



# Owen Gardner is Losing It (Grissom Elementary #0.5)

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**Category:** YA&Teen

**Description:** Tonight was supposed to be legendary.

My best friends, Xander and Abigail, had one goal: to throw the ultimate party that doubles as my golden opportunity to finally ditch my V-card.

But tonight is not my night.

Here's why:

1. I have no idea how to flirt with Beth, the insanely cool older girl I invited here.
2. But Xander does.
3. I just embarrassed myself in front of EVERYONE, including Lena, a girl from my science academic team.
4. For some reason, my stupid brother is here?
5. I discovered the hard way I'm a total lightweight.

This has to get better, right?

**Total Pages (Source):** 10

# Page 1

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## Chapter one

“Troublemaker” - Weezer

“Does anyone want to share their thoughts about Holden Caulfield’s red hunting hat and what it might represent?” I could almost feel my eyes glazing over as Mrs. Harper droned on about the symbolism in *Catcher in the Rye*, which I barely managed to finish reading.

Dissecting frogs? I could do that all day.

Dissecting fictional metaphors? No thanks.

Just as I began to feel myself nodding off, I noticed a few people beside me turn their heads toward the narrow window facing the hallway. Curious, I looked up to spot my oldest friend, Xander Pierce, with his face pressed against the glass. His eyes lit up when he realized he’d caught my attention, and he mouthed something even more difficult to decipher than Holden Caulfield’s whiny ramblings.

I responded with a confused shrug, and he waved for me to come out to the hall. It seemed urgent.

Clearing my throat, I faced Mrs. Harper and warily raised my hand. Astonished, she gasped and said, “Owen! I don’t get to hear from you very often. What are your thoughts?”

Shit. “Actually, um... can I go to the nurse?” Someone behind me giggled.

“Is something wrong?”

“Migraine,” I answered, not daring to look at Xander, whose forehead was still pressed against the glass.

Disappointment was written all over Mrs. Harper’s face. “I suppose so.” She watched me gather my things. “I hope you feel better.”

“Thanks,” I mumbled as I hurried past her. As soon as the door shut behind me, I turned to Xander and shook my head. “Really?”

Xander, dressed in his usual attire of all black from head to toe, turned to me with a smirk. “It’s been too long since we’ve done this.”

“Done what?” I asked. A stupid question. Xander just lifted one eyebrow at me—he didn’t have to say it. I knew exactly what he wanted to do.

He wanted to ditch school and smoke outside of Boomer’s, the old-fashioned general store just down the road from the high school. The place was half gas station, half cafe, and besides the assortment of candy, magazines, and pantry items inside, it looked like it hadn’t been updated since at least the 1970s.

Boomer himself was the reason most of us hung out there before and after school. (Or, in Xander’s case, during school.) He was an old hippie and a teenager at heart, and if we came in smelling like weed, he just laughed it off and asked us why we weren’t sharing. None of our parents trusted him, which gave us more reason to look up to him.

I held my English notebook and copy of *Catcher in the Rye* by my side. “I have a chemistry test seventh period,” I told Xander, following him down the hallway. I had to take quick, long strides to keep up with him. “Why are we doing this today, Xan?”

“One, because it’s Friday. Two, because I don’t feel like factoring polynomials right now. And three,” he said, stopping in front of me, “because I fuckin’ miss you, all right?”

A pang of guilt settled in my stomach. Though I’d known Xander longer than anyone at this school, we’d drifted apart in recent years. I had sort of found my place amongst the band nerds and fellow class clowns, whereas Xander became more and more of a loner, picking fights with anyone who dared to look at him the wrong way. We barely had anything in common anymore, yet somehow, I felt more comfortable around him than any of my other friends.

And I knew that if anyone ever crossed me, Xander would have my back.

When we reached the end of the hallway, he turned right instead of moving toward the front doors of the school. “Where are you—”

“We’re taking Abigail.”

Oh, jeez. I wanted to tell Xander that his life would be a lot easier if he would just let Abigail go, but I knew I’d only be wasting my breath.

He led us to the library, where he immediately found Abigail pushing a cart full of books. She smiled when she saw us, flipping her long, red hair over her shoulder. “Oh boy. Do I even want to know?”

As he approached Abigail, Xander glanced at Mrs. Lake, the librarian, who had her nose stuck in a book at the circulation desk. “Come with us.”

“Where?” Abigail asked, bringing the cart to a halt beside us.

“Boomer’s.”

“For what?”

“To blow off some steam,” Xander said, sticking his hands in his pockets. He blinked at her a few times so she’d get the message. “What do you think?”

Abigail hadn’t hung out with us once that entire school year, and it was already April. Like me, she had her own group of friends, some of them overlapping with the people I hung around with. Yet she’d known Xander even longer than me, and the two of them had a weird bond that was borderline annoying sometimes.

I couldn’t wait to find out which one of them would be the first to admit they were in love with the other.

“Xander,” Abigail said, glancing down at the cart full of books that needed to be returned to the shelves. “I’m helping Mrs. Lake right now. Wait, how did you know I’d be in here?”

“I have my ways,” he answered.

She rolled her eyes. “You won’t talk to me, but you’ll stalk me? Nice.”

Xander's expression shifted, and he seemed caught off guard by her accusation. “What? I talk to you.”

The staredown between the two of them that followed this exchange made me uncomfortable. I glanced up at the library clock. One hour and thirty-three minutes until seventh period. “You don’t have to go with us, Abigail,” I told her, but I knew it was useless. If Xander asked Abigail to jump off a cliff with him, she’d already be getting a running start by now.

“Whatever. Wait for me in the hall,” she whispered, motioning for us to go. We did

as instructed, lingering in the inlet leading to the school library. A moment later, Abigail joined us, and the three of us made our way toward the school entrance.

When we rounded the corner into the front hallway, we came face to face with our assistant principal, Mr. Higgins, and stopped in our tracks.

“Xander Pierce,” Mr. Higgins said, taking a step toward us. He and Xander had gotten to know each other pretty well over the past three years. He was the “bad cop” counterpart to Principal Sloane, and he had held a vendetta against Xander since freshman year. “What kind of mischief are you about to get yourself into, huh?”

Xander responded with a cool, unbothered laugh, which sent a feeling of dread down my spine. “Mischief? What kind of mischief do you think I’m going to get into with these guys?” He gestured toward both of us with his thumbs. “We’re running an errand for the school paper.”

Neither Abigail or I were on the newspaper staff with Xander, and I prayed Mr. Higgins didn’t recall that detail. He took a few steps closer, jingling the keys in the pocket of his khaki pants. And to my surprise, he looked me in the eyes and addressed me directly. “Gardner?”

I swallowed. “Yeah?”

“If you want to get anywhere in life, distance yourself from Mr. Pierce here.” He nodded toward Xander before turning to Abigail. “Same goes for you. That’s the best advice I can give.” And with that, he made his way past us, deciding to duck into a nearby classroom.

We’d gotten away with it, but none of us moved toward the doors. Abigail and I turned to Xander in unison, waiting for him to spout off. But he was silent, his eyes fixated on the purple and white tiled floor in front of us. His nostrils flared as he

inhaled.

Mr. Higgins didn't know anything about my best friend. He couldn't possibly know what made Xander like this, or why he sometimes skipped school for days at a time.

As a matter of fact, Abigail and I were the only ones who knew.

"Fuck him," I muttered.

"My thoughts exactly," Abigail said, and we started walking again. "Don't let him get to you, Xan."

Xander laughed. "I'm not even worried about it. The guy's probably right. I mean, look what I'm making the both of you do now. If either of you were as smart as your grades reflect, you wouldn't be with me right now, huh?"

I didn't know what to say. Neither did Abigail, apparently. The run-in with Mr. Higgins had soured Xander's mood. And as we walked across the lot to his truck, Abigail and I exchanged a knowing glance.

Xander needed this day, maybe even more than either of us knew. As frustrated as I was, I'd do my best to play along.

Just as long as we made it back in time for my chemistry test.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:25 am*

### Chapter two

#### “Oxford Comma” - Vampire Weekend

Boomer’s was a hotspot for local retirees just as much as it was for us high schoolers. They’d sit around drinking cup after cup of coffee while talking over the oldies Boomer had playing in there. When I got my license a year ago, one of those old men had to show me how to operate the still-functional, vintage gas pumps outside.

It was humiliating.

Xander backed his pick-up truck against the treeline at the edge of the gravel lot, far enough away from the building we could smoke without getting caught, but close enough to see if anything interesting happened. Not too far away, there was a car full of seniors I recognized but didn’t really know doing the exact same thing.

With Abigail sitting between us, we passed a joint back and forth and watched the old men come and go, slapping each other on the back and talking about the golf game they’d just wrapped up. Xander’s truck didn’t have an aux cord or even a CD player, much to Abigail’s disappointment, so she set her iPhone on the dash and made us listen to Vampire Weekend.

“So, boys,” she said, relaxing against the seat as Xander passed her the joint. She took a puff and stared at her nails. “Prom is just a month away.”

“Yeah, and?” Xander forced out a laugh. “Who gives a fuck about prom?”

“I might ask Lena,” I said, accepting the joint from Abigail’s extended hand. “But I don’t know.”

Lena Brower was on the science academic team with me, and we had a pretty good rapport. She was so quiet, however, that it was almost impossible to gauge how she felt about me. I kept our interactions platonic in fear that if I ever tried anything else, she’d laugh in my face.

I wasn’t perceptive enough to figure out if her deadpan insults translated to “I like you” or “you’re a fucking idiot.” It was safer to go with the latter.

“She’d totally say yes,” Abigail said. I wanted to ask her how she knew this, but decided I didn’t want to sound too eager. She sat up a little straighter and adjusted her bra straps with a sigh. “I hope someone asks me.”

I looked at Xander. Here was his opening, an opportunity handed to him on a silver platter. As the seconds ticked by, I could almost feel the disappointment radiating from Abigail as Xander said nothing.

He missed it.

“So, Xan,” I said, clearing my throat. I took another hit before continuing. “I read your article about the Battle of the Bands thing.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” I said, letting my arm dangle out of the truck. I tapped my fingers against the warm metal. “I was sad I missed that—but your writing made me feel like I was there, man.”

“Thanks for humoring me.”

“He’s not humoring you,” Abigail said, elbowing him. “You’re a good writer. You’ll be working for the New York Times some day, I bet.”

Xander threw his head back and laughed. “Doubt it. Have to have a degree for that.”

I faced him. “You’re not planning on going to college?”

He looked from me to Abigail, taking a puff from the joint. “I’m not like you guys. My parents aren’t paying my way through college. But they make too much for me to get any kind of financial aid. So without some miracle of a scholarship, I’m fucked.”

“Hello, what about student loans?” Abigail offered.

Xander just grunted. That guy had way too much talent not to go after a journalism degree. I tried to think of some way he could figure this out, making a mental note to research scholarships for him after school. I zoned out for a couple of minutes, staring through the screen door at the side of the building. There was a blonde girl working behind the counter, saying something that made the man buying cigarettes laugh. I’d never seen her working here before. Though she was at least forty feet away, I could tell she was young—maybe just a year or two older than me.

The way she ran her fingers through her hair as she talked to customers caught my attention. She stopped midway, her hand lingering at the top of her head as she laughed. So relaxed. So... something. I couldn’t think of the word.

“Owen is no longer with us,” I heard Abigail tell Xander.

I blinked a couple of times. “What?”

“You’re undressing that cashier in there with your eyes and it’s freaking us out,” Xander said, snickering. “I wonder if she’s Boomer’s granddaughter or something.”

Abigail nodded. “You’re probably right.”

“You should go talk to her,” Xander said.

“Yeah, no,” I said, taking the joint from Abigail. I watched the cashier interact with another customer buying lottery tickets. “She’s gotta be like nineteen or twenty.”

“So? She could teach you a thing or two,” Xander said. Beside him, Abigail giggled.

I rolled my eyes, but I couldn’t stop looking at that girl. Everything about her— from the way she moved to the way her hair fell over her shoulder when she leaned across the counter to hand a customer his change—entranced me.

“Go in there,” Xander urged. “Go get you a Dr. Pepper and pick up her digits while you’re at it.”

