

SAME TIME NEXT WEEK

Chapter 1

Shelby

A crash of porcelain against stone tile rang out into the silence. A hissing "shit!" followed.

"What happened? You okay in there, Shelby??"

"I'm fine," Shelby called out, her voice carrying out of the kitchen and around the corner to the den, where a woman with cocoa skin and a trendy mini afro pulled bubble-wrapped knickknacks from a box and artfully arranged them on a shelf.

"What'd you do?"

"Dropped some plates." She swore again, this time under her breath while whipping around a box-filled kitchen in search of a broom and a dustpan. "Mom, do you know where my—oh, there it is." She plucked the broom from a dark corner where it had been propped behind a stack of boxes yet to be unpacked.

"The Lenox ones? That we bought you from your registry?"

The fine china, now in shards, mixed with dirt and puffs of packing foam in the dustpan and tumbled into the garbage. "Yes."

"No!"

She sighed, rolling her eyes toward the den. "Yes. Don't worry about it, Mom. It's fine."

"Well, how many did you break?"

Shelby glanced up from her squatting position to find her mother leaning against the arch of the doorway between the kitchen and the dining room. The glow behind her had an ethereal effect, the light of the sun peeking out from behind tightly drawn blinds. The house needed to stay cool, so though it was gloomy, the blinds stayed shut until at least dusk. There was no such thing as cool air before midnight in the summer in Orlando.

"Two. It's no big deal. I don't need a twelve place setting anyway."

"What if you have friends over? Or have a dinner party?"

Shelby's eyes lifted again, this time betraying annoyance. Rather than argue, she went back to her task of sweeping up bits of what should have been her wedding china set.

"Or what if you had a friend over? You could, you know. He wouldn't have to be a boyfriend. He could just be a *friend* friend. Someone to spend time with."

"Mom..." Shelby stood, her knees creaking, and returned the broom and dustpan to their corner. "Guys don't do the *friend* friend thing anymore. If I invited a guy over here to eat, he'd think I wanted to have sex with him. I think a twelve piece setting is overkill for that."

"Well..." She began, but Shelby cut her off.

"Don't even start," she protested, but giggled as she walked away. "Let's keep working. I only have you until tomorrow and I want to get a lot of this stuff unpacked."

Shelby and Evelyn worked through the afternoon and into the evening, until the sun had set and the house began to cool. One by one, boxes were emptied, flattened and stacked in the garage. Room by room, piece by piece the puzzle of a new life came together.

Shelby felt as if she'd already lived a lifetime in her twenty eight years, like it had only been a few short months since she was a different woman, living a different life. In truth, it had been years since she was the same old Shelby. After the accident that took the life of her fiancé, she spent nearly a year in a tumultuous battle. When it was over and things didn't get better like they were supposed to, Shelby thought a change would do everyone some good.

Then came the packing, stacking up memories into plain cardboard boxes, saying goodbye to a place that had always been home and moving three hours north. Close enough that people could still visit, but far enough away that people wouldn't drop in unannounced. It was a perfect place, a perfect time, a perfect way to start a new life.

"Boy, I feel like I've been beaten with a stick."

Fresh from a shower and smelling like rain, wearing a cotton top and matching shorts that showed off legs that didn't seem like they'd belong to a woman in her early seventies, Evelyn plopped onto the couch next to a listless Shelby. Half a pizza sat between them, half a bottle of soda, and as an attempt to make the meal healthy, a side salad sat untouched on the coffee table in front of them. The TV blared a reality show that neither paid attention to.

"Me too. We made good time today."

Shelby yawned while absentmindedly scanning the room. Earlier that morning it had been full of boxes. Twelve hours later, it looked like she'd lived there for years. Her books, figurines and keepsakes were all attractively displayed on the shelves of floor to ceiling book cases. Art had been hung, photos dispersed sparingly, even coasters had been placed underneath two glasses sweating with condensation. She was home.

This was home now.

"Shelby, your bed is made. You may as well crawl into it. You should sleep well tonight."

As if on cue, Shelby yawned again and stretched, wincing at the pain of moving limbs that had become tight after resting for a few minutes. "You're right. I'll watch the end of this in my room. Thank God the cable guy showed up."

"Leave that," Evelyn said, slapping Shelby's hands away from the pizza box. "I'll put it away, don't worry."

"Okay, but we get bugs here, like Miami. Put it in the fridge, okay?"

"Don't mother me," Evelyn said, smirking. "I taught you how to put away leftovers. Go to bed."

Shelby leaned over her, dropping a soft kiss on her cheek. "Night, mom. See you in the morning."

"Night, honey. See you tomorrow."

Shelby was going to bed, but tonight would end like all the other nights. She'd lie there, staring at the bluish hue of the TV, then slip onto her back to stare at the reflection of light on the ceiling. Feeling tired, willing sleep to come, to overtake her, to allow her body and mind to rest.

But it wouldn't come. Like every other night for so long, she'd lay awake, thinking, tossing, turning, torturing herself until the sun was just peeking over the horizon. Only then would she feel the cloak of sleep overcome her, giving her a few precious hours before another day began.

What had happened... happened. The past couldn't be un-lived, undone. She desperately wanted to, if only to rid herself of this nightly ritual of wishing things had turned out differently.

But they hadn't. And this was her life. Tomorrow would come, the sun would rise and life would go on. Guilt-ridden sleepless night or not, when the alarm sounded, Shelby would fold back the covers and get out of bed.

Chapter 2

Jackson

He turned in his seat, his eyes roving the plush, indulgent cabin of the jet. He felt out of place, though he remembered almost fondly the days when a private jet was the norm, when male vocal group *Boy Wonder*, his old band, was too famous to fly commercial. They'd never be able to get on the plane and if they could, they'd be bothered nonstop and never be able to sleep, which was all a plane ride was good for.

A private jet offered the ability to rest in luxury, so while he felt out of place, he understood the need for it. And the full bar, the flight attendant in the shortest, tightest, slinkiest uniform possible, the genuine leather seats, the flat screen TVs. He nodded his head, sinking into memories. It had been good, back then.

Too bad they had to grow up.

As a child star on KidTV, a combination talent and comedy show aimed at teens and young adults, Jackson had honed his skills as an entertainer and landed a spot in music group *Boy Wonder*. For ten years, they ruled the charts and the hearts. Then, as suddenly as it began, the days of harmonious bubble gum pop and intricate choreography in color coordinated clothing ran out like sands through an hourglass. One day Jackson was part of a multi-platinum, Grammy award winning music group, more famous and wealthy than he'd ever imagined he could be. The next day he was on his own, marooned in the middle of a wasteland called the entertainment industry, trying to figure out how he fit in.

Nine years and two solo albums later, he'd found his groove in writing and production, where he could still make music but he didn't have to be out in front, pulled from every direction, tempted with all the pretty, pretty sin. He found an excuse to stay holed up in the studio or the writing room. He was good at it, sought after by labels and artists and as the years rolled by, he became more popular and higher in demand. A musical force to be reckoned with, if he had to say so himself.

Writing music wasn't hard. Producing albums wasn't hard. Making stars out of hormone-ridden teenagers wasn't hard. He was a natural, without being boastful about it. It just...wasn't a challenge. He longed for something that stretched him, that made him grow, that made him wake up every day and hit the ground running, then fall into bed every night, muscles screaming, wondering if he had one more day in him. He missed that feeling.

