



Abbi Glines

The Vincent BROTHERS

The Vincent Brothers
by Abbi Glines

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Ashton pulled herself up on our branch and sat down. Once upon a time, she'd needed me to give her a boost. Now, she didn't need me for anything. I'd let her down in so many ways. I heard the term heartbreak before and never really understood it. Until now. Sitting here looking at her, my chest literally hurt. Taking a deep breath had become difficult since the day I'd walked outside the church and saw her with Beau. I'd known. I'd wanted her to tell me anything to prove me wrong. Still deep down, I'd known. Ashton was no longer mine.

"Impressive. You made it look easy," I said loud enough so she could hear me. She'd texted me to tell me she was out here. I'd come down here to think hours ago. This was where it all started. It was fitting that it ended here too.

Ashton's expression was slightly confused. I loved that look. It was adorable. "I was already here when you sent the text," I explained and a small smile touched her lips.

"Oh," she replied.

"To what do I owe this visit?" I already had a good idea as to why she was here. I just wanted her to say it out loud. It was time we cleared the air for good. Standing up, I made my way over to where she sat on the limb but not before noticing the audience hidden in the darkness. The figures Beau would have come looking for me too. Or maybe he'd followed her.

"I wanted to check on you. Beau said you had a concussion."

I couldn't help but laugh. I had a concussion alright. I skipped the rock I held in my hand across the water. "He tell you how I got the concussion?"

"Yes," the guilt in her voice was thick. He must have admitted to bashing my head in. It wasn't her fault though.

"I deserved it. I was shitty to you all week." My chest ached harder. Seeing everyone else treating her so cruelly, while I sat back and did nothing, would haunt me for a long time.

"Um," she seemed unsure of what to say next. I'd let her down this week. I'd let myself down. The guy I'd been, the way I'd reacted, that wasn't me.

"I shouldn't have let them do those things to you. Honestly, Beau beating the crap out of me was a relief. I'd been beating myself up. Having someone physically beat me was a nice release."

"What?"

She was surprised that I felt bad about what I'd let them do to her. Damn, if that didn't make this even harder. Breathing was becoming more difficult.

"Ash, you were my girl for years. Even before that, we were friends. The best of friends. I should've never let one bump in the road cause me to turn on you like I did. It was wrong. You took all the blame for something that wasn't entirely your fault. It was Beau's and it was mine."

"Yours? How—"

"I knew Beau loved you. I'd seen the way he looked at you. I also knew you loved him more than you did me. You two had a secret bond I didn't get to share. I was jealous. Beau was my cousin and you were the prettiest girl I'd ever seen. I wanted you for myself. So, I asked you out. Without going to Beau first, never once asking him how he felt about it. You accepted and just like magic, I broke up the bond you two had. Y'all never talked anymore. There were no more late night roof talks and no more bailing y'all out of trouble. Beau was my friend and you were my girlfriend. It was as if your friendship had never been. I was selfish and ignored the guilt until it went away. On the times I saw him watching you, with that pained needy expression, did the guilt stir in my gut. It was mixed with fear. Fear you'd see what I'd done and go to him. Fear I'd lose you."

That was the first time I'd verbalized the truth. For years, I'd held it inside. Even pushing

it away when my conscience nagged at me. Watching Ashton transform her personality and never saying one word to stop her. All of it. This was all my fault.

Ashton's hand played lightly with my hair and I wanted to close my eyes and sigh from the small innocent touch. Would I always love her like this? Would I spend my life paying for my sin by living with the constant pain in my chest?

"I loved you too. I wanted to be good enough for you. I wanted to be the good girl you deserved."

Hearing her say she'd wanted to be good enough for me, reminded me once again why we'd not worked out. She'd been perfect since the first day I'd met her but I'd let her believe she expected more.

"Ash, you were perfect just the way you were. I was the one who let you change. I liked the change. It's one of the many reasons I feared I'd lose you. Deep down, I knew one day that free spirit you'd quenched would fight for release. It happened. And the fact it happened with Beau doesn't surprise me in the least."

"I'm sorry, Sawyer. I never meant to hurt you. I made a mess of things. You aren't going to have to watch Beau and me together. I'm stepping out of both your lives. You can get back what was lost."

When Beau didn't come charging out of the woods cursing like a sailor, I knew he was too far back to hear us. I reached up and grabbed Ashton's hand. I was the only one who could convince her that she didn't need to do that. It was time I let her go.

"Don't do that Ash. He needs you."

Shaking her head, she gave me a sad smile, "No, it's what he wants too. Today, he hardly acknowledged me. He only spoke to me when he was making a point to everyone else; I was to be left alone."

She really didn't have a clue. "He won't last long. He's never been able to ignore you. Not even when he knew I was watching him. Right now, he's dealing with a lot. And he's dealing with it alone. Don't push him away."

Jumping down from the limb, Ashton stood on her tiptoes and wrapped her arms around my neck for what I knew would be the last time. "Thank you. Your acceptance means the world to me. But right now, he needs you. You're his brother. I'll just be a hindrance to you two dealing with everything."

The pain was almost unbearable now. Reaching out, I played with a lock of her hair. I'd been fascinated with the perfect golden color of it since we were five years old. She'd always reminded me of a fairy princess, even when she was baiting hooks with chicken liver. I'd lost my princess but the memory of her was worth every sharp pain in my heart.

"Even if I was wrong to take you without a thought to Beau's feelings, I can't make myself regret it. I've had three amazing years with you Ash."

That was my goodbye. Beau was out there waiting on me to walk away. It was his time now. I'd royally screwed mine up. Dropping her hair, I stepped back, then turned and walked into the woods, toward my brother.

Chapter One

Six months later...

Sawyer

I'd known better than to come here but I couldn't keep avoiding the field parties. It was time I started acting as if Beau and Ash being together didn't bother me.

"Here, man," Ethan shoved a red plastic cup full of beer into my hand. Frowning, I started to hand it back to him. "Drink it. You need it. Hell, I need it just watching the three of you."

I was thankful he'd spoken low enough that no one else could hear him. I could feel everyone sneaking glances at me. They were all waiting to see how I would react. It'd been six months since I'd lost Ash to my brother. It was easier to see them together now but, normally, I kept my distance. This was the first time I'd had to witness Ashton snuggled up between Beau's legs while my horny ass brother kissed her neck, hand, head and anything else he could get near his lips while I carried on a conversation with everyone else.

Ethan was right; I needed a drink. Touching the cup to my lips, I tilted my head back and took a very long gulp. Anything to distract me from the make-out session in front of me would be nice.

"I still can't believe you two aren't going to the same college. I always expected y'all to get signed on as a package deal." Toby Horn almost sounded let down that I'd chosen to sign with the University of Florida instead of Alabama, like everyone expected me to. Beau and I had been planning to play for the Crimson Tide since we were five years old. But when Florida had offered me a full ride, I'd taken it. I needed the distance. Ashton was headed to Alabama with Beau and I just couldn't do it.

"Florida offered him a sweet deal. Can't blame him for taking it," Beau explained. I got it. He never mentioned it but he knew why I'd gone with Florida. Beau had been careful for a long time not to shove my face in his relationship with Ashton but since graduation he'd put that behind him. Every time I saw them lately she was wrapped up in his arms and he was staring at her with that ridiculous worshipful expression he'd always reserved just for her.

