



Face
the
MUSIC

ANDREA K. ROBBINS

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Published by Andrea K. Robbins at Smashwords

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Table of Contents

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[A Note From the Author](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Connect With Me Online](#)

Dedication

For my blue-eyed, curly-haired, mini-me who, at 5 years old, told me:
Mama, when you finish your butterfly book don't write another, okay? You never have time to play with me anymore.

Prologue

I pushed open the door to his apartment and froze. The place was empty. Totally bare. There were dents in the grey carpet where the couch had been. Nails poked out of the wall, but the framed mirror that hung there was gone.

My brain was slow at comprehending. I just stood there, dumbfounded, trying to understand. What was happening? Where was everything?

Paul stepped out of the back bedroom but stopped when he saw me. He had a suitcase in one hand and the red duffle bag I'd given him for his birthday slung over his shoulder. "Allison?" he said, looking anywhere but at me. "What are you doing here?"

I drew in a deep breath, trying to contain the panic rising inside me. "I was going to surprise you with dinner." I glanced at the sack of groceries in my arm. "I haven't seen you for two days." My mind was replaying recent conversations, trying to recall if he'd mentioned anything about taking a trip. I was drawing a blank. "Are, are you going somewhere?"

His baby blue eyes were dark and darted from the wall to the floor to my face. He may have been silent for words, but the look I got gave all the answers I needed.

"You're leaving." It was more of a statement than a question.

He nodded so slightly that I wondered if I had imagined it. "Look. I don't know what I'm supposed to say here. I thought it would be easier if I just went."

"Went? Where?"

“I’m going to Toronto.”

It was like I was in a dream, disconnected from my body and watching the scene unfold from somewhere else. The detachment kept me from totally losing it.

“Toronto? As in Canada? Why?” My voice was small and high in my throat.

He gnawed on his thumbnail, something he did when he was agitated. “Jesus, Allie. Do we really have to do this? Can’t you just let it be, without all the explication?”

I flinched. “Let what be? I don’t understand what’s happening, Paul.” Actually I did, but I was holding onto the hope that there was another explanation.

“I got a promotion. They need me in the Toronto office.”

I shook my head, tears threatening to come. “I can’t go to Toronto. I have too many obligations here, you know that.”

He blew out a breath and gave me a long, pitiful look. I knew then that there were no other explanations.

“You don’t want me to go.” My voice was deadpan as I stated that little truth. Whatever strength was using to contain my panic was about to shatter.

He continued to look at me as if I were some pathetic little child. “Can you honestly say you’re happy?”

It felt like a loaded question. I closed my eyes, hoping that when I opened them I’d awaken from this nightmare.

But it wasn’t a dream. His grievances went on, “It’s like we’re already married. Day after day, we do the same damn things, have the same stupid conversations. I’m suffocating. Aren’t you?” He paused, and if he was looking for me to give confirmation, I didn’t. I just stood there, unbelieving, watching from my distant, detached perch. “I know you’ve got a lot of shit on your plate right now, and I’ve tried to be supportive. Believe me. It’s just too much. I feel like you’re sucking the life right out of me.”

He then picked up his bags and walked past me. Right out the door. Right out of my life.

Chapter 1

Six months later...

My alarm went off at a quarter to six, but I didn’t get up right away. Instead, I hit the snooze button and buried my face in the soft flannel pillowcase. A vivid dream about Chris Knots, the super sexy frontrunner on this new reality TV show, *Superstardom*, was rapidly fading from my mind. Desperate to reclaim the details, I squeezed my eyes shut and fought to remember. My efforts were mostly futile, however. Nothing left but a few foggy scenes. A campfire on a beach somewhere, under a blanket of stars...

I sat up and hugged my pillow, silently chastising myself for fantasizing about a life I’d certainly never know with a man I’d never even met. “Pull your head out of the clouds, Allison,” I mumbled, tossing the blankets aside and reaching over to switch off the alarm.

My phone buzzed. Two missed calls and a text, both from days earlier. Would I ever get a message on time? I really needed to stop by the store and talk to someone, but with the jam-packed

schedule I kept, getting my phone fixed was low on the list of priorities.

~~Though my schedule was demanding, the days weren't necessarily exciting.~~ At the age of twenty-four, my life was a series of perfectly planned routines: get up around six, go out to the kitchen, flip on the under-the-counter radio, and sip a cup of coffee while I checked my email before getting ready for work.

Life was expensive, and it was hard to make ends meet. My younger sister Emily and I, along with her four-year-old daughter, Molly, shared a small, two bedroom apartment in the West Loop neighborhood of Chicago. It wasn't much, but we were comfortable. Along with the bedrooms, the apartment had a spacious bathroom, a kitchen, and a cozy living room. The taupe colored walls were dotted with pictures of loved ones: Molly as a baby, dressed in a blue and white polka-dotted dress, Emily's high school graduation picture, Grams and Gramps on their thirty-fifth wedding anniversary and a snapshot of mom that was taken just a month before she died. That last one was hard for me to look at.

I had to tip-toe around all of Molly's toys to get out the door. They were scattered everywhere. Some days I wondered if 'kid' was synonymous with 'slob'.

After college, I got a job teaching Biology to tenth graders. It was a lot of fun but didn't pay enough for me to make all my bills, so I gave it up after only a year. But I loved teaching, so I went back to school and was working on my Ph.D. I also spent time assisting my advising professor and tutored the younger contestants behind the scenes of *Superstardom*.

This was the show's first season and, so far, had been number one in its Monday night slot every week since its premiere. The premise wasn't all that original- talented musicians competing each week, hoping to earn the title *Superstar*, a check for a million bucks, and a big-label recording contract that would launch their careers in the music industry. Originally criticized as being a spinoff of *American Idol*, critics quickly came to see that *Superstardom* was much more. While *Idol* focused exclusively on vocal abilities, *Superstardom* expanded the idea by demanding additional talents. Contestants were in charge of all aspects of their performance. Everything from the song choice and arrangement to the stage lights and costumes were up to their discretion, giving the judges a more complete picture of the contestants' abilities as entertainers.

A devoted fan of the original talent-search show, I never dreamed that I'd get the opportunity to actually work for one. Let's just say that one of my friends knew someone who knew someone else that was looking for someone qualified enough to fill the position. Lucky for me, I had the necessary credentials.

I had five students; two sixteen year-old girls, Riley and Sabrina; seventeen year-old Melody; and two boys, fifteen year-old Jimmy, and seventeen-year-old Sam. The law required that they be schooled even while competing in Chicago, but since they couldn't attend their regular institutions, they were stuck with me, Monday through Friday, from eight until noon. After lunch they met with voice coaches, and their evenings were spent working one-on-one with the band and choreographers. This schedule was strictly followed five days a week. The high-school aged contestants had to keep a much tighter routine than their adult counterparts, who, not having to attend class every day, had more freedom in scheduling their practice times.

I taught the basics- English, Literature, Math, and Science, and had a fun day planned. We'd spent the last few days working on professional writing and experimental procedures, and I was going to integrate the two by letting the kids design and perform an experiment of their choice and organize their findings into a formal report.

The kids worked hard all morning. I was at my desk, skimming through a chapter on quadratic

equations (it had been years since I'd had to solve those types of problems), when a frustrated sigh caught my attention. Sam was at a computer, struggling with formatting a graph. "I can't figure out how to set it up," he complained, leaning forward and squinting against the small font on the screen.

Sam was a typical California kid; tall and tanned with sandy blonde hair that often hung in his face. He had a crooked smile and a great sense of humor, and though I tried not to have favorites among my students, he was just too easy to like.