He languished in LA, where the air was thick with smog, the streets were littered with garbage, the homeless multiplied by the day and the sticky-sweet layer of sleaze oozed all over the entertainment industry. Why not join his *Boy Wonder* counterparts and retire from music? He could spend his days ordering Mai Tais from cute waitresses in skimpy clothing, basking in the sun, allowing his mind to compose songs but not letting his fingers write them down.

Kim was why. He'd stuck around for *her*. A lot of good it did him. Bitter laughter had burned in his throat while he read the letter she'd left in an envelope, leaning up against, ironically a framed photo of the two of them. They'd grown apart, she wrote. Had different goals in life. She had found someone else. She loved him, but wasn't *in love* with him.

What did that even mean? Grown apart? Not in love? Different goals? The words on the page swam together as a black velvet box holding an enormous diamond solitaire burned a hole in his pocket.

It was only a matter of time before he was waking up in strange places, unable to remember what he was doing there and how he got there. And where his clothes were. It scared him at first, but there was pain to numb. Weeks and months were pissed away in a drunken stupor. Deadlines missed. Reputation tarnished. He was becoming a statistic and it was quickly getting out of hand.

A phone call had saved his life.

"Can I get you anything, Jackson?"

The soft voice of the flight attendant interrupted his thoughts. He smiled up into a face that was kind but weathered with age. She'd done her best to enhance it with makeup, but the damage was done. Looking into her eyes, he saw something that resonated in him down to his soul.

Pain, maybe. Desperation. Her job was to wear as little as possible and serve food and drinks for music's reigning prince, Rod Phillips, and his band. It was an okay gig, better than serving wings at Hooters, but not by much, especially when Rod got drunk and slapped her ass, demanding shots.

"No thanks," he said, tipping his still full water bottle at her.

Her smile was thin and barely painted on as she slipped past him to the seat in front of him, bending at the knee to whisper in the ear of the guitarist, Duke, who was already too drunk but ordered another beer.

Jackson was tense. He reconsidered a drink but thought better of it and reached under his seat for the same worn, brown leather bag he'd been dragging around for years, his security blanket that held everything he needed—his tunes and his work. He pulled out both, shoving ear buds into his ears and cranking up the music. He balanced a laptop on his knees and opened a composition program, then scrolled a familiar menu, navigating by memory to a collection of songs he was piecing together. It was the challenge he sought, had longed for and honestly *needed*. But he was terrified out of his mind of screwing it up.

Jackson hadn't come to this new gig quietly. Or easily. It had taken some arm twisting and convincing. He'd never been a music director before. He didn't think he could do it, not on the scale that Rod seemed to want. He could produce a few songs and an album, sure.

Change the navigation of a career? Put together a tour? Surely there were better options than a former member of a boyband and a has-been pop star.

Rod must have been desperate. He'd *begged*. "You're the only guy I want for this job. You did my first hit. Remember the writing sessions? We had a great time... we could do that again. We could be that team again."

Jackson considered saying yes, but he wasn't comfortable taking chances with Rod's career. The slightest tumble—a song that didn't chart high enough or an album that flopped could topple him. Wouldn't it be fun, though, to be that team again? Hanging out in Rod's studio, white Chinese food boxes covering the table, cans of Red Bull and dirty coffee mugs lining the counter, empty bags of Doritos and Hershey's Kisses filling the trash bin. Lyric after lyric flowing from both sets of lips. Beat after beat tapped onto the table. Nods of satisfaction listening to the playback, the fruits of their labor.

Jackson laughed, tipping his desk chair back while Rod reminisced, his laugh echoing into the ceiling of a big, empty, lonely house, where he was doing nothing anyway. Rod was offering a change of pace and scenery, something to do to take his mind off of *her*.

Then Rod hit below the belt, leaning forward, his voice low, his tone sympathetic and his brown eyes showing a gleam of concern. "You've got to get back in the game, man," he'd said. "Kim's gone. Drowning in a bottle won't bring her back. You used to be the guy that lectured people about that stuff. Now you're the guy being lectured to. That's not the Jackson Sweeney that I know."

Orlando was muggy. Sticky-wet air invaded the aircraft as soon as the cabin doors opened and the staircase was lowered. Leather bag on one shoulder, duffel bag on the other, he deplaned and walked quickly to one of five waiting vehicles on the private airstrip. Rod and his band were riding in limousines, no doubt headed to Rod's mansion to continue the party before heading to their own estates with what Jackson liked to call a *flavor of the moment*—the girls chosen to party with the band. He had other plans which included a shower, a hot meal and a bed.

Beyond the fleet of shiny cars, a rusty passenger van huffed. The driver side door opened and a lanky man stepped out, his wiry, jet black hair just brushing his shoulders. He walked around to the side of the van and slid the door open, nodding at Jackson as he tossed both bags into the back seat, then climbed back inside. The van was old, but at least the A/C worked. Jackson climbed into the passenger seat and snapped his seat belt over his lap.

"Thanks for picking me up. Were you waiting long?"

Never a man of many words, his childhood friend Ray simply uttered, "Sup. Nope." Ray put the van in drive and pulled away from the airstrip.

I don't believe I'm back here, Jackson thought to himself, reclining the seat and flipping down the visor to block the afternoon sun.

Chapter 3

Jackson

He sat on the edge of the bed in a t-shirt and boxers, elbows on his knees, half-listening to the banter of the morning crew on the radio. Morning had come much earlier than he wanted it to. The previous night was a blur. He wasn't even home for ten minutes before the phone started ringing. Friends—people he'd known since before he was famous, figured out that he was back in Orlando and wanted to stop by and see him for a few minutes, because it had been so long since they could say hello in person. He should have known it would turn into a party. Not that he minded, because they brought food and drinks and made him laugh and reminded him of how much he missed being home. Still, he had only planned to grab a sandwich, take a shower, and hit the bed.

If he managed to make it home before midnight tonight, he wasn't answering the phone.

"In today's Celebrity Dirt Alert, we heard that Rod "The Bod" Phillips brought a stray home from his recent trip to LA."

"Ooh, Jill..."

"Oh, not a girl..."

"You almost broke some hearts."

"I know, right? No, it was Jackson Sweeney! He hasn't been back in town for a long time, but I heard that he's moved back into his old place and uh....he's gonna be here working with Rod on his new album and world tour next year. Pretty exciting."

"Now that's good news for Jackson. He's been off the scene for a while."

"Yeah, well there was that big breakup with that model... what was her name?"

'Kim,' Jackson thought, breathing through the pang that shot through his chest at the mention of her. 'Her name is Kim Valentine. I loved her.'

"She destroyed him when she left."

"You think?"

"Oh yeah! He seems awful since they broke up. Drinking heavily, partying with a weird, really rough Hollywood crowd. The last pictures we saw of him, remember, he looked an absolute mess—"

The radio alarm clock busted into pieces on impact, moments after it was yanked from the wall and hurled across the room, sending sharp plastic chunks in a spray across the carpet. He stared at the mess for a few seconds, finding it hard to believe he'd actually done that.

