

Sincerely, Arizona
WHITNEY G.

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For the Best Readers Ever...

***Note: This is not a standalone or a novel. It's the previously unpublished epilogue to "Sincerely, Carter," and the easiest way I could make sure as many readers as possible have it, since I normally post things like this on my blog. :-)*

PS—Yes, I will still post this on my blog :-)

Just friends.

We're just friends.

No, wait. We're no longer *just* best friends...

Track 33. Wonderland

Arizona

“I loved you then. I love you now. And I always will...”

Carter’s words were currently running through my mind, and every memory I’d ever shared with him was coming into focus. From the time he pushed me off the swings when I was mid-air in fourth grade, to all the times he’d come to my room and spent the night as I cried over another breakup or disaster date in college.

As I lay on top of him—my hands entwined with his after hours of lengthy, make-up sex, I wondered how I was ever going to leave. There had to be some exception about returning to school late with no penalty, some special clause about having your best friend tell you he loves you and being allowed to take some extra time off.

Even if there wasn’t, I was tempted to call the dean of academics and ask if I could be the first.

“Are you okay?” Carter brushed a strand of hair out of my face.

I nodded.

“Why are you so quiet, then? What are you thinking about?”

“France.”

Smiling, he looked directly into my eyes. “You’re going back to school on time, Ari. And as much as I’d like for you to, I won’t let you stay this time either.”

“What makes you think I was thinking about *staying*?” I asked. “I was actually just thinking about how I can’t wait to get back.”

“In that case, I can take you to the airport right now.” His lips curved into a smirk, and I rolled my eyes—unable to keep up that charade.

“I only have three and a half days left here,” I said softly. “I feel like I wasted most of my time being mad at you.”

“No, you wasted it being with Sean.”

“Do you think he’ll ever talk to me again?”

“Do you think *I’m* going to talk about him again?” He gave me a blank stare. “In my bed of all places?”

“Right. I wouldn’t talk to me either.”

“He’ll get over it.” He rolled me off him and pulled me against his side. “Tell me all the things I’ve missed.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” he said, running his fingers through my hair. “Outside of school, I have no idea what you’ve been doing all these months. Tell me everything.”

“You want me to give you a play by play about what I do every day?”

“Eventually, but I’d rather start with something simple, like what made you cut your hair.”

“Do you not like it?”

“I fucking love it.” He ran his fingers through it again. “I’m just curious. You’ve worn it the same way since freshman year.”

“I never thought you actually paid attention to my hair.”

“I *didn’t*.” He smiled.

“Well, my roommate suggested it. She said getting a new look would help me start anew after some guy really hurt my feel-

ings. She said a new haircut and style was the first step in forgetting all about him.”

“Did it work?”

“Absolutely. I haven’t thought about him since.”

We both laughed and he sat up, slowly pulling me with him.

“Since we only have three and a half days left,” he said, “how do you want to spend them?”

“Right here is just fine.”

He raised his eyebrow. “Are you insinuating more sex?”

“No.” I blushed. “But if I was, I don’t think that’d be a huge problem. Would it?”

“No, but...” His voice trailed off, and he stood up and walked over to his dresser.

He picked up his phone and tapped the screen a few times—mumbling words I didn’t understand. When he was done talking to himself, he put on a pair of jeans.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” His eyes finally met mine.

“I’m confused. I just told you that I wanted to stay in bed and—”

“Have sex?” He smirked.

“Yes, and I’m pretty sure putting on more clothes doesn’t necessarily help with that activity.”

“It doesn’t,” he said, stepping over to me. “But since I can personally guarantee that we’ll be spending your final twenty four hours here doing that, I was thinking we could try something else for the other two and a half days.”

“Something else like what?”

He bent down and trailed his fingers against my lips. “Like one of those ‘whirlwind dates’ from high school, except we’ll

both be with the right person this time. Do you think that type of thing is still popular?”

“Yes.” My heart fluttered against my chest. “Yes, I think it definitely is.”

“Do you mind if we bypass the movie theater part, though?” he asked. “I don’t recall that part going that well for you before.”

I laughed and grabbed a pillow—tempted to hit him over the head with it, but he grabbed it and tossed it across the room.

“Get dressed,” he said. “I don’t want to waste tonight.” He planted one more kiss on my lips before stepping back and opening his dresser.

I glanced at my crumpled shirt and slightly torn skirt on the floor, knowing there was no way I could possibly wear either of those.

“Did you, by chance, keep any of the stuff I hid in your drawer last summer, or did you throw it out?” I asked.

“Of course, I didn’t throw it out.” He opened his closet and thumbed through the hangers, taking out a pink hoodie and jeans.

“Thank you.” I managed, keeping my eyes on his as I dressed. Somehow, he seemed to get sexier with each passing second.

As if he was reading my mind, he stared back at me. “If you don’t put the rest of your clothes on, we *will* have to stay here tonight.”

“I’m still failing to see how that’s a bad thing.”

“Five minutes, Ari.” He turned around and grabbed his car keys. “Hurry up.”

“Fine.” I pulled the hoodie over my head and slipped into my shoes. I picked up my phone and noticed there was a new text message. My mom.

MOM: I heard about what happened at Gayle's tonight...Told you so! Tell Carter I said hello, and make time to see me for more at least an hour before you leave. :-)

ME: What makes you think I wouldn't make time to see my own mother before I left? You think I'm that obsessed? That rude?

"Ari?" Carter said my name, making me look up at him. "Are you ready?"

I said nothing, just stared at him—immediately wishing that I hadn't gone for so long without talking to him. I was definitely going to have an even harder time saying goodbye this time.

"Ari?" he asked again, smiling and tilting his head to the side. "Is there a reason you're sitting there, staring at me?"

"Nope." I cleared my throat and looked at my phone again. "Just texting my mom back. I'll be ready as soon as I send this."

I touched the screen and noticed she'd sent me a new text: *You're not obsessed or rude, you're just in love. And I KNOW you! :-)*

Another text from her quickly followed: *I just texted Carter. He promises to bring you by after you two catch up a bit more. See you then!*

I didn't get a chance to ask Carter about that. His arm was around my waist and he was pulling me with him, leading me out of his room and outside.

Just like the summer before, he held the door to his car open for me—letting his fingertips linger against my skin for a little longer than necessary. As I buckled my seatbelt, he looked over at me and cranked the engine—stirring up even more memories.

"I just remembered something," I said. "Do you remember when you first got all those upgrades to this car?"

"Yeah, right before prom. Why?"

“You told me that the reason you got all that stuff done was to impress your date that night, and that you were going to—” I paused to make a gagging sound. “That you were going to make sure that the first girl who saw the new upgrades was worth it, and it wasn’t all a waste. You said you were going to make sure you had her in every position possible on your back seat.”

“What’s your point?”

“Me and you hung out after prom, Carter. Granted, there were no such positions in the backseat, or *anything* like that, but you technically wasted your car’s big debut on me back then.”

Silence.

He adjusted the radio and turned to face me. “I didn’t waste anything on you. I think we both know that now.” He paused. “But I thought I slept with my date in the backseat a week after prom. Didn’t I?”

“*You did.*” I rolled my eyes and he laughed, giving me a light kiss before pulling off.

I shut my eyes as the familiar salty air of the city brushed against my face. The wind was cold for this time of year, but I declined Carter’s offer to let the top up. I wanted this moment to seem as close to old times as possible.

