myself waiting for everyone else to join me. I purposely did not find Eddie and let him know I took an extra ten minutes. I wanted time to be by myself and think. I really didn’t want to face anyone. I just put my attention on the sound of the fountain water, the gentle hum of people talking, the faint melody of Christmas music.

“Already done?” Eddie’s voice broke my concentration as he sat down beside me, tray in hand. I looked over to the left and saw Tony and Beth sitting beside me.

“Yeah, early lunch.” I replied.

“Why didn’t you come and get me? I would have stopped writing sooner.” He sounded so hurt. It actually made me feel a little guilty. But only a little.

“I didn’t want to break your momentum.” I lied. I played with a fry on my tray that I chose not to eat as I diverted my eyes from his.

“Hello people,” Nikki practically sang as she sat down across from me. It was everything I could not to look up and glare. “How was everyone’s morning?”

“Perfectly fine,” Sarah said as she sat down, filling in the last of our little group. She looked over at Eddie, a little baffled at first. “Hi, I’m Sarah, who are you?”

Oh this should be great. “Eddie Lansky, Andi’s husband.” He sounded so proud.

“Ex-husband.” I corrected.

“Husband to which you are separated from,” he corrected with a smile, “who hopes he can work on his marriage?”

“We’ll see.” I mumbled as Tony changed the subject. I heard him say something about Eddie’s pen name and they carried on without my input.

I started to think again, mostly about nothing, just clearing my head. I would watch people on the other end of the food court, seeing them moving single file in line at their chosen lunch place and then aimlessly look for their group of friends in the crowd. I wondered if it was because we sat in the same place all the time that I never had to do that.

“So what do you think about that, Andi?” Nikki asked me a question, and I tuned back in. I looked at

her, seeing the smug victory there in her smile. What did I miss?

"I'm sorry, what was that?" I asked, seeing Eddie looking at me anxiously out of the corner of my eye.

"Well, I was saying how you can take Eddie to the Christmas party as a date. You know, to work things out?" I think I was supposed to be Rob's date.

"Oh, going to see if your new little green number's going to score you some Rob?" I asked a little more bitter than I should have let on. She caught it, and smiled wider, shrugging her shoulders and making a face as she tried to fake that it was only a possibility. I shook my head. "I'm gonna go get some air." I replied.

"Want me to come with you?" Eddie started to stand up but I waved for him not to. As I walked away, I heard Nikki make a comment about how I was just jealous, about how I let a good thing go. Let her tell Eddie everything, what the hell did it matter. Cause it didn't, not to Rob anyway, so what difference would it have made?

I headed down the corridor, deciding I was going to go and sit out in the smoker's area. I didn't care that I didn't have coat, I just wanted to get away from the stupid blonde.

I pushed the door open gingerly, watching the ground for ice. It would be an ugly death if I slipped here, fell, hit my head, and had the heavy door crush me.

"Go away, Nikki." I was startled when I heard Rob's voice. I glanced over at the picnic table and saw him

sitting on the table top. He was smoking, a new package beside him.

"I thought you quit?" I shoved my hands in my jeans pockets as I walked over to him, climbing up on the table and sat beside him. Clearly he didn't know what to think of my being there.

"I took it up again. My life suddenly went to shit." He replied, trying to sound cold and heartless. It didn't work on him, he couldn't pull it off. At least not with me.

"Well," I thought I would try and be funny, "Dating Nikki would definitely make one's life go to shit."

"I don't know what the fuck you're talking about." He replied with real anger that time.

"She's been telling everyone how she stayed the night." I tried to pretend I didn't care.

He took a long drag on his cigarette, breathing it out slowly. He looked like he was trying to find the words. Maybe he was. "Nikki did spend the night." He said matter-of-factly. "She slept on my couch after she got wasted and couldn't drive home."

"Why did Nikki get wasted?" I asked, not even acknowledging that she didn't stay in his bed.

"She thought that's what I needed, brought a bottle of wine, and ended up drinking most of it herself."

I nodded my head. "Eddie wants to try and work out our apparently un-ended marriage." I tried to make it sound like it was a common thing. He took another long drag on his cigarette.

"I heard." He exhaled. "Are you?"

I looked at him, meeting his eye and just stared at him. I still loved him and it swirled and stirred in my soul. "Do you think I should?" What I wanted to asked was 'do you want me too.'

He laughed, shaking his head and took yet another long drag. We sat silent for a minute. "Where's he staying?"

I shrugged, "I assume at the motel."

"What about work, does he have a job to go back to?"

"He's a play writer, he works wherever. His agent just has to know where he is." I shrugged again. I looked up at Rob once more, seeing him take the final drag off of his smoke before tossing it into a puddle of melting snow. He hopped off the table and stood in front of me with his hands in his pockets, looking down at my feet. I watched him carefully.

Then he grabbed my face and kissed me. It was a rush, like the one in the parking lot of Bombay our first night together. I couldn't stop myself for putting my fingers in his hair, for pulling him as close to me as I could. I didn't even care that he tasted like cigarettes. He wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me off the table towards him, holding me close to his body. Then almost as quickly as he started the kiss he ended it. He looked me in the eye. "You should try and work things out with Eddie."

My heart sank. "Why?" More like why would you kiss me like that if you just want me to go back to my husband, or ex-husband, or whatever he is?

“Because I can’t give you what you deserve.” He smiled, still holding on to me. I wasn’t going to push him off of me, but I had so many questions. Like what Eddie had that he supposedly hadn’t. Before I could ask Rob stepped away, just slightly, keeping his hands on my waist. “Come on, I’m going to buy you a coffee. I’m such a jerk I didn’t even offer you my coat and you’re shivering.” I don’t think I was shivering from the cold. He stepped away from me and headed to the door.

“Rob?” I stopped hm. “What do I drink for coffee?”

“Vanilla latte?” He replied like it was a question. I just nodded and allowed him to lead me inside.

Chapter 21

“What do you plan to do today?” Beth asked me as she got ready for work. I sat on the couch in my sweats, my hair tied up really sloppily. It was Friday, a week already come and gone. Because I worked for Frank on Saturday I ended up with a three day weekend. I wasn’t going to complain, or miss anything really. The following night would be the Bayside Mall Christmas party, and I would catch up on all the wacky stuff and horrible gossip.

“I’m going to sit here and watch TV. Maybe go for a walk, I don’t know.” I flicked through the channels. I hated how day time TV was mostly soap operas and talk shows.

“Any boys coming over today?” Beth asked hesitantly.

I snorted. “Why would they? Rob told me to work on my marriage although he knows I love him. And Eddie not only doesn’t know I’m off today and purposely avoiding the mall but he thinks that there’s a chance that I’m going to just fall right back to the same emotional space I was before he ripped a part of my heart out.”

“Just part?” she added sarcastically.

“Yeah, just part. After all, if he ripped the whole thing out, what would I have given Rob to destroy?” I smirked through the cynicism.

“Try not to spend the whole day bitter and resentful.” She headed for the door, trying not to laugh at me.

“I’ll try to try,” I called after her. The door clicked but I didn’t move. I don’t think I moved for an hour. I just stopped on a talk show and listened to some rich mother babble on about how her husband left her with no money. And I thought I had problems; I did, they just weren’t real ones.

I decided that after so long of not doing anything I would be a little productive. I put the breakfast dishes in the dishwasher and turned it on. Maybe I should do laundry? I went into my room and started to gather up my stuff. I went through the hamper, realizing that it had been a while since I’d done laundry. There was stuff in here from over a week ago.

As I tried to sort lights from darks I stumbled across something I wasn’t expecting. A t-shirt of Rob’s. I remembered him tossing it in the dark, a whim of romance and passion when it felt like we were dying. We couldn’t find it the next morning, and he ended up wearing a dress shirt he happened to have with him for work that day. I lifted the t-shirt to my face, inhaling the lingering scent of his cologne.

It stirred so much in me. I had an impulse to lie on my bed and curl up with it. If he wouldn’t give me him, maybe I could keep a part he didn’t know I had to myself. I inhaled again, this second breathe not as sweet. The smell wouldn’t last; I would have to face facts. Stuffed between layers of clothes I wore with him

around preserved the scent, but now with the neutral air of my home around it, it was fading.

I groaned, dropping the black article into my basket of darks. Picking up the basket, I sniffed the t-shirt all the way to the washing machine. My last goodbye. I closed my eyes, dropped it into the washer, and poured the liquid soap on top of it before I added the other clothes. Now not only was its smell compromised, but liquid laundry detergent made me break out if I handled it too much. I quickly added the other clothes on top, turned on the washer and closed the lid. I'm ashamed to say I was a little upset about washing that t-shirt.

I walked over to the couch, sat down, and moped.

Just as I got comfy there was a knock on the door. I seriously contemplated not getting it. After all, Beth and I weren't normally home this hour of the day. But when the second knock came I decided to answer it. Worst case scenario it would be a couple of door to door religion peddlers. I could always pretend to be interested if I felt mean enough.

"Hi," now this was a religion I could get into. Rob stood there on my front step, holding two cups of coffee from the cafe. He was smiling, wearing sunglasses but no outer wear. He was still wearing the blue vest from the art store.

"Hi," I stepped aside, letting him in. "What are you doing here? You should be working." I closed the door, taking another glimpse around outside before I did so.

"I heard Beth say you were spending the day home. And I kinda thought that you may suffer a little if no one brought you a coffee." He stopped between the entry way and the living room, turning to face me and handed me a cup. I took it with caution. He chuckled, "I've known you for half a year and I don't remember a single day going by when you didn't have a latte. I thought maybe you were sick."

"Well thank you for being concerned about my well being." My heart started to race. There was so much possibility in this moment, so much spontaneity. Rob was standing in my house, we were alone, and the last kiss he gave me still hung in my memory. "I uh," I cleared my throat, "I found your shirt this morning. The one there that we couldn't find. The black one?"

"You did?" Rob seemed happy about that. "That's awesome."

"Yeah, it's in the wash now." I said, gesturing down Beth's hall where the little closet for the washer and dryer was. "I can, ummm, I can have it back to you tomorrow."

He laughed stiffly, "You're going to bring my t-shirt to a formal function?"

I blushed a little, laughing out of nervousness. "Well, umm, no, I guess I won't be."

There was a long, awkward moment where we didn't say anything and Rob wouldn't look at me. Then he took in a breath and said, "I thought I would warn you now that I'm going to be going with Nikki." He looked

up at me hesitantly. "I figured with the recent turn of events...."

"Yeah, of course I understand. I wouldn't want to go alone, either." I cut him off. I sounded as hurt as I felt. Which sucked.

"You and Eddie?"

"I didn't actually ask him." I shook my head. "Nikki mentioned it last week to him, but I haven't actually asked him."

"You should." Rob's voice was getting softer, and he didn't want to look at me any longer. I couldn't stop looking at him. "I should uh... I should get going. I'm only on a fifteen. I just called the store on the way over and told Doug I was going to be a couple extra minutes."

"Yeah, umm," I stepped aside as Rob moved briskly to the door. "Thanks for the coffee." I raised my cup a little. "It was extremely thoughtful of you." He stopped at the door, his foot down on the front step. I walked up and stood as close to him as I could, breathing in the same smell that I was currently washing away from his t-shirt. I leaned my face in a little, hoping to get a better scent. He leaned his in to, and I felt his breath on my chin.

"It's not a problem." He replied. Oh come on, Andi, one more inch and lips will make contact, and you can get a fix and be satisfied and... "I'll see you tomorrow night." He pushed himself away from the door so fast and was down the drive just as quickly that if I blinked too long I would have missed him entirely.

I didn't even get a chance to ask why he still had the mustang.

I closed the door, longing for a lot more than I had before he showed up. I bitterly sat down on the couch again. I drank the latte, and although it was good it tasted like guilt. He was taking Nikki to the party; he came here and, in my mind anyway, almost kissed me. Yep, this was a latte of guilt and grovelling. It tasted better than guilt and grovelling normally did, but the espresso was ironically bitter today.

When another knock on the door sounded a little while later, I was really quick to get it. After all, what if it was Rob coming back. He could open the door before I got around the corner and grab me roughly. He'd pick me up and hold me to his body as he hungrily kissed my neck, my chest. He would carry me to the bedroom, throw me down on the bed and...

"Hey," Eddie. Not exactly the fantasy I had in mind. "Rob still here?" He asked, glancing around the walls. Which was kind of funny, because other than a glimpse at the kitchen you can't really see anything.

"No?" I made it sound like a question. "Why would he be?"

"Well, I thought I would either meet him here, or pass him on the way over." Eddie replied with genuine confusion.

"You followed him?" That was funny, Eddie stalking Rob. I tried not to laugh.

"Well, no not really." Eddie shrugged and stepped up inside the house. I let him. "I just heard him say that he

was coming to see you, and Beth said it was cause you were off today so I thought I'd come see you for a bit, too." He shrugged.

I closed the door and leaned against the wall, looking at him sceptically. "You don't mind the idea that Rob was standing exactly where you were a few minutes ago?"

"No," Eddie shrugged, shook his head, and smiled. "Why would I?"

"Eddie, Rob punched you out, and chased after me just like you did that day. Why do you think that is?"

"You two were together," he said it like it wasn't a big deal. "Nikki told me." Of course she did. "I know it was just a fling, a rebound."

"Eddie, that's not what it was." I replied quickly. Leave it to Nikki to tell Eddie false information.

"I don't care what it was." He put his hands up and stopped me from speaking. He walked up to me, putting his hands on the wall behind me. He moved closer, our bodies weren't far apart. This seemed familiar. "All I know is he was an idiot and let you go."

"You were an idiot who let me go." I retorted as he moved closer. I remembered now. This was how Eddie and I first became a couple. It was at the start of college, and I had an Ajax freak out. He was calming me down as I had been sobbing uncontrollably. I think he said the same words about Ajax too. Right before he....

Kissed me, gently, subtly, testing the waters to see if I wanted more. It was a sweet release, though I don't

know if it should have been. It wasn't Eddie who got me wound up like this.

He broke away. "Yeah, I'm a fuck up." He was smiling. "I know I screwed up." He kissed me again, and this time I kissed him back. "I want another chance." I don't know when exactly we started making out, but we were. Heavily, like we hadn't in years. I had to stop myself, to give a man who was trying so hard to be the man I wanted a fair warning.

"I don't trust you, not entirely. And I don't know if I want this either. Ok, Eddie, I don't know what I want." I don't know if I could have been any clearer.

"I know what I want." He said as he went for my neck. He kissed it differently than Rob and I didn't like that I was actually able to make a comparison. I don't think I had compared Rob to Eddie. I should stop thinking about him. Right now, right this instant.

Eddie had pulled my sweat shirt off and made his way up my body to my mouth. I stopped thinking. I started to undress him, it became natural, normal, so long as I let the animal instincts take over, and didn't think about anything else but the carnal hormones that built up inside me. Not who put them there, not who stirred them, just that they were there.

Then something weird happened. A shift, or something, and I saw Eddie. My Eddie. The Eddie I had when we first started dating. When I was slowly falling in love although he had already worshiped the ground I walked on. The one that would do anything to make me happy. I missed him, he went away so quickly. And

now he was back. He was in my arms. He was in my bed, and I wanted him there. I wanted him. I wanted Eddie.

“What are you doing tomorrow night?” I asked him as we redressed after our half hour of passion. I had better, I also had worse.

He smiled, “Are you finally asking me to the Christmas party, Andi Mathews?” He teased me.

“Yeah,” I replied with an eye roll. “I guess I need a date. Everyone seems to be pushing me into having one.”

He walked over to me and grabbed the back of my head and gave me a kiss. “Yes, I will.”

“Eddie,” I said as he started to head for the door. I knew he would need to get back to work, and work wouldn’t have gotten done if he stayed here. He may be able to work where and when ever, but Eddie liked to keep office hours. It was strange, but that was Eddie. He stopped in the entry way, waiting for what I had to say. “I don’t know if I want our marriage.” After all, it was nostalgia that led me into bed.

He shrugged. “I know. You lived the last six months like we were divorced. I understand that you need time to get back to where we were. I know that. I’m patient.”

“Eddie,” I stopped him again. He looked at me with a twinge of fear in his eyes. “I don’t think you understand what I mean. What happened in there,” I pointed to the bedroom.

“I know, Andi. It was a spontaneous, incredible half hour. I didn’t come over here to score.” He chuckled, “I

wanted to see you. Look at you, say hi. Anything after that is a bonus. Let's face it, I did pull off the biggest screw up known to man. I tried to divorce you. So trust me, I know trusts are broken and you are very uncertain about trying this again. I can wait, I'm patient, and I know I have to fight to get you back." He walked to the door, hand on the knob. "I'll pick you up tomorrow." He smiled and left.

I walked into the bright white room with Eddie by my side. Tony certainly knew how to decorate; it was truly beautiful. Gold and silver stars and garland hung from the ceiling, producing just enough Christmas without looking tacky. Along the walls were green Christmas trees decorated in white, gold, and silver. The tables had white linen and gold candles. On the far end of the room was a stage with a full band playing old style music for the people on the dance floor.

I felt a little out of place. I decided to wear my black dress and heels, choosing an emerald and ruby necklace as my touch of color. I looked around and saw a sea of red and green dresses, some silver and a couple white. No black.

I spotted Gaylen and Beth on the dance floor. Beth looked absolutely stunning in her red dress, glamorized up with diamond earrings. I was a little jealous. I didn't even do my hair. Gaylen looked like all the other guys in the room. A suit, black or gray, and a dress shirt in white, red, or green. He wore a red tie with a white dress shirt. He looked perfect next to Beth. Again, I was jealous.

I looked around, seeing Steve, Frank, and Sarah at a table together. Steve had beer, Sarah and Frank had wine. She was one of the girls in white and she actually pulled it off well. Tony was just standing up, making it seem like he was going to be going somewhere for a bit. I started heading in their direction, catching another couple going in their directions.

I felt incredibly heartbroken. They looked good together. He was in a gray suit, a green dress shirt and a green tie that matched her dress perfectly. She was on his arm, smiling. He was too, and it killed me. Rob and Nikki. The perfect couple.

I grabbed on to Eddie a little tighter, and he tugged me a little closer. "Where do you want to sit?" He asked me in a loud whisper. I watched where Rob led Nikki. They chose a table to the right of the others. I assumed the two empty chairs at the main table were Gaylen and Beth's.

"There," I pointed to an empty table to the left.

"Ok, I'm going to get us some drinks." He pecked my cheek and went to the bar.

I took a breath and moved towards my group of friends, resisting the urge to throw a tantrum as I watched the way Nikki and Rob seemed to flirt with one another.

"Andi!" Frank was a little drunk it would seem. "It's about time you finally made it here to the party here. What took you so long?" I sat down as Frank finished answering his question. I glanced over at the all too

happy couple. Rob glanced up, though Nikki was holding on to him like he was a life raft in the ocean.

I shrugged, "My ride was late." I replied.

"Yeah it was totally my fault," Eddie said as he sat down next to me, handing me a glass of red wine. "I had a hard time finding my suit." I looked down at my wine. "Rob, looking good. Way to match your girl." I watched Eddie's shadow on the table point in Rob's direction. Oh how I hated that he called Nikki Rob's girl.

"Umm, thanks, Edward."

"Edmund," he corrected properly.

"Oh, sorry." I looked up, catching Rob looking at Eddie with a subtle hint of hatred. "Maybe I should just call you Eddie."

"It's no problem." Eddie was too nice. I grabbed my wine and chugged it back, feeling everyone's eyes watching on me. This was going to be a horrible night.

"Andi, dear, you ok?" Sarah asked me. I looked over and watched her peer at me through her glasses with an immense amount of concern.

"Oh yeah," I coughed, the wine catching the back of my throat a moment. "Great. Wine is fantastic. Where do I go to get another one?" I stood up from the table as a waiter passed by. I grabbed one off the tray he was carrying, and sat back down. I glanced over and saw Nikki whisper something in Rob's ear that made him smirk. If that wasn't enough, she bit his ear lobe subtly and gently. It was disgusting. I threw back this glass as well.

“Andi love, take it easy.” Eddie warned me gently. “You don’t want to get wasted.” That sounded more like a scold. I glanced at him with a glare.

“Yes you do.” Frank announced loudly, raising Steve’s beer. Steve gently took the bottle back, taking a drink before he set it down on the table.

“I think I agree with Frank.” I said as I took Steve’s beer from him as well. He just watched me as I took a long, large drink. “I’m going to need alcohol to get through this evening.”

“Ohh, what’s the matter, Andi? Don’t like what you’ve been seeing?” Nikki asked as she pulled herself closer to Rob, almost on top of him.

“He’s all yours Nikki.” I got up, feeling the alcohol rush through my system. I was only lightly buzzed from it, but it made my first few steps unsteady. I went up to the bar, ordering two shots of vodka. I did them one right after the other. I wanted to be drunk so badly.

“Andi,” Rob’s hand grazed my lower back, sending shivers up my spine. I looked up at him, seeing the concern in his eyes. “You ok? The last time I saw you swig back the drinks like this it was your anniversary.”

“Yeah, little did I know huh?” I said to him sarcastically before I ordered another two shots. I handed the bartender the money and then sucked one back. “I was still married, and you had no right asking me out. Think of all the problems that would have been avoided if I had only known. You and Nikki would have been together and you wouldn’t have had to pretend you were worried about me.”

"I'm not pretending," he said as he stopped me from taking another shot. Rob plucked it from my hands and threw it back himself. He looked at the bartender and ordered another one for himself. "I am worried about you. I was worried about you then, and even more so now. You look so unhappy." He exchanged his cash for the shot glass and threw that one back too.

"Well, I don't know what to tell you Rob." I shrugged, flopping my arms at my side. I could feel the alcohol affecting my body but not my head. The cloud lingered but never grew. "Do you want me to say I'm happy for you two? I mean why not, right?"

"Andi," He said, his tone sounding like he was going to go on an angry rant. I folded my arms across my chest, waiting for it to start. He took a breath, ordered and threw back one more shot, then stuck out his hand. "Dance with me."

"What?" I shook my head and blinked.

"Dance with me." He repeated. I stared at his hand for a long moment before I finally took it. The second it made contact he pulled me out into the middle of the dance floor, giving me a single spin before pulling me in close, dancing a fast waltz with the other couples. I glanced around really quickly, surveying where everyone was. Beth caught my eye before burying her face in Gaylen's chest. I looked over at the table. Frank and Sarah were occupied with each other, Steve looking between Nikki and Eddie. Those two watched us like a pair of hawks, their glares unhidden.

"We have a bit of an audience." I whispered to Rob after I finished noting what was going on back at the tables.

"Let him watch." He said back in a gruff voice. "I've been waiting for this dance for months."

"Have you now?" I doubted it a lot. It came out in my voice.