"Guess I'll add *replace that clock* to my list of shit to do today," he mumbled to himself, headed toward the bathroom, where hopefully a hot shower would give him some energy and drive.

A long list of errands preceded any music work—change of address form, picking up boxes and other luggage he'd had shipped, arranging for furniture and other items to be delivered to storage. Basic settling in tasks that Jackson wouldn't necessarily enjoy, but they wouldn't bother him as much if he could come to grips with the fact that he was back in Orlando.

4PM was music time. With a lift in his step, Jackson hurried up a winding sidewalk from the circular driveway to Rod's home studio. The massive addition was nearly the size of his home, and for good reason. Rod and the band wrote, rehearsed and recorded there. There were smaller rooms for lounging and a rehearsal room where they played live and worked out songs real time. The band needed space for equipment as well as clashing egos and feelings of self-importance.

Just off the recording studio was a small room, more like a closet where the furniture was not plush and there were no comforts of home like a television or a refrigerator or a microwave, only a square folding table pushed against a wall, a few folding chairs scattered around the room and a stockpile of

pens, paper, and sheet music. The room was barely powered, dimly lit by a single lamp. It wasn't intended to be comfortable, but quiet and efficient. That was where Jackson did his writing, plotting, planning, piecing together. That room was home.

Some of the band members were already likely huddled in the side rooms and worn out from partying the night before. Jackson shuffled past one room, ever-present leather satchel on his shoulder.

"Ay, Jackson!" Sam, a heavyset black man made women swoon with his soulful saxophone. Three years ago, he'd been struggling on the club circuit, trying to stay afloat. An offhand comment to Rod one night while they shared a few beers started the wheels turning and soon Sam was adding flavor and depth to plain old pop—a combination that often surprised people. Jackson liked surprising people with things they wouldn't think they'd like.

Jackson doubled back and poked his head into the room. A ball game was on the TV and two open cans of beer sat on the table in front of them. Duke appeared to be passed out on half of the couch. Sam took up the other half, an arm casually laid across the top of the cushions.

"Hey, Sam. How's it going? How's the new baby?"

"The new baby is fine," Sam answered, his grin wide. "Got her all shined up, She's ready to work." Jackson laughed. The only baby in Sam's life was a shiny new tenor saxophone.

"That's what I like to hear. She's getting a workout. I need to get set up back there, but I'll have some changes for you on *Evil Side of Me* and *Can't Get Enough*. They'll be different than the original notes, but not too much. I want to slow it down a little, give the new baby a chance to shine."

"Sounds good. We'll be ready."

Duke let out a long snore, loud enough to compete with the sound of the TV. Both men stared in his direction, gave each other a look and a shrug, and laughed.

"I don't know how you put up with that. I can't imagine him on a tour bus."

"You tune it out, after a while. You can pretty much live your life around him. He sleeps through everything."

"Thankfully, so do I."

Jackson ducked out of the room and ambled further down the hall toward Rod's office. It was almost as big as the recording room and more decadent than any of the others. Rod could, and sometimes did live there. One side was every cubicle worker's dream—spacious wood desk with matching credenza, leather executive chair, multi-line phone system, carpet that gave the illusion of walking on air.

The other side of the room satisfied Rod's *sleep all day, party all night* side. A mini-bar was built into one wall, alongside a soda dispenser and one of those expensive, shiny, silver coffee machines with all the buttons and knobs that somehow, if you pressed the right combination, would give you a latte or a cappuccino, or some fancy coffee thing. Rod didn't even drink coffee, but Rod liked girls and girls liked coffee and girls loved that machine.

They also loved the long sofa that pulled out into a queen size bed. Few girls actually made it past the studio and into the private living quarters. Rod liked to say he never learned their names because he wouldn't know them long enough to care.

Rod was in his office, feet propped up, showing off tan, muscular legs. The phone had been pulled across the desk, the receiver tucked between an ear and a shoulder while he flipped through a stack of pages. His stare was intense, like he was in the middle of an important conversation, so Jackson hadn't intended to stop and talk. The sooner he got to his room, the sooner he could get to work.

"Yeah, hold on one second," Rod said, covering the mouthpiece with his palm. "Hey Jackson! Hang out for a second, will you? I'm about off of this call." He pointed toward one of the chairs in front of the desk and went back to his phone call.

Jackson ambled into the room and plopped into a chair, probably looking every ounce as bored as he actually was.

"Listen, I don't care. We agreed on three percent. I'm seeing seven percent all over this contract and I'll be goddamned if I'm giving up an extra four percent, so fix it! I want to see a revision by 5 o' clock."

Rod slammed the phone back into its cradle and dumped the stack of pages onto the desk. He propped his elbows on the surface and buried his head in his hands, letting out a long moan.

"Rough day?"

"I wish I could trust people to keep these details straight. I have to comb every contract like I'm looking for something to be wrong. I always find something. Someone's always trying to get over. Like this thing?"

He picked up the stack and tossed it to the edge of the desk. "I'll endorse anything; I don't care. Put my name on it, make some money. My agent gets a cut of that? Okay, cool. But when that weasel tries to take twenty five grand more than his contract says he gets?"

Rod shook his head. "I'm tempted to nix this thing right here and now."

Jackson knew he wouldn't. Rod liked to see his name on everything. And Rod liked money. He would get his way... one way or another.

Rod took a deep breath and raised his head, fanning his fingers out, releasing the bad energy. "So, how's it going? You feel better about all this?"

"Yeah. I've been... working."

He didn't sound convincing and he knew it, but he didn't want to get cocky about his abilities before he could produce something worth listening to. "I've been reworking some stuff. I think you'll like it, but I want to run it through first. Hear how it sounds in real life, as opposed to how it sounds in my head. You know?"

Rod smiled, nodding his head. Knowing. He and Jackson thought a lot alike. "Good. I can't wait to get in the studio. I've got some more phone calls to make, some more people to yell at. Get to work, why dontcha?"

Finally, he thought, but resisted actually saying it. Instead, he got up and went directly to the studio, passing through a cavernous room with every model and make of recording equipment a musician could ask for. Soon that room would be full of music, the beautiful sounds that never failed him, never made him feel inferior, never made him feel unloved or untalented, was faithful and always gave one hundred percent. Music had been a perfect girlfriend, a consummate lover. His soul mate. Maybe he wasn't meant for anyone else.

The moment he entered the familiar room and turned on the lamp, he felt at home. His heart was light and a little happier. He sat in the plain folding chair at the table and started to hum, working through the changes to one of Rod's biggest hits. Adding more soul, mixing in some jazz, extending the song to make it a little longer. For a concert, Rod would want to draw the crowd in and have some time to walk the stage, work the ladies, feel the groove.

He was ready to begin the first of many long days of working magic.

The band had finally called it a night at 4 AM, after Duke passed out. He was stretched out on the futon, hat over his face, snoring up a storm. Duke would wake up and drive himself home or he'd still be there the next day when they arrived.

Jackson was hungry, but like most big little cities, Orlando had nothing open that appealed to him. Winter Park, a ritzy enclave, had even less. LA had places that stayed open all night. He could go down to Kitchen24 and get a burger right this minute, if he was in LA.

But he wasn't. Even the bars were closed and the only places open served shit food that he wasn't in the mood to eat.

