



bad for you **ABBI GLINES**



a **SEA BREEZE** novel
from the **NEW YORK TIMES**
bestselling author of
WHILE IT LASTS

To Colleen Hoover and Jamie McGuire. I wouldn't want to travel this road with anyone else. Knowing
I have the both of you to talk to is priceless. I love your faces.

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BLYTHER

“Go to bed, Blythe. And don’t forget to say your prayers,” Mrs. Williams’s voice broke into my thoughts. I turned around from the window I was perched next to and looked at the woman who was my guardian. I didn’t refer to her as “Mother” because I had made that mistake once and she had hit me with a belt.

“Yes, ma’am,” I replied, and climbed down from the window seat I loved so much. It was the only thing that I felt was truly mine. I had asked for a window seat like this when I saw one in a movie once. Mrs. Williams had called me selfish and materialistic. I had been beaten for making a request such as that one.

But her husband, Pastor Williams, had surprised me with one on Christmas morning. It was worse than the secret punishments I later received from Mrs. Williams for making her husband sin by giving me a gift.

Mrs. Williams continued as I stood by that seat. “Remember to thank God that you’re alive and not dead like your mother,” she snapped. The tone in her voice was especially nasty tonight. She was angry about something. I hated it when she was angry. That meant she was going to punish me if I wasn’t extra good. Even though I was not the cause of her anger.

“Yes, ma’am,” I replied again. I had cringed when she spoke of the mother I had never really known, and of her death. I hated hearing the sordid details of how my mother suffered because of her sins. It made me hate God even more. Why he was so mean and full of vengeance, I didn’t understand. But then over the years I realized that the kind heart I saw in Pastor Williams was what God must really be like.

“And,” Mrs. Williams went on, “thank him for the roof over your head that you do not deserve,” she spit.

She often reminded me of how I didn’t deserve the goodness extended to me by her and Pastor Williams. I was used to this as well. They were the closest things to parents I had ever known all my thirteen years here on Earth. My mother had died giving birth to me. She was sick with pneumonia and it was a miracle I had lived. I had been born six weeks early.

“Yes, ma’am,” I replied again, walking slowly over to my bed. I wanted her to step out of my room before I got too close to her. She liked to strike me, but I didn’t like to be hit.

She stood with her shoulders straight and her nose tilted up so that she had to look down at me. Her red hair was long and pulled back in a tight bun. The black-rimmed glasses she wore made her squinty brown eyes seem even more sinister.

“And, of course, thank the good Lord for your health. Even though you are exceptionally ugly and have no hope for any beauty, you should be thankful that you are alive. That you are healthy. Because you do not deserve it—”

“That’s enough, Margaret.” Pastor Williams voice interrupted her. It wasn’t the first time she had told me how ugly I was. How the sin of my mother had made me unappealing in looks. How no one would ever love me because I was too hard to even look at. I had accepted my life a long time ago.

didn't look in a mirror if I could help it. I hated seeing that face stare back at me. The one that made Mrs. Williams hate me, and Pastor Williams pity me.

"She needs to know."

"No. She doesn't. You're just angry and taking it out on Blythe. Leave her alone. I'm not warning you another time. This has to stop," he whispered to his wife, but I could still hear his deep voice.

Whenever he caught her telling me how ugly I was or reminding me of the sin that would forever haunt my life he would correct her and send her away. I let the relief come because I knew for the next day or so he would be watching her. She wouldn't come near me. She would pout and stay tucked away in her room.

I didn't thank him because I knew that he would ignore me and turn and walk away like he always did. He didn't like looking at me either. The few times in my life he actually looked at me, I could see him wince. Especially lately. I was getting uglier. I had to be.

One day I would be old enough to leave this place. I wouldn't have to go to church and listen about the loving God these people served. The one who made me so ugly. The one who took my mother away. I wanted to escape all this and hide away in a small town where no one knew me. A place where I could just be alone and write. In my stories I could be beautiful. The prince would love me, and I would know how it felt to belong. I loved my stories. Even if right now they were all in my head.

"Go to bed, Blythe," Pastor Williams said as he turned to follow his wife down the hallway.

"Yes, sir. Goodnight, sir," I replied.

He stopped, and I waited to see if he would say more. If he would turn around and smile at me. Or if he would just look at me. Maybe assure me that my mother's sin wasn't going to control my life forever. But he never did. He just stood there with his back to me for a moment before his shoulders sagged as he walked away.

One day . . . I would be free.

BLYTHER

I was as ugly inside as I was outside. It was the only explanation for the fact I hadn't been able to cry one single tear. I hadn't even squeezed out one fake tear at Mrs. Williams's funeral. I knew the church people thought I was evil. I could see it when they looked at me. But they had all gotten to witness firsthand when they'd watched me not show one small streak of emotion when I'd stood beside Pastor Williams as they'd lowered his wife into the ground. She had been diagnosed with a brain tumor only five months ago. It had been stage five, and there had been nothing they could have done.

The congregation had stopped by to check on her daily, and the parsonage had been flooded with casseroles, pies, and flowers. I had been told to stay out of sight. I'd only upset her. Pastor Williams had been kind when he'd instructed me to keep to my room when I'd come home from school, but it still stung. I'd waited until I was sure they were asleep most nights to sneak downstairs and fix me something to eat for dinner. The endless supply of food had made it easy.

When she had finally taken her last breath, the hospice nurse had come and knocked on my door to inform me. I had been asked to call Pastor Williams at the church and have him come home. I hadn't felt anything. Not one emotion from the news. I'd realized then that she had been right all those years. I was evil. Only someone truly evil could be so indifferent to death. Mrs. Williams had been only fifty-four. But then, that was much older than my mother had been when she'd died—she had been only twenty.

That was all behind me now. That life was over and in my past.

I stood outside the apartment building that overlooked the Alabama gulf coast and let it sink in that this was now my home. I was far away from the life I'd lived in South Carolina. I would have a new life here. One where I could sit and write my stories and attend the community college.

Pastor Williams had wanted to get rid of me. I was thankful for that because I needed a way to get free from that place. He had called a friend of his and had gotten me into a community college two hours away from the town full of people who hated me. He had bought me an apartment on the beach and even managed to get me a job working as a church secretary. He had a friend who pastored a church in Sea Breeze, Alabama. It was one of the reasons he had sent me here. He had had someone help set me up while he remained in South Carolina.

I had heard Pastor Williams on the phone explaining to the man who would be my boss that I wasn't good with people and I was sheltered. Which wasn't exactly true. I had gone to an all-girls Christian academy, and everyone there had pretended that I hadn't existed. It wasn't my fault the mommas had told them about the evil inside me. I had never had a chance to actually be around people who wanted anything to do with me.

