

mona kasten



trust again

a novel

Can a broken heart ever mend?

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## *About the Book*

The moment she meets Spencer Cosgrove, Dawn knows she's in trouble. Spencer is sexy. Funny. Charming. Just her type. Or what used to be her type, before she vowed to steer clear of relationships.

Everyone gets hurt in the end, Dawn believes.

Things only get worse when Spencer starts flirting with her, luring her in with his tenderness. But she turns him away. Because Dawn feels damaged. She knows what it's like to trust someone with her heart, only to have them shatter it into a million pieces. Never again. The wounds are still too deep. But Spencer persists. And when Dawn finds out that Spencer is hiding his own heartbreaking secret, she realizes she can't deny her feelings any more. Maybe, just maybe it really is possible for a broken heart to mend ...

## *About the Author*

Mona Kasten was born in Germany in 1992. Before devoting herself to writing, she studied Library and Information Science. She lives with her husband, cats, and countless books in northern Germany. She loves all forms of caffeine and taking long walks in the woods. Her favorite days are the ones when she can block out the world and just write. Mona loves to interact with her readers on Twitter @MonaKasten. Her website (in German) is [www.monakasten.de](http://www.monakasten.de)

MONA KASTEN

# trust again

*Translated from the German by  
Toby Axelrod*



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*For my escalation-girls:  
Bianca, Caro, Kim, Laura, Nadine, Rebecca and Yvo*



trust again playlist

Weaker Girl - Banks  
War Of Hearts - Ruelle  
Lay It All On Me - Rudimental (feat. Ed Sheeran)  
Into You - Ariana Grande  
Let Me Love You - Ariana Grande  
What A Feeling - One Direction  
Never Enough - One Direction  
Bloodsport - Raleigh Ritchie  
No Pressure - Justin Bieber (feat. Big Sean)  
Only Love - Ben Howard  
Rivers In Your Mouth - Ben Howard  
Remnants - Jack Garratt  
In The Shadow Of A Dream - James Morrison  
To The Wonder - Aqualung (ft. Kina Grannis)  
Everything Is Lost - Maggie Eckford  
dRuNk - ZAYN  
Show Me Love - Robin Schulz & J.U.D.G.E.  
Close - Nick Jonas (feat. Tove Lo)  
We Don't Talk Anymore - Charlie Puth (feat. Selena Gomez)  
Where's My Love - SYML

# *Chapter 1*

Such a stupid idea. As if I'd actually get any writing done in a coffee shop.

Nope.

I glance up to see a guy standing in front of me, staring with raised eyebrows, as if he was expecting an answer. What—was I some sort of lip reader? There's no way I could've heard him, and that should've been obvious. My headphones are as big as doughnuts and weigh about ten pounds: they were expensive, and they block out all kinds of noise. Great for concentrating on my work. Even better for avoiding unwanted conversation.

He was cute, no question about that. He had reddish hair and warm, brown eyes. Wearing jeans and a tight shirt that hugged his shoulders—not bad, not bad. So why was I feeling queasy?

Slowly, I lifted the headphone cup from my right ear.

"Did you say something?"

The guy quirked a smile. "Yeah. I said you're here on Fridays a lot. I've noticed you."

True. Even though it wasn't exactly by choice. I'd rather spend Friday afternoons in my dorm at Woodshill University. But that wasn't possible, since I shared a room with a nymphomaniac.

"Yeah. The coffee's good here," I mumbled.

He tilted his head and smiled again. "You don't even drink coffee. You usually get hot chocolate. But it's getting warmer out. Wonder what you'll pick in the spring."

Wow, stalker? My palms were turning clammy, and I swallowed hard. This guy was getting scary. How long had

he been watching me? Oh God, could he have seen what I was working on?

"Inquiring minds want to know," he said, dropping his voice an octave.

Seriously? He was being playful, trying to pick me up, with his deep voice and bedroom eyes. With any other girl it might have worked. But not me. I'd been avoiding men like the plague for more than a year now.

"Thanks, but no thanks," I began, shoving my bangs to the side.