"Yes," He said just before he spun me out, glancing at our table before spinning me back in. The buzz was allowing this dance to be fun, and not nearly as stressful as it should have been. When I was back in position, Rob pulled me in a little closer. "I intend to enjoy it." He added. "After all, this should have been our song."

To be honest, I don't think I even knew what the song was.

But I smiled, which made him smile as he watched me. He picked up the pace a little more. "I didn't know flings had songs." I remarked.

"They don't." He replied softly. He put his fingers in my hair and leaned me back. We paused there, looking at each other, feeling the chemistry churn. When the song ended, he set me up right and directly in line with Eddie's eyes. He was walking towards us. I let go of Rob and stepped back.

"Bob, thanks for calming Andi down." He mocked Rob and gave him a pat on the shoulder. "By the way, your woman wants you." Eddie added with a smug grin. Rob nodded, avoiding eye contact with both of us. When he was gone I shot Eddie a cold look. "What?"

He snapped. "I know you loved him, Andi, but I wasn't about to let him whisk you off your feet. Literally."

"Eddie," I snapped back. "It was a dance. Something you don't do. What am I going to do? Sit at the table all night?"

"I didn't say you couldn't dance," Eddie said through his teeth. "You just can't dance with him." He pointed a finger sharply in Rob's direction. I glanced over at him. It looked like Nikki was giving him a scolding too. He was more interested in watching us than humouring her.

"What happened to Eddie?" I demanded.

"What are you going on about Andi?" Eddie growled a little louder than he should. I looked around, embarrassed that some of the people in attendance were now watching us.

"The one," I whispered, stepping closer to him in fury, "that came to my house yesterday to say hi. That was the Eddie I fell for, the one who came to see me then. Not this one, not this jealous man." I gestured at him up and down.

"Andi," Rob's voice sounded like he was preparing to go on the defensive. When I looked at him it was clear he was preparing for a confrontation. "Is Edmund bothering you?"

"Look, Rob, this is between me and my wife. So if you would go back to your little..."

"Hey guys!" Steve sounded so chipper. He walked up to the two men and put an arm around each of their shoulders. "Let's not fight, ok? It's a party; we're here to

have fun. Now, how about this. Eddie, you go back to the table, socialize with Frank and Sarah. Tony will be back over there in a minute. Rob, you go back to your table and calm down Nikki. Maybe you can work out your differences."

"What about you, Steve?" Rob looked at him sideways, glancing between he and Eddie.

"I'm going to entertain Andi right here." He gave a nod to the dance floor. "I can dance circles around you both and she'll have way more fun with me. And isn't that something we can all agree on? Andi having fun?"

"How do I know that you're not going to be going after my wife too?" Eddie asked Steve as he tried to puff out his chest and look tough. Rob smirked, apparently finding Eddie's attempt at tough amusing. Or maybe it was the question posed to Steve.

Steve grinned, looking at Rob with an almost knowing grin before he looked back at Eddie and asked, "Gay or straight?"

"What?" Eddie replied.

"Take a look at me. What do you think I am, gay or straight?" Steve said it so calmly and casually that I was even a little intrigued as to where he was going with this.

Eddie looked him up and down carefully. "Gay?"

"Well," Steve said as he moved his arms over their heads and walked over to me, grabbing my waist. "You've got a fifty-fifty chance of being right. Now go." He shoed them away with his other hand and waited until they were gone before he spun me into a waltz.

“Steve,” I started to protest but he wouldn’t let me.

“No, listen. We’re gonna play a little game.” He said, trying not to smirk as he watched the men return to their positions. “After this next song, Gaylen and Beth wanted to go back to Frank and Sarah’s place and have a few drinks. I’m their designated driver, so I would go anyway. Frank and Sarah will be leaving shortly too.” He looked back at me and grinned profusely. “I think we could make both their heads spin and then sneak out before either notice. You get to finish this night without either of them bothering you again.”

“Steve,” I replied, “What about you?” He cocked an eyebrow in confusion. “Your feelings for me?”

He shrugged his shoulders and curled his lip. “I’ve moved from second best to third. At this point, I think I would enjoy driving them mad.” I was catching on to what he was suggesting. “Think of me as the wild card. Play me if you want to or not. Just know I’m there.” He looked over at the boys, as did I. They were watching each other as well as us. “Do you know how to tango?” Steve whispered but didn’t wait for me to answer.

I found myself being whipped around into a very sensual dance which fit the change of music. Truth be told, I was having a blast for someone who let Steve truly lead. I just moved my feet out of his feet’s way. It worked, it looked like I knew what I was doing. “They watching?” He whispered, not taking his eyes away from mine.

“Oh yeah,” I replied. Eddie was on the edge of his seat. Rob was literally pushing Nikki off of him. It’s

horrible, but I got an immense amount of enjoyment out of it. I felt Steve run his hand down my side and grab my thigh. He bent me back, putting his face near my abdomen, slowly lifting me back up. His face was close enough to my body that when he came near my chest I felt his nose graze my skin.

He moved his head beside my neck and whispered. "And now?" I caught him trying to glance over, trying hard not to move his head.

I looked over. Eddie was out of his seat, holding onto the arms. Rob was getting up, Nikki pulling on his arm. They looked at each other with a warning look. 'Don't go near her,' I would say would be accurate. "Nope, now they're trying to see which one of them will stop us first."

I could hear the song wrapping up. Steve turned me so he could look at them inconspicuously, dipping me down as he stayed upright. "Perfect," he said as he lifted me back up. He smiled and twitched his eyebrows. "Let's get the hell out of here before the fight breaks out." He grabbed my hand and we ran for the door.

I giggled the whole time, hearing him do the same. We looked over at Gaylen and Beth seeing they noted our quick getaway. Steve gestured with his head for them to follow and they weren't long after. I took one last look at the tables before we left the ballroom, and saw that neither man even noticed we were gone. Jealousy is blinding, and it worked to my advantage.

The four of us laughed hysterically as we sat in the driveway of the Speel residence. Steve told them the story of what happened as we waited for Frank, Sarah, and Tony to catch up with us. It was actually quite humorous looking back on it.

“What made you decide to do that Steve?” Gaylen asked him after a while. “Why the whole dance bit just to get them distracted?”

“When Eddie was watching Rob and Andi, I could hear him cursing him out. When Rob watched Eddie and Andi argue he grumbled about letting ‘the idiot win.’ You pin one against the other in a jealous rage and then you run away.” Steve shrugged. “What did you want me to say? It was the gay thing to do?”

Gaylen giggled, Beth did so nervously. I just glanced over at Steve in the driver’s seat seeing him smirking at me in the dim light. I smiled back uncomfortably as headlights shined on us through the rear window. Sarah honked her horn as she pulled up beside us.

“Oh yay!” Beth just about jumped out of the car when they arrived, Gaylen climbing out after her. Tony was drunk and loud, as was Frank, and the two of them greeted the couple with audible enthusiasm. The five of them started to head towards the house. Steve went to join them, hand on the door handle.

“Steve wait,” I asked him. I had never seen a man freeze so quickly. He turned around and looked me with eager eyes. I understood that doing this in the car would be a mistake, but I didn’t care. I made so many mistakes in the last month, it wouldn’t have made a

difference if I added one more. "I want to thank you for coming to the rescue tonight; If I'd known that Eddie would be like that."

"It's not a problem." Steve shrugged. Nothing was a problem with Steve. It made me truly appreciate his presence in my life. I smiled, feeling grateful, and went to give him a kiss on the cheek.

He turned his head in time to get my lips. It was quick, and when I looked at him, about to give him a piece of my mind I saw the confusion in his eyes. Which in turn confused me. He looked at my lips and kissed them again. And then again a little longer, holding my face. By now his face was contorted in confusion.

"Steve, what the hell?" I asked as best I could as he held my face.

"I like you." He said so simply, factually, with his face still contorted.

"Yes?"

"I like you. But, kissing you doesn't feel.... right." He let go of my face and narrowed his eyebrows, looking at the dashboard. "I don't even know if I liked it." He said carefully, the realization coming on to his face.

"Steve, are you sure you're not..." I started to ask.

"Andi, don't say it, dear god don't say it." He took a really deep breath. "Now I'm the one that needs to get really drunk." He got out of the car and I followed him.

"Steve," I stopped him. He was terrified, I could see that much, and I felt horrible. "I'm not going to tell anyone. No one has to know." His face changed from

petrified to relief. I walked up to him and we put our arms around each other. I leaned in on him as we climbed the stairs. If only all problems of the heart were so easily solved with one awkward kiss.

Chapter 22

It snowed over night. The Trap was covered in a beautiful blanket of frozen water. With the sun glistening off of it, the precious night was brought to the front of mind with every glance outside.

It was a little hard to forget the events that transpired: I went to the Bayside Mall Christmas party with Eddie in hopes that I would have a wonderful time. I saw Rob and Nikki together there as a couple, therefore deciding that I needed to get drunk. I danced with Rob, Eddie tried to tell me I couldn't, they almost killed each other, and then I was rescued by Steve who swept me away before the two alpha males could embarrass me.

I groaned silently at the memory and clung to the cup of tea I was finishing from breakfast. Frank, despite being drunk beyond comprehension, was the first one up and far from hung over. He decided to wake everyone else up by making a huge breakfast. Of course, the smoke detector is what actually what caused us all to get up, but what did it matter? Nothing was actually burning, just an overly sensitive alarm.

The house was busy around me. I stared out the large picture window wearing my dress from the night before, Steve's dress shirt over top of it to keep warm. He brought a change of clothes, t-shirt and jeans, as did everyone else who was warned about this get together. I had asked Beth why she didn't mention anything. Her

explanation was simple: she didn't expect either of the two guys to be a jerk. Fair enough.

"Andi," Steve got my attention. "I'm all ready to go. If you want me to take you home."

"Heading out already?" I swallowed the last of what was in my cup.

"Yeah, why not? Sarah and Frank don't need us around all day. I think Gaylen and Beth are going to be heading out Christmas shopping after, and Tony's going with them."

"You make a good point. Plus, I don't think I would be considered as pulling off a new fashion trend." I lightly tugged at the end of his dress shirt.

"You look hot in my clothes," Steve gestured his hand up and down towards me. He winked at me, a signal that after our awkward and unsure kiss the night before was far beyond mixed. He called out to Sarah that he and I were leaving; I heard her holler back but I couldn't make out what she said. Steve and I then went to the entryway and got on our shoes and coats, waving to the others as we left the house.

"I really should have been warned that Sarah and Frank's was a possibility." My voice shook as I tried to go down their slightly steep and very icy driveway in the heels I wore the night before. Steve got the hint and quickly came over to help me walk down to his car. We laughed as he helped me in, closing the door and moving swiftly around to the other side.

"Honestly," he said when he closed his door. He grabbed his seat belt and started to buckle. "Tony,

Gaylen, and I kinda had a bet going on as to who you would have gone home with. And we all lost. The after party was not an option."

"Whoa, wait a minute," I should have been pissed but I found the idea of the three beating humorous. Steve started to back out of the drive way. "Who bet on who?"

"I will admit I was the only Eddie. And I bet on him because you came with him, and let's face the fact that Nikki wouldn't let Rob go for nothing. But Gaylen thought Rob would take you home but leave before he had the chance to do anything." He got onto the road and headed back towards town. Sarah and Frank actually lived outside of Bayside, about ten minutes away. "Tony thought that you two would sneak out, go to Rob's do the nasty and then he would drop you off home like nothing happened."

"Oh!" I replied, my voice reeking of sarcasm. "How thoughtful you all were. Glad to know I've replaced Nikki as the town tramp."

Steve laughed, quickly leaned over and kissed my cheek, then added, "You are not the town tramp."

"No?" I replied with giggles. "Two of you thought I was going to go home with a man who was not my husband, which in the end I did. But you also placed bets on exactly who I would be leaving with."

"Look at it this way," Steve said, trying not to gesture and trying hard to keep his hands on the wheel. "You didn't leave with either of them. No one was right. Because you didn't leave with Rob, no one is going to

think anything off it. And those who did see you leave with me and did not know we were being joined by Sarah and Gaylen? Well, they got a fifty-fifty chance on being correct about sexual chemistry.”

I looked over at Steve, seeing that there was a bit of concern in his eyes, disappointment on his face. “A fifty-fifty chance?” I asked gently.

“Last night, up until I kissed you, I wanted you. Badly. I slept next to you all night, smelled you, and had no desire to wake you up and start something.” He sighed, “none. Now we’re driving home, and you’re in my shirt and we’re having fun and all I can think about is: ‘what would happen if I pulled over and kissed her?’ But I won’t, because then I remember last night.”

“Steve,” I put my hand on his knee. “There is no rule that says because it wasn’t right with me, that it won’t be right with...”

“I know.” He put a hand over mine and gave it a quick press before he returned it to the wheel. “It’s just, well, I wasn’t lying to you when I said that you were the first person I felt very strongly about. I thought those feelings finally defined me.”

I got it, not like I hadn’t picked up on the disappointment the night before. But I understood where all the disappointment was coming from. Carefully, I laid my head down on his shoulder, and he put his arm around me. “No one and nothing defines who you are.” I reached an arm around his abdomen. “Remember that, please.”

There was a long moment of silence before the car came to a stop. When Steve didn't move, I was wondering if I had made a mistake. Would Steve be so diabolical that he would plot even this moment? In hopes that he would have pulled on my heart and got me to cave so that he could pretend I loved him? His chest started to vibrate. "Andi, darling," he said in fits of laughter, "you have visitors." He then burst out uncontrollably as I sat up. I looked at the windshield and saw two very bitter, very confused, and very horrified men, one Eddie, one Rob, sitting on my front step staring at us.

"Oh this is going to be a fun thing to explain," I said as went for the door handle.

"Don't worry," Steve said as he started to climb out. "I got it covered." We shut the doors to the car and went into my coat pocket for my keys. Steve came and stood beside me as I made the oh to short journey to the front step. "Good morning, gentlemen. I see no bruises or cuts on one another's faces, so I guess that means you didn't try to kill each other last night. I'm proud of you. Good job."

"Cut the shit Steve," Eddie bolted up from the step and confronted him. Steve was a few inches taller than Eddie, making it almost laughable as the guy poked a finger at Steve's chest. "Where the hell did you take my wife last night?"

"Whoa, Eddie," Rob was suddenly standing opposite of me, a hand on Eddie's shoulder. "One, she's not your wife."

"I'm married to her, that makes her my wife." Eddie hissed back.

"She's not your wife. And second, Steve can kick your ass, so I would back off if I were you." Rob cautioned him again. Eddie glared at the two of them for a long moment before he backed off. "Now, Steve, Andi, where did you guys go last night?" Rob asked calmly.

"Wouldn't you love to know?" Steve replied with a smirk, folding his arms across the chest.

"Steve," I growled before I looked to Rob and Eddie. "We went to Sarah and Frank's for some drinks and to get away from you two fools." I replied as I walked towards the house. Steve stayed, the two guys walked to a half way point, undecided on where they should stay.

"Then why are his clothes different? Huh? And why can I see the ends of a man's shirt under your jacket?" Eddie demanded, his tone half threatening, half bemused.

"I had a change of clothes in my car," Steve shrugged. "I knew I was going over there. And besides, if I didn't give up my dress shirt what would Andi have slept in? I mean, come on, if I'd known you would have been happier if she slept naked with me."

"Steve," I said, getting ready about to scowl at him. He wasn't helping defuse the situation.

"Wait a minute here," Rob spoke up loud, silencing everyone else. He was wearing the expression wore when he was unsure he heard something correctly and thought it amusing. It was one of my favourites. "You

mean to tell me you slept next to Andi all night, and she was only wearing your dress shirt, and you did absolutely nothing?" Rob wanted clarification.

Steve grinned like a mad man, raising his right hand. "Scouts honour."

Rob stood frozen for a full second before he burst out laughing on the verge of hysterically. Steve just stared at him as he asked, "Did you need me around, Andi?"

"No, Steve, I'm fine." I said as I unlocked and opened the door. "Thanks for the lift." I smiled and waved as he turned back and headed to the car. I went inside and shut the door, hearing Rob still laughing outside. I went into my room and dug out my sweats from the closet, dropping Steve's dress shirt and my dress in the hamper. When I walked back out into the living room the two guys came inside, standing a decent space between one another. "Is there something I can help you with?"

"You skipped out on me last night." Eddie growled.

"Gee I wonder why?" Rob leaned against the wall on one hand.

"Shut up," Eddie sneered.

"Yeah, I skipped out on you." I shot back. "Because you were acting like a child. It wasn't exactly a way to charm your way back into my life; Telling me what I can and can't do."

"Well, Andraia, forgive me for not wanting you to dance with the man you loved." Eddie started walking closer to me. I glanced at Rob, he was looking at the floor.

"Love." I corrected, seeing Rob's head snap in our direction out of the corner of my eye. "Love, Eddie. And you know what, I don't care what you wanted me to do. I didn't want you to divorce me six months ago. I wanted to work it out six months ago. You were the one who told me no. So, Eddie, forgive *me* for trying to piece my life back together and move on with it when Rob over there didn't have feelings to say in return and you come back in and say 'guess what, we're married.'" I wasn't sure if I should have been having this argument in front of Rob. I looked over, but he was gone. I heard the door close. I closed my eyes, took a breath, and looked at Eddie.

"Andraia, I'm sorry." He said softly, "I really am. You have no idea how sorry I am." He walked over to me and wrapped his arms around me. Why is it every time he was tender like this, he wasn't the one I wanted? "Can I ask you something?" I just nodded. "Do you love me too? I mean, I know love just doesn't disappear overnight, and it takes a while. So I know you love him, but is it with your whole heart?"

"Just part of it," I whispered back. "You never gave it all back to me when you left." I looked over at the door. "Get out, please." I asked as I turned out of his arms and walked over the couch.

"No," Eddie said as he walked over to me and sat down beside me. "I want to stay with you. I want to just be here beside you. We don't have to do anything; we can even sit on complete opposite ends of the couch

and not speak for the rest of the day. I just want to spend a day with my wife."

"I'm not your wife, again." I replied, moving down the couch to the other end. "You don't earn the right to call me that yet."

Chapter 23

"For the fifth time, Ma'am, we are sold out of the Jonas Brothers." I said to an extremely dense woman at my counter. Christmas eve, and the woman expected to be able to walk into the mall and get everything her child asked for. She yelled some sort of profanity that I didn't catch and moved on, allowing me to ring through the man behind her who now appeared to be terrified.

"I feel bad for you," he said with a grin. "Working today with people like that around."

"It's not so bad," I replied as I scanned through his CDs. "In about another twenty minutes the mall will be cleared out and it's not going to matter." I smiled wide as I told him the total.

"Why exactly will the mall clear out in twenty minutes?" he asked, looking behind him and seeing a couple of teenagers lingering in front of the selections. He handed me his credit card.

"Because in twenty minutes it's five o'clock and everyone goes home to have dinner with their families." I swiped his card and handed it back to him. A second later I handed him the slip to sign.

"Do you have a family to go home to?" He asked with a devious smile.

I felt smug, and after just dealing with the psycho woman from who knows where, I wasn't in the mood to be kind. "I'm married." I replied.

"You aren't wearing a ring." He quipped back like this wasn't the first time he heard the excuse.

"I lost it." I replied. "Have a Merry Christmas sir." I said as I handed him the bag. He just studied me for a long minute.

"Andi," Rob called as he jogged into the store. "Do you have some coin I can buy off of ya? I'm out." He handed me a couple of twenties. I took the bills with a smile and ducked under the counter. I wrote a note on one of the paper coin rollers, hearing the annoying man still going on about how he didn't believe I was married. I handed Rob the rolled coin with the scrawled note before I got the other half of his order. When I popped my head back up, Rob was trying not to laugh at me. "Thanks honey," he did a good job at sounding serious. "See you after work." He gave me a really quick kiss on the cheek for good measure and then darted back across the hall.

The annoying man looked between Rob and myself before he said, "He wasn't wearing a ring either."

"Why should he if I'm not." I shrugged my shoulders innocently and was relieved when he left.

I watched Tiffany come out of the back. "There's all kinds on this day." She commented as she tied her blonde hair behind her head. I nodded my head and hopped down from behind the counter. I popped my head out of the store, seeing the mall clearing out. The other end down by the spa was deserted.

"Tiff, if you want to head out you can." I said to her as I walked back in.

“Are ya sure?” She asked, doing little to hide her joy.

“Frank didn’t make me assistant manager because I seconded guessed my decisions.” I replied, nodding my head to the door. “Now get out of here.”

“Oh my god, thank you, Andi.” Tiffany practically threw her lanyard at the counter and jumped out of the store yelling greetings as she ran. I looked back at the store, seeing the place was empty, the teenagers already gone. I looked back out the door, seeing no one at all. I looked down at my watch and checked the time. 5:01.

I walked into the hallway, sitting on the backless bench in the middle and leaned against the metal garbage can.

“What was with that guy earlier?” Rob asked as the last of his customers left his store in a hurry. He walked over to the bench and sat down across from me, leaning against the other garbage can.

“He just wouldn’t get it through his head I wasn’t interested. I should have known something was weird when he spent twenty minutes contemplating between Serena Ryder and Five Finger Death punch for his supposed girlfriend.” I answered with a shrug.

Rob laughed. “Now that’s a loser. So how did the assistant manager get roped into Christmas Eve?”

I was promoted the Monday after the Christmas party, my official six month anniversary of my working for Frank. He said he would have done it sooner, but there was a six month period that had to be filled. “I offered last week. I wasn’t going to have Frank not be able to spend the holiday’s with Sarah.”

"I guarantee you they spent the whole day at your place." Rob glanced over at his store as someone walked by.

I shrugged, "Maybe so, but they're still spending it together." I looked over towards my store, watching a few stragglers pass it by.

There was a long pause of silence, and I could feel him looking at me carefully. "What about Eddie?"

"Eddie will be there when I get home." I replied. "He can wait."

"Have you guys made any progress? You know, on working it out?" Rob leaned forward, lifting a leg on the bench and grabbing on his foot with both hands.

I leaned forward to, crossing my legs into the lotus position. "Some, not much. There are good days where he's Eddie--my Eddie. The guy I married in the first place. Other days..."

"He's a pompous, rich asshole who thinks he can get whatever he wants?" I smacked Rob on the chest and my hand bounced against it. He laughed. We both did.

"Eddie does let his money give him a sense of entitlement." I replied without meeting Rob's eye. I wanted to change the subject. This was the first time in weeks Rob and I had been alone, and I wanted to just talk to him. I missed my friend. "So, tell me, since we are doing the whole thing tonight anyway, who did you get for your secret Santa?"

