

Singer

a romance



Tah the Trickster

SINGER

A ROMANCE

by
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PROLOGUE

She was a freak. Everyone knew that. The reasons that people knew that differed depending on who you asked. If it wasn't because she was a whore or a dyke, then it was for her clothing. If not her reputed sex life, sexuality, or fashion choices, it was her attitude. She did not, after all, act like any other girl in school. She didn't enjoy shopping; she didn't giggle or gossip about significant others; and she wouldn't be caught dead wearing make-up.

As if that weren't bad enough, she seemed to go out of her way to ensure that she was going against the trend grain. Her hair was cut to her jaw and was the same color as her eyes – dark brown, nearly black. A pair of round, wire-frame glasses was always perched on her nose, and almost always too low. She didn't look to have tanned a day in her life; her skin was so pale, she almost looked like she was on her deathbed at any given moment.

She wore jeans that might as well have gone through a woodchipper. Her shirts were either too tight or too loose – it was like she didn't know how to purchase something in her size. Or maybe she merely didn't care. Her most recognized features were her aging leather jacket and a pair of combat boots she seemed to be fond of.

The girl didn't just look the part, either. She acted it, too. She was cold, bitchy, rude – everything one would expect from someone like her. She was, after all, a metalhead. Any mainstream genres or bands were mocked relentlessly.

In short, she was the freak of the school. The outcast that everyone was familiar with but didn't care to know the name of. The person the teacher just told me I had to do science fair with.

Dear lord, help us both.

CHAPTER 1

I stared at the teacher in disbelief; he didn't seriously say I'd be working with *her*, did he? I glanced miserably at the girl he named. She had her chin resting in her right hand so her head was facing the screen. I could tell by the soft breaths she was taking that she was asleep. Again.

I gave a soft, miserable groan. My friend gave me a sympathetic pat on the back. "It's alright," she tried to comfort me. "I doubt she's as awful as she acts." I just shot her a look; she immediately backed down, holding up her hands in a surrendering gesture. There was no way that the girl wasn't as terrible as she acted. That wasn't something you could just act out.

"I don't want to work with her," I groaned, putting one hand over my face. "Did you hear she came out of the closet in like eighth grade?" My friend, Ashley, nodded.

"She always did strike me as a dyke," she commented honestly. I managed a smirk, despite that the derogatory term made me want to cringe. It was true, though. Most people pegged the now slowly-wakening girl as a lesbian. When asked about it, she only ever smiled and made some smart remark about it. My eyes flickered back to my forced partner. The teacher was speaking sternly to her, probably about sleeping in class, and I could make out the girl saying something back to him. He blinked, looking quite taken aback, and asked her something else. She waved him off with her free hand (the other was still propping her head up). The instant she turned around, she crossed her dark eyes and made a face at his back.

The teacher instructed us all to get in the assigned pairs. I didn't bother moving; I could see the girl slowly getting to her feet to approach me. She wandered over towards me and flopped down backwards in a chair beside my desk. So, apparently I had to face her. With a sigh, I sat up to glare at the sleepy-looking girl.

"Look, girl," I started in a huff, realizing in the back of my mind that I didn't actually know her name. The teacher had merely called out our corresponding desk numbers. The young

woman, in any case, was instantly awake, bristling dangerously at my title for her. I blinked; she certainly changed her moods quickly.

"My name is *Rachel*," she spat, obviously not pleased with the fact that I was calling her "girl." I was quite taken aback at the sound of her voice. I wasn't sure that I'd ever heard her speak before, or at least I hadn't realized it was her. Her voice was almost a full octave lower than my own, a low growl, with a thick Southern drawl of an accent to her words. It was nearly enough to make me wince.

"Whatever," I dismissed. It didn't matter what her name was; as soon as this project was over, I wouldn't have to deal with her anymore. We would go back to our separate ends of the school, end of story.

"No," she interrupted me again, "not 'whatever,' *Jessie*." The nickname made me growl.

"It's *Jessica*, not *Jessie*," I corrected with a sharp glare. There were few things that sparked my anger worse than being called *Jessie*.

"Whatever," she dismissed in an almost perfect imitation of my voice. I glared.

"*Stop that.*" And I stood, an attempt at, I don't know, intimidating her into cooperating. I wasn't sure why I thought that it would work. The girl had at least six separate piercings that I could see. She was well and beyond more intimidating than I'd ever be.

Rachel gave me a grin so wicked I expected fangs to sprout from her gums. "Stop what?" I scowled, preparing to snap at her again, but then she languidly got to her feet. In the back of my mind, I managed only one thought: *Jesus Christ she's tall*. "You're taking this much harder than I thought, y'know." Her dark eyes glittered with mirth. "Most people take much nicer to terms of endearment than you are."

I balked. Two things registered to me in quick succession: first, she was almost undoubtedly hitting on me; second, the my hand connecting with the side of her face. I blinked when I noticed that the girl was leaning hard on the wall behind her, rather than still standing straight. I hadn't hit her that hard; how had I managed to send her sprawling her so easily? A small group of people had gathered.

The teacher chose that moment to come back in; evidently he'd been out of the classroom during. Small favors, I supposed. He ordered everyone back to work and left again, presumably

to continue whatever it was that he was doing. The other students went back to their seats, albeit reluctantly. I kept my eyes trained on the girl still against the wall.

Rachel grimaced slightly as her pale hand touched the angry red mark on her face. Then she looked up and locked gazes with me. She gave me that grin again; I was already hating that arrogant expression. I had to force myself not to flinch when I saw a thin line of blood trickle from the corner of the girl's lips.

I bristled when she noted, in barely a whisper, "You hit like a *girl*."

Then the bell rang, and she was gone.

CHAPTER 2

I went to the bathroom directly after class; it was my lunch period, so I didn't have class just yet. I may have played the slap off, but *goddamn* it hurt like hell. I examined myself in the mirror, before absently waving my hand in front of the motion-sensor for the sink. I gathered a bit of icy water in my hand and rubbed it on the side of my face, wiping away the blood, and attempting to soothe the angry red welt that Jessie's hand had raised on my cheek. I had to fight to ignore the girls who came into the bathroom to gossip and use their cell phones.

"Ugh, it's *her*." I grimaced inwardly. Lovely, now I'd have to face off the 'phobes. Schooling my expression into a lazy smile, I turned around to see the disgusted faces of the several girls. I noted quietly that my new science partner wasn't with them. Good, now I didn't have to pretend to be civil to them.

"I hear you got that mark on your face asking Jessica out," accused Ashley, a friend of my partner's. I watched them curiously; was that what this face-off was all about? Hm, wonder how quickly I can piss this lot off. Oh, there's an idea...

I quirked a brow at the leader of the little group, then shook my head, chuckling softly. "Actually, she just got mad because I wasn't sure if she was being honest about your little crush," I lied, giving a long sigh. At her confused look, I gave her my most charming smile. "Oh, no worries, babe, she told me all about your little crush on me." I pulled out a sharpie marker from my pocket and, grabbing her hand while she was in shock, scrawled the number '867-5309' in large lettering on her forearm. "Call me later, babe," I requested in a sing-song voice, putting my thumb to my mouth and my pinkie to my ear. Then I ran out the bathroom door. I paused once it closed, and listened carefully. A few seconds later, I had to stifle my laughter at the squall of outrage from the girl.

I checked my watch as I headed to the library. Yes, it was my lunch block, but I neglected to get any money to purchase a lunch. So, the library it was.

"Hey," I greeted the librarian pleasantly as I scribbled my name into the sign-in book. "Am I still cleaning out computers today?" I often came down to the library during my lunch block, so I was well-acquainted with the staff here. And, since I was a whiz with computers, I often volunteered my time working on the ones in the library.

"It would be a big help if you would..." she trailed off, looking hopefully at me. I grinned and waved it off.

"Not a problem. Hey, is my belt still in the back room?" I asked her curiously.

"Oh, thank you, Rachel," the woman sighed with barely-contained relief, before adding, "Your modified tool belt? Yes, it's still in the back room."

I thanked her as I wandered to the back room, fishing a set of keys from my jacket's deep pockets. I unlocked the door and entered, pausing for a moment to let my eyes adjust to the dim lighting. I'll have to replace that bulb later. I picked up my belt and strapped it around my waist, over the black, braided belt that I always wore anyways. It was, as the librarian had called it, a modified tool belt. There weren't actually any tools on it, though, save a pair of screwdrivers. The rest of the pockets held all manner of flash drives, a few CDs, and even a floppy disk. (It had no real purpose, seeing as none of the school computers actually had a floppy drive.) The word "techie" was sewn onto the back of the belt.

Laughing quietly as I thought of how I must look – the school's resident goth girl, wearing a tool belt with the word "techie" on it – I closed the storage room door and went up to one of the computers I hadn't tackled earlier this week. I cracked my knuckles and began trudging through the files, deleting various suspicious-looking files, as well as files that were more than half a year old. It took almost a full hour, but it was finally done. Rather pleased with myself, I emptied the folder marked "Trash" and began running a virus program. Now that all those files had been cleared out, the search went quickly and came up again saying that there were no viruses, worms, or Trojan horses.

I cracked my now-stiff fingers again, and shut down the computer. It took a minute for it to turn off, and I crawled under the table as soon as it did. I began unscrewing the wire that connected the monitor to the CPU, and heard the soft padding of footsteps coming my way. After

a moment of waiting for the person to acknowledge me, the person rapped on the desk above me a few times.

As I began unplugging the rest of the cords that were connected to the computer, I replied, "Who's there?"

"Jessica." I flinched; she'd heard about the incident in the bathroom, and was going to hit me again. Lovely. Oh, well, nothing to do now but either play it off or get smacked straight-up. That would be the easiest thing, to just act like nothing had happened. Of course, I had never done anything the easy way before, so why start now?

"Jessica who?" I went on with the standard knock-knock joke format. I could hear the confusion in her voice as she elaborated: "Uh, Jessica, from science class."

I crawled out from under the desk and looked at her, brow raised, from my slightly awkward position on the floor. "That wasn't funny," I sighed as I slipped my fingers underneath the computer and lifted it with a sharp grunt.

"It wasn't meant to be," she said matter-of-factly as she watched me lift the heavy thing. "Do you, ah, need any help with that?" Jessie sounded a bit nervous, but I quickly dismissed it in favor of getting the computer into the back room as quickly as possible.

"Nope," I decided, rather bluntly. I began walking towards the back room as quickly as I could. "Walk with me," I ordered as I walked towards the door that I'd intentionally left unlocked. The redhead hesitated, but followed me. I pushed down the knob with my elbow, seeing as my hands were full, and deposited the computer onto the lone table with a soft "uhn!" from me.

"Talk," I commanded as I pulled out one of the screwdrivers on my belt. I began to undo the fastenings that kept the "door" of the CPU closed. As I pulled it open, a cloud of dust was released. I hacked almost violently, waving it away.

Jessie was coughing a bit, too, but I ignored her for the most part. "I, uh, came to apologize for hitting you this morning," she muttered in a rather rushed sentence. I paused from inspecting the inside of the computer to look up at her, utterly confused. She didn't meet my gaze. "It really wasn't appropriate for me to do, and I'm hoping you could forgive me." Oh, so the she-wolf had gotten caught. I scowled and turned back to the computer.

"So, basically," I began slowly, pulling out a small cleaning rag from my belt, "you got caught and told you had to apologize to me." I noted out of the corner of my eye that she was set to protest. "No, no, no," I snapped, turning back to face the girl, "don't even try that 'oh I feel guilty' routine. I invented that one. Besides, that was a completely B. apology, anyway, so either say what you're trying to say, or leave me alone." The girl flinched visibly at my words, and I turned back to the open computer, and began angrily cleaning the dust out of the computer. It made my eyes water, and I wanted to break down into a coughing fit, but that would utterly ruin the image I was trying to project. So I held it in.

She tried to say something, but I cut her off with a snarling glare. Jessie turned and left the room. I huffed softly, then went back to coughing violently. After I managed to breathe freely, without coughing every second, I sat down in the only chair in here. I stared blankly at the half-cleaned CPU, then growled at myself.

"Now you're acting like they are. Bastard." I sighed and slowly went back to wiping the dust out of the computer. After a moment, a thought occurred to me, and I smiled a little. "Wonder if Jessie has a Myspace."

CHAPTER 3

I sighed with relief as I woke up. It was Saturday; no going to school, and especially no putting up with my grumpy science partner. I got up and stretched with a soft moan of contentment, before wandering over to the computer. After giving the mouse a few shakes to wake the monitor up, I first opened up my instant messenger. Then I blinked in confusion when I almost immediately received a message from... "maniacal_laughter?"

Maniacal_laughter: There you are. I was wondering when you were going to get up.
:P It's something like 10 AM.

I just stared at the message in shock. No one got my IM unless I gave it to them. How did this person get it? I decided briefly to ignore it. Then the chime went off, signifying that I had a new message from the same person.

Maniacal_laughter: Christ, Jessie, don't ignore me. I'm attempting to call a truce here.

Jess_kiddin: dont call me jessie

Maniacal_laughter: -hums- I will once you stop calling me things other than "kid" or "girl"~

I scowled and typed in a reply, deciding that it was time she called whatever "truce" she was trying to pull.

Jess_kiddin: w/e. u said u were calling a truce?

Maniacal_laughter: Yepyep. The way I figure it, I'm a bitch, you're a bitch, let's all agree to disagree and get this project done so we can go back to speaking none.

Jess_kiddin: dude wtf. D:

Maniacal_laughter: I'm random, you'll have to deal with it. ;)

Maniacal_laughter: Just remembered the other reason that I IM'd ya. Here, I found a few links to some decent Sci-Fair websites. Take a look through 'em and see if you can find something to interest ya.

Maniacal_laughter: And we're not doing the 'which substance cleans a penny' or 'which color candle melts the fastest' or any of those craptastic projects, a'ight?

Jess_kiddin: lol, fine, just send me the links

I smirked slightly at my partner's somewhat bossy behavior. Who would've guessed that the girl that got mocked on a daily basis would be able to order someone around without thinking twice on it? For a few minutes, I went through some of the websites that she sent me. Several of them were almost painful to look at due to the rigidity and exactness of the procedures.

My computer chimed again, and I glanced at the IM screen, only to notice that Rachel had changed her status: "**Maniacal_laughter** is listening to OneGirl!" Curious, I typed a comment to her.

Jess_kiddin: whos onegirl?

Maniacal_laughter: She's a girl who does pretty good covers of different songs. She's actually getting fairly popular, now that I think about it. I was one of her earlier fans, so haha. :)

Maniacal_laughter: I found her a few days after she started doing songs. She's like the only artist I listen to whose website is on Myspace. xDD

Jess_kiddin: link?

Maniacal_laughter: Why, trying to slack off?

Jess_kiddin: lol, no...

Maniacal_laughter: Slacker. D:

Maniacal_laughter: After all those sites I spent all night digging up and you're just going to blow them off like that.

Maniacal_laughter: You know what that makes you?

Jess_kiddin: no, wut?

Maniacal_laughter: A meanie-face. -nods sagely-

Jess_kiddin: lol, ur so msture

Jess_kiddin: mature

Maniacal_laughter: I figured as much. x3

Jess_kiddin: w/e

Jess_kiddin: can i get the link yet?

Maniacal_laughter: Fine, fine.

Maniacal_laughter: Meanie-face.

I rolled my eyes, an amused smile tugging at my lips, and plugged my headphones into the computer. After I'd put them in, I clicked on the newest link I'd been given. There was no picture of the artist, just a picture of an album cover. It was a stick figure girl with a bass drum strapped to her chest, a harmonica harnessed in front of her face, a guitar hanging off of her shoulder, and a wireless microphone in her ear. At the top was the name "OneGirl" in a font that mimicked someone's handwriting. At the bottom was the title "Get Up!" in a wild-looking text.

Then the music began to play.

"Get ready or not, 'cause here I come!

Dance, dance, dance, have some fun!

Six five four, three two one:

Get up, get up!"

I recognized the song easily, but not the singer. In this version, the vocals were a little lower, but the singer was definitely a girl. She sounded more like a person who sang in a chorus; the words were less harsh, but they weren't overly exaggerated like an actual choral singer. I decided that I liked it. As the instruments came into the song, I reopened the IM conversation.

Jess_kiddin: whoa shes really good lol

Maniacal_laughter: Eh, she's alright. Her drumming leaves a bit to be desired. :/

Jess_kiddin: wait wut? i thought she was singing to a karaoke version D:

Maniacal_laughter: First off, it's karaoke; second, why do you think she's called OneGirl? She plays all her instruments by herself. And sings. It says so on her profile. Someone didn't read...

Jess_kiddin: whoa thats pretty impressive

Maniacal_laughter: Yeah, I guess. Like I said, though, she's not so good on a trap set. Her guitaring is better.

Jess_kiddin: w/e music critic

Maniacal_laughter: Damn straight I am. >3

Maniacal_laughter: Whoops, forgot that I have a doctor's appt. in like fifteen minutes.
I better go get dressed and all that.

Jess_kiddin: wtf ur not dressed yet?

Maniacal_laughter: I'm in PJ's. That doesn't count. P

Maniacal_laughter: ANYways, I've gotta get gone. Talk to ya later. Add me!

Maniacal_laughter has logged out.

I considered for a moment, the music still playing in my ears, and clicked the button,
"Add maniacal_laughter."

CHAPTER 4

I glanced in the mirror again, looking at my newly-cut hair. I liked it, but I couldn't help but think that the 'phobes were going to give me one helluva dressing-down. I smirked and mentally amended, *And not in the good way, I'm betting.*

My hair used to be about collar-length. I'd never dyed it before, but I decided that, since I was in the middle of a rebellious phase anyways, I might as well. Now my hair was cut in a boyish style, with red streaks in it. I'd gelled it into short spikes, and they fell in whatever direction they wanted to. I liked it way more than my old style, but I was sure to get some snide remarks about my sexuality.

"Well, screw them," I decided in an absentminded hum. Then I snorted in amused disgust at the awful, unintentional irony of that statement. "I'm gone," I hollered over my shoulder as I tugged on my "signature" black leather jacket and grabbed my books. The call was more automatic than anything; no one was home right now to answer. I quickly left the apartment, praying to god that I didn't miss the bus again.

Fortunately, I managed to get in the bus with little time to spare. I did, however, get a few lewd comments from boys about my fingers and tongue, as well as glares intended to wish me a slow death from girls. I got muttered words like "bitch" and "slut" from either of them. I schooled my expression into my usual scowl and flopped in the back seat of the bus, next to my two friends. No, not two *of* my friends. *My two friends.* Wow, I need to branch out more.

"Love the hair, Rah," one of them, the girl, commented cheerfully. She messed it up as I protested loudly.

"The lady doth protest too much, methinks," the boy in our group mused aloud, watching as I had my head pulled into a borderline painful headlock and then had my hair

messed up even more. Two of the closest 'phobes turned around in their seats, fixating all of us with sneers.

"Ugh, cut the lesbian foreplay," one of them demanded. My friend obediently turned me loose and we both returned the glares. My guy friend smartly kept himself out of the crossfire.

"You seem to know a lot about lesbian foreplay," I remarked icily. Their glares hardened.

"Whatever, dykes," the second one replied in a flippant, dismissive tone. My female friend and I returned annoyed looks.

"Shall we harmonize in our witty rejoinder?" she asked of me, speaking in an exaggeratedly formal tone.

"Let's," I agreed, using the same tone. Then we both looked at our mutual friend. He rolled his eyes and sighed.

"Oh, fine," he reluctantly decided.

"Closeted," my friend half-sang in a high range; I did the same in lower pitch, and the boy completed our harmony with his lower baritone voice. We each raised a hand and cut ourselves off in perfect time. The girls looked highly offended at our antics, and just huffed as they turned back around. We all exchanged various glances, then burst into hysterical laughter.

"Nice Tenor voice you got goin' on there, Thomas," I giggled like a maniac. He just grinned proudly, though he frowned when I reached over to mess with his heavy mop of light brown hair.

"Jenny's soprano notes were a touch off-key, though," he remarked with a smirk. She frowned and smacked his shoulder.

"Twice for flinching," I laughed when he winced at the hit. Jenny just grinned and hit him again.

"I don't know why I hang out with you abusive dykes," Thomas sighed in a melodramatic fashion. We both snorted loudly at his statement.

"Probably the same reason we chill with a wussy little faggot like you," Jenny pointed out. I barely heard that; my mind was busy going off on a tangent. This one was about how particularly suckish it was to be anything other than straight, especially in a Conservative southern town.

"Rachel's crushing on a straight girl again," my friend's decisive statement snapped me out of my trance very quickly.

"Excuse me?" I hissed, ignoring the embarrassment that crept up in the back of my mind.

Jenny just grinned. "We were just making sure you hadn't fallen asleep," she explained with a laugh. "When you don't respond to that, we know you're asleep." I summoned up an extremely offended look.

"And you do this *every* time I doze off?" I huffed, but it was all in good humor.

"Every time," Thomas chuckled in response.

"Ah, I have the worst friends in the world. You guys *suck*," I complained.

Jenny grinned evilly, the only warning I got before she said, "No, Thomas sucks. I *eat*." Thomas and I glared at her as she cackled madly at her own risqué joke.

Finally, I shut her up by saying, "Alright, now, shut your face before I set you up with a straight guy." She stared at me with narrowed eyes, before grumbling, "Spoilsport."

"Oh, that reminds me," Thomas said suddenly, and we both jumped when he spoke. "Are either of you going to that rally on the steps of the courthouse this afternoon?"

Jenny shook her head unhappily. "No," she sighed miserably. "The 'rents are making me stay at home. I think they're afraid I'm going to go home with some random lesbian that shows up at the rally." She rolled her eyes, and we all laughed a bit as we disembarked from the bus.

"I'm going," I said, and their attention was turned to me. I grinned and added, "They needed someone to play guitar." Thomas and Jenny exchanged somewhat worried looks, before either spoke again.

"You sure that's the best idea?" Thomas ventured hesitantly. "I mean, we know you like your anonymity, so won't you get noticed if you play?"

Movement out of the corner of my eye caught my attention for a moment. I fought the urge to sneer when I noticed Jessie making out with her boyfriend, Kyle. I ripped my eyes away from the pair, back to the somewhat concerned looks of my friends. "Oh, please. What person at this school in their right mind – aside for us three – would show up at a gay rally? I'll be fine. No worries, 'kay?"

CHAPTER 5

I had to try very hard not to stare in disbelief at Rachel as she calmly strode into the classroom. She was almost half an hour late; she must have known that more attention would be drawn to her now. I wondered briefly why she didn't just skip class altogether if she was going to come this late. Then I noticed her haircut and raised a brow.

"Miss Rachel," the teacher, Mister Barker called her attention to him, frowning. "Care to explain why you're getting to my class so late?"

"Not particularly, sir," she replied, her annoyance and her Southern accent both tinging her voice. "But if you're still lookin' to get mad at me for comin' in late, I suggest you talk to the nurse first." Rachel half-threw a slip of paper down before him. I recognized it as a nurse's illness form. He glanced over the form, then his expression softened a bit.

He asked her something in lower tones, but she waved him away with one hand as she returned to her seat. When he looked back at the form, Rachel used that same hand to flip him off... again. I smirked; I had only had one conversation with the girl before, but I was quickly becoming accustomed to her sharp tongue and personality.

"Jeez, look at her hair!" Ashley whispered in horror. I nodded absently as the girl in question flopped into her desk and nearly threw her falling-apart notebook open, flicking through the ton of paper inside.

"No kidding," I mused aloud, though more curious than disgusted as Ashley was, tearing my eyes away to go back to taking notes. I personally thought that it suited her well, but I most certainly wasn't going to say that out loud.

Another thirty minutes was spent in relative silence, with only the somewhat monotone voice of the Mr. Barker and the soft scratching of pencils to break it.

"Alright, now, I want everyone to get with their science fair partner," he commanded; we had another half hour to go before first lunch. "I want three to five suggestions for your projects

before you leave." Rachel got to her feet and silently trotted over to my desk. She sat down, backwards, in one of the closest chairs. I raised my eyebrows when I noticed the earphones wedged in her ears.

"Did you take notes? At all?" I asked her dryly. She gave an eloquent "huh?" and pulled one of them out. I rolled my eyes. "Nevermind."

"So, did you ever choose a few topics to bounce off me, or did you waste your weekend listening to music?" she asked seriously, though the amusement in her dark eyes gave the disapproving expression away. I gave her a slightly irked look before responding.

"No, for your information, I didn't," I grouched, before going through my notebook to show her the printouts of project ideas.

"Chill, Jessie," Rachel ordered vaguely as she grabbed the printouts. I seethed at the nickname.

"Why do you keep calling me that?" I demanded, frowning.

"Cause," she replied distractedly before she mock-scowled in annoyance. "...I thought I told you we weren't doing the candle-melting thing."

I smirked inwardly, but carefully made myself look curious at her statement. "Did we?" That response earned me a smack on the back of the head with the sheets of paper. "Hey!"

She wasn't paying me any mind; Rachel just readjusted her glasses and continued flicking through the papers. Every now and then, she'd pull the rather stubby pencil out from behind her ear and would circle something. I found myself enthralled with watching my partner as she went through the papers. Her brow was slightly furrowed in thought, her mouth drawn up a bit.

"Quit staring at me," Rachel commanded idly. I blushed lightly and was instantly defensive.

"I wasn't!"

"You were," she chuckled, before glancing up at me. "Yes, I know, my hair's really short. Now stop staring or I'm going to start thinking that you're trying to come onto me." I was certain that my blush worsened at that second statement. I was, however, thankful that she had thrown me a lifeline.

"Yeah, it really is," I commented, lightly flicking one of her short spikes of hair. I grinned when she shot me a look that clearly said 'do not touch my hair.' "It suits you."

Rachel rolled her eyes. I could almost literally hear her defensive walls shoot back up. "Suits me, or suits my reputed sexuality?" she growled icily, turning back to the pages. I winced slightly at her words; my friends and I often talked about her. We probably made whatever rumors about her sexuality worse. I attempted to say something, but she quickly cut me off.

"Okay, so I was thinking we could do the 'is soil a type of electrical system,' the water purification experiment, or the mechanics of a hovercraft. Any other suggestions?" Her voice was clipped and close to cold.

"...No," I sighed, taking my papers back. "Those will be fine." I wrote them down in silence as she stood up and put the chair back under her table. She leaned over me once I was done and scrawled her name under mine. I uttered a startled squeak at the proximity. Rachel just rolled her eyes and slipped her pencil back behind her ear, where I noticed she had replaced her earphone. She silently returned to her desk as I turned the paper in. Before I went to my desk, I went over to my partner's desk. She looked up at me from under her red-and-black bangs.

"Yeah?" she half-growled, staring up at me.

"I was wondering if you'd, uh, be on tonight?" I ventured slowly. She just blinked; her annoyed look didn't falter. I shrank a bit. "You know, to... talk about the project some more..."

"No," her tone was sharp and blunt. "I've got a thing. Nothing you'd be interested in."

She was gone almost as soon as the bell rang, yet again. I sighed wearily.

CHAPTER 6

I stormed into my apartment with a little grunt of effort as I shouldered the door shut. I didn't bother calling out to anyone that I was home. There wasn't anyone to call out to.

It was kind of lonely, arriving to an empty house.

With a soft sigh, I dropped my school crap, as I called it, on the breakfast table and headed towards my bedroom.

I examined the disarray with vague amusement. My bed was unmade, as always. (Hey, I was just going to sleep in it in a few hours anyways, why bother fixing it up?) My trap set was hidden under a tarp in the corner of my room, near the small Mac computer that had been a gift to me several years back. Double-pronged hooks on the walls held up my acoustic, electric, and bass guitars. A keyboard was propped on its side beneath them. All of those had been gifts as well, but on one condition – I had to master playing them before I got one of my own. Which was fine by me; I used these very often, and it had been fun, learning how to play all my instruments.

Humming absently, I opened up iTunes on my computer and hit shuffle. Avenged Sevenfold was the first thing to start playing. Favorite band - fuck yes. I slammed my hand down in the classic air-guitar motion as the main riff started up. Grinning lightly, I stalked over to my closet and began rifling through my clothes.

“Here we are,” I muttered, pulling out a slightly faded rainbow tie-dyed shirt. The sleeves were torn off; on the chest was written in bold, black lettering was the phrase “We're everywhere!” I mouthed the words as the song continued playing.

I slid into my new shirt, the well-worn cotton soft on my skin. I then changed from the baggy black uniform pants into a favorite pair of jeans. They were wearing thin (I was sure they were translucent by now) and had several holes and frays in the legs, but that was to be expected.

They were getting close to three years old now. The last thing I put on was my black leather jacket.

I re-spiked my hair with my fingers, probably just messing it up worse, not that I minded, and dragged my guitar case out of the closet, flinging it open and wincing when I remembered that I had put several papers in the case – papers that now went flying to the other side of the room.

“Whatever,” I groused to myself. My room was already a mess, a few more papers wouldn't do much for it either way. I unhooked my shiny black Les Paul from its place on the wall and carefully - carefully - placed it into the case. It simply wouldn't do, to break one of my most prized possessions just half-an-hour before I had to use it. Not to mention, I would get a serious shriek-fest from my guardians. Not that they'd learn about it, not for a while.

I snapped the case shut and locked the clasps in. *This should be fun.* I unplugged my mp3 player and hooked it to one of my belt-loops, shutting off the music playing from my computer shortly thereafter. I then shoved my earphones into my pocket, picked up my guitar, and headed to the parking lot downstairs.

It took me a few minutes, but I did manage to find my truck in the parking lot. Well, technically, it was my uncle's, but he was never around to use it, so it had been “gifted” to me. Plus, he had his own, nicer car by now. Not to mention, my truck was a piece of shit. I fished the keys out of my jacket pocket anyways, half-dumping the guitar into the bed of the beat-up red pick-up.

I started off in the direction of the courthouse, glancing at the clock every couple of minutes. I was on a time constraint, after all. Fortunately, I was able to skirt several traffic jams, courtesy of the local radio, and made it there with a bit of time to spare. Which was just as well, seeing as not everyone was there yet. I quickly introduced myself to the woman in charge and she slapped a label of “B” on the back of my shirt. I laughed a little at that; they'd wanted one person from each side of the “LGBT” spectrum to be represented in the band, and while I wasn't *exactly* bisexual, I was close enough to it that I didn't mind being labeled as such for one performance. Besides, I *had* identified as bisexual for a good chunk of my life, so it didn't really matter to me.

That out of the way, I managed to still find time to set up my guitar where there was close to no chance that anyone could see me. Unless, of course, they were looking for me.

“Hey, did we ever hear about which songs we were doing?” I asked of the drummer, who’d been labeled with a large “T.” I was having some difficulty determining that one’s gender.

“Just one song,” the bassist spoke up with a grin. He was easier to figure out; the letter “G” was slapped onto his back. I supposed, then, that our singer was likely a lesbian.

“What, the first one?” I asked him curiously.

“Yep, that's the one,” he said happily. “It really suits the gay community down here, don't you think?” I found myself almost instantly startled by his overly-cheerful take on things.

“Uh, yeah,” I ventured a little meekly. Optimists always unnerved me, just a little. “D'you know when we're up?”

“As soon as we're announced!” the man declared. Then he blinked when he noticed that I was pretty much hiding behind a set of amplifiers. “Hey, why don't you come out here with the rest of us?”

“It's okay,” I assured him quickly, feeling my pulse accelerate at the mere thought of being out there where everyone could see me. The man just shrugged and waved goodbye to me as he went back to his bass guitar, and I stifled a relieved sigh.

I knew I was being ridiculous. There was no way anyone could know who I was just from my guitar playing. But still - I didn't want to take any chances.

A few more minutes passed in relative silence as the rally kicked off. I spent the moments checking the tuning on my guitar one last time.

“And now, representing the more musically inclined section of our community, we are proud to present the band, GLBT!” There was a roar of applause, and I had to fight to keep from grimacing. The drummer began playing the somewhat slow drum introduction. I silently counted for a few measures, before beginning the equally slow guitar part for this song. It was one of the easier guitar parts. Shortly after, the singer, a girl as expected, came in singing.

“Do you think about everything you've been through? You never thought you'd be so depressed. Are ya wondering, is it life or death? Do ya think that there's no one like you?” I absently bobbed my head in time with the music, as the overly-chipper bassist came in.

I must admit, I was extremely shocked at the fact that we got almost entirely through with the song without interruptions from the crowd, not counting the parts of the song that they were supposed to join in with the band for. I was actually beginning to relax, despite the fact that there was a crowd in front of the band. I silently reassured myself that no one could see me as I all but hid behind the amps. Then, just before the last section of the song – in which the crowd did the majority of the singing – I heard a yell from one of the security guards, just before I felt something cold and wet hit my chest, splattering bright green all over me.

I gave a sharp yelp. There were several outraged hollers from the crowd, and a few from the other band members. The microphone gave off some horrible feedback, and nearly everyone winced. I felt a second explosion of wetness hit my shoulder, slicking my face and hair in bright blue. Paint. Feeling rather ill and infuriated, I silently left the stage with the rest of the band members as the security guards ran through the crowd, attempting to catch the paint-throwers. I silently told myself that it could be worse – it could have been someone from PETA, throwing blood at me for my leather jacket. It didn't help any.

The first speaker went up and began talking. Evidently, we were going to continue as planned. Good. I was going to go home then. I slung my guitar off of my shoulder, and carefully set it into its case. I winced miserably at the splatters of paint on the instrument. I wanted to cry at the sight of my now-ruined guitar. Scowling with frustration, I snapped it closed and picked it up, intending to go straight home now. Then I noticed the security guards we'd hired half-way dragging a group of familiar adolescents towards the exit. My gaze hardened, and I took a shortcut through the crowd to get to the guards.

“Hold up, hold up,” I begged the guards, panting slightly. If they thought anything of my language, they didn't say anything. They did, however, stop. I examined the teenagers, and I practically snarled in rage. I knew all of them went to my school. Ashley, Kyle, Derek, and, possibly worst of all, Jessie.

What the hell was *she* doing here? It was a well-known fact that Jessie was probably the kindest of all the resident ‘phobes. I couldn't even *begin* to imagine that she'd willingly gone along with it.

“These are the guys who were throwing paint?” I asked one of the guards. She nodded. Kyle spat at me. I jerked slightly; the wad of saliva hit my glasses. I wiped the lens with my

fingers, my nose scrunching up with disgust, and flicked the spit off onto the ground. “Okay, we're going to be immature, then,” I muttered. I wiped some bright blue paint off of the other lens, but only succeeded in smearing it worse. I gave up then; I'd have to give them a *serious* scrubbing when I got home, and even then they might not be salvageable. My ire spiked. “Were they *all* throwing paint?” I directed that one at the security guards.

“No ma'am, not all of them,” one of them spoke up. “But they all seemed to be in the same group, so we just rounded them up.”

“Hey, get this dyke to let me go,” Kyle demanded, scowling. I honestly wanted to spit on *him*, see how he liked it, but I refrained from doing that. I was still trying to do my good deed for the day, after all.

“Yeah, they'd probably be all together,” I admitted, now lying through my teeth, “because they all go to the same school. With me. But *Jessie*,” I put one hand on the redhead's shoulder and pointed at her with the other, “didn't *come* here with them.” She stiffened under my hand. I added, “She came here with *me*. She was supposed to just wait for me to get off the stage, and I would've come down after our number to sit with her the rest of the time.” I smiled sheepishly on Jessica's behalf. “She probably saw these guys from our school and just went to hang out with them while I was on stage. She wouldn't have known what these jerk-offs were planning.” I saw a flash of amusement in one of the guard's faces. “So, is it okay if I just take her back home? Please?” My free hand went to her other shoulder, and I squeezed lightly, trying to imply that we were *close*. It'd help cement my request.

The security guards spared each other quite a few glances, apparently communicating in silence. The guard keeping an eye on Jessie finally just nodded and all but shoved my science partner at me. I requested that they have a nice day as the security almost dragged the others out of the area.

As soon as they were out of sight, I felt a harsh slap to the side of my face. I whipped around to face Jessie, who instantly slapped me again. She raised her hand a third time, and I snatched her wrist, fury boiling.

“What the *hell*, Jessie?” I spat, furious. *I save her from getting a criminal record, and this is the thanks I get?!*

“You deserved it!” the little redhead declared, equally angry with me. “People are starting to talk, *girl*. They think we're going out. Do you have *any* idea what that's going to do to my reputation?” She was almost yelling now.

“Well, *gee*, let's ask the school *dyke* if she has any idea on how it feels to be shut out!” I snarled in outrage, eyes blazing.

“And why the hell did you do that, anyways?” she went on, as if she hadn't heard me. “They're going to say that you did that because I'm your *girlfriend!*”

I gripped her wrist as hard as I could – which is pretty hard, considering the fact that I could easily lift most of a trap set – and she shut up, wincing.

“I love how you think I give a shit about *your* rep,” I sneered acidly. “Do you fucking realize what the hell I just did for you? I just saved you from getting a goddamn *criminal record*, you little sonuva bitch, you should be fucking *grateful* I even cared to say anything at all!” I shoved her out of my grip. “Hurry the fuck up. I'm taking you home.” She said nothing, but allowed me to lead her to my truck. After my guitar and my partner were situated, I asked for her address. She was silent for a few minutes, then muttered it, obviously unhappy with me. I didn't give two shits how unhappy she was. I silently drove her to the place she'd named, and stopped as soon as we were there.

“Out,” I ordered her. She attempted to say something, and I held up a hand to silence her. “No. No BS'd apologies. We've discussed this. Get out of my truck. Come Monday, I'll be speaking to Mister Barker to separate us so you don't have to worry anymore about your *reputation*.” I sneered the word out, and she glanced to the side, either not feeling too pleased with how this conversation had turned out, or feeling extremely guilty. It didn't matter. She silently got out and I drove off, ignoring the constricting, familiar feeling of betrayal in my chest.

CHAPTER 7

The next day, I noticed with a bit of confusion that no one was giving me dirty looks for “dating that dyke” anymore. When I sat down in my first class, Chorus, I discovered why, as one of my friends, Kendra, eagerly approached me.

“Did you seriously hit that girl?” she asked me eagerly. I gave her a bewildered look, and she elaborated: “Everyone says that you decked that lesbo yesterday for coming onto you! Did you really do that? I hear she still has the mark...”

I admit, I was stunned. I didn't think that anyone would have heard about me slapping Rachel, even though we did go to the same school. And did I really leave a mark on her face? I hadn't meant to do that... “Wait, is she at school today?” I asked Kendra, accidentally interrupting her rambling. She gave me a slightly reproachful look before replying.

“No, actually, I think she stayed home today,” she admitted reluctantly, before perking right back up with a grin. “Man, you must've done a number on her!” The bell – or rather, the beep; we had an electronic bell – signaled the beginning of class, and everyone fell silent. Kendra sneaked over to her voice section, and the teacher walked out of her office. Few people called her anything other than “Miss Kay;” K was the initial of her last name, which was hard to pronounce, so we just called her Miss K.

“Alright, settle down, settle down,” she ordered us rather loudly. The murmur of voices grew quiet, and she nodded happily. “Now, how many of you have listened to, or heard of, the band OneGirl?” A good three-quarters of the class had a hand up; mine was among them. I was a bit surprised, personally; Rachel had told me that OneGirl was getting more popular, but I didn't know that anyone other than the two of us had ever heard of her. Ms. K seemed pleased with that, though. “Good. Now, I don't think many of you know this, but she's been selling mp3s of choral songs she sometimes does, to chorus teachers, especially those at public schools.” She smiled wryly and added, “She keeps them cheaper for public school teachers, and for good

reason.” A ripple of amusement passed through the students. “Anyways, these mp3s have been specially designed, so we can hear her either do the four voice parts separately, or altogether.” I raised my eyebrows; OneGirl was evidently pretty flexible, going from rock songs, to metal, to choral. “Now, I've purchased several of these, and we're going to listen to them today, and decide which ones we're going to perform in December.”

True to her word, we reviewed all five of the songs; some of them, we only listened to her singing all the parts at once; others, we had to go back and listen to the separate voice parts. It took up the entire class period, and we all reluctantly admitted that we were a bit disappointed to have to leave.

“I can't believe we're actually going to be doing some of OneGirl's songs,” Kendra exclaimed as we gathered our belongings and left the room.

“No kidding,” I agreed. “I didn't even know that she did chorus songs.” My friend rapidly agreed with the sentiment before turning down a different hall to get to her next class. I sluggishly headed towards my Chemistry class, not particularly wanting to meet up with my partner. To my surprise, though, Rachel was not in that class, nor did she show up at any point in the period. Ashley congratulated me on teaching “that dyke” a lesson, but I only accepted it half-heartedly. I hadn't hit her that hard, had I? I couldn't help but recall the day we'd been partnered up, when I had backhanded her. She'd almost instantly gone down, and she had been bleeding. Maybe I *had* hit her that hard.

When the bell for lunch rang – uh, beeped – I quickly left the classroom, intending to go to the library to check to see if my partner was in there. After signing in, I went to the librarian and asked her if she'd seen Rachel today.

“Hm, no, I don't think I have,” she admitted, her brow furrowing a bit. “That's funny, she usually tells me if she's going to be out a day. She's always afraid that I'm going to get mad at her if she doesn't show.” I just nodded, barely listening to that part, and thanked her anyways. Okay, so Rachel wasn't here today. That was okay; everyone was absent at some time or another. She wasn't hurt too badly, I assured myself. She would be back tomorrow.

Except she wasn't. In fact, she didn't show up again until that Friday. I recoiled visibly when I walked into our Chemistry class and saw her. She was seated in her normal seat, slouched

over a book as always, but that wasn't what made me wince. Rachel had a rather livid bruise on her lower jaw. *Did I do that?*

As a few other people filtered into the classroom, I put my books down and went over to my partner's desk. I vaguely noticed that there was no title on her book, only a crude star and a stick-figure girl. I didn't think too hard about that, but just tapped on her desk when she didn't look at me.

"Who's there?" she asked absently, not looking away from her book.

"Jessica," I responded, not noticing that I was being set up.

"Jessie who?" She still didn't look up.

"Jessica, your science fair partner," I replied, a bit annoyed that we had to do this every time we spoke.

Rachel sighed and slid a scrap of paper into the book to mark her spot. "You're kinda missing the basic point of that whole thing, hun," she pointed out dryly, finally looking up at me. When she spoke again, it was in a rather obvious southern drawl: "So, what can I dewyafer?"

"What happened to your face?" I asked hesitantly, pointing at the deep, purplish bruise, as if she didn't know what I was talking about. Rachel flinched away from my hand; whether she was still upset about my accusations from that gay rally, or she thought I was going to tag her again, I wasn't able to tell. She just glanced away, and I felt my stomach clench. The thought of me being abusive hadn't ever come up before, but it seemed to me that I just might be that way. "I didn't do that, did I?"

"The only thing I'm going to hold you accountable for is ruining my four-year-old genuine leather jacket, and the paint job on my guitar," she stated flatly. Her eyes narrowed slightly, and she plucked at the blue paint spatter on her jacket.

I felt a bit of heat rise in my face, and quickly tried to change the topic again: "You didn't tell me how you got that bruise..." The bell "rang," and Rachel seemed to shut down with the noise. I felt her barriers go back up as she stuffed her books in the wire basket under her seat.

"You should break up with Kyle," the lanky girl remarked, almost offhandedly. I gave her an odd look at the sudden subject change, and she added, "He's not much of a gentleman, I don't think." I furrowed my brow and tried to ask her what she meant, but she just offered me that infuriating grin of hers, full of mischievousness and a hint of playfulness. "Siddown, Jessie,"

she ordered me, appearing to be amused. I scowled and silently returned to my desk; class was starting in a minute, anyways.

I wasn't able to get any other explanation for her remarks, that day.

CHAPTER 8

As soon as the bell rang, I was out of the classroom. I had the feeling that Jessie would want to confront me on my words, and I didn't want any of that. I was going to be in deep shit anyways, no need to make it worse. I took an alternate route to the library, hoping to avoid the person I last wanted to see. I finally reached the end of the hall that the library (and the cafeteria) was on, and sighed softly in relief, slowing my pace a bit. *Home free.*

“There's the dyke!” came a guy's triumphant yell. Someone else yelled for the 'dyke' to stop. I prayed quietly as I attempted to get to the library before I got caught. No dice.

“Where the hell are you goin', dyke?” demanded a familiar-sounding voice.

“Oh, were you speaking to me?” I asked curiously, being a smart-ass even though I knew I was about to get beat up, or some other variety of unpleasantness. “I thought you were speaking to an embankment of earth and rock, built to prevent flooding. As for *me*, I am going to the library.” I felt my collar get grabbed roughly, and I was steered towards the small cubby in which the bathroom doors were located. “But apparently not anymore, seeing as I'm being dragged over there, most likely to be terrorized,” I amended reasonably.

I grunted softly as I was practically thrown into the cubby, stumbling and barely staying on my feet. Just as I thought; Kyle, and his posse. Good god, help me.

“I hear you're fuckin' with my girl,” Kyle snorted like an angry bull. “Didn't I tell you to quit it, you little bitch?”

Strictly speaking, he'd only told me that he'd heard talk that I'd been screwing around with Jessie. After that, he just decked me, resulting in the lovely, colorful bruise on my jaw. And today, I hadn't even spoken to the girl – *she'd* approached *me*. “Um...” I got cut off, to my annoyance.

“Maybe I should show you again why you shouldn't fuck with my girlfriend,” he growled, using a heavy forearm to pin me to the wall. I grunted in pain, and felt the panic rising;

I really wasn't sure what this guy had in mind. Although I kept my cool exterior, I was half-way paralyzed in terror. Quite frankly, I was able to hold my own in a fight, but being pinned down like this made my mind automatically jump to conclusions. I heard the lunchroom door open (as did several boys who glanced nervously over their shoulders in that direction) and, praying that it was a teacher or some other good Samaritan, yelled the one word that every high-school girl knew to use in this situation, whether it was true or not:

“*Rape!*” He dropped me like he'd been burned, and I scooped up my binder, scampering out of the cubby as fast as I could. I heard several of the guys make frustrated noises, but if there was a witness, there wasn't much they could do.

I all but ran into the library, and heaved a low sigh of relief as I signed my name in the book. I greeted the librarian on my way to the back room. The only other person allowed back there was the librarian herself, and she was busy with the book club.

I let myself in, dropped my stuff on one of the shelves, and went back to the corner, behind the large rolls of colored paper. I sat down, bringing my knees close to my chest, and hugged them tightly. I remained like that for several minutes (I'm not sure how long), before a feminine knock came at the door. I said nothing.

“Rachel, I know you're back here,” a familiar voice pointed out as the door was pushed open. “I see your stuff up here.”

“Go 'way, Jessie,” I half-growled, lifting my head and closing my eyes. I lightly thudded my head against the wall a few times, as if that would help ease the wad of emotions buried deep in my belly.

“Rachel,” she sighed with a bit of irritation. I could hear her stumbling back to where I had set myself down, and smirked to myself. It was a little-known fact that the library's back room was, essentially, a room full of crap that either needed to be fixed, sold, or just plain thrown out. “Are you okay?” she peeked around the large rolls of paper, and sighed with relief when she found me.

“Yeah. Why?” I asked her curiously, opening my eyes again. Was she still hung up on thinking she had hit me too hard? Jessie looked down at her shoes for a bit, obviously uncomfortable, and I furrowed my brow in confusion.

“I, uh, heard you scream a minute ago,” Jessica murmured softly, obviously hoping that it wasn't a sore subject. My expression hardened.

“Your point?” I groused, frowning a bit as she crouched down near me. I glanced at her, noticing the gentle worry in her hazel gaze.

“He didn't...” she trailed off, and I understood what she was getting at.

“No,” I muttered, resting my chin on my knees. “Hell, I dunno if he was even trying to do...that. He pinned me to the wall, though.” I looked at the ground. I wasn't sure if I was embarrassed at the thought of Jessie seeing me in that situation, or still nervous from the encounter with Kyle. I stiffened instantly when a soft hand rested between my shoulder blades, evidently trying to provide some comfort.

“Has he done that before?” Jessie asked softly, still watching at me. I had to resist the urge to tuck a strand of red hair behind her ear.

“He hasn't pinned me before, no,” I told her, intentionally leaving out the bit about how he'd hit me a few days ago.

“Has he done anything *like* that before?” the shorter girl clarified, giving me a deadpan look. I had to bite back a laugh at the look, but instantly sobered at her question.

“Yeah, something like that,” I mumbled shortly. When it was obvious that she was waiting for an answer, I tipped my head up, showing her the purple-and-blue mark again. She hissed softly, almost sympathetically, then her eyes narrowed when she understood what I was getting at.

“Kyle did that?” I nodded wordlessly. “That's why you told me to break up with him?” Another nod. Jessie sighed deeply, before giving me an irked glare. “Why didn't you just tell me that he was hitting you?” she demanded to know. I kept silent, and my partner huffed softly. “I *am* going to break up with him, though,” she mused softly, taking her hand away from me. “I didn't know that he was the type to hit girls – why *did* he hit you?” Jessica asked suddenly.

I smiled humorlessly at her. “Cause I was fucking with his girl.” Her eyes widened at my statement, and she gave a soundless 'oh.' I could have sworn that I saw a light blush cross her cheeks. The bell chose that moment to end the first lunch period, and I got to my feet, before pulling Jessie up as well. “Get to class, Jessie,” I commanded with a vague grin, lightly clapping

her on the shoulder. She made a surprised noise at the contact, and I smirked as I picked up my things and left the back room. I chuckled softly all the way to my third block class.

CHAPTER 9

I checked the time on my cell phone for what was probably the billionth time that minute. I'd texted Kyle in my third block, right after lunch, with the four words that any guy can tell you is a bad sign: "we need 2 tlk."

I was near the throng of people that were waiting for their carpool rides. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Rachel laughing as she "borrowed" one of the people's guitars, and began plucking out a quick, complex-sounding melody. Then I started as a familiar arm wrapped itself around my waist.

"Hey, babe," my soon-to-be ex greeted me pleasantly, leaning down to try and kiss me. I turned my head enough that he was only able to barely graze my cheek. Kyle frowned at the action. "Something wrong?" he asked, sounding for all the world like he was concerned for me. I had to refrain from melting against him; it was that same concern that had made me fall for him, and it seemed to still be at work now. I glanced away, a tinge of guilt rising at the thought of dumping the guy that I'd been with for almost a year. As I looked away, I saw Rachel grinning up a storm, and I heard the faint strains of the "Smoke on the Water" introduction. What caught my eye, though, was the deep bruise that marred her pale face.

"Kyle," I sighed, and he looked instantly worried. I tried not to feel charmed at his actions. "We've been dating for a while now, but I don't think that we should keep doing this..." His blue eyes widened in surprise, and he brushed a bit of his blonde hair out of his face. I breathed in deeply and continued, "I think we should break up."

"But why, Jessica?" he asked, seeming genuinely bemused. "We're so good together." He gripped my hips. "I don't think we should."

"Kyle, let me go," I requested, pulling away a bit. His grip tightened, and he pulled me closer to him. "Kyle," I repeated in a warning tone.

“Why are you dumping me?” the taller guy demanded to know. “Was it something I did? I swear, I’ll never do it again.” I hesitated, then recalled how Rachel had been rather vague when talking about whether Kyle had, well, attacked her. *How many other times has he hit her?*

“No, Kyle. I’m breaking up with you,” I reiterated. I winced as he held me even tighter. “Let me go.”

“Not until you tell me why you’re dumping me!”

“Dude, leave the girl be,” sighed a familiar voice. We whipped around in tandem to face the person who spoke. It was Rachel, her hands on her hips, looking rather unimpressed. Her hands went to her hips and she shot him a ‘christ-you’re-stupid’ look over the top rims of her glasses. I almost smiled at that look alone; only people with glasses could achieve that specific unimpressed look. “She asked for you to turn her loose. Now do so, you’re making an ass outta yourself.”

I backed away, nervous, as Kyle let me go. “You put Jessica up to this,” he declared, scowling. People were gathering; a fight was brewing. “What the fuck did you tell her?”

She tilted her head back in a laugh. “I wish I could take credit for it, but no. I had nothing to do with it,” she smirked, placing a hand dramatically to her chest, like she was offended at the notion that he thought she’d done something. “She broke up with you ‘cause you look like the southmost end of a north-bound mule – with a personality to match.” A few people snickered at her accent and phrase, but most people (myself included) merely rolled their eyes.

“What the fuck did you tell her?” my ex demanded a second time, glaring venomously at the girl who, while being considerably taller than me, was still a bit smaller than him. He even went so far as to grab the collar of her shirt, jerking her towards them. I felt my heart leap into my throat when he shook her. A rumble went through the small crowd; a guy-on-girl fight didn’t happen often. Maybe even never. But it was happening now.

“I didn’t tell her jack shit!” Rachel snarled back, her eyes blazing. “And at the risk of sounding cliché,” she balled a fist here, “get your *fucking* hands *off* me!” The fist she’d made cracked into his cheek, snapping his head to the side. He was apparently so shocked that she’d hit him that he let her go, took a step or two back, and rubbed his sore cheek. Those who knew about the multitude of rings that she wore winced; that much have hurt.

“You little bitch!” Kyle growled, fury making him ugly. He threw a punch as well, slamming into her chest and knocking the breath out of her. Rachel went back at him, her hands curved like claws in the way that pretty much every girl went into a fight. Her nails raked his cheek as Kyle tried to hit her again, his fist landing on her shoulder this time.

I wanted nothing more than to run in there and stop the two, but I was frozen in place. Even as Rachel hit the pavement with a heavy thud, I couldn't move. The roars of the teenagers around me drowned out my hearing. The rocker stumbled to her feet, eyes wild, chest heaving. She looked like a cornered animal – terrified out of her wits, but ready to rip apart the first person who got too close.

“What's going on over here?” barked an authoritative voice. Many people scattered, Rachel included. I nearly sighed in relief and glanced up at the teacher who was shooing the people away. I noticed Kyle was still standing there, looking rather furious. The teacher glared at him and asked if there was a problem. He reluctantly walked away, muttering about how there was no problem at all. As soon as Kyle was gone, I went in search of the girl who had, essentially, started this whole mess, and had rerouted her ex's wrath.

“Why did you do that?” I asked with a sigh, hands on my hips. I had to fight from frowning when I noticed that she was reclining against a slightly older girl, who was absently ruffling her spiked hair.

“No problem, Jessie. Glad you're thankful for the save,” Rachel said pointedly, lightly shoving the girl who was messing up her hair. I colored slightly, frowning at her amused sarcasm.

“I... look, can I talk to you?” I glanced at the girl that grinned wickedly at my partner, and elaborated: “In *private*?”

“Of course,” Rachel agreed graciously, shoving her friend away so she could get up. The seated girl laughed quietly, muttering something about how she glad she wasn't Rachel right now. She idly strolled over to the farthest bit of sidewalk, before flopping onto the ground. I hesitated, before joining her on the ground.

“Why did you do that?” I asked her again. The girl hummed absently, considering.

“Cause,” she decided with a grin. I glared, and she laughed. “Alright, alright, just think of it as a femi-nazi doing her job and protecting another girl.”

I shrugged tiredly. “So why'd you chase Kyle away, then? You didn't have to do *that*.”

Rachel tilted her head as she thought about her answer. “No, I didn't have to. Buuut I wanted to.” She offered me that same grin, and I slowly colored when I noticed the hint of flirtatiousness in her dark gaze. A car horn honked, startling us both, and the moment was lost. “That'd be my ride. Later, Jessie.” She got up, dusted her pants off, and left me to my thoughts.

I didn't even remember to correct her nickname for me.

CHAPTER 10

I piled into the backseat of the car and threw my stuff into the floor. Jenny climbed into the seat beside me, and tapped her sister on the shoulder when we were both settled. The car pulled out of the school.

We were silent for a few minutes, before Jenny turned to me with a positively evil-looking grin.

“Rachel’s crushing on a straight girl again.” I shot her the most annoyed look I could muster.

“I wasn’t even staring out into space, let alone dozing,” I groused, frowning again when she only laughed.

“I wasn’t trying to wake you up,” she snickered, “I was just stating a fact.”

“What are you even talking about?”

“You’re totally crushing on *Jessica!*” Jenny roared with laughter. I felt a bit of heat starting to creep into my face, but I ignored it as best as I could.

“Like hell I am!” I retorted, clearly unamused.

“Why did you go pick a fight with the school’s resident ape, then?” she asked me smugly, raising a brow.

“He was being an ass!” I tried to defend myself, but Jenny was having none of that.

“And why did you convince her to dump said ape?” she asked me.

I gave her a startled look. “How the fuck did you know that?”

She just grinned. “I have a friend or two in that class.”

“I told her to break up with him because he’s an abusive asshole,” I huffed, swearing loudly when Jenny just laughed at my ‘excuses.’ We quieted down a bit when Jenny’s sister threw an irked warning at us about our language and volume.

“Not to mention I saw you flirting with her before we left,” my so-called friend pointed out, smirking at me.

“I did no such thing,” I lied, crossing my arms in frustration.

“You did. I saw her blushing.” Jenny, ever the foul-mouthed nosy person she was, wagged her eyebrows suggestively at me. “What’d you tell her? Any... *suggestions?*”

“Nothing concerning you.” Now I was being defensive. She gave me a dry look and poked me in the shoulder. Pain shot through the area, and I yelped and gripped it with my free hand. “Damn-shit-fuck-hell. That *hurts*. Don't *do* that,” I groaned through gritted teeth. I ignored the language warning again.

“And that’s another thing! You got into a *fight* over the girl, for god’s sakes!” I shot her an irked glare. Still, she was a good friend, and proved as such when she pulled my sleeve down a bit to look at the shoulder. She hissed through her teeth in sympathy. I glanced down; there was a purpling bruise where Kyle had smacked my shoulder. I winced when I noticed the dark black mark near the edge of the bruise; he’d apparently been wearing his class ring when he hit me. “*That’s* gotta hurt,” Jenny murmured, pulling my sleeve back over it.

“You’re as sharp as a marble.”

There was silence for a little while, the only sound being the occasional growl from Jenny’s sister at an idiotic driver. Then Jenny glanced over at me again.

“So. Crushing on her?”

“Yep.”

“Big one?”

“Little one.”

“Honestly?”

“Doubt it.”

“Straight?”

“Yep.”

“Mm.” We fell quiet for a bit, before Jenny piped up again: “Cheetos and Vault night?” It was a little-known fact that puffed Cheetos and a large bottle of Vault was my odd type of ‘comfort food.’ It never failed to amuse me that when I felt like crap, either she or Thomas would make me that offer. I laughed a bit even now.

“Seems that way, yeah.”

“Have any at home?”

“Nope. Making a grocery run later, though. I’ll pick ‘em up then.”

Jenny glared at me, and I grinned a little. It was an *equally* little-known fact that both of my friends refused to let me buy my own comfort food. “Like hell you *will*,” she declared, shoving me.

“I would do it, too,” I teased her. She and Thomas were both of the opinions that if a friend couldn’t be bothered to go get comfort food for a friend, then what use were they?

“I’ll slash your tires before I’d let you do that,” she threatened playfully as her sister pulled up in front of my apartment complex.

“I’ll take the bus,” I laughed, grabbing my stuff from the floor. I got out of the car.

“I’ll steal your wallet!” Jenny yelled through the door as I closed it. I simply made a rude gesture at her as they drove off. Chuckling to myself, I wandered up to my designated apartment and looked around once the door was closed behind me.

“Well at least I’ll have a dumb pity-party to look forward to,” I muttered, tossing my stuff onto the table. I pulled my belt off with a violent jerk, throwing it... somewhere. My ID badge was right behind it. Tugging my shirt-tail out of my pants as I walked, I went to my room, grabbing my keyboard and half-carrying, half-dragging it to the living room. I had the sudden urge to play, as I often did when I was bored, unhappy, any alone, and I did have nothing better to do, so I might as well play.

Once I had my keyboard situated and in front of me, though, I found myself stuck. “What should I play?” I mused aloud, running a finger down the tops of the keys. I absently began to press the keys, closing my eyes as I hummed softly along with the melodies that the keyboard produced. I wasn’t playing for very long, I didn’t think, before I was jerked out of my trance-like state by a female’s voice:

“Pachelbel’s Canon in D!”

“What?” I asked, bewildered, as I instantly stopped playing and twisted around in my seat. Jenny was coming in with a pair of Kroger bags. Thomas was close behind her. He held a square, heavy-looking case in his hands.

“Pachelbel's Canon in D,” Thomas explained as he flopped onto the armchair next to the couch I was seated at. He carefully set the case down beside him before continuing. “Wasn't that what you were playing?”

I racked my brain, but I found that I hadn't actually remembered what I was playing. Makes sense, though, I play that whenever I have something on my mind. “Yeah, I guess.”

“You guess? You don't know?” Jenny teased.

“Do I ever?”

“Point taken,” she allowed, dropping a large plastic bowl of Cheetos into my lap. I made a tired, yet pleased noise that sounded something like a very weary, monotone “yaaaay,” even going so far as to intentionally crack my voice. My friends just laughed at me and my odd noises. Jenny flopped onto the couch next to me and shoved a 2-Liter of Vault between us.

“Jenny please marry me,” I requested with a straight face. She snorted softly.

“Please! You'd be like the worst wife ever,” she declared. Thomas had a good laugh at my expense; I merely protested Jenny's statement. A knock on the door made me look up curiously. “Do I have any more friends that attend pity-parties?” I wondered aloud as I put the bowl to the side and got up.

“Not that I know of, unless this is someone new,” Thomas teased, raising a brow. I rolled my eyes.

“I'm single, and you know it,” I corrected flatly as I went to my door. I opened the door and, to my shock, my science partner was standing there, glancing at her watch. “...*Jessie?*”

She jumped, and looked up at me – I was reminded instantly of the nearly four-inch height difference as her soft blue eyes met mine. “Um, hi. Didn't you ask me to come over?” she asked, bemused at my evident surprise. “You... had your sister call me and pick me up?” It clicked, and I rolled my eyes.

“No, Jessie, I didn't invite you over. I don't even *have* a sister.” Her eyes went wide, a low blush creeping into her face. I forced myself to not admit that the blush was cute on her - *dammit!* “But you're welcome to come in and hang with me and *my harem*,” I added to get that thought out of my head, saying the last phrase loud enough to spark a round of protests from my friends. I could tell that Jessie was hesitant to 'hang' with the school's infinitesimal gay crowd, so I gripped her shoulder and practically dragged her inside, closing the door behind us.

“Look who showed up, Jenny,” I said, sweet enough to give someone a cavity or three. The glare I aimed at my friend was the polar opposite of my tone, though. “*Imagine that!*” Jenny just smiled innocently at me, offering me a covert wink when my partner wasn't looking at her. I made a mental note to throttle her later.

Introductions were made, with Jessie looking about as uncomfortable as I'd ever seen, and we were soon lounging in the living room. If either she or Jenny thought anything of my leaning against Jessie's shoulder, neither said a thing.

“So, Thomas, what do you have in the case?” I asked him curiously, grabbing a handful of Cheetos. He grinned and flipped open the container, revealing several seasons' worth of classic cartoons on DVD. I made my odd little world-weary ‘yay’ noise again, eliciting another round of chuckles from my two friends, and a considerably more surprised bout of laughter from Jessie.

“What was that noise all about?” she asked me, amused.

“It's her happy noise,” Thomas remarked dryly. “If you were here earlier, you would've heard her do it some more.”

“Why?” she seemed genuinely curious. I opened my mouth to answer, but Jenny cut me off.

“Cause we brought her Cheetos and Vault,” she said, motioning towards the bowl and the 2-Liter.

Jessie still looked confused, so I elaborated: “Comfort food.” An odd look passed over her face, but she didn't say anything. “Yo, sparkle-boy, pop in the DVDs!” I commanded, making a random gesture towards the television. He nodded, wrinkling his nose at the unflattering nickname, but went to the DVD player anyways to put in the first DVD.

We watched only a few episodes in silence, before I turned the volume down. I was the first one to start speaking the lines in tandem with the characters on-screen, but only for a little while. I quickly began straying from the lines to make up my own stupidity. Jenny was the first to join in on my silliness, followed shortly by Thomas. We were more than halfway through the disc before Jessie joined us.

We hardly noticed when Thomas got up to leave; he'd left his DVDs here. I think I was the only one to notice and, being the cynic that I am, the first thought I managed was this:

Two outcast reputed lesbians and a straight popular girl in the same house on a Friday night? Hoo, boy.

CHAPTER 11

When I woke up, the first thing I noticed was the fact that I was curled into something soft and warm. I remained in that small period between sleep and wakefulness for several seconds, wanting to go back to sleep but unable to do so. My eyes fluttered open, and my entire body froze as I realized where I was. Rachel had dozed off sitting up on the couch. I was situated sideways on her lap, my legs curled in front of me. My head was resting on her shoulder, slightly nuzzled into her pale neck. My arms were under her jacket, curled around her shockingly thin frame. I noticed a bit uneasily that one of her hands was resting lightly on my hip. I felt a hint of panic rising in the back of my mind – had we done something? – then I took a deep breath and began sifting through my memories of last night, trying to recall how I had ended up, well, *here*.



"Where'd Thomas go?" Jenny asked curiously. I watched Rachel with a mixture of amusement and disgust as she took a large gulp directly from the 2-Liter. She held up a single finger as she swallowed.

"He left like a couple'a hours ago," Rachel replied, licking her lips absently. "You know how his mom gets when he's over here with us." Jenny laughed a bit, pulling her legs up onto the chair she had 'claimed.' She saw that I was confused, so the brunette decided to elaborate:

"We've told his mom several times that not only is her son gay, but so are we," Jenny chuckled. "She didn't believe us."

"I'm not gay!" Rachel protested, Jenny flatly stating the phrase in unison with her. Rachel's back leaned gently against my shoulder. I nearly choked on air at this statement, but managed to keep quiet. *How is she not a lesbian?* I'd *seen* her date girls, after all. *Everyone* had.

Rachel shot her friend a dirty look at the mockery. "You say that all the time, hun," Jenny reminded the tall woman dryly, before turning back to me. "Anyways, back to the story. See,

Thomas' mom didn't believe us when we told her we weren't attracted to her son." She glanced dryly at Rachel at the different wording. "So we had to prove it." I wasn't sure I wanted to ask how they did that, but my partner supplied the information for me.

"We kissed in front of her," Rachel laughed. "It was literally *the* most awkward moment of my entire life."

"It was so not even that bad!" Jenny tried to defend herself. I shifted uncomfortably behind Rachel, who glanced at me over her shoulder.

"You've got something to say. Spit it out."

"How are you not a lesbian?" I finally managed to make that question come out, instead of asking something more dangerous... like whether the two were dating now, as many rumors said they were.

"The hell kinda question is that?" she laughed. "Nah, I'm not totally gay. I'm pansexual, if ya want to get technical," Rachel mused aloud. I felt even more confused now. *What does that even mean?* "It's pretty much a broader version of bisexual. I don't have to limit my options to just guys or just girls." *What else is there?* "I can also date folks with no gender, both genders, a different gender *entirely*, and, uh, folks who're transgender, too."

I stared at her, utterly lost at that point. "*What?*"

She merely gave me a crooked grin. "Ain't got a gender pamphlet on me otherwise I'd give it to ya. Google it. I'm not gonna sit here and explain gender spectrums, that'll take for-fucking-ever."

Jenny didn't appear to have heard anything past Rachel's utterly baffling description of her sexuality. "Didn't you date one once?" Jenny asked her, stealing a few Cheetos. "Transgender dude? Female-to-male, right?"

"Mmhm," Rachel grunted around her Vault bottle. Once she was finished with her gulp of what she'd previously insisted was pure caffeine with a splash of color, flavor, and sugar, she smirked suggestively and slyly added, "He had a tongue stud, too." Her friend roared with laughter; I just blushed darkly. "Enough about my sexuality and past exploits," she declared after a few more seconds of laughter. "Jennifer," Jenny grimaced at being called by her whole name, "go fetch me my iPod. Please?"

Jenny pretended to whine about it, but got up and went deeper into the apartment. "Which one?" I heard her yell.

"Does it matter?" Rachel laughed in response.

"Tell me why *I'm* the one doing all this, now?" she groused, though the amused look on her face easily belied her fake annoyance.

"Because you're the only representative of my harem," Rachel reminded her, grinning.

"What about *her*?" Jenny asked, nodding at me. I stiffened; I wasn't even part of their 'clique,' let alone in Rachel's little 'harem.'

"She's not in it yet," my partner laughed, before moving and putting her head in my lap. I instinctively yelped and shoved her off of me. Rachel hit the floor with a grunt; Jenny laughed at her.

"*Rejected*," she smirked, tossing a small Shuffle at Rachel, who was still lying on the floor.

"Oh, go fuck yer mom." She caught the thing – barely – in both hands. "Why the hell are you givin' this to me, anyhow, go plug it in!" And the lanky woman chucked the music player back. Jenny caught it much easier than Rachel.

"*You are so needy*," she complained, crossing over to the docking station nearby the television. "Anything in particular I'm playing...?"

The rocker sat up, running glossy black nails through her mess of hair. "Avenged Sevenfold's always a good start." She finally got up, dusting herself off and flopping back down onto the couch.

I winced at the heavy metal that began to play through the speakers. I never understood how anyone was able to listen to that racket. OneGirl was the closest thing to metal that I ever listened to, but it was still a little bit of a stretch seeing as she didn't actually scream very often.

I happened to glance over at Rachel and nearly laughed at the sight. Rachel was bopping her head sharply to the heavy beat of the music, fingers lightly air-guitaring. On closer look, she was actually keeping time to the guitaring from the music.

Jenny plopped back down in the chair nearby, chuckling and shaking her head at Rachel's antics. She nonetheless nodded her head slightly in time with the music as well, evidently enjoying the noise anyways.

I repeated the soft laugh and shake of the head at the slightly-older woman next to me. "You look ridiculous, and I hope you know that," I teased her, unable to stifle my soft giggles. Rachel halted her motions, giving me a disapproving look.

"You're not getting into the spirit of my pity-party," she informed me calmly. I raised a brow.

"Is that what this is?"

"Essentially, yes."

"I'm not headbanging," I deadpanned, giving my science partner a dry look. She and Jenny glanced at each other; Rachel's brows raised. Jenny merely shrugged and held up her hands, surrendering. "What are you two planning?" I asked suspiciously, glancing between them. I couldn't get anything else out, for Rachel was suddenly upon me, tickling my sides mercilessly. I shrieked and tried to push away, but it wasn't much use. I hit the floor; Rachel was still on me, digging her fingers into my ribs with just enough force to make the tickling absolutely unbearable. I tried to yelp for Jenny to help me but she just laughed and held up her hands again, evidently smart enough to not step in where Rachel could turn on her.

Evidently, between the three of us, we make a ton of racket, for a moment later, there was a sharp knocking at the door.

Rachel reluctantly stood up, grimacing a bit. "That'll be the landlord," she sighed pitifully, straightening up. "Be back when I'm back, I guess." She begrudgingly wandered to her front door. Jenny watched her leave, then turned to me, settling down on the opposite side of the couch. The intensity in her gaze made me start.

"I'm going to be blunt here, Jessie," she began flatly, "while Rachel's not back yet."

"It's Jessica," I corrected automatically. I tried not to flinch at the annoyance in her gaze.

"Whatever. As I was going to say: do you like Rachel?" I was startled at the seemingly random question.

"What? No!" I was *not* interested in girls.

Jenny raised a brow at the rapid denial and I attempted not to blush at how it must have sounded. "Are you aware that there's a good chance that Rachel likes *you*?" I froze, stunned at that. How did I miss that? I just shook my head, 'no.' "Do you know what happened last time she had her heart broken?" I repeated the gesture, albeit a bit more hesitantly. In the back of my

mind, I heard the mp3 player shuffle to a different, slower song. "One week. For one full week, she did not eat, she barely drank. She didn't leave her apartment for anything. Not even for me." I just gaped; I felt a twinge of guilt as I recalled how I treated her to keep my friends, well... my friends. "If you don't like her that way, fine. Let her down easy because, at the risk of sounding cliched," her eyes narrowed, and I swore I detected a flicker of longing in her gaze, "if you break her heart, I will break *you*. No joke."

Rachel returned to the room, a few DVD cases in hand, and whatever I thought I saw in Jenny's expression vanished, to be replaced by the gentle amusement that had dominated her look the entire night.

"Okay, at the risk of being yelled at again, we're going to have to tone it down," the taller girl remarked wryly. She turned her mp3 player off and went to the DVD player again. She put one into the player and returned to the couch, stopping about a foot in front of it. Rachel put her hands on her hips and gave us both a dry look, unamused at having her entire couch taken up – and her seat stolen. Jenny and I just grinned up at her. "Alright, I see how y'all are gon' be." I squealed as a pair of leather-clad arms scooped me up.

Rachel just smirked as she sat down where I was, keeping me sideways on her lap. I tried to squirm away from her, but the taller girl just pinched my hip to keep me still. I yelped and smacked her hand. She laughed and teased, "Chill, Jessie, I'm not going to try any *naughty lesbian touching*." I blushed darkly and huffed quietly as I reluctantly gave up trying to get loose.

I didn't pay much attention to the movie – *The Lion King* was never one of my favorites – but Rachel seemed to be a huge fan of the movie. She was able to quote entire scenes along with the characters onscreen, and changed her voice with each different character. As I leaned against her warm, lanky frame, I slowly dozed off. The last thing I recalled before falling asleep entirely was her chuckling quietly in her soft, alto tones as the TV mentioned something dressing in drag to do the hula.



I smiled absently as I recalled the general silliness that had gone on last night. Most of it was incredibly puerile, but it was actually a lot of fun; I hadn't been able to indulge my inner child in a while.

I glanced up at the still sleeping Rachel, absently nudging her glasses, which were low on her face, higher up. *Does she really have a crush on me?* She acted the same with Jenny as she did me.

Either way, I was becoming increasingly *uncomfortable* with the borderline intimate embrace. I slowly shifted myself so I was facing her and put my hands on her shoulders, attempting to push myself off of her. As soon as I put pressure on her shoulders, though, Rachel's dark brown eyes flew open. I froze as my own blue eyes locked onto hers. In that instant, I recognized the awkwardness of this position.

I was all but straddling her waist, my hands on her shoulders, and our noses almost touching. Neither of us moved for several minutes – I was too flustered to try and think of something to do, while Rachel seemed to simply be in shock.

Her lips slowly curled into a playful smirk, and she remarked, calm as ever, "Well, good morning, sunshine."

CHAPTER 12

I had to bite back a mewl when I felt a warm weight shifting on my lap. When I felt a pair of small hands on my shoulders and warm breath on my face, though, my eyes snapped open and instantly locked onto the wide blue eyes of the girl resting against me. She seemed to be at a loss for words, and I could see a blush slowly building on her face. I remained silent, unmoving, as I forced down the urge to close the small distance between us.

I could tell that Jessie wasn't about to break the silence, so I slowly smirked in an attempt to return us to some form of normalcy. "Well, good morning, sunshine."

Jessie blinked a few times, then looked away. "Will you let me go yet?" she requested flatly. I raised my eyebrows.

"Why, getting uncomfortable?" I teased. She frowned and pushed off of me again, standing up entirely this time. I immediately missed the gently heat and weight against me. "Are you mad at me?" I asked curiously. She didn't seem to be entirely pleased with me.

She retained the annoyed look for several seconds before glancing away. "No, I'm not mad at you."

I wasn't sure I believed that, but I chose not to comment, looking instead at my watch. It was almost nine in the morning. I admit, I was surprised; as an insomniac, I rarely managed to sleep an entire night. "Hey, d'you need to call the 'rents or anything?" I asked suddenly, remembering that Jessie's parents would probably want to know where she was.

"The *what?*" she asked, bemused. Her brow was furrowed slightly. I resisted the temptation to smooth the creases out with my fingers. *Definitely crushing on her. Lovely.*

"Rents... y'know... apostrophe-rents," I elaborated, making a curved motion with my finger to signify 'apostrophe'. She still looked confused, so I just chuckled. "Parents. Do you need to call your parents?"

"Oh!" she brightened up as she understood. "Uh..." she glanced at the clock on her phone. "No, I doubt it. I told them that I was going to a friend's house, so they won't be too worried." I ignored the surprised feeling in the back of my mind at being called her friend.

"So, I assume I'm driving you home, then?" I remarked, standing and beginning to stretch, eliciting several sharp cracks from my neck, back, and knuckles.

"If you would," Jessie winced at the noises, and I shot her an apologetic look.

"That's fine, just let me get ready real quick." I scooped up my mp3 player and my keyboard and hauled them back into my room. Once they were back in their 'homes,' I shucked my jacket and pulled my shirt over my head.

"I didn't know you had a tattoo," Jessie mused from the door. I jerked in surprise; I didn't know she had followed me back here.

"Uh, yeah, I got it a *while* ago," I replied slowly. Tattooed onto the small of my back was an upside-down treble clef and a bass clef; they were pushed together to form a heart. I was pleased with it, myself, but I hadn't expected anyone *else* to see it. "Can you, uh, leave so I can finish here?" I requested. I swore that Jessie actually blushed when I turned around to address her, but she left too quickly for me to tell.

I quickly changed into a pair of jeans and a t-shirt, before pulling my jacket over my shoulders again. I went back to the living room, and Jessie looked up at me again.

"Where'd you get that shirt?" she asked me curiously. I glanced down; it was yellow with the stick-figure that appeared on OneGirl's first album on the chest.

"Oh, she started selling merchandise aside for albums a few days ago," I replied absently. "This is one of the t-shirts."

"No way!" she seemed to be thrilled with that information. I just nodded.

"Yep. Anyways, let's get gone, shall we?" I offered her my hand playfully; to my surprise, she took it. I only smiled pleasantly at her as I led her downstairs and out to my truck. As I got into the vehicle, Jessie attempted to give me her address, but I surprised her by quickly rattling it off for her.

She gave me a bewildered look. "How do you know where I live?" she asked, a little suspiciously.

"This isn't the first time I've had to drive you home, Jessie," I reminded her with a crooked grin. She gave a soundless 'oh' and quieted down.

The truck jerked a bit as I shifted gears. I heard Jessie gasp and then demand to know how long I'd been driving a stick.

"I dunno, like three years?" I replied slowly, considering.

"And you *still* can't shift it smoothly?" Jessie inquired in disbelief.

"Says the girl who likely can't shift it at all?" I retorted dryly. That shut her up easily and I laughed. We drove for another several minutes, before I grinned a bit and lightly smacked Jessie on the shoulder. She gave me an odd look and I explained: "Red punch bug. No punch-backs."

"You still play that game?" her voice was dry as a desert. I just laughed again and nodded. Another minute later, and I felt a sharp smack on my own shoulder. I yelped and Jessie giggled softly. "*Blue* punch bug." I used the back of my hand to lightly slap her thigh. She made a startled noise, somewhere between a gasp and a cry.

"You didn't say 'no punch-backs,'" I teased, flashing her an amused look. She just huffed softly. The rest of the trip was made in silence. When we reached her house, I playfully ordered her out of my truck again.

She hesitated once she was out of the vehicle, not closing the door. "I had a good time," she admitted finally, albeit a little shyly. I didn't blame her; for a 'popular' student to find out that one of the school's social rejects was actually somewhat entertaining, it had to be a little odd for her.

"Glad you did," I replied honestly. Jessie just smiled at me, and I felt my heart flutter a bit at the gesture. Then she paused, considering.

"Can you come in for a bit? I want to show you something," she requested. I checked my watch again; almost 9:30. *I've got time.*

"Sure, but I'll have to leave soon." I shut the truck off and slipped the keys into my pocket as I got out.

Her house was similar to what I expected – family pictures everywhere, very homey feel, et cetera. Jessie's room, though, was different. It held very few pictures, but the walls were

dominated by several pop band posters. I felt my lip curl in distaste at the Ke\$ha poster. I had never been a fan.

"Here we are," Jessie murmured softly, pulling something out of her CD tower. I looked back at her as she straightened up, the CD case in hand. She held it up to me, and I froze at the sight.

On the cover of the album was a girl. Her back was to the camera, and she was seated on an amplifier. The top of the album cut off her head, so the main focus was on her back. Tattooed onto her back was an inverted treble clef and a bass clef, pushed together to form a heart. It was a OneGirl album – the latest, to be precise – entitled "Music = Life". My eyes lingered on the image for a while, before dragging themselves up to Jessie's triumphant gaze.

"Have anything to say, Rachel? Or rather, OneGirl?"

Damn. Shit. Fuck. Hell. What do I say here?

CHAPTER 13

I smirked a little at the rocker's startled look. It had taken a lot of assuming on my part, but apparently I was correct. I personally found it odd that Rachel knew right off the bat just about any relevant information anyone cared to know about the famous one-woman-band. The musical critiquing she'd done only added to my suspicions. (Really, now, who critiques the drummer, anyways?) The tattoo was only the clincher.

"What are you even going on about now?" she tried to project her normal, dry tones, but I detected a slight waver in her voice.

"Don't tell me you're going to lie about this," I deadpanned, glaring at her a bit.

"I'm going to lie about this." She turned to go, but I stalked over there and grabbed her jacket's collar. Rachel stumbled and shot me a venomous glare; she wasn't about to leave her precious jacket in my hands, I could tell that much as she halted.

"Come in here," I half-ordered, tugging her back into my room. She came, however unwillingly, and sat at my computer chair – backwards. "I want to talk about this."

"Talk away, then." Her words were clipped; I would have thought she was angry, if I didn't see her eyes flickering about rapidly, nervously. *Is that a nervous tic or something?*

I sat on the edge of my bed. "Why don't you ever put your pictures up on your band page?" I asked. It seemed odd that she wouldn't want the publicity that most people craved.

"Oh, so this is an interview, then? Fine. To answer your question, why should I?" she countered. "If I put my picture up, everyone around here would know who I was. I already get tons of e-mails every day, asking for autographs and such. I don't want to have to put up with that kind of BS on a daily basis, especially not from people who already hate *me*. They'd start liking me just because I'm becoming an internet sensation."

"Plus, the paparazzi?" I teased. Rachel nodded.

"Plus, the paparazzi. *Horrible* little cockroaches. Next question."

"Why are you so paranoid about telling people about your...band?" I asked, genuinely interested. Most people would've bragged to the point of obnoxiousness about their rising popularity, but Rachel seemed almost cowed when it came to her music.

"Because for the first month-and-a-half they act like they're something special because they know OneGirl," she growled, and I saw a flash of annoyance in her eyes. "Then for the next three months, they seem to think that just because they know me, I'm going to give them free merchandise or dedicate albums to them or what-have-you. After that, they have one more month to get huffy because I don't give them any special treatment, and then everything is finally back to normal. I have no desire to spend half a year stroking the ego of morons who wouldn't give a rat's ass about me if I had never put up the first album."

"Ah," I said, as if I understood. I regarded her for a moment, noting that her tensed form slowly slipped back into her usual slouch as her anger thinned. "Wait, are you calling me a moron?" I asked suddenly, frowning at her. She gave a bark of laughter, startling me.

"No, I'm not calling *you* a moron, I'm calling the hypothetical people who know about me morons," she corrected with a crooked grin. "'Cause they would be." I watched her with a curious look for a long time before her grin finally faded and she looked away. "Next question." I thought about my next question.

"How long have you playing all those instruments?" It was safe enough.

"Acoustic guitar, been playing six years. Electric, been playing five years. Bass, been playing four years. Trap set, three years." She shot me a wry glance. "Guess how long I've been playing piano-slash-keyboard?"

"Two years?" I asked dryly.

"Ten years." she corrected. I blinked in surprise. She just grinned. "Wasn't expecting that. That was the third instrument I learned to play. First was recorder, then viola, *then* piano, followed by the others."

I just looked at her, stunned. "How many different instruments do you play, then?" I asked curiously.

She paused, her eyes rolling up, lips counting silently. "Like fifteen?" she grinned when I made a startled, strangled noise in my throat. "Next question, *chica*."

"How long have you been doing the whole 'one girl' act?"

Rachel actually appeared to give this one some thought, staring up at the ceiling again and readjusting her glasses. "Five years, I think." I was about to ask her something else, but she began speaking again. "I started doing it in my eighth grade year. At the time, it was just something to keep my mind occupied with at least semi-cheerful things. I'd find the acoustic tablature to a song and record it; then I'd go back over and record me singing the words along with the guitar. It was fun, even if no one ever did hear it." She smiled a little, but it faded quickly. "When I moved into the apartment, I kept doing it, even if it did annoy people a bit. Well, one day, in a fit of utter boredom, I created a MySpace account – no, I don't know why – and I uploaded several of the songs that had all the parts, not just acoustic and vocals, under the guise 'OneGirl.' It was almost an instant hit. So I did some more recordings. The next album was just as well-received as the first, despite all my lame-ass album covers." She grinned wryly at me. "Next?"

"So, wait, you did both covers yourself?" I inquired, tilting my head. It hadn't occurred to me that she did anything outside of school and music.

"I do all my covers by myself, Jessie," Rachel remarked with a straight face. I glared at her and she cracked a grin. "Oh, you meant album covers? Yeah, which explains the epic *fail*ishness of them. Most of 'em are done in like... GIMP, some of 'em are done with a crappy timer camera. Had to retake *that* shot," she motioned at the CD I'd pulled out earlier, "like twelve times before I got the pme I was trying for." She frowned lightly at that memory. I laughed a bit.

"I bet," I agreed, amused. "Camera timers are a wonderful idea, but mine never work the first time."

"Mm," she hummed in absent agreement, before flinching when her gaze landed on the clock. "*Shewt*," she grouched, her southern drawl mangling the word 'shoot,' "I need to get home."

"Why? Parents not know you're out?" I asked curiously. It suddenly occurred to me that I hadn't seen her parents at the apartment.

She snorted in derision. "Nah, it ain't that," she demurred. "I've just got to go finish up the last songs of my next album. Some don't even have all the parts recorded yet. And *none* of 'em are mixed yet."

"When are you putting it up?" I wondered, interested. I rose to walk with her to her truck.