"Alabama can't handle two Vincent boys. I needed to share the love," I replied, focusing my gaze on Toby before taking another swig of my beer.

"It's going to be weird not having you around though." Damn. Why'd she have to say anything? Couldn't she sit over there quietly and let Beau paw all over her? Hearing Ashton's voice made it impossible not to lift my eyes to meet her gaze.

The sad tilt to her full lips made that old familiar ache start up in my chest. Only Ashton could get to me this way. "You'll survive. Besides, you two hardly come up for air to notice much of anything else." I'd just sounded like an ass. Ashton's flinch from my snide comment was just another strike against me.

"Careful, Sawyer." The threat in Beau's voice was unmistakable. Silence fell over the group. Everyone's focus was on the two of us. The anger flashing in Beau's glare just pissed me off. What did he have to be angry about? He had the girl.

"Why don't you calm down? I was responding to her comment. Am I not allowed to speak to her now?"

Beau gripped Ashton's waist and moved her away from him as he stood up. "You got a problem, Sawyer?"

Ashton scrambled to her feet, threw her arms around Beau's neck and began begging hi

to ignore me. Telling him I didn't mean anything by it, which we both knew I had. Beau's eyes never left mine as he reached behind his neck to unlatch Ashton's hold on him.

Setting my cup down on the bed of my truck, I took a step toward him. This was a fight I needed. Holding my aggression in was so damn hard at times. Ashton, however, wasn't having it. She grabbed Beau's shoulders and jumped up, wrapping her legs firmly around his waist. If seeing her wrapped around him didn't piss me off so bad, I'd laugh at her determination to keep us from fighting. She'd been dealing with us since we were kids and she knew exactly how to keep us from coming blows. Throwing herself in the line-of-fire was the only way.

Amusement lit Beau's eyes as his angry snarl turned into a pleased grin and his eyes shifted from me to Ashton. "What ya doin' baby?" he asked in a slow drawl I hated. He'd been using that on girls since we hit puberty.

"That's the way to distract him, Ash," Kayla Jenkins hooted from Toby's lap.

More catcalls and whistles started. Beau was smiling at her now like she was the most fascinating person in the world. That was it for me. I had to get out of here.

"Let's go get something to eat, I'm starved," Ethan suggested and Jake North agreed.

"You drive," Ethan called out and climbed into the passenger seat of my truck. Without looking back at Ash and Beau, I walked around my truck and climbed in. If he hauled her off to his truck, I'd lose it. Leaving was the best idea.

Lana

Jewel flirted outrageously with the bartender. I knew her game and was willing to bet Lana did too. The brilliant scheme to flash cleavage and bat eyelashes while giggling wasn't the most original idea ever concocted. Why she couldn't just be happy with her soda while we waited on a table was beyond me. The ten-hour road trip I'd been on with her from Alpharetta, Georgia to south Alabama was my quota on quality time spent with my childhood friend and next-door neighbor. Jewel and I had grown up and become two completely different people but that bond from our childhood had somehow kept us from growing apart. However, Jewel could only be endured in small doses.

"Come on Lana, flash him a view of those fabulous boobs you've finally decided to share with the world," Jewel whispered as her gaze stayed on the young guy fixing drinks for another customer. Shaking my head at her ridiculous request, I picked up my soda and took a sip. I was happy with my soda. If she wanted to make a fool out of herself in hopes of getting a mixed drink, then fine, but I wasn't about to join in. The last thing I needed was to get caught with an alcoholic drink on my thirty minutes away from my aunt and uncle's house. My uncle was a Baptist preacher and if he found out I'd been drinking alcohol, there was no way he'd let me stay with him and his family for the summer.

"You're such a party pooper, Lana," Jewel whined and glared at my drink like it was personally offensive.

I didn't really care if she was upset at this point. I just wanted to get some dinner and then get to my aunt and uncle's. The sight of Jewel's taillights driving away was going to be a welcome event.

"I don't get you, Lana. You go and get all gorgeous and finally decide to flaunt what your Momma... Okay maybe not your Momma because God knows she ain't real attractive... How about flaunt what luck must have given you and for what? Nothing! That's what! You buy yourself a new, sexy, cute wardrobe and finally get a hairstyle to show off that head of hair of yours but you *never* flirt. It's as if you did this for yourself and that's just dumb. Guys notice you now Lana. The

turn their heads but you just ignore them.”

————— This was a familiar tirade of hers. It drove her nuts that I didn't throw myself at any boy that looked my way. I wasn't about to tell her the reason why. That kind of information would make Jewel dangerous. She'd find a way to ruin everything. She wouldn't mean to, of course, but she would. Her loud mouth always seemed to bring a world of trouble with it.

“I've told you that I'm just not interested in dating right now. We just graduated. I want a summer to prepare for college in the fall, enjoy being away from my insane mother and just—relax.”

Jewel sighed and bent her head down to nibble on her straw while her eyes zeroed in on the poor bartender who had to be ready for us to be seated at a table.

“You can still come with me, you know. Skip this living with the preacher stuff and come party all summer at the beach. Corey would love you to join us. Her step-father's condo has three bedrooms and a killer view of the ocean.”

A summer hanging out with drunk Jewel and friends was not appealing, at all. I had my own plans and so far everything I'd put into motion was running smoothly. However, I couldn't help but be nervous about the next step. It was the most crucial.

Having my naturally red hair darkened to a deep copper and styled attractively instead of pulled back in a braid or ponytail had been step-one. The darker red color had made my pale skin seem almost delicate. Then the cleaning out of my closet had been the next move. I'd bagged up every single piece of clothing I owned and dropped them off at the local Goodwill. My mother had been horrified but after she'd seen the clothing style I intended to replace it with, she'd been very supportive. Unlike most mothers, my mother wanted to see me in shorts that showed off almost all my legs and tight tops that emphasized my C cup boobs.

Jewel had wanted to teach me how to apply makeup but I'd kindly refused and went to the Clinique counter at Macy's and had them teach me, and then I'd bought everything they'd use. Although I'd never been one for makeup I had to agree that it did startling things to my eyes. I closed my bedroom door and stared at myself in fascination for hours after they'd put makeup on me.

Convincing my mother to let me stay the summer with my aunt and uncle had been a little more difficult. My cousin, Ashton, had helped tremendously with this part. She'd talked to her mother who in return talked to mine. Our mothers are sisters and once my aunt convinced my mother that Ashton truly wanted me to come spend our last summer before college together, I'd been so excited I'd momentarily forgotten about the last step in the plan. The reason why I'd made myself moderately attractive and begged to come stay the summer with my cousin. The goal sounded so simple but when I allowed myself to dwell on it then it became so incredibly complicated. Getting a boy to fall head-over-heels in love with you isn't easy. Especially when he's been in love with your cousin for as long as you can remember.

Chapter Two

Sawyer

“You’ve got to curb the temper, man. If anyone could take on Beau—it would be you but you’d still walk away beat up,” Ethan announced as I pulled out onto the country road from the dirt road that led back to the field parties.

“It’s been six months, bro. How long you gonna be pissed over this?” Jake asked from the backseat.

Why was this any of their business? Neither one of them knew what a committed relationship was like. They’d both been through so many girls during our four years of high school I couldn’t even name them all. Explaining to them that I’d planned my life with Ashton as the center from the time I was twelve years old wasn’t exactly easy. So instead, I leaned forward and turned on the radio to drown out any more of their interrogation.