I shook my head. Had this guy even met me? Flirting with girls on the science academic team was one thing. I could talk to them. I could do more than talk to them. Natalie Castillo and I fooled around a little last semester until she got back with her ex-boyfriend. Talking to girls like Natalie and Lena was easy because they had known me for years, and I didn’t have to hide the fact I was just a goofy, inexperienced nerd. They already knew.

And unlike the girl behind the counter, they were my age. What could I possibly have that a nineteen-year-old wanted?

I glanced at the clock, attempting to change the subject. “Whatever. Let’s not stay too long. I wanted to study for my chemistry test at the end of calculus.”

Abigail let out a little gasp and turned to Xander, “Shit, I just remembered I need to be back by seventh period. I have to turn in an essay.”

Xander let out a melodramatic groan. “Jesus. I’m sittin’ here with a couple of straight-A virgins.”

Abigail froze. I couldn’t see her face, but judging from the expression on Xander’s, she was giving him a long, hard stare. “Who are you calling a virgin?”

Xander looked genuinely hurt. “Don’t tell me you did it with that basketball dork.”

“Ryan? We dated for the entirety of sophomore year. What do you think?”

Xander’s lips parted as he absorbed this information. “I just thought... I didn’t think you were like that, is all.”

I sucked air in through my teeth the second my friend uttered those words, bracing myself for what would come next. “Wow, Xander.” Abigail grabbed her phone from the dashboard and paused the Vampire Weekend song. “Wow,” she repeated. Then she turned to me. “Move.”

Without hesitation, I opened the door and moved out of the way of the feisty redhead who couldn’t even look at Xander. She stormed off toward the store, yanking the screen door open and letting it slam shut behind her.

“Not cool,” I said, sliding back into my seat. I took the joint from Xander. “You basically slut-shamed her.”

With his hands on the steering wheel, Xander peered toward the door of Boomer’s like he might catch a glimpse of whatever Abigail was doing inside. “I just always thought I’d be her first.”

“You could’ve been,” I reminded him, blowing smoke out the window. I coughed a couple of times before turning back to him to say, “You could still be her second.

She's not, like, ruined for you."

"I know she's not," he snapped. "But... I'd be the one to ruin her. Which is exactly why I stay away."

"And what a good job of that you're doing today."

Xander gave me the side-eye. "Get off my dick, Gardner. You're giving me a lot of shit today. Why don't you apply that same boldness inside there with that older babe?" He nodded toward Boomer's and began to say something else, but Abigail came outside carrying a little pouch of candy. He was distracted.

When I opened the door to let her back in, she pushed it shut, leaning against the open window instead. "Okay," she said, biting the end off of a green gummy worm. "I'm with Xander. We're getting you laid."

"What?" I asked with a nervous laugh.

"That girl is just quirky enough that this could work. She was humming along to a Beatles song, and she's got a Lord of the Rings tattoo. And she's even cuter up close." Abigail tucked her hair behind her ear and smiled. "I mean, if you don't make a move, maybe I will."

I wiped my palms on my jeans, staring straight ahead at the girl who was now leaning over the counter reading a book. "She has a tattoo?" I swallowed. "I definitely can't do this."

"Sure you can." Xander clapped his hand against my shoulder. "Go in there and say something suave, like..."

Abigail craned her neck to shoot him a judgy look. "Thought you were a writer?" She

turned to me. “Just walk in and be your usual, charming self. Make a Lord of the Rings reference. It’ll work.”

“I just had the best idea,” Xander said. “My grandparents are on a cruise right now. We could have a little soirée at their house and invite this girl.”

Abigail gasped, leaning through the window. “The cabin? Oh my gosh, I used to love walking down there with you when we were kids.”

Abigail and Xander grew up on the same country road just outside of town, and his grandparents lived in a little log cabin in the woods around the corner. I think his grandfather built it or something.

“Yeah, the cabin,” Xander said, clamping his hand down even harder on my shoulder. He locked eyes with me. “It’s secluded and cozy. Perfect for a small party. And there’s a king-sized bed for you to lose your virginity on, my guy.”

I blinked. “I cannot express enough how much this is not happening tonight, so you can just forget it.” I turned to Abigail. “Both of you.”

I was momentarily distracted by the blonde girl, who stepped outside to dump a Styrofoam cup of ice on the gravel. Her hair shone beneath the sun, creating a halo effect around the crown of her head. I could feel Xander and Abigail staring at me while I watched her, but I couldn’t tear my eyes away.

“How about this for motivation?” Xander asked, crossing his arms. “I’m not taking us back to school until you at least talk to her. You’ll miss your test.”

“You’re not serious.”

Xander shut off his truck, keeping his eyes on me the entire time. “I mean it, Gardner.

This truck's not starting until you go in there."

This wasn't fair. I looked at Abigail, expecting her to have some sympathy, but her grin was just as wicked as Xander's.

"Fine," I conceded, letting out an annoyed sigh. "I'll go in there, but it's not going to amount to anything."

Abigail pulled open the truck door and I slid out, running both hands through my hair. I stood beside the truck for a moment, contemplating what I might say when I went in. I hated this so much, I almost wished I were back in Mrs. Harpers' class listening to my classmates pontificate about the symbolism in *Catcher in the Rye*.

If I screwed up too badly, I'd never be able to show my face inside Boomer's again. Those old men would laugh me out of the place.

I stole a gummy worm from Abigail and ate it in two bites. "'Kay. Wish me luck."

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:25 am*

### Chapter three

“(What A) Wonderful World” - Sam Cooke

I considered asking Xander and Abigail not to watch me interact with the blonde girl, but they wouldn't have listened, anyway. As I pulled open the screen door at the side of the building, I glanced in their direction. Abigail, leaning against the truck, gave me a thumbs up. Xander just stared.

The girl behind the counter smiled when I came in. Abigail was right—she was even cuter up close. She had a round face, striking green eyes, and full lips. “Hi,” she said.

“Hey.” It was too soon to have a conversation, though—I hadn't hyped myself up enough yet. So, I made my way down the candy aisle with my hands in my pockets, eyeing the men sitting at the little round tables near the back. One of them was talking about prepping for his colonoscopy.

It wasn't exactly setting the mood.

I pretended to look at the selection of generic fruity candies while keeping a close eye on the girl behind the counter. She was softly singing along to the Sam Cooke song playing on the radio as she replaced the paper roll in the receipt printer.

God, was she trying to get me to fall in love with her, or what?

The screen door swung open and a middle-aged man came in to pay for his gas. I half-listened to them have a conversation about gas prices while absentmindedly

scanning the candy.

When the man left, I knew I could no longer pace the aisles pretending to be looking for something, so I walked to the coolers in the back and grabbed a Dr. Pepper. Here goes nothing, I thought to myself as I made my way up to the register. She already had her eyes on me—was I walking funny? I suddenly became painfully aware of every step I took and the awkward way I carried the bottle in front of my chest. With each step, the counter seemed farther and farther away.

Shit, am I too high for this?

She smiled at me when I reached the counter, so that was a good sign. “You spent all that time eyeing the candy and you’re not getting any?”

Good, she was initiating the conversation. That alleviated some of my nervousness. I sat the pop bottle on the counter and slid it toward her. “I just couldn’t make up my mind, I guess.”

“You want to know my favorite?” she asked, scanning my Dr. Pepper. I just nodded. “The sour gummy frogs. I don’t know what it is about them, but they’re so much better than gummy bears or worms.”

After giving it just a second of thought, I did something impulsive and very un-Owen-like. I held up my pointer finger for her to wait and made my way back over to the candy, locating the gummy frogs, and brought them up to the counter.

“Aha,” the cashier said as she scanned the package. “I’m glad you’re taking my recommendation, but just a warning: you’re going to be addicted. I don’t know what they put in them. Crack or something.”

I let out a little laugh and looked into her eyes for the first time in our conversation. It

was then that I realized I'd seen her around school before—last year. And the longer I stared at her face, the more I realized we may have even had a class together at some point. “You graduated last year, right?”

“Right,” she said, running her fingers through her hair. “You were in my 2D Art class, weren't you?”

Indeed, I was. Finally, I could place her. We never interacted in the class, but I had some vague memories of seeing her in front of the backdrop of Mrs. Peters' chaotic art room. With the quickest downward glance at her tight t-shirt, I said, “I hope you don't remember any of my terrible drawings from that class. Art is not my strong suit.”

“Oh yeah? What is your strong suit?”

Was she flirting with me? Say something cool. Say something cool. “Science.” Fuck. I can fix this. “I mean, anatomy. More specifically... female anatomy.”

Her eyes widened slightly, and she stared at me for a few seconds in stunned silence. The heat rushed to my face as I stammered out the next few words in an attempt to backpedal.

“I don't—I didn't mean—I was just—”

But she burst into laughter, clutching her stomach. “You did not just say that.”

“Unfortunately, I did,” I said, stealing a quick glance toward Xander's truck. Xander and Abigail were both staring back at me. From their vantage point, it probably looked like I was killing it in here—like she was laughing with me, not at me.

“You haven't even seen a vagina before, have you?”

Was it that obvious? Praying the men at the back of the store weren't eavesdropping, I shook my head and said. "Seen one? No. Touched one? That's a different story..."

"Oh wow," she said, closing the drawer of the cash register. I wasn't even aware she'd finished ringing up my items, but she was already handing me my change. As she dropped the pennies into my hand, she looked me in the eyes and said, "I'd love to hear that story."

Still unaware of whether she was making fun of me or flirting with me, I decided to just throw all caution to the wind and pretend for just a second that I wasn't shy, inexperienced Owen Gardner. What would Xander say? "I could tell you, but it's a long one." Holding her gaze, I lowered my voice to add, "It would take all night."

To my dismay, she threw her head back and laughed harder than ever. "I swear, every word that comes out of your mouth is worse than the last one!" Her shrieking laughter had caught the attention of the men in the back, whose conversation quieted down. We had an audience.

I shoved my hands in my pockets and looked down at my feet. "I'm sorry—my friend—he made me come in here and talk to you, or else he won't take me back to school. I had to at least try." When I looked back up at her face, she was still smiling at me, her slightly crooked teeth peeking out from behind her pink-stained lips. God, she was so pretty. I couldn't give up—not yet. Eyeing the Middle Earth tattoo on her arm, I said, "I should've gone with a Lord of the Rings pick-up line."

"Why don't you try one out on me and see where it goes?" she suggested with a grin.

I licked my lips, pulling one hand from my pocket to rub my sweaty palm on my jeans. "Okay. Uh... what do you say you and I have second breakfast in bed in the morning?"

Her smile grew. “Not bad. Not bad at all. Do better.”

I bit my bottom lip, surprised this might actually be working. With a sigh, I absentmindedly stared at the display of lottery tickets to my right before another line popped into my head. “How about—even the fires of Mount Doom don’t burn hotter than you?”

That one made her laugh. “That’s better, but are you asking me or telling me? Your delivery is all wrong. You’ve gotta say it with confidence.”

Luckily for both of us, I was feeling more confident by the second, and another LOTR pick-up line popped into my mind. “Well, you must be the one ring to rule them all,” I said, leaning onto my elbows on the counter to get a little closer to her. I took a moment to pause, letting the first half of this line sink in before I finished it. “Because I’m about to call you my precious.”

And that was it—that was all it took to win her over completely. Instead of laughing at my expense, she was now giggling and twirling her hair around her finger. It actually worked. “Tell me your name, Frodo.”

“Owen,” I answered, eyeing the set of keys next to the register. One of the keychains resembled a beachy license plate, with a girl’s name embossed on it in skinny, black letters. “Elizabeth?”

“Owen Elizabeth? That’s cute,” she teased.

“No—I mean—your keychain...”

“I’m just fucking with you. And I go by Beth.”

“Beth,” I repeated, my nerves relaxing again. I glanced at the clock on the wall,

realizing I needed to wrap this up if I was going to make it back for my chemistry test in time. “Would you maybe want to come to a little get-together my friend is having tonight?”

She crossed her arms. “Depends. Will there be any alcohol there?”

“Ummm.” Xander had connections with some college-aged folks, so I knew he’d probably be able to score us some. But I didn’t want to give Beth false hope. “I think so.”