Jackson wandered the streets aimlessly, sort of avoiding going to another big, empty house where Kim wasn't. She wouldn't be on the couch, where she would have fallen asleep waiting up for him, because she couldn't sleep alone. She wouldn't offer to make him something to eat before they climbed the stairs and crawled into bed and enjoyed each other for a few minutes before sleep sounded better than anything. More important than Kim not being there, there was no *food* there.

He could buy *food*. It was the perfect time—he was less likely to run into a gaggle of screaming teenage girls. The most he'd get was a smile and a double take from the clerk that rang up his groceries.

Yeah. Food would be a good idea.

Chapter 4

Shelby

Shelby had dropped her mom off at the airport that evening and Evelyn had called to say she made it back to Miami. The sounds of her father's raspy grumbling in the background brought a tear to her eye; Shelby made an excuse to get off the phone quickly so she could throw herself onto the couch and let the tears flow with abandon.

She missed her mom already. And her dad. They were all she had in this mixed up mess. The last year had been... *hell* would be a good word to use to describe it. Running away from Miami and people she thought she could call friends, people she was about to call family, people who said they cared was a last resort. The expression went that the world was a cold, lonely place. At 92 degrees, it was far from cold, but lonely fit the bill.

The few minutes that she was going to give herself to wallow in self-pity turned into hours laying on the couch, on her back, staring at the ceiling, listening to the TV drone while tears rolled down the side of her face, into her ears, into her hair. The sun set, and the house grew dark and the late night shows began.

Time to play out this farce I call going to bed, she'd thought, pulling herself up from the couch. She stumbled toward the bedroom and rolled into bed, surprisingly falling asleep almost right away.

But now it was 3 AM and she was wide awake. Tired as sin, grumpy, almost in pain, she wanted to sleep so badly, but it wasn't happening. Heaving a defeated sigh, she sat up and began her nightly ritual of wandering.

She toured every square foot of the house, from her bedroom to the two spare rooms down the hall, to the den and the formal living room and dining room, to the kitchen and out to the garage, around the back of the house. She ended up outside in one of the patio chairs near the pool, gazing up at the stars, wondering what the hell she was doing up? And what was she supposed to be doing with this time? How was life better when she was three hours away from the only people who had proven they loved her by sticking by her side?

"I need to get out of this house. That's what I need."

That idea sounded good, better every second she considered it. A little drive, maybe to the 24 hour grocery store, down the street. No one would be there. No one would think it was odd to see someone picking up a few items at... she checked her watch... four o'clock in the morning.

It was a time of day. Middle of the day, middle of the night, who could tell anymore? She hadn't slept more than a few hours at a time in months. Around this time of morning, she was fidgeting from cabin fever, having wandered every inch of wherever she was staying—hotel room, condo, house in the hills, or this new home in Orlando. As beautiful as the fantastic view of the surrounding forest could be, she felt closed in, claustrophobic, a little trapped. Fresh air always did her some good and there was something about the air at the edge of night that she much preferred.

Energized and feeling like she had a purpose, Shelby stepped through the sliding glass doors off of the den, back into the house. Made a mental grocery list. Almost ducked into the bathroom to check her hair, but who would be at Publix at that early? Stock boys and random people that would look as harried and tired and disheveled as she did.

A little early morning shopping trip. It seemed like a good idea.

Chapter 5

Jackson

The best thing about shopping before sunrise was that no one was there to hear him talk to himself. Or argue with himself. Or sing along to the 80's hits coming out of the speakers overhead.

"\$4.59 for Cheerios? Highway robbery.... I can't remember if \$1.99 a pound is good for chicken or not..."

The cage of the grocery cart rattled on wobbly wheels as he slowly pushed it up one aisle and down another. Jackson wasn't much of a cook but he could make easy dishes if the directions were clear. He loved those one box meals—pour it in a pan, shove it in the oven. Warm up some rolls and there you have it. It was nothing fancy, but it was dinner. And if he couldn't stop by a Taqueria in the middle of the night and get a burrito, the least he could do was have something easy to make and warm up when he got home.

It was going to be a long year.

The store was virtually empty; a few cashiers, an overnight manager who didn't even look up when he walked past the Customer Service counter, stock boys refilling shelves and maintenance gliding over the floors with dust mops, emptying garbage cans, washing windows. It seemed like a peaceful job, if you were a night owl. Not a lot of people around to bug you, pretty much the same deal, night after night after night. Maybe, when he was done with all of this music industry business, he could retire and work at a grocery store, and work overnights, and make it his job to see that the windows sparkled, and the floors were clean, and the shelves were stocked.

Yeah, right.

Jackson heard the front doors slide open and then close again. Someone else liked shopping at 4 AM, it seemed. He'd made his way around most of the store, his cart only half full of boxed food, cereal, milk and bottled water. He stopped at the vitamin section, overwhelmed with all of his choices—One-A-Day for Men, One-A-Day for Energy, Vitamins added C, D, and E...

He pushed his cart, steering it toward the next aisle. With a loud rattle and the vibrant clang of steel on steel, he collided with something he couldn't see around the bend.

"Sorry, sorry. My fault."

"It's okay," said a female voice from around the corner. "I'm sort of not paying attention, either."

His cart wouldn't pull back for some reason, no matter how hard he pulled, so he had to walk around and inspect the wheels. As he expected, he'd rammed the other cart so hard that the wheels rode up and got caught in the rungs at the bottom of the other cart. The harder he pulled, the more he was melding them together.

"Uhm. Our carts seem to be uh... intertwined, here." Jackson bent and pushed and pulled and tipped and twisted, and finally they came apart, rolling away like they couldn't stand to be near each other.

"Thanks. Sorry, I guess I wasn't looking where I was going."

Jackson stood, wiping oil and dirt off of his hands onto his jeans, reaching out for his cart before it knocked boxes off of the shelves. He redirected it and lifted raised his face to hers. "No problem. It was my fault, anyway."

She smiled back and for a millisecond everything was fine. And then he saw it, in her eyes. Recognition. That look that women got when they realized who was standing in front of them, that split second of trying to decide if they should freak out or play it cool, say something or let it go, ask for a picture or an autograph and a serenade, or respect his privacy.

"Well, it was nice running into you," she said, her smile a little wider. She had a dimple. It was cute. *She* was cute, despite a half up, half down messy pony tail and an inside out t-shirt. Her eyes were red-rimmed, though and she looked tired. "Maybe we'll do it again sometime." She was going with playing it cool. Good choice.

“Sure,” he said with a chuckle. “Anytime you’re out shopping at five in the morning, I’m game.”
“It’s a date. Well... I’ll let you get back to your... shopping.”

He watched her back up and steer her cart around him, on her own trek through the store. He might be missing Kim but he was still a man with a libido and still knew what a pretty woman looked like. He could only imagine how she looked when she tried.

He poked his head around an end cap that boasted 50% off of Flintstone Vitamins, Bayer Aspirin, and Calamine lotion and watched her walk toward the frozen food section. His eyes fixed on two perfectly formed cheeks, hugged and outlined by the fabric of her yoga pants as they moved with her slow, sexy sway across the dull linoleum. His eyes roved up her body quickly before she could move out of his line of sight to her thin waist, slight shoulders and long neck. He wished he’d paid more attention to the front of her, but the back of her wasn’t a bad view at all.