“You can turn on music all you want but the fact is you got to let this go. He’s your cousin and your best friend. A chick can’t come between that. Not for long.” Ethan was watching me from the passenger seat. I knew he was waiting on a response from me but I didn’t give him one. His comment about Beau being my cousin was reminder enough that no one really knew me, except Beau and Ash. He wasn’t my cousin. He was my brother but once Beau found out the truth from his mother he’d decided to keep that information locked away where it’d been his whole life. He didn’t want to claim my dad as his own and I couldn’t really blame him. It wasn’t like my dad had ever done anything to help Beau’s home situation growing up. Beau held nothing but disdain for my father, or father. He chose to remember our father’s brother as his dad. He’d been the only dad Beau had ever known. Even though he’d died when Beau was in first grade, he’d been a fond memory for Beau—unlike his real father.

“Hey! You passed Hank’s,” Ethan announced, pointing his finger toward the burger place we normally went to eat.

“Not going to Hank’s,” was my only response. They were the ones who jumped in my truck. If they didn’t like my need to get out of Grove then they could walk back to town when we got to where I was headed.

“You leaving Grove?” Jake asked.

“Yep.”

Ethan sighed and leaned back in the seat, “We may end up in Florida before he stops this damn truck.”

“Florida? I’m starving and a cheeseburger from Hank’s would’ve fixed that,” Jake grumbled.

Slowing down the truck, I pulled over and glanced back at Jake, “You’re welcome to get out and walk back.”

His eyes widened and he slowly shook his head. “No man, that’s okay. I’m good.”

I pulled back onto the road and ignored the exchange between the guys. They both thought I was nursing a broken-heart. Well, they were right.

No one said another word until I pulled the truck into the parking lot of Wings. I’d driven about twenty miles south to the next town big enough for decent restaurants.

“You should’ve told me you were headed to Wings. I’d have shut up,” Jake made an excited whoop as he jerked open the backdoor of the truck and jumped out.

This was somewhere I'd never eaten with Ash. There weren't many places that I didn't have a memory of her so my choices had been limited. Tonight, I needed to get my mind off her and focus on my future—or at least my summer.

"I'm gonna eat my weight in some wings," Ethan said in reply to Jake's excitement over my choice of restaurant. At least I'd made them happy. Not that it mattered.

Opening the door, I went inside and stopped at the hostess stand. A tall girl with long blond hair pulled back in a ponytail smiled up at me with an appreciative gleam in her eye that I was used to. It had been habit for me to ignore that look in other girls' eyes for so long that I automatically brushed it off. Tonight, I wasn't going to do that. It was time I started flirting back.

I flashed a grin that I knew was pretty damn impressive because it was one Ashton always commented on. "Three please," I told her and watched as her brown eyes got bigger and she blinked several times. She wasn't exceptionally pretty but seeing her get all flustered was a nice boost to my ego.

"Oh...um... okay... yes... uh," she stammered, reaching for the menus and instead knocking them to the floor.

I bent down beside her to help pick them up.

"I'm sorry. I'm not normally so clumsy," she explained with two bright red splotches of color staining her cheeks.

"So, it's just me then?" I teased.

A nervous giggle erupted from her and I realized she'd never do. I didn't like giggles. Ash wasn't a giggler.

Handing her the menus, I stood back up and pointedly shifted my attention elsewhere. I didn't need to flirt with her anymore. She'd get the wrong idea.

"Okay, um, this way," I heard her say. Both Ethan and Jake quickly fell in behind her. I started to follow when my gaze stopped its uninterested appraisal of the bar to focus in on a female who would happily let giggle all she wanted.

Auburn hair hung down her back and curled on the ends. Two very long legs were bare and crossed as she sat on the barstool and a silver backless high-heeled sandal dangled off the toe of her very dainty foot. I hadn't seen the face of this one yet but from the back, she was a head turner. Major potential.

"You coming or what?" Jake yelled but I didn't turn my head to see how far they'd gone or where they were being seated. Instead, I stood frozen watching her. Jake's loud voice caught her attention and she turned in her seat and glanced over her shoulder toward him. The creamy smooth complexion was dotted with freckles. Normally, I wasn't a fan of a lot of freckles but the bedroom look to her green eyes and full, almost unreal, looking lips made it all work. She started to turn back around after seeing what the yelling had been about when she froze and her eyes locked with mine.

Surprise, pleasure, and anxiety all fluttered across her face as she studied me. I was fascinated. The bartender came up behind her and said something and she glanced back at him.

"Sawyer, man, come on," Ethan called out this time. Tearing my gaze off the redhead, I made my way toward the table where the hostess was standing with our menus.

"Sawyer, wait," a familiar voice stopped me in my tracks. Disbelief settled over me as I turned back around to see the pretty redhead making her way toward me. A short denim skirt stopped several inches above her knees as I made my way up her body appreciating the view. The white top she was wearing tied at her waist in some sort of loose knot and small glimpses of flat smooth stomach peeked out as she moved. Finally, I managed to get my focus off the impressive cleavage the shirt displayed to see her face. A small smile tugged on those ridiculously plump lips and recognition dawned on me.

No fucking way.

“Lana?” The incredulity in my voice was unmistakable. The last person I’d expected to see was Ashton’s cousin. The fact she was the girl I’d been checking out was even more shocking.

“Sawyer,” she replied with a full grin on her face.

“What’re you doing here?” I asked, thinking more along the lines of *what the hell happened to you?* She looked nothing like the girl I’d seen about seven or so months ago. That girl had been sweet, prim, and proper. This one in front of me was a walking sexual fantasy.

“Eating,” she quipped and I realized I was smiling. A real smile, not a forced one, for the first time in months.

“Well, yeah, I kind of gathered that. I meant what are you doing here, in southern Alabama?” She pressed her lips together and then her tongue peeked out and nervously licked them. “Hmmm... I wouldn’t mind tasting those lips either.”

“I’m staying with Ashton this summer. My friend is headed to the beach so she’s dropping me off at Ash’s after we eat.”

Ash. Damn. Did she have to bring up Ashton? My good mood evaporated and I was once again forcing a smile. She glanced over my shoulder toward the table I had been headed to and frowned.

“You guys are already seated at a table?” She shot her frustrated gaze over toward the hostess stand. “Figures,” she muttered. I followed her gaze and saw the blonde hostess watching me with an irritated frown on her face.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, turning my attention back to Lana.

She sighed and looked back at me. “We’ve been waiting on a table for at least fifteen minutes.”

Ah. The waitress had given us their table. I could fix this problem.

“Go get your friend and y’all come sit with us.”

Lana flashed a bright smile, “Okay, thanks. I’ll be right back.”

I watched as she spun around and walked back to the bar. Her backside was impossible not to watch as her hips swayed gently from side to side. *Damn*, Lana looked good.

Lana

“Ohmygod, did you just *flirt* with that hottie? Dang girl, when you decide to flaunt it you shoot high.” The awe in Jewel’s voice made me want to laugh. However, the fact I felt like I was about to throw-up kept the humor at bay. Sawyer had checked me out. His eyes had slowly scanned up my body. He’d paused at my boobs. I felt the need to fan myself with the stupid coaster under my drink.

“I know him. And we’re sitting with him and his friends,” I announced reaching for my purse and soda.