Before I took my boxes out of the truck, I wanted to check out the apartment. Pastor Williams had given me a truck, too. Grabbing my purse and the keys he had placed in an envelope, along with one thousand dollars in cash, I jumped down out of the old truck and headed for the stairs. None of the apartments were on the street level. They were all on stilts above the ground. I figured this was fine times when the water got high . . . or during hurricanes. I wasn't going to think about hurricanes. Not

now.

~~I slipped the key into the lock and turned before pushing the door open. It swung wide, and I took the pretty pale yellow walls and white wicker furniture. It was all very coastal. I loved it.~~

Smiling, I walked inside and spun around in a circle with my arms opened wide. I tilted my head back and closed my eyes and let myself bask in the solitude. No one knew me here. I wasn't the evil girl who the pastor was stuck taking care of. I was just me. Blythe Blakely. And I was a writer. . . . a recluse eccentric writer who didn't care what she looked like. It didn't matter. She was free.

Loud male voices laughing and throwing insults in the hallway interrupted my quiet moment of joy. I dropped my arms to turn and lock gazes with . . . with . . . a guy. Blue. Like the sky on a clear sunny day. That was all I could focus on. I had never seen eyes so blue. They were so startling, they were almost breathtaking. His friends' voices were fading away, but he was still standing there. Then I noticed it. . . . Was he wearing black eyeliner? I dropped my eyes to take in the rest of him.

The pierced eyebrow and colorful tattooed skin I saw covering his arms had me jerking my gaze back up to his face. Seemingly windblown platinum-blond hair finished the wild look.

"You done, love? Or is it my turn?" The teasing lilt to his low husky voice reminded me of warm chocolate. It made me feel almost giddy.

Not sure what he was talking about, I looked back at his amused eyes. "I, uh . . ." I what? I didn't know what to say. "I don't know what you mean," I finally told him honestly. Should I apologize for staring at him? Had I been?

"Are you done checking me out? Because I'd hate to interrupt you."

Oh. My face heated, and I knew my cheeks were bright red. What was I thinking, leaving my door open for the world to see me? I wasn't used to this. Keeping my distance from men in general made me extremely inept at talking to one. However, this one didn't stare at me with that leer that made me nervous. I was used to the look men gave me because they thought I would do bad things with them. The ugly they saw didn't seem to deter them from wanting to see if I was as evil as they had heard.

"It's just some tattoos and a couple piercings, love. I promise I'm harmless," he said this time with a smile on his face.

I managed to nod. I should say something. I just wasn't sure what to say. He was waiting on me to speak. "I like them," I blurted out nervously. That sounded stupid. He raised an eyebrow, and a smirk touched his lips. "The tattoos—they're nice. Colorful. Uh . . . I . . ." I sounded like an idiot. There was no saving myself from this disaster. Closing my eyes so I didn't have to see those blue eyes watching me, I took a deep breath. "I'm not good at talking to people—guys, people, anyone really." Had I really just told him that?

If he would just turn and leave, then we could forget this moment forever. I forced my eyes open and caught him studying me with that grin still on his lips. He was going to think I was nuts. Maybe he was visiting someone here and didn't live in this complex. I really didn't want to face him again. Even

He pressed the pad of his thumb to his bottom lip and bit the tip of it before chuckling and shaking his head. "Not sure I've met anyone quite like you," he said before letting his hand fall back down to his side.

I was positive he hadn't.

"Krit, dude." a male voice called down loudly from what sounded like the second floor. "We gotta go, like, thirty minutes until we gotta be there. Go fucking shower and change."

"Shit," he muttered, glancing down at his phone as he pulled it out of his pocket. "Gotta go. But I'll see you around, little dancer," he said with a wink, then stepped back out of the doorway and walked down the hall.

Little dancer? Oh. I covered my face with both hands. He had seen me spinning around like a idiot. I sure hoped I didn't see him again. I just wanted to live life without drawing attention myself. I was leaving that life—the one where people saw me and huddled together while laughing and glancing at me—behind. I didn't want to give anyone here ammunition to make fun of me. Being invisible couldn't be that hard.

Unless you try to talk to guys, genius, I thought to myself. Walking over to the door, I closed and locked it. Next time I wanted to do something like spin in circles, I needed to close my door first.

KRIT

Tonight we had a gig at Live Bay. It was a club in town that drew both tourists and locals. We had become a crowd favorite over the past two years, so the three nights a week we played at the club equaled four hundred and fifty dollars for each of us. Live Bay, along with the bar we played at an hour away in Florida, and another club in Mobile, Alabama, both weekly gigs, allowed each of us to clear over a grand a week just performing.

Green, my best friend and bass guitar in our band, Jackdown, and I shared an apartment. However, we always had people crashing there. We were a family. We had been since we started this thing. Other than my older sister, Trisha, I hadn't had family, really. Our home life had sucked growing up. Now Trisha had her husband, Rock, and the three kids they'd adopted. She managed to make it more fun. Thursday nights to listen to me play, but that was it now. Used to be that she wouldn't miss even one of my shows.

I got it though. I was good with it. She finally had the family she'd always wanted, and she was happy. That was enough. She was a damn good mom, and those kids were lucky she was theirs now.

We had a good show even though Trish wasn't there. But the redhead I'd decided to bring home that night was tugging on my arm, needing attention. I hadn't had enough to drink, and I was lost in my thoughts instead of focusing on her tits, she so wanted me to notice her. I'd noticed already. It was one of the reasons she was going back to my place.

"You're ignoring me," the girl pouted, sticking out her lips, where were painted a deep red. I liked red lips. Another reason she was with me.

"Easy there. He has an easy trigger after a gig," Green called back to us from the driver's seat. He knew how annoyed I could get with clingy needy girls. I just wanted them willing and easy.

"I'm just making sure he hasn't changed his mind," the girl replied.

"When I change my mind, love, you'll know it," I told her, then leaned down to take a taste of her red lips. They had the flavor of the candy she had been sucking on earlier, and beer. It was a good taste. I wanted a little more.

Green chuckled from the front seat as the car came to a stop. "See, he's all fun and games if you just let him be," he said.

I broke the kiss and got out of the car. I was ready for a drink and some music. And a lot of people. I needed the crowd. "They all coming?" I asked Green as I held out my hand for the girl to take. She quickly scrambled out of the car and clung to me.

"Probably already here," he replied. The band liked crashing at our place on nights we played at Live Bay. We kept an open door for any neighbors. Seeing as they were all college students, they never complained. They came and joined the party.

"What's your name?" I asked the girl on my arm.

I glanced down at her to see the pinched frown on her lips. She'd told me earlier, but I hadn't cared then. I hadn't been sure I'd be spending the night with her yet. Now I wanted to know. I didn't fuck

girl if I didn't know her name.