"Ah... Monday, if all goes according to plan," she decided with a nod.

"Are you going to tell me the title of it?" I tried hopefully, lightly poking her shoulder as we exited the front door.

"I'm thinking of dedicating it to you," she mused. "The cover will be a picture of you and me cuddled on my couch from last night."

My jaw dropped. "You wouldn't dare!" I half-shrieked, running after her as she raced towards her truck. Rachel was laughing uproariously. "You little shit!"

"And of course it'll feature a personal favorite of mine, 'Jessie's Girl,'" she panted between laughs, fumbling with her keys. I glared as she managed to get into her vehicle and lock it before I got to her. She grinned wickedly at me, doing something on her phone, before rolling down the window a bit. I heard the strains of male voice singing what appeared to be the chorus to a song. The only thing I could make out of the song was the phrase "Jessie's Girl."

"You'd better not put that up!" I ranted, glaring at her as I panted a little.

Rachel just winked at me. "No worries, *chica*, I ain't gonna do all that. The one I'm working on should cause enough scandal as is."

"What is *that* supposed to mean?" I asked suspiciously.

"You'll see," she just chuckled as she started her truck and shut her phone back off. "I have a feeling that you might like it, though," she added with a pseudo-malicious grin.

"What's *that* supposed to mean?" I tried again, a little nervous now.

"You'll see," Rachel repeated, backing out of my driveway. I watched as she turned to get on the road, and she paused a minute to glance back at me and blow a kiss in my direction, before grinning and driving off. I stayed outside for a moment, stunned by the random affectionate gaze. I could feel heat rising in my cheeks, and I knew I was blushing again. It was an odd gesture coming from me – I hadn't ever blushed with Kyle or any of my other boyfriends. It just seemed to be out of place with them.

With a light shake of the head, I turned around and went back into the house, a slight smile tugging at my lips. I didn't realize like Rachel and I had been playing around like children until later, when my parents were home again. And even then, we had been acting more like a long-time couple than children.

CHAPTER 14

I boredly logged into my account and maneuvered to the upload section. I began uploading the finished songs, the titles glancing over my mind. 'Tainted Love,' 'You Really got Me,' and 'Diary of Jane,' to name a few. As soon as that was done, I began uploading the album cover. The background was black, with a white heart that took up the entirety of the cover. It seemed to be in the process of melting, though, with crisscrossing black cracks across the heart. In deep red font was the title, 'Tainted Love'. OneGirl was, as always, written at the top of the album.

I chuckled softly as I uploaded the whole thing at last. I wondered about Jessie's reaction curiously. She had tried to wring more information about the CD from me at school today, but I refused. I was the only one who knew what all the songs on the album were.

Wonder if she'll get the blatant flirting, I considered to entertain myself. A knock at my door made me sigh as I tugged my earphones out and grab my wallet.

I thanked the delivery kid as I paid him and went back into my bedroom, carrying the box with me. I sat in my computer chair again and set the box in my lap. Before I opened it, though, I instinctively closed my eyes and mumbled a half-assed blessing over my food.

It was a bit of a hassle at times, but my parents had drilled that routine into my head at a very young age, so I did it all the time now. I began to lazily eat my pizza as I waited for my instant messenger to load up. Jenny was offline, but Thomas and Jessie weren't. Thomas was in the middle of cello lessons. I didn't get to read Jessica's status before she changed it: "**Jess_kiddin** is listening to OneGirl's newest album!" I grinned wickedly and went ahead and double-clicked her name. The window came open, but I didn't type anything just yet.

About half an hour later, the window flashed, and I opened it, grinning mischievously.

Jess_kiddin: omg! wtf did you mean wen u said i wud enjoy it?

Maniacal_laughter: Oh, I take it you saw the newest album?

Jess_kiddin: duh! wut was w/ the songs, n e ways?

Maniacal_laughter: Pardon?

Jess_kiddin: y did u say id enjoy the album?

Maniacal_laughter: Did you?

Jess_kiddin: yea

Maniacal_laughter: Well, there you go.

Jess_kiddin: i have 1 more ? tho

Maniacal_laughter: Ask away, then.

Jess_kiddin: were u tryin 2 com on2 me w/ that?

I paused, startled at her forwardness. My fingers hesitated over the keyboard for a moment. Was *I trying to come onto her?* I slowly began typing again.

Maniacal_laughter: Possibly.

Jess_kiddin: oh

I kept the window open for a moment, just awkwardly watching it. When she didn't respond for a few minutes, I reluctantly went back to my web surfing. Several minutes later, the window flashed again. Curious, I reopened it.

Jess_kiddin: y?

Maniacal_laughter: Why what? Why did I make the album?

Jess_kiddin: no, y'd u make it 4 me?

Maniacal_laughter: Why do you think?

There was more silence for a while. She didn't respond until it was close to the time she usually logged out and went to bed.

Jess_kiddin: is it true that u have a crush on me?

Maniacal_laughter: Maybe.

Jess_kiddin: y?

I hesitated, unsure of how much detail she wanted me to go into. After all, I was fairly well-known for my, ah... bluntness. Eventually, I settled on a safe counter-question.

Maniacal_laughter: Tell you what. I'm not doing anything tomorrow afternoon. I'll pick you up after school and we'll go to Starbucks or something. If you still have any questions, I'll answer them as best as I can, alright?

Jess_kiddin: yea, ok

Maniacal_laughter: Well, now that that's settled, I'm going to go drink something extremely caffeinated.

Jess_kiddin: this late?

Maniacal_laughter: Of course. Sleep is a poor substitute for caffeine, anyways.

Jess_kiddin: lol, addict much/

Jess_kiddin: *?

Maniacal_laughter: I'm shocked it took you this long to notice. :P

Maniacal_laughter: Anyways. I'm off to get my caffeine and watch old shows on Boomerang now. See you tomorrow.

Jess_kiddin: alright

Jess_kiddin: good night

Maniacal_laughter: Night, chica.

Maniacal_laughter has logged out.

Briefly, I wondered if I was pushing it with the pet name, but quickly dismissed it. Jessie would get over it sooner or later; I'd already trained her to respond to 'Jessie,' hadn't I?

Smiling slightly, I turned off my monitor and grabbed my baby blanket (say nothing about my sleeping habits!) and wandered into the living room area. I turned on the television and turned the volume down. I rolled my eyes, amused, when I saw what was playing. *Thundercats? Really?*

I only halfway paid attention to the show as I squirmed and twisted on the couch, attempting to get comfortable enough to sleep. *It isn't as comfortable without Jessie here.* I ignored the implications of that thought. Eventually I managed to start dozing off, but jolted back awake at a different thought: *did I just ask Jessie out?* And, of course, that thought was followed by a borderline-panicked *does Jessie think that I asked her out?* She'd agreed to go, after all. Did she think...?

With an annoyed growl, I sat up again and picked up the half-empty bottle of Vault, unscrewing the cap. I downed several mouthfuls – there was *no* way I'd be able to get to sleep *now*.

CHAPTER 15

I sighed quietly as the final bell rang. *It's about time.* I gathered up my books and wandered towards the carpool area, where I knew that Rachel hung out most days.

The first thing I noticed when I got out there was that a few of my friends had practically cornered her under the clock tower. She appeared to be as calm and vaguely annoyed as always, but I could see the gentle tremors in her broad shoulders.

As I approached them, I caught the tail end of Rachel's words: "...and, besides, it's not *my* fault you're a screamer, Ash."

Ashley scowled and flipped her middle finger at the tall girl. "Whatever. Fuck you, dyke," she spat coldly.

Rachel simply grinned quite wickedly, holding up her first and middle fingers. "Works better with two fingers, Ash, you should know that." As my friend sputtered angrily, trying to think of a comeback, I caught the rocker's eye. She nodded slightly and told the girls, "Well, as ever it was unpleasant speaking to y'all, but I'm afraid I've got somewhere to be, so I'll see all y'all later."

"Why – got a date tonight?" Kendra sneered. The other girls snickered, obviously believing that there was no way that she could manage to get a date. They weren't exactly wrong in believing that – the gay community in the state was painfully small.

"You'd better believe it," Rachel smirked. I glared at her words. We were *not* dating, and she knew it. I ignored the barely-noticeable flutter of disappointment. "And if I say so myself, she's a *fox*." I knew I was blushing by now. I gave her a dirty look and mouthed 'cut it out!' at her. She just grinned a bit and left the small gathering of openly-gaping girls, heading towards the parking lot. I took a slightly longer route, attempting to stay out of the path of any of my friends.

"No one says 'fox' in that context anymore, and I hope you know that," I chided her, still frowning a bit, as I caught up to her in the parking lot.

"Of course," she acknowledged easily. "That just happened to be the least possibly-offensive name that came to mind."

I stared at her skeptically at her words. She was busy unlocking the passenger door of her truck. "What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"Would you have preferred that I called you a sexy little vixen?" she shot back with an amused look and a borderline inappropriate smirk.

"No!" I was blushing *again*, now. I chose to pay no mind to the part of my mind that was flattered at that remark.

"Well, there you go," Rachel stated with a nod, as if that were the most logical response in the world. She climbed into her own seat, and slammed the door behind her. I buckled my seat belt as she attempted to turn the truck on. "I hate this truck," she growled, a bit annoyed.

"Why do you keep it, then?" I teased her, laughing when she smacked the dashboard. The truck did rev to life, though.

"Broke-ass musician," she explained wryly, thumbing her chest.

I snorted gently at the name. "Where did *that* come from?"

"S'true," she chuckled, backing out of the parking place. "And if you must know, it's what my friends've taken to calling me. Since, y'know, I'm unemployed."

"Doesn't your music qualify as your job?" I asked curiously.

"Nope," Rachel admitted, brushing a bit of her hair away from her ear. "I'm not employed by anyone; therefore I am legally jobless and furthermore broke most of the time."

"Most of the time?" I echoed. She was confusing me, a little.

"Every time I put an album out, I immediately get hit with a ton of orders for CDs and mp3 downloads," she explained. "So, shortly after every release, I get a crap-load of money. However! Most of that goes to paying rent, food, utilities, et cetera, so I don't usually have any spare cash any time other than the month that the albums are released."

"And you put out an album yesterday, ergo..."

"Yes, I actually have money today," she laughed. She flicked on the radio, but turned it down so we could speak at a comfortable volume. She rolled her eyes as the music started. "Ugh. Mindless Self Indulgence." She shot me a dry look. "Know what the best part of this song is?"

"No, what?" I'd never heard the song. Or the band, for that matter.

"It's over." I laughed a little at her flat tones.

"Don't like the band?" I asked her, amused.

"The band ain't awful, I just don't much care for this song," Rachel corrected, changing the radio station. I jerked slightly as I was instantly accosted with loud guitar riffs. "*Here's a good song,*" she mused aloud. "By Bullet for my Valentine."

"It's a little loud, isn't it?" I said over the music. She offered an apologetic glance.

"Sorry, I keep forgetting that not everyone shares my taste in music," the rocker remarked, a little sheepish. She turned the radio down again.

"I didn't know you liked this kind of music." *Her* brand of music, while a good deal heavier than I previously cared for, didn't employ much of the screaming vocals at all, instead using a hard sort of gritty singing. This, however, was almost nothing *but* screaming.

"Oh, yeah," Rachel affirmed with a light grin. "Alternative, metal, and hard rock. Gotta love 'em. Helped me retain my sanity in more ways than one."

"Yeah?" It never occurred to me that she couldn't cope with anything life threw at her. I guess that was because of her attitude at school. There, she was the cool, snide girl who could take any cold remark and throw it back in their faces. She showed no pain.

"Definitely," she nodded, keeping her eyes on the road as she pulled into a parking space. "If I didn't have my music, I'd probably be in a fuckin' *asylum*." Rachel shut the truck off. It died with a soft rumble. We got out of the vehicle and headed towards the door of the Starbucks.

"I think you're exaggerating a bit," I remarked, elbowing her lightly. Whatever she was going to say next, though, had to wait as we approached the counter.

There was a guy there; he looked to be only a little older than me. He smiled suavely at us. "Good afternoon, ladies," he greeted with a gentle southern drawl; I suspected it was fake. After hanging out with Rachel so often lately, I had come to recognize a southern accent when I heard one. Rachel's wasn't fake. "Can I get you something?" I grimaced a little; I could sense when a guy was trying to flirt.

"Hot chocolate for me, and..." Rachel drew the last word out expectantly and looked at me. I easily supplied my own request. The man kept the flirtatious look in his gaze. "And of course, I'll be paying for my girl here," my partner informed him offhandedly, lazily resting her arm around my shoulders. I froze in shock at the affectionate gesture. The guy looked startled, then embarrassed, and simply nodded, taking the money and going off to get our orders.

"I thought you said no naughty lesbian touching," I groused lightly as he left. I didn't try to move her arm, though.

"I did," she acknowledged with a gentle grin. "*This*, however, is perfectly *innocent* lesbian touching." I couldn't exactly fault that logic. "Besides, would you have preferred that I just let that guy sit there and stare?"

"No," I admitted with a slightly annoyed sigh. Rachel thanked the man as he returned with our drinks. I noticed the smile she gave him and wondered at it. It was triumphant, almost gloating. She easily led me towards the back area of the shop; once we were out of the man's range of sight, I lightly shrugged her arm off my shoulder. It was uncomfortably comfortable.

Rachel easily flopped into a free seat at a table. I sat in the chair opposite her.

"Ow-hot-ow-hot-ow," she winced as she took a sip from her cup. I snorted softly at her antics.

"No shit, Sherlock," I teased, lightly kicking her under the table.

"Oh, stuff it," Rachel grumbled good-naturedly. "I knew it was hot, smarty. I wasn't expecting it to cauterize all the nerve endings in my tongue, though."

I laughed. "That's certainly some interesting imagery, I'll admit that much."

She just stuck her tongue out at me, and I quirked a brow. "You're incredibly mature," I remarked dryly.

"Well, you know what they say," Rachel began, pulling the top off of her cup, "'Most people grow up; I just get older.'" She idly licked the whipped cream from the cap. I raised my other eyebrow at the rather childish actions. The rocker noticed me watching and grinned a bit. "What?"

"Nothing," I replied, smiling a little. I wasn't sure why.

Rachel just chuckled. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were trying to come onto me," she commented teasingly. She flinched a little when I kicked her again. It was only a little harder this time.

"I'm not," I reminded her flatly.

"Hence the phrase, 'if I didn't know any better,'" she repeated, still looking rather amused. "Obviously, I know better." The rocker began playing with the paper grip on her cup. Her eyes, impossibly brown, locked onto mine. "So. If I remember correctly, you wanted to ask me some questions?" And in that instant, the mood sobered considerably.

"Yeah, I did." I inhaled quietly, trying to come up with the courage to ask my next question. How were you supposed to ask a girl if she was trying to apparently become your girlfriend, anyways?

CHAPTER 16

I absently continued playing with the grip on my cup, not really knowing that I was doing it. That was just one of my nervous tics – I always had to be doing something with my hands.

Jessie spoke after a moment of fidgeting. "How did you know you were, um..."

"Gay?" I supplied with a teasing grin. "A lesbian? Dyke? Carpet -"

"Okay, Rachel," she cut me off quickly to prevent me from finishing the list of somewhat offensive names. "And, yeah."

I leaned back a little, my eyes rolling to the ceiling as I considered. "Well, keep in mind that I'm *not* gay, remember." She nodded and I added, "I just thought I might be at the time. Anyways, I assume you know what grade I came out in, thanks to the rumors?" I inquired.

"Eighth?" I nodded, a little surprised that the rumors about me got even that much right.

"Bingo, *chica*. Well, 'member how girls would always get together around that grade and just gossip about their, ah, 'boyfriends,'" I rolled my eyes at the word – there wasn't much an eighth grader could do with a significant other, "acted, and how sweet they were, and how *tingly* they made 'em feel? Y'know, all that gag-me-with-a-spoon kinda things?"

Jessie nodded, appearing to be extremely amused at my phrasing.

"Well, I didn't feel 'em. Well, at least, not as often as the girls convinced me that I should have. Yeah, I did have the occasional crush on a guy friend, but nothin' ever came outta it. To my guy friends – yeah, most of my friends were fellas – I was just one a' them. Just another guy. I was always a tomboy, hun, ya gotta remember that much," I blew a spike of red hair out of my face. "But, yeah. Then, early on in the year, a girl transferred into my class. An' then I felt all those things that all the girl told me I should be feelin' 'bout guys. The blushing, the flutters, the *tingles*..."

"I don't think I could ever imagine *you* blushing," Jessie giggled a bit, evidently imagining the thought of me with a blush. I didn't blame her, not really.

"Ya gotta remember, hun, I was *way* more innocent than I am now," I defended with a wicked smirk, allowing my gaze to flick down her body. That earned me a kick under the table.

"Stop staring at me! And finish your story."

"You are no fun at all," I sighed, taking a sip from my hot chocolate. The burning didn't affect me as much this time, probably because my tongue was too busy being scalded from the first time to notice the new burning. "Anyways, for like a month I was freaking out because I wasn't supposed to feel that way about girls. I was supposed to like guys, to feel incomplete 'cause I didn't have a boyfriend even though I had all these guy friends..." I trailed off and shook my head, remembering the countless sleepless nights, the bouts of crying, the nervous vomiting...

"So what'd you do?" the girl opposite me asked, watching me. My lips quirked into a small smile at her apparent interest in my life; I took a drink from my cup to hide it.

"I hit on her."

"You didn't!" Jessie seemed shocked at the thought that I'd try it.

"Yeah, I did," I chuckled a bit. "How the hell else was I supposed to see if she was gay?"

"Gay-dar?" her serious tone made me laugh. I didn't tell her that *she* happened to set off my 'gay-dar' a little.

"Jessie, hun, this was eighth grade. And just finding out that I was maybe gay. I could operate my gay-dar about as well as a horse break-dances," I remarked wryly. "Besides, it was actually easier than I thought it was going to be. Flirting with a girl just seemed, I 'unno, natural to me." I grinned slightly as I remembered my first few disastrous attempts. "Even so, imagine my shock when she started flirting back."

"She was gay?" She sounded surprised.

"Most definitely," I grinned wider. "So for a month or two, we... well, I guess it was pretty much as close to dating as you can get in middle school. Holding hands in the hallway, occasionally kissing, just little stuff. We went to school dances together, we would go over to each other's houses – our parents didn't know that we were 'dating,' though. They just thought we were really good friends. And, well, no one at school really liked me, anyways – I was too tomboyish to fit in with the girls – and no one really liked *her*, just 'cause she was new." I stared

out into space for a bit. "So, no one really cared that we weren't entirely straight, since no one liked us in the first place. We were fine with that – not only were we 'dating,' we were also best friends. We supported each other. And our parents were just glad that we'd made a friend." I sipped my cooling hot chocolate again. "The only problem was the last school dance of the year. We went together, as usual. Problem? We weren't expecting our parents to show up early."

Jessie took in a soft gasp. "You got busted by your parents at *school*?"

I chuckled mirthlessly. "Yep. They walked in on a slow dance. And a kiss." The girl winced in sympathy. "Christ, Jessie, it was awful. They freaked – well, it was mostly *my* parents who freaked – and pretty much tore us apart. I got taken home, and then I got screamed at. It was mostly m' daddy who was yellin'. My momma was just cryin' and sayin' how she raised me better, and how bein' a faggot didn't fit into my 'life plan.'"

Jessie gently put her hand on mine in a comforting gesture. I didn't comment, but just continued my story.

"My daddy just kept yellin' at me and tellin' me that I wasn't gay, that bein' a dyke was the worst possible thing I could do. He kept tellin' me to tell 'im that I was straight. I couldn't do that, Jessie, I wasn't gonna sit there and lie so he wouldn't yell at me. So I refused to say that I was straight. I thought maybe takin' a stand for myself would help convince him that I wasn't his baby girl anymore. Well, he most certainly didn't think that anymore." I smiled humorlessly. "I tried to hug him, to show him that I was still me, an' he hit me." Jessie gasped softly. I took her hand and slipped it under the collar of my shirt, so her fingertips brushed against the bump in my collarbone. "He accidentally broke my collarbone an' then he told me to get out. So I did."

"That...that's horrible," she muttered, slowly pulling her hand away.

"Ain't it?" I agreed, sipping my hot chocolate. "An' my girlfriend's parents most certainly weren't letting me stay *there*."

"Where did you go?"

"I went to my uncle," I replied easily. "He's the liberal black sheep of the family, a real open-minded fella, y'know? He let me live with him, even though his brother'd disowned me. So I finished out my last year of middle school an' started workin' wherever I could. I didn't want to keep sponging off my uncle – he's more well-off than my parents, see, and he had no children, only a wife who was also pretty damn wealthy – so I started working. I spent my entire freshman

year workin' and studyin'. In the middle of the year, though, my uncle an' aunt had to move. I *couldn't* move, Jessie, I was in the middle of school. So he bought my little apartment. I promised him that I'd pay for most of my rent, even though he swore up an' down that it was no trouble. Shortly after, I started doin' the whole OneGirl thing, an' the rest is history."

For several minutes there was silence, and I just sat there and sipped my drink. It was a lot to take in, I was sure.

I looked up at her, and to my surprise saw her looking rather guilty. "I guess we didn't really help matters, huh?" she asked softly. I knew what she meant.

"Jessie, only Jenny and Thomas knew about it," I told her gently, before attempting to lighten the mood. "And, besides, I turned out alright, didn't I? A little fucked in the head, but who ain't?" She laughed a bit.

"You certainly have an interesting way of looking at things," she teased, apparently noticing my attempt to return things to some sense of normalcy.

"Lookin' at the world through rainbow-colored glasses," I agreed with a grin.

"I thought it was 'rose-colored glasses.'"

"For straight people, yeah."

"Mm." We remained quiet for another minute or so, just allowing the tension to dissipate. "Have you, ah, had any girlfriends since then?" She seemed a bit reluctant to ask that. I raised a brow; was she *jealous*?

"Two girlfriends and two boyfriends." I grinned impishly, amused at her shy questioning.

"Do you have one now?" Jessie asked shyly, taking a sip from her cup.

I smirked coyly. "Why? Planning on taking the title?" I teased, giving her my best seductive look. She blushed, the color adorable on her face, and looked down.

"Why do you keep doing that?" she asked me softly.

"Doing what?" I wanted her to say it.

"Flirting with me." I think her blush worsened.

"Because it's fun," I replied easily, even if it wasn't entirely the truth.

She looked up at me, a bit surprised at my answer. "Really?"

I chuckled. "Nah."

Jessie looked a bit confused. "So why do you keep doing it, then?"

"You're asking a stupid question, hun," I pointed out, smiling gently. "I think you know."
Her shy gaze fell to the table again.

"I'm straight," Jessie repeated quietly, almost uncertainly.

"I was, too," I reminded her with an amused look. "I got better."

"I don't think being straight is a disease."

"Neither did I."

"Rachel, just stop it," she whispered.

"Why?" Jessie wouldn't meet my gaze. "If you can honestly tell me that you have *never* had any feelings for *any* girl at all, I'll leave you alone."

Jessie lifted her light blue eyes to me again. She stared at me for a long while, gaze tracing my face. Finally she replied. "I can't." Her voice trembled a little. I offered her a gentle smile and took her hand. "Can we leave now?"

"Sure, Jessie. Want me to take you home?" I was feeling a little guilty for putting her on the spot, now.

The girl shook her head. "I still have some questions. Can we, um..."

"Stay here?" I supplied.

"No, I don't want to stay here much longer," she replied. "Can we go somewhere else?"

I was a bit surprised at the question, but I grinned a little bit anyways. "Sure, hun. Let's get gone, then."

CHAPTER 17

I didn't ask her where we were going, and I didn't give her any suggestions. My thoughts were too busy swirling madly around my mind. Most of them were insisting that there was no way that I was... well, *that way*, even if it was only an experiment, while others just wanted to know why I couldn't lie to Rachel. I didn't speak to her until her truck stuttered to a halt again.

I looked up, then gave her an odd look. "Why are we here?" I asked her curiously, waving a hand at the small park.

"Cause no one comes here unless it's the weekend," she replied in a tone that said I should have known that. "And besides, I like the playground here." The girl nodded at the small play area and we got out of her truck. She led the way to the playground. I wondered how she kept managing to go from serious girl giving advice to childish teenager insisting that we go to the playground in such a short time.

Rachel happily plopped into a swing and curled her fingers around the chains, showing off her multitude of plastic rings. "So. What's on your mind?" she asked me curiously, lightly spinning in the seat.

I just looked at her for a moment, before hesitantly sitting on the swing next to hers. "Aren't you scared?" I asked softly.

She looked confused. "'Bout what? Swinging?"

"No," I sighed, a little annoyed. "I mean, aren't you scared of going to, um, hell?"

She quirked a brow. "Playin' a dangerous game there, Jessie. For all you know I'm an atheist." I balked in horror at the faux pas – I was used to nearly everyone I spoke to being some form of a Christian, after all – and began stammering out an apology, but she merely threw her head back and laughed. "Nah, don't worry about it, I *am* one. But ya might wanna keep that in

mind for the future.” She grinned impishly. “But to answer your question, why should I be worried about hell if I’m a Christian? I’ve been baptized, even.”

"It says in the bible that homosexuality is a sin," I growled, feeling as if I was explaining all this to a child, and not a senior in high school – particularly one who was claiming to be of this very faith. My annoyance grew when she began snickering softly. "It's not funny!"

"Calm it down, Jessie," she chuckled lightly. "It's just, I kinda figured that you were gonna start quoting that at me. 'Thou shalt not lay with a man as you would a woman,' or, uh, something like that. Is that seriously what's bothering you?"

"Yes," I insisted. "It's in the bible."

"It's in *Leviticus*, hun," Rachel laughed.

"So?" I didn't get her point; it was still in the bible.

"Okay, so you're saying that *every single thing* in the bible has to be followed to the letter, then?" she sighed, looking a little annoyed and a little amused. I just nodded; that was what I had been taught all my life, by both my family and by the church. "Okay, then." She dug around in her jacket's pocket, and handed me a quarter. I gave her a weird look. "It's biblically sanctioned that I can buy slaves from, quote, 'neighboring tribes,' unquote. We live in the same city, therefore we are neighboring tribes, and furthermore I am allowed to do what I just did."

"Wait, what did you just do, then?" I was lost.

"I just bought you," Rachel explained with a rather wicked grin. "Congratulations, you're now officially my slave."

I yelped. "I most certainly am not!"

"Stop blushing, Jessie," she laughed. "I didn't mean *that* kind of slave. Where's *your* mind at, hm?"

"*You are completely insane*," I muttered, looking away as the heat in my cheeks faded. "But –"

"Oh, for the love of all things small and fluffy, *what?*" she sighed dramatically. I rolled my eyes and lightly tossed her quarter back to her. She caught it – barely – in one hand.

"It still says in the Bible that it's a sin."

"It also says in the Bible that eating seafood is a sin," she stated flatly.

"What?" I was startled that one, I had never heard about that and two, that she would have known about that.

"Well, sure, Jessie, didn't you know that? Since you follow every tiny thing written in the bible, after all." I glared at her sarcasm, and she simply quirked a brow at me. "See my point? And, besides, if it's such a horrible, *horrible* sin, care to explain why Jesus-fuckin'-Christ, the *son* of God, never said a damn thing about homosexuality?"

I froze, surprised at her logic. "I...guess you have a point," I relented slowly. Then I turned to look at her again. She was attempting to balance her quarter on the tip of her middle finger. I rolled my eyes at her silliness and flicked her hand lightly. She made a startled noise and the coin fell.

"Ass."

"Lunatic," I shot back, smirking a little as the mood lightened. "I should stop hanging out with you if you're this insane."

"Oh, well you can't help that," Rachel drawled in a rather good impression of the Cheshire cat. "We're all mad here."

"Alice in Wonderland?" I guessed, leaning against one of the poles that held the swing set up.

"Incorrect!" she barked out, making me start in surprise. Then I dissolved into a fit of giggles when I noticed that she had struck a rather dramatic pose, pointing one finger in the air. "It was Alice's *Adventures* in Wonderland."

"Isn't it the same thing?" I wondered aloud.

She scoffed. "No. Alice in Wonderland is the *movie*. Alice's *Adventures* in Wonderland is the *book*. Shows what you know." I lightly cuffed the back of her head to keep her from taunting me further. The rocker yelped as she lost her balance and fell forwards, off the swing. Snickering softly, I helped her up. She just grumbled in annoyance as she dusted woodchips off of herself.

"You're so graceful," I teased, following her as she started walking somewhere else.

"I am the very *epitome* of grace," she declared, putting a hand to her chest. To my amusement, the moment she said that, she stumbled again, this time over the raised cement that outlined the playground.

"Liar."

"I am," Rachel admitted with a light grin. "But hey, that's the pot callin' the kettle black, *ain't* it?"

"Excuse me?" I was a little bit surprised that she would turn around and call me a liar. When have I ever lied to her?

"It's true," she insisted as she stopped on the middle of a bridge. Her eyes brightened as she looked out over the small pond. "Hey, ducks!"

"What?" I had to admit, I was thrown for a loop at her sudden change of subject. I looked at the water, though, and sure enough, there were several ducks swimming about. "That was random."

"Not really. There were ducks, and I pointed them out. Not so random at all." Rachel pulled the quarter out of her pocket again and put it in a small crank-operated machine nearby.

"What are you doing?" I asked curiously as she turned the crank.

"Feeding the ducks."

"Why?"

She gave me a surprisingly child-like grin. "Cause I like feeding the ducks." I shook my head a little bit, trying to not be charmed at her cheerful, innocent responses.

When she finally wandered back over to me, her cupped hand was full of seeds. "Well, feed away, then," I said with a shrug. I personally didn't see the entertainment value in feeding a bunch of birds. I never really had.

"I will," she agreed, peering at the swimming animals. Then she turned to me. "Give me your hand."

"Why?" I asked suspiciously. With her extremely random tendencies, I was a little apprehensive of her intentions.

"Just do it." I hesitantly held my hand out, then looked at her, confused, as she poured some of the seeds in my outstretched hand.

"Why am I being given duck feed?" I deadpanned, raising a brow.

"With which to feed the ducks?" she retorted in a similar tone, quirked an eyebrow in turn. I rolled my eyes a little as she turned back to the birds and tossed a little bit of seed to them. There was a burst of quacking from the ducks, and she laughed. "See, they're hungry." Rachel pointed at the ducks with her free hand, as if I didn't know who she was talking about.

"Fine," I relented, smiling a little at her genuine amusement. I hesitantly threw some of the feed over to the birds, watching as they eagerly went to get the seeds floating on the water. Occasionally, there was a short spat between them when two of them attempted to get the food at the same time.

Rachel seemed to be more entertained by feeding the ducks than I was, laughing a little every time they got into an argument. I shook my head, smiling. It was hard to be annoyed at someone who was so content with such a childish game.

"I have another question," I announced abruptly, tossing my last bit of seeds at the ducks.

"Ask away," the rocker hummed lightly, turning away from the ducks. She tilted her head curiously at me.

"How did you accept it so easily?"

"Being not entirely straight?" she asked for clarification.

"Yeah."

"Hm." Rachel watched the ducks for a minute, her brow lightly furrowed in thought. "Well, I didn't, really, not at first. I spent about a month staying away from girls as much as I could, staying awake most nights, trying to figure out why I had to be so different, crying when I couldn't, throwing *up* when the *stress* got to me." I grimaced a little; she seemed to have been taking it harder than even I was taking it. "Yeah, it was pretty awful. I got over it, though."

"How?" I wasn't sure why I wanted to know. I wasn't gay, after all.

The rocker just shrugged, all traces of silliness gone. "It's who I am, Jessie, I just had to accept it. I accept everything about who I am. I accept that I have the attention span of a gnat. I accept that I indulge my inner child more often than I've been told I should be doing at my age. I accept that I'm screwed in the head and have to see a counselor for it. And I accept that I'm not straight, even though everyone thinks that I should be." Her eyes locked onto mine. "The question is, are you able to accept everything about yourself?"

I remained silent for several minutes, unable to break our gazes. When the eye contact was finally broken, it was Rachel who had done so, not me. I sighed a little, the moment lost.

"Now," she drawled suddenly, tossing the last handful of seeds to the ducks. "About our science fair project."

CHAPTER 18

My eyes scanned over the long message, my finger poised over the 'return' key, as I reread it, unsure if it should be sent or not. After all the drama from the past few days – the confrontation with Jessie, followed by the getting avoided for the next three days – I had to get an outside response from someone. After several minutes of just staring at the message, I muttered a curse under my breath and hit 'enter.' It took another minute or so, but I got a response soon enough.

Jenny_8675309 : Whoa. That's pretty rough, there.

Maniacal_laughter : Ain't it.

Maniacal_laughter : I HATE EVERYTHING.

Jenny_8675309 : LAWL. But it's kinda your fault, anyways.

Maniacal_laughter : Excuse me?

Jenny_8675309 : Hey, you're the one who's crushing on the straight girl. Again.

Maniacal_laughter : Don't remind me.

Jenny_8675309 : Well, you did come on a little... strong, Rachel. You've gotta remember how awkward it was for you when you were just finding this stuff out.

Maniacal_laughter : It wasn't awkward for me, and besides, the only reason she's been avoiding me is because I pretty much told her straight-up that I didn't think she was straight.

Jenny_8675309 : Yeah, well, how would you feel if she came up to you and told you she thought you were straight?

Maniacal_laughter : Mrh. Point taken. I guess.

Jenny_8675309 : When was the last time you talked to her, anyways?

Maniacal_laughter : Tuesday.

Jenny_8675309 : Ouch. She's managed to avoid you for two days straight?

Maniacal_laughter : I know, right? Whatever, though, she's coming over later tonight anyways to work on Sci. Fair.

Jenny_8675309 : Ew. Not the most romantic setting in the world, Rah.

Maniacal_laughter : This is coming from the person who was telling me that I was coming on too strong?

Jenny_8675309 : Touche.

Maniacal_laughter : Besides, I wasn't trying to be romantic. I just want to get this retarded thing done before Thanksgiving break.

Jenny_8675309 : Good. 'Cause I know that your sense of romance is pretty screwed, but I figured even you weren't that hopeless.

Maniacal_laughter : Hey, now, that was cruel, unnecessary, and only mostly true.

Jenny_8675309 : You wouldn't like me any other way. Except maybe dipped in chocolate? ;)

Maniacal_laughter : That's a mental image that I really did not want in my head. I'm going to have to go scrub my brain with steel wool now. Thanks a lot.

Jenny_8675309 : Ouch. That hurts, Rah, that really hurts.

Maniacal_laughter : You lie. I've said worse things than that. :P

Jenny_8675309 : Hm, I guess you've got me there. We're in an abusive friendship. Yaay. :D

Maniacal_laughter : Not yay, you sick masochist. Abuse gets no yays.

Several knocks on my front door made me glance up, before glancing back at the computer's clock. It's about time she got here.

Maniacal_laughter : Well, then, my redheaded closet-case is here. I'd better go let her in.

Jenny_8675309 : Sweep her off her feet, Rachel! ;)

Maniacal_laughter : HAH. We'll see about that, anyways.

I shook my head, smirking a little, and logged out of the instant messenger service. I turned the monitor off and headed towards the front of the apartment.

"You're late, chica," I remarked teasingly as I opened the door.

Jessie appeared to have a smart retort to that, but her words died on her lips. I noticed her blue eyes flick down and then back up, scanning my body, and I quirked a brow.

"Jessie? Hun? I don't mind being checked out, but my eyes are up here," I quipped, pointing at my face. Her cheeks went scarlet.

"I was not checking you out!" she denied vehemently. I just grinned a little; her response seemed to have come just a little too quickly, but I wasn't going to say anything about that. "What are you wearing?" the redhead asked me a bit reluctantly as the blush faded.

I glanced down at my attire. I wore faded jeans that were all sorts of torn up at the thighs and calves, and a black tank top that revealed just a hint of my stomach. Over that was my leather jacket. (Hey, I had gotten cold, okay?) "Clothes?" I guessed slowly, as if speaking to a small child.

She rolled her eyes at me. "I figured *that*. I just haven't really seen you in anything other than your school uniform." I just gave a soundless 'ah.' That much was true, I guess.

"Hey, wait, no, you *have* seen me out of uniform," I stated suddenly, ushering her in. I closed the door behind her.

"When?" Jessie asked me, curious.

"At the rally. Y'know, before you ruined my jacket?" I tapped the large paint stain on my shoulder. "And, well, my guitar, too. I don't mind the guitar so much, actually."

"Why's that?" I could tell she wasn't entirely comfortable with this topic.

"Well, I'll show you," I declared with a grin. I headed back towards my bedroom; I could barely hear her trailing after me. Once we got there, my eyes flickered over the room, and I grimaced a little bit. I hadn't really planned on bringing her back here, so I hadn't cleaned up – and it *showed*.

"*Wow*," my guest commented, an amused chuckle in her voice. "If I didn't know you were a girl, I'd say a *guy* lived here." I didn't blame her for thinking that. With the dark paint, the metal and alternative band posters, and the general mess in my room, it *did* look for all the world like it was the bedroom of a teenage boy.

"Ain't that the truth," I agreed with a light sigh, before perking up. "*Anyways*, back to my guitar." I picked my way over to the wall that held my guitars, and picked up my electric guitar. It looked close to nothing like when I'd bought it; the base was still black, but it now had several

different colors of paint intentionally splattered over the body. I turned to face Jessie, still lurking in my doorway, and grinned lightly holding it up. "Ta-da!"

"I thought it only got one color of paint on it," she demurred, her brow furrowed with a bit of confusion.

"Yeah, it did. But then I decided that I liked the effect, so I did it with other colors. Granted, I had to pay a good chunk of change to replace the strings, but I like the way it looks now."

"Why would you have to replace the strings?" she inquired, tilting her head slightly. She was still admiring the new coloring of my guitar.

"Because I can't play a stringed instrument when the strings are ruined," I explained slowly. When I was done speaking, I made a face at her, crossing my eyes and sticking my tongue out between my teeth, and then went to put my guitar back up on the wall.

"You're so mean to me," she grouched lightly as I made my way out of my room. "I should stop hanging out with you, really."

"Oh, but then you'd have no willing girls to flirt with," I teased, lightly bumping her with my hip as I passed her. She gave a small, startled squeak at the motion. I laughed and she huffed softly.

"I don't flirt with you," the girl disagreed, smacking my shoulder lightly.

"Sure you do. You just don't know it yet."

"You make no sense at all," she remarked, frowning a little. "How would I not know if I was flirting with you or not?"

"I don't know," I admitted as I flopped over onto my couch. "But, hey, you're the same person who just blatantly stared at me and then denied that you did so, so I guess you're living in a river in Egypt."

"I am not!" She yelped in surprise as I poked her stomach lightly. She stumbled away from me, her arms protectively holding her stomach. I laughed a little, before sitting up and curling my legs underneath me.

"Hey, quick question," I requested suddenly. I began gathering the papers I'd left on my side table to keep myself occupied.

"Sure," Jessie allowed, a hint of surprise in her voice, as she hesitantly sat on the couch near me.

"Have you been avoiding me since Tuesday?" It was a blunt question, yeah, but I needed to know.

I felt her shift uncomfortably behind me, and I picked the stack of printouts up, dropping them on my lap. "Kinda," the redhead admitted quietly. I felt my stomach clench.

"I see." No, I didn't, not really. It must have shown.

"Well, can you *blame* me?" she sighed, annoyance tinging her voice. "I'm not exactly *used* to these kinds of things, you know."

"These kinds of things?" I echoed, waiting for her to elaborate.

"You know what I mean!" Jessie exclaimed, throwing her hands up in frustration. "These... these thoughts, these *feelings*. I haven't ever had these before. I *don't* know what's going *on* anymore!" Her voice cracked a little; she sounded close to tears.

Unsure of whether the gesture would be welcomed or not, I put the papers down and gathered her into my arms, pulling her close. She didn't pull away, but just hid her face in the shoulder of my jacket. I could feel her shoulders quivering slightly, and I lightly rubbed her back.

Despite the fact that she seemed to be crying – and that really was the last thing that I'd ever want – the whole scene had a sense of... *rightness*, about it. Me just holding her. Nothing particularly romantic or risqué, no. Just her small, soft body pressed against mine. My mind was a mass of conflicting thoughts.

It feels good, knowing that I'm the one who's able to comfort her.

Jackass. She wouldn't need to be comforted if not for you.

It isn't my fault she's having trouble coping!

It is your fault that she would even have to cope with anything!

The back-and-forth mental argument with myself went on for several minutes, before both sides managed to agree on a single thought: *Damn. I've never fallen quite this hard before.*

After several minutes of relative silence, Jessie pulled away, wiping at her red-rimmed eyes with her sleeve. "Sorry," she mumbled.

"S'fine, Jessie," I demurred lightly, offering a comforting smile. It's the least I could do. I didn't have a shoulder to cry on.

"So, um, I guess we should get to work," the girl decided lamely, motioning towards the papers that I'd put aside. I sighed mentally and picked up the computer printouts again, showing them to her. She leaned against my shoulder, surprising me, and looked down at the pages in my lap.

"Yeah, I guess. Anyways, I was doing some research last night about the 'using soil as an electrical system' project..."

CHAPTER 19

"I'm not sure this is a good idea, Ashley," I disagreed nervously, allowing myself to be practically dragged through the mall.

"Oh, hush," she commanded playfully. "You need to find someone else to take up your time since you dumped Kyle. And you'll love this guy, anyways."

"I don't know... You know I don't like blind dates..."

"Deal with it, Jessica. You'll like Nick. And you won't even have to deal with him at school – he's home-schooled."

"If you say so," I muttered, not entirely believing that I would like him. There was, after all, someone else entirely on my mind. *Not*, of course, that I'd ever *admit* that. *Particularly* not to Ashley.

"I do. So just stay here," she gestured towards the food court in a vague motion, "and he'll be around in a little bit."

"You're not sticking around to see how it goes?" I was vaguely surprised at that. Ashley, after all, thrived off of gossip. Plus, *she* was the one setting up this entire date in the *first* place.

"No, but I think you're a big girl and can handle him on your own," she teased with a slight grin. And with that, she was off. Grumbling softly to myself, I sat down at one of the tables and waited.

I didn't have to wait long, though, because I soon saw a blonde-haired boy headed towards me, grinning a little. His hair was short and spiked, and his eyes were bright green. I had to admit that the guy was cute, but he wasn't anything like the person who was in my mind. *And your heart*, snickered a voice in the back of my mind, but I chose to ignore it.

"Hey there. You must be Jessica. D'you mind if I call you Jessie?" he leaned over me, grinning in what he probably thought was a charming way.

"Ah, Jessica is fine," I corrected with what felt like a forced grin. I didn't want him calling me that nickname – only Rachel got to do that. And even then it had taken me ages to give up on correcting her.

"Oh, sure. I'm Nick, but you probably already guessed that." He laughed, as if that was funny.

"Yeah, I did," I agreed with a frozen smile. "So, tell me about yourself?" I almost instantly decided that that was a bad idea, as he began telling me about his friends and how often they all went skating. I just nodded and laughed and agreed where it seemed appropriate. I wasn't listening to him very well; his skateboarding wasn't nearly as interesting as he probably thought it was. *I'm going to kill Ashley for this.*

"But that's enough about me," Nick decided after almost a full half-hour of going on about the various skating competitions he'd been in. I probably learned more about his skating 'career' in those thirty minutes than I knew about Rachel in almost two weeks. "What does a pretty girl like yourself do in her spare time?"

"Well, I like to sing," I admitted slowly, smiling a little. You also like to hang out with Rachel. I shoved the thought away.

"Whoa, really?" he interrupted with a bright grin. "Same here! Actually, I sing and play guitar in a band. We're called Fire and Ice. Kevin – he's the one I told you about, dragon on his board – plays bass guitar, and Jake – the guy that manages my competitions – plays the drums. We play at that club downtown, you know the one? It's called, um..." He furrowed his brow as he tried to think of the name of the club. I had to refrain from groaning out loud; he seemed to be insistent upon just talking about himself.

"...don't see how you managed to get that thing put in, Rah," laughed a familiar voice. My head shot up, eyes scanning for the source of the voice.

"Ugh, me neither," mumbled Rachel's voice. I finally spotted the pair. Rachel had her tongue out, and she was looking down, her eyes crossed, as if it would help her see the new silver stud in her tongue. I raised my brows a little bit at the piercing. "Damn if it doesn't hurt like all get-out."

"And you call *me* a masochist," Jenny chuckled, lightly ruffling Rachel's short mane. The rocker frowned and ducked her head, shoving her friend away. When she straightened up, I finally managed to catch her gaze.

Rachel's expression immediately brightened, and she grinned at me. It faded a bit when she saw Nick, who was looking away, frowning a bit as he tried to think of the name of the club still.

I mouthed '*help me*' at her, and she gave a silent '*oh.*' I could hear her telling Jenny something; the girl just laughed and waved Rachel off as she wandered off.

"Hey, darlin'," the rocker greeted cheerfully as she dragged a chair up to sit next to me. I smirked inwardly at Nick's startled look. "I was wonderin' where you got off to." She lightly tousled my hair, and I laughed, elbowing her a little.

"Stop it," I complained playfully, giving her a mock glare. Rachel just grinned, placing a light kiss on my forehead. I was then caught between blushing in surprise at the affectionate gesture... and laughing aloud at Nick's baffled expression.

"Fine, Jessie," she chuckled, lazily draping her arm around my shoulders. I smiled shyly, leaning into her grip. Rachel glanced at Nick, as if just now realizing that he was there. "Friend of yours?" she inquired, nodding at him. He was still gaping between the two of us, as if not believing that he'd been set up on a blind date with a lesbian.

"Kinda," I admitted, brushing a lock of hair behind my ear. "You know Ashley? She, ah, set me up with this guy. Nick."

"Yeah?" Rachel seemed interested at that fact. She shot Nick an apologetic look. "Sorry, buddy, I guess she didn't know Jessie was with me."

"Hold up, you two are *gay*?" the guy demanded to know, looking at Rachel with a hint of what appeared to be disbelieving lust in his gaze. "I don't believe it."

"No?" she mused, tilting her head a little. Then she turned to me and before I knew what she was planning, I felt her lips against mine. It wasn't much of a kiss, just the lightest brushing of our mouths, but it was enough to make me gasp and made my heart flutter. Rachel just smirked at Nick, as if she was claiming her territory. I only barely noticed it; my thoughts were too busy replaying that action, recalling the feeling of her lips just barely nuzzling mine. I absently licked my lips, tasting her still.

"Whoa," Nick breathed, evidently as shocked at the kiss as I was. "That is so hot!" He grinned lasciviously at us. Rachel rolled her eyes.

"I'm inclined to agree with you, but I'd rather you didn't talk about my *girlfriend* and I like that," she stated flatly, a snarl tugging at her lips.

The guy looked surprised at her sudden ire towards him. "I, uh, sorry," he stumbled over his words. "I, uh, guess I'll leave you two, um, alone, then. Later, Jessie."

"*Jessica*," I corrected with a small frown as he left rather quickly. He merely waved without turning or pausing.

"I kinda like that I'm the only one that can call you Jessie," Rachel mused aloud, her arm still around my shoulders.

"I bet it does wonders for your ego," I teased, playfully poking her side. She jerked slightly and gave me a disapproving look.

"You know it," Rachel chuckled, an amused look in her dark gaze. It faded after a moment, though, and she shifted uncomfortably. "I, ah... sorry about the kiss, though," she mumbled, glancing away. "That... wasn't really fair of me."

"Fair of you?" I echoed, confused. Yeah, I wouldn't have chosen my first lesbian kiss to have been used to get away from a self-centered date, but did she think that I regretted it? I recalled the conversation we'd had at her apartment the night before, and my stomach clenched a bit. *That's probably exactly what she thinks.*

"Yeah. I mean, I know you're new to the whole lesbian thing, and I'm probably not helping matters at all, so, sor –" I cut her off with a soft kiss of my own. She froze, evidently surprised that I would instigate the kiss. Heck, I was surprised that I started a kiss, but now, here, in the middle of it, I was enjoying the hell out of it. Her lips were a little chapped, yeah, but not terribly, and the taste of her was sweetly addictive. Finally, I reluctantly broke away and smiled shyly at the wide-eyed rocker.

"Stop apologizing," I muttered softly, amused.

Rachel was quiet for a moment, then she chuckled. "*You* are an *incredibly* confusing person, you know that?" she remarked, lightly tapping my nose.

"Is that an insult?"

"No, but it's not a compliment either."

"That doesn't really make me feel any better," I commented dryly.

"Sorry." She smirked a little. "So, Jessie, care to tell me who that guy I just had to scare off was?"

I groaned a little. "Ashley is of the opinion that I need a new boyfriend since I dumped Kyle," I explained, a frown tugging at my lips.

"Ew, *why*?" Rachel wrinkled her nose in mock disgust, and I laughed a little.

"I have no idea. But she set me up on a blind date with, uh... Nick."

"I take it he wasn't the best date in the world?" she asked, amusement dancing in her dark brown eyes.

"Absolutely not. He talked about himself for an entire half hour straight."

"Oh, *ew*," Rachel agreed, wrinkling her nose and nodding. I giggled at her overly dramatic disgusted tone.

"Yeah, I guess you could say that. But, I'm free for the next hour or so..." I looked at her hopefully, playfully twining her pendant, a cross made out of a pair of bent nails and tied together with red wire, around my fingers.

The rocker smiled slightly and lightly ruffled my hair. "I'd love to hang out with ya, Jessie, but I have a previous engagement." I pouted a little, and she laughed. "Oh, don't make that face at me. I've had this planned for like a month."

"Well, when are you free next?" I asked her curiously, untangling my fingers from her necklace.

"Hm." She rolled her eyes up as she thought about that. "Tomorrow afternoon, I'm doing a song recording at home. You're welcome to come watch me do that, but I can't really guarantee that it'll be all that interesting."

I perked up a bit. I'd never seen her playing any instruments before, unless you counted the time at the rally. Now I would get to see her play *all* of them.

"Sure. What time are you going to be doing it?"

"About five in the afternoon. Can I expect you to be there?"

"Of course. I haven't really ever seen you play anything."

"Well, consider yourself lucky," Rachel decided, a crooked grin on her face. "You'll be one of precious few who've gotten to see OneGirl in action." She glanced at her watch and

wincing slightly. "Jeez, I've gotta get gone before I'm late. See you tomorrow, Jessie." I smiled shyly when her lips brushed against my forehead in an affectionate way. Then she got up and left. I remained seated, watching as she wove around the mass of people and finally disappearing among them.

"She sure is something, isn't she?" inquired a familiar voice. I jumped in surprise, and turned to look at Jenny, who was looking down at me.

"Yeah, she really is," I murmured, glancing down. I smiled a little. I didn't bother considering why.

"So, I take it you two are a closeted item now?" I looked up in confusion, and she elaborated: "Dating, but only where no one can see you?"

"I guess," I admitted slowly, my brow creasing with a hint of confusion.

"You'd better not hurt her," she informed me flatly, leveling an impressive death glare on me. I watched her expression for a moment, then something clicked.

"You're in love with her."

Her lips twitched. "Four years," Jenny muttered in agreement. "She doesn't look at me in that way, though. We've tried already."

"I'm sorry," I murmured softly, hesitantly putting a hand on her shoulder. Jenny shrugged it off.

"Even so, she's my best friend. And she's fallen pretty hard for you. So don't you *dare* hurt her." I couldn't say anything to allay her fears, not even 'I care about her.' How could I admit something to one of Rachel's past girlfriends that I refused to admit to myself?

CHAPTER 20

I scowled at the tuner that was perched on my knee as it informed me for the billionth time that my E string was out of tune. Now it was sharp.

"Stupid thing," I muttered, giving the knob the slightest of turns. I plucked the string again, and the note rang out, clear and precise. The tuner told me that it was flat now. "*Son of a—!*" I cut my own frustrated yell off and slapped my hand over the string to quiet it. I breathed in deeply and then sighed with annoyance.

I hate tuning-up. I tweaked the knob again and held my breath as my finger rang the note again. Still flat. Repeat; sharp. Flat. Sharp. *Still* sharp. Sharp. Flat. *There!* Now it was in tune. Nodding once, pleased with the fact that the guitar was in tune but still annoyed that it had *taken* so long, I played a few quick scales, making sure that it sounded right. I had to fiddle with the knobs a bit more – fuck what the tuner said at this point – but I quickly got it to where it sounded like it should, and put the paint-spattered guitar on its stand.

I hefted my bass guitar onto my knee, switched tuners, (the other didn't work as well with bass guitars, even though the package said it did) and began plucking the thick strings. It was even more out of tune than the electric. I growled a little and began tuning the first one. Before I could even get that one in tune, though, a knock came on my door. I glanced at the clock. *She's* early *this time*.

Slipping my jacket on, I checked my appearance in the mirror briefly. Whenever I did a recording, I always put on a "rocker outfit," as Jenny had declared it, to help get the creativity pumping. Today, I had on a black t-shirt with a white deathbat spanning the breast, a pair of slightly-ripped denim pants, and a pair of black lace-up boots. The leather jacket merely complemented the look. I nodded, still perfectly pleased with the outfit, and headed towards the apartment door.

"First you're late, now you're early, make up your *mind*, woman!" I complained playfully as I let the girl inside. I glanced at her outfit and had to resist the urge to laugh at the polar opposites. She wore a light blue shirt with a low neckline; the brand's name was printed on the front. Her legs wore a pair of darker blue leggings, with a knee-length black skirt. For once, Jessie had let her red hair go unstraightened, falling into soft waves about her face. I decided that I liked it. She snapped her fingers in front of my face, and I blinked.

"And you were telling *me* not to stare," she teased, a gentle smirk on her face.

"I didn't tell you not to stare," I reminded her dryly, "I just said my eyes were up *here*." I motioned to my face and quirked a brow. "Besides, I can *tell* when you're not looking at my face."

"Oh really?" Jessie returned, raising an eyebrow in response. "How so?"

I laughed a little and casually stepped forward into her personal space. She was forced to look up at a sharp angle to meet my eyes. "'Cause you have to look up to see my face. If you're looking straight, well... you wouldn't be looking so straight to anyone *else*."

She groaned a little and smacked my shoulder. "That wasn't funny," she told me, lightly shoving me a few inches away from her.

"It was hilarious, and you *know* it." I turned her around and steered her towards my bedroom. "*Anyways*, I need to tune my fucking bass, so let's go over to my IRS."

"Internal Revenue Service?" the girl guessed, confused.

"No. Why does everyone think that? IRS. Impromptu Recording Studio," I explained with a shrug and a grin.

"Ah." Jessie still looked a bit bemused, and I laughed.

"Just sit down wherever." I gestured vaguely around my room; I had a few chairs already in there, as well as my (unmade, as always) bed. The girl sat down on the bed, on the side closest to my "IRS" and pulled her legs up. I picked my way over to the stool, grabbing up the yet-to-be-tuned bass and began testing the first string again, watching the needle on my tuner.

"What are you doing?" she asked curiously as she watched me.

"Fixing this stupid guitar. I swear, all my instruments get together and have a party whenever I'm gone. Then they all get drunk, and therefore they're all loose, out of tune, and out

of place by the time I need to use them again. Fuck-ups, the lot of 'em." She laughed at my mini-rant.

"I can see how that would get annoying," Jessie commented, amused. I just grunted as I began working on the other strings. "Does it always take this long to get ready for a recording?"

"No. It usually takes longer. I was tuning up that fella before you came." I nodded at the guitar that was on its stand. "*It was being exceptionally* difficult. Fortunately, I didn't have to tighten the snare on my trap set today."

"Maybe you should glue them down so they won't go out of tune."

"Duct-tape is better, everyone knows that," I retorted seriously, eliciting a laugh from the girl. I played a few scales on that guitar as well, before reluctantly deciding that it was as in tune as it was going to be. "Well, that's about the least annoying as I'm going to get it. I guess it's time to boot this up." I went to my computer and began the process of opening up my recording software, but continued talking to Jessie. "I usually start off with the drumming part of the songs, just so I have a base to do all the other instruments on. Unfortunately, the drumming is also the most boring thing in the world to watch, so I did it yesterday."

"Oh, and the bass is going to be more interesting?" she teased me.

I flipped her off with one hand as I threw the strap of the instrument over my shoulder with the other. Then I made a "be quiet" gesture at Jessie, who simply nodded. I plugged the bass guitar into the computer and tapped a few keys on the keyboard, setting it to "record." My lips silently counted two measures, before starting the slow, calm bass in time with the drums. It was mostly the same notes for a while, before pausing along with the recorded trap set, and coming back in with several notes played in instant succession. My lips moved silently along with the words of the song as my fingers danced and plucked on the heavy strings. After almost three full minutes, I allowed the final note to fade out on its own.

"I don't see why you keep freaking out over your playing," Jessie commented, and I jumped; I'd forgotten she was there.

"Because I'm not very good?" I said slowly, giving her a 'duh' look.

"You're better than some of the bass guitarists in the band at school," she pointed out.

I scoffed gently. "The school guitarists are morons who only claim they play guitar to make themselves sound like interesting people," I declared, replacing my bass on its stand.

"My point exactly." I glared at her a little and she grinned. "Sorry." She didn't sound particularly apologetic.

"Whatever. Stop being mean to me or I'll throw..." I trailed off as I looked around my work area for something light to throw at her. "...*Something* at you."

"I'm terrified," she remarked flatly.

"Oh, good god, I've turned you into a smartass," I moaned dramatically, putting the back of my hand to my forehead.

She giggled. "Have you, now?"

"No, I'm sure there are many people that would say that I turned you gay, too," I mused aloud. She threw a pillow at my head. "Jerk."

"You had it coming to you."

"I'm sure. Now, no throwing pillows at the performers." I paused upon noticing the light blush that crept into Jessie's cheeks. Then I grinned wickedly. "Not *that* kind of performer, Jessie. Jeez, this is like the third time in the past week. Where the hell is *your* head at?" That comment made me duck a second pillow.

"Shut up!" she hissed, looking quite thoroughly embarrassed.

"While we're on the subject," I mused aloud, pretending not to notice how flustered she was, "don't stick anything down my waistband either, hm?" I winked at the scarlet-faced girl.

"Bite me," she huffed, looking away.

"I consider that foreplay."

"*God*, Rachel!" she yelped, evidently unused to the onslaught of innuendo.

"You make it sound like we're doing something dirty," I commented and got swatted for my trouble.

"Quit it," she growled.

I laughed. "Fine, I'll be good. Unless you tell me otherwise."

"*Rachel*," Jessie stated flatly, not amused. She was still blushing a little, though.

I chuckled softly. "Sorry, *chica*. It's just very easy to mess with you," I remarked, stealing a light kiss from her.

"Hm," she muttered indignantly.

"Well, you shouldn't *make* it so easy, then," I told her, grinning a bit as she laced her fingers together behind my neck.

"Because I do it on purpose," she scoffed sarcastically.

"It wouldn't surprise m - *whoa!*" I yelped as she managed to flip me so I landed on my back, on my bed. Jessie was laughing, straddling my waist.

"That's what you *get*," she giggled as I sat up, barely managing to stay seated in my lap.

"*Hm*. Just for that, I'm trapping you here," I decided, wrapping my arms around her waist. Jessie's fit of giggles had yet to subside, so she simply buried her face in the crook of my neck. I rolled my eyes and glared down at her as best as I could. "Are you *done* yet?" I demanded to know, feigning annoyance. It was, after all, kind of hard to be irate with a girl whose lips were brushing against my neck.

"No, not yet." I smacked her hip and she yelped. "Stop being mean to me."

"Why?" I was being annoying at this point; we both knew that.

"I'll bite you if you don't."

I scoffed softly. "Yeah *ri* - " I got cut off with a gasp when I felt her bite down on my unbroken collarbone. "*Jesus*, Jessie!" I looked down as she pulled away, evidently surprised at her own actions. A blush was building in her face. I lightly rubbed my collar, feeling the slightly damp patch where she'd bitten me. "*That's* gonna leave a mark," I mused aloud.

"I - sorry, I didn't mean..." I put a finger on her lips to quiet her down.

"I don't mind being marked, Jessie," I told her, amused. "But that had no flair at all."

"What?" Her brow creased in confusion, and I chuckled.

"In layman's terms: I don't mind getting bit, but *that* one was *lame*."

Jessie frowned a little, straightening up to look at me in the eyes. "I don't follow."

I grinned a bit and pulled her closer. I had to bite back a laugh at the startled look in her blue eyes as her hands slid to my shoulders instead. "*Well...*" I drew out the word a bit, resting my forehead against hers. I felt her breath quicken a bit at the proximity, and I had to fight from smirking. "For one, you didn't kiss me properly, yet." I closed the distance between us, stifling her soft whimper. I managed to slip my tongue into her mouth, and Jessie gave a soft, muffled gasp. One of her hands slipped up and tangled itself in my hair.

When I broke away finally, she had a slightly dazed look on her face. I grinned crookedly and used the pad of my thumb to wipe a bit of saliva from the corner of her mouth. "You alright?" I teased.

"Y-yeah," Jessie mumbled, brushing a few strands of red hair out of her face. "I, ah, think that was my first time kissing a girl with a tongue stud."

"You've kissed girls *without* tongue studs?" I raised an eyebrow and she mock glared at me.

"You know what I mean. That was my first time kissing *anyone* with a tongue stud," she amended.

I quirked a brow. "Hopefully not the last time?" Instead of answering, she simply kissed me again, clinging tightly to my shoulder and head.

Needless to say, I didn't get any more work done on my recording. And Jessie *did* leave my apartment later with a mark on her neck.



For about two months, we dated in secret. We laid down several unspoken rules. I didn't openly show affection where her "friends" could see her, she didn't join in on my constant mocking. We didn't go to places she knew her friends stayed at often. And the relationship pace was only as fast as Jessie wanted it to be - which was understandably slow.

So imagine my surprise when the rules were broken by *her*, and not by *me*.

CHAPTER 21

I sighed a bit as I shifted in the rocker's arms. I was absentmindedly tracing the contours of a metal skull-and-crossbones ring on her middle finger. Its red, deep-set eyes glared at me.

"Something on your mind, Jessie?" Rachel asked curiously, her chin lightly resting on my shoulder.

"Hm? Oh. Not really, why?" I glanced at her as she tightened her hold on me a bit. I felt her shrug.

"You just haven't said much," she replied honestly. That much was true. In the past two months, I had come to enjoy just talking with the lanky girl as she contentedly held me. I hadn't spoken much today.

"Well, maybe I do," I admitted, my eyes falling back to the slightly morbid ring. She generally had a different ring on every finger, but she wore the skull every day, I had noticed. I didn't ask about it, and she didn't offer to tell me about it.

"Anything I can help with?" she offered, watching as I played with the ring.

"Probably not. It's about you."

"Good things, I hope," she mused, and I smiled a bit. I was the only one outside her circle of friends that understood her few insecurities.

"Of course. I was just wondering..." I trailed off, uncertain. The rocker had been courteous of my boundaries so far, and I hers. Now I was about to cross the boundaries that I myself had set.

"Wondering...?" She prompted, idly lacing her fingers with mine. I glanced down as she did and smirked a little. Her pale, lightly calloused hand, decorated with rings, always looked

odd when placed next to mine: my hand was smaller and tanner than hers, and I wore no rings. Polar opposites.

"Have you heard about that party that they're hosting on that Friday before Halloween?" I inquired, not looking up at her.

"Heard about it, yeah. Invited, of course not," Rachel replied, a tinge of amusement in her voice. "Why, are you going to it?"

I nodded. "Yeah, Ashley invited me," I said, distracted, before wincing a little. Rachel's contempt with that particular friend wasn't exactly a well-kept secret.

"Hm."

"I asked her if I could bring someone with me," I told the girl behind me, twisting around somewhat awkwardly to look at her. The girl simply arched an eyebrow, silently asking me to continue. "I was wondering, y'know, if you're not busy, if you'd maybe like to come to that." I carefully watched her surprised expression.

"Possibly. Is it a costume party?"

I struggled briefly to remember, before nodding. "Yeah."

"Is Ashley going to set you up with several different guys if I'm not over there frightening her off with my gay-ness? Because, y'know, it's totally contagious."

I giggled softly at her roll of the eyes. "Probably, yes."

"Then I guess I'm going." Rachel shrugged as if to downplay the whole thing. I grinned a bit and kissed her thankfully. "Hm. Maybe I should agree to do things more often if that's the response I'm going to get every time," she mused, smirking playfully.

"Nympho." She playfully dug her fingers into my ribs in a borderline rough tickle, making me yelp and squirm in her arms.

"And you love it."

I wanted to agree with her statement, but I couldn't manage to make myself say it.



I grimaced a little as I slipped away from a guy who reeked of alcohol. Always the drunk ones who bother me.

I glanced at my phone and sighed with vague annoyance. She was almost an hour late. Maybe she wasn't coming. I put my cell away and allowed my gaze to sweep over the mass of sweaty, writhing bodies in the middle of the room.

The dancing stilled for a moment as the current song ended. The next one came in to a soft, seductive chuckle that I knew so well. I shivered a little at the sound, and instantly became cross with myself. How does she have this effect on me when she isn't even here?

When there's a chill in the air... chill in the air

I lurked about the edge of the room, occasionally scanning the mass of people in hopes of noticing the tell-tale black leather that Rachel always wore.

You hear a creak on the stair... creak on the stair

I sighed a little bit, smoothing the front of my costume out. Briefly I wondered if I had been stood up, but I doubted that.

You'd better lock all your doors...

The hair on the back of my neck stood up as I got the sudden, uncomfortable sensation of being watched. I glanced around again, but no one seemed to be watching me. The sensation didn't fade.

Is there anybody out...?

I felt a sudden presence behind me and panicked briefly, but a familiar voice softly singing along with the lyrics made me relax, though her actions didn't.

"They're out—" her right hand gripped my left shoulder from behind "—to get you—" her left hand grabbed my other shoulder, so her arms were crossed over my chest "—to capture you—" I gasped softly as I was pulled flush against her front "—and make you..." Her lips barely grazed my ear when she softly sang, "*Spell bound...*" Rachel's hands slowly slid down my sides in time with the phrase, coming to rest at my hips. I had to fight the urge to whimper at her touch.

I turned around in her grasp, a little surprised at her actions. Whatever I was going to say, though, was lost when I saw her saw her costume. Her usually-spiked hair was slicked back and pinned flat at the nape of her neck. She wore a deep crimson shirt over a pair of form-fitting black pants. Over her shirt was a black tie and a dark blazer that molded to her subtle feminine curves. A long, black cape, trimmed in red, was clipped to her shoulders, making her look that much more imposing. Rachel's face was paler than usual, her lips redder, and when I noticed her

slight half-grin I understood why. A pair of realistic, curved fangs protruded from her soft lips. I wondered at her expression, though; with her slight grin and her eyebrow raised expectantly, she looked like the classic seductive vampire - *oh...*

Rachel's cool hand slowly slid to mine as she gently coaxed me onto the dance floor. "Howling and prowling, you're shivering, quivering..." Sure enough, I shuddered a little when I was pulled close to her, her lips barely brushing against mine, "*Spell bound...*"

I stared a bit when she pulled away to dance in time with the chorus, her scorching look inviting me to join her. "You cannot run, and you cannot hide." I hesitantly began dancing alongside the 'vampire.' I inhaled sharply when she leaned into me, forcing me to lean back a bit. "Yeah, you've gotta face it, baby." Rachel leaned back, and I leaned into her, duplicating the move. "Things go *bump* in the night."

The young woman smirked a little when I began to dance a bit more freely. "Wherever you run and wherever you hide, yeah, you've gotta face it, baby, things go bump—" she extended her hand towards me, palm facing me "—bump—" I hesitantly pressed the palm of my hand against hers "—bump—" then I gasped quietly when she pulled me close, our clasped hands trapped between our right shoulders "*—in the night.*" She grinned wickedly at me, leading me in a circle as the singer quieted for a moment.

The 'vampire' lightly turned me so that my back was to her front, and my arms were crossed under my chest. "Tell me, who's spooking you?" she requested breathlessly against the side of my neck. I shivered. I wanted to respond to her question with 'you.' It was frightening, to me: I hadn't ever wanted someone so badly before.

Rachel lazily turned me around again so that I was facing her again. "It's very Scooby-Doo." She released my hand, drawing back a little to dance in front of me. It was while I was fighting the impulse to stare, that I noticed that the two of us had created a small gap in the dancers. *They're watching us?*

"You hear a shriek in the house," the rocker sang softly, giving me a look that practically crooned 'And not a *bad* scream, either.' I'm sure my cheeks went scarlet. "You know, it's freaking me out..."

Rachel twisted her hips in time with the music, her knees bending her into a slight crouch as the notes went lower. "They're out to get you, to capture you, and make you..." She put a hand

to her chest, 'pushing' herself so that her back arched gracefully before she returned to a standing position along with the phrase, "*Spell bound...*" I stared as she completed the fluid motion, then up at her face. A few strands of her hair had escaped her ponytail and were plastered to her forehead, making her appearance more wild, untamed. As if she needed something else to look hot.

A challenging look burned in her dark eyes, and my competitive nature kicked in as I repeated the move in time with the vocals. "Howling and prowling, you're shivering, quivering..." I felt a flush rise in my face when I felt her gaze staring heatedly at me. "*Spell bound...*" I lightly 'pushed' myself back up - not as gracefully as Rachel had, but from the approval in her eyes, I decided that it didn't matter.

"You cannot run, and you cannot hide." She leaned into me again, her smoldering gaze still fixated on me. "Yeah, you've gotta face it, baby, things go *bump* in the night." Now I was leaning into her.

"Wherever you run and wherever you hide, yeah, you've gotta face it baby, things go bump—" her hand faced me "—bump— I pressed my hand against hers again "—bump—" I allowed myself to be pulled into her, our shoulders pressed against each other again, and grinned up at her as she softly finished the lyric, "—in the *night*."

Rachel led me in a circle again, before releasing me. She winked once, encouraging me to dance alone. I hesitated a bit, not particularly wanting to 'cut loose,' so to speak, but when she gave me an expectant look, I gave a mental sigh of defeat and began dancing. When she barely brushed against me from behind, I only barely caught her soft murmur of, "*That's my girl...*" I glanced at her, grinning a bit when I caught her gaze. She just winked at me again, a coy smirk playing at her reddened lips.

Rachel's dancing slowed a bit when the vocals came back in. She watched me calmly, obviously expecting me to know the steps by now. "You cannot run, and you cannot hide, yeah, you've gotta face it, baby, things go bump—" she extended her hand again "—bump—" grinning, I pressed mine against hers "—bump—" we pulled each other close "—in the night..."

The 'vampire' raised her eyebrows slightly, the only warning I got that she was changing the dance. As the melody was played once, she didn't walk us in a circle, but rather backed away,

keeping my hand in hers. The melody was played a final time, and she lightly jerked me to her, and I landed against her. Her arm kept me in a slight dip, and my hands gripped her shoulders.

As the few people who had been watching us went back to their dance partners, I noticed our position and grinned a bit. With her stooped over me and my head tilted back just enough to reveal my neck, we were caught in the classic 'Dracula' pose. *She so did that on purpose.*

Rachel lightly pulled me back into a standing position, keeping her arm around me. When the next song started, I stiffened a little and shot her a pleading look. She simply nodded and began leading me off of the dance floor.

"I didn't know you danced," I told her as we slipped away from the worst of the noise.

Rachel snorted gently, pretending to look offended. "What kinda musician would I be if I couldn't dance?" she quipped.

"Did you practice beforehand?" I teased her and she grinned a little sheepishly.

"Ad libbed the entire thing," she admitted with a half-shrug. I stared at her in disbelief. "What?"

"Nothing," I laughed.

"Hm," Rachel snorted, obviously not believing me, as she turned over a flipped chair and sat down. I gave her a dry look.

"Don't pretend you're offended. You've said *and* done worse to *your* friends," I reminded her.

"This is true," she mused aloud. I made a startled noise as she suddenly wrapped her arms around my waist and pulled me into her lap.

"Am I your personal cuddle toy now?" I inquired wryly.

"Obviously."

"What if someone sees us?"

"So?" Rachel looked a bit confused. "None of them know I'm a girl unless they get like a foot away from me."

I studied her outfit for a moment before nodding in agreement. "I suppose you're right," I sighed.

"Good." She kissed me softly. The first thing I noticed was that her 'fangs' didn't hinder her kiss at all. I curiously ran my tongue over them, finding that they felt rather realistic.

When I pulled away, I asked her where she got her fangs from.

Rachel grinned, revealing the curved teeth. "Bought 'em from a costume store." She reached up and tugged one off, showing me the place that you slid your real tooth into. "Granted, I had to sit there and wait like an hour while my mold set, but I think it was worth it." The 'vampire' replaced the fang and briefly ran her tongue over it, ensuring that it wouldn't fall off. She smirked slightly when I was caught staring.

"Isn't it hard to talk with those in?" I wanted to know. Plus it was a good diversion from my staring.

"Nah. I've had practice."

"You wear fangs enough times that you've gotten practice?" I asked incredulously.

"No, I wore them for the entire day before I came here," she corrected, idly tracing a meaningless design on the palm of my hand.

"That reminds me, why were you so late coming here?" I pouted a little, and she gave me a hint of a kiss.

"I wasn't. I got here right on time, thank you very much. I just couldn't find you." She waved her slender hand about the large basement in a vague gesture. "It's kinda hard to find anyone specific in this mess."

I gave a soundless *'ah.'* That much was true.

Rachel rolled her eyes at the sound of a drunken fight breaking out across the room. "Now I remember why I don't come to these things," she muttered.

"Even so, I'm glad you did." I playfully tangled my fingers into her expertly-combed hair before pulling her close to kiss her again. I shivered a bit at the feel of the cool metal stud in her tongue. "You taste different," I commented absently when I pulled away. Then I colored when I realized how she could twist my words into something utterly risqué.

Rachel raised her eyebrows and I could just *see* that she was about to say something – but then she relented. I could almost literally see the phrase *too easy* pass through her mind. She smirked a little. "Flavored lipstick." I blinked.

"You own lipstick?" I had never seen her wear any makeup before.

"I used to do some acting and stage work when I was younger," she admitted, glancing warily towards the fight, which more people were now urging on with shouts and whistling. "I

still have some of my stage makeup. Thus the ability to have extremely pale skin." She motioned at her face.

"And you just remembered how to apply all of it perfectly with no help whatsoever?" I pointed out, amused. When she hesitated, I laughed. "You actually have a feminine side, Rachel. I can't believe it," I teased.

"Don't tell anyone," she pretended to plead.

I scoffed. "Oh, like they'd believe me if I did."

Rachel frowned suddenly. "Trouble's headed this way," she muttered into my ear, nodding at a familiar-looking guy who was stamping towards us.

"Kyle," I sighed, shaking my head a little. Why won't he leave me alone?

"Let me up," Rachel requested. "Something's telling me that he's going to be attempting to slay me and I don't want you getting in the way of that." I snorted softly - she was the only person, I think, that ever used the word 'slay' anymore - and got off of her. The vampire stood up and boredly dusted herself off.

"You dumped me for *this* jackass?" Kyle slurred and I winced; the stench of alcohol on him was almost overpowering. "He looks like a chick." I noticed the corner of Rachel's lips twitch slightly, and I just barely bit back a sigh. *Don't laugh, Rachel.* "I bet he's gay," the guy slurred, glaring at the 'vampire.' The corners of her eyes creased; she was *really* fighting off laughter at this point.

"You must be Kyle," Rachel remarked calmly, lightly sweeping a bit of her hair out of her face. For once, I was grateful for her slightly masculine voice.

"Yeah, her *boyfriend*," he declared, staring at me. I frowned when I noticed his gaze going over me. Rachel obviously recognized the look, for she stepped in front of me.

"*Really*, now? Because I distinctly remember you getting beat down by a *dyke* after Jessica *dumped* you," my girlfriend drawled calmly. My real name sounded odd in her voice. "And I'd *appreciate* it if you didn't stare at *my girlfriend*."

I gasped softly as Kyle grabbed her by the lapels; to her credit, Rachel didn't make a sound, but merely glanced down at the hand on her neck. One of her own thin hands came up, gripping Kyle by the wrist. "Tell you what. If you let me go right now, I won't hurt you."

Kyle guffawed, as if the idea were outrageous. "Like you'd be *able* to, *faggot*," he scoffed.

"Don't get in trouble over this," I muttered, just loud enough for Rachel to hear it. She just glanced at me, before her eyes went back to Kyle. I saw her tighten her grip, and winced in sympathy; the only time she'd ever grabbed me that hard was when I had hit her at the rally, but I still remembered how much that hurt. Then I gasped again as Rachel's free hand came up, hitting him on the side of the head with a sharp *crack!* The momentum snapped his head to the side, and Rachel dropped her other hand to land a second one in his gut. She brought her knee up just as Kyle doubled over from the punch and there was a sickening *crunch*.

Kyle was unconscious when he hit the ground; I recognized a few of his friends as they half-dragged, half-carried him away, watching Rachel warily.

My girlfriend turned to me, shaking her hands out vigorously, and mouthed the word 'fuck!', eyes wide. I couldn't help it; I laughed at her expression.

"Goddamn! I forgot how much it hurts to do that," she told me, examining her deeply-reddened knuckles.

"You've knocked someone out before?" That didn't sound like something a person would have to do more than once in their life.

"No, but I wasn't intending to knock him out either," Rachel admitted with a shrug. "I took a couple of self-defense classes after I got kicked out of my family."

"How long is he going to be out for?" She shrugged, and I snorted softly. "That's very helpful, Rachel. Well, is he at least going to be alright?"

"Never said I was helpful, now did I?" the 'vampire' teased. I just glared at her. "Yes, he's going to be just fine, once he wakes up. Granted... he's going to have some pretty nasty bruises on 'im, but he deserved those."

"I suppose so," I mused. Then I grinned a bit as a favorite song of mine started playing. I lightly tugged on her tie. "Come on, I like this song."

"Says the person who didn't want to dance in the first place?" she teased flatly, though she allowed herself to be dragged onto the dance floor anyways.

I shot her a dry glance. "Bite me." She ran her tongue over her fangs, raising her eyebrows suggestively. "...On second thought, *don't*."

"Spoilsport."

For the next hour or two, we danced and just generally played around. A few of my open-minded friends – those that didn't associate with many people outside of that specific circle – got introduced to my girlfriend; it didn't matter if they knew or not, since I didn't talk to them very often, and they didn't talk to my *other* friends. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed the grin Rachel sported every time I introduced her as my girlfriend.

There were several complaints as the music stopped, but they quieted as the party's host came on, announcing that the costume contests had all been judged. The winner of best guy costume went to a guy evidently dressed as Edward Cullen, to Rachel's eternal distaste.

"The guy looks about like some of the crossdressers I've gone shopping with, for god's sakes," she muttered, her breath hot against my ear. I snickered softly. "Well, it's true. And the man overdid the glitter. He looks like a drag queen." I stifled my giggles with my hand.

The best girl costume was a girl dressed as Tinkerbell, but with considerably more risqué cuts in the fabric. "Christ, she looks like a stripper," Rachel coughed, shaking her head. I couldn't really argue with that; the girl barely looked like the Disney character she was supposedly dressed up as at that point.

Over the next hour, several more 'awards' were given out. Neither of us were called up there for any of them, though Rachel kept me quite entertained with her barrage of sarcastic remarks.

"...And for the final contest, we have the 'Strangest Couple Costume' award going to... Blossom and Dracula!" My eyes widened in shock as the two of us were half-shoved up to the speaker, before turning around and offering a wave to the various people around the place. I clung to Rachel's side, grinning and waving nervously. Rachel was rather amused with the situation, evidently having decided beforehand that it was most likely going to be us. I barely heard someone in the back yell "Bite her!" I started to warn Rachel not to do it but only hissed softly as she leaned down to playfully nip my neck – to applause from those who had seen it.

I glared at her and she offered me an apologetic look as she led me away from the gazes from all of the people. "Are you mad at me?" she asked curiously, when we got where the music wasn't quite as overwhelming.

I hesitated. "Not really," I sighed, before looking at her seriously. "No biting in public, though." She just grinned slightly, before stealing a kiss from me.

"I can manage that," Rachel snickered. One of the friends I had introduced Rachel to caught my eye and made a whipping gesture at me, grinning impishly. I blushed instinctively; fortunately, my girlfriend didn't seem to notice.

"Can we get out of here?" I asked her softly, wondering at her manner. She'd seemed a little off ever since I introduced her to a few of my friends.

"Don't care to stay in the drunken teenage hormone pit anymore?" I snorted softly at her description, then winced at a sudden crash from the other side of the room.

"Not particularly, no."

"Good, me neither. Am I dropping you off at your house?"

"Please. If you don't mind," I added hastily; it seemed that a lot of the times, I did pawn rides off of her.

"Jessie? Shut up." She grinned playfully, fangs showing, as we left the stifling basement, onto the first floor of the house. Here, there seemed to be couples everywhere, all making out, some in various stages of undress. I sighed with relief as we finally got out of the house, before coughing violently at the stench of cigarettes and other... less-than-legal substances. *Lovely, the smokers are out here.*

"Hey," one of the druggies called out to my girlfriend, looking quite thoroughly stoned, "Y'gotta light?"

"Sure." She rolled her eyes, somewhat amused. The guy managed to get himself over to her, holding his crude cigarette out. Rachel easily fished a lighter out of the pocket on her blazer, and lit the guy's joint.

"Thanks, man," he mumbled, taking an appreciative drag from the drugs. The 'vampire' just nodded and waved him off with a hand.

"Do I want to know why you have a lighter with you?" I asked her, only half-teasing.

"In case someone needs a light," Rachel replied honestly, shrugging.

"Do you smoke?" She didn't seem like the druggie type to me.

Rachel wrinkled her nose. "Eugh, no. Don't have anything against 'em, but I don't smoke, no. There are more interesting ways to die."

"That was incredibly morbid," I remarked as Rachel unlocked her truck.

"Sorry." From the teasing look in her dark eyes, I gathered that she really wasn't.

The drive to my house was mostly silence. Every now and then, I would glance at her, studying her profile against the window. A hint of a contented smile played at her lips, but I couldn't be sure it was there, what with the constantly-shifting shadows.

"Here we are," she said quietly, turning the vehicle off once she had parked it. I nodded quietly and got out of the truck, brushing at the front of my costume again. She silently walked me up to the front door of my house; neither of us said anything, for fear of waking my parents up. It was after midnight, after all.

"I had a good time tonight," I murmured softly, idly reaching up to brush her spiked bangs out of her face.

"Surprisingly, I did too," she remarked, before leaning down. I smiled slightly when Rachel softly, sweetly kissed me. When we broke away, I smiled up at her.

"Not that I'm complaining, but what was that for?" I whispered to her, tracing her firm jaw with my fingers. She turned her head a little, kissing my fingertips. I grinned.

"I'm happy," Rachel replied innocently, turning back to look at me. I lowered my hand to her shoulder.

"Why?" I wondered softly. The girl's pale hands lightly slid up to my face, holding me still as her dark brown eyes studied my expression. I blushed a little at the tenderness in her gaze. My eyes closed, though my smile didn't fade. I gasped softly when her lips gently brushed over my eyelids in a gentle, affectionate gesture.

"You introduced me as your girlfriend," Rachel murmured against my forehead.

"Only to some of my friends," I corrected with a guilty frown.

"That's fine. It takes some time," she insisted softly, placing soft kisses on my lips until I stopped frowning. "I'm just glad you did that much, at least. Y'know what that shows to me?"

I smiled a little. Her soft, quiet manner was almost adorable. I almost didn't want the moment to end, even if I was getting cold. "What does it show?" I whispered back, my own hands coming up to hold her warm hands to my face.

Rachel grinned slightly, a shy, half-grin that made me giggle softly. Rachel was anything but shy. The girl leaned in, just barely resting her forehead against mine. Her lips brushed

tantalizingly against mine with every word as she replied, "It shows you're not ashamed of me." Then she closed the distance between us, kissing me so lovingly that I wanted to cry out in loss at its end. She smiled at my probably-frustrated look and placed a soft kiss on my forehead. "Night, darlin'."

I quietly whispered "Good night," as she headed back down the driveway. I saw her truck start up and slowly drive off.

I stayed on the porch a little while longer, considering her new endearment for me. Darling. My lips curled into a small grin; I actually liked being called darling, unlike a few other 'pet names' I'd been called.

It didn't matter that she said it in the slow, Southern twang that had grated on my nerves at first. It was beginning to grow on me by now. *Just another thing I... like, about her.*

CHAPTER 22

"You know," Thomas commented idly, rifling through a rack of clothing, "I was thinking about getting you guys in the A/V club to create a new computer program."

"To do what?" I asked curiously as Jenny dropped a few shirts on my lap. The two had wanted to go shopping, and as usual, I somehow got dragged into it. This time I was playing the role of 'coat rack.'

"Well, see, it would take any song you put in there..." he paused to admire a pair of jeans nearby before continuing. "And it would convert it into *banjo* music."

"That would be epic!" I cheered from my seat.

"Why the hell would we want to do that?" Jenny inquired, baffled. "No one *likes* the banjo!"

"That wouldn't be all that difficult to do, actually," I mused aloud.

"Yeah, that's why I was going to get y'all to do it," Thomas pointed out. "All we'd have to do is find a way to get the banjo to play the melody for the song. But we'd have to find the sheet music for a ton of songs first."

"Screw sheet music," I declared as Jenny motioned for me to help carry her stuff into the dressing area. "Tabs are the way to go. Easier to read, and you don't have to deal with sharps and flats and crap." I leaned against her door of the dressing room; the latch was broken, so I had to 'stand guard.'

"Screw tabs!" Thomas shot back from the boys' dressing area. "They have no time signature!"

"The hell do you need a time signature for?" I returned, confused. "If you know the song, you can figure it out on your own, it ain't that hard!"

"We're talking *computers*, Rachel, they don't hear songs," Thomas reminded me. If I hadn't been the one to suggest tabs in the first place, I would have the decency to blush at forgetting that.

"Right, right. So, sheet music then." Jenny knocked on the door and I got off of it so she could get out. We strolled back to the 'gender neutral' area.