“Really?” Jewel squealed happily, snatching her purse out of the seat beside her and standing up. The scarf thing she called a shirt showed off all of her flat tanned stomach. The bar in her belly-button flashed two small rhinestones on each end causing eyes to immediately focus on her exposed skin. Then the Daisy Duke’s she was wearing made my mini skirt look classy. The girl turned heads when she walked if for no other reason than most of her body was on display.

“Come on,” I snapped and headed toward Sawyer who was standing right where I left him, waiting on us. His eyes drifted over to Jewel and I watched him appraise her the same way he had appraised me. A sick knot formed in my stomach and I fought the urge to push her behind me. I didn’t want him doing that slow sexy trek up her body with his eyes.

“He’s so freaking hot,” Jewel hissed beside me. She’d stuck out her chest further and the flip thing she did with her long blonde hair over her shoulders had just happened. She was getting ready to unleash her skills on Sawyer.

“Not him, Jewel. Pick one of the others. Just not him,” I tried not to sound like I was begging but there was no masking the desperation in my voice.

I heard a small gasp beside me.

“He’s the reason you...” she trailed off as her mind wrapped around what she was just now figuring out. “Oh, wow. I get it. I won’t poach,” she replied.

No, but she was still tanned, freckle free, blond, and well-practiced in the world of men. Those were all things Sawyer liked.

When we reached him, I knew I had to make the introductions as much as I hated it. Why hadn’t I just left her at the bar to flirt with the bartender and pretended like she didn’t exist? Sawyer’s appreciative gaze was locked on Jewel and although she’d promised me she wouldn’t flirt, it was ingrained in her. The girl couldn’t help it.

“Hi, I’m Jewel,” she drawled out in a sexy voice that had me wanting to slap her stupid.

“It’s nice to meet you, Jewel,” he replied, taking her hand in his large one and... did he just squeeze it?! “I’m Sawyer. An old friend of Lana’s.”

The fact I was leaving them to make their own introductions wasn’t lost on me. I just couldn’t open my mouth, afraid I’d let out the angry snarl vibrating in my chest. At the moment, I really hated Jewel. She was going to spend her summer with a guy that was supposed to be her boyfriend but she was unleashing all her charms to get what out of Sawyer? A one-nighter? I shivered at the thought. I just might kill her if she dared.

“Lana?” Sawyer’s voice startled me from my vicious thoughts and I blinked several times to clear my head.

“Um, yes, I’m sorry,” I replied.

“She’s exhausted from the trip,” Jewel explained, covering for me. No doubt she knew what was wrong.

“I asked if you wanted me to drive you back to Ashton’s, after we eat, so that Jewel doesn’t have to.”

Oh, he was offering me a ride. Jewel would be gone. Yes, please.

“That would be great. Thanks,” I managed to keep the excitement out of my voice.

A pleased smile touched his lips and I wanted to reach over and feel them. See if they were as smooth as they looked. How weird was that?

Sawyer led the way over to the booth and two other guys were smiling up at us. You could see the surprised curiosity in their eyes.

“Guys, this is Lana, Ash’s cousin, and her friend Jewel. They were waiting on a table and I offered to share ours.” Sawyer turned back to us, “The guy to the left is Ethan and the guy to the right is Jake.”

Ethan had a nice smile and short dark hair. It was just barely long enough to flip up some in the front. His dark brown eyes appeared warm and amused. I liked him instantly. I needed to pick a side of the half circle booth to slide into and he seemed less threatening of the two. Taking a quick peek at Jake I saw he was drinking in Jewel’s bare stomach with his gaze. The blond curls peeking out of his baseball cap were cute but the sexual gleam in his gray eyes was a little unnerving.

“Jewel,” Sawyer said, motioning for her to slide in on Jake’s side. I moved to slide in on Ethan’s side. I felt extremely grateful; I wouldn’t have to sit beside Jake.

Then I watched as Sawyer slid in behind Jewel and my stomach dropped. He’d had to pick a side and without a second thought he’d chosen Jewel’s. His offer to drive me to Ashton’s no

seemed unimportant. He'd done it to be considerate because that's was what he was. Not because I had been attracted to me or even remotely interested. I was an idiot.

"I didn't know Ash had a cousin," Ethan said beside me. I tore my eyes off Sawyer as he sidled up to Jewel and focused on the guy beside me. At least he didn't look upset about getting stuck with me, instead of Jewel.

"Um, yes, I'm the only one. I live in Georgia and only get down to visit her about once a year, at the most."

Ethan's easy smile showcased straight white teeth. I liked good teeth on a guy. And Ethan wasn't bad to look at either. His dark eyes were outlined with really long lashes.

"So, you staying long?"

"All summer," I replied. Ethan's smile looked approving and he nodded his head.

"Nice," he replied, then lifted his gaze to the waitress who'd just walked up.

"What can I get y'all to drink?" she asked, tucking a strand of brown hair behind her ear and forcing a smile that didn't meet her eyes.

"Coke," Ethan announced, then glanced down at my almost empty one. "Make that two cokes."

He'd ordered for me. I liked that. No guy had ever ordered for me. It made me feel odd and special.

"A screwdriver for me," Jewel said as if she was going to get away with this. I glared at her and she gave me a small smirk.

"ID," the waitress replied and this time I smirked as Jewel immediately went from looking cocky to irritated.

"Don't have it with me," she replied in an annoyed tone.

"I bet you don't," the waitress muttered.

"Are you saying I don't look twenty-one?" Jewel asked as if she were shocked someone would even question it. Because, of course, an eighteen year old girl could pass for twenty-one easily. Whatever.

"Yes, that's what I'm saying," the waitress deadpanned.

Jewel opened her mouth to argue, no doubt, and I knew I needed to step in and stop her before we all got thrown out.

"Just bring her a Diet Coke, please," I told the waitress with an apologetic smile and then sent a warning glare over toward Jewel.

She harrumphed and crossed her arms over her chest in a pout. Luckily, she didn't have much in the way of cleavage so Sawyer wasn't leering down her shirt as she pushed her small boob up with her ridiculous posture.

Everyone else ordered their drinks. Sawyer leaned down to whisper something to Jewel that made her giggle and I decided I needed to focus on the menu and just get through this. I don't know why I'd hoped for anything different.

"You handled that well," Ethan whispered, opening his menu beside me. I peeked over at him and smiled, "Thanks. It happens a lot."

He grinned and studied his menu. I did the same.

Chapter Three

Sawyer

If the girl giggled one more time, I was going to rip off pieces of my napkin and shove them in my ears. Damn, she was annoying. When I'd first seen her I'd thought she could potentially distract me from Ashton tonight but I'd been so very wrong. All she was managing to do was get on my nerves. If her hand slid up my thigh one more time, I was going to end up shoving her toward Jake.

Soft laughter caught my attention and I turned my attention to Lana. She was smiling brightly at whatever Ethan was saying to her. He'd been talking to her in whispered tones throughout the entire meal. That was grating on my nerves as well. Ever since she sat down beside him, he'd taken up all her attention. It was as if the rest of us weren't even at the damn table.

"Looks like she's interested in your friend," Jewel said, obviously noting where my attention was focused.

"Hmmm," was my only response.