She turned her head as she was about to go down an aisle. He quickly ducked back behind the end cap. Flushed and embarrassed, he pulled his cart down his own aisle and headed toward checkout. Praying she hadn’t seen him leering at her like a creepy old man.

But afraid that she had.

Shelby

Oh my fucking God!

She kept saying it to herself, because she couldn’t think of anything else to say. Why would *he* be at a grocery store at 5 AM? Didn’t he have people to shop for him?

It amused Shelby, only slightly though, that she was more pissed than star struck because she looked like ass and she knew it. She hadn’t even attempted to comb her hair or wipe off her lipstick from earlier in the day, or shower or...or... *anything*. And here she was in the middle of a grocery store, staring at one of music’s most eligible bachelors looking like shit on a stick. She cursed at herself all the way down the aisle.

Just shop and get the hell out of here, she told herself, mumbling something about frozen waffles and rounded a corner. A sale caught her eye and she turned her head. Beyond the sign boasting low prices on things she didn’t need, she caught a flash of raven hair duck behind the end cap. Then his cart was yanked out of sight.

Was he watching me?

She was flattered, sort of. If she’d looked better, she’d have been happy to return the attention, but who knew what he was looking at? And why? Was he laughing at her? Did he think she was drunk? Crazy? Was he comparing her to all those hot women he knew back in LA?

And what was he even doing here in Orlando?

Hope he liked the view.

Fuming, Shelby dug her short grocery list out of her bag and began checking items off, trying to put him —that gorgeous piece of man with blue eyes and dark hair and broad chest and voice like silk — out of her mind. It would probably be the only time she’d ever see him. It was just her luck that she met him at the wrong time, but maybe that’s what she deserved. She didn’t need to complicate her life anymore.

She parked her cart with the others and carried her bags to her car, popping the trunk with the button on her key ring and dumping the bags into the trunk. The sun crested the horizon, lighting up the car with a soft pink glow when she slid into the driver’s seat.

Shelby started the car and checked her rear view mirror. *Holy... God*. Why didn’t he cringe when he saw her? Her hair was everywhere, her eyes were red, her lips still stained with the previous day’s color. And her t-shirt was on *inside out*, the backward logo emblazoned across her chest. She wanted to yell and curse and throw things, but would have felt stupid doing so.

Instead, she rammed the car into drive and squealed out of the parking lot.

Jackson

He had ducked into his car, key in the ignition, about to start it up when he saw her bounce out of the store. She looked to be in a hurry, carrying several bags and a small purse toward a late model Mercedes. He felt creepy staring at her, but he couldn't stop himself if he'd wanted to. And he didn't.

She was oblivious, slamming her trunk closed after loading her groceries into it, then walking around to the driver side door, her breasts under her t-shirt bouncing with her movements. He licked his suddenly very dry lips, feeling a twitch in his dick and a lick of fire through his groin. *Down boy*, he muttered to himself. *Not today. But good to see you're still alive.*

Faster than he would like, she ducked into her car. From across the parking lot, he could barely make out her face through the tint in her windshield. It had a nice shape to it, sort of a heart. Cute, petite nose. Full lips. Arched brows... so maybe her mussed and messy look was a fluke.

He watched her check herself out in the rearview mirror, a look of disgust crossing her face. He laughed out loud, the sound bouncing around the interior of the car. *Yep, she's kicking herself, right about now.* She rolled her eyes at herself, her plump lips pursed as she pulled out, tires squealing as she rounded the corner at the end of the street.

Girls were funny. She was pissed that she looked like shit.

He didn't care. He hoped he might see her again.

Chapter 6

Shelby

"Did he say anything to you? Besides the 'hi' and 'sorry' and whatever else?"

"What was he supposed to say? 'Hey chick, you look like shit. Wanna go get some breakfast?' No, he didn't say anything else to me."

"Aww. Well, next time."

"Whatever," she replied, brushing past the subject. Shelby had relayed the entire embarrassing story and all Evelyn could think or talk about was if Jackson had said anything to her and what would happen 'next time'. It was almost guaranteed that there would be no next time. She had thought it would be fun to share the experience with her mom, but not if she wasn't going to act right. "What's dad up to?"

"You know. His usual. Building things out in the garage. He sends his love." Shelby's father, Roberto had been obsessed with models since he was a boy in Cuba and that was all he'd had to entertain himself. Trains, planes, cars-if a model of it existed, he built them. Thankfully, he didn't keep many of them. He ended up selling or donating most of them. It had kept him busy since he retired from teaching at a Miami junior high. It also kept him out of Evelyn's hair. She'd recently retired as a secretary for Dade County School District.

"Send him some love back for me."

"I will. So, you've moved to Orlando. All unpacked and everything. Now what? Are you going to find a job? Go to school? Lay on your couch for the next fifty years? What's next?"

That was the million dollar question. The idea was to get out of Miami. Everything from this point on was an unplanned adventure. Lucas had made sure she was taken care of for the foreseeable future. Beyond that, the settlement from the accident meant she didn't have to work if she didn't want to. She thought she'd enjoy something part time, maybe at a bookstore or a library, something to keep her mind stimulated and her hands busy.

Maybe she'd drive out to University of Central Florida and see if she could pick up something out there. Full time employees could take classes at a discounted rate. Not that she needed a discounted rate, but it would be another reason to take classes. She definitely had options, but first she had to be able to sleep at night and function during the day. And it would be nice if she could stop looking over her shoulder, eventually.

Shelby sank onto the chair that matched the couch and loveseat in the den, pulling at a lock of hair caught in the ponytail holder. She still hadn't done anything to her hair, but there was little chance she was going to run into a handsome celebrity between the den and the bathroom. She twisted sideways and kicked her feet up so she was laying across the chair, her feet dangling over one arm, her head over the other.

"Now... well, I guess I figure out how to live. How to become this new person I want to be. Live the life I want to live. Try to deal with all of this... yuck going on inside of me."

"One day at a time, sweetie," Evelyn soothed. "That's the only way it's going to come."

"I know. I just..." Tears began to well, her voice becoming unsteady, her breath quickening. Her chest tightened, matching the swell of emotion. "I still feel so guilty. It didn't have to be Lucas."

"But you know it wasn't something you could have chosen, because you would have chosen differently. So that means it was beyond your control. Right?"

That was logic and logic didn't apply here. Guilt knew no logic or sense. She could use sound reasoning all day, but still wail all night long.

"If I hadn't have insisted that we go back to the house, it never would have happened, and Lucas would be here, and—" Shelby swallowed, stopping abruptly.

Evelyn prodded. "And?"

Memories of that day poured into her mind. For over a year, she'd blocked them out. It was too painful to keep reliving. Surviving was not remembering. Now they flooded relentlessly, without warning. She remembered, more often than she wanted to, the last time she'd seen Lucas.

They'd fought. They were in the car, on the way a meeting at their wedding venue, a site that Lucas he had picked out and that Shelby hated, but she'd had no say in the matter. It was too big, too gaudy, too much show. She had longed for a small, private ceremony, maybe one the press wouldn't pick up and paint her as the *woman marrying a man twice her age*. He'd hated the implication that she was ashamed to be with him. It wasn't that way at all. Lucas had made a comment, something snide. Angry, Shelby whipped the car around and headed back to the house, threatening to pack her things and leave.