I groaned and slammed my book shut. Making a big show about having to get up out of my chair, I leaned back, stretched my arms above my head, and twisted my torso from side-to-side. This was one thing I loved about my job- teasing these kids. I got to know them well, and we really enjoyed an informal, friendly relationship.

I made it about halfway across the room but stopped short when I saw Chris Knots, the very man of my dreams- literally, leaning against the frame of the classroom doorway. He was dressed in an old Metallica t-shirt and a pair of faded blue jeans, but he wore it well. Any coherent thoughts I might have had raced from my mind as our eyes locked.

This wasn't the first time I'd seen him in person- we'd walked past each other in the hallway a few times, and once I even had the good fortune of standing behind him in line at the studio's snack bar. He was usually in a hurry, talking to someone, or deep in thought, and never so much as looked at me before, but I didn't really expect much different. He was a star. I was just, well, me.

Not blessed with the gift of being overly witty or funny, I struggled at making conversation outside the classroom. Emily enjoyed teasing me for being so serious and working too much. I tried to loosen up, but it was awkward for me, and I usually ended up saying something stupid and feeling silly.

Nevertheless, I fought for control as he ran those enchanting dark eyes over me, and I found myself wishing that I had taken the time to do something more with my hair. It was piled up on top of my head in a messy knot, a style I was all too familiar with. I usually didn't see the point in fixing it up. Hoping that it hadn't completely fallen to shambles, I reached up and tucked a few loose auburn strands behind my ear.

"Hi, can I help you?" My racing heart and sweaty palms made appearing normal difficult, but I managed to speak with an even tone.

"I need to talk to Sam," he said smoothly, glancing in Sam's direction, "but I can see he's busy, so I'll just hang out here until you release him- if that's okay." He looked at me expectantly, arching a thick eyebrow.

My eyes were drawn to his mouth. A dark soul patch served well in accentuating his full, kissable lips. Lips I couldn't take my eyes off of.

"Um, yeah, of course," I stuttered after finding my voice.

I couldn't believe myself. Here I was, a college graduate student, feeling like a giddy schoolgirl. My heart was up in my throat. "You're more than welcome to come in, if you want." I nodded towards an empty desk.

"I'm fine here. Thanks, though." He flashed me one of his heart-throbbing smiles, making my heart lurch inside my chest.

Eager to escape the awkwardness, I shrugged and started to walk away when he offered his hand. Sam turned and looked at him, and out of the corner of my eye I saw Chris grin and wink.

He returned his attention to me. "I'm Chris, by the way. Chris Knots. I don't think we've met."

His grip was strong and warm. An involuntary shudder rocked my insides. "I know."

The heat rose in my face when I realized what I had said. "I mean, yeah, everyone knows you!"

The giggles of eavesdroppers erupted in the room, but I did my best to ignore them.

He eyed me curiously and grinned. “You must be Miss Banks?”

~~My mind was working in slow motion. I heard him but was so focused on his impeccable mouth~~ that it didn’t immediately register that I was supposed to respond. “Oh! Yeah, of course,” I stammered. “I’m Miss Banks. Actually, Allison, but please, call me Allie, everyone else does. Well, except them.” I gestured to the kids. “They call me Miss Banks.” My blush deepened. *Keep it together, you blubbing fool!*

He looked like he was trying to hold back a laugh. I hated that I was so flustered, especially in front of the kids. Remembering that Sam was still waiting for me, I told Chris he was welcome to wait and then excused myself.

I knelt next to Sam and took the mouse. Chris’s presence filled the room, distracting me. I had to force myself to concentrate on what I was doing. “Let me see. This new Excel is so different from the old version.” It took me a long minute to find the right menu. “Here we go. Your dependent variable goes on the y-axis,” I instructed, dragging the cursor along. “And the independent variable goes on the x. Does that help?”

Sam studied the screen and then flipped through a black and white composition notebook. “Yeah, thanks Miss Banks.” A wrinkle of concentration blemished his brow.

Melody raised her hand. “I need help.” She brushed her long black bangs out of her eyes and looked at me from the other side of the room. Chris still stood in the doorway.

“Sorry honey, I don’t offer the kind of help *you* need,” I teased and grinned when she rolled her eyes. Melody was by far the most mature of the group. The songs she sang always had a jazzy sound and she was well liked for the unusual raspiness in her voice. More of a loner, she kept to herself and preferred to sit away from the rest of the group. I liked to give her a hard time about being so antisocial. She didn’t seem to mind the attention.

After answering her question, I glanced at the clock. It was a little past noon. With Chris still lurking by the door, I felt self-conscious as I raised my voice to address the class. “Listen up! Your experimental designs are due at the beginning of class tomorrow, no exceptions. If you didn’t finish, you’ll need to work on it tonight. We won’t be spending any time on them in class tomorrow.”

The kids groaned. “Aw, Miss Banks! You’re so mean!”

I chuckled and gave them a dismissive wave. “You have no idea. See you all later, have a great afternoon.”

“Sam,” Chris called. He wrapped his arm around Sam’s shoulders and said something I couldn’t hear.

Sam nodded. “I know! Dude, I *told* you!” They both looked at me and laughed.

I had to wrestle down a wave of irritation. I didn’t appreciate being laughed at.

I was gnawing the inside of my lower lip when Chris turned to me. “Nice to have met you, Allie.” Before I could respond, he and Sam were out the door.

I needed to get a grip. My heart was racing, and my knees were actually weak. I went to my desk, dropped my head into my hands, and sat in silence for a few minutes. What was I so worked up about? Even before I became the butt of some inside joke, I was ready to jump out of my skin. It was so out of character. I’d never been the type to swoon over guys. Experience had taught me first hand that love-at-first-sight and happily-ever-afters didn’t exist. Sure, I looked at men and could appreciate a good one when I saw one, and Chris was definitely a fine specimen, but who had time for anything more? Certainly not me.

Chapter 2

The first time I ever laid eyes on Chris was a few weeks ago, during the show's premiere. The host, a tall and dark-haired man named Bradley McKnight, stepped out onto the wide, semi-circular stage.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," he called over the roar of the audience. "It's my great privilege to present to you the final contestant of the night. From the lovely state of Virginia, singing a rock-and-roll remake of the old Johnny Cash song, *I Walk the Line*, is twenty-seven year-old Chris Knots!"

Waves of applause rolled off the crowd as the band began playing slow, rhythmic beats. Plumes of thick, white fog swirled against the darkened stage. An orange strobe light flickered, illuminating his silhouette as he walked out.

"Whoa." The syllable was barely audible as it escaped my lips. This was no ordinary man, not by any woman's standards. Graced with broad, confident shoulders, strong arms and chest, his face was one that I could very easily lose myself in.

In the spirit of Johnny Cash, Chris was dressed in all black, but the look was personalized with a studded belt and a long, silver chain. Throwing an intense stare out into the audience, he gripped the microphone between both hands and in a soft and deep voice, began the first verse.

The camera circled as he sang. I was mesmerized, unable to pull my attention away from the TV screen. Everything from his dark, chocolate brown eyes to his thick, brooding eyebrows drew me in. A thin, perfectly angled beard shaped the frame of his square jaw, contrasting his smooth, clean-shaven head.

Though the lyrics hadn't been changed, the music was completely different from the original version. Chris had transformed it into something much more contemporary. Featuring electric guitar and drum solos, I wondered what Mr. Cash would think of the remake.

Strobe lights flashed as the music quickened. Chris licked his lips, took another deep breath, and began the chorus. His voice, now quite loud, had a gritty, gravelly edge to it.