With a playful roll of her eyes, Beth yanked my receipt from the printer and flipped it over, reaching for a Sharpie nearby. When I realized she was writing down a phone number, I tugged on the bottom of my shirt, desperately trying not to look too excited. “Here,” she said, writing her name beneath the number. “Why don’t you text me in a little bit with the details about this party? And in the meantime, I might be able to score some Smirnoff from my brother. He’s twenty-one.”

She slid the receipt across the counter toward me. “Alright, cool,” I said, sticking it in my back pocket with the most casual shrug I could muster. “How old are you, by the way?”

Beth gave me a tight-lipped smile before answering. “Nineteen. How old are you?”

“Seventeen.”

“When do you turn eighteen?”

“Soon,” I lied, and she must have been able to tell, because she shook her head at me. “I’m mature for my age.”

“I can tell, Owen Elizabeth.”

“I think I might prefer Frodo to that.”

Beth scrunched her nose, and it was adorable. “Okay then, Frodo,” she said. “You’d better show me a good time tonight.”

“I will.” I started to back away from the counter. “I definitely will.”

She nodded at the pop and candy on the counter. “Your stuff?”

“Oh, right,” I said, taking a step forward to grab the Dr. Pepper. But I pushed the gummy frogs toward her. “Those are for you. See you tonight.”

I lingered by the screen door just long enough to see her face light up with a smile. When I stepped outside, I could hardly believe my luck. Suddenly, I didn’t even care about my chemistry test at all. There was no way I’d be able to think about that now. Not when the image of Beth’s sweet smile and tight shirt filled my mind.

I wanted to play it cool when I got to the truck, but I was bubbling over with happiness as I opened the door. “So?” Abigail asked, sliding closer to Xander to make room for me. “How’d it go?”

Instead of answering with words, I reached into my pocket for the receipt. I unfolded the crinkly paper, holding it up so Xander and Abigail could see what was written on it. They both gasped. “Holy shit,” Xander exclaimed.

“You actually did it?” Abigail let out a puzzled laugh, turning to Xander. “He actually did it.”

“Course he did.” Xander gently pushed on her shoulder so he could peer around her at me. “Did you ask her about tonight?”

I nodded. “She’s bringing Smirnoff.”

“Damn, Gardner,” Xander said, his eyebrows springing upward. He turned his keys in the ignition, and the truck started with a loud rumble. “I’m impressed. You might actually score tonight.”

“I have no idea what I’m doing,” I confessed.

“That’s what you have us for,” Abigail said, reaching for her phone off the dash as the truck started moving. The entire way back to school, I stared at Beth’s phone number, memorizing every digit.

Could I actually lose my virginity to this girl? No—this woman?

Don’t screw this up.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:25 am*

### Chapter four

“Waiting” - Green Day

“I sent out an invite to everyone on my MySpace friends list.”

Xander, Abigail, and I were in a three-way call, and I had them on speakerphone while I dug through my closet for my favorite pair of Chucks. “I did, too,” I said.

“You guys do realize my grandparents’ tiny-ass cabin can hold a maximum of twenty people, and you two have to help me clean up in the morning, right?”

“Don’t worry, Xan,” I said. “It’s supposed to be a nice night. Why don’t we just build a bonfire and keep the party outside?”

“I just got a message from Krista. She said the whole softball team is coming after their game. Some girls from the other team wanna come, too.”

I froze in the middle of the pile of sneakers in front of my closet door. Lena was on the softball team. Until now, I hadn’t realized it was a possibility she would be attending this party. Knowing she might watch me interact with Beth made me feel a little weird. How would I balance talking to both of them?

Xander let out a sigh. “So what you’re saying is we’re going to need two kegs. Can you guys chip in?”

“I can help pay for them.” I’d been tutoring elementary school kids for the past year,

and I had a few hundred dollars saved up. I wasn't hanging onto all that cash for anything specific, but I liked having a safety net. And the fact that I'd earned it all with my own little business made me want to be smarter about how I spent it.

I never thought I'd put that money toward beer, but it seemed like a good investment to ensure we all had a good night.

Finally, I spotted my red Chuck Taylors near the back of my closet and sat at the foot of my bed to tie them, half-listening to Xander and Abigail go over their plans for the night. "Do we need to stop by the pharmacy to get Owen some condoms?" Abigail asked with a little giggle.

"I'm covered," I said, eyeing my top dresser drawer. There was an unopened box in there somewhere. Natalie and I didn't exactly make it that far, which was okay. But there I was, hours away from potentially having sex with a college girl.

Shit, what was I thinking?

"You guys, I don't know if I can do this."

They both immediately protested, shouting over each other so that I could barely decipher their words. "...not letting you go into your senior year still a virgin," Xander was saying as Abigail's voice trailed off.

At that very moment, my bedroom door swung open without warning and my brother Jake burst in with a smile so vehemently evil, it was worrisome. "Gotta go," I said before tossing my phone on the bed. Jake was standing just inside my doorway with his hands on his hips. "What do you want?"

"Do Mom and Dad know where you're going tonight?"

“Doubt it,” I said, tying my shoes. “And neither do you, so...”

“Brother, the wall between our rooms is very thin, and you sent out a mass invite on the internet. You and your dipshit friends aren’t being very discreet about any of this. You’re supposed to keep that stuff in private messages, idiot.”

I ignored him, standing up to spritz myself with cologne. I was hoping he’d exit my room so I could grab a condom without his judging eyes, but he crossed his arms and leaned against my doorway, making himself comfortable. “Two kegs.” He clicked his tongue. “Maybe you can lose your virginity and do your first keg stand all in the same night.”

“Fuck off.”

“Who’s the unlucky girl?”

“Nobody you know,” I said, glancing down at a text message from Beth. Her brother was picking up the Smirnoff for her, and then she’d be on her way to the cabin. I offered to pick her up, but she wanted to have her own car there, which I could respect. I slid my phone into my back pocket and glared at Jake. “Can you leave?”

“Nah. You’ve got something I want.”

“Which is...?”

“Cold hard cash, baby,” he said.

“What are you talking about?”

“That tutoring money. I know you’ve got a lot saved up now. And don’t say you don’t, because I just heard you telling Xander you’d chip in for those kegs.”

“What the hell makes you think I’m going to share any of that money with you?”

A grin slowly stretched across Jake’s face in a way that reminded me of the Grinch, or perhaps Mr. Burns from The Simpsons . It made me want to smack him. “Because if you don’t, I’m telling Mom and Dad what you’re up to.”

“Yeah? I’m not you. They trust me.”

“Wanna bet?” He laughed. “Mom will pull you out of there by your ear and you know it.”

I slowly inhaled. “I’ll just lie and say I didn’t know there was going to be alcohol.”

Jake shifted his feet. “Okay, then I’ll tip you guys off to the police.”

“Why would you do that?”

“I need money,” he said slowly, drawing out each syllable. “And you’ve got it.”

Jake had a job bussing tables at the local Applebee’s until about two weeks ago, when he got fired for clocking in late too many times. He could’ve gotten a replacement job, but no, he’d rather exploit his little brother. “So you’re blackmailing me.”

“Just trying to survive.”

“You’re a piece of shit.”

“What do you choose, little brother?”

I knew I wasn’t going to win this argument, because Jake was the most headstrong person in our family. We had a history of ratting each other out, too, and I knew he

wasn't bluffing. With a sigh, I opened my top desk drawer, where I kept my savings in a clasp envelope. "How much?"

"Fifty ought to do it."

"Fifty dollars?!" I put the envelope back in the drawer. "That's two sessions' worth."

Jake just smirked.

With a frustrated sigh, I pulled the envelope back out, reaching for a couple of twenties and a ten and handing them to him.

"You made the right choice." He slapped my shoulder hard and gave me a shit-eating grin. "Anyway, see you at the party."

"Wait, what?" I gripped his arm. "You're coming to this thing? What the fuck?"

Jake wriggled from my grasp, pushing me away. "We'll see how the night goes," he said, heading for the door. "See you later."

"You're such a—" I started, but Jake had already closed my bedroom door behind him. Alone in my room, I flopped onto my bed, staring at the ceiling. Just then, my phone chimed with a new text message. I pulled it from my pocket and held it above my face—it was a photo message from Beth showing a six-pack of Smirnoff Ice and a bottle of Jack Daniels.

Beth: If you're nice, I might share. ??

Biting down on my bottom lip, I sat up and read her message again and again. Could this actually happen tonight? Was I really capable of pulling an older girl like Beth? Doubt nagged at me, but then again, I knew Xander wouldn't let me back out of this.

He'd push me, just like he always did. But maybe that was what I needed—a little push in the right direction.

I stood up and opened my dresser drawer, pocketing a single condom before taking a deep breath. Glancing around my room, I thought to myself, Next time I'm in here, I won't be a virgin anymore.

...Maybe.

I started typing a reply to Beth, alluding to the fact I could show her just how “nice” I could be, when she sent a follow-up text asking for the address for the party.

I took it as a sign I was pushing my luck with the cheesy pick-up lines, so I deleted what I'd typed and started over entirely.

Owen: 618 Ferndale Rd. Log cabin at the end of a long driveway. Can't wait ??

### Chapter five

“If I Had Eyes” – Jack Johnson

X ander’s grandparents lived in a log A-frame cabin at the end of a long, winding driveway. Concealed by trees, it was the perfect place for a bunch of minors to throw a party. The only other houses on this rural lane were Xander’s and Abigail’s.

“Aren’t you guys a little worried your parents are going to question all the cars coming this way?” I asked when I arrived. Xander was tapping a keg in the kitchen, and Abigail was seated nearby on the couch, assembling the perfect playlist for the party. Next to her feet on the rustic wooden coffee table sat her iHome speaker, and she’d already proclaimed herself as the official party DJ.

“No,” Xander said without looking up, his focus on securing the tap. He twisted it with ease, locking it into place. “My parents couldn’t care less. They’re usually too wrapped up in their own shit to notice what I’m doing. Dad’s probably already at the bottom of another bottle and my mom’s just... well, she’ll just be trying to stay out of his way.” Xander cleared his throat and looked up from the keg, his usual smirk returning. “Anyway, I’m not worried. I’m just going to enjoy the party.”

I glanced at Abigail, who gave me a small, understanding smile before looking back down at her phone. “Well, my mom and dad will probably say ‘that Pierce boy down the road is up to something again’ but they don’t know I’m here, so they won’t be that concerned. Hey, how many Coldplay songs should I put on the playlist?”

“Zero,” Xander said at the same time I asked, “How many you got?”

She giggled. “I’ll stick to ‘Viva La Vida.’ That’ll get the people hyped up.”

Xander wiped his hands on a gingham dish towel before moving onto the second keg. “Or make them go home.”

“You take that back,” Abigail warned, and she and Xander exchanged a flirtatious smile.

With no knowledge of how to tap a keg, I paced around the room, glancing at the loft up above. Abigail followed my gaze. “Xander. Remember when your grandma almost caught us kissing up there in the loft when we were nine?”

“Yep.” Xander filled up a red plastic cup and gave me a nod, indicating it was for me. “Remember the tire swing?”

“Oh, God.” Abigail covered her cheeks. “What about your grandpa’s woodworking shed?”

“Jesus Christ,” I muttered, taking the beer from Xander. “You guys were making out twenty-four-seven while I was at home playing with little plastic dinosaurs.”

“It’s okay to be a late bloomer, bud.”

I swallowed a sip of beer. “Yeah, I don’t think I was the one who bloomed at the inappropriate time, but okay.” I shot them a half-smile to let them know I was teasing.

“Says the virgin.” Surprisingly, that jab came from Abigail, who threw her head back and laughed at the look I gave her. “I’m just kidding, Owen. And that’s all changing tonight. Speaking of which—did you bring a condom?”

“Indeed, I did. Thank you for your concern about my protection.”

“I mean, you can’t go knocking girls up if you want to go to Purdue.”

“What’s your strategy?” Xander asked.

“For what?”

“For fuck’s sake.” He grabbed another red cup and began to fill it. “For getting into Beth’s pants.”