"I think we need to go down one on the shirt size," Thomas muttered, looking at Jenny's outfit when she came into view. "And, yeah, sheet music. Do you know where we could get a ton of sheet music?"

"Of course I do!" I exclaimed, purposely making myself sound offended.

"For free?" the gay boy clarified, raising a brow at me.

"Of course I don't!" I replied in precisely the same tone.

"I do," Jenny remarked from inside the dressing room. I leaned against the door again. "You go to a music store, right, but you bring a gun-

I knocked against the door to cut her off. "No *felonies*, you *maniac*." She shoved the door open without warning me, making me stumble.

"Oh, like *you're* not clinically insane, Rachel," she grumbled good-naturedly, now dressed in her normal clothes. "You read comics about fucking... *homicidal maniacs*."

"Fuck you, Mister Bear! You speak lies! *Liiies!*" I cried, pointing dramatically at her. Thomas laughed, having read that particular comic. We exchanged a quick high-five, before linking arms. I stuck my tongue out at her.

"Oh, no, I have the 'Nny-readers ganging up against me," Jenny deadpanned. "What are you going to do?" She linked her arm with my free one, and my friends started leading me out.

"Why are you people dragging me around, anyways?" I asked as we left the store. "You *know* I hate shopping."

"*Dur*, that's why we *bring* you," Jenny replied with a grin. I rolled my eyes.

"Okay, *better* question. ...why have I been trapped between the two of you?" I was getting a little suspicious.

"Because we're getting you a new outfit, obviously," Thomas cheered. I immediately tried to put on the brakes, so to speak, but they just pulled – hard. My heels squealed angrily against the tile floor, protesting as I was quite literally dragged through the mall.

"Come on!" I hollered, indignant. "You guys know well an' good that I hate shopping for me even worse."

"Rachel?" Jenny deadpanned.

"Shut up." That was both of them. I huffed in annoyance and allowed myself to be pulled along, annoyed to the point that I wasn't walking.

"Wait, why are we going in here?" I inquired as they dragged me into the local alt/goth store. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad; I did a good chunk of my casual clothes shopping in stores like these.

"Because you need a new rocker outfit, and the 'jeans and band tees' look is getting old," Thomas replied flippantly.

I just growled at him. "Whatever. You two... go *plot*, then," I muttered, making a 'shooing' motion. They both grinned wickedly and went off into the store. "Good *god*, what have I done?" I sighed, shaking my head. I wandered over to the t-shirts, absently flicking through them and reading their one-liners. About half an hour later, my friends found me and half-dragged, half-lead me towards the dressing room.

Thomas stayed outside of the dressing room, of course, but Jenny pushed me all the way inside and into a stall. I closed the door behind me, grumbling softly as I began undressing; the outfit they'd put together was already on the back of the door. As I began putting the clothes on, though, I felt a blistering heat growing in my cheeks. I knew I was blushing, even though I hadn't actually blushed in who knows how long.

"Jenny, these clothes will get me fucking arrested if I wear them in public!" I snarled.

"Come on out and let us see!" she laughed.

Swearing viciously under my breath, I snapped back, "*Hell* no! I look like a whore!"

"Get your narrow ass out here before I *make* you," Jenny threatened. I winced at that; she had almost dragged me out of my apartment naked the last time she'd made that threat. Grumbling to myself, I slowly left the stall. Jenny gave an appreciative whistle. I glared. "How the hell are you this thin?" she complained mildly. "You eat like a horse."

I smirked humorlessly at her. "Jealous, are we?"

"*Duh*. I eat, like, a slice of *bread* and gain three pounds. That outfit looks hot on you, though." Her eyes scanned the outfit and I instinctively crossed my arms over my chest.

"This is humiliating," I muttered, looking away. That was a mistake, as I caught sight of myself in the mirror. I sighed and turned towards the mirror, putting my hands on my hips. The shirt was a white button-up, though that was a generous description: the buttons stopped around my upper stomach. It fell open from there, revealing more than a hint of skin. Around my neck was a skinny black tie with a large skull printed on the bottom. Over my shirt was a black blazer-like half-jacket. The black skirt I wore was *way* shorter than I would've liked – plus, it was a *skirt*. I didn't *do* skirts. A chain hung from the front pocket to the back. A heavy, studded belt rested on my narrow hips; a black cap completed the outfit. I glowered at my reflection.

"You look fucking *good*, dude," she remarked. I rolled my eyes and she clapped my shoulder. "I'm serious!" Jenny exclaimed, before grinning lasciviously at me. "I bet *Jessie* would like it," she added slyly. My eyes went wide in shock and I froze.

"...That's *cheating*," I muttered, and she laughed.

"Come on, let's get a second opinion." She steered me out to get Thomas' opinion, utterly ignoring my protests.

He whistled, impressed. I didn't look at him. "My my, don't we look sexy."

"You're my friends, you're obligated to tell me that," I pointed out flatly. I hadn't ever been one to wear revealing clothes, and this was just making me feel increasingly self-conscious. My friends always tried to get me in more flattering clothes, yeah, but this was really pushing it. I did *not* appreciate it.

"Rachel, you look *amazing*," Thomas insisted, putting his hands on my shoulders and making me look at him. "Trust me on this, okay?" I hesitated. Jenny was my best female friend, and she helped me through all sorts of trouble, but Thomas was always the one to reassure me when I was going through bouts of self-doubt. Maybe...

Click.

I froze.

Kendra chuckled as she snapped her phone shut, smiling triumphantly at me. "I always knew that you were a *slut*. You just won me a bet. Thanks." With a smirk, she left the store. I stared after her in disbelief for a moment, before silently looking down again. Thomas' reassurance was gone now.

"I'm going to go change clothes," I muttered quietly, turning back to go to the stall.

"Rachel, she was just being a bitch," Jenny tried, but I didn't let her finish. I simply waved a hand as I went back to the stall and changed back into my normal jeans, t-shirt, and leather jacket.

"Thanks, guys, but I guess I'm just sticking to the, ah, jeans and band shirts," I told my friends, smiling apologetically.

"Like hell you are," Jenny stated flatly. "You're buying the outfit, Rah, so get over it." I shook my head, attempting to protest as they took the clothes from me and headed towards the register. I stared after them in disbelief for a moment before shaking my head.

"Maniacs," I muttered, a weak smile threatening to appear at their behavior.

A pause – I suddenly realized something. *They said I was buying the outfit. But they're taking the outfit to the register. Without me.* I began hastily patting my pockets down. My wallet was gone. "Bastards!"

"So, when's your next recording, Rachel?" Jenny asked me cheerfully, handing me a bag and my wallet. I snatched my wallet away from her with a huff, jamming it into my pocket. I took the bag with a great deal more reluctance.

"First day of Thanksgiving break," I muttered, frowning a little.

"Good. You're wearing that outfit. And we're telling Jessie you said to come to your apartment that day," Thomas informed me with an impish grin. My jaw dropped.

"You can't be serious!" I sputtered, eyes going wide at the thought of Jessie seeing me in the incredibly revealing outfit.

"Totally serious, Rah," Jenny replied with a matching grin on her face. "We're doing you a favor. You need to get over being embarrassed about your body. You're fuckin' hot, end of discussion."

I scowled at her. "It's *true*, Rachel," Thomas pointed out. "You can tell you, ah... take care of yourself." He eyed me briefly before shaking his head in amusement. "Even if you *do* eat like a horse."

"Mm. Well, this particular horse desires a milkshake right now to make up for the fact that I'm going to be recognized as the school slut come Monday," I remarked, rolling my eyes. "Again."

"To the food court!" Jenny crowed, and we all headed down that way, insecurities temporarily dispelled. My libido, however, didn't let me forget the fact that Jessie would be seeing me in that beyond inappropriate outfit in less than a week.

CHAPTER 23

For the thousandth time, I wondered if maybe Jenny and Thomas were only playing a trick on me when they told me that Rachel wanted me to come over on the first day of Thanksgiving break. I sighed and knocked on my girlfriend's door anyways. At the muffled call of "Come in!" I opened the door and let myself inside her apartment. I glanced around, curious as to where she was.

"Where are you?" I asked, pausing in her living room.

"I'm in the kitchen," came her voice off to the right. "I was getting a drink before I argue with my instruments." I smirked a little; it never failed to amuse me that Rachel constantly spoke to and of her instruments as if they were people.

My train of thought completely derailed as she came into the room.

She didn't move as I took in her outfit, from the soft black cap to the painfully short skirt. *Since when the hell does she own a skirt, anyways?*

"What..." I trailed off, my mind still attempting to restart itself after the sudden shock of hormones.

"Would you believe me if I said I lost a bet?" she remarked, grinning wryly.

"It wouldn't surprise me," I countered, unwillingly dragging my gaze back up to hers. "Where on earth did you get that outfit, anyways?"

"Jenny and Thomas got it at Hot Topic." She rolled her eyes, annoyed, and then it clicked. I grinned.

"They stole your wallet again, didn't they?"

"Again!" she exclaimed, throwing her hands up in the air.

I laughed; in the past few months, I had learned that the three were good enough friends that borrowing money without permission was something that happened constantly. Rachel

wasn't a fan of it, herself, and I could see why: her friends knew how to pick her pocket quite easily.

My gaze slowly wandered down my girlfriend's body again, pausing especially on the exposed skin of her stomach and chest. I bit my lip slightly as I noticed a hint of white lace peeking over the edge of her skirt.

A pair of fingers snapping in front of my face and a remark of “Jessie. Eyes up here, remember?” made me look up again. Amusement danced in Rachel's dark eyes. “Do I need to go change?” she quipped, adjusting her glasses so they sat higher.

“I'm fine now,” I insisted, though the blush in my face said otherwise. “I like your outfit, though,” I added somewhat shyly, brushing a bit of hair out of my face.

“I don't,” Rachel snorted softly. Her hands went to her hips. “I feel like a whore.”

So that was what Ashley and Kendra were talking about.

“Well, you *look* hot,” I corrected her, leaning up to kiss her softly. I loved to kiss the rocker; her taste was addictive. Somewhere in the back of my mind, a voice commented, *You know, if you look closely, you can tell she's not wearing a bra.* I pulled away from her. I was blushing again – not because of the kiss, entirely, but because my gaze flickered downwards and happened to notice that the voice was right. *Damn hormones.*

Feeling a bit playful, I took her hat from her, placing it on my own head. I did it all the time when I flirted with guys. She pretended to look offended. “Did you just steal the hat that other people paid for with my own money?”

“Yep,” I giggled, then yelped as she picked me up. “Put me down!” I laughed, pushing against her shoulders a bit. She tightened her grip, heading back towards her bedroom.

“Not until you give me my hat back,” she bargained.

“No way, it's mine now.”

“Suit yourself.” She shrugged and dropped me on her bed. Before I had time to recuperate, she was suddenly on top of me, her lips against mine. The feeling of her body pressed against mine made me groan into her mouth. My fingers tangled into her black-and-red hair, pulling her closer. Then I whimpered as she suddenly pulled away, grinning triumphantly. I stared at her, dazed, as she adjusted her crooked glasses and jammed her hat back on her head. Then I noticed something.

“Did you just screw with my hormones to steal your hat back?” I accused, pouting at her.

“Yep.” She winked at me. “Checkmate, darlin.”

“Cheater!” I complained playfully.

“Bite me,” the rocker stated flatly.

“I thought you said you considered that foreplay?” I teased. She winked at me again.

“I did.” I blushed and attempted to reroute the conversation.

“So, um, what song are you recording?” I asked her, sitting up and watching as she went to her 'IRS station.'

“You probably haven’t heard of it,” she remarked absently, tossing the strap of the guitar over her shoulder. I tried to keep my focus on her face; the sight of her guitar pressing against the underside of her chest was extremely distracting. “It’s not exactly in your, ah, preferred genre of music, mm?” I just nodded and watched as she connected her guitar to the computer and began to play. I raised my eyebrows at the complicated-sounding introduction. Rachel was right; I had heard the song before.

As soon as the introduction was completed, she paused for a few seconds before clicking something on the computer. She put her guitar back on its hook and picked up the paint-stained electric guitar. She plugged it in, and rewinded the recording, and didn't begin playing until the recording of her acoustic guitar had finished playing.

For the next half-hour, I just stayed still, watching her record all her instruments into the computer. Her drumming was the most distracting instrument she played the entire time. When she was done, I offered her a light smile and a little laugh, commenting, “Yeah, you were right. I have *never* heard that before.”

“I *told* you,” Rachel scoffed lightly, putting her drumsticks away.

I rolled my eyes, amused at her decisiveness, and fell silent for a moment, just watching her. I took in the image of my girlfriend, surrounded by her instruments, in her element, and felt myself ask her, “What made music your escape?” Rachel looked a little surprised at the question; I was surprised at myself for asking.

She shook her head, smirking a little, before approaching me. “*You*,” she drew the word out, lightly tapping my nose, before kissing me softly. I instinctively wrapped my arms around her neck. She pulled away, but I kept her close. “Are *incredibly* nosy.”

I grinned impishly at her. “I like knowing things about you that no one else knows.”

“Oh really?” she raised an eyebrow playfully. When she saw I wasn't releasing her, Rachel settled down between my legs. “What do you know about me that no one else knows?”

“I know that you're OneGirl,” I started, but she cut me off.

“Jenny and Thomas know that, too,” she interrupted. I gave her a playful glare.

“Fine. I know that you're actually sweet and romantic for the resident, quote, 'raging bull dyke,'” I corrected, idly tracing a pattern on her shoulder blades.

“Hm. That one is harder to correct,” Rachel mused aloud. I grinned.

“I also know that you like to cuddle when you have really tiring days.”

“Doesn't everyone?” she countered dryly.

“Hm, I suppose that's true,” I admitted softly. Then I grinned playfully at her. “I know you're way thinner than you should be, especially with the way you eat.”

“Dammit, everyone says that,” the rocker grouched lightly. I laughed, one of my hands on the nape of her cool neck. “Do I really eat that badly?”

“Maybe not by yourself, but in public, you do,” I informed her. My hand came down, shyly tracing a pattern on her flat stomach. “I am so jealous,” I sighed lightly.

“Oh, don't be. Having a high-as-fuck metabolism isn't the best thing in the world.” She grinned wryly and glanced down at herself. “One of the downsides of it is having pretty much no figure to speak of.”

My gaze flickered downwards and I blushed. “Your, ah, outfit puts more attention on your figure, to be sure,” I remarked, smiling slightly.

“Obviously. You've been staring at me all afternoon.” My jaw dropped.

“I have not!” Well, that was a blatant lie, if nothing else. Rachel just grinned and kissed me again, a bit harder than the previous one.

“You have,” she whispered wickedly against my lips. My head was reeling slightly from the onslaught of hormones.

“Yeah,” I mumbled softly, kissing her deeply. My hand on her stomach lightly slipped under her shirt and began gently stroking her bare skin. Her tongue delved into my mouth in response, and I tightened my hold on her. Our tongues played fervently, one of her hands at my back, keeping me close to her.

The feel of her soft, warm ribs under my fingertips was unbelievable. I had unintentionally imagined that her body would be lean and hard, like most of my ex-boyfriends, but no. Rachel was soft and smooth and deliciously warm.

She broke the kiss, breathing somewhat heavily, and began kissing my neck. I groaned slightly when she kissed at the sweet spot behind my ear. My hand on her ribs drifted higher, grazing the bottom of her breast. Rachel didn't comment, preferring to lick at the base of my neck. The feeling of her soft lips and tongue against my throat was fogging my mind. My hand slipped higher, and Rachel softly growled her approval against my neck. I was certain my face blushed horribly.

I learned a few things about my girlfriend that day. She was soft. She was silky. She was warm. She was smooth.

And she was *sensitive*.

CHAPTER 24

I glared down at the floor. “I hate these shoes.”

“Why’d you wear them, then?” Thomas asked curiously, his gaze flickering down to see the black shoes I wore.

“Because they’re more comfortable than heels,” I pointed out dryly, popping the tab on my can.

“Aren’t those boy’s shoes?” Jenny teased, raising a brow.

“Yeah. Your point?” I shot back, taking a long drink from the can.

“Dear lord, woman. You might as well just drop the ‘cisgender female’ act and call yourself queer.” I made a rude gesture at her, and she laughed. “Hey, you’re the one wearing tuxes to school dances, not me.” I glanced down at my outfit. I wore a white, button-up shirt with a black blazer, tie, and pants. The shoes were, as Jenny pointed out, boy’s shoes. Hey, they were more comfortable than girl’s dress shoes.

“I like my tux. It makes me look like I actually have some vague semblance of a figure.” Thomas laughed and I grinned, taking another sip from my can. “Besides, it makes sure that I don’t get any boys hitting on me during these things.” I made a vague gesture at the ongoing dance. It was the last school dance of the semester, with a name that made me groan: the Snow Ball.

“Now you just have to deal with *girls* hitting on you during these things,” Jenny quipped, lightly ruffling my spiked hair. I scowled at her. She only laughed again.

“The only other lesbian at this ‘phobic school is Jessie,” I reminded my friend, running a hand through my hair. “And she’s closeted.”

“Ah, yes, the redheaded closet-case,” Thomas mused. I glared lightly at him.

“I wish you wouldn’t call her that.”

“You wish for a lot of things.”

I made an indignant noise in my throat and simply lifted the can to my lips again, silencing myself.

“Still pissed that she hasn’t come out yet?” Jenny asked sympathetically.

“Am I getting that readable?” I returned curiously.

“Getting?” my friends deadpanned in unison.

“That was rude, unnecessary, and only mostly true,” I remarked mildly. They laughed. “Anyhow, Thomas, is the new boy coming this time?” I asked him, half honestly wanting to know, half trying to get the focus off of my closeted love life. *Dating life*, I corrected mentally.

“No, Connor had to stay home and babysit his sister,” Thomas admitted glumly. I clapped him on the shoulder and pulled him into a one-armed hug.

“That fails hard. Maybe next time?” I suggested with a light grin. Thomas nodded.

“Hopefully. I really wanted you guys to meet him!” he whined.

“I wanted to meet him, too. That picture of him you sent me was adorable!” Jenny added, nodding rapidly.

“Ugh, they let *anyone* into school nowadays, don’t they?” sneered a familiar voice. I rolled my eyes and released Thomas to face the handful of ‘Phobes.

“I was about to say the same thing,” Jenny shot back. “You’d think that they wouldn’t let animals into a public place, but what do you know? I’m standing in front of a flock of sheep.”

Ashley scowled. “Whatever, dykes.” Her gaze went to Thomas and she added, “Faggot.” “Closet-cases,” I sneered.

“Like we’d ever be gay,” Kendra scoffed, checking her makeup in a compact. “That’d be, like, so weird.” She shuddered theatrically.

“Because, obviously, being gay instantly attracts you to every single person that has the same gender as you,” I snorted, a scowl twisting my features.

“It wouldn’t surprise me,” another girl remarked dismissively. “They have places to fix that now, you know.”

“Well, then, I wish you the best of luck in getting fixed,” Thomas mocked lightly. “Being straight is such an unfortunate disease.”

“Screw you, fag,” Ashley spat coldly, putting her hands on her hips.

“I’d be more interested in your boyfriend. He’s cute,” he admitted in the gayest voice he could muster. He even added in a lisp. Jenny and I snorted softly at his antics.

“Ew!” she hissed in disgust. “Freaks!”

“Want to say that again?” I snarled. I didn’t take kindly to being called names for being different. I never had. Jenny and Thomas gripped my wrists firmly. They knew well that if given the chance, I would *so* try to deck any one of them. Ashley especially. And they were planning on holding me back.

“Ladies, Thomas, is there a problem over here?” a teacher tittered almost nervously. I didn’t blame her. Ever since I had gotten disowned, all the teachers were extremely nervous around me. They didn’t know why I had been disowned, only that I had been. And they assumed the worst automatically.

“No ma’am,” I replied with a smile. Forced. My friends released my wrists quickly. “These girls and I were just having a nice conversation about politics.” Jenny snorted softly at my random lie.

“Is this true?” she asked the ‘Phobes sternly, turning to face them.

“...Yeah. We were talking about the mayoral election coming up,” Kendra agreed, glaring poison daggers at me.

“Oh.” The teacher seemed surprised. “Well, continue, then.”

“No, we were done talking,” Ashley lied. The teacher turned to leave, and Ashley mouthed, ‘This is not over.’

“Bring it, bitch,” I whispered back, grinning coldly. They said nothing else, but left as quickly as they could without running. “I am *so* going to deck her one day,” I grumbled. “And it will be well deserved.” I crushed my now-empty can in one hand, imagining it was Ashley’s stupid throat.

“That’ll be the day we aren’t there to hold you back,” Thomas remarked dryly. I paused, and groaned.

“Now you have that song stuck in my head. You know, that uh, Buddy Holly song. I should deck you, too.”

“I’d prefer that you didn’t.”

“I feel sure.”

For several minutes, we lurked around the edge of the room, staying away from the designated ‘dance floor,’ just sipping our drinks (me with a can of Vault) and chatting. Eventually, I caught sight of Jessie, dressed in a deep green dress. I raised my eyebrows slightly and elbowed Jenny.

She followed my gaze, and gave a soft whistle. “Damn. Now I know why you put up with her,” she teased, looking the girl over. I rolled my eyes.

“For your FYI,” she snorted softly at the old inside joke, “we haven’t done much anything beyond making out.” I sipped my Vault, not allowing the slight disappointment to show.

“*Much* anything?” Thomas echoed, raising his eyebrows suggestively.

I glared at them. “You two are *way* too interested in my sex life,” I huffed lightly. At their expectant looks, I sighed and added, “She got to second base a few weeks ago. At my recording.”

“Nice!” Jenny cheered, clapping my shoulder playfully. “Get any farther than that?”

“If I had, I woulda said,” I reminded her, rolling my eyes.

“So you didn’t get laid?” Thomas asked. I frowned at him.

“No. Why?”

Jenny swore and fished her wallet out of her purse. I watched, confused, as she took out ten bucks and slapped them into Thomas’ outstretched hand.

“You two made a *bet* on whether or not I’d get *laid*?” I exclaimed, embarrassed and shocked at the same time.

“A bet on *what*?” came a startled, familiar voice. I turned to see Jessie as she approached us. My gaze flickered down her body. Her dress clung to her small body, and I gave a mental purr of appreciation.

I shook my head slightly. “It’s nothing,” I muttered, before grinning at her a little. “Nice dress.” I gave her form an appreciative, if not obvious, look, and she colored slightly.

“Nice tux,” she countered, her own gaze examining my outfit curiously. “Are those men’s shoes?”

“Told ya people would notice,” Jenny teased, lightly bumping me with her hip. I glared at her.

“You did not.”

“Well, I thought it,” she amended.

“I didn’t know you were coming to the dance,” I addressed the redhead again, absently adjusting my tie.

“I didn’t know *you* were,” Jessie countered honestly. “I thought you hated these things.”

“I *do*. These two bozos ended up dragging me out last-minute.”

“Ah.” The younger woman reached out to straighten my collar.

“Was it bothering you?” I teased, referring to my collar.

“It was.” Her flat tone made me grin. Her gaze fell to the can in my hand, and she rolled her eyes. “Honestly, I think you’re going to die one day from a combined OD of caffeine and sugar.” That comment surprised a laugh from me.

“Probably, but I’ll go with a smile and last words that were spoken too quickly to catch.” I raised my can, nodding, and took another swallow.

“You are so morbid,” she muttered, shaking her head.

“That’s what she gets for reading Johnny the Homicidal Maniac cartoons,” Jenny remarked, elbowing me. I winced.

“Twice for flinching!” Thomas called quickly. Jenny elbowed me again.

“You two pretty much fail at life,” I complained, rubbing my sore side. Jessie was laughing along with my two friends. I mentally thanked god that my girlfriend got along with my friends so easily. I glanced up at the crappy speakers as a slow song began to play. My gaze fell back to the redhead, who was saying something to Jenny. I lightly took her hand. “Come on, I want to steal you for at least one dance.”

Jessie looked hesitant. “I don’t know,” she murmured, brushing a few strands of red hair out of her eyes. “What if someone sees us?”

“Does it matter?” I asked, a thread of weariness sinking into my words. She faltered, and Thomas came to my aid.

“Jessie, if your friends can’t accept that you’re gay, then they weren’t all that good of friends in the first place,” he said kindly. She considered that, and he added, “Me and Jenny were with Rachel since before she came out.” Jessie looked surprised.

“I...guess,” she whispered shyly. I squeezed her hand a little as I gently led her over to the dance floor, where several other couples were slow-dancing as well. “I don’t know how to dance with a girl,” she muttered suddenly.

“It’s not all that different from dancing with a guy,” I told her honestly. I lightly guided her hands to my shoulders, and she automatically linked her fingers together behind my neck. My own hands went to her hips, and she looked away shyly even as she instinctively moved closer to me. I offered her a light-hearted grin. “Only difference is that our chests can get in the way.” She colored slightly, but didn't say anything, choosing instead to dance quietly for several minutes. I was enjoying it, her cool hands at the base of my neck, her breath soft and warm against my throat. It's a shame that public school never cuts me a break.

Crack!

I stumbled to the side, my face stinging. I touched my cheek, startled at the sudden slap. Ashley was glaring furiously at me. *Damn her to hell and back in a fucking hand-basket.*

“Stop trying to turn Jessica gay!” she snarled, before leading the redhead away. Jessie tossed an apologetic look over her shoulder.

“Not entirely sure I deserved that one,” I mused in my best Jack Sparrow impression, rubbing my stinging cheek. I quietly returned to my friends, who immediately turned me back to face the 'Phobes. Jessie was looking as though she was defensively protesting against whatever it was that an incredulous Ashley was saying. The conversation ensued for a few moments, with Jessie growing more uneasy, and Ashley more disbelieving. Finally, Ashley said something, and my girlfriend froze. I could guess what the question was. There was an uncomfortable silence over there, and Jessie finally answered. The girls immediately recoiled from her, shock and disgust on their faces. *Shit.*

Ashley snarled something at Jessie, who looked startled at the sudden vehemence that was turned on her. She took a step towards her, attempting to say something, but the other girl kept her away by throwing her drink at the redhead. Jessie looked startled at the fact that they would turn on her so quickly, but at a few more choice words from Ashley, she turned and quickly headed towards the door. I scowled; the teacher was going up to Ashley now, probably to write her up, but there was going to be hell to pay for making my girl cry.

“I’ll be back later,” I growled to my friends, who simply nodded. I half-jogged over to the bathroom out in the hall, pushing the door open. I could hear the subdued sounds of weeping coming from one of the stalls. I paused and turned the deadbolt in the door. “Jessie?” I called softly.

“Please go away,” she hiccuped shakily.

“Jessie, darlin', please come out here,” I asked softly.

“Rachel, just go away,” she sniffled quietly.

“I’m not going away,” I replied stubbornly, leaning against the wall in front of the stall she had locked herself in. She didn't say anything, but the soft crying continued. I considered my options for a moment, then glanced at the door again. I sighed softly, and began to sing a song I remembered from a few years ago: “Hush, my dear one, sleep serenely. Now, my lovely, slumber deep. I will rock you, humming lowly. Close your eyes now; go to sleep. Angels hover ever nearer, looking on your smiling face. I will hold you, close enfold you. Close your eyes now; go to sleep.” The stall door opened, and in a flash, Jessie was embracing me tightly, her face buried in my shoulder. I held her close to me, still singing softly. “Lovely, darling, I will guard you, keep you from all woe and harm. Closely, gently, I will rock you, resting sweetly on my arm. May you slumber ever so softly. Dream of vision, wondrous fair. I will hold you, close enfold you. Close your eyes, now; go to sleep.” Her soft sobs had dissolved into soft sniffles and the occasional hiccup. I gently rubbed her back.

“How the hell don't you hate me?” she whispered against my damp shoulder. “I treated you like that *every day*.”

“You don't treat me like that *anymore*,” I reminded her, lightly kissing the top of her head. *And I never hated you.*

“But...” she tried, looking up at me. I silenced her with the gentlest kiss I could manage.

“Let's get you cleaned up,” I suggested softly. Her mascara was running by now, and her cheeks were a bit blotchy and red. I gently led her to the sinks, and tugged one of the cheap, brown paper towels out of the container. I wetted it a bit, then turned back to my girlfriend. I lightly held her face as I began to clean her face up as softly as I could. I could remember when I first got 'dumped' by *my* friends; she would need a little time to regroup.

Once I had cleaned her face up, I turned to toss the paper towel into the trash can. When I turned back to face her, I noticed fresh tears rolling down her cheeks. “Jessie, darlin', what's wrong?” I asked softly, concerned.

“Just, ah, just wondering how I managed to get stuck with you,” she said quietly, offering me a watery smile.

“Is that an insult?” I asked suspiciously. She giggled softly, a few more tears falling.

“No,” Jessie admitted softly, hugging me around the middle. “I just still can't believe that I managed to find someone who's so good to me when I was so horrible to you.”

“It's in the past, darlin',” I promised, before tilting her head up to face me. I gently kissed away each of the tears on her face. When I finally pulled away, she had a stunned look on her face. “No more tears,” I requested softly, gently stroking her soft cheeks with my thumbs. She smiled shyly and looked down.

“Kay.” She wiped her eyes with the back of her hands. “I bet I look like a mess,” she murmured absently.

I grinned lightly, and kissed her lovingly. “You look beautiful,” I whispered softly against her lips. She blushed lightly, before kissing me back softly.

“Can we leave?” Jessie asked me quietly.

“Sure. To my apartment?” I clarified. My girlfriend nodded.

“I'm trying to stall explaining to my parents that I got this huge stain on my dress.”

“You're welcome to stay the night,” I offered. She considered, before nodding.

“I think I'll take you up on that,” she replied, smiling shyly.

That night, as the fragile girl rested against me, her head resting against my breast (to my surprise), her fingers absently playing with my cross pendant, she spoke softly.

“Rachel?”

“Hm?” I was dozing, but I would talk if she wanted to talk. I blinked rapidly to wake myself up.

“What was that song you were singing earlier? In the bathroom?”

“Ah, that was a Welsh Lullaby. I learned it a few years back.”

“Oh.” She was silent for a moment, but I could tell that she wanted to talk some more.

“Rachel?”

“Yes, darlin’?”

“Will you...” she trailed off, hesitating, before asking meekly, “Will you sing for me?”

I was a little surprised by the request, but I would comply. I thought about what song I would sing, before deciding. I inhaled softly, before beginning to sing: “I feel it everyday, it's all the same. It brings me down, but I'm the one to blame. I've tried everything to get away. So, here I go again, chasing you down again. Why do I do this? Over and over, over and over, I fall for you. Over and over, over and over, I try not to.” I quieted for a moment, taking another breath. “It feels like everyday stays the same. It's dragging me down and I can't pull away. So, here I go again, chasing you down again. Why do I do this? Over and over, over and over, I fall for you. Over and over, over and over, I try not to. Over and over, over and over, you make me fall for you. Over and over, over and over, you don't even try...” I paused, listening to Jessie's soft, even breathing against my chest. She had fallen asleep. Against my will, the next lyrics of the song played in my mind:

So many thoughts that I can't get out of my head. I try to live without you, every time I do, I feel dead. I know what's best for me, but I want you instead, I'll keep on wasting all my time...

I sighed softly, gently rubbing Jessie's shoulder. Why the hell had I chosen that song, anyways? Granted, most of the lyrics were *true*, but even so; what did that mean for me? I shook my head a little bit. I knew exactly what it meant, and it was no good to me.

“Good god, help me,” I sighed to no one in particular, “I've fallen in love with this girl.”

Now to admit it when she was awake.

CHAPTER 25

I picked up my cell phone as it vibrated. It was Ashley. Surprised, I flipped it open and put it to my ear. "Hello?"

"Fucking bitch!" she yelled. I winced and pulled the phone away an inch or two. "I know you're pissed at me for outing you, but you didn't have to vandalize my damn yard, you fucking dyke!"

"Wait, what are you even talking about?" I asked curiously. The dance was a few days ago.

"Don't act like you don't know! I'm going to call the cops on your lezzie ass!" The call ended with a click. I thought about her words for a moment, before sighing and calling up someone else.

"Hello?" Rachel asked. She sounded suspiciously pleased with something.

"Rachel, I just got a call from Ashley. She was pissed about something happening to her yard. What did you do?"

"And you instantly think *I* did something. I'm offended."

"*Did* you do something?"

"Yes."

I sighed. "What did you do?"

"I'll send you a picture of it once I hang up."

"Fine. Talk to you later, then."

"Later, darlin'."

I snapped my phone shut and went to the computer in my room. I opened up my e-mail, and sure enough, there was a message from Rachel. I opened it, and double-clicked on the attachment. When it loaded, I wasn't sure whether to laugh at her creativity or sigh at her

audacity. The picture was of Ashley's house, but the lawn seemed to have been dyed into a massive rainbow. I called Rachel again.

"Yes?" she answered, amused.

"You painted her yard?" I exclaimed.

"No, I skittled it," Rachel corrected.

"You *what*?"

"I bought like ten pounds' worth of skittles, separated the colors into a couple'a buckets, and skittled her yard."

I shook my head disapprovingly, as if she could see me. "What am I going to do with you?" I sighed, a small smile managing to curl my lips.

"Are we taking suggestions?" Rachel asked slyly. I could imagine her grinning wickedly at the question.

"No." My tone was flat, and it made her laugh. In the background, I heard a girl's voice saying "she's got you whipped, dude."

"Hey, shut up," Rachel chuckled back at the person.

"Is someone else there?" I asked, then something else occurred to me. "Do you have me on speakerphone?" I accused.

"Yes to both," she chuckled. "My entire harem decided that it would be fun to break into my apartment while I was gone so they could give me my Christmas presents early."

"Your *entire* harem?" I echoed, bemused. I knew that she referred to Jenny and Thomas as her 'harem,' but this was different.

"Yeah. Pretty much all my gay, lez, and bi friends. They all know each other through me, ergo, they're in my harem," she clarified.

"Ah. So what'd you get?" I asked casually, laying back on my bed.

"Um, a ton of stuff that they bought me to, quote, 'spice up my sex life,' unquote." I heard the slight rustle of wrapping paper as she went through all her things. "Let's see... Flavored body lotion, flavored condoms, ah... lubricant, also flavored, a one-thousand-and-one lesbian sex positions book, lingerie - "

I cut her off, "Okay, Rachel. I get it." Not to mention the fact that her list was putting bad thoughts in my head. I colored slightly when I heard laughter in the background. "Your friends are so weird," I commented.

"You're just now figuring this out?" she quipped, sparking a round of protests from her friends.

"Can you take me off speakerphone?"

"Sure, darlin'." There was a brief click, and her voice was suddenly a bit louder. "Okay, you're off. Need somethin'?"

"I was just wondering what you were doing for New Year's Eve?" I asked casually, even though the follow-up question was anything but.

"Hm... Lying around, watch the ball drop, play some guitar chords as loud as the amp can when it does drop, and get chewed out by the landlord for noise pollution."

"Sounds like fun," I remarked dryly.

"Totally," she agreed sarcastically. I could picture her rolling her eyes. "Why'd you ask, anyways?"

"Well, my parents are having a New Year's party kind of thing, and I was wondering if you wanted to come?" I asked, suddenly a little nervous. Rachel was quiet for a moment; the implications of my question were obvious.

"If your parents don't mind having me over, then, sure," she agreed finally. I grinned.

"Cool. Show up around ten, please, so I don't have to deal with my mom's matchmaking addiction," I requested playfully. My girlfriend laughed.

"Sure, darlin'. See you there."

"Bye."

I closed the phone and sighed softly. We had come so far since I first got assigned as her science fair partner a few months ago. I was the one who got to know the actual Rachel, instead of the tough, butch mask she wore in public. I got to see the girl who quoted Disney movies and laughed at the childish humor in them. I saw the girl whose favorite style of music was the least feminine kind out there – anything from hard rock to metal to post-grunge was fair game in her eyes. I saw the girl who was content to just hold me when I was frustrated at something, and was always up for comforting me when I was miserable.

I saw the girl who would not under any circumstances allow me to be hurt. I smiled slightly; who would have guessed that the hardcore bitch was such a softy? With a soft sigh, I brushed my hair out of my face. The thought of my girlfriend made me smile and blush. I hadn't ever had that with any of my previous boyfriends. Why was *she* different?



A knock at my door made me jump to my feet hopefully. I headed towards the door, hoping to get there before my parents did. No luck; I bit back a sigh as my dad opened the door. Standing there was my girlfriend, dressed in jeans and a Bullet for my Valentine t-shirt, as well as her black leather jacket. I blushed a little when I noticed that her shirt was a bit tighter than it needed to be.

"Excuse me, son, but who are you?" my father asked suspiciously. I rolled my eyes; he thought that she was a boy. I had noticed that it was a common occurrence with Rachel.

"Dad, this is my *friend*," I stressed, frowning at him a bit. "My *female* friend." My father winced.

"Ah, of course. Ah, I didn't catch your name," he half-stammered to Rachel, who was looking quite amused with the situation.

"Rachel," she introduced herself, extending her hand politely. My father took it hesitantly; I saw him wince at her grip.

"We're going to go to the backyard for a bit," I told my dad, instinctively taking Rachel's hand and leading her towards the back door.

"Your dad amuses me," she remarked softly, once we were out of earshot.

"I bet," I remarked dryly as we went outside. There were a few other people gathered around the outdoor fireplace, but not many. I sat down on one of the wicker couches, and Rachel joined me. I automatically snuggled against her side. Her arm wrapped around me protectively.

"So, Jessica, who's this?" my cousin, Virginia, asked me curiously, nodding at Rachel.

"This is Rachel. Rachel, this is Virginia, my cousin," I introduced the two, motioning between the two.

"Friend of yours?" she asked, regarding my girlfriend a bit nervously.

"Ah, she's a little closer than that," I admitted softly, blushing a bit. Rachel rubbed my hip comfortingly. "She's... my girlfriend."

There was silence for a minute. Virginia was now giving the rocker the same look she usually reserved for prospective boyfriends. She pursed her lips, evidently not impressed. "You'd better not hurt her," she threatened Rachel. Rachel pulled me closer, lightly kissing my forehead.

"That's the last thing I'd want," she promised with a nod.

"Virginia, be nice to her," I admonished lightly. "I really like her." I absentmindedly traced a pattern on the small of Rachel's back.

"Then I wish you the best of luck," my cousin said with a grin. "You two look cute together, by the way."

I grinned a little. "Thanks," I told her gratefully. It helped me feel a bit better about my... relationship.

"So, Rachel," Virginia addressed the rocker, who looked up curiously as her name was spoken. "What kind of things do you do?"

"Ah, anything computer- or music-related," Rachel replied with a pleasant smile.

"Oh, a musician," she mused, nodding in approval. "What instruments do you play?"

Rachel hummed softly as she considered. "Hm, let's see," she muttered, before speaking up. "Piano, acoustic guitar, electric guitar, bass guitar, trap set, cello, violin, viola, flute, saxophone, didgeridoo, double bass, among others." Virginia's eyebrows rose with every instrument she named.

"Hold up, what the hell's a didgeridoo?" she asked curiously.

"It's an Australian instrument made of wood. It's sort of like a bassoon," she explained vaguely.

"Hey, guys, come on inside," my mom called from the back door. "We're going to play a card game."

I groaned quietly, shifting away from Rachel. No need to make my parents suspicious. "Do we have to?" I sort of asked, getting to my feet anyways. Rachel chuckled as she stood up as well.

"C'mon, darlin'," she murmured softly, lightly clapping my shoulder. "It'll be fun."

As it turned out, they were playing poker. And, ironically enough, that happened to be my worst game - and Rachel's best.

"Awesome!" she cheered as I groaned again. Rachel sat down on one of the free couches, and I reluctantly joined her. "We playin' Texas Hold 'Em?" she asked curiously as my father dealt the cards.

"Yes *ma'am*," my father replied, evidently trying to make up for his faux pas earlier.

"Awesome," she repeated with a grin. "This is *totally* my game."

A few rounds later, we figured out why. Rachel not only had about the best poker face any of us had ever seen, but she was almost a professional at bluffing.

"I'll see your ten," Virginia decided, watching the rocker carefully, "and raise it by fifty. And that'll be the end of my turn."

"I'll raise that bet by a hundred," Rachel declared, keeping up the vaguely amused expression she always wore anyways. The five other players and I (about six people had dropped out of the game entirely by now) winced at the amount.

I checked my cards; I only had a pair of threes in my hand. *She's obviously got something better than I do.* I folded; so did four others. Now it was just Virginia and Rachel.

"I'll raise the bet by fifty more," the rocker remarked, amusement dancing in her dark gaze. Virginia wavered, then folded. Rachel began to laugh, and we all stared at her, confused. She laid her hand down for us to see, and we gaped at her.

"You didn't have *anything*?" my father asked in disbelief. It was true; all she had was an ace and a two. She hadn't even had a pair.

"Not a damn thing!" she affirmed with a grin, raking her winnings back to her. She began stacking the chips in front of her; the girl seemed to be almost OCD about getting them in order.

"Sneaky little bastard," my uncle grumbled good-naturedly.

"I am," Rachel agreed. Her light grin twisted wickedly. "Anyone want to play me again?"

"Not me," I demurred quickly; the others were with me on that one. Rachel only laughed.

"Y'all are a bunch of wusses," she complained playfully.

"No, we just have no desire to lose to you *again*," Virginia corrected, shooting her a dry look.

"Which is essentially the same thing," Rachel pointed out, idly adjusting her jacket's collar.

"So, Rachel," my mother began; she glanced at the girl to ensure that that was her name. At her nod, my mom went on, "How is it that you know Jessica?"

"We're, ah," her dark gaze flickered to me for a second. "Jessie an' I are close friends."

My mother frowned slightly before turning to me. "I thought you didn't like that nickname," she commented, bemused.

"I don't," I reminded her, rolling my eyes a little. "But that's all she calls me."

"It is not," she muttered, just loud enough for me to hear it. I shot her a warning look.

"That's not very polite of her," mom mused softly.

"Neither is talking about me in the third person when I'm right here, ma'am," Rachel said a bit loudly. My mother colored a bit at her bluntness, while my uncle just laughed.

"She's got you pegged, Mary," he remarked, looking amused. My mom glared at him.

"Oh, hush," she grumbled. Rachel chuckled softly at the exchange.

"I'll be right back," I announced to no one in particular, standing up. I just got vague nods in my general direction as I wandered out onto the front porch. My aunt and her fiance were out there, talking about something as they smoked their cigarettes. "Hey, Aunt Susan," I greeted with a smile.

"Hey, Jessica," she greeted with a pleasant grin, idly taking a drag from her cigarette. "How are you doing?"

"Pretty good," I replied, sitting downwind of her. I couldn't really stand the smell of cigarette smoke. "A little confused, but otherwise I'm doing just fine."

"Confused about what?" her fiance, Sean, asked curiously, tapping a bit of ash off the end of his cigarette.

"Ah, just... things, in general," I said vaguely.

"Hm." There was a comfortable silence for a moment, before Susan spoke up again: "Who's the girl you asked over?"

"That's Rachel," I said with a small smile. "She's... a good friend of mine."

"Friend with benefits?" Sean teased. I blushed and his eyebrows rose. "So that's a yes?"

"Yeah," I admitted softly. *Why is it easier to admit it to my non-immediate family?*

"How long have you two been dating?" Susan inquired, tilting her head a bit.

I thought about that for a moment. "About six months."

"So... is she, like, an experiment, or what?" Sean wanted to know.

I shook my head, frowning a little at that. Calling her an experiment just sounded bad. "No, I don't think so," I mused with a shake of the head. "It's weird. I mean, I hadn't ever looked at a girl... well, *that* way before, but she's different. I mean, she's just about everything I ever wanted in a *boyfriend*... She's funny, smart, and really sweet when she wants to be. And she's a musician." I smiled slightly as I thought of how entertaining the girl could be on her own.

"Sounds like you really like her," Susan commented, exhaling some smoke.

"Yeah," I agreed softly. I really did like the red-and-black haired girl, despite her rough exterior and sarcastic demeanor. Looking at us, we had to be the strangest couple in the city, or even the state.

"Do your parents know?" she asked me.

"...No," I murmured, looking away.

"Are you planning on telling them?"

"I am," I protested weakly. "I just... don't really know about how to bring it up."

Sean chuckled. "Well, no offense, but Rachel *looks* pretty gay, so your parents will probably want to talk about *her* anyways."

I grimaced. "Don't remind me," I muttered.

My aunt attempted to salvage my mood. "Why don't you tell me more about your girlfriend?"

I nodded, smiling slightly. And so, for the next thirty minutes, I told my aunt and soon-to-be uncle about how I had managed to hook up with the least feminine girl in the county. When our conversation dwindled to a halt, I glanced at the clock on my phone. It was about eleven-fifteen.

"I'm going to head back inside. You guys should come in soon, too," I advised, before grinning a bit. "Or else mom is going to flay you alive."

Susan winced. "Yeah, yeah, we'll be in in a bit," she agreed with a nod. I laughed a bit and went back inside, heading to the living room.

I was a little surprised to find that Rachel was locked in conversation with two of my cousins. Derek was sitting at a table across from her, and their hands were grasped tight as they

arm-wrestled. Neither seemed to be gaining much ground, so to speak. She also had one earphone in her ear; Virginia was listening to the other one.

"...really hard to play, actually," she was telling the girl her eyes focused on the 'match' in front of her. "You have to bend the note just about off the fretboard to get it t' do right."

"I'd imagine so," she agreed with a nod. "It sounds pretty awesome, though."

"Bullet for my Valentine is an awesome band," Rachel remarked with a light grin.

"How the hell are you this strong?" Derek grunted, attempting to flip her arm.

"I carry around trap sets on a daily basis," she replied dryly. "Hold that thought," she told Virginia, who nodded. With a sharp grunt of effort, she slammed Derek's hand into the table. "Well, shit fire and save matches," she remarked, blinking in surprise. "Wasn't expecting it to be that easy."

"You and your accent," I sighed playfully, joining the small group. Derek was nursing his banged knuckles. Rachel just bristled at my comment.

"I ain't got *that* bad of an accent," she grouched.

"Ack-see-unt," Virginia drawled in a fairly good imitation of her accent. The three of us laughed, while Rachel just scowled. She wasn't particularly fond of her accent, even though I told her that it was cute on her.

I patted her leg under the table, and she glanced at me out of the corner of her eye. I grinned reassuringly, attempting to show her that I wasn't being mean; I was only teasing her.

"That fella's gonna kill himself," she commented vaguely, nodding at the television. Apparently, some guy was attempting to jump the Arc de Triomphe on a motorcycle.

"Probably," Virginia agreed absently, handing Rachel's earphone back. I took it and held it up to my ear; I recognized the song (thanks to my girlfriend) – it was called 'Tears Don't Fall,' if I remembered correctly.

"You and your emo music," I scolded playfully.

"It's not emo!" she protested. Virginia and I laughed at her.

"It is," my cousin demurred with a shake of her head.

"Hm. I don't see why I'm still here. All you people do is make fun of me," Rachel huffed good-naturedly.

"Because you know that I'll bother you for several weeks if you left," I reminded her, elbowing her lightly. She gently shoved me in response.

"Okay, *you*, shut up."

For a while we said nothing as we just watched more motorcycle tricks on the television.

"Can't believe he made it," Rachel muttered as the cyclist jumped a football field. She shook her head in disbelief.

"No kidding," Derek agreed, before adding, "I wish *I* could jump shit like that on my motorcycle."

"You have a motorcycle?" Virginia prompted dryly.

"Well... no," he admitted.

"Well, shaddap," Rachel playfully ordered, lightly cuffing him over the head. The two girls and I just laughed at his protests. "Hey, how long until midnight?" she suddenly asked. The question was apparently rhetorical, as she pushed her jacket's sleeve up to check her watch. "We have like ten minutes left," she announced. "That guy took forever an' a day to get ready to make that stupid jump. And what about the fella who's gonna jump the arc?"

"Impatient," I clucked my tongue, as if chiding her.

"Very," my girlfriend agreed calmly, as if that were a compliment.

"Besides," I went on as if I hadn't heard her, "he's probably doing it right at midnight or something."

"He's not going to make it," Virginia remarked, shaking her head.

"Totally," Derek agreed. "He's going to overshoot the arc or something and hit the ground on the other side. Without a ramp."

"Nah," Rachel disagreed. "He's gonna make the jump *up* there, but he ain't gonna make it on the jump down. He's gonna hit at an angle and go flyin'."

"You two are awful," I muttered disapprovingly.

"Yeah," Derek agreed, amused.

"You've told me that before," Rachel reminded me with a dry look. She pulled out a package of gum from her jacket pocket. "Anyone want a piece?" she offered as she plucked one out for herself. She shrugged when we all declined. Rachel's tongue flicked out to snatch the piece of gum from her fingers. I wasn't aware that I was staring until I saw her lips curl into an

amused grin. My gaze met hers; I didn't have to be a mind-reader to see that she was thinking 'I saw that.'

"Hey, is he actually gonna go now?" Derek asked, eyes on the television. He sat up a little straighter.

"Ah..." Rachel trailed off, watching for a moment. "Nope, just practice runs. They're building this up way too much. It's gonna end up being not nearly as interesting as we're hoping it's gonna be."

"So cynical," Virginia commented.

"She is," I agreed, sighing melodramatically.

"Hey!" I laughed and playfully ruffled her hair. She batted my hand away.

"Alright guys," my aunt called, walking into the room with her fiance in tow. "We've got ten seconds 'till New Year's! Ten... Nine..."

All eyes were on the television, watching as the ball grew nearer to the bottom. Well, all eyes but mine. I was watching Rachel grinning a bit as she counted down with the others in my family.

"Eight... seven... six..."

I wondered for the millionth time how I managed to get a girl who was so easy to love, but was so hated by her peers. How I managed to fall for her so quickly.

"Five... four..."

Unsure of what I was doing, I took Rachel's hand in my own. Her gaze flickered down to mine. The question was evident in her dark brown eyes: *What are you planning?* I wasn't sure, myself.

"Three... two... one..." There was a tremendous cry from everyone gathered as the ball finally hit the ground. Grinning a bit, I pulled my girlfriend into a tight hug. It wasn't so strange; everyone in the room was hugging someone else.

"Happy New Year, darlin'," she whispered, just loud enough for me to hear. My grin widened a little.

"It is now," I whispered back. On impulse, I leaned in and kissed her softly; I obviously forgot where I was.

It was gentle. It was loving. It made my heart flutter.

It was obviously the wrong thing to do.

"Jessica Taylor West, what on earth are you doing?"

Ironically enough, my first thought when I broke away was a phrase that I had gotten from Rachel: *Damn it all to hell and back in a fucking hand-basket.*

CHAPTER 26

I absentmindedly played with the loop of string in my fingers, creating random figures as I sat just outside the closed kitchen door. Jessie and her parents were still in there; I could hear her parents sometimes yelling, but mostly just sounding frustrated. Jessie's voice was a mixture of annoyance and protests. I sighed as my fingers slipped, and the string tangled itself up. I pulled it off my fingers and began untangling it. The yelling and protesting continued.

After a few moments, I gave up on trying to untangle my loop of string and just jammed it back in my pocket. I sighed and tilted my chair back on its back legs, staring at the ceiling. I felt like I was in middle school again, and I was waiting outside of the principal's office as my partner in crime (whoever it happened to be at the time) got chewed out by the demented (the opinions of the students, at least) woman. I smirked a bit grimly at a few memories of sitting in the secretary's office.

I looked up curiously as the door opened. Jessie came out, looking somewhat frustrated and quite weary. "You alright, darlin'?" I asked her curiously, standing up. The chair fell back on all four legs with a small clatter. She shrugged tiredly and wrapped her arms around my middle, burying her face against my broken collarbone. A little worried, I pulled her into a soft hug. "What happened?" I inquired, gently tracing circles on the back of her shoulder.

"They sort of accepted... this." She made a vague waving gesture with one of her hands.

"Sort of?" I echoed. My brow furrowed slightly.

"They're fine that I'm a lesbian," Jessie elaborated, turning her head so that I could hear her better. "It's the fact that I'm dating *you* that they have a problem with."

"Me?" I rolled my eyes when I noticed that I was apparently being a parrot. "Why's that?"

"Rachel, I don't mean to be rude, but... well, imagine you were a boy who dressed that same way. How many parents do you think would want you to date their daughters?"

I glanced in a nearby mirror, taking in my own appearance. The black-and-red spiked hair, the row of silver earrings, the tongue stud, the dark clothes and black leather...

"I see your point," I muttered reluctantly. Obviously, she caught my tone, for she looked up and kissed me softly.

"I don't have a problem with the way you dress," she reminded me, absentmindedly threading her fingers into my hair. "My parents do."

"Are they going to try and keep you away from me?" I asked, a little worriedly.

"They might," Jessie admitted, glancing away. I felt my stomach clench. "I'm not going to listen to them if they try, though," she added, looking up at me, a little shyly. I stifled a sigh of relief.

"Good," I muttered, resting my chin on the top of her head. Jessie instinctively tucked her head in.

"They do want to talk to you, though," she added, somewhat uncertainly. I grimaced.

"What for?"

"Nothing bad," Jessie assured me hastily. "They're pretty much just going to give you the same deal they, um, gave all my boyfriends."

"Oh, fun," I muttered.

"I'll go with you, if you want," she offered, twining our fingers together. I considered for a moment, before nodding.

"I'd prefer that," I agreed. Jessie just nodded and gently tugged me into the kitchen, where her parents sat at a table, looking rather distastefully at me. I could feel panic creeping up in the back of my mind, but I stamped it down as I took a seat in front of them. Jessie sat beside me; she didn't let go of my hand under the table.

"So, Miss Rachel...?" her father trailed off expectantly, waiting for me to give him my last name.

"Just Rachel is fine," I informed him calmly, idly sweeping a bit of hair behind my ear. I didn't want to tell him that I no longer *had* a last name. He obviously wasn't too pleased with that; his frown deepened a bit at my words.

“Very well. I'm going to be blunt, Miss Rachel,” I winced inwardly; any time someone started a sentence with the phrase 'I'm going to be blunt,' it was rarely a good thing. “What are your intentions with my daughter?”

“I want nothing but the best for her, sir,” I replied honestly. I added on the 'sir' rather easily; being born and raised in the South had its perks when it came to manners.

“And if 'the best' involves her being with someone other than you?” her mother inquired crisply. My throat tightened at the thought of being left by the littler redhead.

“Then I'll leave her alone,” I stated calmly. I didn't like this, being grilled by her parents. It happened every time I had a girlfriend, and it never got any easier. I felt sick. “But I'd pray to God that leaving her wouldn't be the best.”

Mrs. West's eyes narrowed. “You shouldn't use the Lord's name in vain.”

“Pardon me, ma'am, but that wasn't using His name in vain,” I corrected calmly, managing to mind the manners my parents had drilled into my head ever since I could talk. “I was being perfectly honest in saying that I would pray that I didn't have to leave her.” Jessie squeezed my hand comfortingly under the table.

“You know, God doesn't sanctify... *these*,” Mr. West made a vague gesture between Jessie and I, “kinds of couples.”

“You mean *lesbian* couples?” I inquired pointedly. They winced slightly at the term. “And, besides, can you prove to me as such?”

“Yes,” he agreed, nodding. “It's in the Bible.” He got up and walked out of the room for a moment, before coming back with a heavy leather-bound Bible. He began flipping through the pages, before handing it to me. “Leviticus - ”

“Eighteen-twenty-two, I know,” I shook my head a bit as I took the book from him. “I own several Bibles, sir.” Without even looking at the verse, I flipped back a few pages. “Tell me, Mr. West, do you enjoy shrimp?”

Jessie's parents looked quite confused at the sudden change in topic. “Well, yes, but I don't see what - ”

“Leviticus eleven-ten,” I declared, reading the verse aloud, “And all that have not fins and scales in the seas, and in the rivers... they shall be an abomination unto you.”

“Well, okay, that one was - ”

“Mrs. West, did you go to church after Jessie was born?” I interrupted, flipping forwards a little.

“Yes, I took her there a week after she was born to have her dedicated - ”

“Leviticus twelve-four,” I broke in, my eyes scanning the page. “The woman must wait thirty-three days to be purified... she must not touch anything sacred or go to the sanctuary until the days of her purification are over.” I looked up at them, amusement in my gaze, as I flipped to a different chapter. “Ma'am, after your, ah, 'time of the month,' do you take either two young doves or two young pigeons to the priest, and have him sacrifice one as a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering?”

“I – no, but - ”

“Therefore, you are a blasphemer and therefore, the Lord says that you must be stoned to death,” I replied calmly, closing the book shut and giving it back to Mr. West. I noticed the mixture of shock and anger on their faces. “Sorry, but there really isn't any verse in the Bible about homosexuality except in Leviticus, and the only things in that book are ancient laws that no one pays attention to, otherwise.” I smiled weakly. “I suppose my point was made, then?”

“Quite,” Jessie's mother agreed shortly. *Damn, I've gone and pissed them off.*

“I do have a question, though,” her husband spoke up, running a hand through his thinning brown hair. “How is it that you know so much about the Bible?”

I released Jessie's hand and absently laced my fingers together. “I went to church,” I replied vaguely. Evidently, too vaguely, for Jessie's father continued questioning me.

“Went?”

“Yes, went,” I parroted, adjusting my glasses higher on my nose. “As in, not anymore. They kicked me out when I came out.” At their gasps of shock, I shrugged. “It was to be expected. Most churches only let me stay one service before they tell me not to come up there until I've left behind my, quote, 'heterodoxical jezebel tendencies,' unquote. And so I make do with watching church podcasts on my computer every Sunday morning.” I shrugged again, attempting to downplay it. Jessie put her hand on my knee, and I glanced down. I had apparently been shaking it; it was another nervous tic of mine, one that evidently aggravated the hell out of my girlfriend.

“And... your parents, they allow this?” Mrs. West asked, brow furrowed slightly. I knew what she was thinking: *a girl who has grown up under such awful circumstances isn't the right one for my daughter at all.* I saw it often enough.

A lifeless grin twisted my lips. “Ma'am, my parents couldn't care less about what the church does to me. They're the ones who blacklisted me in the first place.” An uncomfortable silence ensued; the thought of my last meeting with my parents made my eyes prick with tears that I wouldn't allow to fall.

“Daddy, I'm still the same person I was before!” I cried, tears leaking freely down my pale cheeks now. “I'm still your daughter!”

“I didn't raise a dyke,” he spat out, and I recoiled at the venom in his voice. My mother just peered at me from the kitchen table, weeping bitterly.

“Daddy, please - ” I tried again, stepping towards him with my arms held out for a hug. “I'm still - ” The back of his hand cracked against my shoulder; I howled at the white-hot pain that exploded in my collar.

“You are nothing to me, anymore.” My sobs worsened at the contempt in his words. “Get out of my house!”

“If you'll excuse me,” I whispered calmly to Jessie's parents. I expertly blinked the few tears away; I had practically turned bottling depression up into a fine art. I slowly got to my feet and checked my watch. “It's almost ninety minutes after midnight. I should probably be headed home at this point. Unless you two have anything else to ask me?” I glanced at the adults; they merely shook their heads.

“I'll walk you out,” Jessie added, standing up as well. I just nodded and silently left the room; as soon as we were away from her parents, Jessie took my hand. The knife in my heart twisted. *How is it that my girlfriend is more accepting of me than my own fucking parents?*

“Rachel?” she ventured softly as I attempted to unlock my truck. The genuine worry in her voice made my eyes sting again. Her small hand gripped my shoulder and turned me around to face her. “Are you okay?”

I smiled a little. I don't know why. Maybe because it felt nice to actually have someone care about you for a change. “No,” I whispered. My voice wavered. “I'm not.” The littler redhead enveloped me into a tight hug, attempting to comfort me in whatever way that she could.

For the first time in over three years, I began to cry.

CHAPTER 27

I got up when I heard a knock on the door. I knew it was going to be Thomas.

“Hey,” I greeted him with a smile when I opened the door. I called over my shoulder, “Mom! Thomas is here, I'm leaving now!”

“Okay,” she called back from somewhere in the house. I admitted to some private surprise that my mom let me go shopping with a gay boy, but I guess it was because he didn't present any threat to her daughter.

“Alright, now let's get out of here before she decides that she doesn't want me hanging out with gay guys,” I told Thomas, who merely laughed.

We piled into his car – a camry – and he pulled out of the driveway.

After just a moment of silence, I jumped when his cell phone went off with an interesting song as the ringtone:

You stupid motherfucker

You stupid motherfucker

You stupid motherfu...

KER!

“Hey,” he greeted whoever was on the other line. For a moment, he was silent as the other person talked. “Oh, sweetie, that's horrible,” he cried sympathetically. “Do you want me to drive you over to the shop?” Another pause. “Isn't that like fifteen miles away from where you live? ...You're just going to drag them back? Is that a good idea? ...Okay, well, good luck with that. ...Yeah, okay. Later.” He hung up, shaking his head a bit. “That was Rachel,” Thomas added off-handedly.

I looked at him, curious. “Why was she calling?”

“Someone apparently slashed her tires,” he replied, frowning. “And she just walked something like fifteen miles to the car shop. She's going to buy some more tires and just walk home with them.”

I have to admit, I was shocked. I knew that Rachel was unpopular, but I wasn't aware that people actively sought to make her life miserable. “Someone *slashed her tires?*” I echoed. “Is she going to file a police report?”

“Doubt it,” he replied, shaking his head. “She has this weird... thing, about asking anyone for help,” Thomas added vaguely.

“Oh,” I muttered, glancing away. We rode in silence for a while, before I asked curiously, “How did you meet Rachel?”

“We'd sorta known each other since like kindergarten, but we didn't really talk till like sixth grade,” Thomas replied with an amused look on his handsome features. “I didn't believe my friends when they said she was gay, and I asked her out. She laughed in my face and turned me down.”

I grinned a little. “Do I want to know?”

“All I said was 'hi,' and without missing a *beat* she just kept reading her book and said 'I'm not interested, and yes, I have a girlfriend.’” I snickered softly; that sounded like something she would say. Then something else occurred to me.

“Wait, are you bisexual, then?” I asked him, a little confused. I remembered that he had a boyfriend, Connor, even though I hadn't ever met him.

“No, hun, I'm gay,” Thomas assured me. He paused for a moment as he pulled his car into a parking place. “I didn't think I was at the time, though.” We got out of the car.

“So,” I asked curiously, “when did you get your first boyfriend?” We started towards the mall; Thomas linked his arm with mine.

“Freshman year,” he said cheerfully. “Timmy was kind of an asshole, though.”

“I can relate to that.”

“No worries, hun, everyone's had a bad experience with a boyfriend. Or girlfriend.”

“Rachel hasn't really told me about any of her past girlfriends... or boyfriends...” I mused.

“There's not much to tell,” Thomas said, shrugging, as we entered the mall. “One of her boyfriends was pretty far up there in terms of awful boyfriends, though,” he mused.

“What happened?”

“It turned out that he was only dating her to try and get her in on a threesome with his *actual* girlfriend,” he coughed. I winced.

“...She kicked his ass, didn't she?”

“Up and down the fucking hallway until me and Jenny managed to drag her off of him,” he agreed. I laughed, imagining Rachel's reaction after finding out something like that. “While we're talking about Rachel, I wanna ask you something: what made you start crushing on her?” Thomas asked me, brushing his bangs out of his eyes. I smirked a little at the gesture; his brown hair was reminiscent of a sheepdog.

My smile faded as I considered that. *What did make me fall for her?* “I'm not sure,” I admitted finally, frowning. How was I unable to think of the reason that drew me to her? Was it her dry wit? Her odd Southern phrases? Her looks? “A lot of different things, I guess.” Something occurred to me then, and I accused, “Did Rachel put you up to that?”

“Hun, Rachel's terrified of you right now,” Thomas replied gently. I was startled at that.

“What? Why? Did I do something?” I rambled nervously. The thought of breaking up with the gentle-mannered rocker made my stomach clench uncomfortably.

“No, Jessie, it wasn't anything *you* did,” he soothed me, gently patting me on the back as we wandered into one of the stores. “It was something *she* did.”

“I don't follow.”

“Haven't you noticed that she's been kinda... avoiding you? Since New Year's?” I considered that; it had only been about a week since then, but she hadn't spoken much to me since then.

“Yeah, I guess,” I whispered, before looking at him, confused, as Thomas held a shirt to my shoulders, considering, before shaking his head and returning it to the rack. “But, wait, why is she avoiding me, then?”

“Jessie, have you ever seen Rachel act anything other than strong?” he asked me, picking up another shirt and holding it to himself. He shrugged to himself and tossed it over his arm.

The question made me pause. I wracked my mind for a moment, before shaking my head. “No,” I murmured, my brow creasing with confusion.

“That's just how Rachel is,” Thomas explained sympathetically, clapping my shoulder comfortingly. “Her parents really messed her up when they kicked her out. She got into this mindset where she couldn't show any weakness at all, because that would mean that she needed support from her parents, who hated her. So, every time she showed anything other than strength, she was reminded of her parents, which made her hurt even worse. So everything bad that happened to her, she just took it and bottled it up. Jessie, hun, when you saw her crying, that was the first time in over three years that she's done that.”

I felt my heart wrench in sympathy for my girlfriend. “Wait, that doesn't explain why she's avoiding me,” I pointed out.

“She's ashamed of herself,” Thomas said simply. My eyes widened a little. “She hasn't cried since she left home. And to have *you* of all people seeing her cry? It's too much for her. Rachel's ashamed that she can't stay strong for her girlfriend, and it's seriously fucking with her 'don't-show-weakness' deal.”

I wasn't able to respond for several moments, remembering how quickly she had left as soon as her sobs had faded. How, just before she'd slammed the door to her truck closed, she'd whispered the word “Sorry.”

“What does that have to do with me, though?” I asked suddenly.

“She likes you a helluva lot, Jessie,” he pointed out. “Hell, I haven't seen her get this worked up about a girl since she dated Jenny, and that barely counted.”

I had to fight from grinning broadly at his first statement, but I quickly shook it off and continued. “Why does she think she has to be strong for me?” I wondered. “I've cried on *her* shoulder a few times, why would she think that I wouldn't let her do the same to me?”

“She's afraid that you'll think less of her if she can't keep up the strong front all the time,” Thomas replied innocently, admiring a belt.

I thought about that for a moment. “I wouldn't,” I told him softly, rifling through some of the t-shirts that were out. Before I met Rachel, I wouldn't be caught dead in a one-liner t-shirt, but I couldn't help but adapt some of my girlfriend's styles. “I like her because she's... her. Not because she acts tough all the time.” Thinking of the wiry girl made me smile.

“What do you like about her?” Thomas asked casually. I briefly considered not answering, but finally gave in.

“I like her sense of humor,” I sighed, recalling how her sarcastic remarks were always able to make me laugh. “I like how she can name the title, band, and album of any song she hears on the radio. I like how she's not afraid to act out, even if it makes her look immature.” I smiled a little bit and added in a softer voice, “I like how she likes just cuddling and talking.” My smile widened slightly and I looked away shyly as I finished, “I like how she gives me that little smirk of hers whenever she catches me watching her. And I like how I can feel her smiling whenever she kisses me.”

“Sounds like you like her a lot,” Thomas' remark broke me out of my reverie. I colored slightly; apparently, I had gotten lost in thought.

“Yeah,” I agreed softly.

“Well, Jessie, I don't mean to cut our talk short, but do you want to leave?” he asked kindly.

I nodded. Then something else occurred to me. “Wait, how is it that you know so much about Rachel, anyways?” I asked him curiously as he paid for his new shirt.

“Years of playing psychiatrist,” he replied cheerfully, before grinning wickedly. “Now, let's get you over there so you can harass our grouchy southern rock-star, hm?”

I laughed at his expression. “Yeah, let's get gone.” Then I shook my head in dry amusement; 'let's get gone' was one of my girlfriend's phrases.

CHAPTER 28

I absentmindedly tapped my foot in time with the music as I adjusted the headphones once more. I was almost done with this song, thankfully. *Note to self: finishing a recording after walking thirty miles and replacing three tires is a bad idea.*

Finally, I got to the last part of the song and began to sing again: “You spin me right round, baby, right round, like a record, baby, right round, round, round. You spin me right round, baby, right round, like a record, baby, right round, round, round.”

With that finished, I stopped the recording and set the end to fade out. Then I hit save and got up; it always took the program a while to save mp3s. I left, still humming the words to the song, and went into my kitchen. As I was taking a glass out of one of the cabinets, I heard my front door open and I rolled my eyes. I knew Jessie was out shopping with Thomas, so the only person who had a key was Jenny. And I was *not* in the mood to deal with her right now.

“Jenny, you really do need to stop breaking into my apartment,” I called, a bit annoyed, as I took a pitcher of sweet tea from my refrigerator. I poured myself a cup full before adding, “And, no offense, but I’m *really* not in the mood to deal with you right now.” I returned the pitcher to the fridge, then stiffened a little when I felt a familiar form press against my back, and a pair of thin arms wrap around my middle. I felt an uneasy twitch in the back of my mind.

Jessie rested the side of her face against my back and asked curiously, “Does that go for me, too?” I twisted around in her grasp so we were facing each other. It never failed to amaze me how well our bodies managed to fit together despite the several-inch height difference.

“Not at all, darlin’,” I assured her. Jessie grinned and kissed me innocently. “So, wait, how did you get into my house?” I asked curiously, trying not to shiver as she absently traced a

pattern on the small of my back, under my jacket. “And, ah, aren't you supposed to be out with Thomas?”

“Long story,” she replied with a shrug. “But I wanted to talk to you. Can we go sit down?”

I felt panic attempting to grip me, but I shook it off. “Sure. Let's go to the living room.” Jessie nodded and released me. When I sat down on the couch with my cup, she sat next to me, tugging my arm around her. I was a little surprised at the action, but I didn't say anything. “So,” I drawled, taking a sip from my glass, “what did you want to talk to me about?”

“Why you've been avoiding me, mostly.” Her frank statement made me wince. She evidently saw that, for she added, “I just want to know if it has anything to do with, um... what happened on New Year's?”

My jaw clenched a little. I didn't want to talk about this. I felt my defensive mindset creeping in, keeping me silent, shutting me down. I took a gulp from my cup. I didn't respond.

Jessie's cool hand cupped my face and she gently made me look at her. I could see the concern in her light blue eyes. “Rachel, please talk to me,” she whispered softly. She knew about how I went silent when I had something to hide. “*Did* it have to do with New Year's?”

I hesitated for a minute more, but finally sighed and nodded. Jessie shifted a bit so she could look at me easier. I felt her fingers idly playing with my hair. “Why are you scared of showing weakness?” she asked gently, gazing up at me.

“People take it and use it against me,” I muttered softly. “If they can't see if they're hurting me, then they can't twist it to their advantage.” I felt an uneasy feeling creeping up in my throat; I stared blankly at the wall behind Jessie, so I wouldn't have to look directly at her.

“Do you think I would do that?” she asked, sounding a little hurt at the thought that I would think that.

“Of course not,” I said quickly, but she still looked a little distressed. The fact that I was the cause of that made me feel sick.

“So why can't you stop hiding with me?” Jessie whispered softly, inching a little closer. I set my cup on the end table. “Why do you have to keep yourself strong with me?”

“Because no one wants to deal with all my emotional shit,” I muttered, then blinked when I realized that I said that out loud.

“What would make you think I wouldn't want to help you?” she asked quietly, cupping my cheek again. I was unable to answer that; fortunately, she continued, so I didn't have to reply. “I like you a lot, Rachel. I can accept you.”

“All of me?” I whispered softly, a little scared. I hoped that she would be able to take everything about me in stride, unlike so many people that I had ever met. But there was a lot about me that she didn't know, and a lot about me that I doubted she *wanted* to know.

“All of you,” Jessie echoed with an affectionate smile. She leaned in and gently brushed her lips over my broken collarbone. I inhaled sharply, and she smiled against my neck. Jessie pulled away and took my hand in hers, pulling it up to kiss each tip of my hard, calloused fingers. I simply watched, mesmerized at her gentle actions. She released my hand and cradled my face in her own cool hands. Jessie's soft, blue eyes studied my own for a moment, before she evidently found what she was looking for. She smiled fondly and leaned in to kiss me tenderly. I bit back a whimper of disappointment when she broke away. “All of you,” she repeated, brushing some of my hair out of my face.

“You don't know that,” I whispered uncertainly. In the back of my mind, I knew I wanted to talk to her, but my inner critic insisted that she would leave me if she knew how messed up I truly was.

“No, I don't know that,” she admitted, lacing her fingers together behind my neck. “But I believe it.” I hesitated a moment longer, and Jessie whispered, “Trust me.” The implicit affection in her voice made my chest ache.

I slowly raised my eyes to hers – a mistake, I found out quickly. The tender concern in her soft blue gaze was what probably broke me.

I wept silently, and Jessie hugged me tightly. I remember speaking to her, but I can't recall everything I said. I remember cursing my parents in one breath and begging to know why they couldn't accept me in the next. I remember whispering that I hadn't been able to see my baby brother grow up – he was only one when I saw him last; he would be almost six by now.

I sobbed at the loss of my entire family, except my uncle. And he didn't even call to check up on me anymore. I probably cried about that, too. Who knows.

I wept at the familiar ache in my chest that I had ignored since I was disowned. I wondered if my parents still would have disowned me if they knew that it would have caused my

sink into depression. I still had to see a psychiatrist for it; even she knew that my depression had worsened since I was kicked out of my own home.

I probably cried about several other things. I don't remember, though.

Throughout the time, Jessica never said a thing. She merely held me, tightening her hold on me when my cries worsened. Jessie simply kept me in a loving embrace; she didn't say anything to me, didn't offer any comfort aside for the hug. She just let me cry. Like I had done for her.

That thought made me cry worse. I'm not sure why.

When my sobs finally broke into shaky breaths, Jessie pulled me against her, holding me as softly as she could. I buried my face against her neck. I didn't want to see her reaction. She didn't say anything for a long while, but silently rubbed my back, under my jacket. Emotionally drained and physically exhausted, I began to drift asleep against my girlfriend's soft, warm body.

Just before I slipped into a light sleep, I could have sworn I heard Jessie whisper into my ear, "I don't think any less of you." I'm not sure, though; I was asleep in seconds.

CHAPTER 29

I watched as Rachel slept silently against my shoulder, her previously-quivering breaths now slow and even. Her cheeks were damp with tears. It made me hurt to see her in this much agony.

My fingers slipped up to the nape of her neck. I noted the almost rigid muscles there. For what seemed like the hundredth time, I wondered if she got any sleep at all when I wasn't with her. I began gently working the tight muscles with my fingers and thumb, slowly making them relax.

I considered my feelings about the girl nuzzled against me. Obviously, her tears were the main cause of my own pain, but why was that? None of my past boyfriends – even the ones I was almost convinced that I loved – had ever made me want to cry for them. I had noticed, obviously, that my feelings towards the wayward rocker were different than they were when I was dating boys. I still wasn't sure how, though.

Rachel made a small noise in her sleep, and she instinctively shifted closer to me. I blushed a little when the motion pressed our breasts together briefly. I glanced down, wondering if she was only pretending to be asleep to get away with something like that, but I decided that she was sleeping. Rachel's face, normally caught in either a smirk or a scowl, was smoothed into complete neutrality. I smiled a little and gently brushed my knuckles over her jaw. She sighed at the touch, but didn't wake up.

There was something... angelic, about the way my girlfriend looked when she was asleep, for all she dressed like a seductive little devil. Maybe it was the way her lips were parted just barely, to take small breaths that pressed her chest against mine with each one. Maybe it was

how she clutched at me almost fiercely in her sleep, either seeking comfort or being protective – it was hard to tell which it was, but it was cute either way.

I inhaled deeply, taking in her strange, yet addictive scent – the masculine smell of leather and cologne combined with the more feminine smell of vanilla and mint was odd, but it suited her well. And it drove me crazy with desire for the wiry female.

I examined Rachel's sleeping form in silence. I took in the dark hairstyle, the row of silver piercings in her ears, the occasional glimpse of the stud in her tongue. My gaze slipped lower. I noticed the red, metal cross that rested between her small breasts. I smirked slightly; I found it amusing that she was bigger than me in every way except, well, there. My breasts were almost an entire size and a half bigger than hers. Any time I teased her about it, Rachel would only roll her eyes and mutter something about irony being a cruel, sadistic bitch.

Her blue t-shirt had the word “VAGINA” stretched over her chest in large, white lettering. Under it, in smaller letters, was the phrase, “Does this make you feel awkward?” I rolled my eyes a little at that; it certainly was something that Rachel would wear. I noticed that her shirt was hiked up just a bit, revealing a teasing glimpse of smooth, pale skin, as well as a hint of black fabric that disappeared under her jeans. I colored slightly and glanced away.

“Knowing her, it's probably boxers,” I muttered to amuse myself. Then I got a mental image of a smirking Rachel in a pair of black boxers. *Only* a pair of black boxers. I went scarlet at the thought, and shook my head firmly. *Bad girl! No fantasizing about the depressed girlfriend!*

I glanced down when I felt the knot of muscles under my fingers relax finally. Rachel mumbled in her sleep and sighed against my shoulder. I smiled a little, and slipped my hand under her heavy jacket. My fingertips absently explored the gentle contours of her back. She was so soft and warm...

I pushed the jacket away from her back, and pulled up her shirt a little, revealing the elegant swirls of the clef heart on her back. I slowly traced the tattoo with two fingers. Rachel gasped in her sleep and clutched harder at me. I smiled at the reaction and began slowly tracing the bass clef. My girlfriend whimpered incoherently, but she remained asleep against me.

I wasn't sure why I was touching her, whether it was to comfort me or her. It was relaxing, though, to be able to just be with someone who accepted everything about me. I tried as

best as I could to accept everything about her, as well, which was why I had tried so hard to get her to speak to me. I wanted to accept everything I could about Rachel – I loved her, after all.

My train of thought derailed at that word.

Love? I thought blankly. Yes, I liked her more than any guy I had ever dated, but love? Was it really that much?

Surely it wasn't love. I couldn't leave her if it was. I would be able to handle a break-up with the rocker, right? As soon as I thought that, though, I felt my throat close up, and an agonizing sorrow rose up in the back of my mind. *That doesn't prove anything. Maybe I just like her a lot. It's not like we're going to get married.*

I smirked a little at the mental image of Rachel, with her spiked, streaked hair and multiple piercings, dressed in a white wedding dress. I chuckled. *No, she'd probably be in a tux.* I did have to admit that she looked good in her tuxedo, though. The blazer was obviously tailored to fit her feminine form *very* snugly, so it accentuated her small breasts and narrow waist...

I frowned, blushing, when I realized that I had been fantasizing about my girlfriend. Again!

An audible sigh escaped my lips, and I felt Rachel stirring a little. I glanced at the clock; she had been asleep for almost an hour.

“You're still here?” she mumbled in disbelief against my shoulder. My hand slipped a little higher, rubbing her shoulder blades comfortingly.

“Of course I am,” I replied softly, kissing the top of her head. The scent of her vanilla shampoo invaded my senses for a second. “I wasn't about to leave you like that. Did you think I was going to?” I asked curiously, lightly scratching her back.

“Not really,” Rachel admitted quietly. “Not logically, anyways. I kinda subconsciously thought you'd leave when I fell asleep, though.”

“I'm not about to leave you when you're hurting so much,” I told her softly, tilting her head up to face me. Her eyes were bloodshot. I kissed her softly, trying to put as much feeling as I could into it. Rachel returned it almost desperately, as if needing to know that I was there. We broke away when we needed air. I smiled gently at her, cupping her soft face in my hand. “I do care for you, Rachel. You need to understand that.”

“It's been so long,” she muttered distantly, holding my hand to her face.

“Since what?”

“Since anyone has cared for me.” I hugged her tightly, and she shook in my grip a little. “Don't leave me,” she requested meekly. I could barely hear her, she spoke so softly.

“I won't,” I promised softly, rubbing her back slightly.

“Please don't.” There was a hitch to her voice that let me know she was crying again, and trying to hide it. Sorrow crept into my heart at her insecurities.

“I won't,” I repeated, kissing her forehead lightly. I held her for who-knows-how-long before my mother finally called me, wanting to know where I was; she had evidently gone to the mall and didn't see me. Rachel told me to go on and go home before I got into any more trouble. I was reluctant to leave her while she was still hurting so much, but she simply gave me a watery smile and reminded me that my parents would flip out if they thought I had lied about going shopping with Thomas, and went to my girlfriend's apartment instead. I kissed her softly one last time before leaving.

Maybe I do love her, after all.

CHAPTER 30

I fought the urge to snarl at the counselor. *I hate new counselors. And the first day back to school.*

“There are places you can go to that will offer you financial help,” she was telling me. I’d heard this speech several times before. When you’re the only student in high school who’s been disowned, you tend to get used to the same things that every new counselor told you. Truth be told, I was a bit disappointed that the old one had retired. I had actually kind of liked her. She didn’t care that I swore up a Texas blue streak when she aggravated me.

“I’m well aware, ma’am,” I retorted flatly, surprising myself by managing to keep my tongue in check. “I don’t need financial help. I *have* a job.”

“Ah, yes,” she mused, looking into my file. I scowled; my file didn’t have *crap* about me in there. “You’ve been working in the music industry, I see... OneGirl?” She looked up in surprise. “You’ve made quite a name for yourself. But what if your popularity goes down?”

“I’ll be fine.”

“But you don’t know about making investments or putting things in your savings or...” I sighed as she began talking about how I didn’t know anything about money. I had taken five different business classes, as well as two music classes, so *obviously* I wouldn’t know about money. That made perfect sense.

I barely tuned her in as she began talking about the legal aspects of my “job.”

“...And there are several lawyers that would be able to sue your parents for negligence by disowning you so early—”

“I’m not suing my parents!” I snapped, annoyed. They always suggested that. Seriously, I know they hated me, but I wasn’t going to *sue* them to make them take me back. They’d hate me worse for having to pay court fees or something like that.

“I’m only trying to help, Miss McCaviler—” I stood up so sharply that my chair fell back onto the tile floor with a heavy crash. The counselor jerked back, looking fearfully at me. I didn’t blame her; I’d seen pictures of when I was seriously pissed, and I looked damn *scary*.

“That is *not* my name!” I snarled, my fists clenching hard enough to nearly draw blood.

“Rachel, don’t break her yet,” I heard the secretary call to me from behind the door. I refrained from smirking, despite the fact that I found it amusing that she knew my so well. I was too pissed at the counselor to smirk.

As I slowly calmed down, I glared coldly at her. “My name is Rachel. Now, if you don’t mind, I’d like my schedule?” The counselor meekly handed me the sheet of paper. My eyes scanned the sheet, and I froze at the sight of my first block class. *Chorus?! “I want my first class changed,”* I stated slowly, flatly.

“Sorry, Rachel,” she said carefully, making sure that she said my actual name. “But all the other electives are full. That was the only one that had space.” I let out a furious string of curses; they were evidently pretty bad (I wouldn’t know; I wasn’t paying attention to myself), because she actually blushed at the severity of them.

“Please watch your language.”

“Bite me!” I snarled, storming out.

“I’m only trying to help,” she protested as I left.

“Fuck off!”

“Break her yet?” the secretary asked, amused. I was well-known for causing the retirement or relocation of many of the counselors.

I snorted. “She’ll have quit or gone to the asylum by the end of the week.”



“Sorry I’m late,” I muttered in annoyance as I went into the choir room. It was already full; I was almost a full thirty minutes late. There were several sneers and disgusted looks aimed at me as the director turned to look at me. I ignored them all.

“Oh, you must be Rachel,” Ms. K exclaimed with a smile. “We've already tested everyone for their voice parts; which are you in, do you know? Soprano or alto?”

I shifted a little, uncomfortable. “Actually, I'm supposed to talk to you in private,” I lied, brushing my bangs out of my eyes. I could see Jessie looking at me, surprised, from the back row. I didn't blame her; I'd told her multiple times that I wasn't going to join the chorus for the simple fact that I didn't want my voice to get recognized.

The teacher agreed hesitantly, a little confused, and led me into her office. I closed the door behind her. “Ma'am, I-”

“I've read your file,” she told me softly. I started. “I know what you're about to ask me – not to sing, right?”

“Uh, yes,” I admitted, surprised. “Is... is that okay?” I ventured slowly.

“Do you play piano?”

“Played for ten years.” Hey, I was proud of that fact.

“Good, because I can't play,” the teacher admitted with a dry smile. “And we have been needing a pianist. But if I need help in one of the sections...?”

“I'll correct them and offer help, but I won't sing,” I replied shortly. She simply nodded, willing to work with that.

We left, and I went to the piano. I made sure that I wasn't sitting on the edge of my jacket as I sat on the somewhat rickety bench. Jessie shot me a curious look. I winked at her slightly as Ms. K began reading the syllabus. I slipped my phone out of my pocket and sent her a quick text message: “You still coming over tonight?”

I watched her carefully as she half-listened to the teacher. She jumped slightly when her phone vibrated, and I smirked. She carefully pulled her phone out and read the message. The redhead quickly tapped out a message and closed her phone.

“Miss Jessica, are you texting in my class?” Ms. K asked sharply.

“No, ma'am,” she lied, putting her phone up.

A few seconds later, my own phone lit up with a text message. “sure, b there @ 6”. I glanced up at her and nodded once.

Mentally, I was having a slight freak-out, even though, as far as Jessie knew, I was just having another recording session. I knew differently, however. And I had good reason to be

nervous. Hey, if *you* were planning on telling your girlfriend you loved her for the first time, you'd probably be freaking out, too.

Good God, give me strength to do this.

CHAPTER 31

I couldn't help but stare silently at her as she gracefully pulled her heavy guitar off of the wall. I never could help it. Seeing her here, surrounded by her instruments, she was in her element. I doubt that she would have been able to survive without music – she insinuated as such several times. Occasionally, I felt a twinge of jealousy that she preferred her music over me, but I stamped it away. I knew it wasn't true, after all.