Time stopped for those two minutes. Cheers and screams could be heard throughout the entire performance, but after he finished, the audience simply went wild.

The lights came back on as the camera pulled away, releasing me from my trance. I took a deep breath and looked around my cluttered living room as I tried to reclaim control over my pounding pulse.

The camera settled back on him as he stood before the judges. His chest heaved while he worked to catch his breath, and his dark eyes sparkled with excitement. Sweat glistened on his forehead, and he reached up to wipe his brow with the back of one hand. After some time, the audience quieted down enough to let the first judge speak.

Eddie Ortega, a short, skinny Hispanic man who ran a large radio network, was almost as entertaining as the performers. "Chriss," he said, dragging out the syllable with his heavy Spanish accent. He brought his elbows together on the tabletop and cocked his head in his hands. "That was, without a doubt, the best performance of the night."

The crowd roared their approval, and he waited for them to quiet down before continuing. "You aren't afraid to push your limits. You know your boundaries well and took this performance right to the edge." He walked his first two fingers to the side of the table, as if illustrating his comment. "Simply amazing! I'm in love with you already."

Eddie winked, and Chris wasn't successful in hiding a look of bewilderment. "Um, thanks?" He

clasped his hands behind his back and turned to the second judge.

Lucy was a senior editor for *Billboard Magazine*. A woman of Asian descent with long, silky black hair, she gave Eddie an annoyed look. "Would you stop it? We're here to judge. Flirt on your own time." She turned to Chris. "Just ignore him. The rest of us do."

Eddie sat back in his chair, a pout on his lips. "You just suck the love right out of everything, don't you?"

Lucy didn't respond. Instead, she reached back, gathered her hair, and pulled it over one of her shoulders. "You passed the chill test," she said.

Chris stood there, looking confused.

She laughed. "You gave me goosebumps!" she said, holding out her arm. "You really have a strong stage presence, Chris." Screams from the audience made her pause. "Your ability to excite the room is that of a well-seasoned professional. I think you'll go far in this competition."

Chris bowed his head. "Thanks."

"Oh no, thank you!"

Stella's comments were usually direct, even rude at times, and everyone was silent as the producer for MTV gathered her thoughts. She stared at Chris over the thick frame of her black cat-eye glasses. Her curly red hair was secured in a clip on the back of her head, though some frizzy tendrils had escaped and framed her face.

"You have a raw, natural talent," she finally said, her voice deep and rough like that of a heavy smoker. "You're really quite good."

The audience applauded.

"However," she interjected, raising her voice and straightening up in her chair. "I'm just not sure you're as good as you think you are."

People booed. Chris pressed his lips together into a tight line and shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

"Come on," Eddie complained, leaning over the table to glare at her. "He was incredible. You don't have to abhor everyone."

"I don't 'abhor' him," she said, casting a sharp glance at Eddie. "I just think he needs to be more emotionally connected to his songs." She raised a penciled eyebrow and returned her stare to Chris. "You have the voice, and you've certainly got the look. But you lack the *passion*." She paused. "Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

The pre-recorded anthem of the show blared, indicating it was time to wrap things up. Bradley joined Chris on the stage. "So Chris, this talk about passion, what do you think? Are you lacking in that department?"

Chris narrowed his eyes and ran a finger across his bottom lip. "Me, personally? Hell, no." He laughed and winked at Stella, who shifted in her seat. "My music? Maybe."

My skin tingled as he flashed a stunning, heart-stopping smile into the camera. From that moment forward, I was no longer in control. I was addicted.

A familiar whistle brought me out of my trance. I blinked a few times and looked up when Jake came in the room.

"Hey ya, gorgeous! How's my favorite blue-eyed gal?" Jake was Sam's older brother. He was also a genius when it came to technical stuff. He was offered his job here before Sam had even auditioned. Word around the studio was that Sam only got on the show because of Jake, but I didn't agree. Sam was full of talent.

He propped his foot up on one of the chairs and brushed his blonde hair out of his eyes, flashing me the same crooked grin I had seen on Sam just minutes before. Like his brother, Jake fit the California stereotype to a T. He was tan, slender, and quite the ladies man. At the age of twenty-six Jake had a more solid build than Sam, but the two brothers truly resembled each other.

“Hi!” I flashed him a grin. “Tell me, how are you holding up? Is this cold weather killing you yet?” The frigid Chicago February had to be a shock compared to the warm, sunny climate of Los Angeles.

“Nah, it’s not so bad. Whenever I need warming up, I come find you, babe.” He walked over to my desk, stood behind me, and pressed his strong fingers into the space between my shoulder blades. I felt his warm breath on my neck as he leaned forward and whispered, “Got plans tonight? We could pick up where we left off.”

Jake was a good guy. A bit of a player, but his heart was in the right place. We went out a few times at the start of the season, but it was never anything serious. Our friendship was strong, though, and I trusted him and enjoyed his company.

One night last week we ended up in his hotel room. He’d rented a movie, and I was actually quite interested to watch it, but the bottle of wine we shared over pizza had gone straight to my head. Things had almost gone too far. Lucky for me, Emily called. She needed me to stop by the store and pick up some children’s Tylenol on my way home because Molly was running a fever. Needless to say, I wasted no time in gathering my things and heading out.

I couldn’t see us ever getting serious about each other. But then again, I couldn’t see Jake getting serious about anyone. I was really glad that I hadn’t made the mistake of becoming another notch on his bedpost. Since then I had been trying to keep things casual between us. I didn’t want to jeopardize our friendship by making it something more than it really was.

Yet, despite my best efforts to keep it cool, his intentions were all too clear. His hands were inching down my back. I was uncomfortable and about to tell him to stop when Sam walked in. Chris was three steps behind him.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to interrupt,” Sam said, grinning when he saw us. “I forgot my keys.”

I wriggled free of Jake’s grip. “You didn’t interrupt anything.”

Sam looked back and forth between the two of us. “Uh-huh, sure.” He pulled a chair back and got on his hands and knees to search under a table.

“I’m busy tonight,” I said to Jake. “I’m at the university ‘til five, and then I’ll watch Molly while Emily’s at work. You can come over and hang out with us if you want. We’ll probably have hot dogs and watch *Cinderella*.” Hopefully the idea of spending the evening with a four-year-old would put a kink into whatever romantic schemes he had going.

I watched Sam rummage around the floor. Chris leaned an elbow against the wall, the threads of his T-shirt straining against his thick bicep. I couldn’t tell if he was listening to me and Jake or not.

“Got it,” Sam said, holding up a silver keychain. “See ya, Jake. Miss Banks.” He waved over his shoulder.

Jake was still looking at me. “You have such a crazy schedule,” he said. “I can’t ever keep up. Rain check on the hot dogs though, okay? I think I’ll call a few of the guys and see if they want to hit the clubs tonight.”

I lifted my shoulders in a half-shrug and tried to look disappointed. “Your loss.” I was actually glad he was going out. With any luck he would find someone willing to fulfill his carnal needs and take that attention away from me. “Well, I need to get going, so if I don’t see you later, have fun tonight!”

He was quiet as I gathered up my things. The way he looked at me made me uneasy. His eyes were glued to my face, but he was miles away.

“Everything okay, Jake?”

His brows inched towards his hairline as he came back down to Earth. “Yeah. Why?”

Thursday afternoon Chris showed up during the last few minutes of class and hung out in my doorway. I didn’t understand why- he knew I didn’t release the kids until twelve. He left again with Sam, except this time he didn’t even acknowledge me.