"Frank," Rob said as he leaned back. "I gave it to him yesterday. A mug: World's Best Guitar Hero Player." He seemed so proud.

"Why did you give it to him yesterday?" I whined the question.

"I'm not going tonight."

My heart sank, "What? Why?"

"I'm driving to my mom's for Christmas." He replied with a shrug.

"She sent you down gifts and you're going home with them anyway?" I felt my heart crack a little.

He looked down at the cushion on the bench. "It was a last minute decision. I haven't had a Christmas home since Becca and I split. I think it's time I faced the town again." I think I knew what he was really saying, though I couldn't assume. I could dream, but I couldn't assume.

"Well, wait here then." I faked annoyance to hide my heart ache as I stood up and walked into the CD store. I don't know why I carried it around with me. I'd like to think it was because I didn't want people to snoop under our tree and see my secret Santa gift. I went behind the counter and got my purse, opened it, and pulled out the heavily wrapped and decorated box. I dropped my purse and went back out into the hall. I plopped down across from him and handed the gift over. "Merry Christmas from your Secret Santa."

He smiled, taking the box and pulled off the paper. He reminded me of a kid on Christmas morning, the way he tore into it; his reaction was what I hoped for. The gift wasn't much, a set of extremely high quality acoustic guitar strings, a little polisher kit, and my added touch of a silver guitar pick engraved with Rob's

initials. I think it was supposed to be a necklace charm, though when I compared it to the plastic ones, it was the same size. So what if there was a small chain hole on the wide end? I didn't think he'd use it as a pick anyway, but it seemed special to me. Him. Us.

The gift was way above our twenty dollar budget, but I didn't care. "Andi," he breathed as he picked up the pick and moved it around in his fingers. "This is so special." His mouth twitched into a smile. "It makes me a little sad I didn't get you anything." I suddenly remembered the small box beneath his tree.

"I would have been surprised if you did." I couldn't look at him, knowing we were both lying.

"You know because you gave me this, you're going to have to come to Bombay to hear me play again after the holidays, right?" He asked as he gestured at his gift.

"I went to your last show," I still couldn't look him in the eye, even if I was being honest. I sat on a bar stool where I would be out of his line of sight. "I just don't sit in the same spot. And I didn't stay long enough for you to catch me." That part was a lie. He had only done one show since we split, as the holiday season cancels his Tuesday night shows until after the new year. That last one I wanted to see if someone sat at my table, which they had, and if he left with them, which he hadn't.

"Why not?" He reached out and put his hand on mine. I looked up, he was a little closer.

"I don't want to know who your songs are for." I shrugged. Another long moment of silence, though this one was more comfortable, warmer.

"Hey guys," the maintenance guy said as he walked up to us. "No one's here, so we're shutting her down a half hour early."

"Thanks, Burt." Rob said as he jumped up and ran over to the art store. I blinked at how quickly he disappeared, taking the moment with him.

I walked back into the shop, closing and locking the gate. I brought the tray to the back office, reconciled it really quickly, and then shut it down. I wasn't going to complain about getting out early. I grabbed my purse and locked the gate again behind me, double checking to see if I got all the lights, then headed down the hall.

"Andi," Rob called and I stopped, noticing my heart racing. "Want a lift? You're on my way, unless Eddie's coming to get you."

"No, he's already there." I replied. He was going to leave at six to come get me. "I'll take a ride."

Rob walked up to me and put an arm around me, walking me like this through the mall. We gave our greetings to those we knew on our way out, waving to the cafe works who probably wouldn't get out until six, giving people their last special coffee fix for the next couple of days.

It was snowing a little heavily outside, and against the black sky and the glow of the parking lot lights, it actually looked kind of nice, and pretty. Rob pointed to where the mustang was and I followed him. He jogged

ahead to open the door for me before climbing in himself. He started the car, letting it warm up a minute before we took off.

"So is your sister going to be there?" I asked him, trying to make conversation. "Zoe?"

"Zoe will be there," He gave a definitive nod. "With her fiancé Melvin." Rob sighed. "Which means I'm going to be hounded by aunts and grandmother, and of course my mother, as to why my twenty year old sister is getting married, and I'm not."

"I'm sorry," I replied, looking over at him.

"Don't be sorry," Rob shook his head. "It's not your fault I can't keep a good thing." He went silent as we pulled down my road. I studied his face, his sad eyes.

We pulled into my driveway, and he put the car in park. He wouldn't look at me, but I couldn't take my eyes off him. I wanted to tell him I loved him again, but what good would it do when he didn't want me? "Let me know when you get to your mom's," I said instead.

"Andi, it's two hours away." He laughed, but still wouldn't look over.

"I don't care. It's snowing, and the roads are getting slick. I want to know you're okay." He didn't move. "Promise me? I will call the highway patrol if I don't hear from you by the end of the night." He laughed and nodded. He looked at the house, staring at it. The sad eyes were gone, but his face was expressionless. I leaned across the seat and kissed his cheek, not caring if it was the right thing to do or not. It woke him from

his trance, and for a second I thought he was going to go after my lips. But he just remained still. "Merry Christmas, Rob." I said softly, with a smile, proud that I didn't add anything else.

He reached over and brushed my cheek with his thumb, a smile pulling at his lips, warm and joy filled. "Merry Christmas Andraia." I loved how my name rolled off his tongue. I didn't stay long, seeing the curtain flutter open out of the corner of my eye. I knew who ever was looking out could see us here in the car. I turned away and got out.

I walked up to the step and waved at him as he backed out. The door behind me opened and Eddie stood there with a big dumb grin and his really ugly Christmas sweater. "Hey love, you're home early." He leaned in and kissed me quick on the lips. There was a hint of rum and eggnog.

"Yeah, they shut the mall down a little early and Rob gave me a ride on his way out of town." I said as I stepped inside. I hung up my coat and walked into the living room. Though looking around, it seemed to have changed drastically. We didn't have as many decorations up when I left, and now it reminded me of aisle two in the home decor store: wall to wall Christmas. "Umm, what the hell happened?"

"I did!" A drunken Tony sang. He too was sporting an equally ugly Christmas sweater. "It's Christmas eve, time to be tacky but classy." He poured another glass of eggnog, staggered gracefully over towards me, and

handed it over with a kiss on the cheek. "Come, join the celebration."

"Andi," Nikki called from the kitchen. A couple seconds later she was standing beside Tony. "Did you say Rob was going out of town?"

"Yeah, he's going to his mom's," I replied and took a drink of the eggnog. Homemade. Must be Gaylen's doing.

"The bastard said we'd exchange our first gifts as a couple tonight!" Nikki ripped the eggnog out of my hand and chugged it back. "I got him a cashmere scarf." She sulked.

"Cause nothing tells a guy you love him like a cashmere scarf." Eddie commented sarcastically.

I looked over to him with a smirk. "Funny, that's what I got you." I don't think Eddie had ever been so happy to be used as a punch line. He leaned in and kissed my jaw line. "So what exactly do we do?" I asked, never being part of a Christmas celebration that didn't involve my family.

"We sit around, drink eggnog laced with rum and open gifts." Tony was far too excited. "And when we're intoxicated enough we watch Christmas specials." He jumped up and down with a clap.

"Except Charlie Brown," Steve called from the kitchen. He and Gaylen came out a moment later with a complete Turkey Dinner. Fancy, considering the big day was the following morning. "That one always makes him cry."

"Hey shut up," Tony turned and pointed to Steve. "You got all weepy last year over Rudolph 'cause the Elf couldn't be a dentist."

Steve glared at him as he set the food down on the table. People started to flock to the food and I followed, I wasn't about to turn down a full Turkey dinner. Especially considering I couldn't cook one to save my life and neither could my parents.

After the meal was done we all moved to the living room where we sat around and started to exchange gifts. I searched beneath my and Beth's sparse tree to find any that didn't belong. I had only found the one. "To Steve from Tony." I read the tag out loud. I guess secret Santa only went as far as the moment of exchange. No one kept who they had secret by this point.

"Oh god," Steve groaned.

"Shut up, you'll love it." Tony folded his arms and pretended to be hurt. He leaned against Beth who put an arm around him. Steve groaned again and started to open it up. His eyes grew wide when he finally had the paper off.

"Oh my god, it's Cher's greatest hits!" Steve screeched like a little girl, causing a faint giggle to escape my lungs.

"I told you you'd love it." Tony stuck out his tongue. "Now, who had me?" Nikki handed him a box to which Tony ripped open. His face wasn't nearly as excited as Steve's. "Oh, cashmere gloves." He sounded so disgusted but faked a great smile. "I guess I'm going to

be stylish and warm.” He rolled his eyes when he turned away from Nikki.

We continued the exchange until everyone had gotten their gift. Steve had my name: a gift card for an all out make over. It paid to have a friend in the style business.

It had been a few hours since the party had started, and everyone started winding down to watch Christmas specials together. Steve and Tony argued over who had control over what DVD we watched, causing a small vote to go on.

I hadn’t been able to check my cell phone since I had been home, and I wanted to take a minute to check it, see if Rob got a hold of me. I’m not sure why I felt guilty about what I was doing, but I did. I went the entry way, slipped on my shoes and coat, and grabbed my cell phone out of my purse. I took another glance out into the living room, no one seemed to notice I was gone.

I snuck outside and closed the door quietly. I sat down on the step and flipped open my phone. Nothing. No word from him, just the giant blue numbers that told me the time. I let out a long breath, watching it dance in the air in front of me. I actually started to feel the worry build. It snowed a lot in the last couple hours. It may have stopped now, but the roads were covered.

I knew the truth was something other than a horrible car accident on the way to his mom’s house. It

could be as simple as he just didn't feel obligated to let me know he arrived safely. After all, what was I to him?

My phone started vibrating in my hand, though I didn't recognize the number. My heart pounded in my chest as I flipped it open. "Hello?" My voice was shaking.

"Hey," Rob replied, a bit of a laugh in his voice. "I made it. Safe and sound. Mom and Zoe say 'hi.'"

I laughed, restraining myself from crying with joy. "They don't know me, how could they possible say 'hi.'"

"They know you. Sorta. I've talked about you before. When I told them you wanted a call that I was ok, they asked me to say hi for them."

"Rob," I shook my head. Not like he could see it. "I didn't say I wanted a call."

"Oh, like I would ever trust a text message to go through." I could hear someone laughing in the background and him mumbling something. He covered the microphone on the phone, the muffling drowning out whatever he was saying. He came back on the line sounding embarrassed. "I've got to get going." He sighed.

"Already?" I whined.

"Yeah, family is harassing me about talking to you, so I better." It almost sounded like he was disappointed. But at the same time it could have been sarcastic. I hated not being able to read his face.

"I probably should be going anyway. What with the party going on and such." I didn't bother hiding the disappointment. I missed him.

"Tell everyone I said hi, happy holidays, all that." He paused. "And Andi?"

"Yeah?" Did I say it? Or did I just think it?

"I..." he stopped. "I'll see you when I get back, ok? I'll miss you." He hung up. Before anything else could be said, before anymore words would be spoken, he was gone.

"Hey," Eddie startled me. I felt like I had just been caught, guilt coursed through me faster than I could comprehend. "Who were you talking to?"

I wasn't about to lie to him. There would be no point to. "Rob," I gestured my hand holding the closed cell phone. "I asked him to let me know when he got to his mom's."

Eddie sat down beside me. "Why?" He looked suspicious.

"It was storming out when he dropped me off. I wanted to make sure he was ok." I didn't look at Eddie.

"Andi do you love me?" He asked point blank. I looked at him, seeing he was growing seriously annoyed over something.

"Yes." I replied hesitantly. It was true, I never really got over Eddie. His being here and us trying to work it out made it a little stronger, but not much.

"Then why are you doing this? Why are you playing this game? I love you, I want to be with you. We could

just go back to being married and forget all this ever happened. We could go back to the city and..."

"It's not that easy, Eddie." I replied quietly. He stopped his rant. "You looked at me six months ago and told me you wanted out. You looked at me and told me it couldn't be worked out. You looked at me and told me you didn't love me anymore. How am I supposed to just forgive you for all that and pick up where we left off?"

He shook his head. "I don't know." He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a tiny box, and my heart sank. It wasn't wrapped; I could see the green velvet. "I got you something." He said as he handed it over to me.

I took it from Eddie carefully, opening it up and revealing a small silver locket in the shape of a heart. I gently picked it up, opening it to reveal these two tiny pictures of Eddie and I. One from when we were kids, one from our wedding day. It was the most sentimental and thoughtful gift he had ever given me. I ran my fingers around the edges of the locket, feeling way too much to pin point one emotion. "I missed this." I said softly. "This us. The one where all the bad hadn't happened yet."

"You mean the rushed relationship, the quick engagement, the shot gun wedding and the rapid divorce?" Eddie asked, his sarcasm coming out again.

"Back when we were kids and we were just Eddie and Andi." I smiled, thinking of the simpler times where I

would deny my mother's promise I would marry my best friend.

"We can be Eddie and Andi again," He took my hand in his. "You just have to tell me you're my wife and we will be Eddie and Andi. I won't leave you again. I can't leave you again. I made the biggest mistake of my life when I thought I didn't want to be married anymore."

"Eddie," now didn't seem the time for heartfelt confessions. But Eddie raised a hand, a signal that he wanted to speak his mind. I let him. What did I have to lose?

"I wanted to be like my guys, my buddies. I had it in my head that I should be going out to bars on Saturday nights and look for this fantastic, knock out of a girl to bring home and build a life with. I had this strange, crazy quarter life crisis. And you know what; I did try to do that. When I couldn't find you I did try and do what I set out to do. But then I realized that I always had a knock out girl at home to build a life with. And I blew it." He paused, and took a breath. "I want you to know, Andi, that I'm your husband. I'm saying I was wrong, and I'm thankful I didn't sign all those papers. I am your husband and I will not be the one to end this marriage a second time. I can't. So if you want out, you're going to have to tell me. You're going to have to be the one to end it."

"Eddie," I shook my head. "I don't know what I want yet." I was frustrated. I felt like I was being put on

the spot. My cell phone seemed to burn in my hand. What was Rob about to say? Did it matter?

"I know you aren't, love." Eddie was tender again. He put his arms around me, pulling me into his chest. "Andi, I'm not asking you to decide this minute. Take your time. You'll know when you've made your choice." He kissed my temple, and I curled into him more. He was my Eddie again. How long would it last, though? I took the moment for what it was, moved my head to his and kissed him. "Wow," He said when I pulled my lips away. "That's the first time since I've come back that you've kissed me." He studied my lips.

"I wanted to kiss you," I replied, leaning in again. "Let's go back inside." I stood up. I waited for Eddie to follow me before I went inside.

"Andi," he said with a small smile, mischievous expression, hands in his pockets as he stood up. "I may have done something else, something a little bad."

"Oh?" I loved the devilish pull on his lips.

"There's a special sprig of mistletoe in the house. It's over your bed. Perhaps, that mistletoe will..." He looked down at the ground for a second. When he met my eyes next it caused my pulse to race. I knew the look in his eyes. The intense look he gave when he was being sensual. "...make your bed our bed tonight."

I walked over to him, smirking. I really wished the party was over. "That's a possibility," I replied with a matching grin as I took his hand and pulled him inside.

Chapter 24

"Work faster." Tony whined in the empty barber chair next to me. He bounced around like an impatient child. We sat in the salon while Steve worked on his gift to me.

"I can only go as fast as the dye." Steve said as he finished applying the color to my hair. He pinned it up so that it wouldn't fall around my neck. "So patience, my dear Tony. Andi will look perfect, she always does." He winked before he took a drink of his coffee. I enjoyed how he always made me feel good about myself.

"But I have soo much work to do before tonight." Tony bounced in his chair a little more.

"Gee what are you trying to say?" I asked, turning my head as best as I could to look at him.

He huffed, folding his arms. "Andi, I want to get you into the shops to buy an outfit for tonight. It's imperative that you look like a million bucks."

I laughed, "Because the clothes I have aren't good enough?"

Tony stood and moved to stand in front of me so that his attempt at a scold would be taken a little more seriously. But only a little. "Andi, darling, it's New Year's Eve. This is the end of the shit year you've had and the start of a new, more fabulous one. And I want you to look fabulous as you start the new year."

I laughed again, "Yeah, cause I have so much to look forward to. After all, I started last year with Eddie, and look how that turned out."

"Yeah, but now you're with us too." Steve said as he finished his coffee and put his gloves back on. He stuck his fingers in my hair, started to massage and my eyes rolled back. "And we'll make sure your year starts off good."

"You're doing a great job so far." I moaned.

"Steve," Tony's voice was a little farther away than it was a minute ago. He must have been heading to the door. "Don't kid yourself. Stop blushing, start working. Choppy choppy, I'm on a deadline." I heard the rush of the noisy mall for a moment and then it went away.

"You never told anyone about it, did you?" I questioned Steve with a cocked eye brow.

He removed his fingers from my scalp and my eyes shot open. I turned around as best as I could to see him. "No more scalp massage for you," He said as he gave his head a nod towards the private room. "Come on, I gotta rinse you." I obeyed, sitting up from the chair and following him into the room. I walked over to the chair in front of the sink and leaned back. He grabbed my hair and set it inside the basin. "And no, I didn't tell anyone I kissed you." He said before he turned on the water.

"Why not?" Curiosity always got me. After all, if he viewed himself as the wildcard, the third choice, wouldn't he announce to the other two guys and the

rest of the world that he kissed me? Even if it was awkward, and could only be related to kissing a sibling.

"I didn't want anyone to know my reaction to it." He answered, running his fingers through my hair. "I can't even understand why I reacted the way I did. And for crying out loud, if Tony ever found out." I giggled, thinking of the rant he would go on if Steve's little secret got out. He laughed too. I wonder if Tony was saying the same things in his head. "So, are you any closer? You know, to fixing things."

I sighed. "Am I a bad person if I don't know if I want to be *married* to Eddie? I mean, I think I could still have a relationship with him, if I tried, if it works. But I don't know if I want to be married to him again."

"No, it doesn't make you a bad person." Steve replied as he shut off the water. He grabbed a towel and wrapped it around my hair. "I think you've been burned by him in the situation before and you don't know if you want to go back to the exact way it was before. Why would you?" I shrugged as he held my hair and allowed me to move over to the chair. "Be back in a sec, I need to get my tools." He took my hand and placed it on top of my head, holding the towel in place. Then he pecked me on the cheek and left the room for a second.

Christmas eve, when I lay in bed next to Eddie listening to him snore, I did some thinking. My mind wondered to where Rob was, what he was doing, wondered if he was thinking of me. I would hear Eddie grunt and I would giggle, realizing how much I missed

him next to me. I went back and forth all night between them. My heart had never been torn in two before, and I couldn't figure out which one held the bigger piece.

During the week that followed I practically avoided both of them, squeezing between Beth and Tony during lunch. Eddie came over four times, stayed the night twice. I had snuck out three times on fifteen minute breaks to sit with Rob and chat while he smoked. I never touched him, there was always a foot of space between us, but I got my fix. I was addicted to both of them. It wasn't fair to any of us.

"Alright," Steve said as he walked back into the room, setting down various contraptions on the vanity in front of us. "Let's get you perfected, shall we?" He went to work and neither of us really spoke again while he did so.

"A blouse?" I questioned Tony's judgment as he held up the black garment.

"And really sexy jeans." He said excitedly. I looked over at Beth who shrugged her shoulders. She got out of this whole thing by saying she was wearing what Tony bought her for her birthday. I hated that she'd been playing the game longer than I had, she knew how to get past Tony's defences.

"She won't fit in a medium," Nikki said as she walked by us, giving me a quick once over while she hung up a dress someone didn't want. "Maybe an extra large."

“Nikki, honey,” Tony said in his pleasant voice, his expression screamed annoyance. “Just because you starve yourself into a minus two doesn’t mean that Andi’s fat. She’s perfect.” Tony paused and looked Nikki up and down, scrutinizing her carefully, “And she gets more men than you do.”

Nikki didn’t respond, she went off to help a customer. When she was out of ear shot I looked at Tony shyly, “I really am an extra large.” I whispered.

“Try it.” Tony wouldn’t hear any of it. He shoved the blouse in my hands and pointed sharply at the dressing rooms. I obeyed, reluctantly, and I felt a little foolish as he followed me over to them and stood in front of the door. “I’m going to come in if you don’t show me.” He said after a minute or two.

“Will you please humour me and get me the extra large?” I called to him from the other side of the door. I didn’t think the shirt looked right.

“Will you please humour me and get your cute butt out here so I can see?” he wouldn’t budge. I sighed, a little embarrassed to come out. I did, reluctantly.

“Bitch,” Beth said as I came out.

“I thought you said you weren’t a medium.” Tony folded his arms with satisfaction. I looked in the mirror. It did fit, barely. It was a little snug, but the shirt wasn’t gaping open. It showed a lot of cleavage.

“I can’t get this button here to close,” I said as I tried to cover myself up.

“You aren’t supposed to.” Tony clapped his hands together with excitement. “Now, off I go to get you the

right jeans.” He tried to venture off, but I grabbed his arm before he could.

“I draw the line at new jeans.” I replied sharply. He huffed and sighed as I went back into the dressing room, slipping out of the blouse and back into my sweat shirt. I left the dressing room with blouse in hand and walked up to the counter where Nikki waited.

“The medium, huh?” She said as she rung me through. There was no expression on her face, she just sounded snarky. She took my cash, gave me my change, and told us she would see us tonight. Something had put her in a mood. I didn’t care what it was.

“So where are we off to now?” Beth asked as we started to head down the mall. I looked over to our leader.

“Well, I’m thinking that we should head back to your place, sit around, have a couple drinks, gossip and get ready to leave for the Draught tonight?” Tony listed them off one by one on his fingers like he planned the whole day out. He probably did.

“Sounds goo-“ Something knocked the breathe right out of me. I ran into someone. I stumbled and turned around.

“What is that, your trademark for getting me to notice you or something?” Rob asked with a smirk. He was holding a coffee in each hand, probably going to see Nikki. I felt Tony’s hand grab my arm, but he didn’t move.

"Maybe you should just watch where you're going," I replied with a smirk as well, feeling flirtatious. Stop it, Andi, you're making some progress with your husband. Don't flirt with...

"You know, you're right. I can't lie. I've been the one running into you." Rob replied with a shrug. "After all, I didn't get coffee on me. If you ran into me, it would have spilled. Obviously I was preparing for something."

I grinned dumbly. "You heading to see Nikki?"

"No, Steve. I just called to see if he could get me in for a trim." Rob started moving away. "And since I told him I would be there five minutes ago, I better get going. See ya tonight guys." He said as he raised one cup in the air, lifting a couple fingers away from it in a wave.

Tony grabbed my arm tighter as he started pulling me back down the mall. "What was that about?"