"Jasmine," she replied, then flipped her red hair over her shoulder.

Jasmine seemed to have a bit of a temper with that red hair of hers. Normally, I was amused but not tonight. I was moody.

The music was already going when we started up the stairs. There was no doubt it was coming from our apartment. Matty, our drummer, always grabbed a girl or three quickly and left the club after we finished our gig. But most of the time he got to the apartment first if his females didn't slow him down.

"Looks like the party has already started. I'm gonna step out early and go find somewhere to study," Green said as he slowed to walk beside me.

Green was almost done with law school. He would be taking the bar exam in six months. I was proud of him, but I also knew things would be changing soon. He wasn't going to be able to pursue law and live like we were living. He rarely stayed for the parties. He always escaped to go study. Eventually I would lose him, but I wanted him to succeed.

"We should move the parties to Matty's from now on," I said, feeling guilty that Green had to leave his place to be able to study.

Green shook his head. "Hell, no. The dipshit doesn't ever clean up, and his apartment is tiny as fuck. Besides, let's not mess with a good thing. I've made it this far doing it this way. It works."

Since we'd been kids, Green had been the smart one. The one who always sacrificed. He made things happen. But somehow I had always been the one in the spotlight. Didn't really seem fair.

"Just say the word when you want to change that," I told him, then glanced over at the closed apartment door we were passing.

A smile tugged on the corner of my lips. Damn, that girl had been adorable twirling around her apartment. I had never seen such long thick hair that was so dark, it was almost black. Then those eyes of hers had been fucking amazing. I wasn't even sure what color they were exactly. They looked like they were hazel, but they reminded me of jewels. They'd been startling at first.

Although she had been wearing baggy-ass sweats and an even larger T-shirt, I could see the curves underneath. Sucked that I was only going to have to imagine what they actually looked like because I wasn't touching that. The innocence pouring off that girl was thick. She had barely been able to form words to talk to me.

Fucking adorable was what it had been. And I didn't do adorable. Ever.

Jasmine's hand slid down over my jeans and cupped my balls. "I like to suck," she whispered in my ear.

"Good. You can show me how much as soon as we get in the room," I told her, and reached around to cup her ass.

That had been all the reassurance she needed apparently, because she started unbuttoning my jeans before we reached the door to my apartment. Green turned back to say something to me and saw his hand busy at work with my jeans. He laughed and rolled his eyes then walked into our apartment which was already full of several of the guys who lived around us, and a few locals who we partied with regularly. Of course, there were plenty of girls. Just in case Jasmine didn't work out.

BLYTHER

The sun broke through the blinds on the windows, waking me up much sooner than I'd wanted to. I reached for my pillow and covered my face with a groan. It had been sometime after three before the noise upstairs had ended and I had been able to fall asleep. I kept waiting for the cops to show up and shut the party down. Surely there had been other people in this complex who had been trying to sleep.

But the cops never came. The music continued blaring, and the banging on my ceiling had only gotten worse. I hoped they enjoyed themselves, celebrating whatever it was they were celebrating, but I hoped they never did it again. I still had a week before my classes started. Which meant I had a week to get the things I needed and get settled in my apartment.

Even exhaustion couldn't keep the smile from creeping across my face. Wearing panties and a tank top, I was about to get up and go fix myself breakfast. Then I was going to sit and eat it in on the sofa and not worry about anyone making me feel unwelcomed. I was free. I was finally alone, and there was no one to disapprove of me.

Kicking off my covers, I got out of bed and looked down. Normally, the first thing I did when I got up was to make the bed or suffer punishment. Now I wasn't sure if I would ever make my bed again. With a spring in my step I headed for the kitchen to make coffee and toast a bagel.

Then I would make a list of things I needed for school and my apartment. Although it had come with furniture that Pastor Williams had said was part of the monthly payment, it didn't have things like curtains or a can opener. The shower curtain was also a plain white. I wanted to add some color and because I wasn't supposed to paint the walls, I had to add color elsewhere. Maybe I could find some pillows for the sofa and some pictures for the walls. I didn't have an unlimited budget, so I needed to be careful.

I also didn't start my job for another week, and then it would be another week before I received my first check. Some things would have to wait until later. But I could get started today.

Clothes. I needed a few outfits that weren't oversize hand-me-downs or had come from the thrift store. I really needed to buy a few basic things to get me through the next few months of school and work. I couldn't go to work in what I owned right now. I knew that clothes wouldn't change the way I looked, but they would at least help me appear more presentable. I decided to keep the pillows that came with the sofa. And the pictures for the walls could wait.

* * *

It took me a little over an hour to find two pairs of shorts and a denim skirt that all hit above my knees. I had never worn anything that showed off my legs before. It was both terrifying and exhilarating. Even better than leaving my bed unmade. Then I had bought one pair of jeans that actually fit me. Almost too well. Once I had bottoms, I went to look for tops. I had bought four blouses and two tank tops. Finally I picked out a pair of tennis shoes that would work best for work and school. They were all I really needed, but the pretty pink high heels kept drawing my attention. I had never had shoes with heels, or shoes that could be considered pretty, for that matter. They

weren't very dressy and could be worn with the skirt and two of my blouses. I could even wear the shorts. I had seen girls do that before.

I tried several times to walk away from them, but in the end I picked up the box with my size and walked to the register to pay for them before I could change my mind again. I was going to live differently here. These heels were a symbol of that new life.

Carrying all the shopping bags up to my apartment wasn't exactly fun. I was on the first floor, but so was the beach. So I had to walk up a flight of stairs just to get to the first floor. The people above me had even farther to walk. There were no elevators here since it was just the two floors. It took me five trips up and down to get everything into my apartment. But then my energy was renewed with the thrill of getting to put things in their places.

When I turned to close my apartment door my eyes locked with the electric blue ones I'd seen yesterday. That guy was standing there again, leaning against the door casing with his arms crossed over his chest and a smirk on his face.

"Looks like someone went shopping bright and early this morning," he said with that husky voice of his that made my body do funny things.

I nodded, afraid of the stupidity that would come out of my mouth if I tried to talk to him again. I suddenly wished I had put on one of my new outfits and worn it home. Which was silly. I shouldn't care what I looked like for this guy.

"My band plays at Live Bay on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights. You should stop in one night and see us. I'll even buy you a drink during my break," he said with that amused grin still on his lips.

Was he teasing me?

I had to respond this time. Nodding again would be rude. "Okay. I'll do that one night . . . maybe," I replied. I wasn't sure if I would ever go to Live Bay—wherever that was—but telling him no seemed impossible.

"I'll look for you then." He straightened up from his relaxed stance. "I never got your name."