"Come on," he answered, grabbing a chair from another table and setting it next to mine. Straddling the seat, he rested his arms on the back. "I'm a good listener."

What on Earth made him think I wanted to talk? My eyes flicked toward my laptop. The font size was extra small and the brightness set low, so no one but me could read it. Still, I was itching to shut the screen. What I'd written was not for anyone to read—at least, not yet.

And it was definitely not for the eyes of this unnerving stranger.

"What are you working on?" the guy asked, nodding his head at my laptop.

Trying to look casual, I closed the screen, picked up my bag from the floor and slid Watson inside. That was the name I'd given this clunker of a laptop: It had a huge screen and weighed a ton. It was practically vintage.

The guy touched my arm gently. "Hey, I didn't mean to scare you off. I'm outta here," he stood up, now sounding almost shy. "You just looked so alone over here. And I thought I'd..." He gave an awkward shrug.

Okay, he was starting to seem a little less stalker and a little more cute. But still. I couldn't.

"You seem nice—" Flustered, I wondered if he'd already told me his name.

"Cooper," he said, as if reading my mind.

“Cooper,” I repeated with a smile. “You seem cool, but I have to go. I can’t concentrate right now.”

“We could try another time, when you don’t have so much to do,” Cooper ventured.

I suppressed a sigh and stood. “I’m not interested. Sorry.”

Cooper’s eyes widened a bit. “Oh! I get it.” He nodded. “Not into guys, huh?”

I blinked at him. “What?”

“Nothing to be ashamed of.”

My cheeks felt hot. “Not that my sexual orientation should matter, but just because I don’t want to hang out with you doesn’t mean I’m gay,” I hissed and pushed past him. Faster than I thought possible with this heavy bag, I fled outside.

Brisk February air filled my lungs. It was still pretty cold; I exhaled a little cloud of steam. Wrapping my scarf around my neck, I considered my options.

I couldn’t go back to the dorm. My roommate, Sawyer, was entertaining yet another guy, and I’d seen enough of her sexual conquests already. She was one of the reasons I’d invested in such expensive headphones.

Now the Patriot Coffee Shop was off-limits. As long as that creep was still hanging out here, wild horses couldn’t drag me back.

The school library was an option. But not for this project. Too many people passing by who might glance at the screen.

Digging into my pockets, I touched something cold and metallic. Yes! The cloud hanging over me began to disappear.

About two months ago, my best friend, Allie, moved into her new apartment, and she’d given me her spare key. Partly because I was the official surrogate mother to her cat, Spidey, and partly because Allie was well aware of Sawyer’s active social life. She’d said I could come by any

time I was locked out of my place. So far I hadn't taken advantage of her hospitality, but today I was out of other options.

She didn't answer my call, so I sent her a quick text about my plan to come over.

Allie lived with her boyfriend, Kaden, in a charming part of town near a little park. It was only about 15 minutes from campus. They had a great view of Mount Wilson and the surrounding valley.

A year ago I'd have sworn that Portland was the best place on Earth to live. But now the place was bound up with memories that I'd give anything to forget.

I opened the door to Allie's building and climbed the stairs to the second story. By now I knew the tricks and quirks of her place like the back of my hand. You always had to lift the door handle up a bit and then push the front door open. No sooner did I set foot in her hall, than Spidey trotted over to greet me.

"Hello?" I called out.

Silence, except for Spidey's gentle purr as he brushed past my legs. Gently, I bent down to run my hand over his tiger-striped fur and smiled. Lifting my bag back onto my shoulder, I headed for the living room sofa, ready to get to work.

But what happened next was worse than any worst-case scenario on my radar for today.

Penis.

It was the first thing that met the eye.

A large penis, obviously ready for duty. Tearing my eyes away, I looked up at Kaden, who returned my gaze with an open mouth. The seconds ticked away, and I swear I didn't want to look—but come on, he was naked. And my eyes just did what they wanted. Too late, I shut them tightly.

If only I could disappear.

"Kaden?" my best friend's voice called out from the bedroom.

That was probably my cue.