I tried not to smile. "It's a thing. Umm, how we actually met. Before the whole stealing of the job bit." I had to bit my lower lip from smiling too big at the memory.

"Why haven't I been told about this?" Beth asked me.

"Because, It's a long story." I waved it off as Tony steered us towards the cafe. Eddie was ahead of us in line, glasses on. He glanced behind at us, did a double take, and smiled.

"Hey. What are you three up to?" he asked.

"Shopping," I shrugged.

“Did you want me to pick you up tonight?” He asked, looking ahead at the line moving. When it paused again, he turned back around.

“I will be escorting the ladies.” Tony replied proudly. “You just have to meet the boys at the Draught and wait while I bring the best looking women in the Trap. Kay!?”

Eddie laughed, “Ok,” he ordered his coffee, paid for it, and then turned back and kissed my cheek. “See you tonight, Love.” He then made his way over to his table.

I watched him, curious as to what he was writing about. He was intense and focused, which meant that he was writing something he was very passionate about. I liked seeing his passion.

“He’s kinda sexy when he writes,” Tony piped up as he handed me a latte. I took it from him, glancing away from Eddie for a second to make sure I wouldn’t fumble like an idiot. “I can see why you’re having difficulties going one way or the other.”

“I’m not having difficulties,” I lied, taking a drink of my coffee before we left the cafe. I stole one last glance at him.

“Oh you are.” Tony said when we stepped outside the mall in the brisk air. “And who could blame you? I say milk it, keep them both on the hook for as long as you can.”

Beth laughed as she got in the front seat of Tony’s Fit with him. I climbed into the back. As I looked out the window, watching the scenery fly by on our way home, I was suddenly hit with a sinking feeling. A strange mix

of déjà vu, excitement, and dread. Every time I thought about tonight, or even the possibilities that the next year held, my heart would race in panic and joy. It's like part of me knew something was going to happen, and the rest of me was clueless, scared, and thrilled to find out the secret.

"Oh my god I'm so excited." Tony cried in the passenger seat next to me. I held off drinking so that we didn't have to spend money on a cab to get to the Draught. I loved driving Tony's car. "I love New Year's Eve parties! They're so full of flirting, and teasing and.... oh I'm just excited."

"Ok, no more daiquiris for you." I laughed.

"Why the frig not?" Nikki asked in an overly chipper voice. She always went to one extreme or the other when she drank: overly depressed or extremely happy. "They're good. Maybe you need a daiquiris."

"I don't need a daiquiris." I replied, laughing at Beth who looked incredibly annoyed at the blonde beside her. Even Sarah was more tolerant of Nikki tonight, dancing with her in the back seat as we pulled into the Draught. "Ok, we're here." I announced unneeded. They were practically out of the car the second it stopped, running through the heavy snow fall to the bar. I had to jog lightly to catch up to them.

I was kind of surprised at how busy the bar was. For a night I was expecting the club and Bombay to be the centre of attention, the Draught held its own. I could see my crowd in our usual corner, and I saw a few other crowds eyeing it up as well, probably hoping we would

be leaving before midnight. The large closet at the entrance was open, packed with coats and hangers. I grabbed an empty one and hung my coat up, walking through the crowd to join the party.

"Wow," Frank whistled as I made it through the sea of people. "You are smoking freaking hot tonight, Andi. Tony, where are our women and what did you do with them?"

"I turned them in to perfection, that's what I did." Tony snapped back. Then he smiled wide and took a drink from a cooler Nikki handed him, "deal with it."

I felt a hand on my shoulder, turned, and saw Eddie standing next to me in a dress shirt and dress pants, a tie loose around his neck. He seemed annoyed. "What's with this get-up?" I gestured to him up and down, catching the dress coat hanging on the rack nearby.

"When you told me we were going out for New Year's, I thought you meant going out. Not this," he gestured around to the pool table and surroundings. "Since when was hanging out in a bar like this considered the thing to do?"

"Since I moved here." I replied, a little annoyed. What was wrong with the Draught? It wasn't a dirty bar, it wasn't a sleazy place.

Eddie just curled a lip and nodded. "Alright? So, what will it be to drink, love? An apple martini? Or how about a margarita?"

"How about a beer?" Rob came from behind us, handing me one without the need for an answer. I raised it in thanks and took a drink.

"Since when do you drink beer?" Eddie questioned me again.

I stepped away from him, looking at him sideways. "I've always drank beer." I honestly had. I was never one for girly drinks full of sugar. Unless I wanted to get drunk, and fast. "What's going on, Eddie?"

He walked up to me, placing an arm on my lower back, looking over my head at my friends behind me. "I was hoping for a more upscale, romantic evening. Just me and you." He whispered. "I wanted to talk to you, ask you a few questions about us."

I took a drink of my beer and shrugged my shoulders, "ask away." Why should the location matter?

"This is not the place, nor the crowd. I didn't want to necessarily see these guys tonight." He leaned in closer to me to whisper that one.

I looked behind me. I missed something funny, they were all laughing. "Well, I wanted to see these guys tonight." I turned away from him walking up to the guys. "Is there room for another player?"

"I was about to back out," Frank handed me the cue. "You're on Rob's team." Of course I was.

"Oh? Who we playing against?" I asked my teammate.

He grinned. "Your 'husband', and Steve." He looked over to Eddie with a sense of smugness.

"Shouldn't the Husband and Wife be on the same team?" Eddie asked as he grabbed his cue up again.

"I'm not your wife," I flicked my hair. My tone and remark caused a wave of 'Ohs' from the watchers behind me. "Come on, Eddie, relax. Have fun, let's play."

"Fine," Eddie grinned, taking a drink. "Want to play with a wager?"

"What's that?" Rob asked, also taking a drink.

"If we win, Andi leaves with me, and we spend New Year's Eve alone, as a couple." My eyebrows just about shot off my forehead. That was a strong wager, considering what that would mean, imply. I glanced up at Rob. He seemed unfazed.

"And if we win?" Rob asked.

"State your terms," Eddie was cocky. He did have the right to be, Eddie was pretty good at pool.

Rob held on to his cue at arm's length, staring at Eddie for a long pause. The wheels in his head were turning. How many ideas, thoughts ran through his head while he remained silent. "If we win," he started, "then you stop giving Andi a hard time for the rest of the night."

"Deal," Eddie jumped at it, pulling a quarter out of his pocket. "Tony, can you come flip this?" he looked back at Rob while he gave Tony the coin. "Call it, Rob."

Tony flicked the coin in the air. "Tails," Rob said calmly, watching the quarter like he could see exactly what side was facing up. Tony clumsily caught it, and without looking at the coin, flipped it on the top of his hand for inspection. The two men looked at it. "Tails," Rob smirked. "I guess that means we go first." He

looked over at me and gestured with the cue to the table. "Lady's first." I always felt self conscious breaking. I walked over to the other end of the table and leaned over, going for a hit and getting a nice spread. I smiled, proud of myself. "Good job." Rob grinned.

"Thanks," I looked over at the other team.

"Well, Steve," Eddie waved over to the table. Steve looked at me before he shot, and I could tell he wanted so badly to turn off his competitive nature. He closed his eyes before he shot. There was the distinct sound of a ball sinking. He sighed. "Way to go, Steve." Eddie was eager to congratulate. Steve just re-adjusted, moving around the table to take aim at another ball. He missed.

Rob barely lined up and shot. He sank four balls, before getting himself into a position where he couldn't take another shot. He brushed one of ours, just making sure he didn't scratch.

Eddie was equally skilled, also cleaning up the table. He sank five. He grinned, pleased with himself and how easily he lined up a win for himself. One left on the table, and then it was a matter of the eight ball.

"Andi," he said before I went to take my shot. "Love it's ok if you don't want to finish playing. We can go now, if you want."

I stood up from my hunched over position, straightening myself up. I didn't like how he was, I didn't like this guy. That was what it was becoming with Eddie lately. A Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde situation. Words wanted to escape my mouth, but I

thought I would just piss him off, hit him where it hurt. I bent over and concentrated on the table. One. Two. Three. I looked up after I cleaned up our end. Eddie was a little surprised, but hid it. His hand covered his twisting mouth. He looked over at Steve, then to the table, then to me, and I held his eye as I moved the stick behind my back. It helped get the angle I needed to finish the game. I took the shot, and I must say, even I was surprised when the eight ball rolled around Eddie and Steve's last remaining high ball to go into the pocket.

There was roar in the crowd behind us, and I was not objective when Rob put an arm around me, clanging cue sticks like we were making a toast. "I think I'll stay." I replied with a grin, trying hard to suppress the excitement I had from winning.

Eddie put his cue against the wall, walked over to me and gently took my arm. "Andi, can I talk to you for a minute. In what privacy we can get?" He pulled on my arm before I had a chance to respond. He brought me over to the opposite side of the bar.

"What do you think you're doing?" I demanded.

"I could ask you the same thing." He was furious. I didn't care. "Why did you do that?"

"Win? Because I could, and I don't appreciate being made into a bet." I tried to walk away from him before I said things I would regret but he wouldn't let me. He took my arm again and whirled me around.

"No, I mean humiliate me in front of everyone." Eddie hissed.

“Humiliate you?” I couldn’t believe him. “Edmund, you’re embarrassing. I can’t take you anywhere because I never know how you’re going to behave. One night you’re this great guy that I married and you’re fun to have around. The next you’re the asshole who walked out on me for no apparent reason. You’re constantly switching between two different personas.”

“Andi, be rational.” Eddie grabbed my other arm. “You’re with him, of course you think I’m a different guy.”

“What?” I pulled away from his grasp. “What did you say? Are you saying *I’m* different when I’m around Rob?” I didn’t wait for his answer. His face dropped. “Eddie, you’re the one who changes, not me. You’re trying to win me back, remember? Well, maybe if you were a little more Eddie and a little less jerk, you would actually gain some ground.”

“Andi,” he tried to protest.

I whirled around and yelled, “No, Eddie. No, just....” I paused. “If you can’t be nice, then just don’t bother socializing. Ok? You already ruined my Christmas party. Do me a favour, at least let me start the new year with a smile on my face.”

I turned away and walked over to the crowd. Steve, Rob, Frank, and Gaylen had already started another game and I went and sat down with Tony and the girls. Beth put her arm around me when I sat down. “He’s in a mood, isn’t he?” She asked softly. I nodded against her arm. “It was a dick thing for him to do, you know.

Playing your friends for the chance to pull you away from us.”

“He saw it as removing a threat.” I replied. “Getting me away from the enemy territory.” I glanced up to Rob. He was laughing and playing with the guys, but I caught him stealing a glance in our direction.

I looked over at Nikki and Sarah, both too drunk and preoccupied with each other to have bothered with our conversation.

“You know, as much as I love Eddie, I hate him.” Tony offered up. “I mean, I think the guy is great for trying, most won’t. But I mean, come on. He’s trying to bet against Rob? Trying to make him seem like less of a man, and not in an appropriate way.” Tony sighed.

I looked over to the rack where Eddie had put his coat. It was gone. He must have left. I sighed. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Tonight, you have fun.” Beth whispered back. “Don’t let Eddie decide what you can and can’t do. On paper, you’re married, yes. And if paper was concrete then you should have gone with him out to a nice dinner and blah blah blah. But, it’s not. And you lived your life like you were divorced for half the year. I think you should start the new year the way you would of if he never came back. After all, he’s gone now.”

“I can’t do that.” I said sitting up. “I don’t have that option any longer.” I looked over at Beth. She wasn’t looking at me, maybe she was watching Gaylen, I don’t know. She was smirking.

"Then just have fun." She replied, looked sideways at me. I loved Beth, she always made me feel better, like the sister I never had: the one I liked all the time. I kissed her on the cheek and we laughed.

"Did I just witness some girl on girl?" Steve twitched his eye brows as he stood upright from the pool table. Beth and I laughed at him.

"Steve, you liked watching two girls kiss as much as you like kissing them yourself." Tony said as he got up and walked towards the guys. He stood in front of Steve with his hands in front of his hips.

"I like kissing girls more than you like kissing boys." He said, thinking he was being funny.

Tony sighed, shook his head, and grabbed Steve's head, planting a quick kiss on his lips. And by quick, I mean about five or six seconds. Both guys looked a little surprised when it ended. Tony cleared his throat and patted Steve on the cheek. "Lay off the strawberry lip balm, honey. For a second, I thought you were a girl." He then looked around at us like nothing happened. "Did anyone else want a drink from the bar? No? Ok!" I don't think I saw Tony move so quickly.

We all just looked at Steve who remained frozen for a bit longer. He blinked after a second, cleared his throat a little rougher than Tony did, and said, "Well, that was disgusting." He continued the game like nothing happened. I watched him though, seeing if I could see a shift, a change. If there was one, I couldn't tell.

The hours passed, and I had long forgotten about Eddie and his childish behaviour. I was sitting around with my good friends, my best friends, drinking and playing pool. I can honestly say it was the most fun I had ever had during a New Year's celebration. For the last five, Eddie would get me all dressed up to drag me to some director or producers house where we would drink wine and make boring conversation. This was more my style.

I left the girls and walked to the bar, ordering a beer and staying there for a few minutes. I looked around at the other people in the Draught. I thought I saw Eddie watching me with a scowl, but I couldn't be sure. People kept blocking my sight line.

"Hey," Rob came up and stood next to me. He jabbed me playfully with his elbow. "Great game earlier tonight. I have to say even I was surprised at how quick you cleaned up that table." He ordered another beer.

"Thanks," I smiled. "I played a lot in college, and I never get to show my real skills. I would intimidate the boys and they wouldn't let me play so I stopped."

"Well you shouldn't." Rob said as he paid and took a drink. "I like the idea of having someone decent to play against." I laughed. "So, where do you think Eddie ran off to?"

"I think he may still be here, sulking." Nikki passed us, moving to the opposite end of the bar. We watched her for a minute, seeing her order a drink, seeing two show up, and then she turned around and went off to the other side. A second later, a big guy moved out of

the way and we could see who she was sitting with. It was Eddie.

"He won't be sulking for long." Rob took another drink. "The way she's sitting right now might as well be compared to a cat in heat. It's how she tries to seduce guys." He looked over at me with a smirk. "She's trying to steal your husband, Mrs. Mathews."

"Dangerous word there, Mrs. I prefer to think of myself as a Ms." I replied, standing up straight and turning my back to Eddie and Nikki.

"Alright then, Ms. Mathews. You better watch your back or Nikki will take him away from ya." Rob laughed, and I did too.

"You're not sad your girlfriend is leaving you?" I pulled the trick card out of my sleeve. I was feeling a little risky, very outgoing. I looked up at him carefully.

"She's not my girlfriend." He replied, taking a quick drink. "She never was."

"Alright Ladies and Gentleman," The bartender announced loudly. "Countdown to midnight! Better stand near your partner. Here we go!"

I think my heart went from zero to sixty. I immediately looked up into Rob's eyes, hoping he wouldn't run away or push me towards Eddie. I knew logically nothing would happen. He hated public displays, and he wanted me to work things out with Eddie. That's what he told me, yet when I looked up at him he held my eye.

Ten. Nine. Eight. Seven. Six. Five. Four. Three. Two. One. Happy New Year.

The crowd was loud, and from the speakers of the bar came the traditional New Year's song. Noise makers went off, and a bit of confetti was thrown. But I didn't notice any of it the way I should have.

"Happy New Year's Andi," Rob smiled. I felt arms wrap around me. My heart sped up.

"Happy New Year's Rob," I replied, getting on my tip toes to give him the customary peck on the lips. It was a strain but I made contact, he didn't move to me. Even though it was merely a brush of our lips it was electrifying. It made me smile uncontrollably, like I won the lottery. I waited to be passed along to our other friends, going through the motions, and maybe even make my way over to Eddie, but I didn't want to leave.

Rob didn't want me to leave either. He held my eye after my lips brushed his, a full second of searing stares that thrilled me. Then he kissed me, really kissed me. He pulled my body in close and pressed his lips to mine like I was the only thing that would keep him alive.

Rules about public displays were out the window at that point, and I knew instinctively that people were watching. I didn't care. I should have been embarrassed that even through all the commotion I could hear Tony's gasp and murmurs. It didn't matter.

I broke away, or maybe Rob did first, or maybe we broke apart at the same time, I'm not sure. But he was beaming, I would even saw glowing with joy. I was too, my cheeks here blazing. He was laughing, which made me laugh from sheer giddiness. I forgot where we were.

“Andi,” he smiled, he opened his mouth to say something else when a left fist wearing a very familiar wedding band made contact.

I remembered where I was now.

I didn’t have to look to see who it was, but when Eddie threw himself on top of the fallen Rob all doubts were squashed. Rob defended himself this time, and scrambled to his knees and pushed Eddie back.

“You back stabbing son of a bitch.” Eddie yelled as he stood up.

“I didn’t stab you in the back, Ed.” Rob said as he stood up too, whipping the blood from the corner of his lips. I had no idea who’s side I should go to.

“You kissed my wife.” Eddie pointed at me.

“It’s New Year’s; people kiss each other, its tradition.” Rob yelled back. He pointed to the floor.

Eddie shook his head as a slightly wicked laugh rumbled out of his chest. “Not like that they don’t. You know Rob, I was told you were a decent guy. I guess the guy who told me that was wrong.” Eddie shook his head and looked over at me.

“Well forgive me for not wanting to nurse your superiority complex anymore.” Rob retorted, though it sounded weak.

“Superiority complex?” Eddie turned his head back around in Rob’s direction. “I’m sorry, but I believe as Andi’s husband I’m supposed to defend her honour from sleaze balls like you.”

“My honour?” I demanded to know, but my tone fell on deaf ears.

"Fine." Rob said as he put his hands in the air, a surrender it would seem. He then dropped them to his sides heavily before pointing a finger at Eddie. "You want to be mister big shot and piss around to mark your territory that's fine. Have at her. I mean, let me get this straight. Andi's your wife, so I can't touch her. And if Andi hangs out with our friends then I can't, because heaven forbid I go near your territory," Rob gestured around the room. "So I guess the only choice that leaves me is to leave."

"Rob," Steve spoke, the annoyance in his voice the same as what I felt.

"No," Eddie raised a hand in Steve's direction. "I think that's for the best. After all, how can I work on the marriage you said I should if you keep getting in my way."

Rob raised his hands in the air again and turned for the door.

"Rob," I wasn't concerned about how it looked if I called after him. Joy had turned to heartache so fast that if I blinked I would have missed the transition.

"No," Rob said as he grabbed his coat. "He's right. I did tell him that. Back when I thought he was the best thing for you. But now," Rob just shook his head. "You're lucky I like to think of myself as a decent guy." Rob said to Eddie as he put on his coat.

"Oh yeah?" Eddie folded his arms. "And why is that?"

Rob pulled a pack of cigarettes from his inner coat pocket before answering. "You would have one hell of a

fight on your hands." He pushed open the door and left the silent bar.

I looked over at Eddie who was furious. "Why did you do that, Andi?" He demanded. "Why? Why, out of all the progress we made?"

"Progress!" I yelled back at him. "What in the hell do you call progress, Eddie? I wasn't lying when I said earlier that you're two different people. You push me away the second you do make progress. You know why? It's because you act like this: an idiot." I marched passed him and went for my coat.

"Are you going after him?" Eddie attempted to make a demand, but it came off more as a plea.

"No," I yelled back unnecessarily, "I'm going home."

"I'll drive you," Steve piped up quickly.

"No," Nikki said. "I will."

"Nikki, I'm the designated driver. I'm driving her home. I'll come back after I drop her off." Steve put on his coat and joined me as I walked out the door. I went straight for Steve's car. I climbed in and buckled up. I watched out the windshield as Steve got on his cell. He stayed outside for a few minutes, but I couldn't read his lips to make out what he was saying or even who he was talking too. A minute or two later he was in the car, started it up, and we pulled away.

"Who were you talking to?" I asked when we were on the road. He had been driving so slowly. The Draught wasn't that far from my place, we should have been home in no time.

"I wanted to make sure Rob got home ok. He had a couple to drink." Steve wouldn't look at me. I stared at him for a long time. Then it came, like an erupting volcano. "I'm sorry Andi, but I fucking hate Eddie. How you were ever married to a jackass like that I will never know. You deserve way better."

"Like you?" I laughed, knowing I heard a tone, a spew like this from Steve once before.

He shook his head, "No, I can't give that to you. I want to, but I can't. Because I'm starting to question even myself."

"Oh, so Tony's kiss was breath taking?" I teased him, trying to make light of the evening gone sore.

Steve gave me a sideways glare that turned into a smirk. I tried to read his face, his mind as we pulled into my driveway, the car coming to a stop. "Like I was saying, no, I'm not what's good for you. But what is good for you is waiting for you on the doorstep."

I looked in front of me instead and saw the mustang sitting in the driveway. I don't think I could have climbed out of the car any faster. I called a goodbye to Steve, but he was already backing out of the driveway.

Rob stood up as I walked up to him. I didn't wait for him to speak, didn't care what he had to say, I just dove into him, picking up from where we left off in the bar. I was kissing him as madly as I had our first night together. I fumbled in my pocket for my key and unlocked the door without looking. He felt for the doorknob around my hand and we stumbled up inside together.

I had never been more thankful that Gaylen rented a hotel room for he and Beth. A gift from him to her for Christmas, and now a gift for me too.

I heard the door close behind us as I started to undress Rob. I practically tore off his coat, going for the buttons on his shirt. "Andi," he breathed for a second as I got frustrated and pulled his shirt off. "Andi," he pushed me off for a second. "Listen to me, please. Before you do this."

"What?" I had to take in deep breaths to get oxygen.

"You're married."

"No I'm not." I tried to kiss him again but he gripped my shoulders.

"Andi, you are. You're trying to work things out with your husband, and I'm not helping." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I should go."

"No," I grabbed his arm. It didn't take much to stop him, move him around to face me. "No, don't go, don't leave, please." I buried my face in his bare chest and he wrapped his arms around me. "For this night, please, can we forget what happened before; just let it be you and me another time."

He sighed, "I don't know if I can, Andi. Things have changed and I can't be the man to break up a marriage. I can't be the Adrian in this relationship."

I looked at him, and could tell by the look in his eyes that Adrian was who Becca left him for. I understood why he wanted me to work this out with Eddie. He didn't want to be the guy who did this to another guy. What difference was it if I left Eddie at the

altar or just didn't give our marriage a try? At the end of the day, it was all the same to Rob.

"You can't break what's already broken," I whispered, touching his face, feeling the stubble. "Please, Rob, I'm begging." I shook my head.

"Andraia," he growled. I thought he was mad until I caught the grin on his face. "Don't beg for what you already have." He picked me up and pulled me up to him, kissing me wildly, pulling a bit on my hair. I wrapped my legs around him as he stumbled in the dark towards my bedroom while he held me against him. His hands shifted slightly as he ran his hand up my shirt.