"How long have you known Lana?" she asked. I thought back to the days of her bright orange ponytails and skinny legs with knobby knees and realized she'd come a very long way. Those freckles that had once made her unattractive now somehow enhanced her looks.

"Since we were kids. I always used to have to take up for her with Ash and Beau. They tormented her."

"Beau?" Jewel asked. Apparently, Lana didn't talk much about Ashton to her friend. If she did, she'd know exactly who Beau was.

"My br—uh, cousin," I replied.

Lana threw her head back and let out a real laugh this time. Not one where she was trying to keep her silence but one where she was thoroughly delighted about something and didn't care who heard her. The long silky auburn locks brushed the edge of the table and I wondered how she'd react if I wrapped one of those locks around my finger.

"You think that's funny, huh?" Ethan replied grinning like an idiot because he'd made her laugh so hard.

Lana nodded her head, reached out, and squeezed his arm. "Yes, I do. I'm sorry," she replied, trying to keep the huge grin off her face.

Ethan's body language said he didn't mind at all as he leaned into her touch and began that damn whispering again. Those two were lost in their own little world.

"She isn't normally good with guys. They make her nervous," Jewel pointed out.

She didn't look nervous to me. Although, I had to agree, the Lana I remembered was quiet and reserved. What had changed other than the fact she had gone from forgettable to gorgeous in a few short months?

Jake said something to Jewel and she turned her attention to him. Finally, I had some relief. Maybe she would grope his thigh now and leave mine alone.

Lana reached for her drink and her eyes met mine. She paused briefly then smiled at me. She really had a nice smile. And those freckles... damn they were cute.

"Enjoying your dinner?" I asked.

She snuck a peek over at Ethan who was still staring at her like a lovesick puppy. She managed to wrap him around her little finger rather quickly. "Yes, thank you," she replied, then took a sip of her drink. Those lush lips wrapped around the straw and I had to swallow hard to keep from groaning. How had little Lana McDaniel become so skilled in the ways of seducing a man?

"Lana mentioned we were giving her a ride to Ashton's," Ethan said and I tore my gaze

off Lana and her straw to glare at him. Why I was glaring, I wasn't sure. He'd done nothing wrong. He'd entertained Lana and made sure she felt comfortable at the table. Forcing my face to relax, I nodded. "Yeah, I figured since we were going that way I could take her and Jewel could continue on toward the beach."

Ethan appeared a little too pleased. "Good idea," he replied with a smile and leaned over to say something to Lana that caused her to grin.

Paying for the meal and getting out of there had been my number one priority. I was ready to send Jewel on her way. Girls who didn't take a hint annoyed me. I signed the receipt and stuck my debit card back in my wallet.

"Here," Jewel said in an unhappy tone as she handed the waitress her receipt and a twenty dollar bill.

"Ethan, *no*," Lana's voice broke into my thoughts and I watched as she frowned up at Ethan who was grinning in return.

"I need out. I've got to go to the restroom before I hit the road again," Jewel said. I stood up and let her by but didn't take my eyes off Lana and Ethan who appeared to be arguing or at least Lana looked like she was arguing and Ethan was enjoying himself.

"Those two are about to make me gag," Jake muttered, getting out of the booth. "Besides, why the hell would he go and pay for the chick's meal if he just met her? It ain't like this on a date."

He'd paid for her meal? Why hadn't I thought of that? It was the polite thing to do. Since he was Ash's cousin. I should have paid for it. Except, I'd been so focused on getting away from Jewel I hadn't thought of anything else.

"Come on E, let's roll," Jake didn't try to mask his annoyance. He must have struck off with Jewel.

Lana quickly scooted out of the booth and stood up. Ethan was right behind her with his small red purse in his hand.

"You forgot this," he said as he stepped up behind her.

Lana flashed him a grateful smile and thanked him.

Stalking toward the door, I didn't glance back to see if anyone was following me. I needed to get outside and get some fresh air before I went off on someone for absolutely no reason.

Lana

Sawyer was quiet. I tried not to stare at him as he and Ethan took my things from Jewel's car and loaded them in the back of his truck. He seemed in a hurry to leave. Maybe Jewel had laid on a little too thick with him and he was ready to get away from her. The thought made me smile.

Peeking over at him through the veil of my hair, I could see he'd relaxed since we'd gotten in the truck. Ethan had offered Jake the front seat and said he'd sit with me in the back because Sawyer had said that he wasn't making me crawl into the back of the truck. I didn't really consider the extended cab with the comfortable backseat "crawling" into anything but I hadn't argued. His angry scowl had made me scramble into the front seat. Thankfully, he'd seemed to calm down once the other two got into the back.

"You can change the station if you want," Sawyer said, glancing over in my direction.

I hadn't been paying any attention to what was on the radio. I'd been more worried about figuring out why he was being so surly all of a sudden. I wasn't used to seeing Sawyer like this. Normally he was all smiles and politeness. This must be Sawyer after Ashton. The thought made me sad.

“Ah, man, don’t let her choose. She’s a chick. She’ll pick some awful boy band shit.” Jake complained from the backseat. “Umph, ow, what the hell,” he snapped. I turned to see Ethan glaring at him.

If only Sawyer liked me as much as Ethan obviously did. Then again, Ethan was more my league.

“I’ve a good mind to let her crawl back there and slap you,” Sawyer said with an amused tone to his voice.

“S’okay, I think E bruised my ribs. I’ll shut up.”

The rest of the trip was pretty uneventful. There wasn’t much talking except for Sawyer asking me if I was comfortable. He’d turned the air vent toward me and told me to close it if I got cold. He’d changed the channels several times and always asked if I liked that song. This was the Sawyer I was used to. The attentive, polite one. Not the moody guy I’d witnessed all night.

When Sawyer pulled onto a dirt road, that I knew led out to the field parties, I searched the parked cars for Ashton’s car or Beau’s truck. I wasn’t sure I was ready to witness Ashton with both of the Vincent boys just yet. If Sawyer was still hung up on her it would almost kill me.

“I’ll see y’all later. I’m going to go ahead and take Lana to Ash’s.”

Ethan cleared his throat drawing my attention from the parked vehicles to him.

“Uh, I can take her,” he said in a cautious tone as he stared at Sawyer. Sawyer, on the other hand, hadn’t even turned around to look at him.

“I got this, Ethan,” he replied in a cool hard voice.

Ethan shifted his gaze from me to Sawyer, then let out a defeated sigh and opened the door and got out.

Once he’d closed the door, Sawyer backed up and turned around. I was silently thrilled he’d wanted to take me to Ashton’s but then the nagging reminder that he was probably doing it out of hopes of seeing Ashton squelched my joy.

Instead of torturing myself with different scenarios in my head, I decided to ask him about Ashton.

“So, how are things with the three of you?” I didn’t have to elaborate. I knew he would know exactly who I was talking about.

He tensed up then let out a breath and cocked his head to the side and cut his eyes toward me, “Would you believe me if I said we were doing great?” The sad smile on his face broke my heart.

“No,” I replied.

He let out a small chuckle and ran his hand through his dark hair. “You knew about them last time you were here, didn’t you? I remember that time at the field party. Something had been off about that whole scenario. For starters, you weren’t Beau’s type and Ash wouldn’t have gotten so worked up if he had flirted with you because they’d mended their fences,” he shook his head, “guess you were the only reason I believed that story. I didn’t figure you for a liar.”