Miles past the main pier, his hand clasped mine behind the gear shift, and he ran his thumb along my knuckles as we approached a secluded shore.

Parking near the dock, he took off his hoodie and tossed it in the back seat. I followed suit, not caring to mention that “make-believe summer” or not, the water would probably be death-cold at this time of night.

“No, wait.” I shook my head as he held out his hand. “Let’s go somewhere else first.”

“Why?”

“Because, regardless of the fact that we haven’t talked to each other in forever, I’m convinced your mind is still wired to think that late night strolls on the beach equal breaking up with your girlfriend the very next day.”

“*What?*”

“You heard me.” I crossed my arms.

A slow smile spread across his lips, and I could tell he was trying his hardest not to laugh. “Get out of the car, Ari.”

I sat still, shaking my head at him.

“*Ari...*”

“What was wrong with the movies again?” I asked. “It would probably be a lot less cold there, don’t you think?”

He rolled his eyes and pulled me out of the car—tossing me over his shoulder.

“I *just* got you back a few hours ago.” He playfully slapped my ass. “I can guarantee I won’t be letting you go tomorrow.”

“What about the day after?”

“I can’t promise that one.” He tossed me into an oncoming wave before I could say anything else.

Shocked by the freezing cold, I screamed as he picked me up mid-laugh and tossed me into the water again. Then again.

I tried to escape him, to run back to the sand after each and every toss, but he always managed to grab my waist just in time.

“I miss this,” he said, helping me up after the umpteenth time. “I miss having you here.”

“I really wish I could say the same.” I splashed the shit out of him and swam away, unknowingly starting an hour-long back and forth chase.

When I'd finally had enough of him winning, I dashed back toward the sand and held up my hands in mock surrender. "You win, you win!"

"I'm glad you finally figured that out." He walked up to me and slipped an arm around my waist. "Ready to leave yet?"

"Not really."

"Me either." He pulled me closer. "Let's just walk."

I thought he would strike up a conversation, or that I would start babbling about all the things he'd missed, but it seemed like neither of us could get any words out.

The only sounds around were the waves crashing over one another and the faint and fickle crackles of an abandoned fire pit.

Every now and then, he would look down at me and kiss my lips for no reason, hold me a little tighter with no explanation. When we'd made it halfway down the tourist section, we could see the faint lights of beach patrol cars in the distance, so we headed back toward his car.

"Ready to go somewhere else?" He opened his trunk and tossed me a towel.

"At two in the morning?"

"Yes." He walked over and pressed a smaller towel against my hair. "Good to know your habit of asking as many questions as possible hasn't changed." He looked into my eyes. "Your incessant blushing hasn't either."

"Excuse me?" I slid into the car. "What are you trying to say?"

"I'm saying that I never saw you blush that much around any of your other boyfriends."

"That's probably because you were too busy wishing you were my boyfriend."

“Never.” He slid behind the wheel and looked over at me. “Then again, if I’d known what I know now, I *might’ve* have wished that. Only *after* your braces were off, though.”

I laughed and he sped off, driving past the shops and bars on the other side of the pier. To my surprise, quite a few of the places were still open—still hosting small crowds of people who were home visiting for the break.

Carter eventually parked in front of a microbrewery, and for what felt like an hour, the two of us sampled shots of each and every concoction the manager suggested. In between laughing about absolutely nothing and swallowing bitter beers, our lips found ways to be connected whenever we seemed to struggle with words.

“I baked an ‘I Hate Carter’ cookie for my first assignment,” I slurred. “I got a four out of five.” I moved back as he tried to kiss me. “I got a four point five out of five when I made, ‘I Wish Me and Carter Were Never Friends’ Pie.”

“So, what did you get when you made an ‘I Miss Carter Fucking Me’ pie?”

“Okay, okay. That’s enough, you two.” The manager stepped in front of us and set down a bill. “I’m cutting off your supply. Conversation *and* alcohol.”

“We’re not that drunk!” I attempted to push the check away, but all I did was push at the salt shaker on the other end of the table.

He shook his head. “Yeah, I can see just how sober you are right now.” He took Carter’s keys off the table and put them in his pocket. “I’m sure one of you was going to insist that I hold them until tomorrow anyway, right?” He smiled at me. “Get the hell out and have a good night.”

Laughing, we stumbled out of the bar hand in hand, walking aimlessly against the thinning crowds—acting as if we were the only two people in the universe.

As we approached a new tattoo shop, we gave each other a knowing glance before rushing toward it. This time—after downing a few ‘sober-up’ drinks per the technicians, we thought out what we wanted first and agreed to get the same thing: Small black and grey fountain pens with each other’s name on the handles.

It took much longer than necessary for us to get the ink—mostly because we couldn’t stop laughing at each other and they eventually had to put us into separate rooms.

After the lead technician placed a final piece of gauze over my collarbone, I met Carter by the door.

“What’s next?” I asked. “We have to do at least one more thing before the sun comes up for this to count as a true whirlwind date. It’s a well-known fact.”

“You just made that shit up, Ari.”

“I did.” I smiled. “But only because I don’t want to go back home yet.”

“No worries.” He smirked. “I wasn’t planning on getting you back home any time soon.”

I blushed. “Stay focused. What’s next? Gayle’s?”

“That, or we could always try something new. Since we don’t have a car, we could walk down a few blocks. There’s a brand new specialty diner called Carmen’s that’s closer than Gayle’s.”

“*What?*”

“It opened a few months ago and it has twenty-four hour service, too. I’ve heard the breakfast is pretty good.”

“No, no, no,” I said, shaking my head. “That wasn’t a what, like ‘what is it?’” It was a what like, ‘Why is that even an option?’ Like, how could you suggest such a thing?”

“To be different for a change? To maybe switch things up?”

Silence.

“Yeah...” I said after a while. “Yeah, I guess we should switch it up a bit tonight. We could both get pancakes instead of waffles—at *Gayle’s*.”

He laughed and I couldn’t help but join him. He pulled me close again, smiling down at me and “promising” to lead me toward familiarity.

When we were five blocks away from the diner, he suddenly let me go and pulled out his phone.

“Who are you texting?” I asked.

“Josh. I’m asking him to come and pick up my car as soon he can.”

“He knows how to drive your car now?”

“No,” he said. “Nicole does, though.”

“What?” I raised my eyebrow. “So why wouldn’t you just text Nicole? Why text Josh at all?”

“Because they’re probably together right now, and she doesn’t have the best track record when it comes to answering my texts.”

“By ‘together,’ you mean the two of them are probably together right now as ‘friends,’ correct?”

“Of course.” He smiled, pulling me close again. “*Just friends.*”

Track 34. You Are In Love

Arizona

A couple days later...

With the taste of pancake batter still on my lips and the sting of my recent tattoo on my skin, I gently hugged my mother. She'd been right; I'd nearly forgotten to stop by during my last few days. I'd been too busy trying to spend every second with Carter, to make up for lost time.

"I thought you hated wearing shirts that covered your neck?" She pulled back, looking me up and down. "Did you not pack enough clothes or something?"

"Unfortunately." I blushed, thinking about the numerous bright, red hickeys that were hiding underneath. "Anyway, you can guilt me into coming over, but you don't want to ride along to see me off at the airport?"

"The first time was traumatic enough," she said. "I experienced enough anxiety that day to last me a lifetime. No, thank you. I love you all the same though."