I spun on my heels, stumbling over Spidey of course, because my eyes were still squeezed shut, and ran out of the apartment. Kaden called after me. My steps echoed again in the stairwell; the heels of my ankle boots clattering against the polished granite. I reached the landing, then turned to go down the next flight of stairs, when boom! I slammed full force into someone.

The shock took me aback. A sharp pain shot through my face. My hand fluttered up to my nose. I staggered backward, flailing for support. There! I grabbed onto the guy with my other hand. But instead of catching me, he yelled out and stumbled just as much as I had. He twisted us as we fell, managing to ensure he wouldn't fall on me.

Ow! My nose must be broken. And my knee. And maybe a couple of ribs, too.

"I've been wanting you to fall into my arms for a while now, but I didn't mean it literally," his voice came from under me, and I caught my breath. With one arm I brushed my tangled red hair from my face.

Radiant, dark blue eyes met my gaze.

Their amused, mischievous sparkle was more than familiar. Likewise the velvety voice, the upturned corners of the mouth, and the unruly black hair, which mostly did what it wanted.

Spencer.

I'd landed on my best-worst nightmare. This was the only guy who'd made me question my self-imposed celibacy since my breakup.

"I think my nose is broken," I moaned.

His hand moved from my hip to my face and gently touched the aforementioned body part.

"Nothing's broken."

His certainty made me wonder. "How do you know?"

He brought his hand back to my hip as if it simply belonged there. Familiar. Confident. I didn't move.

"I've broken my nose before," Spencer explained, turning his head so I could see his face in profile. "See?"

Lo and behold! There it was: a slight bump on the upper bridge. My gaze now traveled the strong line of his chin to his mouth, and back up again. Something stirred in my chest, and I finally broke out of my stupor.

"Sorry." Gingerly, I pressed against the floor and pushed myself up. "I didn't mean to knock you down."

He stood up, too, still wearing that half-smile. "It was an honor, Dawn." He looked down at me.

Spencer was tall—much taller than me, which wasn't saying much, given my lowly five two.

"If you ever need your own private wall to run into again, just call. You have my number." Now he was really flashing one of his brilliant, toothy grins.

Again something shifted inside me; this time it was a dangerous flutter in the tummy.

That damn Spencer Cosgrove.

The first time we'd met, I'd mistaken Spencer with Kaden, who hadn't been treating Allie very well back then. I wanted to stand up for Allie and let Kaden know he was being an asshole. Problem was, I'd gone off on Spencer instead. A crooked grin had spread over his face before I realized the mix-up. Shit.

Allie cleared up the misunderstanding immediately. Actually, I would've liked to have stayed mad at Spencer a bit longer. It was a great excuse to avoid the obvious: Spencer was hot.

Too hot for his own good. Not that I wanted to think about him that way. But even my jaded self couldn't deny, let alone ignore it. Hard as I tried.

"Dawn?" Spencer suddenly turned serious, bringing me back to the moment. "Everything okay? You didn't crack your head too hard against my steely chest, did you?"

Of course he was kidding, as usual. Spencer wasn't particularly broad-shouldered. But that didn't make him

any less attractive. Quite the opposite. He had a perfect build, with the slim, sinewy frame of a runner. Not chunky, not skinny. Just in between. Just... mmmm.

"I'm glad it was your strong body I ran into and not the wall," I answered a bit too breathlessly, and looked around for my bag.

"Were you just at Allie's?" Spencer asked. He'd picked up Watson and was brushing some dirt off the bag before handing them over to me.

Oh yeah: I'd nearly forgotten. My eyes widened in panic.

"Don't go up there!"

Spencer frowned again. "Kaden and I were supposed to work on something."

"Kaden was naked when I barged in. I think the two of them are busy right now."

Spencer threw back his head and laughed loudly—a rough and resonant laugh. It filled the whole stairwell and sent a pleasant shiver down my spine.

Why'd he have to go and do that?

Frustrated, I sighed and set the heavy bag on the floor. "Today's not my day."

"What do you mean?" Spencer asked, after his laughter had faded.