“Oh. I don’t know. Just... be myself. Make her laugh. See how the night goes.”

“Good, good,” Xander said, carrying the second beer over to Abigail, who sat it on the coffee table without taking a sip. Xander ran a hand through his hair on the way back to the kegs. “You should brag about tutoring little kids and whatnot. She’d probably think that’s cute.”

“Ooh, that’s a good idea,” Abigail agreed. “And make sure you smile. All the girls really like your dimples.”

“What girls?” Was Lena Brower one of them?

Before Abigail could answer, Xander suddenly strolled over to the window and pulled the forest green curtains farther apart to peer outside. “Whose car is that?” I put down my beer and joined him at the window to watch a black sports car coming up the driveway past the chicken coop. I squinted to see who the driver was, and my heart skipped a beat when I caught a glimpse of blonde hair. “Uh oh, Gardner. Is that your girl?”

My girl. Right. “Looks like her.” My nerves instantly shot through the roof. I had

assumed she'd arrive much later, after the music was playing and I had some more liquid courage coursing through my veins. Her early arrival would give me ample time to fuck this up. With an exhale, I said, "Here goes nothing."

"You're going to be just fine, Owen," Abigail said. And then, as Xander and I watched Beth step out of her car and retrieve the liquor from her backseat, Abigail rushed out some more last-minute advice for me. "Be confident. Relax and be your goofy self, because you already know that works on her. And when it comes time to, you know, perform—make sure you don't rush it and you're focused on her comfort and pleasure. Okay?"

That was way too much to process all at once.

Xander gave me a quick glance before looking over his shoulder at Abigail. He said nothing, but I could tell from the way he was holding his breath, he was thinking about how much he'd like to focus on Abigail's comfort and pleasure.

I turned back to the window and swallowed. Beth closed her car door with her hip, carrying the six-pack of Smirnoff in one arm and the bottle of whiskey in the other. "She's nineteen. Won't she be breaking the law if she has sex with me?"

Xander shook his head. "The age of consent in Indiana is sixteen."

Of course he knew that.

Pushing past him, I made my way to the front door to open it for her as she stepped up onto the weathered wooden planks of the porch. "Hey, Owen Elizabeth," she said with a grin.

"I thought we agreed my name was Frodo." I took the heavy Smirnoff from her, taking note of her appearance. She was wearing short, frayed denim shorts and a low-

cut red shirt, and there was something different about her hair—it looked softer and straighter, or something.

And she smelled citrusy and clean.

“What a cute little cabin. And we are way out in the boonies, aren’t we?”

“Hope it wasn’t too hard to find the place.” I held the door open for her and she followed me inside. I sat the Smirnoff on the kitchen table and turned around to look at her. She spun around in a slow circle, taking in all the rustic decor and wooden beams above.

“This place is adorable,” she said dreamily. And then her eyes dropped to Abigail sitting on the couch. “Did I see you at Boomer’s today?”

Abigail nodded, but Xander, taking a seat on a stool at the kitchen island, answered for her. “We were all there. We’re the ones who dared Owen to talk to you.”

I chuckled nervously, but thankfully, Beth was smiling. “Is that right?”

“Yep. These are my friends Xander and Abigail,” I said, nodding toward them. “And guys, this is Beth.”

Abigail gave a warm smile from where she was sitting, but Xander held out his hand for her to shake. Beth took a step forward, accepting it, and the two locked eyes. “Thanks for having me,” she told him.

Xander’s gaze was a little too intense for my comfort. “Yeah, of course.”

Abigail rose from the couch and made her way into the kitchen area. “I love your tattoos, Beth,” she said, tucking her hair behind her ear. “How many do you have?”

“Well,” Beth said, grunting as she put the Jack Daniels on the counter, “it depends on whether you count all the seagulls as separate tattoos or not.”

“Seagulls?” I asked, crossing my arm against my chest. She was still standing just a foot or two in front of Xander, who twisted in his stool so that his knees were pointed at her.

“Yeah, they’re on my back—there’s four of them. So, counting them, I have... eight tattoos?” She tilted her head to the side, like she was doubting herself. “Yeah. Eight. For now, at least.”

Eyeing the butterfly tattoo on Beth’s leg, Xander asked, “Where do you go for them?”

“Killer Ink, over on Fourth Street. I would trust those people with my life.”

“I’m getting my first tattoo this summer when I turn eighteen,” Xander said, which was news to me. He’d never mentioned that before. “I was going to go out of town for it, but it looks like they do good work there.”

I tried to ignore the way Xander was eyeing a cursive quote poking out from beneath Beth’s shirt near her cleavage. “Do you know what you’re going to get?” Beth asked, glancing from Xander to Abigail like she was trying to assess their relationship.

Good luck with that.

“Probably, like, a melting skull or something like that,” Xander said, and I would have laughed if it weren’t for the twinge of annoyance pumping through my veins. He was dominating the conversation, and I had nothing of value to add.

“Well, you have to go to Killer Ink. They did my hip tattoo just a couple weeks ago,

too. It took six hours.”

“Six hours?” Abigail’s eyebrows raised as she leaned onto her elbows on the counter, giving Beth her full attention.

“I fell asleep halfway through it.” Beth laughed, running her fingers through her hair.

“How big is it?” Xander asked.

“Well, it’s like...” Beth touched her hip, her pointer finger curling around her belt loop. “It’s a little hard to describe. Want me to just show you?”

With her eyes locked on Xander’s again, it was obvious that question was directed at him. I adjusted my arms against my chest and swallowed, awaiting Xander’s answer, hoping he’d throw me a bone and say something to redirect her attention toward me.

“Hell yeah,” he said, dropping his eyes to Beth’s hands, now hovering over the button of her shorts. And the second Xander gave her that enthusiastic answer, the shorts began to come down. But she didn’t stop there. I sucked on my bottom lip when she tugged at the side of her blue panties, too, angling her hip toward Xander so he could get a better view of the floral tattoo.

I was standing too far away to get a decent view myself, but to move closer would make me feel like a pervert. My feet remained firmly planted where they were as Beth’s shorts and underwear dipped dangerously low on her hip. And then, to my astonishment, Xander’s hand lurched forward to hold up her shirt so he could see the full tattoo, which extended from her waist to her thigh.

He was touching her.

“Wow,” he said, raising both eyebrows. “You fell asleep during that? That’s badass.”

“It barely hurt at all.”

I glanced over at Abigail, who was already staring at me with wide eyes, like she expected me to do something about this.

“Hey,” I blurted, wrapping my fingers around the neck of the Jack Daniels bottle. “Should we take some pre-party shots?” If I gave Xander something to hold, he couldn’t touch Beth anymore.

There was a chorus of yesses around me, so I reached for the red cups. I doubted Xander’s grandparents had shot glasses anywhere, so these cups would have to suffice. “We could just drink out of the bottle?” Beth suggested, buttoning her shorts. Both of Xander’s hands were resting on his lap now.

“That works,” I said, turning back around to twist the cap off the bottle. I slid it down the counter toward Beth. “You brought it, so you get the first sip.”

She picked up the bottle and take a long swig, shivering after she swallowed. I watched her wipe her mouth as she handed the Jack Daniels to Xander. Their fingers grazed as the bottle passed between them, and she watched him drink. He offered the bottle to Abigail, but she declined, saying, “It’s too early. I don’t want to be hugging a toilet by ten.”

No one argued with her. Xander then passed the bottle to me, and I took a deep breath, remembering I didn’t handle myself very well when drinking whiskey straight. Whiskey and Coke? Fine. But from the bottle, like this? God help me.

I did my best to keep a straight face as the liquor burned my esophagus on the way down, but a wince still worked its way through my attempt to act tough. Xander grinned. “Would you have rather had one of those fruity Smirnoffs?”

Maybe it was just an innocent joke, but his words felt like a slight dig at my masculinity. Ignoring Beth's giggles, I stared at Xander and said, "No, but I'll take the rest of my beer next to you there." I nodded toward my cup, and Xander handed it to me. It was seconds before his eyes shot back to Beth, though, and she was looking right back at him.

Neither of them were being subtle.

But I had to keep my eyes on the prize. "Hey, Beth," I said, lowering my cup from my lips. "There's some cute baby chicks outside. Do you want to hold one?"

I didn't know a whole lot about girls, but I understood they loved baby animals. As predicted, Beth's face lit up, and she was fully focused on me now. "Aww! Yes, show me!"

I led her to the front door and opened it, allowing her to step onto the porch first so I could pause to give my friends a wide-eyed look. Though Xander merely stared down at the counter, Abigail lightly clapped, making me feel like I'd just pulled the most genius move of my life.

And maybe it was? I was glad I'd heard the chicks cheeping on my way up to the house earlier that evening, because as it turned out, they were the perfect icebreaker. I opened the wooden latch to the enclosed part of the coop, just like Xander showed me a few years ago when I visited him here, and led Beth inside, where a couple dozen yellow chicks were cowering beneath a heat lamp in the corner.

"Oh. My. God." Beth clapped her hands against her cheeks and squealed. "They're so cute. They look a little afraid of us, though, don't they? We're like giants to them."

I bent down and scooped one up, holding it out toward her. "Here you go," I said, and she carefully took the chick from my hands. She held it close to her chest, and it

cheeped softly, nestling against her. “Look, she likes you,” I said before bending over to pick up another one. As I straightened back up, I subtly moved closer to her, praying this thing wouldn’t poop on me. For a few moments, I watched her pet the chick’s head and talk to in a sweet, soothing voice.

“You don’t even know how badly this makes me want to become a vegetarian,” she said. “But I tried that when I was going to ISU last semester, and I barely lasted a week.”

I sat the chick I was holding back down on the ground. “You were going to ISU?”

“Yeah,” she said with a sigh. “But I had to drop out in January for... reasons. So for now, I’m helping my Uncle Boomer at the store.”

I was dying to know what those “reasons” for dropping out were, but if she wanted me to know, she would have elaborated. “What’s your major?”

“General Studies. What’s yours going to be, Frodo? Let me guess—female anatomy?”

“No,” I answered, grinning down at the ground. I held the smile for a moment, remembering that Abigail told me girls liked my dimples. I needed to learn to use that to my advantage. “I’m still undecided. Something in the science field, probably. Or education.”

“You want to teach?”

“I might,” I said, sticking my hands in my back pockets. “I actually, uh, tutor elementary school students now.”

I had hoped that would make her swoon the way Abigail and Xander assumed, but

she was too busy swapping out the chick in her hands for another, clicking her tongue at them.

Outside, I could hear car doors closing. Beth heard them, too. “Should we head back to the cabin?”

“Yeah.” I held the door to the henhouse open for her, regretting the fact I hadn’t taken this opportunity alone with her to impress her more, or even make a move. But at least I knew a little bit more about her.

The blast of cooler air when we stopped out of there felt nice. Around the back of the cabin, Xander was throwing some big sticks into his grandparents’ fire pit. The sun was just barely peeking through the trees at the edge of the property, casting an orange glow on the six or seven cars that were now parked on the side of the gravel driveway. I couldn’t see Abigail, but I could hear a Arctic Monkeys song drifting from her speaker somewhere.

As Beth and I made our way onto the porch to retrieve our drinks from inside, I stopped when I spotted Lena Brower over near Xander’s grandparents’ wicker rocking chairs. She was standing next to her friend, Bailey, who was on the phone.

She noticed me at the same time. “Hey, Owen.”

I held the door open for Beth, but I didn’t follow her inside. For a fraction of a second, I hesitated, knowing that if I didn’t keep an eye on Beth, Xander was likely to swoop in and charm her somehow. But I couldn’t ignore Lena, and I didn’t want to, either. “Oh, good, you made it,” I said before turning to Beth. “I’ll be in there in a sec.”

I made my way over to Lena at the other end of the porch. Clutching her purse to her side, she tossed her head to get her dark hair out of her face as I approached. Though

she didn't wear a lot of make-up to school, her lips were an orangey-red color, and her eyelashes somehow looked longer tonight. Her freckles, my favorite thing about her, were less obvious under a layer of make-up, but the darker ones still popped.