I laughed and handed her a printout of flight information for her sanity. "I'm sure you'll get over your fears and fly to France someday."

"No." She kissed my forehead. "You'll always come visit. Speaking of which, have you decided how often you'll be seeing Carter?"

I shook my head. Originally, his intent of once every month sounded probable, but last night, when we'd discussed it, we realized that would never work. Between his law requirements, and my weekends spent working in restaurants, it would be nearly impossible. The earliest I could see him again would be during the fall.

Six months from now.

"He's going to come see me in September," I said. "He already bought the ticket."

"Good!" She hugged me again. "And when will you be coming back here?"

"October."

"Even better." She smiled. "Do you plan on apologizing to Sean when you get back?"

"Definitely," I said. "I already sent him an email, but I'm going to do my best to say how sorry I am in person. If he doesn't slam the door in my face, that is."

"He won't." She looked as if she was going to say something else, but Nicole walked through our front door.

"Hey there, stranger!" She rushed over, giving me a dramatic hug. "I called you three times yesterday and you didn't even text me to ask what was up! What gives?"

"Um..." I blushed, remembering exactly what I was doing with Carter during each of those calls.

"Were you really going to leave without telling me goodbye, Ari?"

"No, but if I did, I still would've video-chatted with you tomorrow."

"Well, then!" She laughed. "I guess I'm back in second-class citizen territory since you're back with Carter, huh?"

She and my mother laughed hysterically, and I tried my hardest not to join them.

“I just wanted to catch you before work,” she said. “Have a safe flight, and I’m holding you to that video chat.” She lowered her voice so my mom couldn’t hear. “I need all the make-up session details. Tell me right now: Was the sex just as good as it was before you left?”

“It was *better*.”

“Ten o’ clock tomorrow, your time.” She smiled. “I’ll definitely be staying up for that. Have a safe flight, Ari.”

She and my mother slowly began to step away from me—eventually huddling in a corner. Completely ignoring me, they literally held some sort of super long (and super-secret) conversation—one that made both of them giddy for some reason, and then Nicole left.

My mom helped me to make sure all my luggage was zipped and locked—even re-opening the larger suitcase and checking the contents against my spreadsheet, one item at a time. She listened to me tell her about my best made entrees, about my roommate’s new and sudden infatuation with American culture, and all about the endless tours I’d taken outside of Paris in search of a nostalgic beach.

When I was halfway through my explanation of why I no longer enjoyed making macarons, Carter pulled into the driveway and my words simply stopped. I now knew that I only had three hours left.

I watched as he stepped out of the car and popped the trunk—wondering if he was thinking the same thing I was. Without ringing the doorbell or knocking, he walked right in-

side and went straight for my luggage—smiling at me before carrying it outside.

My mom started talking to me about something, something I couldn't comprehend if I tried, and the last thing I heard was an "I love you. Have a safe flight," before she gave me one final embrace.

She and Carter exchanged words, and he grabbed my hand tightly—nearly dragging me toward the car.

As he shut my door, I suddenly remembered that I didn't get a chance to grab mementos from Gayle's.

"Carter," I said, as he put the car in reverse. "I forgot something. Do you think we could—"

"I got you two tins of waffle batter, three cups of their new pancake mix, and a dozen of their newest breakfast cookies. I put them in your luggage already."

"Oh...Thank you."

"You're welcome." He forced a smile and continued to drive.

There were no more words the entire way to the airport. Every few stoplights, our eyes would meet, and his fingers would tighten around mine as each "nearing air-zone" sign whirred by, but neither of us said a word.

I expected him to finally say something after I checked in, but he didn't. To my surprise, he checked in for a separate flight and walked with me to the security line.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"Nowhere." His fingers trailed my lips. "I bought the cheapest ticket I could find so I could at least walk you all the way to your gate today." He smiled. "Is that okay with you?"

"It's very okay."

Twenty minutes later, when the security agents had combed through my carryon bags, Carter slipped his arm around my waist and walked me to a coffee stand that was right next to my gate.

“When you get back, you have to tell me everything I’ve missed over Skype,” I said. “You have to video chat with me at least twice a week.”

“I will.”

“And I expect you to continue writing me letters this time.”

“I expect you to actually open them this time.” He smiled, taking a sip from my coffee. “I’ll definitely do that, too.”

I started to say something else—just to fill time, but he pulled me close and kissed me so hard and deep, that I lost all ability to speak.

“Attention passengers at Gate C5,” the gate agent said over the intercom. “We are now boarding first class for Flight 4457.”

“Are you going to go?” Carter asked, slowly pulling his mouth away from mine. “You fall under that category.”

“No...” I looked at my boarding pass. “I’m in seat 8A. That’s coach class.”

“It’s a bigger plane.” He smiled. “They assured me it was a first class seat when I called to upgrade it yesterday.”

“Thank you.” I hugged him. “Thank you very much.”

“We are now boarding zone one,” the gate agent said. “If you are assigned to zone one, you may now board the plane.”

I stood still. “So...I guess I’ll see you in six months?”

“I guess so.” He ran his fingers through my hair. “It’ll fly by this time.”

I sighed, looking toward the passengers who were making their way onto the aircraft. I noticed that the majority of them were couples.

“Zone two!” the agent said loudly. “We are now boarding zone two for Flight 4457.”

“*Ari...*” Carter narrowed his eyes at me, gestured toward the plane.

“How mad would you be if I decided that I didn’t want to go right now?” I asked. “Like, on a scale of one to ten?”

“*Twenty.*” He tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. “But not as mad as you’d be with yourself years from now.”

“I don’t think that’d be the case.”

“I do. Trust me,” he said. “You need to walk over there now, Ari.”

I didn’t want to admit it, but from the way he was looking at me, I could see how hard it’d been for him in this situation when we’d first separated like this. I completely understood.

“Six months is a very long time, Carter,” I said. “It was hard enough the first—” The rest of my sentence ended on his lips, with him kissing me until I was breathless all over again.

I struggled to regain my balance, struggled to finish my thoughts, but he continued to thoroughly kiss me.

“Get on the plane, Ari.” He breathed. “Get on the goddamn plane.”

“Right now?”

“Yes.” He kissed my lips one last time. “Right. Now.”

His arms slowly fell from around me and he took several steps back. “If you come near me again, I won’t be able to let you go.”

“Well, don’t tell me ‘I love you’ and I won’t.”

“I fucking love you.” He smiled, stepping back again.

“This is the final call for Elite Airways Flight 4457. If you are a passenger on this flight, and are currently standing in the waiting area, please board now.”

I rushed over to Carter and stole one last hug. Then I headed for the boarding tunnel, keeping my eyes on him until I couldn't see him anymore.

When I settled into my seat, I noticed he'd sent me an email.

Subject: This Week...

I mailed my first letter to you in an express package earlier today. It should get there sometime this week. Let me know when you make it back, and Skype me as soon as you get a chance.

See you in one hundred and sixty eight days.

Sincerely (in love with you),

Carter

The flight attendant secured the cabin door shut before my brain could even attempt to think about getting off the plane.

Subject: Re: This Week...

I have something to send you when I get back as well. I will definitely Skype you as soon as I get back to my flat. :-)

One hundred sixty *seven* days, Carter. Today doesn't count.

Sincerely (in love with you, too),
Arizona

Six Weeks Gone

Carter

Subject: Timing.

Did you purposely send me those pictures while I was in study hours with Erica?

Sincerely,

Carter

Subject: Re: Timing.