I always knew that lie was going to come back to haunt me. When Sawyer had found Ashton and Beau having a lover’s spat because Beau had followed Ashton into the woods so he could sneak a kiss, I couldn’t stand the thought of Sawyer finding out the truth that way. So, I’d lied and told Sawyer that Beau had hit on me and Ashton didn’t think he was good enough for me. I’d told Ashton later that she had to choose or let them go because what she was doing to Sawyer was wrong.

“I’m sorry,” I replied. Because I was.

Sawyer nodded, “Yeah, me too.”

The rest of the drive over to Ashton’s was fairly quiet. He didn’t ask me if I was comfortable and he didn’t turn on the radio. Why had I opened my big mouth? Reminding him about

my part in his cousin and girlfriend's deception had been stupid.

~~“Ash's car is here but I doubt she's home. She was with Beau at the field earlier.”~~

I nodded and reached for the door handle. I'd said enough tonight. I needed to get out of his truck before I said anything else stupid.

“Wait, Lana,” Sawyer's hand reached out and his fingers wrapped around my upper arm. Chill bumps from his rough warm skin popped out all over my skin.

“Uh, yeah,” I managed to choke out.

“Look, I was a jerk. I'm sorry. It isn't your fault. That crap with Ash and Beau, none of it was your fault. I just needed an outlet to vent and you were the only person around. I was wrong,” he paused and I glanced back at him. “Forgive me?”

The sincere look in his eyes made me melt. He was like a sweet wounded puppy. Ashton had been crazy to hurt him. I mean, who does that? He was so perfect. How can you hurt someone so incredibly perfect?

“Yes, of course.”

A smile lit up his face and he squeezed my arm then let go. “Phew, thank you.”

We both got out of the truck and I met him on the other side to get the luggage he was lifting out of the back and setting on the driveway.

“I'll help you. Don't get the heavy stuff,” Sawyer said as he reached for the last bag. He didn't normally pack so much but now that I wore makeup and styled my hair and had an actual wardrobe I had quite a few pieces of luggage.

“Thanks.”

“I didn't peg you as a girl who packs a lot,” he observed.

I shrugged, “Things change.” I reached down to pick up my cosmetics and toiletry bags. They were the smaller two.

“Yeah, they do, don't they.” His gaze shifted back to the house and I knew he was staring up at Ashton's window. He was so not over her.

“She's an idiot... for what it's worth,” I would have slapped my hand over my mouth if I hadn't already had them full. I couldn't believe I'd just said that.

Sawyer swung his attention back to me. His dark eyebrows arched in surprise at my statement and I was sure my cheeks were bright red.

“You think so?”

Well, I couldn't exactly deny it now. So I nodded.

Sawyer took a step closer to me and my heart beat so hard against my chest I felt the need to gasp for air. His green eyes studied me carefully. It was as if he was looking at me for the first time. His eyes dropped to my mouth and I fought the urge to lick my lips nervously.

“You think I'm a better choice than Beau? He's the bad one, you know. The dangerous one. Girls like bad boys.” His voice had dropped to a low rumble. I shivered as he took another step closer, his eyes never leaving their study of my lips. It had been awhile since I'd reapplied lip-gloss. I wondered if they were dry.

Forcing myself to remain calm, I responded, “Not all girls.”

“Hmmm...”

He raised his hand and gently ran the pad of his thumb over my bottom lip. I mentally imagined biting his thumb and pulling it into my mouth to suck but I didn't. Instead, I just stopped breathing.

“They are as soft as they look... maybe softer,” he whispered, then he lowered his head and before I could take a calming breath his mouth was on mine.

Forcing oxygen into my lungs via my nose, I dropped both the bags in my hands and ~~grabbed onto his arms to keep from passing out due to the overwhelming fact I was actually being~~ kissed by Sawyer Vincent.

His hands settled on my waist and squeezed the bare skin they touched gently. I think I may have moaned when he pulled my bottom lip into his mouth to suck on it. Before I could completely throw myself at him, he was gone. Dizzy and completely shaken, I lost my balance and reached out to grab the side of the truck.

“Whoa,” Sawyer’s hand shot out to steady me.

Now, that was embarrassing. I took a steadying breath and lifted my eyes, once I got them focused again, to look at Sawyer. Instead of having an awestruck expression like I was sure I had plastered on my face, he was frowning. No, make that scowling.

“I shouldn’t have done that Lana. I’m sorry. I was upset and I just didn’t think,” I reached down and grabbed my two heavy suitcases and headed for the front door without waiting for me to respond.

That hadn’t been the way I’d pictured our first kiss ending. And trust me, I’d been fantasizing about that kiss for years. Most of my life. Although the kiss itself was spot on perfect, the ending was way off course.

Anger suddenly took the place of disappointment and I snatched up the remaining bag and followed him. How dare he kiss me like that, then apologize and walk off.

“That’s—”

The front door swung open ending my sentence, which was probably a good thing since I was about to let him have it.

“Lana, sweetheart, you’re here,” Aunt Sarah beamed at me as she pushed open the screen door.

Shooting Sawyer an angry glare, I pushed past him and into the house.

Chapter Four

Sawyer

That couldn't be good. I mentally cursed myself for making such a jackass move. Jerking my truck door open, I started to climb inside when Beau's truck pulled in behind me. Perfect. Not what I needed right now. I needed to wrap my head around that stupid kiss with Lana. Not face Beau and Ash.

Beau's truck door swung open and he got out with an angry snarl on his face. What was his deal?

"Better be a damn good reason you're parked in Ash's drive."

Adjusting to Beau being a caveman over a girl had been almost as hard as seeing him with Ash. Beau didn't do jealous, until Ashton had become his. Now, he was a freaking lunatic.

"I just dropped Lana off," I replied, meeting his angry glare. I wasn't scared of his stupid tough guy shit. I'd been in more fights with him than I could count.

My answer obviously confused him because he raised one eyebrow then turned to look at Ash as she scooted out behind him on the driver's side.

"She's here?" Ash squealed, jumping down before Beau could catch her. "Remember, I told you Lana was coming tonight," she beamed up at Beau then frowned and looked over at me. "Why... how did you get her?"

Ash was adorable when she was confused. "She was eating dinner at Wings when we stopped in to eat. I offered to give her a ride to save her friend the trip."

Ashton's frown turned up into a smile again. I liked making her smile—always had. "Thank you! I'm so glad you met up with her." Ash turned and wrapped her arms around Beau and laid a loud quick kiss on his lips before releasing him and stepping back, "I gotta go see her. I haven't seen her in months. Call me later."

Beau grabbed her hand and turned it palm up before kissing it and then licking it. Gross. I did not want to see this. "Yeah, I'll call you when I crawl in bed," his voice dropped until it was much deeper than normal and I swear I heard Ashton sigh. I'd seen more than I wanted. I started to climb up in my truck.

"Sawyer, wait," Beau's command stopped me. I really just wanted to leave but he was blocking me in so I couldn't exactly escape.

Ashton ran inside and once she closed the door, Beau turned his gaze toward me.

"About tonight. Don't do that again. It's been six months and Ashton goes out of her way to be kind to you. You talk to her that way again and I'm gonna kick your ass."

Figures it wasn't an apology but a threat. But he was right, I had been a jerk to Ashton. I didn't want to push either of them away. They both knew me better than anyone. They'd been my best friends all my life. We shared a secret and we shared memories. It formed a bond so important that I'd given up Ash without much of a fight in order to preserve.