A sting of disappointment reached my cheeks. Sure, he was on his way to a life of fame and fortune, and I was only the hired help, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t at least say hello. And what was up with him hanging around Sam, anyway? He had ten years on the kid.

I sighed, resigned. At least I hadn’t been laughed at again.

I was glad when he didn’t show up on Friday.

After the kids left for lunch, I filled my arms with books and folders, preparing to head home. Clutching everything with one hand while using the other to dig in my pocket for keys, I lost my battle with gravity and dropped everything.

“Dammit!” Papers scattered across the white tile of the hallway.

I heard a laugh and looked up to see Chris heading in my direction. “Looks like you could use a book bag.”

“Thank you, Captain Obvious,” I muttered to myself. My last one had fallen apart in the washing machine. I hadn’t had a chance to replace it.

If he heard the comment, he showed no indication. Surprising me, he knelt down and gathered some of my papers. “I hope these weren’t in any kind of order.”

I looked at them hopelessly. “Well they sure aren’t anymore.”

He reached past me and picked up two books, giving me a whiff of his cologne. It was musky, smelling of sandalwood and amber, and I inhaled deeply as he studied the cover of a tattered copy of *Persuasion*.

“Jane Austen fan?”

“Yeah, she’s my favorite.” I took another deep breath, enjoying the effect his smell had on my olfactory nerves.

“My sister is a big fan of hers, too.” He stared at the other heavy, hardbound book and slowly read the title, “Recombinant DNA Technology- Bioinformatics and Applications.” The corners of his lips folded down. “You read this for pleasure?”

I wrinkled my nose. “That one’s not such a page turner. It’s for a class.” I described my university life- I worked at the school Tuesday and Thursday afternoons and took a graduate class every Wednesday night until ten.

“Wow, you’ve got a lot going on.”

“I stay busy,” I agreed as he handed me the last of the papers. “Thank you.”

He smiled, stood, and dusted off his pants. “Okay. Looks like you’re good to...” His voice trailed off when our eyes met. He dropped his gaze and cleared his throat. “Well, I’ll see you later.”

He took a few steps backwards then turned on his heel and walked off.

Chris Knots, I thought to myself, keenly aware of the considerable attraction I felt towards him. *Nothing but trouble, an unnecessary complication.* I already had a hard enough time staying focused on what really mattered; I certainly didn’t need him getting in the way.

Chapter 3

February thirteenth was Emily's twenty-first birthday. It fell on a Saturday, and she took the night off from her waitressing job so we could go out and celebrate. Mrs. Johnson, a widow who lived across the hall, absolutely adored Molly and volunteered to take her for the night.

Emily wanted to go to Maury's. It was an upscale Chicago club- complete with a thick, green velvet rope and a massive doorman blocking the entrance. The only people he allowed through were dressed like celebrities. I didn't think my ten dollar clearance-rack heels from Target would quite make the cut.

"What makes you think we'll get in?"

Emily gave me a reassuring pat. "Don't worry, I know a guy."

I could feel my eyes begin to narrow. "A guy?"

"Yes, Allie. A guy. You know, someone of the male species? You should try it sometime. Don't give me that look!" she said when I wrinkled my nose. "I waited on him yesterday at lunch. We got to talking, and he asked if I'd ever been to the club. He's working the front door tonight and said he could get us in."

"Really? But what if-."

"Would you stop worrying? Everything will be fine, trust me!"

I wasn't so sure.

"You remind me of Mom," she continued. "She was always so uptight about everything. Loosen up and live a little, let's have some fun tonight!"

Emily must have seen me flinch. It had been almost three years since Mom's accident, and while I did my best to cope, her death had left an emptiness that couldn't be filled.

She linked her fingers between mine. "Sorry. I miss her too. I was just trying to say-"

"No, it's okay," I said, squeezing her hand. "You're right; I promise to try and have a good time tonight."

She planted a kiss on my hand and then trotted right up to the doorman. Flashing him a bright smile, she tossed her hair over her shoulder and batted her eyelashes. It never ceased to amaze me that we were sisters. We were so opposite.

"John, hi! Remember me?" she said, brushing a polished fingernail down his forearm. "You said you could get us in tonight, so here we are!"

"Emily!" he said, pulling her into a tight hug. He wasn't discrete about sliding his hand down over her backside. Emily sure knew how to pick winners.

"This is my sister, Allie," she giggled, yanking on my arm.

He said hello but didn't take his eyes off her. It used to bother me that Emily always got the attention when it came to guys, but anymore I just expected it. Her long, strawberry blonde hair fell past her shoulders, and her soft brown eyes were always smiling. Her outgoing, bubbly personality made up for her petite frame, and she was the queen of vogue, always dressing according to the latest style. I often told her that she should go to fashion school. She could take random pieces of clothing and put them together to create any look she wanted.

I, on the other hand, was lucky to find a pair of matching socks. My fair skin was sensitive, so I wore very little makeup and was all thumbs when it came to styling my own hair. Hence the frequency of the knot. Emily was well aware of my incompetencies and had therefore insisted on

dressing me tonight. According to her, the coppery colored eye shadow she used made my blue eyes pop—she actually made that sound with her lips when she told me so, and with the aid of a small barrel curling iron, she spiraled my auburn hair into an explosion of tight, bouncy ringlets. I wore a pair of snug black pants that hugged my butt a little too tightly, a slinky silver tank, and a red, low-cut, wrap around sweater. My only contributions to the outfit were the ten dollar heels and a pair of cheap chandelier earrings.

John pulled back the rope and gestured for us to go in. “Ladies, have a good time!” He lowered his voice and nudged Emily. “Call me.”

We stepped into a narrow, dimly lit entryway. The muted bass coming from the club vibrated through the walls. A second, larger door opened up to the main area. Deafening music thumped out of enormous speakers while colored lights bounced around the room. Tall round tables were set up around a crowded dance floor.

Emily grabbed my hand and pulled me towards the bar. “Come on, let’s get a drink. What do you want?”

“Bacardi and pineapple juice.” She lifted her eyebrows; I wasn’t normally one to drink hard liquor. “What?” I said defensively, grinning. “You told me to loosen up and have a good time tonight, right?”

“I did,” she said, still eying me doubtfully. “Just don’t make me regret it. I don’t want to have to carry you out of here.”

She ordered a wine cooler, and we walked around and searched for an open table. “This is something, huh?”

Her energy was contagious, and I couldn’t help but smile. “It sure is! I have to admit, I wasn’t too sure about this place, but this is going to be a great night.” I tipped my glass to her, and we both giggled. “Happy Birthday, Emily!”

“Cheers to that!”

We sat down at a small table in the back corner of the room. The dance floor was packed. Several clusters of people were dancing to the fast-paced remix, and a crowd of onlookers stood nearby. “Wanna dance?” I asked, swallowing the rest of my drink.

I stood briefly but fell back onto my stool when I saw Chris Knots leaning over a large table with others from the show. A tall blonde with legs up to her neck was pressing herself against him. Cynthia, one of the other *Superstardom* contestants. I watched in amazement as she whispered something into his ear and snaked a seductive finger down his arm. I wondered if they were an item.

Emily followed my stare. “What?”

“Nothing,” I lied, dropping my eyes to the floor. The last thing I wanted to do was talk about Chris Knots.

“You look like you saw a ghost. What was it?” She scanned the club. It didn’t take long for her to spot them. “Oh my God!” she gasped, her eyes round. “The Stars are here! Allie, you have to introduce me.”

“No.” I shook my head. “I actually don’t know them.” Besides the kids, Chris was the only one I’d ever spoken to. And it wasn’t like we’d had any kind of real conversation.