What? What pictures?

Confused,

Arizona

Subject: Re: Re: Timing.

You know exactly what pictures I'm talking about, Ari...You just sent them an hour ago.

For the record, I'm not complaining. In fact, they're currently making me reconsider waiting one hundred and twenty six days for my flight to see you.

Talk to you later tonight.

Sincerely (Aroused),

Carter

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Timing.

Oh, I see...Perhaps, you're referring to my naked pictures? :-)

I don't think I would purposely send them during your study hours with Erica. I mean, especially since you told me the exact time that you two normally get together during the week. I wouldn't ever want to interrupt that. :-)

One hundred and twenty *five* days, Carter. How many times do we have to go through this?

Can't wait.

**Sincerely (Wishing You Could Come Sooner),
Arizona**

Dear Carter (JOSH!)

Do you really think that I don't know Carter's handwriting after all these years? Do you really think he would EVER send me a letter that said: "I'm so glad I listened to Josh about you. He was so right about me fucking you one good time and [you] falling back in love with [me]. That's also why Josh will forever be my number one. Because you had a very long and selfish moment, but Josh has ALWAYS been loyal"???!?

Grow the hell up!

And learn how to write a proper sentence. (Aren't you in law school?)

Arizona

Dear Arizona (PAIN IN MY ASS!)

Of course I'm aware that you know Carter's handwriting, but since we shouldn't waste time discussing things you know, here are some things that you *don't*: Your never-ending phone calls and Skype sessions (mostly your loud ass laughter and incessant babbling about absolutely nothing: "Oh my god, Carter...I miss you so much, Carter...This distance is killing me every day") have kept me up every damn night for WEEKS. Is it too much for the two of you to go back to only letter writing and emails?

I think I liked you better when you weren't talking to him.

You grow up first.

I will definitely learn how to write a proper sentence—from someone who doesn't start her own sentences with the word "And".

Josh

Subject: Skype App.

Dear Arizona,

I'm not sure what could've happened to my app between last night and today, but it's not working. At all. I can't even re-install it for some reason. I won't be able to have my laptop looked at until next week, but I'll use Josh's computer to reach you tonight.

Sincerely,

Carter

Subject: Re: Skype App.

BAHAHAHAHA!!!

Arizona

I closed Ari's latest email and checked the tracking on the most recent package I'd shipped. On nights like tonight, it was if she'd never left the beach, as if she was still seconds away from walking through my front door.

Over the past few weeks, a new, comforting routine had developed between us. Instead of our usual weekend meet ups, there were early morning emails. Instead of lengthy text messages, there were lengthy picture threads: She sent me her wet and rainy coasts in exchange for white sanded beaches, and I gave her glimpses of times with Josh and Nicole while she showed me random karaoke sessions with her roommate.

We talked for hours every night, never running out of things to say. And despite the fact that we both had tons of work to do, we never missed a day.

After confirming that my gift would definitely get to her this weekend, I headed downstairs.

"Have you talked to your wife tonight?" Josh asked as I stepped in front of the TV. "If so, bravo. I barely heard your conversation this time."

"You've gone from 'girlfriend' to *wife* now?"

"Might as well." He groaned. "I doubt you'll ever marry, let alone *date* anyone else."

I rolled my eyes. "I need your laptop."

"What for?"

“You know what the hell for.” I reached for it. “My Skype app mysteriously stopped working today. Any idea how the fuck that happened?”

“No, but I have told you that random things happen in this house.” He smirked. “I told you that a *long* time ago.”

“Give me the damn computer, Josh.”

Laughing, he reluctantly handed it to me. “I swear I wasn’t trying to completely kill your Skype app. I was just trying to ruin it so you’d never be able to use it again.”

“Did you actually hear what the fuck you just said?”

“I did.” He laughed even harder. “Wait, before you go back upstairs. I need your advice on something.”

“Yes, your taste in clothes is terrible. Is that it?”

“No.” He rolled his eyes. “I think—” He paused. “I think I might actually like someone. More than just a normal ‘like,’ too.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I said. “You’re not really my type.”

“Seriously?” He crossed his arms. “Did I ever get sarcastic with you when you were moping about Arizona? When you were crying like a goddamn child when every woman on this beach was willing to give her pussy to you and you were too blind to see it?”

“That’s not how that happened.” I refused to entertain his warped memories any further. “Okay, you like someone. Does this someone have a *name*?”

“She doesn’t,” he said. “That’s her best quality. However, I don’t think she’s aware that I actually like her beyond what’s currently happening. There’s only so much more of this ‘just friends’ shit I can take, you know? I’m not *you*.”

“Is there a question coming?” I asked. “Or is this an emotional venting session?”

“I need your advice on helping me figure out how to get away from the friend zone. Preferably by the end of the week, this month at the latest. We can discuss it Saturday.” He grabbed a pair of earplugs and stuck one in his ear. “Okay. I’ve told you what’s up. You can go now.”

“You don’t want my advice right now?”

“Not while I think I can actually get some sleep. I would like to attempt this before you get on Skype.” He put the other plug in his ear and rolled over on the couch.

I was tempted to sit in the kitchen, to pay him back for ruining my app, but I decided against it. I hit the lights and headed back up to my room, opening the laptop at the very second Ari’s call came through.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hey.” She smiled. “How long do you think you can stay up tonight?”

“As long as you need me to.”

“Good,” she said, staring into the camera. “I’ve had a pretty long day.”

“Worse than last Thursday?”

“Way worse than last Thursday.” She sighed. “The lead chef humiliated me in front of everyone. Even though it was the only time I’d ever been late, he said he was giving me an automatic zero grade for the day.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Her lips curved into a small, sexy smile. “Two hours later, he came back to the kitchen and apologized. He said he was just temporarily disappointed in me, but he still thought I was the best in the class. He also offered to give me two extra exempt days for the semester since I always work so hard.”

“Are you planning to use those extra days to come home?”

“Not exactly.” Her smile widened. “I’ll use them the same week you come here. That way, I can actually meet you at the airport.”

“How many days do we have left again?”

“Way too many...”

Track 35. New Romantics

Arizona

I stared out my window, sighing as a heavy rain fell over the city. It'd been storming all week, and although public transit was running on a delayed schedule, my professors were refusing to be lenient in regards to tardiness. In broken English, my pastry teacher had said something along the lines of, "The outdoor rain does not affect the indoor ovens."

Ugh...Please let this weather lighten up by tomorrow...

After watching one of my neighbors chase her son around gigantic puddles, I stood up and walked over to my hanging calendar. I marked an "X" over today's date and sketched my usual heart near the edge of the box. No matter how many times I'd done this, the countdown to Carter coming to see me still seemed too far away.

"Ari?" My roommate—Heather, suddenly stepped into my room. "Can you do me a favor while I'm out tonight?"

"Sure. What is it?"

"Can you roll fifty one-inch balls of dough and freeze them? I need them for prep class tomorrow night."

"Only if you give me a very good reason as to why you can't do it yourself."

"I don't have a reason." She crossed her arms. "This will be you paying me back for when I did the very same thing for you last semester. Don't you remember?"

I gave her a blank stare, but I definitely remembered. There'd been more than one occasion when she'd prepped dough for me, back when my heartache had made it too hard to function outside of the classroom.

"I'll take that as a yes!" She clasped her hands together. "I'll tell you all about my date later, and you'll tell me about your Skype sex with Carter?" She smiled. "Does that really help you two deal with the distance? I mean, do you ever get an orgasm from that?"