"You're right. I was a jackass. I'll apologize to her next time I see her."

Beau seemed appeased. His eyes shifted back to her now lit bedroom window. She and Lana would be inside talking and I wondered if I'd have something else to apologize for the next time I saw her. Because if Lana told her about that kiss then Ash would be pissed. Not because I kissed Lana but because I'd been a complete dick afterwards.

"Good," Beau started to get into his truck and stopped. "Hey you, wanna go play some pool?"

"Aunt Honey working?"

“Yep.”

That meant free beer. I nodded, “Lead the way.”

Lana

I’d barely made it inside the door when Ashton had come racing inside squealing. She made quick work of getting us past her parents and their questions concerning my parents and up to her room. She closed the door and spun around smiling brightly at me.

“I am so glad you’re here.”

Her long blond hair was hanging loose down her back and her golden tan was already perfect. How did she do that? It had been summer for what now—a week? We shared the same green eyes. That was it. When I was younger, I’d hated her. Not because she was mean but because she looked like a Barbie doll. To retaliate, I’d been the one who was mean.

“Me too,” I replied when she plunked down on the bed beside me. Getting away from my mother and her endless griping about my dad was a major relief. They’d been officially divorced now for three months but she still ranted about him daily.

“We’re going to have so much fun. Kayla Jenkins’ birthday is tomorrow night and she’s having a huge party at her house. She throws one every year. You’ll love it and get to meet everyone. Then Beau and I have been talking about a camping trip. Maybe for a week up at Cheaha. We’re going to invite Sawyer, since hiking is his thing, and some other people. You, of course, are coming too. Then Leann is at the beach all summer at her grandmother’s beach house. So, I told her we’d come to visit her one week.” Forcing a smile was hard but I somehow managed.

Pushing Sawyer’s reaction to our kiss as far away from my mind as I could, I put all my focus into talking to Ashton.

“That all sounds like fun. I’m game for whatever,” I assured her.

Leaning forward she touched my hair and studied my face. Then her face broke into a huge grin, “You’re wearing makeup and your hair is darker and...,” she studied my skirt and top. “You have stylish clothes.”

“I decided it was time for a change,” I replied, unable to suppress my smile.

“Well, you look *hot*.”

Ashton stood up and started pulling off the cowboy boots she’d been wearing with a black sundress that barely made it halfway to her knees. It was like God had decided to try his hand at making someone perfect and chose Ashton as his experiment.

“Sawyer said he brought you home. How was he? I mean, was he in a good mood?”

I wasn’t sure how I felt about Ashton still worrying about Sawyer. I hadn’t expected that when I’d planned to spend the summer here. It had been six months since the breakup. Normal people moved on in six months, didn’t they? I mean, she was with Beau now. Shouldn’t everything be watery under the bridge at this point?

“He, uh, was fine.” Okay, so that was a lie but I wanted to protect him from her. He wouldn’t want Ashton to know he was still affected by her and Beau.

She let out a sigh and plopped back down on the bed folding her legs up underneath her and facing me. “Good. He and Beau kind of had some words at the field tonight. I had to jump Beau’s arms to keep them from tearing it up. That’s why he left and ended up at Wings.”

I hadn’t seen them fight since we were kids. Surely, they weren’t fighting over Ashton still. “What happened?” I asked, knowing I probably didn’t want to hear this.

“Stupid stuff. Beau didn’t like the way Sawyer spoke to me. It wasn’t a big deal but Beau got real upset and went on the defensive. They still haven’t found a way to handle me being in the

middle.”

~~The last time I'd been sitting on her bed talking about the Vincent boys I had told her that she needed to let both of them go. Even then, I knew she wouldn't be able to. They were so much a part of her life. Beau, especially.~~

“Is Sawyer dating?” I asked, trying to sound as casual as possible.

Ashton let out a short laugh, “I wish.”

That was odd. He was gorgeous, talented, athletic, polite, and funny—how did someone like him go six months without some girl managing to snag a date?

“Not even one date?”

Ashton shrugged and pulled her knees up to her chin wrapping her arms around the front of her legs. “I think maybe one or two dates. Not sure. I don't ask, really. Sawyer still acts weird around me and Beau gets very territorial if I bring up Sawyer. He doesn't like me talking about him much.”

How sad for Sawyer. Ashton had been a big part of his life since they were twelve. Now he couldn't really talk to her anymore without Beau standing over them. As much as I wanted Sawyer to be over Ashton, I didn't like the picture in my head. Sawyer, alone, bothered me. He didn't deserve that. He'd been so good to both of them.

Welcome to the Jungle started blaring and Ashton reached for her cell phone on the table beside the bed.

“You cannot already be in bed,” Ashton purred into the phone. It had to be Beau.

“Really? Oh, okay, well that's good. I'm glad the two of you are out together.” My ears perked up and I studied my fingernails trying to appear as if I weren't completely curious about the conversation.

“I love you too. Be careful and remember he doesn't drink much so get him home safe. Was Sawyer drinking? With Beau?”

Ashton smiled, “No, I love you more.”

Oh, please.

“I'll keep it beside my pillow. Call me as soon as you get home.”

“Yes, we're catching up,” she lifted her eyes to smile brightly at me.

“Okay, love you, bye.”

She dropped her phone in her lap and let out a happy sigh.

“I know you don't like how things went down and that Sawyer was hurt but I love Beau so much, Lana. I'd do it all over again if I had to. I hated hurting Sawyer, I really did. I've never been so happy. Beau is wonderful.” Her voice went all dreamy and I fought the urge to roll my eyes.

Chapter Five

Sawyer

I still couldn't figure out why I was here. Sure, I'd been to Kayla's birthday parties every year since seventh grade but that had been because Ash wanted to come. This year, what Ash wanted no longer mattered, so why the hell was I here?

Spill Canvas blared through the speakers outside. The pool had several different colored strobe lights pointed at it from an upstairs balcony making the blue water appear pink, purple, green, and yellow. Teak loungers surrounded the pool along with tiki torches. Last year, Jake had bumped into one of those and caught an umbrella on fire. Before it could get too out of hand, Beau had picked it up and chunked it into the pool. We'd laughed about it for weeks afterward.

I made my way over to the self-serve makeshift bar right outside the pool house, which basically consisted of large metal tubs filled with ice and drinks. If I was going to endure tonight, I needed alcohol. Lots of it.

"Sawyer! The man has arrived," Ryan Mason slurred. He was already drunk. This was no surprise. The Mason boys were the owners of the land that we had our field parties on. Ryan's older brother had started the field parties years back.

I nodded his way and reached for a bottle of Corona that was hidden under ice cubes.

"That's it buddy, drink up. Ain't got to impress the preacher's daughter anymore, do ya?" Ryan called out from the middle of the pool. He was laying on a float with some girl I was pretty sure had gone to our school snuggled up beside him.

I didn't respond to his asinine comment. Like Ash cared about that. Hell, she'd left me for Beau. Twisting off the top and throwing it into the recycle bin beside the drinks, I took a long swig. The cold liquid didn't make me feel better but at least it tasted good.

Turning to walk back to the house and maybe find a television so I could turn on ESPN Sports Center, I took only a few steps before the glass doors opened and out stepped Ashton, Beau, and Lana.