“You do work there, with them, right? You see them every day.”

“I see them sometimes, but that doesn’t mean I talk to them. I teach the younger ones, you know, who aren’t old enough to be in a place like this.” I rattled the ice in my glass and looked back over at the Stars. “The others all keep to themselves.”

Emily glared at me, her lips pulled into a pout of disapproval. “Gosh, Allie. If I worked there,

they would all know me.”

I didn't argue with that. ~~Emily had no problem talking to people she didn't know-~~ another thing that made us so different.

“You're too shy!” she complained. “How do you expect to meet new people if you never talk to anyone?”

“I talk,” I said defensively.

“The kids don't count, Allie.” She sat back down, leaned towards me, and examined my face. “You're not telling me something.”

“I don't know what you're talking about.” I sucked in my lips, the way I always did when I wasn't being entirely truthful.

“Don't hold out on me. It's my birthday; you have to tell.”

I looked at her for a minute, surprised at how well she could read me. “Okay, fine. I talked to Chris Knots,” I admitted, looking back over at his group. “I dropped my stuff in the hall, and he helped me pick it up. We chatted for a minute. No big deal.” I took a long swallow from Emily's wine cooler.

“Hey! Get your own.” She snatched the bottle out of my hand and looked over at him. “What was he like?”

“Aside from being really hot?”

She nodded eagerly.

“Kind of a jerk.”

“Really? What makes you think so?”

I told her about how he interrupted my class. “Tuesday he practically laughed in my face, and Thursday he completely ignored me.” I watched him for a minute. He was performing a dance move that resembled a lawn sprinkler. He held one hand behind his head, his elbow sticking out to the side and his other arm was extended out in front of him. His torso twisted around in a jerky, circular motion, and everyone, including him, rolled with laughter.

Emily frowned. “Oh come on; that doesn't make him a jerk.” She got up and pushed her stool aside. “Come on, let's go talk to him.”

“Absolutely not!” I remained firmly planted in my seat. “I have to work with these people, and I refuse to make an idiot out of myself. He already has plenty of people to talk to.”

Emily groaned. “You are so boring, Allie! You promised to have fun tonight.” She stuck out her lower lip.

“That only works with Molly,” I laughed, picturing my niece's pouty face. No doubt who she learned it from. “I did promise you a good time, so let's forget about them and go dance.”

“Fine,” she huffed, “let's go.”

Cher's electronically enhanced voice filled the room.

“I love this song!” Emily said, thrusting her hips from side to side and throwing her hands up over her head.

I enjoyed watching her dance. She was so free and alive, like she didn't have a care in the world. Wanting to be more like her, I closed my eyes and danced too, relaxing as the alcohol worked its warmth throughout my body. It felt good to let loose- it had been way too long.

We danced straight through three songs. By the time the next one came on I was overheated and sticky with sweat. Emily had found another partner, so I made my way to the bar for another drink.

It was busy. The three bartenders couldn't keep up. The man to my left ordered something called a Painkiller, and I curiously watched as the bartender mixed together a dark colored rum, coconut

cream, and pineapple-orange juice. It looked good, despite the gruesome name, and I was about to go one for myself when someone behind me called out an order. “Two Captain and Cokes, please.”

Fully intending to educate this rude person about taking turns, I turned around to find Chris. The blood drained from my face as he clapped me on the shoulder. “Hey!” His eyes were wide as they ran down and then back up my frame. “Wow, you look amazing.” He paid for the drinks and handed one to me. “I don’t know what you like, hopefully this is okay.”

“Oh! Thanks.” I decided against giving him the lecture on manners and instead took a sip from the tumbler.

Amusement touched the corners of his lips. “A teacher who drinks. Isn’t that illegal or something? I thought you all were supposed to be hermits who live in your classrooms.”

“Ha, ha. So funny.”

He said something else, but the music was too loud. I pointed to my ear and shook my head, signaling that I couldn’t hear.

“Do you wanna dance?” he asked, a bit louder than before.

I thought about it for an entire second but decided it was probably better if I just steered clear of this guy. I didn’t trust myself to keep my head, especially with the alcohol in my system. Getting involved with him was the last thing I needed. Even though he was sexy as hell.

“No. Sorry, I’m here with my sister.”

He looked taken aback, as if I’d caught him off guard. *Poor baby*, I thought, trying to stifle a laugh. He wasn’t used to rejection.

“Oh, come on, one won’t hurt. I won’t tell anyone.” His dark eyes burned into mine, daring me to refuse again.

All my willpower melted away. It wasn’t fair.

He had all kinds of wild moves I couldn’t keep up with. I mostly just stood there, bending my knees and swinging my hips while he danced circles around me. At one point, he pulled my arms up over my head and spun me around. I twirled like a stiff board, nearly toppling to one side. “Loosen up!” he laughed.

I was relieved when a slower song came on. Taking one of my hands into his own, he pushed the other against the small of my back and pulled me close. He was at least six inches taller than me; the top of my head didn’t even reach the bottom of his chin. The combination of dancing, alcohol, and being pressed up against his hard body had me sizzling. Streams of sweat trickled down my back.

He rested the side of his chin against my sweaty temple. “Are you having fun?”

“Yes,” I said, feeling dazed. It felt like warm, smooth honey was circulating through my veins.

“Good.” He tilted his head down and focused on me and me alone, despite all the other people around us. Moving slowly and purposefully, as if he were looking for some excuse to touch me, he reached up and swept a damp curl off my forehead.

I was speechless, rendered in a dreamlike state, when, out of nowhere, a crowd of people-adoring fans, most likely-advanced towards him and pushed me off to the side.

And just like that, I was released from whatever trance he had put me in. Leaving him to his fans I went back to my table and thought about what had just happened. It was like he’d taken complete control of my mind, put me under some sort of spell. Never before had I felt so powerless.

Chris Knots wasn’t just some random cute guy off the street. He knew exactly what he was doing. I wondered how many women had fallen victim to his charms, found themselves defenseless against that smile. I was really going to have to keep my guard up with this one.

Emily was by my side in no time. “Please tell me you were just dancing with Chris Knots. I

thought I saw it, but I just can't believe it."

~~"Yes, Emily, I was just dancing with Chris Knots."~~ I was struggling to wrap my mind around it myself.

She squealed. "That calls for another round. I'll be right back."

Within minutes she returned, juggling a couple of wine coolers and two shot glasses filled with a red liquid.

We downed the shots, and I grimaced as the sharp alcohol burned my insides. "Who were you dancing with?"

She shrugged and glanced in his direction. "I have no idea. Although he is kind of cute."

About an hour and who knows how many drinks later, Emily and I went back out onto the dance floor. Somehow we ended up next to Chris's group. I glared at Emily, but she just gave me an innocent smile.

"Where did you go?" Chris shouted over the music, looking genuinely surprised to see me. "I've been looking all over for you. I thought you'd left!"

"Nope, just hangin' out." I nodded towards the corner where we had been sitting. "This is my sister, Emily. Emily, Chris Knots."

"Chris! It's so nice to meet you in person! We're all big fans!" She covered his hand with both hers and shook it forcefully.

"Sisters, huh?" He looked at me and then back at Emily. "I never would have guessed."

The leggy blonde from earlier wrapped a possessive arm around Chris's waist. "Hi, I'm Cynthia," she said in a sing-song voice. "But you probably already knew that."

I nodded and held out my hand. "Allison Banks." She squeezed my fingers and then put her hand on Chris's chest.