I remembered the last recording she'd invited me to watch. It was about a month ago. *What made music your escape?* I remembered asking that. I don't think she ever gave me an answer. I voiced the question once more, and Rachel looked at me, surprise in her gaze, as she tossed the shoulder strap over her.

She rolled her eyes up, briefly considering, before grinning and replying, “Music is like an orgasm to the ears.” I went scarlet.

“Rachel, seriously,” I sighed as my blush faded.

Her grin faded, and she became serious, pondering. “Music is the only thing that makes sense most of the time. And it screams out your feelings when you can't find the words to say them. There's a song for everything, really.” She positioned her fingers on the strings and began playing softly. “Seize the day, by Avenged Sevenfold. Regret.” Rachel's fingers readjusted themselves on the strings and she began playing something that was considerably more intense. “All These Things I Hate, by Bullet for my Valentine. Self-loathing.” She repositioned her fingers once more and began to play a quick, high-pitched melody. “Scared, by Three Days Grace. ...Self-explanatory.” She began to play a lower, fast-paced song. “Room four-oh-nine, also by Bullet for my Valentine. Betrayal.” Rachel then changed something to a different song, strumming her guitar gently. “Dear God, another by Avenged Sevenfold. Completely and utterly

in love.” She put one hand on the strings to silence them, and she offered me a wry grin. “There’s probably a hundred more examples I could use, but I’m lazy.”

I was silent for several moments. Her last example made me curious. “Do you... love Jenny?” I asked timidly. It seemed to me that she did. I had seen how they acted around each other before – they seemed almost like an old married couple. And Jenny had admitted that she loved Rachel.

Rachel looked a bit curious at the question. “Well... yeah,” she replied with an innocent shrug. I gazed up at her, a little hurt. *She loves Jenny?* She evidently noticed the hurt in my gaze and put her guitar back up. “Come here,” she whispered softly, pulling me against her. It was odd, how I was able to see her when she was hurting the most, only to have her able to comfort me so easily only a week later. I wrapped my arms around her torso, needing to know that she was here, with me. I didn’t want her to leave me, either. It would hurt too much.

Rachel rocked me gently, resting her chin on the top of my head. “Jessie, it’s true that I love Jenny –”

“Don’t tell me *that!*” I hissed softly, ignoring the ache in my chest.

“Let me finish,” she requested, kissing the tip of my head. “As I was saying, I do love her. *Platonically.*” I looked up at her, a little surprised at that response. “I know she fell for me while we were together, but I wasn’t ever able to think of her as any more than a friend. I mean... she had been my friend for *years*, Jessie. Thinking of her as anything else was just... *weird*. Have you ever had a friend you had for ages?” I thought about that, before nodding. “Now, think about what it would be like if you were dating him... or her. A little awk-weird, right?” I considered that for several moments before nodding. “Now, granted, I did *try* to make it work, but I still couldn’t see her as anything other than my friend. I only love her as a friend, Jessie. That’s all.”

I thought about the sincerity in her voice, the slight worry in her dark eyes, for a moment, before looking up at her shyly. “D’you mean that?” I asked softly, wrapping my arms around her neck.

Rachel nodded. “Every word. And, besides,” she grinned playfully, threading her fingers into my hair, “I prefer redheads.” I blushed a little, but smiled anyways. “Seriously, though, she might be my friend, but I didn’t sing to her in that album.” I knew which one she was talking

about; the 'Tainted Love' album she had done a few months ago. Rachel leaned in, and I shivered when her lips barely grazed my ear as she whispered, "I sang to *you*."

I pulled away, uncertain. "What are you saying?" I asked softly, brushing my fingertips over her jaw. I don't know why I asked that; I knew very well what she was telling me. I just couldn't believe it.

"I'm saying, Jessie, that I," she kissed me lightly, "love," she kissed me again, "*you*." She kissed me for a third time, but this time she didn't pull away. I melted into the kiss, pulling her closer to me. The action pressed our bodies together, and I shivered slightly. I felt her smile against my lips before pulling away.

"How do you know that?" I asked her curiously, tracing her lips with the tip of my finger.

"You're in my head all the time, Jessie. Somehow you managed to make it into my heart, too. Somehow or another, you managed to get the useless heart of an outcast rocker who promised herself that she wasn't going to fall in love." She grinned wryly, trying to downplay it, but my eyes misted over anyways. I tried for a moment to come up with something to tell her, but couldn't. Instead, I merely kissed her deeply, my fingers sliding into her vanilla-scented hair.

I slipped my tongue into her warm mouth, and Rachel made a soft noise of approval. I loved the feeling of her warm, soft body pressed against mine, as it was now. Without really thinking about it, my other hand slipped down her back, before slipping under her shirt, touching her soft skin. She broke the kiss briefly to give me an amused look. "Getting a little bit frisky, there, Jessie?" she teased, and I blushed darkly. Rachel didn't seem to think much of it, and kissed me again, her tongue invading my mouth strongly.

I groaned softly, my nails biting into her side, as her hand gently caressed my side. I wasn't ever able to understand how she managed to make me ache for her touch so much with even a relatively innocent touch, like now. Her hand slipped higher, gently cupping my breast. *Okay. Okay. Not so innocent.* The resulting ache was at least doubled from the touch, though. I moaned against her mouth as she softly fondled me. I had been touched like that before, yes, but never by my girlfriend.

At that thought, I realized something. *Am I ready for this?*

"Rachel... wait," I whispered, breaking away from her. She instantly removed her hand, and pulled back to gaze at me. I saw the worry and hints of fear in her gaze.

“You okay?” Rachel asked worriedly. It was almost cute, how she was treating me so carefully. It wasn't entirely odd for her to treat me this gently, but she rarely showed it this much.

“Yeah, I'm fine,” I assured her with a weak smile. “It's just... I don't think that I'm, uh, ready. Just yet.”

Her brow furrowed a bit with distress. “I haven't been rushing you, have I?” she asked hesitantly. I shook my head, but I could see how she came to that conclusion.

“No, you haven't,” I told her, smiling a little. “You've been... *really* patient with me, actually. And I appreciate it. I'm just not quite ready for that yet.” I noticed the apprehension still in her gaze, and kissed her innocently. “It's not you. Promise.”

Rachel hesitated a moment, before nodding once. “Okay. That's fine,” she sighed in what sounded like relief. She offered me a somewhat shy smile. “I'm willing to wait.” I wasn't expecting her to accept it so easily, considering my past boyfriends who tried to get into my pants at every opportunity. She evidently noticed my surprise, for her lips curled into a wry grin. “You're worth it, Jessie. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise.”

I nodded, feeling suddenly shy. I leaned in to whisper the next words into her ear, my chest pressed against hers. “It won't be too long. Really.”

“Fuck, Jessie, it better *not* be if you're gonna keep teasing me like that,” she complained lightly, each word pressing her breasts against my own. Her playful comment made me start giggling softly once again.

CHAPTER 32

When my breathing finally slowed to some resemblance of normalcy, I realized that my hand was still buried between my legs. *Good lord that was intense.*

Jessie had left a little over an hour ago – I had actually had to shoo her out a little early. I doubt she really understood how worked up she'd gotten me, and so I had to take care of that before I went insane. Insane-*er*, in any case. Either way, I hadn't expected my body to react quite so... *violently.*

I relaxed my body, releasing my fingers. Briefly, I wondered what Jessie would say if she knew that I masturbated to thoughts of her. I smirked; she'd probably be too embarrassed to say anything. I brought my hand up to my lips, licking the wetness from my fingers. I wondered briefly what my little redhead tasted like before shaking my head a bit. *Man. I need to find other things to occupy my mind with.*



I silently examined the sheets of music that the chorus teacher had given me yesterday. I was at school early today for this reason; hey, if I was going to play the piano, I needed to know what I was playing. I glanced at my watch. There were still five minutes left until the bell rang. I sighed, glancing at the door. *Do they honestly think that I'm not aware that they're outside the door?*

I popped an M&M into my mouth; I'd bought a bag at the school store earlier.

“Um, why is everyone standing out there?” Jessie asked as she came in. I glanced at her and grinned wryly. I surprised myself by acting completely normal around her, considering what I had done just last night.

“Because I'm in here gay-ing up the place. Obviously.” She laughed a little at that.

“Seriously?”

“I assume.” I shrugged, holding up the music and tossing another M&M into my mouth. “But, hey, it's giving me a chance to look over the music, so I don't really care. 'Sides, I don't really care one way or another whether they come in or not. Ain't my problem if they want to get written up for skipping.”

“This is true. What are you eating?” she asked curiously.

“M&M's,” I replied casually. I smirked at her and held up one for her to see. I flicked it expertly into my mouth with my tongue. Jessie stared for a second, before blushing and looking away. “Want one?” I offered teasingly, holding up the bag.

“No thanks,” she declined. Jessie glanced towards the teacher's office; Ms. K was working on her computer. She kissed me quickly, her tongue flicking at my lips briefly. Jessie hummed lightly. “You taste good mixed with chocolate,” she commented. I made a strangled noise as I bit back a loud laugh. Jessie went scarlet when she realized what she said. “That came out wrong.”

“Obviously,” I chuckled. “I know what you meant. Unless that was a Freudian slip?” I grinned playfully at her.

“Oh, shut up,” she muttered, still looking rather embarrassed. “And it was not!”

“If you say so,” I smirked, laughing again when she smacked my shoulder.

I glanced up when the bell rang. None of the students came in. “Now go sit down or you might get written up, too,” I commanded her playfully, lightly smacking her ass. Jessie squeaked in surprise and gave me a mock glare as she went to her chair.

“Where is everyone?” Miss K asked, surprised, as she came out of her office.

“Outside,” I replied, shrugging as though I had no idea what they were doing out there.

Frowning, the teacher stormed out of the classroom. I chuckled softly as I heard her yelling angrily at the students that were still outside.



I tugged a book out of my locker with a soft grunt. I slammed the door to it shut, only to find myself face-to-face with a blonde male with a light smirk on his lips. I instantly scowled.

“Matt,” I greeted shortly, my tones clipped.

“Hey, babe,” he returned, either ignoring or not recognizing the contempt in my gaze. “Love the hair. New style?”

“If you consider 'several months old' new,” I sneered, pushing my glasses up a bit.

“Oh? I must not have noticed. When—”

“What do you want?” I broke in, scowling.

“Whoa. Getting a little testy, there, Rachel. You alright?” I rolled my eyes at that.

“Again, I say, what the *fuck* do you want?” I snarled.

“I want to try again,” Matt told me, reaching out to touch my face. I recoiled.

“Try again?” I echoed, scowling. “You *cheated* on me, Matt. Well, hell, you didn't even do that! You *used me!* I am *not* your whore, you bastard. I'm not going to take that shit from anyone, and especially not *you*. So fuck the hell off!”

“Babe, you're overreacting,” he tried to sooth me, but it only worsened.

“*I'm overreacting?! You dated me just so you could get me in on a threesome! I'm overreacting? Any girl would, quote, overreact in that case! Fuck you!*” I roared. He tried to say something else, but I stormed off, leaving behind a rather flustered-looking Matt and a crowd of confused teenagers.

“PMS, much, Rah?” a familiar voice laughed a bit. I rolled my eyes.

“Oh, shut up, Jenny,” I grouched lightly as she clapped my shoulder.

“Chill. Besides, he deserved it. I still think you shoulda slapped him,” she chuckled.

“Yeah, I was tempted, but I coulda gotten written up for doing that,” I grumbled, shrugging her arm off my shoulders.

“True. But, hey, you're gonna have some 'splainin to do.”

“Huh?” Yeah, that was eloquent.

“Jessie saw that.” Jenny laughed when I swore. “Yeah, she's going to want some explanation on that little display.”

“Lovely,” I grumbled, shaking my head. “I don't want to go into that shit any more than I have to.”

“Hey, she's gonna want to know about your past exploits sooner or later,” Jenny pointed out.

I sighed. “I know,” I muttered. I never did like talking about my ex's – none of them turned out very well. Matt was only one of these examples. “Doesn't mean that I want to tell her about it.”

“Do you trust her?” she asked suddenly. I gave her an odd look.

“Well, yeah, 'course.” I wanted to point out that I was in love with her, but I didn't want to rub that in, either.

“Then trust her with this,” Jenny declared, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“Since when the hell are you this logical?” I asked, confused. My friend just laughed.

“Since when the hell are you this *il*logical?”

Honestly, I wasn't sure. Maybe I was still nervous about opening up to Jessie about my faults, even if she had told me on numerous occasions that she wouldn't think less of me. So I simply shrugged, and bade her goodbye as I went to my second block class.

CHAPTER 33

I nodded at a blonde-haired boy as I left the chorus room with Rachel. It had been nearly a month since I'd witnessed her blowing up at the guy, and had taken several days for her to explain it. "Is that the guy again?" I asked her curiously.

"Unfortunately," she snorted softly, shaking her head.

I frowned a little. Rachel wasn't anywhere near the slut that most of the school made her out to be. Matt obviously thought differently when he dated her. I wanted to go over to him and slap him for trying that with the sweet, loving girl I was now dating. Rachel obviously saw this and laughed a little.

"I know you've got a redheaded temper and all, but don't go off on him," she reminded me, lightly kissing the top of my head.

"He would deserve it," I muttered, glaring at him anyways when we passed him.

"Yes, he would. But he's not worth it," Rachel replied dismissively. "Besides, it's not like I'm going back to that dick."

"I'm glad," I commented teasingly, elbowing her a little.

"Hm," she snorted softly, amused. "Hey, are you free tomorrow?" she asked suddenly.

I thought about that for a moment, before nodding. "Yeah, my parents are going on some couple's retreat thing for Valentine's day. They'll be gone Saturday and Sunday."

"Cool," Rachel grinned lightly, before stealing a quick kiss. "See ya then."

"Wait, what are you planning?" I asked her before she left. "I'm going to be gone until that night; I have to babysit someone."

"Well, good, you aren't going to be seeing me 'till evening, anyways. And I'm not telling you what I'm planning," she laughed. "That'd ruin the surprise. In the meantime, happy day-

before-Valentine's." She kissed me again, before hurrying off to her next class. I smiled a little; I was a little curious as to what my creative girlfriend had planned.



I opened the front door, not bothering to call out that I was home, even if I had been out babysitting the neighbor's kid all day. My parents weren't here, after all. I glanced around, trying to let my eyes get adjusted to the darkness. Only the hall light was on. I shook my head silently as I headed up the stairs.

I paused as I reached the top, though, because my foot hit something. I took my cell phone out and turned it on, lighting up the hallway a bit. I raised a brow at the trail of Hershey's kisses that led down the hall, before smiling fondly. I had the feeling that Rachel had something to do with it.

Using my phone as a flashlight, I silently followed the trail down the hall, and into my bedroom. I blinked, curious, when I noticed that the trail led into my personal bathroom. I noticed a dim, flickering light coming from the smaller room, so I slipped my phone back into my pocket and went into the bathroom.

I froze at the doorway, stunned. The small shower was almost completely hidden under roses – there must have been nearly thirty, all beautiful, all in full bloom. My gaze went lower, to the dim candle that illuminated the hand-written note below it:

I kiss the ground you walk on, and shower you with roses.

Love,

Rachel.

For a minute, I was unable to do anything aside for stare, my fingers against my lips. My eyes were misted over, I'm sure. I couldn't help it; I was just so touched that she would do all this for me. *What did I do to deserve her?*

I wasn't very surprised when a pair of arms wrapped around my middle, though I did give a somewhat watery smile.

"Happy Valentine's Day, darlin'," Rachel murmured softly. I leaned against her, so her small breasts were pressed against the backs of my shoulders. I turned my head to face her.

"I can't believe you did this," I whispered, touching her face. I offered a tentative smile.

“Of course I would,” she replied honestly. If she was going to say anything else, I didn't let her.

I twisted around in her grip, wrapping my arms around her neck. I pulled her against me in a soft kiss, reveling in the silence as our lips met lovingly. When we broke away, I lightly nipped her bottom lip, making her smirk at me. That sexy little smirk of hers always made me blush; it was like she was saying 'I know you want me' with the expression.

It occurred to me that, only a few months ago, if someone told me I would be making out with the school's resident dyke in my bedroom and wondering what she felt like under her clothes, I would have either slapped them or laughed them out of town. Now, though, it seemed perfectly natural to kiss my girlfriend, even if my current thoughts were... less than tasteful. Maybe it *was* time.

I leaned in again, kissing her a bit harder. She returned it easily, and I managed to slip my tongue into Rachel's mouth. She allowed it with a soft rumble in her chest. I loved the taste of the girl before me. She tasted of cinnamon and mint – it was an odd combination, but it suited her well.

I loved just about everything about the spindly rocker, from her boyish haircut to her strong accent to her odd obsession with duct tape. I loved her jokes, her charm, her odd Southern phrases. I even loved her faults: her clumsiness, her sharp tongue, her creative vandalism streak. I loved... *her*. That thought formed a mantra in my head. *I love her. I love her.*

I continued to kiss my girlfriend, clinging to her wiry frame. Our tongues played hotly, and I shivered every time I felt her cool piercing against my tongue.

Somewhere along the line, part of my mental mantra changed, and the message became utterly different: *I want her*.

That thought in mind, I unhooked one of my arms from around Rachel's neck. My hand quickly undid a few buttons on my blouse. Rachel didn't respond, evidently not noticing it. I took one of her hands, which was possessively gripping my hip, and gently tugged it up my torso. I shyly slid her spidery hand into my shirt, placing it over my breast.

I gave a tiny whimper of loss when her lips left mine. There was an uncertain look in her dark eyes.

“Are you sure, darlin'?” Rachel asked softly.

“Of course I am,” I whispered, leaning to brush my lips against her broken collarbone, reminding her that I accepted all of her. “Why would you even ask that?” I was the one who started it, after all.

“I don't want to give you anything to hate me for,” she confessed, just barely breathing the words into my ear.

“I don't think I could ever hate you,” I murmured, dotting loving kisses up her pale throat. “And certainly not ever for this.” I kissed her tenderly before whispering against her silken lips, “I want this. I want *you*.”

Rachel stared at me in disbelief for a moment before nodding. She pulled me into a searing kiss. I clung to her tightly, feeling as though I would drown if I didn't. Whatever thoughts were flitting around my head were lost when her hand gently caressed my chest. An overwhelming ache rose up in me, and I began tugging off of her, if only for the reason that I could rid her of her shirt after...



I gazed down at the bare, sleeping form of my lover. Her arms were curled around my midsection, her head tucked under my chin. I absently rubbed her shoulder with one hand, enjoying the feeling of her soft, warm skin under my fingertips. She nuzzled closer to me, and I smiled a little, though I couldn't help the blush in my face.

I had only had sex once before, and it wasn't entirely pleasant. The guy hadn't really known what he was doing, and it showed. And *hurt*.

Rachel, though, proved to be better than men in that respect, too. Her mouth and fingers had been blazing against my skin. She had played my body easily, had made me scream her name and bite her shoulder to stifle my cries. I blushed when I saw the light bruises I'd left on her breasts and the hickeys on her shoulder and throat.

I had touched her, too. She had felt utterly incredible under my fingers. I had been a little nervous about whether I could actually please her or not, but her soft groans had easily dispelled my worries. I gently kissed the top of her head, taking in her almost overpowering scent.

“Rachel... I *do* love you,” I confessed softly, barely whispering the words into her hair. “I do.”

Even though I hadn't admitted as such to her when she was awake, it felt good to say it. Smiling a little, I fell asleep in the older woman's soft embrace.

CHAPTER 34

I shivered a little at the feeling of thin, feminine fingers slowly dragging across the curve of my breast. I woke with a tiny moan, a little smile twitching at my lips. “That's a nice way to wake up,” I whispered, opening my eyes to blearily gaze up at Jessie. She blushed and took her hand away.

“Sorry.”

“S'fine, darlin'.” I inched up to place a soft, languorous kiss on her lips. When we broke away, I grinned lazily. “I shoulda done that earlier, plus say 'good morning,’” I commented. She smiled. “Sleep well?” It was a little out-of-character for me to be this languid, but hey, I was still basking in the fact that I had gotten to make love with the only person I had ever actually fallen in love with.

“Definitely. You?” She absently played with my cross pendant. She'd apparently forgotten to remove it last night.

“Oh, yeah. You seriously wore me out, Jessie.”

She laughed a little. “*I wore you out?*” she complained lightly, smiling a bit. “I think I'm going to be walking with a limp.”

“That's not the only side effect.” I chuckled and shot her a wicked little smirk. “You're also never going to hear the words 'tongue stud' without blushing.” Her face went absolutely scarlet and I laughed. “Yeah, just like that.”

“You're horrible,” Jessie grumbled, burying her face into my chest. She gave a tiny sigh of contentment.

“You know you love it,” I smiled down at her. She lightly kissed my throat, as if agreeing with that statement.

We rested there for several more moments, simply enjoying the closeness of the other. I was a little surprised at how well our bodies fit together, her smaller form nuzzled against me. I

wrapped my arms around her waist, and was instantly struck by how *fragile* she seemed. Her body, compared to my own, was so small and frail. I gazed down at her, wondering what on earth I would do if she ever got hurt. *Beat the shit out of the guy whose fault it was*, I immediately decided. A little more violent than I usually was, but anyone who tried to injure my little lover would deserve it.

My girlfriend took me out of my thoughts by pressing a soft, open-mouthed kiss to my shoulder. She finished it off with a surprisingly deep bite, making me whimper. The noise earned me a brief glance, but I supposed she noticed that I wasn't any actual pain, because she merely went back to kissing my shoulder. A curious hand slid along my hip, up and down. I couldn't keep a stupid grin from crossing my face. I was only glad Jessie couldn't see it.

"You feel good," she commented out of the blue, mumbling the words into my shoulder. I gave a little snort of surprised amusement at the statement.

"Thanks...?"

"*Really* good." Her tone was a low purr, all pressure and heat. It instantly caught my attention. Jessie shifted then, and I heaved a stuttering gasp at the feeling of her against me. She nipped at my ear, gently tugging at the lobe, and I was nearly gone. "I want you."

I wasn't sure how I was supposed to take that, so I hesitantly responded with a generic, "You *have* me."

Jessie then surprised me by flipping our positions so that she was straddling my waist. She delivered an almost bruising kiss, her hands keeping my shoulders pinned to the bed.

"You're cute when you're oblivious," she breathed when she broke away, sliding down. I was more than a little dazed as she lightly brushed her lips over each of my breasts before slowly kissing and licking her way down my body. My breath hitched faintly as the redhead pulled up, running her fingertips along the outside of my thighs. I merely watched her through lidded eyes, my chest heaving with soft pants. *Does she have any idea how fucking hot she is?*

"I don't really know what I'm doing," Jessie admitted softly, placing a wet kiss to the inside of my knee. She met my gaze, uncertain. "So... you'll have to tell me if, ah..." She trailed off.

I tried to speak, but couldn't manage it. I swallowed to moisten my horribly dry throat and then nodded. "Yeah," I managed to croak out. I smiled a little "You'll do fine; don't worry."

The younger girl gave me a skeptical look, but then turned her attention back to what she was doing. My eyelids fluttered at the feeling of Jessie slowly pressing blazing kisses against my sensitive skin – then I closed my eyes altogether when she got where I wanted her.

A quavering gasp ripped out of my lips.



As I laid on the bed, waiting for my overheated body to cool off, I could hear Jessie moving about in the adjacent bathroom, removing the numerous roses from the shower. She giggled softly as she passed by me, a handful of the red flowers in her grip. “How many roses did you get, anyways?” she marveled, gently touching the red petals.

I made a vague motion with my hand. “A lot. Took me two trips from the truck to here to get 'em all.” I probably *did* have an exact amount, actually, but my brain was too fried to come up with it right now. Hell, I wasn't even sure I'd be able to *walk* for another hour, at least.

Jessie made a soft, surprised noise at the vague amount. “Speaking of, where is your truck, anyways?”

“Parked on the side of the house. Figured you wouldn't notice it in the dark.”

My girlfriend came back from... wherever she'd just been and crawled on top of me, straddling my waist. I smirked up at her, *thoroughly* enjoying the view. Just because I couldn't operate my more complex thought processes didn't mean I wasn't still of the opinion that my girlfriend was fucking *gorgeous*. She leaned down and kissed me softly, her silky lips nuzzling mine just an instant before her tongue dipped into my mouth. I was all but panting when she pulled up.

Jessie smiled down at me, her fingers playing with my short hair. “You're too sweet,” she whispered against my lips.

I smiled a little as she kissed me again in that same slow, teasing way. “Not that I don't like being called that, but what is *this* time for?” My hands tenderly slid along the smooth, bare plane of her back, just *feeling* her.

“Last night.” She brushed my bangs out of my eyes. “All of it. The chocolate, the flowers, the...” She cut off sharply with a deep blush and I grinned; even after all we'd done – all we were doing – she was still so shy when it came to sex. *Not sex. Lovemaking*, I corrected

myself. That's what it was; I was sure of it. I'd never felt that way before with *anyone* – just Jessie.

“Glad I could satisfy,” I quipped, tracing slow circles on her shoulder blade.

“You did *way* more than just ‘satisfy.’” I purred into her kiss. When she broke away, Jessie gave me a coy little smile. “You suppose you can stand now?”

My circle-tracing drifted down to the small of her back. “With incentive, maybe.” And I smirked at her.

“A shower?”

“Together?” I wanted clarification.

“Well, that depends on whether or not you’re able to stand, hm?” She smothered my groan with a quick kiss. Then she was gone, disappeared into the small bathroom. The water started and I groaned again.

“Fucking tease,” I growled, loud enough for her to hear me. She just laughed.

I made myself get up and walk after her.

“I've got you all figured out,” I decided, watching as Jessie tested the water temperature every now and then. She glanced over her shoulder, blushing a little at my gaze. (What? *You'd* stare too if a hot *natural* redhead was bent over the side of a tub.)

“I'm not sure what that means,” she said slowly, looking at me a little suspiciously.

“Exactly what it sounds like. I've got you all figured out.” At her motion to continue, I smirked and elaborated: “You're a nymphomaniac.”

She balked. “I am not!”

“Don't lie,” I teased her as she straightened up.

“I should kick you out of the bathroom for that,” she grumbled, pouting a little. I chuckled softly, going over to her and kissing her until she stopped that.

“Well, you'd get bored showering by yourself,” I pointed out as we shut the curtain and turned the shower on.

“I've done it before, I can do it again,” Jessie declared, turning to face me.

“Yeah, but would you really pass up the opportunity to bathe with a willing girl?” I drawled, raising a brow and pulling her close. I grinned when I saw the blush rising in her face.

“You're making it really difficult to stay annoyed,” she muttered, glancing down at our bodies pressed together.

“Good, that was the plan,” I replied, running my fingers up and down her spine. She shivered and pulled away, turning around and picking up the washcloth she must've gotten earlier. I merely watched as she poured a dollop of body wash onto the cloth, working it into a lather.

“Turn around,” she instructed, facing me again. I raised a brow just to tease her, but did as she asked anyways. I gave a soft groan as she pressed her front into my back and began washing my shoulders. The feeling of her smooth, wet flesh pressed against me nearly made my mind go into overload again, but I managed to pull myself together. Barely.

I felt her shift behind me, then I gasped when I felt her tongue tracing my tattoo. The feeling nearly made my knees buckle, but I managed to stay upright. After a moment or two, she stood back up, lightly nibbling at the back of my neck. I shivered a little. *You're killing me here, Jessie!* She laughed softly, noticing my reaction, and finished washing the small of my back.

The redhead slipped in front of me to kiss me lightly. “Turn around,” she repeated, and I did so, facing the front of the shower again. Jessie slipped her arms under mine and began cleaning my front. She rested her chin on my shoulder as she washed my stomach. I wasn't sure which of us blushed harder when she began washing my breasts shortly after. She certainly took her sweet time doing it, making me shiver every little while from the sensation. I wasn't sure whether to sigh in relief or disappointment when she was finished.

I bit my lip as her hand slipped lower and lower. Even then, I couldn't stifle my mewl when she began washing between my legs.

“Rachel?” Jessie asked curiously, and I forced myself to pay attention to what she was saying instead of what she was doing.

“Uh?” I managed, glancing at her. It was hard to think with her touching me, even if she wasn't doing anything... *blatantly* sexual.

“You okay? You're breathing hard.” I gave her an odd look. *There's no way she's this oblivious. Not after this morning.* I relaxed a little at the playful smirk on her face.

“Fucking *tease*,” I muttered again. She only laughed and lightly kissed my ear.

“Yep.” I forced out a heavy breath when she got on her knees instead, scrubbing my legs. She glanced up briefly - but not at my face.

I laughed softly. “*Such* a nympho. Also, I'm stealing your shampoo.”

“Fine. And I am not!” For a few moments, the only sound was that of the shower running. I closed my eyes tightly as I rinsed my hair. Then I froze as her lips brushed against a *particularly* sensitive spot on my lower belly. A helpless little *uhhhn* grated out of my throat; I felt her lips curve into a smirk against my hip.

“You're *killing me* here,” I groaned. She only laughed and stood up, molding her body to mine, pressing our lips together in a scandalous kiss. I held her tightly and Jessie moaned into my mouth.

...I will admit that maybe I shouldn't have let my hands wander, but *she* certainly didn't seem to mind.

CHAPTER 35

Rachel, as it turned out, actually hadn't planned on staying the night... or sleeping with me, for that matter. "I didn't exactly pack an overnight bag," she quipped at my surprised realization that she didn't have a change of clothes or anything.

I brushed a few strands of still-wet hair behind my ear again, chewing my lip as I considered. "I can wash your clothes from yesterday," I finally decided, turning around to pull some of my own clothes out of my closet. "You'll have to stay a little longer than, ah, you were planning, but..."

The musician, seated on the edge of my bed covered only with the towel that was still wrapped around her damp body, chuckled at my shy remark, looking up at me with a crooked grin. "I *told* you, I hadn't even expected to stay the *night*. I'm *already* here longer than I planned." I was pulling on a pair of jeans as she said that, and she smirked gently, glancing me up and down. "Not that I'm minding *any* of the, ah... *delays*."

I snorted at her crude remark, feeling heat rushing to my face. I took a different route. "You didn't expect me to... invite you to stay? Even though I told you my parents weren't home?" I inquired, mildly surprised. I'd half thought that she'd been expecting it. Not that she would *pressure* me to have sex with her, since she wasn't that kind of person, but... just that she would've been, y'know. Prepared for it.

Rachel's dark brows quirked up. "Not really, no. I expected to *charm* you, but not *that* much." And then she was back to grinning impishly.

I rolled my eyes, grabbing a robe off the back of my bathroom door, and threw it at Rachel. She caught it... sort of. Mostly it just landed in her lap. "Would you get decent?" I pretended to huff at her. Rachel grinned impishly at me, but stood to put it on anyways. The towel slid off of her, pooling at her feet, and I found myself quickly distracted again.

Before Rachel, I'd never even *considered* being with a woman. *But Rachel...* I let my gaze wander over her slender form, admiring her porcelain skin, still littered with vivid love bites on her breasts and thighs. I let out a long, slow breath.

Rachel was different. She always had been.

"Enjoying the show?" the musician teased, slipping the robe on. I started, breaking out of my blatant admiration of her, and blushed deeply. Rachel laughed, tying the robe closed. On me, it ended just at my knees; on Rachel, it ended high on her thighs, leaving her long legs exposed. I admired her for another second before responding.

"Of course." And she laughed again as I pulled my top on. Now dressed, I crossed the room to wrap my arms around Rachel's slender waist and pressing my lips to hers. "Now help me find your clothes," I teased, lightly swatting at her hip. The musician grinned impishly, the faintest of smirks touching her lips.

It only took a few minutes to track down all of her clothes from the night before, fortunately, and I quickly threw them into the washing machine. That done, I turned back around to Rachel with a tiny smile. "D'you want to go back to my room?" I offered shyly. I hadn't ever had a lover at home with me before. I wasn't entirely sure what the protocol for that situation was. "We can go watch movies or something."

She grinned at me again. "Sounds good." And she laced her fingers in mine as I led her back up to my bedroom. "Did you have any particular movie in mind?" the musician asked curiously as I went to look through my DVDs.

"Not really," I admitted, glancing up at her. "Comedy sounds good to you?"

"*Anything* sounds fine to me," she laughed, sitting on the edge of my bed and crossing her legs. "Just pick one, darlin'."

A few moments later and I was cuddled into my barely-dressed girlfriend, smiling softly at her occasional bursts of laughter at the film. Hearing her laugh always managed to bring a smile to my face.

I was, currently, lying between her spread legs, almost on my side against her. Rachel had propped her back up on the headboard, so we were half sitting, half reclining. She had one hand on my back, and would occasionally absentmindedly run her short nails over me, making me shiver. She was *way* too good at distracting me.

I smiled a little as I felt Rachel idly scratching my back again. Her touches were the lightest of grazes, but they made me quiver anyways. I glanced at her, amusement making me grin a little bit. “Am I keeping you distracted, Rachel?” I teased, resting my hand on her bent knee.

“I have a hot redhead sitting between my legs. And I’m wearing like nothing here. I’m allowed to be a little distracted,” she responded without missing a beat. I blushed darkly, and she grinned.

“You’re horrible,” I muttered, adjusting my head against her chest. Rachel just chuckled softly, hugging me around the middle, resting her pale, cool hands on my stomach. I glanced down and placed my hands on hers. I smiled a little at the sight, absently tracing circles on the backs of her hands with my thumbs.

“*Now* who’s being distracting?”

“Still you,” I countered her teasing question in a matter-of-fact tone. “*I’m* trying to watch the movie.”

“Oh please,” the musician snorted.

“I am! You’re the one not watching it!”

“Of course I’m watching it,” she insisted, giving me a crooked grin. “I’ve never seen it before, you little smartass. It’s pretty funny though.” And she pulled me a little closer into her.

“Oh, I thought you’d already seen it before or something,” I admitted, allowing myself to be cuddled. Having her hold me made me smile without really realizing it. I grinned playfully at her. “Maybe I should get it on DVD for your birthday.” It was coming up in just two weeks, after all – March first.

Rachel groaned unhappily and buried her face into my neck. “Don’t remind me,” she grumbled against my flesh. I shivered a little at the feeling of her hot breath on my skin, but her remark made me look at her curiously.

“What’s wrong with your birthday?” I asked, picking up the remote and pausing the movie.

“I don’t need any reminders of my age,” she replied flatly, making me laugh.

“You're turning nineteen,” I giggled, twisting a little awkwardly to kiss her a little. “It isn't that bad. Anyways, don't tell me you don't have any plans for your birthday, 'cause we both know that's a lie.”

“I was planning on getting together with a buddy 'a mine and going moshing at the A7X concert in Atlanta,” she replied, shrugging from behind me.

“A-seven-ex?” I parroted, confused.

“Avenged Sevenfold. Should be pretty epic,” Rachel mused.

“Hm. And is this ‘buddy’ someone I need to be jealous of?” I asked, only half-teasing.

She chuckled. “No, but knowing you, you're going to be jealous anyways.” I pouted a little, elbowing her in the ribs, making her yelp and jerk a little. “I'm going to get you back for that,” she declared. That was my only warning before her hands, still on my stomach, began tickling me mercilessly. I gave a little shriek of surprise as I tried to wriggle away from her. Rachel wasn't letting me up, though, and I only succeeded in getting myself pinned down under her.

“Okay, *okay!*” I gasped out, attempting to defend myself with one hand, but laughing too hard to be able to do much. “I'm sorry! Stop!” After a moment, her hands finally stilled, and she allowed me to catch my breath. With her body pushing tight against mine, though, it was hard to do so.

“Y'know...” Rachel drawled playfully, pressing closer against me, “I think I kinda like having you pinned under me like this.” I blushed darkly as she absently traced my collarbone with the tip of her finger. The fact that the bathrobe she was currently sporting didn't fit her quite right didn't help my flush at all.

“You're awful,” I grumbled softly, squirming under her, trying to get loose. She wasn't budging. “Let me up!” I complained playfully, putting my hands on her chest and trying to push her off. Rachel laughed a little bit, before kissing me. I felt a brief flash of annoyance; she knew very well that I couldn't concentrate when she did that.

Finally, she broke away and sat back up. I shakily followed suit, before glaring at her. “You're trying to distract me again,” I accused, pouting a little.

“Only because I don't want *more* people making a big deal out of my birthday,” Rachel replied with a snort. “Jenny and Thomas are going to go overboard with it, as usual. They're

going to plan out some obnoxious get-together that I don't particularly want to attend, and it's going to be in my apartment as usual, so I can't just leave when I'm tired of it. I don't *want* a damn party!" She finished with an irked huff.

"I'm sensing some other issues here," I commented, wrapping my arms around her neck. "Are you going to talk about it?" She still had the bad habit of closing up when she was uncomfortable with something. I was trying to get her out of that.

Rachel didn't respond for several minutes. I didn't prompt her; I knew she would talk about it after a while. If she wanted to.

"It feels like they're trying to replace my parents," she said finally. "They... they ask me about my *day*, they get into my business *all* the damn *time*, they arrange this *shit* that I don't have *any* damn desire to do... I mean, it's not that I appreciate the *sentiment*, and it's not like they're doing it on *purpose* but..." She trailed off, exasperated. There was a deep sorrow in her gaze, one that made me wince. "They can't." Her voice hitched just a little at that last phrase.

I hugged her tightly. "They're only trying to take care of you, babe," I reminded her. I colored slightly at the pet name that slipped out. Rachel didn't seem to mind it. "They love you."

"I know," she muttered, still looking somewhat distraught.

"I do, too," I whispered into her ear. Rachel froze, startled, before pulling away to look at me.

"What?"

"I love you," I repeated, smiling a little. It felt good to tell her as such. She seemed a little shell-shocked, though. I laughed and kissed her until she snapped out of it.

When we broke away, Rachel was beaming like I'd never seen her do before.

With a straight face, I asked, "So does this mean you'll at least let *me* celebrate your birthday with you?"

The question surprised a laugh out of Rachel. Happiness was dancing in her gaze. "Sure, love."

Wonder if she'll still call me that when she finds out about our plans.

CHAPTER 36

I couldn't really do anything aside for stare in disbelief at the poster, sitting innocently on the wall of the school. It was anything *but* innocent, though.

“OneGirl – Live in Concert!

Tickets on sale in the School Store”

The center of the poster was a picture of my tattoo, the clef heart. There were more words on the poster, but I didn't need to read them. *I didn't agree to this shit!*

My face hardened; Jenny and Thomas were the ones behind this, I was sure. Probably Jessie, too. No one else would have the audacity to put these up without saying anything.

“I wonder who it is,” I heard someone behind me whispering excitedly. My fists clenched and I left, going to my last class, intending to send them a text telling them to come to my apartment after school. *They are so dead. So fucking dead.*



I had already agreed to take Jessie home with me this afternoon (she'd asked for some help in her World History class, a course I had taken last semester), though now I kind of wished I hadn't. That sounded horrible, but I was feeling rather betrayed about now. She *knew* that I didn't want to be exposed!

I silently got into my truck, irritably sticking the key into the ignition and turning it on. I got out of there with relative ease (though the stupidity of the other teenage drivers made me seethe quietly) and headed towards my apartment building. I didn't say anything to my girlfriend.

After several moments of driving in silence, Jessie ventured a comment: “You're mad at me, huh.” It wasn't a question, even if it sounded like one. I felt my anger spike a little. I had every right to be pissed!

“You're as sharp as a marble,” I growled. I regretted saying it as soon as it came out.

Jessie winced and looked away briefly. “It wasn't *my* idea,” I thought I heard her mutter. I rolled my eyes. Couldn't help it. “Please don't be mad at me,” she whispered softly, hurt tinting her voice. She hesitantly rested her hand on my thigh. I glanced down at her hand. My eyes went back to the road. I said nothing. “Rachel?” she asked, dismayed.

“Jessie, if I respond right now, I'm either going to start driving recklessly or pull over and scream at you, and neither idea appeals to me right now, so just *don't* talk to me until we get where we're going,” I replied shortly, a scowl tugging at my lips. Jessie fell silent, looking crestfallen at my angry reply.

I felt a little ill – whether that was because I was going to be exposed as OneGirl or because of how I had snapped at the little redhead, I wasn't sure.



“*I can't fucking believe you!*” I roared at my friends (and girlfriend) as they sat on my couch. I was too restless to sit, so I was standing. And *pacing*. My fists were clenched so hard I was surprised my nails weren't drawing blood. Well, maybe they were. I didn't know, and I didn't care enough to check. “Do you have any idea how damn frustrating you are?” Jenny and Thomas were taking my rage quite easily, having been the subject of it a few times before. Jessie, though, hadn't ever seen me blow up, and was looking rather scared. I was too aggravated. I didn't see her.

“Chill, Rachel. You need this.” I rounded on Jenny, furious.

“Who the hell ever said I even *wanted* this?” I yelled, glaring. “There's no damn way I'm doing this! I am *not* going to humiliate myself on that stage!”

“What makes you think that you're going to humiliate yourself?” Jenny snapped back, standing up. I knew that she got annoyed, even angry, when I started yelling. I didn't care. I was looking for a fight at this point. I was pissed, dammit, and I wanted a scapegoat. “You have tons of fans, you idiot, so do the damn concert already!”

“Hell fucking no!” I snarled. “We all know what's going to happen up there! I'm going to get up there and people are going to see me and they're all going to leave! *No one likes me*, Jenny, you know that as damn well as I do!”

“You underestimate your fans.” That was Thomas. I just flipped him off and he fell silent.

“Even if they don't all leave, I'm probably going to pass out once I get up there,” I growled. I could easily remember the last time I had performed in front of an audience – it was eighth grade, show choir. I was in the back row. I'd been fine for the first song or two, then I had passed out, nearly breaking my arm when I fell. I didn't want that to happen again, especially when all the attention would be on me in the first place.

“That's because you locked your knees,” Jenny retorted with a frown. She sat down again, though. “You aren't going to do that in a fucking *rock concert*.”

“How do you know that?” I asked, suspicious.

“We've seen you performing with your guitar,” Thomas pointed out, tapping his closed laptop. “You can't keep still. That won't be a problem.”

I scowled, knowing that that much was true. “And what about all the other instruments?” I pointed out, finding a flaw in their plans. “I may be able to *play* them all, but I can't do all of them at the same time.”

“Already taken care of,” Jenny smirked. I deflated a little bit. “We've already got a bassist, a backup guitarist, a keyboard player, and a drummer.”

“I still need a tech crew,” I pointed out, crossing my arms and frowning. I still didn't want to do this, but really, I couldn't halfway do anything without a few techies.

“We got your friends from the A/V Club to volunteer to run tech,” Jessie piped up, still looking a little nervous about being yelled at. I looked a little surprised, then embarrassed at the fact that she knew I was in the A/V Club.

I thought furiously, trying to find some little detail they'd forgotten, something minor enough to be overlooked, but still important enough to be a flaw.

My head shot up. “Backup singer.”

Jenny and Thomas winced. “Um... no,” Thomas admitted, a little sheepishly.

I smirked inwardly. *Bingo*. “How the hell am I expected to do a concert with only me doing vocals?” I demanded to know.

My two friends were obviously trying to find some way to get around that, when Jessie shyly spoke up again: “I can sing backup.”

I stared at her in disbelief; she just shifted, a little uncomfortable. Jenny and Thomas obviously weren't expecting that answer, either. “Seriously? You?” I asked, sounding

incredulous to the point that it was almost offensive, the way it came out. Jessie colored slightly and nodded.

“Why not? I've been singing for a few years now,” she pointed out.

“Yeah, in *chorus*,” I reminded her, still stunned that she would make the offer. “There's a difference between that and singing *rock*.”

“You can teach me,” Jessie replied innocently. I growled mentally at the tone she used. I couldn't really tell her no to that, then I would just look like a jerk. Jenny grinned; she knew it, too.

“So, are you in?” my friend asked me, a bit smugly.

I crossed my arms and legs, as if rooting myself into the spot. I frowned at them. “I hope you people die in an excruciatingly painful manner involving poisonous snakes, a train wreck, and napalm, and are forced to live in ICU for a month in pain so severe that morphine will do *nothing* for you before dying slowly, scared and alone,” I pronounced finally. Jessie gasped softly, having never heard one of my empty threats of violence before.

Jenny cheered, knowing that that was my way of giving in. She jumped up and pulled me into a crushing hug. I grunted in pain. “You won't regret this,” she promised, giving my hair a good messing-up before releasing me. I scowled at her.

“Whatever. All y'all get out of my apartment now,” I commanded, waving vaguely at the door as I went back to my room, intending to lay down for a while. I flopped down on my messy, unmade bed, curling up and throwing my might-as-well-be-a-rag blanket over me. I hid under my blanket for what seemed like only a few seconds, but it was extremely comforting anyways, for the simple fact that it had been my comfort blanket for so long. I'd had the thinning blanket since I was born; the only reason I still had it was because my uncle had gone back to get it for me after I had moved in with him.

“What're you doing?” came a tentative voice. I bit back a sigh; I didn't want to talk right now.

“Hiding.”

“Why?”

“Because I don't want to do this,” I reminded Jessie, a little irked. The mattress dipped a little to accommodate for her little weight. She crawled over to me, pulling my blanket off. I looked up at her curiously, then made a small, surprised noise as she hugged me comfortingly.

“You'll do great,” Jessie whispered into my ear. “Trust me.”

CHAPTER 37

I paused to smile at the poster that was hung just outside the school store. Thomas had made it for us; the boy could Photoshop if nothing else.

“Hey, Jessica,” greeted a familiar voice. I carefully schooled my expression into calm disinterest. I didn’t really want to talk to him.

“Kyle,” I returned shortly. Whether I just didn’t want to talk to him, or didn’t want my girlfriend seeing me talking to him, I wasn’t entirely sure. It wasn’t exactly a secret that she hated him.

“So. You going to the OneGirl concert?” he asked casually, leaning against the wall. I debated briefly on whether I was going to reply or not, before deciding to simply nod. “Yeah? Me too. Should be pretty cool. Maybe I’ll see you there?” I knew what he was suggesting. I was about to reply when someone else broke in.

“No, you won’t. She’s going to be with *me*.” I almost sighed with relief as Rachel came up, frowning at him. I thought it was cute how she was so protective of me.

“I wasn’t asking you,” Kyle replied, scowling back at her.

“No, but you *were* asking *my girlfriend*,” she sneered, her leather-covered arm wrapping around me. I leaned into her on instinct.

“Jessica’s not a dyke like *you*,” the guy shot back, before looking at me as if telling me to agree with him. Rachel’s frown deepened. I sighed a little before leaning up to kiss her on the cheek. She looked down at me, curious.

“He’s not worth it,” I reminded her, using the same words she’d told me. She knew it, too, and rolled her eyes.

“Fine,” she allowed, before turning a burning glare on Kyle again. “But he’d better step off.”

I merely nodded; I would prefer it if he ‘stepped off,’ too. We left towards the chorus room, leaving a stunned (and slightly disgusted) Kyle behind us.

“Jessie?” I looked up at her. “Sorry about, y’know, going off on you yesterday. It was pretty much just because you were there and I was pissed.” She looked a little embarrassed and regretful. I just smiled a little before kissing her innocently.

“It’s fine,” I assured her. “I was kind of expecting it, anyways. Just... not quite that intense.” Rachel laughed, a little nervous.

“Um, yeah. I have a worse temper than you do when I get seriously pissed at something,” she drawled, scratching the side of her face awkwardly.

“I noticed.” Something else occurred to me then. “Hey, when are you going to be, ah... tutoring me in vocals?” I asked her curiously, quieting my voice a little.

Her dark eyes rolled up to the ceiling for a moment as she considered. “If you’re free tomorrow, we can do it then,” she decided, shoving her books onto a metal shelf that the teacher had provided for the chorus students’ things. I put my things on a lower shelf; I wasn’t able to reach the one she’d put her stuff on.

“That’ll work,” I agreed happily. She gave me an amused look at my tones.

“Don’t sound so cheerful; trust me, before tomorrow’s over, you’re going to be pissed at me beyond belief.”



I watched curiously as Rachel scratched something onto her clipboard. “Okay. You have a really nice voice, Jessie. You hit the right notes, you kept your vowels in tune, you didn’t hit the consonants too hard...”

I was about to thank her when she shot me an irked look. “Not what I’m looking for. This is *rock and metal*, Jessie, not choir,” she reminded me flatly. She took the sheet music she’d given me, flipping to a page in the middle. “Don’t drop the jaw so much, and harden the consonants. We’ll try it from the pre-chorus there.” I gave her a blank look and she elaborated: “Pick-up to that measure.” She tapped a measure and I nodded.

Rachel repositioned her fingers on the guitar and played a few chords, before singing: “Bodies shaking...”

I began to repeat the phrase like the music said, but she stopped and glared a bit. “Now you’re just off-key,” she told me and I looked down at the music. “No, no, don’t look at the music, just listen.” She plucked a somewhat high note on her guitar. “That’s where you are. I need you to be down...” she played a considerably lower note. “There.”

“I’m not an alto,” I reminded her, frowning a little bit. She was being unnecessarily callous here.

“So? I’m not a soprano, but I can sing it,” Rachel shot back. “Besides, I’m not asking much. It’s a metal song, Jessie; it isn’t going to matter if it doesn’t sound perfect. It’s not *supposed* to sound perfect.”

“Fine, let’s try again,” I allowed, still not entirely pleased with her. “Same section?” She began playing the same chords, answering my question. She sang her part, and I began singing at my part, but she stopped me again.

“Jessie. Don’t drop the jaw so much. I told you that already!” she exclaimed, frowning in an aggravated manner.

“I’m trying!” I shot back, starting to get annoyed. I was used to picking up singing with relative ease, but she was nitpicking, I believed.

“Don’t *try* it, *do* it!” Rachel played the guitar part again, singing at the appropriate time. When I began to sing, she shot me a smoldering glare, and I stopped.

“What now?” I yelled at her, frustrated. I hadn’t gotten to sing my part all the way through *once* yet!

“Are you even *trying*?” she demanded to know.

“You know damn well that I am!” I snapped, fists clenching. “What did I do *now*?”

“You’re still singing like you’re in chorus! For the love of God, *stop it!*”

“*I’m trying!*” I shouted back, my fingers clenching against the sheet of paper in my hands.

“Obviously not!” Rachel growled back, tapping a finger on her guitar in annoyance. “Try it again, and damn it, do it right!”

I gave a frustrated half-scream in the back of my throat. She was being a bitch without any good reason. (Ironically enough, considering the song's title.)

She began playing the chords again, her angry gaze pinned on mine. I returned it fiercely. “Bodies shaking,” she sang, and I repeated it where I was supposed to. “Darkness fading...”

“Darkness fading, *yeah!*” I sang back, and instantly winced inwardly. My anger obviously transferred to my singing, and it sure as hell showed.

Rachel looked at me, and I braced myself for another round of criticizing. Then to my surprise, she smirked.

“It's about damn time,” she laughed, her previously-furious expression smoothing into pleased amusement. I was confused as hell by now.

“*What?*” I asked, giving her an odd look.

“You did it right that time,” she replied with a light grin.

“*What?*” I repeated, not understanding. “That sounded *awful*, and it only sounded that way 'cause you were being a bitch!”

“It's *metal*, Jessie,” she informed me again, reaching out to playfully ruffle my hair. I batted her hand away good-naturedly. “Metal was pretty much written as a 'fuck you' to good singing. It isn't *supposed* to sound like a professional choir. It's *supposed* to sound like the singer is pissed as hell. I knew that I wasn't gonna get that sound outta you if I just told you to sound mad. So I critiqued you as hard as I could.”

She smirked, adding, “I know you hate being corrected. And, see, it worked. I got you to sing like a metal singer.” Rachel leaned back in her chair, lacing her fingers together behind her head, and grinned at me.

I stared at her in disbelief for several moments before I finally responded. “You are fucking *insane*.”

Rachel laughed loudly. “Clinically insane, darlin', got the papers to prove it. Now let's do that song again, from the beginning. And remember what you did last time, because I want you to work on singing that way from now on. At least, when you're with me, don't sing like that in chorus.”

I looked uncertain. “I don't know if I can do two different singing styles,” I muttered, looking down. The way I had sung before felt unfamiliar and coarse in my throat. And even if I did start singing that way, I wasn't sure if I could keep each style separated.

“Sure you can,” Rachel assured me, lightly clapping me on the shoulder. “I did it, after all.”

“I’m not you,” I reminded her. I couldn’t play any instruments. I couldn’t master all the various styles of singing that she had – hell, I probably couldn’t even manage *this* one.

“No, but you can do this,” she informed me, kissing the top of my head. “Now, come on. Let’s take this from the top.”

CHAPTER 38

I glanced at Thomas. “I’m not liking *that* look on her, either,” I commented to Thomas, motioning vaguely at Jessie, as if he had no idea who I was talking about.

He pursed his lips as he considered. “Yeah, I see your point,” he decided finally. Jessie gave a soft sigh of annoyance. She was quite obviously getting tired of this. I didn’t blame her; we’d been trying to find her an outfit for the past hour. Not to mention, she was used to dressing like, well, a prep. She was a little sketchy on the idea of shopping in a goth store.

We left my girlfriend back in the dressing room in search of something to suit her better.

“She’s not going to be able to pull off the ‘bad girl’ look quite as well as you. You realize.” I glanced sideways at the boy.

“Course I do. *No one* pulls off the ‘bad girl’ look as well as me,” I joked, brushing my red-and-black bangs out of my eyes. Thomas gave a soft snort of amusement.

Something caught my eye, and I picked it up, considering. It was a red, black, and gray plaid skirt. It was a lot like a Catholic schoolgirl’s skirt, except considerably... shorter.

“I could see her wearing that,” the gay boy mused, nodding to himself.

“It’d look better with pleats,” I remarked absently, tossing the skirt to him.

“I can do that!” Thomas volunteered eagerly. I raised a brow at him.

“Do you even know *how* to pleat skirts?” I asked dryly. He made himself look extremely offended, and I laughed. “Fine, fine. If we get it, I’m making *you* do it, though.”

“Got it!” I swear, the guy is too damn chipper to be human. “We still need to get her a top to go with it, though.” I rolled my eyes at him.

“No shit, Sherlock,” I returned flatly. Then I grinned wickedly. “Granted... I don’t mind Jessie *without* a top. I just don’t want everyone there staring at her.”

“Of course,” he agreed with a straight face. He couldn’t keep it up long, though, and quickly started laughing. When he finally shut up, Thomas absently decided, “I’m thinking something in leather.”

I grinned. “Leather’s always a good thing,” I laughed, fiddling with the collar of my black leather jacket.

“I swear, you’re obsessed with girls in leather,” he tutted disapprovingly at me, putting his hands on his hips. When he noticed I wasn’t half-way paying attention to him, he went back to rifling through shirts.

“Leather and lace,” I corrected him with a smirk.

“Nympho.”

“You have me confused with Jessie.”

After a moment of searching, I found something. Picking it up, I went back to Thomas. “Will this work?” I drawled, holding up the leather top. He was silent for a moment as he considered.

“Hell yeah,” he decided then. “Might wanna go up a size, though. Unless you’re *trying* to get her in tight leather?” He laughed when I didn’t move. “Right, right, dumb question. I’m going to find her something to go under that, though.” It didn’t take him long to find something, now that he knew what he was matching to. Thomas pulled out a soft gray sleeveless shirt and we returned to the dressing room.

Jessie looked up from the chair she was sitting in, and sighed when she saw the clothes we had in hand. I simply laughed at her.

“Last one. Really,” I promised, handing them to her. Muttering under her breath, Jessie just took the outfit and disappeared into the dressing room. Thomas and I just lurked outside it – he couldn’t go in because he was a boy. I didn’t *want* to go in because, well, I *looked* like a boy.

After a few minutes, I heard Jessie’s muffled call of “Rachel?”

I cast a sideways look at Thomas. “Ten bucks says she needs help with the bodice.”

“Deal.” We shook on it, and I went inside.

Jessie was hesitating in one of the stalls. She had the skirt and gray top on, but she had the bodice in hand. *Knew it.*

“Dunno how to put it on?” I teased her, taking the leather top from her. She colored a little and shook her head. I chuckled and undid the laces. “Lift up your arms.” She did so, and I crouched down to fit the thing to her torso. I began lacing it up again. “Honestly, have you really never worn one of these before?”

“Obviously not.” I laughed at her flat tones.

“Touché. Suck in,” I instructed, picking up the ends of the laces.

“What?” She gave a squeak of surprise as I pulled them tight. “Think ya could’ve made it a little tighter?” she asked sarcastically.

I grinned up at her as I deftly tied the strings. “Sure I could have.” I finished up the knot and straightened up. “I just didn’t think you wanted to look like you had, ah... lower back problems.”

“Such a gentleman,” she teased, and I frowned. Jessie only laughed at my expression.

“Shut up,” I grumbled. “Anyways, let’s go get Thomas’ opinion.”

“I’m not sure I won’t get arrested if I go out in this,” she pointed out flatly. I looked down at her, dressed in the short ‘schoolgirl’ skirt and the soft gray shirt that covered only a little more than the black bodice. A tantalizing strip of her stomach was showing, and her arms and shoulders were bare. In my own humble opinion, she looked *hot*.

I was going to need to fix her hair before the performance, though. From the neck up, she still looked a bit... preppish. I knew how to fix that, though, and I intended to do as such. I was going to turn the girl into a rocker if it was the last thing I did.

“It covers more than *my* outfit,” I pointed out, raising a brow. She faltered on that one; it was hard to deny it. Especially considering the length of *my* skirt, and the lack of all but one button on the shirt.

“Fine,” Jessie agreed, albeit reluctantly. She allowed herself to be led out to where Thomas could see her. He gave a low whistle when she came into view.

“I think that we’re just about done here,” Thomas informed me. I nodded in agreement. “Maybe a belt, though?”

“Sure, go find one,” I instructed, waving vaguely at him. He grinned and hurried off. It took him less than a minute to find and bring back a belt. It was similar to my own, with steel

studs on it. He handed it off to Jessie, who silently put it on like a normal belt. Thomas and I exchanged a somewhat exasperated look. Jessie noticed it.

“What?” she asked blankly, looking between the two of us. We didn’t answer. “*What?*”

I went over to her and tilted the belt down on one side.

“It looks better that way,” the boy informed Jessie at the weird look she gave us. Her look got weirder. “Really!”

I laughed. “You’ve... never worn that kind of belt, have you?” I guessed, amused.

“I’ve never even been in this store,” she reminded me, not nearly as entertained as I was.

“Mm. Right.” Truth be told, I’d forgotten that much. I was in this place all the time, and so were Jenny and Thomas. By proxy, if nothing else.

“Okay, I think we need to expand on the metal thing, there,” Thomas announced, motioning at the belt. “Maybe a bracelet or something.”

“A bracelet?” Jessie and I echoed, confused. Hey, I was the rocker, here. I knew what kinds of clothes rockers wore, and that was about it. When it came to accessories, that was where my line of expertise ended, and Thomas’ began. *Thank god for gay boys*, I thought to amuse myself.

“Well, not like bangles or charm bracelets or anything,” he amended, realizing how we must have taken that. “I mean, like... I dunno, a studded or a spiked bracelet.”

“Oh. Why didn’t you just say that in the first place?” I asked him, a little irked. He never made much sense to me, especially when he got into his whole ‘fashion-expert’ persona.

“Because I’m used to having someone who has the vaguest idea of fashion to talk to?” Thomas replied cheekily. That earned a smack on the back of the head from me. “What was that for?” he yelped, rubbing the sore spot.

“Because you’re being an obnoxious little something-or-other,” I replied matter-of-factly, putting my hands on my hips. “And you deserved it.”

“I shouldn’t get beaten for saying something that’s true,” he muttered in his defense.

“You shouldn’t,” I agreed, smirking. I’d won the argument, obviously. “Doesn’t change the fact that I’m going to smack you if you start mouthing off at me. Now go fetch your accessories, you little slave to fashion.”

Thomas huffed, but wandered off anyways, still rubbing the back of his head. “And stop playing it up!” I called after him. “I didn’t hit you *that* hard!” He showed me his middle finger and I laughed.

“What was all that about?” Jessie asked, completely confused by the exchange.

“It’s a long story, one that involves my lack of fashion sense and his lack of *common* sense. That common sense being, ‘don’t mess with the person who’s twice your size, weight, and strength.’” She laughed a bit at that. “One would think that that was just the smart thing to do, but apparently *not!*”

“Stop talking about me behind my back,” Thomas complained when he returned.

“Mm, no, don’t think I will,” I smirked. He said nothing, choosing instead to snap the studded bracelet around Jessie’s right wrist. The boy had obviously found something else that had caught his eye, and handed it to Jessie. She pulled the black, sleeveless glove onto her left hand. It barely came up to her elbow.

“You look *fabulous*,” Thomas informed Jessie, grinning cheerfully. See, I knew I hadn’t hit him that hard. It had only taken a few seconds to be back to his obnoxiously cheerful self.

“I swear, you have got to be the *gayest* person I know,” I informed him flatly, crossing my arms idly.

“At least I don’t cross-dress!” he shot back, and I scowled.

“I am *not* a cross-dresser!” I snapped. Thomas and Jessie both laughed at my vehement denial.

“Might wanna try saying that again when you’re not wearing men’s jeans,” Jessie giggled, glancing down at them.

“Okay, y’know what, keep it up, and we’ll see how tight I can pull those laces,” I threatened. Thomas laughed, knowing I was kidding, but Jessie only winced and held up her hands in a sign of defeat. I laughed at that. “So we’re getting this one, then?” I directed at Thomas.

He considered for a moment before nodding. “Yep. You’re gonna have to do something with her hair though,” he informed me.

“What’s wrong with my hair?” Jessie asked with a slight frown. She went mostly ignored there.

“Yeah, I know,” I agreed with a nod of my own.

“D'you still have that spray-on dye?” he asked curiously.

“What?” Jessie sounded a little panicked at that.

“Yeah, 'course. I'll take care of it, don't worry.”

“I'm not sure I trust you people with my hair,” Jessie commented suspiciously.

“Oh, please, like Rachel's gonna do anything with your hair that she can't fix in under a day,” Thomas snorted, rolling his eyes. My girlfriend looked confused at that statement. “She's got a... thing, for redheads,” he explained vaguely, making a random waving gesture with one hand. I colored a little at his matter-of-fact statement. Briefly, I hoped it didn't show, but I knew that it did when Jessie smiled a little at me. She leaned up to kiss me lightly on the cheek before returning to the dressing room.

“I'm not entirely sure what that was for,” I commented absently, even though she was out of earshot.

“Cause you're blushing,” Thomas pointed out with a laugh.

“I am not,” I grumbled the lie out, rubbing my cheek with the palm of my hand. *Well, that's the outfits finished up anyways. Here's to hoping everything else turns out alright.*

CHAPTER 39

I colored a little as I glanced down at the outfit that Rachel had helped to pick out for me. I wasn't entirely comfortable with the short skirt and the tight top, but I could deal with those. I was even less comfortable with what she had buckled around my neck – a brown leather collar. The tag even had my name (well, 'Jessie,' anyways) etched into it, for god's sakes. Rachel had promised that I only had to wear it for the concert in a few hours, so I reluctantly agreed. It was a little distracting, though. The implications of my girlfriend putting it on me, though, were turning me on, much to my frustration. But, still, I could deal with it, especially since her outfit was more scandalous than mine – a fact that was becoming increasingly obvious as she stood over me as I sat to fix my hair.

So far, she'd just pulled my hair back into a somewhat messy ponytail, and was currently fixing my bangs. Rachel swept my bangs over my left eye, leaving the right side of my face uncovered. She paused, taking a step back to look at me, before coming back in to gently tug two pieces of hair out of the ponytail, leaving them so they framed my face. Rachel nodded absently to herself, then picked up the can of purple spray-on dye.

I still wasn't entirely comfortable with the dye, but she had assured me that it would look good, and that it was only temporary, so I reluctantly allowed her to use it. The only problem was the fact that she had to stand over me, and if I looked up, I could easily see up her mostly-open shirt, especially since she wasn't wearing her tie just yet. The temptation to look up, if only for a brief glimpse of soft, pale flesh, was overpowering. But I managed to keep my urges to myself, mostly by keeping in mind the thought that she'd mess up the dye if I moved.

Rachel was in front of me now, spraying the hair that she'd pulled out of my ponytail purple. My gaze flickered up, catching a flash of cleavage as she moved a bit to finish up what

she was doing. I smirked a little; she hadn't noticed. When she pulled away, I quickly looked down again. *Okay, well, maybe she did notice.*

Her sharp brown gaze studied my face for a moment before absently informing me that she was almost done. I merely nodded as she went to get something off the counter in the 'dressing room' backstage that the school had been kind enough to provide. (Actually, it was probably intended to be a storage closet when it was built, but a mirror, counter, and chairs had been put into it, and so now it was a dressing room.)

She came back with a cotton ball in hand, one that had something light beige on it. Rachel crouched down so that we were both at eye-level. She gently took my chin in her hand to keep me still as she dabbed the make-up onto my forehead and cheeks. When she was done, I inquired, curious, "What was that?"

"Just some stuff to make sure your face doesn't shine under the stage lights," she explained with a shrug. At the odd look I gave her, she smirked and reminded me, "I used to act, remember?"

"Right," I muttered, a little embarrassed.

"Anyways, I'm done with you now," Rachel informed me matter-of-factly. I rolled my eyes at the grandiose sweep of her hand in the direction of the mirror. I stood up and went to the mirror, freezing in surprise when I caught sight of myself.

I almost didn't recognize myself. Rachel had tied my hair back with a spiked elastic band, had dyed vivid purple streaks into the ponytail. My face was framed with two pieces of purple-dyed hair, and my left eye was covered by my natural-colored hair. The collar, I reluctantly had to admit, *did* go well with the rest of my outfit.

I gave a small, surprised noise when Rachel suddenly pulled a black cap onto my head. I gave her an irked look over my shoulder and she shrugged, grinning.

"Looks better on you than me," she remarked, amused. I merely rolled my eyes, turning my gaze back to the mirror. A tiny gasp escaped my lips when Rachel's arms wrapped around my middle, fingertips barely grazing my exposed stomach. "You make a damn sexy rocker, Jessie," she whispered into my ear, hot breath tickling my skin. Her lips brushed against my bare shoulder, making me shiver.

“Rachel,” I groaned as she gently sucked on a patch of skin. “No. We're going on in like an hour and I don't want to be on stage with a hickey.”

“I'm marking you as mine,” Rachel replied reasonably, lightly licking the spot. “So no one gets any bright ideas.”

“The collar doesn't do that on its own?” I managed to get out. She ignored that, lightly nipping me. I gently pried her off my shoulder and turned around to face her. “Seriously, Rachel. Not now.”

Rachel sighed, putting her hands on her hips. “Fine,” she reluctantly agreed. Then she smirked wickedly in that way she knew made my knees feel weak. “But after this thing's over, you're *mine*.” I shivered at the statement, and she strode out of the room, probably to go do a sound check.

“Wouldn't have it any other way,” I whispered, even though she couldn't hear me.



“You alright?” I asked Rachel. After she'd finished up the sound check (and yelling at the techs for 'having the monitors set on stun'), she'd left the stage pretty quickly. I suspected that her nerves were starting to get the better of her. She picked up a mostly-full can of Vault (of course) on the counter and took a deep gulp from it.

“Absolutely not,” she admitted quickly, running her fingers through her hair wearily. “I'm terrified, I don't want to do this, and I think I'm going to throw up.” I hugged her from behind, resting my cheek on her shoulder blade. I could feel her muscles almost painfully rigid against my face.

“Did you get any sleep last night?” I asked her curiously, aware that she sometimes suffered from insomnia.

“Last *night*? Fuck, I'd be surprised if I slept at all this *week*.” Well, that'd help explain why she was so tense.

“Sit down,” I instructed, releasing her. She gave me an odd look, and I gently pushed her towards a chair. Rachel rolled her eyes a little, but sat in the chair. I stood behind her, putting my hands on her shoulders and gently kneading the tight muscles there. Rachel tiredly dropped her head to her chest, giving a small, mostly-stifled groan that made me blush a little. “I really don't

understand how you manage to do all the shit you do without sleeping,” I commented, leaning down to place a light kiss on her multiple-pierced ear.

“Probably by OD-ing on caffeine,” she replied absently. I grimaced a little at that term.

“In any case, you need to calm down,” I informed her, working my thumbs over the hard knot of muscle at the nape of her neck. “It's going to turn out great.”

“There's two extremes to this situation,” Rachel remarked flatly, raising her head again. “One, they all hate it because it's me, they leave, my sales go down the tubes, and I'm out on the streets. Two, they all love it despite the fact that it's me, they start kissing up to me, and then I have groupies and the paparazzi on my tail. I am *not* liking my options.”

“Being a little melodramatic, don't you think?” I teased, hugging her around the shoulders. Rachel absently slid her hands over mine.

“I wish,” she grumbled. “That's probably what's going to end up happening, though. There's already been a damn *article* in the papers about OneGirl's concert.”

“Seriously?” I had to admit to some surprise; I hadn't heard anything about that.

“Yeah. They interviewed people from the school, an' put 'em in there,” she replied glumly.

“Hm. Did anyone guess you?” I teased, resting my chin on her head. I inhaled a bit, taking in her somewhat clashing, though still addictive scent.

Rachel gave a soft snort of laughter. “I know it's shocking, but no, no one guessed the social reject,” she retorted dryly. “I'd be a little worried if anyone *did* guess.”

I gently smacked her shoulder. “Stop calling yourself that,” I scolded lightly, and she simply stood up and turned in my embrace so that we faced each other. It always made me smile, how well our bodies fit together.

“S'what I am, Jessie,” she pointed out, shrugging. I shook my head, sighing.

“Doesn't mean you have to call yourself that.” I didn't like it when she put herself down like that, but I wasn't going to confront her about it. At least not right now.

I had to look up at a sharp angle to meet her gaze. I could see the near terror in her eyes. “You're going to do fine, Rachel,” I told her, sliding my fingers up to touch her pale face. I felt her hands rest on my hips. “We've got everything worked out. The techs are ready, the other musicians have been practicing as hard as you have, I can sing like a metal singer now – ” her

lips quirked into an amused smirk at that; it had taken several fairly intense rehearsals with the taller woman (in which she'd often pissed me to the point that I was all but screaming at her) for me to learn to sing that way without actually getting angry beforehand – “And the stage is all set up. All you have to do is get up there and do your thing.”

Rachel stared at me in silence for several moments, before her eyes closed and she chuckled softly with wry amusement. Her brown eyes opened again, meeting my gaze with her own. “Yeah, I guess. Thanks.” She kissed me softly, and my eyes fluttered shut when our lips met. After a few seconds spent in contented silence, Rachel broke away with a soft laugh.

“What?” I asked curiously, idly tracing the skull on her tie.

“Just trying to figure out how I manage without you,” she replied innocently, shrugging. A fond smile tugged at her lips. I smiled back at her, blushing a little bit.

“Such a charmer,” I teased, and she laughed softly, kissing me on the forehead. I glanced at my watch and looked a little surprised at the time. “We have to be on stage in like ten minutes. You ready?” I didn't want her to do this if she really didn't want to.

Rachel sighed softly, then nodded, brushing her bangs out of her eyes. “As I'll ever be.” She grinned a bit, and I smiled when I saw her familiar determination reappear in her gaze. “C'mon. Let's get this thing over with.”

CHAPTER 40

I exhaled deeply as I finally got backstage again. My body felt hot from the scorching lights on the stage, my fingers were aching from playing guitar, and my throat burned like hell. (Never let it be said that I can't scream with the best of 'em.) My adrenaline was still rushing, and my own pulse pounded in my ears. I could still hear the crowd screaming.

To my surprise, none of the people who had come (or at least, none that I could see) had left. There *had* been a brief moment of shock from the people at first, but when I started singing, the cheering resumed. I had a very distinctive voice, after all, and none of the songs we had done were on any of my CDs.

“Rachel!” Jessie shouted, and I started. It was hard to hear, especially since the crowd was still going on. By her expression, though, I gathered that she'd yelled my name a few times now.

“What?” I yelled back, straining to hear her over the noise.

“They're wanting an encore!”

I stared at her in disbelief. “Please tell me you're fucking with me!” I roared over the screaming. I saw her laugh, but I couldn't hear it.

“Nah!” she bellowed, still laughing. “So we gonna do this?”

I glanced at the three other musicians that Jenny and Thomas had managed to get to play. They looked about as worn as me, and probably as sweaty, too. “Y'all up for an encore?” I barked at them. They all shrugged and yelled a few half-hearted affirmations back at me. I sighed. I'd half hoped that they wouldn't agree to it, but oh well. “Alright, well, let's get this over with, then! We're doing Forever and Always, got that?” They nodded and we ran back onto the stage to deafening cheers from the crowd.

“Alright, we're gonna do one more song for y'all!” I half-yelled into the microphone, picking up my guitar and tossing the strap over my shoulder. There was more screaming.

The guitarist and I played the opening riffs, and I began playing the guitar melody, taking a few steps back from the mike so I could see what I was doing on the strings. I heard Jessie sing into her microphone: “Forever and always!” The techs had turned the echo on for that phrase, so the last word reverberated around the room for a few seconds.

Me and the guitarist began playing a several-second-long duet, and when we played the same riff as in the beginning, I stepped back up the microphone. “That time is here again; prepare to be apart, and it drives you crazy!” The two of us played the guitar section again, letting it ring around the auditorium as I continued singing. “Each time I go away, the distance gets longer, but it makes us stronger!” I could faintly hear Jessie singing the harmony with me.

“Should it all come crashing down around me? Would you be there should I stumble or fall?” I continued. At the end of that phrase, I heard Jessie sing, “Pick up the pieces!”

I pulled back a little to play a few notes. Jessie sang with me now: “Whoa-oh-oh!” She fell silent as I sang the next phrase alone. “Forget about the shit that we've been through!” Jessie came back in in time to sing, “I wanna stay here, forever and always!”

I repeated the chords on my guitar. “Whoa-oh-oh!” Again, Jessie dropped out for me to sing, “Standing here in front of all of you; I wanna stay here, forever and always!”

The guitars quieted, for the most part, as I sang the next verse: “These days are dead again; it's empty from the start. And it drives me crazy!” The guitars came back in for the second half of the verse. “The hours drift away; it hurts to remember – this will soon be over!”

I played the familiar riffs again, ignoring the throbbing pain in my fingertips. *Stupid steel strings*. “Should it all come crashing down around me? Would you be there should I stumble or fall?”

“Pick up the pieces!” I shot Jessie an approving glance, but I'm not sure she saw it. Either way, she was doing really well for someone who had only started singing metal a few weeks ago.

“Whoa-oh-oh! Forget about the shit that we've been through! I wanna stay here, forever and always!” My throat was burning worse. I was surprised I could still sing somewhat not-terribly. *Never doing a fucking encore again*. “Whoa-oh-oh! Standing here in front of all of you; I wanna stay here, forever and always!”

As the rhythm guitar let the note ring out, I started plucking out a different melody on my own guitar, taking a step back from the mike again. The drummer began playing the song's breakdown as soon as I was through playing that. "Let's give it up for the drummer, eh?" I called into the microphone, gesturing vaguely at the guy on the trap set. He was pretty much the only one playing right now, after all. Several cheers went up. Not as much as I would have liked, though; no one really appreciated a good drummer until they tried to learn to play a trap set. Ah, well.

The other guitarist began playing the familiar guitar melody that made up most of the song. "How about our backup guitarist, here?" I shouted. There was considerably more applause. Of course. Everyone loved the guitarists. The bass player and I came in, and I directed the audience's attention to the bassist. There was a little less cheering for him.

I squinted at the audience, and found, to my surprise, that they were clapping and stomping in time with the drummer. I glanced at Jessie, assuming that she was the one who had started it up. I was right. I bit back a fond smile. *She's learning.*

I began playing a higher harmony to the rhythm guitar, absently nodding in time with the music.

When Jessie finally came in again ("Forever and always!") I nodded at her, asking the audience what they thought of the backup singer, only to be met with thunderous applause. Jessie blushed a little, but smiled, glancing at me.

"Forever and always!" she sang again, and I joined in for the next part: "Whoa-oh-oh! Whoa-oh-oh! Whoa-oh-oh! Forever and always! Whoa-oh-oh! Whoa-oh-oh! Whoa-oh-oh!" I dropped out, allowing my girlfriend to sing "Forever and always!" by herself. As soon as she was done, the lights that were focused on her faded away.

After another brief interlude, the bass slipped out of the song, and the techs faded the lights on the bassist's side of the stage out. Now, only the guitarists and the drummer were playing. When the rhythm guitar dropped out as well, his spotlights also went out. Now it was only me and the drummer... whatever his name was. (Hey, I was only going to have him here for the night, no use memorizing his name.)

Finally, I dropped out as well, and my own spotlight faded. The drummer played his solo for a few seconds, before it finally ended.

The stage went dark.

The crowd went wild.



“Good god,” I groaned as I slipped back into the 'dressing room'. I could still feel my adrenaline rushing. I enjoyed the rush; it was exciting, yeah, but I wasn't entirely sure how often I was going to be able to do it before my heart gave out. I couldn't help but be extremely nervous on stage. Last time I performed, after all, I'd passed out.

“Rachel?” I glanced up towards the door as Jessie came in.

“Huh?” I managed. In an instant, Jessie was hugging me around the middle, grinning broadly. I looked down at her, startled.

“You did it,” she smiled up at me. “I really can't believe it. You did it!” She laughed in spirited disbelief and gently tugged me down for a kiss. Jessie grinned happily at me when we broke away.

“I don't think I've ever seen you this upbeat,” I commented, amused.

“It was fun performing with you,” she said honestly with a shrug, still smiling.

“You're going to be worn out in the morning.”

“I know, but I'm not right now.” Jessie lightly brushed some of my hair behind my ears. She grinned mischievously, asking, “Take me home?”

I smirked down at her, knowing what she was asking, but deciding to mess with her anyways. “Sure, darlin', but won't your parents freak when they see your hair and clothes?” Jessie gave me about the most deadpan expression I'd ever seen on her, and I laughed.



I tilted my head to both sides, cracking the stiff joints there, as I sat on the edge of my bed, waiting for Jessie. When we'd gotten to my apartment, she'd told me to go ahead and go to my room and she would be right there. I assumed that she just had to use the bathroom or something, so I just shrugged and did as such.

When I heard her at my doorway, I looked back up. My breath caught in my throat.

She'd evidently taken off the gray undershirt, and had tightened the laces on the corset. Jessie had discarded the hat as well. The skirt and collar were still in place. She stalked up to me, a purposeful sway in her hips. My mind had yet to reboot.

Jessie smirked a little, straddling my lap and wrapping her arms around my neck. “Distracted, Rachel?” she teased, leaning in to lick my ear. “I could take the outfit off if you want...”

That snapped me out of it.

“Darlin', the only one takin' that outfit off'a you is me,” I growled, kissing her fiercely. My hands slipped under her skirt, resting on her hips.

“Fine,” Jessie whispered, giggling, when we broke apart. She blushed darkly and took one of my hands, adding softly, “But the outfit doesn't need to go anywhere.” Jessie slid my hand up her inner thigh. My eyes widened when my fingers didn't brush against the fabric I had been expecting, but soft, hot flesh instead.

On instinct, my free hand tangled into her hair, and I pulled her into a scorching kiss, and she moaned into my mouth. When I was certain she wasn't going anywhere, my hand slipped down, intending to unbuckle the collar. Jessie gently swatted my hand away, and I broke away to look at her with confusion.

“Leave it,” she whispered, blushing horribly. I stared at her in lustful disbelief for several seconds, and her blush worsened.

I nodded.

CHAPTER 41

When I woke the next morning, I was still deliciously sore from the night before. I could feel the slightly scratchy leather collar against my throat and I smiled slightly. Last night had been... interesting, to say the least. I hadn't ever really noticed how strong she was before last night until she had me pinned down when I most certainly didn't want to be.

In any case, I was still trying to figure out what had woken me up, before realizing that I had apparently gotten cold; the warm form I had been nuzzled against all night was missing. I reached out for Rachel, but couldn't find her. I could hear her soft, alto tones speaking nearly inaudibly, though, so I opened my eyes to try and locate the woman.

She was sitting on the edge of the bed, her phone cradled to her ear. She wasn't facing me.

"Well, I... yeah, I know... *no*. Don't. Really, don't," Rachel insisted softly. Her voice grew in intensity, but she remained quiet. "I don't need your help right now. I'm doing fine... *Really*... No, I..." she sighed and continued whispering into the phone. "Fine... Yeah, okay... Fine... Let the records show that I'm hating this, though. ...Wait, what? Because I had someone sleeping over, duh... That don't concern you, an' you know it... Okay... Okay, okay... I've gotta go now. Bye... Yeah, love you too." Rachel quietly closed the phone with another sigh.

I slowly sat up and went to her, wrapping my arms around her middle, resting my cheek on the back of her shoulder. Rachel started.

"Sorry," she said softly, glancing over her shoulder at me. "Did I wake you up?"

"Not by being on the phone," I replied sleepily, loosening my grip on her so she could turn around. I crawled into her lap, cuddling into her. "I just got cold."

"Hmm." Rachel laid back, half-reclining on the pillow. I shifted against her, resting my head on her breast. She didn't seem to mind, merely slipping an arm around me.

“Who were you on the phone with?” I asked curiously, absently tracing a circle around her navel.

“My uncle,” she grumbled, frowning a little. That piqued my curiosity. I knew that her uncle helped Rachel pay for her apartment, but last I heard, he never talked to her.

“Yeah? What'd he want?”

“Apparently there've been a whole hell of a buncha articles in various newspapers about OneGirl. Well, he read some of them, and so he called to, ah, check up on me,” she explained with a vague wave of the hand.

“I figured as much,” I remarked, glancing up at her. “What were you telling him 'no' to?”

“He was worried that I'm not able to provide well enough for myself, being that I pay my own utilities, food, clothes, and instrument maintenance...” she trailed off, shrugging a shoulder. “So he was telling me that he wanted me to move in with him out of state.”

That made me look up in alarm. “You're not moving, are you?” I asked fearfully. I wasn't entirely sure what I would do without her. I'd gotten used to having the loving rocker around, even the few times I didn't want her to be. She'd been with me through everything, from when I was having trouble accepting that I was attracted to her, to when all my friends abandoned me for it.

Her gentle touch soothed me when I was miserable beyond reason, her soft-spoken manner charmed me even if I was furious with her. What the hell was I going to do without her?

“Me? No, no. That's what I was telling him 'no,' to,” Rachel assured me, kissing the top of my head. I relaxed again, nuzzling into her, though a single thought kept me a bit unsettled: *when did I become this dependent on her?* “Don't worry, darlin', I ain't goin' anywhere.” She glanced at the clock and rolled her eyes a bit. “Well, no, I have to go take a shower now. I'm s'posed to be meeting up with my harem for lunch today.”

“What time is it?” I asked, looking up at her. Rachel glanced at her clock once more, having forgotten the time since she last checked it.

“Nearly eleven. Anyways, let me up so I can go take a shower,” she requested, giving me a gentle, teasing smile.

I shot her a light pout. “What, you're not going to let me go with you?” I inquired, fingers dipping a little lower on her stomach. Rachel lightly smacked my hand away.

“I would *love* for you to join me, Jessie, but you'd make me late.” Her flat tone made me laugh as I crawled off of her. “You're welcome to come to lunch with me later, though. Just remember, I dated several people in my harem, so they're all pretty... friendly, with me.” I raised my brows at her vague statement. I was pretty sure I knew what she meant by that.

“I can handle it,” I promised, leaning up to kiss her lips lightly. Rachel gave me a 'who-do-you-think-you're-kidding' look, and I giggled softly. “I'll *try* to handle it,” I amended. It wasn't exactly a secret that I was *quite* protective of my girlfriend.

The woman chuckled softly at my statement. “That's my girl,” she teased softly, kissing me once again. “Go back to sleep. I'll wake you up to get a shower whenever I get done.” I nodded, and Rachel smiled fondly at me, ruffling my hair a bit before she got up and left the room, towards her bathroom. A few minutes later, I heard her shower start up.

I laid back on her bed, closing my eyes. I always loved sleeping over at Rachel's apartment; I was surrounded by her distinct scent of leather and vanilla. If I strained my hearing, I could hear her singing softly in the shower. (And she wasn't singing metal, though it was her preferred genre of music; currently, she was singing something that seemed to be in Latin.)

I wasn't able to get back to sleep, though, so I simply cuddled farther under the bedspread and stared in silence at the ceiling. Around half an hour later, I heard the shower cut off. I relaxed my body on instinct, making it appear that I was still sleeping.

Rachel entered her bedroom a moment later, and I opened my eyes just a bit, catching a glimpse of her going to her dresser, toweling off her wet hair. She wasn't wearing anything. I felt heat rise in my cheeks, but I didn't say anything, deciding to simply enjoy watching my girlfriend.

She hummed absently to herself as she opened a drawer, lightly going through it. I raised a brow slightly when she put on a bra (black, of course; sometimes I wondered if the woman wore any undergarments that weren't red or black). It seemed to be considerably more... feminine, than I was used to seeing her wear. It was lacy and almost transparent in some places. Rachel then bent over, legs spread slightly, to put on a matching pair of (admittedly revealing) lace panties. I went scarlet at the resulting visual that produced.

Usually, my girlfriend simply wore sports bras and boxers, so I wasn't entirely used to seeing her wearing lingerie. I decided easily that I liked it. A lot.

“I can feel you watching me, you know,” Rachel teased, straightening up and glancing at me over her shoulder. My blush worsened, but I quickly came up with a retort to that.

“I was just debating whether to stick a few bills into your waistband,” I shot back, smiling slightly. The undergarments looked like they belonged to a stripper.

“Stick *anything* down my waistband and I'll spank you,” she threatened flatly. Rachel then paused to shoot me a wicked smirk over her shoulder. “Again.” I blushed so badly at that, I almost went light-headed. Knowing her, she was going to tease me about last night for *months*.