Lena was one of those girls who was so goddamn pretty but didn't know it. If I weren't actively trying to end the night with another girl, I probably would have let her know how good she looked. But instead, I just gave her a smile and shoved my hands in my pockets, asking, "Did I miss anything in history today?"

Lena winced. "Yeah. A pop quiz."

My mouth fell open. Fuck. "What? You're kidding me."

"Sorry to be the bearer of bad news," she said with a laugh. With both hands, she played with the ends of her hair on one side. Bailey turned her back to us, fully engrossed in whatever the person on the phone was telling her. "It was an easy A, too."

"Damn it," I muttered. I had a perfect grade in history—and this was certainly going to mess that up. Not only that, but my chemistry test didn't go very well that day, either. I spaced out the entire time, staring at the word isotope for so long it didn't even look like a real word anymore. And that was Xander's fault, too, for making me leave school to smoke with him in the first place. "I wonder if I can make it up on Monday."

"Probably. I told Mr. Thompson about your 'migraine.'" With a smile, she made air quotes with her fingers. "Where did you and Xander go, anyway? Boomer's?"

"Where else?" I asked, a little ashamed. She didn't seem like the type of girl to skip class to hang out at Boomer's. I'd never even seen her there after school, come to think of it. "Xander can be very persuasive."

“Is he persuasive, or are you just a pushover?” she asked with a grin. This was the type of playful insult she often threw at me, always leaving me to wonder whether she was flirting or just thought I was a moron.

“Probably a mixture of both,” I chuckled out.

Lena licked her lips. “How’s tutoring going?”

“Oh, I love it.” A sliver of sunlight started blinding me, so when Bailey stepped off the porch to continue her phone call around the side of the house, I stole her spot next to Lena. “I’m actually a little sad the school year’s almost over, because I’m going to miss all the kids. Some of them might not even need me next year. They’ve come such a long way.” Was I talking too much? I couldn’t stop. “I just love seeing how much more confident they are once it all clicks.”

Lena’s head tilted to the side. “Aw,” she said, twirling her hair with one hand now. “You did so well with the reading buddy kids last year, too—remember how they all begged you to come back?”

I laughed, remembering how a few of us from the student council went to Grissom Elementary to read to some first graders last year. It was nothing short of chaotic. “Those kids were insane.”

“I was, like, chopped liver compared to you. You’re so good with kids. You’re going into education, right?”

Just then, I spotted Abigail pouting as she came around the corner of the porch, scanning the yard like she was looking for someone specific. Her eyes stopped on me. “There you are.” She jogged up the steps toward me, giving Lena a quick wave before leaning forward to whisper in my ear. “You need to intervene with this Xander and Beth situation.”

I caught her eye. “What happened?”

“Just come to the fire pit.” She turned to Lena. “Lena, girl, you look effing gorgeous in that skirt, by the way.”

The compliment made Lena laugh and blush. I’d been so distracted by her face, I hadn’t even noticed she was wearing a skirt the same ocean blue as her eyes. Had I ever seen her in a skirt before?

I swallowed. I certainly hadn’t seen that much of her thighs before.

“Oh my gosh, thank you,” she told Abigail. “You do, too. In that outfit, I mean.”

“Thanks!” Abigail shot her a sweet grin before hopping down off the porch. I turned toward Lena, beginning to step away with my hands back in my pockets.

“I have to go take care of a situation. But it was great talking to you.” And then, deciding there wouldn’t be any harm in platonically complimenting this girl, I added, “And Abigail’s right. You look really pretty tonight. Anyway, see you later.”

Feeling a little embarrassed, I turned around and walked away before I could witness her reaction. Bailey, whose phone call was now over, glanced from me to Lena with her mouth hanging open like she might have heard what I’d just said and had some thoughts about it.

They were going to talk about me after I walked away, weren’t they?

I made my way through the house before joining the others by the fire pit, grabbing a new cup of beer for myself and a Smirnoff for Beth. Then, I stepped out the sliding glass door to the deck, taking in the scene before me as I pulled it shut behind me.

Xander was crouched next to the already crackling fire, using a long stick to poke at the logs to make the flames bigger. I couldn't quite make out what he was saying, but his deep voice carried across the yard. Whatever he said, it made Beth throw her head back in laughter beside him. "Oh my God, no! You'll burn yourself if you do that!" She gave Xander's shoulder a hard shove, and I could see the resulting grin on his face all the way from the deck.

Even more prominent, however, was the scowl on Abigail's.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:25 am*

### Chapter six

#### “Fireflies” by Owl City

“ Y ou look thirsty,” I said, twisting the cap off the Smirnoff and handing it to Beth. But as I bent over to pick up my own drink from the flimsy plastic chair where I’d put it, she frowned.

“Thank you, but I’m still working on the drink Xander made for me. I’m sorry.” She nodded toward the red cup on the hay bale behind her. “But I’ll drink this next.”

“Oh, okay.” I stood near the growing fire and gulped down my beer, hoping it could loosen me up and make it easier for me to talk to Beth. Because at the moment, I couldn’t think of a single thing to say to her. Why was this so hard for me, when it came easily to guys like Xander?

As more and more people arrived, it started getting a little crowded around the fire, and soon I was surrounded by people I’d never seen beyond the walls of Woodvale High School. A couple of people questioned Xander on how he thought he was going to get away with throwing a party half a mile from his own house.

“Won’t your parents notice?” Davin Reedy asked.

“They don’t give a fuck,” Xander answered, stoking the fire with one hand, a red cup in the other. “I’m almost eighteen, anyway. Pretty soon they’ll have no control over me at all.”

He rattled on about how independent he was, stealing glances at Beth with every other sentence. It couldn't be more obvious he was trying to impress her. I glanced Abigail's direction to see how she was responding to all of this, but she was distracting herself by making a dandelion crown in the grass nearby. I sighed and turned back to Xander. He tilted his cup back before tossing it onto the fire, causing the flames to briefly shoot up higher. And, like clockwork, he turned to Beth to gauge her reaction.

He was supposed to be helping me lose my virginity that night, but his presence was more of a hindrance than anything.

The crowd around the fire had grown even more, with people seeking warmth as the night became increasingly chilly. "I can barely hear the music from my speaker," Abigail complained, wiping the dirt off the back of her shorts. "I should just turn it off." She threw her dandelion crown to the ground, having given up on that, too.

From the other side of the fire, someone said my name. "Owen." I looked up to see Lena sitting on a hay bale beside Bailey, who was facing away from her, talking to some guy. "Isn't this the song on your MySpace profile?"

I held my breath, as though that would somehow help me hear better. Sure enough, "Fireflies" by Owl City was playing up on the deck. "Yeah," I said with a chuckle, meeting her gaze through the billowing smoke. "It is."

"Noooo!" Beth protested, stomping her foot. With a smile, she rolled her eyes at me and said, "This song is so overplayed, and it doesn't even make any sense! Have you listened to the lyrics?"

"I put it on my profile to be ironic," I lied, but her smile told me she could see right through me. I maneuvered closer to her, pleased to see she was finally drinking the Smirnoff I'd brought her. "I should probably change it."

“Definitely. Your MySpace profile song should give people a little taste of who you are, you know?” She took a sip. “And unless you’ve got a sock hop underneath your bed, I don’t think that’s the right song for you.”

I nodded slowly. “Okay. You’ve spent the day getting to know me. If you had to pick a song for me, what would it be?” I turned to look into her eyes, and she met my gaze, blinking as she considered her answer. The noise of the party faded away, and it felt like we were the only two people there. The glow from the fire illuminated the side of her face as she lifted her hand to tuck her hair behind her ear.

“Okay. So, you know John Mayer?”

My smile involuntarily vanished—I already didn’t like where this was going. She never got the opportunity to name the song, though, because somebody tossed a cup full of liquor on the fire, which caused the flames to shoot up a few feet. The sudden roar of the fire was so loud, everyone jumped back, and a few people screamed. Startled, Beth grabbed my elbow, and I gently placed my hand on her back. “Are you okay?”

She giggled to cover her fear. “I’m fine.”

I silently thanked the person who threw their drink on the fire for bringing Beth and me closer together. But just as I was getting comfortable with my hand on her back, Xander swooped in on her other side and bent over to pick something up from the ground. “This yours?”

The unfinished dandelion crown Abigail had been working on dangled from his pointer finger. He must not have seen her sitting on the ground making it earlier, and neither had Beth, who said, “No, but that’s adorable.”

Xander stepped forward, draping the dandelion chain over Beth’s head like a

headband. The two of them made eye contact the entire time, and Beth breathed out a soft giggle. "It's yours now," Xander said, not taking his eyes off of her.

I removed my hand from Beth's back and shot a glare in Xander's direction, but he was too entranced by Beth to notice. He didn't see Abigail approach him from the other side, either. I watched her eyes travel from Beth's flower headband to Xander's face, a crease forming between her brows. "Hey, Xan, do you have a longer extension cord somewhere?"

He turned to her, narrowing his eyes. "What for?"

"We can barely hear the music out here. I want to move my speaker closer."

"There's probably a decent one in my grandpa's work shed."

Abigail looked over her shoulder in the direction of the little shed, which was beyond the chicken coop and past all the cars lining the drive, barely visible in the dark. "Oh. It's pretty dark out there." She turned to Xander with wide, sparkling eyes. "I'm a little scared."

A second passed. And then another. And another. I was practically screaming at Xander in my mind to take Abigail by the hand and walk her down there, but instead, that idiot smiled and said, "Scared of what, the chickens?"

Frustrated, I tipped my cup back and drank the last of my beer before saying. "I'll go with you." I put my cup down and nodded for her to follow me. And, making sure Xander could see, I put my hand on Abigail's back just as I had with Beth, ushering her into the darkness.

I pulled my hand away once we made it out of everyone's line of sight. "I'm sorry."

“You’re totally fine, Owen. I understand exactly why you did that.”

“He’s really pissing me off.”

“I can tell.”

“I don’t get it.” I pulled out my phone and used the screen to illuminate the gravel in front of us as we walked, which wasn’t as effective as I’d hoped. You’d think Apple would have thought to add a built-in flashlight by now. “Why is he acting like this when he likes you?”

“But he doesn’t.”

“Like hell he doesn’t. He’s obsessed with you, Abigail. For some reason he wants to act like he’s not, but he is, and he always has been. He wanted to be the guy you lost your virginity to. He’d kill me for telling you that, but right now, I don’t care.”

We had reached the metal shed, but Abigail paused and turned to me before lifting the latch. “When did he say that?”

“Today. At Boomer’s.”

“Well, he’s got a really weird way of showing it,” she said, turning the latch and pulling the heavy metal door of the shed open.

I pulled down on the chain above to turn on the light. A single bulb flickered on, illuminating Xander’s grandpa’s workspace. The area was cluttered with piles of wood and half-finished projects, and a sturdy workbench held an assortment of saws and blueprints.

I’d talked to Xander’s grandpa a couple of times. He was a gentle, quiet man, and it

was near impossible to understand his mumblings sometimes. Ever since Xander was little, he'd been walking from his house down the hill to his grandparents' to hang out here in this shed.

In one corner, there was a large army cot covered in a red flannel blanket. Abigail was staring at it with a grin, likely remembering one of her many childhood make-out sessions with Xander. But her smile gradually faded, and she sucked in a deep breath.

"I hate how much I like Xander."

"I just hate Xander."

"No you don't," she said, spinning around to scan the room for an extension cord. "Neither of us can ever quit him."

"I just can't believe he's trying to steal Beth out from under me."

"We can't let that happen," she said. "How do you think it's going between you and her, by the way?"

"I don't know. I have no idea what to talk about with her." I turned on the lamp on the workbench so we could see better. "I'm the worst at talking to girls."

"You were doing just fine with Lena," she said, meeting my gaze.

"That's different. Lena's..." I couldn't think of a word. Actually, I was thinking about the way her thighs looked peeking out from her skirt. "It's just easy with her."

"Uh huh," Abigail said, staring upward. "Look, do you think that cord is long enough?"

I glanced up at an orange extension cord dangling from the rafters above us. “Yeah. Did you see the way Beth pulled her underwear down to show Xander her tattoo?”

“Yes. Yes I did. Not to change the subject, but you’re like a foot taller than me. Can you reach up there?”