I'd seen Cynthia's performances on the show and always thought her to be extremely pretty, but she was even more striking in person. She was tall and athletic and looked like a supermodel in her short skirt and sequined, scoop-necked top. Her blonde hair was piled on top of her head, but a few strands had fallen loose and hung in her face, giving her a sexy, tousled look.

She was like a goddess, Aphrodite herself sent down from the heavens above to humble the rest of us ordinary people. Her complexion was flawless, and there wasn't an ounce of flab on her toned and slender figure. I wasn't overweight by anyone's standards, but my soft and curvy body seemed plump compared to hers.

"How do you two know each other?" She looked at Chris and then back at me.

"Allie works for the show. She tutors the kids."

Cynthia didn't seem too interested. The way she glared at me from under her long mascara-coated lashes told me that she wanted his attention all to herself. I was more than happy to oblige.

"I need another drink. You want anything, Em?"

"We should probably get going, actually." She turned to Chris. "We've been hitting it hard all night, and she's a lightweight."

Cynthia laughed. It was a hollow, fake sound; a belittling sneer that someone would make at another, lesser person's expense. I decided I didn't like her.

But Chris's smile only widened. "Maybe we should get you some water." He took my arm and led me away from the dance floor. "Wouldn't want that pretty little head of yours to hurt too much in the morning."

"I'm fine. Really," I added when he gave me a sideways glance. "Don't worry about..." I tripped over my own foot and nearly ran into a table.

“Whoa, careful,” he said, helping me to regain my balance. He raised an eyebrow and flashed me a shameless grin. “What was that you were saying?”

I pressed my palms firmly against his chest. It was solid beneath my hands, and I stood on my tiptoes and tipped my head back to look up into his face. “I think you’re trouble.”

His lips curved into a playful smile. “You say it like it’s a bad thing.”

“I bet you don’t get told ‘no’ very often.” The alcohol must have really taken over because there was no way I would have been so bold had I been sober.

He stepped forward, closing the gap between us. Our bodies were so close that I could feel the heat radiating off him. He cocked his head when he spoke. “You did. You thought you could get out of dancing with me.”

I gawked, not knowing what to say. My thoughts were getting fuzzy.

His grin widened. “It wasn’t hard to get you to change your mind. I bet I could do it again.”

I swallowed hard, feeling that sense of powerlessness, like I was under some kind of spell. The strange thing was that I didn’t mind. I kind of liked it. “I’ll have no problem sticking to it next time.” The words came out with more confidence than I felt.

He asked the bartender for a bottle of water and then turned to me. “How are you and your sister getting home tonight?”

I stared at him awhile before answering. The gears were spinning slowly. “I don’t know. A taxi, I guess.”

“Good. I don’t think either of you need to be driving. I’ve got a rental; I could give you a ride. Where do you live?”

I blinked hard a few times, trying to regain my center of balance as the room started to spin. “Emily and I share an apartment in the West End Complex. A few blocks from the studio.”

“Yeah, I know that place.” He glanced at his watch. “It’s almost two. Are you ready to go?”

“It’s that late? Really?” I reached for his wrist and tried to focus on the hands of his watch, but I couldn’t decide which of the four hands I should be focusing on.

He put his arm around my shoulders. “So? How about a ride?”

“You’re sweet, but no need to trouble yourself. I don’t mind catching a cab.”

“I wouldn’t offer if I thought it was trouble. It would give me peace of mind knowing you get home safely. There are a lot of crazies out this time of night, you know? What would the kids say if you were a no-show on Monday?”

The thought made me laugh. “They would probably throw a party.” I held up my water bottle and pretended to preach. “Miss Banks is allowed to live a life outside the classroom too, you know.”

“Touché!” He waved his hand in salute as he took a few steps back, bowed, and walked away.

I wondered what Cynthia would have said about him taking Emily and me home. The thought was quickly replaced with a sense of panic as the room took on a violent whirl. I plopped down on a stool and, feeling sick, leaned forward and rested a cheek on the bar.

Chapter 4

When I woke up my head was pounding. My mouth tasted like something that had been pulled from a clogged drain. I was in my bed wearing my old White Sox shirt. Odd. I had no memory of coming home or changing my clothes.

Emily was still asleep, so after washing my face and brushing my teeth, twice, I went across the hall to gather Molly from Mrs. Johnson. As usual, she refused to take any money. I think she enjoyed her time with Molly just as much as Emily and I had enjoyed our night out.

It wasn't too much longer before Emily stumbled into the kitchen. She put a slice of bread in the toaster. "Morning," she said, propping her elbows on the counter. "I had fun last night. Thanks."

I poured a glass of orange juice and popped a couple Advil in my mouth. "Yeah, me too. I sure am paying for it this morning though."

"Ah, well, what's the fun without the morning after? It was worth it."

"Do you think so?" I wasn't sure I agreed. The way my pulse was pounding in my temples made me think my whole head might just explode.

"Chris sure seemed to enjoy your company." She raised her eyebrows. "Much more than he did Cynthia's. Did you notice how she was hanging all over him? It was so obvious he wanted nothing to do with her."

Cynthia. I had a vague recollection of her on the dance floor but couldn't quite put all the pieces together. "Yeah, was she amazing or what?"

Emily's face pulled into a grimace. "I'll go with the 'or what.' She looked like a hooker."

I nodded as fragmented memories came to surface. "She was a total bitch, wasn't she?"

"It's true," Emily said, spreading butter across her hot toast.

I swallowed the last of my juice and sat down at the table. "I don't remember coming home." *Or getting undressed.*

She laughed and then groaned. "Oh, you're killing me." She closed her eyes and rubbed a spot in the middle of her forehead. She then looked at me with a grin that would rival that of the Cheshire cat. "That doesn't surprise me. You passed out in his car."

His? "What car?"

I didn't think it was possible, but her grin got even bigger. "Chris's. He carried you up here and put you in bed."

Holy shit.

I studied her expression, hoping to find some trace of ridicule, but her cheesy ass smile gave nothing away. "Oh my God! Are you kidding me?"

She bit into her toast and chewed. "'Fraid not, sister!"

I picked at a thread on the hem of my shirt. She seemed to read my mind. "Don't worry. He was a total gentleman. He put you in bed and left. I undressed you."

I dropped my forehead to the tabletop, partly from relief. If only I could remember. "Oh, Em!" I whined, turning to look at her. "How could you let me do that?"

She covered her smile with a napkin. "Don't worry about it. I think he enjoyed himself. I think I kind of enjoyed you, too."

Her eyes followed me as I got up and headed for the bathroom. A wave of nausea had my insides doing somersaults. "You're insane," I called over my shoulder.

A few minutes later she came in and found me lying on the soft grey rug next to the toilet. "You gonna be okay?"

"I'm fine," I groaned without opening my eyes. I was afraid if I moved something else might find its way back up.

"Are you sure?"

With much effort, I eased up to a sitting position and leaned against the tub. The porcelain was cool through the thin material of my shirt. "Yes. Go. I have a lot of work to do."

She twisted the cap off a bottle of Listerine. "I'm taking Molly with me, so the place should be quiet for you."

"Okay." I took a swig of mouthwash. It burned against the inside of my mouth, and I spit it in the toilet.

Emily dampened a washcloth and tossed it to me. "I'll see you later. Get some rest."

"I will." I wiped my face but made no attempt to get up off the floor.

Emily and Molly headed out, and I was grateful for the peace and quiet. I decided to take a bath to try and clear my head. The hot water was soothing, and I felt myself start to relax.

Something startled me awake. I don't know how long I'd been sitting in the tub, but when I opened my eyes, the water had cooled. There was a faint knock on the front door.