If it wasn't for that pissy fit, they'd have never been on that road. The tragic sequence of events that followed would have never been set in motion. Lucas would still be alive. Maybe not with her, but he'd with his friends and family and all the people who now hated her. She didn't blame them; they had good reason. It was her fault.

Shelby sobbed quietly into the receiver, giving in to the wave of sadness as it washed over and nearly drowned her. When it subsided, she sniffled and managed to sit up, wiping residual tears with the palm of her hand.

"I should try to run into that guy right now, when I look even worse."

Evelyn's hearty laughter on the other end of the line lifted her spirits a little. "Well, honey. It's nearing dinnertime. I better get something on the stove. You take care of yourself. Shower. Eat. Sleep. Get out of the house. Call me if you need me. I love you."

"Love you too, mom," she croaked, and hung up before the tears could start again. She hated the goodbyes.

Jackson

He was tempted to throw everything down and walk out, to head back to LA and sit in his big, empty, lonely house. Between half of the band showing late for rehearsal and the other half bickering with Rod, the 9:00 dinner break could not have come sooner.

Head pounding and nerves shot, Jackson opted to take his break in the car, cool air blowing on his face, smooth jazz on the radio. This was nothing like he was used to. *Boy Wonder* was never a fairy tale, but the guys were friends. They'd spend all day in the studio or on a set, then hang out all night playing video games, eating and laughing and talking.

Rod's band was a hodgepodge of musicians, all looking to break out and stand in front, soaking up the spotlight like they were going to be discovered and stolen away to play *legit* rock, as if the Stones were waiting for them to become available. Duke especially made no secret that he thought he was underpaid, underappreciated and stuck working in the candy ass genre of pop.

The truth, Jackson thought at least, was that pop covered so many different genres-every kind of music crossed over pop... country, rock, blues, alternative, hip hop. And yes, as much as he wanted to create an edgy sound and a new image, Rod Phillips was pop. He wished some musicians wouldn't view it as such a death sentence, but embrace it. You could do whatever you wanted to do and never be ousted from your genre. No one accused a pop artist of being a sellout or trying to appeal to another audience. It was all pop.

The automatic sprinklers embedded in the sprawling emerald green lawn rose from their holes in the ground and began their nightly timed rituals. He tapped his fingers on the steering wheel, creating a beat off of the rhythm of the *chigchigchigchigchig* sounds in the background of Wynton Marsalis blowing a sweet horn in his ears.

The hour passed quickly. Jackson climbed out of the car and made his way back into the studio, determined to establish some kind of order and camaraderie among the band, otherwise they not only

weren't going to get the new album written, but they weren't going to be recording anything and they definitely wouldn't make it to the tour.

"Alright, guys," he said, barreling into the rehearsal room and stepping onto the makeshift stage, which was nothing more than a platform at the head of the room. He added a take-charge edge to his voice, leveling a serious stare at each of them scattered around the room.

"This bitching stops today. Right now. We have a job to do. That job is to make music, to make waves, to make people sit up and *turn it up*. I'm here to do that. Scratch that, I'm here to orchestrate that. If you didn't need me, I wouldn't be here, so if you're not here to work with me, pick up your instrument and get out. Those that choose to stay are here to record an album and plan a tour that will knock fans on their asses."

He should get mad more often—all of them, the band and Rod, stared at him, wide eyed like children in trouble. But none of them moved. Jackson nodded, hands on his hips, satisfied he'd made his point.

"Rod." He pointed, and then snapped his fingers to the platform. "Get up here. Bring your guitar. Let's go through verse two of *Evil Side of Me* with the changes." Rod obeyed, slipping the guitar strap around his neck, poised to play, watching Jackson for the cue.

"Duke." Reluctantly, he stood. Jackson was amazed he didn't check out, but was happy he'd stayed. Duke was a talented guitarist and Jackson had plans for him. "You're too loud and you're coming in too soon, riding all over Rod and competing for sound. Pull it back. You accent the lead. Do your job right and people will hear you. Play the notes and have a good time. Alright?"

Duke nodded, shifting his weight from foot to foot. Contrite, but grudgingly so. "Okay, get up here."

One by one, Jackson placed the band members on the platform, as he'd had them arranged in his mind. Rod was front and center. Cole, the drummer, was back and center. Sam was on Rod's right, Jackson on keyboards and Duke on guitar was to Rod's left. He stepped back, rubbing his chin, chewing his bottom lip, finally making his way back to the platform and stepping behind the multiple sets of keyboards.

"This is our formation. I don't have you here because I'm on an ego trip and I want to be the focus. We all know that's Rod."

A murmur of laughter crossed the room. Jackson relaxed and fell into his new role as the man in charge. "I have you here because I can hear everyone. Everyone can hear me. Everyone can hear each other and you each have a piece of the stage. Everybody shines."

Each man nodded as his eyes traveled the room. There was no tension, only eager anticipation to start playing. "So since everybody shines, that means everybody has to be good, which means we have to rehearse. From the top."

Cole counted off the song with four loud clacks of wooden sticks. A gritty tenor filled the room as Rod broke into the verse, his fingers working the guitar as if it were an extension of him. Jackson backed him, his voice almost echoing Rod's in a sweet harmony. Duke and Sam dropped in perfectly on cue.

They played into their usual 10 second fadeout and then the room was silent, everyone watching Jackson for his reaction. He stood at the keyboard, nodding his head.

"That was good, guys. Real good. Now we're getting somewhere." Not excited, so they wouldn't get to comfortable with making him happy. "We'll go over that one again tomorrow. Let's move on to *Can't Get Enough*. Come around the keyboards and we'll go over the changes."

Jackson hoped 4 AM rehearsal endings weren't going to become a habit. His body was starting to adjust to the new time zone and 4 AM actually felt like 4 AM tonight. He fell into his car, dreading the long, sleepy drive across Orlando to Winter Park. He was hungry and tired. Home called him, harder than it had ever called before.

Forty five minutes later, he was nearing his neighborhood. He passed the Publix, half a smile crossing his lips, remembering the woman he'd seen there the night before, wondering if he'd ever see her again. She seemed nice, kind of cute. A lot sexy. He was always up for meeting someone new. Maybe she could distract him from the Kim-shaped hole in his heart.

Without even thinking about how creepy it was, he decided he'd keep an eye out for her. Maybe run into her again, accidentally on purpose.

Chapter 7

Shelby

I am so fucking crazy. Crazy!

It was 4:30 AM. Shelby was awake and headed to the store. She needed...milk? Right. At 4:30 in the morning. With her washed, blow dried and cascading over her shoulders, casually dressed in tight jeans and a form fitting t-shirt and flip flops, to show off her freshly painted toes. A light dusting of powder, mascara, some lip gloss, her new designer shades and a spritz of body spray.

"Oh my God," she ranted to herself, the bright blue and green Publix sign coming into view ahead. Her heartbeat sped up almost double time. "I look crazy. It's not like I'll see him two days in a row. I don't even know why I'm going. I totally look like I got dolled up to go to the grocery store. For milk! And if he's in there, it's totally going to look like I'm trying to make up for looking like ass yesterday."

Shelby pulled into a spot near the entrance, turned off the car, and stepped inside the brightly lit store, a list in one hand, purse in the other.