“Oh, shut up,” I mumbled, sitting up and crossing my arms. Rachel laughed when I pouted slightly, and came over to me to kiss me lightly. I accepted the non-verbal apology and sighed contentedly when she pulled away. “I just haven't seen you in lace. At all. Ever.”

Rachel rolled her eyes. “That's 'cause the only lingerie I own is thanks to my harem and I wear it as little as possible to spite them,” she replied flatly. “The only reason I'm gonna wear it today is so I don't lie when they ask me if I've used it. Hey, if you're gonna come have lunch with us, you'd better go take a shower now,” she informed me, glancing at the clock. I nodded; I didn't have to worry about not having a change of clothes, I knew. Rachel very rarely cleaned out her closet, so there was bound to be at least a shirt and jeans that I could fit into.

Nearly thirty minutes later, I was out and ready to leave. Rachel was waiting for me at her front door. “C'mon, Jessie, let's get gone.” She turned and opened the door. The instant it was open, a camera flash temporarily blinded us both. When our sight returned, we saw a reporter barely making it through the door to the stairwell. Rachel remained at her door for a moment, stunned.

“Congratulations, Rachel, you have your first paparazzi stalker,” I teased, elbowing her. She snapped out of it, grumbling.

“If I have to put up with that shit every morning, I'm movin' to fuckin' Canada,” Rachel groused, locking her door behind us.

“Why Canada?” I asked curiously.

“Nothin' bad has ever happened in goddamn *Canada*.”

I thought on that all the way down to the bottom floor of the apartment complex. “I see your point.”



“There's a few things you need to know about these assholes before we get there,” Rachel informed me as she shifted gears. “First off, they are *not* shy about talking about sex and their latest exploits. You're gonna have to deal with some pretty explicit details that you could go your entire life without knowing.”

“Lovely,” I muttered, brushing my no-longer-purple bangs out of my eyes.

“Ain't it? Also, we get into random conversations and even random-er arguments. If, when I'm arguing with one of them, they tell me 'fuck you,' I need you to *immediately* say 'no thank you.'”

I must have given her an odd look. “Why?”

Rachel grinned slightly. “Rules of debate in my harem, darlin', I'll get someone to explain when we get there.”

“Where are we going, anyways?” It suddenly occurred to me that I had no idea where we were going.

“That Mexican restaurant down by Wal-Mart. We're gonna try and get kicked out again.”

“Again? What did you get kicked out for before?”

Rachel gave a bark of laughter, startling me. “Party-boyin' the employees.”

I wondered if it was too late to back out.

CHAPTER 42

“It's about damn time you got here!” a girl hollered at me as we entered the restaurant. I had an arm wrapped protectively around Jessie's waist. She didn't mind, silently leaning into me.

“Not my fault you people get here like fifteen minutes early,” I shot back, mock-glaring at her as we headed over to the group. They'd pushed several small tables together already. I got close to no warning before one of the girls was standing and holding me in a headlock. I growled, trying to pry her arm away from my neck. She was considerably stronger than me (if not shorter) and so I couldn't manage it.

“How have you been, have you used anything we got for you, who the hell is this, and why didn't you tell us you were a famous rocker?” she demanded to know in one long string of words, messing up my hair with her free hand. She inhaled deeply once she was done, showing that her sentence had been all in one breath, too.

“Fine, yes, my girlfriend, and you didn't ask,” I returned quickly to be a smartass. Then I remembered what this girl was known for, and had only an instant to think *maybe that wasn't my best idea* before she neatly flipped me over her hip. I yelped as I smacked into the ground, and my breath slammed out of me.

The employees, used to our antics (she did that to me every time we met here), ignored us.

“Bitch,” I groaned as Jessie helped me up. She gazed up at me worriedly, but I winked quickly at her to show that I was mostly alright. I had the feeling that my back was going to hurt like all get-out later, though.

“Okay, harem,” they scowled good-naturedly when I called them that, “this is Jessie. Jessie, harem.” My girlfriend elbowed me in the ribs and I winced. “Okay, fine. You know Thomas and Jenny already.” The two idiots waved cheerfully at her a few seats down. “Here's Roxene, Rox for short.” I motioned towards the girl who'd had me in a headlock only seconds

earlier. She was dark-skinned, with black hair. Her bangs had been dyed yellow with a hint of green. She grinned at Jessie as she sat back down. "Aaron." He nodded in recognition of his name, but he was busy munching away on the basket of chips the restaurant always provided. I frowned at him. "*Aaron.*"

"What?" he mumbled, mouth full, when he looked up at me. I raised a brow at him. "These things are like crack-cocaine, dude!" Aaron protested when he'd swallowed.

"Okay, y'know what, eat your chips and shut the hell up," I commanded, shaking my head. Aaron grinned and went back to stuffing his face. "Anyways, that's Ray." I pointed out a boy who was sleeping, hood over his head, hand propping his head up. When Aaron noticed Ray, he frowned and smacked Ray's arm out from under his chin. Ray's head cracked into the table and he woke with a holler, rubbing his forehead. I snorted softly. "And that's Victoria and Leah." The two girls sat between Thomas and Ray. Both were blonde, though Victoria's hair was more of a sandy color while Leah had platinum-blonde hair. "Yes, they're twins," I added, seeing Jessie about to ask. She closed her mouth. "Harem, this is Jessie. *My girlfriend.*" I wrapped my arm around her middle as if claiming her. I glanced down at her in time to see her smile a little at that.

"Oh my *god*, she's *adorable!*" Leah half-squealed from down at the end. Jessie shifted slightly, uncertain of how to respond to that, and I let her go so we could sit down.

"Yeah, I know," I agreed with an amused smile. My girlfriend colored a little, looking down.

"She doesn't look like the type you normally go for," Rox commented, giving Jessie the once-over. "Y'know, aside for the whole red hair deal."

"Thomas was serious about that?" Jessie wondered out loud, before shutting up when she realized what she said. My friends cracked up, Thomas especially.

"Yeah, she has a 'red hair' fetish," Ray remarked with a teasing grin. I kicked him under the table with all the strength I could muster, and he yelped in pain, instantly going down to grab his injured leg.

"I do not," I growled.

"Liar," Victoria snickered. "Like three of your exes all have red hair."

“You people suck at life and I hope you get stung by a platypus,” I declared, stealing one of the baskets of chips for myself.

“Stung by a platypus?” Jessie echoed, bemused.

“One of our inside jokes,” Jenny explained, still chuckling. “Cause platypuses have a venomous fang on one of their elbows.”

“Really?” she asked, suspicious.

“Yeah, really,” Rox nodded vigorously. “I feel sorry for the guy who figured that out. I doubt anyone believed him.”

“No, really! This platypus stung me from its goddamn *elbow!*” I cried, making frustrated gestures with my hands. A ripple of laughter went around the cluster of tables.

If anyone was going to respond to that, they were cut off when the waiter arrived. We all placed our drink orders as he handed Jessie a menu. We pretty much ordered the exact same thing every time we came here, so we didn’t need a menu by now.

“Newbie?” he directed the question to me, nodding at my girlfriend.

“Nah, she’s not part of this lot,” I shook my head. He simply shrugged, hurrying off to fetch our drinks.

“Oh! Aaron, tell ‘em what you, ah, discovered the other day,” Victoria instructed the guy. He looked confused, and she elaborated: “Y’know, about that *word?*”

“Oh, *that!*” he cackled, grinning wickedly, before turning to face me. “Okay, so, what does yaoi sound like?”

“I’m sure you’re going to tell me,” I drawled boredly.

“It sounds like a pain/pleasure sound,” he snickered. I dissolved into an awful giggle fit. Jessie blushed a little and glanced away.

“Discovered anything for ‘yuri’ yet?” I asked, one hand idly playing with Jessie’s hair.

“No,” Aaron admitted glumly.

For a moment, there was silence as we thought about that. That was unusual, to have all of them quiet.

“Slurping,” I stated suddenly, with no warning. All of them roared with laughter. I thought Leah was gonna have a fit, doubled over and trying to laugh and breathe at the same

time. Jessie went scarlet; I wouldn't be surprised if she got lightheaded, she was blushing so badly.

"You're awful," Rox grumbled between laughs. "I think *straight guys* aren't even as bad as you."

"I take offense to that," I declared. "I am better than straight guys in the best of ways." I stuck out my studded tongue playfully, waggling my eyebrows to ensure they understood what I meant. All the girls at the table snickered; Jessie, Jenny, and Rox all blushed a little, though. Those three were fully aware of what I meant by that. I had dated all three, after all

"You are so full of it," Ray remarked, amused. I briefly considered twisting his words, which would be easy to do, but decided against it.

"I am a guitarist, a drummer, and a singer. I have every right to be 'full of it' in regards to my sex life," I informed him with a smirk.

"What does being a musician have to do with *anything*?" Jessie asked, confused, as she recovered.

"Well, being a guitarist, drummer, and singer are important factors in how good a person's gonna be in bed. Respectively, they're good with their fingers, can keep a beat, and have a good mouth." This incited another round of raucous laughter.

"And since you are all of those...?" Victoria prompted.

I grinned cockily. "I am sex incarnate."

Jenny looked like she was going to reply to that, but the waiter had returned with our drinks. I'd gotten Coke, since, well, they didn't have Vault here. Shame, really. We all placed our orders from memory, except Jessie, who returned the menu as soon as she was done with it.

"So, if she's not new, who is she?" the waiter asked me quietly, referring to my girlfriend, as he scrawled down the orders.

"She's my girlfriend, not one of these idiots in my harem, and she *asked* to come with me."

He gave me an odd look, as if wondering why anyone would willingly subject themselves to my friends. I snorted softly into my Coke (eliciting several bad jokes from my harem about me snorting Coke) as he left. Sometimes, I wondered why *I* willingly subjected myself to my friends.

“You really are full of it,” Ray reminded me, chugging a good half of his drink in one go.

“Not as full as you were last night,” I deadpanned. Hey, if he was gonna give me an opening like that for a second time, I wasn’t gonna skip over it. Thomas and Aaron laughed loudly while the girls tried to stifle snickers at him. Ray nearly choked on his drink and glared at me.

“Ow, babe. Ow.”

“Oh, don’t act all wounded at me,” I rolled my eyes at him, an amused smile tugging at my lips.

“Who’s acting?” Ray shot back with a rather fake pained look. “I might as well be bleeding on the floor.”

“Well, you’re not, so get over it,” I ordered, trying to keep up the mask of being irked with him.

“Fine. But you have to promise to amuse me next weekend,” he bargained.

I quirked a brow. Coming from a guy, even a gay one, that sounded just *wrong*. “Depends on how you’re expecting me to amuse you,” I returned flatly. Jessie had thought it sounded just as bad as I did, evidently, because she frowned a bit.

“You can stay clothed. That’s a plus, right?” he teased, before shifting uncomfortably. He glanced at Jessie a bit nervously. “Oh my god, *call her off!*” he squeaked. I glanced at Jessie, who had evidently given him a death glare. I didn’t blame Ray, exactly; my girlfriend was usually adorable, even when she was pissed, but when she gave someone a death glare, it was *quite* unnerving.

I laughed, wrapping an arm around the little redhead and kissing her temple gentle. I felt her relax a little under my touch.

“You’re... protective,” Rox remarked to Jessie, amused. It was difficult to alarm Ray, and before now, she had been the only one able to do it. I could tell she approved of someone who could do it, too.

“With good reason, apparently,” Jessie murmured softly.

The girls laughed. “Babe, we’re not all that interested in Rachel at this point,” Victoria chuckled, before giving me a suggestive once-over. “Well, interested in *dating* her, anyways.”

“Sorry, taken,” I reminded her. “And unlike *this* one –” I kicked Roxene under the table to make her jerk, showing who I meant by that. “– Jessie’s not so interested in threesomes, foursomes, or moresomes.”

“Should I ask?” Jessie inquired suspiciously, looking up at me.

“I managed to get her in on a foursome once,” Rox replied with a shrug and a positively wicked grin. “It was pretty much *epic*. She’ll tell you the same.”

I colored slightly, gaze flickering to the floor. My harem had a good laugh at my expense. “I don’t appreciate you people discussing all my various exploits, thank-ya-very-much,” I growled, mostly to Rox. “So shut the fuck up, ‘kay?”

“Oh, but I haven’t even talked about the first time I convinced you to try –” I went scarlet; knowing what was coming, I kicked her as hard as I had kicked Ray earlier. She, too, hollered in pain and went down to clutch at her bruised leg. “Fuck you, Rachel,” she groaned, rubbing her shin.

“No thank you,” Jessie put in instantly, just as I’d asked. Everyone burst into laughter. Rox was so surprised that she sat straight up and gazed at my girlfriend, bewildered. Jessie pinked a little, unsure of why everyone was laughing.

“I hate you,” Rox informed me with a straight face. I smirked at her. “Did you even explain all the rules of debate to her?”

“No, she just told me to say ‘no thank you’ if someone said ‘fuck you’ to her,” Jessie spoke for me. Evidently, she was getting a little more used to speaking to these maniacs that happened to be my friends. “She said someone would explain them when I got here.”

So the entire harem had to start explaining the rules of debate.

If two people got into an argument, the first one to say “fuck you” wins. However, if a member of the audience (it couldn’t be the other person in the argument) were to *immediately* respond with “no thank you,” there was no winner and the debate continued, because “no thank you” was the only proper response to being told “fuck you.”

If the argument is attempted to be ended but was continued three times in the same argument, then the person who has tried to end it three times automatically loses, because you just fail at that point.

You cannot slip “fuck you” into the middle of the word (an example being, “antidisestablish – fuck you – mentarianism”) but you can stop mid-word and say it, (“antidisestablishm – fuck you”) provided that they don’t finish the word.

“Did you people really go through and come up with these rules on your own?” Jessie asked, quite amused at their explanation.

“Yep!” Thomas snickered.

“We argue *that much*,” I put in, amused. “Eventually, I just got fed up and came up with the whole ‘say “fuck you” to win’ deal. The rest came later, when we had issues with that.”

The waiter chose that point to reappear and began handing out plates. We fell silent for a moment to try and get everyone’s correct order to them.

“What happens when someone loses automatically after trying to end it three times?” Jessie asked curiously, taking her order from the waiter.

“They get thrown into a pit of platypuses and are forced to suffer from the venom of the elbow fang!” I declared dramatically. We all laughed at that.

CHAPTER 43

“I don't think I've ever been kicked out of a place before,” I commented wryly as we left the restaurant. I glanced at Rachel, only to see her waving cheerfully at the manager as he watched us from the door to make sure we left.

“See ya next month!” my girlfriend called to him.

“We get kicked out every time we come here,” Rox informed me with a laugh. “Hang out with us often enough and you'll get used to it.” She paused, then smirked. She motioned towards where Rachel was, and I had to laugh.

Aaron had Rachel in a full nelson hold, while Ray was trying to tickle her. She wasn't making it easy for him, though, and had her feet braced against his chest, trying to push him away. Leah and Victoria were trying to help get Rachel out of the guys' grip, while Thomas and Jenny were too busy cracking up to do much.

“I swear, I can't take you people anywhere!” Rachel was yelling between laughs.

I shook my head at them, *quite* amused.

“See, now, this is the reason we get kicked out of every-damn-place we go,” Rox pointed out, putting her hands on her hips.

“I didn't do a damn thing!” Rachel cried, trying to kick Ray. She didn't have very good leverage, though, and couldn't manage it. “Turn me loose, you assholes!”

“Fine,” Aaron smirked. He released her from the nelson hold and, since her feet were braced on Ray, she instantly went down. Everyone took a quick step back and Rachel yelled out an expletive as she hit the cement. I gave a little gasp of horror, but Jenny and Leah were already helping her to her feet. They began brushing her off vigorously before Rachel finally managed to wave them off. I couldn't help but feel a brief tingle of jealousy that Rachel didn't do so quicker.

As the group made sure Rachel was okay, I glanced back at Rox. She was rather tall, maybe just a hair taller than my girlfriend, though Rox was a little heavier. (Plus a bit more... endowed, but it didn't take much to be, at least in regards to Rachel.)

“So, you dated Rachel?” I asked curiously. I hadn't heard much about her past “significant others,” aside for her first girlfriend and one of her boyfriends.

“Yeah, for a couple of months,” Rox replied with a nonchalant shrug.

“Why'd you guys break up?”

“Because my jealous streak is just about as bad as yours,” she returned dryly. At my confused look, she motioned towards the group again. I looked over just in time to see Victoria playfully kiss Rachel on the cheek. I frowned slightly as the rocker only laughed and good-naturedly shoved her away. “See? She acts like that with pretty much every girl there is. Looks like flirting, doesn't it? Well, Rachel's never been good with body language. She doesn't ever think that she's flirting with someone, even if it *looks* that way. All *her* flirting is, well, spoken. And I knew that, but I just couldn't stand seeing her acting like that with all these other girls. So I broke up with her.” Rox shrugged, as if it didn't matter.

I glanced away. I'd felt like Rachel flirted with other girl quite often, though I hadn't ever mentioned it to anyone. I looked back at Rox to see a flicker of longing in her gaze. “You still like her,” I commented. It wasn't a question.

“Course. It's hard to give her up just like that,” Rox pointed out, before shaking her head a bit. “She's one-of-a-kind.”

“She is *that*,” I admitted quietly. I watched as Rachel waved most of her friends off; only Aaron, Ray, and Jenny remained. She cheerfully hugged them all individually before heading back over to where Rox and I were.

“Hey, Rox, Jenny's taking you home. That cool?” Rachel asked Rox. The slightly-taller girl simply shrugged and clapped Rachel on the shoulder.

“S'fine. Later,” she playfully ruffled Rachel's hair, eliciting a few protests, before laughing and jogging over to Jenny.

“C'mon, darlin', let's get you home before your parents throttle me,” Rachel reminded me with a grin. I smiled a little and nodded, allowing myself to be led to her truck.

“Your friends are... interesting,” I commented, buckling my seat belt. I knew from experience that Rachel wouldn't go anywhere unless I did so.

She laughed at my statement. “That's one way to describe them,” she quipped. “Another is 'completely and totally fucked up beyond belief.’”

I giggled softly. “That, too,” I admitted, brushing my hair out of my face as she left the parking lot. As the truck passed Ray and Aaron, she playfully made a rude gesture at them. The two only laughed and waved at us. “How often do you guys get kicked out of places?” They seemed to treat it rather flippantly.

“Bout once a month,” Rachel replied, after a few seconds of thought.

“And how often do you get together with them?” I prompted.

“...Bout once a month,” she said in exactly the same way as before. I snickered softly.

“That reminds me. What was Rox going to say that she got you to try?” I asked suddenly. Rachel blinked, evidently not expecting me to ask that.

“Nothing you need to know about,” she replied with a slightly embarrassed look.

“Come *on*, tell me,” I complained playfully.

“Nah-ah,” Rachel shook her head, keeping her eyes on the road.

I pouted a little bit and rested my hand on her thigh. “Please?”

“Not happening,” she said in a sing-song voice. I gently traced the inseam of her jeans. A slight shiver went down her back. I grinned a little at the reaction.

“Come on,” I tried again.

“Nope,” Rachel replied, trying to sound firm. Her hands gripped the steering wheel a bit harder than necessary.

“Please,” I drew the word out, tracing higher. A tiny whimper caught in her throat. My grin widened a bit when I noted the slight blush in her cheeks. I rubbed her firmly and she gave a barely-audible moan. I grinned; I loved having this power over her.

“Jessie, love, if you get us killed in a wreck because you were feeling me up, I will never speak to you again,” my girlfriend threatened. I sighed and took my hand back. Rachel sighed softly in relief.

“Why won't you tell me?” I asked her stubbornly.

“Because it is *extremely* embarrassing, that's why,” she mumbled, shifting gears.

“That bad, huh?” I asked sympathetically.

“Yep.”

“Fine.” Then I grinned wickedly. “I’m going to get you to tell me, though.”

Rachel snorted in disbelief. “How?”

I leaned over to whisper my reply into her ear, gently nipping her when I was done. When I pulled away, I noticed with satisfaction that her cheeks were scarlet. She shifted uncomfortably, and I grinned.

She mumbled something about corrupting me and I couldn't help but laugh.

“Think you can still get me home without wrecking?” I teased.

“Yes, but I'm going to be spending the next hour and a half locked in my bedroom.” I laughed again.

“Well, don't wear yourself out too badly. You're supposed to be spending your birthday with me on Monday,” I reminded her as we pulled into my driveway. I was glad that her birthday fell on a teacher's work day.

“Wouldn't miss it,” she told me with a light grin as she put the truck in park. Then Rachel leaned over to kiss me hotly. I whimpered softly when she broke away; I'd evidently affected her more than I'd thought. “See you tomorrow,” Rachel muttered against my lips.

I nodded, before smirking and taking her hand. I kissed the tips of her index and middle fingers. At her curious look, I grinned wickedly at her. “Have fun when you get home,” I teased, nipping her palm. Rachel colored a little and just nodded. I laughed and got out of her truck.

CHAPTER 44

My ears were still buzzing, even though the concert had ended almost half an hour ago. Right now, I was in the passenger seat of Rox's car, still trying to come down off the natural high that I always got whenever I went to a metal concert.

“*That was fuckin' epic,*” I managed to get out, my voice sore from screaming the words to most of the songs they played.

“Avenged Sevenfold is *always* fuckin' epic,” Rox pointed out, her voice almost as hoarse as mine.

I nodded; that much was true. “I think you just about pissed yourself when 'Scream' came on,” I remarked with a grin.

Rox snorted. “Not my fault. I wasn't planning on them *actually* doing the screams at the beginning,” she grumbled good-naturedly. “Besides, what about *you*? I thought you were going to cum on yourself when he started singing that song.” I simply grinned wider, though a hint of a blush touched my cheeks. I couldn't help it.

“Hey, with that song playing and the half-naked dancers on stage, I'm surprised I didn't make a mess of myself, too,” I joked. Rox muttered something about me being a kinkster. I laughed.

“*I* like that song,” I declared, as if she didn't know that.

“Do you even know what that song's about?” she demanded.

“Necrophilia.” Rox coughed.

“Why do you know that?” she complained. She always hated it when she had some interesting little tidbit that she thought I wouldn't know about, since I usually *did*.

“Because I like knowing useless things that you think I don't know,” I replied in a 'duh' sort of way.

“Bitch.”

“Slut.”

Rox elbowed me in the ribs, and I yelped. “Fuck, that hurt!” I glared at her, rubbing my side. “You have some seriously bony elbows, girl.”

“Yep.” She glanced at me for an instant. “So. Jessie's your new girl, huh?”

I smiled contentedly. Just *thinking* about the adorable redhead usually had that effect on me. “Yeah. Why?”

“I dunno. She just doesn't seem like the type of girl you usually go for.”

“No kidding,” I muttered, rolling my eyes. Jessie was pretty much the exact opposite of what my friends had begun to assume was “my type.” She didn't dye her hair unnatural colors. She didn't listen to metal, or even much rock. She wasn't a sarcastic little smart-ass. And she most certainly was *not* a tomboy.

“How'd you manage to fall for her in the first place?” Rox asked curiously.

I exhaled deeply, pulling on the lever to the side of my seat so I could lean back a bit. “I dunno,” I admitted. “Hell, I didn't even *like* her at first. She was one of the 'phobes, for god's sake.” The girl next to me made a disgusted noise, and I laughed. “Yeah, I know. But I dunno what made me start crushing on her in the first place. I mean, she acted like she was just as big a bitch as the other 'phobes, but... she didn't seem like she was into mocking the outcasts as much as the others.”

As I entered the classroom late (thanks to getting punched in the gut and having to go to the nurse's office), I noted the horrified stares from the 'phobes. I grinned inwardly; I had a feeling that my new 'dyke-ish haircut' (as Rox had so eloquently put it) would cause such a reaction. My gaze flickered to my science partner, Jessica. She was staring at me, too, but it didn't seem to be in a disgusted manner, like the other girls'. It was more curious, as though she were wondering why I'd give her friends more reason to make my life hell.

I tore my gaze away from her as Mister Barker snapped at me for being late. I rolled my eyes and snapped back, tossing my excuse onto his desk.

Even with my sharp tongue in place as usual, I couldn't help but wonder why Jessica wasn't as disgusted as her friends; I could see Ashley snarling something at her, motioning at me, but the redhead only nodded distractedly, still watching me curiously. I smiled slightly as I sat down, threading my headphones up through my jacket sleeve. Now I was certain that Jessie didn't fit in as well as she thought she did.

“I'm thinkin' that's because she was a closeted lesbian,” Rox noted. I rolled my eyes.

“No shit, Sherlock,” I retorted flatly.

The mindless bickering continued all the way home.

“Hey, you missed the turn-off to my apartment,” I commented, though I don't know why. I'd been expecting that she was going to take me to a not-very-surprising surprise party when we got back into town.

“Dur,” Rox replied flippantly, rolling her eyes at me. “I'm in charge of getting you to your surprise party.” I smirked; that was one of the reasons I liked her. She never bothered keeping secrets from me.

I glanced down at myself. I was wearing a black shirt that cut off in a jagged hemline just under my breasts. Stretched over it was the Avenged Sevenfold 'deathbat.' I'd designed it myself, and had Thomas create it for me, since I couldn't operate a sewing machine to save my life. I was also wearing jeans that had so many tears in them, it wouldn't have been surprising if they simply fell apart at any moment. Over that was my black leather jacket, as always. I smelled of sweat, alcohol, and some kind of cigarette, and I was probably .

“What, I'm going like this?” I wondered aloud.

“Oh, please, you're not any worse off than I am,” the girl pointed out. I sighed and nodded.

“Where are we going, anyways?”

She shrugged. “Some new-ish place.”

“Ah. Going to get kicked out of this place?”

“Well, we're damn well going to try.”



“There you people are!” Jenny yelled as we finally arrived at the restaurant. “You're late, dammit!”

“You two look like shit,” Leah commented, amused, as she sipped from her coke. We came closer, and she winced, though the smile on her face showed that it was fake. “Smell that way, too.”

“You can blame that on Rachel,” Rox complained, shoving me towards them. “She was busy playing with herself during the whole concert. I think it was the strippers that did it for her.” I elbowed her roughly as the rest of my harem laughed. Jessie mainly looked embarrassed.

“Bitch,” I growled good-naturedly.

“Slut,” she shot back, sitting down. I sat down next to Jessie.

“Skank.”

“Whore!”

“Alright, you two!” Victoria yelled, though they were used to our bickering by now. “You sound like a bunch of five-year-olds!”

“Nuh-uh!” Rox huffed with a grin.

“Yah-huh!” I shot back. The two of us yelped, then, as whoever we were sitting beside cuffed us over the backs of the head.

It was a common occurrence.

CHAPTER 45

After getting kicked out of the restaurant (as expected), we all went back to Rachel's apartment to keep ourselves entertained. Thomas had suggested poker and everyone agreed... so long as Rachel didn't play.

"You people are *no* fun at all," Rachel insisted, sitting on the couch next to me. "Fine. Jessie will play *for* me." I yelped in surprise as I was pulled into her lap.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" I reminded her, shifting slightly to a more comfortable position. "I can't play poker to save my life."

"Oh, well, if that's the case, we might as well play *strip* poker," Rox smirked playfully.

Rachel snorted, wrapping her arms around my waist and resting her chin on my shoulder. "Like hell," she replied flatly. "I don't have any desire to share my Jessie." I rolled my eyes at her blatant 'claiming,' but smiled slightly anyways.

"Do I have to play?" I sighed as Thomas started shuffling. "I'm no good at this game."

"Which is why I'm going to be telling you what to do," Rachel informed me, breath barely tickling my ear.

"Cheater," Victoria complained from her spot on the floor, near the coffee table.

Rachel snorted. "Oh, please, if you weren't gonna let me play, you should'a guessed that I'd help *someone* cheat," she pointed out.

"I was kinda hoping you'd cheat for *me*," Rox sighed lightly, shaking her head.

"Yes, well, then I'd be in trouble with Jessie," my girlfriend reminded her. Rox merely shrugged. "Anyways, now I'm going to make sure all you jackasses lose. Since you banned me from playing."

I must say, it was rather distracting, having Rachel's calloused fingers idly rubbing my sides and her hot breath on my neck and ear. I think I was blushing the entire time, especially when she whispered instructions into my ear.

“Good lord, Rachel, lay off or she's gonna pop a blood vessel,” Leah laughed, motioning towards my red face.

“What? It's fun making her blush,” Rachel grinned.

“I wouldn't think so, considering how easy it is,” Rox quipped after folding.

“Well, Jessie certainly ain't you or me, so of course she'd blush a lot,” the rocker mused aloud.

“Good thing, too!” Jenny chimed in, amused. “I don't think the world could take another one of you guys!”

“I dunno, I'd always like to think that the world could use another sex goddess,” Rox commented with a wicked grin.

“Sex goddess, maybe. You two are more 'perverts' than anything,” Victoria snorted. Her twin merely nodded in agreement, tossing another chip onto the middle of the table.

“Rachel's a bigger pervert than I am,” Rox declared, standing up. “By the way, d'you still have that shit I stashed here last time I came over?”

“Back of the fridge,” Rachel called as the girl went into the kitchen. “And where do you get off saying that *I'm* a bigger perv than *you*?”

“It's true!” she insisted as she came back, a bottle of beer in hand.

“Okay, okay,” Aaron broke in to try and stave off another argument between the two exes. “Rox, what are you thinking *right* now?”

“Last time I got Rachel drunk we woke up naked in an open garage near Alabama,” she said flatly, as though it were something she talked about every day. I coughed quietly, trying not to bristle at the thought of those two doing... well, anything as a couple.

“Okay, so you're not faring very well on the 'not-a-pervert' scale,” Thomas mused, before turning to the girl I was currently sitting on. “Rachel, thoughts right now?”

“It's ridiculously easy to see down Jessie's shirt,” Rachel remarked casually, sparking laughter from several of the girls. I went scarlet, having not expected to be included in all this.

Not amused in the slightest, I elbowed her sharply to make her release me (albeit with a grunt of pain from her), then got off of her and went to sit on the floor between Leah and Ray.

“Ouch. You just got dissed, Rah,” Jenny teased, thoroughly amused with the situation.

“I know. And now I have no cuddle-toy!” Rachel complained, throwing her hands up in mock disgust. “Rox, get over here! I need a new cuddle-toy, since Jessie's freaking *abandoned* me.” I frowned. I liked Roxene well enough by herself, but I did *not* appreciate how those two acted like a playful couple when they were together.

Now, Rachel was sitting on the bigger girl's lap, since the reverse would have been awkward. Rox's chin was resting on top of my girlfriend's head, and she had her cards held where they both could see them. To be honest, I wanted to deck her. Well, her or Rachel. I suspected they were acting that way on purpose, just to get on my nerves.

Even as I watched, Rox was asking Rachel something, murmuring the words into the rocker's ear. Rachel replied equally as quietly, giving the older girl a 'how-the-hell-would-I-know' look. Rox evidently didn't appreciate being spoken to like that, and playfully bit my girlfriend's ear. Rachel only smacked her thigh in retaliation.

About then, I registered that Ray was saying something to me. I blinked a few times, then looked at him. “Sorry. What?”

“It's your turn,” Ray informed me, and from his irked tone, it wasn't the first time.

I colored slightly. “Oh. Uh, sorry. I'll... fold.” I placed my cards face-down in front of me. I probably could have continued playing, but Rachel and Roxene were keeping me distracted.

When I looked back at the two, who were now bickering lightly over how much to bet, I noticed Rox's hand resting on my girlfriend's upper thigh. I bristled silently. Why the hell wasn't Rachel doing anything about that?

“Ignore them,” Leah advised gently, and I started. I hadn't realized that it was obvious that I was glaring. “It'll be better off for your blood pressure if you do.”

“Do they always act like that?” I asked her curiously. She rolled her eyes.

“All the damn time,” she confirmed. “But even so, they've never talked about getting back together.”

I admitted to some surprise. With the way those two acted, I wouldn't have thought that they'd ever broken up, except that Rachel was my girlfriend. “Really?”

“Yeah. So don't worry about it.” Leah grinned reassuringly, and I hesitantly went back to the game, ignoring the two as best as I could.

Nearly an hour later, Thomas announced that he'd gotten Rachel a gift, and handed her a box wrapped rather badly in green paper. I was glad for the distraction; Ray and Aaron were teasing me about having lost all my chips in poker.

“Wow, Thomas, with as gay as you are, I'm shocked you aren't better at wrapping,” Rachel commented teasingly, pretending to look it over.

He pouted lightly. “This is coming from the girl who gives all her gifts in gift bags?” he demanded.

“She has like a closet full of them, it's not her fault,” Victoria laughed. Rachel only grinned, pleased to have someone backing her up on that. Then she proceeded to tear open the gift with the vigor of a five-year-old in a similar situation.

“Fuck yes!” Rachel grinned broadly as she saw what he'd gotten her.

“What is it?” I asked curiously, sitting up.

“Strawberry Panic on DVD!” She held up the small box, looking thrilled with her gift.

Rox smacked her forehead with her palm. “Honestly, Rachel, it's bad enough that you're an anime geek; can you at least find some *good* anime to watch?” she shook her head, sighing melodramatically.

“Strawberry Panic is a good anime!” the rocker protested, elbowing the girl she was sitting on.

“Like hell it is.”

“Bitch.”

“Slut.”

“Shut up, both of you!” Victoria barked. She seemed to be the mediator whenever those two started bickering. “Rachel, you have shitty tastes in anime. Rox, you need to shut the fuck up about it. Okay, discussion closed.”

Neither of the girls looked pleased that their argument had gotten cut short.

“I've never heard of that anime,” I commented absently.

“Good, it sucks,” Rox informed me.

“It's cute!” Rachel defended.

“I ended this discussion already!” Victoria yelled at them, making the two of them jump.

Several of Rachel's friends had gotten her gifts. By the end of the night, she'd received the DVD from Thomas, a USB game controller from Leah (apparently Rachel had many game emulators on her computer. Who knew?), an iTunes gift-card from Rox, and a stack of legal papers (I couldn't tell what they were, but they'd made Rachel nearly squeal in excitement) from Jenny and Thomas.

Most of them left soon after she'd gotten all her gifts, but Rox lingered, saying that she was trying to stay away from her dorm roommate as long as possible.

“There's absolutely nothing wrong with your roommate!” Rachel insisted, amused.

“Yeah, well, you don't have to sleep in the same room as her. I swear to god, she's got about the noisiest boyfriends in the fuckin' state,” Rox complained. “And a new one each month! It's insane!”

“I'm sure she appreciates you having new *girl*friends every month, too,” the rocker shot back cheekily, inciting yet another argument between the two. I sighed, deigning not to step in.

Rox finally left around eleven, but only after my girlfriend playfully threatened to call the cops. Well... it *seemed* playful. I wasn't sure.

Rachel hugged the girl before she left, and Rox merely smacked her ass in response. To my annoyance, Rachel didn't comment on it, simply giving the girl a light shove out the door, closing it behind her.

Now we were alone.

“Well, that was a whole lot less painful than it could have been,” Rachel remarked cheerfully, flopping down on the couch, on her back. I remained on the floor, still a little hurt that she'd been flirting with Rox all night.

“I guess,” I muttered, idly cutting and re-stacking the deck a few times. It kept me from having to look at Rachel.

“You alright?” I looked up at her. She'd turned over onto her stomach, and was looking at me with a slightly worried expression.

“Yeah.” I went back to playing with the cards.

“You're lying.”

“I'm not.”

“Come on, Jessie.” Rachel was now sitting up, looking extremely worried. “What's wrong?”

“*Nothing.*”

There was silence for a moment, then I nearly shrieked when my girlfriend suddenly swept me off the ground. Rachel went back to the couch and sat down, placing me on her lap so that I was facing her. She locked her fingers together behind me, so I couldn't get out of her grasp. “Now tell me or else you're not going anywhere.”

“It's nothing,” I mumbled, not meeting her gaze. Rachel's fingers tipped my chin up so I was forced to look her in the eye. I could see the worry imbedded in her dark brown gaze, along with hints of what seemed to be fear.

“Tell me 'it's nothing' again,” she half-ordered. I opened my mouth to repeat the phrase, but I faltered. I couldn't lie to her when she was getting this distressed over it. *Dammit.*

“It's Rox,” I muttered, focusing on her ear so I didn't have to look her straight in the eye again. It had been unnerving at best.

“What about her?” Rachel looked confused.

“I don't like her.”

“Why's that?”

I went quiet again. *It feels like she's trying to steal you away from me.* I didn't want to tell Rachel that. She would tell me I was reading too much into it or something.

“Jessie?” I started a little.

“I just don't like how you two flirt all the time,” I managed.

“What? We don't flirt.”

“You let her bite you,” I reminded her.

“I'd said 'bite me'.”

“You sat in her lap.”

“Cause I didn't want to sit on the couch by myself.”

“And you didn't ask me to sit with you?”

“You elbowed me in the gut, Jessie.”

I glanced away. That much was true. “I still don't like her,” I muttered, before hesitantly looking back up at her.

Rachel suddenly grinned at me. “Jessica Taylor West, are you *jealous*?”

I bristled. “No!”

She chuckled softly. “Alright, alright... If you say so.”

I growled in annoyance; I *hated* when she used that phrase. Rachel knew it, too. She did it now just for sake of being a pain. I'd learned by now that the best comeback when she said that was to simply ignore her. I shifted on her lap a little, resting my head on her shoulder, and went silent.

“Silent treatment?” she guessed after a moment. I grinned, but said nothing. “Figured. However, I can break said treatment.” I gave a little scream as her fingertips dug into my sides, tickling me.

“Stop it!” I yelped, giving her a good shove. She was laughing now, holding me tightly, but she did stop tickling me. “You're awful.” I frowned at her.

“You wouldn't recognize me if I wasn't.”

I rolled my eyes, wrapping my arms around her middle. “This is true. You're going to have to take me home soon,” I reminded her. I'd told my parents that I was going to go celebrate Rachel's birthday with her. They'd told me that it was fine, so long as I made sure to come home. The connotations of their request made me blush and agree.

“Damn,” Rachel sighed melodramatically. “And here I was hoping that I'd get to spend the evening with my girl.”

I grinned apologetically. “Sorry.” I leaned up to lightly kiss her cheek. “That reminds me...” I instantly felt shy as I pulled a small box from my pocket. “I got you a present for your birthday.” I handed it to her, and then shifted a little so I could see her open it. I didn't look at her face, in case she didn't like it. It wasn't much of a gift, after all.

I watched, somewhat nervous, as Rachel opened the little box. Her fingers delicately drew the object out. It was a small locket on a thin golden chain. She made a curious noise, and slipped her thumbnail into the crevice of the locket, carefully popping it open. Inside it was a picture I'd had to get from Jenny, one that Rachel hadn't even known she had. It was from the first night I'd spent at the rocker's apartment. In the picture, I was cuddled securely in Rachel's lap, her arms holding me tightly as I slept. Rachel's cheek was resting against the crown of my head; she was also asleep, looking rather content.

For several moments, she said nothing, and I finally looked up at her, nervous. Rachel was smiling fondly at the small picture. I swore that her eyes looked misty, but when she looked back at me, they were dry. She simply kissed me tenderly, then put the necklace on. The locket rested lightly on the center of the cross necklace she also wore.

I smiled, glad that she liked it, but I couldn't help the faint stirrings of doubt lingering in the back of my mind from before.

CHAPTER 46

“Dad, I'm home!”

My head went up at the sound of Jessie's voice from near the front door. I faced the man across the table again. “If we could quickly wrap this up, sir?” I requested softly, idly brushing my bangs out of my eyes. “I'd rather not have Jessie overhear my plans...”

“Of course, that's fine,” he agreed, nodding. I could tell he wasn't entirely comfortable with speaking to a flamboyantly masculine female. I chose not to comment; I didn't want him to take back anything he'd said.

“So you'll let me take her to the thing on Saturday?” I asked, just to clarify.

“Yes, so long as you have her back here before ten,” he added sternly. I nodded, just relieved that he'd agreed.

“Yessir. I'll have her back before then,” I promised, getting to my feet. “Thank ya, sir.” When he'd gotten up, I held my hand out, and he took it, giving it a firm shake.

“Not a problem,” he informed me, smiling almost nervously. “Jessica's never been; I think she'll enjoy it.”

“That's the plan, sir,” I returned the smile. I hated to see my girlfriend so upset with me, so I was going to make it up to her if it killed me. (Actually, the fact that she'd been short with me for the past week or two was more likely to kill me, I think.)

“Hey, d – Rachel?” I looked the doorway to see Jessie, watching me with a surprised look on her face. “What are you doing here?”

“Just talking with your dad 'bout this Saturday,” I replied, going over to her. “Walk me out?” She blinked, then nodded and took my hand. I was glad; I'd only been here twice, and still had trouble getting around the place.

“Okay.” She began leading me down a hallway. “Now, what's happening this Saturday?” Jessie asked, looking up at me.

I grinned slightly. “That's a surprise.”

“What is it with you and surprises?” the girl complained lightly.

“Cause they're more fun than just telling you outright,” I informed her, amused.

“How do you figure?”

“Well...” I leaned down slightly to murmur the words into her ear, in case her dad was still listening. “D'you think you'd've enjoyed my surprise on Valentine's Day nearly as much if I'd just told you I had plans to lay you down and make sweet love to you, hm?” When I pulled away, I noticed with an accomplished smile that her cheeks were bright pink.

“I... suppose not,” Jessie whispered, not looking at me. I chuckled softly.

“Well, the same applies here. You won't enjoy it nearly as much if I tell you what we're doing.” Jessie led me out of the house. She continued walking with me down to my truck.

“Fine,” she muttered. “Are you going to tell me *anything*?”

“Hm...” I unlocked and opened my truck door. “One thing. Wear something pink.”

Jessie's brow furrowed in confusion. “Pink?”

I had to fight from laughing at her expression. It was absolutely adorable on her. “Yes, pink. Light pink, if you have it.”

“Why?”

“It's a surprise.” This time, I *did* laugh at her expression. I'd never seen her look so deadpan. *I'm rubbing off on her.* “I'm serious. Just do it, Jessie.” I climbed into my truck, then smiled down at her. “See ya Saturday.” A quick glance up at her house told me that her father was watching us from the front door of her house. I leaned towards her, chuckling at her surprised look when I bypassed her lips entirely, and placed a light kiss on the soft skin of her cheek. I let my lips linger momentarily, enjoying the feel of her warm skin under my lips, before pulling away. “Your dad's watching,” I muttered to her, amused at the slightly disappointed look on her face.

“And?” Jessie prompted, frowning slightly. I raised a brow at her, and she leaned in, kissing me softly on the mouth. “He knows we're together. He should get over the fact that I'm

going to kiss you,” she informed me firmly. I chose not to point out that she hadn't actually kissed me in a week.

I grinned playfully at her. “Among other things, hm?” I teased softly, tracing her lips with a finger. Jessie blushed a little and lightly kissed the tip of my finger.

“Yes, among other things,” she muttered quickly, blush worsening slightly, and I chuckled.

“See ya Saturday,” I told her with a gentle smile, closing the door once she'd moved out of the way. I started the car up (albeit with a few expletives when it at first refused to turn over) and rolled the window down with the handle. “Don't forget to wear something pink,” I added, shifting the car into reverse.

“I won't,” she called, rolling her eyes, as I backed out of her driveway. I nodded with a smile to acknowledge that I'd heard her, and rolled the window back up before I drove off.



Saturday came around quickly. I was glad; I wasn't sure how much longer I could put up with a disgruntled Jessie. I left the keys in the ignition as I got out of the truck and went up to the front door. I was dressed in a pair of jeans (not ripped, for once) and a plain red t-shirt under my leather jacket. I could feel the cool metal of my cross necklace as well as the locket Jessie had given me pressed against the skin between my breasts, under my shirt. *I really hope I'm not making a mistake, here...*

Exhaling softly, I knocked firmly on the door a few times. Jessie's mother opened the door. She smiled at me; I suspected that it was fake. “Jessica will be down in a moment. She's still getting ready.” I nodded in agreement, and her mother paused before inviting me in, albeit reluctantly.

I agreed softly and entered the house, and the woman directed me to the living room. I uncomfortably sat on the couch as I waited for my girlfriend to finish up. When I heard footsteps on the staircase, I looked up. Soon Jessie was at the doorway of the room. She wore a loose-fitting blouse (light pink, as I'd asked) and a pair of tight jeans. Her red hair had been tied into a ponytail that rested over a shoulder. I grinned slightly as I stood. *My god she's adorable.*

“You ready to go?” I assumed, and she nodded.

“Are you going to tell me where we're going yet?” She paused, then frowned slightly. “And why do *I* have to wear pink if *you* aren't?”

I grinned. “No, and I'm changing when we get there,” I informed her, crossing the room to lightly kiss her forehead. “Now, let's get gone. I wanna get where we're going 'fore the traffic starts up.”

“Traffic?” she echoed softly to herself as she led me to the front door. Her father was already there. to see her off. “Bye, dad.” He hugged her briefly, then turned to me as Jessie went out of the house.

“You'll have her back by...?” the man trailed off, looking expectantly at me.

“Ten o'clock, sir,” I replied with a nod. He smiled, looking relieved. I assumed he'd never had one of his daughter's boyfriends actually remember and adhere to the curfew he'd set.

“Very good,” he mumbled softly, shaking my hand.

“*Dad*,” Jessie groaned, blushing a little. She took my hand and started tugging me away. I chuckled softly. Apparently it didn't matter whether I was a boy or a girl; a girl's father was bound to embarrass her by being overprotective. Once we were out of earshot, she asked quietly, “Why did you need to talk to him the other day, anyways?”

“Cause the place I'm taking you is out-of-town,” I replied distractedly. I glanced over my shoulder to give the man a nod of confirmation; I'd never broken a girl's curfew (if I had been told about said curfew) before, and I sure as hell wasn't going to start now.

I went around to the passenger's side of the truck and opened the door for Jessie. She didn't say anything, but she did give me a somewhat odd look out of the corner of her eye. She always did that whenever I did things like that; holding doors open, pulling chairs out for her, just little things that I'd thought were common courtesies. Fuck the guys who say chivalry's dead.

Once she was in, I closed the door behind her and went around to the driver's side. I started the truck and smoothly backed out of her driveway.

“When are you going to tell me where we're going?” Jessie asked me. I chuckled; it never failed to amuse me how impatient she was with surprises.

“When we get there,” I replied cheekily, switching gears.

She rolled her eyes at me. “Fine. I’m taking over your radio until we get there, though.” I shrugged and gave her a quick tutorial on my ornery radio. She nodded and, as she said, took over my radio for the entire hour-and-a-half drive to my destination.

I had to draw the line when she turned something by the Jonas Brothers on, though. I refused to listen to any band that was mental enough to try and form said band with their siblings. No siblings got along that well. It was one of the laws of the universe.

“I’m starting to think you have something against boy bands,” Jessie had commented, amused at my firm declarations.

“Not boy bands, just Disney bands,” I’d corrected flatly. She giggled softly, and I bit back a fond smile. I loved being able to make her laugh.

When we were less than a mile away from my destination, I told her as such.

“Are you finally going to tell me where we’re going?” Jessie wanted to know. She paused then, and looked around. “Or for that matter, where we are?”

I grinned slightly, keeping my eyes on the road. “We’re in the little town of Macon, Georgia, one of *two* cities – *nationwide* – that holds the annual Cherry Blossom Festival. Which, if you haven’t guessed, is where we’re headed.”

“What’s the other city?” Jessie asked curiously.

“That’d be D.C.,” I replied, glancing at a nearby street sign. I hadn’t been in this city in about three years, so I had to check every once in a while that I was heading in the right direction. “Aaand that’s a little too far away, so I decided that attending the festival that’s in the same state as us would be the better idea.”

“I’ve never been to the Cherry Blossom Festival before,” she commented softly, looking around. Many stores (and cars) had pink flowers painted on the windows in celebration of the festival. It wasn’t surprising; Macon really had nothing else to offer aside for this festival.

“Which is, like, illegal for anyone living in Georgia, so that’s why I’m taking you,” I quipped cheerfully. “It’s a lot of fun; I think you’ll enjoy it.” I turned into a somewhat bumpy dirt road, and soon came to a line of cars waiting.

“Did you bring any of your other girlfriends here?” Jessie asked suddenly. I winced slightly; I could tell she was still sore at me for apparently ‘flirting’ with Rox.

“Nope. You’re the first one I’ve brought,” I informed her. That much was true.

“Really?” She sounded surprised.

“Jessie, love, can you picture, say... me and Rox – hell, even Jenny – coming up here for a Cherry Blossom Festival?” I pointed out. Neither were the type to be interested in something like that.

“Um...”

“Exactly. You're the only girl I've been able to bring up here,” I repeated with a smile. If she was going to reply to that, it'd have to wait, because I'd pulled up to a woman dressed in a bright orange vest. I rolled down the window as she approached my truck, and shifted a little so I could get my wallet out of my back pocket.

“Hi, are you purchasing for today or the week?” she asked me politely.

“Ah, just today, thanks,” I replied with a smile. “Five dollars, right?”

“That's right.” I fished a five out of my wallet and handed it to her, and she gave me a parking pass in return. The woman looked up at me and nearly did a double-take. “Hey – you're OneGirl, aren't you?” she asked, sounding surprised and a bit excited. I wanted to smack my forehead into my steering wheel and groan in frustration, but that would be *rude*.

“Ah, yes'm, that'd be me,” I replied with a somewhat forced smile.

“Big fan, that's all I'm going to say,” she said with a grin. “Just keep on driving, then take a left at the fork.”

I nodded at her, smiling. It felt nice to hear someone *else* have a strong Southern accent instead of me. “Alright,” I agreed, sticking the parking pass on my dashboard, so it would be visible by anyone who came by it. “Preshadeit.” That being said, I drove on down the way she'd indicated, rolling up my window with one hand.

“Look at you, getting recognized already,” Jessie teased. She'd obviously picked up on my annoyance.

“Yeah, well...” I trailed off, trying to come up with a suitable comeback. “Y'know what? Shut up.” She bit back a laugh at my retort.

I kept an eye on the people wearing similar orange vests as they motioned for me to go into the parking lot... which was actually more of a large dirt field, but I digress. As soon as we pulled in, I turned the truck off and got out, before going around to Jessie's side and opening the door for her, too. Again, I got the odd look out of the corner of her eye, but I chose to ignore it.

“I thought you said you were changing when we got here,” Jessie reminded me, getting out of the truck with a little hop. I glanced down; I'd almost forgotten.

“Thanks for reminding me,” I grinned wryly, before slipping my jacket off for a moment. “Hold this, please.” She took it from me. I crossed my wrists and got my red t-shirt off in one quick motion. Under it, I had a black t-shirt with three pink cartoon poodles on the front. In pink text under the poodles was the phrase 'Cherry Blossom Festival.'

I tossed my t-shirt back into the truck, then locked the door behind me. “Alright, now let's go,” I said with a grin, accepting my jacket back. I took her hand in mine and started leading her towards the exit of the makeshift parking lot, into the main festival area. Jessie looked around with wide eyes. I didn't blame her; it was a lot to take in at one time. With carnival-style rides, all sorts of booths and attractions, and all the people here already, it was obvious that the town took pride in the festival.

“Are we going someplace in particular?” she asked me finally, looking up at me.

I grinned down at her. “Yeah; the sea lion show. It's pretty much epic. You'll like it, trust me.” She nodded and allowed herself to be led through the crowd.

CHAPTER 47

I looked at the picture Rachel had bought for me, smiling slightly. The sea lion show had been as interesting as she'd told me, and the lions themselves had been adorable. There had been an opportunity to purchase pictures with the two youngest sea lions after the show, and my girlfriend had bought one for me. It was quite amusing; the animals had been trained to put their chins on the person's head during the picture. The one behind me had done so – the one behind Rachel, though, had tried several times to put its chin on her head before resigning itself to putting its head on her shoulder instead. I thought it was funny. I had to admit, though, it made a cute picture.

“Hey, Jessie, check this out!” Rachel requested from a few feet away. I looked up and nearly screamed. I *did* take a step back, though, a hand flying over my mouth.

She had a *snake* tossed over her shoulders. The thing had to be longer than she was tall. Its lower half was wrapped around her chest, while she had its front held carefully in her hand.

“What the hell *is* that?” I half-shrieked, staring at the huge snake. It stared blankly at me, eyes unblinking. I *hate* snakes!

“Boa constrictor!” she replied cheerfully. “Is this thing cool or what?” A quick glance behind her told me that a man was keeping a booth of reptiles, which I assumed she'd gotten the massive snake from.

“*Why* do you have a *boa constrictor*?” I demanded, incredulous. She shrugged.

“Went to the booth, asked if I could hold the snake he had, he said 'sure, here's how you hold it,' and here I am.” Rachel grinned slightly and held the head of the boa towards me. I squeaked and edged away from it. “What's wrong, Jessie?” The snake flicked its tongue at me and I took another step away from her. “I think he likes you.”

“Well, I don't like him,” I informed her nervously. “Get *rid* of it.”

“What, you don't like snakes?” she asked me, quirking a brow. Rachel carefully pulled the snake up so she was facing it. It flicked its tongue at her, and she laughed. “He seems friendly.”

“I don't *care*. Get that thing away from me!” I half-ordered. She sighed dramatically, then nodded.

“Fine. Give me a second.” Rachel went back to the man at the booth to return his snake. It took both of them to get the boa untangled from her, though she just laughed the whole time. She took some hand sanitizer from him and then came back to me, working the liquid into her hands. “Not a fan of snakes?” she guessed.

“No! And I don't see how you could hold that thing,” I added, shuddering a little. The idea of having a constrictor wrapped around you didn't seem nearly as amusing as Rachel thought it was.

She merely shrugged. “My nana lived in the middle of scenic nowhere, so there were always a bunch of snakes 'round the place,” she explained, taking my hand and leading me away from the reptile booth. Thankfully. “I got used to them. They're not as bad as everyone thinks, really. I never once got attacked by one, y'know.”

I stared at her in disbelief for a moment before shaking my head at her. “Honestly, Rachel, sometimes I doubt that you're actually a girl. Don't say it!” I added, pointing at her when she opened her mouth to respond. “Seriously, though, do you have *any* female traits? At all?”

Rachel considered that for a moment. “I don't like bugs?” she offered. I raised my brow at her. That sounded like an understatement if I knew her way of speaking as well as I thought I did.

“You're scared of bugs,” I clarified, amused. She immediately bristled.

“I am not *scared* of bugs. I just *don't like* them.” As if to prove her point, she swept a mosquito away from her hand.

“Right,” I smirked. I kept that little bit of information in the back of my mind for future reference. “Where are we going?”

Rachel shrugged and glanced at her watch. “If I'm not mistaken, right now there's the 'disc dogs' tournament, and there's probably some band playing on the stage...”

“Disc dogs?” I echoed, looking up at her.

“Yeah; it's pretty neat. People train their dogs to catch frisbees, pretty much. It's a contest. You get points for all sorts of things – height the dog jumps to catch it, length it goes before it gets caught, style –”

“Style?” I repeated, bemused. I wasn't entirely sure of what that was supposed to mean.

“Yes, style. Now stop being a parrot,” Rachel commanded playfully. “I mean style as in, say... throwing the frisbee under their leg or using it to weave the dog through their legs or getting the dog to balance on their feet, it's kinda cool.”

I considered for a moment. “Let's see what band they have playing first,” I requested. I had a feeling she'd prefer that over the dog show, even if it did sound, as she put it, 'kinda cool.' If she'd brought me all the way out here to let me have a good time, the least I could do was request a few things *she* would enjoy.

Rachel nodded, looking vaguely pleased, I noted, and led me towards the stage. She took a brief shortcut through an area in which many rides were set up. I winced slightly at the sight of what appeared to be a circular building that spun around. My girlfriend saw that and laughed a little.

“Not much of an adrenaline junkie?” she guessed, amused. I elbowed her gently.

“What, are you just assuming that because I'm not as insane as you are?” I demanded good-naturedly.

“No, I'm assuming that because you're kinda a wuss.” I bristled at that, and she shrugged, leaning down to kiss my cheek by way of apology. “Sorry, darlin' but it's true. And you can't deny it, either.”

“For your information, I *like* rides. Not just spinning ones like that,” I huffed, glaring up at her. I pointed at the ride as we passed it. Rachel grimaced as well.

“I see your point. I love a good adrenaline rush, but not by way of that particular ride. Bad experience.” I looked up at her curiously, and she elaborated: “My parents took me on that thing when I was like six. I was recovering from some gross stomach sickness at the time and... the spinning didn't help.” She looked mildly embarrassed, and I laughed.

“You threw up?” I assumed, grinning.

“All over the worker who tried to help me out of the restraints,” Rachel sighed, shaking her head. I laughed again. “I was fine on all the other rides. Even the 'Ring of Fire' thing over there.” She motioned towards something that just seemed to be several small roller-coaster-style cars on a single circle track. “And, here we are, the Coca-Cola stage,” Rachel announced suddenly, grinning a bit.

The stage was quite large, and painted bright red. I noted the Coca-Cola logo painted on the front of it, assuming that that was where the name came from. The band onstage seemed to be packing up, just as a second was starting to set up.

“Ah, we caught them in the middle of changing bands,” Rachel noted, a bit unnecessarily. “Since we've got time, I'm going to get a drink. Want one?”

“Huh? Oh, no thanks,” I declined, shaking my head. I wasn't sure how much drinks costed at this kind of festival, but I suspected that it was more than I was willing to pay for it.

“Come *on* Jessie,” she complained with a playful glare. She poked my side, making me squeak and bat her hand away, and added, “I can't spoil my girlfriend all day if you're going to act all like that over a *drink*.”

“Just water, then.” It was probably the cheapest thing available. I felt a little embarrassed about her 'spoiling me,' as she'd put it, but I wasn't entirely sure why.

“*Jessie*.” Rachel gave me such a deadpan look that I couldn't help but laugh.

“Fine! Mountain Dew, now stop giving me that look,” I commanded, giving her a light shove.

“See, now wasn't that easier than being difficult like you were?” she teased, sticking her studded tongue out at me. I rolled my eyes and Rachel chuckled, before telling me that she'd be back in a minute.

I turned my gaze back to the stage, watching with mild interest as the men set things up. A smile flickered on my face when I saw a gangly man turning red as he half-carried, half-dragged a bass drum into place. Maybe Rachel's bass drum was just lighter, but I found it amusing that she was able to move hers around with less effort than him. They were nearing completion by the time Rachel returned.

“I hate lines and I hate people who insist upon getting pictures taken with musicians even if they've never even heard their albums,” Rachel grumbled flatly. I laughed a little and took the cup she handed me.

“Had some trouble in the line?” I inquired, amused. I couldn't help but think that she was cute when she got annoyed. Well, as long as it was at someone else, anyways.

“No, Jessie, I just decided to list random things that I don't like,” Rachel shot back dryly. “I also don't like when people ask me obvious questions.”

I elbowed her, and she didn't even flinch. I guess she was used to it by now. “You're such a jerk,” I commented, not really meaning it.

Rachel merely smiled. “You wouldn't like me half as well if I wasn't.”

We fell into a comfortable silence, watching as the band set up. When they were close to done, Rachel suddenly took my free hand in hers.

“Let's go,” she muttered, tugging my arm gently. I looked up at her, confused. Her tone was short, terse. Almost nervous.

“What? Why?” I asked her curiously, not moving. “They're almost done.”

“We'll come back later,” Rachel replied dismissively. “Let's *go*, Jessie. Now.” Upon closer examination, I could see faint traces of panic in her otherwise neutral gaze.

“Rachel, what...”

“Rachel? Is that really you?” asked a stunned woman's voice from behind me. I turned around, praying that it wasn't one of Rachel's exes. Fortunately, that didn't seem to be the case. The woman was only slightly taller than me, maybe by half an inch. Rachel still towered over her. She had brown hair, though I could definitely see some gray near her roots. Her eyes were dark brown, close to black. I'd gauge her age at just over 45, at least.

Rachel was frozen; she didn't seem to be able to respond. The woman reached out to finger a spike of Rachel's hair and sighed. “Rachel, honestly, what have you done to your hair?”

That seemed to snap her out of it. Her jaw worked soundlessly for a moment, before I was surprised at the sight of pure *rage* in her own dark gaze. “That's *it*?” Rachel snarled, looking more furious than I'd ever seen her. “You... you call me a dyke, order me out of my own damn home, haven't even *spoken* to me in *four years*, and the first fucking thing you have to say for yourself is about my *hair*? What the *fuck*, mom?!”

Shit. This won't turn out well.

CHAPTER 48

I felt a mixture of feelings burning in my chest: I could definitely pick out rage, shock, and hurt, mostly, but I knew that several other emotions were woven into the painful knot, too.

But, really, though, it was *just like* her to comment on my *hair* after refusing to contact me for four years.

My mother looked *horribly* offended at my words. It then occurred to me that my mom had never heard me swear before, especially not so... colorfully.

“Young lady, watch your language!” she scolded, looking horrified that her daughter even knew those words, let alone spewed them out at her.

I scoffed coldly, even though the small part of me that still wanted her momma protested at my behavior. “What’re ya gonna do?” I sneered. “Ground me? I’m nineteen, *mom*. You get no say in my life anymore!” I regretted the words as soon as they came out. My mom winced at the words. Even Jessie looked up at me, startled.

“You’ve changed,” she whispered, a little unnecessarily, in my opinion.

“Yeah, well, three or four years of livin’ alone’ll do that to a person,” I pointed out with a frown, putting a hand on my hip. It was a *particularly* feminine gesture, and one that I didn’t use often, but it fit the situation.

“Where *have* you been living?”

“Daddy’s brother,” (here I frowned at my accent mangling the word ‘daddy’ to sound like ‘deddy’) “took me in like a week after y’all told me to leave. He had to move like three years ago, so I’ve been living in an apartment he’s been paying for for me.”

“John?” She sounded surprised. I knew that my uncle hadn't ever told them that he'd been taking care of me. That was the only I'd pled and insisted that he do for me. I didn't want *him* to get in trouble with the family, too. “He never said anything.”

“Can't imagine why,” I muttered, more to myself than anything. I nearly jumped when I felt Jessie's smaller, cooler hand slip into mine. She squeezed it reassuringly, not looking at me. I forced myself to calm down. At least partially.

“Who is this with you?” my mom asked. I could tell that she was desperately trying to change the subject from something other than my disownment.

Jessie gave a small, sharp inhale when I suddenly pulled her close, my arm wrapped around her waist. “This is Jessica.” Her real name sounded odd coming from me. I got the feeling that my girlfriend was of the same opinion when she twitched slightly against my side. “My *girlfriend*,” I added. It might have been a little unnecessary, but I doubted that my mom would have understood otherwise. She often saw only what she wanted to see. And there would *never* be a time she wanted to see me with a girl as my significant other.

She winced at the emphasis I put on the word. “You're still dating girls?” she sighed, obviously not approving. “I thought you would have grown out of that phase by now.”

I nearly snarled. “*Yes*, mom, I've been living *by myself* for *four goddamn years* because of a *phase*. This is my girlfriend, mom, and it just so happens that I *love* her. So, with all due respect, fuck off.” I gently tugged Jessie. “We're leaving.”

“Rachel, wait!” my mother insisted after a moment of shock. “That's not... You can't leave yet...!”

“Can and am,” I snapped icily. “You wanna talk without insulting me or my girlfriend, my number hasn't changed.” I kept walking, until I finally glanced over my shoulder to see that we'd lost her.

Jessie looked up at me worriedly. “Should you really have just abandoned your mom like that?” she asked curiously.

“No, but if I had to stay there much longer, I woulda said something that I'd *really* regret,” I sighed, shaking my head. “In any case, if she *really* wanted to talk to me, then she woulda at least tried calling by now. She's probably just worried that I'm gonna admit to the press that they disowned me or something....” After a few uneasy seconds to ponder that cynical

thought, I managed a slight smile at the smaller redhead. “Shall we attempt to salvage the rest of the day?”

“Are you gonna be alright?” she countered, raising a brow. I snorted softly and nodded.

“Yeah. I gotta say, though, there are few more awkward occurrences than having your mom walk in on your date,” I quipped, surprising soft giggles from Jessie, who attempted to stifle them.

“That was mean,” she scolded half-heartedly. She recognized my attempt to lighten the atmosphere, which is probably why I didn't get a lecture.

“Whatever, that was *funny*,” I defended with a somewhat forced grin. Meeting up with my mom may have made me feel vaguely ill, but I assured myself that spending the day with my girlfriend would cheer me up quickly. And even if it didn't, I'd be able to keep my emotions locked up. It was almost instinct by now.

“Hey, Rachel?”

I started a little. “Uh?”

“Did your mom really not guess that I was your girlfriend?” Jessie asked, an amused glint in her blue eyes.

I snorted softly, trying not to laugh. “Yeah. Parents are kinda oblivious in those situations. Parents who accept it think that every girl their daughter brings home is a significant other, and parents in denial still think that every girl is just a friend.” We both laughed at that.



I glanced at my watch again. It was nearly time to head back to our own town, or else I'd miss the curfew her father had set. I, however, would have been just fine staying where we were.

We were sitting on the grass of a slight hill, in the dark, watching as various hot air balloons randomly flared in the dark sky above us. We weren't the only ones watching them, either – *many* other people were seated around us and watching as well. Jessie was sitting between my legs, head resting just under my chin. Her hands were more or less full with a not-very-sturdy paper plate. I'd insisted that you weren't allowed to go to a festival without buying a funnel cake, despite her protests. She had tried to convince me that she wouldn't be able to finish one (nor did she need to) and that she'd just split one with me. To my amusement (and silent 'I-

told-you-so's') she put a pretty good dent in it, herself. And, since it would have been a little awkward for me, I allowed the little redhead to feed me, too.

When Jessie offered me another bite, I lazily took it, playfully nipping the tip of her finger before she could pull away. In retaliation, she merely smeared powdered sugar on my nose. We laughed softly while I wiped it off, in turn getting it all over my shirt. I gave up at that point.

“We have to leave in like five minutes,” I informed her. She sighed.

“I don't really want to go home,” Jessie complained, nuzzling closer to me.

“And I don't really want to take you, but I promised your dad...”

“Yeah, I know,” she grumbled, tossing her head back a little to rest on my shoulder. “Why the hell can't you be a rebel? You look like one.”

I disguised my sharp, surprised laugh with a cough. “Yeah, well, you know what they say 'bout books and covers. C'mon, let's get you home, then.” Jessie reluctantly stood and dusted herself off before helping me up as well. I noted with a soft sigh that my t-shirt had powdered sugar smeared all over it, but chose to ignore it. As we trekked back to the appointed parking lot, my girlfriend silently grabbed my hand, holding it tightly in her own. I bit back a smile at the action. She would deny it to the grave, but I knew that Jessie was terrified of the idea of getting lost in the dark.

“Geez! It's cold!” she complained as I let her into the passenger seat of the truck. Jessie rubbed her forearms as if to flatten down the goosebumps that had risen on her exposed skin.

“Yeah, it's definitely gotten cooler now,” I agreed with a nod. I hesitated for a moment before shrugging my jacket off and tossing it over her. Jessie jerked, startled, and looked up at me in surprise. A faint blush rose in her cheeks at the gesture. I guess she was amazed that I'd do that, especially since I was almost never caught dead in public without it. She mumbled a quiet 'thanks' as I closed the door and went around to my own side.

I climbed in and started the truck up, biting back a frown as some obnoxious mainstream band came on. I turned it down, not particularly wanting to hear it. We drove in silence for a moment before I glanced at Jessie. She usually wasn't this quiet. I discovered why quickly: the redhead was cuddled under my jacket, asleep. I smiled fondly. I was already aware that she was

adorable when she slept, but seeing her curled up under the leather jacket (which had to be at least two sizes larger than her) somehow added to that.

And, since she was asleep, I calmly switched to a metal radio station, keeping the volume down so I wouldn't wake her up. If she wasn't going to be awake to listen to it, then there was no way in hell that I was going to willingly subject myself to that kind of music.

To my surprise, Jessie remained asleep the entire drive. When I finally pulled up in her driveway, I still didn't really want to wake her up. I turned the truck off and undid my seat belt before getting out and going around to her side. I opened the door, but she remained asleep.

I shook my head, smiling slightly, and brushed her hair from her face. I leaned in, firmly pressing my lips against hers. After a few seconds, she stirred, and I pulled away.

"C'mon, Jessie, get up," I whispered, trying not to laugh. She mumbled tiredly, slowly getting out. I took my jacket back and slid it back on before taking her hand and walking her to the front door.

"Come in with me for a minute," Jessie requested, unlocking the door.

"What about your dad?" I inquired softly as she led me up to her bedroom.

"He has work tomorrow. He's already asleep." She sounded fairly sure of that, so I decided to trust her. As soon as we were in her room, Jessie shut the door and pinned me against it. I blinked, too surprised to do much other than just let her kiss me. Apparently she'd been more awake than I'd thought. *Sneaky little bitch*. Her lips dipped lower, brushing against my neck. I stifled a soft growl, tilting my head a bit to give her better access.

For almost a full minute, she remained in that one spot, quietly lapping and sucking at my throat. Finally, when I was certain I couldn't take her teasing anymore, she pulled away, looking quite pleased with herself.

"The hell was that all about?" I asked her, almost panting. She grinned cheekily.

"Just making sure that no one mistakes us for 'friends' anymore," Jessie teased, smirking. She released me from the pin, kissed my cheek, and added softly, "See you on Monday."

I wanted to growl. I *hated* when she teased me like that. But, despite my wanting to take revenge, I didn't want to wake her parents by making her scream, either. I'd get her back later. And I *would* get her back.

“Night, Jessie.” She echoed the sentiment as I opened the door again, quietly going back to my truck. I climbed in and, after glancing in the mirror, chuckled at the sight of a light red mark (that would surely get darker by tomorrow) on my throat. I wasn't going to be able to hide *that* one under my collar. I had the feeling that she knew it, too. Shaking my head at the audacity of the little redhead, I pulled out of the driveway and headed back to my apartment.

CHAPTER 49

I don't think there's really anything more embarrassing than having your father tell you that he heard two sets of footsteps heading up to my bedroom, followed by a 'thud.' At first I didn't understand what he was talking about, then I remembered pinning Rachel to my door. Realizing what it must have sounded like, I went scarlet and attempted to assure him that nothing had happened. I doubt he believed me, though.

I had honestly thought that he was asleep, though, since the lights were off. Apparently he'd been in his study.

That short conversation was the reason that I was blushing before I'd even spoken to my foul-mouthed girlfriend on Monday. I quickly got out of the car and left before he could ask me anything else.

I hurried to the chorus room, not really wanting to be late. Rachel was, as always, sitting at the piano, with several girls hanging around her. It pissed me off to no end, really, but it was a common occurrence ever since Rachel performed her concert. Apparently, it was okay to be gay so long as you were famous. Even so, I didn't want to be the subject of their conversations, so I went around them.

As I passed them, I was flustered to hear them asking Rachel how she'd gotten that impressive hickey on her throat. I spared my girlfriend a glance, noticing the deep scarlet mark I'd left. *Geez! That might be the worst one yet!*

Cheeks red, I grabbed my music folder and went to my seat. A moment later, though, Kendra came and took the seat next to mine.

"Hey, was it you who gave Rachel that hickey?" she asked, a little too bluntly for my liking.

“Why are you asking?” I managed to keep the embarrassed stammer out of my voice.

“Cause *she* isn't telling us!” Kendra whined. “If it wasn't you, then who was it? Is she cheating on you?” In the few months she hadn't spoken to me because of my sexuality, I'd forgotten how much she thrived off gossip. I think I had inherited Rachel's dislike of it since then.

“*She isn't cheating on me.*” Honestly, just because someone didn't answer something didn't always mean they were hiding something. I chose to ignore the fact that I often did thought the same thing regarding my girlfriend. “And that mark isn't any of your business.”

Kendra made an annoyed sound. “Oh, fine, don't tell me. No need to get defensive.”

“I'm not getting –!” The bell cut me off, and the girls gathered around Rachel hurried off to their seats. Kendra left just as quickly. No one wanted to get yelled at by Miss K. Rachel, though, looked rather relieved to be freed from the 'daily Spanish Inquisition,' as she called it.



When I got to the library (I rarely ate lunch at school, so I tended to spend the period with my girlfriend there), Rachel was just heading into the back room. The library was a little fuller than usual – again, thanks to 'OneGirl' frequenting it. With a slight roll of the eyes, I signed in and went back there to keep Rachel company as she worked with whatever electronics the librarian had requested she fix.

“Hey, sweetie,” I greeted with a slightly strained smile. Even after I'd gotten out of chorus, I'd been bombarded with questions regarding the mark on Rachel's neck. I closed the door behind me on instinct.

“D'you know how many times I've been asked about my hickey?” she asked without looking at me. I blushed and sat on top of a spare desk.

“Um, yeah... People are asking me the same thing...” I admitted quietly. Rachel merely gave a soft 'hm' of acknowledgement as she continued doing something with the CPU on the table before her. Her tool belt was buckled loosely about her waist. I shifted uncomfortably. She was usually more talkative than this. I wondered if she was mad at me for marking her in such an obvious place. I asked her as much.

“Huh? Mad? No,” she demurred, straightening up and dusting her front off. “A little frustrated, maybe.” She crossed over to the closed door for a minute.

“Frustrated?” I echoed, bemused. Maybe if I had been paying attention to what Rachel had been doing, as opposed to worrying about why she was acting so strangely, I would have realized her intentions.

I nearly yelped as my girlfriend was suddenly upon me, her hands on my hips and her tongue down my throat. I instinctively gripped her shoulders, eyes wide with surprise at the attack.

“You know I don't like being teased,” she growled against my lips. I knew what she was talking about. She kissed me again, and I gave a shrill, muffled yelp when her hands slid under my skirt.

“Rachel!” I hissed, trying to pull away from her, but my back hit the wall behind the desk I was sitting on. “Cut it out! Someone will hear!”

“If you keep fussin' like that, then yeah,” Rachel smirked. “Best keep quiet, hm?” I froze. She was right; the *last* thing I wanted was to be caught like *that*.

I slapped my hand over my mouth when she intentionally raked her short fingernails up my thighs. I glared at her; she was *trying* to make me scream at this point. She just shot me a wicked grin, shifting her hand under my skirt and making me squeak against my hand. I tried to push her off with my free hand, but I wasn't trying very hard. She knew just the right spots to make me weak like this. I loved and hated it at the same time.

Our lunch block was only half an hour long, but that was plenty of time for my tease of a girlfriend. By the time the bell rang, I was flushed, panting, and *way* more frustrated than I'd left Rachel on Saturday.

“I'm trying a new lip balm,” Rachel informed me with a smug smile as she picked up her books. The CPU she'd been working on remained on the desk, still wide open. “Like it?”

“U-um,” I stammered, thrown for a loop by the random question. “Yeah. It, uh, it's sweet.” I had managed to pick up on that through the fog of hormones.

“Hm.” Rachel idly put a finger to her lips, provocatively sucking on the tip. She kept her face entirely innocent, but I blushed anyways. She removed her finger and grinned evilly. “But... it's not quite as sweet as revenge, hm?”

Without letting me get a word in, Rachel nearly ran off. I had gathered up all my own books before freezing as I realized something *very* important. *This 'revenge' is way worse than what I did!*

Blushing furiously, I checked myself to make sure my skirt was, in fact, long enough to cover everything before leaving as well. I made a mental note to *never* wear a skirt to school again.

What was worse, was the fact that I wasn't going to see my girlfriend until the end of the day – and even then, she would probably try to avoid me. *She is so in trouble.*

CHAPTER 50

I knocked loudly on the numbered door in front of me, then stepped back and folded my arms. There was a soft, but clear curse from the other side, followed by a 'hang on a sec!'

The door opened soon, revealing Rox dressed in only a rumpled men's dress shirt that barely covered everything. She raised a brow at me. "Rachel. Could you have possibly chosen a worse time to pop up unannounced?" she asked me dryly, leaning on the doorframe. I knew precisely what I'd interrupted, if her appearance was any indicator.

It was probably a bad thing, though, that I was more taken aback by her latest hair cut (cut to her shoulders and dyed black with green highlights) than I was by her lack of pants. Or undergarments, for that matter.

Nonetheless, I couldn't let a good set-up like that go to waste. "Yeah. I coulda dropped by when you had your tongue up her –"

"*Better question!*" Rox spoke over the crude term with an amused roll of the eyes. "The hell are you doing at my dorm? I thought you had your first press conference in like two hours. Shouldn't you be getting ready?"

"I don't need two hours to get ready for a *press conference*," I pointed out.

"Then, back to the first question. The hell are you doing at my dorm?"

I grinned cheekily. "Long story short, I jumped Jessie at school, stole her panties, ran away from her after school, and need a place to hide out for the next hour or so."

The girl burst into laughter at that. "No way! Are you shittin' me?" she asked, grinning.

"Nope! Hell, still have 'em with me," I added, patting the inner pocket of my jacket. That sent the girl into another fit of laughter.

“Alright, alright, I'll let you stay for an hour.” She checked her watch and added, “I can probably finish up here in like half an hour if you wanna hang out or something.”

I waved the suggestion off. “Nah, I'll just go hang out in the common-room-area-whatever you call it,” I told her. “You go ahead and screw with whoever it is that you've got tied up in here.”

“Current girlfriend,” she informed me with a light grin. “That'd be Jackie. And she's not *tied* up.”

“Ah. Cuffed up?” I guessed, based on the inflection.

“Maaaybe. Just make sure the R.A. knows you're here,” she requested, turning back to go inside.

“She already knows,” I informed her. “I passed her coming in. She also told me to tell you to keep it down in here.”

Rox merely laughed, closing the door behind her. I faintly heard a girl's voice asking who was at the door before I turned and went down to the common area. There were a few girls hanging out in the room already.

“Hey, y'all don't mind if I hang out here for a bit, do ya?” I asked, brushing my hair out of my eyes. Most of the girls knew me already, since Rox sometimes dragged me down there for parties and the occasional drinking binge that I rarely remembered the details of the next day. She had introduced me to the students of her dorm then.

“That depends,” one of the girls replied with a cheeky grin. I think her name was Emma. Or something close to that, anyways. I had been busy losing a game of 'fuck the dealer' when I'd met her for the first time. “Are you planning on coming to the end-of-the-semester party in a few months? You didn't come last year.”

“And I doubt I'm coming this year. My girlfriend isn't fond of me drinking, since I'm only nineteen,” I informed her, flopping onto the couch next to her. “Hell, the only reason I even drink over here is 'cause I don't go to school with you every day.” I'd probably drink at high school parties, too, if I wasn't nearly terrified about what some of the more violent homophones (like the ones who slashed my tires) could do to me when I was drunk.

“That's high school for ya,” remarked Alexis – a blonde girl seated sideways in a chair, nose in a book – without looking up. “Don't worry about it. In a few months, you'll be out of that rat trap and in college.”

“Thankfully,” I sighed, turning sideways and leaning back against Emma's shoulder. Her only response was to mess up my hair. I smacked her hand away. “The only place more liberal than a college campus is a hippie commune.”

“And even then, *this* college could give a commune a run for their money,” Emma laughed. “I don't think communes get to regularly interact with a gay media sensation, do they?” She bumped my back with her shoulder, ensuring that I understood what she meant.

“No, I can't say that I've ever been to a commune,” I mused aloud.

“Speaking of which, why the hell didn't you ever tell us that you were OneGirl?” the girl behind me demanded to know.

“What difference would it have made?” Emma faltered, and I grinned triumphantly. “That's what I thought.”

We fell into silence, but it didn't last very long. We were soon gathered around the coffee table, a deck of cards in use. The random conversations and accusations of cheating kept me occupied for the hour, as I'd hoped it would. I stood up, telling the girls that I had to go.

“That was a short visit,” Alexis remarked, a little annoyed. I figured she was about to win this hand.

“Yeah, well, I have somewhere to be in like an hour, so I really do need to get going.” They bid me farewell, insisting that I come to the end-of-semester party and persuading some autographs out of me (to my vague annoyance).



“*Get out of my apartment,*” I ordered Thomas. Not that he was paying me any mind. He'd been here ever since I'd gotten out of the shower, insisting that he was going to help me pick out an outfit for the press conference. Not that I didn't appreciate the sentiment, but really, he could have *called* or something. I glared at him from my bed as he went through my closet.

“Now, with your figure, I think you should wear a shirt with an empire waistline,” he was telling me, as if I understood any of that.

“First off, I still want you to get the *fuck* out of my apartment,” I reminded him, slipping my hands inside the large sleeves of my robe. “Second off, om-*what?*”

“*Empire*. It's where the shirt would gather in just under the bust,” Thomas explained absently, not even looking at me. “It would work well with you because you're smaller there –” I rolled my eyes. As if I didn't know that already. “– and it would make your chest look fuller.”

“My *god* you are so gay,” I groaned, falling backwards onto my messy bed. “Why do you even know all this?” Thomas chose to ignore the question.

A minute later, he made a noise of approval, pulling out a white, short-sleeved blouse that did, in fact, have an “empire waistline.” He hooked it onto the door of my closet and went back to rifling. I sighed, grinding the heels of my palms into my eyes. A moment later, I got up and went to finish drying my annoyingly thick hair.

“You done yet?” I yelled out the bathroom door as I began quickly, easily spiking my hair.

“Just about!” he replied, unnaturally cheerful as always. I rolled my eyes and washed the gel off my fingers before going back to my bedroom, only to have an outfit shoved into my hands.

“You're welcome,” Thomas informed me cheekily, grinning.

“*Out*.” I shoved him out of my room and closed the door behind me. I silently got dressed in the clothes he'd chosen. I glanced in my mirror and had to admit, disgruntled, that it *was* a nice outfit. Over the blouse Thomas had picked out was a sleek black vest. I also wore a pair of dark gray slacks and the black dress shoes that I really didn't like. Fortunately, though, he'd chosen one of my favorite ties to wear under my vest; it was black-and-white zebra stripes, with black polka dots in the white areas. On the black stripes were the occasional little white skull-and-crossbones.

“Are you done yet? I wanna see!” the gay boy whined from outside my door.

“I swear to god, Thomas, what part of 'get out' do you *not* understand?” I snapped, but I opened the door anyways.

Thomas took a step back and gave me a quick once-over before whistling in admiration. “Y'know, if I was straight, I would totally jump you right now,” he commented with a bright smile.

“Uh, no. You could try, but I'd pull a Rox and flip you over my hip,” I pointed out dryly, even if I was somewhat flattered by his compliment. He wouldn't say it if he didn't mean it.

“This is true. Anyways, put this on,” Thomas instructed, handing me a bottle of something.

“Uh, okay,” I agreed, confused. I looked at the bottle and asked, “Now, is this perfume or cologne?” I needed to know so I could apply it correctly.

“Cologne,” he replied with a grin. “You know how to put it on, right?”

I rolled my eyes at him. “I'm not a *total* idiot when it comes to this kinda stuff,” I remarked flatly as I lightly spritzed my wrists. He merely grinned as I sprayed my neck and behind my ears.

“Um,” Thomas looked mildly confused when I unbuttoned my shirt a bit to add a final spray between my breasts.

I stuck my tongue out at him as I buttoned my shirt back up. “I'm a girl, Thomas, we spray there, too.”

“I'll have to take your word on that one,” he decided aloud, before going back to his normal, obnoxiously perky self. “Anyways, let's go, the press conference is in like thirty minutes.”

“We'?” I echoed, grabbing my jacket from the couch where I'd tossed it.

“Yeah, we're carpooling today,” he informed me with a nod, as if agreeing with himself. “Cause me and Jenny are going too.” I looked curiously at him as I pulled my leather jacket on.

“Jenny's carpooling with us?” I hadn't seen her yet.

“Yeah, that's why I was working so fast, 'cause she's waiting out there for us! Now come *on!*” I allowed myself to be pulled out of my apartment. “Jessie can't come with us, since her parents are making her do her homework first, but she told me to tell you that she's coming later. Also that she's going to beat you. What's with that?”

I snickered, remembering my 'attack' earlier today. “Oh, nothing. Just girl stuff.” He didn't question me further, seeing as we just exited the building and were instantly accosted with multiple flashes from different cameras. “This is getting ridiculous,” I hissed to him as we forced our way out of the throng of about ten photographers and hurried towards his car.

“Speak for yourself. I've never been in a newspaper before!”

He was just so cheerful, I had to burst his bubble. “None of the pictures were any good 'cause we were moving so much. You won't be in any newspapers from that group.”

“Spoilsport,” he muttered as I climbed into the passenger's seat.

“Why, what'd she do?” Jenny asked from the back, leaning up so she was hovering between the front seats.

“Just raining on his parade and setting fire to his floats, nothing much,” I assured her. “Now let's get to this conference, hm?”

CHAPTER 51

When I arrived at the conference, Rachel was sitting at a table on the stage, a microphone at her lips so she could speak to the impressive amount of reporters gathered around. To my annoyance, a small crowd of squealing fangirls was being held back by security guards behind the reporters. *Honestly, have they no shame?*

I lingered uncertainly near the edges of the crowd, trying to figure out where Rachel's sidekicks (as she referred to Jenny and Thomas as) were. In a short amount of time, several of the fangirls nearly swarmed me, excited to meet 'OneGirl's backup singer,' as they knew me as. Questions flew my way as I looked around desperately for some escape.

“Alright, alright, you're suffocating the girl, good lord,” scolded a familiar voice and I found myself nearly roughly pulled out of the small mob of fangirls. Looking up at my rescuer, I was both relieved and mildly irked to see that it was Rox, albeit with a new hairstyle. “Jeez, it's like throwing a sheep to wolves.”

I wanted to protest being referred to as a sheep, but since she'd gotten me out of that, I chose not to respond.

“What were you doing in there, anyways?” she asked me curiously. “We're allowed backstage, y'know.”

“No, no one told me where I was supposed to go,” I admitted, a little sheepishly.

“Well, you can kick *their* asses, too,” the girl informed me, leading me towards the back of the stage. She flashed a pair of passes at the security guard, and he let us pass. “I was supposed to give this to you,” Rox added, handing one of the passes to me. I slipped it around my neck and allowed myself to be tugged over to where Jenny and Thomas were hanging out.

