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trust again

a novel

Can a broken heart ever mend?

Chapter 5

I spent the rest of the week trying to pull myself together, pretending that nothing had happened. Spencer was banished to a file in the corner of my brain labeled non-existent. Instead of thinking about him, I went to classes, worked with Allie on polishing up our essay, and—the minute I got home—returned to work on *Hot for You*, like there was no tomorrow. That was also why I'd turned down Allie's invitation to come over Friday night and go out partying. That, and the fact that seeing Spencer again might well kill me.

Non-existent.

I'd just stay home and write. Or read. Or both. Anything but think about Spencer.

Non-existent!

When I returned to the dorm that evening the halls were buzzing with activity. Many students were heading home for the weekend, visiting their families or keeping up their long-distance relationships.

Carrying my shoulder bag, some groceries, and a bag of new books, I stood for a second in front of my door, then knocked loudly a few times to warn Sawyer. Closing my eyes, I entered the room.

"At the count of three, I'll open my eyes. If anyone's indecent, he or she should get dressed if they don't want me to see them," I announced loudly.

The answer came in the form of a muffled sob.

My eyes popped open, I dropped my bags to the ground. "Sawyer?"

"Get out," came the gruff answer.

She was sitting by the window on her side of the room. Her blonde, tangled hair hung like a curtain in front of her face and she'd pulled her legs up to her chest.

I pulled a second chair up to the window next to her and sat down. "What's wrong?"

"Go to hell, Dawn." She was still looking at the floor.

"I know, you're not into people trying to help you," I said. "But you sound like you've been crying for hours, and Sawyer Dixon just doesn't cry."

Sawyer lifted her head and looked at me blankly. Her makeup was smeared; gray streaks ran down her cheeks.

"Who should I kill? I know someone who owes me a favor," I said.

She snorted.

"I hooked up with a guy a few days ago."

"What did the asshole do to you?" I asked, trying to sound calm. Inside, my stomach was churning.

"We fooled around," she began, clearing her throat.

"My necklace got caught in my hair, so I took it off, and now... it's gone." Her expression went blank again. "He says he has no idea what I'm talking about."

“Is the necklace important to you?” I asked carefully, with a frown.

She nodded. It was a short, choppy motion and I could tell how hard it must be for her to share anything with me.

“It was my mom’s. It’s a pendant and...” She swallowed hard and briefly closed her eyes. Jagged breaths made her shoulders tremble, and I could hardly believe that this was my roommate.

Sawyer never revealed her feelings and was so closed-off that I sometimes wondered if she was human. If losing a necklace made her this upset, it must mean a lot to her. And if so, I wanted to help.

I dared to reach out and touch her arm. “Tell me where he lives.”

She frowned. “I don’t need a guardian angel.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. You’re strong, independent, and fabulous, but sometimes it helps to have backup.” Our eyes met. “I’m going to get your necklace back for you.”

She shook her head, a slight smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. “I don’t have a say in the matter, do I? You’re just going to do it?”

Grinning, I nodded and stood up. She texted the address to my phone.

Of course it was the frat house for jocks. Not that Sawyer would ever hang out with a mere mortal, someone who didn’t look like he could crush me with one hand.

It was obvious from a distance that preparations were under way for a party. A couple of guys were hoisting beer kegs down from the back of a truck, while their friends were coming out the front door to form the next part of the chain to move the kegs inside.

I was sure I’d been here before, a couple of months ago. Allie and I had let a couple of guys talk us into going to their party. It was a frat house, that much I remembered. In any case, the beautiful, old facade of the building seemed familiar.

I squared my shoulders and headed past the beer keg guys, climbing the stairs to the front door. Trying to exude confidence, I tried to ignore the gawkers, hoping none of them would ask me what I was doing there. These frat guys were known for trying to pick up any girls they could. Tonight it was my turn. Undercover, don’t get me wrong.

Sawyer’s instructions told me to go to the second floor, third room to the left.

Easy as pie.