I didn’t even have to stretch to reach the thick cord hanging above our heads. “I’m just so—ugh.” I pulled some of the cobwebs off the heavy extension cord before tucking it under my arm. “I’m almost regretting this entire night.”

“Don’t give up just yet. I think Beth is into you,” Abigail said as we made our way back out of the shed. I looped the extension cord around my shoulder as she latched the door behind us. “You can’t let Xander distract her. And neither can I.”

“Then we have to keep them apart,” I suggested.

“Exactly.”

On our way back up to the cabin, Abigail and I devised a plan: she would work on keeping Xander preoccupied, and I needed to step up my game with Beth.

“Should I ask her who her favorite hobbit is?”

“No. Should I play some Coldplay to start a flirty pseudo-argument with Xan?”

I scrunched up my face. “I feel like he and Beth will just tease you about your music taste and it’ll be another thing for them to bond over.”

She stopped in her tracks and turned to me, shaking her head. “This is hopeless, isn’t it?”

I wanted to believe it wasn't.

But the longer the night went on, the more complicated this got. At what point would I decide tonight's not the night and throw in the towel?

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:25 am*

### Chapter seven

#### “Stay Away” - Rooney

A bigail immediately put our plan into action. After rigging up her iHome to play music from a tree stump just a few feet away from the fire pit, she disappeared for a few minutes, only to re-emerge from the cabin in a different shirt and a cold beer for Xander.

I only noticed the shirt because Beth leaned in close to me on the hay bale we were sharing and asked, “Jeez, isn’t she cold? I wonder why she changed into a tank top.”

“Huh,” I said, knowing exactly why. “Maybe she spilled beer on herself or something.”

Beth watched Abigail interact with Xander for a couple of minutes before turning back to me. “Are her and Xander, like, a thing?”

“No,” I said, breathing out an involuntary chuckle. Wait a second, you fucking idiot. “I mean, well... it’s complicated. They’re not like, together-together, but they’re more than just friends, you know? Nobody can get between them.”

To make myself stop rambling, I took a long swig of my third beer of the night. I glanced around, trying to assess who was around the fire. The group was smaller, as it seemed more people had moved inside. Xander was standing next to the fire, prodding it with a long stick as he stared at the embers below. Abigail was beside him, using her hands to tell some dramatic story that made Xander roll his eyes and

smile. And just beyond them, there was Lena, whose hands were tucked neatly beneath her thighs in the same spot she'd been sitting in for the past hour.

"Are you okay?" Beth asked me, sounding farther away than she was.

"Yeah, why?" I asked, struggling to focus on her face. My head was getting a little fuzzy. Feeling a surge of courage, I placed my hand on the hay just behind her, trying to subtly shift closer. Judging from the way her eyes widened, it was clear my move wasn't as subtle as I'd hoped.

"We should play a game!" she yelled, turning toward the rest of the group around the fire. "Anyone up for a game of Never Have I Ever?"

Someone muttered "oh boy" on the other side of the fire, while a few other people emphatically voiced their support of this suggestion.

"That a drinking game?" Xander asked.

"You've never played?" Beth reached up to remove her dandelion crown, putting it on the hay bale between us. "You make a statement starting with 'never have I ever', and anyone who has done it has to drink."

"There's not a lot Xander hasn't done," Abigail said with a laugh. She sat on the plastic patio chair beside him. "He's in trouble."

Xander's eyes found mine. "Gardner's going to be the most sober person here."

A few people laughed, including Beth, but I held Xander's stare with a straight face. Was I wrong in assuming that was yet another subtle dig at me? What was he playing at? Was I just imagining the constant jabs, or was he actually trying to undermine me in front of Beth?

With a sly smile, Beth cleared her throat and said, “I’ll start. Never have I ever... been attracted to anyone in this circle.” She gestured toward the people sitting around the fire, many of whom raised their cups or bottles and took a drink. I picked up my own beer cup from between my feet and took an enthusiastic gulp, looking over at Beth. She, too, was taking a drink—and staring right back at me.

Instinctively, I stole a quick glance across the fire at Lena just in time to see her swallow.

“Um, not to be a stickler for the rules,” Abigail said, tucking her hair behind her ears. “But aren’t you supposed to state something you haven’t done, so everyone but you has to take a drink?”

“I think you’re right,” Lena said.

Abigail turned to her. “Do you want to go next?”

“Sure, I guess.” Lena sat up a little straighter, yanking on the hem of her skirt. And then she looked directly at me. “Never have I ever ditched class to go get high at Boomer’s.”

My mouth dropped open. “Not fair!” I declared with a laugh before taking a drink, smiling at Lena over my cup. A few others raised their cups, too—Abigail and Xander included.

Beth jabbed my arm. “I knew you were fucked up when you talked to me today.”

“Yeah,” Xander said, his voice carrying across the entire yard. “This guy was crying about missing his chemistry test, but I wouldn’t take him back to school until he talked to you.”

Now I knew I wasn't imagining it. I tried to force out a laugh, but I couldn't even muster it. Irritation surged through me instead, and I was ready to knock Xander down a notch. "Some of us actually give a shit about our grades and our future," I muttered.

In the glow from the fire, I saw a flicker of something on Xander's face—surprise? Embarrassment?

Holding his stare, I decided to take a turn at the game. "Never have I ever hit on a student teacher who was six years older than me—so persistently that I had after-school detention for it and she had to transfer to another school to finish the semester."

After a brief hesitation, Xander lifted his cup to his mouth and took a drink. Several people laughed—even Abigail.

"You didn't," Beth teased.

Xander smiled with a confident shrug. "What can I say? I have a way with older women."

That motherfucker. I'd meant to embarrass him, but it backfired—the other guys sitting around the fire praised him, recounting stories of how hot Miss Johansen was. Xander was basking in the attention, but it didn't stop him from looking across the fire at me to assess my reaction. His smile faded—he understood the game now. The game between us.

"Never have I ever gotten a boner in Mrs. Gruber's class," he said, keeping his eyes locked on me, "and had to make my friend stay with me after the bell rang because I couldn't stand up."

My face felt warm, and it wasn't from the flames.

"Oh wow," Beth giggled. "You really do like science."

A few others laughed.

"That was years ago," I said, trying to join in the laughter to hide my growing humiliation. "Puberty was a weird time."

I couldn't dare look at Lena, who had sat beside me in Mrs. Gruber's class at the time—and was the reason for my erection. I didn't take a drink, either, which nobody pointed out. "That's adorable," Beth said.

I didn't want to be adorable to her.

The rage simmering inside of me threatened to erupt. Xander was supposed to be my friend—was supposed to help me lose my virginity that night—but his incessant need to assert his dominance had taken over. He was now working to destroy any chance I had with Beth by making me look as pathetic as possible in front of her. All while ignoring the sweet redhead beside him who would give him anything he wanted, if he would just open his fucking eyes.

I was sick of it.

"Never have I ever thrown a party as a desperate attempt to stay relevant after alienating myself from all of my friends," I snapped.

"Okay," Abigail said with a nervous giggle. "This is getting a little personal. Maybe we could make them a little more broad?"

Xander's eyes seemed to darken. Ignoring her, which he was getting really good at,

he said, “Never have I ever thrown a party so my best friend can have the opportunity to lose his virginity to a girl he met at a gas station, only to watch him embarrass himself the whole night and fuck it up.” He paused with a smirk. “Oops, forgot the rules.”

Everyone was silent as Xander took a long swig from his beer cup.

It felt like the ground had just been pulled out from under me, and my stomach swirled with a mix of humiliation and anger. I could feel every pair of eyes around the fire on me, awaiting my reaction, but I was frozen. The edges of my vision blurred, and I could only see Xander’s stupid, self-satisfied face. It suddenly looked very punchable.

“My turn,” Abigail announced with a nervous chuckle. “Never have I ever kissed a girl!” She rushed the words out like she was in a hurry to divert everyone’s attention from the fight that was brewing.

Xander and I took a drink, keeping our eyes on each other the entire time. And then, deciding I’d had enough of this game, I tilted my cup all the way back until every last drop was gone and tossed it onto the fire. With only a quick glance at Beth, who was wiping beer from her upper lip, I rose to my feet and walked off toward the darkness.

This was over.

I hadn’t even made it past the chicken coop when I heard heavy, quick footsteps behind me. “Owen.” I picked up my pace until Xander grabbed me by the arm. “What the fuck was that all about?”

I wriggled from his grasp. “I was about to ask you the same thing. Why are you trying to embarrass me in front of Beth?”

“I wasn’t. I was just fucking around. Why are you being so sensitive?”

Sensitive. I’d heard that word used to describe me far too many times, usually by people whose idea of a fun time was pointing out the weaknesses of others. God forbid I react appropriately or attempt to defend myself.

“I’m not being sensitive,” I hissed. “You’ve been flirting with Beth all night.”

Xander laughed in astonishment. “Flirting? I have not been flirting with her.”

“Yes you have, and I’m not the only one who’s noticed.” He raised one eyebrow in question. How could he not know? “Abigail, idiot. Abigail’s noticed.”

Xander’s lips parted slowly. “Oh. Well, I’m not trying to be flirtatious with Beth. I’m just friendly with girls. It’s in my nature.”

I rolled my eyes. “Why can’t it be in your nature to not fuck things up with Abigail? I know you like her, but you’ve squandered every chance with her you’ve ever had. Even when she’s practically throwing herself at you. She tried to get you to ask her to prom. She tried to get you to walk to the shed with her. Missed opportunity after missed opportunity.” I let out a cold laugh. “Why do I ever take advice about girls from you ? You’re the last person I should be getting advice from.”

“Yeah, I’m sure all those douchey nerds you run around with these days are providing you with sage advice about girls.”

I took a step closer. “At least those nerds are going somewhere in life. I love how you act like they’re just a bunch of losers—like they should all be jealous of you. Jealous of what? You’re not even going to college. You’re probably going to be stuck in Woodvale forever and you’ll end up just like your dad.”

With those last words, I stuck the knife in deep and twisted it, knowing how much pain they'd inflict. Xander's eyes flickered with anger or perhaps another emotion, and he let out the breath he'd been holding. Slowly, I watched him sink—his shoulders slumped, and his chin tilted downward.

Shit. I'd said way too much. And I hadn't meant a single word of it. I thought up the words that would hurt him the most and hurled them at him like daggers. This wasn't me.

I walked closer to him and held my hand out to touch his shoulder. "Xander, I'm—"

He jerked away. "I am nothing like my father."

"I know," I said, letting my arm drop to my side. "I'm sorry."

"Get the fuck out of my face," he demanded through gritted teeth.

"Xan. I-I'm sorry. I shouldn't have—"

"Get. The fuck. Away. From me."

I didn't need to be told a third time. Xander's fists were clenched, and I knew that if I dared utter another word, this would turn physical, and the party really would be over.

As I walked past him, I kept enough distance between us that neither of us would be tempted to throw a blow, and I made my way up toward the cabin. It felt like the gravel was sinking beneath my feet with every step. Needing to steady myself, I ran my hand along the parked cars lining the driveway as I trudged forward.

Just as my foot touched the first porch step, I was distracted by a car pulling into the

front yard, making a parking space out of Xander's grandparents' landscaping. The passenger door flung open, and my brother stepped out with his usual shit-eating grin. "Hey, baby brother," he said as a crumpled beer can fell out of the car beside him. "How's your night goin'?"

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:25 am*

### Chapter eight

“Wasted & Ready” - Ben Keller

Jake threw one arm around my neck and pulled me close for a half-hug, half-headlock on the porch. “You don’t look very happy to see me. Who pissed in your Cheerios?”

I wasn’t in the mood for my brother’s bullshit, so I made no attempt to hide my disgust. I let him usher me inside the cabin, where it was an entirely different atmosphere from the party gathered outside. The kitchen table was a beer pong table now, and a couple of guys were playing a raucous game of catch with one of the balls of yarn I’d seen in a basket by the recliner earlier.

Xander would have one hell of a time getting this place back in order in the morning. I was internally debating whether I still wanted to help him or not.

“Is this really how you want to spend your Friday night?” I asked, turning around to face Jake. It felt like the room was tilting to the right, and I had to clutch my brother’s arm to keep my balance.