“You know, one would think that the reporters could come up with questions that didn't involve her sexuality. They've been going on about it for like the past half-hour,” Jenny deadpanned, motioning for us to listen to the conference that was going on just a few feet away.

“OneGirl, aren't you worried that coming out in public will hurt your CD sales?” one reporter called. “Some parents disagree with having their children listening to the music of a publicly pansexual musician.”

“What? No, not really,” Rachel's tone sounded like a mixture of confusion and amusement. “If parents think that they're doing their children a favor by keeping 'em sheltered, they're wrong. If anything, keeping 'em that sheltered is gonna hurt their kids when they move out. 'Cause once those kids are out of that shelter, they're gonna come across gays and lesbians and crossdressers and transvestites, and thanks to their parents, they ain't gonna know how to deal with all that. Besides, a lot of musicians that no one really thinks about are gay, too. I mean, Elton John is gay, and people listen to his music all the time, even if it's only in something like *The Lion King*. Pete Burns, he's a one-hit wonder from the 80's, and he's not only *gay*, but a *crossdresser* at that. So, if parents wanna tell their parents they can't listen to my music 'cause I just happen to have a girlfriend, fine by me, but they'd better know that it ain't gonna stop me from making music, and it ain't gonna stop my CD sales.” She paused to laugh in that charming way I knew so well before adding, amused, “Hell, if anything, it'll make kids more likely to buy my albums, just 'cause their parents said not to...”

“Wow. I think that's the only time I've ever heard Rachel say something serious,” I remarked offhandedly, making the three people I was with laugh a bit.

“Yeah, well, when you hit something she feels strongly about, it's hard to get her to shut up,” Rox smirked. “I used to screw with her about that all the time. Not so much anymore 'cause she's a bit stronger now than she was...”

“I'm not going to ask,” I decided aloud. There were few things that angered me more than hearing about Rachel's ex-girl- and boyfriends.

“Smart girl,” Thomas replied dryly. I colored slightly, but ignored it. It wasn't exactly a secret that I got jealous very easily when it came to my girlfriend. I glanced at the reporters again in time to hear one ask Rachel who her girlfriend was.

The rocker merely smirked and took a sip from the can of Vault (of course) at her table. “I don't kiss and tell. Besides, I don't want her dealing with all the paparazzi photographers I have to put up with when I'm trying to just get into my apartment. Yeah, I'm talking to you,” she added, nodding at some photographers near the front who were constantly snapping away. A ripple of laughter went through the crowd at her comment.

I breathed out a sigh of relief. Jenny, who had been listening to them as well, laughed and clapped me on the shoulder. “See, Rachel may be an ass, but she still has a conscience,” she informed me with a chuckle.

“Thankfully,” I added dryly. I already saw the struggle Rachel had to put up with on a daily basis, just to get out of her apartment without strangling a reporter. “I wouldn't want to have to throttle her even worse than I am already.”

“Yeah, that reminds me, what's with you and Rachel?” Thomas asked me curiously. “Rah just said it was 'girl stuff.’”

I blushed and glanced to the side. “...You could say that.”

“Is this about what she did at school?” Rox asked curiously. I nearly choked on air in surprise. That gave her all the information she needed. She laughed, covering her mouth with her hand so she wouldn't disturb the conference going on only a few feet away from us. Jenny and Thomas regarded us curiously, not really knowing what was going on.

“She told you about that?” I hissed, unsure of whether I was more embarrassed or angry at that.

“Yeah, I asked her why she was at my dorm and she told me about it, saying she needed a place to hide out.” She had the nerve to wink at me before adding, “If it's any consolation, you've got her whipped pretty good.” I rolled my eyes a bit and turned to watch the conference again, though dread crept into the back of my mind. Why would Rachel go to Rox's place? She knew I didn't like the college student, so why wouldn't she 'hide out' at Jenny or Thomas' house? I could tolerate *them*. *They* didn't flirt with my girlfriend.

I assured myself that it was most likely innocent, reminding myself that Leah had told me that they hadn't ever considered getting back together. Besides, Rachel loved me. She'd told me as such. I glanced back at the rocker onstage, who was smiling as she spoke about her music to

the reporters. I shook my head in silence, deciding that I was being paranoid. There wasn't any truth to my nervous musings. There couldn't be. Rachel wouldn't lie to me like that.

CHAPTER 52

I glanced over my shoulder to make sure my girlfriend wasn't anywhere near me before quickly putting in the combination of my locker. I opened it cautiously, but apparently not cautiously enough. Several envelopes fell out of it, landing at my feet. Grumbling in annoyance, I began picking them up. I was getting sick of all this every day.

Some girls had even scented their “love letters” with perfume. Really, now, who the hell actually *does* that?

I sighed, glaring at the letters in my hand before jamming them into the inner pocket of my jacket. I didn't mind getting fanmail, but leaving anonymous love letters in my personal locker was going a bit too far. I shook my head. *And I thought people 'becoming a fan' of me on Facebook was bad.*



“This is ridiculous,” I complained to Jenny over the phone. I had her on speaker so I could check the newest batch of envelopes I'd gotten. Normally, I'd call to whine at Thomas, but he was at his cello lessons at about this time, so I couldn't speak with *him*.

“Yeah, well, price of fame and all that,” she half-yawned in response. I was beginning to wish that I had just waited on Thomas to get home. He would at least have the decency to act a smidge sympathetic. Or at least interested.

“You are no help at all.”

“Sorry, hun.”

“No you ain't.”

“Not really, no.”

I rolled my eyes and went back to reading the letters, occasionally pausing to read one out loud to my bored-sounding friend.

“Jesus!” I coughed as I opened one. “This ‘un went *way* too heavy on the perfume.” I tossed the envelope away, still hacking up a lung, it felt like.

“Ouch. Allergies?” she guessed when my coughing fit didn’t subside.

“I’m not allergic to perfume,” I forced out between coughs. “At least, not when it’s used right.” More than just a few sprays of anything – perfume, cologne, or even air freshener – had the ability to send me into a body-wracking hacking fit.

I grabbed the rest of the relatively scent-free notes from the table and crossed the living room to flop into a leather armchair, sinking comfortably into the fabric. Now away from the offending envelope, my rough coughs dissolved into somewhat labored breaths.

“You alright?” Jenny asked, now sounding genuinely concerned.

“Like hell. I think that one had it out for me,” I growled. I glared at the piece of glued and folded paper, as if that would help.

“Yeah, that makes sense,” my friend replied sarcastically. I could picture her rolling her eyes and smiling as she said that.

“It makes perfect sense.”

“For an asylum inmate.”

“Yeah, well.” I paused to think of a good retort for that. Finding none, I simply explained, “Fuck you,” and hung up the phone. *I win.*

After a few more minutes of going through my notes, I gave up. They were fairly repetitive, so I figured I wouldn’t really miss anything by tossing them out.

So I did.

That chore done, I returned to my armchair, sitting sideways in it so my legs were hanging from the arm rest. I’d have to seriously scrub later to get the perfume scent off of my skin and clothes. The last thing I wanted was for Jessie to smell it on me and jump to conclusions, as she often did. It was bad enough that I got the feeling she didn’t trust me. I didn’t care to verify it.

I sighed, removing my glasses so I could grind the heels of my hands into my closed eyes. It was times like this that I regretted allowing myself to fall for a girl who had been straight before she started dating me. It was almost like a dream that a girl like her would manage to fall

in love with a dyke like me. I couldn't help but feel a deep sense of dread that one day my little lover would wake up.

Then I'd be alone again.

I got up to fetch my keyboard, bringing it back to my living room and setting it up on my coffee table. I always needed to do something with my hands as I pondered. An obnoxious quirk of mine, and one that I *really* wanted to quit, but also one that I knew very well that I wouldn't quit any time soon. I began to play, attempting to drown out my thoughts by mentally echoing the notes I played.

D.

Dyke. She wouldn't really go for a dyke like you. You're just androgynous enough for her to feel comfortable experimenting with you.

A.

Apathetic. You don't do anything for her aside for fucking her. She won't stay with someone like that.

B.

Bastard child. Your parents hate you. They didn't raise a dyke. Why would Jessie stay with someone who doesn't even have a family?

F-sharp.

Sharp tongue. You're a smartass, and a jerk at that. She should be able to be with someone who can treat her like she should be treated.

G.

Guarded. You don't trust her. You don't trust anyone. That's no basis for a good relationship.

D.

Damned. You're the victim of hate crimes just about every day. You don't need to drag her down that road with you.

G.

Gay. Her parents say they're fine with it, but you know they aren't. You recognize that look. Jessie should have a boyfriend, or at least a girlfriend her parents can be proud of.

A.

Average. There's nothing all that special about you. Lots of people could make their own 'one-man-band' online if they wanted. What's keeping her from leaving you for someone... interesting?

“You are no fucking help at all!” I hollered at the keyboard as if it was the instrument's fault that I was having all these terrifying thoughts that could easily come true. I kinda wished it was the keyboard's fault. If that was the case, I could easily just sell the damn thing on eBay and buy a new one, and then I wouldn't have these problems anymore.

I glared at the black-and-white keys, wondering if any of my thoughts were true. What if she was only dating me because I was so masculine? What if I was just an experiment? What if she didn't actually love me? What if, what if, what if...

Growling in annoyance, I slammed my hands into my keyboard, eliciting a stream of sharp notes that rubbed badly together. I winced at the noise and took my hands away quickly to shut the stupid thing up. I sighed, rubbing my eyes roughly under my glasses. She said she loved me, but she could easily mistake curiosity for love. I remembered *my* first girlfriend, too. Her name had been Kristina – Kris for short. I'd thought I'd loved her, too, but I learned after I was disowned that that couldn't be the case.

I'd heard somewhere that if you loved someone, you couldn't live without them. And I could sure enough live without Kris. I didn't enjoy it in the slightest for the first few days, but I quickly got over myself. The point was, I had had enough girl-crushes and boy-crushes to know that Jessie was different.

But I was Jessie's first girlfriend. She could very easily be wrong. What if she was? I felt my stomach drop out; I felt queasy at the thought.

“This is retarded,” I growled to myself, crossing my arms and huddling into my leather jacket. “She's had boyfriends before, and she said I was different.” I was going to make myself believe that the girl loved me if it killed me.

And, damn it, if I had to do this often, it sure as hell would.

CHAPTER 53

I sulked a little as I explained to the chorus teacher in the loudest voice I could manage – a mostly-inaudible whisper – that I'd lost my voice the night before, and couldn't sing today. She regarded me with a good deal of sympathy and said it wasn't my fault, so I would just follow along mentally with the rest of the chorus for the class.

I smiled weakly at her before leaving her office and heading back into the chorus room. I glared at Rachel, sitting at the piano, in disbelief. It just didn't make any sense how someone would be able to perform a three-hour metal concert (complete with her tell-tale death growl and screaming to the audience), attend an after-party that lasted 'till three-thirty in the morning, and still be as awake as she was. She hadn't even lost her voice, for god's sakes!

The concert itself had gone pretty well, aside for a few things she'd done on stage that I didn't agree with. For example, standing on the very edge of the stage, closest to the mosh pit that had formed there at some point, and reached down to high-five some of the more eager fans who had reached up towards her. (She had only been singing last night, instead of playing her guitar as well.) She'd also blown the occasional kiss to her fans, coupled with a flirtatious wink, which had elicited shrieks of approval. This was to say nothing of her less-than-appropriate *dancing...*

“How the hell are you this chipper?” I asked in a low whisper, forcing the sound out of my aching throat.

“Darlin', unlike you, I don't have a regular sleep schedule,” Rachel laughed in her usual husky burr. I picked up on a trace of hoarseness, though, and figured that maybe she wasn't quite as unaffected from all her screaming as I'd first thought. “I've gone like three days without sleep before. One night with little sleep? Not a problem.”

“Okay,” I allowed. She *was* known for her erratic sleep schedule. “Doesn’t explain how you’re still able to talk like that after all the screaming you did,” I pointed out, frowning. Her ability to perform concerts and be relatively unscathed was so impressive, it was annoying.

“Ah, right, I’d forgotten that you’d probably lose your voice, too,” she mused, leaning the piano bench precariously on its back legs. I forced her bench back on all four legs. I didn’t like seeing her do that sort of thing. I could always imagine her falling backwards and hurting herself. That bench was *heavy*, after all.

“Too?” I echoed quietly, confused. “Did one of your band members last night” (they hadn’t been the same musicians as her first concert, aside for the drummer) “lose their voices, too?”

“Yeah. Me.” Her voice was flat, though there was amusement in her dark brown gaze. I raised a brow at Rachel.

“You’re lying.”

“No, seriously, my throat hurts like all get-out,” she admitted dryly. “I just gave myself a home remedy to get through the day. I’ll go get it for ya.”

She stood up and went over to the table that held everyone’s stuff. (The teacher didn’t allow people to keep their purses or anything with them at their chairs. It was a precaution against texting in class.) She unzipped her binder – a task that was deemed somewhat unnecessary due to the fact that the thing was only holding together by duct tape and a prayer – and pulled out two things before returning to me. “Have some Advil,” she instructed, placing the blue gel pill in my hand, “and take it with this,” she also gave me a water bottle that was full of neon green... something.

“Rachel, what is this?” I asked slowly, suspiciously, as I turned the bottle over in my hand.

“Nothing dangerous or illegal, if that’s what you’re insinuating,” she returned dryly, brushing her red-and-black bangs out of her face. “Just do it.”

I hesitated for a moment before placing the pill behind my teeth, washing it down with the cold, green liquid. The effect was almost instantaneous – my aching throat felt pleasantly cooler, if not a bit... odd. “Okay, now tell me what I just drank,” I ordered, handing the bottle back to her.

Rachel shrugged. “Liquid Jell-O.”

If I wasn’t already looking at her, that answer alone would have deserved a double-take. “*What?*” I was a little surprised at how easy it was to talk now.

“Liquid Jell-O,” she repeated, grinning at my expression, I guess. “It’s a trick I picked up when I first started trying to teach myself to sing metal. A big part of metal is screaming, and I couldn’t do that without hurting my throat. So I had to think and think on a way to do it without screwing my throat up. Then I remembered my chorus teacher in eighth grade. She wouldn’t ever let us skip a concert just because we had a sore throat. So if we came in with that excuse, she just gave us liquid Jell-O and made us do it anyways. Apparently, it like coats your throat or something, so you can’t feel the pain when you sing. I tried it out before I started screaming, and it worked like a *charm*. I don’t use it anymore, at least before I do my death growls. I’m used to doing it by now. I still have to drink it *after* the fact, though, so it’s kinda redundant,” she added with a sheepish laugh.

“I swear, you come up with the weirdest ideas,” I sighed, shaking my head at her. My voice was almost normal now, but still a bit hoarse.

“Yeah, but they work, so what’s the problem?” Rachel shrugged and grinned. I would have responded, but the bell rang and I had to go to my seat, preparing to listen to the chorus today.



As chorus let out, I left the room as quickly as I could manage. I still had to get to my advisement (AKA, homeroom) class before I was late. It was odd walking down the halls of my school. It had been that way ever since Rachel had performed her first concert.

Before OneGirl had 'come out,' so to speak, the high school could easily be separated into the normal cliché cliques. You had the jocks, you had the band geeks and the orch dorks and the choir nerds, you had the nerds, the popular girls, the book club... Despite cliques being just annoying clichés of high school, they were in fact, rather true. Once you were in your clique, you stayed there. No talking to people outside of your group of friends, aside for when you got paired up with one of them in class for something. Even then, talking to them inside of school was kinda sketchy.

Rachel had single-handedly managed to change all that. Even if she hadn't tried to.

The school had divided into two distinct groups after her performance. One group was made up of the closeted homosexuals who now felt safe; of men and women alike who had already believed that homosexuals were normal people; and of people who were putting forth an effort to rid themselves of their own homophobia, for Rachel's sake. Kendra was in this group, and a few of my other friends who had 'dumped' me when I came out as well.

Then there was the other group. This group was made up of the homophobes; of the 'fire-and-brimstone' preachers who insisted that Rachel was going to hell; and of the people who insisted that they weren't homophobic, they just didn't like gay people. *Whatever that means.* Kyle and Ashley were still in this group.

Before, you probably couldn't *pay* a jock to talk seriously to a nerd, even if said nerd was a girl. Now I could see one of our cross-country runners conversing shyly with a blushing, soft-spoken girl who was well-known for her near-genius in math. (Now, granted, they'd probably only met due to their shared interest in Rachel's music, but the fact remained the same.)

Before, there was not a chance in hell that you would find two boys kissing in the halls, aside for maybe Thomas and his boyfriend. Now there were three openly gay couples at school, including Thomas.

Rachel was bringing people together. But at the same time, she was pulling people apart. Homophobic jocks refused to use the school showers after practice anymore. (Because, what if there was a gay guy watching them?) Straight girls regarded girls from the non-homophobic group with suspicion, automatically assuming that you couldn't support gay rights without being gay, yourself. There was distrust among the homophobes; now that Rachel had come out as a popular, *gay* musical sensation, who was to say that one of them couldn't be in the closet, as well?

Somehow or another, Rachel managed to upend the caste system of the school in one go. She was pulling people together. She was pushing them apart.

I glanced nervously at a flier that advertised the possible creation of a GSA (that is, Gay-Straight Alliance) club for next year. I couldn't help but doubt that many people would join it, since Rachel wouldn't be here next year. If the famous OneGirl wasn't here to keep the two groups in two groups, people would quickly sink back into their expected roles, their expected cliques.

Rachel was bringing people together. She was keeping them apart.
I could only pray to God that she would bring us together.

CHAPTER 54

Before now, I didn't think that anything would be able to annoy me as much as watching Jessie speaking to Kyle. However, that defensive edge I felt when I saw the two together was at least tripled *today*. I silently cursed Mother Nature's 'gift' to women before stalking up to them. Jessie was looking extremely troubled by something Kyle had told her.

“Haven't I told you before to step off?” I demanded, my lips curling in a light snarl. “Don't *make* me hurt you.”

He scoffed, looking disinterested. “Like you could, dyke,” he sneered. “Besides, I wasn't even talking to you.”

“Yeah, but you're talking to my *girlfriend*, and that pisses me off even worse!” I snapped, bristling. I didn't want this abusive asshole talking to Jessie. She always came away from conversations with him looking rather disturbed at something or another. I felt Jessie grab my hand tightly, as if to hold me back. I knew that, if I really wanted to hurt him, it would take more than just her to keep me from doing so. Hell, I wasn't sure that even she, Thomas, Jenny, Rox, and *Aaron* would be enough to keep me from kicking his obnoxious face in. If I really wanted to, anyways.

“Why don't you just use a leash if you're so worried?” Kyle mocked, folding his arms over his chest.

“Leashes are for dogs, and you're the only bitch I see here,” I returned coldly, smiling icily at him. His eyes narrowed in anger.

“You're one to talk. PMS-ing?” he guessed with a stupid little smirk on his face.

“No, that was last week,” I sneered in return. Kyle fell silent for a moment, surprise briefly flitting over his face. I found that many people were surprised when I mentioned my

period. It's apparently hard to think of me as having one when I'm as masculine as I am. I smirked triumphantly when the boy didn't say anything, looking rather awkward at the direction I turned the conversation into. "Exactly, jerk-off. I'm extremely pissy for the next week. Keep screwing with my girlfriend and I will turn your genitalia into a *hat*."

That snapped him out of it. "Whatever, dyke." He turned to face Jessie. "Just think about what I said." Jessie didn't respond, merely walking with me as I turned to head to the chorus room.

"That was mean," she scolded half-heartedly, referring to my one-up card.

I shrugged, not feeling particularly apologetic. He'd had it coming to him, after all. "Yeah, well, he kept talking to me like I was a guy. I figured he just needed a reminder that I am, in fact, a girl." I winced when I was done speaking, pressing my arm (and, in consequence to the motion, my binder as well) against my lower stomach.

"Ah. Were you serious, though?" I shot her a curious look. "About your period?"

"Oh. Yeah, unfortunately," I growled. "By the way, what did he say to you?"

"Huh?"

"He told you to think about what he said. What did he say?" I elaborated.

"Oh, it's... nothing." Her tone was a little unsure.

"Doesn't *sound* like nothing," I noted.

"It's nothing, really," Jessie insisted. She looked a little annoyed that I didn't believe her, so I just shrugged and tugged my hand back as we got to the chorus room. Most of the girls smiled or waved at me and gave me a 'good morning' that went mostly ignored. Honestly, when I came in with my *girlfriend*, one would think that they'd have the decency to tone down the flirting. I loved her dearly, and there wasn't any way that I'd leave her for one of them.

I wish Jessie believed me when I vocalized those thoughts to her. She was always paranoid that I was looking at other girls, or even other boys. It physically *hurt*, to have her trust me as little as she seemed to. I never told her that, though. I knew she didn't do it on purpose.



"Fellatio."

"Cunnilingus."

"I think fellatio wins this one."

"What? Not a chance, gay-boy, I won that round."

"Like hell!"

"I'd ask what you two are doing, but I'm not sure I want to know," Jenny commented as she sat down next to me and Thomas. We were waiting in the carpool lane for her sister to come pick me and her up. Someone had cut the brake line to my truck, so I wasn't going to be driving *that* to school anymore. At least, not until it got fixed.

"We were having an argument," I informed her with a grin.

"It was a discussion," Thomas defended. He liked to be known as the pacifist, so he never admitted to getting into arguments.

"Whatever, gay boy," I rolled my eyes at him, irked. "It was an argument. Now shut your face."

"About what?" Jenny asked, amused at my mood swings.

"We're arguing over whether lesbian sex or gay sex has funnier terminology. Right now we're on 'fellatio' and 'cunnilingus.'"

"I think Rachel wins this round," Jenny commented, trying hard not to laugh. I grinned triumphantly. "Why are you two arguing over something like that, anyways?"

"Well, I asked Thomas how his date went, and he told me in great detail," I replied, as if his sex life was something we spoke about often. And it was. "And, well, it was all downhill from there. At least it kept the fangirls away."

"So, how do you two feel about random subject changes?" Thomas asked abruptly. I laughed a bit.

"Pick a different subject, then," I half-ordered him, grinning.

"Fine. Are you ready for the Spring Concert for chorus?" he asked, looking curiously at me.

"Yeah, pretty much," I nodded. Then I paused. "Wait, when is that, anyways?"

Thomas and Jenny stared at me in disbelief. "Please tell me you're joking," Jenny stated flatly.

"No, seriously, when is it?" I could feel the faint stirrings of dread in my stomach.

"Tonight?" Thomas said slowly, as if talking to a total idiot.

“Ah, crap!” I hollered, before burying my face in my binder to give a quick stream of swears. I lifted my head enough to ask, “Seriously? Tonight?”

“Yes, Rachel. I can’t believe you forgot about it!” Thomas scolded, shaking his head at me.

“*Craaap*,” I growled, smacking myself with my piece-of-crap binder. Seriously, though, how could I have forgotten about that? “Jenny, new plan. You’re taking me *and* our resident sparkle-boy back to my apartment.”

“Huh? Oh. What?” Thomas rambled, having tuned me out until I referred to him by the nickname I knew he hated.

“Alright,” Jenny agreed, laughing at Thomas’ confused look. “No worries, sparkle-boy, it’s nothing you haven’t done before.”



I muttered several choice words to myself as I stalked irritably down the hall. A few parents were filtering past me on their way to the auditorium; most were stopping and staring at me in obvious disbelief. I doubted they heard my quiet bitch-fest, though. They were staring for a *completely* different reason.

As I approached the chorus room for a last-second rehearsal, I quietly plead to whatever god was looking out for me that no one would notice me.

... Yeah. Not a chance of that.

“Oh. My. *God!*”

I don’t think I’ve ever seen a room full of teenagers go so quiet so fast.

I didn’t blame them for staring, not entirely. I hadn’t worn a dress in *years*. The dress was solid black, with a lower neckline than I was comfortable with and a dip in the back that I *really* didn’t care for. The dress drew in just under my bust (making for a very pleased-looking Thomas, who insisted that it worked well with my figure) and flared slightly at the hips. It went to the floor, hiding my feet from view.

And I *hated it*.

After a moment or two of the gawking, I barked at them to cut it out. They jumped and went about their business, sneaking not-particularly-furtive glances at me. My ears felt warm; I knew they, if not my face as well, were red.

“Um. Wow,” came a familiar voice from off to my right. I relaxed a bit. I could, at least, tolerate my girlfriend. She looked me over in surprise. “I don’t think I’ve seen you in a dress. *Ever*. Even *with* your jacket.” I wasn't about to wander around with my back exposed and no jacket.

“Yeah, well, I don’t like dresses. This one, especially.” I glared down at the black dress, as if my discomfort wasn't obvious enough. “It's *oozing* in estrogen.”

Jessie laughed at that way of saying it. “You are such a boy,” she teased, giving me a gentle shove.

“Yes, well, I'll survive. I did manage to retain *some* masculinity,” I smirked. The redhead raised a brow at me.

“Really. What did you do?” she asked, suddenly suspicious. My grin widened a bit. “Oh, now I'm worried.”

I lifted the hem of my dress a few inches and Jessie buried her forehead into her palm. “Good lord, Rachel. Combat boots? Really?” she sighed, shaking her head at me. “You *would* do something like that.”

“Yeah, well, just be glad the dresses are floor-length,” I replied dryly, dropping the skirt again. “You're talking to someone who's gone to a formal party in a short blue cocktail dress and a pair of motorcycle boots.” Jessie just shook her head and hurried to her spot on the risers as the teacher came in, looking about as stressed as any self-respecting choir teacher would look the night of a concert.

“Rachel, take off those necklaces,” she ordered absently as she passed by me. I glanced down. My cross necklace and Jessie's locket were still around my neck; the pendants hung loosely between my breasts. I rolled my eyes a little at the order and turned both necklaces around, so the pendants were tucked under the short sleeves of my dress. I sat down at the piano and glanced at Jessie. She'd evidently seen me hide the necklaces as opposed to taking them off like the teacher had asked. Our eyes met for a moment, before Jessie turned away with a tiny smile that I didn't really understand.

CHAPTER 55

I watched Rachel in silence as she released some pent-up frustrations on her trap set, the sticks bashing into the drums and cymbals about as hard and fast as she could get them to hit. She'd once told me that, while guitar was her favorite instrument to play, her drums were the best instrument to get rid of stress. I don't even think she was paying much attention to me, with her large black headphones covering her ears and her eyes mostly closed as she focused on a particularly difficult-sounding section of whatever song she was listening to.

I sighed to myself, lying back on her dark, mussed bedspread. I turned a little so that I could still keep an eye on her as she played. I took a short breath in, taking in the soft scent that was distinctly hers. It was an odd smell, yes, but it defined Rachel so well. Hard and soft. Sharp and smooth. Nothing like Kyle's. I focused blankly on the bass drum as I remembered our conversation just a few days ago.



I smiled to myself as I paused to admire the newest concert promotion poster that was placed near the school store. The school didn't handle her ticket sales anymore – they had only handled them for that first concert because it had been a fundraiser – so they now just advertised Rachel's various concerts. I had to admit that this poster was especially interesting.

Rachel was crouched in the center of the poster, dressed in an army-style camouflage outfit. Her skin looked dark with dust and dirt, with a black line smeared under each eye. Her red-and-black hair was more unkempt than usual, her glasses askew. A heavy-looking flagpole rested against her shoulder, bearing a torn and ragged American flag. Her gloved hand was raised to her forehead in a sarcastic salute; her palm faced the viewer, and all her fingers but her middle were closed into a fist. She smiled grimly at the camera. Somewhere near the bottom was the name of the concert in army-styled lettering: Critical Acclaim.

It looked pretty badass, I had to admit.

“Hey.” I stiffened at the sound of the familiar voice.

“Kyle,” I greeted flatly, hesitantly. I knew Rachel didn’t like him talking to me. I didn’t mind; I didn’t like talking to him, either.

“Haven’t talked to you in a while. How have you been?” the boy asked me, smiling. I was a little taken aback by his attitude. I knew that he hated anyone who wasn’t heterosexual, so why was he bothering with me?

“Fine,” I allowed slowly, edging away from him. “What do you want?” Might as well get to the point.

“Well – look,” he sighed, looking a bit regretful. “I don’t want to hurt you or anything, but I figured you should know... I think Rachel’s cheating on you.”

That was news to me. “*What?*”

“You know that other girl she hangs out with?” I nodded, figuring he meant Jenny. “Did you know they used to date?”

Oh, is *that* what he meant? Jeez. I was almost worried for a second, there. “Yes, Kyle, I knew that Rachel and Jenny used to date,” I informed him, annoyed. “They’re just friends now.”

“I don’t mean *that* girl, I mean the other one,” he frowned, obviously not pleased that I didn’t believe him instantly, as he’d obviously expected me to do.

“Which one?”

“I don’t know her name,” Kyle explained. “But she’s tall and had like green bangs or something like that?”

Crap. “Rox?” I ventured.

“Yeah! I think that’s it. Anyways, Derek said he saw those two on a date at the mall.”

“How do you know it was a date?” I asked hesitantly. I doubted that a guy could really tell whether two girls were dating or just friends – it was a blurry line, after all.

“They were walking around and holding hands and laughing and stuff like that,” Kyle elaborated, looking at me as if he pitied me and my cheating girlfriend.

“So? Kendra and I do that all the time,” I informed him, though I couldn’t help but feel panic creeping into the back of my mind.

“Derek said he saw Rox touching her.”

My throat clenched for an instant. I reminded myself that the girl randomly molested Rachel often, that my girlfriend always pushed her away, and forced myself to relax. "I doubt that."

"Well, I just don't want you to get hurt," Kyle replied. He reached out to touch my face and I flinched away. "I still really like you."

"I'm not interested," I muttered softly. I had just about the sweetest, most loving girlfriend in the world. I wasn't about to give that up just because Kyle lied to me about her.

"Haven't I told you before to step off? Don't *make* me hurt you." Rachel's protective voice snarled. I gave a mental sigh of relief; I wasn't sure what else he would have said had she not stepped in. Fortunately, though, Kyle proved his hatred of gay people as he snarled right back at her in a voice that was *nothing* like the one he'd used with me.



I came out of my thoughts as her drumming stopped. I playfully applauded her after she removed her headphones and hit a button on her computer. Rachel just stuck her studded tongue out at me.

"What song was that?" I asked, rolling onto my side.

"Just something I've been working on," she replied, suddenly a bit shy.

"That doesn't answer my question," I pointed out dryly, brushing my red hair from my face.

"I've... been trying to write a song," Rachel admitted, giving a nonchalant half-shrug.

That got my attention. From what I understood, she only ever played covers. I sat up. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. I've got the music and crap all worked out, I just don't really have the lyrics," she explained, putting her drumsticks up. "I mean, I have the chorus done, but I have no verses, no bridge, no anything-other-than-the-chorus." She frowned. "It's starting to piss me off."

"I would imagine." She was a perfectionist when it came to her music. "Can I hear what you've got so far?"

Rachel hesitated. "I guess," she relented, taking her guitar from its hook on the wall. "Hand me that plastic cup over there?" She motioned to an orange plastic cup on the shelf above her bed. I sat up to grab it, then passed it to her. "Thank ya." She pulled a few things from it, then

handed it back to me so I could replace it on her shelf. I turned back to see her putting small, silver things onto the first three fingers of her right hand.

"What are you doing?" I asked curiously, crossing my legs "indian-style" to watch her.

She raised her right hand to show me that she'd put silver fingernail-looking things on the tips of her fingers. "Fingerpicks. It's got some complicated guitaring, and I'm too slow to play it with a regular pick, so I have to finger-style it," she replied, brushing her bangs out of her face. Then she showed me a glass tube-like thing that she'd slid onto her left ring finger. "And the intro has a few slide sections, so." She shrugged nonchalantly.

"Ah," I said, as if I understood *any* of that. I never understood her when she went into detail about her instruments.

Rachel went to her computer to make a few adjustments, then plugged her guitar into its amp. She finally pressed a key on her computer, then sat back in her chair.

The song started out with a slow, high-pitched melody that wavered and trembled a bit as Rachel gently stroked the strings with the glass piece. It made the hair on the nape of my neck stand up, and I couldn't decide whether it was a good thing or not. From the computer speakers, I could hear the soft cymbal of her trap set coming in softly, growing louder very quickly. With a pause that couldn't have been more than a second, Rachel discarded the slide and began playing something considerably louder, faster, and more like what I was used to her playing. I watched, nodding absently to myself, and wondered briefly why she thought she needed the fingerpicks. I'd seen her play faster with a regular pick. Then, as if she read my mind, I found out why.

I raised my eyebrows in surprise as she broke into a sudden burst of rapid playing, fingers flicking over the frets, the metal picks darting across the strings. Rachel's brow was adorably furrowed as she concentrated on the (what was the term she'd used?) face-melter. A few seconds later, she switched back to playing the thick, distorted chords that she'd played earlier, between the slide guitar and the frantic finger-styling, and began to sing in a soft, unnerving half-voice.

"*This is the way the world ends, this - this is the way the world ends.*" The slight stutter was obviously intentional, but it only upped the intimidation factor of the song itself. "*This is the way the world ends, this is the way -*" the music stopped "*- the world ends.*" Rachel played a few chords, each one lower than the last. The final chord hung in the air, and she plucked out an eerie, high-pitched melody, breathing out the final phrase: "*Not with a bang - but with a*

whimper." I have no idea why, but if that was the chorus, I think I'd be terrified to hear the rest of the lyrics.

Fortunately, that part of the song only happened one other time. The whole song couldn't have been more than five minutes, but it was just about the creepiest five minutes of my life. The song ended with a second slide solo, the last note wavering softly before it faded out.

Rachel tapped a few keys on her computer, then turned to face me. "So...?" she prompted, removing the fingerpicks with a little difficulty.

"I think it's going to give me nightmares," I informed her with an amused smile.

Rachel's weak smile faded. "Ah. That bad?"

"No, that's not what I meant," I amended hastily, mentally chastising myself for saying something that could be taken like that. "I meant it's really..." I made a random waving gesture with my hand, trying to think of a word. "*Haunting*, I guess. I'm kinda curious how the rest of the song would come out."

She chuckled softly, dryly. "That'd be two of us, then. A lyricist, I am not." She hung her guitar back up and went to put her picks and slide back into the cup.

Watching her, I couldn't help but wonder if what Kyle had told me held any truth to it. She couldn't go behind my back and then act so casually like this. Could she?

"Rachel..." I started, trailing off uncertainly. I didn't want to make her mad by accusing her of something that a known homophobe told me.

"Hm?" I hesitated, and she looked down at me curiously. "What is it?"

I breathed in, attempting to work up the nerve to ask her. "...weren't you going to do some rehearsal with me today? For the 'Critical Acclaim' concert?" I couldn't do it. Maybe it was because I was afraid of the answer. I was beginning to understand what Rox meant about breaking up with Rachel because of her jealousy. It physically *hurt* to think of her with anyone else.

Rachel didn't seem to notice anything, simply grinning wickedly at me. "Yes, well. It's going to make you really mad and really dizzy, so I decided to put it off until tomorrow."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked suspiciously.

She didn't even reply. She just kept that evil grin on her face.

CHAPTER 56

I placed the ice pack on Jessie's forehead, trying not to laugh. I had to admit that getting glared at by the little redhead was enough to even unnerve *me* a bit, but seeing her dizzy, lying on my couch, and glaring at me (well, not me; more like somewhere over my shoulder) was *really* funny.

"Okay, so, no windmill-headbanging for you, then," I snickered, marking it out on my paper. She shot me a "I-will-kill-you-when-I-can-get-up" look. "What? How was I supposed to know you had balance problems?"

"Why are you making me do this?" Jessie whined, looking about as pitiful as I'd ever seen her. She pressed the ice pack firmly against her forehead. "Geez, my head hurts..."

"Because you have shitty stage presence," I replied dryly, putting my hands on my hips.

"Well, gee, don't hold back," she muttered. "What does that even mean?"

"It means you just stand there, sing, and generally look really boring. Here, I'll show you." I went back into my room to grab my guitar, and threw the strap over my shoulder. I returned, the instrument hanging from my shoulder. "Now, see, this is an example of bad stage presence." I paused, attempting to remember the hours of lessons I'd been given several years ago about 'proper stance.' I straightened my back and stuck out my chest a little, allowing the guitar to fall into place at my ribs. I positioned my feet shoulder's width apart and then readjusted my guitar strap.

I began playing the riffs of the chorus of 'Scream,' my fingers bending the strings as I strummed with quick flicks of the wrist like I had been taught. I sang the words like I always did, firmly and with a slight growl in my voice, but I kept my facial expression neutral, like I would in choir. When I stopped playing, Jessie was in the middle of a giggle fit on the couch, trying hard to keep quiet. I had to admit that I probably looked ridiculous.

"Now, see? That's how I was taught to play and sing. But I don't do that, now do I? I'd look like an idiot," I pointed out with a dry smile. "I'm a *metal* musician. It's meant to be *epic*. And so I play more like this."

My back went back into its usual slouch, and I put my foot on my coffee table, resting part of it on that knee. I played the exact same riffs, bending the strings as I'd done before, but instead of playing with quick, efficient strums, I slammed my hand down in a kind of fist-pump, thrashing the pick into the strings. I banged my head in time with the first two slides, before beginning to sing. This time, I furrowed my brow slightly, my lips curled into a sinister grin. I stopped playing when the chorus was over, and then looked back at Jessie.

"See? Doesn't sound any different, just looks more badass," I teased, brushing my bangs out of my eyes. I went back to my room to replace my guitar, continuing to speak even as I did. "But people go to metal concerts to see badass musicians, not some musicians who just stand around the entire time." I returned, cracking my stiff knuckles. "That'd be a waste of a ticket."

"You realize that the audience is only paying attention to *you*, right?" she pointed out flatly.

"And that's where you're wrong," I informed her smugly. "On the DVDs of the live performances we did, you got more screen time than most backing vocalists do."

"Your point?"

"My point *is*, you're just as big a part of these concerts as I am." Okay, well, that wasn't exactly true, but if it got her to quit just standing around, then I'd say it. "And people pay attention to you even more than the actual musicians, since you're in the front of the stage with me. And it looks awkward for everyone to be rocking out except one of the people in the *front*. If I wanted you to be still the whole time, I woulda put you in the back with the drummer." I grinned at the joke.

She didn't say anything.

"You ready to do some more?" I asked curiously. "Or are you still dizzy?"

"I'm fine now," Jessie replied after another moment, sitting up. "But no more headbanging for now. I think it gave me whiplash."

I laughed. “It *will* do that,” I admitted, amused. “But fine, no more headbangs for today.” I paused to give her a wicked grin. I knew she was gonna hate what I said next. “Now we’re going to work on your screaming.”

Jessie groaned miserably, flopping back on her back. “Sadist. Why can’t we ever do something that doesn’t hurt?” she complained.

“I’d answer, but I’d twist your words and then you’d smack me,” I smirked, scooping her up. She gave a little yelp of surprise and flailed her arms at me, raining harmless little hits on my head and shoulders. I just laughed at her as I carried her back to my bedroom and tossed her onto the bed. Jessie grunted as she hit the mattress and bounced a little. She glared at me again as she forced herself into a sitting position.

“Which song are you going to make me lose my voice on first?” she asked, crossing her ankles.

“The concert’s namesake,” I replied with an impish grin. “You even get your own solo.”

“Does said solo involve screaming?” Jessie asked suspiciously.

“Of course.”

Only a few minutes later, I had to start correcting her on multiple things. “See, you’re keeping your vowels dark on that phrase,” I pointed out. “Sounds very pretty, but it’s not what we’re trying to get here. Tighten up the jaw a bit and keep your eyebrows down.”

“Drop the octave; you’re singing falsetto where it should be more of an alto. Again.”

“Keep the tip of your tongue behind your teeth on that note; it should help keep the tone a bit brighter.”

“Can you add a little vibrato there? That scream is supposed to waver a bit.”

Half an hour of my constant critique and Jessie looked positively incensed. That was good; I always thought she sang metal better when she was pissy. Probably because she was too busy being mad at me to notice how she was singing.

“You don’t sing that phrase, Jessie, you scream it – see, I added a note there.” I tapped a spot on the sheet music I’d given her. “Try it again.” She was so mad that I was actually impressed with the growl in her voice as she sang. It sounded pretty awesome. “Now, see, that’s what I’m looking for,” I informed her smugly. “I don’t get why you don’t just do that in the first place.”

“You are a pain in the ass!” Jessie snarled at me.

“Yeah, but it gets you to sing right, don’t it?” I smirked. She just gave a small scream of frustration into my pillow. I laughed, but my cell phone cut me off with a burst of unintelligible screaming and guitars. I picked it up and flipped it open. “Yo.”

“Sup, Rah,” Rox greeted lazily. “Is our resident redhead over there with you?”

I glanced curiously at Jessie out of the corner of my eye before correcting Rox's nickname for my girlfriend. "She has a name. You realize."

"Answer the damn question."

I snickered. "Yeah, she's here. Why?"

"Tell her to meet me out front in like five minutes. She's supposed to be hanging with me today. Didn't she tell you?" Rox wondered.

"Obviously not, smart-ass," I returned flatly. "But, yeah, I'll tell her. Later."

"Yeah."

I snapped the phone closed and turned to look at Jessie. "That was Rox. She says you two are hanging out today?" I prompted curiously.

"Oh! Yeah, I forgot about that," she admitted sheepishly. "I figured that I might as well try to get used to being around her." She didn't look at me as she said that. I laughed, figuring that she was a little embarrassed about being constantly jealous of the girl.

"Good to know," I smiled, genuinely pleased that she would try to at least manage to tolerate the college student. "She said you should meet her out front in a minute. You should go ahead and get your various manner of crap together."

Jessie nodded, standing and going back into the living room while I put my guitar, amp, and various cords up. It was nice to know that she was going to try and get over her not-too-subtle jealousy of my former girlfriend for me. I smiled to myself as I followed her back downstairs. I pulled her aside, so the photographers who were apparently staked out outside my apartment couldn't see us through the glass front doors. I could see Rox's car lingering outside.

"See you later, then, darlin'," I whispered, kissing her softly. Jessie returned it shyly before hurrying out the door, amidst camera flashes from the paparazzi as she clambered into the car. I chuckled softly as Rox sped out of the way of the cameras, then headed back up to my

room. There was still a considerable amount of planning to be done regarding my concert in a few weeks.

Not to mention I still had Calculus homework to do.

CHAPTER 57

I wasn't really sure what I expected to see when I entered Rox's dorm, but it certainly wasn't something so... calm.

Girls wandered around the place, some chatting animatedly with each other, some working feverishly on their laptops, and a few passed out on the couches. Just what anyone would expect from a girl's dorm. I guess, in a way, I'd expected the student to live somewhere that was as wild as she was - I knew she drank casually, and I think she smoked, too. I just couldn't imagine her living in what was essentially just a regular college dormitory.

Her room was not particularly different, in that it was just a regular room. I could easily tell which half of the room was hers, though; one side of the room was obviously very feminine, whereas the other side was more like Rachel's, with band posters all over the walls and an unmade bed. There was a felt-top table between sides of the room - I assumed it belonged to both of them.

"I didn't know you play drums," I noted absently, motioning towards what seemed to be a trap set in the corner of her side of the room. She grinned.

"Yeah. Who the hell do you think taught Rachel how to play?"

"I dunno," I admitted. "I thought she paid for lessons."

"Ah, no. She was broke then," Rox informed me, going to a mini-fridge on her side of the room. She pulled out a bottle of beer for herself, then offered me one. I declined quickly. I hadn't ever drunk before, and I knew she and Rachel both would tease me for ages if I got drunk off beer. "And so she asked me if I knew anyone who could teach her how to play drums for cheap. I offered my services and taught her how to play." She shrugged. "So she's been playing for three years. First year she was doing the whole 'OneGirl' thing, I guess she was using a program on her

computer to create the drumline, 'cause she sure as hell couldn't play a trap set those first few albums she did..." Rox snapped the top off of her bottle and took a sip, then took something from a drawer on her desk. "So. You play any cards?"

"Like what?" There weren't all that many games that only needed two people that I knew of. Poker and B.S. weren't all that fun with two players.

"Hm. Ever played war?" Rox asked casually, setting her bottle down. She began shuffling quickly, much like a casino dealer would shuffle. I raised my eyebrows at her, and she grinned. "I'm usually the bartender at my work, but we have a small casino there, too, so I play dealer whenever one of our regular dealers are out. I just like showing off. So, war?"

"Sure," I agreed, sitting at the poker table. Rox sat opposite me, and quickly dealt the cards, showing off her card-based skills once again.

"And, go." We flipped our cards. She had an ace, against my five. Rox scooped the cards up and slipped them under her deck. We flipped our top cards again. She won. Again. Seven flips later, I'd lost each hand. Badly. Something clicked then.

"You're cheating!" I exclaimed suddenly, glaring. She merely laughed.

"Well, I must admit, you caught on faster than I thought you would," Rox informed me with a grin. She swept up the cards again, not even bothering to flip her next card. We both knew it would be a higher card than mine. "I like to see how quickly people pick up on that. It's mostly just me using a few sleight-of-hand tricks, instead of like stacking the deck or something. I'll play nice now." She chuckled and began shuffling again. "Rachel wasn't kidding when she said you were slow to pick up on shit like that..."

I bristled.

"Oh, calm down. She didn't mean it in a mean way, more like..." Rox made a random gesture with her hand as she took a thoughtful sip from her bottle. "In an affectionate kinda way? I guess. I mean, when I was dating her, we still called each other 'bitch' and 'slut,' so." She shrugged. "To each their own. So, let's play for real, then." Her quick hands began shuffling again. "Now, see, Jessie - "

"*Jessica.*" Rachel was the only one who I let call me that.

"Whatever. Anyways, like I was saying before I was interrupted," she began dealing the cards and shot me a dry glare, "I'm not an idiot. I know you don't like me. So, I'd like to know your ulterior motive before we continue."

I blinked, surprised. I'd thought that I had been behaving rather well.

"Come on, you can't expect me to believe that you'd actually choose to hang out with me of your own accord."

"I guess... I want to talk about Rachel," I admitted quietly, focusing on the cards instead of her.

"I figured as such," the college-goer remarked honestly, gathering her own deck and straightening it out. "So. Rachel. She makes for a pretty broad subject in and of herself, so you need to be more specific." We began the monotonous game of flipping and picking up cards.

"How did you two meet?" I kept my eyes on the cards, not wanting to look up at her.

"Hm. Well, she was a sophomore when I first met her. I was a senior at the time. If memory serves, she'd just had that bad break-up with Jenny. And, well, let me put it this way: y'know how strong she acts now?"

"Yeah." I'd always admired her for her 'up yours' attitude when it came to intolerance.

"Ah, yeah, now think complete opposite." I glanced up at her, startled. I really couldn't imagine a weak Rachel. Rox had a wistful smile on her face. "She was still suffering from the situation with her family, and having to break her best friend's heart helped none. I felt sorry for her. She was too young to have her life go to shit again and again like it was. So I pretty much offered my shoulder to her, since Jenny wasn't in any condition to be offering sympathy, especially not to the girl who broke her heart. So we became friends really quick, since I was like the only other lesbian at school, and thus the only other person who would talk to her. Then she asked me about drums, and I started teaching her how to do that." I nodded, picking up the cards as I listened. "I decided that she was really cute, and asked her out to a party that was going on that weekend. We both got a little tipsy, and ended up in my bed by the next morning. She freaked out a bit, but I managed to calm her down after a day or two. So we went out a few more times, and then I just flat-out told her, 'you're my girlfriend now.' And we went from there. Of course, since I was forevermore dragging her to parties and shit with people who didn't care for

gay people, Rachel learned real quickly to take everything anyone said to her with multiple grains of salt."

"Is that why she's such a smart-ass now?" I asked as we both laid three cards down.

"More or less. She'd always been a smart-ass, I just had to help teach her to be one with people other than her friends." Rox rolled her eyes briefly, tucking her green-dyed hair behind her ears. "And it worked pretty damn well."

"No kidding," I snorted, pushing my four cards to her. Rachel was certainly that, if nothing else.

"Yep. But I can't take all the credit. She made most of the change from 'shy church girl' to 'badass rocker' on her own. Her tattoo? Her idea. Various piercings? Also her idea. Granted, she made me come with her to get the tattoo and the first three of her piercings, but I hadn't even suggested them."

"And her tongue stud?" I was a little curious as to whose idea *that* was. The very thought of putting a metal stud through my tongue made me wince. Not that I minded it on *Rachel* in the slightest.

"Her idea too, but she got the idea from what's-his-name... uh, I think it was Ashton," she mused to herself.

"Who?" I asked, brow furrowing in slight confusion.

"Ashton, the transgender she dated for a few weeks. His name was actually Ashley, but since that's a girl's name, he changed it to Ashton."

I hadn't ever heard about *that*. "Oh."

"So. Anything else you wanna know about our resident media star?" Rox asked casually, drinking from her half-empty bottle.

I hesitated for an instant. "Yeah." I kept my eyes turned towards the cards again. "How did you break up with her?"

CHAPTER 58

"Any chance we could get the stage lights to flicker with the drumline there?" I asked the tech I was with, David, as I leaned over him to look at the computer screen.

"No, not at all," he returned flatly, thought his quick fingers tapping at the keyboard begged to differ. I rolled my eyes. Obviously karma thought it funny to pair me – a smart-ass – up with every other sarcastic person in the world when it came to me having to work with people.

"Watch it, buddy. There are like a billion and four other techs in the world I could hire," I reminded him, giving him a light smack on the shoulder with the back of my hand.

"None as good as me, though," David replied smugly, not looking at me.

"Definitely none as good as you. They're all *better*." That wiped the grin off his face.

"Ouch. And here I thought that pissy streak was all acting," he mused, sitting up to observe as he tested the simulation for the lights we were working on.

"Sorry to disappoint." Actually, I wasn't, but I figured he knew that. I glanced down as my phone began to vibrate in my pocket. "Hold that thought."

I walked a few feet away before flipping my phone open, ignoring David's protests that I wasn't supposed to have my cell phone in here. I was in the technology club at school. I knew that my phone wasn't gonna bother the computers in the slightest. If anything, the only thing it *would* bother would be the speakers.

I held the phone to my ear. "Yo."

"Hey, it's Jessie," came the slightly fuzzy voice. I frowned at the lack of reception and walked a little ways away, checking my signal again.

“No, really? Amazing. I would never have recognized the voice of my own girlfriend,” I returned in a deadpan tone.

“Jerk.”

“Just a bit. So, need something?” I leaned against the door, keeping an eye on the four or five techs I was working with today.

“Yeah, I was wondering if you were free tonight?” Jessie inquired hopefully.

I sighed, shaking my head as though she could see me. “Sorry, darlin’, I’m booked. I’m up here at the theater we’re gonna be performing at. I’m busy all day today working with the techs. Why?”

“Oh. I just wanted to know if you wanted to go out to a movie or something tonight.” She sounded a little disappointed, and I could figure out why. It’d been a while since we’d gone out on a date; just the two of us. I shifted a little, feeling guilty. I’d neglected to tell her that I was gonna be gone all Saturday, after all.

“Any chance of a rain check? I’m free on Tuesday,” I offered, ignoring the curious looks some of the guys were shooting me. “I’ll pick up the check and everything.”

“Okay,” Jessie agreed, sounding a touch happier, but still let down for the most part.

“Alright. See you Monday, then,” I hinted that I needed to go. “Love ya.”

“Love you too. Bye.”

I snapped the phone shut, to several cutesy ‘awwws’ from the techs. “Oh, shut ya traps,” I growled, my accent twisting my words a bit. “Haven’t y’all ever heard’a privacy?”

“Haven’t you ever heard of ‘no cell phones in the tech room?’” David returned dryly.

“Like it’s gonna bother anyone,” I snorted, going back over to him.

"You in trouble?" he assumed, smirking good-naturedly at me.

"Oh, please, I haven't done anything in like the past week that would warrant my getting in trouble."

"No?" David raised his eyebrow at me.

"No." Well, from what I remembered, I hadn't done anything. There was always the chance that I just didn't remember. "Now piss off, we have work to do."

That settled, I went back to exchanging sarcastic banter with David as we continued working on the light in accordance with the set list.



"Sorry I'm late," I apologized to Jessie as I hurried to her. "I got held up at the photo-shoot-thing I was at." Fortunately, I was only a few minutes late, but considering that *I* was the one who suggested going out with her today, I wasn't pleased with it. Damn photographers kept insisting that I just take *one more* picture. I hadn't noticed the time until just a few minutes ago. I was sure I broke a traffic law or three getting here when I did.

"It's fine," she assured me with a soft sigh. I gathered that that was mostly a lie. Then what I'd said seemed to filter into her mind. "Wait. Photo-shoot?" Jessie echoed, bemused.

"Yeah, I forgot about it until like this morning, an' that's why I didn't tell ya about it. Coca-Cola's sponsoring me for sake of advertisement. Guess what I'm getting out of it?" I grinned, walking into the theater with her.

"Oh, no. The answer eludes me." I laughed aloud at her uncharacteristically deadpan tone. *I'm rubbing off on her.*

"Mostly free Vault, some new amps and mics, and a nice check, but I also got this kick-ass t-shirt." I plucked at the black t-shirt that I was wearing under my jacket. It wasn't so awesome when all you could see was the front, which was blank except for a small 'Vault' logo on the left breast of it.

"Why is it a kick-ass t-shirt?" Jessie asked curiously, figuring that I wouldn't call it that just because of the little logo on the front.

I just grinned, shrugging my jacket off my shoulders so she could see the back of my shirt. A guitar took up the entirety of the back of the shirt. It looked to be a Flying V guitar at first glance, but the body of the guitar was made of a Vault logo. Green and yellow 'lightning' surrounded the guitar. Above it read "VAULT;" below it was the phrase "Just do it."

"Damn," my girlfriend shook her head in amusement. "That *is* a pretty kick-ass shirt."

"Ain't it?" I agreed, grinning. I was *very* pleased with it. I glanced around at the movie posters lining the walls. "So, any movie in particular that you've been dyin' to see? 'Cause I dunno what half these are about."

"You didn't look at what was playing before you came?" she teased, elbowing me in the side. I gave her a half-hearted smack to the shoulder in response.

"May I remind you that I got here late anyways? When the hell would I have had the time to check what was playing?" I reminded her dryly, tugging my jacket back up on me.

"Yesterday? The day before?"

"The day before, I was working with a bunch of sarcastic-as-fuck techies," I corrected dryly. I hadn't really enjoyed working with them, but they knew what they were doing, so I didn't mind it too much.

"Even so."

"Did *you* even look at what was playing?" I raised a brow at her. She faltered, and I grinned triumphantly. "Didn't think so. So, pick something."

A few minutes later, we (well, mostly she; I hadn't heard of more than maybe two of these movies) decided on *The Time Traveler's Wife*. I didn't have any problem with it, considering I'd actually heard that the movie was pretty good. I bought our tickets, trying hard to ignore the quiet click of various cell phone cameras aimed at us.

"This is ridiculous," I muttered to Jessie as I handed her her ticket.

"Could be worse," she reminded me, trying to be helpful.

"Oh, well, now you've jinxed it," I complained playfully, lightly tugging her pony-tail. "That's almost as bad as saying 'what could go wrong.'"

"Hm, you may be right. Now, watch, there's gonna be like six reporters out here whenever the movie's over."

"Wouldn't surprise me. Also wouldn't surprise me if they're the same six reporters who hang outside my apartment sometimes," I shook my head in vague irritation. I didn't care for being blinded by cameras whenever I left my building. I was beginning to make myself take different routes to my truck just so I wouldn't have to put up with them.

"I'm just glad I don't have to put up with them," Jessie remarked with a teasing grin.

"Don't brag, God will hate you," I replied absently before heading to the theater the usher pointed us towards.

The movie was a little over an hour and a half long, and it was dark outside when it was over. The film was alright, if not a little sappy for my tastes. Jessie, though, proved once again to be way more girly than me. She was still sniffing as we left the theater.

"You are such a hopeless romantic," I teased, offering her a tissue from the travel pack that was in one of my jacket pockets. (I keep all sorts of random shit in them, okay?)

"Oh, shut up," Jessie mumbled, wiping her eyes with it. "How the hell are *you* not crying with that ending?"

"Um, because I don't cry over chick flicks?" I replied with a teasing grin. That earned me a light smack to the back of the head. I laughed at the playful glare she shot me. It wasn't very effectual, what with her damp eyes and cheeks.

"I swear, I don't see how you managed to get through movies like that without crying," she muttered.

"I waste all my tears on Disney, not Warner Brothers," I informed her. At her curious look, I grinned a little ruefully and explained, "I still cry when Bambi's mother or Mufasa dies, but that's about it."

"Aww." I rolled my eyes at the 'that's-so-adorable' look she gave me. Jessie stood on the tips of her toes to kiss me on the cheek and ruffle my hair. "You *do* have a heart." With that said, she started off towards her parents' car. I stood there for a moment, blinking.

"*Ouch*. That hurt, Jessie," I hollered after her, putting a hand to my chest as if wounded. She merely laughed and bade me good night. Smiling to myself, I headed towards my own vehicle.

I really wished that I had more time to spend with my girlfriend, but being a self-reliant high-schooler seriously cut into my dating life. I could tell that Jessie found it frustrating, even if she never said as such. I really wished that I didn't have to work as often as I did, so I could spend more time with the little redhead. The only problem with that was that, if I didn't work, then I got no money, and that was a potentially dangerous situation for me.

I sighed, unlocking the door of my truck. I'd have to figure out some way to make it up to her whenever I had some free time next. I really wanted to be with Jessie for as long as she'd have me, and I knew that it wouldn't be long if I was gone all the time.

CHAPTER 59

I glanced at my girlfriend as she studied the several packets of new sheet music the chorus would be working on. She waved the teacher over to ask her something about one of the songs, gesturing at various sections. My eyes flicked back to my own sheet music as I tried to follow along with the CD of the songs that was playing. I wasn't particularly focused on the pages in front of me, though. I couldn't be, what with Kyle's most recent accusations.

Only this morning, he'd stopped me to ask if I'd thought about what he'd said. I told him that I had, but that I wasn't going to let it affect anything. Kyle had gotten angry and told me that I was just so scared of breaking up with her that I couldn't see that she wasn't a good match for me. That, in turn, pissed *me* off, and I retorted with a suggestion foul enough that he'd looked too shocked that *I'd* said it (as opposed to Rachel) to reply. I'd just left.

I couldn't help but feel a sort of cold panic seeping into the back of my mind at his words, though. Rox had told me something eerily similar.

"How did I break up with her?" she leaned back in her chair, eyes narrowing slightly. "Now, see, I can't tell you that. I promised her I wouldn't." Rox took a sip of her beer before going on. "But I'll give you some advice." The chair smacked down on all four legs again, and she leaned in even closer. I could smell the alcohol on her breath and nearly flinched. "If you're not happy with her, get out of that relationship. Now. And I don't mean now as in take another month to build up your courage and then don't even break up with her properly. I mean take out your cell phone this instant and tell her it's over." I didn't move, startled at the soft, fierce order in her voice.

When I didn't move, Rox merely nodded and sat back down in her seat, drinking from her bottle again. She kept her eyes on me. "Why?" I was a little curious about the outburst.

"Because," the student flipped her card, "I know how it goes. You'll take a few weeks to try and find a way to let her down easy. And every single day you're with her, you'll find more and more reasons why you shouldn't break up with her, even if you're not happy. That'll go on for a while, and then one day it'll just hit you - that you aren't gonna be able to stay with her. It wouldn't matter if you like her or not, because your doubts just hurt so much. And you'll break up with her, but it'll be a hard break, and you might hurt yourself, but you'll kill her. And I'm not so sure how many more times Rachel can deal with that." She nodded, as if agreeing with herself. "So, as I said, if you aren't happy, then make it a clean break. And do it fast. I've seen Rachel when she gets hurt like that. It's not something I'd like to relieve."

I said nothing, merely flipping my next card.

I shifted in my seat as Rachel made a few notes on her sheet music. (Unlike us, she got her own copy of music instead of having to use the class set, so she could write on hers.) My paranoia regarding my girlfriend *did* hurt - more than I'd ever let Rachel know. It was a pride thing; she rarely showed weakness around her, and I tried to do the same. She never accused me of anything, even though she was well aware that I was certain that I was straight before I met her. If anything, *she* should've been the one scared that I'd cheat on her, not the other way around.

The facts were all there, I knew; I just couldn't make myself completely believe it. It always felt like she was keeping something or another from me, even if that was rarely the case.



I jerked slightly in my bed as my phone buzzed in my pocket. Really, couldn't I get one night where I could do my homework in peace? I tugged it out and frowned slightly at the screen. The number was familiar, though I couldn't exactly place where I knew it from. I picked up with a tentative "hello?" It was Thomas.

Less than five minutes later, I was running to the front door, yelling at my parents that I was borrowing their car - the faster of the two - and that it was an emergency. I slammed the door before they could even reply.

I could feel my pulse hammering in my ears as I drove downtown, only barely paying attention to the traffic laws. When I arrived, most of Rachel's 'harem' was sitting silently in the waiting room, ashen-faced. Rox stood outside the doors, smoking with a livid scowl engrained

on her features. Leah quietly gave me the room number, telling me that Jenny and Thomas were up there already. The guest limit was three at a time, and they'd figured that the three of us would be the first picks.

When I got to the room, Thomas was just coming out, looking a bit green. Terrified, I asked him about it. He assured me that it wasn't as bad as he'd thought, but that he always got that way at the sight of blood. He also wouldn't let me go in before I'd calmed down a bit.

When I finally went in, I winced visibly.

Rachel lay in the hospital bed, half asleep. Her glasses had been removed and placed on the table; the rims were bent beyond repair. Quite a bit of her skin - mostly her right arm and one of her knees - were covered in white bandages. A white bandage was taped to her cheek. Various cuts and scrapes covered the rest of her visible skin, and a prominent nick was in her eyebrow. I could easily see that her lip had been busted as well, and blood dribbled sluggishly from the tiny wound.

It physically *hurt* me to see her like this, so sickly and vulnerable. Her pale skin on the sterile white of the bed made her look worse than she probably was. I'd seen her hurt a few times before, but this had to be the worst.

"Oh my god," I whispered, a hand automatically going to my mouth. Rachel's head snapped towards me, her eyes wide with surprise. Well, her right eye anyways. The left was covered with an impressive bruise, and was swollen half-shut. I could tell that she hadn't been expecting me.

"Jessie?" Her incredulous tone indicated that she either hadn't expected me to come, or hadn't expected me to know about it. For a moment, I couldn't decide on what I should say first; in that time, Rachel softly requested for Jenny to give us some privacy. Her friend nodded and left.

"How did..." I trailed off as I went over to her, touching her un-bandaged cheek.

"It's a long story," she replied, a little uncomfortably, and gave an idle wave of the hand as if to wave the topic away.

I frowned. She was *not* going to skip out on this. "*Rachel*." The rocker winced slightly at the bite in my tone. I softened slightly; she looked miserable and pathetic, lying on the bed in the regulation hospital gown. But I couldn't go easy on her until I got the full story.

"I'm not sure what you're wantin' me to say, Jessie. I got beat up." She shrugged, grimacing with a hint of pain. I didn't entirely believe that.

"So, what, you expect me to believe that you just randomly got beat up?" I demanded, a mixture of anger and worry in my voice. I crossed my arms, scowling at her. "Do you know who they were?"

"Kinda," Rachel admitted meekly, glancing away.

"Kinda?" She mumbled a response. "What?"

"I said I'd randomly seen them a lot for a few days and didn't think anything of it," she repeated louder, annoyance in her voice. I wanted to smack her.

"You didn't bother to tell anyone?" I nearly yelled. "You had people *stalking* you and you *kept it to yourself*?" *She has been keeping things from me!*

"I didn't want you to get into it," she protested, though a flicker of uncertainty was evident in her gaze.

"I wouldn't have, Rachel, I would have called the police - like *you* should have done!" I shook with rage at her carelessness.

"I didn't think it was a big deal!" Rachel snapped weakly. I could see that she wasn't near as sure of herself as she was before.

"Not a big deal!" I repeated, my voice shrill. "You could have *died*, Rachel! *They could have killed you!* And you're just sitting here like it doesn't even matter! Like you don't even care!" I could feel tears rolling down my face. "*How the hell can you be so selfish?*" I yelled at her, my tears falling faster.

Rachel was stunned into silence, though whether it was at my words or the fact that I was openly crying in front of her, I wasn't sure. The rocker took my hand in hers, tugging me over to her. It wasn't until she inched towards the other side of the bed that I understood her silent request. I shook my head, protesting softly even as I cried. Rachel's firm grip gently forced me to sit, and I collapsed next to her, sobbing softly into her shoulder.

I'm not even sure why I was so upset. She was okay, she was here, and the worst wounds she'd suffered were just scratches and bruises. I guess it was just the idea that someone could have killed her that got me like that.

Rachel merely held me there as I cried, gently petting my hair with her less banged-up hand. It was weird that *she* was comforting *me*; she, after all, had been the one to get jumped and beaten to the point of hospitalization. And yet she was still the stronger of the two of us, always taking things like this in stride. Even when she'd been injured.

I felt her gently rub my shoulder as she shushed me. I looked up at her, sniffing a bit as I tried to stop the tears. She wiped my face dry with one of the tissues nearby, though the motions were a bit jerky. I guessed it was because of the bandages that limited the movement of her arm. I absently wiped my eyes with my sleeve, sniffing again. Rachel pressed the tissue to my nose with a gentle order of "Blow," just like one would do with a child. Had it been anyone else to do that, I would have been indignant. But it was Rachel and she was just like that, so I merely did as she told me and she idly tossed it towards the trash can. It missed by a good foot or so, as expected. She was a horrible shot. I snickered; Rachel just rolled her eyes.

"So," I paused to sit up so I could look down at her. The motion held no meaning other than a slight assertion of dominance. "Are you going to tell me the extent of your various injuries or do I have to go shake down the information from a nurse?"

The question made her laugh, thought it was cut off with a brief grimace of pain. "Jessie, if you go shake down a nurse, I will pay you like twenty bucks." I raised a brow at her. "Seriously, though, it's not half as bad as it looks. Hell, I coulda taken care of *most* of this at home. It's not all that bad."

"Then, you're in the hospital because...?" I gave her a warning look to be honest. Not that I expected her not to be.

"Because, as the cops were breaking up the fight, I got slammed into a wall and KO'd." Rachel frowned, then. Probably at the idea of getting knocked out.

"The *police* were involved?"

"Yeah, but only 'cause a concerned citizen tipped 'em off," she replied absently. "Anyways, the worst of it's my arm and my face. My arm got this lovely gash in it when I got thrown to the ground and got cut with a bit of broken glass. I got these various wounds on my face from tripping and smacking myself on the corner of something. I think it was a dumpster, but it mighta just been the wall..."

I winced when she idly touched her ear, bringing my attention to a different wound. "Not to mention the bastards managed to nearly rip out a piercing. Only tore partway, but I lost the earring. It was my favorite one, too."

"How are you this calm about being attacked?" I repeated my question from earlier. I was still frustrated, but not nearly as enraged as I had been. It obviously showed, though, because she didn't hesitate in answering me.

"Because it's not the first time that I've gotten jumped, and with my sexuality, it won't be the last," she informed me matter-of-factly, with an awkward shrug of a shoulder. "Besides, I've been in fights when the guy had, like, an insanely unfair advantage in terms of size an' strength an' all that. This time, all they had over me were numbers and a set of crappy brass knuckles. And only one guy had 'em."

"*Brass knuckles?*" I repeated, horrified. If I'd thought it was bad without any weapons, it was that much worse with something like that. "And how many guys attacked you anyways?" I'd just realized that I had yet to ask that.

"Just two, but even so. Fun times!" Rachel cheered sarcastically, rolling her dark eyes.

"Where did they hit you?" I couldn't see any marks that a weapon like that would've left.

"Stomach, mostly. Said something about there not needing to be any more dykes like me in the world." She seemed oddly nonchalant about it. I felt ice run down my spine as something clicked in my mind.

"Oh my *god*, are you..." I couldn't bring myself to say the word 'sterile.'

"Not sure, but I doubt it," she replied honestly. "Hit me in the gut a lot, but if he was trying to make sure I couldn't have kids, then he was goin' 'bout it all wrong." She took my hand and rested it on her covered stomach. I noticed that she tried hard not to press my hand down on her skin. Her stomach must have been hurting her more than she wanted to show. "This is where they were hitting me." My fingers were dragged lower on her abdomen. "This is where they woulda had to hit me to *even possibly* do what they were tryin' to do. So I'm not too worried about that, but I *am* a little worried about what they did to my other various organs."

I nodded; that was understandable. "How long are you staying in the hospital, then?"

"From what I understand, if I'm alright, I'll be let out some time tomorrow evening. They're wantin' to run a few scans 'n' tests first and make sure I haven't hurt my stomach too

badly or anything. And they wanna make sure I didn't get a concussion from having my head smacked against the wall hard enough to knock me out. Here's to hopin'. I don't wanna stay here any longer than I have to."

"I doubt you will. You look fine to me," I informed her, attempting to cheer her up. She had the restless look of someone who despised sitting still for any amount of time. Especially if it wasn't *her* idea.

"Yeah, well, I'm just gonna have to wait for them to give their final judgement," Rachel grumbled, folding her arms. Well, folding her less-injured arm into her bandaged arm anyways.

"Is your arm okay?" I asked suddenly. She'd been moving it carefully when she had to, and not at all when she could get away with it.

"Uh?" The rocker seemed surprised at the question. "Oh! Yeah, it's just hurting 'cause I don't think it's sealed up just yet."

"Oh, okay," I murmured. "What happened to your knee?"

Rachel made an odd noise, somewhere between a stifled growl and an equally stifled bark of laughter. "Ah, you can blame that on the police. Apparently they were trying to carry me out of the alley and the guy holding my legs dropped 'em and smacked my knee into the curb. The doctors think it just got banged up, but they wanted to make sure it stayed immobilized in case I broke anything."

"They *dropped you*." It was more a disbelieving statement than a question.

"I know, right?" She sounded amused and disgusted at the same time. "Bastards."

"And your glasses?" With the lenses cracked and the frames completely warped, it was obvious that they weren't like that when they were on her face.

"Fell off in the fight and got trashed. I dunno why they bothered bringing them to me. Oh, well, I'm like a year past due for an eye exam anyways."

If I could have thought of a reply to that, the nurse coming in didn't give me the chance. She poked her head in and informed Rachel that visiting hours were over, and her girlfriend would have to leave. I bristled at the way she spoke about me as if I weren't even here. Rachel bristled at the inflection the nurse put on 'girlfriend.' It was obvious that the woman didn't approve of our relationship.

"Fine, fine. She was just about to leave anyways," Rachel remarked calmly. Then she roughly tugged me down, startling me. It looked like she was about to do something completely inappropriate - like shove her tongue in my mouth - just to freak out the nurse. I wasn't too pleased with that, considering her lip was still bleeding. I relaxed when I felt her cup my face, her thumb covering my lips as well as hers. *Ah. Fake-out make-out.* Since I didn't have to worry about getting her blood all over myself, I played along with her, gripping her shoulders and moaning slightly against her finger. After several seconds, I pulled away with a faked gasp of breath. I glanced at the nurse to see a mixture of shock, horror, and disgust on her face. Then I looked back at Rachel. She was trying not to laugh.

"See you at home, darlin'," she teased softly with a sexy little smirk. She ran her calloused fingertips over my jawline, making sure anyone watching understood what she meant by that.

"Mm, you definitely will," I returned with a slight grin. Rachel paused for a few seconds, then bust out laughing. I glanced back to see that the nurse had left. Quickly, if my girlfriend's reaction was anything. "That was mean," I remarked half-heartedly.

"Oh, *whatever*, you didn't have to participate," she snorted, still grinning up a storm. "Seriously, though, you probably should leave before she comes back."

"Yeah, okay." I hesitated, then kissed the corner of her mouth gently. When I pulled away, I could see the softness in her gaze. "Love you." The words nearly stuck in my throat. I coughed a little, sliding off the bed, and added, "See you tomorrow?"

"Hopefully. Hey, do me a favor?" I paused from walking to the door to look back at her. "See on that chair by the door? My jacket? Take that with you." I must've given her a weird look, because she felt the need to explain: "In case I happen to be accosted by reporters tomorrow morning. I don't want anyone stealing it or anything."

"Okay," I agreed slowly. At first I wondered who would steal a leather jacket if the leather was ruined from paint, then I remembered that people would probably pay a good amount of money on eBay or something for OneGirl's black leather. I picked up the jacket and held it to my chest, making sure none of the many things in her pockets (and, from the weight of the coat, there were *many* things in them) fell out. "That it?"

"Yep. By the way, there's something of yours in the left inside pocket. Just don't take it out until you get to your car."

"Why...?"

"Because I fucking said so," she deadpanned, though with her squinting to see me without her glasses, it didn't quite have the same effect she'd been going for. "And I'm expecting you to keep practicing your parts for the concert. Barrin' any serious damage, we ain't putting it off."

"Fine, fine. See you tomorrow."

"Later, darlin'."

When I got down to the waiting room, her 'harem' had all cleared out. I guess Thomas and Jenny told them that Rachel was more or less okay. Still her bitchy self, but physically, she was mostly okay. Since that was the case, I silently slipped her jacket onto myself. The oversized coat felt comforting somehow, even though it was a little hot wearing it, and my fingertips didn't even extend from the sleeves. I climbed into my car, then took a moment to rest my forehead on the steering wheel and try to calm myself. Rachel was alive. She was okay.

But she kept things from me. I don't know why that disturbed me so much, but it did. *She is keeping things from me. Important things.* From the way she'd looked when I'd shown up in her hospital room, it was obvious that she hadn't asked anyone to call me. Knowing her, it was so I wouldn't worry as much, but still. I couldn't help but feel the cold gnawing of betrayal in the back of my mind. *Has she been keeping anything else from me?* The thought made me feel numb.

I shook the thoughts from my mind, and began digging through the pocket of her jacket that she'd indicated. After pulling a variety of things from it - a travel pack of tissues, a dulled swiss army knife, Spanish flashcards, other random crap - I came across an envelope with my name scrawled on it in Rachel's messy handwriting. I slid it open with my thumbnail and pulled out two pieces of paper. One of them was a triumphant-sounding note that told me that the check was mine; that since I performed, I was getting paid, just like the rest of the band members; that she wasn't taking the check back, so I had to take it; that she wasn't going to take any bitchiness from me over it. I picked up the check and nearly choked. *She must be joking!*

I flipped over the paper in hopes of finding something else, anything else, to explain this randomness from her. All that was there was a postscript:

By the way, the other thing in the envelope is yours, too. Even took the liberty of washing them for you.

It was signed with a quick heart and her name.

I glanced back in the envelope and went scarlet, my mind flashing back to that day she'd cornered me in the back room of the library. *Ah. So that's where that pair went.*

CHAPTER 60

My arms were lightly folded over my stomach as I scowled at the wall. I wasn't sure if I'd ever been so bored in my life. There was *nothing* to do here!

My iPod was dead, so I couldn't play solitaire or listen to my music. Not that it would have helped even if the battery was charged; I realized belatedly last night that it had been in one of the pockets of my jacket. Which was now with Jessie. There was some rule against using cell phones in the hospital, so I couldn't play the 30-second Tetris demo. I couldn't play the single hand of poker the demo gave me, either. None of my instruments could really be played here – all my guitars would have rested on my stomach, which was hurting just from the scratchy cloth of my gown on it. Having a guitar on it would not work. Neither would my drum set, for obvious reasons. My keyboard needed a plug that I wasn't likely to find, my violin was missing its bow, and I was *not* dragging in a cello.

Thomas, kind soul that he is, realized all that and brought me the one instrument I could play here – my flute. My *flute*. He did that just to piss me off, I just know it. He knew very well that I hated my flute. It's one of few instruments that I owned that I didn't enjoy playing. It wasn't that I didn't like playing the flute - it was that I hated playing *my* flute. It was old, so it was hard to finger the notes correctly without having something stick. And having a dysfunctional instrument enraged me like nothing else. I hadn't even taken it out of the case, let alone put it together to play it.

He did bring me our note book, though. It was a book we'd bought and butchered. Well, not exactly butchered. All we really did was turn the back page, which was glued to the cover, into a pocket. We used it to pass each other notes between classes, by slipping them into the pocket. I'd already written Thomas a threatening note and put it into the pocket.

So I was stuck watching TV. The news, to be more specific. And guess who the main topic of the day was?

Yep. Me. Or more accurately, OneGirl's attack. They showed clips of it from a security camera that I hadn't noticed in the middle of the fight. Two of the clips came up often – the one of me getting thrown into the wall and getting knocked out, and the one of me being held in a full nelson while the guy with brass knuckles pounded away at my stomach.

The anchor was going on about how horrible it was that LGBTQ people were attacked like this, even if they happened to be under the media's scrutiny. (Of course, he didn't mention the media's scrutiny bit. But it was heavily implied.) I sighed as he began spouting off statistics about how 'those people' get attacked and harassed and killed all the time. On the video feed, I saw me getting slammed in the gut again and accidentally throwing up. I remembered that. I also remembered – and I grinned as they showed it on the screen – letting myself become dead weight. The guy holding me had lunged forwards, releasing my head from the hold, and allowing me to snap my head back, cracking my own skull against the guy's nose. I was pleased with myself for breaking it – from what I heard, the guy was in the very same hospital I was in now, and was going to jail as soon as his nose got patched up.

"This is retarded," I muttered as the anchor gave what he probably thought was a very heartfelt mini-speech on how everyone should just accept each other for who they are and not judge people based on what they do in privacy. My BS-detector was going off. Badly.

I glanced at the clock and wanted to scream. I'd hoped that it would be closer to the afternoon so I could ask if I was getting out of the hospital, but no. It was getting close to lunchtime, but that didn't really improve my disposition. I hadn't had to be in the hospital since my freshman year, due to a broken arm, and I wasn't pleased in the slightest with being back here.

I stared at the television, but I wasn't really watching it so much as I was spacing out while looking at it. I don't know how long I was staring at it, but it was apparently long enough for it to be time for lunch. The door opened and I looked up. I smirked; it was the nurse Jessie and I grossed out last night. She didn't look too happy to be in my room, especially after last night. Nonetheless, she placed my food on the table-tray-thing that was attached to the bed with a

quick reminder that I shouldn't move around too much just yet. I waved her off and she left. I glanced at the food with a vague sense of disgust.

I decided that it reminded me too much of my school's food, which I never ate anyways, and turned my attention back to the television. I groaned when I saw that the news was now talking about Obama. I had nothing personal against the man, of course, but frankly, I didn't *care* right now. Unfortunately, I'd have to sit here and watch the news for however long it lasted.

Worst. Day. Ever.



"Okay, the good news is you don't have a concussion," the doctor was telling me, test results in hand.

"Imagine my relief," I replied flatly, as if I didn't care. He shot me a poorly-veiled glare.

"And you didn't sustain any irreparable damage to your internal organs, but there was some bruising there, so I would recommend you stick to soft foods for a few weeks. It would also do you good to stay home and rest tomorrow - I'll call your school and let them know that you're going to be out due to injuries. Also, you should consider lowering your intake of highly-caffeinated energy drinks..."

"So am I getting out soon or not?" I interrupted. I got the whole 'stop drinking caffeine' every time I went to the doctor. I simply chose not to pay attention at this point. Everyone has their addictions, mine just happened to be legal.

"Yes, you'll be allowed to go as soon as you get dressed. Do you need us to call someone to bring you home?"

"That'd be great." I gave him Jessie's number and he left. Probably to instruct someone to call and tell her to come pick me up. As soon as he was gone, I exhaled in relief. I wasn't sterile. I wasn't sure why I was so relieved to hear that - I'd been saying for years that I had no desires to have children, so I wasn't sure why the inability to have them would upset me.

I shook my head, wincing slightly as I stood to grab my folded clothes from yesterday from a nearby chair. I wandered into the bathroom, limping slightly from my sore knee. It would probably fade soon, but in the meantime, it stung like a bitch.

I dressed slowly, my various aches making it awkward to get my clothes on. Before I put on my shirt, I glanced in the mirror and winced. My stomach was mottled with varying shades of red, blue, and a yellowish color. *Yeah, that's pleasant.*

"Well, now I have an excuse to not wear that slut outfit for the concert," I muttered, clipping my bra in place. It would take a while for the bruises to fade entirely, and it would look bad for me to perform with my stomach like this. *Matches my face, though.* I smirked at that. With a black eye, split (but healing) lip, busted eyebrow, and a barely-healed gash on my cheek, my face certainly did match the rest of me. Being covered in dried sweat and other grime that was in the alley I got jumped in didn't help in the slightest. I looked about how I felt - disgusting.

Chuckling ruefully to myself, I pulled my shirt on over my head, hissing through my teeth when the tight fabric rubbed against a few sore spots - the healing gash in my arm, especially. I made a mental note to take a few pain pills when I got home. That, and arrange an appointment with my eye doctor. I hated being as blind as I was without my glasses.

I left the bathroom and hopped back up onto the bed to wait for the doctor or nurse to return and tell me that my ride was here, and I could leave. A nurse arrived (not the one from earlier) about half an hour later with a wheelchair. My face fell.

"This is ridiculous," I grumbled, arms folded over my chest as I was pushed down the hall in the wheelchair, my flute case and my note book in my lap. "My *arms* are hurt. My *stomach* is hurt. My *legs* are *fine*."

"Sorry, hospital policy," she apologized with a sympathetic shrug and smile.

"I realize this. Doesn't change the fact that I don't like it."

Jessie was waiting for me in the lobby, handing me my jacket when I was allowed out of the wheelchair. I grinned thankfully at her and slipped on my black leather, near sighing with relief at the soft, well-worn cloth of the inner sleeves. "Thank ya."

"No problem," Jessie smiled at me, slipping her hand into my own. "Let's get out of here before the press decides that they need to hear some words from you, hm?"

"Please."

She led me out quickly, back to her car. "So, am I taking you straight home or what?" Jessie asked, turning the key in the ignition.

"That'd be amazing," I nodded with a soft breath of relief. I ground the heels of my palms into my temples to stave off a headache, tiredly adding, "I need a hot, *hot* bath right about now." Jessie snorted softly and I looked at her curiously. "What?"

"Nothing. I just think that that's probably the most feminine thing I've ever heard you say," she teased, shaking her head in amusement.

"Probably wouldn't help to add that after that, I intend to put on some sappy anime and entertain myself with that for the rest of the evening." She laughed a bit, and I grinned, pleased that I could make her laugh like this.

"I'd ask if you had a lobotomy, but I see no scars," Jessie quipped. Then she glanced at me out of the corner of her eye, suddenly serious. "So, what's the damage?"

"Well, I'm going to be feeling like I've gone through a meat-grinder for a couple'a days," I informed her calmly, brushing my hair from my eyes. I knew what she was really asking though. *Are you sterile?*

"But if you were referring to whether or not I'm 'barren' or whatever, I'm not." I swore I heard her sigh in relief. Well, now that she was calmed down about that, it was time to shock her back to normal. I considered for a moment, then smirked, deciding. "Guess they just weren't good enough to take my vagina." Shame Jessie wasn't drinking anything at the time. I'm sure it would have made for an excellent spit-take. As it was, the car jerked very subtly to the right. Not enough to make me panic, just enough for me to know that I caused it.

"Rachel!" Jessie hissed, a deep flush creeping into her face at the innuendo. I laughed for a few seconds before making myself stop. My stomach was still sore, no need to make it worse. "That was awful!" she growled, her knuckles white on the steering wheel.

"Amazing," I smirked, shaking my head. "All the times we've been together and you still blush any time I say something like that. I really can't believe it."

"Shut up. I *will* leave you on the side of the road."

"You'd really leave your recently-attacked, injured, miserable girlfriend on the side of a street in a sketchy neighborhood?" I elaborated flatly, skeptical. She didn't say anything, which was my answer. "Hey, are you staying with me tonight?" I asked suddenly. Jessie often stayed overnight at my place, despite the fact that her parents would call early in the morning - on *my*

phone, wake *me* up - to make sure she was alright. Even if she'd called them the night before. Overprotective, much?

"I'll stay 'till ten or eleven, then I should go home," she decided, nodding to herself.

"Why?" I asked curiously. Any time she stayed that late at my house, she usually ended up staying the night. She hadn't ever left that late.

"Not sure, but my parents told me to make sure I came home tonight," Jessie replied in an embarrassed mumble.

"Are they afraid I'm gonna knock you up?" I inquired, amused.

"Rachel!" she whispered angrily, for the second time.

"Well, I was just gonna say that they don't have to worry about that tonight, seeing as I'm too sore to pounce you," I added, ignoring her indignant yelp. "And even then, I'd be kind enough to break out the condoms..."

"I'd ask why you have condoms, but I'm not sure I want to know," Jessie remarked, a hint of a warning in her voice.

"Pansexual, remember?" I *did* used to date guys, after all. Most people simply forgot that when they saw me. "More of a 'just in case' deal, though."

"There shouldn't even *be* a case in which you'd need them," she muttered, mostly to herself.

"Sure there is. Even toys need protection, darlin'." Jessie shot me a glare, face scarlet with a mixture of annoyance and embarrassment.

"*Rachel.*" There was a warning in her tone.

"Yes, Jessie, I know my name. Now stop saying it."



"Why must you have heavy packages on the one day you've been discharged from the hospital?" Jessie grunted, helping me to carry some things I'd gotten in the mail to my apartment.

"Sorry. Wasn't expecting to get put in the hospital," I reminded her flatly. The boxes were, indeed, fairly heavy, which is why Jessie had two and I only had one. She'd flat-out forbidden me from carrying them all up myself, worried that I would strain my still-aching body.

“What’s in these boxes, anyways?” she asked curiously, looking at me as she put them on the floor of the elevator.

“Um...” I pointed at the smallest box. “New double bass kick-pedal.” I pointed to the largest. “Crash cymbal.” I sized up the middle box before adding, “I think that’s my new cymbal stand. It has a drop clutch.”