"I can't even stand myself right now. Why am I here? I'm so ridiculous."

"Excuse me?" Shelby whipped around, not realizing anyone would be around to hear her. One of the janitors was behind her, dust mop in hand, dark brown eyes quizzically staring at her.

"Nothing," she replied, shaking her head, dumping her purse into a cart and pushing it forward. "Sorry. Nothing."

Shelby quickly marked items off of her list—things she had to come and pick up at this time of morning, with her hair done and makeup on and her best jeans and that shirt she loved that hit her waist just right. She was not, absolutely not, subconsciously looking for him. He wasn't crazy like her, frequenting grocery stores before sunrise, while no one else in the world was awake.

She didn't see him. She didn't expect to, but was still disappointed to not run into him. Despondent, she unloaded the items from her cart and stood in the checkout line, watched the clerk bag them and set the bags in the cart, paid for her groceries and slowly wheeled the cart to her car.

Maybe... somewhere... deep in the recesses of her mind, she thought she might see him again. And maybe she was hoping to make up for the day before, when she looked so terrible. And maybe show him what she looked like when she put some effort into it.

Shelby sighed, popping the trunk.

And then maybe he'd ask her out and they'd have a great time and keep dating and live happily ever after. Or maybe (and more realistically) they'd hook up and have some mind-blowing sex. Blow off some steam. It had been a long, long time since she'd even felt like having sex. She barely remembered what it was like to enjoy it. He oozed sex. She could use some of that, right about now.

It wouldn't be just the sex that she'd be interested in. She'd never met a celebrity before. Not a real one, anyway. Lucas knew a lot of high powered people and she'd met them all, but no one that anyone would recognize if they walked down the street. Or ran into her with their grocery cart. None with that smile or those eyes or that voice. None that were down to earth and normal. Any celebrity that did his own shopping in the dead of night wasn't spoiled—he was trying to survive like everyone else.

Shelby transferred a few bags from the cart to her car, mentally berating herself. *I can't even believe I was actually putting effort into it. Like, really trying to meet him again, after bawling my eyes out over Lucas earlier--"*

"Hey, there. Thought you looked familiar." Shelby froze, her hands hanging in midair, tan plastic grocery bag dangling from two fingers. That voice. The way it sent tingles down her spine... she'd know it anywhere.

But her body wouldn't move, no matter how hard she tried to casually turn around and flip her hair back and give him a bright smile. The most she could do was turn her head, slowly, and look at his feet, clad in red and black sneakers, then let her eyes travel up his body, over jeans that pooled at the ankles and were loose all the way up the leg and hung low on his hips. She tried hard to skip over the bulge at the junction of his thighs but... she couldn't. Her gaze lingered there longer than she'd planned. *Mmmph*. She wondered if the rumors about him were true.

Shelby resisted licking her lips, tore her eyes away from his groin and forced them up. Up over the Ed Hardy hoodie he wore with the grey t-shirt underneath and what appeared to be a ring of dried sweat around the collar. She wondered what he'd been doing, that he was sweating so hard. And why he was out at so early... or late... again. Was he with someone? And then came to talk to her? Asshole.

A pang shot through her. Felt like envy. She hated herself for feeling it.

Her eyes finally made it to a long, thin face, with more than a 5 o'clock shadow growing, a nose that should detract from his looks but oddly enhanced them and two gorgeous pools of sparkling blue that were narrowed and hooded as he stared at her, a wrinkle of concern spreading across his forehead.

"Are you okay? Let me help you with that."

She swallowed the lump in her throat and let him reach around her for the rest of the bags in her cart and watched him gingerly place them in the trunk. He stepped back and smiled. She stared, speechless.

"Oh, this too? Let me...uh..." Jackson stepped forward again, took the bag that was hanging from her fingers and placed it among the others. "That's it? Anything else going in here? Better grab your purse."

Shelby nearly smacked herself, trying to bring her mind into focus, grabbing her purse and sliding it onto her arm. "Thank you. I appreciate your help." She smiled up at him, hoping she didn't look like a lovesick teenager. It was that he was so... so close and so much better looking in person than on TV and in pictures, and she looked better, she thought, this time around and *ohmyGodpleasetalktome*.

"I was going to close this..." Jackson had one hand on the top of the trunk and was moving to close it, asking for permission with a raised eyebrow. Shelby nodded and stepped back. The trunk closed with a soft thunk, after which he shoved his hands in the pockets of his jeans, and shrugged his shoulders. An uncomfortable smile drifted between them, as if each one expected the other to say something.

"So. I guess you like to shop this early, too." Shelby inwardly rolled her eyes at herself. *Lame*.

"Sometimes," he answered, glancing up at the neon green Publix sign outside of the store. "It's somewhere to go. And it's open and cool inside. It starts getting hot as soon as the sun comes up, so..." Jackson bobbed his head from one side to the other. Shelby thought that was the cutest thing she'd ever seen.

"I totally get that. Not a lot of places are open this early. Or... late. Miami is a twenty-four hour city. I'm surprised at how this place slows down at night."

"Mhmm," he said, nodding. "Yeah, I uh... have spent some time down in Miami. It is like that, yeah. LA, too. I'm starting to miss that. I mean, there's places open..."

"When you get used to being able to get whatever you want, you can't settle for waffles at Denny's."

He nodded, looking relieved that she commiserated. Honestly, she was relieved that he understood. "I don't sleep well," she confessed. "There's usually no one here this time of morning. It's peaceful. A safe place to walk around, at least."

His eyes sparkled, giving her a warning that a joke was coming. "Until some jackass runs into your cart and ruins the whole experience."

She laughed, relaxing and enjoying this encounter much more than the previous one. "Right. Or some jackass is in the way of *your* cart."

He laughed, much to her delight. The sound was genuine, deep and chesty and chuckle inducing itself. She wanted to hear it again. And again and again.

He gestured toward the automatic doors, opening and closing as people were walking in and out. The city was waking up. "Well, uh...I better head in and pick up my stuff. My day starts around noon. I need to get home and get some rest. It was nice seeing you, again."

Shelby could not imagine why they couldn't just stand around smiling at each other and laughing at lame jokes until sunrise. "Yeah, you too. Maybe we'll do it again... sometime."

Jackson turned before walking inside, the greatest grin on his face. "That would be nice. That would be really nice. Take care, honey." He gave her a nod, a tip of his head and wiggled a few fingers at her in a wave, then turned and walked inside. *Sauntered* inside.

Goddamn, that man was sexy.

Shelby unlocked her car door and poured herself inside, then slumped forward onto the steering wheel, trying not to scream. That would be ridiculous and immature. But.... *he* called her *honey*.

Chapter 8

Jackson

Jackson smiled to himself, wandering the store, feeling good about that encounter. He planned to walk around for a few minutes, give her a chance to pull out and be on her way before going back out to his car. He hadn't needed anything from the store, but as he was passing the lot, he saw her pull in and couldn't help himself. He pulled in behind her and watched her get out of the car.

She'd made up for the day before. That she *tried* to was obvious. He appreciated the effort. She was beautiful but that was no surprise. Big brown doe eyes, creamy toasted cinnamon skin, wavy hair that flowed past her shoulders and pretty plump kissable lips. He was impressed, as he knew he would be, at what she looked like when she tried. Truth be told, he liked her fine in yoga pants and messy hair. It told him what she'd look like after sex. Not bad.

