



“What are you doing?” I ask when Dad pulls over at a convenience store only a mile from where Mom and I are now living. My voice sounds rusty after not talking during the five-hour ride. But I was afraid that if I said anything, it would all spill out: My anger. My hurt. My disappointment in the man who used to be my superhero.

“I need gas and a bathroom,” he says.

“Bathroom? So you can’t even come in to see Mom when you drop me off?” My heart crinkles up like a used piece of aluminum foil.

He meets my eyes, ignores my questions, and says, “You want anything?”

“Yeah. My freaking life back!” I jump out of the car and slam the door so hard, the sound of the metal hitting metal cracks in the hot Texas air. I haul ass across the parking lot, watching my white sandals eat up the pavement, hiding the sheen of tears in my eyes.

“Chloe,” Dad calls out. I move faster.

Eyes still down, I yank open the door, bolt inside the store, and smack right into someone. Like, my boobs smash against someone's chest.

"Crap," a deep voice growls.

A Styrofoam cup hits the ground. Frozen red slushie explodes all over my white sandals. The cup lands on its side, bleeding red on the white tile.

I swallow the lump in my throat and jerk back, removing my B cup boobs from some guy's chest.

"Sorry," he mutters, even though it's my fault.

I force myself to look up, seeing first his wide chest, then his eyes and the jet-black hair scattered across his brow. *Great! Why couldn't he be some old fart?*

I return to his bright green eyes and watch as they shift from apologetic to shocked, then to angry.

I should say something—like, add my own apology—but the lump in my throat returns with a vengeance.

"Shit." The word sneaks through his frown.

*Yeah, all of this is shit!* I hear Dad call my name again from outside.

My throat closes tighter and tears sting my eyes. Embarrassed to cry in front of a stranger, I snatch off my sandals and dart to a cooler.

Opening the glass door, I stick my head in needing a cooldown. I swat a few stray tears off my cheeks. Then I feel someone next to me. Dad's not letting this go.

"Just admit you screwed up!" I look over and am swallowed by those same angry light green eyes from a minute ago. "I thought you were . . . Sorry," I say, knowing it's late for an apology. His look is unsettling.

He continues to glare. An all-in-my-face kind of glare. As if this is more than a spilled slushie to him.

"I'll pay for it." When he doesn't even blink, I add another, "I'm sorry."

“Why are you here?” His question seethes out.

“What? Do I *know* you?” I know I was rude, but—hotness aside—this guy is freaking me out.

His eyes flash anger. “What do you want?” His tone carries an accusation I don’t understand.

“What do you mean?” I counter.

“Whatever you’re trying to pull, don’t do it.”

He’s still staring me down. And I feel like I’m shrinking in his glare.

“I’m not . . . You must have me mixed up with someone else.” I shake my head, unsure if this guy’s as crazy as he is sexy. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. But I said I’m sorry.” I grab a canned drink and barefoot, carrying sticky sandals, hurry to the front of the store.

Dad walks in, scowling.

“Careful,” a cashier says to Dad while mopping up the slushie just inside the door.

“Sorry,” I mutter to the worker, then point to Dad. “He’s paying for my Dr Pepper! And for that slushie.”

I storm off to the car, get in, and hold the cold Diet Dr Pepper can to my forehead. The hair on the back of my neck starts dancing. I look around, and the weird hot guy is standing outside the store, staring at me again.

*Whatever you’re trying to pull, don’t do it.*

Yup, crazy. I look away to escape his gaze. Dad climbs back in the car. He doesn’t start it, just sits there, eyeballing me. “You know this isn’t easy for me either.”

“Right.” *So why did you leave?*

He starts the car, but before we drive off, I look around again and see the dark-haired boy standing in the parking lot, writing on the palm of his hand.

*Is he writing down Dad’s license plate number?* He’s a freak. I almost say something to Dad but remember I’m pissed at him.

Dad pulls away. I focus on the rearview mirror. The hot guy stays there, eyes glued on Dad's car, and I stay glued on him until he's nothing but a speck in the mirror.

"I know this is hard," Dad says. "I think about you every day."

I nod, but don't speak.

Minutes later, Dad pulls over in front of our mailbox. Or rather Mom's and mine. Dad's home isn't with us anymore. "I'll call you tomorrow to see how your first day of school was."

My gut knots into a pretzel with the reminder that I'll be starting as a senior at a new school. I stare out at the old house, in the old neighborhood. This house once belonged to my grandmother. Mom's been renting it to an elderly couple for years. Now we live here. In a house that smells like old people . . . and sadness.

"Is she home?" Dad asks.