“I’m just going to nod and act like I know what any of that is.” I laughed a bit as the elevator door opened and I picked up my box again, starting towards my apartment.

“Long story short, it’s all nice drumming equipment I’m spoiling myself with. Well, except for the kick-pedal. I busted my other one, so I’ve been using my single pedal. Which is boring and doesn’t sound right.” I had to bite back another laugh at her blank look. “I’ll show you when I get it set up.” I unlocked the door and pushed down the handle, shoving it open with my knee. “In the meantime, just drop it in my room, okay?”

I heard her echo “okay” as she half-carried, half-dragged the two boxes to my room. I laid the suspected crash cymbal on my bed, followed shortly by my jacket, and went to my dresser to pick out some pajamas. “Hey, what should I do with your flute?” Jessie asked suddenly, holding up the small black case.

“Um...” I considered that for a bit. “Just toss it in the back room, it’s where I keep all my non-essential instruments.”

“The back room?” Jessie echoed, a little confused. I guess I hadn’t ever shown it to her.

“Just past the bathroom, to your right,” I elaborated, tossing my pajamas over my shoulder and going to said bathroom.

“Okay.” I closed the door behind me, only to hear Jessie’s startled exclamation of “Holy *shit*.”

“What?” The back room wasn’t *that* messy.

“I don’t think the *band* room has this many instruments in it,” she replied dryly. I laughed.

“It’s not so much that it’s a lot of instruments as it is that it’s a small space to put them in,” I corrected, amused.

“Even so.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Just let me take a bath in peace,” I complained playfully, clenching my jaw as I jerked off the rather tight shirt in a quick motion.

"Fine. I'm gonna go get some stuff out of my car. Where's your apartment key?"

I blinked. "Um, good question. In one of the pockets of my jacket." I really wasn't sure.

"Oh, fun. You need to clean most of this crap out of your jacket," I heard her call from my bedroom.

"Fuck off. All of that crap, as you put it, is essential to my everyday needs."

"Swiss army knife?"

"In case I have to open a bottle. Or a can."

"Spanish flashcards?"

"En caso de que necesite estudiar."

"Um."

I grinned, pleased with the small victory. "Let me take my bath in peace, woman." I heard her scoff and leave as I turned the water on.



When I got out of the bathroom, dressed in my pajamas, Jessie was sitting on the couch in my living room, fumbling through some homework on her lap. I had to fight from 'aww'-ing at the sight of her looking down at the book, her brow furrowed and lips frowning slightly. It was a lot cuter than it sounded.

I padded over to her, silent without my shoes on, and made her jump when I closed her book and plopped down next to her.

"Rachel, I need to do my homework," Jessie pointed out as I laid down, my head in her lap and my face against her stomach.

"Don't care." It was true, I really didn't. I rarely even cared about my own.

"I'm serious, Rachel," she protested as I wrapped my arms around her middle. I sighed softly, nuzzling against her stomach in an attempt to get her to shut up about homework. "I need to finish it."

"Which class is it for?" I inquired lazily, not moving. I absently decided that her lap was now one of my preferred resting places.

"American Literature."

"Which period do you have it?"

"Third."

"So do it during lunch." I did that often when it came to my afternoon classes. Many people were willing to let me copy their homework. Probably why I was failing calculus, but whatever. I had no use for that class anyways.

"I wouldn't have enough time to do it during lunch," Jessie insisted, glaring half-heartedly down at me.

"You'd be surprised how much you can get done with a half-hour in the library," I informed her idly, fingering the hem of her shirt for no real reason.

"Rachel," she sighed, irritation and resignation in her tone.

"What? I'm tired and I want to cuddle with my girlfriend," I informed her, looking as pitiful as I could.

Jessie hesitated for a moment. It wasn't often that *I* requested cuddling. It was usually her who did that. "If I fail the homework, I'm blaming you," she decided finally, relenting. I grinned.

"Blame away, then." I shifted my weight off her for a moment so she could get into a more comfortable position, half-reclining on the armrest of the couch. I rested my head against her stomach and sighed contentedly.

"Wow, you really must be out of it," Jessie commented, idly playing with my hair.

"Uh?"

"Just that you've never asked to do this," she explained, touching my cheek. Then she smiled wryly. "Plus, I don't think you even have anything to be tired about. You've been lying in a hospital bed all day."

"Have you ever watched the news for seven hours straight? It's very tiring," I argued.

"I guess," Jessie relented, brushing my bangs from my face. I didn't think she really agreed with me so much as she just didn't feel like arguing the point any longer. I requested for her to pass me the remote and she wordlessly did so.

"Let's see what shit they have on today," I decided, turning the television on. I checked Cartoon Network first and wrinkled my nose at the screen. "Flapjack? Ew. Worst show since ever." I clicked to Disney, only to frown again at the sight of Hannah Montana. "Second worst show since ever." I finally just flipped the channel to Boomerang and decided to watch reruns of Scooby Doo. The original, of course, not any of the remakes.

“So picky,” my girlfriend mused, her hand slipping down onto my stomach. I stiffened slightly, unsure if she was aware of how sore the area was. She kept her touch light, though, and I slowly relaxed, even when she slipped it under my shirt. I gave a soft, contented sigh at the feeling of her cool fingers gently touching my bruised abdomen.

“This feels good,” I decided absently, glancing at her from my un-blackened eye.

“What? Me touching you, or you laying on me?” Jessie teased, kissing the top of my head.

I smiled to myself. “Both. I’m going to have to start lying on you more often. You’re comfortable.”

She raised a brow at me. “Pardon?”

"You're soft," I elaborated without really thinking about it.

"Should I take offense to that?" Jessie asked dryly, not looking particularly amused. I winced inwardly.

"I'm not going to answer that 'cause you'll yell at me either way. It wasn't meant to be mean, though," I informed her flatly. If I replied with anything, if she was like every other teenage girl in America, she'd accuse me of calling her fat or some nonsense like that. I had no desire to get into that - especially when it wasn't even true - so I wasn't even going to dignify that with a response.

"Whatever," she muttered, shaking her head a bit. "Just be glad that I'd feel guilty about throwing my recovering girlfriend across the room." I just laughed.

CHAPTER 61

"Rachel," I began, trying to sound gruff. "Rachel, sweetie, let me go. I need to go home." She'd fallen asleep on me shortly after we ate supper (which she'd ordered out for, saying that she didn't want to cook). That had happened nearly two hours ago. It was getting about time for me to go home.

Rachel didn't really reply, simply mumbling disagreement and hiding her face in my shirt. It was very cute, the way she was clinging to me, but I did need to get home.

"Come on, I have to go," I insisted, gently pushing on her shoulder.

"No," she mumbled faintly. I almost didn't catch it. Rachel wrapped her less-injured arm around me, keeping me in place.

"Rachel," I sighed, shaking my head a little. "You're being difficult," I pointed out, a little unnecessarily.

"Mm-hm." She didn't seem to care. I sighed. It was amazing how similar a sleep-deprived metal musician and a sleep-deprived five-year-old acted.

"Come on, now, let's get you to bed," I tried, gently nudging her in an attempt to at least get her to sit up.

"Don't wanna," Rachel grumbled, shaking her head against my stomach.

"Really, sweetie, I have to go home. And you have to go to bed." I finally got her to sit up, and then I got up, myself. I firmly tugged her to her feet, ignoring her slurred, sleepy protests at being made to go anywhere. I led her to her bedroom with very little objections. I guess she was too tired to fight at this point. When we got there, I quickly took the boxes off her bed and pushed her onto the mattress. To my amusement, she almost fell asleep before she even hit the pillow. I tugged the blankets over her still form, since she obviously wasn't going to do it herself.

I jumped slightly when she moved. Apparently she wasn't asleep just yet, since she was looking around sleepily. "What are you looking for?" I asked curiously. She didn't answer, merely looking over the side of the bed and then picking something up. Ah, it was the small blanket that I'd suspected was a baby blanket. She hadn't ever confirmed it, though. With that in her possession, she settled back down. I leaned down to place a chaste kiss on her lips and she made a small noise in response. "I'll be back tomorrow after school, okay?" There was no way to tell if she'd heard me say that or not; she was asleep by the time I'd stopped speaking. And I knew when she was asleep, she was pretty much dead to the world.

I stepped back for a moment, smiling slightly at the sight. It was cute, seeing her in silk, black-and-hot-pink pajamas, her hair mussed horribly, and curled into the little blanket. I took my cell phone out and silently took a picture. That done, I went to gather my things from her living room and head on out to my car. I had to jog to the vehicle, though; it had started raining. I sighed as I quickly unlocked and opened the driver's door. *I hate driving in the rain.* It didn't help that it was dark out, too.

I turned the key in the ignition, and turned on the heater a moment later. I left the car in park, just taking a moment to let it heat up. While I waited, I fished my iPod from my purse. Unlike Rachel, who'd decorated her silver iPod with small stickers of guitars and drums and skulls and such, mine was hot pink and decidedly more boring to look at. Nonetheless, since she'd slowly gotten me more interested in her preferred style of music, I *did* have a rather wide array of genres on my playlist. I plugged it into my car, so I could listen without my headphones, and began scrolling through the songs, attempting to find one to suit my mood. I finally found one and set it to play as I shifted my car into 'reverse' as I backed out of the parking lot.

My amusement at Rachel's sleep-induced behavior faded quickly as the song began. The intro quickly shifted into the first verse, and the slightly distorted voice of my girlfriend filled the small car.

Sometimes I feel I've got to - run away.

I exhaled softly, flicking the windshield wipers on as I drove. It was literally *painful* to be with Rachel at times, for reasons I didn't know.

I've got to - get away from the pain you drive into the heart of me.

Well, no, that wasn't exactly right. I did know the reasons. They sometimes kept me up at night. I just didn't understand why. Why I was only thinking of them now, why I seemed more likely to let them affect me *now* - that's what I didn't understand. The main reason? I didn't trust her. It came down to that. She'd had a pretty awful reputation before we started dating, one that the homophobes still talked about behind her back. It started when she began dating girls in eighth grade, and only got worse when she dated that boy. Rachel was labeled a slut, a girl who slept with anyone regardless of sex. When she and Jenny broke up, they didn't explain to anyone what happened. Thus Rachel slipped even lower on the social ladder than the sluts and the other few homosexuals in school, because she was apparently a whore *and* a cheater. That knowledge hadn't bothered me when I first kissed her, it hadn't bothered me when I first touched her, it certainly hadn't bothered me when I finally gave into desire and slept with her.

I couldn't for the life of me understand why it would bother me *now*.

The love we share seems to go - nowhere.

Maybe it was because I'd convinced myself that it wouldn't affect me. That I would be able to take anything that Rachel did. What a stupid idea. I knew very well that I was nowhere near as strong as her. If I was, I wouldn't be having these... doubts. Rachel had none. I hadn't ever asked her to confirm that, but I could tell by the way she looked at me that there was no doubt in her mind that she loved me.

And I've lost my light – for I toss and turn, I can't sleep at night.

But I knew the rumors about her. I'd known them ever since we started attending high school. Hell, I'd participated in many of them. Any time I'd hear a rumor about her sleeping around, or cheating on someone, I'd tell Ashley or Kendra or any of my “phobic friends” (as Rachel called them) and they'd pass it on for me. I knew *now* that precious few of the rumors had even the slightest bit of truth to them, but I could also see where they'd come from. She was naturally kind of a flirt. I knew she didn't ever see it when she did it, and she never understood why I didn't like seeing her with other girls, even if it was a relatively innocent conversation.

Once I ran to you. (I ran.) Now I run from you.

I couldn't stand this feeling. I loved her, I knew that, but I hated her, too. Hated her for making me feel this way about her when I hadn't ever even looked at a girl before, hated her for her flirtatious behavior. I *especially* hated her for never making excuses for her flirtatious

behavior. It would be easier for my hate to override my love if she did something like that. All she ever did was apologize, and that was only if I confronted her about it. She never even bothered to say she wouldn't do it again, because she knew she was just that way, and that was just how she acted. If she lied and said she wouldn't do it again or something, it would make it *so easy* to hate her. Lying outright to me would be a good reason to hate her, right? I sometimes wished that she *would* give me a reason, just so these conflicting feelings would *stop*.

Not that it would have helped. I didn't want to *hurt* her, I just wanted it to quit hurting *me*.
This tainted love you've given, I've given you all a girl could give you.

I bit back a miserable whimper, wondering in the back of my mind when it had started hurting so much to be with her. Probably about Valentine's Day, when I'd admitted to myself that I loved her. I wished now that I'd never done that. If I hadn't realized that I cared for her so much, my mind wouldn't remind me of the rumors of her cheating on all her girl- and boyfriends, or of the rumors of her sleeping around, or whatever, and make me so damn paranoid. I mentally repeated the thought until it became true, in my mind if nowhere else.

Take my tears and that's not nearly all!

I finally pulled into my driveway and put the car in park. I rested my forehead against the steering wheel, ignoring the rain battering against the windows, and tried to calm myself down. I swiped at my eyes, unsurprised to find them damp. I remembered Rox's warning about being with Rachel. *"Every single day you're with her, you'll find more and more reasons why you shouldn't break up with her, even if you're not happy."*

I bit my lip, trying to calm myself down before I went inside, where my parents were still probably awake. It wouldn't do for them to see their daughter crying over a girl. I could just *see* my father storming to Rachel's apartment and demand she stop seeing me because I was making her cry. No, that wouldn't work at *all*.

So I just sat there in silence as the rain pattered noisily on the car, allowing Rachel's music to wash over me.

Tainted love. Tainted love.

CHAPTER 62

I glanced up at the television, boredly watching the weather channel. I wasn't really watching it, so much as I needed something to keep the apartment from being silent. I didn't have any new albums in the works and I'd already gone to the grocery store, so there was really nothing that needed doing. Thus, I sat here, watching the weather channel and being generally bored, lonely, and depressed. At least school had let out almost half an hour ago, so I wouldn't be alone too much longer.

I heard a knock on the door and opened my mouth to yell at whoever it was (anyone who didn't know me well enough to come in without knocking wasn't anyone I wanted in my apartment), and then the door opened and I relaxed.

"Hey, Rachel," my girlfriend greeted as she came into the living room, tossing her bookbag into one of the chairs. Then she looked at me and paused. I merely smiled innocently. "Um, why?" Jessie pointed to the mostly-empty cooking pot and stirring spoon in my lap. I looked down at it, then back up at her.

"Cause I felt depressed, had no chocolate, *had* stuff for Rice Crispie Treats, and didn't feel like scraping out perfectly good scraps," I replied in one breath, popping some leftover cereal/marshmallow stuff into my mouth. "Besides, the batch I made is still cooling. No sense in scalding my tongue."

"Ah." The redhead merely shook her head, smiling wryly. "So weird," she teased, leaning over the back of the couch to kiss me on the lips. "Geez, your mouth is sticky," Jessie complained, pulling away and rubbing her lips. I laughed a little.

"Sorry?" I sort-of apologized, amused.

"Why are you depressed, now?" the redhead asked then, coming around the side to sit on the couch with me. "And... apparently watching the weather channel?"

I scoffed. “Oh, who knows. Hormones, most likely.” I glanced at the television. “And I’m watching the weather channel ‘cause I didn’t want to watch cartoons and I didn’t want to watch soaps and there’s nothing else on at this time of day. By the way, it’s gonna be stormy for the rest of the week.”

She sighed. “That’s probably about accurate,” Jessie nodded unhappily, then apparently remembering something, went back to her bookbag. “Picked up your mail, by the way,” she added, pulling out a few envelopes with my first name scrawled onto them. I sighed and put the mostly-empty pot and spoon on the coffee table.

I nodded my thanks as she handed them to me. Lord knows I wouldn’t have bothered to get my mail today. I ignored the junk mail, tossing it onto the coffee table (and missing it half the time). “Let’s see. I need to pay the insurance company for the policy on my instruments –”

“You have an insurance policy on your instruments?” Jessie asked, surprised.

“Well, duh. Where would I be job-wise if my instruments got stolen?” I raised a brow at her. She merely shrugged and I continued flicking through the mail. I opened another and glanced over it briefly. “Fanmail.” I tossed it at Jessie and she picked it up to read through it.

“Why would they mention they fantasize about you? That’s really weird,” she wondered, a little uneasily. I agreed with her; that was *really* stalker-ish.

“Yeah, well, they’re creepers.” I shrugged and opened the next envelope. “Bills.” I put it next to me and continued opening letters. Two more were from fans, and I did get one whiny-sounding complaint about how I was poisoning society or something. I laughed at that one while Jessie merely fussed over the fact that someone would send me a letter only to insult me. The last two were thicker, so I opened them cautiously so nothing would come out.

“Holy shit,” I muttered, looking at one of the several papers in the envelope.

“What?” Jessie pressed closely to me so she could read over my shoulder. “What is it?” I knew, to her, it had to look like a whole bunch of unreadable legalese.

“Someone’s offering me a record deal.” I didn’t sound nearly as excited about it as I should have.

“Really? Congratulations!” My girlfriend hugged me, grinning about that. Then she paused, noticing my reaction. “Why aren’t you happy about that?”

“It’s not that I’m not happy, it’s just that I dunno about record companies. They’d show me off and make me go on tour and shit, and that really isn’t what I had in mind when I started doing the whole ‘OneGirl’ deal.” It wasn’t like I needed a record company anyways. I’d been producing and selling my own albums and CDs for three years now. So, in my mind, there really wasn’t anything they could offer me aside for tours and a big fancy recording studio. “And most of them are, like, *seriously* sketch.”

“And this one’s not?” Jessie assumed, her chin resting on my shoulder.

“This is from *Trustkill Records*, Jessie. This is like the biggest company that's tried to pick me up yet.”

"So, what, are you nervous?" she asked. It wasn't meant in a mean way or anything, more just curious.

"Well, yeah," I admitted in a lower tone. It still made me twitch to talk about my weaknesses, even if it was my girlfriend, even if no one else was listening. "I mean, these guys have signed *It Dies Today*, *Too Pure to Die* before they broke up... Hell, if memory serves, *Bullet for my Valentine* is with 'em now, too." There was no way I was big enough of a deal to get offered a record deal from the same company that signed three of my favorite bands, was there? "It's probably a crappy offer anyways," I decided with a sigh, putting the envelope onto my coffee table.

"You're not even going to look at it?" she asked, surprised. "I would've thought that you would jump right on an offer like that."

"Since when have I ever done what someone thought I'd do?" I pointed out, trying to make light of it as I lie back on the arm of the couch, one leg folded against the back of the couch, the other hanging off the side.

"Come on. Why aren't you going to at least look at it?" she asked me curiously, crawling over to me and straddling my hips, taking care not to put her weight on my stomach. I looked to the side, and she made me look at her again. "Rachel?"

"I'm really not sure why *these* guys are offering me a deal. I've never written a song in my life, never played anything original. All I do is fucking *covers*. Why in the hell would these guys even consider signing me on?" I sighed angrily, rubbing my non-blackened eye. The other one throbbed uncomfortably.

"This may come as a surprise, Rachel, but you're kind of a big deal," Jessie pointed out, looking down at me gently. Her hand remained at the side of my face, making sure I couldn't turn away. "You might not have written any songs yet, but I know you're working on at least one. I've heard it, remember. And even if that's the case, you're still a big deal. You play all those instruments by yourself, you do all your own recordings, you edit your own music, produce your own CDs and merchandise..."

"Yeah, but - " She clapped her hand over my mouth, cutting me off.

"But' nothing, Rachel. If they sent you an offer, it's probably serious, okay?" I rolled my eyes and nodded, knowing that she wasn't going to move her hand unless I did. "So you'll look at it?" I hesitated for too long, apparently, and she practically growled my name, making me look at her with surprise. "Seriously, Rachel, you might not like it, but it could be really good for you. Just look at it. Please?" She didn't look angry now, more tired than anything. Tired of dealing with me. Great, now I felt bad for being difficult. I rolled my eyes again in an exaggerated fashion, making sure she saw it, and gave a barely perceptible nod. Jessie grinned, looking almost relieved. She didn't remove her hand though, so I licked her palm and she jerked the hand back, startled.

"Be good," she warned half-heartedly. I merely smirked and tugged her down towards me.

"Don't wanna." I gave her a soft kiss in silent thanks, and she easily accepted it. When she pulled up, I swore I saw unease in her expression, but if so, it almost instantly changed into a fond smile. Jessie idly wrapped the cord of my cross necklace around her fingers, fiddling with the pendant for no real reason that I could see.

"So. Speaking of music, did you get all your fancy new drumming equipment set up?" she asked casually, evidently thinking of nothing else that needed immediate attention.

"Yes I did. Finally put in a few of my other drums while I was at it - they've been in my music room for like two years. And then I had to move my computer desk and rearrange all my guitars and my keyboard and shit. It took up a good two or three hours, so I was mostly entertained today." I paused when I noticed Jessie giving me a serious *look*. It was caught somewhere between annoyance and outright anger. I sighed mentally, a bit tired of getting mean looks (not just from her, but from people in general), and wondered what it was that I'd done.

"What?" Nope, couldn't think of anything that would warrant a dirty look from my girlfriend. Well, nothing *recently*, anyways.

"Rachel, you were supposed to be resting today. That's why the hospital told you to stay home from school - to *recover*, remember?" She seemed one part aggravated, one part worried about me. I could see her blue eyes nervously flick from my face to the mostly-scabbed-over wound on my arm, to my covered stomach. I felt her shift her weight back further, ensuring that she wasn't hurting my stomach at all.

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. She needn't have worried; it was mostly a matter of dragging things forwards a bit. Aside for my computer desk, which had to be moved a few feet away. And the desk had *wheels*, for god's sakes. Not to mention I took several breaks in between moving my shit around. I wasn't about to give myself a hernia or something; despite popular belief, I did not, in fact, go out of my way to get myself hurt.

"Yes, well, it's not that heavy when all you're doing is dragging it, the computer desk had wheels, and I took like twenty-eight thousand breaks during those few hours. Just for the record." Yeah, that sounded kinda snippy, but I didn't like this getting-treated-like-I'm-breakable-just-'cause-I'm-injured bullshit. Mix that with me being cooped up all day and add a dash of obnoxious teenage hormones, and you ended up with a very cranky rocker. I didn't feel particularly apologetic right now.

Jessie narrowed her eyes slightly, looking me over as if gauging whether or not I was telling the truth. Finally she just sighed and shook her head. When she spoke again, I could still pick up on some frustration in her voice. "Fine. But next time, no rearranging your bedroom when you should be recovering. Just ask someone to *help*, for the sake of god." She saw that I was about to protest, and added, "I don't want you to hurt yourself. I worry." And, well, that pretty much ruined whatever argument I was going to come up with for sake of argument.

"Fine," I relented, looking about as irked with it as I could with my girlfriend smiling down at me, relieved. Which is to say, not very. "Anyways, lemme up, I wanna show you my trap set now." She laughed a bit and called me a music nerd, but I just shrugged as she got up. "Yeah, well, you're girlfriend's a nerd in a whole lotta ways, darlin', music's just one of 'em." She didn't argue the point as she helped me to my feet.

CHAPTER 63

If I thought it was annoying to see girls flirting with Rachel on a normal day, it was ten times worse seeing them fawn over her when she was injured. Half the girls in the class were surrounding her; I could hear her relaying the story of the fight.

"Shameless," I muttered crossly as I passed by the piano to get my music folder. I convinced myself that I was talking about the fans, and not my girlfriend. Most everyone jumped and hurried to get their own folders and get in their voice sections before the teacher came out. I glanced at Rachel again, and nearly started. She wasn't wearing her leather jacket.

It sounded like a little thing, but I'd only seen her without her jacket in public twice - and she was *never* seen without it at school.

I wondered why she'd neglected to wear it today. I mean, she should have known that not wearing what was essentially her trademark was definitely going to attract attention. It didn't help that there was a long gash (among other, smaller cuts and scrapes) on her pale, bare arms. Add the fact that she wasn't wearing glasses, either, and she was near-unrecognizable. And it was obvious that she never went without glasses, too. She was squinting badly as she attempted to read the paper that was less than a foot in front of her. I hid a smile behind my hand; I wasn't sure why it was funny to see her squinting and bent over the sheet music, but it was.



"Any particular reason why you're not wearing your jacket today?" I asked Rachel casually as she did something on the school's computer. I wasn't nearly as tech-savvy as she was, so I didn't concern myself with whatever-the-hell she was doing with the one she was on. She had her 'techie' belt on, though, and one of the flash drives in the computer, so I assumed that it wasn't looking good. The frown on her face as she typed madly didn't dispel that assumption.

“Because it’s hot as all get-out today,” Rachel groused, not looking pleased with her lack of jacket. I didn’t blame her; she’d worn the thing so often, her arms were paler than her face and hands were. It looked... odd, for lack of a better term, to see the 'farmer's tan' on her wrists and neck. “And it’s humid as *fuck*, if you hadn’t noticed.” I’d noticed alright. The humidity was making my hair frizz up a bit, even though everyone assured me that it wasn’t all that noticeable.

“This is true. Do you have an explanation for your glasses, too?” I inquired idly, entertaining myself by looking at the rings on her hands. They clacked loudly against the keyboard as she typed. She still wore the silver skull on her left middle finger. As always. I absently decided that I’d have to ask her about that ring sometime. The others weren’t nearly as eye-catching or prominent, though she *did* have a two-finger ring on her right hand of a pirate monkey and a ninja monkey facing off. That one wasn’t eye-catching. It was just strange. Her typing slowed to a softer, slower tapping, like she was looking for something.

“Yep. It’s the same explanation I have for my lack of transportation. See, when I got jumped, it was ‘cause I was walking to the car repair place to pick up my truck, since it was getting some work done on it. ‘Cept now I have no glasses, which my license says that I’m required to wear while driving since I can’t see more ‘n a foot in front of me. And since I have this lovely shiner,” her left hand paused in its typing to gesture at the livid (but healing) bruise over her eye, “I can’t get my eyes examined properly, and I can’t get new glasses. So until this freaking bruise heals, I’m stuck riding the damn bus everywhere.”

“Fun times,” I remarked dryly, idly ruffling her hair. She batted me away without even looking away from the screen and I laughed. “What are you even doing?”

“I started out trying to delete a stupid worm that some jerk-off put on the computer. Now it's gone. And then I started looking for something. But I just found it.” Rachel clicked a few things, and I heard the printer start up. She got up and went to the librarian’s desk, digging her wallet out of her back pocket as she went to pay for the printouts.

When she returned, she thrust half of the papers into my arms. "These are for you."

"Oh my god paperwork." I groaned unhappily, not even looking at the papers. "What are these even for?"

"Performance forms," Rachel replied with a dry grin. "That concert we're doing next month is gonna be huge, and we need to rehearse a whole lot of shit. And you'd skin me alive if I

suggested you just do like I do and skip school the days we drive up to the place." I glared sharply at her to show that she'd assumed correctly. Whereas Rachel would casually skip days if, say, she drove to school and realized in the parking lot that she didn't feel like going to first block and fell asleep behind the seats of her truck; I *did* prefer to have a good attendance record. I didn't miss school unless completely necessary. "Now, see, that look just confirmed it. Just make sure your parents sign, too. I'll have the guys in charge of the concert fax the school some paperwork that shows that we're not lyin' about it."

"Yeah, okay." I glanced at the stack of paper. "Where do my parents sign?" Rachel took them back from me for a moment. She looked over them, eyes narrowed with either extreme concentration or faulty vision. I couldn't tell which. Her hair dangled heavily in her face, and she kept having to push it back as she pointed out the places my parents had to sign. She handed the papers back with a grin, making some smart-ass comment about not having to get parental permission. I rolled my eyes; I'd be turning eighteen in just another two months, and she seemed to feel it necessary to tease me about my age 'till then.

"Rachel? Do me a favor." I pushed her bangs flat against her forehead, and the tips of her hair brushed her eyelashes; "Get a haircut. And re-dye your hair, too, it looks messy with all those random faded streaks." At this point, her hair was mostly just black, with hints of faded red, and too long to spike as she usually did. If she let her hair grow out another inch or so, she'd easily be mistaken for one of the generic rockers that every school had.

She just crossed her eyes at me. "Fine, *mom*." She shook her head, smiling, and turned off the computer monitor. "Jeez, next thing ya know, you'll be calling me a hippie or something."

"Well, you do look like one," I muttered, frowning at her.

"Hey, now." She didn't seem too terribly offended as she gathered up her own stack of papers and went to the back room to put up her 'techie' belt. School was ending in a few months, so Rachel didn't have much to do in the library these days. Mostly she was deleting music files (you weren't allowed to put music on the school computers, but you could listen to it if it was on a flash drive or CD), a few corrupted Microsoft Office files, and occasionally a few viruses put on the computers by annoyingly spiteful people.

I went and flopped onto a couch as I waited for my girlfriend to return. That was one of the good things about our library; we had insanely comfortable chairs and couches. Many

students slept in them during lunch - Rachel did it once or twice a *week*, I knew. Rachel returned then, falling onto the couch next to me, and I leaned against her shoulder for no real reason. Maybe for comfort purposes, as it usually was. *Was*. Now I wasn't so sure.

"Tired?" the rocker asked sympathetically, wrapping an arm around me so my cheek was resting against her collar. I could feel the broken part of the bone pressed dully against my skin and winced mentally. More reminders that Rachel had been hurt so much before I'd ever come along. I put that thought out of my head when I felt her hand gently rubbing my back.

"A bit," I admitted lowly. I hadn't slept well recently. Fear and doubt plagued my mind whenever I tried to sleep at night. Last night I hadn't been able to fall asleep until nearly three in the morning, and even then, the sleep was restless - not a good thing when you're required to be at school by 7.

"So go to sleep," Rachel suggested, pulling me into her. That move used to make me feel safe, protected, loved. Now it just made guilt stir in my stomach for no real reason. I shifted into a slightly less intimate position. Rachel noticed, but fortunately didn't see the reason I'd moved. "Oh, come on. I'll wake you up when it's time to go to class."

I hesitated before finally agreeing. I *did* need the sleep. And I had no doubt that she wouldn't wake me up; she could be annoyingly playful at times, but she knew I had to attend all my classes. I hesitantly allowed myself to slip into sleep against her, feeling the soft rise and fall of her chest and her slow, firm pulse heavy in my ears. I'd slept well against Rachel's body before, and in less comfortable conditions, too, but that brief sleep was even worse than last night. I couldn't for the life of me admit why. So when Rachel finally woke me and asked if I'd had a nice nap, I lied. *Lied*. I told her I did. I even *thanked* her for it, forcing myself to smile gratefully at her. She'd seemed pleased with that. Pleased that she could take care of me even when she was injured.

It was a small thing to lie about, in all honestly, but when you looked at the *reason* that I'd lied... it was nowhere near small.

CHAPTER 64

I jerked as something pricked my side. "Thomas, I swear t'god, if you stab me with that needle one more time, I'm gonna shove it up your ass," I growled to the boy as he pinned the hem of the shirt he was working on down.

"Hey, you're the one who asked me to design your outfit for the concert," he reminded me flippantly, as if that was going to stop me from shoving a needle up his ass. His words were slightly muffled from the pins he was holding in his mouth.

"So? I'll still hurt you," I growled, wanting to fold my arms, but forcing myself to keep them straight out to my sides like he'd indicated.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm almost done with this part anyways," he mumbled around the pins as he finished pinning the black fishnet 'shirt' tight to my sides. "Okay, that should hold, so take it off and give it back to me." I removed the revealing fishnet shirt carefully, grimacing whenever a stray pin scraped my skin.

"Here," I growled, handing the thing to him. "Now keep your damn needles out of my flesh."

"Fine. You can go do whatever for a few minutes while I sew this hem," Thomas informed me absently, going over to where he'd set up his sewing machine. I nodded and went to flop onto my couch in little more than a pair of jeans and a sports bra.

"How long is it gonna take for you to sew up that shirt?" I asked lazily, turning on my side to look at him.

"I dunno. Longer than sewing a hem usually would, since I'm working with fishnet."

"Whatever. Wake me up when you're done," I ordered, then turned so my forehead was pressed against the back of the couch. I barely caught his mumble of agreement.

I didn't go to sleep, though. I wasn't really tired. So I just rested there for a while instead. Finally, getting fed up with the only sound being the sewing machine going, I remarked, "I'm pissed at the chorus teacher."

"Oh?" Thomas replied absently, distracted.

"Yeah. She's making me sing with the tenors in the chorus for one of the songs, since we only have two in our class." I *could* sing tenor, but she wasn't letting me sing an octave higher as I preferred to do, so I was literally singing in the bass clef.

"Uh-huh."

"And she's making me sing in the bass clef, even though she knows I have issues hitting anything below a low F."

"Uh-huh."

I'd begun to suspect that he wasn't listening. "But she's still not letting me sing comfortably."

"Uh-huh."

"I also finally accepted that I'm a transsexual. I'm a man trapped in a woman's body. I'm getting the sex change next month."

"Uh-huh." Yep, *so* not listening.

I glared at him, attempting to provoke a response out of him. "I also discovered that I'm a polygamist. Me, Conner, and Jessie had a threesome in the bathroom during lunch. He gave me an STD."

"Uh-huh."

"*Thomas.*"

"What? Oh, sorry, I tuned out after you mentioned singing with the tenors," he apologized, shooting me a 'please forgive me' look. See, I knew he wasn't listening.

"Nevermind, it wasn't important," I waved him off. I heard a short knock on the front door before someone came inside. "Hello?"

"It's just me." I smiled at my girlfriend's voice as she headed my way. When she got to the doorway of the living room, though, she paused and looked at me and then at Thomas. Jessie finally turned her confused blue eyes back to me. "...Why are you hanging around topless with a gay boy in your apartment?" I laughed aloud at the blunt way she asked that.

"Because sparkle-boy over there is working on my outfit for the concert and I decided it would be easier to just not wear a shirt than to keep changing in and out of it," I replied with a vague wave of the hand.

"Yep! I'm done with part of it already," he announced with a grin, showing the black fishnet shirt to Jessie. She took one look at it.

"You are *not* wearing that," the redhead informed me flatly. I laughed, but I understood where she was coming from; the shirt was literally see-through, since it was only netting.

"Sure she is! I'm just not done with the whole thing yet," Thomas protested, frowning. He didn't like to have his fashion sense criticized, particularly when he was the one creating the outfit.

"We'll see," she muttered, shaking her head. She hadn't seen many of Thomas' works, so she didn't have to much to go on. That's probably about exactly what the boy thought to himself as he flipped to a different page in his sketchbook. Jessie came around the couch and sat on the end closest to my head. "How are you recovering?" she asked me. I saw her eyes flicker briefly to my battered stomach before they returned to my face. I lazily flung an arm over my stomach, a little self-conscious.

"Fairly well. The swelling in my eye went down, finally, so I can actually see out of it." I was pleased; if my eye would heal quickly, I could get new glasses, and then I wouldn't have to bum rides off of people anymore.

"Well, that's good. And the rest of you?" she attempted to make me elaborate.

"Sore." Well, it was true. There really wasn't much other way to explain. I was hurting all over, and having to lug around like ten pounds worth of books all over the campus didn't help in the slightest.

"Oh. Sorry." I considered asking what the hell she was sorry for, but then decided against it. Instead I moved to cuddle against my girlfriend. She laughed a little, gently ruffling my hair. "Why are you so needy lately?" Jessie mused, absently scratching my scalp. I near purred, relaxing at her actions.

"Cause she likes being the center of attention," Thomas called as he looked through the fabrics he'd brought over, considering.

"Piss off, sparkles," I shot back flatly.

"Yeah, whatever. Cut the cuddling short, Rah, I still need to get you fitted into the other part of the shirt," he reminded me. I groaned; if there was nothing else that I hated, it was getting fitted for things. Fortunately, it didn't take much bitching on my part to get him to agree to do it later. I'd already been fitted for the bottoms (whatever the hell they were) and the fishnet shirt. That alone took like an hour to do. I was sick of getting fitted for things, and Thomas was probably sick of doing the fittings. He gathered up his things and left.

"Rachel, that wasn't nice," Jessie remarked dryly, referring to my dismissal of the boy.

"Yes, well. I wanted to be alone with my girlfriend." I shrugged and moved so I could softly kiss along her throat.

"None of that until you can move without wincing," she ordered, even though I'd felt her twitch a little when I'd done that. She gently pushed me off of her and then went to the leather armchair next to the couch.

"Ouch. Cockblocked by my own girlfriend," I teased, acting as if I was actually wounded. I couldn't keep it up when my words finally caught up with her, though; her cheeks flushed a dark red and she looked away. I laughed softly. "You're cute when you blush," I commented, then wondered why I'd even bothered mentioning it.

"Whatever," she muttered, rubbing the side of her face as if that would make her blush fade faster. Then she picked up my discarded t-shirt from the floor and threw it at me. "And for god's sake, put your shirt back on."

"Fine. Forgive me for assuming that my girlfriend enjoyed seeing me semi-nude." I didn't have to look back at her to know that Jessie's face was scarlet again. I did spare a brief glance at her when my shirt was back on, though. I was right. I barely managed to stifle a grin.

"Are you ready for spring break next week?" Jessie asked suddenly. I recognized her attempt to turn the topic. I decided to let her get away with it.

"I am *so* ready for spring break. One week up at Jekyll? It's gonna be epic," I grinned.

"You're going to Jekyll Island?" I detected some envy in her voice.

"Yep. Me and most of the harem. Not Ray, though, he's busy doing something that I think he made up to get out of it. You should come with us!"

She rolled her eyes. "Like my parents would let me go to an island with my girlfriend, her gay friends, and no parental supervision."

"Rox is legally an adult," I pointed out hopefully. As it was, the spring break trip (which was pretty much a requirement ever since my sophomore year, in which my 'harem' was established) to Jekyll was gonna be the most awesome thing all year. I figured having the girl I was in love with on the trip with us would rock even harder.

"Rox also keeps beer at your house, smokes, and invites you to drinking binges," Jessie pointed out flatly. I thought I saw actual anger in her eyes, but it didn't last very long if I did. "I'm not sure I'd want to be around all that mess."

"We don't drink the entire week," I protested weakly. Truth was, we drank a whole lot at night, though we managed to stay sober during the days. Still, that wasn't the entire week.

"Uh-huh." She sounded skeptical about that.

"Can you at least come up the last day?" I offered, trying to look pathetic.

"I doubt it. My parents already don't approve of you, let alone your harem," Jessie reminded me flatly. I winced. I didn't need reminding that Jessie's parents pretty much wished me a slow death.

"Yes. Thanks for reminding me. Will you at least ask them?" I'd let that reminder of her family's disapproval slide if she did that much.

"I'll... try. No promises," she added warningly, seeing my grin.

"That's fine. I won't even make you drink anything if you don't want to," I promised cheerfully.

"Great," the redhead muttered under her breath, not looking pleased with the way I'd phrased that statement. She took out her phone, glancing at the time. "Geez, I have to go."

"What, really?" I asked, surprised. She hadn't been here nearly as long as she usually was. Hell, she'd stayed the night sometimes, and now she was just leaving after fifteen minutes. "If I'd known you weren't staying long, I wouldn't'a made Thomas leave."

"Well, I forgot I have to go. My parents are making me study French with a tutor." She avoided looking at me as she said that. Probably because she figured I'd tease her about needing a tutor for a foreign language. I, after all, was in my fourth honors Spanish class and making straight A's. I kicked ass at Spanish; it was actually the only class I really did well in. (Well, aside for Chorus, but I didn't do much in that class.)

"French... That's one of the romantic languages, right? Those are easy. All you really have to do is memorize infinitives and endings for present tense," I pointed out, getting up to walk with her to the front door. "It's when you get to past tense that it gets weird. But you don't get into that until, like, your third class." She'd put off her two required foreign language courses off as much as possible, which was why she was taking a sophomore class her senior year.

"Yes, well. We can't all be bilingual rock stars, now can we?" Jessie nearly growled. I merely smiled and raised my hands in surrender. She made me sound like some kind of music-/school-god. Truth be told, I was failing two classes by a few points, and barely scraping by with a C on the other class. "See you tomorrow," she told me at the door. She hesitated for a second, then kissed me on the cheek. Then Jessie started to leave, but I grabbed her shoulder.

"That was *not* a proper goodbye kiss." I pulled her close to me, kissing her firmly on the mouth, slipping my tongue into her mouth for an instant. She pulled away quickly, inhaling when she'd gotten away. The move confused me a bit, but whatever. "That was a proper goodbye kiss," I informed her with a playful grin.

Jessie gave me a sharp look then. "Don't do that," she ordered, before turning and leaving. My grin disappeared in confusion. I knew she still wasn't too terribly fond of PDAs, but we were in the door of my apartment. Besides, even when I 'crossed the line' with public displays like that kiss, the worst she'd ever done was hide her face in her hands until we left the area. She'd never pushed me away like that before just because I'd *kissed* her. *Is she mad at me?* I couldn't for the life of me remember doing anything.

CHAPTER 65

Normally, I enjoyed a week away from school with my family on Spring Break. However, two feelings at the forefront of my mind were seriously screwing with that. The first was guilt for the way I'd treated my girlfriend a few days ago. I mean, I shoved her away for kissing me goodbye, I reminded her that my parents all but hated her, and I implied that Rox, one of her best friends, was a bad influence. Rachel hadn't done anything to deserve all that, despite what every instinct was telling me.

The second feeling was worry. Rachel had told me that they didn't drink the entire week, but I'd heard rumors about what she was like when she was drunk. The fact that Rachel slept with Rox the first time they went out drinking together only reaffirmed those rumors. And she was going to be around several lesbian girls, who had admitted before that while they wouldn't want to get into a relationship with Rachel, wouldn't mind sleeping with her. And I couldn't for the life of me tell whether or not they were just joking.

I growled to myself, burying my face in my pillow. They hadn't even *left* yet and I was already worrying about whether or not she'd be faithful. I was getting nowhere by myself. I couldn't talk about this with Rachel; I'd offend her or something if I told her straight-up that I was afraid she was going to sleep around behind my back. I couldn't talk about this to Roxene, either. She'd just give me an I-told-you-so look and tell me to break up with Rachel before I got in any deeper. And, while that might be the easiest course of action, I wanted someone else's opinion. Someone who knew us both, but was removed enough from the situation to give me some advice.

I sighed unhappily and grabbed my cell phone from the table. After a few rings, the guy picked up. "Hey, Thomas, it's Jessica."



"So, what, you're worried that she's gonna cheat on you or something?" Thomas attempted to clarify, sipping at his milkshake. We were currently in the food court at the mall, which almost certainly ensured that we weren't going to run into Rachel, since she almost never came in here.

I sighed, rubbing my thumb and finger against my closed eyes with mild frustration. "It's not that I, like, *actively* think that she's just gonna do something with someone else, but," I trailed off, making a random gesture to show I didn't know how to explain it. I took a drink from the Coke he'd kindly bought for me, under the pretense of not wanting me to get dehydrated. ("Sounds like you have a lot on the brain, which means a lot of talking, which means you're gonna want a drink.")

"So... paranoia, then?" he tried again, stirring his milkshake with a thin spoon.

"I guess," I mumbled through the straw. "I mean... you've heard the rumors, right?"

"That she sleeps around with anyone who asks, that she gave three people an STD, or that she's never faithful to her girl- and boyfriends?" He sounded amused, though I could see genuine anger in his gaze. That in itself was odd; Thomas almost never got angry. Or at least he didn't ever show it.

"Um, mostly the last one," I admitted in a small voice. I *really* didn't like having the self-named pacifist angry at me.

"I figured as much," Thomas mused, shaking his head, disapproving. "You know that that rumor's not true, right?"

"I guessed that it wasn't, but still..." I trailed off awkwardly. My fears sounded ridiculously paranoid when I said them aloud. So maybe it was a good thing that I was talking to *someone* about this.

"Hm." He gnawed absently on his spoon. "So you're worried that she's gonna cheat on you based on a rumor?"

I wanted to disagree with that, make something else up instead, but I couldn't think of anything to say to him. "More or less."

"I'll let you in on a little secret," Thomas told me, tapping his spoon on the rim of his cup. "She has never once cheated on any of her 'significant others.' But she's lost one girlfriend and a boyfriend because of that rumor. Well, with the girlfriend, there was a little more going on

than just the rumor alone, but it was very much a contributing factor.” I winced and looked down at the half-empty cup in my hands. “Just think about that for a minute,” he advised gently, patting my hand. Then his cell phone vibrated and he jumped. “Hold on a sec.” He picked it up and answered absently. “Hello. What? I don’t know, like a fourteen, I think. Welcome. Bye.” Thomas hung up. I must have looked at him oddly, because he shrugged and dryly remarked, “People call me when they don’t remember their sizes in something. Apparently being gay and good at designing clothes lets me memorize everyone’s size.” I laughed a little, grateful for the distraction.

“Anyways. Back to the conversation,” Thomas decided with a light nod. “Was that rumor the only thing bothering you?” He looked at me intently. I was starting to understand why Rachel always went to Thomas for sympathy or someone to rant at. He was really good at talking with people.

“It’s not just the rumor,” I admitted, sipping briefly at my drink. “It’s that she’s like *always* flirting with people. Have you ever noticed that?” That was a stupid question, of course he had. He gave a small laugh, and cut himself off with a few spoonfuls of his milkshake.

“Sweetie, you have to understand that she really, *really* doesn't mean anything by it. Especially now. I mean, you know how sarcastic she is.” Gentle amusement danced in his eyes.

“I don't follow,” I admitted, brushing my hair out of my face.

“Well, think of it this way. Ever since she got disowned, she's had to put up with shit from pretty much *everyone*. And if she did like people expected and just bust out crying every single time someone does something to her, they'd only do it more. So she let herself get sarcastic. See, she's always been a smart-ass, but before eighth grade, it was only with her friends. She wouldn't do that to anyone else. The way she was raised, I guess. Anyways, Rachel got really sarcastic, like I said, to make herself seem more... arrogant, I guess. Stronger, maybe, I dunno how to describe it. But the flirting thing was basically just an extension of that.”

I looked at him curiously, trying to figure out whether or not I understood. “So, you're saying she flirts to be sarcastic.”

“Kinda. But only at first. Now she just does it out of habit. Kind of like how you look at guys, even now.” I started at his matter-of-fact statement, glancing fearfully at him. “Calm down, sweetie, if she cared that you did that, she woulda confronted you by now.” Thomas glanced

briefly at his watch, then turned back to me, tossing his head to get his thick bangs out of his eyes. "So. Talking help any?"

"Kind of. Not much," I sighed, resting my face in my hand. "I mean, all you really did was tell me that I'm being stupid, which I already knew. But I'm still worried that she's not..." I bit my tongue, deciding at the last minute that I wasn't going to say what I'd intended to say. 'She's not satisfied with me' was what I was going to say, but that could be taken too many different ways for me to feel comfortable speaking it aloud.

"That she's not what?" Thomas nudged gently.

"I don't know. I'm just worried," I muttered, chewing on a piece of ice to shut myself up.

"Do you love her?" he asked suddenly.

"Yeah," I agreed, surprised at how easily that came out.

"Does she love you?"

"She's said as such," I sighed, thinking I knew where he was going with this.

"And you're still worried that you two aren't a good match?"

"I know, I know, it's just –"

"Way to interrupt, Jessica," Thomas cut me off with a dry smile, lacing his fingers together. "What I was going to say was, there's no shame in that. There are plenty of people who love each other but still can't stay together for one reason or another. If you don't think you can hold a relationship with her, then don't. Just gently let her go." He spread his hands absently. "I wouldn't hold it against you."

I looked at him, startled. "You wouldn't?"

"No. I wouldn't. Unfortunately, I can't speak for Rachel or Jenny or anyone else. But I'll tell you this;" he raised a finger, as if that were going to ensure my attention. "*Nothing* you do is gonna make Rachel stop loving you."

I simply stared at him, stunned. I knew he was one of my girlfriend's best friends; it didn't make sense that he wouldn't resent me for hurting her like that.

"Trust me. Like most guys, I don't know *much* about girls, but I do know that." Thomas tossed his head again, flicking his bangs from his face. He gave me an innocent, boyish grin. "So, since I was no help at all," he winked good-naturedly at me, "I guess you'll be wanting to talk to her about stuff, right?"

"If you think it'll help," I agreed hesitantly, brushing my hair behind me ears.

"I do. I'd recommend you just invite her for coffee at Starbucks or something. If you're going to order for her before she gets there, the only thing she'll drink from the place is hot chocolate," he informed me calmly.

I laughed. "Is that your prescription for the situation, Doctor Thomas?"

"Damn right it is, Starbucks solves everything."

CHAPTER 66

I wearily climbed into my truck and slammed the door shut. I rested my head against the steering wheel for a few minutes, allowing my ragged breaths to settle. *This is why I'm a musician, not a goddamn dancer.* The fact that my choreographer was apparently a *drill sergeant* in a past life helped absolutely none.

Ever since my black eye finally healed about a week ago (and, in consequence, I'd gotten a new pair of glasses, and also my truck back), the guys in charge of my concert in a few weeks were insisting upon my religiously learning and rehearsing with a choreographer. Today, though, the damn woman made me repeat the same song over and over until I finally snapped at her that it was late, I was tired, and going home. Of course, now I had to drive three or four hours back to *get* home. And it was already dark.

Cursing the woman to myself, I turned the key and (after a few false starts, courtesy of my piece-of-scrap-metal truck) set off. Fortunately, traffic wasn't nearly as bad at night as it was when I headed up to the amphitheater at something like five in the morning. The only people I seemed to be sharing the highway with were truckers and one or two RVs.

About an hour into my drive, though, my cell phone started ringing. That in itself was odd; it was almost nine-thirty. Who calls people at nine-thirty at night, anyways? It didn't occur to me to check the caller ID.

With a sigh, I turned it on and held it to my ear. "You've reached a very tired rocker, who are you and what do you want?"

"It's your girlfriend, and I was wondering why you weren't at school today," came the slightly static-y voice of my redheaded lover. *Why's she calling me so late?*

"Um, today was one of my practice days up at the theater. I thought I told you that," I added with a yawn. I hated driving when I was tired. "But now I'm regretting it. The chick I'm rehearsin' with is a *bitch*."

“Sorry.” I didn’t really pick up much regret, but I didn’t care at this point. “When are you getting back home?”

“Uh, not for like another hour an’ a half at least. Maybe longer, I don’t know. Why?”

“I was up, can’t sleep, and couldn’t think of anyone else who’d be up at this hour.”

“Gee, thanks,” I replied dryly. “Gotta warn you, though, I’m not fit to do much. I’ve been dancing for like six hours straight, and singing-slash-screaming for longer ’n that. I’m surprised I haven’t wrecked yet.”

“Well, if you’re that tired, you shouldn’t be driving.”

“Yeah, well, there’s a lot of things I shouldn’t do,” I quipped tiredly. “So what’d you have in mind?”

“Would coffee work?” I wasn’t aware that coffee shops were open this late. Shows what I know, I guess.

"Sure. Which one are should we meet at, the one downtown or the one like a block from your house?"

"Which one will you come to first when you get into town?"

"Um." I thought for a moment, trying to recall my limited knowledge of the location of coffee-shops as they were relevant to my own location. "The one downtown, I think."

"Then we can meet at that one," Jessie decided. I was instantly against that idea.

"Like hell. I am *not* allowing my girlfriend to drive around by herself in the middle of the night downtown," I informed her firmly. "It is *seriously* sketch over there, particularly when it's nearly eleven."

"And you'd know this because...?"

"Cause it's common knowledge," I replied dryly, shifting the phone a bit. "We're going to the one near your house."

"Okay. Meet you there at eleven?" she assumed.

"Yep. I might be a few minutes late, though. I'm tired as crap and am driving uber-careful 'cause of it."

"Who says 'uber'?"

"Shut up. *I* say uber."

"Obviously. See you in a while, then."

"Kay. Love ya." I hung up and forced it into my pocket, hunkering back into my jacket. It had been cold and misty all day, and since I was doing the rehearsal in an amphitheater, it only made sense to wear a jacket. Even so, I was probably gonna catch a cold or something. "With how my luck is, I've prob'ly got the goddamn swine flu," I growled to myself, punctuating the grumble with a yawn.

To keep myself awake, I unclipped the little iPod shuffle from my belt loop, plugging it into the cassette player adapter I'd bought. I turned it on and jerked at the sudden burst of unintelligible screaming from the stereo. I quickly turned it down. This little iPod had all of my darker music on it. Gallhammer, Black Sabbath, Crowbar, Nortt, Anthrax, Slayer - pretty much anything that strayed from 'metalcore' but still managing to stay in the genre of 'metal'.

Unfortunately, my harem (including my girlfriend) couldn't stand to listen to this, even though I'd managed to get most of them into metalcore bands. Hell, Rox was the only one who'd experiment with that kind of music, and even then, she only really liked Anthrax. So I kept all my non-harem/girlfriend-friendly music on the little shuffle that I'd won in a raffle.

But, hey, with no caffeine and no one to talk to, I'd have to rely on this stuff to keep me up.



When I got to the place, I was mildly surprised that there weren't any cricket chirps or tumbleweed rolling around. It was *that* empty. Fortunately, that just meant it was easier to find my girlfriend - who just so happened to be near the back, in the corner, her nose buried in some papers.

I slipped over there as quietly as I could, sneaking up behind her. I covered her eyes with my hands; Jessie stiffened in shock for an instant then relaxed again.

"Rachel," she deadpanned dryly.

"Damn," I sighed, removing my hands and going around to get to the table she was at. "How'd you guess?"

"Aside for the rings and leather?" Jessie teased, poking me with her pen. "You're the only one who has the audacity to do that." She moved her seat over and dragged the other one over to her side, inviting me to sit with her. I sat down, attempting to think of a good retort. She ruined the chance for me to come up with one, though, by wordlessly passing me a cup.

"Thanks, darlin', but you didn't need t' get me anything," I thanked her, a little surprised at the gesture.

"Isn't that my line?" she replied playfully, smiling tiredly at me.

"Usually, yes. But thanks anyways." I returned the smile. I hated the taste of coffee, really, but I wasn't going to tell her that.

"Mm." She merely leaned over to place a chaste kiss on my mouth. I nearly sighed in relief; Jessie seemed a bit hesitant regarding PDA the past two weeks, and I'd been starting to worry that she was going through 'lesbian issues' again. I ignored the fact that I'd given more intimate kisses to *Thomas*. That didn't matter right now. "Your lips are *really* chapped," she informed me, before opening her purse. I absently ran my tongue over my lips. She was right, of course, but whatever. The little redhead handed me a half-empty yellow tube of chapstick. "Here, this should help."

"Thank ya." I applied it quickly, not really caring enough to ensure I did it right, and gave it back to her. I then took a hesitant sip from the cup she'd handed me and nearly coughed at the taste of hot chocolate. (I'd been expecting the strong flavor of coffee so much that the drink just tasted *odd*.) "So what are we up to here?" I asked her, motioning towards her various papers.

"Oh, um, just college applications," Jessie replied absently, brushing her red hair behind her ears.

"Yeah?" I sat up, more interested. She hadn't yet told me about her plans after graduation. "What college do you want to go to?"

"I've been thinking about going to Valdosta State," she admitted shyly, her eyes flicking down to her papers as she took a few sips from her cup. I noticed the slight curve of her lips; she obviously liked talking about her college plans.

"Majoring in what?" I prodded her gently. It wasn't often that she got excited over things I was interested in - like my girlfriend's future, for example.

"I'm not sure what all the different majors are, but I'm wanting to go into voice study," Jessie replied with a smile.

"Fun," I nodded, taking the lid off my cup to lick the whipped cream off the top. I remained mostly silent as she went on to tell me about all the research she'd done on that particular study, only speaking up occasionally to ask a question or to make a remark. Jessie was

practically beaming as she talked, which in turn made me smile a bit, even though I was just about tired enough to pass out in the floor. "You just have this all planned out, doncha?" I teased her gently when she seemed to be done.

"Yeah, don't you?" she looked up at me curiously.

I scoffed, a little uncertainly. If Jessie was like every other person in the school system, she was gonna give me grief over this. "Like hell."

Jessie gave me an odd look. "You haven't planned anything?" I could tell by the look on her face that she couldn't understand how I hadn't made any plans for college.

"I dunno if you've seen my transcript recently, darlin', but at this point, I'd be lucky to be accepted into a community college," I informed her, examining my black-painted fingernails boredly.

"You're *not* going to college?" she clarified, baffled.

"Nope. I've known that since like freshman year." It was true. Despite all the 'you have so much potential!' talks from my teachers and counsellors, I only barely managed to pass my core classes. The only classes I'd really done well in in the past four years were Spanish 1 through 4, a semester of orchestra my freshman year, and my chorus class this year. I really didn't care anymore that I wasn't going to college. "Which is why I constantly bitch about that retarded math course I'm taking. I'm sure as hell never gonna use logarithms in whatever career I have, so I don't see the point in it."

"You know that - "

"College graduates get something like a 40 percent larger income? Yes, I know. You sound like the damn counsellors," I grunted, sipping irritably at my drink. A combination of my lack of sleep, the late time, and the fact that my girlfriend was acting as though it were *impossible* for a person to go to high school and then not go to college were making me kinda grumpy.

"I'm not trying to make you mad," Jessie looked surprised at my irritation.

"Yeah, well, it's making me mad anyways, so I'm calling for a subject change," I replied with a shake of my head. The motion made my bangs obscure my vision, and I brushed them out of my face impatiently. Jessie was right, I needed a haircut. I made a mental note to go tomorrow.

"Okay. New subject: you."

I blinked.

"Okay, not *much* of a subject change," I muttered dryly. "But, okay. What about me are we talking about?" I felt the deep-seated fear, the one of her leaving me one day, stirring deep in my gut. I shoved it away quickly.

"Mostly about the fact that you flirt with *every* single girl and guy you see," she replied, genuine pain and anger flickering in her gaze. Her words hit me like a blow to the gut. Where on earth did she come up with *that*? I wondered fearfully if she'd been listening to those rumors about me. I wasn't an idiot; I knew I was known as the school whore behind my back. Hell, I was called that in front of my face. But Jessie knew me - she wouldn't think that badly of me. Right?

"I do *not* flirt with every girl or guy I see," I protested with a slight frown.

"Most of them, you do," Jessie informed me softly, not meeting my gaze. "And - and maybe you don't *realize* it or something, but - you do." She tried to look me in the eyes, but her gaze dropped again. I tried to speak up, but she continued before I managed to say anything. "Sometimes I think you're *trying* to make me think your reputation is true."

That near-literally winded me. I felt my defenses shoot back up, my emotions nearly shut down. I didn't often do that with Jessie, not anymore. But she couldn't expect to imply that I was a slut and *not* lock her out.

I nodded shortly. "Yeah, okay. I'll try." My voice sounded flat, even to my own ears. But that was the way I did; when someone I cared about chose to believe someone else over me did that, I'd shut myself down. It was a safety precaution, so to speak. I glanced silently at my watch. "It's getting late. I'd better go home."

"Rachel -" Jessie tried to protest, getting to her feet as I stood, but I cut her off with a half-hearted kiss on her lips.

"Thanks for the drink," I thanked her robotically, holding the cup up and nodding. "See you in school. Don't forget you have some rehearsals next week."

Jessie looked faintly distressed, but she said nothing to stop me, not even an apology, and I left.

As I slammed the car door behind me and placed my cup in the holder, something occurred to me: I resented the fact that she'd said something so... hurtful, but I didn't resent *her*.

I sighed wearily, starting up the engine of the truck, and growled to myself as I irritably stomped the clutch down. I was beginning to vaguely wish that I'd never fallen so hard for the little redhead. Surely it would hurt less if I hadn't.

CHAPTER 67

It was only four days after I'd confronted my girlfriend, and I was already starting to regret it. Now that Rachel wasn't returning the flirting of girls at school, they were bothering *me*, wanting to know if something was wrong with Rachel, telling me that she was acting weird. As if that weren't enough, Rachel seemed to be talking less and less in general. I didn't ask why, and she didn't tell me. I figured it was about what I'd said to her regarding her reputation. At the time, I'd nearly slapped my own hand over my mouth, startled that I could say something so callous to her without apologizing.

On Wednesday, Rachel obviously arrived at school early; she was in the chorus room before even I was, and my father usually drove me to school as early as possible. When I entered the room, though, it was not only Rachel who was there already, but also Thomas and some tall, somewhat cute emo-looking boy I didn't recognize.

"You guys are here early," I remarked as I put my books and purse on the shelves.

Rachel glanced briefly at me. "Yeah." See, she wasn't too eager to talk.

"Yeah, you know how you guys are doing Vivaldi's Gloria?" Thomas piped up, grinning. "Well, the teacher wanted you guys to get some practice with the strings instead of the piano."

"Oh, lord," I muttered. We'd only barely begun to get the hang of most of the movements, and now she wasn't even letting us have the accompaniment. This was not going to end well. "So, you're playing cello?"

"Nope, first violin! And Rachel's playing second violin, and Conner's playing viola," he motioned to the guy next to him.

"Unwillingly," Conner snorted, looking vaguely annoyed at the idea of playing viola. "I'm only doing this 'cause Thomas asked me to."

“Aw, you know you love me,” Thomas teased, ruffling his hair and kissing him on the cheek. Something clicked.

“*This* is your boyfriend?” I nearly exclaimed, startled. I was certainly not expecting some little emo kid to be his boyfriend.

“This is him,” he affirmed, bobbing his head quickly. He irritably brushed his thick hair out of his eyes. He needed a haircut even more than Rachel did. *Apparently it’s a requirement to have weird hair if you’re in Rachel’s harem*, I thought, remembering Rox’s short, dark green hair.

“Nice to meet you,” I tried to be polite to him.

Conner merely shrugged and nodded, his hands thrust deep into his pockets. (Which was a feat in and of itself, considering how tight they were.) I didn’t approve of his lack of manners. Neither did Thomas, apparently, because he gently elbowed the taller boy’s side. Conner merely rolled his eyes and kissed Thomas’ cheek. Thomas blushed a very light pink, grinning.

I turned my gaze to my girlfriend, a little envious of the two boys. It hadn’t been so long ago that we’d done that same thing, was it? I easily remembered countless times that Rachel had kissed me gently like that and made me blush and look down. She hadn’t done that in a while. Or, rather, I hadn’t let her do that in a while. Without realizing it, I’d been taking as little affection from her as I could.

When had that started, anyways? When she started being late to things because of her ‘job’? Or was it when I’d seen her in that hospital bed, broken and having requested they not call me?

Rachel was pointedly ignoring the couple, mindlessly rubbing something quickly over the strings of the bow. Her violin, or at least the case, sat at her feet.

“He’s not particularly talkative,” I remarked softly, sitting next to Rachel. At her curious glance, I nodded at Conner, who was idly plucking the strings on his own instrument. She snorted softly, amused.

“He never has been, Jessie,” she replied quietly, so they couldn’t hear her. “He’s kind of a douche. But, hey, he keeps Sparkles happy, so whatever.”

I looked at her in surprise. Rachel had always struck me as the kind of person who would tell someone straight-up if she didn’t approve of their relationships, but I guess not. My eyes

flicked down to her hand, which was still rubbing that small block against the strings of her bow. I put my hand on hers to make her stop. She looked curiously at me. "I think it's good, Rachel," I remarked with an amused smile, trying to play it off. I wasn't sure why I'd done that.

"I guess," she sighed, glancing at the bow before putting it away.

"Hey, Rachel, does this sound out of tune to you?" Conner asked, plucking one of his strings. Rachel paused for an instant, considering.

"Yeah, a little."

"Thought so. Give me the note?"

"D?"

"Yeah."

Rachel's dark eyes glanced at the ceiling, her lips moving soundlessly as she thought over it. Then she sang a long, clean note, her warm alto voice wavering slightly with a natural vibrato. I felt a brief flash of annoyed jealousy as Conner tuned the string to her voice. I knew she was better than me at singing rock and metal, but I'd assumed she was no longer used to singing in her "chorus voice" (as she called it), but I was apparently wrong on that point. Her "chorus voice" was just as unbelievable as her screaming was.

"How do you know that's right?" I asked, just for sake of being argumentative (though no one else knew it).

"I have perfect pitch," Rachel replied cheerfully, grinning at me.

"You - what?"

"It basically means my tonal memory's so good that I can sing any note perfectly without any help."

I glanced at her suspiciously. "So, wait, why do you use a tuner with your guitars, then?"

"Cause I'm not gonna sit there and sing six different notes for however long it takes to tune the damn things. Takes for-fuckin'-ever and it's just easier to use the tuner." She shrugged. "Hey, by the way, don't forget about your rehearsal with the choreographer-from-hell tomorrow."

"I haven't forgotten, Rachel," I replied dryly. I paused for a moment before giving her a quick kiss on the mouth. She twitched in surprise at the random kiss. I stood up and ruffled her thick, shaggy hair, eliciting a few protests from her as she tried to swat me away. I laughed, a

little relieved that she reacted the same way she always did. Maybe she'd been waiting for me to start acting... normal, again. "By the way, sweetie, you still need a hair cut."

"Yeah, yeah, I'm doing that later this week, now quit messing it up," she complained, shooting me a fake-annoyed look. I merely smirked at her before going to get my music folder; other people were starting to wander in, now.

As I left, I heard Thomas 'aww' and comment to Rachel on how we were such a cute couple. I didn't hear my girlfriend's response, but I knew it had to be something mean, considering the fact that Conner laughed aloud and made a sound like "rowr!"

I grabbed the thin, black binder and headed to my seat in the soprano section. Thomas was pouting heavily as Conner tried to comfort him. I sighed tiredly, looking down at my folder. I decided that I didn't like watching the two boyfriends fawn over each other like that. And, if the way Rachel was rolling her eyes and making snide comments at them were any indicator, she thought about the same thing. *Why aren't we still like them?* If I remembered right, Thomas and Conner had been together longer than I'd been with Rachel.

One glance at the students that were hurrying to get in their seats before the bell rang, and I slipped my phone from my pocket. 'u free this weekend?' I sent it and quickly jammed it back in my pocket so no one would see it.

A minute later and Rachel flinched just slightly. She removed her phone without checking to make sure no one was watching (even though a few girls were trying to get her attention already) and quickly read the text. She turned to look at me, mildly surprised, but grinned and winked. I smiled slightly, taking that as a confirmation, and looked up at the teacher as she began telling us about why the three instrumentalists were with us today. I was barely listening to her, though, trying to come up with something... romantic, for my girlfriend and I. I was regretting my behavior towards her, and now I had to at least try and fix it.

I'd make this work.

CHAPTER 68

“I see why you hate the choreographer.” Those were Jessie’s first words to me when I opened the door of my apartment to let her in Saturday morning.

I laughed. “She’s a bitch, ain’t she?” My gaze flickered over her briefly. She was wearing a pair of frayed denim shorts and a black camisole. I silently guessed that we would be outside for most or all of our date, then, since she hadn’t told me where we were going. All I’d managed to get out of her that it was an overnight trip (which made me raise my eyebrows briefly) and that it was going to be a pretty hot where we were going.

“Definitely,” the redhead agreed. I saw her blue eyes glance over my own outfit; I was wearing my usual get-up of a pair of tight, torn-up jeans and a baggy t-shirt. Had it been cool enough, I would have been wearing my jacket, too. As it was, though, I was going to have to deal with the fact that the scarring wound down my arm would attract some unwanted attention.

She glanced up at my face, then. “You got your hair cut.” It wasn’t a question; the change from long, reddish-black and shaggy to short, red-and-black, and spiked. I’d gotten it cut and colored on Friday, even though the entire thing had taken over an hour to do. And then, “Is that what you’re wearing?” She’d requested previously that I wear something I wouldn’t get too hot in. And, while I doubted that my outfit would keep me nice and cool, I wouldn’t overheat or anything, either.

I glanced down at my outfit, as if I’d forgotten what I was wearing. “Yeah, why?” I didn’t see anything wrong with it, personally.

“Do you not have shorts or anything?” she asked, genuinely curious.

“Uh, no, none that fit. I think I have a few pairs I bought like *last* year, but I’m not even going to try to fit into those.” I grew too much to wear most things I bought a year ago; at this point, I probably had boxers that covered more skin than those shorts did now.

“Ah, yeah, good point.” Amusement was evident in her voice. “Got your stuff, then?” I picked up a black fag-bag (the only overnight bag I owned) and slung it over my shoulder by way of reply. Jessie grinned. “Then let's go.” I quickly grabbed my keys and wallet before locking the door behind me. Jessie then surprised me again by grabbing my hand to lead me downstairs.

A few stray photographers snapped shots of us as we left the building. Most of their crowd had left by now - my novelty was wearing off, I guess - but apparently these guys had nothing better to do than hang around and watch me leaving my apartment with the girl everyone *knew* was my girlfriend. But, hey, if they got their kicks from taking pictures of a teenager and her younger girlfriend holding hands, who was I to judge?

“Planning on telling me where we're going?” I prompted as I tossed my bag in the backseat of her car.

Jessie paused from getting into the driver's seat to shoot me a dry look. “Yeah, if you can tell me why you're apparently the only one who gets to surprise her girlfriend.” I didn't really have a rebuttal for that, so I just shut up and climbed into the passenger side.

“You know, if I'm forced to sing different parts than what I play on piano one more time, I think I'm going to break it,” I informed her dryly, before reaching down to push the seat back enough for my legs.

Jessie laughed and turned the key. “Why, what happened yesterday?”

“Well, you know how she makes me sing with the tenors sometimes?”

“Yeah.” She paused to look over her shoulder before backing out of her parking place.

“She apparently thinks that I can sing tenor, *and* play the female parts on piano. At the same time.” I rolled my eyes. “I think she fails to understand that I can't really do that. Hell, I doubt *most* pianists could do that.”

“Poor you,” the redhead teased as she pulled onto the main road. “At least she's not making you sing soprano.”

“Hey, now, I can sing soprano just as well as I can sing alto. And, for that matter, I *can* sing tenor. And bass too, if it's an octave higher. I just don't like singin' from the bass clef. It gets a little too low for me to hit some of the notes if I sing it in the actual octave.” I shrugged. I

was a girl, despite my masculine looks and hobbies, so it wasn't like it was *surprising* that I couldn't sing properly in the bass clef.

“Ah. Hey, you're an alto, right?” she asked suddenly.

I looked at her curiously. “It's the range I *prefer* to sing in, yes. Why?”

“Are you trying out for the alto solo?”

“Which movement? The eighth?” There were three movements, if memory served, that had an alto solo. But the eighth was the best-known of the three.

“Which one is *Domine Deus*?”

“That'd be the sixth, which is a soprano solo. The movement with the *alto* solo is *Domine Deus, agnus Dei*. Which is the eighth,” I replied dryly.

I laughed a little when she rolled her eyes at me. “Then, yes, that one. Are you?”

After a moment of consideration, I gave a half-hearted shrug. “Thought about it. Prob'ly not, though.”

“Why not?” Jessie seemed a little surprised. Apparently, a *lot* of things I did made no sense to her. Then again, I was sure that a *lot* of people thought that about me.

“Well, first off, no one else would wanna try out for the part if I did, since I'm sort of a professional musician,” I began, ticking the points off on my fingers. “Not to mention the fact that I'd have to memorize a completely new score before the concert. 'Sides, I don't wanna solo, I wanna conduct.” I folded my arms, then, as if finalizing the statement.

“You want to conduct?” my girlfriend repeated, still sounding vaguely surprised. “Are you even allowed to?”

“Yeah. 'Parently Ms. K wanted the last concert to be student-led anyways, but she didn't get much enthusiasm for the student conductors. I asked her 'bout it yesterday, and she said that she'd teach me how to do it so I could conduct the show.” I grinned impishly at Jessie. “Which is good; now I don't have to pretend like I know how to play the harpsichord. 'Cause I don't.” Jessie shook her head in amusement, keeping her eyes on the road. “Are *you* trying out for any of the soprano solos?” I prompted, then, believing that I knew the answer to that already.

“I've... been thinking about it,” she admitted with a hesitant shrug. “I don't know, though. Like you said, I'd have to memorize new parts and everything and... I don't know.”

She doesn't know how well I know her. I knew she loved singing, almost as much as I loved music in general. I knew she wanted one of the solos, even if she wasn't saying as such.

"Well, if you *were* tryin' out for a solo, which one would you try out for?" I worded the question carefully, trying to provoke a response from her.

"*Domine deus,*" she replied instantly. I smiled to myself; I knew she had been thinking about it more than she'd insinuated.

"So why aren't you gonna try out?" I inquired casually. I was going to convince her to do it if it killed me. In my opinion, Jessie had spent too much of her life trying to impress others; I was going to force her to do something for herself, whether she wanted to or not.

We were in the car for nearly two hours before we stopped at a gas station. To my pleasant surprise, even though it was a fairly long car ride, we'd managed to fill up the entire time with conversation. The subjects ranged from serious (why I wasn't going to college) to entirely random (where the hell are all the baby pigeons), which delighted me even more. It had been a while since we'd gotten to have long, uninterrupted conversations like that.

I hopped out of the car at the same time that Jessie did. "I'm fixin' to go get a drink. You want anything?" I offered, motioning towards the store area.

"Just a Coke is fine, thanks," she smiled at me before turning to open the gas tank. I nodded and went inside. Fortunately, the line wasn't particularly long, so I was able to get in and out within just a couple of minutes.

"So, gonna tell me where we're goin' yet?" I inquired half-jokingly, half-seriously as I returned to her car. Jessie just shot me a dry look and I held up my hands in surrender, grinning semi-apologetically. "This is yours," I added, handing the bottle to her. She nodded in thanks and got back into the car. "Can you at least give me a hint?" I complained playfully. "I'm sick of drivin'!"

"We have about an hour and a half 'till we get there," Jessie shook her head at me, a mixture of amusement and annoyance on her face. "Honestly, you're about as patient as a five-year-old."

"Am not." I stuck my tongue out at her and she gently swatted me on the shoulder. I said nothing in response to that, merely unscrewing the top of my Vault. I took a lazy sip from the bottle before pausing and glancing at her with a crooked grin. "Wait, was that my hint?"

She snorted. "It's in north Georgia. *There's* your hint. Now stop asking!" she grouched. For a minute, I thought she was actually angry, but then I relaxed when I saw the corners of her lips twitch a little.

"You are a *crappy* hint-giver, Jessie."

"And *you* have no patience at all."

As it turned out, though, Jessie *was* accurate in her guess of about how much longer we were going to be in the car. At about one-thirty in the afternoon, Jessie turned into a woodsy-looking back road. "You'll be glad to know, we're almost there," she informed me dryly, keeping her eyes on the dirt, tree-limb-ridden road.

I raised my eyebrows at her. "You're taking me to the woods? I'm not sure whether I should be worried or..." I trailed off, deciding suddenly that teasing her was probably not the best way to go about talking to her when we were *just now* coming back together.

"Oh, hush," Jessie ordered good-naturedly, making me grateful that I wasn't pissing her off too badly. "You'll see in a minute."

True to her word, a moment later the trees thinned out, revealing a fairly good-sized cabin. A little ways behind it, I saw a short dock leading into a calm-looking lake.

I whistled softly to myself, impressed.

"We're here now, in case you didn't figure that on your own," she remarked teasingly as she parked her car in front of the cabin.

"I figured as much when ya started slowin' down," I shot back dryly, opening the door. I went to the back to grab my bag from the backseat. "And yet, I *still* have no idea where we are. Can I ask for another hint now?" I grinned playfully at her and then ducked when she threw her empty Coke bottle at me.

"How about I just *tell* you where we are?" She grunted softly as she pulled her own bag out of the car.

"That'd be nice too."

"Well, we're at Hartwell Lake which *is*, by the way, in north Georgia. This is the cabin that my parents and I come to over the summer. And, since I'm not going to be able to go with you on your trip to Jekyll on Monday, I figured we could just... come here." Jessie ended with an

awkward shrug. That movement coupled with her uncertain expression made me realize something, then.

“Do your parents know that we’re up here?” I mock-accused her, hands on my hips.

“Not... really.” Her lightly-freckled cheeks flushed pink. “I told them I was going to be at rehearsals all weekend...”

“Ooh, you did somethin' bad,” I teased, giving her a gentle shove on the shoulder.

“Oh, shut up,” the redhead groused, looking vaguely irked.

I hesitated briefly before kissing her on the top of the head, giving her a one-armed shrug about her shoulders. “I’m only teasing you, darlin’,” I informed her with a smile. I looked about the area with interest. The cabin looked slightly out-of-place, like it belonged more in a mountain than on the shore of a lake. “Y’know, I don’t think I woulda pegged your parents as the type to own a lake house.”

Jessie snorted softly, resting her head against my shoulder and making me smile to myself. “No one ever does.” I tried to bite back a laugh at that, but when I felt her giggling softly, herself, I began laughing with her.

At that moment, with my girlfriend returned to me, laughing together with her, in the middle of the woods, by a lake, *trespassing*, even, I felt a sensation I hadn't felt in years.

Peace.

CHAPTER 69

When we got back to the cabin after going to a local seafood restaurant, Rachel near instantly flopped onto the couch.

"I ate too much," she complained idly, not sounding particularly remorseful. Her shirt rode up a little from the awkward way she'd more or less fallen onto the couch, revealing a strip of pale flesh marred with the ugly yellow and purple blotches of healing bruises. She lay her hand over her stomach as if to emphasize her statement. Which, in my opinion, was useless, considering how thin she still was.

"You think?" I teased her even so. I managed to sit down between her legs and then I lay down as well, resting my head against her shoulder. "With the way you eat, you're gonna be fat when you're like thirty." I covered her hand with my own and gave it an affectionate squeeze.

"Yeah, well, before I'm overweight, I have to *not* be underweight, so for now, that ain't a problem," she retorted dryly. I didn't have a comeback for that, so I just shifted so my head was resting against her chest. Rachel idly curled my hair around her fingers.

We just stayed like that for a moment, reveling in the quiet. It had been a while since we'd just sat and cuddled like this. *I've missed this.*

"Hey, Rachel?" I began suddenly, my voice low, as if I was hesitant to break the silence.

"Hm?" Her nails traced a meaningless pattern on my scalp and I nearly purred.

"I just realized. I dunno anything about you before eighth grade." That thought had just occurred to me. I knew she'd gone through hell and back that year, and much of what she'd endured in high school after that, but I didn't know a single thing about her before that.

Rachel paused from scratching my head to consider that. "Huh. I reckon not." Her fingers began to move again. "Never really came up, I guess."

"I bet you were a bad kid," I quipped, my hand gripping her free hand.

"Depends on who ya asked. Anyone *not* related to me said I was a good kid. My Daddy," I giggled softly when her accent mangled the word to sound like 'deddy,' "though, he broke something like three wood spoons over my ass before he finally just gave up and started switching me. Used to make me go out to the backyard and make me pick out my own damn switch, too."

I looked up at her, surprised and a little confused. "I don't know what a switch is," I admitted, managing to keep my surprise out of my voice. Rachel was a smart-ass, yeah, but I couldn't imagine her pissing her father off to the point that he'd manage to 'break a wood spoon over her ass,' as she'd so eloquently put it.

"Basically a long, thin stick you use to spank bad kids," she replied dryly, shaking her head at some memory. "Stung like a motherfucker. Left at least one scar, too, I know that much."

"You're lying," I accused, stunned.

"Nope." She untangled her fingers from mine to run them across the back of her left thigh. "I know there's one that goes right across here," Rachel informed me with a half-shrug. If there really was a scar there, I hadn't ever noticed it.

"Huh. I would never have guessed," I mused honestly.

"I know! No one would have expected the straight-A Christian Girl Scout to be the kind of kid who'd get whipped on a regular basis," she laughed. I blinked, sat up, and looked at her.

"...You were a Girl Scout?" *That* one honestly threw me for a loop. *I'd* never even been a Girl Scout.

"Don't start with me," Rachel warned, pointing a finger at me. "I was pretty much the exact opposite then of what I am now."

"Bitchy?" I guessed with a playful grin, tilting my head.

"Oh, you did not just go there." I squealed when she lightly rolled me off of her, onto the floor. Then I had to try and fend her off when she landed on top of me and immediately started tickling my sides.

"H-hey - quit!" I shrieked when Rachel dug her fingers under my arm. I tried to squirm away, but as always, she was too heavy for me to push off, even if she technically *was* underweight. I attempted to retaliate by tickling her stomach, which, to my surprise, actually

worked. Rachel gave a surprisingly feminine squeak and jerked away, making me grin and try to attack her.

The tickle-fight only lasted a few minutes before we were both on the floor, a few feet away from each other, trying to catch our breath.

"Truce?" Rachel gasped out, climbing back onto the couch and watching me warily.

"Y-yeah," I nodded, joining her again. We settled back into our earlier position, still giggling occasionally.

"Fuck," she muttered suddenly, making me look up at her.

"What?"

"My sides hurt like hell," she admitted dryly, holding her hand to her side. I laughed a little even though, truth be told, I was a little sore, myself.

"Sorry." I placed a hint of a kiss on the corner of her mouth. "Jeez. I haven't had a tickle fight in *years*. My sides hurt, too."

Rachel leered playfully at me. "Should I kiss it and make it better?"

I laughed, lightly flicking her nose. "Down, girl. I'm tired now."

She pretended to sigh disappointedly. "Damn. Didn't think I could wear a girl out without even doing anything but I guess - " I rolled my eyes and shut her up with a kiss. As always, her lips were a bit chapped, but I ignored it.

Rachel made a soft noise, her hand coming up and resting on the back of my neck. She held me there for a minute before releasing me so I could breathe. I nuzzled the soft skin of her neck and smiled slightly when she tilted her head back in response. She threaded her fingers into my hair as I absently nipped and kissed at her pale throat. I shivered when I felt her drag her short fingernails down my spine, then shyly slipped into my shirt, delicately touching the skin of my back.

We were both honestly too tired – and a little too nervous, all things considering – to do much to the other, though I did renew my mark on her throat, and Rachel left a new one on the side of my neck.

"You bite too much," I complained half-heartedly, rubbing my hand over the still-moist mark. It wasn't the first time she'd bitten me, but as usual, it only hurt *after* she stopped biting.

Rachel scoffed as I stood, allowing her to sit up. “Like you’re one to talk. *I’ve* never drawn blood on *you*.” She stood and stretched mightily, and I winced at the sound of her neck and spine and knuckles cracking loudly. I hated when she did that. Then, when I registered what she’d said, I flushed and looked away.

“It was *one time*,” I muttered, picking up our bags and taking them to the nearby bedroom.

“Yeah, one time that left a mark that’s *still* healing,” Rachel pointed out, rolling up the short sleeve to show me that the bite mark was still pretty visible.

“You’re really asking for me to make you sleep on the hammock outside,” I warned her, closing the bedroom door behind us and taking my pajamas out of my bag.

“Wouldn’t bother me. I can sleep anywhere,” she assured me, changing into a red tank top that was a bit too small for her.

“Have you ever *tried* sleeping in a hammock?” I inquired dryly, pulling on my pajama shirt. I’d done that maybe once, and would *never* do it again.

“Have *you* ever tried sleeping against the tech booth at a Metallica concert?” Rachel shot back, somehow managing to get her too-tight jeans off. I gave her an odd look, and she laughed.

“You are such a liar,” I shook my head to show I didn’t believe her.

“There is picture evidence, courtesy of Roxene.” She pulled out her phone and, after a minute of looking, showed it to me. I didn’t bother holding back a laugh. Rachel, dressed in some ripped-up jeans and a black Metallica t-shirt, was curled up, asleep, against an aluminum-sided tech booth. The odd, multi-colored lighting was the only proof that there really was a concert going on.

“Wow, Rachel. How are you able to sleep through that racket?” I giggled.

She frowned at me. “Hey, now. Metallica is *not* racket. And, besides, I was sick and hadn’t slept in like three days.” She turned the phone off and shrugged before going to tug the bedspread down.

“Is that what you’re sleeping in?” I asked curiously, going to help her. She was only dressed in the red tank top and a pair of black boyshorts.

Rachel shrugged. “The rest of my PJs were in the hamper. So yeah.” That being said, we slipped into the bed and turned off the beside lamps.

I lay against her, resting my head against her shoulder. For a minute, we stayed like that, but I squeaked when Rachel suddenly turned on her side, her arms wrapping around my torso as she spooned me.

"Rachel?" I inquired softly, but she didn't reply, merely burying her face in my hair. I smiled to myself. Apparently all was forgiven.

CHAPTER 70

When I arrived at the restaurant we were meeting at that Monday, Rox stood and just barely glanced me over before shamelessly remarking, "You look like you got laid."

I felt my cheeks warm up at her usual bluntness, but I rolled my eyes anyways. I didn't particularly care whether she thought I got laid or not, but I didn't really appreciate her pointing this out to everyone in the restaurant. "Thank you for your observation," I replied flatly, hands on my hips. "I'm sure you're familiar with that look, yourself." That remark earned me a headlock and a quick flip over her hip. I grunted at the impact of my side onto the floor. I was merely thankful that she didn't throw me onto my stomach or on my scarred arm. They were still rather sore, even if they were healing.

Thomas helped me up, trying not to laugh. "Enjoy your weekend with Jessie?" he assumed with a knowing smile.

"I did, not that it's any of y'all's business," I nodded, taking my seat between Aaron and Leah. Leah, ever the affectionate one, hugged me tightly around the shoulders until I loudly complained about it.

"Sorry, but you're just cute when you get all lovey-dovey about your girlfriend," she informed me with a grin.

"Yeah, thanks," I snorted, shaking my head.

"Who's ready for Jekyll?" Aaron cheered, his mouth full of chips. (This was nearly always the case when we came to the Mexican restaurant. We could only be thankful that the chips were free.)

The entire group whooped loudly, even though we weren't quite *that* excited about it. It was just funny to see the manager poke his head out of his office at the noise, pale when he saw us, and duck back in, slamming the door behind us.

"I think he's scared of us," Victoria smirked, looking positively evil when she said that.

"I think you're probably right," her sister agreed, looking about as wicked as Victoria. "I think we should scare him some more."

"No sexual harassment, you guys, we've already gotten kicked out with that charge before," I reminded them, shaking my head dryly.

"When did that happen?" Jenny spoke up, trying to remember.