Ah hell, I should've stayed home. Ashton waved at Kayla and pulled Lana over to where Kayla was lounging with some of the other girls we'd graduated with. Beau's eyes met mine and he sauntered over to stand beside me. Both his hands were tucked into the front pockets of his jeans.

"Didn't think you'd come to this," Beau said in way of greeting.

Shrugging, I held up the Corona in my hand, "Free beer."

Beau grinned and nodded. Free beer was definitely something he understood. His eyes didn't leave Ash as she chatted happily with the other girls. The tiny cover-up she was wearing over her bikini left little to the imagination. She'd never dressed like that when we'd dated. Probably another one of her attempts at being perfect for me. What bullshit.

"Better be Lana you're checking out," Beau warned.

I shifted my eyes to Lana and was surprised to see her in a pair of really tiny shorts. Her legs weren't tanned like Ash's but they were long and shaped exactly like Ashton's. The pale cream color was delicate looking. I ran my gaze up her body and took in the way her hips flared just below her very small waist completely visible in the halter-top she wore over her bikini. It was odd that she had so many freckles on her face. The rest of her body looked so perfectly smooth she appeared almost airbrushed.

"I think she likes you," Beau's words broke into my thoughts and I tore my gaze off Lana's head of dark copper curls and looked at my brother.

“What?”

“Lana, she asked about you this evening. Wondered if you’d be here,” Beau smirked. “I think she might have a crush on the quarterback.”

I shifted my attention back to Lana at the same time she peered over her shoulder and our eyes met. She froze, as if in shock I’d been looking her way. Ashton’s cousin wasn’t hard on the eyes and she was really sweet. I took another drink of my Corona while playing around with the idea of getting my mind off Ash with Lana.

“Told ya,” Beau said in an amused tone.

Maybe he was right. Lana’s mouth lifted in a small smile and I remembered how soft her lips had felt under mine. It’d been one helluva kiss.

“Come on, let’s go get you something a little stronger than a beer. It’s time you move on from Ash before we end up beating the shit out of each other again.”

Beau headed for the pool house and I reluctantly broke the lingering gaze we’d held longer than I expected, to follow my brother.

Lana

Beau pressed his hand on the lower part of Ashton’s back in a territorial way as he led her toward the stairs. I watched as she fought between the desire to go with her boyfriend and her desire to stay with me.

“I can’t leave Lana,” Ashton whispered.

Beau grabbed her waist and tugged her up against his chest. His eyes never once left Ashton’s face. “Lana is a big girl and won’t mind if I steal you away for a few minutes... or more,” Beau lifted his hazel eyes and grinned at me. “You don’t mind, do you Lana?”

Like I was going to piss off Beau Vincent by admitting that I really didn’t want to be left alone. Shaking my head, I forced a smile, “Um, no that’s fine. Y’all, uh, go do whatever.”

Beau turned his gaze back to Ashton, “Please come with me.” His voice had dropped and his eyes went all dark and pleading. No way Ashton was going to turn him down now.

“Okay,” she whispered without giving me a second glance. I watched as Beau led her up the stairs. Surely, she wasn’t going to have sex with him in Kayla’s house. Shaking my head, I turned to head back outside. Maybe Sawyer would be alone and I could work up the nerve to go talk to him.

Before I reached the door, Sawyer walked inside. His eyes seemed a little glassy and his normally perfectly styled hair was messy. I stopped and watched him as he scanned the room until his eyes found me and stopped. A slow grin spread across his lips and he sauntered toward me. Or was he staggering a little?

“Hey Lana, what you doin’ all alone?”

I swallowed the nervous knot in my throat, as he stood so close my arm was touching his. “Uh, well, Ash and Beau went,” I pointed toward the stairs unable to tell him what they’d gone to do.

His amused smile became an angry snarl as he shifted his focus to the steps leading upstairs like they were repugnant. Great, I’d got him all worked up over Beau and Ashton again.

A warm hand closed around mine and I squeaked in surprise. Sawyer chuckled and slipped his fingers between mine, “Come on, sweet little Lana. You can come entertain me since you’ve been left stranded. Besides, I’ve been looking at those long sexy legs all night. You make them shorts look real good.”

I gaped at him as he pulled me over to an empty couch. Had Sawyer just said my legs were sexy? I didn’t have time to think about his statement before he was pulling me down to sit in his

lap.

He buried his face in my hair and inhaled loudly, "Damn, you smell good," I murmured. One of his hands slipped around my waist and his hand spread out across the front of my bare stomach while his other hand wrapped a strand of my hair around his finger.

"Feels like silk," he whispered and ran my hair across his lips. After my initial shock my heart started racing. This was the closest I'd ever gotten to a boy and the fact it was Sawyer terrified and excited me all at once.

His nose trailed up my shoulder and then he began nuzzling my neck. I couldn't help the shiver that ran through me when his warm breath tickled my ear. The hand on my stomach inched up a tiny bit and he turned me so that I was facing him.

"You feel real good, Lana. Makes me forget everything else," he murmured as his hand cupped the back of my head and gently guided my mouth to his.

The same intense hunger I'd felt the last time we'd done this overtook me. His tongue darted out and licked at my bottom lip and he groaned. Sawyer Vincent *groaned* as he licked and tasted my mouth. I pressed closer to him and ran my hands into his dark locks hoping this kiss didn't end as abruptly as the last one had.

When his tongue swept into my mouth, I was the one to groan. He tasted like something dark and dangerous. Cautiously, I touched my tongue to his. Both his hands gripped my waist and he picked me up to straddle him before he ran his hands up my back pulling me tighter against his chest. His mouth left mine and I started to protest until he began trailing kisses across my jawline and softly nipped my earlobe before kissing a trail down my neck. I wiggled anxiously as heat pooled in my belly and a strange tingling began between my legs.

"Yo Saw, get a room, man," a loud voice called out breaking through my foggy brain and I stiffened, jerking back out of the warmth of Sawyer's embrace. I'd completely forgotten that we were in the living room! Other people were around us. My face was on fire. I chanced a peek at Sawyer who was watching me with an amused grin.

"Don't go getting all shy on me now, Lana," he drawled, squeezing my sides with his hands.

"Sawyer! What are you *doing*?" Ashton demanded from behind me and I scrambled out of his lap like I'd been doing something wrong.

"Well, Ash, I'm doin' exactly what it looks like I'm doin'," Sawyer replied.

"You were all over Lana!"

"Yeah, baby, I was. Your cousin is a sweet little thing. And she wasn't fighting me. I'm pretty damn sure she was enjoying herself too."

Hoots and whistles came from somewhere around us. I couldn't seem to do anything but stare at Sawyer in shock.

"She's off limits. Do you hear me? Don't you dare use her--"

"Use her? Really, Ash? You think that's what this was about? Because baby, it ain't. I can be attracted to other girls. It *is* possible," the pleased tone in his voice was unmistakable. Why was he so pleased?

"That's not what I meant," Ashton all but yelled.

Sawyer raised his eyebrows in disbelief, "Really? Cause that's sure what it sounds and looks like from here, sweetheart."

"That's enough, Sawyer," Beau's voice startled me and I turned to see him walking into the room. Oh, good Lord, he was mad.

"It ain't me this time bro. She started it," Sawyer didn't sound worried at all about the fact Beau looked ready to hurt someone.

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