"I have to get some work done, but I have no idea where to go," I replied.

"Why not just go back to the dorm?"

"Sawyer is... busy." I looked away. "So I went to a coffee shop, but I couldn't concentrate there because this weird guy kept talking to me, so I came over here thinking Allie and Kaden weren't home."

Spencer chuckled. "Don't tell me you also walked in on Sawyer in the middle of..."

"No!" I replied quickly, lifting my gaze to meet his.

"Well, not today, at least."

"You could come to my place."



I was about to protest, but paused: I'd never been to Spencer's place. We had a lot of friends in common and spent a lot of time together, but never on his turf. Actually, I was a little curious as to why he'd never invited us over.

But still, now wasn't the time. Something in me knew it wasn't a good idea to be alone with him.

"I don't know."

He leaned in close. "Why not?" he asked, his eyes traveling thoughtfully over my face.

My pulse began to pick up. Damned misbehaving heart!

If I wanted to prevent the heat in my belly from rising up to my cheeks, I needed distance.

As if reading my thoughts, Spencer picked up my bag and turned.

"Hey!" I called out, throwing on my jacket. By the time I'd turned to follow him, Spencer had already descended one flight of stairs.

"Give Watson back!"

He stopped on the landing and looked up at me.

"Watson? Like John Watson and Sherlock Holmes?"

Nodding, I headed down the stairs while wrapping my scarf around my neck. Spencer tilted his head and watched me descend each step.

"If you only knew how much I'd like to ask you out. Right here, right now."

I sighed. For the past six months, he'd been asking me out on a date almost daily—and my answer was always no.

I didn't date. I didn't want to.

"Spare yourself the rejection. You know my answer," I said, stopping one step above him. Now we were at eye level.

All I could see was blue. Blue eyes. So playful and yet so earnest.

"But you're coming with me anyway, right?"

"Are you giving me a choice?"

He turned and sprang down the rest of the stairs, with Watson held hostage under his arm.

That was his answer.

## *Chapter 2*

Spencer drove a rusty red Volvo hatchback whose color matched my hair. As he navigated traffic, he drummed on the steering wheel to the radio. We chatted about this and that. College, movies we'd seen, the upcoming dorm party we didn't want to go to. He was so easy to talk to.

Spencer always had something to report. He was majoring in Creative Industries and had already changed his minor twice, because he couldn't commit and was interested in everything. This semester he was focusing on Sexuality, Gender, and Queer Studies, something I'd considered as a major. In the end I'd picked English with a focus on creative writing—my favorite subject.

As we talked, my anxiety about going home with him faded. He was a good friend, and as long as he didn't make suggestive comments, I could handle it.

His place was on the outskirts of town, but still somehow fairly close to downtown—like most of Woodshill.

Spencer pulled up to the curb and stopped the car. I stepped out and took in my surroundings. This area was even nicer than where Allie and Kaden lived. Neatly built brick houses surrounded by green lawns and manicured front gardens lined the street.

"Holy cow," I mumbled and looked up at Spencer; he was already walking away from the car. Following close behind him, I stared at the trees and flowerbeds, where the first bulbs were beginning to poke through the earth, despite the chilly weather.

Spencer headed straight for the narrow, hedge-lined path that led to a dark green front door with frosted glass. His shoulders seemed to tense up as he slipped the key into

the lock, and braced himself against the door. It popped open and he stood aside, waving me in.

"I'm not going to find anybody naked in here, am I?" I asked, crossing the threshold with an uncertain step. Spencer hadn't said a word since we'd gotten out of the car. He was quiet. Too quiet. He wasn't messing around any more. The only thing that still seemed like normal Spencer was that he was still holding Watson in a headlock.

"No, I live by myself," he said with a slightly cryptic smile. "And I only run around naked when the mood strikes me." He raised his eyebrows, and I cracked a smile. Now that sounded like Spencer. He took my jacket and hung it in the closet before leading me down the hall to the living room.