"*What?*" I felt my cheeks reddening. "I do *not* have Skype sex."

"You don't?"

"No, we just talk and catch up. That's it."

"Hmmm." She tapped her lip. "So, all of that random moaning and murmuring 'Carter...Oh god, Carter' is simply your version of—"

"Didn't you say that you were going out?" I cut her off, making a mental note to keep my voice ten times lower from now on. "Shouldn't you be getting to wherever you have to be?"

"I knew it." She put her hand over her chest and laughed. "Tell Carter I said hello whenever he calls. I'll bring you back some dessert. Tiramisu?"

"Perfect." I waited until she'd left the flat, until I actually saw her walk away through my window before picking up my laptop and taking it into the kitchen.

As soon as I'd flattened the first batch of dough, a call came through my screen. Carter.

I pressed "accept" and waited for the picture to clear.

"Hey," I said as his eyes met mine, as the screen moved up and down. "Are you walking?"

He nodded. "I'm heading across campus to let my windows up. It just started raining out of nowhere. What are you doing?"

"A make-up assignment." I held up a rolling pin. "Heather's out for the night. Speaking of which, how come you've never told me how loud I am when we um..." I gave him a knowing look.

"When we *what*, Ari?" He smirked. "What type of look are you trying to make right now?"

"I thought Josh was just making things up!" I said. "Am I really that loud?"

He laughed.

"Carter! Am I?"

"You are." He was still laughing. "It doesn't bother *me*, though."

"Of course it doesn't bother you." I rolled my eyes. "Thanks for being a true best friend, for not waiting until the very last minute to tell me about it."

"You're very welcome. Is it still raining over there?"

"Unfortunately. You can call me back, you know. I can wait until you're inside."

"I'm fine." He ignored my comment. "How long will your roommate be gone?"

"All night probably," I said, pushing the dough across the counter. "Would you like to help me practice being quieter?"

"Not at all." His camera finally stopped jerking up and down. "Take off your shirt."

I smiled and slowly pulled off my cami, revealing a bright, red bra.

He was silent for a moment, looking as if it was killing him not to be here as always. "Pull your hair up for me."

“Up?”

He nodded, saying nothing further.

I plucked the elastic band from my wrist and pulled my hair into a high ponytail. Then I stared back at him, waiting for his usual words that made this distance somewhat more tolerable.

“Carter?” I raised my eyebrow. “Carter?”

He touched the screen, trailing his finger around the contours of my face. He mumbled something I couldn’t quite hear, but I was pretty sure part of it was, “This is torture.”

I cleared my throat and waved my hand in front of the screen. “Um...Carter? I’m pretty sure this is the part where you ask me to take off my bra.” I smiled, attempting to mock him. “Take off your fucking bra. This is that part, remember?”

“No,” he said, still tracing the screen with his fingertips. “This is the part where I tell you to open your fucking door.”

“*WHAT?*” I gasped, not wasting a single second to think. I rushed over to the door, damn near throwing it off its hinges as I swung it open.

I didn’t get a chance to say hello.

Carter’s lips were on mine in seconds, and my legs were wrapped around his waist.

“I couldn’t wait.” He said against my mouth. “I couldn’t fucking wait.” He kissed me even harder, preventing me from getting a single word out. “Where’s your bedroom?”

I pointed to the left and he squeezed my ass as he carried me across the floor. As soon as we made it past the door frame, he tossed me onto the bed. Keeping his eyes on mine, he pulled out his wallet and set it on the nightstand.

“I missed you so fucking much, Ari.” The words came out hoarse as he took off his wet clothes. “You have no idea...”

"I do." I swallowed as he climbed on top of me, as he pressed his lips against mine.

"I still take the long way past your house out of habit," he whispered, unclasping my bra. "And I have a terrible tendency to order for two whenever I'm out alone."

I moaned as he trailed wet kisses across my chest.

"And I still..." He gently swirled his tongue against my nipples. "Have yet to get a sleep worth having since you're not there." He looked up at me. "We're going to have to re-discuss our current long-distance arrangement after this."

"After *what*?"

He didn't answer. He flipped me over onto my stomach and rubbed his hands against my sides.

Teasingly kissing his way down my spine, he whispered just how much he missed me, how badly he wanted to be inside of me.

Before I could shut my eyes, he lifted my ass up into the air and slowly pressed his cock against my slit.

He was gentle at first—caressing my skin as he gradually slid into me inch by inch, as he pulled back before burying himself completely. Again and again. But as my body molded to his, as we began to find our rhythm, he gripped me roughly and pounded into me until I couldn't help but scream.

"Carter..." I bit my lip as he grabbed my hair and pulled me back. "Carter..."

"Yes?" He sped up his thrusts. "Yes, Ari?"

"Oh...Oh god..."

"*Yes, Ari?*" He repeated, biting my shoulder.

My fingers clung to the sheets and every muscle inside of me tensed. My legs began to shake, and he immediately pulled out of me and flipped me over.

Positioning me onto my back, he slid into me once more—looking directly into my eyes.

“Don’t shut your eyes,” he said, pressing his forehead against mine. “Let me see you.”

I nodded, moaning as he kissed me.

“I love you,” he said, holding my hips. “I love you more than anything, Ari.”

“I...I love you, too.” The second those words were out of my mouth, he resumed his pace—fucking me as if this was the last time we’d ever see each other.

I dug my nails into his skin, trying to control the tempo, but I lost it completely. I screamed as tremors suddenly wracked through my body, saying his name louder than I ever had before.

I kept my eyes open long enough to see him reach his own orgasm seconds later, and the two of us remained entwined as we both came down from our high.

When I finally caught my breath, I looked into his eyes. “When did you buy your ticket?”

“Two weeks ago.” He smiled, moving over to my side. “It was torture keeping it a secret from you.”

“So, how long will you be here exactly?”

“Just today and tomorrow. I have to fly back Sunday so I’ll make it to tax class Monday night.”

“But you’re still coming back for a full week and a half, right?”

“Yes.” He kissed my forehead. “This was just a spur of the moment thing since I’m ahead in my most difficult class.”

“Okay well...” I touched his chest. “Do you want to do something tomorrow then?”

“Something like *what?*”

“Sightseeing, perhaps?” I shrugged. “I could take you into the city and show you all the usual tourist stuff—Eiffel Tower, Louvre Museum, Loire Valley Chateaux.”

He gave me a blank stare. “Arizona, I’ve been on a plane for most of today, and I only have one full day here with you left.”

“So, is that a *no* to sightseeing tomorrow?”

“It’s a *hell no* to sightseeing tomorrow.” A smile slowly spread across his lips. “But we can do that when I come back in a few weeks.”

“Okay...We can do that when you come back in a few weeks.”

“In the meantime...” He laughed and pulled me on top of him. “How long will Heather really be gone tonight?”

Track 36. Today Was a Fairytale

Arizona

Weeks later...

Carter's hand had been entwined in mine ever since I met him at the airport Wednesday morning. I didn't think it was possible for me to feel any more butterflies fluttering in my stomach, or that my heart could beat any faster since we were long past the 'just friends' stage, but the second his eyes met mine in the terminal, I felt as if I was falling in love with him all over again.