I felt my body hit the mattress but my head never hit the pillow. He cradled it like he always did, sliding his hand out from beneath it to literally rip off my shirt. Thank god it was a button up. Before I could blink, breathe, or think we were together again. Physically one and it felt right.

I knew that when I wake up in the morning I would be sorry. Because Rob still hadn't said what I wanted to hear, Eddie wasn't going to be the one bowing out, and now I had a choice to make. A tough choice. But in that moment, tangled up in Rob and blankets, seeing his smile as I got lost in passion, I didn't think about anything else.

Chapter 25

I glanced over at my alarm clock. It was five in the morning: five hours into the new year and I was already making mistakes. Good mistakes. Great mistakes, actually.

I looked over at Rob who looked at me, feeling the curves of my body with a gentle touch. We'd been lying like that for an hour or so. Unable to move now that our bodies were spent and unable to leave the moment that was ours.

"So," he whispered unnecessarily. We were the only ones in the house. "How bad do you think this is going to make things?"

"I don't think they're going to make things bad at all." I whispered back, reaching out and touching his hair.

"It has though, Andi. We just committed adultery." He laughed at the word, though I'm sure it's not because he thought it was funny.

I moved my fingers from his hair to his arm, tracing the lines of his muscle. "I don't think we did." I replied, watching his chest rise and fall gently. "All you have to do is..."

Rob put a finger on my mouth. "I can't, Andi."

"Why not?" I asked him confused, unable to be angry.

He sighed. "I couldn't before because of Becca." I adjusted myself, propping my head up on my arm as I listened. "The night Steve and I almost got into it, she

showed up at Bombay. That's the real reason I was leaving. I couldn't tell you then, because I didn't want you to worry about anything. She's married to Adrian now. She didn't know where I went, and we crossed paths by chance. We talked about things: him, life, you." He propped himself up too, moving closer to me, brushing my hair off my shoulder. "I'm not going to lie to you Andi, it made me question how I felt about you. I didn't want you to be my Becca rebound, I didn't want to give her the satisfaction in being right: the first real relationship I had since her would be my rebound."

"But--" He cut me off again, this time with a kiss.

"Steve. When he told you so clearly what he felt, what he wanted, that he was ok if you said no. I couldn't put anything so clearly. I wasn't sure if I had that same level of compassion. And when you said..."

"I love you?" I offered up. He nodded his head.

"When you said that, my heart couldn't take it. I didn't know what to do. I just couldn't say it." He rolled on his back. I shifted a little closer to him.

"And now? Why won't you say anything now? Do you love me? Do you want me?" I asked him, trying to keep the desperation at bay.

He took a breath and closed his eyes. He chuckled. "Do I want you?" He opened his eyes and turned his head towards me. "I think I made the answer to that abundantly clear." He sat up. "As for the other part... I can't answer." He shook his head.

"Why?" I deserved an explanation.

"Because I'm selfish." He looked over to me with a smirk. "I really am, Andi. I'm not going to bare my heart and soul to you and risk Eddie winning in the end." He got up, searching for his jeans.

"This isn't a competition." I said standing up with the blankets clung to my body.

"It is though." Rob smiled as he buttoned his jeans. He walked over to me, holding me by the arms. "You would never say it to either of us, but I know you love us both; So does Eddie and that's why we are constantly at each other's throats. And what I say, how I feel, Andi honey it's not going to change a thing. I know what you're going to do if I say it, but I can't live with the victory if I know you'll be constantly wondering if you made the right choice."

"Rob," He kissed me.

"Shh, Andi, no." He shook his head. "We just spent the best five hours of my life together in a very intimate way. You're judgment, and mine, is very clouded." I laughed, he had a point. "I'm going to go."

"Why?" I asked as I held onto my sheet and walked into his chest, wrapping my free arm around him. I was so thankful he held me too.

"Because I don't think it would be wise to still be here when people will, no doubt, start coming by." He kissed my forehead, my nose, my lips and held them. "I want you. I won't stop wanting you. But this choice needs to be yours. I need you to think carefully. I don't want a relationship filled with regret."

I sighed, stepping away from him as he finished getting dressed. I pulled on some sweats that were on the foot of my bed, and turned back to him. He was watching me, a hint of hope and a touch of sadness in his eyes. "I'll walk you to the door." I said with a smile, and followed him out the bedroom.

I could see in the light of the street lamp that it was still snowing heavily. Rob's car was covered, as were his tracks. The ones he'll leave when he does would be gone by day light. He pulled on his coat and shoes, wrapping a scarf (wool, no cashmere) around his neck and grabbed my chin, giving me another long kiss before he opened my door and stepped outside.

I watched as he started the car, brushing the snow off and warming it up. He got in, waved, and drove slowly out of my driveway and down the road.

I stood there for a minute, watching the snow fill up the traces he left behind. I couldn't see the depth of the tire tracks any longer. I turned away, hearing my cell phone beep in my coat pocket.

I retrieved it, walking towards the couch as I flipped it open.

Three missed calls, two text messages. The three calls were Eddie, all placed from the time I got home. One text message was also from him, the other from Rob. I opened his first.

Rob: I made it home safely. I figured you would want to know. Sleep well Andi.

Eddie: Andi, Love, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Please don't do anything rash, please. I love you. Call me in the morning. Please. I'm so sorry.

I flopped down on the couch, unsure if I should laugh or cry. Rob was right. I loved them both. And although I wanted to be overjoyed from my perfect night with Rob, I hated that I went behind Eddie's back and broke any trust he had. I knew that tonight was a secret, Rob wouldn't breathe a word, nor would I. Yet I still felt like I was walking around with the scarlet A on my chest.

After all, I was married, I did just have an affair, and now I had to face the facts that Rob was right: I had to think about this. I had to know what would be the right choice, even if it wasn't him.

I did sleep for a few hours, waking up around nine. I showered, though I didn't really want to wash the lingering scent of Rob off my skin. I went into my room, dressed in some clean sweats, and picked up my black blouse from the night before. I looked at the buttons, one or two were missing, and a couple were pretty loose. I grinned, then blushed, thankful no one was home, and then gathered the buttons. I went back out into the living room, put them down on the couch, went over to the cabinet to get the sewing kit, and then I brought that over with me on the couch and popped it open.

I turned on the TV, leaving it on the romantic comedy that came on, and then went to work on repairing my blouse. With each button I sewed back on,

I thought more and more about what Rob said. He made an all too valid point: that if he said what I wanted to hear, I may never have attempted to repair what was broken with Eddie and me. Because he was right when he said I loved them both. The part of me that rooted for Eddie wanted to vomit when I thought about sleeping with Rob. The Rob part of me was furious he wouldn't just say the words and end this circus of emotions.

I caught a glimpse of a car pulling into the driveway. I moved a little, shifting so I could peek through the partly opened curtain. It was Gaylen's car. I watched as three doors opened, and really hoped Eddie wouldn't be one of the people climbing out. Luckily for me, it was Tony.

I went back to mindlessly sewing as they made their way to the door. "What happened here?" Tony asked as he walked into the living room. He left really quickly, removing his outer wear before returning to lean against a wall. "Well."

"I caught it on a door knob," I replied without looking up.

"A knob named Rob?" Tony crossed his arms and grinned like a mad man. "Steve told me last night. All about how when you left the bar he called Rob on his cell to inform him that you were going to be home. And alone. And that when you guys pulled in he was waiting for you on the door step." Tony twitched his eyebrows.

"Great!" Sarcastic enthusiasm had never been used more appropriately. "How wonderful, Eddie knows about my unbridled bed tumbling. Fantastic."

"No, no." Beth watched Tony as she came over and sat down beside me on the couch. I looked over to Tony who became uncharacteristically bashful and quiet. "Nothing about that was mentioned at the Draught. Steve told us that when you got out of the car you asked if we could leave you completely alone until late this morning. No, Tony's information comes from pillow talks with Steve."

My head shot up and I looked bug eyed over at Tony, noticing he was red with a hint of purple and clearly embarrassed. "Talks, yes. Pillows, not so much." He walked over and dropped down on the other side of me.

"Oh yeah?" Gaylen asked with a smile as he passed us and headed to the kitchen. "Then why did I have to come pick you up at Steve's house? Huh? And what about your clothes, Tony? Little baggy for you aren't they?" Gaylen ran over and leaned in between Tony and I, "That's because they're Steve's."

I looked over to Tony who went through a new wave of color. "No one said pillows were a requirement."

"There was nothing like that, we just stayed up and talked." He shrugged. "Besides, Andi's the one with the problem."

I sighed, "I don't have a problem," I said as I finished sewing the button. "I have the biggest disaster in the history of man." I threw the blouse on the floor, Gaylen

leaving to go the kitchen before I threw anything else. I slumped back on the couch and looked between Beth and Tony. "What am I going to do? Rob wants me to think it through and not make any rushed decisions. And I haven't talked to Eddie but according to his text message he's very sorry about last night." I sighed, then grabbed the pillow from behind Beth and buried my face in it.

"Well, who do you love more?" Tony asked simply.

"Both of them. Equally," I spoke loud, the pillow muffling my answer.

"You must love one more than the other." He pressed.

I took the pillow off my face and hit my lap with it. "No, they're equal. Rob's all 'I'm not going to tell you how I feel until you've made your choice,' and Eddie's all Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde; And really I could go one way or the other completely depending on the day." I pulled the pillow into my chest and hung my head, re-burying my face in it. "I'm a horrible person."

"You're not a horrible person." Beth said as she put her arm around me.

"I totally am," I said lifting my head back up.

"Andi," Beth said firmly, getting my full attention. "The two of them ask you to pick one or the other, and you think you're the horrible person?"

"It's going to come out." I said shaking my head, thinking about the days ahead, when we would all go back to work. "It's going to come out that I'm going to

have to pick a side. We all know Nikki's going to take Eddie's side so she can have Rob."

"Steve will take Rob's side." Tony imputed. Beth looked over at him with a smirk.

"Will he now?" She taunted Tony.

"No, Tony's right. He will. Steve told me while he was driving me home how much he hated Eddie." I sighed. "Frank is Rob's best friend, but Sarah really likes Eddie. Doug?" I looked to Beth, hoping she would know the answer.

"Eddie," She replied with a disappointed smile. "He wouldn't want you to pick Rob just because of Rob's former reputation. He'll think it justice."

"I'm on Rob's side," Gaylen called from the kitchen. "He and Frank are like brothers to me and I stick with my brothers."

I looked at the pillow. I saw the divided line. It wouldn't really affect anything, at the end of it all life will go on regardless who I chose. But for my life to go on, I had to take a side. I had to stand on one side of the line. I looked between my two best friends. "Whose side are you two on."

They looked at each other for a long pause before Beth replied, "We're on your side, Babes. No matter what your choice."

Chapter 26

"Take deep breaths, Andi." Tony whispered in my ear as he and Beth each held an arm and led me into the mall. I hadn't spoken to either Rob or Eddie for a couple of days, New Year's day being the last time I had. Now I had to go back to work and face them both, needless to say, I had a difficult time actually wanting to go. Tony and Beth practically had to drag me out of the house.

"I should have just called in sick." I shook my head and tried hard not to turn into the café. I saw Eddie standing against the counter talking to Nikki. Why couldn't he just have slept with her? Maybe he did. After all, they were looking pretty cozy when we were all at the bar...

"Andi," He sounded so relieved, she looked so annoyed. Nope, Eddie wouldn't be this happy to see me if he took a tumble in the sack with Nikki. I should have known I wouldn't be so lucky. "Love, please talk to me. Please, I know I was horrible the other night, just, please..."

"I gotta get to work." I cut him off abruptly, flatly. I looked at Veronica, the annoying girl across the counter, who handed me a latte and took my money. I watched Tony and Beth walk behind the counter, giving her a glare as they went. I waved away the change and attempted to leave.

"Hey, Roni." Rob's torso stared me in the face. I hated life right now. I was hoping to avoid both of

them. "Two Americano's please." He said to her before he looked over to me with a smile. "Hey," he said simply.

I felt like an idiot, I just looked at him, blinked and walked away.

"Andi," They both said my name at once, one desperate, one confused. I cringed when I turned around, seeing them look at each other with suspicion. Ok, so Eddie was looking at Rob with suspicion, Rob was looking at Eddie cautiously.

"Is there something you two want to tell me?" Eddie asked as he looked between us. Rob looked over at me and bit his lip. I didn't stick around. I turned and walked out of the café.

If they were going to fight, they should just do it, don't involve me. Whoever was still standing when they were done I would pick, that would be easier than trying to decide myself.

"Have a good day," I forced my fifth smile of the day, as I handed the couple on their honeymoon, a CD compilation they decided to pick up and play on their road trip. The hopeless romantic in me wanted to think of them singing the songs together as they traveled through life together. The cynical side of me pictured a nasty annulment because they couldn't agree on what songs to skip over, resulting in them coming to the drastic conclusion that they would never agree on anything.

When they left I slumped against the counter. I wasn't about to keep up appearances if I didn't have to.

I went through more waves of emotions in the last two days than most people do in a typical month. I was guilty, excited, heartbroken, disgusted, angry, but never happy. I hated that I couldn't simply pick a side. I couldn't just flip a coin and let the choice be made. Why did I have to kiss Rob? Why did I have to brush his lips when midnight came? Would I be with Eddie right now? Not in the literal sense, but would he and I have made some sort of progress in our marriage? I didn't know the answers, I would never know, which sucked, because I would give anything for a crystal ball to show me the outcomes of deciding one way or another.

"You can't run away from me in here." I turned my head towards the entrance and watched my legally wed husband walk through and enter the store. He had his hands in his khaki pants, his blue dress shirt impeccably tucked in and a perfect match to his eyes. He didn't dress himself, that's probably why Nikki's been taking an interest in him: he was a customer now. Damn, and here I was hoping there was some changing room intimacy.

"No, I can't, but I can kick you out for not buying anything." I said as I stepped down off the platform. I didn't move far, keeping a hand on the counter like it was the only thing that would support me.

Eddie glared at me, went over to the easy listening CDs and grabbed the closest one, putting it on the counter and pointed at it. "Ring me in so we can talk." He was getting gruff.

“About what?” I asked, though I was starting to back down. Eddie had a way of being intimidating.

He walked up to me, checking the hall, or maybe he was looking over at the art store. He then put both hands on the front of the cash register counter, pinning me in, leaning in and kissing me. I pushed him off. “I know.” He said simply. He didn’t move. I looked out in the hall, hoping for a customer. No one was wandering the halls. “He told me,” Eddie added when I wouldn’t look at him.

“Who told you what?” I asked again, still watching the halls carefully. Eddie put a hand gently on my cheek but forced me to look at him.

“Rob,” I stared into Eddie’s blue eyes, and focused on them, “about New Year’s. About what you guys were doing when I was trying to call you and apologize; What I wanted to be doing with you.” He was starting to raise his voice. Eddie paused, looking across the hall, I was sure he was that time. He looked long and hard. “I hate that you screwed him.” Eddie was sounding harsh, glaring. I wouldn’t look at him. “I hate that he was in your bed, and I hate that he kissed you and caressed you and pleased you.” Eddie’s disdain at the word ‘please’ got my full attention. I could see all the passion he had in his eyes. My heart raced, and I hated myself. “I hate myself for getting us to the point where there was another man who did that, and that other man loves you, wants you and wants to take you from me. I hate that. More than I hate that you slept with him.”

"You've used that word a lot." I commented weakly. I was a little terrified and a little thrilled. I didn't know if I wanted to run away from Eddie or pull him in.

He kissed me again, hard. I pushed him off. "I'm sorry." He apologized, stepping away for the first time. "I just can't think of any other word or action to articulate exactly what I'm feeling, Andraia." He walked away from me, turning around and moving to the other end of the store. "I'm wearing my wedding ring for a reason." He turned back to face me. "Where's yours?"

I inhaled. "A lost and found box, in the bus station back in the city." There was no need to lie to him or keep any secrets as I thought Rob would keep ours, I was wrong. Who was to say that some crazy lady from the bus station wouldn't walk in right now and hand me my 'lost' ring. That's how my day was going to go.

"Ok," Eddie nodded. "I'm buying you a new one."

"No, you're not." I protested.

"Andi, do you want to stay married to me or not?" He yelled it. I looked around, glancing up and down the halls.

"I'm working." I folded my arms. "This is not the time or place for us to have this conversation." I replied, knowing I didn't dodge the bullet but made myself a bigger target.

"Fine," Eddie said as he put his hands up in surrender. "You're right. I'm sorry. You are working, and I'm not allowing you to act in a professional

manner. I should probably get back to work myself.” Eddie turned and left without saying another word.

I watched him walk down the hall, and didn’t look away when he turned around and caught me doing so. Maybe he liked that. I still refused to look over at the art store, even though I knew Eddie’s voice would have carried across the hall. The corridors were empty and no other people would be coming in for a few minutes. I went behind the counter, grabbed my purse and snatched my wallet and keys. I closed and locked the gate, putting up a sign that said back in five. I may have been heading in the same direction as Eddie, but I wasn’t going to catch up to him.

I didn’t go to the food court for lunch. With Tiffany coming in early, I was able to leave early. I went down to the café, ordering a latte, only looking over at the glaring Eddie once or twice, before leaving and heading to the smoking corner.

In college, when I got really stressed, I survived off of the worst things possible: Coffee and cigarettes. I had bought a small pack and a lighter earlier in the day, and now with my coffee beside me I lit the first one in four years. Eddie begged me to quit, even though I didn’t think it was a huge habit. I’d like to see him tell me to quit now.

It was cold, damp, and I was one of the only people out there. A small group from the electronics store gathered off to the side, away from the picnic bench where I currently rested, and avoided me all together. I couldn’t say I blamed them.

I inhaled. I coughed. I didn't care. Just be a few puffs, get it going, and then I would be fine. Maybe even stress free. Doubtful, but a girl could hope.

I did receive a few text messages from Tony and Beth wondering where I was. I told them I was smoking, but they didn't believe me. Even better, no one would find me. Except the only person who would believe I would sit out here, because I had before.

Without the thought even finishing, the door opened, and I didn't bother turning around. The Electronic guys did pause in conversation. I caught one of them leaning back to see who it was and wave. I knew who he was waving too. After all, if I couldn't avoid one, I wouldn't avoid the other.

"You're smoking." Rob hopped up on the table top.

"And you're an asshole, just like I thought when I first met you." I cursed. I lit up another cigarette then looked over at him. "You know, if I just kept with my initial instinct I would have saved myself a lot of trouble."

"Can I have a light?" Rob asked instead, sticking out his hand palm up. I smacked the lighter in his hand. "Thank you," he said as he stuck the smoke in his mouth. It took him a couple of flicks of the lighter to get it going and when it caught he lit up, inhaling, then exhaling slowly. He wouldn't look at me when he handed back the lighter. "I had to tell him."

"Why? Why, Rob? Why did you have to tell him? Was the little cricket on your shoulder going to croak if you didn't?" I tried to keep my voice low, as we had an

audience, and they weren't very good at looking inconspicuous.

"I paid for telling him," He turned and looked at me, a well-developed black eye on his left. I think I gasped. "But he had the right to know. If I was him, I would want to know."

"Oh my god, Rob, are you ok?" I touched his face around the bruise.

"I won't be playing Tuesday night, so that sucks, but other than that, yes, I will be ok. Good to know that beneath the cold shell, the warm caring woman that loves me still exists."

"Don't do that." I went right back to glaring, removing my hand before I was tempted to press against the black.

"Do what?" He laughed and took a drag on his smoke.

"The woman who loves you?" Don't use that if you can't say it back." I flicked the ashes off the end of my smoke and inhaled.

"Sorry." He said, blowing smoke out to the side like I wasn't sitting there with one in my hand myself. "I really am, for it all. Though, if you are keeping score, I took Eddie outside to talk to him, and he confronted you at your work." Rob put a hand up, like he was swearing in. "For the record."

I took another quick puff. "For the record, you broke my trust by telling Eddie we slept together." The door opened.

"Oh come on, he had the right to know." Rob smiled.

"He's right." Speak of the devil. "I did have the right to know." Eddie now stood in front of me. "Andi, what's this?" He took the smoke from my hand. I snatched it right back.

"I'm stressed." I snarled. I took a long drag, turning my head up to the sky to blow out the smoke.

"Well, I hear Rob's a great stress reliever." Eddie looked over at Rob with a grin, "I would have thought the black eye would have served as a reminder to stay away from Andi."

Rob raised his hands in the air in defense. "I came out for a smoke." He sounded so innocent, if only he could stop himself from smiling.

"Bullshit you came out for a smoke." Eddie started to yell, Rob started to yell right back, and before long I couldn't understand what either of them was saying. I looked over at the Electronic guys, seeing them starting to point, maybe even bet, on which guy was going to kick the other guy's ass.

Annoyed, I stood up, took the last puff off my cigarette and tossed it into the snow bank. "HEY!" I yelled over both of them. They stopped abruptly, looking at me like they couldn't understand why I was so angry. "Eddie, you said Rob told you everything, right?" Eddie nodded. "Then he must have also told you that he informed me I had a choice: Him or You. But I had to think about it, long and hard, before I made a choice. Do you think that's fair?"

Eddie blinked, "Well, yeah."

"Then stop forcing me to choose now. Stop trying to say I'm your wife." I looked over at Rob, "Stop using my emotions against myself, stop making yourself seem available and then turn away. Both of you," I made sure I had their attentions. "Stop trying to kill each other and start trying to make me actually want to pick one of you. Because right now, you're both pissing me off." I looked at Eddie. "I love you." I looked at Rob, "I also love you. There, are you both happy? I said it to both of you, in front of your faces. I love you equally. Now start trying to make the scales tip." I turned away furious. I looked over at the Electronic guys who were a little hesitant to look over in my direction, "And you guys, stop being so nosy. It's not my problem men's skulls are thick and a loud voice is required to get through to them."

I pulled open the door and started walking down the hall, I realized I left my smokes outside, along with my latte. I wasn't going back for either of them.

Chapter 27

My alarm blared, telling me that, whether I wanted to or not, it was time to get up. I stayed still in my bed after beating my alarm into silence, trying to listen to see if I could hear the wind blowing outside. It was supposed to give us a blizzard today, as it did just about every year on this day; to my surprise and mild satisfaction, there was no wind. I pushed myself up and turned around, parting the curtains over my bed and peeking outside.

The street lights sparkled against a light dusting of snow. No wind, no current snow fall, practically perfect. Twenty four years, ok, so now twenty five years, of blizzards and heavy snow fall, and all around crappy weather on this day, and I woke up to nothing. I smiled. Who cared if it meant going to work? It meant going out and socializing with people instead of spending my twenty-fifth birthday by myself.