In the dusk of sunset, our house is dark. Gold light leaks out of next door, Lindsey's house—she's the one and only person I know my own age in town.

"Mom's probably resting," I answer.

There's a pause. "How's she doing?"

*You finally ask?* I look at him gripping the wheel and staring at the house. "Fine." I open the car door, not wanting to draw out the goodbye. It hurts too much.

"Hey." He smiles. "At least give me a hug?"

I don't want to, but for some reason—because under all this anger, I still love him—I lean over the console and hug him. He doesn't even smell like my dad. He's wearing cologne that Darlene probably bought him. Tears sting my eyes.

"Bye." I get one slushie-dyed foot out of the car.

Before my butt's off the seat, he says, "Is she going back to work soon?"

I swing around. “Is that why you asked about her? Because of money?”

“No.” But the lie is so clear in his voice, it hangs in the air.

*Who is this man?* He dyes the silver at his temples. He’s sporting a spiky haircut and wearing a T-shirt with the name of a band he didn’t even know existed until Darlene.

Before I can stop myself, the words trip off my tongue. “Why? Does your girlfriend need a new pair of Jimmy Choos?”

“Don’t, Chloe,” he says sternly. “You sound like your mom.”

That hurt now knots in my throat. “Pleease. If I sounded like my mom, I’d say, ‘Does the whore bitch need a new pair of Jimmy Choos!’” I swing back to the door.

He catches my arm. “Look, young lady, I can’t ask you to love her like I do, but I expect you to respect her.”

“Respect her? You have to earn respect, Dad! If I wore the clothes she wears, you’d ground me. In fact, I don’t even respect you anymore! You screwed up my life. You screwed up Mom’s life. And now you’re screwing someone eighteen years younger than yourself.” I bolt out and get halfway to the house when I hear his car door open and slam.

“Chloe. Your stuff.” He sounds angry, but he can just join the crowd, because I’m more than mad—I’m hurt.

If I weren’t afraid he’d follow me into the house all pissed off and start an argument with Mom, I’d just keep going. But I don’t have it in me to hear them fight again. And I’m not sure Mom’s up to it either. I don’t have an option but to do the right thing. It sucks when you’re the only person in the family acting like an adult.

I swing around, swat at my tears, and head back to the curb.

He’s standing beside his car, my backpack in one hand

and a huge shopping bag with the new school clothes he bought me in the other. Great. Now I feel like an ungrateful bitch.

When I get to him, I mutter, “Thanks for the clothes.”

He says, “Why are you so mad at me?”

So many reasons. Which one do I pick? “You let Darlene turn my room into a gym.”

He shakes his head. “We moved your stuff into the other bedroom.”

“But that was my room, Dad.”

“Is that really why you’re mad or . . . ? He pauses. “It’s not my fault that your mom got—”

“Keep thinking that,” I snap. “One of these days, you might even believe it!”

Hands full, chest heavy, I leave my onetime superhero and my broken heart scattered on the sidewalk. My tears are falling fast and hot by the time I shut the front door behind me.

Buttercup, a medium-sized yellow mutt of a dog, greets me with a wagging tail and a whimper. I ignore him. I drop my backpack, my shopping bag, and dart into the bathroom. Felix, my red tabby cat, darts in with me.

I attempt to shut the door in a normal way instead of an I’m-totally-pissed way. If Mom sees me like this, it’ll upset her. Even worse, it’ll fuel her anger.

“Chloe?” Mom calls. “Is that you?”

“Yeah. I’m in the bathroom.” I hope I don’t sound as emotionally ripped as I feel.

I drop down on the toilet seat, press the backs of my hands against my forehead, and try to breathe.

Mom’s steps creak across the old wood floors. Her voice sounds behind the door. “You okay, hon?”

Felix is purring, rubbing his face on my leg. “Yeah. My stomach’s . . . I think the meat loaf I had at Dad’s was bad.”

“Did Darlene fix it?” Her tone’s rolled and deep-fried in hate.

I grit my teeth. “Yeah.”

“Please tell me your dad ate a second helping.”

I close my eyes, when what I really want to do is scream, *Stop it!* I get why Mom’s so angry. I get that my dad’s a piece of shit. I get that he refuses to take any blame, and that makes it worse. I get what she’s been through. I get all of it. But does she have a clue how much it hurts me to listen to her take potshots at someone I still sort of love?

“I’m going to sit out on the patio,” she says. “When you’re out, join me.”

“Uh-huh,” I say.

Mom’s steps creak away.

I stay seated and try not to think about what all hurts, and instead I pet Felix. His eyes, so green, take me back to the boy in the store. *Whatever you’re trying to pull, don’t do it.*

What the heck did he mean?