“Bro.” Though he laughed in my face, he put one hand on my shoulder in an effort to keep me upright. “I can see you’ve been having a good time.”

“A good time? No.”

Jake gave my shoulder a squeeze. “Tell Jakey all about it, little guy.”

“Shut the fuck up.” Another punchable face. “And give me my fifty dollars back.”

“Not a chance. Already spent.” He loosened his grip on me. “But let’s get you to cheer up. Whatcha drinkin’?”

“Nothing.” I attempted to swat him away, but he grabbed my flailing arm and led me to the kegs in the kitchen.

“Where are the cups?”

“Gone,” someone I’d never seen before in my life answered. “We’re using the old people’s mugs now.” He pointed a thumb over his shoulder at the cabinet door behind him.

Jake opened it and pulled out two mugs—one had the St. Louis arch on it, and the other one said “WORLD’S BEST GRANDMA.” I watched him fill them at one of the kegs before thrusting the grandma mug at me. “Here. Let’s me and you have a chugging contest.”

“I’m not doing that.”

“Don’t be a pussy. We’ve never drank together.”

“Yeah we have, with Dad. The boat last s-summer. With Dad on the boat on the lake, we drank.” Some of those words made sense, right?

“That’s different. C’mon. Drink with me. Unless you’re scared you’re going to lose.” He nodded down at the coffee cup. “Take the damn mug.”

I had no choice but to accept it, and somebody nearby hollered, “Hey everyone, the Gardner brothers are going to have a chugging contest!”

Everyone in the kitchen area circled around us, and the room only began to tilt even more. I held the mug with two hands in fear I wouldn't be able to raise it to my lips without spilling it. Jake's friend, Isaac, volunteered to count for us. "Ready? One, two, three, drink!"

What could one more beer hurt, right? I started chugging, watching Jake over the top of my mug for as long as I could. His head tilted back faster than mine—no doubt he was more experienced at this than me.

Everyone was more experienced at everything than me.

I'd made it three-fourths of the way to the bottom of the mug when I heard Jake scream, "FUCK YEAH!" and a round of cheering and clapping erupted around us. He slammed his mug down on the counter.

When I pulled my mug away from my lips and tilted my head forward again, the sudden movement caused my stomach to churn. It made me want to drop to my knees, like I'd somehow have a better grip on the earth, or something. "I'm going to be sick," I said, pivoting toward the sink—but it had been filled with ice.

Someone took the mug from me, and another set of hands gently pushed me toward the bathroom. "Here. Easy now." Jake's voice sounded so far away, but I could feel his hands on my back. "Christ. Where are your dumb friends?"

When we reached the bathroom, I shakily lowered myself to my knees in front of the toilet. I opened my mouth to answer Jake's question, but it wasn't words that spewed out. I lowered myself closer to the toilet bowl and emptied the contents of my stomach while my brother stood watch.

"I kind of feel like this is my fault," I heard Jake murmur in between retches. There were other people just outside the door, but I was too preoccupied to notice who he

was talking to or care that I had an audience.

After throwing up three or four times, I flushed the toilet, but I remained close to the bowl just in case there was more coming. Sweat was seeping out of every pore, and I was suddenly very thirsty.

I could still hear Jake talking to someone. "I'm his brother."

A voice. A female voice.

They sounded like they were under water.

Jake spoke again. "Okay, just stay with him so he doesn't choke on his own vomit."

The bathroom door closed, and for a moment, I thought I was alone until somebody gently laid a cold washcloth on the back of my neck. Assuming it was Jake, I said, "Are you actually taking care of me right now?"

"It's a dirty job, but someone has to do it, Owen Elizabeth."

Oh, great. "It's Frodo," I said, sitting back against the edge of the bathtub. I wiped my mouth with the washcloth and gazed up at Beth. Towering over me with a sympathetic grin, she handed me a water bottle. "I'm sorry," I said, accepting the water.

Beth closed the toilet lid and sat down, crossing her arms on her knees. "Why are you apologizing?"

I took a few big gulps of water. "I don't know."

She gave a sweet smile, and we stared at each other for a minute, listening to the

chaos of the party on the other side of the door. Two mugs clinked together, and then someone yelled, “Oh, shit! Where are the paper towels?”

“Is it true?” Beth asked, diverting my attention back to her. “That you planned to lose your virginity to me tonight?”

Instead of answering with words, I reached into my pocket and pulled out the condom, holding it in my half-opened hand on the rug beside me. Beth stared at it for a few seconds before looking at my face.

“Owen.” She squeezed her eyes shut for a second. Here comes the rejection. “Listen, I think you’re a great guy, and you’re so sweet and adorable—”

“I am not adorable.”

“Um, hello, Mr. Dimples? Let’s agree to disagree.” She let out a little giggle. “Anyway, you don’t want your first time to be with me, okay? Your first time should be... special.”

I wanted to suggest it could be special with her, but it was too late for that, and I’d only sound desperate at this point.

“And despite how I might have accidentally portrayed myself tonight,” she continued, “I don’t make a habit out of having casual sex with seventeen-year-old boys. I was just bored and looking for some fun tonight. All my friends are off at college, and I just needed a distraction.”

“Well,” I said, clicking my tongue. “You’re welcome for that.”

“I’ve had a good time with you. Really.” Beth tucked her hair behind her ears. “But I think I’m going to go. Are you going to be okay now?”

Physically? “Yeah,” I said. Emotionally? That was up for debate.

Beth stood up and held out her hand to help me up. I shoved the condom back in my pocket and let Beth pull me to my feet. Her hand lingered in mine for a few seconds as she said, “You can tell your friends we had sex in here, if you want.”

I dropped her hand. “I’m not going to do that. But thanks for the offer.”

Beth smiled and reached up to pat me on the me head like I was a kid or a cute animal. “Hope the rest of your night is better. Come see in Boomer’s soon, okay?”

I just nodded, knowing I wouldn’t be showing my face there for a while.

And then she was gone.

Surprisingly, I wasn’t very disappointed. I realized in that moment I never really saw myself losing it to Beth in the first place—it was like deep down inside, I knew the night would end like this. And in some way, I was actually relieved. The pressure was off.

I stayed in the bathroom to splash some cold water on my face, and I stole a little bit of Xander’s grandparents’ mouthwash to get the bitter bile taste out of my mouth. Pulling out my phone to check the time, I sighed when I realized it was still just half past eleven. That meant it would be a while before the crowd started thinning out.

I was ready for everyone to leave so I could find a place to sleep.

There was a knock on the bathroom door. “Is someone taking a shit in there, or what? Hurry up!”

I pulled open the door and nudged past a senior guy whose name I couldn’t quite

recall. "All yours," I mumbled.

I had nowhere to go. My brother was dominating the beer pong game in the kitchen, and I was thankful he was too distracted to see me move through the room. I slipped out the front door where a couple was making out on the porch swing, so I couldn't stay there.

And I sure as hell wasn't going around to the back of the cabin, where the others were still sitting around the fire. I could hear them back there singing along to "Live Your Life," that Rihanna song, their loud and carefree screeching making me feel more alone.

I wanted to get as far away from them as possible.

So, I decided to go for a walk. I made my way down the gravel driveway, where the crickets and frogs were my only company. I much preferred them, anyway. For the first time all night, I felt a sense of peace.

I wandered all the way down to the very end of Xander's grandparents' driveway. I could see the lights from his mom and dad's house from where I stood. I wondered if they had any clue where he was or even cared. If they found out about this party, how much trouble would he be in? What would his father do?

Despite everything that happened between us, I knew I'd have to stick around to help him clean up in the morning. I couldn't let him face his dad's wrath.

"You'll end up just like your dad."

I clamped my eyes shut, wishing I'd never said those words. In my heart, I worried they could be true—where would Xander be ten years from now? Twenty?

And what about me?

I thought about what Lena had said, about how I was good with kids. It was something I sort of knew, which was the reason I was considering going into education in the first place, but there was something validating about her words. It was like I needed permission to choose the field of education over, say, biochemistry—and Lena's opinion meant a lot.

As I turned around to make my way toward the woodworking shed, my mind drifted to how beautiful Lena looked earlier, with her dark hair falling over one shoulder and her hands sweetly tucked underneath her legs. She was probably long gone now, or maybe she was still with the people singing and carrying on by the fire.

I regretted not spending more time talking to her. Up until twelve hours ago, before this whole Beth thing happened, Lena Brower was the girl I thought about the most. On any other day, I would have been ecstatic we were at the same party, but I had let Beth distract me.

Man, I really blew it.

When I reached the shed, I noticed the latch was already undone. At first, I thought Abigail and I might have accidentally left it that way, but a sliver of light spilled from the partially open door. Someone was inside.

I cautiously walked into the shed, half-expecting to find another couple in the middle of a make-out session, or maybe it was just Abigail, returning the extension cord.

But sitting over on the cot, wiping tears from her cheeks, was Lena.

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### Chapter nine

#### “Sweet Disposition” - The Temper Trap

“Owen!” Lena wiped her nose with the back of her hand, frantically trying to hide the fact she had been in here crying. But her eyes were red, and there was still a tear rolling down her chin.

“I—I’m sorry. I didn’t know who was in here.” I approached her slowly, unsure of whether my presence was wanted right now or not. However, my curiosity about the reason behind her tears got the best of me. Was somebody at this party responsible for making her feel this way? Were they still here? And would I be able to track them down? I sat on the cot next to her, keeping some space between us. “Are you okay? I mean... obviously you’re not okay. What’s wrong?”

She stared down at her knees, shaking her head. “This is just not my night, that’s all.”

I was tempted to concur, but I wanted to know more about her situation. “Just give me a name, and I’ll take care of the guy,” I joked.

“Not a guy,” she said with a small smile. “Well, not really. It’s Bailey and her new boyfriend. Once he showed up a little bit ago, I became the third wheel, and it’s getting a little old. I confronted Bailey about how she’s been acting toward me lately, and it didn’t go very well. And then I tried to leave, but my car’s blocked in.” It sounded like she was holding in a sob. “This whole night’s a mess.”

I nodded, understanding her better than she knew. “Confronting friends is never easy.

But some things need to be said, you know? Maybe it's not so bad."

"I feel like she and I are drifting in different directions."

"I can relate," I said, looking down at her pink Chuck Taylors and comparing the size of my foot to hers. "Xander really pissed me off tonight."

Lena gave me a sympathetic half-smile. "I caught that."

"Then I'm sure you also caught him announcing to everyone by the fire that the entire point of this party was for me to lose my virginity."

"Yeah, I heard that, too. How's that... working out for you?"

I turned to her and dipped my chin, giving her a few dramatic, slow blinks. Her hands shot to her mouth to cover a smile.

"Sorry," she said with a giggle. "I'm not laughing at your situation. Just the look on your face right now."

"Laugh it up, Brower," I said with a playful grin. "Everyone else is tonight."

Her giggling came to a gradual stop as she twirled her hair around her pointer finger. "So the girl Xander mentioned... it must be that older blonde girl, right?"

I nodded and folded my hands between my knees, circling one thumb around the other. "Yeah. But it's good that it didn't happen with her. The more I got to know her, the more I realized we're not really that compatible, anyway. As embarrassing as it is to admit, I wasn't thinking with my head earlier tonight."

"At least not the one attached to your neck," Lena blurted.

“Nope,” I said with a chuckle, studying her face. I could really see her freckles beneath the glow of the incandescent light hanging just above us. There was a slight pinkish tint on her cheekbones, likely there because she’d just subtly made a reference to my—well, my other head.

It was cute.

“Your first time should be with someone you care about, anyway,” she said. “Trust me. One of my biggest regrets is how awful my first time was.”

“What was so awful about it?”

“Wrong person. Wrong time. Wrong everything.” She laughed. “It was just completely and utterly... wrong.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. It was six months ago, so I’m over it now. Just wish it had been better.”

I squinted, thinking back to the beginning of the school year. There was one guy in particular Lena used to talk to a lot. He was on one of the opposing schools’ academic teams, and he always used to walk over and tell her good luck, despite being our direct competition. I remembered thinking it was a little weird until I saw him kiss her before she got on the bus one time. “Was it that guy from Bedford?” I asked.