My name. He wanted to know my name. I could answer that easily enough. "Blythe?" I replied, wishing it hadn't sounded like I was asking him instead of telling him.

He winked. "Fits you," he replied, then sauntered off without another word. He hadn't told me his name, but I remembered it from yesterday when his friend had called for him. Krit. It was an unusual name. I wondered what it was short for. Walking over to my door, I closed it and forced all thoughts of how sexy Krit's eyes had looked without black eyeliner far from my mind.

KRIT

"I need something more than shitty beer," Legend, our keyboard player, grumbled, sinking down into an overstuffed chair that belonged to Green.

I leaned forward and kissed the ear of the girl who was in my lap, and I relaxed on the couch. "Why don't you go fix Legend some whiskey on the rocks, love." It wasn't a question, and she knew it. Britt was one of the girls I saw off and on. I didn't see most girls more than once, but there were a few who were good with no attachments. The fact that Britt was nice and flexible, she was one who I got in the mood for every few weeks or so. Sometimes we saw each other more regularly. Just depended on how things were going in life.

Legend was busy watching television that couldn't be heard over the music and voices. There were over thirty people in my apartment. Several were watching the football game on my flat-screen. It was an early night for us. I hadn't planned on a party tonight, but the guys had shown up, and Green had been free of studying for once. So it happened.

Britt sashayed over to Legend and bent over while she handed him his drink to make sure I got a good view of her ass. It was barely covered up with the skirt she was wearing. Chuckling at her attempts, I took a drink of my beer and lifted my eyes to see Green standing and talking to someone near our open door.

Normally, people just came on in, but whoever it was wasn't coming in. They were just talking to Green. He waved his hand and stepped back in invitation. It was Blythe. Her eyes scanned the room and people nervously, but she didn't step inside. She also didn't seem to notice me. Then Green reached out and took her hand and pulled her into the room.

I only noticed Green's stupid grin before my eyes snapped back to Blythe. Holy shit, she wasn't wearing baggy clothes tonight. Those curves I had thought I had seen hiding beneath those awful clothes were right there for the world to see. A pair of black shorts that showcased legs from fucking heaven was only outdone by the tank top that covered an impressive set of tits. Then put that all together with the glasses perched on her cute little nose. She hadn't had those on before, but damn, they were sexy.

I realized Green was walking her over to me. Britt slipped her arm around me, plopped herself back in my lap, and began nibbling on my neck.

"Uh, dude, can you break free long enough to come here a sec?" Green asked, sounding uncomfortable. Blythe's eyes grew wide as she watched Britt. Fuck, that innocence was there, shining like a warning sign. As if I needed it. I knew the girl wasn't my speed. But damn, she was tempting. I wanted to reach up and undo that messy bun she had her hair pulled up in.

I moved Britt off of my lap and stood up. Blythe's eyes went from Britt to me, and then she dropped her gaze to study the floor. I noticed Green's hand resting on her arm as if he was there to jerk her from harm's way if needed. I didn't like that. I wasn't sure why, but I didn't. She was letting him keep his hand on her too.

"Did you decide to come join the party, love?" I asked, keeping my grin in place so I didn't scare her with the snarl I was tempted to give Green. He was a horny bastard. Blythe wasn't his speed either.

"No, that's not why she's here. Can we take this outside where we don't have to talk so loudly?" Green asked me with a pointed stare. What was his deal?

Blythe looked back longingly at the door like getting out of there was all she wanted in the world.

"Sure," I replied, and Blythe spun around and hurried for the door.

Green shrugged and turned to follow her.

I glanced back at Britt, who was watching us closely. I motioned to her that I would be right back and then headed toward the door.

Green was standing there asking Blythe her name, and Blythe gave him a shy smile that was more than I had ever gotten from her. What the hell? Green wasn't the charmer. I was.

"What's the problem?" I asked as I joined them in the hallway. The annoyed tone in my voice didn't go unnoticed by Blythe. Her eyes widened, and she started wringing her hands in front of her, nervously.

"Krit, this is our new neighbor, Blythe. She lives directly underneath us," he said in a tone that was obviously trying to make up for mine.

"We've met," I told him, swinging my gaze to hers.

Her cheeks turned bright pink. Why? I hadn't said anything to embarrass her.

"Oh, okay. Well, we are being inconsiderate with our noise level. This is two nights in a row that we've partied, and Blythe isn't getting much sleep."

So she was here to complain. Interesting. No one had ever complained before. This apartment complex was known for parties. Had she not known that when she moved in here?

I studied her face as she bit down on her bottom lip and looked ready to bolt. She thought she was going to make me mad. I was pretty damn sure that a girl who looked like her was incapable of making me mad. She gave off the “I need protecting” vibe in a big way. Add that to the heart-stopping face of hers, and she had a winning package deal to get away with all shit, even from me.

I stepped closer to her, which forced Green to move back some. Reaching down, I pulled one of her hands she was gripping so tightly into mine and ran my finger along the inside of her palm.

“Why don’t you come inside me with just for a few minutes? Meet some of your neighbors, and then when you’re ready to go, I think I have something that will help with the noise,” I told her as I kept my gaze locked with hers.

“I, uh, I’m not good with crowds,” she said with an apologetic tone.

I tugged on her hand until she was almost pressed against me. “I won’t leave your side, and I’m fucking amazing with crowds,” I replied with a wink to let her know I was serious.

“Don’t make her—” Green started to argue, but I cut him off.

“Not your business. Back off,” I warned him before sliding my hand around Blythe’s waist and walking her to the door.

BLYTHER

I didn't want to do this. Why had I come up here? Because I was tired and frustrated with the noise. That's why. I had spent hours writing, then, when I got ready for bed, the noise had started up again. Did these people not need sleep? I just wanted to ask them to be a little quieter. I hadn't wanted to be forced into staying at the party. I just wanted to go to bed.

"I really don't want to do this," I told Krit, who had his hand on my back and was firmly guiding me inside.

"Why not? They won't bite you. I promise, because I won't fucking let them," The amusement in his voice bothered me. I wasn't kidding. I didn't want to go into this party.

"Please. I'm sorry I came up here. I will figure out how to sleep through this. Just let me leave." I was ready to beg now. Whatever I needed to do to get away from this place. I could feel people staring at me. I hated that feeling. I knew what they were thinking. What they saw. I had come up here with my glasses on because I'd needed to see the computer screen, and my hair was in a mess on top of my head. My heart began to race. I had to get out of there.

"Shit, love, you're shaking." Krit's voice was no longer amused. He stopped walking, and slipped his finger under my chin to tilt my head back. The frown on his face as he studied mine was new. He normally looked constantly amused.

"Come with me," he said quietly, and reached down to take my hand. Then he walked down the hallway toward a closed door.