"That was Thomas and Ray's thing, remember?" Aaron spoke up with a grin, his chin in his hand. "You know, that waiter was acting really snobbish towards us guys and then they –"

"*Oh, yeah,*" she laughed, mirth shining in her eyes. "Christ, I thought we were gonna get arrested for that one."

Thomas said nothing, merely blushing and burying his face in his hands. Victoria sympathetically patted him on the back.

Our waiter today turned out to be the usual guy we got – we suspected that the rest of the staff tried to avoid our group as much as possible – and he greeted us with a tired grin. We placed our drink orders and he left.

"Is Ray not even coming to eat dinner with us?" I inquired as the waiter left, stealing a basket of chips before Aaron could.

"Nope. He said he's busy," Thomas replied, his blush finally fading enough for him to look at us again.

"With *what?*" Rox inquired in a bewildered tone, as if she could think of nothing that could possibly be more important than him having lunch with us.

"Being a dick," Aaron offered, and we laughed a little at that. Ray *was* kind of a dick, but he, like me, had been rejected when he tried to come out. And so we accepted him into our little circle, despite his obnoxiousness.

"His loss," I sighed melodramatically. "No booze for him." Then I glanced at Rox. "You did bring booze, right?" It wouldn't be a particularly fun week-long drinking binge without alcohol.

She scoffed. “Of course I did.” Being the bartender had its perks; she was always the one to provide alcohol for our ‘Spring Break Jekyll Binge,’ as we called it. “Speaking of which, you guys need to pay up.” Not that she did it for free, of course, but we were perfectly fine with splitting the bill for it. It wasn’t fair for her to pay for the entire stash from her own pocket, even if she did get discounts.

“Right, right,” I nodded, standing slightly to retrieve my duct-tape wallet from my back pocket. “How much this time?”

“Twenty bucks,” she replied, lacing her fingers together.

I whistled lowly to show my disapproval, but handed her two tens anyways.

“Graci,” Rox thanked me (partially) in Spanish. Thomas and Leah handed her the same amounts and she nodded before slipping the bills into her pocket.

We chatted/argued about nothing for another minute or two, and then the waiter brought our drinks to us. “Aren’t you guys missing a few from your usual crowd?” the guy (whose name I could not for the life of me recall) spoke up for sake of conversation as he passed the cold cups around.

“Just one,” I assured him, assuming he was talking about Ray.

“Two,” Victoria corrected. I looked at her curiously.

“Your girlfriend, remember?” Leah reminded me with a smile.

I rolled my eyes. The man was still waiting to take our orders, but he could wait another minute. “Jessie is *so* not part of this group,” I snorted. She wasn’t screwy enough in the head to be part of this group. Well, not yet, anyways. I was certain that after she hung with me long enough that she’d develop *some* manner of insanity.

That being said, I turned to the waiter again. “*Quiero una quesadilla, sin verduras, con mucho queso y carne. Okay?*” I grinned impishly at him. It was always fun ordering in Spanish. At least, it was in my own opinion.

“One quesadilla, no vegetables, extra cheese and meat?” he repeated with a similar grin. It always amused the Hispanic man when I’d speak Spanish. I suspected that he thought I sounded funny, speaking in near-perfect Spanish with my thick Southern accent.

“*Muy bien.*” I nodded and drank some of my Coke. “And... we probably need more chips, too. *Someone’s* been eating them all. Not to point fingers or say names,” I pointed at the boy next to me, “*Aaron.*”

“Funny, Rachel,” Aaron grumbled, not sounding particularly amused. He placed his order anyways, and the rest of my harem followed suit a minute later.

"Hey, where are we staying for the week?" Victoria piped up as the waiter left.

"Days Inn," I told her with a nod, playing with my straw. "We got three rooms, side-by-side."

"Awesome," the twins hummed simultaneously.

After nearly two hours, we managed to get kicked out once again. He didn't give us the reason this time, but I assume it was because Leah was sitting sideways in my lap. Her hand was resting on my hip so, from the manager's standpoint, it looked like we were doing something... inappropriate.

Which, of course, was the idea in the first place.

"Rachel, do you mind if Victoria rides in your truck with you?" Leah asked me, clinging to my arm as we left the restaurant.

"No, why?" I asked curiously, looking down at her. She was almost shorter than my girlfriend, which is why it always amused me when she called Jessie 'cute.'

"Time of the month," she sighed in a low tone. I winced; having two girls on their periods in the same car was not a good thing. Particularly when said girls were related.

"Yeah, okay," I agreed, shaking her off my arm and going to fetch her sister.



"I. Hate. Driving," Rox growled as we dragged our suitcases into our rooms. I'd be staying with Roxene and Jenny in our room, the twins had the room to the left of us, and the boys would be staying in the one to the right of us. Gay we might be, but we still had respect for gender boundaries.

"At least your van's an automatic," I snorted, rubbing my sore left thigh. "My clutch keeps sticking and now my leg hurts."

"Rachel, babe, it's about time you replace that piece of junk metal you call a truck," Jenny advised, clapping me sympathetically on the shoulder.

"I shan't," I declared, flopping onto one of the beds.

"Let her be, Jenny," Rox scoffed as she began unloading a few boxes from her van.

"Yeah, Jenny, leave me be," I echoed, pulling my phone from my pocket. "Now shut it, I'm on the phone."

"With *who*?" Rox asked, glancing at the clock. It was getting close to ten, after all.

"Her girlfriend, who else?" Jenny snorted.

I shushed them and they went out to finish unloading Rox's van.

To my amusement, Jessie picked up on the second ring. "Rachel?"

"Well, duh, who else would be calling you at ten at night?" I teased, lying back on the bed. "Seriously, though, I was just calling to let ya know that we're at our hotel and no one died. Yet."

"How reassuring," she replied dryly. "Is anyone *drunk* yet?"

I laughed a little. "Nah, we're too worn out right now to drink. It is a long-ass drive to Jekyll."

"I'd imagine," the redhead agreed, punctuating her sentence with a yawn.

"Tired?" I guessed, ignoring my two roommates for the week as they came in.

"A bit, yes," she admitted, and I heard the soft shifting of fabric on fabric. I assumed she was in bed.

"Well, don't let me keep you up," I scolded mildly, smiling slightly though she couldn't see it. "I just wanted to make sure you knew we're alright."

"Okay, thanks, then." She paused then added a little uncertainly, "Have a fun week."

I smiled, relieved that she was at least trying to deal with the fact that I was gonna be gone on a trip with almost all of my gay best friends. "I'll try. Talk to ya later, darlin'."

"Kay," she yawned again. "Love you."

My smile widened; that was the first time she'd ended a phone conversation with that phrase. "Love you too, *chica*."

I hung up, then, ignoring the 'aww's from my friends. I was too happy about coming together with my girlfriend again to care about what they said.

But, since I knew it was expected, I hurled a pillow at them anyways.

CHAPTER 71

"Where'd you get your swimsuit, Jessica?" Virginia asked curiously, just about dragging me downstairs. "It's really cute."

I glanced down at the suit. It was a deep green two-piece I'd bought just a few weeks ago. The top was more or less a tank top, though the neckline plunged almost dangerously low. The bottom was more of a skirt, and it was decorated with lighter green swirls. I rather liked it, myself, but I wasn't sure whether it was a good thing or a bad thing that I'd been imagining Rachel's opinion when I bought it.

"Wal-Mart, I think," I replied absently.

"Seriously? Wal-Mart?" Virginia laughed a little. I snorted, then, realizing that she'd probably never heard me easily admit that I'd bought something from anywhere with the term 'mart' in the name. Obviously my girlfriend was rubbing off on me more than I'd realized.

"Yep. I thought it was cute," I defended, picking up a towel as we wandered into the backyard. That was one of the perks of staying at my grandparents' house for Spring Break; they had a pool.

"Your girlfriend didn't have anything to do with it, did she?" my cousin teased, elbowing me gently.

"No!" I flushed a little at the implications.

"Alright, alright, no need to get defensive," she laughed, brushing her dark brown hair from her face. "Speaking of which, how is the heavy-metal rocker? I haven't seen her since that interesting New Years Eve thing."

I smiled dryly, shaking my head. I easily remembered the thrill I got then from the kiss we'd shared at midnight. *That feels like so long ago now.* "She's fine. Spending the week with a bunch of her friends up in Jekyll."

"Fun!" she decided, sounding a touch jealous. "What all are they doing up there?"

I paused before shrugging uneasily. "Stuff." How had I not remembered to ask what they were doing there?

"Oh." I was thankful when she let it drop.

Then I shrieked in surprise and anger when Derek grabbed me around the shoulders and leapt into the pool with me in tow.



It had been about half an hour since I'd 'gone to bed' and I was still checking my phone every other minute. When we were at the lake house, I'd all but begged Rachel to call me every night. She'd already fulfilled her promise to let me know when they'd gotten to their hotel, but I was still nervous that she'd forget to call.

I smiled wryly at the ceiling. "She's got me wrapped around her little finger," I whispered to myself. I was certain of that fact. That explained why I thought it was funny that she'd told me once or twice that *she* was wrapped around *my* finger. *We're addicted to each other.*

That thought only proved itself when my phone rang - I picked it up before the first ring even ended. "Hello?"

"Were you just sitting around waiting for me to call?" Rachel inquired, sounding vaguely amused. I thought I detected a hint of a slur in her husky voice.

"Of course not," I demurred, though I smiled as I said it. Then I paused. "Rachel, are you... drunk?"

"Not sure. I doubt it," she mused. "Only had one beer. I'm the designated driver for the evening. You should see the resident gay-boys, though. They're totally wasted."

"Even Thomas?" I clarified, a little surprised. He didn't seem like much of a drinker to me.

"Thomas passed out a little while ago," she chuckled. "And everyone else is asleep. So I've got some free time. But enough about the drunken exploits of my friends. How goes the family vacation?" I relaxed now that I was sure she was okay.

"Pretty good. I got to wear my new bathing suit," I remarked casually.

"Seriously? I missed an opportunity to see my sexy girlfriend in a swimsuit? Dammit!" I laughed a little at her incredulous tone.

"Yep, sorry. Shame, too. It shows off my cleavage so well," I smirked, imagining her reaction.

"Dammit, Jessie, stop teasing me!" she whined pitifully, making me laugh. That was about the reaction I'd been expecting.

"Why? I like teasing you." I smiled to myself. It felt amazing to know that we'd gone back to being at a normal enough state where we could just act the part of two girls in love again.

"Here's a good reason: I'm up here for a week, and if you get me too sexually frustrated via *phone*, I'm pretty much going to rape you next time I see you." I stifled a laugh at her seriousness. I didn't want to wake anyone up, after all.

"Hm, tempting," I quipped, knowing that that would piss her off even more. I was starting to understand why the rocker messed with me so often; it was kinda funny.

"*You* are being an *ass*," Rachel complained.

"Just a little." I cuddled under my covers, hugging a spare pillow to my chest. I'd gotten used to sleeping cuddled up with my girlfriend after the weekend we'd spent together, so now I had to have a temporary replacement. "Now back to you, before I decide to tease you more."

"No more teasing! Trust me, you have not *felt* how terrible it is to be horny, drunk, and not being able to do anything about it," she complained. I raised my eyebrows at that statement.

"You have ten perfectly good fingers."

"I'd like to take this time to remind you that I'm sharing a bedroom with two lesbians, and with two *other* lesbians right next door. I think I'll take my chances with the drunken frustration."

That surprised a laugh out of me, but I quickly muffled it with the pillow. "You're gonna make me wake the whole neighborhood!" I warned, pretending to sound annoyed.

"Well, good, I need some people to back me up on that one. Anyways, back to *my* fun day of wandering around Jekyll and being the only sober person there..."

By the time I thought to check the clock, I was surprised to see that it was close to midnight. I'd been talking to Rachel for close to two hours. I couldn't remember the last time I'd stayed on the phone that long with *anyone*.

"Hey, Rachel?" I prompted at the next lull in the conversation.

"Yes, darlin'?" I smiled. She'd been calling me by my pet name often in recent times. I didn't mind it in the slightest.

"Check your watch."

There was a pause, then, followed by a low "Jesus, Mary, Joseph, and camel!" which sparked another giggle-fit that I had to keep quiet.

"Kinda late, huh?" I laughed at her reaction.

"Yeah, ha-ha, Jessie, keep the girl who's gonna be dealing with hungover friends at like five in the morning awake all night, thanks a lot," she grumbled. Rachel didn't sound too serious, though, so I shrugged it off.

"Sorry, sweetie," I apologized half-heartedly. "I guess I should probably let you go now."

"That would be nice. Love you." Rachel had been ending most of her calls with that, too. I minded that about as much as I did being called "darlin'."

"Love you too. Talk to you tomorrow."

And I hung up.

I plugged my phone back in to charge, silently giving thanks for the 'unlimited minutes' program my phone had. Then my eyes went back to the pillow that was in my grip and I sighed to myself. *Rachel's way more comfortable.*

I held it a bit more tightly anyways, mostly out of habit of snuggling with Rachel. As I slipped into sleep, an earlier thought returned to my mind:

We're addicted to each other.

I decided that I didn't mind that, either.

CHAPTER 72

I rubbed my temples firmly, as if that would stave off the throbbing ache behind my eyes. Honestly, I felt like someone had bashed my head into a cement wall for several hours. As if the miniature hell in my head wasn't enough, Mother Nature decided it would be funny to put me on my period too. Now, not only did I feel like my head got smashed against a wall, but I was also feeling like I'd been whacked in the gut a few times, too. *Kill me. Just kill me now.*

"Rachel? You okay?" That was Jessie. She probably wanted to know why I was doubled over on my bench, my forehead resting on my knees. I managed to croak out a response. My throat was burning horribly from vomiting half the night.

Yeah, the Jekyll drinking binge was fun at the time, but now that it was over, it wasn't *nearly* as pleasant.

"What was that?" she asked, apparently not hearing me. I repeated myself, a little louder. She still didn't catch it.

I lifted my head off my knees a few inches and growled through my teeth, "I am hungover, and suffering from period cramps. I am *not* okay."

Jessie winced sympathetically. "Oh, sorry. That sounds pretty awful. Need me to do anything?" I fished my wallet from my back pocket and passed it to her. "Um."

"Water," I croaked out. I'd neglected to purchase myself a bottle of water to help ease my hangover.

"Oh! Oh, okay," she agreed, and I heard her walk off. I whimpered against my knees. Most of the class was here already, and the dull roar of the students wasn't helping my head at all. After a minute of simmering in pain, Jessie returned, handing me my wallet and a bottle.

I forced myself to sit up to take several large gulps from the bottle. "Thanks," I gasped out when I'd finished drinking.

"No problem," she smiled down at me. Then she paused, looking over me thoughtfully.

"What?"

"You don't look too great. Are you sure you're alright?"

I forced out a smile. "Not in the slightest, but I'll deal."

Jessie hesitated for a moment, then nodded. "Okay." She surprised me by leaning down to place a chaste kiss to my forehead. "Just try to recover before Wednesday. That's when you're leading chorus rehearsals." I groaned tiredly at the reminder. I'd picked up conducting quickly enough, so Ms. K wanted me to do the rehearsals on Wednesday through Friday, to give the students some time to get used to me conducting them instead of the teacher. I smirked, remembering the plan I had to get them in line.

"Uh-oh. I don't like that look," the redhead decided, looking at me skeptically. "What do you have planned?"

"Ever heard of 'teaching through intimidation?'" I inquired casually.

"No..." she drew the word out, confused.

"Figure it out. It's the method I'm gonna be using for rehearsals. Should be fun." I would have added an evil little cackle, had I been feeling better. The water I'd drunk was helping, but not enough to put me in a particularly good humor.

"If you say so," she muttered suspiciously.

"I do say so," I agreed with a slight nod. Anything more, and I was certain that I'd lose balance. "I also say that between that and *metal*-concert-rehearsal all next week, we're both going to be dead to the world by the time it's over and done with."

My girlfriend grimaced. "No kidding." If she was going to say anything else, the bell cut her off. She rolled her blue eyes in vague annoyance before giving me a quick kiss on the mouth. "Thanks for calling," she thanked softly, referring to how I'd managed to give her a call every evening last week. Which was impressive, in my own opinion, considering that at least one night, I didn't even remember calling because I was drunk.

I merely gave her a small smile and nodded. "Not a problem," I replied softly. She lightly ruffled my hair before going to sit. My smile remained in place for another few seconds, then

Ms. K came out and began speaking over the roar of the students. Then I couldn't force myself to smile anymore, as my headache came back with a vengeance.



Wednesday came quickly (to my vague annoyance), but by then, I'd gotten my game plan in mind. I'd even managed to get a little help from Thomas, even though he told me many times that he didn't approve of my 'teaching through intimidation' tactic.

I walked briskly into the auditorium, my music folder tucked under one arm, my bottle of water in my other hand. I wore a black Slipknot t-shirt that had a pentagram decorating the front of it. The sleeves were practically nonexistent, so my new scars were easily visible down my arms. My jeans were slashed symmetrically down the thighs and knees, and I'd broken out my heavy black lace-up boots. I kept my expression schooled into vague annoyance.

Thomas had described the overall look as 'scary as shit.' Which was good, that had been what I was going for.

I placed my folder on the piano, followed by my water bottle, and then looked up at the students chattering away on the risers. I glared at them fiercely, but I think Jessie was the only one paying attention to me. With a sigh, I stuck my pinkies in my mouth. I saw Jessie cover her ears a second before I let out a sharp, shrill whistle. Most of the choir members jumped or winced, and they quickly got in place and got quiet. I wiped my fingers on my shirt and walked around so I was standing in front of the piano, facing them.

"Thank you all for attending today's rehearsal," I spoke loudly, curtly. Ms. K had told me that she didn't care whether or not I yelled at them, so long as I at least started out nicely. My eyes roamed over the students in front of me briefly, before I picked up the stack of papers on the piano. "Now, I'm going to assume you all have signed the roll? Yes? Good. Now - "

"Where's Ms. K?" a tenor on the middle row interrupted me. My gaze snapped to him and he flinched at my look.

"Excuse me?" I growled, glaring at his hazel eyes. That was something else Ms. K had requested of me - make sure I didn't accept any backtalk. That wasn't exactly a problem, though. I never accepted backtalk anyways. "I think you've forgotten that *I* am in charge of rehearsals this week. She will not be here. You should have known that by now, unless you simply weren't

paying attention in class?" I raised my eyebrows expectantly at him; several people sniggered at him.

"I was just wondering..." he mumbled. I cut him off with the hand gesture that anyone who spent *any* time in chorus knew meant 'shut up.'

I ignored him, folding my arms over my chest to look at the chorus as a whole. "I am in charge of rehearsals for the next three days. If you all thought that Ms. K was a music nazi, you were mistaken. Let's go over rules." I began to pace in front of them, ticking points off on my fingers. "If you sing with incorrect vowels, I will call you out. If you slide where there is no *glissando*, I will throw something at you. If you sing *anything* other than what Vivaldi wrote in his music, I will make you repeat it until you do it right. You will not speak unless I ask you something. If I ask you to do something, I don't want any attitude over it." My eyes snapped to a girl on the front row. She'd been rolling her eyes and sneering the entire time I talked. I didn't remember her name, but I knew she was one of the 'Phobes who hadn't suddenly found themselves more open-minded when it was discovered that I was a famous rocker. I snapped my fingers and pointed at her. "You. Go sit down. You are out of my rehearsal."

"But - what did I do?" she cried, sounding close to tears. I wasn't moved by that in the slightest. I'd seen people pull that 'fake crying' deal before.

"Don't think I didn't see that. Sit down." That being said, I went to the piano and picked up my folder and began flipping through it. When I heard no footsteps, I looked up at the girl over the tops of my glasses. "I wasn't joking. Go."

What's-her-face left, sniffing pitifully.

"I take my rehearsals seriously," I informed the chorus coolly, making eye contact with a few people; they quickly broke it. My eyes met Jessie's for an instant. She raised her eyebrows, signaling for me to continue. I looked back down at the movement I'd flipped to. "Let's begin with movement five. *Propter Magnam Gloriam*. 'Because of Your Great Glory'... Now, who here can tell me what that final chord is called?" I looked up at them expectantly, only to receive confused looks. I sighed; I'd thought that 'Picardy third' would be an easy answer, but apparently not.

We've got some serious work to do.

CHAPTER 73

Friday came sooner than I wanted, and I was deathly nervous even though my girlfriend had assured me *many* times between her screaming fit (AKA, the last rehearsal she was leading) and when Ms. K came back that if I didn't get picked for a solo part, then Ms. K obviously didn't know what she was doing.

Rachel was forced to leave the room when the teacher arrived, and Ms. K looked down at her list and then back at us.

"You all did wonderfully in your tryouts," she began calmly, "and I had some trouble deciding who should get which solos. But I've made my decisions. Courtney, you'll get the first soprano solo in *Laudamus Te*. Bethany, you'll get the second soprano solo in that same movement. Jessica –" my heart leapt into my throat "you'll get the soprano solo in *Domine Deus*." I don't think I heard another word she said after that.

Rachel, as I'd expected, was right outside the door of the auditorium, waiting to hear the verdict. She looked up sharply when I came out. "Well? Did you get the solo?" she more or less demanded to know. I nearly laughed at her anxiousness.

"I got the solo." I'd barely finished speaking when I was suddenly in a fierce hug that I returned happily. I'd never even tried out for a solo before, let alone gotten one.

"Told you so," the rocker muttered in my ear. I *did* laugh at that.

"Yeah. You did," I admitted, standing on my toes to kiss her cheek. Rachel released me, then, and I asked hesitantly, "Will you help me practice my part?"

She scoffed. "Oh, please, I was gonna help you with your part anyways."

“Tomorrow, then? My house?” I requested innocently as I followed her to her truck. (I think that was one of few things my parents liked about Rachel; she gave me rides to and from things they’d have to take me to and from normally.)

Her brow furrowed in confusion at my request. “Tomorrow? Isn’t that your birthday? *I* don’t even like rehearsing on my birthday.”

I laughed a little, giving her a playful look. “We don’t have to rehearse the *entire day*,” I hinted with a slight grin. Rachel coughed, looking vaguely amused and a touch flustered. I grinned; when we first started dating, I hadn’t ever been able to make her blush like she was doing now, even if it was fairly light.

“Then, yes. Tomorrow. Your place.”



About eleven o'clock on Saturday, my mom called up the stairs to me to tell me that my girlfriend was here. I quickly came downstairs to greet her. My mom was standing next to her, looking a little nervous. Rachel was dressed in a 'Disturbed' t-shirt and jeans that, surprisingly, *weren't* almost completely shredded. I could see why my mom looked a little nervous - with Rachel's taste in music and fondness of band shirts, her fashion sense was a little... frightening.

"We'll be in my room," I informed my mom out of habit. I noticed a vaguely uncertain look flicker over her face and held back a roll of the eyes. *Like I'd do... that, when they're home.*

Rachel followed me to my room, trying not to show that she'd also seen the look my mom had given us. "Does she think I'm going to get you pregnant or something?" she asked quietly when we were out of earshot.

I snorted softly; several times, I'd wondered the same thing. "It wouldn't surprise me," I agreed dryly, shaking my head, and pushed my door open, letting her in. She looked around briefly; it had been a few months since she'd been in here. Since Valentine's Day, actually. I blushed slightly at the memory of *why* she'd been in my bedroom, but it went away when Rachel spoke again.

"Breaking Benjamin? Killswitch Engage? Really?" she teased, nodding at some of the newer posters on my wall. Among the many other "boy band" posters, the newest ones were seriously standing out - particularly Breaking Benjamin, Killswitch Engage, and Three Days

Grace. The rocker laughed and pulled me into a one-armed hug, playfully mussing my hair. "That's my girl."

I gently shoved her away and fell back on my bed, lying on my back. "They're good!" I defended a second before realizing how ridiculous that comeback had to sound to *her*, especially. She merely laughed and leaned down to kiss me.

"Duh. That's why I've been trying to make you listen to them. I take it you finally did?" Rachel assumed, placing a paper bag she'd apparently brought with her (I hadn't noticed it before now) on my bedside table.

"No, Rachel. I decided to put scary-looking band posters on my walls because I wanted to freak my parents out and get sent to a shrink," I replied with a straight face. That got me a light swat to the shoulder.

"Smartass," the rocker growled, straddling my waist and using one hand to pin down my wrists over my head. I raised my eyebrows at her, surprised at her actions. The door was open, after all. "Now I'm starting to think I shouldn't give you your birthday present." That surprised me.

"You got me something?" I'd just wanted her to hang out with me on my birthday.

She held up two fingers with her free hand. "Two somethings. A serious gift and a not-so-serious gift. But it doesn't matter now 'cause I don't think I'll give them to you unless you behave. Are you gonna behave?"

"I'll behave." *Maybe*. Rachel obviously figured I'd think that, because she glared suspiciously at me before rolling off. "You are entirely too strong for your size," I complained, pushing myself into a sitting position.

She stuck her studded tongue out at me and picked up her bag again. "D'you want the serious gift or the not-so-serious gift first?"

I considered that for a minute. "Serious."

"Close your eyes, then." I did so, smiling slightly to myself. I heard the slight rustle of the paper bag, and then I felt something cool and metallic against my skin. "Kay. You can open them now." I did so, and looked down at the necklace she'd put on me. It was a simple golden chain with a pendant that I had to look closer at. My eyes widened a little when I finally

recognized it: it was a gold treble clef, about half the size of my thumb, studded with what appeared to be diamonds. I looked up at her, stunned.

"Rachel, I..." Then I remembered something. "How much did you pay for this?" I inquired, suspicion leaking into my voice. She'd complained more than once about the price of insurance, car repairs, and other things that most people her age didn't worry about. I was a little uncertain about the idea of her buying me expensive jewelry with all the things she had to pay for by herself.

She rolled her dark brown eyes. "Don't bitch about it," Rachel warned. "If I want to spoil my girlfriend, I am damn well going to spoil her. Particularly now that I can afford it. Get used to it." I was about to protest, but she pulled me towards her, kissing me tenderly and robbing me of whatever I was about to say.

When she finally let me go, and I caught my breath, I attempted to object again. She shut me up a second time in the same way. "Are you gonna do that every time I try to argue?" I wondered, trying to catch my breath.

"Pretty much. It works," she shrugged and grinned lightly. "And *you* didn't seem to mind."

I snorted softly. "You're one to talk," I reminded dryly, then leaned in to kiss her softly, a startling difference to the playful, breath-stealing kisses we'd shared earlier. "Thanks. I love it," I told her honestly, fingering the little clef.

Rachel merely smiled down at me, looking a little relieved at that. "Good. D'you want the not-so-serious one now?" she inquired innocently, though it was ruined by her wicked smirk.

I looked at her skeptically. I wasn't liking that look she had. "That depends. Is it going to make my parents freak out?"

"Do your parents watch anime?" That confused me.

"Uh... no."

"Then, no, it shouldn't. Close your eyes. Again." With more than a little trepidation, I did so. I felt what felt like silk being tightened around my throat. "Aaand, done." I was a little worried at the amusement that was thick in her voice. I opened my eyes and looked down.

"Rachel, please tell me why I'm wearing a tie covered in chickens," I requested with a straight face.

“Well, you’re eighteen now,” she said slowly, giving me time to think about it. “So you’re legally allowed to buy and watch porn. So, congratulations on your first *hen-tie*.”

It took me a minute to get it, but I couldn’t stop my giggling once I did. “That’s terrible!” I insisted between laughs.

Rachel merely smiled at me.

She stayed for a few more hours. We didn’t do too much, mostly cuddling, watching a few movies, and a miniscule bit of choral work, but I was satisfied by the time it was over. I couldn’t help the minor disappointment, though, when she left at five, but Rachel insisted that she wasn’t going to intrude by hanging around at dinner.

“Your parents probably have something planned for you. I don’t want to interrupt all that. Besides, have you ever had dinner with your girlfriend – or boyfriend’s, I guess – parents when you haven’t been invited? You can, like, *feel* the awkward.” She gave a theatrical shudder. “No thanks. I’ll leave y’all alone for that.”

“We’re leaving to head up on Monday?” I confirmed as I walked with her to her truck. I silently noticed that someone had apparently keyed the door of her vehicle, but I didn’t say anything about it.

“Yep. I’ll come pick you up, so have your crap packed by six-thirty on Monday. Week-long rehearsal, ew,” Rachel wrinkled her nose at the prospect of it. “But whatever. Friday’s gonna be epic!” That thought seemed to help her get over the long rehearsal.

I laughed a little. “Anything in particular I need to bring?” I leaned on the side of her truck as she tugged the door open and got in.

She considered my question for a minute. “Yeah, most of your clothes just need to be comfortable stuff you can rehearse in. Don’t worry about your concert clothes, Thomas is gonna give me yours when he gives me mine.”

“Thomas never told me he was making my concert outfit, too,” I broke in, surprised. “He never measured me or anything.”

“That’s because unlike me, you’re not weirdly proportioned,” Rachel replied dryly. I laughed a little; I’d heard her complain to Thomas a few times about never finding clothes that fit her quite right. “*Anyways*, you also need to bring a semi-nice outfit, ‘cause I’m dragging you out on a date on Thursday night.”

"I don't remember that being on the schedule you gave me," I teased.

Rachel shrugged. "Cope. Anyways, I'd better get going. I need to get all my shit together."

I nodded and leaned into the open cab of the truck to kiss her on the cheek. That made her duck her head to hide a slight grin. I smiled, myself. "Love you," she murmured in place of a goodbye.

"Love you too."

I closed the door for her, and Rachel left. Still smiling to myself, I went back inside and up to my bedroom. My fingers absently went to the necklace my girlfriend gave me. It felt a little strange; I was never really one to wear jewelry, and certainly not nearly as much as Rachel (even if most of hers probably came from a 25-cent machine), but I liked it.

I flopped onto my bed and hugged one of my pillows to my chest, resisting the urge to giggle like a girl with her first crush. I couldn't help it; I almost *never* got to see my girlfriend for so long, and when I did, it was usually music-related. We rarely got to just hang out like today.

I perked up slightly as I heard my mom calling for me from downstairs. "I'm up here!" I called out my door. A minute later, she was standing in my doorway, looking concerned. I sat up, a little worried at her look. "What's up?"

"Rachel left?" she inquired, looking around the room like she was expecting the rocker to jump out at her.

"Yeah, just a few minutes ago, why?"

The older woman looked down at me like she was pitying me. That didn't help my worry at all. She sat down on the bed next to me and said gently, "I was out at Kroger today. I saw this in the checkout line as I was leaving. I... thought you'd want to see it." She held a rolled-up magazine to me. I hesitantly took it and unrolled it.

I nearly dropped it, horror seizing my throat.

The picture on the cover was actually four different pictures put together. The first was of me and Rachel holding hands as we left her apartment; I figured it had been one of the paparazzi photographers who'd taken the shot. The second was a picture of Rox holding Rachel bridal-style, with Rachel's arms wrapped around Rox's neck and her head against the college student's shoulder. The next picture was of Rachel sitting next to a boy who was clearly thinking lewd

things about her, but she was laughing and blushing. The last one was of her leaning on some boy, her arm thrown over his shoulders. The title? "OneGirl: Singer or Swinger?"

It was hard to breathe.

I looked up at my mother, slowly. My breath was coming in short, quivering spurts. "She lied to me," I choked out.

"About what?" she asked me gently, putting her hand on mine.

I didn't bother trying to hide my tears, letting the magazine fall to the floor. "She said she loved me," I whispered, the tears falling faster now. My mind flicked over everything we'd ever done together. How much of that was all a lie? "And... I told her I loved her, too..." I broke down, my body shaking.

"Oh, honey," my mom soothed gently, pulling me into her arms. I sobbed silently against my mother, trying to ignore how many times Rachel had let me cry on her.

It was probably lies, too.

CHAPTER 74

"This is in-fucking-sane," I snorted, reading over the magazine I'd discovered when I was grocery shopping on Sunday. I didn't recognize half the people who were in the inside pictures with me, so I must have been drunk when they were being taken. That explained the people I was hanging off of or laughing or blushing with. I shook my head in disbelief as I read the article. I only managed to get through half of it before chucking it into the trash. "Damn celebrity gossip magazines," I growled. Very little of it was true, but obviously *many* people now believed that I was polygamous. I'd gotten a thick stack of letters from various people asking me out, or people wondering how my girlfriend was taking the news, or damning my soul to hell. "Vultures, the lot of them."

The only *good* thing about the stupid article was that I managed to get ahold of Jessie on Sunday (to assure her that nothing had happened in Jekyll), and that she seemed to believe me.

Even so, my mood was now a bit soured, so I simply got up and finished the packing I'd started yesterday. I checked my watch when I was done and nodded absently. I still had a good hour or so 'till I had to pick Jessie up. I glanced at the two outfits lying on my bed and grinned. Thomas had, as expected, done awesome on them.

With my bag packed and the concert clothes ready, I grabbed an outfit at random and went to take a nice, hot bath. With the way the company would probably be running me around all week, I doubted that I would be awake enough by the time we got to the hotel each night to indulge myself.



Jessie had been strangely quiet on the way up to the city we were performing at, but I chalked that up to a combination of stress and just plain being tired. I seemed to be correct, seeing as she kept dozing off against the door of the truck.

She was actually sleeping by the time that we got to the hotel, and I had to go over to the passenger's side to wake her up.

"What?" Jessie mumbled, turning away from her door so she wasn't looking at me.

"Come on, darlin', we're at the hotel," I coaxed her out of the vehicle. "We've gotta go put our stuff in the room."

"Oh, yeah. Sorry," she yawned and began slowly getting out. "I didn't sleep too well." I studied her, noting the faint circles under her eyes.

"Yeah, I can tell," I admitted, a little worried. "I'll make sure you go to bed early tonight, 'kay?"

"Kay," the redhead agreed softly, rubbing the corner of her eye as she went to get her stuff out of the bed of my truck. "Hey, did Thomas get my outfit to you?" She was having a little trouble heaving her bag out of the tailgate, so I stepped onto one of the back tires to tug it out for me. I got a little, thankful smile for my troubles. I merely grinned back at her as I lugged my own black suitcase from the truck and hopped down.

"Yeah, he gave both of 'em to me yesterday," I informed her as we went to check in. "You're gonna love 'em. They're sexy as hell." I'd tried on mine already, so I knew that much.

"I'll take your word for it."

As soon as we checked in, we headed up to our hotel room. I was thankful that the company was paying the hotel expenses; from the looks of it, it was pricey.

I whistled lowly as I opened the door. It had three rooms - a little 'living room' area, a bedroom, and a cramped-looking bathroom. "Je-sus-Christ," I muttered, shaking my head.

"This is really nice," Jessie commented, sounding genuinely surprised. I was with her; I was kinda expecting 'Days Inn' quality, but this was pretty awesome, too.

"Yeah, no kidding," I agreed, rolling my suitcase into the bedroom. I laid it on the floor and then flopped theatrically onto the bed. "*Fuck* I don't wanna rehearse today," I whined.

Jessie snorted softly, putting her own suitcase on the floor before sitting next to me. "Not like you've done anything to tire yourself out," she quipped. Her voice sounded a lot softer than it usually was. I wondered about that, but decided it was probably the tired thing again.

"Hey, now, *you* did not have to drive like twenty-eight hours with a stick shift," I reprimanded her. Then I put my hand on my left thigh. "Working the clutch is *tiring*." It was true; with all the various turn-offs I'd had to make to get up here, my left leg was nearly throbbing. Since my truck was so old, the clutch was hard to push down and let up without stalling the engine out.

"Poor baby," Jessie teased, slipping her hand up my thigh and making me breathe in sharply before giving me a light kiss on the corner of the mouth and getting up again. "Now come on, we have to go to rehearsal."

"Fucking tease!" I groaned pitifully. Jessie rolled her eyes.

"Come on, Rachel." I got up and went back downstairs to my truck with her, bitching quietly the entire way. "Oh, get over it," Jessie warned, not sounding amused anymore.

I shut up, a little surprised at her tone.

The hotel was close to the amphitheater, thankfully, so I didn't have too much more driving to do. We got there with a minute or two to spare, but the choreographer was still glaring at us when we got there. I was of the opinion that she just didn't like people. That would explain why she was forevermore glaring or yelling at me. I'd never seen her rehearse with Jessie, so I wasn't able to tell whether or not my girlfriend got yelled at as often as I did.

"Good, you're here," she noticed, her voice clipped. She looked at me sharply. "Have you been practicing what I've showed you?"

"Of course, Katie," I lied, as always. I didn't have enough motivation to practice... pretty much anything. I was too lazy for all that.

"Then you won't have any problems with 'Liberate'?" Katie assumed, folding her arms and cocking her hip expectantly. "And you could do it right now if I asked?"

"Of course, provided my instrumentalists get her in the next two seconds," I shot back breezily, heading backstage.

"Where are you going?" she demanded, annoyed. See, I was pretty sure she didn't like people.

I turned around to face her, continuing to walk, albeit backwards. “Backstage. I need to get some water and I need to do warm-ups and shit,” I reminded her. Katie frowned at me and I shrugged. “Would you *like* me to blow my vocal chords out a week before a concert? ‘Cause that’ll totally happen if I don’t warm up. But, hey, if you think it’ll be better if I don’t –”

“Just. Go.”

I smiled innocently, shrugging and turning back around. “Fine. You can work with Jessie while I’m gone,” I reminded her, then stifled a cackle when she nearly snarled. It was fun pissing her off.

I slipped into what I’d come to call ‘the warm-up room.’ I figured it had been a dressing room at one point, but it had since been soundproofed and had a piano and a keyboard in it, so now it was a warm-up room. I sat down at the piano bench and played a few scales to ensure that the thing was in tune. I could have just found my starting pitches myself, but it was just easier to use the piano.

Once I’d decided that the piano was still in tune, I began my vocal warm-ups. Most of them had come from various choirs and the occasional private voice lesson (widely-known things such as ‘red leather, yellow leather,’ ‘diction is done with the tip of the tongue,’ or ‘mama made me mash my M&M’s’), though I’d put a few tongue-twisters to music to make my own (‘a big black bug bled black blood’ and ‘Betty Botta bought a bit of butter’). I warmed up as high and as low as my range allowed; very, very few metal songs required a huge range, but I figured it was always better to be able to do it than not.

Screaming exercises came next, followed by a combination of singing and screaming practices to get myself used to the switches between the two.

It took a full fifteen minutes (actually, it took more like seven, but I was reluctant to go back out there), but I finally finished. When I left the warm-up room and went back onto the stage, I was a little dismayed to find that the rest of the band had already gotten here. *Dammit.*

I glanced uncertainly at Katie - the band was already playing, and Jessie was practicing - and she just raised her eyebrows at me like I was stupid and motioned for me to just hop right in. I rolled my eyes and plucked my microphone from its stand, checking to ensure it was turned on.

I waited a moment for them to get to the pre-chorus, which I figured would be a good point to join in. I quickly made my way to center stage in time for my part.

My voice automatically dropped to a low growl as I 'sang' my part, prowling over the stage like I'd been instructed. "Bold motherfucker, doncha limit your mind, can't ya see that the messages have fallen behind? All the hate in your heart will be leaving you blind, so bold motherfucker, don't you limit your mind. Bold motherfucker, doncha limit your mind, can't ya see that the messages have fallen behind? All the hate in your heart will be leaving you blind, so bold motherfucker, don't you limit your mind this time." I took a few steps back and pumped my fist up three times in time with the drummer. "Waiting, for your modern messiah," I flung my free arm away from my body, as if presenting myself to the invisible audience, "to take away all the hatred, that darkens the light in your eyes," I swept my bangs out of my eyes like I was clearing my own vision, "still awaiting, I..."

"Rachel, what on earth are you *doing*?" Katie asked incredulously, and the band stopped to look at me curiously. Obviously *they* hadn't noticed anything wrong. For that matter, neither did I. I'd done exactly what I was supposed to. But I supposed Katie was going to tell me what I did wrong anyways. "It looks like you're tripping over yourself, what is *that* all about?"

"Ah, I think that would have been my attempt to keep from flashing the band," I snorted, tugging my pants a little higher on my hips. I pulled the loose fabric in the waist together, showing her that there was about an inch or two of slack. "I'm not stripping for my audience, Katie, I draw the line there." Besides, I'd only stumbled once, and obviously no one had even noticed it.

She looked like she was ready to strangle me. But she *often* looked like that, so I wasn't too concerned with it.

"Aw, why not?" David hollered from the tech booth.

I flipped both middle fingers at him. "*Besame el culo, mariconazo!*"¹ I barked at him with the Spanish accent I'd attained in class. I was of the opinion that being able to cuss someone out in Spanish or some other language merited an automatic win.

David obviously agreed, because he went back into the tech booth, sulking. I could hear some laughter coming from their direction, and smirked at my victory.

"Do 'Liberate' again," Katie ordered, bringing my attention back to the rehearsal.

"Where from? Where we left off?" I assumed hopefully.

¹ Kiss my ass, faggot!

"From the top." I sighed.

As if she felt the need to further prove that she didn't like me, Katie made me run that same song three more times before I finally gave up attempting to keep my pants right on my waist, simply tugging the hem of my shirt lower to cover it up. *I hate her. I hate this. This week needs to be over.*

"Katie *really* doesn't like you," Jessie commented that night as I left the bathroom, toweling my thick hair dry. She'd taken her shower first, so she was already dressed in her pajamas and was currently working lotion into her arms.

"Yeah, well, I don't much care for her, either, so." I shrugged, before going to hang my towel on the rack in the bathroom. With that taken care of, I grabbed some books from my suitcase and went into the living room area to sit down with them.

Jessie looked over at me curiously. "What are you doing?"

"Homework," I sighed tiredly. She didn't say anything, merely nodding and lying back down. I looked down at my calculus book and felt like burning it. *You know your math class is miserable when there are only letters and Greek numbers in the problems.* Even so, if I didn't pass calculus this semester, I'd be held back *again*; I needed this last math credit to graduate. So I miserably began my attempts at working the problems.

"*Hijo de puta,*"² I complained mildly, rubbing my eyes, once I was through. It had taken nearly an hour, but I was through with calculus. *No more homework tonight,* I decided, standing and stretching mightily. I'd do the rest of it later in the week.

With that decided, I went back into the bedroom and climbed into bed. Jessie turned over to face me as I lay down.

"You're through, then?" she assumed sleepily.

"Yeah," I agreed, trying to pull her closer to cuddle. Jessie squirmed out of my grasp, surprising me. She'd never done that before. "Jessie?"

The redhead looked at me for a moment, an odd expression on her face. I couldn't place it. "Sorry, but it's probably better if you don't hold onto me like that. I move around in my sleep," she muttered, then flipped back over, facing the wall.

² Son of a bitch.

Hurt stabbed into me. I knew very well that once she was asleep, Jessie was practically dead to the world. She didn't move around at all. Why would she lie about that? I bit my lip. "Jessie? Are you mad at me?" I wasn't sure what I'd done. She'd told me she believed me when I explained what had happened at Jekyll that the media had twisted.

"No, I'm not. Now go to sleep."

That hurt even worse, that sharp tone she was using. I was pretty sure I knew why she was acting like she was. "Jessie... about those gossip articles... you believe me, don't you?" My tone was low, urgent. Desperate. I wasn't sure why I asked. I was pretty sure I already knew the answer.

Her silence, though brief, stabbed me a second time. "Yes. I believe you."

Several minutes passed in silence. I finally whispered out her name and tentatively rested my hand on hers. She didn't respond, so I assumed she was asleep. Still, I wanted to be sure she wouldn't get defensive in case she wasn't. *Spanish it is, then.* I gently squeezed her smaller hand and shakily whispered, "*Mi corazon, mi corazon, ¿por qué tú no me cree?*"³

I wasn't sure if I'd ever felt this hurt before. With my parents, I hadn't seen what was coming, so there was no time for the dread to sink in. With Jessie, though...

I could see what was coming. I could feel dread spreading thickly through me. And I was certain that this was even worse than being disowned.

³ My heart, my heart, why don't you believe me?

CHAPTER 75

It was getting harder and harder to be around my girlfriend. Honestly, I was paranoid. Everyone she had seen here at rehearsals before was a potential threat. And, much as it hurt to admit, even to myself, I wasn't sure I could trust Rachel anymore. She told me that nothing had happened between her and anyone else over Spring Break, but I wasn't sure if that was true. She had *also* told me that half the guys she was slung over, she didn't even remember, she was so drunk.

That reassurance helped absolutely none. All that meant was that there was a possibility that something could have happened, and she wouldn't remember. My mind also reminded me of Rox telling me that she slept with Rachel the first time the rocker got drunk, which only made it worse. I was trying to deal with it, but... it was hard. I'd never had a boyfriend that made me doubt his faithfulness. I wasn't sure how to work with this.

Rachel seemed to be more soft-spoken since Monday. She practically tip-toed around me, trying hard not to irritate me. Any time I would look at her, I was certain that I could see guilt written in her dark brown gaze an instant before she looked away from me. My trust in her was draining away.

I wasn't looking forward to Thursday.

But, of course, it came more quickly than I would have liked. I wasn't sure how I was going to survive a date with a girl who I was certain was unfaithful. That night, I dressed slowly in the 'nice outfit' I'd picked out for the date, trying to delay it as much as possible.

When I left the bedroom, I was mildly surprised to see what Rachel was dressed in. She wore a pair of jeans that were only slightly frayed at the pockets, instead of the shredded jeans she was a fan of. Over that, she wore a short-sleeved, collared red-white-and-black plaid shirt. It

had been left completely unbuttoned in the front, revealing the black camisole she wore under it. A pair of black fingerless gloves and a pair of knee-high boots completed the outfit.

That wasn't all, though. She'd combed her hair back into a surprisingly feminine ponytail and, I noticed upon a closer look at her, she was wearing makeup. That was probably the most startling part; never, once, had I seen Rachel wearing non-stage makeup. *Ever*. It wasn't much, really, just a bit of foundation and eye shadow, but it suited her well.

All in all, she looked about ten times more girly than she usually did. And, to my surprise, she pulled it off pretty well.

When she saw me, she stood and offered me a nervous grin. "Nice outfit," she remarked, but without that usual teasing lilt in her voice. That disappointed me even more.

I glanced down at the white button-up blouse and black knee-length skirt I'd chosen. She never told me where we were going, or what her definition of a 'nice outfit' was, but I guessed I'd done okay. "Thanks," I mumbled. "You too." I grinned weakly up at her. "I'm surprised you even *own* makeup."

We laughed, an awkward, hesitant noise. "Yeah," she agreed, absently tugging on one of her several ear piercings. "I don't own too much, but I do own some. I'm more surprised that I could find it. I haven't worn makeup since like Junior Prom."

I looked at her face more closely. "Seriously? I wouldn't have guessed. It looks really good." Somewhere in my mind, it registered that this had to me the most retarded conversation in the world, but it was better than the awkward silence that I'd been expecting.

Rachel shrugged. "I had to have at least two female skills or else my shrink woulda said I had gender confusion," she quipped with a slight smile. "One of them just happened to be working with makeup. Shame I hate wearing it." She offered me her gloved hand and I took it, allowing her to lead me out of the hotel room and down to the parking lot.

"What's your other 'female skill'?" I asked curiously as we got on the elevator.

"Yarn work." I gave her an odd look, but she wasn't looking at me. "But that's mainly my Nana's fault. She insisted that I learn how to knit and crochet, and as it turns out, I'm pretty good at it. Well, probably not anymore, I haven't done either in like... six years."

I shook my head. "I'm not sure how to respond to that."

Rachel merely grinned. Our eyes met, but I wasn't sure which one of us looked away first – we'd done it almost simultaneously. The silence as we walked to her vehicle was awkward and uncomfortable, unlike how we used to be able to just be together, silent, and be perfectly content. I didn't like it.

“So where are we going?” I asked as Rachel, ever chivalrous, opened the passenger-side door for me before going to get in, herself.

“This little restaurant I found one of the times I was up here. It's really nice, but it's kinda out-of-the-way, so it doesn't get much business,” she rambled. “The food's pretty good, though.” I could see her grasping for straws, trying to come up with something to talk about. Apparently she'd noticed the change in our silences, too.

“Sounds cool,” I agreed weakly. “What's it called?”

“I don't remember. Mary's or something like that. I've only been there once or twice.”

The idle chatter continued as she drove through the downtown area. It was mostly stupid things – weird cars, interesting billboards, school, things like that. I felt like I was on my first date again, shy and unsure of myself and my date.

I already decided that I was right to dread tonight. This was *terrible*. But it wasn't Rachel's fault. She really was trying. The least I could do was try to match that.

We got to the restaurant, which was actually Marianna's, not Mary's. It was separate from the two bigger buildings on either side of it with small alleyways, both about three feet wide. Still, it *was* an alleyway, so of course there were smokers hanging around the entrance of it. Most of them were on the ground, backs against the walls, looking generally stoned, but two or three were standing - or rather, leaning against the wall - and looked blearily at us as we hesitantly tried to go around them.

Rachel coughed several times, glaring at them. I wasn't sure if she was actually coughing because of the smoke, or just to make a point. She automatically wrapped her arm around my shoulders. For once, I was glad of her overprotective streak; those guys looked seriously sketchy.

One of them gave a little laugh, his reddened eyes looking at us. "Dude, they're dykes," he remarked hoarsely, nudging the guy he was sitting next to. That guy looked up and laughed, too.

I felt Rachel stiffen next to me, and she aimed a harsh glare at them. They didn't seem to notice. Or maybe they just didn't care.

"Hey, man, how do dykes even do it?" the second guy wondered out loud. He seemed to think on that for a minute before shaking his head, bemused. "Hey, how do you do it?" he aimed that question at us.

Without thinking about it, I snapped out a response I'd heard from one of Rachel's harem: "Why don't you just ask your mom what she did in college?" Not entirely appropriate, but they were starting to irritate me.

Rachel, obviously having not expected it either, froze, and I had to all but drag her away from them before she recovered enough to pick a fight.

"I *cannot* believe you said that," she muttered when we entered the building, and I looked up at her to see that she was trying really hard not to laugh. "That was amazing."

I ducked me head, not sure what I was supposed to say to that. I took the opportunity to look around the place instead.

It was, like she'd said, actually pretty nice, even though there were only a few other people, mainly other couples.

"Good evening," greeted an aging man at the counter.

"Hey," Rachel returned with an easy grin. "Can we get a table for two?"

"In the smoking or the non-smoking section?"

"Non."

"I'll see if I can find you a table." For a minute, I thought he was serious, but then he peered out at the restaurant, holding his hand over his eyes in an exaggerated way, and I smiled a little at his apparent playfulness. "You're in luck. We can squeeze you in."

Rachel chuckled and nodded. "That would be great. Any chance we could sit somewhere towards the back?"

"I may have to ask someone else to move, but I'm sure I can find you a table," he promised, picking up a pair of menus and going around the counter. "This way, please."

The man led us to the back, as Rachel requested, and I understood why. Even though there weren't many people in the restaurant, the few that were there were mainly towards the front of the restaurant. Back here, though, there was a certain measure of privacy.

We were seated in a small, circular booth, and I hesitated a moment before sliding closer to my girlfriend. She obviously noticed; a ghost of a smile played at her lips.

"What would you ladies like to drink this evening?" the man asked politely, handing us the menus.

"Coke's find for me," she informed him, tugging absently on one of her earrings.

"Same here," I agreed with a slight smile.

"Alright," he nodded. "I'll be back in a moment with your drinks and to take your orders."

"Gracias."

"Why have you been speaking Spanish all week?" I asked her curiously once the waiter was gone. I rarely heard her speak the language, but she'd been doing it often this week. It was mildly frustrating; I took French, not Spanish, so I didn't understand a word she said.

"Finals are the week after next. The only two finals I really care about are the Chorus and the Spanish Four finals. The Chorus final is pretty much in the bag, so I've just been practicing my Spanish to make sure I get an A." She grinned slightly.

"They teach you how to cuss in Spanish?" I inquired dryly. I was fairly certain that she'd cussed one or two people out this week, but I wasn't quite sure.

"No. But Señora plays a lot of movies with Spanish subtitles, so I learn most of 'em off those."

"Mm." I looked down at the menu to find that it was mostly an Italian restaurant. "You said you've eaten here before?" I inquired, browsing it absently.

"Twice," she confirmed, glancing at me out of the corner of her eye. She smiled wryly before continuing. "So don't bother asking me for food recommendations. All I've tried here is the fettuccine alfredo and the baked ziti."

I shrugged. "It was worth a try. I don't think I've been to an Italian restaurant in a few years. I don't know what half these things are."

"Seriously? My bad," Rachel apologized, a little sheepishly.

"It's fine. Don't worry about it."

And the awkward silence returned.

Fortunately, the waiter came back to our table in only a few minutes with our drinks. "Have you two decided what you would like?" he inquired, pulling a notepad from his apron.

"I guess I'll have the fettuccine alfredo," I decided with a shrug, closing my menu and handing it to him. Rachel nudged me playfully under the table. I nudged her back for no real reason.

"Just lasagna for me," she requested with a little nod, giving him the menu as well.

"Got it. If you need anything in the meantime, don't hesitate to ask," the man assured us before leaving once again.

"Why'd you do that?" I asked Rachel, raising an eyebrow at her.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Rachel replied entirely too innocently.

"Why'd you do *this*?" I nudged her a little more roughly, making her pretend to scowl at me.

"Cause I told you to not to take food recommendations from me," she reminded, resting her chin on her fist.

"It was either that or ordering something I didn't even know what was," I muttered, taking a sip from my glass.

"This is true. You could've ordered that rigatoni alla pajata stuff," the rocker snickered.

"Why is that amusing?"

"No reason." She picked up her own glass to hide her smile. I glanced at her suspiciously, but she didn't say anything else.

For an instant, I thought that there was going to be yet another uncomfortable silence, so I quickly brought up a subject I knew Rachel, at least, could go on about for a while: "So, you think we're ready for the concert tomorrow night?"

Since I was so close to her, I was able to see the interest spark in her dark brown eyes. "Hell, yeah, we're ready for it. We're *so* gonna own this thing!" She grinned widely and I relaxed a little. This was a conversation I was nearly certain she would dominate, so I wouldn't have to do much other than listen.

We were only in the restaurant for an hour and a half, and as I'd expected, Rachel pretty much took over the conversation after my remark.

The ride back to the hotel was pretty much silent. Rachel had run out of things to say about the concert, and I didn't want to talk anyways. Now that the brief flicker of happiness I had while on that date was gone, my thoughts and fears and doubts came rushing back. My mind was replaying my past conversations with Roxene.

"And every single day, you'll find more and more reasons why you shouldn't break up with her, even if you're not happy..."

"One day, it'll just hit you - that you aren't gonna be able to stay with her..."

"It wouldn't matter if you like her or not, because you doubts just hurt so much..."

"Get out of that relationship. Now."

When we returned to the hotel room, I tugged Rachel down and kissed her firmly on the mouth. She was so startled that she nearly stumbled. I felt the glow I'd always gotten from kissing her, but... that wasn't the only thing there.

I can't trust her.

That thought occurred to me and the realization knocked the wind out of me. I broke away, and Rachel looked down at me, her eyes studying mine.

"I love you," she whispered matter-of-factly.

"I love you, too," I murmured softly, releasing her. That was true. I was certain of that.

It's not enough.



I was able to make it through the concert, but God only knows how. The entire time, I felt dread heavy in my throat. I was surprised I was able to sing, let alone do the choreography, let alone do it correctly. From the audience's reaction, Rachel was right: we owned that concert. They called for three encores, and would have called for a fourth if Rachel hadn't lost her voice.

That was as far as I could make it. I couldn't fake it anymore.

I found Rachel in her dressing room after the concert was over. She was still dressed in the outfit Thomas had made for her, with the fishnet-and-leather top, camo pants, and combat boots, and was working on removing the makeup she'd used to give herself a 'gaunt' look for the performance.

When she saw me in the mirror, she turned around to grin at me, evidently still feeling the high from performing.

"I told you we'd own it," she whispered in what would have undoubtedly been a shout had she still had her voice. I didn't return her smile. Rachel obviously felt the mood shift; her grin slowly faded into uncertainty. She knew what was coming. I could see that in the way her gaze fell to the floor.

I inhaled deeply, steeling my nerves for the next four words: "We need to talk."

CHAPTER 76

I want to find out whoever first said 'time heals all wounds,' because that person needs to be kicked in the mouth.

It had been a little over a week since Jessie dumped me. That horrible, disbelieving ache in my chest had yet to fade. I was certain that this was the worst pain I had ever gone through. I now understood what the phrase 'surviving instead of living' meant.

Every day after school let out, I came home, suffered through homework, then sat in front of the television or computer and tried to keep myself occupied until I could go to sleep.

Jenny, to my surprise, had taken to keeping me company after school the past few weeks. Honestly, I hadn't expected her to react like that when I told her I'd been dumped. I'd expected a firm lecture on dating straight girls, an 'I told you so,' a reminder that straight girls often think they're in love with their first girl crush, anything aside for what I got – sympathy.

I glanced in the direction of the door as I heard it open, then looked back at the television. I wasn't really sure what I was watching – I hadn't been paying attention.

“Hey, Rah,” Jenny greeted with her becoming-usual hug from behind.

“Hey,” I whispered absently, covering one of her hands with my own. She released me and gently ruffled my hair.

“Have you eaten dinner yet?” she inquired, coming around to sit next to me. That question struck me as odd, but when I glanced at the clock, I discovered that it was almost six-thirty.

“Not yet,” I admitted with a tired shrug. It hadn't occurred to me that I'd forgotten to eat supper. It hadn't occurred to me several other times, either. I probably would've just passed out from forgetting shit like that if she hadn't been reminding me of it.

Jenny looked me over with gentle pity in her gaze. “Want me to order pizza or something?” she offered gently.

“I’m not that hungry,” I insisted with a slight wave of the hand. My gaze focused on my hand when it returned to my lap. Apparently I neglected to put on my many rings this morning. That was weird. I never forgot to wear my rings.

“I’m still gonna order,” my friend informed me coolly, taking her phone from her pocket. I shrugged. “Kay.”

As she ordered for us, I looked back at the television without really seeing it. It was just something completely mindless, intended to keep my thoughts away from... well. To keep my thoughts away, anyways.

“What are you watching, anyways?” Jenny inquired curiously as she hung up. I shrugged and she looked at the TV. “Flapjack? Rachel, you hate this show.”

“It’s what was on.” I didn’t really care what I was watching. It could have been an infomercial on a home gym or something, and I would have been watching it just as intently.

“Are you okay?” I stared at her in disbelief and she winced. “Sorry.” I let her hug me again, apologetically. “That was a stupid question.”

“No kidding,” I mumbled against her shirt, allowing myself to be pulled against her in a comforting way. I laid my head against her shoulder, just letting myself be held. It felt nice to have a friend willing to do something so simple as holding me.

I wasn’t going to hold that slip against her. Once or twice, I’d nearly slipped, too. But the overwhelming pain that ravaged through me because of those slips were good deterrents from letting it happen too often.

“Which finals did you have today?” she asked casually, resting her chin on the top of my head.

I blinked, trying to remember. “Chorus and calculus,” I finally answered.

“You have a final in chorus?”

“Yeh.” I didn’t feel like I even had the energy to say the word ‘yeah’ right. “She got one person from each voice part and made ‘em sing together. The class graded them.”

“Fun times.”

“Not really.” I’d nearly been paired up with Jessie and two boys, but I managed to get out of it by faking the need to go to the bathroom. When I’d gotten there, it took every ounce of strength I had to keep from crying again. I was trying to stop crying over her. If the redhead could break up with me without even a sniffle, I sure as hell could be dumped without sobbing every time I saw her. Didn’t change the fact that I was shocked I made it through that damn Vivaldi concert. “I wasn’t feeling too good when I was doing it. I probably didn’t get a great grade on the final.” Which sucked; the final counted for 15% of our overall grade.

“Like any of them would have given you a bad mark even if you didn’t sing at all,” Jenny teased, messing up my hair a little. I didn’t bother protesting. “How’d the calculus final go?” She and Thomas were the only ones who knew about my ungodly bad skills when it came to mathematics of any kind. Math was actually the reason I got held back a year.

“I think pretty well. I hope it did. If I didn’t pass it, I have to do credit recovery.” Few things were more humiliating than credit recovery. Saturday and summer school were about the only things that were.

“Mm.”

We stayed like that for a while, me pressed against Jenny’s front and her arms wrapped around me. There was a sort of intimacy in the embrace, but not the kind I was used to. There was no romance here, just two people who were suffering because they couldn’t have the only thing they desired. Or rather, the one person.

I knew why Jenny was doing all this for me. Because she knew exactly how it felt to be denied by someone you loved.

There was a knock on my door, and Jenny gently nudged me off her so she could get up. “I’ll be right back.” She left to go answer the door, leaving me there.

I grimaced to myself. We may have suffered – or suffer, as the case may be – extremely similar anguish, but it wasn’t entirely the same. I, after all, never told Jenny ‘I love you’ back. Jessie... had.

“Pepperoni good?” Jenny assumed, returning with two personal-sized pizza boxes.

“Yeah,” I muttered, accepting the box. I really didn’t feel like eating – truthfully, the thought of putting anything in my stomach was making me nauseous – but she was going through all this trouble to make sure I was taken care of, so I wasn’t going to refuse it. I ate

slowly, trying to keep the food down. I really did feel ill; I was surprised I didn't throw up. "Thanks," I mumbled once I was done.

"No problem." She smiled gently at me and took the box from me to go throw them away. "That reminds me. Picked up something for you today."

I raised my eyebrows at her, and she tugged a bottle of Vault from a black plastic bag. I snorted softly, unable to stop the slight smile. I wasn't sure why, but the idea of her trying to cheer me up with Vault was almost comical. It may have worked for my little 'pity-parties' that she and Thomas entertained me with, but... not so much now. "Thanks," I repeated as she gave it to me.

She seemed almost relieved at the small smile I gave her.

I took a few sips from it, more out of habit than any desire to drink the citrus-flavored soda.

Jenny pulled her phone out of her pocket and glanced at it. "Geez. I've gotta go. My parents are making me study for my social studies final tomorrow," she sighed. "And they told me I couldn't stay here for too long anyways." I glanced at my watch to see that it was nearly eight. "You know how paranoid they are." I nodded absently, barely paying attention. "So, I'm gonna leave, then. See you tomorrow, Rachel."

I said nothing for a while, but then, as she'd gotten to the doorway of the living room, I spoke up: "Jenny." She turned to look at me curiously. I looked up at her, my jaw quivering as I fought off the urge to cry again. "Does it ever go away?" Jenny had to know what I meant. This pain, this betrayal, this... heartache.

The girl regarded me with a look of combined pain and pity. She came over and hugged me tightly. She didn't say anything. She didn't have to.

At the gesture, I began to cry shamelessly against her shoulder. I knew what she meant. *It's not gonna go away.*

"I guess I deserve this," I choked out, my voice muffled against her. I'd done this to her, too; I'd made her feel like this, too. What goes around comes around, I suppose.

Jenny pulled away to look me in the eyes, her cool hands holding me still so I couldn't look away. I searched her watery gaze helplessly. "I never wanted this for you," she whispered gently before pulling me back into her arms. She was holding me so tightly that it almost hurt,

but I didn't notice. The only thing I remember feeling was a numb horror. This ache would never leave.

"How am I supposed to live with this?" I whispered miserably, ignoring the salty taste of my tears.

She shrugged, looking about as lost as I felt. "Same way you've worked through everything else?" Jenny suggested tentatively. She shook her head then, regretfully. "I've got to go. Want me to come over tomorrow?"

I hesitated, then nodded, swiping at my face wearily.

"Okay." She gave me an awkward pat on the back, then stood up. I noticed, with some minor embarrassment, the wet spot on her shoulder where I'd been crying. Jenny looked like she wanted to stay longer, but shook her head once and left.

Same way I've worked through everything else...

I turned off the TV and wandered back into my bedroom, shutting the door behind me. Setting up my computer to record took only a minute or two, and I was soon sitting behind my drums, fitting the thick, soundproof headphones over my ears. I needed to be able to hear the song to get the drums right.

I started playing with the loud music in my ears, hitting the crash cymbal in time with the bass drum. I allowed the words to wash over me, forcing up the pain and emptiness, forcing the feelings out through my playing.

And you neglected I called you out, "Don't, please." I said "We're stronger than this now." You resurrected mistakes years past, it seemed, and they exist to still haunt you.

And still you still feel like the loneliness is better replaced by this. I don't believe it this way. And I can see the fear in your eyes, I've seen it materialize, growing stronger each day.

I could see it as you turned to stone. Still clearly I can hear you say, "Don't leave, don't give up on me;" two weeks and you ran away.

I remember, don't lie to me, you couldn't see that it was not that way. Swear I never gave up on you.

I wanted nothing but for that trust again, and brick by brick you would take it. You feared of phantoms, and none exist but you.

You still saw fit to destroy it...

This couldn't be an album. She wouldn't listen to that; I was certain of that. But I'd make sure she heard me out one way or the other.

Please hear me, Jessie. Please.

CHAPTER 77

It had been nearly two months since I'd last seen or heard of Rachel - or, as she was better known as, OneGirl. That had been at the graduation ceremony. I'd only managed to get a glimpse of her as she crossed the stage in her hat and gown to accept her diploma. I hadn't been able to suppress the flicker of pride I felt at the fact that she'd graduated.

I barely caught a glance of her at the senior's after-party, too. We'd been passing yearbooks around, trying to get as many signatures as we could. When I asked someone where mine was, I learned that Rachel had it. I'd looked over at her, but she wasn't writing anything. She seemed to just be staring at the back page, apparently reading the signatures. She'd looked up and caught my gaze, then, and held it for only an instant. I flinched at the pain in those dark brown eyes. Rachel simply stared at me for a moment, but then she shook her head like she was disappointed or something. She passed my yearbook to someone else, and then she left.

And that was the last I'd heard of her.

No calls, no emails, no texts, nothing. That probably surprised me more than anything; from the way she looked at me, with that near-unbearable agony and desperation in her gaze, anyone would have assumed that she'd beg for me to take her back at every opportunity. But she didn't. If anything, she avoided me as well as she knew how. I was grateful. Had she begged, I wasn't sure I'd be able to push her away. And she deserved better than someone who couldn't trust her.

Still, after two months... I suppose I'd assumed she had moved on. I, myself, was trying to do that, too. But clearing my mind of her... Well, that was harder than it seemed. Particularly when I wore her pendant every day. I wasn't sure why I did that. Maybe I didn't want to get rid of all of her.

So, imagine my surprise when the next time I saw her was in the newspaper.

My dad called me to him, showing me the article. I'd quickly taken the paper to my bedroom, closing the door behind me.

At the top, in bold, capital letters, was the title “RISING METAL STAR ON HIATUS?” Beneath it was a black-and-white photo of Rachel on a stage. She seemed to be in the middle of screaming something into her microphone, her other fist pressed to her shirt. Some dark liquid seemed to be dripping over her hand and shirt. My blood ran cold. I quickly began to read the article.

“From the hellish pyrotechnics to the nearly professional black-light encore to the bloody special effects, it's hard to tell which part of Rachel 'OneGirl' McCaviler's recent 'Requiem' performance was most shocking. Most of her fans would tell you that it was her announcement after her third encore – that she was going on a hiatus.

“I'm really sorry, guys, and y'all [sic] have been amazing, but I've just lost my muse for a bit,' she is quoted as saying. 'And I might come back out, and I might not, but right now, I dunno [sic]. We'll see.'

“The bewildered musicians who were playing with her insisted that they had not heard anything about this announcement prior to the concert. OneGirl, when asked about her sudden decision to stop playing, had no comment.

“The artist's MySpace page is still up, though the banner has been taken down and replaced with the word 'HIATUS.' Several fans have, after watching the DVD several times, hypothesized why she suddenly stopped playing, their reasons including...”

I stopped reading, then. I didn't care about the hypotheses. I was merely in shock. She wasn't playing anymore. She'd been doing that for three years. That was how she paid for everything she needed to. It was how she relaxed, how she vented, how she celebrated, how she mourned. Now she wasn't doing it. That made no sense.

I crossed the room over to my computer, plugging in my headphones and slipping them into my ears. I pulled up YouTube and, after checking the paper to confirm it, typed in the keywords 'OneGirl' and 'Requiem.'

The first video was entitled 'most badass moments of requiem!!' I clicked on that, ignoring the person's note at the right. ('most metal parts of onegirls requiem concert! \m/')

The video started out dark, then the stage exploded in bright lights and flames shooting up (so that's what they meant by 'hellish pyrotechnics') from the floor. The camera switched to a shot of Rachel unleashing a long, fierce scream into the microphone, her body bent at the middle, making the shriek look all the more painful. Her hair was wild, getting in her face and eyes, making her look positively feral as she screamed. The clip was nearly twenty seconds long, impressing me with how long she was able to keep that scream up.

Before I could hear any actual words, it switched to a different clip. The band was in full swing, and Rachel quickly came in: "Wait another minute. Can't you see what this pain has fucking done to me?" For a minute, I couldn't see what was so 'badass' about this clip, then I noticed the little jets of flame that went off in time with the bass drum, illuminating her face. She looked a little more gaunt than I remembered her being, but I chalked that up to all the fire. "I'm alive, and still kickin'. What you see, I can't see, and maybe you'll think before you speak. I'm alive. For you, I'm awake. Because of you, I'm alive. Told you I'm awake, swallowing you." I winced at the lyrics. *She's singing that to me.*

The next clip was mostly focused on Rachel, instead of the band or the pyrotechnics. "I'm not like you – your faceless lies; your weak, dead heart; your black, dead eyes. I'll make it through, but not this time. Your hope is gone, and so is mine." I felt that guilt stirring in my chest again, constricting my lungs, making it hard to breathe.

It didn't get any better as the songs went on.

"In spite of all your prayers, as a light turns off inside your heart, can you remember what it's like to care? Knees are weak, hands are shaking, I can't breathe!"

"So here we are, again, the same fork in the road. I hate you, you love me, this story's getting old. The day I opened up, you shut me out for good. Forgive, forget, fuck you, you are a liar and a whore!"

"I could see it as you turned to stone, still clearly I can hear you say 'don't, please, don't give up on me,' two weeks and you ran away. I remember, don't lie to me, you couldn't see that it was not that way. Swear I never gave up on you!"

"I know now, it's all been a lie, and I'll never come to know why, I woke to discover you leaving me now. It's all been a lie, I don't ever want to know why you've mastered the art of deceiving me now!"

“Good god, you're coming up with reasons. Good god, you're draggin' it out. Good god, it's the changin' of the seasons. I feel so raped, so just follow me down and just fake it...”

I closed the video before it ended. I had a feeling that the 'bloody special effects' would make its way into the video soon, and I didn't want to watch that. I glanced at the caption to the picture in the paper and decided I'd been correct in closing it. “OneGirl uses fake blood and a real switchblade in her first encore of Avenged Sevenfold's 'A Little Piece of Heaven.’”

I could only manage one thought: *I need to talk to her.*

Looking back, I'm still not sure what was going through my head at the time. I didn't know what to say to her, or even why I felt the need to talk to her. All I knew that I was suddenly parking my car in the parking lot of her apartment building, and then I was at her door, knocking firmly for several minutes.

When she didn't answer, I tried the knob. Locked. Borderline frantic for no real reason, I ran my hand over the top frame of the doorway. *Yes!* There was a spare key up there.

I unlocked the door and hurried into the living room. I stopped short in the doorway. Disappointment and horror clenched in my throat and made my eyes sting with tears I was unwilling to let out. *I'm too late.*

The furniture was where I remembered it being, but everything else was gone. The pictures, the VCR and the DVD player, the books and magazines scattered about... gone. I wandered slowly into her bedroom, only to confirm what I already knew: Rachel was gone. Her bed had no mattress or anything; the computer and recording equipment, the band posters, the instruments, of course – they were gone, too.

I barely stifled a sob against my hand. *I'm too late!*

“Hey, you can't be in here, this apartment – oh, it's you.” I whipped around to see the landlord there. I'd seen her often enough that she knew my relationship with Rachel. Well, my former relationship, anyways. The reminder of that made me hurt. I swiped at my tears, but it wasn't much use. They continued coming.

“Where's Rachel?” I asked quietly through my fingers, looking at her. I felt... lost, for lack of a better word. Even though we'd broken up, I'd still known where she was. I would still be able to find her if I needed to. Now... now she was gone.

The landlord looked vaguely uncomfortable. “She left. Just a few days ago. Just packed up all her stuff and left. She didn't say where.” I bit back a second cry. “She told me to give you something. It's down in my office; come with me?”

I didn't dare let the flicker of hope in my chest grow. But I followed her anyways.

“This is for you.” The woman handed me a sealed, orange envelope. I thanked her quietly and went back to my car. I felt numb. *She's gone. She's gone.* I wasn't sure why that thought horrified me so much. I'd broken up with her two months ago. I should have been over her by now.

As I sat in my car, I silently tore the envelope open. Out fell two things: an unmarked CD, and a guitar pick. I examined the pick and had to try not to cry when I saw that she'd cut out part of the top so it formed a slightly lopsided heart. A question mark was carved into one side.

I kept the CD in my lap until I was home and in my room again. I placed the disc in my computer and opened it up. There were two songs saved on the disc. I began to cry again when I saw the titles. “You,” by Breaking Benjamin. “The End of Heartache,” by Killswitch Engage. I knew both of those songs. I knew the words, I knew what they were about. I knew why she'd give them to me.

I chose to listen to them anyways. Out of respect. Out of love.

They made me about as distressed as I thought they would. I was sobbing quietly as they ended.

Rachel...!

CHAPTER 78

“This should be enough to cover the rest of the year, right?” I inquired, showing the man the check I’d made out.

He looked surprised that I’d managed to calculate the exact cost. I’d done my research beforehand; I wouldn’t just all my stuff in just *any* old self-storage, after all. “Yeah, that’s right.” I nodded absently, tearing the check out and giving it to him. “Do you need any help unpacking?” he offered, motioning towards the U-Haul that was hooked up to the back of my truck.

“I’m good, thanks,” I demurred with a shake of the head. The man shrugged and pulled open the door to the storage unit. I opened the U-Haul and began the long, tedious job of carrying the things onto my newly-rented storage.

The first thing to go was my drum set, and that in and of itself took a good half-hour. I had entirely too many pieces in my set. I put them all in the far back corner, arranging it as though I was going to be playing is often. I returned to the truck to gather and put away everything else.

Microphones. Amplifiers. Recording equipment. My keyboard. Cello. Violin. Acoustic guitar. Bass guitar. *Everything*.

When I was close to being through, I stood at the door and looked over all the things inside. It occurred to me, then, that I was basically packing my entire life away into this cramped little room. There was the recorder I began playing when I was six – there was the cello I learned to play with Thomas – there was the guitar my daddy taught me to play.

Everything. Well, mostly, anyways.

I silently placed my paint-splattered electric guitar on its stand at the front of everything else. It was a little more difficult to put this one away than the other instruments, though I couldn't pinpoint why, exactly. With the paint all over it, all it should have been was a reminder of hatred and intolerance. I should have been glad to get rid of the thing. But I wasn't.

I returned to the U-Haul for one more thing. I gently picked up my tell-tale black leather jacket. My gaze traced the deep creases in the leather; my fingertips barely caressed the splatters of paint on the back and shoulder of the jacket. I held the jacket up to my face, lightly inhaling the familiar scent of my leather.

It was borderline painful to get rid of this. It had been a gift to me from my parents in seventh grade, purposely several sizes too big, so I could get more use out of it. It had been my favorite Christmas gift that year. It had been the only thing I'd left home with on the night I was disowned. It had been my only reminder of my parents and, now that it was ruined with paint from that rally, a reminder of how I'd captured one of the 'Phobes in my heart.

And that was precisely why I couldn't keep it.

With a wistful sigh, I draped my jacket over the electric guitar and closed up the storage unit. The last thing I saw in there were those two things – the two signs of mingled love and hatred. I wandered back to my truck with a slight smile on my lips. *Now* it was everything.

I knew Jessie had to have come looking for me at my apartment by now. I wondered if she'd be mourning the fact that I was gone, or celebrating it. I absently touched her locket as I considered.

Mourning, I decided then. She wasn't heartless.

Leaving my apartment was probably one of the hardest things I'd ever done. But I knew that Jessie would come after me as soon as word got out about my hiatus. I knew she would beg for me to take her back because of it.

But I didn't want her to be with me because she thought she had to. I wanted her to be with me because she *wanted* to.

And she'd have to come to terms with that on her own.

I climbed into the truck, still smiling, just a little. I could wait. I could wait as long as she needed.

Sure, I was still upset about the breakup. Sure, it still nearly brought me to tears to think about her. But it was nowhere near as painful as it *had* been. Now I had something I didn't have before.

Hope.

I *knew* she would come back for me. I *knew* that she loved me, whether she wanted to admit it or not. I also *knew* that it would take some time for her to start looking for me again, even with the trail I'd left just for her.

That was fine. I could wait for an eternity if that's what it took to get my little redhead back again.

As I started the vehicle and plugged in my iPod, I grinned to myself, letting my most recent song flow over me, relaxing me. I still loved her. Even with everything she'd put me through, I loved her more than anything.

“(Seek me) For comfort

(Call me) For solace

(I'll be waiting) For the end of my broken heart

(Seek me) Completion

(Call me) I'll be waiting

(I'll be waiting) For the end of my broken heart.”

I'll be waiting for you, darlin'. Always. Please come back for me.

EPILOGUE

I gave a weary sigh as I settled onto the couch, a thin book in hand. The familiar taste of guilt and regret sat heavy in my chest, but I shook my head firmly. *Why do I still feel guilty? It was almost two years ago. We wouldn't have worked out anyways, it was just an experiment.*

A voice in the back of my mind insisted, *Right. You've spend the past two years wondering what might have been because of an experiment.*

I opened the book and smiled slightly at the full-page picture of a handful of grinning cheerleaders. I sat there on my couch, in my apartment, and allowed myself to get lost in the memories of my high school years. Familiar faces popped out, smiling at me as if to welcome me back into my past. I pointedly ignored the page with... her, on it.

I chuckled at the picture of the high school's choir; the camera was so little, and there were so many of us, we all had to squeeze in. I remembered how uncomfortable and awkward that was. I skipped over the chess club, A/V club, and book club's pages. I began to reread the signatures left on the blank back pages. There was Ashley, scrawling the acronym "LYLAS" (Love Ya Like A Sister) in one corner. There was Kendra, wishing me a good summer and a great time at college. There was even Kyle, though I didn't bother reading *his* note.

A frown began to tug at my lips as I read each signature – I was looking for one person specifically, but I couldn't seem to find it.

The last page was completely blank, to my surprise and disappointment. I sighed and wistfully ran my fingers over the page that was glued to the back cover of my yearbook. When my hand hit a bump, I frowned. *Crappy gluing job they did.* I ran my hand over the bump again, trying to smooth it out. It didn't flatten any, but it did shift towards the top of the book with my fingers. *Is there something in the binding?* I wondered, and began gently pushing the bulge towards the top.

After a few tedious moments of this, a small, folded piece of notebook paper fell out of the binding and into my lap. I picked it up with shaking fingers – who else was there that would know something as useless as how to rig a note-holder in a bound book? – and carefully began unfolding it, smoothing out the creases as I did so.

The letter was written in a familiar, untidy scrawl that brought up both wonderful and horrible memories at once. I hesitated, wondering if I should just throw the note away, then breathed in deeply and began to read.

Hey, Jessie.

I bet it's been a few months – even years – since you and me graduated from Harper High. I wonder about what you're doing there, in the future. Are you dating someone? Does he make you happy? Do you hate me? Do you ever wonder what could have been? Do you even remember me? Or have you forgotten all about our apparently forbidden affection?

You broke my heart, chica, so why do I still miss you? Want you? Love you?

Hell if I know. But I do.

Did you know that you still have my heart? Have you been taking care of it? Or did you leave it on a shelf in the attic?

I know you must be wondering why I'm writing you this extremely confused-sounding letter. I want to talk to you, Jessie. (Now, I know you must be wondering how I know I'll want to talk to you so far ahead in the future. Well, I simply looked at how badly I wanted to talk to you now, and I add onto the want every day that passes. That sounds about right to me.) I've even bought a second cell phone for that purpose. I carry it with me, always. No one else knows about it. No one else knows the number for it. Just you and me. It's on the back of this paper.

Even if you don't want to speak to me, at least call me once. Just once, Jessie. I need to know that you're alive and happy. Even if that happiness isn't because of me. And, god, I wish it was.

Love, love, and love again,

Rachel, your OneGirl.

I wiped at my eyes, surprising myself when I felt that they were dry. Apparently I was too stunned to cry at the ending of her letter. I slowly turned it over, revealing the number that was on the back of the paper. I debated with myself in calling it. On the one hand, I already had a boyfriend. Derek. I remembered how stunned he had been when I told him about how I'd used to date a girl. He didn't care, though; he said he was just glad he was with me now. On the other, her letter sounded desperate. I wondered in silence if she still loved me, as her letter said. I didn't see how she could – it had been two years since I had last seen or heard of her, though OneGirl's legacy was still alive and thriving in many internet communities.

I had broken her heart, as the letter said, and I didn't see how she could forgive me for that.

With shaking hands, I picked up my cell phone, and began to dial. I was going to call Derek, and talk to him about this entire thing, about how my ex-girlfriend was apparently trying to get back together with me, but a little voice in the back of my mind said otherwise. I wasn't paying attention to what I was putting in, and by the time the number was in, I wasn't sure who I was calling anymore. I put the phone to my ear and listened to the soft ringing noise.

When it picked up, I swore my heart stopped for a moment as an amused, feminine voice with that tell-tale accent picked up at last:

“Jessie, darlin', if I'd known that it would take you this long to find the note, I'd've given it to you in person.”



A LETTER FROM THE TRICKSTER

Hey!

Wow, it's been a while since I last had much anything to do with *Singer* aside for minor touch-ups and a rewrite or two. It was a little tricky, attempting to do *several* more rewrites, and about a billion and four "minor touch-ups," particularly when I haven't actually written from scratch any Singer-era Rachel, Jessie, Jenny, Thomas, or Harem or, well... any of the rest of our ragtag cast of characters.

I said it when *Singer* ended and I'll say it again: you guys from FictionPress, all of you fantastic folks who supported me with your reviews, with your alerts and favorites, your emotional investment (ranging from excitement to shock to misery to hope, as you all likely will recall), just... everything. *Singer* was never intended to be a big deal, in all honesty. People have asked me frequently how *Singer* got to be as huge a thing as it was, and I genuinely am not certain how. In any case, it did, and the overwhelming response was what kept me pushing it through to the end.

I realize how ridiculously overused that sounds, really, but as I say, *Singer* was shocking to me for it to be as successful as it was. When I started it, I was excited for the prospect of earning maybe six reviews. As of my typing this letter, three years after the first story ended, there are over six *hundred* reviews. Over 300 favorites. Over 100 alerts. At the risk of sounding crass, holy *shit*. That is *far* and beyond the attention I expected to get on my clumsy first attempt at writing original fiction. In that same vein, 80 chapters was *leagues* away from how *long* I'd even thought my story would be.

I have you guys to thank for it.

You guys' excitement and involvement kept me shoving this story through to the very end, and you have no idea how much I appreciate it. Without you guys pushing me to keep going, it's probably a safe bet that the story would've never been completed at all, let alone with as many chapters as it did. Writing *Singer* was a fantastic experience and a brilliant ride, and I only hope that it was as great a ride for you guys as it was for me.

This book was written for you guys.

All the best,

Tah the Trickster

Read an excerpt from the second book,

OneGirl

PROLOGUE

It had been almost two years since I'd seen her. Two years since I'd left my apartment; two years since I'd let myself love; two years since I'd had my heart broken. I feared countless times that maybe I'd pinned my hopes on something that wasn't meant to be. Surely she would have looked for me by now. Surely she would have found my note by now. Of course, there was always the chance that she *had* found it and was merely refusing to contact me. But that thought made tears spring to my eyes and my chest ache, so I tried to ignore it as best as I could.

I clung to what little shreds of hope remained after that first year of being alone. The reasons I kept in mind were often rather juvenile; even I knew that. But it was all I had. And I refused to let that hope die yet. I couldn't count the times I'd stared at my locket – I'd kept it, of course – simply hoping, wishing for her again. Still, after two years... I was losing faith in the little redhead. It was difficult to remain optimistic about her when she hadn't called me a single time.

So when I got out of bed at one in the afternoon one Thursday, the last thing I was expecting was for that particular cell phone to ring. It had not, after all, rung once since I'd bought it. I was in the kitchen at the time, and I shocked myself by not falling to my knees at the sight of the familiar number. I did feel my throat constrict violently. *Christ. Jesus-fucking-Christ.* I panicked; I admit that much. I was certain that I'd spent some time rehearsing what to say to her; why couldn't I remember what I'd practiced?

I quickly pulled a bottle of vodka from the fridge, taking a gulp from it. The harsh burn snapped me out of my panic and I shakily answered the phone. For an instant, I couldn't think of a thing to say. Then I blurted out the first thing that came to mind. "Jessie, darlin', if I'd known that it would take you this long to find the note, I'd've given it to you in person."

For a long moment, there was no answer, and I wondered if she'd hung up. Then I heard a ragged intake of breath and a soft murmur of "Oh, god," in that voice I recalled so well. I bit my lip as if that would help to bite back the emotion that threatened to overwhelm my senses. "Rachel?" she whispered, sounding stunned.

"Yeah," I replied softly, hoarsely. Then I grinned widely. I wasn't sure why. "Yeah, it's me, Jessie. Been a while, huh?"



TAH THE TRICKSTER is the author of *Singer*, the first book in the *Singer* trilogy, which was nominated for the ninth round of the Some Kind of Wonderful Romance Awards in the category of Best Slash. She is also the writer of numerous other titles, including the supernatural titles *Le LoupGarou* and *Disillusioned*. She currently lives in middle Georgia with her family and more cats than necessary as she works towards an undergraduate degree in Information Science & Technology. Visit Tah online at <http://www.fictionpress.com/u/640126/>