"Just a minute, I'm coming," I yelled, jumping out of the tub. I pulled on my short, fuzzy pink robe and found Jake in the hall outside my apartment.

"Hi! What are you doing here?" I held the front of my robe shut as he followed me into the kitchen. My stomach was still churning, and I hoped a cup of hot peppermint tea would help settle it.

"Good morning to you, too." He shook off a charcoal colored coat and hung it over the back of a chair. "Geez, babe, you're a mess."

"Em and I went out last night. We got home late." I filled a tarnished copper kettle with water. I had belonged to my mom.

"You went out without me? Where'd you go?"

"Maury's. Ever been there?"

"Nope, but I've heard good things." His eyes lingered on the bare skin of my chest. My stupid robe wouldn't stay closed, and I felt naked. His gawking didn't help.

"Will you give me a minute? I'm gonna get dressed."

He stepped in front of me, blocking my way. "Why? I don't mind. You look good in nothing." His voice was suggestive.

I ignored the comment and walked past him to my room.

"What's the occasion?" I shouted from down the hall as I dried off and pulled on a pair of yoga pants.

"I was hoping we could eat hot dogs and watch a princess movie." He laughed at his own joke. "I brought you something."

"What for?" I poked my head out the door and glanced at him.

He held up a red, heart-shaped box. "Happy Valentine's Day."

"Oh..."

"You forgot, didn't you? Geez, Allie. It's only the most romantic day of the year. Candy, flowers, love..." He drug out the syllable of the last word.

My stomach flipped. No wonder I felt like crap. This was the most sickening day of the year. "More like cavities, allergies, and heartache," I mumbled as I dug a t-shirt out of my drawer.

"What?" He was standing in my doorway.

"Hey!" I shrieked, holding the shirt against my bare chest. "A little privacy, please!"

He didn't go. Instead, he came into my room, wrapped his arms around my naked shoulders, and nuzzled my neck. "You smell good. Coconut?"

I wiggled free of his grip. "Jake, this isn't a good idea." Aside from the fact that my stomach felt like an off-balance washing machine, I didn't want to be with him this way. It was uncomfortable.

He ran his fingertips up and down the bare skin of my arms. "Why not? I think it's a great idea."

I turned away from him and pulled the t-shirt down over my head. I then folded my arms across

my chest. "Jake," I said, my voice stern.

~~He shushed me. "Don't say anything. I have to tell you something first."~~

Shit. Ignoring his attempts at seduction wasn't working.

We both jumped when the doorbell rang. I was never more grateful for an interruption in all my life.

"You expecting someone?"

"No." I shook my head. "Would you mind getting it?" The kettle whistled in the background. "I should turn off the stove."

I listened from the kitchen as Jake opened the door, but I couldn't tell who he was talking to.

When I saw who followed him in, I was so surprised that I backed into the counter and almost scalded myself with my hot tea. "Chris! Um, hi." I reached up and touched my damp hair, trying to smooth it out. I hadn't gotten a chance to run a brush through it yet.

Jake flashed me a wondrous look from the other side of the room. I shook my head, silently begging him not to say anything.

Chris's eyes darted between me and Jake. "How are you?"

"Um, fine. You?"

"I'm alright." He held up a coat. My coat. "You left this in the car last night. You might need it if it's chilly."

"Oh, thanks." I glanced at Jake. He was leaning against the counter, listening to every word. "And thanks for bringing us home, by the way. I owe you one."

Chris smirked and handed me a small paper sack. "I thought you might need these, too."

Inside was a bottle of ibuprofen. A small red bow was stuck to the cap. "Ha ha," I said, shaking the container. The pills rattled inside.

"Like I said, we couldn't have our little ones without a teacher tomorrow morning. Happy Valentine's Day, by the way."

I tried to think of something clever to say but came up with nothing. "Yeah, you too."

Silence filled the room. The three of us just stood there and exchanged awkward glances. Chris was the first one to speak. "I should get going. I have to get to rehearsal. Just wanted to get your coat back to you." He looked at Jake before heading for the door. "See ya."

Jake remained planted against my counter, his arms folded across his chest. "Later."

I followed him to the front door and wasn't sure if it was my imagination, or if Chris actually lingered a bit too long in the doorway before finally turning and walking away. I shut the door and rested my forehead against it. When I turned to go back to the kitchen, Jake was on my heels.

"Chris Knots, huh? What exactly did you do last night?"

"I told you, Emily and I went out. It was her birthday."

"With Chris Knots? That must have been some party." One side of his mouth folded down into a frown.

"No, not with him. He was just there. We ran into each other. Why the third degree?"

He shrugged, but it was obvious something was bothering him. "Just curious. Why didn't you call? I'd have come."

Monday morning rolled around way too soon. I got to work with no time to spare. Riley and Sabrina were sitting on the floor by my classroom door. "Morning, ladies," I said, putting my key in the lock.

They both giggled and followed me in. Jimmy came in behind us, wearing an uncharacteristically

huge smile. “Hi, Miss Banks! Did you have a nice weekend?” He was awfully friendly for as early as it was.

“I’m fine. How are you?” I asked, a bit skeptical.

Before he responded, Sam came in. He took one look at me and busted up laughing. The other three followed suit.

Melody scowled at her classmates as she strolled in and set her stuff down. “What’s so funny?” Sam handed her something, a newspaper, and her eyes grew wide as she read. “No,” she gasped and looked at me.

“What?” I demanded. “What are you laughing at?” Giggles were all I got in response.

Melody held out the paper, and I snatched it from her.

Some of the Stars had made headlines. It wasn’t all that uncommon considering how popular the show was, but I froze when I saw the picture. It was Chris and me, dancing at Maury’s. My head was leaning on his shoulder, his arms wrapped around my waist.

Chris Knots and fellow Stars were spotted hanging out at local club Maury’s on Saturday night. The Stars were greeted by many fans, including Allison Banks, as seen in the picture above. Knots refused to comment on his relationship with Banks. She is the youth teacher on the set of the show.

The kids were silent and watched closely as I read. I only skimmed through the first paragraph before handing the article back to Sam. I’d seen enough.

“Miss Banks, I’m your favorite, aren’t I?” Sam asked.

Why he would choose that particular moment to ask me something like that was beyond me. I was really irritated at him, and I still hadn’t forgotten about last week when he and Chris had laughed at me. It seemed to be turning into a habit.

“Do you think you are?” I kept my expression blank.

He nodded. “Yep. Sure do.”

“Then that’s all that matters,” I replied candidly.

The other kids laughed.

Sam stared at me for a second, confounded, and then asked Melody if she had any ice.

“No, why?” she asked.

“I just got burned.”

The snack bar was by no means the greatest place to eat, but it was conveniently located just down the hall from my classroom. Little more than a sandwich counter surrounded by a dozen or so tables they also sold bottled water, soda, chips, and an assortment of other snacks.

I grabbed a tuna salad on wheat and a copy of the newspaper. Wanting to study the article in private, I planned to eat alone in my classroom, but Jake caught up with me first.

Eying my paper, he grunted. “So, you’re famous now, huh? You and the big Superstar?” A hint of condemnation touched his voice.

“What are you talking about? I told you, he was there, so were we.”

“But he brought you home,” he pointed out.

I rolled my eyes. Jealousy on Jake was so unbecoming, especially when there was no reason for it. “Yes, Jake, he brought *us* home. He was being nice, saving us a cab fare.”

Jake’s brow wrinkled. “A cab? Where’s your car?”

“It died. But even if it hadn’t, Emily and I had been out drinking. Don’t you think it was best for

us to not be driving?"