It took us two days to step outside my flat, to agree to spend time exploring something other than each other. Although it'd rained during our steep and never-ending walk through the hilly region of Montmartre and we'd gotten soaked during an impromptu wine tour yesterday, today was all clear for a trip to the mainstream, touristy parts of Paris.

"You're not being a very good host today, Ari," he whispered into my ear. "You've been very quiet for some reason."

"Sorry." I stopped walking and pointed to a massive brick building in the distance. "Do you see that? That building with the bronze clock in its gilded frame?"

"Yes. What about it?"

"I actually have no idea what that is, but it's very pretty, isn't it?"

"How insightful." He smiled. "Please tell me more."

“Hold on, I will.” I pulled out my phone. “I’ll google it.”

Laughing, he rolled his eyes. “That’s okay. We need to get to the Eiffel Tower.”

“Now? You’ll be here all week,” I said. “We can come back to that later. It’s usually pretty crowded at this hour anyway. How about going to the Catacombs instead?”

“There’s a restaurant on the first floor. We have a reservation there in two hours, but I’d also like to see a view of the city from the top.”

I raised my eyebrow. He hadn’t mentioned anything about a dinner reservation until just now. He hadn’t even mentioned wanting to go inside of the tower until now.

As if he could tell I was on the verge of asking a slew of questions, he pressed a finger against my lips.

“I’ll explain when we get there.” He looked at his watch. “Should we head that way now?”

“I guess so...”

We pushed our way through the crowds in the plaza, making our way to the massive metallic structure that’d adorned almost every postcard I sent home.

After buying us tickets, Carter led me onto a lift. It rose slowly, but stopped at the second floor.

“We have to get on another one to get to the top,” he said, leading the way.

“So, you did research on this trip before you came?” I smiled as the doors on the next lift opened. “Did you really need me giving you my attempt at a tour?”

“I only researched the most important part.” He hit the top floor button.

“You hate heights, Carter.”

“I do, but I wanted to see a full view of the city at least once—just in case we don’t get a chance to come back.”

I moved closer to him as more people stepped on, and before the doors closed, two people who looked freakishly similar to Josh and Nicole got on. I refused to believe it was actually them, though: Nicole was on a road trip to Louisiana this week, and Josh didn’t believe in taking flights that were longer than four hours.

I looked up at Carter. “Do you see that?”

“See what?”

“The doppelgangers of our friends,” I said as the lift began to move. “I’ll show you when we get off.”

When the doors opened, the doppelgangers went to the right and I motioned for Carter to follow me. I spotted them near a railing, but the person walking toward me stole all of my attention.

It can’t be...

I shook my head and looked over at the city, at the sea of twinkling lights, to make sure I was seeing things right. But when I turned around again, the person was still there. Clear as day.

“Mom?” I stepped closer. “Mom, is that *you*?”

“It is.” She hugged me. “Are you okay? You look scared.”

“Am I dead right now?”

“*What?*” She laughed. “What did you just say?”

“I’m starting to think I’ve died and am stuck in some alternate reality...You actually got on a plane to come here? You got past security without having a nervous break-down?”

“I did.” She pulled a small box of Xanax out of her purse and smiled. “This stuff works wonders.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” I said. “Why would you come all the way here without telling me first?” I noticed the doppelgangers of Josh and Nicole making their way over, noticed that they *really were* Josh and Nicole. “Why are you all here, why are...What’s going on?”

“Ari?” The sound of Carter’s voice made me turn around. “*Ari...*” He took my right hand and got down on one knee.

My jaw dropped, and a sudden bout of butterflies fluttered against my stomach more furiously than ever before.

“I originally wanted to wait to do this when we both finished school, but—” He paused, smiling. “We both know I don’t have the best record when it comes to being patient.”

I let out a nervous laugh.

“I even wrote out exactly what I was going to say, how I was going to say it, and where exactly I wanted us to be when it happened,” he continued. “But since I left that paper at home and waiting is absolutely out of the question now, I’ll do my best to remember most of the words.”

Tears welled in my eyes as he caressed my hand.

“I don’t need to rehash the fact that I absolutely hated you when I first met you, or that I got genuinely happy each time I made you cry in fourth grade, but I will if you want me to.”

I shook my head, laughing softly as a few bystanders listened along.

“Fair enough.” He smiled. “Somewhere between us hating each other back then, you became my first real friend, my first and only best friend, and I didn’t realize it until last summer, but you’ve actually been my first *everything*.”

“You were my first kiss, my first date that I actually *enjoyed*, and the first woman I fell in love with—the first woman I actual-

ly made love to..." he said. "And you're still the only person I can talk to twenty times a day—whether it's via letter, email, text, or phone call, and still feel like it's not enough."

"Carter..."

"Let me finish," he said, briefly standing up to kiss me before returning to the ground. "I've been in love with you for damn-near my entire life, and the only regret I have is that I didn't realize it sooner."

"You've been there for me through everything, and I promise that I will continue to be there for you—whether you're arguing with me about the most minor things in life or not. I'll also be sure to send you my longer, much more eloquently written version of this proposal, but I really can't go another day without having an answer to this."

My heart pounded as he reached into his pocket.

"And for the record, yes: *Yes*, I'm completely aware that you'll want to lay out the next few years of our lives with a spreadsheet at some point next week," he said, smirking—effortlessly reading my mind. "And yes, I also know that you'll need to ask me a million questions about this night for as long as you possibly can, but if you feel the way I do...If you love me and can only think about ever being with *me* in your future, I need you to answer me first. I need to hear you say it." He held up a glittering, diamond ring. "Arizona Turner, I want you to be more of a best friend to me than you already are, and I want to spend the rest of my life loving you. Will you marry me?"

I nodded, feeling hot tears streaming down my face. I felt the words "I do" on the edge of my tongue, but another comment came out instead.

“Dawson Meade III was my first kiss, Carter,” I said softly. “Rachel Ryan was yours.”

“No,” he replied, smiling. “We were each other’s. Trust me.”

“I would’ve *never* kissed you in fifth grade. You were still making fun of my braces.”

“We tested our first kiss on each other, Ari,” he said. “We just didn’t like each other enough to let that count.”

“Or it *didn’t* count, because it didn’t happen that way. It couldn’t have.”

“*Seriously?*” Josh interrupted, stepping closer to us. “All of that over the top shit he just said, flying all of your closest people here just to witness this moment—not to mention offering you that bright ass ring, and you want to question him on a goddamn memory?”

“Shut up, Josh,” we both said in unison.

“Anyway...” Carter caressed my hand and stared up at me. “Can we discuss this after you answer me? Can you tell me whether or not you’ll marry me?”

“It’s been a yes since we met,” I said, wiping away tears. “Yes, and you know you didn’t really have to ask me. I would’ve never said no to you. But if you keep messing up the facts in our memories, I’m going to wonder if you’ll eventually forget ‘us’ in the end.”

“I would never.” He stood up, slipping the ring onto my finger as he kissed me. “But even if I did, I’ll always have you here to remind me.”

****The End****

(For real this time)

(No, really... :-))

Random thoughts...

Whitney

Dear Best Readers Ever,

Thank you so much for being so effin' incredible to me this year and supporting the release of "Sincerely, Carter". (Yes, I still love you even if you hated it. LOL)

I can't tell you just how honored and excited I am to be invited to your digital bookshelf again. I was thrilled to write more Carter and Arizona just for you, and I hope you enjoyed reading a little bit more of their journey.