My panic escalated. That was a bedroom. I wasn't going into a bedroom with him. I had to get away. I tried to tug my hand loose from his hold, but he threaded his fingers through mine and tightened his grip. No one had ever held my hand before. I stared down at his hand in mine and lost my train of thought for a moment.

It was a warm feeling having someone's palm pressed against yours. His fingers laced with mine made me feel like I wasn't alone. Like I was connected to someone. Had I ever felt that before? I wasn't sure.

A door swung open, and Krit pulled me inside before closing it behind me.

"Don't look so terrified. I'm not going to do anything you don't want me to. Just wanted to get you away from the noise a minute so we could be alone and talk."

"Talk?" I asked as his hand released mine. The cold lonely feeling was back. I clasped my hands in an attempt to hold the warmth there. I had liked that warmth.

"You confuse me. Most girls don't confuse me. But you, little dancer, have me playing guessing games. Why is that?"

He called me little dancer again. I wasn't a dancer. Not even close. But I liked that he had a special name for me. It made me feel like I belonged.

"I didn't really get into a social scene growing up. Not very good at that. I don't fit in." I hated pointing that out to him. For some reason he didn't seem to get that I didn't fit in, and I hadn't wanted to be the one to break the news to him.

Krit cocked an eyebrow. "You say that like it's a bad thing. Most people want to stand out."

Stand out? That wasn't what I meant. I shook my head. "No, that's not . . . I mean, I don't . . . I'm not appealing to be around." That probably made less sense. I wasn't about to open up to this guy about what was wrong with me. If he didn't see it, then good. I liked that.

Krit frowned and stared at me like I was insane. Great. Now he saw the real me. Whatever he had been missing, I had just pointed it out to him. Why hadn't I kept my mouth shut?

"You really mean that," he said in a low whisper as he continued to stare at me. "Who the fuck told you that?"

I shrugged and turned my gaze from his to study the bedroom we were in. I wasn't going to answer his question. That was something no one needed to know.

The walls were a smoky gray color, and the ceiling was painted black. I wasn't allowed to paint my walls, yet he had painted his. The large king-size bed in the middle of the room was a ruffled mess. An electric guitar sat in one corner, and in the other far corner was an acoustic guitar. I turned my focus to the posters on the walls. Two of them were of what I assumed were rock bands, and there were signatures on them. Then, of course, the other poster was of a naked blonde with really big—ah, hopefully fake—boobs, because they looked a lot like bowling balls. They couldn't be real. The blonde was straddling a guitar, and the only thing keeping her private area covered were her hands gripping the guitar between her legs.

"I wonder if she ever wears panties," I mumbled out loud before I could stop myself.

Krit's laughter startled me, and I turned to see two very distinct dimples on his face. He didn't look like the kind of guy who would have dimples, but wow, they did things for me. "I like to believe she doesn't," he replied, once he was through laughing.

"Where are you from?" Krit asked.

"A small town in South Carolina. You wouldn't have heard of it," I replied, feeling the sick knot in my stomach forming, the one that always came with memories of my life there.

"Are they blind in that small town I wouldn't have heard of?" he asked with a softer tone to his voice.

I swung my gaze back to his and studied his expression. Was he teasing me again? "No," I replied.

Krit frowned then slowly ran his thumb over his bottom lip several times. It was a fascinating thing to watch. He had really nice lips. I wondered how often he used them. I would assume he was very talented with those lips.

His hand fell away, and he took a step toward me. "Will you go in there and meet everyone for me? Maybe have a beer? Just try to relax and enjoy being in a crowd?" His voice had dropped to a smooth, thick drawl. It was very hard to tell him no. "I just want you to ease into being social. Here it's safe because I'll make sure it's safe. I won't let anything happen to you or hurt you."

In a few days school was starting, and I would need to be in lots of social situations. This was my new start. I wanted to be able to walk through a crowd without having a panic attack. If Krit could help me, then maybe I should at least try.

"Okay," I blurted before I could change my mind.

The pleased grin on his face was almost worth the fact I was going to have to face strangers who might not be as blind as he was about me. Someone was bound to see the bad in me. They always had before.

He nodded toward the door and grinned. "Let's go." Then he made his way to the door to walk out of the safety I had found in his room. I couldn't seem to get my legs to follow him.

When he glanced back to see I hadn't made a move to go with him, he chuckled and shook his head.

Then he held out his hand to me and waited.

~~I liked holding his hand. I could do this. I took a step forward and slipped my hand in his. The~~
warmth was back, and I was able to take a deep breath again. Okay. This was good.

“Come on, little dancer,” he said gently, then led me out of the room and down the hall.

The music was louder out there and the laughter and voices reminded me of how I didn't fit in
this world. I was a loner. I liked being a loner. As if Krit could read my mind, he squeezed my hand
reassuringly. Right. He was with me. This was his crowd, and he wasn't going to let anyone say
anything to hurt me.

“Where'd you two go?” Green asked with a frown on his face, but I couldn't hear Krit's response
over the noise.

I started to say something to Green, who was really nice and who I had felt comfortable with right
away. He had a friendly smile. Before I could speak to him, Krit pulled me over to stand beside him.
“Here's a beer,” he said, handing me a red plastic cup. I took it, although I wasn't sure I was going to
drink it. I didn't like the way alcohol smelled.

“You left me,” the blonde I had seen him with when I arrived said as she walked up to him and
turned her back to me.

“A friend showed up. Sorry, babe, but I'm going to spend some time with her. I'll find you after she
leaves,” he replied with a wink, and tugged me closer before walking us toward the sofa.

The girl pouted at him then shot an angry glare at me. She was upset that I was taking her date
away. She should be. I wasn't going to make any friends by doing that.

Krit sank onto the sofa, pulling me down beside him. I could feel people staring at us. Were they
mad that he wasn't with the blond girl? I studied the cup in my hand, unable to lift my eyes.

“Who's this?” a curious male voice asked. He didn't sound angry. He sounded nice.

“This”—Krit slipped his finger under my chin and lifted it so that I was now forced to look at the
person speaking to him—“is my new neighbor, Blythe. Blythe, this is Matty. He's the drummer in our
band.”

Matty had bright orange hair that stuck up in all different directions. I wasn't able to focus on much
else. I had never seen hair quite like his before.

“Hello, Blythe,” Matty said, and I realized he had a warm smile and friendly brown eyes.

“It's nice to meet you,” I croaked out. The nerves weren't letting up. Speaking to strangers was
hard.

Matty's grin got bigger, and he shifted his gaze back to Krit. “Dude,” he replied, and shook his
head. I watched him take a long drink of the beer in his hand.

“Matty can be a douche, but we overlook his lack of verbal skills,” Krit said so close to my ear that
his warm breath tickled the sensitive skin there.