Beth had to take Gaylen to the airport a week ago. I was growing worried when I came home from work and Beth hadn't returned. She left at three in the morning. Seven o'clock that night I had a call from Gaylen's place, it was Beth. She had been surprised with a ticket, a one week trip to Greece with Gaylen. And Tony was in on it, giving her a weeks' paid vacation, even making a fake schedule for Beth to have and giving all the other café workers the real one.

She wouldn't get in until tonight, late tonight, and that was if there was no massive storm.

I walked into the living room and turned on the stereo, blaring the CD I had in there and walked into my bathroom. I didn't close the door, showering with the music coming in full force. I was alone, what did it matter?

I still wrapped the towel around my body as I moved into my bedroom. Habits die hard after all. I dressed in my New Year's clothes, thinking I would feel good about myself. Until I looked down and noticed the top button that was supposed to keep the 'girls' in, was never replaced. I dug through my closet until I found a camisole, and quickly changed so I could slip it on beneath my blouse. At least I could still use it.

I took my time; blow dried my hair and even did a little make-up. I should at least feel good about myself as I age. I even swapped my sneakers for a pair of very comfortable but very sexy boots, sliding my jeans over the leather that travelled up to my knee.

I walked out of my bedroom as Tony and Steve came through my door. I grabbed the remote to the stereo from the kitchen and turned down the volume as Steve started to make his way over to the stereo to do it manually. I walked around the counter.

"Well hello," Tony said with a grin, folding his arms over his chest and nodding his head in approval. "What is this? D-day? Wanting to make the loser suffer?"

"D-day?" I asked as I went back into the kitchen to grab my purse.

“Yeah, decision day? Have you, you know, pulled a name out of a hat or something?” Tony asked as he moved around to let his voice travel into the kitchen better.

I laughed. “I would have had to talk to either of them in the last week for that to happen.”

“You still aren’t talking to them?” Tony slapped his thighs. “Andi, babe, you’re going to have to. You can’t leave them both hanging. It’s bad enough you’ve been forcing them to sit next to each other at lunch.”

“Well, I wanted to make sure I was talking to a pair of grown men before I started the process of elimination.” I moved over to the entry way, grabbing my nicest winter coat from the closet. “I’ll talk to them today.” I promised.

Tony watched my as I slid on the coat. “You are looking exceptionally good today. Seriously, what is the occasion?” I shrugged my shoulders.

“Andi,” Steve said as he moved over to house phone, “you’ve got a message on here.” He flicked the caller ID button. “It’s from this morning, from Eddie.” Before I had the chance to tell him no, Steve hit the play button on the machine.

Eddie’s voice filled the room in a sing song voice. “Happy Birthday my love!” Hearing his voice made me want to die on the inside. Thank god he changed his tone to a normal one. “Look, I know I’ve been acting like a child lately. I deserve you avoiding me. I really do. But it’s your birthday, love, and I want to make it special for you. So please, don’t avoid me today. Love

you, Andi.” The loud beep of a finished message sounded and I looked cautiously over at the two guys.

“It’s your birthday?” Tony sounded hurt.

“I didn’t want anyone to know.” I replied, feeling a little guilty. He just cracked a smile.

“You’re lucky it’s a weeknight. Cause if it wasn’t, I’d be dragging your hot ass down to the Draught and getting you loaded.” Tony walked over and put an arm around me, Steve following close behind. “Now, come on, let’s get to work.”

As I stepped outside, I noticed that there was only one car in my driveway: Tony’s. I froze, the two guys walking past me and taking their spots at the side of the car. They both stopped and looked at me as I pointed a finger at the Fit. “Why is there only one car here. And better yet, why exactly is Steve here this morning.”

They shot each other wide eyed looks. “My car is crapped.” Steve didn’t look at me right away. “You know how it is, older car and all.” He shrugged.

I held his eye as I walked down the driveway and past him, grabbing the handle to the back passenger seat of the Fit. “Uh-huh.” I said as I opened to door. “Tony, I would have thought that you would have pointed out to Steve earlier that yesterday’s eyeliner is flaking a bit under his eye.” I climbed in as they did.

I watched from the back as Steve turned to Tony. He reached out and gently rubbed a finger beneath Steve’s lower lashes, rubbing away the tiny gray-black flakes from his face. “Thanks,” Steve said after opening his eyes, looking at Tony with a bit of tenderness.

"Welcome," Tony smiled back. They just stared at each other. I found this amusing.

I cleared my throat, startling them both. "Shall we go? Or do you two want me to go back inside and call a cab so you can have a few more moments alone?"

"Hey now," Tony said as he started the car. He backed out of my driveway and headed towards the mall. "It's nothing like that."

"Uh-huh," I retorted, my mouth twisting around as I tried not to laugh at Tony's slightly pink cheeks.

"No, seriously, it's not." Steve answered in a definitive tone. "My car really is crapped out; it's still at the mall. Besides, if I were gay, I wouldn't be with this guy."

"Like you would even have a chance," Tony snapped back.

I watched the two not look at each other for the rest of the drive, though they would glance over at the other with lingering eyes when the other looked away, and it amused me.

When we pulled into the parking lot, Tony pulled up next to Steve's old Jetta. Probably on purpose, to make sure I saw that his car was in fact a sad lemon. I shook my head as I climbed out. I walked in between them as we made our way to the entrance, holding on to each others arms. "Just so you guys know, that whole interaction I saw in the car? I'm telling Beth about it when she gets home."

"There's nothing to tell," the two replied at once, shooting each other a look over my head that I couldn't see. I giggled.

"Yeah, sure." I smiled as Steve and Tony each pulled open the doors, escorting me inside, neither letting go of me. We turned and headed for the café.

"Good morning!" The normally pensive Veronica sang as we approached the counter. She then promptly produced a large latte and a muffin. "Happy Birthday, Andi." She smiled. "It's already been paid for."

I looked over at the table where Eddie always sat. He looked over at me from behind his laptop, smiled, and waved. "I suppose I should go over and thank him." I said a little wearily as it was sweet of him to do that. Veronica grabbed my arm.

"It's not from Mr. Lansky." She whispered. "Open the lid." I put the drink down and popped off the lid. In the foam was a slightly skewed but sketched out heart. I looked up at Veronica a little confused. She rolled her eyes, "It's from Rob. I was going to tell you to smell the drink. It's one thing I picked up on, Eddie orders you caramel, Rob vanilla."

"Well, someone's trying to score some brownie points." Steve said in a low voice. "What would I have to do to get in on this little contest?" I glanced over at Tony who rolled his eyes and walked behind the counter, mumbling something in a bitter tone.

"Steve, darling, walk with me." I said as I grabbed his arm. I looked over at Eddie and lifted my muffin bag and latte in an improved wave. Steve tried to protest

that he didn't have his coffee yet, but when we were just out of ear and eye shot of the café, I pushed him against the wall. "What the hell are you doing?" I demanded. Steve just blinked. "Don't mess with him like that." I slapped Steve's chest. "I don't care if you're gay, straight, bi, whatever, I don't care. Just don't have moments like you had with Tony in the car and then blatantly hit on someone else in front of him."

"Andi," Steve tried to stop me but I pushed him against the wall.

"Don't 'Andi' me, I saw you two. I watched you, ok? Deny it all you want but there is something going on between you two. And you aren't being fair to him by acting the way you just did with me." I glared at Steve for a long moment.

He swallowed, "Can I get my coffee now?" His voice cracked.

"Are you going to be nice to your boyfriend?" I pointed a finger at Steve with a warning tone.

"He's not my boyfriend," Steve replied, still terrified. I guess I must be small but scary. "But I won't be a jerk, I promise."

I held his eye for a long time. "Ok, fine, go get your coffee, but play nice." I warned as I walked away from Steve and headed down the hall to Music Stop.

I heard a cat call as I approached the gate, the kind that construction workers normally give when a hot pair of legs walk by the site. I stopped, trying not to laugh as I heard Rob open the gate from the Art store

and walk across the hall. I turned to face him, and as he came closer, I caught the look in his eyes.

How much trouble would we get into if I let him into the back room? It is my birthday after all...

"You. Look. Good. For a twenty-five year old." He winked.

"Shut up, you're two years older than I am." I laughed as I turned around and unlocked my gate.

"A year and a half." He corrected. I turned back to face him and he gave me a quick peck on the lips. "Happy Birthday, Andi. I do have a gift for you, but I won't be able to get my hands on it until tonight."

"I don't even know how you knew today was my birthday. I never told you when it was." I smiled.

He shrugged his shoulders, "I went through your wallet one night when you were in the shower. I wanted to find out, and I didn't think that you would actually tell me."

"You're right, I wouldn't have." I flirted with him.

He grinned. "So what did Eddie get you?" He folded his arms.

"I don't know yet, I haven't talked to him." I slid open the gate and stepped inside a bit. I would have to start getting the store ready soon.

"Maybe he forgot." Rob twitched his eyebrows.

"Doubtful, he left me a message on my machine this morning. Practically sang happy birthday to me."

"I could sing to you, I'd probably be better too." Rob smirked.

It felt natural, second nature, to stand on my tip toes and peck his cheek before I closed the gate between us. Even though we were talking about Eddie, for the moment it was like he didn't really exist. "You are. See ya at lunch, Rob."

"Who are you and what did you do with my assistant manager?" Frank asked as he joined me behind the counter just a few minutes before noon. I laughed at him as I stepped down. I gave him a quick hug in between.

"How was your vacation, Frank?" I asked him as I waved to a pair of customers who were leaving.

"Not long enough. I imagine you will be needing one soon as well?" He asked as he leaned forward on the counter.

"Soon," I agreed. "I suppose I should be heading to lunch?" I asked as I put my hands in the back pockets of my jeans.

"Yeah, you don't want to keep your boyfriends waiting." Frank chuckled. "Or have we made a decision yet?" I shot Frank a glare. "Go to lunch, Andi." He said with a smile. I waved to him and left the shop.

I was thankful when the only guy waiting for me outside was Steve. I walked up to him, allowed him to put his arm around me and escort me down the hall saying absolutely nothing at all. It was a nice change of pace from the normal being pulled two ways. I leaned against him as we walked. Steve giggled.

"What?" I asked him, looking up at him with a grin.

"Nothing." He replied with a smirk.

“Tell me.” I stopped and looked up at him.

“We have three pairs of eyes glaring at us.” He said as he gestured to the table where we always sat. Tony, Eddie, and Rob just watched us. Steve giggled. “I think that’s the beauty of our friendship. We’ll always be there to make the people in each other’s lives jealous.”

“I thought you said that Tony wasn’t your boyfriend?” I questioned Steve as I looped my arm in his and walked with him over to the smoothie bar. I wasn’t really feeling hungry.

“He’s,” Steve paused, thinking about his response. “He’s not. He’s a very close friend with some mild benefits.” Steve walked up to the counter and ordered us both a drink. I went to hand him money for mine but he waved it away. When the drinks were ready, I looped my arm back in his and allowed him to lead us the long way around to our usual table.

“Can you tell me how this all came to be?” I told him in a voice low enough that it wouldn’t be heard by passer-by’s. He looked over at me, studying me as if he was gauging how much he trusted me for the first time.

“New Year’s Eve, after I dropped everyone off home, I went to bring Tony to his place. We never made it there, we only made it as far as my house.” He kept his voice to the same volume, slowing his pace. “It was innocent enough. Tony left his house key in the Fit, and he realized it on the way home. I told him he could crash at my place. We had a few drinks, and one thing led to another, and we made out.” He looked down at me, a bit of panic in his eyes, but for some reason the

news didn't shock me, and I think it relieved him a bit. "I don't know how I feel about him, but ever since then he's been extra tentative to me, a little more caring. And I think I like him, but I don't know. And I don't know what that makes me, which of course pisses him off."

"It's the reason he left Gary, because Gary wouldn't come clean to being gay." I nodded, understanding Steve's dilemma.

"And I don't think I am, either." Steve stopped me and turned me to face him. "Because I'm walking with you and my heart is racing, and I'm scared you'll judge me."

"That could all be because of what you're telling me." I pointed out.

Steve shook his head. "No, because I have the urge to drag you away from all these fools and bring you back to my place so *we* can make out."

I laughed, which I'm not sure would be an appropriate reaction. Yet, Steve was laughing too. That had to make it alright, right?

I moved him at a faster pace over to the table, joining the three boys and Nikki. I sat between Tony and Steve, both of them sitting with their arms around me. I tried not to laugh.

"So how much longer is Beth supposed to be in Greece?" Nikki asked, poking a fork at her salad.

"She flies back in tonight," I answered, taking a big drink through the small.

"Your best friend won't be home for your birthday?" Eddie sounded almost appalled. Nikki went wide eyed and looked over at him.

"It's not a big deal," I shrugged my shoulders. "I'll see her tomorrow."

"It's your birthday?" Nikki asked a little shocked. It almost seemed like she cared, which was terrifying. The urge to laugh rapidly escaped my body. "Why didn't you tell anyone?"

"I know," Tony rolled his eyes. I felt his hand twitch behind my head, catching my hair a bit. "I already scolded her on it today though," his fingers were searching for something. "But what can you do?"

"Well, for starters, we could have had an excuse to drink on a weeknight." Nikki rolled her eyes. "Not to mention that we always make a big deal about birthdays."

It dawned on me what Tony was searching for while Nikki was ranting. I looked up at Steve. He glanced down and with his eyes gave me assurance that it was ok. I don't know how I managed to read into what he was saying, but I did. I leaned my head forward a bit, taking my hair and making it seem like I was making a pony tail. I leaned back and felt their joined hands hit the back of neck. I dropped my hair over them before anyone could see. I looked over at Tony, he was beaming.

"Well," Rob said as he tossed a fry in his mouth. "We could always meet up for coffee later."

“Oh, I love that idea.” I almost leaned forward and exposed the guys. I stopped myself as I flinched, feeling my hair shift a bit off their hands. I leaned all the way back, playing with my hair again like I was making another pony tail. I did it for a couple of seconds and let it fall over them again. “But, do you think we could do it tomorrow? I would like Beth to be there.”

“Well, what are you going to do tonight?” Eddie asked, taking a bit of his salad.

I shrugged my shoulders. “Stay home.”

“Home?” Nikki questioned.

“Yeah, home. By myself. A bottle of wine, some music.” I replied dreamily as I thought about how nice it all would be.

“You mean the relaxing music Tony and I heard you playing this morning?” Steve asked me, finding himself amusing. I slapped him.

“Are you sure you want to be alone, love?” Eddie asked with a depressed tone. Rob grumbled and rolled his eyes, leaning back in his chair.

“Yeah, it will be nice.” I watched Eddie carefully. I could tell that there was an idea brewing in his head. The way he was biting and twisting his lip, it usually meant he was thinking of his next big story.

“Ok,” he finally said. He checked his watch. “I have to get going.”

“Where are you off too?” Nikki asked, sounding almost insulted that he was walking away.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I have a call I got to make. To my agent." He looked down at me while he walked by, catching my eye and winking.

Why did he do that? I shook my head slightly, feeling the guy's hands come apart after I did. "Alright," I turned my head to look at Tony, feeling the kink from not moving it for a bit. "Change of subject?"

After work, Tony and Steve dropped me off home. I didn't ask if they were going to go back to Tony's, figuring that the best way to let their relationship blossom would be to just let it go.

When I got inside I changed into my sweats, no longer feeling the desire to look hot. I washed my face, every last bit of make-up coming off, and then pulled my hair back. I looked like crap, but I didn't care. I was comfy.

I went into the kitchen, pulling out a bottle of white wine I bought a couple of days ago for this not-so-special occasion and started to search the fridge for an edible left over of Chinese or Pizza. I found the latter wrapped in aluminum foil. I did a little dance as I peeled off the metal covering and sticking the plate in the microwave.

Someone knocked at the door just as the counter was almost at zero, which annoyed me. The smell of the reheating pizza was making me hungry.

I opened the door, revealing Rob standing on the front step with a bag of groceries in his hands. "Hi," He said.

"Hi, what are you doing here?" I asked, not stepping away from the doorway.

"I thought I would make you dinner. It's your birthday, no one should eat..." He stuck his head in the door, sniffing the air, "left over pizza for their birthday dinner."

"Oh yeah, what did you eat for your birthday dinner?" I asked, folding my arms.

"What I ate doesn't matter." He shook his head instead of waving. "Are you going to let me in, or what?" He smirked.

I sighed, stepping aside and letting him in. I watched him walk to the kitchen and make himself at home. It made me miss Gaylen, oddly enough. The two liked to work together in the kitchen, and I missed having the giant, teasing Greek man and his little goddess around. I smiled, thinking of what Beth would say if she was here, seeing all this. I turned back to close the door.

The night was full of surprises; Eddie stood there on my door step with a cake and bouquet of flowers. He looked as shocked as I felt. "Hey," he said in a slightly miffed tone. "What's going on? I thought you said you wanted to be alone?"

"And I'm glad to see you two listen so well. You're right, I did ask to be alone. Yet here you both are, showing up on my doorstep regardless." I don't think sarcasm was an appropriate reaction for the moment.

"I thought we could order in, have dinner together. I brought cake for desert." He sort of gestured with it.

I could hear Rob behind me coming to the door. "Hey Ed." He said simply. "What ya doing here?"

"What are you doing here?" I could feel a fight starting.

"I'm making dinner for our lovely Andi. Would you like to join us?" I think I gave myself whiplash, I moved my head to look at Rob so quickly I felt something pop.

"Uh, yeah, sure." Eddie replied, stepping in and around us.

I stood in the doorway, blinking as I realized what Rob just did. He invited Eddie in. He wanted Eddie to come eat with us. I closed the door, moving into the kitchen where the two of them stood.

"Do you need some help getting dinner ready?" Eddie asked Rob. I went over to the table, grabbing a chair and pulling it into the kitchen where I sat with my glass of wine and watched their somewhat awkward interaction.

"You can cut these," Rob said as he pulled out a bag of green peppers. Eddie walked over to the island, standing beside Rob. He pulled out a knife from the butchers block as Rob opened a drawer and pulled out the cutting board. "Strips, as thin as you can make them."

I finished my glass of wine, stood up and walked unnoticed to the counter. I grabbed the bottle and poured the last of it in my glass. I went into the fridge, pulling out another bottle of wine. I turned away from the fridge and closed the door with my foot, setting the wine bottle down on the island. I caught Rob watching

me, finding something I was doing amusing. "Ed, when you're done with the pepper, do you mind putting them into a wok? I know there's one somewhere in here." Rob said as he turned his attention back to the food preparation.

I didn't wait for either of them to start looking for the frying pan, I moved to the cupboard and got it, setting it in front of them, I went back to the wine, turning it around, reading the label.

"Do you have another white?" Rob asked as he bent stepped past me and grabbed a carton of cream and grated cheese out of my fridge. He must have put them in there after I let him in the house.

"Yeah," I looked over at him with a smirk. "Why? Will that go better with our gourmet burgers?" I winked at him and he chuckled. I went into the fridge after him and swapped the bottles.

"Now come on, be fair. I only did that once. And yes, with our food, white will go better." He rolled his eyes, and moved to the pot and pan cupboard, and pulled out what I would call, the pasta pot. He went to the sink and started filling it with water while I swapped out the bottles. I glanced over at Eddie who looked between Rob and I suspiciously.

"Here, Andi, let me get the cork." Eddie said as he grabbed the bottle from my hand and start riffling through the drawers for the cork screw.

"Third one from the left in the island." Rob said as he shut off the water and set the pot on the stove. Eddie moved to the drawer Rob instructed him to use,

pulled it open slowly, and hesitantly picked up the cork screw.

"How did you know where it would be?" Eddie asked as he went to work getting the cork out.

Rob chuckled as he tended to the veggies in the frying pan, then bent down and pulled out another smaller pot. "This isn't the first time I cooked in this kitchen."

Eddie at least knew where the glasses were. He went to the cupboard, pulled down two more wine glasses, and poured. "So you've done this for Andi a lot? Made her dinner? What are you, a chef?"

"I was." Rob said as he picked up the wok and tossed the veggies around with the flick of a wrist. "I am a Jack of all Trades and Master of none. In my life I have been a chef, a waiter, a bartender, a delivery man, a moving guy, a movie rental clerk, an art store consultant, and a musician." He set the pan back down, grabbed a spice out of my spice rack, and sprinkled a bunch on. I didn't even know what he grabbed, but he moved around my kitchen like it was his.

"Did you go to college for any of that?" Eddie handed me my glass but paid more attention to Rob.

"I dropped out of college after a year because I realized that I didn't want to get into business, but didn't want to go into debt figuring out what I wanted. Why, where did you go to school?"

"With Andi." He said simply. Rob already knew about my college years, a topic that came up one night

when we decided to just sit around and talk instead of sleep. "She and I graduated together."

"You know that's something I've been meaning to ask you about, Ed. She and you are a year apart yet you went through school together? Same grade?"

"I was held back in first grade. I didn't follow the rules, and I didn't play with others well."

Rob snorted, "Yeah, I can see that." He moved for a strainer, setting it in the sink then grabbing the pot of pasta and dumping it in. He gave it a rinse. "If you guys wanted to sit down at the table, I'll only be another minute before this is ready."

Eddie made his way to the dining area, but I stayed behind, watching Rob. He did a double take in my direction before he smiled, giving a gesture to move over to the table.

I pulled out the chair in the middle, forcing the guys to look at each other across the table. Rob entered the dining area carrying the three plates and his glass of wine, showing off the waiter skills he learned over his years. He sat down on my right.

"To Andi," he said as he lifted the glass. "May your twenty-fifth year of life be better than your twenty-fourth. And may all the years that follow be better still."

"That was cheesy," Eddie raised his glass with Rob.

"So's the pasta." He said as he gestured to our plates. I looked down, seeing the pretty looking greens sitting beside an elegant looking pasta dish.

Eddie took a bit, chewing slowly. After he swallowed he looked at Rob as seriously as he could, "I hate you."

Rob burst out laughing, causing Eddie to do so too. "Feeling is mutual." Rob flipped open a napkin and put it on his lap.

We ate with little silence. The food was amazing, as it always was, and the two guys seemed to be getting along. A terrifying thought. They were laughing and joking around, almost like they were old friends and I wasn't there at all. It was kind of relaxing.

"So, Andi." Eddie looked over in my direction. "Frank just got back from vacation. Does that mean you will be having one yourself soon?"

I poked the last noodle onto my fork. "Yeah, I guess I will."

"Here's what I'm thinking. I have to go back to the city next week." Eddie said slowly. "My script and stuff are almost done, and I will have to pop by my agent's office. I need to drop it off, wait around for a week, and see which theatre gets the play so I know where I'll be working."