*Wow.*

Gray walls, hardwood floors, and dark furniture with light accents filled the room. A huge L-shaped couch with patterned cushions divided the living room from the open dining area, which contained a large, rough-hewn wooden table with six chairs. I turned the corner and spied the kitchen. A groan escaped me.

"How could you?" I spun around.

He paused in the dining room, hands buried in his pockets.

I jerked my thumb over my shoulder. "You know how much I love cooking! How could you have kept this from me?"

The new, built-in kitchen was the dream of any hobby chef—and the exact opposite of the dorm kitchen. A gas stove stood on the right side. On the polished countertop was a knife block that looked brand new. Above it hung a magnetic rail to which a metal spatula and other cooking utensils were stuck.

"May I ask you something, Spence?"

He lifted his eyebrows in assent.

"How come I've never been here? I mean, sometimes we all squeeze into Scott's tiny apartment for a weekend, but this place is huge!" I swept my arm around. What an understatement! I could fit three of my dorm rooms in the living room alone.

He sighed. "The house belongs to my parents."

That didn't explain much.

"And?"

He chewed on his lower lip. "They're kind of well-off. A student living in a place like this might come off as an ass."

"You think we'd judge you because your parents have money?" I questioned him, incredulously.

He rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Whatever. I still want to go out for a run. There's juice in the fridge, and I'll get you some water from downstairs," he said quickly. "I think I might even have some Reese's. They're your favorite, right?" He crossed the kitchen and opened a cabinet, searching the shelves with a frown.

"Spence, it's really okay."

"Next time I'll be prepared." He shut the cabinet door and rubbed the back of his head. "Watson is on the coffee table. I thought the couch might be more comfortable than a dining room chair. Make yourself at home."

He seemed restless, looking everywhere except at me. Then he turned and rushed out of the kitchen. His footsteps pounded down the stairs, and a door slammed shut. Stunned, I stared at the spot where he'd just been standing.

I snapped out of it when he reappeared wearing his running things. He acted like I wasn't even there. After putting a bottle of water on the coffee table for me, he headed out, pushing in a pair of earbuds.

Only after the front door clicked shut did I dare to breathe again.

Apparently I'd crossed a line. I, who always insisted on sticking to the rules. I, who hated it when people dug into

my past, had crossed a line with one of my best friends.  
*Dammit.*

It took a while for me to get used to the soft pillows and the new setting. My thoughts kept going back to Spencer, but I tried to focus on my work again. I needed to write a few more words in order to meet my monthly goal. After waking Watson out of hibernation and putting my headphones back over my ears, I got back to work.

*Jasper kept his hand on the back of my neck; his eyes were fixed on my face as he slowly pulled out of me and thrust back in. His hot breath hit my cheek, and I gasped as he ran his tongue along my throat. I pushed toward him, and he let loose a growl.*

*Pressed against the wall, I gasped, arching my back. Jasper drove me crazy. With every thrust he conquered me again, lifting me to a higher plane, from which I could no longer see the abyss.*

Leaning back on the couch, I regarded my efforts. Almost done. A new story, almost ready for publication.

I was beyond thrilled to be able to make a living with my favorite hobby. Some students had to work for a pittance in factories, and others became waiters or tutors, like Allie.

But I wrote erotic stories.

That probably wasn't the first thing anyone would think of when they saw me. I'm kind of petite, with big, round eyes, so most people see me as an innocent little Bambi. Not someone who enjoys dreaming up kinky sex scenes all day long.

Writing has always been my favorite pastime. Even in high school, my fantasies ran wild across the pages of my notebooks. It started out as a hobby. Then came the boom in erotic literature, thank you *Fifty Shades*. I took part in an anonymous writing competition for erotic short stories.

Even though I didn't win, I landed on the short list to be evaluated by the community of writers. The feedback was overwhelming. I'd never shown my work to anyone before, but doing it anonymously on the Internet was easier, because I didn't feel the pressure of being judged. After lots of people urged me to keep writing, I started on my next short story, which was twice as long as the first. The readers in the forum were totally into it and started to send photos and casting suggestions for a potential film based on the story.