I shivered, and Krit went very still beside me. Before I could start worrying about my reaction, his
hand tightened its hold on mine. Again the warmth calmed me.

“Dude,” Matty said a second time, now chuckling. “Shitting me,” he muttered, then turned his
attention to me and smirked. “Careful with him, sweetheart.”

“Don't,” Krit said in a hard voice that startled me.

Matty's eyebrows shot up, then he walked off. He had seen me. He saw what everyone saw. I
wanted to leave. Krit was the most accepting person I had ever met, and I didn't want to meet anyone
of his friends, because I was sure they would all react like Matty had.

“I need to go,” I told Krit as I tried to slip my hand from his.

“No,” he said, tightening his grasp. “Ignore him,” he said.

I wished I could have ignored him, but I had spent my life dealing with people not wanting to be around me. And there was a beautiful blond woman there who wanted to be with Krit. He was trying to help me fit in, and he was being so kind about it. I couldn't do this to him.

"I am really tired. Thank you for . . . for sitting with me and talking to me," I said. "But I really am ready to go back to my apartment."

I managed to get my hand free, and I stood up quickly and darted for the door. I kept my head down and my attention focused on not tripping and falling. Once I was free of the apartment, I took a deep breath but kept moving.

"Blythe." Green's voice called out to me, and I wanted to ignore him and get to the safety of my apartment. But he had been nice to me.

I stopped and looked back at him. He was walking out of the apartment and headed toward me. "Are you okay?"

I nodded and forced a smile. "Yeah, just tired."

He didn't look like he believed me. "You sure?"

Krit was moving through the crowd now. His eyes were on me, and he was headed my way. I had to go. "Really, I'm fine. I just want to go back to my place."

"Blythe." Krit's demanding voice stopped me from running. He sounded angry. I hadn't meant to make him angry.

"What did you do?" Green asked him as he scowled at Krit.

"Fuck off," he growled at Green. "I didn't do shit. I need to talk to her, so go," he replied, but his eyes were locked on me.

"She's not one of—" Green started, but Krit was in his face immediately.

"I fucking know that. Not what this is about. Now, go."

Green let out a defeated sigh and nodded before turning to walk back into the party.

"What happened in there?" he asked me.

He still didn't get it, and I couldn't bring myself to break the news to him that I was tainted. "I'm just tired," I told him.

He ran a hand through his blond locks and sighed. "Okay. I get that. If it's the real reason you're leaving." He pointed back at his door. "But if this is about what Matty said, then ignore his stupid ass. He thinks I'm trying to make a move on you." He stopped and grinned at me like he had made a private joke. "He saw you and assumed the wrong thing. I'm not blind, Blythe. I know you're not my kind. He was worried about it. I'm not a bad guy. I would never go there with you. I see you. I get it. I was just trying to be friendly. You seemed like you needed someone to help you deal with shit, and I wanted to help."

Oh. So he did see me. He knew. I was going to be sick. My head started pounding, and the small amount of comfort I had taken from him was ripped away. I had to go. I managed a nod before I took off running. I had to get to my apartment before I threw up. The sick knot in my stomach had exploded.

KRIT

I stood at the window overlooking the gulf as I drank my second cup of coffee. It was fifteen minutes to eleven, but I hadn't been up very long. Britt's snuggling had woken me up. I didn't like it when Britt passed out and stayed the night after sex. She touched me when she slept, and I hated being touched.

It had taken me getting trashed to fuck Britt after my sexy little shy-as-hell neighbor went running.

off like the bats of hell were chasing her. Shit, that girl was fucked up. It was the only explanation. The girl had head issues. Sure, she was gorgeous, and damn, those eyes were hard not to get lost in. But the head issues were more than I could handle.

Britt was easy. I liked easy.

But Britt didn't have the sweetest smile I'd ever seen. Shit. Shaking my head, I slammed my cup down and turned around to see Green standing in the living room, glaring at me.

"What?" I snarled. I hated it when he had that judgmental look on his face.

"You know what," he replied, annoyed. "You couldn't just leave it alone. I had it under control. She liked me. She was getting comfortable with me. But you had to fucking prove you could get her attention. She isn't like that. She's *innocent*, Krit. Motherfucking innocent. Stay away from her."

It had been a long time since we had fought about a female.

"I know she's innocent. I was being friendly. She was freaking the fuck out, and I was trying to help her. She's shy."

Green threw his hands up into the air. "What the hell did you think I was doing?"

He had been looking at that sweet ass body of hers, was what he had been doing. "I was just trying to help her," I explained. "Not get her to let me in her pants. I was protecting her from you too. You stay the fuck away from her," I warned him.

"Unbelievable. You are a selfish shit. That isn't what you were doing. She liked me. I could see it in her eyes. But you came and snatched her away and sent her running off."

"Something is off with her. I don't know what, but she has some issues. She isn't up for getting to know you any more than a friend. You want a helluva lot more than to be her friend. My last warning, Green. Stay the fuck away from her. She's not like that."

"What are y'all going on about?" Britt asked as she rubbed the sleep from her eyes. She was wearing the sheet off my bed. I hated it when she went walking around with my damn sheets.

"Go get clothed and leave," I ordered before heading for the bathroom to take a shower.

"I don't know why you always treat me like shit the next morning. We had a good time last night," she snapped at me as I walked by her.

"Throw that sheet in with the dirty clothes before you leave" was my only reply. Then I closed the bathroom door and locked it.

"You're an ass!" Britt yelled loud enough for everyone to hear.

"Yet you keep fucking him," Green replied. "Told you before, he'll never treat you like he did Jess. She was different for him. No one else is gonna get that Krit."

Jess. She had been the only woman I had ever let get close enough to me to get me. But we had grown up together. It was easy with Jess. And damn, she was smoking hot. The things she could do with her body. Fuck, I missed her. I reached into the shower and turned on the faucet.

I had put Jess behind me. She was in love and living up north with her Harvard trust-fund boyfriend. She was getting that fairytale she had always wanted, and I had to admit I was happy for her. A life like that didn't come around for people like Jess and me. If I couldn't have Jess, I was glad the man she wanted adored her. And that fucker worshiped the ground she walked on. It was the only reason I had been able to handle watching her go.

I knew I'd never be what Jess needed. I had addictions, and women was one of them. Lots of women. I loved the way they smelled and how soft they were. I loved how warm and tight they felt when I sank into them. I loved everything about them. When Jess had put a halt to our relationship, I had run off that night and had a threesome. No problem.

Apparently Jess saw that as me not loving her. I did love her, but she'd pushed me away and I

gone and gotten me some. I realized later that that had been a bad move. But it had been real. It had been me. Jess knew that deep down I wasn't a one-woman guy, and as much as I wanted her, I couldn't be what she deserved.