Rob hurried to finish chewing. "So you'll be gone?" He questioned with amusement.

"For at least two weeks." Eddie may have answered Rob, but he was looking at me. "Andi," He said softly. "I was wondering if you would like to come with me. Get us out of Bayside for a little while."

"What about Rob?" I asked him carefully.

Eddie's mouth twisted. Obviously he wasn't counting on me asking that question. He looked over at him.

"Well, Rob, if you want to come with us, I guess that will be ok." Eddie wasn't thrilled, and it showed.

Rob picked up his napkin and dabbed his mouth. "Well, Ed, as much as I would love to spoil the would be party, my second job is a part time gig. Therefore, I don't have the luxury of vacation."

"Irving wouldn't give you time off?" I didn't like the idea of Rob not being able to come. I suddenly regretted asking for the scales to be tipped.

"No, he needs me there for the tourists. Winter season's starting up. But it's ok." He lied, I could tell he didn't like the idea, but he wouldn't protest it.

"Great," Eddie clapped his hands together, but his face went from joy to disappointment really quickly. "I have to run out to the car. I forgot your gift there. Be right back."

We all stood up, Eddie heading for the door while Rob and I went for the living room. The second the door was closed I went for him, grabbing his waist in a half hug. "I don't have to go to the city." I shook my head. "I can stay here."

"Don't be silly," he smiled. "By the way, a latte and a muffin will not be the only gift you were getting from me for your birthday," he said as he stepped away.

"But I liked that." I crossed my arms, smirking, flirting. Maybe I was even hoping for something more.

"Wait here a sec." He went into the kitchen and I could see him reaching into the grocery bag. He pulled out what could only be a CD. I worked with them every day; I knew what one looked like. He came back over to me and handed it to me. "You'll like this more." I started to pull at the paper. "Remember how before the holidays, I said I was working at the bar a lot?" I peeled back half of the paper, seeing the name, seeing the face. "I lied."

I held in my hand Robert Amirault's first CD release. It was like holding a piece of treasure. "You got a deal?" I asked with a squeal.

"I got a local deal." Rob cautioned. "It's not a guarantee of success. I get a few Radio slots across the country, but it will take some time to get the music out. Longer than say going to New York or LA, but this way I get to stay in Bayside." He shrugged. "This is home now."

I threw my arms around his neck, knocking the breath out of him. "I'm so proud of you." I really was. "I'm making everyone buy this." I waved the case.

"It doesn't actually come out for another week." He rolled his eyes. "That's why this is a gift and not just a crappy push for my CD to succeed."

I stood on my tip toes and kissed him on the cheek as I walked over to the CD player, opening the fresh case, and popping in Rob's CD. He sounded good live, he sounded great recorded.

I walked over to the table, grabbing my wine glass and returning to the living room. I sat in the middle of

the couch and laid my head on the cushiony back. Rob sat down beside me, his wine in hand.

"Sorry, sorry." Eddie said as he walked in to the house, the door closing a few seconds after scurried to the kitchen. "I couldn't find where I put it." He called as I heard him pull plates down and pull out silverware. "Who are we listening too?"

I looked over at Rob, feeling the pride swell. "Why do you ask?" I called towards the kitchen.

"Because whoever he is, he's good." Eddie said as he came into the living room, kneeling down so we could take the plates off his arm. His waiting skills were not that of Rob's.

"Thanks," Rob said. "I appreciate the compliment."

Eddie smirked in confusion until he looked down at the coffee table. The picture of Rob on the front and his name in big, bold letters stared back at him. Eddie picked up the case, flipping it around and around. He didn't say anything when he put it down. He just slowly sat back and swallowed back his cake.

We sat there for hours in silence, listening to the album, sipping wine, and relaxing as snow slowly started to fall outside. I looked between the two guys as the hours ticked by, but neither seemed to be eager to move. When eleven thirty rolled around, I shut off the stereo and stood up.

"Where are you going?" Eddie asked as I went for my bedroom. The answer should be obvious.

"It's late. I have to get to bed." I replied as I walked into my room. I flicked on the light, changing into my

pyjamas. I walked back out to move into the bathroom. Neither moved. When I finished in the bathroom and they still hadn't moved, I walked over and stood behind the couch. "Are you guys going to go home?" I asked them.

"I still have your gift to give you," he glanced over to Rob, "So after you," Eddie gestured to Rob, waving him towards the door.

"No, no. I want to see this gift." Rob crossed his arms across his chest.

They had a bit of a stare down as Eddie walked into the kitchen. I could see him grab the baby blue gift bag off the counter and bring it over to me. "It's not exactly what I wanted to give you tonight, but it's still pretty good." I reached into the bag and pulled out the green velvet box. It was a necklace box, though the initial color made me panic. Eddie had a disgusting habit, I could see, of picking the same color box to give me anything. I opened it up, seeing the fine white gold rope chain sit delicately in the box. "Something to put your locket on," Eddie looked so proud. "You never wear it."

I looked at the chain, feeling a mix of emotions I couldn't place. So I just smiled, gave him a quick hug. "Thank you, Eddie. It's beautiful." I closed the box. "Now, boys, I have to get to bed." I said as I watched them, seeing if either would move.

"You first," Eddie waved to the door. He looked back at Rob.

He laughed, "After you."

Chapter 28

I woke up before my alarm went off. Which was probably a good thing because I wasn't in my bed. I slept in Beth's bed as the two guys sleeping in mine ended up over crowding me. They wouldn't go home, and I needed to sleep. They each curled up beside me, telling me to just fall asleep, they would leave after I had. A couple hours later I woke up to Eddie snoring and Rob putting all his weight on me. Unable to wake either of the sleeping rocks, I slid myself out from in between them and made my way down to Beth's empty bedroom.

It was now five thirty, a little early for my liking, but it let me wake up, move around, shower, and get ready before needing to wake them up and experience the awkwardness.

I made myself a cup of coffee, and amused myself by standing in my bedroom doorway and watching them sleep. In the night they both must have reached out for me; their hands were brushing.

I heard the door behind me open but I didn't move. I heard the thud of luggage hit the floor, the rustle of boots coming off, and the sound of feet scurrying across the floor. I felt Beth's arm around me before I looked at her. She was cold. "Awl," she said as she peered into my room with me. "They're so cute when they're sleeping." We giggled together. "Happy birthday, babes." She said with a squeeze around my side and a kiss on the cheek.

"Thanks," I whispered to her. "How was Greece?" She didn't answer right away. I turned to face her, worried that something happened between she and Gaylen. I was expecting tears and sadness, instead I found a devilish grin on her face.

"I got married." She admitted.

"What?" I broke out into a smile and a squeal, giving her a big hug. "Oh my god, congratulations Mrs. Otis." I heard the boys stir in the bed. I didn't care. "When, how?"

"We just eloped. Just decided we wanted to be married and didn't want to wait anymore. We already feel married, we already think of ourselves as married, so we just did it." Beth shrugged her shoulders.

"Tony is going to be pissed." I laughed.

"What's Tony going to be pissed about?" Eddie mumbled through sleepiness. I glanced over, seeing the two of them start to sit up, looking at each other with a bit of confusion.

"That you slept with Rob before he did." I walked away from the room with Beth as I heard the two of them laugh awkwardly together.

"I've got to get some sleep," Beth said as she rubbed her eyes. "Long flight. Are we doing anything tonight?"

"We were supposed to meet up for coffee tonight, all of us. Now we have more of a reason to celebrate than just my stupid birthday." I whispered in hush tones as the guys mumbled something to each other in my bedroom.

"You're going to tell everyone aren't you?" Beth smiled.

"You bet your ass I am." I embraced her as hard as I could. "Now go get some sleep Mrs. Otis."

She looked at me with an eye roll and went down the hall. I finished my coffee and put the cup in the sink.

"Andi, do I have time for a shower?" Rob asked as he walked past me towards the entryway.

I blinked, "Umm, yeah." What was he doing?

He smiled, "Great. Just going to grab my clothes out the car." He slipped on his shoes.

I looked at him bewildered. "You *planned* on staying the night?"

He laughed. "You're so impulsive I thought I would come prepared." He whispered back as he threw on his coat. He flew out the front door.

Eddie walked past me, adjusting his watch as he moved. "I have to go back to the motel, get a shower, change, all that." He gave me a quick peck on the cheek as he slipped on his shoes and coat. "I may have to work through lunch today, so I might not get a chance to see you again until tonight."

"Ok," I said as Rob came back in the house with his clothes. I watched Eddie watch Rob kick off his shoes, toss his coat in the closet, and move to the bathroom.

"Is my favourite towel still in here, Andi?" Rob called before he closed the door. He popped back out for the answer, no shirt. Eddie's eyes practically popped out of his head.

"I used it a couple of days ago, I haven't had a chance to wash it." I was apologetic, though I wasn't sure if it was for the towel or for Eddie.

Rob wrinkled his face. "Pink and scratchy it is then. See ya in twenty." He waved as he closed the door. I heard him turn the lock, a strange thing for him to do. Yet maybe this was his idea of behaving.

I looked over at Eddie who stood frozen, staring at the door. "Eddie," he whipped his head in my direction, though his expression didn't change. I tried not to laugh at him, "You got to get to the motel." He nodded, looking back at the bathroom door, staring at it like he was trying to bore through the oak door.

Before leaving, he grabbed the back of my head and gave me a hard, deep, passionate kiss. It felt great, as he scooped me up, pulling me closer to him before he broke away. "Have a nice day," He grinned wickedly as he made sure I had my footing before he turned and left.

A minute after the door was closed, I heard the door on the bathroom door click. Rob unlocked it, inviting me in. I stared at the door. I didn't have the heart to enter the bathroom.

If that's what Eddie wanted, which there was no doubt it was, he got it.

Chapter 29

"You guys ready?" Rob asked as he popped into the store a little after five. Sarah and Steve came down a few minutes before and waited with me while Frank finished up an interview for a new part timer to replace Tiffany. I turned to Rob, barely able to keep my excitement back.

"You're coming?" It was Tuesday night, he should be going to Bombay.

He nodded, "I've got three shows over the weekend instead of one tonight, so I am free."

A skinny boy with a vampire complex walked by us, cape dragging behind him as he left the store, followed by Frank with a slightly terrified expression. "I knew that Goth was in, but that was scary. He didn't even smile and actually asked if he had to work when it was sunny out." He clapped his hands together before he put his arm around his wife. "So, needless to say, I need a coffee, badly. Shall we get this party started?"

The five of us started walking down the hall together. I could hear Nikki's heels on the tile as she walked fast to catch up to us. I slowed a little, causing the others to do so as well. "Oh my god, you would not believe the day I just had." She sounded excited instead of stressed.

"No?" Sarah asked, trying to sound interested.

"Like, oh my god, I just got to dress the most gorgeous man. Oh! It was better than the day I got to play dress-up with Edmund." She practically swooned. I

looked over at her, trying not to laugh as she half froze and looked down at me with a terrified look. "Not," she laughed, "not that I would attempt anything on anyone's husband."

"Just their boyfriends right?" I asked as I absent-mindedly looped my arm around Rob's.

"For the record," Nikki raised a finger, "I never aggressively went after Rob while you two were 'together.'" she even used air quotes.

Rob laughed as he put his hand on mine, rubbing it lightly and giving it a bit of a squeeze before he gently removed my hand. We continued the rest of the way down the corridor in silence, making our way through the crowds of people and into the café.

Tony was pulling a couple of square tables together so that we could have one big one, and Beth was behind the counter in her plain clothes helping the little nerdy boy with bad acne throw together the mass amounts of drinks. Doug walked past us with two large paper bags from the deli, and Eddie was packing up his laptop and getting ready to move over.

We moved for the table, pulling out chairs and arranging ourselves appropriately. Eddie practically dove for the chair next to me, Steve taking the one on my left. Tony sat on the other side of Steve, Beth running over to throw her sweater on the next chair to mark her place. On Eddie's right, Nikki sat like she belonged there, looking over and smiling at him as she scanned his torso, and not discreetly. I think she was even in heaven when Rob pulled out the chair next to

her, and across from me. Frank moved next to Rob, Sarah at his side, and Doug awkwardly sat in the last available chair.

“Dougie,” Rob exclaimed, “Actually decided to come and hang around with us again?”

“Yeah, well, figured I should eventually.” He mumbled but didn’t say much else. He sort of leaned back out of the light.

“OK,” Beth said as he brought over a huge tray covered in paper cups. “Rob, Doug, your Americano’s. Nikki, One extra large, three pump, no whip, extra hot, soy, sugar-free hazelnut latte. Steve, chi latte. Eddie: dry cappuccino. Andi, Skinny Vanilla. Sarah, London Fog. Frank, Tony, Black coffees. I have my tea.” She sat down as she set the now empty tray in the middle.

Doug put the two brown bags in the middle. “Sandwiches courtesy of Angie.”

“Ohh, your woman’s giving away free sandwiches to your friends now?” Rob said as he stood up and started to riffle through the bag.

“Yeah, friends.” Doug joked around, attempting to beat Rob’s hand out of the bag. Rob continued to reach in, grabbing them and tossing one to everyone, not caring who got what kind.

“I’m not hungry,” Nikki said as she waved her hand at the sandwich.

“Are you ok, Nikki? Do you have a problem?” Eddie asked her before taking a massive chunk out of his sandwich.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." She looked at him sideways.

"I don't know if I've ever seen you eat." Eddie remarked after swallowed. "I see you pick at your food but never actually eat it."

"She survives off of coffee and cigarettes." Rob said, shoving his food to the side of his mouth before he spoke.

"Sounds like Andi in college." Eddie piped up. "I begged her to quit. Yet there she was a couple weeks ago with a cigarette in her hands." He looked at Rob with a glare. "I blame the bad influence of this place."

"You drove me to smoke again." I pointed at Eddie, scolding him. "Besides, that was the only day I did." I shrugged. "I forgot my pack outside."

"I'm not heartbroken." He shook his head.

"So I've got to ask." Frank declared after stuffing the last bit of his sandwich in his mouth. "Tony & Steve. What's going on with you two?"

They half looked at each other, Tony blushing a little. "There isn't anything going on Frank." Tony replied almost bitterly.

"Then why did you just blush?" He pressed, leaning in towards them.

"Tony blushes." Steve shrugged. "You've never noticed that when attention is unexpectedly put on him, he turns a little red."

"You've noticed," Frank taunted. "You must be watching for subtle signs of intrigue."

"Steve is way too high maintenance for me," Tony waved at him, leaning back and folding his arms. "I mean, really, have you seen his hair? Yes it's pretty with all its caramel colors and such, but it's styled so meticulously."

"Yeah, really." Doug added in, pointing to Steve's head. "It takes you, like what, thirty minutes to do your hair in the morning?"

"Three." Tony and Steve said at the same time, shooting each other a panicked look as everyone cheered them on.

"I thought you said you weren't gay?" Doug questioned Steve.

He rolled his eyes. "I'm not." He stood up, raising his right hand. "I, Stephen Aaron Murphy, am a Bi-sexual." Applause sounded through the café. He blushed a little. "I've known this since I was nineteen and couldn't choose between Eric or Emily Fraughton."

"The Fraughton Twins?" Rob asked, trying not to laugh.

"Yeah," Steve said as he lowered himself back down in the chair. "I spent the night once, when I was dating Emily. Obviously wasn't allowed to sleep in her room, so her parents thought it would be a good idea to stick Eric and I together. Yeah, no. We ended up making out and, umm, bonded. Of course Emily thought it was great that her boyfriend and her brother were best friends. That was a messy break-up."

"I can only imagine," I commented.

He winced. "It's probably not what you think, though. You see, the family didn't know that Eric was gay. That is until I was over there playing video games with Eric, and Emily confronted me about a one-night thing I had with a guy named John. To which both twins yelled at me about cheating on them."

There was a group wince and a couple of giggles from Doug and Frank. "That still doesn't really answer the question on what's going on between you two. Because clearly there is something." Frank pressed. "Are you two seeing each other?"

Tony immediately turned to Steve. Clearly this was an answer he was waiting for himself. All eyes were now on Steve who looked around panic stricken. He stuttered a bit. "We're umm, sorta testing the waters. Ahh, we're ah..." he cleared his throat.

Tony looked around at the rest of us. "We're sleeping together. But we aren't a couple because Steve here can't commit. Therefore we are only friends with benefits." He looked at Steve, "Good benefits."

Doug shook his head. "I didn't need to hear that."

"Alright, moving right along now." Frank said with a laugh. "I hear Beth is married."

"What!" Everyone but myself yelled out. I had to indulge Frank earlier in the day, the news burning at me. I was usually good with secrets. Beth blushed furiously.

"Wait, wait," Rob cut above the crowd. "You're Bethari Azalia Otis?"

"Shut up." She retorted with a blush.

"What the hell are you doing? Getting married without me around." Tony looked her up and down, scowling. "Now you have to tell me what the wedding was like."

Beth laughed. "I wore a toga."

"A toga?" Nikki scrunched her face.

"Yeah, a toga." Beth snapped back. She recomposed herself to tell the rest of her story. "Gaylen did too. Purple and blue. We got married in his Aunt's home, did the whole traditional Greek reception, and that was it." She shrugged. "Pictures are in the mail. Probably get here next month."

"When Gaylen comes back in July, we are *sooo* going to have our reception." Tony didn't so much say it as demanded it.

"I imagine Andi had an unglamorous wedding like you did." Nikki rolled her eyes and took a sip of her coffee.

"Actually," Eddie said, leaning forward and grasping his coffee cup with both hands. "Our wedding was almost fairytale."

"Really?" Nikki said as she adjusted herself to look at Eddie. "Tell me about it."

Eddie looked at me with adoration in his eyes. "She was beautiful. A big, shiny ball gown kind of dress. Her hair was curled and she wore it down so it covered her back. She had the perfect make-up, that classic bride; Pearl necklace, pearl earrings, just perfect." He replied, remembering the day fondly. He rolled his wedding band around his finger when he spoke. "I had on a full

tux, our wedding colors were gold and white, with hints of teal."

"Where did you get married?" Steve asked, shifting a little closer to Tony. I guess the talk of love was affecting him, and I wish he hadn't moved. I wanted something to cling on to as I died a little at the memory.

"You know that hotel we stayed in?" I offered, figuring I should at least pretend like I cared. Steve nodded. "The top floor suite."

"We rented that out for the ceremony," Eddie cut in. I let him tell the story, it would sound more romantic coming from him. "White roses filled the room, a red carpet for our aisle. We stood under an archway of white roses. For the reception we rented out the ballroom."

Tony, Sarah, even Nikki turned to mush as Eddie spoke. He glowed in the attention, he planned the wedding as he was already getting paid for his plays and I was still writing mid-terms. I didn't have time to think about a wedding, but he wanted to get hitched as soon as possible, and it wasn't like his family was lacking in the funds to do so.

I looked over at Rob, expecting to see jealousy and anger. Instead his face was contorted, staring at me like he was trying to decipher a sign in a foreign language. "What?" I asked him as I sipped my coffee after a nervous laugh.

"That's not how I would picture you as a bride." He shook his head.

“No?” I think I blushed a little.

He shook his head. “No,” he leaned forward across the table. “You know how I pictured you?” I shook my head, silent. We all were. It was like Rob was about to be philosophical. “On a beach, the sun just starting to set so the sky is orange. Barefoot, your hair all loose and breezy. A pretty summer dress, no beading or anything like that, it’s simple. You’re not even wearing make-up. Just you: beautiful as you are. Glowing while you’re walking towards your future husband. He’d be in dark jeans and a dress shirt. Maybe a tie for kicks. And you would just marry him with your toes buried in the sand. Nothing fancy. Just perfect.” He used Eddie’s final words, though I think Rob was more accurate.

I think I stopped breathing. I could see everything he said in extreme detail. Like someone describing a new ice cream flavour and you never had it before: but now it’s all you’d ever want crave.

“Be still, my beating heart,” Tony said slowly, placing a hand over his chest and grasping his coffee cup.

I had to agree, my heart was racing as I held Rob’s eye across the table. I didn’t want to look away before I finished imaging the ‘I do’s.’

I heard Eddie clear his throat but I didn’t move. Not until Steve put his arm around me and pulled me down on his shoulder. “I think you would have looked stunning in tulle.”

I laughed, blushing a little, “I’m short. I looked like an up rooted mushroom.” Everyone laughed.

"I thought you were beautiful." Eddie said as he stretched his hand out to run my knee. "I still do."

"What about your wedding, Rob?" I asked.

"Oh no, not wedding talk." He said as he sat back, smiling and waving his hands in an 'x.'

"YOU were married." Eddie looked over at him in disbelief.

"I was almost married." Rob looked at his cup. "I was left standing in a tailed tuxedo and a top hat with about two hundred or so people staring at me."

"Sorry to hear that, man." Eddie actually sounded like he meant it. I looked over at him and saw a rare moment of sympathy.

"Hey, I dodged a bullet." Rob said as he leaned forward, smiling again. "Otherwise I would have been married to the most self centered, high strung woman in the entire world." Rob practically cursed out Becca.

"Oh," Eddie snapped his fingers. "You and Nikki almost got married?" Even I laughed at that one. Nikki rolled her eyes and then smacked Eddie.

"What about you two over there?" Steve pointed at Sarah and Frank, waving his finger between the two. "The truly married couple."

"Vegas baby!" Sarah threw her hands up in the air. "Married by Elvis in jeans and a t-shirt!"

"Now, Sarah, in all fairness honey, you wore a jean skirt." Frank reminded her in which she pointed to him with a smile and nodded.

"Tell those who don't know what happened," Rob said as he took a drink.

Sarah and Frank looked at each other and giggled. "Ok," Frank said, "and this will blow your minds. We weren't even dating."

"What?" I laughed.

"No, we were there with umm, Rob, Doug and a couple of others from the old days. And we all got really drunk. And these guys all knew I had the biggest crush on Sarah, and they dared us to go down and get married. So, we did. In Vegas. When we woke up in the honeymoon suite of the cheap motel the 'chapel' owned and realized what happened, I told her I was madly in love with her."

"And of course I had admired Frank from afar and we decided that, because we did love each other, we would stay married." Sarah looked at Frank adoringly as she put her arm through his.

"Four years and we're still together." Frank was so proud, still so in love with Sarah, that it made my heart ache. Eddie and I barely made it into year three with looks of tenderness before it started to fade. I looked over at him now: he beamed as I caught his eye. It was like we just started dating again, and I felt my heart skip a beat.

The subject changed, and our laughs and conversation carried on until the café had to close for the night. Yet as we all climbed into our cars, my ride home being with Tony, Steve, and Beth, I looked between my two men.

They looked at each other hesitantly as they climbed into their cars, and as I watched them, the expressions

on their faces as they caught each other's eye, I realized the scales were starting to tip. I just didn't know who's direction they were tipping in just yet.