Once upstairs, I strode down the corridor until I’d reached the door that I hoped would lead me to the necklace. Goosebumps prickled my arms; adrenaline surged through me, and every fiber of my being knew I was about to do something forbidden.

This would work well in my next story.

I felt like an undercover agent, mysterious... but unfortunately not invisible.

“Hey,” a deep voice resounded in the hallway.

Shit.

I stood stock still, and felt my cheeks burning. If only I wouldn’t blush. Putting on my most casual expression, I turned around and ran my fingers through my hair in what I hoped was a flirtatious gesture.

“Hi,” I responded.

I looked at the guy leaning against a doorframe a few doors down, his arms crossed over his broad chest. Beautiful light green eyes returned my gaze.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“I’m looking for…” Damn: Sawyer had told me the guy’s name, but I couldn’t remember it for the life of me.

Feverishly, I tried to come up with something. “... the snuggle bunny who lives here. We met last week in Professor Lambert’s lecture; he ran into me and knocked my things everywhere—they went flying into the aisles. Just like in the movies.”

His mouth twitched and he took a slow step toward me. Automatically, I stepped back.

“I’m Brix,” he said, holding out his hand.

Something clicked in the back of my mind as our hands touched. We’d met somewhere.

OMG. He was the same guy who’d gotten Allie so drunk a few months back that she ended the evening by dancing on a table.

I hoped he didn’t recognize me.

“It’s about time you told me your name,” Brix whispered.

Yes! He had no idea who I was.

“I’m Chelsea,” I said, picking the first name that came to mind.

“Nice to meet you, Chelsea.” Brix gave me a half smile. “Your ‘snuggle bunny’ isn’t home right now, and he usually locks his room. But I’m pretty sure he’d be glad to meet you later downstairs. Why don’t we get you a drink?”

I had a feeling he wouldn’t take kindly to rejection. There was nothing to do but go with Brix. He led me into the kitchen and filled a plastic cup with punch that he’d taken out of the fridge.

I toasted with Brix, who’d opened a beer for himself. Then he pulled me over to a leather sofa in the middle of the lounge. I peeled off my jacket, wrapped it along with my scarf around the strap of my bag and set both at my feet. A few guys were already here for the party; they seemed to be frat boys, as well. A huge sound system was brought in and connected, which thundered bass through the whole house.

Cautiously, I sipped the punch. Mmmm. The stuff tasted like fruity ice cream with a hint of vanilla.

“Good, right?” Brix leaned in and put an arm on the back of the couch.

I nodded. “What’s in it?”

His expression turned conspiratorial. “My grandma’s secret recipe.”

I laughed and took another sip. My weakness for ice cream was getting in the way of my mission—the punch tasted like a passion fruit milkshake. I didn’t intend to empty the cup, but it happened by itself while I kept Brix talking about himself so I didn’t have to think up more lies.

When Brix saw that my cup was empty, he got up and pushed his way through the crowd to the kitchen to get me a refill.

Now was my chance.

I grabbed my things and stood up. Everything started spinning, and I had to lean on the back of the sofa with one hand and blink to make it stop. The sweeter the alcohol, the more

careful you had to be. It was a rule I'd broken more than once.

I squeezed past the makeshift dance floor behind the sofa and headed for the stairs. Tons of people were milling around already. The air was stuffy and smelled like pot.

Excellent.

I climbed the steps, clinging to the railing. The staircase below me seemed to sway, and it took all my concentration to stay on mission. Upstairs, hardly anyone noticed me. I saw a couple standing close to the wall, going at each other. As quickly as possible in my sorry state, I moved to the third door on the left and turned the knob. In a flash I had pushed through the small gap and closed the door silently behind me.

Holding my breath, I turned around. When I finally inhaled again, the smell of citrus disinfectant penetrated my nostrils.

I would kill Sawyer: where had she led me?

After groping around for a moment, I found the light switch on the right-hand side of the door. Flipping it, I wished I could have thrown a tantrum then and there.