Craving touch wasn't a fucking sin. I had gone without it growing up and I liked affection. I liked how good a woman made me feel. My sister wanted me to get counseling because she was sure my childhood had screwed me up. But I was fine. Life was good and I didn't need a psycho shrink telling me why I liked to fuck women.

BLYTHE

The rest of the week went by without one sighting of Krit. He didn't even have any parties. Although the day after I had gone upstairs to quiet the last party, I had come home from the library to find an iPod and a set of earbuds by my door. A small note read, *To help with your loud neighbor's noise.—K*

I had looked for him over the next couple of days to tell him thank you. The iPod had been stocked with more than two thousand songs. It seemed I never ran out of something good to listen to. After I didn't see or hear him for seven full days, I realized that maybe he was avoiding me.

It was what I'd expected, but it still hurt more than I wanted to admit. For a moment I thought maybe he could look past all that was wrong with me, and I could finally have a friend. That, however, wasn't the case.

Today I started college. I had World Literature and Physics 101, and then I had a meeting with my new boss. Pastor Williams had set me up to work with a pastor at a local church. I wasn't sure what Pastor Williams had told this pastor about me, but he seemed sure that I would fit in there just fine. The fear that this new pastor would take one look at me and throw me out had been weighing on my mind. If an eyeliner-wearing tattooed rocker could see the faults in me, then surely a minister of a church could.

But worrying about that wasn't going to fix anything for me. It would only make matters worse. I brushed my hair one more time and stared at myself in the mirror. I had decided to wear a pair of jeans today with the nicer blouse I had purchased, the one that matched my pink heels. I wasn't sure what the church expected me to wear to work, but since I was just meeting with the pastor today, I figured this outfit would do. I made sure I had my glasses in the backpack I had my laptop tucked safely inside of. Once I was sure I hadn't forgotten anything, I headed for my car.

* * *

Getting through both of my classes without getting lost and making sure I took good notes had been easier than I'd anticipated. I felt good about my professors. I hadn't spoken to anyone, but that was okay. I didn't have to make friends. I wasn't there for that.

The church I would be working at was a Baptist church much like the one I had grown up in. From what I could tell, it was one of the larger ones in the town. The coastal appearance was something I hadn't been expecting, but I liked it. Something about that made the church feel less like home. I didn't need any reminders of the life I left behind. Walking into a church was literally terrifying for me. I had made many of my worst memories in a church.

But this was the job Pastor Williams had set up for me. They were willing to work around my classes, and the pay was enough for me to get by and live comfortably. If this didn't work out, I was going to have to find another job on my own, and I wasn't sure what I was even qualified to do.

I pulled the backpack strap up higher on one shoulder and walked inside the front doors. The smell of coconut met my nose, which was odd. Our church never smelled like suntan lotion. It smelled like flowers. Lots of flowers. This place even smelled like the beach. I relaxed as I looked around at the

casual atmosphere. The church wasn't decorated like any one I had been to.

~~"Can I help you?" a masculine voice asked, snapping me out of my thoughts, and I spun around~~ see a guy not much older than I was. I was sure he wasn't the pastor. No pastor I knew was this young and this handsome. His dark brown hair was cut short, and his green eyes sparkled. Wide shoulders and really nice arms were as far as I got in my study of him when he cleared his throat.

Snapping my head up, I met his gaze. His smile was now amused. *Crap.* I was acting like an idiot. "Uh, yes. I'm here to meet with Pastor Keenan. I have an appointment," I explained without tripping over my words like I normally did when attractive guys spoke to me.

"You're Blythe Denton?" he asked as his eyes went wide in surprise.

I only nodded. How did he know my name?

"Not what I was expecting. Wow. Um, yeah, okay. Uh, I'm pretty sure you aren't what Dad was expecting either. Just, yeah, okay." He stopped and chuckled, then shook his head and rubbed the back of his neck.

I wasn't sure what was wrong, but this could not be Pastor Keenan. Something was bothering him, though. "Dad?" I asked him, unable to keep the nervous edge from my voice.

"Dad," he repeated, staring at me blankly. Then he blinked and turned his head, grinning as he looked down the hallway. "Yeah, my dad. Pastor Keenan is my dad, and your meeting is with him."

Okay. "Is he here?" I asked.

He nodded and took a step toward me and held out his hand. "I'm Linc Keenan. It's nice to meet you, Blythe."

I slipped my hand into his for a polite handshake. "Thanks," I replied.

When he let my hand go, he nodded toward the hallway. "This way."

Good. That had been awkward, but I liked Linc's smile. He seemed sincere and kind. I had never actually liked pastors' kids before. I had met many of them when they'd come to visit the church with their parents. They'd always either treated me badly, or given me the creeps. If it hadn't been one of their daughters making fun of me, it had been one of their sons looking at me funny. One had even gone as far as touching me and covering my mouth so that I hadn't been able to scream. He had said he knew I was a dirty slut because he'd heard the gossip. He just hadn't been told how hot I was, and he'd said he wanted a taste of my pussy. I had started crying as he shoved his hand down my pants. Luckily, Pastor Williams had shown up and ordered him to leave. Then he sent me to my room for the rest of the weekend.

It was never discussed. No one ever asked me about it or checked on me. I was just told to stay in my room. I had been terrified and humiliated.

Needless to say, my experiences with pastors' kids hadn't been pleasant. I just really wanted the job to work out.

Linc led me to the room. "Let me go in and speak to my dad and tell him you're here. Have a seat and make yourself comfortable. I won't be but a minute."

I nodded and sank down to wait on the soft tan leather sofa. The decor in the room was also bright and laid-back. A palm tree was in the corner, and bamboo plants adorned the end tables and front desk. The smell of coconut lingered in there as well. I noticed several candles that were in rustic-looking metal tins sitting around. They obviously used them often.

The door to the pastor's office opened, and an older version of Linc stepped out of the room. His eyes locked on mine. A smile lit up his face as he smiled at me. I stood up quickly and nervously fidgeted with my backpack.

"I was at your dedication nineteen years ago, but seeing you standing there all grown-up, it's hard

to believe that's you."

This man had been at my baby dedication? Pastor Williams hadn't told me that.

"You sure have turned into a lovely young woman. But then Malcolm had said you had grown into a beautiful intelligent woman. I just wasn't prepared to see it."

Malcolm was Pastor Williams's first name. I knew that, but I had never called him by it.

"Thank you," I replied, feeling the need to say something but not sure what I was supposed to say to this man.

He stepped back and waved for me to come into his office. "I see you've met Lincoln. He will be meeting with us. We have been without a secretary in the office for two weeks now, and Lincoln has been filling in, but I can assure you that we are all ready for him to go back to his other job. He's not very good at this one." There was a teasing tone in Pastor Keenan's tone.