I'll also try to do much better about that whole, writing-an-epilogue thing with my books in the future. :-)

PS—Do you think Josh and Nicole need a book? LOL

PSS—If you're in the mood for a short and sexy read, check out Reasonable Doubt #1 by me! It's currently FREE on all platforms!

PSSS—Turn the page for a sneak peek of RESENTMENT by Nicole London!

F.L.Y.

Whit

Also by Whitney G.

To be a part of my mailing list and be notified of release dates and special offers, please sign up via this link.¹

Reasonable Doubt Full Series

Reasonable Doubt #1

Reasonable Doubt #2

Reasonable Doubt #3

My Last Resolution: A Novella

Mid Life Love Series:

Mid Life Love

Mid Life Love: At Last

****UPCOMING WORKS****

Turbulence

(2015)

Twisted Love

(2015)

The Jilted Bride Series:

Book 1: Scorned

Book 2: Tarnished

Book 3: Burned

Forget You, Ethan

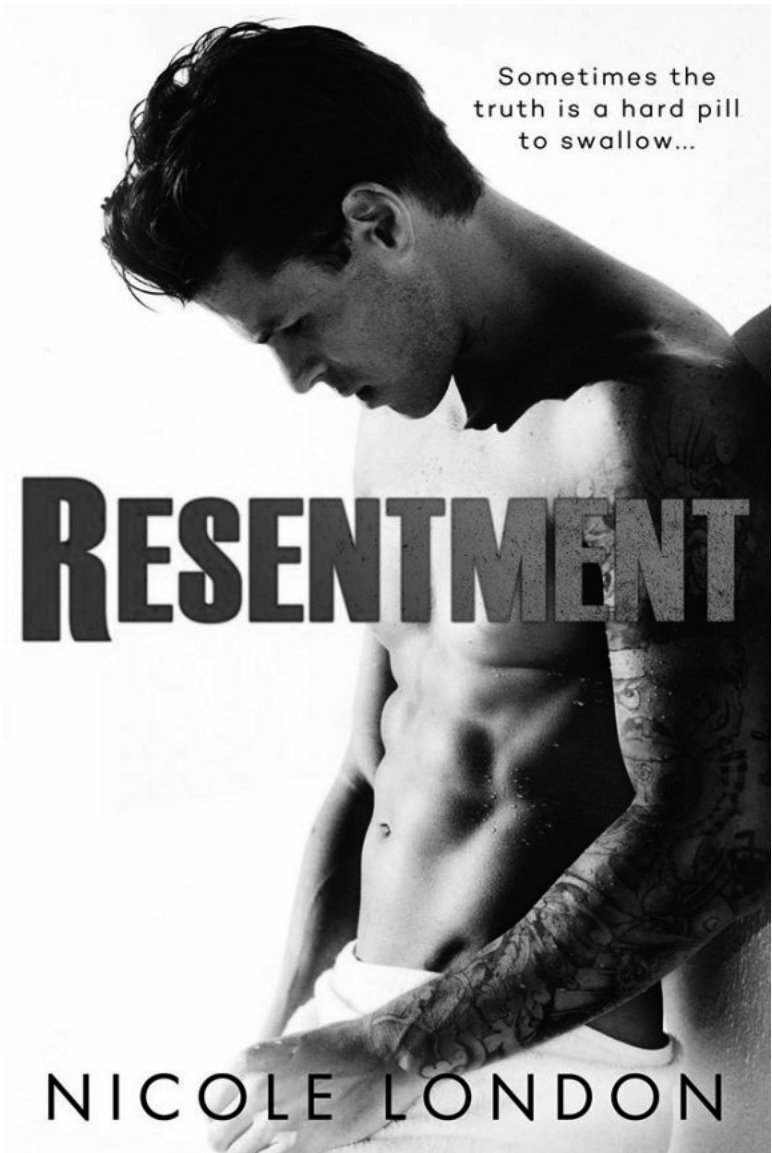
(2016)

Malpractice

(2016)

1. <http://whitneygracia.us8.list-manage1.com/subscribe?u=210b03e34b5377329a9d66b86&id=5f25d9eb12>

scribe?u=210b03e34b5377329a9d66b86&id=5f25d9eb12

A black and white photograph of a shirtless man with dark hair and tattoos on his arms and torso. He is looking down and to the left. The background is plain and light-colored.

Sometimes the
truth is a hard pill
to swallow...

RESENTMENT

NICOLE LONDON

*Turn the page for a sneak peek of **RESENTMENT** by Nicole London!*

To be the first to get the release date for **Resentment** and information on all upcoming releases by Nicole London, join her **Mailing List** > <http://eepurl.com/bkhKNX>

Resentment Coming Soon TBR Link on **Goodreads**:
<http://bit.ly/1AiY5e7>

RESENTMENT

Smalltown, USA

Mia

2004

Dean Collins is the most irresistible asshole at Central High School.

He's your typical cliché, Mr. Popular. The "guy's guy" who's been voted "Homecoming King" two times in a row (minus my vote); the sexy star quarterback who's capable of making grown women swoon from the sidelines (it really is sad), and the guy who can charm the hell out of any admiring girl with a simple smile, and a "Hey...What's up?" in five seconds flat.

His face is the object of sculptures—hard and strong jawline, deep and piercing green eyes and dimples that show even when he's not smiling. And, as if that wasn't enough for the gods to endow him with, he has a six pack of abs that he always shows off, and full and defined lips that sometimes even make me wonder what they would feel like.

Nonetheless, I always do my best to avoid Dean Collins like the plague: I leave the four classes we take together early, never go to pep rallies to cheer on the team (Dean *is* the team), and the few times that he's attempted that "Hey...What's up?" thing on me, I've offered a blank stare and walked away.

Today my usual avoidance routine seems to be getting tested. Especially since he's currently standing five feet away from me.

"Yes?" I look up from my canvas and stare at him from across the classroom. "May I help you with something? You're not in art club."

"I'm aware." He smirks, looking around the empty classroom. "But it doesn't look like *anyone* is in art club..."

That part is true. There's actually no such thing as "art club" at Central High. It's just me taking over whatever classroom I can find to paint for a few hours.

"We're currently accepting applications for membership," I say, setting my paintbrush down in the easel tray. "What can I help you with?"

"I did come here for something..." He steps into the room and pulls the door closed. "But, now that you claim that you're accepting applications for your club, can I fill one out?"

"We don't accept douchebags," I say flatly. "Your application wouldn't make it past round one."

"*Douchebag?*"

"Yes, douchebag. Would you like me to give you the definition?"

Laughing, he tilts his head to the side. "I'm well versed on the definition, Mia Gray..." He stares at me for a long time, looking right into my eyes, giving me his usual charm.

I immediately break our gaze and clear my throat. "You said you came here for something? Can you hurry up and tell me what it is so I can get back to addressing my art club? Today is a very important day for us."

"I can see that..." He pulls his backpack off his shoulder and opens it, pulling out a black notebook. *My* black notebook.

"I found your notebook this morning," he says, "so I wanted to find you and give it back. I tried to give it to you after Physics class but I couldn't get your attention."

I reach out for it, but then I stop. "Where exactly did you find it?"

“It was in the Lost and Found. I just saw it on top of everything in there when I got to school.”

“You know, that’s funny,” I say, crossing my arms. “Because I’ve been checking Lost and Found every day and in between every class for *weeks* and it was never there...”

“Maybe you just didn’t look hard enough.”

“I even checked it *this morning*, and it wasn’t there. It. Was. Not. There.”