Sawyer's instructions had brought me right into the bathroom. That fucking idiot. Just as I was digging my phone out of my bag, the door behind me opened, and I was pushed forward. I spun around. Brix was standing in the doorway, eyes narrowed.

"Did you find what you were looking for?"

"I came for a friend," I said quickly and raised my hands defensively. "She left her necklace here, and I wanted to get it back for her because it has sentimental value. There, now you have the boring truth about why I'm in your bathroom."

"Right, I get it. And I'm Jesus Christ."

In a split second he'd slammed the door shut. Outside, I heard the screech of a metal chair being dragged across the floor. He'd barricaded me in the bathroom with a chair.

"Hey!" Grabbing the doorknob, I rattled it in vain. "Brix! Let me out of here right now!"

He just laughed. "Over my dead body, Chelsea. You can go when the party's over and you don't find anything to snort." His footsteps grew distant; I heard him descend the stairs.

Grabbing the doorknob again, I shook it vigorously and slammed myself against the door. It wouldn't budge. The bastard had actually imprisoned me in his bathroom.

This couldn't be happening.

A hysterical giggle escaped my throat. I tried not to panic.

Looking around the room, I realized my only escape would be through the window, which was between the bathtub and the toilet. Opening it, I poked my head out and looked down to see a bunch of trash bins way, way below. In front of them was a narrow, paved path, and then the lawn. I'd never survive a jump from here.

With a frustrated sigh, I sat on the toilet seat cover and looked at my phone. There was a new text message. From Sawyer.

Sorry, third door on the right. Not left.

I wanted to bang my head against the bathroom wall and write back that it was too late now, thank you very much. Instead, I stared at my phone, turned it around in my hand, decided to swallow my pride and call Allie. What choice did I have, if I didn't want to be trapped here all night? Slowly, I lifted the phone to my ear.

"Hello?" There were voices and the sound of clattering dishes in the background.

I cleared my throat. "Hey, Allie. I need your help."

"What's wrong?"

"I... I'm in trouble."

She inhaled sharply. "Don't worry, Dawn."

"It's not that bad, I promise. Someone just locked me up and..."

"What!" she screeched. "Someone locked you up?"

"Is that Dawn?" Spencer's voice emerged from the din.

"She's in trouble, Spence. I think she..." Allie trailed off.

"Where the hell are you?" Spencer barked into the phone.

I pressed my forefinger and thumb on the bridge of my nose and collected myself.

"I'm fine. I'm at that stupid frat house where Allie and I partied last semester and—"

He cursed. "I'll be right there."

There was noise on the line; then I heard Spencer and Kaden talking in the background.

"Dawn, you still there?" Allie had picked up again.

"Yes. Can one of you come get me?" I asked sheepishly.

"Spencer is already putting on his jacket. I just have to find my bag and—"

"No! You don't have to drop everything for my sake. It's perfectly okay if only one of you gets me. Please don't make a big thing about it."

"But I feel weird about you being in that house with all those creepy guys," Allie insisted.

"Allie, come on. I'm a hundred times safer sitting here on this toilet seat than you were last time you were here. Please don't interrupt dinner for my sake," I begged. It was bad enough to embarrass myself in front of Spencer. Allie's evening shouldn't be ruined just because I was a lousy undercover agent.

There was a brief silence. "Are you absolutely sure?"

"Of course! Tell Spencer I'll text him about what room I'm in."

It took another ten minutes for me to convince her that I was not in mortal danger.

After we hung up, I felt both relieved and nervous to know that Spencer was on his way.

To calm myself, I took a book from my bag and flipped to the last chapter. But I couldn't concentrate.

It felt like it took forever, but eventually I heard heavy steps heading in my direction. Please let it be Spencer, not Brix, I thought.

"Dawn?"

"Spence?"

"I'm going to kill that bastard," he said. Suddenly, I heard the chair being dragged away and the door flew open.

Spencer was standing there; a wave of relief washed over me.