I smiled and glanced over at Linc, who was leaning against a bookshelf, his arms crossed over his chest and a pleased smile on his face. He was ready to hand over the secretary position to me. I understood his excitement about me being there now.

"I would have started last week had I known you needed me. Pastor Williams said that I wasn't supposed to come in until today," I explained, feeling guilty for not coming in sooner.

"Malcolm wanted to make sure you had time to get settled and ready for your courses before you started work. I agreed with him. Besides, I think my son actually got better over the last week."

I glanced at Linc again. His grin was still in place, but he rolled his eyes as if he was amused with his dad.

"Okay, well, thank you. It didn't take me too long to get settled in though," I said, feeling the need to say something. I wasn't good with small talk.

"Good. I'm glad you're ready to dive in. Please, have a seat. Can Linc get you a water?"

I shook my head and sat down in the black leather high-backed chair that sat across from the pastor's desk. But instead of going to sit behind his desk, Pastor Keenan sat down in the chair beside me. Then he leaned back and smiled as he studied me.

"You will definitely be well received here. I imagine my daughter will be up here soon enough when she hears about you."

I didn't know how to respond to that. I wasn't sure I wanted to meet his daughter.

KRIT

I had been stopped outside Blythe's apartment staring at her door for at least five full minutes. Since the night of the party, I had avoided her. Not sure why, because it wasn't like she was one of those females I had to avoid. She never knocked on my door or made any attempt at contact at all.

Secretly, I had been hoping she'd show up at my door all on her own if just to thank me for the iPod and earbuds I'd left her. Not that she had needed them this week. I had moved all parties to Matty's place. Blythe, however, never showed up. Not even in passing. So maybe I hadn't been avoiding her. Maybe she had been avoiding me.

And why the fuck did I give a shit?

"I'm not there." Blythe's voice filled the hallway, and I jerked my gaze from her door to find her standing at the top of the stairs.

Holy hell, she had on tight jeans with a pair of fucking pink heels. I let the image of her legs showcased in the jeans burn a spot in my memory as I trailed my gaze up them slowly. The clinging material of her shirt was cut in a modest enough style, but damn, it hinted at the body underneath.

"I haven't seen you all week." Her voice sounded nervous. "I wanted to thank you for the iPod. You

didn't have to do that."

I mentally slapped myself and focused on her face and the words coming out of her mouth. She wasn't like normal girls. She was shy and unsure of herself. I had to remember that or I'd scare her away. Not that I could do anything with her. She would be too fragile for me.

"Uh, yeah, I did. Now I won't feel like an ass when we have a party," I replied with a smirk.

She grinned and reached up to tuck a strand of her long silky dark brown hair behind her ear. The hair was fascinating. As if she needed one more attractive feature on her already-perfect body. I appreciate it. I really do. I started my classes today, so studying will soon be of extreme importance.

She moved toward her door and unlocked it before glancing back at me. I wasn't ready to let her disappear inside just yet. She was more comfortable talking to me today. I was suddenly curious. I wanted to hear more about her.

"Would you like some coffee?" she asked as she opened the door.

"Yeah, I'd love some," I replied, thankful for a reason not to leave.

She smiled at me, and I swear to God, the entire world around her lit up. How the fuck was this girl alone? Where was the man hovering over her and protecting her from every bad thing that came near her? She was too fucking unreal. Did her family think it was smart to just send her off like this? Were they idiots?

She slipped the backpack off her shoulder and dropped it onto her sofa. In a week she had made the place feel warm and inviting. There wasn't a lot of fussy shit around, and there were no pictures of her with friends or family, which was odd. Wasn't that, like, a girl thing?

"How did your classes go?" I asked, knowing if I didn't control the conversation, we would starve there in silence. Another thing I wasn't used to with girls. Normally, they talked my fucking ear off.

She filled the coffeepot with water then glanced up at me. "Good, but I wasn't worried about the two courses. Wednesday, I have to face Fundamentals of Public Speaking, and, well . . ." She trailed off.

The pink color in her cheeks was enough. I knew what she meant. She didn't like attention on her. I had seen that myself at my party. But damn, how did she manage to get this far in life without being the center of attention wherever she went? "You baffle me," I said. "You don't want attention." I let my eyes trail back down to her legs in those jeans and heels, and my blood pumped harder just thinking about those legs and the things I could do with them. "Yet you have got to be used to drawing attention."

I lifted my gaze back up to see her face as she turned away from me and stared out the window instead.

"I'm working on blending in and hoping people will let me be," she replied

The pain in her voice didn't sit well with me. Had someone hurt her? And if someone had, who the fuck were they and how could they do anything to hurt someone so incredibly vulnerable and sweet?

There should be a dad or older brother or boyfriend making sure no one ever mistreated her. But I had seen no one with her or near her since she moved in. Why the hell was that? I didn't know her family, but I decided that I really didn't like them.

"Blythe," I said, liking just a little too much the way her name rolled across my tongue.

She turned her head to look at me. "Yes?"

I took a step toward her and then stopped. She would spook easily, and that wasn't what I wanted. I also didn't want her getting the wrong idea, because there was no way in hell I was taking on someone like her. I didn't do relationships. I had tried to have one, and I had fucked it up. Jess had been in love with someone else, so it hadn't mattered, but it had just about killed me.

I wasn't ever doing that again. I didn't do it well. But I could be her friend. I could be a damn good friend. I was good at that. "If you need anything, or anyone, you call me."

She studied me a moment then slowly nodded. She didn't ask me why or bat her eyelashes at me in a flirty way. Instead she just smiled. "Okay, thank you" was the only response I got.

"Give me your phone," I told her.

She walked over to her backpack, pulled out a smartphone, and handed it to me. I added my number then texted myself so I would have hers. "Here," I told her as I handed it back to her. "Promise me, you ever need me, you'll call."

She nodded again. "I promise."

"Good." I grinned at her and walked over to sit down on her sofa. I propped my feet up on the table. "Now, come tell me all about your new classes."

She didn't move at first, and I wondered if I had pushed her too hard. I waited. Finally she moved and walked back to the coffeepot and poured two cups.

"How do you take yours?"

"Black," I replied.

She grinned as she brought the cups over and handed me one. "I didn't figure you for a cream-and-sugar guy," she said.

I was making her feel comfortable around me. Good. That was my plan. I wanted her to feel like she could trust me, because she needed someone to fucking trust. "What's your major?" I asked.

She frowned and stared down at her coffee for a moment. I thought maybe she was done opening up to me. Then she sighed. "I want to write books. But first I need a degree so I can have something to fall back on in case I'm a horrible writer and no one buys my books. So, I'm majoring in English."

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