He held up his hands in resignation. ~~"Okay, okay, no need to get snippy. I believe you. Just lookin' out for my gal."~~

"I'm not your gal, Jake."

He looked at me for a long second. "You could be, you know." His voice was nothing more than a whisper.

"Jake, don't." This was starting to get really old.

He laughed. "I'm kidding! Seriously, though, what happened to the car?"

I'd inherited my grandmother's Toyota several years ago when Mom finally decided Grams shouldn't be behind a wheel anymore. It was a clunker even back then.

"It started making these weird sounds. And it smelled bad. And then it stalled one morning while I was on my way to the store. I had to have it towed."

"Did you take it to a shop?"

"Sure did. Paid the guy two hundred dollars to find out it wasn't worth fixing."

"Ouch!" he said.

"Yeah. It sucks, but at least the city has public transportation." I didn't miss the expense of owning a car, but it sure had been convenient when I needed it.

I took the roundabout way back to my classroom but stopped when I heard Cynthia throwing a fit. I peeked inside the rehearsal room. "What part of this is so difficult for you to understand, Riley? Step-step-turn-kick." She demonstrated the move while poor Riley looked like she was on the verge of tears.

It took everything I had to not march in there and tell Cynthia what part of my anatomy she could kiss. I don't care if you're queen of the damn universe, you don't treat people that way. Especially children.

Chris stepped between them. "Give the kid a break. We can't all be perfect like you, you know."

Amen to that. I watched with interest as Cynthia spun around and sneered, "It's not like this is rocket science, Chris! She keeps running into me!"

"Like you've never screwed up? Remember last week?" I wondered what had happened.

The choreographer stepped forward, reclaiming control of the group. "Okay, everyone, let's all take a deep breath and start from the top. Remember this is a team effort, we need to work together." He clapped his hands, marking the tempo. "Five, six, seven, eight."

"Allie! Did you see the paper this morning?" Emily attacked me as soon as I opened the door.

"Yeah, I think everyone saw it," I muttered. "The kids gave me a hard time. You know where their heads are."

Molly ran to me from the other room. I knelt down and held out my arms for a hug. "Hey, baby! How are you today?" I buried my nose in her blonde curls. They smelled like her strawberry shampoo.

"Hi Aunt Allie!! Look what I made." She held up a picture of an orange and black butterfly.

"Wow, this is really pretty! Did you do this all by yourself?" She nodded. "Are you learning about butterflies in preschool?"

"Uh-huh!" Molly loved to learn. She was notorious for taking off with my textbooks; she liked to flip through them and look at the pictures. I'd find them under the couch and in her toy box. "Are you gonna watch the star show tonight?" she asked, her blue eyes hopeful.

"Do you want to?"

“Yeah! We’ll watch Chris sing! He’s gonna win, right Aunt Allie?”

I chuckled. Molly and I had decided early on that Chris was the clear winner. “Sure baby, whatever you say. You think about what you want for dinner tonight, okay?”

“I’m off,” said Emily, pulling on her coat. “Don’t have too much fun tonight, you two! Bye, Molly, I love you.” She kissed us both on the cheek and left for her swing shift at the diner.

Molly decided on fish sticks and peanut butter. This kid came up with the strangest combinations when it came to food. Luckily she was healthy and not overly picky, so Emily and I did our best to appease her.

She drug out her little pink CD player and sang some of her nursery rhymes while I cooked. I sang along with a few, when I knew the words, and we danced around the kitchen as we waited for the oven to heat.

My phone vibrated on the counter. A text message, but I didn’t recognize the number.

Left ur coat in the car. Want me 2 swing by and drop it off?

I just stared at it, not immediately understanding. It then dawned on me that it was from Chris, more than likely sent late Saturday night, or early Sunday morning. Stupid phone. I wondered how he got my number. I made a mental note to ask Emily if she gave it to him.

Just then the show began. Molly jumped off the couch and wriggled her little hips, dancing to the theme music. “I’m gonna be a Sup-a-star!”

I laughed and gathered her into my arms. “You do that, okay? I’ll come to all your concerts.”

She looked at me with big blue eyes and a dimpled smile. I kissed her forehead.

The opening act was the group performance I’d caught them practicing. Riley got all her moves right, but Cynthia stumbled and almost fell. Too bad. It would have been so much more entertaining if she had actually fallen.

After that were the individual performances. Jimmy was first. He sang an older George Strait song. It was okay. Hard for me judge since I’ve never been much of a country fan. It all sounded like twangy, hillbilly music to me.

Cynthia was next. She wore a black halter-top dress and belted out the song from *Titanic*. In the background flashed scenes from the movie, and there must have been a fog machine somewhere near the stage because her feet were covered in smoke. Her voice was powerful. She didn’t miss a single note. She certainly had talent, even if she was a bitch.

After she was finished, Chris took the stage. He had on a pair of worn Diesel jeans and a thin, clingy grey t-shirt that emphasized his broad chest. I wondered what he looked like shirtless. He was undeniably, a very sexy man.

The stage went dark. Everything was pitch black except for the red strobe lights flashing in the back. When the music started I couldn’t believe my ears. He was going to sing *I Dare You*, by Shinedown. It was one of my favorite songs.

Chris’s voice was the perfect match for it. Deep, rich, and slightly gritty. What started out mellow grew into something really intense. By the end, Chris was nearly screaming into the microphone. The muscles in his neck bulged as he held the last few notes. Flames danced on the big screens that surrounded the stage, and a shower of sparks burned along the front.

The whole performance was off the top. I didn’t know how he did it, how he packed so much energy into a performance. I was exhausted just by watching, but he didn’t even look winded.

Eddie stood up and clapped. “Chris, Chris! Just when I think you’ve got no room to grow, you go and do something like that!” He fanned himself. “Lord, I am so hot right now, just dripping with sweat.” He surprised Lucy by grabbing her hand and wiping it across his forehead. “See?”

She squealed. “Ewwww! Eddie! That is nasty! I cannot believe you just did that.” After making a show of wiping her hand on her pants, she calmed down and turned her attention to Chris. “You had a good time with that, didn’t you?”

He beamed. “Yeah, I did. It was a lot of fun.”

“It showed. That was the perfect song for you. Totally chill.”

Stella leaned forward. “I agree. You’ve shown some real growth over this past week.”

The audience roared.

Bradley McKnight joined Chris on the stage. “What inspired the song choice, if I may ask?”

Chris gazed into the camera with a smoldering look that would have made any girl’s core temperature rise. I shuddered. I sure didn’t envy the contestants who had to follow him.

“A friend,” he said.

Sabrina was the last to go. She did an okay job with her song, but forgot some of the words half-way through and stumbled through the rest of the performance. It ended in a complete disaster.

The judges had harsh words for her and decided it was her week to go. I hated to see that; the kids were my only job security. Once they were all gone there would be no reason for me to stay, and then what? This job was the only thing keeping me and Emily in our apartment.

I tucked Molly into bed and checked my email. I didn’t have much, a few questions from the students over at the university and a forward from Emily.

I then checked out the newsfeed on Yahoo and saw pictures from tonight’s performance. I clicked on one of them and was redirected to a different page that was plastered with pictures of the Stars. It was scary, really. Most of them were candid, taken without notice during off-show hours. Jimmy’s profile, Sam sipping a drink at McDonalds, and Chris walking into the studio hotel.

I thought it was bad enough that my picture had been published in a local newspaper; these were much more public. I wondered how they put up with it- someone always ducking around a corner, waiting to snap a picture or get a headline. It was such an invasion of privacy.

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