Chapter 30

The worst part about Fridays in the Trap was, and will always be, the line-ups at the bank. Eddie sprung on me yesterday that we were leaving for the city tonight, and I didn't feel prepared. I hadn't packed, I didn't get out my shopping money, I didn't load up my phone so I could call Rob and ask him about the shows I would now have to miss. Now, fifteen minutes into my lunch break I had barely moved. I could see the ATM's, I was only two people away from using one, yet I hadn't moved. I was constantly checking my cell phone, even though time wasn't escaping from me at an alarming rate.

Someone stepped away from the machine, and the guy ahead of me took over. I moved up, no one left ahead of me. Just had to wait for one to open up. And when it did, I practically dove into it.

I estimated how much I would spend without Tony beside me and withdrew. I was so eager to leave I almost forgot my debit card. I was starved, and needed food. Moving at a fast walk back to the food court, I was a little disappointed to look around and see the long line ups at every place. My stomach grumbled, and I reluctantly went for my table of friends. I would have to wait these lines out.

"What took you so long?" Tony asked as I sat down in the empty seat between Steve and Rob. I looked over at Rob's tray, a pile of French fries scattered around it.

"Bank on Friday." I said as I reached over and grabbed one. "Need I say more?"

"No, you really don't." He assured me as he leaned into Steve. He lifted Steve's arm to put it around him. "So, please tell me that if you look smoking hot in something you will call me and describe, in detail, what it is so I can decide whether it's the right kind of hot for you?" He asked as he reached into his pocket and grabbed his cell phone. He wrinkled his face as he read the message before he looked up at me.

"I'm on a pay-as-you-go phone. I have limited funds." I grabbed another one of Rob's fries without looking at it. I glanced over at Tony. He was looking down at his cell phone, studying the screen. Steve then reached into his pocket, getting out his and reading the screen. I grabbed another fry as I watched him have the same reaction to whatever he was reading.

"Are you hungry?" Rob chuckled as I reached over and grabbed yet another fry. I looked over at him with a smile.

"The line-ups are really long and I didn't eat this morning." I shrugged.

He picked up a French fry, "Well in that case," he moved it towards my mouth, "feel free." He said as he dropped it into my mouth. As I looked at him, feeling flirty, I could see out of the corner of my eye, Frank and Sarah looking at their cells and then to each other.

I turned my head, looking at all of them. "Guys, what's going on? Is something wrong?"

"No," Tony said quickly. "We're all probably just getting the same stupid spam text or something." He shrugged and the other three nodded to each other.

They weren't very good at lying. I could tell something was happening, but I couldn't figure out what they would be hiding from me. I was about to say something else when Nikki excitedly pulled out the empty chair between Frank and Rob. "Why are you so late getting here?" I questioned as I continued to eat Rob's lunch.

"Ok, remember a couple of days ago I was telling you how I was dressing this absolutely gorgeous man. Well, he came back today, and was saying that there was a problem with his receipt. Well, when I asked him for it, he slid it over the counter to me with the information side down and had written on the back of it, 'Dinner? Tonight? Maybe some drinks? I haven't been able to get you out of my head.'" She squealed as she grabbed the edges of the table. "So needless to say I have a date tonight. Oh my god I'm so excited."

"Nikki, that's great." I said sincerely. I don't think I had actually witnessed a real smile from Nikki. Now here was one, clear on her face.

"I know." She clapped her hands together. "Oh, frig. I'm starved. How long do you think it would take to get a chicken burger?" She didn't wait for anyone to answer, she just stood up and moved towards the burger place. I just watched her bug-eyed, chewing away on the rapidly cooling fries on Rob's tray.

Eddie blocked my view for a fraction of a second as he moved to take the seat Nikki was just in. "Where were you hiding?" I asked him as he sat down.

"I wanted to pack your stuff for you. Make sure you have everything." He said with a smile.

"And I'm eight years old and can't figure out I'm going to need for a week in the city?" I snapped back sarcastically.

"I wanted to surprise you. There are some things that I'm planning for and if I tell you what to pack you'll figure all this out." Eddie waved his hand around the table.

I held his eye, seeing if I could burrow deep into his mind and figure out what exactly he had planned for the city. It's not like I owned anything really nice. So what could he possibly have packed that I would have over looked? I was a little distracted by Rob reaching into his pocket and pulling out his phone. It took a while for his spam to come through. He flipped it open, and I tried to read it. All I could see is the word 'win.' He closed his phone.

"Hey," He turned towards me. "Want to go out to dinner tonight? Just me and you? I can give you a ride back to your place after."

"No," Eddie answered right away. "We have to leave for the city tonight. We should probably be heading back around seven-seven thirty."

"Hey Ed," Rob snapped. "If you can take her away, for say a *week*, I can take her out to dinner."

The two stared each other down for what felt like forever. Neither saying anything, neither really even moving. Eddie sighed. "Ok, fine. But you need to have her home by six thirty."

"What are you, my father?" I asked him, trying not to laugh.

"No, but I am your husband and we do have to get going. It's a long drive back to the city, so I don't want to leave too late in the evening." Eddie replied tenderly.

I thought I would over look the 'husband' comment, just this once. "Why can't we just leave tomorrow morning?"

"Because, love, I have a surprise planned for first thing in the morning." Eddie smiled. "It's ok. Rob will have you back home on time, I'm sure." He looked over at Rob and grinned, sure of himself; a typical Eddie moment. Rob looked away from him and down at me.

"If you want to be home by six thirty, I will have you home by then. I promise."

There was so much sadness in his tone, his eyes, his face. But from what? My leaving for a week? I guess the vacation was probably not a good idea. I knew it would affect Rob, I just didn't realize how much it actually would.

"So," Rob put his arm around my shoulders and escorted me down the halls of the mall. "Where would you like to go for dinner?"

I smiled. "Your place." I said it so simply. "You could cook. We could just sit on the couch. I miss your place."

"As much as I would love that, my place is probably not an option." Rob pulled me a little closer to him. I didn't mind. "How about," he thought about it. "I don't know." He laughed. "We only have an hour and a half before you turn back into a pumpkin."

I laughed. "That is true." I looked around the mall as we moved. "Would it be horrible if we ate here?"

"At the food court?" he thought about this. "No, I guess not. It's not exactly the way I would picture our final night, but meh."

"Rob, I'm going away for a week." I stopped and turned towards him. "How about when I get back we can go out for a really nice dinner. What do you think?"

He brushed my cheek. "When you get back." He echoed with a nod. "Now, where would you like to go?"

"I was thinking we could have a very traditional meal." I slid my arm around his waist.

"Burgers and fries," his voice was loud and boisterous, causing me to laugh. "Of course. What else in this world is there *possibly* to eat?"

"Oh ha ha," I rolled my eyes as we moved over to the booth. He ordered, remembering what I ordered with flawless precision, took our food over to the nearest table and sat together.

He acted strangely as if this was our final moment together, as if any minute I would jump up and run for the door. It was unlike him, yet I couldn't really accuse him of anything, because I was taking off very shortly with the man that he viewed as the competition. If it

was between Nikki and I, and the tables were turned, I think I would have been the same way.

Time was cruel, and ran from us at a rapid pace, and I guess when you're having fun, caught in a moment, time will always do that. I didn't want to pick up my tray and dump the empty wrappers in the garbage, and I didn't want to loop my arm around Rob's waist as we moved down the hall in a half embrace. I just really didn't want to go. Yet I knew that time would run away, and I would eventually have to climb into the mustang and Rob would have to drive me back to my place; I watched him as he drove, but he wouldn't look at me, wouldn't even smile, he just stared ahead.

Chapter 31

We pulled into my driveway and we sat in silence for a long moment. I wanted to reach over and grab him, I wanted him to come inside with me and I wanted to tell him I would cancel with Eddie if it would make him happy, but it wouldn't, because that was Rob; It would have to be entirely *my* choice for it to be okay with him. So I couldn't offer that because he would take it and then feel guilty.

I sighed, "I'll see you next Monday." I said, glancing over at the statue in the driver seat quickly before I got out of the car.

I slammed the door shut and moved as quickly as I could up the snow covered steps and I fumbled for my keys, feeling infuriated that the mustang hadn't pulled away yet; I got the key in the lock and I turned it.

"Andi, wait." Rob climbed out of the car but didn't come that close. I spun around, glaring at him.

"What, Rob?" I demanded.

He stood there, dropping his head, his hands in his pockets as the snow started to fall around him. He wouldn't look at me, wouldn't lift his head up, and I couldn't bear to look at him like this anymore, so I turned around to go inside.

"I love you." I immediately spun back around on my heels. He didn't look up at first, but after a few seconds he did. "I love you." He lifted his hands out of his pockets and slapped them against his legs. "And I'm an idiot. I mean really, I am. If I wasn't, I would have just

told you I loved you that night you left, or the night of Beth's birthday, or the date we had right before your mother came. I would have told you that you are all I can think about. Ever since the day you ran into me in the mall, and looked so stunned and confused but so incredibly perfect." Rob smiled. Then he laughed nervously, turning away for a second as he scratched the back of his head. He turned back, twisting his mouth before he spoke again. "But I'm an idiot. No, you know what? Idiot isn't even the right word anymore, because you're leaving. You say it's a week in the city but we all know that once you get there, you won't be coming back."

"Rob," I tried to stop his rant but he wouldn't let me.

"Andi, it's okay. The better man won. Eddie, he deserves you. He fought honestly, made up for his mistakes, he is the better man and you deserve the best." He took a breath, "I just wanted to give you the chance to hear the words from my mouth before you left. So you would know, for one hundred percent certainty, that you and I, we were not just some 'thing,' we were not a couple of people who just messed around. I loved you, the whole time; I love you." Then he took a couple of steps back and stood in the driveway with his hands in the air and facing the sky. "I Love Andraia Marie Mathews." He yelled at the top of his lungs before we walked back to the door. "Now the world knows, it's not a secret anymore." I think I saw tears well in his eyes, though it could have just been the cold, it had to be the cold. "Don't let what I said

change your mind. You're doing the right thing." He took a deep, shaky breath. "I gotta get going," he pointed behind him, maybe at the mustang; I wouldn't look away from him. "I have to get ready for my show, it starts in like twenty and I can't keep the people waiting." He looked back at me. There was no doubt that I was crying, I could feel it streak my face. "Goodbye, Andi."

I watched him turn around and walk to his car. I watched him pull out of my driveway, and turn down the road to Bombay. I stood with my hand on the door knob, and as per New Year's I watched the snow start to fill his tracks. Though this snow was not kind, it would not fill them quickly, it wasn't heavy enough.

Within a minute of Rob leaving Eddie pulled in, and he climbed out of the eclipse, lightly jogging the short distance towards me. "Ready to go?" He was so excited, I shook myself out of my state of shock.

"Yeah," I pointed to the door. "Just let me say 'bye' to Beth."

He waved at the door. "She said something earlier about going to Tony's." He reached out and grabbed my hand. "Come on, I still have to swing by the motel before we head out."

"What for?" I asked him, letting go of his hand so I could move to the passenger side.

He sat there for a second after closing the door then backed out while I watched him, waiting for his answer. We were a short way down the road before he answered me. "I have to turn in my room key."

I blinked. "Did you get a place?" I asked him, impressed that he found a spot in Bayside so quickly.

He grinned. "You could say that."

By the time we got to the motel the snow had covered the parking lot by about a half an inch, but it was light fluffy snow that would blow away quickly. I got out of the car with Eddie, but didn't move to the main office with him, instead I kicked at the snow while he did what he had to do.

I watched the snow fall, thinking about where he could have found a place. Even more so, my curiosity gnawing at me, wondering where he was moving that would have space available before the end of January. I heard the main office door open and I turned my head in his direction. I should ask him.

"You look so perfect right now." He was breathless and I smiled, almost forgetting that I was going to ask him about his new place. "I mean you are so perfect right now. It actually reminds me of how you looked on the night we first started dating." I laughed and opened my mouth to speak. "Wait, wait." Eddie said excitedly. "Before you say anything, there is something I want to do." I looked at him, and watched him get down on one knee. "I was going to do this tonight in our apartment, but I can't pass up a perfect moment like this." Our apartment? "Andi, I was a foolish man to think that I could live without you. And now that I have you back, I have to ask you." He pulled out a familiar green velvet box, and I knew this would be the real deal, the lead up said so. I wasn't surprised when he

opened it up and there, inside, sat my engagement ring, his mother's ring, the same one I gave back to him in the divorce. "Will you be my wife again?"

I looked at the ring for a long moment, piecing everything together. "Our apartment?" I asked slowly.

"Well, yeah, our home. Where did you think we were going to go?" Eddie made it sound so obvious, and maybe it should have been. Maybe if I had opened my eyes to the whole plan, I would have seen what was wrong with it.

"A hotel." I replied bitterly. "You were planning on taking me back to the city and back to the apartment." And then I remembered something that Rob said. "You weren't planning on bringing me back, were you?"

Eddie's smile faded though his body remained frozen and his eyes changed as he blinked. The look he wore when he was caught doing something he shouldn't. "Andi, it's not like that."

"Then what is it like, Eddie?" He had packed my stuff. "You were making sure my room was cleaned out." He wouldn't let me back into my house to say goodbye to Beth. "And she knew, didn't she? Beth was going to tell me you cleaned out my entire room, all my things."

"Not all your things," Guilt flowed from him as he stood up. "I left Rob's CD on your desk."

"Why?" I yelled it though it wasn't required, this wasn't really a point to yell, but I had to release the rage that was building.

“Because how can we move on with our lives if you keep holding on to the past?” He demanded.

Eddie struck a nerve; my world crashed down around me then, I heard every word he said, but processed them a little differently.

I took a couple of steps back, nodding, running my hand over the car. “You’re right. I can’t move on with my life if I keep living in the past.” He nodded his head, smiling and I knew he didn’t get it, I knew he wouldn’t. I shook my head, smirking. “I want a divorce.”

I don’t think I’d moved so fast in the snow. I didn’t get a drive from Eddie, I didn’t want to ask him to drive me into the arms of the other man. That, and he probably would have kidnapped me and drove off to the city, even if I didn’t want to go.

I did flag down a cab part way there, afraid of getting a cold from walking there in the below freezing temperatures. I think I may have scared the cab driver, I was excited and bouncing uncontrollably in the back seat and holding myself to warm up. I probably looked like a drug addict.

When he pulled up, I hauled out a twenty and handed it to him, not waiting for the change and waving at him when he tried to tell me the tip was more than the fare. If he didn’t think I was crazy before, he must have by now.

I pulled open the doors to Bombay, praying that he wouldn’t see me in the middle of a song and stop; It

wouldn't look all that great if he just froze in the midst of playing.

It didn't matter though, I walked in and the stage was empty. There was a crowd, even some of the usuals sitting around looking at the stage. Had he not shown up? There were no hushed whispers of curiosity or annoyance. Was he already done for the night? I looked down at my cell phone, he would still have another hour of stage time. Where was Rob?

I walked along the side of the crowd, avoiding eyes and made my way over to Irving at the bar. He looked at me sideways as he poured a patron a drink. "Irving." I asked in a hushed tone. "Where's Rob?" Irving shrugged his shoulders, which aggravated me. I huffed a little as I turned around and scanned for an empty table, the one where I always sat was empty. I walked shyly over towards it, hoping I wasn't making a mistake, after all, I was supposed to be leaving so Rob could have moved on, or pretended to at least, and this spot could have already been taken.

I sat there anyway, picking up a hood string and played with it, twisting it around my fingers as I waited for something. The band was there, they looked like they were getting ready to play, maybe soon. I wasn't sure.

"You should be on the road right now." I didn't just glance behind me, I stood up and turned to face him. He stood behind me, just a couple feet away, with a new guitar in his hands. He was trying not to smile, and was failing badly.

"But I'm not." I said as I took a small step towards him. "I'm here."

"Why?" He was trying to make it seem like he was angry at me for staying. His tone was aggressive, but his eyes, his smile, gave him away.

"Because," I shrugged my shoulders. "Eddie was going to try and make me into the old Andi, but I'm just not the girl he married, anymore."

He took a step towards me and put his guitar on the table behind me. He then put his hands on my back, pulling me just a bit closer. He looked at me, trying so hard to keep a straight face. "So what kind of Andi are you then? The kind that stays in Bayside, steals jobs, and break hearts?" The left corner of his lip twitched.

"Yeah," I smiled back, "I am. Deal with it."

Rob burst out laughing, "I think I can." Then pulled me in, kissing me in front of everyone in the bar. I threw my arms around his neck. I may have said the corniest thing in the history of relationships, but this entire moment was taking the cake. "Wait, wait." He said as he broke away, excitement in his eyes. "I have something for you. I was going to give it to you for Christmas, but you know, Eddie." He shrugged as he reached into his back pocket.

Then he got down on one knee, and everyone around us started to murmur.

The box in his hand was black velvet. He opened it up with inside turned away from me so I couldn't see it yet. He then took my left hand and looked up with a smile. I smiled too. My heart was pounding out of my

chest. How many people get proposed to by two different people in the same hour?

When he turned the box to face me I burst into tears. Tears stemmed from laughter. In the ring box, on its side, lay a shiny new house key. "Andraia," He said, now trying not to laugh at me. "Will you move in with me?"

I looked at the key. "You've been carrying that around with you since Christmas?"

"Just since New Year's," He shrugged. "After I realized that there was still a chance."

"It's a little rushed, don't you think?" I asked him with a raised eyebrow and a smirk.

"Shut up, we practically did before, just say yes." He said with an eye roll.

"OK, I will." I replied simply with a laugh. He stood up and kissed me again, the crowd applauding this time. I pulled away quickly, embarrassed by the public viewing.

He laughed. "Yeah, I suppose, people didn't come here to see that kind of show." He grabbed his guitar from the table and headed towards the stage. He hopped up and took his place on the stool in the centre of the stage as I sat down at my table. There were still some lingering eyes even after the band did a quick, final sound check. "This is a change of tune from my normal set ladies and gentleman. I give you: a love song." He strummed the guitar. He chuckled, "Guess who it's about." The crowd laughed, and I blushed.

It wasn't his best song, but it was still nice, and I got the meaning. I knew when he wrote it, just by the way the lyrics moved, so I sat back and enjoyed the melody of his music. Irving came by and gave me a beer. I sipped it thankfully, feeling the most relaxed I had in a long time. As the song changed, my cell phone vibrated in my pocket. I pulled it out, trying to be discreet, and flipped it open.

Beth: Eddie just came by to drop off your stuff. I've never been so happy to see a grown man with tears in his eyes. Jerk wouldn't let me tell you >:/

It vibrated again while I was reading Beth's message. I went back through the menu to get to my message inbox.

Tony: I'm so glad I skipped Steve to come over. We'll be there to see you and your man. Yes, I know where you are. Bombay for the show.

I smiled, closing my phone and putting it in my pocket and looked up at the stage. I looked at my boyfriend. He caught my eye and winked, though didn't stop jamming.

Before Rob's song was even over, Beth and Tony came in. I felt Beth's arms around me, squeezing me tightly and I smiled wide as I grabbed her arms in a small hug back. Tony kissed my cheek and they each sat down beside me, Beth holding tightly on to my left arm.

I had never felt more at home than I had in that moment, with my two best friends and the man I believe would be the love of my life, in the town that

saved my sanity. I really didn't know how life could get any better than what it was right then.

Epilogue

We sat in the office of Melanie Williams on a sunny afternoon in June. Eddie sat there with his hands knotting themselves over and over again, and he was sweating a little, tapping his foot gently. It had taken a while to get the divorce process going again because Melanie had a few messier ones to deal with, and our quiet ending wasn't a priority to her; As long as it was done, and soon, I didn't care. Five months wasn't as long of a wait as we could have had.

I sat straight, and patiently waited as Melanie went over the details of the papers one last time. "Ok, the conditions are the same as the last agreement we came up with, except Andi has opted out of having her rent paid for." She handed Eddie the sheets. "And this time, sign all the papers." She removed her glasses and handed Eddie her pen.

I watched him carefully, counting each page as he moved through them. Six was the magic number--three, four, five, he hesitated, six. I breathed a sigh of relief and I was glad he wasn't going to try to put up a fight, then he handed me the pen and papers.

"Are you absolutely sure?" He asked as I took them from him.

"Yep," I replied (Maybe I shouldn't have sounded so chipper, but what can you do?). I started to sign, trying not to hum while I did. "Wait!" he said as I was about to sign the last two and I looked over at him.

"What?" I asked, annoyed. I caught Melanie on the other side of the desk rolling her eyes and leaning back.

"I wanted to give this to you." He said as he handed me a tiny green velvet ring box. Talk about reverse déjà vu. I opened it up, seeing my wedding band inside. I looked at him, seeing the hope there, that last attempt at making me change my mind.

"Keep it," I replied as I turned back to the papers, "It goes with the ring." I went right back to signing then handed Melanie the papers. "Please, double check that every single one is there." I asked, smiling.

She flipped through the sheets twice. "Oh yeah, you are divorced now." She said, also smiling, extending out her hand for a shake and I accepted it this time around. "Congratulations, Miss Mathews." She said still grinning.

"Thank you, Ms. Williams." I looked at Eddie, who stood slowly, shook her hand hesitantly, and looked at me shyly.

"I guess this is it, huh, Andi?" He shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, yeah." I shrugged my shoulders. "There isn't anything else left to say or do." I turned and opened the door to the office, stepping out and feeling free.

I looked around the waiting room, looking for him. He was near the main office entrance, sitting all slouched in the chair, arms folded, patiently waiting. I walked over to my boyfriend eagerly.

"Are you a truly single woman now, Miss Andi?" Rob asked as he stood up, putting his hands on my arms.

“Absolutely.” I smiled, brushing his face with the back of my hand. “Are we heading back to Bayside?”

“Well,” He put his arm around me and walked me out of the office. We shielded our eyes instinctively from the over-bearing sun, the air feeling fresh on my skin as he put his arm around my waist. We didn’t get far, taking a couple of steps away from the stairs and lowering our hands when our eyes finally adjusted to the sun. “It’s a three and a half hour drive.” Rob started to say as we stopped. “I thought maybe we could spend the night, catch a show. I hear Mund Sky’s got a great one we should go see.” He looked down at me, smirking. “I already have a hotel room booked.”

“Sounds good.” I stood up on my toes and kissed him. “Is it ready now?” I asked. He responded with a laugh that mixed lust with humour.

“Patience.” He replied, taking my hand and leading me down the road. “We have the rest of our lives to do that.”

I grinned. “Are you trying to tell me something?” I turned into him, wrapping my arms around him, and he held me in return.

“Not yet.” He replied. “The beach will be better in August.”