He smiles and flips through the pages. “You have a very pretty handwriting...”

“Where did you really find it, Dean?”

“You take pretty detailed notes, too.”

“Did you steal my fucking notebook?”

“Maybe.” His lips curve into a smirk.

WHAT?! I nearly scream, knowing that that’s exactly what has happened. “I had to rewrite the entire thing in one night! The night before our midterm!”

Still smiling, he walks over and sets it on my easel. “Well, good thing you somehow managed to still get an A, right? If it wasn’t for me, you probably wouldn’t have known that you were capable of rewriting a notebook in a night. I helped you push your boundaries, so I think I deserve a thank you.”

It takes everything in me not to pick up my canvas and knock him out with it, but I remain calm, kind of. I stand up from my chair and push the easel by the window. Then I pick up my backpack and storm out of the room, biting my lip to prevent myself from screaming.

I make it to the parking lot and head straight for the after-school bus stop, muttering and cursing under my breath.

“Mia?” Dean calls my name from behind. “*Mia?*”

I say nothing. My mind is still stuck on the fact that he stole my notebook; that he was in class the day I pleaded for everyone to keep a look out for it and let me know if they knew anything.

Asshole...

“Mia...” His hand suddenly grabs my elbow and he turns me around to face him. “Mia, I know you can hear me.”

“I really can’t. I’m completely deaf to assholes who steal things, assholes who steal things on purpose.”

He gives me that gorgeous trademark grin and I almost smile back—that’s how charming he is. I quickly come to my senses, though, and snatch my arm away.

“Thank you for stealing my notebook and having the decency to give it back,” I say. “Now, if you would please continue to leave me the hell alone for the rest of the day—No, the rest of the year, I’d gladly appreciate it.” I don’t give him a chance to respond. I rush to the bus stop and lean against one of the posts.

A slight drizzle begins to fall and I look down the street, hoping that the headlights of a yellow bus appear soon.

I take out my earbuds and turn my music up loudly. It’s going to take me a minute to get back into my original happy mood.

Just as I’m starting to calm down, I see a black Camaro stop in front of me. It’s Dean—*again*.

I turn around and give him a great view of my back. I turn my music up louder, just in case he tries to talk to me, but my headphones are the cheap, flimsy kind and they don’t have outside sound block.

“Let me take you home to make up for stealing your notebook, Mia,” Dean says, actually sounding sincere.

I ignore him and start nodding to my music, hoping he’ll just go away.

I knew I was right for hating him...

“Mia...” He speaks again. “Mia, have you noticed you’re the only one at the bus stop? The last one left ten minutes ago.”

Discreetly, I glance at the watch on my wrist and groan. I’ve forgotten that the first day of the new after-school bus schedule starts this week.

Shaking my head, I turn around and start to walk. There’s a city bus stop about six blocks down.

I expect Dean to go away, but he doesn’t. He stays on pace with me in his car, driving alongside me as I stroll on the sidewalk.

When I speed up, *he* speeds up. When I cross streets, he makes a U-turn and does the same. And when I reach a crosswalk with a pedestrian stoplight, he tries his luck again.

“Look, Mia,” he says leaning over the passenger seat. “Let me take you home.”

“Not interested.”

“Well, at least let me take you to the next bus stop.”

“A four block ride? No thanks.”

“So, you’re really going to walk all the way home in the rain?”

I hesitate, now realizing that the slight drizzle has turned into actual rain, and that by the look of the skies above, it’s about to fall even harder.

“Yes,” I say. “Yes, I guess I am really going to walk all the way home in the rain.”

He parks the car and gets out, walking over to me. Without saying anything else, he puts his arm around my shoulder and leads me to his car, opening the passenger door.

“Get in, Mia.”

The pedestrian light turns green, and I want to back away, but hatred of Dean or not, I'm not going to last four more blocks in the rain.

I slip inside, and he shuts the door behind me. He returns to his place behind the wheel and drives through the light.

"Where do you live?" he asks, looking over at me.

"The corner of Seventh and Broadway."

"Okay..." He turns on the radio, and I'm surprised to hear my favorite band blasting through the speakers. I almost compliment him on his good taste, but then I remember he's a thief.

Thieves do not have good taste.

Neither of us speaks as he coasts through the suburbs and onto the backstreets, but I can feel tension between us; I even feel butterflies in my stomach.

As we approach Seventh and Broadway, he shakes his head and slows his speed. "Mia, you do not live here...This is just the entrance to your subdivision."

"Okay, and do you really think I would give you my real address? I'll walk the rest of the way. The rain isn't that bad now."

Smiling, he drives past the entrance, far down the street, and parks the car in an abandoned lot.

"What are you doing?" I ask. "Go back. Go back right now."

"I need your help with AP English."

"I need your help with learning directions...My neighborhood is back there."

He ignores my comment. "AP English is the only class I don't have an A in."

"You make A's?"

“Yes.” He smirks. “I make A’s, except for English. I have a C plus and I need at least a B minus if I’m going to look appealing to colleges.”

“Wait a minute, what?” I try to temporarily put my annoyances aside. “You’re the star football player. You don’t need to make good grades to get an athletic scholarship; you just need to keep playing football. Isn’t that what you want?”

He doesn’t answer that. Instead he sighs. “I need you to help me with the literature components and help me strengthen some of my essays.”

“Why do you want *me* to help you?”

“Why wouldn’t I? You have the best grade in the class and I’m pretty sure being a smart ass, which you clearly are, requires quite a few brain cells, so I figure there’s no one better to ask.”

“Maybe, but I’m not interested.”

“I’ll pay you.”

I look at him for a second to see if he’s being serious. “Is that how you get what you want?”

“No, that’s not my usual method, but I figure you won’t go for that.” That stupid grin is on his face again.

“My services don’t come cheap,” I say. “They’re not cheap at all.”

“Honestly, I’d be disappointed if they were.”

“Then in that case, I’m sure you can’t afford me.”

“*Try me.*” He cranks the engine and starts to drive, heading toward my neighborhood again.

I think for a moment, unsure of what tutors usually charge. I come up with a number I know he won’t agree to. “Twenty dollars an hour.”

“Deal,” he says smoothly.

“Deal? Just like that?”

“Why not?”

“Because that’s a lot of money.”

“I’m sure you’ll be worth every penny.”

“Fine. We’ll start next week.” I wait for him to drop me off at the corner, where I told him I stayed, but he drives into the neighborhood instead.

Looking over at me, he warns, “I’m not letting you out of the car until you tell me which of these houses is yours? I need to make sure you get home safe.”

“So, now you’re a gentleman?”

“Only for some girls.” He smiles and I roll my eyes, deciding to give in so I can get this ride over with.

“5632...Down a few more houses and on your left.”

He nods and speeds up a little, eventually pulling right in front of my mailbox.

I immediately unbuckle my seatbelt and collect my bag from the floor. Thanks for the ride.”

“Wait a minute,” he says. “I need your phone number...for tutoring purposes, of course,” he adds with a sly smile.

He hands me his phone and I reluctantly type in my number. I save it under “For Tutoring Purposes, of Course” and give it back to him before getting out and rushing inside my house.

As soon as I make it upstairs to my room, my cell phone buzzes with a text notification. It’s an unknown number.

This is Dean. Here’s my number, you can save it under “For ANY Purposes, Of Course...”

I should’ve known to stay away from him that very day...

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