He tried to decide how long he would wait for her to come back out, since he was beginning to feel creepy. Being stalked, knowing someone saw you go into a store and would be waiting for you to come out was unnerving. Yet here he was, doing the same thing to her. He now understood the appeal.

After twenty minutes he'd convinced himself that he was a rude asshole. Besides, he was tired and rehearsal was starting early because the band had a function to attend later that night. He reached toward the ignition but out of the corner of his eye spotted the double doors sliding open.

She exited the store, the corners of her mouth in a downturn. He wondered why she seemed so sad and subdued. She slowly rolled the cart to her car and popped the trunk. And then, because he was suddenly brave, he decided to get out of the car and talk to her.

Despite getting pretty, she must not have expected to see him. She froze in place for a moment, wide-eyed and dumbfounded. He kept talking, trying to get her to relax. It worked. She flashed a pretty smile at him, even laughed a couple of times. He liked the sound of it, the sound of her voice. That dimple in her cheek. The way her eyes lit up when she spoke to him.

She seemed nice. Not crazy. A little hung up but maybe that would fade... well maybe, if he'd actually asked her out like he thought of doing. Or even... he groaned, mentally smacking his forehead. He didn't get her name!

Shelby

He had come tearing out of Publix just as she had composed herself and was getting ready to pull out. He'd marched right up to her window and rapped a knuckle on the glass. Shelby pressed the lever to slide the window down and he practically shoved his head into the car.

"Still here...are you okay?"

She nodded, hoping her shaking hands weren't obvious. "I'm fine. Was about to leave."

"Just checking. Uh...so, hi." He smiled, chuckling a little.

"Hi again."

"I know you know my name, but I don't know yours. Can I? Know your name?"

"Shelby...uhm....Morris." She stuck a hand out toward him. He reached through the window and shook it, giving her a squeeze before he let go. The calluses on the tips of his fingers made her wonder what they'd feel like on her skin. "Nice to meet you."

"Yeah, you too. So, I was thinking..." He hesitated, blinking rapidly, licking his lips. "Maybe you'd want to do a little shopping later?"

"Shopping?"

He laughed, propping his elbow in the window. "It was a joke. About how we keep seeing each other at the grocery store."

"Oh. Because honestly? I just bought a ton of shit I don't need."

He smiled, laughing a short burst of 'ha'. "Honestly, I was about to do the same. So..." Jackson stared, like he was expecting an answer.

"So...I'm sorry. Were you serious about shopping?"

"Oh, no. Sorry. I wondered if you were free later on. If not, maybe we could meet up another time..."

"Uhm... I'm free."

"Cool. Uh. I'm working with Rod Phillips Band— you know him?" She nodded. "We're working today so, I don't exactly know what time I'll be available. Sometimes I get caught up in writing or organizing, since I have paper everywhere and four different notebooks that I keep for music but uhm..."

He scratched his temple as his voice trailed off. Then he regrouped. "Well, anyway. How can I reach you?"

Shelby smirked. "They have these things called cell phones. They're pretty handy. You can call me on mine. From yours."

He laughed, thank God. Kind of hard, with his eyes closed. "I guess I deserved that. Could I get that number from you?"

She dug into her purse for a pen and a piece of paper, scribbled her name and number onto the back of the moving company's business card and handed it to him. He stared at it for a few seconds and then slid it into the front pocket of his jeans.

"Thanks. So. I'll give you a call."

"Sounds good. Looking forward to it."

"Me too. So. I'll let ya go."

Jackson stepped back and shoved his hands in his pockets again, moving to the sidewalk outside the store entrance. Shelby pulled out of the spot, waiving as she drove past him. He waved back. And in her rearview mirror, as she turned onto the side street that ran alongside the store, he was still standing in the same spot, watching her tail lights retreat.

What should I wear? I wonder where we'll go. What should I wear? I wonder what time he'll call. What should I wear?!

Damn. It was going to be a long day.

Jackson

You have a date with a girl you met at a grocery store. Do you even know where you're taking her?

The answer was no, of course. But he wasn't worried about it. He'd come up with something.

What he was worried about was making it through the day and making enough headway that he'd be able to take off early and not feel guilty about it. What he worried about was sitting across from her somewhere... or next to her somewhere... and not being able to concentrate on being with her. He needed this date. He needed this time away, to be somewhere other than home or holed up in a windowless studio with five other guys. He needed the company and pleasure and sight and sound of a woman. A beautiful woman.

There was something about her, this Shelby... something that intrigued him. Something in her smile, her laugh, her sense of humor. When she finally relaxed, he relaxed. He wanted to get to know her.

'Well,' he thought to himself, *'let's be honest.'* He wanted to fuck her.

Jackson wanted to have hot, steamy sex with this Shelby girl, this hot little thing he met at the grocery store, who seemed to want it too if he read her right. He could use some sex; it had been a while. Six weeks, almost exactly. In fact, the day that Rod called him about taking this job, he'd awakened next to a bony, passed out girl in Covina.

It had been even longer since he'd had meaningful sex with someone he actually liked and wouldn't mind seeing outside of the bedroom. Or off of the kitchen counter. Or even if she wasn't up against a wall, moaning his name and screaming dirty, nasty things into the air, he'd be okay with it. He had a feeling that this Shelby was going to be one of those women.

But first he wanted to get to know her, to decide if the need to fuck her came from the fact that he was missing Kim like he'd miss an arm or because she was an engaging, beautiful, sexy little thing. He hoped it was the latter.

By the time he finally made it home, bands of sunlight threatened over the horizon and peeked through the blinds in the living room. Jackson pulled the car into the garage and headed straight through the kitchen and up the steps. Yawning, he peeled off his clothes down to plain boxer briefs and scratched his belly as he rolled into the bed. He lay on his stomach and pointed a remote at the TV that hung in the corner of the room.

It didn't matter what was on—he wasn't watching it anyway. It was noise to drown out the thoughts that kept coming. After a few minutes, he snapped the TV off again and flipped to his back, staring at the ceiling, watching the fan make endless revolutions. Around and around, it turned, providing a light breeze that cut through early morning mugginess, when the cool of night gave way to the heat of the day. The fan needed to be dusted.

Finally he gave in, tucking one hand behind his head, the other under the band of his boxers.

He closed his eyes, filling his mind with her face, from the dimple in her cheek to her long, elegant neck, to that dip at the bottom of her throat. His breathing sped up, matching the rate of his heart beat and the speed of his palm along a rigid length. Pulling and twisting and groaning and breathing deeply, his mind raced with images—the curve of her breasts and the telltale twin signs of arousal poking out of the t-shirt she wore. He pictured her walk, that great ass and the way it moved in those pants she wore yesterday. He heard her voice in his head, loved how it was sort of husky, how it dug right under his skin and danced across his nerve endings and... *uuunnnggghhh...*

His head rocked back in sweet relief as he panted, catching his breath. The fan, coupled with the sheen of sweat over his skin cooled him, though his blood boiled red-hot. His eyelids grew heavy, but his mind was still alive with the thought that he would see her again. Soon.

Shit. It was going to be a long day.