And that was the beginning of my addiction: I spent my afternoons on my dad's computer and wrote well into the night. Dad supported my hobby and even brought me food and drink if he saw me glued to the screen for hours on end. It was probably good that I never let him know my genre. After all, what father would want his daughter writing stories called *Hot for You*, whose plotlines were 90 percent sex?

I was known as D. Lily—my middle name. But no one here knew my secret. Not even Allie. And as far as I was concerned, it should stay secret for the time being. I loved my friends and felt like I belonged here, really fit in, in Woodhill. No way did I want that to change. What if they found out and looked at me differently? What if they thought I was weird? Made fun of me, like Nate had?

If they knew, I wouldn't enjoy writing anymore. Now, it was still magical. I could concentrate fully on my characters. On their personalities. On their vices.

Like right now. My fingers flew over the keyboard.

Until Spencer plopped onto the sofa next to me.

I yelped and startled backward so violently that my headphones slipped off my ears.

"What the hell?"

"Sorry, I thought you heard me," Spencer said, rubbing his face.

*Holy shit.*

His shirt was stuck to his chest, revealing the muscles underneath. Quickly I looked up at his face, but that, too, turned out to be a mistake. With one motion, he swept his damp hair from his forehead. His cheeks were flushed, his face was covered with a thin layer of sweat and his chest was rising and falling faster than usual.

I kind of wanted to be turned off by this sweat-drenched fellow, but some synapses in my brain were obviously not working right. Not after spending the last few hours writing about naked, writhing bodies.

"Did you... already finish your run?" I asked weakly.

"It was great. Damn cold, but still really nice." He leaned forward, grinning, and reached for the water he'd given me. "Didn't you drink anything?"

I shook my head and rubbed my eyes. "I lost track of time."

"I'm going to take a shower. If you want to join me, I can show you how much prettier the bathroom is compared to the kitchen."

I lightly punched his upper arm. "No, thanks."

Spencer stood. His grin was so sexy that it should have been illegal. "Some day you'll voluntarily accompany me to this bathroom, sweetheart. You know it, I know it, and the world has been aware of that since the beginning of time."

For a second I was speechless.

Then I mustered up all my strength and looked back at my computer screen. "If you say so."

That's how it was between Spencer and me. Every friendship needed some way to blow off steam and get back to normal. His comments were part of it. My dismissive replies were also part of it. So I was glad when flirtatious Spencer took a backseat and my good friend returned.

Flirty Spencer often annoyed me, but he was preferable to the reserved Spencer, who wore an artificial smile, avoided questions, and simply disappeared.



## Chapter 3

Two days had passed since the penis incident, and I hadn't heard from Allie at all—except for a WhatsApp chat with a little monkey covering its eyes with both hands, and three winking smiley faces.

The very idea of looking her in the eye and apologizing for having stared at her boyfriend's junk made me burn with shame. But I couldn't put it off forever.

At the first tentative knock on our door, my roommate, Sawyer, tied the laces on her Doc Martens and hoisted her backpack. With her long, blonde hair and the patchwork of tattoos on her arms, she looked dangerous. And hot as hell. It was no wonder she had such a *busy* schedule.

"I'm off," she murmured in parting.

Sawyer usually took off whenever Allie dropped by to see me. They hadn't gotten off to a good start, partly because Sawyer had been seeing Kaden when Allie rented the spare room in his apartment. You could say it wasn't the best way to begin a friendship. On the other hand, Sawyer and I weren't close either. She was pretty unapproachable and difficult. If we hadn't ended up sharing one of the tiniest dorm rooms, she would have probably never talked to me.

Allie smiled tentatively at Sawyer, but it was obviously forced. Sawyer returned the expression for a moment, then pushed past my best friend to leave the room.

Before Allie could say a word, I leapt up and wrapped her in a big hug, my face buried in her sweater. That wasn't hard to do, since she was about the size of a Victoria's Secret model.

"I didn't want to look. I swear, Allie. But he was naked," I blurted out. "It was just right there, waving in the wind."

She returned my hug. "I know. Kaden says you looked like a frightened chicken." She laughed.