Lena covered her eyes with one hand. “Yes, unfortunately.” She removed her hand, looking back at me. “I didn’t know you knew about him.”

Oops. I might have revealed just how much I’d been paying attention to her.

But for some reason, I didn't care. I couldn't be sure if it was the way she kept smiling at me, or maybe some lingering drunkenness from before—but I had a sudden burst of courage.

"I notice things," I said, casually letting my legs fall farther open so my knee touched hers. A deliberate move.

"You notice things?" Lena giggled, and her leg relaxed against mine. "What else have you noticed?"

I studied Lena's eyes for some indication she was only making conversation—that she wasn't flirting with me. But all I saw there was a hint of something that reflected my own feelings at that very moment. "You," I answered.

She drew her eyebrows together in a doubtful stare. "Me? What have you been noticing about me?"

"Well, I... I've noticed the way you play with your hair when you talk, for one," I said, grinning at the way there were a few strands wrapped around her fingers now. She lowered her hand to her lap, laughing at herself, and I continued. "I've noticed the way your eyes light up with this energetic fury when you talk about global warming. And I've noticed the way you always have your nose in a book when we have free time in Mr. Thomspen's class. Doesn't matter if people are throwing a hacky sack over your head. You just tune it out."

"It's a skill I've mastered over the years," Lena said, letting out a breathy, nervous chuckle.

"Well, maybe you could teach me." I held her gaze, focusing on one blue eye and then the other. And then her lips—those pillowy, orangey-pink lips that I imagined tasted as good as they looked.

“Owen,” she said, her voice so low it was almost a whisper. “I’ve wanted you since freshman year.”

My breath seemed to catch in my throat, and my heart nearly beat out of my chest. I focused on the few strands of hair that were yet again covering her left eye, and without hesitation, I reached up to tuck them behind her ear. It was something I’d always dreamt about doing when we studied for our science competitions. And there I was, doing it.

As I lowered my hand to her chin, I allowed myself a few seconds to relish in the way that gesture made her smile. Perfect. Finally, I leaned forward to close the gap between our mouths.

Yes, yes, yes.

Kissing Lena made every moment of this entire ridiculous night worth it. I loved the way she tasted, the way she smelled, and the way her body felt when I wrapped my arms around her waist. She kissed me back with a ferocity I always suspected she had in her, but now I knew for sure.

I gently tugged away just to breathlessly tell her, “I should’ve done that a long time ago.”

“Agreed,” she responded, pulling me back to her for another kiss.

Lips, tongues, teeth, hands—there was a flurry of motion between us, and even Lena’s leg was on top of my lap now. Feeling bold, I let my fingers drift up the bottom of her shirt, giving her ample time to protest if she didn’t like where this was going. A few moments ago, we were merely friends, and now my hand was grazing the bottom of her bra.

All of a sudden, I remembered the question I'd been dying to ask her lately. It might not have been the most appropriate time to ask someone to prom, but you can pretty much guarantee their answer will be a resounding "yes" when you're seconds away from feeling them up. "Lena," I said, resting my forehead against hers. I took a couple of breaths. "Would you want to..."

"Yes," she said, tilting away from me. She crossed her arms over her body, and to my utter confusion, she lifted her shirt over her head and tossed it onto the cot next to us. "I consent."

Oh.

Oh.

My eyes dropped to the cups of her seafoam green bra, and I understood. And, for once in my damn life, I closed my mouth and didn't say the words on the tip of my tongue. A beautiful and consenting girl I cared about was sitting in front of me now, and holy shit, she looked amazing. My eyes lingered on her chest before bouncing back up to her eager eyes.

Right person. Right time. Right everything.

"Looks like Owen Gardner is losing his virginity tonight after all," she said, leaning forward to kiss me again.

Indeed, he is.

### Chapter ten

“Furr” - Blitzen Trapper

The temperature plummeted while Lena and I were in the shed together. As much as I enjoyed the way she clung to me on our way up the drive toward her car, I was happy to take off my hoodie and put it on her instead.

“Thank you,” Lena said with a little giggle. She lifted the collar to cover the bottom half of her face with it, and after a deep inhale, she said, “It smells like you.”

“Oh. Is that... good?”

“Yes, of course,” she said with an enthusiastic nod.

“Okay, good. Keep it.”

“I planned on it,” she said with a grin as I put my hands on her waist.

“Hey, can I ask you something?” I slid my hands lower, grabbing her by the hips. I could barely believe I had this girl naked underneath me just twenty minutes ago. It felt like a fever dream.

And it was incredible.

Even when it could have been awkward, we just laughed and carried on, putting that cot’s flimsy metal frame to the test. I took Abigail’s advice, ensuring Lena was

comfortable and having a good time. I didn't want it to be anything at all like her first time.

She'd been smiling ever since.

"Why do you look so serious?" she asked me on the driveway.

I couldn't wait any longer. "Will you go to prom with me?"

Lena's laughter rang out through the trees over the sound of the music drifting down the hill from the party. "Yes. Took you long enough to ask me, Owen."

"Hey, I tried, but you distracted me," I said, leaning down for a kiss. We only pulled apart when a car came down the path and we had to get out of the way.

Lena's car was wedged between two others. Some asshole had pulled up just inches from her rear bumper. It took me a few minutes, but I tracked the guy down and made him move his car. It was a senior guy I'd never spoken to, and he was reluctant to take orders from me, but I glared at him until he got the message.

"See you Monday?" Lena asked, pulling her keys out of her purse next to her car.

"I'll call you tomorrow."

After one more long-lasting kiss, we pulled apart. I watched her leave, standing in the driveway until her taillights disappeared over the hill.

With Lena gone and Beth a distant memory, I didn't know what to do with myself. There were still a few people inside the cabin and just one shadowy figure in front of the fire up ahead. I recognized that silhouette.

I took a deep breath, the words I spewed at Xander earlier that night echoing in my

mind again and again. Sure, he was the one who acted like a dick first, but mentioning his dad was such a low blow. I couldn't even recall everything else I'd said, but I'd never forget the look on his face. Could he ever forgive me for that?

There was only one way to find out.

I made my way toward the dwindling fire, where Xander was seated on a hay bale, poking at the logs with a long stick. He saw me approach, but he quickly turned back to the fire, refusing to acknowledge me.

But I wasn't going to give him a choice. I sat beside him and folded my hands between my knees, staring at the glowing embers until they made my eyes burn.

He spoke first. "Thought you left."

"No," I said, and I cleared my throat. "Someone's got to help you clean up in the morning."

Xander still wouldn't look at me. "Your brother was looking for you."

I shook my head, grateful Jake hadn't found me. "Where's Abigail?"

"Haven't seen her in a while."

How long had he been sitting out here alone? We were quiet for a moment or two, just staring at the crackling fire. Finally, I turned to him again and said, "Xan, I didn't mean what I said. You're nothing like your dad."

"Yeah, I am. It's in my blood."

"No it's not," I said, resting my hands on the edges of the hay bale. "You're the one who's going to break the cycle."

“Maybe. Maybe not. Every time I look at him, it’s like I’m getting a glimpse of my future, and that scares the hell out of me.”

“I know you’re better than that. And I’ll keep pushing you, just like you push me, until you see it, too.”

Xander blew air from his nose in a silent laugh. “I can’t even help my friend get laid. I’m worthless.”

“Well...” I opened my mouth before promptly closing it, deciding in that moment I wasn’t ready to talk about Lena with him just yet. That could wait.

He lowered his stick to the ground and turned to face me, finally looking me in the eyes. “Hey, I’m sorry for being really forward with Beth. I wasn’t trying to steal her away from you. I don’t think I fully realized what I was doing. I could stand to be a little more self-aware.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “As it turns out, she’s not right for me, anyway. It’s fine with me if you want to date her.”

Xander shook his head, staring at the fire with a crooked grin. “That’s not happening. I tried to get her to stay, but she blew me off.”

“Guess we both struck out with her, then.”

“Guess so.” We sat there for a few minutes in silence again, and I sleepily watched him attempt to stoke the fire. It was hardly a fire at all anymore, just burning embers and ashes. I half-expected Xander to comment on the quiet Coldplay song playing over on Abigail’s speaker, but he didn’t say a word. In fact, I caught him mouthing the lyrics.

Up on the deck, the back door slid open, and Abigail emerged from the cabin with a

quilt draped around her body. She made her way over to us, where she stood before the hay bale and said, "Scoot." We slid apart so she can squeeze between us on the hay. "What a night," she sighed.

"Where've you been?" Xander asked.

"Making my rounds. Taking keys from drunk idiots. Tucking people into your grandparents' bed." She turned to Xander. "Someone spilled beer on the carpet in there."

"Great."

"We'll get it tomorrow," she said, pulling the blanket tighter around her arms. Then she turned to me. "Owen, I'm sorry things didn't work out with Beth."

"It's all good," I said, sitting up a little straighter. "Actually, I finally asked Lena to prom, and she said yes."

Abigail gasped and punched me in the shoulder. "Owen! Shut up!" She laughed. "You guys are going to look so cute together."

"Yeah, be sure an' take lots of pics," Xander mumbled, "because I sure as hell won't be there."

"Why not?" Abigail scoffed.

"I've already told you. Prom is stupid. You have to pay for a ticket. And you have to pay for a tux. And girls expect flowers and dinner and a limo and all of that, and for what? A stupid dance where our least favorite teachers stand around and supervise us? I can think of a million better things to do."

"Would you do all of that for me?"

Xander opened up his mouth to speak, but then slowly brought his lips back together, and the two of them exchanged stares. Could he really say no to her? “You’d have a much better time with literally anyone else.”

“No I wouldn’t. I want you to take me,” she said, and they were locked in a staredown.

Xander cocked his head to the side. “You want me to take you to prom?”

Abigail let out a melodramatic gasp, drawing her hand to her chest. “Why yes, I thought you’d never ask.” Grabbing the edges of the quilt again, she said, “My dress is gold, and you don’t have to take me out to dinner—I’ll cook for you at my house.”

Xander blinked. “I wasn’t—”

“We can double date with Owen and Lena. Right?” Abigail looked at me for confirmation, and I answered with an enthusiastic nod. That sounded perfect, actually.

“I—” Xander began to protest, but he stopped short. I was relieved to hear him let out a defeated sigh. “Fine. I guess you’ve twisted my arm.” Abigail clapped, but Xander spoke again before she got too excited. “But I’m going to complain about it the entire time.”

“You have to dance with me. At least once.”

“We’ll see,” Xander said, and Abigail grinned over at me like she knew she’d convince him.

I laughed, wishing it could be May already. Maybe I’d take the rest of the money I had saved and use it for something to make the night special for Lena. For all of us. What if I got a hotel room for the four of us? Maybe we could have an after-party

here at the cabin. My mind raced with plans for the perfect prom night.

Xander opened his mouth to yawn, which had a domino effect on Abigail and me. How late was it, anyway? “Where are we supposed to sleep?” I asked as I stretched.

“The guest bed up in the loft.” Xander suggested. “If anyone’s up there, we’ll just kick them out and claim it.”

“The three of us?” I asked.

“Sounds good to me,” Abigail said, standing up with her blanket. “Let’s go. Just don’t either of you get any ideas.”

Xander and I turned to watch Abigail walk toward the cabin, the bottom of her blanket dragging the ground. Although I felt like the third wheel in this situation, I was too tired to come up with a better solution.

And that’s how my night ended: crawling into a full-sized bed with two of my best friends, all of us in our day clothes. Abigail took the middle. “Goodnight, boys.”

“Goodnight,” we told her. I rolled over to text Lena goodnight, too, and she replied almost instantaneously.

Lena: Goodnight ??

I grinned at my phone for a few minutes before rolling over to announce I had, in fact, lost my virginity—I couldn’t wait to see the shock on their faces. But once I saw them, I knew my news would have to wait. They were spooning, eyes closed, with identical smiles on their faces.

Idiots.

I would just have to tell them in the morning. I lay on my back to stare up at the stars through the skylight knowing that after tonight, everything would be different. Could my life ever be any better than this?

Doubtful.