I broke away from her. "And he looked like a deer caught in the headlights. A deer with a hard-on."

She pressed her lips together, trying not to laugh. Then she peeled off her coat and set it down on the old dresser next to my desk.

I pointed to the chair that was waiting for her and shoved some chocolates and a bowl of chips in her direction.

"I think Kaden was just as scared as you. Let's forget it. And I'll turn up the volume on my phone," Allie offered.

I nodded vigorously. "Yes, please. That sounds great."

"Then we can meet at my place next time, and Sawyer wouldn't feel like she has to run away from me."

"You could just bury the hatchet and start over," I suggested.

"I don't think she'd go for that."

"Oh, Allie." I shook my head. "You don't really have anything against Sawyer, do you?"

She screwed up her nose. "Not really, except for the fact that she was constantly throwing you out of your dorm room and sleeping with the guy I wanted."

"To be fair, if I had a boyfriend I'd probably throw her out, too," I said with a shrug. "She knew Kaden before you. After you moved in there, it was over."

Allie groaned, still not convinced.

"We're not in high school anymore," I announced. "Next time you see each other, you're going to make some small talk or something. I'm going to lay down the law."

"Oh, really?" Allie smiled skeptically.

"Yes, really," I changed the subject. "What are you and Kaden up to tonight?"

Allie smiled dreamily. She was so in love, it was almost sickening. But since I adored the two of them so much, I could only be happy for her.

"We have a date tonight. Dinner and a movie, and I get to pick the film."

"Which isn't remarkably generous of Kaden, considering you have the same taste in movies," I ventured. "If I were you, I'd also make him let you pick the music for the drive."

"I like you. I think I'll keep you."

I grinned. "Thanks, ditto."

Allie shifted into a cross-legged position in her chair.

"Anyway, what else is new with you?" I asked carefully and imitated her pose.

"I talked to my parents yesterday. It was kind of... weird."

Allie's parents had a screw loose. Knowing what they'd done to her, I wouldn't wish them on my worst enemy.

"Did they turn mean again? Should I sic someone on them?" I asked, pushing the bowl of chips back her way.

"It was just weird, Dawn. They were actually... I wouldn't call it friendly, but somehow more open than usual," she answered with a frown. "It was nice for a change, not to get slammed with insults and accusations. Dad even asked about my classes, and Mom only snorted seven times."

"Wow. If that's not progress I don't know what is."

"Yeah, right?" She bent forward and grabbed a handful of chips. Sea salt and vinegar, my favorite. She sniffed at them, and her face beamed with joy.

Watching Allie eat was the best. She got so excited about the strangest things, you might have thought she came from another planet. Her parents had deprived her of so much. But she was making up for it now, by trying anything and everything she could get her hands on. It was adorable.

"Now that we've talked about my parents, let's talk about your favorite topic, please," she said through a mouthful of chips, a meaningful expression on her face.

Even though she wasn't exactly spelling things out, I immediately knew what—or who—she meant.

Nathaniel Duffy.

"I'd rather not."

"Dawn—"

I sighed. "Okay. I'm glad he doesn't have my new number."

"You're avoiding my question."

Ugh. I really didn't want to talk about Nate.

"As your best friend I am responsible for bringing up sensitive topics. Talking is important," Allie scolded me as she munched away.

"Fine," I sighed, slowly rubbing at the throbbing that began to grow in my temples. "He didn't try to reach me again. I mean, I had to change my number to stop his calls in the first place, but everything has been great since then."

"Why do you think he was trying so hard to reach you?" she asked.

I shrugged. "No idea. To be honest, I don't care. We haven't talked since Thanksgiving, and I hope it stays that way."

Before moving to Woodshill, I'd spent my days under a dark cloud, mourning my lost future. Everything Nate and I had planned that would never happen.

Six. Damn. Years.

*Wasted.*

Sure, at 13 you shouldn't expect to meet the love of your life, but with Nate and me... it was different. Special. Like what you read about in romance novels.

We'd been friends since childhood. He got everything I had to give: my first kiss. My senior prom. My virginity. My past, my future, and everything in between.